Diagonal

by Shivani

Summary

An amnesiac Tsuna finds himself in a new life after a sparring accident with Byakuran sends him into another dimension. Years later, an offer is made, of the deranged kind.

Notes

Warnings: slash, time skips, amnesia, OOC behavior, crossover, elements of crack (mostly played straight), do-over-ish, dimension travel, alternate universe, canon mangling

Beta: —

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Notes:

0. The usual shoutout to Shadowblayze for patiently listening to me babble and making any number of suggestions, including providing some headcanon for Lal's background.
1. As usual, I expect complaints to roll in. There are way too many entitlement queens out there who think that I’m not entitled to write what amuses me. Frivolous complaints will either be mocked or ignored; depends on how feisty I’m feeling that day. I wrote it, I’m posting it. That’s how it goes.

2. Yes, I still have a fixation with cooking and baking.

3. The crossover to Elder Scrolls will not happen until chapter eight, just to keep anyone from getting antsy. There are three parts to this. Chapters are around 10k each (except the last one).

4. Kawahira is a meddling bastard! Also, Tsuna’s starting dimension is not the canon dimension, for reasons which will become apparent.

5. As usual, this rambles along drunkenly from vague point to vague point and even occasionally does things on schedule, though the characters had a tendency to make me take detours and didn’t always want to do what I wanted them to do. It’s … less deep, too, and that includes any pairing scenes. This isn’t romance focused, so don’t expect more than passing mentions or implied behind the scenes activity.

6. Certain chapters are weird as hell in terms of time skips. Skyrim is shorter, and the “ending” to this is another huge jump between established events and that brief, crack-laden visit to the Harry Potter world.

7. Chapter titles courtesy of: *Ride on Shooting Star* (The Pillows, FLCL), *This Silence is Mine* (Onitsuka Chihiro, Drakengard 3, various translations), and Skyrim.

8. I see that AO3 is still being cranky on that whole centering of text issue. Right, anyway, a note will go onto the last chapter with links to my personally formatted e-book copies (because those I know look pretty much exactly the way I want them to for Kindle and various .epub readers).
Byakuran gaped in disbelief as Tsuna’s body just … faded … out of existence. He glanced at his Mare Sky ring in confusion, then at the Vongola Sky ring on the grass where they had been sparring. This was not the kind of birthday present he had intended to give his killer turned friend.

He shook his head and concentrated hard, trying to follow the traces of his friend to wherever it was he had vanished, sinking down to sit on the ground, and finally pinpointed it. Tsuna was in an entirely different dimension. ‘What in God’s name…?’ he thought, then searched around for that dimension’s Daemon Spade. If he could just give the man the right memories, then hopefully he would find Tsuna and take care of him.

Daemon jolted up out of a sound sleep to the sensation of hundreds of moments entering his mind. He was being bombarded with a steady stream of information from—someone in a parallel dimension? It wasn’t until an hour after the memories stopped streaming in that he groaned and bashed his hand against the wall. “I am such a fool,” he muttered. “Elena would be incredibly disappointed with my behavior.”

He rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom to prepare for the day. “But I can beat myself up later,” he said as he reached out to turn on the shower. “I have a Vongola to go rescue. The very one who made another me see sense.” Though not at full power—something impossible to achieve unless he could find exactly the right kind of body to steal—he had more than enough for his purposes. To that end he sent out spies to the various hospitals in the Milan region and waited for one of them to communicate back success.

In the meantime he would have to start looking for a better place to live. A one bedroom apartment was not going to work, not if he intended to take in the Vongola. Based on those memories the young man had left his world in 2025, and it was 1979 now. Not only sideways, but back; the Vongola had been sent on a sharp diagonal. He chuckled as he prepared breakfast. The hairstyles and clothing alone would probably frighten him if the memories he’d received were anything to judge by.

He would have to arrange paperwork for his new younger brother, as well, which meant getting photographs (not a problem if he borrowed Tsunayoshi “Tsuna” Sawada’s face to have that one done), a visit to one of the usual sorts (whom he would generously use his flames on to gloss the process along and make whoever it was forget everything, including any fees, because Daemon Spade never paid for anything if he could help it, or if he did it was with stolen money), and get new identification for himself and his sudden brother.

Daemon had located a new apartment and was in the process of moving two days later when one of
his spies reported in a match, so he deposited the last load of his belongings at the new place and hastened off to the hospital, shrugging on a new guise that vaguely resembled the Vongola. He could worry about appearances for the both of them later. That sort of thing was fluid, anyway, and he needed to know what he was dealing with before making any long-lasting decisions.

He sneaked into the hospital and up to the Vongola’s room to find just what he expected from the memories. The young man looked too damn innocent, even with half his head wrapped up in bandages. He must have landed badly to sustain that much damage. A doctor wandered in, gave him a surprised look, and said, “What are you doing in here?”

Daemon smiled innocently and gestured at the unconscious figure. “I’ve spent two days trying to find my brother. What is wrong with him?”

“Brother?” The doctor looked back and forth a few times, comparing features, then nodded. “Well, I can’t tell you unless you can provide some proof of that.”

He promptly shoved a hand into his pocket and produced a constructed set of identification to show off, plus sent tendrils of Mist into the man’s mind. Once the doctor was “satisfied” the construct disappeared into his pocket again.

“Be sure to stop in at the desk so you can fill out your brother’s paperwork and take care of the details,” the doctor said, then picked up the chart and perused it. “As it stands, he was found with severe head wounds. There is a possibility of memory loss, but we won’t know until he wakes up. We’ve seen to the brain swelling, so no worries there.”

“Where was he found?”

“A park,” the doctor said distractedly. “Some early morning joggers stumbled over him, got him help.”

“He went missing on the ninth.”

The doctor nodded. “He was found the same day, then.”

Daemon nodded to himself and worked out the math. Tsuna was twenty-five years old and had done his inadvertent dimensional slide on his birthday, which made his new one the ninth of January, born in 1954. He would tack on four years for himself so he could be an appropriately-aged older brother. “How long do you estimate before he wakes up?”

“Not a damn clue,” the doctor said breezily. “But by the time you have the paperwork filled out, we should have a better idea of things.”

He nodded and eyed his new “brother”, and definitely added a disguise to his mental list of things to do. Tsuna’s resemblance to Giotto was startling in its intensity, and that should be corrected in case any Vongola who’d seen the portrait hall at HQ happened upon him.

A week later of hectic work saw him relaxing in Tsuna’s hospital room, reading a book and absently eating some hospital food of dubious quality. How they could do that to poor, innocent pasta…? Movement in his peripheral vision registered after a moment and caused him to lower the book. A soft groan of pain followed, so he set his book down, as well as his fork, and turned his attention to the occupant of the bed.

“Hey,” he said softly.

Tsuna’s eyes slid open slowly and a hand reached to shakily touch his head.
“You were in some kind of accident, little brother,” he said, still softly, and took a moment to press the call button to summon a nurse. “You’re in a hospital, so try to relax.”

“I have … a brother?” Tsuna whispered raspily.

Daemon’s brow went up. Before he could respond, however, the doctor bustled in and plastered one of those professional smiles on his face that held all the warmth of plastic.

“I see you’re awake,” the doctor said cheerfully. “Do you remember what happened?” When Tsuna just stared at him in confusion the doctor said, “All right. How about your name. Do you remember that?”

After a pregnant pause Tsuna shook his head, his eyes beginning to fill with panic.

Daemon reached over to place a hand on Tsuna’s. “Hey, it’s all right. I’m here. As soon as you’re ready to be released I’ll take you home. We’ll get through this together, Sora.”

“That’ll be a few days,” the doctor pointed out, eyeing the chart again. “At least.”

“And the memory loss?” he asked.

The doctor looked up and shrugged casually. “Memory is a tricky thing. It may come back, it may not. But trying to force it would be a bad idea. A lot of that depends on why. If it’s just physical trauma…”

Daemon nodded, understanding what was being implied. A glance at Tsuna showed that he did not and was too wrapped up in confusion and, to a lesser degree, panic. He squeezed gently, trying to be comforting. If Elena were present she would give him that damn look, the one brimming with disappointment, if he did anything less.

‘True, the odds of this boy ever becoming the head of Vongola again is pretty damn slim,’ he thought, ‘but she would still expect me to take care of him. At least until he can stand on his own two feet. His memory coming back is just—well, if it doesn’t, he won’t be burdened by all that, and if it does, maybe he’ll be comfortable enough here that he won’t crack. I do wonder how much he does remember, though, but it’ll have to wait until he’s released. I’m not about to bring it up in a civilian hospital.’

Tsuna carefully twisted his wrist so that he could curl his fingers around Daemon’s.

That evening he was bombarded by another set of moments and memories. From what he was getting, Byakuran’s ring had been partially sealed as a result of his attempt to take over the world using its power to see sideways into other dimensions, but Reborn had called in his fellows and arranged to loosen the seal, so that Byakuran could send weak thoughts and receive them.

‘You can’t bring him back?’

‘No.’ The thought was accompanied by memories of Byakuran having brought over an alternate version of himself. The destruction of a world was not a price any of them were willing to pay again. ‘Tsuna’s slide was purely accidental. Even if I could bring him back, he would be a mere shadow of himself, and I will not destroy another world.’

‘He has memory loss.’

‘Work around it. Besides, the others should be able to help.’
‘No. It’s 1979.’

‘…I see. That explains why I couldn’t find myself there. I am not sure what I’ll tell the people here, but no matter what, they’re going to be extremely unhappy.’

‘With you.’

‘Yes, but that doesn’t matter. Tsuna saved me, too. Please take care of him. Help him to stand on his own. I don’t think I can do this much longer, this exchange. It’s a lesser form of what I did with Ghost, so…’

‘I understand. You’ve given me a lot to work with and I’ve already established an identity for him as my younger brother, and found us a place to live.’

‘Good. I’ll send more if I can think of more that would help. But talking? Probably not. I’m already about to lose consciousness.’

‘Thank you.’

When no more was sent he shook himself back to full awareness and sighed. His dinner was a burnt mess. Time for delivery.

“So what do you remember?” he asked.

Tsuna—now Sora—looked up from his meal and frowned.

Daemon bit back a sigh and slid tendrils of Mist into Sora’s mind to make him a bit more likely to actually talk. The quicker he knew what he was dealing with the quicker he could formulate a plan of action. “Do you remember that you were a part of the mafia?” he asked bluntly.

Sora looked back down and shifted uncomfortably. “Yes.”

“All right. Do you remember using your flames?”

“…Yes. But not how.”

“That’s fine. I can teach you if you want. Knowing how to defend yourself is never a bad idea. Give it some thought.”

“I don’t … remember why I was mafia.”

He nodded. “It’s fine. As soon as I found out where you were, that you’d been hurt, I found us a new place to live.” A tiny, minuscule, infinitesimally small part of him squirmed at the lack of blunt truth, but he was a Mist, and deception was his very life. “And arranged for new identities.”

Sora’s head snapped up and he swallowed his most recent bite. “New identities? Then what’s my real name?”

Daemon shook his head. “Until your memory returns it’s probably better not to know.” ‘And maybe with it currently out of reach I can train you properly, so that if it comes back you’ll already be comfortable with your power.’ One of the things Byakuran had passed on was the knowledge that Tsuna had his flames sealed by the Ninth at a young age. He knew better than anyone alive just how much harm that could cause. But, it was possible, enough time had passed that the damage was
mostly healed, and the memory loss would allow for Tsuna to heal in other ways, as well.

‘He’ll probably crack for a while once he gets them back, anyway,’ he thought. ‘He did leave behind his little circle of friends, after all.’ From what Byakuran imparted, however, it was highly unlikely they were properly harmonized bonds. Tsuna should have been complaining of the strain of loss otherwise.

“I guess.”

He aimed a faint smirk Sora’s way. That having been established, he had a rough idea of what he planned to do in terms of training his new little brother. “I will have to create a disguise for you,” he said. “Or rather, I’ll have to place you in the one I came up with. When I created our new identities, I had to play both parts for the pictures. But I have a way to do that and not need to constantly maintain it.”

Sora stared at him, confusion lurking in his eyes again.

“Not hair dye or anything so simple,” he said, shifting his appearance to the new one.

“Oh. You’re a Mist.”

He nodded. “What I can do is create a piece of jewelry for you to wear, a piercing of some kind. Something tiny that won’t be obvious. It can be hidden in the curve of your ear so it would only be seen at extreme angles.” Mukuro’s use of illusion to create functioning organs for that Nagi girl had given him the idea. “I can ensure you won’t feel any pain from the insertion. And from there it’s simply a matter of making sure it heals properly.”

“…You don’t know why I was hurt?”

“No,” he lied smoothly, “but I have suspicions.” He finished up the last of his General Tso’s and got up to throw away the empty cartons, then looked back at his “brother” as a thought hit him. “I wonder… I’m going to track down a Mist ring in addition to a Sky ring for you. You might not be able to use that one as well as your own, but there’s no harm in trying. Being able to competently wield Mist Flames would give you an advantage.”

“The property of Sky is harmony,” Sora said distractedly, as if digging around in his memories the way he was in his Chinese take-away.

“Yes, which means you can probably get some reaction from any ring. How good of one remains to be seen. But if you can learn to wield Mist to a certain level of competence, you could change your disguise on the fly, overpowering the earring temporarily. Or learn to change it directly, to alter what’s, ah, stored in the earring.” He was pleased to see that Sora’s expression began to show interest.

“That might be … fun … to learn,” Sora said slowly.

‘Fun, huh?’ He would have to make all of his lessons fun. Byakuran had hardly been present for any of Tsuna’s original training, but from what he could share, Daemon noted that Tsuna seemed reluctant during the earlier encounters. Later encounters showed that the Vongola had seemingly accepted his power and the use of it, but he never seemed to take any pleasure in it.

That was all well and good, for taking pleasure in something purely for its destructive power was an easy way to losing your grip on sanity. He, like any other Mist, knew that slippery road, as it was inherent in the construction properties of their flames. He thought Tsuna would be one to avoid that trap.
Sora entered the apartment and stopped dead a moment later, divided on whether or not to depart or 
close the door and investigate. The subtle haze of Sky Flame he wore like a cloak and his intuition 
were both pointing to an intruder.

“You’re good,” came an impossibly smooth voice.

Sora watched warily as a figure stepped into view, like it had bled out of the shadows. The height 
and build suggested a man. The toe caps of his shoes, his gloves, tie, one shoulder of his jacket, and 
even the right cheek of his face had a checker pattern on them. His hat appeared to be made of iron, 
and even it had the same pattern on part of it. The man’s left cheek looked scarred, as if he’d been 
burned at some point, but then it faded away in the next second as if it had never existed.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” His brother was going to have a fit over someone gaining entry 
to their home.

The man twisted his hand; from it a—a pacifier?—appeared. It was tossed in the air a moment later, 
where it hovered for a split second at the top of its arc, then fell and was captured, and tucked away. 
“I am here to gather the world’s strongest, the chosen seven.”

He frowned. “Chosen seven? Gather them for what? Are you saying I’m one of them?” And what 
did a clear pacifier have to do with anything?

“I have need of a team,” the man said, his voice like silk, or the sound of scales of slithering snakes. 

It set Sora on edge, but at the same time it was soothing.

“The renumeration will be considerable. But first, I’d like you to get together,” the man continued, 
then gestured at what looked like a map resting on the console table against the wall in the short 
entryway—he only spared it a quick glance. “That will show you where you can meet your 
companions. There you would also find out what the job entails, and whether you think you could 
work with the other chosen.”

So he could decline, in theory. Something he would have to discuss with Kiri.

The still unidentified man tipped his hat and slid back into the shadows. Sora, after a few moments, 
could no longer sense him. ‘How does he do that?’ he wondered, then shut the door. He ignored the 
map for the time being and continued on in to the kitchen so he could begin preparing dinner. If the 
man was still there and beyond his ability to sense, there was little he could do about it. He was just 
about to drain spaghetti when Kiri arrived.

“What’s with this map?” his brother asked.

Sora looked over his shoulder before moving the pot to the sink. “We, uh, had a visitor. I’ll tell you 
once we sit down.” Several minutes later they were both seated with plates in front of them.

“So? This visitor you mentioned?”

“He was already inside when I got home,” he admitted, and was unsurprised when his brother’s eyes 
lit up with anger. “I sensed him the moment I stepped in, but I couldn’t figure out where he was.” He 
twirled his fork into the spaghetti on his plate and took his first bite, absenting noting that his latest 
adjustments to the sauce were good, but perhaps a touch of sugar might add something. His brother
was barely able to fend for himself when it came to cooking, so he had learned in self defense, and because, no matter what Kiri said, he had a tendency to worry about their finances.

“What did he have to say, this visitor? Why the map?” After Sora related the encounter Kiri said, “Hm. I suppose I don’t see the harm if you want to check it out. If you’re interested in the job, why not take it? It’d be experience for you, and experience in working with a team. The note on the map says the twenty-sixth, so you’ve got two weeks to decide. I’m more concerned about how he got in. I upped the defenses after that last idiot who came sniffing around.”

‘Two weeks, huh?’ he thought, knowing by the look on his brother’s face that Kiri was feeling miffed about the hole in his defenses. ‘Plenty of time to mull it over, I guess. It might be interesting. And if I don’t like the other people selected I can say no. On the other hand, there’s been more than one person after me in the past year, simply because I’m a Sky. Experience would be good. Assuming I can trust any of these chosen.’

The meeting place was a rather swanky spot in Rome, a city recognized as neutral ground, mainly because of the Church. It was considered bad manners to misbehave around the Pope. When he arrived he sought out the bar and the man tending it. “Crows,” he said quietly. “Their music is like turtleweed.”

The bartender’s brow slid up, then he nodded and popped open his register so he could lift the tray. A key was handed over a moment later. ‘Down that hall, door at the end on the left. It’s self-locking. There’s a vacuum tube system you can use to send orders, though one of you will have to open the door to accept delivery of whatever food and drink you asked for. The room’s paid up for the year, so keep the key. Come January, though…”

He nodded.

“There’s menus back there,” the bartender added.

“Thank you.” He headed off to the indicated room, tested the door and found it was indeed locked, and then keyed it open. Inside was a medium sized room with a table large enough for the “chosen seven”. Windows along one wall were blocked by wooden-slat blinds stained a dark brown, and the lighting was “intimate”, leaving pools of shadows along the walls.

He was the first to arrive, and took a seat to one side so he could keep an eye on both the windows and the door. A large manila envelope occupied the center of the table, but he ignored that in favor of browsing the menu at his seat. Hopefully the fare was at least decent and the drinks not watered down.

Sora grabbed the waiting order pad and began to write down what he wanted, pausing for a split second when his senses alerted him to someone else arriving just before the door’s lock clicked and it opened. He glanced over long enough to see it was a woman with dark hair, then finished up. He set the pad and attached pencil down and pushed his menu away.

She took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

He gave her a steady look. “Ciao. I’m Higashi.”

“Alfero,” she replied.

He nodded and pushed the order pad past the manila envelope and over to her. “I assume you got the
same kind of visit I did, from a man in a…”

“A mask,” she said, then grabbed her menu.

“With a hat,” he replied.

“Of iron.” She set down the menu and grabbed the pencil, then jotted down her order just as Sora’s intuition alerted him again.

The door opened and a cloaked figure stepped inside. He or she (and Sora was inclined to think male based on the way their clothing hung) approached the table and took a seat equidistant from him and Alfero.

“Ciao,” he said again. “I’m Higashi.”

Alfero pushed the order form over and said, “Alfero.”

“Viper,” said the figure in a whispery voice.

The door opened again, that time admitting a sharply-dressed man wearing a fedora. Sora nearly goggled at the man’s sideburns, but the past year with Kiri had dampened his tendency toward obvious reactions.

Introductions went around again and Sinclair was given the order form. Next was Vittori, a man who, oddly enough, had green hair, then Teschio, who had purple hair and piercings, and finally, a Chinese man who introduced himself as Zhu.

After Zhu wrote down his order Sinclair, whose default expression seemed to be either smug or arrogant, looked at Teschio and said, “Go send that in.”

“What? Why me?”

Sora frowned. “Not a bad idea, Sinclair. We can take turns,” he said, then grabbed the pad, ripped off the top sheet, and delivered it to the cannister for the system and sent it on its way. After he sat back down he said, “This is supposedly a team of seven strong people, not you and a bunch of subordinates.”

Sinclair sneered lightly. “You seem to be game to take charge.”

“Sometimes you reach for the Sky. Sometimes you are the Sky,” he replied, having pegged everyone at the table by their flame type. The masked man had chosen seven people, one of each flame, and from everything he knew, he was intended to be in charge, or at least part of the glue that held the group together. Kiri might have drilled all of that into his head, but his intuition and sensing capabilities told him plenty, as well.

“I’m going to assume none of you know much more than what little I do,” Zhu said. “So, the envelope?”

“Higashi was here first,” Alfero commented.

“Supposedly a team,” he repeated. “I thought it would be premature to open it before we were gathered.” He felt someone coming down the hallway and almost got up again, but waited until a knock sounded at the door. He strode over quickly and accepted the cart, then wheeled it back to the table and began handing orders out.
Once he was seated again he sent out a pulse of Sky Flame to ensure there had been no tampering with his order—Kiri would beat him senseless if he ever forgot that precaution—then took a sip of his wine, followed by a bite of his bruschetta. He looked up when the envelope was pushed at him to see Sinclair staring expectantly.

No one objected, so he wiped his fingers and pulled the envelope closer. Inside was a sheaf of paper in packets; there were seven of them. He slid a copy to each person at the table and sat back to read his.

‘Guard duty?’ he thought. ‘More like “preventing an assassination” duty. So we’d have to surveil the entire route we expect this guy to take, have at least one of us right there as a bodyguard, if not two, and the rest on scouting and distraction duty. At least we have a couple of weeks to get all that done before the actual escort.’

The man himself was of no particular importance aside from knowing who his enemies might be and how they might go after him. The packet included the projected route, but Sora already knew from his lessons that they would have to scout the entire thing, plus make contingency plans for alternate paths. He was also not naïve enough to think that killing was off the table.

“I suggest,” Zhu said into a silence broken only by the rustle of paper or the sound of eating, “that we learn as much as we can based on this information, and meet again in one week to decide on roles and plans.”

No one objected to the assumption that they would take the mission. He was there because he was curious and he wanted something interesting to do. The lure of riches meant little when he had the power to intuit lucrative investments to make that would build up a hefty account in Switzerland, or use what Kiri had taught him to sucker it out of people.

A look around showed that Alfero was only slightly uncomfortable, but she held herself in a way that suggested military training. Barring being a part of the upper class, no one sat like that and moved that way unless they were military. Teschio looked anxious and out of sorts, as if he had no idea why he was there, but wasn’t willing to get up and leave.

“I agree,” Alfero said. “We will all likely have different sources we can tap, and different perspectives to add.”

Sora finished his wine. “We’ll have a fair amount to go over, so ten o’clock?”

Sinclair nodded and tucked his packet away, then transferred his plate and cup to the cart, which started a progression of tidying up. Sora took charge of returning the cart to the front, then headed to the library. He wanted information, not only about the person they would be protecting, but about the buildings along the way. If he could track down the right information he could track down the plans, and start thinking of alternate pathways to take.

Nicolo Ferro was the owner of a manufactory specializing in poisons, and his leading customer was the Velenoso Famiglia, whose entire reputation was founded on being able to poison their targets. They wanted to take over the manufactory and cut Ferro out, to gain not only the knowledge behind the processes, but his contacts, suppliers, and to decrease their costs.

That being the case, they would have to be on guard for poison strikes. How they might be delivered, however… Kiri might know, or could at least point him in the right direction, hopefully. That left the route to go over, first on maps, and then in person.

That evening he pulled some sauce he’d made earlier in the week out of the freezer and set it to
warm up, then boiled some water to make penne. One of the restaurants he had visited recently had baked the stuff in individual square dishes and he wanted to try it, though he felt that plain mozzarella melted on top was a little boring.

He gave Kiri a five minute warning before tossing together two small salads and setting them on the table. A cruet of dressing was placed, and then he was getting the food from the oven. Kiri made himself useful by setting the table and bringing his own plate over after Sora had placed the dish on it.

“I was hoping you could give me some advice,” he said after accepting a glass of wine from his brother.

“About whatever meeting you had today?” Kiri asked, then plunged his fork into the dish. He stopped mid-chew with a funny look on his face.

“Yes. And what is that expression about?”

“What kind of cheese is this?”

“A mixture of Colby and Monterey Jack.”

“…I like it,” Kiri said. “This is a nice change from the norm. What do you need advice on, then?”

“How would I go about getting information on the Velenoso Famiglia? They use poisons, but I’m not sure how they deliver it.”

Kiri ate a few more forkfuls before saying, “Well, I could just straight up tell you. In terms of a mission, I would count as an information source.”

“You have spies everywhere,” he said with a small smile.

“Keep training with that Mist ring and you can probably do the same yourself, if on a smaller scale.”

“I will. I promise. I think…” He paused, turning the situation over in his mind as he ate. “I think this time yes, I will ask you straight. But perhaps profiles on the various famiglie I can use to study?”

Kiri nodded. “I can work something up. But it’s also the kind of thing we can do together. Little missions of our own design to spy out a famiglia and make a dossier.”

“Preferably starting with the less reactionary?” he said.

Kiri nodded. “After dinner we can start.”

He had made a list of all the routes they could reasonably take, then went over the buildings along the way. Even a shop could be of interest if it was possible to use Mist Flames to gloss past those inside to take Ferro through a safer way. He spent his time before the next meeting walking those streets in disguise—or rather, a different disguise from his usual, his brother having taught him how to override the one “stored” in his earring.

Sora was an average Mist at best, but the class of the ring he was using helped push him a little higher, along with the harmony factor of his Sky Flames. Someone skilled in sliding past illusions might see beyond his alterations, but unless they were stronger than Kiri, they would still see what his brother had devised.
‘I wonder what effect layering illusionary appearances would have?’ he wondered idly as he stepped into a coffee shop and purchased a mixed fruit tart and a small coffee (that he would drink and not especially enjoy) with plenty of cream and sugar. ‘I feel like I’ve seen a film once where layer upon layer of masks were stripped away, but for the life of me I can’t remember.’

The shop itself was simply too crowded with furniture to make it a viable egress point, so he drained his coffee and wandered back outside, nibbling at his tart as he moved on to the next possible option. There were so many buildings, and so many spots where someone could snipe from an upper floor, even with senbon or darts. All it would take, with the right poison, was even a bullet shot to graze the target.

‘Why do people in his position feel the need to do stupid things like drive to a fancy restaurant for a business meeting, eat a fancy meal, and then drive back? In a convertible, of all things. It’s like he’s asking to be assassinated. Or hit with a poison that will only be cured if he signs over his company.’

He arrived first and let himself into the meeting room. Menus were out, along with an order pad. Sora took a different seat and glanced over the menu again before writing down what he wanted.

Sinclair was next, and that time he got a nod of greeting, which he returned before sliding the pad over. Once they were all assembled Teschio dropped off the order sheet without being asked. ‘Quite possibly to avoid Sinclair trying to boss him around again,’ he thought, ‘and not be in line again for a while.’

He noticed Viper giving his drink an odd look as he pulsed his selections. Sora had no idea what was so odd about chocolate milk. It had vodka in it! “All right,” he said after a sip, and produced the information he had collected, one packet for each person, and slid them around. “This is what I have.”

Sora sipped his drink and ate his food, feeling a touch of amazement and some mild resentment that half the table seemed surprised at how much information he had collected. True, they had no idea what kind of a slave driver his brother could be, or even that he had one, but still…

When Sinclair looked up next there was an odd gleam in his eyes. Sora found it scarily attractive for some reason he was not willing to dwell on. Even after a year his memories had yet to return, so he had no idea why the thought of being with a female made him want to run the other way as quickly as possible. That he was already finding some of his fellow team members attractive was disturbing.

Sinclair went next, though he gave his report verbally. Sora jotted down notes on the backs of the sheets of his packet. The others followed with their own reports, and then Teschio said, “So we need at least one person with him at all times, maybe two.”

“With the rest acting as scouts and deterrent,” he said.

“Well,” Sinclair said a bit condescendingly, “I vote for placing Higashi and Vittori as the bodyguards.”

“By what reasoning?” Zhu asked.

Sinclair’s brow went up as he ran his index finger over a ring he wore.

“I see.”

He had to assume that was Sinclair saying he could discern flame types. Putting a Lightning in close
made sense, assuming that Vittori had control of his flames, or even knowledge of them. He was going to have to do a lot more research, regarding the rest of his team. Still, given that Vittori wasn’t objecting, it looked like the man had a clue, or at least saw no reason to disagree. ‘Maybe after the mission I can do that,’ he thought. ‘Though I may have some time before this one starts.’

Vittori shrugged as a response.

“It’s fine,” Sora said, though he wondered how that was supposed to work in Sinclair’s head inside the restaurant. He could make himself unremarkable just fine, though he had to wonder how Vittori would handle that. Then again, the man did look like he’d just stepped out of an advertisement for the latest and greatest research facility, so maybe he had some odd tech toys up his sleeve.

“So we need to decide on the most likely places for an attempt,” Alfero said, “so we can position ourselves correctly.”

“My bet is on the way back,” Sora said, “when the client would be feeling more relaxed, though the restaurant itself seems like an obvious choice. Someone could infiltrate the place and poison the cutlery rather than the food itself, or even the man’s napkin.”

Sinclair shot an approving look his way, as did Zhu. Vittori eyed him curiously, but nodded.

“That being the case,” he continued, “I plan to infiltrate myself, ahead of time, and secure multiple copies of each in the event his need to be replaced. I don’t think they’d go for a tablecloth, if only because his dinner partner or the staff might be affected and give up the game. I have some skill with, ah, misdirection, so…”

He also knew, thanks to Kiri’s tests, that the client was not proof against his level of ability when it came to illusions, so Sora could trap the man in one if necessary, just to keep him easy to handle. He hoped it would not come to that, because then he personally would be at risk.

“It’s easier to lead a target,” Alfero said, “so I would expect a back or side attack.”

“One of us should keep watch on the vehicle while they’re in the restaurant,” Teschio said.

“I will,” Viper said.

They spent a few hours hashing out the details, Teschio actually sending off another order and collecting another cart when the expected knock came at the door, but eventually they were satisfied with their game plan.

And not once had anyone actually said anything about flames.

Sora met up with the others outside the client’s ostentatious home. He was dressed in the kind of outfit that suggested a humorless aide with a stick firmly lodged in an uncomfortable place. He adjusted his spectacles in a stilted manner and flashed a brief and utterly devoid of warmth smile.

He got the distinct feeling that half the team was laughing on the inside, so he fussily swapped his leather-bound planner to his other hand and sniffed. A look at Vittori showed that the man was dressed in a sharp suit and wearing a chauffeur’s hat, which hid the green of his hair—or maybe the man had used temporary dye.

“I’ve already gone over the car. I’ll bring it around,” Vittori said, then strode away.
Sora checked his watch, then his planner, then glanced toward the front door.

“Right,” Sinclair said. “We’ll just melt into the shadows for now. Try not to die or anything foolish like that.”

Sora sniffed again and swapped the planner to his left hand, then approached the door and rang the bell. A butler allowed him entry to the foyer and bade him to wait. Ferro showed up a few minutes later and gave him an approving look, then allowed himself to be escorted out to the car. Once tucked away in the dubious safety of a classic convertible Sora said, “We will be arriving at your meeting in fifteen minutes, signore, twenty if traffic is uncooperative.”

“How are you going to protect me inside?” Ferro asked.

Sora flashed another humorless smile. “We are skilled at making ourselves unremarkable and unnoticed, signore. Some of us will be inside the restaurant, ready to deflect any and all attempts on your life.”

“What if I need to signal you?”

“Make a casual remark about the weather, signore,” he replied. He noticed Vittori eyeing him for a moment in the rear-view mirror.

“I worry about the effect all this rain is having on crops?” the man said.

“Something of that nature, yes, signore.”

“It’s just that I can’t afford to look cowed,” Ferro explained. “Going out like this is a way to not only meet my obligations to my business associates, but also to say I’m not afraid.”

“I understand, signore,” he said smoothly. ‘I still think you’re a fool for using a convertible, though. It’s taking that stance too far.’

They arrived at the restaurant a few minutes later and Sora escorted Ferro inside. He knew that Vittori would be entering on their heels, as soon as Viper took on guarding the car from any tampering. The first thing Sora did when Ferro was shown to a table was slide on a pair of gloves and use illusion to swap out the cutlery and napkin.

He wasn’t getting any nudges about those items, but it was better to be safe. He took up a position with an unobstructed view of the table and shoved his stolen goods into the hollowed-out planner along with the gloves, and sent a spy on over to the table to listen in for any verbal cues. It was difficult to split his attention between his eyes and input from the spy, but he managed.

Vittori, sans hat, strolled on by like he had every right to be there, and took up position to keep an eye on the doors to the kitchen and the entrance. Sora was relived when dinner itself went smoothly and Ferro never once referenced the weather. Ferro finished up his business meeting-cum-lunch and paid the bill, then headed for the exit.

Sora took his place again at Ferro’s side as they departed the restaurant, Vittori already having slipped out to bring the car around. It was on the way back, both to his vindication and irritation, that a serious attempt was made. He would have to wait until they met up afterward to see just what else
had transpired, but for the moment…

He could see Vittori’s eyes go wide in the rear-view mirror, and even though the man quickly swerved to the side and reduced the speed of the car, the attack itself was sweeping enough that it could not be so easily avoided. Thousands of flashing needles were headed their way, as if someone had loaded up a trebuchet and launched it.

Sora grabbed Ferro and pushed him down, though that was only a stopgap solution. Any of those projectiles could ricochet and strike, introducing whatever poison they might carry to any or all three of them. Just as he was about to use his flames Vittori erupted in green light, forming a crackling barrier around the “interior” of the car. The man seemed stupidly surprised, but managed to keep the vehicle in motion and headed toward Ferro’s home.

Sora reached out to weave a web of his own flames into the barrier Vittori had made. The combination of the two, and Sora’s intuition, caused sparks of electricity to snap out and scorch each of the needles that approached. They were deflected or bounced off the barrier, but the end result was the same; the client was safe. And hopefully, the poison had been burned away, because someone random would surely end up sticking themselves with one of those things.

“I’m thinking you should drive faster,” Sora said calmly.

Vittori gave a jerky nod and accelerated. A few minutes later they arrived at the house, and Sora quickly hustled the client inside.

“Those lights,” Ferro said, his expression somewhere between shock and wonder.

“I respectfully suggest you not use a convertible next time you go out,” Sora said evenly.

“But those lights…”

“Technology is a wondrous thing, signore,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting I must attend.”

“Oh of course, of course,” Ferro said a bit absently. “I’ll contact the coordinator about payment…”

Sora nodded and exited the house, then got into the passenger seat of the car Vittori was then driving, a sensible dark blue sedan that had seen better days. His prop glasses went into a pocket and the drive to the bar passed in silence, but Sora noticed the signs of anxiety in the moisture darkening his companion’s hair around the temples. Sora could feel the dampness under his arms and the sheen of sweat swiftly cooling on his skin, plus the weariness of coming down from an adrenaline high.

Vittori parked near the bar and they both slid out, walked to it and inside, and headed straight for their meeting room. Vittori was even nice enough to unlock and hold the door for him, which caused some surprise to flit through his head. The first thing Sora did after grabbing a seat was write down an order for more vodka-laced chocolate milk. Food could wait until he got home.

Vittori wrote his down as well and, as everyone else was already present, sent it off to be filled, then took the seat next to him.

“I’m guessing you guys missed one,” Sora said dryly.

“Unfortunately,” Alfero said just as dryly. “What the hell were those lights?”

Sora blinked. “I’ve been able to do it for as long as I can remember,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean a whole lot when my memory is shot. Vittori can, so can’t all of you?” he asked. “Perhaps I was
mistaken, but I rather thought that was part of the point in who was chosen for this team.” In truth it was more of a wild guess, but his intuition seemed to be leaning that way.

“What did you tell the client?” Sinclair asked.

“I passed it off as technology. At this point the shock may have worn off and he’s confused about how that could be possible, but it’s a little too late for him to press the issue.”

Alfero stared at Vittori, her brow going up.

“That’s the first time it’s ever happened, if that’s what you’re not asking,” Vittori said, then got up to answer the knock at the door signaling their order.

Sora pulsed his drink out of habit and gratefully took a sip once the scan came back clear.

“And that,” Alfero said. “What the hell is that?”

He looked up with an innocent expression. “You mean to tell me you don’t test your food and drink for tampering?”

“I do,” Sinclair said. “You don’t get to be so good without making enemies.” He eyed Sora. “I’m just more subtle about it.”

‘More like these people are a lot more observant than the average random person, and someone who plies his trade with a gun needs to be even more so. Sometimes it’s hard to see other people as real when they seem so clueless,’ Sora thought with a shrug. “And maybe my method ensures no one here is getting something unexpected in their selections.”

“How did you guys miss something that could launch an entire shipment?” Vittori asked.

“Remote launch,” Zhu said. “We were looking at people, but the equipment was somewhere else entirely.”

Vittori sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, temporarily bumping his glasses out of the way.

“And those people are all unconscious,” Alfero said, “or were when we left.”

Sora nodded to himself. The mission parameters had said nothing about kills being required. If Ferro had wanted his enemies dead, he should have said so. He only then noticed an envelope at the center of the table.

Sinclair slid it over to him.

‘Is he doing that because I’m a Sky, or because he’s mocking me?’ he wondered, then picked it up and opened it. Inside were eight pieces of paper, seven of them strips with numbers on them. They looked like account numbers. A closer look at one showed him a bank name was imprinted in tiny letters. He kept one for himself and passed the others out.

The final paper was a short letter of sorts, which he read out loud. “Congratulations on completing your first mission and having acquitted yourselves well. I will be in contact in the near future with another job for the team.”

“That’s it?” Teschio asked.

He nodded and set the paper down. “I guess he’ll send post?” he replied uncertainly.
Alfero heaved an impatient sigh and got up. “Well, I’m heading out. I suppose I’ll see you all later.” She left, and was followed by everyone but Vittori and Teschio.

Sora drank more of his milk and wondered if they should have discussed what happened more.

“You can … do that whenever you want?” Teschio asked quietly.

He nodded.

“And you think all of us can. Will you teach me how?”

Sora smiled. “I can sure try.”

“And me?” Vittori asked.

“Sure. How about we meet back here at ten tomorrow?” he suggested. “I’m a bit tired from the excitement and it’s better to start with a clear head and some rest. But tonight, in a safe, quiet place, try to…” He paused, squinting at nothing. “Think about what you might use it for? What would give you the resolve. All right?”

They nodded, but Teschio asked, “And payment?”

Sora frowned. “Payment is in having a team with more options. Something like that can save a life as easy as kill. It might be my life you save.”

Teschio looked only half convinced, but nodded, so Sora smiled and knocked back the remainder of his drink, then placed the glass on the cart and departed.

Out of habit he took a circuitous route home, stopping at the market place to pick up supplies for dinner that evening. He was halfway through making minestrone soup when Kiri wandered in and looked over his shoulder.

“Mm, that looks and smells delicious,” his brother commented. “So how’d the job go?”

“Well enough, I guess,” he replied. “I’ll tell you about it over dinner. On a side note, do we have any spare rings?”

“What kind?” Kiri said, then sliced the end off the load of bread waiting on the counter and slathered it with butter.

“Lightning and Cloud. And if you take the other end of that loaf I will hurt you.”

Kiri laughed. “As if you could.”

Sora stopped stirring for a moment and looked his brother in the eye. “I’ll sing,” he threatened.

“Low blow,” Kiri hissed, then bit into his bread.

Once they were served and seated he went over the mission. His brother shook his head over the description of the attack. “But you used something I taught you, so that’s good. But why the rings?”

“Two of them asked me after the others left if I could try to teach them how to do the same, and I said we could start tomorrow. I figured having rings would help, for focus if nothing else.”

“I will give you some, with one understanding,” Kiri said seriously. When Sora nodded he continued, “The rule still stands. No mentions of the mafia unless you are certain they’re already
Sora nodded again and shoved a forkful of salad into his mouth. The two were not mutually inclusive, but they might as well be. The mafia took a dim view of so-called “civilians” running around using supernatural powers, but if you knew what you were doing, had the right powers, or the right allies, you could avoid notice for an indefinite period of time. “I suspect that Sinclair and Zhu already know. Not sure about Viper. Alfero was military, so probably not. And if Vittori or Teschio had any idea, you would think they’d already be aware of flames.”

“Teschio? Purple hair?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a stuntman. Calls himself The Great Skull. I doubt he’d have a clue.”

“I’ll be careful,” he promised.

“What time tomorrow?”

“Ten.”

Kiri’s eyes went hazy in thought, then he nodded. “I can have them before you’d need to leave.”

He switched back to wine for their training session; vodka was a little too potent, and the combination with chocolate milk made it far too easy to drink more than was wise. Vittori and Teschio showed up within minutes of each other, and the first thing Sora did was hand them each a ring.

“You guys ever read fantasy?” he asked.

Vittori looked almost offended at the idea, but Teschio nodded.

“All right. Think of the rings like Gandalf’s staff or something along those lines. They aren’t absolutely required, but they do make things a whole lot easier. Vittori, how did you feel once we were back at Ferro’s place?”

“A bit wiped out, but not like I desperately needed a nap.”

He nodded. “The way this was explained to me is that those lights—flames—are a high-density energy derived from your life source, much like the energy you would use for running or swimming.”

“So eating and rest…”

He nodded at Vittori. “The, ah, purity of the flames depends on your resolve. You wanted to protect our lives badly enough that your flames came out to do your bidding. Yours lean toward being defensive in nature, but any of them can be used offensively. What happened is that they formed a barrier that also lashed out, kind of like the surface of the sun.”

“And burned the poison off them?” Vittori guessed. “I assume they were poisoned, anyway.”

“I suspect so, yes. Your flames are like lightning,” he said, then chuckled when Vittori looked confused. “The base property is hardening, which allows you to do things like increase the firmness
of something. But as you saw, you can project them as a barrier. Offensive uses are largely up to your imagination.”

“And me?” Teschio said a bit pushily.

Sora smiled. “You feel like clouds. Tell me, are you the sort to keep your heart locked away and drift so that you don’t have to deal with people that often?”

Teschio scowled.

“I’ll take that as a yes. The base property of your flames is propagation. That attack they used? Imagine throwing one needle and multiplying it into thousands. Or propagating the properties of something a little less obvious, like sound waves, or shock waves, or the force behind a punch. If I’m right about your flame type, you’re a seriously heavy hitter, a real powerhouse. Assuming you attack intelligently you can be a one-man army. Or, you can be more subtle, like a plague.”

Teschio’s expression slowly relaxed and flipped into a look of pride.

“So, those rings,” he said, then tapped the one he wore. “Gandalf’s staff, in a much more easily handled form. You can use them as a focal point. They’re made of a reactive metal designed to work with specific flame types, to help you draw them out.”

“Okay,” Vittori said, “can we back up a minute? You said something about your memory being shot. If that’s true…”

“Yes. I ended up in the hospital a year ago. They don’t know if it was an accident or a failed attempt on my life. But as a result, I lost a good chunk of my memories. I bashed my head pretty hard and there was some brain swelling.”

“You kept the important things.”

He shrugged. “Depends on how you define important, but yes, I retained my skills for the most part. I also spent the last year making sure I could use them. The only thing I ask of you two is that you be discreet.”

Vittori nodded. “Speaking as someone who knows more than a little about science and research, I’d hate to see what’d happen if…”

Teschio shuddered.

“Let’s get started, then. The easiest thing you can start with is to create flames on your rings, mainly to prove to yourselves that you have the resolve to do it.” He took a moment and sparked flames off his ring to give them a visual example. Orange flames danced for a few seconds before winking out.

Teschio looked fascinated by the display. “What else can you do?”

“Ah, plenty of things, but right at the moment I don’t want to limit your imaginations. When you can reliably spark flames off your rings we can move on to the next step.”

“You helped with that barrier,” Teschio said, and Vittori nodded in agreement.

“I did. I was just about to do something myself, but you did it first. So I sent my flames in to help. And before you ask, I’m like the sky, and the base property of my flames is harmony.”

Teschio started trying right away, but Vittori eyed him speculatively for a few seconds before staring
at his ring. It made him wonder just how good the man’s memory was, and if he remembered that comment Sora had made at the start of the initial meeting, not to mention Sinclair’s reaction, and Zhu’s.

Several hours later he called for a break and they ordered lunch. While they ate he said, “Something else to consider is that stamina plays an important role in all of this. If you’re in decent shape, that’s fine, but if you’re in excellent shape, you can do more and last longer.”

Vittori made a slight face.

“I practice regularly, and learned ways to incorporate use of flames into something like tai chi for an even greater defensive capability, or a harder style to cause more damage, and unexpected damage at that. From a purely calculated point of view, imagine stamina or life force as a number. If you have one hundred units, you can only spend one hundred on moves of any kind, including flame use.”

“But if you had twice that…” Vittori trailed off and his expression went thoughtful as he had another bite of his pasta.

Sora nodded. “Then add resolve or force of will to that, which you might see as multiplicative rather than additive. The better your resolve, the denser the flames, and the more effect they have.”

Vittori nodded, as did Teschio. Sora wondered if the man’s work as a stuntman involved the study of physics. If so, it should make fairly good sense to him. The two finally got flames to dance on their rings an hour later, which made him smile.

“I would say practice for an hour this evening, before you go to sleep. It’ll tire you out and give you an almost meditative focus. And if you want, we can meet again here tomorrow at ten, and I’ll show you how I check my food.”

That evening he prepared some snacks for the next day—cookies, to be exact—and purposely inserted something wrong in six out of two dozen. Rice paper was used to enclose things like cayenne pepper and stuffed into the center of the unbaked dough.

When he arrived at the bar he asked the bartender for a clean platter and used that to display his offering. When Vittori and Teschio showed up they looked surprised and pleased, at least until he said, “These are a test.”

“How bad of a test?” Teschio said warily.

“Nothing fatal,” he replied, “unless you have some weird allergies. Six of these are in some way bad. We’re going to test pulsing your flames over the platter to see if you can detect which ones are not to be eaten. If you can tell one of them is bad, set it aside on that napkin. Once all six are found, we can eat what’s left.”

Vittori and Teschio exchanged a look of mild disbelief, then nodded.

“All right,” Vittori said. “I will try.” He laid his hand on the table and furrowed his brow in concentration. Flames danced, and he sighed. “Not what I was going for.”

“As a reminder,” Sora said, then pulsed flames off his ring in a sphere. “Though you can do them flat, too.”

Teschio also laid his ringed hand on the table and gave it a go. He managed a tiny circular blip of flames and smiled. “It’s a start.”
Sora nodded. “It takes practice, like anything else. Now, as I said yesterday, the base property of Sky Flames is harmony, so what I sense is disharmony. What you sense is something else, in theory.”

Vittori absently shushed him and kept trying, so Sora shot off an order for wine and the drinks his two companions always ordered. He spent the next two hours patiently, ready to answer questions if one of them should ask one, then called for a break when noon arrived. The platter was shoved off to the side while they ate, naturally.

An hour after that Vittori managed a proper pulse and almost sagged in relief. He pointed at one of the cookies. “I’m fairly certain that one is off.”

Sora pulsed the platter and nodded, then removed the cookie to the napkin. “Five more to go, guys. Actually, wait.” He pulled two good ones off the platter and handed one each to them. “A reward.” As soon as they bit into them he rearranged the remaining cookies to close the gaps and gave the platter a spin.
Sora continued to meet with Vittori and Teschio twice a week to help them work on flame usage. They would work for two hours, have lunch, then go their separate ways. Even with a mere four hours a week, they were coming along nicely, and he had no idea what they were doing on their own time as they never gave any details.

The beginning of March brought a letter in the mail, inviting them to meet again for a new job. Two days later saw him in the meeting room, and he was beginning to wonder if he was being a little too punctual given that he was always the first to arrive.

Orders were sent and delivered by Zhu that time. When he opened the envelope there were seven packets again, so he slid them around the table and set to reading. The mission, should they choose to accept it, was to acquire military secrets. Alfero sucked in a quiet breath, which caused him to look up briefly, but she quickly enough relaxed. Reading further, he saw that the job was in France, which probably explained it.

“We’re going to need to investigate their tech,” Vittori said. “How it’s defending them, how to get around it…”

“Okay, so how about you and I get on that?” Sinclair suggested.

“And me,” Alfero said.

Zhu shook his head. “The way you reacted says you were military at some point, so it’d be a better idea if you were to come up with an overview of potential tactics on their side.”

She frowned, but nodded.

“We’re going to need external and internal schedules,” Teschio pointed out.

“I will see if I can track down the contractor for the base,” Viper said, “and from there track down blueprints, if possible. And if so, Alfero would … be likely to give us some insight on those.”

She nodded after a moment.

Sora wondered if Viper would actually do that, or just glide on in and find a copy at the installation itself. “Well, I can do surveillance for shift changes and the like.”

“I will scout the entire external area looking for anything of interest,” Zhu said, “to start, at least.”

“That leaves Teschio,” he realized. “To do what?” “Maybe you and Teschio should do that,” he suggested. “One to keep a look out and one to note things down?”

Zhu nodded agreeably enough, and there was a hint of relief in Teschio’s expression.

“We just need to find a place to meet.”

Sinclair smiled. “It’s a little quaint, that area, but there are several inns and hotels. One of them has fairly large rooms. So long as we aren’t all coming and going at the same times it shouldn’t be too obvious, or we can split up amongst the available options and just meet at the largest.”

“We could go two, two, and three,” he suggested. “Sinclair and Vittori, Zhu and Teschio, then me, Alfero, and Viper.”
Sinclair nodded and, after no one objected, pulled a small notebook from his jacket, removed the pen clipped to the side, and jotted something down on each of six pages, then ripped them out and slid them around.

The one he got had simply a name, but he could find out what number to call with a little effort.

“Then I suggest we gear up with whatever we think we’ll need to start out with and make arrangements,” Alfero said. “The deadline is the end of the month, so the sooner we start…”

Again, no one objected. Before they left Sinclair said, “Let’s meet up in five days at Higashi’s to talk.”

Thankfully, he had a fair amount of money stashed away after the first job, so he could afford the associated costs with staying most of a month in another country.

“I was thinking of taking a train,” he told Kiri after he got home.

“So you can avoid anyone actually knowing you’ve entered the country?”

He nodded. “Any suggestions as to what I might take along?”

“In return for a nice steak dinner, I will do my very best to come up with a packing list for you, and I’ll even make you a reservation for the remainder of the month there.”

He grinned. “Okay. Potato or mixed vegetables?”

“Baked potato. With all the good stuff added.”

“I’ll go shopping, then,” he said, and promptly set off to do that.

The place Sinclair had selected for him was a larger, older inn. The suite he ended up in was homey and had amenities like an under-counter refrigerator, hot plate, sink, and coffee pot, plus a selection of utensils and dinnerware. He would probably just order up, and the coffee pot was only good for heating water for tea. The suite was probably designed for businessmen, and the outer room was large enough to hold a meeting, even if they’d be a bit crowded.

Nothing he brought with him was of any real importance, so even if someone did break in they would learn nothing about him. That being so, the morning after he arrived he set off to scope out the installation, using his Mist ring to alter the illusion on his appearance. He wormed his way under a bush some distance out from the entrance and started taking notes on the soldiers manning the front.

He stayed far enough back that use of binoculars would be reasonably safe, lowering the odds of any flashes of light reflecting off the lenses, and stopped once the sun angled around low enough to make it a danger. He wasn’t nearly close enough to tell much about any of them individually, so he would have to sneak closer, under illusion, to see if it was likely that any of the soldiers could even spot an illusion, never mind see past one.

But he was tired and desperately wanted something to eat, so he carefully squirmed back out from under the bush and sneaked away until it was safe to get up and move more quickly. He showered back at the hotel and ordered up a meal.

His brother would most likely go straight to illusion for the next part, but Sora was not nearly as strong using a Mist ring. He could use things for cover, such as hiding behind a car entering the
compound, then slide off to the side. The guard post out there might have a copy of the shift changes he could photograph.

But getting inside and poking around for schedules might require some props in case anyone could spot him despite optical invisibility. He suspected that Viper would be a better choice for infiltration, but they were not to meet up for another three days. He knew Viper was in the same inn and had yet to see him anywhere. For that matter, he had not spotted Alfero.

After a nap, and after it was full dark, he returned to the installation and did some more spying. The men on duty yawned a lot and spent time talking to each other, but that could be a front. To test it he used illusion to wrap himself in a light-bending cloak and carefully walked up to the gate. No one so much as twitched.

He was about to turn back when dust kicked up in the distance, signaling the arrival of a vehicle. As it got closer he could see it was a truck, the kind with the bed roofed over and walled in with canvas. It stopped at the gate and one of the men from the guard house popped out to check their identification, so Sora eased around the other side and slipped into the compound.

There were a number of buildings he could investigate, but based on the traffic pattern, he wanted the one not far to the east. People going off shift went there first, nine times out of ten, so perhaps there would be something of interest he could get pictures of. Unfortunately, the place turned out to be a mess hall when he glanced through the windows.

He could sneak in and listen to gossip, but that might not be very fruitful. Checking out the composition of the building materials, however, might be worth his time. Kiri had taught him a lot of useful tricks for a Sky to utilize. That, and he had a large collection of books (and comics for some reason), and Sora was not above taking inspiration from a multitude of sources.

He sneaked back over to the guard post and looked inside. There was a schedule tacked up on one wall, but he would need a camera with a telephoto lens to get a picture (and to avoid the guards hearing the shutter). Or he would have to write it all down by hand, which would take too long for his comfort. With that in mind he sneaked out the next time the gate opened and headed back to his suite.

He opened his door when a knock came; Alfero was standing in the hall. Sora let her in and gestured vaguely at the available seating. “I’ll call down an order once we’re all here.” She nodded and grabbed one of the armchairs, which did not surprise him. He wondered at times if she felt a little uncomfortable being the only woman on the team, but that thought was set aside when another knock came.

Viper glided in and drifted over to the other armchair, which meant the rest of them would be taking up the sofas. He suspected that Vittori and Teschio would sit with him. A few minutes later Sinclair and Vittori arrived and took seats, then Zhu and Teschio arrived a few minutes after that.

As soon as everyone had written down what they wanted he picked up the phone and called down an order, then grabbed his notes and took a seat between Vittori and Teschio, though a part of him questioned if he was going to end up paying for everything each time they met in his suite.

When everyone just looked expectant he started things off by explaining the schedule information he had obtained, plus what he could tell of the base’s layout.

Viper eyed him—or he assumed that was what was happening, as it was hard to tell with the hood
shading half the man’s face—and said, “I noticed you poking around. But I have to say, I am more than a little curious as to how you can phase through walls.”

“I like to be in harmony with my surroundings,” he said as various faces in the room expressed their surprise.

Viper nodded and produced blueprints for the base and laid them on the table their seating surrounded. “From what I was able to tell, the information we need to obtain is in this building—” He tapped a spot. “—and underground about five levels. It might be six.”

“And according to the schedules Higashi got,” Zhu said, “we have a very narrow window both ways.”

“On top of that,” Vittori added, “they have cameras in every hallway, and infrared sensors scattered around. If someone isn’t supposed to be down there and people manning security notice…”

“We could tunnel in,” Teschio said, “but it would take too long and make too much noise. So we need someone who can essentially be invisible, or at least capable of moving outside the range of those sensors.”

“They always go in pairs,” he reminded them, then glanced at Viper. Sure, he could attempt to phase through walls and floors, but harmonizing with vastly differing materials took a long time, so he would be at it for hours just to get down that far in a way that avoided the sensors. And then he would have to repeat the feat. Besides, a single person rather than two or more, from a team of seven? No.

Viper nodded slightly.

“So he is aware,’ he thought. ‘He could see past my “cloak” and…”

Viper nodded again. “Higashi and I will infiltrate.”

“How, exactly?” Sinclair asked, looking a little put out.

Sora arched a brow in mild disbelief. “I think you already know. Why don’t you share with the rest of the class?”

Sinclair scowled. “You’re going to steal some faces, yes?”

Viper nodded. “Correct. Someone will have to stand guard over the two we borrow from.”

Teschio set a handheld radio transceiver on the table. “Zhu and I found this while we were scouting the surrounds. It doesn’t appear to have any tracking devices in it; we checked before we removed it from the area. Whoever you imitate will probably have their own sets and we can make sure this one is tuned to the right frequency.”

Vittori picked it up and gave it a once-over. “Fairly standard, though I expect it’s been modified for military frequencies only. Should come in handy.”

“And after the fact you’ll ensure their little nap is a mere blip in their minds,” Sinclair said.

“Of course,” Viper replied.

Alfero frowned. “I don’t understand half of what you people are saying.”

Sinclair sighed. “Illusions, Alfero.”
Sora sighed as well. “All right, look. Alfero, you have Rain Flames. That generally means tranquility—you’re like a walking version of Valium—and some power over water.”

“And the rest of you?” she said, her frown now tinged with confusion.

“I can only speak for myself. I’m a Sky, with a property of harmony. Some people have more than one type, and some people can control flames they don’t have, if they’re good enough, and with the right equipment.”

“Valium?” she muttered. “I’ve never needed anything like that before in my life.”

Sora shrugged. “Whether or not you learn how to use them is up to you. No one is going to force you. Though if this kind of thing weirds you out, you might want to reconsider being part of this team.”

She scowled at him. “I never said that. And who put you in charge, anyway?”

“All of you, by reason of not objecting, if nothing else,” he said calmly.

Sinclair snorted softly. “Yeah, let’s go with that.”

He smiled and said, “Maybe because you all like to enable my delusion of competence?”

Sinclair laughed. “Right. Who wants to join me and Vittori with guarding the guards?”

Zhu nodded. “I will. We can rotate as lookout.”

“What if a diversion is needed?” Teschio asked.

“We could set explosives,” Alfero suggested. “You scouted the surrounding territory, so you’d probably have a good idea where. If we get the signal, we set it off.”

Teschio nodded. “Yeah, I have a good place in mind. I hope you know more about explosives than I do, though.”

“Yes.”

“…Okay,” Teschio said.

“So we need another set of radios,” he said. “I can pick some up. We’d just need some kind of a code. Maybe a click code.”

“Three short clicks,” Alfero said. “We hear that and we blow the thing.”

Teschio eyed Sinclair, Vittori, and Zhu. “I’m going to hope none of you are the sort to click your pens when you’re bored.”

Sora held a light-bending cloak around himself and Sinclair; Viper handled himself, Vittori, and Zhu. Once inside the building they slipped into a side room and waited patiently after the camera hiding in the corner was looped to show an empty room. Two guards just coming on shift entered the building and walked into the same room, a glassy look in their eyes.

Viper smirked slightly and examined the one on the left, then morphed to look like an exact duplicate. Sora, not to be outdone, did the same with the guy on the right, though it took him a few
minutes. They each grabbed radios, keys, and identification, then stepped away.

“A nerve pinch will do,” Viper said, “or whatever works. I’ll fix them once we return.”

Zhu nodded and stepped forward to do just that, then caught the first body as it fell, and laid the man out. He did the same to the second one while they ensured all three radios were set the same. With that done Viper and Sora stepped out of the room and set off on “their” rounds, which just so happened to take them down to where the information they were after was stored.

Sora had spent the last week after the meeting with a spy on one of their targets, scouting the route the man took during his rounds in the building, so he knew how where to go and what pace they were supposed to take. Given that Viper seemed to be matching him effortlessly, he made the assumption that his partner in this had done something similar. The idea of Viper blindly following him through the halls just made no sense.

An hour and a half later they were on the fifth floor down and Viper indicated a specific door. It had heavy-duty locks and a card reader. It went without saying they were not authorized to enter.

He nodded. “This will take a bit. I will click once, when I’m inside. Once, again, when I’m about to exit.”

Viper nodded, so Sora reached out to place a hand on the door and begin the harmonization process, to feel out the composition of the metal so he could slide through it. Kiri’s habit of reading fantasy novels really paid off in the end.

Five minutes later he was through to the other side, wrapped in another light-bending cloak. He sighed once he saw just how much stuff was in the room. There were numerous file cabinets to check. He reached down to click the transmit button on his radio once, then got to work.

A half hour later he clicked his radio once and started the journey back through the door. “Not the right room,” he said quietly once he was standing next to Viper again.

“So we go down,” Viper said with a sigh in his voice.

Another ten minutes saw them next to a similar door one floor down, and Sora started the process all over again. A half hour later he was back outside with the information they had been tasked to retrieve tucked away inside his clothing. “Let’s go.”

They finished the rest of the guards’ rounds a lot faster to compensate for the lost time and ended up back at the side room on the ground floor. They had a quick huddle so that more than just Sora and Viper were certain that their goal had been reached, then they transferred back their stolen items and Viper did something—not that any of them could see any of it happening—before the five of them sneaked away under illusion again.

Once they were safely outside the compound and far enough away, Sinclair lifted the other radio and sent, “All clear. Return east.”

Sora almost snorted at the hideous code for heading to his room. ‘Sure, make a play on my name,’ he groused.

They all piled into a car and drove to Sora’s inn—‘I have so got to learn how to drive,’ he thought—and arrived there a half hour later. Teschio and Alfero arrived fifteen minutes after they did and another order was sent down.

“Who wants to make the drop?” he asked tiredly. Phasing through objects really wiped him out,
which made it a risky technique.

“I’ll do it,” Teschio said.

“I’ll go with you,” Vittori volunteered.

Sora nodded. “Stay behind once we’re done, then.”

“So…?” Sinclair prompted.

Viper angled his head that way. “As you know, Higashi and I assumed the roles of two guards on duty in the building and took over their round. We stopped at the first of the two possible locations and Higashi phased through the door to avoid setting anything off. Unfortunately, it was not our target. Therefore, we descended another level to the secondary location. Higashi phased through again, secured the information, and returned. We encountered no other guards while en route and no alarms were tripped.”

“It probably helped that Vittori messed with the CCTV system from the camera in the side room,” Sinclair remarked. “But still, good. I wish to hell I could pull off that trick, though. It’s super cool.”

Sora smiled faintly. “I suppose if you tried hard enough you could meld with fire.”

Sinclair adopted a thoughtful look. “Now that … is something to consider.”

Alfero shook her head. “You people are weird,” she muttered, then went to answer the door when a knock came signaling the arrival of their order.

Sora had ordered fruit juice for himself, more for the sugar boost than anything. Alcohol was not a good idea after having expended so much energy. The carbohydrates from his pasta would also help. They ate in silence, and once they were done everyone but Teschio and Vittori left.

‘Just as well,’ he thought, ‘since I’m beat and not in the mood for somewhat sarcastic company, or disbelieving company. Viper is okay, though, and Zhu, he’s pretty calm.’

“That comment you made,” Vittori said slowly. “Do you think I could accomplish something similar with electricity?”

He bit his lip in thought. “I think if you used your flames as insulation and possibly a bridge, you could learn to become unaffected by electricity. You asking that makes me wonder. If a Rain could breathe like a fish. Maybe even a Cloud or Mist, because of the relation to water. Don’t know about a Storm, though.”

Teschio looked both alarmed and intrigued. “I wonder how that could be tested.”

He blinked and looked at the Cloud. “It’d be cruel, but, perhaps on animals.”

“Huh?”

Vittori perked up. “By propagating the oxygen mixture in their lungs? They could exhale carbon dioxide so their lungs didn’t explode…”

“Huh.” Teschio sat back. “Guess I could find some animals that really creep me out, or fight and attack simply because they can rather than because they need to eat. Test the idea with those.”

“You’re … really something,” Vittori said, giving him a piercing look.
“I had a good teacher,” he replied. “Crazy, but good. Teschio, if you haven’t already, I would start with trying to propagate something easier, like grains of sand or popcorn or … whatever.”

“Macro before micro?” Vittori asked.

He shrugged. “Makes more sense, yes? Why start with something you can’t even see? Though…” He thought back to some of the more esoteric things Kiri had drilled into his head. “I suppose if enough oxygen was propagated in an enclosed space, things would get a bit loopy. I’m not all that well grounded in sciences, though, so…”

Vittori gave him a funny look. “And yet you can do such interesting things.”

“That’s just imagination and an awareness of what my flames are capable of through experimentation,” he rebutted. “I told you, most of my memory is gone, so what I know is pretty scattered, except for where I trained hard over the last year with my ability. It seemed more important to ensure I could defend myself first, and then worry about things like what I lost from my school years.”

“And friends?” Teschio asked.

He shrugged again. “I have no idea. I don’t live where I used to live because it’s unknown why I got hurt. If it was a failed attempt on my life it’d be stupid to stay where I was, wherever that was.”

“Your teacher,” Vittori said.

His brow went up at the lack of a question.

“Is he—or she—?”

Sora leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “I’m sorry that this is going to sound sarcastic, but I’m not psychic so far as I know.”

Vittori rolled his eyes. “Are you related to your trainer?”

“Yes. My brother. Why?”

“I just wondered why you would trust someone if your memory was…”

“At the time I was recovering from a bad head injury, he looked like me, had the right documentation, and I was confused and a bit panicky. By the time I realized he could have been anyone I also realized I felt comfortable with him and there were no mental alarms going off.”

“Mental alarms?” Teschio asked.

“I have good intuition. Not saying it can’t be fooled, because that would be naïve of me, but I can generally tell when someone is bad news. If I had gotten any hinky feelings about anyone on the team, I’d have left that first meeting before opening the envelope.”

Vittori and Teschio exchanged a look.

Sora simply ignored that and put the information he had acquired on the table. “I’m going to assume that we’ll get something in the post after this gets dropped off. Still, I kind of feel that we either missed something on this one, or it was a strange choice for a team of seven.”

Teschio frowned. “I felt kind of useless.”
“You weren’t,” he said. “You and Zhu found a good place to stage a distraction we ended up not needing. I just think we weren’t—” He sighed. “I don’t know how to say it. The task was almost too easy, I guess.”

“Hey,” Vittori said. “After we get back, can we start the sessions again?”

“Sure,” he said warmly. “Teschio?”

“…Yeah, okay.”

“All right. I’ll see you two on Tuesday.”

He hadn’t been home for ten minutes when Kiri breezed into his room and handed over an envelope.

“I’m going to assume things went well,” Kiri said.

“Yes, though it was a little boring,” he said as he ripped the end off and slid out another slip of paper with an account number on it.

Kiri snatched it out of his hand. “I’ll take care of the transfer for you so you can unpack.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just open it for me and present my statement as fait accompli,” he said dryly.

“Ah, we have enough problems with mail tampering and theft in this country. I’m not going to contribute to the problem when it’s my own brother. Besides, if I upset you I won’t get those amazing home-cooked meals.”

He snorted. “If the mafia is so damn good at what it does, why don’t they fix that problem, then?”

Kiri looked briefly poleaxed at the thought. “But…”

“Never mind, Aniki.” He turned away so he could continuing unpacking. He had plenty of laundry to do, for one thing.

“Pizza tonight?”

“How about calzones?” he suggested.

“Sure. I’ll call in an order after I get this taken care of.”

When Teschio arrived he brought him with a small container, which turned out to contain both sand and seeds.

Vittori brought his own, a case, but that held a cattle prod. “I want you to use this on me,” he said to Sora.

Sora, for his part, blinked a few times in disbelief. “That would hurt.”

Vittori rolled his eyes. “Yes, it will. But I’m not about to stick a fork into an electrical socket. I made this myself so I could ensure the voltage and current. It has three settings, and right now it’s at the lowest.”
“I need a drink,” he said quietly, and wrote down his order. Once they received their delivery and he’d had a few sips of his wine, he took up the prod and stared at Vittori. “You sure about this?”

“You’re not getting any—ah, how did you put it again?—‘hinky’ feelings about the idea, are you?”

“Well, no…”

“Then yes. Just a quick touch.”

Teschio sat there with a little smile on his face and sipped his wine.

“Well, I was the one to give him the idea,” he admitted, then exhaled slowly. “All right. I’m going to trust that you know what the hell you’re doing,” he said, then poked the end of the rod against Vittori’s arm. Nothing happened.

Teschio let out a quiet laugh and had another sip of wine.

“You need to press that button when you do that,” Vittori pointed out patiently.

He shifted in embarrassment and tried again, just a quick touch while pressing the button; Vittori jerked and bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. “Um…”

“I’m fine,” Vittori said after a few moments. “I’m going to think about this for a bit, examine it from every angle, then we can try again.”

Sora felt relief at that statement and set the prod down. After another sip of wine his attention was caught up by Teschio’s attempts to propagate sand, as watching Vittori ruminate on his recent experience was as exciting as watching paint dry.

As he waited patiently he saw a single grain of sand replicate into a tiny pile and nearly spoke up, but the look of concentration on Teschio’s face stopped him. The barest hint of Cloud Flames was wisping off Teschio’s ring and flitting over the sand. He wondered what exactly was going through the man’s head to have such success, but contented himself with a smile.

A second later the pile multiplied to about five times its size and Teschio sat back with a sigh, looking a bit tired.

“I’m impressed,” he said quietly. “I wonder…”

“Yes?”

“If you can get this down,” he said, “and then got something like a glass tube filled with some kind of gas…”

“He could propagate the gas and cause the glass to shatter from the pressure?” Vittori finished.

He nodded. “That would be on the right track for figuring out how to breathe underwater, right?”

“In theory it would teach Teschio how to propagate something he couldn’t see, and to control it such that things didn’t get messy. So yes, I think it would be.” Vittori looked at Teschio directly. “If you could manage that, then it seems likely you could move on to testing with animals. Of course, if you used something like a deer or a cow, we could just butcher the thing if it died and have plenty of meat for meals.”

Sora blinked. Still a potentially cruel idea, somewhat balanced by proper use of their resources. “I’ve never butchered an animal before,” he said somewhat inanely.
“I don’t exactly have a lot of room to hang up a dead cow to age the meat,” Teschio pointed out. “A rabbit, on the other hand…”

Vittori smiled. “There you go, then. But gasses in an enclosed tube first. I’ll help get that set up whenever you’re ready for it. And speaking of which, prod me again.”

Sora had a quick sip of wine and picked up the cattle prod, then poked Vittori in the arm. Another jerk, a little more blood, and a frown resulted.

“I clearly did not think that through well enough,” Vittori muttered, then adopted his thinking pose again.

“You know,” he said slowly, “it’s almost a little suspicious that post comes from that man like clockwork.”

Kiri poked his head around the door frame. “Are you talking to yourself again? Because that could be a sign of insanity.”

“You would know,” he shot back. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed all the times you ‘kufufufu’ when I’m in another room.”

“So… Another meeting?”

He ripped the end off the envelope and pulled out the letter. “Yes. I wonder if he’ll keep to a pattern of one per month?”

Kiri shrugged and wandered off again.

Two days later he was back at their meeting room and was surprised to see that Vittori was already there. He slid into the seat next to the green-haired man and smiled a greeting.

Vittori gave him an uncharacteristically nervous look and said, “I wanted to say … how much it’s meant to me, how much time you’ve given over to helping me.”

It was cute in a socially awkward kind of way. He smiled warmly. “I’ve been having a lot of fun helping. Well, not the part where I have to hurt you. That upsets me a bit.”

“And yet you do it.”

“Well, you asked for help, and I was the one to give you the idea in the first place. I feel responsible and I want to make sure you’re all right.”

Vittori looked away for a moment. “It’s Lorenzo, by the way, and I don’t exactly have a lot of friends…”

“You have me, and it’s Sora,” he said, then blinked when a feeling of warmth blossomed inside him. At the same time as his hand went up to press against his chest, so did Lorenzo’s to his.

The door opened to reveal Sinclair, who eyed the two of them in confusion. He hovered in the door for a moment, then entered fully and walked over to take a seat. “Oh, I get it,” he muttered.

Sora spared the man a glance, but quickly eyed Lorenzo instead, who looked awfully emotional for a man who normally never quite managed to get the look of boredom off his face.
Sinclair grabbed the order pad and jotted something down, then shoved it at Sora with an expectant look. His hand came down to grab the pen and write out his usual order for vodka-laced chocolate milk and bruschetta, then he slid the pad and pen over to Lorenzo.

“That happen often?” Sinclair asked him.

“Huh? Uh, no, never,” he said distractedly. He made a mental note to ask Kiri about what happened once he got home.

He was surprised to see a faint smirk form and a gleam take up residence in Sinclair’s eyes, but he was distracted again when the door opened to admit another member of their team. Viper glided over and took a seat, swiping the pad from Lorenzo, and then the others entered and took their places. Sinclair took care of the delivery that time, and pushed the envelope over to Sora.

He opened it and pulled out the usual stack of papers, and passed them around. The job was an assassination. A part of him shied away from the idea, but a part of him was insistent that some people did things to deserve retribution, even death. The target was a real piece of work, a serial rapist who even went after children.

In addition to the bio there were pictures of the target, and included in his packet was a selection of documentation on his victims. A quick look around showed that Sinclair, Zhu, and Viper were all nodding slightly, so he supposed this sort of dossier was standard fare. Maybe. Even Alfero seemed all right with it, if he was interpreting her expression correctly.

The target, once Nicoli Rosario, was blond and hearty and caused a vague and menacing half-memory to flit through his head, making him feel upset for no reason he could understand, but it did make him more inclined to go along with the job. Page after page detailed crimes and the corruption that let the man stay free.

According to the packet, the men the target surrounded himself with should be left alone if at all possible, but the man with the iron hat noted that self-defense was always a valid reason for taking out an opponent permanently. It was also indicated that something other than a gun was preferred.

‘Either I read at the same speed as Sinclair and he really likes guns, or he’s making that noise over some other details,’ he thought, sending a quick look Sinclair’s way. The man’s lips were pursed and his brow creased. “I’m taking this guy out,” he said softly.

Six sets of eyes all transferred their attention his way.

“You?” Sinclair said evenly.

“Just watch me. But for that to happen we have to decide how to handle the rest of them. Maybe drive them straight into an ambush so they can be knocked out? Perhaps a diversion that would help to lead them to a spot where they could be ensnared to be driven to that ambush?”

“I could … stage an accident,” Teschio said.

He nodded. “What would you need?”

“Probably a motorcycle, but I suppose we should scout first, decide on where to do this.”

“In theory, just about anywhere, but the better we can control the arena… And of course, having viable exits.”

“This one has a deadline of the end of the month again,” Zhu said, “so there’s every reason for us to
tail the guy for a week and spend time scouting the places he goes. Some of that is here in the packet, but I’d prefer to verify it before acting on it.”

He looked over at Vittori, who nodded. “We can wander around in his wake.”

“I’m going to check out any tech we might need to mess with,” Sinclair stated.

“I’ll keep an eye out for spots for a fake accident while I stalk him,” Teschio added.

Alfero, Zhu, and Viper murmured agreement with the stalking plans.

“So, standard,” he said. “Let’s meet back here in a week with our information.”

Everyone nodded and people started getting up to leave. Vittori lingered, as did Sinclair. Sinclair slid into the seat next to him and said, “How exactly do you plan to kill the guy?”

“I’ll tell you what,” he replied. “When I do it, you can be my bodyguard.”

Sinclair nodded after a moment. “I will. I’ll protect your back and watch your technique. Right. I’m off to do some checking.” He got up to take hold of the cart and started off.

“Say,” he said to Lorenzo, the warmth in his chest intensifying as he looked at his new friend, “would you like to come have dinner at my place tonight?”

“Ah… Sure. What do you plan to make?”

He shrugged. “No idea. But we could stop and buy stuff on the way, decide then.”

“How about chicken alfredo?”

“Sure,” he almost chirped. “Let’s go!”

An hour and a half later they were entering his apartment. Kiri poked his head around the corner and paused noticeably, then said, “Welcome home, brother.”

“Aniki,” he greeted. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Vittori.”

“Lorenzo is fine,” the green-haired man said quietly.

“And, Lorenzo, this is my bother, Kiri.”

Kiri nodded and stepped out fully. “Welcome to our home. I have this strange urge to call you Verde, though.”

“It’s the hair, right?”

Kiri shook his head. “No, you strike me as a Lightning.”

Sora shrugged and said, “I’m going to get dinner started,” the headed into the kitchen.

Lorenzo followed and took a seat, and Kiri helped him unpack the bags.

“Want me to work on the salad?” his brother asked.

“Please.” He got out his tools and said, “Something odd happened earlier. I don’t know what it was.
It was a feeling.”

“Of warmth?” Kiri asked as he sliced up a tomato.

“Yes, in my chest. It’s still there, being all soothing and…”

“Mine, too,” Lorenzo admitted in a somewhat distracted manner.

Kiri sighed and shook his head. “I obviously skipped over that lesson, little brother. What you experienced was harmonization.”

“With a person? Persistently?” he questioned. He knew he could harmonize with any number of targets, but…

“Yes. It means you’ve forged a lasting connection.”

Sora frowned at his brother. “Then why don’t I have one with you?”

“I am … damaged.”

He could hear the reluctance to say more in his brother’s voice.

“But even so, we already have our bond as brothers. We need no more than that. You already know I would do anything for you.”

“Even listen to me sing?” he teased.

Kiri hissed not unlike a cat and scowled at him. “Okay, not anything, but close to anything. With a bond like you’ve forged you can be the best of friends, like brothers, or even lovers. It all depends.”

“I kind of like the idea of a nickname,” Lorenzo said suddenly.

Sora looked over with a smile. “Be easier to say, I suppose.”

“Verde is perfect for you,” Kiri said grandiosely as he sliced up a cucumber. “Electricity is life, my friend!”

Sora raised a brow at his brother.

“Our brains run on electricity, little brother. Little sparks of life, dancing along our nerves and through our synapses. It is a fundamental part of nature. And besides, his hair is green.”

Lorenzo snorted. “Verde is fine.”

Kiri adopted a smug look and put the bowl of salad on the table, along with a cruet of dressing. Sora got plates of food ready in the next minute and ferried them to the table as Kiri got the cutlery, napkins, and drinks.

Kiri dove straight in without comment, and only after he’d taken his first bite did he bother to grab the cruet, shake the hell out of it, and dribble some on his salad.

“Do you think teaching Lorenzo fine control with something like webs…?”

Kiri nodded. “Could work, yes. Worked brilliantly for you.”

“Webs?” Lorenzo asked.
Sora raised his left hand and aimed it at his brother. He concentrated and a fine array of lines spread out, like a spider’s web, and extended to pass into Kiri. Then he relaxed his resolve and they vanished. “It’s how I learned to harmonize with things, how I understand them well enough to do things like walk through doors. But I could use it in other ways, like killing. It takes a lot of control to do, but if you have that control, well, your imagination can provide a lot of ways to use the flames.”

“I could call lightning out of the sky?” Lorenzo said dreamily.

“Probably,” Kiri replied. “No reason why not. You’d be attuned to it. Hell, with the right level of control you could probably turn a person’s internal electrical impulses against them.”

Lorenzo’s fork paused halfway to his mouth, then continued on its way.

They spent the week wandering around trailing Rosario and checking out his normal haunts, usually with cups in hand (hot chocolate for Sora and coffee for Lorenzo), and they eventually came to the conclusion that if an accident was staged outside the man’s business (his personal office was on the first floor) it would draw plenty of attention.

He had even gotten them inside with some illusions to poke around for a good place for Viper to redirect people coming to their boss’s assistance, and a nice room where Alfero and Zhu could knock them out. And, incidentally, a look at what sort of security the building had, and where the guard room was located.

When they arrived at the meeting Sinclair was already present, and Teschio. He didn’t even have to write down his order. Sinclair had done it for him, it seemed, and Lorenzo’s. They were such terrible creatures of habit.

Once they were all assembled and Viper had taken care of the order and delivery, they got down to it. “I’m thinking his office is the best bet,” Sora said. “There’s potential for an outside diversion, room to keep anyone we have to knock out, and a spot we can use to redirect anyone who attempts to get to Rosario.”

“I concur,” Viper said.

“The security there is shit,” Sinclair said crisply. “There won’t be any issues keeping that from causing problems. All we have to do is knock out the guards in the security office and bind them. Turn off the cameras. Jam the door behind us. Gives us plenty of people to disable and guard anyone who gets taken down after that while the hit is being made.”

“The only person directly in line is the man’s secretary,” Vittori said, “but I know she can be handled simply enough.”

Sora nodded.

“Well, I found a spot I could crash a motorcycle into,” Teschio said. “I just need to find one I won’t mind wrecking. Got my eye on a couple of used ones for sale cheap.”

“Tell me how much so I know what to chip in,” Sora said.

Teschio shook his head. “It’s no big deal. I have the money.”

“Not the point,” he replied. “This is for a mission. You shouldn’t have to bear the cost alone. And that includes whatever you’d be wearing, because it might end up too damaged to be of any further use.”
Lorenzo nodded. “I agree. Last time it didn’t matter because you acquired the explosives from the base, but this would be out of pocket.”

Sinclair chimed in next, surprising Sora, at which point Teschio accepted and named a figure.

“Not a problem,” he said, doing the math on a napkin. “I’ll give you my share before we leave.”

Viper produced a map of the building and surrounds—Sora was half convinced it was a solid illusion—and started pointing. “The accident can happen here,” he said, “and this room here is where we can dump anyone who gets too close. I can set up here, a bit down the hall, and redirect anyone while Higashi and Sinclair take out the target. The staged accident should draw most of the building’s inhabitants away from Rosario. He spends his lunch gorging on food and I doubt he would stir himself to get up and see what the commotion was about.”

“I can make the secretary take a nap,” he said, “and then Sinclair and I will enter. I’ll take Rosario out while Sinclair will be lookout in case someone’s hiding in the bathroom.”

“Or under his desk,” Sinclair quipped.

Sora wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, or that.”

“There’s a training seminar scheduled on the fifteenth,” Alfero said, “so a good number of people will be otherwise occupied.”

“That will give Teschio time to get ready.”

“So once Teschio crashes, we can immediately move to negate the security office and get into place,” Zhu said. “We shouldn’t need anything more than line of sight.”

“All right,” he said. “Then we plan to start this at approximately noon on the fifteenth.”

They were standing around in two clusters when the time came. Viper was utilizing his talents to ensure no one walking by asked any stupid questions, so they were perfectly positioned for when a motorcycle roared down the street, swerved to avoid something in the road, and crashed into a wall when the driver lost control.

Sora winced, but Teschio made a specific hand movement he was waiting for, signaling that he was all right, so he nodded. Viper headed off toward Rosario’s office to take position and Sora went with him. In the amount of time it took him to send webs into the secretary and induce a nap Sinclair had caught up.

Sora waited until Sinclair was standing at his side to weave a quick light-bending illusion, then open the office door and slip inside. Rosario was stuffing his face with pasta already and it was barely noon. He looked at Sinclair and held up a hand, then moved it to point at Rosario and began to create his web. Fine strands of Sky Flame extended from his fingertips toward the target and straight through his chest.

Sinclair’s brow was furrowed in confusion when Sora glanced over, but he quickly turned back to the target, who hadn’t even noticed anything wrong. He concentrated again and watched as the threads of his flame solidified, then vanished. Rosario made a strangled sound and clutched at his chest, blood rapidly soaking his clothing and hand, then collapsed back, half-chewed pasta spilling out of his mouth.
Sora tapped Sinclair’s arm and turned away, taking care to wipe the door knob on both sides with a handkerchief on his way out. They collected Viper on the way, and Vittori, Alfero, and Zhu, who were standing guard over two unfortunate souls, then exited the building from a door at the back. Sora used his handkerchief again, just in case.

They all made their way back to the meeting place in cabs and somehow Sora ended up with Sinclair sitting next to him. The man angled his body and stared at him with something like hunger. “That was super cool,” Sinclair said slowly. “The absolute silence and subtlety was staggering.”

“I’m feeling like this moment is apprehensively alliterative,” he replied.

Sinclair leaned in close enough that Sora could see the man’s eyes really were black and not just a dark brown. “I want to be your Sun.”

“Are you hitting on me?” he asked suspiciously.

“Would it help?” Sinclair leaned closer. “I like you. I’m very impressed by you. I would kill for you.”

Sora edged away a little to consider, suddenly remembering Sinclair’s actions the day he had—“Oh… This is… You want to harmonize?”

“Oh yes,” Sinclair whispered. “I want to be your Sun. Will you be my Sky?”

“Um…” Kiri had never mentioned this sort of thing when he spoke of forging bonds. He had, after Lorenzo had wandered off home, mentioned that it was highly likely Sora would pick up bonds with bearers of each flame type and, indeed, would lure them to himself simply by being a Sky, but he had not expected such an aggressive approach from anyone.

He eyed Sinclair; it was something of a bother that he found the man to be so damn attractive, though he normally tried not to think about that. With him leaning in so close it was difficult not to notice. “Er… All right?”

Sinclair’s smile went incandescent and Sora almost lost cabin pressure. And then the warmth set in, and he could feel the distinct “flavors” of the bonds. He could also feel that Sinclair was actually attracted to him, but that might have been the hand on his thigh.

“Were you a shark in another life?” he asked faintly. “Because you have that kind of smile at times.”

“Well, they are apex predators,” Sinclair purred, “and I am the world’s greatest hitman. Though after seeing you in action, I have to wonder…”

The cab swerved to the side and came to a stop, then the driver slid back the window between the front and back seats. Sinclair shoved money at him and reached across Sora’s body to open the door. “After you.”

Sora shuffled out of the car and moved away so Sinclair could exit, then walked into the bar with him as another cab pulled into the spot theirs had just vacated. “How do you get your sideburns to do that?”

Sinclair snorted. “It’s entirely natural. How do you get your eyes to glow orange?”

“Huh?”

“I take it you’ve never seen your reflection when you do your thing,” Sinclair said as he keyed open
the door to the meeting room and held it for Sora.

“…No.”

“We’ll have to do that sometime. And I expect a dinner invitation like the one you made to Vittori.”

“You’re really pushy, you know that?”

“What ever gave it away?” Sinclair said teasingly as he gallantly escorted his Sky to a seat.

Lorenzo eyed the proceedings with scientific bemusement, then heaved a sigh. “Oh dear,” he muttered.

Sora nodded and watched as Sinclair wrote down their orders. “He’s kind of grown on me,” he whispered to his Lightning. “He’s also very pushy.”

“I’m charming,” Sinclair protested.

“I do hope you’re not going to try anything untoward,” Lorenzo said quietly, and a bit menacingly.

“I will if he lets me.”

Sora cradled his face in his hands to hide his expression. “I—”

Lorenzo patted him on the back. “It’s all right, Sora. I’ll protect you.”

“Ah,” Sinclair said. “Sora, is it. How … appropriate.”

They were interrupted by the remainder of the group filing in. Alfero took care of the order that time and Sora opened the envelope that was waiting. It had the expected slips of paper with account numbers on them, plus another letter of congratulations.

Once that was out of the way Sora fussed over Teschio, who gently pushed his hands away and said, “I’m fine, honestly. I’ve done that sort of thing before and I know how to make it look uncontrolled when it’s really not.”

He frowned, then smiled warmly. “Be tetchy if you want, but it won’t stop me from caring. Are we still on for lessons?”

“…Yeah.”

“See you on Thursday, then. I’ll bring cookies.”

“…Cheesecake?”

“All right, sure. Anything on it?”

“Raspberries,” Teschio said quietly.

He smiled warmly and nodded. “I’ll make it myself.” The next thing he knew he was being escorted out of the room by Lorenzo and Sinclair. “All right, all right. You can both come home for dinner. I wonder what I should make.”

“Stromboli,” Sinclair said promptly. “And my name is Renato.”

“Hm. All right. Anything special inside?”
“Bell peppers, but not the green ones. Those never taste as good. Aside from that, the usual.”

He nodded. “Let’s go shopping, then.”

They entered his apartment an hour and a half later and Kiri’s head popped out around the corner again. He was starting to think his brother kept a spy on him at all times, or at least around the building as an early warning system.

“So, another one?” Kiri said as he appeared fully.

Sora sighed. “He’s very pushy, Aniki.”

“He’s a Sun, Sora, they’re like that.”

“I’m charming,” Renato protested.

Kiri smirked. “What’s for dinner?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stromboli. And this is Renato Sinclair. Sinclair, this is my brother, Kiri.”

“A Mist, huh?”

“At this rate we’ll have to get a bigger place,” Kiri said mournfully, then diverted into the kitchen.

“You don’t mind if I seduce your brother, right?” Sinclair asked as he followed Kiri.

He growled and went in himself, and started unpacking his bags.

“Well, that depends,” Kiri replied, moving to help. “If you toy with him or break his heart, I will send you to a living hell for the rest of your miserable existence.”

“I’m more or less immune to illusions, you know.”

Sora ignored the byplay—including the sudden stillness of Renato and the sweat that started to form at his temples—and began to make the crust. When his Sun actually dropped to one knee he sent a sharp look at his brother, who immediately flashed an innocent smile and released his hold on his unfortunate victim.

“Have a seat, Sinclair,” he offered.

He was pinned by those black eyes briefly, then Renato stood up smoothly and leaned against the counter insouciantly. “You can call me Renato.”

“Of course I can. I’m also capable of calling you pushy,” he said reasonably, having decided that Renato needed to be handled a certain way, and the first rule was never to give in too quickly. It was similar to his brother; you had to be firm or you’d drown. Or possibly be mauled.

Sinclair inhaled, a frustrated look on his face, and said, “Please, call me Renato.”

“You look more like a Reborn to me,” Kiri commented, then offered the man a pepper slice.

He shook his head and rolled out the crust. “Are you all right with peppers, Lorenzo? I can make one without.”

“They’re fine. Do you think…?”
He looked up curiously and reached over to grab a knife. “Yes?”

“Maybe pizza Thursday night? I’ll buy all the stuff.”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Any particular kind?”

“You ever heard of Hawaiian style?”

“Ham and pineapple?” Kiri asked.

Lorenzo nodded. “Though I like peppers, too, on it. It’s kind of a guilty pleasure since … it’s not very Italian.”

He smiled brightly. “I won’t tell,” he said, then stared at Renato, who shrugged. He finished making up the four servings and tossed them in the oven, then began to whip up a quick sauce while they baked.

Kiri got out glasses and poured wine, then began to get things out for the table, and Sora was surprised to see that Renato made himself useful by taking the cutlery and napkins and placing them. Lorenzo grabbed the bottle of wine and transferred it to the table. Given that none of them would be driving a car, drinking the whole bottle between four of them should not be a problem.

Twenty or so minutes later the food was ready and on plates, and they sat down to dine after the sauce was ladled into individual bowls. Renato sliced into his, dunked his forkful, popped it into his mouth, and got a dreamy look seconds later.

“And another one bites the dust,” Kiri murmured, then had a bite of his own.

“This is your fault,” he muttered. “If you knew how to cook I’d not have had to learn in self defense.”

“There is nothing wrong, little brother, with being able to cook for your friends and loved ones,” Kiri said, then looked at Renato. “I assume you already know how to do things like heal?”

“Of course,” Renato drawled.

“Good.”

“But I am super curious about those webs Sora makes.” Renato dunked another forkful of stromboli into his sauce and popped it in his mouth.

“Oh-ho, you like those? One of my better ideas, I believe. If you behave yourself and don’t take any unwanted liberties, Sora might be willing to teach you how to do it.”

“I love how you’re volunteering me for things, now,” he groused, sending a muted glare at his brother.

“You’re already teaching two people. Why not one more?” Kiri said reasonably. “And they are your bonds.”

“I only have two!” he protested.

“And working on a third. Don’t think you have me fooled. You’ve been very patient and understanding, but that’s needed to snag a proper Cloud.”

He groaned.
“He has a point, you know,” Lorenzo said. “I was listening when you said those things to Teschio, so it would take time. I’m sure you’ll get him soon.”

Renato leaned sideways and practically breathed in his ear, “I would love to get lessons from you.”

Sora resisted the urge to go huddle in the corner and cry. ‘Do not let yourself be baited,’ he told himself. “You’re so eager to give up your guns?”

“It’s not that at all,” Renato assured him as Lorenzo rolled his eyes. “I just don’t have a problem being more flexible. And I’ve been using my flames for years. If I can learn quickly, I can help teach others.”

“I can accept that reasoning. But until I know if Teschio would be open to the idea, you’ll have to take lessons separately.”

Renato chuckled. “Not a problem. I may not get what you see in a stuntman, but…”

Sora gave his newfound Sun a sharp look. “But if I do gain him, he would certainly deserve your respect, yes?”

Renato gave him a long-suffering sigh and nodded. “I do know how this works.”


“Cannoli,” Lorenzo said.

“Anything with coffee in it.”

He finished up his meal while pondering that and got up afterward to put his dishes in the sink and grab a plate of cookies from his sweets cupboard to lay on the table, then started clearing the other dishes away. Anything with coffee in it could cover a whole host of things—but what would be interesting?

“What do you mean by webs?” Lorenzo asked, breaking Sora from his thoughts.

“Oh, it was something Kiri originally taught me as a way to help with fine control of my flames,” he explained, “but they can be used for a lot of things.” He held out his hand and concentrated so that threads of flame webbed out from his fingertips.

Lorenzo looked at the web, then at Renato, then at Sora. “You used it to kill.”

“Yes,” he said, letting the web disappear. “And to get the secretary to take a nap.”

“I definitely want to learn that,” his Lightning said, almost reverently.

“I’ll do my best to teach you,” he promised, then grabbed a cookie. “I honestly have no idea how well it’d work for anyone else. Certainly not the harmony aspect, anyway. But the web might.”

“It would certainly be an interesting way to electrocute someone,” Renato opined.

Lorenzo nodded, a slight smile on his face. “But not until after I’ve inured myself to the effects. I made a new prod with higher settings,” he said happily. “Can you show me what you mean by harmony, though? I mean, we have the bond, but…”

“Sure.” He aimed his hand at Lorenzo and sent out his web, letting the threads of orange flame enter his Lightning’s chest. Then he concentrated on feelings of affection and serenity and let his flames
carry those to his friend.

Subconscious tension seemed to bleed off Lorenzo almost visibly and his smile widened. It was a little frightening, actually, so Sora eased off on the harmony factor and withdrew his flames. Lorenzo’s eyes flew open and he pouted. “Drug lords would kill to bottle that.”
Renato stayed for a few hours that evening, trying to get the hang of creating a web.

“It’s a matter of belief, visualization, and resolve,” Sora said. “If you can heal…”

His Sun’s mouth flattened and twisted slightly, then he slowly admitted, “But that just happens. It’s not like I’m picturing exactly what my flames are doing. Or even for when I’m augmenting myself. I’ve been lucky that way.”

‘And prideful over it, I suspect,’ he thought. “It’s fine,” he said and created another web for Renato to study. “I believe in you.” Kiri had long since wandered off to his room to read, so it was peaceful in their sitting room, with only the usual sounds of life going on outside their walls. ‘I wonder, though, if he’s as pushy and arrogant simply because he had to crawl his way up to be taken seriously and to be as skilled as he is. Maybe he was a street rat?’

“If I could go from only knowing I had flames and could use them,” he added, “to creating webs in less than a year…”

Renato gave him a steady look, then nodded. “And I suppose it wouldn’t hurt for me to study up on anatomy and how the body responds to injuries.”

He hummed in agreement. “Activating white blood cells? The stuff that makes blood clot at wounds? I kind of think of a Sun as second in line with keeping things together in a group.”

“…I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Well, in the sense that a Sun’s activation property might lead them toward—consciously or not—seeing everyone doing better, or being more efficient, both singly and as a group. And healers can be the most lethal killers.”

“I certainly know where to plant a bullet.”

He smiled. “Part of that is learned, but I would bet a part of it is a Sun’s instincts at play. It doesn’t hurt that you can improve your own efficiency. Makes me wonder if you’re capable of altering the chemicals in your bloodstream to prevent disadvantageous side effects.”

Renato’s lips pursed in thought. “I suppose it’s possible there’s a lot going on in the background I never looked closely at. I’ll have to think about it, do some research. But for now, that web.”

He nodded toward the one still out and wondered if Renato had understood his message.

He brought a box with him to the meeting. He had spent a fair amount of time the day before making a cheesecake and before he left the apartment he drizzled it with raspberry sauce and added some whole raspberries. Lorenzo and Teschio were already waiting for him and so were a round of drinks, plates, cutlery, and napkins.

The first thing he did was set down the box, open the top and flip down the sides, and grab a knife so he could cut servings. Teschio melted into a figurative puddle with his first bite, so Sora supposed he must have done an all right job of the deal. When he tasted it he admitted it wasn’t half bad for a first try.
“Yes, you can take whatever’s left home with you,” he answered before Teschio even had a chance to ask.

Teschio nodded quickly and continued eating.

“I’m bringing cannoli next time, though. Suppose I could use raspberries for some of them instead of chocolate…” Both men looked thoughtful at that and nodded, so he made a mental note and tucked the idea away.

Once they were done with the first piece they got to work. Lorenzo got prodded every so often by Sora while Teschio worked on propagating various things, trying to increase his speed and control the multiplicative factor. When Lorenzo got tired of being electrocuted he switched over to trying to form a web, so Sora helpfully made one of his own and kept it on display for his friend and Lightning to eye as an example.

“Does it have to be the hand?” Lorenzo asked at one point.

“Mm, no. In theory you could make them come from anywhere,” he replied, and promptly set to work attempting to get them to sprout from his elbow. “It would be an interesting trick to do it from your feet and very sneakily electrocute someone that way,” he mused out loud.

After lunch Teschio departed with the remainder of the cheesecake, and Lorenzo turned to him with a questioning look.

“I’m going to wait to ask about Renato,” he said. “Clouds are prickly, and I don’t want Teschio to think I’m giving him any less attention. If we do form a bond, then I’ll see about combining lessons. But for now, I’ll just see Renato on other days. Though if I do keep bonding with more people, Kiri might be right that we’d need a bigger place. It’s not like we have a big enough kitchen for me to cook dinner for all of you.”

Lorenzo smirked. “I find this bonding phenomenon to be fascinating. Is there more information about it available?”

“Um…” ‘Not without going into the mafia,’ he thought, then said, “You should probably ask Kiri that question. And we’d better get going if we want to get the shopping done.”

And he did, after they got to the apartment and Sora was busy making a crust for the pizza. This one he would let rise a bit before beating it down and shaping it, unlike for the stromboli.

“There are certain truths in this world,” Kiri said in response, “but some of them are hidden behind oaths and vows, behind lines that once crossed are difficult to uncross.”

Lorenzo stared at his brother, hard, then exhaled. “You’re talking about the mafia, aren’t you,” he stated, then looked at Sora instead. “You’re mafia.”

Sora busied himself with cutting pineapple.

“These flames—they’re connected to the mafia,” Lorenzo persisted when neither of them verbalized anything. “So all right, now that I’ve done it, shown that I can wield them…”

Kiri sighed and leaned against the counter. “All right. Yes, it’s mafia related. People who have active flames, unless they are discreet enough that they can hide that use and knowledge away, are either incorporated into the mafia or killed. And now that you know that much you are subject to Omertà.”

Sora tuned out while his brother launched into a lecture, moving on to deal with the peppers, and
then the ham.

“Vindice?”

That set Kiri off on another lecture as Sora began to deal with making up the sauce.

“So Sinclair and Zhu most likely already know all this. And probably Viper. It’s Teschio and Alfero who probably don’t.”

Kiri nodded. “But if harmonization occurs…”

Lorenzo nodded in turn. “All right. I won’t say a word to those two. Not the others, either, actually. The only reason you said anything to me is because I’m persistent and technically already a part of it.”

“Technically, so are Teschio and Alfero, but ignorance works in their favor for the moment.”

Lorenzo chuckled as Sora took the sauce off the heat and started dealing with the crust. “And Alfero was military. That’s going to be a rude shock.”

“I don’t know,” he said, finally joining the conversation. “She’s still pretty distant. I don’t feel any particular desire to try to harmonize with her right now, but I’m not opposed to the idea, either. I just feel neutral.”

“You’re not all that close to Zhu,” Lorenzo pointed out.

“True, but I suspect that’s because he’s still making up his mind, and that some odd little key factor will decide for him.”

“So you’re okay with him?” Kiri asked.

He nodded and added sauce to the crust. “He’s ridiculously calm for a Storm, so he’s overcome the worst flaw he could have.”

“Flaw?” Lorenzo questioned.

Kiri stole a pepper slice. “Storms rage, they jump into things without always thinking first. They’re relentless. But one who can calmly assess the situation first? Pure gold. You’ve overcome your own flaw, actually. Lightnings are often brash and loud, attention seekers.”

Lorenzo shuddered and shook his head. “I think I avoided that entirely. I was always too busy pondering science. Maybe once I have a good handle on my own I could try a few things. I’m very interested in the metal the rings are made from, for example.”

Lorenzo rambling about his potential plans carried them through dinner, and Kiri was happy to egg him on.

“I’m impressed,” he said softly, “but I also kind of expected you to get this fairly quickly.”

Renato smirked with pleasure at the web of flames coming from his fingertips.

“Can you extend those to me, and use them to, eh, inquire about my state of health?”

Renato furrowed his brow and concentrated. “You sure you don’t know more than you let on?”
Sora shook his head. “I’m just saying what comes to mind. Maybe someday, if I regain my memories, I’ll know what I should know, but until that day comes I only know what I do know and can imagine.”

“Can’t we just, you know, knock you in the head or something?”

He scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Besides, the doctor assured me it was best to let it happen naturally. Trying to force it could cause further psychological trauma. And on top of that, do you really want to do something that foolish when you know damn well my brother would send you back to hell?”

Renato winced almost imperceptibly. “Ah, right. Why the hell isn’t he your Mist?”

“He said he was ‘damaged’, and no, I did not ask him to elaborate,” he replied, eyeing the steadily approaching web of Sun Flames. He considered pulling his hand back teasingly, but refrained.

“Don’t even,” Renato said tersely. “I saw your muscles twitch.”

“Nah. I’ll save that for later, when you’ve gained some skill.”

“I’ll show you skill,” Renato promised, looking up for a moment to leer at him.

A letter came at the start of the month and they assembled two days later. The envelope contained the usual seven packets of information and Sora slid them around, then set about reading.

“Surveillance?” Teschio said quietly. “Seems a little tame.”

Sora nodded absently. They were being tasked to surveil a building and the people in it, but not enter it. The client simply wanted the visible routines for two weeks, or just one if nothing of note happened during the first. “And we can start at any time.”

“I suggest we install cameras in or on nearby buildings and set up a command center nearby, say in a rented space,” Lorenzo said. “Depending on what things are like after dark, we should be able to get it done.”

“And that means we aren’t all constantly on watch,” Alfero said. “We could be in teams. One to watch the monitors, one to investigate any anomalies the cameras can’t quite capture, the remainder resting or going on a food run.”

“All right,” Sora said. “Who wants to scout out camera positions?”

“I’ll do that,” Renato volunteered, “and I think Vittori should be on the team to find a command center, since he’s going to be one of the people stringing cables.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Teschio, will you help me?”

“As will I,” Alfero said.

Sora looked at Zhu. “How about we stroll around the area just casually eyeing things to start? I’d say we could go purchase the equipment, but I don’t have the first clue about that kind of thing and we’d need numbers, anyway.”
Zhu nodded. “So, back here in a week, as usual?”

Alfero stared at the ring on her hand with a furrowed brow and a mouth twisted in frustration.

“Don’t force it,” he said softly. “This is your power. Command it. Ask it. But don’t try to drag it out kicking and screaming. Your flames are a part of you, so aside from a brisk pep talk, don’t do anything you’d do to a trainee.”

She shot a look at him, then went back to staring at her ring.

Sora turned his head so he could eye the monitors that Lorenzo and Renato were watching. Nothing of particular interest seemed to be happening, but the two were nevertheless jotting down notes.

A flicker of blue light saw him turning his head back to see that Alfero had managed to spark flames on her ring. He smiled, but stayed quiet. Sora was not entirely sure of the best way to motivate the woman, but given that she had actually come to him and asked to learn about her flames…

They flickered out and she sighed. “So… Keep working on this until I can do it reliably?”

He nodded. “They’re an extension of your will, but you still need to be comfortable with them, and calling them. Take a short break, and try again. It can also help at night, if you’re having trouble sleeping.”

“To order your mind,” she said.

“Yes.”

Alfero nodded sat back, glass in hand, and took a deep sip.

“In and around that you can consider the properties of your flames, those being tranquility, primarily, but that could be expressed as a sense of stillness or pacification. You have some control over water, such as freezing it. I suppose since water can be turned into a mist that you could use it as a form of radar, perhaps. That would depend on how strong of a connection you could maintain with your flames in that form.”

She nodded again. “You’ve given me a fair amount to consider.”

Teschio made a happy noise and Sora turned to look. The man had managed to propagate enough sugar cubes to create a model of the Taj Mahal. “Makes me wonder if those would actually sweeten anything, and if so, if it was the answer to fewer calories in food,” he murmured.

“Wouldn’t it all just disappear once the creator lost focus?” Zhu asked quietly.

“Yes, but… Suppose I could test it, but I’m not sure about the long-term effects of literally eating flames. But you know, now I kind of want to build something.”

Zhu chuckled. “I would hesitate, eating flames that way, no matter how sweet.”

“Oh?” Alfero asked.

“Cloud Flames propagate. Eating them, well… Who knows what they might propagate inside you?”

Sora didn’t think so, not unless the—‘Well, in theory he could propagate something edible and use his connection to his own flames to further propagate whatever in a target’s stomach, causing it to
burst, perhaps. But I think I’ll hold off on sharing that idea for now.’ Instead, he went over to see if Teschio would let him play.

The days went by in a rather boring manner, with shifts of watching the cameras and taking notes, sleeping, going on food runs, or practicing. There had been just enough oddities in what they were seeing that they had upped stakes and switched to a new location for the second week, and re-ran the cabling.

He and Teschio were up for their shift of monitoring when someone on the other side saw or noticed something, perhaps. Sora’s intuition fairly screamed at him on Teschio’s behalf. He moved sideways and pushed Teschio away, then jerked and fell heavily when something exploded through his upper chest near his shoulder.

The ceiling needed to be repainted, in his opinion.

Teschio turned on him with an angry look that quickly morphed to fear; he ripped the shirt straight off his own body and crumpled it up before pressing it against the wound. Sora wheezed in pain, and wondered what that thudding sound was.

“Why—how could you do that!” Teschio said angrily. “Even if it hit me—”

He tried to focus on the Cloud. “Because it would have been a heart shot,” he whispered.

Teschio leaned in, still with that angry expression. “I can’t die,” he hissed. “I’m convinced Death hates me. I would have recovered.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t have to—” He coughed, feeling a bit woozy. That thudding noise was getting louder. “I’m kind of stupid that way.”

Renato burst into the room with Lorenzo, stopped dead for a second, then shoved what he was carrying at his companion. He raced over to Sora and laid a hand on his forehead. “Keep up the pressure. Actually, no, we need to sit him up for a moment. I need to know if the bullet went through cleanly.”

Teschio nodded and carefully slid an arm under him. Lorenzo helped in lifting Sora up so that Renato could check. Another wad of fabric was produced, that time pressed against the exit wound.

He could feel both Renato’s hands on his skin, and a welling of warmth seeped into him and rushed toward the hole through his body.

“It’ll be fine,” Renato said quietly. “I’ll make it fine.”

Sora nodded slightly. “I know you will.” He was feeling better by the second and the pain had dulled considerably.

The angry look on Teschio’s face remained, though it was warped by a smidgen of helplessness.

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t let you suffer.”

Teschio sighed, the expression on his face smoothing out. And then warmth came again, that time from a new bond opening up in his heart. Teschio sucked in a breath and almost let go.

The sound of the shower shut off and Alfero walked out a minute later, then paused in surprise. “What the hell happened?”
Sora just looked at her. He honestly wasn’t surprised that she had heard nothing. Zhu was asleep, as was Viper, in another room, and he knew they used the white noise generator that Lorenzo had brought along.

“Higashi took a bullet for me,” Teschio said after a moment.

“I used illusion to cover us,” Viper said as he detached himself from a shadowy corner.

‘Hah, an assumption I was wrong about,’ he thought.

“We only have one more day to go,” Alfero said. “Can you make the place seem abandoned for long enough, or should we pack it up a little early?”

“Let me wake Zhu,” Viper replied. “He should have a say in this.”

Sora nodded. “We got complacent,” he admitted.

Renato snorted. “We did. I’d prefer it if nobody got shot the next time we’re stupid. This is going to scar.”

“So it scars,” he said tiredly. “Better a scar than one of our lives, Ren.”

“Ren?”

“I’m tired. So sue me.”

Renato huffed and removed his hands. “Okay, let’s see the back first.”

Lorenzo removed the wad of fabric and Renato hummed after he ripped Sora’s shirt open a little. “Okay, the front, please.” Once his Sun was satisfied, Sora was divested of his ruined shirt and cleaned up a little, then a new one was fitted into place. “You’re going to eat something, and then you’re going to bed,” Renato said firmly, his expression just daring Sora to disagree.

“Are you going to feed me like I’m a fluffy little chick?” he teased softly.

Renato scowled at him and lifted him up bodily long enough to plant him on a sofa, then he eyed Teschio. “Sit with him and make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Teschio simply nodded and took the spot next to Sora as Renato and Lorenzo hauled away the bloody fabric and took a few moments to clean up. Zhu wandered out, eyed the blood on the floor, and went straight to the food.

Five minutes later everyone had something to eat—Sora was pleased to tuck into a carton of General Tso’s—and Zhu was informed of the decision to be made.

Zhu shrugged. “If Viper is comfortable with keeping up the illusion, we may as well stay and finish out the two weeks. They won’t find anything if they do send someone over here. And for all we know, one of them had a misfire or was shooting at a pigeon and has exceptionally bad aim.”

“It’s fine,” Viper said. “And from what I’ve been able to see, they don’t seem alarmed over there.”

Sora looked up from snaring more chicken to see nobody jumping on the idea of leaving early. “Then we stay. We’ll have to be thorough in cleaning up, though.”

Zhu said, “I’ll take care of that, just like I did for the other place.”
He nodded. Zhu had openly revealed that he had excellent control of his Storm Flames when he had used them to “clean” the signs of their occupation. It made him wonder just how good those would be at getting the blood stains out of the floor.

“Great,” Renato said. “Now finish eating so you can go to bed.”

Sora rolled his eyes and resumed his enjoyment of his food. He was shortly hustled off to take a shower and then to bed. Teschio had been drafted in as his minder, which was just as well. The man kept vacillating between hovering and not, but once they were bedded down Sora heard him whisper, “You don’t, um…”

“My given name is Sora, by the way,” he whispered back.

“Oh. Valerio, but Val is fine.”

“After our usual lesson you should come home with me,” he said, “have dinner. Vittori already does after those. Sinclair comes, too.”

“What happened? That warmth.”

“We bonded. It can happen between flame users.”

There was a pause, filled by the white noise machine and the sound of breathing, and then, “You’ve bonded with Vittori and Sinclair? Is that why they—”

“Mm-hm. You’d get to meet my brother, too.”

“Oh. I really would have been okay. I’ve been in a lot of accidents that should have been fatal. Or maybe they were and I woke up anyway.”

“I see. But it doesn’t matter. My intuition told me it would be fatal to you, so I acted without thinking. Are you normally accident prone?”

Val laughed bitterly. “After I realized… Well, I became a stuntman. What better profession, right? You don’t … think it’s freaky?”

“It sounds depressing, really, and a bit lonely, and scary.” He heard Val exhale at that, possibly in relief. “Think about what you might like for dinner, if you decide to come,” he said, then yawned. Apparently being healed took a lot out of a person.

“All right. Now rest. I don’t want Sinclair to come charging in here to find you still awake.”

When he entered the main room after he awoke the blood was gone, which gave him a new appreciation for Storm Flames. A glance into the kitchenette of the place showed that Alfero was making something in a frying pan, so he wandered in to see if she wanted any help.

“No, it’s fine,” she said with a shake of her head, then slid an omelet onto a plate and handed it to him. “How’s the shoulder?”

“A little stiff,” he replied as he grabbed a fork. “Thank you.”

She nodded and started a new one, so he went out to sit on the sofa and eat. Zhu and Viper were manning the cameras, so he tucked into his breakfast, occasionally rolling his shoulder. Val slid into the spot next to him with his own omelet and they ate in companionable silence.

They started packing up a few hours later. By the time Renato and Lorenzo emerged from the
makeshift bedroom the only things left were the bedrolls and the electronics, plus the supplies in the bathroom. Once they were finished the owners of the place would never even know they’d had guests. They would also never know why they had felt the ineludible need to take a holiday.

The final packing took place and Renato and Viper went off to remove cables and cameras under the cover of illusion. Alfero and Zhu took care of leaving their compiled observations at the drop off, while Viper wandered away on his own. Sora headed for home in the company of Lorenzo, Renato, and Val.

Kiri arched a brow on seeing yet another new person and introduced himself.

“Ciao,” Val said after a moment. “Valerio Teschio.”

“You strike me as being Skull,” Kiri commented, then ducked into the kitchen to get some sauce out of the freezer and drop the bag into a sink of warm water.

“I take it I’m making pasta,” Sora said on seeing that.

Kiri smiled and nodded. “Yes, dear brother. You’ve been away for a fortnight and I would dearly like some of your baked penne.”

He nodded and checked their supplies; Kiri had obviously planned for this event. “Well, I suppose I should mention I got shot.”

Kiri looked at him sharply. “Why?”

“Not sure why someone fired,” he said. “Maybe they were bored. But it would have gone through Val’s heart and—“

Kiri cut him off with, “I get the picture,” then eyed Renato.

“There’s a slight bit of scarring, but otherwise he’s fine. Lorenzo and I got there shortly after it happened, so…”

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “He patched me up no problem.”

Kiri heaved a sigh. “Thank you, Reborn.”

“Reborn?” Val whispered.

Sora smiled at him. “Kiri likes to give people nicknames,” he said, then checked the sauce. It had mostly softened up, so he emptied it into a pan and set it to heat up properly and moved on to getting the pasta going.

Kiri got the dishes ready, lined up like ducklings on the counter.

“After dinner we can practice a bit, or just whatever,” he said, giving the sauce a stir as he waited for the water to boil.

“I’ve gotten pretty good at propagating visible things,” Val said. “Maybe soon we can move on to gasses?”

Renato’s brow went up.

“With the idea of propagating an oxygen mix in the lungs to be able to have a steady supply underwater,” Lorenzo said. “That was one idea, anyway.”
“Ah. That would be an interesting application. But…”

“On a glass tube at first,” Val said, “then maybe seeing if I could manage it for an animal of some kind, maybe a rabbit.”

Renato nodded. “Because there’s no point trying it on a living being if you can’t propagate something you can’t see.”

Sora dumped the pasta in the water and gave it a stir, then turned on the oven. He smiled when Kiri produced a fresh loaf of bread; it even had both ends on it still. “You do love me!” he cried.

Kiri smirked.

He went ahead and got glasses out, and wine, and poured for everyone, then drained the pasta, fixed up the dishes, and shoved them into the oven. “All right, twenty minutes. We didn’t really have a chance to talk much, Val. Do you have any questions?”

“Um… You explained that we bonded, but… What does that even mean?”

Before he could say anything Renato spoke. “Sora is a Sky. We three harmonized with him as his guardians.”

“Guardians!?”

“I kind of hate that term,” he said with a frown. “It makes it sound like you guys are servants or something. I think of you as my friends, primarily.”

Renato shrugged. “The word doesn’t matter. The point is that if we stay apart for too long we get a bit twitchy. But since we have meetings twice a week for training and time together, it’s fine.”

Val looked slightly ill. “Is this parasitic?”

“More like symbiotic,” Kiri said, “and it’s emotional. You needn’t worry, Skull, you’ll be able to have all the alone time you need and desire. But you have a home.”

“I al—right. I see,” Val said, hand pressed against his chest.

“The other point,” Renato said, giving Val a sober look, “is that some people see a Sky and think ‘protect’ or ‘leader’, but other people see one and think ‘puppet’ or ‘hostage’ or any number of not so nice things.”

“You’re right on that point,” Kiri said. “I’ve tricked away a number of people sniffing around. It gladdens me to know that there are others who see my brother as someone to care about.”

Sora turned away to glance at the timer, half embarrassed and half thinking that Kiri’s phrasing was oddly ambiguous. After a sip of wine he started getting plates and cutlery out.

“Well, he’s willing enough to take a bullet for one of us,” Val said.

He coughed. “That’s because I can generally be sure I can take one in a non-fatal, non-crippling way. But admittedly, if I had more options, I’d push us in opposite directions, so neither of us would get hit.”

“It’s not that I mind healing you,” Renato said, “or any of us, but I’d prefer not to have to.”

“Either way, I’m grateful you did. I’d have survived, it just would have taken some time to recover.”
Val got an angrily frustrated look for a moment, then subsided.

Being uncertain of how anyone else would take Val’s claim of being more or less unable to die, he said nothing regarding that. And besides, Val might become angry with him for mentioning that little detail. He sure as hell wouldn’t want it widely known if it were him.

The timer chimed so he shut off the oven and started getting the food ready. Maybe someday the mafia part would come up, but not yet.

The envelope contained the usual packets, this time with information about an underwater cave brimming with treasure. “Seriously?” he muttered.

“It is a bit weird,” Lorenzo said. “This has allegedly been there for how long, and someone only just recently tracked the place down?”

“There was that earthquake not so long ago,” Zhu pointed out.

“True,” Renato said. “I guess it’s at least vaguely plausible.”

“We’re being tasked to find out,” Alfero said. “We get paid either way.”

“Uh, does anyone here even know how to dive?” Val asked.

Sora snorted. “I don’t have a clue, but hopefully it won’t be far down. The entrance, anyway. This doesn’t say anything about us dragging any spoils out. But for all we know there’s a huge sea monster making a home in whatever cave we’re supposed to find.”

“Let us investigate the area, see how it changes at low tide, and plan from there,” Zhu suggested.

“So we need to make reservations for a place to stay, or get camping gear and find a place in the nature preserve,” he said.

“Oh rent a yacht,” Renato said.

Val wrinkled his nose. “That’d be kind of cramped, but I guess it could be okay. But that only works if one of us knows how to pilot one.”

“I do,” Alfero said.

“As do I,” Renato added. “I’ll even chip in extra for a bigger yacht out of my own funds. I’d prefer to sleep on a bed and not in a bedroll, and this way we don’t have to split up again in separate hotels.”

Val shrugged. “Fine.”

“Okay. I’ll get that sorted out. Someone should check into dive gear, or a way around using it at all, such as air hoses. You’ve been making fantastic strides in that project of yours, Teschio, but I don’t think now is the time to test it on humans.”

Val shook his head. “You’re right. It’s nowhere near human testing. I’ll look into alternatives.”

“I would say I’d see about plane tickets,” Sora said, “but it depends on where this yacht will leave port. If we can take that…”
Renato nodded. “Soon as I have that information I’ll swing by your place, or a training session if it works out that way.”

Alfero’s brow went up. “Training sessions?”

He nodded. “Those of us who have a closer bond than simply team mates get together twice a week to train. Flames mostly, though I’d like to keep my hand-to-hand from getting rusty.”

Zhu twitched minutely.

“And I’ve been trying to teach how to use my webs.”

Viper’s head tilted slightly.

“Can we join in anyway?” Alfero asked. “And what do you mean by webs?”

He demonstrated by forming a web off one hand.

Alfero tilted her head curiously and frowned. “What good is that? What purpose does it serve?”

Lorenzo smirked. “A lot of things, including teaching fine control.”

Sora shrugged and extended the web such that it entered his bruschetta, then solidified the threads. With a quick movement of his hand his food was lifted off the plate. He set it back down and released the web. He picked the bruschetta up normally and showed the plate to Alfero; it was undamaged. “I can walk on water using webs,” he said, then bit into his bread.

Alfero gave him a look of mostly concealed incredulous admiration. “Hm. That would be an interesting way to practice, I admit,” she said carefully.

“Yes, you could join in anyway,” Sora said as he set his bread down. “Sinclair has picked it up fairly quickly, but he had prior experience. But it does mean we have two people capable of teaching. We may not have time until after the mission, though. Depends on how quickly Sinclair can scare us up a yacht.”

“Allow me to assist you with that,” Viper said.

Renato nodded agreeably. “Sure.”

He could only hope that translated to haggling the price down. He was by no means a miser, but haggling was an accepted practice in many places of the world. Sora ignored the little voice that sounded like Kiri that insisted that haggling was not going to be in play.

“I will assist Teschio with the diving issue,” Alfero announced. “I am well versed in that.”

“Well, camping or yachting, I can start gathering up supplies,” he said. “If anyone has any particular dietary needs, let me know before you leave, or if there’s anything you’re hoping to be able to eat while we’re away.”

Renato grinned. “I’ll make certain the yacht has the best kitchen we can get, then.”

Lorenzo immediately offered to assist with that, and Zhu did as well. Before anyone left, Sora made sure they all knew he would be in the room at ten o’clock on Thursday in case anyone was able to make it, and everyone left notes on their preferences regarding food. Alfero and Viper were both vegetarians, which meant getting a bit creative in terms of food that would store well. He would have to freeze a number of things, even if that would alter their structure a little.
As it was, he started making a list on the back of his packet of things to purchase, including basic medical supplies—perhaps Alfero would have something to add given the conditions—and Lorenzo and Zhu made lists of their own. “Depending on when we can set out,” he murmured, mostly to himself, “I can start actually buying stuff.”

“We don’t even know how long we’ll be there,” Lorenzo replied. “That quake could have uncovered an entrance into a vast complex of caves.”

Zhu looked up for a moment, then jotted down a number of new items on his list. A quick peek showed things like fluorescent markers, pitons, and guide ropes.

Alfero showed up to the Thursday session with Val. As they were only for two hours he supposed his Cloud had talked her into it somehow—or she really was that curious. Lorenzo showed up, as did Zhu, which was a little surprising. He sent in an order and made sure that Val and Lorenzo were set to practice, then collected the cart, passed out drinks, and set to getting Alfero and Zhu on target.

Zhu already knew how to use his flames, so just shooting a web out of his fingers a few times was enough for him to nod and start making his own attempts. Alfero, however, had only just become interested enough in flames to bother trying, so she would be more of a challenge.

“How’ve you been doing with sparking flames off your ring?” he asked her.

“Well,” she said shortly, then elaborated. “I’ve been practicing for an hour before bed each night and I’m able to do it easily.”

He smiled at her. “Excellent. I had a feeling you’d be disciplined enough to get it and stick with it. So, the webs. They’re a method of learning fine control. When you can do those, you can do about anything within reason, because by then you’ll know exactly how to manipulate them.”

“It’s not just the hands, then,” she stated.

“Right. I can make them appear from just about anywhere if I concentrate hard enough. It’s easier to start with your hand because it’s so visible and we’re used to things like pointing, if that makes any sense.”

She nodded. “It does, yes.”

She looked at his hand so he slowly created a web for her to look at, then waited patiently as she began trying. Zhu occasionally glanced over, as well, so he made sure his web was easily visible to both. Explaining the “how” of something was not his strong point, but sometimes an example spoke louder.

Kiri had not exactly been verbose when it came to explaining certain things, either. He showed; he demonstrated. He expected that Sora would be good with that much, and he had been, because he already knew he could use his flames, and his imagination was flexible.

Alfero had taken his words to heart, though. She didn’t appear to be trying to force her flames out so much as coaxing or asking them. Already she had short threads emerging from her fingertips and a focused, determined look on her face.

They disappeared abruptly when glass shattered. Sora looked up to see the gas-filled tube Val had been working with was in glittering shards, and Val had a bright smile on his face. He smiled, too, pleased at his friend’s success.
Lorenzo had a smug look on his face as he reached over to pat Val on the back. “I have plenty more where that came from,” he said.

Renato appeared on Tuesday, along with Viper, to the next training session, though they were a little late. A sheaf of photographs was placed in front of Sora and he left off being a demonstration model so he could shuffle through them.

“This looks really nice,” he said admiringly. “Do I even want to know how much I’ll be chipping in?”

Viper smirked. “We talked the price down considerably.” He slid a piece of paper over.

Sora took a look and gawked. Eight million lira. ‘I don’t even want to know what it would have cost at full price.’ He nodded and said, “So a little under one point two five each.”

“Eh, make it one,” Renato said. “I’ll cover the rest, since I pushed for a better yacht.”

He nodded. “If anyone is uncomfortable spending that much, I’ll chip in the difference.” His investments were starting to really pay off, after all, and the payouts from the missions were not exactly pocket change. “And since you’re here, order up and join in on the fun.”

Once that was out of the way he asked, “When are we good to go?”

“We can leave on Friday,” Viper said.

“All right,” he said, eyeing the pictures of the galley kitchen.

Another glass tube exploded and Val smiled happily. Renato smirked and said, “Very nice. You seem to be getting that down handily.”

“Thanks,” Val replied as Lorenzo got out another one and set it in place.

Sora ruthlessly suppressed the smile threatening to break free at seeing his guardians getting along so well. The kitchen in the pictures had a stove, though small, a refrigerator with a freezer compartment, and the requisite sink. Cupboard space was a bit lacking, but—“Do we have to supply the pans and plates and…?”

Renato shook his head. “It’s all part of the deal. But if you have anything special you’d like to use, bring it along. There’s a port a little south from the airport, across the river. That’s where we’ll be leaving from. We can go as early as eight o’clock.”

“So probably ten,” he said. “Gives me time to wake up, get ready, get any perishable supplies, and get there.”

“Vittori and I can help with that,” Val said.

He nodded. “I would welcome the help. You can spend the night if you want.”

They nodded.

Renato looked as if he wished he could do the same. “I’ll get there at eight, just in case.”

“So will I,” Alfero said with a nod. “I’d like to check things over before we leave, so that will give me time. I’ll bring along the gear I’ve rented.”
“You need any help with that stuff?” Renato asked.

She shook her head. “I plan to rent a car. But you can help unload it.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, my stomach,” he moaned quietly as Renato snickered at his misfortune.

“I’m going to make a wild guess and say you’ve never been on a boat like this before?” Renato said, then reached out to lay a hand on Sora’s arm. “I’ll see if I can help, but if not, I’m pretty sure I tossed some pills for that into my bag.”

It was the kind of nausea that made him want to throw up, but not badly enough for him to dash off to the side of the yacht to actually do so. He felt as if he was stuck in a limbo of misery. Whatever Renato was doing was helping to tamp down the sick feeling, but the look on his face must have said it for him.

“Okay. Let me go poke around real quick,” Renato said, and gave him a quick squeeze before gliding off.

Just watching the man walk so confidently made him feel irritation.

Lorenzo sidled up to him with a faint smile and gave him a pat on the arm. “With any luck it’ll taper off on its own once you get used to the motion.”

“I just feel stupid that I never even considered it,” he half whispered.

Lorenzo just patted his arm again. “Your body may even adjust once you’ve slept on board overnight and figures out how to react.”

Renato came back with a plastic vial and handed over a single pill. “I’ll put the rest in the bathroom, all right?”

He nodded and headed for the galley to get some bottled water, the other two following him.

“Give it half an hour to an hour to kick in. It might help to stay up on deck where you can see the motion.”

He nodded and headed to the deck so he could slump into a chair and be miserable in the fresh, salty air. Lorenzo followed him again and took the seat next to him, then said, “I stumbled the other day. Ended up doing exactly what I said I wouldn’t.”

“Huh?”

“Jammed a fork into a socket and electrocuted myself.”

He angled his body swiftly, heedless of the nausea, and ran his eyes over his friend.

“I’m fine,” Lorenzo assured him. “It barely tickled. I’ve had worse from the prods I’ve had you use on me. I’m just trying to say, it’s the little things that trip us up. Hell, I’ve never been on a boat this size and I didn’t think of it, either.”

He smiled softly at Lorenzo’s attempt to make him feel better and had a sip of his water.
Renato showed back up and took the seat to his other side, and reached over to lay a hand on his arm. Threads of warmth entered him and helped to quell the seasickness again.

A few minutes later, just when he was beginning to enjoy himself, a somewhat green Val stumbled out on deck and sank into a chair. “I don’t feel so good.”

Renato laughed, not unkindly, and laid a hand on his arm, as well.

“I’ll go grab more water and another pill,” Lorenzo said.

“If no one objects, I’ll go down and scout out the situation,” Alfero said.

Sora nodded. She said she knew what she was doing, and he chose to believe her.

Alfero nodded when no one said anything and went to get changed. A short time later she was back, dressed in a wetsuit. She got her air tank in place—Lorenzo double-checked it—got on her flippers and other equipment, then said, “I plan to be down there no longer than an hour. I’m leaving a line attached to a cleat and if I get into trouble I’ll send up a balloon.”

“In which case we start hauling?”

She nodded. “Or find other, more interesting ways to assist.” She pulled a line from a plastic container on her belt and tied the end around the nearest cleat. It reminded Sora of certain dog leashes. Then she dropped backward off the side of the yacht.

It was a long hour before she returned, with two of them always watching the water at any given time, looking for a signal that thankfully never came. Alfero hauled herself up the ladder and removed her mask and breather. “There’s a fracture down there, large enough to fit two people side by side. Not too far in—it’s like a u-bend almost—it opens up into a small cave with tunnels leading off from it. Two of them show signs of man-made tools, and are large enough to walk through. I didn’t do more than glance down those two. Had no plans to wander very far without backup.”

Sora nodded. “Do we need gear to get down?”

Alfero shook her head. “If you’re a decent swimmer and can hold your breath for a couple of minutes, no. But it wouldn’t hurt to have some lines coming down from the yacht. It’s not so deep that we’d need a generator going. I want to put up a marker, but I’m a little hesitant.”

“Because other people might boat by and notice it, start asking questions,” Val said.

“Yes.”

“Most people cannot see flames properly if they aren’t active,” Zhu said. “Could we not use a flat disk that will float, and place atop it some measure of flame?”

Sora looked down in thought. “Even without flame it would still be visible enough to guide us,” he said quietly. “I think I can make a lasting marker, though. Assuming we have something that would work.”

Alfero ran a hand through her hair. “Okay, well, I’m going to get cleaned up.”

During lunch he opened with, “How do we want to work this? How many of us go down there?”
“I’m not sure how useful I would be,” Viper said slowly.

“I wonder if two of us should be up here,” Lorenzo said, “and I volunteer to be one of them, but we would need a way to communicate.”

Alfero snorted and shook her head. “Not happening, not without running an actual cable down there to get snagged on sharp rock. It’s a risk, yes, but I think we’d be better served to go down as a group.”

Viper looked reluctant as he tilted his head in a way that could be mistaken for acceptance.

Renato and Lorenzo shared a speaking look, and Sora sat back and closed his eyes so that he could better listen to his intuition. “It’ll be fine if we all go,” he murmured.

Renato eyed him piercingly, then nodded. “I see. What aren’t you saying?”

Sora smiled a bit ruefully. “Just a feeling. It won’t go entirely smoothly, but having people up top isn’t going to help us any. So, for those of us a bit on the leery side, we can run hoses. If we don’t already have some…”

Alfero nodded. “I can run out and get some. The water is a bit on the cool side, but we can bring towels in a waterproof bag, dry off a little once inside, and hang them up. Anything we need to bring along can also go in a waterproof bag and I’ll drag it along.”

“Because you’d be wearing dive gear,” he said.

“Yes.”

“All right. If there are no objections?” he said.

After a few moments Alfero said, “I’ll head out after we finish eating. We can go down tomorrow.”

Sora cleaned up afterward with Val’s help and went to go practice on deck. He eyed Zhu briefly with the idea of getting some help with his hand-to-hand, but the idea of doing so on a yacht was off-putting. Aside from space considerations, he did not want to foul up his adjustment to the boat’s motions on the water. Even so, he could talk to the man.

“So, um…”

Zhu looked up from his book and smiled faintly.

“You have experience with martial arts?”

Zhu nodded, and then tilted his head at the next chair over.

Sora took the invitation and sat down. “I was wondering if you would be willing to help me with that sometime soon? My brother only knows so much about that kind of thing…” He trailed off, hoping he wasn’t about to suffer a rejection.

Zhu’s smile grew a tiny bit more wide. “What do you already know?”

“Well, I say martial arts, but it’s more like dirty fighting,” he admitted. “Kind of, you know, whatever got the job done. Not that I’ve been in a lot of fights. My brother has his ways of keeping malcontents away for the most part.”

“Because you’re a Sky?” Zhu asked very quietly.
“Well…” He paused. “We do tend to attract attention.”

“I think we can come to some kind of arrangement. The room we meet in is large enough for at least some things. I can see what you know and figure out a plan to go from there.”

Sora smiled happily. “Great. I look forward to it.”

The next morning, an hour after breakfast, they set off on their adventure. Alfero was suited up again and had bags attached to her belt, which slowed her down, unfortunately, but it allowed those who could not swim all that well to keep up.

Alfero led the procession straight to the entrance of the cave system. Inside and up a slope they were able to breathe again without the need for the air hoses. She removed one of the bags and broke out the towels so they could dry off, though once Sora got used to the temperature it wasn’t too bad.

A look around showed the tunnels Alfero had mentioned. Indeed, two of them looked to be altered by the hand of man rather than the smooth wear of a steady rush of water. Sadly, the battery-powered lights they had could not reveal the entirety of the cave at once, not unless they all faced in different directions.

“Well,” Zhu said. “Shall we try the left-most?”

Sora shrugged. “I don’t see why not.” Some mostly-forgotten memory told him that it didn’t matter which you chose first, so long as you were consistent.

Zhu, after no one objected, got out a piton and drove it into the rock between the two tunnels, then tied a cord to it. The remainder was attached to his belt so it could play out. About thirty feet down the tunnel opened up into another cave. More tunnels led away, one of them carved, so Zhu tacked a fluorescent marker to the tunnel they had emerged from and they continued on, though Val was quietly marking a piece of paper as they went.

Lunch was a cold meal of sandwiches, and they pressed on again until it was near time for dinner, at which point Sora said, “We should probably head back. Teschio, you’ve got all this mapped so far, right?”

Val nodded. “Yes, however shakily. I’m not exactly an artist. It’s mostly just quick lines with compass directions.”

“Well, I’d like to sleep in a somewhat proper bed,” Renato asserted, “so I vote we finish for the day.”

“…All right,” he said, then shuffled over to glance at Val’s map. “So long as we know where we left off, we can get back here easily enough.”

Getting back was far quicker due to Zhu’s markers lighting the return path and warning them off dead ends.

They spent the next week mapping out the cave complex and finally came to a rather odd room. The floor was lower than the tunnel they had entered by and water filled the difference. Seven beams of light played around the room. Sora saw three new exits, and all three of them showed signs of man-made tools.

“I swear,” he muttered, “this place never seems to end.”
Zhu gave a tiny sigh. “This is becoming wearisome, I agree.”

“We still have some time before stopping for the day,” Alfero said briskly as Zhu marked their entrance point. She stepped down into the water and headed for the left-most tunnel, as per their “strategy”. She was at approximately the center of the room when she suddenly sank out of sight.

“Huh?” he said inanely.

She popped back to the surface with a grimace on her face and heaved herself back up to the solid floor, then started wading back toward them. “That kind of hurt,” she said.

“You need any hea—” Renato started to ask, then, “You better hurry. Something is happening where you fell in.”

Sora saw that the water was bubbling.

Alfero glanced back, then start moving faster. She seemed to be favoring one leg that he could see, and when she stepped back into the tunnel he noticed her left leg was badly scraped up and bleeding. Renato immediately set to healing the damage, but the bubbling was getting worse.

“I have no idea what that is,” he murmured, “but…” He stepped forward to the edge of the tunnel and sent out webs in an attempt to cover the surface of the water and contain whatever was happening, or at least pacify things if some manner of creature was involved.

And there was. From the center surfaced a group of odd fish, with gaping mouths showing off sharp and numerous teeth. They made a beeline for the group, possibly following the blood, and Zhu began to disintegrate them, but more kept surfacing, no matter how many he killed off.

Sora’s web continued to spread, but to no effect. When he attempted to send in feelings of satiation or serenity or sleepiness, the fish just kept coming. “Damn it,” he muttered.

“Not working?” Lorenzo asked.

“No, they’re not responding. I don’t think they have enough of a brain for this to work.”

Viper replied, “They do not. They don’t even see my illusions.”

He hummed. “For all we know there’s an enormous underground lake under that spot with thousands more. You can try to thread into what I’m doing and zap them like bugs, but I suspect we need something a little different. Alfero, do you think you can freeze the surface of the water?”

She gave him a startled look.

“You’ve been doing really well in our practice sessions,” he said encouragingly. “Try, please. Imagine freezing the surface of the water, enough to keep them under.”

Renato stood up and nodded. “You’re done, though I’ll take a look at it again once we’re back at the yacht.”

“You are uniquely suited for this, Alfero,” he added. “Hook into my web if that helps you get started, but I know you can do this.”

She straightened up and turned back to the water, then slowly extended a web down from her hand to the one Sora was spreading. Several minutes later of Zhu disintegrating fish that got too close, ice started to form at the edge of the water. It was thin and spread very slowly, and before too long
Alfero heaved a sigh and stopped trying after the effect started to recede.

Sora shook his head slightly. “All right. I say we retreat for now. Alfero can get in some practice in a less tense situation, and then we come back. We still have a couple of weeks left before an answer of some kind is expected.”

“I think that’s probably for the best,” she said. “And all else failing, we rig up some kind of makeshift raft that wouldn’t be too troublesome to cart in here.”

“I would say propagating stones to fill up that hole,” Val said, “but depending on how deep it is, I could be doing that forever.”

“Actually… You could practice propagating whatever ice Alfero comes up with, to hasten the process along for when we come back. Are we agreed on leaving for now?” Once everyone assented he stopped forming his webs.

Zhu covered their retreat back down the tunnel, but was quickly able to turn and follow them properly. They had the route down pretty well by that point so getting back to the entrance was no hassle, and they were shortly enough back on the yacht. Renato took another look at Alfero’s leg after she showered, and once Sora was done with his he got started on a meal.

The next morning after breakfast they set up several pans filled with water for Alfero to practice with. He also hunted down a shallow plastic container and set Val to working on trying to multiply the thing’s size rather than its quantity. Val gave him a funny look and scooted closer so he could whisper, “I thought about what you said a ways back and tried some experiments.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. So I experimented a bit outside the training sessions. I can alter my musculature, so I think I already know how to do what you’re suggesting.”

He furrowed his brow. “You’re okay? You didn’t suffer any side effects?” he whispered a bit anxiously.

“I’m fine,” Val assured him. “It was like a temporary augment. Let me apply that to this, and we’ll see. And then if Alfero steps up to, hm, maybe trying to freeze part of the ocean?—if she can do that we’ll be certain she can handle the cave—I can try to propagate her efforts and speed freeze the whole thing so we can pass by without disturbing whatever those creepy fish are.”

He gave Val a warm smile. “I know you can do it. You doing all right, though? Being cramped up like this can’t be easy for you.”

“It’s a little rough, but it’s easier because you’re here. And Vittori and Sinclair are pretty nice once you get to know them.”

“Hopefully we won’t be out here much longer. I’m feeling cramped myself.”

By the end of the day Alfero could freeze her pans of water over, so Sora suggested she try both at once starting after breakfast. Two days later they were geared up again and in the caves, getting to the trouble spot in record time.

It took a half hour of effort on the parts of both Alfero and Val, mainly because it took some time for the two to mesh properly when it came to extending the ice layer efficiently, but the water was frozen over thick enough to hold them.
“Excellent work, you two,” he said. “So, left?”

Left was a dead end, as was the middle tunnel. But down the right-most tunnel was what they were after. Chests and crates abounded, decaying with age and spilling out their contents on the rocky floor to reveal gold coins and gems and other treasures.

“Oh, if only we could squirrel all this away,” Renato said quietly.

Sora snickered. “We’re getting paid quite well. All right, so, let’s take a moment to admire the swag, then we can check out those last few tunnels. I’d say get some pictures of this place, but unless we set up a bunch of lights…”

“I’ll help you do up a better map once we’re done,” Lorenzo promised Val.

The final few tunnels held nothing of interest aside from a few skeletons and a burnt spot in the center of the floor, so they returned to the yacht to clean up, relax, and have something other than sandwiches on the go.

Val and Lorenzo sketched out a new map that evening after dinner and tucked it away afterward to be dropped off at the location they’d been given in their packets.

The next day they began the return journey to Rome, with Alfero once again taking up the morning shift. Sora went up to see how she was doing and bring her a cup of tea. It was pleasant enough up on the bridge, but not a place he would want to spend a lot of time in, because it felt cramped to him even if the view was nice.

As he turned to leave she said, “I wanted to thank you.”

“Oh?”

“You don’t teach the way I would, but you do get results, and you have a way of making people feel confident.”

He leaned against the wall. “Well, it’s kind of a weird concept to get down.”

“Whereas teaching people how to increase their fitness and fighting capabilities is a lot different.”

He nodded. “True, or I would assume so. Either way, you’re welcome, as a person and as a member of the team.”

“And these Sky people are team leaders by default?”

“Skies are pretty rare in comparison to any other type of flames, and their harmony aspect tends to make them … attractive, I guess you could say.”

She gave him a sharp look. “Attractive as a target?”

“That, too. That may be why I ended up in the hospital, after what might have been a failed hit.” He shrugged his ignorance. “But I’m not without…” He trailed off, unsure of how to say what he meant.

“People who keep an eye on you,” she said, then sipped her tea.

“I suppose you could say that,” he replied, “but I think of them as my friends, because friends look out for and help each other. I’ve created bonds since the accident.”

“You say bond, but I hear something other than what most people would assume you meant,” she
said with a shrewd look.

He smiled. “It’s more than just friendship, yes. It’s more of a spiritual thing. I can feel the people I’m bonded with in my heart, literally, but that’s part of being a Sky.”

Alfero tilted her head and sipped her tea before saying, “And between those people?”

“No. That’s all the old fashioned way.” he replied. “You going to come to the regular training meetings? Zhu said he’d give me some help with martial arts, but I’d still be helping everyone else who needed any. A lot of it is imagination past the point of learning control, though, or getting ideas from other sources. I got a lot of mine from various forms of fiction, actually, but my brother—slave driver that he is—got me started on webs.”

A smile flitted into view before vanishing. “Did he teach you how to cook, too?”

Sora grimaced. “No. He can’t cook to save his life. I had to learn in self defense or we’d have been eating sandwiches all the time or getting delivery. Speaking of which, is there anything in the way of snacks you like? I try to rotate what things I make. Cheesecake, cookies, whatever. I’ll give it a shot.”

“Oh, uh, brutiboni.”

“All right. So you’ll come?”

“Planning to bond with me, too?” she asked.

“I don’t plan those things,” he said with a shake of his head. “And it’s a two-way street, usually with the other person initiating the bond.”

“Well, I’ll be at the meeting. Tuesday, right?”

“Yep. Ten o’clock, Tuesdays and Thursdays.” He gave her a smile before wandering off to attempt a nap. The motion of the yacht was upsetting his stomach again.
Kiri was amused by his description of their adventure, as well as extremely pleased Sora was home again and available to cook, naturally. When Monday rolled around he got post with another account number slip inside, and his brother took care of that for him while he messed around with making sweets for the next day’s meeting.

When he arrived Lorenzo, Val, and Renato were already present. He set down his boxes of baked goods. He had gone a little overboard and prepared goods for everyone he had an idea of what to make. So there were some cheesecake bites for Val, cannoli for Lorenzo, tiramisu brownies for Renato, and bruttiboni for Alfero. For Zhu he had guessed and made pineapple tarts. Viper was the other one he wasn’t sure about, but he could try to make some guesses involving strawberries, assuming Viper ever decided to join them.

He gently slid boxes in front of each person present and smiled when they pulled them close and opened them. Sora sat down and opened his own little box of cannoli and grabbed a napkin. One of them had already gotten drinks, though Zhu and Alfero would have to order for themselves, as both preferred hot beverages.

Renato let out an odd, muffled sound as he bit into a brownie, then gave him a pleased look. A few moments later he said, “These are wonderful. Thank you.”

“I have a few other ideas, too,” he replied, “but I’m very glad you like those.”

Alfero and Zhu showed up right on time and were given their boxes. Zhu seemed pleasantly surprised by his offering if that quality of the man’s smile was anything to go by, and his murmured, “Thank you.”

Alfero opened her box and stared for a moment, as if in mild disbelief that Sora really had done it, then took out a cookie and bit into it. She hummed approvingly and nodded at him.

“I was considering bringing a small, caged, not so calm animal at some point,” he said to Alfero, “so you could try using the tranquilizing aspect of your flames. But what I’d like you to try today is to see if you can use your flames as radar.” He sent out a large pulse of his flames.

“Do you get anything when you do that?” she asked.

“Yes and no. If it’s in a place I’m familiar with I can detect discrepancies between what I expect and what’s new, and I can use it to detect anomalies in consumables. I think it depends on the quality of the flames and the user’s skill. Because you have Rain Flames, you’d probably be looking for something that disturbs the tranquility. People are excitable beings…”

Zhu showed a hint of intrigue and thoughtfulness as he munched on a tart, even though the statement wasn’t directed at him.

“Start with a smaller pulse and keep extending it. I would say … work on range and how diffuse you can make it without losing any feedback you get.”

“All right,” Alfero said with a nod. “I think I can work with that, the idea of spreading my awareness through my flames. Of course, if anyone ever notices me doing it, I’ll know they have the ability to use flames as well.”

“Yep. But if you can get it down, you can later work on refining your control to the point that the
pulse is diffuse enough that people shouldn’t notice unless they’re really sensitive. That’s why I like starting with webs after learning how to spark flames off a ring, because those teach focus and control and help you for other things.”

Zhu took him aside after their snack was eaten and got him started on martial arts while Renato worked further on his own use of webs, Val continued to practice with gasses, and Lorenzo had moved on to messing with battery-operated lights to see if he could disrupt their function.

After forty-five minutes of Zhu showing him stances and katas to do on his own they took a break and ordered himself some vodka-laced chocolate milk—’Maybe I should ask on the way out if they have vanilla rum,’ he thought. ‘That might taste nice, too.’—along with some tea for Zhu.

“You know,” Renato said, “you could always try a White Russian.”

He felt dubious about the idea; coffee was not something he favored.

“Seriously,” Renato persisted, then slid his glass over. “Just a sip.”

He took the glass and cautiously sipped, then hummed. It wasn’t bad, actually, and not at all bitter. “All right, maybe you have a point,” he said, then slid the glass back over. “But there is nothing wrong with boozy chocolate milk.”

Renato rolled his eyes. “At least you didn’t hate it.”

“No. But it’s extremely unlikely you will ever get me to drink coffee.”

Renato looked like he wanted to say something in reply to that, but held himself back. It was probably a perverted comment.

He arched a brow at his Sun before turning his attention to Alfero. “I noticed you were managing a fairly good-sized pulse. Are you sensing anything with it?”

“Almost?” she said uncertainly. “It might be a better test once I can spread it out a bit more, and maybe catch people in the next room over. Something like that.”

“If you have a pet at home, that would probably help. Well, maybe not a dog, since those tend to stick close. But a cat, maybe.”

She wrinkled her nose. “…No, no pets.”

“Birds landing on the windowsill, feeder, or nearby trees?” he suggested.

“Hm. That might work,” she said agreeably.

“You might even be able to pacify them enough to pet one. Or a quiet park somewhere with no other people around.”

Alfero gave him a shrewd look. Considering that some of them, Alfero and Teschio most prominently, did not know about the mafia connection, he hoped that his somewhat ham-fisted attempts at subtlety were working. Kiri would be miles better at it, but he wasn’t Kiri.

A knock came at the door so he went to get the delivery, then served Zhu his tea and sat back down with his own drink. “How about you?” he asked Val. “Coming along all right?”

Val grinned happily. “I’m able to work with smaller tubes,” he bragged a little.
“Ah, so your fine control is coming along quickly,” he complimented. “Perhaps the next step would be to use an opaque tube?”

Val furrowed his brow. “That would up the difficulty. Yeah, okay.”

Lorenzo nodded. “I’ll have some ready for the next session, then.”

They spent the next hour playing a game of who could web to the center of the table the fastest, with Sora as the adjudicator, mainly to get everyone more comfortable using their flames in a real-time manner. When noon rolled around Zhu gave everyone a polite goodbye and disappeared with the cart.

Alfero got up and started toward the door as Renato, Val, and Lorenzo started pestering Sora about later. “What are you going to make us for dinner this time?” Renato asked, leaning in close.


“Oh,” Val said wonderingly. “Um… Let me think… Well…”

Renato got an impatient look on his face, but a glance from Sora made him behave.

“Spinach tomato tortellini?” Val said.

He nodded. “I can make that, sure. You two all right with that? Because if not, deal with it.”

Lorenzo just smiled. “It’s Val’s turn.”

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious,” Renato said agreeably.

“Well, the usual deal, then. We’ll buy what we need and head to my apartment. Technically a late-ish lunch, actually, considering that it’s noon now.” He turned to leave and realized Alfero was lingering by the door with an indecisive look on her face. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I—I just realized that…” She trailed off, shifting slightly. “You’re genuine.”

He furrowed his brow in confusion, but then his chest warmed as another bond formed.

Renato shook his head slightly and chuckled. “Guess it’s a good thing you picked something vegetarian, Val.”

“What? Oh… Right.”

“That was the bond thing you were talking about?”

He nodded. “Are you coming with us, then?” he finally asked. “And next time you get to pick what I make.”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

An hour and a half later they were at his apartment and Kiri popped his head around the corner, as always. “And another one.”

“This is … Alfero. Alfero, this is my brother, Kiri.”
“Lalia, or Lal,” she said to Kiri.

“Ah, the Rain,” Kiri said. “Welcome to our apartment. I can assume this means you harmonized.”

Sora nodded. “And we’re having spinach tomato tortellini for lunch, since you preempted Val’s choice last time. And because of that, and because Lal is new, they can have the end pieces off the bread if they choose.”

Kiri pouted and shook his head mournfully. “So cruel.”

Sora rolled his eyes and headed into the kitchen, followed by his friends.

Kiri came in last and started helping him by unpacking the bags. “You actually look like a Lal,” he said to Alfero.

Sora paused and gave his brother an odd look. “That’s a first.”

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“Kiri likes to give people nicknames. You’re the first one I’ve brought home that he didn’t.”

“Is Sora your nickname?” she asked.

“…I guess so?” he said. “After all, I don’t know my original name.”

“It’s safer that way,” Kiri said firmly. “If there really is someone out there aiming to blow your head off, not knowing your original name means nobody spreads it around.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied and started making their lunch.

Lal nodded, to herself mostly, and took a seat at the table.

“We may have to start eating out in the sitting room,” Renato said, eyeing the kitchen doubtfully.

“What we should be doing is looking for is a new place,” Kiri said, “but not for a bit. And it takes time to find a good place to invest in.”

“Define good,” Renato said.

Kiri looked up from patting spinach dry. “For one, room enough for everyone without crowding, which means multiple levels. For two, an excellent kitchen, because I refuse to go without Sora’s cooking. For three, a place I can set up defenses for far more comprehensively.”

“You make it sound like we’d have our own rooms there,” Val said.

“You would,” Sora said. “Even if you were only there once a week, you’d still have a room and a home. I’ve been experimenting with making mead in my spare time, so I was considering opening a bar of sorts, selling the stuff along with the usual varieties of alcohol, but it would make sense in that event to have a building that went down instead of up.”

Lorenzo and Renato nodded at that. “I love windows and sunlight as much as the next person,” Renato said, “but I have to admit, living underground does tend to make things simpler in some respects. Not to mention that a skilled Mist can fake the windows anyway.”

Kiri nodded. “Exactly. And hide any entrances to the lower levels. Either way, it takes time to find a suitable building.”
A short time later they were eating, though space at the table was a little tight. Val was very happy
with the food, and Lalia was also approving. Before they broke up they made plans for the next
training session, and then went their separate ways for the time being.

Right on schedule another letter arrived, and Sora decided he would bring a little something along for
once, not just to a training session. Two days later saw him hefting a picnic basket up onto the
meeting table as various people eyed him curiously. He smiled and started unpacking it. Bowls,
forks, napkins, and, naturally, the whole point of it, a strawberry-kiwi-spinach salad with a raspberry
vinaigrette dressing.

“So, who’s feeling daring?” he asked as he portioned some salad into a bowl, then slid it across the
table to Val. He quickly shot filled bowls to everyone and finished up with one for himself. Someone
had already sent in the usual drink order, so his chocolate milk was waiting for him.

Viper took one bite and slowly straightened up. Sora could almost see anime-esque question marks
pop up over the man’s head. Viper’s head angled toward what was left in the original bowl, then
quickly reached out to draw it toward him. His sample bowl got tipped into the original and Viper
began to eat from that instead.

Sora eyed the whole thing with amusement. “I’m going to take that to mean you like it?”

“Yes,” Viper said shortly.

He nodded and took a bite of his own, hummed thoughtfully, then reached out to grab the envelope
containing the mission details. He passed out the copies and read while he ate. It was guard duty
again, but this time for a set of five year old heirs, Fahroni and Giomar Cavallone. The name rang a
vague, distant bell in his mind, but it was nothing he could chase down and pin in place.

He ate the last of his salad and pushed the bowl away, absently noticing that Viper was also done—
he must have eaten quickly to manage it—and had a sip of his milk. “I’m thinking at least one of us
should be planted in with the kids, in disguise.”

“Why is it my senses are tingling and telling me you’re going to be one of them?” Renato said.

“Because you’d be right?” he replied.

“Cavallone, huh? Interesting,” Viper said.

“Do you plan to be a nanny this time or…?” Lorenzo asked.

“I was thinking of masquerading as a child.”

Val heaved a sigh. “I’ll join you, then.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Val said stubbornly. “I have an idea what I could do if someone attacked. I can handle the
driving part.”

“And depending on how an attack might happen, stop the vehicle and propagate a barrier?” Zhu
said.

“Something like that, yes. Potentially using a web as a framework.”
Sora nodded. “I could do that.”

“Well, whatever vehicle is being used I want to go over before it’s used,” Lorenzo said. “No sense trying to drive the thing if someone has inserted a few bombs.”

“This’d be easier in the long run if we could just slap illusions on the kids and take them to their destination via public transport and put two ringers in their place, but I guess that’d be just too logical,” Renato said with a roll of his eyes.

“It didn’t work with that other guy,” Lorenzo said, “so why would it for this one? Maybe we can come up with a slightly different take on the idea, but for the moment…”

“We can try,” he said. “Teschio and I will be with the children and the rest of you can have an eye out for snipers and the like. We’ve got enough time to get there and scope out the possible routes before we have to do the actual job.”

“Speaking of which,” Renato said, “I know a few good places there we can get rooms.” He jotted down something on a spare piece of one of the pages in his packet and slid it over. “They have a few nice suites, so you can probably get one. Should be enough room again for a meeting that end. Two people should find rooms there, too, and the others…” He started writing again.

“Um…”

Val looked at him. “I think you should have Sinclair with you. You know…”

“In case he gets hurt again?” Lorenzo said.

Sora rolled his eyes. “Guys… It was one time!”

“I agree,” Renato said. “So duke it out for the other spot.”

Lorenzo, Val, and Lalia exchanged a look, then went for a round of rock-paper-scissors. Val won and grinned happily. Renato nodded and started sliding slips of paper around.

“So, all right,” he said. “Same as before? We meet up in a week at my location, for dinner. Get in any scouting you can in that time, but since we have two weeks before the kids arrive…” He knocked back the last of his drink and started packing up the picnic basket.

An hour and a half later he was home with his guardians in tow and he started in making sauce for some vegetarian lasagne while Kiri secured him a suite in the hotel Renato had specified. The others borrowed the phone one at a time to arrange for their own rooms.

“So, we can—”

Renato shook his head. “I checked while I had the phone. There’s a train that leaves tonight a little before midnight. A bit more expensive for the sleeping accommodations, but we’d get there mid-morning, check in…”

“Oh. What do the rest of you think? Because I’m good with that idea if you all are. Of course, I have no idea how far away any of you live from here, so…”

“I’ll have enough time to run home and pack, get back here,” Val said, and the rest nodded in agreement.

“Then we eat earlier, to give you guys a chance to do that.”
“I’ll stop by the station on my way and get us tickets,” Renato said, and when Sora went to speak he added, “And don’t even say a word about paying me back. You’ve cooked us dinner how many times now? I think I can afford to buy you a damn ticket.”

Sora closed his mouth and went back to seeing about their meal.

When they did get to the train he realized that Renato had pulled something of a fast one and gotten two doubles and a single. Naturally, Renato was sharing a sleeper compartment with Sora. “Should I be concerned?” he asked as he racked his suitcase and inspected the small room.

“What, are you afraid I’m going to ravish you?” Renato said with a smirk. “Or are you hoping I will?”

Sora rolled his eyes. “This is probably a mistake to admit, but … I have no idea if I’ve ever even been in a relationship with anyone before.”

Renato sat on the lower bunk and patted the spot next to him. Once Sora was seated he said, “Well, does the idea bother you?”

“I guess not…? But I don’t like the idea of someone coming on to me just because I’m a Sky.”

Renato snorted softly. “Sky attraction is no joke, but that’s not what interests me primarily. I never thought I’d get the chance to bond with a Sky, and certainly not with one like you. I wouldn’t fuck that up for the world. But you are attractive, in a number of ways and for a number of reasons, and I would gladly fall for you, preferably with you falling for me in return. But for now, how about you take first shot at that closet of a rest room, and then take the top bunk.”

“So you can protect me more easily?” he asked with a faint smile.

“Yes,” Renato said, then leaned in and gave him a soft peck on the lips. “Go.”

He rolled his eyes again and got up so he could rummage in his suitcase. “Pushy mother-hen,” he muttered to hide that fact that even such a quick kiss had felt awfully nice.

“I’m nobody’s mother,” Renato protested grumpily.

He finished grabbing his things and went into the tiny bathroom to brush his teeth, relieve himself, and change into his sleep trousers. He wandered back out and ignored the way Renato eyed him, and folded his clothing before stashing it in his suitcase. He then climbed up into the top bunk and maneuvered himself under the covers, giving Renato enough room to move around properly.

Five minutes later Renato was back from his own ablutions. He climbed a few steps up the ladder and said, “Anything you need before I turn out the lights?”

“Um…” He spied the watch Renato was still wearing. “You setting an alarm on that thing?”

“Yes. Nine, unless you want to have their excuse for food a bit earlier.”

He shook his head. “We can eat at the hotel after we get checked in.”

“All right. Do I get a goodnight kiss?”

Sora smiled and said, “So pushy.” Then he pushed up on his elbow long enough to give Renato a slightly more lingering kiss before retreating.

Renato grinned and climbed back down.
The mission itself was something of a let down in that it went far more smoothly than their first escort. Sora used illusions to make himself look much younger and held Val’s hand as they entered the airport to pick up the two boys from their flight. Viper and Lorenzo hung back in the parking lot to keep an eye on things, to ensure that no one meddled.

Val was wearing an orange carnation in the lapel of his suit jacket, a sign for the children they awaited. First off the plane was a stewardess accompanied by twin blond boys. One of them spotted Val and pointed excitedly.

“That’s the man,” he said. “Papa said to look for an orange flower.”

Sora waved “shyly” as the stewardess carefully looked at the people at the gate, then she walked the two boys over.

“Signori Cavallone,” Val said quietly. “I hope you don’t mind, but I brought my nephew along. This is Piero.”

Sora murmured a quiet greeting, which the twins returned, though they did not provide their given names. ‘These two look … familiar … for some reason,’ he thought.

The stewardess finally left after one of the ladies manning the gate podium called out to her, and Val led the procession to the waiting car. Viper was still lurking in the parking lot, and promptly, once they arrived in the vicinity, used his illusions to fool anyone watching into thinking that Val ushered the children into one car, when in reality it was a different car entirely. The false car started up and drove away while Val was still ensuring the boys were situated properly.

A rather tedious half hour later Val motored up the main drive to Cavallone manor and pulled to a stop. Two servants rushed out of the manor and down the stairs as Val got out of the car and held the door for the twins. Only after the boys were inside did Val get back in the car and drive away.

Sora released his illusionary appearance once they were out of sight and climbed into the front passenger seat. “That was amazingly boring, and I’m glad.”

Val nodded. “Yeah. I’m happy that Viper came up with the idea of faking what car they went in to draw off any pursuit. Saved us a lot of worry.”

He reached over and removed the cap Val was wearing and set it on the dashboard. “So let’s drop off the car and have dinner, and arrange for the trip home.”

“He right!” Val said cheerfully. A half hour later they were back at the airport, dropping the rental off, and then catching a cab to the hotel. The others were waiting at various points in the lobby, and followed him and Val up in stages.

An order was sent down once they were assembled and Sora said, “Mission accomplished. Very boring, but boring is good when it comes to little children. Thank you, Viper, for that lovely bit of misdirection. I expect things would have been much different otherwise.”

Viper nodded.

“Considering that I saw several people expressing their frustration…” Zhu shrugged.

“Tomorrow morning I’m going to see about getting tickets on the night train,” Lorenzo said.
“I’ll go with you,” Val offered.

“Is this the part where I don’t object again?” he asked.

They nodded.

“Right.” He got up to answer the door and was promptly pushed back down by Renato, who went in his stead. “God damn pushy bastard,” he muttered.

Val let out a little giggle and quickly covered his mouth.

Renato came back a moment later pushing a cart and started handing food out. Sora dug into his spaghetti as Lalia said, “I expect we’ll get the slips in the post, then, like last time.”

“I almost feel guilty taking the pay,” he said. “Almost. But two little boys did get home safely, so whatever.”

The broke up after the meal was finished, with Lorenzo and Val promising to return for lunch with tickets. Renato stuck around, and after everyone else had left he said, “So just Storm and Mist.”

“Yes.”

“Viper seemed awfully taken with that salad you made.”

“I hardly think that would be the determining factor,” he said with a sigh. “I know you guys like home-cooked meals, but that’s kind of ridiculous.”

Renato shook his head slowly. “Well… Since we have time tomorrow before we leave, how about we poke around town? Or we could just sit and talk.”

“We could talk now,” he pointed out.

“True. Val doesn’t know, does he,” Renato said. “Nor Lalia. Not so sure about Lorenzo.”

“Lorenzo knows. He pushed the issue and Kiri explained. But Val and Lalia haven’t. I’m not sure they’re even the least bit suspicious.”

“But you’ve made it clear they should be discreet.” Renato nodded. “How did Lorenzo take it?”

He thought back. “Um… Well enough, I suppose. He didn’t freak out or anything. But he also knows that so long as he’s discreet he can escape most notice.”

“Won’t help for anyone who was watching that first job and got a good look at him,” Renato replied. “But yes. The fact that he’s harmonized with a Sky and has fellow guardians will certainly not hurt. I really do wonder about Val and Lalia, though.”

“Why they agreed to do any of this?” he asked. “I wonder that myself. But asking is…”

“Asking opens you up to talking about things you shouldn’t be.”

He nodded. “Right. I don’t doubt it’ll come out at some point, though, and the fallout might not be so nice.”

“Harmonization should cushion that. Do you want to harmonize with Zhu and Viper?”

Sora’s brow furrowed. “Kiri explained a lot to make up for what I lost, so I know that Zhu is a
fantastic example of a Storm. He’s so steady and calm, it’s amazing. He’s also really skilled. He seems like a genuinely nice person. So yes. As for Viper, well… I think a lot of people would have a reflexive—"

“Distaste?” Renato offered.

“…I guess? The idea of never knowing what’s real or not,” he said. “But Kiri is a Mist, so I know they’re just like anyone else. They can be as sane or as psychotic as the next person depending on their experiences. Viper is also really skilled. He’s calm, he seems stable. I mean, don’t get me wrong, my brother sometimes cackles to himself in a stereotypically evil manner, but it’s just one of his eccentricities. Viper doesn’t seem even that quirky. He’s good, he doesn’t flaunt it, and while reserved, I don’t see anything about him that puts me off. So yes there, too. I’ve noticed…”

“Yes?” Renato prompted after a moment.

“It’s—since I’ve harmonized with four of you, it’s like I can feel this emptiness inside me.”

“Wait—” Renato showed his surprise in the rise of his brows. “You can feel the missing bonds? Can you separate them out?”

Sora reached inside himself and slid a mental finger along the bond he had with his Sun.

Renato shivered and smiled. “That … was super cool. I never really expected the bonds to be quite that distinct, or to have any real proof that … well … I’m not really sure what I’m trying to say here.”

“I don’t think it’s the kind of thing a Sky would talk about with anyone other than their guardians, you know? It’s awfully private, don’t you think? It’s bad enough that any Sky who is less than, say, honorable, could use that knowledge against another Sky they had a conflict with.”

“By holding their guardians hostage, or…”

“Yeah. It’s the ‘or’ part that’s scarier.”

“Just how many people has Kiri scared off, anyway?”

“A few,” he said, then poured himself a new glass of wine. “But they could be nosing around because we’re obviously foreign.”

“Is that even your real face?”

Sora grimaced and shook his head. “Kiri fixed that up, too, after the ‘accident’ happened.”

“Well, maybe after your brother finds a decent place…” Renato trailed off, then said, “I’m a freelance hitman, but sometimes I think it’d be nice to operate out of one place, rather than having several families I bounce around between.”

His brow furrowed. “So, in addition to me selling off the booze I make and maybe food…”

“A place where people can go who don’t want to deal with a big, intimidating family. And Lorenzo could have a place to experiment. I did some checking around on other members of the team, but some of us cover our tracks pretty well. So I don’t know very much about people like Zhu or Viper—certainly not enough to know if they’re hitmen like I am. But if they are…”

“I see. If they are, they could potentially benefit from that arrangement, too. A home base, where people have to come to us. And Kiri could certainly ensure that people weren’t trying to trick us into
something. There are probably a bunch of people who could use help, but like you said, don’t want to bother a big family or pay the prices they’re sure to charge. Though, I have no idea what kind of money you normally pull in for hits you do.”

Renato shrugged. “I do all right. But I’d be fine with a change of pace. Nothing says I couldn’t do both.”

“I’d ask about your past, but that doesn’t seem very fair when I don’t know my own.”

Renato chuckled. “There’s not much to tell. French father, Italian mother, both dead at this point. One from drink and one from being unable to keep his hands off other people’s women. I was discovered after I went flame active and brought into the mafia. Once they discovered I was exceptional with a gun, well…”

“Are those people even still around?” he asked, wondering why his Sun would have gone freelance.

“No. It was a smaller family and they tangled with the wrong people. But by then I knew enough people to stay afloat, and actually start to make enough to get a decent place and enjoy some of the finer things in life.”

“Like decent coffee?” he teased. “If there is such a thing.”

Renato rolled his eyes. “And what are you going to do if I give you a kiss that makes you forget how to breathe after I’ve just had a cup of coffee?”

“Be concerned that a basic autonomic reflex has gone by the wayside?” he said, still teasing.

“Oh, wow,” Renato said a bit wonderingly. “You really don’t know.”

“Hey!” he complained, trying to cover his sudden feelings of embarrassment.

“Don’t you worry, Sora,” Renato said leeringly. “I’ll teach you. When the time is right, anyway. No sense jumping into things.”

On Tuesday he was about to leave his apartment to head out to the training session when a knock came at the door. Lorenzo was waiting patiently outside, and on seeing him said, “I figured I’d go in with you. Help you carry anything.”

“Oh.” A smile came to his face. “All right. Um, here,” he said, handing over half his burden. With that out of the way they took off, Sora calling a good-bye over his shoulder to Kiri.

“I made up a new prod,” Lorenzo said as they walked. “I considered the idea of just walking out into a lightning storm, but I figured you would get upset.”

Sora stared at him.

“Ninety percent of all humans who get struck survive, you know.”

“So? And some of them suffer nervous system failure or fried internal organs. I prefer the idea of you being certain you would survive unharmed before you court a lightning strike or try to call it down from the heavens to zap someone.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Which is why I made a stronger prod. I am trying to be scientific about this.”
Sora sighed. “Right. For the sake of my nerves, keep it that way, all right?”

Lorenzo patted him on the arm.

He handed out the food gifts once they arrived and spent the first hour working with Zhu, then took sent in a drink order of juice and tea.

“I could sense you two moving around,” Lalia said once he was situated.

Sora smiled. “Excellent.”

Val shifted impatiently and said, “I managed to explode two opaque tubes at once.”

He turned a warm smile on his Cloud. “Pretty soon you’ll be able to test that theory.”

“And we have determined thus far,” Renato said, “that Vittori is taking no damage whatsoever from his experiments with electricity.”

“Oh, good,” he said. He hadn’t considered having Renato keep an eye on the man that way, which was silly of him when he thought about it. What better person to supervise than a healer? “It’s your turn to decide on the meal today,” he said to Lorenzo, forgetting for a moment that Zhu was sitting there.

Lorenzo hummed thoughtfully. “How about a stir fry? You can add the meat in after one portion is taken out. Or use tofu. Or both.”

He glanced at Lalia, who nodded agreeably. “I can do that. I have more than one wok, so… Yeah. We can decide on what to put in it while we’re shopping. And … whoever wins three out of five on the web game gets to choose dessert.”

Val got a determined look on his face. “All right!”

Surprisingly, Zhu won, at which point Sora remembered that they had been discussing plans the man was not actually included in. He blushed and tried to think of what to say.

Zhu gave him a serene smile and said, “I don’t suppose you know how to make manjū? Say, for the next meeting here?”

He nodded. “Sure. Would you prefer that over the pineapple tarts?”

“I like both.”

“I’ll bring manjū next time, then.”

Zhu nodded and wandered out.

“I feel bad now,” he admitted. “Like we were discussing secret club things and he… Maybe I was already thinking of him as part of…”

“So make it plain in some way,” Renato suggested.

Lorenzo and Val both showed up to escort him on Thursday. Zhu gave Sora another serene smile when a box was handed to him filled with manjū, then hustled him off to the side for martial arts practice.
“I wonder if you have had prior practice,” Zhu said about fifteen minutes in. “You are picking this up faster than I would have expected.”

“Anything’s possible, I suppose,” he replied. “I keep thinking you ought to have tonfa in your hands for some reason.”

“Tonfa?” Zhu said with mild amusement. “No, I prefer only to use myself.”

“I don’t think I’d be all that good with anything else. I think I’d be hilariously inept with a gun or a sword or whatever.”

“And yet I suspect you have something up your sleeve when it comes to using your fists, should it come to that.”

His brow furrowed. “Well, yes, I do.” He glanced over his shoulder to see that everyone was busy doing their training, then made a fist and exerted his flames. Thin blades like razors emerged from his fingers, from the knuckle to the first joint.

Zhu’s brow went up slowly. “Yes, that would cause more than a little damage, I must assume.”

“Yes. You see the concept in science fiction of monomolecular wire. This is similar, I suppose, in that the blades are thinner even than what they resemble.” He dissolved them and relaxed his hand.

“But you didn’t use those against Rosario,” Zhu said with certainty.

He shook his head. “Too much of a chance of getting blood all over myself. No, you already saw what I did, though you might not remember my example.”

Zhu paused and pressed a finger to his lower lip in thought. “The bruschetta, when you speared it.”

“Yep. Got him from just inside the door. He never even saw the web coming. Right through his heart. There was just something about the guy that set me on edge.”

“You mean aside from his crimes.”

Sora nodded. “Yes, but… It’s silly—well, maybe not silly. Just something I suspect is from my memories. Either someone I hated or something unresolved. I don’t really know.”

“With luck, or a sufficiently disruptive occurrence, they will come back to you,” Zhu said calmly, slowly folding down to take a seated position on the floor.

“I suppose,” he replied, sitting down as well. “Though a part of me almost hopes that doesn’t happen. I like my life right now. I have friends I care about and trust. I’m not sure I want to know what happened to land me in the hospital. But another part says I need to know, so I know who I was, and who I might have been.”

“Might have been?”

“Maybe I was on the wrong path,” he said with a shrug.

“You’re gathering guardians,” Zhu said.

He hummed. “Yes. I obviously never did that before, at least not actually bonding with them, harmonizing.”

“And you are now?”
“It’s weird,” he said, giving Zhu a direct look. “This feeling in my chest, and being able to trace the bonds to each person. I can feel the holes.”

“Do you have room for a Storm?” Zhu asked softly.

“Not just a Storm,” he said. “I have room for you.”

“Good.”

And then it came, that warmth, the bond, filling one of the empty spaces around his heart. A quiet smile blossomed on his face.

“It’s nice to have a home.”

“It is,” he agreed. “My brother is looking for a physical one. And speaking of him—will you be coming home with us today? We usually have a late lunch at my apartment, rotating who gets to pick.”

“Not a very spacious apartment, then,” Zhu guessed.

He shook his head. “He picked it for the two of us. It’s kind of a tight squeeze at this point with everyone coming over for meals twice a week. But I’d like to have a place where we won’t crowd unless we want to and everyone has a room for themselves. And have a bigger kitchen and eating area.”

“Well, I would love to join you today. I think … fried rice. With meat added after some is taken for Alfero.”

“So plenty of vegetables.” He nodded. “And my name is Sora.”

“Shi. And we may as well join the others for now.”

“Hm? Oh. Yes, I suppose that’s probably wise.” He pushed himself up and wandered over to the table.

Renato gave him a curious look, eyed Zhu, and nodded. “I see,” he murmured. “So what are we having today?”

“Fried rice, but you guys can pick what kind of meat to add in after, if any. Or tofu.”

“How about you make it with tofu, and then add the meat in after?” Lorenzo said. “Sort of like last time.”

“Fruit all right for dessert?” he asked.

Val hummed happily.

“Why don’t we call it a day early and head out,” he suggested. “Get the shopping done, have a nice meal…”

When they arrived at the apartment Kiri took one look at Shi and said, “You look like a Fon. Well, technically Fēng, but Fon nevertheless.”

Sora sighed quietly. “This is my brother, Kiri. Aniki, this is Shi Zhu.”

“A Storm, I see. Well…”
The usual letter arrived and two days later they assembled at the usual place. He and Renato unloaded his offering of spinach “brownies” and stuffed mushrooms, and once the drink orders were out of the way he opened the envelope and passed the packets around. He was mildly surprised and yet not that the mission was another assassination, except there were two targets, and the packet specified that a non-bloody solution was strongly preferred. ‘So, required,’ he thought, ‘and if we don’t it’s even odds we get a pay cut.’

The two in question were a husband and wife duo who ran a drug operation. The woman was beautiful and her husband was charming, and together they spread their poison amongst the people around them. They also had a little manufactory outside the city that ought to be destroyed.

“Well,” Renato said, “I don’t get to shoot anyone. I’ll volunteer for demolition.”

“Um…” Val looked indecisive, then said, “Demolition.”

“I plan to be part of the hit teams,” Sora said.

“Teams?” Lorenzo said.

“In case they’re separated,” he explained, “Two people on each target. One to do the hit, one for lookout and coordination if necessary.”

“I will be a coordinator,” Viper said.

“I’ll go with you,” Lorenzo said to him. “I want to give it a shot, so to speak.”

Sora nodded.

“I will go with Viper,” Zhu said.

“Okay, then Alfero will be blowing stuff up with us,” Renato said.

“Then we go surveil for a week, make preparations, and meet back here,” she said.

“Sounds good.” As the demolition team took off he said, “Which one do you guys want to go after?”

Shi and Viper exchanged a look, then Shi said, “Orsino, if that’s not a problem.”

Lorenzo shook his head. “It’s all the same to me. We’ll go after Ghita, then.”

He spent the week keeping watch on the lady of the pair with Lorenzo, using illusions to help keep them unnoticed. She spent a lot of time in and out of boutiques, or at visits to the spa. She and her husband didn’t even meet up but for once a day, and frequently that was for a meal.

“I think we actually might need coordination,” he muttered. “But…”

“How do you plan to do that?” Lorenzo asked. “I mean, sure, we could use radios, but that means making excess noise.”

“Illusions can be used for a lot of things,” he replied, “but discussing that will have to wait until we meet up again.”
They showed up to that meeting carrying more snacks, including a portion of that salad Viper liked so much, just for him. Viper snatched it away with a tilt of his head and immediately set about eating.

Sora just smiled. “All right, so … demolition team?”

“We have the explosives,” Lal said. “Or rather, the whole place is explosive. And Val can propagate anything we’re low on from on-site samples. We just need to wait for the right time, and preferably when no one is around.”

“But we can create a diversion to lure people out if there are any hanging about,” Renato added.

“Or find those few, sneak up behind them, and knock them out,” Lal said.

“Whatever works,” Renato replied agreeably.

“We could just use a knockout gas if it comes to it,” Val said with a shrug. “So long as it doesn’t react with whatever they’re cooking in there. From what we could gather there’s only a couple of people who stay at night, mostly to keep an eye on things. The ones we saw seemed pretty sleepy, though.”

“Well, the two targets spend very little time together,” he said, “even at night, so if we want to take them out at roughly the same time and then blow their operation, we’re going to have to coordinate.”

“We could get them after they separate from the meal they share,” Viper suggested. “From what I noticed she usually sunbathes or gets in the hot tub, depending on the time of day, while he heads to his study or leaves entirely.”

“How about this?” he said. “We use illusions to at least keep them from leaving the house after they eat, should one of them break from the pattern we observed. The study and where she usually goes aren’t that far apart, so it’s possible we could have myself and Viper in line of sight with each other when it happens.”

Viper’s head angled his way after shoving another forkful of salad into his mouth, and nodded.

“We have servants to contend with, but only two,” Shi said. “They have the evening off on Wednesday, and leave right after dinner is served.”

“Right, and they don’t come back until Friday morning,” he said. “I think … after they’ve eaten, to give the servants time to vacate the premises.”

“And the blow the manufactory that night?” Val asked.

Renato nodded and asked, “What about security at their house?”

Lorenzo shook his head. “Nothing outstanding. It’ll be simple to disable it. Once that’s done and those two are in their respective areas, we can proceed.”

“So we assemble outside the house at eight o’clock,” he said. “It’ll be boring for a while, waiting for the servants to leave and for them to finish eating, but it’ll give us time in between to disable the security, and then get into position to make the hits. It’ll be getting dark around then, anyway.”

“You planning to meet up with us after?” Lal asked.

He nodded. “Just in case, though I expect you three will have things well in hand.”

“There’s a tree off the right side of the road, a real big one,” Val said, “tilted all funny. You can’t
miss it. There’s a hollow behind it. We can meet up there.”

The sun was nearly below the horizon when they gathered near the Agresta home, in a spot part-way down the street. Sora used illusion to pretend to be female and sat on a bench with Lorenzo. They passed the time while watching their target door by pretending to flirt with each other. Viper and Shi played cards on another bench a short distance away.

It was not until fifteen minutes before the hour that the cook and housekeeper exited the building and hastened off, both with anticipatory smiles on their faces. They waited another fifteen minutes before moving, and Lorenzo and Sora got up first, mainly so that the security system could be addressed.

Lorenzo did some fiddly thing with some of the cables outside the building, then nodded. Sora popped his head out around the side of the house long enough for Viper and Shi to notice, then ducked back out of sight. Several minutes later they were all together, so Sora whispered, “This’ll take a minute, unless one of you prefers the idea of removing the glass.”

“Too much evidence,” Viper whispered.

He nodded and pressed a hand against the glass of the window, and started to harmonize with it. As glass was a liquid to him it took less time for him to pass through it and reach the other side. He pulled out a handkerchief as Lorenzo wiped his fingerprints off the glass, and unlatched the window to let the others in, using the fabric to keep his skin out of contact with the metal.

A quick checked showed the woman where they expected her to be, in the hot tub on the first floor balcony. The man, however, was not in his study, nor anywhere else in the house. They mucked back behind the stairs.

“I did not want to do this,” Viper whispered, “but it seems I must.” As everyone looked on in confusion, Viper pulled a roll of paper from his pocket and tore off a piece about four inches long from the end, then tucked the roll away. Then he sneezed onto the paper.

Sora watched avidly as letters formed on the surface.

Viper sighed and said, “He must have left by the back entrance. He’s headed east right now. Higashi, may I speak with you privately for a moment?”

“Um… Sure,” he said, and waited as Viper put up some kind of illusionary barrier that presumably prevented the others from overhearing.

“We’re going to have to go after him, Zhu and I,” Viper said. “But there is only one way for us to coordinate at this point, unless we try again tomorrow.”

“And you think I won’t like it.”

Viper shrugged slightly. “I don’t know, but I would prefer you keep this to yourself.”

He nodded and said, “I will.”

“I am a telepath in addition to wielding Mist Flames. I can create a temporary link between us such that I can let you know when we have our target in sight and are ready to proceed, but the connection will be passive on your end. Basically, I will be able to get a sense of what you’re seeing as well as know what you’re thinking. Once both targets are down we can regroup, I can remove the connection, and we can meet with the others.”
He half-closed his eyes as he sought out his sense of intuition, then nodded when he felt nothing bad would come of the idea. “All right. Go ahead.”

“...Just like that.”

“Yes. I trust my intuition.”

Viper’s head angled slightly. “Even though I’m a Mist, and I’ll be able to hear your every thought.”

Sora smiled. “My brother is a powerful Mist; he taught me how to use illusions. He’s a bit crazy, but it’s not any worse than most people, I suppose. He can read my thoughts. Not sure how he does it. Maybe he’s just that familiar with me, I don’t know. The point is, my intuition says I can trust you, so go ahead and make the link. I’d rather get this done with today than have to fall back and start over again tomorrow.”

“Is your brother your guardian?”

Sora laughed and shook his head. “No. He won’t tell me exactly why, but that’s all right. He protects me anyway. And I protect myself from his poor excuse for cooking.”

A faint curve of Viper’s lips suggested a smile, then he reached out to touch a finger to Sora’s forehead.

He almost felt like he had a passenger tucked away in the corner of his mind, but that might have been fanciful thinking on his part. “All right. Vittori and I will keep an eye on Ghita. Soon as you give the word, we’ll act.”

Viper nodded and dropped the barrier. “Zhu, we must go.”

Zhu looked at both of them, then nodded and started moving.

Sora was left with a confused Lorenzo, but he shook his head when his Lightning opened his mouth. “We need to keep an eye on the woman, and I’ll keep her from leaving the house if necessary. Either way, I’ll know when she needs to be taken out. Please.”

Lorenzo sighed. “I think I see. All right, let’s go upstairs and find a spot to lurk in.”

During the wait he wondered if the woman might inadvertently kill herself. It was a bad idea to drink so much alcohol while lounging in a hot tub. An hour later he heard a voice in his head, that of Viper.

‘We have located the man and Zhu is ready to proceed.’

‘All right,’ he thought. ‘Then Lorenzo can start.’

‘Yes. We will meet you at the car.’

‘Proceeding, then.’ He touched Lorenzo on the arm and nodded. “It’s time,” he whispered.

His friend got a focused look on his face and turned back to face the window, then started to create a web. All the practice he’d had from the game played in the latter half of the training sessions paid off. He had one extended out to the water in just a couple of minutes, and moments later the woman was convulsing as if lightning had struck. When Lorenzo eased off she slid under the surface of the water.

Sora tapped into Lorenzo’s web long enough to check that she was dead, then released his flames.
and touched his Lightning’s arm. Lorenzo released his web and the two of them made their way back to the window. Lorenzo exited and Sora locked it again, then harmonized his way back outside, using the back of his hand instead of his fingertips to start the process.

They met up with Shi and Viper at the car and headed toward the manufactory. They stopped the car and parked it a fair distance away, then walked the remainder of the way. The tree Val had mentioned was indeed easy to spot, and they veered off to the side and down a slope to find the three waiting.

Renato looked Sora up and down before saying, “I take it everything went well? You’re later than we expected.”

“We ran into a little snag,” he said quietly, “but the targets are down. Are you guys set?”

Val nodded. “We just need those two men out of the way. Would you or Viper like to do the luring, or shall we do things the old fashioned way?”

Viper gave a little sigh and disappeared. A few minutes later Sora could see two men emerge from the large warehouse-style building down the road a short way and wander off. Viper reappeared a minute later and nodded. “They will fall asleep in the woods.”

“So… Right. I’m just going to stand here and wait for the fireworks while you three do the fun bits.”

Renato, Alfero, and Val took off swiftly but silently, and returned about fifteen minutes later. “We should probably get going,” Alfero said, casting a look back over her shoulder.

Sora eyed Val and saw a squinty-eyed look of concentration on his face. Moments later things started blowing up and part of the roof of the building launched into the sky. He snorted softly and said, “Well done, Val. And you’re right, we should go.”

“Meet up tomorrow?” Renato said.

“Yes.”

Renato reached out to squeeze his arm, then loped off with Val and Lalia.

He sat in the back of the car with Viper after the man gave him a look, or what he interpreted as a look. A very subtle barrier went up before Viper reached out to touch his forehead again. That sensation of carrying a passenger vanished and left him alone in his own thoughts again.

“I am … impressed,” Viper said.

“Oh?” he said, clueless as to what Viper meant.

“Yes. You accepted me into your mind, showed no fear, did not speak of it as I requested and showed no evidence of even thinking of doing so, and did not immediately ask me to remove the link. I could see myself harmonizing with a man like you.”

“I could see the same,” he replied, and welcomed it when that hollow space in his chest filled with warmth. He smiled and said, “I would invite you home for the usual lunch or dinner, but it’s a bit late. You can come over tomorrow, though, or join us for the usual training session tomorrow at ten, and join in for lunch after.”

The barrier dissolved as Viper said, “Tuesdays and Thursdays?”
He hummed. “From ten to noon, and then we go shopping based on whoever’s turn it is to pick the meal, and eat at my apartment. You’d get to pick this time, so if you wanted that salad again…”

The corners of Viper’s mouth tilted up slightly. “I will come tomorrow.”

Sora smiled back. “I’ll make you that salad no matter what since I know how much you like it, but too often and—”

“No more than once per week,” Viper said. “Though I also enjoy most pasta dishes, with appropriate alterations.”

“Mm. I’ve started keeping two sets of sauce frozen, and other meat additions are easy enough to do right at the end. But I also do a number of Asian recipes. Maybe if my brother finds us a nice place I can put up a schedule or something and people can claim meals?”

Viper tilted his head just enough that Sora could see the man’s eyes were a blue verging on violet.

“A place?”

He explained about his experiments in mead and the idea for a bar of some kind, but before he could really get into it Lorenzo parked the car and looked back over his shoulder. “We’re here. You want one of us to make sure you get in all right?”

“It’s late and I’m sure we all want some rest. I’ll just cloak myself for the walk up, all right?”

Lorenzo frowned. “So your intuition isn’t acting up?”

He shook his head. “No, just being cautious.”

“We will see you tomorrow,” Shi said.

“Right.”

The meeting went more or less as usual and shopping was even more of a mess considering how many people were involved. Once back at the apartment Sora introduced Viper to his brother.

“You look like…” Kiri paused. “No, you look like a Viper. There’s something else, but I don’t think it quite fits. Either way, welcome to the family.”

Sora headed into the kitchen, saying, “Kiri and Viper can come with me, but the rest of you get to lounge in the sitting room after you get drinks.”

He got started on making the salad once the majority of his guardians had shuffled off clutching their beverages of choice, and after making sure that Viper had some of his preferred strawberry milk.

“It might be fun at some point to spar with you,” Kiri said, a faint smirk visible.

Viper tilted his head. “Perhaps. Skilled illusionists are rare.”

“You are welcome to add to the protections on this place,” Kiri offered. “I’ve done what I can, but a second set of eyes might help. Perhaps after lunch we can go over things and see if you have any suggestions we can implement.”

“Certainly. I would find a comparison of techniques to be of interest.”
Sora listened to their discussion with one ear as he sliced strawberries and kiwi, wondering if it would be a good idea to suggest trying to inure his other guardians against illusions. Once the salad was tossed he set the bowl aside and got a pasta salad he had prepared that morning out of the refrigerator, along with a bowl of diced meats.

Kiri got out the rest of the supplies and ferried them out to the sitting room while Sora put the bowls on a tray and followed.

“All right, guys. Viper gets first dibs on the strawberry salad,” he said.

“So,” Kiri said once they were all set for food. “You have a full complement of guardians, little brother. I always knew you could do it.”

He gave his brother a dubious look at the tone, which was somewhere between portentous and satisfied, then sliced off the end piece from the waiting bread and slathered it with butter. “I wonder about you at times,” he said, then bit into his bread.

Kiri laughed creepily. “You should never wonder about me, and should always do so,” he said cryptically.

Renato rolled his eyes. “Your laugh is too stereotypically ‘evil’ to be real. And yet, somehow it sounds so natural coming from you.”

“Didn’t I tell you? The first thing you learn at the Mist Guild induction meeting is how to laugh properly. Then they start you on reading all the Lovecraft material.” Kiri maintained a serious expression through all of it.

Viper’s mouth twitched in response.

“You should know better than to think you can win an argument with him,” Sora said to his Sun. “He’s too damn slippery. When your mind is geared toward illusions you spend a lot of time coming up with ways to literally out-think others.”

Renato turned to Viper. “Well? Do we get to hear your creepy laugh?”

Viper scoffed. “I’m not a performing monkey in some circus. But if you pay me enough I’d consider it. Say, ten million lira?”

Renato looked surprised for a moment, but quickly regained his cool. “I might pay that to see what you look like under that hood, but for a laugh I might actually hear for free one day? No.”

“You make Viper sound like a car,” Val complained. “Well, darlin’,” he said gruffly, “let me look under yer hood. I bet you got one hell of an engine.”

Sora snickered at the look on Renato’s face. “Be nice, guys, or no dessert. I made a selection of brownies this morning that should be very tasty. Some have coffee, some have cheesecake mixed in, and some have cherries.”

Several people gave him anticipatory looks.

“And of course, you can all take home whatever is left over,” he finished.

“I’d say you’re too good to us, but that would be a foolish thing to complain about,” Lalia said with a smile.
He arrived at the meeting escorted by Renato and Val, carrying the usual offerings. He had baked up some banana muffins that morning, and some of them (coded by the colour of the liners) had chocolate chips, some nuts, and some berries.

Once everyone was set he opened the envelope and slid packets around so they could start reading. He barely managed to read the first paragraph before he was distracted by Lal’s gasp of surprise.

“I know this man,” she said, her expression anything but tranquil. “He’s an asshole.”

“I’m going to guess it’s not because he’s a politician,” Renato said.

Lal shook her head. “Let’s finish reading first, then I’ll explain.”

Onorevole Senatore Ricco Vetere of the Senato della Repubblica was their target, but not for assassination. He ran a prostitution ring, apparently, and their mission was to gather up evidence of his wrongdoings and accidentally-on-purpose leave it somewhere the media could find. Simple yet dangerous. It meant they would have to be very sneaky. None of it explained why Lal had reacted that way.

Lal sighed once she was done reading and shook her head. “I will enjoy this so much.”

Sora took a sip of his drink and noticed everyone else was done, so he said, “I think we’re all very curious at this point.”

She sighed again. “You’ve all figured out I was military. I was part of COMSUBIN, and this guy, for a time, was my CO. He liked to pass me by for promotions because I’m a woman, never mind that I trained half the people there. If that wasn’t bad enough, he taught his underlings to think the same way, so even when he was promoted, they kept doing the same thing. And you might not know, but a lack of promotions is an easy way to force someone out. You either advance or they politely don’t allow you to renew or ask you to retire. And now I find out he’s a pimp?”

“A misogynist pimp,” Lorenzo said with a shake of his head. “How … pathetic.”

“Right. How do we want to tackle this?” he said, getting them back on track. “We have some basic information to start with, so who wants to do what?”

“I will take a quiet look at the operation he’s running,” Viper said. “Lurk around. If I can get into the office there…”

Sora looked down for a moment, then said, “If you need help getting inside, I could assist. Or depending on what the security is…”

Lorenzo nodded.

“I would pose as a reluctant customer,” Renato said, “but I don’t think it’s possible for me to not stand out. Therefore, I think I’ll check out his house.”

Sora eyed his Sun for a moment. “The same applies.”

“I think … I’ll track down information on any of his more interesting customers,” Lal said. “This material doesn’t say anything about them being exposed, but why not? If we do our job right on
Vetere, it’ll come out anyway.”

Val looked conflicted on what he could do, then said, “I’ll assist Lal in tracking down customers.”

“You know, Sora,” Renato said, “you’ve been right there in the thick of things most of the time. How about you play coordinator this time? Stay here, receive reports…”

His brow furrowed. “I could do that. And step out if someone needs me for something specific.”

“Then unless I am needed for something else,” Shi said, “I will also stay. We can work on your hand-to-hand.”

“For the moment I’ll go with Renato, then,” Lorenzo said. “His brothel’s security is probably more people-oriented, but his house might have electronics.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Renato said.

“All right. I’ll be here starting ten o’clock tomorrow, then,” he said. “The question is when to leave for the day.”

“Five,” Val said. “If we find something important after that we can always bother you at home.”

He nodded. “I usually turn in around eleven, so…”

“So we’re good?” Lorenzo asked.

Nods around the table saw them all getting up, so he touched Shi’s arm and said, “What kind of snacks for tomorrow?”

“Anything you’d like to make,” Shi replied. “So far you’ve not made anything I’ve disliked, so you pick this time.”

“All right. I’ll see you at ten.”

“True, but I shall accompany you home, just in case,” Shi said firmly.

“Then I’m conscripting you into shopping with me and you can have lunch with me and Kiri.”

The next week was rather boring for him in that his time at their meeting room consisted of bouts of training interleaved with the occasional visit from one of his guardians dropping by to give him their findings and update themselves on whatever else was brought in. It did mean a lot of uninterrupted time with Shi.

He broke out the snacks he had brought along when they took a break, which happened to be spring rolls and shao-mai, and some containers of hoisin and duck sauce. He fixed himself a plate after sending in an order for drinks and paused in the act of dipping a roll at the look on Shi’s face.

Shi noticed his attention and said, “It just reminds me of something.”

Not wanting to pry he simply nodded and finished dipping his roll, then took a bite.

“It is odd at times, being in this country,” Shi said.

“Because we’re Asian?” he asked. “I don’t even remember my time in Japan, but I know that the
“Have a tendency to offend your sense of propriety?”

He nodded. “I can’t fault anyone for it, obviously, but all the same… It’s just odd, the casual feeling.”

“I suppose you’re wondering about my background.”

Sora gave his Storm a quick look. “True, but I don’t ask questions about things like that. We wouldn’t have harmonized if…”

Shi nodded. “And because you can’t return the favor. All you know is about the head injury?”

“Yes. I woke up with no idea who I was and my head wrapped in bandages. The doctor said something about brain swelling. I get flashes every so often about people that must come from memory. Like you and tonfas.”

“Perhaps you will regain your memory soon,” Shi said. “I will share something regardless, in part because you have not asked.”

Sora tried to reconcile that reasoning, but in the end shrugged it off as unimportant.

“There was a man I met while I worked in a dojo. He was there as a student and I got to know him reasonably well, enough to realize that he was part of the Triads. He never said anything about them and certainly never admitted it, but I’d seen enough of them around to figure it out. So that was my introduction to the mafia, I guess you could say. He met a bad end.”

He bit his lip and dunked another section of spring roll into some duck sauce.

“The Triads are involved in a number of illegal activities, and one of the them happens to be heroin,” Shi continued. “My ‘friend’ was a pusher, but he was too—he started using it himself. I tried to help him, but he ended up overdosing. That man—I call him Checker Face—showed up not long after and made his offer.

“So I had a good idea what I was getting into, but I figured I needed a change and would make my decision once I had seen who else showed up. I also knew enough by then that I knew, at least vaguely, who Renato was. But it was obvious most of the people present weren’t connected. The job we were presented with seemed harmless enough, and while there was a little friction at first I saw no reason to walk away.”

“How did you learn about flames?” he finally asked, then moved on to some of the shao-mai.

“There’s a concept in Chinese martial arts, called qi. It was while studying that and practicing that I realized I could create flames. Experimentation revealed what I could do with them, so I simply adopted practice with them into my normal routines, though I never revealed I could do so to anyone else. I have overheard things, though, certainly enough to understand about the other flames and the relationship they have with the Sky.”

“Val and Lalia don’t know about the mafia connection, so please don’t bring it up in front of them,” he asked. “I have to assume they suspect considering the jobs we’ve been doing, but neither of them has pushed the issue. Viper hasn’t said anything, either, but…”

Shi nodded. “Will you tell me about the mafia from your point of view, what you know?”
He proceeded to do just that during breaks over the next few days, changing the subject every time he sensed someone approaching the door, just in case. He was compiling a fair stock of data on Vetere, though someone would have to take the time to type all of it up, and some careful handling would need to be done on both the pages and whatever they were stored in.

Photographs he had amassed would be fine as is so long as they were wiped down first. By the time two weeks had gone by Val and Lalia had created profiles on a good dozen “interesting” customers, some of whom were fellow senators. A couple were even rather high up in the Church. Lal had a tendency to make strange faces when she read what the others had dug up, but otherwise did not comment.

“I think you guys have gathered more than enough information,” he opined during a full meeting at the end of the second week, “but I suppose there could be more to be found. What do you think? Are we good, or should we take another week for this? Any reporter who gets their hands on this information will probably dig ferociously to get the best, most detailed story to expose this kind of corruption.”

“Honestly?” Renato said. “I am bored to tears following people around and getting names. It’s all very good practice for being sneaky, but…”

“I’m kind of depressed at just how many officials are a part of this,” Val said soberly.

“At this point I’m more interested in waiting to see the headlines,” Lalia offered. Lorenzo just nodded in agreement with the others.

“All right, then we’ll just finish up with this report, put the source material together for the drop location, and sit back to wait. Well, and have our usual sessions. I haven’t been able to cook you guys a proper meal in ages, either.”

Sighs resounded around the table as his guardians all smiled at the idea.

“Let’s say … Saturday? You can come for lunch, so be there by one. I think I might do a sampler.”

His sampler was a range of cold dishes along with his baked penne (minus the meat for two of them)—nothing special overall, but still well appreciated by his acquired family.

“I was thinking,” Lorenzo said to Val, “that maybe we could set up a thing with airflow and smoke so you could get a better idea—visually—of things like that, and it might help you with propagating other things you can’t see, like the force behind a push or strike. Things of that nature.”

Viper and Kiri were having a cozy chat in the corner about who knew what—illusion tactics, probably—and Shi was conversing with Lalia about physical techniques, comparing the things she had learned in COMSUBIN (and subsequently taught to others) against pure martial arts.

Renato shuffled sideways slightly and said, “I’m glad that job is over. It took a lot of skill to pull off, but it was so boring.”

“It remains to be seen just how big of a scandal we get. I can’t say I’m all that vindictive, but perhaps I’m feeling a bit more so on Lal’s behalf. On a side note, Kiri thinks he found a place.”

“Oh?”
He nodded. “Just about everything we were looking for. The ground floor is large enough for a bar, and there are two lower levels. The downside is it would mean moving to Grosseto.”

“That’s only about two hours from here, assuming you had business in Rome. It’s not so bad.”

“That kind of depends on who actually decides to move in with us and where they live now. People have friends, I assume,” he pointed out. “But either way, there will be room for all of us, and we can’t do what we were talking about in Rome. Just need to get people in there to fix the place up. Bedroom suites, a lab, a nice kitchen, a place where I can make a whole lot more mead than I do now, that sort of thing.”

“My apartment is nice,” Renato said, “but I’d rather be close by, so I’ll be moving when you do. That said, when can we look at the place, and what’s it going to cost us?”

Kiri laughed creepily at that and butted in with, “Oh, I think I can talk the price down considerably. And the price for any contractors necessary to fix the place up. Anyone who wants to contribute to the resulting costs is more than welcome.”

“You can bet on that,” Renato said.

Val nodded, but didn’t say anything.

Lorenzo smiled and said, “So I could customize a lab for myself. Excellent. I’m in.”

“Perhaps the two of us could design a place to train in?” Shi said to Lalia.

She nodded. “I think that would be a fun and fruitful thing to do. And it would be nice to have a place to keep in shape without jumping through hoops.”

“I assume you won’t mind if I help,” Viper said to Kiri.

“I would welcome the backup,” Kiri said with a smile. “As for when, I have an appointment on Tuesday, which means if you’d like to come along, you’ll have to skip the training session.”

Sora waited to see what his guardians would react, and when they all looked ready to go there right then, he nodded. “All right. When do we need to be there?”

“Eleven-thirty, so we should leave at eight to be safe, or no later than half past. Bring notebooks so you can keep track of your ideas, because I plan to push through the sale as quickly as possible if we’re all agreed on the place.”

“So, all right. We can leave from here,” he suggested. “And if you come at seven I can make us all breakfast before we go.”

The place in question would need a fair amount of work, but it would be other people primarily doing it, so none of that bothered Sora. The ground floor had plenty of room for a kitchen, bar area, rest rooms, and places for customers to sit. They would have to come up with something appropriate for the décor, but aside from that it was fine.

The real prize was the lower levels. Both were more spacious than the ground floor because they covered almost the entirety of the property. Between the two of them they could fit in a second kitchen and lounge space, ten bedrooms, Lorenzo’s lab, and a training room. And that was with ensuite bathrooms. He would probably just lose a bedroom they most likely wouldn’t need and use it to
make mead.

“I don’t even want to know what it costs,” he said to Kiri. “Just, you know, work your magic, and then quietly take my share out of the account.”

His brother nodded. “I will do so, little brother. And the same for the renovations.”

He wandered around upstairs for the time being, sketching out plans in his notebook for where things could go. The kitchen already present could use some updating, but it was large enough to make the simple foods he intended to make for any customers. If they wanted a restaurant they could go to one. The point of the place was to sell his mead, snacks, and be there so people could attempt to hire them for jobs.

It still needed to look nice and have the right atmosphere. And he would carefully not be asking too many questions of his brother. For all he knew, Kiri would find the most corrupt contractors in the area and use them to his advantage. Or maybe he would play it mostly straight. It was one those times when he just didn’t want to know the details.

Renato sidled up to him and leaned in to whisper, “So, do I get to pick the bedroom next to yours?”

He snorted. “Kiri and I will probably be on the first sub-level, so that leaves three rooms for you to fight over with the others.”

“Isn’t there a special place in your heart just for me?” Renato persisted.

Sora smiled at him. “Yes. You each have a special place in my heart.”

Renato frowned playfully. “I see. Or we could just have a lottery of sorts. I’ll talk it over with the others.”

“Just don’t do something like order of harmonization,” he said. “That sends the wrong message.”

“No, no,” Renato said with a shake of his head, “I’ll ask them if they have any preferences, and if that doesn’t shake out simply, we’ll have some sort of random choice, like drawing names from a hat. I did listen to what you said a ways back.”

He took a quick look around to see who was present, and on spotting no one, leaned in to give his Sun a brief kiss. “Good. What do you think of this so far?” he asked, holding up his sketch. “Maybe dark woods. And I like the idea of incorporating webs somehow.”

“Maybe the seat cushions?” Renato suggested. “And that seems serviceable, though we’ll need a private room if anyone really does come here looking for help. Or have Kiri or Viper provide a sound barrier.”

He hummed. “A private room would be all right so long as at least two of us were in there, and one of us being capable of discerning lies. I mean, I’d prefer to have the advantage, both in information and numbers. So that means my intuition, or an illusionist’s ability to get people to be truthful.”

“Oh, don’t be too sure the rest of us can’t be intimidating enough to make people talk, but it would be easier your way. Okay, let me go talk to the others about the rooms. It’s early yet, but we might as well get that out of the way.”

He wandered out of the kitchen and tracked down his brother, who was keeping the estate agent occupied. He smiled at the woman and felt some measure of confusion when she blushed. After a moment he showed Kiri his sketch.
“I like it. You going to do one for below?”

“Yes. I just figured I’d see what you thought first.”

The estate agent blushed again.

His brow went up in confusion as he made a hasty retreat. He could hear Kiri saying, “He’s shy,” as he made for the stairway. He found his guardians clustered together on the second sub-floor.

“You’re just in time,” Lorenzo said. “We’ve worked out who will take rooms on which floor.”

“All right. What did you all decide on?”

“Renato, Shi, and Viper will be on your floor,” Val said. “We debated whether or not you’d want a room on your floor for your mead, but decided it probably didn’t matter much.”

“No, it doesn’t. Having it on this floor is fine. I won’t be spending much time in there anyway, since it’s just a few tasks every so often and the rest of the time the mead is maturing. We can use the extra room for storage for now, though I suppose we might have an actual guest at some point. You can get with Kiri after he’s finished charming the estate agent to see how much we need to spend, and what you can afford or want to chip in. And if you have ideas for design and décor, bring them on Thursday? We can talk about it.”

A letter arrived right on schedule and two days later they were in their room at the bar. Sora grabbed the envelope and opened it, passed around the packets, and set to reading. ‘Treasure on a mountain?’ he thought.

Lorenzo groaned. “Don’t tell me we get to go spelunking again.”

“I still have pitons left if we need them,” Shi said. “I should probably buy more rope and markers, however. This may or may not be related to the earthquake that revealed that underwater cave system.”

Sora shrugged. “Considering it means returning to Sicily, it might well be. There’s probably already paths to some extent, but if we do end up having to enter a newly-revealed cave… Yes, maybe let’s do some shopping for that. And since we won’t have a convenient yacht to retreat to each day, we’re going to have to rough it. Sorry, Renato.”

“I’ll just have to buy an extra comfy sleeping bag,” his Sun replied. “This has the same limit as the last one—end of the month. So how about we take a few days to get our shopping done, then fly into Palermo? We can rent a vehicle at the airport and there might be a hotel of some kind, or cabins, in the vicinity we could stay for a night.”

“I think Renato just volunteered himself to check into that sort of thing,” he said with a teasing smile. “Shi can take care of basic spelunking supplies. I will look into food…”

“I’ll see about sleeping bags, tents, the usual camping implements,” Lorenzo said. “A second person to assist wouldn’t go amiss.”

Lal nodded.

“Hm, what else?”
Val and Viper exchanged a look, then Viper said, “We’ll see what we can dig up at the library on this place. This”—He tapped his packet. “—mentions nothing other than a vague rumor. I don’t know that we can find anything, but we can check.”

“All right. While we’re working on this why don’t we just gather each evening at my apartment and we can discuss things over dinner? And… Unfortunately, we’re not going to be eating very well, but I’ll make some things that will last a bit so we’re not entirely devoid of home-cooked food.”

“I’m going to guess and say you’ve never cooked over a campfire,” Renato said. He made a face. “I’ve never been camping, I don’t think…”

Val said, “I’ll see if I can find anything at the library while we’re there about camp cooking and bring it over tonight. I’m sure there’s some simple stuff you can make, even if it’s not your usual wonderful cooking.”

“That works, and I’ll be able to adjust my shopping list accordingly. I think we’re done here for now.”

The approach to the summit was steep and littered with treacherous footing. The views they had seen along the way were breathtaking, but Sora was more interested at that point in setting up camp—despite having learned that camping on the mountain was not allowed—so he could rest his aching muscles.

Every so often he would hear pebbles skitter down the slope or tumble over the edge of the rough path, and birds would occasionally make themselves known. He sighed slightly and then smiled when Renato reached over to lightly squeeze his arm.

A half hour later the ground leveled off, though a fairly tall wall of rock was up ahead, forming a ridgeline of its own. It was starting to get dark, so he couldn’t see it very well, though it looked like there might be a crack in the uprising. They would have to investigate, but not until after they’d had a chance to rest.

They stopped for a moment, then continued on when Shi pointed out a likely spot to set up. Unfortunately…

A bright light erupted when they were approximately half-way across, which caused them all to stop again. Sora looked up, even though he had to shade his eyes, but could see nothing. A panicked shout came from behind them and he looked over his shoulder to see a blond man dressed in military fatigues rush forward and push Lal off to the side.

And then he woke up.

The ceiling needed to be repainted, in his opinion.

He seemed to be unharmed, so he sat up and looked around. ‘I have no idea where I am, I just remember that light,’ he thought, then blinked a few times on seeing seven tiny—babies? Toddlers? He frowned when he realized that one of them was Chinese, one female, one had Renato’s bizarre version of sideburns—

“What the hell is going on?” he whispered, then picked up the chibi version of his Sun and ran a finger over his cheek. Renato did not so much as twitch, which was horribly wrong for a man
normally so aware of his surroundings. Renato was wearing a pacifier around his neck, a yellow one.
He set his Sun back down after making sure that Renato was breathing, then checked on the others.

All of them wore pacifiers, shaded in the colour of their flames, but there was one additional person
present. ‘Who is this…? Wait, I remember. He pushed Lal out of the way. So he got caught, too,
whatever happened to do this. Lal is tiny, too, though, so I guess he wasn’t fast enough. But who is
he? I guess I’ll just have to wait until they wake up.’

The blond stranger’s pacifier was blue, which told Sora he was a Rain, but Lal’s—Lal’s pacifier was
dull grey colour. It looked wrong, somehow, and lifeless. His own was orange, but that only made
sense given what little information he had.

Another look around revealed nothing of note, so he cautiously exited the room by the only available
door and found himself in a hallway. There was a door each to his left and right on the same wall at
either end, and facing those were also doors. The only sound he could hear was the wind and rain
outside.

A quick investigation revealed that the end doors led to bathrooms. Of the other two, one led to a
library and the other to a training room—or so he assumed. Downstairs was a kitchen to one side and
a sitting room to the other. At that back, however, were seven doors, each with a symbol carved into
the surface.

Six of them were immediately recognizable, but the last one had just a simple circle carved into it. As
a test he attempted to open the Sun door, and failed. None of them would open for him except for the
one in the center. ‘I guess this is the Sky door?’ he wondered as he reached out to twist the knob.

It gave easily under his hand. He stepped inside and jumped when the door closed behind him, but a
quick check showed that it opened readily enough again. The moment he stepped away, however, it
closed by itself. ‘Maybe to prevent anyone not a Sky from coming in?’

He shrugged and looked around. There were countless small pictures hanging on the walls, and in
the center was a comfortable looking chair, a small side table, and a low bookcase filled with books.

“Maybe this is all just a dream and I’ll wake up and be staring at the sky and my friends will be all
right,” he whispered. Not yet hungry and with nothing better to do for the moment, he sat down and
choose a book to examine, one with a faded orange cover, the only one that stood out.

Two hours later—because he had never particularly been fond of reading—he closed the book and
sat back. “We’re stuck. Cursed. And I have a choice to make. If I wait until the others wake up, they
might start arguing about my options here. Do I stay an adult and die much too soon? Or do I take
the same form as they’re cursed with and live so much longer?

“I’m not going to find some girl and have children. And I can’t—” Sora looked down when his
voice broke. “We don’t exactly have anything yet, but I can’t do that to Renato. So, I’m going to do
it. I’ll take on chibi form, so I don’t break their hearts.”

The book was set aside, open to the spot he needed. As a precaution he removed his Sky and Mist
rings as well as his earring, though he had to put his Mist ring back on long enough to illusion up a
mirror so he could see what he was doing. His real appearance was something of a shock; it’d been
two years almost since he had last seen it.

He woke up some time later and again thought the ceiling could do with a new coat of paint.

His rings ended up on his thumbs, and even then they were in danger of falling off, and it took him a
fair amount of time to fix the illusion stored in the earring before he could put it back on, but eventually he got it right. Without Kiri’s teaching he would never have been able to manage it.

Sora stumbled a few times on his way to the kitchen due to his sense of balance being thrown off by his new size—that his clothing had more or less fallen off him due to the enormous size change and had to be jury-rigged into place did not help—and almost cried when he realized the stove towered over him.

He kicked the nearby cabinet door a few times to vent his feelings, then observed the room carefully. There, in the corner, was a folding step stool ladder he could use. But first, he opened the refrigerator using a handy leather strap attached to the handle and smiled when he saw just how much food was inside.

Once he was finished eating a quarter cantaloupe he rinsed his dishes and wandered back upstairs for a nap. For some reason he was feeling excessively tired. Sora crawled into Renato’s bed and snuggled up to him, and drifted off.

Sora awoke to the sensation of being held, and to the sound of a screaming row between Lal and a voice he didn’t recognize. The blond stranger, he assumed. He simply enjoyed the sensation of being close to Renato and listened for the time being.

“—because you talk in your sleep sometimes, Lal! I heard enough to make me worried.”

“So you followed me!? Do you trust me that little? Or think I can’t handle myself?”

“I know you can handle yourself,” the stranger shot back in an exasperated tone. “Are you saying I should never worry about you?”

“Should I take this to mean that our Lal has a boyfriend?” he murmured to his companion.

Renato chuckled soundlessly. “This has been going on for a while now. I’m surprised you slept through so much of it.”

“It’s bad enough we’re not much bigger than babies now,” Lal snarled, “and you interfered and got caught up in it, too!”

“I was trying to save you!”

“I know that!” she shouted back, then lowered her voice considerably. “And I love that you tried.”

“At least we’re stuck like this together.”

“And you think that’s a good thing!?” she shrieked. “If it was just one of us the other would at least have a chance at a normal life!”

“I won’t leave you, Lal!”

Sora sat up and coughed. “Guys, that’s enough. If you’re going to fight, I can’t stop you, but this—”

Lal’s expression was a mixture of frustration, anger, and helplessness. The blond stranger eyed him curiously and said, “Ciao. Illario Gallo.”

“Sora Higashi,” he replied. “Has anyone done any exploring? There are rooms downstairs I can’t get
“No,” Renato said. “We haven’t left the room yet. We’ve been too busy feeling sorry for ourselves and picking fights.”

‘I don’t know if I should tell them about the choice I made,’ he thought, then sighed when Viper gave him a sharp look. “There are seven rooms downstairs with symbols etched into the doors. I can get into the Sky room, but the other doors are locked to me. The kitchen is well stocked from what I saw, but I admit I got a little weepy when I saw how high the stove is now…”

Val hopped onto the bed and leaned in comfortingly.

“You’re all so damn cute now, though,” he said.

“Right,” Renato said briskly. “We’re stuck like this for now so there’s no sense in wasting time on crying about it, not when we have each other for support. Let’s go investigate those rooms.”

“I’ll put together some kind of meal,” he said. “Gallo, are you vegetarian or…?”

The blond shook his head.

“All right. Doesn’t matter either way so much as me knowing how to portion things. I’ll see what’s available and figure something out.” He squeezed the hands of both Renato and Val, then shuffled off the bed and headed out.

He was waiting on some fusilli to finish boiling for a cold pasta salad when Lal trudged into the kitchen with a heartbroken look on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t open the Rain door,” she said simply. “Something is wrong with me now. It’s like I’m broken.”

He went over to her and grabbed her hand long enough to give it a squeeze. “Have you tried using your Rain Flames?”

She shook her head, then started to form a web from one hand. Threads began to emerge, but she broke off the effort with a strangled gasp. “That felt like a part of me was dying,” she whispered.

He led her over to the dining table and bullied her into a seat. “Let me check something first,” he said, taking a seat of his own. He reached inside himself to find the bond with Lal and slid a mental finger over it. “That’s weird,” he muttered.

“What is it?”

“The, um, flavor has changed, and it’s weaker than it used to be. You must have other flame types available to you and whatever happened made them stronger as a result. This feels a little similar to Val and Viper, actually.”

“Mist and Cloud?”

“Yes. Once we’re gathered again I’ll see what Renato can ascertain. He’s very good at determining flame types, too. I mean, I could tell what each of you were that first meeting, but this is a bit unorthodox.”

“So that’s why this pacifier is so dull and kind of grey?”

“I guess…? Your friend is a Rain. If he had been some other type, things might have gone even
worse.”

“It’s pretty damn bad already,” she said sharply.

“I know,” he replied calmly, then got up to empty the pasta into a colander and run cold water over it.

“What did you find in the Sky room?”

“There was a bookcase in there with a bunch of books, but…”

“What?” she demanded, giving him another sharp look.

“I kind of hate reading,” he admitted quietly as he got vegetables out of the refrigerator and began to prepare them.

“Sora!”

“I know, I know. I’ll go back in while the salad is chilling and check them out. Will you check around and try to figure out where the hell we are? I only investigated briefly before I felt so sleepy I had to go back to take a nap. And later on, we’ll work on you accessing the other two flames I think you have, after Renato takes a look.”

“I don’t have rings for those,” she said.

“You don’t need rings. They just make it easier,” he assured her.

“That’s correct,” an arriving Renato said. “It’s easier with one when you use your flames externally, but internally it’s completely unnecessary.”

“Find anything interesting in the Sun room?” she asked as Sora dumped the vegetables into the cooled bowl of fusilli.

“We are now … Arcobaleno.”

“Rainbow? What the hell does that mean?”

Renato shook his head. “I have this vague memory of hearing the term before, but… In any case, these stupid pacifiers function as rings.”

“So we have no idea why we were ambushed and changed,” he murmured unhappily. “Maybe there’s something in the Sky room, but…”

“Renato,” Lal said, “can you try to confirm what Sora found out? He thinks I also have Mist and Cloud Flames, and now they might be usable since my Rain Flames appear to be damaged in some way. I know I don’t use them all that much, but it hurts to use them now, and I hate that a part of me is broken.”

Renato took Sora’s abandoned seat and examined her carefully, threading a web of his flames into her. She squirmed uncomfortably—at the perceived intimacy, Sora assumed—and only relaxed when his Sun pulled away. “He’s right. You have latent, now patent, Mist and Cloud Flames. Your Rain Flames seem to be warped or twisted. You said it hurt to use them?”

“Yes. It was like a part of me was bleeding away or dying,” she said with a grimace.

“Well, some of the material in that room made it pretty plain that we’ll live long lives like this,”
Renato said, “so if you feel that way using Rain Flames, don’t use them anymore. We’ll get you comfortable with the other two, okay? You know we can, and I’m confident you’ll pick it up just fine. You learned quickly when Sora was teaching you.”

Lal nodded. “It’ll be a bit difficult to shift my focus, I suppose, but I can do it.”

Sora put the salad in the refrigerator and said, “I would start the same way. Spark flames off—well, off the pacifier, I guess. When you can do that, start with the webs. Then we can get into the actual aspects.”

“Right. Now…” She stared at him. “Go check those books.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. With that he exited the kitchen and wandered down the hall, back into the Sky room. He gave the bookcase a disgusted look and sat down, then systematically flipped through every book available, barring the one with dull orange cover.

There was a lot of boring information in them, but nothing explained what the Arcobaleno really were or what purpose they served. Nothing explained why they’d been ambushed and altered. True, he had made a conscious choice to join his guardians in chibi form. The only thing he gleaned from any of the material stored in the room was that he could—should it come to the worst case scenario and his guardians were killed—sacrifice his own life to revive them. And in that instance, his curse would pass on to some other Sky.

“And what a choice that would be,” he said to himself. “Die so that they can live and be heartbroken? Pray that some new Sky would treat them well and love them? Or join them in death because my own heart would be shattered? And if my own curse would be passed on, wouldn’t it mean that if they died, theirs would too? Why would I even have the option to…”

He shook his head in confusion, feeling a little heartsick even though they were all alive, if not exactly well. He set the books aside and got up. As soon as he quit the Sky room Viper appeared out of nowhere and hustled him off outside, despite it being more than a little chilly. There was a spring-fed pond out there with rocks surrounding it that Viper used for seats. At least the rain had stopped.

A hazy barrier went up and Viper actually flipped his hood back and stared at him. “What choice?”

“Ah, you caught that, huh?” he said ruefully, eyeing his Mist. Viper was a handsome man—or so he assumed based on what he could see.

“Yes. Now spill. What did you do?”

He sighed. “When I woke up I was still an adult. Inside the Sky room there was a book and… Basically, I had a choice. If I stayed an adult I would die way before my time. But if I took the same form as the rest of you, I wouldn’t. I’d live as long as you will. I wasn’t prepared to let you—”

Viper nodded. “I chose wisely, then.”

“Huh?”

“You, willing to sacrifice yourself the same way, for our sake.”

“It’s a selfish decision, too,” he pointed out. “I couldn’t imagine life without all of you at this point. To die so soon…”

“I won’t say anything about it to the others,” Viper said. “That’s your decision. I only caught the briefest whisper of the thought anyway.”
He nodded. “Thank you. How about we go see if everyone is ready to eat?”

Viper flipped his hood back into place and released the barrier. They returned inside and entered the kitchen, where everyone had already gathered.

Renato brightened up and said, “Can we eat now? Because I’m super hungry.”

He noticed that the table had already been set, so he shuffled over to the refrigerator to get out the salad and returned to the table with it. “This will take some getting used to,” he said as he climbed onto the chair and situated himself.

Lorenzo took care of portioning things out and they all dug in happily.

“So,” he said after eating his first forkful, “Gallo… Regardless of why, you’re one of us now.”

“I don’t even know what that means, but all right. I’m sticking with Lal.”

He smiled weakly. “Tell us about yourself?”

Gallo glanced around the table and saw inquiring faces—except for Lal, who looked exasperated—and shrugged. “I was in the military, but I decided not to renew my enlistment.”

Lal scowled. “He was in COMSUBIN with me. I trained the ass and taught him everything he knows. You quit because of what they did to me, right?”

“Yes!”

“Oh, Rio…” To Sora she said, “He’s obnoxiously cheerful at times, but a good guy. I should have guessed he had—” She stopped abruptly.

“We’re going to have to teach him,” Renato said. “Even if he rarely uses them, he should still know and be prepared.”

“Use what?”

They all looked at Sora, who heaved a resigned sigh. “Flames of Dying Will. They’re derived from your life force, much in the same way as the energy you use to walk or run or fight.”

“Sounds like magic,” Gallo opined.

Lal snorted and shook her head.

Lorenzo pushed his glasses up—they had mysteriously reduced in size like everyone’s clothing, all but Sora’s—and said, “What I am curious about is the damage Lal has suffered and the inclusion of this unexpected variable.”

Gallo leaned sideways and whispered to Lal, “Is he referring to me?”

Lorenzo sent a serious look at Sora, one brow going up.

“You mean…” He wondered exactly what they had been talking about while he was outside with Viper. Was Lorenzo referring to the damaged bond with Lal, and therefore the lack of a proper Rain bond? “I don’t know how to answer that yet,” he finally said, then forked up more of his salad to eat.

Shi spoke up to avert the awkwardness of the situation. “I suggest we spend some time in that training room, those of us with any knowledge of martial arts. We’re going to have to learn how to
“And I’m going to—” Renato broke off with a scowl. “I can’t even handle my gun now it’s so big in comparison.”

Sora smirked. “Is that so?”

Renato blinked and shot him a surprised look, then chuckled. “Don’t think I won’t get you back for that.”

They spent the remainder of the day either exploring the area outside or in the training room, trying to reconcile their size against their previous physical training. His friends all seemed driven to fill up the time with something other than talk.

They took to their beds that evening after they were all tired out and Sora fell asleep more easily than he expected. But he was awakened by a sound. Someone was … crying? He carefully eased off his bed and followed the sound, only to find Gallo in a right mess. He wasn’t crying so much as his breath kept hitching.

Sora laid a tentative hand on the man’s arm and when Gallo opened his eyes whispered, “Want to go outside for a few?”

Gallo nodded and sat up, so Sora pulled the cover off his bed and dragged it along with them. Outside they bundled up in the blanket and sat on one of the rocks. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked softly.

Gallo shrugged. “I just—I only wanted to help, you know? And now we’re both messed up. I love Lal.”

“We do things like that for the people we care about. I took a bullet for Val once. He was really angry with me, but he understood. I’d do it again if I had to and thought I could live through the experience.”

“Wow… You took a bullet on purpose? Without even knowing you’d live?”

“Well, I was fairly sure I would. My intuition is pretty strong. I was certain Val would take that bullet through the heart and I just couldn’t let that happen. It didn’t hurt that Renato showed up so quickly and healed me. So I understand why you tried to save Lal.”

“Wait, healed you? With those flame things you were talking about?”

He hummed. “Yes. We can talk about that during the day, though, if you want to know more. They can be pretty useful, for a number of things. You do understand why Lal might be angry, though, right?”

“…Yeah.” Gallo hung his head for a moment. “I guess I’d be angry if she had done the same. So you guys are the ones she’s been hanging around with most of the year. A lot more lately than before.”

“I’ve been teaching her how to use her flames.”

“And doing jobs with her.”

He turned to look at Gallo directly. “Yes. We’ve done a number of jobs together. We’ve formed bonds.”
“I was starting to get a bit jealous,” Gallo said forthrightly. “Some of the things she’s said in her sleep, her habit of raising a hand to her chest and that serene smile that shows up—I kept wondering if she’d found someone else.”

“That’s because of the bond,” he replied. “It’s a—well, not tangible. But it’s real. You can imagine it any way you want, but I tend to think of them as threads of flame linking us together, from me to each of my friends.”

“Is this something like that red string of fate thing in Asian myth?”

“I suppose so, except for the destined to be lovers part.” He grimaced at the idea of a seven-way relationship of a sexual nature. Renato was surely enough, though the likelihood of them ever actually… “The point is, the bond lets you know you’re never alone. You can feel it, always. It’s comforting, it’s like a home. Speaking of which, now I’m glad the building my brother found has extra rooms, because I think you should probably move in with us once it’s completed.”

“Grosseto, right? I, uh, followed her that time.”

Sora laughed quietly. “You’re welcome to be a part of this family, too. You can move with us when the building is renovated. We’re all in this together, so…”

“Just like that?” Gallo looked at him searchingly.

“You’re important to Lal. She obviously wouldn’t spend so much time with you or have you in her life if you were the wrong kind of man. Either way, you’re kind of stuck with us, Gallo. You’re a…” He glanced down at his tiny body. “No one is going to take you seriously right now, except someone in the same position. Lal might be angry with you for a while, but as far as I’m concerned you’re a part of this family now.”

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Lal talks in her sleep, huh? Want to sneak back up there and see if she’s saying anything right now?”

Gallo giggled and his hand shot up swiftly to cover his mouth in surprise. “That did not just happen.”

“Um… Right. Of course not. But if it should happen, I think it has to do with our sizes now. Anyway, let’s get some rest.”

“Okay.”

The next morning he put together a hearty breakfast for everyone and tried not to let his feelings of annoyance get out of hand. Having to use a step stool was embarrassing and a bit degrading, but he had made the choice to chibify, so he had only himself to blame in that regard.

“I don’t think we’re in Italy any longer,” Renato said while they ate. “It’s something about the air and the view.”

“I wonder how long it’ll take Kiri to find me.”

“Kiri?” Gallo asked.

“My brother. But since he has no idea how long we’d be gone…”
Viper shot a look his way. “You don’t think he has a spy on you?”

“Why would he? I’m with you guys.”

Gallo sent a confused look at Lal, so Sora said, “My brother is a Mist. That means he can use illusions in some pretty creative ways. We’ll sit down after breakfast and I’ll go over all of it with you.”

Gallo nodded and resumed eating.

“Well, you’re right in this case,” Viper said. “I can’t sense one on you. Would you like me to send a message to him?”

“Yes, but not right away. Let’s take a little more time to adjust first. Maybe send out some scouts to find the nearest town or city?”

Viper nodded. “I will do so. Once I ascertain where we are I could make a simple phone call when you’re ready.”

“That sounds good. And we have an answering machine, so if he’s off making arrangements at the place in Grosseto, he would still get the message at some point, once he went home.”

He took Gallo aside after breakfast and sat with him on one of the beds upstairs, the least likely place for anyone to bother them much. “As I said before, you’re capable of using flames. Probably everyone has the latent ability, but most people never have active access to them. The fact that you ended up taking Lal’s place in this … whatever it is … means you’re most certainly a Rain.”

“And that means…”

“Rains are characterized, generally speaking, by the aspect of tranquility. Or as I originally told Lal, you’re like a walking version of Valium. Your flames have the capability to do things like tranquilize others, to calm them down, or to do things like freeze water. But a lot of what you can do depends on your imagination and what you’re normally skilled at. We’ll get into that later.”

“What about these other types?” Gallo asked with a tilt of his head that reminded Sora of a ferocious puppy.

“Mm. Sky is harmony, and it’s what allows me to form bonds with other people, for one thing. Storm is disintegration; it’s primarily offensive in nature. Sun is activation; they can heal and augment people, make them function more efficiently. Lightning is hardening; they lean toward defensive, but any flame can be used offensively. So they can do things like create barriers of electricity. Or, you know, electrocute people.

“Rain is tranquility. Mist is construction, and that deals with illusions. Some people are way more resistant to those than others. Finally, Cloud is propagation; they can cause things to replicate themselves. So as an example, instead of throwing just one knife, they’d send a dozen or more at their target. It applies in a lot of ways, though. Physical things aren’t the only things that can be propagated.”

Gallo nodded. “Okay, that helps a bit. So I’m Rain. So how do I do this, and are you as much of a slave driver as Lal?”

Sora snickered and shook his head. “No. Now watch for a moment.” He started to focus on his ring, but then remembered the pacifier supposedly served as one, so he focused on that instead. It took him far longer than he felt comfortable with, but eventually he had flames dancing on its surface. “This is
the simplest exercise. You see it. You know it’s possible. I want you to figure out how to do this. Your flames are yours. They belong to you. You can ask or coax or order, but don’t, er, scream at them, because that’s like screaming at yourself.”

“Do flames correspond to personality types?”

Sora smiled at the insightfulness of the question. “To an extent, yes. If you see someone hot-headed, there’s a good chance they’re a Storm, but that’s not always the case, and their flames might not be active anyway. I mean, if it wasn’t for the colours of the pacifiers, could you even tell who the Storm was amongst our group?”

“Now that you mention it, no. The least calm person of the bunch is Lal, and right now I suspect that’s only because she’s shook up. Okay, so, I need to make flames dance on my pacifier. In what life did any person ever think they’d seriously say something like that?”

Sora just shrugged and waited, quietly focusing on making webs come out of his hands to prove he could still do it easily, though he removed the Sky ring from his thumb and tucked that into a pocket. After he managed his self-imposed task he moved on to crafting blades on his fingers.

“Webs?” Gallo interrupted.

“Mm, yes. It’s a method my brother came up with to teach me fine control. During our training sessions we developed a little game at the end of each one, to see who could web to the center of the table the fastest. Sometimes we’d make it a contest and whoever won got to choose what I made for a meal or dessert, stuff like that.”

“And you’re the source of all those delicious goodies Lal started bringing home.”

“Well, whatever’s left over my friends take home, so yes, I suppose.”

“I see,” Gallo said, still focusing on his pacifier.

“I learned how to cook in self defense,” he said, switching focus to sprouting webs from his feet. “My brother can barely cook—just simple stuff—so I take care of most of it. We occasionally order out, but that’s usually when I’m feeling kind of lazy.” He lost focus when blue flames erupted from Gallo’s pacifier. “Hey, well done.”

“I did it!” A wide smile broke out on Gallo’s face even though the flames flickered out. “So now what?”

“You keep practicing that until you can do it easily. Then we move on to webs. After that, specific applications. We’ve got a pond out there you can practice freezing the surface of, for example, though Lal started with shallow containers of water for that. Later on, well, we can always see about combination techniques.”

“Huh?”

“Um, like Lal freezing water and Val propagating her efforts, to make the ice spread faster.”

Gallo nodded. “Okay.” He sparked flames on his pacifier again and asked, “Are your flames the only weapon you use?”

“Mostly, though Shi has been teaching me martial arts for a while now. I knew a little bit in the way of dirty fighting before that, but nothing too involved. Why, what do you use?”
“I really like guns,” Gallo said with a broad, almost frightening smile.

“…I see. You might want to talk shop with Renato, then. He’s very fond of his guns. We’re going to have to see about getting new ones, though. The ones he usually carries around are too big for his hands, now.”

Gallo’s flames winked out, then sparked again. He seemed to have the hang of it. “I will definitely do that. I have a certain fondness for anti-tank weaponry myself.”

He grimaced slightly. Lal sure had interesting taste in men. ‘I can probably get Kiri to pick some guns up, but I don’t know if Renato would be thrilled with not being able to choose his own. But as a stopgap measure…’ “I don’t think I’d be all that good with a gun, but I admit I’ve never tried using one.”

“How close are you guys?” Gallo asked, his attention briefly switching to look at him directly.

“Close enough to trust them with my life. The bond has a lot to do with that, though.”

Gallo looked at him again. “And how do you bond in the first place?”

“You both have to want it, even if you don’t realize you do. But for someone who didn’t know about any of it it can be a really foreign concept. It’s a deeper form of friendship, I guess. Or as my brother puts it, friends, siblings, or lovers.”

Gallo hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t have any siblings. Not a lot of friends, either. Most of the guys in COMSUBIN were… Let’s just say they were a little more concerned with blowing things up in creative ways over making actual friendships.” He paused, the flames on his pacifier flicking out again. “I kind of messed things up for Lal with your bond, huh?”

“It’s still there, it’s just no longer the same. It’s not exactly a Rain bond any longer, but Lal’s still part of our family. What you did didn’t change that.”

“Can I fill the gap?”

Sora grinned. “I don’t know, can you?” he said teasingly. “You seem to be doing really well with sparking flames, so let’s move on to webs. Here, look.” He balanced his wrist on his knee and extended a web from his fingers. “You see it, you know it’s possible, so let’s see you reproduce it.”

Gallo huffed and laid his hand down in a similar position. After a minute he said, “I can already tell this is going to much harder. You have to concentrate on multiple points at once.”

“True. So start with your index finger, just to prove to yourself that you can make a thread.”

Fifteen minutes later Gallo managed to produce a thread, but it quickly winked out. He huffed again and said, “I can see now why this is so good for control purposes. If you could do this sort of thing with no issues…”

“Precisely. But, now that you’ve proven you can, let’s take a break. It can be pretty tiring work at first. Maybe an hour on, hour off. If you keel over from exhaustion, we’re just going to laugh at you for being silly. Remember what I said, it’s like the same energy you use to walk or run, so you have to get enough rest, especially while you’re learning.”

“All right, all right. I am kind of hungry again already.”

They went downstairs to the kitchen and Gallo grabbed a banana to eat while Sora checked their
food supplies. Renato wandered in and Gallo swallowed quickly so he could say, “Guns, huh?”

“Oh…” Renato grabbed a quarter cantaloupe out of the refrigerator, a spoon, and took a seat at the table. “Yes, I use guns.”

“Wonderful!” Gallo enthused.

Sora shook his head lightly and began making brownies. For lunch he would like to make stir fry, as it was simple and easy to make in large quantities, but there was a serious lack of interesting items such as peapods, water chestnuts, and other Asian goodies. Instead he would make sandwiches. Bacon, lettuce, tomato, and cheese, though for Lal and Viper, he would leave off the bacon and perhaps use a honey mustard sauce he saw in the pantry.

Once the brownies were in the oven he joined them at the table and said, into a lull, “What do you think of the idea of Kiri getting you at least one new gun as an interim measure?”

“Yes,” Renato said promptly. “I’ll still have to get something custom, but having any gun small enough for my hand right now would allow me to make the basic adjustments necessary to our reduced stature.”

Shi wandered in and said, “I’ve noticed something odd.”

“Oh?” he replied, twisting in his seat.

“I am just as strong as I was before,” Shi said, his brow crinkled in mild confusion.

“Oh really?” Renato drawled. “We sparred, but that’s not really a good measure of things, especially as we’re having to compensate for ingrained reach expectations.”

Viper entered the kitchen. Sora took note that his Mist appeared to be floating, but that might simply have been the way his clothing obscured his feet. “There is a town not far from here, large enough to have an airport. I saw a plane overhead and sent a spy that way. Let me know when you’re ready; I will head in to make that call.”

“Thank you, Viper. I’m glad to know we’re not out in the middle of nowhere at least.”

“No, just in France, near the border with Switzerland, from what I can tell. The signs I could see indicate that the town is Pontarlier.”

Renato nodded. “How the hell we got from Sicily to here, though…”

He started to respond, but reconsidered and decided to take the statement as rhetorical. All someone had to do was find a way to knock them out. Even if the change had not taken place there, they could have been loaded onto a helicopter, perhaps, transferred to a plane, then dropped off. At least he had found a number of chibi-sized outfits in the dressers that any of them could use.

The oven timer binged at him, so he got up again to take care of the brownies.
Sora spent several hours a day with Gallo (who finally asked him to call him Rio, same as Lal did), working on creating webs and getting to know one another. Rio was mostly cheerful and exuded a sense of optimism. Had he spoken more with Lal about the man he would have been expecting the pestering that started up, to the point that he was tempted to nickname the man Pixie or Sprite.

“I think I could fill that role,” Rio said confidently during one of their sessions. “Then I would be a real part of this family.”

“You’re already a part of the family,” he said again.

“I want a bond, too,” Rio insisted. “I’d like to share that with Lal.”

“Um…”

“I can be very useful, too.”

Sora eyed Rio in confusion. He was vaguely reminded of when Renato had gotten aggressive, except that Rio presumably didn’t want to be his lover. “How so?” he finally asked.

Rio grinned. “I’m really good at blowing stuff up, shooting things, and, um… Actually, I have no real idea what you do.”

“Can you be a bouncer? We were planning to set up a bar before all this happened. I make mead in my spare time and I figured I might as well sell the stuff. Make bar food, nothing special. And to have a place where if people need … help … they could come see if one of us was willing to do the job. But people might get rowdy, so at least one person has to be on duty to keep an eye out for that.”

“I can do that!” Rio said enthusiastically.

He nodded. “That has nothing to do with a bond, however. Do you really want a connection with me? Something you can actually feel?”

“Lal has a home with you, so I want one, too!” Rio insisted.

‘Is there a reason to deny him?’ he wondered. ‘Except for the part where I don’t know what happens if a bond is broken or severed. He just wants to have the same connection and place that Lal does. I’ve only known him for a few days. Can I really just decide I’m okay with it and—’ His thoughts jerked to a halt when he felt that warmth again in his chest.

“Amazing!” Rio enthused. “This feels really neat!”

Lal wandered in and put her hands on her hips. It looked odd on someone her size. “What just happened? What did you do, Rio?”

“We harmonized!” Rio said and slid off the bed so he could capture Lal in a hug. “Now I’m part of the family, too!”

Sora sat there quietly to see what the fallout would be. He felt a little conflicted over the harmonization, but that was mainly in relation to how Lal would take it.

“You harmonized,” she said quietly.
“Yep! Now you and I both have a bond with Sora and we’re both part of the family and we can be together at this bar place and things will be all right.”

“I don’t know whether to be angry with you or pleased that…”

“Aw, Lal,” Rio said coaxingly. “It’ll be fine. You earned your place here, and I’ve already seen that you’re trusted and liked. Hopefully I can earn my place, too. Sora’s been really kind and Renato is fun to talk to.”

Lal spared a moment to send a look at him. “Sora is always kind.”

“Not always,” he muttered petulantly.

Lal rolled her eyes. “I’ll help train this goofball’s Rain Flames, Sora. I know how it feels to use them, so it should help some. And I can work on my Cloud and Mist at the same time. I’m also going to kick his ass around in the training room.”

Sora giggled. “Well don’t kick it so hard that he can’t sit down, or it’ll be difficult for him at meal times.”

By the end of the week they were more or less used to moving around in their new forms, though a fair amount of time would yet have to be spent in a training room. “I think we’re ready for you to make that call,” he said to Viper during breakfast.

Viper nodded and feasted on more of the last of the strawberries; there had been two pints when they woke up in the house. It was amazing Viper had managed to pace himself. He finished up quickly and floated away.

Several hours later Sora was startled enough to miscalculate his attack and whiff himself straight into the wall when his and Shi’s pacifiers both started glowing. He picked himself up off the floor and said, “What the hell just happened?”

“I have no idea. Let us go see if the others are affected.”

The others were clustered in the ground floor hall and all of them were staring at Viper.

“What happened?” Sora asked. “I about gave myself reconstructive surgery bashing into a wall when my pacifier started glowing.”

Viper shrugged. “As I approached the house my own started glowing. Perhaps it is simply a way for us to know when another is within a certain range? In any case, I left a message on your machine, so your brother will hopefully get it soon. I also left a series of Mist markers along the way to guide him. Interestingly enough, this pacifier has…”

When Viper did not continue Sora prompted, “Yes?”

“It seems to refine my abilities. Even so, I would rather be free of this thing and back to my original form. I understand that we serve some purpose in this fashion, but to be duped into it? Was it that man?”

“Checker Face?” Shi said. “I wonder myself. But we only ever got letters. We have no way of knowing where he might be.”
“That won’t stop me from trying to find him. If he is behind this…” Viper trailed off and the corners of his mouth quirked down.

“We can all try,” he said softly. “It’s just as well we already found a place. Once we get set up we can start trying to figure out what happened and if we can fix it.”

Viper nodded again. “I need at least two of you to come with me into town. I want to do some shopping and I’ll need some help carrying things.”

Renato and Shi volunteered, and off they went, which meant his training session was at an end. “We’re going to have to find a tailor,” he said as he wandered up the stairs to clean up.

Three days later he was in the kitchen cutting vegetables to prepare them for steaming when a knock sounded at the front door. He set down his knife and raced out into the hallway, managing to get to the door before any of his friends. He whipped it open and started up into the face of his brother. But for just a moment he didn’t see Kiri, he saw Daemon Spade. And then he keeled over in a dead faint.

His brain felt like it was melting when he started to swim up from the depths of sleep. He could tell he was being held—by an adult, not a chibi like himself. “Kiri?” he whispered.

“I’m here, little brother. Though I’m very curious as to why you passed out.”

“He’s okay?” he heard. Val was quite possibly nervously shuffling around in the vicinity judging by the sounds he was hearing.

“I told you, he’s fine,” Renato said. “I couldn’t find anything wrong when I checked.”

“I remember,” he whispered. “But my head hurts now. How in the world…?”

“Remember? Wait, your memory’s returned?” Lorenzo asked.

He slit his eyes open, and when that brought no additional pain, he opened them fully. “This is so weird. So, so weird. Kiri? How did—? Did he…?”

His “brother” smirked at him and nodded. “He found me and shoved a whole host of memories into my head. That’s how I knew where to look for you. And since you saved me, I saved you in return.”

“So the reason you’re damaged is… Oh, I see. I get it now.”

Renato huffed in frustration. “Care to share with the rest of the class?”

Kiri repositioned him in his arms so Sora could better see his guardians. “Oh, wow. I’m having the weirdest damn flashbacks now. Wait a minute.” He looked at Kiri. “How did you not see this happening?”

“What, you becoming my baby brother instead of just little?”

“Yes!”

“…I don’t know.”

Sora could detect no deception whatsoever in Kiri’s expression.
“I know what you are now. But I don’t know why I never saw this coming. Everything I have done since I found you was to build you up, make you strong, and give you a life you had stolen from you. But this?”

“Is there seriously someone strong enough out there to fill even your mind with Mist?”

Renato huffed again.

Sora waved a quelling hand at him for the moment. “Was he able to find an answer to this?” He flicked his pacifier with a finger.

Kiri shook his head. “He only contacted me twice. Once to get me to go save you, and once while you were still in the hospital to give what more he could. He would have contacted himself, but the time difference… It was taking a lot out of him just to speak to me across the connection. I’m not even sure he’s still alive, Sora. I would have expected something by now. It’s been nearly two years.”

“So… Nothing.” He heaved a sigh, then looked at his friends and guardians. “Right. Well, now I know where Kiri’s nickname habit comes from. You’re not going to believe this at all, but I’m from an alternate dimension. I knew all of you before, but you were already like this, had been for decades.”


“Um… It was 2025 when the accident happened. I was sparring with a friend. He tried to take over the world at one point, but I kind of killed him in the future and… Yeah, that’s a long story. Anyway, we became friends in my normal time. I was … fifteen, I think?” He laughed a bit hysterically. “I was a fucking mafia boss!” he blurted out, then slapped a hand over his mouth in mortification.

Kiri sighed and shook his head. “I should have known it would come out at some point. I’ve tried so, so hard to train that out of you. Really, Sora. Now look, poor Skull’s jaw is hanging open and Lal has never looked so discomposed.”

“What family?” Renato asked.

Sora sent an uncertain look at his Sun before sliding his hand down and whispering, “Vongola.”

“Holy shit.”

“…Well, I mean, I’d guessed, of course,” Lal said, “but I wasn’t expecting confirmation…”

“Sorry?” he said quietly.

Viper floated closer and laid a hand on Sora’s wrist. “You knew us before. Other versions of us. But you never found an answer to our condition?”

“No. I met Reborn first. He was … very special to me. Through him I met the rest of you. Even Rio, though I knew him as Colonnello. That never made sense to me, by the way, because that’s an army rank and… But when I was tossed into the future to fight for the world, no one knew the answer.” he equivocated, though the sudden tilt of Viper’s head made him realize his Mist had picked up on it. “No one knew when I reached 2025 naturally. Then the accident happened and I woke up with most of my memories missing.”

“So you were not our Sky over there,” Lorenzo said.
“No. It was someone from Giglio Nero, and none of you were harmonized with them. But you’re mine and I’m not letting you go. I’m also not going to be a—I won’t be forced into that life again. Kiri?”

“Wait, wait,” Lorenzo said. “Who is Kiri?”

Kiri laughed creepily. “My original name was Daemon Spade, Mist Guardian for both the Vongola Primo and Secondo. This is not my original body, and that’s why I’m incapable of harmonizing. When I was contacted by someone in Sora’s original dimension—someone capable of reaching across dimensions—I accepted the role of caretaker in return for the fact that Sora had saved the me of his world. So to speak. I died over there, but at least he managed to talk some sense into me before I did. Sora has a habit of beating the hell out of an enemy, scolding them, and then either they die or at least become not enemies.”

Lal shook her head slowly. “I did say you were too nice.”

“And I said I’m not always nice. What’s-his-face wasn’t the first person I killed, but now I know why he disturbed me so damn much. Talk about issues. He reminded me of my father.” Sora buried his face in his hands and groaned.

“Now do you understand part of why I would never tell you your name?” Kiri asked.

“Yeah.” He slid his hands down his face. “If I get born again, do you think there’s a way to keep the old man away from him? And maybe make him hand over the job to one of his sons? I mean really. He had three sons and never stepped down? Were they that incompetent? I was too young before to have any clue what was going on, but now?”

“If that’s what you want, I will start keeping an eye on the situation. But you realize you need to maintain the disguise. If that part of this world is the same, you’re going to have a twin. I’ll do some investigating and keep you informed. Right at the moment…” Kiri trailed off and went a bit hazy-eyed. “He’s thirty-five right now. Enrico was born two years ago. Massimo was born this year. I expect Federico will be along within the next few years.”

“So plenty of time,” he said. “And… Well, no, we can talk about all of that later. Plots and plans and meddling and that sort of thing.”

“I have taught you well,” Kiri said, laughing creepily again.

“So, um, did I miss anything much after I very manfully passed out when my memories returned?” he asked.

“Manfully?” Renato said with a laugh. “All you missed was the lot of us being a bit panicky and Kiri being introduced to Rio. You were only out for about twenty minutes.”

He hummed. “Then I need to finish with those vegetables before they dry out and get icky. Let’s move this to the kitchen.”

Kiri promptly stood up and hauled him off downstairs, then positioned him on his stool so he could get back to his work.

The others all filed in and took seats at the table. “All right,” Viper said, “so we know nothing more now than we did earlier about this condition. We can still begin searching.”

“You know… If we hadn’t harmonized,” Renato said, “I think I would be feeling about ten times more bitter than I do right now.”
Sora looked up and pointed his knife at them. “I hate to sound so creepy and possessive, but you’re mine, and I’m not going to let you do anything stupid.”

Renato gave him a look. “I’m not him.”

“No, you’re not. I’m just saying. I came to know and care about all of you without any preconceived notions. We’re a family now. I’m not letting that go. Who you were on the other side is irrelevant. Who I was on the other side is only peripherally relevant, and only because I’m a blood member of the Vongola Family.

“I have every intention of going ahead with the bar, these forms notwithstanding, and our other plans associated with it. Yes, there are a few things I’d like to meddle in. Or more accurately, point Kiri at. But the only thing I’m concerned about is if another me is born in this world, because I don’t want to happen to him what happened to me.

“Lal, your Rain Flames, how they’re warped now? My flames were sealed when I was all of five years old, because the old man decided it was the best thing to do to keep me out of the mafia. It turned me into a brainless, uncoordinated mess who couldn’t even harmonize with the people thrown at me as guardians, and who associated flames with pain and humiliation and loss of control. And when the old man’s sons died, I was dragged into the mafia and told I’d be the next boss. Fuck them.”

Val got up and went over to haul him off the step stool and give him a hug. “We’re here,” he whispered.

Sora hugged him back. “Yeah.”

“We’re not letting go of you, either,” Val said firmly. “So sure, fuck the Vongola. Whoever they are.”

Sora giggled and gave Val a squeeze. “I’m sorry for going off like that, but it felt good to say it. Kiri, thank you, so much, for taking such good care of me.”

“I told you, baby brother, anything for you. Except listening to you sing. No sane man would do that.”

He made a face, gave Val another squeeze, then got back up on his stool to finish preparing the vegetables. “Can you track down some guns that Renato and Rio could use? Renato has been complaining about how his gun’s too big for him to handle lately,” he said with a smirk.

“I really will get you back for this,” Renato promised.

The vegetables got chucked into the steamer and set going, so he started the rice going as well and moved on to the remainder of the meal.

“Yes, I can find guns for the both of you in and around ensuring the work crews are performing to specifications. Also, if you would like, I can make any rental payments while you’re all adjusting to this change. It won’t matter once we can move into the building… I’ll have them do the sub-floors first. That way we can transfer your belongings and I can place a Mist barrier to prevent any of them from returning to those floors.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?” Shi asked.

“I would say … probably we could move in by the beginning of January at the latest, maybe a bit earlier. The more I know ahead of time about what you already have and what you’ll need, the easier
it’ll go. So for example, is the furniture in your places your own or part of the rental? Things like that. If I should just go ahead and arrange for furniture for every bedroom I will do so.”

“Let’s start fresh,” Lal said. “I don’t mean to say we should splurge madly, but I can’t see moving more than my personal effects to the new place, and all of the clothing is going to have to be thrown out or donated to charity. It’s nice that whoever screwed us over provided clothing, but…”

“I don’t care, so long as I get a lab,” Lorenzo said with a shrug.

Renato shook his head. “Start fresh.”

“Um…” Val bit his lip and looked at Lorenzo. “Do you think it’d be possible to make me a me-sized bike?”

“I don’t know the first thing about motorcycles, but if I have one to take apart and study, yes, I believe I could.”

“Then starting fresh.”

Viper nodded. “And I will assist in any illusionary efforts so that everyone can have time to pack up without interference, and with getting out of any contracts.”

“I think I would be the most complicated, but I stored most of my belongings before I came. Fresh, obviously, but I will have to return to China at some point to retrieve things.”

“Fresh,” Rio said with a nod. “I don’t have a ton of stuff anyway. And really? A huge bed when we’re this small now?”

“Would you like a crib?” Kiri teased.

“Hey!”

“Next question: are Lal and Rio sharing a room?”

The two of them eyed each other, then left the kitchen.

“So, Vongola, huh?” Renato said.

“Yeah.”

“What’s so special about Vongola?” Val asked.

“They’re only the largest and most powerful family,” Renato said. “They head the alliance of—how can I put this—less base families, the ones who don’t indulge in drug trade, human trafficking, that sort of nasty stuff.”

“I want to be neutral,” he said, then began putting the meal together. Val and Shi helped by setting the table and Renato and Lorenzo went over to help ferry the food. “Lal!? Rio!?"

“Okay, so, what do we call the place?” Renato asked.

“Filigrana,” Viper said.

“…I could see that,” he said slowly. “It sort of alludes to the webs, if that’s what you were aiming at, without being blatant.”
Viper nodded.

“I already wanted to incorporate webs into the décor, so… I’m fine with it. Kiri,” he said, “can you try to keep an ear out for this Arcobaleno business? This didn’t just happen randomly I assume. If it was that man, he picked us specifically, because we were the strongest seven. And if there was a previous set, what happened to them?”

Kiri gave him a steady look.

“They died, then,” he said flatly. “Fucking fantastic. So we’ve got forty-five plus years. And true, that’s a decent lifespan, but… Still, I have to wonder what people will say when suddenly there’s an entire new set.” He glanced down at his pacifier and wondered if they exuded some weird gas or something for the first few years to screw up people’s memories and make them not ask questions about the ones who had gone before. Or did some story get passed around, juicy and guaranteed to excite, that heralded the retirement to a quiet location of the old and the ascension of the new generation?

“I’ll bring a furniture catalog next weekend,” Kiri said into the silence.

Viper maneuvered him into a walk the day after Kiri left. The forest around their location was lovely, though it was a little chilly. “What happened to us in that future you averted?”

“The guy I killed? The one who ended up becoming my friend and who inadvertently ended up sending me here? One of the things he did in that future was attempt to collect all the pacifiers. He came up with some device that emitted waves that were fatal to Arcobaleno. The only one who didn’t die was the Sky Arcobaleno of the time. She was brainwashed into helping him, but she broke free and she ended up sacrificing her life to revive all of you.”

“…I see. What happened to you?”

“When I arrived I came to in a casket. For the longest time I believed I’d been killed. Turned out that self concocted an involuted plan that would bring me and my—well, they were never really my guardians. But, we ended up in the future and eventually won. The Sky Arcobaleno sacrificing herself was part of that. They were somehow able to send memories back to everyone they could who’d been involved, which meant that all of you knew.

“I remember being really angry at my older self. I get why he did it, but he broke my heart and used me horribly. Either he didn’t remember what a complete fuck-up I was at that age, or he was just too desperate to throw a curve-ball into the equation. I don’t know. I learned how to ride a motorcycle, though, and they could even hover if you had the flames to power that.”

“I think I’d pass. I can already fly if I want to.”

“It’s really selfish to say this, but I’m really glad I have all of you with me in this.”

“I think Renato spoke for all of us when he mentioned bitterness. It’s the bonds that are allowing us to function as well as we are right now. Without those, I’ve no doubt at least half of us would do something inadvisable.”

“I’m glad. I still haven’t figured out how to react to having my memories back, to the realization of just how badly the sealing crippled me. I feel like half my life prior to arriving here was one big lie. Nobody pushed me to find guardians here. I didn’t even know what’d happened when I harmonized
with Lorenzo.”

Viper hummed thoughtfully. “It sounds like the sealing made a small alteration that snowballed into a full-blown mental block.”

He laughed nervously. “I was ridiculously clumsy, had horrible memory retention, failing grades, lazy because it felt like nothing really mattered for a loser like me…”

“You are so far from that person I have serious difficulty imagining that,” Viper said, “and I have an excellent imagination.”

“Oh, I bet. I just … hope that my friends from before have—recovered isn’t exactly the right word. Learned to adjust, I guess. I think I’m only as all right as I am because of my bonds with you guys and the almost two years of memories that are happy and unconstrained. I am selfishly happy with what I have now, despite—” He indicated his tiny body. “—this. But we should still search for a way to break the curse. After all, I’m still a virgin.”

Viper made a sound suspiciously like amusement.

He remembered, as he lay there trying to drift off into sleep, that the Arcobaleno of his world had animal partners. So where were theirs? Was that another difference between the dimensions? Sora eased off his bed and padded downstairs to enter the Sky room. Had he missed something in one of the books? Was there some clue in the tiny portraits lining the walls?

‘Aside from the idea that they are past Sky Arcobaleno?’ he asked himself wryly, a bit annoyed at having missed the obvious. He flipped the light on and took a seat in the chair, then reached for the orange book. He must have drifted off while pouring over it for anything he’d missed, because the next thing he knew he was walking through a forest.

It felt like Spring. The air had that slight snap to it and was scented with green and growing things. He could hear but not see birds in the area, and the chitter of small woodland creatures. Leaves rustled and an odd snuffling sound was coming from somewhere.

Up ahead was a clearing that greatly resembled the area outside the house they’d woken in, with a spring-fed pond and flattish rocks to sit on. He settled himself on one and gazed into the water. The sky’s reflection showed rippling images of puffy white clouds, seemingly hurried along in their passage by the movement of the water.

They were mesmerizing, so he sat there and observed as they floated by, and slowly began to notice that the clouds were forming odd and odder shapes. A quick look upward showed only normal clouds, so he returned his gaze to the pond. Various animals progressed across the reflected sky on their chariots of puffy white, until Sora saw one that made his heart squee and his hands come up to clasp under his chin.

A second later something rose up behind his own reflection and startled him so badly he jerked forward and tumbled into the pond. He flailed around under the water until his sense of up and down reasserted itself, then broke the surface sputtering.

The cutest little squirrel in the whole damn world was sitting there at the water’s edge, and it extended a tiny paw toward him. Confused, but willing to accept the situation, Sora reached out to accept the offered help.
He jerked awake at the sound of increasingly loud knocking and rubbed at his eyes. His neck had an awful kink in it from sleeping in a chair, but despite that he slid down to the floor. A few stumbling steps brought him to the door, so he opened it and slipped through.

Renato eyed him with concern, then surprised wariness. “Sora, why is there a squirrel on your head?”

“Huh?”

“…I see,” Renato said as he took Sora’s arm and led him off down the hallway and into the kitchen. “We were getting really worried because we couldn’t find you,” his Sun said as he was bullied into a chair. Renato left and came back with a half cantaloupe for him. “I’ll be right back.”

He nodded vaguely and grabbed the provided spoon so he could eat. He heard the front door open and close, then a piercing whistle.

Renato returned and eyed him again after getting up on a seat himself. “So, the squirrel?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, though I did dream about one,” he said in between bites.

His other guardians all hastened into the kitchen and Lal said, “What happened!? And why is there a squirrel on Sora’s head?”

“He was in the Sky room, and I have no idea. He’s not awake enough yet to make much sense.”

“It’s really cute,” Val murmured to Lorenzo.

Sora became aware between bites that there was, indeed, something on his head. Something latched onto his hair and pressure moved down his head. Moments later there was a fuzzy little upside-down face staring at him and tiny paws braced against his forehead. He was so startled a piece of cantaloupe went flying across the room when his hand jerked. “All right. So there’s a squirrel on my head. Oh! That’s right. Now I remember.”

Lal picked up the poor, abused piece of cantaloupe and flicked it into the bin. “Remember what?”

“There were animal partners. I remembered last night and went to the Sky room to see if I’d missed something. I guess I fell asleep. Had a really odd dream, and then I woke up to the sound of Renato knocking on the door.”

“What are you going to name him?” Val asked, shuffling around excitedly.

“Um… Squirrels like nuts, so… Cashew, I think.”

The squirrel chittered and gave Sora a fuzzy little kiss on the forehead before moving back to sit on his head again.

“So if we enter our respective rooms and try to sleep…?” Rio said.

“I guess so,” he said, then shoved more cantaloupe in his mouth.

Lal heaved a sigh and went to get a snack for herself as the others dashed off into the hallway. She took a seat at the table. “I don’t even like animals all that much. It’s just…”

He reached over to give her a squeeze, then said, “I don’t even know if they eat.”

“I think I saw some nuts in the pantry, so we can try in a bit,” she said.
Cashew did indeed like nuts—or at least, he liked stuffing them into his mouth. They repaired to the sitting room to play cribbage while they waited to see the results of the others’ efforts, and Sora soon forgot he even had a squirrel in his hair.

That is, until Cashew started moving around, scampering down the back of his neck and over to a bookcase along one wall. Sora looked over and saw his partner busily stuffing books into his cheeks. He gaped. How in the world that tiny little animal could fit things bigger than itself into its mouth—?

“Hey! Put those back, Cashew! Books aren’t food!”

Cashew paused in the act of stuffing another book in his mouth, but popped it in anyway—his cheeks weren’t even bulging—and chittered inquiringly.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked, unsure of how much the little creature even understood. “Those can’t possibly taste good to anything but a bookworm,” he reasoned.

Cashew tilted his head, then reared back and spat out a perfect stack of books.

Sora blinked and hastened over. They were fine, not even moist. “Huh.”

“Maybe he’s trying to show you what he’s capable of?” Lal suggested.

Cashew chittered again, happily, Sora thought.

“Is that it?” he said. “You can store a lot of things? That’s not heavy for you?”

Cashew scampered up his arm to sit on his head again, then launched himself into the air just as Rio entered the room with a falcon on his head.

“Ow,” he said, reaching up to rub the spot there tiny claws had scratched him.

Rio let out a startled cry as Cashew dive-bombed him on a sweep around the room, his limbs spread to let the membranes that stretched between them act as sails, and launched off the blond’s head next.

Lal started giggling madly at the sight, then harder when the falcon made an indignant sound and flew off after the squirrel. Rio huffed over to a chair and sat down.

“I see you made a friend,” Sora said as he reclaimed his own seat.

Rio brightened back up and nodded. “I’m gonna call him Falco.”

“That’s … oddly literal.”

Rio shrugged. “I’m not good with that sort of thing. But anyway, I took a nap in the Rain room and sure enough, I had a weird dream. Don’t really remember it, though. When I woke up, Falco was there with me.”

Renato strolled in, eyed the upper situation, then took a seat. A bright green chameleon was perched on his head. “I really can’t be surprised by this outcome,” he said. “I’ve kept chameleons as pets since I was ten. Always named them Leon, too.”

“Cashew showed us he can store things in his cheeks,” he informed the two. “No idea what his limits are or the effects of long term storage, but that stack of books over there looks fine for being stored briefly.”

Val dashed into the room hugging a little octopus in his arms and raced over to show Sora. “Look!
Isn’t he the cutest?!!

The octopus waved a tentacle, and Sora reached out to gently take it and shake “hands”. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said. To Val he asked, “Do you think we’ll need to have some kind of salt-water bath available for him?”

“Um… I have no idea,” Val replied, looking worried.

“We’ll find a container in a bit, all right? That way if he wants one it’s available. What’s this cutie’s name?”

“Oh! I was thinking of Oodako,” Val said with a grin.

“…Are you a fan of Godzilla?”

Val nodded.

Viper and Shi came in next, with a frog (Fantasma) and monkey (Lichi) respectively, followed shortly by Lorenzo, who was riding a crocodile (Keiman).

Sora looked at Lal and smiled, then leaned in to whisper, “You might not care much for animals, but you’re surrounded by them nonetheless.”

She poked him in the chest. “I will kick your ass around the training room, too.”

He scoffed playfully, then grinned when Cashew landed on his shoulder and nuzzled his cheek.

“Let’s go find a container for Oodako, Val. If he doesn’t actually need it much, maybe you could just run him a salt bath every night to have a soak?”

Kiri visited as promised and produced several copies of a furniture catalogue for them to flip through. Sora had a notepad handy to jot down his personal selections, such as a bed and side tables, dresser, a nice lamp. But he also chose a desk to place on sub-level one where they could keep track of the bar accounts and any jobs they were hired for. He could get stuff for the mead-making room elsewhere, but the catalogue did have some things that might suit for the bar itself.

“You know,” Shi said quietly, “I do know a bit about embroidery. It was one of the things I did to focus my mind. It might be preferable to scrounge chairs for sale in a charity shop, then redo the cushions. We could end up with a somewhat eclectic grouping of chairs that all share the same cushion style.”

“I think I like that,” he said, then glanced around to see what the others thought. Cashew was busy eating peanuts and dropping shells down his front, and there was a pile steadily building up on his lap.

Their days were mainly filled with training their smaller bodies, figuring out what their partners could do, and getting Lal and Rio up to speed on their flames. Keiman could send arcs of electricity from his tail and use that to zap himself places, and that included when Lorenzo was riding him. Lichi seemed to be abnormally strong for his size, and Fantasma, Leon, and Falco were no different from what his memories told him. Oodako did not require a salt-water bath available at all times, but he did like to have one, and retreated every so often to splash around and cause a mess.

“If Shi is willing to give it a shot,” Lorenzo said, “I don’t see why not. It would be more interesting than a bunch of perfectly matched stuff. Same with any bar stools.”
“If we could get some allegedly decorative panels at the entrance to the client room,” Viper said, “made out of Mist-reactive metal, it would greatly help with cloaking the room to keep busybodies from listening in. Line the whole room with panels like that, actually.”

Kiri was nodding along in agreement.

Lorenzo said, “I might try my hand at that. It’s a question of knowing the melting point of the metal, obtaining enough, making the molds… We could also put a set by the stairs leading down, to assist in hiding that from outsiders.”

“It’s just titanium-vanadium alloy,” Kiri said, “but during the formation process it has to be imbued with the flame of choice by at least one strong user. The more working on it, the better the reactivity later on. That’s why we get rings of varying quality, and they’re ranked up to S, though in practice rank C and below are melted down and recast. If you can make your own it’s a bonus, because the people who normally make them charge a lot of money.”

Sora snorted. “Unless you’re the one buying.”

“Well, there is that little detail,” Kiri said modestly. “I am exceptionally good when it comes to haggling, I admit.”

“And the effects of a strong Sky being involved in something other than the making of a Sky ring?” Lorenzo asked.

Kiri looked doubtful. “I’m not sure. It might muddle the results, but it could strengthen them if the Sky was good enough at focusing on only the one aspect of the spectrum. Sora is quite good with Mist for a Sky, but he’s still only average at it, and he’s a very strong Sky. The same might be said for someone with multiple flame types, but even those usually have one that stands above the others.”

“So Lal could assist with Cloud or Mist, in theory,” he said.

“Yes. If Lorenzo wants to include that sort of thing in his lab setup, we can test it out and have some idea of how strong those really are as opposed to her original main strength of Rain.”

Lorenzo was busy jotting down notes regarding his lab, so Sora felt it was safe to assume his Lightning would be learning about metalworking. Maybe he could take up a hobby himself. Making mead barely took any time at all; most of it was waiting, with short bursts of straining and decanting to new containers.

“A very strong Mist, on the other hand,” Kiri continued, “can often fake other flame types well enough to contribute to the imbuing process.”

“A new project for me,” Viper murmured, the corners of his mouth quirking up slightly.

“For the purposes of the bar, however, we don’t need to worry about rings, unless we plan to sell them as a sideline.”

“Are any gems especially reactive?” he asked.

Kiri shook his head. “They’re just decorative. Often used as a way to distinguish which ring is attuned to what. But etchings can do that, as well. Mother of pearl would be the closest, if only because living creatures create it and it’s partly organic material. Those could be imbued if you tried hard enough, I suppose.”
“All right. Something to think about, anyway.” He slid his selections over to Kiri and went to start preparing lunch.

Val was busy sketching out ideas for the panels with Shi making suggestions, and Lal and Rio were arguing over their choices for their shared bedroom. Renato was pestering Lorenzo about metalworking, asking, “Do you think you could cast the frame parts for a gun for me out of that alloy? Kiri brought a selection of guns that are small enough, so you could use them as templates.”

Lorenzo made a distracted sound as he kept making notes and nodded vaguely. “Yes, I suppose I could make the attempt.”

“Just think,” Renato said. “If you could do that, perhaps I could also check out the idea of bullets of the same, to convey flames over large distances.”

“With Sun Flames?” he asked in confusion. “And aren’t most bullets made of lead?”

“Depends on what you’re using them for,” Renato replied, “but yes, mostly. I wonder…” He glanced at Leon, who promptly formed himself into a gun. Renato got up and wandered off out the front door.

“I hope he doesn’t somehow manage to burn down the forest,” Lal commented, then went back to arguing with Rio.

He was just serving up lunch when Renato returned with a look of glee. “That was super cool. Leon can’t fire real bullets, but he can fire ones made from flames. It was ciaossu.” He blinked and frowned unhappily. “What the hell?”

“You appear to have picked up a slight speech impediment,” Kiri said. “I assume you tried to say chaos.”

“Yes,” Renato said unhappily. “And I bet you knew it would happen. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I didn’t want to influence your speech,” Kiri said reasonably. “It might not have happened this time.”

“And…?” Sora interjected. “What was the attack like?”

“He shot out a bunch of Sun Flame arrows. I was too excited to count how many and they dissolve afterward. But a little experimentation showed me that they can attack multiple targets.”

“I see.” He remembered, oh so long ago, when Reborn (with a suspiciously adult shadow) had used Chaos Shot on his behalf, though at the time he was still too mentally shackled to understand what had happened. “Forest still standing, I hope?”

Renato scoffed. “Of course.”

“On the bright side,” he said as he slid a plate in front of his Sun, “you can use ciaossu as a greeting and people will think you’re cool for combining Italian and Japanese.”

Renato gave him a dubious look. “I think I just decided how I’m going to get back at you.”

“Oh?”

“You’re going to teach me Japanese.”
He grimaced. “Wonderful.”

“Hey, I already know three languages. What’s one more?”

Shi leaned over and muttered, “I should teach him Chinese, then, too.”

“I heard that, and I’ll take you up on it. But I’d rather not try to learn them at the same time. I can imagine that’d be entirely too confusing.”

“There’s no reason we can’t all learn,” Lal said. “So, Sora, you get to be our Japanese teacher. Kiri, too. And then Shi can teach us Chinese, and Renato can teach us … whatever.”

Renato rolled his eyes. “I speak Italian, French, and English.”

“I speak Japanese, Italian, French, English, Chinese, Russian, um…” Kiri trailed off. “Spanish, Portuguese, and German. Probably some others, but it’s been a long time.”

“Says the man who’s been alive since the Dark Ages,” Lorenzo pointed out.

“I’m not the only one who’s been alive for so long. I just have a different method of existing.”

Sora nodded. Talbot had been around since Primo’s time, though he looked like a wizened old mummy kept alive by sheer determination. “Great, so you can help teach.”

Kiri shook his head mournfully. “So cruel. I’ll bring along some instructional materials next weekend. For, say, Japanese and French.”

Renato dragged him off into the forest after he bundled up a bit, ostensibly to show off his new attack. “I have to assume you could make use of it if you were on a job and had to take out multiple enemies per shot?”

“Assuming the arrows are homing, sure. Because trees don’t dodge and people do. Of course, if anyone ever actually witnessed me using it, word would get around, but now that we’re Arcobaleno that might not be so terrible. As it is, word will get around once we open the bar. I suggest we all practice our speed with various attacks, even the non-fatal ones.”

“What, like Rio webbing into someone to tranquilize them?”

“Yes. Or you. I’m not sure what feelings you sent into Lorenzo that day, but I conjecture it’d stop most people in their tracks.” Renato found a nice rock and bullied him over to it to have a seat.

He thought back. “I think it was mostly affection. But since I can make people take naps… We’d need volunteers, though, and I don’t know the long-term effects of—I guess I could work on speed with inanimate objects. The webbing, the sending. And then maybe a single test case on a human. Do you think you can translate what Leon’s helping you to do with those bullets you were talking about?”

“Only way to know is to try it. But I didn’t actually bring you out here to impress you with my shooting abilities,” Renato said as he took a seat next to Sora and slung an arm around his shoulders.

“Oh?” he said and smiled, ruthlessly shoving his memories of Reborn into a dark closet in his mind and locking the damn door.
“Unfortunately, we never seem to get much time alone together. And admittedly, I feel a little odd right now about the idea of romancing you. It won’t stop me, of course.”

Sora giggled. “Any outsider seeing us kissing would either fall over from cute overload or start ranting about the evils of homosexuality. I like you very much. Sometimes your aggressiveness makes me a little nervous, but otherwise…”

“I’m charming, right?”

“Yes, you’re charming,” he said, and gave Renato a peck on the cheek.

Renato reached up to touch the side of Sora’s face and lean in to kiss him on the mouth. He pulled back and said, “It’ll be difficult to take you to fancy restaurants. And you’re a better cook, besides. Maybe I’ll learn to make something you like.”

Sora shook his head. “Something not food. Not even necessarily material.”

“Will you do to me what you did to Lorenzo? I’m kind of jealous, actually,” Renato said softly.

He blinked in surprise. “Um, sure.” He extended a web into Renato as quickly as possible, and then focused on his feelings for the man.

Renato sucked in a breath. “Those are some seriously complex feelings, Sora. It’s almost intimidating just how much you trust me.”

“Then you know what you have to live up to,” he said, smirking. “You might be able to learn to do it yourself. All I’m doing is concentrating on how I feel about you and willing it into my web.” He relaxed and the web vanished. “Show me that attack?”

Renato smiled at him and nodded. “Of course.” Sora got another kiss before Renato held up his hand for Leon to crawl onto and transform into a gun. He hopped up and moved a short distance away, then aimed. A small ball of sparkling yellow flame appeared at the end of the muzzle, then Renato pulled the trigger.

Sora watched with interest as the flames transformed into multiple arrows and landed in three different trees, two arrows per. They winked out a moment later, but there were deep holes where they had penetrated. “It could be ridiculously powerful over and above what it’s already capable of. Depending on how many arrows you can make, you could take out…”

“A whole hell of a lot of people at once,” Renato said. “Awfully damn flashy, though. Best saved for making a statement, I think.” He turned a smile on Sora and said, “Are you impressed?”

He giggled and nodded. “Dazzled, even. I wonder if you could blow out a wall with that attack.”

“Do I get another kiss for being impressive?”

He laughed and got up so he could move closer. “Of course you do.” He leaned in for another kiss, but Renato placed a hand on the back of his neck and kissed him properly, which made his head spin a bit worryingly. He shot a thread into Renato and focused on what the kiss was making him feel.

The hand at the back of his neck gripped him almost painfully and Renato pulled away a second later. “Oh, man, that was … amazing. I would desperately like to break this curse now. And as much as I’d like to get revenge on the person who did this to us, without him, we might never have met.”

“All we can do is our best to find a way. There’s no point in … assigning lesser importance to what
we do have. So we search, but…”

“I get the message. I’ll just have to romance you with the tools at my disposal. And if we get in a little revenge on the side, it’s a bonus. So let’s have a romantic walk back through the woods, and we can pretend we aren’t stuck as toddlers.”

Filigrana—not that it had a sign yet—was an utter mess on the ground floor, but the sub-levels were beautiful. Kiri had worked his magic to get top quality materials and workmanship. Lorenzo’s lab was full of shiny, complicated things and the training room was properly lined with tatami.

The bedrooms were duplicates of each other in layout, though the colours differed, and what would have been roomy for an adult was now quite a bit of room per person. Kiri had somehow managed to come up with a room for Sora that incorporated all the flame colours without it looking garish, though the main colour was orange.

Multiple trips were made to gather up everyone’s belongings and transfer them back to their new home, and then Kiri and Shi took a trip to China to retrieve what had been stored. “Bring back some good ingredients?” Sora asked before they left.

Shi nodded. “As much as we can carry.”

“We’ll track down good places to shop here. And if we’re lucky there’ll be some decent suppliers.”

He gave Kiri and Shi hugs and waved them off, then went to see what his other friends were doing.

Renato was decorating his room. He had a number of guns on display on his wall, all of which he could no longer handle due to their size. The weight was nothing, as they had found. As with Shi, their strength had remained on par with their adult forms, but the distance between the grip and the trigger was not something easily overcome by tiny fingers.

“That’s … a lot of guns,” he commented.

“I love my guns,” his Sun said with a somewhat disturbing grin. “And as soon as we’re settled I’ll be pestering the hell out of Lorenzo. We also need to find a tailor and a haberdasher. Maybe Viper will be so kind as to mess with a few minds to keep them from asking too many questions.”

“Well, I don’t care about suits and all, but I would like a better wardrobe. Shopping in the children’s section is likely to see me outfitted with cutesy little shirts with animals on them. And that’s fine if you’re trying to con an unsuspecting adult, but I’d like proper clothing.”

Viper floated in and said, “And I would like a new stock of my own preference. I will be happy to assist in ensuring we are all outfitted to our standards.”

He looked down for a moment. “I wonder if we can convince Rio that military-style clothing is…”

Viper snorted softly. “I will hunt down appropriate craftsmen for us, Sora, and make arrangements for them to come once Shi has returned.”

“Perfect. Would either of you care to accompany me on a shopping trip? I need to know what we have available to us in the area, and I rather doubt you guys would want me wandering around unaccompanied.”

Renato frowned. “Of course I’ll go.”
“And while I suspect you are well able to ‘charm’ any shopkeepers, I will come along to ensure the places we prefer will never give us trouble.”

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “Let’s go tell the others so they don’t wonder where we disappeared to.”

When Kiri and Shi did return they were set for a number of things, and Viper had taken over supervising the work upstairs in Kiri’s absence. Then the tailor was brought in and Renato monopolized the man for hours before he was satisfied.

Sora pulled Kiri off to the side after a while to whisper, “Your thoughts on Estraneo?”

“Oh my,” his brother said. “That is an interesting proposition, now isn’t it? Unfortunately, I have very little information on them, so… Let’s say, once Filigrana is up and running, I will start poking around over there.”

“If it’d be possible to prevent them ever coming up with that damn bullet… Stopping them from that horrible experimentation would be good, too.”

“You do realize that changes I made now could prevent the births of people you knew,” Kiri said seriously. “Can you live with that?”

He inhaled and let out the air in a whoosh. “Yes. I’m prepared to shoulder that. Even if they’re still born, they’d never be the same people. The only way to get them back is to allow Estraneo to—no, because that’d be condoning their actions. I sincerely doubt that Estraneo would ever migrate to the alliance side, but if we could block them early, maybe they wouldn’t be such a driving force in this world.”

“And your thoughts on Vongola?”

“I want the old man to step down far earlier. I know it won’t be for decades yet, but he held on for so long. Why? Why did he never step down and let one of his sons take over as Decimo? Why did none of them ever marry and have children? My perspective is horribly skewed on this, I know, but how did all three of them end up dead? Is Vongola really just a lot of hot air and reigning on reputation? Did his sons even get proper guardians?”

Kiri shook his head. “Not something that your friend imparted to me. He probably didn’t know anyway. But it’s something I can keep an eye on. As you said, however, we’ve years yet to go on that score. I wouldn’t expect Enrico to start gathering guardians until he’s at least twelve.”

“By then we may have built up quite the business here. Do you think they would bother to investigate?”

“Depends on how stingy the old man is feeling. The Varia normally only takes on high-risk, high-difficulty missions, so what we’re trying to start here should sail beneath their notice. Word will get around, however, so he might. Smaller families are to be expected to come snooping around if they think we’re infringing on their job pool.”

He felt someone lay a hand on his arm and realized Renato had sneaked up on him. “It’s your turn, my beloved Sky. And you will be getting at least a few suits.”

“I wonder if the guy can do traditional wear,” he muttered.

Renato shook his head. “We can always take a trip to Japan and get that sort of stuff there. Now come on. It’s not like I’m going to make you get a hat or anything, just clothes, a few pairs of nice
shoes…”

He heaved a sigh and let himself he escorted over to the tailor, casting a wistful look at Shi, who was happily ensconced at a table doing embroidery on seat cushions. He could be teaching himself a new hobby rather than letting some finicky man measure him in awkward places and make humming noises that he personally found disturbing.

Renato just smiled at his discomfort and made suggestions on cut and fabrics. Sora knew the man knew what he was talking about, so he suffered in silence as the two discussed options, and gratefully scurried off when they were done. Shi had been able to replenish his wardrobe in China, so he was off the hook. Lorenzo would only care about practical things, like lab coats. Viper preferred the simplicity of dark clothing and flowing, hooded cloaks, so he should not be much of an issue.

Rio, Lalia, and Val were fair game, however, and Renato gleefully dragged Rio over for his turn. Sora shuddered and retreated upstairs with Kiri to see how the workmen were doing. The floors were being installed, a dark-stained hardwood. The kitchen had already been tiled and the appliances installed, so they went in there to be out of the way.

“Once we’re up and running—and you should have some mead ready—I will go out and find us some customers. The odds of exactly the right people showing up to drink at our new bar and spread the word is too low to bother.”

“So you’ll go find some low-importance mafiosi who need help, nudge them this way…”

Kiri nodded. “I plan to cheat, of course.”

“Of course.”

“You expected nothing less. But once we’ve helped a certain number, word of mouth will take care of the rest. Any preference on what to go after first?”

“I think for that we should have a meeting. Set priorities. See who wants to start things off.”

They did just that after the workmen left and everyone had been bullied around by the tailor, who left with promises of exceptional craftsmanship and delivery.

“I would really like to explode a few heads,” Renato said once the question was posed. “I’m feeling exceptionally feisty these days.”

“I don’t really have a preference,” Val said.

“Blowing stuff up is good,” Rio said. “Maybe someone out there wants to cut down a few drug lords and we can combine that with some awesome explosions.”

“Can we all agree that we won’t deal with the baser side of the equation?” Lal said. “I don’t want to be helping anyone out who’s not neutral or part of that alliance, though I tend to think most of our customers would be neutrals, people who aren’t interested in that struggle or are too weak overall for the allied families to bother with.”

“Definitely,” Sora said. “And the last thing I want to do is get sucked into being folded into the allied families. The second that happens we get pressure on us to conform to what they want, such as not helping neutrals because ‘they aren’t one of us’ or because we won’t convince them to be absorbed into an allied family.”
“I’ll look for some people who need help with the odd assassination, then,” Kiri said. “And I’ll check around and see what problems are available to be sorted. I’ll stick to the neutral areas and families for the time being.”

“What about non-mafia sorts?” Val asked. “What if a local needs help with something? I mean, what little I know of the mafia says part of their money is built on protection services. If there are any gangs in the area…”

Sora glanced around to gauge reactions. “Since none of you are shaking your heads, I think we could make a bit of a difference there, especially since those sorts might well attempt to cause trouble for us. I like the idea of our little slice of Italy being reasonably safe. The side effect is gaining trust with the locals. And if more idiots try to move in, we can probably expect the locals to come let us know. We’re a family, but we’re not a Family.”

Val nodded. “Okay, got it. We can help them, but charging would be a bit much for protection we’d give anyway just to cover ourselves.”

“There is a chance, however remote,” Viper said, “that some of the people we end up helping—paid or not—might have some knowledge of the man who did this to us. So we should always keep that in mind if we’re ever to find a way to break this.”
Target 1985: Estraneo

Kiri sidled up to him and smirked in a way that made him want to shudder, but he bravely tilted his head and said, “What’s up?”

“The Estraneo have produced a prototype Possession Bullet and plan to test it soon.”

He frowned. “On?”

“They’re thinking big for some reason,” his brother replied. “They managed to quietly get Vincenzio Magnani into a seat at the 1983 elections. He’s managed to gain something of a voice in the Chamber of Deputies. They plan to shoot him with it and have him espouse their policies, hoping that his present position will allow them to alter things to their liking, and get others into position for them to shoot. A cascade effect, if you will.”

“It doesn’t sound all that much different from what Mukuro ended up wanting to try,” he pointed out. “He may have overheard the scientists talking amongst themselves and adopted the plan as his own in order to ensure worldwide destruction.”

“And did you have anything to do with the setup for their plan?” he asked shrewdly.

“Perhaps,” Kiri said coyly. “In any case, I plan to be present for this little test and ensure that things go horribly wrong. And before you ask, I’ve been doing things like this for a long time, so don’t worry too much.”

“You know I’ll worry no matter what.”

Kiri picked him up and cuddled for a few moments, then set him back down. “I know.”

In actuality, Kiri went the expedient route of sneaking into the Estraneo compound and forcing the choice of which member would be the one shooting, and therefore controlling the politician. That person, of necessity, was mentally weak, as were the others chosen to go along and witness this glorious advance in Estraneo technology.

‘They’re all mentally weak,’ he thought as he observed from partial concealment behind a pillar. ‘If any of them had half the strength Sora does now I would not be able to sway them so easily, even in my weakened state. It’s too bad for them intelligence doesn’t equate the way they might like.’

He spotted the Estraneo shooter and strengthened the cloak around himself. Other Estraneo members were scattered around the hall, doing their best to look inconspicuous, but their repeated glances at the shooter gave them away to anyone paying attention.

Magnani stood up to address his fellows and that’s when the shooter fired and dropped like a stone. Kiri was mildly surprised that Estraneo had thought to cover the sound in some way, and to throw up an illusion so that no one noticed the man hitting the floor.

Kiri watched patiently as it all went to hell. Magnani broke off his speech and blinked, started to say something, closed his mouth again, then started laughing maniacally. Kiri’s brow went up at the
potential evidence that the man’s mind had snapped under the pressure and that the shooter was incapable of keeping him under control.

The other Estraneo lost it and ran for their downed man, at which point Kiri set off his mental trigger and retreated from the building. He would learn plenty from normal media and from the underground gossips about what would come next.

Sora eyed the headlines with equal parts surprise and resignation. “At least it was limited to property damage and one person,” he said after reading the article.

“The real prize, as you know, is that I’m already hearing word that the Vindice is hunting down Estraneo personally. I wouldn’t be surprised if the bullet used was recovered, but even if not, a competent examination of the shooter would reveal quite a bit, not to mention the others who were there. How terrible that they all acted so openly in their disappointment at the failure of their initial test.”

“It’s really that simple?”

Kiri pouted at him. “Sora… Do you doubt my magnificent talent for mayhem? The subtle application of mental force to cause a ripple that effectively results in Estraneo imploding? Really now, I am a master at this sort of thing.”

“All right. I’ll bake you something special, and if we get word that all of Estraneo is behind bars, you can choose an entire evening meal. Deal?”

“But you’d let me do that anyway if I asked,” Kiri protested. “Or for that matter, claimed a day on the calendar.”

“I’ll make it with extra love?” he offered with a grin.

Kiri smirked and shook his head. “No. I have decided that you will be attending the opera with me. I think … yes. The Barber of Seville. I’ll make arrangements, so you make sure you have a nice suit ready.” He strolled off looking entirely too pleased with himself.

Sora sighed and bit his lip. He hated the opera.

**Target 1993: Guardianship**

“It’s time,” Kiri said as Sora was pulling another batch of pretzels out of the oven.

“Oh?” he said, setting the tray on a wire rack and turning around.

“Enrico is fifteen already.”

At first he didn’t understand what his brother was getting at, and then it hit him. “Has the old man been throwing people at him and pretending that’s all it takes for a guardian?”

“Essentially,” Kiri replied. “I don’t know if he expects people to just figure this out on their own, or is too busy making political arrangements with other allied families to care about proper harmonization.”
“No one ever bothered to explain it to me,” he said, “so I wouldn’t doubt he just never got around to it. When I was in charge I was so damn busy all the time that—well, I can almost understand it getting lost by the wayside. It’s still pathetic, now that I know better.”

Kiri nodded. “In any case, I just wanted you to know I’ll be moving about in the background. My ultimate goal is twofold. First, to get Enrico to have actual harmonized guardians, and second, to use this as a lead-up to the old man stepping down in a few years.”

Sora considered the implications of that. A part of him wanted to very carefully not ask any questions, and he probably would avoid doing so. But another part of him recognized that even people Enrico’s age could be, and often should be, held responsible for their actions. If a guardian wasn’t doing his or her job, should they still benefit from it?

He also wondered if Iemitsu had learned his child-rearing techniques from Timoteo, because both men were severely lacking as fathers. He would be… Sora did the math in his head and came up with sixteen for an answer. It was entirely possible that Iemitsu had learned everything about being delusional from his experiences at Vongola HQ, and Sora’s issues with the man were a direct result of Timoteo’s failures.

Kiri snatched a pretzel off the tray and bit into it.

“Well, um… Let me know the highlights?”

His brother nodded, tweaked his nose, and wandered off.

“What do you mean she had an allergic reaction to her makeup?” he asked in patent disbelief.

“The old man apparently had some hidden motive in presenting her as Enrico’s Sun Guardian,” Kiri replied. “He—”

“Wait, wait,” he interrupted. “Don’t tell me it was a matchmaking attempt.”

Kiri nodded and handed him a rolling pin. “Enrico was scheduled to address the upper level men at HQ at his father’s request, and his Sun suggested that he use some of her face powder to keep his face from getting shiny.”

His brows slowly rose as he rolled out the crust for a pie.

“And she pulled out her compact and said, ‘I use it all the time. See?’ Then she opened it and started patting the stuff on her face.”

“And that somehow translated to her death?” he asked, draping the dough into a pie plate and grabbing a knife so he could trim it.

“Oh, yes,” Kiri said. “Apparently, it’s believed that one of the ladies in residence was quite jealous of the girl and sabotaged her makeup. I overheard one of the maids saying that someone had put glass in her foundation, as one example. In any case, whatever was done to the powder caused an allergic reaction severe enough that she died before anyone could try to help.”

“Where did they get the idea jealousy was behind it? And hand me that bowl, please?”

Kiri pushed the bowl of pre-prepared apples over, though he stole one first and popped it into his mouth. “It might have something to do with the very flowery letter that arrived shortly after.”
He shot his brother a suspicious look.

“Pale pink paper, sprayed with some hideous floral scent, cursive handwriting like so many false eyelashes fallen to the page, with a declaration of love most keen.”

“Uh huh,” he said flatly. “And did you happen to get a look at this letter?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Kiri gave him an innocent smile. “One phrase in particular stood out, something about ‘a love that crushes like a mace’. But the gist of it was a love letter in the grand tradition of someone like your former pink-haired friend, and something about how the purest, most harmonious love was one they shared in death.”

He groaned and shook his head, then smacked his brother’s hand when he tried to steal another slice.

“Did you steal that idea from that one mission we did?”

“Dear brother, whatever do you mean?” Kiri said innocently.

“Right,” he said flatly. “And is it just me, or can anyone see that spade in your eye?”

“Only you,” Kiri said blithely. “In any case, it was all very tragic.”

“I’m sure it was,” he said dryly, then hopped onto his brother’s lap and snuggled in close. “So what happened, exactly?”

“Well, his Cloud was a bit spoiled and unmannerly, and you know how much that sort of thing annoys me.”

“You were nobility, so I suppose that makes sense.”

“Indeed. The mystery lover apparently arranged to poison Enrico’s fork rather than trying to mess with the food. The Cloud was sitting to his left and had a clumsy moment, dropped his on the floor. Instead of signaling a servant to provide a replacement, he snatched up Enrico’s and began to use it. He died very quickly.”

He closed his eyes and rested his head against his brother’s body. “And did another letter arrive?”

“Naturally. From what I could pick up it was on more of that overly-scented pink paper with the hideously ornamental writing. It went on about the tragedy of his survival in the last attempt and how that hussy got in the way, but that it was hoped this time they could be together in the harmony and purity of death. There was also a bit about how they hoped the letters would be buried with him, as tokens of love and devotion to take with him on his journey to the afterlife.”

“I’m feeling a bit sick to my stomach after listening to that drivel,” he complained.

“Oh, poor baby. Shall I make you some peppermint tea?”

“No.” He sat back up, balanced on Kiri’s thigh, and planted a kiss on his brother’s cheek. “I’m going to get Renato to fix it.”

“I don’t even want to know how.”
“He has yet to get the hint, so I tried something a little more direct.”

He thought about that for a moment and said, “I’m going to guess and say you mind-controlled or Mist-manipulated a student and had them … say … something.”

“Very good. And yes. I got a classmate to pull Enrico aside and mention how painful it must be for him to have lost two people he’d harmonized with, and then he clapped him on the back and took off. Enrico left that encounter looking confused and angry.”

“So perhaps now he’s suspicious of the lack of information. Granted, that could lead to a fight with the old man, but one can hope he will instead look to people his own age that he actually likes and might suit, rather than those superficial tossers he’s been saddled with so far.”

“It happened before classes began for the morning, so he had the whole day to think about it.”

“Um…” He bit his lip and gave his brother an uncertain look.

“Go on. You know you can ask me anything.”

“Did you actually harmonize with Giotto?”

Kiri shook his head. “I only joined because Elena talked me into it. And when she died I cracked. I didn’t harmonize with Ricardo, either. And once I discarded my body and took to possession, well, as I said before, I’m incapable of it.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Would you like me to try to show you how it feels? Or would that be cruel?”

“I will think about it. In the meantime, I’ll be keeping an eye on Enrico to see how he reacts.”

“I think we’re on the right track now,” Kiri said to him as he bisected a carton of cherry tomatoes. “He seems to be spending a lot of time with one of his classmates, who just so happens to be a Sun. Probably not someone the old man would have chosen as a guardian for his son, but Enrico seems determined to do things properly.”

“Have you taken a peek at this Sun’s mind?”

Kiri tipped his collection of tomatoes into the salad and gave him an unimpressed look. “Of course I have. I will keep an eye on the situation, but I’m leaning toward thinking that Enrico will harmonize for real, and after that he will no longer accept anything less. I also suspect he will warn his brothers about this in the event that the old man tries the same thing with them.”

“Has it even crossed his mind to be suspicious that his mysterious and deadly admirer has vanished into the woodwork?”

“He’s more than a little paranoid of late, but that’s not entirely a bad thing. It would be a bonus if he made the connection, but that might be expecting too much. All done?”

“Yep,” he said as he tipped his collection of cucumbers into the salad and tossed the contents. “Just has to chill.”
“Now this is interesting,” Kiri said during dinner. “I told you that Enrico took over as Decimo, correct?”

Renato nodded. “So?”

“Remember when I mentioned that a ‘lost’ son was found and brought into Vongola?”

“You mean Xanxus,” Val said. “He must be … twelve this year?”

“Yes. It seems that the old man forgot to tidy up after himself when he stepped down and left a few scandalous bits of information for Enrico to find.”

“Oh,” he said. “Oh, I see.”

Kiri nodded. “Funny that. Enrico read through the material so he would know where to file it and discovered that Xanxus is not his brother. The old man saw that Xanxus could produce the Flame of Wrath and promptly adopted him. Why?”

“I see two choices there,” Lorenzo said. “Either to procure a powerful Sky for his family, or to remove the boy from a woman who’s been said to be insane. Or both, I suppose. I lean toward the former.”

“So how did Enrico handle it?” he asked.

“Very well, actually,” Kiri said. “He handled it maturely. He sat Xanxus down and explained the situation to him, and then assured the kid that he was still his little brother, blood or not. He also told Xanxus that if he continued to work hard and learn well, he was in line to join the Varia and become its next head.”

Target 2005: Nana

Kiri approached a door he had only ever seen in gifted memories and rang the bell. A minute later the door opened to reveal Sawada Nana, who smiled. “Hello, my name is Higashi Kiri,” he said smoothly. “I used to work with your husband. Since I was in the area, I thought I might stop by and see if you had a moment.”

As expected, she accepted that without even a split second of indecision, and said, “How lovely to meet you. Sawada Nana. Do come in. Would you like some tea?”

He smiled and nodded, then stepped inside and removed his shoes, then followed her into the kitchen.

“You worked with my husband? I guess that means you do something else now,” she commented as she set to work.

Kiri took a seat. “Yes, I’m a lawyer, but I was contacted by another firm with an offer I found difficult to refuse. Sawada-san has always spoken so highly of you and I felt I would not be doing his description justice if I didn’t stop by.”

Her shoulders tensed up for a moment, which was a good sign, so he slipped tendrils of Mist into her
mind to make her more willing to speak openly.

“I wouldn’t have changed jobs, but I have a younger brother I like to make sure is all right. He runs his own bar, but…”

“Oh? Is it one that serves food, too?”

“He started out only serving bar food, snacks, that sort of thing, but he’s opened it up some to serve actual meals a few nights a week. Of course, that made things busier, but he has friends helping him out.”

“That sounds very nice,” she said as she brought two cups of tea over to the table and took a seat. “I used to be a waitress before I got married.”

“Ah, so you would have some idea of what he does,” he said with a nod, then took a sip of his tea. “Mm, this is nice. Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome. How long has your brother been running the bar?”

He looked off to the side. “Since 1981. He started making mead as a hobby, and after a while he thought opening a bar would be an interesting idea and a way to sell it. We all live under the bar. It saves costs on heating and cooling.”

Nana looked surprised. “Really? Underground? Doesn’t that feel a bit stifling?”

He shook his head. “It’s decorated so nicely you don’t even notice. And there are some amazingly realistic screens on some of the walls. You’d almost think you were in a normal house. The first sub-level has a kitchen so my brother doesn’t have to cook upstairs for us. He reserves the one on the ground floor strictly for the bar.”

“My, two kitchens! Your brother does all the cooking?”

“Mm. He’s a very good cook, but I might be a little biased. Well, this has been a lovely visit, but I suppose I should be on my way. I did stop by unexpectedly, after all.” He pulled a card from his pocket and slid it across the table. “I’ll be in the area for a while yet, though, so feel free to give me a ring.”

He retreated after that, though not before seeing a curious little Tsuna peeking at him from the top of the stairs.

He ran into Nana while browsing the shops in town and exchanged greetings, stayed to talk for a few minutes about nothing in particular, such as the weather, then sauntered off to purchase an adorable little yukata for Sora—or two, possibly three.

It was three days after that encounter that the front desk had a message for him, from Nana, so he headed to her house and rang the bell. Nana let him in after a moment and escorted him to the kitchen, served him a cup of tea, then took a seat.

“You said you were a lawyer, right?”

He nodded. “Are you in need of one?”

“Ano…” Nana sought refuge in a sip of her tea, then got a determined look on her face. “I have to
think about my son.”

He nodded supportively, inwardly pleased at what looked to be an outpouring of frustration and anger and resolve.

“We have enough money to live on, but I really have to think about my son. I’ve—I’ve been contemplating divorce,” she said, then looked away.

“I see. Do you want to talk about it? Something that significant—well, voicing your thoughts and arguments to someone can help you reach a decision.”

Nana stared at him for a long moment, then said, “He’s never here. My little Tsu-kun is five years old this year and he doesn’t even know his daddy. If the man walked in the door right now my son would count him a stranger. He sends money home regularly, but that’s not a substitute for him being here. He keeps saying he’s so busy and that he’ll try to get time off, but it never happens.” She let out a tiny sigh and sipped her tea.

“What do you think you would do if you did go ahead with the divorce?”

“I … don’t know. The only thing I know how to do is keep house and waitress, but I might be able to find a job in town. I could do that anyway, though it’d mean finding hours during the time Tsu-kun was in something like pre-school. He’s terribly shy right now.”

He nodded. “I take it your romance was something of a whirlwind?”

A smile slipped out. “Oh, yes. He was incredibly romantic, always made me feel like a princess. And it was great at first, but it can’t stay great if he’s never here. Do you think that’s unreasonable?”

“Not at all. Maybe you should decide on an adventure. If you did choose to divorce him I can help with that, but what happens when he finally shows up for a quick, and probably unsatisfying, visit?”

“Adventure? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Such as moving to a new country. You’d have to learn a new language, but it could be very exciting and ensure that he would have serious difficulties in causing trouble for you after the fact.”

She hummed thoughtfully and sipped more tea. “I really enjoyed my language class in school.”

“Oh? What did you pick?”

“Italian.”

Kiri blinked. He’d had no idea Sora’s mother spoke a second language, nor one so convenient. He had expected to talk her around to the idea of divorce, then moving to Italy to live at Filigrana and help out so she felt she was directly contributing to her life, and sneakily making it possible for her to pick up the language quickly by implanting some basic structure into her memories.

“I’ve been teaching my little Tsu-kun, too,” she informed him. “And that’s not a bad idea. It would open up the world a bit for my son, though I would be very sad to leave behind what I’ve known all my life and my cute little house. But … I could make new friends and learn new things.”

He was tempted to poke around in her head a bit more deeply, because her almost easy acceptance of the idea was a bit disturbing to him. Had she really been this unhappy in Sora’s original dimension and just that good at hiding it?
“If I’m lucky he shows up for a week, but he spends the entire time eating, drinking, and sleeping. You know what? I’m going to do it! I’m going to divorce him and leave the country!”

Tsuna was a ghost behind his mother’s skirts the entire trip, or as much as possible considering how much of it was spent on planes. Kiri had facilitated the speedy divorce and helped Nana with the sale of the house (funny how full ownership was granted to her), then made the travel arrangements.

A cab dropped them off at Filigrana (the belongings Nana had decided to keep were being shipped) and Kiri led them inside. The bar was fairly lively considering it was still afternoon, but Kiri ignored all of that and led them into the kitchen.

“Sora~!”

His brother whipped around with a smile and brushed his hands off on the towel he kept at his waist. “Kiri, you’re back!”

He snatched Sora up for a cuddle, then turned to their guests. “I’d like to you meet Nana and Tsuna,” he said, ignoring how Sora went a little stiff in his arms. “And this is my little brother, Sora.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you,” Sora said slowly. “I hope your stay with us will be comfortable.”

Kiri gave him a hug and set him back down, then ushered Nana and Tsuna out and downstairs, where they ran into Renato.

Renato eyed the newcomers, then said, “The room is ready, like you asked for.”

Kiri nodded. Renato had long since moved into his brother’s room, so the extra room on the same level was handy. The last thing anyone wanted was for a small child to wander into Lorenzo’s lab. He would have to check to make certain Viper had put up a Mist barrier to divert the boy, and if not, get it done while Nana and Tsuna were settling in.

“Thank you.” He led the two into the guest room on that level and gestured. “It’s not much, but it will mean you won’t have to worry about housing for now.” There wasn’t a lot of free space left over, but there was room for two beds, even if they were singles.

Nana gave him an uncertain look.

“What is it?” he said.

“Um… Well… Your brother is tiny,” she said barely above a whisper. “And the … man … just outside.”

“They met at a group help meeting for people with dwarfism,” he lied smoothly. “All my brother’s friends are tiny.”

“I see,” she said, then smiled brightly. “It’s terribly cute!”

He set down the suitcases and said, “I’m going to let you get settled in. Once you’ve finished unpacking we can see about getting you two fed, all right?”

“All right!”

He nodded and quit the room, then headed downstairs to ensure Lorenzo’s lab was off-limits.
Sora was tending the bar when a very familiar person danced into Filigrana and started twittering. What Lussuria was doing in town was not something he would inquire about, but he was curious all the same.

“Ciao~!” Lussuria said to him. “I love the sign outside! And the décor in here~!”

He smiled automatically and nodded. “Thank you. Can I get you anything this evening? Some mead, something to eat? We serve proper meals on Friday and Saturday, so…”

Lussuria snatched up a menu and sat down. He hummed as he read, then nodded vigorously. “Yes. I would like some of your baked penne, garlic-roasted asparagus, and—you make this mead yourself?”

Sora nodded. “From local honey.”

“…The sweetest one you have,” Lussuria trilled.

“All right.”

“And while I’m waiting for the main meal, a small salad.”

He nodded again. “I’ll get right on that.” He grabbed the sweetest mead he had from his supply and poured, then set the glass in front of Lussuria, then went into the kitchen to toss together a quick salad, delivered it, and got started on the actual meal.

When he came back out and served it Lussuria twittered again and dug in after a brief, almost unnoticeable pulse of Sun Flames. Lussuria squealed, which sounded off with his mouth full of food, and after he swallowed he said, “I’ve never had something like this with an offbeat cheese blend. It’s fabulous~!”

“It’s just something I tried one day and ended up liking.”

“I am very glad I stopped in here, then.” Lussuria blinded him with a smile.

“Just let me know if you need anything,” he said.

Lussuria kept the menu handy as he ate and nodded occasionally. Twenty minutes later he signaled for attention, so Sora went back over to hear, “I adore the food~! So, could I get a large helping of that pasta salad to go?”

“Enough for how many people?” he asked.

Lussuria hummed. “Seven. And I assume since it’s cold it travels well? I’m a few hours away from my destination.”

“Yes, but since you’re a few hours out, I can include a frozen pack to help. It keeps well for several days in the refrigerator—assuming it doesn’t get eaten straight away.”

Lussuria smiled. “Sounds great.”

He nodded. “I’ll go get that ready, then.”
“Oh, and—” Lussuria glanced at the menu again. “A dozen bottles of that mead?”

“Mm. Be back shortly.”

After Lussuria left Renato hastened over with a quirked brow. “That was the Varia Sun, right? He’s kind of hard to mistake. He ordered a lot to go.”

“He also checked to make sure nothing was poisoned before he ate. I don’t know whether to be pleased or concerned.”

Renato shrugged. “Would it be such a bad thing if—well, technically it’d mean having closer ties to that family, but… On the other hand, if you manage to seduce the lot of them with your cooking…”

Sora snorted softly. “I’m having a hard time believing that’d work with Xanxus.”

Renato shook his head. “You have no idea, tesoro.”

A week later Lussuria showed up again and ordered a meal for himself. He was just as twittery as the last time and just as complimentary about the food. As before he ordered a large to-go order, along with another dozen bottles of mead, though that time he wanted a mix of flavors.

The week after that Levi showed up. He grunted more than he spoke, and he only stayed long enough to pick up a to-go order. Renato smirked at Sora. “I think the whole seduction thing is full speed ahead, tesoro. Why else would they be showing up weekly to haul food four hours north?”

Lussuria showed up the week after and tried the tuna carpaccio. He snagged Sora as he wandered by and said, “Where did you learn to cook?”

He blinked. “I learned out of self-defense. My brother can’t cook to save his life, so I did my best to take up the slack. Just, you know, starting from a recipe and then tinkering with it until I was satisfied.”

“I do like that you have some Asian dishes on the menu.”

“It’s easier now to get supplies for that than when we started this place.”

“He could stir fry weeds and get a gourmet meal out of it,” a passing Renato commented.

Lussuria giggled. “Any chance I could convince you to try tom yum goong?”

His brow furrowed. “That depends. Is it spicy?”

“It has chili peppers in it.”

He bit his lip. He had tried making Shi’s favorite dish and he and his Storm had been upset to discover that the change in stature made them unable to handle a lot of heat. “I can try, but I’m not sure how well it would come out. I don’t do well with that kind of spiciness in terms of being able to check the taste. Still, I suppose I could try…”

“I’ll buy all the ingredients~!” Lussuria trilled.

He considered it some more. “I’d need time, so… All right, here’s the deal. If you can be here at around eleven on whatever day, I could try. We don’t open until two, so that’d give me time to try. I wonder if it’d freeze well…”
Lussuria clapped excitedly. “Let me think… I’ll source the ingredients and we can pick a day next
time I stop by.”

“All right,” he said with a nod.

The very flamboyant Sun danced off a bit later with another to-go order and two dozen bottles of
mead.

“This is getting weird,” he said to Renato.

“And I think you’re denying the knowledge that you’re sucking the Varia into your sphere of
influence. Want to bet on whether or not any of them are even harmonized with Xanxus?”

He shook his head.

The next day he received another surprise. He had just finished a meeting with one of their other
customers (Kiri and Viper had both been out when their other customer had arrived, so he had to
handle the Mist aspect) when into the bar walked Romario and Dino. Dino looked painfully young
to his eyes and more than little downtrodden.

They took a table as he headed to the bar itself and Nana went over to take their order. After a
minute she walked over to him and said in confusion, “They don’t have a clue what they want.”

“I’ll talk to them.”

She smiled in relief and headed off to another table.

Sora strolled out from behind the bar and over to Dino’s table in time to hear, “—only sent me
because he doesn’t care if I die!”

“Dino, no,” Romario said. “He just—”

“Just what? You didn’t overhear what he said.”

Sora coughed, which made Dino blush. “Ciao. I heard you were having some difficulty in deciding.
I’m the cook, so if you have any questions…”

“Oh, um…” Dino glanced at his menu. “Chicken cacciatore, I guess.”

Romario nodded. “The same. Whatever wine you think goes with it.”

“…All right,” he said when they requested nothing else. “I’ll have that out for you shortly.” As he
walked away he heard, “An Arcobaleno? Here? But Dad—” He signaled to Renato on his way to
the kitchen and once inside he said quietly, “The two that just came in? The blond kid and his
companion?”

Renato nodded. “What about them?”

“That kid’s a Cavallone. And they aren’t here because they heard the food was good. I saw that Kiri
got back, so will you ask him to set a spy on them to keep track of their conversation?”

Renato leaned in to give him a kiss. “Okay.”

Sora set about making the latest order and delivered it himself. “If you need anything else, just
signal.”
“I’m curious about something,” Romario said, and continued when Sora nodded, “There’s not a lot on the menu.”

“Right. I buy by day for Friday and Saturday, so the menu is limited by what I decide to purchase. Though there are a few things I always get.”

“I see. Thank you.”

He nodded and wandered back to his bar. After closing he was snagged by Kiri before bed.

“They’re here to spy on us,” his brother said. “The Cavallone Nono is apparently feeling a little threatened because some of the people in his territory have been coming here for help rather than soliciting theirs, so he sent one of his sons to investigate.”

“And the comment Dino made about his father not caring if he died?”

“That came up, too. The twins are duking it out for the position of Decimo, and he didn’t want to risk either of them. Cavallone is also curious in a general sense, so now that Dino is of age, he finally sent someone out he felt he could both trust and risk. However, Dino is in a bad position because, from what I could get out of them, Dino’s mother died in childbirth, and he’s been taking the blame for that.”

Sora frowned. “That’s patently ridiculous.”

Kiri shrugged. “I agree, but people are irrational beings and like to find an external source of blame. Dino is the scapegoat for his mother’s death. The only one wholly on his side is Romario, who was more or less pushed into being the kid’s nanny when he didn’t harmonize with either twin. He has harmonized with Dino, though neither of them are aware of it because the bond itself is a bit ghostly. On a side note, they adored the food.”

He rolled his eyes. “All right, fine. So maybe they’ll return and have more of it.”

Kiri gave him a knowing look. “I didn’t get much about those two from Byakuran, but I can already guess what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“Hm, let me think,” he said dryly, “that I have the idea to add them to our family?”

“The other Dino did adopt you as his younger brother, so yes.”

“Well, they didn’t expect to stumble over Arcobaleno,” he said.

Kiri shook his head. “That just made him nervous.”

“Hold up!” Renato said as he latched onto the arm of a young boy and prevented him from dashing off. “And just what do you think you’re doing?”

Sora caught up and eyed his lover’s prey. How Hayato had found his way into Filigrana he would not question. He would, however, do his best to draw the kid in and give him a safe home. “I would say dine and dash, but considering this one never even ordered I’m thinking swipe and sprint.”

“Let’s take him to Kiri,” Renato suggested.

Sora nodded and waved to Rio, who came over. “Can you watch the bar for a few?”
“Sure thing!”

Downstairs he located Kiri and pointed at the interloper. “I think he just ran away from home,” he whispered to his brother after Kiri picked him up. “Take a look?”

Kiri eyed the boy intently for a few minutes, despite the fact that Hayato was struggling to get away from someone less than half his size. “Yes, he ran and found this place by accident. If we keep him, perhaps he and Tsuna can harmonize for real this time?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Do you think it’d be a problem to make his father not give a damn, assuming he does now?”

Kiri shook his head. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I think … in this case, knowing how Hayato is, a mental tether wouldn’t go amiss?”

“I agree,” Kiri replied, then set him down.

“So, I’m Sora. What’s your name?”

Hayato scowled at him, but Sora could see the underlying fear.

“If you were in here trying to steal food, I bet you’ve run away from home. Do you need a place to stay for a while?”

“You’re just a little kid!”

Renato chuckled. “Oh, you have no idea, do you, kid.”

Hayato struggled some more and failed to free himself.

“Do you need a place to stay?” Sora repeated. “Tsuna probably wouldn’t mind having a friend his own age around.”

Hayato looked cautiously interested. “Tsuna?”

He nodded. “He turned eight this year. He and his mother live here and she waitresses. You could always help out with a bit of cleaning to pay for your keep.”

Hayato wrinkled his nose at the suggestion.

“What?” he said. “Does the idea of actually doing a little work upset his highness?”

Hayato started struggling violently in Sora’s direction, but Renato held him easily. The struggling stopped when Nana and Tsuna wandered in and Nana began to coo about how cute the child was, and then he just looked confused.

Tsuna sidled up to Sora and whispered a little too loudly, “Who is that?”

“You can call me Mama,” Nana said to Hayato with a bright smile. “Everyone does.”

“He was caught trying to appropriate food,” he whispered back.

Tsuna sounded out the word, then whispered, “He’s got nothing to eat? He can have some of my dinner.”
Sora smiled softly. “That’s really sweet of you. He might make a good friend for you. I know it’s a bit hard being here around so many adults.”

Tsuna trotted over and smiled at Hayato. “Ciao! My name’s Tsuna. What’s yours?”

Hayato looked between Tsuna and Nana, confused, then said, “Hayato.”

“That’s a Japanese name like mine!”

Hayato nodded slowly.

“Want to see my room? I share it with my mother, but... Or we could get a snack.” Tsuna grabbed Hayato’s arm and dragged him away.

“Voi! What’s so special about this place?”

Sora’s head shot up to see Squalo accompanying Lussuria over to the bar.

Lussuria gave him a blinding smile as he slid onto a stool. “Ciao~! Everyone loves the food I’ve been bringing back, so I brought a friend along this time.”

“That’s nice to hear. What can I get you two?”

Squalo sat down with a scowl and said, “The tuna carpaccio.”

‘Good thing I bought tuna today,’ he thought and nodded.

“Hm. Pork stir fry.”

“And to drink?”

“A middling mead,” Lussuria said, “for both of us.”

When he brought the food out he fussed under the counter for long enough to feel the pulse of Lussuria’s flames again, checking the food and drink, then left to check on various tables. Before they departed another to-go order was placed.

“Next we’ll be seeing Xanxus in here,” he muttered.

Dino and Romario showed up again on a Friday afternoon and ordered stromboli and wine. Sora noticed as he worked that the two of them kept eyeing him and his guardians (when they appeared)—but of course, they had no other customers that day, so there was nothing to see.

But they kept showing up, even with nothing to see (because when other customers did appear, Kiri or Viper made sure it was never noticed), and Sora finally went over to take a seat at their table one day to talk.

“You guys really seem to like coming here,” he commented.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Dino said awkwardly. “The food is excellent.”

“So I should keep pretending you aren’t here to spy on us for your father?”
Dino jerked in surprise and sent a glass flying, then blushed and stammered out an apology.

“I suppose I can understand why he might be … hm. I’m not sure what to call it, actually. But surely you’re a bit bored of never actually witnessing anything going on. Do you even want to be doing this? Isn’t there something you’d rather be doing?”

Dino stuttered a bit and gave Romario a desperate look, then said, “I, um, well, I’ve always been fond of horses. But my father isn’t exactly keen on the idea.”

“With a name like yours?” he said.

“There is that,” Dino admitted, not even pretending otherwise. “I, um… I never expected to find Arcobaleno here. I figured you’d all have an in with some big family.”

Sora shrugged. “I didn’t see the point. I have my own little family and we wanted to be neutral. I don’t like the idea of someone else dictating my actions, telling me what I can do for a living or what jobs I take on.”

Dino adopted a wistful look. “That sounds wonderful.”

“Want a job?”

Dino blinked. “What?”

“Do you have hearing problems?”

“N-no, I just—a job?”

“That is what he said,” a nosy Renato said as he slid into a chair. To Sora he said, “Are you adopting more strays?”

He smiled. “Trying to!”

“Doing what, precisely?” Renato asked.

“I was thinking I could teach them how to shop for me, then they could take that over so I didn’t have to. It’s annoying at times dealing with people who keep cooing at me and asking about my mommy. We could figure out how to free up a room, so that and board would be part of the deal, along with the rest in actual money.”

“If you’re going to do that, we’d have to also ensure they could both defend themselves, break up any bar fights…”

He eyed his Sun. “Actively?”

“Yes.”

He looked at Dino again. “We noticed you the first time you came in. We investigated, of course. If you want to get away from your father I’m prepared to give you a helping hand. Because really? You’re not going to find anything. Neither of you are skilled enough.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Romario said.

“But true,” Renato replied.

He turned to his Sun and said, 「I could see if Kaminari and Kumo are willing to share a room.」
「If you ask them they probably would. Kaminari only goes in his room to sleep, and Kumo could still have plenty of alone time even if they were sharing, I think. The other option is to build an extension off the back, but that doesn’t fly well with our security. The other option would be Arashi and Kaminari.」

He nodded. 「That might work.」

Dino had a confused look on his face due to the language change.

“And language lessons,” Renato added.

“My father is paying for our accommodations,” Dino pointed out.

“Even without any progress?” he asked.

Romario nodded. “As much as I prefer not to acknowledge the truth, I believe Dino is correct in that his father simply wants him out of the way. If you’re offering a job, then…”

“What the hell, trash!?”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought, eyeing the arrival of the entire Varia into his bar.

Renato appeared at his side as if he teleported and smirked at the Varia Mist. “Yo, Shamal!”

Shamal’s head whipped around toward the sound, and gawked. “Oh my God, is that you, Renato?” He then tried to look like he had not just showed his blatant surprise to the world at large and ruined his stylishly lazy mystique—or whatever he was going for.

His Sun strutted over and hopped up on a chair. “Why yes, yes it is. I had no idea you were…”

Shamal scoffed. “Liar.”

“So what brings you all here?”

“The trash better be right about the steak here,” Xanxus said, “or I am going to introduce him to some very painful corrective methods.”

Sora ghosted over and waved at a table, unwilling to let Nana handle them, then flipped menus into place. Renato jumped down and leaned in to whisper, “I’ll take care of the orders.”

A short time later he was delivering seven orders, though the thought of feeding Bianchi of all people, who turned out to have Cloud Flames in addition to Storm—not a terrible surprise considering how many Hayato had in his stable—was a bit odd. If she was anything like her counterpart she likely would not automatically poison the food he brought out. And if she did, he bet that Kiri or Viper would be more than capable of shifting blame off Filigrana to where it belonged.

Xanxus cut into his steak and shoved a huge piece into his mouth, chewed, and grunted in what sounded like pleasure. Sora nodded to himself and returned to the bar. It wasn’t long before Renato wandered back to him and said, “He wants another one.”

**Target 2009: Vongola**
A cackling Kiri took a seat at the dining table.

Sora eyed him as he slid plates onto the table with Val’s help. “What are you up to?”

Kiri’s laugh cut off midway. “Hm? I just heard some hilariously amusing news.”

Sora took his seat and picked up his cutlery. “All right. Were you going to share with us, or just ‘kufufufu’ to yourself for a while.”

“You wound me. Of course I was going to share. I just wanted to enjoy it for a bit first. But since you’re feeling pushy—I blame you for that, Renato—I could share sooner than I’d planned.”

He looked at his brother expectantly, but when Kiri gave a subtle head tilt toward Nana, he nodded and dropped the subject except to say, “Whatever it is it’s probably not suitable for dinner conversation, so I suppose it can wait a little.”

Only after Nana and the two kids were elsewhere did Kiri open up and say, “Iemitsu has been frozen.”

“…What!?”

Kiri nodded. “Now, you know I did some tinkering with that whole situation. One of the things I did aside from slide that divorce in quietly was to make Iemitsu think he was taking regular holidays to go see them when in reality he was just off skiing or lazing about the area.”

“And that translated into being frozen somehow?” Lorenzo said.

“Timoteo wanted to meet Iemitsu’s precious and adorable little ‘tuna-fish’ and so off they went to Japan, only to find some random family living in the house and no idea what he was babbling on about. Timoteo investigated back at CEDEF and found out that his hand-picked man to head that was full-on delusional. Enrico got involved, and he essentially asked why they went there at all considering he got notice of the divorce years ago. So… Timoteo decided, without consulting anyone, to use Zero Point Breakthrough and freeze Iemitsu, because it was too risky to have him running around or even in a mental facility.”

“How did Enrico react when he found out?” Shi asked.

“He was very quietly furious. He wanted to ice Iemitsu in the old fashioned way, with a bullet to the head, but since that option was taken from him, he took possession of the results and locked it away somewhere in a sub-level of HQ. He also retired his father as an advisor, because the old man can’t unilaterally make decisions like that after he’s stepped down, and asked Massimo to become the new head of CEDEF.”

Target 2010: Overture

When he went up to the ground floor to start prep work for the day Sora was not expecting to see a white-haired, bearded gentleman sitting at the bar. The man in question was wearing a stylish outfit in half purple, half red, had a cane in one hand, and a rather odd smile on his face.

“Ciao,” he said pleasantly, hopping up onto a stool. “Dare I ask how you managed to get in?”

“Hello, hello, hello!” the man said exuberantly. “I have a proposition for you!”
He sat there in a bit of a quandary. If the man could get in past Kiri and Viper’s protections, would he notice if Sora webbed into him? Or sent off a spy to get the attention of the others?

The man chortled and pointed his cane at nothing in particular. “Yes, an offer! I am Sheogorath, Daedric Prince of Madness.”

“You’ll fit right in, then,” he muttered.

“I know!”

Sora was about to call for a brief tactical retreat when Kiri and all his guardians emerged from the stairwell with varying expressions of confusion or irritation. Kiri looked particularly upset to see a strange man lounging in their bar and Viper’s mouth was quirked in that odd triangular shape that denoted unhappiness mixed with annoyance.

“An offer?” he said as the others found seats.

“And what in blazes is a Daedric anything?” Lorenzo asked grumpily.

“Such cheek!” Sheogorath said. “Did you know? There are multiple dimensions wandering about —”

Sora snorted.

“—and not all of them are similar to this one. And not all of them have the same belief systems or abilities. For example, where I’m from there’s none of this Dying Will Flames thing. Instead, we have magic.”

Renato rolled his eyes.

“Who here would like to participate in a little example fight?” Sheogorath asked brightly. “I’ll summon something and one of you can tear it to pieces.”

“In my bar?”

Sheogorath waved his cane again and all the tables and chairs pushed out against the walls.

“Fine,” Renato said, “I’ll do it.”

“Capital!” Sheogorath jabbed the end of his cane at the air and a very peculiar thing appeared; it looked like it was formed from electricity.

Lorenzo leaned forward in interest as Renato slid off his stool and brandished two guns. The thing arced electricity at his Sun, which Renato only barely managed to dodge, and his Sun responded with a hail of gunfire. It went down after a minute of Renato bouncing around like rubber and dissolved in a crackle of electricity.

“You still haven’t said what the offer is or even what Daedric is,” Sora pointed out.

“Right-o! You lot seem to have a tiny problem.”

Val huffed in annoyance.

“I can fix that, but it would require a bit of a sacrifice on your parts. You see, it would mean coming to my world.”
“You’re saying you know how to break this curse?” Viper said intently. “We’ve searched for decades!”

“I can’t break it so much as transfer it onto other people,” Sheogorath said with a quirky grin. “Let them worry about it. You would all get back your proper bodies. And you—” He aimed his cane at Kiri. “—would have a suitable body again.”

“But we’d end up in a completely unfamiliar world, with no place to live,” Shi said. “Assuming any of this is more than a pipe dream.”

“Vaermina handles nightmares,” Sheogorath said with a brief frown. “In any case, the passage through the Void and Oblivion would allow me to shift the curse and give you back what you’ve lost. True, you wouldn’t suddenly gain the ability to do magic, but you’re not without your talents. And to spice up the deal, I’ll even provide you with … hm.”

“You seem surprisingly sane for the Prince of Madness,” Lal pointed out.

“I’m on my worst behavior at the moment! You know what? I’ll even include those two strays you picked up, the blond and his friend.”

“Why would you offer this?” Sora asked.

“I’m mad!” Sheogorath said. “Why do I need a reason to do anything? I know how to convince you,” he said happily, then pointed his cane at Kiri.

Sora’s brother dropped like a stone and the illusion masking his features sheeted away like water, revealing some unfamiliar face which slowly morphed into what Sora knew to be Daemon’s actual features.

Kiri stood up with a look on wonder on his face. “I feel whole again,” he whispered.

“That’s right,” Sheogorath said. “I’ve fixed you up!”

Kiri stepped away a few paces and started weaving illusions so realistic and deep that Sora was starting to get a headache from his brain trying to resist the belief that they were in a jungle complete with appropriate animals. Cashew chittered like mad and tried to leap onto a handy tree only to land on the floor with a look of confusion.

“I’m convinced,” Kiri said.

“Right-o!” Sheogorath warbled. “So, how about you lot think about my offer and I’ll get back to you in, say, a week’s time? If you plan to accept you should probably stock up on goodies. You’d be able to find a nice place, I’m sure, and perhaps run another bar, grow some things you can’t find where I’m from… Might run into a spot of competition from the existing assassin’s guild, but I’m sure you can work that out suitably. Right, I’m off! Ta ta!” He gestured with his cane, which created a purple portal of some sort, and walked through. It collapsed a second later, leaving no evidence of his passage.

“Um…”

“Family meeting,” Kiri said, then started moving the tables back into their proper places.

“All right,” Sora said once they were seated and had drinks. “Kiri, you’re really back to full power?”

Kiri nodded. “It’s like I never discarded my body. So, wonderful, I’m fixed, but the rest of you…?”
Viper frowned. “I guess it would have been too much to fix one of us and we’ll have to take it on faith—assuming we agree to do this.”

“And he said to stock up,” Renato said. “What isn’t over there?”

“Cashew can carry a ridiculous amount,” Sora said, “but we’d still have to plan carefully. Assuming we agreed.”

Looks went around the table.

“A entirely new world?” Val said. “With no idea what we’d be getting ourselves into? But for the chance to be normal again?”

“As normal as any of us can be,” Lal muttered.

“But, Lal, think about it. We could…” Rio trailed off with a wistful look.

“It would mean leaving Nana and the boys on their own,” Lal said. “We’d have to account for that. Nana can’t run this place on her own and it wouldn’t be fair to leave her hanging.”

Sora frowned.

“We could always contact Xanxus,” Renato said. “He never really shows it, but he loves this place. Maybe he could find someone competent and reliable to oversee things. Sora could give the place to Tsuna. Even if the kid does run off to be an interpreter for the UN, he would still have a place to call home and some income. Nana could take over as cook.”

“I’m getting the feeling we’re leaning toward taking a leap of faith and going,” he said, glancing round at his family.

Viper sighed. “What have we got to lose? If what we found out before is true, we’re either going to die horrible deaths or end up as Vindice! Why not take a chance? At least we’d have some kind of a choice.”

“A choice that might allow us to finally … you know,” Rio said, looking off to the side. “Maybe it wouldn’t be void of assassins and the like, but…”

“No mafia,” Lal said.

“Right. The magic thing sounds a bit daunting, though.”

Viper scoffed. “I doubt the average peasant has the time. And while it’s true he said nothing about the sort of society we’d be entering, magic rather does paint a certain picture.”

Lorenzo looked aghast. “You mean … no electricity?”

“So bring along the stuff to make solar panels or something, and schematics. And there’s water power, and wind,” Val said. “And you showed me that one time how to make a battery.”

Shi exhaled slowly and looked at Sora. “The real question is this: what does your intuition tell you?”

“Um…” That was a good question. He sat back and closed his eyes, concentrating on the situation. He came back to his surroundings some unspecified time later and said, “I’m not getting any bad feelings. I’m almost one hundred percent certain we’d be restored to our pre-curse bodies and alive.”

“As opposed to bodies matching our real ages?” Val said.
He nodded. “I mean, I’ve no idea what we have to expect wherever we’d be going—well, aside from those assassins he mentioned—but we’d be alive, healthy, young, and still have our abilities.”

“We’d need to pack a lot of seeds, coffee, weapons, clothes, coffee, Sora’s mead equipment, Lorenzo’s lab—”

“Pack it all!” Lorenzo said vehemently.

— a coffee grinder, coffee…”

Shi looked contemplative as Renato kept listing off coffee every third time and said, “Do you think this new world has tofu?”

“Kiri, can you mind-fuck someone and have them bring back a—”

“I’m going to convert all my assets into gold bullion,” Viper said.

“What about my motorcycle!?” Val cried. “It’ll be tiny compared to the new me! Do you think magical people even have them?”

“Guns! We need guns!” Rio nearly shouted. “And all the stuff to make bullets!”

Kiri leaned over to Sora and whispered, “Probably not a bad thing that he fixed me, you think? I’m going to have to mind control a number of people in order to get us supplied in a mere week.”

“Will you get some people to go buy packets of seeds for like … everything?” he whispered back, then said loudly, “People, people! Settle down. We need to make lists, all right? And I have to get this bar ready for opening in a few hours.”

“I’m going to need a lot of batteries,” Lorenzo muttered, “and a dozen or so laptops. Maybe a solar charger.”

Val gasped and looked at Sora. “What about your kitchen?”

“Huh?” he said, feeling a bit annoyed that his family was not doing as he requested.

“All your tools and implements and … things! Do you think they’d even have stuff like that wherever we’d end up? We can’t very well bunk off and leave Nana with nothing to cook on.”

“Oh dear. Like I said, start making lists, please,” he tried again. “Write down everything you can think of that we might need, and we can go over it at lunch. Viper, will you send something off to Xanxus about keeping an eye on this place in a week? And … Lal, will you talk to Dino and Romario? Mention horses if it helps. Maybe we can work in a stable or something. That should pique his interest.”

They were waiting upstairs when the time came, rather impatiently, and all of them jumped a little when a purple portal appeared and Sheogorath stepped through swinging his cane idly. “Hello, everyone!”

“How does he do that?” Val whispered.

“The portal?” Sora whispered back.

“No, that greeting. It sounds English, and yet I know it’s not.”
“The chaos this past week was simply breathtaking! Just magnificent.”

“You know,” he whispered, “you’re on to something here. I know that’s not English or Italian or anything I actually recognize, and yet we all understand him.”

“And how you’ve managed to pack so much into that tiny little squirrel…” Sheogorath shook his head and sighed happily.

Dino and Romario exchanged a worried look.

“Maybe I should create a new creature to carry my luggage,” Sheogorath continued. “People can be so unreliable, after all, especially the insane ones.” He clapped his hands briskly and smiled. “So, are we all ready?”

“…Yes.”

“Splendid! Capital! And all these crates are going, too, I suppose.”

He nodded. “Preferably, yes.”

“Wonderful!” Sheogorath brandished his cane and swirled it around. Purple started to bleed out the end and form a sphere that encompassed them all, and their belongings. And then there was just blackness.
08: Distant Abyss

Part II

Cyrodiil

“By the way… Do you happen to know what the fine is here in Cyrodiil for necrophilia? Just asking.”

He knew he was dreaming when he realized he was seeing events from a peculiar, higher viewpoint, and more importantly that Squalo, who had arrived to oversee Filigrana, had been chibified and that his mobile phone was then ludicrously large in his tiny hands as he made a call. Thankfully, speakerphone existed as an option. Nana and the children were nowhere to be seen as Squalo ranted in the general direction of his phone, only to be told that all the top Varia were chibified.

“Well what the fuck are we going to do!?” Squalo roared.

“Don’t you fucking yell at me, trash!” Xanxus roared back. “I called Enrico and told him what happened and to send Federico over as the new Varia Sky. He can figure it the fuck out. We’re packing up and as soon as he gets here we’re moving to Filigrana.”

“Wait… We’re sticking with this place?”

“Are you deaf, trash!? I just said we were. So make sure a room is ready for me. The others can sort themselves out for all I care.”

“Right, on it, boss.” Squalo stared at his phone for a moment after Xanxus hung up, then scowled and slammed his hand against the table surface, making the phone jump.

“Where the hell are we?” Renato muttered.

Kiri looked around with interest and saw some odd white-ish ruins a bit north of them, a large lake with a fair-sized walled city on an island at its center, plenty of trees and other greenery, and absolutely nothing that would suggest technology. The nearby road showed signs of passage, but the traces were so narrow he had to assume a cart was involved, not a car.

Lorenzo had a hand to his chest and his expression was one of mourning, possibly over the obvious lack of power poles or lines.

Kiri coughed to get their attention and said, “Are you too disoriented to have not noticed you’re back in adult forms?”

Renato blinked and brought his hands up to stare at them, then threw back his head and laughed. The others had similar reactions, though Rio grabbed Lal and swung her around exuberantly. Eventually Renato repeated his question and added, “And where the fuck is Sora?”

“Oh, did I forget to mention?” a familiar voice said.
Kiri whipped around to see Sheogorath standing there, idly swinging his cane. “Yes?”

“Your little—well, not so little now, is he?—friend is presently scheduled to be a hero to this fine land,” Sheogorath said breezily. “Right at the moment he’s stashed away in a prison cell in the city, all so can take a meeting with destiny.”

“What!?” Val shrieked.

“But if you all wait here, he’ll be along shortly.” Sheogorath inspected his fingernails. “Assuming the goblins don’t kill him. But he’s very skilled, I’m sure, so it’ll be fine.”

“So you’re saying that Sora, along with half our supplies, is currently in prison,” Kiri commented.

“Yes, old boy! Now, I should like to be helpful and point out that he should emerge from that grate over there—” He waved his cane toward the city. “—and be able to swim over to you. Hopefully he won’t dawdle in the water, as the slaughterfish do so like to bite people.

“As well, there’s an inn on the other side of the lake, outside the city, that I think may be suitable for you lot, but I’ll leave the decisions and negotiations to you.” Another portal appeared and Sheogorath vanished through it.

“Well, shit,” Renato muttered. “Anyone remember where we stashed the bottled water? Because I’m not drinking out of that lake.”

Val sighed. “Renato, will you enhance your eyes and see if you can find the grate he mentioned?”

“Right.” Renato took a breath and started scanning the island’s waterline, then pointed. “There. By that dock. We should probably wait over by those ruins.”

When he woke he was very uncomfortable. A moment to open his eyes revealed a semi-dim stone room. Considering he was lying on a stone outcropping, it was no wonder he felt achy. Metal gate doors were off to the side and he could see someone moving around in the cell across the corridor. He got up and went to peer out, but that attracted the attention of the opposite cell’s occupant.

“Pale skin, snotty expression,” the man said. “You’re a Breton!”

‘Eh?’ he thought.

“The masters of magicka, right?” The man made a rude noise. “Nothing but a bunch of stuck-up snobs with cheap parlor tricks. Go ahead, try your magicka in here. Let’s see you make those bars disappear. No? What’s the matter? Not so powerful now, are you, Breton?”

Sora eyed the man, his ragged clothing and decorations of dirt, then glanced up and down the stone hallway. Torches provided flickering and uncertain light.

“You’re not leaving this prison ’til they throw your body in the lake. That’s right, you’re going to die in here, Breton!” the man crowed. “You’re going to die!”

Sora rolled his eyes and decided to wait a bit. Once the prisoner went to sleep he could simply harmonize through the bars, cloak himself with illusion, and find his way out.

“Hey, you hear that? The guards are coming … for you!” The man giggled a bit madly and pressed up against the bars.
He moved to get a better view as he heard, “Baurus! Lock that door behind us!”

“My sons,” said a man with a cultured voice. “They’re dead, aren’t they?”

“We don’t know that, Sire. The messenger only said they were attacked.”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought and stepped away from the bars. ‘What the hell is going on? And why am I in a prison to begin with? Where is everyone else?’

“No, they’re dead. I know it,” that cultured voice said as a man dressed in heavy armor appeared in front of his cell.

“My job right now is to get you to safety,” a woman said. “What’s this prisoner doing here? This cell is supposed to be off-limits.”

Sora eyed the newcomers. Another armored man, the woman, who was also armored, and an older man in stately red robes with fur trimming.

“Usual mix-up with the Watch. I—”

“Never mind that,” the woman said. “Get the gate open.”

Sora stepped back again and bumped into a small wooden table as one of the guards told him, “We won’t hesitate to kill you if you get in our way. Stand aside, over by the window. Stay out of the way and you won’t get hurt.”

Only once he was at the far wall, the one with the window, did the guard open the cell. The four of them entered and advanced. The woman went to his right and did something to the wall. A secret passage opened and the other three approached.

The robed man, however, stopped once he was in the light. “You… I’ve seen you…”

Sora furrowed his brow as the man stepped right in front of him. He was wearing a large diamond-shaped amulet of gold around his neck. Gems studded the outer edging, but the central mass was a huge red jewel, like a ruby, except that it sparkled with an inner fire.

“Let me see your face… Yes, you are the one from my dreams. Then the stars were right, and this is the day. Gods give me strength.”

‘Why do I have this awful feeling that Sheogorath put me here exactly for this? I knew there had to be a price involved aside from giving the Lord of Madness amusement.’

“Assassins attacked my sons, and I’m next. My Blades are leading me out of the city along a secret escape route. By chance, the entrance to that escape route leads through your cell. Perhaps the gods have placed you here so that we may meet. As for what you have done … it does not matter. This is not what you will be remembered for.”

‘Right,’ he thought, still mystified. “Who are you?” he asked softly.

“I am your emperor,” the man replied. “Uriel Septim. By the grace of the gods, I serve Tamriel as her ruler. You are a citizen of Tamriel, and you, too, shall serve her in your own way.”

His brow went up in disbelief.

“You will find your own path,” Septim said. “Take care. There will be blood and death before the end.”
“Please, Sire, we must keep moving,” the woman urged.

The party moved off through the secret passage, leaving both it and the cell open.

He huffed. If he followed them, he would likely emerge outside the city—assuming the emperor knew what he was talking about.

“You lucky bastard!” was hissed from the cell opposite.

Cashew chittered and emerged from his hair, then jabbed a paw at the tunnel.

“Has Sheogorath been telling you things?” he asked softly. “There are times when I really wish you could talk.”

Cashew pointed again and tugged on his hair.

“All right, all right.” It was only then that he realized he was in adult form again, and laughed breathlessly as he followed after the emperor’s party.

The path itself was fairly straightforward. He was stopped at a locked door along the way and noticed a broken wall, so he took that rather than try to harmonize through the wood. Bodies littered the path to that point, all but one of them dressed in red robes and hoods.

The new area was dimly lit, sported rats and some very odd horned creatures that walked on two legs and sent what he could only assume was magic at him, not to mention more than a few skeletons. The chests and crates he came across held an assortment of goods, but he mostly contented himself with taking gold coins and gems. There were also numerous species of plants, though most were varieties of mushrooms.

Eventually he found himself back in the original structure, through another handy break in a wall, and heard the emperor’s party again.

“We should find a defensible spot and protect the emperor until help arrives,” a man said.

“Help? What makes you think help will get here before more of those bastards?” another rebutted. “We need to get the emperor out of here!”

As Sora drew closer he heard the emperor say, “Have you seen the prisoner?”

“Do you think he followed us? How could he?”

“I know he did.”

“Sire, we have to go now.”

“Not yet. Let me rest a moment longer.”

‘He’s waiting for me specifically,’ he thought as one of the guards tried again to get the man moving and was put off. That being so he slipped down off the ledge he was on and down to the same level.

“Damn it,” a guard said and started to advance. “It’s that prisoner again. Kill him! He might be working with the assassins.”

“No,” the emperor said calmly and raised a hand. “He is not one of them. He can help us. He must help us.”
Sora eyed the guard who was seconds away from trying to run him through with a blade, but the man backed off before he was forced to defend himself.

“Come closer,” the emperor said. “I’d prefer not to have to shout. Don’t be afraid. My guardians will not harm you.”

He sighed and approached the emperor. The man looked resigned, weary, and heartbroken.

“They cannot understand why I trust you. They’ve not seen what I’ve seen. How can I explain? Listen. You know the Nine?”

‘No…’

“How They guide our fates with an invisible hand? I’ve served the Nine all my days, and I chart my course by the cycles of the heavens. The skies are marked with numberless sparks, each a fire, and every one a sign. I know these stars well, and I wonder … which sign marked your birth?” The emperor gave him a searching look. “The signs I read show the end of my path. My death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.”

‘Again, he’s making no damn sense,’ he complained. “And me?”

“Your stars are not mine,” Septim said with a bare shake of his head. “Today the Thief shall guide your steps on the road to destiny.”

‘The Thief? Was that part of his dream, too, or just a guess? Because I have no clue what the hell he means.’ For a lark he asked, “Can you see my fate?”

“My dreams grant me no opinions of success. Their compass ventures not beyond the doors of death. But in your face, I behold the sun’s companion.”

He twitched, thinking of Renato.

“The dawn of Akatosh’s bright glory may banish the coming darkness. With such hope, and with the promise of your aid, my heart must be satisfied.”

“And you?”

“No trophies of my triumphs precede me. But I have lived well, and my ghost shall rest easy. Men are but flesh and blood. They know their doom, but not the hour. In this I am blessed to see the hour of my death. To face my apportioned fate, then fall. I go to my grave. A tongue shriller than all the music calls me. You shall follow me yet for a while, then we must part.”

The emperor turned away toward the exit and a dark-skinned guard shoved something at Sora. “You may as well make yourself useful. Here, carry this torch and stick close.”

He took it and followed when they departed. He could always use it to set things on fire if necessary. The emperor’s idea of “a while” was different from Sora’s, as it was the very next room where the way forward was barred and locked. There was another gate off to the side, that one open, and the guards went ahead to scout the route.

Sora stuck by the emperor, who said, “My guards are strong and true, but even the might of the Blades cannot stand against the Power that rises to destroy me.”

‘I’m not so fond of fatalists.’
“The Prince of Destruction awakes, born anew in blood and fire. These cutthroats are but his mortal pawns. Take my amulet,” Septim said as he pulled the chain up over his head. “Give it to Jauffre. I have a secret son, and Jauffre alone knows where to find him. Find the last of my blood, and close shut the marble jaws of Oblivion.”

‘Sheogorath mentioned Oblivion…’ “Then this is good-bye?”

“This is where my journey ends. For you, though, the road is long and dangerous. Here, give me your hand.”

Sora accepted the amulet and tucked it away inside his clothing for the moment. “I will remember you,” he said, mainly to be polite.

“Remember me, and remember my words. This burden is yours alone. You hold our future in your hands.”

The back wall of a nearby niche shifted just then and revealed itself as another secret. But from it boiled two red-garbed assassins who threw themselves at Septim, who had the misfortune to have his back to the thing. He was down and dead before Sora could blink, but he jerked into action and shoved his torch into one face, then the other, as the dark-skinned Blade raced in.

“No… Talos save us,” he said as he crouched by the emperor’s corpse. “We’ve failed. I’ve failed. The Blades are sworn to protect the emperor, and now he and all his heirs are dead.” The Blade whipped his head around to stare at Sora. “The amulet. Where’s the Amulet of Kings? It’s not here.”

He heaved a faint sigh and said, “The emperor handed it to me, to deliver to some fellow named, um, Jauffre?”

“Strange,” the man said as he stood back up. “He saw something in you. Trusted you. They say it’s the Dragon Blood that flows through the veins of every Septim. They see more than lesser men. But why would he want you to give it to Jauffre?”

Sora bit his lip. If only Jauffre knew about the other son, should he really be saying something to a guard whose name he didn’t even know? “Do you know who this Jauffre person is?”

“He’s the Grandmaster of my Order,” the Blade replied. “Although you may not think so to meet him. He lives quietly as a monk at Weynon Priory, near the city of Chorrol.”

“And to get there?” he asked, more than a little surprised that this Blade was so accepting.

“First you need to get out of here. Through that door must be the entrance to the sewers, past the locked gate. That’s where we were heading. It’s a secret way out of the Imperial City. Or it was supposed to be secret. Here,” the Blade said, and offered up a key. “You’ll need this for the last door into the sewers. There are rats and goblins down there, but from what I’ve seen of you—”

‘Which would be nearly nothing.’

“—I’m guessing you are an experienced Agent. Am I right?”

Sora blinked at him and nodded just to get on with things.

“I thought so. A few rats and goblins won’t give you any trouble. Once you’re outside, get that amulet to Jauffre. Take no chances, but proceed to Weynon Priory immediately.”

Sora nodded and took the secret passage, found the door he needed, and got through the sewers. He
knew he was close to freedom when he could smell fresh air and water. Another gate was up ahead, down a long pipe-like tunnel, and once he was through he found himself at the water’s edge. Right in front of him was a wooden dock. Ahead of that was a little land mass, perhaps an island, with odd ruins constructed of a white-ish stone and featuring plenty of arches.

But of more importance was the group of people over there who looked suspiciously like his family. He rushed down to the water and flung out webs of flame so he could race across and rejoin his loved ones.

Val was jumping up and down excitedly and Renato was waiting at the water’s edge looking impatient. He made it across in record time and was pulled into a tight hug by his Sun. “Sora! Are you all right?” Renato asked, then threaded some flame into him long enough to check.

“I’m fine. Really confused, though. And what the hell is that?” he asked, pointing at what looked like a humanoid cat sprawled on the grass.

“A bandit,” Renato said casually.

Sora punched him in the arm. “If you don’t know, say so. Sheogorath seems to have left out a few details about this venture.”

“You might say that. Now come on. Val is going to vibrate to pieces if he doesn’t get to see you.”

He nodded and skipped over to his Cloud so he could pull him into a hug. The others grabbed him one by one aside from Romario and Dino, and Sora got Cashew to produce the picnic basket he had made up beforehand. A few minutes later they were all seated by the bandits’ campfire having a snack after Sora used some bottled water to wash up a bit first.

“Sheogorath stopped by after we arrived,” Kiri said. “Told us where you were and approximately where you’d come out, and that you were to be a hero to this fine land.”

He groaned. “Yeah. Apparently, the cell I was stashed in was the entrance to a not-so-secret passage out of the city. The emperor of wherever we are strolled on in with his guards. He said he’d seen me in his dreams and was more or less expecting me to pop up. The upshot is I’ve been given an item to deliver, supposedly of major importance, and the emperor fellow is dead—and probably his sons. It’s odd, I can’t help but be reminded of Nono and his lot, except it obviously went so differently this time there.”

“Either way, you could have gotten yourself out easily,” Lal said.

He nodded. “Absolutely. I was going to wait for the jerk in the cell across from me to take a nap—or make him take one—and go, but…”

“Sheogorath said there was an inn on the other side of the lake we might be interested in,” Kiri said, “but I would prefer to take a look at several places.”

Sora nodded and shoved another cookie in his mouth. After he swallowed he said, “I’m thinking from what I’ve seen we can count out electricity and vehicles. That being the case, how about we use that cart I spy over there? It looks like it’s in decent enough shape.” He eyed their crates of belongings.

Once their crates were loaded onto it, his brother looked at the sky and said, “We should probably follow the road north and around west. We have no idea how long it’ll take to get there, or what accommodations we can expect.”
The journey was marked by a fair number of creatures trying to have them for lunch, amongst them boars, wolves, some very odd large creature, bandits, lions, and … minotaurs. None of them were any problem, not with so many people capable of using their flames to great effect.

More ruins were passed, both of grey stone and white, a wooden inn, and several hours later they arrived at the bridge over to the large city. On their side were two buildings. One was a home and the other the inn Sheogorath had mentioned. It was nice enough looking, but way too small to house all of them.

Sora grabbed Renato and Viper and went inside to investigate. The door opened onto a tiny landing with stairs to either side. Upstairs had three doors—rooms for people to rent, he supposed. Downstairs was a common room with a bar. A lady with pointed ears was behind it. Sora distracted her so that Viper could slip off behind her and investigate.

“Welcome to the Wawnet Inn,” she said cheerfully. “Could I interest you in a room or perhaps a bit of wine? Oh, everyone’s talking about the assassination, of course. Here. Take my copy of the new Black Horse Courier,” she said, shoving a scroll at him, then tried to convince him to track down ten bottles of something called Shadowbanish Wine for her.

Viper returned and shook his head slightly, so Sora nodded and walked away from her without saying anything. Back outside they convened.

“The lowest level is barely as big as one of our bedrooms at Filigrana,” Viper said. “This place would be a lot of work in terms of expanding it.”

“The land here is quite sloped,” Shi added. “I’m not sure we could grow anything without a lot of bother. We could do terraces, though, I suppose.”

“So we definitely need to keep looking,” he said. “The rooms upstairs are barely big enough for a single person each. I’m also concerned that being so close to that city would be asking for it.”

“We could try to convert one of those ruins, I suppose,” Kiri said. “But for now, let’s some of us head into the city. The rest can remain here to guard the crates.”

“Um… All right. Renato, Viper, and Lorenzo, with me.”

“That looks like a stable over there,” Dino said, pointing at the other end of the bridge.

“Right, you and Romario, too, at least that far.” He looked at Kiri. “A couple of hours?”

Kiri nodded. “If you’re not…”

“We’ll be as brief as possible,” he promised. “Just get a feel for the place, then back here. Right, let’s go.”

On the way across the bridge Renato said, “You probably haven’t realized it, but you don’t look like you anymore.”

He stopped dead and stared at his lover. “What?”

“Your disguise is gone,” Renato elaborated.

“Oh…” He reached up to feel for the earring and realized it was gone. “I guess it doesn’t really matter now, right?”
Renato took his arm and got him moving again. “No, it doesn’t. But I figured I should say something before you caught sight of yourself in a reflective surface.”

Dino made a happy sound at the other side and dashed over to the horse pen. Romario sighed and said, “Once he’s had his fill I’ll drag him back to the others.”

Sora nodded. “Another reason not to go with the one back there. It’s too close to an established set of stables, assuming Dino would like to breed his own horses.”

Romario smiled briefly. “Oh … yes. He hasn’t shut up about it all week. We’ll see you in a bit.”

“Right.” They kept going and entered the very large and intimidating doors in the city wall, then shuffled off to the side to be out of the way of foot traffic. A nearby guard leaned toward them and said, “You look lost. Need any assistance?”

“Yes,” he replied. “The market area…?”

The guard nodded and turned slightly, then pointed off to the left. “Easiest way if you’re not used to the city is to go that way. Head up to that central spot there, then turn left and follow the main road. Through the doors is the Elven District, but keep on to the next set. That’ll bring you to the Market District, with most of the shops. You can go through the center Plaza District, but for now… Places have signs and such, so…”

Sora smiled. “All right. Thank you.”

Everything was made of stone, which was somewhat comforting in terms of solidity, but rather bare in terms of the view, though there were plenty of green places to liven up all that grey. Whoever had constructed the doors had done an excellent job, as even someone of Sora’s size could open them easily enough.

The Market District was more of the same, but signs were up at various doors to advertise their contents. Lorenzo pointed at the Mystic Emporium, so they went in. There were elves there, one behind the counter and one roaming about, but Sora ignored them for the moment, eyeing up the merchandise instead.

“That looks like chemistry equipment,” Lorenzo whispered. “And what are those odd crystals?”

“Maybe the soul gems that one person was babbling about on the street?” Viper whispered.

“Are you looking for alchemy equipment?” the male elf asked from his position behind the counter.

“Perhaps,” Lorenzo said. “Perhaps I should be more interested in a book store.”

The elf smiled. “There is The First Edition. If you go back to the main road and turn left, then take the first right onto the central spoke, it’s down at the end.”

Lorenzo nodded. “That could be highly informative,” he whispered.

“It’s not like we can buy anything,” he said, “but if we could read in situ…”

Viper snorted softly. “Money is never a problem. You know that, Sora.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s go.”

As he was passing back by the counter the elf said, “You’ve the look of one of the Akaviri.”
He shrugged. “It’s been said before,” he lied, and exited the shop. “I have no idea what he meant, naturally.”

“Maybe these Akaviri are their equivalent of Asian?” Renato suggested.

“I sup—”

“—heard they were offering to just give the castle away,” an overly excited woman nearby said. “I was even considering it. Imagine, an entire castle!”

“Really?” her companion replied. “But wouldn’t you have to fight off the bandits and marauders first?”

“That is true,” the first said a bit dolefully.

Viper touched his arm briefly. “I’m going to investigate. I’ll meet you at that book store,” he whispered, then veered off.

Sora continued on and made the specified turn, and they were in the shop a minute later. Lorenzo brightened up and immediately started browsing. Sora and Renato tucked themselves into a corner where they could oversee the room.

“You realize, of course…”

He looked at his Sun in confusion.

“The moment I get you someplace nice, and private…”

He blushed. Even after all their years together, Renato could still make him blush. “I hope nice includes a bed without bedbugs or other creepy crawlies, and preferably one that isn’t made of stone. I woke up on a stone slab, but I guess a prisoner shouldn’t expect much.”

“I can’t say I’m pleased that the price of our restoration is you being made to play hero,” Renato said, “but nothing was ever said about you doing it alone. If you don’t mind, when we have a moment in a reasonably safe place, will you see if you’re getting any nudges?”

“Because delivering an item can’t possibly be the extent of it? I expect after I make said delivery that I’ll be tasked with an escort mission.”

Renato raised a brow at him.

“I’ll explain in full once we’re back outside the city. Kiri or Viper can maybe throw up some protections. There’s not a lot to say about it, but—oh, that reminds me. That woman gave me a paper.” He fished it out and unrolled it so they could both read it.

**SPECIAL EDITION!**

**EMPEROR AND HEIRS ASSASSINATED!**

Elder Council Named as Regents!

Emperor Uriel Septim VII is dead, at the age of 87, having ruled Tamriel for 65 years. He was killed by assassins unknown. At the same time, in separate locations, the late emperor’s three sons and heirs (Crown Prince Geldall, 56; Prince Enman, 55; Prince Ebel, 53) were slain by other assassins. An investigation into the identity and motives of the assassins is under way, but the Elder Council, Imperial Guard, and Blades Guard
have forbidden the publication of reports and rumors concerning the event until further notice.

By ancient precedent, the Elder Council rules the empire until a new emperor is crowned. No direct heirs survive, and the council has proposed no list of candidates. Chancellor Ocato, Imperial Battlemage, speaking for the Elder Council, presented an appeal to the empire’s citizens for calm, and asked that the people remember the Emperor, his sons, and the Elder Council in their prayers.

Emperor Uriel’s early reign was marked by peace and prosperity. The Empress Caula Voria bore him three healthy sons, was a loving companion to the Emperor, and a great favorite of the people. However, the emperor and the empire suffered terribly during the Imperial Simulacrum (3E 389-399), when he was held captive in Oblivion while the usurper Jagar Tharn assumed his appearance and ruled in his stead. Emperor Uriel was finally rescued and restored and the impostor defeated by the agency of the sorceress Ria Silmane and her shadowy protégé, but the affairs of the empire were in great disorder, and Empress Caula Voria, exhausted by her ordeal, withdrew from public life.

The decades following the Restoration were once again peaceful and prosperous, but increasing political tensions among the petty states of northwest Tamriel finally erupted in the Wars of the Iliac Bays, resulting in the establishment of the modern borders of Daggerfall, Sentinel, Wayrest, and Orsinium, and culminating with the remarkable events associated with the Warp in the West.

The latter years of the Emperor’s reign have seen a flourishing of Imperial influence in the provinces, and with the fortunate resolution of the religious wars and the Vvardenfell Crisis, and with the wise and firm guidance of King Helseth and his mother, Queen Barenziah, an extension of high Imperial culture even into the more remote parts of Morrowind.

The Emperor’s murder, and the murder of his three sons, is a terrible crime, and a great tragedy for the Empire. Battlemage Ocato assures us that all the resources of the Elder Council, the Legions, the Guard, the Arcane University, and the Imperial Battle College are being employed to bring the assassins to justice. But, in the meantime, the greatest tribute we citizens can offer to the memory of our beloved Emperor is to go earnestly and diligently about our daily affairs, honoring the life of the great Empire he loved so much, and served so faithfully for so long.

“How did they put this together so quickly? It’s even more similar than I thought, though,” he said, “but at least this one has the excuse of being guided by the gods for not stepping down at a reasonable age.”

“Well, we’re going to have to go on a reading spree,” Renato said. “We can’t afford to be too ignorant of this world.”

“Eh, when Viper catches up I’m sure he’ll not only have excellent information, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he suddenly has a whole lot of gold we can spend.” He tucked the paper away again and picked up the book sitting next to him. It was volume one of ‘Brief History of the Empire’, which lent credence to the idea that there were more in the series. He set it back down as Viper glided into the shop and over to them.

“The castle they were speaking of is off to the west, a bit beyond a town called Chorrol,” Viper said quietly.
“What’s-his-face said the place I’m supposed to make that delivery is right outside Chorrol,” he murmured.

“Then perhaps we should head that way and keep going. If we really could secure a castle…”

Renato nodded. “I’m for the idea. They’re obviously desperate if they’re willing to just hand over ownership. Hopefully the place isn’t too bashed up. Depending on what we find, we could have a nice home base to work out of.”

Viper angled his head toward Lorenzo, then glided over to him and said something Sora could not hear. Lorenzo nodded and started gathering up books and hauling them over to the counter.

“I hope the proprietor has a sack or something,” he muttered.

“Well, we can’t get there before dark,” Rio said. “We’re going to have to fit in at this inn as best we can for the night. We can break out the sleeping bags, right?”

“We can put a barrier at the end of the hall,” Viper said, “keep people away from the rooms.”

“How about Romario and I go buy a few horses to help carry stuff?” Dino suggested.

Viper nodded and said, “I’ll go along to make sure you’re not being suckered on the price.” He glided away and the two Cavallone took off after him.

“I’ll go in and rent us those rooms,” Kiri said. “Back shortly.” He strolled away, as well.

Renato gave him an expectant look.

Sora thought back to his time under the city. “The emperor asked me to deliver his amulet to some fellow at Weynon Priory outside Chorrol. Dire importance and all that.”

“I have a book on the Amulet of Kings,” Lorenzo said helpfully.

He nodded. “We can check that in a bit. He also told me that he had another son, one that no one knew about except for the fellow I’m making the delivery to. Odds are, I’m going to have to go find this son—presumably illegitimate—and escort him to this Jauffre person. So, if we luck out and get this castle, we’ll have a base to work from. We’ll have to figure out who goes with me and who stays with our new property.”

“I’m going with you,” Renato said firmly.

He nodded again. “You’re a healer, so of course.”

“I think you should have at least one illusionist, so either Kiri or Viper,” Lal said.

“I want to go,” Val said, a determined expression on his face.

Sora nodded. “Four of us should be enough. And depending on how all this shakes out, we can always rotate around, give everyone a chance to have some fun with destruction.”

Lorenzo looked up from his book and said, “This is mostly useless, but it does say the following: So long as the Empire shall maintain its worship of Akatosh and his kin, and so long as Alessia’s heirs shall bear the Amulet of Kings, Akatosh and his divine kin maintain a strong barrier between Tamriel and Oblivion, so that mortal man need never again fear the devastating summoned hosts of the
Daedra Lords.

“But if the Empire should slacken in its dedication to the Nine Divines, or if the blood of Alessia’s heirs should fail, then shall the barriers between Tamriel and the Daedric realms fall, and Daedra-worshipers might summon lesser Daedra and undead spirits to trouble the races of men.”

He shook his head. “But not all Daedric Lords are the invading type if Sheogorath is anything to go by. I can see why the emperor felt it was so important, though.”

“We can see about more horses once we get to Chorrol,” Renato said. “Of course, that means learning to ride the damn things.”

“I don’t mind walking,” he said. “I do mind having to be my own pack animal for whatever Cashew can’t handle. So yes, we can check at Chorrol. Dino will probably want to visit every available stable he can find, just so he knows what’s available in terms of breeds.”

Kiri returned from the inn and dangled three keys. “We’ll just have to make do for the night.”

Sounds made them all look back toward the bridge. Viper, Dino, and Romario were approaching, but with only a single horse, oddly enough. Once they got close enough Viper quirked his mouth and said, “The ‘people’ there claimed that all the horses were owned by people in the city. And I did check, but there’s something about them…” He shook his head. “In any case, the only horse they’d sell was this old nag.”

Kiri shrugged. “Still good enough to pull a cart. We can try again at Chorrol on our way by, or back. Put the silly thing in the yard there and I’ll make sure no one steals her.”

The next morning, after a very uncomfortable night, Sora broke out some food to go with the various forms of drink Kiri had charmed out of the innkeeper. The horse was hitched to the cart and they set off again.

The walk was pleasant enough if one ignored all the varied (and ugly, at times) creatures that menaced them. “What kind of a place is this with spider people roaming the countryside and clicking at a person?” he muttered as Val bulked himself out mid-jump and landed on one, cracking it into pieces.

They passed a fort along the way—or more accurately, followed the road through it—and a farm, and then started up a slope. “I think that might be the priory,” he said as a building that vaguely resembled a church swam into view up the hill, partly hidden by trees.

“Then Chorrol must be right up ahead,” Kiri said. “The castle shouldn’t be much farther.”

He hummed. “How’s everyone feeling? You want to stop at the town for a meal, or press on?”

Looks went around. “If they really are under siege, we should probably keep going,” Rio said.

When no one objected Sora nodded. “On we go, then.”

In a reasonably short amount of time they were beyond Chorrol (Dino had looked longingly at the stables just outside the city) and heading up another slope. A red-haired woman with a sleek black horse stood there watching deer prance in the grass as they walked, but they passed her by and continued on.
Eventually a large stone building peeked out from the top of the next hill. “It’s awfully quiet for a siege to be happening,” Renato commented as they got closer.

Once they rounded the side of the rise and got to the front of the castle they could see fighting in progress between knight-types and bandit sorts. They rushed forward and lent a hand, easily taking out the marauders.

The guard there heaved a sigh and checked one of the bodies, then turned and walked away to enter the castle.

Sora shrugged and headed through the wall via the open portcullis. There was a stabling area off to the right inside the courtyard. To the left was a stone cottage with a thatched roof and a blacksmithing area. Sora kept forward and entered the castle itself, and was immediately occupied by that same guard honing in on him.

“This is indeed a dark day for all of us left. But I thank you for risking your own life to help us. Here, take this,” the man said, and handed over a scroll. “It’ll tell you all you need to know. As the newest master of the castle, I bid you welcome!”

Sora smiled briefly and unrolled the scroll. Renato snuggled up against one side of him so he could read along, and Kiri grabbed his other side.

Last Will and Testament

I, Lord Kelvyn, son of Jaren, and a sworn Knight of the True Horn, upon my death do hereby bequeath Battlehorn Castle and all her lands, dependents, and chattels to the bearer of this document.

Such an unusual document requires some explanation. I resort to such measures out of desperation. I pen this while Battlehorn Castle lies besieged by a band of ruthless marauders, with little hope that any of us will survive. “Besieged” I say, although this petty battle would not have even rated a footnote in the great days of the Knights of the True Horn. We have fallen on hard times, indeed.

I will entrust this document to my last faithful retainers, with instructions to destroy it in the last extremity, although I accept that I may have provided the means for my murderers to legally take the lordship of Battlehorn Castle. So be it.

To the new lord of Battlehorn Castle, whoever you are, know that you inherit a stronghold with a proud tradition. Battlehorn Castle was built by a remnant of the Knights of the True Horn who were exiled from our homeland of Lainlyn in Hammerfell. After a failed battle to dethrone Baron Shrike of Lainlyn, our leader, Lord Kain, ordered us to split up into as many small groups as possible until the time should come that he would recall us. My father was part of a group that settled here in Cyrodiil and built Battlehorn Castle as a refuge while they waited for Lord Kain’s message … a message that never arrived.

Over the years, all the Knights of our little band either gave up or passed on, all but one: my father Jaren. Since his untimely death, I have continued to hold Battlehorn Castle in the hope that someday we will hear from Lord Kain and our great exile will be at an end.

I am afraid that the fortunes of Battlehorn Castle have fallen on hard times. What resources I had available I devoted to maintaining the castle itself—its walls still stand...
strong and its hearths still provide warmth. Sadly, this came at great cost, and many of
the items within its walls had to be sold in order to meet the enormous payments such
maintenance begets. If you find yourself with the means to restore Battlehorn Castle to
its former glory, a friend of my father’s named Nilphas Omellian still holds many of the
castle accoutrements in storage and on account. All that is required is to repay the
Castle’s debts to Nilphas, and I’m certain he’ll happily return the items.

My final request for the new lord of Battlehorn Castle is to continue to uphold the proud
traditions of the Knights of the True Horn, and to honor the memory of our brave
service.

He nearly laughed. His family was not even close to being the “right” kind of people to inherit the
place. When Kiri and Renato indicated that they were done, Sora handed the scroll off to Viper, who
shared it with Lorenzo and Val, and looked around.

It was a grand place, with two floors (and probably at least one below-ground level), with grand
staircases and columns and statues. There was a massive chandelier overhead and he honestly
wondered how the men who cared for the place managed to get the candles lit.

“I want two people to go back out and strip those bandits for anything we can put in the armory here
or resell elsewhere. The people who died defending this place, well, we can see about graves for
them.”

Lal and Rio took off.

“Let’s take a tour, then. I’ll worry about reclaiming what was sold later.”

Upstairs in the back half of the castle was the Master’s bedroom. It was ridiculously large in
comparison to the other bedrooms they had poked into. And like those, the most there was in terms
of sanitary issues was chamber pots and a large tub that was probably filled with water heated at the
fireplace.

Lorenzo scratched his head. “I could probably tap into an underground stream or something and
figure out some piping. A water tower or two wouldn’t go amiss, either. Let me think about it.”

“I can ‘drill’ any necessary holes,” Shi reminded him.

“Yes, and that’ll be an enormous help. I really don’t want to think about the smell, otherwise. We’ll
figure it out.”

“We’re going to have to figure out a spot for a new Filigrana,” he said. “Up against the outer wall?
Down at that pond? And who would build it?”

Kiri smirked. “I’ll just mind-control some bandits to do the heavy labor, dear brother. Once you
actually have some mead ready to go we can try to sell it at an inn in Chorrol, or even the Imperial
City, to make a name for ourselves. By the time that happens we could have a new Filigrana ready to
go.” He walked over to one wall where a map that had seen better days was hung. “We’re on the
border with Hammerfell, so it’s possible the road out there sees traffic. And even if doesn’t see much,
word will eventually get around.”

“And you can always rustle up some other customers. All right, well, for the moment, we can set up
in this room. We could certainly make it to Weynon Priory quickly enough, but the sun was on its
way down, and I don’t particularly fancy wandering around just yet at night.”

They were halfway through getting out the sleeping bags when Lal and Rio wandered in. “All the
bandit corpses are taken care of,” Rio reported. “We piled the goods just inside the front door for now. That guard handled his fellows. We also poked around that pond. It’s probably fed from underground, because there’s no visible stream running in or out of it. Didn’t see any fish, unfortunately, but there might be some.”

“There’s not a lot of flat land out there,” Lal said, “but we could maybe build up some raised beds to plant in since the courtyard isn’t exactly massive either. Or we just buy from Chorrol.”

Sora shook his head. “I prefer the idea of planters. They don’t have to be terribly large. We might be able to get some in the courtyard just by keeping them against the walls and out of the main path. Anyway, we can handle paying off the debts tomorrow.”

“After we acquire the funds,” Kiri said.

He hummed. “It’s in the Imperial City, so… Cashew, will you pop out some food supplies, please?”

A few sheets of cloth were located and tacked into place for a makeshift bathing area after they finished eating and a fire was started in the fireplace so they could heat water. Lal took a bath first and emerged a short time later looking refreshed.

“Maybe if that was placed over near a wall,” Lorenzo muttered, “and a drain installed, leading to a channel through the exterior wall…”

“I’m more concerned at the moment that there are ten of us yet for a bath and we can only haul water upstairs at glacial speed,” he said dryly, “but your idea is certainly something to look into.”

“Would you like me to help you bathe?” Renato asked with a leer.

He smiled instead of sighing and shook his head. “Ah, I’m an idiot. Val?”

“You want me to propagate water from a sample to speed this up?”

“Please.”

Val gave him a hug and grabbed a bottle of water. “If some of you will empty that tub out I’ll get started on heating more water.”

He snuggled into bed—he got the one already in the room—with Renato and dropped off, secure in the knowledge that Kiri and Viper had emplaced protections for the night, and promptly entered another weird dream.

“Hello, old boy!” Sheogorath greeted him. “How lovely to see you again. Getting on all right so far?”

The room he was in was stately and bisected in colour. Half the carpet runner he was standing on was purple and the other half was red, like Sheogorath’s outfit. A bored-looking, balding man in fussy clothing was standing nearby, staring at nothing in particular.

“Yes, thank you. I’m very happy to be myself again.”

“Capital! Now, I brought you here to ask you for a favor,” Sheogorath said blithely, though his expression made it clear it was not something he could refuse.

“How can I help?”

“I’ve been a bit bored of late and I wanted your assistance in causing a little mayhem,” Sheogorath
said with a nod. “So! You’ll go to my shrine—it’s in the area between Bravil and Leyawiin—and I’ll explain there what it is I want. I’m sure this little quest of yours can wait a tiny while longer. It’s not like we’re talking about the end of the world or anything.” Sheogorath laughed gaily and waved his cane.

Sora’s eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling. It could do with a scrubbing.

“What is it?” Renato muttered as he took Sora’s hand and planted a kiss on his palm.

“A dream.”

Renato went up on one elbow. “What sort?”

“I have marching orders to go visit Sheogorath’s shrine before anything else. There’s something he wants, but I don’t get to know until I’m there.”

“So…” Renato frowned. “All right. We go there, and we can swing by the Imperial City on the way back to deal with the castle debt, then hit Weynon Priory. If you are sent off to go find this missing son, we can still come back here first so everyone’s updated.”

“Yeah,” he said, and sighed. “Nothing else for it. I knew there’d be a price.”

“So did I, but I can’t say I like that you’re the one paying it.”

Sheogorath’s shrine was a bit of a pain to find. He had asked Kiri to take care of the castle debts as they had no idea how long this “favor” would take. Dino was itching to go buy some horses, but Kiri asked him to wait until he got back and had plenty of local currency.

Sora, Renato, Viper, and Val made the long walk back toward the city, parting with Kiri at the inn they had considered purchasing, then curved south and east to get to the road headed toward Bravil. By the time it was getting dark they happened upon an inn just off the main road, called the Faregyl Inn, and stopped for the night.

The next morning they continued on and bypassed Bravil. They had just come across a bridge over the river when his intuition tugged at him and caused him to stop and turn around.

“What is it?” Val asked.

“We’ve gone too far,” he said softly. “It’s roughly northwest of here, through the trees. I’m going to…”

Renato nodded. “You listen and steer, we’ll deal with Bambi and his friends.”

The shrine was a huge statue of Sheogorath, complete with cane, and complete with mad worshipers. The females wore only their undergarments and the males had left off their trousers. “I guess his worshipers are just as … eccentric as he is?” Two men there kept standing up from the bench they were seated on, would pause for a heartbeat, then sit back down again. It was like some ritual with unvoiced steps.

Val went over to the one wearing a white robe and came back a minute later to say, “We need some lettuce, some yarn, and a lesser soul gem to offer.”

“Somehow I think a god would notice if I made illusory ones,” Viper opined.
“Bravil or Leyawiin?”

He sought the answer inside and said, “Doesn’t matter. They’re both about the same distance. So let’s go to Leyawiin so we can see what sort of horses they’re selling, and pick up what we need there. We can check the stables at Bravil on the way back.”

Cashew chittered and spit out some objects. Lettuce, some yarn, and one of those funny crystals hit the grass in front of him.

“Thank you, Cashew,” he said and gave his companion an affectionate petting, then crouched down to retrieve the items. He placed them at the feet of the statue and was startled to hear Sheogorath’s voice in his head.

“Another mortal dares to summon me, and already I am bored. But enough about me. Let’s talk about you. I could turn you into a goat. Or a puddle. Or a bad idea. I could make you—oh, it’s you, old boy! How lovely to see you again.”

He nodded and craned his neck to look up at the statue’s head for a moment.

“There’s a little settlement called Border Watch,” he was informed. “It’s a nice, peaceful place … and dull, dull, dull! You’re going to make their lives interesting. They’re a superstitious bunch. Everything is an omen or a portent. Let’s make one come true. Find their shaman and ask about the K’Sharra prophecy.”

He fidgeted when he heard nothing more, then turned to his friends. “All right. I take it none of you heard that?”

They shook their heads.

“We need to go to a place called Border Watch,” he said. “I’ll explain on the way. It seems to be south of here, but it’ll probably take less time to go back to the road first.”

Border Watch was almost directly west of a place called, appropriately enough, Water’s Edge. It boasted a small community of those cat people. A tawny one near the entrance to the village spotted them and said, “Welcome to our town, friend. The gods are always watching over Border Watch.”

He smiled. “I was hoping to speak with your shaman…”

“Ri’Bassa is our shaman. You will find him in his house most of the time,” she said, and pointed at a house to her left.

“Thank you,” he said.

She cat-smiled and replied, “You’re always welcome in Border Watch!”

The house proved to be empty—or at least knocking brought no answer—so they climbed up the steps into town. It was somewhat terraced, and houses were built to either side of the main path, and more up at the top. He spied what might be an inn sign off to the left.

A figure up there was wearing hooded robes, so Sora went to talk to him next.

“Welcome to Border Watch, stranger. You are welcome here. I am Ri’Bassa, shaman of our people.”
He smiled. “A pleasure to meet you. I was wondering… Do you know anything about a prophecy of K’Sharra?”

“You know of the K’Sharra Prophecy?” Ri’Bassa said with surprise. “How odd! Are you some sort of scholar?”

“Yes,” he lied. “Do a lot of traveling, too.”

“Wonderful! I would be glad to tell you more. It has been told from our fathers, and our fathers’ fathers, that our time in this place will come to an end. My great-great-great grandfather, K’Sharra, foretold of a time when we would receive three signs from the gods, signaling the end of the world.”

“Signs?”

“Oh, that’s a matter of trust,” Ri’Bassa said. “And I don’t trust you enough yet to say.”

“What about Border Watch itself?”

“I’m glad you asked. I could go on all day about our little community. We are but a handful of Khajiit, as you can see. Many are the evenings we spend around the cooking fire, sharing stories of Elsweyr. The smell of our food travels for miles! If you’d like to stay, I’d suggest getting a room at the Border Watch Inn. We don’t get many visitors, but S’thasa serves a fine ale.”

He smiled. “Is that the inn over there?”

Ri’Bassa nodded. “Yes, yes. She also has the finest collection of cheeses in the Empire! Her prized cheese has such a powerful aroma, she keeps it sealed in a case!”

“Great. I think we’ll go take a look.” He gave a parting nod and they moved off toward the inn.

The first thing he noticed inside were two cases, presumably locked, with cheese in them. One had just a single sample, but the other had a half dozen varieties. The bar was next, opposite two numbered doors, and an area with tables was down at the far end.

He rented both rooms from the proprietor, who was pleased to tell him all about her precious cheeses, and Viper leaned in long enough when they were investigating a room to whisper, “I’ll be back shortly.”

He nodded.

Renato leaned in next to whisper, “What do you want to bet we need that damn cheese? After S’thasa there goes to sleep I’ll pick the lock and slice off a piece. No sense taking the whole thing and chancing her noticing her prize is missing.”

“Sounds good. But if it really is that pungent, wear gloves? And maybe Cashew has something you can put it in.”

They repaired to the seating area after buying some food and drink from S’thasa to wait for Viper to return. The place was empty, but he supposed it would fill up when evening rolled around and chores for the day were done, and people were able to take some time to socialize and relax.

Viper, once he joined them, imparted the following: that the three signs were plagues, of vermin, famine, and fear. First, rats, which was only appropriate for felines, but it did beg the question of why the shaman would use poison instead of just slicing through the buggers with clawed hands or weapons. Famine referred to their pen of sheep. The final one, fear, was utterly ridiculous, and his
“Right,” he whispered. “We’ll get the cheese in the middle of the night and use it in that cooking pot outside tomorrow, yes? And as much as I hate the idea of taking out those sheep…”

“I agree,” Val whispered, “but you kind of don’t have a choice. Not unless you want to find out what’ll happen to you if you refuse. Probably get turned into a toad or something.”

He blew a flat raspberry in distaste. “This mead is … average,” he said to change the subject once residents started filing into the inn. “We need to start sourcing things. And now that I think about it, I think planters on the upper walkways would be all right. They don’t have to be very wide. But that way, with the portcullis down, we would still have food available if someone decided to try to attack again. And if Lorenzo can figure out a way to get running water for us…”

His friends nodded. “Certainly a way to increase safety when half of us are away,” Renato said. “Maybe you could try feeding all of it some flames?”

He shrugged. “I could do a test case. We definitely need to source honey, though. Anyway…”

A few hours past midnight Renato slipped out of the room they were sharing and secured a thin wedge of that cheese, and the next morning it was quietly slipped into the pot over the cooking fire outside by an invisible Viper.

A short time later a plague of rats piled into town and caused the residents to run around in a panic, all except for the shaman, who dropped down piles of poison. Sora eyed them dubiously; it looked like grain soaked in poison, and the rats were eating the stuff.

Ri’Bassa paused near them and said, “You’ve seen it! You’ve seen the first sign! Perhaps this is the beginning of the K’Sharra! We’re doomed! Doomed! Run while you can, stranger! Get out!” He hastened off down the steps, his head darting back and forth, presumably looking for more rats.

He considered taking some of the poison to taint the feed trough for the sheep, but that seemed a bit rude. If he poisoned the feed, and used that to kill the sheep, the residents probably couldn’t butcher them for meat. That being so, he asked Viper to cover his absence and went off to the pen long enough to web into the poor beasts and ease them into death, then slipped back into conversation with his friends.

The shaman flew by a few minutes later, but Sora was more interested in the voice suddenly invading his head.

“You’ve done well, old boy. I’m amused, I think. Head into the center of Border Watch. And make sure to duck.”

Laughter followed him as he tugged on Val’s arm and headed where directed. The sky was steadily turning more and more pink, and then into an odd orange-pink. And then, the Plague of Fear began. Burning projectiles rained down from above, resolved to be dogs. They hit the ground with meaty thuds and the Khajiit of Border Watch again ran around in a panic.

Viper smirked and murmured. “We should probably go.”

He nodded and started down the steps, taking care to avoid any of the dogs. “And perhaps arrange for an anonymous delivery of new sheep.”

He checked in at the shrine on their way back north and heard, “Good times, good times. I hope you had as much fun as I did.”
'Well, no, not really.'

"Here, take this. It's a fun little toy, the Wabbajack. Now, go away. Before I kill you."

A staff inserted itself into his hand. It was fairly plain but for the cap, which was metal and featured three versions of Sheogorath’s face with varied expressions.

"Time to get on with ‘destiny’, I think.”
The priory had a chapel, a house of sorts, a stable, and a sheep pen. Jauffre was upstairs in the house, reading a book.

“Hello, I’m Brother Jauffre. Can I help you?” the man said when he noticed them standing there awkwardly.

“The emperor asked me to deliver the Amulet of Kings to you,” he said, getting it out.

“This cannot be,” Jauffre breathed. “No one but the emperor is permitted to handle the amulet. Let me see it.”

Sora handed it over, rather pleased to be rid of the thing.

“By the Nine! This is the Amulet of Kings!” Jauffre’s voice turned from surprised to suspicious as he said, “Who are you? How did you get this? What do you know of the emperor’s death?”

He explained what had happened as succinctly as possible, though he was a bit more detailed on the emperor’s actual words—as much as he could remember, anyway—and Jauffre slowly relaxed.

“As unlikely as your story sounds, I believe you. Only the strange destiny of Uriel Septim could have brought you to me carrying the Amulet of Kings.”

He shrugged, not particularly caring if he was believed or not, so long as no one tried to kill him again. “Who is this Prince of Destruction?”

“None other than Mehrunes Dagon, one of the lords of the demonic world of Oblivion. The emperor’s words—‘Close shut the jaws of Oblivion’—certainly suggest that he perceived some threat from Oblivion. But all the scholars agree that the mortal world is protected from the daedra of Oblivion by magical barriers.”

“Then how can…?”

“I’m not sure. Only the emperors truly understand the meaning behind the rituals of coronation. The Amulet of Kings is ancient. Saint Alessia herself received it from the gods. It is a holy relic of great power. When the emperor is crowned, he uses the amulet to light the Dragonfires at the Temple of the One in the Imperial City. With the emperor dead and no new heir crowned, the Dragonfires in the temple will be dark, for the first time in centuries. It may be that the Dragonfires protected us from a threat that only the emperor was aware of.”

“All right,” he said, then looked around to ensure none of the monks were nearby. “The emperor mentioned his … other son.”

Jauffre nodded. “I am one of the few who know of his existence. Many years ago, I served as captain of Uriel’s bodyguards, the Blades. One night Uriel called me in to his private chambers. A baby boy lay sleeping in a basket. Uriel told me to deliver him somewhere safe. He never told me anything about the boy, but I knew it was his son. From time to time he would ask about the child’s progress. Now, it seems that his illegitimate son is the heir to the Septim Throne. If he yet lives.” He paused for a moment, then said, “If you would be so kind…”

“You’d like me to find him.”
“Yes. His name is Martin. He serves Akatosh in the chapel in the city of Kvatch, south of here. You must go there and find him at once. If the enemy is aware of his existence, as seems likely—”

‘I don’t see why, but all right…’

“—he is in terrible danger. And please, let me know if there’s anything you need. My resources here are limited, but I will help in any way I can.”

He nodded. “We’re off, then.” Once outside he said, “Knew that was coming.”

“I’ll say one thing for this country,” Val said, “they put up signs all over the place so you always know where you’re headed.”

It was starting to get dark by the time they got to Skingrad. Farther along the road would be Kvatch, then Anvil (which was on the coast). He was interested to note that the Tamika Vineyards were outside Skingrad, along with the Surlie Brothers Vineyards. Apparently it was an excellent area for growing grapes.

The sun was steadily making its way toward dusk, but they pressed on. In theory, they should be able to arrive at Kvatch in good time, find Martin, and keep him safe overnight before heading back to Weynon Priory.

As they walked up the slope to the start of the switchback that led to Kvatch a grouping of tents swam up out of the fog, which seemed a bit odd. Once they got close enough it was evident the people there were refugees of some sort. Sora stopped the closest one and inquired about Martin.

“If you mean the priest, I don’t think he made it out of the city. Very few of us did. But Savlian Matius might know more. He’s in charge of the city guard that are defending the camp. He’s at the barricade at the top of the road. He’s trying to hold what’s left of the guard together.”

A look up showed what might be smoke, but the gathering darkness was making it terribly difficult to be sure. Still, if the people in the camp had fled the city… Higher up the fog cleared and barricades became visible, and the sky was steadily becoming brighter and more pink as they ascended, rather like how it had changed when Sheogorath had intervened in Border Watch.

Great curving spikes rose out of the ground, tipped with red, and dead trees abounded at the crest of the hill. It was only once they came around the bend that he realized a massive portal was planted in front of the gates to the city, filled with a shifting field of yellow and orange and red.

“Stand back, civilian!” ordered a guard. “This is no place for you. Get back to the encampment at once!”

In no time flat Sora had agreed to figure out how to close the Oblivion Gate blocking the way and had entered with his friends. The place was hellish, with lava, spikes, broken walkways, and bizarre plants, some of which attacked. There were towers in the distance, but access to them was blocked by a huge gate.

He sighed.

“There’s no help for it,” Renato said. “Let’s just be careful.”

Viper made a thoughtful noise. “Let’s cloak ourselves, yes? If we can sneak past any beings here…”
Sora nodded. “I’ll handle myself and Renato.”

A long and confusing trek later saw them at the top of a tower—the wrong one, apparently, but one that contained a caged man—and in possession of a key.

The man—presumably one of the guards sent in to close the gate—was naked but for his smalls and bleeding heavily. He gasped, “You must get to the top of the large tower! The Sigil Keep, they call it. That’s what keeps the Oblivion Gate open! Find the Sigil Stone. Remove it, and the gate will close! The Keeper has the key—you must get the key!” He then slid down in a dead heap.

“Maybe he overheard some of the Daedra talking…?” Val said uncertainly.

“I’d like to know if we’ll have time to get the hell out before it closes,” Renato said as they retreated back to ground level and continued on.

At the top of the tallest tower was the sigil stone. It hovered up near the open ceiling, bathed in fire. Renato pushed forward and reached out to grab the thing. He only managed a few steps back and was turning to run when it all went funny.

A few moments later Sora found himself back in Kvatch and the gate was shattered around him. Savlian asked for help within the city walls.

“I need to go in anyway,” he said. “So let’s go.”

Inside the chapel was a mere two guards and a handful of townsfolk, one of whom was Martin. Sora had no real idea how to broach the subject of his mission, so he simply said, “You’re in danger. The emperor told me to find you.”

“The emperor is dead,” Martin replied. “Who are you? What do you really want with me?”

“We need your help.”

“If you came to me for help, you’re more of a fool than you look. Look around. What good is a priest?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re Uriel Septim’s son, all right?”

“Emperor Uriel Septim? You think the emperor is my father? No, you must have the wrong man. I am a priest of Akatosh. My father was a farmer.”

“For the love of cannoli. The daedra came here for you.”

“An entire city destroyed to get at me?” Martin said in disbelief. “Why? …Because I’m the emperor’s son?”

“If you’re a priest of Akatosh, surely you’d have some idea what being in the Septim line means. Why would I lie to you about something like that? This is hardly the time for practical jokes,” he said, waving a hand around at the destruction evident even in the chapel.

Martin frowned. “I don’t know, it’s strange… I think you might actually be telling the truth.”

‘That’s good,’ he thought, ‘because if you don’t cooperate soon, I’ll have to help you do so.’

“What does this mean? What do you want from me?”

He could understand how confusing it might be to have information like that dropped out of
nowhere, but he still felt impatient and annoyed. He wasn’t used to not being listened to. “Come with me to Weynon Priory,” he said as calmly as he could. “Brother Jauffre is waiting to speak with you. I told him I would come find you and get you to him safely.”

“You destroyed the Oblivion Gate, they say. You brought hope. You helped them drive the daedra back.” Martin took a deep breath and exhaled. “Yes. I’ll come with you to Weynon Priory and hear what Jauffre has to say. Lead on.”

Savlian wasn’t done with them yet, though. He wanted to fight to the castle to save the local count. Sora was about to ask Martin to wait for them in the chapel when the man stepped up to the door and made to open it.

Needless to say, the count was dead and Kvatch would be a long time rebuilding.

Martin spent a lot of time muttering to himself on the journey to Weynon Priory, but Sora was partly appeased when the man complimented his cooking. He was also not shy about getting into the thick of things when it came to beating back the local wildlife.

As they walked up to the priory an elf came racing toward them with a red-garbed assassin chasing after him, which boded badly. Once he was taken care of—and his friends—they found Jauffre in the chapel.

“You’re back. Thank Talos! They attacked without warning. I was praying when I heard Prior Maborel shout. I had just time to arm myself.” Jauffre suddenly looked alarmed. “The Amulet of Kings! I fear that was the target of this attack. I kept it in a secret room in Weynon House. We need to go see if it is safe.”

It wasn’t. The next thing he knew they were off to some place called Cloud Ruler Temple, north of Bruma. Along the way several patrolling Imperial Legionnaires recognized Sora, which he found to be a bit odd—word obviously traveled fast in Cyrodiil, not to mention accurate descriptions—but the walk itself was pleasant enough. The weather was fine despite the change to a much higher altitude.

Jauffre made an offer for him to join the Blades after they were safely inside Cloud Ruler Temple and Martin had been introduced, but Sora demurred.

Jauffre nodded. “Very well. Many serve the Empire in their own way. But we would be honored to have you, if you change your mind. But to press on, we must see about getting back the Amulet of Kings before the enemy takes it out of our reach. You should go back to the Imperial City, to Luther Broad’s Boarding House. Baurus may have learned something about the assassins. Give my warm regards to him. Tell him he should not blame himself for the emperor’s death. He did well to send you to me.”

“I will do so,” he said, then departed. Back outside and on the path down toward Bruma he sighed.

“We should probably overnight in Bruma,” Viper said. “And then go fill the others in. I know it’s out of the way, but…”

“But they deserve to know what I’m up to,” he said, “and we still have a lot of things to plan. The sooner we can get through this crisis the sooner we can get back to business as usual.”

Renato looked at him sidelong, a faint smile on his lips.
“And that’s where we are right now.”

“I’m ready to start construction of Filigrana whenever you’re ready,” Kiri said. “Say the word and I’ll go track down some bandits to press into service.”

“I don’t see why not now,” he replied. “Just because the world’s going to hell is no reason not to keep pressing forward. I’d also like planters up on the curtain walls or in the courtyard.” He noticed that his room had gained rather a lot in the way of furnishings since he’d last been there, not to mention the rest of the castle, and Lorenzo and Shi had been busy when it came to sanitary arrangements. Thankfully. “If you can manage it, an extension to the front wall to contain a garden wouldn’t go amiss, and Shi can carefully create an opening into it. The difference in height can be accounted for with good soil.”

“Who do you want with you this time?” Lal asked.

“Um… Renato, Shi, and … you, Lal.”

She nodded. Rio looked a little disappointed, but stayed quiet.

“You’ll all get a chance, Rio,” he said. “If not for this mess, for something else.”

“I know. And there’s just as much to be done here, so…”

“Yeah. While we’re away, if those of you here could get started on the construction, sourcing honey, possibly grapes—there were two wineries down at Skingrad—maybe purchasing chickens and cows and sheep… I just want to get everything as close to normal as possible. Maybe we can set some bee hives out behind the castle to see if we can attract some colonies, I don’t know. I have a hard time believing the people already making mead are frolicking through the countryside thieving from normal beehives like bears.”

Val snickered.

“We’ll also need to incorporate measures to hold off those assassins Sheogorath mentioned,” Viper reminded them. “We brought a fair amount of those panels, so it should be all right. Just have to assemble them again, and make sure they still function correctly.”

“Have we considered melting down the gold we brought and recasting it into the coins they use here?” he asked.

Lorenzo nodded. “I could see about making a mold. It’d be simpler to just sell it as is, though. Surely people dig up gold nuggets or find them washed out into streams. Same with gems, except we didn’t bother with any of those. There are mines, presumably. We could try to cut a deal with some jewelry makers, I suppose. We’ll figure it out.”

“All right. See if you can figure out something a little nicer for a kitchen while you’re at it. I know we have a cook now, but…”

Rio patted him on the back. “We’d prefer you do the cooking for our family and leave the men-at-arms to the mercy of that fellow. He’s competent, but he’s not you.”

“He also hasn’t the first clue how to make anything approaching the sort of food we’re used to,” Kiri groused. “I would about kill for some of your baked penne right now, or your minestrone.”
“Me, too,” he said with a sigh. “Campfire cooking is all very well, but... Well. Lal, on a side note, have you tried using your Rain Flames yet?”

She looked startled by the question, then chagrined. “It never even crossed my mind. I’ll run some tests before I go to sleep.”

“Okay, so,” Renato said, “we have some priorities. Lal, if it still hurts to use them... But either way, I’ll give you a look in the morning just to make sure everything’s as expected.”

“Okay, yeah.”

Sora plucked Cashew out of his hair and looked him in the eye. “Have you picked up anything interesting that we should leave here? Seeds, perhaps?”

Cashew tilted his head to the side contemplatively, then wriggled free and spat out a collection of items onto the table. There were seeds, berries, odd plants...

“Hm. Thank you,” he said as Lorenzo started sorting through things. “Hopefully you can figure out what all of that is and what we’d need to get started.”

“I’m on it,” Lorenzo said distractedly.

Renato clapped his hands. “Right. We’ll leave after breakfast, then.”

Kiri got up and started ushering people away, though he did help Lorenzo carry away all the things Cashew had presented.

Renato exhaled slowly and went to throw the latch on the door, then started heating water for a bath. Sora eyed him a bit nervously, not sure what his lover had in mind. Bathing together as infants was a touch different than in adult bodies. The tub was only big enough for one person.

Renato looked over and smirked at him. “You’re biting your lip, tesoro. Why would that be?”

He shook his head. “You know very well why. We’ve barely had a moment to ourselves since we transitioned to this world, and though we’ve readjusted to being ourselves again, almost as if that curse had never happened...”

“True. Bundled together in a too small bed in some barely private place isn’t much fun, nor is it very comforting or relaxing. But don’t get ahead of yourself. Let’s just relax, okay? Now come here,” Renato said as he poured the last bit of water into the tub.

Once he was over there his lover started to slowly remove Sora’s shirt. “I wonder if becoming an alchemist and using my flames during the process would magnify any healing properties.”

“Huh. I suppose there are a whole hell of a lot of ways we could make a killing, assuming our theories play out right.” He pushed Renato’s hands away and took care of the rest of his clothing, then stepped into the tub and sat down, shuddering in pleasure at the warmth of the water. “Oh that feels nice,” he breathed. “I’d still prefer to be able to shower first and use this for soaking, but right now I just don’t care.”

Renato chuckled and picked up a washcloth and some soap. “So bring up the idea of water purification to Lorenzo. A cistern feeds the shower or water for bathing, and it can be collected a floor down, purified, and... I’m not sure, really, used on the plants or for animals?”

“Or he figures out an electrical system, even if he has to charge batteries with his flames on a regular
basis. I suppose if we got super lucky we’d have a handy thermal vent nearby, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Renato leaned in from behind and swiped the washcloth over Sora’s chest. “I don’t think the gods of this universe would appreciate us setting up our own power company, but for us, here? I don’t see why not.”

He shivered when Renato kissed the side of his neck.

Breakfast featured an upset cook. Sora took over in the castle’s kitchen to make a meal for his family, shooing the man off to the side and out of his way. As a kindness Sora made sure the cook got a plate of his own, which backfired when the man moped over his plate at the difference in taste.

Sora simply rolled his eyes discretely and left the man to do the washing up. He, Renato, Shi, and Lal departed the castle after double-checking their supplies and Renato had had a chance to web into Lal long enough to check her health.

On their way toward Chorrol Lal said, “So I tried them last night. I didn’t have any problems, though I checked to make sure I was still all right with Mist and Cloud. It all seems fine now.”

He nodded. “Then we still have two people in the group capable of cloaking if necessary.”

“Which can come in handy all of the time,” she said, “and especially if we end up in one of those gates you described.”

The Imperial City was reached without more than the usual bother and they located Luther Broad’s Boarding House in the Elven Gardens District. But before they could go in a man stopped them long enough to shove a scroll at Sora, saying, “Here’s a copy of the Black Horse Courier. Identity of the Grey Fox revealed!”

He snorted softly and tucked it away for later. He was fairly certain he already had one about that figure. The people working for the “paper” were not shy about forcing copies onto people. Baurus—and considering the only person in the place Sora recognized was one of the men from that whole escape thing, he must be the one—was dressed rather commonly and seated at the bar, tankard in his hand.

Sora took a seat next to him and was immediately spoken to.

“Listen,” Baurus said softly. “I’m going to get up in a minute and walk out of here. That guy in the corner behind me will follow. You follow him. I want to see what he’ll do.”

He nodded slightly and waited. Baurus finished off his tankard and pushed it toward the bartender, then got up and walked off toward where the entrance to the cellar generally was in these structures, that being under the steps leading upstairs. Sure enough he was followed, so Sora and his bunch padded off after the two.

Down the steps and around the corner the spy raised his hand and cast some spell. An entire set of armor materialized around the man, along with a weapon in his hand. The second he advanced on Baurus, Renato shot and killed him. A quick rifle through the man’s belongings produced a book: Mythic Dawn Commentaries Volume I.

“Good work,” Baurus said as he approached. “I’m glad to see you, by the way. You just caught me at a bad time.”
Sora nodded and introduced his friends, then explained why he had come. “What have you learned?”

“The assassins who killed the emperor were part of a daedric cult known as the Mythic Dawn. They apparently worship the Daedric Lord Mehrunes Dagon. I’ve been tracking their agents in the city; I guess they noticed.”

“I have good news and bad news. The enemy has the amulet, but the emperor’s heir was found—his name is Martin—and escorted to Jauffre. They’re at Cloud Ruler Temple now.”

“Thank Talos he lives! Martin Septim, you say… We will restore him to the throne! It is the sworn duty of all Blades.”

‘How you can you restore someone to something he’s never had?’ he wondered, then asked, “Right, what’s next?”

“There’s a scholar at the Arcane University. Tar-Meena’s her name. She’s supposed to be an expert on daedric cults. How about you take that book to her—” Baurus nodded at the one Sora was holding. “—and see what she makes of it. I’ll keep running down leads on the Mythic Dawn network. If you learn anything you can find me here at Luther Broad’s. May Talos guide you.”

Sora headed back upstairs, and then up another level long enough to crack open that book. The contents were the usual hysterical ramblings he had come to expect from religious crackpots, but Renato pointed out that each paragraph had an ornamental first letter that ended up spelling out “green emperor”.

He snapped the book shut and tucked it away for the time being. “If that’s true, and there’s more of them, as the name suggests, then perhaps the message will become clear if we can find them. For now, let’s see if we can talk to this Tar-Meena person.”

“With a name like that, I expect she’s not human,” Lal commented.

“Proabably not.”

Tar-Meena turned out to be an Argonian. “Ah, you must be the one I got the message about.”

Sora eyed his friends in confusion. Did Baurus employ ninja in order to get messages around that fast? It wasn’t as though they had dawdled sightseeing on their way to the tower.

“How can I help you?”

“…I was told you knew a lot about daedric cults. What can you tell me about the Mythic Dawn?”

“You know of them?” she said in surprise. “One of the most secretive of all daedric cults. Not much is known about them. They follow the teachings of Mankar Camoran, whom they call the Master. A shadowy figure in his own right.”

“I see. I found one of their books…”

“Ah, yes. ‘Commentaries on the Mysterium Xarxes’, wonderful! You have a scholarly interest in daedric cults, then?”

“More like I need to find them,” he said reluctantly.

“Find them, eh? I won’t poke my nose any further,” she said. “Official business and all that. I’m used
to working with the Blades, don’t worry. Say no more. In any case, finding them won’t be easy. I’ve studied Mankar Camoran’s writings a bit myself, at least those that I could find. It is clear from the text that the ‘Commentaries’ come in four volumes, but I’ve only ever seen the first two books. I believe that his writings contain hidden clues to the location of the Mythic Dawn’s secret shrine to Mehrunes Dagon. Those who unlock this hidden path have proven themselves worthy to join the ranks of the Mythic Dawn cult. Finding the shrine is the first test.”

“So I’ll need all four volumes,” he said. “Any idea where I could find them?”

“Here,” she said, and handed over a book. “You can have a copy of volume two. Treat it gently, if you please! Now, as I’ve said, I’ve never seen the third and fourth volumes, but you can try First Edition, over in the Market District. Phintias, the proprietor, caters to specialist collectors. He may have an idea of where to locate those books.”

“All right. Thank you, for the book and your time.”

Outside, an investigation of the second volume revealed more of those fancy initial caps, and those spelled out “way where”, which brought them up to “Green Emperor Way where”.

“Sadly,” Renato commented, “I don’t think scouring that part of the city will do much for us just yet.”

“I agree,” he replied. The book was tucked away and they headed off to the bookstore Lorenzo had spent so much money in.

When asked the proprietor said, “I happen to have a copy of volume three on hand, but I’m afraid it is a … special order. Already paid for by another customer. Sorry. Gwinas would be disappointed if it was gone when he came to pick it up. I don’t know him personally, but he was very eager to get his hands on it. Came all the way from Valenwood. As a matter of fact, he’s already late for his appointment to pick up the book. Feel free to wait for him if you want to speak to him yourself.”

They shuffled off to a corner and settled in to wait. If the man did not appear by closing time they could always return the next day, or make a covert visit during the middle of the night. Thankfully, it wasn’t horrifically long before an elf of some kind entered the shop and said, “I’m here for my book. Mankar Camoran’s ‘Commentaries’, volume three.”

“Ah, of course,” said the proprietor. “Here you go. Keep us in mind for any future needs!”

“Thank you, thank you!” the elf said as Sora’s group got up and prepared to corner the man. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve been looking for this book!”

Before he could leave Sora tapped him on the shoulder.

The elf turned around. “What?”

“I’d like a brief look at that book you just purchased.”

A frown graced the elf’s face. “Have you been following me? Leave me alone! That book is mine!”

Out of patience, Sora threaded Sky Flames into the man and pumped him full of serenity.

“Just a look?” the elf said, then handed it over.

Sora flipped through it long enough to get “tower touches”, then said, “And the fourth volume?” as he handed it back.
“You can only get volume four directly from a member of the Mythic Dawn,” the elf said compliantly. “I had set up a meeting with the Sponsor, as he called himself.”

“I think it’d be wise for you to disassociate yourself from this,” he counseled. “After all, the Mythic Dawn is responsible for assassinating the emperor.”

The elf gasped and shoved the book back at him. “Keep it! And take this!” He reached into his pocket and removed a note. “It tells you where to go. I don’t want anything to do with the Mythic Dawn if that’s true!” He dashed off outside.

The note read:

Your interest in the writings of the Master has been noted. You are taking the first steps toward true enlightenment. Persevere, and you may yet join the exalted ranks of the Chosen.

If you wish to continue further down the Path of Dawn, you will need the fourth volume of the Master’s “Commentaries on the Mysterium Xarxes”. It can be obtained only from a member of the Order of the Mythic Dawn. As your designated Sponsor, I will pass on my copy to you if I deem you worthy.

Study the first three volumes of the Master’s writings. Look for the hidden meaning in his words, as best you are able.

When you are ready, come to the sunken sewers under the Elven Gardens in the Imperial City. Come alone. Follow the main tunnel until you reach the room with the table and chair. I will meet you there and give you what you desire.

The Sponsor

He passed it over so that Lal and Shi could read it, then they returned to Luther Broad’s to see if Baurus was hanging about. He was, back on his stool with a tankard of something in hand.

“What have you found out?” the man asked quietly. After being informed of what Tar-Meena had said and about the meeting, he said, “This might just be the break we’ve been looking for! Good work. We need to get that fourth book, then. If Tar-Meena is right… Well, let’s go. I know that part of the sewers well.”

“All right. The room with the table is just through this door. I always wondered who put it there,” Baurus said after stopping at a door. “I happen to know that if you go up the stairs there, you can get a vantage point on the meeting room. I think I’d better be the one to handle the meeting. You’ll be my backup. Keep watch from above in case of trouble.”

Sora laughed quietly. “Ah, no. I’ll meet the Sponsor.”

“No,” Baurus protested, “it should be me. I have a blood debt to repay these Mythic Dawn assassins. Besides, I’ve trained for this kind of thing my whole life.”

He shook his head. “And that’s exactly why you shouldn’t. You’re too worked up and not thinking straight. You’ve already been noticed by their agents. You think they won’t recognize you in there?”

Baurus started to object again, then sighed. “Very well. We’ll do it your way. Be careful, and
remember, we can’t leave here without that book. It’s our best chance of getting the amulet back.”

He hummed and leaned over to whisper to Lal, “Make sure he doesn’t get uppity. Tranquilize him if you have to.”

She nodded sharply.

Sora went into the room and glanced through some bars off to one side on his way to sit down. An elf in red robes was lurking back there. Only after he was in place did the gate open and the elf emerge.

“So. You want to become one of the Chosen of Mehrunes Dagon. The Path of Dawn is difficult, but the rewards are great. I have the book you seek. With it and the Master’s other three books, you will possess the key to enlightenment.” The elf stopped his pacing suddenly and his head shot up to look at the catwalk overhead. “I told you to come alone! Brothers, kill them!”

Sora shot threads at the elf and killed him by piercing his heart, while his friends took care of the other Mythic Dawn lackeys. On the elf’s body was the fourth volume, along with an interesting ring. The fancy caps of that volume revealed “midday sun”, bringing the entire message to “Green Emperor Way where tower touches midday sun”.

Baurus was glad to have gotten through things with a minimum of fuss, but unfortunately it was far too late to do anything that day. They took rooms at an inn and went to Green Emperor Way the next morning to look around. The only real thing of interest they found was a standing tomb with a carving in one of the inset areas. It had a map etched onto it, which was odd on its own, but above it was a fiery sun, which was suspicious.

They stuck around to wait until noon, though it started raining. “I hope whatever clue we’re supposed to get here isn’t affected by that,” he muttered. At noon the carving lit up with red light, despite the clouds covering the sky in sullen grey, and a particular spot in the northeast part of Cyrodiil was marked.

Renato got out a map and compared the two. “Looks like Lake Arrius.”

“Let’s get lunch, then we can head out. We can always stop at Cheydinhal. Distances in this country are deceptive.”

There was a door of wooden planks covering a cave entrance overlooking the lake. “All right. Lal, cloak yourself. Renato, Shi, sneak along behind. I don’t know if they’ll appreciate multiple people popping up to join the party.”

Renato frowned, but nodded.

Inside was a fairly large cave with Mythic Dawn tapestries to either side of another plank door, a large metal brazier with a fire in it, and a person standing guard. As Sora approached he could overhear what sounded like a ritual greeting between the guard and another similarly dressed figure, but the one moved away toward a set of bars.

When he approached the first person the man said, “Dawn is breaking.”

“Greet the new day,” he replied, as the other figure had.

“Welcome, brother. The hour is late, but the Master still has need for willing hands. You may pass
into the shrine. Harrow will take you to the Master for your initiation into the service of Lord Dagon. Do not tarry. The time of Preparation is almost over. The time of Cleansing is near.” The guard unlocked the door and held it open.

Sora walked slowly, blocking the guard’s sight for long enough that his friends could slip through, then went through himself. A ways down the tunnel he was stopped by an elf.

“I am Harrow, Warden of the Shrine of Dagon. By following the Path of Dawn hidden in the writings of the Master, Mankar Camoran, you have earned a place amongst the Chosen. You have arrived at an opportune time. You may have the honor to be initiated into the Order by the Master himself.”

‘Terrific.’

“As a member of the Order of the Mythic Dawn, everything you need will be provided for you from the Master’s bounty. Give me your possessions, and put on this initiate’s robe.”

Considering that he was wearing nothing of note or real value—Cashew carried that sort of thing—he didn’t bother to quibble, though giving a stranger an eyeful was not his idea of fun.

“Very good. Follow me. I will take you to the Shrine.” Harrow turned to lead the way.

Sora signaled to where he could feel Lal, telling her to search the place for anything of value, then followed Harrow as slowly as possible, trying to arrange his expression to one of awed reverence.

He was led into a large cavern with far too many Mythic Dawn tapestries (‘Seriously, why so damn many?’ he thought.), braziers to light the area, barred off openings, and finally down a “hallway” with multiple openings.

Only when Lal caught back up in his senses did he scurry over to the very impatient Harrow and follow him through another door. The upper level of the new cavernous space held a handful of cultists, but down below a ceremony was going on. Sora signaled.

Harrow went down in the next heartbeat and the others on their level seconds later. Sora flew down the steps to the ceremony level and began to pierce various cultists with his webs, but the one conducting the ceremony portaled out in a way not so dissimilar to how Sheogorath did.

There was a nearly naked Argonian tied to an altar that rested beneath a massive statue—of Mehrunes Dagon, he assumed—so he took a moment to free him before poking around. It was just as well that he had moved away considering that barely had the Argonian gotten up and fled did the statue shake and topple over, crushing that spot.

The bodies of the cultists held nothing of particular interest aside from Harrow having his belongings. Camoran must have been the one who portaled away, which meant the amulet was beyond his reach for the moment, but a book had been left behind. A quick look showed what were probably daedric symbols and designs, so he tucked it away.

“Right. Let’s go, guys.”

After another night spent in Cheydinhal they headed to Cloud Ruler Temple. Jauffre spotted them coming up the steps and hastened over to greet them. “Thank Talos you’ve returned safely! Do you have the amulet?”

Sora shook his head. “Camoran escaped with it, but he left behind a questionable book. I think it’s
the Mysterium Xarxes."

“Ah, all right. You should take that to Martin straight away. He’ll be in the Great Hall. He’s hardly taken time to sleep since you left.”

Martin was inside flipping through one of a number of books. “Ah, you’re back. I told Jauffre not to worry.” He paused for a moment. “I can see you have bad news. You didn’t recover the amulet, did you.”

Sora handed over the book in answer.

“By the Nine!” Martin said in shock as he opened it and quickly shut it again. “Such a thing is dangerous even to handle! But you were right to bring it. I know some ways to protect myself from its evil power.”

“Do you think it can lead us to Camoran?”

Martin’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know. Maybe. I suspect the secret of how to open a portal to Camoran’s Paradise lies within these pages. But I will need time. Tampering with dark secrets, even just reading them, can be very dangerous. I’ll have to proceed carefully. In the meantime, you should probably speak to Jauffre. He was concerned about reports of spies in Bruma.”

“All right, but… The book itself is evil?” he said, trying to understand.

“It was written by Mehrunes Dagon himself, and given by him to Mankar Camoran. I believe Camoran used it to create his Paradise. I will study it. It is clear to me now that the only way to stop the Oblivion invasion is to relight the Dragonfires. Emperor, Amulet, and Dragonfires— with these divine gifts, the daedra of Oblivion have been kept at bay for thousands of years.

“While the Dragonfires burned, the divine barriers kept the daedra from making more than fleeting visits to our world. But the Dragonfires can only be relit by an heir of Septim blood wielding the Amulet of Kings. This was the essence of Camoran’s plot. He was undone only by the merest … chance … but his complete victory remains perilously close. We must recover the Amulet of Kings and relight the Dragonfires, before it is too late to stem Dagon’s invasion.”

“How is it you know so much about…?” He shrugged, not willing to say it outright.

Martin looked rueful. “I put aside the dark arts when I became a priest. But the workings of fate may be seen in this, too. ’The gods can turn anything to good’, or so I piously told those who came to see me for advice. Perhaps I may yet come to believe it myself.”

Outside he murmured, “I can’t remember. Did he admit to messing around with daedra before this?”

The others shrugged. “He probably had something of a wild youth,” Shi opined, “and set it aside once he matured some.”

“Well, wild around here is a bit different than back home,” he said, “and with potentially far more reaching consequences.”

Jauffre, when approached, said, “I hope Martin knows what he’s doing with that evil book. I fear for what it could do to him if he’s not careful.”

“He said something about spies?”

“Ah, yes, I hope you can help there. The gate guards have reported seeing strangers on the road for
the past several nights. I cannot leave Cloud Ruler Temple undefended while my men search the whole mountainside, but these spies must be eliminated.”

He nodded. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you. Talk to Steffan. He can tell you where he has seen them. Captain Burd in Bruma may also be able to help. I’ve asked the Countess to have the guard keep an eye out for strangers. Track down the spies and kill them,” Jauffre said, frowning in his seriousness. “Find out what they know, and what they’re planning, if possible. We can’t afford to let the Mythic Dawn operate out of Bruma with impunity.”

“Ah, which one is Steffan?”

Jauffre looked around the courtyard, then pointed.

Sora nodded and went over to speak with him.

“What can I do for you, sir? Spies? We always see them near the runestone at dusk,” Steffan said. “They aren’t too woodcrafty, but Grandmaster Jauffre has forbidden us to range too far from the walls.”

He recalled seeing an odd grouping of stones on the way up, the central one having an interesting carving on it that gleamed green. “Thank you. We’ll check into it.”

Halfway down the switchback he said, “Let’s split up to question people in town. We can meet outside the church.”

The first person he stopped was a beggar. A small bribe convinced the man to talk. “Ah, it’s coming back to me now. Yeah, seems I saw someone looking out the window at Jearl’s house the other day. Someone I’d never seen before. When Jearl wasn’t home. You see what I mean?”

“Which house is that?” he asked, and got directions. In a place like Bruma it wasn’t difficult. All he needed was which tier and how far from the end.

Captain Burd, once he was located, said, “Except for Jearl coming back from a trip down south, things are pretty quiet. Not much travel right now with the Oblivion Crisis. I’ve told my men to keep a sharp eye out, but I’ve had no reports of any strangers in town. What about you? Turned up anything suspicious?”

“I heard tell that Jearl has a visitor.”

Burd looked surprised. “Really? That is odd. I know for certain that she returned alone. I don’t like it. Since you’re with Cloud Ruler Temple, I’m going to authorize you to search Jearl’s house. I’ll pass the word to my men. We won’t interfere. I trust that you’ll handle things … appropriately. The less I know about it, the better.”

With that he nodded and departed to meet up at the church. Shi arrived first, then Lal, then Renato. They went as a group to Jearl’s house and Renato picked the lock. The interior looked innocent enough, but there was a trap-door partly hidden by a rug. Downstairs was a copy of the Mythic Dawn Commentaries, volume one. Volume two was on a table nearby, along with a note.

**Jearl —**

The Master was pleased to hear of your activities outside of Chorrol. The more gates
that we open, the nearer we are to the glorious Cleansing.

The Master has chosen you and Saveri for a most crucial mission, a sign of your advancement through the ranks of the Chosen. We have learned that the Septim heir has gone to ground at Cloud Ruler Temple, the lair of the accursed Blades. The Master has made its destruction the top priority of the Order, and Lord Dagon has committed whatever resources are required.

Pending your report on the Septim’s activities at Cloud Ruler Temple, and your assessment of Temple defenses and possible routes of escape, we plan to open a Great Gate in the open ground before Bruma as soon as possible.

Remember, the first three Lesser Gates represent only the preliminary stages of Great Gate Deployment. Do not in any way compromise your cover in defense of those gates. New ones can be quickly and easily reopened. And once the Great Gate is opened, the fall of Bruma is assured. Cloud Ruler Temple cannot stand long after that, and the Septim will be caught like a rat in a trap.

We would welcome any further details you can offer concerning the Imperial agent who rescued Martin from Kvatch, but again, we caution you … do not risk a confrontation. This individual is not to be trifled with.

The Dawn is breaking.

Ruma Camoran

The cellar led to a place outside the city walls, which he supposed was convenient for a spy’s purposes.

“So, I’m not to be trifled with, huh? Let’s go lurk quietly by the runestone and see about ending the careers of a few spies, shall we?”

“What have you learned about the spies?” Jauffre asked once they tracked him down inside the Great Hall.

“For one, they’re dead. For two…” He handed over the orders they’d found in the woman’s cellar.

“Excellent work. I knew I could count on you. The gods did not idly choose you as their agent, whatever you may think.”

‘I think you’d be surprised who chose me.’

“But it is clear that Mankar Camoran will soon bring all his power to bear against Bruma. I will warn the Countess of the danger. You should speak to Martin. I believe he has made some progress with the Mysterium Xarxes.” Jauffre strode off purposefully, so Sora moved on to speak with the heir.

“I’ve deciphered part of the ritual needed to open a portal to Camoran’s Paradise,” Martin said as he looked up from his reading material. “The Xarxes mentions four items needed for the ritual, but so far I have only deciphered one of them: the ‘blood of a Daedra Lord’. In fact, daedric artifacts are known to be formed from the essence of a Daedric Lord, from whence they derive their great power. Not an easy thing to come by, obviously—”
Sora nearly snorted.

“—but we will need a daedric artifact. Bring it to me when you have acquired one.”

In town, for it was full dark by the time they emerged, they were nearly at the inn when a man dressed in a quilted doublet stopped him and said, “Good day. I’m Tolgan, herald to the Countess Narina Carvain here in Bruma. She requests your company at your earliest convenience.”

“Ah… What’s this regarding?”

“Countess Carvain would prefer if you speak to her in person. She also said to present you with this stipend as a taste of things to come. My Lady holds court from eight in the morning to six in the evening each day. That would be the time to see her.” Tolgan smiled and strode away.

At the inn, upstairs in one of the rooms they’d rented, he frowned. “That almost sounded like an improper advance, but I’ll assume it wasn’t. I’m not parting with the Wabbajack, so we’ll have to track down some other daedric artifact.”

“So let’s nose around in the Imperial City on our way home to check in,” Lal said. “Maybe we can charm some information out of someone.”

He looked at Renato and Shi, who both nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

During breakfast he overheard two townswomen rabbiting on about some merchant in Anvil who had an amazing magical tent (“Big enough for a dozen people!” one of them said excitedly.) and resolved to check it out. If nothing else, if they could secure ownership of the thing, it would make all the traipsing around the country a little less of a bother if the tent was as magnificent as rumored. They heard whispers of a number of possible shrine sites while in the Imperial City, but the one rumored to be near Anvil gave him the excuse he needed to go there after Battlehorn Castle.

At home there was already evidence of Kiri being hard at work mind-controlling the dregs of society into action. The start of a cellar was being dug near the pond, and a grouping of rudimentary tents were not far off as “housing” for the workers. Inside the castle walls he could see work had begun on the planting beds, which was just as welcome.

Inside he could see evidence that work had been done in the “kitchen” of the castle, which was another welcome sight. The cook pouted when he saw him, but Sora brushed that off and headed down to the cellar where the vintner was. His work was coming along nicely, and Sora assumed that those who had stayed behind had sourced and provided him with what he needed to make his special brews.

He had plans for those, along with his personal variants of mead. His own work would have to wait until he was done with all this destiny stuff, unfortunately. He did not want anyone messing with his mead, and while forgiving to a point, it did have to be strained or filtered every so often and moved to new containers during the process. His own use of Sky Flames was not something the vintner could do, so it was best to just wait on that.

That afternoon he shooed the cook away again and prepared dinner for his family. Rio had his first bite, then asked, “Who gets to go this time?”

Sora rolled his eyes. “You, for one. And Viper. I’m sure we’ll run into more gates that ought to be closed, and having along an illusionist is always a good idea. The faster we can get through them the better. Stopping to fight every raging daedra is just a waste of time when they’ll only regenerate a short time later.”
Rio cheered up, looked sad for a moment when he realized it meant more time away from Lal, then cheered up again as he had more of his meal.

They closed two gates on the way to Anvil, one on either side of an Ayleid ruin, and also found a Wayshrine of Akatosh. The Horse Whisperer Stables outside Anvil sold white horses (something he would pass along to Dino), and they had spent enough time closing those gates—even with cloaking themselves to avoid fighting—that it was full night when they arrived in the city.

They found the inn and entered, ordered some food from the proprietor, and sat down to eat before heading up to sleep for the night. In the morning he asked around about a tent merchant and was pointed at a young woman having breakfast.

“I used to be in the service of our Lady Umbranox, using my magical talents to track her wayward husband,” the woman said. “But somehow he became completely untraceable, even for someone with my formidable magical skill, so I was graciously ‘relieved of duty’. Anyway, I’m retired from intrigue and adventuring for now, and planning on setting up shop here in Anvil to make a living. What can I do for you?”

“I heard in the Imperial City that you make enchanted tents?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, “I think you might be an ideal buyer. In my travels, I learned to enchant fine cloth to make a special set of tent materials. Once placed on the ground and activated by someone, these materials will become a fully furnished luxury tent. Anything you place in the tent will still be there the next time you use it, making it the perfect portable abode. I’m settling down now, so I’ve been looking for just the right buyer for my tent. The price is ten thousand septims. Are you interested?”

Sora tilted his head at Viper, who immediately set to “haggling” the price down to something “reasonable”. A short time later Sora was eating breakfast, the new owner of a magical tent.

As they were trying to leave a well-dressed (by Tamriel’s standards, anyway) man said to him, “I have a manor for sale if you’re interested.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said and kept going.

“Really?” Renato asked once outside.

“Well, maybe. Depending on how much travel we have to do once things are set up, it wouldn’t hurt to have a place in each city we could use, right?”

“Eh, I suppose so, though we do have that tent now.”

“True, but we have to test it out first. But houses in each city would mean a private place to meet people if necessary. We’ll see.”

There was another Oblivion Gate outside the city, which they entered with the intent to close. Viper huffed once they were inside it and said, “Wait here. I can be invisible and fly. I can get this closed in no time flat.”

He thought about it for a minute, then nodded. He knew just how damn effective Viper was and could not see the point in arguing. “We’ll wait here if you need backup.”

Viper nodded and disappeared. Sora tracked his movement until he was out of range, then amused
himself by “killing” any daedra who got too close to their position. A short time later everything went shaky, and white, and then they were staring at the ruined remains of a gate.

With that out of the way they headed north in search of the shrine someone in town had gossiped about. Another gate presented itself, and that time Viper went in alone to handle things. He was back shortly and they continued on north.

Malacath’s Shrine was located, but by then it was full dark and raining hard, so Sora decided to see about using the tent. He got the enchanted materials out and poked around, finally finding a piece that looked as if it was meant to be pulled. He did, and the materials flipped out of his hand and expanded into a fairly large tent in a brownish colour.

He pulled the flap aside and stepped into the promised luxury. There was a large bed, plenty of storage options, a seating arrangement, and—an odd looking altar or book stand? Investigation showed there was a manual attached to the side, which revealed the thing to be both a spell-making altar and an enchanting altar, something otherwise only available at the Arcane University (or so gossip said).

“I suppose that makes sense given who made this place,” he muttered, then set the manual down.

“I wonder if Lorenzo could manage something with this in terms of enchanted clothing,” Viper said.

“Even with us not being capable of magic?”

Viper shrugged. “It’s Lorenzo. He’d take it as an insult if he couldn’t figure something out.”

“Well, we’ll mention it to him when we get back to the castle. I also notice there’s an alchemy work surface here, but none of the actual implements.”

Renato eyed the thing contemplatively, then turned away from it. “Well, it’s certainly huge in here. Much bigger than on the outside. Enchanting is pretty cool, but brown isn’t really our colour.”

He shrugged, then spotted something on the central support post. When he touched it the walls all turned from brown to green, which gave him pause. “Am I hallucinating or…?”

“No, no you’re not,” Viper said in bemusement.

He touched it again and the walls turned blue. A few more tries got them to an amber colour, so he stopped. “Close enough, I guess. And if we all piled on crosswise, I bet all four of us could sleep on that bed.”

“Or we could break out a few sleeping bags,” Rio said. “Realistically, this should be outfitted for twelve people in a pinch, but maybe only four normally. A little rearranging and we’d have the room to do it.”

“I agree. And with all this storage there’d be no problem keeping a full set of sleeping bags here. Nothing saying we can’t make more if we had to. Just need to find some geese. Cooking, on the other hand… Not inside, anyway.”

The next morning they had a chat with the worshipers present and realized they needed some troll fat as an offering. Sora raised a brow at Cashew, who promptly spat some out. “I don’t even want to know what that tastes like,” he said with a slight shudder, then went over to the statue to offer it up.

As before, a voice inserted itself into his head. Daedric Princes were less kind than Viper in that regard. Their voices always felt like they were rattling around in there. “You brought a present.
Good. That’s smart. You want something? Then, if you’re smart, you do what I tell you. Lord Drad took my orgres. Says he owns them. Lying maggot!”

Sora winced at the sheer volume.

“They’re my orgres! Lord Drad put my little brothers in chains, working in the mines. I don’t like that. Get over to Lord Drad’s estate. Let my orgres loose, and get them out! Okay? Get going!”

Sora sighed and shuffled back. He was momentarily confused when he knew exactly where to go, but shrugged it off. These people were deities, after all. Lord Drad’s estate turned out to be very nice at first glance.

“Wow,” he said softly. “If we didn’t already have the castle I’d consider setting you on the owner of the place, Viper. Plenty of growing space, a nice manor house…”

“But out of the way,” Rio pointed out. “There’s not even a proper road to this place.”

“Yeah, well… Let’s head inside to see what the local lord has to say for himself. Though I admit I am tempted to pick all his berries and vegetables first.”

“I welcome you to my humble home, stranger,” a dark elf said inside. The man had an oddly-rounded face and a quite narrow chin. “What brings you to this place?”

“We were exploring and saw it…”

“The land is good, the farm productive. But it’s mining the wealth from beneath the land that will make my fortune. Blackwood isn’t so bad, once you get used to the flies. And being lost all the time. And the zombies and the will-o-the-wisps.”

Sora smiled blandly. “I heard a rumor that you enslaved ogres.”

Drad’s expression went fiercely superior. “Can you think of a better use for the mindless beasts? Under my eye, they do some good in this world.”

“So slavery is good in your book?”

“I don’t believe I asked for your opinion on this matter,” Drad retorted sneeringly. “I am done speaking with you. Please leave my estate.”

They ran into his wife on the way out and, while reluctant to talk, she did mention the nearby mine where the ogres were being kept. The entrance was beyond the fields and up a slight rise.

“I could be mistaken,” he said as they picked strawberries along the way, “but I think we should avoid killing anyone. Just get in, free the ogres, and get the hell out.”

“Two teams?” Rio suggested.

He nodded. “Cloaks or sneaking or whatever. Pick any locks you find, snag any loot, and we’ll meet back outside.”

“Good job! No one owns ogres but me! And I fixed that maggot!”

And he had. When they’d emerged from the mines with all their stolen goodies it was to the amusing sight of the freed ogres standing guard over Drad and his poor wife, who were working the fields.
“The ogres own Drad! Make Drad eat dirt! Bwuahaha! Now you get a present. Keep up the good work. And be nice to my little brothers!”

A very heavy weapon inserted itself into his hand, and he looked down to see a warhammer of sorts. He nodded and stepped away from the altar. “I think if we push it we can make it back to Battlehorn before it gets too dark.”

Rio took the hammer and swung it around a few times, grinning.

The next morning they emerged into the courtyard with the intent to head to Cloud Ruler Temple when Sora noticed something odd off to his right. He dashed up the steps leading to the top of the curtain wall and stared in disbelief at an Oblivion Gate up the hill. “Well, shit. Better take care of that first.”

Viper nodded and floated away.

“If I could figure out how to use that enchanting altar,” Lorenzo said thoughtfully, “then any of us could easily clear a gate without fighting. Maybe not as quickly as Viper, because we can’t fly, but…”

Sadly, Falco could no longer carry Rio and Leon had never flown, exactly, more like hanglided places, which was less than useful when trying to ascend a tower. Still, enchanted items to make them invisible? Not having to sneak everywhere like little ninjas?

As soon as Viper returned they headed out and arrived at Cloud Ruler Temple at around noon. “I’ve learned that the Mysterium Xarxes is both the gate and the key to Camoran’s Paradise,” Martin said without looking up, leaving Sora to wonder when the man had learned to figure out who was approaching him. “In some sense, the book is Camoran’s Paradise. He bound himself to the Xarxes when he created his Paradise, using dark rituals which I will not speak of further. A gate can be opened from the outside, however. It will be more difficult, as I will have to temporarily bind myself to the book. But I believe it can be done. I will continue working to decipher the arcane items needed for the binding ritual.”

Sora laid the hammer on Martin’s desk.

Martin looked up at that. “I won’t ask what you went through to obtain this, my friend. I know all too well the depravity of the princes of Oblivion.”

Sora shrugged. “It was fairly simple, actually. Just a case of sneaking around to free some slaves.”

Martin nodded, looking relieved. “The ritual will consume its physical form. It won’t be seen again on Tamriel for many years. Who knows the tale of how this Dwemer hammer came to embody the power of one of their most bitter foes?”

Having no idea what the man was talking about, Sora simply nodded as if in agreement. “What’s next?”

“Apparently there’s some trouble down in Bruma. Jauffre will know more.”

“We seem to be simultaneously getting closer and further away from the end goal,” Renato muttered as they wandered around looking for the Grandmaster.
“I’ve just received word from the Countess of Bruma that an Oblivion Gate has opened outside the city,” Jauffre said.

Sora exchanged looks with his friends. They hadn’t noticed one on the way past the city.

“It seems that the Mythic Dawn are putting their plan to attack Bruma into motion. We are not prepared at this time to deal with that plan. Since you’ve dealt with these gates before, I’d like you to help the Countess’s guards close this gate. Once they’ve seen how it’s done they should be able to handle any new gates on their own.”

“What is this gate?” he asked.

“Captain Burd is waiting for you outside the Bruma city gate. He’ll show you.”

He exhaled and nodded.

They found Burd near the stables. “Thanks for coming,” the man said. “Since we had the Hero of Kvatch available, I didn’t think it made sense to try this on our own the first time. We’re ready when you are. Just say the word.”

“Now is good.”

“All right. Give me a minute to talk to the men. Everyone’s a bit jumpy right now.”

While Burd did that Sora said, “All of us in this time. We know we can easily survive, but these guys… Let’s keep them alive. The more of them used to fighting the daedra, the better off they’ll all be.”

“Flames?” Lorenzo asked.

“Whatsoever they do see they’ll pass off as magic, I presume.” Burd looked his way and nodded, so Sora headed over. “You ready?”

“Yes, let’s go.” They piled through the gate along with Burd and two of his men. Burd looked more than a little alarmed once through. “This is no place I ever wanted to find myself. I don’t see how we can… No… no, we can do this. We have to do this. We have no choice.” Burd turned to him and said, “I’m glad you’re here. We wouldn’t have a chance otherwise. What’s our next move?”

“Follow us and don’t race on ahead. I don’t want to see one of you getting too excited or overconfident and thinking you can take on the world by yourself. You have to survive to get to the part that really matters, all right?”

Following that was the usual slog because they could not cloak themselves and race through the place unaffected. But once they finally reached the top of the tower where the sigil stone was he touched Burd briefly on the arm and pointed. “That is a sigil stone. Removing that will close this gate, and we get transported back outside in consequence.”

“It’s that simple?” Burd asked in disbelief.

“Yes.” He walked forward and reached out to yank the stone free, then stepped back a few paces. The massive chains holding the spiked ring in place where the stone would hover started breaking as
usual and things began to fall apart. Then things went white and they were suddenly back outside Bruma next to a destroyed gate. It was full night.

“...It was an honor to serve with you, sir,” Burd said. “Now that I’ve seen how it’s done, I think my guardsmen and I can handle any new gates that open near Bruma.”

From behind them came an excited, “You did it, Captain! You closed the Oblivion Gate! We didn’t think we’d ever see you alive again!”

Burd turned with a smile. “Believe me, it was no picnic. But thanks to our friends here, I now know we can close these hell-gates. We can defend Bruma!”

He smiled as Burd and his men walked back toward the city excitedly talking to each other, then started for Cloud Ruler Temple. When they arrived there were only a few patrolling Blades, one of whom was kind enough to tell him it was one in the morning.

Sora thanked him, found a clear spot, and set up the tent so they could get some rest.

There was a massive design on the floor inside the Great Hall when they entered after eating a cold breakfast. It vaguely resembled what Sora had seen in the Mysterium Xarxes. Jauffre was eventually tracked down and told about the previous evening’s excursion.

“Good work. Captain Burd and his guardsmen should be able to handle any additional gates, at least for now. But the Bruma Guard cannot defend the city indefinitely. The daedra of Oblivion are innumerable; the guardsmen of Bruma are not. We need to gather what allies we can before Bruma is hopelessly besieged. If the Mythic Dawn manages to open a Great Gate here, the city will need a stronger garrison for there to be any hope of defending it. Please speak to the rulers of the other cities of Cyrodiil, as well as the Elder Council. Ask them to send aid to Bruma before it is too late. Oh, and Martin has made some progress. You should speak with him before you leave.”

Martin, when queried, said, “I’ve figured out another item needed for the ritual to open the portal to Camoran’s Paradise. It is a counterpart to the first: the blood of a Divine. This was a terrible puzzle to me. Unlike the Daedric Lords, the gods have no artifacts, and do not physically manifest themselves in our world. How then to obtain the blood of a god? But Jauffre solved it. The blood of Tiber Septim himself, who became Talos, one of the Divines.”

“When would a person possibly find that?”

“This is a secret remembered only by the Blades, passed down from one Grandmaster to the next. Jauffre should tell it to you himself.”

‘For the love of cannoli, we were just speaking to him!’ Naturally, Jauffre had finished his breakfast and was elsewhere, which necessitated tracking him down again. The Grandmaster marked the spot on Sora’s map, a place called Sancre Tor. It was north-northeast of Chorrol and a bit south of west from Bruma.

“We’ll get it after we speak to the rulers,” he decided. “No sense going there now, coming back here, and then heading out again. So, Cheydinhal.”

His friends nodded, so they set out. “This is going to suck,” Lorenzo said, “canvassing every city in a gigantic circle.”

“Afraid of a little exercise?” Renato taunted playfully.
Lorenzo sneered and sent shocks into the Sun, just enough to make his sideburns straighten out briefly.

“Pfft. My hair already defies gravity,” Renato said. “I don’t need static electricity on top of that.”

“I don’t have time to chat right now,” Count Andel Indarys said sharply when Sora approached and passed on Bruma’s request for aid. “With that Oblivion Gate looming outside the city walls, we’re bracing for an attack. Perhaps we can speak later.”

Sora eyed his friends. Another gate they hadn’t noticed coming in? “A gate?”

“It manifested just outside the West Gate of our city. Nothing’s come out of it yet, but we fear the worst. My son, Farwil, has taken some fellow Knights of the Thorn and entered the gate bravely in hopes of meeting the enemy head-on. If you want to help, and we can use all the help we can get, head over to the gate and lend a hand to the guards.”

He nodded and reversed himself so he could leave. “I swear, I did not see a gate on the way in.”

“Neither did we, Sora,” Viper said. “Maybe it was the lighting conditions?”

It turned out to be north of the west gate and could easily have been concealed by the trees as they walked the road in toward the city. Or perhaps they just had not been paying proper attention. A guard stopped them when they got close. “I’d advise you to keep your distance from that accursed portal. Although, nothing has come through ever since Farwil entered.”

“How long ago?”

“About two days ago, Count Indarys’s son, Farwil, entered the gate with six other men. We haven’t heard from them since. The Count fears the worst, and has posted guards here so we can watch and see if anyone comes back out. So far, nothing. At this point, Count Indarys is offering a reward for the recovery of his son from inside the gate … or confirmed news of his demise.”

“Right,” he said and strode toward the gate with his family.

Once inside it wasn’t long before they found one of the men in a pool of blood. Then another, and a third.

“This is not comforting,” he murmured as they ducked into a cave system. Two more bodies were found along the way, but on exiting they stumbled over Farwil and the last man.

“It’s about time someone got here,” Farwil said angrily. “What took you so long?”

“I’m going to make a wild guess and say you’re one of the Knights of the Thorn.”

Farwil’s expression lightened up. “We are knights sworn to uphold the laws of Cheydinhal. We fear no being, and we strike fast and true as lightning. Many wish to join our ranks—"

Sora’s brow started to go up in patent disbelief.

“—as we are of the highest echelon. Only a select few—”

‘Your drinking buddies and sycophants?’

“—may join the finest force ever to grace the lands of Cyrodiil. Until now, we numbered only seven,
but attacked like a regiment. Our enemies quake at our approach, and falter at our charge. Huzzah!"

He rubbed his eyes to hide his expression, ostensibly to give them some relief from the lingering ash and smoke, then sighed.

“I set out with the rest of the Knights on the face of our fine world. When we arrived, we were overwhelmed.”

‘By what? Illusionary fans?’

“I myself was able to kill perhaps two score of them, but they just kept coming. Only Bremman and I remain alive. However, with you here now, we can take the sigil stone from that citadel and complete our quest for the good of all Cheydinhal! Huzzah!”

Sora eyed his friends despairingly, then said, “Let’s get you out of here.”

Farwil’s expression went from somewhat nervously pleased to angry again. “Are you mad? A Knight of the Thorn never returns home until the mission is done. It’s our way. Now, in my father’s name as Count Indarys of Cheydinhal, I order you to lead me to that sigil stone. I suggest we use the Reman Sweep Formation. You’ll assault and we’ll guard the rear flank. Onward and upward! Huzzah!”

“One moment,” he said, holding up a finger, then backed away so he could convene with his family. “Kami-sama, what an idiot.”

“I’ll keep them back,” Viper promised. “You three clear the way.”

He nodded. “Thank you. Let’s go, then.”

Halfway up the tower Bremman sidled up to him and whispered, “Don’t judge him too harshly. Most of what he says is … fabricated. But he’s young, and therefore quite brash and inexperienced. All he wants to do is please his father. I’ve known him since he was a lad, and fighting to defend Cheydinhal is in his heart. I just wish his heart was bigger than his hubris.”

Sora huffed a laugh and nodded, then continued on, clearing the way with Renato and Lorenzo. When they finally reached the top of the citadel he gestured toward the sigil stone. “Care to do the honors?”

Farwil looked surprised, but nodded after a moment and stepped forward. But before he reached for it he asked, “What will happen when I take it?”

“Things will start falling apart, the whole place will shake, and then it’ll go white. We’ll be safely back outside Cheydinhal then. We’ve done this a bunch of times already. Go ahead.”

Farwil looked surprised when they ended up standing in front of a ruined gate. “We made it! Er … I mean … victory is ours once again! Huzzah! You’ve done well. I wouldn’t have expected such bravery from someone who isn’t a Knight of the Thorn. Now that this battle between good and evil has been won, and the day is ours, you should go speak with my father. He will reward you greatly for escorting me home and assisting in the closure of the Oblivion Gate.

“And, since you have led us to victory, I am hereby giving you the honorary title of a Knight of the Thorn. Your name shall be revered and your deeds placed into song to be performed by the greatest bards for generations to come. Congratulations! As a Knight of the Thorn, you are expected to carry this symbol of your knighthood. Carry it proudly and wear it well. No more will the gate threaten the good people of Cheydinhal. The Knights of the Thorn have triumphed once more!” Farwil handed
over medallions and turned to leave.

There was a house of some sort not far off, and Sora wondered if the young elf lived outside of his father’s castle. He was about to head into the city when Bremman stopped him to say, “Thank you for getting me out of that cursed place. Perhaps in the future, Farwil will learn patience and careful planning before dragging us into a situation like that again.” He, too, turned, and followed Farwil to that structure.

It was full dark and the guards they met on the way back to the city said it was approximately ten, so they slept at an inn. Even worried about his son’s fate, they did not expect the Count to be anxiously twiddling his fingers in the hall awaiting their return.

He did, however, hasten over to them the second he spotted them in his domain. “I’m pleased to finally meet the savior of Cheydinhal. I’m also overjoyed that you saved my son’s life. I realize he’s trying at times, and he speaks before he thinks, but he’s still my son, and I adore him greatly.”

‘At least you see him for who he is,’ he thought with a faint smile.

“I’m sure he was difficult to travel with, and I respect your patience. Most would have given him up for dead rather than deal with his ego. Anyway, I digress. I’m sure you wish to hear of your reward.”

‘Well, no, more the part where you agree to aid Bruma, but all right…’

“I’m in possession of two fine weapons. They’re both heirlooms of the Indarys family, held in the castle for several generations. I’d take great pleasure in bestowing one of them upon you. Please, choose the Thornblade or the Staff of Indarys.”

He bit his lip in thought, then said, “Thornblade, I think, please.”

“The Thornblade it is,” Indarys said cheerfully and handed it over. “Again, I thank you on behalf of all the citizens of Cheydinhal, and I especially thank you as an elated father. And, with the Oblivion Gate closed, I can now gladly send aid to Bruma. And if you’re ever in the market for a house in our fine city, do let me know!”

Chorrol was next, if only so they could stop in at the castle and catch everyone up, and then they headed to the castle in Chorrol to seek aid for Bruma.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Countess Valga of Chorrol. I wish I had time to chat, but I’m afraid I am in the middle of an investigation. As for Bruma, while I understand their need, Chorrol’s own defense must come first. I cannot spare any soldiers as long as Chorrol remains under threat from the Oblivion Gate outside our walls.”

He nodded and took off again. “I’m starting to think they know when we’re around,” he muttered as they backtracked to the gate by the stables and scanned the horizon. He spotted the damn thing and took off at a jog. Thankfully it was day when they emerged safely so they returned to Chorrol Castle to see the Countess.

“It is quite nice to see you again. I hope you are fairing well,” she said.

“Can we talk about the possibility of aid for Bruma, My Lady?”

“Your reputation precedes you, Hero of Kvatch,” she replied.
‘You mean someone filled you in after you sent me away last time to close that gate.’

“You have done my city a great service by closing the Oblivion Gate. I will now gladly send soldiers to aid in the defense of Bruma. Consider it done.”

Their next stop was the Imperial City, to see Chancellor Ocato.

“From the Blades, did you say?” Ocato was another elf, a lighter-skinned one and quite tall, so an Altmer. “Jauffre sent you? What’s this about? Quickly, now.”

“I’ve been asked to request aid on behalf of Bruma. There is reason to believe our enemy will attempt to open a Great Gate there as they did at Kvatch.”

“This is terrible news. Under normal circumstances, I would dispatch a legion or two to Bruma immediately. But the circumstances are not normal, are they? I’ve been pleading for troops for Cyrodiil for weeks, but the generals assure me that the entire Imperial Army is already fully committed. Besides … I’d have a full-scale political crisis on my hands if I tried to pull any troops out of the provinces. I’m sorry, but the cities of Cyrodiil will have to fend for themselves for the time being.”

He smiled and nodded, then left once Ocato scurried off to do whatever it was people on the Elder Council did. It was not long past noon, so they pressed on toward Skingrad.

“The Count will not see you now. Not now, not ever. He sees no one. I’m Mercator Hosidus, his steward. I believe that’s all you need to know.”

Sora blinked and said, “I come on behalf of Bruma to seek aid for them. There is the possibility of a Great Gate opening there the likes of which destroyed Kvatch.”

Mercator visibly paused, then said, “I believe the Count may want to handle this matter personally. Wait here. I will tell the Count you are waiting to see him.” He wandered off up the grand staircase and disappeared from view, but Sora could hear a door up there opening and closing.

“Really unfriendly,” he murmured to his family.

“Either the man is ridiculously busy and can’t be bothered with random people dropping in to complain about grain prices, or…” Lorenzo trailed off, eyeing the huge portrait on the wall next to the stairs.

Mercator came back a short time later, followed a minute later by a handsome enough older man with oddly reddish eyes. He was a dead ringer for the man in portrait but for that one detail. “I’m sorry. We’ve not met. I’m Janus Hassildor, Count Skingrad. While Skingrad is threatened by an Oblivion Gate, I cannot spare any soldiers for Bruma. Whatever you may think of me, I still protect my own.”

‘What in blazes is he talking about?’ he wondered.

“This is my city, and Mehrunes Dagon will not have it while I remain Count of Skingrad.”

“We’ll just go close that gate first, then. Thank you for your time, sir.”

It was getting dark by the time they exited the castle, so even if they closed the gate in record time (they would) they would likely have to spend the night at an inn in town before braving the castle
once more.

“I’m sensing a pattern here,” Renato said dryly. “I think when we get to the next one we should look around thoroughly first, take out any gates, and then go pester them for aid.”

“Oh, I agree,” he said, annoyed that they would have to walk all the way back down the path to the city, find the right gate, go take care of the Oblivion Gate, and then have to make that same walk twice more the next day.

Mercator greeted them with a wide smile the next morning. “Your bravery is the talk to Skingrad. Well done! I assume you wish to ask for aid, so allow me to see if the Count is available to see you.” Mercator trotted off up the stairs and was back a short time later, followed by Hassildor.

“Mehrunes Dagon has no more love for my kind than for my mortal subjects,” the Count said after greeting them.

Sora noticed that time, as the Count was actually smiling, that he had eyeteeth like a vampire out of some weird romance or fantasy novel. ‘I suppose that’d explain the eyes and the remark he just made. And why he avoids seeing people.’

“Less, perhaps, as we make poor slaves. You have helped me by closing the Oblivion Gate near Skingrad. I will likewise help you by sending aid to Bruma.”

Sora thanked the man and they hastened off toward Kvatch, mainly because it was on the way, even if it did mean traversing the switchback again. Savlian was looking well, though he was out of armor. He greeted them and asked what brought them to Kvatch.

“Ah, we’re presently on a journey to find aid for Bruma and since we were headed to Anvil we thought we’d stop and see how you were all doing.”

“We are well, but… Bruma? What is happening there?”

“Word has it that a Great Gate might be opened there.”

“As it happened here?” Savlian asked in surprise. “I have few enough men to spare, but you have more than earned our help. I will send what aid I can. Bruma must not share the fate of our city!”

After Renato had a chance to check to see if anyone needed healing, they departed back down the switchback and continued on to Anvil. Sora scanned the area very carefully as they approached, but perhaps the four gates they had already closed in the Anvil area was more than enough to get an immediate agreement to send aid.

“Don’t know if this is true,” one of the guards said as they approached the castle, “but I heard a gang of all female thieves is preying on the married menfolk of the town.”

Sora paused to stare at the man, wondering why he brought it up, and then realized, ‘Yeah, I’m a hero or something. Of course he’d mention it.’

“If you want to help us do something about it, go talk to Gogan and Maelona. Let’s just say Gogan is intimately involved and leave it at that.”

Sora nodded and started walking again. Inside the Great Hall there were the usual guards and servants. There was also a man dressed in low-class clothing sitting on one of the benches, just staring up at the Countess. It was a little creepy, he thought.
“I am Millona Umbranox, Countess of Anvil,” the lady said. “I hope you enjoy your visit. I trust you will give us no cause to regret our hospitality to strangers.”

He smiled and inclined his head briefly. “I was hoping to speak with you on behalf of Bruma…”

After he was done speaking she said, “I’ve heard that you closed the Oblivion Gate outside Anvil.”

‘And yet a moment ago you pretended you had no clue who I am.’

“I honor you for your bravery and service to my city. With Anvil safe for the moment, I will send some of my best soldiers to bolster the Bruma garrison. Don’t worry. Anvil’s soldiers are worth two from anywhere else. Bruma will not fall!”

Their approach to Bravil revealed yet another gate, so they took care of that before even considering entering the city. “Are we the only people closing these damn things?” he asked in frustration.

“Technically, I closed that one,” Viper said.

He blew a flat raspberry at his Mist. “And you were very speedy. I very much like that about the whole flying thing you’ve got going on.”

The count there was thrilled to help, so they spent the night at an inn and pressed on to Leyawiin in the morning. Leyawiin had two gates threatening it, so Viper took the one farthest away and he, Renato, and Lorenzo took the nearer one. He was angered to see a dead horse outside his gate, and another one not far inside. Did daedra even eat?

The count of Leyawiin agreed to send aid to Bruma, and they rested for the night before starting the journey north, to Sancre Tor, to retrieve the armor of Tiber Septim. On the way they were distracted by more gates and quickly dispatched them, including one up the hill from where Jauffre had marked Sancre Tor on his map. That little diversion saw them finding Hermaeus Mora’s Shrine, but they quickly retreated.

Sancre Tor was a bit convoluted and involved scouring the entire place for the animated remains of the four men Jauffre had mentioned. Once each was soundly beaten (Sora kept their gear as souvenirs) they steadily marched off to deal with some barrier the first one mentioned. Once they caught up the four ghosts removed what blocked their way, and Sora was able to claim the armor.

The Great Hall was no different than before. Martin sat there at his table (another one had appeared to hold yet more books) and read. Sora approached and laid the armor down on an open spot.

Martin looked up and his eyes widened. “The Septim blood may flow through my veins, but you have the soul of a hero. The armor of Tiber Septim himself! Jauffre will be amazed to see it.” He paused. “You can reassure Jauffre that I will not destroy the armor. All I need is a scraping of Talos’s divine blood. The Blades are as touchy as priests about relics of Tiber Septim, it seems!”

He smiled out of politeness, though he was actually growing to like Martin a great deal. The man was dealing so well with his elevation from simple priest of shaky faith to the next emperor. “Is there anything else I can do?”

Martin nodded. “Ah, yes. While you were gone, I’ve made some progress in deciphering the Mysterium Xarxes ritual. The third item we need is a Great Welkynd Stone. You may have run
across lesser Welkynd Stones; they are fairly common in Ayleid ruins.”

‘Can’t say as I’ve bothered to duck into one yet.’

“But a Great Welkynd Stone will not be easy to come by. They have been plundered one by one over the years, due to their great value to mages and occultists. There is only one place that is rumored to still contain one: the ruins of the Ayleid city of Miscarcand. Many have perished seeking its Great Stone, but nothing else will do, so you must succeed where all others have failed.”

“I see. What do you know of the place?”

Martin slid a map over and tapped the spot where Miscarcand was, so that Sora could update his own map, then said, “It’s the capital of one of the ancient Ayleid kingdoms which flourished in Cyrodiil before the rise of Men and one of the most extensive. It is said that the ruins are still haunted by the vengeful spirit of its last king. True or not, it is not a place to enter lightly. Be careful. You might find ‘Glories and Laments Among the Ayleid Ruins’ useful.” He slid the map away and tapped one of the many books on his desks. “I have the library’s copy here if you need it.”

Lorenzo picked the book up and set to reading.

“What makes these Great Stones so valuable?” he asked.

“The pinnacle of Ayleid magic. Once every Ayleid city had its Great Stone, but they’ve all been plundered over the centuries.”

When Martin said no more he nodded, still having little clue about the things, and waited until Lorenzo was finished with the book to say, “We shall return with the stone.”

Miscarcand—located between Skingrad and Kvatch—looked like any other of those white, arched ruins that frequently featured circular formations aboveground. Inside there were chandeliers with glowing blue-ish stones in them to light their way and what he came to recognize as very characteristic architecture. The elven races—or some of them, anyway—seemed to have a thing for being underground, and their craftsmanship was amazing in its skill and attention to detail.

As they cautiously wandered through the blue-stained white they picked up numerous small Welkynd Stones, “killed” a number of animated skeletons or headless, decaying bodies, and eventually came to a massive room with an equally massive Welkynd Stone on a pedestal not unlike the shapes of the chandeliers.

Guarding it was a less decomposed fellow who retained his head and the bare essentials of clothing, but he was easily enough dispatched and the stone claimed.

Returning to Cloud Ruler Temple saw them walk straight into an uncomfortable “discussion” between Martin and Jauffre.

“With all due respect, Sire, there must be another way. The risk is too great!”

“I know the risk. I was at Kvatch. But there is no other way. We have no choice.” Martin was wearing Tiber Septim’s armor and a longsword was hanging from his waist, which did not bode well.

“The Countess will never agree to it…”
“She will. She must.”

Baurus stood by awkwardly, gazing at the Grandmaster.

“The Blades are, as always, at your disposal,” Jauffre said.

Martin noticed them at that point and turned Sora’s way. “Ah, here you are! I have good news, of a sort.”

“Yes, let’s see what he thinks of your plan,” Jauffre said dryly.

Sora set the Great Welkynd Stone down on one of Martin’s tables to let them all know of the success before he was cornered by Martin.

“I knew I could count on you,” Martin said after giving the thing an interested look. “I never thought to see a Great Welkynd Stone! As beautiful as all the old tales tell… But of course its beauty is a mask for its deadly power, like everything created by the Ayleids. Now we only need one more item, and we’ll be ready to open a portal to Mankar Camoran’s realm…” The way Martin trailed off did again not bode well.

“I’m almost afraid to find out what that might be.”

Martin smiled disturbingly before saying, “I should have seen it sooner. It’s the counterpart to the Great Welkynd Stone, just as the first two were the opposed powers of the daedra and the divines.”

“That would lead me to believe it has something to do with an artifact of man, yet I don’t think this is where things are headed,’ he thought.

“Welkynd stones contain the concentrated power of Mundus; their counterparts are sigil stones, which are used to hold open Oblivion Gates. A Great Sigil Stone, then, is what we require.”

He frowned thoughtfully. Martin obviously did not mean the ones they had already been collecting as a side-effect of closing gates, else he would simply have asked for one. His mention of Kvatch… ‘But even the gate there we closed had a stone no different than the others we gathered.’ He eyed Martin and said, “What’s the catch? Does this have something to do with their plans to open a Great Gate?”

“Yes,” Martin said, looking gratified. “You probably won’t like it. Jauffre doesn’t. The Countess of Bruma certainly won’t. Great Sigil Stones are the anchors of Great Gates, the kind of gate the Mythic Dawn opened at Kvatch. The kind of gate the Mythic Dawn wants to open here to destroy Bruma.”

‘And then you and Cloud Ruler Temple,’ he thought. This Great Gate must have been opened before they ever arrived to fetch Martin from Kvatch, and all that remained after the fact was the “normal” one they ended up closing to allow access to the city’s gates and to find Martin. “So you want to let them open the three lesser gates they need for a Great Gate, and let them open that, too, all so we can get to the Great Sigil Stone,” he said slowly.

“I said you weren’t going to like it. The risk is great. I know, I was at Kvatch. I saw the terrible power of the daedric siege engine.”

‘A siege engine destroyed the city?’

“But we have no choice.”

‘People say that a lot, but I suppose in this case he may well be correct if we wish to...’
“The only way to recover the Amulet of Kings is to allow the Mythic Dawn to proceed with their plan to attack Bruma.”

“And by the armor you’re wearing, I must assume you won’t be up here and reasonably safe.”

“No. I’ll lead the defense of Bruma myself,” Martin replied, looking resolute. “If I am to be emperor, it’s time I started acting like one.”

That gave him pause. On the one hand, he hated the idea. Martin was no slouch in battle, but he was the only one who could relight the Dragonfires. To risk him in front of four gates like that… But on the other hand, he was rising to meet his responsibilities, and that wasn’t something Sora could disagree with. To be a living example of courage and resolve as Martin proposed would endear him to his people and give them strength, courage of their own, and belief in his ability. “It’s so risky,” he said slowly.

“Remember when we first met in Kvatch? I said I didn’t want any part of the gods’ plan.”

He thought back and unfortunately, he had already misplaced a lot of those memories given the frenetic pace of those events.

“I still don’t know if there is a divine plan. But I’ve come to realize that it doesn’t matter,” Martin continued. “What matters is that we act. That we do what’s right, when confronted with evil. That’s what you did at Kvatch. It wasn’t the gods that saved us, it was you.”

Sora felt unaccountably like blushing, but he hadn’t done it alone; his family had been there. He also found it inappropriately hilarious that it was a Daedric Lord who had brought them to Tamriel to play parts in this crisis. He wondered if that meant he and his family were avatars of some kind for Sheogorath, who even in his madness did not wish to see the end of the mortal plane—perhaps because it would signal the end of his amusements.

“Were you acting for the gods? I don’t know. But now it’s my turn to act.”

“…I don’t like it, but I approve, for what it’s worth.”

Martin exhaled in relief. “I explain myself to you so you understand me. And so you can explain to the Countess. I’m afraid she may take a bit more convincing than you.”

He nodded. “I will take on that challenge.”

“Good. Have her meet me in the Chapel of Talos for a council of war. That seems a fitting place to make such desperate plans.”

“Greetings. What news from Cloud Ruler Temple?” the Countess said.

Sora inclined his head and said, “A plan you will not be fond of, I admit, borne of some desperation. We seek a Great Sigil Stone, and that would mean allowing our enemy to open three Oblivion Gates so that they can then open a Great Gate, much like what happened at Kvatch, in order to get that stone. A lesser gate will not provide what’s required. If that were all that we needed I already have a collection of those.”

The Countess closed her eyes briefly. “A desperate plan indeed. This … prince? Emperor? Martin would risk my whole city to gain a Great Sigil Stone?”
“It is the only way to make it possible to recover the Amulet of Kings.”

“This is the only way to stop this invasion from Oblivion?” She let out a tense breath. “I must confess, you are the first person to speak of victory against these daedra. This war has seemed hopeless to me, but what else was there to do but hold on and wait for a hero to save us? And now it seems there is an heir to the throne after all, hidden at Cloud Ruler Temple … and perhaps a hero as well?”

He considered himself a reasonably sane man, not some hero of legend. “Martin waits at the Chapel of Talos. He would speak with you.”

“You avoid answering my question…” she said, calling him on his evasion. “Very well. Don’t think I doubt you. The rulers of Bruma have long had dealings with Cloud Ruler Temple. We know whom they serve. I will meet Martin at the Chapel. When all is ready, I will order my men to stop closing the gates and prepare for battle.”

On the way to the chapel he overheard a townsman saying, “Did you hear about the ghost of Lord Vlindrel? They say he haunts the road to Chorrol. Not that I’ve ever seen him myself, mind you.”

‘I don’t recall seeing him, either,’ he thought, ‘but perhaps he only comes out when it’s dark?’

“Your Highness?” the Countess said once they were assembled. “I an Narina Carvain, Countess of Bruma, at your service.”

Martin replied, “There is no need for any formality at this time. I am not emperor yet. And I am quite new to this notion of being heir to the throne. Thank you for coming. I know I am asking for a great deal of trust. But this is the only way. I would not suggest it otherwise.”

“Your champion has already explained the situation to me.”

‘I am a champion now?’ he thought, frowning when Renato smirked.

“I have agreed to it. We will not win this war through caution.”

“You have a rare gift, to know when desperation is the path of wisdom,” Martin said with every evidence of sincerity. “I will do everything in my power to defend your city, my Lady.”

She nodded. “If Bruma falls, the Empire falls with us. So be it.” The Countess turned to him and said, “I am ready for battle when you are, champion. What say you?”

He looked at Martin, who nodded. The look on his face was equal measures excitement, anxiety, and confidence. Sora said, “Let the battle begin.”

“So be it. Bruma’s fate in in the hands of the gods now … and yours.” She turned away and called out, “Burd! Deploy the troops for battle!”

“As you command, Countess,” the man said, and swiftly hastened off.

The rest of them exited at a more sedate pace, to give time to the troops stationed outside the castle to deploy to meet them at the battlefield. Townsfolk cheered as they walked by. And, as if to prove that no secret lasted very long, they were cheering for the emperor, for Martin.

As they neared the gates the other troops caught up, and it was not far down the road outside that a gate could be seen already tarnishing the landscape. Martin paused some distance away and began to give a speech, but Sora signaled his family to ready themselves for the appearance of any daedra.
They would take out as many as they could each time, to keep Martin that much safer. If the man was hit by spells, however, that was not so easily blocked.

Daedra began to emerge and they webbed into action, though Renato was using an oddly-shaped Leon to deliver arrows of destruction as a sop to the appearance of magic. A second gate opened, then a third. They kept ranging around taking out enemies and ensuring that Martin was still kicking. And then the Great Gate opened and they practically flew to it to enter.

What they saw after the transition was bizarre. There were three towers, one ahead and one to each side in a rough triangle, but the way immediately in front of them was all lava. They would have to find passage to either side rather than just sending Viper to fly to the rescue, for there was a massive siege engine bearing down on them, accompanied by numerous daedra.

“Left,” he ordered, and started running. It was tricky not only keeping from misstepping into the lava, but also dodging the fireballs shot from the guard towers, but they reached a doorway and ran through, barely pausing to do more than let Lorenzo paralyze every daedroth who dared be in the vicinity.

Out the other side was the way to the tower they needed and inside, from there, it was just like any other they had already seen. A race to the top, paralyzing daedra, a short pause for Renato to pick a lock, and they were at the platform that allowed access to the stone. Sora reached out and yanked the thing free.

Moments later they were back outside Bruma, in the midst of a battle still ongoing, and the siege engine was right over their heads. The closing of the gate, however, chopped the thing in half, rendering it so much scrap metal. Another side effect was the closure of the supporting lesser gates.

Once the dregs were cleared up the soldiers started to cheer. Martin wandered over to them and Sora offered up the Great Sigil Stone, which Martin accepted. “We won a great victory here today! We now have the means to recover the Amulet of Kings from Mankar Camoran.”

He had heard that name so many times already that it was starting to blur and sound unreal.

“But we need to act quickly. Camoran will not take long to recognize this danger. Remember, the portal will close behind you. Anything you need, carry it with you. I’ll have the ritual ready in the Great Hall when you arrive. Farewell.” Martin nodded and hastened off, Baurus and Jauffre guarding his flanks.

The red of the sky faded to reveal just how late it was, so they hastened off to Cloud Ruler Temple and set up the tent. Casks of water were broached so they could clean up, though a proper shower or bath would have been nicer, and they turned in for the night.

Breakfast was bread and cheese, and then they packed up and entered the Great Hall. The symbols on the floor had been augmented with the Great Welkynd Stone and the Great Sigil Stone. Both were floating there, one to either side, and Martin was back in his simple robes.

“I have everything in place for the ritual. I’ll open the portal whenever you’re ready. I don’t know what you’ll find in Camoran’s Paradise, but as the portal will close behind you … you’ll have to find another way back.”

“I can hope it’s like the gates,” he said.

Martin nodded. “I believe that Mankar Camoran acts as the ‘anchor’ for Paradise, just as a sigil stone anchors an Oblivion Gate in place. Kill him and you will unmake his Paradise.”
He exhaled slowly. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Farewell, my friend. Our fate is in your hands. Bring back the Amulet of Kings. Now, brace yourself.” Martin moved away, to stand at the edge closest to the massive fireplace, and raised his hand. With magic he brought the ritual to life; a portal appeared, not dissimilar in appearance to an Oblivion Gate.

Sora took a deep breath and stepped through.

He ended up on the other side alone, which was a bit frightening, but at the same time he had expected that his family could not follow, not unless they had enacted some convoluted and acrobatically flexible configurations of their bodies in order to all be brought through. How they were reacting back at Cloud Ruler Temple…

Paradise was gorgeous. Blue skies with wisps of white clouds in a time approaching either dawn or sunset. Given that whole Mythic Dawn thing, he suspected dawn. The trees were large and well-leaved, plants grew everywhere in abundance, and there was either a very large lake or an ocean nearby, in glimmering blue.

As he was preparing to cloak himself a voice echoed around in his head. “So, the cat’s-paw of the Septims arrives at last. You didn’t think you could take me unawares, here of all places? In the Paradise that I created? Look now upon my Paradise, Gaiar Alata, in the old tongue. A vision of the past … and the future.”

When he heard no more he followed the path of stones in front of him, deftly avoiding the hostile creatures wandering about, and happened upon a woman who seemed to have misplaced her shirt.

“So you found your way to Gaiar Alata at last,” she said disparagingly. “Don’t we have enough troubles here, without you adding to them? Leave us alone. Your quarrel is with Mankar Camoran, not us poor fools.”

“Gaiar Alata?”

“It’s the Master’s name for this place. We usually just call it Paradise. This here is the Savage Garden. At the top of that mountain lies the Terrace of Dawn, which leads up to Mankar Camoran’s palace … Carac Agaialor. Beneath the mountain lies the Forbidden Grotto, the only way out of the Savage Garden.”

“Why call it the Savage Garden?”

“Everyone here died in the Master’s service,” she replied. “As the Master promised, we are now immortal, like the daedra. But our life here is a nightmare. The creatures of the garden torment us endlessly. When they kill us, we are soon reborn and the cycle begins again. No one has yet found a way to leave the garden, except those few given the Bands of the Chosen and allowed to enter the Forbidden Grotto. But they never return, so we don’t know what fate awaits them.”

He nodded and moved on, respecting her reluctance to bother with him in the first place. He kept walking, careful to dodge any hostiles, taking some enjoyment in the scenery. The architecture resembled the Ayleid ruins he’d seen numerous times.

“Behold the Savage Garden,” Camoran’s voice came again, “where my disciples are tempered for a higher destiny, to rule over Tamriel Reborn. If you are truly the hero of destiny, as I hope, the garden will not hold you for long. Lift your eyes to Carac Agaialor, my seat at the pinnacle of Paradise. I shall await you there.”
The portion of the Savage Garden he could traverse was not actually all that large, so it wasn’t long before he ran across an actual Dremora.

“You destroyed the Sigil Tower at Ganonah,” it said. “My kin say you fought well.”

“Right. I’m after Mankar Camoran.”

“You speak directly like one of my people almost. I’m glad I did not kill you immediately.”

‘Considering how many of your sort I’ve already killed, I wouldn’t be too sure of your prowess.’

“There is but one way out of the garden.”

Sora looked to his left and saw a pseudo-bridge and a door into the mountainside.

“I guard that path. You will travel that path, and it will bring me honor to defeat you. But you shamed my kin at Ganonah. To bring you into my service… That would also bring me honor. So I offer you a choice. Would you confront me in battle? Or offer me service?”

Sora shot out a web and solidified the threads; the Dremora dropped like a stone. Sora rifled through his gear and turned up a few potions and a set of wrist bands that glowed a sullen red. He took the bands and started off along the bridge.

Camoran decided to talk at him again as he walked. “How little you understand! You cannot stop Lord Dagon. The Principalities have sparkled as gems in the black reaches of Oblivion since the First Morning. Many are their names and the names of their masters: the Coldharbour of Meridia—”

‘Wow, even I know better than that and I’ve only been on this world for a short time.’

“—Peryite’s Quagmire, Moonshadows of Mephala, and … Dawn’s Beauty, the Principedom of Lorkhan, misnamed ‘Tamriel’ by deluded mortals.”

‘Is he seriously suggesting that Nirn is yet another Plane of Oblivion? And even if it is, so what? It’s still the mortal plane.’

“Yes, you understand now. Tamriel is just one more Daedric realm of Oblivion, long since lost to its Prince when he was betrayed by those that served him. Lord Dagon cannot invade Tamriel, his birthright! He comes to liberate the Occupied Lands!”

Sora rolled his eyes and continued to enjoy the view of the ocean from the bridge, but when no more came he entered the cave at the end.

Naturally, Camoran piped up again. “Ask yourself! How is it that mighty gods die, yet the Daedra stand incorruptible? How is it that the Daedra forthrightly proclaim themselves to man, while the gods cower behind statues and the faithless words of traitor-priests? It is simple. They are not gods at all. The truth has been in front of you since first you were born: the Daedra are the true gods of this universe.”

‘And Aedra and Daedra are but two sides of the same coin, you moron. Even what few books I read made that clear enough. That makes all of them gods. But if it is true that the so-called Aedra were the ones to lend their power and substance to create this world, then they are already in it. They just don’t have the same agency as a Daedric Lord due to how they were involved.’

“Julianos and Dibella and Stendarr are all Lorkhan’s betrayers, posing as divinities in a principality that has lost its guiding light. What are scholarship, love, and mercy when compared to fate, night,
and destruction? The gods you worship are trifling shadows of First Causes. They have tricked you for Ages. Why do you think your world has always been contested ground, the arena of powers and immortals? It is Tamriel, the realm of Change, brother to Madness, sister to Deceit.”

He pursed his lips at the “brother to Madness” part.

“Your false gods could not entirely rewrite history. Thus you remember tales of Lorkhan, vilified, a dead trickster, whose heart came to Tamriel. But if a god can die, how does his heart survive? He is daedroth! Tamriel ae daedroth!”

Was this why Sheogorath had stepped outside his own universe to find a champion? To find someone not lifelong indoctrinated in the beliefs of this world? Because he had to admit, as annoying as he found Camoran’s ceaseless nattering, he could also see how the man could win so many followers with that sort of rhetoric.

“‘This Heart is the heart of the world, for one was made to satisfy the other.’ You all remember this. It is in every legend. Daedra cannot die, so your so-called gods cannot erase him from your minds completely.”

He was finally able to pay attention to his surroundings. The tunnel led immediately into water, though judging by the person he saw farther along, it would only come to mid-calf, his knees at best. He did not bother to speak to any of the people milling about inside and instead pressed on, eventually coming to a dark door with symbols on it glowing the same sullen red as the bands he was carrying.

It refused to open and a test of harmonization showed the he was prevented from using one of his more interesting tricks. With no other choice he put the bands he’d taken from that guard on and watched in dismay as they locked into place. The door, however, then easily gave way to his touch.

He was barely down the tunnel when a red-robed elf scurried up to him and said, “You wear the bands, but you’re no prisoner.”

‘Did my clothing give me away?’ he thought sarcastically.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to kill Mankar Camoran,” he said.

To his surprise the elf said, “Can you really do it? Can you bring this eternal nightmare to an end? Can you defeat Mankar Camoran? And free all the souls of the poor fools who followed him? Listen, I can help you. You need my help if you are ever to leave the Forbidden Grotto.”

‘Not much of a grotto considering it’s a smoky cave with lava and the sounds of people in pain.’

“Why would you help me?”

“I was at the sack of Kvatch. They had no chance. We took them by surprise, and we carried the walls in the first assault. But they fought on anyway. Desperately. They seemed to think this decadent, mundane world of theirs was worth defending. I was slain after the battle was over. Three townsfolk hiding in the cellar attacked me when I entered their house, hunting down survivors. They tore me to pieces, although I have no doubt they were immediately killed by my companions. I’ve had plenty of time to ponder my deeds since I came here. Ponder, and regret. An eternity of regret.”

“You wouldn’t last a week in the Christian concept of Hell, then,” he thought.

“For my weakness, the Master sent me here, to torture my former comrades who showed similar
ingratitude for his gift of eternal life.”

He wondered if they took turns at the torturing part, and if the whole point was to make them all more like daedra in the end. “How can you help me?”

“No one wearing the Bands of the Chosen can leave this grotto. The doors will not open, and there is no other way out. I can remove them, but I will need time on my side. The Dremora overseer will be here any minute to check up on me. You need to play along until he leaves. Just act like a prisoner, and do as I say. Once Orthe leaves, we can find a quiet spot to remove these bands.”

Sora leaned against the tunnel wall and sought out his intuition. He already had a hard time believing the elf was lying, but he wanted some kind of supporting evidence. “Fine. I’ll play along,” he said, but thought, ‘And I will ensure it if I must.’

“Good. Follow me, and don’t worry. You can trust me.”

‘That usually implies otherwise, but whatever.’

He followed the elf over to a cave area with a river of lava flowing down the middle, though the level was quite low. Suspended over it were two cages. One was down in the lava and one was waiting up top. Nearby was a lever.

He was about to ask what next when a Dremora stalked in to say, “What’s going on here? Who’s this?”

“A prisoner, sent in by—”

“Show me some respect, worm! Unless you want to end up in the cages with them.”

“…Yes, kynreeve, sir. This prisoner was sent in by Kathutet for questioning. I was about to begin.”

“This is not one of Mankar Camoran’s chattels from the garden. Who is he?”

“Nothing escapes your vigilance, kynreeve. Kathutet wondered as well. This is why he sent him for questioning.”

The Dremora eyed him again. “Well… Carry on,” he ordered.

“Of course, kynreeve.” The elf looked his way and said sharply, “Prisoner! Into the cage, now!”

Sora walked up the open side and turned. The side slowly came up to cage him in, and the elf moved to the lever. He pulled it and Sora’s cage began to lower. A look down showed only lava and the heat was horrendous. It stopped just short of actually dunking him, though, and started the journey back up.

The back side dropped that time to give him an exit.

“I’ll meet you farther on,” the elf said. “I will have to kill myself so as to do so.”

Sora blinked at the matter-of-fact pronouncement, then shrugged and took off, blasting anything in his way, but being far more careful around red-robed figures. One of them could turn out to be his ally, and murdering him would be unfortunate, even if he would pop back up a short time later.

“You made it,” the elf said once they found each other again. “I didn’t think you’d have any trouble. Let’s get these bands off you… There,” he said as the bands clicked open and dropped away.

“You’re not a prisoner of the Forbidden Grotto any longer. Let me come with you. Let me help you
kill Mankar Camoran. I am not without power."

He had kept his word, so—“Sure, I wouldn’t mind the help.”

“I am no match for Mankar Camoran directly, but perhaps together we can find a way to defeat him. Lead on.”

He was about to get moving again when Camoran butted in with more chatter that reverberated in his head. “Well done, champion! Your progress is swift and sure. Perhaps you will reach me after all. You think I mock you? Not at all. In your coming I hear the footsteps of fate. You are the last defender of decadent Tamriel. I am the midwife of the Mythic Dawn, Tamriel Reborn. I welcome you, if you truly are the agent of fate. I tire of the self-styled heroes who set themselves in my path, only to prove unworthy in the event.”

He sighed and pressed on, eventually coming to a door much like the one he’d used to enter the grotto. This one opened immediately. Perhaps they were enchanted to check on both sides for the bands, but only open to them from the outside.

It led to more of the Savage Garden, but higher up the mountain. The path led them to a structure that seemed undamaged. Two red-robed people were milling around outside, but neither wore hoods, allowing him to see they were elves—Altmer probably, going by skin colour and height—and one was female.

Rather than ask questions he simply took them down with solidified webs and rifled through their clothing. A ring and some weapons caught his eye, so he took them as spoils, and he moved on through the only available door. It was large and not unlike one he had seen at Miscarcand.

The interior was in fabulous shape, with more of those bladed chandeliers, a set of stairs to either side leading up and back toward the entrance, and up ahead was a series of low steps and a throne. Sora walked forward, shooting out his webs without breaking stride, and killed the man before he had a chance to start babbling again.

The air went hazy and red, so he quickly rifled through the man’s clothing to retrieve anything that looked interesting, plus the Amulet of Kings, then dashed off to the side to avoid the chunks of stone from parts of the ceiling collapsing.

When the dust and sound cleared he was back at Cloud Ruler Temple. Renato, Lorenzo, and Viper whipped over and started reassuring themselves he was fine.

“You found a way back!” Martin said.

Sora took in the change in clothing; Martin was dressed in fancy robes with fur trimmings, the sort of thing he had seen the emperor wearing.

“Does this mean…?”

“Mankar Camoran is dead,” he said, and offered up the Amulet of Kings. “Here. This belongs to you.”

“Belongs to me? The Amulet of Kings?” Martin took it almost warily. “So you and Jauffre have said. If it is true, if the emperor really was my father, then I should be able to wear it. Only those of Septim blood can wear the Amulet of Kings.”

“Stop stalling,” he said gently.
Martin smiled. “Yes, of course. What am I waiting for? After all, this is my destiny … and no man can deny his destiny.” He lifted it up and slung the cord over his head. The amulet settled into place with a faint rustle of metal.

“You see? You are indeed Uriel’s son.”

“I didn’t really need the amulet to tell me that,” Martin replied. “I’ve known it was true since you first told me back in Kvatch. But it is one thing to talk of becoming emperor, and quite another to actually be the emperor.”

“Be that as it may, but you are the emperor.”

Martin shook his head slightly. “Not yet. Until we relight the Dragonfires, the gates can continue to open, and Mehrunes Dagon’s invasion continues. While you were gone I sent a messenger to Chancellor Ocato. He waits for us in the Imperial City.”

“I remember him,” he said.

“He is the head of the Elder Council, and the Council rules in the emperor’s absence. I don’t expect any objections from the Elder Council, but we should defer to their authority. Let us go there at once, before the enemy can recover from Mankar Camoran’s death.”

The Elder Council Chamber comprised the entirety of the ground floor of the structure but for a hallway that ringed it. The table inside was massive and had numerous seats around it, and the ceiling was so high up he could see nothing but darkness.

“I have been expecting you,” Ocato said. “The full Council has already considered the matter of Martin’s claim to the Imperial Throne in detail.” He went down on one knee and said formally, “Martin Septim, on behalf of the Elder Council, I accept your claim to the Imperial Throne. We should arrange the coronation ceremony as soon as—”

“Chancellor Ocato! Chancellor Ocato!” cried someone racing into the chamber. He wore full plate armor and had a hand at his sword to keep it from tangling with his legs. “Chancellor Ocato! The city is under attack! Oblivion Gates have opened, and daedra are inside the walls! The guard is overwhelmed!”

“Courage, soldier. We have an emperor again. Your Highness, what are your orders? Shall the Guard fall back to the palace?”

“No,” Martin said decisively. “If we let ourselves get besieged in the palace we’re doomed. We must get to the Temple of the One immediately.”

“As you command, sire. Guards! Form up and protect the emperor! To the Temple of the One!”

Outside was a madhouse of sullen red skies, daedra, and soldiers. Lightning arced from Storm Atronachs and large hammers came down on guards. Martin went to begin fighting, but Sora grabbed his arm rudely. “Hey, we don’t have time for this! Your duty is to relight the fires. So come on!”

Martin cast a lingering look at the fighting taking place, then nodded sharply. “To the Temple of the One!”

They burst through the door into the Temple District and Sora jerked to a stop so fast that Martin
nearly plowed into him. Up ahead was a massive red figure with more arms than was sane and symbols in a darker red all over its body.

“We’re too late,” Martin breathed. “Mehrunes Dagon is here! Lighting the Dragonfires will no longer save us… The barriers that protected us from Oblivion are gone.”

He spared a moment to eye Martin askance. “Giving up now isn’t an option. Can we cast him back into Oblivion?” he asked, then went back to keeping an eye on the giant.

“I don’t see how… Mortal weapons may hurt him, but now that he is physically here in Tamriel, they have no power to actually destroy him.”

“The Amulet of Kings is divine. What about that?”

“Wait… Yes. It was given to mortals by Akatosh. It contains His divine power…” Martin frowned. “But how to use this power against Dagon? The amulet was not intended as a weapon…”

Sora watched another soldier get smashed to paste up ahead, and shot out a web to take down a daedroth that got too close to their position.

“I have an idea. One last hope. I must reach the Dragonfires in the Temple of the One. You’ll just have to trust me on this. I now know what I was born to do. I’ll need your help, though, to get past Mehrunes Dagon, somehow.”

“Oh, I’ll get you there. But I hope you’ll forgive me ahead of time if I suddenly reach out and yank you around a bit.”

Martin smiled and nodded. “Let us go.”

“All right. Keep close and follow me. Guys?”

His family nodded, so Sora took off, leaning heavily on his intuition to guide his steps. He did have to yank Martin to the side a time or two to avoid lightning strikes from Atronachs, but aside from that, and the creeping sensation of horror up his spine from getting so damn close to Dagon, he was able to get Martin to the temple doors and whip them open so the man could race through.

He and his family raced in after him. Martin called back, “I do what I must do. I cannot stay to rebuild Tamriel. That task falls to others. Farewell. You’ve been a good friend in the short time that I’ve known you. But now I must go. The Dragon waits.” He reached the center of the temple just as the ceiling and parts of the walls were ripped free and Dagon stepped “inside”.

Sora and his family backed up against the far wall as Martin faced Dagon from the center. Then beams of light—eight of them, then nine total—emerged from around Martin’s chest. A bright white and gold light erupted, obscuring the area, but Sora could see that Martin was rising up into the air on a stream of gold.

He vanished and Dagon roared.

A massive gold dragon appeared overhead. It fought Dagon with flame and tooth and claw; and won. Then it landed, threw back its head, and glowed so brightly Sora had to shield his eyes, suffering a minor flashback to the Fated Day because of it. When he could see again it was a statue of stone, an enduring reminder of Martin’s sacrifice.
Aside from the loss of Martin, immortalized in the statue of his victory’s vehicle, and the damage to the temple, there was little to immediately notice. The sky had returned to its customary blue and the sounds of fighting had stopped, though night was sure to fall shortly.

Chancellor Ocato scurried in looking relieved and pleased. “What happened? Where’s Martin? I must congratulate him! Mehrunes Dagon is defeated! Cast back into Oblivion! We’ve won!”

He pursed his lips, then tilted his head at the statue. “Martin is … gone.”

“What do you mean … gone? We saw the temple dome explode, the avatar of Akatosh appear…” Ocato looked over, then back. “That was Martin?”

“Yes. I think he shattered the Amulet of Kings.” It was the only explanation he could think of, anyway.

“…The joined blood of kings and gods. The Amulet of Kings. The divine power of Akatosh.”

“And Martin’s blood, too…”

“Then Martin is gone,” Ocato said, his expression shifting to one where Sora actually thought the man might lose his composure for real.

“But the gates are sealed, it seems.”

“Yes. Sealed forever. Mehrunes Dagon and his ilk can never threaten Tamriel again. Martin is dead, but he died an emperor, and a hero to rival Tiber Septim.”

‘Eh? What little I read about him waffled all over that and made him sound like a violent maniac at times.’ “What of the Empire?”

“This victory is not without cost. We’ve lost Martin Septim. What an emperor he might have made,” Ocato said wistfully. “His sacrifice was necessary, but it leaves the Empire without an emperor. I don’t know what happens now,” Ocato said (surprising the hell out of Sora, who was accustomed to the lies of politicians).

“There are troubled times ahead for the Empire, but now is not the time to worry about the future.” Ocato’s voice took on a somewhat falsely cheerful tone. “Let’s just give thanks that we’re alive. As the Chancellor of the Elder Council, my concern now is how to choose his successor. We can hold the Empire together in the short term, but I don’t know what will happen. The provinces have been restive for years, even before the latest crisis.”

Sora nodded and was about to make his excuses when Ocato brightened up again. “In my capacity as Lord High Chancellor of the Elder Council, I hereby proclaim you Champion of Cyrodiil! And, as a small token of gratitude for your service to the Empire, I will order a suit of Imperial Dragon armor made for you. It is normally worn only by the emperor himself. But you deserve no less, Champion. You have earned the highest rank possible in the Order of the Dragon, the illustrious order of Imperial Knights founded by Tiber Septim himself. It is a high honor. Only six other Champions have been awarded in the history of the Empire. Please check back in approximately two weeks!”

Sora managed to get away after that and outside the city entirely. Despite dusk being upon them he started across the bridge. “Unless you guys have reason to object, I say we go the hell home. If we
keep a steady pace we should make it there fine—cloak if we have to. And then we can sleep ourselves out in safety.”

“Sora, are you all right?” Renato asked softly. “I know you felt some measure of fondness for Martin.”

“It’s fine. He rose to the occasion after a bit of a wibbly start, right? I’m a little upset, especially the part where I’m the Champion, but I guess I am the head of our merry band of psychos, so… Assuming I understand what happened correctly, this world has been saved, which means—hopefully—we have repaid our debt. We can focus on our planters and hives and the new Filigrana.”

“I wonder what’ll happen to the remainder of the Mythic Dawn cultists,” Lorenzo said.

“We could always help out there,” Viper said, “should we happen upon any while out on errands.”

He nodded. “I’m sure the authorities won’t get too upset, but let’s keep it out of sight as much as possible, unless one of them is stupid enough to summon that armor in plain sight of witnesses. Fairly certain all bets would be off in that case.”

“I’m hoping since we’ve been gone for a fair amount of time that we’ll see some cool changes at the castle,” Renato said, absently shooting a bear lunging their way.

“Well, so, the rotation thing didn’t work perfectly, but I can always be really mean and refuse to cook if anyone gives me a hard time,” Sora threatened.

Viper froze for a moment and grabbed his arm. “You would not do that to us.”

He laughed. “Not you three. You were with me. You’d probably get yelled at, too. Or maybe they’ll just be happy that it’s over and we won’t be taking trips like this any longer.”

When they did make it to the castle it was around midnight, so the portcullis was closed. The man-at-arms patrolling the curtain wall raced down to open it for them and welcome them home. They split inside and up the stairs, with Renato and Sora headed for the master suite. Preparation for bed was a bit rushed, but they fell into bed and curled up together before passing out.

The next morning he took a proper bath and dressed in fresh clothing, then wandered down to the kitchen, where he promptly shooed the cook away and set about making a meal. Renato snickered off to the side where he was gathering ingredients. The cook had yet to learn that pouting would get him nowhere with the master of the castle. He was just cracking some eggs with the idea of making tamogoyaki when the rest of his family strolled in, paused in surprise, then rushed forward.

“When did you get back!?” Rio cried. “And where’s Viper and Lorenzo?”

“Still sleeping, I presume,” Renato said, “and around midnight.”

Viper floated in and shook his head. A moment later the cook suddenly said, “I must take a horse and cart to Chorrol and resupply!” He dashed off, and Kiri and Viper collaborated to toss up a barrier.

“When did you get back!?” Kiri sing-songed.

“Yes, Aniki?”
“I sense something has changed. You’re far too relaxed. What’s happened?”

“The Oblivion Crisis is over,” he said simply and went back to making breakfast.

Renato sighed and filled everyone in on recent events, and by then they were all seated around a table and tucking in.

After taking the edge off his hunger Sora said, “So while the news is sinking in, let’s have a status report. We were too tired last night to pay attention to any changes around here.”

Kiri nodded. “I have mind-controlled a fair number of bandits into the construction of Filigrana. Three quarters of them are off quarrying or delivering stone, while the remainder prepare the site to my specifications.”

“Lal and I have been building planters on the curtain wall walkways and in the courtyard,” Rio said, “but Kiri drew up some plans to extend parts of the front wall. It’d take some doing to integrate them into the existing stone work, but it should be possible.”

Lorenzo glanced at Kiri. “If you don’t mind…”

“Not at all.”

“We considered, seeing as how we have that eyesore not far off,” Shi said, “cutting into the hillside to make more room.”

“You mean toward the gate remains,” he said.

“Yes. It would be an enormous amount of work, but with such a compliant workforce thanks to Kiri, we could probably enclose that space and use it for either an outdoor training area or—”

“Horses!” Dino said excitedly. “I could get a lot of horses and start breeding them. Yeah.”

Sora bit his lip as he stared at the blond, then smiled. “We could do that. Have you been using your Sky Flames to make the two I saw think you’re the head of the herd?”

Dino nodded. “Yep, just like you explained it. Please say you made a note of what stables were selling what horses.”

“Of course. I’ll share after we’re done eating. But keep in mind, until that extension can be built, there’s not much point in having more than a handful of horses, say, a stallion and two mares. I’d rather see breeding stock—” He stopped. “Actually, while chickens can easily wander the courtyard mostly unattended, things like sheep and cows would need work.”

“We’d only need one cow, Sora,” Val said. “We can’t possibly drink enough milk to warrant more than that.”

“Mm, maybe. But we’d need to make a lot of cheese. How am I supposed to make cheesecake and cannoli and similar things with the wrong cheese? I know I stashed a book on cheese-making when we packed, along with a number of related supplies. How are we fixed for things like flour and eggs and tomatoes and herbs—I would really, really like to make some sort of pasta dish.”

“I’m a little surprised,” Lal said.

“How little time all this took. We’ve been here, what, a month? Approximately. Maybe it’s to do
with a different mindset.” She shrugged. “I know, the distance between what they call cities is ridiculously small compared to what we’re used to, but…”

“I’d hate to think of a Cyrodiil comparable in size to Italy,” he said. “We’d have all become accustomed to horses, for one thing, and we would have had to increase how many went with me each time, if nothing else to ensure the horses lived while we were otherwise occupied.”

Dino nodded. “It was around five hours from Treviso to Rome—longer if you went by train. Around ten days walking speed, I suppose, accounting for sleep and meals.”

“Well, I did use a temporary measure once, but maybe I could come up with something that could be attached to their harnesses, something like the earring I made you all those years ago,” Kiri said. “After all, I don’t think reinventing the steam engine for cars would go over well here.”

That afternoon, as he was investigating the updated training room, he noticed not only was there a candelabra at the far end of the archery hall, but that it was behind the target. Flames close to a straw target was odd, even if the thing was currently unlit. Investigation proved it to be a switch, as when he gave it a tug it tipped forward, and the back of the hall opened up to reveal a hidden door.

He thought about just trundling on in, but knew that he should take at least one of his friends in case there was something nasty along the way. He pulled the candelabra again to close the door and retreated back upstairs. Shi happened to be walking down the corridor and he was grabbed and hustled back downstairs.

“Where are we going, Sora?” Shi asked amiably.

“Found a secret passage. Figured you guys would get upset if I charged on in alone.” He reached up to tip the candelabra again.

Shi hummed thoughtfully. “I wonder how many more hidden passages are in this castle.”

Down the passage was a wooden door, and beyond that appeared to be a dead end. That is, until Sora got curious and started pulling on things, like the carved-in pillars, which by all rights should not be movable. And yet one was. The back wall of the niche moved out of the way, as did the little spot that could in theory serve as seating. “All right, now I feel compelled to test every last one of these I see in the future,” he muttered.

Shi went in first again and took out a skeleton off to the left. There was a large square room beyond with a walkway around three quarters of it. Stairs led down in a U shape at the far end to a watery area. There were tables and chairs along the gallery, planters with dead trees in them, and a lich on one of the landings—he thought it was a lich, anyway.

He and Shi took it out without any trouble, and scored a scroll off the body.

Ignorant fool! I could have delivered Lainlyn to him and more. But time is no consequence to me any longer! While he is growing old, I will be only growing stronger, to await the day when I will return to claim my rightful place among the powers of this world!

He rolled his eyes.

The darkness is not so bad. I come to like it. My companion is not very talkative, but that is just as well. I see now that my procedure was somewhat flawed—the flesh was
not fully imbued with life as I intended. But his spirit remains strongly bound. He will provide me with an excellent test subject, as long as I am careful to do no permanent damage.

He wondered if that referred to the skeleton. This person had to be a necromancer.

Sometimes I awaken, and do not know where I am or what I have been doing. How to tell the passage of time here? Why should it matter to me? I believe the change is coming over me quickly now. My lord Mannimarco would be pleased.

“Make a note to dig up that name,” he murmured.


“Apparently whatever process this was is fatal to the brain,” he said with a shudder. The scroll was tucked away and the water investigated. There was nothing to find except a single chest with a few septims inside. “Think we could rehabilitate this area?”

“I don’t see why not. Those trees might be dead now, but I sincerely doubt someone transplanted live ones here just to watch them wither. Do you think those glowing stones serve as a replacement for the sun? We could always empty one out, fill it with new soil, some plants, and stick a few of those stones nearby. So long as we remembered to come down and water regularly, we’d find an answer.”

He nodded and peered over the railing. “And I wonder about where that water came from and if it’s clean. If we have a water source inside the castle that’s a huge benefit. We could turn this into a giant bath, or a fish pond, or…”

“I agree. Something to discuss over lunch. For now how about we close the outer door.”

They did that and then proceeded to check every last candelabra and pillar in the castle. The wine cellar had a door that led up a passage which ended in another of these niches with pillars to either side. Pulling one of those out opened the way to the anteroom off the Great Hall. And finally, in the master bedroom, another pillar opened up a storage closet of sorts that Sora immediately wondered if he should change into an actual closet, and a journal by a Lord Jaren that explained exactly who had been down there in the hidden grotto.

I hope I have done well. I don’t know. Perhaps I should tell the others. But what hope would they have then? I will have to tell Kelvyn, one day, when it is time for him to assume the lordship of the Castle. He, at least, may forgive me, as I am his father.

Later: I am more resolved than ever that the others must never find out. They must never know what Lord Kain has become, our liege lord—we sacrificed everything for him! I will set it all down here, clearly, so that others may judge whether I have done right or wrong.

When Garridan woke me to tell me that Lord Kain had arrived, I was overjoyed at first. Garridan’s grim face soon warned me that all was not well, but he would not tell me what was wrong. Only that Lord Kain was accompanied by Arielle Jurard, a name to
freeze the blood—a Breton battlemage of sinister reputation in Lainlyn.

Lord Kain was waiting in the great hall with Arielle Jurard. He was heavily cloaked, unsurprisingly as it was a foul night, but I wondered why he had not removed it upon entering the castle.

I greeted Lord Kain warmly, ignoring his companion for the moment, but when he spoke, it was only haltingly, and with a grating edge that I had never heard before. “Where are the others?” was all he said. Arielle Jurard quickly intervened, explaining that Lord Kain was unwell and needed a place to rest.

By the time Kain was abed, I was fully alarmed. He moved like an old man, and barely spoke in my presence. He left a foul odor in his wake, and remained cloaked until I left him in my chambers. I then demanded that Arielle explain herself, which she was only too willing to do. Her story was appalling. Apparently Kain had perished in battle shortly after we left, but by her arts she had returned him to life, and now planned to gather an army of Knights to resume the war against Baron Shrike. Her eyes glittered with pride as she told me all this—she is so far gone in madness and evil that she actually believed that I would go along with her plan to install a necromantic puppet on the throne of Lainlyn! For all Baron Shrike’s cruelties, he at least is mortal and will one day pass on the rule to an heir.

Somehow I was able to hide my shock from Arielle Jurard, and pretended to agree to her plan. “The other knights will need to have Lord Kain’s … condition … explained to them before they see him,” I told her. “Otherwise the surprise of seeing him may lead some to regrettable actions.” Thinking quickly, I suggested that she tend to Lord Kain in the grotto until I had prepared the others. She agreed without suspicion—I wonder if her mind has become disordered by her evil practices—my performance could not have been all that convincing.

Once they were inside, I shut them in, with Garridan’s help. May Tu’whacca have mercy on Lord Kain’s soul… As for Arielle Jurard, I wish nothing but endless night on her foul spirit.

I’ve had workmen cover up the doorway. Only a few of the others were ever aware of that passage behind the training room—luckily Kelvyn was not among them. I’ll have to come up with some story to satisfy those who ask about the grotto—or tell them the truth and face the consequences.

He set the journal back down and looked up. There was a trap door in the ceiling; it led to part of the roof. The view was nice.

At lunch they filled the others in and Lorenzo immediately started making plans to run some experiments in the underground grotto, and asked Shi to assist him.

Sora was tending the bar at Filigrana when Viper drifted over with an odd look in his eyes. At least these days they got to see his face on a regular basis. Viper got close enough to whisper, “See that fellow in the back right corner?”

“The one who’s half-potted on mead and drooling a bit?”

Viper nodded. “Just overheard something very interesting. He’s been having a kerfuffle with another
fellow, wants him dead. What do you think of the idea of me investigating deeper to see if we’d be interested?”

He frowned slightly and said, “Pro bono?”

“As a way of sparking the rumor mill. If this is a viable target opportunity—not just some girly slap fest over a drunken violation of the man’s sheep herd—then the man he’s got it in for could coincidentally die. If we could find a few people like him, and do a few hits… Think of it as advertising costs.”

“And some bright soul starts noticing these coincidences—possibly helped along by shady persons staging revealing conversations around other persons—and we get actual customers of the other variety. And those ones would have to pay. But…”

Viper raised his brow.

“Sort of how we kept our neighborhood in Grosseto clean. We could do that for anyone who comes here and … we notice something … and it’s real need, not just…”

Viper nodded. “I see. And yes, I think that could work out. It would mean either myself or Kiri doing the initial investigation. But we could always plant tracers on people we’re interested in, then track them back to wherever they sleep that night, poke around—and that’s assuming I can’t manage it on the spot.”

“For the moment, you have the go ahead to investigate this guy’s claim. We can have a meeting tonight after closing, so everyone can chime in, but I think the overall plan’s a good one. It’ll probably bring us to the attention of that group of assassins, but we can talk about that, too.”

Viper nodded again, the corners of his mouth quirking up briefly, and drifted away.

“Nice idea, Viper,” Kiri said admiringly. “And now that we have people coming in… Though, it doesn’t hurt that Sora has quite the reputation to attract them to us.”

He scowled. “I’m almost embarrassed to be called a hero and a champion. But then, Giotto was a vigilante, so I suppose it’s not quite so bad. If we’re all agreed, I’d like anyone on duty paying attention to what people are saying. If you find a candidate, let Kiri or Viper know, whoever is there. If we decide to ‘help’ the customer, we can figure out a plan and decide who gets to go do it. But that brings up the issue of that assassin’s guild or whatever it is.”

“Ah,” Lorenzo said. “I read a book about them. The leader of a cell is always called the Night Mother and it’s a combination daedric cult and business, basically. They worship Mephala. They were outlawed for some time, but then royalty started using them something like an assassin’s guild.”

“I suppose the Oblivion Crisis cut into their paycheques,” he quipped.

“It’s a little hard to scare up some gold when you’re fleeing for your life from daedra,” Rio said cheerfully.

“I will investigate,” Viper said. “I got enough from his mind yesterday to know where to look, and I’ll be back as quickly as I can.”

“All right. Then you guys can draw straws or something if it pans out. But for now, bed.”
Viper returned two days later, in time to help with the washing up after they closed, and then filled them in on what he’d found. “The case is so: the target seduced the man’s daughter, convinced her to gather up as much money as she could—and of course she took it from her father’s stores—and run away with him. They made it to the next city before he dumped her with the excuse that she traveled badly, and left her to figure out what to do with herself, penniless.”

“Not great, but not terrible,” Sora said slowly.

“The daughter is twelve.”

“Ah.”

“I vote we rip his spine out through his nostrils,” Lal said. “Or his anus, whichever.”

“All in favor?” he asked.

Everyone nodded, so Sora fetched a sack he’d prepared earlier containing one black marble and the rest white. “Okay, anyone who wants a shot, secure a marble. Whoever gets black gets the hit.”

Hands dived for the sack and he had trouble holding on to it.

Shi beamed—well, it was beaming for him, anyway—and held up the black marble triumphantly.

Viper fetched a map out of his cloak and slid it over. “Now pay attention,” he said, then projected an image into the air over the table for Shi to study. He kept it there until Shi nodded.

Shi returned a week later and joined them for breakfast. “It is done. The target had an unfortunate accident. He was walking home after a night of drinking away his spoils, tripped, landed on an oversized hook, and in the process managed to, indeed, rip his spine straight out of his body.” He looked at Lal. “Not quite what you suggested, but close enough.”

“I don’t even want to know how you pulled that off,” she said reverently, then reconsidered. “Er, no pun intended.”

“None assumed,” Shi said agreeably. “On a secondary note, I was visited by a member of the Dark Brotherhood.”

His brow shot up. “So that gossip was true. You’d have said if you weren’t all right, so what happened?”

“I knew he was in the room almost before he got all the way in,” Shi said. “He came close to the bed and whispered, ‘You sleep rather soundly for a murderer,’ at which point I stopped feigning sleep and sat up. When I said nothing he continued with something about Sithis and the Night Mother. Said his name was Lucien Lachance, a Speaker for the Dark Brotherhood. Apparently—if I’m interpreting what he said correctly—this Night Mother is capable of sensing murder and sends one of her people off to investigate, and recruit. Either that, or they have one hell of a spy network.”

“And how exactly does that pitch go?” Renato asked.

“He gave me rough directions to a man at an inn and said killing him would be my initiation, that he would return should I do so and—how did he put it?—he would come ‘bearing the love’ of my new family.”

Val snorted, then started chuckling. “Right,” he drawled.
“I got a free dagger out of it, which I promptly disintegrated once he was gone.” Shi tossed an issue of the Black Horse Courier on the table. “Funnily enough, I found this when I stopped at the Imperial City. It describes the Black Sacrament used to call upon the services of the Dark Brotherhood. Either way, I shall be going nowhere near this Rufio person he pointed me at.”

“But what about bandits and the like? This Night Mother must be something special if she can filter all that out,” Lal said.

Shi shrugged. “Just be aware that we might run into the man again.”

Over the next year Sora seduced the locals with Italian cooking and people kept dying every so often under peculiar circumstances. They had found several other unfortunate souls in need of assistance, and while those sent were also visited by Lucien Lachance, none were ever visited twice.

During that time they had done a few favors for people in Chorrol. The Captain of the Guard had been subtly led to find love (and get an attitude adjustment), a stolen painting had been recovered for the Countess and the culprit fingered, a man was helped to reclaim the family farm for his two sons, a missing Argonian was located for the shopkeep of Northern Goods and Trade, and the puzzle of a man and his mysterious twin was figured out.

He had just checked his stock of mead up front when a haggard-looking man took a seat at one of the tables and cast a furtive look his way. Rio went over to see what the man would like, and was shortly at Sora’s side.

“I think he might be one of those other customers,” Rio said quietly. “In any case, he heard about our wonderful mead and our unique cuisine. A middling mead and some pasta salad for him.”

‘Thank Kami that we’ve all experienced some changes,’ he thought. Lal had been practicing her skills to keep in shape and had realized, after some time had passed, that the ice she had created several days before had yet to melt. It made it far simpler to keep food refrigerated or frozen, and allowed Sora to make up massive batches of sauce with the bounty of their garden. “Just a moment,” he said, then ducked into the back to dish up a portion of the salad. Back at the bar he slid the bowl onto the counter and rooted around for a middling mead—not too sweet and not too dry. “We’ll see if he has the courage to say something outright.”

Rio nodded and grabbed the food to deliver it.

The man did not that day, but he came back every day for the next few. He eventually sat at the bar and was served. Sora got tired of the wait and said, “You look a bit downhearted.”

The man grunted and shoved some pasta into his mouth.

Sora nodded slightly and moved away to clean some mugs from previous customers. Lal’s powers were not the only ones to be affected. Kiri and Viper could create lasting illusions, which meant that some things were but an imagination away.

Val could propagate something and the resulting creations were persistent, though Kiri took the initiative and tested food items on his mind-controlled bandit workforce to see the long-term results. Kiri also planted some propagated seeds in a separate bed, to see what would happen there. Insofar as they could tell the produce was perfectly normal, but Sora was unwilling to rely on any of it.

Their conscripted workforce (after having dug out a huge chunk of the hill north of Battlehorn, built
up all the extension walls, and built Filigrana) had been sent to Hammerfell to get rid of them. Kiri had accompanied them to the border and seen them off, mental compulsions having been used so that his brother could safely return home and no longer have to strain himself so badly.

The man coughed when he walked by to rack the mugs he’d washed and said quietly, “Some odd rumors heard about this place.”

Sora set the mugs in place and replied, “Odd? I didn’t think our menu was so strange.”

“Such like … there be another menu.”

“We do keep a few special options in reserve,” he said vaguely.

The man nodded and returned his attention to his meal. Kiri drifted by and Sora made a subtle hand sign at him. His brother nodded, and Sora could see the subtle wisp of Mist Flames reach out toward the man and latch on.

It was nearing midnight when the man coughed again as Sora passed by and said, “How do a man see t’other menu?”

“You look as if you have a story to tell,” he replied, and leaned on the bar in a confidential posture.

“Well, you be a hero and all,” the man said, which made Sora twitch. “Ah, well…” The man took another sip of mead. “Got this problem, see. There’s this Dunmer done me wrong. Managed to get him arrested, but they only charged him for theft. He still be in prison, up the Imperial City.”

“What did he do to you?” Sora asked quietly.

“Had this farm, see? But all me livestock is dead or stolen. Caught him red-handed, I did, slicing the throat of me best cow. I wish he were dead for what he’s done, not only to me, but to those animals. Poor cow gave good milk, the sheep their fleece. No need for them to die like that. He bragged, he did, that I weren’t the first he’d done it to, the bastard.”

Sora hummed. It sounded good on the surface, but investigation would prove one way or the other. “Who is this Dunmer?” he asked, remembering that fellow in the cell across from his so many months ago.

“Valen Dreth. Gossip done filtered out that he witnessed Emp’ror Uriel go through the prison on his way to his death. Man’d think the guards’d be less talky.”

‘So the same man, probably,’ he reasoned. ‘And while I expect they’ve either locked off access again, or stationed guards down there, I know how to get back to that cell.’ Sora nodded. “Interesting. Let me think about it for a few days. A way might open to net you some justice.”

“Aye, but at what cost?” the man asked.

“Come see me in two days and I’ll let you know.”

He pulled Viper aside in the morning and said, “I have a job for you. Kiri tagged the guy, but I know exactly where to go to check into the customer’s story. If you’re all right with it, you can just take the route directly from my mind, go check the target, and report back.”

“Will you let me see the conversation with the customer?”
Of course,” he said.

Viper nodded and reached out to touch Sora’s forehead. As before he could feel that lurking presence, and he concentrated on his meeting with the customer the night before.

‘Now the route,’ he heard, so he switched focus to when he woke up in that prison cell and his escape.

A few minutes later Viper touched his forehead again to remove the mind link. “A bit nasty, that one. I will go investigate and be back in time for you to speak with that customer again.” He patted Sora on the arm and drifted away.

He returned a day later and filled them in over breakfast. “The target, Valen Dreth, is scheduled to be released in a few weeks. He is guilty of what our possible customer claims. Depending on the location he either steals the livestock for sale, or kills and butchers it all to eat or sell. He’s left a number of people bereft of their livelihood. He’s better than bandits who kill you before making off with your wealth and goods, but not by much considering some of the people he’s targeted may well have fallen on hard enough times as to turn to banditry themselves.”

“And once he gets out he’ll probably keep doing it,” Sora said, nodding. “Some farms are off the beaten path to have enough room for planting, and the patrols don’t necessarily go by more than rarely. I don’t have a problem with offing the guy.”

“The route in to his cell is guarded now,” Viper informed them. “A good few dozen down there, but I snatched copies of all the keys I could find. I considered jamming the locks, but that might have caused them to make changes that’d be harder to deal with, and I did not want to shoehorn Sora into being the one to have to go. Whoever does go, I left a series of markers in place that only we should be able to see.”

“Rather like my fluorescent markers,” Shi said.

“Yes. I supposee someone sneaky enough could exit after the hit by going up through the prison, but getting back the way in would be sufficient and far less risky. There are enough gaps in the patrols to make it easy to slip by. Interestingly enough, they’ve erected a shrine of sorts where Emperor Uriel fell.”

“Huh. Well, shall I get the bag?”

Heads nodded, so he fetched out the sack of marbles and held it ready. Hands dived in and grabbed a sphere each. Val was the winner; he grinned happily as he put his marble back.

Viper handed him a set of keys. “The markers leading in to the target’s cell are round and on the floor right in front of the doors you need to take. The ones leading out are simple horizontal bars and they wrap around the wall.”

Val’s expression went confused.

“Imagine an L-bracket.”

“Oh, oh, okay,” Val said.

“We still need to figure out some kind of payment,” Sora reminded them. “He’s lost his livestock so it’s not like we can ask for much. But there needs to be at least a token payment. Maybe we can ask him to scour the nearby area for alchemy ingredients.”
“Or make him wash dishes for an evening,” Lal suggested. “He’s already spent a fair amount of money just on drink and food at Filigrana trying to work up his courage, right?”

He hummed. “Right. Something like that. I’ll let him know, assuming he comes back. Val, be ready to go.”

“And the cost?” the man said warily.

“When we close tonight, help me clean up.”

He nodded. “I’m not heartless. Every night when we close this place needs to be gone over. Sweeping, making sure the tables are clean, that sort of thing. You do that for me tonight, and your problem will be taken care of.”

His brow went up. “If you mean what I think you do, no. But then, if you had suspected I was, you’d not have asked for my help, would you.”

“Can’t rightly pay for that now, can I?” the man said. “Had to sell off me farm as t’were.”

“You know…” Sora bit his lip and considered. His intuition wasn’t against the idea, so he said, “Would you like a job? We take turns with the livestock here, but…”

The man’s eyes went wide.

“It’d be room and board, some coin so you had some to save up or spend in Chorrol. We’ve got cows, sheep, goats, chickens… Horses, too, but those are more my friend’s thing. And of course, we’ve got plenty of vegetables and whatnot growing.”

“Over at castle?”

He nodded. “We made sure to build up the walls to protect it all from banditry. The hives aren’t protected, but bees usually take care of themselves. We do have to take out the occasional bear,
though.”

“Ah…” The man sipped more of his mead. “Coin’s running out and got no place to be. Aye, I’ll take you up on that.”

Sora smiled and signaled to Kiri, who drifted over. “Aniki, can you run a message over to the castle to get a spare room prepared? I’ve hired us someone to help out with the livestock and farming.”

“Miles be me name,” the man interjected quietly.

He smiled again. “Miles, then. In the morning after breakfast I can show you around the place.” A message popped up in front of him, an illusion from Kiri, asking if the hit was a go. He nodded and popped another piece of tamagoyaki in his mouth.

“I will do that,” Kiri said, then drifted out.

“Are you lodging in Chorrol right now?”

“Aye, at Grey Mare.”

“Well, gather up whatever you have stored there when you’re ready, and I can put it in the back until it’s time to head over to the castle. My brother will have made sure a room is ready for you. And of course, I’ll make sure the men-at-arms know you. We bring the portcullis down once it starts to gets dark. No sense inviting enterprising sorts to come nose around looking for things to steal.”

“Makes sense,” Miles said agreeably. “Well, aye. I’ll finish me drink and trod off t’get me things. Come back.”

“If you need help, just say so. I’ll have someone go with you.”

“Nah, not got much. Won’t take long.”

The next morning he made breakfast as usual, then showed Miles around the lower floors of the interior, then out into the courtyard and “secondary” courtyard so he could see the planting areas and the area where the animals were kept. He pointed at the stables and said, “Those are mostly Dino’s and he and Romario take care of them. I think he’s aiming to create a new breed. If you need a horse for something, though, ask, and he’ll probably lend you one. Over there is a storage shed for tools. Our blacksmith makes sure those stay in good shape, or makes new ones if needed.”

“Got the idea, methinks,” Miles said. “See cart over there to put things in. You showed where to bring everything.”

He nodded. “And just bother the cook if you want something to eat. The only meal I normally cook here is breakfast. He takes care of everything else, since we’re at Filigrana. But if you want, you can always come have your lunch and dinner at the bar, all right? Up to you.”

“You make some right odd stuff, you do, but good, real good.”

He smiled. Aside from spending a few hours once a week to feed Sky Flames to his little plots, he had little to do with the gardening. The only ones of them who actively enjoyed the duty were Val and Lalia, because they both welcomed the general solitude of working with plants.

Miles nodded and headed for the shed, so Sora returned to the castle interior to make a fresh batch of
noodles for the day, then headed upstairs to his room so he could take a bath. He was making a fresh batch of the pasta salad (it sold really well, for some reason) when Val bounced in and gave him a hug from behind.

“All taken care of?” he murmured, mindful of the cook moping in the corner.

“Yep. I’ll give you the details later,” Val said as he stole a grape tomato.

Sora smacked him. “Be a sweetheart and fetch out the dressing I made earlier, will you?”

On his way to Filigrana he stopped in the side “courtyard” and told Miles, “I’ve been informed that your issue has been taken care of. You’re not the only one he ruined, but you are the last.”

Miles widened his eyes. “Aye. Right.”

“Remember, you can eat here or at Filigrana. Suppose it depends on which type of food you prefer. I’ll see you later.”

Miles nodded, so Sora departed with his crew for the day of Rio and Viper.

Two days later the Black Horse Courier had a story about the peculiar death inside the Imperial City Prison, wherein a prisoner, one Valen Dreth, scheduled to be released in a few weeks, had mysteriously suffocated due to a sudden and inexplicable throat tumor.

Several months later Lorenzo came to him and handed over a silver ring. He took it and saw nothing particularly special about it, though it felt … off … somehow.

“Wear it,” Lorenzo said.

He gave his Lightning a dubious look, but did as he asked. He was more than a little surprised when he vanished, even from his own sight. “Eh?”

“Remember those stones we kept finding? Well, we can’t use magic in the conventional sense, but some of those stones give you access to specific magic. And you need that access in order to enchant things with that magic, using that altar.”

“All right.”

“One of the stones I found granted a spell or power or whatever you want to call it that gives you what the mages would call Chameleon. Renato was appropriately amused, I assure you.”

He removed the ring and looked at it again. “What else can you enchant?”

“Speed, how high we can jump, agility, stuff like that, as well as the very interesting options of spell reflection and spell resistance. Well, technically, we’re all classed as Bretons, it seems, so we have an inherent resistance to magic of fifty percent. But we can bump it to one hundred with enchantments.”

“Hostile magic, I assume.”

Lorenzo nodded. “And also a shield of sorts, though I can’t seem to get that one to go all the way. I guess being completely invincible is a bit much to ask.”

Sora snickered. “Well, can you make me a ring that’s … well … something I wouldn’t normally wear, like gold or copper. Then I’ll know it immediately,” he said, offering back the ring. “And I
wouldn’t say no to ones with shield and resist, though I’d prefer those on something I would wear all the time.”

Lorenzo hummed. “I’ll figure something out. On a different note, I was doing some reading—”

Sora rolled his eyes in affectionate exasperation.

“—and I ran across references to some supposed power of the Septims. Tiber Septim was the big one. He was a ‘Dragonborn’ like the other Septims, but he could use the power of dragons. He could shout in their language, like a—how can I put this? You know those silly shows on TV where the hero yells something and—” Lorenzo stopped with a look of frustration. “They shout. When they do that in this dragon language, it does things, like—oh, like a Force Push in Star Wars, for example.”

“Just … shout?”

“Yes. People who aren’t Dragonborn have to spend years learning how to do it. They call those people Tongues.”

“How imaginative,” he said dryly. “Why bring it up? Because it’s something we could conceivably learn and use that isn’t magic?”

Lorenzo smiled. “Precisely. I’m going to track down as much as I can, but I figured I’d mention it to you so that you could join in when I have enough material to work from.”

“All right,” he said with a shrug. “Considering I can no longer indulge in video games, I’ll need another hobby.”

A Khajiit walked into the bar and looked around, then took a seat in the corner where it was nice and shadowy. He seemed a bit nervous, which made Sora curious. Shi went over to take his order, which turned out to be a bottle of the strongest sweet mead they had, plus, “He asked about the special menu.”

“All right, tell Kiri. I’ll go talk to the guy.”

Shi nodded and drifted off, so Sora grabbed a bottle of his Dragon’s Tongue mead and delivered it to the customer. “You inquired about the special menu?” he asked quietly.

The Khajiit nodded at one of the seats and uncorked his drink so he could take a long sip from it. After Sora sat down he picked at the cork with his clawed nails. “This one is unsure if the tales are true.”

“Depends on what it is you’d like off the special menu.”

“This one has heard tales that one might find help here.”

“It’s possible,” he said as he saw wisps of Mist Flames attach themselves to the Khajiit. “Why don’t you tell me what’s troubling you?”

The Khajiit had more mead before saying, “There is this couple in Leyawiin, where this one lives. They are … very unhappy … about this one’s brothers and sisters having a place there, and our friends from the marshes.”

“So they’re racist.”
The Khajiit nodded. “This one is amused and appalled because they spend so much time at two places in town run by the same. This one would think they would avoid dining out.”

Having stopped in at Leyawiin more than once he knew that Five Claws Lodge was run by an Argonian and Three Sisters’ Inn was run by Khajiit, so that made it seem more than a little hypocritical. “What has this couple done specifically?”

“They have talked the Council into ruling in their favor. This resulted in our land being taken and given to them. Moreover, this one has learned that they intend to do the same with the two inns in town. They deprive us of our livelihoods, systematically.”

“I see. All right. Here’s how it works. You tell me their names, and I have this investigated. If what’s found matches up, something will be done.”

“For a price.”

He nodded. “The price depends, however. The very first person to order off the special menu was destitute, so his payment was to help me clean up here one night, but only after his claim was verified.”

“This one knows you are the one they call hero and champion.”

Sora rolled his eyes. “It’s a bit hard to say no when a god makes it clear they expect you to do something. Anyway, after the information is verified, then it can be acted on, a permanent kind of justice.” He wasn’t nervous about saying it even that openly because he knew Kiri would be able to find him anywhere with that tag in place and correct any damage if the fellow talked.

The Khajiit spent a few minutes sipping his mead, then said, “Betto and Julitta Plotius. This one wishes to know how long verification would take.”

“Up to a week. Leyawiin is a fair distance.”

“This one understands and will return in a week. This one would like another of these to take along,” the Khajiit said and put two stacks of ten septims each on the table.

He smiled. “Be right back.” The gold went into his pouch and his other customer was soon on his way.

Kiri drifted off after him a few minutes later, invisibly. Several minutes after that Viper showed up to take his place. “Another one?”

He nodded. “Well, once it’s verified. Two racists who keep managing to take the property of other races, leaving them with nothing.”

Viper shook his head slightly. “I don’t think that’s something we can ever escape from.”

Kiri returned four days later and filled them in over breakfast. The cook and Miles were conveniently suffering from induced inattention and heard nothing of the entire conversation.

“Our new friend is correct. Those two are rabid in their racism and have indeed managed to take their lands. They are presently building up a case—if you can call it that—to get both the Three Sisters’ Inn and the Five Claws Lodge as their property. If they can manage that, they’ll move on to the next victim, Five Riders Stables, using the deteriorating states of the previous ones as further
arguments against having any of them in Leyawiin.”

“The question is how to deal with them,” he said, “and what our Khajiit friend actually wants.”

“Eh… Kiri could always mind control them long enough to write out incredibly damaging journals detailing all their plans,” Lorenzo said, “and those get accidentally-on-purpose found, and they’re arrested, and die mysterious deaths in prison, or on the way there.”

“Or maybe Kiri gets them to write it all down, and then the two of them die in an unfortunate encounter with the local wildlife while they’re scouting for more territory to annex,” Lal said. “And someone finds their journals and makes a huge production out of it.”

“More plausible,” he said, “and it isn’t duplicating an earlier trick. I could see Kiri and Lorenzo working this one.”

Lorenzo looked up in surprise. “Me? What…? Maybe paralyze them while they happen to be standing next to some hostile local wildlife or something?”

“There is a silver mine south of the city,” Kiri supplied. “There are trolls in there.”

“What about a price, though,” Renato said. “This guy has lost his land. How’s he going to pay?”

“Though he did not say so,” Kiri said, “he came on behalf of all of them. They’re really worried. So they could probably pool together some coin amongst the group. At one hundred gold each, that’d be a thousand.”

“Do we have any idea what the other guys charge?” Rio asked.

Sora shrugged. “Unless we run into that Lucien fellow again…”

The Khajiit showed up again a few days later, so Sora went over to talk to him.

“This one would like more of that strong, sweet mead.”

“Sure.” He fetched some from behind the bar and returned, then took a seat as he slid the bottle over. “I assume you’re still interested in the special menu.”

The Khajiit nodded as he shoved a claw into the cork and pulled it out. “This one is.”

“Well, the situation’s been investigated and we’re prepared to enact some justice. The questions remaining are twofold.”

“These are?”

“One is the type of justice, and the second is the price. So to the first, what are you and those you represent hoping for?”

“This one being here is a choice. This one was not driven from his homeland,” the Khajiit said. “But this one, and those like him, are being driven away now. These ones cannot act openly.”

“Hence coming here.”

The Khajiit nodded. “This one admits, a permanent justice would be preferred.”
“All right. Then the price.”

“Something tells this one that the Breton would not be interested in moon sugar.”

He smiled and shook his head. “No. The rest of us just don’t have your, hm, tolerance to that. I’m willing take a number of things. Ingredients you’ve picked up along the way, a few hours of labor, gold, trade goods…”

“This one is authorized to offer a horse and two hundred drakes that was pooled.”

He nodded. “That’s fine.”

The Khajiit slid a pouch over, presumably containing the coins. “The horse can be picked up in Leyawiin from the stables after word of this justice. Make mention of the recent rise in the price of grain. Atahba will understand.”

“You can expect action within the next few days,” he replied.

The Khajiit nodded. “This one would like another of these before he goes,” he said, and slid two stacks of ten septims onto the table.

A knock came at his bedroom door and he looked up in confusion. It was nearing two in the morning. Kiri and Lorenzo were on the other side. Once they were seated he said, “What’s up?”

Renato aimed a disgruntled look at the two.

“You remember that Lachance fellow?” Kiri asked. “He showed up again, but this time Lorenzo paralyzed his ass.”

Sora smirked as Renato laughed. “I have to assume you two took full advantage of the situation at that point.”

“Of course we did, dear brother,” Kiri purred. “This Lachance fellow is a man like any other, if a lot more skilled at skulking around and stabbing people from behind. In any case, while we had him at our mercy, I mind-controlled him so he would spill his guts—figuratively speaking.”

“And then erased his memory of any of it,” Renato said.

Kiri nodded. “It seems this Night Mother is annoyed that we’ve set up business, but as we’re helping people who would never contact them in the first place due to monetary issues—they charge a minimum of one thousand septims per job, more if the target is important—she’s not too terribly concerned about us. More that she wanted to bring in new agents for the Dark Brotherhood, since it’s obvious we’re not common thugs.”

“The interesting thing,” Lorenzo said, “is that the Night Mother has been the same person for ages. She’s dead. Her body rests under the Lucky Old Lady statue in Bravil. There’s a crypt down there, with her body and that of five babies.”

Sora wrinkled his nose.

“The story goes that she bore Sithis five children, then sacrificed them to him,” Lorenzo continued. “In any case, she hears the prayers of those seeking out the Dark Brotherhood and informs the Listener, who then tells the Speakers, like Lachance, and they assign duties that way.”
“The Black Sacrament,” he said.

Kiri nodded. “And obviously, being a spirit—or possibly the Daedric Lord Mephala—she can see when murder is committed and send someone to investigate. It’s possible she knows exactly what we did to Lachance.”

He sat back and considered. “So just in case, we should all be a bit more wary. I’m not feeling anything in particular, but if we are talking about entities that are gods to us, well, I’m not sure I would. That being so, let’s continue to stay away from anything but the type of clients we’ve been handling so far.”

“So Viper and I need to be checking to see if they came to us simply because they didn’t want to pay the Dark Brotherhood’s prices,” Kiri said with a nod. “I’ll mention it in the morning.”

“We’ll leave the rest of the report until breakfast.”

The cook and Miles were distracted again and Kiri started things off. “I used illusion to lure the targets off to investigate the mine south of Leyawiin because of the silver deposits there. We skulked along behind them and, once they were inside and within range of the trolls, Lorenzo paralyzed the two. We stood back and let events play out. The two of them were torn to pieces, of course.”

“I expect it’ll be a few days at least before we hear more,” Lorenzo said. “Kiri did get them to make up those journals containing all their racist thoughts and plans. The husband has a cousin living in Anvil, so I expect word will be sent to her and the journals will be discovered.”

“Yes, and I will return there after breakfast,” Kiri said. “I want to keep an eye on things and ensure that happens, that they get shared around.” He looked at Sora. “I will wear a different face.”

“So…” Dino said, trying not to look too eager. “I have a new horse waiting for me?”

Sora eyed him. “At what point did you participate in any of the jobs we’ve done?”

“Aw, come on,” Dino wheedled. “I love horses!”

“We know,” he said with a sigh. He was secretly amused by just how much room horses took up in the kid’s brain, but showing that was not something he would do. He had no idea if the difference could be attributed to alternate dimensions and the differences in Dino’s starting circumstances, or if Reborn had beat that sort of thing out of him in Sora’s original dimension. At least in Tamriel he was free to pursue what made his heart soar. “All right, you can have the horse.”

“Yeah!” Dino cried happily.

“But—”

Dino looked at him warily. “But?”

“You have to help me with my next batch of sauce. That’s a lot of tomato to cut and strain. And possibly with grinding wheat, and rice…”

Dino groaned.

“You can always not get a new horse and have to eat what the cook makes,” he said with a smile.

“However that works out,” Kiri said, “I have one other thing to add. We stopped in at Bravil on the way back, at the Mages Guild there. I convinced one of them to do some enchanting for me. It’s not
something they offer, and indeed, will tell anyone who asks that they need to have access to the Arcane Academy for enchanting, but the head has an altar stashed away.” He pulled a sack out of his clothing and opened it, then slid an earring to each of them.

Sora picked his up; it looked almost exactly like the one Kiri had originally made for him to anchor his disguise. “And this does?”

“Lorenzo can’t manage to enchant for waterbreathing, and the only ones who stand a chance at doing it with flames are Val, Rio, and Lal. This time, at least, Renato can heal us after they’re inserted, and Viper, Lal, and I can handle the part where you don’t even notice the pain of the piercing.”

“Why don’t we just do this with the ones for magic resist and shield?” he asked. “The only one that absolutely has to be easily removable is the Chameleon item.”

Lorenzo nodded. “I can do that if you want. Unlike rings to help with flame use, enchanting can work on just about anything. I’ll cast more of them and get everyone settled.”

They went about their business until two days later, when a delivery of the Black Horse Courier revealed the fate of the Plotius couple, their tragic deaths at the hands of trolls, and the terrible scandal they were hiding regarding their racist behavior. The Countess was quoted as saying it was a sad day when the deaths of two prominent citizens were discovered, which Sora found hilarious given that she was as racist as the targets if some of the things he’d overheard while in the castle were true.

“So much for that one,” Renato said. “I wonder what will wander our way next.”
12: Crimson Scars

“Do you remember, in Castle Anvil, that odd man in commoner clothing sitting in the Great Hall?” Viper asked him one afternoon as he was washing mugs.

He thought back and nodded. “Yes. He kept giving her wistful looks when he thought no one was paying attention. And who would to the average commoner beyond ensuring they weren’t there to steal the silver? But I sense a mystery is about to unfold,” he said, setting a mug to drain and grabbing another.

Viper snorted softly. “Fine, so I poked around a little. We have to find our own amusements at times.”

He hummed. “What did you find?”

“His mind is—not blocked—fogged. There’s something veiling part of it. But I got enough to know he’s strongly connected to the Thieves Guild.”

Sora looked up. “The guild that every guard in existence swears doesn’t exist? And the Gray Fox is just a myth, of course.”

“Of course,” Viper said agreeably.

“So you stalked him around, I assume,” he said, setting another mug aside to dry.

“He uses an abandoned house in Anvil as his home, but he also heads to the Imperial City to see a fellow by the name of Armand Christophe, and a Khajiit woman in Bravil by the name of S’Krivva. They’re both doyen for the Thieves Guild—and before you ask, that simply means they’re the primary contact for thieves for special jobs.”

His brow went up. “Special jobs?”

“Any thief’s usual business is stealing items and selling them through whichever fences they’re aware of. But every so often a special job comes in and gets farmed out by a doyen to a guild member they think will handle it well. They also handle promotions, but I’m uncertain why a title matters if you’re pulling in enough to feed yourself, put a roof over your head, and maybe a bit on the side for luxuries.”

He shrugged. “What I’m getting from this is that you want to join the Thieves Guild to figure out the mystery behind this man.”

Viper fidgeted slightly.

Sora eyed his Mist in disbelief as his intuition kicked in. “You want me to join the Thieves Guild.”

“At least see the man again,” Viper replied. “Look at him with your intuition, not your eyes.”

Sora was inclined to go along with it simply because Viper so rarely asked for anything. The quirk of his Mist’s mouth was the equivalent of puppy dog eyes on anyone else, so he huffed and nodded. “All right. We can plan a trip to Anvil. Kiri will just have to keep Filigrana running. Renato is a good thief and he’d insist on going anyway. Hm…”

“Val.”
“He is pretty sneaky. Well, it’s not like we have one of the other customers in here every day, or even every week, so…”

They went to Anvil ostensibly to purchase a home there. A man dressed in middle-class clothing at The Count’s Arms, one Velwyn Benirus, had a manor for sale. Sora vaguely remembered him from a previous visit.

“That manor is still for sale if you’re interested, Velwyn said when he inquired. “It’s my grandfather’s house, Benirus Manor. I could let you have it for a modest sum. I have to sell it soon, as I have pressing matters elsewhere. You’re welcome to take a look at it. It’s located across the street from the chapel.”

A convenient location for the religiously-inclined, if nothing else. But the people in town seemed to think there was something wrong with the place, haunted, perhaps. The proprietor of The Count’s Arms swore he had heard screams coming from inside at night.

“Once you buy, you get the key to the front door and the deed of ownership,” Velwyn said, causing Sora to abort an eye roll at the sheer level of Captain Obvious going on. “That’s the deal. Would you like to buy it now? Five thousand gold is all it’ll take.”

If nothing else, purchasing a home in the city meant having a place for people to get away to, should it be needful, so he forked over the coin.

“Excellent! Here’s the key to the front door and the deed of ownership. I hope you enjoy your new home. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must attend to those pressing matters I spoke of earlier. Good day.” Velwyn scurried off at an indecorous pace.

The manor looked a bit run down from the outside. Sora could see dead vines going up the sides and the interior was more than a little in need of work, though there was plenty of furniture in place. Some of it was broken, and those pieces could be scrapped. The odd thing was a large symbol on one wall down in the cellar.

“Right. It’s a bit late, so let’s get something to eat from the inn, then break out the sleeping bags. Not sure I want to use that bed upstairs,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “We can cloak up in the morning and go to the castle to see if our mystery man is there. If not, we can try slipping into that abandoned house.”

He’d not been asleep for very long when he was woken abruptly by ghost floating toward him with the intent to kill. Once those were all dealt with he said, “Great. Let’s set the tent up out back. We can worry about ghosts later on.”

The next morning they ambled over to the castle and Sora leaned against a wall as he eyed the mysterious stranger. His intuition was not meant for what he was trying to do. It was like playing Twenty Questions with himself. He eventually narrowed it down to the man being cursed or under an enchantment. He was definitely involved with the Thieves Guild, and most likely the leader of it if his intuition was to be believed—and he always believed.

Back at the manor he said, “I think he’s the Gray Fox. But there’s some kind of curse or enchantment involved that’s—well, it’s messing up his identity.”

“I recall,” Val said slowly. “that more than one person has gossiped about how the Countess’s husband disappeared about a decade ago. And that the beggars are the eyes and ears of the Gray
Fox.

“So we have places to start looking,” Renato said. “I think we should stop back at our castle. Get some disguise items. Because I don’t think any of us want to be known as thieves.”

“Hey, what’s this?” Val said from over near the corner where a vase had been knocked off a cupboard. “It’s a skeletal hand and some parchment.”

Sora accepted the parchment and unrolled it so they could all read.

2 Sun’s Dawn 3E335

The people of Anvil are worms! How dare they criticize what they don’t understand! I shall have my vengeance in a form they cannot possibly imagine. I shall use the souls of the departed to prolong my own life. The Tome is very specific. I must have more bodies … yes … more bodies.

11 Sun’s Dawn 3E335

I must protect myself from those meddlers. They shall not interfere in my designs. I have constructed a room in the basement of this manor. It is there I will inter my corporeal self and I will transcend this plane of existence. Only a true-blooded Benirus may open the portal, so if I fail, however unlikely that may be, a descendant may attempt to follow in my footsteps to carry on the true way. To make sure our secret is safe, I have harnessed the spirits of those whose bodies I have defiled to forever guard that place.

15 Sun’s Dawn 3E335

The fools think I don’t hear them speaking? I can hear their rumor and innuendo. They intend to meddle in powers they can barely comprehend. They call me an old fool and shun me. The young dare each other to step one foot in my yard. I have become the stuff of old wives tales and campfire stories. They dismiss me as an oddity. But soon they will see. When all of Anvil lies in waste around me, when their corpses litter the streets and their blood dampens the earth … only then will my true power be known and feared.

“Wonderful,” Renato said. “We’ll have to figure out where the guy went. We can’t very well use this place as a retreat if we’re to be woken up by ghosts every damn night.”

“Let’s ask at The Count’s Arms,” Val said, casting a second look at the hand cradled by a broken pot.

“As soon as you bought the place, he pretty much up and left,” a man at the inn said. “I hear tell he’s making his way to the Imperial City.”

On their way out of town Sora said, “Fine. We’ll stop at home to get those disguises, then head to the Imperial City. We can consider both issues there, though the manor can wait until we have a reason to go back to Anvil.”
Wanted
The Gray Fox

Wanted for theft, embezzlement, forgery, pickpocketing, counterfeiting, burglary, conspiracy to commit theft, grand larceny, tax evasion, slander, fraud, perfidy, and impertinence.

Description: wears a gray cloak that conceals his appearance. Presumed male and Colovian. Height between 5 and 6 feet. Normal weight. Hair and eye colour unknown.

Any citizen with information should contact the Imperial Watch.

Watch Captain Hieronymus Lex

“If the beggars are his eyes and ears…”

Val pointed off to the side where a man in ragged clothing stood. Sora could hear even at that distance the requests for just a coin. He wandered that way, his family drifting in that general direction after him, and asked about the Gray Fox.

“Are you looking for him?”

“Yes,” he replied, “I want to work with him.”

The beggar eyed his clothing for a moment, his expression dubious. Sora threaded into him long enough to alter his disposition temporarily, and the man said quietly, “I think I trust you enough to tell you this secret. To learn more about the Gray Fox, go to the Garden of Dareloth at midnight. Look in the Waterfront District. I can say no more.”

Investigation of the Waterfront District revealed a bunch of houses that appeared to be barely standing, and they were all on the exterior side of the Imperial Trading Company arc of offices and warehouses. The wood was weathered to grey by the influence of the elements and there were only eight of them. Only one of those had a “garden” by any stretch of the word’s definition. Interestingly, there was a door on the side where ships docked, but it was boarded up tight.

“We three should probably hide,” Viper said as they stood at the water’s edge beyond the shacks. “If all four of us descend on whatever is about to happen…”

“Well, that roof is right there handily,” Renato said. “We’d be close enough to intervene if necessary.”

Sora sighed and nodded.

As midnight approached he was joined by two others, a female elf and an Argonian. The final person to arrive was wearing leather armor and carried a torch. ‘Not exactly stealthy,’ he thought, then approached the man when neither of the other two did anything.

“Do I know you?”

“One of the beggars pointed me this way.”

“You say a beggar told you to seek me out? Good enough for me, then. The beggars are the eyes
and ears of the Gray Fox. He is the King of Thieves in Cyrodiil. You could think of him as our
guildmaster, although he would deny that title.”

“So how do I join up?” he asked.

The man looked around, then said, “Everyone seems to be here. Let’s begin. Each of you is seeking
membership in the Thieves Guild. It is not a myth. We are followers of the Gray Fox, and I am
Armand Christophe, his doyen. Merely by finding me, you have passed the first test. It’s unusual for
us to have three potential recruits at the same time. Rather than the normal test of skill, I’m going to
make this a contest.”

“That’s not fair!” the Argonian said, cluing Sora into the fact that it was male.

Armand ignored the outburst and glanced to the elf. “Methredhel, you know the rules. However, for
Amusei and the newcomer, let me state them clearly. Whoever brings me the diary of Amantius
Allectus, without killing him, will be invited into the guild.”

“Hah!” Methredhel cried, thrusting a fist into the air. “I’ll have it before sunrise!”

Sora wondered why it was she knew the rules and was not yet already a member of the guild. Had
she tried previously and failed?

“It’s somewhere in the Imperial City,” Armand continued. “The beggars will help you locate it, for a
price. And, I can sell you lockpicks if you need any. One more thing. You cannot kill each other
during this trial. We may be thieves, but we’re not murderers.”

Methredhel took off at a run—she either knew where she was going or was terribly eager—and
Amusei also hastened away. Sora stepped out of the garden and woke a beggar sleeping on a pallet
to ask him about the target.

Ten septims got him, “He lives in the Temple District, on the far east side. You have a map?”

Sora memorized the route to where the beggar had marked and took off running, cloaking himself
along the way. He passed Methredhel, who had slowed down to a fast walk, and found the door he
needed easily enough. Renato would normally pick locks for the group, but Sora had learned a fair
amount himself along the way, and the lock gave easily beneath his probing.

Inside he scanned the room, then hastened over to a desk along the far wall; inside was a diary to
ask him about the target.

Inside he scanned the room, then hastened over to a desk along the far wall; inside was a diary. He
checked the contents to see that it was the correct book, then swiftly exited the house and returned to
the Garden of Dareloth slowly enough that he could read the thing.

I’ve planted the seeds of the Drinkers. Soon I shall know if my theories hold true.

The first shoots have appeared. I must make sure to continue the precise schedule of
nutrient solutions.

Small Drinker fronds are clearly visible. This is a critical time in their development. I’m
almost out of rat blood. I’ll have to catch some more of the filthy beggars.

The young plants are juveniles now. I can see them waving as if in a breeze, although
the air in my cellar is as still as death.

I’m having a hard time catching any more cats. I may have to start using dogs. The
damn Drinker plants have a voracious appetite.
One of them cut me today. I’ll have to be more careful.

My creations are refusing to feed. As an experiment I offered a drop of my own blood, which one of them drank greedily. The other Drinkers are beginning to wither.

I collected a bucket of human blood from the healers. I had to pay her an exorbitant amount to keep her tongue still. The Drinkers are doing much better. Am I doing the right thing? The benefit of these plants to all of Cyrodiil is beyond doubt, but the price may be too high.

It is one of the most difficult decisions of my life. I have destroyed my notes for how to hybridize Drinkers. I set the trays on the roof where the sun could strike them. An hour after sunrise they were all dead. My attempt to create a hybrid of vampire and plant has failed. They were just too dangerous.

Two parts grave dust, one part ash salts. Mix with human blood. Expose to two hours of moonlight each night.

‘Okay,’ he thought. ‘The people of this world are fucking crazy.’ He snapped the journal shut and tucked it away, then began jogging again to return to the doyen and hand it over.

“Yes … you might do,” Armand said. “Congratulations! You have returned with the diary and earned the right to join the Thieves Guild. You now owe your loyalty to our guildmaster, the Gray Fox.”

‘Not in this lifetime,’ he thought.

“He has three rules you must follow. First, never steal from another member of the guild. Second, never kill anyone on the job. This is not the Dark Brotherhood. Animals and monsters can be slain if necessary. Third, don’t steal from the poor. The peasants and beggars are under the personal protection of the Gray Fox, particularly here on the Waterfront.”

“What about … handling stolen goods?”

“The best fences are only available to the higher rank Thieves Guild members,” Armand said. “For you, for now, you can seek out Ongar in Bruma. He doesn’t have much money, but he’s the only place you can sell hot property as a new member of the guild. Also, if you get hit with a fine because someone saw you stealing, you can come talk to me and we can work it so that you’d only have to pay half.”

“So … I have ‘official’ sanction to steal, and support for fines, information sources. Basically, a mostly solo profession.”

Armand nodded. “Well, sometimes the guild gets a special commission. You know. Guaranteed pay to ‘acquire’ certain items for special clients. You should check in with your doyen every once in a while to see if there are any commission jobs available. But right now, you need more experience before I can offer you any. When you’ve contributed to the guild coffers by selling stolen items to Ongar, I might have something for you. Come back then.”

Sora nodded and slowly walked away. He was rejoined by his family part way back to the city. It wasn’t until after they were crowded into one of the rooms they’d rented that he said, “So…”

“Viper and I can go knock over that jewelry shop,” Renato volunteered. “Should have plenty of portable items to take to Bruma.”
“How does a fence even know that something is stolen?” he mused. “Do the beggars have that good of a network that they can make sure all the fences know when a big heist goes down? Forget the thefts,” he said. “We’ll just nail every bandit we see on the way to Bruma, dump all their stuff onto a pack horse or in the tent, and I’ll ‘convince’ this Ongar person that everything I offer is stolen goods.”

Renato shrugged. “Sure.”

Val was still snickering when they made it back to the Imperial City. The people of Bruma had erected a statue of Sora next to the North Gate with an inscription of, “The Savior of Bruma. Singlehandedly fought off the hordes of Oblivion, entered their Great Gate and cast down the dread Siege Machine in ruin. Erected by the Grateful Citizens of Bruma, 3E 433.” For some reason the statue had him brandishing a dagger and wearing a shield.

Around midnight he waited in the Garden of Dareloth and Armand strolled in a bit later. “I’m glad you stopped by. I have a … situation that you might be able to help with. The Gray Fox has asked me to take care of a problem, and I’m putting you on it.”

He nodded.

“Hieronymus Lex actually collected taxes from everyone living here on the Waterfront!” Armand said, scandalized. “The people of the Waterfront are very poor. Traditionally, the city hasn’t collected taxes from them, even though by law they could. The money the city would collect would barely cover the cost of collecting. The Gray Fox doesn’t want to let this injustice stand. It’s a matter of principle. Your job is to recover those taxes. Are you up for it?”

He nodded again.

“Good. Find out where he’s keeping the taxes and bring them to me. I’ll also need the tax records of what each citizen paid so we can return it.”

A beggar told him the coin was being kept at the top of the South Watchtower. With the Chameleon ring from Lorenzo getting both wasn’t an issue. He returned to the garden and handed the records over, along with the measly fifty-three septims.

“Ah! The Gray Fox will be very pleased. We’ll make sure this gets back to the people. Can you believe that fool even bothered to collect this paltry sum!?” Armand scowled, then said, “I think it’s time to promote you to Footpad. Congratulations on your new guild rank.”

Because they had “fenced” quite a lot of goods with Ongar, more so than they should have been able to considering just how little money the fellow had to buy with (Viper had meddled with the man’s mind to make him think he was paying out when in reality he was simply offering a hand empty of coin), Sora asked if there were any other special jobs available.

Armand nodded. “Yes, actually. The guild has received a ‘request’ to obtain a unique statuette. It’s a bust of Llathasa Indarys, the recently slain Countess of Cheydinhal.”

He remembered at least one person gossiping that it might have been her husband who had arranged for her death.

“You will be paid a modest sum. Do you want this job?” When Sora nodded Armand continued, “Excellent. Bring it back to me once you have it.”
He stopped the first beggar he saw in Cheydinhal and asked about the bust. After handing over fifteen septims to her she said, “Count Indarys recently commissioned a bust of Llathasa. They say the elves carved it. He put it near her tomb in the Chapel Undercroft. He also posted a guard so that her tomb wouldn’t be disturbed. Used to be anyone could visit her, but now it’s off limits to the public.” She looked around for a moment, then said, “There’s a rumor going around that the undercroft may be haunted.”

A quick trip into the Chapel of Arkay, down into the undercroft, and past a guard was the bust, so he snatched it and retreated outside, then gathered up his family and headed back to the Imperial City. He barely made it across the bridge to the waterfront when he heard, “Everybody needs a copy of the Black Horse Courier!”

But before he could inquire, one of the Imperial Watch stalked up and demanded, “Can you tell me where Armand Cristophe is hiding?”

The hawker took a step back. “No, sir. Please don’t hurt me.”

The soldier glared and stalked off, and the hawker turned, saw Sora, and shoved a scroll in his hands. “One copy of the Black Horse Courier coming up. Gray Fox steals taxes!”

Once near the shacks, with an idea to talk to one of the beggars regarding Armand, Sora was stopped by Methredhel. “Thank goodness I found you. I assume you know that Hieronymus Lex has issued an arrest warrant for Armand Christophe. He’s in hiding, of course. Armand has been accused of stealing the bust of Llathasa Indarys from Cheydinhal. They say Count Indarys himself filed the charges.”

He sighed. “Well, what am I supposed to do with the thing, then?”

Methredhel’s eyes went wide. “There never was a client who commissioned the guild to steal it. Armand used you to flush out an informant who infiltrated the guild.”


“Myvryna Arano,” Methredhel replied. “Now Armand needs your help to neutralize her. You’re going to pin the theft on her. She lives here in the Waterfront. Over there, in that shack,” she said, and pointed it out. “Plant the bust in her cupboard. Make sure she doesn’t see you, of course. Then go tell Hieronymus Lex that she’s the thief. He probably won’t believe you, so you may have to persuade him. Hopefully he’ll at least go check it out.”

“Right.” It was still day, but that shouldn’t matter if things went right. He wandered off over to a tree so he could whisper to his family. “I’m going to use my ring. If Viper would cover the door opening twice…”

Viper nodded.

Five minutes later he and Viper were back under that tree and visible again. “I see Lex over there looking all scowly. Be back in a minute.”

He shot out a web as he walked toward the man, inducing a sense of trust, then caught his attention.

“What do you want? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of an investigation?”

Sora furrowed his brow and tried to look nervous. “I saw something.”
“Well? What is it? Get on with it, man!”

“I saw that bust people been talking about.”

“You know where it’s hidden?” Lex asked in surprise.

“Aye,” he said with a nod, then looked over at the shack. “In there. The elf woman, Arano. She were carrying it.”

“…Are you sure? That can’t be right. She’s my—I mean, she doesn’t seem the type.”

“Saw it, sir, before the door closed all the way. She put it in cupboard there.”

“I don’t believe you,” Lex said angrily, “but I’ll have to check it out anyway. If you’re right, there will be hell to pay. You’ll have to come along with me.” He strode off and Sora followed meekly enough.

Inside the shack Lex went to the cupboard and practically ripped the door open. “You were right. The bust is here and Myvryna is guilty.” He grabbed the bust and stalked over to the Dunmer woman. “This citizen is accusing you of stealing the bust of Llathasa from Cheydinhal. I even found the bust in your cabinet. What do you have to say?”

“Fool!” she cried. “You’ve just exposed me to the Thieves Guild. That ‘citizen’ is actually the guild member hired to do the theft!”

“Have no further use for you,” Lex replied. “If what I heard is true, you are the thief. If what you say is true, the Gray Fox knows you’re my informant! Either way, it’s over. You didn’t really think I’d trust the likes of you for very long?”

“But I’ve been loyal to you! I’ve reported everything that Armand has done. You can’t just toss me aside like a soiled cloth!”

“Yes, I can. You are under arrest for the theft of the bust of Llathasa Indarys, Countess of Cheydinhal. Come with me.”

Sora watched as Lex escorted the woman away, then headed for the tree. “So much for that. But we still have hours to waste before I can report in.”

“Let’s go shopping, then,” Val suggested.

Much later Armand was back at his usual spot in the dead of night. “With your help I uncovered the informant who had compromised the Thieves Guild. I know I used you in this matter with the bust, but I couldn’t be certain that you weren’t working with Myvryna. Here is the reward you were promised. Even though the bust is gone, you’ve earned it. I’m also promoting you to the guild rank of Bandit, which will let you use Dar Jee of Leyawiin as a fence. Good work!”

Sora pocketed the sack of coins. Being used as a cat’s paw was annoying, but ultimately unpleasant. “Any other jobs?”

Armand shook his head. “Sadly, I don’t have anything for you. I only work with the less experienced guild members. You should go see S’Krivva in Bravil from now on.”

“I will do so.”
S’Krivva turned out to be a Khajiit, though the name was a hint.

“Ah, you are the new thief. I am your new doyen,” she said. “Bravil itself presents little scope for an ambitious member of our guild. Perhaps you may find the castle entertaining. Little else.”

And wasn’t that accurate. Bravil was the poorest of the cities, and it showed in just how run down most everything was. “Armand said you’d be the one to speak to now about potential special jobs.”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “And I happen to have a request from the widow of a former fence in Leyawiin. As your new doyen, I am asking you to help her. A street scavenger made off with a ring that the widow Ahdarji values highly. She is offering a reward. The guild frowns on freelance thieves. Are you willing to go to Leyawiin, find the ring, and get it back to Ahdarji?”

“Yes.”

“This is good. Go to Leyawiin. Speak with Ahdarji and help her find the ring.”

Ahdarji lived on the west side of Leyawiin, according to a beggar there, and was fond of both the Five Claws Lodge (for midday meals) and the Three Sisters’ Inn (in the evenings). He found her outside, in the rain (he shuddered to think how that went along with fur).

“Why does the prey approach me?” she asked.

“I’m here about the ring that went missing,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” she said, and scowled. “A filthy Argonian stole my precious ring. It was a gift from my mate. It has … sentimental value. I will pay well.”

The way she said “sentimental” meant it was anything but, but he nodded agreeably anyway.

“The stupid lizard hunts with the name Amusei. Find him, find my ring. Make him suffer! Kill him and I will be pleased.”

“The guild doesn’t kill,” he said firmly.

She scowled again. “Stupid guild rules! He is only an Argonian. He is less than human, and much less than Khajiit. If you must spare him, at least make him suffer. So many greenskins here. They smell, do they not? Ahdarji won’t drink the water, no. The Argonians swim in it.”

He found a beggar and forked over ten septims to find out that Amusei was languishing in prison after having tried to scam the Countess. He had obviously taken to being a freelance thief after not getting in the night Sora had, whereas Methredhel had probably pestered Armand until she either won a challenge or did some job to finally prove her skill.

He slipped past the guard on duty in the castle dungeon and found Amusei.

“What do you want?”

“How’d you end up in here?” he asked.

“The Thieves Guild refused to take me, so I came here. Leyawiin is my home. It is where I was raised. I went to the Imperial City in hopes of joining the Thieves Guild. Now I am forced to live as a freelance thief.”

“I see.” It sounded more like he just gave up to Sora. “What’s all this about Ahdarji’s ring?”
“Why should I tell you where it is?” Amusei retorted. “Here I sit in Leyawiin’s dungeon while you are free. What will you do for Amusei if I tell you?”

He considered that for a moment. “How about I give you a lockpick? You could free yourself.”

Amusei’s eyes opened wide. “You’d do that for me? Maybe you guild types aren’t so bad after all. Okay. It’s a deal. Give me a lockpick and I’ll tell you about the ring.”

He fished one out and handed it over.

“Sunlit freedom!” Amusei cried as he secreted it away. “Yes, I stole that ring from Ahdarji. When I went to sell it, the fence told me it was too hot for him. He showed me an inscription on the inside, ‘To Alessia.’ That had to be the Countess of Leyawiin. The damn ring was stolen property! Well, I figured I would ransom it back to the Countess. Except she tricked me. I was arrested for theft, and she kept the ring. The Countess rarely leaves the castle. Good luck getting it back.”

Sora hastened off and looked for another beggar, who mentioned that the Countess’s handmaiden, Hildara Mothril, would know where the ring was kept. Sora had figured to simply stroll in invisibly and take the thing, but it never hurt to check with an additional source.

“You should know that there are other secrets in that castle,” the beggar added as Sora was preparing to leave.

“Oh?”

“I’ve heard of a torture chamber. They say that Count Marius interrogates Argonian immigrants from Black Marsh. The servants whisper that the Argonians are dragged into the basement and never seen again. You should stay out of there, just in case.”

“Good to know,” he muttered. In any videogame he'd ever played, being told to stay away from some place meant you would inevitably be going there, so... He stopped to speak with Ahdarji and catch her up on things.

She made a disgusted sound. “Stupid lizard. Ahdarji uses the ring much more wisely. I use it to collect and sell information. That ring can be used to read private messages the Count writes. Get me that ring. Steal it from Alessia Caro if necessary. I will pay double!”

A retreat to the area off to the south of the Mages Guild provided some privacy to talk. “This town is nuts,” he said. “I knew there were racists here because of that one job we did, but...”

“It’s tempting to pay a little visit to the Count and Countess,” Viper said, “and give them some interesting dreams to suffer through.”

Sora shrugged. “For a country that talks of accepting all races, seeing this is … disheartening.”

Viper nodded, the corners of his mouth quirking up for a moment. Sora had no doubt that he and Kiri would get together at some point and plan out a campaign of hell to unleash upon the rulers of Leyawiin.

The handmaiden was easily induced to spill secrets once Sora located her. “Countess Caro is so relieved to have the ring back. It’s been missing for many years. She wears it constantly. Well, not all the time,” the woman amended. “I mean, she puts it in her jewelry box for baths and at night. No proper lady would wear her jewelry to bed.”

Another nudge with his web produced a hushed, “The Countess has a secret passage somewhere in
the basement that leads to her private quarters. That’s where the torture chamber is. Sometimes I can hear the screams of the prisoners when I’m in my chambers.”

He nodded to Viper as he turned to leave. Viper caught up several minutes later and said, “Taken care of.”

That night, around midnight, he snuck into the castle and down into the basement. One wall had a suspicious section that looked like the outline of a door, so he searched around until he spotted a lever in a barrel with no top. A quick pull revealed the doorway. Another lever inside allowed him to close the door in case any guard wandered in.

The room down the hallway and through a locked door had blood all over the place, not to mention implements of torture. What really creeped Sora out was the fork and knife on the blood-covered table. Beyond that was another locked door, another hidden door with convenient levers on either side, and a final locked door that led into an area that somewhat resembled Sora’s own quarters at Battlehorn Castle.

He watched the guards for a bit, slipping on a set of glasses enchanted with Detect Life, then hastened over to the door to the bedroom and picked the lock. The Countess was asleep, and thankfully the tumblers of the lock on her jewelry box were quiet as he manipulated them. He grabbed the ring and took a quick look at a scrap of paper in there as well—

…of night. The Elder Scrolls themselves can pierce the veil. They offer a view of the flux of Time itself. The prophet who reads the scroll sees one version of what might be. Another prophet might have a different vision with equal veracity. The price for insight is the reader’s sight. He is struck blind and…

—then retreated back through the secret passages to the basement, then back outside, taking care to cover his tracks by closing all the doors again. Locking the normal ones was beyond his talents, however, but perhaps whoever used them next would simply insert their key and not notice anything off.

He found Ahdarji at her home early the next morning and handed over the ring.

“My ring! All thanks to the claws of the Clan Mother. You have recovered it. Is the slimy Argonian dead? Did he suffer long?” she asked hopefully, then handed over a pouch of coin. “You have earned the reward. The Thieves Guild was always good to Ahdarji’s dearest mate. I am grateful that the memory is still honored.”

S’Krivva was duly informed that the job was completed—it was on the way north, anyway—and she said, “Good work. You are truly an asset to the guild. I will make sure the Gray Fox himself hears about this. I am promoting you to Prowler. Congratulations. Also, Amusei sends his regards.”

The Argonian had made good use of that lockpick, then.

“While you are here, I have a small problem that you may be able to help with. The guild will even pay a reward. That buffoon, Hieronymus Lex, has invaded the Imperial City Waterfront. Imperial Watch guards from all over the city prowl the streets.”

“Again?”

“Lex has vowed not to leave until the Gray Fox is in custody. The Fox is safe, but the Thieves Guild cannot do business like this. The poor of the Waterfront are kindred to the Gray Fox, and will not betray him. However, cubs soon get hungry. Soon someone will break. Many guild members could
be jailed. Find Methredhel in the Imperial City. She is coordinating the guild’s response.”

A passing beggar was “donated” to in order to find out that Methredhel was hiding out in the Talos Plaza District, in a house owned by a Dynari Amnis. The beggar helpfully pointed it out on Sora’s map, so off they went. Viper and Val waited outside. Renato put on his Chameleon ring and followed him in, just in case.

“It’s good to see you,” Methredhel said on seeing Sora, “but these are foul times for us. Armand is under house arrest, again. Our business in the Waterfront is totally shut down. We need to get Lex to lift his siege, and I have put together a plan.”

He blinked slowly and nodded. “Which is?”

“You and four other operatives will stage high-profile thefts, all at the same time. Hopefully that will force Lex to reassign the guards. Your target is the Arcane University. We’ve had our eye on Hrormir’s Staff for some time, but have been waiting for the wizards to be distracted. This is the perfect time. Will you help us?”

He nodded.

“I knew the Gray Fox could count on you. The staff is in the Arch-Mage’s room. He sleeps between one and seven in the morning. Take this note,” she said, holding one out for him to take. “Leave it in his nightstand. Bring me the staff when you get it.”

Outside and some distance away he murmured, “It’s amazing how high up she’s gotten in so little time if she’s planning out multiple heists. Why are we doing this again?”

“I’m going to assume you don’t mean what she just asked us to do,” Val commented.

He rolled his eyes. “We have yet to get any closer to the Gray Fox.”

“So impatient,” Renato scolded. “You rise up a bit more and who knows? If not, we’ll figure out some other way to unmask the mystery.”

“Right. Let’s go find a nice spot for the tent and I’ll make us dinner.”

Once the tent was set up outside the city and Sora was hard at work cooking, Viper said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll just go get the staff now and be back by the time you’re ready to serve.”

He nodded and handed over the note from Methredhel. Viper came back approximately a half hour later and joined in on the meal, a simple enough stir fry. Once everything was cleaned up with some propagated bottled water, Sora accepted the staff from Viper and went to deliver it. An invisible Renato accompanied him inside again while Val and Viper kept an eye on things outside.

“Excellent,” Methredhel said as he offered her the staff. “Yours is the last item on the list. Now we just wait for the powers that be to pull the plug on Lex’s siege. But…”

“But?”

“I want you to spy on Lex. Make sure you get close enough to overhear any conversations. Sooner or later they’ll order him to return the guards to their original posts. When that happens, come and tell me.”
A trip out to the Waterfront District showed that not only was Lex out and active, but so were numerous guards. A Dremora showed up some time later and made straight for Lex. It handed over a small scroll and left just as abruptly as it had come.

“So, the mages send a foul daedra to deliver a simple note when an honest footman would have done. How typical,” Lex said sourly. He opened the scroll and read it, then tossed it to the ground.

“All right, men! We’ve been ordered back to our posts. I smell the dirty hand of the Gray Fox behind this.”

The note, which Sora grabbed once the guards had cleared away, read:

Hieronymus Lex,

Your vendetta against the Gray Fox has cost the Arcane University dearly. You commandeered the guards patrolling our property. In their absence, someone stole a valuable artifact from the University. We demand that you return all guards to their posts immediately. If you do not do this, we will be forced to bring the matter to the attention of your superior.

Raminus Polus

The Arcane University

Methredhel had one last task for the evening when he reported back to her. “As a sign of good faith, the Thieves Guild needs to return Hrormir’s Icestaff to the Arcane University. However, the wizards are not to be trusted. I’m sure they’re watching for us to put it back where you got it.”

‘Why would they assume we’d return it?’ he wondered.

“They’d have no qualms about killing you once they had it back. Instead, I want you to put the staff into Ontus Vanin’s safe chest. He keeps one in his home. Ontus is a former University researcher.”

“And then you pay me?” he asked dryly.

“Greedy bastard, aren’t you,” she said laughingly. “I like that in a thief. You’ll have to see S’Krivva about that. I’m just running the scam.” She pulled a map out and tapped a quill on the spot where Vanin lived, then handed back the staff.

Outside and down the street, away from any guards, Renato grabbed the staff and took off, vanishing along the way.

“He didn’t even say where to meet,” Sora complained. “Let’s go back to where we set up the tent earlier.”

When he awoke Renato was plastered against his back, one hand wrapped around his wrist. His Sun had a habit of being possessive in his sleep. He carefully turned around in Renato’s arms and, mindful of the other two people sleeping, pressed his lips to his Sun’s. “Hey,” he whispered.

“I know,” Renato muttered, answering the unstated comment. “But I just followed our link back to you.”

He smiled and gave Renato another soft kiss. “A little warning would be nice next time, but it’s good to know you figured out how to use the link like that.”
“Well, imagine if someone kidnapped you.”

Sora snorted. “Right. Will you teach the others how to do that?”

“Kidnap you?” Renato said with a roguish grin. “Let’s return home for a while, okay? The pay from the job can wait a bit. I’ll teach the others how I can use the link like a GPS straight to you. We all love you in our own ways, so I’m sure—”

“Deep affection,” Val objected, sitting up from his bedroll. “Like brothers!”

Sora laughed. “Are you saying it’s not possible to love your family?”

“…Well, no,” Val said slowly.

“If you people aren’t going to be quiet,” Viper said grumpily, “I guess I’ll be getting up, too.”

“I’ll make breakfast, then,” he said. “We’ll head home for a bit, then get back on track with this whole thief thing.”

“What can a humble doyen do for a sly thief?” S’Krivva said after he found her at home. “News from Methredhel has reached me that Hieronymus Lex has left the Waterfront and that you did your part well.” She handed over a pouch of coin. “I am promoting you to Cat Burglar, which means you can use Luciana Galena of Bravil as a fence. Now, on to other matters. I have need of a very special book, the Lost Histories of Tamriel. The cat burglar Theranis was sent hunting in Skingrad for it. However, he has not been seen since. The Gray Fox himself hunts for this book. I need you to find Theranis and help him to bring back the book. If he is unwilling or unable, bring back the book yourself. Are you agreeable?”

“Sure.”

“That is good. Go to Skingrad. The trail starts there.”

“Westward, ho,” he muttered to his family.

A beggar in Skingrad was happy to say, after a stack of coins somehow found its way into his hand, “Here’s what I know. Theranis was drinking in the Two Sisters Lodge. He was bragging about stealing something from the castle.”

Sora groaned.

“Unfortunately, Captain Dion was also in the Two Sisters Lodge. Heard everything. He arrested Theranis and hauled him off to the dungeons.”

Off in a quiet spot Viper said, “We can’t all go. Four of us piling into the dungeons is a bit much.”

“No, but we can guard the way back,” Val said.

“All right. Renato, come on.”

Down in the dungeons he found a white-haired Nord who said, “Are you here to rescue me?”

Sora paused, then shrugged. “Sure.”

“Just unlock the door. A couple of hours after you’re gone, it’ll be quiet again and I can sneak out.”
Before he did that he asked about Theranis.

“You mean the thief? He was in the big cell with that Argonian. They were always whispering to each other. The Pale Lady took him days ago.”

A foreboding feeling tiptoed up his spine. “The Pale Lady?”

“Every few days she comes for one of us. Some return, some don’t. Those that are taken three times never return. This was Theranis’s third time.”

‘What the hell is Hassildor doing in secret? Is he using people arrested for petty crimes as a blood source?’ “Where does she take them?”

“I don’t know,” the Nord replied. “She took the Argonian less than an hour ago, though. He put up quite a struggle. He was bleeding all over the place.”

Sora looked down the hall and saw blood leading up to the end of it. There was an unlit sconce down there and it reminded him of the way to the grotto at Battlehorn. He picked the lock on the cell, nodded at the man, and walked off to give the sconce a pull.

A passage was revealed and the trail of blood continued along it. He waited until Renato had whispered past him to close it in case a guard came down on his rounds. The passage led into the wine cellar of the castle, though yet another “hidden” door was involved.

The blood led to the center-most wine cask. He sensed Renato moving off to the side, then a faint grating noise, and then the cask in front of him opened up to reveal yet another passage. There was a Dunmer lady in there with white hair and wearing fine clothes. A body was off to the side, and a cell to the right. An Argonian was inside, still alive. Bottles of what looked like blood were here and there.

He shot a web into the presumed Pale Lady to keep her pacified and walked right past her—she could still smell him he supposed—and whispered to Amusei, “Hey. Why do I keep finding you in prison cells?”

“We need to get to safety,” Amusei said after he dashed over to the bars. “I am so glad you are here to save me from the vampire! Those cretin Skingrad guards caught me stealing a fish and locked me up.”

‘You couldn’t just, you know, fish one out of the river or lake? You can breathe underwater without enchantments…’

“You have saved my life, again. You are a true friend. I will not forget this. I’ve decided to join the Thieves Guild. No more jails for me!”

“Is the guy over there Theranis?”

“Theranis? How did you know about him? He was my cellmate. At least until the Pale Lady took him away.”

He sighed softly. “Did he ever mention a book?”

“No, but he did give me a message about a treasure to deliver to the Thieves Guild if I was ever to get out. After the first time Theranis was taken by the Pale Lady, he knew he was going to die.”

He fetched out a lockpick and set about working on the lock.
“Soon as we’re out of the castle I’ll tell you all that I know,” Amusei promised.

The lock clicked, so he swung the door open. Amusei stared at the Pale Lady in confusion, then shrugged and started for the exit. It was not until they were halfway down the path toward town that Amusei said, ‘He told me to give this message to any member of the Thieves Guild who asked about him or a book: ‘Look under the bush near the well, behind Nerastarel’s house.’ I was going to take it for myself, but I owe you a great debt. You should take it.”

The book was duly found and Sora cracked it open to see what the fuss was about.

In an earlier volume I discussed the vagaries and influences of the Aedric prophesies, more commonly known as the Elder Scrolls. Readers wanting to know the history behind the highly inappropriate appellation ‘Aedric’ can refer to chapters 23 through 27 of my previous work for a full explanation as well as the incompetencies of my good comrade Therin of Mournhold, who named them thus.

The influences of the archivally historic Elder Scrolls cannot be understated. Once a prophecy contained in an Elder Scroll is enacted in Tamriel, the text of the parchment becomes fixed. All readers ingest the same divine message. It becomes an historical document declaring the unequivocal truth of a past event. Scholars, even those asdim-witted as Therin of Mournhold, cannot argue the bias of the writer, like he has with my earlier works. Not even magic can affect the word written upon those ancient pages.

“That seems pointless,” he commented, “but whatever, I guess. The job was to find it and bring it back.”

He handed over the book to S’Krivva. “Theranis is dead, unfortunately.”

“Dead?” she said as she accepted the book. “I grieve for him. But at least the book has been retrieved. The Gray Fox has sought this book for many years.” She set the book aside and fetched out a coin pouch to hand over. “Here is your payment.”

He unloaded a bunch of gear taken from dead bandits and marauders onto the fence in Bravil and left town. “Let’s do something else for a bit.”

“What about that manor you bought?” Renato said. “We still have to track down that Benirus fellow in the Imperial City.”

“Yeah.” The trek north was nothing special. They were attacked by the usual bandits, bears, and the occasional enterprising mudcrab that wandered too far away from water. All the spoils were packed away in the tent to be later sold off as “stolen” if the need arose. Though considering just how much they had fenced already… The disguises came off along the way, also.

A man on the street dressed in fine clothes told him, “Yes, he arrived in town not too long ago. I believe he’s staying at The King and Queen Tavern, in the Elven Gardens District.”

“Ah, I know the place. Luther Broad’s is right there, too.”

The man nodded. “That’s right.”

“Thank you.” They departed and ended up inside the inn in question. Benirus was there having lunch.
Sora walked over and stared.

Benirus felt it, for he looked up and his eyes widened. “I’m surprised to see you all the way out here in the Imperial City.”

“This one obviously never listened to all the gossip about the great hero, then,’ he thought. “Funny thing about that manor you sold me. It’s haunted. And I found the most interesting scrap from a diary in there, one that mentioned only a blood member of the Benirus family could open that seal in the basement.”

“So you think I’m responsible?” Benirus said, then adopted a shamed look. “I suppose you’re right, as the manor used to belong to my grandfather, Lorgren Benirus. I knew there was a curse on that place, which is why I sold it to you so cheap. I suppose I should’ve warned you, but I had to get out of Anvil. My family said I could move here to the Imperial City once all our loose ends were tied down. The manor was one of those loose ends. I fear my own greed got the better of my judgment. I hope you weren’t hurt badly in that horrible place. I suppose I assumed you’d be able to lift the curse and be done with it.”

“Obviously not,” he said dryly.

“Lorgren Benirus was a strange old man, always dabbling and experimenting with magic,” Benirus said scornfully. “He was mostly harmless, until the fateful day he came across a tome bearing the evil magic of necromancy. He became obsessed and decided that by using necromancy, he could prolong his own life. The dark arts contained in the tome called for him to dig up the recently deceased in the nearby crypts under the cathedral.

“When it was discovered that he did this, the Mages Guild called for a quick meeting to decide what to do. It only took minutes to decide. Led by a young upstart named Carahil, the Mages Guild stormed Benirus Manor and slew Lorgren. However, amid the chaos, his body vanished. Because of this, the people of Anvil concluded the manor must be cursed. You are the first person to set foot inside in a long time.”

“This history is good to know,” he said, “but the curse isn’t going anywhere unless you help by opening that seal.” He accepted Val’s find from him and showed it to Benirus.

Benirus read through it and sighed. “You’re right. According to the diary entry, it seems that I’m the only one who can open the secret door in the manor. And I can’t help feeling slightly guilty selling you the place under these circumstances. I’ll meet you in Anvil at The Count’s Arms. From there we’ll try to lift the curse together.” He got up from his unfinished lunch and went to see the proprietor about supplies for his journey.

Sora eyed the man and murmured, “Naturally, we will follow him the entire way to ensure he’s not going to pull a fast one. I don’t care if he runs once the seal is down. He’d probably only get in the way at that point if he stayed.”

“With a possible lich down there?” Val said. “I bet. Or whimper in the corner with a small puddle forming under him. He probably followed one of the Imperial Watch from city to city just to avoid any fighting.”

“Or he has a family heirloom that grants invisibility or Chameleon to avoid that sort of thing,” Viper said. “Either way, I’ll put a tag on him to be sure.”
Benirus was faithful to his word and made the trip to Anvil straight away, only stopping in Skingrad for the night before moving on again in the morning. They trailed him to The Count’s Arms and entered not long after he did.

“I was half expecting you not to show up,” Benirus said once Sora approached. “Are you ready to go to the manor?”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

“Then let’s get this over with. I don’t relish the thought of spending too long inside of the manor. Follow me.”

‘Because I have no idea where the house I purchased is,’ he thought, but he followed along anyway. Benirus seemed determined to walk as slowly as possible, but Sora humored him. After a torturously long walk they arrived and entered the manor house.

“Okay, you lead from here,” Benirus said. “Hopefully we can make it to the basement without too much fighting. This place makes me … uneasy.”

Sora nodded and said, “Just don’t get in the way if any ghosts pop up, all right? We’ll handle them.” Oddly, none appeared during the trek down into the cellar and to the room with the seal.

Benirus went over to it and began to do something Sora couldn’t figure out. He didn’t care, so long as the seal was removed. “I hope that whatever’s behind this will truly lift the curse,” he said a bit distantly. “I’d hate to risk harm for nothing. As soon as this opens, I’m leaving.”

A minute later the place started shaking, dust from cobwebs raining down from above, and a door began to open in the wall. Benirus stepped back, paused a moment, then turned and fled, saying, “I fear I can no longer assist you here. I’ll wait for you at The Count’s Arms.”


Sora approached. There were smaller seals on the walls, a large one on the floor right before a bier that held what looked to be a skeleton, a table along one wall, and a desk on the other. He walked in cautiously; when he was almost to the bier he heard a raspy voice resound in the room and bounce off the stone walls.

“I am Lorgren Benirus, and I desire the chance to atone for my sins. The things I’ve done to the people of Anvil, the horrible, unspeakable acts I’ve committed demand repentance. Carahil was justified. Slaying me was the only way to stop the madness. I have accepted that fate.”

‘Then why would there still be ghosts attacking people in here?’ he wondered.

“Now, so I may make my final peace with the Nine, please rejoin my hand to my body. Only then, when I am complete, will this eternal nightmare end.”

Sora retreated back to the cellar and then upstairs.

“This is a trick, right?” Val said.

Renato nodded. “Of course it is. We put that hand in place and I bet he rises up and tries to kill us.”

“But if we don’t, we won’t then be able to defeat him,” Viper said, “and this house would remain useless.”
“He seemed pretty lucid,” Sora commented. “That makes me wonder if he’ll be susceptible to your illusions, Viper. And, Renato, the fire of your flames. I mean, all the undead in the movies have a fire weakness, so…”

Renato snorted. “All else failing, Val can bulk up and smash him into paste.”

“Right,” Val said with a nod, then bent down to pick up the skeletal hand. “I’m gonna need a bath after this, though.” He shuddered and held the thing away from his body.

“All right. Let’s go kill us a dead guy.”

Val put the hand in place on the bier and stepped back to scrub at his hand with a spare bit of cloth.

That same voice sounded. “It never fails to amuse me how easy mortal man is to manipulate. You’ve assisted me in completing the very thing Carahil’s cabal sought to prevent all those years ago … my ascension to immortality. Last time I clashed with mortals, I underestimated their power. I shall not repeat that mistake twice.”

The skeleton on the bier fleshed out some and rose swiftly. It went down just as swiftly when Renato used Chaos Shot. “Don’t think those illusions will be necessary,” he said smugly.

Viper rolled his eyes and turned away to leave.

Upstairs they were in for a surprise. The manor had, dare he think it, magically righted itself. The windows let in bright light, furniture was upright and unbroken, and the bed upstairs was actually something Sora would consider sleeping in—with new bedding first.

They trooped off to The Count’s Arms to see Benirus one last time.

“I’m sorry for running away like that, but fear got the best of me. I’m glad you talked me into coming with you. Now that the curse has been lifted, I feel like I’ve taken care of my family’s unfinished business. Excellent work. May the manor give you many years of happiness. I’m now off to the Imperial City once more. Farewell!”

“Can we go home now for a while?” Val asked. “The real one?”
“The esteemed cat burglar honors me,” S’Krivva said in greeting. “It is well you have come. Hieronymus Lex must be eliminated once and for all. The Gray Fox has asked that you do this personally. It is a most delicate matter.”

“We don’t kill, so there must be some other plan in mind.”

“Countess Umbranox of Anvil is hunting for a new captain of her guard. The Legion Commander of the Imperial Watch sent her a list of candidates. The Gray Fox wants this list replaced with one that highly recommends Hieronymus Lex. From Anvil he can do little harm to the guild.”

He nodded. “And the letter?”

“It is currently in the steward Dairhill’s desk. She has lied to Lady Umbranox, telling her that the letter has yet to arrive. For reasons unknown to this one, the Gray Fox has extended his protection to the Umbranox family and Lady Umbranox in particular.”

‘If they are one and the same, the amount of time that “stranger” spends gazing wistfully at her suggests love, or obsession.’

“While Lex is a problem for the guild, his unwavering loyalty and resolve make him the perfect protector for Lady Umbranox.”

“It’s obvious to me that forgery will likely be necessary.”

“Yes,” she said. “You will have to track down one with such skill on your own. I don’t know of any in Bravil. With the forged letter in hand, sneak into the Legion Commander’s office in the Imperial City Prison and seal it with his seal. Dairhill cannot be trusted. You must deliver the letter to Lady Umbranox in person. Will you accept this commission?”

He nodded. Perhaps after this he could get that much closer to the Gray Fox and unravel the mystery Viper was so keen on.

“That is good. Remember, this is a mission of stealth, not blood. Your payment will be higher than normal to cover the expense of the forgery.”

It was a simple enough matter to sneak into the steward’s room at Castle Anvil and appropriate the letter. He tracked down a beggar in town and asked about someone skilled in forgery and, after a donation of fifteen septims, was informed, “Look for a man known only as the Stranger. He lives here in Anvil, near the Mages Guild. He’s out and about in the morning, so I would wait until afternoon or evening to go visit him.”

They actually saw the Stranger not far away, but he was already almost to Castle Anvil. A peek inside showed that he was mooning over the Countess again, so they left and waited near the Mages Guild for him to emerge and, hopefully, enter the abandoned house. He had a fair amount to say once they followed him inside.

“Do I know you?”

“Possibly,” he replied. “Who are you?”
“I am the Stranger. That is all you need to know. That, and I am not to be trifled with.”

“I see. And the Gray Fox?”

“Everyone wants to know about the Gray Fox,” the Stranger said scornfully. “Gray Fox this, Gray Fox that. He’s just a man, not a Daedric Lord. I’ve heard it all. They say he’s immortal because he’s led the Thieves Guild for over three hundred years. No one has ever seen his face because he always wears that gray cowl. Oh, and speaking of the Gray Cowl, did you know he stole it from Nocturnal herself? You’d think he was Saint Nerevar the way they talk about him.”

“I see,” he repeated. “I’ve been reliably informed that you can help me. I have a letter of recommendation I need altered, appropriately forged. I was told you could handle that.”

When the man looked interested he fetched out the list and offered it up. The Stranger read it and nodded. “I can do the forgery, but to what?”

“The top recommendation needs to be Hieronymus Lex.”

The Stranger hummed. “Yes, it can be done. I can change it to give Lex the highest recommendation. I’ll need a full day to properly forge this letter. Return then. And of course I will expect payment in full at that time.”

He nodded and retreated downstairs so he could exit. Once far enough away Viper became visible once more. “So we have a day to waste. Let’s restock the tent, then go clear out some of the bandits in the area, make things a bit safer for travelers.”

The first thing out of the Stranger’s mouth was, “Do you have my fee?”

“You never even told me what it was,” he pointed out.

“Oh? Five hundred drakes,” the man said, looking slightly chagrined.

Pocket change to Sora and his family, never mind that they would get it back, and there was always more to be had just selling off the spoils from dead bandits. He made up fifty stacks of ten septims and placed them on the table.

The Stranger eyed the process carefully, then nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment. “Here is the new List of Candidates. Hieronymus Lex has a glowing recommendation.”

Sora accepted it, glanced at it, and tucked it away. “Thank you.”

They made the trip to the Imperial City and Viper took the list long enough to slip into the prison and use the Imperial Legion Commander’s seal on it, then they spent the night just outside the city, in their tent.

“I wonder if Kiri can warp here without destroying everything around him,” he mused while he cooked.

“What are you talking about?” Renato said.

“I guess it never came up. In my original dimension he could warp around like the Vindice, but unlike them, the area around him was destroyed at his departure point. It’s not that I have a problem with getting exercise, it’s just annoying going to Anvil, then here, then back, all in so short a time. I’ll
They rolled into Anvil and straight to the castle; the Stranger was seated on a bench again, watching. The Countess was still holding court hours, so Sora approached with the list in hand. “Your Grace, I have come to deliver the recommendation list for your new guard captain.”

“Odd,” she replied. “Normally these missives are handled by my steward, Dairhill. Let me see that.”

He let her take the list.

She read through it and hummed. “Hieronymus Lex looks like the best choice. I was about to give the position to Dairhill’s cousin. Well, I have the orders right here. I’ll fill in his name and you can deliver it to Captain Lex,” she said, taking a moment to dip a quill into an ink pot and write on the orders. “Thank you, courier. My steward will tip you,” she added as she waved the orders around to dry the ink, then rolled it up and handed it to him.

He had no intention of speaking with the steward. She’d probably stiff him on the amount as payback for her cousin not getting the job.

Lex was found at The Bloated Float on the Waterfront and, amusingly enough, Methredhel was also spending the evening there drinking. Sora went up the steps to the balcony where a door to the outside was, as Lex was seated on a bench there, and offered him the orders from Countess Umbranox.

Lex set down his tankard and read the parchment. “I’ve been reassigned!? This is outrageous! The Gray Fox had a hand in this, I know it.” Lex sighed and sipped from his tankard. “I am bound by duty and honor to obey this order. After all these years, he has finally won. Maybe fate will be kind and deliver him to me in Anvil.”

Sora nearly huffed a laugh. ‘If what we suspect is true, he will be, you just won’t ever realize it.’

“I’ll leave at once for Anvil.” Lex got up, edged past them, and headed down the stairs.

Methredhel grinned at him as he passed her on the way out, and they spent the night outside the city again before heading to Bravil to see S’Krivva.

“Well done, hunter!” she said. “Hieronymus Lex will no longer be a thorn in the paw of the Thieves Guild. The Gray Fox shows his gratitude. You are being promoted to Shadowfoot, and may now use Orrin of Castle Anvil as a fence.” She handed over a fairly heavy pouch—a later check would reveal it held one thousand septims—and added, “There are rumors that the Gray Fox himself may call on you soon. Wait for contact from him. Keep the guild fences busy.”

The road to Anvil provided plenty of bandits to relieve of their gear, so they had plenty to pawn off on Orrin at Castle Anvil as “stolen” goods.

“Ah, I see you work with the Gray Fox,” Orrin said when he brought up the subject. “Remember, act casual, like we haven’t done anything illegal.”

Sora’s mouth twitched as he started producing his items. But once he’d unloaded everything and pocketed the cash, they camped outside town for the night, then started the journey to the Imperial City. Chests in the tent were again filled with the spoils of battle, but they spent the night in the city itself, at the Bloated Float Inn.
That turned out to be a minor mistake.

Sora woke up and was annoyed to realize the ship was rocking and creaking, unlike the placid stillness it had when he had gone to sleep, and his stomach was protesting mildly at the motion.

“We’re at sea?” Renato said uncertainly as he released Sora’s wrist and sat up.

They both got up, checked their things, and Sora opened the door, only to see someone dressed in leather armor blocking the way to the door up to the tavern deck.

Viper and Val emerged from the other room looking confused, and the sound of the second door opening alerted the person standing in the way.

“Hey! Who in Oblivion are you? You don’t look like one of the Blackwater Brigands! Four of you!” The man readied his sword only to die when Val altered the size of the sword, causing the man to fall over from the sudden weight and impale himself.

“Sad,” he said, shaking his head.

Renato rifled through the man’s clothing and came up with a piece of parchment, a few measly septims, and a key.

**Lynch,**

Your instructions are to make your way to the bottom deck of the ship and secure all of the rooms there. Make sure you don’t disturb Minx. She’s to be left alone to do her assignment. Remember, after the ship is scuttled, we’ll meet back in Bravil in three days. Make sure you destroy this note after you memorize it.

S

“Did I miss some gossip or something?” he asked rhetorically, then tried using the key on the locked room at the end of the “hall”. Inside was an Orc.

“Thank you for freeing me. I’m Graman gro-Marad, the Bloated Float’s bouncer and helmsman. I’ve been locked here in the storage room for hours. I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but not long ago, a gang of thieves calling themselves The Blackwater Brigands stormed the ship. They took myself and Ormil, the Float’s owner, hostage and put the ship to sea. I have no idea what they’re after. If you can get me safely to the top deck, I can steer the Float home. But I’m not budging until the coast is clear. I’m used to dealing with drunken louts, not a gang of well-armed thieves.”

Sora nodded and headed through the door leading to the stairs up to the tavern deck. There was a woman up there, and she obviously heard the door opening, for she said, as she started to turn, “Ho there! Where do you think you’re going? Selene’s not going to like this one bit. I wasn’t to be dis—” She saw who was standing there and whipped out her sword.

After she was dead, Sora rifled through her pockets for a measly five septims and a key. Given that the bouncer wanted a free path to the top deck, he bypassed the room behind the counter and went up to the door above it, where Lex had been seated when he’d delivered the transfer orders.

“Wha—?” said a dark-haired man out there. “What are you doing up here? They find the Golden Galleon yet? I don’t know who you people are, but if you’re dead, it’ll mean fewer people to split the treasure with!”
He had a key on him and four septims. ‘Not very wealthy for bandits,’ he thought.

Back inside Graman had ventured up from the inn deck. “Sounds like the coast is clear,” he said, “so I’ll make my way up to the ship’s wheel. But I’m not moving this hulk an inch until Ormil is safe. Be cautious. Their leader sounds dangerous.” He nodded and headed up the stairs.

The key opened the proprietor’s cabin. Inside was Ormil and a woman. “How’d you get in here?” she demanded.

“I got the key from the fellow at the ship’s wheel.”

“Wrath? I told him to guard the wheel and not talk to anybody. Who are you?”

He realized at that point that she could not see his family behind him since he was standing in the doorway blocking the view. “I’m just the ship’s cook.”

“There’s no cook on board the Bloated Float!” she said angrily. “How dare you try and make a fool of me! After I deal with you, I’ll feed your body to the slaughterfish!”

She died.

“Oh thank goodness!” Ormil cried as he stared at the body. “That horrid woman kept threatening me! Said if I didn’t come up with the loot she’d throw me to the slaughterfish.”

“Why were they even here?” he asked.

Ormil looked rueful. “Well, I’m afraid all of this was my fault. They hijacked the Bloated Float because of me. Business has been waning of late, so I invented a story. I fashioned a tale about a ‘Golden Galleon’ that the previous owner hid within this very vessel. It was to be a statuette made completely of gold. At the time, the idea was quite clever, I thought. I figured the lore would draw more curiosity seekers and adventurers looking for the treasure. What could the harm be if while they were here, they bought a drink or two? My business has increased quite a bit since I leaked the story.

“Well, obviously, I was mistaken. It was a terrible idea. I’m just glad that no innocents were hurt; I wouldn’t want to have their blood on my hands. Anyway, sorry to ramble. You better get below now and rest until we arrive safely at the Imperial City docks. I’m glad that you were on board to help rid me of them. If you hadn’t been here … I don’t even want to think about it… I’ll turn over her body and the bodies of her compatriots when we arrive. Don’t let it trouble you, friend.”

Sora stared for a moment, then nodded and turned around. The rooms were cramped, but a little more rest wouldn’t go amiss. Ormil handed over four hundred fifty septims after he awoke as reward money.

Methredhel found them as they emerged back out into the Waterfront. “I have a message for you from the Gray Fox,” she said in a hushed tone. “He has a task for you. Meet him at Helvius Cecia’s house in Bruma.” She ran off, not giving him a chance to ask any questions.

Val started snickering. “We can visit the statue again.”

“I will end you,” Sora said under his breath. “Maybe we could sneak over to it in the middle of the night and…”

“And what?” Renato said. “Paint graffiti on it? Maybe a nice Snidely Whiplash mustache?”

“I still don’t get why I was depicted with a dagger and shield. As if I’d ever use either in a fight!”
“You look more heroic that way,” Viper said. “Though really, they should have gone with a sword. And perhaps armor. I guess they prefer their heroes to look like fighters and not mages?”

He heaved a sigh. “Let’s get going. We can eat on the way.”

The Gray Fox was downstairs in the building a beggar directed them to. He was wearing dark, worn leather armor and a gray cowl that concealed everything but his eyes, mouth, and chin. The cowl itself had blue Daedric runes running down the center strip.

“I see you got my message.”

‘Funny how he has the exact same eyes as the Stranger,’ he thought, and nodded.

“I have need of your special gifts,” the Gray Fox said. “There is an item, hidden away in a remote monastery. I need you to go get it for me.”

‘And I have to wonder why you are incapable of doing it yourself,’ he thought. ‘Or is that you want to be able to rush back to Anvil at a moment’s notice?’

“The monastery is extensive and well guarded, so you should make sure to be well prepared. Should you succeed, I will pay you well for your services.”

He nodded again.

“Capital!” the Gray Fox cried. “The monastery is called the Temple of the Ancestor Moths. It is where retired, blind Moth Priests go to wait out the rest of their days. I will mark the location on your map. Look for it in the far northeast of Cyrodiil, beyond Cheydinhal.”

Sora fetched his out and offered it. The Gray Fox ticked a spot with a quill and handed it back.

“I need you to acquire Savilla’s Stone. It is a large crystal with special properties that I need to gain … advantage. Remember, do not shed innocent blood. However, there is no bloodprice for slaying the stone’s guardians, human or inhuman. When I receive word that Savilla’s Stone is missing, I will be waiting for you.”

“You won’t have to wait long,” he said, then departed.

“So basically, we take the northeast gate in Cheydinhal as we did when looking for the Mythic Dawn,” Renato said, “but keep mostly north rather than veering off toward the lake.”

“Looks that way,” he replied, studying the map. “A road appears to lead straight to it.”

“He had the same feel,” Viper said. “Can’t for the life of me figure out his name—or more accurately, something is blocking me—but that’s the Stranger.”

“Confirmation is always good,” he replied. “We’re on the right track, then. I expect all of this is leading up to a way to break the curse, so he can return to his original life.”

“Something moderately familiar,” Val said. “Minus the misleading hero statue.”

The Temple of the Ancestor Moths was part way up the mountains and snow lay everywhere. A bit
of investigation showed that of the three buildings, only one was likely to be their target. The chapel held nothing of interest and the other building was a simple enough hut with bed space. The final building was a crypt.

It was fairly standard in layout as compared to the undercroft Sora had been in, but this one had a door leading deeper, into an area with several of blindfolded monks. He and his family skulked by after putting on rings with Night Eye enchantments and eventually ended up in the next section, which had a large room with many beds in it. It, too, was utterly dark, which made sense.

Deeper in was an area that had no monks, but it did have traps. There were trip-wires, spikes in the floor, and some wraiths roaming around. As with anything else, they picked a wall—left again—and followed it so as not to get turned around.

The door that led them to opened into a vast cavern that was roughly square in shape. The center was almost a storey below their entrance, with steps leading down to a dais. He could, should he choose, walk all the way around the room on his level, but there seemed to be little point. He could see hints of tunnels to either side, but the stone they were after was on that dais, guarded by a blindfolded priest and something that looked like a dark Welkynd stone.

Viper touched his arm and signaled for them to wait, then drifted away to make the rounds. When he got back he leaned in to whisper right into Sora’s ear, “We grab the stone and go right. The tunnel over there leads to a ladder I expect will take us back up to the surface. If we’d spotted it in the first place…”

Sora nodded, then turned to whisper in Renato’s ear. “You’re the fastest. Dash down, grab the stone, and then we go through the right tunnel.”

Renato nodded and, once Val was filled in, dashed off. They made for the tunnel and were all shortly up a ladder to the outside. Down the path and well out of sight of the temple they set up the tent and Sora started on a meal.

“That was so boring,” Renato complained. “A bunch of tiptoeing around in total darkness. Being a guilded thief is just…”

“It’s only temporary,” Val said, giving Renato a frown.

“That reminds me,” Viper said, and fished around in his cloak. “I found a parchment in there. I have no idea why, since those monks cannot read.” He handed it to Sora.

They crowded around as he opened it.

![The Gray Cowl of Nocturnal shrouds the wearer’s face in shadow. No light or magic of detection can penetrate its depths. To look upon Nocturnal’s face without the cowl is to view the depths of the void. A man would lose his mind to see it.]

Recently it has come to light that the Gray Cowl has gone missing. This must be at the whim of Nocturnal, for she could reclaim it easily. The Lady of Shadows has seen fit to reveal that a curse is laid upon the Gray Cowl. Whosoever wears it shall be lost in the shadows. His true nature shall be unknown to all who meet him. His identity shall be struck from all records and histories. Memory will hide in the shadows, refusing to record the name of the owner to any who meet him. He shall be known by the cowl and only by the cowl.

I am directing a triad of Moth priests to investigate this tale. They shall determine the
truth or falseness of the story. They shall determine the present whereabouts of the Gray Cowl, be it in Tamriel, Oblivion, or beyond. All curses can be broken, even those laid by Nocturnal. The triad shall determine how this curse may be lifted so that the Moth priests may safely wield the Gray Cowl.

“Why on Earth would they want to use it?” he said. “I can understand the idea of the challenge of lifting the curse from it, but…”

“But it definitely explains what happened to the Stranger,” Viper said. “I doubt he’s actually three hundred years old, however.”

“So, what… Maybe the thing gets handed down to the next, chosen leader?”

Viper shrugged. “Very possibly. But I have to wonder if any of them went to this much trouble to try to figure out a way to break the curse. I have to believe that’s what he wants, else he wouldn’t spend all that time at Castle Anvil, nor get someone like Lex to guard the place.”

“Lex being there could be in case he’s not successful,” Renato pointed out.

“True.”

“It’s also tweaking the man’s nose, even if he’s never aware of it,” he said.

“Wait a minute,” Val said, and looked at Sora in concern. “If he’s really trying to break the curse so he can get back to his original life, he’s probably going to want to hand off the cowl.”

“And I’m the one doing jobs for him now,” he said softly. “Oh.”

Renato shook his head. “Even if that did happen, you could just never wear the damn thing and hand it off to someone else. If the curse gets broken at least no one’s identity would be in danger. Let’s deliver the stone to him back in Bruma. If it looks like you might end up being tapped as the next guildmaster we can have a family meeting to decide what to do.”

“Yes. Because I have enough to do normally without running a guild on the side.”

“I hear the monks were most … hospitable. My sources tell me that Savilla’s Stone has gone missing. Do you have it with you?”

He removed it from a pouch hanging from his belt and handed it over.

“Capital! Now I can see past the palace defenses. It’s a good thing the emperor didn’t know they had this stone. He would have had it destroyed, or taken it from them and kept it under lock and key in the palace. When I have learned what I need to know, I will call for you again. Let us leave Helvius’s house now. He has served me well and deserves his peace.”

“Wait,” he said, and pulled out the note Viper had found. “What’s this about, then? You’re reaching for the same goal, of a sort?”

The Gray Fox took the parchment and scanned it, then handed it back and laughed bitterly. “I suppose there is no hiding it from you. No hiding. What a joke! My whole life is hiding. Everything in that document is true. My identity cannot be known. In fact I just told you my true name twice, but I bet you don’t remember it. You and I have even met before, when I was not wearing the cowl. To your clouded memory he and I are two different people. My own family doesn’t even know me. I
would give much to be rid of the Gray Cowl and its curse.”

He nodded and departed, satisfied that Viper’s theory was correct.

During a trip to the Imperial City a week later he spotted Amusei wandering around, obviously looking for someone, so he and his family ducked into a convenient alley to toss on their disguises before emerging from the other side and continuing on. That the path he chose brought them past Amusei a bit later on was purely coincidental.

“lt is good to see you again!” Amusei said after Sora was spotted and the Argonian hastened over. “I have a message for you from the Gray Fox. He has a task for you, and says to meet him at Malintus Ancrus’s house in Chorrol.”

“I take it you joined the guild, then?”

“Yes, I did,” Amusei said with a nod. “After you saved me in Castle Skingrad, I vowed to join. I was having no luck on my own. Now I am running errands for the Gray Fox himself. I owe you much for your help. See you!” Amusei raced off down the street and around a corner.

“At least we’ll be near home again,” Val said.

Malintus’s house was down in the “slums” of Chorrol, which made a certain sort of sense. The Gray Fox jumped straight into things again without so much as a greeting. “I have need of your services once more. My work with Savilla’s Stone has revealed that I need something special for my plans. It’s a small item in the possession of a powerful court wizard. Will you do this for me? I will pay you well.”

“What object?”

“Capital!” the Gray Fox said, taking that as agreement. “Bring me the Arrow of Extrication. It has a key-shaped head. Bravil’s court wizard, Fathis Aren, recently acquired this unique item. You may kill Fathis if necessary, but not in the castle. My spy network will tell me when you have it. Return here with the arrow when you do. Now we should get out of Malintus’s house before we wear out our welcome.”

“Fathis is also the wizard in the tower outside of town,” a Bravil beggar told him. “He keeps his most treasured items there, not in the castle. Only Fathis can open the door to the tower, but there is supposed to be a secret passage somewhere in the castle that takes him to his tower.”

He thanked her and walked away. “Viper? We’ll set up the tent outside the city walls.”

“On it,” Viper replied, then vanished.

Why bother to sneak into the castle and find a secret passage when one of their number could fly? Viper joined them about an hour later, a key-shaped arrowhead in hand. “This was all he had. I searched everywhere around him. He was so busy with his alchemy that he probably wouldn’t have noticed if I’d stampeded wild elephants through there.”

He shrugged. “I’m sure it’s only the head that’s important. I suppose any old shaft would do.”
Renato smirked. “I certainly hope not, tesoro.”

He eyed his Sun in confusion, then blushed. “Ren!”

Val started snickering and leaned against Viper, who bore with it stoically.

When he arrived back at Malintus’s house he heard, “I have been waiting,” before he even got the door shut.

“The only thing there was the arrow’s head,” he replied, holding it out.

“Hm,” the Gray Fox said, taking it. “I had hoped for the whole arrow, but that is not your fault. I will have to have it repaired. This arrowhead advances my plan to… Never mind. I may have need of you again in the near future, if my plans hold. Here is your reward,” he said, handing over a pouch of coin. “I am also promoting you to Master Thief in the Thieves Guild. Fathis Ules of the Imperial City will be available to you now as a fence.”

Since they were so close to home, once Sora left his meeting they ducked off into the wilderness to remove their disguises and head west to Battlehorn Castle and Filigrana for a while.

Amusei found him again in the Imperial City when they took a trip to pick up a few things. As soon as Sora spotted the Argonian busily searching for someone he and his family ducked away to put on their disguises again, all so he could coincidentally cross paths with him.

“I have another message from the Gray Fox. You must be very important!” Amusei said, a bit awestruck. “Another meeting. Please travel to Ganredhel’s house in Cheydinhal.”

“Why Cheydinhal?” he muttered. “He’s all over the damn place with these meetings.”

Ganredhel’s house was a nice one, but then Cheydinhal was a pretty place. The owner had two dogs that roamed around inside restlessly while their master waited outside.

“Come, we have much to discuss,” the Gray Fox said as Sora approached the table and chairs by the roaring fireplace. “Further use of Savilla’s Stone has revealed that I need another special item to move forward with my plans. I need the boots of Springheel Jak. He is a famous thief that died some three hundred years ago. Legend has it that he was buried with his boots on. Find out where he’s buried and bring me back those boots. Will you do this for me? It pays well.”

He nodded.

“Capital! The Earl of Imbel is the only descendant of his line that I have been able to locate. His name is Jakben, and he lives somewhere in the Imperial City. There might be a clue in the earl’s house.”

He nodded again and departed before the Gray Fox could trot out his usual line about not overstaying their welcome. Hopefully this quest to break the curse was almost done with, because it was easy to feel annoyance at the constant treks around the country. Though, sometimes saving the life—or identity?—of a man was as important as the world, he supposed.

The Earl of Imbel’s house was in Talos Plaza, on the inner wall. His informant mentioned that the man was “odd” and that he only went out after dark. Sora understood exactly what that meant when
he called on the man and saw his eyes and teeth; he was a vampire.

“What do you want?” Jakben said fearfully when Sora approached. “I’ll do anything you ask!”

If the man was honestly that worried about visitors, why had he left his front door unlocked, or had his manservant answer a knock?

“I wanted to inquire about a legend I ran across, regarding a man called Springheel Jak, supposedly in your line.”

“Take everything, just spare me!” Jakben cried and cowered away.

Sora’s brow went up in disbelief. “Just tell me what you know about him.”

“The family crypts are under the house. They give me the creeps. I have the key. Take it. Just don’t hurt me!”

A key was shoved into his hand before Jakben dashed away. He went up a set of stairs and through a trap door, saying, “I’m—I’m still alive!”

“That was fucked,” Renato whispered.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Viper whispered from the other side.

Sora watched as the trap door eased open again for no visible reason, closed, and then opened again a minute or so later.

“Found something of interest,” Viper whispered, “but let’s look at it down in the basement.”

A piece of parchment was shoved in his hand after they were down there and Sora looked it over. One thing stood out after he read: The Imbel family traces lineage strictly through the male line of heirs, as any right-thinking nobility would. Therefore this family genealogy does not record the inconsequential female offspring.

None of the names on it were Jakben. None of them were Jak, either.

He tucked it away and nodded. The door to the crypts clicked open moments later—Renato at work. Inside he spotted what looked like a vampire so he slipped his Chameleon ring on. There were passages to the left and right of his position, and a door almost directly ahead. He bypassed the vampire and headed for the door.

Renato and the others followed their links to him and the lock clicked open a few moments later. Inside was a tunnel that almost immediately turned left. Straight on after the turn it dead-ended, but the way right led to another locked door, beyond which was a stone coffin.

For some strange reason there was a set of clothes and a weapon in there, but no skeleton. He grabbed the only other thing in there, a diary, and cracked it open to read.

I knew a man who was a great thief. He dared steal from Nocturnal herself! How odd that I cannot seem to recall his name. I think we were friends, but I’m not certain. In three days I will venture into Taren’s crypt. Graverobbing alone is dangerous. Maybe I should try to find a partner. Didn’t I once know a great thief?

I begin this second entry in the second volume of my diary on a momentous day. Actually it is night, the night when my second life begins. It will be forever night for me.
I have become one of the children of the night, a son to mother wolf and brother to the bat. I am nosferatu, a vampyre. Tonight is the first night of the rest of eternity.

I rediscovered this diary today. It has been thirteen years since I last wrote in it. With an eternity before, and the blood hunger ever pulsing in my veins, there is little urgency for diaries, or much of anything. Amiela is calling to me. I must go.

Has it really been eighty-nine years since I last wrote? The pages are getting fragile. I have rediscovered purpose, though it took nearly a century. I have finally gained some measure of control over the blood frenzy. I think I will try to establish a life among the living in one of their great cities.

I had forgotten about this diary. I won’t bother to calculate how many decades it has been since I last wrote in it. The cattle of this city know me as Jakben, Earl of Imbel. Centuries ago I knew myself as Springheel Jak, the famous thief. I seem to recall having a famous partner, but his name escapes me. No matter. I have grown beyond friends and partners. I rule the night here in the city.

No sooner had he closed it and shoved it into a pocket did Jakben slam into the room, fully armored, and wielding a sword. “Where is he?” he hissed.

Sora shot a web into the man and induced sleep, and watched as Jakben crumpled to the dirt floor. A few moments later he could hear rustling sounds, and a pair of boots appeared briefly.

“Let’s go,” he heard Renato whisper.

Outside they regrouped visibly and made their way out of the city. “Let’s just head to Cheydinhal, or at least camp out on the other side of the lake. I’m not sure how long he’ll be asleep. I pumped a lot of sedatives into him, but one of his vampire friends might manage to wake him up early.”

“Let’s avoid the normal route, then,” Renato said. “We’ll circle the city and web-walk across near where you emerged after your little prison stint. We can set up the tent at those ruins. And on a side note, in addition to the boots, I scored quite a hefty pouch of coins off that guy.”

He chuckled and started jogging.

“I assume you found Springheel Jak’s tomb.”

He nodded. “His diary mentions knowing a thief who stole from Nocturnal herself, the Gray Fox, I must presume.”

“Ah, it seems you have stumbled over a bit of history that few in the Thieves Guild ever discover. I am not the first Gray Fox. That master thief died sometime shortly after stealing the Gray Cowl and receiving Nocturnal’s curse. However, another thief in the guild picked up the cowl and assumed his identity and the curse. No one in the guild knew it was a different person. Over the centuries there have been dozens of Gray Foxes. To the rest of the world he seems immortal and unchanging. I am hoping to be the last.”

Confirmation, then. Sora produced the boots and offered them.

The Gray Fox accepted them and said, “I am truly indebted to you. If all goes well, I may call upon you for one last task. The danger will be great, but the reward will be greater. For now, here is your reward.” The usual pouch of coin was handed over. “Let us leave Ganrathel’s house and go our
“I have another message from the Gray Fox,” Amusei said once Sora slipped into his disguise and wandered by to be waylaid. “He requests a meeting. Please travel to Othrelos’s house in the Imperial City Elven Gardens.”

He nodded. At least he would not have to travel far for that one.

“May shadow hide you,” Amusei said in parting before loping away.

A brief detour to find out where Othrelos lived and they were off. The Gray Fox was seated at the table on the ground floor, but said as soon as he noticed Sora, “Are you ready for one last great heist?”

“Sure,” he replied. ‘And I hope this does it.’

“This is the big one. This is the heist that will be written about and talked about for decades to come. We are going to steal one of the Elder Scrolls from the Imperial Palace. Are you ready for this challenge?”

‘Aren’t those the things that make you go blind?’ he thought. ‘Or crazy?’ Nevertheless, he nodded.

“This is for glory, not for money. Our names will become legend. I also have a personal need for this particular scroll.”

‘Considering that I think I have yet to even give a name… And what is this “we” part?’

“As for your compensation, I ask you to trust me. If my plan works, you will get a reward worth far more than mere money. Will you do it?”

He nodded, thinking, ‘I already got that reward, friend. I got my life back.’

“Capital! I have worked for eleven years planning this heist. Savilla’s Stone provided the last bit of information I needed. The Elder Scrolls are kept in the Imperial Palace behind a door that cannot be breached. Savilla’s Stone has revealed a path around this door. You will have to travel the Old Way. Once used as an escape route for Imperial Emperors, it has been forgotten for centuries.”

He wondered about that, considering what had happened to him.

“To unseal the entrance, you must sneak into the basement of the palace and activate the Glass of Time, whatever that is.”

“And then?”

“It will open the way to the real entrance, in the Imperial sewers. Here is the key for the gate to that section of the sewers. I picked the pocket of Ocato himself to get it.”

“What is this … ‘Old Way’?”

“My scrying with Savilla’s Stone has provided clues, but not the details. I know the tools you’ll need there, but not the obstacles themselves. The boots of Springheel Jak will allow you to leap to an unreachable place. They will also protect you from a long fall. The Arrow of Extrication is the only way to unlock the final door. Take them both.”
Sora accepted both arrow and boots and tucked them away.

“Once you are inside the palace itself, you need to find the reading room. The blind priests will deliver a scroll to you there.”

He allowed his confusion to show.

“I arranged for the notable Celia Camoran to want to read a particular Elder Scroll. Don’t ask how. However, she will be … unavoidably detained. You will take her place. Do not speak to the priests. They are blindfolded and will not realize it isn’t her unless you speak. As the guildmaster, I am waiving the bloodprice for anyone you kill during this heist. However, I can’t stop the Watch from putting a price on your head.”

‘Camoran?’ he thought. ‘I wonder if there’s any relation…’ He nodded. “Glass of Time, sewers, arrow…”

“I have written it all down for you in this scroll,” the Gray Fox said, and slid the one resting on the table toward him. “I’ve chosen you because you are the best. Good luck.”

Sora took the scroll and departed. He and his family took a brisk walk to an inn and got rooms, then headed upstairs to talk.

“Oh, I have to assume we’re not slipping in through the front door due to a lock even he can’t pick,” Val said, “something possibly augmented with magic.”

He nodded. “I would assume so. Because otherwise this is a ridiculously convoluted plan.”

“I honestly can’t see all four of us going,” Viper said slowly. “And if something goes wrong and a long drop is required, well…”

Renato sighed. “Yeah, I get it. I’ll wait here.”

Viper and Val eyed each other, and Val bowed out rather than play his Undying card. “Viper can float and fly, so…”

The corners of Viper’s mouth quirked up slightly. “I promise you I will be exceptional in my care of our beloved Sky.”

“I know you will,” Renato said. “Just do the usual cloaking routine, use the rings if necessary.”

“Just don’t read the stupid scroll,” Val said.

Sora gave him a confused look. “Why on Earth would I do that? After what Lorenzo dug up in those books of his I’d rather avoid even thinking about doing so. No. We get this scroll, get it to our friend, and hopefully he’s able to break the curse. It would be nice, I admit, to see someone succeed at that kind of thing.”

“Makes you wonder what’s happening back on Earth,” Val said softly. “We don’t really talk about it, but…”

“We did rather cheat fate when we accepted that offer,” he said, “but we were also—we have no idea how much longer we’d have lived. I can only hope that Xanxus and the Varia manage to figure out what we never could. And maybe if they do, and get to know Byakuran, or someone who can transfer information across dimensions, that the knowledge will be disseminated around so that…”
Viper and Renato nodded, but Val suddenly snickered. “A chibi Xanxus would be a sight to see!”

“I only got to see Squalo in that dream, but he was adorable,” he said with a grin. “Not as adorable as all of you were, but…”

Just to check, because he had to, Sora went to the door leading to the stairs going up at the palace and found that, indeed, he was unable to pick the thing. That being so, he and Viper skulked off to the door leading to the basement and he picked that one open instead. There was a single guard down there patrolling the perimeter, but he was easily avoided.

The Glass of Time turned out to be a simply enormous hourglass with pink sand in it. Sora exchanged a bewildered look with Viper and activated it, and then skulked back out. His intuition led them to the Arboretum District. There was a grate-covered well near the entrance to the Arena District that led down into the sewers, which they used, and he let his intuition guide them along until they came to a room with something that somewhat resembled a manhole cover.

The next level down featured a door at the end of the hall, but it wasn’t one he had the skill to pick open, so they headed south instead, through a door he could manage to open. They avoided the various undead creeping around and emerged into an Ayleid ruin, which reminded him that the entire palace complex was originally an Ayleid palace, taken over by the humans after they overthrew their oppressors.

The first thing he noticed was a gleam of blue on the walkway surrounding the area he emerged into. There was another one on the opposite side. Viper flew up to one of them to push it and Sora slipped on the Boots of Springheel Jak and jumped to the other one. That opened the way to continue deeper into the ruins.

The next place of interest was a massive room with a walkway that bisected it and a raised area at the far end that had three statues on it. The two smaller ones looked like armored elves, but the central one was massive and from the waist up. The door at the back was sealed, of course.

He looted the Welkynd stones he found as they investigated, strongly considered just phasing through the barriers that protected the center of the walkway, and found two more of those funny blocks they could push. Activating those opened the barriers and allowed him to stand on the raised square directly across from the massive central statue.

Doing so caused it to rotate and expose a faint blue glow.

“Oh hell. I’m going to have to shoot from here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Viper said. “Give me the arrow. You stay on that platform, and I’ll go jam it into place.”

“An excellent plan,” he said, and handed it over.

Viper nodded and floated away briskly, coming to a hover next to the keyhole, then slammed the arrow into place.

Sora was more than a little surprised when the two smaller statues came to life. Were they Ayleid who’d been frozen in place for centuries? He jumped down and raced forward, up the stairs, and got a quick look before going through the now open path with Viper. They certainly looked like elves to him, some kind of variant of Altmer.
Through the door he saw four guards sleeping; they had emerged into a rather swanky barracks. They skulked off to the door and exited, then began the journey ever upward. Given how late it was there were very few guards present, and even if they didn’t have the ability to be invisible, there were shadowy alcoves every so often on each floor to hide in if necessary.

When they reached the floor that had blindfolded monks roaming around he went through the first door he reached. Off to his left was a seated monk behind metal grating. Behind him a little was a lever. In front of them was a door, but his attempts to pick it open met with failure.

Viper touched him on the shoulder and pointed at the lever, then floated away. He came back into view a minute later and pulled the lever, then vanished again back into the gloom. Once Viper was back with him he tried the door again; it gave under his hand, so he opened it and stepped inside.

Monks were in the central chamber. Some were reading, others were moving about with surety despite their blindness. He spotted a solitary chair at the table in the center—oddly enough, the table itself resembled a wayshrine minus the columns and with a fire at the center—so he took a seat.

Shortly thereafter a monk came down the staircase that spiraled around the interior and stopped near his chair. “Celia Camoran, I present to you the Elder Scroll you requested.” He placed it on the table and departed back upstairs.

Sora snatched the thing and headed for the door, only to find it was locked again. Viper tugged on his sleeve and pointed upward. He shrugged and headed for the stairs. Another door was present there, which they took. The door at the end of the circular hallway led to yet more stairs, and ended in a suite. Half the circle was a sitting area and half was a bedroom.

Not seeing any immediate way out he closed his eyes and leaned hard on his intuition; it led him to the fireplace. The bottom was not solid rock, but instead had a metal grating to allow ash to drop down rather than build up. It moved easily out of the way.

He double-checked to make sure he was wearing those boots, shared a look with Viper, then jumped in. The Gray Fox’s words about a long fall came to mind as he dropped like a stone down several storeys to land back in the sewers.

Viper floated down a minute later and landed gently. “So much for those boots,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” he whispered back. They had absorbed the impact and disintegrated, and saved his hide from being splattered like an egg. He found his usual boots and slipped those on, then got his head wrapped around which way to go. “I have the funny feeling that was Chancellor Ocató’s rooms we went through.”

They stopped in at the inn first, so that Renato and Val would know they were all right. The two were playing cards, but abandoned the game the second Sora and Viper entered the room.

“Just have to deliver it now,” he said as Renato checked him over.

“It can wait until morning,” Renato said firmly.

He shook his head. “No, I’d rather this thing be out of my hands as quickly as possible. Come with me for the delivery, then we’ll rest, all right?”

Renato frowned, but nodded. “Fine.”

The Gray Fox was just where Sora had left him. He quickly handed produced the scroll and held it out.
“You have the scroll? I can hardly believe it!” the Gray Fox said. “The odds were clearly against you. Capital job! Capital! I have spent years learning how to translate this scroll,” he said as he took it. “Even so, I will need a while to decipher what I have sought so desperately.”

“I wish you luck.”

“I have not forgotten you or your loyal service to the Thieves Guild. You’ll just have to trust me. Give this ring—” The Gray Fox slipped one out of a fold in his armor and handed it over. “—to Countess Umbranox in Anvil. Say nothing about me to her. I need to know how she reacts to it. It may provoke anger or tears. If she asks, just tell her a stranger wanted her to have it. Then report back to me on her reaction.”

He nodded. “As you say.”

Viper and Val were still awake when they got back, but quickly packed off to the other room to get some sleep. Sora dearly wished he could do more than use a rough cloth to wipe himself down from a basin, but it would have to do for the time being. Sewer trips were not his favorite activity.

“We’re going home for a bit,” Renato said from behind him.

“Yes. The Countess can wait a day or two. And besides, I figure we should stake out the castle anyway once we get there, to see how long it takes before he’s done. I fully expect he’ll be right there waiting to see her reaction personally. You’ll notice he never said a word about where to report on that, and I doubt he meant for me to come all the way back here.”

A crier for the Black Horse Courier was happy to shove a scroll into his hands on their way out of the city, so he stopped long enough to read it.

**Palace Break-In?**

The Legion Centurion in command of the Palace Guard was charged with dereliction of duty. Although the Council has officially denied the stories of a palace break-in, the rumors persist. Muddled accounts of the events and principles range from a madman intent on spit-polishing the Emperor’s shoes to a master thief stealing one of the legendary Elder Scrolls.

The Palace Guard has made no arrests in connection with the break-in. However, the Watch has been making peculiar inquiries all around the city. The Guard and the Legion are in complete agreement on one matter at least ... neither the fictitious Thieves Guild nor its mythical leader, the Gray Fox, could have been in any way involved. Although rumor has long insisted that the Thieves Guild has been a significant factor in Imperial City criminal activities, representatives of the Guard and Legion insist that even the mythical Gray Fox would never dare to break into the Imperial Palace.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, “legendary, and yet unnamed.”

When they first arrived in Anvil the Stranger was not to be found in his usual spot on a bench in the Great Hall of Castle Anvil, so they checked back daily until he was. It was only then that Sora approached the Countess with the ring handy.
“Yes? What is it?”

Sora wordlessly offered her the ring.

She took it and examined it closely. “This ring belonged to my husband! He has been missing for over ten years now. For some reason, his name and face escape me at the moment.” Her expression hardened. “How did you get it? Do you know his whereabouts? Why are you showing it to me?”

“It’s a gift from a stranger.”

“My husband’s wedding ring! I never thought to see it again. What I wouldn’t give to see him once more,” she said wistfully.

A sound made him look back.

The Stranger had gotten up and was headed toward them, but he was dressed in armor and wearing the cowl. When he reached the dais he went down on one knee briefly, then stood and thrust a hand into the air. “By the power of the Elder Scrolls I name Emer Dareloth as the true thief of Nocturnal’s Cowl.” Some strange magical aura spiraled around him briefly, then dissipated.

“You’re the Gray Fox!” the Countess cried. “I’ve been betrayed!”

“I am the Gray Fox, but you have not been betrayed.”

“But…”

Sora and his family slowly edged away from the drama unfolding in front of them.

“I am also your missing husband, Corvus,” the Gray Fox said, bowing his head briefly. He then removed the cowl.

“Corvus! Is it really you? For years I’ve waited for word from you. Why did you hide from me?”

“Over a decade ago I inherited this cowl from the former guildmaster of the Thieves Guild. I became the new guildmaster, but I also received its curse. ‘Whoever wears Nocturnal’s cowl shall have his name stricken from history.’ Once I donned the cowl, no one in all of Tamriel could recognize me. With the cowl I became the Gray Fox. Without it, I was a stranger, even to you.”

“You mean you were unable to return?”

“I stood right next to you, and you didn’t even know it. I cried out to you, ‘Here I am! It’s me, Corvus!’ but you looked at me, confused.”

The Countess took a half step back. “You have broken my heart for a second time. I cannot let the infamous criminal mastermind, the Gray Fox, become the Count of Anvil. If you try to announce yourself as Corvus, I will deny you. I will deny you before the Elder Council if I have to.”

“You mean you were unable to return?”

“I stood right next to you, and you didn’t even know it. I cried out to you, ‘Here I am! It’s me, Corvus!’ but you looked at me, confused.”

The Countess took a half step back. “You have broken my heart for a second time. I cannot let the infamous criminal mastermind, the Gray Fox, become the Count of Anvil. If you try to announce yourself as Corvus, I will deny you. I will deny you before the Elder Council if I have to.”

“I guessed you would say these terrible things to me. That is why I brought my friend along. From this moment forward, I renounce my life of crime forever. I am passing the Gray Cowl of the Thieves Guild to its new guildmaster.”

Sora’s eyes widened. ‘Damn it, I knew this was going to happen.’

Corvus turned to him and took a few steps forward. “The Gray Cowl is yours now. You are the new guildmaster of the Thieves Guild. You will find that history has been altered this day. Such is the power of Nocturnal’s curse that lifting it can alter time itself. If Emer Dareloth had not stolen
Nocturnal’s Cowl, the Thieves Guild would never have fallen on such hard times.

“Because of the curse, he was unable to operate in the normal world of business and society. He could only act as the guild’s figurehead. That has been undone. If you go to the Imperial City, you will find that the Thieves Guild has a guild hall on the site of the ruins of Dareloth.” Corvus shoved the cowl into his hands, then returned to his wife.

Sora sighed and made for the exit, shoving the cowl into his pack.

“So let me get this straight,” Lal said. “Because you helped this guy break the curse, you got saddled with being the new guildmaster to a bunch of people you have no interest in, and a cowl you’d prefer to lose down a well or something.”

“About that, yes.”

“I have an idea.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “And that would be?”

“Give me the cowl, and I’ll go whip the lot of them into shape.”

“I could help!” Rio volunteered.

“I have a better idea,” he countered. “I go check out this guild hall he spoke of, find Armand sleeping, and put the cowl on him. Let him figure it out. It’s not an organization you can whip into shape or institute mandatory training sessions for. That’d be like taking over a band of marauders and teaching them how to be more effective at trying to kill us when we travel.”

Lal scowled at him.

“You could always find Nocturnal’s Shrine here in Cyrodiil and leave the cowl there,” Kiri suggested.

“…That’s not a bad idea,” he said, giving his brother a smile. “I still think I should probably check out the guild hall, though, just to make certain there’s nothing peculiar there before my thief persona disappears without a trace.”

Lal and Rio when along with him and Renato for that trip. The Garden of Dareloth suddenly sported a door back there where before there had been nothing. Inside was a set of steps down into a basement where several sleeping pallets were, and another set of stairs led up into the house, which was fairly swanky.

The top level was taken up with a bedroom, presumably for the guildmaster—Corvus had stuck a key to the cowl that opened the door. Savilla’s Stone was there on the top of the desk, and he wondered if he should leave it there or anonymously deliver it to the palace, or leave it someplace where it might never be found. A stone that could scry out just about anything? Not something a person would want to leave just anywhere.

He grabbed it and tucked it away. The sensible thing to do, perhaps, was to just put it back where he’d stolen it from, at the Temple of the Ancestor Moths. And now that he knew a shortcut to get back down there…

Once he found the shrine and visited the temple again, it would be back to business as usual.
14: This Silence

On their way to the Temple of the Ancestor Moths, Sora noticed something very odd. He had passed by the little village before in his travels, but now there were no people present. However, he could clearly hear the sounds of someone working the central plot of land used for farming. He couldn’t see a hoe or anything, but he could see clots of dirt being moved around and vegetables disappearing off the plants.

Sora frowned and slid on his enchanted glasses. Sure enough, there was someone working the garden, an Orc if he was not mistaken. He hopped the fence to speak to the person and heard, “Talk to Diram in the inn. I’m tired of this minstrel’s freakshow our town has turned into.”

“All right.” He headed for the building with an inn sign and entered, barely managing to spot two forms there before he was spoken to by one of them, a male.

“Excuse me. We have a small problem that we hope you can help us with. You may be wondering why you can’t see me. We are all wondering the same thing.”

“So you don’t know what happened?”

“Everyone in Aleswell suddenly became invisible several weeks ago,” the man—elf? Dunmer?—said. “It was sort of fun at first, but the novelty has definitely worn off now. You can imagine how difficult it is to run an inn while invisible. Once you get a reputation as a haunted inn, you can just forget about it. So we’ve all been keeping quiet, hoping the spell will wear off. But we’re running out of patience. We’re sure it was Ancotar’s doing, but we can’t find him. If you can help us, we will be extremely grateful.”

“Ancotar?”

“He’s a wizard who took up residence in the ruins of Fort Caractacus a couple of years ago. He’s caused us no end of trouble with his magical experiments, but nothing as bad as this. We’ve tried to find him, but had no luck. If he’s still living in the fort, he’s hiding from us, and no wonder. If you could find him and get him to remove this cursed invisibility, we will all be in your debt.”

“Is that the ruins a bit south of here?” he asked.

“Yes, southeast. Follow the path down the hill. But watch out for the invisible monsters that infest the ruins!”

“We’ll go check into it.” The walk down was pleasant enough if a person didn’t mind being attacked by invisible lions. The glasses let him see them coming, even if his intuition also gave him nudges of warning.

Ancotar was blurring around the fort’s courtyard. “Go away! I told you to leave me alone!” When Sora just stood there expectantly he heard, “Oblivion take you! What is it you want from me?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about an invisibility spell, would you?”

“Yes, I’ve been working on a new one. As you can see, it works quite well. Why?”

“I hate to break it to you, but the people of Aleswell up the hill are all suffering from invisibility now, even their dogs.”
“Oh… Really? Everyone in town? That must have been what all the shouting was about a few weeks ago. I’m afraid I was engrossed in an experiment that required my full attention. You see, in order to increase the efficacy of the spell, the radius was likely to approach the—never mind. I don’t mean to bore you.”

“It’s fine. Tell me more,” he invited, hoping to get on the fellow’s good side without having to cheat.

“Ah, a fellow mage!” Ancotar cried happily, completely misinterpreting. “Please excuse my rudeness earlier. I find most people extremely tedious. Completely ignorant of the arcane. I came out here to get some privacy for my research. Instead, I was constantly bothered by the local peasantry! ‘The explosions are scaring the sheep’ or ‘A plague of rats ate all our crops’. Every day another complaint!

“No understanding of the pitfalls of experimental magic! Finally, I decided that permanent invisibility was the only way to get some peace and quiet. I know! You’re about to quote Vanto’s Third Law—don’t worry! I haven’t actually found a way to violate the Conservation of Perception! The invisibility isn’t actually permanent. You can tell the villagers not to worry, it will wear off eventually.”

“…Eventually?”

“Well … in a year or two? Maybe a bit more. There’s no way to be absolutely sure. That’s the exciting thing about basic research!”

“Unfortunately, being invisible is ruining business. They can’t wait a year or more.”

“Really? I find being invisible quite refreshing. But, if it will get everyone to leave me alone, fine. I did work out a counter-spell last week … if I can just put my hand to it … ah! Here.”

Sora felt something nudge his hand and wrapped his fingers around it; it turned out to be a spell scroll.

“Stand in the center of town, to make sure you get everyone. Oh, and make sure… Never mind. Should be fine.”

His brow went up. “What should be fine? And make sure of what?”

“Well… Just in case, it might be best if you wore this ring while you recite the scroll. I make them myself. Very useful for this kind of research. Not that I think anything will go wrong. Serious side effects are highly unlikely.”

He felt another nudge and accepted a ring, which went into his pocket along with the scroll.

Ancotar wandered off, so Sora took a look around before leaving and found a journal, which he nosily decided to read.

12th of Rains Hand: Today I begin my great project on the spontaneous generation of life. I expect that there will be difficult days ahead, but if I succeed, my place among the great mages of history will be assured.

23rd Rains Hand: Still not able to even reproduce Empedocles’s results with maggots. I’m beginning to think his reputation is overblown.

3rd Second Seed, Tirdas: Empedocles was right! The mistranslation of “sunlit” to “scorching heat” explains my earlier problems. From now on I will work only in the
original daedric, despite the risks.

Fredas (mid Second Seed?): Local peasants came by to complain about the noise. I promised them that all that was behind me. A pleasant if dull-witted crew.

Morndas (I think): The experiment today went better than expected. Although the number of rats produced was surprising, they were all remarkably docile, just as Malham predicted (although only I have ever proven it empirically!).

Middas: Villagers again. More complaints. You would think they’d never seen a rat before! They are starting to become a real nuisance.

I’ve run into a terrible snag. Galerion’s Ninth Law appears immutable! If the total life generated cannot exceed the cube of the source, this line of research may prove a dead end. I must reread Empedocles for any hint that he was able to circumvent this barrier.

Next day: The locals are becoming insufferable! While I was walking in the woods, some of them broke into my laboratory and spilled the solution I was preparing—nearly a full quart of purified imp gall wasted! They did not seem to grasp the absurdity of a crowd of unwashed peasants with dung on their boots complaining about the smell. It is well past time I did something about this problem.

Two days later: I dug up the notes from my permanent invisibility thesis. No time like the present to put theory into practice!

Today: The spell worked! Not perfect invisibility, of course (Vanto’s Third Law), but it was more powerful than I expected. And there were none of the side effects that Professor Traven had predicted. Ha ha, even in my youth I was already outstripping my elders. Now I can get back to my real work in peace.

Back up the hill he put on the ring to be safe, shooed Renato, Lal, and Rio off a ways, and read the scroll in the center of the garden. He saw some pretty lights and assumed it worked, but to be sure he waved at his family and entered the inn. Two Dunmer (one male and one female) and an Argonian were present, all visible.

“Thank you, thank you!” Diram said. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to be able to see myself again. My sisters, on the other hand… I wouldn’t mind if they had stayed invisible!” He laughed. “Ah, me… Friend, you are welcome at the Aleswell Inn anytime. Free of charge.”

“Just glad all of you are fine again,” he said, then nodded and departed.

“Life on Earth was never this weird,” Renato said as they continued their journey toward the Temple of Ancestor Moths.

The shortcut back to where Savilla’s Stone was normally kept was sealed—or at least not openable from the outside—so he phased through it to save time rather than run the gauntlet again. Afterward they headed mostly west, with the intent to overnight in Bruma before heading home.

They were halfway to the inn when an overdressed fellow raced over and said, “Have you given more thought to the Countess’s offer? I assume you enjoyed that stipend she gave you.”

Sora stared at him in confusion. “I cannot for the life of me remember what you’re talking about.”
“Please see the Countess at your earliest convenience,” the man urged haughtily. “In other words, now.” He stalked off a ways and then stared in what was obviously meant to be an intimidating manner.

The last time Sora remembered speaking to the Countess of Bruma was back during the Oblivion Crisis, and that’d been over a year previous. “Seriously, I have no idea,” he muttered. “He probably did give me a stipend from her, but…”

Renato shrugged as Lal said, “Then we go see her. See what she wants. If it’s a bother, you can just say no, presumably.”

“I guess so…”

It was early enough that the Countess had not yet finished court hours, so they entered the castle and Sora approached her. That man had slipped in ahead of them and was standing not far away from her.

“I trust that the stipend Tolgan gave you whetted your appetite?” she greeted him with.

He smiled awkwardly.

“I assume you’ve noticed all of the Akaviri relics I’m displaying,” she said in response.

‘Hadn’t bothered to pay attention, actually.’

“Well, it’s safe to say I’m a collector of sorts. I’ve invested a great deal of time and money acquiring these bits of ancient history. In fact, I’d be so bold as to proclaim my collection the most complete in all Cyrodiil; perhaps even beyond. Except for one thing. A particular relic has eluded me for many years. Possessing this piece of Akaviri antiquity would make my collection complete. I’m of course referring to the Draconian Madstone.”

“I see,” he replied, having no clue what she was on about.

“The stone is a fine bit of Akaviri craftsmanship. Worn like an amulet, this talisman is said to protect the wearer from poisons of any type. The Madstone appears as a snake coiled around and encircling itself. The eyes of the snake are supposed to be precious gems or some such. Through my sources, I’ve learned that the last reported location of the Madstone was the ruins at Pale Pass. Are you familiar with the history of Pale Pass?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Back at the end of the First Era, raiders from the continent of Akavir attempted to gain a foothold here in Tamriel. At that time, the Empire was broken into smaller factions. Reman Cyrodiil decided to unify them and form an army to repel the Akaviri raiders. The force became known as the Army of Reman. The two armies clashed in what’s now northern Cyrodiil. The Akaviri were strong and well supplied.

“But their greatest error was marching through Morrowind on the way to their objective and dismissing the response it would garner from Vivec. They didn’t count on Lord Vivec forming an alliance with the Trident-Kings of the Dreugh. From Morrowind, he struck at their rear flank. Not only did this make the Akaviri fight on two fronts, it also cut off access to reinforcements and supplies from the sea.”

“So this alliance ended the conflict?”
“Not quite. The Army of Reman knew that the organized Akaviri forces were commanded from a hidden post in the mountains. Rumors placed it in a snowy vale called Pale Pass. That’s where Reman focused his attention. As his forces fought their way across the Jerall Mountains, the Akaviri suddenly surrendered. It was assumed they were overwhelmed and gave up.

“The only strange part was that the command post and Pale Pass were never found. It was dismissed as rumor and the Army of Reman celebrated. It’s come to my attention that the post did exist and it happens to be the last reported location of the Draconian Madstone. If you retrieve the Draconian Madstone for me, I’ll be happy to compensate you by rewarding you with another Akaviri artifact. Are you game?”

Doing so would give him personal information about the mountains shared with Skyrim, their northern neighbor. And also, it was not as though he was on a schedule. “Certainly.”

“I had a feeling you’d accept. Good. Then let me tell you how you’re going to find the Madstone. I’ve come into the possession of a diary written by an Akaviri messenger. I suspect that the text within can lead you to the ruins. Here’s a translation of the passages we could still read. It was quite damaged. I’ve also included a rough map that was drawn in the diary as well. I’m also providing you with a unique key that was supposedly found with the diary. I’m assuming it will prove useful when you arrive at the site.”

“Even with the information you have, no one’s been able to track it down?” he asked with minor suspicion.

“I paid several scouts to try to find the ruins at Pale Pass before I hired you. They were only able to locate the first of a series of landmarks. These landmarks are mentioned within the diary. The one referred to as Dragonclaw Rock has been located. The rest is up to you. My scouts reported bitter cold and dangerous creatures in the area, so they couldn’t proceed. Be cautious, and return home soon. Good luck.” She retrieved a scroll and offered it to him, saying “The messenger’s diary will make a nice companion to the Madstone in my collection.”

He smiled again and nodded, then moved away to examine the scroll. Unrolling it revealed that the map she mentioned was actually two, one from her scouts, and a normal one showing where Dragonclaw Rock was in relation to Bruma. The hand-drawn map showed the way to be west from there to a statue, then north. The journal only covered a few days.

**Day Three**

It is with a heavy heart and a trembling hand that I pen this latest entry. It has been several days since I have seen anyone else on the road from our garrison at Grey Ridge. The road is lonely and treacherous. I am rationing my supplies to prepare for a tough path ahead. As long as Reman Cyrodiil’s army hasn’t located our headquarters at Pale Pass, the journey should be fairly uneventful. I admit, I am nervous. It is an honor to be selected to carry these orders to our fort, but sending me alone is a calculated risk. While it is not my own life I am worried about, it is the importance of the contents of the orders that aggrieves me. If they are somehow lost, the fort will not know that their supplies are going to be delayed by a month. Without that knowledge, the fort may choose to press the attacks on the front line as their supplies dwindle. They are counting on those supplies to be there sooner. I must not fail getting this message there. The slate rock that the orders have been carved upon for safety weighs me down; it is a constant reminder of the more than physical burden that I carry.
Day Seven

It has been two days, and I have finally arrived at Dragonclaw Rock. The huge formation is a welcome and invigorating sight. The giant stone appears to reach down from the north and strike at the heart of Reman’s forces like our armies have been doing for the better part of a year now. I have still encountered no one else on this trail. I hope that as I head due west along the narrow path, I will find someone who can give me some news as to how our men are faring in the war.

Day Eight

After winding my way westward, I have come within sight of The Sentinel: a huge statue placed there by some unknown artist many years ago. It stands watch pointing north, as if daring anyone to cross the borders into the Imperial nation. Reman would be quite angry if he knew we used this very statue as a waypoint into his domain. Last night, I encountered another one of our messengers who had been beset by a pack of mountain wolves. His leg was hurt badly, but I managed to help heal it with an ampoule of medicine I carried with me. He said his name was Sylaj, and he was on his way from Pale Pass to request more supplies. I discussed with him the irony of our meeting, and he decided to travel with me back to the fort since his mission would be needless. We plan to leave at nightfall.

Day Nine

I am using much of my remaining strength writing this. As we had made our way north from The Sentinel, we were attacked by perhaps the same pack of wolves that had attacked Sylaj. He had chased them off earlier after being bitten, but now that they had tasted blood, they had returned in greater number. Fighting back to back, Sylaj and I slew at least 8 of the beasts, but not before one of them clawed my gut and left a terrible wound. We were able to drive them off, but now I am bleeding badly, and the only medicine I had I gave to Sylaj. We have decided to continue north until we reach the portal to the Serpent’s Trail and seek cover inside. I will try to write more soon, but I must sleep. I am so very tired.

Day Eleven

This is the last entry I shall be able to write. We entered the Serpent’s Trail nearly a day ago, seeking shelter from the elements and the wolves. What we did not foresee was the creatures that had decided to make the Serpent’s Trail their home. I did not see them clearly, but they were huge and strong. Sylaj died instantly as one of them cleaved off his head with a single stroke. There were three of these huge, ugly man-like creatures. I ran as fast as I dared through the dark tunnels trying to escape. But as I fled, one of them hurled a boulder at me and struck me square in the back. I managed to crawl through a smaller opening and escape the lumbering monsters, but I soon realized that crawling is all I would be able to do. I think the boulder shattered my spine. I can no longer feel my legs. My wound from the wolf attack has reopened and I have lost much blood. I fear
that this is as far as I shall be able to go. I have failed my mission. I have been unable to get these orders to the fort at Pale Pass. I am so close, yet it may as well be leagues away since I can no longer walk and my strength is draining. If a fellow messenger or soldier picks up this diary, please get the orders to the fort before it is too late. And please tell my wife, Vata, that Xhaferi will always love her.

‘A sad tale, but… Well, it explains the map.’ He rolled up the scroll and tucked it and the maps away. “East gate, guys.”

The siege engine from the Great Gate was still there looking all diabolical. He was surprised that no enterprising blacksmith had stripped it down for the metals. They followed the path beyond it and wound around north, then northeast. Dragonclaw Rock was four rocks, one standing in for the hand part and three others, diamond-shaped, as the claws.

The path led north, and a game trail went east, but he turned west and started walking, keeping an eye out for a statue of some kind. He knew something had to be up when he ran across some of those not-spider creatures and scanned the surrounding area. To the south was a statue of an armored figure, so he checked it out more closely, then reversed direction and went north instead.

Not very far off was an iron door set into the stone of the hillside. “After what the journal said, I’d prefer we’re proactively sneaky, so let’s put on our Chameleon rings,” he said to his family. “There’s no point in fighting if we can just breeze by, though looting anything that looks interesting is always part of the plan.”

Lal and Rio nodded, and fetched out their rings. Renato did the same, and once they were ready he cracked open the door. With some patience and attention to detail—someone had trapped the tunnels and some of those were still active—he stumbled over a skeleton propped up against one of the walls. There was a stone tablet in its hand, so the long-since dead figure was probably the messenger in the diary.

Considering they had glossed past several massive ogres already, rats, spriggans, and bears, it wasn’t hard to imagine just how bad the poor bastard had it, though it did beg the question as to how the man’s journal had made it back out to civilization. He grabbed the tablet and tucked it away, then continued on. A door led him back outside again; it was dark and snowing, and the visibility was subsequently poor.

The valley had its own complement of ogres and other creatures, not to mention statues, ruined buildings, and frozen ponds. There were two towers visible, but only one of them had a doorway leading deeper. The interior of the fort looked surprisingly similar to an Imperial fort interior, which he found odd, but he shrugged it off.

The place was infested with skeletons wandering around, each of them holding an Akaviri blade and shield—they were very similar to the ones the Blades used, anyway—but he ignored them and continued on through the maze of corridors and rooms, his family following along behind using their links.

There were traps in place, as well. Some triggered by pressure plates, some by some other method to launch a stream of darts from holes in pillars. He knew he was in the right place when he saw a ghostly man up ahead, up some stairs. There were braziers to either side at the bottom, filled with ghostly pale blue flames.

When he got close enough he could see that the man was armored and had a sword across his back.

“You have made a long and perilous journey,” the spectre said, “but there is no time to rest. The
Army of Reman is at our doorstep, and our supplies have dwindled. We have awaited your arrival. Tell us, what news do you bring from Akavir?"

He was about to web into the fellow when he remembered the stone tablet he’d picked up, so he got that out and offered it. “Here are your orders.”

“Well done, soldier. Your mission is complete, and you have my thanks. Now we may rest. Long live the Akavir!” The spirit faded away into nothingness.

Sora tucked the tablet away again after a moment to keep as a souvenir, then wondered what to do. Just as he was about to start searching, the wall behind where the spectre had stood shuddered and moved out of the way to reveal a long hidden room with several chests and a plinth of some sort.

The Draconian Madstone was on the circular plinth, so he grabbed it. His family took care of looting the chests.

“ Weird how all the skeletons just … dropped ‘dead’ after the ghost passed on,” he commented on the way out. “And you know what?”

“What?” Rio prompted obligingly.

“I don’t think I like this adventuring stuff all that much. Also, the Countess’s scouts are imbeciles.”

Rio laughed loudly.

“Have you recovered the Madstone?” the Countess asked eagerly.

He nodded and held it out to her.

Her mouth dropped open and her brows went up. “I … never thought it possible. I mean … I had hoped … but to actually hold it in my hands,” she said, and slowly took it. “It’s more beautiful than I imagined it.” Then she smiled. “Congratulations. I had a feeling you were the right person for the job. And it seems I owe you a reward. This Akaviri ring was found with the messenger’s diary. It awards the wearer with increased agility and resistance to harmful magic. It’s known as the Ring of the Vipereye. I hope it serves you well in your future journeys.”

The ring went into a pouch, to later be tossed into a jewelry box in his suite and most likely forgotten.

He walked into his kitchen and shooed the cook away; the man pouted outrageously and slumped in the corner. It was time for Sora to make up a huge batch of fresh pasta and sauces. ‘That’s it,’ he thought. ‘No more crazy quests, no more intrigue, no more nobility asking for help with their silly collections. I will cook and take care of my family and send people off to go assassinate others. Just as soon as another customer shows up, that is.’

He spent a good chunk of the morning making up various forms of pasta and setting them aside to dry while his pots of sauce simmered away merrily. He was considering what to make for dinner for later while at the bar when Lal wandered in and leaned against him. “Hm?” he said.

“I was wondering… I would kill for some lasagne.”
“So you’re saying you’ll be on duty today at Filigrana,” he replied, turning his head so he could kiss her cheek.

“Of course, Sora.”

“All right. Fetch whatever vegetables you want in it and we can take them when we go. I’ll pack up the rest of the stuff.”

When they got over to Filigrana and opened for the day some of his regulars drifted in and ordered their usual. As it was the weekend, Reynald and Guilbert Jemane were in attendance, taking a break from the farm Sora’s family had helped them recover.

“It’s about time you got back,” Reynald said as he pulled the cork out of a mead bottle. “The food is just not the same when you’re away.”

He smiled. “Hopefully I won’t be making any more long trips in the near future. I’m happier here, with my family.”

Reynald took a long pull off his bottle and nodded. “It’s nice to have family. None of you guys look alike, though, except for you and the creepy guy.”

He snickered at the description of Kiri. “Sometimes we choose our family. Sometimes they choose us. And my brother would laugh if you said that to his face.”

“What’s the soup today?” Guilbert asked.

“Minestrone.”

The two brothers exchanged a look, then nodded. “And some of that bread you make with it?”

“Sure. Give me a minute.” He was back out shortly thereafter and slid the food into place. “How’s the farm doing? No more trouble with ogres, I hope.”

“No, it’s fine. Just the usual wildlife trying to eat our crops. Nothing out of the ordinary. Is that an offer to come help if something tries to move in?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why not. But if you call us in on a rat problem…”

Reynald laughed. “Ah, I don’t think so. Fairly certain we can handle some rats. Ogres would still be a bit of an issue. But after all the work we’ve done with our crops, my muscles have built back up. Oh, did I mention?”

His brow went up.

“My brother here met a nice girl recently,” Reynald practically sang.

Guilbert groaned and ducked his head to have more of his soup.

“Red Mountain erupted,” Kiri said, waving a copy of the Black Horse Courier around.

“Eh?”

“I heard that, too,” one of their customers said. “Thing blew up and took out Vvardenfell, even up as far north as parts of Solstheim.”
“According to this some prophecy was fulfilled a few years before the Oblivion Crisis,” Kiri added. “The Nerevarine Prophecy.”

“At least we weren’t involved this time,” he muttered and set a freshly-washed mug aside.

“The Ingenium—whatever that was—stopped floating up in the sky and crashed, setting off the volcano. They’ve been having earthquakes and all sorts of disasters over there because of it. Refugees have been pouring into Skyrim, Solstheim, and various other places in Tamriel, but just as many expatriates returned to Morrowind to try to help those who were there when it happened.”

“Well, that’s on the other side of the country. Hopefully it won’t effect the weather patterns over here too badly,” he said.

The weather was a bit dicey for the next few years, not to mention a bit polluted, but of more interest in the sphere of world affairs was the secession of first Black Marsh, then Elsweyr, from the Empire, not to mention an invasion by Black Marsh into Morrowind as vengeance for having enslaved Argonians for thousands of years.

“Oh, wow,” Renato said softly. “Chancellor Ocato was assassinated. This is going to cause all sorts of problems.”

“People fighting to see who gets to take over running the country?” Rio said.

“I suppose so,” he said slowly. “On a side note…”

Renato eyed him. “What?”

“Have any of you noticed we haven’t aged at all? It’s been ten years since we got here.”

“Tesoro, you know I don’t pay attention to anything beyond how much I love—”

Kiri brushed by, cutting Renato off, and wrapped his arms around Sora. “You will always be my beloved baby brother.”

Renato scowled.

Viper looked up from his strawberries and smirked. “I know what you were thinking, and may I say, I am disappointed.”

Sora watched as Renato switched his ire from Kiri to Viper. “I’m allowed to think certain things about my lover,” he said firmly. “But—”

“He was envisioning just how enthralled he felt when you bent over that—”

Renato reached out and snatched Viper’s bowl away. “Oh, look, fresh strawberries, just for me.”

“I will end you,” Viper hissed and snatched it back, curling one arm around the bowl to prevent further theft attempts.

“As amusing as this is,” he said with a chuckle, “I’m serious. We’ve not aged. Do you think Sheogorath…”

“Maybe when he shifted the curse he didn’t get all of it,” Shi suggested. “The not aging part.”
“So we’d be like vampires without the aversion to sun and blood-sucking parts?” Rio said.

“Maybe he wanted to keep something of a … hold … on us,” Lorenzo said. “If we’re ageless, we’ll be around for him to chivvy about to cause mayhem for him, or other things. Daedric Lords do generally need agents to get things done for them on the mortal plane, especially since the barrier was reestablished, and this time without the need for the Dragonfires and someone of Septim blood.”

“If that’s the case,” Renato said smoothly, “then I’ll have an eternity to express how much I love you, Sora.”

He sent a smile at his Sun.

“I still plan to bite, though.”

Viper rolled his eyes. “Did you know?” he said to Sora. “He really likes it when you—”

“Viper,” Renato said warningly.

Viper scoffed and turned back to Sora.

“Oh, my darling little st—” Renato started to say in a falsetto.

“One more word,” Viper interrupted, “and I’ll accidentally let slip about that little incident I witnessed approximately, oh, a month ago?”

“How about we agree not to spill each other’s secrets,” Renato said diplomatically.

“Fine.”

Kiri laughed creepily. “Now the drama is out of the way, I’d like to make a suggestion regarding our situation here. Even before Ocato was knifed in the back—or however he was killed—things have been fairly restive in this country. More and more regular people have been harmed by the jockeying for position and the infighting happening.”

“And…” he said, choosing to set aside his confusion over the antics of his Sun and Mist.

“I was thinking of finding a few more groups of marauders or bandits and brainwashing them for the purpose of patrolling the area around this castle, and the road between us and Chorrol. They could build their own housing, and keep any spoils they got from taking down bandits outside our control.”

Thoughtful looks abounded around the table before Lal said, “Well, if you do that, I plan to make sure they can actually protect people and not just flail around like idiots and accidentally stick each other with their swords and arrows, or worse, the people they’re supposed to be protecting.” She glanced at Rio.

He nodded. “And I’ll help.”

“I suppose I could…” Sora paused. He wasn’t willing to cook all their meals, but neither was he willing to ask the castle cook to do it either. “I guess they could come into Filigrana for lunch or dinner so long as they’re off duty, but any other food they’d have to figure out on their own. I guess it’d depend on just how many people we’re talking about. One meal a day per person doesn’t sound terrible, and almost any idiot is capable of making a stew or whatever on a camp fire.”

Lorenzo snorted. “Even one meal a day cooked by you would be one hell of a reason to behave themselves.”
“We harvest quite a lot out of our own garden and planters,” he said, “more than enough to feed extra people. We could also purchase from people like the Jemanes if we needed extra, though I have to wonder if produce from them would be comparable considering…”

Lorenzo shook his head. “I analyzed ours versus other people’s and there’s a marked difference. There’s a reason why people keep coming back and it’s not because the tomatoes are juicy. Well, I mean…”

He snickered.

“You know what I mean!” Lorenzo said huffily.

“Yes. So, I think I’m all right with this idea. I like the oversight by Lal and Rio. I like the idea of giving them reasons to want to keep being a positive force rather than reverting to banditry. How about you start with one group? Get them in the right mindset, trained up, and on patrol between here and Chorrol. Maybe some kind of insignia showing that while they’re not part of the Imperial Legion, they are part of a guard system.”

“I can come up with something,” Shi offered. “Or we could just borrow the insignia from the previous owners of this castle.”

“Weren’t they from Hammerfell?” Lal asked dubiously.

“Point. I’ll think of something.”

“We have a ridiculous amount of gold,” Kiri said, “so we can supply our new force with at least one set each of decent armor as part of the bargain for ripping away their free will, set up an account with the armorer in Chorrol, or have our blacksmith handle it. They can always resupply from whatever they get as spoils.”

“Or they can fucking learn how to repair what they have,” Lal said firmly.

His brow went up at the profanity. No prude he, but Lal was not normally given to swearing in his hearing. “I think that’s a fine idea. Throw in a little additional responsibility to the mix. Um… While they’re in training, I’ll cook them two meals a day, but once they’ve graduated to actual patrols, just the one—unless they feel like spending some of their coin on a second one. Sound reasonable?”

“I approve,” Viper said, then pushed his empty bowl away. “A lot of what we eat is inexpensive anyway, so it works out to be a net gain. The value is in the preparation.”

Sora held back a smile. His Viper wasn’t nearly the miser as the one he originally met, and his Mist’s take on it was more amusing than annoying. Part of the difference could be attributed to the harmonization, but the slide into a new dimension unlike their own had to have been one hell of a lot of reinforcement against the idea that people lived the same lives over and over again. And why save or stockpile what you couldn’t take with you?

Kiri set off a bit later to go track down the nearest camp or ruined fort infested with bandits and Sora hauled supplies over to Filigrana with the help of Lal, Viper, and Renato. “I’ve never understood how the Black Horse Courier stays in business,” he said as he unpacked. “It’s not like they charge for the damn things.”

“Oh, but they do have a service they charge for,” Lal said. “People can go to their office and pay to have letters delivered by their couriers when they distribute papers to the various cities. They make enough money off that to pay for all the printing costs, plus costs for food and the usual.”
“Skooma-laced wine and Khajiit hookers?” Renato suggested.

Sora groaned. “There are days…”

“Would you behave?” Lal scolded, threatening to clock Renato in the head with a zucchini.

Renato opened his mouth again, his eyes sparkling with mischief, but Sora silenced him with a look. “Save your perverted proclamations for after hours, please.”

“Oh, tesoro, that’s a blank cheque you just wrote me.”

“That you’re hoping I’ll cash, I know. Now make yourself useful and set up the stuff I need for today.”

Renato leaned in for a quick kiss and got to work.

Kiri came back a week later with a group of six “former” bandits in tow and they were properly brainwashed into compliance. Sora wondered for a moment just when his mind had accepted the idea that brainwashing was perfectly all right to do if it served a “good” purpose.

Lal and Rio took over at that point, putting the six through hell in terms of material acquisition, site preparation, building a place for them to sleep, and then, training. Lal was merciless, and Rio was almost the same.

“When it’s time I’ll get another batch,” Kiri said at breakfast one morning. “They can always crowd in six more beds while the next barracks is being built. I don’t think hot-bunking is a viable option, not if we want people patrolling the road between here and Chorrol to start during our operating hours. If they go in pairs, that should give each pair time for a quick meal, and they can always take some bread along with them, or sandwiches.”

Sora nodded. “Yeah. And if we get, say, twelve people total? That’s one group sleeping, one at leisure, and two patrolling if we go by threes. I don’t want too many reformed bandits too soon, you know?”

“As a safety note, I’ll implant a compulsion to never attempt to enter Battlehorn Castle in all of them,” Kiri said.

“I never regretted saying yes,” Dino said in a whispery voice.

He smiled and rubbed the blond’s hand, though Dino’s hair had long since turned to white. “You got what you wanted in the end. A life with horses, something your father never would have supported you on. You just had to come to this crazy place to do it.”

“And suffer without electricity, or entertainment aside from drunken people singing bawdy songs at the local inn, cars, or telephones. On the other hand, no solicitors calling you and offering to replace your roof for a really low price.”

“I think I miss things like video games the most,” he said. “And being able to look stuff up so quickly. I never regretted offering you a job, but you should already know that.”

Dino smiled. “I wonder where we go. To what we expected before, or…?”

“I fully expect that you’ll meet up with Romario.” He did wonder, though. Did every dimension
have its own version or versions of the afterlife? Considering that he was a favored mortal of a Daedric Lord, did that mean if he died he would go to the Shivering Isles? People spoke of certain afterlife realms in Aetherius, but just as many priests talked of the Dreamsleeve, where people went to be reincarnated.

“I hope so.”

He leaned over and kissed Dino on the forehead. “Your family is waiting, so I’ll clear out and let them monopolize you.”

“You’ll take care of them, right?”

He snorted. “Of course I will, even if they are all confused about why their Uncle Sora looks so damn young when he clearly isn’t a vampire. And they’d probably riot if they didn’t get to enjoy Filigrana every so often. I won’t say good-bye, but rather … safe journey.” He smiled and got up, then departed.

Later that night they got word that Dino had passed on during a nap. Sora finished up the evening at Filigrana, went home, and took a seat on his bed.

Renato sat next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “This part I don’t think I’ll get used to. I can understand why a vampire would make others, just so they had company throughout the long years. He was happy.”

“He was,” he said, and sniffed, trying to ignore the way his eyes prickled.

“Let’s get ready for bed, hm?”

He was getting the chairs down off the tables in preparation for opening when his intuition made his spine wobble. He slowly turned around and nearly had a heart attack when he saw a transparent Sheogorath standing there, idly swinging his cane.

“Hello, old boy!” Sheogorath said cheerfully. “There’s this thing…”

“Oh?” he said warily. Over the years Sheogorath had occasionally popped up in his dreams and “asked” him to run a few errands. They usually involved someone getting horribly embarrassed, so Sora wasn’t too averse to simply doing as “asked”. And for all he knew, refusing would see them all turned into toads or suddenly have to deal with the effects of centuries of aging.

Renato, Kiri, and Shi all entered the room and eyed the apparition.

“Things are going to get … feisty … soon. Within the next few years, certainly. If I were you—and I’m not, of course, as you people are way too sane. I have tried and tried to get you to see the utter beauty of madness, but you keep retreating into those bizarre notions of logic and rationality! Where oh where did I go wrong!??”

“Feisty?” he prompted.

“Oh, yes!” Sheogorath said, rapping the end of his cane on the floor. “I would consider taking a holiday for a few years. Say, until—well, I’ll let you people figure that out. At the very least, button this place up tighter than a virgin’s chastity belt! Ta ta!” he cried, then faded out, leaving behind a shimmer of purple and red sparkles.
“Whatever is going on, I plan to blame it on the Thalmor,” Renato said, then shook his head and started pulling chairs off tables and setting them in place. “Odds are, they’re behind it anyway.”

“I wonder if…” He trailed off. “Never mind. I doubt Sheogorath would have bothered to visit if this wasn’t, gods help us, serious. I, personally, do not want to up stakes and go hide out somewhere like Pale Pass for an indeterminate number of years until whatever is going to happen blows over.”

“With all the fighting that’s been going on, the Thalmor, the secessions, and a brand new emperor,” Shi said slowly, “I think the fighting may well increase, possibly near here. Perhaps I am wrong, but I wonder if the Thalmor are going to invade. All that’s left of the Empire at this point capable of action is Cyrodiil, Skyrim, and High Rock. Morrowind is still too busy recovering, and Hammerfell is in the middle of a civil war.”

“We have a couple of years to prepare, then,” Renato said. “To do whatever we can to make this place unattractive, repulsive, or invisible to anyone looking to use it for a tactical advantage, or simply doesn’t care if we’re in the way. We may have a slight advantage simply in that we’re so close to the border with Hammerfell, because if the Thalmor do roll in, they probably won’t be interested in our little patch of Cyrodiil. They’d be going after the cities and especially the Imperial City.”

Three years later the war started.

“Okay, so I was wrong about them not giving a shit about Hammerfell,” Renato said as they stood up on the curtain wall walk and watched troops march by.

Gossip and rumor flew around more slowly than on Earth, but it still got around with remarkable speed. The Thalmor, leading the Aldmeri Dominion, had invaded with Cyrodiil and Hammerfell as targets.

Kiri and Viper had spent the last couple of years working with Lorenzo to create Mist-imbued pieces of the titanium-vanadium alloy, and Shi had spent parts of his off-hours carefully disintegrating small spots on the castle exterior to place those pieces. The same had been done for the exterior of Filigrana, and the pond nearby had been ringed with posts that also served to hold lanterns.

The end result was that Kiri and Viper could, given a little warning, cloak both parts of their property and cause people to stick to the road and give them a miss. The troops passing by on the way to and from the fighting in Hammerfell never even seemed to notice Battlehorn or Filigrana.

Unfortunately, with that much martial activity, Filigrana itself was doing little in the way of business, mostly a few brave souls from Chorrol, so Sora made the decision to close up for the time being and simply made deliveries of his mead to the Grey Mare and the Oak and Crosier.

It wasn’t until four years later that the war ended with Emperor Titus Mede II finally destroying the Aldmeri forces in Cyrodiil, but in the process he nearly exhausted his own resources and the White-Gold Concordat was hammered out, giving the Thalmor exactly the concessions they had demanded at the start of the war, and Hammerfell seceded from the Empire along the way.

The protections on Battlehorn and Filigrana were relaxed only after everything had died down, and one of the first papers from the Black Horse Courier, which was still going strong (if a little battered), informed them that every Elder Scroll in the Imperial Palace had mysteriously vanished one night and that the moth priests had scattered in an attempt to find and reclaim them.
Sora reopened Filigrana, though customers were few and far between for some time.

“It’s not like we need the income,” Viper said, “though income is always nice.”

Rio scoffed. “We already have more gold than most nations. We have so much that Sora created that Filigrana Gold Reserve version of mead with real flakes of gold in it. And the Pearl Reserve.”

He shrugged. “They amuse people and make them think they’re something really special.”

“And it makes it possible to jack up the price,” Viper said happily. “Mead prices have already risen to twenty septims a bottle, and the reserve versions go for five times that.”

“They will probably start coming more regularly once people realize things have calmed down,” Shi said. “Though stopping the sales to the two inns in Chorrol might help them to remember we’re over here, along with actually telling them.”

Lorenzo shook his head. “We could, though I expect the present owners would be unhappy that they’d be losing a source of income.”

“Too bad,” Viper said. “I think we should add more varieties. Lorenzo has figured out how to extract the fortifying effects of certain plants. We could make an alternative to Shadowbanish Wine, for example.”

Lorenzo eyed him. “Shadowbanish, huh? This wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with Viper’s Bugloss giving a Night-Eye effect, and such a mead would be named after you, in theory?”

The corners of Viper’s mouth turned down unhappily. “What if it is?”

Lorenzo grinned at having nailed the reason and said, “I don’t have a problem with it. We could name varieties after each of our flame types for all I care, except that Storm and Lightning would be odd to figure out.”

“Let’s not make this too complicated,” he said. “Having Gold, Pearl, and Viper is fine with me for ‘Reserve’ varieties. One as an excuse to increase the price, one to help people resist the elements, and one for Night-Eye.”

Viper’s mouth quirked back up.

“Just extract what I’d need for the Viper variety, all right? I’ll start making a batch of that and we can add it to the menu down the road once we’ve ensured it works right.”

He was having a perfectly lovely dream involving him and Renato at the Pacifier Spring—it was warm and they were having something of a soak in it—when the scene abruptly changed to that throne room again. Sheogorath was seated on his ornate chair, cane restlessly tapping at the floor.

“Hello, old boy!”

He smiled nervously. “Hello,” he said softly. The room was the same as before, and it was not a place he was likely to forget. It had the same divided nature of red and purple, and that bored-looking balding man was standing quietly off to the side.

“There’s this thing…”
‘Kami-sama,’ he thought. “I see. Or, I will see.”

“You will!” Sheogorath said happily. “Things got a little bumpy there for a bit, but that’s settled down, though not necessarily in a happy way. We’re approaching another crisis point, old boy, and I’d like you to be present for it.”

His eyes widened. “Please tell me I don’t have to save the world again.”

“Technically, you didn’t save it the last time,” Sheogorath pointed out. “You facilitated the man who could based on his research.”

Sheogorath had a point, but Sora felt he was nit-picking there a bit.

“In any case, no!” Sheogorath cried. “This would be another instance of … providing support. No, dear boy, you are not to be a hero or champion this time. Despite what many might think, and as much as I enjoy chaos, there must be something of a stable foundation for that chaos to play out upon. It has been so long now that no one suspects you are anything other than the descendants of yourselves.”

That was true enough. They had used Mist to make people not ask questions about any of that, though a discussion had occurred where they considered using illusion to make them appear to age so they could “have children” and let those “children” grow up to take their places. “What is it you want us to do?”

“My dear boy,” Sheogorath said, leaning forward and pointing his cane at him. “I would like you to move to Skyrim! That is where the next major event of prophecy will take place! I would have considered sending you to Morrowind, but that prophecy was all just a sham! The emperor just kept throwing prisoners at the problem until one of them actually managed to do the job. And besides, that was a bit before your arrival here. Martin, the dear boy, desperately needed competent help, and you gave him that and more!”

He took a moment to absorb that and finally said, “Skyrim?”

“You heard correctly. Events will be heating up in a few years and I’d like you, my favorite little mortal, to be there. I have a good feeling about the person who will be rudely and abruptly dragged into being a pawn of the gods. They might even vie for the spot of my favorite mortal! Share it, perhaps?” Sheogorath looked thoughtful for a moment, then grinned too widely. “She’s a bit like you on the whole ageless thing.”

“…Is she a vampire?” he guessed.

“Glorious!” Sheogorath cried happily. “Such a smart little mortal you are. So, pack up! Move yourselves to Skyrim! Get yourselves established so that when the day comes, you’ll be in a position to be a foundation stone, as you once were for Martin.”

“…Is she a vampire?” he guessed.

“Glorious!” Sheogorath cried happily. “Such a smart little mortal you are. So, pack up! Move yourselves to Skyrim! Get yourselves established so that when the day comes, you’ll be in a position to be a foundation stone, as you once were for Martin.”

Sora woke up with a sigh on his lips, his audience with Sheogorath having for some reason segued into a dream—nightmare?—involving a Cheese Sacrifice Ceremony being held at Cheesemonger’s Hollow somewhere in the Shivering Isles. By the time he woke up the place was practically swimming in cheddar.

“What is it?” Renato murmured.

“Another dream.”

His lover pulled him closer for a moment, then released him and sat up. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but
lay it on me.”

“We’re moving to Skyrim in the near future,” he said dryly. “Another world-altering event is set to happen, and Sheogorath wants us there to be a … support … to the poor sod who’s stuck with handling it. She’s a vampire, apparently. I’m going to assume she’s a sane one, like Hassildor.”

Renato shook his head. “That’s going to be a ton of work, but okay. Not something we can argue. But I sincerely hope that this time doesn’t involve us going off on long trips. Hopefully this champion does their own fighting. It’s not that I minded getting the chance to work out the kinks of the transition, but…”

“We need to have a family meeting and then start figuring out how we’re going to transport what we’re taking.”

“What about the castle?”

He bit his lip. “Marcel and his family can have the place.” Dino’s descendants had long since taken over the stables outside Chorrol. Well, Dino’s and Romario’s given that some of their children had married. The castle environs had not proven conducive in the long run to horse breeding—not enough room for them to get in their exercise—so they had eventually purchased the North Country Stables and greatly expanded it into a horse farm, and continued Dino’s work on attempting to breed the equivalents of both Palomino and Clydesdale.

“But we should probably remove all the Mist-metal and fill in those spots with mortar,” he added. “I mean, who knows? We might need it later on. And they can’t use it at all.”

“Good point,” Renato said. “Gonna be a royal pain to rip it all out again, though. We only have so much and propagating more doesn’t work, so…” He got up and started a fire to heat water for bathing.

Sora got up as well and flicked the covers back into place. The very thought of transporting their things north to Skyrim made his head ache, but Marcel would probably gladly give them horses even without the exchange of the castle, and he stood to make a bundle if he decided a castle was a bit much for the family.

He brought up the dream during breakfast and, predictably, everyone reacted with varying degrees of surprise, annoyance, and excitement.

“Come on!” Rio said. “We’ll get to explore a new country!”

“It is cold up there,” Lal said.

“Some, but it’s only bad farther north.”

“We’d only have two real choices on where to settle,” Shi said. “Markarth is out because of all the troubles with the Forsworn. The Reach might have been reclaimed, but that hasn’t stopped the fighting, and the area is fairly hilly and rocky. Falkreath is a possibility, perhaps on Lake Ilinata, but that area is a bit out of the way. It is, however, one of the places we’d end up in if we took that pass through the mountains. I see Riften and Whiterun as our options in terms of average temperature and size.”

Kiri said, “Falkreath is out, if only because I’m fairly certain there’s a Dark Brotherhood sanctuary in that area. No sense being so close to one. The other place not to go would be Dawnstar, as there’s an abandoned sanctuary there. Too cold, anyway.”
“Whiterun seems to be the center of things commercially,” Shi said, “and fairly neutral.”

“So if we head north past Bruma and into Skyrim, we’ll come out in Falkreath,” he said. “There’s another pass over by Riften, I think, but that seems like we’d be going out of our way.”

“Let’s go over the maps we have after we’re done eating,” Lorenzo suggested. “Then we need to start planning how to do this. How much can Cashew carry? How much can we pack into the te—never mind, we’ll actually need that to sleep in, so there’s only so much of it we can use for storing stuff.”

“With the Mist-metal we take back from the castle protections we should be able to fashion a warding circle for each night,” Renato said. “Protect the tent, any horses, carts, that sort of thing.”

“As to what, that’s fairly simple,” he said. “The Mist-metal, all my mead and supplies, seeds and samples of everything we grow, all our food stores that won’t go bad on the trip, and our personal effects—yes, that includes my kitchen stuff,” he said with a quick look at Val. “I don’t see the point in hauling furniture when we can just make new stuff, though the lab equipment will have to come. I expect, depending on where we settle, Kiri may need to mind-control some bandits to do some of the heavy lifting when it comes to renovations.”

Once they were done eating and clean-up was handled, Shi spread a map over the table for them to look at, while Lorenzo brought a few books from his room. “As you can see from this, assuming the Imperial Cartographers are to be believed, Whiterun Hold is our best bet in terms of land to farm on. Whiterun itself seems to be something of a trade hub due to its central location. There’s also a nice river that runs by the city.”

“Potential power source, water for purification, never a bad idea,” Lorenzo said. “We should probably store your current batches of mead in the tent. So long as we leave enough room for sleeping bags…”

He shrugged. “Considering nothing gets shifted during transport, yes. Right. Whoever isn’t helping at Filigrana today, get started on the lists and plans. I won’t start any new batches, obviously, not until after we’re resettled. And start reclaiming that Mist-metal from the castle. The stuff on Filigrana probably isn’t enough to bother with, though. We can buy a cart or wagon in Chorrol, or make one, whichever.”

“Okay, we have our assignments,” Renato said. “Let’s get to it.”

By the next morning Lorenzo had a meticulously written out plan of action, including complicated mathematical equations regarding the volume of available storage inside the tent, packing instructions, and an itinerary based on the projected route. Sora took it all in with a bemused air; things had not been this complicated when they’d arrived.

“I can recast those pieces into a light but flexible linked fencing we can just jam into the ground at the post points so that you two can work your illusion mojo,” Lorenzo said.

“Mojo?” Viper said. “Since when is it mojo to a scientist like yourself?”

“Since Sheogorath entered our lives. The fencing should roll up well enough so that we can strap it to the side of a wagon or cart—”

Sora stopped paying attention and instead grabbed the lists to check.

Two months later they were packed and headed north.
“Hmmm… ‘Fixed’ is such a subjective term. I think ‘treated’ is far more appropriate, don’t you? Like one does to a rash, or an arrow in the face.”

Helgen was kind of boring after having lived in Cyrodiil for so long, with influences from various provinces. Cheydinhal with its Dunmer slant, Bruma with Nordic influences, and Anvil with Redguard. In contrast, Helgen was a definite disappointment in structure and appearance. It was also very small to be a gateway town or city near the pass over the Jerall Mountains. Hell, the Nordic-influenced Bruma was larger and much nicer overall.

“It’s not much,” Renato said disdainfully as they entered Helgen Homestead, the only inn they could see.

The proprietor introduced himself as Vilod and invited them to try his specialty, mead with juniper berries. Sora shrugged and ordered one for a mere five drakes, just to taste it, and was not impressed. The resinous qualities of the “berries” did odd things to the resulting flavor and cut through any sweetness. A dry mead was all very well, but…

“Do you have room for nine people?” he asked, glancing around a bit dubiously.

Vilod grimaced slightly. “There’s four rooms upstairs and none of them are being used right now. I could try to find some bedrolls to…”

“We have some,” he said. “How much per room?”

“It’s ten septims per room. We don’t usually get such large parties coming through here. You a trading group or something? But you want them, they’re yours for the night.”

Sora delved into his coin pouch and made four stacks of ten septims on the counter. “Not exactly. We plan to head to Whiterun next. Are the roads clear?”

Vilod took the coins and nodded. “Well, aside from the usual wolves that might harass you, and possibly the odd bandit or frostbite spider. But you all look well prepared. If you’re headed to Whiterun, I’d say take the north gate and when you hit the intersection you can go either way, but heading left and following the switchback down will take you along the normal road that follows White River to Riverwood. Cross the bridge and just keep following the river past that, and you’ll come down the hill and see Whiterun off to your left. Can’t miss it.”

He smiled, gave the man a nod, then headed for the stairs. The construction of the inn was “quaint”, which was a polite way of saying semi-shoddy considering half the town’s buildings were fashioned from stone and the inn was wood with a thatched roof. He feared for what population of rodents
might be sheltering in that thatch, actually.

The rooms were decently enough sized that they could easily fit in two people per room, though Shi, Viper, and Kiri would have to squeeze a bit. On the other hand, they could make a temporarily-physical “bunk” bed over the existing one, so only one of them would have to bed down on the floor. One of them would have to set up the tent temporarily outside town, long enough to make sure their animal companions were all right. Cashew, Leon, and Fantasma were one thing, but Keiman and Oodako would cause a panic, and he didn’t expect many people were used to seeing tame falcons or monkeys.

The food available for purchase for dinner was acceptable but boring, and lacking in anything resembling spice. His family all looked despondent over that, but not surprised. It just meant they would need to find a place to live as quickly as possible, though he doubted they would be so lucky as to be handed a castle again.

The next morning they got a quick meal and headed out, following Vilod’s directions. There were, indeed, wolves along the way. What was interesting was coming across a trio of stones off the road, overlooking the river. They were identical but for the markings, and each had a hole clear through. One carved-in image looked like a stereotypical wizard, one a warrior, and one … a thief?

“I suppose these are the Skyrim equivalent of the Doom or Rune stones?” Lorenzo mused.

Kiri shook his head. “You can test them later if you want, but it might make more sense to chat with the locals about them, see what’s available. It’s not like we need yet more power, anyway.”

“True.”

They kept going and followed the road into the next town, which included an island in the river itself, which sported a lumber mill on it. Chickens clucked importantly as they strutted around and pecked at the ground, but they deftly enough avoided them. Heaven help anyone who accidentally offed a chicken. In many respects animals of that sort were more valuable than gold. They were the gift that kept on giving, like sheep and their wool, and cows and their milk.

The road took them over a bridge that spanned the river and they kept to the road proper rather than getting distracted and taking the dirt path that looked to lead up to the interesting looking ruin atop the craggy hill?—mountain?—that stood out a sullen grey against the white of the snow up there.

“Plenty of time for exploring once we’re settled,” Renato said as Rio stumbled because he kept craning his neck to stare at the ruin.

Lal grabbed Rio’s arm just in case.

“Man,” Rio muttered. “If they’re anything like the ruins in Cyrodiil, you can bet there’s bandits up there, and probably some undead.”

“Probably,” Sora said, “but save it until we’re situated better. Or do you really want our horses to have to dodge arrows?”

The road diverged from the river a bit in one spot, which afforded a somewhat obscured view of their destination ahead and to the left, but it quickly enough swung back toward the water and headed downhill to a four-way intersection.

They turned west and Sora almost immediately became interested in the property just to their left. The sign outside said Honningbrew Meadery. There were two buildings, but given that one of them had only clerestory windows, he assumed it was the right-hand building that housed any associated
“That looks almost too good to be true,” Val muttered as they passed the place.

“You can bet we’ll be back,” Viper said.

Kiri nodded. “Soon as we’re set for the day. Assuming the place is worth it, I have every intention of being very persuasive.”

Sora smiled. “It’s actually interesting that we haven’t seen any Ayleid ruins since we hit this side of the pass. I guess they never came this far north?”

“The Dwemer were up here,” Lorenzo said, “and considering the number of farms around here, I’m thinking we’ll do all right with our own garden and apiary. Toss up the usual protections and we shouldn’t have any unfortunate accidents.”

The road continued on west, but they turned north, and were gratified to find a fairly large flat area roughly across from the stables outside the city. The tent was promptly unpacked and set up and the horses were unhitched from the carts and tied off. They immediately started grazing after giving themselves a happy shake.

“All right. Renato, Lal, and—” He grinned when Val started dancing around. “Val. Let’s go check out Whiterun, see what’s available. Kiri or Viper, one of you please go check out that meadery and make an assessment. We’ll have a meeting once we’re assembled again. And if one of you will set up some kind of cooking area, I’ll make us something decent when I get back.”

“Dear gods, please let it be pasta,” Renato said with heartfelt hope.

“If we can find some decent beef for sale in the city, I could make spaghetti,” he replied, and was nearly dragged off his feet when his lover grabbed his hand and hauled him toward the path.

There were guards stationed outside the gates, but they just nodded as the group pushed through. Whiterun shared some vague similarities with Cheydinhal in terms of architecture, though some of the structures had thatched roofs rather than shingled, but it shared more with Bruma overall—not a surprise as Bruma was heavily influenced by the Nords.

Just inside the gate and to his right was a smithy, Warmaiden’s, with a youngish lady working the forge. What looked to be an inn, the Drunken Huntsman, was ahead and to the left. He could see market stalls straight ahead, so he headed that way.

The little plaza was bustling with activity. The stall to his left had produce on display, one had game, and another appeared to be selling general items, such as simple jewelry. In addition to the stalls were signs for Belethor’s General Goods, Arcadia’s Cauldron, and The Bannered Mare.

He hummed. “I don’t expect we’ll need anything from the shops themselves, but let’s see about tomatoes, at least, and beef.”

Lal diverted sideways to speak with the produce lady as Renato headed for the game merchant. Val eyed the area. “They seem friendly enough and I have to admit, the, um, palace up there is fairly impressive. Not what I’m used to seeing, but…”

“It has a certain charm,” he said. “I decry the lack of windows, though. Barely anything here has windows. I know, they can’t work with glass the way we were used to, but…”

“We could always be weird and have Lorenzo make us some stained glass windows for the front of
the new Filigrana,” Val suggested. “It’d be a talking point if nothing else.”

“Talking point?” Lal said, having returned with a net sack of ripe tomatoes, various other vegetables, and even a wheel of cheese.

“Oh, those look nice,” Sora said, eyeing up her purchases. “They won’t be as nice as our own, but they’ll do for now.”

She nodded and looked expectant, so Val said, “Stained glass windows for the front of the new Filigrana. The usual web pattern, perhaps? As it is, Shi is going to have to make all new chairs and stools.”

She shrugged. “They were getting worn again, and we had to leave them behind anyway. And I like that idea. They’d definitely let in a lot of light, even if it would be coloured. Maybe we can sit down and sketch out some ideas. Use Mist-metal for the frames?”

Sora thought that sounded good. A shout caused them to look over to see Renato gesturing. Val dashed over to help in response. “I hope he’s not planning to buy an entire haunch,” he said, “but I guess if he does, I can figure out what to do with it.”

“I certainly hope that doesn’t include hanging any of it in the tent to age,” Lal said uneasily.

“No. But I could make stir fry with parts of it, or steaks. Nothing you’d care for, obviously, but it’d be a shame to waste any of it.”

Renato and Val wandered back over carrying a net sack each. Sora was relieved to see they had not gone overboard and purchased something like an entire side, because what the hell would he do with hundreds of pounds of beef and no place to store or hang it yet?

“You do realize you get to be the one to grind that, right?” he asked his lover.

Renato gave a resigned nod. “And there’s enough for a second meal tomorrow. He said we could purchase eggs and dairy at the Bannered Mare if we needed any, or ask around at any of the farms here.”

“Might as well get started, then,” he said. “We’ll have plenty of time to explore.”

By the time they got back to their campsite Rio and Shi had set up an adequate campfire with a metal tripod over it sporting several hooks. Lal set about getting some water and giving the produce a cleaning before patting everything dry and setting it all aside for the time being.

Sora took some of the tomatoes and started preparing them so he could start on a sauce. Val helpfully hunted down the garlic and salt, and chopped onions for him, while Renato took some of the beef and began to grind it down with tools retrieved from the tent.

Shi had hung pots from each of the hooks and brought out a container of olive oil—getting olive trees to grow in Cyrodiil had been fun, and they were going to have to do it all over again—so he was well set to begin once everything was prepared.

Two pots of sauce were merrily bubbling away when a group of Khajiit rolled up and looked somewhat put out.

“Do you normally camp here?” he asked, getting up and approaching. “Because there’s more than enough room for all of us.”
“You have the sound of someone from Cyrodiil,” one of the males said.

“Yes, just came from there, actually. I’m Sora. We’re looking for a place to relocate to and thought Whiterun sounded nice.”

“Ah, this one’s name is Ri’saad.”

After the introductions were out of the way Ri’saad directed his people to set up their tents, then eyed the food Sora was cooking.

“Probably not sweet enough for you, friend,” Sora said in amusement, then took a seat again so he could start making the pasta. It would have time to dry enough before it was time to boil it. “I was taught a few recipes from your homeland, though. I’ve never tasted them because I don’t think I want to know what moon sugar would do to me, but they were well enough received.”

Ri’saad looked confused, or as confused as a Khajiit could look. It was all about the tilt of his head and the set of his ears and whiskers.

“I ran a bar—a tavern?—near Chorral,” Sora said into the silence. “We had all sorts of customers. You can share our dinner if you’d like. I’ve made more than enough sauce to cover four additional people.”

“This one would be interested to taste.”

Sora smiled.

While the pasta was drying he asked Ri’saad about his travels and was treated to a discourse on the troubles in the Reach and Markarth. “The Forsworn make travel there very exciting,” Ri’saad said at one point.

“That rather confirms our choice not to head that way,” he said, then dumped the pasta into boiling water. “There are so many bandits already on the roads. I can’t imagine having the Forsworn boiling out to join the party. And you said Markarth is built out of Dwemer ruins?”

Ri’saad nodded. “Soulless stone.”

“I’m sure we’ll see some at some point,” he said, giving the pasta a quick stir. “I’m not in any hurry. Though I will say that Ayleid ruins are quite aesthetically pleasing so long as you can ignore the tendency for there to be necromancers, undead, cultists, or bandits lurking in them.”

A faint tug on one of his bonds saw him turning his head in time to see Kiri walking their way. His brother had a smirk on his face that boded well—for them.

“Little brother,” Kiri almost sang once he got close enough. He paused long enough to give Ri’saad a nod of greeting, then sat down. “I think it’ll do wonderfully for our purposes. A few alterations, a bit of construction—there’s a tunnel down in the cellar that leads to a cave system, no doubt filled with rats or something equally unpleasant.”

He shrugged. “That could all be cleared out and some renovations made to make that space usable. By the way, Kiri, this is Ri’saad. He and his group trade along the route from here to Markarth. Ri’saad, this is my brother, Kiri.”

Kiri nodded again, then eyed the pots.

“Just a few more minutes,” he said.
Kiri jumped up and started helping the others to get things ready. A parade of dishes were shortly being filled with pasta and sauce and placed on folding tables along with garlic bread and salad.

Ri’saad and his group were served first, and they seemed to, if not like, at least not hate the spaghetti. The Khajiit politely thanked Sora for the meal and moved away to speak with his people, so Sora cleaned up and retreated inside their tent for a meeting.

“For some odd reason,” Kiri said once they were settled in various spots, “the secondary building is a boilery intended for mead making.”

Sora frowned in confusion. “So the entire structure could be converted to our house.”

Kiri nodded. “The shop is … serviceable as it stands, but some improvements could be made for flow—you’ll understand once you see inside—and part of it converted to a kitchen. There’s plenty of room for storage, though they have their beds up in the loft area.”

“They?”

“The present owner, a Nord by the name of Sabjorn, an Imperial named Mallus, who is more or less enslaved to Sabjorn, and a Nord named Eimar, who mostly keeps the place cleaned and apparently has a burning desire to learn how to make mead.”

“Hang on, enslaved?” Renato said.

“Sabjorn loaned Mallus a sum of coin, knowing the man would find it difficult to pay it back. Mallus is something of an indentured servant because of that, doing the nastiest, dirtiest jobs. Sabjorn seems quite pleased with his … cleverness … at having done this to an Imperial. Basically, we would have to get Sabjorn to forgive the debt before compelling him to relocate wherever, and giving the other two the boot.”

“Really,” Rio drawled. “Perhaps Markarth would be a good place for him, then.”

“The cellar extends under the shop and storage building, but it could easily be expanded with some careful work. And, as I said, there’s a break in one wall down there leading to some caves. We would either have to seal that up, or—” Kiri glanced at Shi and Lorenzo. “—extend over to the river and figure out how to tap into that for water and/or power.”

Lorenzo whipped out a notebook and started jotting down notes and muttering to himself. The word “purification” might have slipped out.

“Out of curiosity, did you try the mead?” Sora asked.

Kiri shook his head. “He only just recently got the place. He made a vague passing comment about having been helped. We’ll find out more once we go back. I’m sure between myself and Viper that we can expose any interesting secrets.”

“All right. You two are good to go back tonight, poke around. After you’ve rested we can talk more.”
Sabjorn,

Within the enclosed crate, you'll find the final payment. As we discussed, Honningbrew Meadery should now begin brewing mead at full production. In regards to your concerns about interference from Maven Black-Briar, I can assure you that I'll do everything in my power to keep her assets and her cronies at bay. This is the beginning of a long and successful future for both of us.

Sora looked up from the note with a grimace. “Great. Well, I’m sure whatever this Maven person throws at us we can handle. I do wonder how long it will take before she gets annoyed at the competition.”

Viper shook his head. “Let’s get this place fixed to our satisfaction, and then we can go out on small missions to scout the other cities.”

He looked around the main room and nodded. “Well that counter has to be moved. The positioning is ridiculous. Why the hell is the opening at the far end, away from the door into the storage area? No, let’s move it to cover that door and have the opening at the back end, so that I can easily go back and forth through the door to whatever kitchen we build back there. We can set up a spot to age meat in the cellar, too.”

Renato held his hand out and Sora looked confused until his lover said, “That can’t be lost. If someone helped that idiot with the express intent to annoy this Maven person, it might come in handy down the road. So let’s tuck it away someplace safe. We also need to be on the lookout for this mysterious benefactor. True, once it becomes known that you make mead they might not bother us, but until that becomes common knowledge…”

He nodded and handed the note over.

“So what did you find?” he asked, eyeing how Shi and Lorenzo were a bit on the cobwebby side.

Shi placed a journal on the counter as Lorenzo snorted and said, “A madman.”

His brow went up, then he flipped open the journal to read it.

Ten years of ridicule. Ten years of imprisonment. Ten years of exile.

The children threw rocks and the women spat upon me as the menfolk dragged me into Whiterun’s prison. They branded me a danger to their pitiful existence … used words like “madman” and “insane”. Could a madman escape the prisons undetected? Could a lunatic establish a laboratory right under their noses? Could a psychopath create a mighty army from the common skeever?

My days as an apprentice alchemist in Winterhold were no better. Those egotistical braggarts couldn’t compete with my abilities. Where they fell short, I’d constantly excel. Did they appreciate my genius? Did they relish my contributions? No. My instructors beat me and said I was irresponsible, and the Arch Mage cast me into the streets like a common beggar.

As my enemy grows complacent and weak, as they forget Hamelyn and his utter brilliance, I build my army. I use every bit of knowledge at my disposal to forge their demise. Thanks to Sabjorn’s unwitting assistance, my legion grows stronger every day.
The irony that the same ingredients used to make his vile drink could be used to feed my offspring isn’t lost upon me.

Oh, they will pay. Their ignorance of impending annihilation amuses me. I will bury Whiterun and watch Winterhold burn. And when they experience the fury I’ve unleashed upon them, when my progeny are gnawing the flesh from their bones, they will come begging and groveling at my feet. But there will be no mercy, no quarter, and no leniency. And I will laugh and I will dance and I will rejoice over their mangled, broken corpses. The time for recompense has arrived.


“Right,” he said in bemusement, then flipped the journal shut. “I assume he’s dead now.”

Shi nodded. “And all his little pets. We can decide how we want to excavate after I’ve had a chance to do some clean up down there. There’s tons of space.”

“I was thinking we could terrace the land behind the buildings,” Lorenzo said.

“For our garden?” Lal said.

“Yes. The boilery could be converted for the horses, a cow, stuff like that. The windows there are just openings, so there’d be airflow even if the doors were shut. And if Shi cut us a path to the river, we could divert water in to both buildings. The apiaries can have the usual Mist-metal protections to keep outsiders away from them. Maybe some fences around the terraces.”

“It’s going to take a year to get a good set of bees going anyway,” he said, “so it’s just as well we brought so much honey with us. Hopefully the local jarl won’t throw a fit when we start terracing, but that’s fixable even if it happens. I would say … let’s focus on three things first. This tavern area, the kitchen, and the hive placements. It won’t kill us to use sleeping bags for a bit. I can start batches of mead straight away. Once those are done, we can start in on the other projects.”

Rio and Lal came in looking somewhat annoyed and flopped into seats. “That was kind of a waste,” Rio said sourly. “But we did run into the expected undead.”

“And spiders and rats—”

“They call them skeevers here,” Lorenzo pointed out.

Lal scowled at him. “And several types of traps. Rio almost set one off.”

“You don’t know that,” Rio protested with a wounded look.

She gave him a look. “Sure. A lever sitting innocently in the middle of the room, a portcullis-style door, and weird carvings, and you weren’t the least bit suspicious?”

“Weird carvings?” he asked.

Lal nodded. “Nords have odd ideas about cleverness. There were three, uh, pillars off to the side. Three sides each, each with a bas-relief of snake, whale, or hawk—some kind of bird of prey, anyway. There were matching carvings in the room up on a walkway, though one of them had fallen. Once we set the pillars to match those it was fine. I suspect if you pulled the lever without the right combination something nasty would happen, because I saw some odd holes.”
“Were the undead like the ones we’re used to?”

Rio shook his head. “No headless zombies here. These were like mummies minus the wrappings, and still wearing armor. Some of them could Shout, which was exciting, but they were no real challenge. In some ways they’re just as stupid as the zombies, because luring them into traps was fairly simple. They had good stuff on them, too, so we can probably fetch some nice coin for it.”

He still did not understand why they looked disappointed, so he asked, “Then why was it a waste?”

“There was a very strange wall in there,” Lal said. “Probably a door, but it was a puzzle. There was a round plate with holes in it, and three stone rings around it with symbols. You could push the rings to rotate them and change the combination, but without whatever key it was impossible to open, and we didn’t feel right about trying to destroy it.”

“Well, we set up a spot in the cellar for heating water and bathing while you were gone.”

Lal brightened. “Then I’m going to go take advantage of it.”

“I’ll scrub your back,” Rio said happily.

He was washing mugs when Ri’saad and his crew wandered into the most recent incarnation of Filigrana. He nodded a greeting.

“Like the windows,” Ri’saad said as he took a seat at the bar.

“They’re nice, right?”

“Why webs?” Ri’saad asked, only just noticing that the tavern’s motif was webs. As before, all the seat cushions were embroidered by Shi, though the seats themselves were a mismatched lot, and there were roughly triangular panels of Mist-metal like spider webs in places that had glass-cage lanterns suspended from them.

“While I’m not exactly fond of spiders,” he said, “not those massive ones, anyway, I really like how they can make webs, and I like silk. I just think it’s amazing, and they’re really beautiful in the early morning, when there’s still dew on them.”

Ri’saad stared at him blankly, then nodded.

“So what can I get you guys? Sweetest mead we have?”

Ri’saad nodded.

He smiled and stepped back a little so he could see under the bar, then hooked out four bottles to place on the counter. “I baked a cheesecake if you’d like to try it. It might not be as sweet as you’d like, but… I don’t know, you might still enjoy it. I won’t even charge you for samples.”

Ri’saad clawed the cork out of his bottle with a contemplative angling of his ears, then nodded.

Sora grinned and ducked into the kitchen long enough to slice four thin wedges of cheesecake and set them on plates, get forks, and bring them out on a tray to serve. He watched as the leader of the group took a bite and the Khajiit’s eyes shuttered.

“This one … does not dislike this,” Ri’saad finally said. “Though a little moon sugar would not go
He chuckled. “How did I know you’d say that? I have no idea what would happen if I baked one with that in it, but maybe if you sprinkled a little on top?” He shrugged.

“Perhaps.” Ri’saad quickly finished the sample and washed it down with mead.

To absolutely no one’s surprise, Ri’saad’s group was a regular fixture at Filigrana from that point on and passed on a fair amount of gossip each time they stopped in.

It was a sunny afternoon when the door opened and a weary-looking Dunmer entered and took a seat at the bar. “Do you rent rooms?”

“Ah, no. Just food and drink, friend. We have several varieties of mead for sale, as well as some basic wines and ale.”

“Mead varieties?” the man said.

“There’s the regular mead, with nothing special about it, from very sweet all the way down to dry, and three reserve varieties. Gold has actual flakes of gold in it, Pearl will give you some protection against the elements for a short time, and Viper will give you night vision, rather like Shadowbanish Wine. The regular mead is twenty septims, and the reserves are one hundred each.”

The man seemed surprised. “I’d like to try something in the middle.”

“Sure.” Sora stepped back and fetched out a middling mead from under the counter and set it down, then took the stack of coin and dumped it in the cash box. An hour later he was amused to note that the Dunmer man had had a bit more mead than he could apparently handle. What was not so amusing was the steady stream of invective rambling regarding the conditions suffered by Dunmer up in Windhelm—or by any mer, really—and how one of their detractors was the brother of the jarl’s right-hand man.

He signaled to Viper, whose mouth twitched.

The next morning over breakfast his Mist said, “I will have to make a trip for verification purposes, but the conditions in Windhelm have been steadily worsening. The refugees from Morrowind are accused of being a drain on their resources. When they attempt to find proper work, they are reviled for their efforts and accused of being spies for the Imperials. Some have been persistent in their efforts and won a grudging respect, but most are so disheartened that they remain mostly within the Gray Quarter, though even there are Nords who come at night and yell abuse at them.”

Sora frowned. “So, an advertising opportunity.”

Viper nodded. “Two, actually, as he was actually here because of rumors that have filtered north about your mead, Sora.”

“Well he did buy a dozen bottles to take back with him,” he acknowledged.

“As to the potential hit, there are two who are particularly vocal, one being the brother I mentioned. Another is a member of the guard. At that, the Argonian population has it worse. They aren’t even allowed inside the city, and instead live on the docks.”

“How important is this brother person?” Lal asked.
“His brother would in theory miss him and raise a fuss over his death or disappearance,” Viper replied, “but he does not seem to do much of anything aside from drink and hurl abuse.”

“All right. Find out what you can and we’ll make the decision, come up with a plan of action.”

Viper’s mouth had that unhappy slant to it when he returned. “That Dunmer works at the New Gnisis Cornerclub in the Gray Quarter. Ambarys employs him to clean, but Malthyr also functions as a pawnbroker. Ulfric Stormcloak took over as jarl in 176, after his father died, and he is much opposed to elves in general, or really, anyone who is not a fellow Nord. He’s not outright dismissive of Imperials, Bretons, or Redguards, but neither is he particularly welcoming.

“In any case, Rolff Stone-Fist indeed likes to bully the Dunmer and roam the Gray Quarter at night to try to drive them away. He has a crony who tags along at times, but Rolff is more of a driving force in this, and Ulfric, and his brother Galmar, do nothing to stop him.”

“I see.” Sora frowned and glanced at his other family members to gauge their reactions.

“Let me get this straight,” Lal said. “Red Mountain blew and destroyed half of Morrowind, and many of them fled across the border here to Skyrim. Ulfric’s father presumably didn’t have a problem with the refugees, but Ulfric is ridiculously racist, and chooses to ignore the issues in his city rather than actually do anything. I could understand if the man was pissed because Dunmer have a long history of enslaving Argonians…”

“I took a look at Ulfric while I was there,” Viper said. “He was a soldier in the Great War, and during that time he was captured by the Thalmor. He was … broken. They made him believe that he gave up information crucial to the fall of the Imperial City when in fact it had already fallen. Later on, not long before his father died, he reclaimed the Reach from the Forsworn, with the understanding that their right to open worship of Talos would be reinstated. Naturally, he was arrested for it and imprisoned, and only let out some time after his father had died, to take up the position of jarl. He would welcome anyone if they swore to fight for him, but he won’t bother to help anyone who hasn’t, unless they’re a Nord.”

“So he has good reason to hate the Thalmor, but not the Dunmer, Argonians, Khajiit—” Lal stopped. “Maybe the Khajiit, if only because they think the Thalmor ended the Void Nights.”

“That and their moon sugar trade,” Lorenzo said, “even though it’s not illegal. And there was that nasty business with the Blackwood Company in Leyawiin involving that Argonian Hist tree, but I don’t know that he’d be aware of the incident.”

“Oh, well, you know,” Rio said with a roll of his eyes, “it’s not like the average Nord isn’t sucking down how much alcohol daily?”

“Let’s get back to Rolff. Do we take him out or not? It’s obvious Ulfric won’t do anything, either to keep his people in line or completely oust non-Nords from his city.”

“If we want to establish our shady reputation here, he’s a good target,” Renato said.

“It sounds to me like Ulfric can’t even govern his own city properly,” Lal said. “And if he’s not prepared to take out a guy who routinely abuses residents, maybe we should. And yes, he sounds like a viable target as a basis for advertising purposes.”

Sora noted that no one seemed ready to object, so he nodded. “Shall I get the usual, or is one of you
in particular wanting to do this?”

“Whoever does it should avoid the appearance of magic,” Viper said. “We are talking about Nords here.”

Val furrowed his brow and said, “I think I’d like this one, but…” He eyed Kiri.

“What did you have in mind?” Kiri said.

“If you could arrange for a brawl between two Nords to break out wherever he lurks, and he gets pushed as a result, I could propagate the force.”

“And his brains splatter all over the nearest stone wall?”

Val nodded. “Something like that, yes. Then there’s no reason for anyone to think magic was involved. Well, okay, someone could have used a frenzy-type spell, but…”

Kiri smirked. “I could take direct control of people and make the resulting build-up seem entirely natural, plus ensure a push in the right direction. True, pure illusion could get two men to play off each other and escalate into a real fight, but the odds of getting the push you need…”

“Right. And this way it would look entirely accidental, rather than having one of them controlled into attacking directly.”

Sora nodded. “All right. I’ll let you two take care of it, then. Aside from that, the usual applies.”

Shi, Rio, and Lal returned from their trip and dropped into seats at one of the tables. Sora wandered over with bottles of mead and took a seat since there were no customers present. “You look tired,” he said.

Lal shook her head as she uncorked her bottle. “Not so much. We did get what we went for, though, after a side trip.”

“We found a candidate roaming the streets and stopped to talk to him. A handful of coins got him talking,” Shi said. “But he wanted us to retrieve a helmet of his he’d lost. We ended up in some place called Shadowgreen Cavern northwest of Solitude. Pretty enough place, but filled with spriggans and bears.”

“At least the ones up here don’t have that weird laugh,” Rio said before taking a sip of his mead.

“Noster is on board,” Lal said. “He’ll be keeping his ears and eyes open for us, so long as we make regular donations. We set up the usual deal with the carriage driver stationed out of there. He’ll ferry messages whenever he comes this way.”

“Then that’s the last of them,” he said with a nod. “I guess beggars don’t see the point of sticking around the smaller towns when they could find better shelter and more opportunities in the cities.”

“Which is helpful,” Shi said, “as the carriage drivers are only stationed at the big five. We just have to send a delegation once every few weeks or a month to make payments.”

“At least Brenuin is easy,” he said with a shrug. “He can just come here for meals once a day.”

“Speaking of Whiterun,” Lal said.
His brow went up.

“Río and I have been talking. We’re not exactly prepared to adopt the kid, but do you have a problem with giving Lucia a place to live? She can help out with the animals.”

“Wait, what? You know I haven’t been into Whiterun for a while. Who is Lucia?”

“Ah, an orphan. Her mother was killed recently and her aunt and uncle took over their farm. Lucia claims they threw her out, saying she was useless. Brenuin explained to her the basics of begging. No one has come forward to adopt her, possibly because she’s an Imperial. We figured, she lived on a farm…”

Sora nodded. “All right. Go ahead and make the offer. We’ll have to figure out a bedroom for her, what duties she can do. It’s one thing for an adult to beg—they could always go help out at one of the farms—but a child sleeping on the streets…”

Lal smiled. “Thanks, Sora. We’ll go talk to her.”

Sora knew that rumor had probably reached a certain point when a young Breton woman with a nervous air about her entered Filigrana and took a seat. Her eyes darted around and she jumped slightly when Renato went over to see what she’d like.

His lover came to him a short time later and said, “Dry mead and a sampler.”

He nodded and fetched out a bottle of mead to hand to Renato, then disappeared into the back to put together her order. A small ramekin of pasta salad, some bruschetta, and two goat cheese and caramelized onion tarts. Renato took the plate over when he brought it out, then came back to say, “Given her general demeanor, I have to wonder if she’s come based on rumors and not for the exotic food.”

A glance her way showed that while she was delicately sampling the food, she still seemed nervous and jumpy. “Or she’s being hunted. But I see that Kiri has also noticed, so I expect we’ll hear something soon enough.”

His brother strolled over to check on her and took a seat, smiling pleasantly. He was too far away to hear any of the conversation, but the woman relaxed after only a few minutes and smiled back. Kiri started gesturing as he spoke, and pointing at various items on the menu. When she did leave she had completely lost the wariness she came in with.

Kiri sauntered over and smirked. “I think we have one of our other customers, dear brother. I tagged her, of course. She’s off to get a room at the Bannered Mare for the night.”

“Any idea what the problem is?”

“Ah, well… It seems that one of guards in Dragon Bridge is two steps away from becoming a rapist,” Kiri said. “No name yet, but it’s a bit early for that. I wouldn’t doubt she’ll be back.”

Lucia came in the front door and stopped dead when she saw Lal and Río. After a squeal of happiness she dashed over to greet them, so Sora got up. “Lucia, how about you go harvest us some kiwi and spinach for a salad? I already picked some berries earlier. That’ll give these guys a chance to clean up before lunch.”

She pouted a little and nodded. “Okay. I’ll get real good ones!” She dashed back out.
The Breton woman returned the next day and took a seat at the bar, and ordered stromboli—Kiri’s work in action, he supposed—to go with her mead. “That’ll be about twenty minutes,” he told her before disappearing into the kitchen to put it together and shove it into the oven.

When he came back out she began to look nervous again, so he smiled at her and said, “I don’t recall seeing you around Whiterun. Are you visiting someone in the area?”

“Oh, um, not really. I heard some … rumors,” she said softly.

“I see,” he said with a nod. “Word has gotten around about the food and drink here.”

She blinked at him in confusion. “No—I mean, I guess?”

Sora smiled. “If you feel like talking… But let me go check on your order.” He retreated into the kitchen and eyed the stromboli, then grabbed a few tarts and returned to the counter. He bit into a tart and eyed the room.

“Things are kind of tense in Dragon Bridge lately. It seems relaxed here.”

“I’ve never been there. What’s it like normally?”

“Oh, well, it’s not a very big village,” she said, “but we have an inn. I work there, learning the trade. I hope to run my own inn at some point. But the guards there are a bit… They seem to think it’s all right to demand things.”

“I think I would want a holiday from that, too,” he replied. “Of course, if some guard tried demanding things of me, he’d regret it. I don’t think he’d end up in Sovngarde, either, were it a Nord.”

She looked startled for a moment, then nodded. “There is something I’ve been meaning to ask about. There’s this one man in particular who won’t stop, and I heard things, about this place. There’s a beggar in Solitude I talk to sometimes when I go there for supplies we can’t get in Dragon Bridge.”

He nodded. “I know of him. Hold on just a moment while I go get your food, all right?” He ducked back into the kitchen and plated her food, added a bowl of sauce from the supply being kept warm near the fire, and brought it back out. “So who is this fellow who’s been giving you grief?”

“His name is Rogen,” she said, eyeing her stromboli for a moment before taking up knife and fork and slicing into it. She dunked it in the sauce and popped it in her mouth, then blinked.

“Not what you were expecting,” he said, “but good, yes?”

She nodded. Once she could speak again she said, “Very good. I’ve never had anything like it, but the food yesterday was just as new.”

“If you ever get to the point where you have an inn of your own, I might be nice enough to share a single recipe. How bad is this Rogen person? I don’t want to make assumptions, but…”

She looked away for a moment, then delayed further by having another piece of her stromboli.

“Is he the grabby sort? Wants more than you’re willing to give? Insistent and demanding?”

A faint sneer developed on her face before it was wiped away. She nodded and had another bite.
“If you want it taken care of we can do that,” he said. “The question is, what result do you want?”

“Ah…”

“If he’s really upset you, he can meet with an unfortunate accident,” he said bluntly. “If you want something less drastic, we can come up with something that will get him out of your hair.”

“But what—at what cost?” she whispered, looking a bit sick.

“Dragon Bridge has a Penitus Oculatus outpost, right?” When she nodded he said, “Keeping the circumstances in mind… Information, then. If anything peculiar happens in your village, let Noster know when you’re in Solitude. It’ll eventually make its way back here.”

Renato came through the kitchen door and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Tesoro, I was wondering if I could talk you into making some tiramisu.”

He grinned. “I could be persuaded. I’m going to have to make another batch of sauce, so if you help with that…”

Their customer watched in mild bemusement as she ate.

“I will even pick the vegetables myself,” Renato said.

“Then you have a deal,” he said, dropping a kiss of his own on his lover’s cheek. “I’ll make some in the morning, after breakfast.”

Renato reached under the counter for some mead and uncorked a bottle. “You know, you and I should consider taking a holiday.”

“I suppose I could make certain things in advance,” he said slowly. “But a holiday? To where?”

Renato shrugged. “Not Windhelm? Well, actually, not Riften, either, or Markarth. The only other decent sized city is Solitude.”

“It’s quite nice there,” their customer said. “Evette San makes and sells a spiced wine that’s nice. The Bard’s College is there, too.”

Renato shrugged. “We don’t have to be gone more than a few days. Go up, see the sights, come home.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Let me think about it. Probably yes, though.”

“Okay, tesoro. I’ll go get the stuff you’ll need for the sauce.” Renato gave him another kiss, grabbed a basket, and hastened off.

Their customer finished up her stromboli and nodded. “I’m glad I tried that.”

He moved her dishes to a bin under the counter. “You don’t have to decide now, you know.”

“No, I… I want him gone,” she said, then rubbed her face.

“It’ll be taken care of inside of a week. Don’t stress over it any longer.”

When she got up and turned to leave he nodded at Viper, who rose from his corner position and took a seat at the bar.
“She’s tagged.”

“Renato and I are going to have a short holiday in Solitude, but there’s a target in Dragon Bridge along the way. Feel like coming along?”

Viper frowned at him. “Yes. You know we’d never let you wander off without at least two of us. And while we’re there I can poke around to see if there’s more trouble than just a would-be rapist.”

Two days later they were off. They camped across the river from Dragon Bridge, behind a helpful rock outcropping a little north of the road, and Viper went in to investigate invisibly. When he came back Sora had food ready.

“The guards here are pissed off because of the outpost,” Viper said as he accepted a plate. “They feel simultaneously as if they’re being watched and judged, and ignored. The one she specifically mentioned, Rogen, is becoming more and more convinced that even if he did take what he wanted by force, the Penitus Oculatus wouldn’t bat an eye.”

“Well, how do you feel about adjusting some attitudes?” he asked Viper.

“Sure.”

“As for Rogen…”

“He’s on patrol this evening,” Viper said. “We could lure him across the bridge with an illusion, then further use illusion to make anyone who sees the commotion think that a bear is ripping him to shreds.”

“I could use a variant on my blades,” he said, flexing his hands.

Viper nodded.

“And you can adjust the rest of them while they’re sleeping. All right. We have a plan.”

Brenuin rushed into Filigrana with a weird expression and over to the bar. “The high king is dead!”

“What the hell happened?” he asked as Shi, Kiri, and Lal converged on them.

“Word came in that Ulfric Stormcloak went to Solitude and challenged him to a duel. He used a Shout to knock the king down, then ran him through. His wife’s taken over as jarl. There’s talk about her becoming High Queen, but just as much about Ulfric becoming High King. It’s for the moot to decide, they say.”

“Wonderful,” he said dryly. “Any other gossip? If he went to the trouble of calling Torygg out, yet isn’t immediately claiming the throne…”

“I’m hearing a lot of talk about his men, the Stormcloaks, making war on the Empire.”

“Just what we need, another war. All right, thank you for information.” He reached under the counter and produced a bottle of Gold Reserve.

Brenuin beamed and accepted it.

“I have a pot of minestrone on right now. Sound good?”
Brenuin nodded and headed for one of the tables, so Sora ducked into the kitchen long enough to fill a bowl and get some bread and butter, then bring it out. When he got back behind the counter Shi said, “If Lorenzo is to be believed about his interpretation of the ‘Book of the Dragonborn’, we’re going to see some serious action soon.”

“Ulfric will start his civil war, try to conquer all the holds and install sympathetic jarls, and win the vote that way.”

“It would make the most sense,” Shi replied.

“Is it just me, or is Val late?” Lorenzo asked at breakfast. “He should have been back by now.”

Val had gone on the usual run to support the local beggars in Stormcloak territory. Sora reached inside himself to trace the bond he had with his Cloud and frowned. “He is nowhere near Riften or Windhelm right now. He’s northwest of us.”

“The only things that way are Labyrinthian, Morthal, and Solitude,” Lorenzo said.

“Maybe he heard something in Riften and went to investigate?” Rio said. “Sounds a bit far-fetched, though.”

“He doesn’t seem to be in any distress,” Sora said. “We’ll give it some more time, I guess? If he’s not back by tomorrow morning, I’m going to track him down.”

“I’ll make sure the tent has what we’d need, then,” Renato said. “This is where I really miss cell phones. I could have sent him a rude text message or called and asked him what the fuck he was doing…”

“I’ll keep an eye on the bond. If he becomes distressed…”

That night he dreamed. Sheogorath was sitting there in his dual-coloured room with the massive tree growing behind the throne, and the bored-looking balding man was standing there staring at nothing in particular. One of these days he would consider asking what the man’s name was.

“Hello, old boy!” Sheogorath said cheerily. “Things are getting really exciting. Well, if you call a bunch of people beating each other to death exciting. And they don’t even have the excuse of being mad!”

“Does this mean the woman we’re supposed to help will be showing up soon?”

“Correct! She has blue hair, by the way, rather like your friend.”

“Oh? I didn’t think that was a thing on this world. Should make it easy to spot her, assuming the eyes didn’t give her away.”

“Just a note of caution, old boy. She won’t have any clue about being a hero when you meet her first, so don’t spoil the surprise.”

He nodded. “Um, do vampires even eat and drink normally, or is it all just blood?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Sheogorath said dismissively. “The vulgar ones might gnaw straight off the still living body to spice the blood they’re after, but this one eats normally, too, if only for the taste. Say, I just had an idea. You could always try making a mead variety with copper in it, to evoke the taste of
blood.”

“Um… Maybe? It’s not like I’ve tasted blood recently.”

Sheogorath shook his head sadly. “And I suppose you don’t bathe in the blood of your enemies, either. How terribly provincial. Well! Ta ta!”

He didn’t wake up straight after an audience with … his god? The dream warped into him in a floating chair at the Circus of Cheerful Slaughter, where he was forced to watch a play being enacted. It was very boring. He obviously wasn’t insane enough to appreciate it.

Val rolled in about halfway through breakfast looking more than a little put out, not to mention uneasy.

Sora got a plate ready for him and went back to eating.

“Sorry I’m late,” Val said as he picked up his fork. “I kinda did something you might not be happy about, and then things got weird.”

“I’m going to assume you’re all right,” he replied. “You look fine. Physically, anyway.”

“Yeah… Um, well…”

“Spit it out,” Renato said testily. “It’s not like we’re going to dogpile you.”

“No thank you,” Val said. “If I’m going to be dogpiled, I’d prefer it be all beautiful ladies who don’t expect anything more than a no strings attached good time. Okay. I was in Riften distributing coin to Edda and Sniff, when I heard another rant about Grelod over at the orphanage. So I snuck in. Oh my god that woman was a nightmare.”

“Was?” Shi asked.

“Oh, um…” Val laughed nervously. “Yeah. I sorta killed her. Snuck back out. Shopped a little, then headed for Windhelm as my next stop.”

“All right,” he said slowly. “If she truly was that bad, she should never have been in charge of an orphanage. Please tell me there was someone else there to look after any children?”

“Yes. Some chick named Constance. She seemed awfully nice, at least when Grelod wasn’t there to witness it. The kids like her a lot. Grelod was… There was this little room, closet sized, no windows, with manacles on the wall.”

Sora sighed. “All right. But how did it get ‘weird’?”

“I went to bed at Candlehearth and woke up in a shack near Solitude. There were three people in front of me, each on their knees, hands tied behind their backs, and hoods over their heads.”

“Aw, man, you attracted the attention of the Dark Brotherhood?” Renato said.

Val nodded. “Yep. Some chick in black and red was lounging up on the top of a cabinet. Said the only way I was going to get out of there was to kill someone. She said I owed them a kill because I killed the old woman. How they figured that out…”

“Maybe you were the only visitor that day?” Shi said.

Val shrugged. “Anyway, my first thought was to kill her, but I figured I would at least play along at
the start. She said one of the three had a contract out on them. The woman was just angry. She has six kids and no husband, apparently. The one guy seemed confused as to why he was there, but as a mercenary, maybe he upset a family member of someone he ended up killing. The last one, though, was a Khajiit fellow. He was an asshole and took great pleasure in threatening me. Sounded like a cocky mafioso from some big family. I admit, I took exception to him saying he’d have his people carve his name in my corpse.”

“I’ll take the Khajiit for two hundred,” Lal said.

Val snorted. “Yeah, I offed him. At that point the red and black chick ‘officially’ invited me to join up with the Dark Brotherhood, gave me the general location of the sanctuary, the password—which is, by the way, ‘Silence, my brother’—and handed me a key so I could unlock the door and leave.”

“Normally I would consider being somewhat upset.” Sora said, “at you randomly killing someone like that, because I know you could have busted out under your own power, but…”

“Having the password is something to hold close in case we need it later,” Kiri said. “We can’t guarantee myself or Viper randomly stumbling over one of them to weasel it free.”

He nodded. “Yes. But…”

Val hung his head for a moment.

“Val, will you head to Solstheim and replenish our supply of pearls?”

Val exhaled in relief. “Sure. I will crack open every pearl oyster there. Hopefully I can collect a good batch. On a side note, things are getting worse. Windhelm is totally geared up and I saw plenty of Stormcloaks out on the roads, not to mention a few instances of scuffles with Legion soldiers. Surprisingly, even though people consider us Bretons, I had more than a few Stormcloaks urge me to join up.”

Sora wrinkled his nose. “Sure, sure, Skyrim is for the Nords, but we’re happy to have you other people as cannon fodder? Well, I should update everyone, actually.”

“You have another dream?” Renato asked. “Because you didn’t wake up like you normally do if so.”

“Yeah. I got to visit the palace at New Sheoth again. Our new friend will be stopping by sometime reasonably soon. And like Lal, she has blue hair. Since she’s a vampire she may wear a hood? He didn’t say. But I’m sure we can figure it out. I have been instructed not to clue her in to her upcoming hero slash pawn status—”

Val snickered.

“—so we’ll just not talk about that until it becomes relevant. However…”

“Right, right,” Rio said. “We make nice, hopefully make a friend—and it would be nice to have another one who isn’t going to leave us due to old age—and make her want to talk to us or whatever when the time comes.”

“And Sheogorath suggested I make up a Copper Reserve with copper in it so it’d presumably remind people of the taste of blood.”

Lorenzo’s brows went up. “Maybe that would work? Copper is toxic in quantity, though, so I’m thinking as interesting as it sounds, it’s a bad idea.”
“Ah. I won’t bother, then. Maybe it also causes insanity? That might explain the suggestion. I suppose it’s possible he’s mildly annoyed that I’ve yet to lose my mind. He keeps sending me to various places in his realm during dreams, but…” He shrugged.

“You’ve weathered plenty of crazy already,” Kiri said, smirking.

His intuition warned him of something, nebulous as it might be, and since Filigrana was placid at the moment he went to the door and gazed out at the road. Lorenzo had long since fashioned them a screen door to keep the bugs out, and during the warmer months they generally left the proper set open.

A figure was off in the distance, coming down the road on the far side of the river. That road wound around the mountain and led to places like Ivarstead, Darkwater Crossing, Shor’s Stone, and Riften. When it got close enough he could hear it was a she; she was telling the guards about an altercation up the hill between Legion soldiers and Stormcloaks. Considering how often that had been happening of late, he was unsurprised she ran into one even so close to Whiterun.

In theory, Jarl Balgruuf was neutral, but in practice he would likely side with the Empire if forced into a situation where neutrality was untenable. There were no Legion soldiers regularly patrolling the area, but he had no doubt that the Imperial in charge of the Empire’s efforts in Skyrim—a General Tullius, according to his information network—would be right on Balgruuf’s doorstep the moment he was given a faint nod of approval. The western holds were aligned with the Empire, while the eastern ones were with Ulfric, making it a seemingly even split, with Whiterun smack in the middle, straddling the line.

The woman, who he suspected was their incipient friend and hero of the day, glanced over and saw the sign outside where the old Honningbrew one once hung. She paused for a moment, glanced at him, then continued on toward Whiterun with a tilt of her head. Unfortunately for Sora, she was wearing a hood to go with her mage’s robes, so verifying that it was, in fact, her would have to wait.
He looked up when the screen door was opened and two people walked in. One was the female mage from nearly a week ago and the other was a male Dunmer. Based on her height, Sora was willing to bet she was Breton. He smiled at them and waited to see where they’d sit.

She forged ahead and took one of the stools at the bar and her companion sat in the next one over, so he said, “Welcome to Filigrana,” and placed menus in front of them. “I’m Sora. Let me know what you decide on.”

She tilted her head in a way that showed off her red, slit-pupilled eyes with black rims, then looked down at her menu. “You’re the only place I’ve seen so far in this country that has something like this.”

“We’re not from around here,” he said.

“You have a Cyrodiilic accent, so I’d say not. Eh, how about a middling mead.”

He nodded and stepped back so he could fetch a bottle out and place it before her.

“I’ll … have the same,” the Dunmer said, and was promptly served one as well.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what any of this stuff is,” she said. “Surprise me.”

His eyes narrowed as he considered. “All right. And if you hate it, I won’t charge—this time. For the food, anyway.”

She pulled the cork out of her bottle and took a sip, then nodded. “I’ll have to try the other varieties at some point. Erandur, just wing it.”

The Dunmer sighed. “Fine. Surprise me.”

Sora chuckled. “I’ll be back in a few. If you need anything while I’m gone—” He pointed at Renato, who was busy washing mugs. “—he’s your man.” He retreated into the kitchen to pull the lasagne he’d made a bit earlier out of the warming slot above the fire and dished up two portions, then added two onion and goat cheese tarts for each.

The incipient hero eyed her food a bit warily before taking up her utensils and slicing into it. She paused before eating, but went back for a second bite. Erandur tried a tart and hummed in a positive way, so he moved sideways and gestured at Shi. “Will you bring in another case of the middling, please?”

Shi nodded and disappeared into the back.

“I wonder how people would react to cheeseburgers,” Renato mused quietly.

Sora huffed a laugh. “We could try it, I suppose. Nords do love their meat, though it seems to me they just hack it off the nearest animal and pass it through the fire before diving in.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Renato replied as he set another mug in the drying rack. “But I’ve seen it happen too often to say you’re exaggerating.”

“Maybe on a busy night I could make the equivalent of sliders and hand out free samples.”
“How about … once a month … you do a special night.”

“So, cheeseburgers and fries one time, and pizza another? Something like that?”

Renato shrugged. “We can talk about it during the breakfast meeting. Come up with some ideas. Aside from Ri’saad and his bunch I don’t think anyone has any particular preferences anyway.” He finished up the last mug and reached under the counter to get himself a drink.

He glanced back to see that both of their two new customers were well into their meals and showed no signs of stopping, which boded well. “So, can I assume that the flavor isn’t lost on you?”

The woman looked up and gave him a barely-visible flat stare.

He gave her a knowing look. “Just curious.”

“It’s very flavorful,” she replied. “I’m enjoying it more than I expected.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Don’t know how often it’ll come into play, but you never know, right?” Given that Erandur did not seem surprised, he was either aware she was a vampire, or just plain clueless. “But, knowing that, it means I have some idea what else you might appreciate. Or you can just keep saying surprise me.”

Kiri wandered in and leaned on the bar. “Dear brother, may I please have a Pearl?”

“Were you planning to get into a fight with a mage?” he asked as he fetched one out.

“No. I simply feel decadent today, but not so decadent as to go for Gold. Besides, it makes me think of poor Val, roaming the coast of Solstheim, cracking oysters open.”

“There are actual pearls in the Pearl Reserve?” she asked.

Sora nodded. “It changes the flavor slightly, but the value is in the magic resistance. But that assumes a person is the sort to swig alcohol in battle rather than a potion.”

“And we’re in Skyrim.”

“Exactly. It saves time, presumably. Interested in dessert? I have some cheesecake back there.”

She bit her lip, flashing a bit of fang. “That sounds really weird, but I’ll try it. Erandur?”

“Certainly.”

Sora looked at his brother and Renato, both of whom nodded. “Be right back.”

A few minutes later he brought out a tray with five plates on it and fresh forks, and slid plates into place, then took up his own fork. He had just taken a bite when Val whipped the door open and came in.

“Cheesecake!” Val cried happily. “Is there raspberry sauce back there?”

“Yes.”

Val dashed into the back and was at the bar a minute later with his own plate. “Are we having a cheesecake party?”

“Nothing exploded, so no. Get a good haul?”
His Cloud nodded. “Yep! I must have opened a billion oysters, too. That ash gets everywhere.”

A tentacle snaked over Val’s shoulder and waved in the general direction of the cheesecake, causing the as yet nameless incipient hero and Erandur to stare in disbelief.

“You know you don’t like this,” Val said, pausing to shrug the backpack off his back and let Oodako out. “I’ll get you some fish in a few minutes, then run you a salt bath, okay?”

Oodako squiggled back and forth a bit, then disappeared into the kitchen.

“What … was that?” the woman asked flatly.

“My animal companion,” Val said. “He’s an octopus.”

“I have no idea what you just said, but okay.”

“Think of him like a summon, sort of,” he said, “except he’s not.”

“The not being ghostly part was a clue,” she said dryly.

He grinned. Perhaps they would all get along just fine. “Just out of curiosity, have you tried Black-Briar mead?”

She shook her head.

“Yes. When we decided to move north we just packed everything up and reestablished ourselves here. It took a year for the new colonies to start producing a good amount of honey, but that’s normal. We brought enough along with us with that in mind, so it didn’t impact the production of new mead. If it’s made right and bottled right it’s good for years, even decades. It usually gets drunk well before that, though.”

“Even the reserve varieties?” she asked skeptically.

Renato snorted. “The, ah, wealthier patrons like to show their wealth fairly often, so yes.”

She grimaced slightly.

Sora’s brow went up. “Ran into Nazeem?” When she adopted a questioning look he said snottily, “Do you get to the Cloud District very often?”

She laughed and nodded. “Yes. Ran into him my first time around here. For someone supposedly so important to the jarl, I sure never see him up there when I go visit with Farengar to see if he has anything interesting for sale.”

“He likes to buy the Gold Reserve, just because he can,” he said quietly. “But we made it to sell it, so it’s all good. If you haven’t already, check with Ri’saad when his crew is camped outside Whiterun. They often have some interesting things for sale.”

She nodded again. “I have. Some of it was a bit too dear at the time, but I am definitely keeping him in mind. With the sheer number of bandits who keep volunteering all their gear for me to sell off…”
That boded well; it sounded like she could handle herself just fine out in the wilds.

She reached into a pocket and withdrew a handful of coins, then stacked them up on the counter; it was enough to pay for both meals. “I expect I’ll be back.”

“We’d love to have you.”

She got up and headed out, Erandur in tow. It was only after they were most certainly a fair distance away that Renato said, “We still don’t know her name.”

Sora wandered out of the kitchen when he heard the front door open and saw the as yet nameless incipient hero. She and Erandur took seats at the counter and she said, “Sweet this time, and … surprise us.”

“Sure.” He fetched out bottles for them, then disappeared into the kitchen again. He had made the usual batch of pasta salad earlier and figured it was worth a shot, but he also had a huge pot of beef stew keeping warm near the fire, so he made up ramekins of the salad and bowls of the stew, along with fresh bread and butter, and brought the tray out to serve from.

The woman eyed the salad, then shrugged and picked up her fork to taste it. She hummed thoughtfully, then set down her fork and tried the stew instead. That occasioned another hum. Then she looked up at him and nodded. “Also good.”

“Excellent.”

“The mead is a bit sweeter than I would want most of the time,” she added, “but it’s still good. I’ll have to try the dry next time.”

Lal brought out a fresh batch of nibbles and placed them on the narrow counter behind the serving one and promptly took a tart from it to eat. Before she bit into it she spotted Viper in his shadowy corner and said, “Kiwi and strawberry.”

Viper got up and floated over so he could grab three of them. “I don’t suppose…”

“Yes, I can make that salad. I only need some spinach.”

Viper nodded and floated away with his prize.

“Wait,” the Breton said. “Just how many of you are there?”

“Eh… Nine? No, ten, if you count the orphan we took in. There’s usually two or three people on duty aside from me. We almost never have anyone rowdy who has to be booted out the door, but it’s better to be prepared. We don’t get the same amount of business as a place like the Bannered Mare, because we’re outside town, but the farmers tend to stop in at the end of their day, and guards coming in off duty sometimes.”

“And anyone who specifically wants your mead,” she said.

He nodded. “We don’t sell it in town, or anywhere else, actually, though people stopping in have a tendency to buy a few bottles to take with them—or in the case of the Companions, quite a lot. We’ve had people come from as far as Solitude, and there’s one fellow in Windhelm who specifically comes here so he can buy up a bunch to resell in his—what was the place called?”

The woman paused, her mouth open slightly, then said, “I never did introduce myself before, did I. Yvara.”

Sora laughed softly. “Now I can stop calling you ‘that Breton woman’ in my head.”

Yvara snorted and flipped her hood back so that Sora could finally see her eyes clearly, and that she did, indeed, have dark blue hair. It wasn’t that he held a lack of belief in what Sheogorath had told him, just that seeing it with his own eyes was nice.

Viper floated back in with some spinach in a basket and entered the kitchen, presumably to wash it.

“Wow,” said Rio from his table. “You’re no longer unique, Lal. She has the same hair colour.”

Lal gave him a look. “I hardly think my hair colour is what makes me unique.”

“You know what I mean!” he protested.

“And the fact that Lorenzo has green hair didn’t already muck up this uniqueness?” she said.

Rio pouted.

“I don’t think you’re going to win this one, Rio,” he said, then looked back at Yvara. “Had any fun adventures lately?”

She stared for a moment. “Eh, I am presently tracking down a necklace of some legend. I figured why not? I’m curious to see what’s so special about the thing.”

“As good a reason as any.”

His intuition had been prickling for the last hour, so Sora signaled to Viper, who floated over.

“Something is about to happen. No idea what, of course. Keep a sharp eye out on anyone who comes in, please. If I sense them, I’ll point you right at them.”

Viper nodded and floated back to his corner.

A short time later he looked up sharply as his intuition spiked; the door opened and a Dunmer lady walked in. She was dressed in clothing typically worn by traveling merchants, but that meant little. She picked a table mid-way down the room, so Renato went over to speak with her.

Sora looked at Viper and made a vague nod in her direction, and Viper reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear, a way of saying, “Tagged.”

Renato drifted over with a smirk. “I just love it when people come in and have no clue what to make of the menu, but aren’t willing to outright say it and risk looking stupid,” he said quietly. “Middling mead and some stew.”

Sora grabbed out the right bottle and handed it over, disappeared into the kitchen long enough to make up the order, then returned and handed the tray over to his lover. The “merchant” in question handed over the coin for her meal, then tucked in, her gaze casually sweeping around the room.

She made no waves; she simply ate her meal quietly, drank her mead, and then drifted off a short time later.
That night during close Viper said, “She lurked around the exterior for a while, scoping the property out. Didn’t find the hives or any of that, though she did peek into the barn.”

“She a thief?” he asked. “We did get rid of that Shadowmark, but…”

Viper shook his head. “No, I was able to catch a few stray thoughts from her. She’s here to fill a contract, so that means Dark Brotherhood most likely. I can’t imagine someone contacted the Thieves Guild to steal something we have, but I could be wrong.”

“Really,” Renato drawled. “Think she has any idea who it was posted by?”

Viper shrugged. “When we take her out I can check, or Kiri can mind-control her into telling us what she knows. She may not, but if she is Dark Brotherhood, that gives us a reason to give a damn. They never really bothered us in Cyrodiil, but considering how badly things went there, this bunch may operate on a different set of rules.”

“They may not even have the Night Mother here,” Lal said. “We have no idea what happened to her after Bravil had that amusing little skooma war and her crypt was raided.”

“Any idea when she plans to act?”

Viper shrugged again. “She seemed to be taking her time assessing the situation, which means she’s either newish, or meticulous. Either way, I don’t expect an attack tonight, but she might prove that thought wrong. We need to be on guard after lights out.”

“All right. Kiri, Viper, do a check of all methods of entry and block most of them with the usual illusions. If she’s going to infiltrate, let’s limit her and make our job easier. We can split the watch so that everyone has a chance to get some sleep. Hide Lucia’s room entirely and make sure she doesn’t wake up in the middle of the night. The last thing I want is a traumatized child screaming in horror.”

Nothing happened for several days, but then he got that prickly sensation up his spine again and twitched a finger at Kiri. “I think it’s tonight,” he whispered. “Warn the others, please.”

They were waiting when the Dunmer soundlessly sneaked in through an opening on the first floor. It was screened to help keep insects out, but removing it was a simple enough matter, which she did. She was also slender enough to fit through, making it a nice way to infiltrate, assuming you had the means to hang off the roof in order to do any of it. Sora gave her credit for her obvious skills and technical achievements, but that only went so far.

Kiri had her under his control a second after she hit the floor with nary a whisper of sound. She mechanically walked over to the nearest chair and took a seat, then stared straight ahead.

“Who sent you?” Sora asked.

“Astrid, Mistress of the Dark Brotherhood sanctuary near Falkreath.”

“Who are you here to kill?”

“The proprietor, a Breton who goes by the name Sora. If I felt like taking out the others who reside here, that’s all to the good and worth a bonus.”

He frowned. “Who put out the contract?”

“Maven Black-Briar.”
“Why?”

“I do not know, but I can assume it has to do with the competition for her business.”

Sora looked at his family to see if they had any questions.

“Tell us about who else resides at the sanctuary near Falkreath,” Kiri said.

“Astrid is our leader. Arnbjorn, myself, Festus, Babette, Nazir, and Veezara.”

“Anything special about any of these people?”

“Arnbjorn is Astrid’s husband and a werewolf. Babette is a child vampire. Veezara is a Shadowscale, one of the last.”

“What about the Night Mother?” Rio asked.

“We don’t know where she is, nor does Astrid follow the old ways.”

When no one else spoke up Sora said, “You do realize you’re going to die, right?”

“Yes. But I’ve always known how I would die.”

“And when?”

“No.”

“You have your family and I have mine. You came here, knowing you could die. We’ll be kind in how we do it, as you were only following orders, but let’s see if you were right, then,” he said, then extended his web into her chest and depressed her system so much that she dropped into unconsciousness and then death. After the last signs of life left her he said, “Let’s at least give her something approaching a decent burial.”

“I can always go bury her in the ash on Solstheim,” Val said, “but the most practical method would be to incinerate her so her body couldn’t be raised by any necromancers who stumbled over it.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Lorenzo said. “And as a nod to her belief system, I won’t even add her ashes to the compost.”

“All right. Discussion?”

“Well,” Lal said slowly, “I don’t think this is cause to storm the Dark Brotherhood. Maven, on the other hand…”

Renato nodded. “Yeah. She sent an assassin after us. I think we should repay that. She has three family members alive in Riften.”

“The granddaughter is slightly estranged,” Shi said, “because she prefers alchemy over the family business. Maven has threatened to cut her off. Her son Hemming is a willing accomplice in her schemes. The grandson, Sibbi, is in jail right now, for killing a man. He’s supposed to be in there well into next year.”

“Killing the granddaughter would be pointless,” he said. “Let’s start with the one in jail. Volunteers?”

“He’s said to be a womanizer, if that helps,” Shi offered. “The man he killed was the brother of his
fiancé, and he was cheating on her with another woman.”

“Oh, really?” Lal said. “Can I be the one to go?”

“I don’t see why not,” he said, gazing around to see if anyone else was keen to go. “All right. Get that taken care of. We’ll just have to see if Maven has enough sense to connect the dots or not. If she doesn’t, I’m sure Hemming won’t mind being object lesson number two.”

“Job’s done,” Lal said at breakfast a few days later. “Sibbi—may the poisonous, entitled, womanizing snake rest in discord—is dead. I managed to catch him just as he was having some mead, so when I froze all the fluids, it made for an interesting corpse.”

“Did you stick around to see the reaction of the guards?” Rio asked with a smile.

“They were appropriately baffled considering that he wasn’t covered in frost as if a mage had taken him out. I can only imagine how Maven took the news, but we can find that out the next time someone makes the rounds.”

“It’s almost that time anyway,” he said, “so we should know soon enough, assuming she lets anything slip where we’re in a position to hear it.”

Yvara came through the door without her usual companion, causing Sora’s brow to go up. She took a seat at the counter and sighed before saying, “Middling mead, please.”

He stepped back so he could get the right bottle and hand it over. “You look … tired. It’s been a while, too.”

“Oh, well, I do like to wander,” she said, yanking the cork out and taking a sip. “We had a bit of a thing up at the College.”

“Oh? Do tell,” he said, leaning forward so he could rest his elbows on the counter. “Because the most interesting thing that’s happened around here recently was the Dark Brotherhood trying to assassinate us all.”

She blinked at him. “What?”

Sora nodded. “Only thing we can figure is that Maven Black-Briar is hacked off at the competition, so she made a contract. But assassins have to be really, exceptionally good to get past us.”

Yvara eyed him for a moment. “I heard a lot of commotion when I was just in Riften. Seems Sibbi Black-Briar met an unfortunate end in jail. Of course, I found it humorous when local gossip said he was drinking mead at the time.”

Sora smirked. “Yeah, almost ironic in a way. The only other thing that might be comparable would be him choking on one of those honey-nut treats people seem to be so fond of. But really, you look done in.”

“I’ve had a few Dark Brotherhood assassins come after me,” she said, “but they were all … pathetic.” She shook her head as Kiri slid into the next seat over. “I was almost embarrassed by their behavior. What kind of an assassin comes after you in broad daylight with a war cry on their lips?”
“You must have gotten someone new, then, because the one we got took the time to scope the place out, and took a couple of days to actually act,” Kiri said.

Yvara nodded. “I still have no idea why one was sent after me. As to the College, well…” Her voice dropped a bit as she said, “The Thalmor ‘Advisor’ there went completely mad. We had found this strange artifact during an excavation at Saarthal. It was … mesmerizing. I could tear my eyes away from it, but other people were just fascinated.”

“The Thalmor wanted it for the power?” Sora said.

“Yep. He managed to kill off the Arch-Mage and had everyone locked out of the Hall of the Elements.”

Viper appeared in the seat to the other side of Yvara and said, “And you ended up being a big damn hero, right?”

Yvara looked his way. “Why would you think that?”

“You don’t seem like the type to just walk away. So what happened?”

After a moment she said, “I was sent off to retrieve a special staff after the Arch-Mage was killed. That was a real trip. I ran into his ghost, I guess you could say. Found out why he was so damn detached all the time. He did something not so nice when he was younger, before he ever became Arch-Mage. But Erandur and I got through the place fine in the end, even if I still think Erandur has something of a death wish, and having to deal with any number of draugr—even the shouty types—ghosts, a troll… There was even a skeletal dragon in there that got up from its nap to attack along with a whole lot of skeletons. Got the staff. Had to take out a Thalmor agent on the way out, but after killing a dragon priest, he was—I nearly laughed in his face.”

“I assume things had gotten worse back at the College,” Sora said.

Yvara nodded. “Things tend to work out that way. The Arch-Mage’s second was dead, killed by our Thalmor friend, and the staff and students had been pushed all the way out to the bridge leading to the College. Some weird barrier. The staff I went after was able to drain it, so we could get in. We had a big fight inside the lecture hall. He started things off by paralyzing Erandur and Tolfdir.”

“But you, as a Breton, probably shrugged that right off,” Viper said.

“Yes. Our Thalmor friend is dead now, and the Psijic Order retrieved the artifact. I can only hope they don’t all go crazy, but something tells me it’ll be fine.”

“You know,” Sora said, “you could have asked us for help if you were going into such a dangerous situation.”

She blinked at him. “Why would that even occur to me? You people run a meadery. It’s only just now that I’ve learned you take assassins in stride.”

“True,” he replied. “Keep it in mind for the future, all right? All of us are practically immune to hostile magic, and we are more than skilled in taking down opponents.”

“But not Sora,” Viper said. “You can’t take him with you.”

Sora scowled.

“I don’t mean that he’s not capable,” Viper said quickly, “just that we don’t like it when he’s off
adventuring and doesn’t have a few of us along, that’s all. He’s the head of this family.”

“And the only one who can cook worth a damn,” Renato said with a faint grin.

“Speaking of cooking,” he said, “are you in the mood for food at all? I made some of that salad Viper absolutely adores, so you could try that.”

Yvara glanced at Viper, who had a hungry look on his face, then said, “Sure, why not. So far everything I’ve tried has been great, even if I’m not sure what half of it is.”

Sora nodded. “And yes, Viper, I’ll get you some, too.” He was back a couple of minutes later with the food and set it in front of them, then moved off down the counter to see what Brenuin wanted. By the time he got back Yvara had demolished her salad and was staring into her bowl with a sad look. He eyed her in amusement, mainly because Viper had the exact same expression on his face—his version of it, anyway.

“So who took over as Arch-Mage?” he asked.

“Oh, um… Yeah, that would be me,” she said, acting embarrassed. “The, uh, spokesperson for the Psijics who showed up unilaterally tapped me for the spot. Tolfdir seemed to think it was a great idea, despite me not having mastered even one school of magic yet. I talked to the staff and they’ll be spreading the workload around for now. As I pointed out, I can’t get better if I’m stuck in a tower all day doing paperwork. They can teach me about all that when I stop in for visits. Eventually I’ll learn what I need to know on both fronts.”

He nodded. “Judging by your accent I’m going to say you came from High Rock, and probably not with becoming Arch-Mage in mind.”

“Just decided to become a mage,” Yvara replied. “This was most certainly unexpected. Still, these guys are way better than what I’ve heard about the Synod and the College of Whispers.”

Sora laughed softly. “Well, the Mages Guild was dissolved not long after the Oblivion Crisis. Idiot non-mages decided they were part of the problem, because magic was involved in opening the gates. The two groups that sprung up are more interested in gaining favor with the Elder Council than they are in doing anything of real worth. Why people get so weird about magic I don’t know. There are just as many or more bandits out there, and they tend to use weapons.”

Yvara rolled her eyes. “I ran into a member of the Synod. He sounded like a snotty bastard who’d been driven crazy by being trapped by the Falmer and all his buddies being killed off. Pretty easy to flatter into giving me the information I wanted, though. All right, well, I want to get some rest, so I’ll be off.”

She stared to reach into her pouch for coin and Sora stopped her. “It’s on the house this time. You looked like you needed it.”

He noticed, as she departed, that Viper’s gaze lingered on her retreating form. Maybe his Mist had a crush? If so, it’d be the first time Viper had ever shown interest in someone.

Two weeks later Yvara returned, this time with a companion, and it wasn’t Erandur. Sora smiled as she took a seat and flipped her hood back, nodded at her friend, who had eyes very similar to Yvara’s, and said, “What’ll it be?”

“I figured since we were headed to the College I’d pick up some mead to take with me.”
“The usual?”

“Yep. A half dozen should be good.”

He stepped back and started snagging bottles to place on the counter, then swept the coin she stacked up into the coin box.

“I don’t suppose…” she said.

His brow went up. “Try me.”

“Do you know anything about Moth Priests?”

“Yes. I’ve met more than a few in my time. They’re usually excellent fighters. They’ve been on the hunt for Elder Scrolls ever since every last one of them up and vanished from the White Gold Tower right around the time the Great War ended. There was one who passed through here a few days back. He said was headed for Dragon Bridge after he had a chance to do some research at the College, so I would still check there first. Up to you. I expect you can run pretty fast.”

She wrinkled her nose at him and started stowing the bottles away.

“And if you remember, bring those bottles back. I can sterilize and reuse them. If not, it’s no big deal.”

Yvara nodded. “If I remember, sure. But we should get going. Maybe we can overtake the fellow.”

He was told, after they left, by Viper, who had been unobtrusively listening, that the unknown female seemed to think Sora was a lot more dangerous than he looked. He wondered just how old she was, and what Yvara had gotten mixed up in this time.

The next time Yvara arrived was two weeks later. Sora’s brow went up in surprise when he saw a spider-legged chest click in behind her and the unnamed vampire. “You have got to explain that thing,” he said in lieu of a greeting.

Yvara smirked and took a seat. “I found it in a place called Blackreach, in an old Dwemer building. Some alchemist made it, but died down there to Falmer arrows. He was doing research on crimson nirnroot, which apparently only grows down there.”

“Was he, by any chance, an Altmer by the name of Sinderion? Had a workshop in the cellar of the West Weald Inn in Skingrad where he used to research regular nirnroot.”

“You some kind of a history buff?” the vampire asked.

“I’m not much of a reader, but things have a tendency to stick in your mind when you’ve lived it,” he replied, then ignored her in favor of Yvara, who blinked at him, then reached into the pack she had and produced six empty bottles to hand over.

They went into a bin for those. “Thank you. I’m glad you remembered.”

“Lived it?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “I am…”

“You were almost twenty-seven when it happened, tesoro,” Renato said, “so we’re approaching
three hundred years old.”

Yvara took a long look around the room, then said, “You don’t look like vampires.”

He shook his head. “Something a hell of lot weirder. It’s a very long story, and if we become good enough friends, I’ll tell you. Maybe over some of that salad.” He almost laughed when her expression went hungry.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said. “Especially considering one of you has that … whatever you called it as a pet.”

“Octopus. Most of us have one. Cashew?”

His squirrel popped out of his hair and chittered a greeting, then spit a flower out onto the counter.

Yvara blinked stupidly. “And I thought my life couldn’t get any stranger after meeting Sheogorath,” she muttered.

“Really? You, too, huh? Did he give you any gifts?”

“Well, yes, but… I ended up inside the mind of the deceased Pelagius III, and after a very bizarre afternoon, walked away with a new set of poncy clothing I’ll never wear but instead stuck on an armor stand, and the Wabbajack.”

“I’m starting to think he hands those things out like party favors,” Kiri said as he practically materialized in place off to the side.

“There’s this weird thing where every time one of the guards cracks that snide joke about sweet rolls, this bolt of pink lightning comes down and transforms the guard into one. I’ve built up something of a collection of them in my house. And I’ll never eat another again.”

Sora snickered.

The vampire shifted impatiently and Yvara glanced over before saying, “You told me if I ever needed backup, you could help.”

“Yes. What kind of a fight are you going to get into this time? I can spare five people.”

Yvara bit her lip, flashing some fang. “A group of vampires who want to permanently blot out the sun.”

“Kiri, will you get everyone in here, and make sure Lucia is busy with the animals so she doesn’t walk into this conversation?”

“On it, brother.” Kiri drifted outside while twitching his fingers. He was back before the stragglers arrived, but once Lal and Rio showed up Sora got things started.

“I want five volunteers to go help take out a nest of presumably ancient and powerful vampires to aid our friend here.”

Val started jumping up and down. “Me! I’m going!”

Kiri nodded. “I’ll go. Unless Viper is interested.”

“Why not both of you?” Yvara asked curiously.
“Because Viper and Kiri are our illusionists, and we like to have one of them here for when a more subtle, peaceful solution is needed for something,” Sora said.

“Weakness to fire, right?” Renato said.

Yvara nodded. “Generally so, yes. But a resistance to frost.”

“I’ll go.”

Lal and Rio both shook their heads. “Still, with us here, we can pacify people. It should be fine if both Kiri and Viper want to go.”

Sora nodded. “A fair point.”

“I will go,” Shi said.

“All right. How far is it?” he asked Yvara.

“It’s northwest of Solitude, an island out on the water.”

“We can all water-walk, so it’s not like we’d have to cram into a rowboat,” Renato said.

“All right. I’ll start making up some supplies,” he said. “You’re going to be gone for at least a few days, if not a week, so…”

“I’ll give you a hand, tesoro.”

“You guys won’t be eating very well, but that can’t be helped. I can give you stuff that you can heat over a fire without too much trouble.”

“What about the tent?” Kiri asked.

“Yes. But take some of the fencing with you. What you have for the horses is fine on its own, and they’re hardy enough to stand the cold that far north while you guys are beating the stuffing out a bunch of power-hungry morons. I’d want them dead for that ludicrous plan alone. Anyone who comes up with a plan that stupid is unlikely to be someone you can reason with.”

Yvara snorted and swiftly covered her mouth as her companion’s forehead wrinkled.

“I’m assuming you two normally dine on the bandits stupid enough to threaten you?” he asked.

Yvara nodded. “And there’s plenty of those out there. What I don’t drink immediately I drain to make into blood potions, so I always have sustenance handy. Luggage is really handy for that. He’s a lot bigger on the inside than he seems.”

“Well, that pasta salad is cold, and that’s good for up to a week so long as its kept chilled. I have some bread I baked this morning. Various sweets. I also have a stew I started that should be ready shortly. It’ll take a little while for it to cool down enough to put in containers, but…” He eyed the spider-chest. “That can keep up with a horse?”

“Or me sprinting full out, yes. And I can summon it.”

“I see. Well—no, you can store all of that in the tent. That way the horses won’t be burdened. All right, I’ll get started. You two are free to come into the kitchen if you want.”

“I’ll keep watch out here with Lal and Rio,” Kiri said.
“Thank you, Aniki.”

In the kitchen he swiftly started gathering up various boxes to put things in and began to load them up with his lover’s help. Because Val was going he included a whole cheesecake he had planned to sell, and tucked a jar of raspberry sauce in with it. As soon as that was done he grabbed things for the pasta salad and set some water to boil after salting it and dashing in some oil as Renato picked up a knife and sharpened it in preparation for cutting vegetables.

“So the idea of storming a vampire castle is just…” Yvara’s brow went up questioningly.

“I’ve killed more than a few myself, as have my family. It’s no big deal. And like I said, we’re more or less immune to hostile magic. If one of them does manage an infection, there’s always potions for that, or a shrine. We’ve handled vampires, headless zombies, necromancers, bandits—you name it, we’ve killed it, for the most part. We even got our hands on an Elder Scroll once, but that was to help someone break a curse.”

He tossed a fair amount of spiral pasta into the boiling water and gave it a stir, then shifted so he could put together the dressing. “We’re a bit jaded, as a result, but through it all, we’ve continued to sell mead. Maybe after this fight we can sit down and I’ll explain more fully.”

“He … told me,” Yvara said slowly, “that you would be a good resource.”

Sora looked up with a smirk. “But you weren’t sure what to believe, because Sheogorath is nuttier than a squirrel?”

Cashew chittered in annoyance at the comment and thwapped him with his tail.

“I was sent on a quest by him once. He ‘asked’ me to make a prophecy come true at a town in Cyrodiil. It wasn’t something I felt comfortable refusing, but overall it was amusing, despite having to end the lives of some sheep.”

“People, or animals?” the vampire asked dryly.

“Animals,” he replied. “Did you try the mead?”

The woman frowned and nodded. “Yes.”

“Sheogorath suggested I make some with copper in it, to see if it would taste like blood, but Lorenzo pointed out that copper is pretty toxic in quantity, so I didn’t bother. The thing with Sheogorath is, he likes to remind you that he’s around. It’s not necessarily all that often, but from the sound of it, you get reminded a lot.”

Yvara nodded. “And nobody ever seems to notice it happening. It’s bizarre.”

“Be aware,” he said, “that you may be wandering around nowhere in particular, and some crazed-looking person may run up to you and beg you to use the Wabbajack on them. They don’t care if they get turned into a mudcrab, so long as they feel Sheogorath’s influence. As to how they know you have it?” He shrugged, then set the dressing aside to work on crumbling some goat cheese.

Renato scraped a board of cucumber into the dressing bowl and moved on to an orange pepper. “He’s even visited. Nothing like having a god pop up at your residence to startle the hell out of a person.”

“I didn’t think they could physically visit,” the vampire said a bit skeptically.
“Oh, they can,” Yvara said, looking at her companion. “I ran into a disguised Sanguine at a tavern. He tried to lure me into a drinking contest.”

“I think a physical manifestation comes with certain rules considering what Martin Septim did,” he said as he chucked the cheese into the bowl, then turned so he could take the pasta off the fire and run cold water over it to stop it from cooking further. “Mehrunes Dagon can’t stomp back in to cause direct trouble, but a mostly harmless night of debauchery? Not so disruptive. I guess Akatosh has a sense of humor.”

Yvara tilted her head to the side in consideration. “You were there? During the Oblivion Crisis.”

He nodded. “Right in the middle of it. You couldn’t walk very far, it seemed like, without a damn gate opening up and daedra spewing out of it. There was one place I remember, two gates opened, so we split up to take care of them. The one I took had a dead horse outside and another one not far in. That upset me.”

“We woke up one morning, got ready to go on a trip, walked outside the castle, and Sora suddenly looked to the right,” Renato said. “There was that damn glow. Raced up the steps to the curtain wall and sure enough, a gate had opened overnight, up the hill. But they were pretty simple to close, especially if you knew how to be unseen, or paralyzed everything in your way. Daedra reform a bit after you ‘kill’ them, so it was faster to just avoid them entirely.” He tossed the last of the vegetables into the bowl and put his things into the second sink.

“How were they closed?” the vampire asked.

Sora eyed her for a moment, wondering why she wouldn’t know if she was even close to his age, then said, “Each gate was powered or held open—whatever you want to call it—by a sigil stone. Remove that from its cradle and the whole thing would collapse. Thankfully, any non-daedra would get shoved back to where they’d entered. We ended up with quite the collection. They could be used in enchanting. Or, you know, garden decorations.”

He gave the pasta a good few shakes and tipped it into the bowl, then tossed everything. Renato fetched out a container and slid it over, then went to get containers for the stew.

Val wandered in with the tent in his hands. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll set this up so we can get it loaded.”

The vampire eyed the thing skeptically.

Val just grinned at her. “You’ll see. Hey, what’s your name? I’m Val.”

The woman stared at him, then said, “Serana.”

“Cool! Sora, I’ll just leave this here by the door for now. No sense setting it up early.”

“All right. Might as well pack, then.” After Val dashed away he said, “It’ll be a short while before the stew is ready, but once we can get the tent loaded, you’re good to go.”

His family rolled in a week later looking both weary and amused. He got mead out from under the counter and set them up. “Have fun?” he asked, taking a moment to check them over.

Renato nodded. “It was a blast. Yvara and Serana should be over in a bit. She’s living in that house on the other side of Pelagia’s farm, near the watchtower.”
“Huh. Maybe I should make that salad…”

Viper gave him one of those looks and jumped back up to go outside. Sora could only presume he was gathering ingredients.

“Mission accomplished, though.”

“Of course,” Renato said, scowling at him. “And yes, we all chugged Cure Disease potions just in case. It’s obviously possible to be something other than a fluff-brained, blood-starved wreck, but I’d rather not find out personally.”

“I would hate for you to lose those gorgeous black eyes,” he said with a faint smile.

“I hope they get here soon,” Val said impatiently.

“You could start unloading the tent,” he suggested. “That would keep you occupied for a little while.”

Val nodded and jumped back up, taking his mead with him.

Sora served a few customers, one of whom was Nazeem, holding an empty court in the corner and drinking Gold Reserve. Nazeem sneered when the door opened and Yvara walked in with Serana. If the man was worth killing he would consider it, but farmers were actually important, and trash talk could be ignored up to a point.

Val dashed back in a minute later with the folded tent and said, “I’ll unload it after.”

“I’ll just get our lovely customers to shuffle off early,” Kiri murmured, then proceeded to do exactly that.

“Right,” he said, getting out mead for the two ladies. “So, what happened?”

Renato said, “We hoofed it to Solitude and looped around the coast to get to the jetty for the castle in question, then boated or water-walked our way across. The vampires there weren’t too pleased to see us, made their gargoyle statues come to life—they have some nice stuff on them, by the way—and we fought our way in, shredded the vampires inside—they lived like pigs, it was disgusting—and while we kept an eye on the place in case any more showed up, Yvara and Serana took care of the big bad.”

“You use Chaos Shot?”

“Yep. Worked like a charm. The smell was awful, though.”

He wrinkled his nose at the thought, then said, when Viper came back inside, “Let’s move to the kitchen so I can make that salad.”

He was making the vinaigrette when Yvara said, “So what’s the story behind your longevity if you aren’t vampires?”

“Do you believe in alternate dimensions? Or other worlds?”

“…Sort of,” she said. “There’s a lot of theories about what Nirn really is, and the planes of Oblivion, the Void … if those moons up there are really parts of Lorkhan’s body … stuff like that. I guess it wouldn’t be too far of a stretch for there to be entirely separate places, but…”

“We were born on a planet called Earth. I was transported from my world to a duplicate due to an
accident while sparring with an enemy turned friend who happened to be capable of seeing sideways into alternate versions of our universe. Lost a lot of memories because of a head wound I got when I landed. Met my family. I did eventually regain my memories. The thing is, we were cursed.”

“With immortality?”

He shook his head. “No. We were cursed into the form of toddlers and didn’t age. But fast forward a good thirty years. We were still cursed, expecting to die that way. I came upstairs to the bar one morning to see a strange man. White hair, very odd eyes, manic expression, and a red and purple outfit. Had a cane.”

“Sheogorath?” Yvara murmured.

“Yeah. He made us an offer. He would shift the curse onto other people if we agreed to come to his world in his dimension. Like I said, we expected to die in those cursed forms, or end up as something horrifying, a kind of undead, with no power except what we leached off the leader. At any rate, we discussed it, made a decision, and packed up. Sheogorath came back a week later and transported us through the Void and Oblivion and we found ourselves in Cyrodiil on the day the emperor was assassinated, back in our proper bodies.”

“Well, you got to see it happen. The rest of us were chilling out next to an Ayleid ruin after taking out some bandits,” Renato said, “one of whom happened to be Khajiit, not that we had any clue what we were looking at, considering there are only ‘human’ races on Earth.”

“Wait a minute,” Yvara said. “I’m not exactly a history buff, but I have read about the Oblivion Crisis. It started right after he died. The book I read said he escaped the White Gold Tower through the prison area, through one of cells, into the sewers under the city.”

“Yes, that happened.”

“The prisoner the book mentioned…”

“Yes, that was me.”

Yvara scrunched up her face and took a long swig of her mead. “You’re the Champion of Cyrodiil?”

“And the Hero of Kvatch, the Savior of Bruma, the killer of Mankar Camoran, mighty slayer of mudcrabs, and the person who did a whole hell of a lot to ensure that Martin Septim could defeat Mehrunes Dagon, even if it wasn’t by relighting the Dragonfires. And I can’t even do magic. None of us can.”

“Then how—” Serana stopped. “Is it some odd talent like Tiber Septim’s Shouts, but … not?”

He nodded. “There were people on our original world who could use—well. It’s a way of utilizing your life force to certain effect. But each person is different. We call them flames, but they don’t necessarily burn, and not everyone can even see them. Renato can heal people, for example. Lal and Rio can freeze a person, or duplicate the effects of a pacifying spell. Kiri and Viper are illusionists. Lorenzo can use lightning. Shi can disintegrate things.”

“And Val can do some very odd things,” Serana said. “I don’t think I have ever seen a spell which could duplicate some of the stuff I saw you do.”

Val grinned and nodded.

“But my brother taught me some interesting tricks, and I taught everyone else, which explains why
we can do things like walk on water without magic. Back in our world it was something of a secret. You do things people can’t explain and they start getting scared and try to jail or kill you, or they try to use you or experiment on you. In a world like this? Anyone can do magic if they put some effort in. Doesn’t mean we advertise those abilities, though.”

“If it weren’t for the fact that Sheogorath himself mentioned you, and having seen some of it with my own eyes,” Yvara said, “I would think you’re completely mad.”

He finished up the salad and started portioning it out into bowls—Val grabbed them one by one and passed them around, along with forks—and said, “Our patron is the Prince of Madness. We should not have retained our agelessness, but he either forgot that detail or deliberately let us keep that, maybe to have his own set of champions available. Either way, we’re as immortal as you two, without the need to drink blood or get a bit grumpy in the sun.” He looked at Renato. “Do we even still have anything from back then?”

Lorenzo snorted and said, “I do still have some functioning laptops in the lab.”

“Ah. In any case, in and around all of that going on, we inherited a castle after saving it from bandits, and set up a new Filigrana. A little illusion goes a long way in preventing people from asking questions about why you never seem to get any older.”

“You’ve spent hundreds of years simply running a bar?” Serana asked skeptically. “And you fight that well?”

He smiled at her. “No. We’ve learned another skill, but that’s a story for another day. We’re also assassins.”

Yvara tapped the table. “So that’s what that beggar in Solitude was hinting at. And come to think of it, the ones in Riften. And I’ve seen the one from Whiterun in here.”

“The Gray Fox used the beggars as information sources. He also protected them and made sure none of the guild thieves ever stole from them. I figured, why not use the same tactics?”

“And you’re not Dark Brotherhood?” Serana asked.

“Why would we be? The only god we’ve run across is Sheogorath. Wait, that’s not entirely true. I did a favor for Malacath in order to obtain an artifact for Martin. But we don’t worship Sithis or Mephala, despite all the webs you see around here. We tend to help people who actually need help, and not all of them have to pay, or even have the means to. It depends. One fellow I had help me clean up Filigrana that night as payment, then offered him a job taking care of the animals and some gardening work. He got room and board, money, and he was doing the same things he did before that someone ruined his life and he was forced to sell his farm.”

“They won’t even take contracts where the pay is too low,” Val said. “And they don’t seem to care about the why of things.”

“Huh,” Yvara said. “What can you do? You didn’t say.”

“My ability is that of harmony. Renato and Kiri are convinced that’s why people love my cooking and the mead. But when it comes to being an assassin? I use my flames in some inventive ways.”

They both looked confused, but chose not to question it further. Instead Yvara said, “I guess that means that Sheogorath cares about this world.”

“I presume so, though his rationale might be somewhat incomprehensible to us. I kind of figured that
it’s hard to have chaos that entertains him if none of us are here on a physical world. I don’t think all Daedric Lords are evil, and I don’t think we can necessarily ascribe human morality or emotion to them, though some of them I’d rather drop my dignity and run screaming in the other direction from.

“Maybe Sheogorath wanted someone who needed help, and hadn’t grown up with the same prejudices or indoctrination as the average mortal on Nirn, but would care enough to get the job done.” He shrugged. “And maybe he was in cahoots with Akatosh, because Uriel Septim himself told me he had seen my face in his dreams and was expecting me to be there, in that cell. Who was the big bad at the castle you had to take care of?”

Serana shifted and stabbed her fork into a strawberry, then said, “My father. He found an Elder Scroll a long time ago, figured out part of some prophecy in it, and … went mad. Turned out the whole thing was partly a hoax, though how it was accomplished I will probably never understand.”

“We ended up having to find three of things, and I had to read them.”

He looked at Yvara sharply. “You seem all right.”

She nodded. “Oddly enough, yes. But one fellow said that Elder Scrolls have minds of their own, and won’t be found unless they want to be. So maybe I was supposed to be involved. And how many people can say they’ve visited the afterlife. Or an afterlife. Did you know? People who are soul trapped go to a special place rather than something like Sovngarde or the Dreamsleeve?”

He suddenly felt a bit bad about Lorenzo’s enchanting experiments as he shook his head.

“There’s this place called the Soul Cairn. People who get soul trapped end up there. A lot of them are miserable, but some don’t even realize they’re dead. Or maybe it was just that one guy. It’s pretty creepy. I don’t even know if it’s possible for anyone there to end up in the Dreamsleeve and reincarnated later on.”

“Sounds almost like Purgatory,” Rio muttered.

Yvara shrugged, visibly not getting the reference. “I don’t understand what point there would be for the overlords of that place, the Ideal Masters, to keep so many souls around when all they do is nothing, but considering they like to trick people I don’t think I’ll be asking. There was a dragon in there they’d tricked. He taught me how to say his name. Said all I’d have to do is shout it when I was in Tamriel and he would come, but only for five minutes.”

“Sounds like a lifetime for someone who’s been trapped in a place like that,” he commented. “And over far too quickly.”

“Considering that the Soul Cairn is mostly desolate, always night, and usually with lightning flashing in the sky, I’d say so,” Yvara replied. “Still, I don’t understand how he expects me to call him out of there. It’s not like I have the lung capacity of a giant.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t seem like anything to worry about for now.”

“What curse was that Elder Scroll supposed to take care of?” Serana asked.

He had to stop and think about that for a moment considering it had been a week since they had last spoken. “The Gray Cowl of Nocturnal was cursed to essentially wipe out the identity of anyone who put it on. The person’s entire past was removed from history, people’s memories, the written word. Viper became curious about this odd man who kept showing up. We couldn’t figure out who he was, but we were fairly certain he was both connected to the Thieves Guild and under a curse, so we investigated more deeply.
“Turned out he was the current Gray Fox. The previous one had passed on the curse, and this one spent a decade trying to figure out how to break it. We got involved, mainly because we’d been cursed and it was only a Daedric Prince getting involved that helped us. True, we had repaid that help, but… A number of things were quietly appropriated, an Elder Scroll was made off with, and he used that to figure out what to do.

“Of course, there we are, delivering his wedding ring to his mystified and heartbroken spouse, and he pops up after seeing her still upset over his disappearance, proclaiming his name, and what happened to him.”

“It was kind of funny, actually,” Renato said. “She promptly told him she would never admit to his identity because of his ties to the Thieves Guild, so he renounced his life of crime forevermore—never mind that the blacksmith there was a fence and continued to be—and passed on the leadership of the guild.”

“To me,” Sora said sourly.

Yvara smirked. “I take it you didn’t stick with that.”

“Heck no. We gathered up something we had previously ‘borrowed’ from the Temple of the Ancestor Moths while avoiding all the retired priests there, and quietly returned it, then I left the cowl at a shrine to Nocturnal. Since we’d used disguises the entire time we were helping, no one could find us afterward, so it’s not like we had thieves pestering me to come be a guild master. We more or less ignored them after that point.”

“And the Elder Scroll?” Serana asked.

He shrugged. “No idea what happened to it. Maybe it returned to the library on its own, or wandered off somewhere else. They’re supposed to be fragments of creation, so I don’t have that much trouble believing they could have minds of their own, so to speak. It wasn’t where he used to spend time and it wasn’t in the Guild Master’s quarters, so… I’m just glad I was never expected to read it myself. Maybe having the favor of a god would protect you, but I wasn’t in any hurry to test it.”

“What do you mean by harmony?” Serana persisted.

“It can mean several things. Creating lasting bonds with other flame users, making other people feel what I want them to feel, or harmonizing my way through a door or wall.”

“But other aspects? You said none of you can do magic. What about alchemy and enchanting? Or using enchanted staves?”

“Because of certain inborn characteristics,” Lorenzo said, “we can enchant. We were classed as Breton when we arrived, so I can enchant things with magic resistance. The stones in Cyrodiil, which are different from the ones here, give you certain powers, which made it possible to do certain enchantments. But yes, we’re limited that way. Alchemy, though, any idiot can do, even if not necessarily well. From what I can tell the Nords here in Skyrim developed a different way of handling enchanting, probably because of when they developed the aversion to magic.”

“Huh.”

“As for staves? I don’t think any of us have tried,” Sora said. “But those use the enchantment and the charge from a soul stone, so … I guess we could? Maybe? The Wabbajack isn’t really a good metric to judge by.”

Yvara snorted. “I have this urge to take mine to Windhelm and use it on Ulfric, just to see what he’d
turn into.”
Shi wandered in with a parchment in his hand and went straight to Sora to show it to him.

“Interesting,” he muttered. “Especially given we have every reason to dislike that sort.”

“Is it all right with you if I go investigate?” Shi asked.

“Sure. Actually, I think I’d like to go, too.”

Shi arched a brow at him, then nodded. “Who else?”

“Let’s have a meeting. We can talk about it while we’re closing up tonight, or at breakfast.”

The parchment went in the coin box under the counter as a reminder and they went about their business. That night, while they were getting the place wiped down, Shi said, “A courier was delivering copies on his way by. I’d like to think this Silus person isn’t seeing much business considering this is a Nord country and Dragonborn would be dear to their hearts.”

“Maybe not the Empire itself these days,” Renato said, “but I take your point. I’m a little divided on the issue. On the one hand, ugly history shouldn’t just be swept under the carpet, but…”

“Depends on his angle,” Lorenzo said.

“So let’s take a trip,” Sora said. “Who wants to go aside from Shi?”
Kiri raised a finger.

“Me, of course,” Renato said.

“I expected that,” he said. “Business as usual here while we’re gone. Shouldn’t take long to assess the situation up there. Probably more time just getting there and back. After that we can talk about it, decide if there’s anything to do.”

“We’ll keep things running here,” Lal said.

He nodded. “I’ll make up the usual before we go. That way you’ll have plenty to serve.” He spent most of the next day making up stew and other things that would keep well, and they set out the following morning after getting the horses ready. Lucia insisted on helping saddle the beasts, despite being too short to be effective, but Sora just smiled indulgently.

The trip was fairly boring if the usual wildlife encounters weren’t included. Along the way they fought off bandits at Fort Dunstad and again at Fort Fellhammer. They probably looked like any other group of well-heeled and easily picked off travelers, and the bandits in residence who bothered to come out and engage quickly found the opposite to be true.

Red Road Pass had a giant and his mammoth, but they all ignored each other and the group passed by peacefully. Dawnstar itself was pretty bland for a hold capital. He would have expected strong stone walls, to help protect the place from the bandit infestations on the road if nothing else, and to break the icy grip of any wind, though being on the water as it was, some of that could simply not be helped.

They tied off their horses at the Windpeak Inn and went inside to warm up a little and rent rooms for the night. The proprietor, who introduced himself as Thoring, said, “What brings you up this way?”

“Curiosity, mainly,” he said. “We’ll probably check out Morthal next, maybe Solitude. Do you have rooms available for the four of us? We have bedrolls with us if only one room is open.”

“Ah, yes. I have two rooms, so if you double up… Ten septims each.”

Sora nodded and fetched out the gold to hand over and watched as Thoring pointed out where. He was annoyed that neither room had a door, so basic privacy would be nonexistent. But then, the inn at Helgen was not much better except for the rooms being on the first floor and not down off the actual tavern itself. “Thank you. If you have any mead, that’d go over well.”

Thoring fetched out four bottles and accepted the coin, then went back to doing the usual bartender things.

Sora handed out the substandard mead and said, “Might as well take a walk around.”

Outside they headed east, following the road, and passed the jarl’s house; outside were the usual guards.

“So there’s an inn, a mine, and an alchemist?” Renato said a few minutes later. “Wow. I would have expected more for a hold capital. People are way more rustic up here. Hm, what’s all that commotion?” he asked, gesturing toward a house at the end of the path, across from a ship in the small bay.

“Let’s go find out,” he replied, and wandered that way in time to overhear part of the conversation.

“Your ancestors wouldn’t want this, Silus!” the woman said.
“Bingo,” he murmured, eyeing the man in mild disbelief for the Mythic Dawn outfit he was wearing for all the world to see.

“Why should I hide from it? This is my family’s legacy!”

“Legacy?” Renato muttered.

“It’s the past! Dead oaths on dead lips. Let it stay there.”

“The museum is opening, Madena,” Silus said firmly.

She huffed in frustration, slapped her hands against her thighs, and stalked off.

“And here comes my first visitors,” Silus said, spotting them. “The Museum of the Mythic Dawn is open, friends!”

Sora walked over and said, “Museum?”

“Yes. My collection of artifacts from a group that toppled an empire,” Silus said almost proudly.

He nodded thoughtfully as Renato said, “What was that argument about?”

Silus shook his head dismissively. “Never mind that. Madena is a good woman, but I have my own reasons for opening this museum, and I’m not changing my mind. The collection of artifacts I have—their importance to history cannot be forgotten. Why don’t you come in? You can browse the displays, and we can talk. I have a job you look perfect for."

‘A job?’ he thought suspiciously. “We’ll come look, sure.”

Silus led the way inside and made a sweeping gesture at the display cases in his house. “Feel free to look around. Talk to me when you’re ready to discuss that job I mentioned.”

‘I rather think not, given the subject at hand,’ he thought, but moved over to one of the cases.

“The tapestries hung here and outside were found in hideouts where members of the Mythic Dawn would meet and plot. The cult’s greatest accomplishment was the assassination of the Septim Dynasty and the opening of the Oblivion Gates.”

‘Somewhat inaccurate, considering that Martin heroically sacrificed his life to close off all the gates and prevent more from being opened, rather than be assassinated.’

“Those robes were worn during the Mythic Dawn’s secret meetings,” Silus continued, “where they plotted to bring the Daedra Mehrunes Dagon into Tamriel. Each bolt of yarn used to make the robe was coloured with a dye made from sacrificial blood.”

‘No opinion on that, since I didn’t stop to try to scent out blood around the general unwashed smell of those garments I had to dress up in when I infiltrated.’ He moved forward and looked into the case on the left.

“That burned paper is all that remains of the fabled Mysterium Xarxes, the blasphemous book written by Mehrunes Dagon himself. It’s said that Mankar Camoran used the book to open a portal to a Paradise where all his followers would live forever.”

‘Interesting how the truth about that didn’t get around, but I suppose I was a bit too busy at the time to make waves. His remaining followers most likely wouldn’t have believed me anyway.’ The next case over held four books with familiar pressed-in designs on the covers. He still had two sets of
them in his personal library, though they were probably still in a box rather than out on a shelf.

“The commentaries on the Mysterium Xarxes were written by the Mythic Dawn cult leader, Mankar Camoran.”

‘Why do you have the cases in this order if you wait until now to explain who Camoran was?’ he wondered.

“He promised a paradise awaited his followers when they died, that they would be reborn by Mehrunes Dagon’s side.”

‘I guess you could say that, but only the mentally weak would have appreciated anything other than the gorgeous setting.’

When he got to the final one Silus said, “Ah, yes. That scabbard. Notice the insignia? An Oblivion Gate. A key symbol of Mehrunes Dagon, the patron Daedra of the Mythic Dawn.”

‘This guys needs a ton of work when it comes to presentation. I’ve seen grade school children do better,’ he thought, then looked at Silus directly.

“Did you have any questions about the museum, or would you rather talk business?”

“Why did you open this museum?” Shi asked. “It’s a sore point.”

Silus shrugged lightly and said, “It’s no secret that my family were once members of the Mythic Dawn. One of my forefathers was even chosen to assassinate Uriel Septim himself. We hid from our past for years, became tradesmen, people of coin and influence. But I realized that the Mythic Dawn’s importance—our importance—to history cannot be denied. I’ll see everyone in Tamriel remember that for a moment, we held the fate of the world in our hands, for good or ill.”

“That insignia you pointed out is simply the letter O in the Daedric script,” Shi said. “The gates were in that shape, yes, but it’s still just a letter.”

“Really?” Silus drawled, looking unimpressed.

“So where’s Mehrunes’ Razor?” Renato asked, glancing at the scabbard.

“Ah, a little history first,” Silus said. “After the Oblivion Crisis, a number of groups cropped up dedicated to wiping out the remnants of the Mythic Dawn. One of these groups found Mehrunes’ Razor, the artifact of Dagon. They split it into three fragments and pledged to keep them apart forever. That was almost one hundred fifty years ago, and the pieces are still being kept by the descendants of that group. And they’re right here, in Skyrim.”

“And you want the pieces, right?” Kiri guessed.

“Yes. The Razor is Mehrunes Dagon’s personal artifact. It has always heralded bloody change and carnage. It’s held many names: Dagger of Final Wounds; Bane of the Righteous; the Kingslayer. The Mythic Dawn worshiped Dagon as a god. Having his Razor would be invaluable to my collection.”

“I think we’ve seen enough,” Sora said quietly. “Certainly something to think about.”

Silus seemed discomfited by the casual dismissal of his passion and said, “Well, if you reconsider that job I mentioned…”
Sora nodded and headed for the door. Back at the inn they chose a room to crowd into and Kiri casually tossed up a barrier to make people stay away.

“I don’t like this,” Sora said. “And why are people so fucking stupid? If there are pieces sitting around, why couldn’t they send them to different countries, or dump them into the ocean? It’s like these people don’t have even a passing acquaintance with common sense at times.”

Renato snickered. “I don’t like it, either. He doesn’t seem the sort to go after the pieces personally, which is one thing, but he’s glorifying what happened. Instead of trying for an unbiased account of the time, with visual aids, he’s reveling in it.”

“I do not like that he may find someone to convince,” Shi said.

“All right, how about this?” Kiri said. “I go in there and get the information out of him. He can keep his silly little banners, and even that outfit—well, both, since he was prancing around like an idiot wearing a set—but the books, that scrap of the Mysterium Xarxes, and the scabbard? We take them, dispose of them, and I tinker with his mind to make him think all of it’s still there.”

“And anyone who does stop by ends up thinking he’s mad,” Sora said.

“Precisely. Once we’ve disposed of the stuff he has, some of us can go get one of the other pieces—or all of them—and dump it in the ocean, or Shi can disintegrate just the right size opening in the side of mountain for a piece. Whatever works, since I don’t think we can truly destroy pieces of a Daedric Lord’s artifact. Or we do it for all of them, and not rely on people to guard any of them.”

Sora thought about it and nodded. “All right. Here’s what we’ll do. Kiri, take care of Silus tonight. Position other books in that case if necessary to aid the illusion in his mind, but yes, take that scrap and the scabbard. If you notice anything that could substitute for those, great, use them. We will…

“Whoever goes next to Solstheim for pearls could possibly dump at least one part of this while on the ship. I know that won’t destroy whatever it is, but it will be a hell of a lot harder for someone to find. As for the rest, we’ll discuss that once we get home, how to proceed. And for the moment, we make like any other travelers.”

Everyone nodded and piled out into the common room and grabbed seats at a table. When no one came over Shi sighed quietly and got back up to go speak with the proprietor. He was back a short time later with some venison steaks with assorted vegetables.

“Not very friendly,” Renato muttered.

“I don’t like that we’re all facing the damn wall and can only sit two to a table,” he muttered back, then sliced into his meal. He felt Kiri leaving the inn after they’d gone to bed and nodded to himself, then rolled onto his side and tried to doze while his brother was off being stealthy and sneaky. The next morning they untied the horses and rode away from town, back to Filigrana.

“So here’s the present situation,” Kiri said. “The scrap is currently playing lining between layers of a bird’s nest we found on the way. I have no idea if that will finish the thing off or not, but we can hope. The scabbard is currently affixed to the underside of the bridge leading north of here and under illusion until we figure out what to do with it.”

“Where are they?” Sora asked.

“He said the pommel was at Dead Crone Rock, southwest of Markarth, which means the Forsworn,
briarhearts, and hagravens. The blade pieces are at Cracked Tusk Keep, due west of Falkreath. He claims there are orcs and bandits there. The final piece, the hilt, is supposed to be in Morthal, with a fellow by the name of Jorgen—he runs the mill there.”

“We can put one piece in Bleak Falls Barrow,” Rio said. “All we have to do is get up high enough to attach it to the stone. No one would ever see it and unless they were non-Nord persons interested in combing over everything there so they could write down every detail of the place…”

Sora nodded. “That sounds like an interesting idea. And even if bandits have re-infested the place, there’s nothing saying they can’t take a little nap and never be aware that anything out of ordinary happened.”

“I can make a spot, like you said,” Shi said, “and insert one of them into the side of a mountain, preferably high enough up where ice would collect and seal it up.”

“You could also pack in some stone shards before pouring water into it. How about … you, Viper, and either Lal or Rio, go to Bleak Falls Barrow to take care of the scabbard, then head over to Cracked Tusk Keep to get the next one. If you find likely places to hide the blade pieces on your way to Dead Crone Rock, go for it. The pommel, again, if you find a good place along the way, hide it. There’s plenty of snowy mountains over that side of the country. The hilt in Morthal can be dumped into the Sea of Ghosts. Sound reasonable?”

“So we have a nice mix of pacification, flying and mind fuckery, and disintegration,” Shi said with a nod.

Lal and Rio eyed each other, then Rio said, “If you want it…”

She smiled. “Okay, I would, actually.”

“Even though I’ll be here enjoying home cooked meals and a warm bed?” Rio teased.

“Don’t make me beat you.”

Rio scoffed. “Riiight.”

“You guys all right with this plan?”

They nodded. “Just include a few niceties for us to pack,” Shi said, “and I’m sure we’ll do fine.”

“Of course,” he assured his Storm.

He was relieved when they got back. He could feel his bonds with them thickening and had known they were headed his way, but seeing them was always comforting. Shi had a restrained smile on his face as he entered and gave Sora a nod on his way by to the back. Viper drifted by silently, but Lal paused long enough to say, “Mission complete,” before ducking through the door herself.

Serana appeared a short time later and took a seat at the bar. “Hey. Middling mead, please.”

He stared at her for a moment, glanced at the door, then stepped back so he could see to fetch one out. “Where’s Yvara?”

Serana rolled her eyes and uncorked the bottle, then took a sip.
As she went to get coin he said, “I’ll run a tab. You can pay it off each week, all right?” A quick moment was all it took to jot down a note on a pad he kept back there, and then his attention was back on the vampire.

“Well,” she said. “We were up in Morthal after going to the College and working our way west, taking bounties. Big scandal in Morthal. A house burned down and a woman and her child were killed. The husband claimed it was bear fat in the fire, that his wife was careless, but the very next day he pledged himself to another woman.”

“Because that’s not at all suspicious. Any proof of…”

She shook her head. “Yvara got curious and wanted to investigate. She gets these weird fits of being helpful to people. It’s odd. Anyway, the girl child was a ghost and we found her hiding in the ruins of the house. She said she’d talk to us after it got dark, but we had to make sure we found her first. And it was morning.”

He snorted softly. “That’s a fair amount of time to kill.”

“Yeah. So Yvara helped a few people during the day while we were waiting, then we found her grave that evening, had to take out a vampire who attacked, and then the little girl told us what happened. She was too young to really understand, but we got the message. The same vampire we’d just had to take out was the one who set the fire, but—get this—she tried to infect the girl.”

“Well, I’ve heard more than a few stories about how it can make a person go nuts, that kind of transition, especially when you aren’t expecting it.”

Serana nodded. “The dead one’s husband showed up, told us who she was, gave us some hints. The one who probably turned her was quite the, uh, flirt in town. We headed back to the main road and Alva was just then leading a guard into the inn, so we broke into her house, stole her journal. Your basic conspiracy to turn the town into cattle for a nearby vampire lair. Alva was supposed to seduce all the guards as part of it.”

“I know you’re not telling me she’s dead, so how did you end up here and her not?”

“I’m getting there,” Serana said, then paused to give Kiri a nod when he appeared in the next seat over. She then took a long sip of her mead, eyeing Sora with amusement over his annoyance with the deliberate delay. “So, we took our evidence to Jarl Idgrod the next morning. She asked us to clear out that cave. The townsfolk who came along in a righteous fury all got cold feet and minced shamefully back to town with their pitchforks and torches. We went in, killed every vampire in the place, then collected the one guy who had the bravery to stand guard outside.”

“Oh, oh,” he said. “Wait a minute. Don’t tell me she got thaned.”

Serana smiled. “Yep. She came out of the jarl’s place with a guy in tow, and the look on her face… I wanted to laugh, because she looked so confused. At that point I told her I was heading back to the house to give her a chance to figure this one out.”

Sora started laughing quietly. “So she was given a person.”

“Yes. You know, I’ve noticed. Half the stuff you serve, or more, has cheese in it. Is that because of Sheogorath?”

He blinked at her. “I hadn’t really thought about that. But no. A lot of the recipes from home involved cheese. Maybe that’s part of why he focused on us?”
Serana shrugged, then looked behind him as Shi, Lal, Rio, and Viper came back out, looking refreshed. Lal nudged him aside long enough to get bottles for them all, then said, “All of it has been dealt with.”

“All right. No problems, then?”

Lal shook her head. “We were blindingly efficient and clever.”

“I just bet you were.” To Serana he said quietly, “Some damn fool in Dawnstar was trying to reconstitute Mehrunes’ Razor as part of a tribute to the Mythic Dawn, so we decided to complicate things.”

She started to nod, but frowned slightly and just barely turned her head as Sora’s intuition kicked in. He tilted his head to the side to see beyond Serana and eye the door, which caused Lal to follow his lead. The others pretended not to notice. The screen opened and a little girl dragged herself in. There was hay in her hair, dirt on her face, and she looked like she’d been chased halfway across the country by wolves.

Serana frowned and took another sip of her mead.

Lal set hers down and went to talk to the girl. And while she was talking, making fussing noises and generally creating noise pollution, Serana whispered, “Whoever that is, it’s a vampire.”

“And my gut tells me she’s not here to ask for some milk and a place by the fire,” he whispered back.

“Sora,” Lal called. “Do you think we can get something for this poor dear?”

“Of course. Just get her set up at a table. She can have some juice or milk, and a bowl of stew.”

Lal smiled at him and ushered the girl over to a table near the fire, then hastened off behind the bar and into the kitchen. Once the girl was provided with a meal, Lal drifted back over and Kiri’s fingers twitched.

“Right, she’s a vampire,” Kiri said. “What do you want to bet she’s phase two of Maven’s plan?”

Sora nodded. “We give her a bedroll by the fire. We knock her out once we’ve closed. Mine her mind for information. Since killing the last one did not get the message across, let’s treat this one differently.”

Kiri laughed creepily. “If she’s what I think she is, I can warp her to the old sanctuary in Cheydinhal. Let her figure that one out, and have to come all this way north, looking like she does, just to report in.”

“Do you think you can alter the schematics on the wards you have up to exclude her after that?”

“Absolutely. Your intuition would warn us anyway, but it’s better to cover more bases.”

“Thanks, Aniki. We have a plan. Lal, just be like you would with—shit. We need to keep Lucia away from her, just in case. I know she’d probably ask if we could give her a home, too.”

“I will go get Viper to keep her occupied,” Shi said, then slipped off his stool to do that.

“You guys act quick,” Serana commented.
“If she really is just some poor soul who got infected as a child, that’s one thing. But my intuition says otherwise. You hungry? There’s stew, and cheesecake, and—”

“I had something on the way, but your stew is good. I’ll have some of that,” she replied.

He jotted it down on his pad and ducked into the kitchen.

Serana appeared to leave when they went to close, and Lal got a bedroll ready near the fire while the others were wiping the tables down and doing all the things one did when cleaning up at night. Once they were done Lal extended her flames and tranquilized the girl into sleep, then nodded. “She’s down.”

Kiri opened up the door long enough for Serana to pop back inside, then locked up again for the time being. “So, let’s see who this little morsel is, shall we?”

Between his and Viper’s efforts it came out that she was Babette, the child vampire the Dunmer assassin had mentioned, except that in addition they found out she was three hundred years old. Babette was there to see if she could succeed where Gabriella had failed. Maven had upped the contract price quite a bit, and it included all of them, even Lucia.


“What does everyone think happened to Gabriella?” he asked.

“We assume she died. She was utterly loyal to the family and would not have run after a failure. She would have come back and admitted it, and explained, so we could plan a new approach.”

He waited to see if there were any more questions, then signaled to Lal, who knocked the girl out again. “All right. Lal, how long will she be out for?”

“A few hours, but she should pass into normal sleep after what I did wears off.”

“Right. Let’s get her memories cleaned up, then Kiri can warp her out.”

“I am not making book on how this goes down in the aftermath,” Lal said with her arms folded across her chest.

Renato made a rude noise. “This Astrid chick will get pissed off and send someone else, possibly after telling Maven to go fuck herself. And speaking of Maven…”

Sora nodded. “Yes. It’s time for Hemming to die. Anyone feel up to drowning him in honey?”

Viper scowled. “That’s a waste of decent honey and you know it, even if her product is inferior to yours.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Instead, let’s fill his lungs with Black-Briar mead.”

Viper’s mouth quirked up. “Better.”

“So picky,” he complained. “Who wants to go? Or do I need to get out the bag?”

“I’m out,” Lal said. “I took care of Sibbi.”

Rio’s hand went up slowly.

“All right,” he said when no one else jumped for a chance. “You’re up. Make a statement. Possibly
even one that’s highly embarrassing to our dear friend Maven.”

“Her son is already an embarrassment,” Rio pointed out. “Turn him into a dog and you’d not even realize the difference.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh.

“That’s done,” Kiri said cheerfully, then grabbed Babette by the back of her robes and hauled her up. “Back shortly, my dear family.” Then he disappeared into a purple portal that snapped closed behind him.

“Huh,” was Serana’s reaction. “That looks handy. The only people I know of who can teleport are the Psijics, and they sure aren’t sharing the secret.”

“Just imagine all the crazy Thalmor teleporting around,” he said.

Serana wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, let’s not go there.”

Rio rolled in on a cold, sunny afternoon a few days later and smiled at Sora. After walking behind the bar he got close and said, “Hemming is now considered something of a pervert as well as being too stupid to live.”

‘Why do I get the feeling his sometimes juvenile sense of humor took precedence for this one?’ he thought. “You all right? No problems?”

“I’m fine,” Rio assured him with a grin. “I’ll dish the details later.”

Serana stopped in a few hours later to be sociable and have some food.

“So what have you been up to over in that house?” he asked as he slid a plate in front of her.

“Reading, mostly. Getting myself caught up on history.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, right, I never mentioned that part. I was … asleep … for a long time, since before Tiber Septim went on his crusade to unite Tamriel, protecting one of the Elder Scrolls that was a part of the prophecy my father had found.”

“Wow,” he breathed. “That’s got to be super disorienting. Waking up after all that time and not having a clue what’s going on. And the landscape can sometimes change in the blink of an eye, never mind hundreds of years.”

She swallowed and said, “Yeah. So since Yvara is figuring out what to do with a housecarl, I’ve been steadily reading through her library. She collects stuff without even thinking, so she has plenty of books for me to go through. I’m just trying to get it all straight in my head, what happened while I was in locked away in dreams.”

“Someday you’re going to have to tell me about this,” Kiri said.

“I’m starting to wonder about you,” he said. “Every time Serana comes by you pop up like you were there the whole time.”

“Just for that comment, I’m going eat all the ends off the next loaves you make.”
“Uh huh. Assume standard threat was voiced.”

“So cruel,” Kiri said, shaking his head.

“I’m sure it wasn’t easy for any of you to be dumped into Tamriel.”

He shrugged. “No, not really, but we’re sort of used to adapting quickly.”

“We have a very large library,” Kiri said smoothly. “So if you run out at Yvara’s, I’d be more than happy to show you ours.”

She gave him a knowing look and nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Kiri, you want to round up any stragglers? I haven’t had any orders for the past twenty minutes, anyway. We can close up early.”

Once that was taken care of and the place was being cleaned, Rio said, “Okay, so, Hemming. He was found, on his back, quite dead. There was a multitude of empty bottles of mead around him, and of course, his lungs were swimming in it. A few sticky trails off his mouth. There was even a moth caught in one of them.”

“I am almost afraid to ask how you made it embarrassing,” he said as he tossed his cloth into a bin.

Rio grinned unrepentantly. “His trousers were lowered a bit and his smalls adjusted, with a hollowed out loaf of bread covering his assets. He was found atop the stone wall in front of the Temple of Mara. I guess the guards there are so deep in Maven’s pockets that they didn’t dare stop her son in his excesses.”

Sora bit his lip to keep from smiling, or god forbid, laughing. “All right,” he said after a moment to compose himself. “Good work. Figure out what you’d like me to cook, then.”

“Whoo!” Rio punched the air and went back to closing tasks.

“You people are weird,” Serana said with a shake of her head.

A handful of days later they had a werewolf sniffing around their territory, and it wasn’t one of the Companions up at Jorrvaskr. Sora sighed and eyed the ceiling in frustration, then handed a Gold Reserve to Shi to deliver to Nazeem.

Viper had handed him a note which read: He’s circling the building checking windows, entrances, and the like.

Sora grabbed a quill and wrote back: Knock the fucker out cold or trap him in an illusion and keep him that way. We’ll deal with him after closing.

Viper nodded and took the paper, finely shredding it along the way.

That night when Serana dropped by for her usual he gave her a long-suffering look and handed her a bottle, then leaned in to rest his elbows on the bar. “Got another one. Awfully persistent, these guys.”

“Oh. Yvara told me she gets attacked every so often, but she’s getting all the loud and stupid ones.”

He sighed. “We will be making a very clear statement this time. You’d think they’d have caught on by now that we’re not exactly normal here. That’s two agents already who’ve been caught. Maybe
they sent the third because Babette didn’t come back quickly enough. I honestly don’t care at this point.”

“Going to wipe them out?”

“Most likely. Maybe we should leave a note in case any of them were out on jobs.”

“I’m kind of surprised you keep including me in these discussions,” she said casually.

“I have my reasons. They might become clear at some point, but I’m not ready to lay all my cards on the table. The fact that you’re even older than we are, sane, and highly skilled are all points in your favor.”

“So it has nothing to do with him having his eye on me?” she asked dryly.

“Well, you—hang on.” He reached inside and checked his bond with Kiri. For once his brother was upstairs, but that guaranteed nothing. “It’s been centuries since he’s looked at anyone. You must be some kind of special to get that reaction.”

She nodded, but shifted topics. “How long have you and Renato been together?”

“We’ve—that’s a weird one, actually, considering I knew him for over a decade from my original location, and then again in the new one. But… Since I was twenty-six. He’s very pushy.”

“I’m charming,” Renato protested.

Sora sighed and looked over. “I swear, it’s like you have automatic, built-in teleportation for that statement. I say it and you are right there to protest.”

“It’s a gift,” his lover said flippantly.

“You’d think I’d be better at sensing you people about to pop up,” he muttered.

Renato shook his head. “Nah. We swim around in your little harmony field so much that you just sort of register us and set it aside.”

“If you’re a fish, can I make sashimi with you?” he asked playfully.

“Ah, tesoro, I’d rather you not come at me with sharp knives.”

He hummed.

After closing they gathered around the werewolf, whom Viper had tricked into the sub-level. The guy was still trapped in an illusion, but for the time being he was also in a cage as a precaution. Sora looked at Viper for a more detailed report.

“I verified that he is Arnbjorn,” Viper said promptly. “He’s here because Astrid is annoyed at the contract still being open. She is embarrassed and frustrated by the failures, so she sent her husband.”

“So Babette hasn’t gotten back yet.”

Viper shook his head. “This fellow was going to kill us all in the most painful ways. And yes, that still includes Lucia.”

“I see. Well, he just bought himself a ticket to the afterlife. Suggestions on what we do after that? I have ideas, but I want to know you guys think.”
“We have the password,” Kiri reminded them. “Even if we didn’t we could get it from him. I say we go there and waste them. It was mildly amusing at first, but when an innocent little girl gets added to the list just because we gave her a proper room and bed to sleep in and decent food…”

Lorenzo coughed and adjusted his glasses. “I say we kill him, drag his body back to that sanctuary, and dump him into the same bed as Astrid. And when she wakes up and sees him, we kill her. Then the rest of them there. If Babette isn’t back yet we can leave a note warning her to stay the fuck away from us. She can restart her cell, maybe up at the Dawnstar sanctuary, if she knows how to get in.”

“And maybe this time they will actually pay attention,” Lal said, “and realize they’re picking a fight they can’t win.”

Renato nodded. “I say we do it. And get Lorenzo to write the note, or Shi. They have the best handwriting.”

“We’ll draft something out, but we need to be quick. I’d actually like to get this done tonight, if possible,” he said.

Lorenzo and Shi drifted off to the side to start on that, so Sora stared at the werewolf. “They heal fast, right?”

Serana did a strange little combination shrug-nod. “So I understand.”

“I wonder…” He lifted his hand and shot a web into the man, then solidified the strands and released. Blood gushed from the man’s chest and his wounds healed before their eyes. “Interesting. But let’s see if he can heal this.” He shot twin webs out, that time through the werewolf’s head, and solidified them again.

Arnbjorn dropped like a rock and sprawled in his own blood, twitching slightly, then stilled.

“He’s gone,” Viper said. “My illusion shattered. There’s nothing left there for it to work with.”

“Doesn’t look like he’s breathing,” Renato said, then shot his own web into the man. “Nope. He is so dead he no longer registers. Excellent job, tesoro. I guess if puncturing his heart didn’t work, the brain was the logical alternative.”

He gave his lover a smile and asked, “Who wants to go on this mission?”

“I think I have to,” Kiri said. “If you want this done tonight I should just warp us there, and back afterward.”

He nodded. “Who else?”

Shi looked up from the draft he and Lorenzo were working on and signaled, and Lorenzo indicated as well. Val looked up from counting something on his fingers and nodded.

“All right. Soon as that draft is ready and approved, you can start.”

Shi handed him a piece of parchment a few minutes later which read: We figured you’d get the fucking picture already, but apparently you’re all too stupid. Maybe this will finally get the message across. Leave us be and we’ll leave you be. If not, try again, and you’ll visit Sithis and the Void earlier than you planned.

He coughed. “It’s a bit saltier than I was expecting, but I don’t have any real problem with it.”
Renato chortled from his position next to Sora. “And the handwriting is already so beautiful.”

“Right,” he said as he handed the letter back. “Get in, take out whoever is in there. Traumatizing Astrid before you kill her is up to your discretion.”

Kiri nodded and gestured for the other three to come closer, then hefted Arnbjorn up with Val’s help. A moment later the portal opened and they had warped away.

Sora stared at the blood on the floor and sighed. “Oh well, at least it should clean up easy.”

“Werewolf blood is supposed to be contagious if it gets in your mouth,” Serana said. “I’d be careful.”

“Tch. Lal, will you freeze that so it doesn’t spread, please? And, Viper, a quick barrier as a reminder, until Shi returns. He can disintegrate the whole thing. Probably safer than burying it or burning it.”

Lal shot webs into the pool on the floor and froze it, and Viper followed up with illusionary posts and ropes to enclose the space.

Somewhere between twenty and thirty minutes later Kiri and the others warped back in.

“Before you report,” he said. “Shi, please disintegrate that frozen blood and maybe a layer of stone under it.”

Shi’s brow went up, but he nodded and took care of it.

“Thank you.”

Viper removed his illusion as Kiri said, “Mission accomplished, dear brother. Astrid is dead, and we were able to use Lorenzo’s idea. She was both sad and furious when she saw his body next to her, so the marriage may have been more than just an arrangement of convenience. There were only two others there, the mage and the Argonian, so we relieved them of their lives. Val found a handy metal pole and slammed that into the floor near the entrance inside, so we had something to stick the letter to. Then we looted anything that looked interesting and warped out.”

“Amusingly enough, there was a small frostbite spider in there near the alchemy station,” Lorenzo said, “along with a skeleton. We left the spider alone, but we found this.” He handed a note to Sora.

My scribing tools are lost, and I’ve no time for a lengthy entry, anyway. It’s taken weeks, but I’ve finally found it! The Sanctuary of the Dark Brotherhood! One of them, anyway. In Skyrim, under a forest road.

I’ve been watching them, the assassins. Their comings and goings. The fools have no idea they’re being observed. My next goal is to somehow make it past the sinister black door, into the Sanctuary itself.

I don’t have time to even think about the dangers. The truth must be known!

“Huh. Well, that’s one idiot who was probably better off dead.” The note was placed on a nearby table. “If they don’t behave this time, we can tag the remaining ones and deal with them. For now, though, let’s just go to bed. I’m tired.”

Kiri gallantly offered his arm to Serana, saying, “Allow me to escort you out.”
He looked up to see Yvara entering along with Serana and someone he didn’t recognize, so he got out two bottles of middling mead and set them on the counter. Yvara grinned on seeing them and took a seat at the bar.

“One extra of those, please. This is my shiny new housecarl, Valdimar,” Yvara said. “Valdimar, this is Sora, the owner and proprietor of this fine establishment. There’s a bunch more running around here, plus a little girl they sort of but not really adopted. She was an orphan in the city.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said as he got a bottle for Valdimar. “And glad to see you back. Get into more trouble while you were away?”

Yvara rolled her eyes. “Let me think. We helped a ghost bard against a king who imprisoned him after retrieving some poem thing he led us to—and what I assumed was his skeleton. And I was attacked by a cultist of Boethiah in broad daylight.”

“I’m starting to think someone painted a target on your back,” he said, “but I trust you dispatched this latest idiot.”

“Yes. But at least he wasn’t completely inept. I didn’t walk away from the encounter embarrassed that it happened. Ended up in Solitude for a while and cleared out a cave of necromancers. I am not the stealthiest of people, but they were chanting so damn loud they never heard me coming. And then usually their hair and clothing ignited and that was something of a distraction.”

He snickered.

“What have you made today for nibbly things?”

“I have some goat cheese and caramelized onion tarts, some mixed berry tarts, some—”

“Oo,” she interrupted. “The goat cheese ones. I’d love some of those.”

He nodded and noted it down on the tab for her group, then looked at Serana. “The berry ones.”

Valdimar looked confused, so Sora said, “I’ll bring out a platter with both, and you guys can just figure it out.”

“Sounds good,” Yvara said.

He disappeared into the kitchen long enough to get that ready, then returned and set it in front of them. Yvara snatched up a tart and bit into it, then hummed in appreciation and waved her free hand at Valdimar, who was slow to take one.

After she stuffed herself and tucked a half dozen bottles of mead in her pack, Yvara said to Valdimar, “I have a quick errand to run, so just familiarize yourself with Elysium, get your stuff settled, that kind of thing. I’ll be back. Oh, and apparently we have a tab here, so you can stop by and get something to eat if you don’t feel like cooking. I don’t think you can go wrong with whatever you choose, so… Okay, later.” She hastened off.

Valdimar sent a questioning look at Serana who said, “Don’t worry about the tab. I pay it off each week with stuff I sell off in town from the bandits who are stupid enough to attack, or wolves, stuff like that. I’ll explain a few things when we get back to the house.”

Four days later Yvara returned at dusk and slumped into a seat. “I got thaned again.”
He bit his lip to keep from laughing at her.

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved a hand around. “Stew, if you have some on the fire.”

He got her some mead and headed into the kitchen. When he got back she was halfway through the bottle already.

She sighed happily at the bowl he placed in front of her and picked up her spoon. “Got another person given to me. I installed her at the house I ended up with in Solitude. That makes three houses now, if I count the Arch-Mage’s quarters at the College.”

“There’s this saying about having a port in every storm, though it wasn’t talking about houses. Still…”

She shrugged and had another bite before saying, “Less money toward inns, and more toward house upkeep. Doesn’t matter, really. I make plenty just on my rounds from selling off loot, and now that I’ve decided to start enchanting in order to try to master that, I’ll have plenty to work with and sell. Poor Horse has been complaining about the weight anyway.”

“You using the station up at Dragonsreach, or…?”

“No, the house has one, and for alchemy, and even a complete set for a blacksmith in the cellar. Thankfully, even if it’d be a bit messy, if I really wanted to I could lead Horse around the back of the house, open the trap door into the cellar, and just chuck stuff down to unload his packs. I was at the College when I got a message to come to Whiterun anyway. The Harbinger of the Companions has something he wants to talk to me about.”

He nodded. “I’m sure that’ll be fun, a mage walking into a hall full of boisterous and potentially drunken blade users.”

“Well, he asked for the Arch-Mage, so I should at least see what he wants. Probably something to do with their curse.” She shook her head. “Well, some of them probably enjoy it. We’ll see.”

Yvara stopped in the next evening with a slight frown on her face. It was fairly empty, so she leaned in and said quietly, “You would think a damn werewolf wouldn’t get all huffy about a vampire strolling in all polite like.”

“What happened?”

“One of the younger ones called me a bloodsucking fiend and kicked up such a fuss that I told Kodlak to send a message in care of Filigrana when it was a better time to talk. I spent the rest of the day enchanting. I’ll do more after I eat, probably. And speaking of that, I am very much hoping that you have some of that delightful salad with the strawberries in it.”

“Mm, no, but I could make some for you.”

Viper drifted over as if summoned by the very idea of it and said, “I will go get what you need,” then floated away quickly.

“Right,” he said. “In the meantime…” He got out the usual mead and set it before her. He was greatly amused some time later when, after he made the salad and portioned out two bowls of it, Viper lured Yvara off to a table to sit with him.
Sora felt a sense of mild unease prickling up his spine, but couldn’t quite pinpoint what was causing it until Kiri sauntered in the front door and over behind the counter. As his brother leaned down to get himself something to drink he said quietly, “We have a thief casing the place. I got the impression that he’d be in here shortly. Bosmer.”

He wondered if that meant the fellow did not follow the Green Pact, living outside Valenwood as he did. Then again, as a thief, presumably one who was not supposed to be killing people, perhaps it didn’t come up. He assumed that any Nord catching a Bosmer eating the remains of a fallen enemy would not end well—for someone.

Fifteen minutes later the elf walked in and took a seat at one of the tables. Shi drifted over to see what he wanted and Sora could overhear the man saying, “I don’t know. Black-Briar mead is just about the best tasting mead in all of Skyrim.”

Shi murmured something.

“I know alcohol,” the Bosmer insisted snottily, and Sora was reminded of Nazeem for a moment. “I used to work in my father’s winery in Valenwood. But fine, I’ll give it a try.”

Shi drifted back and said with exaggerated patience, “One middling mead.”

He fetched one out and handed it over, then watched while doing busy work and pretending not to be paying attention. He was gratified when the Bosmer took a sip of the regular Filigrana stock and got a pleasantly surprised look, and amused when the elf wiped all expression off his face.

There was more conversation, that time too quiet for him to hear, as the Bosmer had lowered his voice, then Shi returned to him. “Salmon steak.”

When he was in the back he tapped Viper and said, “Kiri warned me of a thief casing us. He’s in the front room right now. I expect Kiri tagged him, but I’d like you to lurk and keep an eye on him, please.”

“Given the Thieves Guild’s ties with Maven,” Viper said, trailing off, then he drifted away, both in distance and visibility.

Sora got on with preparing some salmon and tossed some garlic-roasted asparagus on the side, then brought it out. Shi took it from there. Sora could feel Viper off in the corner where he had a direct line of sight to their target.

He realized, even if his intuition hadn’t warned him, that he would have noticed something off. A stranger, not dressed like the average merchant or traveler, who moved a certain way? Thieves—good ones—were very precise and economical in their movements, very graceful, and this guy was setting off warning bells in his mind entirely unconnected to his inborn power.

That night after they closed up Kiri and Viper dragged a knocked out thief into the main room and dumped him on the floor. “I have a suggestion,” Kiri said.

“For disposing of him, I assume.”

Kiri nodded. “After we find out why he’s here, I suggest we start slow. Wipe his memories of ever leaving Riften—for I assume he came here on Maven’s orders—and dump him there, drunk as a lord, stinking of alcohol, face down in a ditch.”
“Black-Briar mead, one assumes,” Lorenzo said.

“Of course,” Viper said.

“Well, let’s see what he knows.”

A short time later Viper touched the man’s forehead and said, “Yes, Maven sent him to case the place, and to find where we’re getting our honey with the idea of edging in on that territory. He was frustrated at not being able to enter the main building except by the front door, and at not seeing any evidence of an apiary. If he could, he was to rifle through everything we have in here and take back anything of interest, not to mention line his own pockets with things he could fence.”

“He’s all yours, Kiri.”

“So,” she said softly, “it turns out that Kodlak wanted to be freed from his curse.”

“I heard plenty about the attack in town,” he replied. “Kodlak died that night, right?”

Yvara nodded. “But it can still be done, apparently. He sent me off to gather the supplies necessary for that after I agreed to help. I got back in time to see the aftermath of the attack. Anyway, that blacksmith up at the Skyforge, Eorlund Gray-Mane, is attempting to reforge Wuuthrad, the axe that Ysgramor fellow used back when. I guess it’s necessary to get into his tomb, like a key, where we can do this little ritual.”

“Well, if he wanted so badly to free himself from Hircine’s version of the afterlife…”

She nodded again. “I’m fairly certain two of the others will want to, as well. Maybe not straight away, but we’ll see.”

A blonde Imperial woman walked into Filigrana radiating weariness and took a seat at one of the tables. Sora saw that despite the persona she was projecting she moved like a more-skilled version of that Bosmer thief they had tossed back to Riften. It was interesting to him that his intuition did not see her as a threat when his eyes said otherwise.

She probably wasn’t there to attack or burn the place down, but that did not mean she wasn’t dangerous. She got her order of mead from Rio and proceeded to be quiet and unassuming for the time it took her to drink it, then ordered a second one.

When he went into the kitchen to prepare an order for an arriving Serana he told Kiri about both. Kiri smirked deviously—which could have applied to either female, actually—and sauntered out.

“So she’s round two,” he said a while later, then shook his head in exasperation. “You would think after the Dark Brotherhood failed so miserably that Maven would buy a damn clue. Fine. Escalate our response as we did the last time. See what happens.”

“I think … Bravil this time,” Kiri said. “And she’s not a vampire, so she’ll be forced to rely on something other than her own speed.”

He shrugged. “She’s a thief. I’m sure she’ll have no particular problems stealing horses to speed her journey home.”
“No, that’s all taken care of,” Yvara said. “The only one left is Aela. She’ll never give it up. But
maybe now those who choose that will be able to choose it with full knowledge, rather than as part
of the initiation into their super secret club.”

“Good to know,” he said, and mentally updated his “files” on the inhabitants of Whiterun.

“And, a serial killer in Windhelm was handled. Naturally, the guards up there were too busy being
useless to run the guy down, but I figured, I was there, not particularly in a hurry, and took care of it.
Some Imperial fellow who’d gone insane and was using girls he killed as a medium to resurrect his
sister. And I have to say, the journals I found and read made it sound like he was in love with her.”

He wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Sure, sure, nothing like a little necrophiliac incest to ward off the
cold up north.”

“Yeah,” she said with a weirded-out look. “Okay, I gotta run home for a bit, but I’ll probably be
back this evening for dinner.”

“I’ll make that salad,” he offered.

She beamed at him and hastened off, so he asked Renato to arrange for it. It was temperate enough
even in winter to grow crops in Whiterun, but for certain items they also had a backup of hydroponic
beds in the cellars underneath Filigrana and the converted boilery. Gods forbid Viper didn’t get his
salad on a regular basis. His poor lover spent a fair amount of time during the colder months
underground, powering and maintaining the artificial sun.

His spine tingled around dusk and he heaved a sigh. “Renato,” he murmured.

“Yes, tesoro?” Renato asked as he leaned in close and gave his hand a squeeze.

He enjoyed the closeness for a moment before saying, “I think round three is incoming.”

“I’ll let the others know. And,” Renato said, pausing, “if this is, I think I’ll go grab that note we got
way the hell back. It might help to get them off our case. Or maybe not. Who knows?”

A handsome red-haired Nord male strolled in a while later and took a seat at the counter. “You’re
quite the fellow, then, aren’t you,” he said to Sora.

His brow went up in mild surprise. This was different. A thief being blunt? What was the catch?
Then he smiled and slid the promissory note from so long ago over. “This was left behind when the
previous owner decided running a meadery here wasn’t for him and moved away. Perhaps it’ll be of
interest to you. But I have to say, you guys are proving to be just as persistent, and perhaps as stupid,
as the Dark Brotherhood. So, this is our last warning. Another thief shows up here looking to cause
trouble and we’ll get mean.”

“I’ve heard rumors, lad,” the man said, not even looking at the paper.

“I’m sure you have. Whispers in the dark sounds like your kind of thing.” His gaze shifted when the
door opened and Yvara walked in along with Serana.

She stopped in confusion on seeing the red-head, then started forward again to take a seat next to
him. “I thought you never left Riften.”

“Friend of yours?” he asked as Serana took the next seat over.
She nodded. “Well, sort of. I like to sit with Brynjolf and trade stories when I’m in Riften.”

“Ah. He and his buddies have been sniffing around of late.” He was amused when Yvara frowned at the thief.

“Brynjolf, you really shouldn’t…” She trailed off, shaking her head, then said, “The usual, and … that salad,” and was echoed by Serana. “For afters, surprise me.”

“You’re lucky,” he said as he got out bottles for all three of them. “I made cannoli earlier.” He left before they could ask what that was and returned with a platter within a minute.

Yvara snatched a bowl of salad and grabbed a cannolo, and bit into it, then hummed happily. After she swallowed she said, “How you can do this with cheese, I just don’t know. Cheese and chocolate? Who would have thought? C’mon, you two, try one!”

He tapped the promissory note. “When you do go, take this with you.”

Brynjolf furrowed his brow and pulled the thing closer with his free hand, then frowned outright. He tucked it away in his pocket as he had another bite of his cannolo.

“I think I’m going to go work on my relationship with my mother,” Serana said into the silence.

Yvara’s head snapped around to stare at her. “Okay,” she said. “I think it’d be wonderful if you could regain that part of your family. But always remember you have a home here, too. The loft is yours.”

Serana smiled and briefly clasped Yvara’s arm. “Don’t be the least bit surprised if you see me often enough when you come home.”

He noticed that Kiri was skulking nearby, a smirk on his face, and wondered just exactly what those two had been up to. Serana stuck around after Brynjolf and Yvara departed, at which point Kiri said, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Sora lifted a finger. “Aniki?”

“Just a little trip, dear brother,” Kiri assured him. “I’ll be back before you know it. I’m going to warp Serana back to the castle instead of her having to take the long way.”

“Is this some version of—no, never mind,” he said, thinking better of it, not wanting to interfere with his brother’s potential love life. “Right. You want anything to take along?” he asked Serana.

She hummed thoughtfully. “A dozen middling, two each of Gold, Pearl, and Viper, and maybe some small snacks I can share?”

“Sure. Give me a few minutes and I’ll have that ready. Just remember, if you can, to bring the bottles back when you visit next. No reason not to recycle!”

“You know what? Throw in an extra bottle of middling,” Serana said. “I’m going to try mixing it with a blood potion to see what it ends up tasting like. It would be sort of cool to get a meal plus amazing extra flavor at the same time.”

He blinked and nodded. “You’ll have to let me know the results.”
“I’m fairly certain we’re not having an earthquake,” he said dryly as everything shook like the effects of the crash of a mammoth hitting the ground from low orbit after its giant caretaker missed a swing against some foe.

Kiri smiled and disappeared outside. He came back a good half hour later with a smirk on his face. The commotion had caused all the customers to rush out, so it was just the family there, taking the time to clean things.

“My dear ones, I was witness to a dragon attack at the western watchtower. Guards from Whiterun took care of it, along with a very special someone.”

“It’s that time, then,” he said, his cloth dropping to the counter.

“It appears so,” Kiri said. “I tagged her, just to be certain, but she headed back into Whiterun after the attack was over. I did witness her Shouting after she absorbed that dragon’s soul. Just a single word, but that was more than enough proof.”

He started to nod, then realized what his brother had said. “Wait, wait. Was she in disguise or something?”

Kiri nodded. “Sort of. She was wearing actual armor, if you can believe that, and it greatly resembled a dragon’s scales. Where she got her hands on it I have no idea. There was also a mask, so the only part of her face visible was her eyes, and I didn’t get close enough to verify what colour they were.”

“And how she fought?”

“Not quite the same way. Still primarily magic, but shock spells instead of her usual tendency toward setting things on fire. She also used a bow briefly, but considering how much she missed I can understand why she switched back to magic.”

Just then the world shook again as a Shout rumbled down the nearby mountain like the crash of a tidal wave. “Dovahkiin!”

“Great. The old men are involved now,” he said dryly. “Kiri…”

“I’ll shadow her, don’t worry. I will not get involved unless I absolutely have to. At least not obviously. This is her fight, and I wouldn’t want to cheapen her efforts or hinder her growth.”

He nodded. “Keep the spy on her. At some point I expect she’ll come back in here to visit, probably as herself. We have verification, we can offer our help when she needs backup. And hopefully she trusts us enough that when we point out that we know her secret, she won’t flip out on us.”

“The moment I feel her moving outside of the usual places I’ll start following her. In fact, let me make up a pack to take with me right now.”

The next morning Kiri suddenly looked up, grabbed the pack he had waiting, and hastened off.

Kiri sauntered in not long before closing two days later and came behind the bar. “She’s currently in her house in Whiterun,” he whispered on his way back up from setting his pack down. “But I know
“She’ll be on the move again soon, so I’ll have to restock and be ready to go, probably in the morning.”

He nodded. “There’s still some stew back there, some cheesecake, but if you want something else, just say so and I’ll make it for you.”

“No, that’s fine. Soon as this place is closed up, I’ll tell you what’s happened so far.”

Several hours later they were seated at the large table in the kitchen where Kiri said, “She and the housecarl she was saddled with hoofed it over to Ivarstead—and it’s probably a good thing that Horse is so average-looking—and spent the night there, then headed up the mountain in the morning.”

“What’s it like?” Val asked.

Kiri shrugged. “Cold, snowy, with the usual hostile wildlife. The path winds around in a kind of switchback and there are stones along the way with little history lessons carved into them. That housecarl was useless. A bear showed up to get angry and the girl just fiddled with her armor a ways back while Yvara took it down, though later on she used her bow.

“Considering she was decked out in steel plate armor, she should have been right up there in the thick of things, tanking hits and using her blade, not hanging back like an archer or mage. In any case, High Hrothgar itself looks fairly imposing, but no more so than any other fortified castle-like structure. The masters in there move around almost as stealthily as a thief, or one of us.

“Once she got inside one of the Greybeards approached, Master Arngeir, and they spoke. Yvara was fairly cagey in what she said. I got a chance to watch them imprint a word of power for Unrelenting Force into the floor for her to absorb, then as one of them directly shared his knowledge of that word with her, so she could use it immediately.”

“That could be handy,” he said, “if any of us could do it. Considering just how damn easy a Dragonborn has it for this stuff, if there were any words she really ought to have…”

“I paid very close attention, brother, and again when they went out back to do the same for a word for Whirlwind Sprint. Master Arngeir seemed almost scared of how easily she learned, not to mention envious, but he shook that off quickly enough.”

“Well, considering how much effort we all had to put into learning Shouts, I could see where he might feel like that, even if only for a moment,” Lal said.

“I wonder if she’ll have to deal with the remnants of the Blades getting in her face,” Lorenzo said. “That organization went seriously downhill after Martin died.”

“You’re just annoyed that they kept pestering us until we figured out how to use illusion to mask our practices,” Viper said.

Lorenzo shrugged. “Doesn’t change the fact that they’re a shadow of what they were, and after the Great War, well… Who knows how badly they’ve degraded? I have to assume some of them managed to survive.”

Kiri exhaled through his nose and, when no one else made a comment, said, “She was given a task to retrieve Jurgen Windcaller’s horn up north, so that’s her current agenda. I will be up early to lurk near her house in the city so I can tag along. But at some point I’d like to warp back up to High Hrothgar with Viper.”
Viper eyed the other Mist. “You’d prefer me to take the memory from one of them so I could share it?”

“Yes. Just in case. I could try to isolate one of them and mind-control him into explaining the process—both of them—but a more subtle method out the starting gate might make more sense.”

Viper nodded.

Sora frowned. “I want you to be careful. These men may not have absorbed dragon souls, but they must be very mentally strong to have learned to use a dragon’s power. Just because they’re pacifists doesn’t mean they won’t retaliate if they feel they’re being attacked. Viper, you’re exceptional, but … just be careful. Please.”

Rio made a rude noise. “Viper doesn’t get cocky, you know that. One threat from you regarding—”

Lal slapped a hand over her lover’s mouth to shut him up. “Don’t push your luck. Or do you really want a repeat of that incident where you annoyed Viper too much and—”

Rio slapped a hand over Lal’s mouth and made angry brows at her.

Sora heaved a sigh. “If she’s off on a quest to retrieve something, then logically she’ll be going back up there. I suggest that when she’s halfway back up the mountain to return it, you warp back and get Viper, return there, and take the opportunity to spy again, and get that information.”

“So that when she stops in here again, we can let her know we know,” Renato said, “and not have to tail her all the time.”

“Right.” He helped Kiri replenish his supplies before they all shuffled off to bed, and his brother had disappeared again by the time he went down to start breakfast.

Kiri strolled in and set his bag behind the bar before getting some mead. “She’s over at Elysium right now, as herself. Considering I watched her switch both gear and appearance…”

“So she’s keeping them separate, like we did with the Thieves Guild,” he muttered. “All right. We’ll have a meeting later, preferably with her involved, but…”

Frustratingly, Yvara did not show up at all that evening, so after closing Kiri caught them up on events which, in truth, wasn’t much. “There were bandits encamped outside the tomb, necromancers inside who were thralling people to mine ore, the usual skeletons and spiders—nothing particularly out of the ordinary.

“The housecarl was probably one step away from an unfortunate accident several times. Her attitude is seriously poor. Our Yvara rolled her eyes so often I’m surprised they didn’t roll right out of her head. Anyway, the horn she was sent to get wasn’t there. A note was in its place.”

“What about that attack we heard about?” Val asked. “Some cultists in town? The guards aren’t much to rely on for eyewitness accounts, and Brenuin was drunk as a lord at the time, so…”

Kiri nodded. “Two of them. They questioned her as to whether or not she was Dragonborn, she said yes, and they attacked in the name of Lord Miraak, the ‘True Dragonborn’. They were quickly enough cut down. If I encounter one you can bet I’ll be doing a little digging. If necessary, we can just take out any we stumble over. It’s bad enough we have Thalmor roaming around. We don’t need a bunch of psychotic cultists causing trouble on top of that.”
Back up a second. The horn wasn’t there,” he said.

“Yes. Some ‘friend’ in Riverwood. Yvara seemed rather annoyed by the whole thing. Think it’s one of the Blades?”

“I suppose some of them could be hiding out here. After all, Nords revere Dragonborn, so if one was to pop up…”

“This would be a likely place,” Shi said. “In theory.”

Yvara didn’t actually drop by until the last day of Evening Star. She shuffled in and took a seat at the counter, and Sora automatically gave her a middling mead. “Been having fun?” he asked.

“Been working on enchanting,” she replied as she removed the cork. “I’m finally to the point of being able to double enchant things.”

“That would explain the rash of waterbreathing items that Belethor has been selling. It’s been a while. You should stick around after close.”

She gave him a funny look, but nodded.

“Hold on a minute,” he said. “I’ll bring you something to eat.” A few minutes later he brought out a square ceramic dish with baked penne in it and set it in front of her. “Well at least now, being able to enchant like that, you can ensure you’ve got what you need rather than rely on the whims of others out there.”

She nodded. “Plenty of people sell enchanted items, but a lot of the time it’s never what I’m after, too weak, or on the wrong things. Because really, who other than an exhibitionist runs around dressed like the Forsworn? And besides, you can only wear so many necklaces and rings before it’s like begging people to attack, and I get enough of that already.”

He shrugged. “Unless a person goes around with a massive entourage of heavily-armed, brutish-looking guards, or invisibly… Besides…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. A girl needs to get her beverage of choice somehow.”

“That reminds me. Serana said she was going to try mixing a blood potion with a bottle of mead to see what it tasted like. I keep hoping for word on that.”

“I could try if you want,” she offered.

“After close. I’ll provide the mead, you provide the potion.”

A couple of hours later they began cleaning up as Yvara mixed mead with blood in a large mug and took a sip. “Huh. I’m not sure how I feel about this,” she said, then had another sip. “It’s not bad, though. Just not sure if it’s good.”

“So, it was pretty exciting around here not long ago,” Sora said casually. “An actual dragon attacked.”

She nodded, sporting a wonderful poker face. “I heard two guards got hauled off by it.”

“Kiri went out to investigate when the ground shook. So, tell me, what did you think of Greybeards?”

Yvara shot him a look that managed to combine surprise with a glare. “Have you been following
Kiri laughed creepily. “I followed the mysterious Dragonborn, my dear. That she just so happened to turn out to be you…”

Yvara sighed and had another sip. “I don’t know what I think of them yet. Arngeir seemed a bit divided on his reaction to me. He seemed impressed and fearful and envious, but still willing to help, even if only in a limited sense.”

Sora nodded. “Now you that we know, I can tell you something, because now you know.”

Her eyes crossed. “You’ve been spending too much time around Sheogorath, right?”

“Funny you should mention him,” he replied. “He ‘asked’ us to come north a few years ago, for your sake, so that we could provide support if you needed or wanted it.”

“Why does that fill me with dread?”

He shrugged. “It boils down to a few meanings. We’re here, if you need us, rather like how we helped when you and Serana were having your fun little adventure. We are all Tongues, though passing on words or understanding the way the Greybeards do is not currently in our stable of talents.”

“But it might be?”

“Possibly. Determination on that is pending. But. You’re a mage. Most of the Shouts we’re aware of magic can duplicate, or your vampiric powers. There’s not necessarily a point in using Aura Whisper when you can use a spell, or your altered vision, right? Same with something like Kyne’s Peace when you can pacify with a spell.

“We definitely don’t follow the Way of the Voice, but neither do we wander around Skyrim using Shouts for the hell of it. But of more importance, we’re simply here, if you need to talk. And if you need some back-up along the way, just ask.”

After another sip she said, “Okay. I’m having some trouble with the idea of Sheogorath sending you all here to be support, but okay. It’s crazy, but that means it makes sense, I think.” She paused to frown slightly. “As you probably know—” She eyed Kiri for a moment. “—the Greybeards sent me off on some test to retrieve an item, and it wasn’t there.”

“Right, there was a note,” Kiri said.

“I’m certain I can handle myself, but, I won’t say no to one of you lurking in the background when I go to deal with that note. Whoever left it had to be pretty clever to figure a way in when it was designed around the idea that a person entering could Shout.”

“I will be there,” Kiri said. “You won’t even know it. But if, for some reason, you need to talk to me, uh…” He looked lost for a signal.

“Rub your fingers together,” Renato suggested, demonstrating what he meant. “I’ve never seen you do that as a tic.”

Yvara shrugged. “Sounds good.” She looked at Kiri again. “What was your impression of Lydia?”

Kiri smirked. “Useless, and has a chip on her shoulder so large that she’s going to trip over her attitude at some point. She’s a fucking housecarl and she gets pissy any time you ask her to act like
one, or, gods forbid, use some common sense.”

“So it’s not just me,” she said quietly. “I’d already decided to leave her at Breezehome for now. There’s only so much I can take before I do something crazy like snap and ditch her in front of an enraged giant. It’s like now that she has the excuse to be out and about as a housecarl she wants to take the first opportunity to go out in a blaze of glory or something. I do not understand Nords—eh, present day Nords. Serana isn’t like that, or her mother.”

“I don’t understand it, either. There were plenty of battlemages at the Arcane University and certainly not all the mages in the guild were elves. And even here the jarls have court mages, though that might be a concession to tradition and so they have someone to enchant things.”

“Well, I’m going to get some rest. I will start out whenever I wake up,” she said.

Kiri nodded. “I’ll be around if you need me, but otherwise I won’t interfere.”

She nodded and Viper escorted her out. They could hear him saying, “Please know that we’ve said nothing to Serana. That’s your prerogative.”

“That went better than I hoped, actually,” Sora said. “I expected her to be angry angry.”

“She might end up more confused when it sinks in that Sheogorath sent us up here. I mean, why? Sure, being revealed as Dragonborn when it’s been centuries since the last one is pretty interesting, but… Odds she’s read that book?”

“So…”

Sora jumped slightly and turned to glare at his brother. “Don’t do that, please.”

“Speak to you?” Kiri asked with an innocently confused look on his face.

Sora switched to a sad expression and watched as his brother pouted.

“Anyway. So far so good, but I had second thoughts about that earlier plan. Maybe it’s better not to try poking around in their heads.”

He nodded. “I had wondered when you didn’t pop in to pick up Viper. It might be a better idea to simply find out what words she knows. Because really? There’s only a few I’d even bother using myself. So what happened? And since you’re here at just the right time, you may as well help.”

Kiri sighed and picked up a cloth so he could start wiping down tables. “Okay. She went to meet this ‘friend’ who turned out to be some woman named Delphine.”

“Sounds Breton.”

Kiri nodded. “She had the horn and handed it over, and led Yvara down into her super secret hideout to talk about Dragonborn and Greybeards and trust. We’re talking serious paranoia here, and all of it aimed at the Thalmor. Yvara told her to shove it for the moment and took off to take the horn to Arngeir to complete her test. They taught her the final word for Unrelenting Force and did their little welcoming ceremony.

“Then she returned to speak with Delphine, who claimed that the dragons were coming back as opposed to coming out of hiding. And then we were off to Kynesgrove, so that Yvara could prove to
Delphine that she really is Dragonborn. The humorous part was where Yvara pointed out that Delphine was in Whiterun the same day the dragon attacked, that if she had stuck around after getting some stone, she would have seen it then."

“I’m pretty sure you skipped stuff there, but all right. So…”

“Yvara gets really sarcastic when she’s annoyed,” Kiri said with a smirk. “Big black resurrected a dragon from one of those funny mounds right in front of us, then flew away. Yvara and Delphine killed the one still there, Yvara absorbed its soul, and Delphine did something of a one-eighty. Delphine is one of the last remaining Blades, but she made it sound like their real purpose was dragon killing, not emperor protecting.”

Renato looked at him funny. “Their whole job when we got here was protecting the emperor and his line. Sure, fine, we didn’t have dragons flying around roasting the populace and they were forced to disband after the Great War, but…”

“I know. At any rate, Delphine is blaming all of this on the Thalmor.”

Sora rolled his eyes. “Anyone with any sense would blame the Thalmor, but I hardly think they’re so damn amazing that they started a chain reaction of dragon resurrections. You know, those large creatures which kill indiscriminately? And used to enslave people? Presumably elves, too?”

“I know, preaching to the choir, little brother. Delphine’s idea was to infiltrate the Thalmor Embassy, and dashed off to go make plans before Yvara could ask any other questions. She was right put out by that, too. It was then that she signaled and I came out of hiding. She said she needed to do some thinking and that I could go home for now.”

He nodded. “I guess we’ll see. But still… It’s really tempting to be proactive and, frankly, nosy here, and send one of you to go poke through Delphine’s mind. But since Yvara now knows why we’re here, we should consult with her on the matter. I guess.”

“Right.” Renato tossed his cloth in the bin. “Let’s see if she asks. It’s very tempting, I agree, to toddle off there and unearth the wealth of information that woman is surely hiding in her brain, but let’s not piss off our friend.”

Yvara rolled in with Brynjolf in tow, something which made Sora’s brow go up in mild disbelief. He automatically fetched out two bottles of mead and set them on the counter, then leaned forward to rest his elbows on the bar. “I’m missing something here.”

She yanked the cork out of her bottle as she took a seat and set it down. “Yes, I suppose you are. There’s this thing I want to do, and I worked out a deal with Brynjolf here, but…”

He wanted to complete that sentence, but refrained.

“Considering where I need to go…” She trailed off again, glanced around to see who was present, then said quietly, “I need to break into the Thalmor Embassy. I’m fairly certain between the two of us we can get in through the, uh, back door I found. But I wouldn’t mind having a tiny bit extra help, just in case, and I know you guys are not the least bit fond of them.”

“We haven’t gotten around to poking our noses in over there, true,” he said just as quietly, his gaze skipping sideways for a moment as Kiri popped up as if he’d been a part of the conversation from the start. “But going there would afford us the opportunity to acquire some potentially valuable
information. It’d be a win-win situation.”

“Are you after something in particular?” Kiri asked.

“That woman wants me to find information, but she probably has some asinine plan that would put me at direct risk.”

“And not her?” he asked.

Yvara rolled her eyes in disgust and nodded. “Oh, and he figured it out,” she said, tilting her head toward Brynjolf.

Sora eyed the thief. “Interesting.”

“Is this the sort of thing where you’d need to remove something from the place?” Kiri asked.

“Because even though we could be like shadows, if something important is stolen… That might determine who you’d want with you.”

“Very possibly, yes,” she said. “But I’m going in blind, really. I’m not sure either way. I’ll know what it is I’m after when I see it.”

Sora looked at his brother. “Val might be the right one,” he said, alluding to his Cloud’s persistent propagations—something he continued to suspect was part of the package deal they got from Sheogorath in compensation for a lack of “real” magic, the alteration of their inborn powers, like a melding of magic and flame—so long as he wasn’t trying it on anything too large or too complicated.

Kiri’s gaze bore into him for long moments, then he nodded. “And he can alert you if I’m needed for something unexpected. That being so, I will not get too deeply involved in anything for the time being.”

Yvara was casting a confused look at the two of them, but her expression smoothed out and she nodded slightly, as if to herself. “Oh… Right. I think I get it. Yes, that would be good. Hopefully not necessary, but good to have in the event.”

“All right. Let me get Val and ask,” he said, then disappeared into the back. Val was in his room, making a complicated structure out of sugar cubes. “Is that … supposed to be Markarth?”

“Yep!” Val said without looking up.

“I have a potential job for you, if you’d like to come downstairs.”

“Okay!” Val set down a partially carved cube and got up.

Shortly thereafter Val was off with Yvara and Brynjolf. He would have to wait on the details, but he was a patient enough man.

Val scurried in with a thoughtful look on his face and took a seat at the table in time for Sora to dish up breakfast. “It wasn’t anything special, going up there,” he said as he accepted a plate. “Just finding some documents. I made copies of the ones she found so they didn’t know they were stolen. There was someone down there in their little dungeon area, some thief fellow. Brynjolf went all wibbly over it, but between potions and Yvara’s healing spells, they were able to get him moving again.”
“So they’ll still know something happened,” he pointed out.

Val nodded. “Yep, and I offered to have Kiri come so he could cover that up, but they said not to bother. There was a dead body down there below the trap door, so they hauled that up, swapped the clothes around, and left it where the thief was. For all we know the Thalmor are too busy being important to notice small details.” After a shrug he dove into his food.

A minute later Val continued, “Anyway, we got the thief prisoner out and took off, though Brynjolf ended up stealing a horse so the guy could ride. Even after being healed he wasn’t in the best of shape. I expect those two went back to Riften. Yvara vanished somewhere along the way, but I figure she went back to her house to read that stuff.”

“And your opinion of the embassy?” he asked.

“I think Kiri and I should go there and give it another look,” Val said. “I’m not saying we should burn the place down or anything, but maybe we should consider burning the place down.”

Sora chuckled. “Something to think about,” he said. “It wouldn’t solve anything, though. The Thalmor would just send more people.”

Val shrugged. “Yeah. Just means more assholes to kill when one of us is in a bad mood for whatever reason. Because really, most of them actually buy into the crap they spout and think purges are a fun way to pass the time.”

That was not a sentiment he could disagree with.

Yvara rolled in with no expression, which meant she was unhappy about something. He fetched out a bottle of middling mead and set it on the counter, then ducked into the back long enough to get a bowl of Viper’s favorite salad for her.

She smiled briefly when he set it down, hissed, “I really dislike that woman,” then took a bite.

“Delphine?” he asked quietly.

Yvara nodded and said, “I get that she’s paranoid beyond belief, but she wanted me to go there anyway to get information. Then when I tell her what I found out, not having waited around for her make up some stupid plans, she doesn’t believe me until I throw a dossier at her.”

“What did she want you to do, then?”

“She had some damn fool plan about me going to a party there and finding a moment to slip away so I could find the information she wanted.”

“At a Thalmor party?” he said in disbelief. “A complete stranger shows up and that’s not supposed to be suspicious and cause the emissary to keep a close eye on you?”

“There’s some Bosmer who works there who hates the Thalmor,” Yvara replied. “He was going to help with that, but still… Yes, she finagles an invitation for me, this utterly unknown woman, and—well, as I pointed out, I wasn’t appreciative of the idea that she was thrusting me into the spotlight and placing me on the Thalmor hit list, assuming they could make the connection between a guest and things suddenly going missing.”

“She’d be providing an extra target, and distraction, for the emissary.”
“Exactly. Well, I can’t stay, really. I need to go chase down some fortress or something with her and that friend of hers I rescued. I’ll be in touch.” She wolfed down the remainder of her salad, grabbed the bottle and re-corked it, then took off.

Sora’s intuition started to creep up his spine, so he snagged Viper and whispered, “Something’s going on. Low key reaction this time, but I think we’re being targeted again.”

Viper nodded and disappeared, literally.

Sora continued to wash dishes as part of closing while he lamented getting to bed at a reasonable hour.

Viper and Kiri arrived a bit later dragging a large, dark-haired, bearded Nord man. He was pushed over onto his back and Viper reached down to touch the man’s forehead, then sat back after a minute with a sigh on his lips. “Maven again. He’s here to look only, but he’s had his own thoughts about the mission, which is probably why your intuition kicked in, Sora. He wouldn’t go against Maven’s orders, though.”

“I have to wonder if Brynjolf passed along the message,” he said. “Because if he did, she obviously doesn’t think we’ll retaliate in any meaningful way.”

“Then let’s be ‘kind’ to this one,” Lorenzo said, “and strike back a bit later, hard.”

“We just need to decide how,” Shi added. “And when. It’s been, what? Approximately a month since the last attempt?”

“Something like that,” he said. “Yeah, we’ll be kind again. Wipe his memory and dump him in Riften, drunk. We’ll talk about Maven soon. I just want to get to bed at this point.”

Kiri nodded and shared a look with Viper.

He looked up when he sensed Yvara approaching Filigrana. She came in with a grim look on her face and sat down with a sigh. He fetched out a bottle for her and said, “Something tells me you finally figured out what you’re supposed to do.”

She glared at him and yanked the cork out. “You could have warned me,” she bitched.

“Ah, no,” he said, shaking his head. “I thought telling you that a god sent us north so we’d be nearby for you was more than enough to kick your brains into overdrive trying to figure out why.”

“I’ve been distracted!” she cried and knocked back a good quarter of the bottle. “I need to trap a damn dragon,” she hissed quietly.

He looked over toward the door out of habit, despite it being closed, then said, “Like that one story? Numinex?”

“Yeah. And I just know Jarl Balgruuf is going to think I’m insane.”

“You do remember the part where I said we’re here to help…?”

She glared at him again and had more mead, then jumped a little when Viper appeared next to her.
and said, “So, I expect I’ll be heading to Dragonsreach to investigate a bit?”

“Please,” he said, unable to not smile. “Once you know the current score we can plan something out.”

“I will take care of that tonight,” Viper promised, “and we can discuss it over breakfast.” He paused to eye Yvara. “You should probably be here for that.”

She transferred her glare to Viper, who smiled insouciantly at her. “Right.”

The next morning Viper let Yvara in and ushered her to the table, where Sora slid a plate in front of her.

“That reminds me,” Sora said. “Did Serana ever say anything about the blood potion-mead experiment?”

Kiri shook his head. “And I didn’t think to ask.”

“Say what now?” Yvara said.

“We have your opinion on the mix, but we’re still waiting on hers, it seems,” he told her. “Anyway, report please.”

Viper nodded. “The jarl would deny the request on the basis of the continuing hostilities between the Empire and the Stormcloaks. His reasoning is that any sign of weakness would cause one side to attack, just as would happen if he were to make overtures to either side.”

“Now wait a minute,” Yvara said. “A handful of guards took care of that first dragon. Sure, a few people died, but…”

“But that was at the watchtower,” Lorenzo said, “not on the balcony of the jarl’s house.”

Yvara scowled. “So if, say, Ulfric was no longer an issue?”

“His death would be faster than joining a side in the war and winning it,” Rio said. “The man has his reasons. All of us here probably know that. But…”

“Yes, the Thalmor had a dossier on him, what was done to him, both in the Great War and regarding the Markarth Incident,” Yvara said. “But he can’t even govern his own city effectively. He ignores any calls for help unless they come from fellow Nords. He’ll accept non-Nords into his army, but…”

“So you’re not opposed to him having an unfortunate accident? And his right-hand man?” he asked.

“Galmar might not have Ulfric’s charisma,” Shi said, “but he does have a certain level of authority.”

“Tempting to soul trap them first,” Lal muttered.

“And what about that Delphine chick?” Rio said.

Yvara scowled. “Those two,” she said with a huff. “When we went to open up Sky Haven Temple, they stood back and let me do all the dangerous work. This, from people who supposedly serve and protect Dragonborn? The woman loves to try to order me around like I was her personal toy.”

Val laughed uproariously. “Oh, the images that creates in my mind…”

Sora heaved a sigh. “Val, stop being perverted.”
“So here’s a potential plan,” Shi said. “We take care of Ulfric and his right-hand man, sending that side of the war into a downward spiral. Perhaps those men will still fight, but without the leadership they presently … enjoy … and without the legitimacy he brings, I expect they would stay away from Whiterun. On top of that, we can persuade the jarl to allow Yvara to use Dragonsreach for her plan.”

“Well, I already have a name,” she said. “I know who to taunt.”

“Seriously, though,” Val persisted. “Should we check up on this Delphine chick and see what her real intentions are?”

Sora looked at Yvara who, after a moment, shrugged.

“I guess?”

“All right. Kiri, head to this Sky Haven Temple and do some digging. Once you’re back we can discuss how we’d like to do this. We could simply persuade Jarl Balgruuf, but…”

“The Thalmor want the war to keep going for as long as possible,” Yvara said. “That was in one of the dossiers I found.”

“Well, taking a side and winning that way would result in a lot of deaths anyway,” Lal said. “This would just shortcut the whole process.”

Sora started gathering up plates with Rio’s help as Kiri slid into a seat next to Yvara to talk location.

“Let’s make teams.”

Renato rolled his eyes at the obviousness of the statement and said, “I want Delphine and Esbern. Who’s with me?”

Lal raised her hand. “Partly because I think it won’t hurt for an illusionist to be on each team.”

Renato nodded and sat back.

“I want Maven,” Viper said.

Val flung his hand into the air. “Me, too! I want that bitch dead.”

Sora chuckled at his Cloud’s enthusiasm. “Right,” he said, then looked at Kiri.

“Ulfric it is.”

“I will,” Shi said with a nod toward Kiri. “We can take a few days to discuss how we want to accomplish our tasks, and then act, preferably on the same day.”

“I do wonder, though,” he said. “We take out Ulfric, the war is technically won, but I wonder if the currently pro-Stormcloak jarls would be replaced, or if they’d fall back into line.”

“Jarl Laila is a complete pushover,” Val said, “and her own court leads her around by the nose. Still, she’s better than Maven being in that position. Hey, wait a minute, we really ought to take out the idiots over at the embassy, too, right? Throw all that into confusion. Alinor isn’t exactly next door and they can’t teleport like the Psijic Order, so them getting word and sending out a new group would take a while.”
Sora nodded. “True.”

Kiri exchanged a look with Shi. “We could swing by there after we’re done with Windhelm. I’m sure we could figure out an accident that would take out the emissary and her cronies. We’ll figure something out while we’re there.”

Viper wandered over to Elysium the morning they returned to fetch Yvara for a meeting. Sora was ready with breakfast, though Yvara chose to have a blood potion to go with the food. After she sat down she said, “So, you guys have fun?”

“Well, my dear,” Kiri said, “I would say so. It’s a matter now on the one front for messengers to spread the word about the not so glorious demise of the Stormcloak.”

“What did you do?” Yvara asked.

Kiri laughed creepily. “I decided to combine things, with Shi’s approval.”

“Oh?” she said, leaning forward with interest.

“I’m going to assume you’re not a delicate flower so—”

She snorted rudely.

“I will commend Shi on his excellent technique of disintegrating the linings of their throats, causing them to drown in their own blood while, at the same time, as I had helpfully warped us all to the embassy, they were fitted into human-shaped holes disintegrated in the embassy walls and pinned in place. Then I used illusions to drive every last Thalmor stark raving mad. When we left they were all drooling and babbling to themselves.” Kiri grinned. “It was a total coincidence that an Imperial Legion squad happened by the place and noticed their interesting new decorations.”

Sora hummed. “Interesting solution, guys. How about Team Haven?”

Renato and Lal shared a look, then Lal said, “It’s chilly up there in Sky Haven Temple. Renato thought they could use a little warming up, but then they looked too warm, so I cooled them down. It was sad when they shattered, but on the other hand, it’s not like their bodies could be reanimated.”

“Well, they were a disgrace to the Blades, so… Nothing like the ones we knew.”

Yvara eyed him. “Do I even want to know what plans they had brewing?”

He hummed. “The death of Paarthurnax, for one, with you as his killer.”

She scowled. “I’m sure there’s more.”

“She never had a thought in her head as to actually respecting you. She was so paranoid and dismissive of anything that didn’t come from her own head that you were supposed to just buckle down and behave for her, like a dog or something, and act on her commands. And so far, she’s been of approximately zero help to you.”

“All she really did was piss me off and put me in danger. I get enough of that just walking down the road in my real form. I didn’t need her asinine schemes to make it worse.”

“She would have,” Kiri said. “She was so paranoid it made her into a control freak. If she could have
she’d have put a collar around your neck and attached a leash.”

“All right,” he said. “How about Team Honey?”

Val laughed. “Did you know? She has a room in the cellar of her manor in town that holds the remains of a Black Sacrament.” He fetched a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it over.

Astrid,

I thought your people were supposed to be reliable. I’ve performed the Black Sacrament, I’ve paid the proper penance and I’ve waited patiently for results. If you can’t handle a simple assassination, I’ll find someone who can. I want this contract handled, and I want it handled immediately!

Maven Black-Briar

He smirked and handed it to Renato. “Yeah, that didn’t work out so well for any of them, right? So…?”

Viper sighed faintly. “Val thought it would be apropos to leave her corpse in the middle of that Black Sacrament after he propagated a punch to her chest to liquefy her heart.”

“I guess that’s one way to cause a heart attack,” he commented quietly. “Good work, you two. I’m sure someone will find her at some point.”

“Probably the granddaughter, and even though she’s not as bad as the others were,” Viper said, “she’s still the one doing alchemical experiments and likes to go on about how it’s exhilarating to watch the heart stop and the eyes to go blind. A little trauma won’t hurt her, and she’ll probably be pleased.”

Yvara looked up from the note Renato had passed her. “I’m not a huge fan of attacking people who haven’t first attacked me, but I can see the value in assassins, and even shift my view in terms of a proxy attack on behalf of someone who has been wronged. If Ingun gets out of control, there’s every possibility that someone in Riften will drift this way on the advice of the beggars there and cut a deal of some kind with you guys. As for Delphine and Esbern? She wanted to use me like a puppet and Esbern was henpecked enough to go along with it. Hell, he may even have agreed—”

“He did,” Kiri.

Yvara sighed and nodded. “So…”

“I will head up to Dragonsreach with you long enough to ensure that the jarl will assist you,” Kiri said. “He may want a day for preparations, but what I do will stick. I would prefer he agrees of his own volition, of course.”

“Well,” Sora said, “let’s give it a day or so to see word reach here about Ulfric’s death, then move forward.” He turned to Yvara and said, “You probably won’t be able to take anyone with you…”

She nodded. “I know. I don’t think the gods would allow that. It … scares me, but…”

“But we already know just how skilled you are;” Val said, “that you’re intelligent, methodical—”

“And sometimes get a bit crazy,” Yvara interrupted.
Sora rolled his eyes. “Any decent fighter does, and it seems to be in the job description for anyone approaching hero status, never mind being one. Sometimes a little crazy is exactly what’s needed. Baffle your opponents with a ‘What the fuck just happened?’ status. Mind you, when I was sent to part of Oblivion—and I don’t mean the gates—I ended up there alone. That was a bit nerve-wracking, I assure you. But I found someone there who was willing to help, even if I didn’t need it in the end.”

“So you—wait,” Yvara said. “When I gained understanding of Dragonrend I had to be sent back in time briefly to get it. There were three heroes fighting the dragons on Alduin’s side, and Alduin himself. One died during that fight, but she went bravely. The other two… I assume they died honorable deaths, however a Nord truly figures that.”

Sora nodded. “So for all you know, those three might be there to assist you against Alduin. And four people Shouting has got to be more effective.”

“Yeah. It was just me and Paarthurnax at the Throat of the World, and we managed, but my poor heart… It was beating so hard I thought it would escape my chest. It took a while for everything to settle down after Alduin fled.”

“Adrenaline rush,” Lal said. “Yeah, that’ll do it. I assume it was Paarthurnax who told you who to taunt.”

Yvara nodded. “Who better to ask? He would know all of the ones presently flying around. So yes, he gave me a name and even explained why the guy would show up when I called.”

“All right. You two can head on up to Dragonsreach and sweet talk the jarl into getting that trap up there in working order. But while we’re waiting on that… Yvara, are there any Shouts you wanted to get, uh…”

“Unlocked?”

He shrugged. “However that works for you.”

She shook her head. “I have quite a few I’m able to use, but it still boils down to magic most of the time. You were right about that. I really do like Marked for Death, though. Never hurts to use that one on a tough enemy. Though…” She paused for a moment. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot I consider terribly tough at this point.”

Sora grinned at her. “The big bad I was sent against all on my own? Took him down with one web, and his two children. Just don’t let it go to your head too much and you’ll be fine. We’ll have to go dragon hunting at some point so I can see how effective my flames are against one.”

“Well, considering that Alduin seems to have resurrected approximately a million of the suckers…”

He nodded.

Brenuin rushed in two days later to spread the news of Ulfric’s death, so Kiri shot a look at Yvara, who nodded and got up. Sora turned his attention back to the beggar, handing over a bottle of mead.

“And they said the Thalmor did it,” Brenuin said, ripping the cork free.

“Well, they don’t like any of us, but… That seems like a drastic measure in support of the Empire.”
Brenuin necked down half the bottle before saying, “No idea. Everyone’s just throwing out weird ideas about what could have happened.”

“Huh. Since you’re here, can I ask you to make a delivery for me?”

“Hm? Depends. What kind of delivery?”

“Just a note, to Jorrvaskr. You can have a second bottle for it.”

“Sure!”

He quickly wrote out a note to the Companions letting them know their latest order was ready for pick-up, then handed it over along with a second bottle.

Kiri wandered in a short time later with a smirk gracing the corner of his mouth. “All clear,” he said quietly. “Yvara’s gone home to pack anything she might need. She’s got this really interesting enchanted pouch that’s rather like our tent, but far less cumbersome. And of course, she can always summon Luggage. Not sure it could get to her in Sovngarde, but…”

“Well,” he said, and sighed. “She’s strong. She had to be, to transition and come through that relatively sane. Maybe at some point she’ll tell us exactly what happened, but until then, I’ll go by what I’ve seen. So they’ll probably be ready tomorrow,” he said, not quite making it a question.

Kiri nodded. “I reinforced their desire to be helpful and follow through. I plan to be there, tucked away in a corner, to watch. Yvara’s said that dragons can’t be fooled by invisibility, but what we do isn’t magic, so it might yet work to keep me off the table as a potential snack. The one up at Kynesgrove certainly didn’t gun for me, but he was being kept distracted by her and Delphine.” He shrugged.

“All right. Suppose I could make up a care package she could take along. At least have something other than just blood potions with her.”

Kiri headed out the next morning, care package in hand, to watch Yvara head off to destiny. He was back an hour later with a bemused look on his face. “The plan worked perfectly, though Farengar is something of a fool. He tried to take scales and blood off the dragon while it was still locked into place. At any rate, Yvara hitched a ride and flew off to the east after making a deal with it.”

“Could be days or … who knows,” he replied. “How was her mood?”

“Good. She seemed amused, actually. She’ll pull through. I have faith.”

Something was coming. No—someone. Sora looked up from his account book, toward the door, and watched as it opened and revealed Yvara. She gave him a brief smile and walked over, to take a seat on one of the stools and prop her chin on her hand.

He automatically got her a mead and set it on the counter. “You look all right. Tired, a bit awed, but far more relaxed than you’ve been in a long time.”

“It’s done,” she said quietly, then pulled the cork out and took a long sip of her mead. “And you were right, I had help. The three I learned that Shout from were there and pitched in.”

He leaned in with his elbows on the counter and said quietly, “Kiri told me about the first one, over at the western watchtower, what happened in the aftermath. I could be mistaken, but … I rather
doubt this one went the same way.”

Yvara shook her head. “No, his … essence? Whatever. It all flaked away and spiraled up into the sky. I figure … Akatosh put him in a time out, so to speak, for his hubris. Something like that. I expect he’ll be back, centuries down the road. Whenever it is that this world is ready to rebirth itself.”

“Now there’s an odd concept for people who don’t age,” he replied. “What happens to us? Do we stand on nothing in the void between the world and the stars while a new world forms? Or are we finally swept through the Dreamsleeve to be reborn along with the world?”

Yvara looked uneasy at that, her mouth twisting. “Not something I really want to think about just yet.”

“You get used to living,” he said. “Even when sometimes it seems like infinite boredom stretches out in front of you, there’s enough in life to make it interesting and exciting that the thought of not being is painful and frightening, the idea of not being yourself any longer.” He shook his head and got a bottle of mead for himself. “Not something to dwell on.”

“Not everyone,” she said. “I saw any number of souls in Sovngarde. And there are other places, though… Well, supposedly, should I die, I have a place in Sovngarde.”

Sora chuckled. “With a bunch of people who practice the three Fs?”

Yvara’s nose wrinkled. “Yeah. Speaking of which, I did not see Ulfric or Galmar.”

His brow went up. “They probably earned a place during the Great War, or even during their retaking of Markarth.”

“Alduin had this thing,” she said slowly. “A soul snare. Some of the souls there explained—badly, because they all talked like a damn bard—that Alduin used the mist to confuse their senses, to make it easier for him to swoop in and consume them, for power.”

He huffed. “I admit that I’m at least mildly amused at the idea of those two getting to Sovngarde only to be eaten by a dragon. Anyone else interesting you run across while there?”

“Kodlak, for one. Jurgen Windcaller. High King Torygg. Ysgramor. As much as I wasn’t looking forward to the big fight, if I’d spent any more time around that bunch I’d have started speaking like a bard myself, so I went ahead and spoke to the three, got on with things. After it was over Tsun, the… He called himself a shield-thane to Shor, and he guards the way to the Hall of Valor, testing people to see if they qualify to enter. Tsun sent me back and gave me a new Shout, to call one of those three into battle if I needed help.”

“I’m going to assume the place was markedly different from the Soul Cairn.”

“Oh yes, very much so. It was an idyllic place, though the sky was really weird. Beautiful, though.”

“Paradise was beautiful, but deadly. It was artificial, though. Did it actually take you a week, or have you been wandering again?”

“Oh, just a couple of days. I’ve been searching through Dwemer ruins in search of Aetherium shards. I found one quite a while ago, but then I saw this book and realized what I might have, so I’ve been searching for more pieces. I’m heading northwest next and leaving the south for last. It may amount to nothing, but it’s something to do while I’m furthering my skills.”

“Having goals within goals is not a bad goal,” he said, then smiled when she shot an annoyed look at
him. “You hungry?”

Yvara came back a few days later and claimed a seat at the bar, accepting a bottle of mead from Sora. “Hello,” she said. “I would like to talk about borrowing someone for a little adventure.”

Viper materialized in the seat next to her and aimed an inquiring look her way.

She smiled at him and shook her head. “This is against Dwemer automatons, so…”

Viper’s mouth quirked down unhappily. “In that case, Val might be a good choice, or Shi.”

“Well, from experience, I can say that they shrug off frost attacks, and it’s hit or miss on fire and shock, so physical attacks are generally more effective,” she said. “Shock is the most effective magic overall.”

Sora nodded. “Well, let me get those two in here and see which one wants to help.”

Viper got up and drifted into the back, saying, “I’ll get them.”

When they arrived and took seats Yvara repeated the earlier information.

Despite Val looking excited by the prospect, Shi spoke up. “I am curious as to the effects of disintegration on these mechanical guards.”

Val immediately settled down. “I go out way more often than you do, so it’s all yours if you want it.”

“Thank you, Val,” Shi said quietly.

“I don’t think it’ll take more than today,” Yvara said. “The place is a bit southeast of Ivarstead, so getting there should be quick. At most, we’d be done sometime tomorrow.”

Sora eyed Shi for a moment, then said, “I have a few things I can pack for this, food-wise, while you guys get ready.”

“No, we took care of the big bad—which turned out to be a simply massive Dwemer construct—and Yvara was able to fashion a crown of sorts with those shards, though she could have chosen a shield or a staff,” Shi said. “The ghost, Katria, thanked her for seeing her dream through, and departed to wherever they go. I admit to being more than a little shaky on how ghosts work.”

He nodded after a moment. “I take it she took off in a random direction at that point.”

Shi nodded. “After we took out a dragon, yes. I don’t know if it’s because of my flame type or if they have no resistance to them, but taking it down was fairly simple. You have to be very quick. All those games we played…”

It was a few days later that Yvara showed up again, that time with Serana and Brynjolf in tow. Brynjolf shot him a disgruntled look as he took a seat and said, “You just had to take her out, didn’t you.”

Sora’s brow went up. “We’re not thieves. When people threaten us, we strike back in a permanent fashion if they don’t get the message. She had how many warnings?”
“Hey,” Serana said, “before you two get into it, break out the mead, please.”

He stepped back so he could get three bottles, set them on the counter, and said, “Speaking of that, what was your opinion of the mix?”

“Hm? Oh. Weird.”

“Fair enough. Though I wonder… Anyway, Brynjolf, if your lot was as stealthy and skilled as they ought to be to even warrant a guild structure, you wouldn’t need someone like her terrorizing the populace. She was like a spoiled toddler throwing tantrums with her power.”

Brynjolf sighed. “I know,” he admitted. “Things have been looking up.”

“You and yours are more than welcome to visit as normal customers. So long as you don’t come here with an eye for anything else, we’ll get along just fine. Now, are you guys hungry, or…?”

He was listening to Kiri tell Serana all about the Benirus Manor adventure when a courier entered the bar and presented him with a scroll. He took it and unrolled the thing to read: Went to Solstheim as ‘her’ to see about those cultists. Left a new housecarl with Valdimar. Will be in touch.

He handed the scroll to Serana. She read it and heaved a sigh. “Another one? I knew about the trip, but not this addition.”

“She must not think it’ll be too difficult if she didn’t take anyone with her,” he commented.

Serana shrugged. “I think she was worried about connecting anyone she cares about with her. I can’t say I disagree with the reasoning.”

He couldn’t either, though given it had only come up once that they could assume disguises and she had been distracted by any number of things, it was no surprise she hadn’t remembered that detail. On the other hand, he had never bothered to remind her of it. “Well, she knows she can ask. We can come up with something if necessary.”

In the end it was unnecessary. Yvara herself strolled in with a grin and took a seat at the bar. “Well, that was fun.”

“Cultists are fun?” he asked. “Actually, hold off on that for now. How about you stay after close?”

“Sure. I’ll go drop some stuff off at the house and come back,” she said.

He gave her some mead to go and got back to his usual duties for the remainder of the day. When Yvara returned she had Serana with her. Sora slid bowls of salad in front of them—Yvara brightened on seeing it—and waited until Kiri and Viper had glossed the last few customers out and locked the doors to say, “I’m going to assume that your crazy cultists weren’t much more for common sense than my crazy cultists.”

Yvara snorted. “In short, they were the minions of the very first Dragonborn, who was originally a Dragon Priest. That fellow decided he had better things to do than, say, take out Alduin. Apparently those three I learned from asked him to help, and he bugged off. He was saved from certain death by—” She stopped and bit her lip. “I don’t really want to say the name. The Daedric Lord of Knowledge and Fate.”

“Ah,” he said with a nod. Hermaeus Mora, then.
“He was trapped in that realm and made plans to retake control of Solstheim, which he ruled back in
the day, through this bizarre form of mind control and his cultists. Originally, when I realized just
what Daedra was involved, I freed the Skaal who were enraptured and got on the first boat back to
Skyrim.”

“What changed your mind?” Serana asked.

“Well, on my way south toward Riften I ran into another one of those inept Dark Brotherhood
assassins and that cheered me up considerably. I talked to Brynjolf and then got some rest, but—I
dreamed.”

Serana stared at her in disbelief.

“Yeah, I know. We don’t dream. Well I did. I was worried because it was a Daedric Lord who
seemed to think I was next in line to become a minion. Sheogorath is one thing. Akatosh came to me
in the dream and more or less told me my soul was safe. I guess if it belongs to anyone it’s him. He
also told me to go back and finish things. And let me tell you, wandering around in that realm is
creepy, really creepy. All tentacles and oily black water and eyes that expand and pop and … blech.

“I had to fight a dragon while I was over there and Miraak showed up just as its soul was releasing
and stole it from me. At that point I got angry, because no one steals from me and lives.”

Viper promptly stole a strawberry from her salad and aimed an insouciant smile at her. “Nobody?”
he taunted, then popped it into his mouth.

She growled at him. “I expect a discount on my meal due to theft from a worker,” she said to Sora.

He grinned. “I hadn’t planned on charging you for it to begin with. It’s after close, remember? This is
family time.”

“What happened with Miraak?” Val asked, leaning forward.

“Him? Well… He’s a dirty cheater, or was. I finished learning a Shout that would allow me to press
a dragon into service and used that to get a ride to where he was. The dragon fought on my side,
while Miraak had two on his. But they weren’t really troublesome as they mostly flew around, rarely
landing. Miraak, on the other hand, had this trick. Every time I got him close to death he would
speed up and sink into that weird black water, then pop back up in the center of the … arena and
suck the soul out of one of his allies to restore his health.”

“What … a healing spell was too plebian?” Kiri said sarcastically.

“I guess. All it did was point out how very little he valued anyone but himself. The final time he did
it he took out my ally, and then, after I was about to finish him off, he was speared by a tentacle and
admonished for his lack of loyalty or something. I was able to gather up all his stuff before getting
the hell out of there. And after taking care of a minor errand and stopping in to see the blacksmith
there, I came home. If I ever go back it’ll be as myself.”

“What did you mean by mind control?” Kiri asked with a slight frown marring his forehead.

“I don’t know how he did it unless it was connected to that Shout, Bend Will. I didn’t try it on
anything but that one dragon, but I assume it’d work on people.” She gestured toward Sora’s
notebook so he placed it in front of her along with a pencil. After examining the pencil she used to
write down: Gol Hah Dov. “At least, I think that’d be the closest equivalent. Speaking a language
isn’t the same as writing it.”
“Huh. Not the kind of thing the average Tongue would want to use often,” he commented.

“All of it was learned over there, and two of the words came from the lord of that realm, so... I’d say it’s pretty special, and rare. And unless I am in desperate need for quick travel from one side of the country to the other and just happen to stumble over a handy dragon, not one that’ll get much use. Anyway, it’s possible he used some form of that to make the people of Solstheim do his bidding each night. Hell, I woke up that first morning to find myself helping them, but I was able to break out of it on my own rather than having to wait to be released. I’m not sure whether Rieklings count as people or creatures, but they were subverted, too.”

Serana wiggled her hand back and forth. “Not quite people, but organized in that fashion to a fair degree. I think they can talk.”

Yvara nodded. “Well, hopefully I’ll be able to spend some time working on my magic. I still don’t get why that Psijic decreed I’d be Arch-Mage—unless it had something to do with possessing actual common sense—but with time I’ll be able to work up to master level.”

“A clear goal,” he said agreeably. “So... Hopefully there won’t be more potentially world-altering events any time soon.”

It was back to business as usual the next day when a shifty-eyed young man skulked into Filigrana and took a seat at a corner table, anxiety hazing around him like a cloak.
19: Journey’s End

Chapter Notes

My personally-formatted e-book versions are available: azw3, mobi, and epub.

Sora, Serana, Everyone Else —

Kind of in a bind here. Apparently being a responsible member of society means you get dragged off into bizarre quests and circumstances. I don’t know quite how to explain this. It has been explained to me that I am the reincarnation of a soul that originated on a different world. This world has magic, but not the same kind as what we’re used to.

That version of me was killed by some psycho—I’ll explain in more detail once I understand things better—and my soul ended up reborn into our Nirn. However, there’s some weird tournament thing going on here and they use some enchanted cup to determine who competes. The moron who killed that me decided I must still be alive, so he arranged for my name to be entered.

And wouldn’t you know, the enchantments had the power to drag me through the Void and into that world. What is it about people who were born or chosen to be, as Viper put it, “big damn heroes”? I am at something of a loss here and would really like some back-up. Fawkes (a phoenix—some kind of fire-bird) says Bormahu will allow for one companion to join me for this. As much as I would like to have an illusionist with me, I know better than to take one of the family away from Sora for the better part of a year.

So, Serana? I think of you as my older, more experienced, and wiser sister. We’ve never talked about it, but that’s how I feel. Will you please join me here? I won’t be able to return until all three tasks are complete or I stand to lose my ability to do magic.

Fawkes assures me that Bormahu will bring us back once this is all over. I just have to get through this stupid tournament. Give your reply to Luggage. I’ll summon him back in half an hour.

— Yvara

Yvara —

I’m touched, actually. And yes, I will join you, sister. I don’t understand how, but I assume that Akatosh will handle that aspect.

— Serana

P.S. Sora here. You will be writing to us on a regular basis, correct?
Filigrana —

You would not believe just how idiotic these people are here! I swear, the concept of common sense is seriously lacking. It’s like having the ability to do magic has corrupted their heads and made them into sheep. Whoever is most persuasive or loud is the shepherd or something.

Beard is the leader here at this school. He told me his name at one point, but I honestly can’t be bothered to remember it. Red is my previous incarnation’s mother, but I avoid all of that whenever possible. As far as I’m concerned my parents died in the attack that saw me transformed into a creature of the night.

(She’s being dramatic again. There’s a half-vampire in this world—how that’s even possible I don’t know—who is a very popular singer, if you can believe it. All of his song titles are vampire-based puns.)

Will you please load Luggage up with some mead? And maybe some of that salad? I tried to explain it to the servants here (some weird little creatures called house-elves—oh, if only this was the fate of the Thalmor) but they cannot get it right. I’ll send Luggage to Valerica for a new supply of blood potions, so don’t worry about that part of things.

(Do you think if we sent over a book from here you could check to see if you could decipher it? For all we know the languages here are similar to the ones from your original world.)

There are three other competitors, all of them young, one from each of the schools involved. The rules stated that you had to be seventeen to put your name in for consideration, though I wouldn’t doubt some of the younger students tried to figure out how to bypass the restrictions.

I was actually expected to show up to something called the “Weighing of the Wands” so that some old guy I decided to call Wispy could check them. I showed him my Wabbajack and he turned Beard into a mudcrab with it. Temporarily, I’m sure. I got out of there before he turned back. Some crazy lady was there and wanted “pictures” of the four of us, and to write up a story, so…

(Not to worry, he turned back. We saw him later on and he seemed fine.)

The “First Task” is supposed to be soon. It’s supposed to test our daring. Somehow … I don’t think I’ll have any problems.

— Yvara (and Serana)

Yvara, Serana —

I packed up Luggage with several cases of mead and a good portion of that salad. Let me know if there’s something else you get a craving for. Definitely send a book along and we’ll check it out.

(Send many! We speak so many languages that odds are we may already know it or be able to translate it.)

Fine, send many. Lorenzo is chomping at the bit to mess around with potentially unfamiliar things and is already making plans to create another workshop. He has been badgering Shi for his help on that point. He is also interested in so-called magical plants. Since you’re at a school, perhaps they have greenhouses or something you could get samples from?
Perhaps this Fawkes will be able to say one way or the other if transporting them here would cause problems. I know from my original world that transplanted plants or creatures can sometimes have serious repercussions on the local ecology.

Horse showed up at Elysium and Valdimar has been caring for him. We have to assume you’ve also sent letters to the College and Brynjolf, so keep that in mind if you’re sending instructions to your underlings.

(We miss you!)

Val says, “Hi.” We’d love it if you’d tell us more about the world you find yourself in. Books would probably do a good job of covering many aspects there. If you can find one of those crazy people to take you into a shopping area… We can send gold if you don’t already have plenty stashed away in Luggage or that pouch of yours.

— Everyone

Filigrana —

You would not believe what the first task was. It was dragons! The kids all looked sick when they pulled miniature ones out of the pouch we selected from, poor things. When it was my turn I just strolled out and introduced myself. As you can imagine, the dragon just about wet itself in fear. Even on an entirely different world, Dovahkiin are not unknown.

We did the usual greetings of fire—for some reason the crowd was screaming in fear the entire time—and then I got the golden egg I was supposed to acquire. The dragon—Brisuah, such a pretty name, and female—looked relieved to have escaped the situation. The egg contains a clue or something, but it’s not like I care. I’m just killing time, right?

(You’d think none of these people had ever seen resistances in action before.)

We stuck by the lake afterward to allow the crowds to all filter off, and one of the champions came to visit with us. His name is Viktor, supposedly famous here for some game he plays (as if anyone on Nirn has that kind of luxury) and is expected to make a living at. We compared cultures a bit, he was bright enough to spot that we’re vampires, and he eventually left because his leader would get antsy if he didn’t get back.

(He was surprisingly calm, and rather relieved when we had no idea what this Quidditch game was he’s supposedly famous for.)

Serana and I talked our way into visiting the magical village near the school and bought one of everything in terms of books. Just ask Luggage and it’ll spit them all out for you guys to go over. If possible, we’ll try to sneak out and investigate father afield, but something tells me this world is very different from Nirn, perhaps a lot closer to where you came from.

We’re out in the middle of nowhere, though, because the “normal” people might do evil things to the magic users.

(Worse than Nords when it comes to this sort of thing.)

If you want more books, we’ll have to see about finagling a trip into the main shopping area. As for
the plants, I was my persuasive best and the lady in charge of the greenhouses here was willing to pack some up that I’ll send when those are ready. There’s an apothecary in the village, too, but check out those books first.

— Yvara (and Serana)

Yvara, Serana —

The books you sent are in English, so they’re perfectly readable. Wherever you are it shares something with our original world. It is called Earth, by any chance? Countries like England, Italy, France, and Japan?

I included more salad, some cannoli, and a cheesecake. More mead, too. Any books you want to send this way would be great. Any and all topics regarding magic would be fine. We likely can’t use any of the spells, but some interesting ideas might come to light. Lorenzo, Shi, and Viper are going over the ones you sent with fine attention to detail.

Admittedly, the samples might not amount to anything. Their magic and Nirn’s are potentially too different for any of it to survive here. If any of it requires their magic to survive, well…

(But we still want to analyze samples!)

Lorenzo says, “Hi.” He’s very good at extracting things from … things. Have you made any other—well, not friends, exactly. I don’t see the point in making friends when you’ll be coming home in a few months. Any amusing people, at least?

(Pass on any good jokes!)

Rio says, “Hi.” And I don’t feel like explaining what he means. You’ve been around him enough to know for yourself.

— Everyone

Filigrana —

Yes, actually. I checked and this is Earth, and those places you mentioned are all here. Viktor is from some place called Bulgaria.

We’ve met a few interesting people. Most people just get nicknames because why bother to make an effort, but there’s two that are special enough to stand out. I already mentioned Viktor, the poor kid. Were any of us that painfully young at some point in our lives?

Anyway, the poor boy is inundated with screaming girls, presumably all wanting to marry him and have his babies, all because he’s good at a game. Go figure. The other one is this blonde waif of a girl who showed up at the Yule Ball the school hosted.

Tartan told me I had to go, so I asked Viktor for advice (Serana refused to come along and “play dress up” as she put it). We ended up escorting each other and getting through the meal, requisite
opening dance, plus one more before we casually fled the scene. These people have complicated dances made up and you know there’s nothing like that in Skyrim (or, I assume, Cyrodiil).

The waif—however she got in, since she’s technically a year too young to be there without an escort—danced on over to us and smiled like she had only a passing acquaintance with sanity. I think you guys would like her.

(After speaking with her, I wonder if she can see things other people cannot. It’s not such a stretch. Magical people can see ghosts, while non-magicals cannot. Not everyone can see flames. Either way, it’s left her ostracized and ridiculed by her peers.)

Yeah. She’s real sweet, though, so we told her, as we told Viktor, that she can stop by any time to visit, get away from it all. It kind of reminds me in a way of those poor girls in Rorikstead. They’re grown up now, but at the time… If I wasn’t such a nice person…

(I don’t think the leadership here would appreciate if I acted on my impulses. The waif’s name is Luna, by the way.)

Right. Luna. I expect we’ll be seeing plenty of her in the months to come. Viktor was curious about our magic so I sent Luggage to Valdimar to track down that ring Serana and I found over on Solstheim. We all went up to this place called the “Room of Requirement” and did some testing after reading a spell book didn’t quite produce the hoped for results.

The ring opened a connection to Aetherius, though, and after that they were able to cast Candlelight.

(Yes, they agreed to keep it a secret. Neither of them wanted additional attention anyway. It was an interesting experiment, though. I wonder if it’d work for you guys.)

It might, but I can’t imagine you’re in any hurry to test the idea. Send the usual supplies, if you will. They are greatly appreciated.

— Yvara (and Serana)

Yvara, Serana —

Lorenzo is having a field day playing with that stuff you sent. Quite a bit of it wilted the second it was out of Luggage, but that’s all right. It’s something new for him to play with. He was muttering something about mandragora and Hist, but I don’t think there’s a real connection there considering Hist trees are sentient and mandrakes are just deadly screamy brats.

I think we can empathize to a degree with Viktor. But unless he has some way to reliably disguise himself, he’s in for a rough time, never knowing if people want to know him, or get close to someone famous. As for the waif, maybe she can. We don’t know what’s really over there or what gods watch over that world, right?

Things have been more or less the usual here. We get the occasional other customer. We had to alter one fellow’s memory because he showed up for ridiculously self-serving reasons. I would ask our network to do a little more digging before subtly pointing people in our direction, but the less they know overall the less can be tricked out of them.

It’s entirely possible that ring would work for us, but we’ve gone centuries without needing magic as
you wield it, so it’s not something we’re particularly eager to try. We did obtain certain benefits when we transited, so… Wouldn’t want our patron to think we wanted more, you know?

— Everyone

**Filigrana —**

The “Second Task” was something of a joke, though these wizards (and witches) know some interesting spells. They have a variant on waterbreathing that looks strange, but it seems to be effective. I would still classify it as Alteration, but I think they call it Charms. Their classification system is a bit muddled, in my opinion.

Basically, they took a “hostage” for each “champion” and stuck them under the lake in some enchanted sleep and we had to rescue whoever they picked for us.

(You can imagine how well that went. The enchantment they tried using to put me to sleep was useless, and we can breathe underwater naturally. It would have been boring down there if not for the “merpeople” swimming around trying to look threatening. For all I know they’re vaguely like the Maormer, but far more bestial.)

Yeah. I just water-walked out while listening for sounds under the surface, skated on over, and canceled the spell so I could sink down. On a side note, it is not possible to properly laugh underwater. Serana waved when she saw me.

Back on the surface we just summoned our Soul Cairn horses and used an on-touch water-walking spell. We were the first back, of course, and spent the remainder of the time relaxing. The blonde part-human girl failed, but the other two managed to get their hostages back safely.

We visited again with Viktor and Luna afterward, up to that Room of Requirement, and I “required” Elysium and the surrounds, just to give them an idea of where we’re from. Also briefly showed them the house in Solitude.

Basically, it was a break for those two from their school mates or screaming fans. I’m so glad we don’t normally see that sort of behavior at home. Sure, there are powerful figures who’ve earned the respect of people, but screaming and jumping and fainting because someone is good at catching a ball?

(I guess when you have magic of the type they’re accustomed to, there’s too much free time to be had. I can’t see how this kind of behavior would manifest otherwise. I expect wealthy people are likely the same all over, however.)

Only one more task, but… Get this. It’s not for four months. Why they didn’t spread these out better I have no idea. Please, send another salad, Sora. I need to drown my sorrows with your cooking.

— Yvara (and Serana)

**Yvara, Serana —**
Not normally, but there was that one Nord guy we ran into who wandered the breadth of Skyrim in his search for the Gourmet so he could impress him with his skills. I imagine people like him is why this Gourmet’s name and face have remained unknown.

Luggage has the usual gifts. Lorenzo messed around with—

(It’s not messing around! It’s science!)

—the second shipment of plants, but I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere with any of it. Either they really do need that version of magic to survive, the transition is affecting them badly, or the gods don’t like the idea of any of it being here.

I imagine the people there went a little batshit over your horse summons, but then again, you may not have bothered to pay attention. On the other hand, it’s magic, right? Why should they get fussed? It’s wearisome that there’s another four months of this waiting.

On a side note, you missed Frothar being instated as the new jarl of Whiterun. Balgruuf finally stepped down. There’s been talk of Frothar getting married to that girl from Riverwood, Dorthe. She’s the daughter of the smith there, so you may remember her.

Aside from that it’s been business as usual, except that now we’re making deliveries of mead to Dragonsreach in addition to Jorrvaskr. Their cooks come here occasionally (they think we don’t know it’s them) and try to figure out what magic we’re working here, and they always leave disappointed with their lack of insight. It’s tragic, and it reminds me of that cook we had for a while at Battlehorn Castle.

Merpeople, huh? They have fishy tails and gills and—wait, Shi just reminded me there was an illustration in one of those books you sent. I’ll check that in a bit.

— Everyone

Filigrana —

The “Third Task” is going to be a maze. Mind you, these people have only passing acquaintance with common sense, so I’m sure you can imagine my strategy already. I was going to deliberately fail the damn thing, but I remembered I got hauled over here for a reason, and I should account for that.

Letting one of the others win this task might end up all right, but it might mean an innocent gets teleported away using one of their forms of transportation magic to face what I’m supposed to. So, yeah. I’ll have to take this seriously.

What a pain. Hopefully if something insane happens (and you know it will) it won’t take long to resolve. And then, finally, we can come home!

— Yvara (and Serana)

Yvara, Serana —

The odds are running that you’ll simply climb atop the maze and bypass the entire thing. That’s what any sensible person would do. Why be a sheep and follow clearly laid out plans when you can come
up with something better?

(We approve, obviously.)

Kiri says, “Hi.” So does Viper. Well, his mouth quirked. I know those two have been sneaking their own letters to you guys via Luggage.

(So cruel.)

Kiri’s just annoyed that he didn’t get to have an end off one of the latest loaves of bread.

I mean, if you had some way to swim through the earth that’d be another tactic to use. I wonder if any of them will be smart enough to do the same as you, or if they feel it’d be against the spirit of the task. They chose to take part, so maybe they would play by the ostensible rules.

Just as well you’ll be back soon. Horse is getting fat and lazy without you dragging him all over creation to carry your loot.

One last shipment included in Luggage.

— Everyone

Filigrana —

Third task is complete, and wasn’t that a load of fun. We’ll be transiting tomorrow, but I confess I’m not entirely certain where we’ll end up.

We’ll be with you as soon as we can. As for food, whatever you have handy will be more than welcome. Well… I wouldn’t say no that lemon-blueberry cake for dessert.

— Yvara (and Serana)

A smile developed when he felt some very familiar people approaching Filigrana, along with two unknowns. He sent out a pulse of Sky Flames to alert his family and people started slipping in from the door to the kitchen. A couple of minutes later the door opened and Yvara strolled in, a grin on her face.

Viper glided over as Serana came in next, which saw Kiri quickly greeting her. Behind them came in two strangers, and he could only imagine they had to be Viktor and Luna. Sora produced mead for everyone and nodded at Val, who ducked back into the kitchen to bring out the cake. No one ever said a person had to have dessert last, after all.

“Welcome back, ladies,” he said.

Yvara left off whispering with Viper to duck back behind the bar and give him a hug. “You are a saint for supplying us with all that food and drink. I tell you, people kept raving about how good house-elves were as cooks, but they’ve got nothing on you. And, as you’ve no doubt figured out, Viktor and Luna came along for the ride.”
He glanced over and saw that the blonde waif had gotten right up in front of Shi and was playing with the end of his braid. Viktor, in comparison, looked a bit awkward.

Yvara pecked him on the cheek and ducked back around to the other side. “Okay, you two. Introductions time.”

Once that was out of the way—Viktor looked no less awkward and Luna was still fascinated by Shi’s braid—Sora was able to slice and serve the cake Val had brought out. “So,” he said, “what exactly do you plan to do with these two?”

“Teach them how to survive, and thrive. Their culture isn’t too terribly different from ours, except for the part where there are bandits around every corner. They even have spiders as big as ours, except theirs can learn how to speak a human language.” Yvara paused to shove a forkful of cake into her mouth and hum happily. “I have dreamed of this—well, you know what I mean.”

“With the magic here?” Val asked.

Yvara nodded as Serana said, “If those sticks of theirs ever get broken, it’s not like we could make new ones. They’re a liability, just like getting attached to a particular sword is.”

“Admittedly, it helps when you can just forge and enchant a replacement if some shouty draugr knocks it into Oblivion,” Yvara commented.

Serana rolled her eyes. “Yes. We’re going to get them to learning spells, and then take them on training rounds. Elysium will be home base. In the course of all that these two can figure out what they want to also learn.”

Sora suddenly stiffened and looked around.

“Hello, old boy! Lovely to see you again.”

He exhaled and prayed at the same time. “Welcome.”

“I sponsored the little blonde girl, so treat her right.” Sheogorath produced a somewhat frightening smile and twirled his cane, then disappeared through a portal.

“He was interesting.” Luna said serenely. “Who was that?”

Yvara face-palmed and dragged her plate a little closer.

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