



Chapter 1

Dawn's light broke above the Imperial City to the music of Tamriel's orchestra. The symphony of the docks playing the fanfare that greeted those who arrived in the capital of the Empire by boat. Footsteps beat out the rhythm, the circling birds calling out their melodies, the gently swaying sails and the tinkling of bells caught in the motion of the warm autumnal breeze, dancing upon the voices that chanted out among the busy workers. The slamming of heavy barrels being moved between the piers and strong timber decks, was the deep bass filled percussion that accompanied the soft tones of the creaking of oak and the water that lapped at the shore. It was a song of the city, different in tone and meaning than those heard in other districts, but one that the bosmer courier meandering through the crowded street knew all too well.

Perhaps it was the familiarity with the chorus of the waterfront that made him first notice the out of place pleading that clashed with the harmony. Somewhere in amongst the noise of the harbour, was the sound of a woman in distress, arguing with a group of sailors. All thoughts of the job he should have been doing now gone from his mind, the short elf ran along the dockside in search of the source of the cries. It did not take too long for him to spot it.

Standing on the deck of a huge square rigger flying the colours of Hammerfell, was a crowd of redguard sailors, surrounding a bosmer woman clutching at something in her arms.

"Get out of my way, let me leave. I have paid you in full for my journey." The woman made a step toward the gangway, but was pushed back by one of the men.

"Oh, but you still owe me my payment for not tossing you overboard when I found that you'd snuck on in the first place." The man moved closer, reaching out his hand to grab her arm.

"Perhaps, we can come to some other arrangement, seeing as how you're now clean out of coin." He smirked, as the woman recoiled in horror, stumbling on the uneven floor.

"You wouldn't dare..." she snapped, her eyes glaring with equal parts rage and fear.

"What is this?" The man, whom the courier assumed at this point to have been the ship's captain, snatched the bundle of rags the woman clutched tightly to. "Hmm, might be worth a few septims, what is it worth to you?"

"Give that back! It's all I have left!" The woman called out in terror, battling against the strong arm that held her back. The captain lifted the sack over the railing, dangling it above the waters. Laughing at the woman's distress.

"Ask nicely."

The shock of the dagger that plunged into his groin caused the man to lose his grip, the bundle smacking the water as he screamed out in pain. The woman did not stop to retrieve her weapon as she leapt toward the shore, running as best as she could between the barrels and crates that lined the dockside, angry shouts and thundering of boots as the sailors gave chase.

The courier watched, his mind torn between chasing after her and curiosity over what had been cast into the water. Curiosity won out, and in an ill prepared moment, he found himself diving headfirst into the clear waters in search of the bundle.

Plunging beneath the cold waters of the lake, the noise of the world above him faded in the moment when the shock of the sudden wetness knocked the breath out of him, and he forgot for a second why he had done this at all. Then, searching as best he could through blurred vision, he found the spot where the fallen sack had fallen in amongst the reeds that covered the sandy lakebed. The huge hull of the ship, looming above him, mere feet from being run aground. Grabbing the bag, he pulled it and himself upward away from the vessel and up toward the shore.

The bosmer broke through the water's surface, sucking in deep breaths of air, lungs gasping as he pulled himself out of the docks, the heavy bag still in his possession, water draining from his small, soaked frame. His boots, filled with water, felt like lead weights as he ran toward the city gates in pursuit of the woman.

He tried to call out to her, and she paused before turning toward him, taken aback by the drenched stranger who greeted her.

"I have... s-s-something... for you... I b-b-believe... this... is... y-yours?" The courier struggled to get the words out between exhausted breaths as he stood shivering in the cold, holding the bag for the woman. Pulling him toward her, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a friendly hug.

"I cannot tell you what this means to me..." She started to thank him, and then abruptly stopped as she spotted the sailors closing in on the two of them. The courier turned to see the burly men scrambling through the busy street, where a small crowd had started to form around them. Grasping the woman's hand, the courier pulled her along with him as he ran toward the city gates.

"Come with me! I can help you."

The two of them crashed through the gates, stunning the city guard posted on watch the other side. "Stop, in the name of the Emperor!" Came the cry of the guard, before the gate slammed open again and the redguards giving chase crashed into him. It was enough to

stop the pursuers, and the courier and his female companion made their way through the paved streets of the city's temple district. Above them towered what remained of the Temple of the One, now forever a shrine of the events long passed when Martin Septim closed shut the doors of Oblivion, and above that still in the heart of the city, the mighty White-Gold Tower that sat a brilliant beacon of the Empire to all Tamriel. As the two bosmer entered into the inner plaza of the city, they paused for a moment to catch their breath.

The woman gazed up in awe at the sights she had been dragged so hurriedly past.

"By the nine." She said, her voice a soft whisper. "I'd heard so many stories, but to think that I might actually see with my own eyes..." Letting go of the courier's hand, she was lost in the moment, and perhaps might have stayed there a little longer before her thoughts were interrupted by a gentle throat clearing and the words of the courier.

"I believe you might have dropped this." He held out the bag, a large grin spread across his face, "I'm afraid it might be a little damp."

The woman took it from him, blushing cheeks washed by the tears that fell from her tired eyes. "Thank you. I thought I had lost this forever." Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a bundle of clothes wrapped around an unusually shaped something made from wood.

Carefully removing the soaking fabric, a dark wooden lute was revealed, beautifully carved, with intricate patterns inlaid with gold running along the neck. Six well worn strings ran along it, fastened with ornate metal fittings. Turning it in her hands, she gently ran her fingers across the strings, her eyes closed, listening intently to the sound the instrument produced. Despite not being tuned, she seemed satisfied with the condition of her treasure, and pulled a thick leather strap over her shoulder to carry it, stuffing the rest of her waterlogged belongings back into the sack.

"You have no idea how much this means to me, however can I repay you?"

"You could start by telling me your name. I'm Caspian, courier to the Imperial Merchant's Guild, at your service." The young man gave a small bow, and a gentle chuckle, somewhat in awe of what it was he had retrieved from the water, and thankful that his cold dip in the lake had not been for just a simple bag of clothes.

"Lillian of Daggerfall. Travelling bard." She smiled warmly at her fellow kinsman. "It is good to see there are other wood elves still living outside the dominion."

"Most prefer the name bosmer. But I don't really mind. It is only the altmer who would take offense to the word elf. But despite the weakness of the empire, this city still welcomes all who enter, mer, men, beast, as long as they pay their taxes." Caspian gave a small wink as an Imperial guard marched past the pair. "But enough about politics. Tell me Lillian of Daggerfall who happens to be a bard, what has brought you travelling to Cyrodiil with such terrible company? I trust that your journey till now has been more favourable than your arrival."

Lillian laughed, "Let's just say that I'm relieved to be here. Though, if I may ask, perhaps you could assist me further? I'm in need of a bed for the night, and a good meal at a tavern. I trust you are familiar enough with the city to recommend a place I might stay?"

"Were I a young woman travelling alone in the city, I would recommend no better place than the Merchant's Inn in the market district. Marcius and his wife who run the place would be more than willing to put you up for a few days, and dare I say it, may find the services of a bard of use." Caspian made no mention that he was himself a regular customer of the tavern and had often sat wishing for a little music to accompany the chatter of business following a

long working day, but it was not a lie that the Merchant's Inn was the best place to stay.

"But," He sighed reluctantly, "I should probably let you find it yourself, I am late for an errand and, well, I shall have to find a fresh set of clothes before I return to my work."

"I cannot thank you enough for your help," she said with a smile, "I hope that this is not the last time we meet, I still must find a way to repay you."

"Oh, we will meet soon, and to hear you play that instrument again will be payment enough."

He gazed after her as she left him and headed toward the city gates, her long dark hair blowing gently with the breeze, the lute strapped across her back, and sack of wet clothes held in one hand, she melted into the crowd and passed out of sight.

"Caspian!" The thoughts of the courier were interrupted sharply by a familiar stern voice. "I do hope that my letter was delivered before you decided to go for a swim?" Turning behind him, he wished that Oblivion would open beneath him and swallow him whole.

"Master Thoronir. I..." The shock of seeing his mentor standing before him made finding the right words difficult. "I'm terribly sorry..." His words of apology tumbled forth from his mouth, as he remembered the scroll he had earlier tucked into his belt, now lost to Lake Rumare forever. How foolish he must have looked, standing soaked to the skin in the centre of the city, gazing off into nothingness.

"Was she at least pretty?" The wrinkled eyes of the wise master merchant sparkled playfully, his lips barely containing the smile that crept in at the corners of his mouth. He knew his young apprentice all too well. Caspian sighed somewhat relieved, "Like dawn's beauty itself."

Chapter 2

Familiar scents of stale ale and roasting meat over a crackling fire, greeted Caspian as he stepped through the doors of the Merchant's Inn. The room was filled with people, every seat taken, all tables full. The young breton barmaid moving swiftly through the crowds carrying trays of food and drink for the patrons. It was a welcome sight for tired traders looking for somewhere to end their day.

Beneath the noise of conversation and laughter was the real reason the courier came to this place, the music. Or more importantly, the musician. Not that he would not have come here otherwise, it was by far the cheapest tavern in the city and the closest to where he called home, but these last few months had given him a far better excuse to sit at the bar every night.

The joy that he had felt upon seeing Lillian perform for the first time was as fresh in his mind as it was now. That she had chosen to stay as long as she had, was to him the greatest privilege in the world. The music she performed was as beautiful as the instrument she played on, and that voice! Oh what delight it brought to his ears.

"I take it you'll be wanting the usual then?" The burly imperial landlord said with a smile, fingers reaching for a tankard ready to fill. The bosmer took a seat absentmindedly, lost in the song of the tavern. For a moment he had forgotten why he had come in the first place. "Not tonight Marcius." He sighed, staring through the packed room, eyes searching for the bard that played. There she was, in the corner by the fire, the light shining against her dark loosely gathered hair, falling onto smooth cheeks past those hazel eyes in large elegant curls. Dibella herself would seem plain in comparison he thought to himself.

"Oh, I see. The other usual then." Marcius chuckled softly. "So, when I can expect an invitation then?"

"Invitation?"

"To the wedding!" He threw his head back in laughter, his belly shaking as he slapped his arm over the shoulder of the young mer. "When are you two lovebirds going to get together?!"

Caspian blushed, his cheeks turning a deep shade of red. "I-I don't know what you're saying..."

"Oh come off it, I've seen the two of you together. I know what brings you back here night after night. Why, it reminds me of the time back when me and the missus met. You know, she was working in the alchemy shop, I didn't even know what half those things were, bits of mould, jars of insects, what looked like the toe of a giant, but I could recognise a flower when I saw it. There I was, just kept coming back in, day after day, just for a chance to see her smile..." Caspian smiled and nodded as the old barkeep continued his story. The young bosmer wasn't listening, he didn't need to. The man was right.

The atmosphere changed as Lillian finished her song, the tavern's patrons bursting into drunken applause and cheers. Taking a short bow, she smiled at her audience, and then a bashful grin spread across her face as her eyes met those of the young courier sat at the bar. After placing her lute delicately atop a small corner table, she turned and floated through the crowd toward him.

"Caspian!" She called, her hands reaching out toward his. He pulled her toward himself playfully.

"Lillian, I... I have something I want to tell you." He began, tripping over his words, embarrassed at his inability to form proper sentences around her. "Would you meet with me? Tonight, in the elven gardens by the statue of the old king the nords love so much?"

"You speak of Talos boy! Watch your tongue when you talk of the divines." A brutish nord dressed in heavy armour interrupted the pair, "I've had enough of your kind and your words against Ysmir!" He slurred drunkenly, dropping off his stool and making his way toward the bar, his hand reaching for an axe fastened to his belt.

"I think you've had enough to drink Ulfric. The elf meant no offense, I don't wish to clean up another fight." Marcius spoke sternly, his own weapon only inches away from his hand, it would not be the first time he would use it here. "Don't make me summon the city guard." The nord backed down, grumbling angrily, "Tiber Septim was more than just another king..." Caspian sighed in relief, turning back toward Lillian whom he had shielded behind himself. He was not built for fighting, but would have put up his best effort if it came to it. He was still shaking as he retook his seat.

"Might want to watch your tongue Caspian. Rumours of the Thalmor making advances in Hammerfell has the Empire worried. Things are not as they once were, too many ears and eyes listening." Marcius spoke softly to his elven friend, "There are things I have heard mentioned that would cause every citizen of the Empire to fear."

Caspian nodded. He too had heard words muttered in secret, it was part of the reason... "So, Lillian, will you meet me?" He returned to his beloved, his face trying to force back a smile that the confrontation had removed.

"Of course, once the last round's been called." She too seemed concerned, "Just, make sure you meet me in one piece."

The twin moons were halfway through their nightly dance as the two bosmer made their way through the quiet city streets. Caspian's arm draped across the shoulders of Lillian, the pair of them talking softly as they walked along the paved road lined with flowers. The pale moonlight, lighting their path and casting deep shadows where the houses stood tall against the sky.

"So, are you going to tell me?" Lillian said, her pace slowing in step with his, the conversation turning to the real reason he had asked her here. "You haven't been yourself today."

Caspian sighed deeply. He could put it off no longer. "Lillian... I.. I.." He struggled to find the right words, his heart holding back what his head had been wanting to tell her. "I have some important news to tell you." He stopped, dropping his arm down, he pulled her in toward her, and stared deep into her worried eyes. "Master Thoronir has offered me a promotion. I'm not going to be a courier anymore."

"Oh that is excellent news!" Lillian exclaimed excitedly, "Isn't this what you've always wanted? I mean, what sort of promotion..." her voice trailed off as she sensed this was not what he wanted.

"In Leyawiin. I would be moving to Leyawiin." It might as well have been a plane of Oblivion for all the difference it made. The small city sat in the furthest reaches of Cyrodiil, guarding

the mouth of the Niben River. The journey to it would itself take several weeks, he did not know if he would ever return.

Lillian lifted her fingers to his face, lifting his dejected head till her eyes met his. Words were pointless, they each knew what the other was thinking. A small glistening tear fell from her eyes, he moved his hand to wipe it away, his fingers twirling through her hair.

"Come with me." He whispered at last.

Lillian's brow furrowed, and she pulled back, a look of concern crossing her face. "I... I..."

She turned back toward the city gates they had passed through. It had been only six months since she had been pulled through the streets by the young mer stood before her, and yet already she did not wish to leave them. For the first time in many years she felt at home, and yet, was he the reason she felt this way? To go on living here without him felt as wrong as leaving. "I don't know." She broke down in tears, confused by her own emotions.

"Then I will stay." Caspian said at last, pulling her into his arms, wrapping her tightly in a warm embrace.

Lillian stared up into his face, her tears fading with a warm smile. "Don't let me hold you back. I know how much this means to you, your whole life's work, this could be the start of a great opportunity. Don't throw that away on me."

"I would not leave without you. I will go with you anywhere, to the edge of Mundas, beyond the mortal realm, and I will stay where you are. Because..." He paused, unsure whether now was the right time to say what he must. "I love you."

There. He had said it. The word had been uttered and from it there was no going back.

"I... I love you too." Lillian sobbed, clinging onto him, unsure why this was so hard for her.

"Just... let me sleep on it, tonight is not the time for rash decisions."

Caspian sighed, and nodded slowly. Whatever she decided no longer mattered, whatever happened, he would not leave her.

As the two of them stood silently in the street, he slowly sensed that they were no longer alone. In the corner of his eye he spotted them, two tall shadowy figures lurking beneath a statue, watching the pair of them. He felt a chill creep down his spine as he clutched tighter to his beloved. "We are being followed," he whispered into her ear, "don't panic, just come with me."

Holding onto her hand, the two of them began to move along the street, daring not to glance behind lest their watchers realise they had been noticed. His breaths heavy, his pace quickening they moved swiftly down a darkened alley toward the heavy gates that led to the neighbouring plaza district. The sight of the city guards on nightwatch holding torches to wield off the darkness was a welcome relief, and as the pair turned back to check behind them, Caspian began to feel foolish at seeing the empty street. Had he imagined it?

The return journey to the inn was less eventful. The tired mer let out a small yawn as he stood in the street outside. "I guess, I'll see you tomorrow then?" He shifted awkwardly as Lillian took her leave.

"You will." She said, turning back to him, pausing just for a moment before taking a step forward and lifting her lips up to his in a gentle kiss. Then before he had a chance to respond she skipped away to the doorway, a playful smile lighting her eyes.

Caspian stood speechless, before finally realising what had happened, his shocked expression turning to one of embarrassment, and then into joy. He shifted nervously before

walking away, turning behind him to see her lingering on the step watching him as he turned the corner out of sight. Today had been an interesting one.

Lillian watched as Caspian disappeared into the night. Her heart felt like dancing, and it took everything she had not to burst into song. Yet, she still had reservations about what she would tell him. As she pushed open the old wooden door to the Merchant's Inn, she gasped as she felt a heavy hand land on her shoulder. Turning back she hoped to see Caspian, but instead was greeted by two altmer faces, leering out at her from beneath black leather hoods that matched the dark robes they wore. She went to scream, but another hand covered her mouth.

"Do not think we did not see you," said one of them, "you may well be bosmer, but we know those who would conspire against the Dominion. Tell me, who were you meeting beneath the statue of Talos?" The way the high elf spat the name made it clear he hated the mere thought of it.

"W-w-who... who is Talos?" she stammered, her mouth finally free, all desire to scream swallowed in the deep fear that had now taken over.

"Don't play ignorant! You and all those fools in the Empire will soon know what punishments come upon those who insult the eight with their lies." His eyes were like two dark stones, no light seemed to reflect from the dark pits that glared in fierce hatred. "I'll ask you one. More. Time... who were you meeting?"

Lillian froze, nothing they could say to her was enough to persuade her to talk. She kept her mouth shut, her hands reaching behind her searching for the handle that would open the door to safety. As the two elves pushed in toward her, her trembling fingers found their grip and twisting it quickly, she fell back into the door slamming it open.

The swift and sudden swinging open of the door was enough to stun the attackers, and caught in the light from the fire, they turned back long enough for Lillian to enter the inn and push the door closed. Her whole body shook as she reached up and pulled the bolt of the deadlock into position.

Marcus had been right. Things were not safe. In the moment that she fell to the floor sobbing, she had made up her mind. Leyawiin would be an interesting adventure.

Chapter 3

The blood soaked messenger collapsed on the steps leading to the council chambers at the Imperial palace. His final words bringing the news that had cost him his life. "Leyawiin has fallen. Bravil under siege. The Thalmor advances. Send more troops." The words rang in the great hall, echoing through the long corridors and out into the city itself. It was the news that many had dreaded since the ultimatum was rejected. The Empire was now at war with the Aldmeri Dominion.

"I don't see how the Emperor expects us to stop it. Things are bad enough already without losing what little there is left to take." A frustrated Caspian let out a sigh as he paced back and forth in the small room that formed the headquarters for the Imperial Merchant's Guild. The once grand offices were now little more than spaces filled with old dusty tomes and piles of papers now discarded and trampled as the needs grew beyond simply keeping the city's merchants in check. The elderly bosmer and master of the guild, Thoronir, sat in the well worn chair behind a large desk, covered in old quills and empty bottles of ink. His face bore a look of concern as he conversed with his young apprentice.

"We can't stop it. Not by ourselves." He paused, staring out of the dirty window towards the bustling city streets below. "It is the nature of the strong to prey on the weak. And there are too many weak."

"Those cowards should be out fighting, not stealing from those who have nothing. Everyday more and more show up in the city, searching for shelter, hoping for safety. Sick, injured, starving. And the few things we have that can help them, taken before it can reach those who need it the most. How long can this go on?"

Thoronir listened as the younger bosmer spoke, his face not betraying his emotions. Finally he responded, "I will ask the council to provide more guards for the warehouses and shops." Caspian groaned, "What guards are there that they can spare? There were two more with me last night, and the thieves still outnumbered and overpowered us. The Empire has every last man they can spare being slaughtered on the front lines, the guards that remain are too old to fight, and too ill equipped to deal with those too desperate to survive."

"This city has stood against the very gates of Oblivion itself. I saw with my own eyes. Not even the Thalmor can stand against the White-Gold Tower. This war will end, we must ride out the storm." The old mer's voice quivered as he spoke. It was clear that his words were not spoken to Caspian but to himself, as though somehow he could be convinced that all hope was not lost if he spoke them aloud.

"They think we're the enemy." Caspian said. "Lillian told me what they speak in the tavern. The people believe we are hoarding all the food, the clothes, the tools, the weapons."

"Pah! What weapons? The legion has taken everything they can lay their hands on."

"Precisely, but try explaining that to those who don't understand. The Niben rages in conflict, the Southern regions have been invaded, the roads are no longer safe, every farm, village and city suffers as we do." Caspian halted his ranting. It was pointless to continue, he was preaching to one who already knew what he spoke of, but it felt good to vent his anger. He'd

spent the past two weeks trying to keep the limited supply of goods the merchants depended on safe from attacks, but after another night of raids he had finally had enough. Part of him wished to escape from the city. Even if not under direct siege, it still was no safer than trying to survive in the wilds. Lillian too was desperate to flee, but right now there was little they could do.

The conversation was interrupted by a loud banging on the door. Caspian marched over to open it, revealing a short Dunmer courier.

"Guild Master Thoronir? I bring you a letter from Nirinil." The courier said, bowing gently as he handed over a sealed scroll. Thoronir snatched at it, his hands trembling as he inspected the design on the wax.

"From his own hand to yours?"

"By the Revelation Flame, the Threads of Fate, and the Blessed Dawn and Dusk. May Azura curse me should I lie to you. When I spoke with him two weeks past, he was alive and well. But perhaps I should let you read what he says?"

Thoronir carefully opened the letter, reading it in silence, his eyes lingering on every word. Suddenly the silence was broken with a joyful shout.

"He lives! They survived! Oh The Nine be praised, there is still hope yet."

Caspian stood quietly, a small smile breaking onto his face. It had been too long since he had seen his master happy.

"Nirinil? He's the ship owner from Leyawiin that you would have had me work for, if I am not mistaken?"

"Indeed," said the older bosmer, "but it seems he had a chance to escape up the Niben before the city was captured. He says here not to worry for him, he has found refuge in the small settlement of Cropsford, east of the river. The Thalmor have not managed to advance their forces beyond it, it seems they will be safe for now. Such a tiny village will escape the eyes of the Dominion forces, it may yet be that I see him again." He stopped and addressed the courier, "Please, sit and relax. I will see what food there is available for you. You must rest, and of course, I will compensate you for your efforts. But first..." He paused as the dunmer searched for an available stool, waiting for him to finally give up and shift and pile of books off the nearest one onto the floor. "Tell me, what news is there of the war?"

Caspian hovered by the desk, staring off through the window. While he too was curious to hear what the dunmer would tell them, his mind had already begun to wander. Could there really be a safe haven from the war? Might this Cropsford be a place he and Lillian could run to? Would he dare abandon his master? Excusing himself from the present company, he made his way out of the building to the streets outside. He needed time alone to think.

Caspian sat drinking in everything he could of his surroundings. He wanted to keep these memories, it might well be the final time he would see this place. The Merchant's Inn had long since stopped being a tavern of the people, the shortage of food and drink, as well as the shortage of those able to pay had crippled the once thriving business. Not that this had stopped Marcius. Even despite the lack of everything, he and his wife still looked after those who needed a place to stay, mainly women and children, widowed and orphaned by the devastations of war. Anything to keep them from retreating down into the sewers where the

desperate did desperate things. And so, in the dim light of the small fire that heated the room, the young bosmer sat and waited for Lillian to return from what had once been her room. She was taking her time, and he couldn't blame her.

Marcus stood by the old bar, his arms resting in their familiar place on the worn wooden counter. His rusting warhammer sat behind him leaning against the wall, it had seen too much use in the past two years since the war started. Caspian knew it would see much more before the war ended, he just hoped it would not.

"I don't fault you for wanting to leave," the aging imperial said, "you are both young, especially for your kind. Men have but limited lifetimes, and mine approaches its end. Besides, there is nowhere we can go to that would do more good than what it is we can do here." Despite the boldness of his words, Caspian could sense the true fear in his eyes. The city was under siege, the Aldmeri army had finally crossed the northern Niben and was advancing every day. The Empire was too weak to defend the capital much longer. To stay here, was to die. Whether from enemy sword and flame, or the punishing agony of starvation. He would try once more.

"Please reconsider Marcus. There is room for two more in our party, we could use your strong arms."

"But then who would defend these little ones?" he responded as two young boys ran past playfully, oblivious to the reality of their situation. "I understand your concern, but while there is still strength in these arms, there is still hope for the people. I will not go down without a fight."

Caspian sighed. Marcus was a stubborn man, perhaps too stubborn for his own good, but then again, he might just be stubborn enough to survive.

There was a sharp rapping on the door, an unusual pattern, three taps, then a gap, followed quickly by two more. It was the signal of a friend. Marcus moved over toward the entrance, slowly sliding back the thick bolts that secured it, and cracked open the door. "Ah, Master Thoronir. You are expected, do come in."

The elderly master merchant, hid beneath thick robes and hood, was carrying something carefully wrapped in an old cloak. He made his way slowly into the inn toward where Caspian sat, and was shortly followed by Marcus having once again sealed the door tight.

"I had to see you young Caspian, before you left. You have been a most wonderful apprentice, and while I regret that there is much more I could yet teach you, it is of little use in this present time. I have instead a gift that will aid you on your journey." The old mer's voice cracked a little as he unwrapped what he had brought with him. A glass bow and matching quiver with a dozen arrows glinted in the firelight.

"Whatever happened to not having weapons?" Caspian said with a smile.

"Well, there are always exceptions," Thoronir winked, he too had managed to smile. "This was one of the first things I traded in the city. Little did I know that the one who sold it to me was to be the Hero of Kvatch, aid to Martin Septim himself when he ended the Oblivion crisis! Back then, I had refused to join the guild, or the 'society of concerned merchants' as it was at the time. Got myself involved in some terrible dealings. Well, long story short, it was that hero who helped me see the error of my ways, and once I had cleaned out my inventory, I was sold this bow. The day has never left me, for it changed who I was, and so I have kept this till now."

Caspian took the bow gratefully. It had been many years since he had fired such a weapon, but the bosmer blood that flowed in him knew well how to use it. "Thank you master. I will see that it goes to good use, though I hope never to need it."

"I would prefer that you took it and sold it than have it gather dust any longer. I have no need of it."

Caspian's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his beloved. Lillian stood at the top of the stairs, dressed in her travelling clothes and boots she had worn on the day they both met. It felt like a lifetime ago, and the sight of her now, bag on her back, and lute cradled in her arms, brought back so many memories. Her eyes were red and wet from crying, and as she gently walked toward him, she tried to mask her sorrow with a smile. Placing the bow down on the counter, Caspian rose from the stool and embraced her, his own eyes welling with tears. "Are you ready to leave?" he said softly.

"You said you would follow me anywhere. Well now, I will go where you do."

A small group had begun to form around the couple in the tavern. Sad faces looking on, each wondering whether they would see the pair again. "But first," she said, pulling away from his arms and lifting her lute, "I must sing one last song."

All eyes were now upon the young elven bard, as her fingers plucked at the worn strings. A soft, gentle tune that rose and fell with the words that she sang. Her voice, strong and clear, and filled with sorrow, yet still proclaiming the message of hope. The time had long passed for merry drinking tunes, and ballads of wars long fought. This song was one she had written in the silence of the night, when she listened to the heartbreak of those who had entered the inn for help. This song was for all who sat listening, and she hoped that it would not die with them.

"There's a light in the distance, while shadows close in.

Please hold on.

Though hope seems hopeless, and its feels light won't win.

Don't give up.

They can take our homes, but they can't take our hearts.

We'll keep going.

And though many will pay, the ultimate cost.

Just live knowing,

That it wasn't for anything else but love.

That the freedom we fight for, is not yet gone.

And the night is its darkest right before dawn.

I hope you'll keep singing, I hope you stay strong."

As she finished her performance, she took a short bow before her audience. They sat in silence, warm smiles on their faces, and tears in their eyes. It was not because the song was not well received that they did not applaud, it just did not seem right in the sacred moment that followed.

Marcus walked over from the bar, lifting the young maiden in a huge hug. "Why'd you have to go making me cry like that eh? I'm going to miss hearing that beautiful voice of yours." Then turning toward Caspian he added, "And you better look after her, y'hear me!"

You better make sure that you use that bow to keep this little lady safe." It was all the burly man could do to stop himself breaking down weeping as he let her go gently.

"Of course." Caspian answered, choking back his own emotions. Fastening the quiver and bow to his back, he covered himself in the old cloak Thoronir had wrapped them in and picked up his small bag that had a few days worth of food and a spare shirt inside. The road to Cropsford would be a long and difficult one if they could not find supplies along the way. Taking hold of Lillian's hand, they made their way toward the door, and before stepping out into the cold dark of the night, he turned once more to look at his friends. It would be the last time he saw them.

Arm in arm, the two bosmer headed for the city gates. The stars veiled beneath thick clouds. The streets silent save for their quiet footsteps, and the distant wailing of those from whom the effects of war had most taken.

Chapter 4

The chorus of birdsong, and the sound of children's laughter was a reassuring welcome for the two hunters returning to Cropsford. It had been a long day out in the forests that grew ever more dangerous, and it felt good to finally be within reach of a safe space to rest. Drawing closer to the small settlement consisting of a handful of small houses and a tavern that now housed a dozen or so refugees, Caspian and Nirinil waved at the small company of workers busily tilling and weeding the fields that surrounded the village. The sun was slowly beginning its descent, and the dark clouds on the horizon threatened rain, a good hot meal would be well received by them all that night.

Caspian's eyes lit up, and his face grew into a large grin at the sight of Lillian sitting outside the tavern, her hands hard at work repairing a torn shirt, while her eyes kept a close watch on the pair of young breton children skipping about by the central well. Seeing her there, her eyes tired, her hair a mess, yet a warmth in her smile as she observed those who were too innocent to understand what it was that kept them all on edge every night. It made him hope someday to see children of his own grow up with no knowledge of war. Perhaps, should this war ever end, the two of them could begin a family. His heart sighed. When, if ever, would this war end?

"How did the hunt go?" She asked the two bosmer as they headed toward the tavern entrance.

"We won't go hungry today," said Nirinil, though tomorrow was a different question he thought but did not say.

Caspian took off his bow and quiver and handed them to his beloved. "Anything of interest happen while we were away?"

"Inside, we have a few visitors. Dunastyr will fill you in shortly." Lillian looked hesitantly at the mer, "I'll talk to you later, better get your meat inside, Karlah's already preparing the meal." Leaning in she gave Caspian a gentle kiss on the cheek, and did her best to smile "I'm glad my hunter came back safely."

"Thoronir was right to send you both here." said Nirinil as he and Caspian stepped through the door into the dark timber building that formed the heart of the community. "I just wish the old mer had come with you, it has been too long since the two of us spoke face to face." He paused, aware that this was perhaps the wrong time to remind Caspian of those who remained in the Imperial City, and knowing the foolishness of his wish against the harsh reality.

Caspian chose to ignore his comments, and instead made his way to the tiny kitchen at the rear of the building where a female Khajiit stood chopping vegetables before a small fire.

"We've brought you some meat Karlah," he said, dropping two dead rabbits onto the wooden countertop. "Sorry it's not more."

"It is better than to have nothing," she replied, "Khajiit can make a good stew from this, you'll see."

"I'm sure you will," came the voice of Dunastyr, Breton leader of Cropsford, entering the room from upstairs. He was accompanied by two soldiers from the Imperial Legion, both road weary, and half dressed in armour. It was not an unusual sight to have men passing through the settlement along the yellow road south, but each time it was a reminder that the

war was still going on, and that it would not be long before it reached them too. "I hope there will be enough to feed a couple of extra mouths."

Karlah scoffed, "there won't be if too many more join us. This one will have to bake some more bread, though do not complain should there not be much flour for winter."

"It is ok, we will not be staying longer than tonight. Our orders are to head to the Imperial City, the Emperor plans to make one final stand before retreating to the Northern border. The Dominion has moved their troops up from the South, the legions ships can no longer protect the Niben Bay, all forces are set to the Capital." The dark haired imperial soldier spoke with the voice of one who had seen too many battles and was resigned to fate.

"May the Nine guide you friend. I have faith that the Empire will not fall to this evil. Talos himself will protect it." Dunastyr's words were more hopeful than those of the others, and while few believed with him, no one dared crush his optimism.

"It is true that the Aldmeri forces are pushing toward the city. We saw a patrol of Thalmor soldiers passing along the coast this side of the river. It may not be long before they come closer to Cropsford. We cannot hope to remain unnoticed much longer." Nirinil spoke, his voice angry to mask his fear. "We must make preparations to flee should the White-Gold Tower fall."

"And where would you flee to?" asked Dunastyr, "no city will take in cats and elves while the war rages. I doubt you would even make it far enough along the roads to reach Bruma, let alone cross into Skyrim, and the Valus Mountains cannot easily be passed. Not that the dark elves will take you in either."

"We could still head south," Caspian retorted, "true, Leyawiin now sits in the hands of the Dominion, but there are still places no one will find us. There are Alyeid ruins we could shelter in, ancient forts left defenseless. Should the Emperor succeed in his defense, as you so boldly claim, it would still be safer than remaining here."

He and Nirinil had spoken of this plan for the past few weeks, sitting up late into the night with Lillian, gazing up at the two moons that lay above them, staring down upon the affairs of mortals. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was better to be prepared.

"Karlah will go with you," the Khajiit said, somewhat insulted by Dunastyr's use of the word 'cat'. "This one knows alchemy, and her claws are sharp. You could use Khajiit's eyes in the dark."

"Don't forget you're a good cook too," Nirinil smirked as she proclaimed her loyalty to the pair.

"I will go with you." The younger of the two soldiers, who until this moment had remained silent, finally spoke. "It would serve the Empire more to keep you from harm than any death I would die in the city."

The elder soldier looked moved to object to this blatant show of defiance to his orders, then stopped, resigning himself to the notion that the young man was right. "I will stay here in Cropsford. Those who do not wish to leave will need protection too."

"Then I guess we have little else to discuss. I will not stop you from going, but this town was rebuilt by my Grandfather, I cannot abandon it to destruction again." Dunastyr sighed, "When do you plan to leave?"

The small party of six met under the stars by the Cropsford Well. Caspian and Lillian, Karlah, Nirinil and his wife, and the young imperial soldier who went by the name Titus. Despite their pleas to those who remained in the settlement, none of the others wished to risk the dangers of the Yellow Road, and the hardships of living rough for who knew how many more months. Caspian could not blame them for wanting to stay. Had circumstances been different, he too might have been tempted to settle there, the peaceful fields and warm cottages set in beautiful forests was a far cry from the stone city he had grown up in. But the reality was that despite the current appearance of safety, the increase in enemy forces marching in ever greater numbers closer and closer to Cropsford meant that it was only a matter of time before the illusion was shattered. He hoped that he was wrong, that the families that stayed would still remain unnoticed and ignored as the Dominion looked towards bigger targets. It was not a risk he was willing to take.

Word was that the Imperial City was under heavy siege, Emperor Titus Mede the second of his name, was preparing to abandon the capital. The Empire's forces are no match for the might of the Aldmeri Dominion. News of great losses to the west in Hammerfell had also reached them. Defeat was only a matter of time. The faint prospect of the Empire managing to push back and retake what was lost was all that inspired those who now stood ready to leave.

Glass bow and quiver on his back, he held the hand of Lillian tightly as the group set off toward the road, the dark path in the forest hid from the light of the moons. They dared not light torches lest they be spotted. Karlah, with her natural gift of night vision led the group south toward the river, the only accompaniment to their footsteps was the distant howl of a wolf, and the buzzing of insects. They walked silently, none wishing to speak of what lay behind them.

Lillian's lute swayed on her back, she had not touched it since leaving the Imperial City. The time for songs seemed long ago to have passed. Caspian had hoped that she would sing for him again, perhaps one day, once this was all behind them, the gentle sound of music would once again come from those strings. He gripped her hand tightly, he had promised to look after her, and he would not go back on his word.

As the road wound its way toward the shore, the trees began to thin back, and a view across the Niben opened before them. The travellers stopped, frozen in shock at the light on the distant horizon to the north. An orange glow of fire blazing in the blackness of the night came from the Imperial City, the White-Gold Tower now a burning pyre of the destruction that lay beneath it. What they had all feared might happen had finally come to pass.

Lillian's hand shot to her mouth in horror. A quiet frightened gasp as all that it meant became clear. Caspian could not manage to hold back his tears at the thought of those who had perished in the attack. His heart still held out for the hope that Marcius and the others had managed to escape, but there was no denying the truth that his friends were now gone.

Screaming in pain and rage he dropped to his knees, overcome by grief and guilt.

"I should never have left them!" He sobbed, his fists pounding at the muddy shore.

Lillian bent down to comfort him. She too was in tears. "You would not have stopped this."

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him as he shook in sorrow. "We must keep going. We must survive. Do not let their deaths be in vain."

The others stood watching, each silently trying to comprehend what it was they now witnessed. None willing or able to offer words that would ease their suffering, all feeling the same sense of despair. After waiting for their companions to regain their composure, they

continued on the journey south. The war now behind them, and the unknown ahead. 'Peace will come again,' they each told themselves. As the distant light of dawn began to break upon a new day, they pressed along the road knowing that everything was now changed forever. There could be no turning back.

Chapter 5

The Rusty Anchor was a far cry from the Merchant's Inn. A dark, damp, and dilapidated building that sat on the outskirts of Leyawiin, was once a first port of call for the deckhands who worked the docks, and now a home to the city's outcasts.

Lillian stood by the fireplace, lute in her arms, playing a song that was a favourite for the tavern's regulars. Karlah, having delivered a bowl of stew and tankard of ale to the waiting customer, paused to watch her friend conclude her performance before heading back to the kitchen. The upbeat clapping that accompanied the strong strums and playful lyrics echoed through the mostly empty room. Not that it mattered who was there to listen, it brought the young bard happiness to pretend that life would go back to normal, and that was all that she really cared about. It also kept the workers coming back in and spending their coin, and the old Argonian couple, Hides-Behind-Scales and his wife Walks-In-Hope, who ran the place were pleased to have both Lillian and Karlah working with them.

Lillian was glad to have finally settled again. The end of the war had given them a chance to return to a more normal existence, and while things were still difficult and supplies scarce, the small city was beginning to recover following the retreat of the Dominion five years prior. Not that anyone called it victory.

Her eyes met those of Titus, now serving as a captain of the city guard, sitting quietly in the corner, his pint of mead untouched. It was not unusual to see him come in, yet these past few months he had become more silent, and his visits less frequent. Having noticed the eyes of the bard upon him, he turned away as though ashamed that he had been seen. Lillian was puzzled by his reaction, and would have gone to speak with the Imperial, but was instead distracted by the door swinging open and the trampling of two tiny feet running toward her.

"Mama!" A small Bosmer child cried, his arms outstretched to grab her, "Papa took me to see the ships... I'm going to be a sailor someday!" Putting down her lute, she swept the little boy into her arms, his golden hair flopping down over his smiling face. He giggled happily, safely held in his mother's arms.

"Really? My little Thoronir is going to leave his mother and go out to the seas? I think you'd miss me too much. Who would sing for you then?" she said playfully, ruffling his hair and smiling at Caspian who followed closely behind.

"Oooh, sing the orc song!" the child squealed in delight. Lillian sighed.

"Maybe later little one." She gently placed him down on the floor and he ran off toward the kitchen giggling. "Thank you for watching him today," she said as Caspian placed his arms around her aching shoulders in a reassuring hug.

"Oh it was my pleasure, it's good to get some time with him. I'm sorry I've been working so much."

"Did you meet with Nirinil?"

"Yes. He's found a ship and captain willing to work with us, word from the mill is that they'll be wanting to get the goods moving in the next fortnight. But..." His voice trailed off, lost in thought. A look of concern crossed his face, that he quickly tried to mask with a smile. Lillian always worried when she saw him like this. There was something wrong, something he wasn't telling her.

"But what?"

"I wouldn't worry. It's nothing, I'm just tired is all. Looking after Thoronir is exhausting work, I don't know how you do it."

The change of subject and complement was enough to take her mind off his words. She would trust him to tell her in his own time. She turned back toward the kitchen where their son had run off to, Karlah was watching him as she often did. Lillian was thankful for her friend's help in raising him. Caspian was often working long days with Nirinil, trying to get his business back together in a city that no longer wanted him there.

She sighed, why couldn't the people see that they were just as much victims of the war as they were? But being bosmer was reason enough to be looked down upon. Even entering the city gates to visit the shops was hard for her. The angry, frightened stares of the people as her and her son walked the streets, the hollered insults, the refusal of services. She did not blame them, they had seen too many horrors at the hands of elves.

Nelacar's was the only face that ever smiled. It was a twisted smile that sent shivers of fear down her spine. It was a smile she had seen the Altmer wear when he had given the order to execute the Nord who had refused to accept the terms of the White-Gold Concordat. She was glad that Thoronir had stayed with Karlah at the tavern that day, it was not a sight anyone should have had to see. Even with the war ended, the presence of the Thalmor Justiciar in the city was enough to make the citizens feel uneasy. The wrong word spoken in secret was all that it took to be reminded that the war had been for nothing. Lillian had found herself biting her tongue on more than one occasion, many songs of the empire no longer safe to be sung.

Looking over toward her son, she felt tears begin to form in her eyes as she watched him sitting quietly on the dusty floor, nibbling on a sweetroll innocently. She resolved she would do everything she could to shield him from the harshness of the world.

The peace of the tavern was interrupted by the door slamming open and a hulking Imperial stormed in, his boots thumping across the stone floor toward the nearest table, slamming the tankard that sat upon it into the worn and stained wood. "Pint of mead elf!" he barked at Lillian, lumping himself into the chair, and lifting his feet onto the table. She noticed Caspian scowl at the way the man had addressed her, she grabbed hold of his arm tightly. "It's ok, I'll get him his drink. He'll be gone soon." she whispered softly into his ear. Maximus came here at least once a week to harass those who frequented the Anchor, word from the townsfolk was that the old soldier had lost everyone in his company during the war, caught in an ambush by Aldmeri battlemages. His face still bore the horrific burns from that day.

Somehow she knew that this was the only way he could release his anger at those whom he believed had caused him to suffer, but even so, she wished he did not threaten her and Karlah as much as he did. Walking back over to the bar, Hides-Behind-Scales handed her a filled tankard, a resentful look on his reptilian face.

Bringing the mead to the man, she placed it carefully on the centre of the table, before turning to walk away, never acknowledging the Imperial's presence. The sound of the metal tankard hitting the floor, as the liquid that should have been inside splashed into a large pool, made her spin around in anger.

"You dropped it elf. Can't do anything right can you?" Maximus smirked at the mess he had created. Lillian glared at him, she did not need this today. Caspian was not in the mood for this either. He lept forward, hand clamped around the muscular neck of the veteran, eyes filled with a fiery rage.

"Find another tavern." Caspian's words were slow and deliberate, each syllable punctuated with a strengthening grasp.

Maximus laughed hoarsely as his own hand twisted the arm of the Bosmer away. "You'll regret ever touching me elf," he said before spitting in Caspian's face and shoving him away to stand up. Kicking over the table, he reached for a dagger fastened to his belt. Lillian gasped in fear, rushing over to the aid of her love.

Suddenly the scene was interrupted by the drawing of a sword as Titus made his way toward the group. Weapon pointing at Maximus, he held it as steady as his inebriated fingers would allow. "You heard him. Find. Another. Tavern."

Maximus slid the dagger back into its sheath with a bitter snarl, and began to make his way toward the exit. Titus continued his speech, "If I ever see you enter this place again, you'll be spending more than a few nights in the comforts of the city's jail. Do I make myself clear?"

"You are a traitor of the Empire! You think you can stand with the elves who took from us everything?" He paused as Karlah exited the kitchen to see what all the shouting was about. "Didn't want to be here anyway. You let a filthy animal enter." The Khajiit let out a sharp hiss in anger.

"Get. Out." Titus moved toward the imperial, sword still drawn and ready to fight.

Maximus snorted in disgust and backed out of the tavern in anger, calling out behind him as he walked away. "You'll regret this. You won't survive another week in this city. I'll see to that!"

As the door slowly closed and the shouting subsided, Titus sheathed his sword and walked back to the corner where he was sat. Lillian gasped a deep sigh in relief, and then groaned in frustration at the mess she would now have to clear up. Hides-Behind-Scales walked out from the bar, ashamed of his inaction in the confrontation. "It is ok Lillian. I will clean up this mess. You need to go home and rest with your family. Hope and I can manage the tavern this evening."

Caspian pulled her into his arms, she felt him squeeze her tightly, not wanting to let her go. She looked around the room for little Thoronir, finally spotting him cowering beneath a chair his eyes wide with fear, all traces of the laughter he had entered the tavern with, now gone. Silently she prayed that Maximus would not return, and that Titus would stay true to his word if he did. Her heart longed for the tavern of High-Rock she had grown up in. Not for the first time since leaving was she now regretting that choice.

Resting her head upon Caspian's chest, she was reminded why she stayed. Together they had survived this far. Together they would survive further.

Chapter 6

Lillian walked silently with Caspian holding their young son in his arms as the three of them made their way along the unlit dirt track that led to the small shack the family rented outside the city walls. She was still shaking from the incident at the Anchor, and exhausted from a long day's work cleaning and waiting on tables. The distant hooting of an owl could be heard mixed with the sound of the waters splashing against the rocky shore, the peace of the evening enough to help her mind relax.

The small shack sat in a small wooded area near the river, a set of rotting wooden steps leading up a muddy bank to the tiny porch where an old lantern hung waiting for oil to once again refill it. Not that they could afford oil. A small stack of firewood sat by the doorway, and the sight of the tattered rug hanging over the fence to dry was a reminder that there was still more cleaning and cooking to be done once inside.

Stepping into the little room the three bosmer called home, she went over to the fireplace and poked at the smouldering embers from that morning's fire. Carefully relighting a small handful of tinder and placing a couple of chopped logs into the stone pit, she began searching through the cupboards for what food she could prepare that night, as Caspian sat and read with Thoronir on the family's bed. He's growing up so quickly, he'd soon be needing his own, she thought, not that she knew where they would find the space for it. She smiled, her heart warmed by the sight of the two of them, even with all the hardships they faced, it was enough to inspire her to keep going.

Grabbing a cabbage and a couple of potatoes she set about chopping the vegetables. If only her mother could see her now, violating the green pact in such a way. Not that she had any other choice. Meat and milk were too expensive following the war, and besides, the plants had not grown in Valenwood.

Once the food was cooked, and the table set, the bosmer family sat to enjoy the meagre meal. Thoronir was not his usual bubbly self tonight, Lillian realised as the young boy sat stirring his soup, staring into the bowl his tired eyes drooping. Perhaps he was just feeling as worn out as she was, he'd been up before them both this morning, jumping excitedly when he found out that he was going to spend the day with his Papa. Or maybe he was still afraid after the run-in with Maximus.

"Looks like someone needs to go to bed." She said, running her fingers through his hair as she patted him softly. "Come on, I'll tuck you in." Lifting the tired child into her arms, she carried him over to the bed, and pulled the blanket over him. The little boy smiled at his mother.

"Can you sing the song?" he asked, his eyes staring up at her, bright amber and filled with hope.

"Of course," she replied reaching over to pick up the lute she had left resting nearby.

Plucking the strings softly she sang the familiar lullaby once again, watching as Thoronir's eyes gently closed in a blissful sleep.

"Softly, feel the wind blow, as the sun gently sets.

Peaceful, lay in my arms, as you go to your bed.

As the darkness, ever growing, slowly turns into night,

Fear not, for the shadows, will be banished by the light.
And as sure as the moons shine, will dawn finally break,
I will be there always for you, when with sunrise you wake.
So, sleep my child, rest, hear the words of my song,
May the sweetest dreams find you, all the night long."

As she let the final notes fade out, she turned back toward Caspian who sat watching her as he always had done all those years ago back in the Imperial City. Careful not to wake her sleeping child, she placed the lute back, and returned to the table to finish her meal.

"I stopped by the memorial today," Caspian said. "It would have been five years ago today that we lost her."

Lillian paused before answering, "How's Nirinil?"

Nirinil's wife had caught bone-break fever in the months the group from Cropsford had spent living in the abandoned fort east of Leyawiin. It had been a difficult time, there were not the right ingredients available to help make a cure, and everyday that the fever progressed the young Altmer had become worse. It was their desperation to help her that led them all to return to Leyawiin. War or no war, it was better to try than to succumb to the sickness. But perhaps they would have been better off not returning. Nirinil had returned to his former home to find that his house had been declared abandoned and sold to an Imperial woman. Despite his pleas and protests to Countess Alexia, the sale had been declared legally binding, and besides, no one wanted to help an elf. His trading offices had fared little better. The dockside offices were burnt out and ransacked, a shelter from the cold for skooma addicts. The discovery of her home in ruins, and those she had once considered friends now shunning her as a traitor was enough to send the poor Altmer to her grave. The final weeks were spent using every septim they could find to pay mages of the guild to keep her alive, though none were skilled enough in the art of restoration. Her death sent Nirinil into a deep despair. The memorial markers by the river where they buried her were four large rocks stood tall against the shore. One for each they had lost.

"I didn't remind him. I couldn't put him through that today." Caspian had done whatever he could to help his friend recover, and to provide a home for himself and Lillian. The decision to start a family was the best they could hope for, and it had been enough to pull Nirinil back from his grief. Together the two bosmer traders had set about restoring what they could of the old offices, and in the years following the war, the two of them managed to find some limited success as the Empire slowly recovered.

"You mentioned earlier that you'd found a ship?" Lillian asked, reminded of the conversation that had been so rudely interrupted. Caspian's face dropped, he sighed before finally speaking.

"The sisters at the sawmill will trade their stock, they don't care who gets it. The Empire wants us to send the logs north to help rebuild Bravil, but for the amount they are offering, we won't even break even."

Lillian nodded, she understood his frustration.

"Then Nirinil tells me he's found us a better buyer. Importer from Valenwood is willing to pay six times that of what we would get from the Empire, but... I can't help but feel wrong in doing so."

It was a tempting offer. The gold would be enough to settle the debts Nirinil had found himself in trying to stave off competition from the East Empire Trading Company, it would even have been enough for Caspian to buy the shack they were renting, and perhaps even expand it. Accepting this contract meant food on the table, and fuel for the fire. But it also meant betraying the Empire. The Green Pact prevented the native Bosmer from harvesting their own forests, and were dependent on wood from the Empire and Alinor. It had been imported timber from Cyrodiil that had helped build the Dominion's invasion fleet. Caspian let out a sigh, "Nirinil wants to go ahead with the deal, and I don't blame him. But the ship he's using... That Argonian captain is not the sort to be trusted. Not that we've really had any other choice."

"What are you going to do?" Lillian said, understanding why it was that he was having trouble with the situation.

"I told him I'd let him know tomorrow. I wanted to talk it over with you first."

"Let me sleep on it."

Lillian's eyes sagged in the dim light of the fireplace. It was too late to be making such a huge decision. The day's events had left her feeling drained enough already. She moved to begin clearing away the empty bowls, but was stopped by a hand resting on hers. She looked up to see Caspian staring into her eyes.

"Get to bed. I'll clean up."

Making her way over to the bed, she found herself collapsing onto the blankets as a deep sleep overtook her.

Caspian waited until his beloved was asleep before quietly gathering his bow and unlatching the door. He stepped out into the cold night air, a fresh wind blowing in from the coast. He needed some time to think. Walking out into the forest alone, he knew what it was that he must do.

The small shack shook as the hammering on the door woke Lillian from her sleep. Opening her eyes she rolled over to see Caspian making his way toward it, still with his shirt off.

"I'm coming... I'm coming..." he mumbled, as he sleepily stumbled across the room. His fingers found the latch on the lock, and he let out a huge yawn as the door opened.

"Caspian. You are under arrest for the murder of Maximus Arellius and for involvement in the theft of Imperial property." Three city guards stood on the porch, accompanied by the smirking face of Nelacar the Thalmor Justiciar. It took a moment for the words to sink in. Lillian sat up quickly and moved to join Caspian stood in the doorway. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

"What?" Caspian said, squinting in the early morning sunlight. "I... I don't know what you're talking about." He shifted uneasily as Lillian wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Owner of the East Empire Trading Company Warehouse found their stock has been taken overnight. A group of Argonian sailors were caught trying to leave with the goods and have told us that they were working for your partner Nirinil, whom we have discovered is unable to pay back the city for the gold that he owes." The guard said, stepping closer to the Bosmer couple.

"You said something about murder?" Caspian said, still confused.

"Maximus Arellius. Found dead at the warehouse where he worked. We have reason to believe that you were both involved in an incident at the Rusting Anchor yesterday."

"I didn't kill anyone." Caspian said, starting to shake. Lillian gasped. Maximus was a brute and a bully, but there was no reason to suspect...

"His body was found with this sticking from his neck." The guard at the rear lifted a glass arrow up, his eyes meeting those of Caspian to where the face of Titus could be recognised beneath the steel helmet.

Lillian spun around, searching for the bow and quiver in the corner where Caspian kept them. They were not there. They sat instead by the entrance, eleven glass arrows sat in the quiver.

"Tell me you didn't..." She began to cry, she didn't want to believe this was happening. It was all just a nightmare. Any moment she would wake up back in her bed, her lover asleep next to her. She shook her head. The dream did not stop.

"Lillian... I do not know anything of what these men are saying. I have had no part in this. You have to believe me. I've been set up." Caspian's words became more desperate as the guards pushed in to grab hold of his arms. Dragging him from her arms, Lillian cried out in terror.

"Caspian! No! Stop! Please, he didn't do it! He was with me all night. Please, stop!"

The shouting was enough to rouse Thoronir from his sleep. The young boy waddled over to the doorway, watching as Caspian struggled against the strong arms pulling him away. He ran forward to his papa, his short arms wrapping around his father's leg, desperately pulling him home. "Papa! Papa!" His cries became filled with tears.

Lillian was in shock, she stared at Nelacar who stood silently watching, and then toward Titus who shook his head in pity.

One of the guards grew tired of the screaming child, and kicked the small boy to the ground. Thoronir let go of his papa's leg, howling in pain. Lillian rushed forward to grab him, feeling a fury that only a mother could feel in that moment.

Caspian cursed at the guard. "I swear, when this is over you will regret touching my son..."

He was interrupted by a punch to his face. Lillian called out in horror at the blood that gushed from his nose. She fell to the ground weeping, Thoronir still screaming as Caspian was dragged toward the city gates. Nelacar walked slowly behind the guards, his face still held in that despicable smile.

Turning back toward the small place she called home, Lillian noticed a freshly killed rabbit hanging by the swinging door.

Chapter 7

Lillian stumbled in the mud as she ran, clutching Thoronir tightly. She had to get help.

Panting heavily, gasping for breath, she pounded her free fist into the door of the Rusting Anchor, calling out as she did with lungs too exhausted to properly sound.

"Hold your hollering... I'm coming..." came a raspy voice from the other side. There was the sound of bolts scraping, and the great creaking of hinges as the door swung open slowly to reveal Walks-In-Hope standing bleary eyed in the entrance. "Lillian?"

"C-c-caspian... they took... they took Caspian..." Lillian stammered. "He's... he... didn't... they can't..." It was all coming out wrong. She burst into tears, which woke the half-sleeping Thoronir on her shoulder. He began screaming.

"Woah, woah. Slow down. Come inside, tell me what's happening." The old Argonian woman moved to let Lillian enter the tavern. Her puffy eyes met the sleepy face of Hides-Behind-Scales staring confused as he stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"Hides, bring us a chair!" Walks-In-Hope called to her husband as she shut the door behind the Bosmer. Hides-Behind-Scales wandered over, and pulled down a seat from the table it had been placed on the previous night.

"What's all this about then?" he asked.

Lillian tried to calm herself down enough to explain what had happened. Thoronir continued to cry. She bounced him gently, but was unable to console him.

"Let Karlah look after the little one," came a soft purring voice. The wailing child had awoken the Khajiit who had walked into the room to see what was going on. Lillian hadn't noticed her presence till now. She did her best to force a smile at the sight of her friend, and carefully allowed her to take Thoronir from her arms. She rocked him against her bosom, her warm purrs enough to soothe him.

"The city guard," Lillian managed to say at last. "They came this morning, arrested Caspian. Said he was accused of murder. But he didn't kill anyone. He must have gone out hunting last night in the forest, but... he wouldn't. He couldn't. I don't believe it."

"Murder? Who died?" Hides-Behind-Scales said.

"Titus said it was Maximus. Found dead in the East Empire warehouse this morning. Apparently he'd been killed by one of Caspian's arrows." There was a silence as the group took in the news.

"Titus is involved in this?" Walks-In-Hope said, shaking her head. Lillian nodded, she could barely believe it herself. Surely he knew Caspian better than this. She thought back to the look he had given her the previous night. Had he known something was wrong? Did he set this up?

"I don't know what's going on. They took him... I... I have to see him." Lillian stood up suddenly, turning back towards the door. "Can you watch Thoronir for me?"

Karlah walked over to the crying Bosmer, and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Go, see Caspian. Khajiit will watch him for you."

Lillian turned and hugged her friend. "Thank you." Then running her fingers along her son's cheeks she whispered to him softly. "Mama is going to go see Papa. You can stay here with Karlah and Hope. I'll be back soon." The small boy's eyes stared widely at his mother.

"Why did they take Papa?" he asked before bursting into tears again. Lillian wiped away her own from her face and did her best to force a smile for her son. "I don't know little one, but I'm going to find out."

As she walked away from the tavern she felt her whole body shaking with each step. Sorrow. Anger. Fear. Approaching the city gates she took one final glance behind her at the home the family had rested in the previous night. Would they have to leave this place too?

The city streets were quiet save for a group of workers constructing a platform in the square as Lillian made her way toward the castle. Her mind was racing, so many questions, so many emotions. Passing the huge walls that bordered the castle courtyard, she couldn't help but feel trapped by the rough hewn stones towering above her. The city was uninviting to her at the best of times, but today it was especially oppressive.

She had no idea where it was she was headed, only that she had a knowledge that the city guard were headquartered within, and so it was a lost and confused Lillian that Titus ran into as she tried to open the huge iron framed door.

"Lillian... I'm... I'm sorry," he stammered desperately as the Bosmer backed away, her face flushing in anger, "You have to understand, I had no idea this was going to happen!"

"Where is Caspian? Where have you taken him!" Lillian snapped.

"Listen... I was only following orders. Last night at the Anchor I..."

"Last night? I don't care about what happened to Maximus. I want to know why you've arrested Caspian!" her voice grew louder with her frustration.

"Lillian, calm down. Please. I'll take you to see him, he's in the jail with the others." Titus sighed reluctantly. "Just, don't tell anyone I let you in."

"He didn't do it! You have to know this Titus? Caspian wouldn't kill anyone!" Lillian burst into tears, staring up at the face she had trusted for so many years. Never had she felt so betrayed. Right now though, he was her only hope at seeing her love, and so she finally relented and followed him inside the castle.

Titus spoke softly to the two guards stationed outside the door leading to the cells, and after a few awkward glances at each other, the pair parted and unlocked it allowing Lillian and Titus to pass. The long dark corridor had three iron gates along it, despondent faces peering out of each one. The first cell held a group of four Argonians, all cramped into the tiny room. They hissed menacingly as Lillian and Titus passed by them. The second cell held Nirinil, curled into a sobbing ball on the floor. Muttering to himself over and over.

The face in the final cell called out to her as Lillian ran toward it, arms outstretched, face wet with tears.

"Caspian!" Lillian cried, her hands grasping those of the Bosmer through the thick metal bars that separated them. "Please tell me what is happening?"

He lifted his hands to her face, trying to offer his comfort.

"This is all a misunderstanding. We've been set up. I did not kill Maximus last night. I went hunting, tried to catch us some meat. I have no idea what they are accusing me of, but I had nothing to do with it."

"I know," Lillian whispered between sobs. She stared into his eyes, they too were red and wet.

"Where is Thoronir?"

"With Karlah at the Anchor."

"Lillian, I need you to take him. You have to make sure..."

He was interrupted by the sound of the door slamming open, and the sharp footsteps of the Thalmor Justiciar Nelacar marching toward the pair.

"Execution is all set for this evening," the altmer said gleefully, "should be quite the show, not every day I get to watch six hangings."

"Execution..." Lillian gasped, she felt her legs begin to give way beneath her, the room spinning, her heart pounding. "No." She fell toward the floor away from Caspian's grasp. He reached out toward her calling in panic.

"Lillian!" his arms swatting at the air, desperately clawing at her, straining through the bars in a futile effort to catch his beloved.

"You said they would stand trial!" Titus shouted at Nelacar, "By whose orders are they sentenced to death?"

"Countess Alexia's, the evidence against them was overwhelming. Thanks to your help," the Thalmor Justiciar smirked. He turned toward the fainting Lillian, who struggled to pull herself up beside the wall. He moved in toward her, his insane stare lingering over her.

"I wouldn't worry about your wife Caspian. I'll make sure that her needs are taken care of. Personally make sure." The altmer gently ran his hand along her shoulders. Lillian flinched, utterly petrified, unable to speak.

"You bastard!" Caspian screamed in rage, "I will kill you!" He threw his whole body against the cell door, slamming into the iron bars with all of his fury. The gate shook with each blow, the bricks that held the fittings in place began to crack.

Nelacar laughed at the bosmer's efforts. "I'll leave you till last. Make sure that your son gets to see his father hang."

There was a loud grunting charge as Titus lunged toward Nelacar, his sword swinging to take off the Altmer's head. The Thalmor Justiciar ducked beneath the blade, and Titus recovered and attempted a second swing. The sword found its mark, and stabbed through Nelacar's shoulder, forcing him away from Lillian.

The altmer winced in pain, and then lifted his other arm, magicka swirling with a tumultuous power. Three shards of ice flew across the corridor, pinning Titus to the wall.

The two guards who had been standing outside burst in through the doors, weapons drawn ready to fight.

"Arrest Captain Prevatius. See that this traitor goes to the gallows with the others." Nelacar gestured toward Titus, thick blood oozing out from his wound, dripping onto the floor.

Lillian staggered toward Caspian, grabbing his hands tightly, not wanting to let him go.

"Run Lillian," Caspian said, "Run from Leyawiin. Take Thoronir and don't look back."

Lillian squeezed him tighter, no, she couldn't. She wouldn't. "Not without you."

"I... I'm not going to get out of this. You have to make sure that the two of you survive. Take care of our son for me."

"Lillian, listen to him. Run!" Titus called out as the guards threw him into Nirinil's cell, the poor Bosmer completely gone from reality, already resigned to his fate.

Nelacar walked toward her, the same twisted smile still accompanying the wild look in his eyes. "Get her out of here. She can see her husband at the execution."

The guards clamped their arms around her, dragging her kicking away from Caspian.

As Lillian was thrown out of the jail room she could hear the last words he spoke to her. "I love you."

Chapter 8

Two tiny hands stroking her face woke Lillian. Opening her eyes she could see Thoronir staring at her, a worried look on his small face. "Mama?" He said confused. She blinked in the light, perhaps... perhaps it had only been a nightmare? Sitting upwards she realised that she was not in her own bed, or indeed her own room. Staring around she searched desperately for any sign of Caspian. This hadn't been real. She couldn't believe that it was. She called out for him, but already knew that he would not respond. The warm orange light of the fading sun made her question how long she had been asleep. Sunset. The execution. Was she too late to stop it?!

The door to the bedroom opened and a familiar furry face appeared in the form of Karlah.

"Lillian, you are awake! We've been so worried."

"Where am I? Caspian... Nelacar... I... I have to stop them..." Lillian swung her legs off the bed, and began to try to stand, her legs felt like two twigs beneath her. Heart pounding, deep breathing, she tried not to panic. "How much time...?"

"You're at the Anchor, you passed out trying to explain..." the Khajiit paused, looking out of the window. "We have an hour. But you must first get your strength back." Karlah turned and called down the stairs, "Hope! She's awake, can you bring it up?"

"What is going on? Caspian! I have to save Caspian!"

Thoronir was growing increasingly restless as his mother began to panic. "Where is Papa?" the young boy asked fearfully, before bursting into tears. "I want Papa!"

Lillian pulled him toward her, holding him in a fierce embrace, terrified to let him go. She felt nauseous, her chest twisting in pain. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

Walks-In-Hope entered the room carrying a tray of food. "You must eat. You need to get your strength back, the road is long."

"Road? I'm not leaving. Not without... not..." she couldn't say it.

"It is too late. There is nothing we can do to stop it." Karlah rested a reassuring paw on Lillian's shoulder. "Nelacar will come looking for you. This is our only chance to escape. This one will go with you." The Khajiit's eyes filled with tears. Lillian shook her head.

"No." she whispered. But Karlah was right.

She sat still for a moment, listening to the quiet sobbing of Thoronir resting on her shoulder. She remembered Nelacar's threats against the two of them, Caspian desperately pleading with her to run, to take Thoronir and leave Leyawiin. He knew what he was saying. She just couldn't accept it. But if she stayed... She felt torn, if there was any way she could stop this from happening...

"Karlah packed you some things. This one went to the shack, prepared some bags. Not too heavy though, don't want to slow us down." Karlah lifted two bags onto the bed, and then reached down to pick up one last item. Her lute.

The old instrument, now looking so much worse for wear after it's many years on the road. It had accompanied the young Bosmer bard everywhere, its music had been her life. A joy in the mornings, a comfort through sorrows. A reminder of that day when she and Caspian met... She took it carefully, her hands shaking. Reluctantly she accepted what needed to happen.

"Where are we going?"

The distant roll of thunder echoed across the Lower Niben. Splashes of rain tumbling from the sky like tears, crashing into the ground as the two figures walked along the dirt path in the dark. Karlah carried the bags, and Lillian held a sleeping Thoronir wrapped in a worn cloak, as the pair walked in silence, exhausted from their many hours on the road. The storm continued to worsen, they would need to find shelter from it soon.

"This one sees a light not too far ahead. There may be somewhere to stay." Karlah spoke to the tired bosmer. Lillian did not react. The two had barely spoken as they walked. There were no words to describe how she felt. The only thing that kept her moving forward was the child in her arms, for his sake, she reminded herself, over and over again. Never once turning to look back lest she be unable to press on. They had walked far that night, and despite their aching legs they still stumbled forward through the trees, searching for somewhere they could finally rest. They had passed by the ruins of a farmhouse but the burnt out building was of little use to shelter them from the rain and winds. It was a reminder that not every place affected by the war would recover,

Lillian followed the lead of her Khajiit friend, drawing closer to what appeared to be a small town hidden in the hills. She sighed in relief, hopefully they could find an inn that would have them. Hopefully no one would be so cruel as to turn them away.

The wind continued to tear at them. Her fingers numb from cold, a shiver running down her back as her wet hair dripped onto it. Little Thoronir also shivered beneath the cloak that wrapped him. The swinging sign outside the small building they reached, rattled with a fierce gust, the noise and cold enough to wake the sleeping child.

Stepping in through the door, Lillian was surprised to see several Khajiit sat round a small table, and another one tending bar. She was reminded how close they were to the border with Elsweyr, though other than Karlah, Leyawiin had very few of the cat-like people dwelling there. Not that they were permitted to live inside the city walls. Elsweyr formed part of the Aldmeri Dominion, and the Khajiit had a poor reputation as thieves and skooma addicts. It was not an entirely unfounded belief, though Karlah was always quick to point out not all Khajiit were the same.

"Welcome to the Borderwatch Inn travellers. My, you all look so cold. Come sit, warm yourselves by the fire." The Khajiit woman spoke with the same soft purr that Karlah did as she motioned toward the three, "Can this one get you a drink? Perhaps something to eat? Ah, it is late, is it a room you require?"

Lillian said nothing, her eyes beginning to close, Thoronir poked at her face, a small smile lighting up his eyes. She tried to return it, but her heart was not able to match her face. Everytime she looked at him, she saw Caspian looking back.

Karlah spoke to the Khajiit innkeeper, and shook out a small coin purse, carefully counting out the correct change for a single room.

"This one will sleep by the fire," she said to Lillian, "Karlah will arrange things for the morning. You need to rest."

Lillian and Thoronir followed the innkeeper who led them to a small side-room with a single bed and table. Placing her child down onto the blankets covering the straw padded wood frame, she slipped her lute off her back and placed it on the table. Having thanked the innkeeper, the door closed between them, and she sank onto the bed.

"When do we go home? I want Papa." Thoronir wrapped his small arms around his mother. Lillian hugged him tightly, tears filling her eyes.
"I don't know," she whispered.

Lillian poked at the slice of bread and cheese that sat on the plate in front of her. It wasn't much of a breakfast and she hadn't eaten properly the day before, yet there was little she could do to motivate herself to manage the food. She shook with cold, her face more flushed than usual. It had been a restless night.

Karlah sat at the table opposite her, little Thoronir was on the floor by the fire, his face buried in a sweetroll. Lillian still had no idea how to tell him that Papa was never coming home. That they were never going home. That there was no home for them to go to. She could barely comprehend this herself.

"Bravil is not a suitable destination for you," Karlah said, "The city is much worse than imagined, the destruction from the war has still not been repaired, the streets run with beggars and thieves. The people will not take kindly to more refugees. Especially two bosmer and a khajiit."

"Then where in the Empire can we go to?" Lillian said.

"Perhaps the Empire is not where we should be staying."

"Hammerfell is too far to travel, at least by foot."

"This one was thinking, perhaps further south than that. It may be that we find a home in Valenwood."

"But that would mean..." Lillian stopped. She couldn't be serious? "But, we'd be living in the Aldmeri Dominion." Ever since the war had started, the Dominion had been the enemy. It was the Dominion who destroyed the Imperial City. It was the Dominion that forced them to flee from Cropsford. It was the Thalmor from the Dominion that killed Caspian.

"Living among your people. No one would notice two of their kin as outsiders. The bosmer are a hospitable race, they will not turn you away as men have."

Lillian considered this proposal. Karlah was right. Again.

"How would we get there? We would need to travel across Elsweyr." She had heard tales of the strange land divided into two states. The thick jungle to the south, a harsh desert to the north. They would never survive it alone.

Karlah pointed to a khajiit couple sat in the corner of the inn. "This one has spoken to a few last night," she said, "they would be willing to help us reach the nearest city. Once over the border we can find a caravan to travel with until we reach Valenwood."

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was something. Lillian nodded, still unable to properly process what she was going through. She shivered again. Was she just cold? In shock? Ill? She looked over to Thoronir, it was his future that mattered. Valenwood would be a better place to raise him than the slums of Cyrodiil, it would be good for the two of them to reconnect with their own culture. She could only hope that they would all survive the journey.

Chapter 9

The journey was much harder than expected through the hills that formed the border between Elsweyr and Cyrodiil. Lillian had not been prepared for such a demanding walk. Her legs ached, her shoulders ached. She had not slept properly, and had not eaten, all will to live had been taken from her save for little Thoronir who ran along with the three Khajiit ahead, fascinated by their brightly coloured attire, and excited to be seeing sands for the first time.

She smiled as the small boy threw himself tumbling into the long grass that covered the hill they now walked down, his childish squeals of delight enough to distract her from her sorrow, if only for a brief moment. How Caspian would have loved to have been here, he would have probably rolled himself down the hill with his son. She realised she would never hear him laugh again. Never see him smile. She paused to take a deep breath before continuing forward. It would not do to cry now, she needed her strength to keep walking.

Every step was feeling harder and harder. The air grew hotter as they approached the desert that stretched out ahead for miles. Just dunes of dust as far as she could see. Mountains standing in the distance, dark and foreboding in the shimmering heat. Her heart once again sank as she realised it would take several days to cross it.

The heat, oh the heat. The burning sun scorching down upon her, so bright it hurt her eyes, already tormented by the sand that blew with the warm breeze. Feeling for the water pouch lent to her by the the khajiit couple they had left Borderwatch with, she lifted the leather sack to her lips and drank thirstily. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she began to feel somewhat distant, as though the world had become submerged in water. Her legs shook as she pressed onwards toward the others who were now several feet ahead.

They stopped, turning to watch her struggling. Karlah was now carrying both of their bags, Lillian still had her lute strapped to her back. She had refused to let the poor khajiit from burdening herself further. The wooden instrument bounced with each step she took, a soft echoing tone resonating each time it struck.

"Are you alright Lillian?" Karlah asked with concern, she too appeared to be bothered by the heat. Neither of them was exactly dressed for the current climate.

Lillian tried to nod in response, her head felt heavy.

"Just... not used to the heat." She felt a shiver run through her. This was not just the warm weather. She began to feel the world spinning around her, Karlah called out something, but it felt as though she were hearing it from across a great distance. Her ears began to ring and the world grew fuzzy. She felt her legs give way beneath her as the ground rose to meet her. Slumping face first into the dry desert grass, she allowed the blackness to take over.

Cool water splashed against her face, as she slowly regained consciousness. All energy now gone, Lillian failed to lift herself from the ground she lay on. The feline face of Karlah watching over her, holding the water pouch that had been emptied onto her. Thoronir stood by, watching his mother. It was the second time in as many days he had seen her like this. "Mahirr says that he has spotted a small village not too far ahead. Can you make it a little further?" Her khajiit friend's face was crumpled into a frown. Lillian knew this was not a good

sign. She attempted to roll onto her side, and slowly began to drag herself up. Her legs and arms shaking, not wanting to respond. She gasped deeply for breath, the world still spinning. "I don't feel well," the bosmer said.

"That much is obvious. It seems you may have contracted a fever. This one will try and help you, but first we must get to some shelter."

The khajiit couple the three from Leyawiin travelled with looked on as Lillian slowly got back onto her feet.

"How much further?"

The female khajiit spoke, "Just in the foot of these hills, a little ways into the sands. It will not take too long to reach it."

Lillian slowly nodded, and Thoronir ran and wrapped his arms around her legs.

"Mama! You come with me!" he said, pulling at her.

It was enough to motivate her forward again, despite her whole body telling her she should not be trying to walk.

The group of travellers made their way slowly down the hillside, the tall dry grass giving way to rough rocks and cracked dirt, and finally into soft warm sands. Together they reached the small village, the small huts and tents surrounding a well in its centre. Two khajiit merchants sat in the shade of a large canvas awning, a limited selection of wares laid out before them on woven rugs. They smiled warmly at the sight of the strangers who approached them, calling out in greeting. "Blessings of the moon upon you travellers."

Mahirr, the male of the party, approached the merchants. "Fortune smiles upon this meeting," he began, "the Bosmer who travels with us is sick, we are in need of a shelter to stay. Can you assist us?"

The second merchant waved his arm toward a small hut in the corner of the village. "Over there, there is no one who lives in that shelter. You may rest there as long as you need."

Mahiir's wife smiled and thanked the merchants, and relayed the news to the others. Lillian and Karlah both sighed in relief. Exhausted and ready to collapse again, the two of them entered the hut. It was bare save for a pile of straw in the corner, and a few clay pots by the door. Thoronir followed closely behind.

Lillian slumped into the pile of straw. It was not much of a bed, but it was better than the hard ground. She allowed her eyes to close for a moment as Karlah began searching through her bag, muttering to herself, her desperate shuffling growing more frantic. Finally Lillian heard the khajiit sigh in frustration.

"What is wrong?" Lillian asked weakly.

"This one does not have the ingredients needed for a cure. The herbs this one packed will not be enough to remove your fever. Karlah must go and search for them. You must rest." Mahiir and his wife entered the hut.

"We should not stay here long. The merchants tell of bandits who have raided this place twice in the past month. It is possible they may return." He looked toward Lillian, and then toward Karlah, his face bore a puzzled expression. "What is wrong?"

"This one needs to find ingredients for a potion to help the bosmer. Though where this one will find them..." Karlah's voice trailed off, lost in thought. "Might I ask you to watch over her and the child while this one searches?"

Mahiir frowned and shook his head. "Mahiir will go with you, it is too dangerous alone. Shara can help look after her." His wife nodded in agreement.

Karlah sighed, "Of course. We must move quickly, it should not take long to find what we need." She turned to Lillian, taking a moment to feel her face, the fever was not relenting. "Make sure she stays cool and drinks plenty," she said to Shara. Karlah and Mahirr took their leave and Lillian allowed herself to sleep.

Thoronir's stomach grumbled hungrily as he sat in the hut watching his mother sleeping. Shara had left a few moments earlier to collect more water from the well. It had been a strange few days for the small boy. Watching Papa being dragged away by the men in the armour, his mother screaming with tears. The frantic packing from Karlah, and the terrible silence and lack of all smiles on Mama's tear stained face as they walked away from the only home he had even known. The long cold night in the rain, and the strange tavern room he had awoken in, followed by yet another day of walking. He tried his best to understand what was happening, it was clear things were not alright, but he trusted his Mama to make things better as she always did for him. All it took was a hug and a song, and the big strong arms of Papa lifting him onto his shoulders. He missed his Papa. He liked Karlah too. Her strange furry face and arms, and long tail that swept behind her, though like no other person he had met till now, was still the face of a friend. A friend who told him stories of the deserts he now found himself in, and more importantly, handed him treats. He wanted some treats now. He waddled over to his mother, hoping to wake her and ask her for food, but his prodding fingers were not enough to wake the softly snoring mer. Fed up with the small room, he decided in that moment to try and find the other cat-lady to see if she could find him something to eat, and after much struggling to open the wooden door, he finally ventured out into the village alone.

Chapter 10

Thoronir wandered out of the small hut his mother slept in, it felt good to be out in the open air. He looked around. There was no sign of Shara in the empty village. The two merchants had begun to pack their things as the sun descended toward the distant horizon. A light breeze blew through the silent dusty settlement. Whoever had lived here before was long gone.

Had the four year old Bosmer been older and wiser, he might have realised that something was horribly wrong with this place and that it would be better to stay away, but he was too young to notice this. He approached the well in the centre of the village. He was just slightly too short to see over the pile of rocks that surrounded it, but standing on his toes and pulling himself up, he was just able to peer down into the dark wet pit below where a bucket floated a few arms lengths out of reach. Picking up a small pebble, he dropped it into the water, listening to the echoing plop as it hit the surface and sank beneath. Thoronir giggled and went to find another stone, this time a bigger one.

The rock crashed into the bucket with a satisfying splash. It reminded him of trying to skip stones across the river with Papa. He had struggled to get them more than a few feet away, but he enjoyed watching his father make the stone bounce several times before disappearing. He missed Papa.

His stomach growled. He was reminded why he had come out of the hut. Looking around him, he hoped to spot a familiar feline or at least someone with food, but he was alone. He slumped down onto the ground, resting his back on the wall of the well, legs sticking out in front of him. The others would be back soon he hoped. Mama would wake up and hug him. Maybe Papa would come and find them both. Maybe they would soon go back home to how things were before. He didn't like it here.

Back home he could sit and watch the ships coming and going. He could listen to Mama singing at the Anchor, surrounded by the smells of food cooking, and the occasional sweetroll from Karlah when Mama wasn't looking. The days he got to spend with Papa, running along the wooden dockside or stalking through the forest looking for rabbits. Here there was nothing but sand and empty buildings.

A small sudden movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. A little lizard, no bigger than the bosmer's foot had moved from behind a rock next to Thoronir. The pale green creature blinked slowly, its tiny tongue slipping in and out of its mouth, warming in the slowly fading light of the sun. The small boy watched fascinated, it looked like a tiny argonian, he thought. Cautiously he extended his hand to the lizard.

"It's ok. I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered softly "Just want to be friends." The lizard sat unmoving, neither noticing or caring of the boy's proposal.

"Are you an argonan?" he said, mispronouncing the name given to the race who hailed from Blackmarsh. "You must like water too." The lizard scuttled toward another rock. Thoronir crept slowly toward it, not wanting to lose his new companion.

"What is your name?" he tried to ask it, but received no response. "Ok. I'm going to call you Hides-Behind-Rocks." He let out a small chuckle. The lizard moved back toward him.

Shooting his hand out quickly, the little boy managed to snatch up Hides-Behind-Rocks into

his fingers. He held the creature softly, feeling its beating heart and cool skin, giggling as it's flickering tongue licked at his hand.

Standing up carefully he planned to take his new friend to meet Mama, and walking slowly away from the well, he tried to prevent it from leaping from his hands.

So focused as he was on watching what he was holding, that he missed the small rock in front of him and tripped over, crashing into the ground, a scraped knee and a few bruises the price he would pay for his inattention to where he walked. Normally he would have wanted to call out in pain from his injuries, but in that moment he was more concerned at

Hides-Behind-Rocks escaping the grasp of his fingers and running off into the sands.

Standing up he began to give chase, leaving the boundaries of the village behind him as he headed over a sand dune in pursuit. As he skidded down the other side, no one had noticed him disappearing out of view.

Thoronir stopped the chase. He was out of breath, and exhausted from running in the heat of the desert. Besides, Hides-Behind-Rocks had long since escaped the young bosmer. Sitting down to regain his energy, he wiped a dirty hand across his sweaty brow and sighed. He was now thirsty as well as hungry.

Looking back the way he had come, he was surprised that he could barely make out the village from behind the large dunes of sand, in fact, he wasn't even all that sure if what he was seeing was actually the place he had just come from.

He stood up again, and attempted to clamber back up the hill he had just run down. As he pulled himself over the top, he became frightened and confused as he realised he was lost. How far had he been running? How long had he been away from home? Mama would be waking up, looking for him. He was going to be in trouble for leaving the hut.

He collapsed into the sand crying. He felt ashamed of his tears, but there was no one there to see him. This was his own fault. "Stupid argonian" he muttered to himself. The sky began to turn a deep shade of red, as the shadows grew longer, and the sun lent in gently to kiss the horizon. It would soon be nighttime.

Realising that it would soon be dark, Thoronir decided to at least try finding the village again. That was when he spotted them. There, not too far away in the distance was a small group travelling through the sands. Hoping it was Karlah and the others looking for him, he ran toward the group. As he drew closer he realised that these were not the friendly khajiit he had crossed the border with, but were instead complete strangers, dressed in leather armour and wearing swords and daggers strapped to belts hanging below small backpacks. Hoping that these strangers would at least be friendly, he continued to move toward them, somewhat slower than he had set off.

The group stopped moving at the sight of the small child walking toward them. "What do we have here? A little elf eh?" spoke one of them with a laugh.

A female redguard in the group bent down to talk to him. "Where did you come from? Where are you parents?"

Thoronir started to cry, unable to articulate that he was lost and just wanted to go home. The woman removed a water pouch from her belt and held it out to him. "Here, you look thirsty." He took the water bashfully and started to drink. The cool water on his parched lips enough to bring back a small smile.

"Looks like he might have come from that village," said the other redguard of the group, pointing off into the direction the elf had come from. "Would it be worth making a visit, might have a few things worth taking?"

"We're late enough as it is already. Besides, don't want our tail to catch us before we make camp. Just leave the child," said the khajiit male who had greeted Thoronir, to the others.

"He's seen us now. Might be too much of a risk to let him stay, should the Thalmor ask for us..."

"He's too young to know anything. He's just a lost little kid. His parents are probably looking for him right now, the sooner we get away the better."

The redguard woman stood back up, having taken back the water pouch from Thoronir who was not really paying any attention to what those around him were saying. She took a long look at the small bosmer before finally speaking.

"Bring the child with us. If he has parents they may be willing to pay for his safe return. Even if he's alone out here, it would be better than to leave him for the Thalmor to find, or even to perish from thirst."

The large khajiit who made up the fourth and final member of the group grunted in agreement, and lifted Thoronir off the ground and onto his shoulders. Thoronir squealed with laughter, it was just like when Papa picked him up.

"Come on, can't keep standing around here. Night is falling, we need to keep moving."

The group turned away from the village and continued to march into the desert sands, Thoronir moving with them, not realising that he was being taken away from the safety of his mother and his khajiit friends.

Chapter 11

Lillian woke to the gentle shaking of Karlah holding a bowl filled with a dark liquid. "Here, drink this." said the khajiit.

"Ugh, where am I?" Lillian felt confused as she blinked in the dim light. "How long was I asleep?"

Karlah placed the bowl down on the floor and helped her bosmer friend sit upright.

"We are in Elsweyr, do you remember? You were sleeping when we left, and now the moons are already out." She picked up the bowl and held it out for Lillian to take. "You have a fever, you should drink this. This one was able to find what she needed to make a cure."

With shaking fingers, Lillian took the bowl and lifted it to her lips. She sipped at the liquid, a sharp bitter taste bit at her tongue. She nearly spat it back out, but knew Karlah had worked hard to help her and that this was for her own good. It reminded her of the time she had been sick as a child, her mother had handed her a similarly unpalatable mixture, and had been very cross after she vomited it back up again. Lillian hoped that this was one she could keep down as she gulped back the liquid.

Having finished drinking, Karlah handed her a filled water pouch.

"Might want to use this, remove the taste."

Lillian snatched at the pouch and drank thirstily. She hoped that whatever Karlah had given her would be enough to get her strength back so they could continue on their journey to Valenwood.

"Where is Thoronir?" Lillian suddenly noticed the absence of her son, she needed to see him, to hold him, to let him know everything was going to be alright. It was going to be alright? A deep crushing in her chest returned as she remembered why they were out here to begin with. Home was gone. Caspian was gone. She gasped in pain and tried to prevent the floods of tears, but she could not contain it any longer.

"Hush, he is probably with Mahirr and Shara." Karlah said purring softly patting the back of her friend reassuringly. "This one will go and find him. You need to rest, let the cure do it's work."

Karlah stood and made her way outside the small hut, leaving Lillian sobbing as she sat in the pile of hay on the floor.

"How is the wood elf?" Mahirr asked Karlah as she exited the hut. He was standing out a few yards away from the well, holding a lit makeshift torch to fend off the darkness.

"She will live," said Karlah, "though this one does not know whether she still wishes to. Lillian has suffered too much these past few days. Her poor child..." she stopped, come to think of it, she had not seen him since Mahirr and herself had returned from their hunt. "Have you seen Thoronir since we returned?"

Mahirr thought for a moment before responding. "No, this one has not. Perhaps he is just sleeping somewhere? Shara has gone to find fuel for a fire, Mahirr will ask her when she returns to us."

The two khajiit stood silently, waiting for Shara who had just exited another small hut on the far side of the village centre, her arms filled with branches of dead wood, and slats from broken crates and barrels. Dumping them into a pile near the entrance of the hut Lillian slept in she let out a deep sigh.

"This is all this one could find. It appears none live here any longer, the merchants we met this morning have long since packed and gone. We should not stay here another day, it is too dangerous."

"Have you seen the bosmer child?" Mahirr asked, his face turned downwards into a frown. Shara froze, the hairs on her body stood tall, her tail flicking back and forth in fear. "The boy... this one has not seen him since she went to collect water. Shara did not notice he was not in the hut..."

Karlah gasped, "We have to find him."

Mahirr nodded slowly, "Mahirr will search the village. He cannot be far. Shara, it is best you get the fire started, a warm meal will do us all some good."

"Of course." Shara set about gathering rocks to form into a circle. She would not look at the others, ashamed that she had both allowed Thoronir to become lost, and also that she had not noticed this failure till now.

Karlah sighed. "This one will see to Lillian." She turned from Mahirr who began walking off toward the nearest hut, torch held aloft. Returning to the hut Lillian sat in, she tried to figure out what she would tell her friend, worried for the safety of Thoronir.

Lillian looked up as Karlah entered quietly. The khajiit was alone. "Where is Thoronir?"

"Mahirr has gone to look for him. I would not worry, he cannot be far. Probably fell asleep in one of the huts."

Lillian tried to stand up, but her body was too weak from the fever. "I... I have to find him..." She fell onto the ground. Karlah rushed to her aid.

"We will find him, you need to rest. You are not yet recovered. Shara is preparing a meal for us. Once you have eaten and slept and your strength returns, we can all leave for the city together."

Lillian shook her head. She had already lost everything, she would not lose her son too.

"But..." she tried to speak, but she could not find the words to express her emotions. Her stomach twisted in fear, she knew something was wrong. She hoped she was wrong and that it was just the mixture Karlah had given her, but it was the same sinking feeling she had when she watched the guards dragging away Caspian. Curling up on the makeshift bed, she prayed quietly to whichever of the divines might be listening to protect her son. As she closed her eyes, a deep sleep overtook her, the horrors from the past few days filling her mind, this was just another nightmare. This couldn't be happening.

Thoronir sat crying in the bandit camp. He had woken from his sleep to find himself not back with his mother, but instead surrounded by thugs and criminals. He was hungry, he was thirsty, he was tired, and he was frightened. So he screamed in tears. He screamed hoping Papa would hear him and come to help. That Mama would hear him crying and rush to comfort him. Instead he got a boot to the face. He howled in pain.

"Someone shut the brat up!"

"Who's idea was it to bring back a child?!"

"I don't care, just get him out of my sight! I'll deal with him in the morning."

The bandits argued among themselves on who would remove the little bosmer before one of them reluctantly pulled him off the ground and dragged him over to an area behind the tents

where several large cages held huge tiger-like khajiit that growled and snarled at their captors. Opening an empty cage, the bandit threw Thoronir inside and slammed the gate shut.

"Better shut your mouth kid or we'll feed you to these 'ere cats. They haven't eaten in a while, they might enjoy the taste of wood elf. Heh, you'd know all about that wouldn't you, yer little cannibal."

Thoronir sobbed quietly, cowering in fear of the huge creatures next to him. He was surprised when one of them spoke.

"Release khajiit and he will feed on you." The snarling beast hurled its weight against the side of the cage, the metal bars shaking but not relenting.

"Oh, you'll make a fine rug. Was going to let you live, but perhaps I'd get more coin for your hide." The bandit drew a dagger and stalked over toward the cage. He was interrupted by a shout from another bandit, and sighed as he returned his dagger to its sheath and staggered back toward the centre of camp where a huge fire was blazing.

Thoronir shivered in the cold night air. He had never been more frightened. The friendly redguard woman who had brought him here was nowhere to be seen, he felt ashamed that he had gone along with the group. His stomach growled in hunger. He still had not eaten. The khajiit in the cage next to him turned and spoke softly, his voice a deep purr. "How did a little elf like you end up with these criminals?"

Thoronir shrank back, frightened of the huge paws and gleaming fangs. He didn't answer the question. He didn't really know how to. "Are... are you... a khajiit?" He finally managed to say. Karlah had told him many stories of her homeland while he sat scoffing sweetrolls by the fire at the Rusting Anchor. He could just about recall her mention that there were many different types of khajiit, some of them small like housecats, others like herself that were almost like bosmer, and others like the one before him; huge prowling beasts that walked on all fours like animals, yet spoke with the tongues of men. It had something to do with the moons, not that he really could recall or understand it all.

"You have not seen a Pahmar-raht?" The creature let out a low growl that Thoronir thought might have been it laughing. "You have much yet still to see little elf. Do not worry. This one only eats cowards."

Then the little mer did something very brave indeed. He reached his arm out through the bars between them and rested his small hand on the furry face of the Pahmar-raht. He could feel the hot breath of the large khajiit as it stared at him through large yellow eyes. The creature blinked slowly, then stuck out its tongue and licked Thoronir's hand. He giggled at the feel of the wet rough tongue on his skin.

There was the sound of shouting in the distance, followed by the blinding light of what appeared to be lightning striking from the other side of the tents. The light from the fire grew brighter, and the fire itself larger and hotter. There were screams from the bandits that could be heard above the clashing of weapons and the roaring blaze of the fire as the camp came under attack. The Pahmar-raht arched its back as the hairs on it stood tall. Thoronir pulled his arm away as the Khajiit growled.

A dark figure was walking toward them, hands glowing with a swirling blue light, face hidden in the shadows beneath a black hood. The long robes somehow familiar to the young bosmer. He looked like the altmer Mama was frightened of in the city. The one who was

watching when the men took away Papa. Thoronir fell back to the rear of the cage, shivering with equal parts fear and cold. The khajiit let out a single word in a snarl. "Thalmor."

The robed figure lifted his arm toward the cage and let out a stream of lightning magic. The brilliant white and blue crackling and leaping between the bars of the khajiit's cage. The khajiit snarled and hissed, shrieking in agony as the magic passed through him. The sharp snapping and ripping sounds of the lightning accompanied the noise of his suffering.

Thoronir sat curled up in horror. "No! No!" He screamed, he covered his face with his arms, the bright light hurting his eyes, the sounds of the torment too much for him to bear. The lightning stopped, the khajiit let out a low groan, breathing heavily. It was still alive. The little elf lowered his arms, peering out toward the hooded figure through his fingers. There, at the far end of the cage, the hooded figure had knelt down. An unfamiliar altmer face staring at him inquisitively, his face lit by the blue magicka swirling around his fingers. He said nothing to Thoronir, his face twisting from one of puzzlement to one of anger, and then to one that appeared full of sorrow. Finally the face stopped in a serious frown.

"What should I do with you elf?" The question seemed more directed at himself than at Thoronir. The altmer lifted his hand, allowing a small spark to jump between his fingers. Thoronir sat motionless, petrified with terror. The altmer tilted his head slowly, his gaze never wandering from its intense stare. Finally after what might have been several minutes, the altmer extinguished the magicka and lowered his hands. Reaching over to the bar that held the door to the cage, he slowly pulled it back and opened the gate.

"Come with me."

Thoronir hesitated at the order, glancing over at the unconscious khajiit in the cage next to him, then back to the altmer who had tortured it. What was this mer going to do to him? Was he also going to be left in pain like his new friend the Pahmar-raht? Did he really have a choice? Cautiously the little bosmer crawled out of the prison he had been in. The altmer removed the cape on his shoulders and draped it over Thoronir.

"I can find a use for you." Taking Thoronir's hand, he led him away from the cages and toward the centre of the camp that was now completely in flames. Bodies of the bandits littered the ground. A small group of heavily armed khajiit and a two more altmer in dark armour stood waiting for the pair to arrive.

"Did you finish them all off?" The robed altmer said, not acknowledging the presence of the small boy. The group nodded silently. Letting go of Thoronir's hand, the altmer pushed him toward the others. "Found this in the cages to the rear. Make sure he gets fed and watered, and don't let him out of your sight. He will learn to serve the Dominion."

Snatching up a lump of half eaten bread that was sat on a table nearby, one of the khajiit tossed it to Thoronir who tore into it hungrily. He coughed as he choked on the stale food, it was a far cry from the food Mama gave him, but it was better than nothing. One of the other khajiit chuckled at him, and took him by the hand, dragging him away from the bandit camp as the robed altmer walked out into the sands flanked either side by the other two altmer. Wherever they were going, it would be better than being back in the cages.

Chapter 12

The city of Rimmen grew larger on the horizon as the small group from Borderwatch crossed the desert as the sun began to rise to the east. Lillian willed her tired legs to move forward, her heart almost unable to bear the weight of emotion the sight of their destination gave rise to within her. She prayed silently that Thoronir was within reach, that she would not have lost everything. The large ivory domes of the northern state's capital shone in the morning light, beacons of hope to the travellers who had walked all night without rest.

As they drew nearer, the sight and sound of large colourful tents surrounding the outer city became clearer, crowds of Khajiit of many kinds that seemed even more animal like than those the Bosmer travelled with, setting up stalls, and heaving heavy bags of wares between them, warm rasping voices calling out offers of trade. Small Khajiit ran along the streets, weaving between the legs of the larger ones, laughing and rolling on the sands. Lillian gasped as she spotted a young boy not too dissimilar to Thoronir leaping after another group of young, but her hope was just as soon dashed as she noticed the distinct facial markings of the Ohms-raht upon him. Karlah walked beside her, gripping tightly her hand reassuringly as the four of them made their way through the outer caravans toward the city itself.

The huge gates of the city loomed large and foreboding above them, patrolled by guards and archers, watched over by the steely eyes of a Thalmor Justiciar, the banner of the Dominion waving in the morning breeze. Lillian flinched in terror at the sight of the Altmer, it had been just under a week since she had seen that uniform, five days since Caspian had lost his life to one wearing it. Karlah squeezed her hand tightly, whispering gently.

"The Thalmor have no reason to stop us, Nelacar is far from here, we will not stay too long. Keep your head down and do not stare."

Lillian pulled her scarf over her head in an attempt to hide her face, walking behind the others, her head hanging low watching her feet, slowly moving toward the checkpoint hoping that they would pass through unnoticed.

Ahead of them was a group of Khajiit dressed in leather armour, short swords and daggers hanging from belts, bags upon their backs. Lillian assumed them to be either mercenaries or perhaps bandits, though they could just have likely been caravan guards.

"The Renrijra are not welcome in the city," one of the guards said nervously as the Thalmor justiciar stood behind him. "This one has seen your kind enter here before. The city struggles enough without thieves and dealers. We do not need your skooma..." the guard was interrupted by a hand resting on his shoulder. One of the armed Khajiit hissed angrily at the statement.

"This one does not know what it is you speak of. Khajiit and his brothers wish only to buy supplies in the markets, perhaps spend more coin in the taverns, sell a little moon sugar. We do not know of this Renrijra."

The Altmer said nothing, only silently tilting his head as though deep in thought, his eyes unblinking as he watched the Khajiit who tossed a small purse of coins between his hands, his tail flicking back and forth to the same rhythm.

"Let them pass." The Altmer said after a few moments. "I am sure these honourable traders will be pleased to pay the tax for merchants on all wares they sell."

The Khajiit dropped the coins onto the floor at the feet of the guard, tipping them onto the dusty ground. The guard growled at him, but was pulled back by the Thalmor justiciar.

"This one thanks you for your understanding." The Khajiit bowed mockingly as the group of them moved quickly through the gates into the city walls. The guard was released by the Altmer who turned from him and began to follow them. Stooping low to pick up the coins, the other guard, who had stood watching the whole time, shook his head. "Leave them." Mahirr and Shara motioned toward Lillian and Karlah who had stood watching this scene play out. They moved swiftly past the distracted guards and Lillian breathed a sigh of relief as they made it through the gates.

Through the winding city streets they walked, following the lead of Mahirr. There was a strong sweet scent in the air, and on most corners sat groups of Khajiit, staring blankly ahead, their heads nodding softly, oblivious to the world around them. "The skooma," said Karlah to Lillian, "the refined moon sugar can cause Khajiit to become dangerous. This one would advise that you keep your distance." Lillian nodded in response.

The winding streets began to thin out to reveal a large canal that stretched across the city. The sight of the dusty water was something of a surprise given that the city sat surrounded by desert, but after three days of nothing but sand, it was everything Lillian could do to not throw herself into the water. The canal branched out to form waterways through the city, small boats stacked with sacks and crates moved silently along, piloted by Khajiit with long poles. Colourful awnings and market stalls lined the paths of the canal, merchants dressed in ornately decorated outfits sat beside their wares, calling out to the passersby to inspect what they had to sell, tempting them to part with their coin. It was an overwhelming sensation of sights, sounds, and scents, unique to anything Lillian had seen before. Had circumstances been different she would have loved to explore the culture more, but as she watched a group of young Khajiit playing in the streets, she was reminded why it was she had travelled here, and her heart began to sink.

Mahirr and Shara paused ahead, looking about them as though lost. Lillian waited as Mahirr left the small group to speak with one of the merchants nearby.

"That instrument..." came a purring voice. Lillian spun around to see an elderly Khajiit, his fur grey, whiskers drooping, eyes half open, but mouth smiling warmly, sat legs crossed on a small mat by a stall filled with an assortment of goods. "It has been too many moons since this one has seen such a thing. Khajiit's heart longs to hear music, but to own such a treasure..."

Lillian clutched tightly to her lute. "It is not for sale." She said firmly.

"This one offers his best price, as much gold as you can carry. It..."

"Not for all the gold in all of Nirn." Lillian said, cutting him off, her voice shaking. The lute was all she had left to lose, it was her anchor to the life she had lost, to the memories of Caspian, to the hope of finding Thoronir. Her eyes began to well with tears.

"This one offers his apologies," said the old Khajiit, his smile fallen to a weary frown. Lillian turned away, not wanting him to see her cry.

Karlah who had wandered to speak with Mahirr and Shara returned to Lillian's side. "Mahirr has found us a place to stay while we search for Thoronir. It is likely the small caravan from the village has travelled here, there is still hope we can find him."

Lillian tried to seem hopeful, but the city was huge, filled with people, it would take days to search it completely, and it might not be long before the caravan they searched for packed up to leave again. But beneath her fear lay an assurance that all was not lost, she would find her son again. "He is still alive. I know that much."

A short walk along more narrow streets, the three Khajiit and Lillian arrived at a small inn. The main room was filled with small round stone tables low to the ground, with cushions and mats spread about them, a small bar sat to one side with a short female Khajiit standing by to greet the four of them as they entered. A few other Khajiit sat around one of the tables, the strong scent of a skooma pipe in the air, as a few of them lapped at small bowls of what Lillian assumed to be some sort of stew.

Sat in the far corner alone was one who was clearly not Khajiit, though dressed in a long robe like many of the cat-like people she had been seeing since her arrival. He had not the beard of a Nord, nor the skin of a Redguard, had Lillian not spent time in High Rock she might have thought him to be an Imperial, but there was something in the way he wore his hair that made her suspect he was instead a Breton. His back was turned from her, hunched over a small plate of food clearly not wishing to be disturbed. She turned away from him, as Mahirr spoke to her.

"This one has negotiated for your stay in the city for the next week. Mahirr is sorry that there was not more this one could do to find your son." Mahirr lifted his heavy paw onto her shoulder. "Mahirr and Shara must leave you and Karlah here, may the roads lead us together again and may the moons bless you on your search. Should Mahirr learn anything on his journey, he will have word sent here."

"You are leaving?" Lillian said, somewhat surprised at the revelation. Shara joined the two of them and nodded. Until now the small Bosmer had not realised how much the presence of the two Khajiit had made her feel safer, and now as they stood to depart, she felt very much alone.

"It is ok, Karlah will not leave you. We can begin our search once you have rested." Karlah said to Lillian before turning to address Mahirr. "This one thanks you for all your assistance. Karlah regrets that it was in such bad times. Blessings of the moons to you friend, and may the sands be warm upon your travels."

"Thank you." Lillian finally managed to whisper.

The two Khajiit took their leave, and Lillian could not hold back her emotions any longer. The warm tears ran down her dirty face that had been washed with too many of them the past few days, and she felt her legs begin to shake.

"Get some rest, you will feel better once you have slept and washed. You have still to recover from your illness." Karlah pulled her friend into a hug.

The innkeeper stood silently watching the group say their goodbyes. "This one will show you to your rooms," she said to them. Lillian followed her as she led them to a small set of rooms that had only a single bed and chair with a small square window set high in the wall through which the morning sunlight shone. Thanking the innkeeper, she placed her lute on the chair, and fell onto the bed exhausted.

Chapter 13

The sun was beginning to descend when Lillian awoke, the warm amber rays of the late afternoon shone through the small window, leaving long shadows behind them. For a few moments she lay there, wishing she could return to her dreams of home, but already the cold reality was shattering the illusion. Alone, in a strange land, with no home in sight and a single thread of hope she was clinging desperately to, she almost wished to have died with her love, it could not be worse than the overwhelming grief she felt now. For the past three days she had tried to believe it had only been a nightmare, but now she could only question why such sorrow had fallen upon her now in so harsh a manner.

Slamming her fist into the pillow beside her, she could only blame herself, her own weakness, if she had only fought back on that morning when they took away Caspian, if she had aided Titus against Nelacar, if she had been brave enough to return to the city to stop the execution, had she been better prepared to journey, had she not been so weak to have become ill, or stronger to have overcome it, had she not fallen asleep... *Enough!*

There was still that hope. Thoronir was out there, and if she were to not to use everything she had to find him, she would be deserving of her fate.

Wiping away hot tears from her eyes, she stood to notice Karlah had left her bag on the chair at the end of the bed, along with a large bowl and jug of water. Washing quickly and putting on fresh clothes she felt more awake. Her stomach gave a low grumble, it had been too long since she had eaten, she would need to find food. Packing away her dirty clothes she placed the bag onto the bed and turned to leave, pausing to stare at her lute sat beside it.

Grabbing it, she fastened the strap around her shoulder and slung it over her back. She had no desire to play it, but she dared not leave it behind. Closing the door softly behind her, she headed toward the main room of the inn.

The room was empty save for the Breton still sat in the corner, staring out from under a cloth hood half covering a rough unshaven face. There was no sign of the innkeeper or Karlah, and the other Khajiit were nowhere to be seen. Lillian stood awkwardly, unsure whether to remain or leave.

"Are you going to sing me a song elf?" The silence of the room was broken by the question. Lillian gave the Breton a quizzical look, momentarily forgetting the lute she wore.

"Aye, that is a beautiful instrument you carry," the man continued, "worth quite a few septims I imagine. Makes me wonder what a young Bosmer like you is doing all the way out here with it."

Lillian opened her mouth to speak but before she had a chance to respond the Breton spoke again.

"Another man might assume it was stolen, but from the way you hold it, you know it too well for it not to be your own. Reminds me of a lute I saw back home in Highrock, so I ask you young mer, why are you so far from home?"

"I could ask the same question of you," Lillian retorted, somewhat offended at the suggestion she might have been a thief.

"Oh, well, if you insist. I'm an adventurer seeking his fame and fortune in the golden sands. Or perhaps I'm a dangerous bandit on the run from the law. No? Well perhaps you would prefer if I were just a skooma addict in search of his fix? Scorned by a lover and drowning

his sorrows on the far side of Tamriel? A jester who angered a dragon. I have plenty of stories, you can pick whichever you wish to believe.”

“I’m looking for…”

“Searching for something, are we? Well good luck with that! Do you know how hard it is to find something in these deserts? Like looking for a pearl in the sands, and the sands are always shifting, no place the same, season after season, you walk in circles for days never finding what you seek, and you begin to go mad, wondering if what you look for was ever here to begin with…”

“I’m looking for my son.” Lillian snapped at the Breton, interrupting his rant. “I’m looking for the only person I have left in this world, and I carry the only reminder I have of everything and everyone I have lost. I will not stop until I find him, and Talos help me, I will not let anything stop me searching!”

“Talos?” the man blinked, puzzled at her choice of gods. “You speak a dangerous name in these times. You should be careful who you talk with.”

“Everything I have suffered has been since that cursed concordat, perhaps if all other divines have forsaken me he will not…” Lillian felt her cheeks flush red, the burst of anger turning to tears of frustration. The Breton fell silent at her words.

“You’re not from Valenwood, are you.” he said at last. His words broke the silence, in a tone more statement than question. “And I dare say you’re not from Cyrodiil either. No, your voice has a particular note of *home* in it. So I’ll ask you again young mer, why are you so far from High Rock?”. The arrogance of his earlier question had faded, and with it a gentle, genuine gaze met her eyes.

Lillian hesitated. Who was this strange man? She had just as much a reason to question his presence as he did hers, yet, perhaps she could trust him. Just a little.

She sat down on a cushion next to him, her eyes unable to look at anything but the floor, and began recounting her journey into Elsweyr. She told him what she could remember, about the border, the Khajiit who helped them, her collapse, the village, the long night of searching for her son, and the long, oh so painfully long, march to Rimmen. She did not talk of Leyawiin. Of Nelecar. Of Caspian. Those wounds were still too fresh.

When she had finished her story, the Breton said nothing. His posture changed. No longer the guarded, arrogant man who had first confronted her.

“There is still hope.” He said finally. “Caravans pass through this city every day. News travels between them. Stories. People. If your son is still alive, and we have every reason to believe he is, he is with one of them.”

“I must go out there. I have to find him. There is nothing left for me but that.”

The Breton, straightening his posture, leaned back into the wall, his eyes darting to the doorway as a patrol of soldiers wandered past. He waited for them to pass by before returning to the conversation.

“You don’t know the dangers of this desert young maiden.” he said, and then after seeing the pain in her face, “or, perhaps you know them too well.” He knew what it was that haunted her, even if she had never spoken it aloud. The Thalmor. “I’m a traveler myself. A mercenary of sorts. I go with the caravans, a sword for hire. I know people. The Renrijra, I’ve worked with them. I would bring you with me, but, well let’s be honest here, you wouldn’t survive. You barely crossed the short passage from Borderwatch to Rimmen. The desert only grows more perilous from here until you reach either the jungle or the mountains. And even then, those are new challenges entirely. And you’re not a warrior, or a seasoned traveller of the

sands. You're a bard. Yet that instrument you carry might help you find your son in more ways you think. Find a tavern in this city that will have you. Sing your story. Share your desperate plea. Such a tragedy will be remembered. Be spoken of in hushed whispers beneath the moons on the sands. Those who hear it will search for your son, and..."

His speech was interrupted by the quiet sob that finally escaped Lillian. He reached out his hand to hers as her grief of the past few days finally collapsed into desperate tears.

"Talos will find him." He said.

The reverence with which he spoke that name caught Lillian by surprise. Like that of a priest, she thought. Yet his hand touching hers was not one that held quill and candles. The calloused, scarred fingers were those more accustomed to sword and bow. She gasped softly as she realised who it was who sat beside her. There was only one explanation.

Perhaps Talos had indeed heard her prayer. Of all the people on all of Nirn, that she would have stumbled into this tavern at such a moment. This man was a Blade.

"I didn't catch your name." She asked, her voice a whisper, knowing that he would most likely not share it.

The Breton hesitated, his eyes searching the still empty room. "You can call me Garath." He turned his eyes to meet hers, "And what name should I remember for you?"

"Lillian."

The moment was interrupted by the return of the barkeeper. Garath lifted his hand from hers, and quietly returned to his position of quietly watching the tavern door. Not acknowledging the conversation that had just occurred. But Lillian knew. He would help her.

Chapter 15

[Introduce Arantar's camp, get Thoronir to a point where he's trying to settle into a hostile environment. Drop in some dialogue about the Renrijra and some vague hints about Manuviel's search for the Blade agent.]

Chapter 16