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Big thanks to Staci (Jim) who went through and beautified this doc for future reading. She's a hero!

Part One: The Meeting

Jim

Jim's been to Skyrim--visited Stratos. He's been to every single PINpoint location he's ever saved in his phone in relation to Felix. There's nothing.

He's gone.

So Jim had turned to the Nexus. Loudly, even. And it had come up that a certain Ixis Naugus had made plans to abscond away to Apocrypha with Felix. That Felix had talked about rituals and the like to one of Adia's newcomer friends in the Nexus. A lead. A small one, but a lead nonetheless.

He doesn't know why he didn't think to try this sooner when he texts Harrowheart. Harrow's a death knight *and* a werewolf. He knows magic and he knows tracking. If anyone might be able to find Felix? Jim hopes it will be his friend.

Harrow it's Jim we need to talk. It's an emergency.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart's reply, unfortunately, doesn't come quickly. It's a few hours before he finally texts back:

What's wrong? Where are you? What can I do?

Jim

It's f--well okay it's *not* fine, nothing is fine. Harrowheart comes from a technology sort of weird place though, so Jim understands when it takes him some time to respond.

He still bolts out of the briefing room when he feels his phone go off. Spock and Bones understand and everyone else can live if Jim doesn't hear their report about spores on Tersius III's surface right this second.

I'm in the Plaza, by the main square. He's not, but he's about to be in less time than it will take the message to get to Harrow. *Long story but Felix is AWOL and possibly crazy or possessed. I'll explain when I see you.*

Harrowheart

Shit, *that's* not a text he expected to get. Or... Well. Harrowheart looks up at the sky for a second and nods, shrugging. Yeah, that sounds like Felix. Still, there's no time to tarry. Felix needs help, and that's that.

Harrowheart makes his way very quickly to the Plaza. By now he's learned how to take advantage of the Nexus' lack of logical geography to his advantage. People wind up where they need to be, and he finds it happens most naturally when he allows it to happen passively rather than storming off on a great, determined mission.

He's in the Plaza in a matter of minutes and already looking around for Jim -- and bracing for him to be frantic as Hell.

Jim

Harrowheart knows Jim all too well.

The captain certainly hasn't slept more than what he's probably gotten in haphazard passing out spells. He's downright jittery from all the replicated coffee in the known galaxy.

Still, he looks almost put together (if not a bit rumpled) when he hurries over to Harrow.

"Sorry--I hope I didn't grab you from anything important." He sounds like he might even halfway mean it.

If it wasn't an emergency, he wouldn't have said Now.

Harrowheart

"Me?" Harrowheart asks, no hint of amusement in his voice. "You're the one talkin' about Felix bein' crazy or possessed! Don't you waste time with pleasantries, man. What's goin' on? What happened?"

Jim

Jim doesn't have to pull his collar down far to let Harrow see the bruises around his neck that most definitely bear a resemblance to hand prints. The other bite marks and bruises are also worth noting, though they're not exactly out of place. Just much more severe than normal.

"Felix tried to kill me in my sleep. I fought him off and quite literally knocked some sense into him and he came back to himself for a minute. He's been weird lately. Not sleeping. Sneaking off. Lying to me and his brother where he's been. Says he's researching. But when he came back I...I thought it was okay. I should have listened to my gut, but he was off. He wasn't himself. And when I woke up, he was on top of me, choking the shit out of me. Kept talking about how I was so bright even when I was burning. He left before I could ask him what the *fuck*."

Jim's voice is strained, breaking at the end. It takes something out of him every time he has to retell the story. Cements the fact more and more into reality.

"Felix is *gone* Harrow. I've been everywhere and I can't find him. And there's something not right about him. He's been secretive. Mean. Adia said he was scaring newcomers a few days back before all of this. There's something wrong with him and he could be in danger. And anyone he runs into is *definitely* in danger, if he could try to kill me with a manic smile on his face."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart listens to all of this with a gravely serious stare. There's no room for joking or light-heartedness, not even to lighten the mood. This is a mood that can't – and likely *shouldn't* – be lightened.

And when Jim is through speaking and he's left alone with his thoughts he stands very straight, the lights in his eyes now and then darting from place to place as he processes all of this. Sudden anger. Secrecy. An urge to kill. It all sounds so incredibly familiar. His eyebrows twitch with his unspoken concern. His silence says everything. He doesn't think this can possibly end well.

"You been *everywhere*?" he finally asks, his voice still quiet for his thoughtfulness. "You... Tried doin' any magic to scry for him? Get somethin' of his – a hair, or an object he owned – and start a ritual. It ain't magic I can do, but I guarantee Isidor or Viatorus could. Even Naugus, but... Naug's work comes at a price."

Jim

Jim sucks in a breath--sharp and sudden. This is no time for panic and no time for tears. There *has* to be something he can do to find Felix. That's why he's asking around to begin with. Sleep deprivation and way too much caffeine are making him jittery though so it does take him a moment to regain his composure.

"Everywhere I have PINpoint coordinates for. Stratos is looking on his end too." Jim crosses his arms over his chest to keep from fidgeting. Grips tight to himself while he tries to think. "I know Stratos is pretty good at finding things, and Felix in particular. Felix called it clairvoyance."

He shakes his head firmly at the mention of Naugus.

"He's already involved more than I'd like. I'm not going back and asking him for anything else."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart blinks hard at a mention of clairvoyance. It's not a word he's heard often, but he knows what it means. Still, now isn't the time to dwell on it. He tries to comfort Jim with anxious pats to the shoulder and he starts to look around, searching for some clue as to how he needs to proceed.

"Tell you what," he says when he finally drags his attention back to Jim. "I'll call the Durants, huh? I'll call 'em over to Naugus' property and we'll do the ritual there. You go find somethin' that belonged to Felix or some of his hair and meet me at the castle. In the meantime I'll dig up my runeblades, and once we know where Felix is we'll go find him right away. How's that sound?"

Even as he waits for Jim's answer he fumbles for his phone and, sparing the screen just a few glances, starts to type a message to Viatorus.

[Jim's boyfriend Felix has gone missing and might be posed. We need someone to scry for him and help us hunt him down. Maybe Isidor? Can she help?]

Jim

Jim nods, pulling his own phone out and shooting Stratos off a message to update him on everything he's found.

[We need to talk. I think I might know what Felix is doing. Harrowheart thinks he can track down Felix with the help of the Durants. Can you swing by the Plaza soon?]

He looks up once he's sent the message.

"Finding something of Felix's won't be hard. I'll swing by my quarters if Stratos doesn't have anything on him."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart nods, more confident now that they've got some direction. "Keep me in the loop, huh? Seeya in an hour or so. Least I hope Isidor can get here that fast."

With that out of the way he turns to leave. Seems they'll all be reconvening for a ritual soon...

The Meeting Subscene: Jim Calls Stratos ([Top](#))

Jim

We need to talk.

Jim hadn't been able to fully explain everything he'd learned to Harrowheart, and for good reason. Some of it is speculation and from a man who doesn't understand the intricacies of Tamriellic magic at that. He wants to tell Stratos first.

Get his opinion. While they're on the way to Naug's place where Harrow lives with his family. Before he has to try and explain what he fears to his friend and Ms. Isidor Durant.

The captain waits near the Imperial station in the Plaza for Felix's brother.

Stratos

Stratos tells himself not to just drop what he's doing when he gets the message. He still has people in the College to question, still needs to cloak or persuade his way into their library to find out what his little brother wanted in there. Nevertheless, he knows Jim wouldn't waste their time, not now. It's only a minute before he appears at the station - and that testifies to how close the relatively technophobic Caelus has been keeping his phone.

"Jim? What is it? What have you found?" He's not in his Legion armor, this once, but a dark blue tunic and robe much like those Felix wears to be formal. Stratos glances around them, some part of him hoping wildly to see Felix there. That Jim has already found him...

But then he looks at Jim's face properly and he knows better. His jaw tightens, instinctive anticipation. It's not the first time he's received bad news about family...

Jim

"I've got a lead. Possibly two, but you're not going to like either."

The captain looks absolutely haggard. He wastes no time turning away from the Imperial garrison post and leading Stratos through the Nexus proper. He also

suspects Stratos won't like where they're going, but if it gets them closer to tracking down Felix he doesn't think either of them are above hanging around Naugus' tower.

"Ixis Naugus said that he and Felix had conspired to go to a place called Apocrypha some time ago but had yet to make the trip. A place of 'unlimited knowledge'. And considering the fact that he has one, never brought it up with me and two, trusted this to Naugus out of all the magic users in the Nexus, I'm inclined to think this place is probably not the sort of place folks should be."

He can see the change to the elder Caelus' expression but shakes his head. There's more to tell.

"That *alone* was weird but not altogether out of the ordinary, especially if this place belonged to those things Felix prays to as a conjurer. I could see him trying to chum up with a creature of knowledge." His steps slow considerably. He lowers his voice when he starts speaking again.

"But I saw Adia earlier today. She said Felix was last seen in the Nexus scaring some new folk. One of them was a guy who died before he arrived in the Nexus. Showed up with his clothes covered in his own blood. But he was alive in the Nexus. Said Felix took a lot of interest in him and how he arrived in the Nexus."

Stratos

His mind is racing trying to extrapolate ahead from every word, desperate to know what Jim's learned. He notices the direction their steps take. Oh, he does. And he's not exactly surprised. Didn't he warn Felix only recently about trying to cosy up to Naugus? About the sheer pointless recklessness of it? He knew that creature would turn on his brother given half an excuse...

It takes a moment for it to sink in that Jim isn't blaming Naugus, at least not yet. His expression turns tight. He knows what Apocrypha is, yes. He's still less surprised, but he hasn't a chance to start mentally berating Felix for this new stupidity before Jim lowers his voice. His eyes widen with unveiled concern when he looks at Jim.

"He's studying death...?" His own voice has lowered, softened. "He can't be... Felix knows how such magic works. Better even than I do. He knows better than...." He looks away for a minute. He can see the implications starting to

unfold. He doesn't want to believe them, and yet if he can make the connections, so could Felix. If his brother wanted to make them.

Jim

"Adia said he wanted to learn how to protect me. That's what he told the guy. But..."

Jim shakes his head. It doesn't add up. For a number of reasons.

"He's never once asked me how I was brought back. So I don't think he's trying to see if the circumstances were similar. Plus, he tried to *kill* me. Adia said he was trying to get to another realm to find the knowledge to protect me. Best I can figure....he wanted to try and bring me back after he killed me. To see if he'd figured it out."

Jim can still remember the hands wrapped around his throat. Squeezing the life out of him. Robbing him of much needed air. The mad look in Felix's eyes and just how cold his hands were to the touch...He shudders uncontrollably.

"That's necromancy, isn't it?"

Stratos

Stratos doesn't answer for a moment.

He wants to say *He couldn't*, but the logical part of his mind won't stop bringing up the memory of those marks on Jim's throat. Suspicious instincts remind him of all the magics he knows to sway a man's will and twist his spirit. All the many times he's vented about Felix's weak will come back to him in a rush of frustrated anguish.

Then he catches how Jim is shuddering and turns automatically, reaching out a hand to the other man's shoulder. With family matters his instinct is always to curl in on himself, to keep anything serious safely concealed, but Jim is family too and that overrides secrecy.

Jim

"Felix's never said a kind word about it. He...h-he didn't even like Harrowheart for the longest time, and he's one of my best friends here. I don't know why. But he wasn't himself if I was able to snap him out of it. And I just--"

Jim shakes his head. Leans into the hand on his shoulder. Frankly, the captain is too damn tired to shake off the gesture.

"I think that's what he's trying to do, now. I don't know what changed. But Harrowhear thinks he knows a way to track Felix down. He's enlisted Ms. Isidor Durant's help. We're heading over to where Harrow and his family live now to set it up. I wanted to make sure you were present as well. Do you have anything of Felix's on hand? If not I need to PINpoint back to my quarters and track down his quill or check the bed for hairs or something. Harrow said we might need it."

Stratos

"He knows better." Stratos is trying to control his voice, out of habit, but Jim will recognize the strain in it. "He knows that kind of thing doesn't *work*, he despises necromancy..." And yet. He doesn't sound wholly sure of that last. He's always viewed his brother's moral backbone as his weak point. Always recognized his posturing about necromancers and rogues for the exaggerated snobbery it was. When push comes to shove, when something he wants is really on the line, how does principle really fare against practice...?

Stratos knows the answer for himself. Perhaps that's why he's so afraid.

He reaches into his coat - a pocket perhaps, it's hard to believe what you see with Stratos - and pulls out a folded bundle of paper. "I have one of his letters, if it will do. I... have little else from him." He closes his eyes a moment as they walk. Trying to compose himself. "I know Isidor Durant. I still know little of her family's magic, but I have trust in her competence." To say nothing of trust in her. Jim probably doesn't know that he and Harrow have tapped one of Stratos's allies, but it's reassuring to the tribune.

Jim

"Yeah well, I thought he liked me well enough *alive*, too."

Jim can't help the hurt in his voice at that, nor the anger that simmers beneath it. He's always thought better of Felix than most, and made it a point to stand up for the other. But how does he reconcile this? Even if something is controlling Felix, the conjurer had to have interacted with it in the first place, right?

He sighs and heads up the hill toward Naugus' grand estate in the Nexus.

"If she can find Felix, we're one step closer in bringing him back. " In the end, that's all Jim cares about. He can wait to learn why until later. For now, saving Felix's life (and anyone who runs INTO Felix in this state) is more important than understanding. "It should be just up here."

Stratos

Oh gods, Felix. The fear is a cold knot in his gut. After all this time, all the warnings- what if his little brother has taken a plunge Stratos can't swoop in to lift him from? What if he's finally crossed a line there's no return from? What if...

No.

It cannot be so. He will not *permit* it to be so. The ice in his veins transmutes to something crackling and furious and just as raw. Stratos's pace quickens abruptly: he pulls ahead of Jim as he strides up the path. The air about him is suddenly heavy with suppressed magic. "And you've heard nothing more about Naugus's part in this?"

His voice is calm again now. But it's the calm of an Imperial tribune about to walk into battle. Assessing the enemy before he orders their destruction.

Jim

"I haven't. Naugus actually offered to hold Felix if he came across him in the Nexus."

And this on the heels of them having the most awkward gentleman's agreement that Jim only has to worry about getting killed by Naugus if the wizard TELLS HIM he's going to do it. And perhaps buys him a bouquet to celebrate the declaration.

"I don't think this is his doing."

Stratos

"We will see." It's not that Stratos is going to disregard that information. It's that he has a deep-seated distrust of Naugus, creatures like Naugus and specifically mages like Naugus. Whatever the truth, his tone says, he is going to find out.

And someone is going to pay.

Part Two: The Scrying ([Top](#))

Harrowheart

What will an Earthen scrying ritual be like? The only thing Harrowheart knows about Durant magic is that at times it's vastly different from what he's used to. Still, a spell like this can't be too different regardless of where it's performed, correct? Either they'll use a locator crystal or a reflective surface for viewing. He collects the reagents he assumes they'll need: One magical crystal on a string courtesy of Naugus' obsession/profession of crystalizing the world, one bowl with clear, fresh water and a hand mirror as the possible viewing surfaces, and two maps: one of 'Tamriel,' which he's fairly sure is the place Felix said he was from, and another a map of the Nexus that shifts in real time with the changing of the interuniversal hub. For good measure he's brought a mortar and pestle -- no telling which reagents Isidor might bring that might need manipulating.

His array of objects sits waiting at the U-shaped picnic table on Naugus' property that's now lush with late summer harvests waiting to be reaped. They're watched by Tamminy, the pink-haired gnome woman, who's -- as usual -- distracted by her own schematics.

Isidor

It doesn't take long for Viatorus to reply. The moment he tells Isidor about the text she makes her decisions quickly, with no room for argument from her brother. Soon a message flashes on Harrowheart's phone. [She's on her way. Be careful.]

It's almost half an hour before she comes marching towards Naugus' tower, but she moves in a determined stride. Like the last time Harrowheart saw her outside her work hours, she's wearing all black, but this time her clothes are practical, her hair tied back loosely to keep it out of her face. She carefully sets down the bag she's brought with her on a bench where it rests with a weighted thud, but her eyes are on her friend. She looks troubled, but that's understandable.

"Harrowheart. What's going on?" Her frown deepens a little. "Are you all right? Is the captain?"

Harrowheart

Just as Isidor arrives Harrowheart returns to the table from wherever he'd been on the property, and he very much looks the opposite of all right. His forearms and bound hands are muddied to the elbow, and there's a wild, worried look in his eyes.

"My runeblades are gone!"

Tamminy looks up from her work when she hears that, eyebrows high as they'll go. She looks between Isidor and Harrowheart listening closely but with no input of her own.

Harrowheart runs his muddied hands across his temples and back through his hair. "I-I-I-I I can't help y'all with no scryin', I gotta find my weapons! Isidor? Isidor you-- you-- you just stay here! You stay here, help them out when they arrive, all right?"

He doesn't wait to hear her reply before he's spinning around, looking for the next place to search without a hint of direction.

Isidor

Her eyes go wide with shock and she rushes over to him. "Doesn't your soul live in those? How could you lose them?"

When she reaches him, however, she takes a minute to stop herself from asking any more accusatory questions (No matter how ridiculous losing track of your own soul sounds). Sorting other people's problems is something she's more than used to, so she knows her own confusion can wait.

She puts a hand on his arm and moves in front of him to try and get his attention. "Slow down and breathe. Where did you last leave them?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart tenses at the touch and frowns deeply as he forces himself to calm down and focus.

"I hid 'em," he says, almost offended at the implication that he simply left them lying around. "I hid 'em and I *know* nobody saw me do it. I buried 'em someplace secret and I *know* no one was around to see! But someone had to know they were there anyway, 'cause there's no way no one dug 'em up by accident."

He looks around quickly, still full of worried energy, half certain he's being watched *now*. He brings his cold and muddied hand up to rest on Isidor's even as his attention is elsewhere.

Isidor

"Secrets aren't usually as secret as people think they are," she says with a twist of her lips. But she pushes her cynicism aside with a deep breath and tries to offer more helpful comments.

"Were they on Naugus' property? Could he know about them?" Before he has a chance to look offended again she levels him a look and adds, "Bearing in mind that they're heavily magical objects and Naugus is sensitive to magic."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart's gaze slowly shifts to the castle and his eyebrows lower. "They were. And... Maybe he took 'em but..."

He wants to assume this isn't Naugus, but he finds himself at a loss for excuses. It very well could have been Ixis Naugus who stole those blades. His sudden doubt shows in the twitch of his eyes and remorseful tilt of his brows.

"If he took 'em..." which he still doesn't want to fully believe, "I don't feel 'em nearby."

Isidor

Now that he's calmed down and she gets to see how seriously worried he is, Isidor feels a sudden, deep pang of sympathy for him. She doesn't let it show for long, though. Right now she has to be the strong one, the one with the solutions.

She looks around for inspiration and spots the maps set out on the table. When she turns back to him she's full of resolve. "You brought me here to scry for you. So let me scry for you."

Jim

It won't be too long before the captain arrives with Stratos in tow. The Imperial Tribune looking like he's ready to take on the world if it comes down to it and the Starfleet captain looking pale, exhausted, and grim behind him. Jim doesn't

bother with pleasantries when Harrow and Isidor come into view, though Harrow being completely covered in mud up to his elbows and streaked across his face and into his hair does make Jim pause and raise an eyebrow.

The fuck did he *miss*?

"I brought Stratos. He has an old letter of Felix's we can use, and might have some insight into wherever we find him. If we can." He looks between Isidor and Harrowheart briefly. "Did...I miss something?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart turns quickly when he hears that familiar voice. In his panic he'd honestly forgotten that he and Isidor would have guests soon. He immediately steps away from her, trying even in a moment like this to remember presentation above all else. It wouldn't do for people – even Jim – to see them too close together.

He grips his hair with his hand and, expression pinched, an uncertain look passed between Isidor, Jim, and Stratos. "S-somethin's goin' on with me, that's all. A-ain't nothin' to worry about. Isidor, how 'bout you do their scryin' first? That's what we're all here for..."

Stratos

"We need to locate my brother." Stratos's voice is urgent. Commanding. He's normally more circumspect about ordering people round outside of uniform - or in the Nexus at all - but that time is past. He glances over the strangely worried draugr, his proximity to Isidor, and ignores any implications. Only one thing matters now. "I apologize if the timing is inconvenient-" blatant lies, "-but we don't have a moment to spare."

Isidor

"You're in luck, finding wayward brothers is a speciality of mine," Isidor says with dregs of a wry humour that are just barely appropriate for the situation. Joking aside, her actions show that she knows just how serious this is and how everyone must be feeling. She moves quickly, taking her equipment out of her bag and spreading out the maps until she's happy with their placement. "Well they'll be useful. I wasn't sure what kind of scrying you wanted."

It's been an exceptionally long time since she did something like this in front of people who weren't family. Viatorus is the scholar, he's the one people are meant to consult, but she'll be damned if she's letting anything possessive near her brother. Besides, this is far more her forte than his. From the bag she takes out a wooden box, setting it on the table and opening it up to reveal a variety of ritualistic objects and sachets. From this she takes out a small cup, a metal droplet pendulum with a crystal tip on a chain, and returns to her back to take out a jar of honey and another of water. All of these get set out on the (thankfully large) table, but she spends a little longer using magic to take the lid off of the jar of water and make it float just above a magical blue flame to start heating up. With that done, she takes out a small bowl with holes in the lid and with a quick flash of magic, lights incense inside it.

While the thick scents of frankincense and myrrh starts to waft into the air, she turns to Stratos, holding out a hand. "The letter?" She glances at Jim then, and her other hand points between the captain and the tribune. "You two need to stand on the other side of the table from me, but not right next to each other."

Jim

Implications between Harrow and the lady he's been sweet on since he and Felix caught Harrowheart chatting her up right after asking Jim and Felix *how* to sweet talk a classy lady are so far outside of Jim's mind right now. If anything, he's just grateful Harrow knows someone with the magical capabilities they need right now.

In this place Jim is the weak link. He has no magical aptitude and none of his skillsets are of use in locating Felix in Tamriel. The feeling of helplessness claws at his insides even as his stubborn nature makes him stand taller. Determined to do whatever he can to be of help.

When Isidor addresses he and Stratos, Jim spares the elder Caelus only a moment's glance before moving diagonally to Isidor's left on the other side of the table. Stratos can take the other side.

"Whatever you need, just tell me."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart isn't sure what to do with himself, but he knows that he's terribly curious to see some more Durant magic. Watching her take out *honey* surprises

him, and from then on he's watching her every move with wide eyes. It's a welcome distraction, honestly, and he isn't conscious of how quickly he calms when he's given something to be curious about – especially when that involves watching Isidor.

He keeps himself off to the side but positioned so that he's got a clear view of everything going on.

Stratos

Stratos hands over the letter and steps into the position left for him. His breathing is even and steady, but his eyes are intent on Isidor and the paper in her hand. Felix would have spent days adding to that letter, a too-rare connection to a far-off brother, layered with meaning and messages between the innocent-seeming lines. It will bear a strong connection to the hand that wrote it. It must. But he's never seen the Durants scry before...

He doesn't tell Isidor that he's attempted his own scrying and found nothing. Doesn't want to interrupt her with irrelevancies and doesn't really want to dwell on what it could mean. Felix might know the gist of how to cloud a scrying, but Stratos didn't think he'd have the strength nor the experience. Talos, he just hopes this works, somehow. He forces his mind clear and nods to the other mage, attentive. Whatever his part in the ritual, he's prepared to play it.

Isidor

Isidor takes the letter carefully and considers it before she moves back to her work station and sets it down safely away from everything else. She pulls the band out of her hair as she puts a teabag into the cup and pours the heated water into it. To those who recognise it, the smell of warm pomegranate joins the frankincense and myrrh. Once it's brewed to her satisfaction she takes out the teabag and, with the help of magic, adds a generous amount of honey. That set aside, ready and waiting, she looks to everyone else. Everything looks ready.

She takes a deep breath and raises her arms, head turned skyward. Though her accent shifts the Nexus helpfully translates the words of this different language. "I call on you, Lady Isis, the Great and Marvellous. I, your gift, call on you who gives birth to heaven and earth, knows the orphan, knows the widow, seeks justice for the poor, and shelter for the weak. Isis the Uraeus protect us, guide us."

Then she lifts the incense and holds it up as she inhales slowly and deeply. When she sets it down again she looks more relaxed, her eyes slightly glazed over, her movements fluid. With a wave of her hand Felix's letter lifts into the air a few inches from the table and the pendulum hovers just above it. This time she holds her hands out but doesn't raise them to the sky. Again her voice changes as she switches to another language, but the Nexus allows everyone to understand as she speaks strong enough to nearly roar and deeply enough to make it feel as though she's talking earnestly to someone standing before her.

"Three Faced Hecate, Come to me Beloved Mistress graciously hear my sacred spells. Hecate, Many Named, Thrice Resounding, Triple Voiced, Three Headed, who holds undying flame in triple baskets." As she speaks a flame appears in front of her, twisting and turning until it splits into three and spreads out across the maps not unlike the position of the three of them around the table. "You encompass the vast world at night, you make the daemones shudder and the immortals tremble, you roam around Olympus and traverse the wide and fathomless Abyss. You bear at Your brow an everlasting diadem, the unbreakable and irremovable bonds of great Cronus. You are the Beginning and the End, and you alone are Mistress of All: For from You are all things, and in You, Eternal One, do all things end. Hail Goddess and attend your epithets!"

She lifts the incense and moves it in three circles, raising it once before putting it down again. "I offer You this incense, Lady of the Moon." Then she picks up the cup and raises it up. "I offer you this fruit of the dead and treasure of the earth, Keeper of the Crossroads and the Ancient Mysteries." Setting the cup down again she raises her hands. "I your daughter, your servant, blood of the dragon, call upon you Nocturnal One of the Underworld. Come to my sacrifices and fulfill this task for me!"

Again her hands gesture and the pendulum and letter rise in front of her. "We seek Felix Caelus of Tamriel, friend of those of the Void and seeker of magical mysteries. He who walks through other realms, who honours you with the roots of his world. Clear the fog that surrounds him. Guide us to he who is hidden!"

At the last word she plucks the letter from the air and takes the chain of the pendulum which starts to swing now that it is no longer being supported by magic. She watches it intently, interpreting its small movements as she moves it over the maps. It's as it gets to Cyrodiil that the pendulum starts to get impatient, visibly tugging her hand until the tip lands on a very particular point. Isidor moves it experimentally but the tip remains planted, almost magnetically, to the spot.

Isidor looks to Stratos, eyes still oddly distant. "There is your answer."

Harrowheart

A ritual like this... Harrowheart has never seen anything quite like it. It would be impossible to compare it to anything. Incantations of goddesses? The supernatural, the all-powerful, shaper of things, masters of their realms? This is so far beyond his experience with magic. So far removed from what he understands to be scrying, invocation, *everything*.

Everything except for *one* thing, something which leaps prominently to the forefront of his mind. His filthy fingers clench tightly into fists and he watches, stiff and still, disquieted by that slight shift in Isidor's visage. This is the closest thing to demonic summoning he's ever seen, and he can't shake the way it sets him on edge.

This isn't right. But if it weren't right, would Isidor have agreed to do it? Would she even know how to do it? And these are... These are her Goddesses. The infinite powers that give *her* power. Would she pray to them if they were dangerous?

He really, honestly can't be certain...

Jim

Even Captain Kirk, a man with no real exposure to magic before he arrived in the Nexus, can sense a Power here. It's in the distance of Isidor's gaze and the change that her voice takes on. The way Harrow is stiff as a board in his peripheral vision. The way his own hairs are standing on end on the back of his neck.

His pitiful human instinct screams danger. Jim plants himself firmly in place instead. Wills his heels to dig in and for his body not to shake with the Wrongness in the air around them.

Felix is a conjurer, after all. Is this not the same sort of rites he would do if he ever bothered to show Jim what it was he specialized in? Felix. *Felix*. Isidor's crystal has stuck fast to a point on the map of Tamriel. Jim's breath seizes in his chest.

"That's in Cyrodiil, isn't it?" His gaze is on Stratos now. Please. Please know where this is.

Stratos

In contrast to the others, Stratos- worried, closed-in, suspicious Stratos - actually relaxes as the ritual goes on. To be certain it's foreign, and he frowns a little at some of Isidor's wording, where it gets a little too reminiscent of what the tribune imagines a daedric invocation would sound like. But. He recognizes at least one of those names. Felix spoke of the engagement ceremony to him; assured his brother that the Durants worshipped the legitimate gods of their own realm. Isidor's patrons may be strange to him, but they are not barbaric or savage.

And Stratos has been raised to trust and honor his own gods. Of course he has. The Divines guard the Empire's soul the way the Legion guards its body. There's something fundamentally reassuring about reaching out for the goddesses' help. It explains, too, how Isidor may be able to pierce whatever is shrouding Felix from him. Magic backed by a god can oft do things a mortal mage cannot - especially against daedra. And necromancy... Perhaps these goddesses are Earth's equivalent of Mara and Arkay - and if anyone can help his brother, they can. The sense of power is comforting to him: he doesn't know if he's imagining it, but it *feels* more tangible and potent than he would have expected. They are not going unheard.

He keeps his head bowed, committing himself to the ritual, adding his silent voice to Isidor's prayer. At least until the pendulum begins to move, until it's point tracks finally and unerringly to Cyrodiil. Bruma. Northwest, among the tiny trees marked on the mountain slopes. Stratos doesn't even realize how he's leaned forward, palms on the table, eyes locked on that one point.

"There is nothing there." He doesn't understand. Bruma? Yes, he sees now. He understands that, but... his eyes are distant too, his voice distracted, though the tribune is searching not the aether but his own childhood memories for answers. "That's southwest of Cloud Ruler Temple: there are only forests and hunting trails... ruins." He frowns. "Yes. I know the area."

Harrowheart

While Stratos debates the place which Isidor (or her Goddesses?) described as Felix's location, Harrowheart -- with his hands still clenched worriedly -- inches closer, uncertain of his next move. He needs to know where his runeblades are, but something in him still makes him wary of this ritual. Will it be too much for Isidor to ask her deities? Will there be some cost beyond fragrant, honeyed teas and powerful incense? He presses his lips into a thin line and forces himself to be bold enough to ask.

"Isidor," he says, his voice low. He clears his throat and, eyes wandering upwards as if he expects to see her Goddesses in the sky, corrects, "Isis? Hecate? Where--" He stops, licks his lips. "My runeblades..."

Jim

Bruma?

That's Felix's hometown. He and Stratos are from there. It sort of makes sense in a way, considering they're likely to know that area better than any other. If *Jim* were going to try to do something crazy amoral and illegal and needed a secret base to do so, he can think of more than a few abandoned quarries near the shipyard in Riverside. Or a couple of seedy places in San Francisco off campus of the Starfleet Academy.

Jim's gaze snaps up from where it had been locked onto the map at Harrow's request. That's right--something's happened in the time Jim had left to go and get Stratos. A pang of guilt grips him at having forgotten his friend's distress so quickly.

"Aren't those..?" Don't ask questions you know the answer to, Kirk. Those blades are very important to Harrowheart, and crazy dangerous to boot. Harrow doesn't let anyone touch them in as long as Jim's known him, says it's dangerous to be close. "Might as well ask while we're set up here. We gotta get those back for you. "

Isidor

Isidor pulls the chain of the pendulum, lifting it so that she can leave it hovering in the smoke of the incense while Stratos ponders over what this location means. Of all the maps that one is the most foreign to her. The names and detailing mean nothing to her, but Stratos is able to read into this answer like she can understand the guidance of her goddesses. Guidance which finds itself being called upon again.

She looks at Harrowheart and then carefully places Felix's letter close to Stratos. That's when she hesitates. She doesn't *have* anything of Harrowheart's. It's a reversal. She has the person but needs the object... which is also part of the person. Then, suddenly, she knows what she has to do.

Spreading her arms again she speaks. "Hecate, Torch Bearer, Crowned Three

Voiced Lady of the Crooked Paths, give us your guidance. We search for the weapon soul bound to Harrowheart the Converter, Death Knight of Azeroth, Warrior of Acherus, he of death and the wolf, who is friend of dreamers and dragons. Guide us to what is hidden!"

Like last time she takes the pendulum, holding it gently between her fingers, but this time her other hand stretches out to Harrowheart. He'll definitely feel it -even Stratos or Jim might feel it- a heavy pressure, a feeling of power connecting with him. It doesn't push, or retrain, it simply... looks, as if recognising that he is there as much as he knows it is there. While Harrowheart wrestles with that feeling, Isidor's focus is on the pendulum again, watching it twist and turn with more difficulty than with Felix, but slowly it finds its mark - on the same spot as Felix was said to be. Isidor's brow lifts, her hand pointed at Harrowheart drops.

"Harrowheart..." With her normal, albeit worried, gaze, she looks at Harrowheart. "I... I don't understand."

Harrowheart

Hearing himself referred to in such flattering words disarms Harrowheart, which only makes the shock that much more real when he feels that Divine grip surrounding him. He's being watched by something that his mind imagines as predatory. It makes him feel hunted. Makes him press his open palms against the seat and table, ready to spring up, as if he might outrun the magic that's washing over him.

It's over much more quickly than it feels, but no sense of relief comes from Isidor's lowered hand. His blue eyes fall on the pendulum resting there in the same spot it had been before. His eyebrows twitch, confused and frustrated but unwilling to admit as much.

He looks to Isidor, his fear quickly disappearing, leaving only doubt and disappointment in its place. "It didn't work?..."

Isidor

"No, it did work," she insists. Then her gaze turns back to the map. "So why is it pointing at the same place as Felix?" Her eyes snap to Harrowheart again. "Did he know where you buried your runeblades?"

Jim

*Nice axes. I've never been much for weapons but--
Just don't touch 'em, okay?*

Jim can feel his heartbeat in his ears. In the tips of his fingers.

*Did he tell ya we had a meeting? He's gonna help me with my runeblades--He's
gettin' me a soul! From something called a vampire!*
**HARROWHEART WHAT ARE YOU DRESSED AS PLEASE STOP TALKING TO
JIM ABOUT SOULS**

People are talking around him but he can't make out the words. He feels
unsteady on his feet and no, dear god no not now. Keep it together Jim.

*I've been busy. Researching. Don't worry about where I've been, Jim.
Was he fighting a den of bears?*

The captain's gone pale, hands shaking at his sides. He looks like he's about to
be sick. Every time he tries to talk all he can manage is the same small choking
sound.

What do you think he's done, Jim?
*I don't know what he's done, but what he's doing is trying to bring the dead back
to life.*

"He...he....son of a bitch."

Harrowheart

While Jim quietly loses his mind, Harrowheart is completely, obviously caught up
in Isidor's accusations.

"I told you: *No one knew!*" He barely refrains from slamming his palm down on
the table, but that moment of restraint gives him pause enough to think.

And that's when his eyes slowly catch sight of Jim.

His lip lift into a quiet snarl and he turns his bitter expression away. "He *touched*
'em," he stresses through gritted teeth. "He put me in some kinda *trance* and
when I came out, he had his hands on them. I didn't think nothin' of it after the
fact, but..."

"That thievin' rat bastard!" He stands without warning in a sudden, furious motion. "When we catch him..." His empty hands clench at the air, hatefully strangling and straining against nothing. "I'm gonna *choke the life out of him!*"

Jim

Jim will worry about standing up for Felix in a minute. Harrow's sudden rage and proclamation for strangulation have him suddenly struggling to breathe himself.

Stratos

What.

Stratos was entirely wrapped up in his own doubts and puzzles right until the pendulum lands dead between his hands once more. He tears himself away from the map slowly, more than a little lost as to what they're talking about now, but... his reaction to the threat is immediate.

"No." There's a brief moment where the air around him crackles with charge, but memory of the anti-violence field checks him. The magic that flickers over his hand instead is faint and nearly colorless, and instead of attacking the death night it stifles the air around him. Stratos's vehement words are the only ones allowed to carry in the sudden silence.

"You will go nowhere *near* my brother." His magic may be held in check, but his gaze burns into Harrow. It softens a little when he turns it on Jim, and the tribune strides around the table to place a hand on his shoulder. One carrying an unseen charge of calming magic. He knows better than to over do it but Jim needs the buffer if he's going to avoid breaking down. Stratos knows that look painfully well. It's not making him any less mad. He looks between Isidor and Harrow. "Now. Explain what these blades are, and why Felix would have anything to do with them."

Isidor

The fear and worry she understands, but Isidor is more than a little taken aback at Harrowheart's sudden *fury*. Her expression is one of confusion and adamant disapproval. So when Stratos, the elder sibling of the man being threatened, reacts with such strength Isidor understands completely. You do not threaten little brothers, Harrowheart. *Ever*.

When Stratos looks to her and Harrowheart for answers, she turns to the Death

Knight. "You know the answer best. You explain." She tips her head to fix a serious stare at him. "*Calmly.*"

Harrowheart

Stratos' defiance makes Harrowheart bristle. Despite the fact that he is most certainly wrong, and his rage is not only displaced but completely out of line, he doesn't want to *hear* that. Not at a time like this, and not from this man – someone he doesn't know and who's defending someone he feels has wronged him. His grimy fists clench and his eyes narrow as he stares the mage down, back straight and muscles tense. He doesn't even notice Isidor's disappointed look until her words catch him off guard.

His edge doesn't soften all at once, but he does look a hair less likely to start a fight with the flimsiest of excuses. His eyebrows furrow in quiet frustration, and he spends a silent moment considering his words before he explains... To Isidor, not Stratos.

"Runeblades are... Haunted magical weapons," he starts, still thinking as he goes. "They're... Not alive, not undead, but they have a *will*. They want things. They want *souls*. They need the magic of the souls to fuel their own magic. But they can't wield themselves. They need someone to fight for 'em. So a runeblade seeks out a wielder..."

He stops abruptly. It's written all over his face that he knows exactly who – or, rather, *what* – is to blame for this. He clears his throat and uncomfortably continues, attention now on the ground between himself and Stratos.

Harrowheart

"A runeblade seeks out a wielder to kill for it. And the magic of the souls that flows into the weapon flows into the wielder, too. They become one. Runeblade and death knight. And he *will* become a death knight. A... *Draugr*," to use Tamrielic terminology, "Like me. The more they feed him their power, the more he'll change, 'til eventually he slips from life to death seamlessly without even dyin'. Unless..."

He looks at Isidor, suddenly burdened by the weight of his guilt. "Unless they get impatient and want him dead sooner. They might... *Force his hand.*"

Quickly he shakes his head and looks at the ground again, concern tightening his

features.

"There's a chance he's undead already. The longer we wait, the bigger that chance gets. And if he dies... If they become his blades... Then they're not mine anymore. The magic that they feed me to keep me *undead*... Without it, everything that's in me is gonna burn up, 'til there's nothin' left to animate me. Then I'll be dead, too. Deader than him. Dead-dead."

Jim

It takes Jim a moment to realize what Stratos has done with his magic. It's a move so much like one Felix would do that he has to doubletake even as his chest relaxes enough for him to breathe properly again. He still feels like warmed over shit, but if he can breathe he can push through this. It wouldn't be the first time the captain's done so and it won't be the last.

Of course, being able to hear what Felix's fate is to be isn't exactly any better than the thoughts jackhammering in his head mere moments ago. Felix is going to die? Die and become something he's only spoken hatefully about up until now? Taken over by a pair of swords?

No. Not if Jim has any say about it. And can get the rest of them to stop fighting long enough to come up with a plan. (Though considering the fire in his eyes when he looks at Harrow, Jim's only just barely keeping his own anger in check.)

"So they want souls. In Tamriel, it's not exactly uncommon for souls to be used to power magic of other sorts. Enchantments and the like. If the blades want souls....what is it Felix is gaining from this? And what's his goal? The consensus I got in the Nexus was 'to protect the people he cares about' but what does that mean? Khan is defeated and my world isn't at war."

Yet. It's not at war *yet*. But while Jim's is not, Felix's is. He looks back at Stratos.

"What exactly could Felix hope to accomplish with a pair of sentient swords and the ability to raise an army of corpses? And....how long does it take to do that?" Another glance back to Harrowheart. "And..how long do you have? We don't have time to waste arguing here. We need to go to Tamriel *now* and find Felix. Stop him."

Save Him.

His gaze snaps to Isidor next.

"I'm going to Tamriel. I can't make you all come with me, but I can ask. Please. Felix is in danger and is a danger to others like this. I have to get to him."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart shrugs one shoulder defeatedly. "I got... Couple'a days, maybe. Felix... All depends on how strong his will is. And considerin' what he's already done, and what he might be doin'... How much magic might'a gotten into him from the blades... A week or two, maybe? Tops? The more he uses, the faster he'll turn. And that's *if* they don't fill him up with necromantic energy and make him... Hurry things along."

Jim

"He was cold, at the end." Jim's gaze has dropped to the table now and to the map of Cyrodiil spread out on it. "The last time we were together, before he...before he tried to strangle me in my sleep."

That was days ago, now. How much worse could he have gotten in the days since?

Harrowheart

The white lights in Harrowheart's widening eyes swing away from Jim. That's not a comforting fact to learn...

September 23, 2017

Isidor

Isidor had been planning on tidying up while Harrowheart spoke, but then he's focusing on her so she stops and gives him her full attention. Anything to help smooth things over and avoid people testing the Anti-Violence Field. Her brow furrows as she follows what he's saying. This isn't magic as she knows it, it's harder to understand, to *really* understand wholly and fully. But the more he explains, the more her brow rises and her eyes widen.

'They might... force his hand... Then I'll be dead, too.' She feels like she's going to be sick. Carefully, purposefully, she makes sure she breathes deeply and slowly. She has to be the calm one, the steady one. She focuses on listening, trying to analyse what she's being told. Right now she needs to be smart, to understand what's happening, what could happen, and what they need to do.

Jim asking her for her help snaps her out of her thoughts. She blinks at him. "After Viatorus' engagement ceremony I talked to the priest. He said Felix had asked his priestesses about talking to Hecate... Whatever he does, whatever he says to her is partly my family's responsibility. Of course I'll help." She looks to Harrowheart. "And I've spent too much time and energy making sure you're a good friend for Viatorus to let you go and die on me now." As if that's the only reason...

She stands straight and looks between the three of them. "Tell me what I have to do."

Stratos

Stratos doesn't care who Harrowheart wants to pretend he's speaking to. Doesn't care if it makes the draugr's pride feel better to defy him a little. He only cares about hearing the truth... as little as he wants to hear what comes spilling out of Harrow's mouth. His face is a grim mask as he takes it in. The kind of magic that has Felix in its sights. In its very *clutches* already. What it truly wants from him. He's a tribune of the Legion, has played reluctant liaison to Thalmor representatives before. He knows how to listen to soul-twisting news without a crack in his expression. And in a way Harrow is only spelling out the worst possible path Stratos feared for his brother all the way here. The moment Jim brought up necromancy... well, every child in Cyrodiil knows where liches come from.

And nonetheless he can feel the tremble in his hands. Realizes Jim will too and leans forward on the table again. The better to stare seriously at the map and plan his next move, of course. It's not that Harrow's complaints about his own situation have turned into white noise in his ears or the chatter around him is a babble broken only when Jim's question to him filters through. What could Felix do...?"

"He could make the same mistakes as every other bloody idiot who's tried to play King of Worms," he growls. It's not like Felix. It's not his way. But Felix is a fool and a fool not thinking with his own mind, at that. No, Stratos needs more time to puzzle out what his little brother is trying to do, and right now things are being said that demand urgent attention. He looks around the table. Jim gets a slight nod - he has PINpoint coordinates to Cyrodiil, Stratos knew already he couldn't stop the captain getting involved. But the other two? Harrow just made himself a priority to keep away from Felix with that homicidal outburst and Isidor....

"Miss Durant," he says, a good deal more evenly, "I thank you profoundly for your

help already, but there is no reason to drag you further into this sordid affair. It will involve a deal of travel in my realm, to say nothing of what we will find... what will need to be done at the end."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart's attention swivels between Stratos and Isidor rapidly. He holds up his hand and starts to protest, "Now – Now, wait a minute here! *I'm goin' with*. My soul's in those runeblades, and I'm not gonna sit back and let someone else handle this. But I'm not goin' with you," Stratos, "Without havin' someone magical in my corner to look out for me. Now, Isidor said she'd help, and helpin' means comin' along. Don't snub her offer."

That's when he focuses on Isidor again, his face tense with worry and guilt. "I... I'll owe you more than I can repay if you go, but... I *need* you in this with me, Isidor."

Jim

"Your *what*?"

Oh, somehow, that detail was never mentioned to Jim before. His eyes have gone wide again though this time there's a real anger there and not just pure shock. Harrow's *soul* is in the blades? Jim understood that it took the essence of others, but the weilder's?

Even if they rescue Felix, if his soul's been removed from his body then. What then?

"Un-fucking-believable." Jim scrubs his hand through his hair several times. "Shit. We don't have *time* for this."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart snaps at Jim, "My *soul*, Jim! You heard me! I died to the blades and my soul was the first they ever took. It's *always* gonna be in there, long as the blades exist. And no offense to either of you, but I'm not lettin' y'all decide what goes on with my soul without me around to defend it."

He takes a long stride toward Naugus' castle but stops mid-step and turns back to everyone. "I'm gettin' my armor and some kinda weapon. Any of y'all who're goin' with..." And his attention rests briefly here on Isidor, quietly hopeful, "Get

what you need and meet back here in half an hour. And if *you two*," he points between Jim and Stratos, "try and leave without me, rest assured I'll find my way to my runeblades by myself, and I'll fix our little problem *my way*."

September 24, 2017

Isidor

Isidor watches the exchange between the three of them with a raised eyebrow. When Harrowheart has said his piece and started to head off she turns to Stratos.

"You're trying to tell me that you plan to walk into a necromantic lair to save your brother from possession with a Death Knight you don't trust and a man whose experience is scientific, not magical- No offence, captain," she says aside before returning her attention to Stratos. "And *not* accept the help of a mage who has been trained since childhood to protect and banish, and who understands just how terrifying it is to know that your brother is in danger and he needs you?" The look she levels Stratos with is heavy with scepticism. "Pride and politics mean nothing when your brother's life is at risk, I know that, and no amount of pretty words will convince me otherwise."

She sets about quickly tidying up the scrying equipment she brought along. "Your chances are better with me. If it looks like I'm holding you back or slowing you down then I'll leave." Hefting the strap of her bag over her shoulder, she looks at Jim and Stratos again. "But if we do this together, as a team, then it will be safer for everyone." Taking out her PINpoint she gives them one last look. "No longer than half an hour."

And she blinks away.

Jim

Both of the captain's eyebrows have made a mad dash for his hairline with how far they've raised.

He'd love to snap at Stratos *and* Harrowheart for continuing to goad each other on, but there's really not going to be any salvaging this horrible first impression for some time. If ever. Their conflict aside, there's a sense of relief when Isidor insists on coming anyway. He knows that he has no place here other than a refusal to be left behind. In a quest of mages and dark magic, what good is a starship captain?

Going to have to be good *enough*, because he's going.

"Try not to kill anyone before I get back, Stratos." Jim squeezes the elder Caelus's shoulder before scooping up his own PINpoint and heading back to the ship. He needs to make sure everything on the Enterprise will be fine without him for a few days. As much as he'd love to just drop everything and head to Tamriel without waiting around, he does still have a job and responsibility to see to on his own world.

"Here."

Jim looks up from where he's tucking a spare energy cell into the jacket of his Envirosuit as Leonard sets down a small shoulder bag on his desk.

"Bones--"

"Your allergy hypos, half a dozen tranquilizers, a derma kit, and some other first aid supplies." He crosses his arms and stares down the captain. "Ain't no way anyone's going to stop you, so be safe for once, dammit."

The doctor's met Felix. He knows more than anyone what this means for Jim. The best Leonard can do is make sure Jim's got the odds in his favor. Everything else is going to be up to him and the folks he's heading out with. Jim's the first back to the garden they'd all been using for Isidor's scrying. The command golds are replaced with an all-weather dark blue suit and gloves and he's carrying a small shoulderbag.

Sitting at the table is just not going to happen, but he'll be pacing when the others arrive.

Stratos

If Stratos was worried about letting Harrow get to Felix, the Death Knight's threat to go storming through Tamriel after him has the tribune clenching his jaw to stop himself speaking his opinion. But the logic of the situation is clear. Maybe even clearer to him than to the others. He manages a stiff nod to Isidor, and then to Jim, but nobody is really waiting for his answer.

He waits until they've all gone to heave a deep, pained sigh. Well. It's not as if he isn't used to his plans being overridden by others. But he doesn't think he's ever hated it more than now, when the thing that matters most is hanging in the balance. Isidor is right, after all. For all that he's devoted his days, his heart and soul to Imperial duty... at the root of it, family comes first. Felix comes first.

You've always trusted that, haven't you, little brother? You depend on that.

What if I can't save you from yourself this time?

He has his own arrangements to make, but he was already half-prepared to dash after his wayward sibling. When he returns it's in the segmented steel armor of a Legion officer, the heavy version of Felix's own uniform. It's well-tended and cleaned, but the marks on it testify to the recent use it's seen. He's even wearing his cloak and the steel helm with its red crest. He's got his own supplies in a satchel and a bigger pack slung at his back. Neither is full yet, but unlike the others he knows exactly how long the trip is going to take. They need room for supplies.

"Jim." He nods to the captain, busy mirroring his own anxieties. "...Did you pack any Cyrodillic clothes?" Honestly Jim could just pull a cloak or tunic over himself, it'll divert enough attention.

Jim

"Got a cloak here." Jim gestures to a rolled bit of fabric under one arm. "Wasn't going to wear it until we left."

Felix hasn't cleared out *everything* from Jim's room yet. It's big, but it'll work.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart doesn't have far to go, being that his family and his things reside in Naugus' tower these days. In short order he's suited up in his saronite battleplate, a grim, dark blue set of heavy metal lined with fur and rimmed with spikes. His face is obscured by the matching helmet with sweeping tusks jutting forward from the jaws, its grilled visor down but the cyan glow of his eyes visible through the slats. A bright red cape is wrapped under his pauldrons and flows down his back. Not a hint of his undead flesh shows through. Though he might look suspiciously ominous, he could pass for a living human.

But without his runeblades, the image of a dark knight is so incomplete. Instead he has two common wood-cutting axes hanging from loops at his belt.

Like Stratos, he's bringing with his satchel – empty – and a leather backpack – full. He stands apart from Jim and Stratos as he waits for Isidor and the eventual portal that will take him to a new world and an unwelcome adventure.

Isidor

The entirety of Isidor's otherworldly experience has been in the Nexus and Azeroth, which Harrowheart kindly guided her through. So choosing what best to take into Stratos' world is not the easiest of tasks. Despite the old fashioned ways of her family, she doesn't personally have old world clothes. Not any that would be considered practical, anyway. It feels awkward. Like coming to a party and not knowing the dress code. She'll have to do the best with what she has.

She arrives not a minute after Harrowheart's return, sporting practical hiking gear with sturdy boots and a waterproof jacket. A dramatic red cape offsets the modern look, ready to cover anything too foreign. Even her backpack has more buckles than zips. Her hair is pulled back in a practical braid and a tactical tomahawk sits in a belt at her hip. She tries not to smirk at the similarities between herself and Harrowheart, and instead eagerly turns to Stratos.

"Shall we?"

Part Three: The Smiths ([Top](#))

Stratos

Stratos looks around and tries not to dwell on what he's doing here, bringing this party into the heart of his homeland. "Very well. We'll need to stand closer."

Much closer, in fact. Awkwardly close considering the feelings among the band. But it's only for a few moments while Stratos activates the PINpoint and brings them...

Right to his cousin's back garden. The air is immediately warmer around them, the sun brighter. They're behind a low-slung house, all white-washed plaster and timber eaves. At their sudden appearance a couple of swallows dart out from the eaves, and swoop away over the grass. It's a fairly big house, and there are others nearby, though the most striking view is to the west, over the low stone wall. Beyond it the grass rolls down to the shore of Lake Rumare, the waters stretching out as far as can be seen. So does the island across the water, and the towering walls of white stone that ring the Imperial City. (And from the center, rising impossibly tall and slender, is the gleaming spire of the White-Gold Tower.)

Closer by, though, the breeze carries the smell of flowers and hearth-smoke and hot metal, the sounds of distant bustle from the main roads. And there are voices from around the corner, where the smithy juts out from the house proper. Stratos glances around, checks everyone is present and accounted for, and heads that way.

Harrowheart

Being removed from the Nexus to other worlds where Harrowheart's violent inclinations aren't dampened is always a shock. When they make footfall in Tamriel the knight braces himself for the discomfort to come... And looks around in surprise when it doesn't. The shade that haunts him... Without his runeblades, it seems to have separated itself from him. What a welcome relief in the face of so much struggle to come.

With his mind strangely clear he finds it easier to look around, to absorb the sights through the slats in his visor. Blue light still streaks from his helmet, poorly concealing the fact that some magical light shines beneath. Hopefully that won't be too terrible out of place to the people of Cyrodiil.

The distant tower catches his attention, and he struggles to look away from it. It's so incredibly tall. Difficult to comprehend, honestly. Taller than the Cathedral in Stormwind, he's confident. Taller than Icecrown Citadel?... It's been so long, he can't be certain.

He's so caught up in his staring that he takes a few seconds to realize Stratos is leading the other away. It wouldn't do to get lost in a place like this! He strides after quickly, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Stratos

In spite of how long it's been, for Stratos there will always be something deeply and fundamentally reassuring about coming into view of the smithy and hearing these two voices. Hearing Ushug holding forth over the blade she's hammering into shape, Seeing the way Marcella brightens when she looks up from the ledgers and catches sight of who's arrived.

"-why we don't take arena jobs, I told you. We could have used that week for ten contracts with people who know what they damned well want. Is that halfwit even offering to make up the cost?"

"No, he's- Stratos!" Her quill's dropped, Marcella wiping off her hands on her apron (then wiping them on her dress because it's less sooty) before she gives her cousin and his shiny uniform a hug. But she already knows what's going on, and the hug lasts all of a second before she looks up at him urgently. "...Have you found him?" She takes in the new arrivals then, smiling at Jim and casting sharp eyes over the two following them. The forge is pretty big for two people, all the doors and shutters currently open to let the air flow and the light in. There's a neat stack of blades beside the orc woman working the forge at the moment, and racks on the far side of the room with an assortment of armor, axes, bows, swords, hammers and daggers of all shapes and sizes.

Stratos hesitates. "We... he's near Bruma. We're setting out now to bring him back." He steps aside, the better to make introductions. "This is Isidor Durant, a mage and a lady from a.... realm..." his voice just got so quiet there, "...akin to Jim's. And this is Harrowheart." How to even begin with that. "It's simplest to say he's a knight in his own realm. *This* is Marcella Avita Valeria, my cousin, and Ushug gra-Grubura, her business partner and our friend."

Marcella takes a long moment to inspect them all while he speaks, her mouth drawing tight when she notices Stratos's hesitation. She looks... more like Felix than Stratos, in fact. Shorter, female, and a little darker - and much more inclined to sizing people up than giving them charming smiles. Marcella looks like she'd get confused if you asked her to charm anyone.

Jim

"I'm sorry to be coming back without him and so soon."

Jim pulls down the hood from his borrowed cloak and gives both Marcella and Ushug a friendly nod by way of greeting. He's been here before, both times much more recently than Stratos had. Now is not the time for forced smiles and pleasantries, however.

"We're going to get him now. That I can promise you."

Harrowheart

When they step into the smithy Harrowheart's attention goes immediately to the people inside of it. Weapons aren't dangerous without someone to wield them, after all, and in a new world he's got to be prepared to do battle with whatever dangers may lurk.

And it's a good thing he's got his wits about him, too, because there's an *orc* in this building! His immediate reaction is to step between Isidor and the orc with his left arm out to keep any brutish beasts from charging at the mage and his right hand already drawing one of his axes. He holds a defensive position rather than charge, but he is ready to throw hands (axes?) the very millisecond this orc moves.

Stratos

It can't help that Ushug looks up and immediately laughs at Harrow's armor. "Malacath give me strength, not another one!" Wait. Is the big lug *drawing* his- oh, now she's giving him an angular green glare. "Put it down. This isn't the damned arena!"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart does not obey orcs!

But.

Stratos is the leader of the party, and he is the one most knowledgeable in this realm. The blue lights from his visor shift in his direction expectantly...

Isidor

Isidor uses a hand to brush away Harrowheart's protective arm and shoots him a pointed look followed by equally sharp words. "Harrowheart, don't be rude. Put that away."

Harrowheart

"*Isidor*," he strains, his hollow voice echoing in his helmet. He repositions himself so that he can keep his eyes on Stratos and The Orc, and through his helmet he whispers for (hopefully) her ears only, "*That's an orc.*"

Jim

Jim is going to bury his face in his hands and muffle a groan of frustration.

Why is this happening?

Harrowheart

Racism, Jim.

Stratos

Stratos is just over here trying not to explode with angry magic right now.

"Harrowheart! What do you think you're doing? This is my family!"

Marcella's edging backwards. Toward the nearest rack of weapons

Jim

Can Jim get away with leading Marcella and Ushug away from the party?

Because. He senses a loud argument about to break out.

Again.

"Come on, just...ignore them."

Stratos

Ushug... is giving the look that says she needs a damned beer. "What the fuck is wrong now?"

Isidor

Isidor's eyes widen and she tilts her head slowly, bearing down an expression of 'Do what I say *right* now or so help me...'.

Harrowheart

Beneath Harrowheart's helmet is an unseen frown. His eye lights swing from Isidor to Stratos and back to Isidor again. It's a few seconds of silence before he finally moves... And resheaths his weapon.

He looks away from the others, as if not being able to see them means they also can't see him. Whatever his bullshit outburst was about, he'll have to explain it to the party when they're out of earshot of *that thing*.

Stratos

Well. Okay. That's... not creepy at all. Stratos finds everyone is staring at him for answers. He looks back at Harrow, checking for himself that the axe is sheathed, and then sighs. "I'm sorry, Ushug, Marcella. I think our guests are still... on *edge*. We just need to make sure all our party are... properly armed before we leave. Immediately."

Marcella's giving him a skeptical look, which turns to Harrowheart. "Are you sure you want to arm *him*?"

"Sure." Ushug's set her work in progress aside, deciding nothing more is getting done for a bit. Idiots or no idiots, Marcella's kin is in trouble and that comes first. "Did you get a look at the state of that axe?"

Jim

"It'll be fine. I know it doesn't look like it, but he's here with us."

Jim shoots Harrow a look to make sure he's not trying anything else before folding his arms and turning back to Marcella and Ushug. He just hopes nothing else is said or done to wreck this introduction more than it already has been. He's going to have to have a talk to Harrow about threatening people just to get results. Ideally before it gets him hurt.

"Stratos has his Legion gear, but the rest of us aren't as fortunate. No telling what we're going to be up against making our way to where Felix is, so we had hoped to be able to prepare here." Jim at least has no real weapon aside from his phaser. And while that's all well and good, he'd really rather save the device's charge for when it's needed.

Isidor

Now that everyone is calm(er), Isidor steps further into the group, allowing herself to take in the sights of the weapons around her and try not to stare at the orc. It's lucky she's spent so much time being confident regardless of her situation. This is the first time she's headed towards a real fight, and it's hard not to worry if she's acting like a novice as much as she feels she is.

"I've got an axe," she says, hand resting on the weapon neatly attached to her hips. Then it's her turn to look between the others. "Between that and my magic I should be all right... Unless any of you think I should take something else."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart slowly turns his attention to the smiths, then down at the axes at his waist. They're... Embarrassing. There's no two ways about it.

"Felix stole my weapons," he explains, his voice heavy with ghostly reverberation. "I need somethin' in the meantime. A..." He feels so stupid saying this, "Rental."

Nothin' for keeps. Once we find Felix I'll have my r— my blades back. 'Til then, I need somethin' to kill with. Sharp, not crushin'. Axe, sword, or polearm, two-handed or one. Probably one-handed, easier to cast that way."

Stratos

Good. Stratos sees Marcella relax and set her shoulders back and knows they'll be all right for a little longer. This is just about dealing with customers. Marcella can do that. She looks to Ushug for a minute. The orc woman shrugs. She can guess what the looks are about, but dear daedra, she's never known anyone near wet their armor just meeting an orc at the shops. To say nothing of the strange clothes they're all trying to hide under their cloaks. Where do the Caelus boys *find* these people?

"All right. I'll deal with... Harrowheart, then take a look at Isidor's axe. If you like," she adds to Isidor. "If it doesn't have an enchantment already I can do that for you. Jim, you use a bow, don't you? Ushug, could you help him find one he likes. Stratos, sit down and stop fretting, you'll be in our way. When was the last time you boys ate?"

She pauses, and gives Stratos another look that transfers itself to Jim and then the others. "And make no mistake, I want to know what's going on here. Since when does Felix steal other people's weapons? He doesn't even like carrying blades around in plain sight."

Jim

It only dawns in Jim after the directions are given that the problem this time was with meeting Ushug in the first place. He can't help the scowl he gives but makes no attempt to say anything about it for the time being. They've only just *avoided* an altercation, he'd really rather not start another one.

"Thanks. " He nods to Ushug and lets her lead him off to look at a bow. He's got no problem with the orc, and minds his manners to boot. "I'm not sure how much Stratos will be able to tell of what's going on, but I'll do my best to explain anything I can. "

Whether or not she's the one who cares is another matter.

Isidor

Isidor looks down at the simple, but sleek axe and presses her lips together thoughtfully. She's never used an axe that was enchanted, only magical axes that

did the job of any normal axe. When she looks at Marcella again it's with a smile. "That sounds nice, thank you."

While she waits she can take a look at the other weapons and armour around the place, with one eye kept on Harrowheart, that is.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart watches Ushug leave with what *may* be described as suspicion. Without a visible expression it might be difficult to tell, but an unblinking stare and stiff-set shoulders do all the talking he won't.

He approaches Marcella slowly, almost cautiously. He wouldn't want a *human* woman to be scared of him, after all.

And when he's there lurking near her and waiting for her weapon he says to her quietly, "I didn't mean to insult you. Where I come from, orcs kill humans on sight, so I thought..." He makes a grunt that comes through his visor like two stones scraping together. "I didn't know she was your girlfriend, or Felix's family."

Stratos

Marcella's making a visible effort to keep her cool and stay courteous. Sometimes she wishes she was as good at that as Imperials are supposed to be. When Harrowheart actually speaks - and not about the swords she's picking from their stands - she tenses up. What in Mara's name is with that *voice*? But you know what, she's dealt with enough oversized lugheads who think they're scarier than her right up until she tells them her fee. She turns to stare up at him, mouth set in a line before she answers. She can't see his face, can't get a read on this man and she's choosing to be annoyed about that. At least, until Harrowheart calls Ushug her girlfriend and she laughs out of pure surprise, which at least breaks the tension.

"She's not..." She glances at Ushug, merrily not caring while she scrutinizes Jim stringing a bow. Marcella drops her voice a little more. "Ushug was in the Imperial Legion with my mother. After the war... when my mother went back to her duties, Ushug took care of me. She took care of all of us, when Stratos and Felix came down here. She taught me how to forge a blade and temper steel like she would her own daughter." There's something fierce in her voice there, quiet though it is, as she stares into those strange eyes behind Harrowheart's visor. Like a good smith, she wants to make sure he gets the point. "I knew Stratos would never let

you hurt her. But if you do anything like that again... well, he'll have to get to you before I do. Clear?"

Harrowheart

The orc was in an army with this woman's mother? Excuse him for a moment as he unsubtly whips his head around to stare at Ushug. An orc. And a human? Friends in an army? And the orc returned from the war to care for a human child? He's not equipped for mindbending concepts like this. Not at all.

Honestly her threats are a welcome change of pace. He returns his attention to her, staring through the glowing grate of his helmet.

When she's through, when she's said her piece, he tilts his chin up slightly as he considers all of this. He doesn't know what kind of power she may secretly wield... And he's not sure he wants to test it. Seeing Isidor's foreign magic for the first time was enough of a painful surprise. Who knows what kind of feats Marcella could conjure?

He nods once, stiff yet certain in his decision. Marcella succeeded her bluff check.

Stratos

Marcella looks back down at the weapons to hide her relief. "Good, then start telling me what you want. I have one-handed blades in steel, glass, elvish make and... uh, orichalcum. Depending on what sort of enchantment you'd favor. Fire works for most things, I'm told frost is good against some daedra, shock against mages..." She pulls up an axe with a faint purple glimmer to it and then shakes her head, puts it away. "No, you won't need to soul trap... maybe something to absorb your enemy's magic? A fear enchantment?" She's just put out a nice ebony axe with an undead-repelling enchantment on it, too, but she doesn't think to point it out.

Harrowheart

"Lifesteal," is his immediate response. And the less he says the better! "On a steel blade."

Stratos

Marcella blinks at how specific and fast he is, but nods. "I have one like that. Just let me look..." She has to go to a rack that's pretty much all steel, Legion-style short blades with all types of enchantments, but she comes back with one for him. "Here, how does this feel?"

The blade shimmers faintly with deep red light when lifted, and anyone with a knack for magic can recognize the health-draining enchantment bound into it.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart takes the blade and measures its weight in his hands. He steps back so that he won't damage anyone and gives it a curious swing. It's... Different. His form really isn't that great! A weapon without a mind of its own is not something he's used to, and he feels so unbalanced trying to fight with this *actual sword*.

He's not sure if he's supposed to do this, if he's allowed to cast or not, but before he commits to a weapon he wants to try something out. He holds the weapon beneath his wrist so that the blade extends past his fist, then conjures up ice around the hilt to affix it to his bracers. It holds fast, and it's long enough to be functional. A sharp new extension to his arm. He gives the air a few exploratory stabs and swipes and finds it's much more natural this way.

Finally he nods at Marcella. Yes, this will do.

Stratos

Well that's... unorthodox, and it makes her wonder how people fight in the mysterious place he's from. At least that's that sorted though, so she gives a nod of approval. "It's a good sword for close quarters. Should let you keep your balance while you cast. Good. That's... Isidor, shall I look at your axe now?"

Harrow can go check out the bow Jim's looking at, or join Stratos at the table in the corner. The tribune has a map spread over it, and is either plotting their route or pretending not to watch the newcomers interact with his family. Or he could hang around and listen to the girls talk axes. If Harrow knows a thing or two about those.

Jim

Jim's not especially picky when it comes to a bow. He's not sure what the difference is between most things, being an amateur hobby archer at best. When

Ushug asked him what he was fighting Jim honestly just shrugged.

"Probably undead, if I'm being honest."

He'd like to think otherwise but well, after everything Harrowheart's said....

Harrowheart

Harrowheart hears the word 'undead' and instinctively looks. Huh? Y'all talkin' 'bout him? No? Okay then, he'll wander off to quietly loom near Stratos and absorb what that map looks like. You know, just in case they leave his ass behind here in Cyrodiil.

Stratos

She jerks her head back to give him a speculative look - considering this involves Felix - then exhales through her nose. "Fire, then. Or a repelling spell."

"I've only seen the dead repelled a couple of times but they run like a Bosmer with a slapped arse. It'll keep 'em good and far away from you."

Jim

"Repulsion is fine."

The last thing Jim wants is to accidentally set anything on fire. Doubly and especially if they end up fighting Felix. He won't be using arrows against him, that much is for certain. He's saving the stun from his phaser for that. No lasting damage then

No scars

He's not going to notch an arrow against Felix.

Not now or ever.

"I'm not certain enough of my aim to want to have fire on my weapons."

Stratos

"Try this for size, then." Ushug pulls out an elven bow with the enchantment, the gold-tinted limbs patterned to look like feathered wings. Seems right for this boy. "It's near as pretty as you are, and meaner than it looks."

Jim

Her commentary startles a laugh out of the captain. Jim tries to stifle it a moment later in an attempt to keep serious but the tremble in his shoulders speaks for the

eased tension in his posture.

"I appreciate it. Anything that will help me find and rescue Felix is a blessing, right now."

Have confidence in yourself Jim. This may not be your world or your specialty but there's lives on the line that are important. It's not a matter of can. He'll make sure they see this through.

He follows Ushug through the wares to get himself a quiver and a stock of steel arrows. There's a brief moment where he pauses and considers taking off his cloak to shoulder the gear before ultimately deciding to equip them over his cloak instead. It's stifling and warm in the Cyrodiilic afternoon but until they're out of any traveled areas he needs to keep himself covered to avoid drawing suspicion with his clothing. once he's got the bow and quiver settled he'll go and find Stratos and Harrowheart at the table in the corner and offer them both nods before taking an open seat.

Isidor

At Marcella's prompt, Isidor turns her attention back to the other woman, taking out her tomahawk and handing it over. It's no battle axe, but it is nifty, and made well with its smooth modern design. Isidor's lips twist into a smile and she folds her arms. "My cousin made it. She's a smith too. She loved the opportunity to make a weapon."

Her hands shift to latch onto the straps of her bag. "But I've never needed to enchant it before..." For a moment she considers being honest with Marcella about her lack of experience, but Felix is her family. Knowing that one of his potential rescuers has no idea what she's doing is the last thing she'd want to hear. So instead Isidor tries to look interested, even enthusiastic. "What would you recommend?"

Stratos

"You're going to stew yourself by the forge," Ushug warns Jim. He's not sitting the closest but even with the fresh breeze coming through the doors the smithy is especially warm. Not that that's stopped Stratos keeping his armor, but a), Ushug knows there's no helping him and b), he's probably using his magic to cheat. The orcish smith's just going to saunter on past with a swish of her heavy skirt to gather up the pile of blades in need of cleaning and finishing. Don't worry, Harrow, she'll sit out by the far door to work on them.

Marcella's taking a good and curious look at the tomahawk, meanwhile. Her sharp frown eases as she realizes the craft with which it's been forged. All right, so it looks and balances strange, but it's clearly supposed to be like that. And maybe she can't help a smile when Isidor relates its origin.

"I heard Jim mention undead, there. Typically I'd suggest either fire or undead repulsion for that. Although if there are necromancers with them, you might like an effect to drain their magic for you."

Isidor

Isidor's eyes narrow thoughtfully at the weapon. "Fire is my speciality with casting, and I know I'll have far more control over it... Draining magic sounds really useful, but I think the only mage we're expecting to see is Felix and I do *not* intend to swing at him," she says with certainty and a small nod. "So I guess undead repulsion would be the best choice."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart is blissfully not conscious of the sweltering heat beneath his heavy, fur-lined armor... But his body isn't. Fortunately, any decay he may be experiencing remains concealed from sight and smell by the seal of his armor.

Mentions of undead repulsion make him laugh -- a hollow laughter that sounds altogether much more evil than usual. The helmet must be enchanted... How very dramatic.

"I don't think any enchantment could make you repulsive, Isidor."

He clears his throat.

"... No more than your personality does."

Good save. Perfectly under cover. Nobody the wiser. And she'll understand. Right?

Jim

The face Jim is making right now says that is not at all a good save and seriously, what the fuck, Harrowheart? Are you flirting with or insulting the lady?

He nearly opens his mouth to comment before snapping it shut right away again and turning to the map Stratos has laid out on the tabletop. Whatever grave Harrowheart is digging for himself is his own business right now. Jim isn't even going to get involved.

"Can you tell me which route we're going to be taking and what to expect?"

Stratos

Marcella just choked a little, which might be good or bad depending on whether you're Isidor or Harrow and whether you interpret that as a stifled laugh. She's not *good* at diplomacy, but she has a decent sense of when she doesn't want to get involved. That said, Isidor's doing a lot to win the smith to her side right now.

"Well, I appreciate you holding back on my cousin. Mara knows he makes a tempting target sometimes." She examines the axe and nods. "I'll need at least half an hour to make a good job of it. In the meantime Jim can show you the larder. Whatever you need for the journey is yours."

Stratos meanwhile moves his helm off the table so both Jim and Harrow can see the route he points out. "The main roads are fastest, though we'll have to abide the traffic. We'll take the ring road north around Lake Rumare until we can turn north onto the Silver Road, follow that to Bruma and cut through to the mountains beyond." He looks around his companions and lifts his voice. "Can all of you ride? I think it faster to hire horses for the road."

Isidor

Judging from the way Isidor squints at Harrowheart as though he were book with indecipherable text, it looks like Jim isn't the only one baffled by Harrowheart's intentions, and why he thought that was subtle enough for public consumption. She pauses and, after a breath, decides not to comment, instead turning back to Marcella, whose intentions and meaning are all perfectly clear. "If we can spare the time, I'd be grateful. The more they talk the more I feel like every little helps."

Jim

"I can ride, no problem."

Perhaps not the expected response from a spaceman of the future, but Jim gives Stratos a nod that has no hesitation behind it. It's been a few years, sure, but Jim's got plenty of experience on a horse from growing up in rural Iowa. The

captain moves to take a closer look at the map spread out in front of Stratos with a newfound scrutiny.

"It's a mountain village, right? I remember Felix saying that before. Guess there'd be plenty of valleys, caves, and out of the way spots to hide round in."

He moves to get up after that though, conscious of Marcella volunteering him to show them all to the larder. Jim remembers the way well enough and wants to do all he can to efficiently get them ready for the journey ahead. Best to pack some of those empty bags up with supplies and do his best to get them ready to head out. As much as he enjoys Marcella's home and company, they have things to do.

Stratos

Marcella gives Isidor a brisk nod and whisks the tomahawk over to the enchanting table standing covered and disregarded at the back of the forge. When she pulls off the ash-dusted cloth the engraved runes and ward lines glow dimly blue, catching the ambient light. It's much like its Skyrim counterparts in design, though in place of an inset skull at the back, there's a small pyramid carved in bone. Marcella dusts it off to be doubly certain while she talks to Isidor.

"An hour in the planning saves a week on the road. And if you're going adventuring in a wilderness you don't know... believe me, you'll be glad of every advantage." She checks the candles, nods and roots in the box under the enchanting table for a taper. Isidor gets a glance when she straightens up with it. "Do me a favor and light this?"

Stratos looks around at the others, hesitating just a bit, though he covers it with a dry tone of voice. "Can I trust you all to behave civilly while I fetch mounts?"

"Go and get on with it, boy," Ushug scolds him lightly from the door. There's a degree of exasperation beneath the growl. They might forget their manners but they're not like to kill each other before he returns. Imperials make such a damn fuss every time their feathers are ruffled.

Isidor

The reveal of the enchanting table draws Isidor's attention and she approaches it to inspect it from a safe and respectful distance. She doesn't hide her curiosity, but she does her best not to gawp or get in the way either. Getting asked to help is a pleasant surprise, even if it is just to light a taper. She smiles and nods. "Of course." Once she has the taper it's a flick of her fingers and the small flame she summons lights the taper with ease. It's as she's offering it back that Stratos

speaks up.

"Don't worry, Stratos, we're all friends here." The reassuring tone she uses hardens as she fixes a pointed stare on the death knight. "Isn't that right, Harrowheart?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart is probably making a guilty expression beneath his visor, but nobody can see, and so he saves a little face. He nods stiffly .

"We're all allies," he concedes. 'Friends' is pushing it, but he can stay his blade for an hour while Stratos brings the supplies they need. He'll just hang out here, quiet as can be, cooking in his armor...

Stratos

Marcella looks up and nods at him, and Stratos grabs his helmet from the table as he stands and strides out. He'll make it as quick as he can. Meanwhile Marcella lights the candles on her table with a muttered thanks to Isidor, and adds the final component to her enchanting: a large faceted purple crystal that's weighty with the soul it contains. The enchanter sets it down among the thread lines of the table, then gets to work. The tomahawk is held in her left hand, and with her right she spools power out from the crystal, weaving thin white threads out into the air. The markings of the table glow brighter as they catch and hold parts of it for her, and then she starts to bind the magic into the metal of the blade, coiling it over and into the haft in a repeating pattern. At first the light it gives off is white and ghostly; only as the enchantment begins to take specific form and all the parts fall into place does it brighten, taking on a golden-white hue.

The smith is quiet with concentration as she works, aside a few questions about the use of this axe she can't quite resist. And she's willing to explain the essentials of what she's doing to Isidor, including the purpose of the soul gem.

Stratos

When Stratos does return he's hitching four bay and chestnut horses to the gate. They're strong, well-groomed beasts with an even enough temper to stay calm on the crowded roads, though personally Stratos wonders how they'll react to Harrowheart. He calls the others to start loading their supplies, since Marcella has not only finished with the axe but produced a pair of custom braces for Jim too.

...Though in the latter case, he can guess she's been working on those for a while.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart has been waiting for any excuse to get out of this place, so Stratos' return with the mounts is both timely and appreciated. It's a relief taken for granted that they turn out to be horses. Who knows what other strange sorts of creatures they might ride on this other world?

How the horses are going to tolerate the presence of the undead is another matter entirely, and one which certainly crosses his mind if the slow, cautious way he approaches them is any indication. He'll view them from afar rather than stride up and watch them kill themselves thrashing against the fence to get away.

Then again, if they *do* die, he could always fix that...

Jim

"Here."

There's a slight *thunk* as Jim hands over Harrowheart's extra pack--now laden with rations and a few potions-- back to the deathknight. He's still carrying Stratos' and will offer it to the elder Caelus once he's got the horses tethered. They're already saddled and geared for the trip, which leaves little for the captain to do to busy himself.

"Marcella graciously offered us supplies for the trip. I've made sure your maps are well stored in your pack as well. " He's adjusting his own cloak to once again hide his otherworldly clothes from the locals. Casts a glance back toward the home but makes no attempt to head back in.

"We're as ready as we're going to get."

Stratos

Maybe the horses here have evolved some tolerance for unnatural magics, but they don't immediately berserk at the scent of Harrowheart nearby. They do lift their heads and flatten their ears as he gets closer, stamping and fidgeting uneasily. The most nervy of the bunch tries to yank himself free of his tether before Stratos puts a hand on his neck and he relaxes. About ten seconds later

so do the others, as an unseen illusion spell takes effect. Stratos glances over at Harrowheart, taking note that he'll need to keep a watch on the beasts to make sure they stay magically placid for the trip.

At least now he knows the horses will all but ignore the death knight while he and Jim get the horses laden with their supplies. "Thank you. Perhaps you can help the others with their mounts for a moment..."

Marcella and Ushug have come out to see them off, and Stratos wonders affectionately if his cousin knows how much she looks like her orcish mentor when she folds her arms that way. (Ushug wonders if the imperial cousins know how alike their worried frowns are.) He takes a minute to thank them both, for Marcella to quietly, fiercely warn him that he'd *better* come back, *with Felix and* Jim. A moment for her to add, "Talos be with you," softly... and for Ushug to add loud and unrepentant, "Malacath watch your back."

He manages a lopsided smile to them both before he pulls himself straight and strides briskly back to his horse. He's not a natural rider, but a few years of working with mounted knights have taught him how to keep up and he's confident in taking the lead. "Is everyone ready? We'll have to work our way through the press on the road to get out of Medesgate, so keep close, mind your horses and don't get distracted."

Harrowheart

After his embarrassing display in the smithy Harrowheart isn't sure if it would be right to give Ushug and Marcella a respectful nod, or if they'd refer he not remind them he exists. Eventually something in the back of his mind that sounds like his mother's voice reminds him to be gracious to his hosts. As he mounts the calmer of the horses with practiced ease and gathers up the reins in his hands he gives a single, respectful nod to the two women whose business he so rudely invaded.

"We will find Felix," he assures them... Or maybe himself.

And with Stratos' guidance he's ready to ride. His job from here on out will be following the leader, obeying orders, and (eventually, he's sure) doing what a death knight does best. They don't need his input, which is a relief as it gives him time to absorb the sights around them. How strange it is to be in a world so similar to his own and yet so vastly different...

It's a good thing Stratos warned them not to get distracted, or he certainly would.

Jim

Harrowheart clearly doesn't need any help with his mount so Jim brushes past him without looking up while he heads over to see to Isidor. He has no idea what her comfort level is with horses and will make sure she gets situated on her mount if she needs a hand.

If not, or when she's finished, he'll head back to the last horse and quickly hop on with a practiced ease. It may have been a couple of years since Jim's had the chance to ride, but it's always been an activity he enjoys. It's only when he's astride the horse with his gifted clothing donned that he turns back and regards Marcella and Ushug with a determined nod of his own.

"You can count on us."

Isidor

It's now that Isidor wishes earnestly they were here under better circumstances. She is all too happy listening to Marcella explain what she's doing and show magic with its familiar elements but different details. All of it leads to more questions than she has time for today. So when Stratos appears with the horses, and Jim with the supplies, she thanks Marcella for both her time and her talents. She's more than a little curious to see how the horses react to Harrowheart, but Stratos has everything under control. One less thing to worry about, it seems.

What she doesn't expect is Jim's offer. She hasn't been offered help getting onto a horse since she was a child. With a smile, she politely declines, but it does make her think that perhaps hoisting herself unceremoniously onto the tall beast in front of her friends might not be something she wants to do. Instead she leads her mount to a patch of unused ground which a little magic can make a nifty step from. It doesn't quite flatten properly when she tries to fix it, but it's harder from horseback. But once she's up it turns out she's quite confident on a horse.

Circling back, she gives the two ladies a grin to lighten the mood. "I'll keep them all in line. We'll be back before you know it." Then she turns to Stratos. "Lead the way."

Part Four: The Ride and the First Night ([Top](#))

Stratos

Tense meetings aside, the circumstances cast quite a shadow over their visit. Marcella gives the group a nod in return, almost smiling in answer to Isidor's grin. Ushug looks them over thoughtfully and wishes them luck as Stratos leads them up the street at a swift trot, heading away from the lake. There's no time to stop and take note of the other craftsmen and women who occupy this street, farriers and wheelwrights and fletchers and at least two more specialties of blacksmith. He knows how long it's going to take them to get out of this place, and indeed as soon as they come across the main thoroughfare he turns them left onto a road several times wider and about a thousand times busier.

Medesgate isn't much more than a satellite village, a small tangle of streets feeding into the point where the bridge to the capital's east gate meets the great ring road. For the impatient travellers, that means they have to push their way through half the people, animals and carts (there is an *armada* of carts) heading both inward and out. It certainly feels like half the Empire is trying to use this one road: farmers, pilgrims, traders, soldiers, mages, beggars, scholars, adventurers in mismatched armor... To the left a pair of Khajiiti merchants with magnificently braided manes wearing fine (if travel-stained) clothes; to the right, a weatherbeaten Dark Elf trying to inch his cart full of passengers out of the town. There are a lot of humans here, dark-haired Imperials or otherwise, but to Isidor and Jim the other residents are going to stand out most.

That and the noise. Cattle and dogs and far too many people in one place. Of course there are stalls set up by the road to sell food and wine to hungry travellers; on one side of the street, the traders selling merchandise for the Blue arena team trade shouted banter with the Yellow team's stand across the way. A young Argonian in a smart green uniform stands on a pile of crates to call out in a raspy voice, "Emperor Dispatches Mission to Hammerfell! Read it now in the Black Horse Courier! Get your copy here! Skingrad Count Denies Fresh Rumors! *Only* in the Courier!"

At least it's not utter chaos – they move steadily along, no small thanks to the armor-plated legionnaires keeping the crowd in line. These guards favor plate armor more in the style of a medieval knight, Isidor might notice, but they salute smartly when Stratos leads the way past, and his uniform and air of authority prompt most people in the crowd to make way as much as they can.

Honestly though, the people they'll be most grateful to are the small gangs waiting in the alleys with buckets and shovels, waiting to nip in among the crowd and scoop up dung to throw in their carts. Imperials like *clean*, neatly-paved streets, and if the place hardly smells sweet... it could clearly be so much worse. When they pass the junction that leads down to the great city gate, they get a glimpse of the white stone bridge, and it's noticeable *lack* of carts or horses. The handful of carts heading that way are stopped before the bridge and their contents transferred to porters for the last leg of transit.

Jim

Out of the shade in town the heat is even more oppressive but Jim finds himself gathering his cloak around himself even tighter to keep from drawing attention to his strange clothing. The envirosuits are designed for planetside missions in climes that would be ill suited for humans normally so the captain is in no danger of passing out from heat stroke or the like but it doesn't mean he's *comfortable*.

He's seen all of this before during the New Year festival he'd attended over his birthday with Felix--and isn't that just another barb shoved deep into his chest that he hadn't been braced for? They're at least *leaving* the city rather than entering it, this time. Though his eyes are scanning around for the hilly area outside Medesgate that his own PINpoint coordinates bring him to when he comes to this place, mostly as a reference. It's a fine distraction for the moment from both the task at hand (traffic) and unwanted sweet memories that crush something inside of him every time they come to surface.

Stratos

Stratos maneuvers his mount through the press with a steady hand and an expression of stern determination. He spares a polite nod to those citizens who make an effort to clear his path, the occasional glance back to check his companions are still with him. Despite the heat and the noise and the bustle, they're making good headway and it's a tiny relief.

They're heading for the village outskirts before he sees anything to really irritate him. An actual carriage is coming the opposite way, an elegantly carved affair in black wood and gleaming gilding behind a pair of white horses. It's surrounded by an escort. At the front are a pair of mounted legionnaires in heavy armor - an orc man and redguard woman with equally dour expressions. The rest, though, are high elves with their golden skin and eyes, and the perpetual air of superiority that's all Dominion. Whether they wear robes or the gold-tinted elvish armor, they watch the people around them with the cool expressions of men and women who

think they're only sneering on the *inside*. Or maybe they don't care. What's the good of being better than filthy mortals if they don't know you know you are?

"Out of the road. Now." Stratos lifts his voice to be heard, and wastes no time himself. He turns his horse's head and swings the whole party right out of the way without hesitation. He's not alone there. The entire crowd is making sure to stand back, and not just to avoid the dozen horses trying to come through. But where Stratos is nearly expressionless as he pulls his mount up and nods to his passing comrades, the common citizens are much more open in the looks they give those elves. Wary faces. Irritated faces. Frightened looks, weary ones. A few don't try to hide their hate. No wonder those legionnaires are watching the crowd carefully. Stratos just wants to make sure his party stays out of the way... but he can't help studying that carriage, trying to pick out who's inside.

Jim

These too, are familiar faces from the new year. Jim feels hatred simmer underneath his skin as he hurries to move out of the way and pull his horse up next to Stratos'. All he knows about these elves are what's been told to him and what he's witnessed firsthand, but it doesn't stop his nerves rising.

"They can't sense undead can they...?" A hushed whisper and a worried glance back toward Harrowheart are quickly given. "Is that a thing Thalmor can do?"

Stratos

It's a reasonable question, and Stratos gives Jim credit for thinking of it. Fortunately when he looks at the captain it's to shake his head slightly.

"Only some of them, and only if they're looking for it. I would certainly detect the spell. The wizards may notice he's magical-" indeed, one of them is giving the strangely armored warrior a look of mixed disdain and suspicion, "but not the source."

Despite what the Thalmor claim, they're not *that* preternaturally attuned to magic. They're good, yes. But he's learned much about their limits.

Isidor

Although they have been brought to this world for an exceptionally urgent reason, part of Isidor appreciates the slow progress. It gives her time to observe the many types of people around her, and even to occasionally glance to the tall tower in the distance, all in between paying attention to the people closest to them.

Even on another world pickpockets in crowds must be an inevitability. The last thing they need is some form of technology or oddly crafted item to go 'missing'.

All this looking around means that the carriage coming the wrong way catches her by surprise, but though she has to hurry Stratos' warning ensures she's out of the way in time. Once in a safer place, she battles with a scowl. The inconsiderate, obnoxious air grates her. She doesn't like getting forced aside. She doesn't like it one bit. It makes her bristle. Don't they know who she is? *She* is a- nobody. She is nobody on this world. She closes her eyes, breathes slowly, and when she opens them again she tilts her chin up and stares at their destination. While she would happily stare them down, that might risk a fight. Not that she would mind a fight, but they have more important matters to attend to.

Harrowheart

Beastfolk like Harrowheart has never seen before... Cat-people, lizard-people. He can't help but stare. They should be so familiar – his world is full of beastfolk, after all – but they're just different enough to leave him emotionally conflicted. Even the elves here are different – shorter ears, shorter brows, slanted eyes like nothing he can compare to. In so, so many ways this world is home and yet utterly *not*. It's *deja vu*, a memory of something entirely new.

He focuses instead on Stratos. The man has an air of command about him. More than an air, honestly. He *does* have command. This is new information for him. He had no idea Stratos held actual, respectable military rank.

Being ordered off the road for a troupe of elves surprises Harrowheart, but his own slow reflexes surprise him more. Still, he does as he's told without complaint and pulls his horse in line with his companions'. His head faces forward as if he has no interest in seeing who is passing... And in a sense, he doesn't. He's learned well that it's better not to be curious about certain things. He's already made a fool of himself interacting improperly with an orc. If he earned himself or his party the ire of these elves because of his curiosity. Well... Better not to dwell on it.

He grips his reins tightly and focuses forward, stark still, not a single natural motion shifting his suit of armor that doesn't come from the impatient horse beneath him.

Stratos

Despite his cool air, Stratos is honestly praying to get out of here without incident. Oh, there's no real reason his party should draw the elves' attention. There's nothing so obviously out of place about them that such elevated persons should deign to notice their existence. It's a reflexive fear, a spark of old hate buried under the gut knowledge that every time they appear it's to make his life more horrifying.

But the moment passes and the Thalmor go with it. Harrow and Stratos draw a few glances and one of the tall warriors seems to sense Isidor's pointed disregard- but the two legionnaires at the front don't care. They just want to get these pretentious fetchers into the city and get themselves the hell out of this escort job. And the lofty wizards aren't going to actually *stop* in this mass of smelly mortals. Harrow's horse gets jostled aside by an impatient warrior, but otherwise the little convoy moves on. As soon as they pass, Stratos is urging his horse into the gap they've cleared. There's only room enough to pick the pace up to a trot, at least until they get past the complex of stables on the village outskirts, heading down along the high banks above the lakeside.

Then he leads them to the outer edge of the traffic, gestures to his companions to keep up, and breaks into a canter that takes them well down the road and clear of the main traffic entirely. He's not going to slow until someone falls behind or it gets quiet enough to hear the waves on the shore to their left. He wants some space, he wants the group in safer territory.

He wants as much distance as he can from the Thalmor.

Harrowheart

When Stratos' horse begins to canter Harrowheart urges his on with a kick to the sides and a forward lean. Only when the city is far behind and Stratos eventually slows his pace does he manage to properly catch up.

"What was that?" he asks through his visor. "Those elves... What was going on there?"

Jim

" Thalmor. Not our problem right now. Which is for the best because they're assholes and they hate humans. "

Jim doesn't even try to watch his mouth.

Shaking his head and pulling his cloak back from around his face finally.

Isidor

Isidor is right with Harrowheart in catching up to Stratos as soon as she gets a chance to ask about the people who deserved such an extensive guard. The swift response from Jim doesn't dissuade her. She raises an eyebrow at him. "Are they going to *become* a problem? I know you must be familiar with this world, but Harrowheart and I aren't. I don't think either of us want any more nasty surprises today."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart nods once and grunts in agreement with Isidor. She said exactly what was on his mind.

Stratos

"With any luck we won't meet any more between here and Bruma." Stratos's surprised glance at Jim's ability to answer is cut short so he can turn to look at the others. He can be sure his expression is under control now, and he looks about as happy as he has all day. "They aren't part of the Empire. We went to war with them thirty years ago, after they invaded..." He seems to catch himself, there. "We have a peace treaty, but relations are still... *strained*. If we do meet any more, avoid their attention, but Jim is right. There's no reason they should get involved in *our* business."

Even speaking so innocuously, he glances casually around, absent-mindedly confirming there's no-one in proper earshot. It's much easier to relax now there's only a thin stream of pedestrians and carts on the road with them.

Harrowheart

"And how long 'til Bruma, anyway?" Harrowheart is quick to ask. "Looked pretty far on that map, and I'm gonna be honest with y'all... I can't go too long without killin'. If my body holds out for two days, that's about when I'm gonna have to do it. If we run across any Thalmor between tomorrow and when we find Felix and they *do* start somethin', I ain't gonna be able to stop myself like I stopped myself from killin' that orc."

Stratos

He needs to kill. The undead monster they're transporting along with them *needs* to kill. And *soon*. The thought hammers in his mind, drowning out his worries about where those elves were travelling south from. It wars for attention with the urge to bristle at the death knight's casual talk of killing 'that orc'. *As if I would let you, you soulless-*

Stratos is silent for a long moment, not looking back at Harrowheart. When he speaks it's in a detached voice, his words very deliberate. "What, exactly, will happen if you don't kill after that?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart doesn't answer immediately. This is a serious question, and it deserves the right answer the first time. His friends' lives could depend on it, and so could his. When he's finally ready to reply he clicks his tongue for his horse to up its pace, putting him beside their leader.

"A day and a night and I'm normal."

He glances in Isidor's direction and tries to lower his voice, but he can hardly hear himself over the horses when he does so, and so resigns himself to publicizing the reality of his existence.

"Two days and two nights and I start thinkin' weird, but I can handle it. Just don't talk to me and don't look at me too much. Don't touch me. Don't bleed and don't act wounded around me."

He looks around again, from Jim to Isidor to the broad, foreign world ahead of him.

"Three days," he starts, then hesitates. "Three days and I start fights, but you can probably stop me. Three nights and I start shakin', and I start losin' my mind, and then I fight to kill. I ain't normal 'til I kill somethin'. The slower the better."

His heaving sigh sounds like a wailing wind through his helmet. "If I ain't killed somethin' by the second night just chain me up, I don't give a fuck. I ain't gonna die from the hunger, just lose my mind for a while."

Stratos

Marvelous. Just when he was beginning to harbor hope he might get this party to Felix and safely off of Nirn again *without* causing a bloody disaster. He lets Harrow finish, nodding ever so slightly as if he's just mulling over how to adjust his plans.

"And you chose not to mention any of this earlier - before, I might add, we left the one place we might have *acquired* chains - because...?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart scoffs, a grating metal sound. "What was I supposed to do? Tell the smiths I'm a *draugr* and I need to be chained up 'cause I'm a fuckin' serial killin' monster? Or just ask the people who don't like me to give us some chains for no real reason, just 'cause?"

Stratos

"You could have informed *me* and trusted that I would see to it." His voice has tautened a little despite himself. He turns his head toward Harrowheart, eyes hard. "I am *very* used to handling matters that require discretion. Or do you think there is *any* effort I wouldn't make to see this mission succeed?"

Rhetorical question. He relaxes his grip on the reins and moves on. "Does it matter *what* you kill? Is a certain size of soul required?"

Harrowheart

Stratos' increased seriousness only riles Harrowheart, who tenses beneath his armor and causes his pauldrons to shift. His back straightens and the cyan lights from behind the grates of his visor.

... But Stratos calms, and Harrowheart abruptly follows suit. He turns his face away and shakes his head. "Things that are most like me are best. Humanoids, then animals. Demons work. Souls don't matter without my runeblade to steal 'em. I need the pain for my mind and the life energy for my body."

A few more tense and silent seconds before he clarifies, "I can kill animals. I can... I can catch us dinner."

Stratos

The Imperial nods slowly. "Fortunately *that* should be easy enough to come by." Cyrodiil is one of those places where the wildlife just leaps out at you. So do the less-savory locals. "We'll try using that to keep your.... needs at bay. And in case it fails... I will need to confer with Miss Durant on the best method of restraint."

Focus on the practical. This is what they need; this is how they'll meet it. Don't imagine what it will be like. No amount of disgust changes what must be done. Anguish won't save anyone.

Jim

Now, the captain has been oddly quiet since before they arrived to the seat of the Empire. His mind has been drifting in and out of focus as sleep deprivation and his worries over Felix vie for taking all of his energy to deal with. Forcefully stuffing every shard of emotional shrapnel into a too small internal bag and trying desperately to keep it secured.

However, when the talk of *killing* starts, Jim snaps back to attention--ready to bristle and snarl at anyone even thinking of suggesting they harm Felix unless there's no other choice left to them.

But they're not talking about Felix. They're talking about Harrowheart and in a context that Jim has never been privy to before. Shame washes over him suddenly since his first kneejerk thought was that he didn't know this. Didn't know any of this about someone he considers to be one of his closest friends in the Nexus.

Jim Kirk simply never asked. Not a word about his past in the years they've known each other. It's short lived however, as his shock and confusion loosen what has been a tightly held tongue for some time of riding.

"*Jesus*, Harrow. How--is it like that even in the Nexus? How do you stay *sane*?"

It's a question he knows the answer to already.

You don't.

He doesn't want to ask now. Knows he should. That their survival very well depends on it. But all he can wonder is if Felix is having those same thoughts now with no one there to help him or talk him down. It turns his stomach and not for the first time he has to stop talking for fear of throwing up.

Harrowheart

All that tenseness that left Harrowheart when Stratos calmed? It's right back, baby! Jim invokes the name of his world's god and Harrow's gauntleted fists tighten once more around the reins. He turns his head sharply and hisses back, "*No it's not like that in the Nexus!*" He scoffs and faces forward once more. He doesn't even want to look at Jim. He's *definitely* not going to look at Isidor.

"Why do you think I spend so much time there? Anti-violence field. I can't kill, and I don't feel the Hunger. I get to be a person. A normal fucking person."

Somehow, something in Jim's question burns him. It writhes in him and it won't be calmed. He begins to pull the reins taut between his hands, desperate to break something but faintly conscious of the fact that he'll have no reins if he destroys them.

That's what keeps him level. That's what keeps him quiet. It doesn't calm him, but it anchors him.

Don't break your reins.
Don't break your reins.
Don't break your reins.

Isidor

She's heard this before. The gist of it, at least. Not in such detail, and not because he had to. Part of her doesn't want to listen, wants to give him the privacy he deserves... But it is important. She can't be out of the loop, and she can't be unaware of something so dangerous. So she listens, watching the road ahead as if none of this interests her.

Her gut clenches with the rising tension, and she side eyes her companions with dry disapproval. Every time they speak they come so close to a full blown fight. But before she can intervene, Stratos has calmed the conversation, however briefly. She frowns at the other mage. In the short space of time they have been here, he's shown himself to be more than capable. Which is why she doesn't doubt that he knows exactly how far he can push and pull Harrowheart's ire. And she does *not* appreciate him testing it. But bringing it up will do more harm than good. She reluctantly leaves her annoyance aside to try and keep everything calm. And since it seems to work for Viatorus... She moves the conversation on with safer questions before either Jim or Stratos can upset Harrowheart any

further.

"How long *is* our journey? And how good are the roads? Is there anything we should be keeping an eye out for? Wolves or bears?"

Stratos

Jim's reaction spares them both any questions about how much *he* knew, at least. Stratos is trying to concentrate, not to get drawn into the personal argument now going on beside him. Nonetheless he's acutely aware of the boiling tension in Harrowheart's posture beside him, and he pauses a second before he replies to Isidor. He has to consider first whether his answers will cause any more trouble.

"Eight days to Bruma, making haste. The Imperial roads are as good as this one-" he surely doesn't need to point out that means clear, paved, level and as straight as possible, "and I'll use the Imperial Post to get us a change of horses at the Legion forts. There are patrols, and the road should be safe enough until we reach the northern shore and the Great Forest. There is always the chance that we'll be accosted by bandits, of course - or the wildlife. There might be bears and wolves, yes - and mountain lions, trolls, imps, rats... ah, I doubt we'll run afoul of goblins, they *usually* tend to keep to themselves these days."

Jim

If he's expecting a joke from the normally flippant captain he will find nothing but silence as his answer. There are jokes to be made, surely, but Jim isn't really in the jovial sort of mood. Stratos' descriptions of the dangers they may face merely makes him reach back with one hand to touch at his bow to make sure it's within easy reach should he need it.

Not that firing on horseback is something Jim wants to try even with enchanted bracers aiding his aim.

Stratos

If his explanation causes any consternation, well, Stratos has nothing else to do but answer them as the group travels. The road gets quieter as other travellers peel off to join another road curving away toward Cheydinhal, but guards still plod by on their horses once in awhile and the walls of the city to their left hardly seem to budge. The land they have to cross here in the heartlands is mostly gently rolling grass, warm and damp and lush, with forests visible across the hillocks to

their right. Tucked in among them are occasional glimpses of architecture: a small circular wayshrine open to the winds, the roof held up by graceful columns, or half-buried remnants of white walls. Close to the road itself they pass a small Legion fort, the gate bustling with soldiers and carefully watched citizens.

Stratos keeps his eyes fixed ahead. The shore and the green fields stretch out into the distance, but in the clear air the forested highlands can already be seen rising ahead. And beyond them, the faint white peaks of the Jerralls, where his brother is...

It's a long way to go. He's going to push them on until nightfall: hopefully they're in no more mood to sleep than he is. But eventually even the long Cyrodillic summer evening turns dusky, and military sense compels him to stop at a secure spot while they have enough light left to make camp. There are tasks to be allotted among themselves, then.

"Jim, Miss Durant, perhaps one of you would assist me in watering to the horses and the other begin arranging a fire. Harrowheart..." neither of those tasks seemed to suit a walking corpse, "keep watch over our supplies... if you would."

Harrowheart

Eight days.

Hearing that isn't easy. Beneath his helmet his jaw clenches, and he vaguely realizes that his mouth feels... *Strange*. Relaxing eases the discomfort, and despite the fact that he now knows he isn't going to live to retrieve his runeblades it feels better to try for some semblance of calm. Better to be resigned to death. It's not what he wants, but he can't burn up what little energy he has being distraught. After all, it's taking so much more focus than usual just to stay on this horse...

The ride is long, and night is welcome. This feeling pressing down on him? He realizes too late that it's *tiredness*. How foreign. How unwelcome. So when Stratos stops them for the evening he's quick to slide off of his saddle, though not at all graceful about it. His coordination is shot. He feels utterly drunk, and as soon as his metal boots hit the ground he staggers into the horse's side and leans heavily against it. It moves away from the pressure and he stumbles, nearly falls, catches himself at the last moment.

Nothing is right. A day on the road and he feels like he's coming apart...

He only barely hears when his name is called and turns in a hurry to face Stratos. He mumbles a confused, "Sir," and his head bobs like a marionette on a loose string. As if struggling through dense mud that greedily grabs at his boots he clomps heavily toward their things, though he manages to stand perfectly straight when he arrives at his post. He remains completely motionless for a moment or two before stiffly raising his arms and removing his helmet in precise, almost robotically-programmed motions of his limbs. And when it's off?

The immediate, unmistakeable, and heinously *fetid* smell of rotting flesh escapes from beneath. A suit of armor on a hot and humid Cyrodiil day has done absolutely nothing but accelerate the near-decade of rot that magic has staved off from his corpse. All of the veins of his once-pale, chilled face have turned deeply black and risen to the surface of his now-gangrenous, shallow skin that blisters and peels in all the places where bone is close to flesh. The bridge of his nose bone has already burst through the skin there. The contours of his eye sockets show around his eyes, one of which is... vaguely *not right*. It wouldn't do to look closely enough to determine *what*, exactly, is wrong about it.

And yet he doesn't seem to notice. He sets his helmet on their stacked belongings, draws from his hip the sword that Marcella gave him, and with his weapon at the ready stands at attention and stares into the distance waiting, watching, ready to do as he was bid.

Isidor

Harrowheart said he had a few days. Somehow Isidor doesn't think that stretched as far as eight. She casts a worried look over to Harrowheart, but it's impossible to tell what he's thinking, or feeling, especially with that helmet on. Stratos' warning of the local wildlife only registers in the faintest regard. They are all dismissed as manageable threats so that she can continue to wonder if she should ask Harrowheart if he is all right, if this is an acceptable plan or if they need to move faster. But not like this. Not right after they have just diffused an argument. It can wait until they stop. Which, as it turns out, is a while away. On the one hand she's glad of the progress, but staying quiet while she could be planning with Harrowheart is agonising. Both her nerves and her muscles are glad when Stratos finally calls them to a stop.

She dismounts stiffly, taking a precious moment to let her legs recover before she starts to walk again. Hearing at least one familiar task in Stratos' instructions, she seizes upon it gladly. "I'll get a fire going." Taking care of horses was never part of the riding lessons she participated in. It has the added benefit of ensuring she

and Harrowheart get a moment to talk. As soon as she's handed Jim the reins to her horse, she turns to Harrowheart.

Though the smell reaches her first, it doesn't hit her until she faces him fully. Until she sees him. Then it hits her all at once. Decay fills her nose, rot reaching into her mouth to pour into her stomach, and a grotesque horror stands in place of her friend. There is a second where the world seems to stop with her first breath. Where she stares in wide eyed terror and feels the potent, lead weight of fear, of failure, of despair, deep in the pit of her stomach. In that moment she might have clung to the thought that what she was seeing wasn't real, that she was imagining this terrible thing. It was in the moment that followed, when her senses could smell the death and taste the decay, when every inch of a primal instinct screamed that she was in the presence of something *Wrong*, that she rejected it. She doubles over and retches. Clapping a hand over her mouth and spinning, stumbling away and retching again.

Within a moment she's turned into a shaking, gasping mess. She grabs onto the nearest tree to support her and stares at the ground, trying furiously not to throw up or let the tears starting to run down her face become crying. She has to stop. She has to compose herself. She has to control herself. She has to not have seen what she just saw.

Jim

Jim hasn't said a word in hours.

He doesn't even speak up when Stratos dishes out their orders nor when Isidor hands over the reins of her horse to him. For all he usually won't shut up, right now his mind is so far off that it would be easy to mistake him for being in a sleep deprivation induced haze. The shadows under his eyes seem darker now with the heat and the humidity and the long hours of riding.

Jim remembers all too well what those cave made bases are like. The damp cold of the stone and the smell of stagnant water. Would Felix be in a place like that? A place that smells of rot and decay as he buries his hands in cadavers and gleefully works--lost to the madness that dominated his gaze. Pale and clammy himself but with a fever in his eyes that belies a mania. A sickness of the mind.

Would that smell fester and cling to the walls? Would he even notice anymore? It's enough to make Jim's stomach turn just thinking about it. The bile rises in his throat and he shakes his head. The imagery is gone, but the smell remains. It's even stronger now that Jim is paying attention again. But that doesn't--

Isidor is retching and the reins Harrow has handed over are damp with a slick smell of sweat. Except it's not sweat. It's a liquidous mix of flaked off skin and a dark substance that Jim stares at as it clings to his own palm.

Oh.

Oh no. No no no nonono.

He's doubled over before he can even think anything other than the mantra drilling in his ears dry heaving and unable to stop for nearly a minute. He's dragging his hand through the grass, hiccupping even as he tries to breathe properly again but every lungful of air *tastes* of bloated heat-stricken death.

The horses are rearing back, huffing at the stench and trying to bolt.

Jim can't keep a grip on all of them.

Harrowheart

Everything that happens from the moment Harrowheart removes his helmet is a blur to him. It's not that Isidor and Jim react too quickly, but that he can't react quickly enough. Their movements, their sounds, it's hard to track it all. Hard for his mind to keep up. He looks between the two and to the horses in their fear, too slow in his movements.

A few seconds in and all he knows is that Isidor locked eyes with him and in her face was *fear*. And yet his first instinct is to stumble and turn and look behind himself. What did she see? What hurt her?

Nothing.

It's only him.

His mind knows he should stay away from her but he finds his feet propelling himself forward, an automatic trudging that he can't stop once his momentum starts up. He drops his sword in the grass and staggers toward her with one hand out and his blackened, cracking lips parted.

"Isidor?"

It's Harrowheart's desperate voice -- mostly. There's a scratchiness to it, a rough rasp. That faint second voice that always trails behind his words is more prominent now, a hollow, metallic echo that belongs more to the dead than the

living.

"Isidor, what's wrong? Let... Me help you..."

He reaches out to her with a trembling hand.

Isidor...

Isidor

This isn't working. The more she tries to calm the more what she saw sinks in. Harrowheart is dead. Harrowheart is *dead* and now he's liquefying, disintegrating over there... Not over there. She hears him move. Hears him- something using his voice calling her name. She can feel it approach. Like a shadow, a looming entity that terrifies her to the very core. A being intent on taking the person she cares about away from her. She's only partially in Cyrodiil when she turns around. But all she sees is the hand, all she hears is the voice.

"N-N-No." Her voice is so weak. So *useless*. She can't deal with this. She can't handle this. She needs time, she needs space. She needs *space*. With that one certain thought, she throws up her hands and light flashes bright white. It dims to a shield that surrounds her, visible in the purple light that twists and flickers sporadically across its surface. She doesn't look at him, but her trembling arms stay raised. "I-I-I need a minute. I need a minute. Please."

Stratos

No matter how intent Stratos *was* on practical concerns, there's no distracting from the stench that washes over them all. It's a smell that triggers a primal repulsion, reaches deep into the back of the brain and the base of the spine and demands he *run*. He wheels to face the source, even though he already knows he'll regret it. His eyes fall on the softening bloat of Harrowheart's face and... he *stares*. He feels himself recoil, feels the blood draining from his own face, but his gaze doesn't move- until his gasp gives him another taste of that sickly stink and he gags on it.

He's met the dead before in many forms: the remains of lost patrols found too late, shambling husks that patter eagerly out of the shadows with grasping hands. Helped escort burial wagons where the bodies were brought in too late for chilling spells to work. Helped search far too many necromancers' lairs. He knows that *stench*. But what stands before them is so much more.... viscerally

putrid than most of the cold cadavers and desiccated bones he's encountered. Arkay have mercy, his flesh is ready to slough from his bones...

Stratos gets little enough time to dwell on the grotesquerie. Isidor lurches away in retreat, he hears Jim heaving beside him - and the horses are panicking. They can't lose the *horses*. He turns to grab at the reins just relinquished - too many horses backing and shifting behind him, and just as his fingers brush leather his throat spasms and he doubles up, trying not to retch. He's knocked stumbling back as one takes off into the gloom, and the others follow suit. *No. No, no!* No subtle sorcery now- he lifts a hand burning with green light and throws it after his own mount, the nearest and slowest. It drops behind to a halt and he sucks in foul, fetid air in relief. Forces himself straight, not to gag- *oh gods it's everywhere* - and turns around slowly to see Harrowheart... moving. Lurching forward, advancing on a frightened Isidor.

"*Harrowheart! HOLD!*"* His voice is a whipcrack, all his own disgust and instinctive panic overridden in a heartbeat. In a matter of seconds their entire expedition is a shambles, and *he* needs to fix it *now*. He has to help Jim and Isidor, he has to get the horses- but *first* Harrowheart has to be *stopped*.

Harrowheart

Bright lights and the undead don't mix. Her spell blinds him and he staggers back with a choked sound and a *hiss*. His hand clasps at his eyes and when he pulls it away he realizes two things:

Firstly, and most importantly, that he isn't just feeling like he's falling apart. He actively *is*. A sheet of skin comes away with his glove, supple and shining like a sheet of gold foil with none of the desirability. A small sound escapes his throat -- a sigh of resignation, fear, sadness, and realization.

Realization that he *is* what's making Isidor ill. He is the thing she saw and feared, or worse -- is it worse? -- was repulsed by.

The expression on his face disappears to a glassy-eyed neutrality. She's disgusted by him. The illusion of his humanity is finally shattered. She knows now. She knows what he is. What he really is, or really ought to be.

A corpse.

He can't bear to look at Jim and Stratos right now. He can't see that expression in their faces too. No, he keeps his face hidden with a hand as he stumbles back to

their things and in search of his helmet.

He doesn't *quite* get there before he hears Stratos calling his name, ordering him. Somehow it clears his mind of doubts. He was made to obey, and he will obey. He stops mid-stride, pulls his feet together, and stands. He turns stiffly to face Stratos and waits to be told what comes next, his milky blue eyes focused on a point far beyond.

Stratos

That... worked surprisingly well, is the thought that follows his relief. Perhaps... *disturbingly* well, as Harrow turns to him and just... *waits*. Sightless-seeming eyes staring past the mage, entirely motionless. There's a strange shock to his nerves as Stratos begins to suspect- an odd sense of *control* where everything was chaos a moment ago. There's a twinge of gladness at the sense of power - overwhelmed immediately by the way his stomach turns, and not only from the smell wafting through the air. But... better to be in control than not. Even if it places him at the reins of an undead monster.

Especially if he's at the reins of the undead monster.

"Harrowheart." His voice is tight still as he tries to control the urge to gag, but his words are firm. Steady. "Put your helmet on." He watches the death knight closely a moment, then turns slowly to go check on the others. "Jim? Miss Durant, are you un- are you well?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart doesn't have to be told twice. It was his idea in the first place anyway. He pivots, crosses the distance to their things, and takes up his helmet.

Putting it on is such an emotional relief, and he does so gladly and with haste. Better not to force his friends (and Stratos) to see him like this. Better not to scare the horses, when they come back. *If*. They come back.

With his body once more trapped in his armor, the smell... Well it doesn't *go away*, not immediately at least, but it certainly doesn't get worse. With a little breeze, a little time, the air will be breathable again.

Harrow turns to see Isidor one final time, but before his vision even focuses in on where he last saw her he turns away. She deserves her privacy, and he... He

doesn't even want her to remember that he exists right now.

His glowing visor swings back to Stratos in a limp-necked, fluid motion, and on the way he catches sight of the sword he dropped in the grass. One more glance at Stratos, as if waiting to be told not to do it, and he quietly (if possible while stomping in plate armor) retrieves his weapon.

Feeling the grip in his hands is such a mixed sensation. It's comforting in a way, but it feels all wrong. It isn't his weapon. It isn't his runeblade. Like wearing another man's shoes, this blade doesn't quite fit.

"I can't help you hunt the horses," his hollow voice tells Stratos. So he *does* have his mind. "But I do need to hunt. I'll go, and leave you all in peace. I'll return in two hours and watch over you all in the night."

Jim

"Will y--hrghh. Ugh. Wh."

Jim can't look up just yet. His body is still fighting with everything it has to empty every last speck from his insides and bolt like there's no tomorrow. Wrestling control over his panic is something the captain is all too familiar with but it is not a perfect thing.

The horses. They need the horses.

It's a focusing point. A goal that helps drown out his internal screaming that will *not* stop. Anguish over what is happening to his friend. Over what Felix's future holds if they don't *hurry*.

"Wh--willll. Will you be able to hunt?"

Every word is ground out with the force of another breath. Another inch in Jim getting himself upright on his feet again. Looking *decidedly* to the right of Harrow even when he glances back toward his friend. Baring his teeth in a grimace to quell the urge to double forward again when he sucks in a lungful of air. Harrow might need help, but he's not about to give Isidor the order. It's her choice.

"Horses. We gotta. I'm with you, Stratos. Fuck. *Fuck*."

Isidor

Magic is a priceless gift. It affords Isidor a magical incarnation of her will. Even through all the emotions flooding her system, she can feel the shield around her, protecting her. She can see the light through her clouded vision flickering its warning like a the bright scales of a coiled snake. She can see, and she can feel, and she can focus on that security. Nothing can touch her. She has space. A safe space, where everything horrible and bad is outside, but inside she is okay.

Part of her notices Harrowheart move away, and hears Stratos ask after her, though it sounds distant, muffled. A shaking hand wipes her eyes dry and she drowns out the part of her that is screaming and crying with something more important. She is a Durant. She is a Durant Patron, and the daughter of the Archon. She can hear her uncle commanding her, roaring at her: *Be better. Be stronger. You must be stronger than everyone else or they will tear you to shreds. They will eat you alive. They will literally eat you. You cannot afford that. You cannot submit. You are a dragon. Failure is not an option. Fail and you watch them defile and destroy everything you love.*

She has to be better than this.

Slowly the shield around her evens out into a dim light that fades until all that is left of it is a faint ripple in the air: A true Durant shield. It waits a moment and then comes down at a steady pace. "I'm fine." Her voice is too shaky. She clears it and raises her voice. "I'm fine."

Again she clears her throat some more and finally looks up, looks at Stratos as if her face isn't blotchy and her jaw isn't twitching. "Tell me what I have to do."

Stratos

Stratos gives a nod when Harrow looks at him for permission to pick up the sword. The death knight pulling himself together - mentally, if not physically - helps the sense of order re-imposed on the situation. Gives him a moment to compose himself and nod again. Harrowheart's voice seems to have changed beyond the awkwardness of his tongue- but best not dwell on his physical state.

"If you haven't returned then, we will look for you." He means it to be an assurance, should Harrowheart get lost. It doesn't come out that way. He's putting a hand on Jim's shoulder to steady him. And because he's the tribune and the oldest and the one who assumes he's in charge, he makes the decision for Isidor. She seems so much younger in this moment, putting a brave face over her

panic, in spite of the impressive ward she had up a minute ago. Of all of them, he guesses the aristocratic mage has surely had least encounters with the sight and smell of death. For that matter, he's pretty sure the gathering gloom is the only thing hiding how pale *his* face is. That she's in control of herself now does her credit.

"Miss Durant, please attend to the fire," he instructs firmly. He won't question her insistence she's fine, just give her something to focus on. Something most mages find relatively simple and comforting. "We'll need you to keep watch over our camp while Jim and I retrieve the horses."

That should give them all something else to think about for a couple of hours. Time enough for he and Jim to round up the horses with the help of the one left and a life detection spell. It's a little unnerving, knowing there's a death knight out there who *won't* be visible that way, but the horses haven't gone too far. They'll soon be safely back in the flickering circle of light Isidor kindles, and trying to snatch a little food and rest. Under the circumstances, both are easier said than done...

Restful or not, the night falls around them regardless. There's a coolness to the air this close to the lake, a gentle breeze sweeping off the expanse of water to their west. It clears the air of the lingering rot, makes the fire jump and flutter sparks into the breeze. They've almost passed the Imperial isle out there, but the northern sweep of the city walls lies between them and the setting sun, so for a while the spire and the huge walls are a black silhouette beside a lake that shines in gold and red. By the time everyone's settled down the sun is gone and the city is pale and quiet beneath the stars.

The sky glitters with them, alive with pinpricks of blue and white light, some large, some small, arrayed in patterns that hint at constellations, at patterns in the chaos. As the sky darkens further still there are vast nebulous swathes of cloud in the void above, glowing orange and pink as they try to veil the stars beyond. But beneath them and before them, the moons are rising.

Secunda is first tonight, tinged with a rim of shadow on the upper edge. It sits closer and much larger in the north-eastern sky than Earth's Luna, every crater and crack on its silver-white surface plain to see. It's racing ahead of something much bigger, though, and anyone expecting the show to end there is in for a surprise. Masser rises shortly after her sister, pale red and dwarfing the hills below. The lower half of the bigger moon is in shadow, so that she seems to loom from nowhere even as she climbs higher in the sky.

It's peaceful out here. The city shines white under the moonlight, a few pricks of light marking distant watchfires along the walls; across the water, the lake's edge is marked by the silver light of an occasional nirnroot. Besides the fire's crackle there's just the sound of summer crickets in the grass, the lap of waves carried on the cool air, the stirring of sleepy horses a little way from the camp. The swallows have gone to roost and in their place can be heard the ever-so-faint squeaking of bats hunting on the water. Pale moths in green and blue are drawn briefly to the firelight, torchbugs dancing above them. The breeze smells of sacred lotus and foxglove blossoms, mingling with the sharp smell of woodsmoke.

The First Night Subscene: Jim and Stratos ([Top](#))

Jim

Jim has been dreading nightfall.

There's light by the fire and the pop and sizzle of the moisture inside of the logs whistling steadily with the warmth radiating off of the blaze. Neither darkness nor silence are the issue, here. Stopping is another matter entirely. Nevermind that Jim is in real danger of falling off of his horse with just how exhausted he is. Sore and stinking of horse and sweat from their rescue mission of the beasts.

Stopping means having time to look at the grit underneath his fingernails and *knowing* that Harrow's skin is under there. Stopping means sleeping and sleeping means nightmares. He doesn't need to be asleep to have them even. Jim knows what waits for him.

Bloated rotting hands squeeze the air from his throat even as the skin splits and drips pus and coagulated blood down his chest. Fevered eyes sit too deeply in sallow sockets--one turned a milky offwhite--as they bear manically down at Jim. Dark hair coming out in matted clumps with every swipe Jim makes to try and pull himself free. And the smell.

The stench.

If they're too late, what will there be left to save?

A choked sob comes from Jim's end of the camp. The captain sits trembling on his bedroll, face buried into his hands.

Stratos

Stratos has given the others some quiet and space since they returned. He doesn't know Isidor as well, but he thinks neither she nor Jim wants to let their brave fronts slip. Or maybe he should admit to himself that he's afraid *his* will slip. Act focused and brisk and it reassures others, helps them cling to the idea that you know what you're doing and they can put their trust in you. It's better for him to set a good example and focus on watering and unsaddling the horses, pulling his armor off to wipe it down and inspect it. Passing around a bowl of lake water for the others to wash their hands before they eat, making sure they eat, adjusting the fire to burn slower, telling everyone to rest...

The choking sound from the bedroll beside him cuts straight through all of that. It always does, though these days it's seldom something he's supposed to deal with... But these aren't the barracks, and that's Jim, not some homesick recruit. He's putting his armor aside before he knows it, moving over to sit beside the captain. He almost wraps an arm around the man's shoulders, then thinks of their company.

"...We will find him, Jim." It's the first thing he can think to say. "We'll bring him back." One way or the other... and he's trying so hard not to think about what that might mean.

Jim

Hitched breathing freezes with Stratos' words. Jim's eyes are puffy and red from tears he's been shedding silently up until now.

How is Stratos so calm about this? It's a stupid question. Jim knows the answer and hates himself for it. He's calm because he has to be. He's making up for Jim's weakness. This is Felix's own flesh and blood standing here and trying to ease Jim's fears. Knifing pain stabs at his abdomen as Jim swallows back his sobs and forces himself to breathe. His juggling act with all of his emotions had fallen to pieces but he can't afford to let that happen.

Not when it means Stratos is left alone bearing everyone's burdens.

"It's not...a matter of will we find him." His voice is steady even if the rest of him is anything but. Come on Jim.

Come on, Jim. Pull yourself the fuck together.

"It's how we find him."

Behind them the fire is a steady comfort even though all here are too far down into their own self reflections to take heed of it. It is still a Presence here and one to not be taken for granted. Jim forces himself to sit upright and stop holding himself like he had been. Head held high as he glances about the camp even when the effort makes his hands shake in his lap.

"We've got three goddamn mages here, I have no doubt we'll be able to track Felix down. But what if we're too late?"

The heaviness of those words threatens to stifle everything else. Crush it into ash and dust and scatter it on the balmy breeze.

"Wh...when we find him. What if there's nothing left to bring back?"

If Felix is no longer there in soul, even if the body is intact, that is no victory. Harrowheart isn't going to make it to Bruma at this rate. What if Felix is no better off?

"I don't think I can live with myself if I have to kill him."

Stratos

Stratos is silent for a long moment, though he knows the answer. Because he knows what the answer must be. Do Earth people grow up knowing how this kind of story ends, the way children on Tamriel do? He suspects not. There's no magic there. The dead of Earth stay where they've been put. They don't recruit from the living. He looks into the fire as he finally lets Jim's words sink in and with them the reality of what's ahead.

What *may* be ahead. But he can't afford not to ready himself for the worst.

He still can't bring himself to say it, for a minute. His tongue is a lead weight, heavy as the one in his chest. Even when he opens his mouth there's a moment where his throat won't open and his voice is a hushed croak. "You..."

He swallows. Closes his eyes. Focuses on uttering the words. "You will not." Deep breath. "Harrowheart knows the ways of his blades. Isidor has strength enough to protect us all. And I know my brother." His voice is lower there, almost vehement in his insistence. "I have known him since the day he was born. I know

his mind and his heart and his soul. I will find a way to reach him; I will tear down whatever gates he has barred shut, and I *will* wrest him free of whatever cursed spirit has sunk its fangs into his soul. Whatever the end.

"And if..." his voice falters, but he catches himself. "If there is nothing left to save, then the final duty is not yours to carry out."

Jim

Jim's laugh is piercing as he barks it out. A pained noise made to sound lighthearted and somehow anything but. Harrowheart knows the blades, Isidor knows the wards, Stratos knows *Felix* so....

"Why the *fuck* am I even here then?!"

Jim's gripping at his forearms tight enough to dig marks into the skin. The bracers Marcella so carefully constructed for him and enchanted stare like an accusation at both Stratos and Jim in the dim firelight.

Stratos

"Because I think you're the only one he'll still listen to." It's painful to say, the words wrenched out of him to meet Jim's bitter demand. His hands are curled into the folds of his own cloak, pulling it tighter around himself. "All of this is for *nothing* if Felix isn't willing to *fight* for his own life. For his own soul. If he rolls over and accepts what he's becoming he is *gone*. But he will come back for *you*. I know that he will."

He lifts his head to glance across the fire at Isidor, then looks at Jim finally. Without the layered steel of his armor and the crested helm the tribune looks a smaller man, diminished in his simple tunic and rumpled black curls, but his eyes are intent as ever. "And you're the only other person in all the realms who I can trust will never abandon him. No matter what happens. We need that now. *Felix* needs you now. As he never has before."

Jim

Wide blue eyes stare back at Stratos, all the forced movement and words dried up and gone. He doesn't even catch himself to close his mouth; he just gapes back at Felix's older brother with the weight of everything Stratos has confided in him just now.

A nervous tongue darts out and licks at his bottom lip while he blinks rapidly and tries to save face as best he can. Clearly, Jim wasn't expecting that to be what the elder Caelus was going to say.

"I. Uh. So what you're saying is. I'm your distraction."

When he finally manages the reply Jim's voice is even again if not strained with fatigue. Accepting the role Stratos has given him and donning it as though it was his own suit of armor. Both of them can look strained and tired so long as neither of them are completely broken down or giving up. And Stratos is trusting him. He makes no mistake of not knowing the significance of that trust.

Stratos

"You're his anchor," Stratos corrects. But despite his weariness and the drained quality to his voice, there's just a hint of something like amusement. Affection. Jim is a part of his family now as much as his blood brother. Now he dares to reach up, to wrap an arm around Jim's shoulders and clasp him tight for a moment. "Although I have my hopes that you can keep his attention better than any of us, too. If need be."

Jim

Both of Jim's hands come up, pulling Stratos into the hug a bit more than mere reciprocation. Stratos isn't alone here and neither is Jim.

Plus, the elder Caelus has a point. They're the only two here putting Felix's safety above everything else. To say nothing of what the local authorities would do to Felix if he was caught in the midst of his machinations. They only have each other to rely on in this, but that's surely more than enough.

"Best get some rest, Stratos." A beat while he glances back toward the fire. A tired sigh. "In separate bedrolls this time." It's a forced joke in a humorless tone, but the underlying meaning is still there. Jim sees himself as a part of this family too. He'd like to keep it intact.

Stratos

Stratos manages a chuckle in answer, though it's drained of humor. Sometimes trading the words is gesture of comfort enough. He gives a last squeeze of Jim's shoulder and goes back to settle down on his own bedroll.

It's been too long since he was back in his homeland. Much less spending a night

camped beside Lake Rumare as if he was a child again. A pity he can't enjoy it. He hardly takes it in, mechanically going through the motions to settle himself down to sleep. He turns himself away from the fire, staring up at the constellations, the lunar phases.

Masser, Secunda, Steed, Warrior, Lady... It's his birth month, there's an irony. The Lady sits highest in the sky, watching over them. Where is her kindness in this? Where's the strength he needs now? He breathes deep and deliberate and looks again. He can't see where the Serpent's got to. Perhaps it's vanished behind the moons...

Only when he's sure that everyone else is asleep or absent does he close his eyes and let his breaths shudder, the stifled tears hot on his cheeks and quickly wiped away. He can't grieve yet. He can't rage or hurt until he's found his little brother and brought him home.

The First Night Subscene: Harrowheart and Isidor ([Top](#))

Harrowheart

It's long after the horses are wrangled, the fire started, and the living are given time to eat and relax (if such a thing can be achieved) when Harrowheart returns from his hunt. Even with his armor to keep his body hidden it's clear his trip was a success – he walks more fluidly, more confidently. No staggering, stumbling, or stomping. When he approaches he doesn't exactly radiate the scent of death, but whether or not that means he's somehow cleaned himself or is merely keeping himself contained is up for debate. A debate which, hopefully, no one will want to have an answer to.

He lingers at the edge of the camp, staring at Isidor with one hand half-raised in an awkward sort of wave. Is... Is she willing to see him? Will she allow him near? His fingers curl worriedly as he waits for her to approve or deny his approach.

Isidor

Eating was difficult. Resting isn't much easier, but she knows has to try. If nothing else, today proved that they are going to need all their strength in the next few days. Isidor is lying down, curled up on her bedroll when Harrowheart returns, but her eyes are open, staring into the fire. It's difficult to stop thinking about everything that happened during the day and the flickering flames help her mind drift away.

Her eyes dart towards him when she sees movement in the corner of her vision, but any fear that is in her eyes is replaced by guilt at the sight of him. Her fingers tighten on the cloak draped over her and without meaning to she glances to her axe that rests nearby. The guilt only gets worse.

With a deep breath she hauls herself up to sit straight. She owes him an apology but even with him standing so far away her nerves are already starting to tremble under her skin. She reacted so badly... But it was bad... Without knowing what she's going to say or how she's going to react she looks over at him and offers a weak, flickering smile. Come on over.

Harrowheart

He approaches slowly with his hands behind his back. He's reluctant to get too close in case she catches a smell he doesn't notice himself, but it's well and truly blocked by his armor. Confident that his presence won't offend her any more than it has to he lowers himself to a seat nearby her – not so close that she feels trapped, but not so far that their voices can't be private between each other.

"I didn't mean to scare you earlier," he says quietly in a voice that's made unnecessarily ominous by the enchanted helmet. "I didn't know I..." He's silent briefly, unsure of his words.

"If I had known, I wouldn't have even taken my helmet off. I hope you can forget what you saw. Remember me like normal."

Isidor

It's always strange to see him in armour. In the Nexus it's so out of place in such a safe realm that it almost comes across like a costume. Here, it's starting to make him look like a soldier. Usually that wouldn't sit right with her but right now she's just so glad he's got it on. It covers everything. Almost as if it's protecting her instead of him. She can even glance at him between staring at the fire.

Can she forget what she saw? No. At least, she doesn't think so. Certainly not at this moment. Sitting so close to him, thinking about it, she can feel her eyes watering and she has to take a moment to contort her face this way and that until she can stop any tears from falling. No crying. Not in front of him.

"I didn't mean to..." Cry and choke and cast magic to keep him away? She

winces and looks away in shame. "I'm sorry. For how I acted. I... I've never... It was rude."

Harrowheart

Isidor goes out on a limb and apologizes to him, and what does Harrowheart do? He laughs. Not loudly and not at her expense, but a quiet and (perhaps) good natured chuckle that nonetheless sounds a little more fiendish than it should. He raises his hand as if he's about to reach out to her, but quickly thinks better of it and presses his palms against his plated knees instead.

"Girl, you don't gotta apologize to me," he says quietly. "You already did that once, remember? You hit your quota. I'm set for life."

He tries for another laugh that peters out quickly. Light, he's got so much to say, but saying it feels so wrong. He can't do this to her. He can't admit what he needs to. It isn't fair to make her face that reality when she reacted so poorly to it earlier. In the background of his silence the fire crackles, burning away with the night.

When the words come they tumble out in a hurry. "I ain't gonna make it to Bruma." Immediately he's struck with the guilt of it. He doesn't want to leave it there, but he regrets what he's already said and can't imagine he'll make it any better by continuing.

"I know I oughta let you three go on and save Felix without me holdin' you back."

He doesn't move. If he breathes beneath his armor it doesn't show.

"But I ain't ready to give up this time."

A sentiment that feels so foreign coming out of his mouth. It's as much a question to himself as a statement.

Isidor

It's such a Harrowheart thing to do, to try and bring laughter to an otherwise awful conversation. If she wasn't so tense she might have managed to strain another smile for him. Instead it's just his own chuckle echoing from that intimidating helmet. When the silence falls again everything seems almost normal. Both of them sitting with unvoiced thoughts, trying not to let anyone else see what they're feeling. Except this time there is nothing pleasant or exciting about it.

There are questions she has to ask, but she stays quiet, avoiding the answers. It doesn't matter. In the end it's Harrowheart who breaks the silence.

She gasps and clutches her stomach, the expression of physical pain etched into her features. There is a knife in her throat and a gash through her chest and everything feels hot and cold at once. She doesn't look at him. She's just trying to keep herself together.

"You... can't *die*." Her words are breathless. A small surge of energy allows her to look at him. To meet his eyes, or as much as she can make out. The face of desperation is an ugly one, but it's the only one she has right now. "Tell me what to do." It's so hard to speak with no air in her lungs. She can't breathe. Why can't she breathe? "What do we do? When we get them back. When we get the blades back, do we bring them to you? Do we... Do we bring you back to Azeroth? To Acherus? Will people there help you? Heal you?"

Harrowheart

There are no eyes to see, hidden as they are behind the slats in his visor. Only the pale cyan light of his eyes and their magic comes through as she looks to him and he, in kind, watches her.

"When you get the blades back... Give 'em to Hephaestia to study. If my body gives out, if I..." His expressionless helmet stares at her. "Deanimate. Then let me rest. If you resurrect me again after that, I'll always look like whatever's left of my body when the new spell takes. I can't... Isidor, I can't be hideous like that to you forever. I won't do it to you and... I won't let you do it to me."

He tentatively reaches out then but only to put his hand on the grass between them. It wouldn't do to touch her with his filthy gloves.

"I'm sorry. For... Everything. For all of this. For puttin' you through this. Comin' into your life and leavin' like *this*."

He turns his covered face from her. Whatever he's feeling, whatever he's thinking in his prolonged silence are hidden along with his warped form. His fingers grip the grass, anchoring him to the reality he's trying to confront.

"You deserve someone who gives you somethin' normal. Somethin' good. And I'm sorry that never coulda been me. And... I'm not sorry that we met each other, but..."

Silence. Stillness. So many impossible things to say.

"I wish I had met you when I was still Peter."

With slow reluctance he turns to see her once again. The lights behind his visor glow as bright and inhuman as ever. Right now he's as far from Peter as he's ever been.

"We wouldn't be here if we'd met then. We'd be... *Ngh.*"

He turns away, raises his glove to his helmet. He can't lift his visor, not even to wipe away his emotions.

"We wouldn't be here. And we wouldn't have had to be so secret. And it wouldn't be so hard for you. I woulda held your hand more often. I woulda been brave enough to kiss you like I always wanted. We coulda had a life together, maybe. And I think now... For the first time..."

His voice cracks and he presses his visor down, as if it weren't already locked tight.

"I really regret the choice I made," he croaks. "Cause now I know what it's like to want to live for the future."

Isidor

The knife in her throat is taken out and shoved into her heart and then out and then in again. Over and over, again and again. And she's burning alive in anger, in fear, and the smoke stings her throat and sucks all the air out of her collapsed lungs. Her fingers dig into her own skin but it's no use. Hot tears burn lines into her cheeks, like a branding of her weakness.

Stop. Why won't he stop? He needs to stop saying all these things. He needs to stop acting as if he's going to die. He can't die. She won't let him die. This isn't *fair*. This isn't *right*. He's the only good, honest thing to have come into her life since Viatorus. Doesn't he know that? Doesn't he know that she needs him? He can't die. He has to stop talking like this. He has to help her. He has to tell her what to do, how to fix this.

All these things race through her head, but it's so hard to speak. She finally pulls herself together enough to answer him, but it's anger that gives her the drive to

force her words out. "How... How *dare* you. You... You don't get to... to say you want to die... just because you're... you're afraid of being... being *ugly*." She can barely see more than a blur as she skips and gasps through her words. "You don't get to... get to die because you're too... too *proud* to... to..."

Harrowheart

Pride? She thinks this is about *pride*? After everything he's just told her, all the things he admitted, *that's* what she comes back to him with? *Pride*?

He watches her face as he presses his hands to the side of his helmet and threatens to lift it off. To show her the face she can't possibly want to see. But if it's just a matter of *pride* then she won't protest, will she?

Isidor

He moves his hands to his helmet and her aching heart starts to hammer, her hands tremble. But she watches. With wide, distraught eyes she watches. Her lips waver and her body shakes, but she holds that gaze. Determinedly.

She doesn't want to see it. She doesn't. But she has to be better. She has to be stronger than this. He doesn't get to scare her.

Harrowheart

Isidor stares him down, eyes ablaze with defiance even as she quakes, even as her body shakes with the potent smell of fear. She doesn't want to have to see this, and yet she won't look away. Her determination, her bravery, her pri-

Her pride.

Harrowheart's mind stops with his realization and so do his hands. His helmet stays on, half-removed and half-remaining, and through the bottoms of the slats of his visor he watches her.

Isidor is made of pride. It's in everything she does, isn't it? And it's in that moment when for him everything is standing still that he knows the definitive answer to the question he's asked himself over and over: *What do I see in her?*

She's beautiful, of course, and yet that hardly factors in. She's loyal and committed, but to her brother and her family. Her lifestyle, her upbringing? Certainly *not*. Her interests, even her *personality*... She plays them so close to

her chest, hides them like cards in her hand for a game it sometimes seems only she is playing.

No, it's always been her pride. The one thing he's known about her from the start, even before he knew her. The thing that pushed them apart for so long. Her powerful need to succeed, to be *right*, and his inexplicable desire to make sure she always is.

She'd stare down something she can't emotionally bear to see just to prove that she would keep him. She won't let him die because she refuses to allow herself to be left behind. She's Isidor Durant, and she can't lose him because she doesn't lose.

And strange as it might be, in that moment it makes perfect sense to him: This is how she proves her feelings for him. This is how someone who can't lose makes a sacrifice. She would keep him in her life as a hideous thing because it would mean keeping him. And he, as always can't bear to let her be wrong.

He lowers his helmet into place once more and his hands drop limply to his sides as the emotions wash over him. His arms are heavy, weaker than ever, and yet something is alight inside him. It propels him forward and despite his bulky armor or the judgemental eyes of the others he wraps his arms around her. His plated jaw rests against her shoulder, and with his visor close to her ear he whispers what he should have said from the start.

"I love you, Isidor."

Isidor

That tense moment where his hands stop, his helmet lingering between off and on, she forgets to breathe. It seems to stretch on... Until he finally sets it on his head again. She exhales, rocking forward, her head dropping as all her energy leaves her and she gives into the *relief*... while she hides the shame. He didn't take it off. He didn't make her look. And she knows -she *knows*- she still confirmed his fears. That's all she's doing; Making this worse, making him fear. She needs to be better for him. She needs to be stronger for him.

But when he pulls her into his arms her strength fades and she collapses into them. He whispers into her ear and she sobs.

Once she starts she can't stop. The cracks in her mask have made it shatter and the tears stream down her face. Hands grasp at Harrowheart, clinging to his arm

and curling up against his chestplate. His decaying state forgotten, she leans into him and cries. It doesn't matter that instead of burying her face into warm cloth she's pressing it against cold metal. It doesn't matter that a few hours ago she had been running from the sight of the man she now hugs desperately. What matters is that she's not good enough for him. That she's not strong enough, and that she's here weeping like a girl instead. That she's not smart enough to figure out a way to help him, and now she's helpless. She can't even stop her sobbing long enough to speak. Instead all she can do is cling to him to tell him not to leave.

Harrowheart

He won't, he assures her, in his whispered words and in the way he so carefully hides her crying face from the view of the others. She deserves the privilege of privacy. The illusion of dignity. If he knew what she was thinking he would argue, but all he knows is that she's crying, and that she wants him near, and that he needs her just as much right now. He does. He does.

It's only when he hears the rumble of the fire in place of her crying and feels calm breaths instead of sobs that he slowly pulls away.

"I'll be with you in the morning," he says, his voice so soft and yet so sure. "I'll be with you nine mornings from now. A hundred. As many as you'll have me."

The tips of his leather-gloved fingers graze her shoulders as he pulls his hands back to rest them on his thighs.

"But right now you gotta sleep. And I'll be right here next to you. I ain't goin' anywhere without you."

Isidor

It takes time, but eventually the pain turns to a deep, dull ache and she finds herself able to breathe in deep, albeit shaky, breaths. After everything she feels so empty. Not in a sad, or cold way. It's a warm, contented emptiness. But then maybe that's her surroundings. Harrowheart might not be warm, but with the fire nearby and his arms around her it gives the illusion that he is. If she closes her eyes she can imagine that the buzzing in her head is because this is a dream, not dehydration. It's a dream that slips out of her hands as he pulls away.

Her hand rests on his chest a moment before she takes it away and she lifts her

heavy head to look at him. A pang of fear runs through her as the cool air on her damp skin reminds her how awful she must look, but she quickly finds that she's too tired to care. Instead she sighs sadly, looks at him worriedly. "You'll let me help? In the morning, you'll tell me how I can help, won't you?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart nods, and he does so fully knowing that there's nothing Isidor can do for him. He stares at her a while before it occurs to him to say, "Pretend you can see me smilin', all right?" With his voice twisted as it is it's impossible to tell whether or not it's the truth, but he wants her to believe it. Something good, some little shred of happiness to sleep on.

Isidor

Isidor doesn't smile back, but her expression softens for a brief moment as though she's trying to. Ultimately though she just looks tired, and sad. She reaches out to grip his hand and gives it a squeeze as she looks into his eyes and tells him in all seriousness, "Don't leave me."

With that said, she exhales again and slowly, awkwardly, makes her way over to her bedroll. Thankfully all of that she's left exhausted and sleep is not that far away.

Part 5: The Feast ([Top](#))

Harrowheart Part Five

The amazing view of two otherworldly moons is a night-long distraction Harrowheart is most grateful for. Something peaceful to look upon, yet grippingly strange and exceedingly lovely. His own world has two moons, but these are so much bigger, so much brighter. He can see the forms of their surfaces, imagine their geography. Inwardly he wonders if Elune lives in these moons, too. If she can see him staring up at her, the lights of his visor a pale imitation of her glorious court of stars.

But the imaginings of moons only take him through a few hours of the night. Eventually he tears away his waning attention and considers the rest of this world, what parts of it he can see. The city and its unfathomably tall tower occupy him for a while and then it's onto those 'stars' that grow along the lakeshore. Plants? They glow like the mushrooms in the swamps on Outland and remind him of times he'd rather not consider.

He staggers through the camp, pacing circles as the others sleep. Just before dawn when he's sure they'll rise soon he stumbles off into the nearby treeline to see if he can't find something to steal the life from. When he returns the sky is foggy silver with the rising of the sun and the dragging of his feet has lessened.

With dawn upon them he moves first to Stratos. He's the leader. That means he gets the least amount of sleep. He isn't reluctant to wake the man, only unsure of how to do it. Eventually he decides that the best tactic is to nudge his shoulder with the tip of his plated boot.

He bends down nearer to his face then and in his metallic voice whispers, "*Stratos...*"

Stratos

The tribune isn't sleeping that deeply. It's close to dawn after all, and once you've been shaken awake for a dragon attack or two you tend to be jumpier ever after. He jerks slightly as his eyes open... to a grim visor hovering over him and an unnatural voice whispering his name...

"Son of a dreugh-!" His hand is crackling with lightning for a second as he lifts it- and drops it again. Deep breath, Caelus. It's not a threat. *"Harrowheart."* He gropes for something sensible to say, wanting to sound composed and too frayed to pull it off. "What's wrong now?"

Jim

In the roll next to them Jim's eyes have snapped open though he hasn't so much as moved otherwise. As far as they can see, at least. He carefully holsters his phaser again and tries to get a handle on his jackhammering heart. His skin feels too tight and everything is webbed around the edges.

Breathe in. Hold it. And release.

If this is what the next eight days are going to be like Jim's not sure *he's* going to make it. His frayed nerves aren't going to last.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart stands up straight when Stratos wakes. Judging by the way he's unafraid of Stratos' startling it's almost like he expected it. Was he fucking with him? Perhaps. (He was absolutely fucking with him.)

"The sun's rising," he says. "Let's saddle the horses. Leave the others to rest until it's time to eat."

Oh, now he's the one giving the orders?

Stratos

Stratos gives him a long, hard, decidedly befuddled look. It's hard to look quite as serious from this angle, hair still rumpled from sleep. First things first, then. Get out of the bedroll and grab his armor. Look like an officer and you'll feel like an officer.

"We don't have time to spare-" but how much sleep did Jim get, last night? He glances over his shoulder at the captain's steady breathing. "But yes. I suppose we should allow them a few minutes more."

Jim

"I'm awake."

Stratos knew that the minute he looked at Jim, but the captain still makes a point of saying so as he sits up and scrubs a hand down his face. He couldn't have stayed awake through the night if he'd wanted to (and he did). He doesn't look quite so much like he's barely holding himself together with some hours of solid rest under his belt.

As if he could sleep through someone yelping and the telltale smell of Tamriellic magic in the air?

"I'll start packing up the camp."

Stratos

"Thank you, Jim." Stratos looks regretful, but he's looking at the armor he's about to pull on. He settles it over his head and pulls straps tight, clasps the skirt closed and settles the segments into place with familiar efficiency. Runs his hands through his hair in an attempt to smooth it, and nods at Harrow before he strides off toward the horses. They'll be quick, but he needs to make sure the beasts stay calm.

Isidor

After a long day and an equally long night, Isidor was more than ready to sleep. Waking up is a slightly harder prospect. While she is not adverse to an early morning, getting up

at dawn after such a trying journey is not something she's used to anymore. Combined with the fact that she's used to having servants move around her room before she wakes, the disturbance of the other three does not immediately stir her from her slumber.

Eventually though, their talking does pull her back into the waking world. It's more than a little disorienting to find herself outside, with not a familiar building in sight.

So. It wasn't a dream.

Without a word she sits up, glances over to check that the other three are in fact alive and not killing each other, and begins to get her things together. Looks like she knows the drill. Some of it, anyway.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart begins gathering things and bringing them to the horses when he notices Isidor sitting up. He hurries with his current armful of goods and sets them by the horses, then leaves the work to the living men for a moment. He's quickly at her side to be sure she's well, and when it seems she is he laughs lightly in lieu of a smile.

He nearly asks if she slept all right, but it feels out of place considering everything. Instead he offers, "You wanna help out this mornin'? Cause I think I know a death knight who might appreciate a little ice magic... If that's somethin' you can do?"

Isidor

Isidor can only hope that she doesn't look like as much of a mess as she feels, but it's still an improvement over how she was when she went to bed. When Harrowheart approaches she manages a small smile with relative ease. Everyone else looks like they're moving at a brisk pace, however, so she doesn't stop sorting herself out until Harrowheart asks about ice magic. She slows to a stop and her shoulders slump.

"I'm a fire mage, Harrowheart. I've never been very good at ice," she tells him with an expression that's both apologetic and guilty. She thinks for a minute before becoming hopeful. "I could try and draw heat away from you? Or give you heat resistance? Would that help at all?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart stares at Isidor, and in that moment he is so, so glad she can't see the expression of doubt on what's left of his face.

"Nngh..."

She's offering a gift. He shouldn't be rude. But he knows he's going to head right over and ask if Stratos knows frost magic.

"I think what I really need is to be cold, but..."

Light. She wanted to help him so badly last night and *this* is how he starts the morning? He needs to give her something to work with. Some kind of act of aid to focus on.

"I know somethin' you *can* do? Not right now, but... When we get to Bruma? When we find Felix? If I ain't..." Word choice matters here. "If I ain't *with y'all*, I'm gonna need someone to put my runeblade in my hand. The right blade," he says, then lift his right hand and clenches his fist. "In my right hand. That's how it was when we first became one. It might restart our connection. It's the best thing I can think to do to fix me. But you're gonna have to be careful. Wrap your hands up before you touch it, and no matter what it makes you think, *don't fall for it*. I know you can do that, huh? You got a strong will."

He looks back to the horses, then to Isidor once more. "And... If it looks like I can't go on no more, I brought somethin' I can drink to heal me just a little. It's in a wine bottle in my bags. Just close your eyes, lift up my visor, pull the cap off the bottle, and pour it in my mouth. It'll give me a few hours, I figure, but it's only for emergencies."

Isidor

When he asked for ice magic she didn't think heat resistance was going to cut it, but it was worth a try. Even though she knew it was a long shot, her shoulders slump and her lips pull into an automatic smile. This morning she has enough energy to use her public relations voice which she's a little too quick in using when she tells him, "Of course."

She's equally quick in shutting up when he starts to give her actual instructions. At least it gives her something to focus on other than the embarrassing uselessness she feels. Harrowheart gets her full attention, her brow furrowed in concentration and her arms crossing while she listens.

"Right blade in your right hand. The drink in your bag for emergencies," she repeats so he knows she's got it. Then it's her turn to glance over to the others and then back to

Harrowheart. She lowers her voice and looks him in the eye. "I'm getting you to Bruma. And I'm getting you your blades back. I promise."

Harrowheart

This is a grave promise she's making him. More than a vow to get him there on time, he understands the implication of that glance; she intends to protect him from the others in the event of their inevitable decision to leave him, end him, anything.

As subtly as he can he reaches out and holds her by the wrist, squeezes her tightly so that she knows he knows. He lets her go quickly so as not to look too suspicious, and with his own voice lowered he says, "Don't let 'em destroy my blades. I get the feelin' one of the two of 'em'll try. No matter what happens with my body, no matter what happens with Felix... Don't let 'em do it."

He punctuates it with a casual pat on the shoulders even as he stares unblinkingly through his glowing visor. He knows she'll do right by him, but he also knows he can't linger around her too long while the others work. He nods to the horses, and with that leaves to resume his packing.

Stratos

There are questions to be answered and Harrow to be packed in magical frost before they depart, but the sun's not high when they take to the road again. Hard to say their stop has been restful, but much has been aired and some of it answered. Perhaps it's with a clearer sense of how stark their situation is, a sharpened sense of resolve, that they ride onward.

They're already far enough from the city that they begin to see settlements not strictly part of the capital. Farms spread across the low-lying hills, more than a few walled estates perched up high to look down on the lake. Places for nobles to avoid the plebian bustle of the city when it pleases them. Small roads lead off to nearby villages, though Stratos leads them straight on and doesn't even stop at the inns dotted along the road. Better not to rub elbows with the citizenry now. For the next three days or so the countryside changes only gradually. From time to time summer flies bother the horses and try to circle Harrowheart, but either the icy armor or a blast of Isidor's air magic keeps them at bay.

After a couple of days' either walking or trotting without pause, they stop at a stone fort manned by Imperial legionnaires. Stratos dismounts and exchanges papers with the Praefect in charge, and quickly thereafter their horses are exchanged too, bags swapped and tack readied quickly with the help of a couple auxiliaries. Stratos gives

them a look when they seem curious about his company. Within minutes he has them back on the road, and the sound of archery drills and mess duty falls behind them.

They follow the curve of the lake around to its northern bank; to one side the hills rise closer and higher, lush forest closing in to meet the road; while to the other, the road climbs higher above the water. The clusters of fishing shacks that had broken the shoreline disappear, replaced only by one or two solitary Ayleid ruins, once-grand settlements reduced to half-submerged skeletons garlanded with lotus beds and echoing the chimes of nirnroot. The road is easy going this far, though the number of guards and travellers alike on the road diminishes each day.

Though the routine of making camp each night and trusting Harrow to keep watch has become less fraught, it's not entirely uneventful. Come the third night when they stop above the north shore, a glimmer of light can be seen burning through the trees. Stratos can tell them it's an Ayleid well – show it to them, if they're curious – the little column of magical energy that fountains up from the center of a paved circle. When a mage touches it it flows straight through them, a surge of recharging magicka, though by the time they're all done the well is dark and dry. It's begun to glimmer again faintly come the small hours, when they catch a small humanoid figure rifling through their packs. The moment it's caught the imp screeches and leaps to the air on leathery wings, baring sharp teeth and hurling fireballs at them until struck down or frightened off. Fortunately it hasn't done much more than gnaw into a cheese wheel...

And then on the fourth day, at long last, they turn right and away from the lake for good, their backs to the distant spire of the White-Gold Tower. They've reached the Silver Road, and it's going to be uphill just about the whole way. They're heading through the Great Forest now, the trees crowding the slopes; above and ahead of them can sometimes be seen the snowy peaks that give this road its name. There's still traffic on the road: fewer farmers, more hunters, warriors and soldiers heading to or from leave. Merchants still go to Bruma, but trade through the path to Skyrim has fizzled to near nothing now that civil war has locked its borders tight. They have to be more wary of wildlife, too: a short-lived mountain lion tries to stalk the horses while Harrowheart's hunting, and it's only a matter of time before one of the humans tries to relieve themselves in the bushes and gets chased out by a disgruntled wild boar. At one point Stratos has them halt quietly and moves ahead quietly to scout with Jim, but the abandoned fort ahead turns out to be occupied not by bandits but a cohort of Fighter's Guild mercenaries... who just killed the bandits.

Wild as it is, the country isn't always hostile. The wild flax blooms on the lower hillsides, big blushes of pink and blue flowers; the glossy sheen of viper's bugloss blooms and the purple of hardy motherwort springing up at the roadside to draw the attention of bees and butterflies alike. A fox pauses on the road, takes a good look at them and vanishes into the brush. The road cuts near a mountain stream, giving them a chance

for pure, clean water. Shortly after they change horses at a second fort they're stopped on the road by a Legion forester, a Bosmer who guides them quietly up the path so they can see the trio of hulking minotaurs slouching around a waterfall down the slope. One of his colleagues is perched on the rocks, keeping a watchful eye on the beasts – and the massive warhammers they're carrying – but the party is guided past safely.

Seven days past, then. One more day to Bruma. They can see the lights atop the town walls through the mist above them. Stratos is tempted just to have them push on, but. The road has been much harder the last few days, everyone is tired, and sleeping in an inn is still not an option. By the time the last light is fading even he (and Isidor) have to admit they won't finish the journey tonight. A horse with a broken leg won't carry them anywhere... and as night falls, so does the temperature. They're on the lower slopes of the mountains now. As it's summer the snow doesn't quite reach this far down, but the chill is sharp in the air. He's sure Harrow enjoys it, but Stratos is regretting not stopping them sooner when he starts to shiver, cloak wrapped over his bare arms and knees.

Under the circumstances, it's a damned piece of luck to see a merry fire burning in sight of the roadside – to hear the clunk of mugs, and a throaty voice calling out cheerfully to them.

"Ho there, strangers! It's getting dark to be on the road! Come join us for the night! The ache in my knees says it's gonna be a cold one!"

Jim

If only they could appreciate the beauty amid the strangeness and danger of this world.

Jim's become nearly mute since his outburst on the first night. He's not in charge here and he doesn't want to be. For the first time in his *life* keeping his head down and following orders is not only easier but preferable. What could he say? What words of comfort could he give? Harrowheart's condition is worsening and with it Isidor's grip on her professionalism. Stratos has become closed off and distant and Jim....

He's retreated inward.

What is Felix doing now? Why would the gods he seeks favor with not protect him? He thinks of the mountain Felix brought him to and the picnic they shared by the fire of the Imperial garrison in Skyrim. The scent of mountain blooms that speak of Felix's alchemy that never seems to leave his leathers. He remembers sleeping on a bed of furs , cursed into a child's body and huddled with Felix and Stratos for security.

The tears come in fits and bursts, usually silently and with no attempt made to stop

them as they continue plodding down the roads. It's not until the fourth day that life crawls back into Jim Kirk's eyes. The mountains that loom above them are a turning point. They raise a challenge and the captain pushes himself and his mount in answer. No wall of stone is too high, no cave crevice too remote to keep him from finding Felix.

They've come this far.

It's Stratos who's stopping him on the seventh eve and Jim nearly lashes out but he knows as they do that impatience will only hurt them. Most of them, anyway. He's grateful for the thicker cloak Marcella had given him as well as his suit to protect him from the worst of the cold. Still, the fire is a welcome sight even if company isn't exactly on the top of Kirk's list. He gives a glance toward Stratos, inching his horse forward.

It's fine, surely?

Harrowheart

A few more days on the road and they reach their first outpost. Up until that point Harrowheart has been struggling to hunt for himself on his own, though he refuses to ask for help – or, if he can hide it, to even admit there is a problem. Tracking and killing large mammals soon turns into field birds and rabbits, and though it's enough to stave off his mental drive to kill, it's never enough to sustain his weakening magics. He spends his nights siphoning the life from the flora nearby; leaning against trees and breathing in what magic flows through them, digging up bushes by the roots to sap their life, collapsing on his hands and knees to crawl through the grass that dies with his greedy inhalation of their life. It's all barely, *barely* enough to keep him in the saddle the very next day.

'Struggle' doesn't begin to describe the strength of will it takes him to mind himself during that first outpost stop. So many sentient races, so much perfect life magic in the likeness of what he needs... He stands by Isidor and fights with all he's got against the way he quakes in his armor. He can't cause a scene. He can't be the reason they're stopped, found out. His behavior can't be the reason he's destroyed. But how reinvigorating it would be...

It's a good thing Stratos gets them back on the road as quickly as possible.

Finding that magical well is a literal blessing. At first Harrowheart is reluctant to approach it – something is whispered about Moon Wells, holy places – he does eventually take a chance and slip his hand inside. Immediately after he puts his whole face into it, or as near as he can bear. The magic that washes over him is everything he

might have stolen from those auxiliaries and more. That night he looks up at the moons, and whether or not she can hear him, he thanks Elune.

It gives him the strength to save the horses from a stalking lion the next night, and he doesn't miss his opportunity to thank the goddess once again. If they had lost even a single horse it would have been the end of this mission.

But magic lent by the well doesn't last long. It gave him two days more than he expected, but by the seventh day he's fighting for his existence again. The breathers need to stop, and when they do he needs to break with them. Needs to lift his visor to siphon the life from every tree, plant, and inconsequential animal he can find.

By the seventh night he's flagging, his body limp on his horse as any propped-up corpse's might be. His head rolls, his arms hang. What had once been the glow of his eyes has turned into a weak, strange stream of blue fog, of magical steam that pours from the cracks of his visor and flows upward only to disappear in the chilling air. The horse he rides follows the rest of the team without his guidance as his neck cranes skyward.

And yet when he hears a voice he doesn't recognize some sense of life seems to creep up from the hidden depths of his body and his will, and he turns his head to face the source of the noise.

There is life.

Strange life.

Life to...

To...

Isidor

The only preparation Isidor has had for this sort of thing are the camping trips with her uncle. Week long outings with waterproof tents, canned food, steady hikes and hours upon hours of elemental training. Trips where she became so used to the scenery that she knew exactly how to get swiftly back to civilisation, where every moment felt like *progress* and her mistakes were easily rectified. She hadn't had to deal with caring for horses before, or a friend who was literally falling apart. The long rides seem never ending, and they never seem to get anywhere. It's just more countryside, more trees, more grass and the lake seems to never go away. Occasionally she wonders how long of this it will take before she gets fed up with it and starts trying to fill the inland sea. She is immensely relieved when Stratos finally turns their backs to the blasted thing.(edited)

For all that's happened already, it doesn't sit right for them to be so quiet as they travel. Stratos is concentrating, Jim is... silent, and she's not always sure Harrowheart is alive

let alone able to speak. So, in a small effort to keep their spirits up, she staggers out some conversation. Monologuing, really. She quietly thanks the gods that comes naturally to aristocratic mages. Sometimes she talks about the countryside around them, about which countries she's visited that it reminds her of, and then sometimes stories from those countries. She talks about camping with Klaus, her uncle, and how he liked teaching her fire magic in a forest in the height of summer to make sure she acted with control. She talks about how Stathis had insisted Viatorus go fox hunting with some lords once, and he'd ended up using his magic to give the critter an escape. He never went hunting again. She talks about museums she's been to (and mentions several that she'll have to take Harrowheart to), and about the many Durant vaults scattered around the world piled high with history and magical objects. She talks about how once Viatorus is an accomplished Scholar she'll get to have a look at even more of them. She talks, and talks. Even with the many breaks she has to take to think of something pleasant to talk about, it's the most she's talked in a long time. It's the only thing that keeps her from focusing on her fears.

Throughout their journey she knew what Harrowheart had told them he was doing when he went off and hunted. It was different *seeing* it. When he can't wait long enough to leave them and she sees him take energy, take *life* from the things around him... She stares, until he turns her way and she quickly looks elsewhere. It's surreal, and terrifying, and she doesn't recognise this magic, this side of him, and that only scares her more. When she gets a moment alone she examines the dead plants he leaves behind and wonders. She pushes down the primal fear, the instincts telling her that this is Wrong and Bad and Dangerous.

After that it's even harder to talk about meaningless, happy things.

By the time the seventh day rolls around to its end she's finally gone quiet. If anyone asks she blames a dry throat and not the mounting fear at seeing Harrowheart reduced to a ragdoll. She's exhausted and concern is fast becoming her main driving force. That said, when she hears voices, voices of strangers, she sits straight in her saddle, suddenly wary. She eyes Stratos for direction, to see if their faces or clothing mean anything to him.

Stratos

Stratos glances uneasily back at his group, but nods and lets Jim lead them off the road. He just hangs back enough to drop his voice and order Harrowheart firmly, "*Harm no-one,*" and Isidor, "*Watch him.*" The draugr has harmed none of *them* so far, but by now they've all had a chance to see for themselves what he does to the expendable life around them.

"Perhaps we will, sir," he says then, lifting his voice. He dismounts and leads his horse closer to the fire. It belongs to a small gathering of people, half a dozen of them camped in a sheltered hollow beneath a low cliff. They're Imperials, Nords, one Khajiit, all dressed in a motley of travelling clothes and outfits that rightly belong at a party, but their cheeks are flushed and they don't seem to mind the cold as they wave the others to join them, mugs in hand. They have a fine fire going - unnecessarily large, Stratos thinks as he looks them over and notes what might be wine stains on their clothes.

"Well, well, and an officer of the Legion no less! What an unexpected honor!" Their leader is a Breton, with eyes sharp as his cheekbones and scruffy brown hair framing his pale face. "Come on, make yourselves comfortable. There's always space for more at the fireside."

"Thank you." Stratos is still cautious as he sets to tethering his mount. "Please excuse my companions and I if we're not the most... sociable of companions. Our journey has been very hard, and our friend in the armor is quite unwell."

"Oh, don't worry, officer, I see. Tie the horses, take off your packs, grab a mug and kick your feet up. The nights are long up here, might as well enjoy them! Eh?" The man is grinning as his companions chorus agreement.

Jim

Look, a fire's a fire and Jim for one is glad to have access to it.

The thought of company--drunken revelry company no less-- turns his stomach but at least it will prove to be a distraction. It's impossible for him to submerge into his own fears, thoughts, and speculations among these festive folk already clapping him on the shoulder and jostling his cloak the moment he gets off his horse. A garment which Jim draws all the closer around himself so as to avoid questions about his state of dress.

Though given the sheer smell of wine on breathes and in the air this lot will be lucky if they remember their travelling new company at all come morning when their migraines and hangovers bring them crashing back to reality all too soon.

"...Thanks for the offer." The forced politeness barely past his lips when he's being herded and jostled until he's sat between two of the revellers on a log brushed free of snow and had a mug pressed into his gloved hands. "Uh--"

"Drink! Relax! This is an eve to be merry!" The captain finds himself a bit at a loss for words suddenly, thrust among strangers and with his companions still by the horses beyond the edge of the fire. He looks around at the others before taking a cautious sniff

of the drink. The last thing he needs is to have a Reaction when they're supposed to be resting for the evening. It smells suspiciously like snowberries and that's probably going to be an issue for him. The first chance he gets he's going to pass it off to someone who needs a refill for their own beverage as casually as possible.

Harrowheart

'Harm no one' Stratos had said. Strong words, and, he assumed, backed up with strong intentions. The tiny light of logic left in Harrowheart's mind tells him that if he does what he'd most like to do to these people, there will be consequences. He can imagine what sort.

And yet that sensible part of him *is* tiny, it *is* distant, it is so, so hard to yield to. His mind is a fog, his thoughts small sparks, threads of word associations and desires and observations that come in bursts and disappear with the sickly rolling of his head.

Men and snow and wine, laughter, fire, *life*, men, Jim sitting, drinking, snow, laughter, fire, *life*, wine. Isidor, Stratos, hitching horses, laughter. Men and wine. Wine and life. And life. And life. And life.

Harrowheart can hardly move himself out of his saddle. Every part of him feels stiff, dry, and so unwilling to move. He tries to swing his leg behind the horse to dismount but he loses his balance and falls heavily onto his back. If it hurts he doesn't show it. He doesn't make a sound apart from the clattering of his armor, but rises from where he lands and sways on his feet facing the opposite direction of the party.

It's getting so cold at the base of this mountain. That must be what makes him shiver, makes him tremble beneath his platemail. Makes him move so stiffly. Makes him stare, makes him stumble, makes him find a place to be near the crowd yet behind them, apart from them. Makes him collapse to his knees rather than sit. Bows his head and stays his hand at the hilt of the sword that's his-yet-not-his...

He's mumbling something repetitive to himself as his body wavers back and forth like the shafts of flax in the fields they'd passed days ago. One-syllable words, simple words, roll up and down in circular patterns of tone. *Life, men, fire, snow. Life, men, fire, snow. Life, men, fire, snow...*

Wine.

Everyone around him is laughing, cheering, drinking. It's the perfect time for singing. The perfect time to sing a song. The perfect way to avoid his thoughts.

His body's swaying doesn't cease as he starts to hum, off-key and stilted, a beat which can't quite be recognized through its raggedness – to say nothing of how *quiet* his sounds are. Anyone not sitting near him certainly won't hear him well. With a little time and a little buildup he finds lyrics to focus on, even if he does fail to keep up the beat. He heaves every word like it might be his last breath.

Isidor

Once they start moving towards the fire, she hesitates. She's counting how many there are, and where they are, and how tired her friends are. She doesn't like this. She doesn't *like* this. Regardless of how rude it might be, she adamantly passes on the offers of drink that she's given, and beelines for Harrowheart. She kneels by him and keeps her voice low, tries to keep it steady despite his strangled swan song. "Harrowheart? Harrowheart... That drink you mentioned before? Will I get it for you? You... You look like you could use it."

That's putting it mildly.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart weakly bats at Isidor's nearest hand. He misses the first few limp-wristed attempts before he finally finds her. His fingers curl around her arm, rest frailly there for single, wheezy breath, and then slide back to his side again.

"No. There are," he sighs, then sits in prolonged silence as he summons both the physical strength and focus of mind to continue. "People."

He's watching those people. He won't take his eyes off of them. If he... has eyes anymore, anyway.

But then his head rolls toward Isidor. His gaze doesn't quite fall on her and he looks at her from a crooked angle as he whispers, "Why?"

Isidor

The small gesture gets an equally frail smile in return. She's worried, and she doesn't have a helmet to hide under. Part of her appreciates it, the other part wishes he would save his strength. It's hard to watch him, usually so energetic and vocal, struggle through a handful of words.

She doesn't understand his question, but if she asks him to clarify it will take him more time and more energy. So instead she just tells him the answers to both the questions she can hear.

"I don't know why we've stopped. I don't know who these people are..." She glances over to Stratos and then turns back to Harrowheart. "I don't think Stratos does either. Maybe he thinks that it's safer in numbers? Or that we need the fire? I'll ask him when I can and I'll tell you..."

She looks him over again, wincing. "You fell straight off your horse, Harrowheart. Are you sure you don't want me to help you go somewhere more... private so you can have the drink?" Is privacy what he's looking for? She doesn't know. Gods, she wishes he could talk more.

Harrowheart

She's trying, he knows she's trying, but when she says she can ask Stratos who these people are 'when she can' he groans his frustration and turns his head away. He wants

answers *now*.

In tiny twitches he shakes his head at her suggestion, and in a series of stilted sighs he manages to say, "Blood. Bag. Bruma. Now... People... *Why?*"

Another sickly groan. He can't even express himself properly. His words turn to confused whispers, the repetition of three syllables over and over, again and again.

Stratos

Stratos keeps shooting glances over his shoulder at Harrow, even while he's tending to the horses. He's glad Isidor is practically shadowing him, because he doesn't have time to spare worrying about the death knight. No sooner are they and their packs added to the camp than he too is slapped on the back and guided to a log, a mug of ale pressed into his hands. He takes an alchemist's sip and a good look at the other men freely drinking the stuff before he sighs and accepts it. They're a few hours outside Bruma, not deep in the wilds. There's honestly no real reason to think these people are anything but what they seem, and frankly, his party is too weary to be choosy.

No, what Stratos is *worried* about is fending off their questions and any drunken curiosity regarding Harrowheart. The revellers' leader - well, actually perhaps he's just the least sozzled - asks most of the friendly questions, but the others are quick to chime in with more-or-less witty jokes. Some of which are at the Legion's expense, and come followed up by a slurred "Pressent comp'ny excepted!"

In the gloom and the dancing light it would be hard to spot the way the Breton man grins when Harrow begins to sing. Hard to make the connection given how faint the sound is. His head turns toward the death knight with interest, but Isidor is by his side and Stratos chooses that moment to ask, "And who are you, exactly?"

The man slaps himself upside the head as he turns back. "Ain't that rude of me? I must be getting old to forget my manners after just one round." His companions laugh and he confesses, "Fine, fine, two rounds... maybe three. Anyway! You good folks can call me Sam. Sam Guevenne. And this is Chezán, Brucus, Thal-hialjorn..." he points out each of his companions, listing each name in turn. "And *you* must be *ravenous*! What'll it be? Baked potatoes, meat pie? Slow-roasted boar in apple-cider sauce? You would not believe what Chezán can do with a whole pig, let me tell you. We've been stuffing our guts all evening."

"And the evening's just started!"

"Right you are, old buddy! Here, boys, pass around the plates for our friends. Can't leave our guests going hungry, can we?" He turns back to Stratos. "And you, you sound like a local boy. Pardon me for asking, but you're a..." squint, squint. "Livianus?"

"Caelus." Stratos shakes his head. There's no real sense in lying. And despite himself there's something strangely relaxing about the merry atmosphere. He's home, in Bruma. Almost at the foot of his hometown. There's ale and food - gods, he had no idea he was hungry until he smelled the boar being uncovered - and the fire is so inviting, the chatter so merry even if half of it is drunken stories. Not twenty feet away is a road he knows the local guard patrol.

He and his brother used to camp out like this with their friends. This is what he wants back. This is the kind of homely, comforting *safety* he wants to bring Felix back to. And the moment his boots hit the earth he knew they were right to stop. He's so tired. Exhausted from riding. From fearing. From thinking. He can't imagine how the others must feel.

"Well, can't guess 'em all." Sam leans over to pass Jim his plate. "Not a wine man, eh? What can we get you, my friend? Mead? We've got a few bottles of Honningbrew, first-rate stuff. That'll put some strength into you. Or beer? Got some straight from Anvil, never tried it yet but I hear sailors love the stuff."

He's not the only one talking, of course, and he's quick to offer a bottle to any of his own company who ask. When one of them belches or treads in the fire by mistake the others laugh and joke and help him right back up. There's no pretension here. No need to worry what these people will think. There's something almost heady about it. No-one's even going to *remember* whether you kept up an act tonight, are they?

And then Sam trots right over to Isidor and Harrow. Luckily he stops just out of range for easy grabbing, but he does give the death knight a puzzled frown and a shake of his head. "Whew! 'Unwell' my fine Breton backside! Don't tell the officer I said that. You're in a bad way, aren't you? Anything I can do for you? What about you, my lady? I'm starting to look like a terrible host, leaving you out in the cold like this."

Jim

Something lodges in the gears of Jim's brain tight enough to grind and squeal and ultimately shut him down until he's staring slack jawed at their host for nearly the entire time he's talking to Stratos. It's amazing they can't see smoke coming out from between his ears.

Sam?

And of course, *of course* it's not the clever broad shouldered Iowa boy who ran off and never looked back all those years ago--but with everything that's happening. With the terror and the fear and the sheer exhaustion both physically and mentally Jim can't help but stare. The man has Sam's smile, he's sure of it. It's in the way his eyes crinkle at the edges when he grins. His posture. His gait.

Jim doesn't even realize he's smiling faintly until the man's attention is on him again. That the anger, the bitterness, the fear are all somehow smothered right now. They're here in front of a roaring fire with fresh food and drink without another care in the world.

How could he have ever considered passing this by?

"Beer, please." Jim doesn't even try to hide his odd gloves or uniform when he shifts on his seat to accept the drink and a plate of hot food. Just meets Stratos gaze, smiles a bit more and thanks them before digging into his food.

Isidor

Isidor doesn't know Stratos well enough to guess the man's thoughts, nor does she know missions like this well enough to guess good reasons for them stopping. She exhales, trying to temper her dismay and her own frustration at this limited communication, but they don't have time to riddle through it before someone is coming over to them. Anything she might have been about to say is quickly silenced.

Without meaning to, she immediately rises to her feet, back straight and chin up. She tries to hide the wary look in her eyes, but it's not until he tries talking to Harrowheart that she forces her regular smile onto her face and quickly answers. "He's fine over here. As fine as he can be. The fire... agitates him." Give a reason, Isidor, a good one. She waves a hand to her own face. "The flickering light makes his head ache more. We're fine, really. Thank you."

And lest he pry any further into Harrowheart's condition she continues, "And it's Isidor. Not 'my lady'. Just Isidor."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart freezes on the spot the very *second* the man approaches and begins speaking. Isidor stands in a rush and the energy she exudes gets him rocking in discomfort and anticipation again. Light, he's so close. He could reach out and touch him...

He only realizes too late that he *is* reaching out. It's fortunate that Sam is too far to grab.

Harrow has to lean far enough forward to come nearer that he loses his balance and nearly falls on his chest. He catches himself at the last moment and pushes himself back to a kneeling sit.

Distantly he hears what Isidor is saying. He has to try to roll with that excuse. His shaking hands rise to cover his visor from the light of the fire. Yes. That is exactly his issue. He is better now.

Stratos

"Whoa there, big fella!" Sam sways back half a step, laughing. "I see how it is, Isidor - hah! That's a pretty name. A Breton name. Very honorable. *Chivalrous*. Don't worry, Lady Isidor." He winks, but his tone is perfectly serious as he adds, "I give you my promise none of my friends will bother him. But you, you're barely on your feet yourself. Consider it a special request from your good host. Break bread with us, sup some ale with us. I don't know where Caelus was taking you in such a hurry, but you won't get there in the dark. Besides, hah, those horses look fit to drop dead if they go another mile. And your friends look worse, if you don't mind me saying. Can't take care of them if you keel over first!"

He's backed another step away from Harrow, gesturing idly with the bottle in his hand. Harrow seems to be practically forgotten, no longer the subject of dangerous attention. The threat is receding; she is in control. And this dance now is one she knows better than anyone. Guest and host, host and guest. Surely he's only offering what he ought to? What he's saying is reasonable, right? Logical? And Isidor might find her stomach growling at the mouth-watering smells from the fire. The warm, inviting fire. Her element. Her position of strength.

Sam grins at her, and it's a little silly now, a broad hopeful smile she knows from somewhere else. "Hell, if you're gonna wander these roads have I got some stories to tell you. You'll want to hear about some of the crazy things going on in good old county Bruma these days."

It's too bad Harrow isn't in a position to do much talking. Ask a lot of questions. Surely his worn nose can't still be working the way it used to, but as he kneels and sways and tries to keep a grip on himself, there's a faint whiff of something else on the air. Something heady and intoxicating. Wine, yes, meat, yes, and fire of course, and blood, hot and potent and there is something *intoxicating* to the air here. Something that seems to lull and promise and soothe his urges for a little while. Just a little longer, friend...

Harrowheart

Crazy things in county Bruma? Harrowheart's weak head rises in curiosity. He can't help but seize on those words even with his mind hazed as it is. Strange goings-ons in Bruma... He must mean Felix.

Felix.

It's been so long since he even considered the name. All of his mental energy has been spent keeping himself awake, alive, not killing his friends. Truth be told, there were times he forgot the point of their quest. Rode his horse mindlessly, followed the others, scavenged for life any way he could. But Felix... *Felix...*

And as soon as he thinks it he finds himself caught up in a new direction. It's a sense of invigoration, yes, but a strange one. Intoxicating really *is* the only word. He finds himself on his feet before he realizes he's pushed himself up. The stagger in his step is lessened just a hair despite his frailty. There's a future for him, he feels it. A sense of inspiration. A knowledge that everything will be right.

It will be right.

It will be.

Whether Isidor follows him or not he finds himself a place on the seating logs with the others, and though he probably shouldn't he holds a hand out for whatever food or drink they'll give him. Does he intend to eat it?... It doesn't matter. He wants it. There's a party, and he's taking part.

Isidor

Sam's easy going back and forth catches her between his kind offers and her role as Harrowheart's Pa-protector. Carer. He's so friendly and he coaxes her to the fire, to the food, with such charismatic gentleness. And yet she hesitates, speechless as she looks between Harrowheart and her host. She is tired. She is so tired, and so hungry... but she can't just leave Harrowheart aside... can she?

Maybe just for a minute. Just while she gets something to eat... Then all of a sudden Harrowheart is rising to her feet and she's staring at him with wide eyes, suddenly tense, terrified he's about to- sit? And... *eat?*

Isidor blinks in confusion at the death knight's sudden boost of energy, completely stunned. That is, until Sam catches her attention again and finally she relents, drifting towards the fire. Towards the warmth and the safety of the fire. She sits down next to

Harrowheart and stares at him until someone distracts her with food. The moment it's in front of her she realises she's not hungry, she's *ravenous*. Whatever manners she'd been taught in her mansion home are forgotten in her need to devour her food.

Jim

It's not as though Jim had *forgotten* about Isidor and Harrowheart in the midst of all this friendliness and warmth. He'd just sort of assumed they'd be along in their own time. Even Harrowheart looks to be doing better. And why shouldn't he? Get a little food and drink back into his system and he'll be right as rain.

He's not been chugging the beer that was handed to him, but already there's a faint warmth to his cheeks. Chapped skin, perhaps from the dryness of the cold mountain winds. Blue eyes flit between conversations around the fire and his smile grows to something more genuine as he listens.

All four of them are together again here with their new friends.

Just as they should be.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart sits with one hand full of pork and the other holding a mug of honey mead, neither of which he has raised to his face. He wheezes quiet little laughs at the japes and stories of the others, but something occurs to him and eventually he turns his attention to Sam.

"Tell us," he says in a single heave. Then there comes the wait as he raggedly sucks in another breath. "About." Wheeze. "Bruma..." Sigh. "Sam."

Stratos

The time's been slipping away already while they talk. For the others one beer has turned to two beers, three if they're thirsty. In Stratos's case Sam just passed him a smaller cup with a wink, and he doesn't think to question when it turns out to be brandy. He's the merriest and most attentive of hosts, this man. The longer they sit, the more relaxed and uninhibited they're going to feel. They're not going anywhere, why not let loose for a little while. Could be the last chance they get!

At Harrow's question Sam laughs and tosses another log on the fire. "I thought you'd never ask! Oh, the things I can tell you..." and *does*, for the way Sam tells it their little band has celebrated in every nook and hollow of the Bruma wilds. Even Stratos cracks a smile and joins in the jokes when he tells a story of getting run out of some old fortress ruins up north - every Brumese child apparently tries to sneak in there a few

times.

"Lemme tell you, though, you've gotta be *careful* where you step out here. Sure, Brucus's singing could scare off a troll - seen him do it! - but there's stranger things in the wild. I've seen frosted spriggans skating over frozen ponds in the northern forest, goblin caves hidden right under the bushes beside a nice clearing. Ruins are the worst - I mean, great shelter, real pretty, never short of a place to sit. But try finding one that ain't occupied! There's this classy old place up northwest, Ayleid or something, you know the type.

"Well, we went to have a little get-together out there last week- week before? I dunno, who cares? - and whew! The smell of that place! And worse'n that, the shadows. Something bad's settled in there, and I wasn't gonna make it *my* problem! That's when you've gotta turn tail and- whoosh!" He punctuates it with a flick of his hand, sending his empty bottle flying like a dart into the blackness. There's laughter as it smashes.

Jim

Jim doesn't know the names of the places, or the rhymes and reasons for why most of the jokes are amusing but he listens all the same while he drinks his beer. Or a few, really. It's hard to count when the mug always seems to be full and he's not really able to join in much for the story telling. His experiences in Tamriel are limited to Stratos' camp in Skyrim and to the capital they'd ridden here from. Still, it's easy to picture the snowy homes in Bruma the way the Tribune and Sam talk about it.

How easily Jim could have grown up somewhere similar. By his fourth drink Jim's face is flushed and his laughter more boisterous. His smiles take over his face and crinkle his own eyes in a way that lights his expressions up. The sun has long since set by now but the darkness hardly seems to be noticeable by the roaring fire.

"Don't tell me *you* tried to sneak anywhere, Stratos. I'll begin to think you're capable of mischief."

He reaches over to nudge the Tribune's shoulder and nearly misses him in his inebriation.

Stratos

Stratos laughs! And lifts a hand to ward Jim off. "I'll admit nothing! No b'smirching my family's good name!"

And Sam laughs along with them, though as he cracks open another bottle he asks,

"S'what's, what's *your* story anyway? Huh? What's got you riding up to the shit end of Cyrodiil all footsick and heartsore, eh? Heartsick and foot- nevermind." He leans forward, peering across the fire at Harrow, eyes glinting yellow with reflected flame, and then smirks.

"I bet I know. Yeah, I know what your problem is. It's written all over his face. Hah!"

He lifts the bottle to his lips, but before he takes a swig, he points straight at Harrow, takes a deep breath, and crows triumphantly, "*Woman trouble!*"

Sam takes a long drink before he catches his breath and grins at Harrow. "Ain't that it, buddy? Hah, that's always how it is, right? I know. Old Sam knows."

His tipsy ramblings blend right into the lulling air of the party, the pleasant air of indulgence. If the new arrivals are inebriated, the men who were there first are downright falling off their logs, in no state to pay attention at all as Sam keeps talking, his easy-going voice washing over them.

"You look just like an old friend of mine- well, a guy I know, but let's not split *threads* here. He has this girl - wicked sharp, dark as they come, lovely as you please, and wouldn't you know it, off she runs, finds some strapping young warrior, wraps them round her little hilt, and tears through half the country with them. Not a damn thought for what he thinks. Hah, maybe he put too much of himself into her, you ask me. You'd never catch my Rose making off like that.

"But that's the girls for you, right. No offence, m'lady. You give 'em your heart and soul and whaddoes it getcha? Huh? Well, don't worry. Old Sam knows *exactly* what you need."

His grin is wider, sharper. "What you *want*."

Harrowheart

Woman trouble. It's an effort to do so, but Harrowheart scrapes out a little laugh. One of his pauldron-clad shoulders vaguely shrugs. He tries to speak but hardly gets the whispered word 'Woman' out before Sanguine is continuing. Probably for the better. It would have taken him a *very* long time to express himself. It's easier simply to put his hand on Isidor's. In his mental haze he can't remember to keep certain things secretive, and, after all, who will Sam tell?...

But Sam keeps talking, and Harrow keeps listening, his visor trained on the speaker as it steams its blue lichfire, so pale against the brightness of the flame. It's strange... It's *strange*, Harrowheart finds, how clearly he hears Sam's words. He didn't have the mind to hide his affection for Isidor, and yet this story sinks into his mind in full. Buries itself

into his flesh, bores into his bones. He feels it pulling at the emptiness in his chest where a soul ought to go...

What he needs.

What he wants...

He finds his body rising as if out of his control. No, no! Entirely by his own will. He's never been more in control of himself. He's never known what he had to do – what he needed, what he *wanted* to do – more than in this moment.

His palm that had been on Isidor's hand now wanders to the hilt of the blade Marcella so kindly lent him, and he stares at Sam as if to ask his final permission.

Stratos

Sam's smiling at him like a proud friend before he turns and calls out, a strange new timbre blending into his voice, "Ulov, Larus, our new friend here needs a hand *relieving himself*. Give him some help."

Despite the surface tone it's unmistakeably, irresistibly a command, and the men in question mumble agreeably even as they stumble to their feet, Ulov clapping Harrow on the back as he 'helps him' out of their little circle of light.

Jim

"Wait--w-wait. We're his friends. If anyone's gonna help..."

Jim's sure the tubby one and the guy with the crooked nose are fine people but even drunk enough to be laughing and forgetting his problems Jim still knows Harrowheart has special needs and random people should not be touching him just willy nilly.

But Harrowheart seems to be fine with it? Jim frowns, trying to think but finding nothing but a pleasant fog where wit and strategy usually lay.

Isidor

The food, the drink, the stories... It's all so blissfully comfortable. Everyone is calm and safe and happy. She can finally relax... With her head propped up by an arm, knuckles pushing into her cheek and pulling her small contented smile out of sorts, she watches everyone around the fire, listens happily to the stories being shared. She's shared enough of her own. She's glad to be quiet again.

When Sam calls Harrowheart out for having *woman trouble* she doesn't blush or scamper to hide. Instead she giggles. It's such an absurdly large understatement, after all. That's when she feels Harrowheart's hand on hers and she smiles. Just for a moment, they can be themselves...

The rest of Sam's story gets a sceptical scrunching up of her face, but her host has been kind. She's got thicker skin than that, she's not about to take offence, and she doesn't have the energy for a witty comeback. She doesn't pay it any heed... Until Sam isn't telling a story to the people around the fire. He isn't talking to anyone but Harrowheart. And she doesn't understand what he's saying, or why he's saying it. She doesn't know what's going on. All she knows is Harrowheart's hand is gone from hers, his affection for her swiftly pushed aside for a different want, a different need. Her senses are numb but she still feels the pang of hurt, the useless stirring of worry, and the unsettled feeling as she watches him get up with strangers and start heading for the woods. But she's so tired. Her head is swimming, aching, and her muscles refuse to move. She simply watches him and gives a small, worried, "Harrowheart...?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart heard Jim, that much is certain, because he starts to look his way as the men come to take him by the arms and guide him from the fire. He follows them willingly past Isidor and doesn't so much as glance her way as she calls his name.

Shortly they're out of the bright aura of the fire, and in the darkness of the night in a pre-industrial world they may as well have disappeared. Whatever happens in that black space beyond the warmth and light of Sam Guevenne's fire is not for mortal eyes to know.

Sam's wonderful party has a way of obscuring the flow of time. By the time Harrowheart returns it's impossible to say how long he's been gone. The only certainties are that his gait is confident and steady, and that he returns alone. His new friends must have decided to enjoy a little more time together in the wilds of this scenic locale.

The magic of Sam's presence embraces him the second he makes it back to his sitting log and takes his place next to Isidor. He asks for mead and raises his mug in a silent toast to Sam. But this time rather than sit and hold it he flips up his visor, tosses back his head, and drinks! He finishes it all in one long swig -- it's easy when you don't have to pause for a breath. He's quick to lower his visor once more, but in that brief glimpse of him he looks suspiciously *well*. Better even than on the first night here in Tamriel. It must be the way the orange glow of the flames livens up his flesh...

As if nothing at all were out of the ordinary he falls right back into the rhythm of the

party. He rests his hand in Isidor's far hip and resumes his earlier song with a pleasant voice and renewed enthusiasm.

"Little hotel, older than hell, dark and cold as a mine. Blanket's too thin, but I lay here and grin, 'cause I got me a bottle of wine~"

Stratos

Any protest Stratos might have made when Harrow left was swiftly diverted, and only on Harrow's return does he frown a little, trying to remember. He was concerned... about... Harrow, walking off. But Harrow is back and all seems well enough...

And Sam sure doesn't seem to see anything wrong. He laughs and welcomes Harrow back, and this time he even joins in the song, almost on key as he echoes the words like he's always known them. When the song ends - or Harrow runs out of verses he can recall - he lets out a hoot that stirs the conscious revellers to clap unsteadily.

"That was beautiful. Y'know I'm *glad* I met you fine folks on the road tonight. You're a great bunch of people. So *determined*. You've done well, you know. Quick-marching all the way up here, eyes *dead set* on the prize. No stopping you boys - and lady! That's for damned sure, eh? There's just one thing I'm wondering about. One teeny-tiny question. Wouldn't even be important any other time."

He leans forward, glancing around them, and asks, "Just what are you gonna do when you *get there*? You don't have to look all confused, tribune, you know where you're going! You know what you're gonna find. So how do you plan on fixing it, huh? 'Cause I don't think you've figured any of *that* out at all. And speaking personally, I'm gonna call it a waste of good time if you run all the way here just to fuck the job up at the last second."

"Not your concern, is it?" Stratos is stirring with alarm, head fuzzy but alarm bells ringing at the very way this man is talking. There's something sharper about Sam's silhouette against the fire as he looks over his shoulder.

"Ain't it? Hah. You think I don't care, old buddies? Sam always looks out for his friends. I see three mages and one guy who's sharp enough to cut himself here. You've got some brains left. You've got power. But you don't got the *knowhow*, am I right?"

Jim

"You know....about Felix?"

Jim didn't make it up to his feet before, but he's sure as hell upright now. Mostly. There's

a fair bit of a stagger going on but he's not falling over. Stratos might be alarmed but Jim is *desperate*. He knows just how valuable friends are to the younger Caelus. Have they found an old one? Someone who knows what's been going on up there? Pride be damned, he's got both gloves fisted in San's tunic before he can even stop himself.

Jim does not know how they're going to stop Felix without killing him. What is waiting for them up there. Whether or not the conjurer is even still alive. He doesn't know. He doesn't know. *He doesn't know what to do.*

"Tell me. Everything you know about Felix. Right now. Please. I need--We have to get him back--!"

A sober man might have had second thoughts about this. Or at least more dignity.

Harrowheart

Beneath his visor Harrowheart's eyebrows twitch. What did the group tell Sam while he was gone? They must have talked about their mission. But why would they? Was it not a secret? He honestly can't recall...

With so much life magic flowing through him Harrowheart is overconfident. He pounds his fist into his open palm and loudly announces, "We're gonna take back what's mine! That's what we're gonna do!"

Suddenly Jim says the name Felix and Harrowheart quiets. Wait. *Wait*. So they *didn't* tell him?... His hands fall into his lap and he instinctively moves a little closer to Isidor. Hearing Jim speak the way he is has him worried – not for Jim's safety, but for everyone else's. He puts his arm around Isidor's waist again and readies his other fist for whatever comes next.

It's strange, though, how his clarity fades in and out. Sam's spell isn't breaking for him just yet. Despite the tension, despite the fact that this man knows *far* more than he should, there's something keeping Harrowheart in his seat: Acceptance. A strange kind of acceptance. A tingle in the back of his mind that's putting everything that's happened tonight in context.

Sam knows things. Sam knows too many things. He did all along, didn't he? Knew about his needs, knew about their quest, knew about *Felix*... And Harrowheart knew deep down, too. Knew it from the start. There was always more than coincidence at play here tonight.

And it doesn't feel good to be right.

Isidor

All she wants to do is sleep. To drift away and sleep. Although Harrowheart's return eases her fears, something still doesn't sit right. She can't place it. She can't place whether it's because of Harrowheart or Sam. For the first time she wishes Viatorus was here with her. He'd be able to tell her. As it is she sits, arms curled around herself for comfort, and to keep the warmth of the fire close. She doesn't relax when Harrowheart sits next to her. She doesn't lean into his touch when he puts his arm around her again. In fact, she hardly acknowledges his return at all. Instead she focuses on the way her head swims when she tries to think. It's like wading through a murky swamp and getting nowhere.

Then, out of the blue, Sam comes out with talk about Felix? Their mission? Things she doesn't remember them talking about, but maybe they did? Everything's a blur. If there's any doubt over what they're talking about, Jim dispels it pretty quickly, just as Harrowheart dispels any doubt over his feelings on the matter. Isidor frowns, sighs, closes her eyes and wishes she were more sober for this.

"We go in, we deal with any of his goons, we find him, we sleep spell him, we take him home." Opening her eyes again, she lifts an eyebrow at Sam. "Seems pretty simple to me."

Harrowheart

"Sleep spell?" Harrowheart suddenly scoffs incredulously. "He's gonna be half-undead *at least* when we find him. Sleep spell probably ain't gonna work on him if he don't want it to. That can't be the plan!"

Jim

Half undead?

Jim's knees threaten to give out underneath him as his stomach rolls. No. No no nononono they can't. He can't leave Felix like this. It's unfair to ask a stranger for answers even they don't have. Though he should probably ask himself why Sam even seems to know as much as he does.

"Please.....*please*..!"

Stratos

"All right, all right. Easy there, Jimmy-boy." Sam detaches him almost gently and presses the bottle in hand on him. "The dead man's right, Izzy. Your tribune's mind magic ain't gonna work too well on the undead either. You're not *that* good, are you Stratos? Now on the other hand-" His head whips back to Harrowheart, and his smile is very sharp. "You've had your gift. Now you owe me a life or two, I'd say. So the plan *you're* thinking up just isn't going to *cut it* either. Oh, no."

"What're you suggesting?" Stratos is aware enough to be profoundly suspicious. Not sober enough to hide it- nor to decide whether he's glaring at Harrowheart or Sam. But he can feel a proposal coming.

Harrowheart

Sam must be aware of the way Harrowheart cringes beneath the cover of his visor. His fingers clench tightly, not with a need to fight or defend himself but from the anxiety of what's been said anticipation of what's to come. He's listening, though. He's watching, wide-eyed, and waiting. Taking orders is what he does best, and despite his mounting fears of this supernatural being, he's ready to do as he will be ultimately bid.

Stratos

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there. Don't rush me, officer." Sam shushes him with a wave. "Let a guy finish, why don't you? Now, I've gotta proposition, alright." He grins down at Jim, seeming very tall against the firelight. "Call this one a gift."

There's a glint and a glitter as he leans down tosses the captain something, angling to land neatly in Jim's lap if he doesn't catch it. It's a round, many-faceted crystal much like those in Marcella's forge... only this one is much larger, and the color of it is darker, tinged a deep, bloody red. Jim doesn't have the magical senses to feel its unholy aura, but that's all the better.

Sanguine points at it. "You know how to cast a soul trap at least, don't you tribune? You're a Caelus, you'll be fine. Well, when you find my fine friend Felix, cast one on him. Do that and his soul gets snared into there. Along with the bond to whatever's holding him... and whoever's carrying the gem. You understand? You'll have your chance to get your man back."

"Only one of us?" There are so many questions he needs to ask, about this magic, this unknown magic, this *man*, but- Stratos too wants this to be real. Wants this to work, to

be more than a drunken delusion. His lesser worries are falling away in the face of a solution to the one overriding terror.

"Oh, you'll all have your hands full. Don't worry about that."

Jim

Jim's on his ass in the snow, staring up at Sam with his mouth hanging open slightly like the undignified fool that he is. In the light of the fire and with the smile he's giving Jim feels very small in comparison. Miniscule. Unworthy. Inconsequential, even. He swallows around a lump in his throat, fumbling for the crystal with his gloved hands but at least succeeding in keeping it in his lap as his uncoordinated fingers refuse to work with him on even the simplest task right this moment.

He's seen these before. Well, something like them at least. Marcella was using a much smaller one to enchant the kites they were flying over New Years and she saw several more around the smithy when they were there a week ago now. Soul gems.

This one however...

He's never seen one this dark before, nor this large. He picks it up in one hand and holds it up to catch in the light of the fire. He might be the *only* one in the party who can hold it without their skin crawling with his lack of magical sense. He can't look away from Sam no matter how much he wants to turn and ask Stratos what's going on. Why they need a crystal this large. What it's supposed to hold--

Jim needn't bother with good ol' Sam there.

They're putting Felix in here. Felix...and himself.

Oh.

Ohhhhhh oh he is not so sure about this plan, but it's not as though there's anyone else chiming in with an idea here. And besides...

"Your *fine friend*....?" Jim scowls up at Sam then, desperately trying to wrack his intoxicated brain. Wouldn't he know this guy if he was Felix's friend?

Harrowheart

The presence of unholy magic, of *soul magic*, is like blood in the water for Harrowheart, who sits incredibly straight and, stunned, stares at that massive soul gem. He knows that's what it is before Sam even has to explain. Azeroth has them too, of course – different shapes, but they have the same scent, and this one isn't so different from the vampire soul Felix fed him during the ritual that never should have happened.

Beneath his visor Harrowheart's eyebrows come together and his lips press into a thin line between his teeth. He has to think this through from every angle. Jim's soul, Felix's soul, and 'the bond that holds him' will be trapped inside the soul gem...

After a long, silent hesitation he finally, quietly says, "I—I don't know. Runeblades ain't in the business of givin' up souls. Anything could happen, but... I f... I figure there's gonna be a whole lotta energy tryin' to get out all at once."

He looks to Isidor, then to Stratos, and, shaking his head, worriedly says, "Sam's right. Y'all're gonna have to be ready for whatever happens. Magical explosions, wild souls. The swords might try and fight us on their own if Felix's body gives out. Anything."

Isidor

Isidor's scowl is fixed in place the moment Harrowheart scoffs at her idea. It's not as if he were being a helpful, masterful tactician. Her annoyance with him has no time to be voiced, let alone considered more thoroughly. Between Sam and Harrowheart terrifying Jim, Stratos' questioning and Sam's oddly familiar, strangely knowledgeable, unmistakably *questionable* suggestion, Isidor's fuzzy mind is focused elsewhere.

Then Sam produces a crystal that has Isidor shifting uncomfortably in her seat. People using crystals for magical purposes is common enough where she's from, but she doesn't understand the significance of this one, or why it sends a ripple through the party as people recognise it. All she knows is that it's Bad. She can hardly keep up with what everyone is saying, and what they're meaning. What stands out to her is one very important thing: They are discussing tampering with souls, and several of them. The souls of *friends*. A shiver runs through her as her memory's of dealing with her brother's displaced soul stir and flash through her thoughts.

"I... I don't know," she says quietly, shaking her head. "I don't think this is a good idea... There has to be another way."

Stratos

"What's the look for, Jim? I knew him first. How many of his old friends do you think you know about?" Sam just looks amused by the captain's annoyance.

"You want me to soul trap my brother," Stratos says flatly, drawing Sam's attention onto the glaring tribune.

"Well, only if you want him *back*. If you want *them* back." He's looking at Harrowheart there. "I'm just saying, good luck trying to get through to him from the outside. There's a *shroud* over that boy's mind. You think you can bring him down the hard way? Beat him down and prise those blades out of his hands? Sure, be my guest. Should be a show anyhow. What happens when he kills one of you, though, eh? He gets a little stronger. More *theirs*. And if you kill him?"

Jim

"He doesn't ever tell me about his stuff no matter how many times I ask. That's part of what made this whole stupid fuckin' problem to begin with."

Huff. If Felix would have just talked to him. If they'd have come up with something together, would he have felt it necessary to do all of this? Any of this? If the Runeblades infected him so long ago, could they have headed this off? Sought out help?

Something. *Anything*.

He's failed Felix as a partner. So wrapped up in his own problems he didn't make time for Felix's. They can't change the past. All Jim can do now is put everything on the line—including his soul—to get Felix back. If Sam thought such a risk would be too much for Jim Kirk, he thought wrong. Risking his own life for the safety of others is just who he is.

"We're not killing Felix. B...better t'die saving lives than to live taking them. I'll do it. Get me in there an' I'll do it. Whatever it takes." If only the alcohol added slur wasn't ruining his heroic declarations. Or the fact that he's still on his ass in the snow.

Harrowheart

Jim's line about living by taking lives gets Harrowheart to snort, and the bitter sound is amplified and turned metallic by the enchantment of his helm.

"That's our plan, then," he says, his voice tense with pent-up frustration that obscures his inner anticipation. His resignation. That's their plan. That's all they've got.

He doesn't realize how he's shaking his head as he stares at the ground beneath his boots. After a bit of quiet thought he raises his head and snorts at the captain again. "You better not fuck this up, Jim. We're all dependin' on you."

Isidor

All Isidor can think is how glad she is that Viatorus isn't here. Harrowheart's soul is on the line, Jim's soul is on the line, Felix's soul is on the line... Stratos would surely sacrifice his at a moment's notice. Will her soul avoid the risk? What would she do if Harrowheart's soul depended on her risking her own?

She doesn't have any better ideas, but her discomfort is visible for all to see in how stiff she is, how she nervously looks from one person to the other. Perhaps there is another way... but this is the way that's here, right now, ready for them to use. They don't have time to go searching for some other solution, and this isn't her life, or family's life, at risk. "We're... really going to do this?"

Stratos

"If we do," Stratos speaks up pointedly, pulling Sam's attention away from giving Jim a benevolent smile, "will we get them both back? Felix and Jim? Soul and body restored?" He can feel his mind clouded with the drinks he's had, but alarm has him upright and tense on his log. Everything about this is wrong, suspicious, but he can't see through whatever illusion is masking this man... if he's a man.

"Sure. It's just a fancy soul gem. You do know how those work, right? Casting the trap by itself ain't enough to steal away anyone's soul. Not for real. Your boys'll be fine."

And that makes sense. Elegant sense. But there's a piece of it missing and Stratos can feel it. His voice is low when he demands quietly, "What are you?"

Sam snorts loudly. "Like you haven't guessed already. No no, I've got a question for you, Caelus." He leans closer to Stratos, their eyes locked. "No matter what answer I give, what does it matter?"

Stratos stares at him, at his eyes sharp and his smile amused even as Sam drains the bottle that's appeared in his hand, and he can sense it. The power hanging in the air around them. The sense of something vast and ancient in their midst, the shadow of a leviathan beneath surface sight. And he knows himself. Feels his own deepest desires come rising to the surface and he *knows. What. He. Wants.*

He wants his brother back. He wants his family back, safe, together, celebrating the way they used to. He wants to make this right. Wants to be the brother he should have been. He wants everything whole and well again. He wants to go *home*. His want is an ache and a thirst and a tugging need he's carried for so long now.

He knows what he has to do. There's no option here. No moralizing, no qualms. This isn't just duty. This is *family*, and the only thing he will not do is fail.

"Then we're going to do it," he says finally, nod curt. Resolutely. There's a firm authority in his voice, deliberately assuming the certainty the others lack. That's a commander's job. No matter the nature of the orders, they're committed to them. There's no better option.

Jim

The sureness in Stratos' voice eases any misgivings Jim might have over the nature of this plan. It's dangerous and it's risky and neither of these are words that have stopped James T. Kirk in the past. This may not be the same as saving whole planets, as risking everything for Starfleet and its continued existence but to Jim it is equally important.

He's a changed man because of Felix Caelus. A healthier, better man. Someone who sees a reason to keep struggling through the demons of his past and for once in his life look toward the future rather than simply living from day to day. To live as something more than a captain, but as himself again too.

And yes, the things Felix may have done, may be doing now even carry weight. But not nearly so much as getting him back. Getting those godforsaken blades away from him before he's unable to be restored to himself. If being able to do that means putting Jim's soul on the line?

It's not a debate.

"We will. I'm bringing Felix back. "

No matter what it takes.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart can't possibly understand whatever subtleties about Sam's identity pass between he and Stratos. As far as he's concerned, he doesn't need to. Sam is

something beyond the average sentient creature, some supernatural force of this world; a demon, a force of nature, a god... It doesn't matter. He's something beyond all of them, something powerful and knowing. Something which, for whatever reason, has taken an interest in their quest.

As Stratos and Jim pledge their courage to Sam, Harrowheart begins to nod. "We can do it," he says quietly. Then, more confidently, "We *will* do it." He turns his visor to his companions and warns, "But we can't if we waste time. You breathers gotta sleep. We'll wake up early, we'll get to Bruma, we'll find Felix, and we'll get this whole thing fixed. Fixed the right way. The way we all want it. No one dyin', no one losin' their souls, and only one of us undead at the end of the day."

He's hesitant to look at Sam again now that his suspicions about him being something with a fearful power have been all but confirmed, but with great effort he eventually does. Sam can see his face, he knows it. Can see the way his eyebrows tilt with worry, can see the way his wide eyes search for confirmation. And yet there's something beyond his doubt, something in the thin press of his lips and the grip of his fists. Determination despite uncertainty. He has a lot to fear (and with good reason) but he also has a need to succeed. To prove himself right to this entity called 'Sam,' among a hundred other reasons.

He tears himself away from the sight of their mysterious aid and repeats, "So get to sleep, all of you. The horses'll be ready in the morning."

Part Six: Bruma ([Top](#))

Stratos

"One more round!" Sam insists, before any such sensible notions can set down roots. Almost simultaneously it seems like he's pressing a mug on each of them, a mug of something hot and rich and *potent*...

What remains of the night is just a blur; small wonder that the group (or the living portion, at least) is slow to rouse come morning. They are, somehow, all in – or on – their bedrolls come morning. Probably even on their *own* ones. Stratos shivers as he wakes – and then forces himself upright in a clank of armor, looking around warily. In the cold dawn light there's no sign of their companions. Just a fire burned to ashes and a few discarded bottles gathering a little frost. Ugh. He feels unwashed, stiff and sore from sleeping in armor, and there's a lingering feel of sick realization in his gut...

"Fuck." The word is low, but clear and vehement in the cool morning air. The dishevelled tribune forces himself to his feet and takes stock of his small company – counting heads, just in case.

Jim

It's a blur. A fog.

Sam's words a soothing balm on nerves of live wires, his gift of drink a shut down that sends even the most stubborn among them to an eventual deep sleep. Falling into a sea of unconsciousness and sinking ever further down into the dark depths of slumber until all memory fades and the body is without any tension at all. Resting deep enough into their bones at the behest of this otherworldly draught.

Jim should have woken at the first sound of movement. When the party left them behind he should have been upright immediately, paranoid in this strange place and never feeling safe. It's too risky to sleep deeply and years of trauma have made him a light sleeper. Usually. The fog of sleep hangs heavy over him, keeping him down in his roll and unaware even as the sky lightens. When Stratos stirs Jim doesn't wake. Not even when he gets to his feet, even though his roll is next to Jim's.

When he's asleep nothing hurts. There is nothing lost and nowhere to be.

It takes quite a bit of noise before Jim finally claws himself awake, bleary eyed and wincing in the light of the day. As soon as he cracks open an eye he gives a protesting noise and shuts it again. Drags an arm over his eyes to shield them. There's a pounding in his head, an unpleasant roll of his stomach. How much had he had to drink? Why was he drinking, anyway? There is no crash of clarity, the night rushing back to him. It comes in small handfulls and pieces. Scraps of conversation.

A blood red crystal the size of his fist still gripped in his right hand, never letting it go even as he slept.

"...Th'fuck..?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart remained in his armor through the night, and though he said he'd rise in the morning to ready the horses he's done nothing of the sort. Instead he's sitting up

against the base of a nearby pine, frost fractals growing across his blue armor. He's motionless, and there's no light -- no smoke even -- pouring from the slats in his visor.

Isidor

For her entire life Isidor has had luxuries few others do. Even when she spent days, even weeks, pushing herself to her limits she would return to her creature comforts. So far through this journey she's been tense, on high alert, ready when the others were ready, awake with daybreak's bright interruption. Last night has thrown her off kilter. Provided with a hearty meal, warmth and a relaxing drink, she's back to her comforts. The bedroll is no feather mattress but while she's asleep she doesn't know that. The rising sun and the stirrings of the others as they shuffle and curse doesn't wake her. She remains curled up, blanket pulled tight around her, peaceful as can be.

Harrowheart

It's a while after the men have risen before Harrowheart's body begins to move. His legs stretch and his head rolls, and soon he raises a hand to his forehead, forgetting his helmet is in the way until his palm is mashed against it.

Last night is a blur... Until it's not. He remembers what he did and why he feels so well, he remembers drinking, the fire, and the man he feared. *Sam*. Sam who gave them a mission. Sam who wants them to find Felix as much as they do.

Harrowheart rises slowly, his armor crackling with the thin layers of ice that break around his joints. He shakes his head and the dust off the night's frozen dew falls in all directions.

"We have to go," he mumbles to no one in particular as he stumbles toward the horses. His body is on autopilot, already moving to ready their mounts. Let Isidor sleep, as far as he's concerned. Let Isidor sleep, let Jim wrestle his confusion, let Stratos... Frankly, let him do whatever he wants. He's their leader, after all.

Stratos

"Jim." Stratos is leaning over the younger man, bleary-eyed and face tight, his voice urgent. "Jim, are you alright? Do you still have..."

He can almost feel the crystal's presence as soon as his eyes fall on it. There's a swift, harsh exhale, the tribune almost reaching out for it- before he grasps Jim's shoulder tightly instead and shakes him a little. "Jim, come on. We need to leave. Put that... wrap that up and put it away. Hide it. Do you understand?"

He forces himself to walk steadily as he heads over and kneels to wake Isidor. There'll be time for stretches (and sneaky healing spells) once everyone is up and moving. There's a glance over at Harrowheart as he stirs, but the death knight is getting to his feet unhindered by the flakes of ice he's shedding in all directions. It's like watching a fallen tree get up from the snow, he thinks, before he makes himself focus.

"Miss Durant." He doesn't quite dare shake her, but he touches her blanket-wrapped shoulder. "Isidor. Are you well? It's time to go."

Isidor

The attempt to rouse her is met with a sluggish waving of her hand and an unhappy murmur as her face contorts and she turns into the warm bedroll beneath her. "Come back with tea."

It takes a minute for her to become conscious of the cold air stinging her skin, the uncomfortable lumps she's laying on, and the varying aches and complaints her body has that remind her of the events of last night. Of where she is now. Reluctantly, she opens her eyes. She sits up suddenly and immediately regrets it. Her head hurts, her back hurts, her- *everything* hurts, and she's cold. With a groan she puts her hand to her head and blinks away the sleep until she can focus on Stratos, squinting at him with a confused scowl. "Stratos? What... What happened last night? Did we- Was it as strange as I remember?"

Jim

"Here. I..I'm here."

He wishes he wasn't. With his head throbbing and their mission coming back to him Jim nearly wishes he was still passed out on the ground, drunkenly freezing to death. At least then he wouldn't have to deal with his growing and re-emerging anxieties as well as a hangover.

Though the comment about the crystal gets Stratos a raised eyebrow, he's already moved on to rouse Isidor. It's strange to him, but he won't argue. Whether it shouldn't be held aloft in the sun or other reasons, Stratos wants it put away. Jim doesn't want to let it stray far though. He's irrationally afraid of losing it. They're key to helping Felix. He has to keep track of it and take good care of it. It gets tightly wrapped in his thinner cloak he'd traded out a while back and tucked into his pack, though in one of the outer

pouches so he can keep his hand near and feel it to make sure it's there still while they ride.

Safe. Safe and secure. Jim won't let anything happen to it.

Stratos

He grimaces at Isidor's question, but admits, "I fear so. Do you feel anything different? Any... after-effects from the encounter?"

He's not even sure what he should be afraid of. Not if everyone is conscious, sane, uninjured... still in possession of their souls (where applicable). But his suspicions are returning, and every folk tale and account he's ever read concerning Greater Daedra is coming back to haunt him.

'Sam' wanted them to rescue Felix. Why? What does he gain? He has to think it through, go over the entire plan given to them last night. He can do that while they travel. First, there's only one member of the group left to check on. Stratos grabs his bedroll and ties it up as he goes over to the horses.

"What about you, Harrowheart? Are you...?" As well as he has been on this journey? *Not* yet degenerated into a mindless bonewalker?

Harrowheart

Harrowheart turns in surprise at hearing his name. He stares at Stratos, unsure at first of the question and then of the answer. He presses his palm to his breastplate as if that's going to give him some insight.

"I'm fine," he finally says. "Better than I was when we stopped last night. Good enough to make it to Bruma."

And here's hoping none of them stop to reflect on *why* he might feel so well...

Jim

"Wh-really?"

For the moment even the pain in Jim's head is insignificant as he looks up from packing up his sleeping area. Harrowheart sure *sounds* better than he has all week and he's standing of his own accord. Nothing around them is even rotted or dead.

"Guess we just needed to get you back into the cold, huh." He doesn't know how magic works and he certainly doesn't remember enough about the night before to be asking. "That's a relief. Welcome back, man."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart stares at Jim, unblinking behind his visor. He listens to everything his friend has to say. When Jim is quiet again, Harrowheart is too. Silence passes between them until Harrowheart begins to laugh. Quiet at first, it growing louder over time until he begins to shake his head to turn his attention back to the horses.

"Must be that cold air," he agrees. You're funny, Jim. You're funny.

Isidor

Isidor shakes her head, regrets it, and focuses on breathing. "My head could be better, but... No. Nothing bad."

Now that she's more awake she can see that she's the last person to wake, and she has some catching up to do. She gets up and starts packing away her things when Stratos asks after Harrowheart and she has to stop and stare at the death knight. He's... doing okay? OH. OH WAIT. She turns her wide eyed staring back to her things. Part of her really hopes they all decide to skip breakfast because she is feeling *nauseous*. It gives her a good reason to focus on getting everything ready for them to leave. No more questions from Isidor.

Stratos

That is... possibly the least reassuring laughter Stratos has ever heard, and he was suspicious at Harrow's first answer.

"The air, or the hospitality?" he asks sharply. Even if Harrowheart isn't to blame, he can put the pieces he remembers together and anything that... *Sam* did for them is suspect. Beware of daedra bearing gifts...

Harrowheart

Harrowheart slowly, slowly shifts his gaze to give Stratos what is presumably a *look*. He tugs the understap of his horse's saddle a little too tight and it snorts in protest. He snorts too and turns his attention away from Stratos to fix his mistake and get to work on Isidor's horse next.

"Just cause I got a little more time don't mean we get to stand around playin' *slap the murloc*. Felix is waitin' for us. Let's get our asses to Bruma."

Jim

Harrowheart's words dim the light in Jim's eyes for a moment, too slow to put on his brave face before anyone can see. He can't exactly fly through packing up with the pounding in his head and the nausea, but there's sure going to be an effort to do so as much as possible now.

He's right, obviously.

Does Felix know they're coming? Jim hopes not. If he caught wind of trouble Jim knows his first instinct would be to run. It's what he's done so far. Why would he change that up now? It's clearly been working out for him. If he'd known people like Sam were worrying over him, it wouldn't change a thing. If anything it would just make him more wary. It's stupid, idiotic, and Jim *understands the urge completely*. The people he lies most often to are the people closest to him. Not wanting to worry them, not wanting to drag them into his own problems...

Goddammit, Felix.

"I'm ready to go. Get a move on."

Stratos

None of them want to talk. No-one's in a mood to stop and eat. Even Stratos, though he may be casting his suspicions in all directions, doesn't actually care enough to question Harrowheart in any more detail. The kindness of daedra means nothing good: daedric kindness to the undead doubly so. But Stratos Caelus has bigger problems on his mind. Personal problems. So despite the look he gives Harrowheart in turn, he lends a hand to ensuring they're all packed and mounted up as swiftly as possible.

Besides, he's so close to home.

The last stretch of road winds quickly upward among the rocks, though it cuts a long meanders back and forth on its way, a defensive measure that Stratos is both irritated by and glad of today. Irritated, because of the delay, and glad, because it gives him some quiet time to think as everyone nurses their heads and their worries. The last upward turn brings them up on the small arc of ground beneath the town's walls, the

road curving round under the sentries' watchful eyes. Well, bored and sleepy eyes at this hour, most like.

They join the thin trickle of people seeking to enter or leave the town already. Summer or no, they're high enough now that a thin layer of snow lies over the ground, and their mounts' hooves crunch through it as they ride round to the gates of Bruma. It's a fairly clear morning and the light turns slowly from grey to pale gold, a sharp breeze carrying the sound of bells from the great chapel. It's obvious this town is on nothing like the capital's scale, but neither is it small. If the grey stone walls lack the same smooth polish, they're solid and impeccably constructed, towering over the road. The southern gate faces out from the mountains, and as the road comes round to it the travellers have a view right down across the Nibenay basin: over the rocky slopes they've climbed, the expanse of forest falling away to the shining blue of Lake Rumare – and distantly, the gleam of white walls beneath the rising sun, the glitter of an impossible spire.

There's a small stable outside the gates, the hands already at work grooming a pair of carhorses. Past that, the city banner sways above a raised portcullis: the arms of Bruma, a black eagle on a bright gold field. The gate guards stand close to the massive reinforced doors of the inner gate. They stand open already, admitting the early traffic in either direction: hunters and trappers, a small company of Legion recruits being urged back to the barracks by their quaestor; a young couple sheepishly avoiding eye contact with anyone as they slip back into town. There are significantly more Nords here, the tall, pale, stocky folk who don't seem to mind the chill whatever they're wearing.

When the guards see Stratos leading a mounted group for the gate they're immediately on alert. One hangs back and whistles to the guards inside, hand on his sword; the other steps forward, hand raised. Stratos gestures to his own party to halt and rides forward, passing a folded sheet of orders to the man as he speaks with him. Perks of being a tribune: if he says his business is urgent enough to warrant passage through the town, no-one's like to question him. Stratos is soon waving his companions onward, onto the cobbled streets of Bruma town.

As soon as they're through the gate, the terraced rows of houses rise in front of them, sweeping away to their right. As is the way of most worlds, the nicest and largest houses seem to be toward the top – and beyond them, the high walls and gatehouse of Castle Bruma. Still, none of the buildings here seem like places for the truly poor. They're sturdy and low-slung, equal parts hewn stone and wood, sometimes carved with designs that range from swirling stylizations of animals to neat geometric patterns. Some of them seem very low indeed, and rather small unless one spots the vents that hint at hidden depths. Where there are windows, they're generally small and heavy-framed.

There's one exception – one large and outstanding exception. Dominating the town to the party's left – and in the direction Stratos is about to take them – is what's unmistakably some sort of cathedral. The spire juts above the multi-tiered body, every face of it decorated with stained-glass windows, framed by almost-Gothic arches and capped with small spirelets. It's a magnificent sight... and quite at odds with the handful of beggars huddled in the nooks of its masonry feet, staying out of the wind while they hope for some morning alms. And indeed, if one looks *past* the chapel then one might notice the other rows of streets curving round the back of it: the ones lined with shabbier houses, a few roofs that look short of tiles from afar.

Stratos leads the party uphill, to the far side of the chapel plaza. "I need to retrieve some books before we leave the town. Can I trust you all to wait here?"

Harrowheart

A town like this is one which Harrowheart is more comfortable with. Mostly humans, familiar architectural styles. Even the snow, though he would never see it in Westfall, is comforting. It feels right.

Well, it feels right until they take a left and head towards a church. He's about to protest before Stratos beats him to it. Fortunately it sounds like he won't have to enter a holy place. He can never be sure how that's going to end for him.

"What do you need books for?" he grunts more roughly than he means to.

Stratos

"The plan we've been... considering requires me to use a certain spell." Stratos keeps his voice even, relaxed. He's not looking at Harrowheart. "I haven't practiced it in some time and I want to be certain I know how to cast it correctly. On the first try."

"We have the books I need at home, and I know where they are."

They're Felix's old books, in fact.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart grumbles lowly as he considers what he's heard. "It's cold out here," he finally says, his voice no softer now than before. "Don't make the breathers stay out in it. Take them with, warm them up. I can mind the horses right here."

Jim

There's a moment where Jim looks between Stratos and Harrow. The knight is making a good point but he can't deny that Harrow heart hasn't made much argument for being left alone at all, let alone in Stratos's home town.

"I'm fine either way. "

He wants to follow Stratos, but under the circumstances....

Isidor

The change of scenery is welcome. It gives Isidor something to focus on that isn't a grim reality of what she's witnessed and what they're all about to face. It gives her a distraction from the bizarre, unsettling events of the previous night. She's still happily looking around when Stratos announces that he needs to gather supplies and prompts a discussion about splitting the party.

She looks at Harrowheart, then to Stratos. "It only takes a little magic to warm myself. I'll stay out here with Harrowheart." Keep him out of trouble.

Jim

"All right. I'll be back with him then. "

Jim is quick to follow the elder Caelus up the road.

Stratos

Stratos may be well distracted from his fears about Harrow, but he's deeply relieved when Isidor rules out the idea of leaving him alone, among innocent defenseless townsfolk. There's gratitude in his nod to her, before he turns his horse and canters down the near-empty streets with Jim close behind. It's not long before they return, weaving through the bustle that's already started to spring up as the town wakes properly, hearths and ovens warming to life and apprentices fetching in water from the wells.

The horses in the middle of town draw enough curious glances that Stratos is very keen to move on. He just nods to Isidor and Harrowheart to rejoin the group as they pass and head across town to the northern gate. His pack is visibly heavier, and between himself and Jim they've picked up a small bundle of torches each, ready for anticipated tomb-delving.

Harrowheart

In the short amount of time away from Jim and Stratos' prying eyes Harrowheart keeps close to Isidor. No one in Bruma knows who they are, so no one can criticize them if, while they wait on their horses, he rests a hand on her leg.

Stratos' return is welcome, though. Harrowheart is all too aware that, despite not knowing who they are, these townsfolk are staring at them. He encourages his horse to follow Stratos quickly. The sight of those torches worries him in a way he can't quite put to words. Torches for fire, fire for burning the undead... Hopefully none of them will be destined for his body.

When he catches up he presses, "How far to our destination, Tribune?"

Jim

Any questions Jim might have had about their destination or what they're likely to be facing once they arrive he's already asked in the time they were separated from Isidor and Harrowheart. Now the captain has his sights focused on the direction of their destination.

Inside his pack, the black soul gem is a reassuring weight he can reach down and feel whenever his nerves strike him. They have a plan, for better or for worse. Jim knows his part to play in the oncoming struggle.

If Felix still cares for anything but his work at all, they've got a chance. This is one time the captain will not sit by and allow himself to be abandoned again.

His horse keeps pace behind Stratos as they head out. Only a glance is spared for their companions. There's nothing left for Jim to say.

Isidor

There was no way Harrowheart was being left on his own. Especially after last night. She shuffles restlessly on her horse while she waits until Harrowheart's hand stills her. At first she blinks in surprise, but stays still until Stratos' return. She'll take what she can get while she can. As soon as the tribune reappears, however, they're all eager to get going. She wants this over with. She wants everything back to normal.

Catching up, she adds, "And do we know anything about it? Is this a place you've ever been to before?"

Stratos

Stratos motions them to wait, and only when they've passed through the gate and left its guard behind is he willing to speak further. Out here the snow remains, the country silent aside from the song of some hardy birds and the rustle of wind in the sparse trees, the clops and snorts of their horses. The road out this way is narrower, more of a path, the stones sunken amid earth and snow, and they're the only ones taking it.

"I think I know the place where he's laired, yes," Stratos says at last, eyes on the path ahead. He's thinking back to dimly remembered words, the memory that flew to mind when Sam spoke of a ruin... "It's an... well, a ruin, a place called Rielle. We found it as children, exploring out here... and I've no doubt Felix returned without me, later." When Stratos had gone away to study, and no-one was left to tell Felix not to go inside...

"It's about three hours from here on foot- less for us, but the horses won't bear us too close. The ground is too steep and the path unreliable. We'll rest an hour and prepare once we've sighted the place. I know this type of ruin: there are likely to be traps, using darts or spikes or poisonous vapors, and given our opponent we can expect any number of undead. There *should* be some lights still working in the place, but if not we'll have torches to supplement our magelight."

Jim

The copious amount of traps Stratos is listing honestly worry Jim a hell of a lot more than the idea of undead. He's seen plenty of undead since coming to the nexus and befriended most of them. By and large they are still people, though he hopes any they end up facing aren't sentient like Harrowheart is. That falls awful close to outright murder. Not something Jim is ever for unless it's unavoidable.

Besides, Jim's seen his fair share of antiquated traps in old ruins on his away missions planetside. Lost a number of good men and women to them as well. He knows better than to treat such threats lightly.

"We're going to have to be real careful. " There's unease in the captain's voice when he finally speaks up. "Can't afford to lose anyone here. "

Harrowheart

"Let me go ahead, then," Harrowheart says, his voice harsh through gritted teeth. "When we enter the ruin. Stay behind me. Poison hurts, but I won't die. Spikes, darts... I'll survive. Or."

He clears his throat, a sickly, phlegmy sound. "I'll control the first body we find. It can be our scout."

Isidor

Traps? Nobody mentioned anything about traps before! They all sound so horrible too. Isidor frowns and glances between Harrowheart and Jim. She's glad the captain is as worried as she is. It reassures her that this isn't something basic that she was ignorant of.

Harrowheart's suggestion only deepens her frown. "Doesn't that require energy and concentration? You'll need all your strength for when we find Felix."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart turns quickly to look at her. "And you'll need your lives," he snaps. "You can fight without me if you have to, but unless the Tribune can cleanse poisons you might *die* to those traps."

Stratos

Stratos is quiet - disapproval and recognition of the practicalities conflicting. Making use of necromancy to protect themselves? Even under the circumstances, how should he feel about that?

We both know it doesn't matter.

"I have seen these kinds of trap before, and I *did* take all the counter-toxins we had at home. But Harrowheart is right. We can afford to lose no-one before we reach Felix. The corpses we find are another matter." He turns to look around at the death knight, and nods. "Do what you must."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart doesn't nod in return. He fully intended to do what he had to do regardless of moral objections.

Jim

"Still, watch where you step and we may avoid a lot of it all together. And don't touch anything. Learned that the hard way. "

There's no limit to how crafty such traps can be designed. The passage of time and degradation of the components are the only limiting factors on these lethal setups. He's grateful Stratos isn't arguing with Harrows idea. It's one that may keep them safe as they venture onward.

"Keep in mind some of our weapons are charmed to turn undead as well. If we can get them to activate their own traps it will save us a lot of trouble. "

Isidor

Harrowheart snapping suddenly catches Isidor off guard, and then Stratos goes and agrees with him. If things had been calmer, the sentiment might have been sort of sweet, but instead her shocked expression turns into a scowl and nudges her horse closer to Jim.

She turns her full attention to the captain. "Have you fought undead here before?"

Jim

"Never."

He slides a sideways glance toward the other Earth-born. Carefully shakes his head.

"They don't exist in my world. I've fought non humans before but unsure any of their anatomy would be comparable. Even if it were, Starfleet isn't an army and I'm no soldier. "

Isidor

Undeterred, she presses, "Have you explored some of the ruins on this world? Is that how you 'learned the hard way'?"

Jim

"I was held captive in some once. But my experience is more from exploring old ruins on other planets for study as per Starfleet mission statements. "

He feels like he's just letting her down the more he talks, but there's no good lying to her either.

"Lost several good people to similar circumstances before. "

Harrowheart

What Jim says sparks a thought in Harrowheart. His armor creaks as he turns to look between the three living humans. "Nobody's dying here," he says – demands, really. It doesn't sound like he's leaving room for argument... Yet something remains unsaid, judging by the way he stares at them rather than resume his forward-facing ride.

"But."

He clears his throat wetly again.

"If one of you does. I have enough energy in me to bring you back. With your minds. Like me. If you don't want to stay dead, tell me before we enter the ruins."

It doesn't seem fair to keep looking at them after offering that option. He returns his attention to the road. That's for them to consider privately.

Stratos

Stratos reacts immediately - and poorly.

"Absolutely not!" he snaps, turning to glower back at them. "We came here to prevent one undeath. I won't have anyone else lose their soul for this!"

Jim

"Whatever it takes to save Felix."

Jim's normal hesitation is gone in this moment. He has no desire to die again, nor to be resurrected again. But if the mission isn't over.... if Felix still isn't saved...

"I'll do whatever it takes to save Felix."

He doesn't look at any of them when he answers. Jaw set as he stares straight ahead.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart points a finger at Stratos and comes back at him with a sharp and immediate, "Shut your *fuckin'* mouth, Tribune. It's *their* choice, *not* yours."

But then Jim speaks, and Harrowheart quiets himself. He tips his helmet ever-so-slightly at Stratos. See? They're not against it.

Isidor

"Here's an idea: Let's *not* kill each other before we even get to this cave." Isidor tries not to sound too sarcastic. She tries.

Stratos

Stratos reins in his horse a step so he can look Harrowheart in the eyes, and though his tone is icy there's a hint of much more simmering beneath it, something nearly tangible that makes his horse shift and flatten her ears nervously.

"But everything that happens here is ultimately *my* responsibility. I will do whatever I must to stop the fate your blades intend for my brother... to prevent him inflicting it on anybody else. No-one else is *exempted* from that." His gaze shifts to Jim, and though his face shows a distressed strain, the moment where he seems about to say more passes, and he regains control of his emotions, looks ahead again. Gods, he's a mess if he can't hide his own opinion when needed.

"Isidor is right, of course. If we use some *sense* we can simply avoid the issue."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart stares Stratos down throughout the other man's tense speech, but just before Stratos swings his gaze to Jim he looks down. Looks away. He was wrong to have spoken the way he did. He knows it. There's nothing more for him to say now. Let the moment pass. Let him wordlessly admit that he was wrong and let the rest of them move on.

Isidor

Wonderful, boys, well done... Isidor rolls her eyes and waits for everyone to say their bit, and gives them all time to cool their tempers. A couple of minutes will do before she moves the topic onto something productive.

"So does anyone have tips for fighting zombies? Because, honestly, this is going to be a

first for me. Somehow I don't think the tricks I've learned for incapacitating a person will work the same on something that's already dead."

Harrowheart

Ah Hell, Isidor. Harrowheart wanted to be left to his silence, then you go and ask a question he knows best how to answer. Still, he glances Stratos' way before he answers. Is he allowed to speak yet? He's clearly got something to say...

Jim

"Iiiii mostly plan on shooting until it runs away or stops moving. "

That's a definitive 'wing it ' from the captain.

Stratos

Stratos is no longer looking at Harrowheart, but at the road ahead. Presumably he doesn't care if the death knight answers. He does remark automatically, "Use fire and aim to incapacitate them, as a first rule."

Then there's a pause, because he wants to say Harrowheart will have more insight but he's trying to frame that in a way that won't come out as a poor jab.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart gestures Stratos' way. "Fire's best, but don't let them burn you. They won't die right away. Isidor, be ready to cast. A lot. Don't go for the legs or the guts with weapons. Go for the head if you wanna kill them. Don't ever, *ever* let them get you on the ground. Don't grapple with them. Bright lights might turn them around or blind them. Electrical magic will stun them, might kill them. Without their master there to order them, we might be able to sneak past them. Usually they tell the living from the dead by smell, but sometimes they can sense when someone ain't 'with them.' Number one thing is to *keep quiet* when you can. And if they attack, don't split up unless you really can't help it. We're gonna need each other."

Jim

"Is my body gonna be an issue when I'm... you know. "

Jim reaches down and pats at the soul gem he has safely wrapped up. If Stratos worries Jim isn't taking this seriously or doesn't know what he's agreeing to, he's

wrong. He does.

And he's terrified.

It's not going to stop him from doing any of it though. Not when the alternative is losing Felix any number of ways.

Stratos

Harrowheart is offering sound advice - some of it things that Stratos wouldn't have expected from his experience with Tamrielic zombies. He sounds a little distant when he answers Jim. "We'll protect you. Just as they will need to protect Felix, I suspect..."

He's not sure he should discuss *that* aspect of the incentives too much, lest it tempt Harrowheart to take a simpler solution than he wants.

Isidor

Stratos might not want to discuss it, but Isidor likes her plans. "How *are* we going to do that part? Do we know how this is going to play out? Because if there's a role I should be focusing on I'd like to know. Once we get into things should I be fighting whatever we're dealing with or shielding Jim?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart heaves a sigh. "By the time we get to him there probably ain't gonna be any more zombies. *But.*" Another sickly rumble from his throat. "Runeblades can fight on their own for a little while. If they know someone's trying to steal some of their souls, they might fight back. Someone has to be damn good at parrying or shielding if that happens."

Jim

It hasn't skipped Jim's notice that there's really not much anyone can say about what he's going to face inside the soul gem.

There's every possibility he gets rushed and consumed by something inside there with no chance to fight back. It's not like anyone else has been in one of those damn things before.

"Won't have any of my weapons in there. I'll have to make do. "

Harrowheart

Harrowheart scoffs. "What do you think is going to be in there? It's a soul prison, Jim. It'll be nothing but souls in the runeblade. They probably can't even hurt you. You've got the easy job. Find Felix's soul and hold out in the gem until the rest of us can put you back in your bodies."

Isidor

This time it's Isidor's turn to turn on Harrowheart, but while she's firm she doesn't snap at him. "Putting your soul on the line isn't an easy task."

Then she turns to Jim. She looks him in the eye and speaks slowly, clearly. "When Viatorus was younger it wasn't always easy coping with his powers. His soul goes elsewhere and his body stays behind. If this is anything like that then you have to make sure you don't lose yourself. You have to keep the connection to your body, and your own identity through whatever you experience. It's a matter of will power, not physical or magical power."

Jim

It's a few moments before Jim can manage anything to say. On the one hand, Harrow makes it sound like a perfectly ordinary thing to do and his only real worry will be having a body to come back to. On the other...

Harrow is often wrong, or his definition of ordinary very skewed from most people's. He's grateful for Isidor and her commentary.

"Being stubborn and self assured is pretty much what I'm known for. Better hope it's enough. I'll keep it in mind for sure. "

Isidor

It's good to know that her advice is being taken to heart, and that it might actually help. She nods, and after a moment she tilts her head at him. "What's your full name and title?"

Jim

" Captain James Tiberius Kirk, Starfleet serial number SC937-0176CEC."

It's the only thing he's supposed to say if he's ever interrogated and it shows in the way he says it.

"Just take my pin off my shirt if you need my number. It's on the back. "

Stratos

"Can you use it to help anchor him?" Stratos asks from ahead. His expression can't be seen but his voice has softened.

Isidor

"Names have power." She can't help but glance at Harrowheart before she continues. "I use Viatorus' name when I need to ground him and bring him back to his body. He uses it when he needs to come back, too. It helps him remember the waking world and come back to it. If..." She looks to Jim and then to Stratos. "If something goes wrong I'll use it to help how I can. It's very effective with helping Viatorus. I don't see why it wouldn't help here too."

Stratos

Stratos nods, as if to himself. "As to shielding against attack, that happens to be one of my combat specialities. I can focus on thwarting the blades. Though there is the nature of the soul gem to consider. It's a daedric artefact: there is no guaranteeing its properties, especially once you're inside..."

Jim

"It'll work."

Jim's got no proof, no guarantee that this is true. Nothing except a hazy alcohol fueled memory of Sam giving him the crystal and his declaration of having a vested interest in Felix himself. Learning the artifact is daedric honestly makes a lot more sense so far as the captain is concerned. Felix is a conjurer after all. One of his lords seems to have a keen interest in seeing him returned to the land of the living.

Or at least for his soul not to be claimed by someone or something else.

"Let's get this over with."

Part Seven: The Lair of the Necromancer ([Top](#))

Harrowheart

Stratos wasn't wrong about the time it would take to get to the ruins, nor was he wrong about the terrain. It is incredibly steep, and the horses have to be tethered a distance off from the ruins as the group continues on foot. Soon they've sighted their location, and as Stratos had promised, the four take a well-needed rest.

Those parts of the ruins which are still visible above ground are thin, columns and crumbling arches worn narrow by wind and snow and ice which cling thickly to the ground. It's cold here, yes, much colder than it had been in Bruma. For his part, Harrowheart seems unbothered by it despite the way the small amount of moisture in the air coalesces into hoary frost on his blue armor. He loosely loops his cape around Isidor's shoulders as they take their rest. She's going to need it more than him.

They can't hesitate forever, though. Just long enough to regain their strength from the difficult climb. Any longer and that cold will set in. That sense of *dread* will set in. Even Jim, without a sense for magic, must be acutely aware of the unnatural presence which radiates from the ground up into the hearts of the living. No birds sing here, no rabbits investigate any evergreen underbrush. Life has gone away from this place, and necromancy has taken hold. The natural inclination to leave this place is certain to only get worse as they continue, and yet they can't deny their mission. Not this close to the end.

As Harrowheart promised he would, he walks in front of the living. If there are any traps on the way he'd prefer to be the first to find out.

What remains of the ruins above ground isn't much. The faint outlines of buildings where the bases of walls have yet to crumble lie between warped stone pathways that have shifted with the burgeoning earth. It's difficult to tell what anything once was – a shop? a home? a place of worship? – or what the people must have been like.

The ground here remains difficult to traverse, and so their progress through the ruins is slow. There's time to absorb the details of the place... Bleak though they may be.

Now and then hints of what awaits are visible from ground level: sinkholes in the ruins where the foundations of the city have caved into darkness. There must be

a tunnel system beneath where they walk, though judging by the crumbling walls that slope underground the party is just as likely to meet dead ends and cave-ins down there.

One fortunate thing about these northern mountains and their snow are the tracks they leave. Faint hints of activity guide Harrowheart through the ancient city under half-formed arches, through the crumbled floors of manors long destroyed. Eventually his search brings them to a well-preserved city wall that looms above most of the remaining architecture. Shallow stairs lead steeply up to a stone door tucked away beneath dangerously large icicles. The door splits vertically down the middle and bears some kind of circular design in the center.

Harrowheart turns to his companions before he opens it and motions for them to keep a safe distance. You never know what could come barrelling out, after all...

He fumbles with the mechanism before he realizes how to part the door, and even then he struggles with pulling the halves of the door apart. Ice cracks like breaking bones as Harrowheart opens the way to the darkness below.

Just as he predicted something *does* come out, but it isn't something physical – nor is it quite a ghost. Rather that necromancy they could feel before seeping through the ground like radiation comes bursting out, not visible and yet powerfully present. It comes like a stench, heinous and thick. Yet Harrowheart seems not to notice it. While the others are left to deal with their sickness he peeks his head into the darkness.

"We're gonna need a light..."

Stratos

Stratos isn't terribly concerned about traps as they progress. Not out here. It's never been a prime spot for bandits and Ayleid traps rarely survive exterior conditions. He remembers these ruins, too. Remembers sneaking off to clamber over the sunken walls and argue about what the crumbling rooms were for. Being persuaded into going inside - just for a peek - only to find that young hands and minds weren't enough to lever the stone doors open.

But that makes it easier to feel how strange the place is. The silence in the air. Birds used to live in that broken tower - now the tangled nests are empty. Clumps of purple motherwort flowers used to bloom between those fallen stones, but only withered stalks remain. This lonely place has become desolate. Stratos feels a prickle at the back of his neck that tells him, *This is no place for you.*

He tells himself this can't all be Felix's doing. Perhaps he's just grown far too used to seeking out the signs of dark magic.

He's standing back with a ward spell in one hand and lightning balled in the other when Harrow drags those grinding doors apart. He feels prepared to face anything... but he's not expecting the *wash* of malevolent energy that rolls over them. Gods, he can *feel* it on his skin, sinking into him, filling his mouth like the stink of decay. Stratos gags despite himself, spells flickering as he tries not to give in and just start dry-heaving. It's going to be a minute or two before he can try to supply a magelight.

Jim

Ruins and remnants of ancient civilizations are nothing new to Captain Kirk. The last three years have had him delving into long abandoned outposts and alien dwellings to take readings and record the activity of these places on more moons and planets than he can even remember off the top of his head. He's inspected long dead places of worship, abandoned cities, and even derelect ships during his five year mission. The lack of life in a place that was once built to sustain it doesn't bother him.

At least, it *shouldn't*.

Jim's felt this sense of foreboding once before. When he was given the preliminary reports of the Valiant's last logs when they gave the order to have the ship self destruct. The moment he knew he'd brought something dangerous back onto his own ship but had yet to realize what it was. That mistake had cost him the lives of a dozen crew members in total. Including Gary Mitchel and Lee Kelso's. That mistake is two years old now and yet it's coming up fresh in his mind because it's *that* kind of dread creeping into his skin in a way Jim can't understand. It's nothing but crumbling stone and snow covered ruins.

So why does he feel like he's about to die? His fight or flight instincts are rearing up with an urgency that speaks to the many horrors Jim Kirk has survived. Having his bow out and half drawn eases the tension and gives him some sense of control as they creep forward through the twisting ruins. They have a job to do and Jim's here to play his part. They've come this far.

When Harrow breaks the seal on the door there's a soft clatter as the arrow Jim had notched slips from his fingers and drops to the stone floor. It takes Jim a moment to realize his hands are shaking even with the soothing calmness the

bracers' magic tries to instill in him. He's trembling from head to foot, unable to breathe as the panic attack sets in. Jim doesn't know what's triggering it. He doesn't know but it's *not safe* here.

The self loathing creeps in behind it, biting his own head off with its ferocity. *They're hardly past the front door and you're already falling apart. Pathetic. You're pathetic. How could anyone expect you to save someone? Anyone? Is Felix of so little importance that you'll fall to pieces the moment the goal is within reach? Get up. Fucking get **up**. Get up or just roll over and die already.*(edited)

Isidor

With Harrowheart taking the lead and Stratos anchoring their small team together, Isidor sticks with Jim as they travel. The scenery, lifeless though it is, catches her attention and distracts her from the imminent mortal peril she's walking into. That works better for her. In the stress of a moment she can make sure she's calm, it's the waiting, the approaching that's terrifying. If they were here for any other reason it might have been a lovely trip. As it is she has to resist the urge to go and investigate the hidden city. That gets easier the closer they get. The foreboding silence is deafening, and her senses fill her with a low but certain dread. That, at least, she can understand. Isidor is not unfamiliar with the terrifying anxiety of being watched closely by beings she cannot see, cannot fight, cannot predict, who are most certainly more powerful than her. And that was only her gods.

All thoughts of exploring vanish entirely at the sight of that stone door. Stratos is quick to prepare himself and like Jim, Isidor follows suit, getting her axe ready, a shielding spell not far from her thoughts. The moment of tension, right before Harrowheart opens the door is when she feels it. *Really* feels it. This place is cursed. It reminds her of Harith Nur's place of work. A whole building that felt like a mausoleum. That's what they're about to walk into. A mausoleum.

The door cracks open and her stomach drops. Its presence is seemingly immediate and it makes her instincts scream. Death, decay, shadow, malevolence... Axe forgotten, she's quick to put up a shield. It's not a physical shield like she's shown Harrowheart before, this is against negative energy, *bad* energy, and she has to focus to wrap it around herself, to make sure nothing more is going to affect her. She hasn't thrown up, at least. Taking a deep breath, she steps closer to Stratos and Jim, trying to extend it over them to give them a chance to recover. Hopefully the feeling will pass and they won't have to deal with it again. Hopefully.

Ignoring Harrowheart's question, she looks between everyone, confused and concerned. "Was that a trap?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart wheels around in a hurry when he hears someone gagging. He's just in time to catch sight of the three living looking nearly as queasy as they had when they saw him remove his helmet. He doubletakes, checking the darkness once more before looking to his company again.

"Necromancy," he says. "Get used to it." A few seconds pass as he lingers stiffly near the open doorway before he demands, "Now one of you, bring me a light."

Stratos

Stratos can feel Isidor wrap her magic over them, and though the touch is unfamiliar the effect is less so. It eases the assault on his senses and he gets his body to calm, nodding gratefully at the Earth mage. Her question gets a shake of his head, but Harrow answers in full before he can.

"I've never felt such a... heavy aura before," he mutters, all the more worried about what has his brother in its grip. He steps forward, though, and tosses a ball of white light into the air above Harrowheart. It bobs above his head like a balloon, giving out no heat in the chill air.

Jim

Hands that are ceasing their tremble fumble in the darkness for the arrow Jim had dropped, scooping it up and renotching it to his bow. Unlike Stratos, Jim doesn't know what Isidor's done any more than he had what caused his panic attack in the first place. All he knows is that he's breathing again and able to stand on his own two feet, no matter how queasy he still feels.

"What aura? I don't feel anything." He frowns sharply. Not being able to tell what's going on makes him uneasy. "Just my nerves and the urge to run." The last bit is a mutter more to himself than to the others. If that's going to be a theme for this place, he'll have to brace himself going forward. At least now he knows to expect it.

Isidor

It's the dismissive of Harrowheart's answer that gets to her. All the strange and terrible things that have happened and after one night with a crazy (genie?) stranger he's answering her like that? *Her?* Isidor glowers at Harrowheart for poignant moment, but whether or not he sees it she has to turn her attention to Stratos and Jim.

Isidor turns to Jim and eyes him up and down, making sure he's all right. "Not right now you don't." Turning to Stratos she speaks honestly. "I can't hold this *and* fight. You're the most experienced commander here, do you think I should hold it for as long as possible or drop it and hope we become accustomed to that..." She wrinkles up her nose. "...*feeling?*"

Stratos

Stratos takes a moment to answer, looking back at the others and trying to feel out what Isidor has done. Finally he admits, "As glad as I am for the relief, we'd be better saving our strength. The shock should recede as we adjust to the atmosphere here... but if you can lower your protection slowly, I would be grateful." He glances back at Harrow, and the door. "If it becomes severe enough to stop us from defending ourselves, I should be able to rally our spirits against it." For a time, anyway...

He glances at Jim, not quite meeting his eye. "What you're feeling is the natural response of a living creature to the presence of powerful necromancy nearby. You don't feel it directly, but your instincts know. Unfortunately for us..." he steps forward to join Harrow, "it's time to tell our instincts which pit to go jump in."

Harrowheart

Isidor's stare is mirrored by Harrowheart, who watches her impassively behind his visor. When she turns away, so does he. As the breathers talk he begins through the door, but after a few feet turns and calls to those outside, "Follow me."

Past the door is a small landing, an entryway of sorts where people may have been expected to prepare themselves for entrance to whatever lies below. Small holes worn in the stone ceiling allow shafts of grey-filtered sunlight through, but they're not enough to light the place on their own.

Just beyond lies the stairwell that descends into the cold earth. Harrowheart descends with his sword drawn. The way ahead narrows and the steps are tall

and precariously shallow. Despite the claustrophobic walls the ceilings are high, perhaps designed for a race of people taller than men of Stratos' height. The steps are not easy for the death knight to traverse in a bulky suit of armor, but at least with his body blocking the way the three behind him should be safer from surprise attacks. The stairs spiral for what could be multiple storeys, but it's impossible to tell as there are no meaningful markings on any of the stone walls.

Suddenly Harrowheart dips, half-falling with a frightened "*Hup!*" Almost immediately after he begins to laugh dryly. He turns to the others, the light of his eyes glowing brightly in the dimness. "Careful," he says, "Stairs end there."

They let out to a long hallway that's only half-illuminated by the light Stratos gave Harrowheart. As with everything in the Ayleid ruins above it's all stone walls and stone floors, but rather than being built by marble blocks everything has been carved from the rocks of the mountainside. And unlike the city at the surface, this place has been less weathered by time.

Hip-height pillars designed to brighten the place with candles or torches sit darkly now, though some ash nearby suggests their recent use. Between each of these pillars is an arched doorway into rooms which once might have been used for business or rituals or any number of things that can't properly be discerned after centuries of disuse and looting. In some of these rooms strange crystals are growing outward from the rocks. They catch the light and powerfully reflect it, brightening those rooms more than others. And yet, disappointingly (or, perhaps, relievingly?) there's not much to be seen. Shattered bits of furniture, empty chests, rotting, ancient rugs and blankets... And in one, unfortunately large blood stains near a makeshift bed. The blood trails off as if something were dragged from it – doubtlessly the body of the person who lost their life there.

Harrowheart proceeds down the hallway curiously peeking into doors and lingering to allow the living to look as well. He pauses briefly and holds his hand out for the others to stop. In the distance, far, far off, a sound is echoing through the tunnels. It reaches them as barely a whisper. An *agonized* whisper. Someone or something is moaning in pain and torment. Or perhaps it's just the wind. Just the wind. Underground.

But it seems the moan isn't what Harrowheart had them pause for. He looks around, head raised. With the others to his back he flips up his visor and sniffs the air. Pauses. Thinks. Smells again.

"The living," he says, lowering his visor once more. "Someone living was here recently. Just up ahead..."

Jim

The further the party descends into the depths the warmer it *should* be. With how frozen the surface was, these ruins deep into the mountainside should be a more stable temperature especially out of the wind like they are. And yet...whether it's from the latent dark energies surrounding this place or a much more practical means of magic for preserving corpses and stifling the smell, Jim can still see his breath even once they've stepped away from the staircase.

The emptiness of this place grates on his strained nerves. Isidor's slow release of her ward has allowed Jim to adjust to the situation at hand but it's only keeping him upright, not calming his frazzled psyche that screams danger around every corner and blares warnings that this is no place for a living man such as he. So strung taught is he that Jim isn't even certain he's hearing the agonized moan or if it's just his mind playing tricks on him. Giving a body to the copious amounts of semi-fresh blood stains that were drug out from the previous room. The stains aren't fresh enough to be wet, but neither have they turned brownish-black with age just yet.

Harrowheart's comment doesn't surprise him in the least. He could have said as much from the sordid story-telling stains in the previous room. Shouldn't someone living still be here? Felix couldn't have changed that far so fast, could he? Still, the warning gives the captain something to focus on. The enchanted bow he'd been gifted is a comforting warmth in his fingers. He can still make out faint golden runes whenever the magic flickers in the grain of the wood. A weapon enchanted to repel the undead. He is not entirely powerless in this place, even if the magic is borrowed and not his own.

He gives Harrowheart a wordless nod. Ready no matter what lies ahead to do what's necessary.

Stratos

Stratos reminds himself that he shouldn't expect to find Felix up here. Wherever the conjurer has chosen to set himself up, it's likely somewhere more secluded – and fortified – than the upper chambers. That said, casting a careful eye over the debris reveals a sort of order imposed on it. Splintered and charred furniture has been dragged into one corner, some of it broken up into a neat pile of firewood.

Assorted junk and mouldered cloth thrown by the abandoned bed. It's not all sorted, but much of the space has obviously been cleared out. And there are no bodies...

But following Harrow leads them out into a somewhat larger room – or maybe a small atrium – where the remains of a burnt-out campfire sit. In a small alcove nearby is a bedroll, draped with extra blankets against the cold. There's a scattering of abandoned candles, a small chest with a few of Felix's clothes inside; a sack full of... well, the *remains* of food. Forgotten plates, a cup or two. It's all terribly normal, if the camp wasn't weeks old. If it wasn't in a forgotten tomb of a city.

And then there are the books. Piles of them radiating out from another small room. Small piles, arranged in some order only their owner could easily discern. Books with paper markers sticking out of them. Books of spells and summonings, accounts of meeting daedra and ways to protect the mind. Books with titles like *A Catalogue of Forbidden Names* and *Wards Against Destruction: Lessons from the Oblivion Crisis* and *A War-Mage's Guide to Siegecraft*. Some are ancient; some bear stamps inside proclaiming them 'Property of the College of Whispers – PURLOIN AT YOUR OWN RISK'. Some fall open to diagrams of ritual circles, or inked illustrations of something coiled and writhing with too many inhuman eyes... eyes that almost seem to focus on the reader...

And there, amid the books, is a simple desk scattered with notes and sheets of smudged paper. Some are written out in Felix's steady hand. More are dragged out in a tired scrawl or scribbled in impatient shorthand. Some sheets are balled up and thrown aside, or have even just drifted down to lie heedless in a corner. Felix's satchel has been thrown down atop some of them.

Should the sheet poking out from beneath that bag catch the eye, it begins: "*Dear Stratos...*"

The tribune is already taking a good look around, motivated by far more than the need to check for lurking enemies. Felix was here. He can read his little brother's presence without having to check the handwriting on those notes or possessing a worgen's nose. *Felix is close*. The moment he sees that satchel cast aside he goes to check it- and then grabs at the letter beneath. It's incomplete, the rumpled paper with its torn edges suggesting it's lain forgotten a while. Stratos's eyes dart back and forth as he scans it. Then he reads it again, face tightening.

Dear Stratos,

I've given a lot of thought to what you said. You're right, as always. I can't be of use to anyone the way I've been going about things, not anyone who still

matters. That's exactly why you won't see me for a little while, brother.

I'm going to follow my own research, as I should have been doing all along. Even if I could be moulded into the proper war-mage you want, your lesson plans wouldn't be enough. I don't know where you'd like to fit me into your war plans, but you and I know that there's someone more important than any of them. Being a dutiful little Imperial legionnaire means nothing if I still can't defend him. I can't rest stop t forget

I refuse to remain a liability to him.

It's not the only such letter: another in a slightly messier hand is crumpled up by the dead fire that reads:

Dear Stratos,

I considered writing you earlier, brother, but it's hard to remember everything when I'm researching. Never fear, I'm alive and well and not under arrest, but next time you see me I'll have something to show you.

and there's another by the bedroll, scrawled in exhaustion,

Stratos,

You'll have to find someone else to mind your make-work for a while. I'm sure your plans won't miss me. I have a better idea for solving our problem. You'll see when I'm done.

Stratos is distracted enough by his letter not to take much immediate notice of the desk, or the parchment at the top of the pile there. A dried-up quill lies atop it, and the inkwell's been knocked over, soaking the upper right corner black and spilling on to ruin a few other notes and sketches as it trickled away. The other side remains, the words legible in spite of the shaky lettering. It starts, quite simply: *Jim...*

Jim

It's not until Stratos has moved away from the party and started digging through all the sheafs of paper that Jim takes notice. He's never really seen Felix's spaces lived in before. He stepped foot in the other's old room in Bruma earlier. But the only time he was in Felix's camp they knocked the tent over before he really got a look at it and also he was a child at the time thanks to a Nexus curse. He isn't as aware of what Felix living in a space looks like. Though by Stratos' face and actions Jim's able to connect the dots.

Once again he slips the bow away and re-quiver's the arrow he had selected. Moves an empty potion vial to the side while he looks over the desk Stratos

walked past. The spilled ink catches his attention first and while following its path his eyes settle on the letter.

His heart stops.

Jim licks at his bottom lip, gaze flitting between the paper and the rest of the desk before he quickly clears it off and picks up the note.

Stratos

The message is painfully short. It's even more painfully clear exactly when this one was written.

Jim,

I'm sorry, love. I can't think of the words to tell you how sorry. I can't understand how I could try to harm you, and I can't come back until I know for certain it won't happen again.

I think something in my research must have gotten to me. I think I've found a way to keep it out

The last letter is sloppy, trailing off near to the abandoned quill.

Jim

The message is ruined and hard to read with the ink stains especially with Stratos' magelight hovering over himself. He'll have to shuffle a bit closer to the Tribune to read properly.

This is why he's here.

The note is folded and hastily stuffed into his pack. Forget auras and instincts telling him where to run. Later, he can cry. Later he can scream out his frustrations and fears. For now, Jim has his target.

Isidor

Letting the shield down slowly is almost more difficult than keeping it up. Between focusing on that, and making sure to keep an eye out for danger, she doesn't pay much heed to the debris around them. She hates this, she realises. She hates being in a place that sets her so on edge, that makes her suspicious of every

shadow and corner. This world isn't like hers. All she has to look out for it traps and undead... which includes wraiths, right? She starts eyeing the shadows again.

What is even less encouraging is the copious amount of blood they find and Harrowheart's subsequent mention of something living being around. Whatever living thing is around it's not going to be the owner of the blood, she's certain of that. Stratos sees something and Jim follows him to root through bags and papers. She trusts that whatever it is must be important enough to them both for them to get distracted, but she keeps an eye on them while they read notes. With them stopped, she moves closer to Harrowheart to ask in a whisper, "Could it be Felix?"

Harrowheart

Harrowheart doesn't show any curiosity when the letters are found. He lingers near the door of the room and watches the hallways for threats that, fortunately, don't come. Isidor surprises him instead, and he stares at her for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "I'm sure it is," he says quietly. A few more seconds pass before he adds, "Probably a good sign. He wouldn't be writin' letters if he was dead." A glance back at the other two and he whispers to Isidor, "Unless they're suicide notes."

He hisses to get the others' attention, then continues down the hallway on the assumption that they'll follow.

Harrowheart continues down the hallway until he comes to the end of the passage where another spiraling stairway has been carved. He peers down with the light above his head and finds that it's been caved in by massive slabs of rock. Water drips from a hole in the ceiling above, and from below the sound of moaning echoes up. There's a gap in the cave-in below where a person ought to be able to wriggle through. Harrowheart gets on his hands and knees and looks through the hole, then back to his companions, and with that he turns around and begins to lower himself in feet first.

The sound of his metal boots scraping stone below signals his brief landing. There's a groan and a scuffle, the sound of a heavy collision, and a repeated thumping – a crunching of bone and a squelch of meat. Leather scrapes metal like the sound of hands being rubbed on plate, then Harrowheart orders the group above, "Come down."

Harrowheart stands waiting next to a rotten body whose head has been bashed in against a wall, leaving the evidence of its violent death as a dark smear

against the wall.

In the stage below things are simultaneously more and less immaculate. Looters haven't been able to steal what once was in this part of the city due to the cave-in that blocked the way of the stairs, but the stairwell wasn't the only place the rocks above have sunk into the structure. The way ahead is littered with boulders that make the path treacherous and block entrance into the side rooms and other hallways. The parts of the walls that still remain are decorated with tile murals of elves and birds and, in some cases, elves turning into birds, but much of the scenes are obscured by rock or utterly destroyed by time. The water that dripped from above has pooled on the ground, leaving the floor slick with mold and incredibly cold. Going quietly through this place is going to be difficult.

Once the others have joined him on the second level Harrowheart continues forward. He navigates the rubble slowly with his sword at the ready. Where there's one zombie there's bound to be more...

The cave-ins are half a blessing; there's no way to get lost when there's only one way to go. The sound of dripping water accompanies the group as they continue through the ruins, but distantly ahead another sound grows louder. Painful, mournful moaning. Not one person, not a few, but a dozen or more – a small crowd of zombies.

Harrowheart stops abruptly a few yards ahead of where the sound seems to come. He turns to Stratos and hisses, "*Dispel the light. We gotta be sneaky. No lights, no sounds. We go through the dark 'til we're past...*"

Harrowheart looks to each of his companions in turn to be sure they're ready for what comes next before the light is gone. And when it's snuffed out they're left in near complete darkness. The only light is the unliving glow of Harrowheart's eyes magnified by the vertical slats of his visor. He closes his eyes then, leaving them all in total darkness... And him without sight. His hand reaches to where he last saw Isidor and holds her by the shoulder.

"Go," he whispers to them. "*Quietly.*"

Jim

Quietly.

They're supposed to be quiet through water, slick moss, rubble everywhere, and

the undead. Jim swallows his complaints and crouches down. Just like the empty alleys of Tarsus, Jim. It's slow going when he has to slip out of the puddles with every step but he keeps his eyes and his ears focused on the destination beyond.

Harrowheart

Around them are the sounds of *others* walking in this water. Long, slow strides without direction, gentle splashing as bodies trip or lose their balance, whispered moans of discomfort and confusion. Of pain.

As Jim leads the way through the group crouched down as he is he comes in contact with limply dangling arms, cold flesh slicked with the wetness of the water and decay. Dead fingers run through his hair as he passes, causing sounds of distant awareness in the unseen zombies.

As they call to each other the quiet sounds of legs through water grows a hint stronger. More of them are moving. They're coming closer, but slowly. They might not know exactly what's going on, but they suspect something is calling their attention...

Isidor

The sight of the cave-in doesn't concern Isidor. She's about to offer to use magic to clear it but Harrowheart is already halfway through to the other side. Perhaps it's better, she muses as she waits for the all clear. The more magic they cast the more likely they are to catch unwanted attention. Her thoughts are interrupted by the sounds of the scuffle below. Even when Harrowheart calls to them her body is tense, her hesitation apparent. For good reason, too. She has to clasp her hands to her mouth when she sees the smashed up corpse, and quickly decides that the less she stares the better. There is going to be a lot of this.

As they continue she focuses wholeheartedly on following Harrowheart and keeping her footing on the slick stones. It takes her a minute to register the sounds, another to realise what is ahead of them. She gets her axe ready and looks to Harrowheart, expecting a plan. What she gets is the order to sneak past. Sneak past dead things in the dark. The last thing Harrowheart sees before the light is snuffed out is Isidor's expression: Wide eyed, terrified indignation. But then they're in darkness and they're moving. All she can think is how dangerous this is. They should just use magic. They should burn them all. She can *feel* them. If they decide to bite her like this she won't be able to react in time. She

won't be able to help anyone. Yet still she feels her way along, sticking to Harrowheart with a tight grip on his arm.

Stratos

Stratos's expression has been a calm mask since he tucked the letter into a pocket. There can be no dwelling on anything but the task at hand. No acting as anything less than an Imperial war mage. When Harrow gives the word to sneak he doesn't waste breath questioning it. Perhaps there are more zombies ahead than the living can detect; perhaps Harrow's just aware that these dark, slippery, cramped quarters don't favor them. He just gives the others a second to ready themselves before he snuffs the light.

Thanks to his skill with illusions, Stratos knows he has the advantage here - more than anyone besides Harrow, perhaps. He can cast a spell that abruptly deadens the noise from his steps, the soft scrapes of his armor - and this time, unlike the spells he *wants* to be seen, there's no flare of light, no sound when he casts. He passes a hand over his eyes as he follows, making the shadows recede in his vision. It doesn't make daylight of the gloom, nor do anything to make the treacherous floor less slick, but he can see what's before them. Try to help the others if they slip. There isn't room to truly evade the lurching dead, but at least he won't be surprised by the bump and brush of listless bodies in the dark.

And atop that, how great a comfort it is to have his armor now. To make sure every rotten touch is a distant one, warded away by plates of uncaring steel. Stratos hasn't bothered to draw his sword. If this goes arse-up right now it's the least effective defense he has.

Harrowheart

The zombies wander aimlessly through the passageway and in and out of side rooms, each of them just as blind as the group. Barring Stratos, of course, who has the distinct pleasure of not only smelling them but seeing them, their faces half-melted from rot, their noses caved in, their empty, pale eyes just as unseeing in the darkness as in the light.

The farther the group goes the more they begin to arouse suspicion. Some of the corpses hang their jaws or sniff at the air with their noseless faces. The scent of the living is in the air. They begin to vocalize, to moan and gasp and grunt in confusion and excitement. Their noise encourages only more noise, and soon they're loud and eager enough that the sounds of Felix's rescue team in the water is an afterthought.

The bodies begin to bump into each other at a quickened pace, and limp-jointed arms strike out against whatever is in front of them. Some fruitlessly smack crumbling walls, while others smear their slimy fingers across the faces of the living. They hiss their anticipation at touching something unfamiliar, but before any of them have the chance to bite to grips in earnest the living have moved on.

And just when it seems the hands roam their quickest and the pained moans are their loudest, suddenly the group is out of the throng. The zombies continue to shuffle through the watery passage, moaning and feeling and searching for victims they can no longer find.

Harrowheart urges everyone in front of him to go faster with a silent shove and reaches back to pull anyone behind him along. Go, go, go! They hit the end of the hall and are forced to turn down a set of thankfully dry stairs. Harrow stops them, listens, smells the air... And finally whispers, "*Tribune, li...*"(edited)

But before he can ask for a light he sees something below that catches his eye. There's already a hint of light glowing dimly from the level below. It's not enough to see by, but it's enough to be noticed.

Harrow's glowing visor sweeps across the group, illuminating each of their faces just enough to make out their expressions.

"Light means someone's down there. Could be him. Y'all ready for a fight?..."

Jim

Thank every god for the noise the undead are making all on their own. It lets Jim move quicker, skirting around legs that stumble toward him until the sound of splashing is behind him and his feet are once more on dry land. His bow is in his hands the moment he doesn't need them to guide his way and balance, but Harrow's hand is clenched around Jim's arm tugging him along even quicker still.

So much for quietly. Now isn't the time for scowling or arguing though. They've made it through the throng of bodies no worse for the wear, save for perhaps their nerves or sanity. The captain pulls his arm free from Harrow's grip as soon as he's able to but nods all the same.

He's as ready as he's going to get.

Stratos

There's no comfort in being able to see the ruined faces that loom out of the shadows when Stratos gets close enough. They turn blindly toward him, groping after his companions' passing. Less than a foot away and he can see the dim outlines of their sagging features. He turns his gaze away and hurries after the others. One zombie lurches into his way abruptly, arms jerking out in search of Jim. Stratos feels its flabby cold flesh swipe across his face before he shoves it away reflexively. It tumbles on the wet floor and goes down splashing. The tribune steps past it hastily, bringing his steel boot down heavy and silent and ignoring whatever crunches beneath it. Head down, hands closed around his readied spells, don't *think* about it just follow the others.

He's wiping his mouth when they're finally free of the mire, grimacing unconsciously. He can still taste the slime of it, feel the foetid scent of it fill his nose. His footsteps are still soundless as he joins the others. His expression is set and grim again when Harrow looks at him, and there's a small flare of light around his fingers before the faint green sheen of an armor spell settles over his skin. Then he nods.

"You and I will go down first," he says to the death knight. They're best protected in case of a nasty surprise, after all. Though Stratos would be lying if he didn't see Harrow going in ahead of himself.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart stares blankly at the tribune for a short while until eventually he gives a curt nod. "Together," he says seriously. His hand grips the handle of his sword as he begins down the stairwell and prepares himself for whatever comes next.

As the light of the next level grows brighter so does the sound of the discontented dead. Then, carefully, silently, he peers around the final corner to see what awaits them. He stops the others behind him, gives them a final look, and takes a deep, loud breath in as if suggesting they all do the same.

And then he charges forward, sword at the ready like a jouster's polearm. The soles of his boots are terribly loud as they slam against the stone floors, but the reply of the wailing dead quickly grows louder. Corpses moan and gnash their teeth, wail and hiss and shriek as they turn their milky eyes to see an enemy charging toward them. Shambling bodies from the adjacent rooms begin to fill the hallway as Harrowheart and Stratos go forward to cut a path for their companions.

The first zombie that comes within blade's reach of Harrowheart is swiftly impaled through the gut, but aside from its howl of frustration it hardly seems to notice. It paws at him as he runs a second through behind it. With his full strength – waning though it may be – Harrowheart swiftly raises his weapon, splitting the bodies vertically by their own weight.

That's two down. Only a few dozen more to go.

More bodies continue to filter into the hallway, and these new arrivals are unsettlingly *wrong*. Experimental, perhaps, but experiments that never should have been attempted. Multiple arms sprouting from a single body grope in all directions. One has a sharpened ribcage split like an open maw that heaves, opening and closing in a blind attempt to gnash at anything chest-level. Some are centaur-like, multiple torsos welded together with necromancy, skittering on many sets of filthy hands. Others, it seems, were found mid-creation – upper halves which swing their legless bodies on emaciated arms, seeking to bite at calves and thighs, to pull humans down to the ground to be devoured.

One of the centipede amalgamations deftly climbs the lichen-slicked walls in an attempt to bypass the claustrophobic throng, but Harrowheart slams his spiked shoulderpad into it, pinning it in place. It tries to bite at him but its teeth meet only armor. Harrowheart attempts to slash at it with his sword, but his position doesn't make it simple. It shrieks and shouts as his fumbles with his slices, rending flesh without doing the kind of damage that needs to be done to kill it. Zombies crowd around him, pawing and gnawing, and he struggles to push them back with frantic kicks. A growl of frustration becomes a shout of desperation until suddenly he knows what to do.

He sheaths his sword in the chest of a nearby zombie, then reaches back with his gloved hand until he finds the centipede's head and presses that into the wall with all the power he can manage. Its multiple hands push against him even as its face begins to distort. With a sudden crunch its head caves in beneath his palm and its body begins to spasm.

Harrowheart unpins it, retrieves his sword, and looks behind him to Stratos, Jim, and Isidor. All of that time he wasted killing a single abomination meant he wasn't keeping the other beasts at bay. They're closing in on the living now, and he's left trapped against a wall in a heavy push of the dead.(edited)

Stratos

Stratos has been planning since well before they reached these ruins. Turning over the potential situations and traps and threats they'd face, the weapons and skills they can bring to bear. He has no idea what's about to come crawling and shambling out of the passage ahead, but he's prepared to face it. His orders come briskly as Harrowheart charges the horde and the tribune steps up to the fore in his wake.

"Isidor, mind our close quarters and keep them away from Jim. Jim, make sure your sight-line is clear. Don't keep attacking the ones you've turned." Those enchantments on their weapons are the one thing he knows that can render those incoming corpses instantly ineffective in their attacks. He's gesturing as he talks, and the first thing he does is toss a magelight out above the crowd. It sticks to the ceiling, throwing down a harsh light on the flailing, misshapen mass that crawls and lurches toward them. Later, maybe, Stratos will be glad his younger comrades can't see his face.

But Harrow has only slowed the flow of the dead towards them, and they're not all distracted by their unliving foe. The death knight's been separated from them, but that means he's clear of their magic. Stratos lifts a hand and fire spills down from it in an instant, wrapping over the battlemage in a searing aura that blackens skin and lights flesh when the first zombies get close enough to reach for him. Stratos bowls the first two shamblers back with a fireball, but he barely has time to throw a frost rune ahead at the wall near Harrow before something with too many legs- no, *hands*, those are human *hands* pushes through and comes skittering at him. There's no time for fear or feeling or even shock. There's only his training and his duty to be done.

The rune pattern he throws, meanwhile, barely glimmers on the stone for a second before it explodes in frost magic, shards striking into the nearest undead, the cold biting deep to turn their movements slow and brittle. It's the quickest opening Stratos can give, but once he hears Jim's arrows whistle out he knows the pressure is about to ease. Every time an arrow sings home, another abomination flees from the crowd back into the shadows. Every time one slips by and meets a stroke of Isidor's axe, it turns blindly back, pressing against the tide... and the more easily cut down by Stratos or Harrowheart.

A firestorm might be quicker, but this is not a pitched battle and they don't have room to avoid friendly fire. Stratos fights like a Legion mage, not a Telvanni wizard: he sticks to smaller, more efficient bursts of ice and flame, calling out to the others to take openings and trusting them to guard his flank. When the crawling torsos reach up for him he's taken by surprise and falls back

immediately, drawing his sword and throwing down a frost rune in front of him.

"Isidor!" The crawlers are still moving, trying to reach up for them, and he'll need Isidor's help to hack them to pieces. "Cover fire, Jim!"

Jim

There's a distinct advantage here in never having faced an undead of any kind before. These misshapen horrors are no more traumatizing to Jim than the rest of the creatures that come shambling out in all their wrongness and horror. The captain doesn't know enough about necromancy and magic to know that such things are not just spells gone wrong but *planned* and *executed* freaks of nature that must have been designed intentionally for one reason or another. Later, when there's time to think and talk the wrongness of what he's seeing now will be made clear. Later he will ask *why* such things were made and designed.

Just to see what would happen, perhaps. And the answer will churn his stomach and raise the bile in his throat. But that is later.

Their grotesque features are certainly intimidating but they're also distinctly on the other side of Stratos and Harrowheart and Jim would like to keep it that way. A soothing warmth eases down his wrists as Marcella's enchantment on his bracers does what it was made to do and steadies his hands. A softly golden glow gently lifts the unrest from his mind as he notches an arrow and aims well away from Stratos and Harrowheart toward one of the legless cretins slithering on its hands toward the fray.

An easy target to test his aim. He can nearly hear Marcella's hissed urge to be safe and strike down his enemy when the arrow flies true and lodges itself in the back of the undead. It yowls pitifully in as much fear as it does pain and turns back toward its bretheren. Away from Jim and his comrades. There's a Power here that breaks the encroaching cold grip the latent dark energies here have had on his pitiful human heart. Watching the undead turn and run back into their own, fleeing from him. *Afraid of him*. The next arrow comes easier than the first, burying itself in a shambler's upper arm.

Jim Kirk's grin is fierce in the palid light.

He keeps shooting.

Isidor

None of this has been enjoyable. None of this has been *nice*. But crawling past creatures in the night was at least akin to the games children are put through during Samhain. It was dark. She didn't have to face it. The moment Stratos' magic lights up the battleground there's nowhere to hide from the reality in front of them.

And it is *horrible*.

Tortured, melting faces. Broken teeth, exposed bone. A throng of stomach churning, mindless danger crashing towards them. Harrowheart charges into them, ploughing into them without a second thought. Stratos strides on after him, giving orders. Beside her Jim nocks an arrow, draws, and releases. The sturdy weight of her axe pulls at her arm, but Isidor doesn't move. She can't breathe. She can't tear her eyes off of the nightmare playing out in front of her in harsh light and dark shadow. What is she doing here? Why did she think she could-?

A zombie slips past Stratos, headed straight for her and Jim. In a panic, she swings her axe. The slicing doesn't kill the creature, but it does send it running. Isidor straightens again, shaking, panting and wide eyed. Slowly her adrenaline starts to have the opposite effect. All it takes is a well placed force push and a deep cut and she can help keep Jim safe. That's what she's here for. To keep them safe. She spares a glance to look for Harrowheart and her pulse quickens to see him overwhelmed. Stratos' call for aid is barely needed. She dashes up to meet him, sending a smaller force wave to stagger the creatures. It gives them a moment to breathe before they start hacking again.

Harrowheart

What the team lacks in numbers in makes up for in strategy and magic. The zombies might be horrifying and they might be mindlessly driven, but they don't coordinate, they don't look out for each other, and they aren't on a mission to save one of their own. The undead who are turned away by magic flee into the rooms from which they came. Others are burned, crushed, sliced, dashed against the rock walls and stomped under boots.

Isidor's push of force comes at the perfect time. Harrowheart is weakening and hardly keeping on his feet in the throng of undead. The blast of her magic shakes him just as it shakes the others, but he keeps on his feet by the skin of his teeth and wheels around to see her. She gets a grateful nod from him, but there's no time to talk. He has to kill these minions while they're immobilized, and quickly goes about smashing his boot down on undead heads.

It certainly doesn't feel like a short amount of time passes in this hellish hallway, but in short order the team has cleared themselves a path to the end of the hall. Only lingering bodies remain to weakly grasp at legs and moan in discontent. Harrowheart wastes no time hurrying for the end. The others will follow without him needing to order them, he's sure of it.

But in his haste he doesn't watch the path on which he runs. He's nearly to the end of the corridor when suddenly his boot sinks into the tiles. He trips and falls flat on his front as the sound of stone rumbling against stone echoes through the passage. He struggles to get up and finds himself much weaker than he thought. His armor is so heavy...

That sound of rumbling stone stops only when the end of the hall is revealed to have been a door, a rising slab that opens up with a blast of icy air. No sound of footsteps or pattering hands precedes what comes out from the next room...

A construct of bone floats out, wraith-like, and brings with it another gust of chilling wind. Its central ribcage, legless and ending at the hips, is much larger than a human's, warped and grown with necromantic energy. Its neck is long and horselike, as are its three sloping heads that end in fangs like shards of broken glass. A set of winglike limbs extends from its back, and like the rest of it are entirely bone – hands and arms and legbones all merged together into one spanning mess. The construct's arms may once have been human but now are stretched and misshapen, and in its wispy hands it holds a curving scythe of bone.

Seeing the living it howls, a wail like a wolf and the distant scream of a dying horse. With a lift of its scythe it conjures icicles in the air, and with a swipe it sends them rocketing forward to impale the intruders.(edited)

Harrowheart gets to his feet at exactly the wrong time and takes a shard directly in the chest. He staggers back and bumps into the nearest wall to brace himself.

"Isid..." He can't properly speak with this thing in his lungs. Instead he raises his arms, gesturing to the ceiling, then drags his hand down through the air toward the floor. We're surrounded by stone – do some earth magic!

Jim

"Harrow!"

Jim can't stop himself from crying out the moment the death knight falls face first

into the floor. Adrenaline dumps through his veins when he tries to hurry forward and help his friend, only to be stopped dead in his tracks by the sounds coming from the chambers beyond. He's seen Felix's Frost and Storn Atronachs in action, so this amalgamation of frost and bone doesn't come as a colossal shock to Jim but it's large.

Powerful looking.

And carrying a Very Big Scythe.

"Harrow look out--!" Jim can't warn the undead fast enough. In his light clothing it's much easier for him to jump out of the way of the oncoming ice. Felix is best with frost magics. This Jim knows. This creature, whatever it is, isn't going to be a slouch in that department. It's not going to take very many swings of that hideously grotesque weapon it's wielding to take Harrowheart apart. There's no time to think, to worry about his own safety. Jim notches another arrow and grits his teeth. The second one of those skeletal jaws opens to shriek it's getting an arrow lodged in it's gaping maw.

Jim's fingers bleed as the bowstring snaps the uncalloused skin from repeated use. The magic Marcella bestowed on his weapon isn't working here. He has to throw himself against the far wall to evade another spike of ice lobbed toward his head. He's not going to be stopping this creature, but maybe he can be enough of a distraction to buy time for whoever can.

Stratos

Stratos has been a little slower than Harrow, using his short sword and the flames that still flutter over his skin though to polish off the zombies in their way. He's sparing any fresh magic to give himself a little more time to recover. He needs it the moment the bony monstrosity floats into their path. Those icicles rip out and he drops to a knee, hand raised to summon a pale, shield-like ward before him. He tries to spread it, to ward the shards away from those behind him, but stretching it allows a couple of them to pass through, deflected but still powerful enough for one to gash his lifted arm.

What *is* that thing? His ears are ringing from the unholy noise of it, thoughts racing as he tries to think how they'll counter it. It's huge, and this is the *worst* place to be fighting it. Forget how inexperienced Jim and Isidor are. Don't worry about Harrow's condition. There must be a way to take this appalling golem down and he has to figure it out. Quickly. Meantime he cups his hands and sends the

crackling flash and heat of a thunderbolt right at the thing's bared ribs.

He already guesses it won't do much damage. He's hoping it saps the creature's magic enough to forestall another icy barrage while he checks the others are still standing. *Think, Stratos...*

Isidor

The sight of a monstrous construct is frightening, but somewhat less shocking than the initial writhing throng of undead flesh. Isidor is much quicker in spotting the impending attack and throwing up a shield as strong and wide as she can. Easy enough to fill most of the space around her, helping to partially protect Stratos and Jim in the process, but ahead of them the death knight is thrown aside.

"Harrowheart!" Her breath hitches, but when she sees him move again she exhales in relief. He doesn't need to tell her what to do. This thing needs to go down before it does that again. Fire would require time and power, and they certainly don't have time. "Stratos, shields!"

She drops her axe, braces herself, extends her arms and focuses. Except she's not focusing on the monster itself. She's focusing on everything around it. From behind her an arrow comes flying, pulling its attention away from her. Jim's buying her time and she has no intention of wasting it. Sensing a vein of a stronger mineral, she pulls at it aiming, in one way or another, for it to stab through the monster. Wasting no time, she finds another from an opposite side and does the same. Each cast she yells, directing the magic with her hands. Hopefully that will keep the monster still. Keep it away from Harrowheart. It won't stop it though. That won't be enough, she knows it.

With another tug that heavy stone door comes crashing down far faster than it went up. Now for the hard part. She can feel Stratos' shield over her, and hopes to her gods that it protects her while she casts. Her will delves into the earth, carving out a portion along tiny weaknesses to make the shape she desires, and drags it up. The ground shudders beneath them, around them, and a wall of earth rises slowly, carefully between Harrowheart and the construct. It's nearly reached the top when it stops. Isidor takes a moment to catch her breath, and she corrects her position again. Finds her centre. Finds her power.

Then she twists, pulling back both hands, and snaps forward, arms extended, back foot pushing itself forward. Her roar is hardly heard over the crack of stone and the scraping of earth as the wall she brought up swiftly, determinedly, moves

towards the end of the corridor, paying no heed to anything inbetween.

As soon as it's done, Isidor drops her arms and falls to her knees to catch her breath.

Harrowheart

The wall of rock prevents the living from seeing the destruction of the monster, but the sounds of it all says everything. It squeals, screams, a high pitched whinny-wail of desperation and rage and pain as the rock cracks its twisted, brittle bones. The sound of its banshee howling grows louder and louder and *louder* until —

Silence.

The thing is dead. Truly dead. Pinned between two slabs of stone and utterly destroyed. When Isidor's wall returns to the rock from which it was conjured the only evidence of the construct is the dusty silhouette pressed into the stone door, which rises once more when her magic is no longer holding it down.

Harrowheart pulls the icicle from his chest and huffs a weak little laugh at Isidor's magic, but when he turns to see Isidor he's no longer triumphant. He staggers toward her and falls to his knees next to her, and, conscious of the blood and grime on his hands, hovers his palms near her face.

"You did so well," he whisper-wheezes. He looks up to Stratos and Jim then and begins to nod. "All of you. But. We have to. Keep going. My blades are. Close. I feel them. Just up ahead..."

He slips his arm under Isidor's shoulder and tries to get her to her feet as gently as he's able. All of that violence brought him back to his own mind, but a hardened heart would have been better in this underground ruin. He isn't sure he's ready to face Felix like this, but he has to. He has to get his runeblades back. For himself, for his friends, and for Isidor.

Now he keeps his eyes on the tiles of the floor as he staggers through the rest of the hallway and past the remnants of the proto-lich. Past that doorway it's incredibly cold, colder even than it had been at the surface. It's a magical cold, a greediness that seeks out energy to steal.

They pass through an empty hall, not one meant for traveling but one which,

perhaps long ago, was meant for feasting or politics. Stone tables remain just as they were left, altars and candle pillars are preserved near perfectly but now obscured by ice and a conjured fog that settles at waist height.

At the end of this abandoned place is the final door. Heavy and stone just as the very first one that let them into the ruins had been, this one is decorated with a carving of a tree around a glowing, central gem. Harrowheart staggers forward and struggles against his failing body to part the doors, but he can't. Not quite. He leans against it heavily and begins to shake his head. He can't do this on his own.

Isidor

It feels as if she's run a marathon. Her veins, lungs and muscles all burn furiously. The sight of someone coming close startles her at first, but when she sees it's Harrowheart she smiles briefly at him before focusing on breathing again. He's right, though, they need to keep going. She takes up her axe again as he helps her to her feet and she finds there's even more aching, even more tiredness in her, but she's determined to press ahead. They're so close.

She watches Harrowheart closely, barely taking any notice of their surroundings. She watches him even as she starts to shiver and pulls her cloak close. It's become normal for her to stand back and let him tackle the heavy lifting. Even now it takes her by surprise when it doesn't come easily to him. She rests a hand on his back. "Take a moment. I'll help you." She takes a step back and watches him, watches the door, preparing herself to use more magic, to summon more strength from... somewhere.

Harrowheart

It's impossible to tell exactly what he's feeling beneath his visor, but the way Harrowheart watches Isidor as she offers to help suggests gratefulness at least. A little pause precedes a heavy sigh and finally a nod. "Together," he says, his voice physically wavering but his confidence unmistakeable.

With Isidor's help he tries again, and this time the door begins to open...

Stratos

Stratos doesn't get a chance to dwell on what's just happened, but there's newfound respect in the way he bows to Isidor in wordless thanks before he checks that Jim is up and moving with them. There's no time to sit and think on

what he's seen. What he knows Felix has done now. He has to bring his brother back. It's all that matters. While Isidor and Harrowheart get the door open, he stands ready behind them, waiting to beat back anything that rushes out at them.

-

He's been waiting. He felt Harrowheart coming the moment he set foot on THEIR soil. There was alarm for a moment, then anger. Contempt. It's far too late for that wretch to do anything against him. The blades are his now. He's spent weeks learning how to attune to their power, to use it for his own purposes. Even they disdain their former master now, their amusement at his return bringing a thin smile to his own lips. In the end he merely puts away his latest work and waits to see if what's left of the death knight makes it down to challenge him.

Time is a blur. He hardly notices it slipping by.

-

When that door grinds open, the unnatural cold intensifies. It flows out with the mist that slithers to meet them, dragging at them, drawing them in. There's a glimmer in the shadowed archway, something pale darting past. Then the howl of a wolf, low and melancholy and echoing strangely from cavernous walls. As the group steps warily through, they find a greater hall than the rest, lit by the pale glow of crystalline lights. A long set of stairs rises before them, up toward a platform ringed with archways.

Silhouetted at the top is a lone figure, his stance casual, head tilted down at them. Hands on the twin hilts of two blades that glow with eager magic. Bone white has chased out the black of his disheveled hair; his eyes are too bright and too wide as he stares at them. Felix always tended to a pale complexion, now Stratos sees with a pang how grey and unhealthy he looks, gaunt and unfed. His leather armor is tattered at the edges, marked with dark stains and burn marks like those that taint the stone floor around them.

Despite his relaxed stance, he seems frozen for a moment, cold eyes flicking over each of them, his breaths shallow. His gaze lingers on Stratos, stays on Jim. Then he smiles sharp and bright.

"I didn't expect you'd come." His voice is rough and low, rasped from a dry throat. "Harrow didn't surprise me, but you..." His voice is a little softer, before he chuckles. "I wish I'd known. It's lucky you made it this far." He shakes his head, adds thoughtfully as if he's just deciding, "But I'm glad. I am. I wasn't sure I'd see

you again. But you're here now. You'll be safe, Jim. I can show you what we've accomplished..."

His eager tone fades as his eyes track back to Harrowheart. He takes in the death knight's condition fully and then laughs aloud. It's a harsh, unsteady sound. "Why, look at the state of you, Harrowheart! I'm shocked you had enough strength to drag your corpse here! I'm impressed, but whatever did you come for? Unless..." His voice turns colder, but he's promptly interrupted.

"Felix, enough." Stratos steps forward, blade sheathed and hands shimmering with magic. "We're bringing you home. One way or the other."

"No, Stratos." His voice is sharp suddenly. His brother gets an icy glare. *"We're not finished."* He shakes his head then. Shrugs, and the blades hum faintly as they move. The conjurer's familiar is prowling around the base of the raised platform, translucent fur bristling as it watches the new arrivals. It's bigger than usual. Leaner. "Didn't you see my work out there? I've been busy, solving your problems. All our problems."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart's hands ball into weak fists when Felix has the audacity to comment on his state of being. It's *his fault* that he's rotting away inside his armor right now, and that bastard has the gall to mock him for it?

The death knight – the real, *full* death knight – reaches his left hand out as if he might grasp his right runeblade from so far away. He casts no visible magic... So why is the runeblade trembling? It vibrates as it feels the call to the fateful wound that connects it to its true master. The soul inside of it tells it that it knows where it belongs. And yet it resists. The blade doesn't want to go. No, more than that, it *refuses*.

Hold it tighter, Felix. Hold it tight and don't let go! Defend what's yours, Felix! Felix! Felix! FELIX!

Jim

He knows that howl.

The ever present pounding of his heart thudding in his ears stops frozen in Jim's chest. Bloody fingers loosen and lower the arrow from his bow. Slip it back into his quiver even as the bow is slung over his shoulder. A far more practiced maneuver follows as the Starfleet Captain pulls his phaser--fully charged--from its

holster and readies it instead.

Jim thought his hands would shake more. Seeing Felix come into view, seeing the gaunt shell of the man he's devoted himself to staring down at them. By all accounts this is a terrible scenario and Jim Kirk is pointing a potentially lethal weapon at the only man he's ever loved. The cold seeps into his bones. He relishes in the numbness that it brings.

As the palid light catches and Felix's face comes into view Jim knows what he has to do. It comes as a whisper in his heart. A begging for forgiveness he knows Felix is too far gone to hear or give.

The whine of a broken engine pierces the chaos in engineering. Scotty's grabbing his arm. We'd be dead before we make the climb, sir! Jim, we can't go!

You're not making the climb.

Clammy hands grab hold of Jim's dusty electrical burned covered ones. Pleading eyes stare up at him. Jim. Jimmy. Do it. Pull the trigger. Do it before that thing comes back. Jimmy Please--

I'm Sorry, Gary.

Captain James Tiberius Kirk lifts his head high and stares down the lich Felix Caelus has become with a phaser at the ready. Even if it means eating a discharge set to kill later in his grief, Jim will do what has to be done now. He's going to save what's left of Felix, or he's going to die trying. And even if he does die trying, Harrowheart better make sure he comes back long enough to finish the job. He knows that now and there is no time to be afraid. It's stomped down and gutted like Jim's had to so many times before.

In his pack, the soul gem is the only sense of warmth Jim can feel amid all this seeping insidious cold. Its weight presses on Jim. All he has to do is get hold of Felix, right? Stratos can handle the rest? Jim doesn't know. He doesn't know magic. He lowers the phaser.

"I'm here." Jim confirms. Takes a step forward toward the stairs. His heart agrees with Stratos even as it's crying out in anguish over what Felix has done and done to himself. He's going to bring you back home Felix.

Hold on.

Stratos

The cool smirk on his face twists into a vicious snarl the instant he feels someone else call to his blades. Stratos is forgotten. Jim is forgotten. All he sees is Harrowheart, the rejected, the abandoned shell of a wielder. And he dares to try and call them away?

"You pathetic husk!" He steps back, swings the blade in his right hand to point at Harrow. His familiar leaps forward with the motion, ears flat and teeth bared as it prowls toward the death knight. "The blades are mine now! They chose ME! Did you actually think you could take them back? You third-rate shambler? You are nothing! I've learned more of their potential in a week than you have in all the years you held them!" His voice drops to a hiss. "Let us show you."

The light that shoots along the blade is purple, flickering with black shadows. It lashes out toward Harrowheart where the spectral wolf is menacing him. Strikes deep into him and demands...

Yield your will. Know your place. OBEY.

Felix winces in the moment after, rolling his shoulder to dispel the burning sensation. He still suffers every time he tries to cast from that side – the stronger side – but no matter. He's laughing again as he feels the spell work. "Do you know which of us is master now? Don't fear, Harrowheart, if you want to end on these blades we'll see to that. It seems fitting to reunite you with your soul again."

Harrowheart

Even if Harrowheart had his full wits and strength about him would he be able to deny the magic of the blades? They called to him once before and bested his will even as a living man. Now, here, undead, weakened as he is, he stands no chance. His body seizes as the magic flows into him. Magic that he's powerless to keep at bay.

His thoughts disappear in an instant, and with them goes the cyan glow of his eyes. No lights shine through the slats of his visor briefly and his body goes half limp, but then the darkness gives way to something different. A purple glow shines through, bright as that bolt Felix's blades shocked him with. And then he stands, straight and stiff-backed, and most importantly... Obedient.

He looks to his master and waits for his command.

Stratos

Felix grins down at him, pride in his voice as he turns back to the others - just missing the way Stratos gestures to Jim. The tribune's face is pale and strained beneath his helmet. Felix gestures at Harrowheart. "See? Isn't that better? Just like that, he's no threat to anyone. I've learned so much, brother. Don't you want to see what I can do? What we can give the Empire? I mean, that? That was nothing. Easy. He's hardly got a will to command."

"You always despised those who enslaved helpless souls," Stratos says flatly.

"You thought them cowards and incompetents. This is not your way."

"It wasn't. But now I have a reason to go to war." Felix looks down at the blades.

"And finally I've found the way. You'll see. We'll show you."

Isidor

Isidor keeps a safe distance as they proceed. Her companions have a bigger stake in the events that follow than she does, just about. More importantly, they understand the situation better than her in one way or another, though she would be loathe to admit it. She follows, keeping her glare fixed on Felix as he monologues and snarls against the reminder of who the true death knight is. That is, until there's a flash of purple light that strikes Harrowheart. Her eyes widen, her muscles tense, and she stares with bated breath to see what happens. There's relief when he stands again, but that's short lived as she realises what has happened.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" Right now she wants nothing more than to set this whole place on fire and drag her friends out, but she can't do that. Instead the fire rises within her, not outside her. Isidor turns her utterly offended expression from Harrowheart to Felix, then she lifts her empty hand to point at the undead knight while her other tightens around her axe. "Could you not? I didn't wade through all your pet projects for you to brainwash Harrowheart."

Jim

It's the shortest of glances exchanged between Stratos and Jim.

The captain nods ever so slightly before Felix's attention shifts to them again.

Felix won't expect Jim to fight him, Jim would be willing to bet on it. But he can't account for the blades or their assessment of him so he needs to be quick. Jim forces himself to not look at Harrowheart. To treat the other as inconsequential as he takes another step up the stairs with his weapon still at his side.

Stratos

"I didn't have to." Felix's attention turns to Isidor for the first time. He looks down on her indifferently, though his eyes narrow as he starts to wonder why she's here. She's the only one he didn't have any forewarning of. *Why would Stratos bring her? What does he have in mind?* "I command and he obeys. That's what he was made for. This is where he belongs. But you shouldn't be here, Miss Durant... ah. *I see.*"

He thought he felt unfamiliar magic. Powerful. *It must be hers, of course. That powerful Durant blood. Did she come in hopes of gaining more power?* His grip on each hilt tightens. He's turned a little away from Jim, heedless of the faint magic Stratos has, the look exchanged between them. He's focused on the threat Isidor presents... and unlike his brother, he knows immediately what to do with her.

"You destroyed my guardians, didn't you? I'm almost impressed. But you won't take anything from me. I have a war to fight, and you... well, maybe you can help too." *Harrowheart. Strike her down. Bring her to me.* His blades are just dying to taste the soul of such a powerful mage...

Harrowheart

Harrowheart is commanded, and he must obey. He turns when he's told to and focuses on Isidor. He draws his sword and holds it in one hand with the palm of the other resting on the pommel for stability. Without further hesitation he follows the orders he was given and charges forward, heavy in his armor and off balance after everything he's been through but no less determined. He'll run her through like the zombies in the halls if she doesn't find a way to stop or delay him!

Jim

The blades see only an ordinary human in Jim Kirk. And by some regards, they would be correct. There is no powerful magic bloodline coursing through his veins like there is in Isidor and Stratos. No history and magical contracts between them like Harrowheart has with them. James Kirk has no magic and no power here. They deem him nothing more than scenery--albeit aesthetically pleasing

scenery where Felix is concerned--and do not pull Felix's attention away from watching his newest pet face down the daughter and firstborn of the head to the Durant line.

After all, where else should Jim *be* but at Felix's side? He is a trophy. A fine piece of art meant to be kept protected and admired but without much more purpose than being enjoyed. He will join Felix as he was meant to and everything will fall into place. The blades and Felix will have what they want.

Felix being made to forget just who James Tiberius Kirk *is* will be the blades' first mistake.

He ignores Harrowheart's charge on Isidor. Raises a bloody pale face up to Felix's gaze and there is a fire in those eyes that should speak to who Felix is dealing with. How reckless Jim Kirk has been before with his life when things that matter are on the line. The captain who has died before to protect others and never hesitated to jump into danger if he could make a difference.

The soul gem grows hot in Jim's bag. Urging him not to hesitate when he whips the phaser back up and fires twice directly into Felix's chest. The stunning bolts will not be nearly enough to severely hurt the newly minted necromancer, but they ought to be a hell of a distraction. If it looks like Felix is going to stand up again Jim will keep firing.

"**NOW**, Stratos!"

Isidor

Jim's apparent apathy gets wide, fierce eyes and a tilted head, but Felix swiftly grabs her attention again. The more he talks the more her anger grows, bringing with it the unrelenting energy of one determined to get revenge, to strike down the person offending her. Her lips twitch into a sneer, teeth bared even before she opens her mouth to retort. But before she can, Harrowheart turns to her, *draws his weapon, and charges at her.*

Her shock and horror at seeing him so easily turn on her stuns her. He's practically within swinging distance when her instincts move her into action. A broad wave of her free arm casts a force push spell to send him backwards. It's sloppy, it's panicked, but her magic is powerful. The result is a bright flash of light and burst of energy that sends her flying back just as much as him. The ground winds her as she hits it with a cry, and she's slow getting to her feet despite

knowing just how much danger she's in. This isn't fun and games anymore. There's no family, no anti-violence field to save her here.

Stratos

Stratos is reaching out the second Jim fires. While Felix stumbles to his knees in shock, the blades starting to glow again, the tribune strikes out with that inconsequential spell he's been concealing. Not a thunderbolt, not a fireball. Telekinesis.

Before Felix even drops to the stone he's yanked forward, down those steep steps. He's halfway down before he forces himself back up, resisting with all the unholy strength flowing through him. "*YOU DARE-*"

Jim shoots him again, Stratos drags him farther down, and this time he doesn't resist, just makes sure he's on his feet when he reaches the lowest steps. Felix's pale face is twisted with uncharacteristic fury; this close he looks even less healthy, but it doesn't stop him snarling at them both. He doesn't mind coming closer. It just means they're in his reach.

"I should have known," he hisses, and there's something else to his voice, a faint unpleasant echo. Stratos just has to shut down any plan that doesn't meet his *approval*. "No schemes but yours. Isn't that right, broth-"

Jim

"No-!"

Jim fires one last time before he drops the phaser to the ground. He's moving before it's even clattered, throwing all of his weight around Felix's middle as he all but tackles the undernourished man to the ground. From inside Jim's pack the soulstone glows with a deep red hue. The color of only the most brilliant of roses. And of blood freshly spilt. From it eeks a familiar source of magic to Felix. One that will only grow stronger when Stratos begins to channel his spell.

His brother's schemes?

Come now Felix. You know better than that. Good Old Sam has the best schemes. He's been missing you lately, you know? Why don't you *come and stay awhile* with your little sharp eyed friend, hm?

Stratos

Three things happen at once, before either Felix's addled wits or the blades can react to them.

Jim tackles him, the disregarded mortal suddenly developing a suicidal urge to throw himself right into their range. The grey silk hood over Felix's head, already pushed back with the jostling, slips back around his shoulders, making him blink with disorientation under messy white bangs.

And the purple aura of Stratos's soul trap spell wraps around him. He feels it sink in, knows only too well what that horrible constricting sensation is. He doesn't *understand*.

"Come on, Stratos. You can't trap... me-" What is that? That overwhelming surge of magic from the man pinning him to the ground. The scents of wine and sulphur filling his nostrils, the icy surge from the blades as they desperately grab at him. Trying to stop him being

ripped

away

Felix falls limp and lifeless on the ground, Jim likewise clinging to him. Only the blades are left aware and humming like enraged wasps, pulsing with furious light. Okay humans. They indulged their wielder this far. But little Felix isn't here any more. The sheaths. Are. Off.

Harrowheart*

Harrowheart is thrown fully off his feet by the force of Isidor's blast. He falls backwards and skids across the icy stone floor, his metal armor shrieking against the rocks as he goes. The second he comes to a stop he begins to rise, though not as quickly as he ought to. His arms tremble as he pushes himself up, and only after a long hesitation does his body swipe for his sword and re-arm itself.

He begins to trudge slowly toward her, heavier than before, almost reluctant. But his sword is in both shaking hands, and he still intends to do as he's told. He nears Isidor – mumbling half-formed sounds of pain and desperation as he does – and raises his sword.

But then he freezes, his body stiff apart from the way it shakes and shudders,

sword still raised up.

As Felix falls the runeblades seethe. Their runes alight, igniting the purple light within Harrowheart's helmet. Unable to resist any longer he swings his blade at Isidor twice, fast as he can manage.

The runeblades, meanwhile, begin to spin like deadly windmills. The fog in the room whips with their movement and a cyclone begins to form at the center of the chamber. Soon the cold grows greater, the wind grows wilder. Snow forms, turning the air whiter and whiter with time. Those left outside of the soul gems are caught in a blizzard – one which Felix and Harrowheart should be able to weather, but how long can Jim's prone body last on the icy floor?

Harrowheart and the blades are visible by the light of their glow, but the living have the benefit of being relatively hidden from view... And from each other.

Isidor

This time the sight of Harrowheart heading towards her spurs her to her feet. Her grip tightens around her axe and she holds her left hand out, ready to cast, but hoping to halt him. As the distance between them closes she starts to take a few steps backwards.

“Harrowheart,” she whines, looking up at him with desperation. “Don’t make me do this.”

The flare of magic is enough to make her react. Her shield comes up just in time to come between her and Harrowheart’s blades. It’s been a long time since she’s casted while this exhausted and she can feel how sluggish it makes her reactions. She can’t keep the shield up indefinitely. Not unless she uses her father’s techniques and then... then she’ll be protected, but she’ll be useless to Stratos, to Jim, and even to Harrowheart. No, she has to act.

When she sees an opening she drops her shield and tries to slash out at Harrowheart. Gods damn his armour. It looks so good, but it’s so *effective*. She doesn’t have time to dwell on that, though. The wind is picking up, biting at her skin and making it difficult to see. At least this was vaguely familiar. Without thinking she makes a dash in the same direction as the wind to get away. She wants to put some distance between her and the death knight. He is undoubtedly stronger. She has to be faster.

Stratos

"Isidor!" Stratos calls out to her over the rising wind. Shards of conjured ice are biting into his legs, his arms and face, making him duck his head down. Even at this distance he can't see her any more through the storm of ice. Only glimpses of the death knight's glowing eyes. He casts another flame cloak over himself, though it only blunts the edge of the freezing gale around him. The tribune circles, trying to get close to the two unconscious men on the ground, eyes on the fell light of the spinning blades. Sanguine's gem must have done as promised. He has to believe it. But now the blades are truly threatened, and he needs to get Jim and Felix to safety.

He approaches the base of the stairs carefully, drawing his sword, lifting a circular ward before him like a fighter's buckler. It helps deflect the wind so he can see... and it may be a better defense than his own unenchanted blade.

Harrowheart

Isidor's weapon dents Harrowheart's armor but that blow wasn't enough to pierce it. He tries to retaliate with a slice of his blade but barely misses her, and then she's lost to the whiteout.

The purple glow of the magic gripping him turns slowly like the beacon of a lighthouse as he searches for the living. The blades, though, they don't need eyes to find the living. The relentless winds continue even after the blades stop their spinning and hover with their tips pointing toward Stratos. They're reluctant to leave Felix's proximity. Their new body has to be protected above all else.

The runes along their surfaces flash, a split-second warning for the magic they cast in Stratos' direction: a shock of purple necromantic energy that forks like lightning as it flies and burns a path along the ground toward the tribune. The magic strikes his conjured shield. The burst only lasts a few seconds and is followed by more shadow energy sparking from both weapons, a storm of dark magic that forms a flickering shield of its own, in a way. More than anything they don't want Stratos coming closer.

Isidor

The sound of Stratos' voice catches her attention. She can barely see the steps, let alone anyone nearby them, but she can see Harrowheart. In any other situation she could attack freely, without fear of the consequences... but this is *Harrowheart*. Her whole reason for coming along was to make sure he *didn't* die.

Light flashes to the side, giving away the position of the other fight and telling her where she is in the room.

The other fight. The real part of this mission. This isn't about killing anyone. This is about buying Jim enough time to get Felix's soul. That? That she can work with.

She crouches down, palms on the icy floor, and concentrates. The rumble of earth isn't heard and barely felt in the midst of the gale. The pillar stands about head high and she frantically takes her cloak off to place it around the pillar. She backs off, carefully gauging how far away she can get while still staying being able to see the conspicuous flash of red, and stays low. "Harrowheart!" If she can just get him still for a moment...

Harrowheart

At the sound of his name Harrowheart immediately turns to the source of the voice. With all the strength he has in him he forces himself to call her name, but it hardly comes out as a mumble that dies in the gale. His body lurches forward toward the silhouette he sees, sword raised high. When he stumbles into blade's reach of the pillar that he's sure is Isidor he swings for the midsection. The sound of metal crashing against stone and the instant blunting of a sword is greater than the howl of the wind and just as loud as his own scream. The reverberation of his armor stuns him and he falls to one knee with his hands on his helmet until the shaking can stop.

Stratos

Stratos feels the blades' magic crack against his ward, already sidestepping when he sees it rip out along the ground. There's a chill in his gut at the way they're pointing at him. With each step he took down here he's seen and felt how powerful these weapons are. Seen the horrific powers they wield - and the twisted inspiration they impart. And now their attention is directly on him.

He needs to make sure both Jim and Felix stay alive. He's certain the blades want at least half of the same thing. He has no idea what's going on in the gem. He stares down his eyeless opponents as best he can through the veil of fire frost. He knows better than to drop his guard - he'll have to trust Isidor can either handle Harrow or get to him. He tries throwing an armor spell over Jim, the more vulnerable of the two fallen men to freezing. If nothing else, he can test how that shadow ward works.

There's a flash of silver amid the white and black and orange - Felix's familiar, slinking back toward its master. It seems confused, Stratos thinks. He keeps a wary eye on it as it creeps between blades and mage, lowered head turning between them. *It doesn't know who's friend or foe.*

Isidor

Harrowheart at least is easy to keep track of with those beacons for eyes. The moment he stops to swing her hands are on the ground again, focusing. Lifting and pushing earth is easy for her, but it takes concentration to will the earth to rise in sections, at angles, to pin a living (and therefore fragile) thing between stone. It's slower magic, and difficult, but the more Harrowheart allows it to, the more stone builds itself around his feet, his legs, around anything touching the ground.

Harrowheart

Harrowheart realizes he's being trapped even as it's happening. His body wants to escape it, but he wills himself to stay put. His attempts at fleeing are slow, jerky, the uncoordinated movements of a man fighting against himself. He pounds his fists against the rock that traps him and makes no progress. Eventually he starts to thrash, but his energy is waning and he can't keep it up forever. His movements gradually slow until eventually he accepts his fate. With no living to kill in view he's without purpose and returns to his vigilant staring.

The blades sense their minion's stasis and begin to vibrate once more. They're livid! Bolts of necromantic energy shoot wildly into the wind with no target in particular. If they hit Isidor and Stratos, all the better.

Stratos' ward bypasses the lightning barrier the blades had created and settles on Jim's body. It seems that magic isn't as much an actual ward as a cage of dangerous magic meant to keep Stratos away physically. But the blades sense the magic that came through the second it lands and realize a physical barrier isn't going to be enough. No, one of them is going to have to fight for what is theirs.

The right half of the blade surges forward like a spear thrown directly at Stratos. If it doesn't impale him immediately it's ready to twist around and start swinging. Hope you're used to swordfights, Stratos!

The left half of the blade, meanwhile, remains hovering near Felix's body defensively.

Stratos

Jim is a little safer from the frigid winds, but Stratos has no moment to celebrate. A bolt of energy blasts through the edge of his shield and burns into his chest armor. He retreats, gasping for air and refusing to double up over the pain. And a good thing too, because he has to lurch aside to avoid being impaled on the lunging blade with a choked sound of pain.

The magic is icy and excruciating where it penetrates his armor, but he's still moving. He pulls out his blade and shifts stance in time to parry the first swing that comes down at him. His jaw is clenched against the pain as the swords ring against each other, and the duel is on. It's a counter-intuitive fight, against an opponent that can whip around in an instant, with no body to maneuver or defend, no footwork to watch. It only needs attack, and Stratos can only defend.

Isidor

Only when her spell is complete does she risk looking up. Harrowheart is stuck in place, staring vacantly ahead of him. Slowly, Isidor rises to her feet, but when he doesn't immediately go for her she turns her attention to Stratos. No sooner has she taken a step than there are blasts of magic firing around madly. She tries to duck but a bolt catches her upper arm, sending pain shrieking all through her body. She cries out and drops her axe to clutch her wound and shakes with terror, with the cold, and with adrenaline. A horrible sticky sensation warns her that she doesn't want to try and look at it.

She stumbles towards the blades, battling against the wind to get closer. "Stratos!" There are glimpses of what she thinks is the tribune ducking and weaving, but she can't be sure. Closer to her are Jim and Felix, a spirit wolf, and one blade standing ready. It's not hurting them, but this whole thing could fall apart if Felix and Jim die of the cold before Jim has finished his task. Cautiously, she begins her approach.

Harrowheart

Isidor's shout makes Harrowheart turn to the best of his ability. He starts up his struggling anew.

The half of the blade which Stratos is left to fight jabs and twists and slices deftly.

Meanwhile, the blade guarding Felix's body rattles and points its hooked blade tip at Isidor. It knows you're there! Don't come any closer! Don't make it fight you, too!

The sound of Stratos' parries echoes in the stone room and appears to be growing louder. Or – No! The wind has weakened, and with it the howling. It still blows, but not as strongly. No more magical lightning sparks from either blade, and the one dueling with Stratos falters. It dips in the air, weighed down by its own hilt. Their runes are dimming. Something is going wrong with them. Still, neither of them is fully ready to give up. The one goes back to brandishing itself at Isidor while the other swings at Stratos.

Stratos

In a way it's simple.

Block high, step left, block to one side, then the other. There's no purpose in feints or counterattacks or anything but defending himself. The blade swinging itself against him has no chest to guard, no face to be stabbed at. Stratos has only one thing to do: keep it from killing him. He doesn't want to know what happens if that wicked, hungry edge bites his flesh. But the pace is frenetic: the runeblade springs back from every blocked strike and whips right around again. And every time he lifts his arm to defend himself brings a flare of pain from his chest. He knows the blade only has to get one really good blow in.

"Here! I'm duelling the second blade!" Isidor can see the tribune's burning aura better than the duelling man himself, even before the blizzard begins to falter. He's doing his best not to let the blade work him around to show his back to its twin. He shouts over the wind, "It can't-" clash, retreat, sidestep- "block spells!"

His last words ring out oddly clear. He can see better, too, as the driving snow slows to a swirl on the wind. The blade fighting him is no longer a veiled shadow- so Stratos sees when it drops. Snatching the moment of reprieve, he takes a risk and falls back, raises his left hand. Shifts his concentration to throw a small healing spell over himself and ease the wound he carries. A second later, he nearly loses the hand as the attack resumes and the blade goes straight for the opening.

But that moment of weakness gives him hope. Something is happening in there. Something is weakening them. He just has to outlast the blades... and maybe he can do a little more than that. He starts to move, retreating toward the door in a

way that ought to line up the two blades in front of him. He can see them both now – and Isidor. The wind really has dropped...

Isidor

The gale eases and Stratos' voice becomes clearer with each word. They can't block magic. Isidor nods with determination, but she's not sure what to do with that information. Fire won't do anything to help, nor would earth. A sleep spell is hardly going to do anything against weapons, and what would a banishment spell do to them? Nothing? Or worse, what if it shook the souls inside?

She turns her attention from Stratos to the still forms on the ground. The cold may be easing slightly, but she still needs to make sure they're ok. With one hand raised placatingly, ready to cast a shield, she slowly tries to get closer. Her eyes are fixed on the blade. "Please. I won't do anything. I just want to see if my friend is alright. I just want to check." She's not even sure the blade can hear her, let alone understand her. "Please..."

Harrowheart

Oh, how they've heard begging. How they've seen groveling. People on their knees, bleeding, desperate, imploring mercy and salvation. Prone in the snow praying, crying. Wonderfully, deliciously desperate and powerless.

But that isn't quite what this is. This is... Something else. Something worried, yes, but soft. Something careful. Something not concerned with itself. How strange. How foreign. A flesh-bound sentiment they were never designed to comprehend.

Miming Isidor's slow movement the blade that guards Felix lowers itself toward the ground in front of him. Jim's body is close, but what is the use of a body without a soul? There's no point in killing it if it can't be drained... Though it would make a useful minion, wouldn't it?...

... Or perhaps not. If the living woman wants to see her friends, let her see them. One of them, anyway. The blade twists around so that the hooked groove at its tip is nearest Jim's body. With a swift motion it hooks itself into the flesh of Jim's side – not a mortal wound, not even close, but not a *fun* one, either. Not for Jim, anyway.

The blade lifts his body just enough to toss it a few feet toward Isidor. As Jim's unconscious form rolls her way the blade returns to guarding Felix.

Distract yourself with that, wom—

Both blades shudder, faltering once more. Their runes flash frantically as they shake and seize. They sink once again and clatter, clatter, rattling their metal tips against the stone floor and drumming up blue sparks.

When they rise they rise together, though heavier now than before. They've barely got the energy left to keep themselves afloat. The one that had been fighting Stratos retreats to its mate and the two fuse into one once more.

With a flash of blue light they come together as a single broadsword with a glaring skull at the base of the hilt. Their runes are weakly glowing and the lichfire in the eyes of the skull is dimming. It quickly becomes apparent why: The faint river of souls that flows between the two prongs is leaking, dissipating into the mist of the room and funneling into the soul gem. They're being drained of their essence by Sam's magic!

Furious at this altogether wrong sensation of its own weakening the broadsword swings wildly in front of Felix's body before it gets a different idea. It presses the tip of its blade against Felix's neck and freezes. Stay back! All of you meaty, living things stay back, or it will end this! If it can't win, neither will any of you.

Stratos

The way Stratos has been trying to turn his duel around, he has a perfect view when Jim's body is tossed through the air, blood spattering around him. The captain's unconscious form smacks down on the icy floor. Between fending off blows Stratos glimpses the blood pooling around him and horror jolts through him. His guard breaks and the other blade swings in, cuts up at Stratos's bare legs...

And drops right back to the floor. Stratos backs away hastily, barely processing what's happened before the blade struggles to rise, visibly fighting gravity now. His fingers twitch with sparks, aching with leashed potential, but he doesn't strike. He skirts around toward Isidor as the blade also withdraws sluggishly, all but dragging itself over the floor. Stratos crouches protectively over Jim, but he has to keep his eyes on the reforming blade, and what's happening to it...

Oh no. No they are *not*-

The blade poises itself at Felix's throat and the familiar lying beside him finally rises to snarl- but doesn't dare spring. As if its teeth could scratch that metal.

Stratos's expression mirrors it. There's pure fury in his eyes, tightening every line of his face. After the nerve-wracking journey, the weeks of worry, the horrors fought through... now the runeblades are demonstrating the fundamental, naked truth of their intentions toward his brother, and Stratos has no restraint left in him.

"*Give him up!*" The tribune's free hand shoots out- pointing not at the blade, but at the immobilized Harrowheart. "Take your own bearer back and be *satisfied!*"

Isidor

A sense of hope rises through her when the blades respond, but wounding Jim like that is not what she had in mind. Her expression is one of horror as she lunges to reach the captain. Immediately her hands are on his side, trying to slow the bleeding. All thoughts of first aid are forgotten when the blades shudder again. She prepares herself to defend against an attack, only to watch them merge again. There's something wrong. Terribly wrong. Is... Is Jim succeeding...?

She watches, eyes widening, as the blade points right at Felix's neck. No, she decides, Jim is not succeeding. Thoughts of subtle shielding spells run through her head, but she doesn't dare move or speak lest she provoke any action. All she can do is hope they listen to Stratos.

Harrowheart

Hidden beneath the sound of a desperate man's shouts is the delicate tinkling of glass cracking.

Stratos orders the blades to reconsider, and *somehow* it seems he's gotten through to them. They begin to raise themselves off of Felix's neck. And rise. And rise. Arcing backwards, building up height...

And momentum for the downward swing! The runeblades fall like a guillotine toward Felix's neck.

But the dull sound of chopping bone and flesh is not what Stratos and Isidor hear. No, it's a shattering sound, a pop like a bulb of overheated glass, and with it comes the shards of the soul gem lying forgotten in the thin layer of snow on the stone floor.

A new gust billows through the room, but not of the blades' doing. Whatever it is

stops the weapon in its sharp descent. It hovers a hair above Felix's neck and begins to tremble as its runes glow brighter, brighter, brighter until!...

Until it *screams*. It screams like metal on metal, like stone on stone, like a beast in a trap, like men and women dying. Like the men and women who *have* died at its merciless whim.

From the wind figures begin to appear. They form from the snow that blows on the gusts. They take their souls' true shapes – human men and women, beastfolk like bison and walruses, elves and dwarves and other races of Azeroth all in their armor or in furs, in civilians' clothes, in uniforms. They hold their mortal wounds out of habit, covering their split throats and opened bellies, but no pain is on their faces now. Their chins are held high, their white eyes burn brightly as they watch the blades shivering in fear. This is not more of their eternal damnation. No, this is their *justice*.

As the wind dies down a final figure begins to form from the dust of the snow. From the ground up he appears, boots to legs to body to arms. A left arm appears, bleeding, without a hand. The right grips the hilt of the shuddering sword whose scream has turned from fear to desperation. Finally the face of the man appears. It's Harrowheart's soul holding onto the weapon that caused this. The weapon that it is responsible for.

Teeth grit, he looks across the crowd – across the faces of the other souls, across the faces of the living. Felix's body, Jim's body. A man he doesn't recognize, and, finally, a woman he can't keep his eyes off of.

He stares at Isidor, his blank eyes searching her face, twitching with a shadow of recognition.

"You..." he says, his voice so soft without the ghostly echo that haunts his body's throat. "Know what I want. Help it be over. Let me be gone."

Isidor

The blades fall swiftly to Felix's neck and Isidor feels the air get sucked from her lungs. Time slows suddenly and what follows is experienced with surreal clarity, a despairing calm. They've lost. All of this was for nothing. They've lost everything. She doesn't have time to contemplate what she's seeing before the air fills with that screaming... It should unnerve her. It should terrify her. But it doesn't. Felix isn't dead. Which means they haven't lost.

It might have been a ritual in another place, another time. All these restless souls

with their violent pasts drugged up like wraiths from the underworld. Their power, their will, fills the room, fills Isidor's heart with an eerie calmness. Of everything that they've been through, this is the most familiar. She knows that what happens next is certain. She will have to accept it.

That calmness doesn't stop the sharp pain in her heart when she sees a familiar face. The moment she lays eyes on him her whole body sags and she stares at him, despair etched deep into her face. Just when she thinks this journey can't become any more cruel he has to speak. He has to go and say those words, to ask that of her. Again. It's happening again. Tears run down her face and her hands flutter. She wants to move closer to him, but she's so tired, she's so weak. It's happening all over again.

"No," she whispers. She can't. Doesn't he know that she can't?

She struggles to her feet to reach for him with bloodied hands. Her breath hitches and she raises her voice. "That's not what you want." More determinedly- no. More desperately she says, "I'll prove it to you."

Jim

"Felix--NGAHH! OH...Oh...*Fuck* that hurts--Felix?!"

Jim doesn't know where he is. The moment he tries to move there's a jarring stab of pain shooting up his side and squeezing tight in his chest. He knows the wetness he feels is blood. His blood. He's lived through enough pain and torture before now to know when he's been wounded.

Did his soul shoot out of his abdomen when it left his body? What the *hell* happened here? The scream of the blades is drowning out his voice, making everything small and unimportant and Jim tries again to get up. Struggles with numb limbs and the pain.

"F...Felix...!" He's made it out, right? Right??

Stratos

There are no words for the way Stratos's heart stops when the blade comes down. No adequate description for the sound of rage and despair that emerges from his throat in the moment where his little brother is about to be murdered in front of him. He's already reaching out futilely when the blades just... stop.

He's frozen as the wind picks up, unable to comprehend what happened or what that shattering sound was... but he flinches away at that horrific scream. A chorus of screams, the agonies of a multitude splitting the air around them, a sound like the tribune has never heard in his life.

One thought makes it through the din. The blades are in pain. They're distracted.

He still has a chance.

Stratos throws himself forward, reaching out to try and push the blade aside telekinetically, drag Felix away. Back into his reach at last. He only hesitates when the powdery snow swirls upward, forming the outline of very familiar figure with his hand on the blade. Stratos stares at him in bewilderment, and only now does he realize how many figures are standing around him, ethereal and mutilated. They're strange figures, types of elves and beastfolk and humans in clothes he doesn't know, but as he looks from face to face he does understand the fire in their eyes. *Justice. Vengeance. After so long...*

He hears Isidor speak with the spirit before them, but the outcome is nowhere near as important as the way Felix is stirring... and Jim's yelp behind him.

Harrowheart

The soul that holds the hilt of the blade watches Isidor as she approaches him. His only remaining hand can't stray from the quaking hilt, but he can turn his body to better face her, to watch her with a patiently, placidly flat expression. How could anything she says or does convince him against the only thing he's needed for so terribly long?

Isidor

Not a word in response. Is that better somehow? How can she know what to say if he won't speak with her? This isn't the Harrowheart she knows. If he would just tell her what to say. If he would just say anything other than asking such a cruel thing of her...

She searches eyes that are so unfamiliar, but they give nothing away. Slowly, she shakes her head, her eyes still transfixed on Harrowheart's ghost. "I've made too many promises." A little hope lifts her eyebrows then. "Do you remember them? I said I'd make sure you got out of this safely. I said I'd protect you." She steps

closer and lowers her voice. "I promised I'd look for a way to free you from the shade. Do you remember that?"

Harrowheart

Does he remember that?... His eyes slide away from Isidor until his gaze rests on his lifeless body trapped in a tomb of stone. That's who she made those promises to. The part of himself he's so poorly connected to. The part of himself that exists outside of the blade. The hand that holds it. The body that kills for it... but which she nonetheless makes promises to. Promises of protection, of freedom. Devotion.

The phantom returns his impassive attention to Isidor. His grip tightens around the hilt of the weapon, and it begins to still. From the edges of the chamber the souls standing guard begin to stride forward. A bloody-necked bison woman reaches for Stratos' shoulder and rests her broad, two-fingered hand there. Despite her ghostly pallor and wounded form her presence is as pleasant as one living and full of hope and vigor.

"Make me one last promise, then," Harrowheart's soul whispers.

Another spirit come forward from the silent onlookers, a woman knight with a roaring lion tabard. She kneels beside Jim and places her hand on his wounded side. Her weightless presence erases his pain.

Harrowheart removes his hand from the hilt of the blade and, much slower than gravity demands, it begins to fall to the ground. The hand that held the weapon now reaches out to grace her cheek. For the first time his touch is warm and full of life. No, more than that. The pure magic of his life. The only part of himself he can no longer share with her.

"Promise me," he softly says, "That someday I'll be free, and whole again."

Harrowheart

The tip of the blade touches the ground, and slowly it lowers itself into the snow. Its runes are dull, mere carvings void of magic. The eyes of the hilt's skull are pits of shadow and nothing more. Its energy has been drained. Its souls have left it. Its wielder is gone. It is undone.

A final, gentle breeze, a life's last breath, passes through the chamber. The souls

which had been formed from the snow begin to disappear, begin to fall apart to motes of magic that drift like dust in moonbeams. The energy of the souls touching Jim and Stratos settles into their wounds, healing them, returning life which had been lost.

Harrowheart's soul, the last to form, is the last to disappear. As the delicate wind blows through him he breaks apart like grains of sand. From the bottom up he departs, and with his last few moments he watches Isidor. The faintest smile turns his lips, and just like that his face is gone. His fingers on her cheek are the last to turn to dust, leaving behind the memory of his warming touch. His essence drifts downward and settles on the sleeping blade until, like the snowfall on a warm hand, it disappears.

Jim

The promise Harrowheart's soul made Jim vow to him burns in Jim's chest as he drags himself up to a sitting position. Ghostly hands are covering his own clenched to his wound. Rather than a chill or more pain the touch brings relief. The captain's head falls back as he gasps for air, gulping it into his lungs while he watches the exchange between Isidor and Harrowheart.

He hears the promise change, when he asks it of Isidor too. Perhaps there isn't as little life in him as it first appeared. Jim can understand that, since she means the world to Harrowheart. If he was going to be honest with anyone completely it would be her, right? It feels like no more than a blink of an eye before the woman in the lions tabard is fading away to nothing before Jim can even thank her.

It jolts him back to the present.

He leaves Harrowheart's trapped body to Isidor to deal with. All his attention is focus on The body Stratos is holding so protectively. Pale white hair stuck to his clammy face. Jim feels his chest constrict then, kneeling over Felix's body like he is.

"Felix...come on. Please." Jim had him in his arms. Surely he made it out of there. He has to have. The alternative is too much to bear.

Stratos

Felix is breathing steadily in Stratos's arms. His eyes are open, unfocused as his gaze shifts from place to place. The first thing he's aware of is cold. He's icy cold.

When did that happen? Stratos's bloodied face is above him, outlined in flickering fire; he looks frightened, searching Felix's face for something. There's light from beside him, pale and getting brighter...

Stratos looks up again at the figure that stands over him, the hand on his shoulder. In spite of everything there's a calm nobility to the strange woman; her presence brings a sense of hope and ease even before that warmth flows down to ease his wounds. He doesn't have the words to offer her, but he bows his head in respect before he realizes she's disappearing into the snow. He looks around, still cradling his brother. Cold hands reach up to cling at the tribune's arms, but Felix doesn't seem to focus until Jim kneels over him.

He gasps then, fumbling to pull himself upright and reaching for Jim. Get out. They were supposed to get *out* and get **away*...

"Felix, it's *safe*. You're safe. I swear." Stratos is breathless himself, squeezing his brother's shoulders tightly. He shifts to let Jim at Felix, though. He knows better than to come between them.

Jim

The moment Stratos is moving Jim's pulling Felix into his arms. Burying his face in the mage's shoulder. There are no words for the relief flooding him. Threatening to spill tears down his face with the adrenaline that's bleeding out of him.

They've made it. Felix is alive.

Isidor

A promise is not a thing Isidor Durant has ever taken lightly. After all, once one false promise was made all others were worthless. Harrowheart releases his Runeblade to reach for her and she gasps with the warmth of his touch, the feeling of comfort, of love. Her hand rises to touch his arm, and she's about to step closer, but his words make her hesitate. Can she promise that? Can she promise that when she knows so little about any of this? She doesn't want to make false promises. She *never* makes false promises. So can she promise him she'll save his soul?

All too soon a breeze picks up and Harrowheart's soul begins to drift away from her. Isidor's eyes go wide, desperation cracks through her like lightning. "I

promise! I *promise!*"

Tears well up, distorting her vision. The last thing she sees is the small smile on his lips and then he's gone. She shuts her eyes tightly and powers through the tight, twisting pain in her chest. With a deep breath she opens her eyes again and looks over to Harrowheart's body. *Move. Please move. Please.*

Harrowheart

But Harrowheart doesn't move. His body, half trapped by rock and slumped limply, is as still as his blades.

A thought enters her mind then.

Isidor it calls in the sound of her own thoughts. *You know what you must do. Take up the blade. Bring it to him. Didn't he tell you? Put it in his hand. Pick it up... And give it to him.*

Isidor

That's what he told her. That's what she has to do. Just because he isn't moving doesn't mean he's gone. There's still hope. There's still time.

Isidor doesn't spare it another thought. Bending down swiftly, she picks up the Runeblade and rushes over to Harrowheart, rushes to put it back in his hand. She needs him to wake up. She needs him to be himself again. Please...

Stratos

As Jim pulls Felix to himself Stratos finally has the chance to look around. To take in the emptied chamber, the now-silent snow still drifting slowly to the floor. And Isidor... he's about to ask her if it's done when she stoops.

"NO!" His shout is hoarse and terrified. Without thinking the shaken, exhausted mage has raised a hand, not to stop or strike her as she runs... but trying to wrench the sword from her grasp, throw it away from her. He already fears he's too late...

Isidor

The blade goes flying from her hand and Isidor yells in horror. She turns on Stratos, furious and terrified, not sure whether she's about to have to attack or

defend. Either way her magic is ready. "What are you doing?!" She starts towards the blade again, keeping an eye on the other mage this time. "We need to save Harrowheart too!"

Stratos

"But you can't touch the blades! Don't be a fool, Isidor!" If she gets too close he'll slide the blade further out of reach.

Jim

Stratos' shout breaks through the shroud of relief Jim is lost in and he jerks upright, wild blue eyes watching Isidor go for the sword. Ice dumps into his veins and Jim struggles to get to his feet. Shushing Felix if he seems to be disoriented or upset. He's only going to be up for a minute, don't worry--

"We'll bring him to the sword then...!" Jim points to Harrowheart's body

Isidor

Isidor stops in her tracks and stares at Stratos suspiciously. Now that he has Felix can she really trust him? He has no reason to want Harrowheart alive and every reason to want to destroy the blade...

"No," she says suddenly when she sees Jim move. "I'll bring him to the sword."

Her gaze is fixed on the others as she moves to Harrowheart. It takes her a minute to undo the earth bindings but far longer for her to lift him, one arm around his waist, the other pulling his arm tight around her shoulders. If she had enough energy she would magically lift him up, but right now her determination is all she has.

Stratos

"Isidor..." Stratos wants to protest, to offer help, but he's seen the look in her eyes before. It's that of a woman ready to throw down a steel gauntlet. And she is no longer offering her hand to the blades. He has no more will to command or argue. He sits down heavily in the snow and watches Isidor finish the job, putting a hand on Felix just to reassure himself that his brother is there.

And for the first time in a very long while, he feels Felix lean against him, tiny sobs hitching each gulp of breath he takes. Felix is safe. They've succeeded.

Everyone's going to be all right.

Jim

There's no strength left in Jim's legs; he'd only gotten up to his feet out of pure determination before. If Isidor isn't going to allow then to help, then Jim's going to drop right back down onto the snow covered floor. Sucking in breaths and wiping his hair out of his face.

He turns and looks back at Felix and Stratos, tension finally beginning to bleed out of Jim's shoulders. They've done it., right? Dizziness overcomes Jim when the adrenaline ebbs. The cold is once again seeping into Jim's bones and making everything heavy. He has no magical ability, no resistances. He'll just take a moment and catch his breath.

Just a moment....

He's passed out within seconds.

Stratos

They slump down together beneath an empty throne, exhausted in body and soul. The only illumination left is the pale light of Ayleid crystals that carry on shining as they have for eight thousand years. One more mortal drama, one more little tale of tragedy and love and heroics. The smell of burning and blood hang in the air- and something else, faint but arresting.

Each of them dreams of this:

Someone walks among them, black boots crunching on the frost. Their owner is taller than a High Elf, clothed in black silk that shimmers red where the light catches. Two pairs of horns sweep back over black hair and knife-like ears. He's humming to himself in a familiar gravelly voice that meanders in and out of key.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm-hm, but I lay here and grin! 'Cause I got me a- theere you are." He stoops down at the base of the steps, fingers digging through the little drift of snow there. He scoops up a few handfuls, packing them into his other hand to

make a snowball as he stands. He lifts it to his lips – and his skin is black and red too, face marked by a mask of crimson. He sucks in a breath, puffs, and the snow flies off the gleaming surface of a blood-tinted soul gem. The man holds it up to the light, polishes it with his sleeve. He turns to the dreamer then. The grin across his face is wide and thorny-sharp.

“That wasn’t half bad, if I say so myself. Just remember who you’re raising a glass for, later.” He tosses the gem in the air lightly. It glitters as it tumbles. Then they’re both gone.

Harrowheart

A familiar hand rests on the runeblade's hilt; their true wielder is reunited with his weapon and his soul once more after so dreadfully long apart. What little magic remains inside of the blade slowly feeds back into his body, which is plagued by the strangest dream of a demon.

When Harrowheart awakes it's with a gasp and a cough. Groaning, he rises up on shaking – no, *stable* arms. His own strength surprises him! He sits on his knees and feels at his armor, but it reveals nothing. Hurriedly he tugs off his gloves and turns his hands in surprise of what he sees: flesh! All of it! Not living, of course, but not a slimy, sloppy mess of rot and sloughing skin.

He rushes to remove his helmet and freely see the world once more. It's a grim sight, a bleak place of dim light and snow and – Oh no. His friends. Each of them are fallen in the snow, none of them are awake. Jim and Felix are together, Stratos is near, and Isidor... She's right beside him.

Careful in case she's wounded Harrowheart drags her halfway into his lap. One of his icy hands feels her forehead while the other sharply pats her cheek to rouse her. He watches anxiously, looking down at her with upturned brows and trembling lips. *"Isidor,"* he whispers in a shaking voice. *"Isidor, wake up. Please..."*

Isidor

The effort of bringing Harrowheart to his Runeblades was too much. She doesn't even remember blacking out. Had she tried to keep warm and found she had no energy to spare? She can't recall. All she knows is that she is suddenly aware of how cold she is. How her bones feel like they're made of ice, and her muscles refuse to stir. And yet she's moving anyway, being pulled... She tries to push

away, a surge of panic running through her as images of a black and red demon flash into the forefront of her mind. Her motions are weak and sluggish, though, and by the time she manages to raise her arms the sound of a familiar voice stills her. At first she can't see. The cold has frosted her eyelids shut, but soon she's blinking, squinting with the effort of focusing.

"Harrowheart?" There he is... Just as he's always been. They succeeded... but he's not... His soul... How is she happy and sad at the same time? Her brain tells her to sit up, but her muscles don't respond. "Are... Are you all right?"

Harrowheart

Hearing her voice is enough to bubble up a quiet, overwhelmed laugh from him. He smiles with such relief. "Better now that I heard your voice." He briskly rubs one hand up and down her arm in a poor attempt to warm her as he looks around the chamber at the bodies of the others. Are they still living? He can't tell if they're breathing...

He looks down at Isidor once more, torn. He doesn't want to leave her, not in the snow, not after everything they've been through and everything she's done for him. Everything he's afraid he's done to her. He runs his hand over her hair, sighs, and looks around.

It isn't kind, but he picks up his discarded gauntlet and tosses it at Stratos. "Tribune?" he calls. His other glove is thrown onto Jim's legs. "Felix, Jim! Are any of you?..."

Stratos

Stratos is drifting between wakefulness and troubled dozing. His dreams are unsettling; he keeps thinking he should wake up, he has to do something, but it's so hard to- *ow!*

The heavy clang against his chest armor jolts him awake with a gasp and a jolt of adrenalin. He pulls himself away from Felix, scrabbling for the shortsword where it's slipped from his fingers. "What? What is it? Harrowheart?" Up on one knee now, he pans a groggy look over the four of them: Harrowheart's back to normal, the damned blade beside him; Isidor's cradled rather tenderly in his lap (don't think about it); Jim is breathing steadily, no sign of blood pooling around him now despite the stains on his clothes, and there's Felix...

Breathing. Pale and thin, white-haired still, but there's blood in his cheeks and his hands are red with cold as the dislodged conjurer stirs and tries to push himself out of the snow.

The younger Imperial doesn't say anything, for a long minute. He just about gets himself into a sitting position even with Stratos leaning over to put a steadying hand on his back. His right shoulder is aching dully: feels like his old scar is on fire. He looks up at Stratos's ever-so-faint smile; looks at Harrow and winces, jerking his gaze away from that sword, which makes it fall on...

"Jim?" His voice cracks as he utters that one word. But it's his own voice. He scrambles around on hands and knees so he can shake Jim. "Jim, wake up!"

Jim

The Starfleet Captain is cold to the touch. Just as pale and numb as Isidor is. Hypothermia has started to set in. Despite how much he wants to jerk awake at the hands shaking him everything comes slowly as though he's struggling with his own body.

All he manages is an incoherent grunt before tremors start to settle in.

When his eyes open, they're unfocused.

Stratos

He's half-frozen, Stratos realizes. The tribune is getting to his feet stiffly, because even with his own protections the cold's been sinking into his bones too. He lets Felix fuss over Jim for a second while he looks Harrowheart's way. "You seem... better. Miss Durant, are you well? We all need to get out of here. Felix, it's all right. We're going to take him home."

Harrowheart

Harrowheart nods when he's spoken to. He hooks his arm under Isidor's and behind her back and helps to haul her to her feet. She needs to get up, but it wouldn't do to carry her. She deserves the dignity of being able to stand on her own two feet, even if it is with a little assistance.

"How?" he asks Stratos. "You got a portal for us, Tribune?"

Stratos

Stratos sticks his sword back in its sheath with only a little difficulty, then loosens one of his armor's stays at the side so he can pull out his phone from a pocket underneath. He lifts it so Harrow can see. "I assumed you'd have brought a PINpoint as well, but I suppose not. I can return you and Miss Durant to the Nexus, if need be."

Isidor

Isidor nods when she's spoken to and mumbles a word of thanks to Harrowheart as he helps her to her feet. It's a small thing, but she appreciates it.

"I have my PINpoint as well." She stops to lean against Harrowheart and breathe deeply. "Some of my things are with the horses. I should get them first."

Harrowheart

"And then we get outta here," Harrowheart stresses.

Stratos

Stratos's eyes flit between them and the two men at his feet. "Do you need assistance to get back outside? If not, I'll take these two home first." Not that there's anything up there he really cares about securing. As long as the horses are safe until the next day...

Isidor

Isidor hesitates and looks to Harrowheart. "Could you help me get back to the horses?"

Harrowheart

"Of course," Harrowheart whispers. "Of course."

Isidor

She smiles softly at him and then nods to Stratos. "Take care of Jim and Felix. We'll manage."

Stratos

The tribune jerks his head downward once, setting his phone to take them home and crouching to get a hold of the other two. "Be safe, Isidor."

They're gone in the blink of a PINpoint.

[Inside the Soul Orb \(Top\) \(Return to Part Seven Link\)](#)

Stratos

A mortal mind isn't meant to grasp the sensation of one's soul being snatched from one's body. It's a shock through nerves you never knew you had, a wash of darkness over one's senses, a painful, terrifying force dragging you tumbling into a cold void. You cannot scream; there is nothing to scream with.

There is a stone floor, when it ends. Jim will find himself standing on it, though the transition will leave his head swimming. Around him in every direction is a thick mist. Everything sounds distant, feels distant. No sky is visible beyond the greyness; the shadows of trees seem to loom through the mist, though if Jim walks toward them they get no closer.

In the distance, a figure stumbles silently through the mist.

Jim

He's standing.

There's a coldness that has seeped through to his bones that tingles everything from the tips of his fingers to his lungs. Whatever just happened, it felt an Awful Lot like dying had back in the warp core just without the pain. There was nothing to be hurt, after all. His body is fine somewhere else. Hopefully. When Jim moves to wrap his arms around himself to try and hold onto some semblance of warmth he's surprised to find himself in his command golds. The all-weather gear and cloak are gone, as are the bracers Marcella made for him. Jim's left in his Starfleet uniform because even outside of his body that is who Jim Kirk IS.

Isidor warned him how easy it was to get lost in a place like this. How important it would be to remember himself. In this place of stone floors and heavy mists, Jim's more worried about losing sight of Felix than he is himself.

"I thought it'd be more red in here." The uneasy mumble doesn't ease his nerves

any, but at least he knows he's able to talk in this place. Or at least thinks he is. Trying to wrap his head round all of this is driving him in circles. Having a body at all in this place is weird, but then again, what else would he have? This is the only form he knows himself as.

"Felix....?" Best to start looking.

Stratos

It couldn't be that simple. It'll take some trudging through the haze for Jim to sight anyone else. The closer he gets the clearer it becomes that this figure is not Felix. There's something deeply wrong with the way they move, their profile...

It's the spectre of an older man, dressed in a stained uniform and horribly disfigured. He bears a huge gaping wound where something hacked into his side; the right side of his face is a bloody wreck, flesh and bone hanging loose. He wanders slowly through the emptiness, apparently oblivious to Jim's approach. Looking around, there are other silent shadows moving aimlessly through the grey.

Jim

There's no one else here in this place to judge Jim Kirk when he recoils from the sight at the injured spectre. Like so many of the undead they've snuck past or fought in this place he's grotesquely disfigured, though Jim frowns as he tries to get a better look through the mists at the uniform the man is wearing.

Well, alright then. Looks like he shouldn't go just shouting for Felix in here either. There's plenty of other souls wandering lost in this place, apparently. A spike of worry courses through him that Felix was not underneath him when he came to in this place. They came in together, surely he can't be *far*.

He slips past the man who used to be a soldier and continues on through the mists. Felix..? That aimless shambler doesn't look to be the conjurer either. Maybe over here? It's easy to lose track of time as Jim wanders through the mists. His steps lack the hesitation and stutter of the other beings here. They have a purpose, even if he's lost insofar as direction.

Felix. *Felix*. He's got to be in here somewhere.

What if it didn't work? What if Jim's the only one who ended up here after all? The thoughts bring a sick chill to Jim's skin he tries to shake off as he moves

quicker through the mists. He wants to see Felix. Wants to find him. Has to find him. He doesn't realize he's started running.

Harrowheart

Mutilated figures wandering through the mistscape largely ignore Jim. They're caught up in their own often-quiet pain, distracted by gripping their wounds and looking sightlessly around for someone or something which never comes into view. One of these people, though, one of them seems more aware.

From the edge of the darkness a man stumbles into Jim's view. His familiar silhouette isn't obscured by his clothes, which give him the appearance of a late-19th century farmer. Blonde hair, white skin, tall... It's Harrowheart, it's got to be, though not as a death knight. Mist swirls around his legs as he staggers through the blackness, his wide eyes looking around in confusion and worry. His right hand is clamped tightly to his left wrist, a bleeding stump.

It takes him a moment to see Jim, but when he does he freezes immediately, half bent over from his pain but unable to take his eyes off the sight of someone he doesn't recognize. His lips tremble with uncertainty and fear before he finally says, as much a question as a statement, "You don't belong here..."

Jim

A billow of mist wafts between both blonde men frozen in place while they stare at each other. The only movement besides two pairs of wide, fearful blue eyes darting back and forth.

It takes Jim a moment to realize what it is he's seeing. To process Harrowheart with a normal human palor (if not pale from blood loss and the cold) and without the presence the death knight usually carries with him. He's tall and unmistakably rural from the way he talks down to the way he dresses. A thought occurs nearly too slow to stop Jim from snapping his mouth shut before he creates *more* confusion.

He has no idea who the human was **before** he was Harrow Heart the death knight. Somehow, Jim doubts that's his given name with a sister named 'Anna'. He looks a lot like her, actually. But Not-Harrow is talking, and Jim's finally moving to raise both of his hands in a placating manner.

"I really don't. I'm looking for someone important. I didn't expect to find *you*, too. But...you don't recognize me."

Harrowheart

While Jim wrestles with the confusion of seeing someone he's known for so long looking so different, Harrowheart's soul continues to fearfully watch him.

"You know me?" he asks, his voice distant and uncertain. His chest heaves and he closes his eyes as he winces from the pain in his arm. He begins to stumble off in another direction, starts to return to his aimless wandering, but when his eyes open he sees Jim once more and experiences his surprise and confusion all over again.

"Who?" he asks. His nostrils tremble as he fights to hold back a sob which nonetheless escapes him in a rush of foggy breath. "Who are you here for?"

Jim

"In...a fashion, yeah. It's a long story."

It's hard to not stare at the bleeding stump Not-Harrow is gripping on to. Jim wants to help him, but he's not sure how to. How does one help stop a wound that isn't there? Or is it a metaphor for part of his *soul* being missing? The thought sends a chill down Jim's spine. He doesn't want to think about that. Not in the least. He needs his and he needs it intact.

"Felix Caelus. He....also doesn't belong here." No matter what anyone says. He belongs with Jim and decidedly not cackling like a maniacal demon of a man. "Pale skin, dark hair and eyes." Would it be white, now? Surely not. That's not who Felix is.

"Is...is there anything I can do to help you though? While we look? That looks like it hurts a fuckton."

Harrowheart

"*Felix*," Harrowheart whispers worriedly. His brow knits and he begins to nod. He looks around with a new sense of urgency, then begins to stumble through the mists. It seems he knows where he's going.

"You still have time to save him. And you have to," he whispers as he goes. "Or

he'll suffer with the rest of us. Forever."

Together they pass other souls – it seems more of them are appearing, wandering as shadows through the mist – who all grip their own wounds and search for their own missing saviors. Small whines escape Harrowheart as he continues on his path to Felix's soul.

A long silence passes where Harrowheart neither speaks nor answers anything said to him, until eventually he stops. He bends at the waist and resumes his painful posture cradling his bleeding arm, then looks up at Jim imploringly. "Promise you'll free the rest of us? All of us? Promise you'll get us out. Tell me you'll end it." He fights to keep eye contact with Jim before he has to turn his head away and cough out a single sob.

"Destroy the runeblades and burn my body. Let me be free. Let me be gone."

Jim

"You know Felix?" Wait, that doesn't make any sense. Jim's hurrying after Harrowheart now, struggling to keep up despite being the one in possession of all his complete limbs here. "Wait, Harrowheart-Harrow WAIT."

The color is bleeding out of Jim's face. Free them. Get them out. They're trapped. But won't that--

Oh.

Oh, no.

"Don't...don't ask me to do that, Harrow." Jim's hands are shaking as he reaches out to touch his friend's shoulders. He wants to pull Harrow into a hug and tell him it's going to be okay. But he knows they're not. Nothing about this is okay.

All this time.

All this time while Jim's been joking and laughing and playing around Harrowheart's True self was stuck here in eternal agony and suffering. Every embrace and drink they've shared has been Jim parlaying with a corpse. Nothing but a minion to the blades. Has he ever truly known his friend? Has he ever even given thought to what Harrowheart's circumstances were? Even still, he finds himself hesitating now. Jim doesn't want to lose Harrowheart.

But if this is the reality...if *this* is the human's true will...can he really refuse? Even if it kills something inside of Jim to do it, it wouldn't be the first time. It won't be the last.

"We're friends." Jim says finally. Firmly. "I understand. Anything I can do to help you, I will."

Harrowheart

The touch to his shoulders is so foreign. When was the last time he made contact with someone else's soul? It feels so long ago, and yet something inside of him whispers that it isn't so. That he's known love and connection. Distantly. Filtered through his far-away body and that fragment of himself which still resides in it.

"We're friends," he whispers, uncertain and yet brightened by a spark of hope. He has a friend. But then his mood turns and he looks away. "And I don't even recognize you. We don't even know each other's names..."

He keeps his face down as he walks. He doesn't want to look at this other man, a friend he doesn't even know.

Jim

"We are. My name's Jim Kirk. I want you to know that. And I'm so goddamn sorry I didn't realize your situation before now."

He hadn't even come here for Harrowheart. Jim hadn't even thought to look. Self loathing knifes at Jim's insides but it will have to wait. He can't afford to get distracted now, lost in his own sea of demons and bad memories. Felix is counting on him. Harrowheart is counting on him--no. Not Harrow Heart.

"What's your name?" He's not sure he wants to know, but Jim owes it to this man to know it. To hold it with him even after his friend is dead and gone. Destroy the blades. Burn the body. *Let me be gone*. Fuck, *fuck* why does it always come down to this? Why isn't there another way?

He has to save all of them. All the souls trapped in here.

Harrowheart

"Jim..." The soul whispers the name, carefully weighing its worth. He forces a nod and the hint of a smile despite his pain. "Even if it had to be here... I'm glad we met. My name's –"

Another wandering soul, this one with an opened throat, bumps aimlessly into him and stops him mid-sentence. He stares off into the distance blurry-eyed and vacant until suddenly he exclaims, "*Felix!*"

He's staring at the shape of a man that Jim must recognize. The shape of his friend, his lover. Of Felix Caelus. His soul is just a few strides away, but even a few strides in this strange place can seem so far.

Jim

Jim nearly shakes him--come on this is *important* Harrowheart don't leave him hanging here-- only to stop once again mid-action and follow Harrow's gaze through the mists.

He forgets what he was asking. Pulls away from Harrowheart and turns.

"Felix..." He'd know that silhouette anywhere. He spares Harrowheart one last look, quick and barely more than a glance. "I won't forget. It's a promise." His hands drop from Harrowheart's shoulders and Jim hurries off again. Can't afford to lose sight of Felix now, not when he's so *close*. "Felix!!"

Stratos

Felix is utterly lost. He doesn't understand where he is. This isn't a normal plane, but he's struggling to make sense of what it could be. He feels cold. Feels something gripping him with insubstantial claws, holding him, trying to call him back. Something he fears and yearns for in equal measure.

Where are you? Where am I...?

His head jerks up at the sound of his name. A voice they... they? He knows. Two voices. *Jim*.

Felix turns, wild-eyed but very much himself. His hair is dark, here, and though he still looks gaunt and weak his armor is ordinary unblemished leather. It takes him a second to focus, and when he does his gaze lands on 'Harrowheart' first. He recoils a step before Jim moves in front and takes up all his attention.

"Jim?" His voice is a thin whisper.

Jim

The only thing he's wanted for months. Since stepping foot in Tamriel. Since fighting his way through that ruin of broken rock and the undead.

That voice untarnished by the blades' controlling him. Those eyes looking at Jim and *seeing* him the way they used to. Jim's arms are reaching out and pulling Felix into his embrace. Jim is warm. The only warm thing in this place. He's nearly glowing compared to everything else here. Jim knows Who he is and why he's here. He knows what he wants. This place may exist to confuse the soul and strand the lost to wander but it's never had to go toe to toe with James T Kirk's stubborn refusal to be denied.

"I'm here. I will *always* come for you."

Stratos

Felix lets out a sharp breath. It's a shaky, stunned sound. He looks like he's struggling to articulate a thought when Jim pulls him close and wraps warm arms around him and he just gasps again. Jim's here. He's lost and everything feels wrong but it's *really Jim* and Felix knows that on a level that goes far deeper than surface recognition. Their souls embrace and it's the most real thing in all this tiny self-contained universe. There's a solidity and a comfort to the captain's presence that drowns out the grey nothing around him. He wraps hesitant arms around Jim in turn and immediately clings tight.

Even as he feels unseen talons deepen their grip in his chest.

"H-how are you here? I left you in the cave." The cave. What were they doing there? His thoughts are so jumbled, with the guiding intent behind them far away. But still reaching for him. He presses his cold face into Jim's neck and murmurs anxiously. "You shouldn't have gone there. I'm trying to keep you safe..."

Jim

"Man by the name of Sam might have told me how to come and get you. But I don't know any magic, so thank Stratos for the heavy lifting. I'm just the guy who jumped headfirst outta my body into wherever we are to come get you."

Jim wraps his arms around Felix and hold him against the captain's body. Safe. Secure.

Stratos said Jim was the only one Felix would listen to. He'd better hope he's saying the right things now. Second guessing himself won't get them anywhere and Jim knows what he wants. Always has.

"Come back with me."

Logically, Jim knows that none of this is real. None of what he's feeling can actually be here. He has no fingers to dig into Felix's leathers as they're back with his body. But it feels real to his senses. Felix's cold face pressed into his neck. If he had a heart to beat here in this place he's sure it would be pounding from the trepidation he feels now.

"If you run off again, I'm just gonna have to come after you."

Stratos

"Sam?" He doesn't get it, not with his thoughts so confused. Other patrons have been driven from his mind in the last few weeks. He can't articulate it, but he knows the only power that has him in its grip. He breathes in deep, as if imbibing Jim's warmth, his strength... his vibrant, shining *life*.

"I... I want to. I've missed you. But I-" He shudders abruptly as something drags at him, struggling to get a grip on him in here. He can feel it - *them* - reaching deeper, trying to pull him back out. "Jim, I won't be able to- I can't *stay*. I have to go back. I can feel them reel me back..."

His fingers dig tighter against Jim, and yet he sounds almost resigned to it. This is the way it must be, and he can't see an alternative. Even though he no longer remembers exactly why he had to take up the blades...

Harrowheart

"Don't give in."

It's the voice of Harrowheart's soul, which hasn't moved from where Jim left it. His hand is still clamped onto his wrist and a look of agony still twists his face even as he shakes his head. And he isn't alone. None of them are. More souls now than ever before are wandering through this once-dark space, now quickly growing crowded. More and more seem to appear, too, each of them aimless, each of them silently wailing as they press their hands against their mortal

wounds.

"Don't let it do to you what it did to me, Felix. Don't – nnggh – don't –" He stops to pant, to cough. "Don't let it end just because you think you can't go on. It's never too late. Live for something. Don't give up like I did..."

Jim

Jim turns his head so he can see Harrowheart and feels a spike of guilt jolt through him all over again. His gaze flickers to other faces, other souls wandering the mists. More visible now than they were before. Or are there more of them? What's going on here?

There's a needling feeling that they're running out of time. How long have they been in here? How long was he running around looking for Felix?

"Felix you're not understanding. I'm not going to give you up. Not to some lord or lady from your world, not to some debonair charlatan you meet in the Nexus, and *certainly* not to a pair of disembodied necromancer blades who want to use you for a plaything until they discard you like everyone else here. Look around you. Is this where you want to spend eternity? Come on. Come back with me, *please*." *While you still can.*

Stratos

"You." Felix doesn't meet the lost soul's eyes when he glances that way. He's heard that voice before. Ignored that voice before. There's guilt on his face now, but it's banished by another shuddering pang. "They want me back. They want..."

He gasps, nearly sobbing as those thoughts come to the fore. They've already had what they want from him, time and again. He tried to kill Jim for them, has killed and desecrated so many others they asked for. Trying to become fit for them. He's already so far gone...

The soul beside them urges him to *live for something*, and there is only one thing Felix knows he wants desperately. They can't have Jim. And Jim can't stay here. He closes his eyes, though it does nothing to shut out the icy force clutching and tearing at him, trying to wrench him back into its hold.

No. He wants to be free of this. He wants to be home with Jim. He doesn't want them to take him back. His eyes lift to meet Jim's, pleading with him.

"I don't know the way back. Show me, Jim. Please. I- I want to be free again."

Jim

Yes. Yesss.

He leans forward and captures Felix's mouth with a firm, relieved kiss. Wraps an arm around Felix's waist protectively as he turns them to head back the way they've come. They have to get out of here. Although, the more Jim looks around the less sure he is about which way he'd come when he was running through the mists.

"We have to get out of here...."

It's not like he'd used a door. *How exactly* are they supposed to leave this place now that they want to?

Wait.

Shit.

Harrowheart

There are so many souls here now. So much uncomfortable company. Harrowheart's soul is no longer visible, as the gap between them has been filled by others wandering without sight or purpose through this place.

And then the darkness of that void is split by a sudden beam of light, the smallest streak of brightness that shines on one of the wayless souls. This is enough to make it finally take notice of its surroundings. It looks toward the sky, eyes and mouth wide open. And then relief begins to soften its twisted features. Yes. Hope and freedom. Something other than this eternal torment...

Another beam illuminates a second soul, but before it can react a massive rip tears through the sky of this realm, brightening the whole of this graveyard of souls. Eyes which see for the first time since their deaths look around in wonderment, but they don't have long. Light streams in from the floor and the souls begin to drift apart as the darkness on which they stand cracks and splits. The whole of this strange realm is tearing apart in complete silence until –

A *crack* like the shattering of crystal splits the air, and the entirety of the soul cage shatters.

[\(LINK BACK TO PART Seven: Outside the Soul Orb\)](#)

Conclusions [\(Top\)](#):

Jim, Stratos, Felix:

Jim

Bip.

Thick carpets rather dusty from their lack of airing out in winter's chill lay underfoot. Or under Face, in Jim's case. The particulate he's breathing in makes him sneeze though it's done very little for stopping the shivers. He's numb enough that he doesn't feel the warmth rush over them when they appear in one of the rooms in Felix's childhood Brumese home. Trembling hands try to push themselves underneath Jim so he can sit himself upright but he only manages to raise himself up a few inches before his arms give out and he drops to the floor again in a *POOF* of dust motes catching in the light that streams in through the windows.

For Felix, there can be no doubt where he is. He's *home*. Everything from the familiar taperstries that hang over the walls to the eagles and dragons carved along the archways of every door confirms it. Familiar smells, familiar sights. Really the only thing out of place here is Jim struggling to sit up on the carpet where they've PINpointed in.

Stratos can breathe his first untroubled breath since this voyage started. He's made it home with his little brother alive and in tow.(edited)

Stratos

"H-here...?" When Stratos said home, Felix had assumed he meant the camp. He looks around in stunned wonder. His thoughts are still scattered; everything feels half a dream, down to the icy crypt vanishing in favor of this warm, familiar house. Where he'd normally shrug and think *PINpoint*, right now it doesn't make sense. Nothing feels like it makes sense. He looks at Stratos, but his elder brother is sitting with his eyes closed, just breathing in and out in deep gulps of air.

...And Jim. There's Jim beside him, sneezing and shivering. Felix scrambles

around on hands and knees to grab his shoulder, turn him over and see that it's really him there. He's gasping himself then, hardly knowing what he feels except Jim got them both out, somehow, impossibly.

Terentius can't sprint like he used to but they hear his boots thudding on the floorboards before he shoves the door open and takes a good look at them all. One in particular. "Felix!" He strides in and drops to his knees on the carpet, catching Felix's shoulders and pulling him into a hug. "Thank Stendarr! Are you all right, lad? Are any of you injured?"

"I-I..." Stratos, help?

Jim

Terentius can wonder how they all drug themselves in here without catching his notice later. Or perhaps now that he's getting a good look of Jim in the clothes from his own world, he'll assume it was somehow the Captain's doing. Because aside from the bracers Marcella has made for him, everything else about Jim is Not Of Tamriel. Not that Jim's aware enough of himself to try and pull his cloak around himself.

He's laying on his back now, staring up at the wooden beams above them. They made it. They're out of that horrible place. Jim can hear Felix next to him. Can see Stratos out of the corner of his eye. Slowly, sluggishly, Jim reaches back and pushes himself up from the floor. Grabs hold of Stratos' arm to use as an anchor as he pulls himself upright into a sitting position. The cold still seizes at him and trembles him from head to toe but he's moving on his own now. Albeit slowly.

"We'll I-live." Jim croaks the words out from where he's leaning against Stratos.

Stratos

Jim can feel Stratos grip his arm in turn before the tribune looks up at his family. "No-one's injured, uncle. We were... lucky."

Terentius gives them all another look. Takes in Jim's clothing and more importantly the slime and blood staining it. The filth on all three of them; the melted frost dripping from their hair; the look in each pair of eyes. And speaking of hair... he runs his fingers over Felix's magic-bleached locks with a worried frown.

"What in bloody Oblivion happened to you all?" he mutters, and if that sounds like

a rhetorical question it's because he doesn't expect to get any coherent answer for a while. The moment he looks at Stratos the tribune starts pushing himself to his feet, looking vaguely guilty for dawdling. For now, Terentius can only do what they need of him: he helps the elder brother get the other two on their feet and hustles them all to a warmer room. Amid gruff, quiet words of reassurance he helps them strip off soiled cloaks and armor (and *especially* boots) beside the warmth of a roaring fire. One sniff of Felix's leathers tells the old legionnaire more than he wants to know.

Felix gets his first attention, because even aside from his incoherence the boy looks like a walking corpse himself. There's a pitcher of water waiting, and Terentius helps Felix get some down his throat before he checks if Jim and Stratos can drink by themselves. By now they've established that there really are no injuries, so the basins of water by the fire become solely for wiping the worst grime from hands and faces. Stratos at least can help, though his uncle informs him in short order that he's to see to himself first. Age comes before rank in this house.

Jim

They're all of them completely filthy. Stratos may actually be the cleanest given he was actually able to see down there in the dark confines of the iced over cove of corpses they had to traipse through. None of Jim's clothing is normal for this world though he removes it with the same slow obedience that Felix does. Underneath his cloak there's a toughened fabric jacket Jim's unzipping (what sorcery is this zzzzzzzzzipp-sounding device?! Little metal teeth on a coat? How bizarre!). Even his black undershirt is soaked in a cold sweat even if it's not as outwardly filthy as the rest of his clothing. His pants (more zips!) and boots follow suit until he's left in his black undershirt and underwear shivering next to the fire.

Cleaning up is a slow task with lots of fumbling and dropping the washcloth more than once. His eyes won't leave Felix while he works. As if the mage would disappear if he looked away for even a moment.

Stratos

Felix is the only one whose head doesn't snap around at the sound of the zip, though Stratos remembers what it is and loses interest when he sees Jim undressing. His uncle, on the other hand, gives the strange clothes a fascinated inspection as he takes them from Jim... at least until the smell beats his curiosity.

As for Felix, he still seems dazed, eyes tracking from place to place as he tries to

make sense of his thoughts. It feels like a wall's been lifted from his mind and let the world come flooding back in – and bobbing up amid the rush of clarity are dark thoughts that feel like they made sense just a few minutes ago. Half-recalled intentions. Disjointed thoughts about how vulnerable the others look. Things that make him shudder and shut his eyes tight until they pass. But when he opens them, over and over again he turns a plaintive gaze back to Jim, to Stratos. They're alive, they're here. He didn't hurt them.

He doesn't want to hurt them. He really doesn't.

Terentius bustles off with an armload of stinking clothes he really wants to get rid of, and the next thing Stratos fills Felix's gaze as he crouches down before his little brother. He takes Felix's head in his hands and looks into his eyes.

"Are you free? Really?" he asks quietly, and Felix can feel the elder mage looking at his mind, seeing the truth for himself when he nods. There's only one soul and one will in there. Even if he's not sure who that is.

It's somewhere in the next couple of minutes, while Stratos is draping blankets over them, that the conjurer seems to focus properly. He's stringing together his memories of the last few weeks. Some of them. Enough to make him widen his eyes at the air and utter two hoarse but heartfelt words.

"O-oh *fuck*."

Jim

"What? What happened?"

Jim jerks upright from his own chair. His listless staring in Felix's general direction now sharp and focused. There have been far too many times when the rug was pulled out from underneath him just when he thought things were finally alright for the captian not to immediately become on edge at Felix's exclamation. His glass of water drops to the floor and rolls, spilling the last sip that was in it on the floor.

What now?

If it's bad, Jim's not sure what more he can do or give, especially in his underwear and a blanket.

Stratos

Stratos too looks up, but there's no fresh sign of anything wrong except that Felix is covering his face, scrubbing at it with his palms as if he can wipe away the memories that are falling into place with dreadful certainty.

"I..." His voice chokes, dry again. He can't form the words. Doesn't know where to begin. Jim knows what happened. What he *did*. *Did he see...? Wasn't he there?*

He forces himself to look up at Jim again, pale and drained and utterly shocked. His voice rasps when he manages to utter the thing that he remembers clearest and most painfully.

"I attacked you." He swallows with difficulty. Adds almost pleadingly, "I was going to fix it... I was fixing it..." But he didn't. He mustn't have. Because it all got worse.

Jim

"Oh."

It's not the most helpful answer even as Jim relaxes again in his seat. He almost asks *which time?* but thinks better of it. That's not what Felix needs to hear right now. Instead Jim nods absently and pulls the blankets around him more firmly.

Beneath the fatigue is a real anger at what Felix has done. What he chose to do. Jim knows much of it would have been the Blades imposing their will on Felix, but not all of it. At some point, Felix was in his right mind enough to choose. That fact is what fuels his anger. When he can speak without every word being an endeavor there's going to be words aplenty. For now, all he can do is nod.

"Yeah. I know you were."

Stratos

Stratos looks away himself as he sits back down on a stool. It hurts to see Felix half-pleading in his confusion. Still trying to justify his actions. But he's in no state to argue with. More to the point... Stratos simply doesn't have the energy left to talk him through it.

Felix falls silent for another minute at Jim's reassurance. Gathering his thoughts before he says quietly, "You got me out anyway."

He can't quite fathom that, not yet. Stratos he understands, though he's grateful

for that too. But this is Stratos's world and he's Stratos's family and there are *rules*, ironclad rules that make it inevitable he would act as he did. Jim isn't bound by those. He can't articulate the difference but he knows it on a gut level. Expects it, anyway.

Jim

"Yeah, we did."

Felix may not be making note of Stratos' help let alone the others but Jim certainly is. Knows he wouldn't have had a chance at rescuing Felix without them. How many times were they nearly brought down? Jim shuts his eyes and sighs at the outstretched arms he can still see reaching for him behind his eyelids. One more nightmare to add to the pile.

"Rest for now, Felix. We'll talk soon."

Stratos

Felix looks uneasy, but he doesn't have the wit to argue and Stratos is opening his eyes again, taking over the speaking.

"I can help Terentius put him to bed, Jim. There's an unused bedroom if you'd like to rest alone. One of us can stay with Felix." He can't countenance the idea of leaving his little brother alone. What if something is still wrong? What if he wakes and goes wandering? What if he's lost and afraid when he wakes?

No. He won't be left alone.

"If you need something to help you sleep," Stratos adds quietly, "we can give you that too."

Jim

Jim nearly pipes up for Stratos not to be foolish. That of course he's going to rest wherever Felix is. But the moment he opens his mouth he feels a cold hand clamp down on his throat, choking the life out of him. Mad eyes and pale skin staring down at him with fevered glee. Perverse pleasure.

He doesn't realize the noise he's made, nor the way he's shaking.

"S-sure. Both would be nice." When he finally croaks out a reply he barely recognizes the voice as his own. It's weak and trembling. Jim hates it. There's

precious little he can do to stop it, though. Other than wait until he's alone in the unused room and bury his head into his hands, stifling the choked sobs that threaten to spill.

Stratos

Jim may not know, but Felix hears that sound. Sees the shaking. He may not be thinking coherently right now, but his gut twists and his chest tightens painfully. It's his fault. His fault that Jim's so frightened. He lurches forward on his stool before he catches himself. Checks the urge to reach out for the other man. He clutches his empty cup and keeps his silence. Doesn't protest when his family bundle him off to bed.

He doesn't really drift off to sleep, though. He lies exhausted and unsettled while Jim is seen to and given a dose of something to ease him to sleep. It's a while before Terentius sits him up and urges him to drink something that sends him, too, slipping into a sleep that's deep and dreamless as his body's exhaustion takes over. He's not aware of the others watching over him. Isn't aware that it's his uncle who soothes him when he does stir and then gets him to drink a thin broth. before he sleeps again.

It's going to be a long, long night for them all.

Isidor, Harrowheart ([Top](#)):

Harrowheart

From the abandoned throneroom Isidor and Harrowheart traverse the underground ruins – a much quicker trip up than down. The tortured corpses of before have all returned to the rest they deserve, and the only struggle ahead of the two is the terrain. It's a struggle, but with each other and a hint of magic they eventually emerge to the remnants of the town that lie above ground.

How does a snow-covered mountain manage to feel so warm? After everything Isidor has been through, it can't be any wonder how the waning light of the evening sun is almost an exotic heat. Harrowheart keeps her close as they retread their steps through the snow. Often he looks down at her to be sure she's still there, still alive and breathing, thinking, feeling. He reassures himself that she has the will and the power to go on.

As they pass below an ancient archway he breathes in deeply. His lungful of air remains trapped in his chest for a long while as he considers what he needs to

say. Finally it comes out as, "I'm sorry."

His arm around her holds her just a hint tighter as he guides her down a flight of icy steps. "That I wasn't strong enough to keep my own mind down there. If I hurt you..."

He bites his lip and worriedly looks her up and down. "I didn't, did I?"

Isidor

It feels as if she has no energy left, but she still keeps moving, keeps walking. Tired or not, they have to get on with things. She has to keep going. That's all she's thinking about when they reach the surface: Keep going, keep moving, one more step, and another... So Harrowheart's word catch her by surprise.

She blinks at him and then turns her attention the icy stairs. "No. We've fought before, remember? I knew what to do this time." Once they reach the bottom she puts a hand on his and looks at him. "It wasn't your fault. You don't need to be sorry."

Harrowheart

The relief on his face is palpable. He gives her hand a gentle squeeze before he lets it go. It wouldn't do for her to hold him too long in this cold.

He's quiet again a while as he follows the trail they left on the way in. The silence of this place is healing, somehow. He'll only ruin it if he speaks.

Now and then he glances her way and parts his lips. Something is on his mind, but his need to say it is outweighed by his inability to express it.(edited)

Eventually he stops her and turns her so that she's facing him directly. He holds her at half arm's length, hands on her elbows, and begins to shake his head.

"You saved me, Isidor. And I – I know you know that. But... It's the first time I –" he shakes his head again. "You put yourself in danger for me. You risked your future for me. For... *Me*."

His hands move to her shoulders and his blue eyes remain locked on hers. An exhausted sigh escapes him.

"No one's ever saved *me*."

He can't go on until he clears his throat.

"I never thought I'd know what it feels like to matter this much."

Isidor

As much as he's relieved Isidor is also glad she managed to ease his guilt. After all of this he'll have quite a bit to deal with, she imagines. Her focus returns to stepping carefully in the cold and she only half notices his glances. She assumes he's worried about her. Has he ever seen her look this tired and this worn before?

All thoughts of the past are interrupted when he stops her to... express his... gratitude? His disbelief? Her gaze slides to the ground and she rolls her shoulders, shrugging off the discomfort of not knowing how to respond. "Losing you... isn't an option anymore," she says quietly. With a deep inhale she summons the energy to lift her head again and meet his gaze. "I'd do it again, if you needed me to."

Harrowheart

Everything that's passing between them is so heavy, so serious... Yet despite the gravity of the situation a weak little laugh escapes him. When she looks up at him there's a light in his eyes. "*Isn't an option anymore*," he whispers. After he says that he has to spend a moment considering her face, and a hint of a smile begins at the corners of his lips.

"Ain't that just the Isidor thing to say?"

Judging by the warmth of his expression, that's a good thing. He runs his hands over her hair until his palm rests on her back. Gently he encourages her to turn back to the path, and he begins walking toward the ruins' exit. Losing her isn't an option either, especially not to the cold. The gear – and, eventually, their homes – await.