

Cyhrein sat hunched on the wide stairs that led up to Understone Keep. Afternoon sun beat down on them, yet did nothing to chase away the deep cold from their bones. It only made their shoulders hurt. Cyhrein sighed, then hissed as their chest pain flared up. They gazed down with hatred, suppressing the urge to just rip the accursed briar out and go back to being dead in the Hunting grounds. Cyhrein didn't ask for this, they were absolutely fine with dying. After all, they have fulfilled their destiny as the Dragonborn, stopping both Alduin and Miraak. The world didn't really need them as much anymore. There was another Dragonborn who was much more kind and friendly and had much more patience for people than Cyhrein did, on top of Miraak joining them. And Cyhrein's death was what any Forsworn would consider a good death: they've gone down fighting the Jarl of Markarth together with Madanach and Rowan. And then some gods damned feathery asshole decided to raise them as a Briarheart. Ironic, really. They've lusted after Briarhearts for the longest time, but being one was the least enjoyable thing they've experienced so far. They were cold and their chest hurt constantly, and they couldn't even put a shirt on because it would snag on the briar, or touch the slowly healing wound, and make it hurt like all the planes of Oblivion. They didn't even mind nudity that much, but having a hole in their chest, open for everyone to see, made them feel too vulnerable for their own liking.

They wondered if Rowan was in a similar kind of pain, or any other Briarhearts that they've come in contact with. Rowan didn't seem much bothered, despite his scarred Briar. But, on the other hand, he was always calm. Somehow Cyhrein never thought to ask him, despite the two of them being so close.

The sun finally became unbearable, and Cyhrein hissed again, slowly rising to crawl into the shade. They cast a healing spell on their burnt shoulders, and tried casting one on the briar heart wound, but for some reason that did nothing. Hagraven magic, Cyhrein assumed, and continued their brooding. Not like they had energy to do much else aside from sitting around and plotting the murder of the hagraven matriarch who raised them.

Madanach stepped out of the dark space of the Keep, and cursed immediately as the bright light blinded him. His eyes never really adjusted to sunlight after the years he'd spent imprisoned underground. Squinting, he looked around, spying a skinny antlered figure curled up in the shade at the top of the stairs with their back to him. He walked over, and sat next to Cyhrein. They didn't even react first, then slowly turned to look at him, their one intact eye dull and lifeless. Yet, they smiled and moved to lean against him. He was warm and alive, and Cyhrein couldn't help but huddle closer to him. Madanach sighed and opened his arms to them, and they clung to him, shivering.

"So cold. Why am I so cold?" Cyhrein whined as they pretty much wrapped themselves around Madanach. He held them close, stroking their back slowly. Guilt hounded him once again. He felt like he could have healed Cyhrein. He was healing them! He could have saved them! But then Ivella, the High Matriarch of all Hagravens, showed up, and demanded her price for lending her magic to the siege of Markarth: the chance to raise the Dragonborn Beast of the Reach as a Briarheart. And Madanach couldn't say no. He couldn't let Cyhrein go, and he also knew deep

down that his healing wasn't enough. Cyhrain was taken away, and Madanach wouldn't hear anything from Lost Valley in weeks, both him, and Rowan, the newly crowned King of the Reach, devastated and worried. And then they received summons. Ivella called on King Rowan to come retrieve the Beast, and so Rowan did, and Madanach tagged along. How could he not? It was his mess after all, yet another poor decision in his long life.

They climbed up all of the stairs to the altar before one of those ancient word walls. Cyhrain's dull lifeless stare would haunt Madanach for the rest of his life. The way they called out to him and Rowan.

"Maddi? Why is it so cold?"

The voice from the memory bled into Cyhrain whining again in present time, and Madanach hugged them as tight as he could, burying his face in their bony shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, love. I couldn't save you."

Cyhrain mirrored Madanach's actions, nuzzling weakly into the crook of his neck.

"You're here. You're warm. I'm not angry at you. I'm just cold, and sad, and angry. Is there a word for when you're both?"

Their raspy voice sounded even more hollow than usual. Madanach just squeezed them a little tighter, silent. What could he say? What do you say to comfort someone who was brought back from the dead?

"Is there anything I can do to make it better?"

"I don't know. Being held helps. But Tiernach can't be with me all the time, even though he tries to. He's nice, and pretty, and I like him, but he's not warm. Not alive warm," Cyhrain continued in their quiet whisper of a voice, snuggling up to Madanach.

"Then I'll hold you as much as you need."

"Thank you."

The two stayed silent for a while, with Madanach racking his brain for anything he could do for Cyhrain, to bring them at least a little bit of relief and happiness, or at least distract them while they recovered. He still felt guilty, not just over the situation as a whole, but over not being able to spend as much time with Cyhrain as he could and wanted. Even though Madanach wasn't the Reach King anymore, Rowan relied on his experience and counsel heavily, and so Madanach was wrapped up in setting up a court and helping run things. But now Rowan seemed to do fine by himself, and Madanach found himself wandering the halls alone like the shadow of the past he was. And so he sought out Cyhrain, who at least didn't side eye him with

distrust like a lot of Forsworn did these days after the details of the arrangement he had with Thonar Silver-blood came to light somehow, ruining any remnants of power and respect he held. Some, mostly those of older generations, understood why he did what he had to, while some hated him for it. Madanach was lucky he didn't get exiled or killed, as Rowan had put him under his protection, arguing that Madanach had been indispensable during the time leading up to the battle for Markarth. Rowan had stated that Madanach's counsel would have to be enough to atone.

So now Madanach had all the time in the world, and intended to spend it with someone he liked, and who actually could stand him.

An idea suddenly appeared in his mind. What if they got away from the city for a bit? Cyhrain had to endure their share of distrustful glances, for they were forced to attack Forsworn settlements by the jarl of Markarth not too long ago. Getting away from that would be a relief for both of them.

"How would you feel about going hunting? Or just getting out of the city?"

Cyhrain was quiet for a bit, and Madanach feared they'd say no.

"Eh, why not. I'll ask Tiernach if it's okay, and if he wants to go too."

Tiernach had been an almost constant presence at Cyhrain's side since they were brought back from Lost Valley, looking after them and their healing briar, and guiding his new fellow Briarheart through the healing process. It was a rough one, Cyhrain's body not prepared for the ritual, and fighting the new heart as a result. And here he was, walking up from the direction of Dibella's temple, waving, long hair and blue body paint impeccable as always. Cyhrain looked up at him.

"Hey Tiernach, wanna go hunting or something?"

Tiernach raised an eyebrow, then nodded slowly.

"Sure. I take it you'll be the one hunting."

"Yeah. Kinda sick of this city and I haven't ran as a beast in a long while."

Cyhrain slowly rose from their sitting position, and the three of them then made their way down the streets of Markarth. People still glared at Cyhrain, the memory of the Beast seemingly turning on them still fresh. They didn't call for blood anymore, as Cyhrain has already spilled enough of their own blood getting Markarth under Reachfolk control. And like Madanach, they were under the new King's protection. Still, both of them kept their heads low until they were out of the gates.

It took a bit to get away from the city and into the Reach's winding mountain paths. As soon as the three were out of the earshot, the werewolf finally acknowledged the dragon in the room.

"They still stare."

"At least they aren't out for our heads."

"I guess," Cyhrain shrugged and focused inward, drawing the inner beast out. They wondered if they could change at all anymore, but were too afraid to try, until now. They took a deep breath, that came out as a deep growl, and felt their body change. It was a painful thing, but familiar and in a way, welcome.

Madanach and Tiernach watched them shift and wondered if Cyhrain's beast form would be any different now that they were a Briarheart, but there wasn't that much change. They just looked even thinner than before, and had a briar in their chest. The two men watched as the werewolf climbed up a small cliff to get their bearings and to scout out any potential prey.

"Well, they seem more lively," Madanach said. Tiernach nodded, glowing eyes trained on Cyhrain.

"Having something to occupy both mind and body will do that."

Cyhrain looked around, plans were swarming in their mind. It was nice to do something. Hunting has always been an activity they enjoyed and were fairly good at, even before accepting the gift of Hircine. Now, they wanted a challenge. Something to fight and test that fabled Briarheart strength and vitality on. They sniffed the air, and a scent caught their attention. They moved their head about, trying to determine the direction the scent was coming from. The two men just saw Cyhrain climb down, crouch, and head off towards a stand of juniper shrubs.

"Guess they found something," Madanach whispered. Tiernach nodded, and the two dropped into a crouch as well, following the werewolf at a distance. It wasn't long until they heard pained roars and the sound of branches breaking. The two men crested a ridge and saw a large bear thrashing around the juniper bushes, the werewolf on its back and clawing and biting at its face. They watched for a moment, then readied spells to help the werewolf.

For a moment, Cyhrain felt alive again, as they pounced onto the bear's back and bit into the back of its neck. Warm blood filled their maw, and the thrill of being up against a worthy opponent swept away the misery they had wallowed in for the past weeks.

The bear reared up, and Cyhrain quickly jumped off before the animal could try to crush them under its weight. The werewolf started circling around the bear, jumping out of the way when it lashed out. Madanach and Tiernach watched. They didn't intervene in another's hunt, but had spells ready if things went badly: an ice spike floating next to Madanach's open hand, and a faint green glow around Tiernach's, ready to share the bear with vines and roots.

Cyhrein circled, looking for an opening. So far, none has presented itself. A plan started to form in the werewolf's mind. They would bait out an attack, and then go for the underside of the throat. It was risky, as it put them too close to the claws and teeth, but in Cyhrein's mind, it was all worth it. What's a good hunt if they didn't nearly get mauled to death? They lunged forward, and the bear swatted at them with its huge paw. The werewolf jumped out of the way, and kept circling and growling. They charged at the bear again, this time slashing at it with their claws. The bear roared and stood up on its hind legs, ready to smash their head in. The momentary opening was all Cyhrein needed as they ducked, and then jumped up, fangs sinking into the bear's throat. Blood sprayed out, and the beast collapsed, the werewolf releasing their grip and rolling out of the way to not be crushed under the bear's weight. They stood over the defeated foe triumphantly, covered in blood.

Madanach and Tiernach ran over, and stopped a few steps away, surveying the scene. Cyhrein looked over their shoulder at the men, and for the moment, Madanach thought they seemed happy.

"That's a big one," Tiernach pointed out, "Impressive."

Cyhrein moved towards him and tried to grace him with a friendly headbutt, but the Briarheart dodged it.

"Wash the blood off first," He laughed.

The werewolf turned their attention to Madanach instead, who reluctantly accepted the grisly display of affection. He was now also bloodied, but it was a small price to pay for seeing his lover happy for the first time in weeks.

Between Tiernach's nature magic raising vines and roots to carry the beast, and Cyhrein's beastly strength, the three of them were able to haul their kill all the way to the gates of Markarth, where they received help from a few impressed guards. Cyhrein's shoulders hunched when the city came into view, but the prospect of enduring distrustful glances wasn't enough to dampen their spirits. They felt a little more alive and renewed after the hunt.

Tiernach and the small group of Reachfolk he has commandeered fell behind with the bear, while Cyhrein and Madanach made their way back up the winding streets, and into the keep. Madanach let out a sigh of relief upon entering the darkened hallways, his eyes sore from being in the sun for so long. He managed to corral Cyhrein into the bath to clean the blood off of them. The werewolf let him do it, and found that they actually enjoy being touched once more. They spent some more time together after, and went their separate ways: Madanach towards the throne room to check on King Rowan, and Cyhrein out of the keep to wander around.

A week passed, and Cyhrein found themselves brooding on the steps once again. They felt less miserable these past few days, but today was definitely a lower point. They wondered if they

could just leave the city and disappear, but they didn't want to leave Madanach and Rowan behind, worrying.

Cyhrein heard approaching steps and turned around to see Madanach coming their way with some kind of bundle in his arms. They tilted their head to the side in confusion, unsure of what the bundle was, until Madanach reached them. He stopped to unravel the bundle into a fluffy cloak, and wrapped it around Cyhrein's shoulders.

"You said you were cold," Madanach said, carefully pinning the cloak on one side with a pin carved from bone. "I hope this will help."

He sat down next to Cyhrein and watched them as they grasped at the thick fur and the pin.

"Thank you," They finally rasped, and leaned over to nuzzle into Madanach's hair.

"Thought it would be fitting for you to have the pelt, since you've done all the hunting."

Cyhrein nodded, and moved closer, wrapping an arm around Madanach.

"You know what else is warm? You," They said, wrapping the bear cloak around both of them. Madanach had no objections here, snuggling into them.