**Mage and Wolf - Chapter 3: Hircine’s Champion**

Hunter was a little frustrated at their progress, as due to the earlier ambush, and a few trivial stops since, evening had melted away to the start of night. It wasn’t long after, however, that the mage and archer gave a sigh of relief when their current destination came into view, the presence from the vast mountain casting an intimidating blanket over the small village.

“Marcurio, how’s your jaw? That’s a rough lookin’ bruise you got goin’ on.” Hunter bit her lip, brows furrowing at the dark patch that was growing on the man’s face.

“You should see the other guy.”

“I have a salve for that. It’ll help for the pain.

“Can’t I just use a potion if it gets bad enough?”

“Potions don’t help much for bruising and soreness.”

“Fair enough.” He rubbed the spot with tentative fingers, “But how about after dinner? I’m feeling rather hungry after reverse-raiding a bandit camp, and we should probably order food and a room before it gets too late.”

Ivarstead was accommodating enough, or, so much as Hunter and Marcurio were concerned. Most of the inhabitants were fairly friendly, and a select few seemed eager to make conversation with outsiders, as being stuck in such an obscure town for trading roads lent itself to being less traveled. They’d hitched their horses on a post outside of the Inn, paying a handful of septims to a couple of locals for grooming and feeding services while they went inside.

“Welcome to Vilemyr Inn, travelers!” a man called from the bar, giving them a friendly smile as he looked up from his task of cleaning tankards. “What can I get for you?”

“We’ll need two beds for the night.” Marcurio spoke up as his companion trotted past him.

“Got any drinks, mister?” Hunter questioned, “I’m thirsty!”

“’Mister’? No need for such formalities, lass; ‘Wilhelm’ does just fine. What can I start you off with?”

“Milk for me please, if you have it.”

“I’ll take a light ale.”

“Coming right up.”

The travelers sat themselves down at the bar, setting down their bags and stretching from the days ride.

“Here’s a menu.” The mage said after a moment, passing a leaf of paper towards the feline, who took it and squinted.

“Do they…have any grilled leeks?”

“Hm? No, says here on the bottom that they aren’t serving any right now. Hmm, I wonder why…”

“Ah, that.” Wilhelm turned back, placing two full tankards on the bar for his guests. “Ivarstead is in, ahh… a bit of an economical situation. Our gardens haven’t been able to yield leeks this season, so please forgive the inconvenience. We have plenty of everything else on the menu though.”

“I…I think I’m not really hungry after all. But the milk is good, thank you.” Hunter smiled, taking a swig of the warm beverage.

“Ah, it’s no problem. Let me know if you do happen to need anything.”

Her employee gave her a sideways glance, though kept his tongue; choosing instead to place an order for himself. The two men chatted on another moment, though Hunter didn’t pay them much mind as a blonde woman that sat at the same bar caught her attention.

“Excuse me miss, um, Khajiit? Would you care to hear me play the lute?”

“Sure! How much do you charge?”

“It’s five gold per request, if I know your song of course.”

“Oh I…I don’t know any particular songs, sorry… but, I would still love to hear you play. Here.” Hunter passed the woman five septims, “Play your favorite piece.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The Nord stood, grabbing her lute and strumming along the strings, the soft melody relaxing the khajiit and sending a wave of sleepiness over her eyes. She laid her elbow on the top of the bar, resting her head in her hand and savoring the music…when a hand on her shoulder gave a gentle rousing.

“Everything all right?” Marcurio asked, removing his hand when he had her attention, “Are you feeling ill?”

“No, it’s just that instrument…” she pointed a claw at the lute, “…it’s sounds so nice. I always get sleepy when I hear it.”

“Our room is over there, if you’re feeling tired. Now, I may just be assuming this, but I’d wager it will do you better than the top of a table. Wilhelm say’s there’s two beds inside, pick whichever one you prefer.”

“Thanks. Here…” The khajiit reached a clawed hand into her coin purse, passing the handful of septims to her companion. “Ask that lady to play her lute for as much as this will buy. I could use the good sleep for once. Oh, and, take whatever you need from my coin to pay for everything. It’d be cruel of me to hire you for this trip and not pay for expenses.”

“If you insist. Good night, Hunter.”

“G’night.”

\*\*\*

*‘Hunts-in-Shadows…’*

*The voice was smooth, soft, compelling the khajiit to rise from her bed and wander into the dining room to find….nobody? Well, of course, everyone was in bed…right?*

*‘I’m out here. Come, heed my voice.’*

*Heed she did, following the kind tone through the doorway and out into the moonlight. A man stood with his back to her, dressed in a pair of night breeches, and familiar in a way she couldn’t quite place her finger on.*

*‘I’m here.’ She called quietly, careful not to wake any of the townsfolk, and the man turned an ear towards her words, though she still couldn’t see his face.*

*‘No, not here. Let us talk in private.’ He started walking down the road over the bridge, veering off towards the tree line after a moment and entering the forest. Hunter followed dutifully, squinting and peering at the man in a frustrated attempt to catch and glimpse of his identity.*

*’Where are we going?’*

*The man made no attempt to answer, only continuing up his path and leaving the khajiit to trail behind, speaking again only when they reached a small clearing.*

*‘Meet me in the glade, Hunts-in-Shadows.’*

*‘Who are you?’*

*He turned slowly at her, his human visage rapidly turning into that of a massive hulking wolf.*

*‘Wake up…’ he spoke again, urgently.*

*She was frozen in place, watching as the human vestiges were swept away- and he lunged at her.*

*“WAKE UP!”*

“HRRGH!” Hunter jolted awake, fur bristling and teeth bared at the nonexistent entity that had assaulted her. She took deep measured breaths, a clawed hand clutching at her bare chest as her heart beat painfully fast. “Rrgh, dang it all…” she muttered through grit teeth, trying to keep calm and find a distraction, looking around the room to get her bearings. Though almost pitch black, the khajiit’s superior night vision allowed her to see everything in the small room with clarity.

Her clothes and equipment were resting at the foot of the bed, and she spied a small plate of food lying on the end table; a single sweet roll and a jug of milk. That was when her stomach finally spoke up; giving a loud complaint and reminding her the she hadn’t eaten supper. She crawled out from the fur blanket, silently reaching for the pastry and giving it a hearty bite, tail swishing back and forth in glee, chest pains already subsiding.

“*Hunts-in-Shadows…”* that familiar dreamlike voice called, whispering softly. “*Meet me in the glade…”*

Ah, right. *That.*

A soft rustle caught her attention, causing her to flinch and look over at the other bed, noticing her companion had retired for the night. She’d forgotten that they were sharing a room, though breathed a sigh of relief to see that the arcanist was just readjusting himself in his slumber, and wasn’t actually awake.

Good.

She climbed off of her bed as silently as possible and approached the man, peering over him a moment to see that he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

Extra good!

Looking around only a moment, she found it folded on the nightstand; the spare tunic that he kept on hand. She tossed the cloth over her head, wiggling into the knee-length garment and heading for the door, making her ‘escape’ with the mage none the wiser. There were a couple of people still in the dining area, though Hunter was able to avoid detection with a nigh-supernatural grace, sneaking out the door before they even realized the origin of the cold draft that found its way inside.

Her nose, ears, and eyes confirming that nobody was about, she clung to the shadows, walking carefully around the buildings, past the bridge, and slipping into the forest.

*“This way. I await your arrival, anxiously.”* The voice trailed off, but she caught the direction, heading through the trees with bare feet striking the ground almost soundlessly, muscles easily moving her body forward in spite of the terrain. Moments later, and she reached her goal; a small moonlit clearing in the trees, dotted with fireflies that flew around in a slow and lazy dance.

“Um, I’m here…” She said, stepping into the area.

“So you are. Most excellent.”

The owner of the voice suddenly started coming into view as a rippling veil of magicka appeared. He stepped out of the portal, one cervine hoof after the other, until all four of his legs were on the ground. Hunter’s breath caught, unable to deny the bizarre majesty of the Deadric Prince that stood before her, unlike any of his fellow Princes.

Had Hunter been aware of a centaur, she’d have easily compared him to such a being. His upper body was that of a human, but covered in fur with a wolfish visage, and the antlers atop his head were a crown in their own right. His waist trailed down into a deer-like lower body, full of grace and power that ended with a wolf’s tail.

He took a few steps towards the Khajiit, who looked down, ears pinned back in a show of respect towards the Prince.

“You…wanted to talk to me, mister Hircine?”

“Indeed, we have matters to discuss that require some attention. However, there are a few trifling things to address first.” He paced around the female, looking her over with an inscrutable gaze as she listened intently. “Such as why you have been neglecting your transformations as of late, or resisting the urge to satiate your instincts. Or…” he gave a curious sniff in her direction, wrinkling his snout, “...why the garb you are wearing is not of my enchantment.”

“Oh, this?” she asked, looking down at the brown tunic, “I wanted to get here as fast as I could, so I grabbed the quickest thing to wear.”

“Hmm. Mortal logic…” He said, pacing around, long tail swishing back and forth in thought, “No matter. You’ve been neglecting the hunt, and from your heartbeat, I can hear your desire to change form has gone unattended for some time now. You know this can be dangerous, especially for those around you.”

The khajiit made to say something, but Hircine raised a clawed hand, continuing.

“Regardless of your reasoning; mind it doesn’t go on for too long. Even for all of the control that you have over your blood, you may find yourself in a compromising situation at some point, *especially* if you continue to deny yourself… catharsis.”

“Yes sir. I’ll…keep your words in mind.”

“Good. Now, on to the more pressing matters. I would have you hunt with me tonight, so that we may discuss formalities. Better you find yourself well-fed so that you can hear me over the grumbling of your stomach.”

He stepped to the side, eyes glowing a soft red as he looked to his ward.

“I will prepare The Place of Refuge. Ready yourself, Hunts-in-Shadows.”

Hunter nodded, pulling the tunic from her body and allowing the cold night to embrace her fur-covered form. She folded the garment and laid it at her feet, claws lingering on the fabric before she turned back to the Prince, noting his gentle bow for her to continue as he made to summon a softly-glowing barrier around the clearing.

She inhaled, closing her eyes and willing the change that came so naturally.

Her body was ready to obey, heart starting to pound and enlarge; the worst part of the transformation process for most werewolves, but she usually found it to be bearable, as the rest of her body shifted rapidly to accommodate the growing size of the large, rhythmic muscle. Every bone was lengthening and thickening to fit itself into the bestial form, muscles growing and swelling, tensing and relaxing to better fit along their anchors. Even her skin was pliable, only causing a minor itching sensation as it happily stretched and contoured around where needed.

Though already covered in fur, she could feel it thickening and growing a little bit longer, glad to see that her proper grooming had kept it unmatted and full of deep luster. She could feel her hair shorten, receding from waist-length to form a thick mane along her head and upper back. She was pleased, too, when her nose caught her own scent, glad that it was still reminiscent of cedar and pine, and not like many of her brethren that smelled of rot and decay.

Claws and snout came too, but were just as easy to handle for the female. She held a hand up, relishing the view as she flexed her digits, rotating the paw around and grinning, her natural feline muzzle growing longer to fit the lupine teeth, and jawbones forming into powerful crushing tools.

Her tail was the least-affected thing, as it just seemed to increase in fur density, but she swished it nonetheless, finally stretching of wolfish form in the moonlight and giving a grunt of satisfaction.

“What’s this? No howl to finish the process?”

“Eh? Wouldn’t that give us away?”

“Not one for tradition, I see.” Hircine grumbled as he raised his hands, summoning a bright light that formed itself into a large bow, the wood sporting a simple but intricate design of swirls and leaves, and matching quiver appearing along his back in the same manner.

“In any case, let us hunt!” he threw back his head, announcing their presence to the area with a mighty bay.

\*\*\*

“Awwrroooooooooo!!”

The sound could be heard for miles, as citizens of Ivarstead were roused from their beds in a panic, many of them instinctively realizing that it wasn’t the call from a normal wolf. It sounded bigger.

*Much* bigger.

Even Marcurio wasn’t immune to the sudden announcement, the noise having surprised him from his comfortable sleeping position and stirring him into action before he could blink the sleep from his eyes. He could hear the startled townsfolk fussing around the dining area of the Inn, as they’d all decided to band together for safety in the building. He listened intently, trying to gather information about the situation while hurriedly dressing into his mage robes.

“That’s not a normal wolf!”

“Sounds like a werewolf, if you ask me.”

“No way; that has to be some other monster- werewolves don’t sound that loud!”

“You wouldn’t know a werewolf if fell on top of you.”

“Maybe it’s someone playing a trick?”

“Where are the guards?! Aren’t they supposed to deal with these kinds of problems?”

“The town guard don’t deal with…whatever *that* was.”

For all of their clamor and rabble, the same word kept sticking out among the rest:

*Werewolf.*

The wizard yanked his boots on, standing and rushing over to the other bed.

“Hunter?” he called softly into the darkness, suppressing anxiety as his hands patted empty blankets.

No response.

He turned around, groping in the darkness and noticing that his extra tunic was missing from the nightstand, and… the sweet roll he’d left for her was gone, too.

She wasn’t here.

Rushing out of the room, the mage forced his way past the civilians towards the front door, shoving it open despite their protests for him to stay inside.

“Stay here, and keep the door locked until morning!” he commanded, closing the wooden beams and looking around as the lock clicked. The murmur of the crowd was still fearful, but with the door closed, at least it was muffled and, hopefully, less of an attraction for whatever had made the noise.

“Hunter!”

Nothing.

He took off towards the bridge, hoping the more level ground had been her more tempting option if she’d decided to take a moonlit walk.

“HUNTER!” he yelled louder, straining his ears as a crashing and thundering sound approached.

“Marcurio?!” her tree-muffled response echoed back, causing the mage to take off blindly in the direction of her voice.

“Marcurio, get inside!” she yelled from some unseen place- as a massive man-beast erupted from the forest and sprinted in his direction, stopping the mortal in his tracks.

Whatever this being was, his overwhelming very presence demanded respect. Standing tall and proud, his body unlike any deadra, monster, or fantastical beast that the mage had even heard of, and wielding a bow that looked like it was a gift from the forest itself. Marcurio only had one guess to his identity;

Hircine.

Of course, this was confirmed near-instantly, as a werewolf came running up alongside him, ferocious and wild, running with its master as a hunting dog might their owner. He suddenly felt as if time moved in slow motion; the Prince and Wolf running past him with such power and grace, he couldn’t even react to them as they passed.

They were taking off down the road, ignoring the town completely as they ran towards some unseen goal- and leaving him gasping for air on the bridge.

The wizard stood another moment, catching his breath and thankful that they had ignored him. He might’ve been a talented and powerful mage in his own right, but even he knew that fighting against a Deadric Prince was a fool’s game. A werewolf he could probably handle- but their Master?

He watched them veer off into the wilderness before turning himself, heading into the direction where he’d last heard his companion.

“Hunter!” he called, rushing through the trees, moonlight being his only guide as he sought the khajiit. “Oh gods, where are you…” he panted, stopping a moment to catch his breath when he came upon an empty clearing. “I can’t keep losing employers like this…”

There was a strange feeling about the place, and though his instincts were telling him to go no further, when something in the light caught his eye, he felt compelled to investigate.

Hircine’s unseen barrier started working the moment the mage stepped inside, putting the man into a groggy state of mind before he could even register what happened. He approached the lone item, recognizing it as his missing tunic, and picked it up…while also sitting himself down in the grass.

*‘What is this?’* he tried to fight back against the magical force, but it was too much; he was laying on the ground and drifting into the magically-induced sleep before he even realized it.

“Mara, please help us…”

\*\*\*

“A good kill!” Hircine praised his werewolf, looking on with great satisfaction as she raised a bloody maw from their downed quarry; a massive cave bear that, up until their arrival, had many strong years ahead of it. Of course, it’d been only a small test for the Deadra to see his Champion in action, but he was satisfied with the results.

“You’ve done good, thus far. Seeing as you’ve grown more confident with your form since our last meeting, I am sure that you will serve me just as well going forward.”

“Thank you, sir.” The werewolf wagged her tail, looking eagerly to the Prince.

“Go on, do help yourself. The hunt was for us, but the meal is for you.” He waved a generous hand towards the bear, to which the werewolf wasted no time biting into enthusiastically, devouring the still-warm muscle as her Master continued.

“Considering your travels in Skyrim thus far; Have you heard of Molag Bal?”

“Mmmrff, yeah.” She replied, swallowing a mouthful of meat, “He’s a Deadric Prince like you, right? Father of all vampires, like how you are to werewolves?”

“Yes. Though, his children are very different from mine, mind you.” The Deadra bared his fangs in disgust, not liking his creation compared to that of his ‘sibling’. He continued as the woman returned to stuffing herself.

“Long ago, in the Second Era, Molag Bal challenged me to a grand contest. He suggested that we see which of our wards would be stronger over time; His Vampire Lord, which had countless years to live and thrive, or the descendants of a First Turned- a generational lycanthrope who’d been bred to be stronger than their common bretheren. I’m sure you can see where this is heading...”

Hircine trailed the thought off, giving the khajiit a moment to really let the words sink in.

“So you…want me to fight a vampire?”

“Not just any vampire, but one that has been turned directly by Molag himself.”

“With all due respect sir, do you know my pedigree? I’m hardly qualified as ‘generational’ when a werewolf’s bite turned me in the first place.”

“But that is where you are wrong, Hunts-in-Shadows. Your mother was a born werewolf, just as her mother before her, and so on, all the way back to your ancestors in the Second Era. The werewolf that bit you didn’t change you, but simply activated your abilities earlier than anticipated.”

“So, why me? Ain’t there better werewolves that could do this?”

“That you survived your first transformation so young was already a show of promise. Your *mother* was my intended Champion for this little game, but circumstances at the time rendered her reluctant to assume the Wolf, and so she was killed by a rouge shifter- a ploy set by Molag Bal to ruin all of my progress.”

“Oh, how nice of him.” Hunter spat, taking another bite of meat when she noticed her master summon a shimmering portal.

“You’re leaving? Can’t we talk about this more?”

“Questions will have to wait until another time.” He cut her hopes short, “The dawn approaches soon, and you will need to find yourself back alongside your companion if you are to avoid detection. I sensed his presence enter the Place of Refuge shortly after we departed. See to it that he remains steadfast, as I predict he will also be of use to me in the future.”

“Yes sir…”

“I will call you when should meet again. Until then, good hunting, child.”

With that, the Prince of the Hunt vanished back to his plane of Oblivion.

\*\*\*

“Hey….”

Something nudged Marcurio, causing him to stir, albeit begrudgingly.

“Wake up, sleepy heeeaaaddd…” the voice sounded like it giggled, prodding harder this time.

Sharp, pointy.

What in the…?

He opened his eyes to see the canopy of foliage above him rustling slightly, birdsong filling the morning air with music and… a familiar feline face grinning at him, outlined by the warm glow of sunlight as it filtered through the trees. Her dark hair was cascading down everywhere, reaching the ground from her squatting position and fanning out whichever way it seemed pleased.

“Hunter!” he bolted upright, grabbing her shoulders as if she might disappear. “You’re alive! Tha—AAAAnd my gods, you’re naked! Why are you naked?!”

He jumped up from his seated position, whirling his line of sight away from the khajiit, face burning as he’d no intention of seeing his boss in such a way, despite the previous day’s jest.

“I tried to get the shirt back before waking you, but you wouldn’t let it go.” She said, tugging lightly on the brown fabric that was still clutched tightly in his fist. He released it, keeping his face turned and a hand along his eyes to preserve her dignity.

Well, not that she seemed even remotely ashamed of her nudity, but still; he’d felt the secondhand embarrassment nonetheless, waiting impatiently for her to clothe herself. While a naked woman wasn’t any new concept or sight to him, he certainly didn’t want to risk throwing their current relationship overboard so soon, strictly professional as it was.

His hand pressed firmly against the side of his face made him remember the ache he’d earned yesterday, though- a soft pat yielded no pain. He would’ve questioned it further had he not been brought back to the current situation.

“Okay, I’m decent.”

The mage turned back slowly, releasing the breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding, and stood straight. Hunter smiled, her tail swishing around in good humor, and he frowned.

“We really should get you some casual clothes that…aren’t mine.”

“Aww, but I like your clothes. Or, well, I like this one at least.” She fanned the tunic out with her claws. “This one is big and flowy on me, but I don’t think I’d like the robes you wear. Too big.”

“*That’s* too big, if we’re being honest here.”

“Is it? You can have it back then, if it’s not a good fit for me.” She started reacting as if to remove the garment, but he lunged over and grasped her wrists, holding them high above her head so that she couldn’t proceed, desperate to change the subject.

“How about breakfast? Are you hungry?”

“YES!”

“Good! Keep the shirt on till you get your own clothes back, and I’ll pay for whatever you can eat.”

“Mm, there’s one small problem…”

“Oh, and what would that be, m’lady?”

“I should’ve been honest with you when we started traveling, but…”

“Mhmm?” He eyed her suspiciously, wary of any jokes she might be up to.

“I can’t read.”

Well.

That was certainly…something. He released her wrists, to which she folded her arms.

“You can’t read…at all?”

“No.” she stated, looking at her suddenly-interesting toes, “Like I said, I should’ve been honest with you, but I didn’t think it was gonna come up. But last night, I…I couldn’t read the menu, so, thank you…for the sweet roll.”

The mage gave a discerning look over the small woman, realizing she was, indeed, being entirely honest with him.

“Hey,” he toned, pulling her attention to look at him again, “Don’t beat yourself up too much over it, there’s many people in the world that can’t read. We can study sometime, if you’d like, and…I can read the menu to you. I am, after all, a most accomplished student at the University in Cyrodiil. With my excellent teaching skills and your half-swift wit, I’m sure you’ll be reading faster than a horker can chase a fox.”

“You think so?”

“If you can learn to read half as fast as you throw a punch, I’m sure of it.”

“Let’s get going then! The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get back and practice!”

“One thing at a time. Let’s eat first, hm?”

\*\*\*

“Hey, so…what’s a ‘Universe City’?” Hunter wondered, stuffing half a baked potato into her mouth and looking to her friend.

“A what? …Oh, heh, it’s…a kind of school, if you will, but very large. A building dedicated to teaching you many different things about- and outside of, the world as we know it.” Marcurio answered, taking a sip from his tankard before helping himself to his plate of food.

“Is it like the Collage of Winterhold, in Skyrim?”

“Not quite. *That* Collage has a primary focus in schools of magicka.”

“What about High Hrothgar?”

“The monastery? I’d hardly call that a school, since their knowledge is not taught to the public. Like I mentioned before; they pray and study alone…Though it’s possibly more of a religious practice now that I think about it…”

“Still sounds an awful lot like a school to me…” she mumbled into her cup as Wilhelm leaned over to join the conversation.

“Speaking of the monks; you’d best be prepared for a long trek up *and* down the mountain today, my friends. The Greybeards are not known for their hospitality, and turn almost everyone away from their doors.”

“Eh? Why do so many people go up there if that’s the case?”

“Pilgrimage, mostly. Some like the challenge of the climb, and others take it as a spiritual journey. There are also those few individuals who seek council from the monks in the Way of the Voice, but, only a select few are allowed to enter their doors.”

“Hmm…” the Khajiit pondered his words, dutifully tending her food in silence as the mage and bartender continued to talk.

A few hours later, and almost finished with their upward climb, Marcurio hadn’t heard much out of his furred companion. Instead, she’d been sitting quietly in her saddle, lost in thought as she was snuggled up in a bear pelt that she’d bought before they’d departed. A question had been on his mind, and he was itching to bring it to light.

“So… why are we going to high Hrothgar?” Marcurio asked, catching Hunter’s ear. She looked a little hesitant, as if considering her words.

“I didn’t wanna come alone.”

“Maybe that answers why *I’m* here… but not *you*.”

“I was…told to visit.”

“Oh? By who?”

“Mmm…the Jarl of Whiterun?”

The mage raised an eyebrow, very curious as to how someone of her appearance was able to gain such lofty audience.

“So, the Jarl himself told you to come to High Hrothgar… May I ask what for?”

“I…I dunno. He said they summoned me, and told me to visit sometime.”

“Ahh, I see.”

Marcurio was entirely aware that she was skirting his questions, and though he wanted to press further, he decided against it; reminding himself that he was being paid to accompany the woman, not interrogate her. Perhaps he would find out once they arrived…or not, if the Greybeards were keen on turning them away. Either way, he’d been able to leave the stale pit that was Riften, and that was good enough for him in the meantime.

“Finally!” the feminine voice interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up, the fortress-like building looming just ahead of them.