A New Life Carol

by Springinkerl

Summary

Vilkas only does his job. Farkas doesn't think a job is so important. And Olava doesn't either.

Notes

A little something that just spilled out of my head. Must be the time of year.

For OpalBee and her continuous, un faltering belief in fluff, feels and redemption. Thank you for your support!
“This,” Vilkas dangled the trinket accusingly in front of his brother’s face, “is all I got!” They sat opposite of each other at a table in Jorrvaskr’s backyard, and the boiling anger in Vilkas’ voice made Farkas flinch. “What in Oblivion did you think to take this lousy job? Why do people hire us when they can’t even pay?”

“But she said she can pay,” his brother said helplessly, wringing his hands in his lap. “What should I have done, send her away?”

Vilkas’ face crunched into a cruel grin. “Exactly, brother. Send her away. Or demand payment in advance. Every dork could see that these people have nothing to pay the Companions with.”

“But she said…”

“You’re so gullible, Farkas! Gods, when will you grow up and start to think for yourself? Her husband got himself locked up in a bloody cave. He didn’t work during that time. What do you think, from what did she want to pay us if he didn’t even get that sorry wage in the mine? And when will you learn that we’re no charity?”

“At least you got to kill some necros,” Farkas muttered. Everybody knew that Vilkas loved to kill the evil mages that dabbled with life and unlife, no matter if he got paid for it or not.

Farkas remembered their client, the wife of a miner from Darkwater Crossing. A small, haggard woman, withered far beyond her age from hard work, too many childbirths and starvation, with a frightened girl clutching her hand and a newborn tied to her back. He remembered how she had begged under tears to rescue her husband from a circle of necromancers. She had been lucky that Farkas was the first one she met, the huge warrior easily softening to her obvious despair and his own pity.

She had been less lucky that his brother fulfilled the contract in the end.

Although he was glad to get out of Whiterun for the few days, Vilkas’ mood was already more than sour when he left Jorrvaskr. It had been foul for the whole month, like every year in Evening Star, the ubiquitous preparations for the New Life Festival making him itchy and irritable.

Gods, how he wanted this to be over. He wanted the darkness back, the long nights and dusky days that were so characteristic for this season, the snowstorms, blizzards and the impenetrable cover of clouds over Dragonsreach that matched the darkness in his mind.

He hated the festival, and he saw absolutely no reason to celebrate the beginning of another year that would be exactly as dull as the last. He hated the music, those sweet tunes with no rhythm and drive that only appeared in the bards’ repertoire during this time of year, that the children sang along with their mothers and the shopkeepers hummed behind their stalls. In duets and trios, for Ysmir’s sake! He hated the smells, vanilla and pines, anise and cinnamon everywhere. He hated cinnamon! Two days ago, he had turned on his heels and left the Bannered Mare without something to drink for the first time in his life, barely containing himself from throttling Hulda to death. Cinnamon mead! She dared to offer him cinnamon mead! Gods, that women stucked at nothing.

He hated the decorations. Fir branches and mistletoes everywhere, wreaths and garlands, candles and lights!
Jorrvaskr was, just like every building in the city, strewn with decorations, in- as much as outside. It was humiliating to see the entrance to the proud hall adorned with evergreens and Wuuthrad and all the other precious weapons mounted on the walls, emblems of the Companions' honour, history and prowess, entangled with straw star garlands and glittering baubles.

Straw star garlands! It became worse every year. And Kodlak let her!

Since decades, since he had been a little boy, Tilma forced the warriors of Jorrvaskr every single year not only to festoon the ancient hall with straw star garlands of the most intricate designs, but to make them themselves, of course under her watchful surveillance. An unavoidable ritual. There had to be miles and miles of straw star garlands stashed away somewhere in the depths of the storage rooms, all of them made by rough, calloused hands much more used to stick a piece of steel into living flesh than to form something so fragile.

Ria loved it, but she also still slept with an unidentifiable stuffed toy clenched into her arms every night, proudly declaring that it was as old as her. Farkas loved it too, although his pathetic efforts always rather resembled a bird-nest after a storm. Of course he did, that brute also practised romantic ballads on his lute when he thought no one could hear him, and he could spend hours discussing the correct preparation of boiled crème treats with Tilma and Brill. Aela didn’t love it, but she let Tilma have her way with her, always had been plush like a tuft of tundra cotton with the old woman, and Skjor did what Aela told him. Athis didn’t love it either, but he was far too afraid of Tilma to argue. The only one who regularly had the balls to vanish from Jorrvaskr when the date was scheduled was Njada. Vilkas envied her for it. And Torvar… yes, Torvar. Always drunk, always boisterous, full of hubris and questionable morals. But as soon as the first leaves changed into the colours of autumn, Torvar started to practice, to draw new designs and make prototypes, his fingertips always sticky with the pine resin he used to glue the straws together.

Disgusting.

But most of all, more than the music and the decorations and the smells, did he hate the mood that came with the festival. Suddenly, without any obvious reason, people became nice. Animosities and petty quarrels that had simmered for months or years suddenly blew away like smoke in a winter storm, people who had to be forced to breathe the air of the same room with physical violence before suddenly drank themselves into a stupor together while sharing family secrets and childhood memories.

Happy faces, smiled and friendliness all around. Disgusting. As if not everything would go back to normal when people were sober again.

Gods, how he wanted this to be over.

The seemingly simple job Farkas had thrown at him had been a welcome escape. The best had been to kill the pathetic couple of necromancers in their shoddy cave, to impale and incapacitate them. The miner they had kidnapped to perform their hideous experiments on him had been more dead than alive when he freed him from his rusty shackles, but that wasn’t his problem. As long as he breathed, he had done his job, and he expected to get paid.

Especially as he had to carry him back. The rundown shack the man called home had only one room, tamped mud with a thin layer of straw on the floor, raw furniture, the fire not able to keep the cold creeping in through the leaky walls at bay. But at least nothing here reminded him of the upcoming festivity, not a single fur twig decorating the walls, no bright light, and the few shrivelled potatoes lying on the table would certainly not make a feast.

The horrified expression of the woman when he tossed the unconscious man from his shoulder onto the hard cot didn’t escape him, and her wail when she threw herself over the motionless body
only set him further on edge.

And when he demanded his payment and she wrought her hands and cried that her husband’s boss hadn’t held his promise and she needed the few coins she had for potions and sobbed into her palms, “please, kind Sir, please, have mercy!”, he had lost his temper.

“You don’t need potions,” he had barked, “he won’t survive the night anyway.” The deadly silence that followed his words had filled him with cruel satisfaction. Of course he had pilfered a good amount of coins from the cave, along with some jewels, rare alchemy ingredients and a few tomes Farengar would give him a small fortune for. But that wasn’t the point. The point was that he had earned his payment and that he wouldn’t make a fool of himself or of the Companions as a whole by selling himself cheap.

But the woman had nothing she could give him, nothing but a few copper coins and this cheap trinket that he snatched from her hand with a derisive snort after she had unfastened it from her neck with trembling fingers and a new flood of tears.

And now Farkas turned the pendant carefully between his broad fingers and examined it. “Not worth much,” he said pensively, “but it’s pretty.”

“Not even Fralia will take it,” Vilkas snorted. “Keep it, it’s perfect for that pretty bitch from the Mare that you can’t keep your hands off.”

Farkas gave his brother a frown, but his attention was back at the jewellery when he felt something under the pad of his index. He trailed it along the edge, strangely carefully, until he found a small knob. A gentle press, and the lid popped open with a faint sound.

Inside was a lock of hair, a thin blonde strand, tied together with a simple piece of cotton thread.

Farkas held the open amulet on his flat palm. “What is this?” he asked, an edge to his voice that was unusual. Vilkas looked defiantly at his brother. He wouldn’t get emotional now, would he?

“How would I know? She babbled something about a dead daughter. Probably the sister of the brat hanging on her apron.”

Farkas closed the amulet with careful, nearly tender motions and buried it in his large palm as if he had to protect it, but his jaw was tight.

“And you took it from her? A family heirloom?” His voice was dangerously low.

Vilkas wasn’t oblivious to the change in his brother’s mood, and that he had to justify himself now only kindled his anger. “Of course I did! What should I have done, leave with empty hands?”

“You got your share.” Farkas pointed at the thick pouch tied to Vilkas’ belt, then looked at the trinket again. “And for us, it’s worthless.”

“That was loot. Loot is not payment. Didn’t you listen to me? Gods, why do you even care?”

The enervating pale gaze of his brother came to rest on his face, and Vilkas felt his cheeks heat up. No one looked through him like his twin, saw the misery coiling in his chest and the strain on his shoulders that never gave him rest. No one cared for the Companions like him, for their tenets and traditions and honour, for the well-being of every single one of them. He was the one who held them up in these hard times, who kept the contracts coming and made sure that they weren’t seen only as a drunken bunch of rubble. He felt like being chained, tied down by petty, worthless jobs and his efforts to chase and claim the respect he deserved.
His brother saw all this, but he didn’t understand him. No one understood him. Sadness stood in Farkas’ eyes. Sadness… and pity.

“And why don’t you, Vilkas? Why don’t you care… only once?”

Vilkas stood up, slowly, propping his hands on the table and hovering over his brother. “Because one softhearted fool in this hall is more than enough,” he hissed before he stormed out of the door.
Chapter 2

The streets were bustling with life, laughter and music and people everywhere, but Vilkas hurried along without seeing where he went, shoulders tight and jaw clenched, and beneath the anger he felt the tension behind his eyes coiling into a throbbing headache.

He made his way through the crowd on the market place, uncaring for the incomprehensive looks that followed him. Not that anyone stood in his way. No one ever stood in his way, people were going out of their way to evade him, scurrying away to avoid getting in contact with the dark, brooding Master-of-Arms of the Companions, awe and fear in their faces. As if carried a contagious disease, he thought bitterly.

Not that he cared. In fact, he was glad for the space he had, glad that he didn’t have to deal with fraudulent conversations, cheerful greetings and children tugging at his armour. How Farkas could bear all this importunity was a mystery to him. The noise and all the cheerfulness was already bad enough.

He didn’t care where he set his feet, and so it took him completely by surprise when he suddenly bumped into something… someone.

Or rather, someone had bumped into him, and he bit back the snarky remark spilling over his tongue in the last possible moment, making it only an annoyed grunt. Watery, redrimmed eyes looked up to him as the old woman steadied herself with a blotchy, claw-like hand clenched into the fabric of his cloak.

A joyous, nearly innocent smile spread over the wrinkled face. “Greetings, Vilkas,” she said with a humming lilt to her voice, and the casual, familiar way she addressed him made him scowl. But although Olava had a reputation of being not completely normal and always a distressing air of absence around her, as if her mind was somewhere else, still in the past or perhaps already in the future, the deeply rooted respect for his elders he could never shake off, even if they were completely nuts, made him hold still and grab her elbow to help her. The bone felt brittle in his firm grip. The woman had already been old when he was only a boy.

“Olava,” he said, bowing his head, waiting for her to let him go. But she didn’t, instead she tilted her head and eyed him curiously, and then she shuffled even closer into his personal space and placed a palm flat on his chest, right above his heart. And suddenly, he had the enervating feeling that he didn’t have to look down on her any more, that she had straightened herself and grown, her eyes on level with his, and under the aged dullness of her eyes he found a clarity that reflected him back at himself.

And the warmth from her hand seeped through his tunic, not like the touch of a lover on bare skin, but going deeper, piercing through his ribs and coiling into a hard ball of ache in the hollowness beneath, where he hadn’t felt anything for more years than he dared to count.

“Happy New Life Festival, Vilkas,” she said lowly, her gaze locked on his face, and he felt the gentle press of her hand and the intensity of her eyes, knew that she knew, and he wanted to cower and hide.

Instead, he squared his shoulders and tore his hand from her arm. “It’s not New Life Festival yet,” he answered defiantly.

“No.” She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. “New Life starts tomorrow. Today, it’s time to look back.”
He didn’t know how she did it, but he obeyed and looked back where he had come from, to the market place, the Bannered Mare and up the stairs to the temple and to his home. And for the first time since he had stormed out of Jorrvaskr, he saw what was going on around him, as if she had torn the veil from his eyes.

“See, Vilkas,” she murmured but didn’t tell him what, and his eyes darted around, searching frantically, desperate for something to hold on to, something that would give him a meaning. He didn’t know what he was looking for, only that he couldn’t help it because Olava had told him to see.

When his head jerked around as if it was guided by a string, he found what he was looking for, and he watched the scene that unfolded before his eyes with held breath. He watched the girl – Braith, wasn’t it? The daughter of this mercenary that was nearly as incompetent as Uthgerd – how she held the little Battle-Born boy in a headlock and punched him in the gut, fury in her face, fear in his and dark smudges of dirt in both, until his clenched fist opened and a few coins fell to the ground. She let him go with a shove and pocketed them in her shabby dress. She was known as a bully, and no one interfered. Children had to learn to take care of themselves.

And then his vision greyed out, became blurry and the picture was swapped, something else layering over it, different and still so similar. He saw himself a lifetime ago, a scrawny little boy, black tousled hair and pale blue eyes under dark brows, his neck held tight in the lock of a larger boy, his wrists locked behind his back, and again he felt the helplessness, the pain from the bruising grip and the fear of the punch that was inevitable. Hrongar had been his Braith. But he also felt – and saw and remembered, in startling clarity – something else. His brother was there too, standing in a group of other children, half a head larger, already with broader shoulders and more bulk than he and yet unmistakably his twin.

He was there, but he didn’t interfere either, only spurred him on. “Let him have it!” Farkas had yelled, “give him your fist!”, his bright voice only meant for him. And he remembered the sudden certainty that had flowed through his mind and pushed away helplessness and fear, unconscious and vague and indestructible, the knowledge that nothing bad would happen as long as his brother was there. Farkas was there and didn’t think it necessary to step in for his twin, believed that he would win this fight against the Jarl’s son all on his own, and it was Farkas’ faith that made him throw back his head, crush his skull into Hrongar’s jaw and use the moment of surprise to squirm out of the suddenly slack grip and kick him in the guts with more ferocity and confidence than he had ever felt before.

The pain in his head from the impact made his eyes water, but as the larger boy lay on his back before him, speechless and with reluctant respect creeping into his face, his own triumph and pride was mirrored in his brother’s laughter. Farkas never fought his battles for him, but his faith gave him strength, his belief that he was strong on his own, that he could fight for himself. And yet, he had always had his back.

Vilkas came back to himself, shaking his head in an effort to clear his vision, the strangely clear pictures from the depths of his memory lingering in his mind. He swallowed heavily, his mouth dry.

But Olava wasn’t finished with him. “See, Vilkas,” she mumbled again, a strange authority in this brittle voice, and again his attention was drawn towards a scene he had seen a thousand times before, ordinary and mundane and usually only coaxing a condescending scowl on his face.

He watched Adrianne at her anvil, the thick leather apron tied around her waist, hair tied back into a tight braid in her neck, the wiry muscles of her arms and shoulders working as she lifted the hammer and let it crush with finely attuned force on a piece of metal that would perhaps become a
pauldron. And he watched her beaming smile when her husband stepped out of the shop they owned together, bringing her a drink of water. Ulfberth placed the glass on the workbench, stepped to his wife and slung an arm around her waist, wiped some soot from her cheek and tugged a stray flick of hair behind her ear before he kissed her tenderly. For a moment, they had eyes only for each other, their intimacy unbreakable, and as the edges of his vision blurred again and he felt himself drawn away, he squinted his eyes shut in fear of what was to come.

Again he saw himself, proud and tall in the distinctive armour of a Companion leader, his hands on the hips of the woman he once thought he would marry. It was another New Life Festival, and she leant against him under the mistletoe at the back entrance of Jorrvaskr, her forehead on his shoulder and a small, shy and so incredibly happy smile on her lips. And as he smiled back and dipped down to kiss her, she pressed something into his palm – a pin, a little badge in the form of a falcon, a small trinket she had once gotten from her deceased father and that she now wanted him to have.

It had been the most precious gift he had ever received – more precious than the armour he got when he joined the Circle or the jewelled sword sheath the Jarl had presented him with for his merits for the security of Whiterun, more precious than the unique claymore that he still wielded, a masterpiece that Farkas got made for him, and more valuable than the priceless tomes Kodlak left him for his studies – and still he had never worn it.

Not once, and he hadn’t been true to the vague promise he had made under the mistletoe either. He hadn’t been ready to settle down, to start a family, to leave Jorrvaskr and to commit, and other things had always been more important, work to be done, jobs to deal with, places to see, people to meet. He was gone more often than not and took over more and more responsibilities for the Companions, and she left him a few months later and married a farmer outside of the city. And when he watched her pack her things in his small room, watched her silent tears without showing an emotion himself, he felt a coldness creep into his bones that had never left him since.

When they met now, every once in a while and only accidentally, he was able to greet her with a stern nod. They had never exchanged a single word again, but he still kept her gift, wrapped in cloth and hidden away deep in a drawer of his desk. She hadn’t asked for it, and he hadn’t given it back. But he had never again engaged in anything but fleeting, meaningless flings and had never again taken a gift from a woman.

A groan broke from his throat when he came back to the present, his eyes still firmly closed, and he slumped together, leant against the old woman who held him with surprising strength. “Vilkas,” she whispered, and now her voice was nearly gentle, but he shook his head frantically, trying to force the pictures she made him see out of his head and pleading with her to let him go.

She tugged at his tunic, removed her burning hand from his heart and palmed his face instead, dry and rough on the stubble. He opened his eyes, hesitantly, and searched her face.

“She, Vilkas.” And now she showed him, arm stretched out and pointing towards the stairs that led to the Gildergreen. On top of them stood a figure, dark against the pale brightness of the sky, someone who was only seldom seen out in the open and no one would want to meet voluntarily.

Andurs, the priest of Arkay was a strange man and an eerie sight, hollow eyes and hollow cheeks, skin pale from lack of daylight stretching tight over the bones of his skull, his hands forever discoloured from the essences he treated the dead bodies with, large and gaunt in his plain dark robe.

Vilkas knew him, of course he did, he was no stranger to death. He had been to the Halls of the Dead more often than he wanted to remember, buried friends and shield-siblings, people who had died while having his back and people he ought to have protected.
In their line of work, death simply happened. Instead to waste his time with long periods of mourning, he went on with his life like they would have expected him to, perpetuated the memory of their lives by going on the best he could and continuing what they had died for.

Andurs stood on top of the stairs, no one coming near him, his gaze running slowly over the crowd at his feet as if he was searching for something. When it came to rest on Vilkas, something flared up in these deep, dark sockets of his eyes, like a beam of light that hit him and pulled him in.

And all of a sudden, Vilkas felt fear that was new to him. Blank terror that made him gasp and his skin crawl, reaching deeper than everything he had ever known before. He wanted to get away from this fear that screamed in his head, but for once there was no escape. No happy memories, no pictures emerging from his mind. It was so much worse than being outnumbered, than foes stronger and larger than he, worse than the blood and gore and the very concrete panic that had to be overcome when he had to fight for his life.

This was overwhelming, and there was no thrill in it, no adrenaline, no chance of escape or of turning the tables. Only certainty, heavy and dreadful.

The certainty of another body lying lifeless and still on the stone table in the Hall of the Dead, of another laughter he would never hear again, another strong hand that would never again help him up when he slipped and fell, another body that wouldn’t warm him through the winter. It could be Kodlak, rotting away with his illness, or Aela, fierce and reckless when she was on the hunt. It could be the woman he hadn’t even found yet, hadn’t bothered to search for. It could be his brother, Farkas, who had always more than one eye on his siblings and became a beast when he saw them endangered.

Or it could be himself.

Today, they celebrated Old Life Festival. It would be over tomorrow. Everything could be over tomorrow.

Olava looked after the man sprinting over the market place, pushing people roughly aside and running up the stairs towards the ancient hall of the Companions as if he was chased by an army of ghosts, and a content chuckle escaped her. And she was sure that a smile flashed up under the hood of the priest that was meant only for her before the man turned on his heels and vanished back into his vault.

"Happy New Life, Vilkas," she whispered.

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A/N: I'm offline for the next two days, so don't worry if I don't answer any comments :)
Chapter 3

Vilkas leant against the door to Jorrvaskr, one hand clenched around the bronze handle, the other flat on the smooth surface of the wood, uncaring if people saw him from below the stairs. The familiar carvings pressed into his forehead as he fought for breath, desperately, in fast, shallow, rasping pants.

The air didn’t come, not like he was used to, as if the iron bands adorning and strengthening the old wood of the door were now mounted around his chest. Even with his eyes clenched shut he was unable to force the pictures out of his mind, the black void he had fallen into under Andur’s unrelenting gaze still making him feel as if he was falling and falling, nothing but a whirling abyss beneath and around him, and he wanted to scream and flail and plead for something to hold him.

What had this hag done, what evil spell had she released on him? She had shown him nothing he didn’t know before, nothing he hadn’t put behind himself long ago. It was necessary to leave these things behind, if only to be able to go on. He had always given his best… and more. So many people believed in him. His brother’s faith in his strength, Kodlak’s trust in his leadership, his siblings and their demands, clients needing him to take care of their petty concerns.

He had always performed, always fulfilled these expectations. No one would do it for him… and when people relied on him, he couldn’t afford to show weakness.

What had she done that everything that mattered slipped through his fingers now, dripped away like icicles in spring until nothing was left? What had she done that not only his past looked so futile – so worthless – but his future as well?

Where did this guilt come from? Where was the anger that had kept him going for so long?

Noises from inside reached his ears, laughter and unintelligible words, and he let go of the handle as if it had burned him. More happy faces that would turn into a frown upon seeing him, people scurrying away just to avoid a snarky remark, no one asking him to join into the festival preparations, knowing up front that they’d only get a scowl full of contempt… he couldn’t bear this now. Couldn’t bear to enter his home.

But there was nowhere else he could go, and as he went on and away, he climbed blindly up to the Skyforge. Not even Eorlund worked these days, no one witnessing the man dragging his feet up the stairs and bracing himself on the edge of the forge, barely recognising the heat flaring up from the glowing coals.

No one but the two people circling around each other with blunt training swords. They only sparred to kill time and to escape the hot, sated air inside for a bit of an outdoor exercise, and Farkas lowered his weapon in the middle of an attack sequence and looked after his brother, a deep frown on his face. Ria followed his gaze, incomprehension and worry in her face.

“What’s the matter with him?”

“You know how he is this time of year.”

“Yeah. Yelling at us and complaining and bitching around. Cantankerous. Not looking as if he met a ghost.”

Farkas shrugged. “Perhaps he has. Sometimes I think he has ghosts in his head.” He was used to his brother’s erratic moods, and he was still angry with him. Especially as he would have to travel
to Darkwater Crossing himself to bring the trinket back. No way he’d keep it, now that he knew what it meant.

But Ria placed her sword on the rack and marched towards the stairs. Vilkas was her shield-brother, after all, even if he was sometimes an ass. He had taught her nearly everything she knew, and now she would look after him.

Farkas reached out for her. “Leave him alone, Ria.”

She pressed her lips into a stubborn line, taken aback by his gruffness. “No. It’s New Life Festival. He can be obnoxious all he wants, but he will be obnoxious with us.”

Reaching the top of the stairs, she stopped dead. Vilkas leant against the wall over the coals, looking as if he would fall into them any moment and didn’t care. As if he was preparing to fall.

Something was wrong, and it made her swallow. He looked smaller than usual, and it wasn’t because he didn’t wear his armour.

“Vilkas,” she said lowly, but her hand on his shoulder was strong and her grip firm. And when he turned his head to her, slowly as if every movement hurt, teeth bared in a snarl and with a growl that screamed at her to leave him alone, she didn’t shy away. Instead she took him in, saw how his fingers clenched into the cracks in the masonry and the tightly coiled cords of his neck, the darkness in his eyes and the depth of his loneliness, and she pulled him wordlessly into a hug, cupped the back of his head and slung the other arm around his waist.

She was surprised herself that he didn’t resist, that he didn’t break free and toss her down the stairs.

“Hey,” she whispered into his ear, “you okay?”

Vilkas didn’t react, but he didn’t retreat either, his sweaty face buried in her shoulder, the muscles of his back hard like iron. This girl he had never taken seriously, a whelp he had whipped merciless through his training, more a nuisance than a true shield-sister with her youthful enthusiasm and inexhaustible energy and the ridiculous pride she displayed simply for belonging to them, someone he had always seen as weak, sooner or later just another dead body on Andur’s altar – this girl was suddenly there, solid and strong, knowing that he was far from being okay and just holding him.

Catching his fall.

A shudder went through his body, and she felt him relax. And when he lifted his head and made a step backwards, warpaint smeared and tousled hair falling into his face, she removed her hands and took the chains that had bound him with her, and he could breathe again.

He rubbed his hand over his face, breathing deeply, and then his gaze came to rest on the young woman who stood before him, a fist on her hip, watching him… not pitiful like he expected, but full of curiosity, as if she had never seen him before.

Perhaps she hadn’t.

“Better?” she asked, and he couldn’t help the hesitating smile that curled his lips as he nodded.

“You know…” Ria cocked her head, a giggle in her voice, “if you smiled a bit more often, you could look nearly as good as your brother.” And with a grin she turned and hopped down the stairs.
The man who stormed with heavy steps through the hall and down to the living quarters held himself straight, his face emotionless. He wasn’t oblivious to the looks that followed him, sideward glances from his siblings trying to avoid another outbreak of his bad mood, cautious curiosity from the guests that had come to Jorrvaskr to join the Companions for the festival.

No one saw the slight hint of panic in his eyes and how he fought to keep it down.

Only when he neared his quarters, his steps slowed down, and he took a moment to calm himself before he knocked on the door opposite of his own – for the first time in years instead just to barge in.

Farkas’ face fell in surprise when he opened the door. “Vilkas?” He narrowed his brows. “What’s the matter? Back to being an ass?”

Vilkas clenched his teeth and entered his brother’s room. “I want it back,” he said roughly.

“What?”

“The amulet. Where is it?”

“You gave it to me. Not your business any more.”

“But she can’t have it. The… girl from the Mare.”

Farkas chewed on his lip. “I didn’t plan to give it to her. What do you need it for?”

His brother swallowed heavily, avoiding his eyes. “Gonna give it back,” he said lowly.

Farkas’ stare was dumbfounded, then he took a step back until he leant against the bar. “Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?”

The snotty remark coaxed a fleeting grin on Vilkas’ face, and suddenly it wasn’t so hard any more to admit. “I messed this up, Farkas. And now I’m gonna fix it.”

It was quiet for a moment, and then his twin muttered the question that Vilkas had dreaded.

“Why?”

And like so often, Farkas somehow managed to wrap up all the other questions in a single word. Why now? and Why have you never fixed your mess before? and, most importantly, Why did you mess up at all?

“Don’t ask. Please.”

He had no answers to these questions.

But Farkas saw through him, and he saw the lingering hint of panic in his eyes, the fear of his own courage and the insecurity, and he thought that his brother never looked so vulnerable. “Gonna join you,” he said gruffly as he went around the bar and took the trinket out of a drawer. “Wanted to do that anyway. Better to go with you.”

But Vilkas squared his shoulders. “No, brother. This is something I have to do alone.”

Farkas turned to him, slowly, slung a heavy arm around his twin’s shoulders and dangled the pendant in front of his face. “No, you don’t,” he huffed. “When will you learn? We all know that you can. But you don’t have to.”
The twins whirled like scalded cats in hectic, frantic activity through Jorrvaskr, ruined the work of
days in a matter of minutes and left nothing but confusion and chaos behind, but the Companions
who tried to stop them and get an explanation for their behaviour only got a grinning growl.

Farkas plundered Tilma’s kitchen, snatched a half-baked turkey from her oven and filled the
biggest jars he could find with filling, sauce and vegetables. Several loaves of bread, a whole tray
of sweetrolls, some sausages and a ham hanging from the roof as well as some plates and cutlery
also vanished in the depths of his saddle bags while Vilkas gathered together blankets, furs and
some spare, warm clothes and tied them into tight bundles. And in the end, he removed Torvar’s
masterpiece from Wuuthrad with a strangely satisfied smile, folded it carefully and stashed it away
as well.

And when they stood at the door, ready to leave and heavily laden with bags and knapsacks full to
the brim, Vilkas called Ria to him.

“I expect a feast tomorrow,” he said sternly, “and I expect you to make it happen.”

She looked at him with bright eyes. “You’ll be back in time?”

When he nodded, she gave him a beaming smile. “Okay.”

“Thank you, sister,” he said lowly, and the small smile that quirked his lips was only for her.

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