He is the Dragonborn

by lockstockbarrel

Summary

A tale of the last and Greatest Dragonborn. Arnsmyth Bulgoar spent most of his adult life in Cyrodiil as a blade for hire, but tragedy forces him to return to Skyrim. Little did he know he would be caught up in unimaginable events from the moment he arrived...

*Work originally begun on FF.net, but moved it over here for more freedom to write. There are over 50 chapters to this already. So I will be updating every few days with more chapters since dropping that many chapters at once is too much. It will also give me time to figure out the ins and outs of using AO3.
A New Nightmare: Helgen

Arnsmyth Bulgoar stared wide eyed in disbelief as two imperial guards were incinerated only twenty feet from where he kneeled in the mud.

He had just managed to slice through his bindings using the Axe man's discarded Great Axe that merely moments before was going to be used to behead Arnsmyth, or at least, they were going to try.

Arn had tried reasoning and remonstrating with the Prelate woman who seemed in charge. He couldn't get the attention of a General Tullius who seemed entirely preoccupied with the execution of some other prisoner named Stormcloak.

They didn't believe he was just a traveler coming back home after years away in Cyrodiil. They seemed recklessly convince he was a spy for some rebellion they were rounding up. They didn't believe he had formerly served the legion with distinction in the Great War despite being only a lad in his teens at the time.

The only one to listen to any of his entreaties had been one of the guards who asked the Prelate if they could really justify executing a man not on the list. But just like Arn's entreaties, the Prelate didn't listen.

After getting a few vicious backhands from the guards when he tried to continue reasoning, he'd started plotting how to escape on his own, taking careful stock of how many guards there were, where they were at, and how they were armed.

He'd been dragged from the line of prisoners and thrust onto the Axman's block. He had been about to roll to the side and kick the guard behind him into the Ax man when the unthinkable happened.

An earth shaking roar erupted from overhead and large shadow swooped by, the gush of air shaking the trees.

Everyone froze and looked up to behold a dragon...yes...truly it was a dragon. It could be no other. Like something out of a bad dream, Arnsmyth found himself about to be beheaded only to look up at a monstrosity that shouldn't exist.

Another roar echoed so loudly, most of the people in the courtyard were covering their ears, and the dragon appeared suddenly, crashing to a perch atop one of the guard towers and spewing forth flame and death for the first of many times.

Years spent in combat and harrowing situations allowed Arnsmyth to react almost without thinking, immediately rolling to the side, knocking down the stupified Ax man who dropped his Ax.

Slitting loose his bound hands, he immediately beelined across the chaos of the courtyard toward one of the towers. He needed to get out of sight of the distracted guards and some cover from that beast.

He was met part way by the previously sympathetic guardsman and thought for a moment he was going to try to detain him, but the guard, who introduced himself as Hadvar, motioned him to follow inside if he wanted to escape.

Once inside, Arn felt a wave of relief partly flood over him.

Nothing like escaping your own execution to start the morning...
Hadvar immediately found a chest and handed him some imperial armor to wear and a steel sword.

"What happened to my own?" Arn asked angrily.

"They're in the tower the dragon's currently sitting on"...Hadvar answered a little sheepishly.

The tower they were in shook and rafter beams broke loose, falling to the floor as Arn and Hadvar ducked into a hallway down further into the structure.

"We really should get moving!" shouted Hadvar as the tower continued to shake.

They made their way through the barracks, out and in a few buildings toward what Hadvar said was a tunnel escape out of the keep into the mountains.

As they made their way, the carnage outside was unmistakable.

More and more flames sprouted everywhere. Several places in the towers were already crumbling. Corpses littered what could be seen of the courtyard. The sickening stench of burnt flesh filled the air.

They rounded a corner and stopped in their tracks as they confronted a group of prisoners arming themselves with the weapons and armor of the imperial guards who lay freshly slain at their feet.

Arn recognized one of them as having been in line with him...Ralof he thought his name was.

The one named Ralof opened his mouth to apparently address Arn, but before he could get much out, a woman next to Ralof and another of his comrades yelled "More Imperials!" and attacked Hadvar and Arn.

"I remem-- Wait!" Ralof cried in vain as his fellow "stormcloaks" as Arn saw they fancied calling themselves attacked.

The battle gave Arn a familiar feeling as he wielded sword and shield against a frenzied opponent.

He angled himself into a fighting stance and waited a second or two for the charging woman to commit to her rash overhead attack with a Battleaxe, then side stepped slightly, avoided the blow, brought his sword lightly down on the ax wielding hand, cutting enough for the woman to screech and drop the ax. Then he brought his sword back up, arcing across just under the woman's chin, easily beheading her, the twitching face unnerving the other attackers as it rolled across the floor.

"Come, this is a waste of time!" cried Ralof to the others as he and another prisoner in rags ran from the room as the foundations quaked again with whatever the dragon was doing outside.

Hadvar was trading blows with a greatsword wielding ex-prisoner in rags. Arn thought about intervening, but decided against it instead and leaned against the wall for a moment to watch.

But after another sloppy exchange of blows between the two, he got impatient, drew his sword and faked an obvious lunge at the prisoner, who panicked and turned too far to keep his guard up against Hadvar, who promptly ran him through with his longsword.

"Why didn't you help?" Hadvar asked in an annoyed tone as he pried his sword from his opponent's rib cage.

"Don't rutting tell me you wear a legionnaire's colors but can't handle some sot with a big sword?" impatiently returned Arn.
Hadvar didn't reply. He just stared at Arnsmyth with a mixture of unease and consideration. Wiping the blood on his blade off on the corpse's ragged clothes, he motioned further down the keep.

"A short distance from here and we'll be home free into the cave that will get us far enough out into the woods away from the dragon" Hadvar remarked as they made their way more cautiously this time down the passage.

"And then what?" replied Arn, who'd been wondering this whole time why Hadvar was actually helping him. It seemed unlikely to be a gesture of good will since those seemed lacking in the Skyrim he had returned to. More likely Hadvar wanted him to do something, though Arn couldn't surmise what that might be since he himself was still unsettled about the dragon and wasn't able to keep the images and roars completely from his mind.

"Then we need to get the word out that a dragon has attacked. My uncle Alvor lives in Riverwood. He can help us until we figure out where to go" stated Hadvar matter of factly. Arn was a little surprised by the younger man's openness and considered maybe he spoke truly.

It took them an hour to carefully navigate what was left of the keep and through a not so secret cave system into the green forests and blue sky of Skyrim.

It was such a refreshing sight, Arn wondered if he was somehow enchanted and imagined the whole thing, but a roar in the distance brought him back to reality.

"It's probably better if we split up. I have to go warn the legion encampment east of here. You know how to get to Riverwood from here?" Hadvar asked nervously, still eyeing the sky.

"Should be southeast of here, what, a day's journey?" replied Arn.

"Yah, something like that. If you make it and I'm not there, look up my uncle Alvor. He's the Blacksmith there. He will help you. May the Nine protect you" said Hadvar, giving him a Legion salute and handshake before departing.

Arn began making his way, being a bit more cautious than he probably normally would be, his mind still replaying the scene in the keep courtyard over and over. The roar of the dragon, it's black scaled hide with reddish orange zigzaggy stripes patterning it's entirety, swooping back and for, snapping up a soldier here, belching flame there, the flames, the screams of the soldiers....

Arn was jostled out of his reverie by someone screaming in front of him.

He stumbled in surprise just in time to see an icicle go flying by his head.

In the woods ahead, as a Bosmer woman in a black robe screamed a spell out and hurled more icicles his way.

He got his shield out in time to block these and charged the spellcaster. Painful memories flashed before him, recalling the last time he'd fought a spellcaster and why, making him charge faster and with more determination as the caster tried to cast enough cold spells to freeze Arn's shield and person before he could get to her, but Arn was too quick.

Despite beginning to feel numb in his shield arm, he was able to bash at the same time he collided with the caster, knocking her off her feet and back into a tree. Arn didn't let up. He unleashed a string of slicing attacks to break down the barrier the caster feebly tried to put up.
It didn’t last long. The barrier collapsed with a hiss of bluish white color and Arn slashed the caster across the torso, cleaving robe and flesh. The woman collapsed immediately, eyes full of hate at Arn as she tried to gargle out another spell through the blood coming out of her mouth.

Arn stabbed her through the throat to prevent any death throes surprises and spit in disgust on her corpse as he wrenched the blade back out, trying to flex his shield arm to get feeling back into it.

He groaned in sadness, trying to forget the memories the encounter had brought back to the surface.

*He’d come back to Skyrim to get away from that.*

Thoroughly angry now, he sheathed his sword and began searching the caster, finding nothing much but a few septims and a couple of potions.

As he resumed his trip to Riverwood, He marveled how much things had changed since the last time he was in Skyrim. When he was a boy, it would have been unthinkable that Dragons even existed, or that you would be randomly arrested and executed for being in a particular area, or that some random spellcaster would set upon you in the woods in broad daylight.

Of course, that was thirty years ago. This was certainly not the Skyrim he had been expecting to return to.
Old Times and New: Riverwood

Chapter Summary

Arn finds not all is at it seems in the small hamlet of Riverwood...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The melodic sound of a woman laughing floated into Arnsmyth Bulgoar's ears as he trudged into the small hamlet of Riverwood.

It had taken him twice as long as it should have to reach Riverwood.

His feet were sore and he was tired from walking and climbing cautiously through unfamiliar terrains.

A dragon and an attacking mage weren't the only nasty things in these woods.

He'd been set upon by a group of amateur bandits demanding "toll" and attacked by a set of wolves.

Now as the sun was setting, the smoky smell of something cooked, warm firelight from comfortable looking houses, and the prospect of meeting other people who weren't trying to kill or rob him sparked renewed enthusiasm in his tired body.

He pushed through the door of Riverwood Inn and basked for a moment in the warmth before making straight for the man at the counter who appeared to run things.

He'd gotten a decent amount of money from the bandits who'd tried to fleece him on the way. The first one had been beheaded before he'd even finished threatening Arn sufficiently. The second died quickly after a riposte on a sloppy attack. The third fled for a brief bit before Arn's thrown sword had gotten him in the leg, then he just finished him off.

"You got any rooms?" he said tiredly, tossing a few septims on the counter and nodding to the bottles of mead.

"Yes, we do--Delphine! Room" he hollered across the room.

Arn's gaze followed the yell to note the group of people all seated around some man apparently spinning a good yarn or some such thing.

His gaze immediately caught sight of a young attractive Imperial born woman with dark hair and yellow frock on. He hoped for a second this would be the Delphine he'd do business with but was disappointed when an older Breton woman turned and emerged to talk to him.

Delphine looked like she had been a great beauty once but life hadn't been kind. A sharpness to her facial features combined with graying hair pulled back in a pony tail and some wrinkled worry lines on her face didn't do justice to the shape she kept her body in.

Arnsmyth had been a fighter all his life and knew the little things to look for in a person's body,
posture, and complexion that would signify the same of someone else.

Despite the country frock and peasant exterior, this Delphine obviously knew how to swing a blade from the thickness of muscle on her limbs, calluses on her hands, and the lack of any fat or jiggling hips made it a lot more likely she had more muscle than she wanted to let on.

As she approached, he noticed she gave him the same once over briefly before returning to the peasant inkeeper act.

"Ah, an Imperial legionnaire, are you from Helgen?" she asked.

He was still wearing the full imperial armor Hadvar had given him.

"You've heard of the dragon attack then?" returned Arn, hoping to avoid any details of why he was in Helgen.

"So....it truly was a dragon then?" she said slowly, pursing her lips and bringing her hand under her chin as if in deep thought.

"Did any of the others make it?" Arn asked, wondering if Hadvar had made it here before him.

Delphine didn't immediately answer, so the Innkeeper spoke up as Arn realized everyone else had gotten quiet, hanging on any information about Helgen.

"Two men came stumbling out of the woods babbling about a dragon attack yesterday, but they were both in bad shape....bad bad burns. One died shortly after arriving....the other passed this morning. We don't really have any skilled healers here. One of the town guards left to investigate but hasn't returned. No one was sure what to believe" the inkeeper finished.

"Well, Believe it. A dragon haunts that area. I saw the destruction it wrought firsthand and I was sent to warn the Jarl of Whiterun" stated Arn more loudly as he realized he was more or less addressing everyone in the hamlet in that room.

As soon as he had finished, a cacophony of voices erupted from them all. Some asked more questions of him. Others demanded he leave at once for the Jarl to get more protection for Riverwood. Still others, notably the attractive woman he had noted earlier he now knew was named Camilla, urged them to let him rest and recuperate from his ordeal.

The whole time, Arn didn't respond or say a word. He simply leaned on the counter and swigged the mead that probably wasn't very good but seemed heavenly after the events of the last few days.

After a brief time, or at least he thought it was brief, he realized the mead was starting to affect him.

Arnsmyth used to be able to down mead with the best of them when he was a young man. Now he never seemed to have a reason to celebrate like he did then.

He knew that drinking this much mead this quickly after not having anything of the sort for several months or so was probably a bad idea and he needed to have a plan for the night in place before he said or did anything foolish.

"I'll stay here tonight and rest for the journey to Whiterun tomorrow. It's far too perilous to travel at night" he interrupted into the chorus of voices who went silent as he spoke.

He finished his mead too quickly and pondered the situation he'd gotten himself into for a moment before he found himself staring at Camilla's clothed breasts from across the room.
He was shaken out of his lustful reverie when he realized Delphine was asking him more questions about the dragon attack.

He realized he hadn't caught a thing she said. He must really be fading. This was bad.

She stood there cleaning the counter...again. She'd done that already once...twice? before just now? Was she following him?

"I really should retire. I'll try to answer tomorrow what I can" he mumbled in reply before retiring to the back left room Delphine had motioned him to during the general discussion.

Sleep was no comfort though.

The same dreams haunted his mind that had plagued him for months, except this time worse.

A ruined campsite...the bodies of friends and comrades littering the ground...a blood trail...a moonlit ruin filled with cloaked figures...the naked body of his beloved Desarra impaled on a stake...He felt himself running toward them...maybe this time he would be in time to save her from the macabre ritual...maybe this time he would slay them all...as he neared to strike the first figure, they all turned to him and changed shape...all of them morphing together to form the head of the black and orange dragon...it's gaping maw the size of a building...Arn charged and the Dragon breathed out flame...engulfing and burning his flesh off...

Arnsmyth bolted up in bed with a start, coming to the sudden realization it was just a bad dream and also the realization that a dark figure was in his room, going through his things.

Even though the cloaked figure clearly had the drop on him, Arn reacted quicker, lunging off the bed and tackling the intruder against the small room's wall, knocking things off the dresser and sending his things scattering.

They struggled awkwardly for a minute as he realized several things: first, his assailant was a woman in a tight magically imbued leather jerkin. Second, she was strong and knew several bare hand fighting moves; and Third, none of that was going to stop Arnsmyth.

She put up a good fight. He had to give her that. She even managed to land an elbow to his jaw. That really made him bring things to a halt. Disentangling himself momentarily, he dodged a well-aimed jab and kicked her in the midsection, sending her back against the night stand and wall, causing more noise and following it up with a hard backhand across the side of her head, causing her to fall on the bed face first.

As she did so, he noticed at the same time she went for it, a dagger in a sheath at her waist.

He leaped on her back, pinning her in place and clamped down on her dagger wielding hand with one arm and reached up to yank back the leather cloak hood with the other.

"Unhand Me!" Delphine hissed.

"Really? and what have those hands of yours taken?" sneered Arn in reply.

"Nothing!"

"Oh truly...well, I'm sure you were just breaking in my room and rifling my things as a gesture of good will!"

"I didn't think you were who you claimed to be!" she hissed again, continuing to squirm, trying to
"get out from his hold."

"Maybe because you're not who you claim to be!" replied Arn as he began searching her pockets and armor for any more surprises or things she'd taken.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You're the ridiculous one. You think no warrior would notice the muscle and calluses in your wrists and hands and you hardly fit the appearance and stock of hamlet innkeeper!"

Delphine stopped struggling for a moment as she seemed to realize only then she was caught in something she hadn't anticipated but didn't reply.

"So what is it? You lead the local bandits by shepherding travelers to them? Some agent for whatever this rutting rebellion is that's got everyone angrier than a skeever on skuma?"

"No!" she hastily and Arn thought truthfully denied, although he had a harder time reading women when it came to impressions.

A loud rapping on the door interrupted them. The aggravated voice of the co-innkeeper Orgnar followed shortly thereafter.

"Camilla, damn it lass! You can't keep doing this! You're brother's already offering me money to keep you out and you're back at it again with this stranger! Leave him alone! He's got to make it to the Jarl or we'll never get any protection for Riverwood! Now come out this instant and go home or you're brother and the town guard will hear of this!"

Arnsmyth smirked in surprise at Delphine who huffed and rolled her eyes in annoyance.

"Looks like the town lass makes it around a lot, does she" stated Arn bemusedly, while also pondering what course of action to take now.

As he was pondering, the innkeeper tried to force his way in and pounded on the door again.

"Last Warning, Camilla!"

Arn was about to drag Delphine off the bed and throw her at the innkeeper's feet when she managed to wriggle her way just enough off his center of gravity that she got loose and sent him rolling off the bed at the same time.

He sprang back up, ready for another blow when he realized she wasn't attacking him. In fact, she was undressing hastily.

"Please play along" she whispered as she pulled the leather jerkin over her head and threw it to the side. She was wriggling out of the leather pants when she grabbed the blanket on the bed, wrapped it around her now naked form, unlocked and opened the door.

It took him a second to figure out what she was doing, then decided in the last split second to play along for now.

When the door to the room opened, Orgnar was stunned into silence to find NOT Camilla, but his boss and fellow innkeeper Delphine in an obvious state of undress with the stranger in the bed in a seemingly similar state.

"De-Delphine...I...uh...I didn't know...um" he stuttered, averting his eyes and rubbing the back of his
"What I do in my own time is my business, Orgnar, and I doubt this man likes getting interrupted any more than I DO!" she sneered with such force that Arn almost felt sorry for the innkeeper who shrinked away from her and trotted back to this room.

Delphine slammed the door shut in a huff and threw the blanket back to Arn, who was lying in the bed, slightly amused but also felt his loins growing harder with every glimpse of her skin in the moonlight through the small window.

As the blanket settled he caught a glimpse of her naked body as she strode around the bed and collected her discarded leathers.

"So...why did you do that?" asked Arn trying to gulp down the lump that had arisen in his throat at the sight of her.

"Why did I do what?" she asked as she pulled the leather pants back up over her buttocks and fastened the belt loop.

"You...were ready to fight me before. What changed?"

"I saw that" she said reverently, pointing to his Imperial Legion tattoo on his shoulder.

"But you already thought I was in the legion."

"Yes, but that mark is different from the ones they use now.....I recognize it" she said, slowly tracing her fingers over it, making Arn shudder slightly at the contact, realizing how close she was sitting to him and that she was still naked from the waist up "...They haven't used that particular mark for nearly thirty years. That would put you in the legion during the Great War."

Arnsmyth was beginning to put the pieces together, he thought.

"You fought in the Great War as well..." he ventured.

"Yes...and lost as well" she murmured as though talking to someone else, facing away from him.

For a moment they were both silent, Arnsmyth remembering some of his fallen friends and brothers in arms...so many gone, so quickly...

He realized that bond had evaporated any hostility they'd had instantly. Strange how that could happen.

He shook himself from the memories to see her sitting silently still near him on the edge of the bed looking out the window at the stars. Her still naked breasts heaved a sigh and he realized she must be reliving similar memories. She was young, voluptuous beauty, but she was still a fit woman and it had been a long time since he'd been with anyone.

Part of him, maybe particularly his cock, wanted to pull her into an embrace, but it didn't seem right. She was probably a former soldier herself, maybe an ex-spy who still fancied keeping her skills sharp.

She was no threat to him, though he felt a little bad for putting her in this predicament with her fellow innkeeper, though he also wasn't sure what there was he could have done differently.

He looked at her again to find her staring intently at him.
"Well, by tomorrow morning, the whole village will hear from Orgnar that we were rutting like rabbits....I...don't meet many people I have any respect for, especially not men anywhere near my age....You-- seem to find me attractive enough..." she trailed off, sliding her hand across his bulging crotch "I would not be opposed to staying..."

As she finished talking, Arn had already made up his mind, or rather his body had made it up for him. He firmly grabbed her by one shoulder and laid her down, grabbing the top of the leather breeches and pulling them down and off her feet with the other hand.

Then he set to work answering the growing demands his body and even hers seemed to want.

He hadn't been with a woman for a long time...not since Desarra. No, he was NOT going to think of that right now.

As he began thrusting in earnest into her, though, memories of making love to Desarra came unbidden back into his mind.

It had been a long time for both of them apparently. It seemed like they had barely started when she gasped and tightened around him and he exploded inside her in turn.

He looked at her in the dim moonlight. She had kept her eyes shut the whole time, never grabbing him or responding with her hands at all, though her legs were wrapped around his waist.

They lay together in the bed panting for awhile before he dozed off again. This time the images in his mind weren't as violent as before.

They both awoke to the chirping of birds outside and sunlight flooding the small window.

They repeated their rutting of the previous night in about as awkward and quick manner as they had done before, though this time there was a little more desperation to the act as though each was trying to hold onto some long forgotten piece of something that would be gone once the other was gone.

When it was done, Delphine went to the dresser and used the damp cloth in the basin to clean herself up a bit before donning her leathers and slipped out with a quiet "Thank you and farewell".

Arnsmyth pondered for a short while after she left, but no matter how he looked at it, he felt increasingly angry. Angry for losing Desarra, angry for not getting all those responsible, angry he kept thinking of Desarra, angry he hadn't been able to enjoy being with Delphine, and angry he hadn't been able to please her like he should have.

He looked out the window. He knew the perfect way to work out that frustration.

Pounding after pounding, Arnsmyth worked the steel in Alvor's shop in the way his father had first taught him as a boy and he'd perfected as he grew into a man.

Alvor had decent enough material to work with, just not the patience to forge anything that would stand out. Once Arn had sufficiently produced a nice steelwork dagger for Alvor and given him some pointers, Alvor provided him with some food, provisions, and directions to Whiterun and the surrounding area.

By midday, Arnsmyth left the small hamlet of Riverwood, despite the commotion over a theft at Camilla and her brother's shop. Hopefully, his arrival in Whiterun would go better than his arrival in Skyrim.
*I didn't actually originally intend for Delphine and Arn to "hook up", it was something that I realized made sense for the characters in the context of the situation they were in. Short and not very sweet, they're both using each other as an outlet here. So it's only a small scene that I felt didn't deserve a lot of detail.
Chapter Summary

Arn reports to Jarl Balgruuf, meets the Companions and some of Whiterun's other occupants, and is sent on an important errand...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A First Foray

Whiterun didn't look any different than Arnsmyth remembered it from when he was a boy.

His father had brought him along twice on business transactions here and he remembered it as being quiet, nice, and generally hospitable.

The stone walls of the city and imposing castle of Dragon's Reach on the summit all reinforced the idea none of the outside threats could ever reach there. Situated in the south central area of the middle plains of Skyrim, the city commanded a bird's eye view for miles and miles around.

As he gazed at it from afar while walking, a bellowing of sorts echoed across the plain ahead of him.

As he rounded a bend in the road, he caught sight of a group of warriors besieging a Giant on a small farm next to the road.

As he got closer, he leaned against a stone and paused to watch.

Several beefy Nord men with various weapon styles had hemmed the thing in, carefully measuring their attacks at its legs while avoiding the club the size of a tree that it kept swinging at them.

Even as he watched, he heard a loud battle cry from behind the Giant and caught sight of a female warrior lunging in to hamstring it from behind.

She was...beautiful. Long curly blondish red locks bouncing to and fro as she dodged and weaved in for a blow with one of a pair of longswords. She wore a surprisingly small set of custom leather armor that certainly helped her...uh...mobility. It also showed off quite a lot of her breasts.

Arnsmyth wondered if she did that on purpose to distract opponents. Regardless, her attack failed to make it home as the Giant stumbled quickly to one side and her swords swished through thin air.

They were going about this all the wrong way, Arnsmyth mused as he unslung the bow Alvor had given him before he left Riverwood and knocked an arrow, taking careful aim at the Giant's head.

He grinned slightly, envisioning the killing shot hitting home as he released the arrow and watched it fly....ten feet over the Giant's head and embed itself in the thatched roof of the farmhouse.

Well....that wasn't supposed to happen. Apparently, his archery skills had eroded quite a bit since being on the road these few months.
Gritting his teeth in frustration, he took aim again, taking time to get a feel for the power of the bow's draw, this time truly. The arrow singed from his bow and struck with a satisfying thud through the back of the giant's head and out its mouth.

The giant instantly froze and fell over, hitting the ground with a loud rumble as the group of warriors all suddenly turned and glared at him.
Arn threw his hands up in the air questioningly.

"What? you were taking too long!"

"Everything was well in hand, stranger. We would've finished it off soon enough!" growled one of the bearded Nords with dark hair as he sheathed his greatsword.

"Yes, and in the meantime turned this poor farmer's crops to mush as you stagger around in his field forever" Arn retorted, getting a bit peeved that not even his aid seemed welcome anymore.

"We don't care about crops, we care about our kill!" retorted one of the other burly Nords.

"Spoken like a true city guard, completely uncaring about what they muck up in the process" returned Arn.

At that retort, the one that had spoken first marched up and put a finger on Arn's chest.

"We are no lowly city guards. We are the Companions. Warriors without equal and if you weren't new in these parts, your words would be taken as insult worthy of an answer, but we are done here. Think what you will" he sneered before whirling and nodding at the others who all began departing.

Arnsmyth glared his answer at the departing Nord while relaxing the grip on his sword he thought he might have to use for a second there.

As he turned to pick up his pack, he realized the beautiful warrior woman was still standing there looking at him.

"Have you stayed behind to return insult for favor as well?" Arn asked a bit more unpleasantly than he meant to.

She laughed at that and he couldn't help but be disarmed by it. Something about a beautiful woman laughing just seemed to make him forget about how unpleasant things might be.

"You'll have to forgive them. The joy of the hunt is diminished if the kill is taken by another. They'll get over it" she replied.

"So are you their diplomat then of this band of warriors?" asked Arn, biting his tongue to avoid the sarcasm he'd wanted to retort with.
She laughed again.

"Hardly, I am far from doing anything like a diplomat. I do, however, know talent when I see it. The Companions are always welcoming to those who have the strength, courage, and resolve of a true warrior. Should you desire it, come by Jorvaskr in Whiterun if you wish to join."

"I doubt your friends will be that welcoming."

"I am Aela. Some call me the Huntress. If any question you about being there, tell them I recommended you."
And with that, she whirled and marched off to Whiterun.

Arnsmyth watched her go, her blonde-red locks whirling in the breeze, the dark smooth skin of her shoulders, the slim hourglass figure, muscular legs, and pronounced sway of her hips.

He would definitely have to look into joining these Companions, he thought as he lifted his pack and resumed his walk to Whiterun.

He got exactly the treatment at the gate he expected. Guards stopped, questioned him, and once he announced he was from Helgen and had a message for the Jarl, he was ushered hastily up to Dragon's Reach for an audience with him.

Once the large doors of the Reach had been shut behind him, Arnsmyth took a long look around the hall. He'd thought such an old keep would smell musty and at least show some signs of decay but neither of those things met his senses as he looked around.

A long banquet table sat in the middle just up a flight of stairs from the entrance with several well dressed men and women eating there, probably the town's thanes or family of the Jarl.

As he trod up the stairs, he caught sight of the Jarl himself seated leisurely on a wooden throne, guards flanking either side and a minister looking man standing to the fore.

As he approached, a Dunmer woman emerged from the shadows to the left with her sword drawn, causing Arn to jump back with his hands raised in a gesture of defenselessness.

"I've got my eye on you. You try anything and you'll be dead quicker than you can say 'spy'" she growled at him, her red eyes and slightly raspy voice unnerving him slightly.

"Easy now, all I did was come to make a report. By the Nine, has everyone gone mad in Skyrim?" Arn meant to say the last part to himself but apparently everyone heard it.

"You've obviously not been around the land much lately, then" piped up the Jarl from his chair.

"No, I haven't. I've only just returned after being away many years in Cyrodiil."

"What's your name?"

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar"

"I am Jarl Balgruuf, jarl of Whiterun, thank you for your swift action in coming to report here, wait.....Bulgoar....is your father a member of the smith's guild that used to function here oh, gods, that was nigh thirty years ago?" the Jarl pondered, rubbing his bearded chin thoughtfully.

"Kynsmyth Bulgoar, yes, my father was a smith who came here a number of times. I was just a boy then."

"He's passed on then? I am sorry to hear it."

"We left to do business in Cyrodiil during the Great War and I'm afraid he became another of its casualties."

"As it did to so many. My housecarl, Irileth and I both fought in the Great War and saw the same" he said gesturing to the Dunmer woman who'd threatened Arn when he came in and was still standing only a few feet to his left, sword still in hand.

"Much as I appreciate being able to talk to a fellow veteran, I think we have more pressing matters"
Arn remarked.

"Of course, proceed with your report" returned Balgruuf with a wave of his hand.

At length, Arnsmyth felt safe enough to relate every detail of Helgen, including his unlawful detention and near execution to the stunned court. It didn't stop Irileth or the court wizard Farengar Secret-Fire from interrupting him with questions or accusations of impossibility to his claims.

Once he had finished and was thoroughly annoyed with both Farengar and Irileth, all were quiet as the Jarl frowned his brows in deep thought.

"Send a detachment of guards to Riverwood to increase its defenses. Irileth, send messengers to the other holds and inform them that a dragon has been confirmed and all cautions should be taken. Farengar, you have my permission to proceed with your investigations. Arnsmyth, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What can I do to help?" Arn tried not to cringe, wondering if offering services were a wise thing to do, then again, if he were hired into the Jarl's service, that would certainly give him a legitimate position and probably very good pay.

"You can obviously handle yourself in battle and I have need of someone for a special task. If you succeed, it will go a long way to helping Whiterun and people of Skyrim in general. We need to find out all we can about these Dragons. My wizard, Farengar, has need of someone to retrieve an artifact from a dangerous place. Needless to say, if you succeed, you will be well rewarded. Talk with Farengar for the details" Balgruuf finished with a wave of his hand as Farengar motioned Arn to follow him into a side room which was apparently Farengar's personal laboratory.

After a bit of condescending small talk about how Farengar despised the current civil war and also "brutish mercenaries" in general, he instructed him to fetch what he called the "Dragonstone", a map of sorts, detailing Dragon burial mounds or rites in Bleak Falls Barrow.

Arn nodded assent to everything Farengar told him, trying to shorten the conversation as much as he could, not really wanting to converse anymore than he had to with the aloof wizard.

As he emerged from the wizard's study and made to leave, the Jarl's voiced echoed through the halls once more.

"Wait! one more thing, Arnsmyth, if you would."

Arn turned and walked back.

"Yes?"

Balgruuf sighed as though a bit heavy of heart.

"There is a group of city guards that was sent to deal with a Bandit threat in the area just north of the mountains where you're headed. If you would...could you please look into it? They should have been back days ago."

Arn thought the Jarl looked extremely sad and noticed the sudden look of warning Irileth seemed to be giving the Jarl. There was something else going on here and both of them seemed to be having a conversation of looks about it.

"Is that all there is to it--"
"THAT WILL BE ALL!....dismissed" interrupted Balgruuf.

Arn didn't press the issue.

"Very well" and he turned and departed Dragon's Reach.

He used most of the money he'd gotten on his travels and the small bit of compensation Farengar gave him up front to provision himself with some more arrows, a better steel armor chest piece, and some potions for his journey.

He stayed at the Inn for the night and departed early in the morning, avoiding the merriment of the locals in favor of rest, knowing the days ahead would not be easy.

For a day's journey, he made good time without incident. He spent the night in a cleft of rocks with no fire, opting for safety instead.

The second day, he encountered several wolves, whom he killed and got some nice size pelts from to attach to his pack, for either tanning purposes or to stave out the cold at night.

On the third day, he approached the mountains, expecting to go through a pass directly to Bleak Falls Barrow on the opposite side, and avoiding the extra day's journey around by way of Riverwood.

This was the area he'd been told to search for the lost guard patrol. He sat hunched on a rocky outcropping overlooking the plains that ran up to the base of the mountains, occasional trees dotting the landscape here and there, and a stream winding its way across the plain.

He surveyed carefully for any sign of human activity when a flash of movement caught his eye off and far away to his left.

Through the brush and occasional trees at the edge of the mountains, he caught sight of something he didn't believe at first.

A beautiful woman, stark naked, ran for her life, dodging and weaving through the vegetation, her shoulder length dark hair flying in all directions.

Armsmyth soon saw the reason, after a few moments he caught glimpses of at least five different men chasing behind her.

Was she a forsworn? Couldn't be, no paint markings that he could tell from this distance and this was too far east for their usual haunts. Though she might be a captive, transplanted from the western areas for someone's twisted pleasure.

He slowly edged off his perch and tried to make his way as stealthily as possible toward where she was heading.

He saw her stop for a moment, breasts heaving, crouch down and take stock for a moment before ducking behind a bush as one of her pursuers emerged nearly where she had just been.

With a club drawn, he slowly moved around the area, looking for tracks on the ground until he had his back turned to where the woman was hiding. She then launched herself from her hiding place, kicking the man's legs out from behind and elbowing him in the back of the head.

Before her assailant had even hit the ground, she'd grabbed his club and turned to face two more of them that had emerged and were hollering for the others. One of them had a club but the other had a longsword.
Arn was way too far away to be able to hear anything they said and continued sneaking his way forward to figure out just who these people were, though he had a hunch he knew what this was and had already notched an arrow in his bow.

As the naked woman squared off against the two who began to circle her, they exchanged blows, but it was never really going to be much contest. Even as she tried to defend herself, a third attacker emerged behind her and brought a mace down right between her shoulder blades, crushing her to the ground in the mud at the banks of the stream.

Arn began to pick up the pace of his approach. He was still out of bow range.

The three men taunted and spit on the woman before kicking her once or twice as she tried to get up. Then two of them grabbed her by the arms and forced her face into the mud while the third pulled her arse up on her knees and began unbuckling his breeches.

Yes, Arn knew exactly what this was and began running full tilt, his blood going cold with rage as he closed distance.

By now the man had removed his breeches and tossed them aside, his pale buttocks a stark contrast to the mud and armor of the scene around him.

Sprinting now, Arn took stock and came sliding to a halt on his knees, holding his breath and taking careful aim. He was now close enough to hear the sounds of their laughter and bantering with the poor woman.

He unleashed his first arrow, it's flight arced truly, finding its mark in the man's right buttock, causing him to scream and lurch over forward and sideways awkwardly as the other two turned to face the new threat, but a second arrow was on its way already, and barely had they turned when it impaled the one holding the woman's right arm down through his eye socket, immediately slumping over.

By now, two more men had arrived on the scene, saw what happened and charged where Arnsmyth was kneeling on the opposite side of the stream.

Fools, he thought, downing the two with successive arrows as they got slowed down trying to trudge through the water. The third was making his way up the bank.

Arnsmyth could have downed him with another arrow, but was furious at what he saw. He'd kill this one in a more personal way, he thought.

Dropping his bow, he drew sword and shield as the man came up charging with only a longsword.

Arn swatted the man's pathetic sword strikes aside repeatedly with either his sword or shield. The man began to tire quickly and realized he was overmatched with no backup. Pausing, he turned to flee but Arn hamstringed him from behind with a slice across his legs.

He screeched and fell face first to the ground, dropping his sword and clutching at his legs.

Panicking, the man tried to crawl using his arms to propel him back toward the stream.

Arn simply kicked the sword away and crouched down next to him and sliced across the man's biceps on both arms.

He screamed again and looked up with terrified eyes at Arn who simply crouched and grinned wickedly at him.
"Aw, what's the matter, don't like feeling helpless?"

The bandit simply muttered incoherently in response.

"If you want this to end quickly, you'll tell me everything I want to know"

The Bandit simply stared at him in response.

"How many more of your bandit brethren are there and where are they at?"

When the bandit didn't respond, Arn simply prodded the cut hamstrings with his sword.

"AAAAAHHHH--in the cave--the gray wilderness cave---up on the mountain pass!"

"and how many?"

"D-D-Dozens... you won't get away--there are too many!"

Arn grabbed the immobile man and dragged him to a certain spot on the stream bank.

"The plan was never to get away" sneered Arn "How many times did you rape that woman?"

"I-I-I--didn't"

"HOW MANY TIMES!?"

"I-I-I don't know..."

"Well, maybe there'll be at least one slaughter fish in this pool for every time you did!" snarled Arn, and before the man could react to what he perceived was coming, Arn sliced him again several times across the torso and shoved him into the deeper part of the stream.

It didn't take long. Slaughter fish were ravenous once they got the smell of blood in their nostrils. Several shadows emerged and closed on the cloud of red that was the bandit. Arnsmith turned and strode away from the gargled screams as the water boiled red.

He scanned the area quickly, knowing he needed to get the woman to safety before anymore bandits investigated their fellows' disappearance.

He turned the woman over and she coughed up blood and mud as she struggled feebly against him, one eye swollen shut and the other covered in mud.

Even as she did so, he felt her spasm and pass out, going limp in his grasp as he tried to extract her from the mud. She was covered mostly in mud by now, with a creamy blotch of smooth skin peeking out here or there and nasty swelling dotting here or there.

He picked her up and moved her to the faster running part of the stream. Slaughter fish didn't like fast current, though if they got the smell of blood, all bets might be off.

He crouched down, cradling her in his lap as he used the current and free hand to wipe the mud off so he'd be able to figure out just how bad her injuries were.

Unfortunately, as he cleaned off the mud to reveal more of her, it was difficult for him to concentrate. She was stunningly beautiful. Despite the swollenness from her injuries, he could tell she had soft symmetrical facial features, Nordish with maybe some Imperial in her blood.
She had shoulder length black hair which he took care to keep out of her face and rinse the dirt and grime out. The harder part was cleaning the rest of her body.

He hadn't really seen any details from a distance and when covered in mud and grime, it hadn't been so distracting, but now as more of it was revealed, he had to grit his teeth and focus.

She had large breasts, full and supple, a trim, muscular abdomen, and wide flared hips coming down to curvy muscular legs. By the Nine, she could be Dibella personified, he thought as he closed his eyes, forcing his body to obey him despite what his loins were telling him.

No wonder the bandits had kept her captive, he thought sadly. He was brought back to the reality of the situation as he uncovered the extent of her injuries.

The bruising about her face was recent, and there were probably internal injuries from the mace blow, but what bothered him more was the nasty swollenness and bleeding of her womanhood, pelvic region and bruising on her knees.

Oh they would pay for this...and soon, but for now he needed to find shelter as night was coming on. About an hour later once he'd finished cleaning her, he constructed a wicket of branches to lay her on, wrapping her in furs and tying it all together.

He managed to find a cave on the plains where he'd come from, killed the lone bear sleeping inside and began setting up camp.

He got a fire going, blocked the opening with brush he'd collected as best he could and began applying the healing potions and liniments to her injuries as best he could.

Once he'd done that, he sat on his knees and slowly held out his hand, summoning his knowledge of restoration magic he'd picked up over the years.

He was hardly a mage, but he had some knowledge of magicka and over the years found that as a warrior, healing potions were not always readily available. So whenever he could, he'd gotten training in Restoration.

A healing spell here or a regenerative spell there, as he travelled around he'd met many people who'd been able to teach him a thing or two. Now he applied all that he'd learned to heal whatever he could for this poor woman.

A bluish light began to glow between his hands and her skin as he focused his willpower into regeneration and healing, whispering the words he knew repeatedly.

He slowly moved the glowing blue aura over each area of her body in case there were something internal he couldn't sense. He was relieved to see the swelling going down, cuts mending themselves slowly, the bleeding ceased, and her breathing, which had been erratic and cough filled grew calm and peaceful, breasts softly rising and falling.

Arnsmyth felt ecstatic she would pull through and wrapped her back up in the furs and added his own magically enchanted elk pelt he'd gotten as a steal from Belethor who'd not known it was enchanted against the cold.

As a precaution, he tied the woman back down to the wicket in case she woke and panicked. She had no idea who he was or what he'd done, and it wouldn't do to have her wake in the middle of the night attacking him.
After all that magicka expense, Arn did feel more exhausted than he'd been in awhile, but it was worth it. He huddled close to the dying embers of the fire and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

*Just to put this up front. MAGIC AND DRAGON POWERS aren't going to work the same in this story as they do in game. Video game mechanics don't translate to narrative works in a way that always makes sense. You will learn about them when Arn learns about them.

*Also, I will be playing a bit fast and loose with the locations of words of power and relics since it's impractical to have Arn bouncing all over the map.
Arn takes his vengeance on the bandits that have taken over the area before finishing the Jarl's errand.

Arnsmyth was awakened by moans. Shooting up from his fetal position by the coals of the fire with sword at the ready, he checked his surroundings to be sure there were no intruders.

The barrier at the cave entrance was still securely in place along with the noise trap he'd set. Turning, he saw the moans coming from the bundled woman.

She tossed and turned her head, her thrashing becoming more and more violent.

He moved to her and tried to hold her still, whispering to her it would be alright, that everything was fine now. It seemed to have an effect on her, even though she still wasn't conscious.

The thrashing died down, but she still moaned occasionally. Arn wondered what he could do, feeling saddened at what she must be reliving in her mind.

Then it occurred to him, if he found the right plants, he could make a sleeping poultice that would allow her to sleep more peacefully. So arming himself again, he exited the cave, replaced the defenses and set off scouting for certain plants he knew would do the trick.

He had to keep his head about him though, the bodies of the bandits were gone and he knew there were a lot more to be reckoned with.

At length, after about an hour of searching in the fog of early morning light, he found several plants by a rotten tree that would suffice.

Taking his time to harvest every one of them, a light crunch of twigs behind him signaled his mistake in not watching out enough and he rolled to his left just in time for a battleaxe to cleave the air where he'd been.

He got his shield up just in time as he came up in a crouch to block the second blow, and launched a kick out that caught the approaching bandit off guard and stumble back.

This gave Arn time to draw sword and shield properly and advance on his would-be murderer.

"Who the rutting blazes might you be?" the man sneered as he neared Arn, more carefully this time.

"Just the last person you'll see alive"

The bandit charged with axe raised and Arn stepped in, cutting off the man's downswing with the edge of his shield on the backs of his elbows, pining the man's axe over his head, and ran the shocked bandit through the throat with his longsword.
As the man lay gurgling his last breath, Arn made quick work of getting anything useful off him, getting his plants and herbs, and quickly leaving before anymore showed up.

Back at the cave, he quickly mixed and ground up the herbs and plants using smooth stones he'd gotten from the stream banks, mixed them in some water and got the woman to drink it as best he could.

He waited awhile, watching her intently to see it take effect. After about an hour, she stopped any moans or sounds and there was no more thrashing at all, just peaceful breathing again.

Arnsmyth felt like he'd been holding his breath in the whole time and he let out a huge sigh of relief.

Then a whole new set of problems dawned on him. He had absolutely nothing for her to wear. He had only the clothes on his back.

He still had no idea who she was or where she was from. There was still the lost guard patrol to look for, though Arn was pretty sure the bandits were to answer for that.

Speaking of bandits, there were still many more who could happen upon his shelter at any time the longer he remained there and he still owed them all a reckoning, but it wasn't something he could do if they trapped him here.

He briefly and tiredly contemplated just taking the woman to Riverwood and leaving her there to be taken care of so he could get on with the Jarl's quest, but he immediately revolted at the idea of letting the bandits responsible for what was done to this woman live.

The vision of his beloved Desarra impaled naked on an unholy altar in a clearing came back to his mind unbidden and he clenched his fists in rage. This would not stand.

He looked over at the sleeping woman again and saw a lone tear had escaped her eye and trailed down the side of her cheek. It almost made him cry as he gently wiped it away.

He rose to his feet determined. He would get no help from anyone. Whiterun had already sent people. Riverwood feared for a dragon attack.

He wished he'd had the time to look up the Companions when he'd been back in Whiterun. Maybe they could have helped in some fashion, though given the cold reception he would probably have been given, he doubted they would jump at the chance to tag along with some new sot they didn't like on some quest they weren't getting paid for.

No, if this was going to happen, he would have to make it so. Arming himself completely for battle, he set out for this Graystone Cave the bandit had mentioned.

It didn't take him long. He reconnoitered for only about two hours before finding it. A table sat out front of a double set of doors back into the mountains, and Arn counted six bandits at the table and two more meandering about the immediate area.

No telling how many more were inside. The bandit said dozens but he may have been exaggerating, or maybe not, if there were enough of them to overpower a city guard patrol.

He needed some way to even the odds...something else, he pondered, looking around. Then an idea occurred to him and he sneaked off further into the pass.

It took him a bit longer to find what he was looking for, but as midday was nearing he found a large cave and crept very carefully in, looking to see if it was inhabited and froze as his heart leaped into
his throat.

The large outline of a massive bear lay curled on the floor sleeping soundly not thirty feet from him inside. Arn had hoped for a bear like the one he'd killed the other day, but this one was far bigger, dark colored with a silver spray of color across the hump of its back.

It must be close to fifteen feet tall and just as long, thought Arn. This must be an elder bear, a breed he had only heard about and most people thought were extinct except in the remotest and wildest areas.

Oh yes, this would do nicely, thought Arn, if he survived it.

Very carefully, he crept back out of the cave and back to the bandit's encampment.

He waited for dusk to fall and planned his attack.

The first two bandits fell without their fellow's knowledge, one whittling away on a stick off to the side, the other stood around the bend pissing on a tree. They both got arrows through their brains before they knew they were in any danger.

Arn crept closer to the group at the table, several of them passed out drunk.

He arrowed one of the sleeping drunks through neck, pinning him to the table, but because he never moved, none of the others could figure out what happened. They just looked all around, puzzled at the sudden noise but unsure what it meant or where it was from.

When Arn nailed the second, his shot was less accurate, hitting the man in the shoulder instead of the face and he fell backward with a scream. Well, no more stealth.

Arnsmyth readied shield and sword and charged, jumping off the overhang where the doors were and landed on the table, taking another bandit's head off who'd been too shocked to do anything but stand there staring.

Of the remaining three, one of them was too drunk to do much and staggered around toward the door while the other two went for their weapons.

Arn charged the two, keeping his shield up and a good thing he did too because just as he closed on them, an arrow pinged off his shield from the direction of the doorway.

Another bandit must have emerged armed with a bow. He needed to make quick work of these two or he was done.

Arn slashed down on the torso of the second who was too late getting his weapon up while blocking the blow of the first's great sword with his shield. Arn waited for him to raise for a strike again and kicked him, knocking him off balance and creating an opening for Arn to run him through.

Another arrow whizzed by his head.

Turning, he crouched down, set his sword on the ground and drew a dagger from his belt and hurled it at the bandit knocking another arrow.

It caused the man to panic and he dived to the side to avoid it. When he got to his feet again to knock the arrow, Arn was already almost on him. He never had time to get the arrow back before Arn's longsword cleaved an arm off at the shoulder and he finished him off with a thrust through the chest.
Arnsmyth marched to the door and finished off the staggering drunk who still hadn't been able to get the door open.

Then he began removing the pieces of heavy armor that would slow him down so that he could put the next phase of his plan into action.

When he was down to his leather jerkin and his weapons, he crept inside the bandits' cave.

It was not surprisingly, poorly lit and bits of bone and food were tossed here and there. Obviously, housekeeping was not one of their priorities.

He crept on ahead, bow drawn with arrow knocked, until he came to a wooden platform looking out onto a den area.

There were several tables piled with food and mead attended by some twenty bandits either passed out or stuffing their faces. In the back end of the room, he could make out several cages, but couldn't see what or who was in them. There were several passages off further into the mountain and there was no way to get to them without being spotted.

As he observed all this, a large Nord with long blonde hair emerged from one of the passages, dragging a stumbling naked Bosmer woman behind him.

They ascended up to another wooden platform overlooking the tables opposite where Arnsmyth was crouching.

At the sight, all the bandits at the tables roared in delight to which the Nord bellowed in response.

"WHO'S MOUNTAINS ARE THESE?!" he yelled.

"JORGUND STORMTAMER'S!" came the reply from the floor.

"WHO OWNS THE ROAD?"

"STORMTAMERS!"

"WHO'S GOING TO OWN WHITERUN?"

"STORMTAMERS!"

"WHO CAN TAME THE WOMEN?"

"STORMTAMERS!"

"WHO WANTS TO WATCH ME TAME THIS ONE?"

"YEAH!"

"MAYBE SHE'LL TELL US WHERE HER NOT SO LITTLE FRIEND RAN OFF TO....AFTER ALL, WE WEREN'T DONE TAMING HER EITHER!" sneered the self proclaimed Jorgund Stormtamer as he thrust his pelvis against the poor bosmer woman's arse as he pushed her against the railing he stood behind.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but Arn had heard enough. He let fly with his arrow, but it didn't hit quite where he wanted it to.

He'd aimed to nail Stormtamer in the head and he did, but it went through his cheeks, immediately
silencing him, but not killing him.

"YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE SHE'S AT? I TOOK HER FOR MYSELF! YOU SKEEVER RUTTING INBREDS!" Arn yelled, knocking another arrow and hitting a bandit through the back as he retreated back towards the door, the room erupting in commotion as the tables emptied themselves of bandits and Stormtamer gargled a curse at him.

Arnsmyth reached the doors just in time. As he passed through and went to close them, an arrow stuck fast where he'd just been.

Sprinting past the bodies of the previously slain bandits he made straight for the bear cave. He had made several marks on the trail. So it wasn't hard to find in the fading light.

He made sure not to go too fast. He needed them to follow. He would go so far, then duck behind something to peer back and there were always at least several who were pretty fleet of foot and were staying on his trail pretty good, hollering to the others lagging behind where Arn was at.

He finally made it to the cave and slowed down, creeping inside. Making sure he heard them coming, slipped behind some stalagmites on the side and watched the opening, readying his bow with an arrow.

Within a few minutes, the fast ones had arrived at the opening, but in the fading light couldn't see in. So after conversing among themselves for a bit, they waited for the slow ones to catch up so they could go in with overwhelming force.

Arnsmyth smiled to himself, this was working out even better than he thought it would. He could count at least a dozen, probably a few more by the entrance. As they shouted insults and curses into the cave, the bear began to stir.

Arn waited until they were a good ten feet inside the mouth of the cave, then released his shot into the shoulder of the bear.

The roar of anger echoed around the walls of the cave and made Arn cover his ears. The next sound was a rush of air and padded feet, then the screams of the bandits, then the sickening crunch of bone and flesh tearing amidst more screams.

The elder Bear continued bellowing as the bandits tried in vain to either escape or kill it, both futile as it tore into them.

Eventually after a minute of carnage, the beast moved away from the mouth of the cave to chase down some of the stragglers who were running away.

This gave Arn time to sneak out and head back around toward the Bandit's cave. He made sure to take the long way around as he didn't want the bear to pick up his scent if he were anywhere near the bandits trying to run back.

After arriving and re-equipping himself in his heavy armor pieces, he entered the Bandit's Cave again and slowly made his way back down.

Between everything he'd done earlier and finishing off a few stragglers near the cave on his way back, Arn was completely out of arrows, so he'd have to do this the hard way.

Brandishing sword and shield, he crept back to the large room he'd been at before, largely empty this time except for two sleeping bandits and another woman in bandit garb cleaning up.
Leaping off the platform, he landed on a table, going down to one knee and sliding a ways down, sending food and dishes flying before stabbing down and finishing one of the sleeping ones.

The woman screamed and immediately began yelling for reinforcements. She didn't get out much more as Arn charged and finished her with a stab as she stared at him in shock, crumpling before him.

He turned and avoided a clumsy mace blow from the other previously sleeping one, kicked the mace aside and ran him through.

He crept further in, encountering two more men coming to the screams of the woman he'd just cut down. Dispatching those two, who strangely answered a call for help unarmed, he moved into what must be the back end of the cave, a creek running through the bottom with stairs that ascended up to rocky platforms on either side.

No point in sneaking now. The wooden stairs would creak for sure and give him away. So he just sauntered up them like he belonged there.

At the top he looked to one side and saw a large straw stuffed mat and pillows which must have passed for a bed with the naked Bosmer woman he'd seen before laying face down on it not moving.

Just off to the side, Jorgund Stormtamer sat half clothed messing with the arrow wound on his mouth, trying to apply some sort of potion to it apparently.

"THIS ISN'T WORKING! I TOLD YOU TO--" he stopped short, noticing Arn standing there instead of whoever he expected.

"Guess I get to pay you back for this, personally" he rasped, pointing at his cheeks.

"Oh, now you want to actually fight, too bad you waited til all your men were dead and your women gone"

"I AM THE STORMTAMER!" he bellowed, lifting a great axe and charging Arnsmyth who stood at the ready.

Stormtamer was much larger than any of the other bandit opponents Arn had faced. He was a full head taller than Arn, mostly muscle, and knew how to use that Great Axe.

Arn realized at the last second the force of one of his Great Axe blows might break his shield or at least permanently damage his guard arm, and side stepped just enough that it was a glancing blow, but it still took a slice out of his shield.

Not good.

Stormtamer was also quick enough to avoid Arn's reposte with the handle of his Axe, pushing Arn back and coming in for another power attack.

Arnsmyth rolled to the side, the Axe thudding against the stone floor and arced his sword around, gashing Stormtamer's right leg.

He tried rolling again, but this time as Stormtamer came around he seemed to predict it, and brought his Axe down right on Arn who only managed to get his shield up just in time, but the Axe still cleaved into the shield and Arn had it ripped off his arm as Stormtamer lifted his Axe back up.

"Raaaagh!" charged Stormtamer as he came at him again, this time Arn only had his longsword to
defend himself with, but by now he was in the position he wanted, at the edge of the platform.

He waited, then timed his lunge inside of Stormtamer's swing arc, and lowered his center of gravity, stabbing into the large Nord's rib cage and pushing him past Arn...and tumbling over the edge in a gargled yell.

There was a thud and tell tale crunch of bone as Stormtamer landed twelve feet down either head or neck first.

Arnsmyth turned to the Bosmer woman who had been awake and alert the whole time, just apparently too scared to do anything else. She stared at him with wide uncertain eyes.

"Don't worry, I'm not one of them" replied Arn, sheathing his sword.

"But...the-the-rest of them--"

"Are all dead or will soon be" answered Arn as he turned to a dresser and began removing some clothing he thought would fit her. Keeping his back turned, he tossed her the clothing and waited as she snatched it up quickly and dressed in them.

"Now, there's something I think we need to finish" he said, motioning for her to follow him as he went back around and down the stairs. She ran and clutched at his arm, not wanting to let go or stray far from him, her eyes growing wide again as they came to the foot of the stairs to find Stormtamer's broken body laying there.

He was splayed in an unnatural position, paralyzed, but still alive as they could see his eyes darting back and forth to them but unable to speak.

"Figured you'd suffered enough at his hands, you'd want to do the honors" he replied, handing her his longsword.

At first she just stared at it, then at Stormtamer. After a few seconds she tentatively took the blade and approached him, still clinging to Arn with her other hand.

"Filth! You are not even worthy to worship Baan Dar!" and with that, she screamed and brought the sword down, nearly cutting his head off, but it took another couple of angry hacks for her to finish it, then she handed the sword back to Arn and took a deep breath, a couple tears coming out and she tried to calm herself down.

"I am called Lareneth. I am most grateful for your aid. If there is any way I can repay this kindness--"

Arn waved his hand to interrupt her speech.

"Don't start with that. It's not kindness if I expect payment, is it?"

"I don't....understand...you do not wish for anything?"

"I have a special place of hatred in my heart for men who defile women in body or spirit...It is the right thing to do" Arn said, scooping up Stormtamer's head and bagging it.

"Do you perchance know what happened to my fellow prisoner, a Nord woman with dark hair, very beautiful....she tried to escape the day before yesterday...I...never heard anything."

"Don't worry, she's safe. I've got her resting up with healing potions nearby"

"OH! Thank Auri-El!" she exclaimed, clasping his hands in hers "Please, be careful with her good
stranger. I thought I was enduring Oblivion itself, but when they captured her...oh...it was so much worse for her. She would even volunteer herself in the hopes they would spare me" she started to choke up.

Arnsmyth grimaced at that, though he didn't intend to. He rested a hand on her shoulder.

"It's all over" was about all he could think of offering in the way of comfort. After he'd collected whatever he could use from the area, they walked back to the main room.

Lareneth showed him the pit in the back where they threw the bodies of their victims. Arn found six sets of Whiterun guard armor, but there were only five fresh corpses in the pit. He turned to Lareneth.

"Was the other woman a guard from Whiterun?"

"Yes, she was brought in with that armor on"

"Guess I should get it back for her" he murmured, rummaging through until he found what obviously must be hers based on the room allowed for her proportions.

While he was searching around, Lareneth had gotten a pack full of provisions for herself and armed herself with a dagger, bow, and arrows.

He awkwardly wondered how to tell her it would be safer for her to stay traveling with him.

"Not to tell you what to do or anything...but the roads are still perilous, especially for a lone young woman"

"This nest of Bandits ruled this area. Without them, the roads are much safer. My people are the people of the woods. I will stay in the woods. There I will be safe" she said determinedly adjusting her outfit.

"Um...uh...Ok, I guess" puzzled Arn

She turned to leave but stopped at the top of the platform.

"What is your name, kind stranger, that I may know who to thank Auri-El for"

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar" he replied, feeling more awkward by the second.

"Then farewell, and if you ever need aid from my people, may the grace of Auri-El make it so" and then she was gone.

"Ok...sure thing" puzzled Arn, not knowing at all what any of that meant.

Loading up with as much provisions as he could carry, he made his way back to the cave and the woman he'd left sleeping.

As he shoved aside the brush and avoided his own sound trap, he plopped the provisions bags down along with the guard armor along with his own pack, looking over to see the fully awake woman staring daggers at him.

"YOU RUTTING PIECE OF MUDCRAB SOT! LET ME GO THIS INSTANT!" she yelled at him.

It then dawned on Arn he had left her tied down to the wicket covered only in the blankets.
Arn you idiot. You didn't even untie her before you left.

He stood there stunned for a moment before she yelled the same phrase louder at him again.

"Who are you!? Why did you bring me here!? What did you do to me?!” she rattled off in quick succession to him as he panickedly tried to get all the guard armor out of the stuff he'd returned with to give to her.

"Now, now, I'm a friend. I killed the bandits who were chasing you and brought you here to heal up"

"Oh, a likely story...you're just another one of them and probably brought me here to have me to yourself until the others find out"

She looked conflicted as if unsure she should lobby for a different outcome than the one she thought she was in.

Arn walked over and began untying the straps on the wicket to free her.

"If you're referring to...uh...what was his name...uh...Stormtamer, was it? he won't be bothering anyone ever again" he said, untying the last knot and returning to the supplies.

She was glaring death at him again as he looked up, but there was something in her eyes...a spark of hope maybe.

"Don't believe me?" he grinned slightly "See for yourself" he said, pulling the head out and tossing it across the room for her to see.

She stared at the head for a moment, a range of emotions crossing her pretty features as she looked at it. Then suddenly she sprang up from her blankets still naked, ran across the space, grabbed the steel longsword he'd brought for her, ran back, and viciously began cleaving the head with her sword repeatedly, screaming angrily with each strike.

Arnsmyth allowed her to take out her feelings on it for awhile, then, when it became obvious she was tiring and still not recovered completely he grabbed her by the shoulders as she sank to her knees, bits of blood splattered on her here and there, her shoulders shaking slightly as she willed herself not to weep.

"They're all gone. I made sure of that"

She shrunk away from him back into the covers, clutching them about her protectively.

"Impossible. You're just one man. There were dozens of them"

"True, there were. However, I am a veteran of the Great War and have spent my whole life as a sword for hire or bladesman in a Cyrodiilic Guild. I've been an archer since I was a small lad and only gotten better with years. I know my way in a fight" he stated with utter confidence.

"But you couldn't take on that many alone...no one could"

"You're right. That's why I enlisted the aid of a sleeping elder Bear to even the odds a bit" he grinned, preparing some things from the pack to make a meal.

They were silent for awhile, Arnsmyth preparing supper and the woman sitting huddled in the blankets staring at him in disbelief.
"If you want, you can wash up and dress, I got your Whiterun armor back" he motioned to the armor.

"I can never wear that again..." she sighed, looking distant.

"Why not?"

"Obviously you've never been a woman city guard"

"No, but--"

"Once people learn what happened to me, I'll be seen for the failure I am and be sent away"

"Guards have been captured before and returned to service"

"But not women who get violated repeatedly!"

Arn was silent. He began to understand. There had always been this strange variance in how women were treated in Skyrim. On one hand they were to aspire to be proud warrior women like Freida Oaken-wand, yet they were never allowed any defeats or setbacks that male Nord heroes often had.

Women were allowed to be Housecarls but only if they were master combatants or voluptuous beauties that really only served as concubines for their Jarls or Thanes.

It was all or nothing. Fair or not. If a woman was ravaged, she was never told outright but often treated as though she was second class to others.

He looked up to see her staring wistfully at her armor.

"But what if no one ever found out what happened?" he ventured.

She turned to stare at him.

"What do you mean?"

"You go back to the Jarl and report the death of all the bandits. You tell him your group was ambushed and you fought valiantly but one by one your comrades fell. You retreat to figure out what to do, waging hit and run strikes against whatever lone bandits you can find until I show up and help you get the rest. No one can say it didn't happen that way."

"But..honor dictates that--"

"What was done to you was not honorable and you said yourself the way it would be received would not be honorably"

She went back to staring off into space, conflicting emotions clouding her face.

Arn walked over and sat down in front of her, venturing to lift her chin with one hand, looking her in the eye.

"Don't do this to yourself. No matter what happened in that cave, you can still be whoever you wish to be. You can never let someone else take that away from you. I saw you take the fight to them even though you were injured, naked, lost and afraid. I can see that fiery spark in you trying to come back, but you're letting doubt cloud it out. Don't let the dead or dispassionate rule your mind or heart" Arn finished, but even as he did, he felt a pang, knowing the words he spoke applied to himself as well.
He grimaced slightly, the memories flooding back, and he turned to return to his preparations.

There was silence for awhile, then he heard the rustling and clanking of her donning her armor and he smiled, glad she was making the right choice.

"What is your name?" she said behind him, sounding much more confident now.

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar" he said, standing and for some reason, felt like they were meeting for the first time, expecting her to state her name in turn. 
"So...you saw me naked? washed me in the river without a stitch of clothing on?"

"Uh...well, yes, I didn't--"

CRACK, she slapped him hard across the face.

"By the Nine! What was that for?" he exclaimed, grabbing his chin, smarting from the sting.

She huffed and put her hands on her hips.

"I don't know. I just made me feel better that I could do something about it again."

Arnsmyth simply groaned, but before he could come up with a sarcastic retort befitting the occasion, the woman grabbed him with both hands on the back of his head and pulled him into a passionate kiss.

Her soft, warm lips immediately chased all rational thoughts from his mind as he felt their armor clink together as they closed distance and embraced, her hands caressing the short hair on his neck and back of his head.

Then she pulled back, straightening her armor and brushing her hair back, breathing heavily as he stood there in a daze, wondering if he'd daydreamed the whole thing.

"Well....What was that for?" he stuttered out, wide eyed.

"I just....wanted to say thank you" she stuttered as well, looking confused for a moment before she marched passed him, picked up a cloak and some of the provisions, rolled them up, waved at him, and marched out of the cave.

Arnsmyth slumped to the ground, running his fingers over his lips, feeling the warmth and moisture still lingering there from her kiss, but was interrupted by the smoking burn smell of his vegetable stew burning on the fire.

As he attempted to remove it, suddenly it occurred to him that he still didn't know her name at all! He grimaced in pain yet again as he burned himself.

Well, that's just great.

Two days later, Arnsmyth wondered why the Jarl had called clearing out Bleak Falls Barrow a "dangerous assignment".

Besides a few inept bandits at the entrance, all he really had to deal with was about a dozen shambling draugr spread out over the whole barrow, an old crippled spider and some amateur mage who thought running away from him and calling him a sucker after he'd freed him was a good idea.

He'd found his corpse further down with two draugr standing over it.
Draugr certainly were unsettling looking, like reanimated mummies with glowing blue eyes. But while they looked horrific, they weren't actually very threatening.

Most wore no armor, weren't armed with any significant weapons, and had no skill with what they were using.

They largely just shambled at you and attacked until you killed them or more of them showed up and overwhelmed you. Having spent a lot of time in Aeyleid ruins for many years, Arnsmyth had fought numerous skeletons and spectres before, so Draugr were nothing that new or fearsome.

Having retrieved this strange golden claw from the fallen mage, Arn solved the puzzle that got him into the final sanctum. Well, after taking on a Bandit stronghold alone, this felt like any milkdrinking sot could do it.

He strode forward into the final chamber, taking stock of his surroundings, the writings on the wall feeling familiar for some reason.

As he was looking around, the coffin in front of him popped open and a draugr rose to look at him.

Not really surprising, but this one was faster and fiercer for some reason, forcing Arn on the defensive for a bit before he was able to sucker it into over-committing on a strike and he cleaved an arm off before finishing it off.

Picking up the Nordic longsword, he noted the tell tale runes of enchantment on it along with a faint blue glow.

It would make a good backup he thought, finding a spot to get it in his pack, then made his way forward into the main area of the sanctum.

There on a pedestal was the Dragonstone. He eyed it warily for a moment then moved around behind it, reached out and quickly snatched it and leaned back as darts and arrows shot back and forth across the space where his hand had been.

As he looked at the Dragonstone, he heard a strange rushing noise, like wind.

He looked all around but saw no one and no openings out for wind to be coming from, then he noted the large concave stone wall behind him.

He then realized the sound got louder the closer he got to the wall. Ordinarily, Arnsmyth would have gotten out of there right away. No telling what sort of curse or magic ward he may be tampering with, but for some inexplicable reason he felt like knew this while at the same time didn't know it.

Curiosity was the number one thing that often got adventurers killed but Arn ignored his common sense screaming at him to get away from it. Getting closer step by step.

It seemed so...familiar...like he'd seen it somewhere else or something, like he should know it.

When he was only several feet from the wall, he felt something take hold of him and stood stock still as images and words raced through his mind like the wind and when he could move again the idea of Unrelenting Force seemed pounded into his brain.

He looked up at the wall and one symbol seemed to stand out. Somehow he knew that symbol meant Unrelenting Force. He didn't know how he knew it or why. He just knew it all of a sudden.

Disturbed by what had just transpired, he packed away the Dragonstone and made his way back to
Whiterun as hastily as possible.

Maybe Farengar knew something about what happened to him.
An Unexpected Calling: The First Dragon

Chapter Summary

Arn finds himself pulled into battle against a Dragon...and finds out something about himself in the process.

An Unexpected Calling: The First Dragon

"HAIL! IT'S THE JARL'S MAN!" came the thunderous greeting from the guards at Whiterun as Arnsmyth Bulgoar approached the gate.

"Yes...uh...Hail to you too" Arn mumbled out as the gates opened and a half dozen eager city guards converged on him, congratulating him on a legendary victory over the bandits, and asking for stories and details.

Arnsmyth surmised the woman guard had made it back and stuck to the story he'd instructed her to use.

As he got clapped on the back and bombarded with questions he wasn't sure where to start and how much to say since he wasn't sure what details the woman might have given, a loud voice overhead silenced them all.

"I'll escort him to the Jarl immediately!"

Arn looked up to see Irileth descending the ramparts. He fell into step behind her, leaving the guards gawking after them as they made their way up to Dragon's Reach.

The awkward silence of the ascent through the town was broken as Irileth turned at the Castle's door.

"Did you get the Dragonstone?"

"Aye"

"Good, take it to Farengar immediately then return to make a full report to the Jarl."

Arn simply nodded, a little rankled at her gruff demeanor.

Farengar wasn't alone when Arnsmyth entered. There was a cloaked woman, shrouded in a leather hood and cloaked to their eyes to avoid recognition.

Cloak and dagger stuff wasn't typical of wizards, then again maybe that was another thing that had changed in Skyrim in Arnsmyth's absence.

Both Farengar and the cloaked woman immediately grew silent when Arn entered, Farengar immediately approaching him and giddily accepting the Dragonstone when Arnsmyth presented it.

"Yes...yes...this is exactly what we needed!" Farengar exclaimed as he turned it over and over again in his hand, taking in every detail "Well! You've certainly proven you're above the usual lot of mercenary brutes--"
The cloaked figure cleared her throat loudly, interrupting Farengar, who returned to whisper back and forth with her.

Arn was catching bits and pieces of what they said, when he suddenly placed that annoyed whisper of the woman.....Delphine? the woman he’d rutted with in the Inn right after Helgen?

He leaned against one of the castle beams with his arms crossed, smirking.

My, my, she did get around. So she was secretly some agent for this wizard...or maybe the Jarl. Neither made much sense, since you’d get farther with the official sanction of either than you’d get with none at all.

Briefly, the images of her lying naked in his bed, her hands gripping the sheets tightly as he plowed into her repeatedly flashed across his mind but were replaced just as quickly by more recent events.

The beautiful guard woman running naked through the woods, slaying the bandits, tending the woman's wounds...running his hands over her body--

Arn realized suddenly Farengar and Delphine had finished their discussion and she had collected some things after a short farewell to Farengar who immediately went back to looking at the Dragonstone.

He realized Delphine had never addressed him and perhaps didn't even realize he was standing there. As she passed by to the doorway, Arn reached down and patted her left buttock quickly, making her whirl on him.

Arn was rewarded with seeing her angry eyes widen in shock and recognition and the balled fist that was meant to punch him receded back to her side as he winked knowingly at her.

She didn't respond at all. If anything, she left even more hurriedly without a word.

Now alone with Farengar, Arnsmyth tried to ask about his strange experience in Bleak Falls Barrow near the stone wall, but was interrupted by the court courier at the door.

"The Jarl's Court is summoned!"

They filed back in the next room as the Jarl sat in his chair receiving a report from a shaken guardsman.

Arn caught the gist of it as he arrived. Apparently a dragon had been sighted in the vicinity of the western watchtower.

No sooner had the guard finished talking, than the Jarl began issuing orders.

"Irileth! take a group of Guards and reinforce the men already there and deal with this. Arnsmyth Bulgoar, I am already in your debt for your service, but you have proven yourself to be a capable warrior and we will need all we can. Go with them and if you can in any way, help take the beast down, your reward will be great indeed."

"Aye, my Jarl" answered Arn with a nod of his head.

Farengar and his questions would have to wait.

Night was falling, but twenty minutes later, after arranging things with Irileth and following her and a group of about six guards out across the savannah west of Whiterun, they came to a tower that used
to be a part of a larger keep, but now was just a shell of a tower with dilapidated wall nearby and stones laying here and there from the old structure.

The guards already there were terrified. Arn was surprised they hadn't fled they were so worked up.

"Was the Dragon Black with Orange stripes?" Arn asked determinedly, wondering if it was the same one he'd encountered at Helgen.

"NO! It was large and BROWNISH GREEN!" answered a panicked guard.

It was dark by now, but there was still plenty of light to be had on the crystal clear night from the full moon and radiant stars.

As Arn asked a few more questions while some of the others fanned out, the dragon made his entrance.

A slight whisp of wind from it's wings was the only warning and one of the guards standing in the middle of the makeshift courtyard by the tower was engulfed in its jaws.

"DRAGON!" were the repeated screams as guards scurried every which way away from the dark form devouring the unfortunate first victim.

At the first sight of its shadowy bulk descending, Arn had unslung his bow and begun firing, angling his way near the dilapidated stone wall next to the tower.

In a few seconds, two more guards met their demise at the Dragon's claws even as the others began to focus their bow shots and weapon strikes against its flank.

As the dragon turned this way and that, swinging a clawed forearm at one guard or breathing fire at a darting and taunting Irileth, Arn was vaguely aware the Dragon was...making noises...saying something?

He had no idea what it was, but he felt like he should. It was the same feeling he'd had in Bleak Falls Barrow. The feeling of familiarity like he knew something but just couldn't place it.

Arn wasn't sure how many guards there had been at the tower originally, but he figured only half were left alive now, and as the dragon lofted himself up with his wings, he breathed flame at three foolish ones who'd picked the same stone to hide behind to fire arrows.

Their screams as they roasted alive made Arn aim at the Dragon's head but in the darkness, it was hard to see if and how many of his arrows were actually piercing the Dragon's scaled hide.

"THE WINGS! AIM FOR THE WINGS! BRING IT DOWN!" screamed Irileth to whoever was left.

Arn immediately complied but realized as he reached back that he was going to run out of arrows soon.

The Dragon vanished into the night and silence fell again, broken only by the moans and cries of the dying as all eyes scanned the starlit sky.

Arn spotted it this time, swooping back around from over the tower.

"THERE!" he hollered, unleashing a shot at its left wing.

It pulled up into a mid-air hover, turning toward Arn, who immediately tackled the guard next to him
through the tower doorway just as the beast belted a blast of fire at where they’d been.

Arn heard a few more screams from outside as he got back to his feet and retrieved his last arrow, taking aim around the corner as the dragon stayed hovering, covering the landscape in flames as it spewed it back and forth at anything that moved.

As it lifted itself to fly forward, Arn let fly with his last arrow, striking it in the left wing and its impact immediately noticeable as the beast flailed in its flight and crashed to the ground, one wing bent at a wrong angle.

Downed but not in the least bit dead, the Dragon roared a flame at Irileth and what looked like the only guard left outside, then turned and charged partway up the broken stone wall, lunging at Arn through the tower opening.

The guard inside the tower with him shrieked as the dragon's head appeared suddenly through the door and snapped at them, unable to reach because of the awkward angle and size of the dragon.

Arn dropped his bow, arming his sword and shield instead.

*Alright, the hard way then.*

As he did so, the dragon had turned his head to snap at the guard, who had wisely armed his sword and shield as well, blocking a bite at his torso with his shield.

Then the dragon did something unexpected. Seeing the shield defense, it slipped its large tongue out and slapped at the guard's legs, knocking him over. Then it just snatched him up in its jaws, crunching his legs and shaking him back and forth like a chew toy.

"NOOOOO!" screamed the guard, flailing his arms, looking for anything to grab onto.

But in doing all this, the dragon had not taken Arn into account.

He'd charged when he saw the Dragon divert his attention and now he struck a stab home in its right eye socket as its head neared the doorway.

Releasing the Guard, it bellowed in pain, backing out of the doorway and stumbling around the courtyard.

Irileth and another guard were still there, timing dart in attacks on its flanks. It turned to snap at them and Arn saw his opportunity.

Running out of the doorway and down the steps, he took a one step leap on one of the large stones lying in the courtyard, then launched himself onto the Dragon's neck.

He'd ditched his shield and held instead a dagger in one hand and longsword in the other.

When he landed, his dagger thankfully held fast as he sank it in the flesh where the head met the neck behind the bony plates that circled the dragon's head.

It roared in rage and thrashed from side to side, but Arn had already stabbed his longsword as a follow up into another part of its neck, holding on for dear life as he was jerked back and forth.

Irileth and the remaining guard continued attacking and Irileth must have hit something painful because the Dragon immediately shifted attention to her and stopped thrashing briefly to breathe fire at them.

This was Arn's window of opportunity. Righting himself, he stood up, grabbing onto the bony plates
of its head with one hand and raising his longsword with the other then he brought his blade down right into the eye that wasn't damaged and stabbed repeatedly as the dragon bellowed, alternately belching spurts of flame in no specific direction and stumbling around like a drunk.

Then in a final thrust, he brought the longsword down in a spot near its forehead that looked like it might fit between scales. Burying it to the hilt, Arn let out the breath he'd been holding as the Dragon immediately stilled and collapsed to the ground, uttering a last phrase that Arn thought he recognized. "Dovahkiin......no....."

He stared down at the Dragon's face, bloodied eye sockets and flesh filled teeth from the men he'd devoured.

Then he let out a huge "WHOOOOOOO!" in triumph that echoed across the plains and looked up to see Irileth and the remaining guard staring at him.

"See! Told you it could be done!" barked Irileth at the remaining guard.

Gods, the woman was insufferable at times, thought Arn, realizing they were probably the only survivors of a group of about a dozen and a half.

"Ooh...oh! If only I could get a painting of this moment!" wheezed Arn, out of breath, as he slid down off the Dragon's head.

"Well?" asked Irileth at someone past Arn, who turned to look and realized the remaining guard had gone to check on the other one who'd been in the tower with him.

The guard had emerged and just shook his head negative, which put a damper on how elated Arn had felt only a moment earlier.

Spreading out, they silently looked around for any others but as they made their way back it was obvious no one else made it.

As Irileth was about to give some sort of order to them, they heard a strange rushing noise, like the wind.

"IT'S NOT DEAD!" she yelled as all three turned towards it.

However, it still didn't move. The rushing noise grew in volume and all three began slowly backing away uncertain what was happening.

Then the Dragon began to glow a golden white light, very bright, radiating all around for hundreds of yards.

They shielded their eyes as it got brighter.

What sort of strange magic was at work here?

Then the golden light began shooting out from the Dragon's carcass and coming straight toward...ARNSMYTH!

He had no time to react really. He had only just turned to run or dive to the side when he felt like something seized control of him and held him there.

He felt suspended in air as the golden light swirled all around him. Then flashes of images filled his mind, making him unable to think, only react as image after image bombarded him, all to do with the dragon...flying, feeding, other dragons, the land of Skyrim, it all passed through his mind like a tornado while his body suspended in paralysis.
It seemed like forever until the golden light receded and Arnsmyth felt himself fall to his knees, wondering what just happened.

He turned to see both Irileth and the remaining guard staring at him again in shock.

"You.....just.....absorbed that Dragon's...Soul" stuttered Irileth.

"I did what?"

"You absorbed its Soul!"

"But I didn't do anything! I was just standing here!"

"You must be...one blessed by Akatosh...with the blood of the dragons!" exclaimed the guard.

"A Dragonborn..." pondered Irileth aloud as the guard fell to his knees and began uttering prayers, though Arn wasn't paying attention to the content of them.

"A what?!"

"A Dragonborn"

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know, but if it means you can kill these things easier, then all the better. We should return to inform the Jarl" stated Irileth, kicking the praying guard before turning back to the Dragon's corpse for another surprise.

Instead of a flesh carcass, all that remained of the Dragon was a skeleton.

"Well, I guess it makes cleanup that much easier" muttered Arnsmyth as he got to his feet, looking at his hands, wondering why he felt different.

After retrieving his weapons, Arn followed silently behind the other two as they headed back to Whiterun.

What was it about him and Dragons? First, one attacks his execution, then he has a strange experience surrounding a stone of dragon lore, now this.

He would have a lot more questions for Farengar now, he thought as they reached the gates of Whiterun to shouts and cheers from the Guards as Irileth relayed the news of their success and shouted out more orders as the gates opened.

Once they were back in the Jarl's council, Irileth relayed all that happened in detail, even Arn's daring dragon back riding.

When it came to the part about absorbing the Dragon's soul, everyone, even the Jarl gasped and turned to look at Arnsmyth seated at the table trying to sneak a bite of fruit.

"What?"

"You....are a Dragonborn!" exclaimed Farengar when no one else said anything.

"And?" queried Arn with his hands up, still confused as to why that mattered.

"Only one blessed by Akatosh with the blood of the dragon kin may be a Dragonborn! Only a
Dragonborn possesses the power of the Thuum that the Dragons possess. Reknowed slayers of Dragons and powerful men able to turn the tides of battles and wars--continued Farengar until something even stranger happened.

As if on a gust of wind, an old man's voice was heard in the distance.

"Dragonborn....You are summoned....to High Hrothgar..." were the unmistakable words as everyone in the room stood stock still listening.

Arn was about to ask what in Oblivion's name was that, except he felt like all he'd done for the last hour was to ask himself and other people what was going on.

"The Greybeards! They're summoning him!" practically shouted Farengar, beside himself apparently.

"Alright! Enough is enough! You all seem to know a great deal about this. Well...I know nothing. So if you want me to do something, you'll need to explain what this is all about!" exclaimed Arn exasperatedly.

For about the next hour, Farengar, Irileth, and even the Jarl tried to spell out at length what being the "Dragonborn" meant.

From what Arnsmyth could gather, it was a title born from legends concerning several famous warriors who could command the powers of the dragons through the Thuum.

Then there was the part about a Dragonborn in some prophecy.

Arn didn't particularly care for either of these things as it did nothing to help him figure out what had actually happened to him either in the Barrow or when he absorbed the Dragon's soul.

Before Farengar could wax anymore eloquent about someone hundreds of years ago who said something that might pertain to the Dragonborn, Arn cut him off.

"Enough! That's all well and good, but what just happened to me...with the Dragon's Soul and the other incident in the Barrow I was going to ask about earlier?"

They were all quiet for a moment before Irileth, the most skeptical of the group, spoke up.

"We don't know. You have to realize this was something only talked about in stories and legends. Most people didn't think it actually happened much less anything specific about it. If you want to learn more, your best bet will be the Greybeards."

"Then I guess I will have to answer their summons" sighed Arn as he rose to leave.

Jarl Balgruuf raised his hand to halt him.

"Wait! Before you go. You've done me and the people of this hold several great services. We are in your debt and I would see it repaid."

He motioned to a guard from the side who emerged, carrying a very nice set of armor, skyforge steel sword and an unusual shield.

"I name you Arnsmyth Bulgoar, Thane of Whiterun and all the lands that belong to its hold. You will be entitled to all the privileges and duties of a Thane and are here bestowed the estate of Breezehome as your land holdings. Take these arms, armor, and the Shield of Whiterun as a token of
Arnsmyth was stunned, clumsily holding out his hands as the guard deposited all the aforementioned arms and armor into them.

A Thane...him an actual Thane. Thanes were from important families, businessmen and women, influential generals and the like, not a low born bladesman.

He sat back down, staring at all the things he'd just set on the table.

"But...I don't know that someone as low born as I should--"

"Nonsense, you're a skilled warrior whose served my people well and you're the Dragonborn" interrupted Balgruuf who apparently wasn't taking "no" for an answer.

"I will strive to do the title honor" responded Arn, not sure what else to say.

"I am aware you may be travelling a lot given that you're the Dragonborn, but you will always have a place to come back to here. And I don't expect you to stay here for court like I would my other Thanes. So you can make haste to answer the Greybeard's summons or get whatever other answers you need. Are we agreed?"

"Y--Yes my Jarl"

"Good, I also declare that Lydia will be your housecarl and do her best to serve and protect you in whatever way you think best"

At that, Arn jerked his head over to where the Jarl had gestured to see that this Lydia....was none other than the guard woman he'd rescued from the bandits!

She must have entered at some point during the discussion because Arn hadn't seen her there to start the report.

It was a good thing Arn already had his hand on his chin. Otherwise, his chin might have hit the floor when he turned and saw her standing there at attention on the right side of the room, with wide eyes just as shocked as he was.

It was silent for awhile, then Arn realized they were waiting for him to respond.

"Is...that acceptable?" asked the Jarl.

Arn found his voice after he cleared his throat a time or two.

"Yes..yes indeed. I've seen her fight before and she'll do just fine."

"It's settled then, good. Court dismissed" he said with a wave of his hand as everyone began going different ways.

Arnsmyth sat there at the table, staring at the stuff in front of him, trying to wrap his mind around how much his life had somersaulted out of control in the last several hours when he realized Lydia was standing next to him silently.

"So uh..um...as you can see, I'm kind of new at this and am not sure what a Thane-ly thing to do right now would be" he whispered to Lydia, who smirked slightly before turning to face him.

"Well, even Thanes need sleep and it is getting late...unless you wish to celebrate your slaying of the
dragon. I hear they're already toasting you and singing songs with your name at the Bannered Mare."

"Not really sure I feel like celebrating anymore..."

"I can go make sure Breezehome is ready for our arrival, unless you wish me to stay at your side to protect you"

"No...no...go to Breezehome and I'll meet you there later" muttered Arn, avoiding looking at her altogether, lest more...intimate...images flood his mind.

"Very well, my Thane" she replied a bit flatly before whirling and leaving.

After he'd changed into his new steel armor set, he found himself out on one of Dragon Reach's porches overlooking the city.

Leaning on the railing he looked down on the city, still with numbers of places well lit. He could even hear singing echoing up from the marketplace. Must be quite a party at the Mare, he thought.

"You seemed eager to celebrate earlier and yet here you stand" the gruff voice of Irileth interrupted his thoughts.

"That was when I was just a simple swordsman slaying a dragon, not some mythical being or town noble..."

They were both quiet for awhile before it seemed Irileth moved closer after looking around to see no one was around.

"I've seen far too much of war and the world to believe the story that girl came back with about the bandits" she spoke with intensity, her eyes never leaving his.

He was silent, returning the intensity of her stare, wondering why Irileth cared anything about his housecarl.

"You rescued her didn't you?"

Arn tried to laugh it off.

"Ha ha! Why would you think that? You think I killed all of them alone?"

"I've seen you slay a Dragon. Oh sure, your story looks good to those who want a good story, but on closer scrutiny, it doesn't add up. Too much missing time, too little details, and I've seen the way she reacts when someone touches her when she's not expecting it now"

Arn sighed sadly.

"What are you after? Do you feel you must discredit the poor lass? Because no one will support you if you try" he retorted, his anger growing with this insufferable demeanor she always projected.

"No...just trying to gauge what sort of man you are."

"This is about me?"

"Yes, I'm entrusting her to you and I wanted to make sure you would take the best care of her" Irileth continued, her usually harsh tone unexpectedly softening.

"Of course...why wouldn't I?"
"It's just that...I...well...Just treat her right"

"Do you wish to stop beating around the bush and speak your mind woman!" snapped Arn, tired of these games of implied pasts and secrets. Irileth's harsh tone returned.

"It would be good if she travelled WITH you. This city has not always treated her well..."

"You're still not speaking plainly" retorted Arn, but Irileth didn't answer. She simply turned and walked back inside Dragon's Reach, leaving Arn to ponder the mysteries surrounding his Housecarl.
Chapter Summary

Arn and his new Housecarl Lydia try to figure each other out while dealing with Arn's newfound fame.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arnsmyth awoke to a scream.

He jerked awake and sat up from the floor suddenly, smacking his forehead on a low hanging shelf sticking out from the wall.

"Argghhh" he gritted in pain, holding his head.

He heard the tell tale swish of a blade, followed by a thud into the floor coming from downstairs.

Grabbing his sword and new shield, he rolled to his feet and ran downstairs, wondering who'd be foolish enough to attack the new Thane of Whiterun in his own home.

He halted at the bottom of the stairs to see his housecarl, Lydia, standing in the middle of the room with sword and shield standing over two Skeever corpses.

She looked at them and visibly shuddered.

"HATE those things!" she exclaimed, turning to see Arn sigh in relief, lowering his weapons.

He saw her eyes widen at seeing him and he realized he was only wearing his cotton breeches, his muscular and much scarred bare chest very visible, though Arn didn't particularly care compared to the throbbing in his head.

Sitting down on the bottom step, he cradled his head with his hands and tried to talk to Lydia without grimacing.

"Do all Thanes get bestowed skeever infested empty houses like this one?"

"No, usually Thanes are not bestowed any lands. They must already own lands to become a Thane" said Lydia, averting her eyes and putting her weapon away.

"Well...it's a start..." Arn muttered, continuing to rub his head, which caused Lydia to then notice the large red mark on his forehead.

"My Thane, what happened?" she asked approaching him hurriedly.

"No...no, it's nothing. Just my forehead losing a battle with a shelf upstairs" he answered, waving her off as she drew near, intending to tend to him.

An awkward silence followed as he sat there rubbing his head clad only in his breeches and Lydia stood nearby in her full armor, waiting for him to give her orders.
“Did you...uh...see to getting those potions and other supplies I asked about last night?”

“Yes, my Thane, I've gotten them all prepared already this morning” she said with a nod.

“Then let's just get our stuff together and head out” he said, rising to his feet and heading back upstairs.

“But, my Thane, we haven't gotten any food and you haven't eaten any breakfa--err Lunch yet”

“We'll kill something on the way”

It took most of the remainder of the day to get far enough away from Whiterun to get the message through to a couple of overly persistent bards and sellswords that their services were not required and turned back to Whiterun.

Once Arn had reconnoitered in a circle to make sure no one else was following, he signaled Lydia to halt.

“There is still daylight left, my Thane. You don't need to stop on my account.”

“I'd rather not camp in the mountains until I have to. We'll make camp here.”

With all the craziness of the previous night and groups of overexcited people to see them off today, Arnsmyth hadn't had a lot of time to think about his housecarl and how he was supposed to treat her.

Part of his mind was still occupied with all the dragon things that had happened to him in the last few days and what that meant, and the other part of his mind kept his head on a swivel to watch for any threats and the odd bard or mercenary following at a distance.

Now, as they found suitable shelter and began setting up a small camp, his mind turned back to her as he watched her move about.

Of course, he was immediately struck by her beauty again as he observed her movements. She was clad in a heavy armor set that resembled a mesh of standard steel and imperial armors with a few alterations made over a skin and leather jerkin set underneath.

It was good protection, and the alterations she'd made to the torso must be to allow for her larger than normal bust as well as allow her more flexibility in the waist and shoulder.

She used sword and shield which was also good and seemed comfortable with it the lone time he'd seen her in stance after killing skeevers.

Still, if he was going to trudge into who knows where to get answers and fight anymore dragons, he needed to know exactly who was standing at his side and what she could do.

As she dropped an armful of firewood, she turned to see him regarding her with some intensity.

"Is there something wrong, my Thane? Did I do something incorrectly?"

"No--no not at all. I was just thinking"

"May I ask what?"

"Do all housecarls always act so servant-like around their Thanes?"

"I...do not know. If you wish me not to speak so much, I...can remain silent unless spoken to” she
said, obviously feeling hurt as she said it.

"Nonsense! I want your input. You are no servant. You're a housecarl. You're my housecarl. Speak whenever you wish. I don't like this meek Lydia. I've been wondering what happened to the fiery lass I met in the cave who called me 'a rutting piece of mudcrab sot' if I recall correctly"

Lydia blushed and looked away but Arn noticed the small smirk she allowed herself.

"My apologies, my tha--err, what do you wish me to call you?" she asked.

"My name, Arnsmyth, or Arn for short"

"I will, though if we are in the Jarl's court, it is still important that I refer to you by your title"

"Fair enough"

"May I ask you something personal, Arnsmyth?"

"Sure" he said, removing a sharpening stone from his bag and set to work sharpening their weapons.

"You're Nord by birth but seem unaware of a lot of our ways. You told me you were a veteran of the Great War but you don't look that old. How old are you and did you ever spend any time here in Skyrim before?"

"I was born here in the Hjaalmarch region. My mother died giving me life. My father was a smith but also a merchant and would travel on behalf of other smiths to arrange trade of material and weapons. So I got to travel around Skyrim some as a boy. When I was fourteen, my father took me with him to Cyrodiil to do trade there with the outbreak of the Great War. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time for a surprise Thalmor raid. That left me alone with nothing, but I hated the Thalmor. So I lied about my age and claimed to be sixteen and joined the Imperial Legion who were desperate for recruits at that time.

"I served in many battles, though not the famous ones you hear about for the Imperial City. I was with the men in the west under General Decianus, later discharged as an 'invalid'.....Oh, but we invalids put up a fight. If it weren't for us making Aranyella's forces think the army was still there, the famous Battle of the Red Ring would never have turned out the way it did" sighed Arn in disgust, sharpening his blade harder than he meant, remembering how bitter that time had been...how hard they had fought while others were the ones with the glory.

He pushed the unpleasant memories away to look up and find Lydia sitting comfortably against a tree only a few feet from him regarding him with a look of both admiration and concern.

"So that makes you what...forty one?" she puzzled out loud.

"Yes...forty one" Arn sighed " some reason you wanted to know the exact age?"

"No...I was just...curious. You certainly don't look it. Most of the guards thought for sure you were only in your thirties, but that would make you a child at the time of the Great War."

"Yes, well part of it is not letting my hair or beard grow out, or then I'd look much older"

"Ah but Nord women like beards on their men" she replied, that smirk creeping back onto her face.

"Yes, well, I doubt much what some sot does with his beard when women see what I can do with my sword" he smirked back.
It took him only a second to realize that didn't come out like he meant it to.

"I mean...uh...if I can slay a dragon without a beard, then a woman--wait, I mean, that is, me without the beard, not the dragon--" he stuttered out, failing to find some way of smoothing it over without making it worse.

Her laughter cut him off and he just threw up his hands and had to laugh at himself a bit too.

"Well, now that I've sufficiently made a fool of myself, what's your story?" asked Arn, slightly worried he'd shared too much about himself as well as wondering if she might share anything that would shed any light on the mysteries Irileth had implied in Whiterun.

She stopped laughing for a moment, brushing a braid of black hair back behind her ear as she looked off in the distance at the setting sun.

"Well, it's certainly not as interesting as yours" she started "I never knew my parents. From what I was told, I was an orphan left on the steps of Kynareth's temple. I was raised by the temple priests and priestesses there until I was about eight. Then I was brought into Balgruuf's service when he became Jarl as a maid in the dragon reach kitchen until I was entering maidenhood. I thought of joining the Companions, but they said I was too young then, so I trained and joined the city guard instead. I've been doing that for ten years now, using any opportunity I can to improve my skills and maybe join the Companions later, though now that's all changed..." she finished with uncertainty.

"So that would make you...at least twenty six...?" he mocked in the same tone she'd asked the same question to him earlier.

"Twenty eight." she replied, smiling a little sheepishly.

"So...no family...no husband?" Arn continued the train of thought out loud.

"No...no husband" she replied, a little sadly.

"None right now or none ever?"

"None ever"

"Surely you've had proposals"

"No...not one"

"WHAT?!" Arn reacted more surprised than he meant to before asking more than he meant to.

"Come now, surely a beautiful young lass like you has men hanging by every door to open it for her, especially during your maidenhood"

"Not really...there were one or two, but the Jarl said they proved unworthy of me and no one else really has tried....I thought...at one time...that the Jarl wanted me for himself, but then he never did anything more--"

"What do you mean by anything more?" Arn interrupted.

Lydia blushed redder than he had seen at any time up until now, even more than the time she'd realized he'd seen her naked.

"During the waning years of my maidenhood, I think I was seventeen at the time, there was an incident between the Jarl and I that made me think he had interest in me"
"Oh? What happened?"

She fixed him with a sharp gaze.

"If I tell you, you MUST promise not to tell another soul. He is still the Jarl and has been my guardian since I was a little girl."

Now Arn thought he was getting somewhere.

"Consider your story safe with me"

"One time, I was cleaning up after a banquet. The Jarl had given himself to an awful lot of mead and was asleep at the table. Everyone else had retired to other parts of the hall. Irileth was escorting guests somewhere else in Balgruuf's stead."

Arn had a bad feeling where this was going.

"As I was cleaning, the Jarl stirred and ordered me to come over. As I did so, he told me to turn around and sit on his lap. So I did, then he began to...touch me...underneath my skirts and my bodice...in such a way it became obvious what he wanted"

"What did you do?"

"I let him. He's the Jarl and after all he'd done for me growing up, who was I to deny him a repayment on all he'd done for me"

"You mean to say you let him take your maidenhood in the banquet hall?"

She smirked a bit at his conclusion.

"No, silly. It didn't go that far. Wouldn't that make a saucy tale....No, as anyone who'd been around the palace would know, the Jarl is never alone for long before Irileth is back to faithfully watch over him, even if it's just to take a piss."

"When she returned to see the Jarl with one hand in my bodice and the other underneath my dress, by the nine, I've never seen her so furious. She was screaming, though mostly at the Jarl, to my surprise......After that, the Jarl hardly ever spoke to me again and I think Irileth made sure I got sent on assignments that took me away from him."

"Did you never challenge the Jarl during your maidenhood years why more men were not coming forward at your most eligible time?"

"Not really... It's difficult. You begin your maidenhood and you're just becoming a woman. There's still so much you don't know about everything and you just assume everything will work out later. It just...didn't...for me."

Arnsmyth didn't buy it completely. Irileth had said far too much for him to believe the tale Lydia was telling him was all there was to it, but she likely didn't appear aware of whatever things Irileth was implying or was too ashamed to say, though he didn't sense any deceit in her demeanor.

As he pondered the possibilities that might explain all the strange behavior, he was vaguely aware Lydia had asked him something.

"I'm sorry what?" he muttered.

"I was wondering if you are or ever were married?" she asked, more calm now that the subject of the
conversation was him again.

Immediately, the memories of Desarra filled his mind, this time more vividly than in the last few days. From meeting her in the guild, to working alongside each other, to sharing drinks after missions, to sneaking away from the others to make love in the fields and the woods, or even the cleared areas of the ruins...then the betrayal....the clearing...the hideous altar...her body, naked and cold, impaled on some disgusting spike.

Arn felt the anger and loss welling up raw in him again and felt like weeping anew at the memory, gritting his teeth while staring purposefully into the glow of the sunset, hoping Lydia hadn't noticed too much, but it was far too obvious.

"You...lost her....didn't you?" she stated more than asked slowly, her tone softening and countenance filling with concern as he turned to look at her.

"I didn't lose her, she was taken from me" he hissed through gritted teeth.

A powerful silence fell between them for a minute or two before Lydia spoke up again.

"I am sorry...I...did not know. I didn't mean to bring up such a painful memory. I will not bring it up again."

"It's not your fault. She was not my wife, but my beloved nonetheless.....Her name was Desarra and she was a Breton beauty"

Arn swallowed down the lump in his throat, wondering in some part of his mind why he was continuing to talk about it to Lydia.

"She was small of frame with blonde hair and loved fighting with two shortswords" he grinned at the memories of watching her wade into a big melee with her two little swords.

"We met in the Starblades fighter's guild....at first we didn't like each other. Then as time went on, we worked together more and more until it became obvious we were each taking assignments solely based on if the other would be there. Then it was just a matter of time before we were sneaking off from the campsites to rut each other senseless" Arn chuckled, his hand thumbing the hilt of his longsword as though remembering what her skin would've felt like as he caressed it.

"Then a year ago, our guild was betrayed. We were hired by a large group to clear out an a ruin of whatever haunted inside, but it was a setup. The real prey was us. The group that hired us wanted sacrifices for an unholy ritual. So they gave us poisoned provisions and sent us to the ruin."

"I was separate from the others getting some arms and other supplies from a nearby city, when they sprung the trap. Because of the poison, my friends and brothers didn't have the strength to fight. They fell by treachery, and when I returned, found only bodies and desecration of all that had been my friends...and my beloved Desarra...I found impaled on some hideous altar in the ruins" Arn realized he'd balled his hands into fists, shaking in rage, a lone tear streaked down his cheek.

He felt a soft hand on his arm, stilling his shaking as he turned to look at Lydia, who was trying to give him a smile and a reassuring look, her feet pulled up underneath her and her eyes watering with emotion.

"But you avenged her..didn't you?" she whispered, trying to hold back emotion.

"How do you know?" Arn replied, more cynically than he meant to, thinking of the one culprit he hadn't been able to get to.
Lydia chuckled a little at that.

"Come on. I've only known you what, three days? and in that time you stormed a Bandit stronghold by yourself because of what they did to me. I can only imagine what you did to those who betrayed her."

"Yes...they wanted sacrifices to Molag Bal. I tracked down every one I could find...one by one I got them and made sure they knew what a real bloodbath was.....all except one. He turned out to be the Magister's son and I couldn't touch him without proof. It didn't matter to me...I went after him anyway, but accidentally killed the Magister in the process....I immediately became a wanted fugitive....scrambling and hiding for months until I decided to come back to Skyrim for the time being until things blew over.....now all this has happened" Arn sighed, waving his hands around.

"I'm sure you'll get him eventually, or maybe he'll be betrayed by someone else...that might be fitting for his crime" smiled Lydia reassuringly, rising to start building the fire.

After a few minutes of silence, Arn turned his mind to the present, putting the past back out of his mind.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow, we have a lot to go over"

"Okay, wake me at mid-watch so you can get some rest"

"No....I won't be getting any sleep tonight" was the abrupt reply from Arn Smyth.

As Lydia curled up under her blankets, and turned away from him, momentarily bewitching him with the curves of her bust and hips, Arn wondered just what possessed him to share so much with her and so soon.

They'd only been gone from Whiterun one day. Was something wrong with him or was she affecting him more than he wanted to admit, or both maybe?

Chapter End Notes

I hope people understand the liberties I take with some of the characters in the story. Most characters in the game are blank slates, so it's easy to create a character personality based on a template, but for others, I felt their behavior in game didn't make enough sense, so I've tweaked some characters to what I felt both makes sense in general and fits the narrative I'm telling. Additionally, I've tweaked the timeline of the Great War to fit the ages for several characters. I will also be avoiding spending a lot of time on things the game deals with at length, both conversations and events. Scripting out a convo that's in the game is kind of redundant, so I prefer to spend time flushing out characters, epic fight sequences, and drama.
Chapter Summary

Arn tests Lydia's combat skills as they continue to get to know each other. Their fledgling partnership is put to the test much quicker than they anticipated.

An arrow whizzed past Arnsmyth Bulgoar's head in the midday sun.

"You missed again" he sighed, turning to look through his helmet slits at where Lydia stood with her bow, some thirty paces away, knocking another arrow to take aim at the gourd Arnsmyth held in his hand.

"Maybe it would help if you weren't holding it" she muttered, taking aim.

"I could be locked in mortal combat with one or more foes. You should be able to pinpoint a target from that distance with me tangled up with it...Besides, that's why I'm wearing all my armor pieces."

Lydia didn't answer, just simply huffed slightly as she let loose the arrow which flew straight and impacted through the gourd, sending it flying out of Arn's hand!

"So that's your secret ability? If you huff angrily when you shoot, you're guaranteed a hit?" teased Arn.

"Well, it's only the second time in two days of trying that I've gotten it...so...if that's what it takes!" she exclaimed, happily skipping up to inspect what was left of the gourd.

"So...if you want me to be as good as you are with a bow, how come you're not giving out any pointers?" asked Lydia cautiously as they began retrieving arrows from the bushes.

"It's not ALL about how good you are as an archer. You can learn a lot about someone by just watching them learn to shoot a bow. Don't tell them anything. Don't show them anything. Just watch. Are they patient, adaptable, aggressive, confident or not? and how much? Do they take a strategic or tactical approach to anything or not?" replied Arn, returning the handful of arrows still salvageable he'd gathered to her.

"So...you've been grading me?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Eh...more like getting the measure of you...don't know that I like the term 'grading'" he mused, removing his helmet and stroking the growing stubble on his chin.

"And? Do I 'measure' up?" she asked with some concern in her voice, cocking her hip to one side and resting her Imperial Longbow at her side.

"Would you be angry if I said you had shortcomings?"

She seemed a little hurt by it, but perked her head up, that spark of fire returning to her personality.

"Then it would be good to know what they are. So I can fix them."
"Well, you trust me. That's a good start. You are also fairly patient as long as you perceive a point to what you're doing and you are willing to employ different strategies to accomplish your goals. Your aggression is a problem though" Arn said, sitting on a log and motioning her to sit next to him.

"I thought warriors needed to be aggressive?" Lydia replied ponderingly as she sat next to him.

"For sure, but only at the right times. Over-committing to anything is just as bad as not committing anything at all. I would swear two thirds of all killing blows I've ever made with my sword have come right after an opponent overcommitted on a strike. You can't win fights with pure zeal, or you make mistakes. If you make mistakes, you die and the people relying on you die."

"I see....so...what would you advise to channel my aggression at the right times?" she asked, brushing one of her braids back out of her face.

"Part of it is thinking and reacting more strategically. If you train yourself to take all options into consideration, the right one will become more apparent. The other part is just getting the combat experience and getting a feel for the right time in a fight to be more aggressive. It's not something I can teach."

"Right...so...is that why you've kept me from accompanying you into those grottos you went into yesterday?"

"That not so much as the fact you need to learn to be more stealthy"

Lydia raised her eyebrows a bit incredulously.

"But...I wear heavy armor"

"So do I"

She looked puzzlingly at him for a second, causing him to marvel at how cute she looked with her features scrunched up with brows furrowed in contemplation before Arn shook himself back to what he was going to say.

"It's a common misconception. Just because it's more difficult, doesn't mean it can't be done. I'll teach you what I can about that as well, but that will take more time."

She looked down at her armor for a moment before shrugging.

"I guess as a city guard, I never really had much reason to sneak anywhere before"

"Rule number 4: ALWAYS sneak, unless you can't anymore" Arn replied proudly.

"A Rule? Where are these from?" she asked, turning to grin at him.

"Oh...that's a holdover from the Starblades Guild. We had a...list of rules of sorts. They pretty much all applied to fighting or things to do with it. They're good things for any warrior to remember"

"How many were there?"

"I think there were 37, but I don't remember the newer ones they put in place"

"What were the others?"

"Oh, I think I've done enough talking for one day. I'll teach you them all in time. We need to get moving or we won't make much progress. I was hoping to be in Ivarstead by tomorrow night."
"Well, if you stopped investigating every unusual looking cave and ruin along the way, we'd probably make better time" she teased, with a smirk.

Arn knew she was completely fine with investigating whatever they came across. She just wanted to go in with him, which up until now, he hadn't allowed.

"We'll need the money we get from whatever we find. I don't expect people to help me just because of some title no one knows anything about, nor will Breezehome furnish itself...and don't worry, you'll be trudging in behind me soon enough" He smiled reassuringly to her as they gathered their gear and packs to depart.

They made good time to finish out the day, setting up camp on the bend of a hillside just off the road. By his reckoning, Arn figured they were within half a day's journey to Ivarstead.

"So...what was it like growing up in Kynareth's temple?" Arn asked after they'd eaten and sat around the fire, idly gazing at the stars, though Arn kept finding himself stealing glances at Lydia, lounging on her side with one hand supporting her head and the other tracing little circles in the dirt.

"It was surprisingly interesting. A lot of people think living in a temple like Kynareth's would be boring, but I learned a lot from the priestesses there, mostly about people. People were always coming in, looking for help with all kinds of things, even if it was something Kynareth had nothing to do with."

"What made you want to become a warrior, if you grew up around priestesses?"

"I don't know...I guess...maybe it had something to do with how many people came in looking for healing after being attacked or beseeching Kynareth on behalf of a missing family member...so many things that the priestesses could do nothing to stop, only react to. I guess...I thought I could do more to change things as a warrior than anything else" she finished, still looking up at the stars.

"How did Skyrim get this bad?" asked Arn, unintentionally staring at Lydia.

She turned and gazed curiously at him.

"What do you mean? get this bad?"

"When I was growing up, there were no dragons, no rebellion, bandits didn't own the roads, there weren't beasts encroaching on the outskirts of the cities themselves, and you didn't get set upon by rogue mages in broad daylight"

"Ever since the Great War, from what everyone tells me, even you now, Skyrim hasn't been the same"

"So it would seem..." Arn sighed sadly.

"Well this is a first" Lydia said, sitting up and crossing her legs underneath her "Looks like this time, I'm giving you the history lesson"

Over the next hour, Lydia related to him what she could about the incidents that had led the land to where it was at now, from the Markarth incident to the slaying of the High King Torygg and the Stormcloak rebellion.

"So they still haven't elected another High King?" asked Arn incredulously.

"No, the land is too divided. Each side wants victory before consolidating power to one person"
"And now there are dragons in the mix..." pondered Arnsmyth aloud.

"Yes, but now there's also a dragonborn to be reckoned with" Lydia smiled reassuringly at him before laying back down and enveloping herself in her fur blanket to sleep.

At least one of us seems to think that's comforting, thought Arn, moving up higher on the hill to get a better position to watch for any threats.

He had been uncertain when he'd left Whiterun who this woman was and if he really was better off with her around or not. Now as he looked down at her sleeping form, he had to admit that the prospect of travelling without her saddened him so much he didn't want to consider it.

He was still uncertain what he was to do. After all the things Lydia had said about Skyrim that evening, it seemed worse than even his first impressions had been.

He stirred himself from these depressing thoughts to begin his usual routine of placing rune trap spells in any strategic spot an enemy might use to approach the camp.

As he moved quietly around, he lamented he hadn't learned more of Illusion magic since this sound trap rune had come in handy countless times.

After an hour, they were all set and he returned to the campfire to the sound of moans.

It had started again. Lydia lay curled up in a fetal position in her bedroll, moaning and her head beginning to thrash back and forth. Arn sighed sadly and sat next to her, taking one of her hands in his and cradling her head in his lap.

Slowly, the thrashing stopped along with the moans, and gradually her breathing calmed as she curled closer to him.

It had been the same every night since they'd left Whiterun, the same as the first time when she'd been recovering from the Bandits. She must be reliving the same nightmares night after night, much like Arn did with Desarra's death.

Though he had to admit that he hadn't had any nightmares at all since leaving Whiterun.

He looked down at her as she slept calmly, raven shoulder length hair tousled and fair cheeks tinted with a shade of red, her posture unclenching slightly from the fetal position she had been in and Arn's heart leapt into his throat as he saw below her arm, the cotton undershirt she wore had the same hole cut as her armor, so when she had moved her arm up to cling to his leg unknowingly, he caught sight of the pale side of her breast through the armpit area.

He closed his eyes and swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to force his loins to stop hardening up.

Just...treat her right...this city hasn't always treated her well.

The words of Irileth came back to him. Yes, indeed, treat her right...because you didn't. Guilt, that's what this was about. Guilt over keeping her from proper attentions during her maidenhood, guilt over drunkenly taking advantage of her, guilt over sending her on a far off assignment that got her captured and raped repeatedly.

The solution? Send her off with the dragonborn. Of course, show your support for the new warrior and get rid of a nuisance at the same time.
Shrewd, Balgruuf, very shrewd. Then again, maybe it was more Irileth's doing. Arn wondered just how much the Jarl actually decided or if Irileth guided him to whatever decision she thought best and he just went along with it.

Just...treat her right...

Arn looked down at her again and realized he had been stroking her hair carefully and softly the whole time.

The poor lass had been the Jarl's puppet from the time she was a maiden. She'd been ignored or mistreated in Whiterun, captured, ravaged, and abused by bandits, and now sent with some older man she didn't know as a housecarl to who knows where to do who knows what.

This would not stand.

She wanted to be a warrior. She wanted to save people. By the Nine, Arnsmyth swore he would make it so. She would be the best warrior he could possibly make her, and he would not treat her the same as other thanes or jarls. He would not take advantage of her, no matter how beautiful she was or how willing she might be to rut with him.

Arn looked around for a moment and reckoned the mid-watch hour was approaching.

Carefully, as he did every evening, he extricated himself from her grasp, arranged her bedroll in such a way that she did not suspect anything unusual and moved back across to the other side of the campfire.

Then, after rechecking the perimeter briefly, he returned and woke her up to take watch.

Despite being a sound sleeper, she was active quickly once she woke, allowing Arn to slide into his bedroll for some needed shut eye.

As his consciousness faded into sleep, he glimpsed her outline as she moved underneath a large tree branch on the hill to obscure her to any approaching threats.

Yes, she was coming along just fine.

It seemed like he had just shut his eyes, when he felt himself violently shaken awake, Lydia whispering in his ear: "Dragon in the sky!"

Arn roused himself quickly, grabbing his weapons, glancing up this way and that in the early morning light, but not seeing any sign of a dragon.

A little surprised, he turned to look enquiringly at Lydia, who just brought a finger to her lips to motion silence and then another hand to cup her ear for him to listen, which he did.

For a minute, he heard and saw nothing, then he heard it...that same whoosh of wind from large wings he'd heard at the western watchtower, and at the same moment a slight shadow passed through the woods as Arnsmyth followed its trajectory back to its source.

A dragon flew low and relatively silently over the woods just east of them, scanning for something. It was a little obscured as the sun had not yet risen, but it was still obviously a dragon in flight and very close.

Even as Arn considered what to do, the dragon seemed to turn its head and look right where they crouched against the hill in the woods.
Surely it couldn't see them from that range...with the tree cover...with the dim light of morning...

Arnsmyth’s heart fell as he both felt and heard the roar of the dragon as it turned in flight, heading straight toward them.

It closed with astonishing speed as Arn armed his bow, taking aim.

"Stay separate, take its wings out first, use the terrain to our advantage, and don't go at it head on” he admonished Lydia, who scrambled away to his left, bow in hand as the Dragon closed to near bow range.

"Damn you beasts” muttered Arn as he let loose with his first arrow just as the dragon pulled up mid air to belch it’s flame at them..or so Arn thought.

Instead of flame though, a spray of frosty ice came forth from the dragon’s maw, forcing Arn to leap aside to his right, sprinting amongst the trees as the frost breath followed him.

Lydia must have been hitting it with arrows as well, because it abruptly stopped its pursuit of him and turned opposite him to belch more frost.

Arn took the opportunity to get into a good defensive position amongst some trees for when it turned again, knocking and firing arrows as fast as he could. It only took a moment for it to return its focus back to Arn, flying toward his spot in the woods, spraying frost down at him as it swooped overhead, the wind from its wings beating down on the trees, raining the icicles loose the freeze breath had caused.

Arn felt lethargic from the amount of cold in the area, but he forced his body into a sprint as the dragon came back around, hoping to make the next major clump of trees before it arrived, but he miscalculated.

Either the cold was making him slower or the dragon was faster than he'd anticipated. He didn't even make it halfway there before the dragon was nearly on him, swooping in nearly sideways and landing feet first against a clump of trees, riding them to the ground in a loud crash and swinging a winged claw at Arn, who dived behind a fallen log to avoid being eviscerated.

It’s claw grabbed the log Arn was behind, ripping it up and tossing it like a toy, striking again at Arn, who'd gotten his shield and sword in place, blocking the blow and countering at the retreating wing.

The dragon growled in pain at the slice Arn made and lunged with it's head.

Even though Arn blocked the bite, the force of the strike knocked him off his feet, sending him flying ten feet backward before sliding across the uneven ground, thumping to a stop against an uprooted tree.

The dragon lumbered quickly forward, intending to finish him off in its jaws.

Arn had dropped his sword mid-flight and dazedly struggled to get up, even as the dragon closed on him.

Then Arn did something he himself didn't expect.

He didn't know where it came from, but it just seemed right at the moment and he yelled the dragon word he'd learned in Bleak Falls Barrow.

"FUS!"
He felt a wave of force erupt from him, impacting the advancing jaws and causing the dragon to literally stumble on its face.

Just then, Lydia arrived on the opposite side of the clearing, charging the dragon's flank.

Arn charged forward with shield in one hand, diving low underneath the dragon's rising jaws. He slid a short way on his chest, reached his sword, grabbed it, rolled back over and stabbed upward into the dragon's throat.

The dragon meant to bellow, but instead made a cackling loud gurgle as Arn stabbed repeatedly, rolling one way then the other as the dragon stumbled around.

It stumbled away from them and tried to fly but their arrows and Lydia's attack from behind on its right wing made it unable to do so.

So it just hopped up, only to come down, crashing into a broken tree, the jagged stump impaling the other wing. It gurgled again and tore its wing loose, rumbling toward them enraged.

Arn recalled the ground shook with the pounding of its claws. He and Lydia split and sprinted opposite directions so the dragon would have to pick one to go after.

Losing a second or two deciding which way to turn, the dragon turned and lunged after Arn, who turned and delivered another "FUS!" into its face again, knocking it off its feet again.

Instantly, Lydia had moved in again to attack it's legs from the flank, ducking under a slam from its tail.

This time Arn needed to finish this.

Running in, he ducked as the dragon lifted its head to lunge at him and came up with a powerful slice right behind the bone plates on the head, just like where he'd stabbed the first dragon at the western watchtower.

It must have done the trick because the dragon thrashed around more angrily and out of control, lashing out seemingly randomly at them, not hitting anything and falling to its belly in the process.

Arn could hear the tell tale sound of blade cutting flesh from its flank where Lydia was and knew she must have been getting some serious wounds on it as well. He got one more good slice on its neck before it began stilling, thrashing its death throes for several minutes as Arn and Lydia backed off, watching carefully as it stilled with its last breath Arn heard that same word or sound he'd heard from the other dragon.

"dovahkiin...."

It lay there still for a full minute before Arn charged in and drove his longsword through the top of its skull, surprising Lydia, who stared at him surprisingly for a moment.

"Rule number one= ALWAYS MAKE SURE THEY'RE DEAD!" He exclaimed too excitedly, as he pried the sword back out with great effort.

Lydia beamed from ear to ear, skipping toward him happily and Arn realized he was grinning ear to ear as well, hopping up and down with excitement.

"We killed a dragon!" she shouted.
"Yes! Yes! Whooooo!" shouted Arn as he met her halfway and they sort of over excitedly leaped into each other's arms, half hugging, half holding arms as they leaped up and down with excitement.

After a short while of celebrating, Arn realized they were both laughing giddily and running around the dragon carcass like mad fools. He also realized both he and Lydia had gotten into quite a bit of the dragon's frost breath, as his teeth were beginning to chatter and he could see Lydia's hair had icicles in it.

As they began to tire, Arn collapsed and lay down on his back, staring up into the sky as the sun rose over the peaks of the mountains to signal sunrise.

In a few moments he felt Lydia collapse next to him.

"Whew!" she said through shaking teeth as well.

"Y-you-you're c-c-cold" said Arn, sitting up.

"S-s-s-o-o ar-are y-you" replied Lydia, still beaming happily at him while shaking.

"W-w-we s-sh-should b-b-build a f-f-fire" Arn shuddered, getting to his feet and eyeing the broken trees all around the small clearing they were in.

"M-m-maybe h-h-he c-c-can h-h-help" said Lydia, hugging herself with one arm and pointing with the other past Arn.

Arnsmyth turned to see they had moved parallel to the road and the clearing they were in was adjoining to it. So anyone on the road could see, and sure enough, there was a horse-led cart standing there with a man sitting with his mouth literally hanging open, staring at them and the dead dragon.

Arn later would swear the horse's mouth was hanging open in awe as well, but then again he was rather excited and...may have imagined it or maybe the horse in question just liked hanging its mouth open.

As Arn started toward the man, he tried to shout to him, but felt something seize hold of him. Too late he realized the rushing noise of wind had been building but he'd been too chatteringly cold to realize it and a shimmering golden light enveloped him, holding him in place as he felt the images and words flashing through his mind so quickly, he nearly passed out.

When he was coherent again, he was on his hands and knees in the field and heard voices hazily from a distance.

Then Lydia was beside him, with that cute frown of worry on her face as she tried to help him back to his feet.

Then he began making sense of what she was saying.

"Arn! Are you alright! What was that?"

"That was...me..absorbing its soul..." he stated, holding his head with one hand as though he had a headache.

"You can just do that anytime?"

"No...apparently it just sort of happens after I kill a dragon..I guess" he replied, turning to see she was still shivering with icicles in her hair, but Arn didn't feel cold at all anymore....maybe another
side effect of the soul absorption...he didn't know for sure.

Just then the man from the cart on the road reached them, having run to them while Arn was out of it.

"I can't believe you just did that! Are you alright?!" he exclaimed.

"We need a fire or somewhere warm" said Arn glancing at Lydia shivering again.

"If you're headed to Ivarstead, you can sit in the back of my cart...besides no one will believe my story if you're not there. Not every day you get to meet dragonslayers!" he patted Arn's shoulder as they walked toward the wagon.

Arn turned and took one last glimpse at the dragon's skeleton and something caught his eye amongst the bones.

"I'll be right back!" he yelled, running back to the belly of the carcass.

When he arrived, he was surprised to see a shiny black sword. Can't be, he thought, but on closer inspection, it had to be...Ebony, a class of weapon far beyond the steel he and Lydia both were using.

Grabbing it, he ran back even more happily to Lydia and what must be a merchant based on all the wares in the back of his wagon as Arn directed him back to their camp so they could get their things.

As they sat rocking in the back of the wagon, Lydia covered in furs while Arn organized their things, she sat up, beginning to get warm enough to not shiver uncontrollably.

"So...is this how it's going to be? You run around like a mad fool dodging things while I attack their arses?" she smirked.

"Worked out pretty well this time" he grinned back.

"So if I can help you take down a dragon, do you think I measure up enough to go against whatever you find in those caves and grottos?" she said with a raised eyebrow, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"You measure up just fine" he said with an approving nod.
Chapter Summary

Arn and Lydia travel up the frozen slopes of the Throat of the World, but the Greybeards aren't what either of them expect...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Armsmyth stared through wincing eyes at the stiff corpse, frozen solid in a fetal position just off the steps.

"Sh-sh-should we do anything for him?" came the shivering question from Lydia behind him.

Arn shook his head.

"N-n-not if we d-d-don't wanna j-j-join him"

He grabbed her arm and helped her through a large snow drift across the top of a flight of stairs as the wind began picking up again, blowing snow across the side of the mountain and obscuring their vision.

Arn understood why they called it the path of seven thousands steps now. It felt like they had been climbing for a week, though in reality it had only been two days since they left Ivarstead.

The lower part of the mountain was just like any other. They encountered a wolf or two and some pilgrims meditating, but as they got higher the temperature steadily declined.

Arn had remembered his father's words that High Hrothgar was the coldest place in Skyrim and if he ever travelled there, to always have extra coating and carry firewood from below because up top, there was none to be had.

Lydia hadn't been too thrilled about leaving some of their provisions behind to shoulder a bundle of firewood, but he had insisted and now it would pay off as he spotted a crack in the rocks in the mountain and surmised it would be a good place to spend the evening.

Spending some time to clear snow out with his shield and pack it into a barricade to keep the ever increasing snowstorm out, they set up the wood and after awhile got the fire going.

Even with the fire though, they were both shivering cold.

Arn set the sound trap at the opening but figured it was pointless since nothing could survive up here for long and certainly wouldn't be prowling in this weather.

It was so cold, neither he nor Lydia felt like talking, so after a long silence and scraping out what little rations they had left, Arn breached the subject they were probably both thinking about but weren't saying anything.

"W-w-we s-s-should p-p-p-rob-bably sh-sh-share a b-b-bed-roll to k-k-k-eep w-w-warm"
Lydia didn't say anything, she just nodded her head "yes" as she shivered while hugging herself with her arms.

Once they had removed all metal armor pieces and arranged the bedrolls as close to the fire as possible, Arn motioned Lydia in and slid in before pulling the patchwork of skins and blankets over them.

At first, they awkwardly lay next to each other, staring up at the rock above them, each shivering slightly, but getting warmer as the extra blankets along with Arn's trusty enchanted Elk pelt did their job.

For some reason, Arn had an uncontrollable urge to put his arm around her. So much so, that twice he twitched his arm up and down as he jerked it back into place.

Either the awkwardness or the cold kept them awake. After about an hour, Lydia turned on her side and looked him in the eye.

"If y-y-you w-w-want, we can m-m-make love t-t-to stay w-w-warm"

"What?!!" said Arn, almost jumping out of the bedroll in surprise.

"Don't b-b-be s-s-so s-s-surprised...a l-l-lot of Th-th-thanes r-r-rut w-w-with th-th-their h-housecarls"

"N-n-no, I-I-I...uh" stuttered Arn, his right arm reaching for Lydia before pulling it back.

"W-w-why n-n-n-o...you've a-a-already s-s-s-seen m-m-m-me n-n-n-naked b-b-before...it's-s-s n-n-not a b-b-big d-d-deal...I'm h-h-here t-t-to s-s-serve h-h-however I c-c-can"

Arn remembered the oath he'd sworn about not taking advantage of her no matter his position.

"P-p-pull the b-b-blankets o-o-over our h-h-heads" was all he said, not wanting to refuse her but also not wanting to have to explain why he was refusing. So he just avoided answering.

Covering their heads seemed to help immensely, though he could feel Lydia still looking at him in the darkness, her soft, warm breaths hitting him on his chin and making him even more aware of how easy it would be to just reach out with his hand....

No...he couldn't do that to her.

You're almost old enough to be her father. Get a hold of yourself, fool. How much different would you be from Balgruuf?

But even as he thought about it, Lydia questioned him again, though neither of them were shivering anymore.

"Do you want to make love to stay warm? It's not a difficult question..."

He could tell by her tone she was annoyed with him. Why did he feel like the bad guy here? Why did she have to ask him that now?

So Arnsmyth did the only thing he could to save himself from either his own scorn or hers...he pretended to be asleep.

He made slow deliberate breaths with as relaxed a posture as possible, eventually even snoring a little for good measure.
After a few minutes of this, he felt her breath on his chin, her face must have been only an inch or two from him and he could feel her body heat, her hand brushing over his arm and her knee touching his.

He kept his act up however and after a moment, she huffed her signature angry huff, turned away from him, not subtle in her movements at all, and rolled onto her back again and away from him.

Arn realized his adrenaline was pumping despite his controlled fake breathing and his heart rate was escalating. Had it given him away?

Regardless, she said no more and after awhile, he could hear the faint steady breaths denoting sleep from her...or maybe she was faking too?

Damn it. Enough games, he thought, and purposed to go to sleep regardless. Once the warmth set in and the adrenaline of the moment passed, Arn was finally able to reach that blissful sleep he'd been faking for going on an hour.

Amsmyth woke, feeling a refreshing hot warmth that seemed to permeate his body unlike any blanket and basked in it for a moment before becoming more aware of his circumstances.

Coldest place in Skyrim....my arse. He could stand sleeping in to this warmth, then he realized the warmth was coming from someone...else.

As he awoke more fully, he realized his body was completely entwined with Lydia's!

Somehow, during the night, their bodies had migrated across the narrow space and subconsciously gripped each other like lovers, she with her arms around his chest and a leg thrown over his thigh, he with his arms gripping her upper body to his chest with his chin on the top of her head.

It was made worse by the fact that both of them were in their thin cotton undershirts and breeches.

Arn realized with horror that his cock was rock hard through his breeches, poking against the skin where her shirt had ridden up her hip, and he could feel the firm softness of her large breasts pushing warmly against the muscles of his chest through both their shirts disturbed only by the prick of each of her nipples which seemed to be bigger than what he remembered.

Very slowly, he disentangled himself from her and after getting his loins under control, ventured a peak out of the blankets, the blast of cold air making him instantly regret it.

Lydia instantly awoke with a moan and huddled further down to escape the cold.

"Awake sleepy maiden, you really need no beauty sleep" he smirked

"You mad fool! Where did that come from?!"

"What..." she muttered groggily

"Uh--we should..um...get going" he replied shakily, though not from cold.

She groaned before snatching the covers away from him as he got out to fetch their armor.

Once they'd suited up, packed up and headed out, they were stunned to round the first bend and run smack into the foreboding stony front of High Hrothgar.
Arsnmyth groaned.

"Damn it....thirty more feet and we would've seen it"

"So I spent part of the night offering myself to you so we could stay warm and the whole time, the entrance was a mere hundred feet from us!" cried Lydia in annoyance, her shivering beginning to return.

"And imagine how you'd feel now if I'd given in to your entreaties?" asked Arn, feeling a little better about turning her down.

"ENTREATIES?!" she shouted back "Did it SEEM like I was throwing myself at you? Did it SEEM like I was begging you? NO!!"

Arn began to realize the gravity of his mistake in his choice of words as her volume and intensity increased as she advanced on him, poking in the chest with her index finger.

"WHAT DO YOU TAKE ME FOR? SOME TAVERN WENCH..EAGER FOR A GOOD RUTTING? SOME HUSSY WHO'LL THROW HERSELF AT YOU WITH YOUR FANCY TITLE? WAIT--entreaties? so......you WERE AWARE THE WHOLE TIME?"

"Now..now Lydia, please don't--"

"BE WHAT? ANGRY? Why wouldn't I be? All I did was offer to help keep us warm the only way I thought was left and as a housecarl it wouldn't be unusual and instead of even giving me a rutting answer, all I get out of you is pretend games! Aarrgh!" she growled, exasperatedly throwing her hands in the air.

"Lydia, you have to let me explain--I--"

"DRAGONBORN!" echoed a thundering voice across the snow covered steps.

"What?!" both he and Lydia cried in unison as they turned to realize that five robed men in grey cloaks, each with long beards, had emerged from the fortress at some point and stood there watching them.

"Uh...greetings. I think you, uh, sent for me?" asked Arn tentatively, hoping the red flush of embarrassment he felt didn't show on his face.

"Come inside. We have much to discuss. However, she...may not. Women are not allowed at High Hrothgar" spoke the one in the middle.

"Um...I understand she won't be allowed to discuss your...teachings..but she WILL be staying indoors. I'm not sending her back down after getting here" replied Arn, surprised the greybeards would order something so nonsensical.

The first one seemed about to say something before another whispered something to him. Then another chimed in before they seemed to come to some sort of agreement.

"Fine, but she must remain in seclusion in the guest room. You must make yourself wholly devoted to the Way of the Voice while you are here. Under no circumstances will there be any....relations" he finished with disdain, eyeing Arn scornfully.

Before Arn could say anything, Lydia pounced.
"Oh, you won't have to worry about that. He's not interested in women. These" she said, jiggling breastplate and breasts underneath "are a complete turnoff to him"

At the rather provocative gesture, one of the greybeards nearly shrieked and turned away with a gasp, covering his eyes. Several of the others fixed them both with stern looks and the first one raised his eyebrow in question at Arn.

"That's not-I--just...can we discuss this inside?"

Thankfully, they nodded and Arnsmyth's strange stay at the Greybeards had begun.

Once they were inside and Lydia had been sent to the guest room, thankfully, the Greybeards seemed to forget all about her and there was no awkward follow up to their previous conversation.

That didn't mean there was nothing strange or awkward about them. While they seemed readily eager to tell Arn all about the "Way of the Voice" and the Thu'um, they immediately hushed up if he asked too many questions or about their strangely absent leader, Paarthurnax.

Over the next few days, Arn learned the meaning of the words of power, such as the one he'd found in Bleak Falls Barrow, and that he gained power each time he absorbed a dragon's soul.

He even learned a new shout, Whirlwind Sprint, that he loved even more than the full Unrelenting Force that he'd learned.

The first Greybeard, Arneir, had also pointed him to several other places where words of power might be found that he could check out.

They had also tasked him with a mission. Apparently, they still didn't fully believe him or it was some sort of initiation rite.

He had to go retrieve the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller from its resting place as a final test. He wouldn't have minded except that it was halfway across Skyrim!

Thus after four strange and awkward days in the largely completely silent fortress of High Hrothgar, he gathered provisions for the trip back down, nodded goodbye to each of the Greybeards and walked outside to where Lydia was waiting to depart.

It was the first time he'd seen her in that four day stretch and was momentarily struck again by her beauty as she stood there at the bottom of the steps in her armor, raven hair blowing in the wind, her hand on her the curve of her hip, with that cute scrunched up face of hers when she was trying to think something through she was confused about.

"Ready to get back where we don't have to wear these things?" Arn motioned to the new furs they both had gotten from the Greybeards to keep them warm on the trek down.

She frowned at him, not paying any attention to the furs.

"I'm still mad at you"

"Ah, well, I still welcome it"

"What?"

"I've been alternately whispered and shouted at by strange old men for four days. Your voice is such a welcome reprieve, that it doesn't bother me at all if it's angry or not."
She didn't seem to budge in her demeanor, but Arn caught the slight upturn of the corners of her mouth that she tried to stop, but failed at, making her frown look so funny, he burst out laughing.

He was still laughing when they picked up their packs and she punched him facetiously in the shoulder, sighing in frustration, her frown gone completely as they set off down the mountain.

It took far less time going down than going up and they didn't have to camp in the coldest part or ponder awkward sleeping arrangements to stay warm.

They did have to to each watch part of the night since wolves and trolls could be active at that part.

On the second day, Arn had exhausted telling Lydia everything about what he'd been through during the four days with the Greybeards.

He realized she'd been remarkably quiet over that span. He'd hoped that time would soften her anger about the sleeping incident.

He was pondering how to apologize or if he should even broach the subject when Lydia spoke up.

"So...if women aren't allowed to know or even BE there, isn't you telling me all this stuff...sort of...taboo?"

"You're going to see me doing it anyway and you'll be coming with me to get the horn whenever I get over there. So I think you've a right to know. Maybe you'll have some insight into them I didn't see. What did you think?"

Lydia then made a mock gasp and shrunk away from him in much the same manner the one Greybeard had done on the steps when they'd arrived.

They both laughed at that for a bit.

"So...what does that mean for insight?" asked Arn

"It means that despite how much they know and see, they probably aren't looking at the whole picture and aren't likely to tell you the whole story...I wouldn't trust them overly much" she replied more seriously.

"Well, they certainly wouldn't tell me the whole story....about anything. Despite how much they wanted to 'teach' me, I never got more than a few questions into any discussion before they would shut me down...odd...and unsettling" mused Arn.

They continued on down in silence for awhile before Lydia abruptly stopped him.

"What--" he asked as she held a hand up to his lips to silence him.

"Look, Arnsmyth, about what happened up there about sleeping with me...I...had some time to think about it...and I realized...I was--I...I acted rashly...I remembered what you said about your past...relations and realized...maybe it would have been painful for you....and I did not realize it...I thought you found my offer unsatisfactory for...other reasons"

Then she dropped to one knee with her head bowed to him.

"My Thane, I have wronged you and spoken harsh words to you in front of others. Please forgive me."

Arn quickly reached down, grabbed her by each arm, and pulled her up on her feet facing him.
"No, no, no. That's not it at all, Lydia."

Arn, you fool. That was your way out. All you had to do was agree with her.

"I haven't had any nightmares about Desarra for awhile. Maybe it's been enough time mourning. Your offer was not out of line. It... just... took me a bit by surprise... and... I...uh" Arn faltered

"You what?" asked Lydia, staring wide eyed into his, hanging on whatever his next words were.

"Ah damn it! Lydia... you're a beautiful, strong, talented woman. No man in his right mind wouldn't want you... but... I am... an old man by comparison"

She frowned a bit incredulously at his assessment of himself, as though it were impossible that it mattered, before he continued.

"I am past the prime of my life, whereas you are just blossoming into it. Gods, I'll probably be eaten by a dragon within the year considering how bad things are here--" he joked before she pounded his chest with both hands, eyes watering with tears.

"Don't say that!"

"It's probably more true than either of us want it to be. Besides, I swore an oath... that I would never take advantage of you the way Balgruuf did. I want more for you than to be the bed trophy of some Thane. We go places and I see the way men look at you. I see the way you glare back. You're tired of being looked at as some piece of arse fit only to be rutted and put back."

He realized he had both her hands in his and her lower lip was beginning to quiver as she continued staring at him, wide eyed.

"I know you have a warrior's heart. I know you want to do whatever you can to save the people of Skyrim. So that's what I want for you. I want to help you become that warrior. So that when we go into a city or village, people don't look at us and say, 'Oh, there goes the dragonborn and his wench', they'll know better. Instead they'll say, 'Oh, there are Skyrim's finest warriors!'

She stood silently stiffling a sob, a lone tear creeping down her cheek as she avoided looking him in the eye.

When the silence continued, Arn slowly took her chin in his hand, raising her face to look him in the eye.

"Lydia... do you understand my meaning?"

She nodded affirmative, wiping her eyes fiercely to get rid of the tears.

"I thought you would be happy... have I offended you in any way? If I have, let me know. This old warrior's been on the road a lot and not in the company of women for some time" said Arn, letting go of her chin and taking a step back.

When she looked more composed after a moment, she finally spoke.

"It's just that... no one's ever said or done anything like that for me before" she said, wiping a final tear away.

"They should have" replied Arn with a little venom to his tone as a few people came to mind he blamed for it.
"Why should the--?" she began to ask before Arn hushed her.

"Wait--do you smell that?"

They both stood silently a moment before Lydia registered the same smell Arnsmyth had: the smell of burning flesh.

Drawing their weapons, they advanced quicker down the path, conversation forgotten.

As they got lower, the smell got stronger and soon they saw a haze of gray smoke clogging the lower slopes of the mountain.

It took them another hour to move through the layer of unnatural cloud. Once they were below it, they looked out across the base of the mountain to the source of all the smells and smoke.

Down at the base of the mountain, an ugly belching pillar of black and gray smoke billowed up from a black area of forest and road that only days before had been the town of Ivarstead.

"Ivarstead....no..." whispered Lydia, giving voice to both their thoughts.

They scrambled down the rest of the trail, heading across the blackened stone bridge that looked to be all that was left of the village.

It looked like someone had unleashed the seven hells of Oblivion. Everything was turned to black ash. Bits and pieces of houses lay still crumbling and burning.

They looked for survivors but both knew even as they did so that they would probably find none. They hardly found any corpses, only a few horribly burned mounds of flesh that stank so bad, Lydia vomited in disgust.

As Arn moved around the remains of one of the houses, he heard a slight wheeze coming from the woods.

Running toward the sound, he came upon a hideous sight. One of the town guards lay in a burnt mess at the base of a tree, his armor melted into his flesh and oozing blood and gore from several places, but he was still alive as Arn could hear the irregular wheezing of his breaths.

Arn tried to apply a potion to at least ease his pain, but he writhed and sent the fluid spilling.

Arn knew from one look at him there was no healing that would help. Sadly, he gazed into the gross swollen red flesh where his face used to be.

"What did this?"

No reply. The man just gargled and wheezed as it was obvious he could not speak. Then he lashed out with a stub of a hand and groped at Arn's sword hilt before collapsing back against the tree. Arn knew what that meant.

"May Sovngarde ease your pain" he spoke before drawing his sword and stabbing decisively through the man's chest, putting him out of his misery.

"Did he say what happened?" asked Lydia somberly.

"No, but he didn't have to. Only one thing in Skyrim could have done this, a Dragon"

Arn felt the weight of it hit him hard. Before, he'd been unsure what to do or how exactly to go about it.
Now looking around at what was left of Ivarstead, he knew he had to find a way to stop the Dragons or more would suffer the same fate.

Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one who noticed there were no women at High Hrothgar? Also, the fact that they're known as "Greybeards" would imply they were an all male group.
The Huntress and the Hunted: Whiterun Interlude

Chapter Summary

Arn joins the Companions and wrestles with his growing attraction to Lydia.

The clash of steel echoed through the courtyard of Jorvasskr.

Arnsmyth fainted left then closed distance inside Vilkas' swing arc, bashing him with his shield and swatting the flat of his blade across his torso before backing off again.

"That's three touches total for the new blood" announced the twin Farkas gruffly from the veranda as the others watched them.

"Three to nothing," Aela whistled "You're starting to look like the old one, Vilkas"

Vilkas said nothing, just continued circling with his greatsword, glaring at Arn with the same look he'd given him at the farm when he'd bickered with him over killing the giant.

Then he lunged in fast, bringing down a mighty swing that Arn sidestepped and tried to counter, but Vilkas got his handle and blade up, shoudering them into Arn, knocking him momentarily off balance, allowing Vilkas to pivot and spin, bringing his blade across Arn's lower back.

"Ugm......" Arn groaned, glaring back at Vilkas. This was only supposed to be a touch match. Five touches wins. No actual striking.

Guess Vilkas really didn't like him, Arn thought as he felt blood trickling down his lower back. The slash must have either broken the metal plate or hit just next to where the plating ended at his side.

"Three touches to one" announced Farkas.

"If you call that a 'touch'," spat Arn with contempt.

Everyone was silent as they continued circling each other.

Vilkas moved to strike again, but this time Arn had been watching for the tell in his hands, exploding in on him again and catching his downswing with the edge of his shield before following through with a pommel strike from his sword hand to Vilkas' face and slashing with the flat of his blade across his torso as he kicked him away.

"Grrr..." Vilkas growled at him, spitting out blood, and Arn saw something in him was changing. His eyes were a different color.

"Four touches to one....Vilkas, be careful" Farkas announced.

They continued circling and there was no mistaking it now. Vilkas' eyes had turned from a dark brown to a silver white while he continued growling at him in a way that didn't seem right either.

Arn had seen men lose themselves to blood lust, but he'd never seen someone's eyes change color or shape. This had to be something else, some strange magic at work.
Then Vilkas attacked, but faster and far more fiercely than he had before or even than Arn thought should be humanly possible.

He only had half a second to get his shield up before Vilkas rained down blows so fierce and fast, it knocked Arn to the ground.

In the space of two or three seconds, Vilkas had hit him with six or seven repeated overhead swings of a greatsword. It was all Arn could do to block them, but the seventh blow hit so hard, he felt something snap in his shield arm and pain shoot up his arm.

"Vilkas! STOP!" yelled Farkas

"Vilkas! Get ahold of yourself!" followed Aela's shout.

Arn thought they were going to intervene but he couldn't wait that long.

Pulling his shield in closer to help his ailing arm, he rolled into Vilkas' legs as he was bringing his sword down again, knocking him down.

Ignoring the shooting pains in his shield arm, Arn sprang to his feet in time to be facing Vilkas on his feet again.

This time Arn went on the offensive, feinting in for a high shoulder strike before swinging underneath Vilkas' block and tapping him on the left side of his abdomen with the tip of his sword, pushing Vilkas away from him in the process.

"Five touches...I win" growled Arn, staring Vilkas straight down the blade of his sword.

"Grraaaaaaahhhh!" bellowed Vilkas.

"VILKAS! STOP!"

"VILKAS!"

Arn heard the cries of the others but they only just now started off the porch and were too far away to stop or intervene in any attack Vilkas made.

Vilkas growled again, louder this time and more feral. Arn thought his hair of his beard was also suddenly a lot longer.

Then in a feat of superhuman ability, Vilkas ran to the side, leaped on a rock sideways and used it to spring across straight at Arn twenty feet sideways in the air!

This would not stand.

"FUS RO!"

The partial word of power erupted from Arn, caught Vilkas midair, and sent him flying backward into the rocks like a rag doll, knocking his sword free and knocking him unconscious.

Then it was a rush of people converging, all the companions going over to Vilkas and huddling around him, meanwhile Lydia and a few other hopefuls came rushing up to check Arn over with a pouch full of potions.

"And here I thought the Companions were all about being honorable warriors" sneered Lydia angrily as she carefully tried to get at the cut on his back without causing anymore pain.
As Arn moved to allow one of the other new recruits to take his shield off, he gritted his teeth at the pain in his arm, which immediately caught Lydia's attention as she raced around to cradle his arm carefully with that cute scrunched up face of hers.

"You have more serious injuries...we're going to need to get that armor off" she said, carefully shepherding him toward Jorvasskr's door.

"Yes...we do need to get him out of that armor" said Aela, walking up to them.

Her honeyed tone and exaggerated cocking of her hip, combined with her already barely-there leather armor suggested she wasn't talking about healing, and no one could fail to notice it.

"Is there somewhere he can use where your friends aren't going to try anything else stupid?" snarled Lydia, glaring daggers at her.

"Sure, we can find a nice, private spot" Aela grinned at Arn who would've been more intrigued if the pain in his arm wasn't forcing all his concentration from him at the moment.

"It's....not.....that....bad" gritted Arn, the pain making him annoyed at everyone.

"Yes, it is" insisted Lydia, returning her attention to him "We're going home...now" she glared back a warning at Aela, who simply shrugged and took a seat on the porch and crossed her long bare legs as she watched them go.

Once they were back in Breezehome, Arn got more cantankerous.

He wasn't used to anyone removing his armor or looking after him.

Part of him detested moving this way and that as Lydia unbuckled the clasps that held on the plating and slowly removed them, but part of him also felt comforted by her every touch, being able to forget the pain with every momentary brush of her fingers or arms on him.

Once the plating, leather jerkin, and cotton undershirt were gone, he sat bare-chested on the edge of his bed as Lydia sat behind him with a platter of poultices and potions, examining the ugly gash on his lower back.

"My arm is much worse than my back" he muttered, wincing again as he shifted.

"Yes, but once I get your back taken care of, you'll be able to lay down while I work on your arm" she replied.

She began cleaning the wound up a little which caused him to stiffen slightly.

"Oh no...it's ok...just a little more" she almost whispered to him while calmly patting and caressing above his wound.

Arn couldn't hide his grin. He really was getting the baby treatment. Not that it was that bad. It was making him forget the pain and making him want awful badly to lean into the warm touch of her hand more.

"Hey! What are you grinning at?" she asked while applying a powerful regenerative potion that Arn could immediately feel taking effect, the pain in his back lessening to almost nothing.

"You....you're completely treating me like some milk drinker who's never gotten a splinter in his life"

"And how many times are you going to try to tell me 'It wasn't that bad?'" Lydia asked, the last part
in a deep mockery of as much of a male voice as she could come up with.

"Why? It actually wasn't--"

"See! That's what men always say" she said, tapping a finger on his good shoulder chastisingly, "Then they groan and bellyache and secretly cry and let it fester....and in the end, they finally have to get more help"

Arn turned his head with a raised eyebrow as she continued.

"Raised in Kynareth's temple...remember? Do you know almost every grown man that showed up for healing was always worse off because he refused to come at first because 'it's wasn't that bad'"

"Yes, well, I doubt most of them could do this" replied Arn as he moved his right hand over the left injured arm and began whispering the words to the healing spells, a blue light glowing from his hand and encircling his injured arm.

Lydia stared in silence as he moved up and down his injured arm twice before relaxing his right hand and flexing his left arm around to test how healed it was.

"You're a Restoration Mage too?!!" she asked incredulously, moving off the bed to come around, watching him flex this way and that.

"No...no, no. I'm not gifted with enough magicka to be a mage, but I have tried to learn a few spells that will help in my line of work. If you spend your life with sword in hand, you have to expect you'll need healing or need to heal someone else at some point."

"So...once I got the pain level down, you were able to focus your willpower better?" she surmised, getting to her feet in front of him.

"Yeah...you know about restoration magicka?"

"Kynareth...remember?"

"Right...did you ever try practicing any?"

"No...I figured I wasn't magicka inclined enough to be a mage or healer, so better to focus on my martial skills"

They were both silent for a long moment before Arn realized she was staring at his bare chest.

Arn was going to give her a hard time, but for some reason the memory of her passionate kiss in the cave after they first met leaped unbidden into his mind and he found himself staring at her lips.

Knowing his loins were stirring and there would not be much to conceal it, Arn needed a way out.

"So...hungry?" he felt like he blurted out, startling her out of whatever she was thinking or fantasizing about. In retrospect, it probably wasn't the best thing to say if they were both thinking about rutting.

"Oh...sure...uh...let me fix something for you" she said, a bit flustered before hurrying out of his room and downstairs.

After throwing his cotton undershirt back on, he took his time checking any damage to his armor before going downstairs to find Lydia standing over a stew bubbling on the newly installed oven.
"So much nicer to have some furnishings now" he said, easing into a chair at the table.

"Yeah..." she answered indirectly, not taking her attention off the stew.

Arnsmyth saw she had changed out of her armor at some point as well, now just left in her leather breeches and cotton undershirt.

Seeing her figure from behind in just the leather and cotton didn't help him take his mind off that kiss.

"So...you don't care for Aela that much it seems" he said, finding something to hopefully keep his mind off more intimate things.

"No...I don't" she replied, a frown crossing her face as she half turned to answer him.

"Is that because of what happened today or have you two never gotten along?"

"I...used to idolize Aela....when I was younger. She's about six years my senior. So I watched her do all sorts of things just before the time I could. She lived with her parents out in the wilds, got to hunt all sorts of things, and became a prominent member of the Companions....it was...everything I wanted...until a few years after my maidenhood."

"So...what changed?"

"When I had petitioned to join the companions at the end of my maidenhood, they said 'no' on account I was too young...even though I knew Aela had been accepted at a younger age than that and I knew she could've swayed them if she wanted."

"And?"

"And what?"

"I'm sensing more to this than that"

"Well....a few years afterward...when I had gone into the city guard, I found out about the men..." Lydia replied.

There was a long pause before she continued.

"Whereas I practically couldn't buy a man's attentions during my maidenhood, Aela had them following her in droves. That wouldn't have been bad, except she liked to play with them...string them along...seduce them, sometimes more than one at a time. Her nickname..the Huntress...isn't just about hunting animals" she said, turning to fix him with a stern look.

"So...you're jealous?" he muttered before instantly regretting his choice of words.

To his surprise, she didn't lash out. Worse, she stood with her head hanging in somewhat ashamed manner.

"I don't know...maybe....Just...it seems horrible to be given that much only to then use it like that...she doesn't even entertain marriage offers...it's like a joke to her or something when any man tries" she replied silently.

"And you're worried she'll get her claws into me?" surmised Arn.

"Yes..." said Lydia, blushing uncontrollably, avoiding looking up at him.
"Well, don't worry. I'm old, remember. It wouldn't be the first time a woman tried to seduce me" he replied matter of factly, retrieving some dishes for the meal.

"Oh...the old 'I'm too old for that' reason huh?" she brightened up at him with a raised eyebrow "So who were all these other seductresses that you left in your wake of oldness?"

He laughed.

"That would certainly NOT be appropriate dinner conversation. Maybe some time when I've had too much mead, then I'll talk about all my 'oldness' adventures" he replied before they both laughed and set about eating the stew she'd prepared.

Arn happily waited for his stew before having his heart jump into his throat as Lydia handed him a bowl. Her cotton undershirt had no buttons at the top and was partway open. When she leaned over to hand him the stew, he'd watched the fire light catch a glimpse straight down her shirt and between her large breasts hanging loose.

His loins were hardening again. Damn it. Couldn't he even eat a meal without being tormented so?

As he avoided looking at her, both of them eating in silence, Arn realized he needed to get away from her, even if just for awhile. Being around this beautiful woman was becoming harder and harder.

He needed to spend some time on his own, or better yet, with another woman. He hadn't had a woman besides Delphine in some time and he figured he was getting to the point if he didn't have nightmares about Desarra anymore, maybe he was ready to be able to please a woman properly again.

Maybe that's why he was having such a hard time focusing around Lydia. Maybe if he found another woman to be involved with, he wouldn't be thinking about her that way anymore.

He doubted Lydia would see it that way, though, and there was no way he was going to let her know he was struggling to keep her body out of his mind.

"So...I am going out tonight, I think" he said, breaking the long silence as they were finishing up.

"What do you want me to bring?" Lydia asked, brightening up.

"Nothing...I think you should stay and rest...I think I want to do some recon of the area northwest of here and I'll move a lot quicker and quieter on my own" he replied cautiously.

"You're the one who was injured today" she smirked, though he could see the hurt in her eyes at being told to stay.

"Yes, but I'm not tired and there's some things my mind won't let go. So I'd like to get a head start on finding the bandit hideouts for the Jarl"

"Ok...well...is there anything you want me to do while you're gone?"

"Just rest up...I'm sure looking after me and my 'oldness' must be tiresome sometimes" he replied, rising with a grin.
Chapter Summary

Arn sets off to clear his mind, but while he's out reconnoitering for the Jarl, he runs into someone unexpected...

Three hours later, Arn found himself sneaking across the dusk-lit plains of western Whiterun hold.

It shouldn't have surprised him that he'd been besieged with requests for assistance as soon as they'd gotten back from High Hrothgar. Find this for me. Help me look for this missing person. Investigate this place for me. Kill this bandit if you see him.

Arn had no less than a dozen different people or groups asking things of him the moment he'd gotten back.

Most of them were things he could do on his own time, but the Jarl's request to clean up the roads of bandits was one he didn't feel he could put off, particularly since he was going to be using those roads to travel and soon.

Clad in a some leather armor he'd scavenged from bandits previously, he was able to move a lot quieter and faster than he'd been wearing his heavier stuff with Lydia in tow.

He'd already located one bandit shelter off the road about a hundred paces, marking it on his map before moving on. Once he pinpointed the hideouts, the Jarl could send men to deal with them, provided there weren't overwhelming numbers.

Another hour passed and he had found a series of interconnected huts and a cave system with a lot of bandits an even some stormcloak clad men mulling around in them.

Why were they there? Arn wondered.

As he marked his map and was about to crawl away, he heard a faint rustle off to his left.

Freezing, he slowly withdrew his dagger, placed it between his teeth and quietly and slowly sneaked around behind the noise, intending to just leave before he caught the brief glimpse of a woman's outline crouched among some bushes.

His first thought was that Lydia had followed him, but the brief glimpse was enough to tell him it wasn't her just based on the length of the woman's hair and didn't seem to be as curvy of body as Lydia. Lydia also wasn't skilled at sneaking...at all.

So who was it then? Not a sentry. Someone keenly intent on whatever the bandits were doing.

Arn mulled it over for a bit, but his curiosity finally got the better of him and he began sneaking closer to the woman who was now a lot more obscured by brush.

He had just gotten where he thought he'd get a better glimpse of her, when she rose off her belly to her hands and feet and sidled out of her brush almost completely silently and began sneaking on all fours straight toward him!
She couldn't possibly know he was there. He hadn't made any noise at all, but on she came straight for him. All he could do now was try to stay still and hope that in the now darkness broken only by moonlight amongst the clouds, she wouldn't see him.

But Arn was not so lucky. Instead she crept right up to him and sat on her haunches.

"Hello, Dragonborn" whispered Aela the Huntress.

Arn didn't answer. Instead, he just motioned further away, indicating they should move farther away from the bandit camp before talking further which she nodded to.

Half an hour of sneaking later, Arn pulled up behind a rocky outcropping.

"I have to hand it to you, Dragonborn, not many people have ever snuck up on my arse like that" she purred, crossing her legs and stretching her arms as she sat down.

"Maybe you're just off your game...Huntress"

"Oh no, my game doesn't even know I'm nearby yet" she nodded back toward the bandits.

"You're here for the bandits....by yourself?"

"Sure, hey if you can take out a stronghold of them with just you and your housecarl, how hard can it be?" she grinned at him.

"Thanks for the praise" mocked Arn.

"No housecarl?" she asked teasingly "trying to challenge yourself this time?"

"I'm here on the Jarl's request. Once I can locate and get some information on these camps, the Jarl can send men in force to deal with them"

"Right...so why do it at night, alone?"

"If you truly are a Huntress, then you should already know the answer to that"

"Yes, I've always enjoyed the night a lot more for the freedom of movement it gives...and yet why spend the night alone?" she asked with another grin, the double entendre causing Arn to smirk.

"Lydia is not skilled at sneaking. So I gave her the night off."

"Yes...she never was very subtle at anything" Aela pondered aloud

They were silent for a moment as Aela looked up at the moon and Arn started suddenly as he realized her eyes had changed color just like Vilkas' had!

"What happened with Vilkas today?" Arn abruptly changed the subject, intent on finding out what was going on.

"Eh..he just got carried away. He objected to you joining...remember?" she tried to brush him off.

"I'm no fool, Aela. I've seen plenty of men get lost in bloodlust, but they never get supernatural abilities like that and their eyes never change color like this!" he said, grabbing her by the chin and turning her to look him in the eye.

She jerked her head free and grinned at Arn momentarily before becoming serious.
"Vilkas was a fool. The secret is not mine to share, but if you swear on your honor not to tell a soul, I will explain it to you. You deserve that much after what happened and given you're going to be a great member of the Companions" she said as the grin returned.

Arn thought about it for a moment before replying.

"You have my word. I, Arnsmyth Bulgoar, swear not to tell a soul"

"Come then, and I'll show you" Aela said, rising to her feet and motioning back toward the Bandit camp.

"You said you'd explain it"

"I like showing things off a lot better than explaining" she winked at him.

"I can see that..." he muttered, trailing behind her with a moonlit view of her skin and leather strapped armor riding up on her buttocks as she crawled along in front of him.

At length, they got to the overlook where Aela had been earlier, watching the bandits.

Arn turned to her questioningly and saw her eyes had gone completely silver white again as she smiled at him.

"You're supposed to be a good warrior....don't disappoint me" she whispered to him as she stood up.

Arn turned quickly to see if any of them had noticed before turning back to grab her and pull her down.

"What are you doing? Get down!" he hissed as silently as he could, turning back to her to be stunned into silence as he saw her unclasp the links at the tops of her shoulders and let her armor fall to her feet.

Then she reached down and slipped her fingers inside the leather underpants she wore and slipped them down her legs and off, grinning seductively at him the whole time.

"Whatever you do...don't follow me inside the caves" she whispered as she suddenly hopped out of the brush and down from the bluff, walking straight into the camp amongst the Bandits!

Arn felt his hands moving, setting arrows in the ground from his quiver and arming his bow, even though the whole time he felt his eyes riveted to her naked body as she sauntered into the open.

She didn't have quite the curviness Lydia did---NO! He refused to think about that.

She was taller than he'd expected, maybe an inch or two taller than he, filled with a lithe and grace of a hunter. As she sauntered forward, all of them immediately stopped and stared, her walk changed to twitch her buttocks in the most convincing of fashions, making Arn feel every twitch in his hardening cock as well.

She came to a stop by a campfire in an exaggerated fashion, cocking her hip to one side.

If it weren't for the bandits, Arn thought he would probably would have started stroking his own cock, but the bizarreness of the situation had him start looking around at the men closing in on her.

"IT'S A GHOST! WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!" screamed one of the bandits before shrinking away.
"Shut up! Vargoth!" a few others retorted as they closed on her.

"NAKED WOMEN DON'T JUST WALK OUT OF THE WOODS! SHE'S A GHOST, I TELL YOU!" the one named Vargoth continued.

Arn had knocked an arrow, but was unsure who to take out first since he still had no idea what she was doing.

Seeing no one was listening to him, the one called Vargoth took off running.

Grinning seductively, Aela then got down on all fours, spreading her legs provocatively and looking over her shoulder back at Arn in the brush who gulped at the sight of her arse and breasts hanging down and forced himself to look at the bandits instead.

"So, who are you, woman? Looking to join us?" said one, dropping his breeches to the ground as he stepped around behind her.

"I'm no ghost...but you are all going to die..." purred Aela before beginning to contort in an unnatural fashion, twitching and pounding the ground, gritting her teeth and growling in the same manner Arn had heard Vilkas do.

"What in Oblivion...?" muttered one of them as they all slowly began backing away from her.

"Grrrrrrrrrraaaaahhhhhhhhhh!" she growled as Arn saw Aela start to change, becoming more muscular, her torso growing in size as auburn hair began to emerge all over her body.

Her neck and head began growing in size as she pounded the ground again and Arn saw in a few seconds as she howled, she had fully turned into a werewolf.

The bandits only had time to scream or utter an exclamation before she was up on two feet, snatching one in each clawed hand and clattered them together like broken toys.

Arn watched as they scurried for their weapons they'd set aside when she'd walked in naked.

He took careful aim and began picking any off that got to them.

The others were getting eviscerated by Aela. Crushing, disembowling, mutilating, it was a scene of auburn furred gore as she tore through the scrambling bandits who screamed for mercy but got none.

Then Arn saw stormcloaks and bandits began coming out of one of the cave openings.

Taking aim, he shot one through head taking aim at Aela with a bow, then another with a crossbow.

The third had a large shield and sword and had noticed the arrows from Arn's position and charged, but he didn't make it far.

Aela leaped from her position and landed atop him, crushing him to the ground and with a single swipe, took part of his head clean off with a clawed hand.

Arn let fly with another arrow that zipped right by Aela, hitting an Axe wielding bandit in the throat that had just emerged behind her.

At that, she spun and charged into the cave.

Arn made his way down off the bluff and began finishing off any bandits that were unfortunate enough to survive the gorings and injuries they'd received.
The whole time he could hear screams and cries echoing out of the cave along with the growling and howling of Aela.

Once he'd scavenged anything of worth off what was left of the Bandit camp, he pondered going in the caves.

It had gotten quiet and he was worried. No telling what was down there, but her warning kept him in place. He began to wonder if he should even stay there, or if she was completely out of control once she changed.

Feeling more uncertain what to do as more time passed, Arn returned to his spot on the bluff, watching the cave openings for any sound or sign.

He waited another hour, then just as he wondered if he should just leave he saw Aela emerge in werewolf form from the cave, her auburn fur soaked and splattered in blood and gore.

She wasn't dashing around energetically, though. Instead, she seemed to be staggering and alternately dragging her feet.

She turned to look up at him momentarily before howling loudly at the moon and shambling off away from him, turning occasionally and looking back at him.

She wanted him to follow?

He started off, but thinking for a moment, stopped, picked up her armor and underpants and followed after.

About another hour passed of him following, he stopped to find her huddled under a small waterfall running over some rocks.

He stopped and waited, wondering if there was some signal she would try to make, but she made no movement or noise at all.

After awhile, he crept close enough to discern the slow breathing and closed eyes denoting sleep.

She was asleep? What was he supposed to do now?

He decided to reconnoiter the area while he thought about it, leaving her stuff in a pile at the foot of a tree.

After awhile, he returned to find Aela was no longer a werewolf. She lay curled up naked just out of the flow of the small waterfall, fast sleep.

Well, that was a relief. Now what? Should he wake her? What if she wasn't fully turned back yet? He couldn't just leave her laying there.

He sighed and set himself up in a good sentry position in a tree, overlooking the surrounding area in case any threats appeared and pondered the implications of the secret knowledge that Aela and at least some if not all the other Companions were actually Werewolves.

He wasn't sure how much time passed but the reddish orange glow of dawn was just appearing on the horizon and Arn was beginning to feel very tired when he heard a yawn and looked down to see Aela stretching herself awake.

He'd forgotten all about her nakedness for the moment until he looked down and saw her breasts
jiggling slightly as she shook her wet hair and stretched her arms.

Hopping down from his perch, he retrieved her clothes and moved to hand them to her, but she didn’t take them.

She looked at them for a moment before pushing them away and looking up at him with a half lidded look that indicated a hunger of a different nature.

Arn wasn’t sure who moved first, whether he reached for her or if she grabbed him. Regardless, they were suddenly pressing themselves together fiercely against the rock, turning this way and that, her lips locked on his, hands vice locked around his neck with her long legs locked around his waist.

Arn had known in the back of his mind this was probably going to happen ever since Lydia had talked with him about her.

Part of him felt bad for validating anything Lydia had cautioned about, but then again why was he worried about her right now? Part of the reason he was doing this was to keep her out of his mind.

As if to reassure himself, he threw himself into caressing and kissing Aela more, though as he did so, he realized he was tasting blood every time he kissed her.

The more he did so, the stronger it became and very unpleasant.

So he set about kissing her everywhere but her lips, trailing kisses down her neck and across her right breast, lightly sucking on a nipple in passing before continuing down her slim, lithe abdomen to her hips.

Realizing her back was rubbing against rock, he pulled her into him, moving them off away from the waterfall and back under the tree he’d been in before setting her gently on her back, cupping one of her soft buttocks in each hand, and pulling her dripping woman hood up to his mouth.

She cried out and arched her back, clasping his head into her as he plunged his lips and tongue into her lower lips and explored.

"YES!.....Oh.....yes....more.......Dragon......born!" she gasped as he continued exploring.

This continued shortly before she pulled him out and began pulling at his leather armor that Arn realized he still had on.

It only took a short while for him to get rid of his leathers, and once he was naked as well, resumed his exploration of her womanhood with his kisses, occasionally caressing the nub there, causing her to continue gasping and moaning.

When Arn thought she was just about to explode, He pulled out of her, causing her to grasp at his head fiercely to pull it back in, but instead he moved up to her breasts, lining up his now long hardened cock at her entrance.

Without waiting, he slowly pushed inside, the moist warmth of her womanhood almost causing him to explode instantly.

"OH!....Yes....Oh!" she continued moaning, her grin returning to her features as she caressed and pulled his head into her bosom further.

Her breasts were neither large nor small, but had a lengthened and supple quality to them that seemed in keeping with the rest of Aela's tall grace.
Cupping one with his left hand, he rubbed and pinched the nipple while licking, nipping, and kissing the right one as he slowly began thrusting in and out of her, feeling his loins tightening.

With his right hand he moved behind and caressed her right buttock moving over and around it.

He continued thrusting into her harder and harder, faster and faster, her cries becoming louder.

"Yes! Oh! Yes! Harder!"

He suddenly felt her arc up against him and heard a loud gasp as she exploded fluid over his sheathed cock which in turn caused the pressure building in him to release, exploding inside her and feeling far better about it than he did with Delphine.

Although he felt a huge surge of relief and a bit tired, Aela didn't let up one bit.

Instead, she pushed him over onto his back, straddling him, that seductive grin on her face and still her eyes sparkling with the glint of the rising sun over the horizon.

Agonizingly slowly, she squatted down, teasing his cock with her womanhood, her strong grip keeping his upper body in place as his lower body moved of its own volition, trying to get back into the wet warmth of her womanhood.

She teased him a moment longer before making sure his cock was hardened again and abruptly sheathed herself on it with a huge sigh of joy.

"OH....Yes....you.....don't...disap..point..." she gasped as she began rising up and dropping down on him as he tried to match her movements with thrusts of his own.

The cold air of the morning mists only made the warmth of her core that much more intoxicating as he pushed up into her as she came down on him harder and harder each time.

He reached up one hand to caress her right breast as she was already caressing her left breast with her own hand, gasping and moaning.

Their grunts and the slaps of her buttocks against his hips echoed in the small glade off the rocks.

This time, he exploded first, his seed pumping until it dribbled out her opening over his cock and onto his hips as she kept plunging up and down, throwing her auburn hair this way and that in ecstasy.

A little while longer and she grunted much louder, her body spasming as she came again as well.

They gripped each other for awhile, panting heavily, Arn still sheathed inside her warm snatch.

He smiled up at her as he felt himself hardening again, but to his surprise, she pulled away from him and got off with a loud slurpy pop and walked away toward the waterfall.

"Done already? I thought you'd be up for more?" he teased, half expecting her to turn around and jump back on him.

She simply turned to grin her seductive grin at him again.

"A Huntress can't share all her tricks....otherwise you won't wanna come back for more...." she purred as she began washing herself off in a more tantalizing way than she needed.

Arn's heart fell a bit. They'd just rutted for a good hour and obviously both of them wanted more, but
she was putting a stop to it because...she wanted him to come back for more?

Arn sighed and sat up. His cock was in no mood to be strung along or toyed with.

Arn wondered if she were doing this as bait to join the companions. Why couldn't it just be two people enjoying themselves? Why did there have to be any ulterior motive, though Arn felt himself cringe at that, realizing he had an ulterior motive, mainly to get Lydia off his mind.

Lydia had been right, though. Aela liked this control over men she possessed a bit too much for Arn's liking.

Even as Arn watched her running the water caressingly over her breasts and over the auburn patch of hair between her legs, he knew this had to be a one-time thing. Reluctantly, Arn rose, went to the waterfall, and washed himself off as well, despite his raging hard cock initially and despite having her standing naked only a foot away.

He was silent and avoided looking at her. Once they'd sufficiently gotten clean from their activities, they redressed in their armor and Arn checked the surroundings, trying to mentally note how far they were from Whiterun.

"So...will I be seeing more of you at Jorrvaskr?" she asked coyly.

"Maybe" he responded as nonchalant as possible.

"Only maybe?" she asked, trying not to show surprise.

Arn thought about listing the pros and cons of joining or that he couldn't be bought with a good rutting, but he didn't feel like getting into any arguments with her.

Now that the excitement from his loins was dying down, the tiredness of being up all night was setting in.

"I'm the Dragonborn. I already have a lot on my plate"

"I see. Well, I'd wager being part of the Companions could help lift some of that load" she said, sounding less sensual and more introspective for a moment.

"Yes...but I'm still finding out what that burden entails"

"Well, you've passed your entrance trial and you've got Farkas' and my recommendation....so, whenever you're ready, look us up, okay?" she sounded uncertain at first but finished on a more reassuring tone, as if to reassure him that it was the right path to take.

He simply grunted his assent as she turned to leave.

"One more thing.....Lydia said she tried to join the Companions but was disallowed because of her age, even though others joined younger? Why?" asked Arn, immediately wondering why he'd broached the subject.

Aela turned and stared at him in surprise.

"I really must be off my game if we just made love but you're asking me about another woman"

"She's my housecarl"

"Have you sampled her goods yet?" Aela retorted, crossing her arms, the seductive grin returning.
Arn stepped closer to her and glared as he replied.

"Why is it all you people from Whiterun ever seem to do is undermine whatever she tries to do? She tries to join the companions? you say no. Tries to become a city guard? gets sent on the worst assignments. Becomes a housecarl? you assume she's some rutting toy for her Thane. Why is it you all treat her like an outsider?"

"You mean the Jarl never told you?" asked Aela with a raised eyebrow.

"All I was told was not to ask any more questions!"

"And yet you still ask them? Huh...well, guess I'm just spilling all kinds of secrets tonight...err morning" she replied, looking around at the sun-brightened forest.

"So?" asked Arn impatiently as Aela sighed in an annoyed fashion.

"Look, I don't know specifics, but the rumor has always been that Lydia is the bastard child of Jarl Balgruuf and a high ranking Imperial noble from the Imperial City"

"Why would that keep her out of the Companions?"

"We were...informed...by someone that she was too important to be put in the peril we face, but that she was not allowed to know"

"As opposed to following around a Dragon magnet now?"

"Is that an ability the Dragonborn has?" she asked, surprised.

"Don't change the subject"

"I don't know any details. You're talking politics now...something the Companions try to avoid..."

"Right..." stated Arn scornfully, beginning to think less and less of the Companions the more he learned.

Aela turned to leave again before looking back one more time.

"For what it's worth....I do feel bad for her. She....deserved better than what she's gotten"

"You could've tried being more friendly and less like the others. She used to idolize you as a girl, you know"

Aela's countenance fell and he saw her look genuinely sad for the first time.

"Yes...well, at least things are looking up for her now"

"How so?"

"Well, she has you now"

"Yes, she's my Housecarl"

"Is that all she is to you?"

"What makes you think there's anything else to it?"

"Why are you so doggedly defending her then?" her sly grin returned
Arnsmyth simply huffed and rolled his eyes in reply as she nodded with a smirk and departed.

Several hours later, Arn groaned as he shoved through the door to Breezehome and un-shouldered his pack, suddenly surprised to find Lydia sitting at the table.

She had fallen asleep reading a book with her sword in one hand and a spent candle sitting just out of reach.

He chuckled and slowly pried the sword from her hand, carefully sliding the book out from underneath her face, and then slowly lifted her out of her chair, one arm under her legs, the other around her back and carried her up the stairs.

Despite everything he'd just done that evening, the soft warmth of her dark hair under his chin as her head lay against his shoulder, soft breaths rising and falling, was intoxicating and he felt like not setting her down, but he carefully laid her down in her bed and tucked the fur covers over her before retiring to his room.

Arn was so tired that he barely had any time to ponder the revelations he'd learned before he drifted off into dreamless sleep.
Chapter Summary

Fighting their way to the end of the Ustengrav ruins, Arn and Lydia are stunned to find what they came for isn't there. Taking a detour to Morthal, Arn and Lydia are greeted by a familiar foe.

"ARN! BEHIND YOU!" screamed Lydia.

Arn rolled left just as a greatsword clanked into the stone floor where he'd been. More draugr were pouring down the ramp into the area at the bottom of a large chamber where they'd been fighting for the last few minutes.

Was there no end to these things?

Arn realized with desperation they were getting overrun. Lydia was surrounded by three of them. Arn had two in front of him and two coming up from behind and about half a dozen more were shambling down the ramp.

"FUS RO DAH!" the force of the shout erupted going out from Arn, sending the two draugr in front of him along with most of the ones on the ramp flying off the side into the abyss below.

He spun around in time to block another greatsword blow with his shield, parrying the other one's axe blow with his sword.

Sidestepping left, he avoided another sword blow and came down on the draugr's arm, severing it and finishing it off with a slice across the neck.

He'd just pulled his sword free and blocked another axe blow when he felt his vision going blurry. *Not now...he hadn't even seen any runes!* There must be a word wall, as the Greybeards called them, somewhere close to him that he hadn't noticed before they'd been ambushed.

Now he was too close to it and images and words came rushing through his mind. He tried to resist, but that seemed to make it worse. He didn't even have time to call out for Lydia as he felt the magic seize hold of him, his vision darkening.

*Fine way to die, Arn, taken out by a draugr because you're stuck staring at some rutting wall and on the first time you take Lydia with you.*

There was no life flashing before his eyes as all that occupied his mind was the dragon tongue words as they imprinted themselves through the magic in his blood.

Then it was over and he was on his knees panting, staring at the moss covered stone alcove in front of him.

Spinning around, he realized Lydia was crouched next to him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you okay?" she asked, staring at him with those brandy brown eyes of hers.
"What do you mean 'Am I okay?' Are you okay?" he asked, turning this way and that to look at all the defeated draugrs lying dead or dead again, however you want to put it.

"I took care of them" she said, not removing her gaze from him "but what happened to you there? You didn't move or say a word for a minute there...just stared at this wall..."

"It was the dragon speech. Walls like these are etched in dragon tongue and usually the dragon blood in me reacts with them when I get close, making me lose control" he replied a bit sorrowfully.

"What exactly happens?"

"I end up learning a word or words in the dragon tongue...usually only one, but sometimes more"

"Hrm...well, do you feel alright?" she asked, looking him over as though the experience might have injured him in some way.

Arn noticed as she said it that she grimaced slightly, trying not to grit her teeth.

He turned his head and eyed her suspiciously.

"You never told me if you were fine or not"

"It's....nothing major" she replied with an obvious grimace this time.

Arn gently grabbed her by the shoulder and carefully turned her around to see a jagged cut on her hip between the back plate and leg plate of her steel armor.

"Lay down on your side" he ordered.

"But I'll be fine" she protested.

"Now who's the one saying 'It's not that bad'?" he mocked in the best Lydia voice he could muster.

She realized with a smile she was beaten and lay down as he removed a couple of potions and tried to move the armor aside to get at the cut.

After fumbling awkwardly for a few minutes, Lydia finally huffed, reached down and with a grimace shoved her armored leggings and breeches down to her thighs, exposing the creamy white skin of her midsection.

Unfortunately, the cut had delved right into where her smallpants went around the side. So when she shoved her breeches down, her smallpants came loose with them, leaving her naked from waist to thigh.

An intoxicating view marred only by the nasty cut Arn had been trying to get at.

Focus on the cut, Arn. Focus on the cut, he thought as he tried to resist taking in the firm curves of her buttocks and hip down to what her womanhood might look like.

"You didn't really have to do that" he muttered, trying not to sound interested or betray how hardened his cock was beginning to get.

"You were taking your sweet time, besides, these are useless and uncomfortable now" she replied, reaching down and pulling loose the cut smallpants and tossed them off into the abyss.

"Don't waste any potions if we don't have to. I trust your restoration stuff" she said in a very
nonchalant manner.

"Yeah, but I need to put something on it to prevent disease infection"

"Fine" she grimaced slightly as he dabbed on the contents of a potion.

Once he was finished, he slowly set his hand on her hip, the bluish light of his healing spell lighting up the darkness more than he'd thought it would, making him glance around to make sure nothing was suddenly appearing.

When he looked back to her, she had her eyes scrunched shut, biting her lip. The healing shouldn't hurt.

"Are you okay? Is something I did hurting more?" he asked with some concern.

Arn realized by now the cut was completely gone on the surface and he had been dragging his hand caressingly with the bluish healing light across from the top of her thigh to the top curve of her buttock and then back again.

"No, no, no. It's...fine...just...a little...more" she seemed to gasp.

Arn realized she wasn't in pain at all. She was...pleased by his touch....a lot. He also realized his cock was straining against his own armored breeches.

"That--uh--should be good--I think" he said, abruptly pulling away.

Get a hold of yourself, Arn, you fool. It's only been three days since you were rutting with Aela in the woods and you're already starting with this again.

"Yeah-uh--it's much better, I think too" she stuttered, sitting up and turning away from him in a sudden display of modesty, though it still left him with a complete view of her buttocks as she pulled her breeches back up.

"By the way, exactly how many draugr did you have to kill while I was standing here stupefied?" Arn asked, both genuinely curious and anxious to find some other subject to get his mind on.

"Well...um....six, I think" she replied a little sheepishly as they collected their gear.

"Six?! Wow, I guess I really owe you one" he exclaimed.

"No, you don't, silly. I'm your housecarl, remember. It's my job to save your arse, especially when it's standing there staring stupefied at everything" she smirked at him, feeling pretty good about finally venturing into somewhere along with him.

He eyed her mischievously but before he could come up with any retort, she continued in a little more serious tone.

"Besides, if you're really keeping tally, I'm pretty sure it would take me a long time to catch up on all the ones I owe you"

"Now, now, no more talk about that" he replied, not wanting her to think about what happened to her at all. "We really should push on and get this blasted horn the Greybeards want"

TWO HOURS LATER

"Damn it!" Arn yelled, kicking a skull across the platform and skipping off into the water on either
side of the ramp to get to the pedestal they were at.

"What did the note say?" asked Lydia

"Some rutting fool took the horn and wants me to go all the way back to Riverwood Inn to get it! TO PROVE MYSELF!"

"Did they give a name?"

"No! Just signed....a friend" he sneered in a mocking tone.

He huffed in anger, kicked the rib cage of the aforementioned skeleton again and sat down, frustrated beyond belief.

"What is it with these people?! The Greybeards won't tell me anything because they don't trust me. Whoever this is lets me travel halfway across Skyrim, only to demand I go all the way back to prove myself to them. Jarl Balgruuf heralds me with title and lands but refuses to tell me anything about.....ah! Damn them all!" he yelled again in anger echoing into the crypt they'd spent a day clearing.

He realized as he put his head in his hands, massaging the headache of frustration that Lydia sat down next to him, a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I can't speak for those people, but I trust you and I'm sure eventually others will see that you're exactly the man they need for these kinds of times....I'm not sure my saying so matters, but well...there it is" she said, looking into his eyes with a reassuring smile with her hand now at the base of his neck, consciously or subconsciously caressing the small locks of hair there.

Arn didn't say anything but her saying so did help...a lot. From wanting to just go kill the first person he came across, he felt more relaxed and the stress of wondering why people kept treating him this way was suddenly forgotten.

He pondered in silence for awhile, Lydia continuing her massaging of his neck as he thought.

"You know, we're not that far from Morthal. I grew up just to the northwest of there. I think it would be nice to see what it's like now. Maybe find old friends....maybe find some people that rutting trust me for once" he stated, rising to his feet with purpose.

"We could also use the opportunity to resupply" said Lydia, going to fetch the packs.

"Hopefully, the place isn't as much a disaster as the rest of Skyrim" said Arn wistfully, several childhood memories coming to mind.

Later that night, Arn sat by the bedrolls with Lydia's head in his lap as she slept. Sometimes she slept fine, like when they were in Breezehome, but when they were out in the wilds, she typically didn't and he would hold her hand or keep her head in his lap to shoo away the nightmares.

He wasn't uncomfortable about it anymore. Tonight though, his thoughts went back to his childhood.

Growing up in the swamps north of Morthal, he'd had plenty of adventures getting chased by a Spriggan or trying to trap a mudcrab but still fairly harmless compared to what seemed to be the perils of the roads these days.

The next day, Arn found himself in much better spirits at the thought of arriving in Morthal and seeing some old but known faces.
As they travelled through a pass toward the ravine Morthal lay housed in, Lydia's questions interrupted his reverie.

"So who was Jarl here when you left?"

"Sigmund Ravencrone...though, I heard about his death some time ago from another Nord in Cyrodiil."

"Idgrod Ravencrone has been the Jarl for awhile now"

"What? They made Idgrod the Jarl?" Arn asked incredulously.

"Yes, why?"

"Well, when I was a boy, she was a bit...well odd. Even though she was the Jarl's wife, no one knew quite what to make of her, though she was always nice to me. It was stuff about magic and visions that she would talk about that seemed to put people off."

"What did she used to say?"

"I don't know. I was a boy. I wasn't interested or even knew much about what visions or magic things people discussed."

"Anyone else there you might still kno--" her question cut short as they both fell silent to the unmistakable bellowing of a dragon echoed in the distance.

"No, not Morthal too..." Arn hissed, picking up speed.

They came over the last hill and looked down into the valley below to see a large red dragon sitting atop one of the larger structures breathing fire and smoke at the scurrying dots of people.

"Potions only!" shouted Arn as they both dropped their packs and started sprinting.

Lydia had the potions separated in a separate pouch so when she dropped her pack, she retained that pouch and kept pace with Arn.

It seemed like eternity and Arn's heart stung at every scream or yell he heard as they ran down the hill into the town.

As they arrived, Arn saw the dragon lunge down and snap a guardsman whole into its jaws as several others scrambled, firing arrows that mostly missed or plinked off plaiting, not finding their mark.

"AIM FOR THE WINGS! BRING IT DOWN!" bellowed Arn as he took several potions from Lydia and poured them over the steel armor he wore.

The dragon swooped off the building top and across the small lake in the middle of town, crashing through the roof into a house opposite and snapping up whoever was unlucky enough to be hiding inside.

Arn looked at the scene of chaos around him, fires raging on almost every building, a few bodies mangled and burnt here and there, guards huddled at the corners of buildings scurrying around enough to fire their bow before retreating, the smoke billowing out of two completely destroyed houses and townspeople huddled or scurrying this way and that.

"GET THEM INTO THE LAKE! GET THE PEOPLE INTO THE WATER!" continued Arn,
Lydia repeating him, beginning to usher the people huddled in place into the lake as Arn circled toward the dragon.

Arn continued yelling at people, even as he knocked and fired arrow after arrow into the dragon's right wing.

It only took about four arrows before it turned directly toward him, jaws gleaming crimson with blood and lunged through the wooden front of the house directly toward him.

Arn tried to line up a shot on its head, maybe even an eye shot and let fly, but the arrow hit just below its eye, though the impact near such a tender area cause it to momentarily recoil, giving Arn time to draw sword and shield.

Then the dragon belched flame. Arn was going to jump off into the lake, but had an idea and figured this was the best time as any to test the enchantments he'd paid Farengar to put on the steel armor in combination with the potions he'd drenched himself with.

Ordinarily, the Dragon's fiery breath would melt to a crisp whoever stood in its path particularly for any length of time. Not this time, though.

Arn crouched down, shield in front, the flames parting around him, the aura of magic visible to him along with the vapors of flame resistance of the potions he'd used.

He heard Lydia screaming his name frantically from across the lake partway and hoped she wasn't too terrified for his safety. They had talked about this plan before, just not when he would employ it.

Just as he was starting to feel his armor heating up and starting to burn underneath, the dragon let up, suddenly a lot closer and surprised Arn was not a pile of ash.

Arn sprinted forward, his whole armor still wreathed in flames from the aftermath of fiery breath.

Before the dragon could move or react, he stabbed directly into its face, aiming for the eye, but instead got the nostril when the dragon recoiled a little.

It recoiled its head up into the air before Arn had a chance to pull the sword out. At the sudden jerk of a stop up in the air, both Arn and his sword came dislodged from the dragon and continued flying up and backward.

He was probably thirty feet in the air now.

Not good.

He caught a glimpse of Lydia closing from the left of his view, still firing arrows.

Then he crashed into an unexpectedly soft landing in the straw matting of the roof of the Jarl's longhouse.

Just as he was thankful for the straw, though, the back of his head met a wooden beam very hard, a resounding crack ringing through his helmet.

That was gonna hurt in the morning.

As he got his footing, the dragon took wing and flew directly at him, intending to land on him feet claws first.

Arn took two steps back, then waited a second to get what he thought the distance was right as the
dragon was almost on him.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded in a whirlwind sprint straight into the dragon, blade first, the force of movement helping plunge the lightning crackling blade to the hilt into the dragon's torso right where the neck met the chest plating of the dragon.

"NOOOOOOOOOO DOVAAAACKHIIINNN!" growled the dragon as the power of the hit snapped it backward in midair, sending it crashing backward to the ground, shredding a dock, the broken wood cutting and impaling it in several spots, Arn riding it down with a firm grasp on his sword.

Before it could even flail or recover, Arn had removed his sword and charged its head.

It barely had time to right itself onto all fours amidst the wreckage of the dock and shallow water as Arn leaped onto its neck, plunging his blade down through its head.

It immediately shuddered slightly and then stilled with a collapse.

Arn stood astride its neck, gasping for breath as he immediately looked around to find Lydia running towards him with relief.

Not surprisingly, everyone in view was staring at him and the dragon.

"Are you okay?" she asked, mirroring the smile he had, they always had after defeating something like this.

Arn realized then there were still flames flaring up here and there on his armor.

"Well, it did its job, though I still feel a little sizzle" he remarked, causing her to frown a little and rummage through the pouch for a potion.

"Don't...save it for one of them" Arn said, motioning his hand around to the town "I have a feeling there's a lot of people that will need it"

"Right" said Lydia, scurrying away to help the guards as they helped people out of the lake and burning buildings and some were already setting up bucket lines from the lake to put out the fires.

As Arn caught his breath and moved off the dragon back toward the Jarl's longhouse, he kneeled again, feeling the pain in the back of his head from that beam.

He looked up to see an elderly woman in nice garb with a sweet smile on her face.

"Welcome, Flamewalker" she said in a squeaky but sure voice.

"Wh-What?" asked Arn as he was suddenly aware of the growing sound of wind coming from behind him where the dragon was.

"The one who walks in flames....I saw your coming..." was all Arn heard her say before the magic of the soul absorption seized him, lifting him in the air and filling his mind with images, some of them horrifying as he saw people chewed and devoured.

Instead of coming back out of it though, his mind went blank and he passed out.
Chapter Summary

Despite slaying a Dragon, Arn and Lydia are immediately tasked to sort out the strange disappearances around Morthal...

Arn awoke in a haze, a throbbing in his head keeping him still for the moment as he tried to get his bearings.

For some reason, the first thing he thought of was the feeling of Lydia pressed against him like they'd been that one night up on High Hrothgar.

Fool, get that out of your mind.

Then, his memory wandered to more recent times, rutting with Aela in the woods, the secrets he'd discovered, the crypt of Jurgen Windcaller, the dragon in Morthal, and Idgrod Ravencrone calling him 'Firewalker'.

He wondered again why he'd left Whiterun in such a rush. He'd sent a note to the companions that he would take up a position with them but had his own missions to deal with. He still wasn't sure what to do about the possible implications of Lydia's heritage.

On one hand, he didn't think it mattered for the future at all. On the other hand, he didn't want to be surprised if someone showed up someday to take her away. He also didn't want to somehow become a scapegoat if something did happen to her, ....or maybe that's what they wanted.

He just didn't know.

Well, she'd been entrusted to him, and he'd be damned if anything were to happen to her or some noble was going to swoop in and pluck her away to some posh lifestyle because they needed another heir. Of course if it were the Emperor himself, that would be trickier.

Listen to yourself, Arn. Trying to figure fighting off the Empire itself for her. Snap out of it.

In frustration, he sat up groaning, holding his head in his hands and opening his eyes for the first time that morning...or afternoon, whatever it was.

As the covers fell to his waist he realized two things: someone had removed his armor and most of his clothes, and he was not alone in the room.

He looked over to see Lydia sitting in her leathers in a chair not far from the bed glaring at a pretty dark haired young woman in cute blue peasant frock sitting about the same distance from the other side of the bed who glared back at her.

"Well, good morning to you too" muttered Arn while shifting himself slightly to check if he still had his smallpants on, which he thankfully did. He could also smell the strong scents of healing poultices and herbs in the room.

"Good morning, Flamewalker, how do you feel?" beamed the unknown young woman.
The youthfulness in her voice made Arn realize she couldn't have seen more than twenty summers.

"It's the evening, and I'm sure I can look after whatever he needs" snapped Lydia.

Obviously, there was some sort of rivalry going on here.

"Really? you sure you can take care of whatever he needs?" responded the younger woman with deliberate emphasis on the whatever while laying a soft hand on his arm.

"Yes! I most certainly can take care of whatever he needs anytime!" snapped Lydia, standing and placing a hand on her hip cocked to one side, repeating the emphasis on whatever.

Arn meant to stay stop or whoa but it got jumbled.

"Sto000aaa, stop--whoa" he said, waving his hands slightly "I'm fine, really"

"See? He's fine. Now go report back to mommy" responded Lydia harshly to the younger woman, who's countenance fell at the lack of opportunity to do anything.

She rose from her chair and placed a second soft hand on his well muscled left arm.

"Well, if you do ever need something, just let me know, okay?" she said in an overly reassuring tone before departing the room with a sweet smile back at him.

When she was gone, Lydia let out a loud huff of disgust while Arn chuckled.

"Well, she seemed eager to please" Arn said, enjoying watching Lydia's reaction a little more than he probably should.

"Tch...at least I was never THAT desperate during my maidenhood years" she said, still glaring at the door.

"Aw..I'm hurt now. You make it sound like I'd be such a bad catch" Arn said in mock sorrow.

"That's the problem. You're an ideal catch: landholder, has money, slays dragons, older, and good looking to boot" she replied nonchalantly as she turned to collect Arn's clothes and armor from over by the wall.

He thought she was teasing him at first, but the matter of fact way in which she said it implied she was serious.

He should just drop it or change the subject, but he just couldn't resist.

"So I should take her up on her offer then? Find me a young wife to start a family with?"

He caught the unmistakable hurt in her eyes as she turned her head to stare at him for a second before leaning over to gather his things.

"No, you obviously shouldn't" she replied, returning to the cool but disdainful demeanor she'd had.

Arn wondered if she was intentionally taking her time leaning over to make him stare at her leather clad arse as she swayed this way and that, taking longer than he thought she should to collect his things.

After a moment of silence, he couldn't resist continuing.
"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because....you're old, remember?" Lydia said, rising and depositing his stuff unceremoniously on the bed.

"Ouch" he chuckled

"Your words, not mine" she said half mockingly, raising both hands in a surrender fashion.

"Heh, I guess that's true..." he chuckled as he began sorting his things, noting they hadn't been cleaned and the dirt and dragon blood was still caked on some pieces of his armor.

"Have I been out long--"

"My apologies, my thane" Lydia blurted out, bowing her head "I didn't think it wise to clean your armor if it meant leaving you alone with...that...girl".

"It's okay. It'll enhance my appeal" Arn teased as Lydia glared back at him for a second before punching him playfully on the shoulder.

"You've been teasing me this whole time!"

"It was too fun to watch you get all worked up over some girl"

"She not just some girl. She's the Jarl's daughter, Idgrod the younger, though everyone here calls her Ingrid to keep from confusion"

"Ah, well, speaking of the Jarl, I assume we're in her Longhouse"

"Yes, it's been a couple of hours since you killed the dragon. I...got your armor off so myself and the town alchemist could apply a few things to the burns you had and that lump on your head. We're wanted downstairs whenever you feel up to it" Lydia finished, donning her own armor as they talked.

After Arn had gotten some privacy again, he checked to see if he needed to cast any healing on himself before donning his steel armor, gathering his things, and left the room to go downstairs.

As he came down, Lydia joined him and they approached the Jarl on her chair.

"Hey!" they were interrupted by a stout bearded man in a dress tunic who stepped in front of them "the Jarl asked you here for a specific purpose, not small talk. Unless she asks it of you, any of your concerns should be taken up with me."

"And you are?" asked Arn, visibly annoyed.

"Aslfur, the steward of Hjaalmarch"

"Were you born here, steward?" Arn continued with crossed arms.

"Well, no but--"

"Well, I was, and I grew up here. The Jarl is an old friend of mine and I'll talk with her about whatever I damn well please" Arn interrupted before stepping by him toward the Jarl, who had been talking with a little boy the whole time.

Arn recognized her as the old woman who'd greeted him right after he killed the dragon, but by the
gods, the years had not been kind to her.

By his reckoning, she should be no more than 62 years of age, but she looked as if one foot was already in the grave. No wonder he hadn't recognized her right away.

As they approached, she shooed the young lad off and smiled warmly at them.

At least he still recognized the same honest, generous smile she always had, but instead of raven black braided hair, it was grayish white and thinning.

Instead of pale skin with reddish cheeks, she had wrinkled skin and pale sunken features.

Instead of the country girl frocks the other Jarls used to mock her for wearing, she wore the usual richly silken robes of a Jarl or noble that hung too loose on her thin form.

"Kynsmyth's boy, my my, you've certainly grown into a fine man. I was very sad to hear about your father's death"

Arn bowed.

"And I was saddened to hear of your late husband's death, my Jarl"

"Yes, but that was...oh..twenty five years ago. I got another one now" she said, waving nonchalantly at Aslfur "and you don't have to call me by title, young man. I told you that a long time ago"

"Okay" replied Arn, rising to his feet "I wasn't sure how much you or anyone else here remembered of me or my family"

"Well, they'll sure remember what you did today"

"I did what I could"

Idgrod laughed a screechy and ragged laugh at that

"So modest in your manners...just like your father. He taught you well"

"Yes, he did"

"Why don't you join me for dinner so we can talk all about what you've been up to these...what...thirty years?"

"Of course...though, I was not expecting to dine in fine company...we don't hav--"

"Nonsense, you're fine just the way you are. Now, come on."

Over the next few hours, they sat at the Jarl's table, mostly listening to Arn talk about the things he'd done since leaving the Hjaalmarch with his father at the outset of the war, while Aslfur hovered around the room glaring at them like they'd committed some crime.

Arn left out any mention of Desarra, deciding there was no need for that much detail, though both Lydia and Idgrod still seemed to hang on every detail, both of them chiming in with questions every once in awhile.

"My goodness, that's quite the tale" said Idgrod quietly when Arn had finished.

"You...called me 'Flamewalker' when I first saw you. Can I ask why?" said Arn, his stomach
reminding him that he hadn't even touched his food yet.

"Last night, I had a vision of one wreathed in flames who would come to dispel darkness that haunts my people" said Idgrod in a completely serious tone, though Arn saw Lydia's eyebrow shoot up in surprise.

"Well, we dispelled the dragon for you. So I guess it worked out."

"No, that's not what I'm referring to"

Arn had a sudden uneasy feeling.

"So...what is...the problem here?"

"I don't know, but we've had too many suspicious disappearances or coincidences happen, and now the people are frightened. They feel we may be under some sort of divine chastisement...Psh...as if they knew the minds of the divines."

"So...what do you want me to do?" Arn asked, puzzled.

"To start with, look into the recent housefire. A small girl was killed and her father has acted...unusual for someone in his position. I'm commissioning you as my investigator. So you have my full authority to talk to anyone you need to. I suspect that as the Flamewalker, you'll find what you seek."

"Uh, okay" Arn murmured, trying to devour the now cold food that he realized he was getting really hungry for.

"When do we start?" piped up Lydia.

"As soon as we're done eating, I guess" replied Arn.

"But it's evening out"

"Yeah, that means we won't be interrupting anyone's work when we talk to them" muttered Arn through a mouthful of food.

Right then, Aslfur trotted up and whispered something in Idgrod's ear.

"Well, I must go, Arn, but it was so good to meet and talk again. I'm sure your path will be made clear soon. Let me know as soon as you find out" Idgrod said before rising from the table and retiring with a nod to each of them.

Once they'd finished eating, they set out from the Jarl's longhouse.

Unexpectedly, they got very little cooperation from the townsfolk. After an hour of inquiries, they found themselves with little to no information. Apparently, the townsfolk weren't terribly happy with the Jarl either.

Still, he had killed a dragon in front of them. Why wouldn't they at least trust him?

"I know you won't like this, Lydia, but we may need Ingrid's help if we can't get anyone from the town to talk to us"

Lydia huffed and crossed her arms.
"Surely not"

Arn was about to head that direction when he spotted a man heading into the Inn.

"Benor? Benor! Is that you? Do you remember me?" Arn shouted, hurrying over.

The burly Nord in hide armor stared dumbfounded for a moment before approaching Arn and staring for a moment more before clapping him on the shoulder.

"Arn! Arnsmymth Bulgoar! It really is you. I thought my ears deceived me when I heard you were back. Gods, man, we were only stripling lads since you were here last."

"Yes, it's been too long. Tell you what, let me get you a drink and we can talk about it inside"

"Sure"

Once inside, Benor was shocked when Lydia joined them at a table.

"Who's this fair lass? She with you Arn?"

"This is Lydia. She's my housecarl"

That caused Benor to freeze for a moment.

"You mean to tell me the Jarl made you a Thane after being back one day with some foreign beauty as your housecarl?"

"No, no, no, I'm a thane in Whiterun"

"Oh, okay then" said Benor, who seemed to relax again at that.

"What's got you so worked up about the Jarl making me a Thane?" asked Arn jovially, though also wary.

"That woman doesn't know what she's doing!" Benor hissed.

"I know she's always been a bit odd, but--"

"It's more than just that! She used to be a good Jarl, always looking after 'er people. Now, we never even see her hardly...stays shut up in 'er Longhouse, and we get stuck dealing with that arsehole, Aslfur, and don't even get me started on her 'visions" Benor replied with a sneer.

"So I gather she's not well liked" said Arn, taking a sip of mead.

"It all went to sot when that wizard, Farion showed up"

"Why do you say that?"

Benor's voice dropped to a whisper.

"You remember we never had any court wizards right? Nobody trusted 'em. Then one day this Farion shows up. Soon after, the Jarl gets pregnant, but she ain't supposed to, see? She's in her fifties. It shouldn't be possible, but it happens. Things don't go well and before you know it, they've called in this wizard sot to try to save the Jarl and her baby" he hissed before taking another swig of mead.

"So...what happened?" both Arn and Lydia asked at the same time.
"You've seen 'em haven't ya? The Jarl is all pale and sickly looking and her boy Jorric is....got something wrong in the head...he ain't all there, but they've been grateful and let the little wizard stay here these last eight years, and nothin's been right since" he finished, swigging on his mead again.

"What do you mean by 'nothing's been right'? What else has happened here?"

"Strange stuff...people disappearin for no reason, people behavin strangely, the dragon attack, people seeing ghosts in the swamps or in that burnt house that killed that poor little girl"

"What happened in that house?"

"Well" Bonar kept whispering "that's Hroggar's place. You remember, old Thornmare, well that's his boy, Hroggar...fire burned the place down, took the wife and child, but the sot moved in with Alva right afterward, like it didn't even happen!"

"Who's Alva?"

Benor's mood seemed to brighten and he stopped whispering.

"Who's Alva? you say? She's only the fairest lass this side of the Hjaalmarch and someday she'll see I'm the man for her"

"But she asked Hroggar to move in with her?" puzzled Arn as he noticed Lydia covering her mouth so as not to betray the smirk she was trying hard not to make.

"She probably just feels sorry for him. You'll see!" Benor stated loudly before swigging some mead again.

"Okay...uh..well, good luck to you on that and enjoy the rest of the mead, but I think it's time we headed out" said Arn, trying to disengage them before the questions or answers got any more awkward.

A few more awkward goodbyes and they'd managed to get back out into the night air and headed toward the burnt out house.

"Why are we going in a burnt up house at night?" asked Lydia as they stepped over some rubble through the doorway.

"Well, if there's anything amiss in regards to ghosts or thieves, this is probably the time to find out" muttered Arn as he squatted down, torch in hand to scan the floor.

"Ghosts?" asked Lydia skeptically.

"Clearly, you've never spent any time in Aeyleid ruins."

"So...if you've fought ghosts before, how...do you do anything to them if they're...all...ghostly" she said, waving her hands nebulously in the air.

"Elemental, they really don't like the elements..." Arn trailed off as he moved around, looking at the floor.

Without warning, Arn's torch suddenly blew out and they heard the faint sound of a child giggling.

"Have you come to play...........I love playing hide and seek...." the voice said as it seemed to come from one spot then another in the room.
As they looked around, they caught a fleeting glimpse of a little girl, completely white and ethereal, darting here and there, appearing and disappearing into thin air.

Lydia's hand went to her sword, but Arn held his hand up to stay her from drawing it.

"Are you Helgi?" Arn asked tentatively.

"My mom said I'm not supposed to talk to strangers.......but she's gone now.......only the other one comes to play with me....." continued the ethereal child.

"Who's the other one?" asked Arn.

"You have to play....hide and seek with me or I'm not telling...." said the child as the voice drifted out behind the house.

Even as they jumped through a burnt out opening, they caught sight of the whitish child's form hopping over the rocky outcropping further up the hillside.

"Come on, we can't lose her" muttered Arn as they climbed up the hillside.

They heard another giggle as they came over the hill and made their way down several large rocks before emerging near the cemetery.

Arn caught a glimpse of white, as he saw Helgi peaking at him from a rock and ran towards her.

He was stunned to round the rock only to find a cloaked figure hunched over a newly uncovered grave.

The figure turned to reveal a pretty blonde nord woman glaring at him, but something was wrong with her. Her eyes seemed to glow reddish and her skin looked unusually pale.

She hissed at him and bared fangs from her mouth. Vampire.

She sprang at him and Arn had no time to unsheathe his sword or shield.

"FUS RO!"

The force of the Thu'um caught her only a foot from him and she was hurled back against the newly resurrected casket with a sudden look of shock and terror.

She didn't have time to attack again. Arn had armed his sword and shield and was on her before she could do anything.

Closing distance, he ran her through the heart with his crackling ebony longsword just as she sprang back to her feet.

She stared at him, hissing for a moment as she spasmed and then slumped down, her body shrinking a bit and the red light dying from her eyes.

Arn was suprised when Lydia suddenly appeared to his left and cleaved off the vampire's head with her sword, stabbing the head again before it could roll far.

"She was...dead already..." he murmured, glancing around for signs of Helgi.

"Rule number one, remember? I didn't think you could just kill vampires like that anyway. So I wanted to be sure" replied Lydia, prying her sword from the disembodied head.
"Have you seen where Helgi went at all?" asked Arn, still pacing back and forth looking.

"No, but maybe it has something to do with this" said Lydia pointing at the coffin from the uncovered grave.

Arn looked at it more thoroughly and realized it was Helgi's grave and the coffin half open was hers.

"No wonder she still haunts the town...her grave's been desecrated by these vampires" he said, nervously looking around.

"Wait, you mean there's more of them?"

"There's always more than one" said Arn, sheathing his sword and setting to work fixing the casket back in the hole and burying it again.

"WAIT! WAIT! What are you doing?!" came an unknown man's cry from the darkness, causing them both to draw their blades again as the man ran up.

A young man ran up to them with wide eyes, stopping in his tracks as he saw their drawn blades and the body of the vampire on the ground.

"What--what's going on here?" he asked in a shaky voice, out of breath from running.

"I could ask you the same" replied Arn harshly "Let's start with a name and why you're out here following us."

"I'm--I'm Thonnir. I was--I thought--maybe you might know something about what happened to my wife, Laellette."

"Why would we know anything about that?"

"Be--because I he--heard you were helping the Jarl investigate the st-strange things going on around here" stuttered Thonnir nervously as Lydia circled him with sword and shield still trained on him.

"And what happened to your wife?" asked Arn, eyeing Thonnir for any sign he might be a vampire.

"She-she disappeared one day...went to visit Alva, who said she left to joint the Legion, but I don't believe it! She wouldn't just leave me like that!"

"Alva again..." muttered Arn, relaxing and re-sheathing his sword, content Thonnir was no vampire.

"When did you last see your wife and what did she look like?" asked Arn pensively as he went back to burying Helgi's casket.

"She was a pretty young Nord, short blonde locks and blue eyes...every Nord man's dream really....last saw her two days ago. She was--hey, Hey! What are you doing?! That's--" cried Thonnir as he noted Lydia moving the head and body of the vampire away.

"NNOOOOO..no no no!" Thonnir cried, falling to his knees, ripping away Laellette's head from Lydia, and clutching it to his chest protectively.

"YOU DID THIS!" he snarled angrily at Arn.

"She was a vampire" replied Arn calmly, continuing shoveling.

"SHE NEVER HURT ANYONE!"
"She tried to kill me"

"YOU NEVER GAVE HER A CHANCE!" Thonnir started sobbing.

"She desecrated this child's grave and attacked me as soon as she laid eyes on me" replied Arn with a sigh, packing the remaining dirt down on Helgi's grave.

Lydia tried to put a calming hand on his shoulder, but he shrunk away.

"Leave me alone!"

She turned and gave Arn a 'what do we do now' look he was familiar with.

Arn strode up and put a firm grip on the man's shoulder that couldn't be shook off and forced him to look him in the face.

"There's always more than one vampire. Who did this to Laellette? Who made her this way? There's nothing more you can do for her than remember her as she was and help us stop whoever's doing this. You can do that for her, can't you?"

Thonnir didn't say anything at first, just nodded his head affirmative while clutching the head closer to him.

"A-Alva...it had to be her....sh-she was the last one Laellette went to see..."

"Makes sense" said Arn, rising and turning as Lydia grabbed his arm and pointed toward the hillside.

Near the top, they could see the whitish form of a woman, like Helgi had been. They heard the faint girlish giggling they'd heard before and saw Helgi appear next to the woman, holding hands with her.

The woman raised a hand and waved at them before crouching to hug Helgi as they both vanished into the night air.

"Wow" Lydia couldn't help but mutter as they both looked at the dark hillside.

"Come on, Thonnir, we need to talk to the Jarl" said Arn, pulling him up on his feet.

Twenty minutes later, and after having to use Laellette's disembodied head as a threat to Aslfur, they'd finally gotten to talk to the Jarl about what they'd discovered, left Thonnir there to recover, and had been able to get access to two silver longswords from the Jarl's previous husband's belongings and a silver dagger from a town guard.

"So...take out the brain or stab them in the heart is the only way to kill them, right?" asked Lydia a little nervously as they packed up their potions and double checked their armor.

Sensing an unusual trepidation from her, Arn turned her to look at him.

"You charge dragons without fear. What has you worried about vampires?"

Blushing a little with shame, she averted his look, fidgeting with her armor.

"I don't know. Before tonight, I'd never seen or done anything with ghosts or vampires. It was all hearsay....I don't know. I guess I just like knowing I can kill whatever I'm facing. You always seem like you've fought everything and faced all odds before and that's why you're so confident. I--wish I had that kind of confidence" she finished, looking up into his eyes, seeming to look for an answer in
"Rule Thirteen: There's always something else out there you haven't seen" Arn replied, pausing a moment for her to think about it before continuing "I'd never seen or killed a dragon until I came to Skyrim, and I'd never met a ghost that wasn't trying to kill me until tonight."

She seemed to brighten up a little, though still pensive.

"There's also Rule Two: Everything can be killed somehow" Arn said, turning and bringing both the silver and ebony longswords up to look at in front of him

"Everything can be killed somehow" he repeated, sheathing one on each side of him and picking up his shield "Ready to go bring true death to these nightwalkers?"

"Yes" she said firmly, picking up her own gear in the more usual calm and determined manner he was used to seeing.

By the time they emerged from the Longhouse, it was light out already, as Arn had hoped.

Lydia took up position around back of Alva's house while Arn approached the door.

Fiddling with a key he'd been given by the Jarl, he tried to quietly unlock the door, but the key wouldn't work and he heard someone approach the other side.

"Who's there! What do you want?!" hissed a nervous male voice.

"I need to talk to Alva. I have a message for her from Benor" lied Arn.

"She doesn't want anything to do with Benor!"

"I was told to ask her in person"

"Well, you can't...she's...not feeling well"

"Look, at least let in so I can write the message down for you"

"No! Come back with a note and slide it under the door!" came the annoyed muffled response.

"Well, I tried to be nice..." muttered Arn as he readied the silver longsword and shield of Whiterun.

"FUS!"

The wave of power shattered one of the windows and Arn barreled in immediately after, clattering through some chairs before coming to a halt.

"You will never touch her!" came an angry Hroggir from by the door, picking up a dagger from somewhere and charging him.

But Hroggir was not a fighter, and Arn easily bashed him aside with his shield, sending him clashing into a cabinet, dishes flying and breaking on the floor.

At that moment, Lydia came flying through the glass from another window, rolling on the floor up into a guard stance in a move that impressed Arn greatly.

"Watch this one. He's a thrall of hers but fairly harmless" said Arn, canvassing the room and bedroom before heading downstairs into the basement.
A few good kicks sent the locked door flying open to reveal a candlelit room with an ornate casket on a pedestal in the center, small bouquets of flowers littering the area around it.

As he stepped in, the casket lid flew off abruptly and the young Vampiress Alva herself sat up and spun around to see Arn.

Arn had been told she was beautiful, but was still unprepared for how it struck him.

Brownish black locks in alternate braids hung to her shoulders as she climbed out, her light tan skin adorned with gold bracelets and a ruby necklace that matched the red glow of her eyes as she stood facing him. She wore a fancy version of a bar wench's frock that came to her knees with a slit up the thigh and a plunging neckline that exposed most of her prominent breasts to the light as they seemed pushed together and straining against the straps of the top.

"My my, aren't you a strong one...did you come here for me?" she purred.

Arn should have attacked already, finishing her before she could even get out of the coffin, but he'd been too dumbstruck for the moment.

Now, he seemed transfixed by her glowing eyes and smooth tan skin, feeling himself unable to talk.

In the back of his mind, Arn knew he was being charmed, failing to resist a spell she'd exerted on him the moment they encountered each other. He should be resisting, but all he could do was sink to his knees to the floor, gritting his teeth even as he said words he didn't mean.

"Y-yes"

"Mmmm....you're a fighter...good, I can use a fighter" she purred, sauntering towards where he knelted.

He didn't respond this time, trying to focus his mind on why he was there.

"Tch tch tch" she tisked "You're forgetting...you came here for me" she purred as she reached up and slipped a dress strap off one shoulder, letting one half fall down, exposing her sumptuous left breast as Arn continued gritting his teeth.

She smiled seductively at him before turning slightly and slipping the other strap off, letting the dress fall to the floor, leaving her completely naked as she had nothing on underneath.

Arn's mind was losing. He couldn't remember what his name was or why he'd come there. All he was beginning to wonder was what it would feel like to touch her..to explore her....to belong to her.

"Do you want to be mine?" she purred again, slowly sauntering towards him and caressing her right breast with her hand, running her hand around it and pulling up her nipple before running her hand down to her hip as she came to stop in front of him, the small patch of hair at her womanhood right as his eye level.

"Do you want to be mine?" she said again, stopping and leaning down in front of him, the red orbs of her eyes inches from him and her breasts hanging down just in front of him.

All he had to do was say 'yes'. All he had to do was reach out and he could partake of her, become part of her, he thought, as he stared at the smooth tan skin of her breasts swaying in front of him, but some part of his mind was screaming warnings, bucking and resisting, though lessening by the second.
He looked up at her eyes again and reached up to caress her locks of hair as the word formed on his lips.

"Arn? Arn, is everything good down there?" came Lydia's voice from the top of the stairs.

Instantly, Lydia's voice seemed to cut through everything.

The charm was broken and Arn realized he was kneeling in front of a naked Vampiress he'd come to stop.

Alva's eyes widened for a second as she realized her hold was broken, but before she could do anything, Arn came up hard with a shield bash, sending her stumbling back away from him as he got to his feet.

As Arn got into a defensive stance, Alva got onto all fours and hissed at him, baring her fangs before she sprang the eight feet between them in the air, fangs bared straight at his neck.

He got his shield up in time for her to clatter into it and they struggled awkwardly for a moment before he felt her plant a foot on each of his arms and leap up.

He spun around, expecting her to be there, but found no one. Too late he realized she must be on the ceiling and a hiss followed by a whoosh of air above him let him know he was about to be pounced on.

Fortunately, he shifted left at that moment and the fanged bite Alva had aimed for his neck hit on the plate of steel armor covering his right shoulder with a painful CLACK.

They struggled awkwardly around for a moment, Alva clambering a hold on him with all fours, trying to get a bite through his armor while Arn struggled to disengage her.

Finally, Arn dropped his sword, reached back and grabbed a handful of her hair with his right hand, dropped to one knee, and simultaneously jerked her over the top of him by her hair, pulling her free with a hiss as she rolled across the floor in front of him.

"You WILL be mine" she hissed again as she righted herself into a squat, then charged him.

Unnaturally fast, Arn barely had time to retrieve his sword from the floor before she was on him, but he brought the bottom edge of his shield up, catching her under the arms and above her breasts, and drove her back into the wall, stabbing her through the heart with the silver longsword into the wall, backing away as she spasmed for a moment before hissing hatred at him before she expired.

Arn heard a commotion upstairs before he heard Hroggir's cries and people running down the stairs.

"Alva! Alva! My love!" he cried, bursting into the room and wailing at the sight of his naked mistress beginning to shrivel slightly, still stuck against the wall by the silver longsword.

"Mistress...Mistress please...come back" Hroggir wailed, on his knees, pleading with Alva's body.

Then Lydia was next to Arn.

"I am sorry, I was too preoccupied with what was going on down here and he got loose"

"It's okay" murmured Arn, beginning to realize just how close he had been to becoming just like Hroggir.

The thought forced him to shiver involuntarily, looking at his hands, clenching them to force them
not to shake, but Lydia still noticed.

She crouched down next to him, putting her shield down and took one of his hands in hers.

"Are you okay, Arn?" she said, the warm touch of her hands and concern in her voice helping to bring him back to the moment.

"I am now" he said, smiling over at her, feeling incredibly comforted and relieved to have her at his side again.

As they were talking, they heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs as the town guards arrived.

"Ew, uck..." Arn heard them exclaim. Then he looked over to see Hroggir had removed Alva's body from the wall and was acting like a madman trying to get a response from it.

He had bit his hands, dripping bits of blood on it, massaging it and thrusting against it as he whispered nonsensical things to it frantically.

"Get him out of here!" barked Arn, breaking the surreal silence of the room.

The town guards dragged Hroggir kicking and screaming from the room as Arn and Lydia threw Alva's body back in her casket and looked over the rest of the room.

"So, it's all over then?" said Lydia after they had gone over everything.

"No" replied Arn sadly "It's just the beginning" he said, holding up Alva's journal.
"This is very troubling" replied Idgrod Ravencrone as Arn and Lydia watched her peruse Alva's journal.

"Do you know anything about this 'Movarth Piquine' she talks about?" queried Arn.

"Yes...long time ago...shortly after you and your father left, when my first husband still lived, Movarth came to this area and we thought we killed him, but apparently he either got the wrong vampire or didn't finish the job..."

"Any idea where we would look for him?"

"Yes...there is a cave dubbed 'movarth's lair' since that's where we supposedly killed him years ago, though, of course no one goes there now"

"Well, I'll need some help if we want to take out the whole group this time and make sure they stay gone" replied Arn, thoughtfully stroking the stubble of a beard that was beginning to show.

"Recruit whoever you need to. There should be plenty of angry townsfolk eager for revenge"

"Eh...well, I was hoping for fighters...not farmers" Arn said, hoping he didn't sound as condescending as he felt for saying it, but after his experience with Alva, the prospect of sending regular townsfolk up against a master vampire's followers seemed like a recipe for disaster.

"I'm afraid there's not much I can do to help you there. We've only got a handful of town guards. You're welcome to take them, but otherwise you'd need to make the two day journey to Solitude to get help from Jarl Elisif or the Legion outpost there."

"Except we can't afford to wait that long. With every passing hour, we run the risk of Movarth discovering what's happened and fleeing, or relocating and attacking us when we least expect it. Our best chance at this is now."

"Then...you'll have to make do with what you have. I have confidence in you, Flamewalker" Idgrod smiled at him, closing Alva's journal.

"Then we have some more preparing to do" Arn said, rising with a bow before departing to his quarters to assess his gear again.

He heard the door open and shut behind him as he eyed the nasty scratch left by Alva's teeth on the shoulder part of his armored breastplate.

"You'll need to go to the Alchemist for some more potions, I think. Tell her it's for the Jarl and she shouldn't charge anything" muttered Arn, assuming it was Lydia, but the soft touch of a girl's hand on his left forearm proved him wrong and he turned quickly to see Idgrod the younger standing
there.

She still smiled at him like before, still wore the blue country frock, but something about her made him uneasy.

For some inexplicable reason, the image of Alva standing naked before him, offering herself to him flashed briefly across his mind and he remembered how powerless and at the same time how enraptured he’d felt, completely able for those seconds to forget everything else in Skyrim, the war, the dragons, the myths, the bandits, the jarls.....nothing had mattered but he and she, gloriously naked before him.

He was shaken out of his reverie by the gentle shake of Ingrid's soft hands on his biceps, since her hands were too small to encompass his arms.

"Flamewalker! Flamewalker? Are you well?" she asked, the smile replaced by a frown of concern.

"I..uh..I...was just...my mind wandered, I'm afraid. I'm sorry if it frightened you" replied Arn, shaking his head slightly, as though the physical act could dislodge the memory.

"Maybe you should sit down and rest for a bit" she said, gently pushing him to sit on the edge of his bed, "You've been up all night and all day. You shouldn't strain yourself too much" she said, laying the back of her hand across his forehead as if checking for fever.

Arn grinned slightly, but tried not to show it.

"I've done so many times before, lass. I think I'll survive one more time" he replied, trying to sound reassuring, though he felt like it came out in a more condescending manner than he meant, which made him feel a bit guilty since she was genuinely trying to help, albeit he knew she was interested in him in a more than charitable way.

"We've never had someone who could do the things you do here, especially one of our own. I don't think I could bear it if something happened to you" she said quietly, intensely gazing into his eyes.

"Well..uh...you have no fear of that happening...I--"

"Vampires are supernatural foes, faster, stronger and more vicious than any mortal man" she interrupted as he realized she was caressing up his arm.

"But they can still be killed like any ma--"

"It is said that some vampires have the power to charm men, making them forget themselves for eternity in slavish devotion to them...that's what happened to Hroggir, isn't it?"

Her statement had silenced him as he remembered how close he had come to such a fate and the image of Alva offering herself to him flashed through his mind again, causing him to put his head in his hands, groaning in frustration.

"Flamewalker" Ingrid said sweetly, lifting his chin with her soft hand so that he faced her "I--"

Right then the door flung open, and a huffing and puffing Lydia stood staring with a shocked look at them for a moment.

Then before Arn realized what was happening, Lydia tossed the bag she was carrying on the floor, marched straight to them, tackled Arn onto his back and planted her lips fiercely against his, sending pieces of his steel armor clattering off the bed.
Arn was in a state of bliss for a few seconds as the warm curves of Lydia's body pushed into his as they tasted of each other lips and mouths, Lydia's hands grasping the sides of his head firmly so that he saw and felt nothing but her.

Even as he felt the round globes of her breasts pushing against him through their leathers and her shoulder length raven brown hair curtaining his face, he felt his arms leaving the bed to envelop her, but then it was over.

She pulled up and hopped off the bed, leaving him in a daze as his senses tried to regain themselves.

As he sat up with his head spinning, he realized the whole thing had happened right next to Ingrid, who still sat on the edge of the bed with her mouth hanging slightly open and glaring death at Lydia.

Lydia nonchalantly straightened her clothes and pushed her hair back behind her ears before turning a stern gaze at Ingrid.

"I told you I would take care of anything at anytime" she said with venomous emphasis "Now, if you don't mind. We need to get prepared" she finished with a sultry and insinuating tone.

Ingrid rose with a huff and Arn felt bad for her as he could see the moisture of tears beginning to form in her eyes as she spun and stormed out.

"That was rather...harsh...and uncalled for" said Arn after Ingrid had slammed the door and they were alone for a few moments.

"As uncalled for as..say...sneaking in here to seduce you while I'm not here?"

"She wasn't seducing me!"

"Oh truly? Why was she here then?"

"She was just....worried...I guess...she's just a girl--"

"She's a girl in the midst of her maidenhood and you're the big, strong town hero who HAPPENS to be very eligible right now!" interrupted Lydia.

"Did you see me doing anything with her?" retorted Arn a little angrily.

"I saw you sitting with her on your bed alone with her hands all over you! What am I supposed to think?"

"Did you think I was actually going to take advantage of her?"

"No, I figured you were going to do nothing until she took advantage of you."

"I am not the communal kissing post" glared Arn.

"No, you're far too skilled a kisser to be mistaken for a post" grinned Lydia mischievously as she went to retrieve the bag she'd entered the room with.

"I get the feeling you're not sorry for that at all" replied Arn, trying to still be angry with her, sitting on the bed with his arms crossed.

"Nope, not one bit" she replied, beginning to sort out small phials and bottles she'd obviously just gotten from the alchemist's store.
"So...why did you decide to...kiss me. You could have just asked her to leave."

"I thought I would kill two birds with one stone" Lydia replied, still rummaging through the bag, not looking at him "I knew she'd leave if I kissed you and I also thought maybe I could help you after what happened at Alva's house"

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's heard the stories about vampiresses bewitching mortals, and I'd seen how Hroggir behaved. When I came downstairs and saw a look in your eye I'd never seen before, I knew something must have happened that you hadn't anticipated" Lydia said, becoming more solemn as she spoke and stopped sorting phials to turn and look intently at him.

"I knew she must have tried to charm you and it must nearly have worked. So...I figured...if you have to go face more vampiresses, then maybe it would be good to have something else in your mind to remember other than some sick creature's attempt on your soul...It might help if anymore try...anything" she finished, sitting down on the edge of the bed and picking up pieces of his armor.

After a few moments of silence, Arn finally spoke.

"You know, that's a little disturbing"

"What?!" asked Lydia, suddenly worried as though she'd somehow gotten it wrong.

"That you can read my mind so easily sometimes" Arn said, rising from the bed and beginning to put on his armor with Lydia's help.

"Hah! I'm your housecarl. It's my job to read your mind" she said with a smile as she helped buckle another piece on.

It's a good thing you can't read my mind all the time, thought Arn, as memories of more intimate encounters played through his mind as he remembered their passionate frolic only moments earlier.

He realized as he relived the taste and feel of her lips in his mind, that his cock had been hardening the whole time and was now painfully pressing against his trousers.

"I'll...uh...finish up here and meet you downstairs if you want to go check to see who's coming with us" muttered Arn, turning away from her, trying to get his armored greaves on so Lydia wouldn't notice.

"Okay" she replied, cinching on the satchel of potions before picking up her weapons and departing.

Arn was surprised when he later emerged from the Jarl's longhouse to a rousing cheer of townsfolk and guards as a fairly large party was assembled to take down the vampires.

Even as they marched through the marshes outside Morthal, Arn pondered what to do.

There was no way he could send some of these people up against vampires. The perfect example was Thonnir, leading the way, yelling and making more dramatic gestures than the others but wasn't even holding the sword he'd procured from somewhere correctly.

Arn noted that as they travelled, the fervor of the group was diminishing notably.

By the time they reached the rocky outcropping with an opening down into the earth, no one was shouting or making any gestures. They all stood staring at the cave opening silently.
Arn made a decision.

"Well, why don't you all take up a...perimeter position at the opening here to keep any from escaping while Lydia and I go in and clean 'em out?"

After a moment or two of silence, a couple of them nodded and gruffly agreed as Arn and Lydia moved forward and entered Movarths lair.

Upon entering, they both went into the sneaking manner Arn was used to and Lydia was trying to master.

Arn pulled up, trying to think of any other ways they could even the odds.

"I'm guessing they won't chase us into any bear caves..." whispered Lydia.

"No....but we might turn the tables on them a bit" whispered Arn back

"How?"

"I'm better at sneaking. So I'll get in place, then signal you. You'll make a loud noise on purpose and when they come after you, I'll pounce."

"I guess I can be loud if need be" smirked Lydia.

"Not too loud...don't want the entire clan on us at once"

"Very well" she replied, then leaned up against his back and kissed the side of his neck before nipping on his ear with her lips "Just remember, there are better things out there than anything the vampires offer" she whispered huskily before pulling away.

But Arn wasn't letting her off that easily.

As she turned to sneak further back from him, he reached back and hooked his hand underneath her armor, pulled up and slid his hand down the back of her breeches, cupping the soft skin and hard muscle of her left buttock as she gasped loudly.

"You too" he said louder than he meant to as he pulled his hand back out.

Arn sneaked forward, coming to a narrower portion of the passage that afforded a good ambush point on the rocky ledge above.

Getting in position, he signaled Lydia, crouched about twenty feet back, who made a loud scuffling noise and a cough.

"Who goes there?" immediately responded a voice. After getting no response, Arn heard soft footsteps and shortly thereafter, a cloaked figure appeared in the passage.

Spotting Lydia, it hissed but didn't have a chance to do much else as Arn was already airborne from his perch, landing behind the cloaked vampire, bringing his sword straight down, cleaving the skull in two.

Taking no chances, Lydia stabbed it through the heart as they moved on.

They repeated this process several times without problem until they encountered what looked to be a well lit area and likely had more than one occupant.
They repeated the ambush tactic, but this time there were three of them with noise further down that indicated more were coming.

"FUS RO DA!"

The powerful blast of force plastered two of them to the ground as Arn attacked, but the third was already almost on Lydia who crouched ready with sword and shield.

Arn stabbed one through the heart before he could get up but the second one sprang up and leaped at him, barely enough time for him to get his shield up.

Pivoting, he pushed the hissing vampire aside with his shield and tried to finish it off even as he heard Lydia make a fierce battle cry as she clashed with the vampire attacking her.

Unfortunately, Arn had shoved his attacker too far away to finish off and by the time he'd closed with him, the vampire, a large male breton, stood ready, pulling two daggers from his leather armor.

Giving him a fanged grin, the vampire attacked with a flurry of arcing slices from both daggers, Arn able to block most of them, but one or two glanced off his shoulder and arm plating of his armor.

Taking a few moments to get the timing of the vampire's faster than normal movements, Arn waited, then stepped in, catching the right dagger with his shield while taking the vampire's left arm off with a clean slice from his longsword before driving it backward and finishing it off with a stab through the heart.

Pulling his sword out, he cut off it's head and spun around to see the first vampire standing over Lydia kneeling on the floor.

"LYDIA!" he yelled, sudden panic seizing him as he began sprinting toward her.

Then he saw the blade of her sword was sticking through the vampire's heart and her shield was clutched over her head as she pushed it back off her and it fell over spasming in death throes.

"What happened to being stealthy?" she chided him with a smirk while panting from exertion.

Arn stopped and put his hands on his knees, suddenly aware how fast his heart was beating and glanced around to make sure no more were appearing only to see a female bosmer vampire appear in the doorway with blood dripping from her mouth and chin.

Arn immediately got his sword and shield up, but the woman didn't attack, instead she sauntered towards him, licking the blood from around her lips, staring him in the eyes.

"Don't you want to see what I have to offer first?" she croaked, Arn realizing her attempts at being sultry were nowhere near as good as Alva's had been, though he began to feel thatuzzy cloud effect trying to assault his mind as she tried to gain hold with her charm.

Sensing she wasn't getting a hold of him, the woman untied the sash at her middle and slowly stepped out of the robe she wore and tossed it aside, leaving her in only some generic leather smallpants and breast strap.

"I have sooo....much to offer...if you'll only be mine" she said a bit more nervously.

Arn had an idea then. He slowly lowered his shield and sword, walking toward her slowly in an apparent dumbfounded state.
The vampiress smiled, thinking she was finally getting somewhere.

"Arn! Arn, what are you doing?! Snap out of it!" he heard Lydia screaming, clattering to her feet as she tried to get to them.

"Become mine....and you may partake of me...don't you want that?" she hissed at him through her fanged mouth, reaching back to free the knot holding the breast strap on as Arn tried to keep up the facade as he got to within arm's length of her.

Then he sprung his trap. The vampiress only had a brief moment to realize she had been the one getting played as Arn's sword swept up and across, severing her head from her body.

"No...not really" spat Arn in retort to the Vampiress's last question as her body fell to the floor "and THAT is how you charm a vampiress" smirked Arn as he turned to find Lydia relaxing her bow and arrow she'd readied, letting out a big sigh of relief.

"You had me worried there" she said, putting away her bow and arrow to ready her sword and shield again.

"Well, now that they all know we're here, maybe we should try a different approach...I'll lead and draw attention while you pepper them full of arrows"

"Sounds good to me" said Lydia, getting her bow back out.

They advanced a little less slowly now, taking out two in the next area and then a lone straggler before coming on a strange passageway with scaffolding around it.

Arn made a motion and they slowly climbed the scaffolding and crept slowly forward since it was harder to move quietly on the wood.

The passage opened up into a large haze filled room with at least a dozen vampires armed and ready for them positioned in different spots around a cavern whose central piece was a large candlelit banquet table hideously filled with scraps of flesh, bones and fruits.

What got Arn's immediate attention was the vampire seated at the head of the table. A good head and shoulders above the others, the vampire also didn't look right, even for a vampire.

He had a large, unnaturally thick head and neck with a protruding jaw full of sharpened teeth, not just fangs. Wearing fine noble robes, he sat lackadaisically eyeing his followers, for surely this must be Movarth Piquine.

Thankfully, none of them had expected Arn to be up on the scaffolding and now he had a commanding view of the room and its inhabitants without their knowledge.

Arn made motion to Lydia to stay put as he slowly eased himself further off to one side across more scaffolding so that they were a good twenty to thirty feet apart and readied his bow as she did the same.

Take out the supporters first, or the master? wondered Arn.

Surely Movarth was the more dangerous, but engaging them all at once was precisely what Arn wanted to avoid, so he had to have some way of thinning their numbers.

Pointing out a target to Lydia, Arn took aim at the farthest cloaked figure off to the left side.

Exhaling his breath, he let fly and the arrow flew truly, thudding through chest and heart of the
vampire as it flailed and fell to one side, Lydia's arrow striking truly shortly after, hitting another vampire in the head.

Two down, eleven to go.

Arn was already picking out his next target as the figures in the room moved in response to their unseen assault.

Several rushed to the fallen one while others closed on the passage opening, while several others huddled near Movarth either to protect him or maybe hoping he would protect them.

Arn began firing at will, picking off one then another of the ones closing on the passage opening, hoping to reinforce the idea that they were in the passage further down.

Lydia continued firing as well, though her shots weren't as accurate, hitting one in the arm and another in the chest, but not through the heart.

As they scrambled toward the passage, the foremost one finally noticed after the vampire next to him got an arrow through the head that it came from higher up and sprinted, leaping up toward Lydia.

She was ready though, and with arrow already knocked, nailed him through the heart, the force of the shot just enough to make him fall short of his mark and clamber against the front of the scaffolding before he fell.

Arn was knocking another arrow when the vampires finally pinpointed their location and one leapt at Lydia.

Three more followed suit, leaping the ten feet off the ground toward Lydia, who had dropped her bow and was trying to get her shield and sword up.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The force of the shout caught all three midair and threw them back against the stone, pulverizing one of them, which surprised Arn since he'd never done that with that shout before.

Singling out another one, Arn let fly with another arrow, missing his mark as the arrow flew past its head.

"HERE! BLOODSUCKERS!" cried Lydia, pounding her shield threateningly to get their attention, hoping they wouldn't notice Arn, though the dragon shout had nullified any chance of that.

Surprisingly, during this whole thirty seconds of mayhem, Movarth Piquine hadn't moved an inch from his chair. He simply sat with an amused? or threatening smirk on his face...hard to tell which with all those teeth showing.

As if in response, he waved his hand to those around him to attack them.

Arn kept nocking and firing, arrow after arrow, with Lydia bashing or slicing any vampires that tried leaping or climbing up the scaffolding.

Only about half Arn's shots were hitting their marks since they were all moving around so much faster now and trying to avoid the deadly shots, and of those hits only a few had been fatal blows.

A large blast of ice crystals suddenly surged from the hands of one of them and nearly hit Arn as he crouched with his bow, firing at the mage at the same time.
He heard a loud crash off to his right where Lydia was and heard her grunt as he turned just in time to see her crash into him.

Evidently, the vampires had decided to tear down the scaffolding to get to them, unsettling Lydia’s footing and in the process granting an opening to a leaping vampire to land up top, striking her so hard she went flying into him.

Arn sat up as Lydia dazzedly shook her head, their arms tangled around each other and their bows/swords, and he looked past her to catch the red gleam from the eyes of an onrushing vampire with a nasty looking mace.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Again the force of the shout caught three vampires clambering toward them, this time because they were so close or for some other unknown reason, the shout pulverized all three into dusty ashes.

Another Ice bolt flew by them as Lydia scrambled on all fours to find her shield.

Arn locked onto the firing mage and took a step back.

"WULD NA KEST!"

He exploded off the scaffolding right into the mage, burying his sword in her chest as she stared in shock at him before beginning to spasm and shrivel as he pulled his sword out, turning to catch a hefty clash of a greatsword from another vampire with his shield.

Arn felt the vibration of the blow in his arm, briefly remembering the last time someone with unnatural strength had fought him with a greatsword.

He had to end this soon, catching Movarth Piquine out of the corner of his eye still seated, casually watching.

Timing the next swing, Arn hooked the edge of his shield behind the vampire's wrists, knocking them wide enough he could come back across with his blade, severing the vampire's head.

Just as he did so, he felt himself suddenly feel dizzy, fog about his head, and he stumbled, falling to one knee.

"Arn! Arn!" he heard Lydia calling from behind him.

He looked up to see the fuzzy shape of Movarth rising from his banquet table, lifting a glass of blood and sipping it, letting a lone drip come down his chin as Arn's vision began to normalize again, his strength returning.

Then Lydia was by his side, limping with a lump already starting to form on the red spot on her cheek where she'd taken a blow.

"Are you okay?” she panted, handing him a potion.

Arn wasn't sure what happened there but took the potion just in case as Movarth plodded toward them.

"You must be the one they are calling the 'Dragonborn’" Piquine's voice echoed through the space, making Arn feel like he was whispering in response.

"And you must be the one called Movarth Piquine"
"I am Movarth Piquine the Undying. You have disturbed my thralls and my land" boomed Piquine.

"I'd say we did more than disturbed them" smirked Arn, nodding at the bodies all around.

"What punishment shall I prescribe for you...?" muttered Piquine as if only to himself, completely ignoring Arn's retort.

"Well...I think we're done talking" said Arn, readying to charge Piquine as Lydia got her own weapons ready.

"This is only the beginning for you" sneered Piquine as he waved his hand in the air, a faint reddish white light emitting from it.

Arn suddenly had a very bad feeling.

They both froze as suddenly each body left in the room suddenly rose in the air, glowing with a reddish light as each one seemed to recompose itself regardless of what injuries it had or what body parts it was missing.

In a moment, the tables had turned, and Arn and Lydia found themselves surrounded by all the vampires they thought they'd just killed advancing on them.

This was bad...very bad.
Chapter Summary

Movarth Piquine proves to be more powerful than anticipated, and Arn and Lydia finally unravel the secrets surrounding Morthal's problems...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arn stood with his back to Lydia, surveying the vampires slowly approaching them.

This time, Arn decided Movarth had to go first. Maybe that would break whatever spell he'd cast to revive his followers.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded toward Movarth, expecting to impale his heart with his crackling ebony longsword, but instead found himself stabbing thin air when his burst came to a halt, looking up to see Movarth, in a feat of supernatural speed had expected as much and somersaulted backward about thirty feet, landing on one foot and a knee as he grinned toothily at Arn.

"Arn! Arn!" he heard Lydia cry out behind him, suddenly not at her back as the vampires closed in.

Arn turned and tried to get as many as he could with a shout, hoping he didn't strike Lydia as well.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The blast caught several of them rushing Lydia from her left and pulverized two of them, but even as he shouted his thu'um, Arn felt himself suddenly lightheaded again and drained of energy.

He stumbled to his knees, his sword clattering out of his hands as he looked up through foggy vision at the blurry image of the vampires leaping on Lydia, tackling her to the ground and ripping her sword away.

Then it was a grey and black haze of figures as Arn tried to will himself back up but instead felt himself falling further.

As what must have been the stone floor struck his face, he passed out.

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Slowly, dazedly, Arn became aware of noises around him...voices....people walking around....furniture moving...more voices.

For a moment, he thought he was back in the Jarl's longhouse in Morthal and that all the vampires had just been some nightmare, but then the blurry image of vampires mobbing and tackling Lydia, ripping her weapons away shot through his mind and his mind sprang alert, though he still felt like
his eyelids were weighted down by stones.

He shifted slightly and realized he was gagged with something wool and seated in a wooden chair, wrists, ankles and waist tied to it by strong ropes.

"Bethynia...Moralia....you're sure you need nothing from the town for the ritual" Movarth boomed across the room at someone.

"No, dear master, we have all we need....we just require time for the mixtures to be prepared" responded some female voice Arn didn't know.

"Moralia...stay here and pacify this female if need be. She refuses to be charmed it seems" Piquine continued.

"The longer she resists, the more her loss" came Moralia's enraptured reply to Movarth.

Arn moved slightly in his chair, testing the strength of the ropes hopefully without anyone noticing.

At the same time, he was wondering why he'd blacked out. He'd gotten dizzy earlier but recovered, then it hit him.

He'd tried to use too many words of power in too short a time. The Grey Beards had warned him it could happen, but he'd been able to push the line more since High Hrothgar.

This time, he'd pushed it too far and now he and Lydia were paying the price for it.

LYDIA!

She must be the 'female' Movarth had referenced resisting.

Suddenly, he felt a sickeningly cold, large hand with long, hooked finger nails grab his jaw and shake his head.

"I know you're awake, Dragonborn" sneered Movarth only inches from his face.

Slowly, Arn cracked an eye open to see the gray bloated head, sharp teeth, and red eyes of Movarth Piquine.

"I was getting tired of waiting. We only have an hour or two til dusk. Then we must go feast on the simpletons out in front of the cave."

Arn realized he must have been out for at least an hour or two. Opening the other eye, he yanked his jaw away from Movarth's hand, taking a quick glance around the room at the same time.

He caught a glance of Lydia on her knees in just her leathers, bound with her arms behind her back, gritting her teeth as several cloaked figures stood around her, one of them casting some sort of spell on her.

"That's right. I want you fully awake for your punishment" Piquine mused, rising to his full height and chuckling as Arn's eyes turned again to focus on what they might be doing to Lydia.

Arn tried to say something, but it was too horribly muffled by the gag to make any sense.

"Observe carefully" Piquine sneered at him as he paced back to where Lydia was dragged to her feet and made to bow her head as Piquine approached.
With a wave of his hand, the figures, one of whom Arn recognized must be the Moralia that Piquine had been talking to, began untying Lydia's ropes. Soon she was completely unbound and made to stand up straight.

She instantly tried to dart away but suddenly stood stock still and straight as Movarth stepped in front of her in a flash and held up a hand, locking eyes with hers.

"You will do as I command....I will be your master....you want to serve me...do you not?" He boomed with authority, towering over her.

Lydia didn't respond. She simply stood stock still with her eyes wide and staring straight ahead of her, as though sleepwalking.

She shook her head furiously for a moment before Movarth nodded to Moralia again, who cast another spell on Lydia, returning her to a straight and motionless posture.

Piquine circled her for a moment before waving his hand again.

"Those clothes are unbecoming, girl...Remove them...all of them" ordered Piquine, turning to give Arn a toothy grin.

With shaking hands, Lydia reached up and unbuttoned her leather jerkin before slowly reaching up and pulling it up and over her head. When she hesistated, Moralia hit her with another spell and Lydia resumed, pushing her leather breeches down over her bountiful hips, down her legs and stepped out of them, tossing them away.

"All of them!" reiterated Movarth when she hesitated again.

Her hands went to her back to untie her leather breast strap but froze, quaking in place.

Movarth sighed "Must I do everything myself.." he muttered moving behind Lydia and with one swipe of his large hand with oversized fingernails, he'd ripped the breast strap off, her large breasts now bouncing free in the cold air of the cave, and with another swipe, he'd done the same with her smallpants, the force of him tearing them off pulling her down halfway on all fours.

"Stay down and don't move" he ordered as she tried to cover her nakedness momentarily.

Arn had been transfixed on what Piquine was doing before he realized he needed to find a way out and fast.

Pulling again on his fastenings, he tested the gag on his mouth, getting a mouthful of dirty cotton in the process.

Movarth chuckled.

"He he...you begin to understand. That dragon blood in your veins is important to me. So, nothing's going to happen to you....yet, but your lovely companion here" he said while caressing one of his big gray hands over Lydia's head and down her bare back to rest on one of her buttocks "will do whatever I want....and you will be powerless to stop it. You will just have to watch as I make every part of her belong to me"

Arn thrashed against his bindings more as his anger and shock got the better of him.

"I am the master of these lands and you either follow my bidding or you are of no use to me" continued Piquine, removing his hand from Lydia and waving it over her again before walking to the
"Come, child" he motioned to her "crawl to me".

Slowly, Lydia crawled on all fours, her resistance palpable by her entire body shaking as she moved.

When she neared, Movarth pulled a bag off the table, opened it and withdrew a hideous sight......the disembodied head of Thonnir!

"This sot ventured into our little home not long after you. We gave him an appropriate welcome. Now girl, if you wish to become one of us, you must drink and eat as we do. Come....feast on this morsel" He commanded, setting the still bleeding head on the edge of the table and motioning her toward it.

Arn was enraged now, veins popping out of his head, face flushing red and the cold feeling of hatred filling him as he thrashed furiously in his bindings to the chair.

"Yesss....." leered Piquine at Arn "It's going to happen...and you will be powerless to stop any of it....quick, now, put his weapons in front of him so he may feel his powerlessness even more" he commanded.

On cue, Arn's silver and ebony longswords were placed in front of him on the table along with his dagger and shield of Whiterun, making him thrash harder.

By now a plan was forming in Arn's mind, but he had no idea if it would work or if he had enough time to pull it off.

"You know, I can no longer feel Alva's presence in the town...I guess you are probably to blame for that too" growled Movarth as he moved back over to Lydia, who was shakily beginning to crawl towards the table edge.

"Such a shame....she was my most pleasing subject" drawled Piquin as he stroked his large gray hand across Lydia's body, first over her right breast, squeezing gently before moving on over her stomach and hip and over to her lower back before stopping and grinning at Arn again "But your companion seems pleasing enough. She will have to do as Alva's replacement, I think" he sneered.

Arn continued to thrash, his adrenaline pumping harder, his thrashing beginning to lift the chair off the ground.

Piquine huffed slightly in annoyance before running his hand back over Lydia's buttocks before spreading them and inserting a large hooked digit into her arsehole and using it as a grip, shoved her forward into the table, sending Thonnir's head toppling along with various pieces of bone, flesh, and fruit from the table.

"Hurry....UP!" Piquine boomed at Lydia "Why does she continue to resist?" he questioned back at Moralia, who simply shrugged her shoulders.

"I guess I'll just have to use more...force...to break her will" he sneered, approaching Lydia from behind as she looked over at Arn with gashed forearms and a bloody nose from her impact with the table.

Arn could see in her eyes she was still there, still resisting, but she was scared..terrified. Her eyes were wide and pained..looking at him pleadingly, expectantly.

Of course she looked to him. He was the Dragonborn, the Great War veteran, the able Sellsword, the
Thane of Whiterun, and Flamewalker. She had trusted him with her life and this was what happened to her. Arn felt a sudden weight of guilt, knowing he had led her into this.

He tried to say something to her, encourage her. Help her keep resisting, but he was gagged and it was all muffled. So, he instead looked her in the eye with as much care and encouragement as he could, the look saying more than words perhaps ever could as he continued thrashing, finally feeling the give on his right wrist he was looking for.

Movarth approached Lydia and pushed her further onto the table, pinning her face and breasts to the table while her arse stayed pulled up on two feet as he began messing with his lower robe.

"Her mind can only resist so long...enjoy the defilement" he sneered at Arn with another toothy grin as he moved to spread her legs wider.

Then Arn's right wrist popped loose from jerking the ropes to and fro like a saw, and his hand was immediately on the silver dagger in front of him, slashing down with it to cut his right ankle loose.

Even as Piquine roared at his followers to detain him again, Arn half rose to a crouched position, still half tied to the chair and spun, hurling the dagger at a surprised Moralia whose scream of surprise was cut off as the dagger embedded itself in her throat.

Piquine dropped Lydia in a heap and moved to grab Arn, but with his free hand, Arn pulled the gag free of his mouth.
"FUS RO DAH!"

This time, Movarth was too close and unprepared to dodge it. The blast didn't pulverize him, but it crushed the hand that had been reaching for Arn and sent him flying twenty feet in the air backward into the stone wall.

The others were closing on him, but Arn was already mostly free, hacking with a longsword in each hand on his bindings.

He spun again, this time using the chair he was in as a buffer between him and anyone attacking from behind.

Strangely, they still seemed intent on capturing him alive and unharmed since none were using weapons or attacking him with enough viciousness to take any limbs off.

They must really want that dragon blood.

Arn deflected a few blows, but really wasn't interested in them at all. No....he needed Movarth dead....now.

He turned just in time to see Movarth spring to his feet with a hiss of rage and leap the twenty feet in the air back at Arn.

He was still engaged with two vampires and had no free hands or weapons to deal with anything else. If he used shouts anymore, he'd black out again.

He had no choice, though.

Even as Movarth landed next to him with a hand about to close on him, another shout erupted from Arn, sending Piquine flying back again.

Arn spun again, making one vampire back away and left the other grappling with the chair as Arn
turned and made one last desperate move.

"WULD NA KEST!"

He exploded across the room, his swords both impaling Piquine as he just sprang to his feet, a look of sudden shock across his features as Arn satisfyingly realized he'd gotten him through the heart with the ebony one in his right hand.

"Enjoy the damnation!" Arn spat as he pulled the silver longsword in his left hand from Piquine's chest and with the remaining strength he had, cleaved Piquine's bloated head from his shoulders.

Even as Movarth Piquine's body fell to the floor, Arn felt himself falling with it, his vision becoming increasingly blurry and his energy ebbing away completely.

As his vision went dark, he heard a battle cry from Lydia and felt himself smiling.

At least he could die knowing he'd take Piquine with him and given her a fighting chance...then all was darkness again.

Hazily, Arn became aware of a beautiful voice singing....

For a moment, Arn thought he'd died and gone to Sovngarde and that some valkyrie was singing to him to usher his soul to rest.

He became aware that a beautiful woman was indeed cradling his head in her lap and singing, but as he blearily opened his eyes, he looked up into the tear stained face of Lydia whose countenance suddenly brightened and she leaned over him, clutching him to her bosom and neck.

He realized she must still be naked as one of her nipples poked against him briefly.

Not a bad way to be brought back to life, he mused hazily for a moment, enjoying the warm softness of her breasts and face as she clung to him, their breaths mingling for a what seemed like a long time but was in reality only a few seconds before the rest of their predicament hit Arn and he clawed his way loose, scrambling to his feet, wondering what happened to the rest of the vampires.

Even as he got his sword up and ready, all he saw around the room were bodies.

"What--what happened?"

"After you killed Movarth, all the vampires just....collapsed....died...or whatever vampires do when they cease to exist" said Lydia sombrelly.

"So it was all over when Piquine died?" puzzled Arn, still wandering to and fro, expecting someone or something else to appear.

"Well, not exactly...There were two women who weren't vampires. You killed one with a dagger but the other one came running when the commotion started...but I killed her" Lydia replied, clutching herself as though suddenly aware of her nakedness.

Arn glanced around and located her leathers, looking away as best he could, he handed them to her and turned back to the table, getting his armor back on while she dressed.
There was an awkward silence for a long time broken only by the muffled noises of clothing and armor clinking as they each got all their weapons and armor back on.

"I...had no idea you could...sing...like that" said Arn, hoping to break the awkwardness.

"You heard that?...Oh...ha ha...I...uh..used to sing a lot when I worked as a maid in Dragonsreach...used to make the time go by better. Not much to sing about as a city guard, though...." said Lydia, flushing a little red with embarrassment "I wasn't sure what else to do since I had already tried potions and you weren't waking...thought I lost you for a moment there" she finished somberly as she cinched on the last piece of her armor.

"It's my fault, really. I tried to use too many words of power in too short a span. The dragon magic in my blood couldn't handle it and I passed out" replied Arn, feeling more than a little guilty.

"It's okay. If you hadn't....well, who knows what would've happened" she replied sadly, glaring sternly at the shriveled torso of Movarth Piquine.

Arn didn't feel like it was okay, though.

Searching the remains, they puzzled over the fact that the two women mages were not vampires and what ritual exactly had they wanted Arn's blood for, but no answers were there to be found.

They did find something else surprising, however.

As they entered what must be Movarth's personal chamber, the furthest room into the structure, there was a massive chest to one side filled to overflowing with money, jewels, and rare cloths and trinkets.

"Whoa..." murmured Lydia as they thumbed through just the surface layer as bits of money and jewels clattered off onto the floor around them.

Arn noticed a strange black orb that didn't look like it belonged there. It didn't look like a gem or like it had the consistency of anything else around them.

Foolishly, Arn reached down and picked it up.

Immediately, his mind was filled with a white haze. He could still feel himself in the room, but he only saw a white mist around him and a female voice seemed to echo inside his mind!

"YOU HAVE SLAIN THE UNDYING...BUT YOUR WORK IS NOT DONE! YOU WILL GO TO MY SANCTUARY...AND YOU WILL PURGE IT OF THE DARKNESS THAT HAS DEFINED IT! THIS YOU ARE COMMANDED IN MERIDIA'S NAME!"

Then his vision returned to him and he was back standing in front of Piquine's treasure horde with Lydia shaking him violently by the shoulders.

"Arn! Arn! For Oblivion's sakes! Stop doing this to me!" she chided, half concerned, half annoyed as he shook his head to check if he was truly back where he was supposed to be or not.

"What happened this time?!"

"This orb...belongs to Meridia...she...spoke to me...wants us to clear her temple of something...presumably more vampires based on what she said" mused Arn as he continued eyeing the orb, turning it over and over in his hand.

"A wise man once told me that the number one thing that kills adventurers is curiosity" snapped
Lydia "then I watch that very same man go ‘oh look, a strange orb, let's touch it’ and get his mind invaded by a Daedric prince!” she finished angrily, though Arn had to smile at his own stupidity.

"You're right...that...was foolish, but I promise...no more blackouts...I’ve reached my quota for the day"

"You've filled your quota for the month!” she snapped back, though a smirk appeared on her features.

After spending a few minutes debating what to do with the pile of Piquine's wealth, they settled on taking what they could before bringing the townsfolk in to carry the rest back to the Jarl since a lot of it could be used to rebuild and even improve Morthal as a city after the dragon attack damage it had sustained.

An hour later, they finally emerged from the cave only to be pelted with rocks, a few stray arrows, a misguided lunge with a sword, and even someone's boot?

"Hey! HEY! It's us!” grouched Arn annoyingly, pulling an arrow from his shield and throwing it at their feet.

"Oh! It's them! You're finally done? You killed them all?” they asked nervously.

"Yes, now there's a more pleasant task you may help us with” said Arn

"What happened to Thonnir? He went in after you after awhile. Did you see him?” they asked.

"He...didn't make it. They got him” was all Arn said and it quieted them up for a moment as the reality sunk in.

"You recall I said there was a more pleasant task...well, the master vampire had hoarded quite a bit of goods and we'll need all of you if we're to carry it back to the Jarl's longhouse in one trip.

This news of course changed their demeanor considerably and after an hour of venturing in and loading everyone up with bags and pockets of wealth, they were all on their way back to Morthal as the sun was setting.

Arn could feel Lydia's eyes trained on him as they walked back.

"What is it?” she asked, even as they came within sight of Morthal and the group cheered and some ran ahead to tell the others.

"Am I that easy to read?” Arn said almost mournfully.

"To me, yes”

"We need to make one more stop before we call it a day" Arn replied quietly so that the others wouldn't hear him.

"Where?”

"That wizard, Farion....too much of this doesn't add up and I could've sworn I heard one of those thrall mages say his name while I was waking up."

Lydia simply nodded her head and they veered away from the rest of the group as they entered Morthal and Arn watched for a moment to make sure they all or mostly reported back to the Jarl as had been agreed upon before ducking away and heading south toward the shack on the outskirts
where Farion was said to live.

It was a simple one room abode with a garden and small corral for a horse that looked too old and feeble to be ridden at all.

Arn was tired, angry, and frustrated. Despite their victory, they'd been through a horrid ordeal, Lydia especially, not to mention all those the vampires had slain or enslaved.

He didn't bother knocking, instead he just kicked the door in, a man in his nightclothes starting up in his cot, summoning a flame spell to his hands before Arn batted it away with his shield and yanked him from his bed, dragging him outside and dropping him in a heap in front of the shack.

"PLEASE! I--I have nothing of value!" Farion cried pleadingly.

Arn crouched down and glared menacingly into the haggard, slightly wrinkled face of Farion.

"Oh but you do....you have information...even better...you have the truth" sneered Arn.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Farion, I've had a very BAD day and I'm in no mood for games. This vampire business....this is your doing somehow, isn't it?"

"N-n-no, why would you think that?" Farion retorted, suddenly less startled and more wary.

"I DONT KNOW....MAYBE BECAUSE OF....Bethynia...and...Moralia" spat Arn with deliberate emphasis on their names, Farion's horrified reaction showing him exactly what he wanted.

"Wh--what happened to her--them? Did you spare them...are they free of Movarth's clutches?" cried Farion desperately, clutching at Arn's knees pleadingly.

"They are free of his clutches now.....but that doesn't mean I spared them" stated Arn with a somber finality as Farion's demeanor had gone from one of relief at the first part of his statement to clenching his fists in anguish at the second half.

"What a fool I've been!" Farion gritted, fighting to keep his emotions in check, a lone tear streaming down his cheek.

"I thought...I could do the impossible...even after I failed. There was still hope...still time for me to fix my mistakes....but not anymore" Farion muttered, his hands falling helplessly to his sides as he sunk on his knees.

"Let's start with what you did to the Jarl and her son" stated Arn as he leaned against a rock, crossing his arms but keeping close eye on Farion.

"I...had trained at the college in Winterhold for so long, but there are things...experiments you just aren't allowed there. They're too bold...too dangerous. So I left and came to this out of the way town...figured it was as good a place as any to try out new things in the different schools of magic."

"I didn't come here for a biography! What did you do to the Jarl?!" snapped Arn angrily.

"She became pregnant...not sure why...it's not natural to conceive that late and of course there were complications. We have no skilled healers here and the alchemist was out of town at the time. So I was summoned to see what I could do."

"Which was?"
"I had been experimenting with summoning daedra and using their life force to heal myself. I figured it was a simple matter to summon one and use it to heal someone else instead...but it didn't go as planned. When I summoned the daedra, I...lost control or did something wrong and discovered it had begun siphoning the Jarl and her son's life forces to itself!"

"I tried to immediately send it away but instead just ended up teleporting it elsewhere....I found it two days later in the cemetery. It had used the life force it had gathered to raise what it thought would be its most powerful ally from the dead....Movarth Piquine.

"I managed to send the Daedra back to Oblivion, but Movarth escaped...and became the greatest bane to me I have ever known."

"Why do you say that?" queried Arn

"You mean, they didn't tell you?" puzzled Farion, staring at Arn "Moralia and Bethynia were my apprentices...stolen away by Movarth's foul influence. I have just figured out how to get them back too...." He sighed sadly.

"What do you mean? get them back?"

"I have discovered a way to cure vampirism" stated Farion proudly.

"Yes, it's called a cure disease potion, fool" retorted Arn, unimpressed.

"That only works before someone fully turns. I'm talking about once someone has completely changed into a vampire...I found a way to undo it!"

"Maybe the Jarl will take that into consideration when it comes to sparing your life or not" retorted Arn as he nodded to Lydia before dragging Farion to his feet and heading back to Morthal.

"Hold it right there!" growled Aslfur, halting their progress as they tried to make their way to the Jarl in the crowded Longhouse.

"Not you again..." murmured Arn "Farion, can you turn this man into a pig, preferably a fat and annoying one?"

"W-What?" both Farion and Aslfur replied at the same time, even as Lydia stifled a laugh.

"Useless wizard....come on Aslfur, you know who we are already" Arn sighed.

"How do I know you weren't turned into thralls? The people say you were in there for hours!" demanded Aslfur

"If we were thralls, we'd be kissing your boots right now, trying to blend in, instead of contemplating cutting that foolish tongue of yours out!" sneered Arn, stepping into Aslfur's personal space, forcing him to step back.

"Is that a threat? Because if it is, I cannot allow--"

"I AM THE FLAMEWALKER, YOU WILL LET ME PASS!" bellowed Arn, the conviction and volume of it silenced everyone as they all turned their attention to them.

"Let them through" Idgrod stated, breaking the dead quiet of the room.
An hour later, after Arn had made Farion sorrowfully repeat his tale, the room was silent again as Jarl Idgrod sat in her seat, her head hanging in sorrow.

"It appears...it was my folly to put my faith in a wizard" she said haggardly, the sadness in her voice striking a chord in Arn. It was that same emptiness he saw from veterans after a battle...that feeling of having lost something that can never be regained.

"Throw him in stocks...I'll decide later what is appropriate. It is late and we've all had enough for one day" she continued after a long silence.

Quietly, everyone slowly shuffled out, leaving the goods they'd taken from Piquine behind, leaving only the Jarl's family, Arn and Lydia in the hall.

Slowly, one by one, they each retired to their rooms and Arn motioned to Lydia they should retire as well, taking one last look at the sad form of Idgrod sitting on her chair, holding her son Jorric close, occasionally a sob shaking her form.

Arn closed the door on the sad scene, feeling suddenly like an intruder.

He turned and realized there was only one bed in the room and it wasn't big enough for two even.

Lydia was already making herself a bed of furs and cloaks on the floor when Arn waved his hands, shooing her away and back toward the bed.

"You take the bed....and no, it's not up for discussion" he stated, feeling suddenly more and more weighed down by his tiredness.

"Arn..are you okay?" she murmured, even as they each pulled up their covers in their respective spots, he on the floor, she in the bed.

"Just lamenting things that can never be undone...." he murmured before drifting away into sleep that had been calling to him for some time.

They spent another week in Morthal, helping clear out some other bandits, helping rebuild and move damage from the dragon attack, training the town guards and some of the townsfolk better on how to wield their weapons.

Ingrid was never far away from Arn, which of course meant Lydia shadowed him too, each exchanging challenging glances to either Arn's amusement or annoyance depending on what mood he was in.

Of course, during this time, Lydia had picked up an admirer or two as well, but she found ways to dissuade them, usually just never leaving Arn's side for any reason was enough.

Arn realized, though, that though he knew the land and some of the people, it didn't quite feel like home.

People changed..even the land had changed. Perhaps more troubling was the fact Arn felt more like a bringer of bad news and misfortune than he did a deliverer.

Most of the people still saw them as outsiders. The only exceptions were the Jarl and Ingrid.

As he helped remove debris, his mind was brought back to the dragons and the fact that they were
still out there, still attacking other people and towns across Skyrim.

The next morning, Arn stood before Jarl Idgrod playing with her son as Lydia readied their provisions to depart outside.

"So you're leaving us" Idgrod stated matter of factly, not looking up from where Jorric played with some wooden pieces on the floor.

"Yes...well, the dragons refuse to commit suicide. So I have to help them on to the next life myself"

She chuckled.

"So optimistic about such things, even though there's so much you don't even know about who you are as Dragonborn..." she said, looking up at him with a weak smile.

"Might take awhile, but I'll figure it out" Arn tried to sound reassuring. He didn't want to leave her on a sour note.

"You know, if you're going to be travelling Skyrim a lot, you should look into getting some good riding horses. The stables in Solitude have some of the best in the land. I know it's not on your way, but you'd travel two to three times as fast on horseback....that and you wouldn't have to make that poor girl carry your things like some beast of burden" she mockingly chided him.

Arn chuckled

"She's not the dainty beauty she looks. She frequently goes above and beyond what is required, even when I order her not to..." Arn stated

"Of course, she's quite the gem...." Idgrod muttered, taking her chin in her hand as if in thought suddenly.

"Yeah, she certainly is..." agreed Arn nervously, wondering why she was suddenly interested in Lydia.

Just as he was about to turn to leave, Idgrod interrupted his departure.

"Oh! I forgot! You are now a Thane. Surely you didn't think you'd do this much for us and not get made a Thane out of it, did you?" she smiled warmly at him.

"Very well, my Jarl, but...you do realize--"

"Yes, I know, you may be travelling a lot. That's fine. I do have one condition, though"

"And what might that be?"

"You must invite me to the wedding"

"What?" Arn nearly choked "Um...what wedding?"

"You know what I mean" she gave him a sly grin

Surely she couldn't mean Lydia. If she didn't mean Lydia, who else could she possibly be referring to...Ingrid? That didn't seem likely, but Arn thought it might be a safer answer.

"Does this have something to do with...Ingrid's....er....attentions these past few days?"
Idgrod chuckled again

"Attentions is putting it mildly, the lass has practically glued herself to your bootstraps this past week"

"I hope I didn't give any...false impressions" muttered Arn awkwardly, wondering how to get out of this conversation.

"You were fine...she's a young lass still. She'll get over it. I was talking about Lydia"

"It's...it's not like that...with us" stuttered Arn.

"I've seen the way you two look at each other, the way you read each other's minds. People don't go through what you two go through without bonding"

Now, Arn really needed to get out of this.

"Well...he he...you know, if it ever happens...uh...I promise I'll invite you to the wedding. How's that eh?" he said hurriedly, inching his way away from her toward the door.

"Fine..fine. You know, I had a vision about you two...There was a snowy hillside...and a dragon..."

Arn began backing away and turned to leave.

"Just know that she will die before you find love again" came the stunning words as Arn froze halfway to the door.

What? Why would she say something like that? It didn't even make any sense with what she was just saying....

For a moment, Arn contemplated whirling on her and interrogating every last piece of whatever she was babbling about from her, but then again, she had suffered a devastating revelation recently and surely not all her 'visions' were real.

Couldn't be.

"Goodbye, my Jarl. Next time, I hope my visit is less ominous than this one has been" Arn stated formally without turning before marching out the door.

"So...where to?" asked Lydia.

"Solitude" replied Arn, trying not to betray the confused panic in his mind every time he looked at her after hearing the Jarl's words.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may notice I left out the song Lydia originally sang. I had originally intended Lydia to be more musically inclined, but trying to either come up with stuff on my own or even hunt down a bunch of songs to actually use proved too tedious and I was also worried that adding in a significant musical factor would make her character seem like she was too good at too many things to be believable. She can still sing, but she is perhaps not bard level material. I felt there was no reason to include the first song
if I never followed it up with any more. So you'll just have to imagine what she may be singing at any given times in the story when she sings.
**Chapter Summary**

The tension between Arn and Lydia moves them to a breaking point, and they both find themselves in unexpected places as they navigate the politics of Skyrim's capital city.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Finally..." muttered Lydia tiredly as they crested the rise of the road and saw the city of Solitude's imposing walls gradually rise as they got closer.

"You're not that tired" Arn half teased, glancing at his housecarl as they both trudged tiredly toward the gates.

"FIVE days...Arn... FIVE days for us to get here from Morthal" she grouched in reply, stretching an arm as she switched the bag she was carrying to her other shoulder.

"We needed to find more words of power..." Arn countered cautiously, noting Lydia seemed genuinely exhausted and not in a jovial mood at all.

"Still don't have to stop at every rutting cave and hole in the ground..." muttered Lydia to herself but he had heard anyway.

They grew uneasily silent as they approached the gates whose shadows grew larger in the sun-setting sky.

Arn had been to Solitude a number of times as a boy. It's thick walls and strategic location made it nearly impossible to be breached as a fortress and the vast space within allowed for a robust city with thriving trade.

He always remembered it as a place where a lot was always going on and lots of other children to meet and play games with. Whenever his father told him they were going to make a trip to "the city", he was always talking about Solitude.

"Hey! Identify yourself!" a gate guard interrupted Arn out of his reverie.

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar, Thane of Whiterun and Morthal, and housecarl Lydia here on business" he said, indicating the packs of gear and spoils both he and Lydia carried, along with the pack mule they'd picked up from a crazy hunter's camp.

"What business might that be?" continued the guard as the others looked over their bags suspiciously.

"Adventuring and exploring....we need to sell goods and re-provision" continued Arn with a sigh as Lydia huffed and thumped her bag down on the ground.

"You've an awful lot here...for adventurers" queried one of the other guards.
"We're good" replied Arn smugly.

"Or maybe just fronting for thieves and bandits" replied the first, fixing Arn with a stern questioning look.

This time, Arn huffed in annoyance and turned so the guards could see his shield.

"Note the symbol...and this sword" he pulled the sword of Morthal out of the pack enough so they could see the hilt "I'm a thane of two holds...not some bandit lackey" Arn grumbled a little more angrily than he meant even as he heard a loud voice inside the gates making some sort of speech or proclamation.

"Fine" relented the guard "just be sure that you behave while you're here. You're no Thane of this city."

"Yes...yes" muttered Arn as they picked up their packs and trudged through the gates.

As they walked through the gates, they were greeted by the sudden spectacle of a man getting publicly executed with a loud THWACK as the executioner's great axe descended onto the block, severing the culprit's head to a mix of cheers and groans from a gathered crowd.

After selling a few things at the only shop open that late, soon they pushed through the door of the Winking Skeever.

Immediately, the sounds of laughter and singing rang clear around the area inside as several bards seemed to be having some sort of competition with each other, bringing great laughter from the onlookers.

"Ugh...bards...just rutting great..." muttered Arn annoyingly as he directed Lydia to an empty table in the back away from everyone else.

After retrieving a bottle of mead and some food they sat down to quietly eat as the songs and laughter continued in the background.

As Arn looked at Lydia, tiredly prodding a potato with her fork, his mind wandered back to the events of Morthal.

The guilt he felt about having gotten them caught by Piquine made him wince. It was what had made him push to find more word walls. He wanted to know as much of the Dragon tongue as possible. He never wanted to have that happen again.

*Promise you'll invite me to the wedding.....she will die before you find love again...*

The words of Indgrod Ravencrone crept back into mind for about the hundredth time since they'd left Morthal. He couldn't help turn it over in his mind every time he thought about it, but it made less sense the more he did.

One thing was for sure. It scared him. a lot.

It made him feel like a large ominous shadow followed him and would swallow her up if he faltered, slowed down, or let her get too far away from him.

He shook his head of the crazy thoughts, suddenly aware one of the bards was sauntering closer to their table, his eyes locked on Lydia, singing some ballad about the "love surviving the cold", except for a moment, to Arn it seemed he sang the prophecies of Idgrod Ravencrone, heralding doom and a
wedding.

He stood suddenly and looked down at his cup of mead, refocusing on the here and now, then looked up to shoo away the pesky bard to find himself in for a surprise.

Not only was the bard closer, he was right next to their table, singing away while strumming on some tiresome stringed instrument. Even more surprising, Lydia actually seemed interested, swinging around and crossing one leg over another, drinking her mead slowly while staring at the bard.

"Hey! No one here asked for your services!" Arn interrupted, trying to restrain the urge to grab the smaller man and throw him across the room.

"Oh, but you did" replied the bard smoothly "the beautiful lady was beckoning me with her sad eyes. Eyes like hers should never be sad, they should--"

"ENOUGH! BEGONE WITH YOU!" roared Arnsmyth angrily.

The bard did leave, but not quickly. He simply started strumming and singing again, backing away while sending smiles and adoring looks at Lydia who turned and glared at Arn.

"What is your problem?" she hissed before downing the rest of the mead in her mug.

"What do you mean, 'what is my problem?' You mean to tell me you found that little sot 'interesting?'" retorted Arn.

"Is it so horrible to sit and listen to something nice for once!" she retorted back angrily before refilling her mug and downing it again.

"We don't need some little sot like him latching onto us and following us around.....and you...don't need any more mead" Arn said, reaching down and snatching the bottle of mead off the table, suddenly aware there were three of them there whereas they'd only started the meal with one.

Lydia must've gotten some more, or the bard had left one or more while Arn was lost in his thoughts, which made him even angrier as he suspected the bard might be trying to get Lydia drunk.

"You don't need any more mead" grumbled Lydia in the best mocking tone of his voice she could muster "What do you know about wud I need?" she spat at Arn, some of her words beginning to slur.

"Calm down. We're both tired and need rest" Arn replied, trying to restore calm to the discussion.

"Wad do you know about what I feeel!"

"Look, I'll get all our stuff upstairs into the room and we can finish this discussion later when we're both in a better mood" replied Arn with finality, hoisting several bags over each shoulder and heading up the stairs, feeling the glare of Lydia on his back as he left.

When he'd arranged things in their room, he returned but made a detour to the innkeeper first.

"Hey, who ordered the other bottles of mead?" he asked.

"Eh? Oh, your housecarl lady did...uh...sir" replied the innkeeper uneasily.

"Truly?" questioned Arn suspiciously.

"You were staring off into space for quite awhile there, so she just came and got more" he replied,
shrugging and wiping the counter.

Arn huffed and leaned on the counter for a moment before turning and heading for their table only to find Lydia wasn't there.

He glanced around nervously for a second before he spotted her on the edge of a crowd...whispering something in that damned bard's ear.

His first instinct was to march over and drag her away but realizing how stupendously possessive that seemed, he sat down at their table and waited...and waited....and waited.

Finally, Lydia turned and walked back towards him, but hand in hand with the bard! They didn't come to his table either, but walked past a stunned Arn and headed up the stairs, him helping her up with his hands on her hips.

"Rule 33: Never rut with a bard!" Arn called angrily as they began to climb the stairs.

"What nonsense is that?" Arn heard the bard mutter to Lydia as they continued climbing.

"Nothing...he's just making up rules to suit himself now" he heard Lydia reply loudly, turning and glaring directly at Arn.

Arn jumped to his feet, shocked and suddenly filled with angry energy.

Just before they went out of sight, the bard looked at him and nodded his head in some sort of salute, as if he was congratulating Arn for his attempts up to this point but he had now surpassed him in his fair conquest.

"That little sot..." hissed Arn to himself, his eyes glued on the stairs.

As your thane, I order you to leave that man.

The thought burned in his mind for a moment, the words on the tip of his tongue. He had the right. He could do it. What's worse, he could wait a little then run up there and break it up, right as they were losing their clothes. That would teach the little man to mess with....them?.....him?.....her?

Arn sank back down in his chair as he realized he couldn't do that to Lydia. Much as part of him wanted to, if he did, it would betray everything in the way he'd promised to treat her.

A giggle from Lydia and some shuffling of furniture from upstairs interrupted his thoughts. It was coming from their room. That fool hadn't even had the courtesy to rent his own room for them but availed himself of the room Arn had paid for!

He couldn't stand it. He was thumping the table with his fingers on one hand, clenching and unclenching his fist with the other all while his feet were bouncing up and down suddenly with energy as he nervously tried to think of something else.

The sound of a gasp and groan that was obviously Lydia's seemed to penetrate the din of song and laughter and resonate in his ears only.

He pounded the table in a rage and stood, grabbing his weapons from the side of his chair. He had to get away.

Angrily, he marched to the innkeeper, who must've seen what happened, because he tried to scurry away before Arn could ask him anything, but Arn was too quick.
"Innkeeper! What else is there to do in this rutting city after dark beside getting executed and putting up with these fools!" He growled angrily, gesturing to the other bards still playing.

"Uh..well..um...Legate Rikke sometimes puts on small fighting contests up at Castle Dour...if you're into that sort of thing" he replied nervously.

"Wait! You said Rikke...as in Rikke the Bladebreaker?" asked Arn incredulously.

The innkeeper just shrugged and threw his hands up.

"I don't know...we just call her Legate Rikke......will...uh...you be needing a separate room now?" he asked Arn cautiously.

"No..." gritted Arn in reply as he whirled and shoved the door open as he exited the Winking Skeever and made his way toward Castle Dour, all the while trying to get the sound of Lydia's sighs and groans out of his mind.

At the rapid pace he walked, it wasn't long before he was in the castle courtyard, watching the movements of the legionnaires moving to and fro, their shadows cast by the torchlight making it seem like the courtyard was populated by far more.

After questioning several of them, Arn discovered there was an archery competition in another hour, but that Legate Rikke was too busy to see anyone, thus making him have to wait longer to discover if it was the Rikke he knew or not.

He sighed and took a seat on a low stone wall, removing his bow from his back and running his hand along it, checking for any damages or deformities it might have incurred while travelling as he pondered the upcoming competition, but his mind had other plans.

Immediately, the image of Lydia naked and writhing, gasping and moaning as that stupid little bard made love to her came unbidden into his mind.

Angrily, he stood and moved to the target range and prepared to fire, trying to force his mind to the task.

Rikke the Bladebreaker...that's who he should be thinking about. If this was indeed the same one, they would certainly have a lot to catch up on.

Arn drew his first shot and fired, slightly off to the right.

He remembered the last time he'd interacted with Rikke the Bladebreaker......

He was still a stripling lad of sixteen...well known among the regiment as a bowman but too small for anyone to regard as anything else.

Their army under General Decianus was camped just outside of Skaven in Hammerfell.

For two years, the Great War had raged. Now well into its third year, rumors were swirling in the camp.

Orders had come in from Cyrodiil. Some said they were going to get called back to fight for the capital. Others said it meant they were getting sent reinforcements, but most knew better.

Arn had yet to hear from regimental command, though.

As he mulled around the regimental tents, listening to a couple of the other men making jokes about
cripples' ability to please women, he was suddenly startled to find Rikke the Swordbreaker standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

Rikke the Swordbreaker....his first crush really. Long auburn hair she usually kept tied up in buns, fierce countenance to contrast her soft Nord features.

He'd caught a glimpse of her once getting a wound dressed in the healer's tent and seen the white skin of her shoulders as they wrapped her chest in bandages, a chest Arn had fantasized about when he was alone, wondering what it might look like or what it might feel like.

She was older than he of course, like almost everyone, but only by about six years, so he didn't feel the difference quite as keenly.

She was once just a rank and file soldier like he, but she was always in the thick of things and somehow survived. She had moved up in rank and now, after the last disastrous engagement had claimed the life of the regiment captain Jakory, Rikke had been promoted into his place.

They called her 'the Swordbreaker' or 'Bladebreaker' since she was one of the few women who was so fierce and strong while melee fighting that she had broken the swords of men with her blows.

Now, she stood before him in only her leather undershirt and some leather breeches, eyeing him with a smirk, a look he had seen her give to size up people before brawling or fighting them in single combat. He had no desire to fight her. Why would she look at him like that?

Unsure of what else to do, he half-smiled at her. To his surprise, she took him by the hand and began leading him through the tents out of the camp.

"What are you doing? Where are we going?" he asked, trying not to get too worked up about the fact that she was holding his hand and wondering what the other men would think, seeing them hand in hand walking about.

When she reached the edge of the tents, Arn noticed they'd were taking a route that avoided the sentries' paths.

When they got a little beyond the edge of camp, she crouched behind a shrub and pulled him down on his knees behind her as she peered at a sentry in the distance.

She made a shushing signal to him and they waited and sneaked past the sentry when he walked back the other way.

Soon they were out in the rolling fields dotted with clumps of shrubs and bushes that was typical for that region of Hammerfell.

Arn also began to see and hear things that surprised him.

There were couples in nearly every clump of bushes or ravine eagerly rutting like there was no tomorrow. The early night sky echoed with moans, sighs, cries, and weeping.

Arn was a bit stunned. Things like this only happened on the eve of battle when people would seek out and cling to each other, knowing many of them would not survive the next day. It was one last chance they would have to feel...alive.

Arn grew worried. Why was she taking him out here? Was someone in trouble? Was there a battle tomorrow that he was unaware of? Did she want him to help her find someone specific?
He couldn't help himself shivering as the thought occurred to him that she might be bringing him out here to help HER feel something on this last night, but it was also terrifying.

He'd never been with a woman before. He'd lied about his age to get in and he was so undersized at first, that none of women in or outside the regiment would even look twice at him. He heard men talk about the act. He'd even espied people doing it on nights like these, but the prospect of him doing it with a woman, that woman being Rikke, to boot made him gulp in fear.

The further out they went, the more his fear grew, until he couldn't help himself shaking, sure that Rikke had to notice since she was still holding his hand.

Finally, Rikke pulled him into a grouping of bushes and sat him down, plopping next to him.

"This should do nicely" she sighed, looking around and up at the emerging stars momentarily before turning to him.

"F-for w-what" replied Arn, unable to control the shakiness from creeping into his voice.

"What do you think, silly?" she smirked at him.

"I--I--uh--um" he stuttered, shaking even more.

She reached up and put a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Relax...where are those breathing skills you do so well while shooting your bow at distance?"

Arn realized he was hyperventililating a bit and closed his eyes to focus his breathing even as he wondered why she'd chosen him to come out here with since he knew she had been with other men and was even rumored to be getting serious with one.

"So...uh wh-why me?"

She sighed and took his hand in hers, looking him squarely in the eye, making him both want to shrink away and gaze deeper.

"Arn, it's okay. I know you haven't been with another woman before. I know you get teased about it and I know that because you're...a little younger, a lot of the women don't pay you much attention, but...a lot of things will change tomorrow and...I know you've saved a lot of our lives on more than one occasion and this is just...something I wanted to do with you...so what do you say?" she replied as she stood and began untying the strings that pulled the leather undershirt over her bosom together "Do you want me?"

"I...guess...so" Arn shakily replied, a familiar heated tightness erupting in his loins as he looked up at her.

She chuckled.

"First things first, Arn, if a woman asks if you want her, you don't say 'I guess so'. It's a big deal for a woman to offer herself to a man. Some men never hear such words. You understand?" she mused as she continued unlacing the leather undershirt, the top swells of her breasts now plainly visible to Arn as he tried to choke down the lump in his throat.

"I gue--I mean, yes" he stuttered.

"Good, now, I'm going to help you learn everything you need to know about pleasing a woman,
okay?" she continued.

Arn could only nod as her shirt had come off and the wonderful white round orbs of her breasts sat bunched in her breaststrap in the moonlight.

Arn didn't remember getting undressed himself. He only remembered watching her undress. Then she'd made him lay down as she straddled him....

"Arnsmyth...Arnsmyth Bulgoar!" cried a female voice and Arn's mind was suddenly brought back to the present.

He realized he'd been shooting arrows the entire time. All four range targets had center areas filled with arrows.

He turned to see who the voice belonged to, and there stood Rikke the Swordbreaker flanked by about a dozen legionnaires staring at him.

"Rikke? Rikke the Swordbreaker?" Arn asked, making sure he could confirm what his eyes told him since she wasn't the young maiden she used to be.

"Yeah, but no one calls me Swordbreaker around here" she smiled, arms crossed in an observant but pleased posture.

"How did you know it was me? Arn queried.

"In all the years since the war, I never met another archer who shot like you. When the men told me some stranger was filling up our targets like some Dwemer machine, I had to come see for myself."

"So are we still having the contest?" asked one of the troops.

"You really think any of you can compete with that?" Rikke asked, waving a hand at the target centers Arn had filled.

After some grumbling and murmuring, the rest of the troops dispersed, leaving Arn and Rikke, who motioned him inside.

As they walked through the castle halls, Arn got a chance to see her in more light.

Despite her years, she seemed to keep her figure rather well, based on the swing of her hips when she walked.

She wore heavy custom Imperial armor over some furs and leathers. So he wasn't going to get much more detail than that.

She still had the same fiery auburn hair though it was cut shorter now, the same determined or aggressive posture, though now the soft features of her face had become slightly sunken.

Slight crows feet visible at her eye edges, a blade wound scar on her lower cheek and several worry wrinkles were the tolls age had taken on her face.

At length, she ushered him into a room with a large table with a map and markers spread on it.

Closing the door behind him, she moved to the side, removing her cape and arm braces as Arn gazed at the map of Skyrim on the table.

"So...Arn, tell me, have you been in Skyrim all these years?" Rikke asked almost incredulously.
"No....I was in Cyrodiil, until just recently"

"You were in Cyrodiil...but you didn't stay in the Legion?"

"What do you mean, 'didn't stay in the Legion? Last I checked, the Legion left me in Hammerfell because it deemed me....an 'invalid'" he replied, the memories immediately angering him.

"But you still fought. It isn't like you gave up or were discharged!" she countered.

"Of course we didn't give up. There was a war on and Aranyela's forces weren't just going to go away. We were fighting for our land, for our fallen brothers...not the Legion."

"If you fight in the Legion, you are fighting for the land, for the Empire. Arn, open your eyes. The Thalmor aren't defeated and gone. They're just biding their time. Wouldn't surprise me if they had a hand in the civil war here. If you--"

"So you've gone from scolding me to recruiting me?" replied Arn, leaning against the wall with folded arms.

"Hah, of course! Your skills with a bow are unmatched" Rikke replied, resting both hands on the map table, looking over at Arn, who caught her looking him over from top to bottom in an appraising look.

"Those the only skills you're interested in?" replied Arn, with a smirk, wondering if she had given any thought to the last time they'd seen each other.

She chuckled.

"I have to admit, you've...gotten a lot....bigger since last I saw you" she flicked her gaze again at him out of the corner of her eye.

Arn began to feel his loins hardening as memories of their last time together flooded his mind, having her riding him, throwing her auburn hair back and arching her back as she moaned and urged him on.

Briefly, the image changed and it was Lydia straddling him, riding him, urging him on with moans and sighs before he shook his head in frustration.

*Keep it together Arn.*

When he looked back up, Rikke was leaning a hip against the map table, with her head cocked to one side and grinning slightly at him.

"What's the matter, Arn? Was the memory that intense?" she smirked.

"You offering an alternative?" came Arn's reply in turn.

She looked at him a moment with that same appraising smirk she had from so many years ago, before licking her lips.

Then she hurried around and locked the door before turning and grinning at him again.

"Get over here"

Arn didn't need to be told twice.
In a second, he was across the room and crushing her against him, carrying her back around the map table.

He realized as he set her down with her butt against the edge that she had already managed to get his greaves and breeches undone and as they moved, had fallen down to his knees, his hardening cock jutting out into Rikke's greaves.

That would not do. Immediately, Arn went to work getting Rikke's greaves and breeches undone even as she kissed and sucked on his lips, face and ear.

"You have gotten lot bigger" Rikke sighed as she took in the sight of Arn's hardened cock now extended to near full length as he finally got her breeches undone and she wiggled her hips to help him get them to fall to a bunch around her feet as he saw her womanhood was already swollen and dripping.

"You've been thinking the same thing I have" growled Arn as he tried to line himself up to enter her, but she abruptly spun around and put both her hands on the table, baring her white, muscular buttocks to him instead.

"I want you in the back!" she groaned.

Arn tried to snake his hands around and down to her womanhood even as he nudged her muscular legs further apart, but she grabbed his hands and brought them back up to her chestplate.

"I need these working my tits" she groaned as Arn's cock prodded her lower lips from behind "I mean MY behind, Arn" she continued with urgency.

"You mean your arse?" Arn asked, a little surprised and disappointed.

"Yes, yes! Come on, I need you inside!" she nearly whimpered.

Arn moved up slightly and found the puckered flesh of her arsehole and slowly pushed in.

"I'm not some dainty farmgirl, Arn, come on!" she growled at him, urging him on, reaching back with one hand to try to push his cock in faster.

He pushed harder, and when he was all the way in, they both sighed in unison before he began to slowly work his way in and out.

"You know....you....lied....to me....about this.....you're...one of....the only....women....I've...ever......rutted...who liked.....it....in the.....arse" groaned Arn between thrusts as Rikke gasped or moaned on each thrust, the pace picking up, bouncing the table up and down slightly.

Frustrated with the breastplate, Arn reached back around and slipped two fingers into her lower lips. In only a short while, his stroking fingers felt her clench around them, a small burst of liquid inside signalling she'd climaxed, Arn followed shortly after, pushing himself deep in her arse and feeling his cock fire off spurt after spurt of its load in her arse before stopping for a moment to catch his breath.

"Don't...stop...Arn...come on...harder!" Rikke commanded after they both spent a few moments catching their breath, causing him to resume, his cock hardening again.

"Harder!....Harder!" she cried.
By now, the pieces on the map were scattered everywhere and the table was getting gradually bounced toward the door with Rikke latched on with both hands as her body impacted the table with each of Arn's thrusts.

Amidst this, there were faint voices heard in the hall, which didn't concern Arn in the least, but it caused Rikke to immediately go stock still.

"Stop! Stop right now!" she hissed at Arn, who stopped, wondering what was the matter.

The echo of voices again sounded in the hall, and Rikke's eyes grew wide suddenly.

"Quick! We have to put everything back and you need to go! This isn't exactly the best way to greet a superior officer!" she hissed at him, shoving him back hard so that his cock popped loose and he was left standing there stupidly naked from the waist down for a moment wondering what was happening as she hurriedly pulled her breeches and greaves back up and fastened them before hurrying around to move the table back where it belonged.

Arn had barely time to get his own clothes back in place before he realized the voices were right outside the door and Rikke was shoving him under the table.

"Wha--?"

"It's the General--just get in there!" she hissed, shoving him under and straightening the fur table cloth to cover him.

Arn huddled confusedly under the table as he heard Rikke go around and open the door, letting in a man whose voice sounded familiar...

"Blasted rebels, lost two patrols in the western quadrant of Haafingar. Decided to come back earlier to see if my request from the capital for more troops had come through yet" muttered the General.

The General...that voice...of course, General Tullius, the sot that tried to execute him for no good reason.

For a moment, it seemed too good to be true. He could emerge and surprise the good General, mock his fantastic incompetence and there would be nothing the fool could do about it.

Arn had the support of two Jarls and would certainly get Rikke to vouch for him. Suddenly his gleeful thoughts were interrupted as he realized the tactical conversation the General and Rikke had been having had turned suddenly and strangely personal.

"You knocked the pieces around the board because you were...frustrated?" asked Tullius in quieter and more caring tone.

"Mhmm...." replied Rikke in a tone Arn knew was not professional.

"Been thinking about you since that last time. Maybe I can ease your...frustration." murmured Tullius, as in horror, Arn heard short kisses and shuffling of feet as they both moved over to the far wall.

Then he heard Rikke groan slightly, and he jumped slightly when several metal pieces of armor, notably Rikke's breastplate hit the floor with loud clangs.

More shuffling and clothing movements followed, all the while the moans and kisses increasing.
Stunned, Arn realized he was just laying there letting this happen.

Well, he wasn't going to listen to this any longer. He immediately purposed to pop out from the table and just deal with whatever he had to deal with.

He took a deep breath and swore that somewhere, Sheogorath or some Daedric Prince was laughing at his predicament.

Arn rolled out from under the table and stood up to face a sight he never wanted to ever see or remember...Rikke was pinned to the wall with her legs wrapped around Tullius who had his pants and greaves around his ankles, fumbling with her leathers as they both gasped and moaned, though Rikke opened her eyes momentarily to nod urgently with her head toward the door in an almost shrug.

Arn silently glared at her and waved an angry fist at them both. Rikke only nodded more urgently toward the door as Tullius began to turn his head, only to have Rikke grab him and plant a long kiss on his lips, keeping him from spotting Arn, though.

Anger, confusion, and shame swirled through Arn as he just stood there for a moment, aghast that Rikke would do such a thing but she gestured out even more violently, almost angrily.

Not wanting to get her in trouble, or perhaps unwilling to admit his shame in being tossed aside so easily in favor of a man he had no respect for, Arn gritted his teeth and silently moved around the table before quietly slipping out.

What in Oblivion's name had just happened?

As he emerged back into the castle courtyard, he walked out into rain that had begun to fall while he'd been inside. Great....just great.

Even the thought of going back to the Winking Skeever brought images of Lydia back into his mind moaning and gasping.

Eventually, he sulked himself to sleep in a nook of a temple courtyard...

He awoke suddenly, the memories of the previous night immediately making him wish he was asleep again.

He realized it was still raining and that he hadn't gotten complete cover from it. So he was soaking wet.

He also realized he was right next to a small wooden pen with a large pig in it.

It lay there and oinked at him through the wood slats.

"Yeah...I know how you feel" he replied, feeling a strange kinship with this pig, having spent the night in the rain here in this wretched city.

The pig oinked some more.

"Yeah....I guess I understand now why it's called Solitude"
*Some of you may notice I've tweaked with some things in this chapter that I wasn't happy with, while trying not to rewrite the whole thing.
*There are reasons Arn hates bards. You will see.
*Arn and Lydia shippers be not dismayed. I did say this was a slow burn. There are things they both need to learn both about themselves and each other. Patience.
Chapter Summary

Arn finds himself called into action unexpectedly and is summoned to an audience before Jarl Elisif the Fair...

As the sun dawned in the sky, a young boy emerged from his house in Solitude, intent on harvesting enough worms for his next fishing venture.

It had rained steadily during the night and there should be plenty of worms to be had.

He withdrew a small jar and began collecting a few here and a few there, slowly making his way through the cobble stoned streets as the city woke up.

He was completely absorbed in looking down for worms when an enormous shadow swooped by, causing him to look up, but it was already gone.

Then he heard some guards shouting and the alarm bell had begun to sound.

It was only the second time the boy had ever heard the alarm bell sounded and froze for a moment, unsure of what to do.

Then he remembered his mom had instructed him to return to the house so they could be sheltered from whoever was attacking the city.

He knew he should go, but he just had to know what was going on. He always saw the guards and soldiers walking around with those weapons but never got to see them use them.

Now was his chance, just for a little bit, to see them in action. Once he'd watched for a little bit, then he would go home.

He started creeping toward the wall, but he kept seeing people that hurried past him were all looking up.

Why were they looking up?

As he approached one of the walls, he heard a loud noise that seemed to shake the windows. It was a loud roar, no mistaking it, and it came from...the sky.

He froze, looking up at the guards on the walls firing arrows frantically at something in the sky. No bear or beast the boy knew anything about could make such a loud noise or fly in the air.

Then he shrunk in horror as a belting wave of flame engulfed the guards on the wall he had been watching.

Then it swooped by, a massive dark shape with wings. The boy had heard stories before about dragons, but the adults always assured him they were all dead. There was even a skull from one long dead in the Fletcher's shop.
But this one was far larger than the one in the Fletcher's shop.

Dark brown and scaly, it swooped gracefully back and forth across the city, spitting fire here and there.

The boy realized he had been frozen in place for minutes, just watching the dragon pass overhead back and forth, but he could hear people screaming, flames burning, and buildings crumbling.

Suddenly, he had a horrible feeling. What if one of those houses was his?

Scared, he turned and began running back toward his house.

As he rounded a corner, more smoke began filling the air and he saw one of the beggars laying there under a pile of wood and straw that had been knocked off someone's roof, but he didn't say or beg for anything.

He was just laying there with his eyes open, looking up at the sky without blinking with some blood coming out of his mouth.

The boy tried to shake him, but he didn't respond, just stayed there. So the boy continued on.

Another ROAR echoed overhead and the dragon swooped by low again, but this time crashed to a landing on the houses in the next block as the boy could see the massive spiked tail swinging back and forth far above him.

Several more people came running by, trying to get away from wherever the dragon was.

Then as the boy rounded the corner to the block, he froze in horror as a man he recognized as one of the guards stumbled toward him, screaming in pain as he was burned alive by fire that engulfed him.

He backed away, horrified and unsure what to do as the man collapsed and burned in front of him.

The boy began to cry as he saw the older couple that lived next to them scrambling as fast as they could hobble away, their clothes singed and smoking as they emerged from the smoke that billowed from the other side of the street.

The boy stumbled onward, determined, needing to make it home. He had to know Momma was safe, that she wasn't going get burned or crushed, but so far no one could do anything to stop the dragon.

It sat on the buildings and continued to spit fire and smoke across sections of Solitude.

Finally, he'd made it to the square near their house, but just as he did so, the dragon swooped by and landed on a small house across from him, smashing it to the ground as he did so.

It spun and breathed fire all around, the boy ducking behind a stone wall to avoid being burned as flames sprouted up everywhere there was not stone.

He looked back over the smoking rock wall and saw a burning man collapse in a pile of gore in the square and another child and mother running for their lives across toward an opening, but the dragon was right there, looking at them. They would never make it.

Tears streamed from his eyes as boy watched in horror as the dragon turned and opened its fanged mouth.

Then a loud noise stopped it. The boy turned and saw someone else..a man....and he was walking toward the dragon, even as others scurried away.
He had made some sort of shout at the dragon that had immediately gotten its attention, and it seemed to growl something back at the man who kept walking forward through the flame and smoke.

He wasn’t the tallest fighter the boy had ever seen, but was a little taller than the average Nord, and he did have thick muscles bulging wherever armor wasn’t showing. He had stubble growing instead of a beard and he must keep his head shaved cause he had only the dark outline or stubble of hair on it.

Strangely, the man was also..filthy. He looked like he’d rolled around in the mud the night before and the hard metal armor he was wearing looked covered mostly in mud and grime.

This strange fighter carried an impressive looking bluish bow with an arrow already knocked as he walked forward.

The boy froze as he saw the dragon open his mouth to breathe fire at the fighter, but then something unexpected happened.

The strange fighter roared something of his own and a wave of force erupted from him, knocking the dragon back from what he was about to do.

Then the fighter was firing arrows, repeatedly into the dragon's left wing.

The creature roared furiously, righted itself and lunged forward at the fighter, who the boy feared would be swallowed up whole.

Then the fighter let fly with an arrow that struck the dragon right in the its left eye as it was about to chomp him, making it recoil, howling and roaring with rage, thrashing its head about.

The fighter was out of arrows and appeared to be putting a helmet on when the dragon spun and slapped him with its tail, sending him flying into a wall fifteen feet behind him with a loud CLANCK as his metal armor impacted the stone.

Then the dragon was after him again, galloping forward and spitting fire again.

The man was stumbling to his feet when the boy saw him get engulfed in flames.

The boy cried a little bit, sad that this one valiant fighter was gone, but froze stunned for a moment when he saw the flame breath stop and the fighter was still there, crouched behind a shield with a black sword in the other hand, though smoke was coming off him.

The dragon seemed surprised too, because it then did something else unexpected. It seemed to burp loudly, and spit a large wad of green goo out at the fighter who blocked most of it with his shield, but recoiled suddenly as the green goo seemed to start dissolving the shield.

Quickly he threw it aside and drew another sword.

The dragon tried to spit the green goo at him again, but suddenly the fighter in a flash appeared twenty feet closer to the dragon and sliced it across the jaws with one of his swords.

The Dragon responded by trying to bite and then swipe at the fighter with his claws.

He dodged the bite, and tried to slash the claws to stop them but they still hit him, tearing part of his armor and knocking him off his feet.

The boy could hear the cry of pain from where he crouched.
He thought the Dragon was going to snap him up in its jaws again as it lunged for him, but the man rolled to a crouched position and in a flash appeared again twenty feet away, this time below the dragon and tried stabbing up into its belly.

It bellowed in rage and stamped about, forcing the fighter to roll and dodge this way and that to avoid getting stomped or slashed and leaving one of his swords embedded in the dragon's stomach.

Just as he had gotten out from underneath the dragon, it spun again, and again caught him with a swipe of the tail, sending him crashing into a marketplace stand by the buildings.

The dragon belched flame again, but the fighter stumbled through one of the building doorways to take refuge as fire coated the area outside.

The Dragon roared and began belching fire and goo alternately at every opening in the buildings, occasionally swiping a large clawed hand into an opening but catching nothing it seemed.

Then the Dragon was still and everything seemed to stop for a moment as both the boy and Dragon wondered where the fighter was.

Then the boy saw him, leaping off the roof of a nearby building, the Dragon was completely unaware the fighter was descending through the air with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Then the fighter landed on the Dragon's right shoulder, stabbing deep with his blades, causing another below and thrashing about from the Dragon as the man held on.

The boy heard shouting and footsteps behind him that he recognized to be the legionnaires approaching.

Now the dragon was really in for it, but then the boy stood in shock as the dragon quickly beat its wings and lifted itself into the air, rising higher and higher with the fighter still clinging to the right shoulder of its wing.

The boy strained his eyes to see as the Dragon got higher into the air what exactly the fighter was doing.

He could see the Dragon wasn't flying normally anymore. It seemed to flail in the air, starting to gradually descend.

Then he heard that loud shout noise the fighter had made before and the Dragon's head seemed to snap back and immediately began falling back rapidly toward the town.

The boy jumped up and down with glee as the dragon fell to the earth, the impact shaking the ground and buildings just as the Legionnaires marched up behind the little boy, a woman in beautiful Imperial armor shouting orders to them as they fanned out in formation, looking at the wreckage of the Dragon's impact with some houses.

Then to the boy's horror, the Dragon moved and began to stir.

It wasn't dead yet!

Then he heard a loud war cry and saw the fighter appear in the wreckage, plunging his sword repeatedly into some part of the dragon they couldn't see at first. Then after about the sixth time the Dragon's head came into view, bleeding and impaled with wood as it groaned its last.
Without realizing it, the boy, the Legionnaires, and even the woman the boy knew was the Legate Rikke shouted in triumph as the Dragon stilled.

The boy then noticed another woman running up. She was younger and seemed very pretty with long black hair that was all loose and messy, like she just got out of bed or something.

She was carrying a large pack of things and immediately ran to the fighter, who stumbled out of the wreckage of houses and kneeled down on one knee, resting against his black sword sticking in the ground.

Even Legate Rikke had rushed forward and both women had begun chattering at the fighter while the younger one with the messy hair began dabbing bits of liquid from phials on the fighter, who seemed either upset or uninterested, or maybe injured, because he didn't respond to either of the women.

He just sat still, looking straight forward.

The boy had been edging forward toward them until he realized the fighter's helmet he'd dropped was nearby. So he ran, picked it up and ran over to hand it to him, slowing to a stop as he got nearby.

Up close, the boy seemed even more in awe of the fighter. The mud, blood, and dragon's blood covering him seemed to add even more to what the boy had seen him do.

He slowly shuffled forward and handed the fighter's helmet to him, who for the first time since killing the dragon, stirred and turned to regard the boy.

"Thanks, boy. You'd best run on home now. I'm sure your folks are worried about you" replied the fighter in a deep masculine voice the boy would never forget.

"Y-yes sir" he muttered before turning around to leave and happily spotted his mother running toward him out of the throng of growing onlookers.

POV Switch back

Arnsmyth sighed contentedly, seeing the small boy reunite with his mother in a fierce hug as the crowd around them grew.

It then occurred to him that both Lydia and Rikke were continuing to ask him if he was okay or not while Lydia continued to furiously administer healing potions to his burns and cuts.

"Enough with the potions, or we'll use them all up" he abruptly cut their entreaties off.

They both stood stock still and stared at him as he rose uneasily to his feet, the aches and pains he still felt almost making him collapse again.

Then Arn heard the tell tale rushing sound and saw the dragon's corpse begin to glow.

"Great....here it comes again" he muttered, sheathing his sword and tossing his helmet down, knowing he wouldn't be able to hang onto it anyway.

"Here comes what?!" shouted Rikke in surprise, drawing her sword and dropping into a guarded
stance against the dragon's corpse.

Lydia opened her mouth to answer but then closed it again, tiredly regarding Rikke with something between annoyance and indifference as the Dragon's soul began its exodus into Arnsmyth, making Rikke jump back.

"What's happening?! What's it doing?!" Rikke and others among the crowd began murmuring and shouting.

"He's absorbing its soul" finally shouted Lydia over them all as Arn was suspended in the air, absorbing the golden traces of Dragon essence "He is the Dragonborn!"

Gasps broke out among the crowd and Rikke sheathed her sword, not realizing her mouth hung open in shock as she watched Arn collapse back down to his knees, Lydia holding him up as he came back to consciousness.

"He never told me..." Rikke seemed to whisper, though Lydia heard her.

"Why would he?" she snapped, as Arn groggily rubbed his eyes then his head.

"It's just that....it changes....everything..." Rikke trailed off as she backed away deep in thought, rejoining the other Legionnaires who were keeping the crowd back.

"Well, that was different" Arn stated, slowly rising to one knee, testing his balance.

"What do you mean?" asked Lydia, offering her arms to support him, which he shrugged off.

"It was just....more...of everything than the others" he replied, looking up at her pensively.

"It does seem to be much larger than the other Dragons we've fought" replied Lydia, looking back at the skeleton lying amongst the house ruins.

"Nahlslennir....that was his name" said Arn, rising back to his feet slowly, while also turning to regard the skeleton.

"How did you know that?" asked Lydia, surprised.

"I've learned enough Dragon tongue to pick up some things they say. I-"

"Hold there, in the name of the Empire and Jarl of Solitude!" boomed a voice Arn really didn't want to hear.

General Tullius emerged from the crowd and immediately Arn and Lydia were surrounded by Legionnaires.

"What now?" he practically spat at Tullius.

"The Jarl requires your presence!" he answered like someone used to getting whatever he ordered.

"Oh, the Jarl wants to see me. For a moment, I thought I'd be cursed with you wanting to talk to me" Arn chuckled at Tullius.

"It can still be arranged" retorted Tullius, not amused.

"Well, I should probably get cleaned up if I'm--" began Arn regarding his mud and blood soaked armor and clothes.
"The Jarl commanded your presence...that means now" interrupted Tullius.

"Fine, fine, by the Nine, let's get on with it then" grouched Arn as he gathered his helmet and retrieved his other longsword from the Dragon's skeleton before falling in with Tullius and the Legionnaires as they marched through the crowd to the Blue Palace.

Arn couldn't help but gawk a little bit as they marched down the long avenue that led up the hill to the ornate castle known as the Blue Palace.

While he'd been to Solitude plenty of times before, neither he nor his father had been important enough to get in the Blue Palace.

While it was large and impressively built, it wasn't daunting or imposing.

With the rich blue color of the roofing and eaves along with the colorful flowers on the ivy and in the flower beds, it had a much more welcoming and pleasant atmosphere that made Arn feel relaxed, though quite out of place as they entered.

The inside was no less resplendent.

White marble floors, criss-crossed with blue patterns and ornate pillars lined the lower floor as he uneasily walked past a line of guards and a few onlookers toward the staircases going up either side of a centerpiece to the main platform where the court must be.

As he climbed the stairs, he was keenly aware he was leaving a small trail of bits of mud and grime behind him on the steps and hoped this Elisif the Fair wouldn't be offended at his condition.

He also heard commotion behind him, and turned to see the guards below holding Lydia back, saying only the Dragonborn had been summoned and that she'd have to wait.

Arn turned back to pause in step.

He'd reached the top and the legionnaires had parted from him, leaving him alone, stepping forward in all his dirtiness amongst arguably the highest court in all Skyrim.

He was immediately met almost head on by a bruiser of a man at least a head taller than Arn and just as bulky.

"I am Bolgeir Bearclaw, Housecarl to Jarl Elisif, I must ask you to hand over your weapons while addressing her as a safety measure" barked the burly man in a heavy Nord accent.

Arn noticed even as the man spoke, that just past him, Arn could see a line of Legionnaires formed with General Tullius with Palace guards also flanking them.

Why were they so worried?

"Fine, here you go" replied Arn, casually handing him both longswords, his bow, and a dagger.

"You are also to wear this over your mouth while addressing the Jarl" continued Bolgeir, holding up a thick fur neck scarf.

"What?" asked Arn in bewilderment.

"Last time someone in this city used the power of shouts like you did was the day the High King was murdered. We're not taking any chances" stated Tullius determinedly.
"Ohhh, that's what this is all about" muttered Arn, suddenly feeling a lot more enlightened "Well, I can try to wear it, but...I doubt I'll be able to be understood trying to talk through it" Arn said, taking the scarf in his hands and looking at it ponderingly.

"That's enough, General, I think if he meant us harm, he would have done so already" came a melodic feminine voice from behind the Legionnaires.

"But, my Jarl, if he's an agent of Ulfric's, it could just be a ploy to get closer--" Tullius retorted in a stunned manner.

"By risking his life to kill a Dragon?" continued the woman's voice.

"But power of that kind--" continued Tullius, sputtering a reason.

"My Jarl" spoke up a man with bright red hair and beard "Is it wise to ignore the general's counsel?"

"I SAID that would be enough! Did I make myself clear, General?!" the woman replied, raising her voice, which seemed to shock everyone, even Bolgeir turned around with raised eyebrows.

"Yes...my Jarl" replied both the red haired man and Tullius with a slight bow before turning around to glare at Arn again.

Then the woman Arn had been hearing stood and he finally saw her at the throne behind the legionnaires and Tullius.

Now Arn knew why they called her Elisif the Fair.

She was stunning, particularly set against the backdrop of Tullius, his Legionnaires, and Bolgeir.

Light auburn hair that looked either more blonde or red depending on the lighting, fell in curls down her back over a lavish red and yellow ornate gown that accented her seemingly perfectly symmetrical figure just so while the white and black cloak she wore exuded royalty.

Her eyes shone a strong blue against creamy white skin and pink lips. She smiled at Arn and revealed a seemingly perfect set of white teeth, also a rarity. If ever there were a perfect picture of classic Nord beauty, surely it was Elisif the Fair. Any Nord man or any man with blood pumping in his veins would slay a thousand dragons for her dowry.

Suddenly, Arn was aware that it was dead quiet. It registered to him that he should be saying and doing something and not standing there staring like a fool.

"Uh...I'm h-honored, my Jarl, I am Arnsmyth Bulgoar, the Dragonborn" he stuttered at first, bowing on one knee.

"Oh my!" Elisif exclaimed, holding a hand to her mouth in surprise "Was the dragon covered in all that muck?"

"Err--well...no....I slept with a pig last night so I--" he stopped when he heard the collective group of people in the court gasp and realized his blunder "I mean...not actually WITH a pig. Uh...It...I mean, I was next...to it...like, next to the pen with the pig IN it...uh...and when the dragon came...I figured the mud would be a good defense against the dragon's breath...so I...uh...rolled in it first" Arn finished sheepishly, glad the dirt and grime hid the crimson blush he could feel on his face.

Elisif's brow had been crinkled in concern at first, but the more he stuttered through his explanation the more it had disappeared and been replaced by a warm smile.
"Well, it seems to have worked. You're quite the skilled fighter it seems, Dragonborn" she replied, continuing to regard his dirty state.

Having a beautiful woman tell a man he's good at something always has an effect no matter how humble he claims to be. It also affects other men around, no matter how indifferent they seem to be.

Arn bowed with a smile, suddenly more confident despite his dirty countenance and speech blunders, relishing the annoyed look from Tullius.

"It seems your first night in Solitude was quite poor, spending it in the company of a pig and forced into mortal combat ere dawn appeared" said Elisif with a more pondering tone as she waved a hand at the Tullius, who grudgingly made a motion and the Legionnaires all departed with the flanking guards.

"You shall stay in the Blue Palace as an honored guest if you so wish it, Dragonborn. There is much we need to discuss" finished Elisif as she made motion and two maids appeared from the right.

"I would be honored, my Jarl" continued Arn, still bowing, though the motion was causing pain from the gash in his abdomen that he hadn't had time to fully heal before being summoned "I just would like to make sure my housecarl is also welcomed and provided for" he finished, gritting his teeth.

Elisif frowned, suddenly aware of his pain.

"You're injured! Sybille, see what you can do, and summon his housecarl!" she cried as Arn, lowered his head and clutched his gut instinctively in pain.

"Thank you, my Jarl" he replied, rising and retreating down the steps with Bolgeir behind him and a maid at each arm.

As they ushered him into another wing and then further into a beautifully decorated bedroom.

As they entered, a mixture of pleasant smells invaded his nostrils as he took in the rich tapestries and large soft bed.

Well, apparently he would be sleeping better than last night.

Guess Solitude's not so bad after all.
The Blue Palace and Wolfskull Cave: Solitude pt. 3

Chapter Summary

With frustration boiling over between Arn and Lydia, Arn decides to give her some time off and instead take someone else with him as he ventures forth on the Jarl's quest...

Arn eased himself into the large tub of steaming water.

After some healing and a long nap, it felt immeasurably good to bathe in hot water after being on the road for some weeks and a fight with a dragon.

After he had washed thoroughly, he lounged comfortably, leaning back and closing his eyes, contemplating what his next course of action should be.

He heard the door to his rooms open, shut quietly, and the soft padding of fine shoes or slippers on the rug approaching the screen behind which he bathed.

"I appreciate your concern, but as I stated a few minutes ago, I have no more need of anything presently" stated Arn, assuming it must be either Erdi or Lysi, the two maids the Jarl had sent to see to whatever he needed earlier.

Puzzled when he heard no answer, Arn turned his head to see a short Bosmer woman kneeling beside the screen.

"I am Nasriel, my lord. I come at the request of Lord Erikur, to attend you in whatever manner you please."

"Lord Erikur?"

"He is high Thane of Solitude...and my master."

"Didn't know there was such a thing as high thanes or that thanes were suddenly called 'lords'."

Arn was no expert on Bosmer, but from her complexion and youthful tone, he didn't expect her to be out of her maidenhood yet, if that was such a thing among the Bosmer, making her probably no more than twenty years of age.

She didn't respond and nervously began untying the strings of her purple cloak she wore.

Withdrawing it from her shoulders, she tossed it to the side, but the outfit underneath, or lack thereof immediately made Arn gulp and draw back instinctively, his loins beginning to react.

She wore a frock of sorts, but it was low cut from her shoulders down to between the curves of her modest sized breasts and had a diamond shaped cutout in the midriff that showed off her tanned flat stomach and bellybutton down to just above her pelvis. Her skirt portion was made of flaps that shuffled around, showing off smooth tanned skin of her legs.

"Uh...I...don't need anything right now. So...you can...uh...go..." Arn stuttered out as Nasriel stood and ran her hands through her flowing blonde hair, making Arn realize that was the first time he'd
ever seen a blonde Bosmer.

"Are you sure you don't need anything?" Nasriel asked, looking at him with large, imploring dark brown eyes.

"Yes, I'm sure" said Arn, recovering his composure, and growing slightly annoyed at continually having to dismiss people that kept asking him to do things.

"What if you need something later?" she continued imploring.

"I will be fine" Arn replied, wondering why this one was so determined to help him somehow.

"You do realize I can do..." and she froze, nervously looking down for a moment.

"What?"

"I can do......anything....you wish" she continued, looking up at him and reaching up to cup her left breast in her hand, squeezing and kneading it in front of him "Among my people, I am considered to have...very large breasts...you...humans like them....no?"

"Why are you so determined to do something for me when I clearly told you I am fine? I'm just trying to finish getting a bath without being interrupted five times" replied Arn, both aroused and annoyed at the same time before looking away from her and softening his tone "You should just go. Tell your Erikur 'Thank you, but I'm fine'."

They were both silent for a moment before Arn turned to see she not only hadn't left but was visibly shaking, her eyes watering with tears.

"P-p-please....d-d-don't....s-s-send me...away" she began sobbing to Arn's astonishment.

"Whhaat?" was all Arn could get out.

She moved forward and got on her knees next to the tub.

"PLEASE...d-d-don't....s-s-send me away!" She implored more forcefully, before biting her lip and looking away "I...I...will...do....anything you want...." she sobbed out the last part.

"Okay" Arn replied to which the Nasriel stood upright for a moment before shakily reaching up to shrug her dress off her shoulder.

"No!" stated Arn determinedly "If you're determined to do whatever I want whenever I want, then the first thing you will do is go stand on the other side of that screen until I've finished bathing and dressing, understood?!"

"Y-yes" she replied nervously, pulling her dress back up and scurrying around the screen.

Finishing bathing and dressing gave Arn time consider if the woman was really in distress and what to do with her if she was. If she was terrified of getting sent back to her master, that could only mean her master, this Erikur, must not be a very good one. In fact, he must be quite bad if she was reluctantly ready to offer her body to keep him from sending her back.

Emerging from the bathing area, refreshed and clean, Arn was about to address Nasriel, sitting obediently in one of the plush chairs when the door to his room opened abruptly, and Lydia marched in with the other two maids, carrying the rest of their belongings.

They plopped the bags down with a sigh, both maids obviously much more tired with the exertion
than Lydia, who seemed unfazed and was instead turning a critical eye at Nasriel.

"Another maid?" she asked sarcastically.

"Yes, from one of the Thanes" replied Arn, unsure how much he should say in front of the others.

"Is there anything else you need?" asked Erdi.

"No, that is more than enough" replied Arn since he hadn't asked them to help with anything, but they kept looking for ways.

"Very well, the Jarl would like to speak with you as soon as possible. We will be around if you need anything" she replied before they both curtsied and left the room.

"Well, best not to keep the Jarl waiting" murmured Arn as he critically eyed the newly repaired breastplate of his cleaned armor.

"Does it meet your approval?" asked Lydia with a slight grin.

"It's okay, but, such a blow will weaken it permanently. So I think it will have to be replaced when I get the chance" he stated as he began donning the other pieces of armor "surprised the smith got it done this fast".

"This man does all the smithing for the Legion outpost here. I gather he's used to getting a lot of repairs done in a hurry" replied Lydia, turning her eye back to Nasriel for a moment "So....why is she still here?"

"Huh? Oh, well....that's a long story and we need to go talk to the Jarl. Just for now, she will be staying here" replied Arn a little distractedly, trying to get the last few buckles of his armor done.

"What?" asked Lydia angrily "Look, just because you're angry at me over what I...said...last night--"

"This has nothing to do with any of that!" snapped Arn.

"Truly?" she retorted, crossing her arms.

"Gods! Why is it that every woman who gets near my vicinity is called into question, but if I question one man getting near you--"

"It wasn't just one man! If I remember correctly, you call all bards...into question, to put it mildly!" Lydia snarled in retort.

"Because they're leeches! Can you not see that? They latch onto you, follow you around, chum up to you just enough to find out some interesting stories. Then they leave you and make up their own spin on it...or whatever they need to do to make some coin on it. They take other people's deeds and use them to their own profit. They are among the most unloyal of companions or travel-mates you could choose....and also useless in a fight" Arn finished, but did nothing to soften the glares each were giving the other as Lydia didn't relent as she looked at him.

"So you think anyone who can't fight is worthless?" she retorted.

"No, that's not what I meant, and you know it!"

"What about artists? Is what they do important? Is it important to express and appreciate beautiful things in life?"
"Yes, of course it is--wait, is this some speech that sot told you to give me?" Arn replied.

"That 'sot' as you refer to him, has a name, Falnir, and he is an apprentice bard at the Bard's College, and NO! This is no rehearsed speech!" Lydia replied, her voice rising in anger.

Arn sighed exasperatedly. This was getting out of control again, except there was no Mead to blame it on this time. He sighed again, leaning back against a dresser and crossing his arms.

"Are you saying you'd like to see him again?" he replied, softening his tone considerably, acquiescing to finding out where she wanted to go with this.

Lydia stared in shock at him for a moment before looking down and blushing brightly, surprised that either he'd guessed what she wanted or that he might grant it.

"Well...I hadn't planned on asking right now, but at some point, if you don't need me for something..." she paused "I mean, my place is at your side, as your housecarl."

"You've been at my side these last two months. It seems more than reasonable you should get some time to yourself...to use...however you see fit" Arn replied, unable to bring himself to just outright say anything about her going back to that...bard "Just...don't leave the city" he added quickly, remembering Idgrod's prophecy again "uh... in case I have need of you" he added awkwardly.

"Are you sure?" asked Lydia softly, all the fire from the conversation earlier gone.

"Yes" Arn replied, looking down, not wanting her to see the regret or frustration in his eyes "You may go now if you wish. I have to go see the Jarl and talk with some others, no doubt. So I will be tied up in things here for at least the rest of the day, maybe tomorrow as well."

"What about her?" asked Lydia, nodding at Nasriel, who Arn remembered was there again, seated with wide eyes staring at them.

"Oh, she'll be fine. I'll get to the bottom of it later."

There was a long pause, both Lydia and Arn staring at each other across the rooms, arms crossed, searching each others' expressions for something neither seemed to find.

Finally, Nasriel cleared her throat and Lydia turned back to her with another critical look.

"I still don't know, as housecarl, if I feel comfortable leaving this woman here" she replied, not looking at Arn.

"These things are filthy....I...can wash them" came the awkward statement from Nasriel, who had begun looking at some of the sweat, dirt, and bloodstained clothes that had fallen out of one of the packs.

"I'll make sure she doesn't behave improperly and she seems to have found something to occupy her time" replied Arn, continuing to study Lydia's countenance.

"I will be checking on you" stated Lydia emphatically as she turned to leave, though Arn realized it was said to Nasriel more than he.

Leaving his quarters and Nasriel behind with several assigned cleaning tasks, Arn ascended the stairs again to Solitude's court, though his mind was still pondering Lydia's behavior and his own reaction.
to it.

Why? What had he said or done to cause this? Had that bard really done something special for her or was she just angry at him...or both maybe?

Maybe a combination of things after what they'd been through in recent weeks. Maybe they needed to be away from each other. Of course, that's what Arn had been telling himself back in Whiterun...though that only lasted a night, really.

Arn was snapped back to the present by a short sniffle and realized it came from Jarl Elisif as she sat slightly slumped in her chair with her head down, blondish red, flowing locks partly obscuring her face as she held it in one hand.

"So many..." she murmured sadly as Arn realized they must be making a report on casualties of the Dragon attack, so he quietly stood off to the side a bit as the red haired man he now knew to be steward Falk Firebeard continued.

"We are still trying to get an accurate assessment of the outlying areas. Our main objective has been to shore up the city itself."

"Make sure those without a home are taken care of" Elisif continued raising her head to place her chin in her hand thoughtfully as Firebeard continued looking at a parchment he was reading from.

Arn's observations were rudely interrupted as a thick Nord man with finely cut brown hair in extravagant garb, elbowed up to him and whispered in his ear.

"I trust you found the young lady I sent to your quarters...agreeable, no?" he murmured in Arn's ear.

"Err--you are Erikur, then?" Arn whispered back, not sure whether to be conversing at a time like this or not, though he did see others occasionally whispering, so maybe that was a court thing.

"Yes, I am" he whispered cordially, shaking Arn's hand suddenly without permission "I am one of the Thanes here and a big believer in the future of Skyrim. I own a considerable amount of businesses here and am most grateful for your aid in destroying that Dragon" he gushed, continuing to shake Arn's hand.

"Yes, well" grunted Arn, extricating his hand, "Just doing what I could."

"A man of your prowess can certainly go places. I have a proposition I think you'd find most interesting” continued Erikur, seemingly unaware Arn was straining to hear what Elisif and Falk were discussing.

"Dragonborn, I have a task I would ask of you!" interrupted Elisif loudly and stunned everyone into silence for several seconds.

"Yes, What is it?" Arn asked, stepping out and bowing to one knee.

"You have done much for the people of Solitude, but I would ask more of you" Elisif stated, fixing Arn with a stern look he hadn't seen up until now, as though trying to emphasize something.

"You have but to name it, my Queen" stated Arn, wondering if he was being too formal or not.

Elisif smiled slightly, a sad smile really.

"I am no longer High Queen, but I thank you for your eloquence. There are strange happenings at the Wolfskull Cave. In light of the recent events, all my guards are needed here and a man of your
caliber is best suited with a weapon in hand, not fixing roofs."

"Ah...uh...what sort of strange happenings?" stammered Arn, his eloquence suddenly gone, puzzling over the sudden dead silence in the court. Elisif waved her hand at Falk Firebeard, who continued.

"Farmers and travelers have reported ghost sightings, cloaked figures and strange lights at night...but...my Jarl, do you really think such stories have any merit?" Firebeard puzzled, turning back to question Elisif, much to Arn's surprise.

"If I recall correctly, I thought General Tullius recommended the Dragonborn for a different task" piped up Erikur, sauntering out into the middle as well.

"I did not ask for the Thane's vote on this matter!" retorted Elisif, obviously frustrated.

Arn was a bit shocked. He'd never seen anyone challenge a Jarl, much less the woman who was for all intents and purposes going to be the next ruler of Skyrim.

"But if Tullius thinks that--" Falk tried to continue.

"ENOUGH! It is what I have asked of the Dragonborn, but I have not ordered it so. It will be up to him what he wishes to do" she stated emphatically at first before softening her voice and turning to look at Arn again.

Arn realized all eyes had turned to him again as he still kneeled.

"I....will investigate Wolfskull Cave. Whatever mischief is afoot there will be dealt with. Rest assured" he stated, rising back to his feet, finally happy there'd be a reason to get away from these politics and maybe get a jab in at Tullius at the same time.

"Thank you, Dragonborn" replied Elisif quietly with a nod as Arn turned to leave.

As he turned and strode off, Arn smirked a little at the dead quiet in the court along with the flushed and angry expression on Erikur's face as he departed.

After taking an hour or two to make arrangements and gear up again, Arn quietly hired a random sellsword out of the Winking Skeever and headed out of the city.

It had taken longer than it should have and it was already dark.

If he'd had Lydia with him, they'd already be there probably.

As they walked, Arn reflected again on his decision not to bring her.

When he'd first left the Blue Palace, his first instinct was to go find her and set off just like they always did, but as he began asking around, he discovered she had gone to the bard's college and was apparently taking some sort of lessons there.

As he approached, he could hear singing and laughing, some of it unmistakably Lydia's.

He stood there on the steps as dusk settled its orange light across the city and pondered.

He'd told her to take time off. She had chosen this, even though he neither comprehended or liked her reasons.

Arn had a bad feeling about what might be said or transpire if he walked in the Bard's College and
summoned her.

Just let her be. It's one trip. Maybe some time apart will help us both get our heads back on straight. Besides, if there are vampires in this cave too....wouldn't want Lydia subjected to those memories again.

Arn turned to leave, realizing he needed to stealthily hire someone else to come since going alone was foolish but he didn't want the whole city to know what he was doing and he especially didn't want Lydia finding out he'd gone on an expedition without her or he'd probably never hear the end of it....

As Arn and Gorlic, the Nord sellsword he'd hired, approached a crest just off the road, Arn wondered just how wise it had been to hire this man without even talking to him since he had to hire him by proxy or else people would suspect.

Torches were lit by the entrance. So something was definitely going on.

They sneaked inside, but Arn found himself frequently stopping to make Gorlic hold back as the man had no skill at sneaking and when they were together, Arn found himself frequently getting poked in the back by either the Gorlic's greatsword or nocked arrow from a shabby bow that he didn't seem to know much about.

There was not much at first, a couple of draugr and a couple of mages in dark robes, who attacked without saying anything and received a quick reply in arrow shafts.

After a lengthy trek of nothingness, both Arn and Gorlic were surprised to find the passage open up into a vast chamber that stretched hundreds of feet in every direction with ancient carved pillars and stairs that looked like part of an old keep built into the mountain before them.

Across a large chasm, half a dozen dark cloaked figures chanted atop a platform with a strange altar. Bluish purple light swirled and shot around the room, illuminating most of the cavern in a dark blue light as Arn began counting the cloaked figures and skeletons on the walkways and readied his arrows, removing the extra set from Gorlic's pack.

Though as he began to line up his first shot, Arn could hear the chants echoing around the cavern and something about them sent a chill up his spine.

While he was no mage, Arn had a bad feeling they needed to stop whatever was happening up there right away.

After taking out two skeletons, one of the mages spotted another mage going down with one of Arn's arrows through their neck.

"We're under attack!" came the shouts as figures began scurrying around and spell barriers glowed to life.

"Just hold them off a little longer!" came the reply from up top.

Damn, no time.

"Come on! We've got to stop them now!" hissed Arn loudly to Gorlic behind him and took off sprinting across the paths that would lead him across and up.
Bypassing a skeleton with an axe, Arn leaped up onto a different walkway, glancing back enough to see Gorlic following him before turning around just in time to see a cloaked figure step out and fire a blast of ice aimed at Arn's head.

Ducking under the blast, he came up with an arrow nocked, and nailed the mage through the chest knocking him off his feet, even as Arn kept moving.

The chants up top were escalating in volume and intensity.

Arn barreled around another turn and nearly ran into two skeletons and a mage.

Kicking one skeleton away, he used the crook of his bow to wrangle the mage around the neck and shove him into the other skeleton before getting his bow free to nock arrows to finish them off.

One more level and he'd nearly be there as the chants changed again.

No time.

Rushing past another shambling skeleton, Arn turned a corner to face four cloaked mages with spell barriers already up.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The explosion of force caught all four, broke their spell shields, and tossed them like rag dolls against the stone surface of the underground ruins.

The chanters were now chanting the same thing in unison loudly.

"WULD NA KEST!"

In a blur, he was up the last flight of stairs and across the platforms as a figure stepped into the center to begin chanting a single line as the rest fell silent.

They raised their hands upward toward the blue glow of magical essence that drifted above them and just as the leader in the middle was almost finished chanting, Arn's arrow found its mark in his chest, causing everything to suddenly fall silent as he lurched over, gurgling his last breath.

"Noooo!" came the cries as another loud voice rose above them all and filled the chamber.

"FOOOOOLLSSSS! DID YOU TRULY THINK TO BIND THE WOLF QUEEN! AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!" it hissed, receding along with the blue light into the cracks of the ceiling of the cavern.

Despite the loud presence, Arn was still firing arrows at the remaining mages, who'd turned on him the moment the loud voice subsided.

He crouched to avoid a fireball before pegging another mage with an arrow, leaving just two.

One tried to flee, leaving only one facing Arn, which didn't last long.

When the last one realized she'd tried a dead end, she turned and tried to cast something at Arn, but he was ready with an arrow.

Making sure each of them were finished, Arn checked the platform altar to make sure whatever they were doing couldn't be restarted, taking a book of magic incantations from the pedestal.
Realizing it was dead quiet, Arn had a bad feeling.

Gorlic should have gotten up here by now.

Retracing his steps back down, Arn sadly found the sellsword's body surrounded by the bones from three undead skeletons.

Arn felt a sickening feeling in his stomach, eyeing the nasty gashes Gorlic had taken.

He'd bypassed too many, left too many roaming behind him as he passed. Then again, they had to stop that ritual.

Arn sighed, kicking a skeleton's head off the platforms, angry and disgusted with the whole situation as he looked around.

*What in Oblivion were they trying to do down here?*
From One Queen to Another: Solitude pt. 4

Chapter Summary

Arn gets to know more about Elisif, and discovers he has enemies closer than he thought...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The warmth of the morning sun beat an unwelcome heat into Arn's armor as he trudged around the last turn on the road into Solitude, the litter of sticks he'd constructed to carry Gorlic's body, dragging behind.

Making his way past the curious guards, he caught sight of exactly what he didn't want to see.

Lydia stood leaning against the stone wall just inside the gates, arms crossed, with a scowl of annoyance on her face as she observed him enter.

Somehow she'd found out he had left.

Since Arn chose to keep on going, she fell into step beside him and there was a long awkward silence for awhile as he trudged to the chapel of Arkay to drop the body off.

"You know, you--" she started before he cut her off.

"NOT--right---now!....okay?" he gritted as they came to a stop at the chapel of Arkay.

She continued watching silently as Arn made arrangements with a priest to deal with the body.

"So....how did it go?" she asked in a forced apathetic manner.

"Fine" he lied.

"I see that" she replied sarcastically, looking back at the body being moved around the side of the chapel "You're the one who asked me to stay nearby in case you needed me"

"Wouldn't be much of a break if I was calling you right back, would it?"

"My job is to protect you."

"And you have. Now, it's your opportunity for a break. Relax, have some fun" Arn said more angrily than he meant to as they neared the Blue Palace.

"And what will you do?"

"Right now, report to the Jarl. After that, sleep."

They stopped at the palace doors.

"At least let me know beforehand, if you need to leave again" Lydia replied, stopping and leaning
against the wall by the doors.

"You're supposed to be taking a break from watching my back"

"A housecarl doesn't just stop protecting their Thane"

_I can protect myself._ The words were on the tip of his tongue, but instead they just stood there staring at each other for a moment.

"You should get some rest. Travelling with me has set you too much on edge" Arn said.

"Is that an order?" Lydia didn't budge.

"Yes, it is. As your Thane, I order you to relax and take a break. There, are you happy?!" he retorted quickly.

"As you command, my Thane" Lydia huffed with a scowl as she turned to leave.

Feeling no relief, Arn entered the Blue Palace and was quickly ushered into the private wings down a long hall and into Jarl Elisif's personal study room.

Bookshelves lined the walls and large windows let in abundant sunlight across several desks and a table that Elisif sat at.

She wore a blue satin frock with ribbons at the sleeves. Even though it was still early morning for most nobles, her appearance was still immaculately beautiful.

As the doors closed, Arn suddenly felt nervous, realizing he was alone with her.

"Come, come, Dragonborn. There's no need to fear me" Elisif chided with a half smirk as Arn realized he was still standing still by the doors.

"Oh..uh, my lady--jarl, I investigated Wolfskull cave and found a sizeable group of mages attempting some sort of summoning or binding ritual. I put a stop to it, and recovered this" Arn stated, moving to her and withdrawing the incantation book.

"Hmmm...our court wizard, Sybille Stentor will have a better idea what this means" said Elisif as she thumbed through the book before setting it aside "A more important question I have for you is what are your plans?"

"My plans?"

"Yes, you are the Dragonborn. You have already shaped the fates of everyone in this city. Why are you here and what is your purpose?"

"Uh...well....We came here to resupply and get horses. I was on an errand for the Greybeards before we got sidetracked fighting dragons and vampires."

"Dragons and vampires...oh my. Please, do tell me about it" Elisif exclaimed, pursing her hands together and fixing him with those blue eyes of hers.

At length, Arn related all the things that had happened to him since finding out about being Dragonborn.

"That's quite remarkable, but...tell me, what is your purpose as Dragonborn? What is your overall goal?" Elisif replied ponderingly as Arn finished.
"I...I don't know...I guess kill any dragons that try to harm the people, I think. The Greybeards seemed to know more but refused to tell me. I have to go get this Horn of Jurgen Windcaller from whoever took it before they'll trust me more."

Elisif quietly rose and seemed to glide over to one of the large windows with her hands clasped behind her back.

"You do realize why the Greybeards don't trust you, right?"

"Not really. All I got out of them was something about abusing power or trust. Based on how secluded they are, I assumed that was how they treated everyone."

"It's because of that damn traitor, Ulfric Stomcloak. He was a student of the Greybeards for awhile. Then he took the power they helped him achieve to murder my husband” she replied sadly, turning to him with slightly watery eyes.

"I am sorry, my Jarl. I did not mean to bring up such a painful memory."

"Don't apologize. The fault lies with Ulfric and his rebels. You, like me, have simply fallen into the mess left behind” Elisif continued, gazing intently at Arn, forcing back tears that threatened to come.

Arn was silent, unsure of what to say and pondering his own path.

After a silence that seemed long but probably wasn't, Elisif resumed walking back over to the table.

"So you see now why you were received the way you were both here and by the Greybeards"

"Yes" replied Arn frustratedly.

"But I didn't ask you here to dwell on bad memories" Elisif seemed to shake herself out of sadness and back to her inquisitive mode, sitting down again, crossing her legs and pursing her hands together "As you have probably been able to tell, my court is not altogether....loyal..shall we say?"

"It did seem...unusual" was all Arn dared reply, a bit apprehensive of where this was going.

"It is a long story and it is only fair that I start from the beginning” she replied before motioning Arn to a chair opposite her.

Once Arn was seated, Elisif began.

"As you know, I was married to Torygg, the High King. I was....a different person then....young, naive...and obsessed with all the things that involved being a queen or a princess of Skyrim."

"Our marriage was one of arrangement. Neither of us knew the other and I was only thrilled because of the position it afforded me. It was decent enough at first, but over the first few years, things became more difficult since I could not produce an heir."

"We grew unhappy with each other, we both took lovers until Torygg was made High King in place of his father. I think we both realized then we could no longer try to escape the responsibilities we had been avoiding up until that point. We put an end to our affairs, and actually learned to start tolerating, liking, and ultimately loving each other again."

"During the time Torygg was King, I had no part in ruling. I had no interest in politics. That was all his job. Consequently, when he was gone, I had no experience ruling and no respect from the court."

"Torygg's death was both the worst and best moment of my life. It ripped me out of my previous life
and forced me into a whole new way of thinking."
"It all truly dawned on me during one of the festivals about six months ago. I was walking through the marketplace with my housecarl and some of the members of court when a little boy ran up to me and handed me a flower."

"He said it reminded him of me. So I asked why that was, and he said it sits in the sun and looks pretty. That was all. So simplistic an evaluation truly struck me hard. That's how people saw me, Elisif the Fair."

"I truly did nothing but sit in the Blue Palace looking pretty while others ran the hold and Skyrim fell apart under Ulfric's assaults."

Arn was silent, staring into her blue eyes in surprise that she would bare her flaws like this to him.

"Since then, I have tried to become the ruler my people need, but for so many years I was not, that much damage has already been done. I do not have the confidence of the court. The Jarls across the land are divided and have their own agendas. The Empire sees me as a convenient puppet to wield against Ulfric, and now Dragons are threatening the people."

"Additionally, there are rumors and conspiracies here in Solitude."

"There are people here who oppose you?" Arn queried, running faces and people through his mind.

"One, specifically...you've already met him, Erikur. He would like nothing more than to supplant me."

"How would he possibly do that?"

"There are two ways a Jarl can be deposed. One is to have the High King do so, which there is none right now. Second is to have a unanimous vote of no confidence among all the Thanes."

"So..."

"There are only two Thanes right now, Erikur and Bryling. Bryling supports me, but it may only be a matter of time before Erikur finds some way of swaying or forcing her vote against me."

"So...why are you telling me all this. What is it you want from me?" Arn asked, intently studying Elisif's beautiful face with concern.

"You seem so surreal sometimes, you know" Elisif replied slowly almost reaching out to touch his arm before pulling back.

"Surreal?"

"Yes, as if the Divines knew exactly what was going on and dropped you out of the sky...You seem too good to be true, if you know what I mean" Elisif blushed.

"I am no divine"

"But you have delivered others from death and despair" Elisif replied, making Arn blush uncomfortably.

"I don't know that I'd make too much out of it...it's not good to set expectations so high that one can't
"reach them" Arn mumbled uneasily in reply.

"And yet, if we want a better future, we all have to believe in something" Elisif replied, smiling warmly at him for the first time that morning.

"What is it exactly that you want from me?" asked Arn.

"I'd like you to stay and help the people long enough for me to make you a Thane....and more importantly....I'd like...a friend, a real one."

Arn was silent for a moment as he thought over everything she'd said, combined with his observations of things ever since he'd arrived in Solitude.

"Yes....I think I can do that" Arn replied, smiling a little to try and encourage her.

"Excellent!" she beamed, reaching out and somewhat shaking hands with him "but I will not detain you further. I am sure you are wanting rest after your excursion" she finished, rising and taking the magic incantations book with her.

"Of course, my jarl" replied Arn, rising with a nod.

"When we're in private, just call me Elisif" she smiled back.

"Okay, Elisif" answered Arn, feeling all manner of awkward calling her by her first name but trying to get used to it.

Later, as Arn lay nodding off in his quarters, he wondered just how long it would take to be made Thane here and how long it would take him to ever get that horn of Jurgen Windcaller, though Elisif's intense blue eyes seemed to keep creeping back into his mind.

If he waited too long, the Greybeards might never let him back in.

Sleep finally came but not restful.

...a clearing among the pines, bodies stripped of clothing, cut and mangled, strewn around the ground....robed figures in black standing in a circle around an altar with a horrid iron spike pointing skyward....Desarra impaled on it....Arn's scream of rage filled the night sky--

Shooting up in his bed with a start, Arn was suddenly aware it had just been a dream.

Breathing heavily, he wiped the sweat from his brow, cursing his memory and wondering why he was having a nightmare about it after not being plagued by it for some time.

Leaning back against the soft pillows, he tried to relax and go back to sleep, but shortly thereafter heard the door to his chambers open and shut softly.

Cracking an eye, he saw the outline of a robed woman creeping across the carpet with a candle and flask in hand.

Stopping by the nightstand, she emptied the flask into the pitcher of water as Arn caught a glimpse of her face: Nasriel.

Waiting a few moments, Arn sprang out of the covers, and got a restraining arm around her shoulders before bringing his dagger to her throat, muffling her cry of surprise.
"I allow you to stay and this is how you return the favor!" hissed Arn in her ear.

"Please! Don't kill me!" she whispered, terrified, her hands gripping his muscular forearm, trying to get out of his tightening grip "It's....it's not what you think!"

"Truly? Then maybe you can drink this water" he hissed, grabbing the pitcher and bringing it up to her lips as she tried to writhe away.

"No no no! Please--not--!" she sputtered as the door to Arn's room flew open and Lydia appeared in the doorway.

An awkward struggle followed wherein Arn ended up spilling the pitcher, Lydia barked at Nasriel who in turn pleaded with Arn, but when it was over, Nasriel lay tied up on the floor with Arn and Lydia contemplating what to do.

"I told you I didn't feel comfortable with her" Lydia stated demurely, bending down to check Nasriel for any weapons or other surprises.

"I don't have any weapons. I told you I wasn't here to harm you" hissed Nasriel in a panic as Lydia continued searching.

"Then why are you here if it's not to act the part of the maid?" stated Arn, relaxing on the edge of the bed and lighting a lantern to illuminate the room.

"I.....was supposed to.....seduce you" Nasriel sputtered embarassedly, her face blushing red.

"Why the flask in the water?" queried Arn, eyeing the spilled contents on the floor.

"It was a special potion prepared.....to make you more....receptive"

"Prepared by whom?" Lydia snarled.

"Please!...I cannot say!...They will likely kill me already for failing!"

"For failing to do what! What is the point of all this!" Lydia continued, crouching down and taking hold of Nasriel's robe.

"For failing to get me in Erikur's pocket, I imagine" stated Arn thoughtfully, causing the other two to pause and turn to look at him.

"What is going on?" Lydia asked, rising back up and walking over to sit next to Arn on the edge of the bed.

"It seems this lass' master, Erikur fancies making himself Jarl and is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to make it happen."

"Please! You cannot confront him. He will surely have me killed!" squeaked Nasriel.

"Then you will remain bound here" stated Arn with finality as he stroked the stubble on his chin thoughtfully, wondering just how to go about this.

"Should we really trust anything she's saying?" asked Lydia, still eyeing Nasriel critically.

"It fits with what the Jarl told me earlier"

"So why is this Erikur interested in you?"
"Anyone who supports the Jarl is in his way. Likely he was trying to get me to do something he could blackmail me for later. Speaking of later, how is that you happen to arrive in the middle of the night to check on me, or were you following her?" Arn asked, suddenly turning to Lydia.

"I...told you I would check on you...I guess....I just happened to arrive at the right moment" she seemed to stutter out unconvincingly.

"Were you outside on watch all this time?" Arn asked with a smirk.

"No...not all this time" Lydia blushed, looking away "Besides, you caught her yourself."

"Yes, well, we should get some rest with what's left of the night and decide a course of action in the morning."

"I think I should stay here given the circumstances" Lydia muttered in reply.

"Fine" Arn answered getting up to retrieve some extra blankets from one of the shelves. In the morning though, Arn was still undecided about how to proceed.

"Why don't we just go confront him?" Lydia yawned sleepily after they'd donned their armor and contemplated the gagged and tied up Nasriel.

"What would we accuse him of? We don't have proof of anything except he tried to get me to sleep with a maid."

"So..."

"I guess there's not much we can do right now. I doubt she would testify or that her testimony would weigh against a Thane's before any magistrate in Skyrim."

Lydia huffed in annoyance as a knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Cracking the door, Arn grew equally as annoyed to see Lydia's bard "friend", Falnir, standing there with a grin on his clean cut features.

"Just checking on the fair lady to make sure all was well" he spoke loudly enough for Lydia to hear. Arn simply threw his hands up with an annoyed huff and motioned for Lydia to deal with it as she crossed the room with a skip and a grin, stepping outside and closing the door.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you here like this until I talk to the Jarl about what to do" stated Arn to Nasriel after a few moments as he strapped on his gauntlets and headed out the door. Arn nodded at Lydia as he exited his rooms and she whispered a few things more to Falnir before giving him a light kiss on the cheek before falling into step behind Arn as he ascended the steps to the court.

"So what's the plan?" she whispered into his ear as they went up the steps.

"We need to talk privately with the Jarl. She will have a better idea about what can be done, I think."

But getting a private audience with the Jarl wasn't as easy as Arn thought it would be. There was a steady stream of people from the town with all sorts of requests and needs resulting from the dragon attack as well as normal items of the hold that needed attending to.
Arn had tried to impress on Falf Firebeard that it was important, but this hardly seemed to do anything to move him up in the order of supplicants...or maybe he was deliberately moving him back?

Just as Arn began to wonder if Falk was truly trustworthy, Erikur seemed to appear at his elbow between him and Lydia.

"I trust you slept well last night, Dragonborn?"

Arn simply turned and scowled, eyeing Erikur critically.

"Well, if you didn't sleep well, I hope other activities made up for the loss of it" he continued a little nervously, still looking questioningly up at Arn.

"You can't buy me with women" Arn bluntly stated.

After an awkward silence where Erikur cleared his throat and seemed to recover his composure, an eerie grin crept onto his face.

"But you can be bought then?" he gleefully hissed.

"No"

"Ah, but I'm a businessman. And if there's anything I've learned from business, it's that EVERYTHING's for sale. It all depends...on the price" Erikur finished with another eerie grin before turning and sauntering off to the other side of the court.

Something about that statement struck Arn in a foreboding way. He'd been so confident confronting Erikur with his failure to sway him, but the ruthless epithet he'd just spit out before leaving left Arn wondering if there wasn't much worse things the man was capable of.

Arn began to feel as the minutes passed that he'd made a big mistake in not playing along for the time being.

When the court broke for lunch, Arn nodded to Lydia to follow him to his room instead of the dining hall.

Opening the door, Arn's heart fell as the foreboding he felt was made palpable by the fact Nasriel was gone.

"She couldn't have gotten loose. We made sure of it!" cried Lydia exasperatedly as they searched the rest of Arn's quarters.

"Maybe she didn't. Maybe she was taken" Arn muttered, recalling the frantic pleas Nasriel had made.

"You think Erikur would stoop that low?"

"I begin to think we've misjudged just how ruthless he might be..." Arn muttered, staring down at the empty couch where Nasriel had been only hours earlier.

Chapter End Notes
1. I've referenced the idea of "maidenhood" a few times now. The idea is similar to some older cultures' idea that once a girl began puberty (13ish) until the time she was done with it (19-20ish) was the ideal time to find a spouse and have children. In Skyrim, it would be a little older, say...16-22ish for a woman to be considered in her "maidenhood". That would be considered the ideal time to find a husband, and older women who didn't would at times be treated differently.
Chapter Summary

Elisif asks Arn to find a way to pre-emptively outmaneuver the grip Erikur has on Solitude, but doing so will reveal the extent of Erikur's power and influence...

"You're sure no one saw anything?" Elisif asked, brows knit with concern.

"They must have. They're just not saying anything" Arn replied tiredly as they sat in Elisif's study after half a day of asking around about Nasriel.

"Could Erikur really have that much control over people?" Lydia ventured to pitch in from off to the side, leaning against a bookshelf.

"He gets his power from control. He finds your weak spot and uses it against you. He will resort to being more ruthless if he can't find a weak spot" Elisif stated sadly, rubbing her temple as if the thought plagued her mind.

"So he blackmails people?" Lydia asked in wonder, amazed such a thing went on.

"In a way...Usually it involves business dealings since he owns or controls practically half the business in Skyrim, but if that doesn't work then he resorts to more....personal measures" Elisif replied without looking up.

"You sound like you've been on the receiving end of it before" Arn stated cautiously, carefully studying Elisif's features.

"Yes....when I was first made Jarl after Torygg's death, I was approached by someone who had knowledge of my previous affair with one of the Thanes at the time, Aren Vicci. I was given a message that I should step down in favor of Erikur, and that if I did not, that Aren might suddenly find himself in danger."

"What happened?"

"I talked with Aren and we both agreed we would do no such thing, both of us knowing how rotten things would become if a pig like Erikur was made Jarl. A week later," Elisif paused as she swallowed the rising emotion in her voice "Aren's body was found off a road east of the city, allegedly slain by bandits while checking some of his family's holdings."

"Gods..." muttered Lydia in disbelief.

"Since then, slowly but surely, my allies have either fled or mysteriously died. We had five thanes when Torygg died. Now we have two. I've brought it up to Tullius before but got laughed off. He only cares about the war."

"If he operates with such impunity, why has he not moved against you directly?" asked Arn.

Elisif raised her head then, wiping a tear away, and clapped her hands. One of the bookshelves made a clanking noise and slowly spun outward to reveal a robed Breton woman with dark skin exiting a
hidden passage.

"This is my court wizard, Sybille Stentor. Fear of her is what keeps Erikur from moving directly against me" Elisif replied, nodding a greeting at Sybille who walked up and bowed slightly before turning to face Arn.

"Wait, so there are hidden passages--" Lydia had begun to exclaim, looking at the passage Sybille had emerged from.

Arn was looking at Sybille Stentor. He'd caught a glimpse or two of her hooded form moving around in the castle, but never a close up look until now.

Something about her wasn't right. She half smirked at him and it suddenly dawned on him: her eyes. They weren't a natural color. They were a bright yellow or orange....just like....Movarth Piquine!

Instantly, Arn barreled over the table, trying to tackle her away from Elisif and draw his dagger to her throat in the same motion, but instead she caught him midair and pivoted, tossing him aside like a rag doll into a bookshelf.

"What are you doing?!" he heard both Lydia and Elisif exclaiming, though he heard Lydia drawing her sword and shield as he did so, rising from a pile of books into a guard stance, eyeing Sybille warily.

"Look at her eyes! She's a vampire" gritted Arn, as he began closing on her as Lydia moved to a flanking position.

"I know. I've known for a long time" replied Elisif imploringly "Now, please, stop this so I can explain!"

"What?" both Arn and Lydia asked incredulously, shooting her a look of disbelief.

"You should listen to her, Dragonborn" Stentor replied disdainfully, crossing her arms with an air of annoyance.

"How do I know she's not a thrall?" hissed Arn, not letting his eyes leave Sybille.

Sybille Stentor huffed in annoyance and simply waved a hand at Elisif who walked to her and slapped her hard across the face.

"I hate it when you do that" she muttered, glaring at Elisif.

"It wouldn't be necessary if you'd ever agree to casting something on yourself to mask your appearance at least a little" Elisif glared back.

"Give me a good reason not to kill you where you stand" hissed Arn, still not letting his guard down, still eyeing Sybille warily.

"Do you always introduce yourself this way, Dragonborn?" she sneered in answer.

"I don't normally befriend abominations"

"So says the man with Dragon's blood in his veins"

"I don't feed on the lives of others"

"You slay them and take their souls. Do you not?"
"I slay them because they have it coming to them. Taking their souls is something that just...happens. It is not of my own choosing."

"And you think becoming a vampire was of my own choosing?"

Arn faltered a bit, eyeing her frustratingly, wanting to be angry or aggressive, but finding it difficult to continue to do so.

"So how did you become a vampire?" Arn queried, backing away and motioning Lydia to sheath her weapons.

Sybille huffed in both annoyance and reluctance, turning to Elisif with a pleading look, who in turn gave her a nod to continue.

"Like any young mage, I was a bit too headstrong for my own good. Got in over my head in a place where my magic couldn't get me out of. Instead of becoming a meal, a vampire named Movarth Piquine thought I'd make a better disciple. He was wrong. I broke his hold and returned, but not before I'd been made into...this" Sybille gestured her hand across her features.

"And how is it you thrive here in the Castle?"

"The blood of the condemned sustains me. Surely, you've heard the rumors" grinned Sybille wickedly, fangs visible.

"And you're fine with this...arrangement?" Arn turned to Elisif.

"She has safeguarded the Jarls here for over forty years. Not once has she stepped out of line or behaved inappropriately. Both Jarls before me knew and trusted her. I haven't been given any reason not to do the same" replied Elisif, laying a hand on his sword arm gently "Please, trust me."

"Oh, I trust you, but her kind....I've seen too much of recently to use the word 'trust' in the same sentence. There's also the matter of those charming abilities..." Arn replied, still unwilling to put his sword away.

"Trusting too readily will get you killed. It's wise to exercise discretion and caution before trust ever comes to mind" Sybille replied sardonically before continuing "The Dragonborn is wise to doubt. He will have plenty of enemies of his own before long."

"What do you mean?!" retorted Arn, wondering what this strange anomaly of a woman knew.

"You have power and a destiny. People will seek you out wherever you go. They will want you to be something for them...a deliverer, a shield, a sword, a tool, a puppet. They will love you when you are what they want.....but if you're not, then they will become your enemies."

"Just turning someone down isn't going to make them automatically an enemy. That's a rather overly cynical outlook."

"Suit yourself, but don't say I didn't warn you" replied Sybille apathetically.

"Enough of this, both of you" interrupted Elisif "We have a powerful enemy right here in the city to deal with."

Arn slowly sheathed his sword, still eyeing Sybille Stentor warily as they all moved to sit at the table.

"So...if there are secret passages in the Blue Palace, is there a chance Nasriel left using those?" Lydia
ventured after they’d all seated and an awkward silence passed.

Arn noted both he and Lydia made sure to sit as far from Sybille as possible.

"There are no secret passages that border your rooms" Sybille answered nonchalantly without looking at Lydia "Do you really think the girl left of her own accord still?"

"Maybe there are new ones or maybe passages you're not aware of?" Lydia asked in reply.

"You don't think in forty years of using them that I wouldn't find any and all of them?" scoffed Sybille "More likely, Erikur had men take her right out the front door and either bribed or threatened the door guards into silence. Also, none of the magical wards I put in the secret passages have been disturbed."

"So...who exactly can we trust here?" Arn muttered thoughtfully, though still eyeing Sybille Stentor warily.

"Bolgeir Bearclaw, my housecarl, is completely trustworthy and an able fighter--" Elisif replied.

"Also dumber than an ox" interjected Sybille.

After several rounds of questions, it became apparent that the only people inside the Blue palace that were completely reliable not to do Erikur's bidding either willingly or unwillingly, were Bolgeir, Sybille, and Elisif's two maids, Erdi and Lysi.

There were others that were possible allies, but too many unknowns made them question marks in their minds, particularly with Sybille's cynical insights on them after each question.

"So, what should we do? Should we ask out in the city?" Lydia ventured after another thoughtful silence by them all.

"Enough about the girl! She's gone. Best thing you can do is try to beat him at his own game" retorted Sybille.

Arn was about to snap back at her but Elisif interjected first.

"Last time we tried that, it turned out badly"

"Last time, we didn't have the Dragonborn to protect the supplies" replied Sybille, sitting back smugly, waving a hand in Arn's direction.

"Arn, would you be willing to invest time guarding caravans of supplies?" Elisif asked, fixing him with those deep blue eyes.

"I...think...so. You mind explaining this strategy you two both seem to already know?" Arn asked cautiously.

"Erikur's power comes largely from his control over businesses both here in Solitude and other places in Skyrim. The best way to throw him off track is to undermine his power base. Find ways of undermining his profits and he'll lose focus and power at the same time" Elisif responded excitedly.

"Whenever anyone else tries opening up any shops, Erikur always finds a way to force them out, either by forcing prices too low, or the supplies for those businesses mysteriously seem to always get waylaid by bandits" Sybille finished.

"But if you were to protect the caravans, they could make it to Solitude without a problem" pleaded
Elisif.

"Even if this new business gets its supplies, what's to keep Erikur from forcing them out with the competitor's prices?"

"If we keep getting supplies, we can outlast them. Erikur isn't willing to take that much loss for long."

"If you make the arrangements, I can make it happen then" Arn replied, rising and stretching, realizing they'd been in the room conversing for several hours now.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Elisif as the rest of them rose from the table "Within the next few days, I will have made the necessary arrangements. Thank you again, Arn" she replied, smiling warmly at him with a nod as he and Lydia left the room.

Two days later, Arn found himself armed and geared up, quietly saddling a horse outside Solitude in the early morning dawn.

Hearing footfalls behind him, he glanced back to find Lydia with her pack and potion bag, armored up and ready to go.

"Trying to sneak off again?" she stated quietly with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, but not from you" he replied, returning to cinching down the saddle.

"You never summoned me."

"You were visiting your friend" as Arn had taken to referring to Falnir.

"If everything goes as planned, you're still going to get attacked. You're going to need me" she stated, sitting with folded arms on a bale of hay.

"Yes, I will need you, but not with me. I need you to stay here and keep an eye on Jarl Elisif for me."

"What?!" Lydia gasped, sitting up in surprise.

"With what we know, I feel better having someone I trust watching out for her. With me gone for awhile, I don't know what Erikur will try, but I want you here just in case" Arn replied sternly, mounting the horse and getting his boots firmly in the stirrups.

"She's got the behemoth housecarl and a vampire mage for that!" retorted Lydia angrily, standing and putting her hands on her hips.

"I don't know that behemoth housecarl and I don't trust that vampire mage" Arn replied more urgently, knowing he needed to get going. The longer he waited around, the more people were likely to find out about his leaving.

Lydia sighed exasperatedly, and Arn could see she understood his reasons, but didn't really want to be left behind.

"If it makes you feel better, the contact that will be heading up the caravan is a reputed swordswoman" Arn tried to console her as he turned the horse around to move towards the door.
"Yeah, so reputed, she couldn't protect the caravans up to this point?" retorted Lydia with a sigh.

Arn leaned over and tipped her chin up gently with his hand, looking her intently in the eye.

"Lydia, this is serious. Watch your back and watch over the Jarl. I'll be back before you know it, and hopefully before too many other people notice" Arn implored, sending as much concern in his look as he could before Lydia relented with a short nod as she handed him the pouch of potions and shouldered her pack.

"Ah, there you are" came an unwelcome smooth voice Arn recognized as Falnir peeked his head out from around the stable doors.

"Falnir!" Lydia gritted, glaring at him "I told you not to come out here!" she hissed.

"But it's such a beautiful morning! I thought we might take a nice stroll among the hills just south of here. I know a few nice...secluded spots" he implored, strolling up to her and caressing a lock of her hair before she aggravatedly batted his hand away with a glare.

Arn was in no mood for this. Trotting forward slightly, in a flash he drew his longsword and had Falnir pinned against the neck to a post in the barn, the point of the blade just pricking enough for a dribble of blood to run down the panicked bard's neck.

"Arn!" Lydia yipped in shock.

"If anything happens to her or if you repeat anything you saw here to anyone else, I will find you when I get back and I will gut you like a rutting pig!" hissed Arn with all the venom he could impart without being loud before putting the Spurs to his charger and was galloping out of the barn and off through the fog of the morning mist on the roads east of Solitude.

Arn had been surprised how quickly Elisif had been able to arrange setting up a competitive general store.

Apparently, this had been tried a number of times before but never successfully, but since Erikur was so generally unpopular among the general populace, there were always people ready to get behind an endeavor that would get them out from under him.

Enough of the pieces were already in place, that all Arn had to do was get to a prearranged point on the coast east of the city and escort the shipment offloaded there to Solitude.

Most of the day had gone by without incident, but ominously he saw no other travelers on the road at all. He only passed one farmhouse, a Nord farmer eyeing him warily from a distance as a woman watched him from the door.

Alternating riding at pace and resting his horse, Arn planned to ride through the night, knowing he needed to make contact with the supplies as soon as possible.

He had just passed a wide open area that narrowed down to a turn, a rocky overlook on one side and a thick wooded forest beginning on the other....perfect for an ambush, Arn thought as he approached.

He pondered stopping to recon the area, but darkness was falling, he was in unfamiliar terrain, and every moment longer he waited to get to the meeting point was a greater chance for something to happen before he got there.

Making up his mind he spurred his horse onward, first a gallop, then by the time he hit the turn was at a full stretch sprint, urging his horse on with everything he had.
No sooner had he begun circling the turn than a short hiss of an arrow flew past him with a thud into a tree followed by another.

He ventured a glance off where they came from and caught the silhouettes of several archers sitting up on the rocky overlook and the glow of a mage further down, probably with more.

He had barely gotten his gaze back in front when a dozen dark shapes rushed out a hundred feet in front of him, blocking the road.

Arn couldn’t see what they had, but instinct told him he needed to get off the road now.

He held up on the reins, veering hard left, hoping the woods would afford enough room for the horse, but he wasn’t so lucky.

Two arrows impaled his horse, one in the neck, the other in the chest before he could even get turned toward the woods, the horse stumbling forward now, whinnying and crying out sad noises as Arn knew it would not survive.

Several more arrows flew by, some from the right side and more from up front, one grazing Arn’s helmet as he extricated his boots from the stirrups and got three arrows in one hand as he perched on the saddle ready to leap off.

Several more arrows hit the horse with sickening thuds, silencing its sounds and causing it to slump forward to the ground.

As it went down, Arn unslung his bow and leaped from the falling horse, loosing shots from his bow as he plummeted toward the brush on the woods side.

Falling into the brush, he rolled further into the welcome cover of the woods as he heard a satisfying thud of one of his arrows hitting flesh and a man scream as either he or one of his buddies was hit with another.

He slithered further down and got an angle on some of the dark shapes in the road, moving toward his downed horse.

He waited until he could get a good look at seven outlines before he began unleashing a rain of arrow shafts at the fools in the open, four of them falling in the road before the rest were smart enough to get into cover.

He turned his head toward the overlook just in time to see the silhouettes of more archers zeroing in on him, rolling away just in time as several shafts came flying through the branches, two of them hitting where he had just been.

As he crouched among some bushes behind a tree, he could hear the crashing amongst the brush as the bandits left from the road were circling around his left flank.

He was now surrounded on all sides except one, which was to go back the way he came, around the turn and into the wide open space, sure to be covered by the archers on the overlook.

Now each group was shouting at the other, the flanking group was closing up and approaching Arn’s position based on the yells of the group on the overlook.

Based on the noises and voices, Arn knew there were at least eight closing on him from the woods side and at least six up on the rocky overlook on the other side of the road.
Arn hunkered down and waited for them to draw closer. If he timed this right, he could turn the tables on them. If he didn't, he might get filled with arrows before he could do much of anything.

It was nearly dark now, and the crunch of leaves and branches signaled them drawing nearer and nearer as Arn slithered off to one side of the tree and lined up a shot in the vicinity of the noise from one approaching.

Loosing his arrow, a satisfying thud resounded a moment later followed by a cry from the dark woods as all of them froze for a moment, reacting to their downed comrade.

"Damn fools, I told you to get your shields up!" growled a voice at them which Arn responded by pegging with an arrow but heard a tell tale PING noise as he must have hit a shield or some heavy armor in a strong spot.

When they were within thirty feet of him, they stopped for a moment, Arn just making out a silhouette or two in the darkening woods.

"Come on out, Dragonborn. We know where you are. You're surrounded. Surrender! There's no way out. We have you pinned down!" hollered the same voice as before.

"WULD NA KEST!" Arn made his move, exploding through the brush to find himself appearing right in the middle of them, bow and arrows in hand.

They only had a moment to make a startled movement before Arn kicked one to the side and turned on the majority of them.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The explosion of power caught five of them in a vortex of force that exploded through the brush and trees.

The two next to Arn exploded in a shower of gore and metal as they along with wood, splinters, and leaves were exploded backward through the others.

Arn didn't have time to admire his handiwork, though. He made a complete turn and loosed an arrow into another stunned figure on his left, drew and put an arrow through the head of the one he'd just kicked down, and turned back to the right just in time to avoid an arrow flying past his head.

On instinct born of many fights, Arn ducked left and fired two successive shots in the vicinity where the arrow came from, the second hitting flesh and a cry echoed through the woods as he heard the man fall and stumble around in the leaves.

Arn's head felt a bit woozy suddenly and he ducked behind a nearby tree as he recovered from using words of power in succession as he took stock of what was left of those hit with the unrelenting force.

Two of them were just gone, another had been tossed in the air and impaled on part of a tree ten feet back, still flailing, moaning helplessly as he looked down at the branch protruding from his chest.

The other two had been pelted with chunks and splinters of wood and what was left of them wasn't pretty as they lay in a patches of leaves that grew darker and darker with the blood pools.

He stood still for awhile before sneaking forward, making sure the others were dead, and that no more were left on this side of the road.
He carefully moved around to the bandit impaled on the tree, quickly removing the dagger he had on him before he knew Arn was even there.

"H-h-help...m-m-me" he gargled at Arn, waving imploring bloody hands at him.

"I can't help you if you don't help me" hissed Arn, keeping away from the bandit to avoid any surprises and keeping an eye out for any others approaching.

"W-w-what?" the bandit spat, laboring to breathe.

"How many of your friends are left over there and who put you up to this? Who's your leader and where's he at?" hissed Arn in reply.

"I-uh-guh-ug-uk" was all the bandit got out before he began to cough up blood. Clearly this one was done for.

But Arn wanted to send a message to the rest. So after taking a look around, he emerged from the bushes, walked up to the bandit and began wrenching on the branch back and forth eliciting screams and gurgles of pain, over and over until Arn thought he'd sufficiently put some fear into the remaining number, broke the pointed end of the branch off and stabbed it through the bandit's throat, finishing him off.

Arn knew he'd gotten his point clearly as he heard the others calling out to them from the overlook as he began sneaking around.

It was dark now. The only light was afforded by the rising crescent moon amongst the clouds as Arn carefully made his way forward and around, carefully across the road and looked for a way up the rocky overlook.

It didn't take near as long as he thought it would since the bandits used this as an ambush point frequently and had worn a path up their given route, allowing Arn a quick and silent ascent up the back of the hillside.

As he approached, he could hear the remaining ones arguing.

"We should leave!"

"Nobody's leaving! We got a job to do!"

"But you heard what happened to the others!"

"It's one man. He couldn't possibly have gotten em all. More likely that was him we heard screamin like girl!"

"Sounded like Jorak"

"We should go check and find out"

"Snatches, go sneak down there and find out what in Oblivion's goin on"

"This one will go" answered a feline voice before barely audible shuffling of feet.

Arn took up a perfect spot behind a large tree trunk just off the trail as the Khajiit bandit came sneaking by. To his credit, he made hardly any noise, but Arn was expecting him and made hardly any noise as his longsword cleaved his head from his shoulders as he went by.
The thud of the twitching head and rolling body down the hillside keyed the others, already on edge.

"W-w-what was that?" one hissed.

"Quiet fool!" another hissed.

Arn had his bow drawn now and peered around the tree trunk.

Fools, all five of them were outlined against the night sky.

Releasing arrows in quick succession, Arn got good hits on four of them, the arrows flying up out of the pitch black at the stunned bandits, who cried out and stood to run to no avail.

The last, the mage, had the sense to drop to his chest, unleashing a fireball in the general vicinity, lighting up the woods as Arn ducked behind the tree.

"Ha Ha!" he shouted over-excitedly "I see you, Dragonborn! You won't get me!" he shouted, repeatedly firing more fireballs, lighting the woods on fire and exploding against Arn's tree as he was forced to crouch and draw his sword and shield.

"Just you wait! There are more of us! More will come! Y-y-you won't get me!" he screamed hysterically.

This was troublesome, Arn pondered, putting his shield over his head to deflect some flaming branches that fell on him.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn turned, exploded in a flash of movement, and was suddenly standing over the stunned mage, bringing his newly purchased steel shield down, bashing the mage over the head, battering his face into the rock.

"You'll find no more friends here" sneered Arn as he yanked the stunned mage up and shoved him face first against another rock.

Tying his hands and hamstringing one of his legs with his longsword, Arn dragged the stunned man over to the edge of the rock before dangling his legs over the edge, holding onto the man by his throat.

"Now that we've introduced ourselves properly, I think it'd be in your best interest to tell me everything about who you work for" sneered Arn, squeezing the man's throat.

"I c-c-can't. Th-they'll k-kill me" rasped the bandit.

"Well..." said Arn, looking down to get his point across "Die now....die later. Tough choice, isn't it?"

"You don't...k-know...w-wh-wh-what you've done...he has t-t-trained a-a-assassins.....the k-k-kind they t-t-tell st-stories about....m-m-more b-bandits.....a powerful...mage" rasped the bandit, beginning to settle down and recover his spite, glaring at Arn.

"Well, if the mage is anything like you, I can't say I'm worried" he retorted as the mage began writhing his hands behind him.

"H-he's...f-far...m-more...p-p-powerful...you d-d-don't stand a chance"

"I wish I had a Septim for every time someone told me that" sneered Arn.
"We...almost...h-h-had you" rasped the bandit, this time trying to spit at Arn.

"IN CASE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN, I HOLD YOUR LIFE IN MY HANDS! NOW START GIVING ME ANSWERS OR I START MAKING NEW INJURIES!" roared Arn, shaking the mage violently, aware the man wasn't responding the way a fearful man should.

The mage grinned.

"Then you should've...payed m-m-more attention...to m-m-my hands!" he gurgled out just as Arn realized the mage had burned his own hands to free them and brought them around to fire something at him to which Arn simply shoved and let go, dropping the mage cursing and screaming off the rocky overlook to a sickening crunch of bone and flesh twenty feet below.

Arn sighed, angry and annoyed.

Well, if they were that scared of Erikur's forces, Arn figured he'd send a message of his own as he turned to leave.
Chapter Summary

Arn attempts to deliver merchant goods to undercut Erikur's grip on commerce, but is surprised by what he finds.

A loud woman's cry pierced the pitch black of night as Arn sneaked through the woods toward the intended delivery meeting point.

Fearing the worst, he burst into a full sprint, hoping he wasn't too late.

Over logs and rocks and under branches, he continued on, fearing the caravan had been set upon already until he burst from the cover of the woods onto an open beach area to see a ship docked at a platform a hundred yards off with a large group of men sitting around a fire on the beach with two people brawling or fighting in their midst.

As Arn gasped for air from running, he eyed the gathering angrily as he approached.

Crates stood stacked here and there along with packs, and several wagons and horses.

Not even a sentry posted...he mused angrily as he walked right into the midst of the seemingly uncaring and unwary workers, who seemed much more intent on the fight by the fire.

Arn hadn't payed much attention to the fight, being more concerned with the supplies, but as he walked around, amazed even more than no one even seemed to notice or say anything, he turned his attention to the fire as the sound of steel clashing echoed across the beach.

In the firelight, he caught sight of a woman and a man trading sword blows.

As Arn got closer, he stopped and observed while the others were cheering or guffawing alternately at the participants.

Arn was surprised at how short and small the woman seemed, probably a good eight to ten inches shorter than he, and small enough to dart around to avoid blows instead of blocking them.

After watching for a few moments, Arn had seen enough, marching out into the firelight, he pulled the woman back by the collar of her armor before he kicked the armored man aside easily as he bellowed:

"WHO'S IN CHARGE OF THIS MESS!!"

For a moment, it was dead quiet on the beach as they all stood there stunned, looking at him before a higher pitched voice than Arn was expecting came from the woman he'd pulled away apart from the fight.

"I AM! AND JUST WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!" she chirped, poking him in the chest angrily with an index finger.

"I am the Dragonborn, and if you call this...a protected caravan" Arn motioned around at the men
sitting around on the crates on the beach "Then perhaps it's no wonder not many get through!" He sneered angrily back at her, both the force of his words and the revelation as Dragonborn causing her to pause, taken back a bit.

The woman looked around for a moment, and Arn studied her face for the first time intently. She was Nordic for sure, with blonde short locks all in short braids adorned with beads. She was also very young. By her voice and youthful facial appearance, Arn gathered she couldn't possibly be out of her teens and in the flickering firelight, looked almost childish at times.

"Then...if-if you're the one the Jarl sent, then w-we should talk" stuttered the girl as she sheathed her sword and replaced her shield on her back before motioning to the men around who groaned in disappointment.

Against his better judgment, Arn waited until she had pulled him aside, away from the others before tearing into her over the lax security.

"You don't even have any sentries posted!" he hissed, flicking his glance over to the men who were mulling around the camp now aimlessly.

"You don't understand!" she hissed back "These aren't good men!"

"What are you talking about?" replied Arn, uneasily beginning to wonder what else was in play that he wasn't aware of "This was all arranged with a reputed merchant."

"Yes, my father" the girl replied before biting her lip worriedly "but...you must understand, we...have taken so many losses that...we couldn't find or hire any quality men on this short notice. These men are the dregs. They refuse my orders frequently--" she worriedly brought her voice down in fear.

"Then refuse to pay them" replied Arn.

"But--you don't...if things don't go well this time, do you know what they'll do?" the girl hissed more fearfully now, glancing around.

Arn looked at her quizzically for a moment.

"This is the first time you've done this. Isn't it?" he stated, catching the shocked look in her eyes.

"My father was a merchant for years--" she started

"But you're not!...You're what? barely a maiden? What is he thinking, sending you out here on your own?" Arn interrupted.

"He's not thinking anything anymore. He died last week!" the girl hissed angrily, emotion bursting onto her features as her eyes watered with tears.

Arn waited to reply as someone walked by.

"Let's start at the beginning, shall we? What's your name?" Arn asked, giving himself a moment to think the situation over and give the girl some time to collect herself.

"Jordis"

"The same Jordis as the reputed Jordis the Swordmaiden who protects caravans I was supposed to meet?" Arn asked skeptically.
Jordis blushed slightly before bringing her head back up again haughtily.

"I will explain, but for now, please, you must help me get things going here!" she implored, wiping a tear away angrily.

"Fine" Arn replied quietly after studying her demeanor for a moment.

Turning and marching to the middle of the mess that passed for a camp, Arn began barking orders.

Everything was largely already organized, just the sots in question didn't seem to feel like doing much. A couple of them were slobbering drunk and another seemed fouled up with skooma.

After setting a few of the most seemingly sensible ones as sentries, Arn got most of the men working on loading up the supplies onto the wagons. The whole time, Jordis followed him at his elbow, watching and inspecting.

By the time everything had been prepared, the night sky was already beginning to lighten up as dawn approached.

Arn was exhausted but knew that the volatile situation would allow for no breaks.

By dawn, the caravan was setting out with five wagons and four horses, two in front ridden by Arn and Jordis, with two of the most reliable on the other two in back.

The rest of the men were either driving and guarding the wagons or were left on the beach because they were either drunk or otherwise useless.

It felt at least some relief not to be running or walking anymore, but that did little to ease the tension Arn felt as the hours rolled on and the caravan plodded over the road westward.

To make matters worse, a heavy rain rolled in, bogging down the wagons, and forcing them to stop for several hours to repair one and extricate another from the mud.

At this rate, it'd be two nights before they would make it to Solitude.

As night on the first day closed in and the rain cleared, Jordis piped up with questions for the first time as they plodded carefully along, Arn continuing to eye the surrounding terrain.

"How does someone become a Dragonborn?" she queried in that higher pitched voice Arn never seemed ready for.

"I don't know" Arn replied without looking at her, not particularly feeling like talking about himself.

"Well, how did you become Dragonborn?" she continued.

Apparently, this wasn't going to stop.

"Maybe a better question is how a girl like you is trying to lead an expedition of misfits through a bandit attack?" hissed Arn quietly while still keeping his eyes on the woods.

"Stop calling me a girl!" Jordis retorted "I'm twenty years o--"

"You can't be more than sixteen summers!" interrupted Arn.

Jordis was silent for awhile before pipining up again.
"Fine…but it's seventeen!" she almost whispered "Just…don't tell anyone. They think I'm much older" she nodded back at the caravan.

"No, they don't" muttered Arn.

"Why are you being so mean?" she finally retorted after another silence.

"I'm not being mean, just realistic. This is no place for children or anyone being a pretender. There are real threats out there and people will die." Arn muttered, finally turning to look at her with all seriousness.

"I am NOT pretending. I DO know how to handle a sword. I've trained with one since I was a child"

Arn couldn't help but smirk at the child reference as she continued remonstrating quietly with him so the others wouldn't overhear.

"You don't understand. I HAVE to do this. If I don't, then I can't pay my father's debts off and I am sold as property along with all he has left" she hissed angrily.

"You don't have to pretend to be a fighter" Arn muttered in reply, noting they were approaching the scene of the site of his first ambush.

"I AM NOT PRETENDING!" she hissed again, emotion filling her voice now "Oh Gods!..." she then muttered in exclamation as they came around the bend in full site of the "message" Arn had left on display.

Taking some rope from the bandits, Arn had tied all nineteen or so bodies of the bandits up and hanging between some trees, scribbling a crimson red message in blood upon the rocky face of the overlook:

"Thus to Bandits and Thieves"

The caravan stopped as they all gawked for a few moments of silence at the macabre display.

Arn turned and noted Jordis' face was a hue of light green as she looked away.

"Don't empty your stomach on the horse. They don't like it" Arn muttered before they continued on.

After another two hours of silence, darkness began to fall.

"This looks like a good place to camp" Jordis quietly noted, nodding at the open terrain around them.

"We're not stopping to camp" replied Arn "we keep on until we reach Solitude".

"But the horses will have to stop at some point and if we stay in the open, we'll be able to see anyone coming, right?" Jordis tried to sound confident.

"Unless they've got invisibility spells or potions, of course" Arn replied tiredly.

"W-what?" Jordis asked in disbelief.

Arn realized then that his tiredness was really getting to him. He normally would've had no problem explaining any of this to Lydia or anyone else he was travelling with, but he hadn't slept in two days and the whole situation had him on edge as well.

"Just focus on the task at hand" Arn gritted, trying to keep himself alert and not irritated at Jordis.
As darkness fell, the caravan stopped briefly to rest and water the horses at a stream before continuing.

"Careful now, tonight is when they will strike" Arn muttered to Jordis as they stood next to the stream, eyeing the men moving around the wagons and the darkness of the woods in their vicinity.

"How do you know?" Jordis whispered.

"If they wait until tomorrow night, we'll be too close to Solitude. It'll be tonight or they'd have made their move already."

Jordis nodded silently as they mounted up again and moved out.

The partial moon gave a lot of illumination in the clear night sky as they moved on.

Then the unexpected happened. Instead of arrows or knives in the dark, they heard a small girl crying by the side of the road.

Amist the blubbering, Jordis managed to coax out of the girl that her parents had been killed by bandits and she was left lost and wandering the roads.

"Just get her and go!" Arn hissed "We cannot stop!"

"But--" Jordis tried to sputter as she held the girl's hand and wrapped her in a cloak.

"Let's go!" hissed Arn, still not looking at them, and instead paying attention to the uneasiness his horse had suddenly demonstrated, pawing the road and shifting uneasily forward and backward.

Jordis helped the little Breton girl up on her saddle and climbed on as they resumed.

As Jordis and the little girl began to chatter, Arn grew more worried.

Something wasn't right. The horses seemed to know it. The strange little girl in the middle of nowhere didn't make sense.

His musings were interrupted by the little girl who tugged on his armored gauntlet from Jordis' lap.

"Can I ride with the nice man?" she asked sweetly to Jordis.

"His name is Arn, but...I don't know that he's a very nice man" grinned Jordis to the little girl "In fact, I think he's a little grumpy right now."

"No, you may not ride with the nice man" muttered Arn, growing even more uneasy as his horse tried to bolt before Arn could rein it in.

"You're the Dragonborn, aren't you?" continued the little girl, causing Arn to freeze.

"How do you know anything about that?" he spun on her.

"I can smell it in your blood" retorted the little girl sweetly.

"Then that means you're..." even as Arn processed it out loud, he saw the little girl look up adoringly at Jordis before leaning up and opening a fanged mouth toward her neck.

There was no way in that split second that Arn had time to reach the little vampire. So he did the only thing he could.
"FUS!"

The power of the shout knocked Jordis and the little vampire off her horse and knocked the horse down sideways, whinnying in pain and confusion.

Jordis screamed as she was thrown sideways along with the little girl she still didn't know was a vampire off her horse and slid across the edge of the road to the side.

Within a second, the little vampire was on her feet and closed on the prone moaning form of Jordis, but Arn was quicker.

Leaping from his horse as soon as the first shout was done:

"WULD NA KEST!"

In a blur, he was there, but his stab with a longsword missed since it was hard to adjust to fighting someone half your size, but his knee still connected hard with the little vampire's midsection, sending her sprawling back with a loud cry.

Arn was vaguely aware at the same time that he heard commotion behind him, horses and men yelling and screaming, arrows flying, and the familiar clash of steel.

There must've been a full on ambush behind him when the little vampiress made her move.

Arn didn't dare use another word of power so soon again, so he closed on the little vampire as she sprung to her feet, glaring at him.

"You don't realize how lucky you are" she spoke almost blandly to him as he approached before clasping something around her neck and whispering something.

Arn charged but before he even got close, the little vampiress vanished into thin air with a cutesy fanged smile.

Turning back to the melee behind him in the caravan, Arn tried to drag Jordis back to her feet but didn't have time for niceties as he drew his bow and took up a position beside Jordis' fallen horse, beginning to pick off attackers as he was able to pick out and distinguish them in the moonlight.

Arn was thankful he'd taken the precaution of having all the workers wear a bright colored handkerchief around their arms. Made distinguishing the attackers a lot easier.

Arn had just gotten into a rhythm of drawing and firing, target after target, when an arrow struck him in the thigh from the right side, penetrating the armor and keeling him over as pain shot through his leg.

As he righted himself on one knee, he leaned against the downed and dying horse, now with an arrow or two through it and leveled his bow off to the right side before picking out a target and firing.

Over the next ten minutes, the battle played out quickly. Once the melee attackers had thinned, Jordis and the caravan men moved off the road into the trees on one side to hunt down the stragglers firing arrows while Arn covered the other side before they repeated the process there.

As dawn's light began illuminating the carnage of the previous night, Jordis and the remaining caravan workers slowly staggered out of the woods on the remaining side, calling and congratulating each other, while others looked for missing friends or comrades.
"Gods...." muttered Jordis, staring down at Arn's would be cover of two dead horses.

The ground and both horse carcasses were littered with arrows, with Arn nestled in between both horses, furiously administering some potion on an arrow sticking out of his calf and a bluish glow coming off his hand as he attempted healing a bloody wound on his thigh where he'd pulled an arrow shaft out of, gritting his teeth in pain.

"How many dead?" Arn gritted after awhile of Jordis sitting there staring at him in horror, shaking all over at the sight of the amount of blood and gore in the area, noticing for the first time in the morning light how much blood she herself was spattered with.

"Ours or theirs?" she asked after a long silence.

"Their of course" Arn gritted, testing moving his leg as he lay in the mud and blood between the horses.

"Th-th-thirty" she stuttered.

"How many did we lose?"

"Eight dead, three wounded"

"We had what, twenty to start with....so that leaves nine able bodied men" Arn groaned as he lurched himself up on one of the horses, attempting to stand.

Finally, Jordis shook herself out of her stupor and took hold of his arm to help him up.

"You understand my meaning now?" Arn sighed, as he leaned against one of the wagons, surveying the bodies and arrows that littered the road.

"Why did you hit me?" Jordis asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Right when everything started. You turned and did something to knock me off my horse and the little girl has completely vanished!" Jordis replied growing more animated and upset as the memory of the event seemed to newly return to her.

"She was a vampire and was about to make a meal of you" replied Arn, motioning to Jordis' neck region "I did the only thing I could to get her away from you."

"But it was a little girl--" Jordis stuttered in disbelief.

"There was always something wrong about that. Why was she out here by herself? She seemed awfully in a good mood as soon as we found her despite being 'lost'" Arn replied.

"But--" Jordis continued to stare at Arn in disbelief "What happened to her?"

"She said I was lucky and vanished into thin air....not an invisibility spell either" Arn muttered, looking around the area as the dawn illuminated the area further "We should figure out what we can and get going."

Jordis nodded, still staring in disbelief at the area around them as they began searching the bodies of the attackers and getting the dead and wounded of their own into wagons.

Beyond money and some random valuables, though, there was nothing on any of the bandits or thieves that tied anyone to them. Arn sighed in frustration as he drove one of the wagons onward.
They still hadn't gotten a ringleader yet.

By midday, they had made it to the lone farm Arn had ridden by on his way there.

In the lead wagon, Arn pulled to a stop as he eyed the farm over. There was no sign of anyone. That wasn't right. On a good, end of summer day like today with plenty of sunshine, farmers would work long hours.

"Why are we stopping?!" hollered Jordis from behind him.

"We'll water the horses here. I need to check something!" Arn stated, before testing his legs gingerly as he got down off his wagon and armed himself as he limped toward the farm cottage.

Kicking the door in, as Arn suspected, there was no one there and not much indication that the occupants were farmers. After searching around for awhile, Arn found a trap door beneath the rug in the main door.

Summoning Jordis in, he had them circle the wagons by the cottage before he opened the trap door and descended.

Descending through a long, narrow excavated passage, Arn found himself coming out into a large natural cave system patterned with green moss and the yellow glow of torchlight.

Arn noted wagon tracks in the dirt as he eyed both directions in the large cave before sneaking his way as best he could down the direction that looked further in.

As Arn rounded a large turn in the cave, he was unprepared for what he found.

A large series of natural chambers going further back into the rock filled to overflowing with supplies, crates, furs, and weapons of all types stunned Arn to a stop as he stared at the massive amount of material stored here before noting a flash of movement as someone was walking around one of the nearby piles of supplies.

Arn didn't have hardly any time to react before the person would look up and see him, so he just drew bow and arrow, letting fly with the arrow as soon as a cloaked man walked around the bend, catching him in the throat as he sank to the ground with a shocked look on his face.

Noting the man's face, Arn recognized him as the "farmer" that had eyed him over when he first rode out. So these were the informants for Erikur's bandits and this was where they stored their loot.

"Korin! Did you get the message off yet?" Arn heard a woman holler nearby as footsteps approached.

Once again, Arn barely had time to rearm his bow before the woman he'd seen on the farm before came around the corner and froze, stunned to see Arn crouching over the man's corpse.

She turned to holler an alarm, but Arn's arrow found its mark in her throat as well, toppling her as she spasmed her last gasps.

As Arn sneaked further in, continually amazed at the sheer amount of material, he heard voices coming from a platform off to one side.

Sneaking closer, he could just catch a glimpse of a robed man gesturing wildly at someone else on the platform. He'd have to get closer to learn more.
As he got closer, he was surprised to hear the voice of the little girl vampiress along with the angry robed man.

"THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE!" screeched the robed man.

"That is your problem" replied the child.

"I COULD EXPECT THE THIEVES TO BE COWARDS OR FAILURES, BUT YOU....YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE UNSTOPPABLE!"

"We were not stopped. We simply chose not to follow through" came the almost uncaring response.

"BUT YOU CAN'T DO THAT! I PERFORMED THE RITUAL! YOU HAVE TO HONOR IT!" the robed man was nearly frothing at the mouth in anger.

"We honor Sithis and the Night Mother. She decreed the Child of Akatosh was not to be harmed. You lied to us about who he was when you contacted us."

"THAT'S NOT--! YOU CAN'T DO THAT! I NEVER LIED. YOU NEVER ASKED! NO ONE'S SUPPOSED TO SEE YOUR FACE AND LIVE!"

"You certainly won't"

"WHAT?! I'M THE ONE WHO CONTACTED YOU! I'M THE VICTIM HERE!"

"I won't be the one who kills you, though. The Dragonborn is coming. I can smell his blood. Somehow, I think he seeks yours. Goodbye" followed by a giggle.

Arn peered over a stack of crates just in time to see the little vampiress clasp that amulet or phial thing around her neck and vanish again, leaving the robed man to whirl in Arn's general direction.

"COME OUT! I KNOW YOU'RE THERE!" he screamed, spell shield flaring to life as he slowly began descending the stairs of the platform.

Time to end this.

"You know, as operations go, this is pretty impressive" Arn growled, stepping out into view with bow and arrow at the ready.

"Everything was fine until you showed up!" hissed the mage "They could still be fine if you'd LISTENED!" he spat, as though it was the only logical thing Arn should've done.

"The only thing I'm interested in listening to is information about who's in charge and where I can find them" growled Arn as he took aim at the mage's head.

"You'll get nothing from me but DEATH!" yelled the mage as he unleashed a bolt of ice at Arn.

Arn ducked left and fired a shot but the mage's spell shield was strong enough to deflect it even with the sizzling lightning effect damage it gave out on impact.

Arn nocked and would've fired again, but the bow and arrow both began to freeze over instantly, and he dropped them as they became a block of ice on the floor as the mage continued cackling behind his spell barrier.

Drawing sword and shield, he crouched to sprint forward but stopped just short of using a whirlwind sprint as the mage had called forth a powerful spell right on his area.
Holding his hands in the air, crackling with energy, his words rang loudly as a large circle formed thirty feet all around him and suddenly a series of massive fireballs rained down in the entire sixty foot circle.

Even stranger, the fireballs broke the mage's spell barrier, battering, burning and ultimately engulfing him in flames as he screamed in pain.

"AAAAHHHH! AAAAAAHHHHHH!" the mage screamed as he burned alive, Arn stood watching as the mage fell over eventually in a pile of ash as the area continued to burn and smoke.

"Gods...." he heard Jordis running up behind him "Wh-what happened?" she muttered, staring at the pile of ash that had been the mage only a minute before.

Arn chuckled, scratching his head for a moment before sheathing his sword and shield.

"Lass, that...is what happens when you play with fire" Arn chuckled again, marveling at the strange turn of events.

A day and a half later, Arn and the now heavily laden caravan found themselves finally trudging into Solitude to much fanfare and interest, crowds lining the street in curiosity as the wagons rolled by toward the new storefront.

Amidst the crowd, cheers, questions, and congratulations, Arn hobbled down off his wagon and walked away toward the Blue Palace.

He'd done his part and now all he could think of was making it up the steps, through the front door and into his bedchambers before he collapsed from exhaustion.

He was just through the front door of the Blue Palace when he heard a familiar voice shouting his name.

"Arn! Arn, wait!"

Then Lydia bounded through the door after him with a happy smile on her face as she regarded him at first before seeming to read him like a book, her face changed to a frown of worry and immediately reached out to help support him as he hobbled toward his chambers.

"Arn! Arnsmyth, you're back!" he heard Elisif exclaim excitedly as Arn noted her and both her maids emerge from the dining hall, approaching them with a spring in their step.

"It's done. You need to send Legionnaires to guard the farm east of here. Jordis can tell you all about it..." Arn muttered, thankful Lydia didn't stop as they stumbled into his room before he finally pitched forward onto his bed, all strength seeming to ebb from his body as his consciousness drifted into the blissful rest of unconsciousness.
As Arn begins to train Jordis and the City prepares to celebrate, Sybille Stentor suddenly alerts Arn to an imminent danger right beneath their feet...

Arn shuddered as he closed the door to his quarters, staring down at the ancient daedric staff known as the Wabbajack in his hands.

"You've been avoiding me" came the familiar voice Arn was dreading encountering as Rikke sat comfortably in her beautifully polished custom imperial armor with her legs crossed in his room waiting for him.

"I've been busy" Arn brushed her off, moving to put the Wabbajack in a secure place with his other weapons.

"Really? You've been in Solitude almost three weeks and you've only been gone on those expeditions for the Jarl once a week for a couple of days at a time. What do you do with all the rest of those days? Rutting your way through the bevy of women you have following you around?"

Arn spun on her with an angry glare.

"If you MUST know, I haven't rutted anyone here but you and that didn't last very long if I remember right!" he retorted.

Rikke chuckled a little, smirking.

"You really must forgive me for that. Tullius wasn't supposed to be back for another two days."

"Oh, so only rutting other men while he's away makes it all better?" Arn sneered in disbelief, crossing his arms and leaning against a dresser.

Rikke huffed and rolled her eyes.

"Arn, Tullius and I aren't...together."

"You were very much together last time I saw you" retorted Arn.

"But we're not serious. We're just trail-mates. You know how it is when you're campaigning."

Then it was Arn's turn to huff and roll his eyes.

"Sorry, but I find that hard to believe"

Rikke held her arms out to the side in question.

"Why? Because you didn't get the night of fun you wanted?"

"You don't drop your breeches and tell a man to get in 'em then dump him under a table so he has to watch you get ploughed by some old fool and then expect him to believe you don't have a thing for
the old fool!" Arn retorted more angrily than he meant to.

"That's really the way you remember it?"

"I try not to remember it at all!"

Rikke scowled at him and crossed her arms.

"All these years and you still haven't learned anything about women..."

"Is that what you came here for? To lecture me about my knowledge of women?"

"No, I came for a completely different purpose."

"Then spit it out...before this conversation grows more distasteful" Arn muttered.

After an awkward silence with both glaring at each other, Rikke finally resumed.

"I came to ask you about re-enlisting in the Legion."

Arn rolled his eyes in disbelief and did nothing to hide the smirk on his face as he massaged his forehead with his hand.

"Truly? You really think--"

"Please, Arn, just....hear me out" Rikke pleaded, the glare replaced by a look of concern.

Arn had a feeling he would regret this, but he motioned to her to proceed.

"You would be a lettered officer, either a Legate or Tribune, and would answer only to myself and the General. You would get your own regiment to command and a twenty thousand septim salary."

"Why would any of that appeal to me?" Arn replied sadly, the mention of the Legion bringing back a host of sad memories.

"Arn! Think about it! I know how well you fight. With a regiment of your own, you could turn the tide single-handedly! Gods, you could even end the war on your own!"

"Exaggerating a bit...don't you think?"

"This war started when Ulfric challenged Torygg to a duel then used the Thu'um to murder him. You could do the same to Ulfric and end this in one fight!" Rikke exclaimed excitedly.

"So you preach of his dastardly deeds. Then expect me to go and do the same? You don't see anything inconsistent with that?"

"Not if he's the one who started it!" Rikke retorted angrily.

"You know Ulfric himself is hardly the reason the war started. He was just the spark. If no one felt as he did, there would be no rebellion."

"So while the land tears itself apart, you'll just do nothing?"

"I have plenty to do! In case you didn't notice, there are dragons flying around and NO ONE seems to know or care WHY?!"

"Which is something we could ALL focus on if we didn't have to fight a war!"
"Have you suddenly forgotten your history, Rikke?"

"Oh no, I remember it damn well. Which is why I know we need a united Empire to drive the Thalmor out!"

"Why haven't they done so yet?!"

"Kind of hard when you keep having to put down little rebellions all over the place over the last two decades!"

"And why do you think the Empire keeps having rebellions?"

Rikke was silent as she glared at him in response.

"Because the people are unhappy. They're overtaxed, denied rightful worship, and not protected enough by the vast entity that the Empire is SUPPOSED to be. All the while, the rich fools on the Elder Council grow richer and more disconnected from the people they're supposed to be representing!"

"The Elder Council alone is not the Empire"

"Might as well be. Gods know the Emperor himself hasn't done much to stop their foolishness."

"The Emperor's had his hands full trying to rebuild and re-forgie alliances since the Great War."

"Yeah, how's that going?"

"If people would ever get through their heads we're stronger together than in a bunch of separate pockets then it'd be going a lot better!"

"Then the Emperor must not be a very convincing man" Arn chuckled, drawing another scowl from Rikke.

"His leadership helped us avoid defeat in the Great War" Rikke snarled.

"You call the White-gold concordat, 'not a defeat'?!" Arn marveled with a raised eyebrow.

"You saw how Thalmor treat other races they took captive. It could have been a LOT worse!"

"So that's going to be your recruitment motto? 'Join the Empire...it could be worse'!" Arn queried with mock zeal.

"No! Because it could be so much better!" Rikke retorted angrily as Arn noticed her eyes watering with emotion "We could throw the Thalmor out once and for all, even take the fight to their doorsteps!" she hissed, lowering her voice as they both knew such words could land her in a lot of trouble "It could be a new era of peace and prosperity for everyone, Skyrim included!"

"I didn't return to Skyrim to fight someone's Civil War for them" Arn stated coldly, refusing to get caught up in Rikke's vision of the future.

"I have no idea why you even came back if you don't give a damn about your own people!" Rikke retorted angrily, raising her voice again, forcing back any tears that had threatened to appear.

"You don't know a damn thing about why I really returned to Skyrim!" Arn replied angrily, his face mere inches from hers.
They stayed like that for a what seemed like a long time, scowling at each other before Rikke whirled, her red cloak swirling behind her as she moved to her chair and retrieved her helmet.

"I had hoped to talk to the same determined, idealistic lad I used to know instead of the bitter old man I see in front of me" Rikke replied sadly to him before heading to the door "I really do hope you come to your senses, Arn. The longer you wait, the more it will cost Skyrim" she muttered before turning and leaving Arn seething in his quarters.

She had only shut the door before Arn looked around for something to throw angrily across the room when someone clearing their throat interrupted his angry outburst.

He turned to the changing partition where the sound came from and immediately his anger evaporated, his heart leaped into this throat, and his loins began to harden.

Lydia was standing there next to the screen, but dressed like he'd never seen before. She wore an long, elaborate red and pink dress with small purple bows around the bodice's midsection with purple trimming around the waist, hem and low cut neckline that displayed a lot of her large bosomed cleavage, a modest sized silver necklace with a purple jewel adorning her neck.

Her hair was also not in any of the usual braided looks to keep her hair free of entanglement. It was completely unbraided, long, loose and looked like it had been curled somehow with very small pink or reddish flowers dotting here and there.

Not that she needed it, but she looked like she wore make up and lipstick also. It occurred to Arn that he'd never seen Lydia dressed up like this. He'd really never even seen her in a dress before.

Arn had to look away instantly, lest he betray how stunning and arousing just the sight of her was, even with a frown of concern on her features.

"I'm...sorry I heard all that. I was going to say something, but I wasn't done changing and things got so heated so fast....that...it didn't seem right to interrupt" she muttered.

Arn felt his face redden, realizing she'd heard all about the rutting situation with Rikke and Tullius, all the more reason not to look at her as he responded.

"It's okay. Nothing you don't know or wouldn't have learned sooner or later" he tried to shrug off "What's the occasion that's got you all dressed up?" he asked, both genuinely curious and desperate to change the subject.

"You mean you forgot?" she asked as he heard the shuffling of her skirts as she moved to the other side of the room.

"Forgot what?" Arn asked, racking his brain to remember if she'd told him anything recently that pertained to this.

"The Festival of Lights is tonight. It's only been scheduled ever since you brought the first caravan in" Lydia responded, and Arn could hear the playful smirk in her tone without even seeing it on her face.

"Festival of lights....?" Arn muttered, again racking his brain to remember.

"The yearly autumn festival....They're throwing a little early this year to help the people celebrate something after going through what they've been through recently?" Lydia filled him in as she moved around the room.
Arn scratched his head, wondering how he'd forgotten.

"You sure you didn't spend any of those days in the Blacksmith's pounding your head instead of your armor?" Lydia chided playfully.

"So...?" Arn muttered, wondering if there was something he was supposed to do for it that he'd forgotten as well.

"Did you try on the nice clothes Elisif got for you?" Lydia asked, forcing Arn to look up to see what she was talking about.

On the side table were a pile of fine clothes: blue and black intricate vest and formal breeches, shirt, and some sort of sash Arn wasn't sure what to do with as he picked at them with one hand while feeling the fineness of the fabric with the other.

"They won't bite you. Just try them on. I heard Elisif sent away especially for them" Lydia stated before he felt her presence and rustling of skirts at his elbow.

Gulping, he turned to face her before voicing his objections.

"I don't think I've ever worn anything like this. I don't think it--"

"Nonsense! You'll look just fine"

"But, I mean, like this thing here" he waved part of the vest "I don't even know how that's supposed to go"

"Arn, don't tell me you're afraid of dressing up in fine clothes?" Lydia grinned at him.

Arn looked away quickly, not wanting her to catch him staring.

"No...no..it's just...I..feel more comfortable in my armor. I mean, it's even polished..." he muttered weakly, feeling her look of disapproval on the back of his head as he continued toying with the finery.

"After the trouble I went through to get your sizes and Elisif went through to get the outfit, you WILL wear it" Lydia seemed to state with finality as Arn turned to her with a slight panicked look on his face.

Lydia had her hands on her hips and a determined smirk on her face that didn't budge.

"Now, it's almost time for me to head out. I haven't worn a dress like this before. Elisif loaned it to me. How do I look?" she beamed as she spun around to display the whole getup to him.

Arn gulped yet again, and wanted to look away to avoid the reaction it was threatening to elicit from him.

"You look beautiful, Lydia. I'm sure you'll be the toast of the festival." he replied quietly before turning away and trying to find something to occupy himself with.

Before anything more could be said, they were summoned by one of the Jarl's maids to the Court since there was apparently some matter of business that pertained to the Dragonborn.

As Arn was ascending the stairs to the court, Lydia's skirts rustling behind him, she nudged his arm and quickly whispered in his ear.
"Just so you know, I may have purchased a house in your name"

"WHAT?!" Arn replied loudly.

"Just...trust me. Go with it" Lydia whispered again as they reached the top and stepped into the court, Arn with a look of bewilderment on his face at the news and noting everyone else in the court was dressed up in their finest as well.

"Thank you for coming, Dragonborn. There's just a small matter of business to clear up that concerns you."

"Y-yes my Jarl?" Arn asked a little nervously, wondering how it was connected to the house Lydia had allegedly purchased without his knowledge.

Arn also noticed Jordis was standing off to one side as well with all the usual members of court, a dignitary from the Imperial city and several of the town's shopkeepers.

"You've done much for the people of this city. You've saved us from a Dragon, made the roads safe from bandits and thieves, helped our economy prosper, and even purchased land to take up residence here" Elisif stated proudly, the last part causing Erikur to jump to his feet off to the side.

"I have room in my court for another Thane and wondered if you would accept this honor in return for all you've done?" Elisif asked Arn, leaning forward in her throne.

"What?!" exploded Erikur "This wasn't on the schedule! Since when do we just elect strangers?!"

"He's no stranger to the people after all he's done. Wouldn't the court agree?" replied Elisif calmly.

Mutters and nods of assent went around as Erikur continued to stand there bewildered.

"But--he's not from here!" he sputtered.

"He's purchased property as a good will gesture of investing in the community and has interest in several businesses here now" Elisif continued, unfazed.

"Well, I object! He's only going to leave and go elsewhere!"

"Then, he could serve our interests wherever he goes. Surely you see the advantages of having the Dragonborn as one of our Thanes." sweetly added Elisif, clearly enjoying Erikur's flustered situation.

More murmurs and nods of assent went around the Court as Erikur panickedly scowled and looked at different members for help.

"It's settled, then. Arnsmyth Bulgoar, will you become a Thane of Solitude and a member of this Court?"

"It would be my honor" Arn stated with a bow as Erikur stormed out of the court.

"As Thane, it is proper to be awarded a housecarl. Jordis the Swordmaiden, step forward" commanded Elisif, smiling happily.

Jordis nervously stepped out and half bowed, half curtsied, probably unsure which to do as she looked down.

"You have cleared your father's business debts to all but the city treasury. As a cancellation of those debts, would you consent to becoming housecarl to Arnsmyth Bulgoar, the Dragonborn?" Elisif
asked in a stately manner.

"Why Yes! Yes, indeed!") Squealed Jordis happily, unable to keep from hopping up and down a few times "Thank you so much!"

"Oh no....." muttered Arn to himself, contemplating what it would be like having her following him around all the time.

"Excellent! Then you may start your duties right away at the Dragonborn's new residence, Proudpire Manor. Court is adjourned for the day. See you all at the festival!" finished Elisif, but Arn was still processing what had just happened.

As various members of the court converged on him, shaking hands, offering congratulations, and offering services to him or Jordis, Arn managed to get turned around to find Lydia, but she was gone already.

She told me she bought a house, not a rutting mansion! Arn thought to himself, remembering how large Proudpire Manor was every time he'd walked by.

How in Oblivion did she pay for that!

"Arn, do you have a moment?"

Arn whirled to find Elisif motioning to him.

"Er...uh, yes, excuse me, excuse me" Arn muttered as he extricated himself from the small mob of well wishers and met with Elisif over in a corner of the room.

"I'm sure you're a little confused but don't worry. We worked out everything mostly in your absence since it was when Erikur was least suspicious. Everything's been paid for legitimately, but you'll find yourself down about a dozen bags of loot you left laying in your room at various times" she smiled wryly at him.

"So they weren't just getting put in shipping containers like Lydia promised" Arn mused back.

"I see you're still in your armor. I'd have thought you'd be changed for the Festival by now" Elisif mused, eyeing his armor critically.

Up close, Arn had a chance to note Elisif's elaborate outfit more closely.

She wore an orange dress with puffy hips and sleeves, red ribbons on embroidered edges with a satin sash pulled across the bust and tied at the hip. It was the first time he'd seen her wear anything with a revealing neckline, and the white pearly cleavage that presented itself as he looked down at her made him look away quickly, embarrassed she might have seen him notice.

"In all honesty...um...I'd forgotten about the Festival"

"Arn!" she chided, playfully slapping his arm "At least tell me you're going to be in the robes I got you when the Festival starts, please?"

"Yes, yes...I'll change..." Arn muttered quickly, trying to escape.

Three hours later, Arn stood fully armored at the Festival of Lights.
As he sat in an alcove of one of the store fronts, he puzzled over what to do exactly.

There were orange and red decorative lanterns hung all over the city square and a group of musicians playing lively jigs to a dancing throng of people in the center of the square while off to one side, various Bards were putting on some sort of play on a stage to the delight of the audience, busting out roaring with laughter periodically.

Over to yet another side, were a series of games mostly the younger folks and kids were playing while a lot of the older folks sat comfortably watching, laughing and conversing.

Further down, were tables shared by mostly men drinking and laughing over the different array of meads, wines, and ales brought in for the occasion.

Arn had seen Elisif and her maids all finely dressed, laughing and dancing their way through the middle of everything at least once.

He even caught glimpses of Rikke dancing with Tullius and some of the other legionnaires.

He finally spotted Lydia and her...friend, Falnir, dancing their hearts out, laughing in the square.

Trying to find something else to think about or focus on, Arn looked around and finally spotted his new housecarl, Jordis, sitting on the lap of Bolgeir Bearclaw by the drinking tables, though in truth, he was so large and she so small, that she barely took up space on one of his thighs.

That was...a little scary to think about, Arn mused, remembering how young Jordis actually was.

His musings on the matter were interrupted as someone strong grabbed him from behind and yanked him around the side of the store, pinning him to the wall.

"Dragonborn!" hissed Sybille Stentor, her yellow eyes glinting in the darkness.

Maybe it was the occasion or the absurdity of it all, but strangely, Arn didn't feel on edge like he usually did around her.

"Easy, now, Sybille, I usually don't accept such forward advances from vampires" he replied, straightening up.

"Hush, fool! This is of dire importance!" Sybille hissed before glancing around to make sure no one saw them.

Arn instantly became focused, wondering had happened.

"Did something happen to Elisif?" Arn muttered, hastily trying to remember the last time he'd seen her in the square.

"No, but that may change if you don't stop what is about to occur! Come!" commanded Sybille as they began walking hastily away from the celebration.

"What do you know of Potema?" Sybille hissed as they walked.

"As in the Old Septim Queen? The crazy one?"

"The same...she was known as the Wolf Queen"

"Wait, so you're saying the voice in the cave of the ritual I disrupted....was her?" Arn asked incredulously.
"Keep it down!" hissed Sybille as she pulled her hood closer and they passed some revelers headed to the festival. "Yes, the very same. Those necromancers were seeking to bring her back and bind her to their control. I had thought your disruption of the ritual should have dispersed her essence so that she would pose no threat, but some bad news just reached my ears that changed that."

"What?" Arn asked as they stopped in an alley. Sybille seemed confident no one would overhear them.

"Falk Firebeard dropped mention to me of some strange happenings beneath the temple and that the Priest Styrr there is in a panic."

"So someone is trying to bind her there?" Arn asked.

"No! The ritual in the cave brought her essence back together and she is strong enough of will to stay that way. Now, she is down by her burial site, probably attempting to get her minions to reconstruct her body so she may be reborn physically as well!"

"But how is that possible?"

"She is a powerful necromancer...perhaps the most powerful one Tamriel saw in an age. If she is allowed to return in any form, the damage she could cause would be untold to the entire land. Dragonborn, you must put a stop to her...once and for all!"

Arn had never seen Sybille look that concerned. Gone was the air of sarcastic indifference she normally possessed.

"Then let's go" he muttered, turning to head toward Castle Dour.

"No! I cannot go with you" Sybille remonstrated, pulling on his arm. "Potema could command the undead like no other. I...cannot go down there. I...can already feel the pull of her presence. I just didn't know what it was before."

"Wish you were a human now?" Arn retorted, unable to resist.

"Mock me all you want later. Go kill that monstrosity, now!" hissed Sybille, before turning and vanishing into the darkness of the night.

Arn stood stunned for a moment at the turn of events and pondering his next steps carefully before turning and heading back to the festival.

Biding his time on the outskirts, he finally spotted what he was looking for.

Jordis stood by the drinking tables, retrieving several mugs of something while looking forlornly over at Bolgeir who had another woman sitting on the thigh opposite Jordis had been on, giggling away at whatever he was saying.

With purpose, Arn strode into the middle, brushing aside and declining all the shouts of congratulations and offers from the townsfolk as he passed.

Jordis spotted him as he walked up, and looked sadly over at Bolgeir before turning back to him with an incredibly sad look on her face as Arn walked up.

"C-can you tell me how to lose my maidenhood?" she stuttered out desperately.

"Come with me!" Arn ordered gruffly, ignoring the sad plea she made, figuring he'd kill two birds
with one stone taking Jordis with him into the crypt and keeping her away from an unpleasant experience with Bolgeir.

Making a brief stop by Proudspire Manor to acquire more arrows, soon they had entered the Temple of the Divines and a hunched, older priest approached and handed Arn a key.

"Make sure you bring what's left of her back up here, so I can sanctify it" he asked in a scratchy voice before motioning down a passageway.

"Right" Arn muttered as they continued on downward.

As they reached an old wooden door with rusted hinges, Arn used the key and wrenched the door open after great effort from the creaking hinges.

Arn used his torch to light several sconces in the first entryway as Jordis pulled the door closed.

Lighting his belt lantern to illuminate the gray darkness of the crypt, Arn noted several skeletons decked in decayed finery in several slots on the sides as the passage led down.

"You know why we're here?" Arn muttered behind him to Jordis who seemed to be taking unusually long catching up.

"Yes" he heard her timidly reply behind him along with the shuffling of armor.

"What are you--Gods!" Arn muttered as he turned around to see Jordis without a stitch of clothing on behind him before whirling back around and closing his eyes in shock.

"What are you doing, girl?!" he hissed.

"What do you mean? I thought I should get undressed..."

"Why?!"

"Well, I asked what I should do to lose my maidenhood and you just said to come with you. So I thought..."

"You thought I was going to do it?! Arn asked incredulously.

"I thought that as Thane, you wanted to be the first. So, we were going to make love..." Jordis stuttered, her voice beginning to shake with emotion after she got over the shock of surprise.

"IN A TOMB?! Arn asked even more incredulously.

"Well, it's my first time. So if we were loud, a tomb might be a good place...." she faltered as Arn turned back on her only to whirl away again as she was still standing there naked.

"In-a-TOMB?" Arn repeated exasperatedly.

"I just...I'm sorry" she began to cry "I-I'm so foolish"

Arn sighed, staring at the ceiling as her crying continued.

"I-I just wanted to know what it..(sniff)...was like (sniff)to be wanted" she stuttered before continuing to cry.

Arn sighed again and turned around to find her still naked, but holding her face in both her hands as
she sobbed, her small but perky breasts shaking with each sob.

Focus Arn. Keep it together. There’s evil afoot.

Part of Arn was exasperated beyond belief, wanting to just leave her there and go. Part of him realized that this was an important moment for both of them.

Since the moment they'd met, Jordis always seemed to encounter Arn when he was in a bad mood or under duress. Even during the sword lessons he'd taken to giving her on the fly during caravan escorts or on a free day here or there in Solitude consisted of a lot of criticism.

Consequently, she probably thought of him as more grumpy and unkind than he really was.

She clearly thought she was undesirable and that always turned into a sort of poison in a woman. It could manifest itself in a lot of other ways later in life, none of them good.

By now, Jordis had retreated a few steps to the side of the crypt, continuing to sob and covering herself partly in shame while trying to explain herself repeatedly.

"I-I mean you always call me a girl...I don't have big things...like some women" she sobbed motioning at a small breast as Arn tried to look away quickly, pondering what to do.

"Maybe if I did...or maybe if I had a bigger arse" she sniffled, cowering down, looking away from him and continuing to cry.

Arn recalled she had lost her father recently with no mention of her mother or siblings...probably alone now. It also hit him for the first time the full significance of her being his housecarl.

Like Lydia, she was completely in his charge, completely his responsibility, even though she would say it was the other way around and that he was her charge.

If she was your child, what would you do or want someone else to do in your stead? Arn pondered.

Sheathing his sword and replacing his shield, Arn took a couple of steps to close the distance and pulled her up by the arms before enveloping her in a hug against his armor as she continued sobbing.

They stood like that for awhile, him holding her while she sobbed uncontrollably into the metal chest plate of his armor.

Arn would never have attempted this without armor, as clapping her naked to him without armor between could have resulted in other outcomes he didn't trust his loins not to follow through on.

Thankfully, he was fully armored and she would have no idea what effect her nakedness was or wasn't having on him.

At length she started apologizing again between sobs. So he quietly stroked her short braided blonde hair, whispering it was okay and that she had nothing to be sorry for.

It occurred to Arn that this outburst of emotion shouldn't have come as much of a surprise to him. Jordis was still young, somewhat sheltered, and had gone through a lot of hardship recently. The emotional extremes should have been something he'd thought of before.

As she looked up tearfully at him, Arn weighed carefully his words.

"Jordis, I don't dislike you and it's not that men don't find you desirable. But you're just growing into womanhood. I don't want you to get hurt in any way rushing the journey. I may be your Thane, but I..."
would never take advantage of you that way. Just ask Lydia. I told her the very same thing. Do you understand?" He stated, stroking her short braids as she nodded her head, wiping tears away with a sniffle.

"I'm so sorry, I-

"That's enough apologies. I need the Swordmaiden. We have a Wolf Queen to put down. You think you can do that?" He asked with concern.

She replied with a small smile and nodded her head as she wiped away more tears and went to retrieve her armor.

Arn turned his back to let her have some privacy putting her clothes back on.

After a few minutes of armoring up and letting her regain her composure, they set out down into the crypts.

They'd only gone about fifty feet down when a woman's hiss seemed to erupt through their heads.

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! INVADING MY SANCTUM! IT MATTERS NOT! YOU WILL FAIL....YOU WILL BE MINE!"

They both writhed in pain at the sound and intense feeling of violation as Potema screamed in their minds.

After a moment of disorientation, they both righted themselves, checking for any other anomalies before continuing on.

Killing a few draugr, they made their way into a large room complete with home furnishings, book shelves and even an alchemy table.

After looking around, Arn noted a cloaked figure materialize on the walkway overhead.

Grinning down at them through fanged teeth, a ghostly white skinned male vampire hissed at them before raising his arms and casting a spell.

Instantly, skeletons around the room began to assemble and long dead corpses began to materialize, but no sooner had the vampire begun his spell than Arn drew back and unleashed an arrow that zinged upward and pierced the vampire through the forehead, immediately halting the spell and sending him pitching backward with a hissing gurgle.

That did nothing to stop the six draugr that emerged from doorways and alcoves, rushing at them with their glowing blue eyes and wheezing breaths.

Firing again, Arn downed one coming straight for him before spinning around and nailing another coming in on Jordis' left. Kicking an attacking one aside, Arn stabbed another with an arrow before using the arrow to finish off the one he'd kicked down.

By then, Jordis had finished one off, sidestepping its over-committed axe swing and beheading it with a swift chop before blocking a sword swing from another.

She danced in and out for a moment, baiting it into over committing until the draugr finally lunged and she pounced, taking an arm off before stabbing it with a final high pitched war cry.

After killing a few more Draugr, and going further down than Arn had ever thought the catacombs
went, they were faced with a seeming dead end.

After perusing the passages, they began looking over the walls for any hidden buttons or levers.

Jordis had just called to him, motioning him over when she went to step closer to look at something.

"WULD NA KEST!" In a blur, Arn was across the room and yanked Jordis back away from the wall as the pressure plates she stepped on activated and plumes of flame sprouted up from the floor, reaching five feet in the air.

"Gods....what was that?" she asked, bewildered.

"Pressure plate trap" Arn muttered as they crouched down, eyeing the floor.

"Sorry" Jordis apologized.

"First time in a crypt?" Arn asked, even though he knew it was.

"Yeah, I guess I thought the booby traps they talk about in stories would be a little more...I don't know, easier to see" she murmured, squinting at the floor plating.

"That's a good sign, though" Arn murmured, eyeing the wall.

"Why?"

"Cause if there's a trap, that means we're close to something. No one puts traps where people won't be. So if it's somewhere you don't want anyone to go, that's where they put traps" Arn groaned with a stretch as he reached out with a longsword to the wall through some moss and pushed a button.

With a loud shudder, the wall seemed to sink in and spin around, opening a doorway.

Making their way further down, they killed another couple Draugr before encountering a throne room of sorts with a pale figure sitting on one of them.

Repeating their battle earlier, Arn nailed the vampire through the head before it could do much and then they both polished off the remaining Draugrs.

Finding a key on the remains of the Vampire, they moved through a large set of wooden double doors and moved down into a long hallway.

"There's certainly a lot more to the crypts down here than anyone let on" Arn whispered as they looked down the passage.

"Maybe no one's ever been down here" ventured Jordis, looking past his shoulder and overhead at the ceiling.

As they moved further down, they came to a circular room with a pile of corpses and draugr laying everywhere and all over each other.

There was no way around it and there were layers on layers of them piled high.

"Yuck" hissed Jordis at the sight of it.

After Arn had fired arrows into several to check whether they were truly lifeless or not, he traded bow for sword and shield and they slowly tried to make their way through the decaying pile of corpses and draugr.
"YOU ARE POWERFUL, BUT YOU WON'T LAST FOREVER" boomed Potema in their minds again when they were halfway across.

Then blue glows began sparking through all over the floor, groans coming from bodies that began to rise, Draugr's eyes glowed blue to life as they turned and reached for them.

All at once, the pile of dead things was a writhing mass of undead, all reaching, grabbing, swinging at them.

Arn barely had time to look up to see a vampire rise in front of him, fanged grin lighting her now glowing facial features as she leaped at him before he brought his sword across and beheaded her.

Hands and arms were grabbing his legs and feet, trapping him in place.

A Draugr rose from the mass on the floor and stabbed at him with a dagger. Pivoting with his hips, he blocked the blow with his shield and cleaved up with his sword, slashing across the draugr's torso before shoving it aside.

He could hear grunts from Jordis behind him and turned just enough to see her leaping to and fro amongst the reaching hands and arms.

Her small stature was actually a boon since it made it easier for her to writhe away and avoid the grasping undead that were starting to get to their feet as she hacked hands, fingers, and arms off as she moved, darting this way and that.

Arn needed to get free. He looked down in time to see a Draugr coming up between his legs, blue eyes blazing, mouth gaping open, hissing.

Stabbing down through its head, Arn ended its undead existence before bashing another on his left with his shield.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn sent the wave of force straight down, blasting the writhing mass below him into powder and at such close range that the rest were thrown to the sides of the chamber and Arn was momentarily pushed straight up in the air for a few seconds before coming back down in a clatter on a mess of body parts and ash on the floor.

Gaining his feet, Arn looked around to see Jordis getting to her feet before stabbing a half draugr crawling towards her.

It didn't take long to finish off what was left of the undead in the room after the word of power took most of them out.

Opening the next door revealed a long burial chamber with a throne at the end and ornate chests on either side.

"This is it" Arn muttered, looking around, then back at the room they just came through "Once we're inside, shut the doors and make sure they stay shut. I have a hunch she's going to try to bring those back" he whispered to Jordis, nodding at the body parts everywhere on the floor.

Jordis nodded as they crept further into the main room.

Shutting the doors behind them, Arn expected something to happen, but nothing did.
After awhile, they ventured further and further in. When they were in the middle of the room, Potema struck.

"WELL DONE MAKING IT PAST MY MINIONS, BUT WILL YOU MAKE IT PAST MY INNER COUNCIL!" she screamed through their minds.

Instantly, the rocks broke away from the tombstones. Draugr, vampires and skeletons began emerging from seemingly everywhere.

Immediately, Arn was firing. He'd downed five in a row before he heard Jordis scream a warning as he heard her clash of steel behind him.

He leaped up and to the left, nearly cleaved by a great axe that came down where he'd been. Turning, he put an arrow through the head of the Draugr wielding it and turned left in time to kick a skeleton away from him.

Amidst the melee, Arn spotted a large Draugr in black armor with horns rising from a crypt just in front of the throne, wielding an obviously magic greatsword.

Not good, but Arn had no time to dwell on it, putting arrows through several skeletons before turning to nail a vampire leaping at Jordis from behind.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a killing shot, only enough to knock it off trajectory and it glanced off her left shoulder, causing her to duck and hop to the right, barely avoiding getting a leg taken off by the draugr she'd been fighting.

Arn armed and fired again, this time nailing the vampire through the head, but realized his mistake as he heard a loud hiss and a wave of force hit him from the left, throwing him and everything and everyone in the vicinity across the room like a rag doll.

So that's what that feels like.

Arn impacted the wall sideways with a painful CLANK, thankful he'd put in the time he had on his armor, but worried what condition Jordis was in.

Scrambling to his feet, he realized he'd lost his bow in the blast. Switching to sword and shield, he began finishing off whatever was near him that was too slow to get up or out of the way.

Kicking a Draugr aside before he finished it off, he caught sight of Jordis flailing around on her hands and knees for her sword and shield. She hadn't been wearing a helmet and an ugly gash was bleeding down the back of her head.

He didn't have time to help her look for them, though. She needed cover until she could find them. Turning around, the remaining draugr, skeletons, and at least one vampire closed in on him. They were all in front of him.

My turn, mused Arn, waiting until they were close and about to strike him before unleashing the word of power.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The explosion of power ripped forward, tearing apart the nearest ones and sending the others hurling back.
While it cleared the way out, the big draugr in black that had used the thu'um before was too far away to be affected and charged forward now.

"THAT'S RIGHT! COME ON!" yelled Arn, bashing his shield with his sword, tauntingly.

Then the Deathlord was on him, swing after swing with the Greatsword, faster than a mortal man would be swinging it.

It was all Arn could do to block it or get out of the way as he pivoted and leaped back toward the middle of the room, baiting everything away from Jordis, who finally found her sword and shield and was just getting to her feet.

Arn had a sixth sense in combat and felt the other ones getting up and closing on him.

Forcing the Deathlord back with a shield bash, Arn moved forward and turned around with another Unrelenting Force shout.

"FUS RO DAH!"

It pulverized three of them and sent the remaining three flying, two of them flying apart on impact with pillars.

Arn spun back around to find the Deathlord making a heaving motion with his chest and fixing to shout right into Arn's face.

Reacting quickly, Arn sprang forward and bashed the Deathlord with a powerful shield bash on the chin, knocking its face skyward as the shout erupted toward the ceiling, but he didn't stop there.

Bringing his longsword up, he stabbed under the chinstraps of the Deathlord's helmet and up into its head, it's blue eyes fading out and body growing limp as it shuddered and fell to the floor.

Arn turned back just in time to see a vampire lunging at Jordis in a guarded position. His heart caught in his throat for a split second until Jordis used her guarded position to launch a powerful shield bash to knock it aside and stabbed it through the head before it could rise again, hissing and shriveling as it died.

He grinned and nodded at Jordis as she turned and nodded back, taking in the carnage surrounding them.

"YOU THINK YOU'VE WON! YOU FOOLS! YOU WILL JOIN ME AND BE THE FIRST OF MY NEW ARMY, BUT YOU MUST DIE FIRST BEFORE RECEIVING THAT HONOR! COME AND RECEIVE IT!" Potema screamed as a bright bluish purple light erupted in the chamber, lighting everything up brightly as Arn tried to shield his eyes and his ears, though that did nothing to keep her voice out of his head.

After a brief few moments of energy swirling around them as they tried to shield themselves from whatever was happening, the energy all gathered in one place to form the figure of a woman floating in the air, facing away from them.

She was tall, beautiful and naked from the tips of her toes to her shoulders. From the shoulders up was the headdress of a wolf.

As she floated in the air in the chamber, she glowed a transparent blue as she slowly turned to face them.
While Arn had been momentarily transfixed by the ethereal beauty of her body as she first formed, as she turned around, it all went wrong.

There was no beautiful face to match the body, not even any lips or eyes, simply the face of a skull looking out the wolf head's mouth, grinning wickedly at them as she floated toward them.

"NOW DIE AND JOIN ME!" she screamed.

Immediately, she began to summon creatures. Daedra appeared out of nowhere, the things they'd just killed floated back up in the air and had life again. More draugr and skeletons seemed to appear out of nowhere.

This would not stand.

"WULD NA KEST!"

In a flash, Arn was across the space and had impaled the Wolf Queen with his crackling longsword, eliciting a shriek of pain as he pulled it out of the ethereal form and began slicing and hacking, not letting up for one moment.

She had tried to put up a shield barrier but Arn battered through it in seconds, the lightning from his longsword continuing to sap her of any magicka as she shrieked and spasmed.

Just as he felt presences around him from her minions closing on him, Potema shrieked loudly and began to morph, her essence exploding outward, dissipating and along with it everything she'd summoned either collapsed or vanished, leaving Arn and Jordis alone, gasping for air, staring around them in surprise.

After checking around the room, Arn ascended to the throne and removed the skull and other bone on the burial platform.

Picking up the skull and looking at it thoughtfully, Arn put the other bone in his pouch before frowning at the skull.

"Stay dead this time" he growled at it before they gathered their things and departed.

Ascending out of the crypt, they were surprised to find Styrr, Falk Firebeard, Legate Rikke, Tullius, and several other priests huddled in some sort of conversation.

"Don't trouble yourselves. It's over" Arn muttered, removing the skull and other bone for them to see before handing them to Styrr.

"We heard such awful noises all the way up here!" exclaimed one of the priests.

"Well, can't say it was fun, but it's over" groaned Arn, moving around slightly to check himself for any aches or pains he hadn't noticed before while glancing over at Jordis to see if she was showing any signs of injury.

Jordis had grabbed the back of her head, which had started to bleed again.

Arn was about to put his hand on it and exert his own healing spells when a priestess stepped forward and offered Jordis assistance to healers.

"Is this truly going to work? or should we be grinding those to powder and spreading them to the far corners of the Empire?" mused Arn as Styrr took the bones and reverently began plodding with the
others back up to the sanctuary.

"Once the bones are blessed, she will be unable to use them for any unholy purposes" several of them assured him as they departed.

Once they were gone, that just left Falk, Rikke, and Tullius all eyeing him with concern.

"What?" Arn asked, puzzled.

Rikke finally cleared her throat before speaking.

"Not to sell you short, Arn, but if you'd heard the things we heard up here, you'd be surprised anyone came back out of there too."

"Yeah, well, it's becoming a normal thing for me" Arn muttered slightly angrily as he sauntered out, not liking the look he was getting from Tullius and not wanting to rehash any of Rikke's previous discussion.

The cool early evening air felt good as Arn emerged from the Temple and made his way back toward the Festival.

He needed to find either Elisif or Sybille and let them know, then head back to the healers to double check and make arrangements for Jordis.

After checking alcoves and alleys and only finding a couple too eager to rut each other senseless to find a room anywhere, Arn figured he wouldn't find Sybille anywhere near the festival and looked for Elisif.

He spotted Bolgeir Bearclaw still by the drinking tables with two wenches on his lap. Lydia was still happily dancing with...her friend.

Arn spotted Lysi chatting with some other girls amongst the audience by the Bards' stage, and he finally spotted Erdi just coming out of the square, winded from dancing, gasping and fanning herself smiling as she giggled with another townsgirl about something, but no sign of Elisif anywhere.

Making his way there, Arn waved and got her attention as they made their way out of the throng of people in the square.

"Have you seen Elisif or Sybille?" Arn quered.

"Sybille had to leave. She got a hold of Lysi earlier and said she had to get away from the town for the night. Something to do with a ritual. Didn't say anything else" Erdi replied innocently.

"What about Elisif?"

"She was just...." Erdi replied, looking around and looking around some more.

Arn looked around too, but after a few minutes of not spotting her, Arn grew more worried.

"If Lysi, Bolgeir, and I are here and Sybille's gone...?" Erdi spoke the question mark Arn was already thinking.

"Don't worry, I'll find her. Get Lysi to go to the temple and look after Jordis, she sustained some minor injuries. Make sure she gets home safely. You and Bolgeir keep looking here for Elisif. If you find her, send someone up to the Blue Palace because that's where I'm headed to look."
"Right" she nodded as Arn turned and hastily walked out of the crowds before sprinting his way toward the Blue Palace, hoping nothing had happened to Elisif.
"Did the Jarl come through here?" asked Arn forcefully as he burst through the Blue Palace doors.

"Yes, about an hour ago" answered the door guards.

"Right" Arn muttered as he raced up the stairs and made his way past another door guard into Elisif's personal wing.

Desperate, he didn't bother knocking as he threw open successive doors to drawing rooms, dining room, library and finally her bedchambers.

Throwing open the door, he heard Elisif yelp in surprise.

She was seated at a candlelit desk on the far side of the room piled high with stacks of letters, books, and parchments.

"Arn! I know we're on friendly terms, but it's more than a little inappropriate for you to be barging in a lady's room without knocking!" Elisif chided, breathing a sigh of relief as she spun in her chair to face him.

Arn closed the door and wrung his hands around his helmet as he approached, trying to catch his breath to explain.

As he neared where she was, he noted she wasn't in her fine dress anymore. Instead, she wore a blue velvety house robe over something blue and gauzy, probably her nightgown.

Drawing near, he took some deep breaths before embarking on an explanation as she eyed him with a raised eyebrow and crossed arms.

"Sorry, my lady, it-just-you weren't at the festival and Sybille left and the maids and Bolgeir were all there so I didn't know if something had happened to you or not" Arn wheezed out between breaths, gulping to himself and looking away embarrassed as he realized he was alone with her in her bedroom.

"Sybille left the city?" Elisif frowned in puzzlement.

"Yes, Erdi relayed the message to me a short time ago."

"Hmm...she didn't say anything to me about it...I guess I can trust our newest Thane for protection" She replied after a moment of pondering, giving him a small, wry smile.

"Come, sit with me" she motioned to a chair at the side of the desk.
Arn moved and sat a little uncomfortably, eyeing the room around him, realizing he should be watching for threats.

"You disappoint me, Arn" Elisif stated bluntly when he sat down, though there was a playful undertone to it as he noted the slight upturn of her lips.

"W-why?" Arn muttered, wondering what this was about.

"I recall someone promising me to wear these, beautiful, fine, custom made clothes I got him...all the way from the markets of the Gold Coast, and yet look! here they are, NOT being worn!" she chided, gesturing to the pile of fine clothes she or the maids must have retrieved from his quarters after the festival had started.

"Well...uh...um" Arn rubbed his neck shamefully, feeling about an inch tall.

"Instead, I still see you wearing that armor of yours and it's...Arn! Have you been fighting!? It's got blood and other marks all over it!" Elisif exclaimed, her eyes growing wide in surprise and leaning forward to trace her hands over some of the marks on his armor in concern.

"Well...I-

"Arn! It's the Festival of Lights!"

"Oh? Then why did you sneak off?" Arn countered.

"I have some correspondence to look over" she gestured at the desk "and I'd already spent a good deal of time there having fun!"

"Hrmph" Arn muttered, crossing his arms defiantly.

"We're all supposed to be celebrating and enjoying ourselves, not fighting! What was so important that you had to dash away from the celebration to go kill things?!" she fixed him with a look Arn fancied was probably the same one Mothers gave when scolding their children.

"A Wolf Queen who didn't want to stay dead" Arn replied somberly.

Elisif froze and sat back up straight.

"As in...THE Wolf Queen?" she asked, stunned for a moment, staring at him with those deep blue eyes.

"The very same" Arn replied.

"Tell me everything!" Elisif exclaimed, crossing her legs and pursing her hands together before fixing him sternly again with those blue eyes.

At length, Arn related all the events of the evening as Elisif listened, occasionally biting her lip at the more tense moments.

When he was done, she sighed loudly, as though holding her breath the whole time.

"So it was really her" she mused, leaning back and placing her chin in her hand "Oh Arn, if you only knew the tales and records about her. She is a monster in every sense of the word. The threat of the Dragons would have paled in comparison to a woman who could raise an army of undead at will. She is a terror" Elisif replied with a shiver.
"Not anymore" asserted Arn "She won't be coming back ever again."

At that, she cocked her head and looked at him quizzically until it made Arn too uneasy.

"What?"

"You have such a casual manner sometimes about life and death ordeals. Having just dealt with the threat of the Wolf Queen, and here you are, sitting casually, dismissing any fears without question" Elisif stated, crossing her arms while still eyeing him curiously.

The motion had the effect of pushing her breasts up in her nightgown, making them a lot more visible through the top of the robe, making Arn gulp and look away.

"I've spent more of my life around death than I'd like to admit. I am good at making things dead it would seem" he replied more sadly than he meant.

"But have you learned to celebrate life as well?" Elisif asked after a short silence "Life isn't all about killing things."

"If you're the Dragonborn, it seems like it sometimes" Arn mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Getting out of that armor is a start" Elisif mused, gesturing at it.

"Again with this..." Arn groaned "Not sure why all you women are so worried about it" he murmured, remembering Lydia's chiding from earlier.

"Arn, you should know by this point in your life. We're women, we like everything to be pretty, even our men's clothes. Now, come on"

Arn didn't budge at first, simply looked down at the pile of finery with disdain.

"Fine, if you're going to be that way, then as Jarl, I order you to dress in this finery this instant" Elisif grinned at him with folded arms, not looking away.

"So you're ordering me to take off my clothes?" Arn smirked as he picked up the pile of finery disdainfully.

Even in the candlelight, Arn could see the bright red blush on Elisif's features.

"Not....exactly. I'm ordering you to make yourself more presentable. Besides, you promised me" She recovered.

"But how am I supposed to protect you if I'm not in my armor and prepared to do so?" Arn replied with a smirk, thinking he'd found a way out.

"We're going to go somewhere you won't need it" Elisif replied, grinning mischievously at him.

"Uh...okay, but if I go change behind a screen, I won't be able to see if something is happening to you" Arn remonstrated weakly.

"So are you saying I need to watch you change?" asked Elisif in mock indignation.

Arn huffed in part frustration, part giving up.

"Damn it" he muttered as he moved behind the changing partition and removed his armor.
It didn’t take near as long to remove the armor as it did to get the finery on. Awkwardly, he finally got the vest on and stepped out before sitting down to put the shiny leather boots on.

"Happy now?" he sighed as he stood and turned around for Elisif to see, who was beaming at him as she stood the whole time.

"Yes" she giggled "but this...here...is on backwards" she stated, walking up to him and unlatching the vest thing for him before helping him remove it and put it on correctly and latch the little things on the front correctly.

Having her standing that close to him was rather intoxicating. The beauty of her features that always struck him, the piercing blue eyes, blondish hair cascading down her back, the pearly white expanse of skin from her neck down to the valley between her breasts, pushed together by the gauzy blue nightgown.

She also smelled of flowers, roses and something else Arn wasn't sure of.

"See?" she stood back a little and clapped excitedly "You do look splendid. If you had gone to the festival in that, you'd have had every maiden and woman in the town fighting for the next dance" she beamed, continuing to admire the look he cut in the new outfit.

"Uh...um....dancing isn't really my thing...at least not for some years" Arn tried to protest.

"Arn!" Elisif was looking at him again with that scolding look with her hands on her hips "Come, there's something I want to show you" as she whirled and picked up a lighted candle and moved to part of the bedroom wall.

Arn hurriedly grabbed all of his weapons and latched the scabbards on before following her over.

"You won't need those" she laughed before activating some button Arn didn't see that made part of the stone slide back and in, revealing a dark passage "but you know, if you're really afraid of the dark, you can hold my hand" she goaded as she led the way in.

After descending a long series of stairs, they went through a long corridor then down another series of stairs before Elisif pulled a lever and they found themselves in a rounded alcove of sorts split in the middle by a small waterway with steps coming up out of it.

It was obviously meant to be some sort of secret dock or escape route Arn guessed, with some lever or button opening up access to the outside. Even as he was thinking this, Elisif set down the candle and motioned him over.

"Can you pull that down? It's actually quite hefty" she asked, pointing to a lever.

Getting a firm grip, Arn was surprised that it took a lot of effort to get it pulled down, resulting in a loud clang that moved a large slab of rock about ten feet tall by five feet wide to shift out and up, revealing an opening out into the moonlit sea.

Elisif gasped happily in wonder as the moon and star filled night flooded its light across the water and into their little secret sanctuary, the underwater vegetation reflecting the moon's rays, giving the normally clear blue water a light green glow to it.

Laughing happily for a moment, she blew out the candle. Then she shrugged her robe off and hung it on the lever before hiking the hem of her nightgown up to her knees as she sat on the edge of the inlet and dangled her flawless white feet in the water.
"It's so beautiful. Isn't it?" she exclaimed happily, motioning him to sit next to her.

"Yes" Arn replied, though he wasn't thinking about the landscape since he hadn't been able to tear his eyes away from her as soon as she'd shed her robe.

It was indeed a gauzy blue lace nightgown with frilly straps over the shoulders and strings across the bodice to aid supporting her generous breasts confined in a low top that was see-through enough for Arn to be able to pick out the outline and shading of her nipples through the sheer-like fabric.

It also seemed to reveal more of her seemingly perfect figure while obscuring just enough to keep Arn from being able to see it all.

Shutting his eyes and trying to focus elsewhere, he sat down cross legged next to her, removing his boots to enable him to do so.

"Told you you wouldn't need the weapons" she smiled at him before returning her gaze to the starlit sky.

"It's so pretty down here on nights like these, but the lever makes it impossible to get open unless I get Sybille to open it, which she doesn't like to do."

After a few minutes of silence, Arn began to feel more at ease as Elisif twirled her feet in the water occasionally.

"I'm sorry if I'm not the best company for this sort of thing" Arn murmured, rubbing his neck uncomfortably.

"Nonsense! I usually don't have any company for this sort of thing, and hopefully it will take your mind off all the killing...at least for a little while" Elisif smiled over at him.

Surprisingly, the sentiment got to Arn for a moment, throwing his thoughts back to everything that had happened in the last few months.

It made him think harder about the future and he remembered what she had first asked him in her study that morning:

"What is your purpose as Dragonborn? What are you going to do?"

It made Arn sad to remember that he still didn't know. He had no idea what the future would hold for him. He only knew that at some point, he had to return to Cyrodiil to exact justice for Desarra.

Desarra...the emotional weight of her memory seemed to strike him, something he'd thought he was over, but for some reason had crept back into his thoughts and dreams more of late.

As he looked out at the starlit night, he suddenly felt tears streaming down his cheeks, but before he could do anything to hide them, he felt Elisif's soft fingers carefully wiping and caressing them away through the stubble on his cheeks and chin.

"Arn" she asked softly, carefully turning his chin towards her "What's wrong?"

"Just...remembering" Arn replied in a shaky voice "Those I could not save" he murmured before more tears came he could not control, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists in anger, trying to will it away.

"Oh Arn" Elisif whispered, turning and sitting up on her knees to pull him into an embrace.
Arn allowed her to pull him to her shoulder and gradually let the sobs loose into the softness of her skin and frilly strap of her nightgown as her soft fingers caressed his head and she whispered in his ear.

"It's okay. I know losing those we love hurts, even long after they're gone. You always wonder if there's something you could've done more or different that would've made things turn out different"

As Arn got himself under control, the soft warmness of her embrace and fingers making him want to draw closer, he pulled away slightly, looking deep into those blue eyes of hers he now saw watering with their own tears.

"Don't let guilt over the past shape your future, nor should you let the weight of possibility discourage you. Focus on the present, and the future will take care of itself" she whispered through quivering lips.

Arn took one of her soft hands and kissed it lightly before beginning to wipe away her tears she was trying not to shed as they streamed down here and there.

"You astound me sometimes" he sniffled.

"Why?" she sniffled, recovering.

"You said were this naive, silly girl until...after Torygg, but it seems so hard to believe you were ever anything but the wise and fair woman I see right now" Arn marveled, continuing to caress away the remaining tear streaks.

Elisif couldn't help but smile a little sadly at that.

"Sometimes, it takes death to give you perspective about life. The view I got wasn't very pretty. I soon realized the person I had become was not very wise and in some ways, not very fair either" she murmured, looking away in shame momentarily.

"Most people don't just...change" Arn replied, still caressing one of her cheeks slowly.

"Once I saw what would happen if I remained the way I was, it wasn't hard to be motivated" she weakly smiled back.

"What did you do?"

"I spent a lot of time reading, honestly. My library has tripled in the last year. I try to get my hands on anything about politics, philosophy, or history especially. Not that I don't mind a good tale every now and then. I've also spent a lot of time in my life watching people. I'd like to think I've learned at least some things from that." she smiled at him, sniffling away the last of her tears.

At length they were silent for awhile and Elisif turned back and dangled her feet in the water.

"You know, this is the only time of year the water is actually warm from all the days of warm weather over the summer. Then as soon as Fall hits, it begins getting colder again..." she mused swirling a leg in it and straightening it out and letting the water drip off "You should put your feet in and try it" she urged him.

"I don't know...I'm in all these fine clothes..." Arn teased.

"Maybe you'd like to get rid of them and go for a swim" Elisif smiled excitedly.
"Uh..."

"You know what, I think I’d like a swim" she exclaimed before looking over at him "Would you mind turning around?"

"Uh....sure" Arn murmured before spinning around away from her.

Gods...was she really going to--

Before Arn had any chance to finish the thought, he felt two soft hands on his side and a hefty push sent him flailing into the water with a loud splash.

Getting his feet under him, Arn stood up and sputtered water out of his mouth and nostrils for a moment, wiping his eyes and listening to Elisif laughing away the whole time.

Glaring at her, he couldn't help but be completely disarmed by the fit of merry giggling it seemed to put her in, holding her sides, blue eyes sparkling happily.

"You....should have...seen your....face" she laughed, barely able to breathe as she sat back down on the edge of the inlet with her feet dangling in the water.

"Oh...truly?" Arn grinned evilly, before reaching out and latching onto each leg and pulling her in with him with a loud squeal.

Once she'd surface and sputtered some water, she was still laughing at him and he couldn't help start laughing too.

"I saw yours coming, though" she sassed at him.

"But you didn't see this coming" he grinned, heaving a large slosh of water over her as she squealed again in surprise.

For a few minutes they traded splashing blows, which meant Elisif got soaking wet while Arn got more soaked from swimming around chasing her in the little inlet than he actually did from her meager splash attempts.

At length they found themselves in the shallower end, crouched on the steps in the water, still laughing at each other, Arn wringing and discarding his weapons and vest.

After awhile they finally stopped laughing, both sitting there in the water, staring at each other intently.

Arn didn't think he'd seen her look more beautiful, radiant blue eyes and smile sparkling in the moonlight, the soaked curly mass of blondish hair highlighted by the green glow of the pool, white smooth skin dripping with water as her blue nightgown had now become a second skin in its soaked condition.

Before he knew it, they had both moved closer together, smiles gone now, just an intense look of mixed pain and desire in both their eyes as their bodies gradually closed the distance.

Then their lips met, the moist softness driving him to want more. Slowly they kissed at first, then harder, more greedily, then they were fiercely caressing each other's heads as they kissed longer and harder, before their hands began to roam each other's bodies.

As she half climbed onto his lap under the water, Arn began feeling around for a little before finding
the hem of her nightgown. Lifting it, Elisif broke her hold and kiss long enough for him to peel it off her and up over her head before flinging it away.

Even as he did so, Elisif's fingers were clawing and scratching at the now destroyed fine satin shirt he was wearing. Setting her down for a moment, Arn slipped the breeches off as Elisif got the fasteners loose on his shirt and he let her remove it.

All this time, they only stopped kissing to get garments over their heads, their mouths still working furiously at each other while their fingers worked furiously to get rid of the layers separating them.

Now both naked, their bodies clashed together hungrily in the glowing green water, the moonlight dancing its glare across their forms as Elisif clasped him fiercely to her, her arms around his chest, silky soft legs clasped around his back as his now thick, hardened cock sought out her delicate folds.

Arn paused only a moment as he clasped her buttocks to help support her as her warm lower lips met the end of his cock. Kissing her fiercely, he pushed in slowly, causing her to break the kiss as her back arced her soft breasts against him with a loud gasp as she looked up, mouth open in ecstasy.

"Oh....Oh....Gods!" She cried out as he pushed further in, stopping for a moment because of her tightness "More!....More!....Don't Stop!" She gasped at him pleadingly as he pushed further in with effort, feeling an incredible constricting warmness as her core clenched him fiercely.

Arn didn't know if he could go further she was so tight, but he pushed slowly further, Elisif shuddering and gasping at each bit that budged further up inside of her as the firm grip she had shifted to his shoulders grew so tight that her fingernails threatened to break the skin.

After a brief moment, Elisif cried out, spasming around him, his cock coated in her fluids before Arn had even gotten completely in.

"OH!......OH!" she cried as she shuddered into Arn, him holding her tight as she relaxed against him.

"I'm.......sorry" she said after awhile of them both panting, holding each other like that, Arn still mostly sheathed inside her "It's been.....such a.... long time.....for me...."

"You have nothing to apologize for, my dear Elle" he whispered caressingly against the top of her head as he kissed her hair.

After a few minutes, Elisif looked up at him and he could see tears coming from her beautiful blue eyes.

"Did I hurt you?" Arn asked, concerned.

"No...no" she whispered breathily at him "I just haven't felt this good for so long" she smiled at him before kissing him passionately again.

This renewed flurry of kissing prompted Arn to push all the way into Elisif's hot, tight core, his hips impacting the insides of her soft thighs with a slosh in the water.

Slowly he began pulling out, even as Elisif gasped and clawed his back, before pushing back in again to a cry of happiness from her as she tried to pull him against her harder with both arms and legs clenching against him.

"Oh gods! Yes.....yes...please....more...harder!" she cried out as Arn began to speed up his thrusts.

Arn began to move harder and faster, her core having loosened up a little and now very wet and
moist, making it easier for Arn's hard cock to push in faster.

Elisif's softness was maddening. From the hair on her head to her dainty feet, Arn didn't know if there was a single spot he had felt that wasn't soft and caressing. The only exception might be her hardened nipples that were pricking against Arn's hairy chest as he began pistoning harder into her.

"Oh...gods!....Oh....gods!" Elisif gasped as the water began to churn as Arn thrust into her over and over again. It didn't take long. The water was positively boiling as Arn felt his cock swell and explode stream after stream inside her own heated tightness as Arn thrust into her up to the hilt.

"Dibella have mercy!" she gasped as she clenched around him and exploded her own fluids in turn as they shuddered against each other, clutching each other fiercely in the moonlight.

Retreating from her womanhood so she could recover, Arn sat with her on the steps under the water, holding her in his lap gently as they heaved and gasped from the exertion as their bodies continued to pulse with spent effort.

They didn't say anything, just closed their eyes and held each other or looked intently at each other without speaking as the minutes passed.

After awhile they began to swim around languidly, occasionally grabbing or kissing each other, giggling and splashing.

As Elisif avoided his reach one more time with a giggle, she ascended the stairs out of the water, naked and dripping, turning to look at him with a mischievous grin.

Arn's heart began beating furiously again and his cock grew hard again at the un-obscured view of her nakedness. Porcelain white skin from her toes to her head with soft curves encompassing her flawless, hourglass figure.

"If you want me, you'll have to catch me" she giggled before taking off running toward the passage they'd come in by.

"Oh truly?" Arn grinned again.

"WULD NA KEST!"

In a flash, he exploded out of the water and across the space, coming to a stop right in front of Elisif, who ran into him with a yelp as his arms closed on her and he carried her back to the water.

"That's not fair!" she protested in mock indignation "How did you do that?"

"Doesn't matter. You never said I couldn't use any powers. All I had to do was catch you, and I have" Arn grinned as he lifted and carried her back into the water until they were waist deep.

She giggled again and they kissed as he set her down before running his hands down over her shoulders, over her soft breasts and down her soft flat stomach.

"How is it that you're so soft everywhere?" Arn muttered against her lips as she sighed to his touch.

"Helps to wear fine clothes and not armor" she teased, grinning against his lips.

"Maybe I should inspect these benefits more closely" murmured Arn as he picked her up again and carried her to the side of the inlet before spreading their wet clothes out and laying her down on her back on top of them.
She grinned and opened her mouth to say something but was turned quickly speechless as two of Arn's fingers snaked their way down and inside her womanhood, causing her to buck up against them with a gasp as Arn's other hand found her soft breasts and began exploring them. It didn't take long before Arn added another finger and began pumping her core in earnest, her hips bucking up in coordination with him as he rubbed and pinched her breasts and nipples alternately before adding kisses on different parts of her body as she began crying out.

"OH!....ARN!......Gods!.....Talos!......Mara!" The stream of exclamations continued until she was speechless with gasps. It wasn't too long after that she was climaxing hard, bucking up and clutching him as fluid exploded over his fingers buried deep inside her womanhood and she shuddered against him as he kissed her left breast momentarily before sucking gently on it as she clutched him.

As Arn retreated a little into the water, he let her half lay there, curled up for a moment as he stroked her hair and held her hand as she turned and gazed at him with a look of such wonder and happiness Arn hadn't seen since....Desarra.

*Desarra...*

Immediately, the sad memories flooded back, forcing Arn to retreat to the middle of the pool, looking down at his hands sadly before closing his eyes and trying to will away the terrible images the memories brought back.

Elisif seemed to sense it, because she sat up immediately and hopped in, walking over to him and immediately taking his head in her hands.

"Arn...Arn come back to me" she whispered, kissing him gently before taking his hands in hers and immediately taking his head in her hands.

"Arn...Arn come back to me" she whispered, kissing him gently before taking his hands in hers and placing them one on each of her soft breasts tipped by a hardening nipple.

Slowly, Arn opened his eyes and gazed sadly for a moment at nothingness before bringing his focus back to Elisif and the soft breasts he felt rising and falling in each hand.

"You've made me feel such wonders" she whispered, caressing the side of his face "Is there anything that I can do for you?" she pleaded, staring intently with those deep blue eyes.

"You already have" stated Arn, beginning to rub and caress her soft breasts in each hand "I needed this" he whispered, blinking back tears.

"We both did" she whispered back, wiping a stray tear away.

"Do you want more?" Arn muttered, not stopping his kneading and caressing of her breasts.

"Gods yes!" she gasped, barely able to stop from squirming and writhing against him as she bit her lip to keep from crying out in pleasure as Arn used his knee to spread her legs apart. Slowly, he ran his hands down to her hips before picking her up again and lining his hardening cock up and sliding into her with a gasp from them both.

Over the next hour they continued their frenzied coupling, finishing by the side of the inlet with Elisif grasping the sides with both hands, legs spread as Arn pounded up into her from behind, reaching around and holding her by the breasts as he did so.

"OH...OH!....UUHNNNNGHHH!" Elisif exclaimed incoherently as they both exploded inside her again in near unison before slumping utterly spent against the cold stone of the side of the inlet.

As Arn helped her up on the side, they both lay there panting, her curling against him in the now cooling night air as he curled his arms and legs around her in turn.
"Why does this night have to end?" Elisif murmured tiredly into the crook of his neck.

"There can always be tomorrow night" smiled Arn into the top of her head.

"Can there be?"

"What do you mean?"

"We go back up into the Palace and I become the Jarl again. I have to oversee the hold, work on saving Skyrim, and visit the Imperial city soon to set things in order there. We go back up there and you become the Dragonborn again, fated to leave and save Skyrim by doing gods know what elsewhere. You might even have to leave Skyrim" Elisif replied sadly.

Arn didn't reply, knowing she was right. He briefly considered a host of crazy ideas...moving to Solitude, joining the Legion, whisking Elisif away to Whiterun, but none of them made much sense and he knew he was rationalizing his way into making whatever they had done into something more than a night of passion.

Part of him was desperate to make this into something more permanent...or at least give it a chance, while another part of him scoffed at the idea, not just because it was her, but because the idea he would settle down anywhere seemed like a silly and unreachable dream.

Arn went from the heights of joy to the glum melancholy in moments in the short space of time she'd said those few words.

Maybe deep down, they'd both known this the whole time. Maybe that was part of the reason they were so desperate in their lovemaking.

After a long while of simply laying together, they rose and retrieved their clothes, hers still soaking wet and Arn's both wet and torn in pieces in the haste to remove them.

Elisif giggled as she handed him the last piece of his breeches as he appraised their ruined state.

"All that work getting me into these...and now look at them." Arn teased

"Getting you out of them was worth it" she giggled, leaning up to kiss him again.

"Well, you know, if we only have tonight..." Arn murmured against her grinning lips.

Biting her lip, she stopped to look around momentarily. Then, making up her mind, Elisif giggled as she dropped her wet nightgown and leaped into Arn's arms again.

Another hour later, after they'd attempted to return to the palace two more times and had spent their last coupling on the passage stairs landing next to Elisif's bedroom, Arn carried an utterly spent but smiling and asleep Elisif back into her quarters and laid her naked form carefully in her bed before tucking her in.

After drying off and cleaning himself up a bit, Arn redressed in his usual armor before checking on Elisif again.

Just as he did so, there was a knock at the door before Erdi poked her head in.

"There you are! Where were you?! We looked all over and even came back here but never found El-" she groused at Arn before he shushed her in a quick motion, pointing at the sleeping form of Elisif.
"Oh...I'm so sorry" Erdi whispered "Is she alright?" she asked, hurrying over and putting a hand to Elisif's forehead as if testing for a fever.

"She's awfully warm. Did she say anything to you?" Erdi asked worriedly as Arn rubbed his neck in embarrassment, wondering what explanation to use.

"Hey! Why is she naked?" Erdi whirled on him, fixing him with an angry frown before it suddenly dawned on her and she gasped, covering her mouth with her hands

"Did you...did she...did you two--" she gasped, an enormous excited smile spreading over her features.

"Hush you!" Arn hissed, trying to be intimidating "If even rumors of this appear anywhere, you and I will be having an unpleasant conversation!" he hissed before whirling to leave.

As he left Elisif's quarters he could hear the disturbing sound of Erdi giggling happily to herself. What an odd little lass, thought Arn, as he headed back to his rooms.

By Arn's reckoning, he'd spent the last four hours passionately rutting Elisif but for some reason he didn't feel very tired for long. In fact, he felt completely recovered and ready to go again, even as the memories of her soft curves and tight heated womanhood began hardening his cock again.

Strange, Arn thought. Maybe it was some sort of side effect of the Dragonblood, Arn pondered.

Even as he reached his quarters, his mind was buzzing and his body was pulsing like some dwemer machine that had been turned on by the experience with Elisif.

That all evaporated when he went through the door to his quarters and heard Lydia crying in the corner.

She was sitting in a corner, knees hunched up against her chest. She still wore the fancy dress but had a cloak huddled around her that obscured it.

Tear streaks marring her makeup gave indication she had been crying for some time. As Arn entered, she looked up and the pain in her eyes sent a stab of pain in Arn's heart as he looked at her huddled there.

"Lydia! What's wrong?! What happened?!" Arn nearly shouted, rushing to kneel in front of her, pushing aside the cloak's hood, looking for physical injuries.

"Rule 33....that one you said about Bards" Lydia sniffled.

"What did he do?" Arn felt his anger rising, fists clenching.

"You weren't making it up were you?" she asked tearfully.

"What...did he do?" Arn tried to emphasize without upsetting her further.

"It's all my fault. I should have listened to you. None of this would've happened." She replied with a big sigh, blinking back tears and wiping her eyes.

"Lydia, honey, what happened?" Arn asked with concern as he knelt and caressed away a strand of hair while handing her a handkerchief to dab away at the tear marks.
"I had been having nightmares" she replied almost disconnectedly at first "about the bandits...." she faltered "in the Gray mountain cave"

"Shhhh" Arn shushed her, kneeling next to her and enveloping her against him so her head was nestled against him as she fought back tears.

After awhile of quiet sobs, she continued.

"F-falnir and I had been sleeping together.....so when I had nightmares, he asked me why. I thought he cared....so I told him everything. But at the Festival, he got up in front of everyone and sang a song about us....about the Dragonborn....and he told them everything!" she faltered before continuing "the way they all turned and looked at me!" she sobbed "Arn, can we leave here? tonight or even tomorrow? Please?" she implored sobbingly into his armor as they held each other.

"Don't worry. We'll leave here soon." Arn replied, caressing her dark locks as she kept sobbing against him.

It took about an hour and a half, but he finally got her calmed down enough to sleep, gently tucking her in his bed fully clothed, soothing away a lone tear from the corner of her eye.

It occurred to him as he armed himself that he'd had to console three different crying women on the same day. There should be more laughing and less crying in the world, Arn mused as he took one last look at Lydia sleeping.

Arn typically wasn't much good at making people laugh, but he could cause pain and there was one fool who was going to feel it very soon, Arn resolved as he left the Blue Palace and looked across the city with a cold angry gaze toward the Festival lights and music still blaring in the square.

Chapter End Notes

*Those of you who followed this fic on FF may notice some differences in these chapters. I figured that since I was going to be re-uploading them, it was a good time to tweak or change a few things that were typos, syntax errors, or just story things I thought could've been done better. Hope you find it improved.*
Reckonings and Respite: Solitude pt. 8

Chapter Summary

Arn exacts his vengeance on Falnir, but being a Thane only gets you so far...

Despite being the wee hours of the morning, the Festival of Lights was far from over, though most of the elderly and all children were gone to bed.

The lively jigs and choruses still emanated from the city square, but had taken on a different tone now.

Instead of the classic favorites and folk songs, now it was a stream of tavern and barracks tunes Arn had heard a number of times and the lyrics were certainly not for children's ears.

From the roof of a nearby house, Arn surveyed the scene in the square and was surprised to see Rikke in just her leathers and some wench he didn't know engaging in the game commonly referred to as Dibella's hardest worker.

It involved two or more women standing on a table or stage and the audience would yell numbers, upon which the women would lean over and shake their arses back and forth the prescribed number of times before turning back around and drinking the same amount of shots of whatever the prescribed beverage was, usually a strong ale or mead.

Then the audience would shout "Who's Dibella's hardest worker?!" and the process would repeat until there was only one woman who could continue, either because the others were worn out, too intoxicated, or got carried off by male audience members since it was a practice common in brothels in Cyrodiil and the women were usually in a state of undress. Then the lone remaining woman got to shout that she was Dibella's hardest worker.

This spectacle had the most crowd by far, but the bards were still performing plays, though now of a more raunchy sort on the stage across the way.

The game of Dibella's hardest worker was already up to 26 for the number, though, if Arn remembered correctly, he doubted there was any local wench that would be able to keep up with Rikke in terms of drinking and she didn't look tired at all as she energetically shook her leather clad arse back and forth to the cheers of the mostly male audience.

Surveying the crowd, though, Arn couldn't find what he was really looking for...that damn bard, Falnir.

As he continued looking around, noting bemusedly a passed out General Tullius slumped against some barrels just off the square, he heard that cocky staccato voice he was hunting and turned back to see Falnir up on the Bards' stage, addressing the audience below him.

Arn took careful aim with his bow, taking the slow, cool night breeze into account as he looked down the arrow shaft at the form of Falnir on the opposite side of the square.

Despite the desire to just end the fool's life, he'd originally planned to shoot him in both hands before shooting him in the balls.
No, he thought, not like this. He was still thinking like he had back in Cheydinhal when, perched from a roof like this one, he'd tried to take out the Magister's son and the Magister walked in the line of fire instead.

Things are different here. He wasn't a wanted man. He was a Thane. Besides, if he wanted to send a message, a public pummeling was far more effective than an anonymous arrow.

Arn decided he would test how far being a Thane would go as he made his way back down off the roof and began striding his way back into the square.

With a murderous glare, he locked onto Falnir as he strode through the revelers in the square.

It took him awhile to notice Arn's approach, but when he did, his eyes widened momentarily and he faltered for a bit before stutteringly continuing on, attempting to regale the crowd with a punch line to some bawdy joke.

He never got the chance.

Arn leaped in the air and shouted.

"WULD NA KEST!"

In a flash, he was past the audience and gripping Falnir by the neck on stage, ramming him back against the backdrop with a growl as Falnir choked and gasped and the audience gasped in surprise.

"I warned you what would happen if harm came to her!" Growled Arn into Falnir's panicked face as he clambered at Arn's gauntleted grip on his throat, feet dangling off the ground.

"I....d-didn't--do--anything!" he choked out.

"Oh, I think you know exactly what you've done!" hissed Arn, shaking Falnir with another THUD against the backdrop of the stage as he began hearing pleas from the other bards on stage.

"Begone!" Arn growled loudly at the others approaching pleadingly on stage, one with some sort of pole at the ready.

Without waiting to see if they obeyed, he turned back to Falnir and rammed his other gauntleted fist into his stomach.

"Maybe you need some reminders until you CAN remember!" Arn growled angrily before dropping him to his feet and clocking him with a roundhouse to the side of his jaw.

As he reared back to strike again, he felt arms gripping and pulling him back.

"Stop, Please!" exclaimed the other bards, holding him back.

"I'm a Thane. You will release me this instant!" bellowed Arn before shrugging loose from the weak hold they had on him and beginning to pummel the moaning Falnir anew, barking the same query between punches.

"Do you remember NOW?! How about NOW?!"

He'd only gotten a few punches in when stronger arms grabbed him and he even felt someone leaping on top of him, dragging him back into a heap of armored bodies.

As he tried to free himself, he saw Rikke emerge in front of his field of view and woozily address
"Arn! You canna jush beat him up like that!" she tried to seem imposing, hands on hips bobbing back and forth slightly.

"I'm a Thane! Of course I can!" bellowed Arn angrily as he managed to extract himself enough to get free to stand.

Getting to his feet and not seeing Falnir, he spun around and spotted the other bards trying to carry him away and Arn leaped off the stage in pursuit.

This time though, the bards rallied to their comrade, two of them turning and attacking Arn with flailing punches when he got near.

Dodging one of them, he blocked the other easily and slapped the sot aside who threw it before reaching to grab the back of Falnir's robe and yank him away from the others.

Arn began to think this might not go so well as other bards converged on him and he suddenly had five of them punching, slapping, and pushing at him to keep away from Falnir as they dragged him back toward the Bard's College.

Batting away flailing arms and punches, he felt several latch onto him to try to hold him in place as their comrades carried Falnir to perceived safety.

By now, Arn's temper was getting the better of him. Finally shrugging free for a moment, he turned and attempted to get free of them.

"FUS!"

The whispered word of power was still strong enough to send three of them flying back into the crowd.

Even as Arn turned back around, he was caught with a hard roundhouse to the chin by Rikke, who'd managed to finally catch up.

"Whaddayu think you're doin'!" she tried to sound sassy as she hiccuped mid-phrase.

Before Arn could respond, he was tackled by more guards and Legionnaires.

It all fell apart after that. People began throwing punches and shoves as they lay in a writhing, struggling mass of people and even as Arn extricated himself again from their drunk clutches, he saw a brawl had broken out in the square where he'd tossed the bards earlier.

Avoiding a few punches and getting a few in of his own, Arn felt a pang of guilt as he connected on a hard cross on someone's cheek that he realized after the fact had been Rikke, stumbling to one side a little before chuckling mockingly.

"Arn, ya hit like a girl" she slurred as she spat out something in the shadowed mess of the square as bodies flailed around them.

Arn looked around momentarily, realizing the square had gone from late night raunchy theatrics to a drunken brawl in the space of a few minutes. No sign of Falnir either, though that probably meant he was in the bard's college.

CLANK!
"Ha ha!" exclaimed Rikke as she pounded a powerful but pointless upper cut right into the chest plate of Arn's armor "He he! Gotcha...you'll be feelin' that one in tomorrow's march..he he he he!" she continued to laugh as though having gotten the last word.

Arn frowned, noting the snap he'd felt from her when she hit him and the way she was clutching her wrist and elbow now.

"You just hurt yourself. Didn't you?" Arn retorted before getting shoved from behind by someone and avoiding another swing.

"Nuh-uh...You'll be the one hurtin' if you don't start followin' orders...now get back to the regiment and stop causin' t-trouble" she ordered, beginning to grimace as she spoke.

Annoyed, Arn turned and attempted to make his way out of the ruckus, but Rikke kept following him, making slurred orders and mockery.

When they'd finally made it clear of the brawl in the square, Arn looked around momentarily to get his bearings and noticed Rikke stumble out of the fray after him.

Arn huffed in annoyance.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't be concerned for her, herself being more than a match for all but the most skilled men in the Empire, but in her current drunken and injured state, Arn doubted it was wise to leave her stumbling around by herself in the middle of the night, particularly after shaking her arse at a crowd of drunk men long enough to give a few some unwelcome ideas.

Falnir would have to wait a little while longer.

Putting an arm around her shoulder, Arn steered a laughing and cocky Rikke back to her Castle Dour quarters.

Would've been much shorter to carry her, but she'd have castrated him if she ever found out, so he settled for the longer version of just having her lean on him as she staggered on.

Collapsing on her fur and blanket covered bed, she sighed tiredly, looking up at Arn through blood shot eyes and swollen cheek as he took her arm in his hand, bringing his healing touch to bear on it as he closed his eyes in focus.

When he was done and she moved it around a little, she sighed tiredly again, grinning at him.

"Ya know, I still owe you a good rutting....he he he he" she chuckled, breath still strong with ale.

Arn shook his head exasperatedly.

"Get some sleep. You're a mess" he replied sternly as he pulled her blankets up and tucked her in.

"But I'm a fun mess" she retorted tiredly as she closed her eyes and was fast asleep shortly.

Arn simply shook his head and retired from her quarters, emerging into the middle of an armed troop of guards and legionnaires with weapons all trained on him in the Castle Dour courtyard.

"Are you arresting me?" Arn queried cautiously, looking around.

"Not if you return peacefully to your quarters in the Blue Palace" came the response.

Guess that's as far as being a Thane got you, mused Arn, counting two dozen surrounding him.
"Fine, fine...guess I've done enough for one night" he muttered as they led him out of Castle Dour and escorted him back to his quarters in the Blue Palace where he found Lydia still sleeping soundly, but curled up into a fetal position in his bed.

As he began to remove his armor, he finally felt tiredness seeping in after the adrenaline and energy of the night began wearing off.

Looking at Lydia curled up with her face scrunched up in a frown as she slept, he felt a pang of pain again, wishing somehow he could just undo everything, make it all go away and never have happened as he sat down on the bed and stroked a strand of her hair out of her face.

Either his presence or physical contact seemed to help as she seemed to relax slightly. So he continued stroking lightly as he thought to himself what to do about Falnir.

If he could just find some way to discredit him, he could then kill any credibility in the part of the story about Lydia.

He would never be able to get close to Falnir after what happened tonight, but maybe he could file some sort of official complaint as a Thane. Maybe Elisif would have some ideas.

So after thinking and observing Lydia for a bit, he lay down next to her, making sure he was on top of the covers, not wanting a repeat of the intimate position they'd found themselves in on High Hrothgar and drifted off into sleep.

A heavy rap on the door to Arn's chambers interrupted his blissfully heavy slumber as he stirred awake.

"Make yourself presentable! You are summoned for Court today!" came Falk Firebeard's surprisingly angry tone through the door.

Stirring himself further, Arn awakened quickly as he realized it was a good thing he was on top of the covers as he found himself entwined with a sleeping Lydia again.

Thankfully, they were only clasping each other's upper bodies together, with her head nestled comfortably under his chin as she continued sleeping peacefully, not frowning or curled up in a ball like she'd been the night before.

Panicking briefly, Arn quickly but carefully extricated himself, bathed, and dressed in his usual armor before emerging from behind the changing partition to see Lydia sleepily sitting up in bed, with a puzzled look on her face for a moment while messing with her loose, raven colored locks.

"Are we leaving today?" she asked Arn hopefully, though with a sad face.

"Uh...Apparently, there's something in court I have to deal with first" Arn replied, cinching on his weapons.

"But...we'll leave after that...right?" she responded, intently studying him.

"If all goes well" he responded, heading for the door "If you want, you can get our things together here and get our horses ready. Anything not essential can be left in Proudspire" he stated before leaving his quarters and heading to Court.

As he peaked the top of the stairs, he had to bite his tongue to keep from chuckling at the scene there.
About half a dozen bards, including a swollen and bruised Falnir were huddled over on the other side glaring at Arn and whispering amongst themselves while several of the guards in the court had bruises and black eyes as well.

Perhaps most humorous was Erikur slouching over in a corner with a swollen face, a black eye, and a gash on his forehead.

Arn didn't recall seeing him at the late gathering, but he must have been there somewhere. Apparently some unhappy underlings had gotten their jabs in at him....literally.

Arn also couldn't fail to notice the glare he got from nearly everyone as soon as he arrived. Even Bryling and Falk were giving him an angry look instead of a customary greeting.

Strangely, Elisif was nowhere to be seen and the court members were all mulling around and whispering amongst themselves uneasily as they waited.

Just as Arn was pondering this, he heard a loud hiss from behind him and downstairs. Turning to find the source, Arn spotted Sybille Stentor motioning to him from an alcove below.

Following her into an adjacent wing, Arn was familiar with this drill enough not to say anything until they were at their destination. Moving through one room and then through hidden passages, Arn was surprised when she ushered him into the passage he and Elisif had used just the night before and motioned him to go in her room.

"Um...." he started to ask.

"You caused this. You fix it" was all Stentor said before whirling and gliding back down into the darkness of the passages.

"Okay..." Arn muttered, puzzled, before poking his head around the open passage door into Elisif's room.

Elisif was still in bed and turned to Arn with that same happy smile he remembered from last night in the hidden pool. The memories of their lovemaking came rushing back.

It was almost enough to make him want to drop his armor and leap into bed with her and say to Oblivion with everything else.

His hardening loins were certainly telling him to, and he might have actually done so if circumstances had been different. He tried to gulp down the brief spike of lust he felt, turning instead to watch Erdi and Lysi removing a tray of breakfast and some sort of ointments or potions.

"Oh Arn...I'm so glad you came. Come, sit with me" Elisif motioned tiredly to the edge of the bed.

As Arn approached and took a seat, he noted she had put on another blue nightgown.

"That will be all, Ladies" she stated to Erdi and Lysi, who both curtsied before removing their respective trays and leaving the room.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Arn, enjoying the chance to search those radiant blue eyes again.

She smiled weakly but happily at him while blushing.

"It seems...I may have overdone it last night" she said weakly, trying to sit up but wincing in pain as it became obvious to Arn that last night's activities had left her extremely sore in sensitive areas.
"I'm sorry. I never meant to cause any pain" He replied contritely, grasping her by the upper arms and helping her sit up and lean against him.

"Don't be. I wanted it just as bad and it was more than worth it" she winced before whispering the last part.

"If you want...uh...I can...um....heal it" Arn awkwardly offered.

"I'd heard you had a gift with restoration magic. Sybille is far more gifted with destruction than restoration and was quite upset we had opened the outlet door and 'compromised' the castle security in her absence" Elisif replied with a wry smile.

"This will only take a little bit. Try not to get too excited" Arn grinned in turn as he moved his hand beneath the covers and up the smooth skin of her leg to the soft swollen folds of her womanhood as she gasped to his touch.

Closing his eyes in concentration, it took effort, but Arn pushed all other things out of his mind, focusing on making this right as the blue light glowed out from his hand as Elisif shivered for a moment before latching onto him with both hands.

It was only a little while before he withdrew his hand and opened his eyes to find Elisif biting her lip and still clutching him before she gasped loudly and relaxed once he removed his hand.

"Feel better?" he asked, helping her to swing her legs out of bed and onto her feet.

"Oh yes....much much better" she sighed as she walked back and forth in the room in her nightgown.

Arn slowly found himself enraptured by her figure through the sheer blue material as she sauntered back and forth before he realized she had stopped and said something to him.

She had that mischievous grin on her face but tinged by sadness in her eyes.

"Uh...sorry, what did you say?" Arn muttered, jumping off the bed to his feet and hoping the blush he felt wasn't terribly obvious.

"I know what you're thinking. Trust me, I've been thinking the same thing since I woke up, but I hear I'm late for Court and there was a huge brawl in the square last night. You don't know anything about that, do you?"

"Well....uh....sort of"

"Arn!"

"Just let me explain!"

At length Arn explained some of what went on in the square, making sure she knew there was plenty of ale involved and a game of Dibella's hardest worker and that Falnir had slandered his and Lydia's reputations, which was true...in a way.

"Well, I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it in Court. It wouldn't be the first time the bards stretched tales for their own profit. I'll see you in Court once I'm changed....and thank you" Elisif replied sweetly before smiling and leaning up to give him a quick peck on the lips before retreating to her boudoir.
An hour later, Arn exasperatedly found himself on one side of the Court with a dozen people on the other side accusing him of all manner of mischief from the previous night, most of them bards of course.

Before any more accusations could be made, Elisif interrupted the grumbling din.

"I understand this to be largely a drunken brawl, the result of too much ale and a spark of bad blood between two of Solitude's citizens"

For a moment everyone was quiet, before an Altmer bard stepped forward.

"My Jarl, I understand he is a Thane and that he has saved our city, but will you really countenance the flagrant assault on one of our own, seen before the eyes of all in the city square?"

"Of your own admission, all eyes in the square were swimming with ale by then" Elisif replied demurely, crossing her legs and pursing her hands, fixing the bard with a critical look.

"Look at him, then!" asked the bard Arn now recognized as Viarmo, the headmaster at the Bards College. Then Falnir himself emerged from the others and stepped forward, feebly bowing to show the extent of his injuries and turning his swollen head from side to side, exhibiting the bruising and scrapes he received.

"Dragonborn, do you have anything you wish to add to this account?" Elisif enquired as everyone turned to regard him.

Arn had never been worried for himself. He knew he'd be fine somehow. He just needed some way to undo what the fool had spilled about Lydia. He'd been mulling over possibilities in his head since the accusations had started and now he thought he had an idea.

"Yes, I do have something to add. I was wondering why bards are allowed to make up whatever fanciful tales they like about Thanes and others who perform feats of heroism on their behalf?" Arn started out slowly before growing louder and fixing Falnir with a look of death as he finished.

"What are you talking about? Falnir worked long and hard on that song and it fits exactly with all accounts" Viarmo protested loudly.

"Oh? and what of the part about myself and my housecarl getting ravaged by bandits for days?" Arn exaggerated in indignation.

"That's not--" Viarmo started before Arn interrupted him.

"Let the sot speak for himself. It's his song!"

"That's not how it went!" snarled Falnir angrily, holding his head in pain "It was...only uh....it was....only your....housecarl that happened to" he struggled to say.

"Oh? and how did you come by this fanciful tale?" Arn sharply retorted, not letting up.

Falnir's swollen head seemed to turn a little redder and he stood silently staring at his feet or looking to Viarmo for help before Elisif interrupted.

"Speak up, bard. How did you come by this information?" she stated, fixing him with a measuring look.

"I...uh...well, you see, we're lovers....his housecarl and I, that is....and uh....well, when we sleep
together” he gulped, shuffling his feet "she has nightmares. I always asked her why. So one day, she finally told me the story. It all came from her. I swear it's the truth. Ask her if you don't believe me” he finished, sneering at Arn in triumph.

Elisif was about to say something but Arn pounced first.

"So! Either you are the world's WORST lover that women have nightmares in your bed....OR...this is a fanciful rendering that you've embellished to propel yourself to MORE coin and women!"

"No, that's not--" Falnir tried to counter weakly as Arn noticed a visible shift in the bard contingent, some of them beginning to eye Falnir suspiciously.

A man may endure many things, but rarely will a man countenance his sexual prowess to be publicly shamed. Arn knew Falnir had dug himself a hole, and if he wanted to stick to his story, Arn wanted to make sure it cost Falnir something he valued.

"So which is it, horrid lover or another bard exaggerating things for his own coin?!" Arn practically bellowed with genuine anger.

"Not ALL bards exaggerate tales for their own benefit" interrupted Viarmo with indignation.

"And yet that is the reputation of many in taverns across the land. Is it NOT?" retorted Arn.

Viarmo simply glared his response.

"It would not be the first time, even just this year, the bards at the college have taken liberties with the private lives and reputations of lords and thanes" Elisif responded critically.

"Just ask yourself” Arn sneered, stepping up close to Falnir "Do you want to be known as the man a woman will have nightmares with, or just another tavern bard with smooth lips but an exaggerating tongue?” he hissed in a whisper at the now panicking Falnir, who realized now the trap he'd gotten himself into.

"Well, bard, speak now. Which is it?" demanded Elisif with finality.

"Well...I...uh....m-might have exaggerated a little" he replied weakly, looking at the floor.

"A LITTLE?!!" retorted Arn angrily.

Elisif sighed sadly and glared at Viarmo with a look they seemed to have had this conversation before. Viarmo in turn, glared at Falnir before moving away and leaving Falnir alone in the middle of the room.

"My apologies...my Jarl and uh...Thane" Falnir stuttered.

"You should make your apologies to those you lied about" Elisif stated loudly, gesturing past them all.

To Arn's surprise, Lydia was standing in her armor at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide with shock.

Immediately, Falnir moved and tried to apologize quietly to her but her look of shock turned to one of rage and she shoved him away, not wanting to talk or be anywhere near him.

"If you want to publicly defame people, you should publicly apologize" stated Arn loud enough for all to hear.
Penitently, Falnir looked around in a panic for a moment before getting to his knees in front of her and pleading eloquently for forgiveness in having made up what happened to her, much to Lydia's surprise who turned and looked at Arn in confusion.

After making his admission and publicly apologizing, Falnir seemed to be getting over his embarrassment, his smooth tongue returning to form as he tried to complement Lydia, still on his knees in front of her.

Her rage returned quickly, though, and burst forth in a torrent of angry insults and a swift knee to his already swollen head before kicking him in the groin angrily just as Arn pulled her off him before the guards could.

As order returned to the court, Viarmo approached Elisif.

"My Jarl, while I cannot condone my colleague's behavior, I think it sets a poor precedent that anyone can be allowed to assault and harass us the way the Dragonborn has done. If he took exception to what was said, he could've summoned us to court and we could have had this whole conversation without a brawl in the streets and injuries tended to."

At the remonstration of Viarmo, some of the other bards piped up and began listing their grievances against Arn, who simply huffed and threw up his hands in annoyance and disbelief.

"Enough!" interrupted Elisif, silencing everyone "As punishment for the role he played in this debacle and as an example to keep other bards from doing so, Falnir will compose a song to perform publicly about the exaggeration of bards or he will not perform publicly here ever again. For future Festivals, no strong drinks will be served past midnight."

Arn grinned as there was an audible groan of disappointment through the room then before Elisif continued.

"Additionally, as restitution for his attack on the bards and a show of goodwill, the Dragonborn will help you retrieve that ancient manuscript you were so zealous to obtain, Viarmo."

Arn wasn't expecting that and turned in surprise to Elisif, who simply sat back and fixed him with that chiding look she'd given him when he'd tried to worm his way out of wearing the finery she'd gotten him.

Arn thought about fighting it, but realized it was probably futile based on the look Elisif was giving him.

Damn it.

"What just happened?" Lydia whispered in his ear as he realized she knew nothing of what happened last night and had only witnessed half of the events in the Court.

"I'll tell you on the way to wherever this rutting place is we have to go get this manuscript from" he replied as they turned to leave.

An hour later though, Arn realized he might not get a chance to do so since he'd forgotten about Jordis coming with them as all three prepared their horses to head to this Dead Man's Respite that Viarmo had told him about.

As they prepared to depart, Arn noted Erdi hurriedly run up giggling, and handed both Jordis and Lydia small coin purses filled with money, which prompted both Jordis and Lydia to turn and stare at Arn.
"What?" Arn asked, puzzled.

"Oh, nothing" giggled Jordis as she tUCKed her coin purse away while Lydia eyed Arn with something between annoyance and confusion before turning to Erdi.

"When?" she asked.

"Last night...so romantic!" Erdi tried to whisper, but Arn still heard.

"Last night what?" Arn interrupted them, wondering what this was about.

Erdi didn't answer, just giggled again before covering her mouth as though it would prevent anything from being said and scurried away back toward the Blue Palace.

"Anyone care to tell me what that was about?" muttered Arn as they mounted their horses and began trotting out of the stables.

After a few moments of silence, Lydia piped up, still eyeing Arn curiously.

"We and the maids had a wager with Stentor and Bolgeir over whether you and Elisif would end up.....bedding each other. We won the bet" she said in a rather dispassionate tone.

Arn threw a hand up in annoyance.

"Is nothing I do private anymore? What made you all think that would happen?"

"Well, given the way you two were looking at each other and how long--" Jordis started to say before Lydia shushed her into silence.

"Just one question, though, did you give her your 'Oldness' speech too?" Lydia asked in a veiled angry tone.

"Why would I?" retorted Arn, beginning to grow a little angry himself.

"Well, you know, she's only twenty seven....so, just a little surprised you didn't have an attack of conscience and run away" Lydia replied in a nonchalant manner, but there was no mistaking the venom behind it.

"And yet you wagered it would happen" Arn pounced.

Lydia simply glared her response as they rode side by side.

Arn thought of trying to tell her not to take her relationship frustrations out on him, but felt like that would make it worse. So he didn't say anything, just eyed her with a questioning look.

Lydia simply huffed before riding further forward.

*Women,* Arn mused, though he was very surprised to find out Elisif was much younger than he'd thought.

Sure, she was beautiful, but that sadness and loss that had always seemed on the edge of her countenance and tone had made Arn think she was at least five to seven years older, not to mention her keen insights on people and life that he had enjoyed and been the recipient of more than once.

Remembering the time he'd spent with her became a much more pleasant pastime while riding than trying to decipher Lydia's confusing behavior.
It took a good portion of the day to get to Dead Man's Respite and it was passed mostly in silence from Arn and Lydia.

The exception was Jordis, who seemed unfazed by their silence and happily chattered and commented on just about any landmark or wildlife they saw.

Reaching the impressive stone edifice of Dead Man's Respite on the banks of the Hjall river, they made their way inside after securing the horses and leaving a disappointed Jordis to guard them.

At first, it seemed a typical crypt with a few draugr here and there and some spoils to be had, but as they got further down, the carvings and stonework became more ornate and unlike other crypts, it was surprisingly clean.

After descending a spiral staircase down further, Lydia hissed at Arn and motioned him over to an obscured door in the side of the room.

After searching for a little bit, they found the lever that opened it, but were stunned when the door opened.

In the small alcove behind it was a skeletal corpse clutching a book, but that wasn't what made them jump back in surprise.

A glowing blue apparition of a young man sat on the side of the alcove, looking at them intently as they both jumped back with their weapons at the ready.

"You must end Olaf's tyranny" he murmured, gesturing at the book.

"Are you Svaknir?" Arn asked, edging forward cautiously still in a guarded position.

"You must end Olaf's tyranny" the apparition stated more forcefully this time, rising to its feet and pointing dramatically at the book.

"Okay...okay" Arn murmured, cautiously reaching forward, prodding the book loose, and pulling it back to within his reach with his longsword.

As soon as Arn had picked up and opened Svaknir's book, King Olaf's Verse, the apparition vanished.

"Is that it? Are we done then?" asked Lydia, looking around cautiously before peering past his arm at the book.

"YOU MUST END OLAF'S TYRANNY!" boomed the voice of the apparition through the rooms around them.

"Apparently not" Arn answered as they both spun to look around anxiously.

"On we go then" Lydia murmured as they trudged further down.

"Well, I was going to continue on anyway. Given that Ruby claw we found, that means there must be a word wall down here somewhere" Arn whispered as they sneaked further.

"And don't forget to stop Olaf's tyranny too" Lydia whispered back with a slight grin.

"Yeah....whatever that means" Arn replied.

Before long, they arrived at the tell tale vault like passage that marked the circular door unlocked
with the Ruby claw.

Moving the circular stones around to match the pattern on the claw, the door clanked and groaned as the stones moved around before clanking into place and the door slid down to open into a large burial chamber.

It was a fairly large room with a small pool of green water at the front with steps coming up out of it rising up to a sarcophagus on a platform with ornate carvings and chests adorning it.

The sides of the room were narrow at the start, but opened up into a larger circular area centered on the sarcophagus.

Even as Arn had drawn his bow and taken a bead on the nearest Draugr seated motionless in a throne along the side, the blue apparition appeared again in front of them, pointing toward the sarcophagus.

"We must end Olaf's Tyranny!" it cried before dashing up the steps, triggering the room to life or undeath at least.

"Damn it" Arn muttered as he and Lydia both began unleashing arrows at the Draugr that sprang from the chairs and lurched out of broken open tombs from all sides of the circular side of the room.

Even as Draugr after Draugr went down, Arn saw the main sarcophagus open and a large Draugr unlike any he'd seen emerged with a loud bellow of rage.

It had unique steel armor fitted to it, wielded an ebony sword and shield, and had a black high pointed crown atop its head as it spun its bearded head this way and that before clashing blades with the suddenly armed blue apparition that attacked him.

Arn didn't have any more time to observe as six draugr closed on them and Lydia struggled to nock another arrow quickly to fire.

He'd just downed the third one of the group when he heard a loud shout and clicking noise and suddenly had his bow wrenched as if by an invisible hand and tossed twenty feet away in the green pool of water.

"What in Oblivion--" Arn exclaimed as he looked up to note the King-like Draugr alone at the top of the stairs focused on Arn, the young bard's ghost nowhere to be seen.

"You deal with that thing. I'll finish these off!" He heard Lydia exclaim as she drew sword and shield, the Draugr almost on them.

Arn rolled under an Axe swing as he rolled by the group and came up drawing his blade across its legs, taking one partly off and pitching it over before turning to face the charging King Draugr.

As it closed on him, Arn could note the more intricate detail of its armor and crown. Had to be what was left of King Olaf himself, mused Arn, as he blocked a hefty sword swing that knocked him back as he danced away from the other group of draugr Lydia had engaged.

Even as they circled each other momentarily, Olaf's draugr was muttering things Arn could only make out pieces of before seeming to grin.

Arn had a bad feeling. Draugr didn't grin.

Then it shouted that same thing he'd heard earlier with a click at the end and his longsword was
wrenched from his hand and tossed some distance away.

Then it charged Arn, who blocked, but was hit with a shield bash that nearly knocked him off his feet, stumbling back a ways before planting and drawing his other longsword.

Two can play at this game.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded forward, thinking to take the unsuspecting Draugr King's head with a slice but instead felt Olaf pivot and catch him with his shield, the force of the whirlwind sprint causing him to get shoved up and over Olaf, flipping end over end in the air, even as he felt like someone had hit him in the stomach with a stone hammer.

He clattered against the stone side of the room with a loud THUD and flailed around, not sure which way was up or down as he wheezed for breath and his vision blurred.

He wasn't sure how long it took him to get righted and his weapons at the ready again. It felt like a long time but was probably not more than five or ten seconds. Still, in a fight, that was a long time, and when he got himself together, wondering why Olaf hadn't finished him off, he looked up on the platform to see Svaknir's apparition had appeared again, trading blows with Olaf along with Lydia, who'd finished the others and come charging to Arn's defense.

Time to end this.

Getting a running start, Arn charged up the steps and thundered into Olaf's blindspot shield first, shoving him off the platform.

As Olaf regained his feet down below, he looked up and Arn saw him prepare to shout again, but Arn was ready.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force nailed Olaf squarely and plastered him against the floor, sending his sword and crown flying.

Before Olaf could right himself this time, Arn was already leaping down, crashing on top of Olaf's torso and stabbing his silver longsword through the stunned Draugr's head, its blue eyes fizzling out as its body went limp.

As Arn moved back around and met Lydia halfway down, they both turned and noted the blue apparition of Svaknir bowing formally to them.

"Thank you, the tyranny of King Olaf has been ended" it spoke somberly before fading into nothingness.

"Are we done now?" Lydia asked, a little annoyed, as they sheathed their weapons and moved themselves this way and that as they felt and looked for any injuries.

"How is this man a Draugr? He was High King" murmured Arn as he eyed the Olaf draugr's remains.

"Who knows...just another angry undead as far as I'm concerned" Lydia replied, eyeing Olaf as well.
"Too bad. I would've liked to learn what he knew of Dragons and the Thu’um since apparently he was well acquainted with both" Arn stated a little sorrowfully before rising and spotting the word wall in the back.
Chapter Summary

Arn finishes up his obligations for the Bards, but Erikur isn't willing to concede defeat without a parting shot. Arn makes plans with Rikke to protect Elisif.

Arn and Lydia tiredly trudged out of Dead Man's Respite into the darkness of the early evening with an armful of armors and weapons each.

As they approached the horses, Jordis gleefully appeared.

"Look what I found! Aren't they soooo cute!" she squealed, running up to them with some little blobs cradled in her arms.

"What?" both Arn and Lydia murmured, not very interested at first, beginning to load up the newly acquired loot into their packs and not able to see what she was talking about in the darkness.

"These kittens! They were crying and all alone in a little cleft in the rocks up there" Jordis nodded, cuddling the little fur balls closer in the darkness.

"Wait--" Arn hissed, dropping what he was carrying to eye one of the kittens carefully before spinning Jordis around and pushing her back towards the hillside "Where did you get them?! Was there anything dead nearby?!" Arn urged.

"N-no....they were all by themselves" Jordis muttered confusedly.

"Arn?" Lydia called, unsure what was going on but recognizing the urgency in Arn's tone.

"We have to put them back now!" hissed Arn.

"But they were--"

"Now!" replied Arn more urgently, swiveling his head as he urged Jordis on.

"B-but why--" Jordis tried to stutter out.

As if in answer, the loud scream of a sabrecat echoed through the glade and Arn immediately made Jordis put the sabrecat kittens down and tried to push her back toward the horses.

He only briefly registered the padding of large feet through the leaves as he pulled his sword and readied his shield just in time as the large, angry mother Sabrecat pounced on him from his left, sending both him and the Sabrecat rolling and flailing down the lower part of the hillside.

The Sabrecat's large teeth scratched nastily against the side of his helmet and shoulder plate as they rolled to a stop, his shield and the cat's lack of leverage preventing it from biting with any more force.

Continuing rolling, even after reaching the bottom, Arn got free enough to roll into a crouch as the shadow of the sabrecat righted itself and was on him in a flash.

It wasn't the largest he'd seen or heard of, but still large enough to keep him from handling it like he
would've liked to.

Leaping on him, it tried to latch on again, but Arn ducked under his shield and pivoted, dumping the beast off to one side before stabbing down and through its chest.

It screamed an agonizing cry and flailed more violently, managing to wrench Arn’s sword free of his hand before getting to its feet and swiping a clawed paw at Arn's now unguarded side.

The claws didn't make it through the thick plating, but the blunt force of the impact felt like a mace blow, making Arn grunt in pain and involuntarily pull back before bashing the advancing Sabrecat repeatedly with his shield as it tried to repeatedly claw its way through the steel barrier.

Arn had to continue backing up as the cat's assault grew more desperate. Arn's sword strike having been a death blow, he knew the cat's time grew short as it bled out and internally.

Just as he was beginning to wonder how long the cat could last and how he might get his other sword drawn without compromising his defenses, two arrows zipped into the cat in succession, one in the head, the other in the chest cavity near where Arn's sword was embedded, causing it to slump down finally.

Looking up, he could see the outline of Lydia with her bow about thirty feet away as he gasped in pain and exertion.

Making sure the Sabrecat was dead and retrieving their weapons, they returned to the horses and a very upset Jordis.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know. They were all alone. So I thought--" Jordis stuttered emotionally.

It was too dark for Arn to see details, but from her tone, he figured she was either crying or close to it.

"Enough, let it be a lesson. You should never take any wild animals into your care unless you're SURE they are completely on their own, and even then, sometimes you shouldn’t" Arn grimaced, downing a healing potion discreetly, not wanting either of the women to notice or worry any more about it.

After a few minutes of awkward silence between them as they loaded the new things into the packs, Arn couldn't help but hear the cries of the sabre kittens from where he'd made Jordis put them down.

Arn sighed and held his head in his hands for a moment before turning to regard his two housecarls, who in the darkness he found looking at him expectantly.

"Fine, go get them" he muttered as they both moved over to retrieve the crying kittens, who stopped as soon as they were retrieved.

There were two of them and they didn't look much different from regular kittens, except for the short tail, slightly larger body, and if you were very observant, you could tell the slightly longer head shape that would become more pronounced with age.

They decided to set up camp inside the first room in Dead Man's Respite.

Once everything was in place, Arn marveled at how quickly both Lydia and Jordis were taking to the kittens, both sitting and playing with them by the fire as they gnawed on little bits of their rations.

"What have I done?" Arn teased tiredly, gritting down the pain in his side as he took a seat and
observed.

"They're so cute"

"Just look at them" came the replies.

"They won't stay that way" cautioned Arn to no effect.

"They need names" uttered Jordis excitedly "I think this one should be named Cinnamon because of her fur color"

"Cinnamon?" scoffed Arn "That's not a very--" he abruptly paused when both women glared disapproval at him "Fine, Cinnamon it is, then. Lydia, what about that one?"

"I don't know. I was thinking maybe something in the Dragon tongue would be appropriate for her."

"They're both female?" Arn queried, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Yes" both women answered happily.

"Wow, I really am outnumbered now" Arn mused sarcastically.

"I was thinking something strong...but, I don't know, pretty" Lydia pondered out loud.

"Pretty? Don't think the Dragons have a word for that, or at least not one that I've encountered. Everything I've seen is very...elemental or forceful, NOT cutesy" Arn replied, amused.

"Then I think we'll call her Kyna, after Kynareth then" Lydia replied with finality.

"Good enough" murmured Arn as they all got set for the night.

The next day found them trotting along back to Solitude a lot more merrily as the women both chattered happily together about the new sabre kittens tucked sleeping in their napsacks while Arn lead the way in mostly silence, eyeing the terrain as he was wont to do when travelling.

As they neared a large bend in the road before joining the main route back to Solitude, Arn caught sight of something amongst the trees that got his attention.

"Off the road now!" he hissed at Jordis and Lydia, who both recognized the gravity of his tone and grew silent as they turned their horses and followed him left into the woods, coming to a stop as he dismounted and gazed around cautiously.

"What is it?" Lydia whispered as both she and Jordis dismounted as well.

"Stay here. I need to check something" Arn whispered before sneaking forward and around through the woods.

As quietly as he could, Arn crept through the woods around and toward the outline he'd spotted between some trees from horseback.

Making a long half circle, Arn made sure no one waited in ambush before curling back around and walking out to the sad scene he'd spotted from afar.

A naked young woman was tied spread-eagle between two small trees.

As Arn got closer, he could see her head was cocked back and to one side unnaturally. Her neck had been broken.
Still, he checked for a heartbeat as he stared in disgust at the state she was in and grew colder with rage as he tilted her head forward and recognized through the swollen face and cuts, the familiar features of Nasriel, the maid who'd vanished.

She'd been beaten and raped, dried blood ran down from between her legs and a sinister message written in blood on her small flat stomach obviously meant for Arn himself:

*this isn't over*

Arn clenched his fists in rage. Erikur.......he would pay for this.

Arn thought back to his night with Elisif, wanting him to celebrate life, get away from the killing, but here he was, only a day removed and all the ugliness seemed to come roaring back as he looked at the broken body of the poor girl.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Arn bellowed with frustrated rage as he whipped his sword free and cut the girl's body down.

Moments later, he heard Lydia and Jordis running through the woods to him.

"HOLD THERE! DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!” Arn hollered at them, bringing them to a dead halt. He didn't want them to see this.

Returning to the horses, he retrieved a cloak, wrapped Nasriel's body in it and tied it on his horse as Jordis and Lydia watched quietly.

The rest of the trip back to Solitude was spent in silence, but once there, Arn stormed straight to the Blue Palace while Lydia and Jordis unpacked everything at Proudspire.

This time it was Arn that hunted down and yanked Sybille Stentor into an alcove.

"We just found the body of that maid. It'd been 'conveniently placed' just so I would find it. There was a message in blood on her saying, this isn't over” he hissed urgently at the dispassionately proud features of Stentor as she stood there with arms crossed.

"What do you expect me to do about it?” she retorted quietly.

"Can't we charge him? Open an Inquiry? Anything?” Arn hissed angrily, growing frustrated.

"Not if there are no witnesses or anyone willing to come forward. If you make the accusation, it would just be your word against his, which would accomplish nothing" Stentor mused, chin in hand.

"Damn it! Come on! There must be something!” Arn replied, whirling and beginning to pace back and forth.

"Just because we've diminished his power doesn't mean he's powerless or that he doesn't still have agents willing to do his bidding. Patience, Dragonborn. This is a game we've been playing for over a year now. You can't expect to blow into the city for a few weeks and solve everything.”

Arn sat down on a bench nearby and huffed his anger, holding his head in his hands as he tried to think of some way to do something about it.

"You should not react so violently" Stentor replied in her usual haughty tone "You are too soft here” she muttered pointing her index finger on his chest in the heart area "Your enemies will find out and use it against you.”
"Well thanks for that encouragement" Arn sneered as he rose to depart.

"Anytime" came the fanged grin.

Still frustrated, Arn retreated to a different alcove and sank onto the bench there.

He continued there, lost in thought, until he was abruptly jarred to stand up when he looked up to see Erikur leaning against a pillar next to him, grinning knowingly.

"You...." Arn sneered.

"Good morning, Dragonborn. I trust your trip for the Bards was successful."

"You know full well it was!"

"I'm sure I don't. This is the first time I've seen you since Court two days ago" Erikur chuckled.

"Stop playing rutting games! I got your 'message'!" sneered Arn, angrily balling his fists.

"Your fatigue must be affecting your mind, because I surely never dispatched any couriers directed to you" replied Erikur smugly.

Arn gritted his teeth, feeling indignantly indebted to do something, but lacking the means to do so. Just as he was wondering what the ramifications might be if he pummeled the smaller man, Elisif appeared just past Erikur and fixed Arn with an inquisitive look of concern.

"One day, you won't be able to hide your deeds behind others anymore, and on that day, I'll be waiting" Arn hissed with as much venom as he could put behind it.

"Is that a threat?" snarled Erikur.

"Not if nothing is out line now, is it?" Arn abruptly changed tones as Elisif glided around and behind Arn, gently tapping his arm.

Seeing Elisif, Erikur turned and made his way towards the dining hall where Court had apparently taken a break for lunch.

"Arn, what happened?" Elisif asked quietly as Arn watched Erikur go.

"Not here" Arn muttered.

Once they'd retired to Elisif's personal quarters, Arn sank into a chair and related the details of his trip, minus the sabre cats.

"That's awful" Elisif stated sadly as Arn finished up with details on Nasriel.

She sat at her study desk, legs crossed and hands pursed, deep in thought. She was wearing blue again. This time an ornate blue frock with crisscrossing white and blue weaves over the bust and midsection and white frills on the sleeves and hem.

"Sybille said there was nothing to be done" Arn said sadly after they both sat silent for a moment.

"I'm afraid she's right, for the moment. But we're still watching him and working on other ways we can potentially undermine him. You've given us a safer position to work from and more resources to work with" Elisif responded sweetly, trying to comfort him.
"I have to leave soon, probably as soon as everything is set at Proudspire." Arn continued somberly, not looking at her. "I can't put off the Greybeard's quest any longer and it seems like I have more and more questions all the time about...this." Arn stated, motioning to himself as he finished.

"I figured as much." Elisif replied sadly.

"I'm leaving Jordis here, both as protection and as my eyes and ears. I will tell her the situation and instruct her in how to behave. She may be young and not very wise in the ways of the world, but her heart's in the right place. As she gets older, she'll learn, if she has the right teachers." Arn stated, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

At length, he looked over once Elisif didn't say anything and saw she'd turned away slightly, looking sadly off at nothingness it seemed.

"You will also be able to rely on Legate Rikke when she is stationed here" even as Elisif looked over quizzically at him and opened her mouth to object, Arn raised his hand to stay her before he continued "I know Tullius brushed you off before, but Rikke will listen. I knew her in the Great War. Trust me."

Elisif seemed about to say something, but instead grew quiet again, twirling the toe of one of her dainty slippers in an invisible pattern as she looked at the floor.

"I wish there was something more I could do." Arn finished sadly, surprised at Elisif's chuckle in reply.

"What?"

"Arn, you've done more to shape the future of this city in three weeks than anyone has done in the last decade."

"Still doesn't seem like enough when you find a girl's broken body left on display." Arn replied sadly.

"Leave Erikur to me." Elisif replied sternly before rising and gliding over to a large window, looking out thoughtfully. "He'll find out eventually not all women can be used and discarded like so much waste."

Arn simply grunted and continued with his hand in his chin thoughtfully.

"There is something I would ask of you though," Elisif stated with formality as she glided over to a dresser and opened a wooden box and withdrew a gilded ram's horn.

"By now, you know all you have to do is ask." Arn answered somberly, for some reason feeling that he should be standing as she glided over to him.

"This...is different." Elisif replied, fixing him sternly with those blue eyes again as Arn rose and held his hands out obediently, sensing she wanted to place the horn in his hands.

"This...was...my husband Torygg's war horn. He was High King and died in battle. I don't know what you believe about Talos, but I wanted to ensure prayers and an offering are made on Torygg's behalf at the shrine of Talos rumored to be just outside of Whiterun." Elisif stated cautiously, looking into his eyes searchingly.

"Shouldn't be a problem if I can find it." Arn answered, tucking the horn away carefully.

"Please, Arn, what I'm asking of you is illegal by current law. The Thalmor have active agents and..."
small groups roaming Skyrim, looking for places such as these to entrap and imprison any who dare venture there" Elisif replied cautiously, touching his forearm with concern.

"Come now, Elisif" Arn chided, giving her a reassuring smirk "After an undead Queen, Vampires, and Dragons, do you really think those pointy eared sots are going to scare me off?"

"I just...well...thank you. It means a lot to me" Elisif smiled warmly at him before abruptly gulping down her cheery demeanor and gliding back away from Arn and clearing her throat, as if trying to bury any intimacy that might have been threatening to emerge in the conversation.

They both stayed like that silently for a moment, Elisif looking sadly out the window and Arn seating himself again while pondering Elisif, before she resumed.

"I'm instructing the maids to send the purple dress with Lydia. She was rather upset and didn't want anything to do with it, but I think she deserves a chance to make better memories in it. Can you make sure she doesn't send it back again?"

"Yes, Thank you. That's very kind."

"Will she be alright?"

"What do you mean?" Arn puzzled, suddenly worried there was something going on with Lydia he wasn't aware of.

"We conversed quite a bit while you were gone with the caravans, but since the incident with the bard, she's been very quiet and withdrawn" Elisif ventured.

"I gather it was her first serious relationship and I had cautioned her against it, not to mention the way it ended" Arn replied, pondering over her behavior since then.

"That was very sweet...what you did for her."

"It was the least I could do" Arn muttered uncomfortably.

"Not many men would take the hit to their own reputations to save that of those in their charge"

"I wasn't aware my reputation had taken any hits" smirked Arn, wondering if the bards were planning some sort of nasty song to sing about him after he left.

"I mean the bandits..Gray Mountain Cave. The bard wasn't exaggerating, was he?"

Immediately, Arn looked up at her in surprise, wondering how she knew and how he should respond.

"It's okay....the secret is safe with me and I don't think anyone else in the Court caught on. If any rumors start again, I can quash them" Elisif replied, smiling at him reassuringly as he must have looked very confused.

"Truthfully, I think the whole mess with the bard might have been avoided if she hadn't been angry with me, which she still seems to be for some reason" Arn grimaced.

"Arn, you have two women housecarls now. They may be warriors, and they may be fierce, but they're still women. You have to remember to give them time to be who they are" Elisif smiled.

"Why don't they just tell me?" groaned Arn.
"Oh, I'm sure they have...maybe not verbally, but I'm sure the signs are there" responded Elisif as if it were obvious.

"Sometimes I find it easier deciphering the Dragon tongue than trying to read their moods" Arn huffed as he threw his hands helplessly in the air.

"Oh pshh, it's not that difficult. Besides, you're already learning" giggled Elisif.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because they both seem quite happy with you"

"I don't know..." muttered Arn.

"Nonsense...there are certain things all women like no matter what they say. Take care of them and they'll be happy" Elisif smiled, moving to Arn and gently tugging him to his feet with her dainty hands.

"Oh? and what are these mythical things that make all women happy?!" teased Arn in mock disbelief.

Elisif giggled again but fixed him with a stern, motherly look before continuing.

"They like to be recognized. They like to look beautiful, and they like to have others figure out what they want without them having to say so."

"Ach...you ask the impossible!" groaned Arn teasingly as they walked arm in arm towards the door.

"Just think of it like watching an opposing swordsman for the tell in his lunge" Elisif smirked "You're good at that. Aren't you?"

"So...what is it that you want?" asked Arn, looking down at her in all seriousness.

Elisif's smile faded but she tried to keep it up.

"Now, now...it's ch- cheating if I h-have to tell" she stuttered, suddenly a look of pain in those beautiful blue eyes Arn wanted more than anything to take away.

Arn stared down at her for a moment, soft Nordic beauty framed by the locks of her blondish hair in the sunlight, pink lips slightly quivering as she looked deeply at him with those blue eyes.

"I think I can figure this one out..." he whispered as he leaned down closer and closer until their lips met, first softly then harder as he picked her up by her small waist off her feet in a passionate embrace, her generous but soft breasts pushing against the steel of his breastplate, her soft arms around his neck, the scent of roses intoxicating as they continued kissing.

Arn wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, but it wasn't long enough for either of their likings, breaking for air with a gasp as he gently set her back down as she gasped for air and tried in vain to keep a lone tear from coming down her cheek.

As he moved to caress it away, though, she gently pushed his hand away and stepped back.

"Please, Arn, you know we can't do this" she mumbled, lips still quivering.

Arn looked down at the floor sadly. He knew she was right. He knew he should go, but he just didn't want to. For the first time in a long time he was thinking about what he wanted and not simply what
had to be done.

"Please...just...go, before I come up with any more reasons to keep you here" Elisif gulped down her rising emotions and turned away.

Sadly, he turned to leave, but stopped at the door and looked back at Elisif standing by the window.

"I wish.....that your path be made clear soon and that someday, gods willing, it will bring you back here" Elisif whispered breathily before turning away.

Arn nodded and bowed formally before turning and stepping out.

As he closed the door and tried to regain his composure, he could hear a muffled sob from Elisif through the door.

Steeling his resolve, Arn marched out of the Blue Palace, channeling his frustration and sadness into the tasks he knew he had to get done before leaving.

An hour later, he arrived in the Castle Dour courtyard with Jordis, Lydia, and the body of Nasriel in tow.

The sudden appearance of the Dragonborn put some of the men on edge, while others tried to chum up to him with offers of a drink, while still others tried to desperately get the attention of the beautiful housecarls by ramping up their sparring or shooting.

Arn wasn't interested in any of this and simply barked at one of the Legionnaires standing guard by the barracks door.

"I need to speak with Legate Rikke, privately!" Arn ordered.

"She's too busy to see anyone right now" came the rehearsed answer.

"Tell her it's the Dragonborn, and that it's about her offer. She'll want to know" Arn replied confidently.

Once they had moved to a small adjacent courtyard, it only took a few minutes before Rikke emerged with her normal aggressive stride as she walked to Arn and stopped with her arms crossed.

"This had better be good" she huffed, eyeing him critically.

Without replying, Arn kneeled down and flipped open the cloak that concealed Nasriel's body and gestured to it.

Having lived through the Great War and countless smaller engagements and campaigns, Rikke was no stranger to such sights. There was no gasping in horror or tears unlike Lydia and Jordis who both gasped involuntarily at the sight.

She knelt down and gave the body a once over visually before eyeing the hands and feet.

"Where'd you find her?" she asked.

"At the fork in the main road southwest seven miles of here" Arn replied "She was tied up between two trees."

"Bits of wood on her feet, probably from a cellar" Rikke mused, continuing to eye the body "She from around here?"
"Yes and no" Arn replied, eliciting a glare of annoyance from Rikke as she stood and turned her attention from the body back to Arn.

"Come on, out with it. What's this about?"

In as concise a manner as possible, Arn related the power struggle between Erikur and Jarl Elisif, finishing by pointing to the message written in blood on the body.

At the conclusion, Rikke was quiet, hand drumming her armored greaves thoughtfully as she knelt and regarded the corpse again.

"So...why come to me now with this?" She asked after a few moments of silence.

"Because I have to leave and will be unable to directly help with anything here" Arn replied, carefully weighing his next words.

"I will talk with Elisif. Things like this should never happen on the Legion's watch" replied Rikke, angrily eyeing the body.

"While I appreciate it, that's not why I asked you here" replied Arn, drawing a perplexed look from Rikke.

"You said I don't give a damn about my people. Well, I'd like to prove you wrong. This quest from the Greybeards takes me elsewhere, but I am leaving my housecarl Jordis here as protection for the Jarl and the people. She will also be my eyes and ears, communicating anything that happens to me and relaying my wishes" stated Arn as Jordis gasped in dismay and hung her head in disappointment.

"But--" Rikke began

"Eh--I'm not finished!" interrupted Arn "Lydia, Jordis, please go back to Proudspire and prepare two mounts for our departure. I'll meet you back there"

They both silently nodded and left with their mounts, Jordis obviously trying very hard not to cry or be upset.

Once they were gone, Arn pulled a large sack of septims from his pack and deposited it on the ground next to Rikke.

"What's that for?"

"For Jordis...I want you to train her. She's nicknamed the Swordmaiden but it was something she coined to keep men she was afraid of in line."

"She's got a good foundation, but still a long way to go before she's where she needs to be. I want you to make her into another Swordbreaker" Arn stated, crossing his arms with one hand on his chin, thoughtfully.

"But....I have duties to the Legion that may take me away..." replied Rikke, looking incredulously at the large bag of money.

"I know. Just do what you can for her and by extension, the Jarl, when you are here. That way, even with you or I gone, there will always be someone here that can protect the Jarl" stated Arn with finality as he regarded Rikke.

"I guess...so. I'm not unhappy with the arrangement. I'm just a bit surprised by all this" Rikke
responded, eyeing Arn curiously.

"While you're at it, teach the girl a few things about the world. Her father sheltered her a lot and there's plenty of things she doesn't understand" Arn stated as he wrapped Nasriel's body back up and slung it back on his horse.

"Is there anything off limits?" Rikke asked with a wry grin.

"No men for her yet. She's too young and naive right now and I don't want her getting hurt"

"Eww-you sound like an overbearing father if ever I heard one" Rikke scoffed.

"If you'd witnessed what I had these last few weeks, even you would agree with me" Arn retorted, fixing the last of the fastenings on the saddle "Oh and absolutely NO stories about ME!" he fixed her with a stern stare as he turned to depart with the horse in tow.

"Well, I might be able to agree to the no man policy for the moment, but the no stories part, I can't promise you anything there" she grinned wryly as Arn glared at her and rolled his eyes as he departed.

After arranging with the priest of Arkay to take Nasriel's body, Arn returned to Proudspire Manor to find Lydia mounted with the packed horses, ready to go, while Jordis sat dejectedly just inside the front door caressing the little sleeping Cinnamon carefully.

Once Arn entered, she rose carefully and bowed her head slightly, looking at the floor in shame.

"I am sorry, my Thane. I will try to be better so that next time you're--" she sorrowfully stated before Arn interrupted her.

"Enough of that. Look at me" He interrupted, reaching out, cupping her chin, and gently bringing her gaze up to look at him.

"I'm not leaving you here because you're a failure at anything. I'm leaving you here because I need someone here."

Moving to the living room area, Arn spent the good part of two hours reciting and instructing Jordis with everything from the situation with Erikur to tending the growing sabre kittens to how she should conduct herself as housecarl in his absence to her apprenticeship under Rikke.

As Arn turned to depart, he was suddenly ambushed with hug by Jordis, who still had Cinnamon sleeping in one arm and now was pushed into the crook of Arn's neck as Jordis thanked him profusely before withdrawing the furry bundle and smiling at him as he nodded at her and departed.

Mounting their horses and departing, Arn couldn't help but feel a weight of sadness as he looked back through Solitude at the Blue Palace, envisioning the beautiful form of Elisif standing at her window, as they trotted their way through the foothills outside the city.

Arn had a bad feeling. All this talk of fate, visions, and destinies. Before, Arn had always been able to make decisions in his life based on his own will and abilities.

Now, everything around him was beginning to feel like a tapestry woven about him without his permission. He was simply moved from one thing or place to the next, not knowing if he would be brought back or allowed to come back.

Contemplating this angrily, Arn resolved to himself that he would return to Solitude someday and
that he would make sure nothing happened to Elisif.

"What's the matter?" Lydia interrupted his thoughts as they sat around the campfire that night.

"What do you mean?" Arn tried to avoid the question.

"You've had a scowl on your face for most of the day, even now as you've been staring into the campfire for the last half hour" remarked Lydia, bringing her knees up and hugging them as she peered across at him.

Arn regarded her for a moment, realizing he hadn't paid much attention to her since they'd left Solitude.

There was an energy to her demeanor that had been lacking the previous days, and the twinkle in her eye along with the wry smile on her lips made him contemplate how happy she must be to be gone from a place that left her with painful memories.

Arn caught himself taking in the curves of her figure in just her leathers, her voluptuous form reminding him again just how beautiful she was and how much he had been able to avoid thinking or regarding her in such fashion while they had been there.

Of course, it also made him think of Elisif, wet and naked, clasping him tightly, moaning and crying for more as he plunged desperately in and out of her hot, moist womanhood.

Clasping his head in his hands angrily, he pushed the thoughts out of his mind and simply turned away from Lydia, not answering.

He heard some motion behind him as he angrily looked out across the moonlit, wooded rolling hills and tried to think about what he had to do.

"Come on now, don't be a grouch" Lydia teased him, nudging him in the rib cage with the leather toe of her boot, prompting a sudden hiss of pain from him as it was the same side he'd repeatedly injured in the previous several days' ventures.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, nudging him harder as if to make sure he truly was in pain "You're injured! You didn't say anything!" she chided before she was on him, trying to get his armor off and slapping his hands away when he tried to push her away half-heartedly.

In only a matter of minutes, Arn found himself down to just his leather breeches and tucked in a bedroll as he wheezed in pain while Lydia gently applied a potion and rolled him this way and that, puzzled there was no visible marks of an injury.

"It's a deep bruising. The potions can't reach it effectively" Arn replied almost dispassionately, not really concerned about it at all as he looked up at the stars.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Lydia asked, leaning over him and looking deeply into his eyes with her beautiful brandy eyes and cute, wrinkled frown of worry.

"The pain is too deep" Arn simply replied, looking away from her, lest his thoughts take him a direction he wasn't prepared for.

"Well, that simply won't do" Lydia replied confidently before Arn felt her warm hand caressing his rib cage, prompting him to involuntarily jerk away from her.
"What are you doing?" he retorted as she added another hand to his side and began humming.

"Making sure you get your rest so you can heal" she interrupted her humming to state.

"But--" he started to protest.

"Nuh uh, none of that now, or I'll start scolding you for hiding this from me" she sassily cut him off, adding a warm poultice to his side that felt heavenly, administered caressingly by her warm hands.

In his mind, Arn was thinking he should probably stop her, though as the moments passed, he wasn't sure why.

Between the beautiful tune she began singing quietly and her warm ministrations on his ribs, Arn was able to forget about the pains in both his side and his heart as he drifted off into a peaceful sleep.
Arn and Lydia return to tracking down the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. Finding it reveals more about the Dragon's return...

Arn crouched carefully amongst some bushes, taking careful aim with his bow at the crouched figure some thirty paces away.

Unless it was enchanted somehow, there was no way the greenish hued light armor would hold up against a well placed arrow.

For a moment, memories of being a hunted, wanted man resurfaced in his mind, wondering if getting on the Thalmor's wanted list was a good idea, but he pushed them out.

Not if they never knew what hit them.

Relaxing his breath, he released the arrow and heard the satisfying clack and thud as it pierced the light armor and keeled the Thalmor agent over in place.

He only had to wait a few minutes before he spotted the other two sneaking up the path, predictably investigating the noise.

He waited for them to turn parallel to him before he unleashed arrows in quick succession, downing both of them, but the second one still gasped and flailed on the ground.

Cautiously surveying the surroundings again before he emerged, Arn marched forward to loom over the bewildered Thalmor who had managed to apply a healing potion before Arn stepped on and pinned the Thalmor's left arm away from his body, bringing the tip of the crackling ebony longsword to his neck.

"Anymore of you sots around? My blade thirsts!" sneered Arn as the Thalmor angrily stared up at him.

"Barbarians....the lot of you!" the Thalmor wheezed before Arn had had enough and stabbed down through the fool's face, ending the tirade Arn knew was coming.

Making his way down the path and around to the shrine of Talos, he knelt reverently and withdrew Torygg's war horn.

Placing it carefully at the feet of the statue of Talos, Arn whispered a prayer for the deceased King's soul and rose slowly afterward, eyeing the statue as he pondered, but a slight scuff of noise behind him made him whirl and drop into a crouch with bow drawn and arrow nocked as Lydia kicked the ground in frustration some thirty paces away.

"Arrgh! Damnit! I almost got you!" She bemoaned "You have to admit I got closer this time without you realizing it" she asserted with a smirk as she sauntered up to him.

"I told you this was a personal errand. You were supposed to stay in Whiterun" Arn replied a little
sourly, unsure how upset he should be with her.

"You don't have to be ashamed of worshiping Talos" she replied cheerily, kneeling and making a sign of acknowledgement at the foot of the Shrine.

"I don't worship Talos" Arn replied flatly, drawing raised eyebrows from Lydia.

"Then why--"

"An errand for someone else" Arn replied as he turned and began walking back up the path to the overlook.

"So you don't think Talos is a divine or..." Lydia trailed off not daring to finish the question as she followed behind him.

"In these four months since we've been together, have you seen me pray to anyone, wear anyone's signets or amulets, pay homage at anyone's temple?" Arn replied a bit more angrily than he meant to.

"Well, no..."

"If you'd seen what happened during the Great War, people of every race and tongue praying to their gods, and telling everyone else that they were...better or more powerful than the others and were going to do this thing or that thing!......"

"In the end, none of it mattered" Arn muttered angrily as he reached the Thalmor corpses and nudged one over with his foot, looking at the shocked look on the angular face.

"Thalmor..." Lydia whispered as she saw the corpses.

"Yes, I figured they'd have someone watching the shrine. The ones below would confront anyone who showed up and if they put up any sort of fight, this sot here was up top to support them....so predictable" Arn sighed in contempt as he knelt down to search the bodies.

"So....you don't believe in any of the Divines or Daedra?" Lydia asked both cautiously and incredulously, surprisingly disinterested in the Thalmor.

"I didn't say I didn't believe they exist. I just don't think any of them much care about us lowly mortals."

"But--they interact with us" Lydia tried to reason.

"Who? The Divines? When was the last time anyone interacted with Kynareth....Akatosh....Stendarr....Julianos? And no, despite what people brag about in taverns, Dibella doesn't show up anytime a couple ruts themselves senseless" Arn scoffed.

"But you've interacted with a Daedra"

"Two of them, actually.......though, I wouldn't term them gods or even benevolent, really....more like a strange distant relative. You have to be associated with them but you don't really know who they are or what they will do on a given occasion."

"Wait, I was with you at Meridia's temple last week. So I remember that, but who and when was the other one?" she asked, surprised.

"Sheogorath...in the Pelagius wing of the Blue Palace in Solitude"
"INSIDE the Blue Palace?!
" Lydia asked, stunned.

"Look, it's a long story. I'll tell you when we're on the road sometime. Right now, we need to get everything off these corpses and get rid of the bodies" Arn replied, glancing around.

A day later, they were on the road again, finally bound toward Riverwood after a delay of nearly two weeks setting out from Solitude.

The horses made the trip go by faster, but Arn still felt conflicted.

Detouring to deal with Meridia's temple had been somewhat necessary, not to mention getting the finest looking longsword Arn had ever seen out of it, as he looked down at the reddish white glowing crest just above the handle of Dawnbreaker.

Getting forcibly bedridden by Lydia for a week hadn't been part of the plan. He had underestimated her resolve to make sure he got healed when they got back to Whiterun and after the first night's rest, found himself without any armor or clothes besides his smallpants, forcing him to remain in Breezehome until she deemed him 'ready' again.

He'd never found out where she'd hidden his things but he was almost positive Ysolda in the marketplace had something to do with it.

He had to admit it wasn't too terrible to rest for a week while Lydia doted on him like an invalid. The biggest problem was having her in just her leathers that close to him that often. He would frequently have to turn away from her or huddle himself so that she wouldn't notice his loins responding as she tended him.

Hard to believe he was that affected by her still after everything with Elisif in Solitude.

On a positive note, Lydia seemed to have left behind her animosity towards him. No more moody looks or snide remarks like the sort he'd gotten in Solitude.

As they approached Riverwood now, Lydia piped up for the first time since he'd finished the story about the Pelagius wing and Sheogorath.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" she wondered cautiously.

"I guess so" Arn replied, keeping his eyes on the surrounding area.

"You said back at the Shrine of Talos you didn't believe the Divines cared or interacted with us. Are you still sure about that after becoming the Dragonborn?" she eyed him worriedly.

Arn wanted to just dismiss her concerns like earlier. It was far easier to just deny it and move on, but there had been a nagging in his mind since Helgen.

Between Idgrod's prophecies, the Dragons, and his own sudden abilities as Dragonborn, Arn was no longer sure of a lot of the things he'd known before and felt there was far more that he wasn't aware of.

It was a similar feeling to when he'd found out his father had been killed in a Thalmor raid, except this was gradual instead of sudden.

It wasn't supposed to happen. It didn't make much sense, and it totally destroyed whatever plans he had made or expected in life up to that point.
"I used to be very sure....now Dragons roam the land and I've discovered a strange power in my veins. So...No....I guess I'm not sure anymore" Arn replied thoughtfully, though it came out more sadly than he intended.

He was surprised by the firm touch of her hand on his gauntlet as she looked at him with concern.

She opened her mouth to say something, but instead closed it and simply patted his forearm before withdrawing her hand, trying to give him a reassuring smile as they trotted into Riverwood's outskirts.

Arn was happy to let the matter drop.

Making their way to the Inn, Arn was greeted by some of the same sights from last time as he entered, immediately drawing Delphine's attention as they moved across the room.

Attired in the same bland peasant frock he'd seen her in before, she bee lined to them and looked as if she was going to say something until she noticed Lydia, both women eyeing each other before Arn spoke up.

"We'd like to rent the attic room" muttered Arn sourly, remembering the note.

"We don't have an attic room here, but you can have the last one on the right there" she responded curtly, pointing as she continued eyeing Lydia critically.

Not wishing to be caught up in anything else that would slow them up, Arn pushed by and Lydia followed suit as they made themselves comfortable in the aforementioned room.

Arn wasn't terribly surprised when only a few minutes later Delphine slipped in the door and made a silencing motion to them before moving to the closet on the side and activating a hidden lever which opened the back into a dark passage down into a hidden basement.

"Why am I not surprised..." muttered Arn as they silently followed Delphine down the steps into a well lit area stocked with weapons, rations, armors, and a surprisingly detailed map on a large table with books piled here and there.

"So....you're the Dragonborn..." murmured Delphine, eyeing him cautiously, with an arm across her chest while resting her chin in her other hand.

"If you'd stayed around Dragonsreach a little longer that night, you would've found out" retorted Arn.

"Is she your woman or a hired blade?" Delphine nodded at Lydia, who blushed brightly at the former insinuation.

"Housecarl" snapped Lydia.

"Where are you--" Delphine had begun to ask.

"Enough with the questions!" Arn cut her off "What's with all the codes and secrecy?! What's the point of making me travel halfway across Skyrim and back? Not finding the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller made me very....displeased" Arn hissed, toning his voice down as Delphine made a shushing motion and nodded upward toward the Inn.

"I had to make sure you weren't a...plant, decoy, or fraud" Delphine retorted.
"You honestly think someone could've done the things I've done and NOT be real?" Arn scoffed, folding his gauntleted forearms angrily.

"Sure, if you had help" Delphine didn't budge.

Arn huffed in obvious displeasure.

"So you've taken the Horn, kept me from getting it to the Greybeards, and made me chase across half the land to find you, and now, you still aren't telling me what this is all about!" Arn hissed angrily.

"Before I explain anything else or give you the Horn, there's something I need you to do" Delphine stated almost formally, ignoring Arn's rant.

"And before I do anything for you, I need you to give me the Horn and start explaining" retorted Arn.

" I have to be sure of--"

"The HORN...NOW!" growled Arn, refusing to be denied after coming all this way.

For a moment, there was a palpable tension as each eyed the other.

"I respect the journey I've put you through, but you must understand I have an obligation to others in this matter. You can do and think what you like, but I owe it to them to take care of matters you aren't even aware of yet!" Delphine replied with a fiery conviction in her demeanor.

Remembering what he knew about her and seeing the truth in her eyes as she spoke, Arn finally relented after a few powerful moments of silence.

"Fine, ONE errand and then I will demand answers" Arn stated, backing up and leaning against the map table with crossed arms.

"Very well, then....You've seen that Dragons have appeared. No one seems to know why, but I have a theory. I need you to help me prove it" Delphine replied.

"And?"

"I'm trying to find out how the Dragons are coming back, and I think the next one will appear just east of Kynesgrove. I'd like you to go with me there and investigate" Delphine looked hopefully at Arn, who simply nodded "Good, I'll get changed, make the arrangements and we'll get going."

The next morning, all three departed early, but the journey was passed mostly in silence, Arn still frustrated with a lack of answers and both the women taking an instant dislike to each other for some reason.

When they were almost to Kynesgrove, a large contingent of soldiers appeared on the bluffs on either side of the road as half a dozen more stepped out into the road to confront them.

Arn had to admit they had done a good job of concealing themselves and silently began taking stock of their numbers and positions even as Delphine began arguing with one of them about being stopped.

"What business brings you into Stormcloak territory?" one of them demanded at Arn.

"Heard there was a dragon to be slain" Arn replied in a nonchalant fashion, trying to gauge the threat these soldiers posed.
"And you think you're some sort of professional dragon slayer?" came the mocking response to snickers and laughter from some of the others "Just who do you think you are?" scoffed the Stormcloak with his hands on his hips, still chuckling at the previous response.

Just as Arn was about to enlighten the fool to whom he was addressing, he caught a look of warning from Delphine, who'd apparently gotten nowhere with the soldier she was arguing with.

"Just...an adventurer" replied Arn, swallowing his pride for the moment, growing suddenly concerned as he noted two soldiers coming up behind Lydia's horse, eyeing her and her pack suspiciously.

"You're awfully well off for JUST an adventurer" replied the Stormcloak, nodding at Arn's armor, weapons, and pack.

"Some adventurers kill some overgrown spiders and brag about it while spending their few coins in taverns. Others kill dragons, clear ruins, and wipe out bandits. You judge which is more profitable" Arn tried to assert as he kept eyeing them.

"HEY! Back off!" Arn bellowed angrily as several of them had tried to grab the reins on Delphine and Lydia's horses, prompting several to draw weapons and Arn found himself targeted by half a dozen archers before calm settled again.

"We haven't heard of any big name adventurer in these parts for a long time. Anyone around here with half a fighting sense has joined the war, as any true Nord should" scoffed the Stormcloak.

"Don't start on the speeches. I already had enough trouble from the Imperials. I HAD thought Stormcloak territory would be more hospitable" Arn retorted, trying a different tactic.

"Just what sort of trouble?" asked another.

"The damn fools tried to kill me at Helgen" Arn huffed.

"Helgen's a ruin. You'll have to think up something better" they chuckled.

"And do you know how it became a ruin? A dragon. Laugh if you want now, but ask your Jarl Ulfric. He was a prisoner there with me, bound and gagged for fear he would use his voice. If it wasn't for the Dragon attack, you might be leaderless right now" Arn retorted, growing impatient.

At the mention of Ulfric's name, most of them stopped laughing and the foremost of them that had done most of the talking eyed Arn cautiously, probably weighing whether the story was true.

"You could be an Imperial spy with knowledge of the incident" he mused.

"Would a spy ride around armed as I am?" Arn retorted, gesturing at his armor and making sure to turn so that the glowing crest and hilt of Dawnbreaker became visible.

"Gods! What is it?"

"Where did he get that?" came the responding murmurs.

Arn saw the leader's eyes widen in surprise at the radiating light emitting from the powerful longsword and regarded Arn with surprise.

"Very well, then" he relented, motioning the others away from Delphine and Lydia's horses "But tell me. How came you by such a blade as that?" the Stormcloak asked incredulously.
Just as Arn opened his mouth to answer, a booming roar echoed through the sky and around them in the woods, making them all look up.

Arn had only a brief moment to register the large dark shape swooping by before a massive fireball exploded off to their left, incinerating the Stormcloaks that had been there and exploding the trees into flaming shrapnel, sending fragments flying everywhere.

In only a matter of seconds the roadside stop had become a flaming inferno, filled with the cries of the dying and pieces of flaming trees flying everywhere.

Arn had instinctively huddled on his horse which startled and darted forward even as he felt small shards of wood plink off his armor.

As he got the horse back under control, he turned to see both Delphine and Lydia had followed suit and looked unscathed.

Arn looked back at the scene of burning trees, bodies, and scurrying Stormcloaks.

"Come on! We have to get to that Dragon!" urged Delphine, putting the spurs to her steed once she'd checked on Arn.

Following suit, they all rode at full gallop the remaining short distance into the small hamlet of Kynesgrove.

The Dragon had just been here too. Several houses lay in flaming ruins and a few bodies lay here and there.

Following Delphine further, they galloped out of Kynesgrove and up the large hill on the opposite side before she halted suddenly on her horse and dismounted, motioning them to cover.

Taking up position behind some large rocks, they peered through the openings cautiously at the valley below and there Arn saw it.

It was the same Dragon he'd seen in Helgen, huge and black with orange zig zagging patterns on it, far larger than even Nahlslenir had been.

It was hovering over a large mound, bellowing waves of force down into it, words echoing in the Dragon tongue, but Arn couldn't decipher them.

Then even Arn felt himself inhale sharply along with Delphine and Lydia as the mound caved in on itself and another Dragon emerged glowing with magical energy from it.

The newly formed Dragon bowed its head and growled more Dragon tongue as the two Dragons seemed to converse back and forth for a moment before the big one turned and looked straight to where Arn and the others were hiding and roared that unmistakable word Arn knew.....Dovahkin!

They knew they were there, even talking about him!

In a flash, the larger dragon turned and flew rapidly away to the west, leaving the newer dragon turning to regard them behind the rocks.

"They know we're here" stated Arn before removing his bow and nocking an arrow as he moved from cover, Lydia doing the same in the opposite direction.

The dark blue colored Dragon Arn recognized must be named Sahloknir from the conversation with
the other growled a few words at him before galloping forward out of the mound and up the rocky terrain of the valley, roaring loudly.

Immediately, both Arn and Lydia were firing arrows at Salohknir's left wing.

"Hah!" cried Delphine furiously as she charged down toward the dragon, sword and shield at the ready.

"NO! Wait!" Arn tried to caution, holding up his next shot as she ran through his line of fire.

Seeing the woman running down at him, Sahloknir slowed momentarily before belching frost breath up at her, causing her to dive behind a rock and duck behind her shield as the area became covered and coated with ice.

Then, with a roar of rage at the arrows repeatedly piercing his left wing, Sahloknir latched on to a boulder with one of his clawed forelimbs and hurled it through the air at Lydia, who only had a moment to dive away before it whooshed by where she'd been standing.

Turning on Arn, the Dragon leaped upward through the air with a few flaps of wings and was about to land right on top of Arn.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force hit Sahloknir on his descent and knocked him backwards onto his back on the downward slope, flailing to right himself as Delphine emerged and tried to get some good strikes on the vulnerable Dragon.

But Sahloknir was too fast getting on his feet and spun around quickly, lashing Delphine with a swat of his tail, sending her flying backwards with a painful THWACK against a boulder, leaving her lying helplessly moaning in and out of consciousness.

Even as this happened, Arn was leaping off a large boulder overhead, descending on the Dragon before it turned and opened its mouth to engulf him with its breath.

"WULD NA KEST!"
Exploding forward through the air, Arn connected shield first against the dragon's snout, knocking it down just enough to avoid flinging himself straight into its mouth.

Arn tried stabbing, but still in the air, he had no leverage and simply scraped off the Dragon's snout weakly just before landing shakily and stumbling back.

Barely a moment later, the Dragon's open maw was descending on Arn from overhead, intending to crush and swallow him in one snap.

Leaping to the side, he sliced across the side of the Dragon's jaws as they missed and thudded into the ground where he'd been standing with enough force to shake the ground.

But Arn couldn't avoid the blunt force of the Dragon's head connecting with him as it swung its head sideways, knocking Arn off his feet and sending him back fifteen feet, sliding through gravel to a halt as the Dragon repositioned before turning to note the moaning form of Delphine and moved to snap her up even as arrows plinked off its head from Lydia's desperate shots.

"SAHLOKNIR!" Arn bellowed, rising to his feet, his invocation of the Dragon's name forcing it to turn and regard him just as he was about to devour Delphine.
With a mighty heave, Arn threw his ebony longsword end over end straight at the Dragon's head.

In a fit of pride, the Dragon opened his jaws and attempted to crunch the blade, not realizing the quality of it and instead succeeded only in having it puncture out the bottom of its mouth as it snapped it jaws shut.

Bellowing in pain, Sahloknir grabbed another boulder and hurled it at Lydia, who's arrows were now becoming more than a nuisance to the beast as Arn drew Dawnbreaker and charged.

But charging proved foolish as the Dragon spun and the tail caught Arn and threw him back a long way, impacting the gravel hard further up the other side of the small valley.

Arn could feel blood dripping down part of his face as he groggily tried to right himself and find where he'd dropped Dawnbreaker, even as he sensed the ground shaking with the Dragon's approaching.

Suddenly, Arn was pushed down into the gravel by a massive weight and realized with horror that Sahloknir had pinned him to the ground with a clawed forelimb as it loomed over him.

He blinked blood out of one eye long enough to see the Dragon raise a boulder in its other clawed limb to crush Arn with.

"ZUN HAAL VIIK!"

To the Dragon's surprise, Arn's shout of power wrenched the boulder free and flung it some thirty feet away.

It turned to regard him momentarily, growling something in the Dragon tongue before Arn heard Lydia's war cry on the Dragon's flank and it bellowed in pain at whatever she was doing, moving and apparently swatting her away with its tail because he heard her cry of pain and the CLANK of metal on rock a short moment later.

Strangely, he was more worried about her at that moment than he was for himself.

Turning back to him, the Dragon's jaws descended on him, but all this time, Arn had been fumbling around for Dawnbreaker and finally he had found it and plunged it into the claw holding him down while shouting into the descending face of Sahloknir.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The effect of both blows sent it reeling back and freed Arn to get back on his feet, feeling a nasty gash on his side as he did.

Even as the Dragon was righting itself, Arn was already there, slashing and cutting at its joints and weaker plated areas.

Feeling weak from using so many words of power, Arn wasn't able to capitalize on the opportunity though, and it was only a second or two before Sahloknir swatted him away with a clawed hand.

Getting to his feet for what felt like the hundreth time this fight, Arn had only a moment to crouch behind his shield as flames engulfed him from Sahloknir's maw.

The enchantments did their job, keeping him from being incinerated, surprising Sahloknir again as he let up.
Growling some more, the Dragon grabbed another boulder and rose to crush Arn with it and a combination of its upper body coming down to crush him at the same time.

Hurling the large boulder down at Arn, he only had a fraction of a second to step a little to his left before shouting it back into the Dragon's face.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The boulder immediately reversed direction as if by catapult and struck the Dragon hard in the head with a sickening crunch, shattering the boulder into several pieces and knocking Sahloknir off his feet backwards.

Though his head was growing foggy, Arn charged down shakily, stabbing wherever he could into the groaning Dragon, who finally spasmed and stopped moving.

Stabbing and stabbing again, Arn roared with a war cry as his arms finally had had enough and he slumped onto the Dragon's neck, utterly spent, but dragged himself to his feet moments later and stumbled out amongst the boulders, terrified he hadn't seen or heard anything from Lydia since the Dragon had pinned him.

His heart leaped into his throat as he finally spotted her laying slumped down by a boulder, face down and unmoving.

"Lydia! Lydia!" he heard himself yelling frantically as he ignored the painful cries of his body as he ran and slid to his knees by her side, carefully rolling her over.

"Oouuuwww" she groaned, groggily opening her eyes, looking at him through a grimace of pain.

"Can you move? Are you alright?!" Arn hollered, wrenching his helmet and gauntlets off before he carefully helped her sit up.

"Is it dead?! Lydia suddenly asked, alarmed and trying to stand up.

"Yes...yes...we did it...again" Arn murmured, restricting her from standing for the moment and finding themselves suddenly hugging each other in relief, laughing for some strange reason, relief flooding over both of them as they breathed heavily with exhaustion.

"I can't believe that really just happened" came another voice, shaking both Arn and Lydia out of their embrace and bringing them back to the realization they hadn't been alone as they turned to see Delphine had recovered and was limping down the hillside toward them and the Dragon's corpse.

Arn was about to say something when the glowing light suddenly engulfed him and he was seized into the air by the soul absorption, visions and words flashing through his mind as he was suspended in midair, glowing with a golden light as both women watched speechless.

Arn found himself back in the supportive arms of Lydia as he slumped down out of the air and looked up at Delphine who was standing there wide eyed and mouth slightly agape.

"You truly are Dragonborn..." was all she stuttered out as she stared almost incredulously at Arn, who was struggling to his feet.

"Of course....now.....about that damn explanation" He growled.
A Cold Reception: Windhelm pt. 1

Chapter Summary

Forced to detour to Windhelm for Lydia to recover, Arn's fame draws unwanted attention from Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak himself...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arn dropped his armload of gear and turned just in time to catch Lydia from collapsing as they tried to trudge out of the Valley where they'd fought Salohknir.

Unfortunately, between the Dragon's tail swipe and the rough impact with a boulder, Lydia's pack of potions had gotten utterly smashed, meaning they had only a few potions between them left and that wasn't enough to deal with all of their injuries as Arn carefully picked her up, armor and all, as she bit her lip in pain, gritting her teeth and closing her eyes.

"You...don't..." she tried to grit out, her eyes watering with the effort.

"Don't talk. In fact, I don't want you trying to do anything until I get a better idea of how bad it is. It shouldn't take Delphine too long to get back with more supplies" Arn grimaced as he carried her to an alcove among the stones to use as a camp.

It took Arn a little longer than usual to get things set up on his own, but as night fell, he had a good fire going and had set the sound rune traps at each important approach point.

He returned to find Lydia still awake, grimacing up at him from her sleeping roll.

After contemplating a moment, Arn removed his armor and kneeled next to her.

"This will hurt, but I need to get you out of your armor" he stated, looking intently into her eyes and caressing away a loose strand of hair from her face as though maybe that would lessen what she was about to feel.

She simply nodded while continuing grimacing.

Ordinarily, the act of undressing Lydia or even the thought of it would have been enough to drive Arn mentally stupefied and try to find some way to hide his loins' reaction.

This time though, it was nullified by his concern as he noted the look on her face as he carefully unlatched and pulled off piece by piece.

Crying out in pain as he removed her last piece of armor, Arn realized there was no way to get her leathers off without inflicting even more.

With a quick flick, Arn had removed his dagger and with several brief cuts, had divested her of her leather jerkin. Her breeches followed shortly thereafter, leaving her in just her leather breaststrap and smallpants.
Now able to see more of her body, Arn could already see the purple blooming all over her right side, from below her hip all the way up to just beneath her armpit, bruising and probably something broken in there from the impact with the boulder.

Arn shuddered to think what might have happened if she'd landed against her back or front instead of the side.

They'd used the few healing potions they'd still had left on Delphine's nasty head gash and made Arn drink the other. Arn had used all the healing he thought prudent on the nasty gash on his side where Sahloknir's talon had sliced through when he'd gotten pinned.

Despite his desire to do anything to take away her pain, Arn was reluctant to use his healing hands on her.

If he exhausted himself healing her, there were no potions of any type to help him regain energy and if they were attacked by anyone or anything, Arn was the only able bodied one left.

Despite her best efforts, she cried out in pain as he moved her arm up before carefully laying it back at her side.

Arn sighed in frustration and looked at her.

"Why did you insist I use the last potion? You said it wasn't bad."

"It doesn't matter....if...I..." she started to grit out before he interrupted her.

"Of course it matters! And I don't EVER want to you to think otherwise!"

"I'm...your...housecarl, it's what.....I'm supposed to do"

"But I'm your Thane, and I don't want you to. So that's final" Arn replied stubbornly as they stared at each other.

"Someday....you may not have a choice" she muttered.

"And here I thought I was the one that was supposed to talk pessimistically about oldness and dying" Arn retorted, fixing her with a mock stern look.

He saw a grin appear on her features and she started to laugh, but immediately grimaced and stopped.

"Oh...please, it hurts...to laugh"

"Sorry...do you think you will be able to sleep?" Arn replied, eyeing her with worry, and caressing her forehead and cheek, not knowing what else to do.

She simply shook her head, grimacing more.

Making sure she got water before tucking her in carefully and wrapping her in his trusty enchanted Elk pelt, Arn sat back and contemplated.

Finally, after seeing her continue to grimace in pain for awhile, he couldn't take it anymore and set off to find some herbs he could use to make a sleeping poultice and maybe more if he was lucky.

In the darkness of the night, it took a lot longer, maybe a couple hours by Arn's reckoning. He even tried asking in what was left of Kynesgrove, but no one would even answer their doors.
Eventually he checked further out and found what he was looking for, but just as he finally found another good clump of undergrowth that sported several necessary ingredients, he heard the tell tale WHOMP of one of his sound rune traps exploding.

Grabbing a handful of them, he took off at a full sprint, stuffing the herbs in his bag as he ran.

As he approached the camp, Arn leaped over one of his sound runes and slid to a halt, drawing his bow, nocking an arrow, and taking aim at the same time on the dark cloaked figure striding toward Lydia's bundled form.

"Another step and you're dead!" Arn growled.

"Well, good to see you didn't leave things completely undefended" tartly answered Delphine as she turned and lowered the hood that had obscured her earlier "Those sound runes are more powerful than I remembered" she grimaced, shaking her head slightly.

"I would've expected a veteran like you to avoid them" retorted Arn.

"I wasn't expecting you to put traps on your own camp" she retorted in turn.

"You have to be a little unconventional when you travel alone a lot" Arn replied, lowering his bow and re-sheathing the arrow as he walked to where she knelt and rummaged through her pack.

"How are your wounds?" she asked, not looking at him as she removed about half a dozen phials and a book or two.

"I'm not the one who needs them" Arn replied, nodding at Lydia's grimacing form when Delphine turned and eyed him a bit surprised.

As Arn busied himself preparing the plants and herbs he'd gathered, Delphine administered the potions she'd brought before wrapping Lydia back up and moving over to Arn by the fire.

"That's much worse than I would've thought. She's got an awful lot of grit to have even gotten up from a blow like that, much less try to walk away" Delphine remarked as she eyed Arn's preparations.

"I was wondering something" Arn muttered, continuing the mashing of the herbs "Why did you give me that warning look when we got stopped by those Stormcloaks?"

"I did tell you I am wanted for being a member of the Blades right?"

"Yes, in your brief explanation after the fight where you were talking so fast and worriedly, we wondered if your mouth was going to fall off" Arn replied, somewhat amused at the memory "You're lucky I already interacted with some of the Blades during the Great War or I'd still be asking questions."

"Given how powerful you already are, I'm positive the Thalmor have already taken an interest in you, especially if you haven't taken any pains to conceal your abilities" Delphine stated, ignoring his amusement at her previous flustered state.

"Why would that matter in Stormcloak territory?"

"You should never assume you are safe out on the roads, no matter what territory you are in. You can be sure the Thalmor have their spies in Stormcloak territory. I've stayed alive and undetected by always being cautious. You should do the same" Delphine replied confidently, as though lecturing
him on the virtues of doing so.

"And not trusting anyone as well?" Arn retorted.

"Trust is for less dangerous times" Delphine scoffed.

"You really think the Thalmor are behind the Dragons' return?" Arn mused after a moment of silence, changing the subject to avoid another argument with Delphine over her issues with trust.

"Have to be. They're the only ones with anything to gain from it and possibly the power to make it happen."

"And how do you propose we go about finding out?"

"There's an official party hosted by the Thalmor at their embassy with most of the Jarls or dignitaries in Skyrim invited. That will be your ticket in. Once you're inside, it will be up to you to sneak away and find out just what they're up to. They're bound to have records somewhere."

"You want me to break in?"

"They'll let the Dragonborn in"

"You tell me to keep my identity a secret. Then a minute later, I'm to proclaim myself on their steps so I can mingle with them?" Arn chuckled sarcastically.

"I'm sure they already know who you are, and if you're coming to them, they're not going to suspect anything" Delphine huffed as she readjusted her pack and stood as Arn finished his poultice preparation.

"I assume you're not coming with"

"That would be a death sentence for sure. I need to make the preparations, though. It will take me a few days at least, but once I've arranged everything, meet with a man named Malborn in the Winking Skeever in Solitude...discreetly. He'll give you further instructions on the Embassy" Delphine stated as she watched Arn carefully help Lydia drink the prepared sleep drink.

Arn didn't look at her, simply nodding as he tucked Lydia back in.

"You should take her to Windhelm. You can leave her there to recover while you head to Solitude" Delphine stated almost matter-of-factly.

"I'm not leaving her there" Arn growled back more quickly and angrily than he meant to.

"She can't go with you to the embassy and the kind of healing she needs will take days and the effect hangover could last over a week, maybe more" Delphine tried to reason.

"And if it wasn't for her, neither of us might have walked out of that valley today" retorted Arn, rising and fixing her with a stern glare.

Arn expected another argument, but instead, he was surprised to see her relent somewhat, looking down with a newfound care or respect at Lydia's now sleeping form before turning back to him.

He was surprised again when she moved closer to him and carefully placed her hands on his forearms and looked up at him with something between worry and desperation in her eyes.

"Arn, just...don't do anything foolish. You have no idea how long I've waited..." she actually
seemed to choke up a bit at this point, stopping for a moment to reign in the emotion Arn had not seen from her up to this point "...how long everyone has waited for someone like you. The gathering at the embassy is in 8 days and is 2 days long. You have to be there. We may not get another chance like this for awhile."

"Don't worry. I'll be there" was all the answer he gave.

"Good" she sighed, releasing his arms, turning, and walking to her horse "I will see you then. Safe journeys" she replied before mounting and galloping away into the darkness.

The next day found Arn leading the horses and a litter with Lydia tied in it across the long bridge over White River, approaching the massive ice covered walls of Windhelm.

Situated on the banks of the White River and nestled in the rising slopes of the Velothi Mountains, Windhelm, as its name implied, was prone to cold windy gusts and weather that was funneled in from the sea to the north and east, leaving the walls covered in ice and large icicles nearly year round.

There was fresh snow on the ground as well, giving it a rather bleak appearance.

Whereas in Solitude and even Whiterun, there were plants, greenery and paint of different colors, Windhelm seemed only the gray color of stone, layered with the white of snow here and there, and only the largest of the icicles retained any of the blue color they had when formed.

Not surprisingly, there was a checkpoint at the city gates manned more heavily with troops than any of the other cities Arn had been back to since he returned to Skyrim.

"State your name and business" barked one of them loudly, interrupting Arn's appraisal of the surroundings.

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar...I'm an adventurer looking for some respite. We've had a hard time of it lately" he nodded to Lydia's bundled form.

Gruffly shoved aside, Arn was surprised as several of them went to work rummaging through their packs.

"Is that truly necessary? I am a Thane in two holds. Anyone from Whiterun or Morthal can attest to that" Arn replied a bit angrily, just trying to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"Yes, and I'm Dibella personified" muttered a much scarred Stormcloak sarcastically, sitting off to one side and observing impassively.

"Whadda we got here, lads!" exclaimed one of the guards before Arn could respond to the scarred one.

The jingle of coins signified to Arn they'd located the money pouch and were more amused than they should be at the amount contained therein.

Arn was tempted to remonstrate more, but decided to wait and see what course of action they took as they seemed to finish going through everything, including giggling merrily at Lydia's sleeping face when they peered into the tied up bundle.

"You haven't fallen on hard times" they chuckled as they walked up to him with his money bag "A
winsome wench tied up and a bag more full of coin than some nobles....I'd say you've done rather well for yourself” smirked the apparent leader as they stood around him.

Arn suddenly found himself taking account of their number and position in relation to him, wondering if this was going to degenerate into something he had to fight his way out of.

"You don't seem to be a spy of any sort, so....I'm sure you don't mind helpin' out the cause" chuckled the leader, dumping a prodigious amount of septims out of Arn's coin bag into some sort of collection box before tossing it back to him "Move along now"

Bitterly, Arn grabbed the horses' reins and continued on, tucking his much emptier coin bag away in one of the packs again.

Finding what passed for the local Inn, a place called Candlehearth Hall, he purchased a room and got Lydia settled before seeking out a healer and healing potions.

He was unable to locate a healer and thanks to the forced "donation" from the gate guards, Arn ended up spending most of the funds they had left to get as many healing potions as he could before returning to administer them to Lydia.

As he helped her drink down the last one, a loud pounding echoed on the door.

"Open up!” came the gruff order through the door.

Arn rose, placed his helmet on, and cinched his longsword sheath on before opening the door to find himself face to face with a squad of Stormcloak soldiers.

"You are to come with us, by order of Jarl Ulfric" came the command.

"Come where?” Arn huffed angrily.

"If you do not comply, we will use force" came the abrupt reply.

Arn looked back over his shoulder at Lydia, who was half out of it.

"I'll come, just give me a moment to make arrangements with the innkeeper” Arn muttered as he moved out with them and descended the stairs.

Tossing the bag of remaining septims to the innkeeper, Arn made arrangements to care for Lydia before he was escorted out and up the stone stairs toward the massive stone structure of the Palace of Kings.

Inside, they were joined by more guards, the total numbering now a dozen as they marched through the long hall past a long dining table and came to a halt before an elevated, empty stone throne of furs and a brace of swords and shield over the top with the Stormcloak banners on either side.

Here they stopped and waited uneasily for a few minutes until raised voices from the hallway to the left drew their attention as an entourage of people began pouring out, growing silent as each spotted the group in the main hall.

First came more guards, then a man in a minister's apparel, an aged wizard, a large, burly Nord with a bear's headdress, and finally Ulfric himself, who Arn recognized from Helgen.

Growing silent as they entered, Arn became more uncomfortable as all eyes fell on him while Ulfric casually strode up and sat on the throne, taking a few moments to lean forward and eye him over
critically before sitting back again.

"You are not the young pup the reports claimed" muttered Ulfric in his thick Nordic accent after a few moments of awkward silence.

Arn simply shrugged his shoulders, biting back the sarcastic reply he wanted to make, waiting to see what Ulfric's intentions were.

"I have watched your eyes, though. You've already taken stock of everyone in the room and their location in relation to you. Those are the signs of a fighting man" Ulfric stated, leaning forward again "at least that part of the reports seem accurate."

"I'm not entirely sure what you're getting at, but you may have me mistaken for someone else" Arn replied, realizing he was a little too late to be playing the false identity strategy.

"Oh, I'm certain we have the right man" chuckled Ulfric "Deception doesn't suit you, a good quality for a Nord."

"I'm still waiting on an explanation as to why I've been dragged here"

"That depends. I'd still like a good explanation as to why you're in my city" stated Ulfric in a lower, more threatening tone.

"Fresh from the court of the little whore queen!" finished the Headdress wearing Nord to Ulfric's right side.

"So, because I spent some time in Solitude, I must needs be an Imperial spy?" chuckled Arn.

"In only a matter of weeks you were made a Thane. That's not normal unless...extraordinary services were rendered" Ulfric growled, sitting back again and stroking his beard, putting extra emphasis on 'extraordinary' and 'rendered'.

"Did ya service the little whore's cunt well?" growled the head-dressed Nord, whom Arn was beginning to wonder if he should add to his "to be killed later" list.

"The only services I 'rendered' that got me titled a Thane were done for the good of the people of the land, not the Imperials or the Stormcloaks" angrily retorted Arn "and if your spies were any better at their jobs, then you'd already know that."

"Watch yer tongue! Any milk-drinker can make claims of faraway exploits" grunted the Head-dress again, earning another glare from Arn.

"Do you always insult and detain guests to your city this way?" retorted Arn at Ulfric but still looking at the Head-dressed Nord.

"None of the other guests in my city lay claim to the deeds and power that you do" responded Ulfric in turn.

"I laid claim to neither coming here, just simply an adventurer seeking respite, which is the truth, whether you believe it or not" staunchly replied Arn, folding his arms defiantly.

There was a long tension-filled silence before Ulfric spoke up again.

"Well, if you're so eager to help the people of the land, I should put you to work. I have several tasks that a man of your...caliber could accomplish"
"But Ulfric--" the Head dress began to remonstrate before Ulfric cut him off.

"I have an important task for you to embark on right away. In fact, Galmar and a contingent of my troops will go with you as backup to the ruins of Korvanjund to retrieve something very important to all of Skyrim. He can fill you in on the way" Ulfric finished with a wave of his hand as the guards all turned and pushed Arn toward the door as Galmar fell in right behind them.

As they marched down the steps out of the Palace of Kings, Arn felt the presence of the larger Galmar Stonefist at his shoulder before he heard him whisper into his ear.

"Ulfric doesn't think you're gonna tuck tail an' run, but if the urge to be a coward takes ya, just remember, yer friend will pay the price" Galmar whispered menacingly as he nodded at Candlehearth Hall as they passed, Arn noting the guards posted at the door.

Lydia....

Turns out coming to Windhelm wasn't such a good idea, Arn gritted to himself angrily as he continued looking back over his shoulder at the Inn as they moved toward the stables.

Chapter End Notes

1. I have portrayed potions working differently/more slowly than in the game. In game, everything is instant, but chugging potions like Popeye does Spinach doesn't translate well to a narrative story.

2. I have mentioned a "effect hangover" in conjunction with healing. The idea is that even though the body may be healed superficially or even down in the tissue, it may take hours/days/weeks for the nervous system to realize that...leading to sometimes lengthy "hangovers" from healing where everything may appear fine outwardly, but the body is still recovering.
Caught in the Middle: Windhelm pt. 2

Chapter Summary

Arn's retrieval of the Jagged Crown doesn't go as planned after being ambushed at the ruins of Korvanjund

Dark grey clouds overcast the sky as Arn trudged westward on horseback at the front of the Stormcloak column.

His spitefully unfriendly babysitter, Galmar Stonefist, rode next to him, attempting what Arn could only suppose was whistling, but just came out as wisps and hisses.

The breaths of both horse and man appeared as a vapor in front of each with every breath as they trotted on, the air growing colder as the day wore on.

"You mind telling me what in Oblivion we're doing out here" Arn finally piped up, if only to get Galmar to stop the infernal half-whistling.

Arn didn't glance at him, but felt the glaring response from the larger man.

"We'll be retrieving an important piece a' history, the Jagged Crown" Galmar finished smugly.

"So you have me chasing fairy tales and legends, in other words" huffed Arn in response as they rounded a bend and caught sight of the enclosed columns and arches of the ruins of Korvanjund.

"Not everything in the old stories is a fable, lad. You would do well to remember that, considering you yourself are one of those 'fairy tales', if you actually even 'are' Dragonborn" scoffed Galmar in reply.

"The Jagged Crown has been lost for over a hundred years and not even on Nord soil. Why would anyone think it's here?" Arn continued to protest.

"That's not for you to know. All you need to know is that Ulfric has his ways of finding things out" retorted Galmar self-assuredly.

"Do they involve torture and prison sentences?" chuckled Arn cynically almost to himself.

"Only if yer' a Thalmor or an Imperial bastard..." retorted Galmar quickly, but his attention seemed drawn to something else as he trailed his statement off.

Arn turned to find out what caused this and at the same time noticed the lack of any sound in the woods, no birds or insects chirping at all.

Galmar turned in his saddle, looking off at the bluff to his left before holding his arm up and pointing left.

Just as he opened his mouth to say something, an arrow struck Galmar in the Bear's head dress he wore followed by a loud shout as Imperial soldiers surged out of the woods and over the bluff on the left of the column.
The arrow blow had nearly keeled Galmar from his saddle and instead leaned out and pushed off Arn's horse to keep himself up, further startling the horse.

Just as Arn got his horse back under control and the Imperial soldiers clattered into the Stormcloak column in a clash of flesh, steel, and shouting, Arn heard a clear ROAR overhead drown them all out momentarily.

"Listen!" Arn tried to admonish Galmar, who'd righted himself and shook off Arn's hand on his shoulder, bellowing a war cry as he turned his horse into three approaching Imperial soldiers.

The ROAR came again and it was unmistakable.

No...no...not now....not here....

Arn looked up just in time to see a dark bluish-gray Dragon appear suddenly out of the overcast clouds nearly right on top of them.

"DRAGGOOOONNN!" Arn bellowed to no avail to the Stormcloaks and Imperials locked in combat.

The Dragon tucked its wings and sailed right down into them, plowing into the back of the column and sliding forward, tearing up the road, men, and horses with its talons as it snapped and tore apart men left and right as it came to a stop atop a mass of earth, blood, gore, and body parts amid the screams and cries of the wounded and dying.

Its trajectory had brought it to the front of the column and in a moment would have snapped up Galmar Stonefist, who, in the midst of killing a second Imperial soldier, was completely unaware there was a Dragon on the increasingly empty battlefield.

 Arn, however, had no intention of returning to Windhelm alone and risking any harm to himself or Lydia, no matter his feelings for the rude, larger Nord.

"FUS!"

The word of power sent Galmar, his horse, and his Imperial opponent flying off the road into the ditch below the bluff and just out of the reach of the Dragon's jaws as they snapped shut in thin air before turning to regard Arn.

Rumbling loud words in the Dragon tongue, the Dragon made a heaving motion with its chest and Arn knew what was coming next.

He turned to take cover, but realized the trees in the vicinity would not be enough. So he did the next best thing.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded forward thirty feet and slid to a stop further up the road as the Dragon belched frost breath all over the wooded edge of the road where he'd been.

By now, Galmar had gotten to his feet and charged the Dragon's left wing with a loud war cry, but he was slow and had nothing to block with, and the Dragon swatted him off his feet with its left forearm like a fly, sending him flying back into the ditch he'd charged out of.

As Arn saw the Dragon turn to face him on the road, he realized he was completely alone, no one from the column was left, save Galmar if he'd survived the Dragon's swipe.
There might be a few Imperials left up on the bluff, but Arn hadn't seen any arrows fly since the ambush, so they had likely fled or were part of the assault.

Despite having killed four dragons already, the whole situation felt wrong.

He kept wondering where Lydia was and why she wasn't on the Dragon's flank as usual. He kept expecting to hear her call his name or cry out loudly as she charged, but instead there was just the rumbling words of Dragon speech as the Dragon bounded toward him.

All Arn understood of it was "Dovahkin" like before.

By himself, Arn doubted he stood much chance in the wooded area in the vicinity.

So he turned and sprinted into the tighter, twisting confines of the ruins of Korvanjund, up a flight of stairs and weaved his way through an arch before he heard the gust of wind as the Dragon leaped and made to land on him.

Spinning around, he found the Dragon nearly on top of him.

"FUS RO DA!"

The shockwave of force caught the Dragon and hurled it back and down into the small valley amongst the archways and stairs that made up the ruins, crashing through archways and knocking dirt and stones loose on the way down.

Leaping off the side of the valley of ruins, Arn lined himself up on the downed Dragon, now flailing amongst the dirt and stones at the bottom.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded straight down, the force of it plunging his sword strike deep into the Dragon's torso, eliciting a loud bellow of rage from the beast as it stillled momentarily before turning to snap at the Dragonborn perched on its chest.

Arn's sword strike had hit so hard, the entire ebony longsword and part of his arm ended up embedded in the Dragon's flesh, a miniature explosion of blood shooting up on him and forcing him to let go of his sword just so he could get his shield up to block the Dragon's reprisal.

Arn blocked the Dragon's jaws lunging at him, but the force of it knocked him off and flying backward.

He thought for a split second he was done for, expecting to impact hard with stone, but instead hit on his side, and slid to a stop in the dirt and pebbles of the road approach.

Getting to his feet and drawing Dawnbreaker, he saw the Dragon extricate itself from the rubble, bleeding and rumbling fiercely.

Noting the ability to slide on the loose bits of the road, Arn marched toward the Dragon, beating his shield with his sword tauntingly.

Bellowing with rage, the beast lurched forward, shaking the ground with its strides as it closed on the lone figure of Arn in the middle of the road.

As it closed on him, Arn took off running at it full speed.

Just as it lunged at him, Arn ducked and slid on his arse, feet first, barely under the closing jaws of
Coming to a kneeling position under its neck, Arn brought Dawnbreaker straight up.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Explosive upward, the blow cut short the bellowing of the Dragon and elicited another geyser of blood all over Arn as the beast wretched and spasmed, stumbling around and clawing at the air as Arn landed repeated hacks on its joints, though knowing the whole time the death blow had already been delivered.

Ducking under another flailing claw, Arn came up and stabbed through the Dragon's right eye, causing it to immediately wheeze and suddenly grow still.

Wrenching Dawnbreaker free with a grunt, Arn turned around to see what had become of Galmar.

Gasping for breath, he was further stunned by what he saw.

Galmar and the lone imperial were STILL fighting, now exchanging blows out in the road, seemingly oblivious to Arn's fight with the Dragon.

Unbelievable....Arn mused angrily as he strode purposefully toward them.

As he approached, Arn noted the remaining Imperial was wearing the standard heavy Imperial armor of a Legate, dancing and leaping this way and that to avoid Galmar's heaving Battle Axe blows.

Just as Arn neared and opened his mouth to say something, a golden light enveloped him and he was seized into the air before he'd barely had a chance to realize it.

When the visions and words flashing through his mind subsided, he found himself kneeling in the road with both Galmar and the Imperial Legate standing on opposite sides in guarded positions but both staring at him.

"What in blazes--" Galmar had begun to mutter before Arn cut him off.

"That will be enough....both of you!" Arn bellowed angrily.

Ignoring him, Galmar lunged at the Imperial.

Energized by either the soul absorption, his anger at the ludicrousness of the situation, or both, Arn moved inside Galmar's swing arc, batting his swing off target, knocking him off balance and sweeping a knee back and toppling him over.

Spinning back around, he held the Legate in check with the extended blade of Dawnbreaker as the Legate had moved to close on the downed form of Galmar.

Arn was surprised to see the face of an Altmer behind the helmet of the Legate as he stared him down.

After a tense moment, the Legate backed away a little before removing his helmet.

"I'll not fight you, Dragonborn, but I have a mission to complete" he stated in the well pronounced way all Altmer seemed to possess.

"Do I look like I give a damn about your mission?" retorted Arn.
"I must keep the traitors from recovering the Jagged Crown"

Arn rolled his eyes in annoyance and huffed, his anger growing even more.

"And the Dragon?...you two didn't seem to think that mattered much, even though it killed all of your men more or less" snarled Arn.

That retort was met with angry remonstrations from both the Legate and Galmar, both trying to talk over the other to persuade Arn that the other deserved death or at the very least, more scorn.

Apparently, this Legate Fasendil as Arn learned, was a high ranking officer, tasked with more responsibility than most Legates and when both had caught sight of each other on the battle field, had become obsessed with taking the other out.

After a minute of this childish arguing, Arn had had more than enough.

"By the gods, ENOUGH!" he hollered "YOU" he gestured down his longsword at Fasendil "if you have any men left alive, get them and get out of here!"

"But--"

"NOW!"

The sight of Arn's angry countenance, covered in blood and dirt, looking down the glowing red and white blade of Dawnbreaker seemed to finally convince the Legate that retreating was a good idea.

Just as Galmar grasped his axe and made to go after the Legate scurrying away, Arn spun and kicked him hard in the midsection, bowing him over.

Ripping the bear's head dress off, Arn slapped the flat of Dawnbreaker's blade against the prone man's cheek, drawing a line of blood as he kneeled down and glared into the rising sneer of Galmar.

"If I find out even one hair on her head has been harmed when we get back, you and your precious Ulfric will rue the day you summoned me to do your dirty work" Arn hissed venomously, locking eyes with the larger Nord, slapping his cheek again with Dawnbreaker for good measure.

"Don't push me--" started Galmar, his balding head glinting in the fading daylight matching the glint of anger in his eyes.

"I already did" Arn cut him off, "Don't make me do it again" he finished, rising and turning to stride toward the ruins of Korvanjund, tossing Galmar's head dress into the dirt.

A few minutes later, Arn watched Galmar trudge up with his now dirtier head dress back in place as they ventured into Korvanjund.

"You go first" Arn muttered, already having thought it out and knowing Galmar would never be stealthy enough to do this the way Arn would've liked to.

"So ya can shoot me in the back?" snarled Galmar, the tension ratcheting up again.

"If I was going to kill you, I'd have done it back there on the road. Taking your head off would've been easy."

"Th--then follow me" Galmar retorted after an awkward silence where it seemed he couldn't come up with any good responses.
They made good headway at first. Arn was getting proficient at what to look out for in Nord ruins. 

Galmar would go first, Battle Axe in hand. Arn would follow behind, bow and arrows at the ready.

Whenever they happened on any draugr or were ambushed, Galmar would wade in with his axe, while Arn took out half of them by bow before any weapons even clashed.

Then it was just a matter of keeping them off Galmar's flank.

After the first ambush, Galmar turned and stared in surprise as Arn retrieved the arrows from half a dozen draugr while Galmar had slain two.

After that, almost without realizing it, he and Galmar kept trying to outdo the other.

Galmar began not so silently announcing his tally after each skirmish and resumed his infernal half-whistling, eventually prompting Arn to respond with how many arrows he'd used.

It was lopsided in Arn's favor for quite some time, but as the day wore on, Galmar began to slowly catch back up, largely by charging into likely ambushes instead of waiting for favorable angles.

Arn had to admit the larger Nord was probably the most proficient Axe user he'd run into in awhile, though the style was still too slow and impractical for Arn's tastes.

By Arn's reckoning, it took the good portion of the night and into the next day for them to make their way down through the passages and crypts inside Korvanjund before they reached what looked like the end.

A lone Draugr sat on a wooden throne on a platform in the middle, surrounded by caskets and coffins on all sides.

On its head sat a crown made of Dragon bone claws, the Jagged Crown.

"Well I'll be....." started Arn when Galmar charged forward.

"Wait!" he tried to stop Galmar, knowing the ends of these crypts always held surprises and this one was no exception.

As Galmar neared the draugr on the throne, it came to life, looking up with glowing blue eyes.

It barked a loud word of power that sent Galmar flying ten feet back onto his back as Arn was taking aim.

Even as Arn let fly with the arrow, he could hear the crashing of crypts opening and numerous draugr emerging on all sides.

His shot flew truly and pegged the draugr through the head to the back of its throne, its eyes losing their blue glow as it went lifeless.

Galmar rolled to his feet with a war cry as the Draugr closed in from all sides.

The next few minutes were frantic.

It was all Arn could do to keep the draugr from overrunning the axe wielding Galmar as he repeatedly nocked and fired arrows as fast as he could, finally exhausting his quiver on the last one to try flanking Galmar as the larger Nord finished off the two in front of him.
Even as Galmar moved to carefully removed the Jagged Crown from the dead draugr and eye it over carefully, Arn carefully moved toward what he thought was a concave looking wall in the back.

As he drew near, the tell tale, rushing wind-like noise increased and he knew it must be a word wall.

Just then, Galmar chose to pipe up about his kill tally.

"Let's see...that's seven more foes to taste my axe!" he exclaimed in what Arn could only fathom might be a jolly mood after getting the crown.

Arn was about to retort with a dozen of his own, but he was caught up in the air before he had a chance, words and phrases passing through his mind, his body humming as he stayed suspended in the air.

When he became coherent of his surroundings again, he found himself laying on his side in the dust of the crypt, Galmar kneeling next to him with a curious but stern look peering out of his bear's head dress.

As Arn pondered the implications of what he just learned, he began to chuckle.

"What? What was that? What did you do?" questioned Galmar uneasily.

Rolling over on his back, Arn began to belt laughter out even louder, echoing through Korvanjund.

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"WHAT?! What is it?!" bellowed Galmar with increasing frustration.

Finally, Arn got himself under control enough to rise to his feet, though still chuckling.

"Dragonborn stuff, man. You wouldn't understand" Arn chuckled at the bewildered Nord before moving to retrieve his arrows while still chuckling occasionally.

*I'll have to try out this 'Slow Time' soon*, Arn mused humorously to himself as he finished retrieving arrows and set about looting anything of value from the dead draugr.

Despite not having rested in two days, the pair didn't risk staying any longer than they had to, worried the Imperials would return in force.

It took them the good portion of the next day to get back to Windhelm, using up the horses to get back firmly in Stormcloak territory as quickly as possible.

Arn felt a huge surge of relief tinged with worry as they came in sight of the icy walls of Windhelm.

He was relieved to get back to check up on Lydia, but apprehensive of what had transpired in his absence.

The gate guards didn't bother Arn this time as they made way with a Galmar nod and rode on through.

Arn immediately bee-lined to Candlehearth hall.

"Ulfric will be wanting to speak with ya" Galmar gruffly ordered, his earlier belligerent demeanor returning as they had returned to Stormcloak territory.

"He can damn well wait til morning" snapped Arn angrily, not in the mood to be detained any
longer, shouldering a pack of loot from his horse and shouldering through the door to Candlehearth Hall without so much as a nod to Galmar.

Fortunately, Galmar didn't press the issue.

Ascending the stairs with a nod to the innkeeper, Arn glared at the guard by their room's door until he sheepishly moved down the hall.

Opening the door cautiously, Arn was relieved to find no guards in the room, and Lydia peacefully sleeping bundled in the bed, just as he'd left her.

Setting his weapons and pack aside and removing most of his armor, Arn then carefully sat on the bed and gently peeled back the blankets to get a look at the progress of her recovery.

It had been three days. So she should be recovered to a much greater degree if the innkeeper had kept up on the potions as Arn had instructed.

With a sharp inhale of breath, Arn looked away hurriedly.

He'd been expecting her to still have some bruising and at least be clothed in her undergarments.

What he found instead was a creamy expanse of skin and curves from her shoulder down to her hip completely unclothed and unbruised.

Even the brief glimpse of her naked flesh had immediately hardened his loins and his hand was shaking, gripping the covers fiercely as he closed his eyes, trying to get his mind away from questing further under the covers.

Getting off the bed, he carefully tucked her in again and moved to the wash basin, splashing the cool water on his face, trying to dispel the thoughts of his housecarl and realizing after a short while just how bad he must look and smell.

He looked at the single bed in the room and recalled how every night turned out sleeping next to Lydia.

That would not do.

Consequently, he grabbed a chair and moved it against the door, collapsing in it and holding his head in his hands, pondering the events of the last few days.

At some point during his contemplation, he unintentionally fell asleep.

Some ambient noise outside finally jarred Arn awake, realizing he'd nodded off in the chair.

He leaned forward and tried to massage his neck as he looked up to find Lydia wide awake and smiling at him.

"You look terrible" she stated matter of factly, still grinning.

"Good morning to you too" Arn retorted sarcastically.

"Where were you? They just said you were going to be gone for a bit" Lydia continued, but
gradually lost the grin as worry crept onto her pretty features.

"That's a long story" replied Arn, moving to the wash basin and attempting to clean his face off again. "besides, who is 'they'?"

"The innkeeper and Jarl Ulfric" Lydia replied, grimacing as she sat up, clutching the blankets around her chest.

"Ulfric was here?!" Arn snapped more worried than he meant to.

"Yes"

"Are you alright? What did he do?" Arn replied, moving to sit on the edge of the bed, his washing up suddenly forgotten.

"Nothing....we just talked. All he did was ask questions...mostly about you" Lydia replied a little sheepishly.

"What did you tell him?"

"Not much. Since you weren't here, I wasn't sure what was going on. So I didn't tell him anything I didn't think was already common enough knowledge."

"Was he okay with that?" Arn replied, watching Lydia carefully.

"I don't know. I wasn't very coherent and he didn't exactly tell me his thoughts either. All I know is that he was here the second morning after you left for an hour or two, and once he was done with the questions, he was quiet for awhile, then told me I was a good housecarl and left."

"Hmm" Arn muttered, stroking his dirty and blood caked beginnings of a beard as he pondered. He was about to say something when a knock on the door interrupted them.

"The Jarl commands your presence, Dragonborn" came the muffled guard's voice through the door.

"Well, guess I'll go find out what he thinks" muttered Arn as he cinched on his weapons again and moved toward the door.

"While you're out..." Lydia started, but blushed and grew silent.

"What?"

"I...um....could use some new clothes. I...uh...don't really have any...uh....right now" she muttered sheepishly, blushing redder than Arn had seen in awhile.

"Yeah, I noticed" replied Arn before he was immediately sorry as Lydia's blush grew redder and an confused frown appeared.

"You WHAT?"

"I...uh...look, I-I was just checking o-on your injuries...n-nothing I didn't do before. All I did was look...I didn't--" Arn tried to remonstrate.

"I wasn't naked before!" she snapped, snatching up a dish off the side table.

Arn had the reflexes to get the door open and slide through, closing it just as the dish broke against
the inside.

"Uh..N-no one should go in there" Arn stated awkwardly to the stunned guard standing there, who after an awkward moment of listening to another object pound against the door shook his head in agreement before Arn headed down stairs again.

Time for another chat with Ulfric.
Arn is co-opted again by Ulfric to lend a hand...this time to find a murderer.

Arn once again found himself flanked by a group of guards, standing in the Palace of Kings, waiting on Ulfric to make an appearance.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before Ulfric strode in, all the while listening to Galmar rant about Whiterun's neutrality and how they might bargain with Jarl Balgruuf.

At the sight of Arn, he held up a hand and silenced Galmar, who's head dress looked newly cleaned and spruced up.

After seating himself, Ulfric leaned forward and eyed Arn silently for a moment. Arn couldn't help but chuckle at seeing Ulfric already wearing the Jagged Crown.

He caught a slight gleam of irritation in Ulfric's eyes, but Ulfric didn't rise to the bait, instead sitting back and motioning at Galmar.

"Galmar tells me you fight every bit as well as reports indicated, maybe even better since no one mentioned you were a better archer than swordsman."

"I thought this was about the people, not me" retorted Arn, crossing his arms.

"It's important for the people to have their history...their culture preserved. This--" Ulfric pointed at the crown "has been lost for far too long. Its return to the hands of true Nords will bolster the morale of everyone in Skyrim."

"I'm sure it will" replied Arn sarcastically.

"If you truly are a man of the people, though, you cannot just be a beast of war" Ulfric continued, ignoring Arn's barb completely.

"You mean like Galmar here?" retorted Arn.

"Watch yer tongue! You--" started Galmar before Ulfric silenced him with a motion of his hand.

"I have another task for you, Dragonborn."

"I'm here to re-arm and re-supply, not to be your errand boy."

Ulfric leaned forward in his throne, eyeing him in an almost challenging manner.

"Young women are being murdered. Here in Windhelm of all places...just today we found another body. That makes three so far."
"And?" Arn retorted "You're the Jarl. Can't you find the murderers yourself?"

"I have a war to win!" Ulfric sharply replied with raised voice, as though Arn had hit a nerve
"Besides, I have had my steward looking into it already and has thus far not even produced any suspects. I'm hoping putting someone of your caliber on the trail will yield....different results."

Arn looked over at said steward and noted the man hang his head in shame, looking at the floor.

After a long silence of Ulfric staring at Arn as he contemplated, Arn finally responded.

"Sure, I'll look into your murders for you, but I demand payment for my services."

"Done! See the Steward for all details. You will be commissioned my official investigator" replied Ulfric quickly, as if eager to be done with the conversation.

"I'm not done naming my terms" retorted Arn quickly.

Ulfric sighed in obvious discontentment before motioning for Arn to continue.

"In two days, I and my housecarl WILL be leaving, regardless of what has transpired. In the meantime, you will remove all guards from the Inn, return the money taken from me at the gates by the guards, and NO ONE....not even you, is to disrupt my housecarl during her recovery."

Ulfric huffed, angrily eyeing Arn for a moment before turning and nodding affirmatively at the steward.

"Fine, we'll meet your 'terms', Dragonborn. Just make sure you bring me the murderer!" ordered Ulfric as he rose, retreating with Galmar and others from the hall.

An hour later, Arn was standing out in the lightly falling snow, gently nudging his way through a crowd gathered around the latest murder victim.

It was...disturbing...to say the least. Arn recognized the young woman's face from the Inn. She was one of the serving wenches, the one they called 'Susanna' if he remembered correctly.

She had been a pretty young Nord, but looking at her now, you wouldn't have known it except from the smooth complexion of her shocked facial features as she stared blankly up at nothingness.

As Arn knelt down and eyed the scene, he put his annoyance with Ulfric out of his mind as he began to try piecing together what happened.

Susanna's body had been savagely mangled. She had been stabbed and slashed across the torso repeatedly. So much so that from her waist to her neck was a bloody mess of fabric, mangled flesh, and frozen blood.

Arn noted her coin purse was still on her belt, along with her dagger, still uselessly sheathed and unused.

So, not a robbery....that left the other obvious possibility that Arn cringed to investigate.

"Guards! Get this crowd moved farther away! I need space to work!" Arn ordered before instructing what the guards should be asking the bystanders.

Then, he abruptly tossed a blanket over the corpse, making sure to clumsily trap himself half underneath.
Then, while no prying eyes could see, he darted his un-gauntleted hand up the woman's skirt, pulling aside her smallpants and dipped a finger in her womanhood carefully, feeling around for the telltale bruising, bleeding, or swelling associated with a rape.

He was surprised to quickly run into a small tissue barrier that prevented him checking further before he pulled his hand out and eyed his finger for a moment.

So she still retained her virginity. That's not what Arn would've thought from the revealing frock she wore in the Inn, but at least she hadn't suffered in that manner before she died.

"What are you doing?" came a woman's voice from over Arn's shoulder.

Extricating himself from the blanket, Arn turned to see a dark haired young woman standing over him, looking at him sternly.

She wore the usual Stormcloak armor, but seemed bundled in furs underneath with a fur hood over her head that barely contained the black locks that poked out here and there.

She was tan skinned and had a splash of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. As Arn wiped his fingers off in the snow, he realized she wasn't a Nord.

The darker skin with the sharper eyebrow ridge and nose, combined with the dark hair, definitely Imperial.

"What do you mean 'What am I doing'? I'm doing exactly what the Jarl asked me to. Who are you and why are you not back with the guards?" Arn stated, rising to his feet.

"I am Freyya, and I was sent by Jarl Ulfric to assist you in whatever manner is needed" she replied sternly, not looking away from the steady gaze she'd fixed him with.

"And your first step in 'assisting' me is to come down and immediately question what I'm doing?" replied Arn skeptically with raised eyebrow as he glanced around the scene quickly.

He could tell it irked her, but she stayed on task, continuing to levy that steady, almost passive look in her eye.

"My apologies if I spoke out of turn. I just didn't understand what you might need to be doing with a body under a blanket."

Arn was in no mood to be diplomatic or ashamed about what he needed to do.

"Simple, really. Attractive young woman turns up dead...one of the first motives to come to mind is the obvious. Was she ravaged?" Arn replied almost absentmindedly as he looked up at the lightly falling snow.

"Was she?"

"No"

"Robbery then?"

"No, coinpurse is still here"

"Then, we are dealing with a madman?"

"No...I don't think so.....at least, not the mindless sort. The torso is badly savaged. So much so that
I'm wondering if it was done to conceal what the killer was really after."

"So... the killer wanted a certain part of her body?"

"That's what it looks like, and the only people that kill for body parts...are necromancers."

"We have no local groups of necromancers. Anytime even rumors of such surface, Ulfric is quick to deal with them" Freyya replied proudly.

"Then perhaps someone here in Windhelm is practicing secretly."

"The guards say that they did see a man walking the other way down the street on the far side, but no one knows if it was anywhere near the time of the crime" Freyya replied after a moment of silence.

"The snow started falling about two hours ago..." murmured Arn, looking around at the sky and then the ground again.

"What?" Freyya asked, perplexed.

"Stand back" Arn ordered, getting down on his hands and knees, carefully beginning to blow the powdery snow off to the sides of the sidewalk.

It didn't take long before a smudged bloody footprint was made visible enough on the stone sidewalk underneath.

Arn continued on as he heard Freyya issuing orders for the guards to close off the adjacent street so that any other footprints wouldn't be disturbed.

It took the good part of an hour and a half, a lot of blowing, and losing the trail several times, but finally, the partly bloody tracks led to a quiet house at the end of the adjacent street.

"Who's house is this?" Arn muttered through exhausted cheeks.

"It belonged to Frigga Shatter-Shield."

"Belonged?"

"She was the first murder victim"

Arn moved to go inside but found the door locked.

"I can get the key from her mother" Freyya nodded before running off toward a different house.

Returning moments later, they both entered the quiet house to discover darkness, cobwebs, and dirt.

But as they searched further, they found several bloody stains on the flooring near a chest.

Opening it yielded a journal full of ramblings about the merits of necromancy and the plans of whoever they were after for different body parts.

"Eww" Freyya shriveled her freckled nose in disgust as she read portions of it over Arn's shoulder.

"Necromancers are all the same" shrugged Arn as he finished perusing the journal and slapped it shut.

"How would you know?" queried Freyya as they both continued searching the room.
"Without the long life story.....let's just say I've killed my share of them and leave it at that" Arn replied before stopping to examine a wardrobe carefully.

"What have we here?" he muttered before shoving the wardrobe aside to reveal a small passage into a hidden space.

Arn heard Freyya shudder and noted she refused to enter the blood spattered space filled with a small altar lit with candles and a table filled with various organs, bones, and body parts.

The stench was terrible, but Arn was focused on finding out who was behind this.

Scouring the area, he found another journal but it had nothing in it that would identify anyone.

After some more searching, he found a strange amulet and a pamphlet evidently written by someone here in Windhelm about the actions of said murderer.

"Who is this Viola Giordano?" asked Arn, eyeing the pamphlet.

Freyya opened her mouth to answer, but Arn looked up at her just in time to see a dark outline appear behind her.

Arn didn't even have time to holler a warning as he saw a nasty hooked blade descending towards Freyya's neck.

"TiiD KLO UL!"

Everything around Arn froze in place as he sprinted forward, watching the descending blade slow to a crawl in the air as he slowed time down.

Grabbing Freyya by the collar of her breastplate and pulling her forward, it cleared her of the blade arc as time sped up again and the blade sliced through thin air.

"I've come too far! I'm too close for anyone to be meddling with my work!" hissed a middle aged Imperial man who staggered back momentarily on having his target suddenly several feet forward and the burly Nord Dragonborn in front of him, glaring at him across the darkness of the secret passage.

"It's over man. Your foolishness is at an end" growled Arn as he drew sword and shield.

"The only thing at an end will be you!" replied the man angrily, charging with hooked blade in one hand and dagger in the other.

Arn waited until the man was about to swing into him with his blades. Then he struck out and kicked the man on the right side of his hip, knocking him off balance and backward.

Arn then brought Dawnbreaker up in an arc, cutting across the man's right bicep, making him drop the hooked blade, before coming around and down across the other bicep, forcing him to drop the dagger as well.

The Imperial man staggered backward and fell to the floor, rasping in pain as he cringed his arms closer together, bleeding onto his shirt.

Arn was about to stride forward and finish things off, but he saw the man's lips moving in some sort of magic incantation and caught the glare of something magic happening behind him.

Spinning around, he saw the body parts had animated together into fleshy corpses, rising from the
tables and beginning to close on a stunned Freyya.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded forward past Freyya and stopped in front of the middle undead corpse, slicing powerfully through it with Dawnbreaker.

It must have been a particularly pleasing feat to Meridia, for the impact of Dawnbreaker's fire effect actually turned into an explosion of light, making the other two undead corpses disintegrate into piles of gore.

The explosion of light stunned even Arn for a moment, even though it had happened before and he knew it could happen anytime Meridia found his feats particularly pleasing.

When the light subsided, he spun and eyed the shocked Imperial man who'd gotten to his feet and was staring forlornly at the bits and pieces of flesh all over the floor.

Then, as the man's terrified look followed the floor up to Arn as he strode forward, he turned and took off running.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Then Arn was running after him, but time had slowed down and the man had barely made it into the next room before Arn was running by his motionless form and put his foot right in the way as time returned to normal speed.

"Ughhhfff!" the Imperial man went sprawling over Arn's foot.

"Fool, you're not getting away" growled Arn confidently as he prodded the tip of Dawnbreaker to the back of the man's head.

It took a few moments before Freyya ran into the room in astonishment and then ran outside to summon guards to come get the culprit.

Once the guards had bound and led away the man Arn was informed to be named Calixto Corrium, he turned to find Freyya still staring at Arn in shock, her eyes so wide Arn wondered how it was they didn't hurt.

"What?" he finally asked as they left the house Hjerim.

"I...just...how...how did you do that?" she stuttered out.

"How did I do what?" Arn asked nonchalantly as they followed behind the guards.

"You were in one place one second, then across the room in another! And then that last time you were in a completely different room! How in Oblivion did you catch up to him so fast?!" she marveled.

"It's Dragonborn stuff, lass. That's about the only way I can explain it" Arn lied, not wanting to give Ulfric any more knowledge or specifics about what he could or couldn't do.

After speaking to an overjoyed steward, Arn was paid handsomely back both the amount taken by the gate guards and then some as reward for catching the murderer.

As he turned to leave, Freyya approached him and bowed slightly.
"Thank you for your service, Dragonborn. It was truly a privilege to see the power of the gods at work, helping the people" she stated with formality, still fixing him with an intense, scrutinizing look.

Arn simply nodded before he made to leave again.

"If there's anything else I can do....Anything else you need, please, let me know" she practically stepped in front of him.

Arn was about to sigh and dismiss her with some degree of annoyance, but then he remembered something he needed to take care of.

"Actually...um...I...uh...need to find somewhere I can get a young woman some clothes"

"What sort of clothes?"

"Well..." Arn scratched the back of his head, feeling a little embarrassed "all of them?"

The resulting shopping trip wasn't near as embarrassing as it would have been if Arn had tried to do it on his own.

The only real embarrassing moment was when Arn had to explain to Freyya that Lydia was rather...well endowed and that any breaststrap or leathers would have to have plenty of room for an ample pair of breasts.

Returning to the Inn that evening, Arn was relieved to find Ulfric had kept his word and removed all the guards.

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't still being watched.

Knocking carefully and hollering through the door, Arn shouldered his way into Lydia's room with a newly purchased pack with Lydia's new clothes and armor.

Arn was surprised to find she wasn't in the bed, but instead over in the corner sitting with her knees tucked up in the wooden barrel that passed for a bath tub, soapy suds obscuring her nakedness, but enough skin showing to cause Arn to gulp and look away immediately.

"It's okay. I made sure you won't see any of my womanly parts...again" Lydia greeted him with a something between relief and sarcasm.

"I tried to tell you before. I didn't see anything specific...just the side--"

"But you wanted to see more. Didn't you?" Lydia smirked at him.

"N--uh--that's..." Arn stuttered, wanting to instinctively deny it, but realizing it would be a lie if he did.

Arn sighed in frustration and fixed her with as stern a look as he could work up as she smiled at him mischievously with her chin on her knees "You're trying to trick me with my own words now. That's low"

"I've been cooped up in here for almost a week. I've been plotting" she continued grinning.

Arn returned the mischievous grin. He knew exactly how to derail her planned attack.

Withdrawing the clothes from her pack, he began laying them out on the bed, taking care to make sure she saw each piece.
It only took a few pieces and Arn could see he had her attention as she scrutinized each piece he put down.

Acting preemptively, Arn handed her a large towel, then sat down on the opposite side of the room, facing away while she got dressed in her new things.

Arn smiled smugly to himself as he listened to Lydia happily comment on each piece, but before he knew it he was nodding off into dreamless sleep.

Arn awoke slowly to sunlight coming through the small paned window in their room.

He slowly realized several things.

Firstly, he was laying on his side in the lone bed. He wasn't wearing any of his armor, in fact, not even his leathers. Thankfully he could still feel his small pants on and a cotton overshirt.

None of that was as surprising as realizing the warmth at his back was the equally undressed Lydia spooned to his back, the soft firmness of her breasts pressed through her overshirt and Arn's against his muscular back and her soft arms and calloused hands clasped around his chest.

Normally, he always quickly extricated himself from these positions, but Arn still felt exhausted, realizing the only night's rest he'd gotten recently had been a few hours sitting in a chair.

Maybe it was the tiredness. Maybe it was being so close and caring for Lydia so much this last week, but Arn simply snuggled in closer to her warmth, moving so that she rested her head against the back of his neck, her warm, even breaths soothing him back into a deep sleep.

They spent most of the rest of the day and night like that, though Arn wasn't aware of it since he slept soundly.

The next morning, after bathing, Arn helped Lydia into her armor since she was still moving gingerly at times and they began packing to leave.

"I must say I'm impressed" Lydia chimed as they were loading packs onto their horses "I wasn't sure you would know how to buy clothes for me that would actually fit"

"I had to explain it to Freyya a few times, but I don't think I did a bad job" proudly replied Arn, cinching down one of the bags.

"Wait a minute. Who's Freyya?" asked Lydia suspiciously.

"Oh, she's some assistant of the Steward. She was helping me in the murder investigation and afterward, I asked for her help finding women's clothes."

Lydia sighed and shook her head in disappointment.

"I leave you alone for a few days and you've already got another woman following you around. How sad..." she smirked.

"All she did was assist in the investigation and help get your clothes. I would expect you to be more thankful for her involvement in the process" Arn tried to remonstrate indignantly.

"Did she just happen to know my measurements perfectly or was that your doing?"

"I'm..uh...not sure what you mean" lied Arn as he tried to distract himself with finishing up packing.
"Well, normally, when someone gets me a new outfit, it doesn't fit because it's too tight or too loose up here" Lydia gestured to her bust as she mounted her horse "Yet, these leathers and breast strap fit perfectly"

"Well...I guess you were fortunate then..." was all Arn could come up with in reply, avoiding her smirking gaze.

"So you're telling me you had nothing to do with making sure my tits were comfortable" Lydia continued to query.

"I...uh...it's...important for anyone...who's going to be fighting...um...to be...c-completely comfortable...with...m-movements...uh" Arn stuttered out, feeling his face turn red with embarrassment and realizing he was retying the same knot again for the third time.

"Ah! Damn it, woman!" Arn exasperated, turning and fixing her with a frustrated look, hands on his hips "What's gotten into you?"

"It just took me awhile to realize you were so scared of treating me like a woman, that you started treating me like a child" Lydia's smirk disappeared, for a moment overshadowed by a pained frown before she just looked at him hopefully "I am NOT a child"

"Yes, I am very much aware of that" replied Arn exasperatedly, but deep down feeling her words hit home.

"Oh? Very 'much aware' are we?" Lydia's grin returned "And how far does that awareness extend?"

Arn wasn't sure if she meant the double entendre or not, but he dared not risk going there.

"That's it. No more bed rest for you. This is far too much mischief to be worth it" Arn replied, attempting to change the subject as he mounted his horse.

Just as they turned to leave, a shout from someone stopped him as a guard ran up.

"Dragonborn, before you leave, Jarl Ulfric requests you speak to him" the guard puffed, out of breath.

"I've already done everything the Jarl asked of me. I've no more time for any of his errands anymore" Arn growled and made to leave again.

"It is a command. He said you may not leave until you speak to him" uttered the guard as Arn saw a dozen more fan out in the road before them.

Arn sighed angrily.

"Lydia, I'll meet you on the west road. Go" Arn stated before turning to the guard "I'll have words with Ulfric, but my housecarl leaves FIRST"

"Ulfric only commands your presence. Your housecarl may go wherever she pleases" responded the guard.

Arn nodded and Lydia trotted on down the road, shooting him a worried look over her shoulder as she passed the gates.

Arn waited until she was well across the bridge and down the western road before wheeling his horse around and galloping angrily up to the Palace of Kings, the guards struggling to keep up.
Shoving the doors open loudly, it made the guards jump in surprise as Arn strode in with purpose, glaring at Ulfric from the other end of the hall.

Arn strode up angrily and was about to tear into Ulfric when he noticed all of the court members were dressed up in their finest, Ulfric included, wearing a long black fur robe over the Stormcloak crest on his battle armor and the Jagged Crown on his head.

"What new game is this, Ulfric? I told you I was leaving, regardless" snarled Arn.

"I would have talked to you sooner, but you seemed to be in greater need of rest yesterday. So I didn't disturb you."

"The prospect of disturbing me hasn't stopped you any other time"

"Come, come, Dragonborn. This isn't a time for hostilities, but celebration" urged Ulfric, motioning to the court members around him.

"You have five minutes before I'm suddenly not here anymore" retorted Arn, crossing his arms and leaning against the long table.

"Ya think ya can just stroll out--" began to chuckle Galmar before Arn cut him off.

"Freyya's seen what I can do" nodded Arn at Freyya, who he'd just noticed standing off to the side. "If I want to suddenly be somewhere else, I can be, and there's nothing any of you can do to stop me" retorted Arn forcefully.

"I'm well aware of all you can do...and all you've done for the people" Ulfric replied, motioning his hand to silence the reply from Galmar that surely would have come. "That is why I called you here, to make you a Thane of Eastmarch Hold and offer you a place here in Windhelm to call your home, if you so wish it"

Arn was stunned for a moment, having expected this charade to be another pretense for a quest or order of some sort.

"Well, what do you say, Dragonborn?" asked Ulfric with a grin, the first time Arn had actually seen him grin at all.

"W-why?"

"We've all had a chance to see that you truly are Dragonborn, and that you can vanquish Dragons and other threats to Nords everywhere. As such, I'm duty bound to do whatever I can to aid the agent of the gods" replied Ulfric regally, leaning back in his chair, stroking his brown beard streaked with gray.

Arn didn't think he believed a word of that, but he remembered being stopped by that Stormcloak patrol outside Kynesgrove.

It would give him more freedom of movement, and freedom from harassing guards or patrols as well as a sanctuary of sorts if he was ever back in this area.

If he could be on at least amiable terms with both factions, then it might help him distance himself from the damnable Civil War that everyone kept trying to push him towards.

Despite his dislike for Ulfric, and his gut reaction to tell him he could shove his Thaneship where the sun didn't shine, Arn slowly nodded his head.
"Very well, I accept, on one condition"

"What might that be?" Ulfric looked puzzled for a moment.

"I want no part of your war. The Imperials tried recruiting me and I turned them down. If this is your way of trying to recruit me, you'll get the same answer."

The mood in the room immediately turned a bit chilly as Arn noted the passion flare in Ulfric’s eyes and the look of utter disdain he got from Galmar.

After an awkward silence where everyone turned and looked at Ulfric, he finally leaned forward on his throne and eyed Arn carefully before replying.

"Much as I wish you would see the justice of our cause, I've extended the offer in good faith. We've seen the damage these beasts are causing and we are committed to helping end their threat."

"Then I accept your offer" Arn replied, still with arms crossed and leaning against the table.

"Good!" Ulfric relaxed and sat back in his throne "Freyya, whom you've already met, will be your housecarl" he gestured at her off to the side.

Arn noted how much prettier she looked out of the bundle of furs he'd seen her in up to that point, wearing a green frock with a fur neck cover with a small slit in the bodice where the valley of her pert breasts peeked through.

She was more beautiful than he'd realized before, and caught the wide eyed look of shock in her eyes as Ulfric made the announcement.

Perhaps she wasn't on board with this arrangement.

Arn realized as he contemplated this that Ulfric was still showering him with things. He'd apparently been given the house Hjerim as an abode and a servant named Calder to act as steward while Freyya was out protecting Arn.

Arn wasn't in the mood to be detained any longer. He could sort out anything about his new charges later. Right now he needed to get going.

"Whatever you’re planning, it will have to be without me as I must be leaving immediately and cannot delay any longer" Arn interrupted Ulfric.

"Freyya will meet you by the gates within the hour, then" Ulfric responded after an awkward silence.

Arn simply nodded, turned on his heel, and left the feast that broke out behind him, emerging back out into the cold, light snow and wind.

In less than an hour, Arn spotted Freyya riding up adorned again in her stormcloak armor and furs.

Her eyes were red and slightly puffy. She'd been crying.

"Look, if you wish to stay here in Windhelm--" Arn started.

"I'll do no such thing. I've been granted this opportunity to aid the Dragonborn. What kind of Stormcloak would I be to shy away from such" replied Freyya staunchly, avoiding his gaze, instead looking off into the snowy hills.

"Fine" Arn replied, not wanting to delay longer, and they rode off.
Trotting up to Lydia and her pack horse on the western road, she took one look at Freyya and threw her head up and sighed while simultaneously trying to smile genially at them.

"Let me guess, they made you a Thane?"

"Yep" Arn replied, not stopping as they continued on.

Arn was sure they would have an interesting conversation about this but the pace of their journey didn't allow it to happen as he needed all speed to get to the Thalmor Embassy in time.

Arn thought somewhere, Sheogorath must be laughing at him to end up with a third beautiful woman for a housecarl.

*Great, another puzzle to solve...* mused Arn.

Chapter End Notes

1. Freyya is not to be confused with the Frea from the Dragonborn DLC. This Freyya is an OC of my own and serves several purposes if you hadn't guessed at least one already.

2. As an unattached male Dragonborn, it only makes perfect sense that Jarls would use attractive young women as housecarls to curry favor with an individual as powerful as the Dragonborn.

3. Though there are other circumstances that fell into place to make Jordis and Lydia housecarls, Freyya is the first (not the last either, considering there are some other, more unsavory Jarls to come) to really be an obvious pawn used to get influence with the Dragonborn.
Chapter Summary

Arn crashes the Thalmor's party...and runs into some familiar faces.

Arn looked up again at the annoying windmill creaking loudly overhead for the dozenth time.

Arn wondered how anyone could possibly live within hearing distance of such a racket, as he waited to rendezvous with Delphine and Melborn at a farm outside Solitude's imposing walls.

He'd left both Lydia and Freyya in a disgruntled state in Whiterun. Arn wasn't sure if Lydia was more angry that he was leaving her behind or because he was leaving her with Freyya, who had been extremely quiet ever since joining them, only speaking if she had to.

The only thing that had really gotten a strong reaction out of her was when Arn told her to ditch the Stormcloak armor since it could cause problems, depending where they went.

Even in Whiterun, walking around in Stormcloak armor was raising eyebrows and drawing stares from the guards.

Of course, that could also just have been because she was a good looking lass, but Arn knew sooner or later, walking around with the Stormcloak crest showing would cause problems he didn't want.

She had stared at him again with a pained look of shock on her features before swallowing down her disappointment and hanging her head as she removed them and carefully put them away in a drawer.

He hadn't really had much time to deal with much else, tasking Lydia with finding some suitably fitting replacement armor for Freyya as well as getting some improvements made for her new set.

Arn had ridden all day and through the night to get to Solitude on time, dispensing with any attempts of a subtle entrance since time was short.

He'd met Melborn quickly and left him with one of the sets of Thalmor armor he'd taken from the agents by the Talos shrine.

If he was going to be sneaking around, best to look like he belonged there.

Of course, Dawnbreaker was definitely going to stand out, so his ebony longsword would have to stand in. He brought his usual bow and arrows, but the lighter Thalmor shield would feel strange to wield after normally using heavier ones.

He couldn't help but feel heavy of heart a bit after not getting to see Elisif again. He'd learned from Jordis that Elisif had gone to the Imperial City for the bi-annual meeting of the Imperial Council and no one knew exactly when she'd be back.

"Psst..." Delphine's hiss interrupted his contemplations as she motioned him over behind the barn.

Sauntering around the corner, he met Melborn and Delphine next to a wagon hooked up to a fine set of horses.
A nasty gash bandaged up on Delphine's arm immediately caught his attention.

"What happened?" Arn wondered, immediately concerned.

"Doesn't matter. It's a scratch" replied Delphine before fixing him with a severe gaze "Did you give EVERYTHING you need to Malborn? There's no going back after this"

"Yes, it's all taken care of"

"Was there an invitation at Proudspire Manor?"

In response, Arn held up a small folded letter with broken wax seal.

"Excellent, now all you need to do is change into these and you can be on your way"

"Oh no..." Arn murmured, looking down at the contents of the box.

"What?"

"An enemy of mine" Arn sighed

"Who?" Delphine grew worried.

"Finery" Arn scoffed, drawing what he could only suppose was a jacket with fur borders from the top of the box "This will be more unpleasant than I thought"

Several hours later, Arn sat uncomfortably hunched in the back of Melborn's wagon as it rolled through the large fenced gates to the Thalmor embassy.

Arn was a little surprised at just how large the embassy estate was. You could probably fit the lower district of Whiterun inside the fences.

There were four different housing structures with at least three of them interconnected, and the entire grounds was crawling with enough archers and justiciars to have no problem taking out an imperial regiment.

Looking around at the off-tan, almost golden skin of the Aldmeri Dominion soldiers as they patrolled, Arn felt a spike of cold anger rising in him, memories haunting him.

Given their long life spans, he mused probably all of them were Great War veterans and wondered if any of them had been in Aranyela's forces.

The wagon stopping jarred his thoughts back to the task at hand.

Being an invited guest, Arn was escorted into the main hall and left standing just inside the main doors while Melborn and the others went in through the servants' entrance.

Arn stood there awkwardly by himself as he surveyed the guests milling about the hall around a long banquet table, overflowing with foods, delicacies, and drinks of every type.

He spotted the familiar faces of Jarl Idgrod Ravencrone and her daughter Ingrid, Two merchants he'd dealt with in Solitude but couldn't remember their names, and even Erikur and Bryling.

Still there were plenty more that he didn't recognize.
As he was pondering what to do next, a Thalmor woman stepped suddenly in front of him, eyeing him intensely with a feigned smile.

"You're....the one they're calling the Dragonborn. Are you not?" she nodded to him slightly.

"Yes, that would be me" Arn nodded slightly back, a bit unsure what was customary or if he should even care.

"I'm surprised. We didn't think you were in the area, but sent you an invitation anyway. We have these gatherings as a show of good faith. Many view us with much hostility, but once you get to know us, you'll see we only have the best of intentions for Tamriel" the Thalmor woman continued in a lecturing tone, clapping her hands behind her back as she continued eyeing Arn thoroughly.

"I'm sure you do...mused Arn with a feigned smile of good nature in turn as the woman motioned him further into the hall.

"I am the Aldmeri Dominion's Emissary to this region, Elenwen. If you have any questions or anything to report, seek me out immediately. If time allows, later, I'd very much love to hear of your tales" she continued with another feigned smile as they walked.

Of course you would...

"But alas, there are some things I must attend to" she stopped their stroll "So until later then, enjoy of whatever sort of goods you wish. We've spared no expense" she motioned at the table full of food.

"Thank you" Arn lied with a nod as Elenwen moved away towards a set of double doors.

Moving off to the side and leaning against a wall, Arn noted out of his peripheral vision Elenwen was moving from guard to guard, whispering some sort of instructions to each.

They couldn't possibly be onto him already. He'd only just gotten there. Then Arn chastised himself for not remembering the lessons of the Great War.

The Thalmor were always more shrewd than you gave them credit for.

The most successful campaigns against them were predicated on their overconfidence or strategizing in such a way to make them try to over-think their own plans.

No, Delphine had been wrong. The Thalmor suspected something and Arn needed to move quickly before they manufactured any proof to detain him with.

"I never saw any visions of you here in this place" creaked out Idgrod Ravencrone at his elbow, almost making him jump.

"That's because I'm trying to be discreet about what I have to do" nearly whispered Arn, taking stock of the positioning of the guards and the servants' entrance.

"So, you're saying you need a distraction?" she chuckled lowly.

Arn looked at her, surprised for a moment.

"Yes..."

"No problem, an old woman can get away with anything" Idgrod smiled with a mischievous twinkle in her eye before turning and sauntering back across the room.
Twenty minutes later, once Arn had carefully made his way near the servants' entrance, he saw Idgrod carefully climb onto the banquet table before throwing her arms in the air.

"I HAVE SEEN A VISION! A VISION OF DRAGONS AND A CITY BURNING!..."

She continued her ranting despite the protests of several of the guests. Eventually this got heated from both sides, Idgrod intent on continuing at the top of her lungs and several of the guests intent on shutting her up.

Soon, the guards against the wall moved forward to calm and separate the aggrieved parties, giving Arn the window he needed to sneak through the door into the kitchen.

Another five minutes later and Arn was strapping the last greenish hued gauntlet of Thalmor armor on as Melborn handed him his weapons.

Donning the helmet, Arn moved this way and that to try to get the feel of the stuff.

"You don't look like one of them" venture Melborn cautiously with a worried frown on his face.

"Not up close" Arn muttered, realizing he was too wide shouldered and thick with muscle to pass for one of the slimmer Altmer "but from a distance, it'll do."

As Melborn was about to leave, Arn grabbed his shoulder.

"Look, I know what Delphine said earlier, but based on the reception I got from Elenwen, the Thalmor must suspect something already."

"Were you seen leaving?" hissed Melborn with a look of panic slowly etching themselves onto his features.

"No, but they will see that I'm not there anymore. That will start things I don't think you should be around for" replied Arn cautiously, shooting a look around the small room they were in.

"Very well, I will try to make my departure as soon as possible" replied Melborn after a gulp.

"Wait for them to focus on me. That should give you the opportunity" Arn tried to reassure him before Melborn nodded and departed.

Arn waited a little then began sneaking through the mansion.

As he moved, he felt a spike of adrenaline, as if he was back in the rolling woodlands of Cyrodiil or the arid shrubbery and desert of Hammerfell, sneaking forward to take out a Thalmor sentry or ambush a scouting party.

Moving into a hallway, he spotted a Justiciar standing over some parchments by a desk in an adjoining room.

There was one way to stealthily deal with Thalmor.

Sneaking forward, Arn grabbed the shocked Justiciar by the top of his head while stabbing forward through his throat, ending his life and any threat of spells instantly.

Shutting the door, he spent a good ten minutes rifling through papers but finding nothing of interest.

Arn spent the next ten minutes checking rooms in the corridor, but didn't really bother with any since none of them looked like they were anything but guest quarters.
Arn moved around the corner and nearly ran into a sentry that must’ve just come through the door to the outside.

"Wait! You're not--" was all the Thalmor managed to get out before Arn punched him in the throat with his swordhand fist.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed down as Arn stepped around the sword drawing Thalmor, reached up and snapped his neck.

Depositing the body in a side room, Arn stepped outside and sauntered down the sidewalk as though he belonged there, noting there was a group of guards out front receiving urgent remonstrations from a Justiciar.

Moving through the door of the outlying building, Arn realized immediately that this was the place he was looking for.

There were several doors with bars on them and a double door that led into a large study or office.

Arn sneaked into the office just as doors further down the hall opened and several Thalmor hurried forward and out the door into the courtyard.

Closing the doors and latching them, Arn heard shouting and footsteps on the grounds.

They must have found a body or grew worried enough about his absence to start turning the grounds upside down.

He didn't have much time.

After short while of searching, Arn hit the gold mine in the form of Elenwen's personal notes and files on literally everything going on in Skyrim, particularly the Dragons.

Disappointed that it seemed the Thalmor were just as much in the dark about the Dragons as he was, Arn still tucked it and all of the other entries in her book away in his pack.

He could read the rest later. Tucking away any other books that looked interesting, particularly the investigation notes about the Blades, and Ulfric Stormcloak's dossier, Arn then proceeded to make a mess of everything else.

He needed it to look like a robbery at least, pocketing several satchels of coins and surprised to find a rather rare looking and large gemstone in a palm sized box.

Packing it away, Arn was about to leave when he heard noise coming through the door in Elenwen's study.

Apparently, she had her own personal holding cells entrance.

Arn stopped dead in his tracks as he realized for the first time there were actually people currently held there.

The common sense part of him was screaming at him to escape. He had what he came for, but the images and memories of survivors of Thalmor torture came to mind and he immediately sneaked through the holding cell entrance.

The sickening smell of urine, waste, and blood immediately assaulted his nostrils as he sneaked
down a small wooden staircase to the space below, listening to voices and noises growing louder the closer he got.

From an overlooking platform, Arn could see down into the holding cells and what he saw made his blood boil with rage.

There were several people tied down in different cells, but in the last one two Thalmor soldiers were holding a woman down, arms out to the side on her knees as Erikur held her dress up at her waist while he ravaged her from behind.

As the poor woman grunted with each thrust, Erikur was pantingly trying to tell the uninterested looking Thalmor what they were missing out on. He never got the chance to finish.

Releasing his first arrow, Arn pegged the Thalmor on the right through the light armor chest plating, pitching him over backward.

Erikur and the remaining Thalmor both jerked their heads around, but Arn's second arrow was already on its way, hitting the rising Thalmor painfully in the crotch.

He staggered back with a scream before Arn's third arrow pinned him to the wall through the throat, his breath gurgling to a stop.

"W-what are you doing? I-I was given permission by Elenwen herself!" Erikur screamed, withdrawing himself from the woman and shrinking back into the holding cell away from Arn, who'd jumped down from the overlook onto a table below.

As soon as no one was holding her anymore, the woman covered herself back up and huddled over against the right side, covering her head with a sob.

"You mistake me for one of them" growled Arn as he took the Thalmor helmet off, sauntering forward menacingly.

"Y-you! Y-you c-can't be here!" Erikur yelled in shock, his pants still around his knees, huddled in the corner.

"I warned you there would come a day when you hid behind the wrong people" Arn sneered, drawing his ebony crackling longsword.

"W-w-wait w-we c-can make a--" Erikur stuttered out, putting his hands up, but he didn't get a chance to finish as Arn cleaved his head from his shoulders mid-sentence.

Arn spit on the slumping headless corpse, wiping his blade off on the dead Thalmor's robes as he turned to regard the woman huddled to the side.

"Wh-why did you do that?" she murmured, looking up at him from the straw covered floor.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" Arn gently admonished, kneeling down and offering her a hand.

"Now they'll think I did it! I'll be a hunted criminal for the rest of my life!" she exclaimed as Arn recognized her as the Bosmeri serving girl in the main hall.

Arn heard noises from overhead as someone must be in the main hallway leading to the cells. He didn't have time for this.
"Look, I--"

Just then, the doors up top burst open and two Thalmor dragged a protesting and fighting Malborn in onto the overlook.

Immediately whirling, drawing bow and arrow, Arn nocked and fired, nailing the left Thalmor through the chest as both groups noticed each other.

The other Thalmor let Malborn loose to draw his bow, nocked an arrow and fired, sidestepping Arn's second arrow, forcing Arn to cover behind the corner of the bars, the arrow whistling past his head.

Arn leaned around the corner and fired a third arrow, but the spokes of the railing blocked his arrow, the Thalmor keeping on the move.

However, the Thalmor had become so preoccupied with Arn, that he'd forgotten about Malborn, who'd pulled the dead Thalmor's longsword from its sheath.

The sentry turned just in time to realize his mistake as Malborn sliced into his neck with an angry war cry.

"Malborn, get this girl moving while I get the others out!" hollered Arn as he dashed out of the first cell.

Arn opened the cell doors and moved to release the occupants of their bindings.

The first was a Breton young man tied up and stripped to the waist, but it was what was on the rack nearby that sent chills up Arn's spine.

There was a large, clear jar filled with greenish water and dozens of little black writhing critters inside....pain leeches.

Pain leeches were little creatures the Thalmor among others favored to use as torture, attaching them all over the victim's bodies. When they latched on, they released toxins that caused local paralysis of the muscles but extreme pain in the nervous system.

If applied all over the body, it left a person helpless but in excruciating and unending pain. If left on for a long time, the leeches left little scars that not even magicka could completely heal.

Illegal in some places, about the only upside was that they were very rare and hard to breed or find in the wild.

"Thank the gods" the young man breathed in relief as Arn unstrapped him "If you'd come any later, they'd have started putting those....things on me"

"Hurry and get your things. We don't have much time" Arn replied, moving over and carefully picking up the jar of pain leeches.

As the Breton left the cell and searched for his clothing and weapons, Arn angrily threw the pain leech jar down against the floor, destroying it and leaving the leeches flopping around on the floor.

Arn then proceeded to gleefully crush every last leech beneath his boots before moving to the next cell.

No more pain leeches for you, Elenwen....

Opening the next cell, about half a dozen haggard looking Nord men and women stumbled forward.
"They were going to kill us for worshipping Talos" they remarked as Arn yanked the door open.

"Get yourself some armor and weapons. We're not out of this yet" Arn ordered as he wondered how he was going to get all these people out of here without any casualties.

"I know a way out. There is a place they dump the bodies into a cave" answered the Breton as he motioned Arn and the others over to a trapdoor in the floor.

"Perfect! Start getting them down there while I take care of this last cell" Arn replied as he fumbled with the keys to unlock the door.

He yanked the cell door open before he suddenly stopped, recognizing the face of the man strapped down in the cell.

"Falnir?"

The pitiful bard turned his head to the side and Arn could see marks on his cheeks where he'd cried for a long period of time as Arn began to note the little leeches attached all over the poor bard's body, spread eagled on a rack.

"P-p-please...k-k-kill m-me" Falnir sobbed at Arn, a look of abject terror and pain in his eyes.

Arn knew even if he took the time to get all the leeches off, Falnir wouldn't be able to walk or even stand, nor would the pain wear off any time soon.

Even as he was thinking over the options, he heard commotion coming from overhead. There was no time.

"I'm sorry this is all I can do for you" Arn replied soberly as he stabbed through Falnir's chest with his longsword, putting the sad man out of his misery.

As Falnir's breath ceased, Arn picked up a lantern from the main area and doused the oil all over Falnir's body before setting it ablaze, burning up all the leeches.

Just then the doors overhead burst open and several Thalmor entered, shouting out when they saw the people down below funneling into the trap door.

They needed more time.

Two Thalmor sentries and another Justiciar followed, though the Justiciar looked decidedly older and wore slightly different robes. Arn mused he must be in charge or at least an assistant of some sort to Elenwen.

Focused as they were on the escaping people, they didn't see Arn taking aim with his bow in the smoke of the last cell until an arrow pegged the first one descending the stairs through the face.

The second got his shield up in time to block Arn's second arrow, but was oblivious to the fact Arn slowed time down to aim over the top of the shield on the third arrow, hitting him in the face.

"Detain him! We need him alive!" yelled the Justiciar at the other two Thalmor running down the stairs, leaping over their fallen comrades' corpses.

Arn was tempted to focus on the closer Thalmor sentries, but experience taught him that the Justiciar was the more dangerous threat.

Turning to fire on the Justiciar, he realized he was too late as his bow began to turn into ice.
Dropping it, he drew sword and shield, sprinting out of the cell and jumping off the table, cleared the first Thalmor sentry before slicing the neck of the second as he landed, the whole time feeling ice chunks hurled past him by the Justiciar.

Rolling to the side to avoid the back swing that inevitably came from the remaining sentry, Arn came up swinging, catching the sentry's sword wrist, severing the hand.

The sentry clutched his hand with a scream that was silenced as Arn stabbed through his throat.

Then an aura of cold struck Arn just as he removed his blade, feeling suddenly burdened and sluggish as he tried to get out of it, but instead stumbled further away from the stairs, collapsing near the cell doors as his body failed to respond, feeling numb almost all over.

"Not bad, but I would've expected more from a mythical creature like the Dragonborn" muttered the proud Justiciar as he stepped onto the railing, and then levitated down in the air, floating in a spell shield just over the table, looking down snidely at Arn.

"Come, come....don't tell me that's all you have" smirked the Thalmor.

"It isn't" replied Arn with a sneer "FUS RO DAH!"

The Thalmor's eyes grew wide for a split second before the wave of force shattered his spell shield and hurled him backward in the air, his head connecting with a rafter from the bottom of the overlooking platform with a sickening crunch as the skull was crushed inwards.

The Thalmor was dead before he hit the floor.

Arn suddenly felt like a weight was lifted from his body as he stood, trying to shake his arms and legs to get circulation flowing good again as he shivered, turning to see the prisoners who hadn't gone through the trapdoor were standing stock still, staring at him.

"Go! More will come!" growled Arn as he hobbled over to them.

As the last one shuffled through the opening, Arn threw down a lantern on the straw and boxes in a corner, setting it ablaze.

That should cover our tracks for a bit and give them something else to occupy their time with.

And with that, Arn shut the trapdoor over his head as he carefully climbed down the rocks with help from others down below since there was no ladder.

Now, to get away from here.

A day later, Arn knelt carefully by a small waterfall in the river south of Solitude as Delphine carefully made her way to him.

"When I didn't hear from Melborn, I feared the worst" she whispered, kneeling next to him and shooting a cautionary look around.

"It didn't go exactly as planned, but I found out quite a bit" Arn replied, also uneasily feeling like Thalmor might pop out at any second.

At length, Arn explained everything he'd found in Elenwen's study and the information he'd gotten from the Breton young man, one Etienne Rarnis.
"Esbern! Esbern's alive!" Delphine exclaimed with a smile. It was actually the first time in a long time Arn could remember seeing her smile "That IS good news....but you said the Thalmor know about him already and are looking for him"

"Yes"

"We have to get to him first"

"You won't be able to go hardly anywhere if they already know you're in the area too and are looking for you by name"

"Damn them!"

"If you need a place to stay out of sight for awhile, you can stay at any of my holdings, though house Hjerim in Windhelm would probably be safest, given it's in Stormcloak territory, just tell my steward Calder that I sent you."

"I appreciate the offer, but I need to tie a few things up in Riverwood first. Meanwhile, you need to get to Riften as soon as possible and find Esbern before the Thalmor do."

"Sure--"

"Arn, you do realize you're now going to be hunted too."

"They can't prove it was me. All of them that saw my face are dead, and all the prisoners scattered safely away."

"That won't stop them from acting. They just won't do anything publicly. In the wilds though, anything could happen" Delphine cautioned with a hand on his arm.

"It's not the wilds I'm worried about"

"What do you mean?"

"In the dungeon, I found a bard that used to be involved with one of my housecarls. He'd been severely tortured with pain leeches" Delphine cringed at the mention of the leeches "The only reason they would've had him there is to find out about me."

"I told you they would've already taken an interest in you"

"Didn't think they'd go to that extent with people I was connected to" Arn mused sadly with a worried frown.

"I'm not sure what it's like to be a Thane, but maybe it would be wiser to cut your connections loose or at least...."

"At least what?"

"You shouldn't be telling them what you're doing. Your housecarls don't need to know everything. You think it's a coincidence all your housecarls are beautiful young women? Don't be a fool, Arn" Delphin hissed.

"We'll rendezvous in the patch of land I was given outside Morthal after I find Esbern" Arn sighed angrily before turning and disappearing into the woods.
A Late Night Conversation: Whiterun Interlude

Chapter Summary

Arn returns to Whiterun to find a surprise. Needing answers, he consults Jarl Balgruuf.

Arn rode furiously down the dusty road west of Whiterun in the waning light of the day.

"Don't be a fool, Arn..."

Arn couldn’t help but be haunted by both what he'd seen in the Thalmor Embassy and some of Delphine's words as they'd parted.

Gritting his teeth, he urged his horse on even faster, making sure he'd reach Whiterun before it was too late at night.

The full weight of being hunted by the Thalmor was beginning to sink in as he made his journey, and it wasn't just putting him in danger.

Lydia and Jordis were probably prime targets for them, as well as Freyya and Calder, though the latter two were new to his service and Calder wasn't likely in any danger in Windhelm.

He had left Cyrodiil precisely because he was a wanted man and trying to lay low. Now here he was, doing exactly what he shouldn't be: drawing attention to himself.

Maybe going to the Embassy as the Dragonborn was a mistake. Maybe he just should've tried to sneak in and get what he needed.

One thing was for sure. Moping about it wouldn't change anything.

The first thing would be to take precautionary measures for Jordis since she was in the most immediate danger. Then see what Lydia and Freyya had got up to in his absence.

Arn's head was on a swivel, looking across the plains as darkness fell and he nodded to the stable boy as he reached the Whiterun stables, the horse panting with exertion.

Just as he made to dismount, two cloaked figures emerged from the darkness of the stable stalls, cutting the front legs of his steed, sending Arn pitching forward off the horse as it went down.

"Death to the Heretic!" cried one of them, a woman, as Arn rolled forward on landing, narrowly missed by a blade swing.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn turned and burst past the two assailants and fallen horse, stopping out in front of the stables, giving him time to draw his bow as the two looked around confused for a moment before turning and spotting him.

"The True Dragonborn commands y--" the woman started to cry out before an arrow from Arn's bow caught her in the throat, just below the strange mask both of them were wearing.

"Miraak commands your death before his return!" cried the other, the light of magicka flaring to life
in his non-sword hand.

Arn let loose another arrow, but had to sidestep left as a large chunk of ice went flying past him.

His arrow glanced off the shoulder plating of the strange outfit his assailant wore as he advanced fearlessly at Arn, still firing icy blasts at him.

His assailant then began freezing Arn's arrows as he fired them, continuing to advance.

This would not stand.

Rolling to the side to avoid a near point blank ice blast, Arn dropped his bow and came up blocking with his shield, an ice blast crashing against it before the bottom portion impacted the chin of the assassin, making him stumble back, swinging wildly at Arn with his sword.

"Now you die, false Dragonborn!" the assassin coughed, steadying himself.

By now, Arn had drawn sword as well and closed on the assailant, batting his spell hand away with his shield before cleaving down on his sword hand before he could do any more with it.

The heavy armored gauntlet prevented Arn from cleaving it off, but it still made the assassin drop the sword with a cry of pain as Arn kicked him away.

"You will not--" the assassin began to assert as he tried to get to his feet.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The proximity of the unrelenting wave of force caused the assassin to disintegrate into a small crater in the ground as an explosion of dirt, sticks, hay, and blood appeared where the assailant had been.

"False Dragonborn my arse" spat Arn angrily as he sheathed his sword, turning to regard the stable boy, huddled crying by Arn's now dead horse.

"It's alright, lad. They're dead now" Arn tried to reassure the boy as he knelt next to him.

"I-I'm s-s-sorry, th-they said th-they'd k-kill me if I t-tried to warn you" the boy sniffled out before bawling anew.

Arn looked down sadly at the lad, no more than eight years old probably, sitting next to the dead horse, stroking its neck as he cried.

Here was yet someone else who's life had been put in danger simply because someone wanted to get at Arn.

Rising angrily to his feet, Arn rapidly moved and searched the remaining assassin's corpse, but found nothing to identify them save for a strange note full of rubbish about some sot named Miraak and how urgent it was they find the "False" Dragonborn.

Taking the strange mask and note from the dead assassin, Arn marched angrily into Whiterun's gates, shouting at the guards about being accosted in the stables of his own hold's capital.

Reaching Breezehome, a spike of alarm went through him as he spotted a pair of burly, well armored men standing outside his door.

_Gods, what now?_
He made to enter, but predictably, the men stepped in the way, holding out their hands to stop him.

"No one keeps me from my own home" snarled Arn.

"We must speak with your housecarl about some important matters" muttered one quietly.

Arn noted neither of them were Nord, and their armor was uniform and of a make that was more consistent with Redguards or some Cyrodiilic nobility with exotic tastes.

"And who is 'we'?

At this question, both men looked at each other a little puzzled before turning to answer him.

"Uh...it...it's not entirely safe in these lands and our lord--er...employer has deemed it wiser to travel anonymously. We apologize for the inconvenience. We were ordered to compensate you for whatever time or money is lost while we conduct our business."

"And what 'business' would that be?"

"I'm sorry, but we cannot speak on such. They are private matters."

"Are they now?" Arn wondered sarcastically aloud, backing up slightly as he formulated in his mind what to do.

"TIID KLO UL"

Time slowed down as Arn ducked around the leftmost guard, opened the door, and slipped through before time sped back up.

He didn't have time to enjoy the effect it might've had on them as he looked at the scene before him.

A finely dressed Redguard man sat rigidly at the table with a book and several parchments spread out.

Lydia sat across from him, looking serious but also as if something greatly upset her.

"What nonsense is this?" Arn snarled at the Redguard, who was startled to find an imposing Nord instantly inside the door and locking his guards out.

In response though, the Redguard man didn't say anything. Instead he just turned and looked at Lydia as if for guidance.

"I'm sorry this happened, Arn. I...uh..didn't know anything about this" Lydia replied apologetically, pursing her hands in her lap.

Then it hit Arn....her parents....or at least her mother maybe. Of course, Arn wasn't sure of the whole story either. There was no way she was Redguard, but these must be representatives for whoever it was.

"Is this about your...family?" Arn queried slowly, crossing his arms.

"It would seem so" Lydia also replied quietly.

Arn couldn't help but sigh out his annoyance and frustration, crossing his arms and eyeing the Redguard representative critically as Freyya suddenly appeared at the bottom of the stairs.
"These are sensitive matters and I was instructed that it was to be discussed privately with Lydia here" the Redguard man stated with a precise diction, returning Arn's severe gaze.

Arn was surprised to see Lydia look at him imploringly while wringing her hands slightly.

"You wish me to leave?" Arn couldn't help but mutter in surprise.

"Just until we finish?" Lydia asked more than replied.

There was an awkward silence as all parties regarded each other for a moment.

"Fine, but she stays here as a neutral observer" Arn replied, pointing to a surprised Freyya "She will ensure nothing...goes ill with the proceedings"

The representative opened his mouth to protest, but instead looked at Lydia for approval, who gave a small nod of approval, much to his annoyance as he turned to regard Freyya.

"I'll be back in an hour or two. Be done by then" was all he cautioned as he whirled and strode back out the door to the stunned guards.

"Hey! How did you--"

"As you were" Arn grumbled as he walked faster away from them.

As he lifted his eyes up, he caught sight of Dragonsreach castle. Arn would need some answers of his own, and he knew just where to go to get them.

"You need to wait until tomorrow. The Jarl has already retired for the evening" Proventus Avenicci replied to Arn's order to see Balgruuf as they stood in the main hall of Dragonsreach.

"It concerns an ongoing matter. Either you let me speak to him now, or I interrupt his evening some other way!" snarled Arn.

If it had been anyone else, the steward would probably have had the guards throw them out, but having the fully armored and angry Dragonborn on your hearth making demands was a different story.

Eyeing him carefully of a moment, finally Proventus nodded his head slightly and made a motion to one of the servants, who disappeared through a door into the private quarters.

Moments later, Arn sighed with annoyance again as Irileth emerged with her customary frown slightly more pronounced than usual.

"I asked to speak with BALGRUUF" Arn emphasized as Irileth marched up to him.

"What do you need at this hour?" Irileth hissed.

"I don't think it's a conversation you'd want me to have in front of everyone" Arn replied with a wave of his hand around the room.

"Is that a threat?"

"It's an answer to your question"
"If you need to talk, then we can step outside and discuss this more privately"

"I came to speak with Balgruuf and Balgruuf alone" Arn replied, not budging.

"And so you shall" interrupted a voice that caused everyone to turn and see Jarl Balgruuf standing at the door to private quarters.

"But--my Jarl--" was all the startled Irileth could get out before Balgruuf simply waved her protests away and motioned both of them into the passageway.

A few minutes later, Arn found himself awkwardly sitting in Balgruuf's personal chambers with Irileth while Balgruuf was at the door ordering a servant to do something.

Arn had imagined Irileth would be furious with him, or at the very least looking for more ways to annoy him, but instead, she simply sat with her hands on her knees, staring at the floor almost sadly.

Balgruuf quickly dispatched the servant before closing and latching the door, whirling and pacing back to the center of the room.

"I assume this is about the unexpected visitors" he rumbled out thoughtfully at Arn as he paced.

"Yes, you could say that" replied Arn, sitting back and crossing his arms, waiting for Balgruuf to disclose whatever he was going to say.

"I apologize if you feel you've been...misled. I suppose I should start at the beginning if this is going to make sense" Balgruuf continued.

"A long time ago, during the Great War, I was badly wounded during the battle for the Imperial City. While recovering, I met a young woman, a volunteer helping the wounded and refugees."

"We were both young and times were desperate. We shared a brief passion that I thought..."

Balgruuf stopped as his voice faltered a flicker and Arn watched him stop pacing, stroking his blonde beard as he collected himself before continuing.

"...that I thought was something more. It was only later that I learned who she really was." At this point, Balgruuf stopped pacing and seated himself in a chair across from Arn and Irileth.

"Have you heard of the Olaren family?" Balgruuf queried.

Arn sat up at the mention of the name.

"Yes....powerful family in the Imperial Capital, though I've no idea where they're from. I think they occupy at least two seats on the Elder Council."

"Yes...Colovian in origin, powerful bloodline...some say they have Septim blood in their heritage as well" muttered Balgruuf as he stared off into nothingness.

"So this woman--" Arn started

"Veradissa!" Balgruuf interrupted him "....Veradissa Olaren was her name. After everything was over and I was back in Skyrim, I got a letter from her, saying that she'd had a child from our union but that no one could know the truth since she was betrothed by then to a high ranking noble of another house."

"I also didn't know that she'd had the child smuggled out of the Imperial City and sent right on the heels of the letter. I was still a young adventurer then, looking to make a name and fortune for
myself, unattached...unmarried. I had no idea what to do with an infant girl."

"So you gave her up" Arn stated.

"One night, I had Irileth leave her at the Temple of Kynareth. I knew some of the priests and priestesses there. They would take good care of her and I could keep an eye on her from afar."

Arn sighed and stroked the stubble on his chin. Part of him wanted to tear into Balgruuf for not telling him sooner, for not raising her as his child, for drunkenly molesting his own daughter after a banquet.

But he knew he could say nothing of the banquet incident without betraying his promise to Lydia.

Still there had to be more to it.

"It doesn't add up" Arn responded slowly, but sternly after a long silence.

"What do you mean?" asked Irileth, piping up for the first time in the conversation.

"Once you became Jarl, what prevented you from declaring what happened and adopting her then? Why is Veradissa suddenly interested in her now? Why did she even carry the child to birth? Why not use potions or other things to ensure it didn't happen if she didn't want anyone to know? Isn't that what young women in rich families do?" Arn replied, fixing Balgruuf again with a glare.

Balgruuf sighed again, hanging his head slightly.

"When I became Jarl, I had married and my wife was heavy with our first child. Lydia knew nothing of her heritage, and I felt that as long as I looked out for her from afar, it was better for everyone if it stayed that way."

"Was that the only reason?" Arn nearly interrupted him.

Balgruuf eyed Arn carefully for a moment before responding.

"You seem to be a more perceptive man than the one that first appeared in my court with news from Helgen"

"It's a side effect of every one wanting to use me" Arn snapped back.

Balgruuf simply nodded slowly before continuing.

"I did....and still do have doubts that I'm actually Lydia's father. Looking at her, she seems to have more Imperial blood in her than I would think a daughter of mine would appear. You also pointed out the other reasons. Once the blind passion of my youth dimmed enough for me to see the situation better, I realized what you pointed out."

"She would never have birthed a child she didn't think was somehow advantageous to her prospects. Why birth the child of a lowly Nord foot soldier? My thought at the time was that she had another lover, wealthier and higher placed whom she sought to use the child as leverage into a marriage, but I could never be sure."

"Whatever it was, it didn't work out for her, since she got rid of the child. I assume either they thought I was the father or that the other suitor assumed I was and the leverage they thought they had did no good."

"But why the interest from her now?" Irileth interjected.
"That, I truly don't know" Balgruuf replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully "I've seen her several times over the years when I went to the Imperial City for Elder Council meetings. She has her own family now. Last time I was there...four years ago, she had two older sons and a young daughter."

After a long silence where it was apparent none of them had any more answers, Arn rose to his feet to depart.

He thought about a dozen different things he wanted to say, but none of them ended any different than either not having the answers he wanted or scolding Balgruuf for decisions he could not undo.

"Well, Lydia will know all about her heritage by now. I doubt she'll think any better of you than I think now" Arn replied with finality as he picked up his gauntlets to leave.

"I was young and foolish. I made a mistake! Is that what you want me to say?!" snarled Balgruuf angrily, contrite demeanor vanishing as passion flared in his eyes.

"And was that the only mistake?" snapped Arn right back, looking Balgruuf squarely in the eye, trying to will his intention across.

For a moment, both men glared defiantly at each other before Balgruuf seemed to remember something and gradually lowered his gaze in shame again.

"No, but that's why maybe it's better that you take care of her now. I never could do so like I should because every time I looked at her, I saw Veradissa and the passion of my youth. THAT was my biggest mistake" replied Balgruuf softly.

"And you always thought that someday you could recapture it" Arn finished for him.

"We all think the passions of our youth are the strongest....and the ones most worth recapturing. It's part of the folly of aging" Balgruuf answered, looking at the floor.

"A folly you failed to avoid" Arn retorted.

"I avoided it until my wife died" was all Balgruuf said, still avoiding eye contact.

Arn had had enough of the sad spectacle and by now it'd been a good hour or two. So with that, he turned and left the two sad souls sitting in Balgruuf's personal chambers and started his trip back down to Breezehome.

Part way down into the upper District, Arn suddenly grabbed the person walking past him by the arm, stunned to be looking into the surprised features of Lydia beneath a helmet she'd gotten from somewhere.

"Lydia? What are you--?" Arn started before Lydia shrugged his grip on her arm loose, causing the loose fitting helmet to fall off with a clank.

"Let go of me!" she hissed.

Arn noted her attire seemed ridiculous. Clad only in her leathers, she was still wielding her sword and shield with the ridiculously oversized helmet.

"Do you know what that man told me?!" she whispered loudly at Arn, choking up on the last part.

In the flickering lamplight, Arn finally caught sight of the tears running down her cheeks.

"Lydia--"
"That Balgruuf is my father?" she whispered with a sob, shoving him away with her shield when he tried to move closer.

"Lydia, honey--"

"You know what he did to me...how he....touched me...me!...his own daughter" she sobbed as her emotions threatened to shake loose her hold on her weapons as her body shook with sobs.

"Lydia, come on, it's me" Arn whispered, easing the sword out of her hand before she dropped her shield and hung her head, crying.

"I don't want it...I don't want it....It's not fair....It's not fair" she cried, beating on Arn's chest as he carefully enveloped her in a hug.

"Shhh.....I know..." Arn whispered into her hair as she finally stopped beating against him and leaned against his breastplate, quietly sniffing now.

Arn wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, but after awhile, he carefully leaned down and picked her up, carrying her with him back down to Breezehome as she sniffled.

Relieved the delegation from earlier was gone, Arn was surprised to find Freyya out cold laying on the floor with blood trickling out her nose.

Apparently, her attempt to stop Lydia hadn't gone so well.

So after getting Lydia tucked in and staying briefly until she fell into a deep sleep, Arn had to awaken and heal up Freyya, who Arn was relieved to hear speak, even if it was profuse apologies and promises of no more failures ever again.

Still worried about the Thalmor in the back of his mind, Arn moved furniture in front of the main door before placing some sound rune traps on certain spots and then finally retired for the night.

All this and Arn knew he still had to get to Riften as soon as possible.

Then again, from what Arn remembered of Riften as a child, if you wanted to hide, there was no better city to do so in, and Arn doubted the Thalmor would get much help from anyone with the connections to do so.
Arn sat on the edge of his bed in Breezehome, staring out the small window at the dawning sun.

He hadn't slept well, and already his mind was churning with different plans for dealing with the Thalmor hunting him as well as things here in Whiterun while trying to figure out the best way to quickly get to Riften.

Something had to give. He couldn't travel at ease, train his housecarls, or investigate the Dragons if he had to spend all his time looking over his shoulder.

Hiding wasn't really an option.

Practically anywhere he went now, everyone had heard of the Dragonborn, and if they hadn't, any use of the Thu'um would give it away.

A short rustling disturbed his thoughts, and he looked over to see Freyya peering around his door with her usual disturbingly quiet demeanor.

"Did you need to tell me something?" Arn queried, pulling a cotton over-shirt on.

"Just that breakfast is ready.." she answered demurely, straightening a black braid of hair before vanishing.

Descending to the kitchen, Arn found Lydia furiously preparing eggs and bacon as if the yolks and strips of meat had greatly offended her and were being punished.

Sitting at the table, both Arn and Freyya involuntarily jumped as Lydia threw the eggs onto their plates with a gratuitous SPLAT followed by the sizzling burnt bacon that slid off their plates.

"Lydia, sit" Arn ordered.

"I'm fine" she muttered, not meeting his gaze before throwing the pans in the wash bucket.

"No, you're not. Now, sit down" Arn ordered more sternly.

A long awkward silence followed with them all three sitting at the table, Arn eyeing Lydia, Lydia crossing her arms and glaring at the table, and Freyya toying with the eggs while glancing at each of them.

"Is the....family representative coming back?" Arn finally asked.

"No...he's just waiting at the Inn for my answer"

"Answer to...what exactly?"

"If I'm coming with them back to the Imperial Capital or not" Lydia huffed, finally making eye
contact with Arn.

"If you need time to think about it--" Arn started.

"How can you even say that?!" Lydia retorted sharply, fixing Arn with a glare "Why would I even consider it?!

"It's what many girls dream of...to be whisked away to a lavish estate or castle...to be nobility, with attendants waiting to do your bidding. You'd have enough money and influence, you could go wherever you wished to, and you would be safe from the chaos here in Skyrim" Arn finished, emphasizing the last part more than he meant to, perhaps because that's what was on his mind at the moment.

Lydia looked at him wide eyed, almost shocked that he would suggest such a thing.

"How do you know all that?"

"After I left here last night, I went and got some answers of my own.....Lydia, that life is your birthright. Maybe you didn't know about it before, but now you do, and it's important for you to think about all the consequences of your decision. If you wish to go, I will gladly release you from your vow of service, and would be happy to help you on your journey." Arn replied less convincingly, suddenly panicked that she might actually do so.

"Why would I do that? Why would I want to go become some flaky truffle of a woman to a mother that's ignored me all my life? Do you really see me as that much of a child?" Lydia burst out angrily, fixing Arn with watery eyes at the last part.

Arn felt ashamed and the pain of her look made him wince and look away. Part of him wanted to plead with her to stay with him, to forget about everything else, but he knew that wouldn't be very fair of him.

"Please, Lydia....I'm not saying that's what you should do, but just want to make sure you're aware of what you can...do if you want it, and before you scold me any further, let me tell you something. Things from here on out are going to get a lot more difficult. We are now hunted."

Surprisingly, this didn't seem to phase Lydia as she wiped away a tear that threatened to slide down her cheek.

"So?"

"The Thalmor are now after me and anyone connected to me. Some strange cultists tried to kill me when I arrived in Whiterun last night."

That got Lydia's attention, and her look softened as she sat up a little, still staring at Arn intently.

"That's not counting any bandits, Dragons, thieves, or whatever other enemies I encounter trying to do whatever it is I have to do as Dragonborn, as well as this damned civil war that keeps trying to drag me in."

Arn thought his speech would soften Lydia's demeanor somewhat, but although the revelation of the previous night's assassins had eased her expression, as soon as Arn had finished talking, her glare returned.

"I should slap you" she replied almost casually.
"What?"

"Have we been together these last few months and you think I'd pack up and run off to some dainty castle to get away from a warrior's life?"

"No, l--"

"Don't you remember what I told you I wanted more than anything over that campfire not long after I was first made your housecarl? Don't you remember what you promised me on the slopes of High Hrothgar?" Lydia asked with a pained expression, emotion making her voice waver.

It was all coming back to Arn, and he felt like a sot for even offering otherwise, but he didn't want her to regret anything, and part of him was fearful for her for reasons he'd never told her.

"Yes...I remember" Arn replied somberly.

"Why would I want anything else? I want to be...my place is here....with you" Lydia wavered out before silence fell on the table.

Arn and Lydia both sat silent for a time, stealing glances at each other as if something more was going to be said, but both were waiting on the other to say it.

"So, what's the plan, then?" muttered Freyya, surprising the others.

Arn scratched his chin thoughtfully for a moment before his gaze fell on Freyya collecting dishes from the table.

"I have an idea, but first, we need to gear up as much as possible....and I need to get an idea of what you can do in a fight" Arn replied to Freyya as he rose from the table.

The early morning was an excellent time to train in Jorvasskr's courtyard since most of the Companions were late drinkers and even later sleepers.

After another loud clang of steel, Arn looked up from his chair on the porch to see Lydia knock Freyya's sword away and shove her roughly backward on her arse with a shield bash.

"That's five times in a row, Freyya. If it's a discipline you're not comfortable with, you should let me know what you've trained in" Arn stated matter of factly, observing the aggravated scowl on her face deepen with a tinge of red from embarrassment.

"I...have spent far more time fighting with a bow in my hand than a sword" Freyya muttered quietly, looking at the ground in shame "But....I WILL learn, my Thane."

"I'm sure you will, but first, we need to gear up as much as possible....and I need to get an idea of what you can do in a fight" Arn tried to respond reassuringly.

The next few hours saw all three of them firing repeatedly into straw dummies at various ranges and at different speeds.

Arn was pleased to find that Freyya was indeed quite skilled with a bow, even more so than Lydia, much to Lydia's embarrassment to be the one usually checking past the targets for stray arrows.

When they were finished, Lydia went to the Inn to give the representative her answer while Arn pulled Freyya aside before they left Jorvasskr.
"I have a plan to deal with the Thalmor, but I need your help" Arn stated, fixing Freyya with a determined look.

"I can do whatever you need me to do" she replied without emotion, though worry crept into her look.

"I don't necessarily need you to do anything, so much as I need to know what you know" Arn replied.

"What do you mean?" she answered, her worried frown growing more pronounced.

"You know where the Stormcloaks' encampments are. Don't you?"

"What! Wh-why would I know?" she replied hurriedly.

"Come on, Freyya. You honestly expect me to believe Ulfric selected you to send with me and you weren't high enough in his service to know where the camps were?" Arn retorted, not wanting to get drawn into anymore Civil war nonsense.

"I-I was selected because he thought I could serve you best" Freyya stuttered, looking away suddenly.

"Really? that you could serve me best? or was it about who could use me to serve him the best?" Arn replied more angrily than he meant to.

"I don't know what you mean" she looked away.

"Ulfric is not as subtle as he thinks, Freyya. I'm tired of this civil war nonsense, and I was long ago tired of Ulfric's games."

"What would you know of Ulfric?" Freyya snarled, her head snapping back around fixing him with an angry glare.

"What did he instruct you before you left?" Arn continued, remembering the tears he'd seen in her eyes when they'd left Windhelm "To do whatever it took to get me on the Stormcloak's side?"

Freyya didn't reply, but her eyes widening in surprise told Arn all he needed to know.

"What else did he tell you to do? Scout out Whiterun's defenses? Find out what all I can do as the Dragonborn?" Arn hissed, lowering his voice as Freyya struggled to find words.

Freyya looked at him in silence for a moment, fearful of him in a way, but a defiant look in her eye as she finally spoke.

"Again, what do you know of Ulfric?"

"That he will do anything to get what he wants" Arn replied.

"He simply does what MUST be done" Freyya countered fiercely.

"I'm sure the Thalmor tell themselves the same thing when they go to sleep at night" snorted Arn sarcastically, crossing his arms.

"Ulfric does what he does for the good of all Skyrim!"

"Unless you're not a Nord" retorted Arn "Then it's the Grey Quarter for you. I wonder.....was one of
the reasons he picked you was that you weren't a Nord?"

That really did it. Her defiant look softened as her lower lip began to tremble and tears welled in her eyes.

"I'm as much a Nord as anyone else! I was born and raised in Skyrim!" she retorted, angrily trying to force down the tears.

"But does he see it that way?" answered Arn.

This caused Freyya to burst out sobbing and collapse to the ground, her back against the wall as suddenly things clicked for Arn and everything about her demeanor made sense.

"You're....in love with him, aren't you?" Arn replied slowly after a moment of silence.

Freyya didn't respond at first, just hugged her knees up to her chest and looked off at nothingness.

"Why must you torment me so? Do you know what it was like to hear him declare me as your housecarl? To have him visit my quarters only to send me away, telling me that he needed me to do whatever it took...whatever it took!" Freyya reiterated, halting her speech lest she sob more.

"And he knew you would....because you loved him, and believed in his cause" Arn replied somberly as he knelt down next to her.

The combative demeanor of the discussion had subsided. Freyya seemed to sense that the ruse had never worked, and Arn felt sorry for her.

"So what now?" Freyya muttered after a long pause, reigning in her emotions surprisingly quickly.

Arn sat next to her.

"I still need the location of the closest Stormcloak camp to Riften"

"You want me to give up secret information?"

"I want their help against a common enemy" Arn replied, causing her to look over at him with a puzzled frown.

"The Thalmor...." she stated slowly as it dawned on her what Arn was thinking.

Four days later, Arn, Lydia, and Freyya all rode hurriedly eastward on the road south of High Hrothgar.

Arn had baited the trap carefully, making sure he and the two women dropped plenty of scraps of information to anyone and everyone in Whiterun about where they were headed next.

Surely someone in Whiterun would be informing the Thalmor of their movements. The lure of coin was too great for some to pass up.

Of course, they made sure to let everyone know which route they were taking. Then made sure to take a different one when they did actually leave.

They'd spent the last few days gearing up as best they could. Arn had gotten a new set of armor from Eorlund Greymane that he'd been working on for awhile.
Ebony breastplate, greaves, boots and gauntlets inlaid with silver blue lines denoting the fact it was enchanted. The lines on the breastplate were crafted into the shape of a winged dragon breathing fire.

With the fine steel helmet Arn already had, it was a very impressive getup and had even stronger enchantments than any armor he'd ever had. When he first put it on, he'd felt like royalty since ebony was so expensive and hard to come by.

Lydia had a new set of customized steel armor and Freyya sported medium leather armor, since Arn had figured she would need the mobility as an archer over the protection.

Arn had made sure to send multiple messages by raven to Solitude, making sure Jordis knew not to leave the city or have anything to do with any Thalmor inquiries.

Based on what Freyya told him, he'd carefully picked out an ambush spot that was on the edge of Stormcloak territory, on the way to Riften, and was a natural funnel for travelers.

He just hoped they got there before the Thalmor did.

It took them another day of hard riding to get there.

Thankfully, there was no Thalmor ambush awaiting them as Arn scouted around the rocks overlooking Darkwater Pass.

It was a shortcut through the hills northwest of Riften with high rocky walls, boulders scattered about, and crossing a fast moving but shallow river.

Arn was about to dispatch Freyya to ensure the Stormcloak camp's location and readiness when he spotted the familiar green and bluish tint of Thalmor armor through the boulders in the distance.

Damn, no time. Maybe Arn had been too generous with spreading information.

Arn quickly hissed a noise and motioned to Freyya and Lydia, who both took cover behind boulders as they spotted the approaching Thalmor.

Arn could see two Justiciars and two footmen, a standard "Talos enforcer group."

Arn was about ready to take aim when Freyya motioned off to Arn's right.

Arn turned just in time to see a Thalmor archer moving quickly only about thirty yards away behind a boulder.

Another group?

Arn couldn't see any others, but he had to assume there were since Thalmor would never travel alone in hostile territory.

Just as he noticed this, he heard some noise behind the original group and another "Talos enforcer group" showed up, conversing quietly with the first, making motions at the ground.

Arn bided his time. Then the opportunity came.

The group off to his right stood up from behind boulders, waving at the groups down below.

Arn knew now was the time since he might not get a chance at them behind cover.

Motioning to Freyya and Lydia, Arn rose slowly and got a bead on a Justiciar off to his right before
letting loose.

The arrow zoomed to its destination with a hiss, punctuated by a satisfying THWACK as it found its mark in the Justiciar's neck.

Arn's second arrow was on its way already as they turned, but they were too quick and it glanced off the stone where one had just been as he sidestepped into cover.

Arn knew at least one of the women's shots hit when he heard a gargled scream from below amid shouts and scurrying.

An awkward back and forth battle ensued, comprised of bobbing heads and glancing arrow shots that saw Arn, Lydia, and Freyya each pick off one more Thalmor before an arrow glanced off Arn's shoulder plating sending him hunching back down.

He was about to try again when Freyya whispered across to him.

"Another group!"

Arn peaked around the path-side of his rock to see another four or five Thalmor scurrying into cover behind the ones below.

As they arrived, almost in concert, they formed ranks with the first two, Justiciars at the front and marched forward double file up the hill towards Arn, protected by the Justiciar's spell shields in front.

"They're rushing us! Move!" Arn hissed to Lydia and Freyya.

They had pre-planned to make a fighting retreat into the Stormcloak's camp, but as Freyya left cover to sprint toward the next boulder, an arrow from Arn's right caught her in the leg.

Yelping in pain, Freyya fell to the ground, out in the open momentarily. Quickly, Lydia stepped in front of her with sword and shield blocking the next two arrow shots.

Drawing a bead, Arn timed his appearance and emerged just as the opposing Thalmor were trying to get a third arrow past Lydia, they both let go of their arrows simultaneously, the Thalmor's stuck fast in Lydia's shield, Arn's pierced the unfortunate Thalmor through his face.

Arn unleashed a few more to keep the other one behind cover as Lydia helped Freyya to one leg and they hobbled behind cover.

Arn hunched back down, peeping around the path-side to discover the rushing group was almost on top of him as an Ice shard flew past his face.

Leaping into the open, Arn stood directly in front of them, ten feet away.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of unrelenting force plowed into the rushing column, exploding their spell shields and bowling them all over backwards down the slope.

The spell shields must've taken enough bite out of it that none of them were destroyed by it.

Disappointed, Arn fired another arrow, pegging a rising Justiciar through the chest as Arn sidestepped back behind cover, another arrow flying past his head as he did so.

He could probably hold this position long enough for Lydia and Freyya to get away.
"Arn!" he heard Lydia scream in desperation, jerking his head around to see yet another Thalmor group closing in from their flank, directly in the way of their retreat.

Even as he did so, Lydia was hit with a large Ice shard before she could steer Freyya into cover, knocking her onto her back with a grunt.

Both women were now down and out in the open as at least five Thalmor closed in at a steady pace.

This would not stand.

Arn began firing arrows as he sprinted toward where Lydia wheezed and tried to roll to her hands and knees.

Unfortunately, once again, a Justiciar stepped in the way of Arn's shots with a spell shield to deflect them.

"Surrender, Dragonborn, or we kill the women!" shouted the Justiciar.

When Arn continued advancing, the Justiciar nodded and two of the footmen fired arrows.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn finally reached his downed housecarls and saw the arrows slowly moving through the air toward them.

Arn dropped his bow and grabbed each arrow out of the air with each hand as time sped back up.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Exploding forward, Arn stabbed each arrow into the neck of a shocked Thalmor, one of them the Justiciar as he came to stop, a spurt of blood obscuring his vision through his helmet.

Acting on instinct, Arn kicked out to his left, connecting with another archer before wiping his helmet with the crook of his elbow as he drew sword and shield.

But he was too late as a powerful slash from a Thalmor sword connected across Arn's shoulder and torso. Thankfully, ebony armor was not easily penetrated.

Despite the hit, Arn sprang forward, bashing into the much lighter Thalmor forcing him back, their blades clanging together.

An arrow hit Arn square in the back, the ebony armor preventing its penetration, but the force of the hit knocked him forward and to his knees.

"FUS RO DAH!" Arn gasped out, obliterating the Thalmor swordsman in front of him into a cloud of bone, blood and flesh as if the air had been ripped in half.

As Arn rolled to one side, avoiding another arrow shot, he was relieved to catch sight of Lydia carrying Freyya over one shoulder, heading toward the woods where the horses were in the distance.

Arn tried to get to his feet, but felt suddenly woozy, the vertigo reminding him he'd used a lot of the Thu'um recently.

When he finally did get to his feet, he realized the groups from below had made it over the rise, at least a dozen of them closing in, along with two more from the rocky cover, and the two in front of Arn.
He contemplated making a retreat, but knew from the lack of any hoof noises that the housecarls hadn't made their's yet.

He needed more time.

Just as they encircled him, keeping their distance, a particular Justiciar stepped forward, his robe wet and bespattered with blood and mud.

"Surrender, Dragonborn" the Altmer spat at Arn, his rage barely contained, fists shaking in fury.

Apparently, Elenwen really wanted Arn alive.

"I've seen what you do to your prisoners....I'll pass" sneered Arn.

The Justiciar simply made a curt nod off to his right.

Sensing something bad was about to be sprung on him, Arn exploded forward.

"WULD NA KEST!"

He came to a stop just past the ring of Thalmor, cleaving the head off one of the other Justiciars.

And not a moment too soon. One of the other remaining Justiciars had tossed some sort of phial or flask where Arn had been, an explosion of green mist occupying where he'd just been standing.

Arn pivoted and cleaved into the neck of a Thalmor footmen as they spun to face his new location, but Arn suddenly felt weaker, the vertigo growing stronger.

He exchanged sword swings with another footmen until a fireball exploded on his right side, knocking him off his feet.

Desperately, he rolled left into a crouch and arced the blade over his head, catching one of them behind the knee, nearly decapitating the lower leg.

Then massive Ice chunks hit Arn in the shield and chest simultaneously, knocking him on his back, wheezing for breath.

Amidst his blurry vision, he could see the dozen or so remaining Thalmor moving to surround him again.

He had to strike before they could get spread out again.

"FUS RO DAH!" Arn bellowed out with all the force he could muster, trying to rise up.

The wave of force caught most of them, bursting spell shields and sending them flying like rag dolls back against the boulders.

All Arn could do after that was collapse back down to the ground, wheezing for breath and trying to will his body into responding, desperately fighting the urge to simply recede into unconsciousness.

As he struggled, he had no idea how much time passed, but as he finally thought he could move his neck to look up, he saw the wave of force hadn't killed many if any of them.

They walked toward him slowly, or maybe his head was so much in a daze that everything seemed slower.
Just as they closed on him and Arn was fighting harder than ever to get his body to move, the Thalmor all suddenly looked up and their eyes widened in surprise.

Then something impossible happened.

Arn felt the rushing wind of large wings and a large green Dragon crashed down right on top of them, crushing several Thalmor, and immediately lancing out with its claws to eviscerate others.

Arn heard screams and the flaming breath of the Dragon as he slowly by degrees got his body to move, crawling slowly back toward the trees, hoping the Dragon didn't notice him.

It seemed to take forever, and Arn suddenly heard everything grow silent.

Freezing in place, Arn stayed perfectly still for awhile until he thought it might be safe to look.

With effort, Arn carefully looked back over his shoulder.

To his utter shock, the massive green Dragon, which had to be as big as Nahlslennir had been, was sitting perfectly still looking down at him.

"Dovahkin..." the Dragon rumbled before beating its wings, rising into the air and in a flash was gone.

The whole experience was so stunning, Arn wondered if he was actually passed out and dreaming the whole thing.

After a time of crawling, Arn finally had enough energy to get to his feet and make his way toward the trees only to find another surprise.

Where they'd left the horses was the scene of another battle, two Thalmor and two horses lay dead, arrows littering the ground here and there, blood splatters on the stones.

Another group? or maybe Arn had lost tally of exactly how many there were?

Either way, he suddenly panicked, wondering if Lydia and Freyya had fallen into their clutches.

Newly energized, Arn began following the signs, an arrow here or there, bloody splotches or dots on the ground.

After about twenty minutes of trailing, he rounded a bend of woods to hear a strange chirping noise.

While Arn was no expert at types of birds, he had a pretty good idea when something was a natural noise and when something was a man made noise.

Slowing his pace, Arn carefully raised both hands as a sign of non-hostility to the Stormcloaks he guessed were watching his movements.

Sure enough, about a dozen leather and fur clad Stormcloaks emerged slowly from the brush and trees, eyeing Arn carefully, but not pointing any weapons at him.

"We were told the Dragonborn was in the area....and you're certainly not a Thalmor" grunted a shorter but stocky Stormcloak officer approaching him "but I'd still feel better seeing your face."

"Did you grant refuge to the two battle maidens that came through here?" Arn gasped, out of breath as he removed his bloody and dirty helmet.
"Aye, we did...and not a moment too soon" the Nord man replied, clasping Arn's arm in a warmer greeting than Arn was expecting "Well met, Dragonborn. I'm the ranking officer here, Gonnar Oath-giver they call me"

"Well met" Arn returned, wiping sweat from his brow "Are they both alive and well?"

"They're both alive. Took a few knocks and an arrow or two, but nothing some time an' healin' won't take care of."

"I'd like to see them."

"Every man in my camp wants another look at them" chuckled Gonnar.

Arn was too worried to enjoy the jest, looking around at the rest of them as they fell in walking behind Arn and Gonnar.

"Figured you'd want to see what became of yer Thalmor friends before we headed back to camp" replied Gonnar after a short silence, veering off the scant path to a ravine, nodding with his head as they reached the edge.

Arn looked down into the makeshift ravine to see about half a dozen Thalmor bodies unceremoniously thrown on top of each other, riddled with arrow wounds and cuts.

The Stormcloaks had apparently made quick work of them, already stripping the bodies of everything and disposing of them.

"You have my thanks" muttered Arn after an awkward silence.

Twenty minutes later, Arn strode into the healer's tent amidst the Stormcloak encampment to find both housecarls bound with bandages and laid up on mats alongside other wounded.

Lydia was still conscious and unknowingly pushed the healer mage away from her arm as Arn leaned down onto the mat, enveloping her in a hug as she leaned against him, exhaustedly sighing into the hard ebony breastplate, neither one caring about the dirt or blood.

"Oh, thank Talos. For a moment, I wasn't sure how we were going to get out of that one" she whispered with a sigh.

It was a few moments before Arn realized Lydia was only in her breast strap and small pants, bandages wound around her entire right arm and shoulder along with a large one on her abdomen.

"I think you should make a rule not to start anymore fights around big rocks anymore" Lydia smiled weakly as Arn ushered her back down on the bed gently, pulling the blanket back up.

No need to give the entire camp a show.

Kissing her on the forehead, he watched her eyes tiredly close.

Arn turned to check on Freyya, but she was already sound asleep, her injuries having been much worse, but already tended to with potions and poultices.

Arn left the healing tent with a brisk stride, nodding at all the hails and pats of congratulations offered as he passed. Despite the celebrated treatment, Arn couldn't help but be upset seeing both the women injured in such fashion.

Despite escaping their predicament, Arn's plan had essentially backfired when their retreat was
unexpectedly cut off and if it hadn't been for the strange intervention of the Dragon, Arn himself would probably be in Thalmor custody.

He felt guilty about it, particularly for Lydia, since she'd just healed up from her injuries outside Kynesgrove.

Heading to speak with Gonnar, Arn was surprised to learn there was a Thalmor prisoner they'd taken. It gave him an idea.

Allowed passage into Gonnar's command tent, Arn found Gonnor and several other Stormcloaks badgering the Thalmor footman with questions which he refused to answer, simply glaring at them as he kneeled in the dirt.

A debate then broke out among them about exactly what methods to use to break the Thalmor into telling them anything they wanted to know.

Arn had other ideas.

"We need to speak" Arn hissed into Gonnar's ear as he pulled him aside.

"What do you want with the Thalmor?" Gonnar asked after they'd stepped outside the tent.

"I need him to relay a message to Elenwen"

"You want me to set him loose?" Gonnar asked incredulously.

"I need him to be alive in order for the message to be convincing"

"I'm sorry, Dragonborn, but I need more than that if I'm to allow it. If I let him loose, we will have to relocate the entire encampment."

"Look, those Thalmor you saw were only one of the groups chasing us. The others lie dead in Darkwater Pass. I need the Thalmor off my back if I'm to accomplish my tasks as Dragonborn. I need them to know how badly they will fail if they keep trying to kill me" growled Arn, unintentionally letting his anger over Lydia and Freyya surface.

Gonnar sighed and looked away thoughtfully, clearly not enthused about the idea.

"Don't think Galmar will appreciate my decision, but Freyya trusts you, and she was one of our best scouts. So, for now, we'll do it your way, Dragonborn" Gonnar replied after a short silence.

Re-entering the tent, Arn abruptly cut off all questions and retorts between the officers and the prisoner by grabbing the surprised Thalmor by the throat and yanking him up and back onto a table.

"Would you like to share the fate of your fellow sots at Darkwater Pass?" Arn sneered into his face.

"If it hadn't been for the Dragon, you'd b--" the prisoner started to retort, letting Arn know what he wanted before banging the Thalmor's head on the table, cutting him off.

"You're going to go back to Elenwen, and you're going to give her a message" Arn growled into the Thalmor's surprised features "If any more of you sots so much as breathes in my direction or anyone else close to me, I will have no qualms about calling another Dragon down on you"

Arn knew it wasn't the truth, but if the Thalmor had seen most of the ordeal, he would have no choice but to at least assume it was possible.
"Th-that's impossible" wheezed the prisoner, but the tone wasn't an incredulous one, more of a hopeful denial.

Arn knew he had him hooked.

"Just try it. It'd be amusing to wonder what your Dominion masters will think of the surprising numbers of Justiciars getting shredded like cattle in such a...'barbaric and simplistic land' like Skyrim" Arn retorted, making sure to use the exact words he'd read in Elenwen's journal before shoving the Thalmor prisoner back onto the floor.

Once the Stormcloaks had dressed the prisoner in rags and had some fun taunting and ridiculing him, he was sent away with a patrol, leaving Arn watching from Gonnar's tent.

"Can you truly call forth Dragons at your command?" whispered Gonnar at his shoulder.

While Arn had no desire for Ulfric to know what he could or couldn't do, Gonnar had been nothing but helpful and honest. He couldn't really justify misleading him after everything he'd done for them.

"We need to talk...privately" replied Arn.
Not What It Used To Be: Riften pt. 1

Chapter Summary

Arn arrives in Riften, but finding the Thieves Guild and getting them to cooperate will be harder than he thought...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's my fault" Arn sighed as he sat on Lydia's mat in the healing tent.

"Stop blaming yourself. The Thalmor got there almost as fast as we did. Freyya had no time to contact the camp like we'd planned" Lydia tried to reassure him.

"I should have sent her anyway"

"And then she'd have run into the other patrol alone. I'm flattered you think we're that good, but come on, Arn. Besides, none of us thought the Thalmor would risk travelling through Stormcloak territory to cut us off."

"Gonnar was surprised at their numbers and proximity as well" Arn mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully "That probably also means they might already be in Riften."

"You should go" Lydia stated quietly after an awkward silence lingered.

"I'm not leaving you two behind" Arn replied quicker than he meant to.

"We'll be safe here, unless you're worried we'll get too many marriage proposals" Lydia answered with a wry smirk.

Arn eyed the flowery wreaths and furs left at the ends of both housecarl's beds.

He knew from experience that during a campaign, few things lifted the morale of the men in the unit like having beautiful damsels in distress seeking refuge.

The Stormcloaks had seen a resounding victory over hated Thalmor enemies and now had two beautiful battle maidens in their care. No wonder the men were in good spirits.

"Wait, did you actually get a proposal?" Arn wondered aloud.

"No...but maybe you should kiss me in front of everyone so that they know I'm spoken for" Lydia whispered, continuing to smirk.

For a moment, Arn stared at her speechless, unsure if he'd actually heard that right, wondering how to respond until Freyya's stirring across from them gave him an idea.

"Uh..um...well, you know, if I give you a kiss, then it's only fair that Freyya gets one too" Arn smirked back.

Lydia's wry smirk disappeared, replaced by a frustrated frown and puckered lips.
"Men..." she huffed, pulling her blanket higher.

"Hey, I wasn't the one that brought it up" Arn shrugged, throwing his hands up as he rose to his feet.

Lydia's frown slowly vanished and her wry smirk returned, unsettling Arn a bit as he was about to turn back to Freyya.

"I'm going to pay for that remark. Aren't I?" he sighed.

"Yes" Lydia returned "I haven't figured out how yet, but I have time" she sighed, stretching her good arm.

"Damn it" Arn muttered "Well, don't exhaust yourself thinking of revenge" he smirked before moving to Freyya's bedside.

She'd taken two arrows in one of her legs and had a nasty gash from something on her lower back. Arn hadn't spoken much to her since the battle, but she was improving.

"How are you feeling?" he asked quietly as she peaked open an eye at him before looking at him with relief.

"A lot better that you're not that child trying to put a ring on my finger" she grimaced, glancing past him.

"Some young man's taken an interest, eh?" Arn replied, eyeing where she was looking.

"Some stripling of a man.....already proposed..amulet of mara and everything" she murmured, a scowl of annoyance etching themselves onto her face.

"What did you say?" Arn asked, surprised.

"That I was sworn to your service and with as much travelling as we did that it would never work"

"You know if you wanted to settle down--" Arn started.

"Shhh, they don't know that!" Freyya hissed.

"Is there anything you need?" Arn asked with a shrug.

"Yes, I need you to go do what you need to in Riften and stop fretting over us like a hen would its chicks. We are perhaps in the safest place in Skyrim from the Thalmor and you are wasting time waiting" Freyya stated with more forthrightness than Arn was expecting.

"You sure?" Arn asked, rising.

"I've known Gonnar for years. We'll be perfectly fine" she answered.

"I'm not sure how long things in Riften will take, but if I'm not back in a week, meet me in the Inn there" Arn replied before leaving.

A few minutes later, Arn sat in Gonnar Oath-giver's command tent, watching the men pack things up as both he and Gonnar looked through the effects of all the Thalmor slain in the battle.

"Damn...nothing useful" muttered Arn after awhile.
"Maybe not for information, but these weapons and armor will be put to good use, and whatever we
don't use can be sold for a good price" Gonnar replied, stroking his bushy brown beard.

"I should get moving then" Arn sighed, looking out the tent for a moment.

"Shame....we could use a warrior like you" Gonnar replied.

Arn sighed.

"Hey, can't blame me for trying" shrugged Gonnar.

"I appreciate all your help. I've left funds with the camp healer for my housecarls' care. I plan on
returning within the week, but if not, they will be meeting me in Riften" Arn replied, picking up his
helmet.

"Well, if you have any more Thalmor chasing you, drop by and we'll give 'em a warm welcome"
Gonnar replied, clasping his arm in salute as they parted ways.

"Oh, one more thing" Arn said just as he was almost out of the tent "Have your men seen that big
green Dragon before?"

"Only from a distance...a few times in the early morning, we've spotted it flying far off, but its never
come close or bothered anyone in the area we know of" Gonnar replied.

"Hmph.." Arn grunted in puzzlement as he turned and left.

Half a day of riding later, Arn trotted into view of Riften.

It was...not what he remembered.

The Riften he remembered as a boy was resplendent with red, yellow, and blue painted wood. The
city had been bustling with crowds of merchants, travelers, and shop owners hawking their wares.
The air had been filled with noise, talking, and shouting as people carried on their business.

The stands and people had streamed well out past the original city gates. Warehouses, shops, and
tents had been spread around the outskirts of the city. Workers had always been laboring to clear
more of the woods.

The pinnacle of Riften's architecture had been the Thieves' Guild Palace, a massive estate right in the
center of Riften. Of course, no one openly called it that. It had simply been referred to as "the
Palace" by anyone there at the time.

His father had made sure Arn knew even as a boy that everything that happened in Riften was
conducted with the Thieves Guild's approval.

But despite this knowledge, Arn had never felt afraid in Riften. Even his father let him roam and play
with others in the streets without worry. Arn had even wondered some of the Ratway's tunnels
underneath the city, even though he wasn't supposed to be.

The Riften Arn looked at now was none of those things.

There was no color to be seen. The wood in the buildings looked old and rotten. There was nothing
outside the city gates save lush forest and vegetation, as if nature had swallowed up all the men and
buildings that had once been there.
There was no bustle of people or noise, just the quiet chirping of birds as he rode to the city stables.

Arn didn't relish the idea of doing business with thieves, but he knew from Etienne Rarnis that the Thieves Guild was hiding Esbern from the Thalmor.

It had also occurred to him on his journey that having allies with more...shady connections might be something he needed soon as he was increasingly skirting the law, either in the killing of Thalmor or straddling the fence between the Stormcloaks and Imperials.

Unsure how to contact them though, Arn figured the best thing was to advertise himself and then let someone find him, as Rarnis had suggested.

"Hold there!" one of the gate guards snapped "Who might you be?"

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar"

"Since you don't live here, you'll have to pay the toll for travelers and its extra if you want to do business in town" came the reply.

_Gods, was this a practice in every Stormcloak controlled city?_

"No...I don't" replied Arn, staunchly crossing his burly arms, assuming an intimidating posture.

"If you don't pay the toll, we ain't lettin' ya in" sneered the guard.

"Yes, you will, or the person I'm doing business with here will be very unhappy" replied Arn, guessing correctly the gate guards would be aware of the Thieves Guild's presence.

This caused them to all pause and look at each other part puzzled, part nervous as they contemplated his words.

Arn pressed his advantage.

"Keep hassling me if you like, but it will only make me late, my employer annoyed, and you still won't get your money"

"Well....fine then, be on your way, but you best stay out of trouble" came the half-hearted reply as they parted to let him through.

Once inside Riften, Arn was surprised that the Thieves Guild Palace was completely gone. In its stead, in the middle of town, was just a flat expanse with several merchant stalls set up.

After talking to a few of the townsfolk, Arn was surprised to find everyone seemed rude, grumpy, and evasive, particularly when it came to information about anything in Riften.

He was wondering if it would be more effective just to start wondering the Ratways when he was suddenly grabbed by the shoulder and spun around.

Arn was surprised to be looking up into the face of a tall, statuesque Nord woman with rich, flowing blonde hair that lay bunched on her wider than usual shoulders.

She had a wide line of dark blue war paint down one side of her face.

"You are a stranger here" she stated more than asked as Arn took in her appearance in surprise.

"Uh, yes....you could say that"
"But you carry yourself with the posture of a warrior and your attire is marked by battle" she beamed, gesturing at the marks on Arn's Ebony Armor.

"Yes" Arn replied, glancing down involuntarily at his armor as if to see what marks she was pointing out.

"And just who is it that you sought out battle against?" the woman asked, shifting her weight, continuing to appraise Arn.

"That would be a long list" replied Arn, uncomfortable with the assault of questions.

"Who would you say are your most frequent enemies, then?" she continued.

"Bandits probably" Arn answered, since over the course of his life it was certainly the most frequent adversary he encountered.

"Excellent, a man after my own heart!" she exclaimed, clapping Arn on the shoulder "My name is Mjoll. I am a warrior seeking to defeat worthy foes and stop the corruption rampant in this place" she continued, tossing her head back slightly in a proud stance.

"And I'm Aerin..." came a meager voice from a much smaller robed man at her elbow that Arn hadn't even noticed before.

At length, Arn conversed with Mjoll and Aerin for quite some time, finally able to figure out some things about the city of Riften itself, but nothing about the Thieves Guild...well, at least not anything useful.

Apparently, they were Mjoll's mortal enemies, or at least that was the way she made it sound. So Arn decided it might not be best to say or ask her anything more about it.

An hour after they'd finished conversing and left, Arn sat on a bench in the middle of Riften, still nowhere closer to finding Esbern or anyone from the Thieves Guild.

"I hear you've been asking a lot of questions" came a rich Nord male voice from behind Arn.

He was about to turn around but was interrupted with a warning.

"Don't turn around! Just rest at ease and listen...let us talk awhile first."

"Who are you?" queried Arn quietly, continuing to look ahead.

"Ah, names aren't important right now. What is important is, what are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for an old friend" Arn lied, unsure how much to divulge to the stranger.

"And you think to find them here in Riften?"

"I know he's here, but he's in hiding"

"Ah...a wanted man. Such a lot is difficult, but hiding in some places isn't so terrible if the company is pleasant."

"So you're saying I should check a brothel?"

"Ha ha, maybe. I could help you out, but information comes at a price. You can't expect me to believe you're too naive to figure out how this works."
"How much do you want?"

"Money's tempting, but right now I need someone for a specific job."

"What sort of job?" Arn cringed to ask.

"Ah ah, let's not get ahead of ourselves. You need to prove to me you have what it takes to get the job done. I need someone ingenious, stealthy, and resilient."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I need you to prove to me you're an able thief. For starters, take a gem from the jewelry merchant and put it into that shop owner's pocket over there, all without being caught" the stranger smugly stated.

"How about taking your coinpurse and dagger without you realizing it?" Arn retorted, holding the items up in one hand.

"What--" Arn heard before a scuffle of movement as the stranger checked himself to realize they really were his items Arn was holding.

"How did you--Ha ha....well, well played, well played indeed. You do show promise" the stranger nervously chuckled, taking the items from Arn's hand.

"I guess we can bypass the jewel test and get straight to it since we both need something and time is fleeting" continued the stranger, composing himself.

Arn knew the act had unnerved the stranger, but he regained his composure quickly. Of course, Arn had to slow time down twice to accomplish the feat, but no need for anyone to know who he was or what he could do just yet.

"There is a tavern down in the Ratways called the 'Ragged Flagon'. Meet me down there tonight, and maybe we can help each other out. If anyone questions you, tell them Brynjolf sent you" the man replied before rising and walking away.

Arn didn't wait for nightfall to make his way into the Ratways. He knew it was a maze of tunnels and sewers, and figured he would need the extra time to find his way through.

Entering through the yawning open grate by the water in lower Riften, Arn was immediately assaulted by the awful stench in the tunnels.

The unpleasant mixed smell of sweat, dead fish, burnt leather, and stagnant water made Arn recoil at first, wondering how anyone could frequent such a place.

Drawing a cloth over his mouth, Arn continued on.

Initially, he was surprised to see quite a few people in the passages and openings.

A man and a woman rutting on a mat or against the walls in alcoves. Several other women paraded themselves naked by mats while men and other women eyed them as they walked up and down the passages.

Apparently these were the brothels Arn had unwittingly referenced when he talked with Brynjolf.
As he went further into the tunnels, the torches were spaced further apart and there were no people apart from corpses dumped unceremoniously in corners and grates, pillaged of everything and left naked and decaying.

As Arn moved further in, a man screamed and jumped out of the shadows at him, but Arn already had his shield at the ready and bashed the man away before running him through with Dawnbreaker.

The emaciated man in ragged leather armor dropped a half broken dagger and wheezed his last breath as Arn removed the glowing red longsword from his chest.

Arn spotted several other desperate looking characters in the shadows as he continued, but either his intimidating appearance or previous display against the first would be murderer scared them away.

After awhile, he finally found the well lit entrance to the Ragged Flagon.

Upon entering, Arn was surprised to find a large pool of water in the middle of the tavern crisscrossed by walkways, with tables and chairs around the outside.
It was also surprisingly empty.

Other than a card game at one table and two lone men drinking at another, the only soul present was the barkeep at the counter in the back.

Arn walked up to the counter and was about to say something to the Barkeep when Brynjolf emerged from the shadows in the back and motioned Arn to follow.

"If they don't seem accepting of you, show your skills off a little" Brynjolf whispered as they walked.

Passing through another door, they entered another large room with a criss-crossing walkway over water.

This time, there were other men and women loitering around the outskirts, applying themselves to different tasks.

In the middle stood an older Breton man, clad in the same peculiar black leather armor as Brynjolf.

"What do we have here?" asked the older man as Brynjolf and Arn approached, fixing Arn with a severe gaze.

"Just some new talent" quipped Brynjolf.

"And you brought him down here already?!" protested the older Breton "He hasn't done anything to prove himself one of us!"

"Just relax, he shows great promise. I've already seen he has very...impressive skills. Don't you?" Brynjolf replied, turning to Arn.

"You could say that" Arn replied, holding up the older Breton's dagger and longsword.

The older Breton looked a cross between terrified and enraged for a moment as he seemed to check himself all over briefly before settling himself and smoothing his graying blonde hair behind his ears and forcing a smile to his lips.

"Hmph....perhaps you show promise" he admitted in a slightly gravelly voice as he snatched the weapons back out of Arn's hands "But still, you should have sent him on some of the smaller jobs
before bringing him down here."

"I was going to have him accompany me...to...Goldenglow Estate" muttered Brynjolf, suddenly sounding less confident.

"Again with this?! Why must you persist? They're the two best infiltrators we have!" snarked the older man.

"They should have been back some time ago" reasoned Brynjolf, Arn noting the determined frown creasing his brow "Come on, Frey, you can feel something’s wrong. Can you not?"

The older man, apparently named 'Frey', stepped closer to Brynjolf and hissed quietly at him "You sure you're making decisions with your head and not your cock?"

"At least I'm making decisions instead of sitting around and waiting for nothing to happen" Brynjolf hissed in turn, the tension between the two palpable as Arn watched them stare at each other for a moment.

"Fine....go mount your....mission to Goldenglow, but you will look all the more fool when they return in your absence" Frey finally responded before turning and walking away.

Brynjolf seemed to release pent up breath in relief before turning and nodding at Arn.

"Is that your boss?" Arn whispered as they walked away.

"Don't know if 'boss' is the right word" chuckled Brynjolf "But yes, Mercer Frey is in charge of things here if that's what you're asking."

As they exited the room back into the tavern, Arn turned to catch a glimpse of Mercer Frey by the far door staring at Arn. He had a look in his eye Arn had seen before...the one men got when they were planning to kill you.

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTES:
1. The quests and some of the characters (particularly the targets) from the Thieves Guild quest line will be presented quite a bit different so as to fit with Arn's storyline as well as streamline a lot of running around.
2. Don't ask how much will be followed because I still don't know how much I can incorporate without deviating far from the main storyline or the main protagonist's moral compass.
3. SPOILER ALERT: For those of you puzzled at Riften's historical portrayal, if you look at Skyrim Lore, Riften was once perhaps the most economically prosperous city in the land and the Theives Guild did have a Palace under the old Guildmaster (before he was murdered and the Skeleton Key stolen).
Night on Lake Honrich was eerily quiet as Arn and Brynjolf paddled quietly across the lapping waves toward the hill filled islands in the middle of the massive lake.

Arn had tried to get some answers from Brynjolf as to what exactly they were doing, but had only received a closed fist, signaling silence, as a response.

It took several hours, but they finally sneaked ashore, dragging the small wooden boat behind some rocks and stashing the paddles with it.

"Okay Daggersnatcher, here's your job. Two of our members were sent here before to sneak in and....relay a message. Something apparently went wrong as we haven't heard from them in days. You're going to sneak in and find out what happened. Help free them if you can." whispered Brynjolf as they crouched by the rocks.

"That's it?" asked Arn a little surprised "What about you?"

"I need to check something, but we'll meet back here or in the Ragged Flagon as soon as possible" replied Brynjolf before pulling his hood over his head.

"Who are they? How will I know them?" Arn whispered.

"A man and a woman....Delvin and Vex. If they're still alive, you'll probably find them bickering" mused Brynjolf as he pulled black cloth up over his nose, just leaving his eyes visible as he sneaked off into the darkness.

Arn sighed and looked over the sprawling estate built into the rising hillside of the island.

While he felt relief that he wasn't asked to do anything more unsavory, he still felt like he was figuratively in the dark about what was going on, though unsure if he wanted to know the full extent of what was happening.

If Mjoll had been even partially correct about how things were in Riften, then it was likely whoever owned the estate was just as much or more involved in illegal activities as Arn was at the moment.

Mimicking Brynjolf, Arn drew the hood and mask cloth onto his face of the borrowed leather armor Brynjolf had loaned him.

Ebony armor was impressive protection, but Arn needed all possible stealth.

It took quite some time to scout around the exterior. The estate was larger than Arn would have expected in this part of Skyrim and a surprising number of guards patrolled the grounds.

Finally, Arn spotted something promising, a culvert that came out of the hillside, the grate that covered it slightly ajar.
Looked like a good spot to sneak in.

Following carefully up the passage with lightly flowing water, Arn peaked through another grating when he heard voices.

In between some rocks, Arn could see a platform and several cages.

There was a low hum of voices but they were too far away for Arn to pick out anything distinct.

Moving further down the tunnel, Arn looked for another opening that might be closer.

Just as he spotted another grating further down, the ground beneath Arn suddenly gave way as a trap door opened beneath him.

It happened so fast that even slowing down time mid-fall didn't help as he was left grasping at thin air.

Tumbling down, Arn rolled to a stop amid the rock strewn sand of an arena pit of some sort.

"See! I told you!" boomed an unhappy voice from a platform to Arn's right.

Recovering himself, Arn crouched behind a rock as he peaked over the edge.

An elderly looking Altmer man stood on the prominent platform overlooking the pit, eyeing Arn grumpily.

"I don't care who you worked this out with. Here's another one come to cause trouble. How many more will they send? Best kill them all now and be done with it. They'll get the message soon enough" grouched a heavily armored Breton next to him.

"Don't be a fool!" came a male voice from behind them Arn couldn't see "Just think how ridiculous that sounds...trying to send the Thieves Guild a message...psh!"

"Do it and you'll never sleep easy again" came a woman's voice along with the other.

Several slaps of flesh and grunts followed shortly thereafter as silence again descended on the cavern.

The elderly Altmer squinted at Arn and huffed, leaning on the railing.

"There was only supposed to be one intruder. Instead, I have to deal with three. I tire of this" he grumbled in a squeaky tone.

"Shall I give the order?" queried the mercenary next to him.

"No...no, I have a better idea. I haven't fed my new pets this week and I'm sure they can be far more entertaining at disposing of these pests. Throw the others in with this one" replied the Altmer with a sinister grin.

This whole time, Arn had been eyeing around the cavern, looking for a way out, but finding none out of the arena except a large, heavy iron barred door.

In short order, the mercenaries heaved two heavily bound individuals over the railing that was already almost thirty feet off the ground.

Arn only had a moment to react.
Arn exploded forward, and slowed time down, snatching the bound man and woman out of the air and setting them down before time sped back up.

"Wha-- how did he do that?" gasped the mercenary, watching Arn drag the two behind a rock and out of view.

"No matter, open the cages!" exclaimed the Altmer gleefully.

"Quickly! Get us out of these!" hissed the woman, flinging her white-blond hair back out of her face as Arn started cutting knots loose.

"Vex and Delvin, I presume?" muttered Arn as he continued cutting, marveling at the ridiculously profuse amount of ropes and knots the mercenaries had used on both of them.

"No time for pleasantries" groaned Delvin as they all heard a series of clanks from the large gate that opened slowly "He keeps some sort of beasts down here. If you don't hurry, we're all going to be their next lunch."

"Yeah, I got that" replied Arn, finally getting enough knots and ropes cut off Vex that she could start moving and untangling the rest herself.

As Arn started on Delvin's bindings, they all froze as a loud roaring echoed around the arena, but it wasn't just one beast making noises. There were at least two.

Arn peered over the rock and was surprised to see an obsidian colored Dragon of sorts crawling out of the gateway.

He would've said it was a dragon based on the fact that it was reptilian and the shape of the head, but there was one prominent thing missing.

It had no wings, just the elongated, lizard-like body and a massive tail that had spikes that got larger further down the tail until they ended in one long, ugly looking bony spike in an orb of flesh at the end of the tail.

"Get him free. I'll get their attention" Arn urged, tossing Vex his dagger as she shed the last of her bindings.

Running from cover, Arn got his shield ready, thumping on it with his crackling ebony longword.

He was dismayed to see a second black dragon emerging behind the first one.

"Damn it" muttered Arn, taking off running as the first one drew a bead on him.

Arn knew they probably moved fast once they put their mind to it, but even he was surprised at the burst of speed the first one showed as it charged in a straight line at Arn, who ducked around a rock just before it reached him.

Just as Arn was relieved to think he would be able to exploit their inability to turn quickly, the large tail spike came thundering down into the rock Arn was hiding behind, cracking a piece of stone off.

Apparently these rocks were more malleable than Arn was counting on, or that tail spike was a lot nastier than he'd thought.
Running past the dragon's behind, Arn heard the other black dragon charge straight to the side where he'd just been, another tail spike impacting the ground right behind him.

"Aringoth!" came a voice from overhead "We have another intruder!"

"Well? deal with it!" answered the Altmer exasperatedly, impatiently watching the spectacle below.

"The safe is empty and a fire has been set!"

"WHAT? NOOO! We must find them at once!" screamed Aringoth as he ran off, following the mercenaries.

Arn reached the cover of another rock and turned just as a Black Dragon leaped, and landed partially on top of the rock, swiping at Arn with a clawed forelimb.

Dodging to the right, Arn pondered striking back, but realized if these were truly dragon kin, that killing them and the consequent soul absorption would put him in jeopardy if he didn't kill both quickly.

"Keep that one busy! We'll draw the other one here!" shouted Delvin from the gate opening as Arn spotted Vex weaving her way through rocks toward Delvin as the other Black Dragon gave chase.

They must be planning some way to drop the gate on it.

Arn had to act quickly.

Rolling further to the right, narrowly avoiding another spiked blow into the sand, Arn tried to slice off the end section of the tail, but was surprisingly rebuffed by the thick, almost plate-like skin of the Black Dragon.

The recoil of the blow cause Arn to stumble back, barely ready for another tail strike from the Dragon, its spike piercing Arn's shield, barely missing him off to one side before Arn released it and the shield was thrashed around as the Dragon tried to rid its tail spike of the annoyance.

So their skin was impervious to blades. Arn knew of at least one spot that wasn't.

"TIID KLO UL!"

As Arn darted in, time slowed to a standstill as Arn sidestepped the lunging Black Dragon's maw and stabbed straight into the brain cavity through its left eye just as time sped back up.

The beast let out a painful howl and hissed as it thrashed around, trying to dislodge the crackling blade from its skull as Arn rolled behind a stone to avoid the flailing tail.

At the same time, Arn heard a terrifically loud CLANG.

Spinning to see, Arn caught sight of the other Black Dragon pinned to the ground at its neck by the massive steel gate door that Delvin and Vex had found some way to release.

It wasn't dead, though. Instead, it continued to thrash around and growl angrily in the enclosed space at its two tormentors as Arn desperately waited on the other one to stop thrashing and die so he could get his blade back.

After what seemed like an eternity, the first one finally stilled enough for Arn to pull his blade free and turn to deal with the other one.
It had started striking the steel gate with its tail spikes since it couldn't move anything else. Arn felt a little sorry for it as he approached for the coup de grace.

Arn was about to time his slide under the partially closed gate when the dreaded golden light began to glow around him.

"Oh no..." he briefly muttered, backing away from the beast, turning around just in time to see the other Black Dragon's corpse glowing golden and begin the soul absorption, seizing him in the air.

Strange and unusual creatures and races flashed through Arn's mind before he finally felt the sand of the arena on his hands and knees, lifting up his head from where he was kneeling.

Getting a running start, he slid in the sand under the partially closed gate and rolled into a crouch.

Delvin was crouching over an unmoving Vex and the Dragon was still groaning and growling, stuck in its predicament.

Re-energized by the soul absorption, Arn didn't hesitate.

"TIID KLO UL"

He was surprised to find one of the Dragon's eyes already bore a blade wound.

Vex must've tried it with the dagger he'd given her, but couldn't finish the job.

Arn stabbed in quickly as time sped back up, but the Dragon was so exhausted and already bleeding that it didn't thrash much more, just growled loudly before its head thudded against the ground with a shudder.

As he did so, Arn suddenly realized what might happen once the soul was absorbed.

"Get her out of here now!" yelled Arn at Delvin.

When Delvin took his time to carefully lift her, Arn was on him in a second, ripping her from him and blitzing back to the gate and under, setting her down unceremoniously before holding a hand back for Delvin to crawl under as Arn could already see the Dragon's corpse beginning to glow golden.

"What in Oblivion are you on about?! Delvin hissed loudly, glaring at Arn.

Arn opened his mouth to answer but was gripped by swirling golden light.

When he was finally released from the strange visions of Taesci, other strange races, and extraordinary creatures the like of which Arn had never even heard of, he found himself on his hands and knees again in the arena.

Looking up, he found Delvin leaning down next to a now conscious Vex, both of them staring at him.

"So you're a battle mage?" both queried Arn at the same time.

"No" Arn grunted, retrieving the sword he'd dropped next to him and rising to his feet.

"Then--" Delvin started to question further before Arn interrupted him.

"We don't have time for this. We need to find a way out quickly before the others return."
"He's right" Vex sighed before rising to a crouch "Unless you brought some special gear, the only way outta here I've seen is up there...." she murmured, nodding far up the outside wall to an opening into the night.

"You think all three of us can make that climb?" groused Delvin "That wall does not look climbable"

"You implying me or the new guy can't?" sassed Vex back, striding purposefully toward the distant cavern wall.

"Why not find a way up the platform and through the estate? Our new friend seems pretty handy with a sword" reasoned Delvin, eyeing Arn a bit more earnestly now that they had time to ponder their options.

"No telling how many other surprises Aringoth has, and how many heavily armed mercenaries did we count over the last two days?" retorted Vex as she reached the edge of the arena.

"And they'll all be stirred up like hornets by now..." mused Delvin sadly.

Twenty minutes later, Delvin groaned as he reached for another hand hold high up the cavern wall.

"Why....did....I have....to go...first?" he wheezed between gasps of effort.

"Because....you're the....'master' of infiltration, remember?" came the sarcastic reply from Vex, climbing a few feet below Delvin.

"Now...now...I--" Delvin started to defend himself, reaching another grabbing point.

"That and if....I had to go first.....you'd probably spend....your entire time.....staring at my arse...instead of climbing" Vex hissed.

"No....I wouldn't" retorted Delvin.

"Yes....you--" started Vex

"Enough...both of you!" hissed Arn in annoyance "Gods, just get out of the damn estate. Argue later" Arn sighed as he rested, waiting for the two above him to make more headway.

Of course, Arn made no mention of the fact he'd stared at her arse more than he needed to.

Clad in the same unusual black leathers that Arn and Brynjolf had, the stretching and reaching just seemed to outline her taut and well defined hips and legs as they climbed.

Once or twice, Arn nearly turned away as the leather pinched in the cleft of her buttocks, leaving next to nothing to the imagination.

Once they'd gotten about fifteen feet up, the climbing had become easier. Now, Delvin was almost at the opening.

Arn looked up at Vex's lower half again as he started to follow her up.

Briefly focusing on that leather clad arse again, Arn was suddenly aware that she'd thrown her head around, glancing down, catching him in the act.
Glaring at him out of the corner of her eyes, Arn heard a loud hocking noise as she gathered spit. Arn was about to pipe up in his defense before she spit on him when the stone beneath Vex's left foot gave out and she suddenly lost her hold.

She only slid down a foot or two because Arn grabbed her left foot and held her aloft, until she could get firm holds again.

Glaring down at him again, Arn wasn't sure how to respond. So he just shrugged and grinned sheepishly.

Reluctantly, Vex spit out away from them and kept climbing.

Another hour later, they met up with Brynjolf by their hidden wooden boat.

"Well done, Daggersnatcher" whispered Brynjolf excitedly as they removed the boat from the bushes, carrying it down to the water's edge.

"Daggersnatcher?" puzzled both Delvin and Vex quietly as they boarded and began silently paddling.

"Later..." whispered Brynjolf as they quietly paddled away into the darkness, watching the smoke rise from part of the estate as guards hurried back and forth in the distance.

A few hours later, all four sat hunched in the woods outside Riften.

"So what happened?" asked Brynjolf quietly.

"They knew we were coming!" replied Vex angrily.

"How?"

"Had to be someone on the inside. They knew when and even where we were infiltrating" mused Delvin.

"Not possible. The only ones who even knew about the job were us three, Frey, and Maven" replied Brynjolf.

"Maybe someone of Maven's is in Aringoth's pocket?" puzzled Delvin.

"Aringoth's clearly not the merchant we thought he was. He had far more coin and goods than we thought, and those mercenaries weren't from around here" added Vex.

"Might explain why he's suddenly grown some balls in his dealings with Maven" mused Brynjolf "Guess it's a good thing I snatched all the documents from his safe. Should shed some light on things" he chuckled, withdrawing a stack of papers from his satchel.

As they started sorting and reading, Arn leaned back against a tree and sighed.

As far as he was concerned, his part was over. Now it was just a matter of collecting on the information he was owed.

Given how concerned the other three were over the situation, Arn figured he could wait until they'd sorted it out.

After awhile, Arn was disturbed from the sleep he didn't know he'd fallen into as the other three
argued louder.

"How can you NOT recognize the mark, Delvin?!" Vex hissed angrily.

"Look, I organized and catalogued them. I never said I invented them" he retorted.

"Frey will have some idea" muttered Brynjolf as he gathered up the papers and slipped them in his pouch.

"What of our arrangement?" Arn interrupted them, drawing surprised looks from Vex and Delvin.

"You'll have to talk to Frey about that too" responded Brynjolf "He's the one who made the deal with your friend."

Sighing with impatience, Arn got to his feet and followed the others back through a secret sewer entrance into the Ratways below Riften.

An hour later, Arn sat disgruntled outside Frey's personal quarters in the Guild's hidden section of the Ratways.

The others had been inside discussing the developments at length while Arn had to wait his turn to deal with the person who seemed to like him the least.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Mercer Frey emerged, an annoyed frown finding Arn.

"Up...if you really want that information, you'll be coming with me" Frey ordered.

"I already did what was asked of me" Arn replied, refusing to budge.

"But NOT what I asked of you" Frey retorted "I make the deals around here, and if you want any more help from any of us, you'll do as I say" he chided as Arn's hand clenched into a fist with anger.

Arn glanced quickly to Brynjolf for some sort of help, but both Brynjolf and Delvin seemed to have found something more interesting to converse about, just leaving Vex leaning against a wall eyeing both Arn and Frey watchfully.

He felt like walking out and leaving. While he had wanted allies with shadier connections, this wasn't what he had in mind.

He wasn't sure how they would react if he tried to do so, and Etienne Rarnis had assured him the Guild was hiding Esbern. In retrospect, Arn wondered if Rarnis had simply been telling him what he wanted to hear as a means of repayment.

He could try to intimidate or force the information out, but Arn had no desire to stir up a hornet's nest down here by himself without his heavy armor.

Besides, revealing any of his abilities as Dragonborn might lead to more 'requirements' for the 'deal'.

"Fine....Frey, have it your way, but this is the last thing I do for this 'deal'. You'd better not break faith on your word" growled Arn, rising to his feet and stepping forward.

"Or what?!" snarled Frey, tossing his graying blonde hair back.

"Or I'll be very....displeased" Arn growled, both men now only a foot from each other, Arn slightly
taller, looking down into Frey's grumpy features.

"It's nothing terribly hard...Hunt down and kill a thief and a traitor. You can do that. Can't you?" sneered Frey.

"Yes, I can" retorted Arn as Frey began rattling off instructions on where and when to meet.
Looking down into the snowcapped dome of the ruins of Snow Veil Sanctum, Arn couldn't help but feel that something was amiss.

While Mercer Frey had been superficially pleasant in the day of travelling it took them to get there, Arn couldn't shake the impression of fear, anger, and distrust that had radiated from him since the moment they'd met.

The mission, as Frey had related, seemed straightforward: find and kill the former guild member, murderer, and traitor named Karliah who was hiding in the area of the ruins, but in the time it took them to travel there, Arn had started to ponder over several puzzling facts that didn't add up.

Why would the guild master go by himself with one who was admittedly not one of their own?

Surely, a different task could be found to pay for the 'information' he sought, or at least have others like Brynjolf accompany them.

Then there was Frey's behavior. Arn had tried to figure if the man just hated him personally or generally just acted like an arse with everyone.

The others seemed to have no problem trusting him. The only thing Arn could figure was that the man's ego must've been somehow affronted when Arn had slowed time down to snatch his weapons off him when Brynjolf introduced him.

Still, Arn had been around enough fighting in his life to note that look he remembered getting from Frey right before he and Brynjolf had left to rescue Vex and Delvin.

Then there was the strange armor Frey was now wearing. Gone was the black leather that all of them were usually garbed in.

Mercer Frey wore what Arn could only describe as a sort of light plated and leather armor with metal and properties that, stare and rack his brain as he might, nothing he could think of matched it.

It was light weight, utterly silent no matter the movements, and seemed to change shades of darkness based on the surroundings. There was also a faint purple glow to it at times, likely meaning a magical enchantment of some sort.

"You go on ahead" ordered Frey.

"Pretty sure you sneak better in that than I will in this" Arn gestured to his ebony armor.
"I want to double back around to make sure no one followed" murmured Frey, putting a mask on and pulling a hood over his head.

"But--"

"Do as I say!" hissed Frey "And kill the traitor if she attacks before I get back"

Arn gulped down his huff of annoyance, further bothered by Frey's behavior, but on he went, arming his crackling ebony longsword and newly replaced steel shield.

Watching out of the corner of his eye as Frey disappeared into the woods, Arn slowly began descending the circular stone staircase into the ruins, a light snow beginning to fall through the opening of the dome.

The steps winded down about fifty feet circularly to a door. There were two wider sections of platform on the sides, but any misstep could send a person plunging down onto a caved in and jagged floor.

Without warning, Arn was suddenly grabbed and shoved from behind, sending him stumbling off the stairs.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Acting quickly as he fell, Arn burst forward and slid to a stop on a platform fifteen feet down on the opposite side from where he'd fallen.

He spun and looked back, expecting to see this Karliah character, but instead saw Frey in his shadowy armor staring at him from the steps.

"This what you planned all along Frey?" Arn bellowed with rage.

"What are you?" hissed Frey in annoyance, downing a potion and disappearing before Arn could answer.

"You can hide, Frey, but it won't help!" sneered Arn as he carefully crouched into a guarded stance, watching for any abnormalities in the snow or tell tale sign of movement.

Arn knew Frey had to use the stairs, but engaging on them might be foolhardy since he didn't know what else Frey had up his sleeve, not to mention some of the steps didn't look all that sturdy.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment as Arn's breath came out in vapors amid the lightly falling snowflakes, eyes glued to his surroundings.

Then he caught the faintest discrepancy among the falling snowflakes, responding by sliding his foot across the snow covered platform, slinging a wave of powdery snow across the invisible form of Mercer Frey.

They both attacked each other simultaneously.

Arn was stunned to suddenly feel a blade arc across his right shoulder.

Mercer was only partially visible, but Arn had blocked a blade blow with his shield.

Frey must be double wielding, even though Arn had only seen him carry one sword during the trip.

Arn had never favored dual wielding for its lack of defense.
Frey, however, didn't need defense as his furious and skilled arcs and spin attacks forced Arn backward, connecting several times against the heavy ebony armor.

"TIID KLO UL"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn picked out the nebulous shape of Frey in the snow in front of him slicing down across Arn's leg with one blade while bringing the other down towards his sword wrist.

Arn stepped around Frey and brought his crackling ebony longsword down right in between Frey's shoulder blades with a loud crack as Frey's light armor surprisingly held firm, but the invisibility vanished as the electricity crackled over him while he grunted in pain.

Stumbling forward, he spun and pointed both swords straight at Arn.

Frey had thicker gauntlets than most light armor, and from this angle, Arn could make out three small holes facing outward in each one.

He only had a brief second to recognize all this before small hisses of air came from them and Arn instinctively raised his shield as he felt small sharp projectiles pinging off it.

When they'd ceased, Arn angled back just in time as Frey renewed his flurry of dual attacks.

They fought back and forth briefly on the platform, first Frey driving Arn back with high and low arcs and powerful spins, then Arn shoving Frey back with a shield bash and trying to follow it up with a several swings either blocked or held at bay by the surprisingly sturdy light armor.

"What's the matter, Frey? Out of potions?" sneered Arn, twirling his longsword and moving in on Frey as they both gasped with exertion.

"No...but you're out of time" chuckled Frey circling around Arn carefully.

Arn was about to reply, but suddenly felt a small prick of pain on his neck, instinctively reaching up and feeling a small dart sticking out that he hadn't even realized was there.

Looking back up at Frey, he felt his vision grow blurry, blinking his eyes to try to focus.

Then his chest began to feel tight and heavy, staggering one way, then another to try to keep his feet.

"You know, I was actually curious how it is you're doing these stunts you're pulling, but it matters not. The poison will do its job" boasted Frey "In the end, it doesn't matter who you are, your death will come from the shadows" he sneered, withdrawing another potion.

By now, Arn was struggling to get to his feet as he saw the blurry form of Frey drinking something.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Frey had just turned invisible, but it didn't matter.

Arn exploded forward in a flash, surprising Frey, bringing his crackling ebony blade across where the blurry form's head had been and Arn was rewarded with the brief resistance as his blade cleaved flesh and Mercer Frey's head suddenly became visible, tumbling through the air and rolling to a stop on the platform.

Both Arn, and Mercer Frey's now headless body collapsed on the snowy platform, Arn on his knees trying to focus on the body spurting red across the white expanse of the platform.
"I'm the Dragonborn...fool" Arn slurred out before collapsing on his front, but before everything turned black, he sensed another dark shape arrive, small hands carefully rolling him over, then another dark shape appeared and the two shapes seemed to dance with each other briefly before the darkness took him.

Not for the last time, Arn opened his eyes again, expecting to find himself in Sovngarde, but instead staring at a torch lit ceiling.

He tried to move, but even the act of trying to raise his head sent waves of pain all through his head and torso.

"Unghf..." he grunted in pain.

"Don't try to move. The effects of the poison haven't worn off" came a female voice and Arn felt the bed shift slightly as someone small sat next to him.

He looked up into the face of a small Dunmer woman with a rounded face and darker skin than most Dunmer Arn had seen. There was also something else different that he couldn't place for a second before he realized it.

Her eyes.

They weren't the usual red that all Dunmer possessed. Instead, they were a vibrant purple.

"Fear not. You will be safe here. I am Karliah."

Arn was confused, figuring Karliah would've been the one to attack him, not Frey.

"I don't...understand" he groaned out.

"How long have you been with the guild?" Karliah enquired, patting his wrist as though they were dear friends.

"He isn't" came a female voice from across the room "He was only helping us as some part of a deal"

It took Arn a moment to realize the voice belonged to Vex.

"What sort of deal?" asked Karliah in surprise.

"I don't know. I wasn't involved" replied Vex.

"What's...wrong...I...can't...move" gasped Arn in pain.

"It will take time for the poison's effects to go away. I gave you an antidote, but it will still take time. Here, drink this and get some rest" Karliah answered, putting a phial of something to his lips.

Arn drank it and slowly receded into sleep again as he heard the murmurings of Vex and Karliah conversing in the background.

Slowly, Arn awakened, but felt utterly exhausted. It was as if his whole body had been clenching something for a long time and had just let go.
His muscles ached all over, but thankfully, he could move at least, sitting up in bed with a groan.

"About time" snorted Vex from a chair nearby, some cards on the table in front of her.

"Vex....why are you here?" Arn muttered, stretching his arms as he realized they'd removed his armor.

"I followed you and Frey after you left Riften" she replied passively, continuing to move cards around.

"On someone's orders?"

"No"

"Then....why?"

"Because I knew something wasn't right"

"What gave it away?"

"Because Frey was afraid of you" she replied, stopping with the cards and turning to look at him
"Granted, the man is always an arsehole with people, but I'd never seen him actually afraid of anyone until I saw him react to you."

"And that piqued your curiosity?"

"That and what I saw you do at Goldenglow."

"You saw what happened when we got here then?"

"I saw the start of it, but not the end, though I wish I had" said Vex as she crossed one leg over the other, straining the black leather of her shapely legs and hips, smirking at him, really the first time he'd seen anything resembling a smile on her features.

"I don't understand, though. Why did Frey want me dead?"

"I can answer that" came Karliah's voice as she entered the dome shaped room they were in with an armful of wood.

Both Arn and Vex waited patiently as Karliah crossed the room and deposited the wood next to the fireplace before rising and taking a seat at the edge of Arn's bed again.

"I would not normally tell these things to anyone, much less one who is not even a member of the Guild" stated Karliah formally before removing her fur and leather jacket and hood "But....I don't think you're very.....normal. Are you?" she fixed him with those vibrant purple eyes.

"No" Arn replied solemnly.

"To make a long story short, whatever Frey told everyone about the former guild master's death and decline since was a lie. He was the one who betrayed and murdered Gallus. By the time I found out, it was too late for me to do anything" Karliah grew sad as she mentioned Gallus, staring at the floor dejectedly.

Arn knew that look, as well as the feelings that went with it.

"That was over twenty years ago" piped up Vex "How is that you're moving on Frey just now?"
"Frey sprung a trap on me that sent me into slavery in the Aldmeri Dominion. He used my absence to further solidify his claims that I was the traitor and murderer."
"I wasn't there to defend myself and for a long time...I couldn't mount a successful escape" Karlia replied, surprising Arn by un-strapping her leather doublet and opening up the front, showing the expanse of her tan skinned torso from the waist up.

Staring at an attractive Dunmer woman in just her breast strap would normally have been a pleasant experience, but Arn was prevented from enjoying it as soon as he noticed the little white, round scars all over her torso, left from long applications of pain leaches.

Arn grimaced and looked away as she cinched her doublet back together.

"I escaped eventually and made it back to Skyrim, where I started making plans to draw Frey out. I never intended anyone from the Guild to be harmed" Karlia continued, turning and gazing with concern at Vex.

"If Frey knew you were drawing him out, why bring anyone else? Why try to kill them on arrival?" Arn puzzled.

"He meant to kill you all along" Karlia answered, swapping looks between Arn and Vex.

"Why? I wasn't part of this."

Karliah didn't answer. She simply pulled out a leather pouch and withdrew a strange metallic instrument with a glowing greenish handle.

"Is that what I think it is?" muttered Vex, scooting her chair closer.

"The Skeleton Key..." answered Karliah, cradling it reverently.

"That is supposed to be in the Guild Vault" stated Vex cautiously.

"But it hasn't...not for a long time. Was supposed to keep the Ebonmere open, not be locked away or used by anyone. All these years, Mercer has had it, used it, hidden it. It is the reason dear Gallus was murdered" Karliah continued, turning the Key over in her small hands carefully.

"So Frey thought I found out about it?" Arn mused.

"He either thought you found out about it, or was worried that in time, you would" answered Karliah

"From what Vex has told me, it seems between Frey finding out I was back and that you had unusual abilities, he began to get a little paranoid."

"So he figured to kill two birds with one stone..." answered Arn.

"I found it in a pouch on his corpse, and if he was brazen enough to do that, I don't imagine the riches stolen by the Guild have remained safe either" Karliah sighed, looking at Vex again.

"Come to mention it, Frey was the only one allowed in the inner Vault...." Vex murmured thoughtfully before shooting to her feet "That Bastard!"

"Where are you going?" queried Karliah as Vex grabbed her jacket.

"The others must hear of this!"

"But will they believe you if you show up alone, without Frey, and without any proof other than your word?" asked Karliah in concern, causing Vex to stop by the door.
"They can check the Vault for themselves"

"Can they? Do you think Frey would allow such a possible discovery to be made in his absence? I'm afraid your friends will find their keys...won't work" finished Karliah sadly.

"Gods! It's a good thing he's dead, or I'd be hunting his sorry arse down right now" exclaimed Vex angrily, huffing and crossing her arms as she moved back across the room.

"That would be difficult. Even I wouldn't dare face him alone in martial combat. He was among the best I've ever seen with a blade. Which makes me wonder... just how is it that you bested him?" mused Karliah as she turned and fixed Arn with those bright purple irises.

"I don't know that it's a simple explanation" groaned Arn as he tried to sit up more.

"Come on, you've practically heard all our dirty secrets in the last five minutes" retorted Vex impatiently.

"I am the Dragonborn" Arn stated simply, watching Vex look puzzled and Karliah look surprised before suddenly grinning and seeming very pleased, making Arn uneasy.

"Of course! It all makes sense now! The gods have brought you here for this exact purpose!" exclaimed Karliahexcitedly.

"Uh...no. I was brought here to find someone who can help me find out more about the Dragons" Arn corrected her, bemoaning the fact he'd let them know who exactly he was. No telling what they would try to get him to do now.

An hour later and both women were looking expectantly at him.

"You must do this, Dragonborn" reiterated Karliah for about the thousandth time it seemed "Nothing with the Guild will be made better until Nocturnal's portal can be restored"

"I HAVE to find Esbern. The longer I wait, the more dangerous it becomes. Don't you remember me telling you about the Thalmor?"

"They won't find him as long as he is under the Guild's protection and this is URGENT! Don't you see?" Karliah was kneeling next to Arn's cot, pleading with both her words and her facial expression. Arn sighed in frustration, looking away from the imploring features of Karliah. If what she said was true, then it was of some import to get the portal opened again, though Arn doubted that he was the 'only one' who could do it.

Then again, they were dealing with a Daedra and a Daedric artifact. Maybe this would get him the allies and connections he needed.

Sighing again, wondering how long it would be before he regretted the decision, he turned back to Karliah.

"Fine, I'll do it, but I'll need provisions."

"On it" answered Vex, quickly departing.

"Is there anything more I can get you? Do you feel better?" Karliah asked a little awkwardly.
"I'll be fine" Arn replied, stretching his arms again "But tell me, are these Nord ruins?"

"Yes..." she answered tentatively.

"Is there a large curved wall with old Nordic script on it in the last burial chamber?"

"Actually, yes, I think there is, why?"

"Take me there immediately"

"Well, there are many traps I will have to undo since that was my plan for dealing with Mercer. We need to leave as soon as possible."

"You want me to do this? Then get me to that word wall" Arn answered, reaching for his armor.

Chapter End Notes

1. Not sure if anyone caught the lore reference to Akavir lands last chapter. I'd wanted to find some way of incorporating Black Dragons, but I just haven't been able to find out hardly anything about them either in or outside the game. So I had to come up with my own version of them.

2. If anyone does know of a good place for more lore related to Akavir lands, please PM me and let me know as it's something I'd like to explore further down the road.
Imperial City Interlude: The Elder Council

Chapter Summary

While Arn plods his way toward his goals in Skyrim, the political landscape is shifting in other places both near and far...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Imperial City, Cyrodiil

Elisif the Fair glided down the large vaulted hallway of the Imperial tower toward the large doors leading to the Elder Council.

She could sense Erdi's worried glances to each side as she tread carefully behind her. While Elisif had been to the Imperial Capital several times as a lass and a handful of times since maidenhood, this was only Erdi's second time both in the city and in the Imperial Tower.

She was about to reassure her handmaid before leaving her outside in the hallway, but realized she needed to get in early if she was going to improve her chances at finding out about the other councilors.

Erdi and then Bolgeir stepped off to one side with several other attendants as Elisif was ushered by Imperial Guards into the Elder Council Chamber.

Occupying the topmost space in the Imperial tower, it was an impressively built stone dome, the stone pillars around the exterior reinforcing both it and the notion that nothing could interrupt or reach them here.

Unfortunately, Elisif could see no adornments in the room itself at all. A large round room leading up to the dome, there was a large, round wooden table with cushioned high backed chairs surrounding it in the center.

It made her realize how much she would stick out in her ornate blue silk frock with white shawl tied with a pink rose broach at her bosom.

Surely the other Councilors' finery would make her not stick out so much in the dull gray of the room.

Her hair was coifed up at the back of her head with intricate braids hanging in curls. The frock was low cut in front but not wide, and adjusting the shawl over it allowed her to display just enough of her bosom to remind others part of why she was called "The Fair", but not so much as to be thought gaudy or desperate.

Thankfully, she was one of the first to arrive.

"Greetings, Elisif the Fair, Jarl of Solitude" announced a Breton young man with thick brown hair tied back in braids hanging down to his shoulders as he motioned her to a chair.
This must be the new Imperial Battlemage, Izmo Ledora. Elisif had heard he was young for the office, but even she was surprised at the young man that looked no more than his twenties and that he was a human, surpassing many others for the highest mage held office in the land.

As Elisif took her seat, she noted the other two Council members who'd already arrived.

The elderly Imperial man attired in heavy gold plated armor was surely the Lord High Chancellor, Magnus Olaren, perhaps the most decorated and storied general of the Imperial Legion, he looked ahead impassively with his hands folded on the table.

It took Elisif a few moments to guess the identity of the other before she realized it must be Skordane Tulphim, Count of Chorrol.

The only other Nord on the Council who wasn't a Jarl, his Nordic facial features and bright blonde, shoulder length hair were a familiar trait to Elisif, seeing a potential ally, particularly as religiously devoted as he was rumored to be.

"Greetings, Amaund Motierre, Imperial Treasurer from the Imperial City" hailed Izmo as a smaller Imperial man in a red and green satin outfit quietly slipped in and took a seat.

"Greetings Colin Redoran, King of Morrowind and Champion of the Arena" Izmo hailed again before Elisif had gotten done examining Amaund.

Elisif jerked her head to see the Dunmer King faster than she meant to. Attired in a mix of Ebony and Dwarven steel armor, he noticeably wore a shield on his back and an ornate but obviously well used longsword on his waist.

Slightly taller and more muscled than most Dunmer, Elisif remembered why she had been smitten with him when she was younger. Of course, back then, she had received all kinds of attention from the male nobles in the Imperial City.

She'd gotten everything from compliments whispered under a breath to vases of flowers to secretly delivered notes begging for a secret rendezvous. Foolishly, Elisif had basked in the attention then, not fully indulging in any liaisons or physically breaking her vows to Torygg, but delighting in the attention and fantasies nonetheless.

Elisif suddenly realized she was staring at her lap in shame as Izmo had hailed many more Councilors in quick succession.

Edward Carvain, Count of Bruma, and Dorian Lerus, Count of Bravil were both taking their seats as Countess Karis Hassuldor of Skingrad quietly paced past them to her seat a few spots down.

Elisif was more than a little surprised that one of the few other women on the council was attired in what appeared to be plain black leathers with a cloak. Karis was an attractive woman, the leathers particularly accentuating the curves of her hips as she sat and crossed a leather clad leg over the other.

Elisif had a hard time reconciling the knowledge that Karis was a beautiful woman and among the most powerful mages in Tamriel with the fact that she attired herself as little more than a back alley thief.

Apparently at least some of the rumors about her desire to stay out of the spotlight at all cost were true.

More familiar faces arrived. Jarls Idgrod Ravencrone the Elder and Siddgeir from Skyrim along with
the Countess of Anvil, Janora Umbranox arrived.

Elisif had met Janora on her first visit to the Imperial City and had remained in touch with the middle aged Imperial woman since then, visiting with each other when in the Capital and corresponding by letter at other times.

She didn't have much time to nod or greet Janora though, as other Councilors filed in.

Jarl Igmund from Markarth, Count Junius Olaren of the Imperial City, Count Alexus Caro of Leyawiin, and Jubius Morley, Count of Kvatch all filed in and found their seats as they were hailed in turn by Izmo.

By now, Elisif knew they'd attained the quorum they needed of at least half the Council, but others were still coming.

All the Imperial aligned Jarls were present and all but one of the Counts of Cyrodiil were accounted for.

"Greetings, Bawgtor Gro-Nagorm, King of Orsinium and Regent of High Rock" hailed Izmo as Elisif watched an Orc stride in with midnight black heavy armor over white furs and take a seat.

Elisif couldn't help but wince as she noted the number of empty seats around the table. It wasn't just the Stormcloak Jarls that weren't there.

No one had ever bothered to remove the seats that used to belong to Councilors from the provinces of Hammerfell and Elseweyr, now no longer part of the Empire.

"This session of the Elder Council is called to orde--" Izmo had started before another rushed figure entered and hurried to take a seat.

"Greetings, Lothiel Indarys, Count of Cheydinhal" hailed Izmo, a little annoyed, as Lothiel gruffly took his seat as though having to attend was an inconvenience to his schedule.

Elisif was surprised, considering it was the young Dunmer's first Elder Council session. Perhaps he was still distraught over the murder of his father some months back.

"This session of the Elder Council is now called to order" stated Izmo, moving to the seal on the floor where the Imperial Battlemage was supposed to stand as the adjudicator of the proceedings.

"Aren't we missing someone important?" rumbled Bawgtor from the seat that looked too small for him, gesturing with a large arm toward the larger seat designated for the Emperor.

"The Emperor has declared himself feeling unwell and we must administrate in his absence" came the abrupt reply from Izmo.

A noticeable stir of unease crept through the group, though Elisif wasn't sure if it was because they were concerned for the Emperor or because they scoffed at his reasons for being absent.

What followed was a long series of reports from different Imperial Officers about the state of the civil war in Skyrim and the uprising put down in High Rock.

Elisif had to cringe yet again as General Tullius' letter of recommendation was read to them. It sounded far too desperate. She blushed with a flush of anger, having once again been bypassed by Tullius straight to the Council.
When the letter was finished, it was silent for a moment before Magnus Olaren, the Lord High Chancellor rose to his feet to speak.

Receiving the prerequisite nod from Izmo, he started.

"There you have it. Last time we met, the fighting in Skyrim was but a series of skirmishes with a disgruntled, but murderous noble. Now it is a war, with hundreds of casualties on both sides and ground to be both gained and lost at stake. Tullius is a sound General with a proven record. However, I cannot approve of sending another Legion to reinforce them without leaving Cyrodiil too weak. The only other solution I can condone would be the reassignment of the Second Legion, currently just mopping up the remnants of conflict in High Rock."

With that assessment, he sat down, but promptly Bawgtor rose to answer.

"The whole reason the Legion had to be deployed was because some of those in the provinces didn't feel the Empire did enough to protect them. So they banded together to gain their own protection" he rumbled after being acknowledged by Izmo "If we pull the Legion out now, those that have scattered will reform and we could risk even more joining them if they know the Legions are currently too busy to answer a call for aid.

"May we have open forum on this?" asked the elderly Bosmer, Jubius Morley to Izmo.

"Yes, but if order is not kept, I will bring the session back to the regular format" answered Izmo formally.

Relieved that they didn't have to observe the usual order of things for this particular topic, the group seemed to collectively relax in their chairs a little.

At first it was silent before King Redoran lightly tapped the table with a fist.

"Gods...what happened to the Empire's warriors? We're sitting here talking about throwing thousands of men at our enemies in one place or another to just force them into defeat. With all due respect to General Tullius, I do not understand why he feels the need for another legion. He already commands the Third and the Sixth there. To give him another would put him in command of three Legions, something that hasn't happened since the Great War. I think it is neither necessary or prudent to do so" Colin Redoran finished, leaning back in his chair and looking at the High Chancellor.

"Tch...not everyone can have the Arena Champion leading them into battle" scoffed Jarl Siddgeir, slumped in his chair lazily.

"Maybe you should impress upon your own people the importance of destroying this usurper themselves instead of crying to the Empire for more Legions" retorted Colin Redoran, leaning forward slightly on his elbows.

"I doubt it's a matter of Skyrim or another place" creaked out Idgrod, surprising the others as they turned to her "This pattern has repeated itself countless times in the last decade or two, except this time on a larger scale than before. I was very much hoping to hear the Emperor's long term strategy for dealing with the cause of these ills" she finished sadly, staring at the empty Emperor's chair.

"I agree with Idgrod. The fact that it's in Skyrim doesn't make it their problem alone. To say so only gives kindling to those who want to make others see the Empire's actions as folly" replied Janora Umbranox sternly.
"That was not my intent" the Dunmer King sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"A question, if I may" Edward Carvain stated, sitting up "Can we truly afford the expense? I think Amaund would back me up in saying the treasury would be in even poorer shape to pack up the Legion and send it across the continent after only just getting them there" he finished as Amaund nodded his head sadly in acknowledgement.

"And how much do we lose every day if we do nothing?" Elisif pounced incredulously.

"The reports show how much we have lost" replied the gravelly voice of the High Chancellor, his presence and the raw numbers they'd just heard calming the stormy discussion for the moment as the group contemplated the full implications.

"A theoretical question then?" spoke Lothiel Indarys, the first time many of them had ever heard him "Can you truly save people that don't want to be saved?" he queried smugly, the brief glare he exchanged with Colin Redoran was not lost on Elisif.

"That assumes you cannot distinguish between those fighting and all the people that live and try to work in the land they fight over" Elisif retorted quicker than she meant "You assume because a land area is controlled by a military force that what?...every man, woman, and child there is happy about it?"

"I was speaking in principle" replied Lothiel with barely veiled contempt for her rebuttal.

"We're here to discuss specifics, not the abstract. If you wish to be abstract, I'm sure there are a few priests and scholars in another part of the Imperial Tower who can assist you. Skyrim NEEDS aid and soon" Elisif retorted again.

She realized as she leaned back that her rebuttal of the young Dunmer had more than surprised a few of the Councilors. As she looked around, most of them were staring at her as if she'd been replaced with a stranger.

It was unnerving at first, but then she realized a few of them were more than approving of her rebuttal. From a knowing grin from Janora to a slight nod of salute from Colin Redoran, she realized she might have more allies than she thought.

After a brief silence, Junias Olaren spoke up.

"I suppose it comes down to a vote to move the Second Legion or not since it is the only one not already overly stretched" he sighed.

A brief discussion followed of the numbers and tactics in High Rock.

Elisif could sense it was not going to go her way and there was nothing she could do about it. She couldn't very well call the reports on High Rock a lie, nor could she truly bring the more ominous reason out in the open: the Dragons.

She knew other lands had the same problem, but from the reports, they had started and were far more plenteous in Skyrim. The last thing she wanted was for all the Empire to blame Skyrim for the return of the dragons. They surely wouldn't get much sympathy if it became known the dragon problem had started there.

Elisif could only watch sadly as all the votes were cast, with only her, Idgrod, Siddgeir and Skordane Tulphim casting votes in favor of moving the Second Legion. All others cast opposed, even Igmund for some strange reason.
"The second topic: the appearance and spread of Dragons, their kin, and the malicious and destructive actions they have done" hailed Izmo, loudly reading from a scroll before the chamber fell silent again.

"Truth be told...the return, if you will, of these creatures disturbs me more than any civil conflict" spoke the High Chancellor, looking around the room as if expecting someone else to add something.

"It's unnatural" muttered Skordane Tulphim.

"Since the reports I've read are conflicting, I'd be interested in hearing what the Imperial Battlemage has to say on the matter. Dragons are magical creatures after all" piped up Jubius Morley with a wave of his hand.

After a quick vote allowing Izmo to report on the creatures since the office was not usually allowed to provide commentary on topics, He stepped off the seal of adjudicator where he stood and cleared his throat.

"According to both records and eyewitness accounts, Dragons cannot reproduce naturally, but they do not die natural deaths either. The reappearance and resurgence of their number is no doubt due to some magical intervention, but the cause and source of it is still unknown to us" Izmo stated formally.

"So you're saying someone is resurrecting them...like necromancers do?" asked a worried Alexus Caro of Leyawiin, running a hand through his thick, wavy brown hair before leaning forward in his chair, resting a hand on his cleft chin and reminding Elisif why many women in Cyrodiil considered him the most eligible of bachelors.

"That is one possibility" sighed Izmo as the group shifted uneasily at the thought.

"You don't have any more information on them?" asked Junias Olaren incredulously.

"None that is credible. Much knowledge of the dragons vanished when the order of the Blades was wiped out" replied Izmo.

Elisif was about to speak up, but the quiet, smooth tone of Karis Hassuldor's voice gave them all pause.

"I have learned a few things about them" muttered the sorceress, still seated comfortably with one leg crossed over the other.

That made everyone sit up.

"They are difficult to kill, but it can be done. However, their essence lingers, and unless you find some way of...dispelling...their soul to another plane, it is only a matter of time before they can be resurrected by other dragons."

"Other Dragons?" queried a few of the others at the same time.

"I had thought initially it was only one dragon who could resurrect them, but reports from my people have shown there are several that are doing so" came the reply from Karis.

"How came you by this knowledge?" asked Izmo suspiciously, forgetting he was the adjudicator for the moment.

"I have my ways" shrugged Karis with a brief smirk.
"So then, we simply have to determine which Dragons are the ones resurrecting the others and put an end to them" Redoran resolved as if thinking to himself out loud.

"One does not simply...kill...a Dragon, particularly not the powerful ones" Jubius Morley exclaimed. "Did no one read the reports of the attacks on the Gold Road, or some of the attacks even among your own provinces?"

"My people have killed two of them since the sightings started" proudly replied the Dunmer King.

"Well then...all our ills our forgotten" sarcastically replied Lothiel.

The resulting argument was deteriorating to the point Elisif could see Izmo had stepped back onto his seal and was about to rein them back. Now was her opportunity.

"There is one who can defeat the Dragons!" she stated loudly, rising to her feet in emphasis. Everyone was surprised into silence, and Elisif knew she had their attention.

"In Skyrim, there is an old prophecy, that in time of great need, a Dragonborn would come, defeating the Dragons and restoring the land. I know many of you think the idea ludicrous that an old prophecy would be the key, but I can assure you that indeed a Dragonborn has come forward."

"Impossible! The Septim bloodline has been wiped out" exclaimed Skordane Tulphim.

"He is not from any known bloodline. He is simply a gift from the Divines" reassured Elisif.

"How do you know?" queried Magnus Olaren.

"He has slain no less than three Dragons already...and absorbed their souls" Elisif stated proudly, taking no small measure of glee in the dumbfounded looks of several of the other Council members.

The part about absorbing their souls caused even the aloof Karis Hassuldor to lean forward in her seat.

"Tullius makes no mention of him in the reports" the High Chancellor more asked than stated.

"Tullius wished to wield him as a weapon in the civil war. I felt he was more useful doing as the Divines intended...dealing with the Dragons. I'm sure the Council can see the wisdom in this." Elisif replied, wondering how Tullius might take getting humiliated in absentia. Then again, if he wasn't constantly bypassing her, they wouldn't have to so publicly disagree.

There was a long silence that surprised Elisif. Surely they weren't going to try to follow Tullius' advice...

"You say he's killed three dragons already?" queried Colin Redoran. There was incredulity in his tone, but the stern look on his face as he clased his hands in front of him betrayed a sincere interest.

"Yes, and to my knowledge, at least two of them were done singlehandedly" Elisif stated, turning to look at Idgrod, who nodded to reinforce what she'd said.

"Singlehandedly would be an impressive feat" Redoran replied thoughtfully, but obviously not convinced such a person existed.

"I had read some reports on this man, but they seemed too fantastic to believe. Some of them are even contradictory" replied Karis Hassuldor, intently studying Elisif and making her a bit
uncomfortable.

"It may be hard to believe his martial prowess, but I've seen and benefited from it firsthand, as has Idgrod. Siddgeir have you seen--?" Elisif started, turning to the slumping Jarl.

"NO! He hasn't answered my summons...yet" murmured the disgruntled Siddgeir.

"As for the contradictory reports, I can't speak to what others say, but only what I've seen firsthand already, and I tell you this man can solve the Dragon problem. We just need to support him" staunchly reaffirmed Elisif before sitting back down.

"Then why has he seen fit to hand Ulfric Stormcloak the Jagged Crown?" challenged Karis quietly.

Elisif couldn't help but start in surprise, but then composed herself.

"I've heard no such thing" she tried to bluff, but even as she did, she knew Karis and her network of agents had far more credulity than the relatively new Jarl of Solitude "I can only assume Ulfric would lie to claim the support it would bring. He's already proved he's willing to do anything" she added on quickly, hoping to deflect the suspicion.

"Does he march with the Stormcloak banner?" asked Jubius Morley with concern.

"No" replied Karis.

"Perhaps he is simply trying to keep all avenues open to him..." murmured Morley thoughtfully
"What is the saying? When in the Marshes, do as the Argonians?"

"But we cannot support someone who countenances treachery and treason" Junias Olaren uttered gravely.

"What is his name?" Skordane Tulphim queried.

"Arnsmyth Bulgoar...he served in the Legion during the Great War" returned Elisif.

"So we know his pedigree, but not his loyalty..." muttered Janora Umbranox, folding her hands in front of her.

"This bears more investigating before we act in any official capacity" Morley exclaimed as the others nodded.

"You cannot send any officials or envoys to places where the Empire isn't welcome, though" Lothiel pointed out.

"I have several agents that have served me well in the past" answered the High Chancellor as he scratched his bushy, gray beard thoughtfully "They will discover the true quality of this so-called 'Dragonborn', if he truly is what he claims or not"

The outcome wasn't what Elisif was hoping for, but it would put more Imperial interest in Skyrim and was cause for all of them to put more people in her territory.

After a swift and unanimous vote to further investigate the Dragonborn using the resources of the Lord High Chancellor, Council was adjourned for lunch.

As Elisif marched out the doors and was greeting by Erdi, she felt a bit relieved and hopeful that she could convince some of the other Councilors to take further interest in Skyrim's affairs.
A brief nod from Janora Umbranox as she passed, signaling they were still on to meet for lunch gave Elisif further good news as she departed the Imperial Tower.

Everything was starting to improve until she saw trouble standing before her procession in the side courtyard they’d chosen to leave by.

Arch-Magister of the Aldmeri Dominion Mircano stood squarely in the path, his Thalmor bodyguards fanned out to a four corners position.

Taller than most Thalmor, he still wore the usual green and gold of the Dominion, but his armor was mostly golden with a shimmering green glow to it that Elisif knew must be magical in some way.

All of them stared passively at them as Elisif stepped forward to Bolgeir's side.

"If you have business to discuss, I'm sure you could've dispatched Elenwen to my castle at any time" Elisif tried to sound annoyed, though her heart was beating rapidly.

"And rob myself of the chance to see the one both Mer and Man alike are calling, 'The Fair'?” sarcastically queried Mircano as he paced toward her, golden eyes locked on her in a look Elisif couldn't read.

"I have a hard time believing the highest ranked Thalmor in Cyrodiil lacks for the fair things in life" Elisif hoped she didn't betray the fear in her gut by gulping as she spoke.

"Ah, but surely even a little fledgling leader such as yourself must realize that being a leader means confronting...ugly...realities" he stated, stepping closer in front of her than she wanted, but feeling that retreating from him was a sign of weakness.

"Like having lunch delayed because someone feels like playing Court intrigues?” She retorted, standing her ground only a foot from him.

"Playing? Your ignorance is amusing" he chuckled.

"Do you insult the others on the Elder Council as well?"

"At least I don't lie to them" he sneered, slowly pacing around her.

"Come to the point already!” Elisif snapped, continuing to turn as he slowly walked behind her and Bolgeir.

"Why do you promise hope from a false savior?” Mircano smirked at her, continuing to pace.

"The Dragonborn is just as real as you or I" Elisif proudly retorted.

"Oh, I have no doubt he exists, but do you truly think him a savior? Virtue and power so rarely co-exist happily in men" he grinned, pacing back in front of her.

"Of course, the Mer-folk wouldn't have that problem since they've always lacked both” snarled Elisif, letting her anger get the better of her for a moment as she felt herself flush red in anger and embarrassment.

"I wonder if the King of Morrowind would share that view” Mircano chuckled lightly before stepping closer again, this time only inches from her, his eyes squinting slightly and his mouth losing its smile to form a grim line.

Elisif was expecting a sharp retort, but was shocked further when he slapped her hard across the
cheek. Turning in surprise to Bolgeir and Erdi, she was stunned to see them both continue looking forward as though nothing had happened, a lifeless stare in their eyes.

They both had some sort of spell on them, and she hadn't seen the Thalmor do anything!

She was about to raise a cry of alarm but felt her throat constricting and reached up to feel nothing there, but she could make no sound as she turned with wild eyes to Mircano's amused look.

He continued pacing as she struggled with her hands at her throat, clawing at invisible fingers.

"Do not pretend to lecture anyone about virtue or power" he whispered from behind her into her ear "As we both know you have neither!....or is that what you think the Dragonborn will do for you? Finally give you some...real power" he sneered, spinning her around to face him.

"You wouldn't know the first thing to do with it! You've wasted away your years in the Palace dressing like a Jarl's plaything and spreading your legs whenever you got bored, and now you think you have some real power you can come to the Imperial City and what? That others will...care? Care about the province that's unleashed Dragons upon the land? The land that's eating its own so badly, they wanted to send another Legion to....stop the bleeding?" he sneered, shaking her by the shoulders.

Elisif wanted to shout, scream, run, something, anything, but instead she found she couldn't do anything but stand there with him glaring down at her, face to face.

"What did you promise him? What did you offer him?" he continued, mockingly picking at her outfit, pulling a hairpin out and picking at the broach at her bosom as though it was a meal not cooked to his liking.

"Oh, let me guess...you bared your soul to him" he scoffed, reaching down and stretching the neckline of her frock until both it and her breast strap tore slightly, leaving her left breast exposed "And your body, promising him more"

He latched hold of it with a golden gauntlet and squeezed harder and harder.

"Promising so much more, if only...he'd...save you...from those who would usurp your throne, from those who would supplant and mock you, from those whispering and laughing behind your back" he hissed still squeezing her naked left breast harder and harder as he stepped around behind her again.

Elisif could feel tears running down her cheeks as the pain became too much.

Why was no one else walking through this Courtyard?

"Ah, but you have lied to him too" he chuckled into her ear "You can do nothing for him now...but arrest him when he comes to claim his reward"

As if in answer to the question in her mind, he produced a parchment and shoved it into her hand before closing it.

He then callously slipped her breast back inside the slightly torn neckline and rearranged the shawl deliberately off-kilter, making sure to wipe away her tears and put the pin back in her braids sloppily.

He then moved away from her and snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, Elisif felt she could move and coughed to make sure she could talk again.
"I simply came to warn you to let the people down gently. Turns out, their savior is a murderer" stated Mircano smugly before whirling and departing with his bodyguards as Elisif whirled to find Bolgeir and Erdi both looking at her curiously.

"Did you...see that?" she gasped at them.

"See what? We've only been here a few moments" Erdi replied, puzzled.

Elisif wanted to cry as she looked to each of them and saw the same clueless wonder. Neither of them knew what had happened, and no one would take her word over the Arch-Magister's.

Spinning back around, she stomped angrily to her waiting coach before reading the parchment Mircano had forced into her hand.

It was a Bounty posting normally issued to the Legion outposts and any Guild or Mercenary deemed skilled enough to pursue it.

Wanted: Dead or Alive
Be it known the villain named Arnsmyth Bulgoar
formerly of the Starblades Guild is wanted for Murder
in the following Counties: Bravil, Bruma, and Cheydinhal
Many persons have died by his hand and he is considered armed
and very Dangerous.
All caution and subtlety is encouraged in apprehending and prosecuting this criminal.
900 Septims dead 1500 Septims alive

Elisif felt sick in her stomach as she finished reading Arn's physical description at the bottom of the parchment, rolling it up and shoving it into the pouch at her belt.

It couldn't be. There had to be some explanation. This had to be some sort of setup. Arn could not be a murderer, not the Arn she had met.

As the Carriage began rolling, Elisif sighed. She had thought things had gone so well, now she had practically trumpeted Arn to everyone on the Council and here he had a bounty out for his arrest.

Even as she was thinking over this, Erdi timidly handed her several small notes.

Elisif gained some measure of relief as she read through them.

Apparently she'd made an impression on some of the other Councilors at least. Skordane Tulphim and Colin Redoran had both sent messages to set up private meetings about the Dragonborn. The third didn't leave a name, but based on the writing style, Elisif surmised it was Karis Hassuldor.

All was not lost, she resolved. If she could persuade the others about Arn, perhaps they could fight whatever Thalmor trick this was with the Bounty.

Clearly, the Thalmor were a lot more worried about the Dragonborn than Elisif had considered.

She smiled slightly to herself in grim determination, hunching down in her seat in thought.

She would make Mircano eat his words.
Chapter End Notes

1. Writing Politics sucks. I had to come up with a whole dossier and list for each of the Elder Council members to make sure I kept everything straight. Some of them will become much more important later on.

2. Not a normal chapter, but I feel it's important to point out at least some of what's going on elsewhere. The Dragons aren't only doing things in Skyrim, and despite his desire to avoid politics, the power the Dragonborn wields will eventually draw Arn into the political machinations of others, whether he wants to or not.

3. More of this sort of thing will show up in my other fic, a companion piece to this one that centers on Elisif. I haven't started posting it on AO3 yet. I have to wait until I get to certain points in the main story so I'm not giving away any spoilers.
Chapter Summary

Arn tries to come to terms with his attraction to Lydia while he, Karliah, and Vex make their way toward the Pilgrim's Path, but even from the grave, Mercer Frey still has a surprise or two for them...

Arn sat on his bedroll, staring out on the calm, moonlit waters of Lake Honnrich's western shores.

A day of rest and two days of travelling since the incident with Mercer Frey and they still weren't close to the entrance to this Pilgrim's Path that Karliah was referencing.

Sleep would not come to him. He was trying to decide if the collective number of people looking to him expectantly was beginning to weigh too much, or if his unease was due to one woman in particular.

"Maybe you should kiss me. So they know I'm spoken for..."

Arn sighed and hung his head as Lydia's words, but maybe more the tone and look on her face when she said them replayed in his mind again.

She had looked...happy, content, even though following him around had nearly killed her...more than once.

It was as if as long as it was just the two of them, nothing bothered her. By now, she and Freyya would both be in Riften looking for him.

He hoped the message he'd left with the surly innkeeper at the Bee and Barb would be enough to keep them from worrying.

A slight rippling sound from the Lake caused Arn to raise his head.

He was surprised to see someone walking up out of the Lake toward him.

The moonlight silhouetted dark, voluptuous curves as a woman slowly strode toward him.

Arn gulped as she got nearer and felt his cock beginning to harden, realizing she was naked, the gently bouncing breasts and sway of her hips holding his gaze, even though he knew he should not be staring at a stranger bathing.

But as she walked directly closer and closer toward Arn, he forced himself to tear his eyes away from her body and look up at her face long enough to gasp in surprise.

"L-L-Lydia!"

At the sound of her name, she giggled and ran to him, knocking him back onto his bedroll and straddling him with a shapely leg kneeling on either side of him.

"You can't be.....How did you—?" Arn sputtered as Lydia wasted no time in beginning to grind
herself against his hips and now painfully erect cock that needed to get released from the confines of his leather breaches.

"I finally tracked you down" she sighed breathily, smiling at him "Don't you think we've waited long enough"

After seeing her come up out of the lake like a vision and feeling her rubbing her womanhood against his abdomen and his cock straining to be let free from his leathers as she grinded on him, Arn quickly lost control.

But Lydia was atop him and he was still in his leathers.

Sitting up, he quickly shirked his top off before Lydia slid down his legs to his feet, pulling his pants and smallclothes with her, her bountiful breasts glancing off his freed lower extremities, driving him mad with desire.

He looked down to see her smiling happily as she crawled back up toward him on her hands and knees, large slightly tanned breasts swaying hypnotically.

Right as their lips were about to meet, he felt her hand on his chest as she pushed him back down with more force than he was expecting.

He was about to remark about it, but lost the ability to when he felt a soft lick on the tip of his cock, further hardening him beyond what he thought was possible.

He looked down to see Lydia perched over his crotch on her hands and knees, looking at him deviously before opening her mouth and gently engulfing the head of his cock.

Arn couldn't help groaning and throwing his head back in ecstasy as the soft warmth of her lips and mouth slowly slid over the head of his cock and continued down, soon engulfing all she could as he hit the back of her throat.

Arn's legs spasmed and he heard sounds come from him he didn't recognize as Lydia began to go up and down on his cock, sucking and swirling her tongue around it as she went.

Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, with the moist warmth of her mouth plowing up and down on him, he felt the plump softness of her breasts pressed and fondled against his sacks as she continued.

"OH...Mmfh...Gods...Lydia....I ....won't....last" Arn managed to get out as he felt his loins beginning to tighten up further in prelude to exploding.

Lydia sat up for a moment with a slurpy pop as she released him.

Just as he reached for her, her smile suddenly vanished.

"You should have kissed me" she muttered sadly.

Arn woke up suddenly, springing up out of his bedroll, and panting wildly as though he'd just run for miles, looking all around for the bewitching woman of his dreams.

As he looked out across the early moonlit morning on Lake Honnrich's western shores, he sighed and lashed out at the air angrily, realizing it had all been a fantasy.

It wasn't the first time he'd had such a dream about her. Most went further than that.
He angrily slumped back down on his bedroll.

Why couldn't he get her out of his head? Why did he even think about her so much, especially when she wasn't even there. While he'd thought about his time with Elisif for awhile before reluctantly dismissing any future as a fantasy, he'd never really dwelt on Aela, Rikke, Ingrid, or any of the other women who'd flirted or slept with him.

He had always been a loner and the only time he thought he'd found a woman who he would spend the rest of his life with, she ended up dead. Arn wondered if it was a symptom of growing older to long for someone to stay with. Arn had slept with plenty of women in his lifetime, and flirted with more beyond that. Most were one night stands with a tavern wench after a week out in the wilds with both of them barely aware of each other's names, much less anything else important.

There had been one affair with a married woman, one or two village lasses, and a drunken encounter with a merchant's widow that neither of them remembered much of later. Arn was not a bad looking man, and kept himself in peak fighting condition since his job depended on it. The women he'd been with certainly appreciated it, and Arn found the women he bedded to be pretty enough.

He'd even worked with some attractive women in the Starblades Guild numbers of times before on missions, and he'd never struggled to keep focus...at least...until Desarra.

What was it about Lydia that vexed him so?

He briefly compared Desarra with Lydia in his mind, wondering if there was some similarity that he hadn't noticed before, but it wasn't long before that took him places he was trying to avoid, his loins stirring anew.

Even as he angrily tried to force those thoughts from his head, he looked up when he heard water rippling again.

He put his face back in his hands as he saw a woman's silhouette rising from the smooth waters.

NOT again. Wake up fool!

As he dragged his hands down his face, stretching his features and shaking his head in frustration, he realized he must be awake already.

Looking back up, he realized as she got closer to the shore, she didn't have the same physique Lydia did.

Slimmer with smaller, but still perky breasts and slim, tight hips, the near-white blonde hair dripping wet and sticking curled around the left side of her neck was the final piece of the puzzle.

Vex surprisingly said nothing nor bothered to cover herself at all as she sauntered up naked from the water and rummaged through her bag as Arn sat stupefied for a second before staring down at his hands in his lap.

Adventuring in the wilds meant seeing your fellow travelers in a state of undress from time to time, but Arn knew from experience women did not parade themselves completely naked in camp...unless they had other things in mind.

Arn noted she didn't look flirty or amused, more matter of fact than anything else. Of course, he hadn't seen her be very expressive about anything since meeting her.

He did note a nasty jagged scar of a cut extending from the right side above her hip down to a hands
breadth above the juncture of her womanhood.

"How'd you get the scar?" Arn muttered as a means of breaking the awkward silence.

"Didn't make a clean escape from somewhere" she replied nonchalantly.

"But you did escape?"

"Of course"

"Must've been quite a feat with a gash like that"

"You know what's ironic?" Vex replied as she slipped her smallpants on and stood up to tie her breast strap on.

"What?" Arn tried to keep focus on her face as she talked, but he felt like there was something odd about her movements.

"If I hadn't been struggling with the guard, the slice would've been cleaner and it wouldn't have been as bad" She murmured, tracing a finger over the jagged scar tissue.

"You know, you don't strike me as a person that would believe in all these stories about the Skeleton Key and Nocturnal's blessing" Arn ventured, both wanting something to talk about to get his mind off her flesh on display and genuinely curious as to her real feelings about their journey.

"Maybe if I hadn't seen you do what you've done, I would be a lot less...receptive...to the idea, but in the end, it doesn't matter if I believe it" Vex replied cynically.

"Why not?"

"Because the others do. Karliah's not the first person I've heard to mention such tales. And if there's a chance that this place will provide proof of what she's saying, then I'm willing to chance it....that and maybe the opportunity to get some spoils back that Mercer absconded with" she muttered with a slight smirk, though Arn couldn't fail to notice she'd stopped dressing and simply leaned against one of the large stones in just her smallpants and breast strap, eyeing him with an expression he couldn't distinguish in the darkness.

"Of course, it would come down to gold" Arn replied with a sigh.

"And why not?" she retorted.

"Why would you choose a life like this? taking from others to supply whatever you want or need..." Arn mused, wondering if his assessment had been too harsh.

"You speak as if the world were some vast place full of happiness and possibility" she scoffed "The reality is no one gets what they want or deserve, either good or bad. Best advice I heard from a young man a long time ago, get what you can, while you can because it will all be over a lot sooner than you think."

"Tamriel's already too full of people taking whatever they can" retorted Arn more harshly than he meant.

"And why aren't you one of them?" Vex asked him, surprising him for a moment.

"What do you mean?"
"Well, with what I've seen you can do, with the power you have as this...Dragonborn, why aren't you taking what you want?"

"Is it so hard to believe someone would actually hold to any sort of honor or morality?"

"It's not hard to believe when it's some peasant or priest who'd never see more than a few septims even if he decided to ditch his morals somewhere, but for someone with power....yes, it is strange....or is it that you just don't know what you want?" she cocked her head slightly as she spoke.

"The thing I want most is answers" Arn murmured as he looked away, frustrated with how little he actually knew about the power pulsing in his veins "Answers no one seems to have...or want to give" he sneered.

"It's not the..only thing" Vex replied, her smirk growing.

Arn looked up and followed her gaze back down to his crotch where his cock was still tenting his breaches and blanket enough to be noticeable even though it'd receded from where it had been when he woke.

"Agh" Arn sighed in aggravation, turning away and closing his eyes in frustration, just wanting the night to be over with.

They were both silent for awhile before Vex spoke up again.

"You know, I saw it as soon as I returned from bathing in the Lake. I figured as corked up as you were that you'd have been all over me. I figured a man with your power takes what he wants. So I had this stashed out of sight in case you tried to force me" she remarked as Arn looked back up to see her holding a dagger in her hand "but you never did..."

"I don't force women" Arn replied bluntly, looking back to his lap and feeling more aggravated the more she insisted speaking about the subject.

"But if I wanted a quick rutting in the bedroll..." she replied, suggestively swaying her hip out and running her hand up the side of her hip as Arn's head bolted up to look at her again, feeling his cock beginning to harden again.

There was a brief silence that seemed suddenly charged with energy between them before she bit her lower lip and unabashedly eyed over his muscled torso as he still sat in his bedroll.

"Are you offering...?" he mumbled

"Do I have to spell it out for you or do I just have to wonder loudly enough if daggers are the only thing you can snatch?" Vex huffed before licking her lips in anticipation, her eyes locking on Arn's hardening crotch as he got to his feet.

Arn paced determinedly over to Vex and stopped before her, his eyes clouding with lust as the frustration of the sleepless nights and thoughts of his housecarl gave vent to a blaze of passion.

In a few blinks of an eye, Vex found both her breaststrap and smallpants had vanished and Arn stood naked in front of her, his cock now engorged and sticking out in a slight curve forward.

"I see you can snatch other thing--" Vex had begun to remark, but Arn burst forward, bringing a muscular arm up between her legs, both lifting and spreading them wide while the other hand steadied her upper back enough to guide her to lean against the rock she'd been leaning on while he used his mouth to latch onto her left breast with a powerful suction as she couldn't hold back a
screech of surprise and pleasure.

"Oh....Ahn....Gods...I" Vex could only gasp as Arn's mouth worked over her left breast before switching to the right one, licking, kissing and sucking on the perky mounds before lavishing attention on her nipples.

She arced her back and Arn kissed up to the side of her neck before nipping at her earlobe and stroked the wet mass of white blond hair while Vex felt his other hand leave holding her up, his torso pinning hers to the rock while his other hand adventured further, caressing over her left buttock down the cleft between them before coming back up her spine, around her ribs, cupping a breast before sliding down to the slit of her womanhood, now swelling and beginning to moisten.

"Ahn....Ouh..." she moaned as Arn slid a finger inside her womanhood and carefully traced its inner outline before exiting and sliding around the outside, coming to rest atop it, carefully circling the bud and pinching it delicately, causing her body to collectively try to get closer to him, her arms and legs jumbling, trying to latch onto him and bring him closer, insider her, but she was denied.

Arn was surprised to hear her whimper as he eluded her grasp, reached under her inner thighs with both hands, and pulled her hips up to him, leaving her top half leaning back on the rock.

"Mphf...I...Ahn" she continued to gasp as Arn brought his lips to her lower lips and immediately slithered his tongue in, causing her hips to buck up toward him as he continued his exploration of her womanhood with his mouth.

He continued to kiss, lick and explore her womanhood with is mouth as he allowed his hands to wander her hips, thighs and buttocks.

She began to shudder and Arn knew she was close. Withdrawing his mouth from her lower lips, she opened her mouth to complain, then was silenced as Arn slipped two fingers in her womanhood and thrust upward.

Vex's body spasmed uncontrollably and her seed splurted onto his fingers inside as she threw her head back and wailed in ecstasy.

Arn only waited briefly, giving her a moment to get her bearings back and steady enough to stand before he picked her up by the inside of the thighs again and stretched her legs wide as he lined his now dripping cock with her dripping womanhood.

Then he slowly allowed her to sink down onto it, stretching wide the moist lips of her womanhood and allowing both of them to sigh with great pleasure as he felt her moist warmth envelop him.

Slowly at first, he began picking her up and then letting her fall back down on the hard cock that filled her, making them both groan and moan in excitement as Arn picked up speed.

Just as he really began pistoning up into her as she bounced on his cock, he felt her body begin to tighten as did his cock.

Then she did something unexpected.

She'd been gripping his shoulders with one hand and alternately playing with her breasts until she got close to exploding again. Then she grabbed him by the back of his head and locked him in a passionate kiss, her pert nipples poking his muscular chest.

"You should kiss me. So they know I'm spoken for..."
The act brought up everything he'd been thinking about for the last few days and suddenly he felt like it was all wrong.

He wanted it to be Lydia here, bouncing on his cock, moaning his name, sharing the perils of the wilds, not....this thief.

Suddenly, he realized he had slowed to a near stop, though that hadn't stopped Vex from picking up the pace on her side as she bounced up and down, pushing off his hips with her legs coiled around him.

Angry with himself again at the prospect failing to please a woman he'd consented to rut with and failing to relieve himself for his own good, Arn picked Vex up off his cock before setting her down.

She opened her mouth to wonder aloud at his actions before he spun her around so she was facing the rock.

He snaked an arm around her waist before nudging her legs wider. Vex knew what was coming and braced both hands on the rock.

Arn latched on with his other hand as he leaned over her slightly and slowly slid his still engorged cock into the moist sheath of her womanhood from behind.

Vex had been vocal before, but it paled in comparison to the cry of joy she made as his hips finally smacked the soft skin of her buttocks as he fully shoved himself inside her.

There would be no kissing, no sweet nothings whispered, nothing tender.

Arn closed his eyes and imagined it was the voluptuous form of Lydia that he was pounding away into, beginning to moan himself as he picked up speed.

"Ahk...Mmf....Gods.....Oh.....Ahn....Yes....." Vex moaned out as Arn picked up speed, rutting her from behind with greater pace, the slap of his hips against her buttocks beginning to be louder.

He squeezed his eyes shut harder, pounding her harder as she squealed and moaned.

Arn opened his eyes briefly and realized he had been rutting her so hard that she was no longer bent over, but pressed up against the rock with her hands splayed out, her breasts rolling up and down against the mossy surface, feet flailing off the ground as he was pounding straight up into her.

Closing his eyes and envisioning Lydia pinned to a wall before him, Arn crouched over her back closer and reached an arm around to squeeze and caress her breasts as he pounded up into her faster and faster, feeling his loins tightening up.

Then Arn felt himself shut everything else out as he thrust up into her deeply, squishing her buttocks and exploding inside her, vaguely aware she was spasmng and exploding over his cock as well.

As Arn breathed and gasped for air, slowly becoming more aware of things again, his mind latched onto the fact Vex had been moaning a name when she came.

"Oh...Bryn....Bryn" she cooed with closed eyes as Arn set her down on shaky feet and slowly withdrew his deflating cock.

Once Arn was sure she could stand unassisted, he slowly moved away and walked out into the lake to wash the smell and seed from their activities off.
What a pair they were, he mused sadly.

The Dragonborn of legend and here he was pining for a woman he was almost old enough to be the father of. He couldn't even get a good casual lay without the woman calling someone else's name out....figures.

Dipping his hands into the cool water and drenching it over his face, he hoped the shock of the cool liquid would help clear his mind now that his body was fairly "uncorked".

He felt a soft touch on his arm and turned to see Vex standing in the waist deep water next to him.

By the worried look on her face, Arn figured she must've realized what she had said.

"I...uh....wanted to thank you for that" she mumbled, looking unnerved and distraught for the first time that Arn had met her.

"We both enjoyed it" Arn evaded, pretending to continue washing, wondering if she would actually acknowledge it or not.

"Uh...did....was I...too...erm...loud?" she stuttered.

"Yes, I heard you screaming Brynjolf's name" Arn sighed, not feeling like waiting for her to finally come around to it.

"Oh um...I mean..." she started before they both fell quiet for awhile, the splashes of water as they both pretended to continue washing the only sounds that filled the now blue darkness of the dawning morning.

"I'm sorry. I...didn't mean for that to happen" she muttered after a long pause.

Arn turned to leave the Lake when Vex latched onto his elbow with surprising force.

"Please, not a word of it to anyone. I'll make it up to you, I promise"

 Arn wondered for a moment if he should just admit to her that they'd both used each other and that it was no big deal, but he wasn't sure if telling her he'd fantasized he was with another woman might do more harm than good at this point.

Vex interpreted his silence for indecision and immediately leaped unbidden onto him, wrapping her arms about his heck and locking her legs around his waist as she slowly started to grind against him, feeling to see if his cock was responding.

"What are you doing?" Arn sputtered in surprise, doing his best just to keep from falling over when she jumped on him.

"Making it up to you" she whispered.

Arn was about to protest, but his loins were beginning to respond, and dumping her off him and trying to backtrack the conversation to explain seemed pointless.

Suddenly, she arced her back and jerked against him.

Arn was surprised she would've come when he hadn't even done anything yet, then froze when he saw the look in her eye.

It wasn't pleasured bliss. It was shock.
Looking down between them, he saw an ugly black arrowhead sticking out of her abdomen just as he felt one whip by where his head had been.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn grabbed Vex and twisted, plunging them under the water as Arn saw several arrows just behind her on a path to hit them if they hadn't moved.

Releasing Vex under the water, Arn came up standing in the cool water of the Lake, furious that even here, he was once again hunted.

His blood began to boil with rage. He'd had enough of being hunted, enough ambushes.

Now, he would do the hunting.

With a bellow of rage, he raised both fists in the air and pounded them down into the water.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

The new word of power he'd learned burst from his lips and a frosty blast of wind shot forth, freezing the wave he'd just created and freezing the water in front of him for about six feet, causing the dark cloaked attackers on the bank and wading toward them to pause.

Reaching down, he pulled Vex back up and knelt with her behind the frozen wave of water.

"This will give you cover long enough for me to deal with them. Get out as soon as you can before the slaughter fish pick up the blood scent" he muttered before submerging into the water and swimming out in an arc.

Finding a nice sharp, sizable stone on the bottom, Arn gauged his location before ambushing his would be ambushers.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded out of the water, plowing sprays of water to both sides of him as he came to a stop, connecting the sharp rock into the unguarded face of one assailant, the gratifying crunch of bone signaling his attack had accomplished its purpose.

Arn stepped behind the dying assailant and grabbed him over his shoulder under the neck, pulling him over Arn's shoulder and draping his spasming body over his own as he charged the next group of attackers.

He felt several arrows hit his human shield before he reached the next group.

Flipping the man off him, the corpse landed atop one of the attackers as Arn snatched his short sword from his hand.

"ZUN HAAL VIIK" Arn bellowed, sending the next attacker's longsword flying out of his hand far out into the lake before Arn slashed across the now defenseless man's neck.

"TIID KLO UL" Arn spun, crouched and pivoted as arrows from the second group were fired at him.

As time slowed, he crouched, grabbed one out of the air, and let the others go by, two of them hitting the lone other hapless attacker at Arn's back.
As time sped back up again, Arn stood to his full height and walked menacingly toward the remaining attackers.

Four of them in dark cloaks with cloth pulled over everything but their eyes stood in the lake where they'd been wading toward him, but the display of power followed by the sudden deaths of the other group of comrades had made them hold their attack momentarily.

Arn had felt a brief wooziness after the last word of power, but his continued rage, combined with a brief respite to walk a few steps toward the other group had allowed it to subside.

One of the four started backing out of the water.

"That's right. You should run!" growled Arn angrily.

The other three aimed their bows to fire as Arn burst sprinting forward.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

The blast of icy wind burst forward more powerfully than the first time he'd used it, freezing the water, leaving the assassins' feet frozen in place as the arrows they'd released were frozen and flung backwards, cracking in pieces against the rocks behind them.

One of them even had his arm frozen solid, screaming out in pain.

Stepping up onto the uneven ice, Arn grabbed the frozen arm and ripped it off with a crunch, wrenching a blood curling scream from the now stub-armed assailant.

Pivoting, Arn used the frozen arm to block the longsword swing from the second assassin before stepping inside his swing and latching onto his neck before driving him backward, bending him over until he heard the sickening snap of the man's back giving way before Arn let go.

Standing to full height after picking up the dead man's bow and an arrow, Arn stared at the terrified assailant still left frozen in place a few paces away, desperately trying to wrench his feet free.

Slowly, he brought the bow up with the arrow nocked and ready, aimed right between the wide eyes of the frightened assassin.

"Please! Please! It was Frey! He wants you dead! We were to track and kill you if he didn't tell us otherwise within two days of his departure from Riften. It's him you want! I could probably even help find him. Surely that's worth something!" stammered the Nordic assassin staring at Arn's nocked arrow.

"No, it isn't" muttered Arn as he released the arrow, thudding through the man's skull with a loud THWACK as he pitched backwards.

Arn looked back to see Karliah had appeared, her armor spattered with blood, as she helped Vex out of the water.

Still stark naked, Arn picked up a sheath of arrows before sprinting into the woods toward the lone assassin that had run off.

A few words of power helped Arn easily catch up to the sprinting man.

Taking aim, Arn let an arrow fly, impaling the fleeing man's left thigh.

"Augh!" he exclaimed, trying to get back up on both feet as Arn advanced on his downed form.
As Arn neared, the smaller man tried to draw his longsword and slice at him, but Arn kicked his elbow before he could draw it, sending him sprawling on his back with a yelp of pain as the arrow in his thigh shifted.

He tried to crawl backwards before Arn nocked an arrow and he stopped moving.

"How many more of you are left?" sneered Arn.

The wide eyed man seemed to look around for a moment as if considering his options, but the THUD of Arn's arrow into the ground next to his head made him jump.

"How many?!" Arn bellowed, advancing slowly as he nocked another arrow.

"I..I don't know. I don't know who's left from the group that was supposed to deal with the sentry" the downed assassin stammered.

"How many of you made the journey?"

"Twelve of us"

"Is that all of you, or are there more of you back in Riften?"

"There's always more men in Riften willing to do what Mercer Frey asks"

"How does he pay you?"

"If I tell you about it, will you spare me?"

"Maybe..."

Ten minutes later, Arn left the lifeless body of the assassin with several arrows pining it down as he ran back towards camp.

Circling around to find Karliah's sentry spot, he found four dead assassins, one of them, an older looking Bosmer hadn't bothered to wear a covering over his face like the others.

Once he'd removed anything of value from them, Arn carried the small bags of items back to camp.

Bright rays of sunlight shone through the trees as Arn made his way back out to the camp on the shoreline.

He found Karliah had already removed the arrow from Vex and administered healing potions, carefully wrapping the wound and drawing a cloak over her.

Both Vex and Karliah looked up as Arn stepped into the shoreline area and he was reminded of his nakedness again as both sets of eyes grew wide with surprise for a moment as they took in his blood spattered form before looking away.

Arn unceremoniously dumped the bag of stuff from the assailants on the ground before turning to go bathe the gore off of him, but as he looked out on the lake waters, all the ice had melted, and all the blood and bodies had attracted a vast amount of slaughter fish, making the water writhe and move with their sinuous movements as they fed on the bodies.

"I'll find a stream" Arn simply muttered before grabbing his leathers and walking off into the woods.

After awhile, he found a stream and washed the blood and gore off as he thought over what the last
assassin had coughed up before Arn killed him.

Arn had wondered from time to time if he was putting too much faith in the word of thieves that they would make good on the deal he kept having to do more for, but knowing where Mercer Frey had been hiding most of the goods he'd stolen was an unquestionable guarantee in getting the Guild's help when the time came, both now and in the future.

This trip had turned out more useful than he thought it would be.

Arn sighed as he looked around, cautiously dressing in his leathers.

There was still the matter of dealing with Nocturnal, which he honestly was not looking forward to...
Negotiating Nocturnal: Riften pt. 5

Chapter Summary

Arn comes face to face with Nocturnal herself while Lydia tries to sort out what's going on back in Riften...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"They will try to kill you..."

Karliah's words from earlier echoed in Arn's head as he crouched in an alcove as glowing forms hovered in the air, gradually moving around the chambers inside the place Karliah had called "The Pilgrim's Path".

This all seemed very wrong. To have ghosts so focused on one objective, to have the servants of a supposedly "benevolent" Daedra become mindless, raging forms in the dark....it didn't sit well with Arn at all and only added to the apprehension he already felt.

Then there was the Skeleton Key itself.

Ever since Karliah had reluctantly handed it to Arn, he had felt confident. So confident in fact, that he had left his shield behind and opted only to take a sword and dagger in.

In retrospect, this had been a horrible decision and as Arn realized it, he was suddenly aware that the thing in his pocket might actually be affecting both his mood and thoughts, something that scared him more than anything else had up to that point.

Since that moment, he kept wildly wavering between supremely confident and horribly paranoid. It made him feel like a basket case.

He was taking a lot longer to sneak than he would normally, even though Karliah had outfitted him in Mercer Frey's old Nightingale Armor.

Oddly, or maybe magically, it seemed to fit him perfectly and made absolutely no noise at all, even when Arn had tested it outside and tried to make noise with it.

He would occasionally stop and look at his satchel where the Skeleton key was, almost worried the thing would somehow escape and cause some harm to him of its own accord.

Even as he moved deeper down the Pilgrim's Path, skirting the angry ghosts and making his way past several odd challenges, strange thoughts occurred to him.

If this is so powerful, why give it up? Just think of what he might be able to do with it. Unlock literally any door. Become a better at everything. Imagine being able to wield a sword like Frey had been able to.

No, he had agreed to do this.
How would they know if he didn't? All he had to do was say he did and they would believe all was well. A Guild of Thieves being stolen from...it would serve them right...It was...justice in a way.

Aagh! Enough of this!

As Arn shook his head out of the stupor that he found his mind clouded with, he realized he was standing at the bottom of a stairway, looking down into a pit.

How long he'd been standing there, he didn't know.

The power to bypass all obstacles before you...

Arn gritted his teeth and leaped into the abyss of the pit.

He fell briefly before seeing the rising floor with the broken body of some other unfortunate would-be adventurer.

Arn was about to hit bottom, but just then, the floor seemed to activate, swirling open in a vortex of bluish blackness that swallowed him up.

Everything was pitch black around him briefly before he was deposited abruptly, but gently into a stone room with a domed roof, several strange circle shapes on the floor, and a round platform with a small crevice in the middle.

As Arn stepped up on the platform, he felt the Skeleton key begin to hum in his pocket. Pulling it out, he could see it was glowing along with the crevice in the middle where it was obviously intended to go.

Looking at it briefly, he quickly and awkwardly pushed it into the crack before any more strange thoughts invaded his mind.

Instantly, an explosion of bluish black threw Arn backward off the platform as it burst open in a swirl of darkness.

Arn looked up to see the swirl of darkness turn into a flock of ravens flying in a vortex before shifting again into the shape of woman stretching her arms out as she floated in the air.

Nocturnal floated before him, her form that of a beautiful woman. Pale white skin draped in a black robe that floated on her much like she floated in the air, casting more shadows across her to add to those already cast by the dim lit room.

The only things that really could be discerned were scowling facial features crowned by fierce blue eyes shining down at him along with a plunging opening in the front of the robe, exposing the inner halves of considerable breasts.

Arn was only momentarily taken aback before he got to his feet.

"My, my...what have we here? You're not one of mine. It's been years...or maybe moments since I've set foot in this world. Hard to remember sometimes..." she spoke loudly and but curiously, briefly pausing to look around the stone room.

Arn was about to say something when she cut him off.

"So...you've returned the key that was stolen, and now await...what, I wonder.." she muttered, fixing him with the glowing blue eyes that seemed to ignite into bluish glowing orbs "A reward...a
boon...perhaps some accolade or gift befitting a 'grand' deed such as this" she remarked with some cynicism.

"I came seeking nothing in particular from you" Arn ventured, hoping that didn't sound insulting.

"Oh? and just what were you seeking then and who from?" Nocturnal replied a little more smugly, making Arn surmise that somehow she already knew everything and was just toying with him.

As she spoke, she began to drift off the platform, slowly approaching Arn.

"I seek someone the Guild protects. This is...part of the deal" Arn replied a little nervously.

"Was it always part of the deal?" Nocturnal smirked back at him, drifting even closer.

"N-No"

"Tsk...you've been had then" she smiled before instantly vanishing in a whisp of black and blue "Dragonborn" she whispered in his ear, reappearing right behind him.

Arn spun around only to find she had vanished again as the room darkened even further.

"I need more than just the person I seek" Arn sputtered, glancing worriedly around and wondering if he should be worried for his life.

"I've watched you...child of Akatosh..." he could hear Nocturnal's whisper loudly as though she was all around, but saw nothing.

"For a time, you were a child of the dark..." she continued, now appearing across the way to walk to the doorway and lean on it gently, looking away "Seeking refuge in the shadows and waiting..."

"Waiting to STRIKE from the dark at your enemies!" she exclaimed, whirling and fixing him with the glowing blue eyes, her words drawing him back to Cyrodiil, his guild's betrayal and destruction...and the revenge he wreaked in its wake.

The memory seemed to physically weigh Arn down, dropping to his knees and removing the Nightingale mask.

"I needed the darkness to avenge my friends, and others..." Arn drifted off sadly.

"I don't care why!" Nocturnal answered abruptly, appearing in front of Arn and gently tipping his chin up toward her face with a single pale, white finger.

"Everyone needs the darkness at some point. You...will need it again, but you already know this. Don't you?" she whispered, gently bringing him to his feet and looking him in the eyes.

Arn could only nod his head yes as he stared sadly into the dark blue eyes that had stopped glowing and were fixed on his.

"And yet you have become sloppy...lazy...foolish! Allowing yourself to be taken advantage of and nearly killed!" she scolded him with her eyes blazing up momentarily.

Arn couldn't take his eyes off hers and only nodded, ashamed of himself.

"You must begin to show the same cunning with people that you do when fighting an opponent" she replied tersely, nodding slightly.
"Know when to press your advantage" and she stepped right up to him..a mere inch from his face "And when to back away..." as she spoke, she vanished from in front of him and appeared across the room.

"Those who hunt you will be hard pressed to gain an upper hand if you keep to the shadows" she stated, pacing around the far side of the platform, eyes still fixed on Arn "And...you will need luck on your side."

"Luck?!" Arn couldn't help but retort "Was it luck that my father was killed in a Thalmor raid...or that my friends and comrades were slaughtered while I was away getting supplies?" he snarled back more angrily than was wise to a Daedric prince.

"Is it ill luck that you weren't with them...or good luck that you survived even when they did not?" she queried quietly, continuing to pace, seemingly not bothered by Arn's outburst.

"I could have--"

"You could have done NOTHING to change those events!" she commanded sternly, silencing his outburst "You would simply have joined those unfortunate souls in their fate."

Arn hung his head slightly, biting back the anger he wanted to lash out with, his emotions raging inside.

"Enough about the past...Just think what the future would be like if you were...more than just a little lucky..." Nocturnal's whisper echoed all around as she vanished again in a whisp of black and blue smoke.

"More luck in battle..." sounds of arrows thudding all around Arn made him jerk his head up and raise his shield arm for a moment before realizing it wasn't there and no arrows materialized.

"Lucky in love as well..." came her whisper next to his ear as she suddenly appeared right behind him, her form pressed to his.

Arn shuddered with desire as he suddenly felt her entire body pressed to his as though neither of them wore clothing, her large soft breasts pressed to his back, pointed nipples coldly poking his shoulder blades as a soft hand reached around and stroked his rapidly swelling cock.

"What man would not wish it so..." she lustily whispered in his ear before dragging her lips in a caress across the back of his neck. While Arn was in the thralls of desire, he had enough of his conscious mind still working to notice every part of her body felt cold or at best cool. Nothing was warm or hot.

"And if you wanted to gain an advantage in the markets of the wealthy, what could stop a man with luck on his side?" she continued, vanishing again as the sounds of coins raining all around Arn made him briefly cover his head, trying to regain his composure.

"Thrones of men would open themselves to you instead of having to take them by force..." she continued as the sounds of coins jangling changed to the clash of battle and shouts of men around him, shortly followed by loud cheering and shouting as though he were a King, marching in procession up the steps to a throne.

Nocturnal reappeared above the now swirling pool of black and blue that was the Evergloam on the platform in the middle.

"With the power that you wield, no one could stop you with luck on your side. Become one of my
Nightingales, and you may know feats beyond what most could dream of!” Nocturnal commanded regally, gesturing with a sweep of her arm to the swirling pool below her.

Regaining his composure, Arn picked up his Nightingale mask and took a ready stance for what might follow.

"I've seen what your servants become. I think I'll pass" Arn tried to reply calmly, though still breathing heavily.

Nocturnal crossed her arms in disapproval while raising one eyebrow slightly.

"A pity...but...predictable” she sighed, relaxing as if she had expected this outcome the whole time.

Arn was about to say something when she cut him off.

"Still...you have restored the portal, and with it, the guardians of this place should know more...sanity, and yet..." she spoke loudly at first before quieting herself and making a shushing motion toward Arn as she waved her hand and the lone door on the one side opened, enabling both Arn and Nocturnal to see out into the Hallway.

At the end was a door, but in front of it, both of them could see Karliah standing with a glowing form.

At first Arn thought she was in trouble, but Nocturnal shushed him again as he made to move toward the ghostly apparition.

Taking a little longer to look, Arn could see that Karliah was having an intimate moment with what Arn could only surmise was the ghost of Gallus, her old lover.

"Not all become mindless and filled with rage" spoke Nocturnal quietly as Arn watched Gallus' ghostly white hand caress through the face of Karliah before vanishing away.

Arn could see Karliah put her face in her hands and her shoulders begin to shake with sobs.

"Emotion is often the price of failure. Look to your own feelings, Dragonborn, lest I be even more disappointed in you" Nocturnal smirked with finality as she floated back to the Ebonmere before vanishing in a swirl of black and blue.

Arn knelt quietly for a time as he gave Karliah time to collect herself before he approached her.

Deep in thought, he was taken off guard when he looked up to find Karliah looking down at him pensively.

"You refused the offer to become one of us?" she asked quietly, but there was surprise in her eyes.

"I told you before I had no interest in it" Arn muttered, rising to his feet.

"But...Nocturnal appeared. Did she not?” Karliah asked, still coming across confused.

"Yes, she appeared."

"And you turned down the offer she made?"

"Yes" Arn replaced the Nightingale mask on his head.

"She...must have been exceptionally pleased then!” Karliah seemed to brighten up.
"Why would you think that?"

"Well...it's just...no one's ever refused the offer before"

Arn scratched his neck as he looked over at Karliah's scrutinizing face.

"No one...ever?!!" Arn retorted sharply, as he began to get a sense of why Karliah was surprised.

"No one who...was allowed to live..." she answered a bit meekly as she shrank back from Arn's sudden outburst.

"So...this was all supposed to be a one way trip!" Arn growled, backing away and drawing his blades in a ready stance "Who is the one who cuts them down? Does Nocturnal do her own dirty work, or does one of you wait in the hallway to stab them in the back!!"

"Please, Arn, I never meant it for you!" pled Karliah, drawing her own shortsword in defense as they shifted around the room, facing each other "I thought for sure once you saw the benefits yourself, spoke to Nocturnal on your own that surely you would agree!"

"And if I didn't?!" snapped Arn, unable to shake the itching on his neck from growing worse.

"Then if there was anyone who could go through the entirety of the path, deny Nocturnal herself, and walk away, then it would surely be the Dragonborn" Karliah replied with conviction "That is why I was HAPPILY surprised!"

"Convenient" replied Arn tersely, slapping her blade aside briefly before they resumed their standoff at blades' length again "Now that I'm onto it!"

"Please...it's not a practice I would enjoy, but it's a precaution we MUST take. Anyone leaving here knows too much not to be under oath to Nocturnal herself" Karliah tried to plead.

"That didn't seem to stop Frey"

"In hundreds of years, Frey was the only one to be a traitor, and even so, he still worshiped Nocturnal, he just....chose himself over the guild" Karliah stuttered out, as though trying to reason through the betrayal would help.

"You mean he just used you....like you're using me" Arn retorted.

"I have no desire to harm you, Arn. If I had wanted to kill you, I would have done so before now or made a better attempt than walking up to face you" Karliah replied more calmly, briefly opening her arms in a submissive gesture.

Despite his anger, Arn had to concede that she was right in that regard, relieved that the itching on his neck had subsided.

Sighing in annoyance, Arn sheathed his dagger, but left Dawnguard at a guarded position in front of him.

"Fine....I did as you asked, and FAR more than I agreed to the bargain with the guild"

"I cannot speak for the guild--" Karliah started.

"But you will" Arn interrupted her "when you and Vex go back and tell them what has transpired"

"But what--"
"I'll be along on my own time. Be sure you and your fellow guild members honor the terms. You've seen what I can do in a fight, and...if business is exceptionally good, I might throw in some of what Frey stole from the guild over the years" Arn answered sternly, motioning her to the door at the end of the passage.

Karliah's eyes went wide with surprise for a moment before returning to a sad, searching look he was used to seeing from her before she slowly backed down the passage, nodded, sheathed her weapon and departed.

Meanwhile, in Riften:

Lydia sighed for what felt like the hundredth time and sloshed the remaining ale in her mug around as she and Freyya sat in the Bee and Barb.

It wasn't the waiting that was the hard part. It was the not knowing.

Not knowing why they were waiting and wondering if Arn was out there somewhere with his life in peril while they sat and wasted time in the local inn.

Still, at least they would have a tale or two of their own to tell him when he did get back. First, they had to sneak away from the Stormcloak camp for fear several particularly amorous soldiers would follow, though Lydia was unsure if all of the ones in question were truly amorous or if Freyya was somehow using them to get messages to Ulfric.

She knew Arn was aware of the shy housecarl's intentions, and that they'd had several heated discussions about it. However, she had no idea if any of that had changed the former stormcloak scout's purpose in swaying Arn to Ulfric's cause.

Lydia knew she couldn't take any chances though. Despite Freyya's desire to explore Riften and some of the surrounding area, Lydia had insisted they stay together and await Arn in the Inn as instructed.

It turned out to be a good thing too. During the second morning they'd been in Riften, a huge, green Dragon had sort of attacked the city.

She couldn't be sure if it was actually an attack because all it really did was crush one of the walls on the harbor side and sit there, growling loudly, sending any guards or townspeople fleeing like ants.

She and Freyya had taken up positions with their bows in the middle courtyard in case it encroached further into the city, but were surprised to see it glance around as if looking for something before heaving itself into the air with powerful beats of its wings and flying off into the morning mists.

She took another swig of Ale and took the liberty of glaring across the table at Freyya, who seemed a lot more aloof and unbothered about the whole situation than Lydia was.

Her musing was interrupted, however, when the doors burst open and town guards began filing in rapidly, weapons at the ready.

Several people who were obviously wanted by the law for one thing or another bolted from their chairs. One of them, a Khajiit, broke through a glass window in back and leaped into the harbor below. Another man ran upstairs.

Lydia was about to chuckle in amusement as the guards chased them, but was rudely awakened to
the fact that all dozen of the guards closed and surrounded her and Freyya's table.

There was nothing she could do. There was no space to run, and in such tight confines, she would hardly get her sword out before they ran her and Freyya both through.

"You are under arrest, by order of the Jarl!" loudly proclaimed one of the guards before motioning them to raise their hands.

Instantly, Lydia's mind went to Freyya. This was somehow part of her scheme. Why else was she so calm and patient? This must be her way of getting Lydia out of the way.

"YOU!" Lydia hissed, turning on Freyya "Of course! It all makes sense now--"

"Wait, what are you--" was all Lydia heard from Freyya as she turned with raised hands and glared at her angrily before Lydia felt a sharp blow on the back of her head and the world spun into blackness.

Chapter End Notes

1. For those perhaps puzzled by Daedra behavior both here and elsewhere, the Daedric Princes all know much more about Alduin and the Dragonborn than Arn does, and will continue to be that way for some time. Most if not all of them have a vested interest in preventing Alduin from succeeding in his ultimate goal. So they will obviously push for Arn's devotion/allegiance if they can get it, but will not stand in his way if it comes down to it...at least, not until after Alduin is dealt with.

2. The mentions of Arn's neck itching aren't random or accidental either.
On returning to Riften, Arn finds that his Housecarls are missing and finds himself summoned to deal with an unexpectedly cunning foe in Maven Blackbriar...

"You're under arrest! By order of the Jarl!" barked a Riften town guard as Arn suddenly found himself surrounded while on his way to the Inn to find his housecarls.

"Now...now...if this is about that business 'tax' from earlier, I'm sure we can work something out" Arn muttered, dropping into a ready stance and keeping his hands slightly to the side but not far from his weapons.

Even though he was surrounded, none of the guards moved to bind him. Arn even noticed several weapons shaking slightly as it became obvious they feared what he might do.

Somehow, they must've found out who he was.

"Say...100 septims to split? That seems generous..Eh?" Arn ventured, jingling his coin purse slightly so they could hear there was actually a fair amount of money inside.

"Th-this isn't about money. The Jarl demands an audience with you at once!" one of the guards stated tentatively at first before growing in confidence and edging slightly closer.

"What?!!" Arn hissed, surprised this had nothing to do with tolls or tributes.

"Your housecarls are already in our custody. Come with us at once!"

An awkward silence followed while Arn continued to look around, uncertain if it was wise to agree or if he should make a run for it.

Considering Lydia and Freyya already being in custody, Arn decided to go along with it at least for starters and see what it was all about.

Slowly, he raised his hands.

"I'll go. Lead on" he replied calmly.

Thankfully, they did not press him to give up his weapons as the group awkwardly moved across the center of town to Mistveil Keep while all the townspeople stared curiously at the spectacle of Arn walking with his hands up while the guards tried to stay in a circle and walk coordinately across town while keeping their weapons trained on him.

Once inside Mistveil Keep, Arn was surprised to see a naked man standing in the midst of the court, standing silently as the entire court seemed to be huddled around the Jarl's chair, whispering amongst themselves.

As they walked closer, Arn noticed the man was painted completely white and had no discernible hair that he could see. The stranger also carried a mage's staff, but was otherwise completely bare.
Just as they were approaching where he could get a look at the stranger's face, Arn was shoved sideways and the whole procession of guards moved Arn to the right, into a side room, down a hallway, up some stairs and into yet another room.

Arn was surprised to see the guards all moving out, leaving him in a lavishly furnished bedroom obviously in the use of some noble, a woman by the looks of the decorations.

Just as he was taking in the surroundings, a burly Nord man walked in another door, followed by an older woman, attired in a rather rich looking outfit, nearly as colorful as anything he'd seen anywhere in Skyrim.

The guard, or whoever he was, immediately took to searching Arn, feeling him up and down for something. It wasn't weapons since he left all of those be.

"Besides the obvious, he's clean." growled the attendant, rising and looking to the older woman for further instructions.

The older woman didn't respond. Instead, she clasped her hands behind her back and began pacing around Arn, examining him up and down as she walked.

Arn took the time to examine the both of them.

The attendant looked like someone who'd been in more than a few scraps. About the same build and as tall as Arn, he was sporting some well used steel armor with an array of nicks and scratches. Given how easily it would be to fix some of those, Arn surmised he was either very poor or liked to wear his battle marks with pride.

Since his benefactor looked quite well off, Arn surmised the guard must like the rough and rugged look.

The older benefactor was a little harder for Arn to read.

She could have been anywhere from his age to somewhere in her sixties. She still retained some curves on her figure, visible through the fine raiments she wore, but the slight worry lines on her face and perpetual stern glare she eyed him with belied an older age than Arn guessed.

Arn figured she was probably around fifteen to twenty years his senior, but possibly had some...alteration magic done to keep her looking younger. He wasn't sure exactly what, but he knew that there was a market for such things in the Imperial capital among the wealthier women.

Still, if she retained as much of her figure at this age, she must've been quite the looker when she was younger.

Wealthy, vain, and powerful enough to command a private audience right out from under the Jarl's nose, this could only be one person: Maven Blackbriar.

Just as he came to this conclusion, she spoke up.

"Have you already concluded your business with the thieves guild?"

"I thought that's what this might be about" Arn ventured, trying to cut to the chase.

"This has nothing to do with them"

"Truly?" Arn raised an eyebrow skeptically.
"They might answer to me but they still have their own dealings. I trust your...business with them...will not hamper your feelings here today?" Maven queried smugly before seating herself comfortably on the bed and crossing her arms.

"If you know about my dealings with them, then you know I've been out of town for a time. So the sooner someone tells me what is rutting going on, we can stop this dancing around each other and come to some sort of...understanding" hissed Arn, tired of waiting and prompting the guard Arn knew now was probably Maul, Maven's enforcer, to step up to him in a threatening manner before Maven waved him away.

"Direct and strong willed, that's what I like to see" Maven mused, relaxing slightly and leaning to one side as if seeing Arn in a new light.

"You saw the naked man in the hall as you entered, yes?" she continued.

"Yes"

"He started showing up about a week and a half ago. When the guards confronted him, they were defeated by powerful spells he wields" Maven said as she straightened up and leaned forward.

"He walks into the court and stands there immobile all day after loudly proclaiming 'he will only speak to the Dragonborn' before departing again in the evening"

"Why?" Arn puzzled.

"Says he represents a Dragon, some...Sahroka..uh...Sahrokoa--Damn it! Maul, what was the name, again?" Maven snapped.

"Uh..Sahrokona" Maul tried to sound confident.

"Whatever it is, we thought it was all some ridiculous jest until the Dragon itself showed up at the precise time and place the naked man foretold" retorted Maven while glaring at Maul for not being able to come up with the Dragon's name.

"A Dragon showed up here?" Arn asked worriedly.

"Yes"

"What happened?"

"Outside of some damage to the city walls and some guards sotting their pants, nothing really"

"Why?" Arn puzzled.

"You mean you don't know?" groused Maven, sitting forward on the edge of the bed and scowling at him harder, if that was even possible.

"Why would I know?"

"You're the only one who's had any dealings with Dragons around here and lived to tell about it, and the strange mage was asking for you and you alone!" snapped Maven, clearly incredulous that Arn didn't know more than he was telling.

"Wait, what did the Dragon look like?" Arn asked, cautiously beginning to wonder if this might be the same Dragon from Darkwater Pass.
"What do you mean? It looked like a rutting Dragon" snarled Maven.

"I mean, what color was it? About how large would you say it was?" Arn quickly queried, unable to keep his curiosity about the potential for answers about the green Dragon at bay.

"Very...green" Maven curtly answered before turning to Maul "How large would you say it was, Maul?"

"Uh...about seventy to eighty feet in length" Maul grumbled.

Arn pondered over the memory of the Dragon at Darkwater Pass as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment before Maven snapped him back to the present.

"Do you know anything of this or not?!" Maven snapped, rising to her feet and walking up to Arn.

"I think it's the same Dragon I encountered once before"

"It seeks to slay you then?" Maven's expression softened a bit as if she'd finally figured it out.

"No, it could've done so back then"

"Then what does it want?" Maven snapped, the scowl returning.

"I don't know" Arn confessed, scratching his grizzled chin thoughtfully.

"Tell me then, what do you know of Dragons?" Maven sat back as if counting on being there awhile.

"What about them?"

"What drives them, makes them do the things they do?" Maven replied, stroking her own chin thoughtfully as if thinking out loud.

"Mostly, they just seem to be out to kill me and anyone else around" muttered Arn cynically.

"And yet...if the tales are to be believed, they can be reasoned with...deals made" Maven continued more to herself than Arn.

"I've yet to get any chance to make any deals with them" Arn shrugged.

"And yet even you say this is different from anything you've encountered so far, yes?"

"True"

"Then we should take the opportunity to find out" Maven replied, standing to her feet and beginning to pace again.

"Why do I get the feeling that the 'we' there is really just going to be 'me'?" Arn answered crossly as he folded his arms across his chest.

"And why shouldn't it be? You're the only one it will deal with" smugly replied Maven while continuing to pace.

Both parties were silent for a time as they weighed the possibilities and eyed each other.

"So then, if you encountered it before and no communication took place, I think it's safe to say that
whatever the Dragon wants has to do with the city of Riften. I assume you will negotiate favorably on our behalf...seeing your women are in my custody" Maven slowly stated as she returned to her seat on the bed and crossed one leg over the other.

Arn was about to snarl back when the side door burst open and another Nord man with a large bowl of fruit clumsily burst in.

A little taller than Arn, but slightly lanky of frame, he had a finely trimmed beard and mustache, and wore the same type of finery that Maven wore.

"Hemming, I told you not to bother me! We're in the middle of important matters!" snapped Maven in a far more harsh tone than any she had used on Arn.

"But I thought it concerned Ingun--" Hemming had begun to reason as he set the fruit bowl down clumsily on the dresser next to where Maven sat.

"Shut up and go back to tending the ledgers!" snapped Maven, silencing Hemming's protests as he turned and scurried out.

Arn had been full ready to lash out at Maven before, but the interruption had given him time to do some quick thinking.

He couldn't allow Maven to have the upper hand in this exchange or it would end up like Windhelm or even more recently like the Thieves Guild.

While he was worried about Lydia and Freyya, he knew that if he was the one the Dragon wanted, then in reality, he had the upper hand.

As the door shut, Arn replied with a determined but calm demeanor.

"Why should I do anything to help you or this city?"

"I thought I had made myself abundantly clear before that I have BOTH of your Housecarls in my dungeons. They will remain untouched and well taken care of ONLY...if you act favorably on our behalf. Make a favorable deal and I promise they will be released to you...unharmed" Maven responded after raising an eyebrow in surprise.

"If I know anything about dungeons, then you're feeding me pointless promises. They've already been tortured for what? a week? How many of your men have ravaged them while you weren't down there watching the interrogations?" Arn snapped back cynically as he began to pace and fix Maven with a look that said he would not be cowed like so many others she was probably used to dealing with.

Maven's eyes widened slightly and her nostrils flared as Arn continued to berate her threats.

"You think you can take and abuse my people and then dangle them in front of me like some prize? If they really are broken already, I guess I have no use for them. I should just ride away from this rutting city and leave you to whatever the Dragon feels like doing" Arn chuckled callously.

He knew he was treading a fine line. What she was telling him was probably true. No one in Riften would cross a Blackbriar. Still, He really was worried for Lydia, but he could not have them knowing that. If he left them with no bargaining position, they would have to accept his demands.

"Watch it!...or I'll cut out that insolent tongue of yours!" snarled Maul from the corner, stepping forward until Maven waved him back.
"Try it and see how displeased the Dragon gets when your emissary can't speak to him. I've heard Dragons have a bitch of a temper" Arn sneered at Maul, reaching back to scratch the itching that had begun to creep up on his neck again for no apparent reason.

"Why you--" Maul started to snarl back.

"Enough!" Maven silenced Maul with her command, followed by a glare "What would it take to get you to make a...favorable arrangement on our behalf?" She tried to ask Arn civilly while glaring daggers at both him and Maul in the corner.

Arn cleared his throat and began pacing again to buy himself a little time since he hadn't really planned out what his demands would be except that his Housecarls had to go free, but of course he couldn't ask for that right away or it would destroy the bluff he'd just created.

So instead, he began naming off all the provisions he and his housecarls would need for a comfortable trip back to Whiterun, assuming their horses and supplies had been stolen by now.

"That's it?" asked Maven suspiciously when he'd paused in his list of supplies.

"No, this is just to cover the things we had before that have undoubtedly been stolen now that you've kept me and my people cooped up in here"

"Well...what then?" exasperated Maven.

"A tidy sum of say...five hundred septims, my people's safe release, and....something else" Arn mused.

"What do you mean, 'something else'?" impatiently snapped Maven.

"Something...unique. Something that says to everyone...'that I'm in good with the Blackbriars and not to be trifled with'. I'm sure you can think of something" Arn finished confidently.

Maven was quiet for a time, contemplating her answer as Arn continued to pace, thankful the itching had subsided and glancing between her and Maul's frown from the corner.

"You're a lot more of a shrewd man than I would've given you credit for" Maven replied after a long silence, a slow smirk growing on her features as she resumed her comfortable slouch on the edge of the bed and lazily plucked a grape from the fruit bowl.

"I will agree to your terms, provided you can make a deal favorable to ME" Maven emphasized.

"How do I know you will keep your word?" Arn replied, ceasing his pacing.

"How do I know you will keep yours?" Maven replied confidently as she popped the grape in her mouth.

"It seems we are at an impasse then" Arn returned sternly.

"Not quite. I have a solution that I think suits us both" Maven replied smugly as she rose to her feet and headed to the side door.

"Follow me" she motioned to Arn.

They passed down a long corridor and through another door or two before Maven turned and made a shushing motion to Arn as she opened the door and went in.
They walked down a small wooden walkway that overlooked a lushly decorated bedroom below, but that wasn't what caught Arn's eye.

There was a beautiful young woman bathing herself in an ivory tub down below.

There was a partition that would have hidden her from anyone walking in the room at floor level, but from their high perch, the three visitors could see everything.

Thankfully for Arn, there were soap suds that obscured her most private regions, but they did not cover the shapely leg that sat perched on the edge of the tub, or the tops of her breasts that just peeked out from the suds of the tub as the lass lay there humming a tune while contemplating some branch of an herb in her hand.

Abruptly, the young woman stood up and stepped out of the bathtub where a female attendant waited with a towel.

Arn tried to look away hurriedly, but not fast enough.

Long, dark black mass of hair down to between her shoulder blades and a nearly flawless Nord complexion, the young woman was of decent height and had some decent muscle in her arms and shoulders with full, round breasts and a figure that was accentuated by a thin waste with wide curvy hips down to more curves in her thighs and calves.

Gods, the lass had almost the exact same voluptuous physique that Lydia did.

Arn tried hard not to look, darting his gaze away towards the wall. He tried to push the thoughts from his mind, but he knew he looked down and found himself leaning over, gripping the railing much harder than he should.

He turned to the left and saw that Maven had been watching him like a hawk the whole time.

She grinned slyly before motioning him to follow quietly, which he was thankful for as they went through another door, leaving the bathing maiden, and returned to the original room where they'd talked.

"What was that all about?" Arn snapped, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"That...was my granddaughter, Ingun" Maven replied, smugly plucking and eating a grape again.

"And?"

"Well, the Dragon obviously doesn't want to do his negotiating here. So I will have to send someone to ensure you're keeping your end of the bargain."

"And you're going to send Ingun?" asked Arn incredulously.

"No, I'm going to send her attendant, Iona" Maven chuckled "You don't think I would just hand you my granddaughter to run off with before negotiations were complete?"

She continued after Arn fixed her with another suspiciously puzzled look.

"I will send my Ingun's attendant, Iona, and my own bodyguard here, Maul, with you" Maven stated as Maul started with surprise from leaning against the wall "That way, you'll have two of my people and I'll have two of your people until we finish with this deal" Maven finished as she sat forward again.
"Why should I trust this one?" Arn sneered at the glaring Maul.

"He won't have any weapons" Maven replied smugly as Maul started to protest before a wave of Maven's hand shushed him.

"And what of my other demands?" Arn queried.

"I can assure you they will be met, including the unique...something...you were asking for" Maven grinned knowingly as she stood.

An awkward silence followed as Arn tried to consider other options.

"I have a better suggestion. Release one of my people and you can keep Maul here since I don't trust him at my back anyway" Arn stated, casting a wary eye at Maul again.

"And which of your housecarls would you suggest I release then?" Maven sternly replied, eyeing him carefully.

"Doesn't matter. Flip a coin if you please" Arn tried to be as callous about it as possible, aware of Maven's careful scrutiny.

"Maul" Maven asked, with a look that Maul seemed to interpret as he opened the door and said something to someone who'd apparently been on the other side.

After an awkward silence that seemed to last a lot longer than it actually did, Arn heard Lydia's telltale aggravated tone come through the din in the hallway as she made a snide remark to a guard while the noises moved closer to the door.

Hearing that it was her and that she was at least safe gave Arn the time he needed to compose himself before she actually appeared.

He couldn't show any great relief.

The side door opened and Lydia was shoved unceremoniously into the room by the guards who retreated for a moment before another young woman came in.

Lydia had looked relieved to see Arn standing there fully armored and with his weapons, but it quickly turned to confusion as he fixed her with a disappointed scowl.

An awkward silence again followed before Arn finally piped up.

"I am disappointed, Housecarl. I left you with strict instructions, provisions, weapons, and armor. I leave you two alone for merely a few weeks and I come back to find you taken prisoner. What kind of servant allows that to happen?!" Arn chided.

"I-I uh" Lydia stuttered with surprise, searching Arn's features for some clue to this bizarre exchange.

"I told you long ago. Rule number one, what you do as my servants reflects on me. This is indeed a poor showing of your training" Arn emphasized as the situation dawned on Lydia, who evidently recognized his hint about rule number one, which was certainly not anything to do with service.

"I--uh apologize, my Thane. W-We were caught by surprise" Lydia bowed her head in mock shame, just barely wiping the smirk away that threatened to appear.

"We will speak more of your failures later. Right now, I have business to conclude. Tell me, did either of you get ravaged or otherwise damaged? I have no use for a womb that cannot seed a
Dragonborn child or housecarls that cannot guard my back in battle” Arn continued to chide, wondering if he was taking the ruse too far.

"No, my Thane. We--" Lydia got cut off as Arn started moving her head around with his hands as if inspecting a horse before purchase.

After awkwardly allowing Arn to move her around this way and that, "checking" for injuries or other problems, Lydia was finally let loose from his grip and motioned off to the side dismissively by Arn.

"See Dragonborn, we need not be enemies" chided Maven as she slurped down another grape "and the benefits of being...allies far outweigh any other alliance you can make in these lands" she finished smugly.

"Let's get this done then" Arn sighed, trying to sound reluctant "You are Iona?" he asked to the other young woman who had come through the door, who nodded affirmative in turn.

Slightly shorter than the average Nord woman and slighter of frame, she still had some muscle in her arms and wrists, likely from cleaning since the steel armor she was wearing was ill fitting on her and was either poorly fit or belonged to someone else.

She kept her brown hair short and unbraided, not even reaching past her neck.

"See to the provisions they are giving me. Hopefully, you can do better at keeping track of those" Arn tried to sound gruffly at Lydia before motioning Iona to follow him as the entire procession made its way back out into the main hall of the keep where still the Jarl's court hovered around her chair and the naked man still stood quietly.

Arn wasn't halfway to where the stranger stood before he turned and fixed Arn with eyes that glowed a faint blue hue.

"You...are the Dragonborn" he spoke loud and clear in a Redguard accent.

"Yes" Arn answered cautiously as he approached and stood just off to one side while the room grew quiet.

"I speak on behalf of the great and mighty Sahrokonikaan. I will speak with you and you alone, but not here. The words and dealings of the great and mighty Sahrokonikaan are not meant for the unworthy ears of the fleshlings. Come!" spoke the stranger before turning and walking toward the entrance to the court.

Arn rushed after the stranger, wondering how to address the fact that he had to have one of these "fleshlings" in tow behind him as they headed out the door into Riften.
A Bargain Is Struck: Riften pt. 7

Chapter Summary

Arn must negotiate with a mysterious Dragon for the fate of Riften.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Uh...what is your name...man?" Arn muttered as he tried to keep up with Sahrotkonikaan's representative without having to run.

Once again, his entreaties were met with silence by the naked man, continuing to stride on with purpose through the woods outside Riften as if Arn had said nothing.

Just as Arn slowed a little to ponder what else to try, he heard the familiar hiss from behind him as Iona, the Blackbriar's chosen representative, whispered her displeasure from a distance at him as she followed a ways back, ducking between bushes and trees behind the pair of men.

"I'm trying!" Arn tried to subtly hiss back at her as he turned and ran to catch up to the man painted white.

It had been several hours since they'd left Riften, a mob of worried onlookers at the gate, and since then, Arn had tried a dozen times to get some answer from the Dragon's representative, but had received nothing but silence in response.

After several more hours of pointless entreaties, Arn noted it was beginning to get dark and Iona's patience or stamina was wearing thin as she was no longer taking any pains to conceal herself, simply trotting behind the two a little ways back.

In the half a day their trek had taken them, Arn had noticed several details about the naked man that he hadn't before.

Underneath the heavily coated white paint, he could make out markings that looked a lot like letters in the Dragon tongue all over his body. He was definitely a Redguard man, and he had been emasculated at some point, having no...shall we say...family jewels beneath his tentpole.

As it got darker, Arn started to feel the fatigue himself, still in his full armor and not having stopped for as much as a breather since departing Riften.

Iona looked a lot worse off, beginning to drag behind, her poorly fitted armor clunking as she wheezed effort just to keep pace with the two men.

Another hour passed and Arn was really beginning to feel the effects of walking so far without a break when suddenly, the Dragon's representative came to a sudden stop where a path out of the forest started ascending into the mountains.

The man in white seemed to look up and around as if trying to gauge his surroundings in the growing darkness as Arn used the opportunity to take a seat and catch his breath.
This brief respite turned into a much longer one as the naked man just continued standing there, looking around into the night.

By now, Iona had finally caught up to them and hauled herself past a surprised Arn right up to the man in white.

"My...name...is....Iona...and....I...represent--" she began to gasp out while leaning against a rock.

The naked man simply turned and struck out with his mage staff, stopping just short of the surprised woman's forehead, but it still pulsed with magicka and Iona's eyes rolled back into her head before pitching forward.

Arn scrambled off his seat to grab her awkwardly before her face struck the ground.

"What have you--?" Arn began to stutter when suddenly the beat of massive wings and the accompanying WHOOSH of air indicated a Dragon came hurtling by them just overhead.

Instantly, Arn had set Iona down and drew sword and shield, dropping into a ready stance and looking all around into the night sky.

"The great and mighty Sahrotnokonaan" muttered the Redguard with a bow of reverence, breaking his half a day of silence.

"Is this the place he wishes to treat with us?" Arn ventured after waiting for sign of the Dragon to return but receiving nothing in sight or sound to suggest the Dragon was anywhere nearby.

The man in white simply turned to Arn and shook his head negatively before beginning to walk again.

Rapidly, Arn sheathed his weapons and scooped up Iona's thankfully only unconscious body and trudged behind the Dragon's representative as the path took them into the rocky slopes of the mountains.

After another hour or two of climbing the slopes into the mountains, Arn felt a huge wave of relief as they approached a large cavity in the side of a cliff with steps that led down inside.

His feet were killing him and Iona's extra weight was only taxing him further, sweat pouring off him inside his armor as he clanked down the stone stairs after the man in white.

At length, they reached the floor to a large chamber filled with stalactites and stalagmites jutting randomly up or down from the darkness here and there.

There was a slight crack in the ceiling which allowed some moonlight in, but outside of that was nearly pitch black, allowing Arn to see no more than ten feet or so in any direction once the man in white extinguished the blue light from his staff they'd used to go down the stairs.

Since the man in white hadn't killed Iona, Arn figured he wouldn't push his luck by trying to include her any more in the proceedings than she already was, setting her down with an involuntary sigh of relief at getting the extra weight off his left shoulder.

His relief was short lived, however, since as soon as he had taken his helmet off, he found himself the object of a stern glare of disapproval from the man in white, his eyes glowing slightly blue much like they had in Mistveil Keep.

"The great and mighty Sahrotnokonaan continues to await the customary greeting!" snapped the man
in white impatiently.

"Uh....Hello....Greetings" Arn ventured with a slight bow, staring around the cave into the darkness, realizing for the first time that they might only be feet away from the Dragon itself and wondering what this 'customary greeting' was that he was supposed to know.

After a long silence, Arn wondered if he should continue trying things as greetings or if that would make things that much worse as it became obvious this was not what the Dragon was looking for.

"Is this fleshling your mate, Dragonborn?" asked the man in white, gesturing to the prone form of Iona.

"No, she's just a--" Arn began by way of explanation before turning and freezing mid sentence as he saw the enormous, green reptilian head of Sahrotonikaan emerge from the blackness and hover his snout just over Iona's unconscious form.

Arn said nothing as he kept his eyes glued to the massive beast, which looked much larger than before, seeing it up this close without anything else as a distraction.

He was vaguely aware the Dragon seemed to be testing him somehow. It lowered its nostrils and began sniffing Iona, but kept its large, yellow eyes glued on Arn the whole time, as if watching for a reaction.

Unfortunately, Iona took this precise moment to return to consciousness, groggily stirring and beginning to rise for a moment before the Dragon pushed her back down with a slight shove from its snout, prompting Iona to screech in terror for a moment before slamming her hands over her mouth and staring imploringly at Arn who tried to calm her with a motion of his hand as the Dragon continued sniffing.

All this time, the Dragon's eyes never left Arn.

After a short interval, the Dragon finally finished whatever it was doing and blew a burst of air through its nostrils, blowing Iona's short hair forward, eliciting another muffled scream as tears streamed down her cheeks before the Dragon withdrew its head back into the darkness of the cavern.

"The great and mighty Sahrotonikaan says it is good that she is not. For she is weak and ugly, even by the standards of the fleshlings" stated the man in white in a matter of fact manner.

As soon as the Dragon had withdrawn, Iona had rapidly crawled over to Arn and was now cowering behind his legs. Arn could still feel her shaking through the armor.

Arn really had no idea what to say to that, but thankfully the awkward silence was again broken by the man in white.

"You don't know very much. Do you, Dragonborn?"

"Depends what the topic is" Arn tried to sound confident despite the fact that he couldn't help but wonder if this Dragon and its representative were a means to getting some of the answers Arn had been seeking about himself.

"You have not treated with a Dragon before?" continued the man in white.

"None of them were interested in....talking" was the only thing Arn could come up with for whatever this exchange was.
"Did you slay them?"

"Any of the ones foolish enough not to flee" Arn replied, plucking up his confidence.

"A Dragon never flees" remarked the man in white.

Arn simply shrugged as if the answer was self explanatory then.

"How many dragons have you slain?" he continued, fixing Arn with a more passive stare, blue eyes shining in the darkness.

"Eight" replied Arn, deciding that counting the smaller black ones at Goldenglow Estate would look better.

"Eight?!" boomed the man in white with surprise "Do not lie to me Dovahkiin! How could eight Dragons fall to your unskilled hands and unknowing ways?!" the man in white spat with indignation.

The outburst surprised Arn, but it also showed him that the man in white was talking as if HE were the dragon. He wondered for a moment if this was all rehearsed, but the blow glow in the man's eyes suggested that the Dragon was somehow communicating its thoughts directly to the man, who spoke for him.

"It is the truth. Sahloknir in Kynesgrove, Nahlslennir in Solitude, the others I do not know the names of and two smaller black dragons on an island in the large lake west of here."

The man in white continued to look angrily confused for a moment before returning to his previous passive demeanor.

"Then as payment for this fleshling's transgression, you will relate how you slew two dragons as powerful as Sahloknir and Nahlslennir" demanded the man in white, stamping his staff end down on the floor with finality.

"And if I choose not to?" ventured Arn, not keen on letting the Dragon know anything about what he could or couldn't do.

"Then the fleshling's life is forefeit. For she is not worthy to be here" answered the man in white with the same finality as before, this time punctuated by a rumbling growl from the Dragon nearby that made the ground vibrate.

When Arn didn't immediately answer, he immediately felt Iona grab him violently by the leg, pulling and grabbing at his armor to get him to look at her as she shook her head violently 'No', mouthing words too rapidly for Arn to understand, though he was sure she was pleading for her life in some fashion.

"Fine, then...Where shall I start?" Arn relented, taking a step or two to one side to lean on a stalagmite since he was still tired and realized they might be here talking for quite awhile.

At length, Arn recounted how he'd ended up killing both Nahlslennir and Salokhnir, occasionally interrupted by the man in white with surprisingly detailed questions about the Dragons' behavior during the fights.

Arn was surprised the Dragon seemed more interested in the other Dragons than he did in what Arn had done and was thankful there had been no further inquiries about Lydia or even Delphine.

After he was done relating his tale, there was another long silence before the man in white spoke
again.

"The great and mighty Sahrokonikaan judges these tales to be the truth. Your fleshling's life might be spared."

"Might be?!" Arn retorted with surprise, ceasing his leaning on the rocks as Iona still scurried to stay behind him.

"She must keep silent or she may yet be devoured for impertinence" replied the man in white rather passively, as if it were an obvious thing.

"Fine, then...now what is this greeting you're expecting, since you obviously know by now I've not spoken with any Dragons before?" Arn queried, hoping the good will gained from his tales might get him some information from the strange duo.

An awkward silence followed where the man in white gazed at him with an upraised eyebrow as if surprised or trying to gauge something before finally replying.

"From the dawn of time, when mortals consulted with their Dragon masters, their dealings were always preceded by a customary greeting.....Uth"

"Uth" repeated Arn, wondering what it meant while at the same time not liking the sound of 'Dragon masters'.

For whatever reason, saying it made him feel inexplicably more calm than before.

"From the mountains south and east to the Lakes in the West and north to the Throat of the world...all this land belongs to the mighty Sahrokonikaan. Now you must agree to a tribute in order that Sahrokonikaan does not cleanse his domain of the undeserving vermin that have made their home there" proudly declared the man in white, stunning Arn for a moment.

"And how often would this tribute be made?" Arn asked cautiously.

"Every new moon without fail, else Sahrokonikaan will exercise his wrath on the fleshlings of their largest city" replied the man calmly.

Arn was taken aback for a moment. Unsure what a Dragon would want for tribute, and not wanting to offend by offering something that might seem silly to a Dragon.

Then he remembered he was supposed to be bargaining, not just waiting for some likely impossibly harsh demands from the beast and his mage.

"And if we did meet your...tribute, what would we gain in exchange?" queried Arn, aware he was again toeing a dangerous line.

The Dragon rumbled again through the cavern in apparent displeasure, all of them hearing and feeling it as the Dragon shifted its bulk while it growled.

"The fleshlings would be allowed to continue their lowly existence in all the foolish things mortals find necessary" the man in white spat back with indignation.

"But wiping us out gains you nothing" Arn spat back just as quickly "You would have a territory...free of fleshlings, but no tribute that would continue to add to your greatness...every new moon"
Both Arn and Iona jumped involuntarily as the Dragon cracked several stalactites or stalagmites loose in anger after Arn's reply, another rumbling growl reverberating around the chamber.

Finally, after a few tense moments of silence, the man in white spoke up.

"The great and mighty Sahrotkonikaan offers in exchange for tribute, the protection over all his domain. No other Dragons or invading armies may set foot there. With such...powerful protection, the fleshlings may thrive as subjects of the great and mighty Sahrotkonikaan...provided they send sufficient tribute" declared the man in white reluctantly at first, but finishing more confidently.

"And what shall the tribute consist of?" asked Arn, suppressing his excitement at getting the Dragon to relent in even the smallest degree.

"The fleshlings shall provide one thousand pieces of gold, five hundred of silver, fifty pounds of precious stones and metals, and fifty potions of magicka, and a weapon with a different enchantment every tribute" replied the man in white calmly.

"And this will stay the same?" returned Arn.

"This will remain the same amount unless terms are changed in accord with both the mighty Sahrotkonikaan and the fleshlings"

"I cannot stay here to oversee this"

"Then you will appoint a mage fleshling slave to act as the representative in your stead" demanded the man in white.

A bizarre push and pull discussion then began where Arn tried to haggle the amounts of the tribute down as low as possible, but didn't get very far before the man in white simply refused and grew quiet.

"Fine, then. I will agree to these terms on behalf of the fleshlings. I expect the great and mighty Sahrotkonikaan will remain true to his word" declared Arn formally as he stopped leaning on a stone and stood with his arms crossed.

Suddenly, the massive head and neck of the Dragon glided in from the darkness of the cavern, stopping right in front of Arn, making him involuntarily step back, half stumbling over Iona, who was still clinging to the backs of his legs.

"YOU HAVE MY WORD...DOVAHKIIN. DO NOT TEST ME FURTHER" rumbled Sahrotkonikaan in perfectly audible speech!

"You can speak our tongue!" Arn retorted with surprise, his hands falling to his weapons by default.

The Dragon shifted its head slightly, looking him over.

"YOU ARE BOLD...FOR ONE SO SMALL AND UKNOWING. MAYBE ALDUIN DOES HAVE SOMETHING TO FEAR FROM YOU"

"Who is Alduin?" asked Arn desperately as the Dragon receded slowly into the pitch darkness of the cave.

"BUT I THINK NOT..." rumbled the Dragon in the darkness as if Arn hadn't said anything.

After Arn made arrangements with the man in white as to where and when the drop off of the tribute
was to be made, he began the long walk back to Riften with a much more calm Iona behind him.

Most of the time was spent in silence, Arn pondering the things the Dragon had said and its unusual behavior compared to the others he'd encountered so far.

After half a day's journey, Iona regained enough composure to speak up.

"I...I don't know if the Blackbriars will be happy with that tribute"

"They should be" Arn replied inattentively.

"You should have gotten the numbers lower"

"We're lucky to get what we did" Arn tried to dismiss her concerns.

"If I could've said something back there, I would have. It's far too high."

"Are you telling me the Blackbriars couldn't pay that every month?" Arn stopped and turned on her.

"They...could, but it would be very taxing" Iona retorted.

"The deal gives them control over the tribute. That's what Maven loves most, right? If she controls the tribute, no one will risk sabotaging her operations or attacks on her personally while also gaining the protection of a Dragon for her home and business. How is this NOT favorable?" Arn hissed, his fatigue and stress shortening his patience.

The outburst silenced her complaints as they continued on, but they hadn't gone far before about a dozen armed men melted out of the surrounding woods as Maul strode toward Arn, eyeing him over with no little amount of disdain.

No sooner had they appeared than Arn's neck had suddenly begun itching so badly that it felt on fire.

Looking over the men, Arn saw no Maven present or even any city guards. This was no official delegation.

"Is the deal done?" Maul gruffly questioned at Iona as Arn rapidly drew sword and shield.

Arn had no idea what her response had been, but instantly, Maul had whipped out two axes as the group around them closed in.

"You're nothing!" Maul spat as both men moved to engage each other.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

Arn's frost breath spewed forth like a miniature blizzard, which looked strange since all around them was warm, daylit wooded plains.

Arn turned this way and that, the blizzard forcing all of the attackers to shield themselves for fear of freezing up or being struck with ice chunks.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn blitzed past the stunned group, and in a flash, found himself nearly forty paces past them down the path.

As the attackers slowly lowered their shields and arms, they all looked dumbfounded not to find Arn
in their midst.

The answer to their quandary soon came in the form of an arrow thwacking through the back of one of their heads.

They spun and charged Arn, who'd already let loose another arrow and was readying another.

One after another they kept falling to Arn's arrows, even as they got nearer to him.

Maul was the only one smart enough to immediately seek cover once the arrows started flying, sprinting for the cover of the nearest trees.

Arn simply waited until the remaining attackers were nearly on him, before releasing another arrow, pegging one through a chest plate of some cheap looking steel armor before another Whirlwind Sprint put him another forty paces away from the hapless remaining ones.

Laying into the remaining attackers with arrows, in only a few draws, there were only three able bodied attackers left.

When one of them fell from another of Arn's arrows hitting him in the neck, the other two turned to flee, but an arrow caught one in the back, pitching forward.

Arn was taking his time aiming carefully for the last one when Maul suddenly burst free from the nearby bushes, his axes crossed in a guarded position in front of him.

Arn had spent so much time picking off the underlings, he'd lost track of Maul...or rather that's what Maul was assuming.

Even as he raised his axes for a series of killing or maiming blows on Arn, Arn simply pivoted towards him.

"ZUN HAAL VIIK!"

Both of Maul's Axes flew out of his hands and he was left with a shocked look of surprise on his face as Arn simply turned with his already drawn bow and fired an arrow straight into Maul's stunned expression.

"Uh...One of them got away" stuttered Iona in surprise from where she crouched on the ground.

"Not for long" Arn muttered as he took off again, only needing several Whirlwind sprints to catch up to the fleeing man and dispatching him with an arrow.

As he slowly returned to the scene of the battle, finishing off any of them unlucky enough to still be alive, he glared at Iona.

"Is this how Maven repays me?" he snarled, advancing on her.

"N-n-no...no this isn't what it looks like!" gasped Iona as she scrambled away from him.

"Isn't it?!" Arn replied, fixing her with an ominous glare as he shoved his sword into the throat of another attacker that was gurgling on the ground.

"I know Maul is her enforcer, but these men don't belong to the Blackbriars!" Iona gestured wildly at the fallen bodies.

"Truly?" Arn sneered, eyeing one of the corpses.
"I know some of the men Maul usually runs with. These aren't them!" Iona insisted.

"And why should I believe you?"

"It...doesn't make any sense. Why would Maven go through the trouble to get this all in place just to get rid of you?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to follow through on her end of the deal. Maybe she's worried what I'll do when I return to the city" Arn mused in an annoyed manner as he began stripping the valuables from the corpses and looking for anything that would show their identities.

He had to go back to Riften anyway. He had to show he had fulfilled his end of the deal or Freyya and Lydia both would be in trouble. Strangely, he didn't feel as much ill at ease about it as he would've thought. Maybe that was because the itching on his neck had disappeared during the fighting. It had started as soon as the men appeared.

Maybe the two were connected somehow.

"Come on then. It will be amusing to stroll into Mistveil Keep and show Maven how she failed" Arn muttered as he grabbed Iona by the arm and shoved her ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

1. It makes sense to me that Dragons will not all follow Alduin in his goals and purpose. Some will expect things to be the way they were before, and still others will have other motivations and goals, but I don't want to say too much or I'll be spoiling things later on.
Chapter Summary

Arn negotiates his Housecarls' release from Maven Blackbriar, but then must rush to avoid scrutiny from the Thieves Guild. Sneaking away from Riften to lay claim to Mercer Frey's hoard, none of them are prepared for what they find...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Come on, keep up!" snapped Arn, as he jerked Iona by the arm back around in front of him as they approached the gates to Riften.

Given that he was again unsure what he was walking back into, Arn had taken generous breaks on the journey back to recover his strength and ensure Iona had no excuses for failing to keep up with him.

To his surprise, as he neared the gates, all the guards broke out in loud 'Huzzahs' of praise, cheers, and even some applause from onlookers as if he had single-handedly saved them.

He was just starting to process this when two figures emerged from the crowd at the gate that looked strangely familiar.

Brown mage robes over a strange steel armor with those strange bony masks like...the ones from the assassins in the Whiterun stables!

Once again Arn was yanking Iona by the arm, this time behind him as he drew his sword and shield while the assassins yelled something indecipherable amongst the cheering throng at the gate and charged at Arn, one of them flinging a large fireball while the other drew a greatsword.

Arn ducked behind his shield as the fireball hit, an explosion of flame briefly blanketing his front side before he could lower it enough to see.

He had been about ready to charge the pair, but once he lowered his shield he beheld an unexpected development.

As soon as the assassins had attacked, the city guards swarmed them, hacking them down and further to pieces as Arn stared stunned for a moment before rushing forward to stop them before they destroyed any evidence of who'd sent them.

"Wait, wait, STOP!" Arn hollered to no avail as the guards continued gleefully hacking at what was left of the assassins.

They finally stopped as Arn pulled up with a raised hand, their faces a mix of pride and surprise.

Trying to peel through the blood and gore soaked shreds of their coin purses yielded nothing and there was nothing else to be found on them apart from their mangled armor and weapons.

"Bah!" Arn groused before grabbing Iona's arm yet again and setting off for Mistveil Keep.
Lydia met him almost as soon as he was inside the gates.

"What's going on?!" she hissed at him, obviously aggravated with him but trying to keep their conversation from being overheard by nearby cheering people.

"Not now" Arn hissed, continuing to move, casting glances around for anyone closing on him or following him "Keep the horses ready. Watch yourself, and I'll be back as quick as I deal with this" he muttered, continuing to shove Iona ahead of him.

To his surprise, Arn wasn't stopped or questioned by anyone on his way to finding Maven.

Instead, he kept getting more 'Huzzahs', cheers, and offers to buy him a drink from nearly everyone he saw on his way into Mistveil Keep.

Why am I being treated like a damn hero?

Still suspicious, Arn had kept Iona in front of him as they moved through the main court inside.

After asking several guards, Arn found Maven in a room adjacent to the one he'd talked to her in before, this time standing over a table with a number of maps on it.

Slamming the door behind him, Arn made sure to slide the lock bar across with a loud THWACK.

"Does that mean that things didn't go well?" Maven asked in a sour but calm manner without looking up from the maps on the table.

"You mean the deal...or the double cross afterward?!" snapped Arn, eyeing around the room for anyone hidden.

"I suppose that means you ran into Maul on the way back" Maven replied with a sarcastic edge as she finally looked up from her maps.

"I'm afraid you'll have to find a new bodyguard" Arn replied with mock sympathy.

"Good" Maven smirked as she moved around the table, leaning back against it and folding her arms.

"And just how is that 'Good' for you?" Arn sneered, suddenly feeling uneasy that she would be gleeful about it.

"I'll admit good help is hard to come by these days" Maven sighed before glancing off into space "Maul was a good, loyal hound....as long as I threw him a bone every once in awhile" she continued in a more dour tone.

When Arn didn't respond, she shrugged and continued.

"But everything changes. Eventually, he wasn't happy with bones anymore and thought he deserved steak from the master's table" Maven stated before making some sort of whistling noise that prompted a guard to enter from the other door to the room, momentarily making Arn reach for his weapons.

"Fetch Ingun. Tell her, it's time" was all Maven said before the guard nodded and left.

"Maul...wanted Ingun...for himself" Arn stated slowly, piecing it together out loud "Then you paraded her in front of me for his benefit!" snarled Arn "You knew he would come after anyone threatening to take Ingun away."
"Maybe" Maven replied aloofly, looking sideways at one of the parchments on the table.

"If he'd killed us, what would've happened to your deal with the Dragon?!!"

"Don't be dramatic. We both know Maul stood no chance against you. Tell me, child, how easily did he kill Maul and his men?" Maven snapped before turning to Iona.

"He killed them like they were nothing. I-I.. don't think any of them even touched him" Iona replied demurely, rubbing her arm where Arn had jerked on it repeatedly.

"See?" Maven gestured with a wave of her hand.

"No reason you couldn't have taken care of him yourself" Arn replied angrily.

"And have people thinking I would punish my top lieutenant for wanting a 'just' reward after all his hard work?" Maven replied with biting sarcasm on the 'just' "Come now, Dragonborn. I can't have my own people thinking I'm a heartless bitch, even if I do act like one" she finished with a smug grin.

As she finished speaking, there was a slight knock at the far door, quickly followed by guards escorting in a frazzled, dirty, and very angry looking Freyya.

"See, I have kept my end of the deal" Maven began with a wave of her hand "Now tell me, what sort of deal did you make with this uh...Sahrotkokina...the dragon" she finished with a serious tone, fixing him with an unyielding glare that Arn thought must pass for scrutiny.

After a long silence, Arn sighed with annoyance, relaxed his grip from his weapons, and nudged Iona, allowing her to finally be out of the reach of being yanked around anymore. He then proceeded to relate in detail what all had transpired with the Dragon and his representative.

Arn half expected an outburst of anger as he related the final totals of the tribute, but Maven said nothing. She had raised an eyebrow during one or two details of the story, but otherwise was silent, occasionally glancing at the maps on the table or holding her chin in thought.

"I...I informed him as soon as I could that the totals were too high" muttered Iona, breaking an awkward silence.

"As well you should" responded Maven thoughtfully before turning back to Arn "Tell me, Dragonborn, what makes this a good deal for me?"

There was no venom or sarcasm in the question. She simply looked at him with a slight smirk, as if the answer were the punch line to some jest he didn't know.

Arn wondered if it was some sort of test, or if the woman somehow got amusement from it.

"If you choose to control the payment of the tribute, no one would dare interrupt your operations. It also gets you future protection from any other dragons and keeps the different sides from making war here" Arn replied slowly at first before finishing more confidently.

"All true" quipped Maven "The amount is easily obtained, however it sounds better to others if it is a large one, makes us look more generous" she grinned smugly.

"I would caution however..." Arn started before cursing his own honesty.

"What?" asked Maven with a raised eyebrow.
"I'm not sure if and what the Dragon has planned for the future. It makes me uneasy."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes" Maven dismissed with a wave of her hand.

"You'll need someone else to act as representative since I will be heading out soon"

"Our court mage is crazy enough to say 'yes' to anything, so I think we will be fine" came the reply.

"Other than my reward then, our business is done?" queried Arn before motioning for Freyya to join him by the door, which she did.

"Ah, not quite...We still both have the unpleasant task of reporting to Jarl Laila" sighed Maven reluctantly.

Arn glared a look of disbelief at her.

"Just because I run things doesn't mean we don't have to make it look official" she answered, grabbing up one or two papers before motioning them back out the way they came.

Sauntering back out to the main court area, Arn and Freyya both had to endure the over-dramatized account of Arn's exploits that Maven recounted to the clueless Jarl Laila Lawgiver, who largely just sat enthralled except for the occasional giddy clap of excitement at one detail or another.

During this charade, Arn had spotted Lydia trying to get past the guards at the entrance, wildly gesturing and pointing at Arn, but only getting negative nods from the guards until Arn made a hiss-whistle that got their attention and motioned Lydia to him, which they finally allowed.

By the time Lydia had made it to him, Maven had finished with the tale.

"This is a great deed. We should do something" Laila exclaimed before Maven interjected.

"You could make him a Thane. I would even offer my granddaughter as a housecarl, if you did."

"Of course! Great idea. Dragonborn, you are hereby granted the title of Thane of the Rift with the Honeside home here as a place of residence and uh...Ingun Blackbriar shall be your housecarl" Laila proclaimed, pausing and looking to Maven to make sure it was okay to assign Ingun, getting the nod of approval from the older woman.

No sooner than the proclamation was done, than Arn was suddenly swarmed by everyone in the court with well wishes, offers of services, and congratulations.

While trying to extricate himself from this and relocate Freyya and Lydia, who'd both been lost in the crowd of enthusiastic locals, Arn heard the familiar hiss of Maven in his ear.

"Your reward will be with Ingun out front. I expect at least one Dragonborn great grandchild, get busy" came the admonishment in his ear before someone, presumably Maven herself swatted him on the rear.

Rather panicked, Arn finally located both his housecarls and made a hasty exit before anything else happened.

As they gathered themselves on the steps to Mistveil Keep, Arn looked up to suddenly find his arms full of the buxom Ingun Blackbriar, who'd run to him, leaping and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Thank you so much. I'll make sure you don't regret this!" she exclaimed into his shoulder plate as he
stumbled slightly under her weight, half trying to extricate himself, half stopping to process what was happening.

When he'd finally uncoiled her from him, he found himself the center of a lot of unwanted female attention.

Lydia and Freyya were both looking at Arn with unveiled anger, while Ingun stepped back with her hands on her hips, eager and excited.

Arn thought about addressing the situation, but he knew he still had a lot left to do in Riften and he didn't have time for any sort of serious discussion with any of them right now, much less out in the middle of Riften.

"Everyone get your things and get to this...Honeyside. We have a lot to do" Arn ordered in a tone that got their attention.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Arn discovered that Ingun had been granted her own entourage of four personal guards and her personal attendant, Iona, to travel with them.

Once they were temporarily set up in Honeyside, Arn took Lydia and Freyya out of Riften before sneaking around and back down beneath the docks to where he'd hidden the Nightingale armor.

He could see they both had tons of questions, even as he quietly shucked off his ebony heavy armor to change into the lighter, daedric armor, but silence was more important right now.

Once they were ready, Arn led them sneaking out into the woods north and east of Riften.

It had gotten dark, but Arn knew it wasn't far and the darkness would further hide them from anyone in the thieves guild attempting to follow them.

After only an hour, Arn spotted a small farm nestled amongst the trees at the slope of a hill.

It took them a little while to scout the area surrounding it to ensure there was no one waiting in ambush or following them from Riften. Arn felt a lot better once they discovered this secret hiding place for Mercer Frey's goods had still not been uncovered by the thieves guild.

They would likely have tried his home in Riften where Arn was sure they would've found a good many things to sate some of their lust for vengeance, but what they didn't know was that Frey would never hide the things he stole from the guild in such an obvious place like his home.

The mercenary Arn had interrogated on the shores of Lake Honnrich had confessed that he knew his boss always came to this small farm to be paid.

So, either the farm was the secret hiding location, or the person living there knew where it was.

Something Arn would shortly find out.

Motioning Lydia and Freyya to covering locations, Arn crept up to the door and peered through a crack by the window.

A well dressed, middle aged Nord man sat reading at the table.

Too well dressed for a farmer...

Arn thought for a moment, then grinned as a thought came to mind.
Pulling the Nightingale hood and head piece tighter, Arn stood at the door and knocked gently.

"Who is the Mistress in the night?" came the Nord's voice from the other side, surprising Arn.

Mentally scrambling, Arn wondered if the man had spotted either Lydia or Freyya somehow.

"I have none" Arn replied in a hiss, trying to gruffly reassure the man that there was no one else here, as Frey would do.

Arn was surprised to hear a sigh of relief before the CLACKS of the door levers and locks being disengaged.

The Nord man opened the door a crack before swinging it wide and motioning Arn in.

"Master Frey, it is good to see you, though I must confess again that I wish you'd change the pass phrase. I've never had the taste to flaunt Nocturnal like you do" muttered the man with a bow of reverence after closing the door.

Arn simply shrugged, trying to avoid talking as long as possible.

"I was worried. You've been gone longer than any of the recent times. One of the nymphs has grown ill and nothing I've tried has improved matters" muttered the man worriedly as he bustled around the cottage, moving candles and some of the chairs.

Arn could tell the man was moving things to clear space for some secret entrance, but even when the rug was moved and everything out of the way, Arn could see nothing in the floor that would indicate anything but wood planks were there.

"Bring anything good back this time?" whispered the Nord as he waved his hand across a floor section, a brief glow of magicka glowing momentarily before the outline of a trap door suddenly became visible.

Arn shook his head negatively as the other man opened the trap door and climbed down a ladder into a torch lit passageway.

Climbing down after him, Arn left the trap door open, unsure how things were going to go and worried the thing might seal magically after him.

Reaching the bottom, he found himself in a natural cave system, green moss covered rocks poking out here and there as they walked another twenty paces before Arn saw an opening in the rocks with a small pulley system.

Glancing into it as they walked past, he could see some light down below, but not much. There was apparently a much larger chamber about thirty feet down to one side with a number of objects, furniture and weapons.

Just as Arn was wondering how they were going to get down there, Frey's assistant stopped at the dead end of the passage, crossed his arms, and turned to look at Arn expectantly.

Arn looked around to see what the man was expecting him to deal with, but it was too slow and looking around obliviously was something Frey would never have done.

Arn realized his slipup, but too late.

The assistant started for a moment before uncrossing his arms.
"You...where....say something!" the awkward confrontation began as the assistant was too worried Arn might actually be Frey to just straight up attack him, instead settling for stepping back and putting a hand on the hilt of the fine dagger in the sheath at his waist.

"Stop wasting time and open it!" Arn tried to hiss as much like Mercer Frey as possible, hoping that intimidation would work as a last resort.

It didn't.

"You're not Mercer Frey!" sneered the assistant before drawing his dagger and lunging at Arn.

Arn already had his hands on his weapons when the man grew suspicious. Now he drew sword and brought his shield to bear while the man stabbed at him, the dagger glancing off to one side of the shield as Arn tried to pivot and bring the shield back to bash him away.

Unfortunately for Arn, this was not the assistant's first fight.

He quickly leaned back and to one side, allowing the shield edge to swish by before trying to catch the inside of Arn's elbow between the armor with a back hand slash, but Dawnbreaker was already moving on the follow through.

This time, there was no retreat far enough for the assistant. He was caught between exposing himself in a bold attack and trying to sidestep the slash of Arn's longsword.

The blow caught the man on his forearm, and without any armor, nearly severed it in half, the remaining piece hanging by some bare amount of flesh as he screamed and stumbled back.

Arn was in no mood for anymore surprises and his swing back with the longsword caught the reeling assistant just below the chin, severing the front half of the neck. He collapsed in a growing pool of blood, his eyes twitching with shock at Arn as his body stilled.

Examining the assistant's body for presumably a key or something that would open up the passage further, all Arn found was some coin, an unidentified potion, and an empty flask that smelled of skuma.

After scrutinizing the passage some more, Arn found what he was looking for, but his heart fell when he saw the shape of the opening. As he looked at the shape of a keyhole between the stones, Arn remembered where he'd seen that shape before...the Skeleton Key.

Even as he sat looking at it, he heard a whisper from the hatch opening.

"Arn! Are you alright?" whispered Lydia.

"It's okay, Frey's man is dead" Arn muttered, moving back to the ladder and looking up at both housecarls crouching by the opening "You should quench those candles up there and bar the door, though."

Freyya scurried away to comply, but Lydia kept scrutinizing him, her face scrunched up cutely in that worried look of hers that he had missed.

"What?" Arn mused.

"What's down there?"

"A door I'm trying to figure out how to open"
"What's beyond?"

"Not sure. Likely a lot of stolen goods and some slave women, if what this poor sot said is true" Arn muttered, returning his scrutiny to the wall.

"What are you going to do?" asked Lydia, noting the stone walls Arn was examining.

"About the only thing left for me to try.....make sure you and Freyya stay back from the opening" Arn stated as he backed off to one side from the keyhole.

"FUS RO DAH!!"

The wave of power hammered the rock and shook everything in the passageway as it seemed to reverberate around, making Arn stumble momentarily.

"FUS RO DAH!!"

The wave hit harder this time, eliciting loud cracks from the stone as a large chunk was thrown outward into a passage beyond the keyhole.

It wasn't a lot of room, but Arn could crawl over and he didn't know if trying anymore would collapse the passage or not.

"Don't worry...if I can fit my big arse through here, you lasses should be f--" Arn started to huff as he crawled over, but the handhold he grabbed on the other side was loose stone that gave out under his weight and he went toppling over, thudding against steps that turned out to be steeper than he thought.

Unfortunately for Arn, it was also a straight set of stairs, which meant once he hit the ground, he began rolling and flopping uncontrollably all the way down.

One moment he was carefully climb-crawling, the next his world was spinning every direction, sharp hits of stone edges hammering his Daedric armor every second as he was vaguely aware of the sounds of traps springing, flame, and darts or arrows flying.

Since he was getting hit by the stairs repeatedly, he had no idea if and what else he had gotten hit with on the way down.

Once the world gradually stopped spinning, Arn realized he was laying flat on his back on the stone floor of whatever chamber he had seen earlier, but the aches and pains in his body made him move slowly as he sat up and took stock of himself.

"Arn?" came Lydia's worried voice from the opening at the top of the stairs.

"Stay there! Don't come down here!" Arn hastily ordered, worried they would befall the same dangerous plummet he had.

"Why?"

"Getting down isn't easy...and there are traps on the stairs" Arn groused, sitting up on his knees and taking a look around for the first time.

"How did you get down?" Freyya piped up.

"I rolled...I don't recommend it" Arn groaned.
Satisfied he'd taken no injuries other than some bruises or hard knocks, Arn eyed the chamber before him.

A shallow green pool fed by small rivulets running out of the rocks higher up sat on the left side of a stone walkway while the right side was lined with torches and alcoves.

Further along the walkway was a large stone or metal tablet in the middle and toward the end, Arn could see a larger domed area with a lot of furniture and other items littering the view, but too far to pick out specifics.

As Arn was about to turn and investigate the stairs for a way to help his housecarls down, he heard a brief clank of chains and a small splash off in the green pool.

In a flash, he whirled, drew his sword and shield, and dropped into a ready stance, edging forward slightly.

He could not move quickly to investigate since he had to both be aware of where he was stepping and what or who may yet be down here.

Slowly inching forward, he eventually became aware of a small huddled form far away on the other side of the green pool closer to the middle tablet of the walkway, though that wasn't where the splashing noise had come from.

Arn moved slowly further, and had turned just in time to see the top of someone's head peering at him from just above the green pool as he swung his gaze back left.

"Stop right the--" Arn had begun to order before he caught a better look at the person.

As soon as he'd laid eyes on the small head peering at him from the water, they'd submerged and shot like a dart through the water to the far left wall, huddling against the waters cascading down from the cracks in the side of the green moss covered rocks.

Even as Arn moved his head from side to side to get a better look in the light at what looked like a small elf-like woman, she began making what Arn could only describe as high pitched chirps directed at the other huddled form further away from them.

Must be Frey's captive women...

Arn glanced around once more before sheathing his weapons and slowly wading out toward the lass huddled against the wall, who continued to make chirps or short whines toward the other one that for whatever reason remained unmoved.

Arn moved slowly, fearing more traps, but was pleased to discover that the water in the pool was only waist deep at the deepest point.

Finally reaching near the wall, Arn got a better look at the captive woman.

A beautiful young elvish lass huddled naked against the cave wall, regarding him with terror in her bright green eyes as she tried to squeeze her knees harder together under her as she hunched down.

Seeing her up close struck Arn dumb for a moment as he regarded her.

Flawless white skin, rosey pink lips, small pointed ears, large vibrant green eyes, small nose, and soft round cheeks adorned with flowing, curly blonde hair that must reach partway down her back.
Then as his gaze travelled further down, he noticed the thick silver collar or choker on her neck and the chains on one of her dainty wrists and one on her ankles that coiled up to anchor points on the wall.

She had been chirping at her fellow captive as Arn approached, but once Arn was almost to her, she grew quiet and tried to huddle in a fetal position against the wall.

Arn was about to say something, but stopped when he saw her feet. They were dainty and pearly white, just like the rest of her, but they were also longer proportionally than any mer...and she had webbed skin between each of her toes, which were also slightly longer than one would expect.

No...it couldn't be...

Arn reached out to her, but she lay on her side and made a pitiful crying noise as he nearly touched her.

_Fool, you're wearing Frey's armor still. They think you're him._

Slowly, Arn removed his Nightingale hood and head piece before kneeling next to her.

"See? I'm not him. Frey's gone. You don't have to worry about him ever coming back" Arn tried to speak reassuringly as she cracked a green radiant eye to stare at his face with surprise for a moment before opening both eyes and looking at him.

Slowly at first, the lass sat up, still staring at Arn with those green eyes with an expression that was something between surprise and fear.

Then she did something unexpected. She slowly reached out a hand and touched his face, as if to ensure that he was really there, or that his face was not an illusion compared to the rest of him.

Arn let her slowly trace soft fingertips across his face as she stared worriedly into his eyes.

He was about to gently take her hand to help her stand, but instead she quickly pulled it away with a chirp of alarm and huddled against the stone wall again, hugging her arms to herself.

The action had the distracting side effect of pushing up her tits up into prominent display, heaving up and down faster and faster with each panicked breath she took. They would not be considered large among humans, but for her small frame, they were perfectly proportioned and rounded.

Arn shook himself free of the momentary lust that rose in him, forcing himself to focus on her pained expression of fear.

"My name is Arn, Armsmyth Bulgoar. What's yours?" Arn tried to get her talking.

Instead of a response, she cracked an eye fearfully at him, and made a high pitched chirp again.

"Can you not speak, or have these collars done something to you?" Arn asked before gently reaching up to her chin and lifting her head so he could get a better look at the silver collar on her.

He was wondering how he was going to get the collar off, but when he tilted her chin up, he made a startling discovery.

In the area just below the jawline of each delicate cheek, were several pink slits in the flesh that Arn realized couldn't be anything else except gills.

Impossible...
Arn stared dumbfounded at the tiny slits of flesh on the underside of her jaw. They weren't Mer women at all. They really were Nymphs!

Chapter End Notes

1. It seems reasonable to me that Frey, at some point, would lose interest in wealth as an end goal to his thieving. Eventually, he would covet only the most rare and impossible to find things, even if they were living things.

2. It made no sense to me that in the game, Frey has a huge lavish mansion right in Riften under everyone else's nose and no one wonders how he came by all of it. So I moved his hoard away from Riften, but not far, and use an intermediary to do his bidding.

3. Elder Scrolls lore is kinda sketchy on any details about Nymphs. So these two are really my own creations based on what I think they would appear and act like in the Elder Scrolls universe.
Chapter Summary

Arn's seizure of Mercer Frey's treasures puts him at odds with the Thieves Guild, something that comes to a head when he, Lydia, and Freyya are attempting to smuggle the Nymphs to safety.

For a moment, all the stories Arn had ever heard about Nymphs flashed through his mind, but none of them seemed terribly reliable as accurate. Most of them were just Brew addled fantasies from late nights in taverns or wild stories by people no one trusted.

About the only things that seemed for certain amongst all of them were that they were ethereally beautiful and lived in or around the water.

Arn did recall that nearly everything he'd heard about them suggested they sang and talked with magic infused in their voices. Just as he wondered why these did not speak, a terrible thought occurred to him as the nymph slowly opened those big green eyes again once he gently released her chin.

"Do these collars make you unable to speak, or did Frey do something to you?" Arn queried gently.

In response, the Nymph stared wide eyed at Arn for a moment before the answer he feared became evident as tears began streaming down while she shook her head negatively, as if the memory was too terrible to acknowledge.

Arn gently gripped her chin as she opened her mouth slightly, enough for Arn to see down to the fleshy nub that should've been her tongue.

"Damn you, Frey" Arn muttered angrily, gently releasing her chin.

His anger seethed further as he noted the lock on the back of the silver neck collar was shaped like the Skeleton key.

"Damn your soul to Oblivion, Frey" Arn hissed, frightening the nymph, who jerked away from him.

"It's okay. Just cursing the one who did this" Arn muttered as he rose to his feet.

His contemplations about what to do about this development were interrupted when a rough grunt from the direction of the stairs was followed by the clanging of metal as Lydia came unceremoniously rolling down the steps, flame leaping into the air behind her as she triggered something in the floor before coming to rest in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, wheezing for air.

"Are you alright?" Arn hollered, starting towards her.

"Ugh....I think so" groaned Lydia, sitting up just in time for Freyya to carefully make her way by, stepping carefully down spots in the stairs and onto the walkway.

Lydia threw her hands up in disgust at Freyya, who simply smirked as she crouched and eyed over the cavern.
"You learn to watch where you step as a scout" she muttered while Lydia sarcastically mouthed her words back at her.

Arn made his way to them and gave Lydia a hand getting up.

"What is this place?" Freyya asked.

"A Master Thief's personal hideaway" Arn replied, following Freyya's gaze around the cavern.

"Why is it out here instead of in Riften?" Lydia muttered, checking herself over.

"Because he was stealing from the Thieves Guild" Arn replied.

"Another damned sot who kept mer slaves for his rutting pleasure?" Lydia snarled angrily, her eyes falling on the huddled form of the nymph off to their left.

"They're not Mer women. Come" Arn motioned to them as he waded back over to the Nymph.

Initially, both housecarls thought Arn was crazy until he pointed out the physical differences, particularly the gills.

"That's..."

"How can..."

Both women seemed as dumbstruck as Arn had been when he first realized it.

The nymph, meanwhile, continued huddled against the stone wall, casting worried glances back and forth between the three of them.

"You poor thing" Lydia gently admonished after a short silence, kneeling in the water next to the nymph and carefully pulling a loose strand of hair from her face, causing the nymph to pull away with sudden alarm at being touched.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. We want to help you. I know what it's like to be held captive" Lydia continued, holding out her palms.

Arn gently pulled Freyya away by the arm, giving Lydia some privacy to converse however she wanted with the nymph without Arn or Freyya there to cause alarm.

Moving back to the main walkway, they both carefully made their way further down, checking for any signs of traps as they went.

Arn had fully expected the other nymph to bolt away from them as soon as they got close, but was surprised to find she didn't move at all.

As they neared, Arn saw why.

The other nymph was slightly darker skinned, with black hair and blue eyes, but there was obviously something wrong with her.

She sat in the water with her feet tucked under her, but hugged herself randomly as if to still herself from shaking, her eyes staring off at nothingness, not even acknowledging them when they knelt next to her.

"She must be the sick one that Frey's man mentioned" Arn mused, gently eyeing her over for any
signs of anything else different. Much like the other one, she had a silver collar on and was chained by one wrist and one ankle to the far wall with silver chains.

"Maybe there's something here that will get those bindings off" ventured Freyya, stepping back onto the walkway.

"We'll see" Arn murmured, already knowing there was no other Skeleton key.

He tried to pat the nymph's hand reassuringly, but she made no response to it and her eyes still stared off blankly at nothing.

Continuing on, they noted every alcove on the right side of the walkway was filled with boxes and barrels of fine silks, furs, and other materials for crafting finery, including some rare looking metals Arn spied.

Getting toward the end of the walkway, they encountered more grim sights.

There was a larger alcove with torches all around. A large bed lay off to one side with chains anchored to the wall above it. In the center stood some sort of metal chair with an opulent cushioning to it and chests of all kinds of valuables stashed around and under it.

Several of the walls had valuable looking tapestries, paintings, and sculptures that Arn figured must be worth a lot, but since he was no art expert, he had no idea how much or where they might have come from.

Both he and Freyya drew a short intake of breath at the same time as their eyes fell on a display case with an incredibly ornate looking, blue colored glass longsword mounted inside.

While lighter and faster to swing than nearly all other longswords, glass longswords tended to lose their edge quicker and were a lot more costly to repair.

This one, however, promised to be different.

"What...what do you think it is?" Freyya murmured as Arn carefully opened the display case and gently lifted the blade up for inspection.

"Well...it's a glass longsword, that's for sure" Arn muttered, marveling at its lightness.

"Shouldn't it be green, though?" asked Freyya.

"Must be enchanted in some way" Arn reasoned aloud, carefully turning the blue blade over and over in his hands, looking for any identifying signs of the maker or enchanter.

"What should we do with all this?" muttered Freyya after a long silence of Arn intently studying the blade.

"Pack what valuables you can carry on your person that won't keep you from sneaking. We'll have to come back later for the rest" Arn stated, retrieving the sheath for the blade labeled "Chillrend" on the case.

Making their way back down the walkway, they were surprised to find Lydia seemed to have gotten through to the nymph somehow, both of them kneeling in the water, the nymph making some sort of cooing sounds at Lydia as they both pointed and made signs on the mossy rock of the side of the cave.
While Arn was pleased at the development, his gaze was immediately drawn to the tear marks on Lydia's cheeks. He knew probably why they were there and it made him feel like a speck of dirt for bringing her into a situation that reminded her of her own terrible ordeal.

Then again, this was all Frey's doing, but the knowledge that he had ended Frey was only little consolation to him as he looked at the lovely nymph trying to make noises and Lydia's tear stained cheeks.

Growing increasingly angry thinking about it, Arn decided to channel his frustration into figuring out how to get rid of the chains.

Silver was more durable than most metals, and these links and locks in particular were likely enchanted in some way to keep these creatures of legend in bondage.

Still, all metal changes with temperature.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

Frost breath spewed forth, quickly forming icicles on the chain where it was anchored to the stone. It caused all the women to jump with surprise at first, turning to see what Arn was doing.

Arn eyed his handiwork for a moment before hitting the anchor again with frost breath, then again, again, and again.

After taking a moment to get his energy back, growing slightly dizzy for a bit, Arn took careful aim at the icicle covered chain anchor in the stone.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn's plan worked to perfection as the anchor broke loose from the wall and the chain cracked in several places.

It took quite awhile, but Arn repeated the process on each chain point anchored to the walls, eventually freeing each nymph's wrist and ankle chains from their anchor points.

He knew he couldn't use the method to get the chains off of them for fear of harming them in the process, but at least now they could get them out of this prison.

As soon as her chains had been loosed from the stone, the first nymph quickly shot through the water over to the sick one, gently holding her and making small chirps at her.

"I remember a time when you passed out after using only a fraction of that many Dragon shouts" Lydia struggled to jest, trying to hide the tear streaks as she waded up to where Arn sat resting on the edge of the walkway.

Arn cracked a small smile tiredly.

"Yet another thing I don't have any answers for yet" he replied sadly, both of them watching the two nymphs sitting and holding each other in the distance.

"Please tell me you killed him" Lydia muttered after a long silence as they both sat on the walkway.

"You mean Frey?"

"Whoever did THIS!" Lydia hissed, her voice cracking as she gestured to the pair of nymphs.
"Yes, I killed him in some ruins far to the north of here when he tried to stab me in the back" Arn
offered matter of factly.

"Did you make him suffer?" Lydia snarled, still angrily eyeing the nymphs, pulling her knees up in
front of her as they sat.

"As much as I suppose a man can when his head gets taken off"

They were both silent for awhile before Lydia piped up again, still emotional.

"Freyya and I have been here for two weeks. What happened to you?"

Arn took his time to recount all that had befallen him from the time of his first arrival. The only
details he left out were some of the things Nocturnal said, along with his tryst with Vex by the lake.

By the time he was done, he realized that the blonde nymph had been helping the other one
gradually inch closer to the walkway entrance where they were and now were sitting only about ten
feet away in the pool, intently listening to Arn, though still clutching each other.

When Arn was finished, the blonde nymph chirped at Lydia and gestured her to the collars on their
necks though still casting wary glances at Arn.

"It's okay. We're going to get those off for you. We just haven't found the key yet" Lydia gently
admonished, moving and kneeling next to them in the water.

"We're going to have to take them to Riften and get someone to pick the locks. The only key that
opens those is now in Nocturnal's portal" Arn muttered, rising to his feet to test if his strength had
returned enough.

But the revelation that there was no key was a bit too much for the blonde nymph, who burst into
tears and clutched the other protectively to her.

Lydia tried to comfort her, but she shrunk away from her touch.

Gently, Arn stepped into the pool and crouched down next to the nymphs, the blonde sobbing and
the raven haired one staring off into nothingness blankly.

"Don't be afraid. We'll get you and your friend here free and we'll make sure she gets better. I swear
it, as the Dragonborn of Akatosh" Arn stated reassuringly, gently extending a hand to her as she
searched his eyes with those big green ones of hers.

He had no idea if the term 'Dragonborn' meant anything to her, but something in either what he said
or the way he said it made a difference.

Slowly, she stopped crying and tentatively took his hand.

"They'll need clothes. No way we can sneak them in like this" Lydia whispered, not wanting to ruin
the moment.

"Already on it" interrupted Freyya, walking up with two sets of brand new leathers she'd found from
somewhere in the piles of materials that, while not fitted for women or even close to the nymph's
size, would at least cover them while they got into Riften.

They quickly discovered, however, that this would not work.

As soon as they tried to get the blonde nymph to put on the leather top, she squealed in protest and
pushed the thing away like it had bitten her.

The pristine white skin that had touched the leather had puffed up into a red rash.

"So...they can't wear...clothes?" puzzled Freyya as they eyed the nymph's skin on her arm.

"Look for something softer. I'm pretty sure there were silks or some furs in those alcoves" Arn replied, wondering what else to try.

After awhile, Freyya finally came back with several roles of blue and violet silk sheets and some finely treated pelts either from elk or larger deer.

They discovered that not only did the silk work, but the blonde nymph seemed quite taken with the feel of it, making little excited chirps as they draped multiple layers on her shoulders since only one layer would have been see through.

Sadly, the raven haired Nymph was still not responsive to their entreaties.

In due time, they got both nymphs swathed in silk sheets, but due to them just being sheets and the fact that both nymphs still had two long lengths of chain still attached to them, walking was going to be near impossible for them.

"We'll have to carry them" Arn muttered as much to the housecarls as to the blonde nymph chirping questioningly at him.

After some discussion on options and re-arranging armor and weapons, they got underway.

Arn carried the raven haired nymph curled up in his arms while Lydia left her heavy armor behind to sling the blonde nymph onto her back in a makeshift sling with Freyya alongside to carry the heavy lengths of silver chain.

This arrangement made sneaking impossible, but Arn was just desperate to get back into Riften while it was still dark. Daylight would bring a lot more unwanted attention on them than he thought was safe.

They had to take a longer way around since he didn't think it would be wise to try to wade under the docks with their burdens.

After just over an hour of traipsing in the dark, Arn thought they were actually going to make it, but his neck began itching.

Shortly after, the light of the moon showed several dark shapes melt out of the surrounding forest, closing on Arn's group.

Arn stopped dead in his tracks as the six shapes in the dark turned into Brynjolf, Karliah, Vex, Delvin Mallory, and two others Arn didn't know.

"My, my, Dragonborn....what has such a distinguished person like yourself out wandering the roads at such an hour?" came the a deceptively jolly sounding greeting from Brynjolf as the six of them closed on Arn's huddled group.

Arn knew this was no chance meeting, but the fact that they were so far from the farm meant that they had likely lost Arn in the dark earlier and now were just finding him again.

"You should know better, Brynjolf" Arn stated, straining to see their facial expressions in the dark.
"Come now, Dragonborn. Fair's fair. We helped you out. How about you help us out? We are just as much Frey's victims as you are if not more so" Brynjolf responded, unfazed by Arn's glare in the dark.

"Helped me out?" snarled Arn "You haven't done anything for me yet!" Arn marveled at Brynjolf's poor attempt at talking him into their side of things. Then again, maybe he didn't know all that had transpired.

"Arn, we only want what's ours" Karliah interjected, stepping forward and placing a hand lightly on Brynjolf's forearm which was resting atop a sheathed longsword.

"Ironic...coming from a thief" Arn retorted.

"We're not here to argue. Be smart about this, Dragonborn. I'm sure we can make some kind of deal" Delvin Mallory spoke up almost as quickly.

Arn chuckled. He was tired of deals, double dealing, and sneaking around.

"I've already done more than enough for you lot. It's you who should be making payment for services rendered" Arn growled as he turned and set the raven haired nymph at the feet of Lydia and Freyya.

"I'm not sure you're in such a good negotiating position" Brynjolf returned, his previously jolly demeanor giving way to a more calculated threat.

"Bryn, that's not--" Karliah began to interject, trying to temper Brynjolf's anger.

"Silence! You've had your say already!" hissed Brynjolf, shrugging off her grip.

Arn stared down at Lydia in only her leathers with the blonde nymph staring fearfully past Arn and the raven haired nymph curled unresponsively on the ground.

He could give them the remaining wealth in Frey's stash, but what would guarantee their trust to let them go, and if they did think they'd gotten some of it, what would stop them from trying to finish Arn and his group off to get the nymphs or anything else they thought was theirs.

Arn's anger grew as he remembered the promise he made to the blonde nymph, glancing over at her green eyes, glinting lustrously in the moonlight.

"I'm in a perfect position!" Arn snarled as he whirled on the group of thieves.

"You and you owe me your lives" Arn stated, pointing at Vex and Mallory with the point of Chillrend that he'd drawn when he whirled "You owe me for avenging Gallus and appeasing Nocturnal" Arn growled at Karliah, pointing accusingly at her as he advanced step by step, his voice rising in volume "And YOU and the REST owe me for getting rid of the thief leeching your efforts and making void your best work!" Arn bellowed at Brynjolf and the others he didn't know, continuing to advance.

"That's--...uh" Brynjolf faltered momentarily, taken aback by Arn's sudden outburst and maybe...just maybe...a little guilt.

"There's also the small matter of being Maven's chosen new Thane and ally" Arn stated with stress on Maven's name "BUT...if you are all really that faithless" Arn growled, dropping his voice lower, "Then none of you will leave here alive" he finished, pointing Chillrend at the group and pulling his shield out.
"There are at least a dozen more of us closing on this position by now" Brynjolf tried to sound confident.

"It won't be enough...will it Karliah?" Arn sneered, his anger continuing to grow, already planning exactly who was going to die first.

"Bryn, please..." Karliah implored again, gently tugging at his arm.

"Leave or be slain....last chance" Arn tried to sound as menacing as possible.

An awkward silence followed before a surprising voice spoke out.

"Sometimes...it's just not our night" Vex sighed before backing away and looking to the others.

One by one, the others turned to follow her, the last one being Brynjolf, angrily glaring at Arn before turning to leave.

"I do have a job if someone wants to be paid for their services" Arn emphasized 'paid' loudly at the departing group, who all turned to stare at Arn in confusion.

"What sort of job?" queried Karliah cautiously, but eager to maybe put the confrontation behind them.

"Who among you is the best at picking locks?" Arn replied, not letting his guard down.

They all turned and collectively looked at Vex, who slowly stepped forward.

"Are we infiltrating somewhere? Because that costs a lot more" she wryly stated before crossing her arms.

"We can discuss details once they're gone" Arn gestured toward the remaining five thieves.

At first, they didn't move, but after Vex motioned them away, they all quickly faded back into the darkness of the woods.

Arn knew better than to assume they were gone. They were probably still there, just keeping their distance, hoping Arn would do something to lead them to wherever Frey's hideaway was.

"We shouldn't stay out in the open" Vex whispered once the rest of the thieves were gone, motioning toward the edge of the forest.

Once Arn had retrieved the raven haired nymph from her curled up position on the ground, they all made their way to the treeline off the road.

"Brynjolf seems not much like himself" Arn whispered to Vex once he'd gotten the housecarls and nymphs seated or laying down.

"Ever since Karliah and I returned with the news, the guild has been...in turmoil" Vex returned uneasily.

"Were you all really planning on attacking me?" Arn inquired, still a bit on edge from moments before in the road.

"I don't...think so, but some of the members took the news about Frey pretty hard. We lost some long time people and Bryn has been...well, he's probably taken it hardest since he was closer to Frey than anyone else. I think he feels he has to somehow make up for all of it now" Vex muttered, not
bothering to hide her concern about Brynjolf.

"Well, there's still some good coin for you to make, provided you can actually do what I'm asking" Arn replied, gently scooting the raven haired nymph into his lap so he could show the silver collar around her neck.

"If I have enough time, there's no lock I can't pick" Vex answered proudly as she crouched down to see what Arn was going to show her, but she pulled her head back in surprise when Arn gently pulled aside a silk covering to show her the head and neck of the raven haired nymph in the moonlight.

Vex had immediately seen the silver collar and lock at the back, but her sharp eyes had also immediately spotted the pointed ears and small, slitted flesh of the gills just below the jawline.

"That's...what-what are they?" she stuttered out, catching sight of the blonde nymph's face peering fearfully at her from behind Lydia kneeling nearby.

"Doesn't matter! Can you pick these locks or not?!" Arn hissed, not wanting to get held up now.

"Yeah, but these are silver" Vex replied, eyeing the one closest over slowly.

"So?" interjected Lydia impatiently.

"I'm going to need some silver lockpicks or at least made of something that won't bend if I start tweaking it around inside the mechanism. Regular steel ones won't work" Vex explained, still eyeing the lock.

"We have to go to a smith anyway to get these chains off. We'll have him forge you some, but we need to make speed. We have to get back into Riften before daylight" Arn replied hurriedly as he scooped up the raven haired nymph and stood.

At some point during the journey, Arn noticed that the raven haired one had actually begun holding onto him. That was a good sign at least.

The rest of the trip was thankfully uneventful, but they barely made it back into Riften just as dawn was approaching. The only event of note was Arn marching up to the gate alone and demanding that all the guards go into the guard house until Arn said so.

Being Maven's new favorite had its advantages.

Having ensured the guards weren't going to get any glances at their precious cargo, Arn retrieved the rest of the group and they hurried into Riften.

The town blacksmith, a Nord named Balimund, was rather surly at first over having his home broken into and disturbed early in the morning, but as soon as Arn promised him all the remaining silver would be his to keep, he was a lot more amenable to the task.

"How is she doing?" Arn whispered to Lydia, nodding toward the blonde nymph huddled next to Lydia, staring wildly around the blacksmith's house while Balimund moved about getting his things ready.

"She gets very excited about the wilds. She was making little cooing sounds every time we were within sight of the lake" Lydia whispered back, a small smile gracing her lips before disappearing "But people are frightening. As soon as we entered Riften, she curled up in a ball and made no noises at all."
Arn grimaced to think about it, but pushed the thoughts away for a moment while he and Vex arranged a bunch of tanning racks to block the view from anyone trying to see what was going on at the forge outside.

Since the raven haired nymph was not very responsive, it was easy enough to get her chains off, but it was going to be a different story with the blonde, who was terrified of both Balimund and the forge itself.

Eventually, Arn had to dismiss Balimund to go start working on melting down the other chains for lockpicks while he himself undertook the task of getting the chain cuffs off the blonde nymph.

Arn took a lot of time being as gentle as he could using the smith's implements to remove first the ankle shackle, then the shackle on her wrist as she clutched Lydia, quietly sobbing into her shoulder.

Unfortunately, they had to wait another couple of hours for the lockpicks to be finished and fine tuned.

By the time Arn and Vex came back in from outside with the finished lockpicks, Arn found both Nymphs curled up on either side of Lydia, who was regaling them with stories of Arn's previous exploits while Freyya paced the house watchfully.

"You still sure you want to do this?" muttered Vex quietly.

Arn simply glared back.

"Fine, but if these collars are somehow keeping their magic in check, I don't know what they'll do when you take them off" Vex tried to sound reasonable.

"Do it" Arn replied unflinchingly.

The lock on the raven haired Nymph came off surprisingly easy, but for some reason, the blonde one's was far more stubborn.

When at last it did come off, she burst in tears again, making broken chirping sounds as she caressed all around her neck and clutching the raven haired one happily.

Vex was well paid with a sizable coinpurse taken from Frey's hideaway and was allowed to keep the silver lockpicks when she left.

Despite all the jubilations, Arn scowled, worriedly stroking the stubble on his chin.

"What is it?" Freyya asked.

"How do we heal the sick one...and do we just let them go into the wilds here, or will they die when the winter hits?" Arn mused, still watching the blonde nymph chirp happily.

"Well, moving them across town right now is out of the question" Freyya muttered.

"I have an idea, but we'll need Ingun. Keep watch out here. Pay Balimund more if you have to" Arn ordered before briskly heading out of the smith's house toward Honeside to retrieve his newest housecarl.
Arn realizes Ingun Blackbriar may be more useful than either of them assumed, but getting her to behave less like a Blackbriar will be more of a challenge than he wanted...

Arn was pleased to find all four guards attentively performing sentry duty, but was not so pleased when one tried to stop him from advancing further into the house to retrieve Ingun.

"She's sleeping" he tried to tell Arn, withering a bit under Arn's glare of annoyance.

"Not for much longer" Arn retorted before pushing by.

He was a little surprised to find Ingun in the master bed instead of downstairs in the one assigned to her earlier. The bare flesh of her head and shoulders poking up from the layers of fur covers alerted Arn to the fact she was probably sleeping naked, but the fact that she had insinuated herself naked into his bed should probably not surprise him given what Maven had said earlier.

"Time to get up. We have things that need doing" Arn tried to be nice to start with.

Ingun only groaned lazily and turned away from him.

"Come on, get up already."

"Eugh....You were supposed to come to my bed last night. I...always sleep later" Ingun groaned, burying her face into a pillow and pulling the covers up higher.

"Not today you're not" Arn retorted before yanking the covers back and latching onto her arm.

In her half awake state, Ingun didn't get a chance to register what was happening until the covers were gone and she had been hauled halfway across the bedroom floor by an arm before a sudden drenching blast of cold water startled her fully awake.

Arn made sure to empty every last drop of water out of the pitcher from the dresser over the squealing Ingun before releasing her arm and allowing her to stand on her feet, spitting and gasping while trying to wipe the wet strands of hair away.

Since Arn had spent the last day around both Nymphs, he had grown at least somewhat accustomed to naked female flesh on display, but Ingun's more buxom form, particularly those larger tits, now fully drenched with water running down them caused him to look away, a bit annoyed at having to deal with it.

"W-why did you do that?" she shivered in shock.

"Because we don't have time to dawdle. It's already nearing midday" Arn replied less forcefully, feeling a little bad about jerking her around.
"But I need to sleep..." moaned Ingun, still wiping water from her face.

"You can't spend this much time sleeping" Arn reasoned, wondering if she really spent this much time sleeping every day.

"But I will need my rest if we're going to be married and have Dragonborn children" she slowly smiled, blinking her eyes free of the last bits of water.

"Is that what you were told would happen?" Arn sighed, cursing his own inability to show any desire when Maven had paraded her before him.

"Well, you desire me, don't you?" Ingun tried to sound confident, but there was an obvious stroke of doubt that crept into her voice as she wiped a wet strand of hair away.

When Arn didn't answer right away, instead turning to search for a towel or something else to put on her, Ingun plucked up her courage and moved to try hugging or grinding herself against him.

For a woman practiced or experienced in such things, the motion would have been smooth and sensual, but apparently, Ingun was none of those things.

Instead, it resembled some sort of accidental collision between two people who are sparring with different partners, Arn turning abruptly and eyeing her with confusion while Ingun, sensing she'd not achieved what she wanted, shrunk from his look and suddenly became ashamed of herself, using her hands to try covering herself, stepping back, and looking at the floor.

"I'm aware of what you were led to believe, which...is partly my fault I suppose, but I have no designs upon marrying or seeding you with a child" Arn softened his gaze, trying to hand her a towel as she shrunk back from his statement.

"But...but I saw you up on the walkway with grandmama!" she exclaimed with surprise, as if that fact would confirm her views.

Arn blushed with shame, but also anger, feeling that he and Ingun had both been used by Maven.

"It was a ruse to get Maul to come after me" Arn reasoned.

"So you're saying you...you don't desire me at all" Ingun replied fearfully, still backing away from him, now at the point of hitting the bed with the backs of her legs.

"If I'd desired you in such a manner, I would've come to your bed last night instead of sneaking out with the other housecarls" Arn answered, still moving toward her with towel outstretched to her.

"S-so you'll rut your other housecarls...but not me?!" she asked incredulously, falling back on the bed as she continued to retreat from Arn.

"I haven't rutted either one of them, nor do I have any intention of doing so" Arn continued, trying not to blush with shame considering some of the dreams and thoughts he'd had about Lydia.

"You mean...you prefer men?" Ingun relaxed slightly.

"No...it just means I don't mean to take advantage of my position"

"Why not?" Ingun looked baffled, slowly taking refuge under the covers again.

Arn sighed with exasperation before remembering he was talking to a Blackbriar. Taking advantage of position was practically their motto. He doubted a short explanation would suffice or sway her in
any moral direction, besides, he was partly to blame for this predicament.

"Look...just--" he began.

"Is this about Maul?! He never touched me! Grandmama wouldn't allow it. He was only allowed to watch me, but Grandmama said he wasn't worthy!" Ingun exclaimed, as if that would put Arn's concerns to rest. By now, she'd fortified herself in the covers.

"My decision has nothing to do with Maul" Arn exhaled, trying to find a way to get Ingun off this single focus of mind.

"You-you mean I'm not to be married...?" she began to snuffle, her hazel eyes moistening with tears, shrinking away further from Arn to the headboard of the bed "I won't ever have children.." she sobbed before starting to bawl in earnest.

"No-that's not--just--" Arn tried to rapidly reason before the showers of tears began.

To compound matters further, Iona took this particular moment to appear in the doorway in her nightshift, having just apparently also awoken.

"You brute! You made her cry!" Iona lambasted Arn, spending only a moment to take in the scene before assessing Arn to be guilty.

"It's not what--" Arn tried to defend himself.

SLAP!

Iona surprised him by crossing the room hastily and delivering a very unexpected slap across his right jaw before moving over to the bed to comfort the huddled pile of sobbing furs that Ingun had become.

"What kind of person are you?!!" Iona sneered at Arn accusingly before sitting on the bed and gently patting what Arn assumed must be Ingun's back since no part of her was visible anymore amongst the furs and pillows.

Arn was about to defend himself vigorously, but after taking a moment to think it over as he rubbed his stubble filled jaw, he reckoned since he was partly to blame that he in some ways deserved it.

Despite the press for time, he decided silence might be best until the emotional storm subsided.

"It can't be that bad, Mistress. Was he too rough with his lovemaking?" Iona questioned, drawing a raised eyebrow of amusement from Arn.

"NO!..sniffle...He doesn't want me...sniffle...No one wants me!" Ingun lamented through the blankets.

"But you're so beautiful" Iona tried to reassure her, casting another accusing glance at Arn.

"But...I'm so old, and this is the third time!" Ingun sobbed in reply.

"Twenty summers isn't that old. Is it, Dragonborn?" Iona consoled, looking to Arn expectantly.

"I'm more than twice that age. So no, it's not old" Arn replied warily.

"See? He's an old man and you're so young. You have so much time left" Iona continued, drawing a half smirk from Arn at the remark about his age.
"What good is it? I was supposed to be the famous mother of Dragonborn children!" moaned Ingun.

"But you've always wanted to be a famous alchemist" Iona tried to reason.

"But no one wants me to!" Ingun snarled, briefly appearing from the covers with the blankets framing her face to glare at Iona angrily for even bringing up the memory. "And now, no one even wants to marry me!"

"Who said you can't be an alchemist?" Arn interrupted.

"EVERYONE, except Elgrim!" Ingun turned to yell at Arn, but it turned into a sob as her voice cracked.

"What if I needed your alchemist skills now?" Arn replied gently.

"Wha...t?" Ingun queried in a pitiful manner, cautiously peering at Arn from the safety of the covers.

"Several people told me that you had some skill in alchemy and that you even had ingredients stored in some of these crates" Arn answered, gesturing to some of the boxes in the entryway.

"You...you truly mean that?" both Ingun and Iona asked at the same time.

"Of course! Why else do you think I would barge in here and yank you out of bed? I need someone I can trust who's also a good alchemist" Arn explained even as Ingun inhaled a sharp breath of excitement.

To Arn's surprise, Ingun popped up off the bed and rushed to him, staring at him wide eyed from the bundle of blankets still wrapped around her.

"What do you need?! I can poison ANYTHING!" she exclaimed with gleeful pride.

"First, get dressed. Then, bring a sample of as many ingredients as possible to the Smith's house" Arn ordered, taking a step back from Ingun's giddy bundled form.

"The Smith?" Ingun wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"We...had to hide something there" Arn tried to explain without giving too much away too soon.

"Oooh, we're hiding things. I like it!" she turned and exclaimed to Iona before turning back to Arn. "What is it?"

"It's...uh...a surprise" was all Arn wanted to divulge.

Ingun tripped herself with excitement as she tried racing to the dresser to get her clothes.

Arn turned away to find all the soldiers in the entryway staring at the scene with shock until they saw Arn looking at them, prompting them to all suddenly look away and start plodding around the entry area as if busy.

Arn leaned against the doorway of the master bedroom, wishing whoever had built the house had considered actually having a door there, all the while keeping his back turned and waiting on Ingun to finish dressing.

After a short time, he suddenly realized Iona was standing at his shoulder, eyeing him suspiciously.

"You'd better not be having us on" she whispered, tapping a slipper covered foot next to him as Arn
noticed she was now dressed in a colorful frock.

"This is no jest, and where was all this vigor when we were confronting Sahrotkonikaan?" Arn whispered back, half smiling.

"I'm not trained to deal with Dragons and mages, but I'll not allow anyone to toy with my Mistress" she hissed at Arn, pointing a finger into the chest of the Nightingale Armor.

"What did she mean by this being the third time?" Arn replied, eager to avoid further accusations.

"This is the third time the Blackbriars have tried to marry her off. Her first husband died on their wedding night, keeled over right after dinner. The second became afraid and ran away a week before they were to be wed. Since then, no one's come forward as a suitor" came the whispered reply from Iona, still not backing down her glare.

"Why did they not want her to train to be an alchemist?" Arn hushed his question further as they heard Ingun moving around behind them nearby.

"Because too many accidents happened around her. Some people claimed she caused them by her carelessness, but really, she's just been unlucky" Iona answered once they'd waited for Ingun to move further away back into the bedroom.

"Hmph" Arn nodded as Ingun came happily into view, fully dressed in a nice frock with a plain cloak over the top along with a book full of recipes and ingredients.

As Ingun organized which crates were to be brought with them and all of them except Iona got going, Arn wondered if he was making the right call.

Arriving at the Smith's house, Arn had the four guards stay outside while he moved the boxes inside for Ingun, who immediately rushed inside to see what the "surprise" was.

"...By the gods, they are. Aren't they?!!" Arn heard Ingun exclaiming in conversation with Lydia as he dragged the two crates in the door and closed it.

Lydia still sat comfortably on the bed with the nymphs curled on either side, each still wrapped in their silk sheets.

The blonde one had grown alarmed when Ingun arrived, and the raven haired one had drifted off into peaceful sleep, leaning on Lydia's shoulder.

"Any problems?" whispered Arn to Freyya as she walked up.

"Not really, but we'll have to pay the smith a lot more for all the time he's lost today"

"Won't be a problem. I just really hope this works"

As he approached the group with the nymphs, Ingun was still making exclamations and excitedly looking both of them over.

"This is incredible!" she stood and proudly exclaimed to Arn with eyes that one would never have thought were bawling with tears less than an hour before, "Can I have their hair?"

"What?...no, you can't" Arn stuttered out in surprise.

"But it's one of the rarest alchemy ingredients" begged Ingun.
"The dark haired one is sick. We need to find a way to get her better. Get your book of ingredients out and show it to the blonde one. See if she can point out any ingredients or recipes that will help her get better. We don't know if having her try any of our normal potions will help or harm her" Arn admonished, trying to steer Ingun's excitement back toward their reason for being there.

It was hard going at first. The blonde nymph was quite scared of Ingun, and took a lot of persuading from Lydia and Arn to even allow her to come near. Then it became apparent that the book was not in a language she could read, but thankfully there were illustrations of most of the ingredients, and for those that weren't, Ingun had some of them on hand in the crates to demonstrate.

Between looking over all the ingredients and a lot of gesturing, pointing, and chirping, they eventually came up with a recipe for something the blonde nymph insisted would help the other one get better.

"I'll mix this up right away!" declared Ingun excitedly before rushing out the door.

Arn nodded at Freyya to go with her.

"Able to find out anything more?" Arn asked Lydia, realizing for the first time that day just how tired he was as he crouched down next to the bed.

"Well, this one's written down some things on that parchment, but it wasn't anything that any of us could read" Lydia whispered so as not to wake the dark haired one, nodding at the table nearby.

Retrieving the papers, Arn looked at the scribbles in ink on the side margins.

"These look a lot like Ayleid runes" Arn muttered while looking them over.

"What do you think it means?" Lydia whispered back.

"Well, it's been awhile since I was trying to decipher anything in Ayleid ruins, but I think this word means 'spring', and this one has something to do with 'beauty', I think. There's really only the two words here. She's just written them multiple times"

"Is she trying to communicate with writing?"

Arn turned to find the blonde nymph had scooted to the edge of the bed, keenly intent on Arn.

"Am I on the right track?" Arn asked her, pointing to the runes on the pages.

She nodded vigorously in the affirmative, but also immediately began pointing at herself and then back at one set of runes.

"This is...where you live? Did I translate it correct? Wait, is this your name?" Arn queried after working through other questions.

The blonde nymph nodded wildly and affirmatively, making motions to her mouth and then tentatively reaching and placing several soft fingertips on his lips, as if trying to caress something out of them.

"Laralleis" Arn sounded the Ayleid-like word out as best he could.

The reaction was probably something Arn would never forget.

The blonde Nymph Laralleis closed her eyes and beamed the most wonderful smile, as if given the best news of her life.
"Laralleis is your name" Arn stated, rising to his feet just in time for her to shrug off the silk sheets, spring off the bed into his arms, and grip him in a fierce hug with a strength that surprised him.

They stayed like that for awhile, Laralleis still clinging to him, using chirps to urge him to say her name over and over again.

What must it be like to not have heard your own name in years? Arn mused sadly as Laralleis slowly released her grip on him and sat on the edge of the bed again, wiping her tears away and beaming smiles at Arn and Lydia.

"So this other word here...is her name?" Arn asked, gently nodding toward the sleeping dark haired nymph.

Laralleis slowly nodded affirmatively as she wiped away more tears.

"Riella" Arn sounded out cautiously, looking to Laralleis for confirmation.

She nodded, happily chirping at both him and Lydia.

Their mirth was interrupted when Ingun came bursting in with an armful of potions.

After calming Laralleis down, Arn got her to administer several of the potions to Riella, who groggily woke up long enough to drink them down.

"What now?" both Lydia and Freyya stated at the same time after everyone had watched for any immediate effect on the sleeping Riella.

"I'm guessing she needs rest?" Arn mused, looking at Laralleis for confirmation as she stayed huddled next to Lydia, still warily casting glances at Ingun.

After another strange conversation of motions, chirps, and pointing, it became apparent that the nymphs required water to sleep like they were supposed to, something that surprised all of them.

"Uh...how is that going to work?" queried Lydia tiredly.

"They can use my tub!" interjected Ingun excitedly.

"What tub?" Arn asked, not remembering seeing any such thing in Honeyside.

"Oh, it's in the Honeyside basement. I had it brought in while you were all away yesterday" Ingun proclaimed with pride.

Arn spent another long session of hand waving and questioning Laralleis while most of the others left to prepare Honeyside, making sure they had everything set up correctly.

After waiting for night to fall, Arn, Lydia, and Freyya smuggled the two bundled nymphs across Riften to Honeyside.

Arn felt a little bad for continuing to order Ingun's guards about, while refusing to tell them anything about what was going on, but until he knew more about them, he didn't feel like putting more trust in them than he had to.

They were all surprised by the size of Ingun's "Tub", as she put it. It was more like a large vat, nearly five feet across and four feet high, with metal and wood sections that could be taken apart, quite clever really. It was large enough to comfortably fit three full grown people inside as well.
Thankfully, by the time Arn and Lydia got the nymphs down there, it was already full of warm water and decked with bits of branches from a particular tree that Laralleis had requested.

Chirping happily, she quickly shrugged her silk sheets off and slipped in, turning and excitedly gesturing for them to put Riella in.

When Arn carefully set her inside, Laralleis took hold of her and they both disappeared beneath the water.

Arn couldn't really see down to the bottom of the tub, but from what movement he had seen, it looked like they both curled up separately and grew still.

"I guess now we just wait" Arn mused, turning to Freyya and Ingun.

"You want me to take first watch?" Freyya queried.

"I'll do it. I have some things to think over" Arn tried to state with as little fatigue in his voice as possible.

"Make sure you get one of us up for the next. You've been even longer without sleep than we have" Freyya admonished before turning and heading into the next room.

Arn nodded, turning to find that Lydia had nodded off to sleep sitting in a chair against the wall, her head slowly nodding up and down, subconsciously attempting to keep her head up.

As Ingun and Iona went to the master bedroom upstairs, again without Arn's consent, Arn gently lifted Lydia and carried her to the next room, where several small beds were set up for housecarls, servants, or children, depending on the needs of the house's owner.

Gently laying her in one of these and pulling a blanket over her, he smirked as he noticed Freyya was already fast asleep in another one of the beds.

As the house quieted down, Arn began to feel the effects of his own fatigue in his body. It had been close to three days since he'd last slept, but his mind was still churning.

He was trying to figure out what to do with the nymphs, assuming Riella made a full recovery.

He surmised that they could not survive the coming winter, the early stages of which would start within a few weeks. Already, the days were short enough for farmers and hunters to begin their preparations.

The nearest warmer climates were either in Cyrodiil to the south, or Morrowind to the east.

Cyrodiil was more familiar to Arn, but more dangerous as well. His name would be well known on the wanted lists among the northern provinces of Bruma and Cheydinhal. Both passes into Skyrim would be heavily guarded and watched, and making the treacherous climb over the mountains as he had done to get into Skyrim was not going to be an option for the Nymphs or anyone else he took with him.

Arn had never been to Morrowind, but he doubted it would be without its own perils. To make matters worse, he knew of no other way to get in from Skyrim other than travelling north to Windhelm to go through the Dunmeth pass.

Arn realized that the time for first watch was over, but decided that he'd let them continue sleeping. He could rest during the day.
He continued turning the problem over and over in his mind, not reaching any good solutions until he began hearing the chirping of birds outside, signaling the approaching dawn.

As he stopped pacing the floor to consider it, he turned and noticed the small head, big blue eyes, and pointed ears of Riella peaking at him from just over the lip of Ingun's tub.

"Well, hello there..." Arn chuckled tiredly, thankful he'd had gotten out of Frey's old Nightingale armor earlier so as not to create a bad first impression.

She made no acknowledgement of his statement, instead still glancing at him and around the room fearfully, never showing anything more than her eyes and top of her head from above the edge of the tub.

"You're Riella, right? My name is Arn. Do you remember anything about how we got here?" Arn tried gesturing with his hands, unsure if she was able to understand him as well as Laralleis was.

At the mention of her name, her eyes widened as she stood, her hands covering her mouth in shock.

Arn was silent as she processed it, slowly backing away in the tub to the far side, her big blue eyes slowly watering with tears.

As Arn was about to say something else, Laralleis slowly emerged from the tub, again just the top of her head, taking the world in with those big green eyes.

She slowly rose further and began chirping happily at Riella, who still looked stunned as she huddled back down in the tub.

Arn decided silence would be best as he watched the two huddle together and chirp back and forth a little bit before they both lifted several fingers to each other's mouths.

With each holding several fingers to the other's lips, they seemed to mouth words to each other silently.

Arn simply waited until they appeared done, both turning and staring at Arn.

He thought about approaching closer, but waited until they both moved to the closer side of the tub before he made a move, and even then, the first step he made sent Riella scurrying below the water.

After a lot of waiting, watching, and encouraging chirping from Laralleis, eventually, Reilla gradually became less afraid of Arn and more used to the idea that they were not in any danger.

Arn held his hand out for her to touch or hold, but she only looked at it, reaching out and bypassing it to touch his face.

Eventually, she moved her touching down to his arms, hands, and even chest, jerking her hand away as she brushed against a rough edge to the leather jerkin.

So consumed was he in all this, that he didn't realize the rest of the household was stirring awake until Riella jerked away from him in surprise as she caught a glance of Lydia leaning against a doorway.

Arn turned to regard her as well, but his reaction was quite the opposite of Riella's.

In only her leathers, leaning against the door on one leg, Arn was reminded again exactly how curvy her figure was. Even worse, several buttons at the top of her leathers had come apart, leaving a good
portion of the top gaping open, the creamy melons of cleavage practically screaming for his attention.

Despite the tousled hair and tired eyes, she still looked stunning to Arn. She smiled warmly at him, watching his interactions with the nymphs.

Arn gulped, hoping the pang of desire he felt didn't show in his face or in his breeches as he tiredly returned her smile.

Somehow, Arn thought the Nymphs must both have sensed it somehow. They both immediately giggled, glancing back and forth between Arn and Lydia before sinking back down into the tub to return to their usual posture of peaking just over their fingertips as they held the edge.

Arn didn't know if he was just too tired to mask it anymore or if it was some effect of the nymph's laugh, but he laughed at himself, chuckling even more at Lydia's slight frown of confusion.

"Is my hair that bad?" she asked with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

"No, it's not that" chuckled Arn.

Arn was wondering how exactly to explain himself when Freyya appeared and nudged past Lydia.

"I told you to wake one of us!" Freyya grouched, looking even more tired than Lydia had, or maybe that was just how annoyed she was with him.

Suddenly, Arn found himself the center of much scorn and derision from both of his housecarls about not taking care of himself and being the one in the most need of sleep.

He barely had any chance to defend himself before he was ushered into the next room and almost forcibly put to bed. He was asleep almost seconds after his head hit the pillow.

An unknown amount of time later, Arn awoke again to the sound of voices from the adjacent room.

As he slowly became more cognizant of the world around him again, he realized the voices belonged to his housecarls as they discussed what to do with the Nymphs.

The more Arn heard, though, the less he liked it. For whatever reason, it seemed all three of them seemed to think the Nymphs could stay with them, just living in Ingun's tub, even if it involved moving to Whiterun. They were currently hashing out logistical issues about transporting the tub and puzzling over what they might need in the way of food or supplies.

Slowly opening the door, Arn noticed it was dark through the window outside, meaning he'd slept all day.

Ingun, Freyya, and Lydia were so absorbed in their conversation that they didn't notice Arn standing there initially.

Arn didn't see either of the Nymphs peaking at him from the tub. So either they were sleeping, or were submerged to hide from Ingun.

"I'm so excited! Just think of all the possible things we could learn from them!" Ingun was exclaiming when Arn decided to put a halt to things.

"They cannot stay here" he tried to sound firm, but came out more groggily than intended.

"We can take the tub apart and move it to Whiterun" reasoned Lydia, her pleading look forced Arn to look away.
"Here, Whiterun, Solitude...it doesn't matter. They cannot stay...with us" Arn replied, emphasizing the 'with us'.

"But...why not? I thought it was the best way to keep them safe" Lydia answered somewhat unconvincingly.

"We fight Dragons, and are hunted by the Thalmor, bandits, assassins, and bounty hunters. That's not the safest life to lead, and even if we weren't doing those things, there are plenty of both mer and men out there who would not hesitate to sell their soul for a piece of creatures so rare as these" Arn stated ploddingly.

"But we do have more resources at our disposal now" Freyya piped up, surprising Arn a bit that she would also be in favor of keeping them around.

Arn sighed.

"It doesn't matter. Just look at how many people already know about them. The Smith and his apprentice know and despite being paid well, will surely begin to brag and sport trophies of the silver before too long. The thieves guild knows by now, and even if they chose not to act, what's to stop them from selling the information to someone who will?"

They were all quiet as Arn turned to note the heads of each Nymph peering at him from the tub now.

"Even if we did move them, even if we went somewhere no one knew us or anything about them, look at them. You really think they should be cooped up in a tub in someone's basement? They belong in the wilds" Arn finished, crouching down next to the tub and staring sadly into Laralleis lustrous green eyes staring back at him.

He had been expecting more of an argument, especially from Ingun, but surprisingly, none of them said anything at first.

"So, what do you propose then?" Ingun half pouted at Arn after a long silence.

"The closest and best option is to find some way to get them into Morrowind. The temperatures there are warm all year and there's plenty of terrain that's suited to hide them. If they want to go somewhere further south, they can use the sea" Arn reasoned, scratching the grizzle of hair on his jaw that was starting to approach a weak version of a beard by now.

"But my Grandmama could get us--" Ingun began to reply before Arn cut her off.

"We are NOT involving Maven in this!"

"Are you saying we'll be heading up to Windhelm, then?" Freyya asked warily.

"Not if I can help it" Arn replied, knowing Freyya already knew his feelings about Ulfric.

"So...just use my family's pass then" interrupted Ingun.

"What?" they all almost said at the same time.

"Use the pass my family owns to get into Morrowind" Ingun replied as if it was such a simple thing.

"The Blackbriars OWN their own pass into Morrowind?" Lydia asked incredulously.

"Well, I don't know if we own ALL the land, but it's been there for as long as I can remember, and we're the only ones that know about it or use it" Ingun returned, having ceased her mournful
demeanor over losing access to the Nymphs in favor of the usual proud bearing.

"You're sure it goes all the way to Morrowind?" Arn inquired with a bit of skepticism.

"Of course! We've used it to get...things and people back and forth into Morrowind for years without
the authorities finding out" Ingun boasted.

"Where is it?" Arn asked faster than he meant to.

"Well now, that's the thing isn't it?" Ingun practically gloated, rising and sauntering toward Arn with
her hands on her hips "If I help you get what you want, shouldn't I get something that I want?" she
practically sneered.

"Let me guess, you want to keep one of them" Arn half smirked, trying not to show his
disappointment at Ingun acting like the rest of her family.

Arn had expected some sort of reaction from the Nymphs themselves, but apparently, they'd
submerged in the tub as soon as Ingun had approached.

"And why not? You can appease your conscience by letting one go free. I get to keep the other one
and learn all sorts of wonderful things from it" she responded far more cheerily than she should have.

"They're both going to go free" Arn stated unquestioningly, glaring his resolve at her.

"Then I'm not telling you where the pass is. You'll just have to wander around on your own" Ingun
pouted sarcastically, petulantly crossing her arms.

There was a long awkward silence of Arn and Ingun glaring at each other before Arn slowly walked
purposefully over to her, looming a good five inches taller.

"I know this is probably how things in your family work, but that's not how they work here. You're
my housecarl, and I'm your Thane. That alone should ensure you behave with respect, but if that isn't
enough, consider this. I am the Dragonborn. When I or the others go out to fight, travel, or explore
anything, do you want to be part of it? Do you want us to bring you things back? Do you want me to
bring you along? or do you want to be left out because we haven't negotiated how beneficial or not
things will be for either of us? You cannot bully and bribe your way through everything and expect
others to show you good faith. Either be one of us, or be left alone" Arn declared, waving his hand
toward Lydia and Freyya, refusing to flinch from staring into Ingun's hazel eyes.

Ingun had been equally as defiant, staring up at Arn with her arms crossed. Even as he finished, she
still stood staring defiantly before either the prospect of being left out or the fact that she wasn't going
to be able to manipulate him made her pause.

Slowly, she cast her eyes down a bit shamefully, then glanced around suddenly as if looking to the
others for some sort of answer before shrinking back from Arn a bit.

Slowly, she began mumbling the directions to get to and through the pass they referred to as
Dawnguard's Pass a few miles south of the Blackbriar lodge.

"Should we get ready to leave?" Lydia asked, standing and stretching, once Ingun had finished
reluctantly giving out directions and retreating upstairs.

"No, I have one more thing I need to take care of" Arn replied, turning back to the adjacent room to
get his armor out.
"What's that?" Freyya asked with a yawn.

"The whole reason I came to Riften to begin with" Arn chuckled as he pulled out his ebony armor pieces and began suiting up for another trip down into the Ratway.

Chapter End Notes

1. This isn't the start of Dawnguard dlc content. That won't happen for a long time.
2. Originally meant for this arc to run much longer, complete with another trip back to Sahrotronikaan, but I felt the main quest has suffered lack of attention long enough.
3. Won't be taking long in Morrowind, but it will give us a good brief respite for our main characters.
Finally, an Old Man...: Riften final pt.

Chapter Summary

Arn finally makes contact with Esbern, but the Thalmor have their own designs on him.

Arn cautiously edged his way through the murky shadows farther down into the Ratway below Riften.

He had been reluctant to leave Lydia behind, but he didn't want to leave Freyya alone to look after the Nymphs with an aggravated Ingun, who had four guards on hand and even more in Riften at her disposal should she choose so.

Arn wondered what the long term effects would be of his confrontation with her.

He had expected a tantrum, or at the very least another outburst of tears like the one before, but she had done neither.

Instead, she simply retreated upstairs and sat on the master bed with a book of alchemy ingredients, looking through it in a rather detached manner as Iona sat off to one side, waiting diligently for...anything to happen.

Arn had told them he was going out to finish a deal, but decided not to specify any times or locations until he was more sure of their disposition toward him.

Peaking around a corner, he spotted what he'd been looking for: the door to the Ragged Flagon.

As he entered, he was surprised to find it was a lot more crowded than the first time he'd been there. So much so, in fact, there were no tables open.

He stared around the noisy din of card playing, laughing, and mugs clanking to finally spot what he'd been looking for.

In the back left corner, Brynjolf, Delvin Mallory, Vex, and someone Arn didn't recognize were gesturing wildly over a card game at a table.

Trying to do his best to approach noiselessly behind Brynjolf, Arn felt that distinctive itching rising again on his neck.

Glancing around the room yielded nothing to be alarmed about, but Arn knew no one here.

"Care to join us for a game of cards...Dragonborn?" Brynjolf muttered without turning around before Arn got a chance to say anything.

"I'm sure you have something of value to wager" added Delvin Mallory, absently wiping sweat off his balded head.

"Actually, I'm here to collect something you already owe me" Arn muttered quietly, hunching down next to Brynjolf's chair.
"Well, you've gotten quite a lot of our things already. I'm not sure what's left here that you think is yours" replied Brynjolf, absently beginning to shuffle cards as the others looked on.

"It's not a thing" replied Arn even more quietly.

"Oh...that, heh, I'd forgotten" chuckled Brynjolf after raising his eyebrows in surprise for a moment.

"Say, what were we going to charge for housing that old coot?" Delvin piped up.

"Considering how much of his food you snitched, Bryn should probably give them a discount" Vex interjected, flashing a wry smile at Delvin.

"I did NOT eat any of that old fool's food! I carry it dutifully down to him every day" Mallory protested, crossing his arms indignantly.

"Several times you came back with crumbs on your jerkin, hmmm?" Vex continued, pointing a finger in mock accusation.

"I did NOT!" he exclaimed.

"You did, actually" piped up the other man at the table Arn didn't recognize.

"Well...so what? Are you saying you...carefully take in every detail of my clothes?" Mallory changed tack mid statement, turning to grin cheekily at Vex.

"Just enough to make sure they're all on and far away from me" Vex retorted dryly before taking a swig from her mug.

"By the gods, you see what I live with every day, Dragonborn. I guess after all that's happened, maybe it will just be good to have both you and that old man gone" reasoned Brynjolf as he took another swig from his mug before handing off the stack of cards to Vex. "Guess I can take care of this" he muttered as he stood.

Following Brynjolf out of the Ragged Flagon, Arn was surprised at how much more jovial they all seemed compared to before, but he could still feel that itching on his neck as they turned and journeyed further down into the Ratway tunnels.

After a series of twists and turns with the occasional commentary from Brynjolf about having avoided being killed in one place or another, they finally arrived at a heavy duty steel door deep in the Ratway Vaults.

Arn waited for Brynjolf to continue, but instead, he just stepped aside and motioned Arn to the door. Arn tapped on the door several times before a hoarse whisper broke the silence from the other side.

"Go away"

"I've gone through a lot to get here. I'm not leaving now" Arn muttered, trying to remember what Delphine had told him about Esbern.

"No one's here. Go away"

"Does that actually work on anyone?" Arn asked with a wry grin.

"The crazy ones it does" muttered an old man as a slide in the door moved open to reveal a dark silhouette of part of someone's head against the dim interior.
"Do you know what the 30th of Frostfall is?" Arn queried, remembering the pass phrase had something to do with it.

"Who are you!" hissed the old man from the slit panel in the door.

"The Dragonborn of Akatosh. Delphine sent me. That good enough for you, or are we going to banter around this hole in the wall some more?"

Arn was aware Esbern had moved closer to the slat, eyes slightly twinkling from the torchlight as he squinted at Arn closely.

"Huh...you're old" Esbern finally declared with some disappointment.

"You're one to talk" puzzled Arn with a frown.

"Let me get my things" Esbern muttered in reply as he left the door and began moving around inside. After a lot longer than either Arn or Brynjolf would've liked, the door finally began unbolting and an old man in a grizzled mage robe appeared before them with a stack of books.

"Hold these" came the abrupt demand, as he shoved them into Brynjolf's arms.

"I'm not your manservant" protested Brynjolf, moving to hand them to Arn.

"They're important" came the muffled response from back inside the sparsely adorned room.

"To you maybe" grumbled Brynjolf as Arn grudgingly took the stack of books from him.

"All of our lives depend on them. Here, take these" Esbern mumbled, exiting the room with a pack and another stack of books that he promptly handed to a surprised Brynjolf again.

"I'm definitely charging for this now" grumbled Brynjolf at Arn from behind his stack of tomes.

"Let's just get going" murmured Arn, peeking over the top of his stack at the darkened hallways around them.

Esbern set off ahead of them at a surprising speed, making it difficult for the two younger men to keep up without worrying about running into something or dropping their cargo of books.

"Oh...where are we going?" Esbern suddenly stopped and turned to ask.

"To Honeyside" Arn replied after Brynjolf turned to look at him for an answer.

"Well, if you're trying to remain unseen, you shouldn't be going back out the main route. I'll take you out the back way. I'm sure the Dragonborn can throw in another fifty septims for extra service" Brynjolf muttered dryly as he took the lead.

But they had not gotten much farther when Brynjolf rounded a turn to find a woman Khajiit crouched in a corner, cautiously eyeing them.

"Shivari, what are you--" was all Brynjolf got out before she signaled loudly.

"HERE! HERE! This one has found them, COME NOW!" she hissed loudly, echoing through the passageways, prompting both Arn and Brynjolf to immediately drop their piles of books and draw weapons.
Brynjolf immediately engaged the Khajiit Shivari, drawing longsword and dagger before scything in with a spinning attack against the dual shortsword wielding Khajiit.

Arn had only just gotten his sword and shield out, scanning the surrounding passages for whoever she had been signaling when Esbern cried out and lunged to pick up the tomes up out of the muck that layered the Ratway floor.

"My books!"

Just as Arn was about to admonish him to forget about them, the telltale burst of a spell came flying at them from a passage to the left.

In a flash, he turned and yanked Esbern back by the hood of his cloak as a fireball came flying by, bursting on the adjacent wall with a WHOOSH.

In the flash of light afforded by the fireball explosion, Arn could see down the passage, and what he saw made his blood run cold.

He had expected there might be trouble in the Ratways. It was filled with low lifes and vagabonds. What he wasn't expecting was a column of Thalmor troops pouring down the passages toward them.

Had they not learned their lesson at Darkwater Pass?

Arn stepped into the passage opening.

"FUS RO DAH!"

A wave of force belted down the passage, shattering the arrows that had been airborne and thrusting the first grouping of footmen backwards with a grinding of armor against armor and stone.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Exploding forward, Arn connected his shield bash with an excruciating crunch against the chestplate of the first footman not already on the ground, the impact imploding the breastplate inward with the sickening crunch of bones and sending him flying backward into two more.

Two slashes of Dawnbreaker finished two already on the ground before he sidestepped a sloppy slash from another Thalmor swordsman attempting to rise while shrugging the body of one of his comrades off him.

Even as Arn parried, bashed away the other's guard and ran him through the armpit opening in the armor, he felt several arrows whiz by his head.

"FUS RO DAH!" he turned and delivered down the passage with even greater force than before.

The blast caught several footmen advancing on him and knocked the archers behind them back about ten feet.

The footmen were so close that the Unrelenting Force simply obliterated them in a bursting shower of flesh, blood, and armor metal.

Ducking underneath another fireball spell, Arn was surprised to catch a lightning bolt from another spell caster on his shield, the effect shocking him momentarily and causing him to stumble backward.

The Justiciars must be hiding in the back.
"TIID KLO UL!" Arn sliced another two footmen rising from the ground as time slowed down.

Running past them, he could see two arcs of lightning firing from the hands of two Justiciars at the back with several archers in front of them taking aim.

Arn had just enough time to push two of the archers in the way of the lightning bolts as time sped back up again, screaming and spasming in place as they got lit up by their own Justiciars.

Distracted by their calamity, the remaining archer easily had his bow batted away and finished with a slice underneath the chin.

Finally down to the two Justiciars, Arn already knew what he would do.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force bashed through the spell shields they inevitably tried to throw up to stop him, tossing them like rag dolls against the far passage end.

The one that managed to get to his feet was met suddenly with a shield bashed to his head and run through with Dawnbreaker.

Arn briefly considered interrogating the remaining one, but Justiciars were just too dangerous and he had no idea how Brynjolf and Esbern were faring.

As the remaining Justiciar groggily tried rising to his hands and knees, Arn simply took him by the hooded back of his head and rammed it into the stone wall.

Arn spun around, still in a ready stance, hoping for silence, evidence the fighting had stopped, but he still heard the clanging of steel from the other end and a shout from around the corner.

Pivoting around the corner, there were two Thalmor archers firing repeatedly down towards the far corner where Esbern had apparently taken refuge, only briefly appearing to fire a decent sized ice shard at the Thalmor.

"We have the old man cornered!" hollered one of the archers over his shoulder, evidently expecting the others to still be around the corner.

"No, you don't" growled Arn from behind them, stabbing through the back of one's helmet as the other spun to fire at him.

The arrow glanced off Arn's already raised shield as he pivoted and sliced the inside of the Thalmor's left knee, dropping him to the other knee and setting him up for an easy finishing slice across the throat.

After finishing a few slowly dying ones off, Arn made his way back over to Esbern to find him well enough and Brynjolf tiredly standing over the bloody body of the Khajiit Shivari.

Ironically, Esbern had used piles of books for a bunker of sorts and a number of them sported arrows sticking out of them, prompting grumblings and cursings from the old man as he carefully inspected them.

"I always thought her bark would be worse than her bite, but sometimes people surprise you" joked Brynjolf as he wiped the blood from a cut on his jaw, striding towards them "I can't imagine the other fools down here were near that bad. How many other sots did she convince to--oh...." Brynjolf had begun to joke when Esbern moved down the passage enough for the torch to illuminate the
nearly dozen and a half Thalmor bodies laying broken and bloody all over the passageway all the way down to the end.

Both Esbern and Brynjolf were stunned silent as they moved through the carnage, eyeing the Thalmor and occasionally stopping to pick up a coinpurse or a parchment here or there.

Arn had stayed seated against the area with Esbern's books, recuperating his energy and trying every stretch he knew to get his shield arm to stop shaking after absorbing that electrical hit from the Justiciars.

When Brynjolf and Esbern had come back with another pack full of valuables, they both stared wide eyed at Arn in his gore splattered armor as he sat flexing his shield arm.

"I...guess you'll do alright, even if you're...eh...old" chuckled Esbern, obviously unnerved by the sight of so much violence so suddenly.

"You're trouble, Dragonborn" Brynjolf declared, leaning against a wall and once again wiping blood away from the cut on his jaw.

"Only to my enemies" Arn grunted as he stood.

"Well, if this kind of trouble follows you everywhere, I think we should part ways here" Brynjolf rejoined.

"You can't expect me to believe you became a thief, but are scared of trouble" Arn replied sarcastically, eyeing over several of the tomes in the worst shape.

"Well, you got me there, but this kind of trouble is the kind no guild or group needs" Brynjolf half joked before gesturing down the passage of bodies.

"It's over...and you'll be richer for it...problem?" Arn bluntly replied as he rummaged through some of the spoils before tossing Brynjolf a hefty coinpurse.

"Damn...are you sure you weren't a thief in some previous life, Dragonborn?" Brynjolf whistled at first before returning to his jovial demeanor of before.

"What makes you say that?" grunted Arn as he began restacking the tomes.

"You keep managing to find ways of outmaneuvering us" Brynjolf replied a bit slyly, flashing that dashing smile he'd tried to use on Arn to recruit him when they'd first met.

"Well, I did talk with Nocturnal herself" Arn joked before turning to Esbern "Do we really NEED ALL of these tomes?"

"Well, uh...there are a few that...maybe...they were personal favorites of mine" Esbern stuttered sheepishly as he removed several arrows from one.

"Truly! Truly?!" Arn hissed back, holding up a particular brown and green sheathed book "The Lusty Argonian Maid..The COMPLETE SET?!" Arn growled angrily at Esbern.

"Don't be so harsh. A man gets lonely down here...all alone" Esbern snapped defensively, clutching his other tomes to him possessively.

"Yes, but I thought by the time a man got to be your age, things started to shrivel up" joked Brynjolf with amusement, gesturing at his crotch.
"Just because there's frost on the roof, doesn't mean there's not a fire in the hearth" Esbern touted indignantly, refusing to back down or even be ashamed.

"True, but you don't even have frost on the roof anymore" chuckled Brynjolf as he rubbed Esbern's bald head, who attempted to awkwardly ward him off.

"Enough! We need to move" Arn snapped as they piled up the last few books "We are NOT taking these" he growled at Esbern, tossing the volumes of the Lusty Argonian Maid back into the muck.

After a few more minor disagreements about the importance of a few tomes, thankfully nothing quite so saucy as before, they finally shouldered the plunder from the Thalmor and the stacks of tomes and headed out.

After the racket of the battle, everyone in the Ratways would know something had happened and likely who was involved. Arn didn't care if they knew. In fact, he thought it would be another opportunity to put some fear into potential enemies.

So, instead of sneaking out the back, Arn had them simply stroll out the front.

It was well into the evening when they made it back to Honeyside. Arn sighed with relief as he dumped the pile of books he'd been carrying on a crate and tried to flex his arms.

"We have more company" whispered Lydia before her eyes grew wide with surprise at the blood and gore spattered all over his armor.

"Another Thalmor ambush" Arn whispered quietly before she could ask.

"Are you okay?" she replied, eyeing him over quickly.

"Who's the other guest?" Arn replied, grumpily trying to avoid having her or Freyya scolding him for not taking them down with him.

Before Lydia could reply, Arn spotted Delphine sitting on a nearby crate among the guards.

"Esbern!" she cried out with excitement, running to him and relieving him of his books and pack as they began chatting excitedly to one another.

"Hmph, help them with the stuff" Arn grunted, making for the basement to get out of his messy armor and maybe treat his arm without anyone noticing.

On the way, he noticed Ingun had fallen asleep on the master bed with the book in her hands and Iona sat sleeping in the chair next to it, her head slightly bobbing to stay upright.

His first instinct was to tuck her into the other side of the bed with Ingun, but then he remembered all the gore covering him.

Thankfully, Lydia was making sure Brynjolf was paid...again and Freyya was helping unload the Thalmor's plunder and arrange the books all in the same place.

Angrily, Arn still couldn't get his arm to stop spasming, and trying to hold it just made it vibrate even more.

Making his way to the basement, he was thankful that the Nymphs were already asleep for the night.

Setting his weapons aside, his peaceful recovery was short lived when Delphine came flying around the corner and down the stairs into the basement, her eyes glaring daggers at Arn as he continued
trying to work his hand out of his gauntlet.

"YOU! What in Oblivion were you thinking!" she almost yelled at Arn "Esbern tells me you were ambushed by Thalmor...the THALMOR!"

"Yeah, well...Thalmor were never very friendly sorts" Arn replied dryly, still trying to get his hand to unclench long enough to get the gauntlet off.

"Don't play the fool with me!" she pounced on his indifference "You knew we were being hunted. You KNEW that!"

"I've been sought and hunted wherever I've gone. Why should that change here?" he deflected, his anger growing.

"It's been a rutting MONTH!" Delphine hissed at him "I had time to go all the way to Riverwood, back to Solitude, wait for you, and then come all the way down here when you didn't show!"

"Throw your fit tomorrow. We all need our rest" Arn grunted, finally getting the gauntlet off with a sigh, turning away from Delphine to put it with his things.

But Delphine wasn't having any of it. Arn felt a hand on his arm before being whirled around and grabbed by the chestplate. Delphine stared up at him, her anger evident in the vein popping out of her forehead and quivering lips.

"I bust my arse sneaking around and Esbern nearly gets KILLED while you--" Delphine had begun to sneer into his face before she suddenly choked on her words, her hands going to hold her head as she writhed in pain.

Arn stood shocked as he watched her stumble back, clutching her head in agony.

As she fell to her knees, small drops of blood began dripping from her nostrils and ears as she looked imploringly at Arn.

Arn suddenly realized there was a high pitched hum in the air. He whirled to find both Larelleis and Riella standing at the edge of the tub, Riella with her hand outstretched directly at Delphine, her brow furrowed in anger.

"Stop...stop, it's okay, it's okay. I'm okay" Arn moved and gently lowered her arm as Riella stopped the humming and both nymphs chirped at Arn with fearful eyes, gesturing at the gore all over his armor and motioning him to them.

"Don't worry, it's not my blood. See? I...just have to get out of this" Arn tried to soothe them before grunting with effort as he got rid of his other gauntlet and with effort, the chestpiece, followed shortly after by the boots and greaves, leaving him in just his leathers.

Both Nymphs chirped worriedly at him and ran their hands over his face, torso, and arms before coming to stop on the arm that continued to occasionally twitch with spasms.

They both seemed to coo at him at once, gripping his arm and pulling him to the edge of the tub.

"It's not that bad. It'll be fine" Arn tried to reassure them, wondering what exactly they were doing.

They both rolled his leathers sleeve up and sunk his arm in the water, now changing their chirps to encouraging ones.
Rather quickly, both of them submerged in the water and each planted kisses at different places on his forearm before emerging again with smiles on each of their faces, chirping happily at him.

While it was an adorable gesture, Arn couldn't fathom how that would help until he suddenly realized his arm wasn't spasming anymore. In fact, it felt perfectly fine as he withdrew it and turned it this way and that, staring at it with an apparent perplexed look on his face.

Both Nymphs giggled at him and in turn elicited a laugh from him, though again, he didn't know why.

"Wu...wh-why....why'd you do that?" groaned Delphine as she slowly rose to her knees, wiping the blood from her nose with her sleeve as she turned to look at Arn.

"I didn't do that to you" Arn replied, turning to her and leaning his back against the tub edge.

"Then what was it?" Delphine snapped, some of her fire returning as she squinted and blinked at Arn.

"You scared our other guests" Arn waved with his hands to either side as Riella and Larelleis each pressed against his back, peering around at Delphine cautiously.

"M-mer women?" stuttered Delphine in confusion, still massaging her head with a frown.

"The explanations can wait until tomorrow. Right now, rest is in order...for everyone" Arn declared.

Even as Delphine collected herself and slowly trudged back upstairs, Arn felt both Nymphs had slowly been gripping him tighter, their perky round breasts distractingly poking his back and arms.

He tried to extricate himself from them, but they gripped him tighter and chirped at him with fear. Riella looked as if she was about to cry.

"Don't worry. I'm not leaving again. We will all be safe here, tonight" Arn soothed them as they finally relinquished their hold on him, but not before each of them reached up and gave him a peck on each cheek.

By this time, Lydia and Freyya had both finished their tasks upstairs and joined them in the basement, the looks on their faces demanding an account of what happened in the Ratway.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow. Rest now" Arn simply muttered.

After a brief discussion on arrangements, Arn slept in the main basement room, Freyya took first watch, and Lydia retreated to the adjacent room to sleep until second watch.

Reassured that Arn wasn't going to leave them again, the Nymphs finally chirped happily from their perch at the edge of the tub and sank below the water to sleep the rest of the night.

The morning found Arn groaning himself awake as several aches and pains from bruises he hadn't felt last night announced themselves.

"They're waiting for you" Lydia half smirked at him, leaning against the tub, nodding her approval at something that Larelleis chirped, her big green eyes peering at him over the edge.

"Who?" Arn yawned, wondering if it had something to do with the Nymphs or Delphine and Esbern.

"Everyone" Lydia simply stated before joining him in stride as he stood and trudged his way up the
stairs.

Arn rounded the corner to the upstairs to find a veritable council of people waiting for him.

Iona and Ingun both sat on the master bed clothed in their usual fine frocks with more plain cloaks over them. While Iona looked comfortable, Ingun seemed to huddle back against the headboard with her arms crossed, glaring at Delphine and Esbern for some unknown reason.

Delphine and Esbern sat on some chairs opposite them, Esbern with several books opened and marked at certain parts, whispering something to Delphine, who was still rubbing her head from the previous night's "incident" with the Nymphs.

Freyya leaned against the side wall watchfully, and the four attendant guards all sat in the entryway, looking on with curiosity.

Well, about time we all got some answers.

Arn gingerly took a seat as Lydia stood behind him, nodding to Esbern.

"Delphine tells me you know more about the return of the Dragons. I assume she's filled you in on what's happened on our end of things" Arn declared, breaking the tense hum of muttered conversations.

"Yes...yes she has. Before we begin, though, is it safe to discuss such things...here, among all these people?" Esbern cautiously ventured.

"They are all sworn to me in one way or another. They will be working with us in one way or another. As such, it's only fair for them to hear what's going on" Arn replied, deciding it was time the guards were given some measure of confidence.

"Fun as it might be to surround yourself with pretty women and token guards, I did tell you before to cut your housecarls loose" Delphine snapped back at him "These things...are NOT for their ears"

"And just who do you fancy to solve all...this Dragon trouble?" Arn retorted "You think you'll just point me at whatever you please, and it will just fall into place. You think it's easy facing down Dragons?" Arn stood, his anger slowly rising, his patience with Delphine at an end "The most powerful of creatures to roam all of Nirn. I seem to remember you didn't last very long against the one in Kynesgrove"

The outburst, along with memories of Kynesgrove gave Delphine pause for a moment as she looked away.

"But the prophecy says--" she started to reason.

"I don't give a damn about it! I'm not entrusting my life to some prophecy in a book somewhere!" Arn snapped then turned to Esbern "No offense"

Esbern nodded, wincing in pain at the conflict between the two people he was hoping to work closest with.

"I think...I take your meaning" he replied slowly.

"I have not done this alone up until now" Arn declared, looking first at Lydia and then Freyya as he walked back toward his chair "I don't intend to do so in the future" he stated with finality as he took his seat, Lydia giving him a reassuring smile.
As he sat, he caught a quick glimpse of the two small heads of the Nymphs, peering cautiously at the proceedings from around the corner of the staircase doorway.

"If you want the Blades' help, you should take the Blades counsel" tartly replied Delphine, crossing her arms and leaning back.

"If you want the Dragonborn's help, you should take the Dragonborn's counsel" returned Arn with a half smirk, knowing they needed him far worse than he did them.

"I think the threat posed to us is important enough that everyone should know" interjected Esbern, glancing back and forth between Delphine and Arn.

Delphine simply huffed and leaned back, gesturing him to continue.

"I'm sure everyone knows that the Dragons have returned. In truth, this was long foretold. The reason for this, is that the chief of all Dragons, Alduin, the world eater has returned" Esbern stated deliberately and emphatically.

"I thought all that World Eater nonsense was a fairy tale to scare children about the end of the world" piped up one of the guards.

"Sadly, it is not. Alduin is the one who is resurrecting the Dragons and sending them against mankind" Esbern replied somberly.

"So, what's his goal? Why do this? Why now?" Arn queried.

"Alduin hates mankind. Long ago, he led the Dragons in their war to dominate all of Mundus. To him, we are all vermin, fit only to feed the power of the Dragons. No one knows specifics, but long ago, he was defeated. Despite this, there were prophecies that he would return. Depending on which one you prefer, it either means the end of the world is upon us, or that we will only be saved when the last Dragonborn comes" Esbern stated, wincing a little as the ramifications sank in on the faces of several around the room.

"Well, there's a Dragonborn right here. So I think we all know which one of those is true" Lydia piped up, gesturing at Arn.

"You speak truly. I had very much despaired until I heard rumors that a Dragonborn had surfaced. Your deeds have already started to spread, Dragonborn" Esbern replied more hopefully.

"To our detriment at times" Delphine murmured.

"For starters, everyone can stop calling me by my title. I have a name, Arnsmyth Bulgoar, or just Arn for short. Secondly, are you saying that all we have to do to stop this...event is to kill one particular Dragon?" Arn declared, leaning forward in his chair.

"I think not. Alduin is the chief of all Dragons. Most old texts said he was unbeatable by any mortal device or power" Esbern plodded, as if thinking out loud.

"So, how did they beat him before?" Freyya chimed from over by the wall.

"That, I do not know, but...I do know how we can find out. There is an ancient temple called Sky Haven Temple, built by the Akaviri several thousand years ago. There is knowledge there about all these things that was sealed away, meant only for a Dragonborn to access" Esbern replied excitedly.

"Where is this place?" Ingun nearly interrupted him.
"Ah...that, I do not know" Esbern stuttered, casting his eyes down in shame as nearly the whole room groaned.

"Then how does that help us?" Delphine sighed in frustration.

"Well, even though records on it were purged, I have pieced together several things about it from references" Esbern ventured before continuing "I have several geographic markers we should look for. Also, I know it is either in the Reach somewhere or possibly in the Winterhold region since that was the capital back in those times."

"So, we will need to scour those areas, looking for these markers and the terrain indicators you have on that list?" Arn summarized, gesturing at the parchment Esbern was holding.

"Yes, I think that about sums it up" he replied a bit tentatively.

"Winter is nearly upon us. You might get some searching done in the Reach, but once it sets in, you will be hard pressed to do anything around Winterhold" Freyya muttered what several of them were already thinking.

"Then we should make haste" Delphine replied, standing up quickly enough to make them think she would depart that instant "Arn, how quickly can you get all this...troop of people ready to leave?"

"I have some things to take care of first" replied Arn, staring forward at nothing in particular as he rubbed his chin.

Delphine suppressed her outburst with a large exhale of breath before crossing her arms and fixing Arn with yet another glare.

"What could possibly be more important than this?" she snapped.

"A promise I made" Arn replied cryptically, unfazed by her demeanor.

She was about to launch another tirade, but Arn headed her off.

"We won't be leaving together anyway. In order to make best use of our time, we should split up. I think it would make more sense for Delphine and Esbern to search the Winterhold region. It's held by Stormcloaks, and the Thalmor shouldn't be a problem. Meanwhile, I will finish the other thing I need to do and take some of my people to search the Reach" Arn stated, finally fixing Delphine with a question in his expression.

"Only SOME of your people?!" Ingun perceptibly interjected.

"I have a different mission for you" Arn stated before rising and stretching his arms.

"Just don't spend another MONTH dithering around" Delphine retorted, sighing with resignation that Arn was obviously not going to change his mind.

Although Arn had wanted to talk to Esbern a little more about the Dragons, Delphine was practically cracking a slavemaster's whip to get them packed and on their way.

In little less than an hour, they had horses, packs, and provisions ready. As Delphine started trotting off, Esbern turned his horse momentarily and smiled at Arn for a moment before waving a hand.

"Until we meet again, Arn. I thank the gods you exist" he declared before whirling and hurrying to catch up to Delphine.
"That's a strange way of being told goodbye" Arn muttered to Lydia standing at his side.

"The man's been living alone in a sewer for nigh on eight months. I'm sure he's still getting used to talking to other people" Lydia smiled slightly.

"I suppose" Arn muttered, heading back inside.

Upon entering Honeyside again, Arn was hit with a barrage of questions from nearly everyone else still left there.

"Am I going to get left here?" worried Iona.

"No, you're going with Ingun" Arn replied.

"Can I wear a mage cloak instead of this armor? As a mage, I'm not suited to it" asked one of the guards Arn had learned was named Marcurio.

"Yes"

"Where exactly am I going?" huffed Ingun impatiently.

"I have a secret mission for you" Arn replied a bit mischievously, as he knew that would get her attention immediately.

At length, he detailed to her and the guards the account of Mercer Frey's stash of wealth at a farm northeast of Riften and how they found the Nymphs.

"The Thieves Guild will be watching me, Lydia, and Freyya wherever we go. They won't be watching you and your entourage. Even if they did, they'd never move against you since you're a Blackbriar" Arn plodded, all of them sitting at or around the table area.

"You're going to take your entourage there along with extra horses and crates, take anything and everything of value left there and head to our house in Whiterun" Arn finished.

"But, how will I know how to get to Whiterun, and where to go when I get there?" worried Ingun, clearly intrigued, but also concerned.

"Freyya will go with you, hiding in one of the crates as far as Frey's farm" Arn replied, Freyya predictably sighing in annoyance off to his right.

"Had to wait a week in jail for you. Now I'm to be imprisoned in a crate?" Freyya sighed sarcastically.

"At least you didn't have Sibbi attempting to seduce you" reasoned Lydia with a half smirk.

"True, Sibbi's quite insufferable when he's trying to get you in his bed" interjected Ingun, causing an awkward silence to fall on the group as they all looked at either each other or Ingun in confusion before Arn cleared his throat and continued.

"Don't worry. I'll make it up to you" Arn tried to reassure Freyya with a smile.

"What will I do once we get to Whiterun?" Ingun pressed, unfazed by the raised eyebrows and wide eyed looks she had gotten.

"There's an alchemist there, an Imperial woman named Arcadia. Apprentice yourself to her and learn whatever you can, ESPECIALLY in regards to healing. There will be a time for poisons, but mostly,
we’ll need healing potions and poultices” Arn stressed.

"I assume this means you and Lydia will be taking my tub and the Nymphs to their...freedom” Ingun stated, trying not to sound too derisive about the prospect of it.

"You can take your tub with you” Arn answered, a slow smile forming on his features.

"How are we going to get them all the way to Morrowind then?” Lydia almost interrupted him.

"We’ll need a horse cart and some large wine barrels, preferably with the Blackbriar markings prominent on them” Arn replied with a smirk.
Arn steadied himself abruptly as the cart he was driving lurched over a tree root.

Worried about the wine barrels shifting, Arn glanced back over his shoulder at their load, but nothing had been dislodged. Instead, both Nymphs peaked their faces out from under the lid of the largest one in the middle, smiling and giggling at him.

At least someone was enjoying the swaying and lurching of the cart.

"Please tell me the road gets better once we're further from Riften" Lydia grouched, adjusting her sitting position next to him as they rode eastward just outside Riften.

"Unfortunately, I can make no promises, and since none of my Dragonborn abilities affect the driving of carts, I think we're in for a rough ride, at least for a bit" Arn responded, moving his head one way and then another to get a better look at another bumpy bit of road ahead.

"At least we are free of Riften" sighed Lydia, somewhat relieved as she looked at the surrounding woods.

"That bad, eh?" Arn smirked.

"It has its good points, I suppose"

"Like what?" Arn queried, still eyeing the road ahead.

"Hah, and I thought I was going to be the pessimist" Lydia responded.

"I was a bit busy. It didn't give me too much time to do any sightseeing, and you didn't have to deal with Maven Blackbriar either."

"Well, you may have missed the splendid Temple of Mara then, though, given the other terrible things here, I'm not sure why anyone would journey across Skyrim just to get married there. There's also no civil war fighting here, and there's a decent amount of goods available."

"But no armor that would fit you" Arn muttered, more than a little irked that none of the vendors had anything approximating Lydia's measurements and knew they couldn't go back to Frey's farm for her old set.

"At least I look more like a normal merchant like this" Lydia replied more happily than Arn had expected, turning to eye her for a moment as she gestured down at her leathers with a heavy leather tunic over them.

"Guess I'll just have to pretend to be your bodyguard then" Arn smirked as they rode on.

"And while I may not have had to deal with Maven Blackbriar, I did have to put up with Sibbi
Blackbriar for almost all the time you were gone" Lydia insisted, a frown slowly creasing her brow.

"How bad is he, compared to our naughty little alchemist?" Arn asked, his thoughts turning to Ingun.

"Worse" Lydia snapped "Despite Ingun's naughty streak, I dare say she has a side to her that is almost...innocent...naive....not sure if that's the right way of saying it. It's as if she puts on an air of being like all the other Blackbriars, but deep down, she doesn't know how to be or isn't sure if that's the way to be if she wants to get the things she wants from life" she finished more pensively.

"So how is Sibbi worse?" Arn asked, nearly interrupting her as his concern over what Sibbi may have done or said grew.

"He thinks that all the normal things that apply to other people don't apply to him" Lydia replied with no small degree of aggravation in her tone.

"All the Blackbriars are kind of like that" Arn mused.

"Not like this. Sibbi made it abundantly clear that he could do anything he wanted without any consequences."

"Did you point out the irony of him saying this from a jail cell?" Arn retorted, slightly amused.

"His explanation was that him being in jail was Maven's punishment and that once her anger was expired, he would be free again."

"Unfortunately, that sounds about right..." muttered Arn, scratching his chin.

"He thinks Maven's displeasure is the only check on what he can do. So...he is free to do what he wants" Lydia shrugged.

"Well, as Maven's new favorite, I can assure you that we have her protection" Arn answered, trying to be reassuring while deep down becoming more worried, knowing how dangerous a man with Blackbriar resources and nothing to lose could become.

"Bah, we shouldn't have to worry about that" Lydia sighed contentedly, scooting closer to Arn "We are free of Riften. No more thieves, no more crime families, no more grouchy vendors, and no more young women throwing themselves at you" Lydia turned and eyed him a little mischievously.

Arn was about to defend himself on that last point when a voice rang out behind them in the distance.

"DRAGONBORN! DRAGONBORN, WAIT!" shouted Mjoll the Lioness as she clattered up next to the cart, stopping to breathe heavily for a moment as the same smaller man Arn remembered from before caught up to her and wheezed for air momentarily.

"Dragonborn...I am Mjoll..called the Lioness. We spoke...in the city before" she tried to declare, still gasping for air between phrases.

"Yes?" Arn replied, wondering what this was about.

Mjoll dropped to one knee and presented her greatsword in front of her.

"I wish to pledge myself to your service. You are an honorable warrior, skilled and righteous. Moreover, you are the Dragonborn, chosen by the gods to save the world. I wish to become one of your warriors" she declared with unfeigned sincerity and austerity.
"Are you prepared to follow my leadership?" Arn asked with equal candor.

"I am"

"Are you prepared to leave Riften?"

"I am"

"I have others in my service, in particular, one of the Blackbriars. Will that be a problem for you?"

"As...long as she is serving you, I will have no problem with her...or any of the others" Mjoll replied after thinking for a moment.

"Then I accept your offer of service. The first thing you shall do is to collect your things and meet with the rest of my people in Whiterun at a house named Breezehome--" Arn began to declare before the smaller man next to Mjoll interrupted.

"I also would like to pledge my service!" he uttered with such severity, it was as if it he had been holding his breath and it all suddenly came out with his declaration.

"What is your name?" Arn asked, a bit irked at being interrupted and seeming rather obvious the man was only pledging himself after it became apparent that the woman was accepted.

"Uh...Aerin" came the less enthusiastic follow up.

"Aerin, are you prepared to fight on my behalf?" Arn asked sternly.

"I...am not really a fighter. My gifts are in the healing arts" Aerin replied more confidently.

"Well, you do realize we will be facing thieves and bandits?" Arn queried.

"Yes"

"And assassins and Thalmor?" Arn continued, trying to think of all the most fearful things to dissuade the young man.

"Yes" Aerin gulped.

"And wild beasts and Dragons?"

"Yes" Aerin replied, blinking in confusion.

"And....Daedra and pestilence?" Arn stuttered momentarily.

"Wha-" Lydia started to question before Arn kicked her boot to silence the query.

"Yes. We both thought this over" Aerin answered, undeterred.

An awkward silence settled for a moment before Arn sat back up in the seat and gestured away towards the northwest of Riften.

"Fine. Then I accept your pledge as well. Go with Mjoll to Whiterun and await us there" Arn dismissed them hurriedly, glancing around with some concern that anymore people might have followed them from Riften.

Once Mjoll and Aerin thanked him profusely and departed, and the wagon was creaking over the
road again, Arn glanced sideways at Lydia, who'd been quiet ever since.

Sitting with a shapely leg crossed over the other and her arms folded, her mouth was pursed in a sour expression that forced a chuckle out of Arn as she eyed him with annoyance.

"What?" she snapped.

"You look like someone forced you to eat a lemon" Arn chuckled.

"I had just said it was good to not have any young women throwing themselves at you and then one runs up and does just that!" Lydia replied with no small measure of exasperation.

"At least she wasn't demanding a child of me" Arn mused, unable to help winding her up a little more.

"Ugh" Lydia huffed "And you didn't even turn the woman away, but you sure gave that young man a hard time!" She was playfully chiding him, but Arn could tell she wanted to know what was going on.

Arn was silent for a time, waiting to see how long it would take before she couldn't help it.

After less than a minute, she couldn't hold back.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well, what?" Arn grinned as they lurched over another rough spot.

"She's not a housecarl. Why did you decide to take her on, and why give the young man such a hard time? Pestilence....psh" she insisted.

"Well, you remember what I told Delphine when we had our meeting in Honeside?" Arn asked, finally relenting with a grin, unable to avoid watching her cute confused frown that now blanketed her features.

"Which part?"

"The part about me not doing this by myself."

"Yes, I remember"

"Well, after picking up a couple of housecarls, I considered that taking Dragons on by myself wasn't a smart idea, Dragonborn or not. Talking with Sahrotkonikaan got me thinking harder about what it would take to defeat the Dragons and what else is out there that I don't know about."

"You think Sahrotkonikaan would defeat you?" Lydia asked, growing more serious.

"I don't know, but trying to fight Dragons alone is foolhardy. We've done so up until now because we really had no choice, and we've gotten lucky."

"What will you do then?"

"I thought I might form my own fighting force. Find and train fighters to specifically fight and take down Dragons."

"And...the housecarls would be the start of this...fighting force?" Lydia eyed him, dropping her frown and a slow smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.
"Housecarls are a start. Then I can recruit others like Mjoll or anyone we encounter that we deem skilled and trustworthy enough to join" Arn finished, watching as she thought it over.

"So why did you give the man a hard time?" she wondered.

"Because he obviously was only volunteering because she was" Arn replied sternly, for a moment wondering if he should have really accepted the young man.

"But you still accepted him"

"We will sorely need healers and until now, we didn't have any" Arn mused as they lurched over another series of roots.

"Do you plan on trying to get more housecarls?" Lydia suddenly blurted, the worried frown returning.

"I don't know about that. I have considered it, but I don't know what I'll end up with if I do. I guess I've drawn a decent lot so far" Arn grinned as Lydia's frown evaporated in a bemused smirk.

"Oh..only a decent lot?"

"Well, you haven't been able to keep the Daedra away from me and we keep having to deal with these Dragons. If I was a proper Thane, I could sit on my arse eating grapes all day while you lot took care of everything" Arn grinned.

"Oh, truly? I think you have being a Thane confused with being a Jarl" Lydia smirked back "And besides, if I weren't watching out for your arse, there's no telling where you might be."

"So you don't think there's anything you can do to watch out for my arse better?" Arn ribbed, in mock consternation.

"Well, I'll concede I don't frown away any danger like Irileth does for Balgruuf. I apologize, my Thane. I will work on becoming a better frowner" Lydia declared in mock seriousness.

She proceeded to make good on this by frowning furiously at passing birds and at the slowly side walking mud crab off in the distance.

Arn laughed harder than he could remember doing for some time and after a short while, Lydia couldn't help bursting out laughing either.

Their laughter was joined by that of both Nymphs, whom Arn had almost forgotten about.

The rest of the day's journey was passed in much the same way. So caught up were they in chatting and laughing that it seemed they had just left Riften before suddenly they realized that the sun would be setting soon and they needed to find a good camp for the night.

After finding a good niche in the woods far enough off the road, Arn began setting up camp when he felt Lydia touch his sleeve to get his attention.

"I..think the Nymphs want to get out and walk around" she muttered quietly, gesturing up at the wagon where both of them were peering at them and making quiet cooing sounds while pointing at the woods around them.

Arn didn't like the idea, not because he didn't want them to enjoy themselves, but if anyone was following or watching them, they would see the Nymphs for sure if they got out of the wagon.
He was about to express this, but one look up at the pitifully hopeful look on both Laralleis and Riella's faces and Arn just couldn't say no.

"Fine...just...make sure you go with them, and that you stay armed, and don't go far" Arn relented, fidgeting with worry as he watched Lydia happily bound up to the wagon to help the Nymphs out of their barrel.

They had brought along the silk sheets they'd used for coverings for the Nymphs in Riften. Lydia draped them both in them before they happily chirped and bounded a few steps before each of them found a flower or leaf that seemed to excite them.

Arn was trying to get things set up, but he kept finding himself watching them.

The silk coverings didn't last long, of course. Both Laralleis and Riella had shucked them off absentmindedly as they perused through the trees and plants around the camp site, cooing and chirping at each find and marveling with those big eyes of theirs at every little thing that Arn and Lydia were so used to seeing.

Pretty soon, they had pulled Lydia into their explorations, adorning her with leaves and flowers they found, cooing in admiration of how she looked while Lydia protested very unconvincingly as she was made more and more to look like some forest maiden.

Even as he finally finished with the camp setup, Arn noted that the Nymphs weren't plucking anything living from the plants. Everything they adorned Lydia with had already fallen, and at this time of year, that was a lot.

That night around the campfire, they discovered something else the Nymphs loved, singing. Arn never ventured singing much unless it was a tavern or barracks tune in a tavern somewhere. In those cases, he'd usually had too much ale and everyone else had too. No one cared what anyone sounded like.

He was content to let Lydia sing the tunes as the Nymphs snuggled on each side of her, contentedly humming along until the end of each one, then chirping hopefully at her until she sang another.

This continued long into the night until Lydia finally relented and said she was too tired to do any more. Laralleis and Riella both pouted briefly, but sensing Lydia needed rest, they both rose and kissed her on the forehead before holding each others' hands as they retreated and climbed into their barrel in the wagon for the night.

Arn had sat himself off a ways on a rocky outcropping which afforded a good view of the niche in the forest and the grassy swath out onto the roadway. He'd set the usual traps and was going to split the watches with Lydia, but it was already nearing first watch before the singing in camp had stopped.

It was maybe only an hour or two before it was time to get Lydia up for first watch. His senses fired in alarm as he heard a short fearful cry from Lydia as he approached the camp. Sprinting in, he found no attackers there, but Lydia was curled up in a fetal position on the bedroll by the fire, moaning, and tossing and turning occasionally.

No, not this again.

Sheathing his weapons, he double checked the perimeter, set a few more traps and returned to Lydia's tormented sleeping form.
Sitting on the bedroll, he gently pulled her into his arms and stroked the side of her cheek, humming softly.

Slowly, she unclenched from her fetal position and the moaning and thrashing stopped.

He'd been doing this a short while when he looked up to see both Nymphs with their heads poking up from the barrel in the Wagon, watching them in the sparkling starlight.

He wondered for a moment if they knew what was going on. A brief flash of light from the moon across the forest illuminated the tears on their faces and Arn realized they knew exactly what was going on.

It made him angry, feeling helpless to undo what had already been done.

He looked down at Lydia's sleeping form, nestled partly in his lap, her face now peaceful instead of pained and contorted.

He wondered what he could say to her by way of encouragement or if he should even say anything at all.

He spent the rest of the remaining watch pondering this over as she slept soundly in his lap.

The chirping of birds brought morning along with a much more chilly sunrise, heralding the impending arrival of winter.

Arn had been quietly taking in the morning as the sun dawned when Lydia awoke and sat up suddenly, looking around wildly for a moment.

"I'll take wa--wait, what? It's morning?" she croaked with a sore voice, confusion clouding her mind as she rubbed her eyes.

"Time to get underway" Arn replied, gently helping her up and beginning to gather things up from the campsite.

"Why didn't you get me up?" Lydia grouched at him, still rubbing her eyes in confusion.

"You needed the rest" Arn replied quietly after a moment of contemplating an answer.

"What about you? Ugh-you are so frustrating sometimes" Lydia chided him after a moment gathering herself.

Arn just chuckled in reply as he began putting things into the cart.

"From here on out, I'm taking first watch" Lydia snapped at him once they'd gotten underway and she was perched next to him as the cart lurched on.

Arn just shrugged, happy to be back underway with Lydia rested and in a more cheerful mood, albeit a bit hoarse due to all the singing the night before.

It didn't take them long to find the cave that Ingun had instructed them about. Travelling through its narrow confines had Arn wondering at least twice whether they would fit through, but they squeaked by, the sides of the cart glancing off the cave walls a couple of times.

It opened up into a beautiful valley set back into the mountains. While the track of the road was still there to see, there was a lot of grass grown up, indicating it didn't get traveled much.
After a time, they finally spotted Fort Dawnguard sitting back up on a hill off to one side. Arn was surprised. He had thought an abandoned Fort would be small and dilapidated, but Dawnguard was neither.

It was possibly the largest Fort he'd laid eyes on since returning to Skyrim and while vegetation had overgrown its approach and some of the doorways, the structure itself looked perfectly intact and nothing looked decayed or broken down.

There was something eerie about it....an abandoned Fort in perfect working condition, in a secluded mountain hideaway. Arn didn't like it and sped up the horses to get them further past the structure, wondering if someone or something used the place as a hideaway.

Getting into Morrowind from the valley proved a little more challenging.

They had to ride through a creek bed to the place where a "false hedge" had been placed. Then they had to locate the pulley that moved the "false hedge" out of the way. Then one of them had to drive the cart through while the other kept it open, then slip through quickly before it closed.

Going past the false hedge put them in a small cave with the creek rushing over the small stones that made the cart wheels crunch and lurch as Arn took over the reins again.

Surprisingly, it took them a good part of a day to get out of the cave system, and more than once, Arn had to stop and use his Dragonborn capabilities to move obstacles that prevented the cart's passage.

The further they went, though, the more the temperature was rising, to the point that in the evening when they emerged from the cave into Morrowind, Lydia had ditched her leather overcoat and Arn was sweating profusely in his armor.

When they finally exited the cave, they stopped for a moment, transfixed by the completely different landscape that greeted them.

"Whoa..." Lydia whispered in surprise.

The Velothi mountains, imposing and snow covered on the Skyrim border, here were a dark brown and sloped gradually downward toward the sea, dotted with jagged spouts of lava and ash pits in lower lying areas.

The higher ground was dotted with either strange vegetation, or bulbous housing structures. He supposed some of these were the huge mushrooms that everyone always talked about. They certainly were the size of trees.

In the distance, across the ribbon of water that was the sea, was the massive island of Vvardenfell that occupied much of the U-shaped bay that made up much of Morrowind. Crowning the island through the hazy smoke in the distance was a massive peak that had to be the volcano known as Red Mountain.

Closer to the sea, the ground became level and even showed grassy spots in some places, but even there Arn could spot cottages and other strange structures.

Morrowind was far more populous than Arn had imagined as he gazed around, looking for an unobstructed path through the narrow strip of land to get to the sea.

"Morrowind is so....ugly" Lydia remarked "It's all brown and gray. There's no color to it. No wonder many Dunmer always seem in a bad mood."
Their observations were interrupted by the excited chirping from Laralleis and Riella as they both nearly jumped out of their barrel with excitement, gesturing and pointing wildly at the sea.

Arn couldn't help smiling at their happiness. They would soon be free, but he knew they couldn't just recklessly ride down there.

As Nords, they would stick out like a sore thumb here, and there was no telling who occupied all the different dwellings he was seeing.

It looked to be less than ten miles to the coast, but it would be daylight and they would be in unfamiliar terrain.

Moving back to the cart, he got in and gently took one hand of each Nymph.

"Don't worry, we'll get you there soon enough, but we need to wait until nightfall. There are many strangers between here and there" he admonished them, a pitiful frown clouding Riella's features before Laralleis pointed out at something in the landscape.

Arn spun and his heart dropped. About a mile out, a column of mounted armed Dunmer were galloping at a steady pace over the hills along the side of the creek.

They were headed right for them.
Chapter Summary

The Nymphs are finally free, but Arn and Lydia both find saying "goodbye" difficult. Conversing on the Beach of Nibenay bay, they both find themselves taking steps in a new direction.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The cool water of the stream was a relief to Arn in the sweltering haze of Morrowind's volcanic heat, but the waters running across his chest as he lay flat in the stream did little to cool the fear he felt as he heard the thundering of hooves approach from downstream.

As soon as Arn had spotted the approaching cavalry, he'd moved the cart back inside the cave and tried to erase the tracks, but he didn't have enough time to make it look natural and had no idea if they'd already been spotted or if this was some sort of regular patrol.

The nymphs both stayed in their large barrel while Lydia crouched behind the cart, looking to Arn for any instruction.

Arn listened intently as the hoof beats approached, slowed, then turned and started moving away to the north, the splashing of them crossing the creek further down prompting him to let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

Slowly rising into a crouch, Arn decided not to even venture out of the cave again until darkness fell.

This respite of sorts gave the nymphs a chance to get out again and explore back inside the cave since Arn wouldn't risk any of them being seen near the opening.

Much like the previous day, Arn sat guard, watching while Lydia followed Riella and Laralleis around, both of them cooing and chirping quietly at Lydia as they went, prancing in the running water and growing excited to find little colorful salamanders amongst the rocks.

It was enchanting, much like before, but Arn couldn't help feel a pang of sadness as he watched, realizing that if all went well that soon they would both be gone, free out into who knew where.

He knew he would never see them again, and the thought almost brought him to tears. It was silly. They'd only been with them a few days, but for some reason, it felt like he was going to say goodbye to family.

Watching them both happily lay in the stream, swinging their feet up and down, trying to get Lydia to come closer to the large salamander that Lydia didn't feel particularly fond of struck a final chord of sadness in him and he turned away in a huff to hold back the tears of sadness that he felt would surely begin if he kept watching.

It seemed so grossly unfair for two such innocently beautiful creatures to be the subject of so much harm. He sat contemplating how such a thing might have come to pass and resolved that if he could ever find out how they'd been enslaved, that he would make the perpetrators pay.
So lost was Arn in his vengeful thinking, that he was shocked out of his reverie by a large salamander nearly shoved into his face, followed by the happy chirping of Riella as Laralleis crouched behind Arn and peaked over his shoulder, pointing and chirping at the salamander.

They'd both lost their silken coverings, of course. By now, Arn was getting more used to seeing them naked, but it was still unnerving to see up close.

"That's quite a large one. He has some good color to him as well" Arn tried to comment cheerfully, hoping his sadness hadn't crept into his voice, forcing himself to keep focused on the salamander.

Arn decided he would take some time and share a few tales from his childhood about animals with the nymphs, who both immediately grew fascinated and plopped on either side of him in the stream as he regaled them with tales of attempting to avoid a big mudcrab or failed attempts to catch a glimpse of a wispmother before being chased off by the wisps.

He got so involved that before he knew it, darkness was falling. They all looked out into the setting sun quietly for the longest time, perhaps the realization of the coming goodbye was finally settling in.

Arn felt a kiss on the top of his head and assuming it was one of the Nymphs, simply smiled warmly at them before he heard Lydia whisper in his ear.

"I think it's time"

As he was rising and getting some of his things together while Lydia helped the Nymphs back into their barrel, it suddenly occurred to him that the kiss on his head had not been either of the Nymphs, which only left Lydia.

He stood confused for a moment before Lydia tsk'd at him to get his attention, prompting him to start leading the horses out of the cave again.

The night sky was remarkably clear, something that worked both for and against them. It helped them see the roads and dwellings better from a distance, but it also made them easier to see from a distance if anyone was watching.

They could no longer sneak. Arn just had to hope that their cart and demeanor would not be suspicious to anyone.

Slowly, they trudged out of the cave, through some vegetation and onto one of the winding roads that snaked their way between the lava pits and bogs of the northern area of Morrowind's Nibenay Bay coast.

They kept complete silence as the cart creaked over the road before they took a turn that would lead them out to the coastline.

As they neared the coast, they passed two lone travelers, neither of whom paid them much attention as they traipsed past them down the darkening road.

Arn felt a surge of relief as the sound of crashing waves grew louder and louder before they finally left the coastline road and lurched off into the sand dunes that served as a barrier to the sea.

There was no containing the excitement now. Riella and Laralleis sprang out of their barrel with squeals of excitement and bounded across the dunes before Arn could even stop the cart. Lydia hopped off and tried to keep up with them, but had a hard time negotiating the sheer amount of sand.

Securing the cart, Arn slowly followed from afar as the Nymphs continued squealing and chirping
with joy as they bounded onto the beach and plunged into the surf.

As Arn cleared the last sand dune and walked down onto the beach, he spotted Lydia standing on the beach staring out at the surf, where the nymphs could be barely spotted making small splashes with each other as they swam and jumped between the incoming waves.

As he got closer, he saw that her shoulders were shaking with sobs, hands wiping away tears, and he heaved a heavy sigh himself as he picked up the pace to get to her.

He'd gotten within thirty feet of Lydia when he saw the Nymphs emerge from the waves again, this time walking slowly and quietly up the beach to the crying shadow of Lydia.

Watching the three of them hug and hold onto each other, Arn decided to give them space and moved over a ways and sat down on a large piece of wood that the tide had washed up.

After awhile of absentmindedly drawing bits in the sand, Arn was surprised to look up and find Riella walking toward him.

Walking diagonally up the beach from the surf towards him, Arn was awestruck by her momentarily. Her petite body, now no longer crouching in fear or worry, strode toward him full of confidence and purpose, her pale skin glazed with the water from the surf that still slowly dripped off of her as she walked up to him.

She stopped and cocked her head slightly at him as she took her hands and arranged the wet mass of raven hair to one side of her neck before she extended a beckoning hand to him.

Arn stood and stepped up to her, unsure what words would be fitting of an appropriate farewell; worry, lust, affection, reverence and sadness all wrestling within his heart as he took his gauntlets off before accepting her dainty hand in his.

"I am...sorry I could not do more for you. I hope you will both be careful. These waters are still not safe for you. There are fishermen's nets, wild creatures, and...uh...other men who would harm you if they found you. Also, be careful of the seasons. Winter will be upon us soon and the waters to the north and west of here are almost always cold" he muttered with worry, trying to keep his gaze on her big blue eyes that sparkled in the moonlight and avoid any glances at the dripping nakedness below.

"Also..um...in the western lands, the seas are filled with pirates. You should be careful if you go there too--" He blurted out before she reached up her other dainty hand and placed a finger over his lips to shush him.

Arn felt a lone tear trickle down his left cheek as she smiled warmly at him before taking his other hand and bringing it to her chest and placing it flat over her beating heart.

For a second, he feared she would place it over one of the wet, perky tits he had been trying to avoid looking at, and was relieved to feel the soft skin of her chest, accented by the periodic thumping of the heart beneath.

Arn wiped away another tear as Riella closed her eyes and hummed something for a short time before opening her eyes and beaming a much bigger smile at him.

What happened next surprised him more than anything the Nymphs had done.

With a deliberate motion, as if it was part of a ceremony, Riella took her free hand and slowly slid it down her small tummy to the womanly junction of her hips and legs, spreading the outer lips of the
slit of her womanhood and sinking her fingers deep inside with a loud sigh.

Part horrified, part intrigued, Arn jerked his head aside to be further surprised to see Laralleis in a similar posture also inserting her hand into herself in front of Lydia, who continued to struggle to contain her crying.

It seemed to calm him some, and he resisted the urge to yank himself away from her, realizing that whatever they were doing, it was of great significance to them.

Riella began humming again, this time louder and growing in crescendo.

Arn could feel her heart rate increasing more and more. He also felt something else, a certain warmth that seemed to slowly envelop his hand and be emanating from her heart.

She continued humming louder and louder until she sighed loudly, leaning against him for a moment before she righted herself and smiled at him again.

Arn tried to smile back at her reassuringly, wiping another tear that came from somewhere.

Riella beamed at him as they both looked down to see her remove her fingers from the slit of her womanhood with a small elliptical shaped white thing in her grasp.

Arn supposed it looked like the color and consistency of a pearl, and shaped like a large seed of some sort. Even as he stood looking down at the thing in her grasp, she held it up to him and chirped an encouragement at him.

Taking a quick look again to see Laralleis doing the same in front of Lydia, Arn went to take it from Riella's hands, but she jerked it away and gently caressed around his lips, indicating he was apparently meant to swallow it.

Very carefully, he leaned down and allowed Riella to slip it onto his tongue, but before he could do anything else, she leaned up and kissed him full on the lips, her small tongue invading his mouth momentarily to touch the seed like thing, which immediately seemed to dissolve in a swirl of flavors that Arn couldn't place, but were all sweet like honey.

So intent on the thing in his mouth, he had momentarily forgot that he was locked in a kiss with Riella, her arms flung around his neck to pull her up just off her tip toes.

Suddenly conscious of this and worried about the rash she was likely incurring by touching the hard Obsidian and leather of his garb, Arn gently hunched down, allowing her to regain her footing and beamed perhaps the biggest smile he'd seen from her as she let go of his lips and leaned her forehead against his.

Somewhat stupified at the turn of events, Arn found himself being led by the hand across the beach to where Lydia and Laralleis had apparently finished the same thing.

Both Riella and Laralleis chirped and cooed excitedly at each other before switching between Lydia and Arn and bestowing each of them another kiss of farewell before joining hands and bounding off into the surf.

Arn and Lydia both stood silently for the longest time, watching them go. They waited until they saw their two small heads emerge far out into the bay and wave one final time. Then they were gone.

Once it became apparent they were gone for good, he heard Lydia burst into sobs.
During this quiet waiting, Arn had begun ditching his armor, feeling that he needed out of it and that he wanted to sit and enjoy the cool peace of the beach for a time to think over what had just happened.

By the time it became clear the Nymphs were gone for good, Arn was finally down to just his leathers.

Stepping up behind Lydia, he pulled her into an embrace and held her shaking form for a long time until he realized she might weep for a lot longer.

Gently, he ushered them both down until he was seated on the sand and she was huddled up against him between his outstretched legs as she slowly quieted her sobs against his chest.

Neither of them said anything.

Eventually, her sobs ebbed and she turned and sat with her back to him and pulled her knees up in front of her, being careful to keep his arms pulled around her midsection.

"I feel like I just had to tell my children goodbye" Lydia sniffled.

"It's funny. It's only been a few days since we rescued them from that cave, but you're right. It does feel like I've said goodbye to someone close" Arn agreed, perching his chin on Lydia's shoulder as they looked out at the waves crashing on the beach.

"I shouldn't be so distraught. It's not like I didn't know this day was coming" Lydia muttered, seemingly angry with herself.

"They're magical creatures and we made a bond with them. I wonder if that's what that seed thing they gave us meant?" Arn mused out loud, trying to comfort her.

Lydia just shrugged as if it might be so, but didn't matter much.

"It's sad, you know. I never really said hardly anything to them...about...what happened to me. I just looked into their eyes, and...it was like I was looking into my own...and then it all came back. I could remember it like it was yesterday" Lydia muttered, staring at nothing in particular.

"It's all in the past" Arn whispered, trying to pull her closer in his arms.

"But it isn't! Is it?" Lydia retorted angrily, though Arn wasn't sure who it was aimed at "If one look brings it all back!" she continued, the sobs slowly creeping into her voice again.

"Lydia--" he started to reason before she cut him off.

"I tried. I did all the things I was supposed to do. I was strong. I pretended it never happened. I lied to everyone like you said. The only one I told was Danica Purespring, since she's been like an aunt to me for the longest time. You know what she told me?"

"What did she say?" Arn tried to respond calmly, hoping to soothe the raging emotions that were causing her to physically shake in his arms.

"She said trees got cut, burned, and abused by mankind, but just kept growing as long as they got nourishment and care. In short, she said I should be strong like a tree"

"It's...sound advice, in a way" Arn replied.

"It sounds like something a priestess would say, but when I get up every morning, it's hard to think
'Be like a tree, Be like a tree!' Lydia spat cynically.

Arn briefly thought about pointing out how silly it sounded to be lamenting not feeling like...a tree, but he knew that wasn't the point and this wasn't the time to jest.

"For a number of years after the Great War, I did a lot of travelling. I moved around a lot working, and if there wasn't work, I just moved elsewhere. I met a number of women who'd been victims of rape and pillage during the War" Arn stated quietly.

"I thought the Thalmor considered women who weren't Mer to be inferior and a stain for them to...rut with" Lydia replied, confused but her shaking slowly subsiding.

"Not all the Thalmor were so scrupulous, and in some parts of the land, there were bands of brigands and Legion deserters who would wander the countryside, looking for anyone they could take advantage of given the war time circumstances" Arn continued.

"During one of my jobs, I met a washer woman who had been set upon by one of these bands of 'routers', as we called them then. She was one of the more pleasant people I encountered, and I was surprised to find out she'd been ravaged repeatedly and most of the criminals had gotten away with it"

"How is it that no one investigated?" Lydia sniffled.

"It was at the peak of the war in Cyrodiil. Roads were treacherous, and due to territory changing hands frequently, there were few magistrates in place and even fewer willing or able to mount any sort of investigation outside the center of their cities or towns"

"That's...awful"

"It's what happens in war. The common folk get forgotten and people fall through the cracks" Arn replied sadly, thinking of others he knew had fallen in the same category.

"But, you met her years after?" Lydia interrupted his brief wondering memories.

"Yes, I was younger and more foolish then. So I rather bluntly asked her how she dealt with what happened to her"

"What did she say?"

"She looked sad for a moment, but then looked at me with pity. I guess she knew what had happened to my father, and that I was on my own. She said there were no magic words to make the pain go away, but that as long as she was making better memories as she lived, that the bad ones would never be what she focused on."

"Hmph...I suppose it makes sense. Did she seem happy?" Lydia queried after a lengthy silence as she continued to calm down.

"Yes, she seemed to be" Arn muttered as they both watched the waves slope up onto the beach nearby.

He thought of saying more, but words failed him and finally he decided that continuing to try to offer advice or care might do more harm than good if she didn't ask for it.

They both sat silently on the beach for a long time saying nothing, but slowly, Lydia calmed and at some point leaned back into him, resting her head just below his.
"You should probably have brought someone else" she muttered in a resigned fashion.

"Why?" Arn asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You need a strong housecarl to take care of you. You shouldn't have to be taking care of me."

"So which one should I pick?" Arn grinned a little "The naughty alchemist in training, the quiet Stormcloak scout, or the naive swordswoman in training in Solitude."

"Arn..." Lydia huffed in disapproval "They're not all that bad. You've taken Jordis on expeditions before, and Freyya has fought at your side."

"None of the others have faced off against Dragons yet' Arn declared, realizing that for himself for the first time.

"That's not--I mean...ugh. You should just find someone else!" Lydia huffed again, unable to come up with a response. Instead, she tried to pull away and get up, but Arn wasn't having any of that.

"Ooof!" He bear hugged Lydia back against him as she tried to get up.

"Arn, I'm serious. I can't be a distraction. My own weaknesses shouldn't be holding you up" she protested weakly, looking down at the sand with a sigh.

"Holding me up? Right now I think I'm the only one holding anything" Arn chided with a smirk as an idea formed in his mind.

She turned in his embrace and eyed him with pursed lips and a cute frown of annoyance that slowly melted as she looked up into his own look of playful affection.

Without saying a word, he leaned forward and planted a kiss on her forehead, erasing all the annoyance from her features and leaving her staring deep into his eyes for a moment before turning her back to him and leaning into his embrace again.

She huffed loudly again.

"What was that for?" Arn chuckled.

"I had something all ready to say...and now you made me forget"

"Well, if it involves leaving you behind, I don't want to hear anymore about it. I rather like having you around" Arn replied with finality.

"Just remember you said that" Lydia chided him, a playful sarcastic edge finally making its way back into her voice for the first time since they got to the beach.

"In fact, I like having you around so much that I thought you should have this" Arn stated as he uncoiled his arms from her long enough to reach over to the pile of his things to retrieve the blue Longsword Chillrend and bring it over her head to present it in its sheath in front of her.

A slight inhale of breath from Lydia and Arn knew he had made the right choice.

"You want me to have it? For my own?" she asked, cautiously running a hand over it before he motioned her towards it with a nod.

"I told you I would try to make it up to you for spending time in the Riften jail" Arn muttered proudly as he watched her take the sword into her hands with reverence before pulling and
inspecting the slightly glowing blue blade.

"It's...so blue. What enchantments does it have?" Lydia asked, mesmerized by the blade she held.

"It's lighter than most glass swords, and I suspect it has either magicka damage, ice, or some other property that affects those it hits. We won't know for sure until we use it in battle or have Eorlund Graymane inspect it when we get back to Whiterun."

"But...this is...such an incredible blade. You should be using it" Lydia reasoned aloud, still with wonder in her voice as she moved the blade one way and then another.

"I already have Dawnbreaker and my other enchanted Obsidian blade. Besides, I think this one is more suited to you since it's lighter" Arn replied, pondering what other properties the enchantments on the blade might show.

"Is that your polite way of saying my sword arm isn't strong enough?" Lydia nudged him playfully in the ribs as she sheathed the sword and set it down alongside them.

"No, just that mine are stronger" Arn replied, flexing his biceps as he held her to emphasize his point.

"It's a shame we have to go back so soon. After everything over the last few months, being here on this beach feels good" Arn mused after another long silence between them.

"I've never been to a beach like this. I've only been to the north coastline in Skyrim" Lydia replied, stretching her arms for a moment before hugging Arn's arms closer.

"Not near as much sand, and probably a lot colder" Arn mused again.

"Not hardly any sand, and the water's cold pretty much year round"

"Wanna go for a swim?" Arn asked suddenly.

"What? No, there's probably things in the water or...something" Lydia refused unconvincingly.

"Come on. You've been sweating in those leathers just like I've been sweating my arse off inside my armor. There isn't anything wild in the water in this part of the bay to worry about, and they are the coolest places we've been since we've gotten to Morrowind" Arn chided, extricating himself from her and standing before removing his boots and upper leathers.

"I'll have you know I've not sweated nearly as much as you and I've kept myself quite clean" Lydia snapped back, clearly affronted that he would imply she needed bathing for any reason.

"Well, we'll have to fix that, won't we" Arn chuckled before reaching down and depositing two fistfuls of sand down the front of Lydia's leathers into the valley of her cleavage.

"OOOp! Arn!" she squealed in surprise, jumping to her feet and slapping at his hands before shaking and swaying one way or another as she reached down her front to do anything she could to allay the feeling of the granulated intruders sliding down inside her clothes.

"See? Now you definitely need a good bath" Arn laughed as he watched her shimmy and twist on the beach before finally turning on him.

"Oooooh you are in so much trouble" she tried to sound menacing.

"Oh, am I now?" Arn chuckled gleefully, retreating slowly from her as she began advancing on him.
"Yes, you are" she grinned as she reached down and picked up two fistfuls of sand before advancing on him.

A playfully awkward tussle began with Arn and Lydia dancing around as he held her fistfuls of sand at bay until all of the sand had leaked out in their struggling. Then she knelt down and got more before charging him.

Arn had distanced himself and took the opportunity to shuck off his leather breeches, leaving him only in his smallpants before darting off into the surf.

"You'll have to catch me" he hollered over his shoulder as Lydia flung the sand at the empty space he'd just been in.

As Arn swam out into the waves, he wasn't surprised to hear a splash behind him as Lydia chased him into the surf.

He was surprised, however, to turn and see her standing in just her breast strap and small pants in the shallows, looking around for a moment before reaching behind her to untie the breast strap.

Arn jerked his glance away suddenly. As dark as it was, it would've been hard to see details from the distance he was at, but still, his cock was growing hard and he could feel himself shaking at just the idea of her naked flesh on display.

Hearing a splash behind him, Arn ventured a look behind him only to get a large glob of sand smack him on one side of his face with a resounding THWACK.

"Ha!" Lydia triumphantly exclaimed, paddling slightly near him.

Washing the sand off his face with a grin, he could see the grin and twinkle in her eyes as she paddled close to him.

"You're lucky I lost my other handful on the way" she sneered in mock defiance.

"Too bad. You're going to need it" Arn sneered back before slinging a giant wave of water over Lydia, who squealed and tried to pathetically splosh back at him.

This banter continued for awhile until Lydia tried to turn and swim back to the shallows for more sand, but Arn was having none of that.

Grabbing her outstretched ankle as she tried to paddle her feet, he pulled her back with a WHOOSH of water and clasped her to his chest.

"I got you now" he laughed as she giggled, playfully trying to break away.

"Oh, and what are you going to do with me now that you have me" she whispered, the playful laughing now silent between them as their bodies both became aware of every point of contact they were making as the waves washed past them.

Breathing heavily, Arn touched his forehead to hers and stared deeply into her eyes, his arms pulling her closer to him, her generous tits now crushed to his own muscled chest.

"Get out of the water"

Both of them stared in shock at each other for a moment, surprised that the other would say such a thing until they realized neither of them had said it, and instead turned to see a dozen dark shapes
standing on the beach.

"You there! Get out of the water!" hollered one of the dark shapes again, the accent unmistakeably a Dunmer, perhaps the same patrol they'd seen earlier.

Immediately moving Lydia behind him, Arn edged closer to the shore, but stayed far enough out in the surf to keep them from seeing too much.

"Who are you?" Arn hollered once he'd gotten as close as he felt comfortable, still keeping Lydia huddled behind him, but still peaking out at the mer on the beach.

"These are our lands. We ask the questions!" barked the same Dunmer again.

"Uh...we are merchants, delivering Mead" Arn mumbled at first, realizing he couldn't say the location they were supposedly headed because it wouldn't make sense if they came from Skyrim without giving away they'd come in a different way.

"Delivering what Mead where" demanded the Dunmer.

"Uh.. Blackbriar Mead to...Mournhold, of course" Arn added as if it should be obvious.

The Dunmer nodded to another one, who walked back and mounted one of the horses over the edge of a dune that Arn hadn't spotted before and rode back toward where their tracks came from the cart.

"If you're supposed to be delivering Mead, and particularly fine a Mead as Black brier's, why are you both...cavorting about in the bay?" snapped the Dunmer as he crossed his arms in thought for a moment.

"Well...uh...heh" Arn sputtered at first, wondering how to respond without being insulting, before Lydia leaned up next to his ear.

"Tell them we are newly wedded" she whispered.

"We are newly wed" Arn hollered to the Dunmer on the beach, taking Lydia's hand and kissing her fingers for dramatic effect.

"Oh indeed?" the Dunmer retorted sharply and obviously not believing his story.

"Look, just go see the cart over there. You'll see what I'm saying is true" Arn tried to reason, not sure what else to try and wondering if it might come to blows since the leader either didn't believe his story or just simply didn't like them.

Just then, the previously dispatched Dunmer came riding back up and whispered something in the leader's ears.

"You have the prerequisite stamps on your barrels of Mead for travelling, but I still find it suspicious of you to be out here" mused the Dunmer, scratching his arm momentarily, as if letting them go unscathed troubled him too much.

"You recall Mournhold is in Indoril territory. We are in Redoran territory. Since I don't know if you paid the appropriate fees for this delivery to another house, we will take one--no, two barrels of Mead as payment" the Dunmer leader finished declaring before making a hand motion and all the Dunmer on the beach retreated to their horses and rode off toward where the Cart had been.

"You think they're gone?" Lydia whispered at his ear after a while of them both watching quietly.
"Last thing I want is to get caught out in the open without my gear if they come back" Arn muttered as he breathed a sigh of relief that they were likely gone.

Despite their close proximity and lack of clothes as they bobbed lightly in the water, the appearance of the Dunmer had shattered the moment.

There was no more splashing or laughing. They were both silent, watching the bank until Arn felt it was safe to go ashore. Then he slipped in and geared up before motioning Lydia in, while he took up a watchful position on a sand dune, keeping his back to her to give her some privacy while she dressed.

Arn sighed heavily as he watched, his mind playing back what had just transpired between him and Lydia. Gods, he wasn't supposed to be doing this. It wasn't supposed to happen.

He ventured a glance back to see if she was finished changing and found her just finishing adjusting her leathers before picking up her leather over cloak which had been hiding Chillrend, which she stopped to unsheathe and admire for a second before looking up at him and flashing him a beaming smile.

The realization hit him and he grew very afraid.

He had fallen madly in love with this young woman he wasn't supposed to, and now he had no idea what to do about it.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Nymph's "bonding" ritual is quite significant, but won't be made clear why for quite some time.
2. As to whether we will see the Nymphs again, the answer is yes and no. They will factor in again, but not until much much later, after the main storyline is complete.
3. No more Morrowind chapters, Arn and Lydia will be returning to Whiterun next chapter.
Winter Begins: Whiterun Interlude

Chapter Summary

Arn tries to negotiate having so many more people in his home in Whiterun while wondering what to do about the barely contained feelings between him and Lydia. An attack and an announcement changes their plans.

The sudden onset of the Winter cold came as something of a shock to Arn.

It had taken much longer to get back to Whiterun than he had hoped. By the time they delivered what was left of the Blackbriar Mead and sneaked back into Skyrim through Dawnguard Pass, the weather had turned colder much quicker.

Even with his Nord blood, Arn still wasn't used to the sudden change after being away in Cyrodiil for so many years. Lydia, on the other hand, seemed far less bothered by it.

After the incident on the beach in Morrowind, a silent distance had formed between the two, mostly due to Arn becoming quiet for most of the trip, not allowing himself to fall into any of the usual banter with Lydia.

Before, he had always just denied the feelings that simmered between them, but after what had happened, Arn knew he could no longer explain them away.

He just didn't know what to do about it. He had just gotten used to being on his own again after what happened with Desarra. He'd even to some extent gone back to his old pattern of bedding a woman every so often during jobs as he traveled.

Except now he was no longer a blade for hire bedding tavern wenches. Here, he was a noble, and he had now five young women, not counting Mjoll, who he was responsible for, and even though Lydia was the oldest of the group, she was still far younger than he.

He wondered what sort of anger and scandal might follow if he acted on his feelings for her. Nords were quite blunt about courtship, and usually didn't frown too much on those deciding to marry, but that was due to their view of marriage as an arrangement.

But some things were just human nature. Despite the obvious pandering for favor and approval he'd received from a lot of Jarls and merchants, some of those same people would look at him with veiled contempt as he trotted through the marketplace with the women housecarls in tow.

He had long ago given up on the prospect that he would ever be married and settle down, and it bothered him that he so quickly seemed to weigh the option as a possibility.

"You know what they say about late winters" Lydia muttered, interrupting his musings as they trotted up to the stables outside Whiterun, almost a week after departing Riften.

"They're always worse" Arn replied, shaking himself a little as the cold made him feel lethargic.

"It's good to be home, though" she sighed, dismounting as they entered the stables, handing off their horses to the stable boy.
"We can't stay long, or Winter will set in before we even get a chance to do any searching" Arn muttered, eyeing out the stables into the darkening gray sky overhead.

Dusk cast muddled shadows across the houses of lower Whiterun as they made their way back to Breezehome.

Pushing past two of Ingun's guards posted outside the front door, Arn was greeted by a completely unexpected sight upon entering.

Mjoll and Aerin slept in bedrolls in the back area just off the stairway along with two other bedrolls Arn assumed must be the other two of Ingun's guards.

It was the remaining three occupants that drew Arn's attention.

Ingún, Freyya, and Iona sat at the table in the center of the room, though "sitting" might be a generous term for it.

Ingún and Freyya slouched over the table on opposite sides of each other, drunkenly giggling about something while Iona sat sleeping in her chair with her head tilted almost completely back, mouth wide open with a bit of drool occasionally falling off to one side.

"What's all this about?" Arn grouched with a raised eyebrow as he approached the table and snatched up the lone jug and took a sniff of the contents.

"He..he he he...it's a fungi" giggled Ingún sloppily, gesturing at a fuzzy green piece of vegetation laying on the table while lazily grinning up at Arn and Lydia before hiccuping violently.

The whiff of smell from the jug was enough for Arn to realize it was something pretty strong they'd gotten into, stronger than mead. Since he knew Breezehome wasn't stocked with anything like that, it must've been something Ingún brought or something that was in the stash from Frey's hideout.

"What about the fungi?" retorted Lydia harshly while Arn was pondering the contents of the jug.

"It's...he he he...not very fun" giggled Freyya droopily "Get it? he he he..."

"She doesn't...get it...he he he" giggled Ingún in response, prompting another fit of giggles between the two.

"This is hardly acceptable behavior for housecarls" Lydia snapped in response.

Ingún gasped in mock horror before hiccuping violently again.

"Quick...we need to save the...Dragonborn from the fungi" she slurred out before slapping awake Iona next to her.

"Wha....?" was all a groggy Iona got out before Ingún had shoved the piece of fungi in her face.

"Save the Dragonborn...eat this" hiccuped Ingún.

"Okay.." Iona murmured sleepily, taking the fungi without question.

"Enough of this" declared Arn, reaching across and snatching the fungi away from Iona before she could devour it.

"What prompted you to indulge in a...afternoon of drinking?" Arn queried, eyeing the others sleeping in the back room for any signs they had also participated or if it was just the group at the
"We...were celeburting...celebrating" Ingun replied, frowning sadly at the loss of her fungi.

"Celebrating what, exactly?" Lydia snapped, crossing her arms in front of her.

"We're rich" slurred Ingun, gesturing sloppily around at the piles of boxes and materials they'd brought from Riften and Frey's stash.

"But...you were rich...already" Freyya replied giddily before attempting to get to her feet and failing.

"Doesn't matter. I think it's time you all got to bed" Arn interrupted, setting the jug off to one side before latching onto Ingun's arm to help her up onto her feet.

"See? HIC...rich...and beautiful, and...he still...doesn't want me" hiccuped Ingun as Arn tried to help her stand, swaying wildly as she did "But...HIC...if you did...want to...rut me...tonight, HIC...he...no one would know" She continued in a loud, rasping tone Arn assumed was supposed to pass for a whisper in her drunken frame of mind.

"Enough, up you go" Arn chided in response, steering her by the shoulders toward the stairs.

Getting the drunken lot to bed took a lot longer than it should have. It would've been a lot easier for Arn to just throw Ingun over his shoulder and deliver her directly to her bed, but he had no desire to be touching a drunk and giggling Ingun any more than he had to.

So instead, they all had to wait while Arn tried to steer the stumbling Ingun up the stairs. Finally getting her and a not much better off Freyya to follow, only the now sleeping Iona remained.

Arn's patience was at an end, and he had no qualms about throwing her over a shoulder, lugging her surprised form upstairs, and tossing her on a cot next to Freyya's and Ingun's.

After downing some supper and looking over the piles of stuff stacked around the house that they'd taken from Frey's stash, Arn tiredly climbed the stairs and rolled into his own bed finally.

He'd been pondering the lack of space now in Breezehome as he'd watched Lydia setting up a bedroll in the hallway, but he was sleeping almost the moment his head hit the pillow.

His sleep was quite restful until sometime in the middle of the night when the feeling of something nudging him in the back woke him up.

Being used to the wilds, he woke with a start, leaping out of bed and whirling with the dagger in hand he'd yanked from under the pillow.

Ingun was curled sleeping on the bed next to where he'd been, and even more surprising, Iona was laying fast asleep across the end of the bed near where his feet had been. Thankfully, both were still fully clothed.

Arn huffed in annoyance. He was tired of them appropriating his sleeping quarters, but in their current state, it was unlikely they were aware of much of anything and if he did move them, what was the guarantee they wouldn't return again.

Donning his armor again, he grumbled to himself again about the lack of space in Breezehome and the talking to he would have to give Ingun when she was sober enough to remember it.

Leaving his room, he stopped momentarily as his breath caught in his throat.
Lydia was asleep on a bedroll in the hallway, but from where she lay and Arn's viewpoint, he could see straight down the front of her leather top to the creamy valley of cleavage presented to his view.

Moving by didn't help much either. She had tossed and turned somewhat, knocking the blanket back and letting the bottom of her leather top ride up to mid stomach, allowing Arn the full view of the smooth skin of her tummy and the beginning of the curve of her hip.

He kneeled down and reached out to pull the blanket back up, but found himself frozen halfway. All he had to do was move his hand slightly and he could feel her skin again. He wanted so badly to just reach his hand further up and begin stroking and caressing. He wanted to just shuck his armor off and crawl into the bedroll with her.

He realized as if coming out of a daze he had just been sitting there with his hand poised over her for who knew how long. Looking down in a panic and seeing his hand shaking, he clenched it into a fist, stood, and went down stairs.

"I'll be in Jorrvaskr if anyone asks" Arn muttered to the two sentries outside the door as he departed.

After a more restful night of sleep in one of the rooms below Jorrvaskr, Arn was donning his armor when a familiar voice interrupted him from the doorway.

"Not sure if it's a good or bad sign the famed Dragonborn is sleeping in a lowly Companion's room" Aela the Huntress muttered, eyeing him with no small tiredness of her own as she leaned against the door frame.

"Breezehome's gotten kind of crowded" Arn muttered, returning to latching up his armor pieces.

"It will only get worse, if you keep recruiting people..." Aela replied, leaving it hanging as if she expected him to explain or finish something.

After a long silence of Arn finishing gearing up and waiting for her to elaborate, he finally turned and fixed her with a searching look.

She wore the same revealing leather armor as usual, but now had a set of fur coverings underneath, likely to account for the cold. She didn't look sultry or angry. Arn wasn't sure what she was after.

"What?" Arn stated bluntly as he walked up to the doorway, locking eyes with her.

"Just curious" she replied, while not in the least bit cowed by his stare "Your flock of followers keeps growing and already we get recruits asking if being a member of the Companions is the best way to impress the 'great' Dragonborn into recruiting them".

"You're worried I'll steal your recruits?" Arn queried, rubbing his chin to check the degree of stubble for a moment.

"Depends, what is it you plan on recruiting fighters...or whatever you call the group of women in Breezehome for?" Aela snapped more severely than Arn expected.

"You know, I hadn't figured you for the jealous type" Arn retorted, not caring for her tone or barb aimed at those under him.

Aela chuckled at him.
"I'm not jealous...of your recruits, that is, and since you sleep alone, can't say I'm jealous in that regard either" she smirked, nodding past him at the empty bed.

As if to add punctuation to her statement, Arn saw Skjor appear behind her and let loose a low werewolf growl as he kissed the nape of Aela's neck. The whole time, he stared intently at Arn, watching for a reaction before disappearing into the dim lit hallway, but not before slapping Aela's arse quite forcefully.

The message was pretty clear. Aela was spoken for.

"I'm trying to build up a force specifically for fighting Dragons" Arn stated bluntly, crossing his arms in frustration at being second guessed even in Jorrvaskr "I had thought about recruiting some of the Companions, but I figured trying to hire everyone wouldn't work since some of you can barely get along with each other and others only work alone."

"Well, don't. We're going to be too busy to be fighting Dragons for you" Aela stated, shifting on her feet a little uneasily.

"Truly?" Arn challenged skeptically "We both know your contracts will dry up in the Winter since travel is difficult"

"We...have something we're dealing with. It will take some time" Aela responded, evasively looking away and reaching up to play with one her braids of hair.

Arn simply shook his head at her evasive response, sighing his displeasure.

"I...can't tell you. You're not one of the inner circle" Aela muttered quietly and defensively after glancing around first to ensure no one was nearby.

"That's on you, not me. I did jobs for you before, helping clean up the plains around Whiterun, and I know all about the...other thing. I have the Dragonborn blood in my veins and my merits as a fighter are beyond question at this point. The circle's decision to keep me as a regular member is on their heads, not mine" Arn snarled defiantly.

"Your accomplishments are beginning to overshadow our own, and your refusal to...become a child of Hircine made the others nervous" Aela hissed back, her head snapping back to fix a disapproving glare at him.

"I'll not be anyone's zealot, and your jealousy is your problem" Arn stated with finality as he turned to grab his last few things before shouldering past Aela out the door to the room.

"Arn, please..." Aela grabbed him by the arm as he moved past her "I spoke truly. We are really dealing with something, and if you must know, I voted in favor of allowing you into the circle"

"So?" Arn looked down at her hand gripping his arm as though it shouldn't be there, prompting Aela to let him go.

"Just...don't interfere with anything going on right now" she pleaded.

"The only thing getting interfered with right now is me being able to get a good night's sleep..." muttered Arn as he turned and strode away from her.

An hour later, Arn felt the satisfying TWANG of his longbow as he fired shot after shot at one of the targets behind Jorrvaskr.
He'd spent too much time fighting with his sword lately, and it felt good to get his bow back in his hands, though his time not using it was starting to tell as a shot sailed high over the target.

After a few more shots, he moved back another series of paces, but his first shot missed to the right, and was greeted with a loud gasp from behind him.

"Ooohhh, will you look at that?" Lydia gasped in mock surprise to a bleary eyed Freyya next to her "Even the great Dragonborn misses with his bow."

"Ha ha...ha" Arn replied only half joking as he refocused his next shot before letting it fly only to see it sail over disappointingly.

Both the Housecarls grinned in amusement as they continued to watch him. More frustrated with himself now, he took a moment to relax, refocus, and then began hitting the inner area of the target repeatedly.

"Try all you might, we both saw you miss the target before" Lydia smirked at him.

"Twice, actually" added Freyya, starting to come out of her drowsy stupor.

"Go ahead, relish the sight. It won't happen again" Arn grinned back, easily falling into the back and forth banter.

Once he'd finished with his quiver of arrows, they all three went to the target to retrieve them.

"I feel I should apologize for yesterday" Freyya began tentatively as they pulled the arrows from the target.

"What happened to you three?" Arn muttered as he pulled another arrow and placed it in the quiver.

"I...uh...I don't really...um...remember" Freyya replied sheepishly, looking at the ground in shame "The last I remember was us three looking through the boxes of things we got from the Thief's stash".

"You don't remember ANYTHING?" Arn asked suggestively, winking at Lydia as he turned away to retrieve the last few arrows left.

"Why, w-what'd...I do?" Freyya muttered, biting her lip in fear, eyes growing wide with uncertainty.

"Truly? You don't remember what you did?" Lydia asked in a scandalized tone, taking Arn's cue.

"N-no" Freyya looked horrified by now.

Arn and Lydia continued baiting her on as they retreated a good distance from the target. By the time Arn was ready to start shooting again, Freyya was nearly in tears and Arn couldn't bear to keep up the charade any longer.

"Relax, you got drunk and said some stupid things. That's all" Arn finally relented as he let his first arrow fly straight to a satisfying THUD of a bulls-eye in the middle of the target.

Freyya looked skyward and sighed loudly with relief before frowning at both of them.

"Why? What did you think you did?" Arn grinned as he let another arrow fly.

"Come on now! You two can be mean sometimes" Freyya exclaimed, trying to nudge Arn's aim off with her elbow as he fired another arrow.
"It serves you right for rendering yourself useless to your Thane without his permission. What if Arn had needed something, or we were supposed to go somewhere?" Lydia snapped, not near as forgiving in her tone as Arn had felt.

"Sorry, I thought you took care of everything" retorted Freyya back, clearly not amused anymore.

"Enough, you two" Arn sighed, not wanting the camaraderie they'd finally built up with the shy ex-Stormcloak scout to vanish due to a silly incident.

An awkward silence fell on the trio, punctuated by the THWACKING of Arn's arrows striking home, before Freyya finally spoke up.

"You said in Riften...that...you'd make it up to me for having to stay in the Riften Jail?" she muttered tentatively.

"Yes" Arn replied without looking.

"And also for...having to ride boxed up from Riften?" she continued a little more confidently.

"Yes..." Arn grimaced a little as he let fly with another arrow.

"I...thought of a way...you could do so" Freyya replied, enthusiasm creeping into her voice.

"What might that be?" Arn asked, lowering his bow and turning to regard her.

"I...have received a summons...from Ulfric...to give a personal report in Windhelm to account for my service since I've been gone" she returned to a tentative tone as soon as Arn fixed her with a steady gaze, biting her lip slightly and waving away a whisp of dark raven hair that had gotten loose from one of her braids.

"And you want my blessing to go?" Arn mused, reminded again as he watched her eyes twinkle with excitement that she was quite pretty and it should be no surprise to him that Ulfric had chosen her.

"Well...that and..."

"And what?" Arn asked, puzzled about there being anything else she might want.

"There's this blue frock in Belethor's Goods that would...be...uh...It would fit me very well" Freyya stuttered, suddenly very shy again.

Arn eyed the target quietly for a time. He didn't like the idea of Freyya reporting things to Ulfric, but at the same time, there might come a time he needed Ulfric's help in finding or killing this Alduin, and the Sky Haven temple they were supposed to be looking for could very well be near Winterhold, part of Ulfric's territory.

"Fine, you may go and buy whatever supplies you need, including whatever frock pleases you" Arn stated, still not looking at her.

"Oh thank you, thank y-!" Freyya began exclaiming, jumping up and surprising Arn with a hug round the neck before turning to dart off.

"But--" Arn declared, stopping Freyya in her tracks before whirling to stare at Arn in surprise.

"Not a word about Sky Haven Temple. All he needs to know is that Alduin is the main threat. Talk to me before you ready to leave and we can discuss travel arrangements" Arn declared with finality.
before turning back to the target.

"Yes, my Thane!" Freyya exclaimed excitedly before racing off.

After a long silence from Lydia as Arn began firing again, he finally stopped and regarded her, slouching against a stone nearby, looking rather sour.

"What now?" Arn eyed her a little mischievously.

"Why did you sneak out last night?" Lydia folded her arms, looking a little hurt.

Arn couldn't help but chuckle at how she frowned with concern.

"I didn't sneak out. I was abruptly disturbed from my slumber by a sleepwalking Queen of Fungi and her attendant Fungi Devourer" Arn grinned.

"They...didn't...do anything...else? Did...they?" Lydia worried aloud.

Arn fixed her with a look of somewhat disappointment before readying another arrow.

"You truly think anything else happened?" He chided.

"N-no...just..." Lydia shuffled aimlessly, coloring a little with shame "Concerned..that's all".

"Noted" Arn replied before nailing another bullseye.

"You...have noted how much Freyya...seems infatuated with Ulfric?" Lydia ventured cautiously after another silence.

"Yes, I have. In fact, I told her it was a foolish idea in no uncertain terms before" Arn continued, unfazed.

"Then why did you allow her to indulge in it by getting the frock and going to see him?" Lydia puzzled.

"I do owe her, and no matter what I say, she's still convinced Ulfric is the man for her. If she doesn't see it for herself, nothing I say or do will matter. Trying to forbid her from it will likely only strengthen her resolve for it" Arn mused, eyeing an arrow he had just pulled from the quiver before tossing it aside.

"It seems cruel" mused Lydia, staring off into the plains beyond Whiterun's walls.

"What's cruel is for a man like Ulfric to exploit the lass' affection to send her on an impossibly difficult task. She's braved jail, thieves, Thalmor, and other perils and it hasn't even been what? Two...months since she joined us?" Arn reasoned angrily as he let another arrow fly.

He was about to expound further on the matter when he realized the clanging of steel had begun above and behind them at the Skyforge, signifying Eorlund Greymane had walked by without them noticing and had begun working.

"Come on" Arn motioned to Lydia, glancing quickly to ensure that Chillrend was strapped to her armor belt before heading up the steps to the Skyforge.

"You always bring me the most interesting blades" rumbled Eorlund Graymane, once they'd
exchanged greetings and Lydia had shown him Chillrend.

"We found it in a thief’s stash. There was nothing else with it to identify anything about it other than the name plate" Arn explained.

Both Arn and Lydia watched quietly as Eorlund examined the blade, turning it this way and that, using a magnifying glass to eye the handle over, and briefly holding the blade over some flames of the Skyforge before pulling it back and feeling it for a short time.

Arn was briefly aware of a brief cry from the front of Jorrvaskr to accompany the rise in noise of blades clashing, but thought nothing of it since there were always people, usually recruits, sparring in the courtyard along with a Companion or two.

"As you might know, Glass smithing used to be a tightly held secret only the Altmer knew. No one could figure out the correct ways to meld the malachite and refined moonstone without the end result cracking easily" Eorlund muttered while still carefully eyeing up and down the blade of Chillrend studiously.

"What do you make of this one?" Arn queried, eager to see what the master smith had gleaned from looking at it.

"I was skeptical at first, but it is actually a glass longsword. It's just that they've both added something I don't know to the material and it looks like it was forged differently than other glass weapons somehow" Eorlund stated as he continued to feel the blade and look it over "And as far as enchantments go, that's anyone's guess at this point. There's no markings at all that I can find to show what they would be."

Arn was about to comment until he heard what distinctly sounded like a blade slicing through flesh coming from the Courtyard, and looked up from the Skyforge to see a young man he didn't recognize come running round the corner of Jorrvaskr with sword and shield drawn.

"HERE! HERE!" hollered the young man behind him as he ran towards the group at the Skyforge.

"Who is that?" Arn asked, not liking the look of his approach.

"No idea" replied Eorlund.

"Why are his weapons drawn?" Lydia worried aloud as she turned to regard the young unknown running toward them.

As the young man reached the steps to the Skyforge, Arn got a good look at his face, clenched with determination and angry zeal: clearly he meant to attack them.

"By Oblivion, I think he means to attack us" muttered Eorlund in surprise just before Arn stepped forward to the edge of the steps.

"FUS!"

The lone word of power was enough to knock the mysterious attacker off the stairs and onto his back on the ground.

Startled, the young man eyed Arn with surprise for a moment before turning and yelling to three other mysterious attackers that came barreling around the corner.

"THE DRAGONBORN IS ONE OF THEM!" the young man practically screamed from his place
Lydia was about to charge down the stairs when Arn grabbed her shoulder and pulled back.

"Stay with Eorlund!" ordered Arn in response to the questioning look in her eyes as he moved past her and took aim at the rising young man.

"I can take care of myself" grumbled the elder Blacksmith as he grabbed a crossbow from nearby and began loading a heavy bolt.

Arn figured that was probably true, but since he had no idea what was going on or who these people were, he didn't want to chance the safety of the older man who'd become a closer friend than anyone else in Skyrim except Lydia.

The young man had barely gotten to his feet when Arn let his arrow fly, catching him just under his chin, scything through his neck and downing him instantly.

Turning on the approaching group, Arn was dismayed to see them all wearing heavy steel armor.

Taking a few steps to one side and taking careful aim, another arrow sang from his longbow and found its mark in the armpit of one of them foolishly running with his sword raised high.

He was about to unleash the next arrow when the loud CLICK followed by the twang of string signified Eorlund's crossbow firing, its heavy arrow thudding powerfully into the chest of one of the attackers, a Breton woman.

The heavy armor kept it from penetrating, but it still knocked the woman on her back with a loud CRICK of metal on metal sound.

Distracted for a moment by his fallen comrades, the lone remaining running attacker slowed and turned to regard the fallen woman when Arn used the window of opportunity to bury another arrow in the side of the running attacker's neck.

The woman took a moment to get her breath back before trying to rise, but the moment she did, an approaching Arn mercilessly pegged her right in the face with another arrow.

"I would've gotten the job done" groused Eorlund from up on the Skyforge as Arn finished off the one he'd hit in the armpit earlier as he tried to crawl away "Just gimme a moment" as another loud CLANK echoed out, signifying he'd readied another bolt in the crossbow.

"Now you know how I feel" Lydia muttered to the surprised Eorlund, staring down at the bodies below.

Arn was going to make a remark back up at them until he heard more clanging of weapons and noises from around front.

"Stay with him" Arn urged back at the disapproving glance of Lydia before running around Jorrvaskr toward the sparring porch and courtyard.

He wasn't surprised to find more bodies. What he was surprised to find was the number of them.

Close to ten bodies lay in the Courtyard. Farkas, Torvar, Skjor, and a couple other recruits Arn didn't know still fought with half a dozen unknown attackers.

Taking careful aim, Arn began picking off attackers one by one until the Companions closed ranks
and finished off the remaining ones, but there was no resting. Immediately upon the last attacker getting run through by Farkas’ Greatsword, they all turned and motioned inside Jorrvaskr.

Entering by a side door, Arn immediately heard the clashing of steel down below and a battle cry from Aela.

Knowing his bow wouldn’t be ideal in such close quarters, Arn exchanged it for Dawnbreaker and his shield before heading for the stairs as the others fanned out, going from room to room.

Arn never made the stairs as three of the unknown attackers with heavy armor came running up, two of them weaponless, terror etched on their faces as they obviously fled what or whoever was down below.

Unaware Arn was almost at the steps, they were easy pickings for an ambush.

Catching the nearest one underneath the chin, his head went flying even as his body kept taking steps forward.

Taking a step forward, Arn caught the next with a slice behind the knees, toppling him forward before Arn caught up to him and finished him off with a stab through the neck on the floor.

The remaining one was the only one with a sword left out and would have made the door to escape, but Arn had other ideas.

"FUS!" the lone word of power sent the fleeing man flying forward into a beam he would have just run around.

Falling onto the floor on his back, the unknown assailant wheezed for breath and his nose and forehead streamed blood down onto the silver pendant he withdrew from his armor before kissing it fiercely, apparently expecting Arn to deliver the killing blow.

But Arn wanted answers. Who were they? Why attack here, now? Were there more?

Stepping up to the fallen attacker, Arn held the edge of Dawnbreaker to his neck, drawing another line of blood.

"Who are you? Why did you attack us?" Arn demanded sternly after glancing around to make sure all was clear.

"The Silver Hand will never fall! Others will always rise to defeat abominations like you!" spat the man at his feet.

Arn was about to say more, but a flash of movement from his left turned into the form of Vilkas, and his signature curved sword crunched down, cleaving the mystery attacker’s head into a gory mess.

"I was trying to get answers" Arn tried to reason in a measured tone, unaware how much bloodlust raged through Vilkas at the moment.

"We have all the answers we need" seethed Vilkas, still staring down angrily at the remains of the attacker on the floor, before spitting on the corpse and turning to tread back down below.

Arn’s relief at finding Lydia and Eorlund unharmed and untouched as they moved among the bodies in the courtyard fell as they began to tally the losses on the Companions’ side of things.

Nearly all the new recruits had been slain or been part of the ambush of this Silver Hand. Ria was
killed, cut down completely without warning as she ate breakfast. Athos had died valiantly, fighting desperately to keep the invaders from getting down the stairs. Telma also, gentle soul that she was, wasn't spared the blade from the invaders. Vignar was badly wounded, but they thought he would pull through. Kodlak and Farkas both sported minor wounds and Aela a more serious one lengthwise down her back, though all of them would recover.

As Lydia watched over Eorlund and Brill tending to Vignar, Arn approached Kodlak's room, where the Circle members had gathered and discussed angrily among themselves, growing quiet as Arn entered.

"Someone want to explain?" Arn sighed as he leaned against a doorway, already knowing the answer from the looks on some of their faces.

"You fought as a true shield brother today. We will not forget it--" Skjor rumbled before interrupted by Vilkas, who stepped in front of Arn, blocking his view of anything or anyone else.

"--But I'm afraid this is a problem for the Circle to handle" he all but growled with finality.

Arn stretched to see past him to where Aela and Kodlak's wounds were being treated by Farkas and another attendant to see if any of them would speak up, but when no one said anything more, Arn shrugged and returned his own frown at Vilkas.

"Suit yourself" he muttered as he turned and left.

No point trying to help where it wasn't wanted.

As Lydia fell into step beside him and they left Jorrvaskr, a troubling thought occurred to Arn.

Why did the city guard not raise an alarm?

Doing a little searching, they found the nearest guard sentry's body stashed behind the Inn. Still, someone in the marketplace should've raised a cry...until Arn noticed the marketplace was empty.

Following the sounds of commotion farther away in the upper city district, they found practically the entire populace of Whiterun gathered around the central courtyard, watching with worried whispers as guards posted a parchment on the city sign post.

"What's going on?" Arn whispered to Adrianne Avenicci and her husband Ulfberth, standing at the back of the throng.

"A truce rider came in" Adrianne whispered back.

"What happened?" Lydia interjected.

"Idgrod Ravecrone has died. Both sides have agreed to a month long truce as a result" Adrianne replied.

Arn felt a little as if someone had invisibly punched him in the gut. Idgrod was gone. A host of childhood memories flashed through his mind even as her more recent words echoed in his ears.

He walked back down towards Breezehome in a daze, only pausing when he felt Lydia tugging on his Arn, slightly teary eyes staring into his.

"Arn...Arn are you okay?" she asked, disturbed at the effect it had on him.

"Yeah...just...remembering a promise I'll never be able to keep" He muttered as they resumed
walking back toward Breezehome.
Winds of Change: Idgrod's Funeral

Chapter Summary

After a truce is called so that everyone can attend Idgrod Ravencrone's Funeral, Arn finds that even there, others will attempt to sway his favor to their own causes. A New Housecarl surprises them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arn had never been to a noble's funeral. Most of the ones he'd been to were guildmates or other fellow fighters fallen in battle. Funerals for them usually involved a brief but respectful service in the wilds or a brief eulogy by a priest in the Hall of the Dead in one city or another.

As he stood on the mountain ridge outside Morthal, looking across the city to all the tents and new cabins built especially to house all the incoming visitors, he knew it would be a large ceremony, attended by many more than Arn had even speculated might show.

"It looks a lot different than last time we were here" Lydia ventured as her ailing horse finally drew alongside Arn's.

Arn dismounted his horse before eyeing Lydia's horse's front left leg.

"We'll walk the rest of the way" He grimaced after noting the swelling and warmness of its shoulder joint.

"It's gotten worse. Hasn't it?" Lydia asked with a sour look, patting the horse's head as consolation after she'd dismounted.

"I think that stumble on the ice might've caused some sort of strain or tear" Arn mused, continuing to feel over the inflamed area.

"Don't worry. Soon enough you'll have a nice warm stable and a soft bed of hay" Lydia patted her mare encouragingly, though the mare seemed not much enthused and continued to favor the ailing leg.

"If there's any space left" Arn muttered as they began to make their way down the mountainside.

Arn figured that after their last visit to Morthal, that they might have been received with much celebration, but even after getting an eager greeting from the perimeter guards, there was so much bustling about among crowds of people in the city, that no one seemed to even notice their arrival.

Trying the Inn was a mistake since it had filled up first. After asking around a bit, they finally got directed to some stables to care for the horses. Finding a room would be much more difficult, it seemed.

As they led their horses toward the makeshift stables, they passed all manner of visitors: Stormcloaks, Redguards, Imperial nobility, Dunmer house delegations, Legionnaires, and even Thalmor.
"Didn't think there'd be this many people here" Lydia whispered askance to him as she eyed several Thalmor sitting by a tent they just walked by.

"Neither did I" Arn muttered, trying to be casual in his gait, despite the urge to walk faster.

Once they'd got their horses situated in a crowded, temporary stable, they both stood outside gazing around for anything that might be indicative of a place to rent for the night.

"My Thane! My Thane!" came a sudden cry from a male voice among the crowd to their right.

Puzzled, they turned to find a Nord man in a hodge-podge of leather, fur, and other armor bits hailing them as he reached where they stood among the moving people before bowing very ceremoniously.

"Uh...I think you have me confused with someone else" Arn muttered, eyeing the stranger over.

"You are the Dragonborn. Are you not?" asked the man, going down on one knee before Arn.

"Yes..." Arn replied tentatively, wondering if this was some sort of swindle or trick.

"I am Valdimar. You were made a Thane of Hjaalmarch last time you were here, and were given land, but no Housecarl. I have since then been assigned to serve you as Housecarl to remedy this. I will protect you and all that you own, with my life" he finished with solemnity.

"Oh..." Arn said, realizing that what he said was true, before becoming more jovial about it "Heh, finally, a man" he smirked aside to Lydia, who chuckled a little along with him.

Realizing how strange that would sound to someone who was a complete stranger to the situation, Arn tried to clarify after abruptly stopping his chuckling.

"It's just that...so many of my housecarls are women, it's good to finally get a man among the bunch...not that they're inadequate or anything. It's just good to...get some variety" Arn started confidently before devolving into a stuttered reply as he realized that no matter how he tried to phrase it, it didn't sound right.

Glancing to the side, he found Lydia with her arms crossed, one eyebrow raised with a smirk creeping onto her features as he finished his poor explanation.

"Anyhow...uh...what is it that you're most capable at...Valdimar?" Arn changed the subject, eyeing down at his newest housecarl, who'd not yet risen from his bowed knee.

"I favor destruction magic, my Thane. I also am proficient at some healing. I am not classically trained. Though, I consider myself adequately passable as a mage with just about any other you might meet. I learned my skill on the job as the steward for a merchant long since passed on" Valdimar explained, running a nervous finger over his bushy, brown mustache.

"Ah, a mage...and a healer, excellent. We need both!" Arn exclaimed, eyeing Valdimar with satisfaction before taking his arm and gently urging him up "But no need to be formal. There is no kneeling or titles with me. I am Arnsmyth Bulgoar, or you may just call me, Arn."

"I am glad to know I will be useful" Valdimar couldn't help a slight bow of respect, still reverently nodding to Arn.

"Um...tell us, though, is there anywhere we might find lodging?" Arn murmured, glancing around again as more people walked past them.
"Oh, the Jarl has set aside quarters for you in Highmoon Hall, the Jarl's longhouse" replied Valdimar, motioning them to follow before turning and leading on.

"There's a lot more buildings here than last time we were here" Lydia commented as they wound their way through several crowds of people.

"After the Dragon attack, they did a lot of rebuilding and added more buildings to house refugees from the war and travelers from Solitude" Valdimar noted as they neared the Jarl's Hall.

"HOLD!" came the abrupt command from a line of Morthal guards that had formed across the road.

Arn was about to demand an explanation when they all saw processions of Jarls and attendants walking on the other side of the guard line. They were all leaving an adjacent cabin.

They watched as Balgruuf and Irileth walked by, several Arn didn't recognize before seeing Ulfric and Galmar, and then another one Arn didn't recognize.

Arn had been eyeing Ulfric and Galmar receding into the darkening gloom of dusk before he heard his name called from the cabin to the right.

"Arn! It is good you've come" Elisif the Fair exclaimed as she stared at him from the doorway to the cabin.

Arn was momentarily caught off guard, seeing her fetching figure framed in the doorway by firelight in a dark blue dress with a white fur cloak over it, the hood bunching the long, blondish red curls together around her delicate neck.

In a panic, he realized that he hadn't answered and was just standing there, stupidly staring at her.

Thankfully, Elisif had descended the steps and was talking to Valdimar.

"It is good to see you once again, Master Valdimar. I am glad you've found service with the Dragonborn. I'm sure he will prove a good leader. I was too young to remember much of my father, but I am still thankful for your service to him, and I'm glad you've returned to Skyrim" she was saying to a bowing Valdimar.

"So...you know Valdimar?" Arn asked, finally finding his tongue.

"He served my family before their untimely death. When I became a ward of High King Istlod, he moved off to Cyrodiil. I am delighted to see he's returned" Elisif replied, gently indicating Valdimar to rise.

"Ah, well...we had just met" Arn offered as an explanation, feeling a little bit like he was intruding in a moment between acquaintances.

"I am glad you're here. We need to talk...if you have a moment, that is" Elisif turned to implore Arn as she gestured back inside her cabin.

"If you can help Lydia get things settled in Highmoon Hall, I'll be right along" Arn muttered to Valdimar, not daring to venture a look at the glare he knew Lydia was likely firing at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Of course, my Thane" Valdimar nodded with again more formality as he turned and gestured Lydia to follow.
Arn breathed a sigh of relief after he was seated at a large table inside the warm cabin and Elisif had closed the door.

"I am glad we got to meet again, though I'd prefer better circumstances" Elisif started as she paced quietly around Arn and sat a few places away from him, a bit to his disappointment.

"I would too" Arn smiled at her, wondering if it passed for a flirting comment, or if it mattered or not, confusion making him scratch the table with his fingernail absentmindedly.

He hadn't expected to run into her again, at least...any time soon. While he'd eventually passed off their tryst before as an action of the moment not likely to be repeated, the warmth of her smile and demeanor when she'd spied him awoke doubts in him as to his own feelings, his concern for Lydia the whole time looming in the back of his mind like someone watching over his shoulder.

"I've heard reports of your deeds. I am glad you make progress in your tasks" Elisif stated more formally than Arn wanted to hear from her as she sat and crossed a leg over another under the blue dress.

"I can assure you. It's not as easy as it sounds" Arn muttered, stopping his table scratching to watch Elisif more intently.

"Of course, but tell me, now that you've seen more of Skyrim these last few months. Has it changed how you feel?" Elisif asked, leaning forward to rest her hands on the table in front of her as she fixed him intently with those piercing blue eyes of hers.

"About...you? Why no, I still remain loyal to you. I swore I would be a friend to you, and I still am" Arn replied hesitantly at first before wondering if he'd read the question all wrong as he finished hurriedly.

Elisif smiled a little slyly, surprising Arn, before answering.

"We can talk about 'us' later. I was asking about Skyrim. You've been to many more places since we last talked. Have you gained any...different views on things? There...were even reports that you helped Ulfric..." she finished, suggestively waiting for him to finish her statement somehow or explain by the way she raised her eyebrows and looked at him.

"I didn't 'help' Ulfric anymore than I had to" Arn replied sternly, put off by her talk of politics instead of their own relationship.

"So...you did help him get the Jagged Crown..." Elisif looked a little hurt.

"I HAD to go to Windhelm, and Ulfric essentially imprisoned my housecarl in exchange for...services" Arn spat, his unhappiness growing with her continued line of inquiry.

"I see" Elisif nodded before leaning back in her chair, an awkward silence falling on them before Arn's irritation got the better of him.

"You're angry about the Jagged Crown incident? Truly?" Arn quipped a little louder than before.

"I never said I was...angry" snapped Elisif right back, her blue eyes blazing with passion "I just need to know what's going on. There are plenty out there who are claiming you're just playing both sides to get what you want"

"I'm not 'playing' at anything!" snapped Arn angrily.
"Arn, come now, I never said you were, but I have to find allies and resources, and that's harder to come by when any time I point out the gods granting us a Dragonborn in Skyrim, someone is always there to stand up and point out how you continue to pile up wealth and women without bothering to pick a side or even so much as declare your support" Elisif waved her hand in exasperation as she finished.

"It didn't bother you before" quipped Arn before snatching a nearby mug of leftover ale from the previous dinner at the table and swigging it without a care.

"Things were different, then" Elisif implored, deliberately folding her hands on the table in front of her as if it took great concentration to explain "You're no longer unheard of and unknown. All Skyrim and even parts of the Empire have heard by now of your existence and at least some of your exploits. You think it's lost on people that you've refused to take a side?"

"Is that what this is all about?" Arn barked a little louder than he meant "You're trying to recruit me. Is that it?"

"I wouldn't put it so bluntly, but I wish you would...at least do...something to show your support for the Empire in the war" Elisif reasoned with a sigh.

"I have my reasons for not supporting either" Arn snapped crossly as he folded his arms defiantly.

"Please, Arn, at least...reconsider whatever reasons those are. Skyrim needs it and...I...we...cannot truly have any real relationship if you refuse to side with the Empire" Elisif tried to sound reasonable.

A mocking smile crept onto Arn's face as his brow furrowed in anger before rising to his feet.

"Everywhere I go, it's the same damn thing" he muttered cynically before adopting a mocking tone "Help us, Dragonborn. Fix our problems. Slay our enemies. We'll reward you if you do"

Elisif was silent as he paced slowly over and leaned on the table in front of her, daring to glare straight into those piercing blue eyes of hers.

"Just about everywhere I've gone, Jarls have thrown women and riches at me in exchange for help with their problems. You...you just offered yourself instead. Did that night in the Palace truly mean anything to you? Or was it just your means of securing my loyalty?" Arn hissed angrily.

"Don't be childish, Arn! That's not fair or true, and you know it!" Elisif snapped back.

"And yet here you are, putting our relationship behind a...test of loyalty" Arn continued cynically.

"Because it's the truth!" Elisif insisted "As High Queen of Skyrim, I cannot court a man who refuses to take a stand!"

"Well, then, best take my leave. Wouldn't want to besmirch your good name with my cowardly presence" Arn growled before turning to leave.

"Arn, don't do this! I'm not the only one with an eye on you" Elisif implored before dropping to a hissed whisper "the Thalmor seek your death by a warrant from Cyrodiil, and I know for a fact they aren't the only ones with secret plans for Skyrim!"

The mention of the warrant for his arrest in Cyrodiil stopped Arn in his tracks, a flood of memories surging through him at the mention of it, but still he didn't turn around.

"Then you should understand at least a little, then, why I'm better off on my own" Arn growled to
the side, not daring to look back at Elisif's blue eyes, now starting to tear up, before he opened the
door and left quickly, slamming the door behind him.

Angry and upset, Arn found himself walking quickly around the City, but with no particular purpose
or destination. He must've paced around all the encampments several times before his temper began
to cool, and he went from angry to sad, his pace changing to a slow trudge.

He couldn't believe Elisif had just tried to talk him into joining the Legion, and even worse,
disavowing their...interest in each other unless he did so. It felt like a betrayal.

Sleep would not come to him. So going to the Jarl's longhouse was pointless. Instead, he went to
check on Lydia's mare again.

Thankfully, the stable hands had followed his instructions and the horses were well fed and resting.

As he eyed over the resting animals, he heard a brief, muffled cry from the back of the large tent
stable.

With a hand on the handle of Dawnbreaker, Arn carefully eased back to the section where the noise
came from.

Peering around a corner, he spied through the legs of several horses back around another wooden
partition where some hay was piled.

In the secluded corner, barely illuminated by lantern light among the shadows, two naked bodies
writhed and thrust against each other on a blanket among scattered pieces of armor.

Arn had no idea who they were, a blonde Nord woman, not bad looking and a sandy haired Breton
or Nord man, hard to say since he was mostly obscured.

Looking closer, he noted that one set of armor was that of an Imperial Legionnaire, but the other was
clearly a Stormcloak set.

Arn marveled for a moment, but realized it made sense, in a way.

He turned away and paused, listening for a moment to the hisses of sweet nothings they whispered to
each other as they continued to share a passion that would likely be stamped out by war.

Further saddened, Arn left the stables and finally made his way back to Highmoon Hall to finally
turn in for the night.

He was surprised to find it largely empty except for Aslfur wondering around directing guards and
servants.

After getting directions to go upstairs from one of the servants, Arn was surprised to find Ingrid, now
officially the only Idgrod Ravencrone in Morthal, sitting sullenly on a nearby chair.

"Oh...Dragonborn!" she exclaimed in surprise, popping up from her seat at the same time as Arn had
noticed her.

She still looked the maiden lass Arn remembered from last time, but now she wore fancy,
embroidered robes of nobility.

When she popped to her feet, a greenish blue wreath adorned with ribbons that was perched over the
raven locks of her head fell off, rolling a short way on the floor closer to Arn.
"Oh..." she lamented before Arn reached down to pick it up, but she didn't take it at first when he tried to hand it to her.

"The uh...other Jarls gave this to me when they made me the new Jarl" she muttered forlornly, looking at the wreath carefully before slowly taking it from Arn's hand.

"I suppose congratulations are in order" Arn tried and failed to sound cheerful.

Deep down he feared for her. At barely more than 16 or 17 summers, she was far too young to be Jarl, then again, he cringed at the thought of Aslfur being made Jarl.

She smiled weakly at him before her lower lip began to tremble and he saw tears welling in her eyes.

"I always knew I'd be Jarl some day, but I didn't want it to be now. All I want is my mum and brother back" she said brokenly before starting to cry uncontrollably.

Arn gently took the wreath out of her trembling hands and gently enveloped her in a bear hug, allowing her a good long cry into the fur and ebony plating of his armor.

"I am sorry for your loss" Arn whispered into the top of her hair.

Gods, no one had even mentioned that the poor boy had died too.

Once she'd gotten the crying under control, she took the wreath back from him, wiping away remaining tears.

"I...I...will be courted now by many men. Some have already sent letters of intent" she stuttered, suddenly shy, staring at the floor.

"I am sure one of them will turn out to be a decent man. Just make sure he's interested in you and not your throne" Arn tried to caution optimistically.

"I...was...wondering if there was anyone....any man....that you might....recommend" she muttered, smiling sweetly but with uncertainty up at him as she finished.

Not this again, Arn groaned inwardly, regretting the hug of comfort he'd just given.

"I think you should focus on leading your people for the time being. A husband can wait" Arn counseled her.

"But how will I know...how...to be a good leader. How will I learn about things?" she asked, growing in panic.

"Stay calm. Protect your people and do right by them. If you don't know something, find someone trustworthy to find out. The rest is simply a matter of being a good example for those under you. Do that, and they'll trust you" Arn soothed before taking the wreath from her hands and gently placing it back atop her head.

"I suppose so....Thank you for coming...and for your comforting words" she said after a short silence before whirling and whisking by him down the stairs.

Arn had a bad feeling she was more upset now because it wasn't the answer she wanted, but he didn't know what else was appropriate to say at the moment. Now really wasn't the time to be deciding such things anyways.

Alas, it was not to be Arn's last surprise of the night.
Entering his assigned room, he was surprised by the squeal of a small girl in a night gown.

"EEEE! There's a filthy man in our room!" she hollered as she started grabbing and tossing anything and everything around at the surprised Arn.

"Hey now- what in Oblivion are you-" Arn stuttered, slapping away the clothes, shoes, silverware, and bottles she was tossing at him.

"That's enough now!" the imperious command of Lydia came from behind the little girl, who stopped throwing things but still eyed Arn warily.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Arn queried of the girl, who looked around 8 or 9 years old.

"This is Bryda. She is the daughter of Valdimar" Lydia announced, rising up from a bedroll to appear behind the bed that Bryda was cautiously perched on.

"He has a daughter?" Arn puzzled, unsure how he was going to negotiate that unexpected addition. While Arn wasn't familiar with all the trappings and traditions involving Housecarls, he was pretty sure they were required to be unattached at the time they were pledged. That meant no spouse or children.

"Oh! There you are!" gasped Valdimar, as he burst in the room behind Arn before slamming the door "I thought I might have missed you out in the town somewhere among the campfires"

"This...is your daughter?" Arn asked, trailing off at the end, hoping for an explanation.

"Ah...uh...yes, she is. I...know it's highly unusual, but let me explain. I returned from Cyrodiil close to two months ago, but on the trip back, our caravan was attacked by bandits and my wife, Elise, was killed by an arrow. Many of our valuables were stolen, but I kept my daughter safe" Valdimar struggled to explain, wringing his hands as he stared at the floor, willing away the bad memories.

"When we arrived here, we didn't have much left, so I offered my services as a mage. Unfortunately, I have since discovered that mages aren't trusted here for reasons I don't quite understand. Things would have been bleaker had Aslfur not intervened and offered a place of service to you in exchange for basic goods and housing. That is how I came to be your Housecarl" he finished, looking back up at Arn hopefully.

"It's not--" Arn began to say before Valdimar interrupted him.

"Please, my Thane! I will protect you with my last breath. I swear it....but...I fear to leave my daughter on her own" he implored, bowing his head in earnest again.

All the room's occupants were silent, the toll of their plight sinking in.

"It's not a problem...but...the wilds would be far too dangerous for her, and we frequently end up in fights" Arn mused, turning to eye the young girl for a moment.

Thin and undernourished, her slightly freckled face frowned out at him from under a bit of messy, long brown hair.

"Only bad people get in fights all the time" she unexpectedly blurted out at Arn.

"Bryda!" hissed Valdimar before Arn raised a silencing hand.
"What if the bad people are always trying to get me?" Arn reasoned with a raised eyebrow "Doesn't that mean I end up in their fights all the time?"

"Only if you're stupid and they catch you" retorted Bryda, crossing her arms defiantly.

Arn briefly considered continuing the discussion, but the evening was growing late, and he decided he didn't want to spend it arguing with an eight year old.

"Get some rest. When the funeral is over, do you think you can get to Whiterun?" Arn turned back to Valdimar, who had leaned back against the door in relief.

"The route has been cleared of bandits, and there should be plenty of other travelers headed that way. I think we can make it" worried Valdimar a little bit, unsure what Arn was implying.

"I have a house there, Breezehome. Some of my other housecarls and...people are there already. Identify yourself to them and they should make room and provision for both you and your daughter. Lydia and I will journey on to Falkreath" Arn declared before beginning to remove his weapons.

They all managed to get situated for the night, but Arn lay awake long into the night with memories of Cyrodiil, Elisif, and the Thalmor swirling in his mind.

As he finally began to doze off, he wondered if Bryda's words really did apply to the path he had chosen to take.

"Only if you're stupid and they catch you..."

It was several more days before the funeral, and more visitors and mourners arrived. The mood was somber, as it should be for the funeral of a leader, but there was something else that tinged everything.

The war fomented a distrust than ran deep. Even during a truce, a time of peace, where those on opposing sides might have sat down and shared a campfire, sang songs, and even snuck off to rut in the shadows, everyone stayed separated into their respective groups, rarely interacting, and when they did, always with an eye askance at the others or glancing over one's shoulder.

The funeral for Idgrod was conducted with much pageantry and a lengthy ceremony before the funeral pyre was finally lit. Arn didn't pay too much attention to what the priest was saying, besides he was too far away to hear anything other than a few snatches carried on the wind every once in awhile.

He had paid his own respects to Idgrod beforehand.

As Arn looked out across the rows and rows of soldiers, Jarls, diplomats, servants, and others of all races and professions, their grim faces watched the ceremony while stealing occasional glances at each other, their breaths vaporing out into the cold, winter air before finally the pyre was lit, the only sound besides the crackling of flames was the wailing cry of Ingrid.

A day later, Arn hurried Lydia and her new horse along the road south of Morthal, anxious to make distance between them and the various groups still left after the funeral.

"You worried we're being followed?" Lydia whispered roughly as she fought her mare for control again.

"I made sure no one knew we were leaving, and Valdimar and Bryda are safely hidden away with a merchant who left this morning" Arn replied, still absently looking back through the hills toward the
direction of Morthal.

"What's the matter, then?" Lydia muttered, eyeing the area around.

"I just want away from this madness. That's all" Arn muttered angrily, turning his horse and putting spurs to it as heavy snowflakes began to fall.

Little did either of them know, they were heading right into the eye of the storm.

Chapter End Notes

1. I wasn't particularly happy with any politicians when I wrote this chapter (still not happy with them). So some of that bitterness may have bled into the portrayal of them.
2. The Funeral itself is a bit glossed over, but I didn't feel there was anything of import left for Arn. At that point, he just wants out of there. Also, it was hard to find any information on funerals in Skyrim other than the one Companion's funeral which I doubt is a normal one.
3. I'm trying to avoid getting caught up in nitty gritty details about armor, horses, weapons etc. since it doesn't usually serve a narrative purpose, but there are times when the state or lack of something may cause an issue.
A Blizzard and a Surprise: Falkreath pt. 1

Chapter Summary

Arn and Lydia trudge through a Blizzard to make it to Falkreath. Unbeknownst to them, Falkreath is the fulcrum both Stormcloaks and Imperials are desperately trying to control.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arn squinted against the gusting snow in the darkening sky before he trudged through another drift as he led his troubled horse through the storm that had grown from a gentle snowfall to heavy dumping of snow, to a near white out Blizzard as they traveled further into Falkreath territory.

Neither he nor Lydia had really been to Falkreath before. Arn didn't count his secret foray to the Twilight Sepulcher as anything helpful since they avoided roads so much. So neither of them knew the terrain or quite what to expect when they got there.

Situated in a lush valley between mountain ranges, the city occupied a strategic position of control over the main route into Skyrim from Cyrodiil to the south.

After a brief stay in Rorikstead, Arn grew concerned the heavy snow would block the passes. So they had pushed on through a day and a night of travelling and figured they must be getting near the city, unless they'd taken a wrong turn.

With all the snow and wind, it was impossible to carry on a conversation, and they had fallen into a single file line to ensure only one person had to break a trail through the snow.

When they had all poured over the maps and landmarks with Delphine and Esbern in Riften, they had discovered that the area of the "Reach" in earlier times also encompassed the north and western areas of Falkreath.

Since Arn had no desire to deal with both the Winter and the Forsworn, he'd decided on Falkreath as the first area of interest to explore. He supposed he should also speak to this Jarl Siddgeir that kept sending him imploring letters that declined to give any specifics, though he didn't have a good feeling about it.

What problem could they possibly want him to deal with if they had such a strong Imperial presence? Arn wondered before immediately reminding himself of the problems in Solitude despite the heavy Imperial presence there as well.

His contemplations about Solitude brought back his memories of Elisif and their recent argument at Idgrod's funeral.

With renewed energy, he angrily forced his way through another snow drift before he spotted lamplight very close ahead.

"Travellers! Open the Gates!" came the holler from guards to one another as Arn and Lydia finally reached the outer walls to Falkreath.
As Arn and Lydia trudged through the small opening the guards labored to create between the gate
doors, they were quickly surrounded by half a dozen guards asking questions all at once.

"Where did you come from?"

"How long have you been travelling?"

"Were you attacked on the road?"

"Did you see anyone else?"

Arn took a moment to catch his breath and look around at the gaunt faces and pale lips of the men
that he supposed were the guards of this city before he answered.

"We came from the northwest route, near Sunderstone Gorge. We didn't see anyone, mostly due to
the storm over the last day and a half" Arn replied tiredly as he looked around at the buildings for an
Inn.

"You should talk to the Jarl immediately!" they all exhorted before prodding and pointing toward the
large square building in the center of town that was apparently the Jarl's Longhouse.

Their arrival had turned into an event. Guards scrambled and scurried to tell each other and others in
the buildings that visitors had arrived. Arn might have normally thought it was due to him being the
"Dragonborn" or due to Lydia's head turning looks, but since he hadn't said anything about being the
Dragonborn and they were bundled up too thick for them to get a good look at Lydia's figure, Arn
figured something else must be going on.

Once their horses were situated in the stables, Arn and Lydia trudged back to the Jarl's Longhouse,
thumping ice and snow layered boots up the stairs before being ushered into the heat and delicious
smell of food inside.

Arn and Lydia both breathed sighs of relief as they unfurled furs from around their helmets and
dusted the snow off themselves as they took in the interior of the Jarl's abode.

The Jarl's Longhouse was a surprising contrast to everything they'd seen on the way in. It was well
lit with bright, burning lanterns. Spotlessly clean, a housecarl and several guards stood waiting on
Jarl Siddgeir himself, who sat on a polished wood throne inlaid with antlers and blue cushions.
Flanking his throne were two rich, blue banners with the Falkreath crest and several impressive
hunting mounts.

A golden haired Altmer woman, tall and clad in a more richly embroidered mage robe than normal,
stood in the foreground, likely a steward, while a pretty, young Nord lass with auburn hair scrambled
around the hall, tending the fire and running in and out of the kitchen.

Siddgeir himself was attired in opulent noble robes, and sat dining with a silver platter of chicken
meat and vegetables, seemingly unaware of anything else.

Arn was wondering if they should just approach or wait when the Altmer woman marched up to
them and clasped her hands in front of her. Looking down slightly at them while looking them over,
she turned to Arn first.

"I am Nenya, steward of Jarl Siddgeir. I don't recognize you. What business brings you to these
parts" she announced rather formally.

"My name is Arn. I am the Dragonborn, and this is my Housecarl Lydia" Arn answered curtly,
deciding that it might be wise to avoid mentioning his last name too much now that he knew there was a warrant for him out in Cyrodiil.

"Ah, Jarl Siddgeir has been awaiting your arrival for some time" Nenya visibly relaxed and a small, formal smile graced her lips as she bowed reverently.

"NARRI! NARRRRIIIII!" bellowed Siddgeir from his throne, interrupting the warm calm of the Hall.

The pretty, auburn haired Nord lass from earlier hurried back out of the kitchen and knelt fearfully before Siddgeir.

"Look at this! Look at this! Tell me, what do you see?!!" Siddgeir cried angrily, thrusting a chicken leg at the bewildered lass.

For a few moments, the girl looked between the chicken leg and the angry Jarl despondently before Siddgeir unleashed more words at her.

"PINK! There's pink meat in the middle! This isn't why I hired you! You begged and begged for a job. I could have said 'No'. After all, Nenya can cook just fine when I order her to. But I hired you!" Siddgeir exclaimed as he stood and leaned over the kneeling servant.

"I am sorry, my Jarl" the lass stuttered before Siddgeir resumed.

"You're supposed to make my Court look more pleasing to Nord eyes. Where's that tavern wench outfit you're supposed to be wearing?" he sneered, eyeing the plain frock she wore with disdain.

"I-It was drying.." she muttered as Nenya sped up the group's approach to Siddgeir's throne.

"That's two things now that you're supposed to be doing that you've failed at. You know what'll happen if I have you thrown out on the street!" snapped Siddgeir, continuing to point the chicken leg at her.

"My Jarl, the Dragonborn has finally arrived, just as you'd hoped" Nenya interrupted, stepping off to one side and gesturing to Arn and Lydia as she bowed reverently.

Arn perceived Nenya had acted quickly to circumvent Siddgeir's wrath with the servant girl from getting worse.

Turning at the interruption, Siddgeir's countenance changed drastically from a scornful frown to a lighthearted smirk.

"Ah...yes. Finally! You've come!" he exclaimed, eyeing them both over before rubbing his hands together in a gleeful manner. It filled Arn with a sense of greater unease than before.

Siddgeir was younger than most other Jarls Arn had encountered, or at least looked that way. Maybe in his early twenties, he had smooth unblemished skin, rich brown hair, and a clean shaven handsome face.

He wore opulent embroidered noble robes and flashed a golden circlet on his head engraved with emeralds.

Anyone seeing him might have thought him a fine example of noble appearance, but the cruel display they'd just witnessed tarnished that image.
"This is Arn, Dragonborn of Akatosh, and his Housecarl of...Whiterun, Lydia" Nenya resumed, making a hand motion to wave away the startled Narri while Siddgeir resumed his seat on his throne and eyed both of them over.

"I've heard of some of your mighty deeds...Dragonborn" Siddgeir declared, sitting forward in his chair as if anticipating something.

"I've not heard much about Falkreath before, but your poor treatment of that girl wasn't the best first impression" Arn replied more coldly, not feeling much inclined to make nice with a Jarl that seemed at first glance to possess a nasty streak for cruelty.

"Clearly, you've never ruled anything" Siddgeir frowned slightly at him as he waved his hand dismissively.

"One can rule without being cruel" Arn replied, being careful to rein in his growing anger with this Jarl.

"If you're not cruel, no one fears you, which is necessary to rule any land, especially one so troubled as this" Siddgeir continued, tossing away what was left of his chicken onto the floor carelessly before taking up an ornate silver wine goblet and taking a swig.

"And what exactly is it that makes this a troubled land?" Arn asked, eyeing around the room for a moment as he scratched the itching that had just reared up again on the back of his neck.

"You do realize this is an important hold? We control the pass in and out of Cyrodiil to the south and we serve as a buttress against the ravages of the Forsworn in the west" Siddgeir proudly announced to them, rising from his throne and motioning the different directions with his hands.

"And?" Arn nearly interrupted him, the itching on his neck making him grow more cross with the petulant ruler.

"It means we are a vital piece of the Empire, AND AS SUCH...our Imperial allies are tied up in keeping control of these places" Siddgeir glared at Arn, emphasizing his words impatiently.

"They encountered no one when they went through the pass, my Jarl" Nenya chimed in with an explanatory tone.

"So they don't know? Of course, then it would seem strange" Siddgeir was either speaking to himself or Nenya, Arn didn't know.

"We are referring to the bandit problem" Nenya turned to tell Arn in a calming tone.

"How bad?" Arn retorted, figuring this was going to be just like many other jobs he'd undertaken both with the Starblades and on his own.

"Well...it wasn't so bad at first" Siddgeir suddenly grew almost sheepish about it, sitting down and rubbing his chin as if it was difficult to recall.

"They've grown in numbers and boldness the longer they go unchecked" Nenya continued.

"Where? How many? How do I find them?" Arn asked briskly, wanting this interview over with.

"There are probably dozens by now, but you're in luck" Siddgeir seemed to recover his confidence once it became apparent Arn had no qualms about hunting down bandits "They've spread themselves thin in an attempt to seige the city of Falkreath."
"Seige the city itself?" Arn asked incredulously.

"More or less...Since the hold is surrounded on most sides by mountains, all they really need to do is control the passes in and out" Nenya explained.

"But they have grown more bold. Haven't they?!" Siddgeir proclaimed, angrily looking off into space before taking another drink from his wine goblet.

"Yes...well, once Winter began to set in, their numbers began to swell and their attacks have moved closer and closer. Now, camping outside the city walls isn't even safe anymore" Nenya struggled to explain, as if there were a painful memory attached to it.

"Why haven't the Legion broken them?" Arn asked, trying not to be moved by the display and the implications of what the reality of it meant.

"I told you BEFORE!" angrily exclaimed Siddgeir "They have a war to fight, and if they leave the caravans or pass to the south unguarded, they risk losing it all"

"How are you getting supplies?" Lydia interjected before shrinking back from Siddgeir's glare.

"We don't get supplies or trade from anyone else except any traders coming through the pass south from Cyrodiil, which is very few, and they never stay" Nenya replied calmly.

"Why haven't you told anyone else?" Arn snapped, reasoning that if he had, there would have been enough rumors for him to have caught wind of it by now.

"WHY? Why would I?" Siddgeir snapped incredulously "I'd become the laughingstock of all the Jarls, the Jarl held captive in his own city!" he finished, folding his arms crossly and leaning back in his throne.

"What do I get out of this?" Arn huffed, deciding it best not to say anything about his real reason for visiting.

"Oh...well" Siddgeir perked up suddenly, as if it never occurred to him that he'd have to pay for something "Ah...I've heard you were made Thane in several holds. I too can...offer you a place of Thane in my court" he motioned generously around at the empty space in the rest of the Hall.

"That's it?" Arn muttered, looking around at the emptiness and wondering if there were any Thanes at all in Falkreath and the reasons for it being that way.

"It comes with a handsome sum as well, I assure you, uh a-and a fine woman...errr Housecarl too. Do I look like a man who doesn't know about the finer things?" Siddgeir again waved around him again before relaxing in his throne and sipping his wine goblet.

"I suppose it'll do. Is there anyone that we can talk to or hire that knows the lay of the land?" Arn queried after a short silence thinking over things while continuing to wonder why his neck kept itching so bad.

Nenya and Siddgeir looked at each other for a moment before he waved his hand at her and she replied.

"There is a hunter named Sinding that lives North of here just on the north side of the old Bastion ruins in the mountains across the pond outside the city. He can help you" Nenya replied.

"If even he's still alive" muttered Siddgeir without looking at anyone in particular.
"We'll look into it when the storm passes" Arn replied before whirling decisively and departing the Jarl's Hall with Lydia.

Arn was about to turn and remark something to Lydia as they bundled themselves back up outside when they were interrupted again.

"Dragonborn! Come, our commander wishes to speak to you!" briskly ordered a young Imperial Legionnaire with three others standing at attention in the road.
Arn huffed and motioned them to lead on.

After a few minutes of marching, Arn and Lydia were led into a separate barracks manned only by Imperial Legionnaires at the southwest end of Falkreath.

After standing awkwardly in the front room for a short while, two Legionnaires marched in from an adjacent room.

Both wore armor designating them as Legates, but they were completely different otherwise.

The first was an older Nord man, with skin starting to wrinkle with age and tanned under many days under a harsher sun. His armor was the dull shine of steel, but bore many signs of past battles and Arn didn't doubt there were probably scars to match on the veteran.

The second was a much younger Imperial man, with black hair and paler skin than most Imperials. He also had bright green eyes that immediately drew attention.
Arn figured it to be either made of Bronze or glazed gold with several precious stones inlaid in it. There was no way it could be entirely gold, too heavy and too soft a metal.

"I am Legate Sven Skulnar and this is my second in command, Legate Forius Moldak" gruffly barked the older Legate with the effortless authority of a lifetime of giving orders.
Arn simply nodded by way of greeting. Until he knew what this was about, he had no reason to be friendly with any other Legionnaires.

"Are you the one they call 'Dragonborn'?" continued Skulnar.

"I am" returned Arn warily without trying to sound wary.

"I understand you've come on the Jarl's business" it was more a question than a statement.

"We plan on helping lift the siege of this hold if that's what you're asking" Arn replied, tossing the implications of it back at Skulnar.

"I don't care how many songs they sing about you elsewhere. I've seen enough fighting to know no one can do the things claimed about you. Here, I command the Legionnaires in this hold, and our priority is to protect the Empire's interests here. That means the supply route in from Cyrodiil and making sure no...revolts can destabilize the Jarl's peaceful rule" snapped Skulnar with contempt as he eyed Arn over.

"Peaceful rule?" Arn joked a little incredulously.

"Don't jest. We know you gave Ulfric the Jagged Crown" interjected Legate Moldak.

"We ALSO know you're a man who only gives his loyalty to the one who offers the most tits and coins" grumbled Skulnar before spitting on the ground in disgust.
Arn huffed and tried to calm himself before responding, but Moldak jumped into the conversation again.

"Sure your ancestors must be very proud of you, taking advantage of those desperate to believe something in these difficult times, selling your mercenary skills to both sides whenever it suits you" chided Moldak snidely.

"If all you want is to insult me, then surely I can set up a snowman that looks like me and you can have your merry way with him while I go get warm at the Inn" Arn shrugged, refusing to let the young Legate's remarks get to him.

"I've no reason to hold you, but mind my warnings and stay on the good side of the Empire here, or I've no qualms about putting both of you in the brig and throwing away the key" barked Legate Skulnar with finality before whirling and leaving the room.

As Arn and Lydia trudged back down the street with Legate Moldak and a few other Legionnaires glaring at their backs, Arn glanced back at them before whispering to Lydia.

"And I thought our welcome in Windhelm was bad..."

"Oh for the days when everyone loved us..." Lydia grinned a little wryly at him.

Entering the warmth of the cheerily named "Dead Man's Drink", another gloomy scene greeted them.

A tavern should be the most crowded place in a winter storm. There's warmth, food, drink, and company enough to while away the time when there's nothing else to do but wait for the weather to pass. Many Innkeepers allow patrons to run up tabs during storms that they otherwise wouldn't allow at all.

This tavern, however, was nearly empty.

A balding older man with a white beard picked at a plate of sinewy meat while another older man across from him was setting out some cards.

A blonde male Breton was tuning a lute in the corner, likely a bard.

There was an attractive young Imperial woman with a fierce frown behind the counter whose eyes grew large with surprise when they walked in before she composed herself and tried to look calm as they walked to the counter.

"We'll need a room until the storm is gone" Arn announced.

The woman looked at him in surprise for a moment before responding.

"Oh...yes, of course. It's ten septims a night" she replied happily after recovering from her silence.

As they made arrangements, the woman gradually leaned in closer, occasionally stealing glances behind them at the other patrons.

"The name's Valga Vinicia and if one or both of you wants any....extra services, I charge another 20 septim per hour" she whispered.

Arn knew what that meant and it wasn't unusual to use prostitution of the sort as a side income when innkeepers were desperate, greedy...or just more depraved. He wasn't sure which of those categories
she fell into, but he did feel like he needed to know more about this Bandit situation, and an Innkeeper was always a good source of information of the local goings on, but before he could reply, someone else behind them in the room piped up.

"Don't do it. She has diseases" muttered one of the older men at the table.

"SHUT UP, DENGEIR!" barked Valga loudly before hurling a mug in her hand across the room with surprising accuracy, bouncing off the table top right next to the balding man "YOU TOO!" she also hollered at the bewildered bard.

"But I didn't--" the bard tried to remonstrate before a glare from Valga silenced him.

When calm had returned again, Arn eyed the Imperial woman now fiercely glowering at the floor in shame.

"If it's true, why not consult the alchemist? That is an alchemist shop down the street, right?" Lydia chimed in with enough concern in her voice to disarm the angry response the embarrassed innkeeper would've levied against anyone else.

"It's closed. Zaria left town some time ago" she hissed quietly, still embarrassed to look them in the eye again.

"Tell you what. I am interested in extra...information about the area and we can pay in...potions" Arn whispered after casting a look over his shoulder and brandishing two phials of orange-red liquid.

Valga Vinicia's eyes grew large again when she saw the phials, but bit her lip and looked around worriedly again before leaning even closer to Arn.

"You seem like decent people. So I'll tell you this. Leave. As soon as this storm is over, leave. You're goods, your life, and your....dignity are at risk the longer you stay in these walls. Please don't ask any more questions. I...I can't answer them. You'll find out more outside the city than you will in it" she whispered, her face dropping the mask of the intimidating frown for a few moments so they both saw the terrified look of the woman underneath.

Arn wanted badly to ask more questions, but it was evident the woman feared reprisal, and he had no desire to bring that on her. So he quietly handed her the two phials instead, quietly directing her on the use of them before he and Lydia retired to their room for the night.

Once they'd gotten set up in their room, Lydia frowned at him as he quietly moved several pieces of furniture in front on the door.

"You don't think we'll be safe in the Inn?" she worried as he checked the edges of the walls to make sure there were no secret entrances or peepholes.

Only once Arn had assured himself the room was secure did he answer.

"Did she look like she felt safe?"

"You think it's the Jarl?" she asked, sitting cross legged in just her leathers on the lone bed as she watched Arn remove his armor pieces.

"I don't know. Everything seems wrong here. Did you see how shocked they were to get visitors? Did you see how thin and emaciated the guards were?"

"You think they're not getting fed?"
"Not very well, at least, but did you notice anything about the Legionnaires?"

"Besides the fact they practically spat on us" Lydia frowned.

"They weren't gaunt and emaciated"

"The underling Legate looked a bit thin...and pale, especially for an Imperial" Lydia mused as Arn continued to remove armor pieces.

"Heh...that's just because he's first Legion material" Arn chuckled a little ironically.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, however many Legions there are in the Imperial Army...I think it's six or seven right now, the first Legion is always stationed in the Imperial City" Arn replied, setting his sheathed weapons on the stand next to the bed.

"Why?"

"It was a safety measure after the Great War, a safeguard to make sure the Imperial capital never fell again, but the downside is that they never really see any combat at all. Sure, some of them are decorated veterans who get promoted to a life of ease and comfort as reward for their heroism, but that is rare. Most of them are like that Legate Moldak" Arn sneered as he sat down on the floor with his back to the bed before he continued.

"His armor is lavish to the point of ridiculousness, and his wrists are so thin they could pass for a child. I doubt he's ever lifted a sword in combat in his entire, sheltered life. He's likely the rich bratty child of wealthy nobles who use their influence to get him a post where he won't be at risk, but can still get promoted and recognized."

"What's he doing in this 'troubled hold'?" Lydia attempted to mock Siddgeir's annoyed tone.

"One of a couple of reasons. It could be that the war goes so badly that they've dipped into the reserves of untested Imperial youths, but I doubt that. It could also be that he pissed off someone important in the Imperial city and his penance is this post."

"What gets a rich noble's son sent to a bad post?" Lydia wondered.

"Get the wrong person's daughter pregnant, accidentally kill a man in a tavern brawl, snitch on another rich noble's son, who knows" Arn mused before stroking the stubble on his chin.

"And him being in Skyrim is bad news?"

"Of course, if he's being punished, he'll take it out on his soldiers and still not have any idea what he's doing. The other possibility is even less pleasant."

"What do you mean?" Lydia's frown returned as she moved to lay on her front across the bed, resting her head on her forearms next to where he leaned back against the bed.

"The other reason he might be here is that someone has a merchant interest that they're using the war to profit by, and having him here gives them a direct ear and influence in what goes on" Arn muttered angrily.

"You think there are those in Cyrodiil that would see the war in Skyrim that way?" Lydia sighed, knowing it was true.
"After what I saw happen in the Great War, which happened a lot in Cyrodiil, you can be sure there are plenty looking to profit. Just look at what we've dealt with in the last months. Bandits, Erikur, the Blackbriars, and now even more bandits...I tell you, nothing makes men lose their minds like war. Once you beat the drums of war, it's like nothing else matters. All rules are suspended, all honor is relative to a faction, and nothing else seems to matter to the masses except if the 'other' one is gaining an advantage or not" Arn spat more angrily than he meant.

"Not everyone acts without honor" Lydia shrugged before reaching over and gently caressing the short fuzz of hair on his head as if her messing with it would ease the cynical thoughts he was dwelling on.

"Sometimes it doesn't seem like anyone cares about it anymore" Arn muttered.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with your visit to Elisif's cabin..would it?" Lydia ventured cautiously.

"Why would it?" Arn replied evasively.

"I did notice you didn't go back after the first time, and you've been in a grumpy mood ever since" she left off at the end as if it were a question instead of a statement.

"Elisif and I will NOT be resuming our...relationship. I am apparently not loyal enough to the Empire for her, and instead is worried about those wagging their tongues and assuming all the gossips speak truly about me" Arn derided before turning to catch Lydia slowly smirk at him.

"What are you smiling about?" Arn inquired, unable to stop a smirk from slowly creeping on his face as well.

"I'm not smiling" she snapped, her smirk growing into a full fledged grin.

"You're still smiling" Arn turned to squint his eyes to fake his intense scrutiny. Lydia cleared her throat and took visible effort to erase her smile, replacing it instead with a look of scrutiny of her own.

"There, see? I'm not smiling" she frowned triumphantly.

"But you obviously want to" Arn retorted, prompting her facade to fall, the smile returning.

"Damn you, Arn. I'm trying not to" she grinned.

"Well, you still haven't said why" Arn replied, grinning back.

"I....just...think you're better off this way" she began while trying to avoid looking him in the eye "If she doesn't understand or agree with your beliefs, then it's probably better if the two of you part ways" Lydia finished, turning and fixing him with a smug grin before resting her chin on her forearms again.

Arn smiled but grew silent as he contemplated things.

At length, Lydia went to sleep on the promise he would wake her for second watch. Arn continued watching the door, but without the smiling presence of Lydia, the many problems of the troubled hold of Falkreath swirled again in his mind.

He wasn't sure if it was just the doom and gloom of everything in the town or if there was something
else at work, but Arn felt an ominous foreboding about the war here.

Somehow, he suspected they would not let him stay neutral. One of them was going to force his hand eventually. As he looked back up on the bed to see the gentle rise and fall of breath from Lydia's curvy form, he prayed none of those under his care would be forced to pay the price Arn was willing to endure for his beliefs.

Chapter End Notes

1. Kind of a set up chapter.
2. No Barbas dog quest. It really didn't seem like something that went or could be fit in with everything else going on.
3. You'll notice I mentioned Sinding from the "Ill met by Moonlight" quest. However, I will have my own take on it for this story.
Chapter Summary

Arn and Lydia meet up with Sinding, but he is not what he seems, nor does their assault on a bandit hideout go as planned...

Chapter Notes

WARNING: BRIEF NON-CONSENSUAL FLASHBACK IN THIS CHAPTER IN THE ITALICIZED SECTION!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the storm abating in the night, Arn and Lydia were in for a rude surprise the next morning when they found their horses were gone from the Falkreath stables.

Even more disconcerting, no one seemed to know anything about it, and prodding the guards more intently only drew the ire of the Imperial Legionnaires, who promptly had Legate Skulnar come out and order them to leave the guards alone.

When Arn questioned Skulnar about investigating their horses' disappearance, Skulnar simply glared back before replying.

"I've no time for such nonsense, but if you really need horses, I hear you're very good at getting the Jarls to give you things" he sneered to chuckles from the other Legionnaires before whirling and retreating back into the barracks.

Arn glared his response at Skulnar's back before whirling and indicating Lydia toward the general store labeled "Gray Pine Goods."

When they entered, they surprised a pair of blonde Nord men, both so alike in appearance, that Arn figured them for brothers if not twins. They had been hunched over the counter whispering between themselves and jerked back startled when Arn edged the door open.

As soon as Arn saw them, that itching on his neck returned.

Why whisper when you're the only two people in the room? Arn wondered as he and Lydia made their way to the counter.

"I am Solaf and this is Bolund. Welcome to Gray Pine Goods. What can we sell you now that the storm has passed" greeted the one in the brown vest in a cheerful manner while the other looked a bit sour that they'd been interrupted.

"We need to pick up some supplies before we head out. Wondering what you have for sale?" Arn stated as he not-so-accidentally jingled his coinpurse to let them know he was a serious buyer.

"Well, I'll admit our stocks aren't as good as they would be normally, but we still have a few things
"you'll find useful out on the road. What are ya looking for?" Solaf returned as he glanced back to his own shelves.

"Well, we're interested in any potions you have as well as food rations and maybe some pelts if they're winterized. Also, I was wondering--" Arn started to relay before the other brother, Bolund, interrupted them.

"Hey, you....you're Imperial. Aren't you?" he suddenly barked at a surprised Lydia.

"Bolund, calm down. They're only here to--" Solaf started to reason before Bolund continued, louder and more irritated than before.

"Tell me! Are you an Imperial or not?!" he slapped the counter.

Arn was going to gently pull Lydia away from the angry Nord behind the counter, but she stood her ground, glaring back at Bolund.

"HALF Imperial, and a lot more Nord than you with your haughty attitude" she spat back at him.

"See brother, here's another one! Stomping around our lands, taking our goods, our jobs, our homes, and not a whit of an apology! Instead, they think they own the place, just like those Legionnaires!" Bolund hissed, glancing back and forth between Lydia and Solaf.

"If you can't see past someone's skin, maybe you shouldn't be a merchant" Arn grunted, placing himself at the counter between Bolund and Lydia.

"I'll not be selling anything to Imperial dogs and the cowards who bow to them! Just look at what your kind has done to our town! Skyrim for the Nords and the Nords for Skyrim!" Bolund spat angrily as he backed away before turning and marching up the stairs and out of the room.

"Oh...uh...sorry about that. Don't listen to him. He's....just upset that times are tough right now" Solaf tried to apologize as he nervously tapped the counter, casting his eyes down.

"He seems more than 'a little worked up'' Arn grumbled, warily eyeing the stairs where Bolund had disappeared.

"He's always been a bit hot headed" Solaf tried to chuckle dismissively.

"What has everyone so on edge here?" Arn queried, leaning on the counter and fixing the merchant with a scrutinizing glare.

"Well...eh...Winter is always difficult" he chuckled halfheartedly.

"I've never seen guards behave the way these do, and everyone.... EVERYONE has been watching us like a hawk....WHY?" Arn practically demanded.

Solaf gulped and grew visibly uneasy before he seemed to remember something and glared directly back at Arn.

"Because the Empire feels sacrificing this hold is worth it to hold open the cursed southern pass!" he spat, growing emotional.

"You sound like you share your brother's sympathies" Arn replied in a cautionary tone.

"A lot of folk around here do. We were doing just fine until that son of a swine Siddgeir used the Legion to supplant Dengeir of Stuhn as Jarl" he hissed with quivering lips.
"We saw Dengeir in the tavern" Lydia stated, giving voice to Arn's puzzlement how a capable man was somehow ousted from being Jarl, but remained living comfortably in the same city.

Jarls just didn't step down, and the only way one got changed was through death, prosecution of a serious crime, or in a few rare cases, banishment by unanimous vote of a Moot of the rest of the Jarls.

"Dengeir is Siddgeir's uncle. The sot was too cowardly to just have him killed. Instead, he lets him live nearby, just watching him ruin everything in Falkreath" Solaf muttered before he grew emotional and sat down on a stool behind the counter.

"How did that happen?" Arn asked, suddenly feeling maybe they needed to whisper, despite no one else being there.

"Stop asking questions! No good will come of it! I'm tired of making excuses and groveling out a few septims here and there. There aren't even any proper women here anymore! If you want answers, maybe you should go ask the ones with everything!" huffed Solaf, gesturing over in the direction of the Jarl's Longhouse and the Imperial Legion barracks.

Arn relented, suddenly feeling that maybe he owed them an apology, but even as he was purchasing a few winterized furs, he caught sight of Bolund coming back down the stairs, his gaze was still full of anger and still entirely focused on Lydia.

Making their way back to the Inn and collecting their things, they set out on foot North through the freshly fallen snow.

Recognizing that the mobility of any would-be thieves and bandits would be hampered by the freshly fallen snow, Arn and Lydia pushed hard to make as much progress as quickly as they could.

Dusk was casting shadows through the snow blanketed forest as Arn and Lydia trudged through the final drifts before making it into the clearing in front of the cabin supposedly belonging to Sinding.

Arn noted there were fresh tracks and some bloody kills hanging in the shed nearby.

"Hold right there!" hissed a voice from one of the windows as Arn tried to approach.

"My name is Arnsmyth Bulgoar and this is my Housecarl Lydia. I am the one they call 'The Dragonborn'. We were sent by Jarl Siddgeir. They said you were familiar with the land in this hold. We'd be willing to hire you as a guide" Arn explained, keeping his arms away from his weapons, despite the uneasiness of the situation.

"The Jarl sent you, did he?" returned the voice, still uneasy.

"Both he and Nenya assured us you could help. We aren't familiar with the area or the terrain" Arn tried to sound calm and reassuring.

After a short silence, they heard the bar being removed from the door before it was unlatched and opened to reveal a wiry, but muscled blonde Nord man in fur armor glance out at them.

He glanced quickly around as if worried someone might be watching before quickly motioning them in.

Tired and relieved to get out of the snow drifts, Arn and Lydia both heaved sighs of relief as they entered the warmth of the small cabin.

After negotiating a price, Arn sat down next to Lydia on the floor as Sinding eyed over the septims
Arn had just paid as if he was concerned they might be fake.

"I guess he doesn't get many people up here" Lydia whispered to Arn.

"Probably not, even less with the bandit problem" Arn muttered as he began to think through what to do next.

"What did they tell you in town?" Sinding huffed almost in a vexed manner as he stuff his septims away in something before crossing his arms and scrutinizing them both.

"That bandits were controlling the passes....and that we'd find out more outside the town than inside" Arn replied, returning the wary gaze.

"I suppose that's true, though I've not been in town since last Winter" Sinding continued eyeing them over.

"I need details. Who are they? How many are there? Exactly where do they camp?" Arn asked, hoping to get some indication of what this Sinding character knew.

"Just cause I know the land doesn't mean I know everyone who's here and what they're doing" he huffed again, looking away for a moment before continuing "Best bet to find out what's going on is to talk to the other hunters."

"Are there a lot of hunters here this time of year?" Lydia queried, a little puzzled that anyone would stay out in the wilds during the worst parts of the seasons.

"You really don't know much about Falkreath, do you?" Sinding frowned back.

"No...we don't" Arn resisted the urge to get short with the man despite his apparent annoyance to their intrusion in his life.

"Falkreath's only real business outside of being a gateway to Cyrodiil is furs from the abundant woods and mountains surrounding it. There's plenty of game all year round. Even during the harshest winter months, there's still plenty of game to be found in higher elevations or taking cover in sheltered valleys, caves, and grottos" Sinding replied, gazing past them out the window, a slight grin crossing his features for the first time since they'd seen him.

"You enjoy the life of a hunter?" Lydia more assumed than asked.

"I've done it all my life. There's nothing like it. You're free to wonder the gods' creation, worship however you please, pit yourself against its creatures, make yourself into whatever you want. Fortunes can be made with good furs, especially when harsher winters hit further south where they aren't expecting it. There's a few hunters that have very big, expensively built cabins in the mountains" Sinding continued, a slight smile returning.

"There's no one to bother you. No one to crack a whip over your head, or scream politics at ya. No one to vex you with taxes or any other nonsense like that" he mused before taking a swig of presumably water from a canteen pouch.

"Until now..." Arn interjected.

"Bandits are an occasional problem. Anytime you meet someone you don't know in the wilds, there can be trouble" Sinding seemed to shrug it away.

"So how did this end up the way it is then?" Arn persisted.
"Heh, you can blame it on the war...I suppose" Sinding scowled at Arn before looking out the window again.

"Wouldn't the war make it harder for bandits?" Lydia puzzled.

"Nah...the armies stay in the south and west areas, fighting each other and using up all the wild game as rations of their own. It makes everyone else have to go elsewhere. Used to have a way open east, then the Dragon attack on Helgen changed all that" Sinding shrugged before drinking from his canteen again.

An awkward silence fell on the bunch until Sinding piped up again.

"What makes you think you can take on a bunch of bandits by yourself?" he squinted his eyes at Arn as if probing for some secret.

"Depends how many there are, besides, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve" Arn tried to smile confidently as the itching on his neck flared up slightly again.

"Ask me tomorrow morning, and I'll show you why I'm called 'The Dragonborn'" Arn replied, thinking over how he would actually deal with a bunch of bandits and realizing it probably seemed like a suicidal task to someone who knew nothing of what he'd done or what he could do.

As they set out their bedrolls on the floor for the night, Arn couldn't help scratching his neck and wondering why he kept getting the fierce itching at seeming random intervals.

"Do you see any signs of a rash on my neck?" he whispered to Lydia, pulling his collar back and craning his neck so Lydia could see.

"There's nothing visible there" she whispered back before handling his leather collar around to see if there was any rash further to the sides or back "I don't see any sign of anything unusual. What's wrong?"

"It's just...I've been getting this itching...right here" he indicated on the back of his neck with his fingers "It's not constant. It seems to just appear and then disappear almost by chance"

"You think it's something to do with being the Dragonborn?" Lydia muttered quietly after casting a look over at Sinding's slightly snoring form in his bed.

"But it didn't start until I went to Riften..." Arn puzzled.

"Did Ingun do something to it?" Lydia snapped in a more worried tone.

"No...no one did anything--wait" Arn muttered as his memory of Nocturnal running her lips across the base of his neck replayed in his mind.

"What is it?" Lydia whispered, her proximity and touch at his neck unwillingly sending Arn's mind wandering about what it would be like to have her kissing the base of his neck.

"Uh...um...in my meeting with...Nocturnal...she...kissed that spot" Arn muttered, for the moment caught up with the soft breaths of Lydia falling on his neck at that moment.

"Did she? You think it means something special?" Lydia whispered, almost right by his ear.

Arn gulped, unsure if Lydia was purposefully trying to be seductive or if he was just that responsive to the ministrations she was using to investigate his complaint.
"I don't know. I've felt it flare up the most right before I was ambushed outside of Riften and then again later when the Thieves' Guild confronted us after Mercer Frey's hideout, but I've also felt it slightly some other times...like when we talked to Siddgeir yesterday and a little bit just before when Sinding was talking" Arn whispered, casting a glance at Sinding's sleeping form again.

"Do you want me to put anything on it? We still have one disease curing potion" Lydia opined before gently running two fingers across his neck, her touch requiring all of Arn's willpower not to shudder with desire. Once again, he found himself fighting the urge to just turn and make love to her on top of their bedrolls right there and then.

Sighing with resignation and more than a little disappointment, Arn decided they should save the potions.

"We might need them later and who knows when we'll find more. Best get some sleep" he murmured, gently removing her hand from his neck and giving it a gentle squeeze before moving to set two precautionary sound traps on the floor by their bedrolls.

He momentarily worried about getting any sleep with Lydia snuggled at his back next to him, but their trek through snow drifts all day ensured he was blissfully asleep within minutes.

The next day found Arn and Sinding out in the early morning dawn eyeing over trees nearby.

"Those two on the right" Sinding muttered while pointing at the two larger pine trees at the base of a rocky hill "That's where I plan on putting my smoke shed."

"Okay" Arn answered before sauntering to about fifteen feet away from them off to one side.

"FUS RO DAH!!"

The wave of force shattered the trunks of both trees at their base and sent the tall timbers crashing to the forest floor amid a large POOF of snowy powder.

Sinding hopped over to him through the snow, staring wide eyed back and forth between Arn and the downed trees.

"That's....that's really something!" he gasped for a moment before returning to his aloof demeanor from before "I suppose that's not all you can do?"

"You'll see when the time is right" Arn answered, not willing to indulge the man's unintentional-intentional curiosity into Arn's abilities.

Setting out from Sinding's cabin, Sinding explained they needed to reach a Hunter's camp and trading post, a place about a day's journey Northwest known as Hunter's Rest.

Though, Arn knew he probably shouldn't be, he was still surprised at how fast Sinding negotiated the snowy terrain. It took a lot of effort on his and Lydia's part to keep up with him and they left far more of a trail behind than Sinding did.

As a precaution, Sinding kept them off the road, weaving through clusters of trees and through rocky ravines.

At length, Sinding motioned them to stop and hunched down, cautiously eyeing ahead.

Arn could barely make out a shack of some sort through the trees, but something seemed wrong. Sinding was on high alert. He motioned them to wait while he scouted around to one side, leaving
Arn and Lydia crouched quietly in the snow.

"Are we going to ask him about Sky Haven Temple?" Lydia whispered next to him.

"We need to deal with this bandit problem first. Maybe that'll get some of these people from breathing down our necks. It will also tell us how good Sinding knows the area." Arn whispered back, still keeping his eyes scanning the woods.

After what seemed like a long time, they spotted Sinding peek out from behind a tree and motion them to come in. Still moving quietly, they moved in toward the camp, but quickly discovered something was very wrong.

The door was battered open.

Investigating inside revealed that the two hunters who'd been inside had been brutally murdered, hacked to pieces and the place had been ransacked.

There were only wolf tracks in the snow, clearly not the culprits, and no blood spatters were on the fallen snow.

"How long ago do you think this happened?" Arn asked Sinding, eyeing over the scene.

"Hard to say...at least two or three days judging from the lack of any sign on the snow" Sinding muttered, kneeling down to eye the ground at the doorway.

"What do we do know?" Lydia whispered, her sword and shield out as she watched cautiously around outside the cabin.

"We'll have to go further to the south and west. There's a big camp there that Hunters often use during the Winter months called Knifepoint Ridge" Sinding muttered, pulling a fur hood over his head as the wind whipped up momentarily.

"You don't seem thrilled at that idea" Arn muttered, seeing the change in Sinding's demeanor.

"I'm not as familiar with the men there, and they can be very...unfriendly if they don't know you" Sinding replied as they set off again.

Emerging from the mostly wooded ridges of the mountains, they ditched the sneaking approach and made all speed they could to reach this Knifepoint Ridge before night fall.

As they began to wind their way up the base of another mountain, they spotted the encampment further up the winding pathways that ended in a lumbered series of walls and gates. Seeing it, Sinding pulled them aside.

"There's no telling how many Hunters are here and they might not be friendly to any outsiders, but I know a few of them. Just stay calm and let me do the talking. You draw any weapons and this will end in a blood bath real fast" Sinding cautioned before casting a glance back up the trail.

Lydia looked at Arn, who nodded.

As they slowly made their way up the paths, Arn's neck slowly began to itch more and more. Nearing the top, it was nearing the point of pain.

Arn stopped and cast a look at Lydia that told her everything she needed to know.

Sinding turned and saw them both stop at the narrow point on the path before it opened up in front of
"What are you doing?" he hissed.

Lydia looked at Arn again before getting Chillrend and her shield at the ready.

"What's wrong with him?" Sinding brushed past Lydia, where Arn was cringing as he took cover from the ambush surely coming from the fort.

"I told you not to draw weapons!" hissed Sinding angrily as Arn ignored him completely, readying his shield and Dawnbreaker.

"They plan to ambush us" Arn muttered, cringing again as the itching grew even stronger "Lydia, move to the left flank"

Arn had thought for sure to surprise the ambushers, but what he'd failed to reckon was that the itching on his neck didn't mean an ambush. It meant a betrayal.

Even as he pointed Lydia where to go, moving to follow suit, Sinding produced a wooden club and cracked Arn hard upside the head with it, sending Arn tumbling off the narrow pathway and rolling over the side of the ledge and off a cliff.

Arn never saw the blow coming. He didn't see the gates opening and dark figures pouring out. He didn't hear Lydia screaming his name as she dropped her weapons and vainly dove to grab his falling form. He didn't see the terror on her face as she reached out for him. He didn't see Sinding's club strike her on the back of the head as many pairs of hands appeared to latch hold of her and drag her away. All he knew was darkness taking him as he fell...

Laughing, she remembered the laughing as they grabbed and pulled at her armor pieces. She knew what was coming. Why wouldn't they at least let her see what happened to Donrir, Cassily, and the others.

Even as she fought to move her limbs, she could feel two blades scything through her tunic and hands fumbling with her smallclothes. She tried to scream, yell defiantly, anything. Instead, she was held spread eagled by multiple hands on each limb before another hand grabbed her by the neck and forced her to look up at him, instead of toward the road where she wanted to look.

Jorgund Stormtamer hovering over her, leering angrily at her. He let spittle run from his mouth down onto her face, unable to do anything to stop it.

"You're on my land, bitch!" he spat, lowering his face in front of her "Time to pay the toll!" he grinned to the laughs and chuckles of all around as he and some of the others began unhitching their trousers...She wanted to say something, show some defiance, but he tightened his grip on her throat...

Lydia gasped awake with a start, only to find herself tied to a post, down in what appeared to be a mine shaft lit by lanterns at intervals.

Hyperventilating for a moment, she gulped and relaxed as she realized she was still fully clothed and
still had her armor on.

She could not move, though. They had bound her hands behind her back and bound her legs together from ankle to knee. As if that wasn't enough, she was further bound to the beam itself by many strands of rope.

As she began to shift around to figure out if there was any give to it, a sudden commotion erupted just around the corner.

She stilled herself as a half dozen dark forms emerged from whatever was around the corner and stood for a moment staring back at her.

They were all men attired in various types of leather and steel armors, and all Nord, except for one orc. Sinding was among them.

"You didn't clip her hard enough Sinding" grunted the orc.

"I'm tellin' ya, we should just slit her throat and be done with it" exclaimed a younger looking one.

"Until you can be sure the Dragonborn's dead, we have to keep her as insurance" ordered Sinding.

"Who said we can't have some fun with her, though" chuckled a burly one with a finely manicured beard.

"Can't you think about anything besides ravaging women" snarled Sinding.

"Women were made for ravaging...or they wouldn't have so many holes" chuckled the burly one before glaring back at Sinding "or is all this just you wanting her for your own"

"Yes, well, your attitude is why Tstrasuna and Ahjissi left" barked another angrily.

"Those furry bitches left because they were thieving Khajiits and knew that sooner or later one of us'd catch on to them snitching stuff from us" retorted the burly one again.

"The longer we waste here, the more likely someone or something else will find the Dragonborn's body and make off with all the money" Sinding piped up again.

They all moved off to the left and up an incline, except for the burly one, who turned to cast a roving eye across her bound form before Sinding barked from further up the passage "Torkild, you know the rules!"

Torkild grumbled to himself before turning and departing. Lydia sighed with relief as she heard a heavy door up and off to her left open and close again.

Her heart had soared at the revelation that they had found no body, even though she'd seen Arn tumble off a cliff with her own eyes, but now she fought back tears at the thought of his broken body lying somewhere...alone and dying.

Even as emotions welled in her and memories threatened to overwhelm her mind, she breathed slowly in and out, squinting her eyes to shut out the doubts and fears. She was not helpless. She would escape. They had not found Arn's body, and so until they did, there was no reason to think Arn was actually dead, and if he wasn't dead, he was injured and gravely needed her.

If he wasn't gravely injured, then he would surely come for her, and then all these sots would be sorry they'd ever even entertained the thought of betraying them.
Looking around, she hoped to find something to use somehow in escaping. All she could see were crates, furs, and barrels. There seemed to be nothing in the way of weapons.

After awhile of glancing around to the point of nearly hurting her neck, she spied a small stone with a jagged edge on the sandy floor nearby.

Jerking and writhing violently, she couldn't do anything to get herself closer. She tried a different tactic, instead trying to turn herself slightly so as to bring her bound beet back up under her on one side. Hopefully, she could reach far enough with her feet to scoot the stone close enough to grab in her bound hands.

After what seemed a long time of writhing and turning, she finally got past the fulcrum point and scooted the stone, along with a bunch of sand and soot to the base of her bound hands, grabbing it up like it was food to a starving person.

Her good fortunes ended there, though, as the door up the left passage opened and closed again and voices flooded the tunnel.

This time, there were a lot more men that came in, and they all slowed or stopped to leer at her before moving on, to her relief.

Sinding was one of the last to come by.

Seeing her glare of death at him, he stopped and sauntered over before leaning down in front of her, looking into her eyes as if trying to find something else there.

"Don't look at me like that" he murmured at her before glancing back to find Torkild glare at them both as he sauntered by.

"Really, how exactly should one look upon filth then?" she sneered, her anger with the man getting the better of her.

"I had to do what I did" he grew serious.

"That's what they all say" Lydia scoffed dismissively.

Sinding's hands suddenly trembled in rage and faster than Lydia would've thought possible, he reached out and grabbed her head, thumping it back against the post and forcing her to look him in the eye as he leaned in.

"What would any of you know? You and your...'Dragonborn'? You come here with all your finely crafted armors and weapons, laden with fur and coins. You think you're 'benevolent' to come and help out us poor besotted fools who can't handle our own hold" he hissed right into her face.

"Your arrogance has cost you. I'm not even one of them, but I can sympathize with the plight of bandits in times like these" he continued, Lydia noting the change in his eye color from a light blue to almost silver or white.

"You're with them. How can you not be one of them?" Lydia gritted from the unyielding grip he held on her head.

"I need their help. They want you and the Dragonborn's spoils. It's a fair trade. Both your armors alone should fetch a good price in one of the towns or outposts, not to mention the hefty bag of coin I know the Dragonborn was carrying on him"
"Why would you need their help?" Lydia asked again, vexed that Sinding wasn't making much sense.

Sinding seemed to shudder for a moment before he stared wildly at his hands and then felt himself strangely as if to confirm he was still there before releasing her as if touching her were poison and quickly shuffling away down the right passage.

Lydia had a hard time making sense of it, but put it out of her mind as she began sawing away at the bindings on her wrists with the small stone she'd gotten off the ground.

She heard mutterings and talk for a good long while, not sure how long it was or what time of day even. All that mattered to her were the bindings on her wrists, slowly weakening and dwindling under the sawing from her small stone.

She had just gotten through enough of them to start working her hands loose when she heard someone in the passage.

Freezing for a moment, she gulped in fear as the burly Nord called Torkild crept around the corner.

She thought about calling out, but feared that might end worse for her. Besides, maybe she could make this work in her favor.

Settling down in front of her after glancing cautiously around, he held a finger to his lips.

"Shh...now love. I've got a deal for you. You've heard what they plan to do with ya once they've got their coins. You're too pretty a lass to end up as supper for wolves. You do a good job with that pretty little mouth of yours on me and I'll make sure you stay in my quarters. No one will be killing ya and no one else will touch ya if I buy you with my share. Come on now...Whadda ya say?" he whispered as he glanced around again before rising to his feet and beginning to unbuckle his breeches.

"Why...why don't we do this the right way?" Lydia gulped down her repulsion, thinking quickly of her options as she wriggled her hands just enough to know they'd be free if she got unbound from the pillar.

Torkild must not have expected her to agree to anything because her statement stunned him for a moment before he squinted at her as if he didn't get it.

"Unbind me from this thing and you can take me however you like" Lydia whispered to mask her fear that her acting was poor.

Torkild's eyes lit up at that, but fear of the others forced him to turn and glance behind him again.

"Please, I haven't even been able to take a piss all day" Lydia pretended to plead.

"Anyway I want right?" Torkild hissed, rapidly scooting around the pillar and beginning to undo the knot at the back.

"Yes, anyway you want" Lydia whispered, knowing she only had seconds before he realized her hands were already unbound.

As he loosened the knots in the back, Lydia quickly wriggled away from the pole and used her hands to shuck the folds of rope up and over her head.

"Hey!" he hissed, turning and lunging at her.
While her hands and torso were free, Lydia's feet were still bound. So all she could do to avoid Torkild was roll to one side.

He still managed to get a hand on her leg as she tried and failed to reach a pickaxe sitting on a nearby crate.

They flailed around on the ground awkwardly for a moment. Thankfully, he was so intent on his conquest of her that he didn't bother calling for help.

Lydia knew she couldn't keep this up. He would gain the upper hand soon or someone would hear or find them.

Knowing he wouldn't expect it, she turned and launched herself at him, body slamming his head with her chest, her breast plate thumping his head against the floor with a THUD and Torkild screamed in pain into her bust as she grabbed her small stone off the floor again before sitting up on her knees and pounding his face and head with it and her still armored hands as mercilessly as she could.

She wasn't sure how long she kept this up, but she kept going until he stopped moving.

Breathing heavily and shaking, she realized her front was all spattered with his blood and his face was now a mush of bloody flesh.

Sighing with relief she reached down to his belt and pulled his dagger out and finally freed herself of the ropes on her feet.

Standing up felt like a huge victory in and of itself as she looked at the bloody body on the ground and felt the growing pain in her tits and chest from the body slam.

She had a dagger. It wasn't the best, but it was something. Now to figure out how to get out of here, and find out what happened to Arn...

Chapter End Notes

1. My concern was that Lydia was becoming too much of a damsel in distress, particularly since her fighting will always get overshadowed by what Arn does. So I split them up for a bit to give Lydia a chance to fight on her own and exorcise some demons.
2. Little bit longer of a chapter, but I figured readers would have a fit if I just ended it with Arn falling off a cliff.
Chapter Summary

Arn wakes to find himself in an unknown place with the most unlikely of rescuers...

Arn was dreaming. He had a visceral knowledge of it, but somehow...couldn't escape it.

In his dream, miniature versions of Elisif and Ulfric argued frantically with each other over things that made no sense.

"He needs more straw!"

"No, he doesn't. He just drank too much water!"

Then, both midgets seemed to run around him, occasionally stopping and ordering him to lay down, which he was powerless to resist, so they could run across him, both hopping and stomping deliberately on his stomach each time.

Amidst this madness mixed with darkness and pain, Arn finally cracked his eyes open in a gray, murky darkness.

He felt...off...like nothing was where it was supposed to be.

Since all he saw was gray darkness looking up, he tried to turn his head, but quickly made several revelations.

Firstly, his head was completely wreathed with pine needles...as if someone had constructed a semi-circle of them and wedged it around his head.

Secondly, there was a searing pain in his shoulder that shot down his arm, and a sharp pain in his side as well. It would have made him groan in agony if the spasm of his gut hadn't also caused him to feel queasy and liable to unleash the contents of his stomach.

Thirdly, the face of a little Breton...or maybe Nord girl appeared in his vision as she leaned over him and stared with surprise into his open eyes.

"Hith eyeth are open!" she lisped eagerly to someone Arn couldn't see.

Almost immediately, the face of a little Redguard boy joined that of the little girl and looked with surprise at Arn, who stared back at them with surprise.

"Who-who are you?" Arn struggled to speak, realizing his jaw was swollen considerably, and based on how much it hurt to talk, was probably broken in at least one place.

"I'm Thigrid" the little girl lisped in reply, brushing a clump of stray raven locks out of her face.

"I'm Cyrus" replied the little Redguard boy, his eyes widening as he looked at Arn contorting his features in pain while he labored to sit up.

Once Arn got himself into a sitting position and used his one good hand to remove the wreathed pile
of pine needles from around his head, he got a much better sense of where he was at.

He had been laying on a slab of stone, and they were inside a cave of gray stone, explaining the mostly gray darkness around them.

Panicking for a moment, he realized his weapons were missing. His mind started processing what had happened and he jumped up with a start, both sending pain shooting down his left side and thumping his head against the rock ceiling.

"Ow...damn!" he growled before remembering there were two small children standing right in front of him "Uh...I mean...this is crammed...isn't it?" he massaged his head as he looked around more.

He'd been about to give Lydia orders in front of that barricade...and...that was all he remembered.

How did he get here? Where was here? And more importantly...what happened to Lydia?

"Wh-where are we?" Arn muttered, testing his weight on his feet again.

"Thith ith our cave" Thigrid replied.

"Is your name Sigrid or Thigrid?" Arn asked, wondering how bad her lisp was before she frowned slightly at him, as if it was obvious.

"Ith Thhhigrid" she insisted.

"Yeah, it's Sigrid" the boy replied, still gawking at Arn.

"Well...uh...where is this cave at?" Arn queried, cautiously limping toward the opening.

"In the woodth" the girl lisped in reply before the two children cautiously followed him over to the entrance.

Arn glanced out carefully, but nothing looked familiar...just...thick wooded hillside with a river running by not far away through the brush. He could tell the cave they were in was built into the sloping base of some mountains, but where and which ones was anyone's guess.

He vaguely remembered a river running out of the mountain near Knifepoint Ridge. Maybe this was the same one...maybe not...but what had happened to make him end up here?

Running through the possibilities, his mind settled on the one and only possible reason: Sinding. Sinding must've betrayed them.

"Did you find me here? How long have I been here?" Arn spun to ask the surprised children.

"You were in the river with a bunth of branthes. You jutht been layin' there for two whole dayth" Sigrid replied, waving her small arms.

"You got me out of the river?" Arn turned to her.

"Thort of" she shrunk back a little, now that Arn loomed over them and was no longer the lethargic thing on a slab of stone.

"Your pet deer saved you!" blurted the Redguard boy with wide eyes, aghast at Arn's apparent ability to control deer...

"Wh-what?" Arn muttered, wondering for a moment if he was still dreaming.
"We thaw you in the branthes, floating down the riffer..until a biiiiiiiiig, whiiiiite deer came out of the wooodth” explained the little girl with wide waves of her small arms.

"It jumped in the river and used its big horns to drag you out and then it just...slowly walked over and plopped you here" continued the boy, pointing at the cave opening.

"We were thcared...tho we didn't go out until it left" explained the little girl.

Arn scratched his head, trying to make sense of it, but no matter, he had more immediate problems to worry about.

Sensing their growing fear of him and his own panicked fear over Lydia's fate, he took a few deep breaths to calm himself before gently easing himself back to a seat on the slab of stone he'd awakened on.

"I'm...uh...my name is Arnsmith Bulgoar. You can call me 'Arn'” he sighed, trying to calm himself and focus on what to do next.

The two children just looked at each other before turning back to him.

"I'm...the...uh” he puzzled for a moment, wondering exactly how to explain to them what he was doing as the Dragonborn.

"I...uh...hunt down Dragons...and help people” he muttered, wondering if that made sense to them, or just sounded foolish.

"But Dragons are soooo big” the boy exclaimed.

"No one can kill the Dragonth. They're too big" the girl frowned at him "Are you lying to uth?"

"No" Arn tried to insist without sounding argumentative.

"You can't kill Dragonth” she insisted with a tone that suggested what he said was outlandish, even to a child's ears.

"Yes, I can"

"No you can'th"

"I can so"

"No you can'th"

Arn huffed for a moment, scrutinizing her returning frown before wondering if somewhere Sheogorath was laughing at his plight: Weaponless and alone, trying to convince two children that he was a mighty warrior.

Mighty warriors didn't need children to save them, and arguing was only wasting time.

Arn had been so panicked over Lydia and his own fate that it only just now registered to him that the two small children were living alone in a cave in the wilds.

"Wait...Why are you here alone? Where are your families?” he asked, looking them over with concern.

On closer inspection in the gray gloom, Arn could tell they were both very dirty and very thin. Sigrid
wore what looked like a burlap bag with holes cut for her head and arms, while Cyrus wore tattered, baggy pants and a loose shirt. Neither of them really wore shoes. They both had rags wrapped around their feet all the way to their ankles and tied with strips of hair or twine.

Cyrus looked like he could be 7 or 8, but the girl looked a little younger.

When Arn asked them about their families, they both huddled closer together and neither of them answered at first, Sigrid growing very emotional and threatening to cry before Cyrus shushed her and turned to Arn.

"The bad men took them" he explained.

"Who are the bad men?" Arn asked, beginning to put things together.

As if in answer, they heard a woman's scream echo far away outside the cave.

Arn immediately moved to the entryway, though it caused him a great deal of pain.

Peering around, he couldn't see anything, but straining his ears, he could hear the faint sound of fighting...shouts...whinnying of frightened horses...another scream...a man this time.

Arn was tempted to investigate, at least see what was going on.

He felt a soft tug on his good arm, prompting him to turn and find Cyrus looking up at him with a terrified look.

"Don't go out there! The bad men are out right now! It's not safe!" he whispered, tugging Arn back toward Sigrid, who was huddled on the floor.

"It's not safe...it's not safe!" they both whispered at him.

Arn slowly allowed Cyrus to tug him back over to where Sigrid was before Cyrus joined her huddled on the floor.

Much as he didn't like to admit it, they were right. It wasn't safe.

Without any weapons, hobbled, and his left arm next to useless, he was no good in a fight. He might not even be able to escape if someone saw him, and if he did...would it draw attention to the children's shelter?

Just as Arn was pondering these things over, Cyrus got up and moved to the opening, and pulled a large bush across it, blocking access to anyone and blocking any real visibility in or out.

Sitting there, Arn was versed enough in sleeping in the wilds to double check his surroundings.

Looking into the gray darkness to the left, Arn couldn't see any back to the cave.

"How far back does this go?" Arn asked the worried children, gesturing to his left.

"Once you go past Simon's bed, there's a door, but we blocked it" Cyrus replied.

"Wait, who's Simon?" Arn queried as he rose and slowly felt his way back in the dark.

"He's another one of us. He's sick and sleeps all the time now" Cyrus answered, beckoning Arn back.
Arn ignored his beckoning and moved back in the dark until he felt a pile of rubble and rocks in front of an ornately carved door.

He supposed there was no way to open the doors with all the rubble in the way, but it was yet another question mark in a long line of them.

He hadn't seen or felt anything to indicate another child was sleeping in the vicinity, but since it was so dark, there was no way to tell other than feeling, and he had no desire to terrify a sleeping child by suddenly being grabbed in the dark.

Moving back to his own slab, he observed the two children huddle fearfully and whisper among each other.

Very gingerly, he slowly unlatched and removed each armor piece he could. It was painful getting his breastplate off, and it was even worse trying to get his left gauntlet off, but there was no other way to get at the injured areas.

The children simply stayed huddled on the floor, mostly watching him with big eyes, but occasionally glancing back toward the doorway in fear.

The first order of things would be to get healed. His potion pouch was gone, along with anything else that had been attached to his belt. That only left the slow process of repeatedly using magic healing, waiting for recovery, and then repeating the process until he was fully fit.

A battle mage or a powerful healer could have gotten the job done in less than a day, but Arn was neither of those.

He exhaled loudly and closed his eyes, pushing all his fears for Lydia, pains of his injuries, and uncertainties of his own predicament out of his mind as he focused entirely on healing.

Slowly, the soft bluish light glowed from his right hand as he slowly healed all the way up his left arm.

The children were not expecting this, and quite amazed, though they still stayed on the floor watching him.

Arn continued healing all over every part that pained him until he felt all his energy gone and slowly leaned back before pulling his armor pieces over him as a makeshift blanket and drifted off into dreamless sleep.

Cracking his eyes open in the steely cold air of the morning, Arn fully expected sharp pains as he sat up, but instead felt a little tired, but otherwise normal.

Moving his arms and torso one way and then another, he was surprised to feel perfectly fine.

Even his jaw seemed reduced to normal size.

It didn't seem possible for his injuries to be healed in so short a time. He'd only applied one round of healing treatment, no potions, and as far as he knew, it had been only one night. The aftereffect hangover should have been at least several days, if not a week.

He was so surprised by this development, that it took him a few moments of testing his movement out before he realized something was wrong.

The children weren't there.
Glancing toward the mottled darkness that was the back of the cave, Arn considered feeling around for them, but just as he was considering the options, both Sigrid and Cyrus came skittering into the cave with their small arms clutching dark shapes close to their ragged frames.

As they knelt on the floor, Arn knelt down to see what they had.

They both sat down and huddled together, shivering in the cold air of the winter morning.

Arn had thought they were just cold, but as he kneeled down, he saw tears streaming down the cheeks of both of them, sniffling and shaking as they clutched dirty pieces of jerky, cheese, and some bread in their small hands.

"The...the only time the bad men aren't out...ith..e-early...in...the morning" Sigrid sobbed.

Arn looked her sadly in the eye, hoping she hadn't stolen it from their camp, as she extended a broken off piece of the dirty cheese block toward him.

"You w-w-want th-thome ch-cheethe?" she tried not to sob.

Arn gently took the piece of dirty cheese and ate it without complaint before gently sitting next to them and drawing them close to him on either side to help them warm up and allow them to cry out whatever fears plagued their poor hearts.

After they seemed to calm down some, Arn slowly rose and began putting his armor back on.

He would have to thank Eorlund Graymane again next time he was in Whiterun. The enchanted ebony armor continued to hold up against surprising amounts of punishment. There were some scratches on it, but otherwise it remained in perfectly functional condition.

Stretching again to double check his healing, Arn turned and knelt down by the children again.

"I am going to go have a look around. No matter what you hear out there, and no matter who calls out. You stay put in here until I get back. In fact, make sure you pull that bush in front of the opening after I've gone, okay?"

They both nodded at him with bleary eyes before he turned and departed the cave.

It was snowing again, but Arn had to guess it was the start of the morning based on where the sun was. There were no seeming landmarks anywhere. So after a brief roundabout of the cave opening area, he set off sneaking down the river, hoping to find some sort of sign of where he was at.

It didn't take him long before he ran into a road and a bridge across the river, but no signs that denoted anything.

He was startled into further alertness by the snarl of an animal from up the road and back to his left. As he crept through the brush alongside the road, it wasn't far before he spied what the commotion was.

All across a section of the road, a broken cart lay battered on the cobblestone. Supplies lay scattered all over along with several dead bodies as a small pack of wolves clumped around several of them, chewing and gnawing at the flesh left exposed from the armor.

Arn crouched down and scanned the scene before him.

It was surely the result of a bandit attack, and now Arn knew for sure that the 'bad men' the children
kept referencing were what he had suspected. Unfortunately, that wasn't all.

Whoever these unfortunate people were, the bandits had laid into them mercilessly. There were the broken bits of two carts and a number of broken boxes and crates, their contents spilled in the snowy mud and stone of the road.

Two armed men lay dead by the carts, while another so poorly mangled by the wolves Arn couldn't tell who or what it was lay on the other side. Further off the road, Arn's stomach nearly retched at the sight of a two dead Nord women, naked and tied bent over a downed tree, their hands tied to their ankles, leaving them in a grotesque 'U' shape for whatever sordid things the Bandits had done. One of them had her stomach ripped open by something. The other had an arrow through her skull.

A horrible realization dawned on Arn then.

The children had both seen all of this.

That's where they'd gotten their food from. That's why they'd been crying...not just because they were afraid.

The wrongness of it all brought tears to his own eyes as he crouched and looked sadly again at the gory scene in the road, his breath vaporizing out amid the falling snow.

After getting his own tears under control, he looked back toward the sloping mountainside near the road.

Sure enough, on the side of the mountain on the side where the road snaked by, there were the remnants of an old tower barely visible through the snow and trees.

A fortified perch to see far down both stretches of road, controlling the only way across a river and perhaps a pass through the mountains, of course that's where the 'bad' men were...Arn surmised as he slowly sneaked closer.

Arn was careful, but even he was surprised by the stealth of their lookout.

It was a female Khajiit laying in a worn out spot on the ground between two bushes, her head peaking out barely from beneath their branches. It also helped that her fur was the same dark brown as the branches of the bushes.

Creeping just off a path that the bandits had clearly worn up the side of the mountain to get around to the tower's approach, Arn had just rounded a tree when he looked to the right and saw her.

Unfortunately, she spotted him at the same time.

With no weapons, Arn needed stealth until he'd sufficiently armed himself.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn burst out of the underbrush, picked up a large stone, and bashed the frozen Khajiit lookout in the head.

Time returned to normal as he delivered a finishing blow to the back of her head before glancing around quickly to make sure no one heard.

Dragging the body back into the brush, Arn was annoyed to only find the bandit armed with a dagger and small bow so custom tailored to the Khajiit's smaller arms, that Arn eventually gave up
on it and just strapped the dagger on before continuing.

Further up the path, there was no hiding since it ascended up onto a stony platform that rounded the mountainside into the partly broken down tower.

Edging his way slowly forward, he heard some snoring around the bend, and raised voices higher up in the tower.

As he edged around, he spotted a lone man sleeping half in a bedroll with another Khajiit woman carefully crouched next to him, riffling his things.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Arn slowed down time again as he darted around the corner, dagger in hand.

Acting quickly and decisively, he used his acquired dagger to cut the throats of both before time sped back up again.

Unfortunately, even as he was trying to get at the man's sword in his bedroll, another bandit, this one an orc, appeared in the doorway to the tower.

"Hey! Hey!" He hollered, pulling a axe from beside the doorway and rushing Arn, who merely turned to face him with a surprise of his own.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force hit his attacker with merciless effect, crunching bones, cracking his armor, and sending him flying back through the doorway as the entire tower shook with the force of the blow.

Knowing stealth was no longer an option, Arn quickly got the steel longsword out of the dead bandit's bedroll and charged in through the tower entrance.

And not a moment too soon either. Even as he made the doorway, he heard two arrows clink off the stone behind him.

He quickly found himself face to face with three rapidly waking bandits trying to grab armor and weapons as they had just jumped out of their bedrolls.

Arn fell on them with a merciless zeal, his simmering anger with this state of things burning into a cold rage.

Wielding a longsword in his right hand and a dagger in his left, he quickly carved up the first after parrying a weak sword slice.

The second might have gotten the better of Arn if they had committed to the attack, instead of using measured, planted steps as they swung an axe at Arn that he didn't remember seeing.

Arn leaned away just in time to avoid the slice at his neck and shoulder, bringing his sword up in an arc to catch the axe wielder's hand on the follow through.

He screamed in pain as Arn's longsword scythed into his wrist, dropping the axe before Arn stepped beyond him, engaging the third as he sliced the neck of the second with the dagger in his left hand.

Terrified after seeing what happened to his comrades, the third bandit kept backing up with a sword and shield until he bumped a large bookshelf.
Arn didn't have time to wait, others were no doubt on their way down and he would soon be flanked if he wasn't quick.

In a calculated attack, he lunged in, sloppily locking swords, but keeping his on the inside enough to push the bandit's away. Keeping the bandit's sword locked in a sloppy struggle, Arn made him forget about using his shield. Using his other hand, Arn simply snaked the dagger up over the shield as he leaned against it and stabbed the man in the face.

Arn turned and spotted another on the staircase aiming a crossbow at him just in time to duck as the bolt flew by and impaled the hapless bandit he'd just stabbed.

"NO!" the bandit, a surprisingly older man yelled as he turned to run up the stairs, likely heading to cover to reload.

Arn never gave him the chance. Racing forward, he lunged and used his dagger to stab the bandit in his legs as they neared the top of the rickety stairs. As the bandit turned back over to swipe at Arn with his unloaded crossbow, Arn batted away the blow with his longsword which he used to lunge forward and run him through the neck.

Rolling the body off the stairs to the floor below, Arn heard the slow creak of someone trying to sneak somewhere on the floor just above him.

Looking at the stairway opening, he surmised there was probably at least two waiting to ambush him up here.

Considering his options, Arn finally went back down and grabbed the fallen wooden shield from one of the dead bandits and sheathed his dagger, though it had served him well so far.

Looking at the stairway opening, he got an idea, a gruesome one to be sure, but Arn was in no frame of mind to spare anyone. Looking around, he found one of the bandits with a nearly severed head. Using his sword, Arn finished the job and after pulling the hair back into a ponytail just to give it a different look, Arn deliberately crept up the creaky stairs, making sure anyone above would hear the noise.

Then he slowly stretched out with his hand and ensured the head slowly peaked over the edge of the entrance.

For a second, nothing happened, then, as Arn had suspected, the twangs of bows sounded and Arn's puppet head went flying from his hand as it was pierced by two arrows.

Quickly, Arn ran up and into the room, hoping to catch the archers before they could reload and aim.

Two men with longbows jumped with surprise, apparently thinking they'd dealt with the problem. Arn batted aside the longbow of one and proceeded to run him through while the other quickly stepped back and knocked another arrow.

Arn turned to face him in the act of pulling his sword loose just as the bandit aimed.

"ZUN HAAL VIIK!"

The bandit's bow went flying out of his hands across the room along with the arrow.

Standing there stunned, he could do nothing as Arn laid into him with a shield bash to open him up for a slice across the neck.
Striding deliberately up to what he thought was the last level of the tower, Arn was surprised to find a man in mage attire carefully eyeing him from behind a spell shield.

"I.....I am Feorus the Cyclone. I...am-m a m-mighty mage. Y-you will bow to me" he tried to sound imperious as he slowly stepped out from the partial bits of rubble he'd been behind.

Arn eyed the man for a moment silently, letting the sight of his ebony clad, bloodsoaked form and wrathful gaze work its effect on the clearly already flustered and fearful bandit leader.

The bandit leader looked around wildly before suddenly collecting himself.

"Surrender now, or I will fry you like a piece of raw meat!" he spat indignantly.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn was sick and tired of this. His wave of unrelenting force hit the mage just as he tried to step closer.

With no armor, the close proximity, and Arn's rage channeled into the shout, the unrelenting force obliterated the mage's shield along with the mage himself, blowing a hole in the tattered top of the tower in a dark red splat of gore.

"No" Arn sneered at the empty air.

Thankfully, that was all the bandits, but the surprises weren't over.

There was a large amount of coin and other valuables locked in a chest under the stairs. There were also a decent collection of weapons Arn perused before selecting the best replacements until he could find the weapons he'd lost at Knifepoint Ridge.

The other major surprise came in the form of a journal that the Bandit Leader, this Feorus the Cyclone, had kept. Arn tucked it away for later, but it promised to shed some light on where they were.

Grabbing only the supplies he and the children would need, Arn returned to the road, shooed away the wolves, and quickly buried what was left of the poor souls who were the last victims of these bandits.

Returning to the cave opening in the early afternoon, Arn was relieved to find the bush still there and no tracks in the surrounding snow.

"Cyrus, Sigrid...it's me, Arn. I've brought supplies back. I'm coming in now" he gently declared before shoving the bush aside and ducking inside the opening.

Even though he had announced himself, the two children were not prepared for his bloodsoaked state, and Sigrid screeched fearfully and Cyrus waved a stick threateningly at him for a moment before he kneeled down and dropped all the things he was carrying, showing them his open hands.

"Don't worry. Everything's fine now" he assured them, as Cyrus slowly lowered the stick and they both stared at his blood-spattered armor with wide eyes.

"W-what happened?" Sigrid murmured.

"I made sure the bad men will never bother anyone again" Arn replied as he began opening up some food containers to hand to the surprised children.
Power and Control: Falkreath pt. 4

Chapter Summary

In her attempt to escape the Bandit hideout, Lydia ends up in an accidental confrontation with Sinding. The outcome is something neither of them expect...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lydia looked at the exit door to the mine.

Freedom lay beyond...but at what price. She knew there were at least three sentries from what she'd seen earlier.

If she bolted now, she'd have to hope to outrun their shots, for she surely couldn't fight all of them with just a dagger. Even fully armed, it would be a tall task. Even if she did outrun the sentries, she would be far too easy for them to track down in the snow.

What other options did she have, though? Someone was bound to notice she wasn't tied to the pillar sooner or later, and despite cleaning up the area and stashing Torkild's body behind the crates, the stench would soon alert the occupants that something was wrong.

Weighing her options, she suddenly grew aware of voices closing on the door from the other side.

Rapidly turning, she scooted quickly back down the passage and back behind the crates in the alcove.

She heard arguing echo down from the passage as the door opened.

"Take the rest and keep searching. I'll show this to the Champion"

"It's getting late"

"It's not even dinner time yet. There's still plenty of light for you sots to search. Finding a body's not THAT hard, is it?"

"What if he fell in the river?"

"Then search it! Honestly, ever since winter arrived, you bunch have turned into such milk drinkers. Have to have someone hold your hand to do anything!" exclaimed the demanding voice before shutting the door on the other's protests.

Lydia held her breath in apprehension, as the lone bandit entering the mine strode by quickly, apparently oblivious to Lydia's absence by the post.

Her heart fell, though, as she saw him carrying Arn's tattered belt, along with the sheath containing Dawnbreaker, his other ebony longsword that he'd never given a name to, and his enchanted shield.

NO! It couldn't be!
In a vengeful impulse, Lydia suddenly realized she'd catapulted herself from behind the crates, dagger in hand, and was rapidly closing on the bandit carrying Arn's things from behind.

She was vaguely aware of passing a door on her right as she neared the lone bandit, who was approaching another door further down.

Hesitating for a moment, Lydia lurched back toward the bandit again when she realized he was almost at the door and that it might be the best opportunity she had to arm herself with something better than just a dagger.

She had to hurry to get to him before he made the door, but in her haste, she scuffed the ground with one of her boots, which caused the bandit to turn his head and spot her.

Lydia lunged, desperate to stop him before he could cry out.

Fortunately for her, the man had his arms full, and had no time to defend himself, but unfortunately for her, he managed to get out a half yelp before she sloppily buried her dagger in his neck.

Because it was a sloppy strike, the two floundered against each other awkwardly for a moment before Lydia pushed him back against the door, intent on trying to finish him off as he continued to gurgle and hiss out his final breaths, half dropping the weapons in his arms before Lydia pinned them between their bodies.

As the man's spasms began to subside, clawing more slowly at Lydia and the dagger in his neck, Lydia became aware of voices back and off to her right from behind the doorway she'd rushed past.

"What was that?"
"Quiet...I have watch tonight"
"Sounded like someone trying to holler out"
"Wait! Where's Torkild?"
"Out searching...with everyone else. Now, can I get some sleep or are you going to cover my watch tonight?"
"I didn't see him out there earlier"
"He's probably bribing the Champion into letting him have that Dragonborn's wench"
"That's a waste of money. The last few we just had our fun with once we'd taken them down to the river to finish them off. One of them even offered herself if we let her go."
"Yeah, well Torkild's not one for waiting"
"For the last time, quiet down or get out. If I have to suffer through any more noise, the Champion will hear about you lot shirking your posts"

Lydia cringed in despair as she heard footsteps thump closer to the other door. She had to get out of there, and also find some way to hide the body she was still mashed against.

Fumbling for a moment, she reached past the stilled body of the bandit she leaned against and unlatched the door, falling through it in a heap before scurrying back to close it before the other door in the passage opened with the sounds of several bandits walking out.
As the sounds faded toward the mine entrance through the door, Lydia realized she'd been holding her breath.

Only as she reached down to get Dawnbreaker and Arn's shield did she look around to see where she'd stumbled into.

A large cavern stretched out further down, with a large flat area filled with tables, charts, ingredients, and all manner of other things spread across them.

The area was lit by torches, but thankfully, Lydia saw no one sign of anyone present.

Hurrying to stash the bandit's body behind a pile of old shaft supports, she puzzled for a bit over the new weapons she possessed.

Arn's belt was broken and mangled and Lydia's was gone. Without sheaths, she wasn't sure how to keep both blades with her unless she carried them in her arms, or brandished them both and left the shield uselessly on her back.

As she was pondering this dilemma, she suddenly tensed as the sound of voices echoed faintly from the back of the vast chamber.

Deciding quickly, she readied Dawnbreaker and Arn's enchanted shield before sneaking further toward the back of the chamber.

Moving closer, she finally spotted two men at the back, one hunched over a table while the other stood next to him, remonstrating.

It only took Lydia a moment to recognize Sinding's voice as the one remonstrating over something. She didn't know who the other was, but he was a well built Dunmer with some sort of custom or enchanted ebony armor on.

Creeping closer, she began to pick out their conversation.

"Enough pestering Sinding, I have things to do..."

"Please, I already asked Feorus and your group has the most territory. Surely you've seen the White Stag..."

"I agreed to help you if you provided us decent enough coin or something interesting to leverage against Siddgeir. You have provided neither"

"I had to do what I did. You didn't see what he could do!"

"You think we can't handle ourselves? We've so far kept ourselves off the Empire's chopping block well enough. Why worry over one fighter?"

"Come now, you'll find the body soon enough! The wench should be worth something, and her armor should fetch something good in Rorikstead or Markarth"

At that point, the aggravated Dunmer turned on Sinding with mounting anger.

"The wench is useless except as a diversion to sate some of the men's baser instincts. The road to Markarth is now fouled by Forsworn attacks, and the people in Rorikstead begin to grow suspicious of us when we sell things there. Again, you've given me nothing!"

"Just tell me where you've seen it. Please, then I will leave you in peace"
"You plan not to leave me in peace if I don't?!"

Sinding seemed to shake his head in confusion, backing away from the Dunmer.

"Please, Champion, do not raise your voice at me!"

"No need to act pretentious. I know what you are....and I know why you want to find the White Stag so badly" sneered the Champion as he turned and snatched a flask of something off the nearby table.

"Stop...just stop" Sinding waved at him wildly while slowly backing away.

"Afraid of a little silver powder are we?" sneered the Champion.

"Y-you don't know what you're doing" Sinding retorted, continuing to shrink away.

"I know exactly what I'm doing, and if you'd leave me alone, I could get back to my own creations!"

"You can be free of my questions and my presence if you'd just tell me where you've seen the White St--" Sinding was about to mournfully finish before the Champion whirled abruptly and raised his hand to silence Sinding.

Lydia didn't think she'd made any noise, but she'd been so focused on the conversation that she wasn't sure.

"We're not alone" hissed the Champion before turning and crouching into a sneaking stance.

What followed next surprised Lydia even more. The Champion seemed to turn nearly invisible as soon as he began sneaking, looking like little more than a greyish black haze against the cavern walls and very soon, Lydia lost track of him in the flickering torch light.

She briefly considered heading back towards the door, but...that's probably what they would expect an intruder to do.

Without being able to see him, this 'Champion' would surely get the drop on her, ending any fight before it could start.

Deciding to force the issue, Lydia instead went after Sinding, who was still standing by the back table, looking around out into the area.

Sneaking for a short way, Lydia emerged from behind a mining pillar and closed on the surprised Sinding.

To Lydia's surprise, Sinding fled.

"NO! Get away!" he exclaimed as he hopped and dove one way and then another to dodge the arcs of her blade swings.

This continued only for a few moves before Lydia connected with a satisfying slice across the back of his left leg.

"Fools! Both of you get away from there!" interrupted the Champion as Lydia turned just in time to see him appear clearly leaping over a nearby table on a beeline straight toward her.

Turning to engage the Champion, Lydia quickly felt she was overmatched.

He seemed to produce an ebony shield and Longsword instantly and wielded them with such speed
and force she was barely able to block his attacks, much less counter them.

She spent a few moves getting backed up before sidestepping just when the Champion sensed the chance for a killing blow. His over committing to a broad slice at her neck area gave her a chance to slice at his shield wielding arm, gashing a small wound near his arm pit, but nothing serious.

"Both of you...STOP!" Sinding was crying from off to the other side, as though the violence pained him for some reason.

Both of them ignored him, clashing blades and shields again.

"So...lass...you have some skill" he tried to banter as they clashed before separating and circling each other again.

Lydia was growing desperate. She couldn't keep this up forever. Eventually, Sinding would get involved in some way, or at least call the others in. Not to mention, the longer she fought him, the weaker she felt for some odd reason.

Backing away from the Champion to the back table, she fumbled briefly before grabbing what she thought had been the same flask the Champion had waved at Sinding earlier.

"NO!" he yelled as Lydia hurled it at him.

It had an even greater effect than she'd hoped for.

Instead of a smoky explosion of silvery gray against his shield, there was a bright blue explosion of powder along with crackling energy to it as the Champion flailed wildly.

Not taking any chances, Lydia stepped to one side, deflected the wild swing from the Champion and sliced across the side of the bewildered Champion's head, gashing it open and sending him pitching sideways as he clawed to hold his wound, yelling in pain.

Mercifully, Lydia made a clean kill of it by taking his head off once he hit the ground.

Turning back to one side, she fully expected Sinding to have armed himself or to be fleeing the cavern to warn the others, but instead she saw him writhing on the ground, seeming to froth and groan at the mouth.

Unsure what to make of this, she turned and hurriedly looked over the ingredients on the table before finding the flask of silver powder.

She turned back just in time to see Sinding's legs and arms sprouting out longer and hair growing out all over his body as his torso and head grew larger.

In a matter of seconds, she was staring at a large, brown haired Werewolf.

Howling loudly, it immediately turned on her, preparing to pounce until she popped it in the face with the flask of silver powder.

The POOF of silvery gray air sent it flailing back, swiping at the air like a bear that's gotten stung by too many bees.

It howled again before turning and bolting across the cavern and crashing through the door, leaving Lydia breathing a sigh of relief, but only briefly as she heard voices cry out in alarm at all the noise.

Glancing around quickly, she grabbed what appeared to be two healing potions from the table, a pile
of writings that might show what this 'Champion' had been up to, and quickly acquired the Champion's belt so she could carry a sheath.

There were many other things worth grabbing: phials, potions, books, armors, weapons, and even a few chests laden with valuables, but Lydia knew her time was short.

She had planned to just go, but it occurred to her that if she found Arn, he would be weaponless. She wasn't much of a housecarl if she rushed to find him, then left him defenseless or left herself defenseless to protect him.

Considering her options, and the fact that she could still hear cries and Werewolf growls from outside, she decided to take some time and fully prepare before emerging.

As a precaution, she quenched all the torches that were near the back of the cavern, ensuring she worked in the light cast from the torches by the entrance to the cavern and also allowing herself the luxury of seeing anyone entering before they got a good chance to see her.

After getting Arn's old longsword in its sheath on her belt, she made sure to take all the parchment writings and anything that looked like a journal and pack it in a small satchel.

She thought she was about ready to go when she noticed something odd. The custom ebony armor that the Dunmer Champion had worn had changed somehow.

Looking more closely, she could sense a faint green glow from it, and noticed that it had actually changed in size. When she'd fought the Dunmer Champion, it looked to have fitted him snugly, like a glove.

Now, it sat loosely on the corpse, as if prepared to remove.

She recalled stories of Daedric armor that magically changed to suit whoever wore it. If it did fit her...and she could wield the near invisibility she'd seen the Dunmer use, it might ensure her escape a lot easier than any weapon might.

Biting her lip with worry, she quickly moved to the Dunmer corpse and easily extracted the armor from it.

To her delight, when she put on the gauntlets to test them out, she felt them slowly shrink some to fit her snugly.

Unable to suppress a grin of excitement, she quickly removed them again before starting to unlatch her own armor.

Her excitement quickly died, though, when she heard the sloughing noise of a footstep from someone trying to sneak back behind her.

She had only just gotten most of her own armor off and was in little more than her leathers when she spun to see a dark shape move around a table, turning to see her at the same time.

"It's the wench!" hissed one of the bandits in surprise before charging her.

Rapidly reaching down to grab Dawnbreaker and Arn's shield, Lydia sidestepped around the side of a table to avoid the charging bandit, knowing if he hollered out, there must be at least one more of them nearby.

"Leave the wench! Just find the gold and let's get out of here!" came the holler from across the room.
With Lydia's attention on the armor changing, she'd failed to hear or see the bandits sneaking into the chamber.

"The Champion's dead. We're in charge now. No need to run anywhere!" came another voice.

Lydia went on the offensive.

Feinting in with a high, arcing slice across the bandit's left shoulder, she veered away and back in again to bypass his block with his own sword and made him pay for not using a shield with a slice across the right side of his neck before bashing his sword away to his left and running him through to finish him.

She knew others were near, but the next attack nearly ended her.

Even as she was running the bandit through, she heard the faint huff of someone heaving a heavy weapon through the air nearby.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the rising outline of a bandit swinging either a Greatsword or a large Battle Axe at her head.

She was moving back and away from the slain bandit and had no torque to pivot and block with.

So all she could do was duck back and away before swinging Dawnbreaker back up and around to block.

A split second later and she might have lost her head. Still, the tip of the Bandit's Greatsword cut a nasty gash along the top of her forehead and down the right side of her head. For a split second, Lydia thought she had failed and was done for, but despite the stinging slice, she was still on her feet, flailing away from him and still had her weapons.

Gaining her footing, she was ready for the next blow, but was quickly aware that the gash on her head was bleeding a lot and would soon obscure her vision in one eye if unattended as it dribbled down the side of her face.

Trading a few blows, Lydia got a sense of the bandit's timing on his greatsword attacks before trying something she'd seen a fellow guardsman try once.

She never got the chance, though, as she was so focused on the bandit with the greatsword, she didn't sense the other one creep up behind her until large arms closed around her, pinning her arms to her side and shaking her violently from side to side, trying to get her to drop Dawnbreaker.

"Gotcha" he grunted in her ear as she grunted and kicked, trying to get Dawnbreaker into position to poke or slice his arm, but instead he smashed her hand against a table repeatedly until it fell to the floor.

"I call first since it was my idea to come back here" came another voice off to one side, distracting the Greatsword wielding bandit, who clearly didn't like that idea.

Struggle as she might, Lydia knew she wouldn't make headway using what she was currently doing. She froze for a second, realizing the bandit behind her was only in leathers as well.

Probably was sleeping when all the trouble started.

Waiting for him to slacken just to readjust his grip, she struck when he tried to shift his hold.
Pushing back down behind her and between them, she grabbed his manly parts and gave them a good twist and pull.

Instinctively, the bandit let go of her to hold his crotch, giving Lydia time to grab Dawnbreaker up off the floor and roll forward past the swinging Great sword of other, coming to crouched stop between his legs before stabbing Dawnbreaker straight up into his groin from below.

The scream of pain he let out was unlike anything Lydia had ever heard, and startled everyone in the chamber as she ripped Dawnbreaker back out before rising and finishing him off with an arterial slice to the right side of his neck.

"I'll...rut...you... in....the.." the grabby bandit tried to threaten her, still holding his crotch before she charged him and he fled.

At least, he fled until two more of his compatriots showed themselves.

Lydia had hoped that Sinding in his Werewolf form would have killed most of them, but that was either not the case or there were simply more of them than she had guessed.

Pausing as she was confronted by two other bandits, one wielding a longsword, the other aiming a crossbow at her, and the crotch wounded one pulling a battle axe from off a table.

"Leave, or I'll kill you all" she glowered, channeling all her frustration into a growled threat.

"We're not going anywhere!" sneered the crotch wounded one, but the other two didn't seem quite so confident. In fact, the Crossbow bandit was visibly leaning away and glancing nervously at the bodies behind Lydia that were visible.

"M-maybe we should just go" he muttered.

Lydia knew she couldn't wait. The longer she did, the less they would be shocked by anything she did, and the more likely they would get reinforcements or pluck up their courage.

"I warned you" she sneered before closing on them with deliberate strides.

The two in the front were slowly inching back until Lydia charged, prompting the Crossbow bandit to fire.

Glancing off her shield, it apparently dismayed them enough to force the two to turn around and flee out the cavern, leaving just the crotch wounded one to attack Lydia with a hefty diagonal slash.

Unsure how the shield would hold up against a full on blow from the Battle Axe, Lydia avoided his swings the first few times, staying out of reach.

It gave her a chance to note the bandit's stunted movement due to his likely crotch pain.

Measuring his movements as they got closer, she took the next time he swung as the moment to strike, parrying his axe blade wide with her shield while bringing Dawnbreaker around and on the top of his left hand, slicing it nearly to the bone.

Unfortunately for Lydia, she had pivoted too far, and the Axe blade strike had been heavy enough to just slide off her shield and caught her shield holding arm on the back of her upper arm, sinking into flesh down to the bone.

Both combatants cried out in pain, but Lydia had the advantage of a one handed weapon...and a
greater zeal for vengeance.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed the Axe out away from her and let it drop to the floor, along with the shield she could no longer hold onto before running the surprised bandit through the heart with Dawnbreaker in her right hand.

Quickly drinking one of the health potions and dribbling the other over the deep gash in her arm, she looked around the room at the bodies.

Her face was half covered in blood and the gash on her head still oozed more blood. She couldn't lift her left arm and the wound would take a lot longer to heal, potions notwithstanding.

Still, she was alive, and victorious. Outnumbered and with no armor, she had triumphed.

Slowly, a smile crept onto her lips as she looked around.

Arn wasn't the only one who could fight his way out of a scrape.

The thought of Arn, and the odds of seeing him again wiped the smile off her face.

Quickly, she went back to patching herself up as best she could before, arming up, and setting out.

With a hobbled arm, it took a lot longer to get her new armor on, but when she did, it made her feel nigh impenetrable.

Grimacing to get Arn's shield situated on her back, she slowly set off up the passage, stopping occasionally as a precaution in case there were any bandits left alive nearby.

There was carnage outside. Lydia had been right about there being more than three sentries, or maybe their search party had come back.

Either way, there were bodies or body parts belonging to six more bandits spread in bloody swaths around the mashed down snow of the camp by the barricade.

One thing was for sure, Sinding had laid into them viciously and the ones who weren't killed had fled.

She found Sinding's bloody tracks leading off down the winding path.

Following them down, she found many sets of tracks going every which way.

Remembering their reference to a river and hearing the splash of a waterfall close by, Lydia carefully moved through the brush and trees to the base of the mountainside.

It was slow going. Her wounds were hampering her, she didn't know the terrain, she had to watch for any other bandits still prowling the area, and light was fading into dusk.

Finally reaching where the waterfall sprouted out of the mountainside down into a pool before winding its way through the snowy countryside further, she sat down and looked back up toward Knifepoint Ridge.

She had been the one to best see where Arn fell...besides Sinding that is.

There was a tall, broad based pine tree near the river's edge.

Looking up, she could see where branches had been broken off either completely or left dangling
after something had fallen into them.

It had to be Arn. It had to be.

Following the trajectory of broken branches down brought her gaze back to the waterfall pool and the river running away into the wilds.

She spent the next day and a half slowly tracing the river, looking for any sign of Arn. She only stopped to drink water occasionally, even spending the night searching with a torch.

By now, she wasn't worried as much about bandits. The farther she'd gotten away from Knifepoint Ridge, the less tracks there were.

A day's distance out, she ceased to see any tracks at all.

Still, there was no sign of Arn anywhere.

It was starting to get to her. Her resolve wasn't fading, but the nagging "What if" questions kept popping into her mind more frequently.

Her injuries didn't help matters either. Occasionally, her head wound kept coming open, seeping blood down the side of her head inside her newfound helmet, and her left arm was still useless for little more than pushing small branches aside.

After almost two days of this, with exhaustion seeping in, she sat in a heap by the river, wondering how much further she could go without taking some time to sleep.

She could still see vividly in her mind, the moment when he fell off the edge at Knifepoint Ridge...with her crying out his name and failing to catch him, failing to do anything to help.

She sighed with emotion, eyeing her surroundings again, and refusing to give way to doubts when the most incredible thing happened.

She heard a loud sound in the distance, but it wasn't just any sound.

It was a Thuum Shout.

She could tell. She'd heard Arn shout dozens of times now. It had to be him!

Buoyed by the sound of hope, she got up and lurched forward, wading through the ice cold river waters and trudging straight toward the sound of the Dragonborn.

Chapter End Notes

1. Since it doesn't make sense for a Daedra's armor to look anything like what mortals would make, the "Champion's Armor" in this case should look more like "Boethiah's Ritual Armor" from Nexxus Mods, rather than the ebony armor you see in the game. The only beef I have with it is that the Headpiece appears to block off the Peripheral vision on one side, but for the sake of my story, I'll just say it doesn't :)

2. I think I've mentioned it before, but I'll say it again. Narratively, the Shouts, magic, and Skills increases don't function the same way that they do in the game. You can't
really use game mechanics and expect it to make a whole lot of sense beyond a basic template for "how the world works". Shouts and magic I have deliberately left unexplained since Arn isn't a mage/hasn't been to Winterhold yet, nor does anyone know much about Dragonborns. When Arn learns about it, so will you.
Chapter Summary

Arn and Lydia attempt to locate each other. The Winter sets in harder, and Arn tries to figure out what Jarl Siddgeir's part is in this mess.

Parched lips greedily drank down the gulps of water Arn offered from his canteen as the little, emaciated boy called "Simon" gradually grew more responsive while Arn tried to bring him back from the brink of death.

Once he'd gotten supplies, he set up camp inside the children's "cave" in a proper manner, with a small campfire and a torch further back in an old holder to give more light.

Illuminating the place revealed more than a few surprises. Firstly, the cave they were in was actually an entryway to old Nordic ruins of some kind with the stone slabs containing skeletons and draugr corpses laying in them on either side. Surprisingly, the Children didn't seem fazed by this, as if they knew their makeshift home was actually littered with the bones of the dead and one or two lifeless draugr bodies.

The next surprising discovery was finding the smaller Breton boy named "Simon", maybe 5 years old, curled up shivering and gasping on the corner of one of the slabs in the back next to one of the Draugr bodies.

Arn rushed to get some water in him and tried to feed him some porridge, but the boy couldn't keep any food down. Ever since then, Arn had been rushing back and forth, shoving all the bones and Draugr bodies up into one of the slabs, grabbing more supplies from the now lifeless Bandit encampment, and fretting over exactly what to do next.

He couldn't just leave the children in the Wilderness all alone, particularly with one of them maybe moments from starvation, but he couldn't take them along to trudge around in the Wilds looking to wage bloody retribution on Sinding and any other Bandits unfortunate enough to cross his path.

All the while, every moment Lydia wasn't there felt like a visceral gnawing at his heart that kept gradually getting worse.

Between his scurrying around, worrying about Lydia and his predicament, trying to answer Cyrus and Sigrid's occasional questions every time he came back with supplies, and administering potions, food, and drink to the slowly improving Simon, Arn slowly stopped paying much attention to his surroundings outside the cave.

Upon nearing the cave again with an armful of furs and some more food rations, Arn was suddenly startled to hear the crunching of footfalls in the snow behind him. Spinning to find an unknown but fiercely armored woman bearing down on him, Arn tried to react swiftly.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to stand still as Arn dropped his supplies in a hurry before drawing his wooden shield.
and steel longsword, moving to outflank the new arrival as time slowly sped back up.

He was about to lay into the new arrival from behind when her voice froze his sword arm in mid swing.

"Arn?...."

"L-Lydia?" Arn half-stuttered, standing there shocked as she turned around and opened the front of the strange horned helmet to reveal her face beaming a wide eyed smile of surprise.

Arn didn't remember dropping his weapons. He didn't remember saying anything.

The next thing he remembered was finding himself fiercely embracing her, whispering her name into the side of her armored helmet as they clung to each other.

Then snow was falling on them. Arn thought maybe the skies had opened up on them again until he realized it was clumps of snow falling off the boughs of the tree that they'd crashed into in their wild embrace of reunion.

The cold impact of the snow brought Arn back to reality as he realized he was holding his Housecarl in a much more than friendly manner, and suddenly noted that her left arm hung limply at her side, instead of clasped to him as were her legs and other arm.

"What happened?" he gasped, setting her down and eyeing her over for any other possible injuries he'd missed in his excitement to see her again.

"What do you mean 'What happened to me?' I saw you fall off a cliff!" She frowned weakly as she tried to look him over.

Arn slowly helped her get her helmet off and eyed over the nasty gash on the side of her head. For a moment, they both seemed to be eyeing the other over for anything wrong before they were interrupted.

"Oh...hello there" Lydia declared as she turned and looked past him with surprise.

Arn turned and saw Sigrid and Cyrus both peaking at them from behind a nearby tree with wide eyes.

"Looks like you've made some new friends" Lydia tried to gather herself together as Arn motioned Cyrus and Sigrid toward them.

"This is Cyrus and this is Sigrid" Arn gestured at them as they slowly came forward, seemingly enthralled by the appearance of Lydia, though Arn had to admit the effect her reappearance had on him was much greater.

"They helped save my life" Arn continued as the two children stared at Lydia in wonder, Sigrid even going so far as to feel Lydia's face before noticing the gash inside her helmet and turning quickly to Arn.

"Thee hath an Owie!" she exclaimed with worry, both children looking at Arn expectantly.

"We can fix that" Arn reassured them as he ignored Lydia's weak protestations, lifted her into his arms, and carried her back to the cave, tasking the children with bringing the things he'd dropped in the snow.
Much later, Arn warmed himself out of habit by his newly built campfire by the front of the cave as he looked across at the sleeping form of Lydia, bundled in a bunch of furs he'd retrieved from the Bandits camp.

Finding her again had buoyed his spirits far more than he would've thought. He should be tired after carrying things around all day through the snow, and spending energy healing her injuries, but even now, he was full of energy and excitement, optimistic again that they would be able to sort out any problem they encountered. He briefly relived the moment he'd taken her in his arms, overcome with joy at finding her again, but quickly pushed those thoughts away, choosing instead to consider her injuries instead.

The cut on her arm was deep, almost to the bone, but he had seen worse recovered from. The cut on her head wasn't deep, but if it had been any deeper, she might not have made it out of there. As it was, the size of the cut, and lack of immediate treatment likely meant the wound would turn into a scar. He didn't think she would worry about it. Most of it would be hid by her hair, but still, he'd seen other women warriors break down and cry at the prospect of a wound turning to scar tissue.

He looked back up again at Lydia's sleeping form, her curves only slightly obscured by the layers of furs Arn had retrieved from the Bandit camp.

Sigrid sat on her haunches nearby, as if her presence watching over her would make her injuries heal faster. It was remarkable how fast she'd latched onto Lydia. They hadn't even exchanged more than a few words, but from the moment they'd met out in the snow, Sigrid stayed almost right next to her, asking Arn every few minutes if she should get anything to help while he was healing the gashes in her arm and head.

Arn hadn't asked about the children's families. It wasn't hard to put two and two together as to what happened to them, but Arn didn't know anything about where they were from, where they were headed, did they have other family, did any others of their family group escape? All these were things he would have to find out, but asking about it was likely to bring back traumatic memories he didn't wish for them to endure.

Changing his focus again, he tried to get Simon to eat some bread and drink some water before he moved and sat down among a pile of books, scrolls, and satchels he'd retrieved from the Bandit overlook along with one or two Lydia had snatched on her way out from this "Champion's" hideout.

He was so engrossed in reading over the scraps, scrolls, and books, that by the time he looked up again, both Cyrus and Sigrid were curled up asleep on their slab of rock across from Lydia, and the fire was dying down. Adding some more wood to the fire, he continued reading long into the night, trying to make sense of just what was going on here, and occasionally checking to get Simon to take more water or food.

Cheerful chattering awoke him, and he groggily cracked his eyes open to realize he'd nodded off at some point while reading.
It was daylight now, but he realized another winter snow storm had set in as he looked past the huddled forms of the children by the opening to see large flakes whistling by in droves. Already, their tracked up portion by the entryway was covered in a fresh blanket of snow. To Arn's surprise, Lydia was even up and moving around, but he noted her left arm still hung loose and unused. as she sat and tended the fire while chatting with the children.

"I was explaining to them that they don't need to go looking for food anymore" Lydia tiredly croaked at him as she scooted over and handed him some small bread rolls and jerky.

"How is Simon?" Arn blurted out faster than he meant, remembering the little boy in the back of the cave he'd been trying to nurse back to health.

"I gave him some water and a few bits of bread. He kept it all down. I think he's improving" Lydia replied with an assuring smile as they both made their way back to see the small boy curled up in his now padded bedroll with fur blankets.

To both their surprise, the boy was awake and somewhat alert, his eyes growing wide with fear for a moment before Lydia shushed his whimpering and stroked his curled up arm reassuringly until he stopped trying to pull away as she lifted a canteen of water to his lips.

"They're so small...so frail" Lydia almost whispered to Arn as the little boy drank greedily from the canteen while still eyeing them both fearfully.

"Once they've killed or enslaved the adults, most Bandits can't bring themselves to just murder the children. So instead, they send them helplessly off into the wilderness, assuming the Wilds will kill them off in due time" Arn whispered back, sadly wondering how many children hadn't made it.

"Well, they won't succeed this time. This time, we found them first" Lydia replied, though Arn could tell she was trying to use it to encourage little Simon more than she was responding to Arn's statement.

"Hith eyeth are open!" came the familiar exclamation from the excited Sigrid, who had appeared next to Lydia and was looking wide eyed at Simon's improved condition.

"Yes, pretty soon he'll be able to outrun and out jump all of us. Isn't that right?" she smiled at Simon, who looked at each of them with a mixture of uncertainty and relief.

"Just need to keep getting food and water down, and he'll be good in no time" Arn chimed in, handing the little boy a small piece of bread roll, and watched with satisfaction as he took and ate it on his own power.

"We could speed things up if one of us went back to Knifepoint Ridge and got the supplies they left stashed there, not to mention all the things in the Champion's hideout that I had to leave behind. You could also deal out some justice to those...uh people we both know deserve some" Lydia tried not to fume as they walked back to take a seat by the fire.

"I don't like the idea of splitting up again" Arn replied after a short silence of pondering.

"The bandits will regroup" Lydia cautioned "and Sinding will flee....Talos knows where".

"We know where they will be" Arn muttered, looking back at the pile of papers and journals he'd poured through "and Sinding will not go far if he thinks this is the area his fabled 'white stag' is in."

At length, Arn and Lydia spent the morning sharing what had happened to each of them and what they had learned. What became apparent was that Arn had fallen off the cliff, had his fall broken by
the trees, and was somehow pulled out of the river by the children. Try as they might, neither Arn nor Lydia could make much sense of the "pet deer" explanation.

From the writings Arn and Lydia had retrieved, it became apparent that Jarl Siddgeir himself had been in direct contact with three different groups of bandits: The Champion's camp, Feorus' Camp, and one last one run by someone named Rochelle the Red.

It seemed they had all at one time been working for Siddgeir, but for some reason, later turned on him, and now worked at the exclusive direction of this "Champion of Boethiah".

"I still can't believe that the Jarl of Falkreath himself would've set this up" Lydia shook her head as they sat near the campfire that night.

"The man clearly had a streak of cruelty about him....what I don't understand is...why go to such lengths?" Arn mused as he put another couple of pieces of wood on the fire.

"Maybe he just wanted more than what he could collect in taxes?" Lydia theorized out loud before taking a bite of a muffin.

"He could charge whatever he wanted. The Imperials didn't seem to care what he did as long as they kept him in power" Arn returned as he resumed his seat.

"You really think there's more to it than money?" queried Lydia pensively as she stared at the revived flames of the campfire.

"Too many things don't make any sense. Who is this 'Champion of Boethiah', and why was everyone taking orders from him? Why were there no Thanes in Siddgeir's Court? Why organize such a large operation just to swindle people of their goods when he could've set up a roadblock of Legionnaires to do the same thing outside of Falkreath? What caused the fallout between the Bandits and Siddgeir?"

"Something to do with the war?"

"If I hadn't seen some of the crazy things I've seen these last few months, I'd agree, but....something tells me there's a Daedra involved here" Arn quieted his voice as he eyed the children sleeping nearby, worried that even the mention of a Daedra around them would somehow drag them into knowledge of worse things than what they'd endured.

Nursing little Simon back until he was healthy enough to travel took longer than Arn would have liked.

Nearly a week went by and he was still barely able to stand, much less walk. Their supplies were running low, and Arn had taken everything left there was to take from the Bandit encampment in the way of food. A few more days and Arn would have to search out some wild game or they would start going hungry.

All this time, it seemed like the snow never stopped. Every time they looked out the opening, the blur of white snowflakes was all that could be seen. Gradually, the entryway began to fill with packed down snow, despite Arn digging it out every other day or so to go get more supplies.

Arn watched by the campfire as Lydia sat with the children further back in the cave, regaling them with stories of their previous adventures. Sigrid and Cyrus sat on either side of her, hanging on her every word, though Cyrus occasionally interrupted with odd questions only a child would wonder.
Little Simon was curled up in Lydia's lap, not looking at anything in particular, but seemed to be listening.

Arn figured the little boy must've been through more trauma than the other two because it had been a week and he still hadn't spoken a single word to any of them. He would just nod and point at things.

It was a joy to watch the children bond so well with Lydia. While Cyrus seemed to be enthralled with the things Arn said and did, both Sigrid and Simon seemed afraid of Arn at times. Perhaps he reminded them too much of something they didn't want to remember.

Still, it warmed his heart to watch them fall asleep leaning on her side or sitting in her lap as she told them stories, or hummed songs to them. It meant they felt safe, cared for, protected.

*This is what Lydia would be like as a mother to his children...*

Where did that thought come from?!

Arn visibly shrugged as if the physical act would ward off whatever strange musings his mind turned to as he observed Lydia setting little Simon down and tuck him in his bedroll.

So caught up in his musings was Arn, that he failed to hear the soft snort of a large beast just outside the opening, nor did he see the large, white haired arm reach in until it was too late.

The first inkling Arn had that anything was wrong was when he felt something grab his leg, but by then it was too late to react.

Before he knew what was what, Arn was yanked out of the cave opening and hurled backward through the air end over end until the drifts of snow dragged his flight to a stop in a wet POOF of white powder.

"TIID KLO UL!" Arn sputtered out the word of power, slowing the snow and time itself to a stop as he rolled to his feet, drawing his sword and shield, and wiped the snow from his face to see his assailant.

It was a good thing too. Arn found himself looking up at three Frost Trolls closing on him, their features barely distinguishable among the driving snow, with a fourth Frost Troll, larger than the others, still crouched at the cave opening with his arm inside, reaching around for anything else he could drag out for the lot of them.

Arn had fought Trolls before, but they were always swamp or forest trolls, the smaller and less hardy versions of the white haired beasts that now stood around him.

Without a mage casting fireballs to stop their regenerating, this would be next to impossible.

Dawnbreaker did some mild fire damage, but Arn doubted that would deal significant damage to them.

"FUS RO DAH!"

As time sped back up, Arn's thuum shout Knocked two of the trolls away into the snow covered thicket off to one side before he turned and ducked under the swinging grasp of the one left on his right side.

Arn caught the underside of the Troll's next swing with the blade of Dawnbreaker, a brief plume of flame visible at the cut as the Troll growled in rage, but didn't slow down.
Instead, it grew more furious, speeding up his swings and catching Arn off guard with a two handed punchlike thrust with two fists that Arn managed to block, but the force of it knocked him back and off his feet.

In that split second Arn found himself flying backward through the air, he heard a brief snort behind him and rightly deduced the other two Trolls hadn't been dealt a mortal blow by his Thuum shout and had made their way back out of the thickets.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn's body blitzed forward through the air and driving snow, his still raised shield battering into the face of the Troll that had just launched him backward, stunning it momentarily and allowing Arn to ride it down to the ground as it fell over with the weight of the impact.

As it hit the ground, Arn stabbed hard down through its head, the satisfying crunch of bone and flesh immediately ending its surprised howl.

Arn had no time to savor the victory, though, as a large hairy hand grabbed his left leg and hurled him through the air again.

It was the larger one that had been by the cave opening.

The driving snow had obscured its approach to the fighting and now as Arn's leg bounced off a tree trunk and he thudded into another snow bank, he realized that the snow would only continue to give the Trolls an advantage as it slowed his own movement down and kept him from seeing clearly.

He'd only just gotten to his feet before he found the remaining three Trolls bearing down on him.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn hit all three of the approaching Trolls with a blast of force, but it only knocked them tumbling into the snow, and didn't seem to harm them much at all.

A loud crunching sound of snow letting loose interrupted everything as Arn tried to peer back over his shoulder up at the mountain, but all he saw was the driving white dots of snow in the darkness.

He was about to slow time down to try and hamstring the large Troll when the slight sifting noise like the shifting of sand and growing crunching sound of snow grew louder and confirmed what Arn had feared.

An avalanche was coming.

"Arn?" Lydia hollered with urgency as Arn spotted her dark form through the trees and driving snow by the cave opening.

Arn tried to run toward her, but the snow hampered his movements and he heard the Trolls growl behind him.

The sifting noise grew louder and he looked up to see a white cloud rise up on the mountainside just above them.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn shot forward, stopping just in time to grab Lydia with one arm around her waist and dive through the cave opening just as the white cloud of snow descended on them.
Arn had dived right onto the campfire, but the sudden influx of snow as it gushed by and filled up the opening immediately snuffed it out and covered Arn and Lydia in an unwelcome blanket of wet coldness as they sputtered and gasped for breath.

The children had screamed and Arn could hear at least one of them crying as he helped Lydia to her feet in the now pitch dark cave.

"Don't worry. We're all here!" Arn tried to sound reassuring as he felt around for the torch to light.

Eventually, he got the torch lit and looked around to find Lydia consoling the three children, now huddled next to her as she sat on one of the slabs.

Silent sniffling was all the noise in the cave as Arn listened to yet more snow settling outside the entrance.

Had to be at least fifteen to twenty feet, based on what he'd seen and heard.

"Whado we do now?" asked Cyrus after another silence of watching Arn eye over the cave opening now filled with snow.

"We'll have to find another way out" Arn declared, quickly gathering up the essentials they would need.

"Do you think we might wait until morning. Maybe Simon will be able to walk by then?" Lydia pled in an uncertain tone as she looked down at the curled up boy with tears streaming down his face.

"With the opening now blocked, there's no telling how long the air will last. We have to go now" Arn replied, trying not to sound dire as he moved to the back of the cave and began moving aside the rocks and debris the children had piled in front of the crypt door.

It didn't take Arn long to clear the doors, but it did take some doing to get them open, eventually resorting to use brute force.

By then, Lydia had rigged up a sling to carry Simon on her back and prepared packs and supplies for the other two children to carry.

"It lookth thcarry to me" Sigrid's words echoed as they all stood in the doorway and looked down into the dim ruins lined with draugr and spider webs.

"Don't worry. We've done this before" Arn replied, not bothering to add they'd never had to do it while escorting three children. Nor did he know for sure what was down there or if it truly was a way out or not.

There was only one way to find out.
Chapter Summary

Arn and Lydia escort the three children through treacherous Nordic ruins, trying to find a way out of the mountain. It seems lifeless at first, but they both know something stirs down below...

The blade of Dawnbreaker easily scythed through another thick curtain of spider web, the brief plume of flame spreading out and illuminating the darkness of the ruins with flickering colors as the flame burned out the webbing in each direction until it petered out near the walls of the catacombs.

"Oooohhh" cooed Sygrid with wonder before Lydia shushed her with a hand over her mouth.

It had been a good portion of a day since Arn, Lydia, and the three children had begun their trek down into the bowels of the mysterious ruins, looking for another way out of the mountain.

Initially, everything was done cautiously and quietly, but after half a day with no sign of any life, the children had grown far less afraid of their surroundings and would occasionally make an exclamation or sound that Arn and Lydia would quickly try to compensate for.

Arn knew something had to be stirring down here. It was a surprise to him that none of the Draugr toward the entrance had been active. Even more surprising, despite the vast amounts of spider web, they'd encountered no spiders either.

The reasons for Draugr's existence and activity or dormancy wasn't something Arn was entirely sure of. As a child, he remembered hearing tales with Draugr featured in them, though, each time, they were presented as the restless souls of the undead, or minions of something similar. It made them sound like little more than corporeal ghosts.

While working as a young sellsword, he remembered hearing a story from an older Nord mercenary about how the Draugr were really servants of the Dragon Priests, and that they kept the tombs up in accord with the Dragon Priests' instructions and power.

He'd never put a lot of faith in that theory since no one had ever mentioned Dragon Priests to him since, but once he returned to Skyrim, he'd noticed the Draugr were always more plentiful and active near the Word Walls and anything else connected to the power of the Dragons.

Pushing idle thoughts aside, Arn found it believable enough that Draugr might not be active in the upper parts of some ruins, but found it highly suspicious that they didn't even find any spiders, given how much spider web there was.

Spiders were by far the most common denizens of dark ruins and caves that Arn had encountered. They could see in the dark, preferred ambush tactics, and could slow down their body metabolism for long periods of time, going months or even years without a meal. That is why when you surprised one, they would react sluggishly at first, but then attack with increasing speed and ferocity.

Arn expected to have encountered at least one by now, if not a dozen based on how much spider web they'd had to cut through as they progressed further and further down into the ruins.
Something was off about these ruins.

The sense of foreboding only grew as they continued on for another hour with no sign of anything but more spider webs and complete and utter silence.

"How are they?" Arn whispered to Lydia as they stopped to rest and partake of some rations.

Lydia didn't respond, but simply turned around for Arn to see the peacefully sleeping head of little Simon, bundled onto Lydia's back with one small arm clutched tightly to her shoulder.

"He sleeps peacefully" Arn whispered, since Lydia wouldn't have been able to see.

"We're not stopping to sleep. Are we?" she whispered back, a slight frown creasing her brow as she darted a glance around again.

"No" Arn replied, glancing around again before noting Lydia's grimace of pain as she took of her shield from her left arm and set it down.

"How is it?" Arn nodded at her shield arm.

"Still hurts more than I'd like, but at least I can hold my shield now" Lydia grimaced, stretching her arm this way and that as if to test it.

"Rest a little while more, then we'll continue" muttered Arn as he munched on a piece of jerky and a piece of bread.

Lydia merely nodded, while continuing to glance around into the darkness that stretched out past the lanterns they each had on their belts. She must have sensed the lack of usual signs too.

"Ever hear any stories about a place like this?" Arn asked after a few moments of silence.

"There are rumors of many ruins in Skyrim, but...I would have expected to encounter some Draugr or at the very least some spiders by now" she replied uneasily.

"Frost Trolls don't eat spiders, do they?" Arn queried, trying to come up with a reason for their absence.

"No, while Trolls might kill spiders for getting in their way, they hate the taste of them" Lydia replied absently, her mind still wandering the darkness where her eyes were glancing with worry.

"We should keep a little farther apart" Arn spoke up after finishing up his rations.

"If something attacks, I want there to be some space between us" Arn left the implications unspoken, and gave a look of finality when he saw the challenging look on Lydia's face, knowing she still felt keenly in charge of his protection and not just the three children, but Arn wasn't having any of it, and merely furrowed his brow in determination, their argument of looks a necessity to ward off worry from the young faces of the children eyeing each of them as they whispered in the dark.

After another hour of trekking, they reached a large chasm of sorts.

In the pitch dark, it was hard for their lanterns to illuminate anything beyond twenty to thirty feet in front of them, but from what Arn could see, it was a large opening carved down into the mountain, circular in shape, with vaulted doors built into the sides. The top was some sort of dome, but beyond that, any details were impossible to discern due to the massive amount of spider web that layered the
entire area.

Arn briefly considered trying to use the spider web to get across since there was so much of it, but despite not seeing any spiders or draugr at all, it just wasn't worth the risk.

There were broken off bits of stone around the edges that seemed to suggest that at one time there had been some sort of stairs or other structure to travel down the chasm and to connect all the vaulted doors.

After a good deal of eye straining, consideration, and whispered debatings with Lydia, Arn finally decided to try venturing around the outer ledge to try to see if there was a way into something on their own level without having to find a way down into the darkness of the chasm far below.

Taking his time, Arn carefully tested each dirt and web covered ledge before sidling his way past slabs of Draugr and more layers of web along the wall as he made his way around the chasm while Lydia stayed with the children in the main passage opening.

The Spider Web grew so thick that Arn had to stop to cut it away at one point.

Sidling further, Arn had to be particularly cautious as he came to a thin point where only a small portion of ledge was left to stand on next to the web and dirt covered wall.

He thought he was making good headway, pleased that none of the pieces of ledge crumbled away under his weight, when suddenly, the wall at his back began to move.

Specifically, it moved backward and up very quickly. So quickly in fact, that Arn was left flailing as he fell onto his rump unexpectedly.

He would have been pleased at this development, except he couldn't help but notice the wall hadn't moved in a natural, straight line like a mechanical device in the wall should have.

Arn spun quickly, drawing Dawnbreaker and his shield, only for his suspicions to be horribly realized as the dirty, web covered 'wall' he had been leaning against turned out to be the hairy, web covered abdomen of the largest spider Arn had ever seen!

Rising up on its eight legs and spinning around, Four pairs of greenish, glowing eyes fixed upon Arn and its fanged mouth opened with a loud hiss that felt like it scratched Arn's eardrums it was so harsh and so near.

The thing was monstrous, easily some twenty to thirty feet across. One fang alone was bigger than Arn himself, and the glowing green eyes made it seem unnatural in a ghostly kind of way.

Arn was briefly aware of Lydia screaming his name from back and off to one side as the spider reared up slightly and hissed again, this time with the telltale swish of a spit glob firing at him.

Arn tried to get to his feet to block it steadily, but the wad of mucus hit him faster than he'd anticipated, pushing him back farther, exploding on his shield and showering him with likely poisonous goo.

He was about to go on the offensive when the ledge piece he was standing on gave way, sending him flailing down and backwards when he'd wanted to get on the other side of the spider.

Fortunately, he was quickly caught in the relative safety of the layers of web across the chasm, but this only proved troublesome as the stickiness of the web made his movements more difficult, and he couldn't right himself as the huge arachnid came out of its crevice fully and propped itself up with
legs on either side of the huge chasm as it reached toward Arn's flailing form in the webbing.

Seeing the spider reaching for him, Arn tried to strike before he was enveloped in more webbing.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Unprepared for the blast of Thuum, the huge spider was dislodged and momentarily tossed upward toward the domed ceiling of the chasm before quickly re-establishing its hold on the sides with its many legs and hissing loudly at the offending blob of Arn flailing in the webbing far below.

Unfortunately, the spider had also spotted Lydia trying to hurry the children back into the passage and moved to ensnare them, likely not worried about Arn getting away since he was already flailing in the webbing.

Arn was having none of that, though. As the massive spider moved its body across the chasm and flung a large wad of webbing into the passage with its oversized abdomen, Arn tried a different approach.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Facing upward, the Thuum shout flung him straight upward toward the spider. Unfortunately, he still wasn't free of the webbing, and instead of connecting with a satisfying stab into the spider's abdomen, he was instead yanked back down before bouncing back up again since he'd gotten enough webbing loose to move, but was still wrapped with a good bit of webbing.

When he was at the top of his rebound, Arn tried again.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Shooting upward he stabbed hard into the spider's abdomen, pounding into it hard enough to knock himself out of breath against his own shield.

The Spider, which had been flinging webbing and poisonous spit into the passage at Lydia and the children was suddenly dislodged from its perch by Arn's violent attack and briefly fell before trying to latch on again to the sides, but Arn struck again.

Slingshotting down and back up again, Arn was primed and ready.

"WULD NA KEST!"

But this time, his trajectory was a little off. Instead of hitting the spider squarely, Arn's explosion upward took him just off to one side, slicing into one of the legs as he went by.

The Spider reacted faster than Arn thought possible and spun to deal with Arn.

Suddenly, Arn found himself being pulled back down straight toward the glowing green eyes of the huge spider and he knew there was a huge, fanged mouth waiting beneath it in the darkness.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn's wave of force knocked the Spider off its holdings and momentarily plummeting downward with Arn.

There was still a lot of webbing below, and the spider easily caught itself and tried to stabilize, but Arn was not going to let up.
"FUS RO DAH!"

Another wave of Thuum force, knocked the huge spider loose and through its webbing, sending both it and Arn flailing downward while the spider tried to grab hold of something and Arn tried to land on the Spider itself so he could stab it in a more vital area.

They kept falling, Arn refusing to let the spider latch hold and the spider unable to do anything to Arn as long as it was disoriented and unable to right itself. It even tried to latch some webbing onto the side to hang from, but Arn hit it with a wave of force.

Arn wasn’t sure how far they fell, but in the midst of his desperate attack on the huge beast, trying to keep his bearing and his wits about him, and fighting in midair, Arn thought it had to have been some 100 feet at least.

At length, the spider tried to grip Arn with all eight of its legs, and then use its webbing to stop its fall. Arn was surprised by this, and the force of the impact of eight huge spider feet engulfing him forced him to drop Dawnbreaker.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn broke free of its grip and sent them tumbling again.

This time, they both slung to a halt amidst thick webbing at the bottom of the chasm, but by this point, Arn could barely see. So he had no idea what was below him, only that it was the bottom about twenty feet down.

Furious, hurt, and now full of energy, the spider righted itself and quickly spun on the flailing Arn, trying to free himself of the accursed webbing.

Weaponless, Arn did the only thing he could think of.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Exploding forward, Arn connected with a powerful CRACK against the spider's head with his shield, his weight behind the blow as they were both sent sprawling down again.

Arn was still half snagged in webbing and ended up falling down head first as webbing still snared his legs.

Barely able to see and without any weapons, Arn had only one option.

As he clanged against the stonewalled side of the chasm, he could see the shadow of the huge spider roll back upright and come at him.

"FUS RO DAH!"

"FUS RO DAH!"

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn pelted the huge beast with ever increasing desperation as it grew wilder and more enraged with each thunderous wave of force from him.

Arn had no idea how many times he used it. He just knew that he felt finally satisfied when the shadows stopped moving, but even as he tried to extricate himself, he could feel himself passing out from using Thuum too much.
Working desperately on his feet, he had just freed himself when he felt the world melt away into the blackness of unconsciousness as he felt himself fall....

"Arn...Arn" he could hear Lydia's soft whispers. Was she whispering to him?

It was a pleasant dream. He imagined them intertwined together in a nice cabin somewhere. No dragons, no bandits, no politics....just...the two of them. Then he heard some children giggling and quite easily, he imagined what it would be like for them to have their own children running about the yard out in front of the cabin.

"Arn...Arn" Lydia whispered again, shaking him a little this time, and Arn suddenly realized he wasn't dreaming and opened his eyes to find Lydia hovering over him in the darkness at the bottom of the chasm.

Disoriented and confused for a moment, he did the only thing that seemed sensible, which was to pull her into a fierce embrace, glad that she was there, in the flesh before him.

Doing so, though, put him eye to eye with little Simon staring wide eyed at him over her shoulder from his sling on her back, surprising Arn into releasing Lydia from the passionate embrace he would've given.

He then heard some giggling off to the side.

"Hush you two!" hissed Lydia to quiet Sigrid and Cyrus down.

"Where are...what is....how....?" muttered Arn in confusion as he looked around into the blackness around them that was only illuminated by Lydia's belt lantern.

"It's been hours. You were starting to worry me" Lydia whispered, still eyeing Arn over with concern in the dim light.

"I had to use the Thuum...too much" Arn groaned, massaging the back of his head as he sat up fully to take stock of their surroundings.

"Yeah, we heard" Lydia replied, feeling a lump on the back of Arn's head with some concern.

"The spider--!" Arn exclaimed, suddenly remembering what had transpired and trying to get to his feet.

Fortunately, Lydia restrained him, patting him reassuringly on the shoulder while pointing beneath them with her other hand.

Only then did Arn realize that he was actually laying atop the huge mangled upside down body of the hair and dirt covered monstrosity.

Looking around at the dim outlines of the mangled legs and seeing the glistening blood had dried on the crushed sections of its abdomen and head, Arn breathed a sigh of relief before casting his gaze around wildly again.

"But...how did you get down here?!" he exclaimed, fumbling to get his own belt lantern lit again.

"Like I said, it's been hours" Lydia murmured before turning and sliding down the spider's body partway before hopping off onto a stone floor.

Arn followed suit shortly after with his belt lantern now lit.
"But...the children--" Arn began to mutter, whirling to glance upward again before Lydia cut him off.

"Are just fine...provided they stay quiet" Lydia returned to a whisper as they walked a few paces to find another surprise.

With Arn out cold at the bottom of the chasm, and no rope to get down, Lydia had improvised in a way Arn would've had a hard time coming up with himself, much less pulling it off safely.

Moving to the edge of the wall, they came upon the two children, Sigrid, and Cyrus, hanging in bundles of webbing. Lydia had wrapped their lower bodies up completely, all the way up to just under their armpits and then used the webbing to lower them down before somehow using the webbing to get herself down.

Arn simply stood there aghast, marveling that they'd pulled off something so treacherous while Lydia seemed to fix them both with a stern gaze.

"I told you to wait on playing the bouncy game until I finished checking on Arn" Lydia scolded them.

As if in reply to the question in Arn's mind what she was talking about, the children immediately began trying to bounce in their webbing sheaths against each other, trying to bounce the other one to swing away further from the wall.

"Ooof, ith not fair!" groused Sigrid as it became obvious Cyrus was enjoying his ability to bounce her much further away than she could do to him "Hith bounthy ith bounthier than mine" she pouted before immediately ceasing her bouncing and folded her small arms crossly as Lydia simply smirked back.

"Don't tell me you actually all got down here using the webbing?" Arn murmured in disbelief, looking back and forth from the children to Lydia and up to the top of the chasm.

Lydia was about to reply when the small arm of little Simon shot out, pointing at something back past Arn.

Arn whirled to find the glowing blue eyes of a Draugr approaching much faster out of the darkness than Arn would've thought possible.

He still had no idea what had happened to Dawnbreaker and he didn't want Lydia to be going weaponless. Thankfully, he still had his shield.

The Draugr was on them faster than Arn anticipated, and he barely had time to get his shield situated on his left arm before the grayish husk of a body lunged at him out of the darkness.

"CRACK!"

Arn pounded the Draugr in the head with a lunging shield bash, sending it sprawling off to one side amongst the rubble, and then followed it up by repeated shield bashings to the face until it stopped moving.

Almost as if they had triggered some imperceptible switch, or crossed some imaginary line, all around them they began to hear the noises of Draugr groaning to life and shuffling in the hallways around and above them.

"Quick!" Arn hollered, pointing to the children as he ran to search for Dawnbreaker.
Arn briefly unclenched his jaw with relief as he spotted the faint, reddish glow of the Daedric blade caught among some webbing on the far side of the bottom of the chasm.

Running to snatch it up, his heart leaped into his throat when he turned back around.

Several Draugr, some of them armored, were running out of the passage directly toward Lydia, who'd only just finished extracting Cyrus from the webbing "sling" she'd made for them. Arn could see even more glowing eyes in the passage coming behind the initial bunch.

"WULD NA KEST!"
"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn had to make two different whirlwind sprints to get where he needed.

Zipping by the giant spider corpse, Arn turned and blitzed forward to come to a stop just behind Lydia, bringing Dawnbreaker in a slicing arc as he went, taking off the heads of the two nearest Draugr.

Arn knew he should take it easy on using words of Power after only just coming back from unconsciousness, but they were going to be in a tight spot either way.

Catching a fierce strike from the next Draugr on his shield, Arn was surprised to get knocked back by the severity of the mace blow.

These weren't just normal Draugr. They were moving faster and hit harder than the ones Arn and Lydia had run into previously.

Exchanging blows, Arn finally pried the Draugr's mace far enough out of the way to take its head off, but there was no respite as he immediately had to sidestep to avoid a lunging slash from another.

Easily dispatching it after another sloppy slash, Arn turned just in time to avoid the falling body of a Draugr thudding into the stone floor where he'd been. They all cast their eyes up to behold a terrifying sight.

The vault doors on the sides of the chasm were opening and they were all filled with Draugr, some of whom were now in desperation leaping down at them, their groans and shrieks echoing off the chasm walls as they jumped.

"Into the Passage!" Arn hollered, noting with relief that Lydia had finally gotten Sigrid free of the webbing.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn's belted wave of force impacted the Draugr falling nearly on top of them, the power of it crunching them into small grey pieces as Arn, Lydia and the children ran into the passage.

"Keep going until we find a door or a choke point!" Arn hollered as he began pushing, bashing, slicing, or anything else he needed to do to clear a way for the children and Lydia, who was fending off Draugr trying to catch them from behind with shield bashes and the occasional exchange of blade blows.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn belted another wave of force as they rounded a corner, sending the shambling Draugr there
flying back onto the floor as if they were sticks tossed on the wind.

Running by their downed forms, Arn saw even more Draugr coming to life from their slabs, their blue eyes glowing like a swarm of blue bees in the dark as they shambled after them and jumped down from the sides of the crypt hallways.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a standstill as Arn pivoted and sliced down next to Sigrid, taking off the bluish gray arm of a Draugr emerging from a slab next to them as they were running by.

Arn continued on, taking the heads off of two Draugr in front of Lydia, cleaving down on the head of one that had managed to leap past her, and bashing away another one crawling out of a slab on the other side of them as time sped back up.

"There!" Arn hollered as he spotted the tell tale vaulted hallway ahead that indicated a door puzzle much like other ruins he'd explored since arriving in Skyrim.

Bashing and slicing away a few more Draugr, Arn and Lydia and the scrambling children made it inside the chamber, and Arn quickly found the control lever for the door.

Unfortunately, even after throwing the lever down, the large, stone door was very slow to close, and the Draugr were closing in.

With Lydia shielding the children behind the closing stone door slab, Arn moved to keep any Draugr from getting in, but as soon as he moved into the opening, a black arrow glanced off the side of his helmet, momentarily knocking him off balance.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Slowing down time, he regained his footing, bashed away a greatsword swing and kicked another mace wielding Draugr away, taking stock carefully as he did where any arrows were headed near him, barely making out several in the growing bluish light of the passage they'd come from as it filled with more Draugr.

As time sped back up, Arn had moved clear of them and waited until the next group of Draugr all neared the closing doorway at the same time.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force obliterated the closest Draugr and crushed the others back into each other as they were rushing forward.

Not taking any more chances, Arn then pivoted back around into cover as the door closed the final feet of space before any Draugr could get it, closing into its jamb with a tremendous THUD of stone against stone.

Then it seemed like all was immediately quiet, only it wasn't. All of them were out of breath as they heaved and gasped for air from all the running, Lydia going so far as to sit down and lean against the side of the passage.

The muffled groans, shuffling, and even some pounding could be heard against the other side of the stone door they'd just closed as the Draugr were loathe to give up their pursuit.

Arn collapsed to sit in a heap on the floor as well, feeling both winded and light headed as the tell
tale symptoms of Thuum overuse crept up on him.

After some time to cool down and get their breath back, Cyrus broke the silence as he stared wide eyed around the puzzle chamber.

"Are we trapped?" he asked in a hushed tone.

"No, there's another way out beyond that door" Arn pointed with Dawnbreaker at the far puzzle door "but there's likely more enemies there too."

"What will we do?" Cyrus continued.

"We'll wait until we've recovered our strength, then we'll keep on going. We're close to the end" Arn answered as confidently as he could, trying not to sound as tired as he felt.

What Arn didn't say was that there was still a chance the Draugr behind them would find a way to open the door they'd come through, but Arn couldn't risk facing whatever was in the final chamber while being exhausted from overuse of the Thuum.

The uncertain wait seemed to last hours, though Arn doubted it was no longer than an hour, but the longer they waited, the more doubt seemed to creep into each of their minds as they kept glancing back at the stone door every time a Draugr noise made it through.

Finally, after using up the last of their rations and water, Arn carefully took the metal dragon claw from its pedestal and aligned the circles on the puzzle door to match the combination on the claw.

The children watched in wonder as Arn inserted the Dragon Claw into the door slot and couldn't help gasping in wonder as the circles began moving and the door clicked loudly as the mechanisms unlocked and the door opened down into the floor.

Arn took a quick glance at Lydia and nodded reassuringly as they turned to see what lay beyond the door....
Hevnoraak: Falkreath pt. 7

Chapter Summary

After barely escaping an undead Horde, Arn, an injured Lydia, and the three children must survive a confrontation with a Dragon Priest...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A large burial chamber lay beyond with an ornate casket laying on the raised platform in the center, flanked on each corner by an imposing carved pillar. There were some alcoves on each side and a door at the back, but Arn knew his focus had to be on whatever came out of that casket.

As the door came to a THUD, fully opening down into the floor, Arn and Lydia both heard the clanking of the stone covering breaking on the casket.

At that moment, Arn would've given just about anything for a quality enchanted bow with some powerful arrows, but his bow had been broken in the fall off Knifepoint Ridge, and the one he'd picked to replace it from the Bandits' stores had been broken in his tussle with the huge spider earlier.

"Use the pillars for cover!" Arn hollered over his shoulder as he took off sprinting toward the platform, hoping to catch whatever came out of the casket by surprise.

But it was Arn who was caught by surprise when instead of a Draugr coming out of the casket, a skeletal ghoul like nothing Arn had seen before floated up into the air, hissing loudly in the Dragon Tongue.

Arn was almost on him and was about to hit the thing with an Unrelenting Wave of Force, but was blindsided by a hard bash from his left, practically bowling him over.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to stop as Arn rolled to his feet to see the huge, ebony armored Draugr that had clocked him with a heavy mace pivoting around the corner where he'd been to bring his mace on the spot where Arn had gone down.

Leaping up onto the side of the casket, Arn sliced across the neck of the large Draugr before time sped back up again.

Turning back to the floating specter, Arn was dismayed to find it had disappeared.

Glancing around wildly, Arn spotted it back behind him.

To his horror, it was fixated on the children and Lydia, who was locked in a melee scrap with another large, ebony armored Draugr.

"FUS RO DAH!"

Arn's wave of force surprised the floating ghoul and it was knocked back in the air before turning on...
Arn with a loud hiss in the Dragon tongue.

Arn barely had time to react as he realized the Draugr he’d thought he’d finished was still going, bringing a blow down towards his head he barely got his shield up in time for, but the force of the blow forced him to step back down and inside the casket.

Arn knew the Floating Ghoul was closing on him and turned in time to see it target him.

A wave of force came flying out at him, but Arn, already half standing in the casket, dropped down inside completely to shield himself as the wave of force went by.

Thankfully, the wave of force caught the Draugr about to bring its mace down on Arn's huddled form and tossed it back from the casket.

Arn and the Floating Ghoul traded Waves of Unrelenting Force a few times, the Ghoul each time disappearing and re-positioning to try to catch Arn off guard, and each time Arn getting down inside the coffin just in time. It did keep the Draugr off him, though, tossing any that got close to him away and crushing one against a pillar.

Arn knew he couldn't keep this up, though. He wasn't doing much damage to the Floating Creature and he had no idea how Lydia and the children were faring with increasing numbers of Draugr showing up from somewhere unknown.

The conditions were changed for him, though, as the Floating Ghoul let loose another Thuum shout, but this one unleashed several mini-tornadoes of air that swirled rapidly in among the pillars, the power of the suction lifting Arn up out of the coffin and swirling him around in the air as if were a leaf tossed on the wind.

Arn clattered to the ground among some rubble completely unsure which way was up or down and half stumbled to his feet as he tried to get his bearings.

Fortunately, he was half shielded by a pillar, or the Floating Thing might have finished him off right then, but it had to move to a different angle as it produced a mage's staff.

"Arn!" Lydia called frantically from off to his right and back a ways.

It was a warning. He had to move...now.

Still uncertain where anyone or anything was, Arn shuffled one way and then blitzed forward with a Whirlwind Sprint.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Whatever he did, it must have gotten him clear of whatever the Floating Ghoul did, he even battered into a Draugr unfortunate enough to have been in the way.

The contact with the Draugr and the time to recover allowed Arn to finally get his bearings just as he saw the Ghoul appear floating some twenty feet in front of him and move to unleash a spell from its staff at him.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a standstill as Arn raced forward aggressively to finally get within melee range, but then got surprised again as the Floating thing seemed to join him in the same time slowed moment with a Thuum shout of its own, leaving Arn swinging at thin air as it disappeared again.
Appearing again some distance away, it unleashed its staff at Arn again, sending a massive wave of lightning crackling out in a wave that lit up the entire chamber.

"WULD NA KEST!"

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn blitzed away from the wave and then changed course, dodging the swirling mini-tornadoes the Floating Creature tried to catch him with again.

Arn yelled with enthusiasm as he finally connected with a slice into the Floating thing’s body, though the armor rebuffed it.

It was wearing some sort of plated mail over a ragged, but apparently enchanted cloak.

Arn was suddenly launched back by a wave of force from the thing, but a distant cry of pain from Lydia kicked his adrenaline into a gear he didn't know he had.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Without having even hit the ground from being thrown back, Arn shot forward in the air again, crashing into the creature with his shield and running it through the rib cage with Dawnbreaker, eliciting a scream of pain from the creature as it writhed to dislodge him.

They spun and physically beat on each other as they tangled, knocking into things, and eventually Dawnbreaker slid out, plopping Arn back down on his feet, but he didn't relent.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

The frost breath of a Dragon spewed forth, catching the Floating apparition, still reeling from where Arn had stabbed it, knocking it to the ground and pelting it with ice, snow, and wind.

Suddenly, it disappeared, but Arn reacted quickly.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Immediately, he found the thing was thirty feet away in the process of letting loose more mini-tornadoes.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn exploded forward, making it to the Ghoul before it could get its words of power off, impaling it again with the Blade of Dawnbreaker.

The Floating Ghoul writhed and screamed in both noises and Dragon speech as it fell to the ground again.

Again and again, Arn stabbed, though it kept struggling, trying to crawl away.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"

Arn blasted it with more Frost breath as he was vaguely aware of Draugr steps closing on him and another wind-like noise coming from the other side.

"FO KRAH DIIN!"
Arn belted the thing at point blank range as he continued stabbing, desperate to kill it dead and hopefully end any power the Draugr may have been feeding off, but he was in for another surprise.

In the course of their fighting, Arn hadn't realized they'd worked their way to one side where there was the tell tale concave shape of a word wall, and he was now standing in front of it as he was trying to finish off the undead creature.

Suddenly, he was practically ripped up in the air, suspended as words and power surged through him, the magic in his blood reacting to the words that were now glowing on the Word Wall.

Then all he remembered was darkness....

Tap...tap....tap.........tap....tap....tap...

Slowly, Arn became aware of the fact that something small was tapping or patting him on the face. As he came fully back to the realm of consciousness, Arn was aware that a pair of small hands were patting his face.

Opening his eyes, he found himself looking up at the worried features of little Simon as he was just about to pat him on the face again.

Seeing Arn open his eyes caused little Simon to raise his eyebrows in surprise before pointing with his small arm back beyond him.

Realizing the implications of the fact Lydia wasn't the one waking him up, Arn shot up to his feet, nearly bowling little Simon over.

Glancing around wildly, Arn was slightly relieved to see no Draugr moving about, but his heart fell when he saw no sign of Lydia.

Pulling Dawnbreaker from the pile of ashes left of the Floating Ghoul, Arn ran around to the direction little Simon had been pointing, his breath catching in his throat when he saw her lying on her back with both Cyrus and Sigrid looking over her with worried faces.

Dashing up to them, he breathed a sigh of relief when she turned her head and grinned weakly at him.

"Sorry, my shield arm wasn't working like I wanted" she grimaced.

Arn could see the dents and slash marks on her shield and armor in different places. There was no way to tell how bad it was, but clearly, her armor had absorbed a lot of damage and eventually some of that damage would transfer through in the form of blunt force injuries.

"I held them off long enough, though. You killed the thing, right?" she grimaced again as Arn carefully eased her one way and then another to see what she could move.

"Yes, I killed it, but....if I'd been able to kill it quicker--" Arn started to reply, feeling guilty over leaving Lydia to both protect the children and face the Draugr on her own.

"Don't!" she cut him off, grimacing as she moved to sit up "We're all alive. We won.....and little Simon is walking" she smiled reassuringly at him before turning to the small form of Simon that Arn
hadn't even been aware had walked up next to him.

Seeing Lydia sitting up and smiling had a tremendous impact on little Simon as he immediately rushed forward and hugged Lydia around the neck.

Arn felt rather angry with himself over Lydia's injuries, but it was hard to remain negative in the face of such a touching display of emotion, particularly since the little boy had been so unresponsive to them before.

Some time later, after Arn had secured the chamber as best he could, he set to work getting her armor off to administer any healing he could as well as try to gauge how bad her injuries were.

As Arn sat next to her, running his healing hands over her left thigh and left rib cage areas, he could feel Lydia eyeing him with concern.

Her shield arm, the one not fully healed had been re-injured, broken in several places, but thankfully that was the only major blow. The rest was severe bruising from the blunt force blows of maces and a Greatsword.

Arn was honestly surprised the injuries weren't far worse. Clearly, it had been the right decision to ditch the armor she had been wearing for whatever Daedric armor she had gotten.

"Stop worrying" she chided, breaking the long silence as Arn was focusing on healing.

Arn glanced over at the huddled forms of all three children sleeping nearby on a blanket.

"I told myself I would never let you get hurt like this again..." he murmured.

"It's my job to bear your burdens. Not your job to bear mine" she quietly admonished him as he finished his healing, again wondering why he felt no fatigue after exerting so much magicka.

Removing his hands from beneath her leathers, he stared at one of them for a moment, wondering for the thousandth time about the mysteries surrounding the blood pumping in his veins.

"What did you learn this time?" Lydia interrupted his musings.

He had been so concerned about her that he hadn't really taken much time to digest or even try out the new power shown to him by the Word Wall.

"Aspect of a Dragon" he replied solemnly.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm...not sure, but it has to do with the ability to summon the power, strength, and toughness of a Dragon...probably for a certain amount of time" Arn muttered slowly, piecing the concepts burned into his mind out into words.

"You haven't tried it out yet?" Lydia raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise.

"I was worried about you" Arn replied, still trying to piece together from his mental images and concepts what it meant.

"I don't know, but having the strength and toughness of a Dragon, even temporarily sounds pretty...amazing" she marveled for a moment, also pondering what it meant.
The words were on Arn's lips as he turned back to look at her, but he said nothing, knowing she would just admonish him in the same way as earlier.

Once he'd gotten her situated for the night/day or whatever they were calling their resting periods, Arn moved over to examine the pile of ash left by the Skeletal Ghoul he'd fought.

Poking around in the ash revealed a mask with a clear magical hue to it left perfectly intact. Arn eyed it closely, worried that touching it might produce some ill effect to himself.

The front of it was nothing special to look at, though the design style mimicked the same style found in the Word Walls, but turning it over was a revelation.

The inside of the mask was filled with runes of Dragon speech.

"Hevnoraak"

The word showed up repeatedly among other phrases about the Dragons. Arn recognized it from the runes on the coffin the Skeletal Ghoul had emerged from.

It suddenly occurred to him that this must've been one of the fabled Dragon Priests. He really couldn't come up with any other convincing explanation for both the abilities he possessed and the phrases and words in the Dragon tongue that were all over the mask and the coffin.

Still wary of the mask, Arn prodded it into a small bag and stowed it away along with the powerful mage's staff that also glowed with magical potency.

Arn gave Lydia a half a day to sleep and heal before they packed up and tried to continue on.

If they'd had provisions, Arn would've waited as long as necessary, but they had no food left, and water was running low.

This time, it was Arn who had little Simon bundled onto his back and carried what was left of their gear. He just hoped they wouldn't have to fight anything. They were in no shape to fight or even flee if they did run into anything. Lydia could barely walk and Arn was burdened with too much in the way of supplies.

Moving through the doorway out of the chamber, they simply had to ignore the chests of riches and weapons there in their haste to find a way out and find some provisions.

Leaving the architectured walls and ceilings of the crypt, Arn's heart leapt in joy as he felt a cold breeze hitting him in the face as they walked up a dark passage carved into the stone of the mountain that grew smaller and smaller.

They all groaned in disgust, though, as they came to the end of the tunnel only to find it blocked by a large boulder.

Arn could feel air coming through some cracks on the sides. So there had to be space beyond it, but there just didn't seem to be any way to get past...

After spending a bunch of time examining every inch of area around it for the expected secret lever or switch, Arn sat back on his haunches in aggravation when they found nothing, wondering what to do next when he felt Lydia's gauntleted hand on his shoulder.
"Looks like it's time to try out those new Words of Power" she quietly urged him.

"It could collapse the cave" Arn worried, but was still buoyed by the idea that hadn't occurred to him.

"Not much choice" was Lydia's only reply as she motioned Cyrus and Sigrid away from the large stone.

Unstrapping little Simon from his back, Arn sent Lydia and the three children back to the architectured part of the cave in case of a collapse.

"MUL QAH DIIV!"

Immediately, Arn felt as if he'd grown twice as tall, though he still seemed to be looking at everything from the same level.

Stepping forward, he then noticed a faint blue outline that glowed around him, as if someone had outlined him and then magnified it several times.

It had a strange look to it, almost as if he was walking around inside a larger version of himself painted on and around him in a bluish magical light.

As he reached out with his hand to place it on the rock, when he focused on it, the bluish light became more solid, nearly blocking out any view of his own hand, and made it feel like his hand was actually that big where he was touching the rock.

Expecting to have to put a lot of effort into it, Arn was surprised when the massive boulder simply gave way as he began to push, sending it tumbling down the side of the mountain in a shower of powdery snow and fragments of rocks.

A few small rocks fell and bounced off Arn in the opening of the cave, but he didn't even feel them bouncing off him while he stared out into the bright whiteness of a snow covered Skyrim landscape.

After trudging through darkness for days, the transition to suddenly seeing so much light and whiteness, even if it was a light snowfall, made Arn feel like he was finally able to breathe freely again.

"Arn?" He felt a hand on his arm before it was quickly jerked away.

He turned to find Lydia and the children standing back from him, staring wide eyed at his still glowing blue outline.

"What's the matter?" Arn asked, worried something about him was wrong.

"N-no, nothing....it's just...different" Lydia muttered, still staring at him in surprise.

With no supplies, scant knowledge of the area and terrain, and wounds that still needed to heal, there was really only one place for them to head to that they knew was nearby.

The trek back to Knifepoint Ridge was unpleasant to be sure. The snow drifts were too high to traverse in some places, and despite Arn's use of the new Dragon Aspect to aid them in making a trail for the rest to walk in, even he was exhausted after a few hours.

Thankfully, they reached Knifepoint Ridge without incident, and were thankful to find no sign of anyone when they arrived.
Once the area was secure, Arn set to securing the mine entrance while Lydia and the children eagerly scoured for food among the crates and barrels of stored goods.

Later, as Arn sat by a campfire, content after a full meal, he turned to regard Lydia sleepily eyeing him from where she lay on a nice sleeping pad and covered in a pile of warm furs.

The children had fallen asleep almost immediately after eating, their small bodies worn out by the grueling terrain they'd covered that day with no supplies left.
"We should be safe. No one will be able to get through that barricade at the door" she muttered tiredly.
"That's not what worries me" Arn replied, tossing a crate fragment on the fire.
"What then?"
"If it's been snowing all this time, I doubt we'll be able to make it out of any of the passes. We'll be stuck in Falkreath until the spring thaw."

Lydia opened her mouth to say something, then stopped before actually speaking.
"We knew it would be difficult with Winter rolling in"
"I wonder if Delphine and Esberne found anything" mused Arn, rubbing the beard that had grown out over the last week.
"Part of me hopes they found the Temple, but part of me will be glad if they don't" Lydia replied in a short huff as she looked up at the ceiling.
"Why?"
"Because then she'd be even more insufferable to be around" Lydia muttered, drawing a wry smirk from Arn.

A loud growl in the sky far away in the distance made them both silent as they listened for any follow up to it.

To the untrained ear, it might have been passed off as a bear, a wolf, or maybe even a Troll growling to stake their claim to something, but Arn and Lydia knew better.

It was a Dragon.

Neither of them said anymore, and Lydia soon nodded off to sleep, but Arn kept awake, his ears perked to anything that sounded remotely like a Dragon, but all he heard was the whipping of the wind, as snow battered Knifepoint Ridge and the mountain side.

Stranded for the Winter, he couldn't help but wonder....

What was he missing while stuck here? What else was going on out there?
1. Yes, I know Aspect of a Dragon isn't introduced in the game until Dragonborn DLC, but I did say before that I was changing around some of locales and powers for narrative purposes.
Chapter Summary

After finding shelter, Arn ventures out to scout the surrounding area, worried more orphaned children may be hiding nearby. Instead, he stumbles onto a majestic White Stag, that leads him on a strange chase...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Snow swirled and gusted in the cold, winter air as Arn looked out from Knifepoint Ridge at the snow covered landscape far below that stretched out in front of him.

It was...beautiful.

It wasn't snowing, but the wind was blowing and shifting small bits of snow here and there in the morning sun as Arn looked out at what would have been a wooded countryside with a winding river instead covered in a blanket of white.

He admired the view for a moment, remembering why his countrymen would take such pride in Skyrim, despite the sometimes savage and brutal effort it took to carve out a life here.

Of course, that savagery and brutality was what had drawn Arn out into the cold on this morning, leaving a still recovering Lydia with the three children nestled in the back of the former Bandit hideout.

A growing fear had occurred to him while he spent a day cleaning up the mine, tending Lydia's recovery, and going through the former bandit provisions to set them up with supplies to last for awhile.

If there were children that had escaped or been cast away by Bandits at one of the locations the Bandits had been using, that meant it was possible there were more at the other locations where the bandits had set up ambushes.

While he didn't like the idea of leaving Lydia in her current state with the three children, Arn remembered the condition they'd found little Simon in. If there were other children in hiding nearby, every moment mattered.

Eyeing around for what appeared to be the nearest road, Arn set off through the snow, carefully winding his way down the Mountainside.

Swinging in a wide arc out from Knifepoint Ridge, Arn traced the edges of what appeared to be a road as he checked for tracks, particularly small ones.

"MUL QAH DIIV!"

Immediately summoning the aspect of Dragon, Arn leaped and ran for far longer distances than a normal man could. This would help him cover ground quickly.
But even after searching for an hour, Arn had found no sign of anyone and the only tracks he'd found were all from animals. After another hour of searching in vain, he sadly wondered if it was a lost cause when something unexpected happened.

As he was hunched over checking some tracks that turned out to belong to a Sabercat, he looked up to see a massive white Stag standing some fifty paces away on a hill side, staring intently at him.

Arn was no stranger to deer, elk, and other antlered creatures that roamed both Skyrim and Cyrodiil, but the beast he was looking at fit into none of the usual categories. Far larger than any deer, one might assume it was an elk, but its snow white coat of fur was certainly not like any elk Arn had seen or heard of.

For a moment, they each stared at the other until the white stag pawed the ground several times before turning and galloping off into the snowy woods.

Arn figured that was probably the end of that, but somehow, something about it felt...off, like he was missing something.

Moving through the snow drifts to where the white stag had been, Arn knelt down and looked at the tracks, impressed with the sheer size of the animal. He was about to turn and leave when he heard a slight huffing noise and looked up to see the White Stag looking at him again through the snowy branches some fifty paces away.

As soon as Arn stood up, it pawed the ground again before bolting off into the woods again.

"MUL QAH DIIV!"

Arn leaped and ran the fifty paces to arrive almost immediately where the white stag was. Expecting to surprise the creature, Arn was disappointed to see it again watching him from some distance away, immediately pawing the ground when they made eye contact again.

Following on after the beast, Arn couldn't help but feel some sort of strange magic was at work here, and his mind went back to Sigrid and Cyrus' remonstrations about a big white deer pulling him out of the river.

Could this be what they were talking about?

More rapidly now, Arn continued following the White Stag, though no matter how fast he moved or arrived, even sometimes almost instantly to where the White Stag had been, he always looked around to find it standing some great distance away every time...as if by magic.

So intent was he that soon he lost track of his location, and before long, he was at the base of some mountains further to the north and west.

After another sighting or two, Arn found himself at the entrance of a cave that went into the base of the mountains. Snow clogged most of the entrance, but there were some obvious tracks around it...human tracks. Also, the White Stag had disappeared in such a way to appear that it had walked into it, though there was no way such a large beast could've fit into such a small opening.

So Arn found himself eyeing it over with some degree of uncertainty.

There were some sticks with animal skulls on them around the perimeter of the entrance, though Arn had no idea if this was meant to ward off something or attract something.

Some of the more primitive people groups like the Reachmen or sometimes Orc tribes would use
such to ward off evil spirits and show them as a means of displaying status, but others, like necromancers used them to draw in energy and power from dark forces for their rituals.

Arn was no expert on which ones were which, or even if it mattered since he doubted the effectiveness of them, but as he stood eyeing them over, a sound from off to his right brought him back to the present as a blur of movement closed on him from his right after barreling out from behind a nearby tree.

At first instant, Arn thought it was a beast of some sort ambushing him when he heard a high pitched cry and a glimpse of fur, but as he sidestepped the attacking thing while drawing Dawnbreaker and his shield, its awkward flailing lunge revealed itself to be a person...a small woman to be precise, attired in.....not much.

Arn didn't have much time to marvel or inspect her since despite missing with her first lunge, the woman immediately spun and followed up her first attack with another lunge at his throat, enabling Arn to see the dagger in her hand for the first time.

His attacker was determined, but not skilled, and Arn easily parried away each of her attacks.

So determined was she, that Arn didn't get much of a chance to say anything before she was lunging at him again, but it wasn't long before she began to tire.

Growing desperate, she changed tactics, trying to latch hold of his shield arm and climb up Arn to stab him in the neck, but Arn simply pivoted and flung her against a nearby tree.

Even Arn heard the CLUNK of her head hitting the tree and cautiously moved to her side where she fell and lay motionless after hitting the tree.

Thinking initially of finishing her off, Arn realized that on closer inspection, she was really just a girl, maybe in her early teens, but he doubted much older than that.

Her attire...or lack thereof consisted of some fur pieces stitched together into some sort of primitive breaststrap, skirt, and armbands. She had some leather boots that were very worn out, and otherwise just had some necklaces with feathers and some feathers in some sort of headdress on.

Prying the dagger from her hands, it confirmed what Arn began to wonder. Chiseled from a large bone, it too was adorned with feathers and some symbols Arn couldn't decipher.

She must be a Forsworn. Arn could think of no other explanation for her attire and decorations.

Looking around to ensure there were no others, Arn returned to find the girl groggily holding her head and moaning in pain.

Arn knelt down next to her, trying to offer a piece of bread to the thin girl.

Suddenly, as if coming to and realizing her predicament, she sat up suddenly, staring wildly around before yelling something unintelligible and lunging at Arn's neck again, this time with just her hands.

"TiiD KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn moved around the lunging girl before time sped up again and he watched her fall flat into the snow in surprise.

She turned and stared wide eyed at Arn with something between confusion and fear.
"Hey, I'm not here to hurt you" Arn tried to reason.

Eyes darting around wildly, the girl quickly spotted her bone dagger on the snow nearby and lunged for it while crying out again in some language Arn didn't understand.

Arn lunged simultaneously and pinned the girl to the snowy ground with a thud that seemed to knock the wind out of her as he grabbed her hand and yanked it away from the bone dagger before she could reach it.

"NO.....No....no" Arn repeated, trying to will his meaning into her wheezing face as they both looked back and forth at each other and then the dagger.

Slowly, Arn got off of her and made a deliberate show of sheathing Dawnbreaker and putting his shield on his back while the girl slowly stopped wheezing, watching him with wide eyes.

Eyeing him with fear for a few moments, she continued to stare in trepidation at him when he offered her a piece of bread.

Getting no response from her, Arn withdrew his offering to replace it with a small piece of jerky instead.

Using the brief distraction, the girl lunged and grabbed the bone dagger from the snow with another cry of an unknown language.

Arn was expecting her to attack him again, but he was surprised when she instead turned the dagger on herself, putting the point of it against her chest and chanting something that sounded like a brief prayer.

"TiiD KLO UL!"

Time slowed down and Arn trudge forward, snatching the dagger out of her stationary hands before time sped back up again.

Crying some strange exclamation when she realized her dagger had been taken, she turned and stared in fear at Arn again, muttering some strange plea as she shrank away from him.

"Hey...I mean you no harm" Arn declared, packing away the bone dagger to prevent anymore outbursts before he handed her a piece of jerky again.

For what seemed like a long time, the Forsworn girl simply stared back and forth between Arn and the piece of jerky before slowly reaching out and snatching it out of his hands.

Eyeing it over and smelling it thoroughly, the girl slowly put it in her mouth and chewed it carefully, as if she expected it were some sort of trap or poison.

This pattern replayed itself two more times with a piece of bread and another piece of jerky.

Finally, the girl seemed to calm down some, but still eyed Arn over with wide eyed scrutiny.

Arn knew the Reachmen, now known as the Forsworn, had their own language, but he knew nothing of it.

Still, he tried what he knew to see if the girl knew any other languages.

He tried what little he knew of Yoku, the Old Redguard tongue, and he tried Ayleid, but she only looked oddly at him, occasionally saying things that he didn't understand.
At length, he just had to resort to hand signals.

It took some time, but Arn was finally able to get her to understand his name and found out that her name was "Ilyk".

Beyond that, it was hard to understand anything she was motioning, and he seemed unable to get her to understand any of his questions through hand motions.

Finally, he tried pointing into the cave to ask about it, prompting a sudden response from her.

She got up and ran back around the cave entrance to a tree, retrieved a dead rabbit, freshly slain, and ran back up to him, waving it triumphantly.

Arn wasn't sure she understood what he was asking. So he moved to the cave opening to point inside, but she immediately raced ahead of him and blocked the opening, motioning away with her hands.

"What...what's inside? Who is inside?" Arn asked, trying his best to make motions she would understand.

She seemed to understand since she looked away worriedly before trying to distract him with the dead rabbit again and pointing away.

Arn wasn't sure why she was so intent on keeping him out, but he could clearly see the tracks of the White Stag in the snow pointed inside.

"Sorry, I have to know what's in there" Arn muttered before sidestepping by her, despite her urgent remonstrations to stay out.

Entering the cave, Arn was pleased to find there was more room to stand up than he would've thought by looking at it from the outside, but he immediately felt Ilyk latch onto his arm, trying desperately to pull him back out.

It was a natural cave, and in the dim light, Arn spotted a small boy poke his head around a corner, staring at Arn with wide eyes.

"Hey there...it's okay. I mean you no harm. I can help you" Arn waved his hands out toward the little boy and slowly withdrew some more of his rations and slowly deposited them on a stone before kneeling down on the earthy ground to make himself less imposing.

The moment he'd spotted the little boy, Ilyk had stopped pulling on his arm and stood transfixed, as if unsure what would happen.

Slowly, the small boy came out and greedily snatched up the bread and began devouring it.

The act precipitated a flurry of activity.

Suddenly, little voices and bodies were emerging from every direction and converging on Arn.

Arn realized that suddenly he was surrounded by at least a dozen children all touching or patting him as if he was some unknown curiosity that required inspection.

During all this commotion, Ilyk retrieved her dead rabbit and came back in where Arn was swarmed with children.

Making an announcement in her unknown language, all the children seemed to know what it meant
as they immediately left Arn and rushed to where Ilyk was.

Arn turned to find Ilyk looking at him with a pleading expression, motioning at his belt where he'd stashed her bone dagger.

Contemplating for a moment, Arn slowly withdrew it and handed it to her, trying to take stock of how many children there were, their races, ages, and anything else he could figure out without disturbing them.

They were all dirty and haggardly thin. Some of them had so few clothes that they shivered as they stood waiting patiently while Ilyk cut up the rabbit and began handing them out little pieces to each one.

Arn thought about making a fire to cook it for them instead, but he doubted they would've listened to him, considering how quickly they each snarfed down the small pieces of meat.

Going through his pack, Arn soon became the center of attention again when he pulled out the small amount of rations he had left on him and disbursed them to the hungry mouths that now surrounded him.

As Arn watched in sadness as their eyes all turned to him again with that same helpless stare he'd seen too much of late, he noticed Ilyk was counting them, as if to make certain they were all there.

She seemed agitated and continued counting over and over again, moving to and fro, looking around as if they were missing one or more.

Moving further into the cave, Arn lit his belt lantern and began searching the areas further in.

The cave didn't stretch too far back. So it didn't take long for Arn to find the one Ilyk couldn't locate.

A little boy was curled up in a ball between two rocks, as if the stones might give him warmth.

Moving close to him, Arn kneeled down and gently set his hand on him to shake him awake, but as soon as he did, his heart sunk.

The boy was dead....cold as the stones he had huddled between.

Arn hung his head, sadness and anger warring in his soul as he slowly pulled the boy's body from between the stones and saw the frozen countenance, eyes clenched shut.

A little Nord boy...maybe five years old...Arn tried stroking the blonde locks of his hair, but even that was frozen in place.

"Aaahhh!" he growled angrily, slamming his fist into the ground and frightening all the children, who immediately skittered to hiding places.

Amid his sorrow, Arn suddenly realized that Ilyk was kneeling next to him, trying in vain to feed a small piece of rabbit meat to the boy, holding it out and whispering something repeatedly in her strange dialect, as if her urgency could will the boy back to life.

Slowly, Arn reached out and pulled her hand away.

She looked at him with eyes that began to fill with tears as Arn simply shook his head.

Words weren't needed. She knew what it meant.
Slowly, her lips began to tremble before she turned away, running to a small crevice, curling up in a ball, and sobbing into her hands.

Arn felt his own tears running down his cheeks, but he knew what had to be done.

Picking up the frozen body of the little boy, he slowly carried it past the hiding children and out of the cave.

Finding what he thought was a suitable place to bury him, Arn was interrupted suddenly by a still crying Ilyk, who pointed urgently for Arn to follow her.

Taking her lead, Arn found himself in a small nearby grotto where there were small piles of stones atop seven small graves.

Arn stood aghast for a moment, holding the dead boy's body as the reality of it sunk in.

At least seven other children had died already...

Abruptly, Arn realized Ilyk had set to work trying to clear snow off an adjacent area to presumably bury the little boy.

Arn interrupted her to take over the unpleasant task. His Dragonborn abilities made quick work of clearing snow and digging a small grave.

Once they'd buried the little boy and began setting stones atop the grave to keep predators out, Ilyk knelt and began chanting some sort of prayer as Arn kept to his task of placing stones on the grave.

Arn would have taken the opportunity to contemplate the matter more or at least have a moment of reverence for the little one, but he knew he needed to get the children to shelter and food as fast as possible and there was no telling how long it would take them to get back to Knifepoint Ridge.

Convincing them all to come with him to Knifepoint Ridge was actually a far more difficult task than Arn had counted on.

The children were afraid of him and said nothing, no matter what he asked or said to them, and Ilyk was also skeptical of anything about going anywhere else.

Arn decided that since Ilyk had taken on the role of "mothering" the children that his best bet lay in persuading her. If she came with Arn, the children wouldn't be afraid to come too.

It took him awhile, and included a lot of food and shelter hand signings, but oddly, it was the fact that there were other children there that seemed to settle Ilyk's mind and she began motioning and calling the children to her in her unusual dialect.

Setting out from the cave, Arn used his Dragonborn powers to clear a path as well as carry any of the little ones whose legs got too tired or feet got too cold.

Arn's use of Dragonborn powers always wowed the children, and by degrees, they seemed to become less afraid of him as their journey wore on.

Unfortunately, they were quite a distance from Knifepoint Ridge, and it took all the way until dusk for them to finally reach Knifepoint Ridge. All but the oldest of the children were completely worn out, and even Ilyk looked haggard as she carried two of the smaller children up the winding path to the encampment.
As Arn entered the palisade area, his heart jumped into his mouth as he laid eyes on two freshly slain men, arrows sticking out of their bodies from where they lay in the gusting snow drifts.

His concern for Lydia and the other children spiking, Arn hurried to the mine entrance, knocking louder than he meant.

"Lydia....Lydia are you okay?" he hissed urgently.

"Yeah...yeah, I'm fine...who's with you?" came the yawning reply from Lydia behind the locked door as Arn heard her fumbling with the latch.

"I found some more children...a lot more, actually" he muttered, turning to regard the hopeful and tired faces that looked back at him.

Getting the mine door open, Arn couldn't help feeling a huge weight of relief as he saw Lydia with her bow, smiling with excitement as she looked out at them.

Shepherding them all inside, the children seemed to come alive with excitement at the new surroundings and new people.

By now, Arn wasn't surprised that the children took almost instantly to Lydia, some of them following her around constantly and even beginning to talk, something none of them had done while Arn had been around.

Nor was he surprised how quickly Cyrus and Sigrid began conversing with the other children and showing them where things were.

By now, Arn had tallied the children. All in all, thirteen children had been in the cave, fourteen if you counted Ilyk, herself.

Most were Nord or Breton boys and girls ranging from the youngest at three years old to the oldest around nine. Arn wasn't sure, but he surmised Ilyk was around 12 or 13. There was a lone Bosmeri little girl and what appeared to be a young Orsimer boy.

Arn waited until the children had gotten situated with food, water, sleeping pads, and some of them new clothes before he finally got Lydia alone off to one side.

"I saw the bodies outside" Arn whispered, hoping not to alarm any of the children.

"There were four of them. I recognized one or two from before. I guess they thought it would be easy pickings coming back here" Lydia muttered as she eyed around to make sure none of the children were close by before continuing "They couldn't get in, nor were they expecting the welcome I gave them"

"The others fled?"

"Yeah" she nodded.

They both grew silent as Ilyk suddenly walked up to them, chattering excitedly in her unknown language to them.

Neither of them understood anything she said, but based on her demeanor, she seemed to express satisfaction with their arrangements before patting them both on their hands in some sort of strange handshake before returning to where the other children were.
They grew silent again as the children approached them...or at least Lydia with more questions and exclamations.

It wasn't long, though, before the excitement of the new people and surroundings faded and the fatigue of the day's journey took its toll on the children.

Some habits were hard to shake, though. Despite providing each of them with sleeping pads and furs for blankets, all thirteen of the newly arrived children moved their sleeping stuff over by where Ilyk had set hers and they all curled up together before falling fast asleep.

As Arn watched them all quiet down to just the whisper of breaths from the bundles of blankets, he noted that Lydia had been beaming a huge grin from the moment the children had arrived.

"I thought you'd be even more worn out than them" Arn marveled as she finished tucking in little Simon before joining him by the small fire.

"I am tired....but...happy" she sighed as she plopped next to him before eyeing over the sleeping children again "This is the reason I wanted to be a warrior...to stand up for those who could not" she grinned at him again contentedly before unexpectedly leaning against him and laying her head against his shoulder.

Arn looked at her contented face in the flickering firelight and decided against telling her anything about the frozen little boy, or the seven other children's graves he'd had to leave behind.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to do anything about it.

"Tomorrow, I'm going hunting" he stated with resolve after a short silence.

"Well, it is a lot more mouths to feed, but I still think with all the barrels and crates we should be good on supplies for at least a month, I'd wager" Lydia replied pensively, as if calculating in her mind what they would consume.

"Not hunting for food" Arn replied quietly.

Lydia abruptly sat back up and looked at him slightly puzzled, as if sensing for the first time there might be something he wasn't saying. She looked as though she might challenge him on it for a moment before softening her scrutiny and caressing his forehead.

"You need your rest too. The entrance is blockaded and the traps are set. Whatever worries you have can wait until tomorrow" she tried to soothe him as he reluctantly began to allow her to help him out of his armor.

Arn slept well that night, but not for long. Around the time he would normally have taken second watch, he lay awake, unable to shake the image of the little frozen boy's face, a grimace of unbearable pain etched permanently on his small features.

Long before any of the children were awake, Arn was strapping on his armor over heavy fur pants and over coat.

He had no idea how long it would take to track down the bandits, but Arn didn't much care. He would pack some food and live off the land if need be. Running would not save them.

He'd just finished latching on his last piece of armor when he felt a soft nudge at his shoulder.

"You sure this cannot wait?" Lydia tiredly asked him as she groggily handed him his belt.
"If I wait, their tracks will be covered by snow before long" Arn replied more curtly than me meant, not looking her in the eye as he cinched his belt and weapons on.

"Just...be careful" she admonished with a hand on his gauntlet as he sheathed Dawnbreaker.

Arn didn't reply at first, but took her hand and carefully turned her arm this way and that to see how well healed her injuries were before he squeezed her hand and turned to leave.

"You too" was his only reply as he left.

Tracking his quarry in the gusting drifts of snow finally gave Arn some outlet to vent his angry determination.

"MUL QAH DIIV!"

Bounding and running through the powdery winter forest, Arn closed relentlessly on a quarry that couldn't possibly know what was headed toward them....

Not far away on the Mountainside, a large man stood watching Arn's progress as he tracked the runaway bandits in the snow, or....at least, one would've thought it was a man at first.

Tall, and well muscled, he was attired in thick furs adorned with decorative etchings and markings. He carried a large and impressive spear in each hand, but it was the head that was most notably different.

He did not have the head of a man, nor a stag, but of something in between, with large ears, an elongated snout, a large set of antlers, and a piercing gaze from keen eyes.

Watching Arn make his way through the woods, the mysterious figure was passive at first, but then a small smile could be seen on his lips before he howled loudly into the sky like a wolf and set off at a perpendicular angle to Arn, wolves running at his feet...

Chapter End Notes

1. If you hadn't figured it out, ilyk is an outcast forsworn. While in the game they speak the same language, I felt it made no sense for a separate race (Breton) with their own very different culture (Reachmen) to be using the same language as Nords. Sure, some of them would learn the language of Nords, but mostly they would only speak their own language. As to how Ilyk ended up an outcast, well, you'll have to wait to find that out.
Weather, Bandits, and Giants will not stop Arn from hunting Sinding down. Will the appearance of another Daedric Prince change anything?

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Hunting the Betrayer: Riften pt. 9
Northeast of Falkreath
A day later, below Pinewatch Cottage, a wiry, Nord man slowly roused himself from sleep, turning and sitting up on one of the many bunks set up in the living quarters deep in the Labyrinth of passages below the Cottage.

He considered getting out of bed, but then remembered there was no hurry. After all, not many travelers would be moving around in this Winter weather, and since the passes were already filled with snow, there were no caravans to pick off.

No matter, on his way in the day before, he recalled seeing quite a few stores of food and other goods, and Rochelle the Red herself had assured him and his friend, Jacoby, that her group had plenty of supplies to last the winter.

It was a good thing Rochelle was more practical than the Champion had been. Things had gone so well for them while they were secretly serving the Jarl. They had known exactly where and when travelers were coming and even what sort of goods they had.

Then, for reasons he didn't understand, the Champion had up and decided they would no longer work for the Jarl, nor would he listen to anything Jacoby or any of the others said about it. His will was set in stone.

And while he and the other bandits had vastly outnumbered the Champion, no one was willing to cross him.

It all really went wrong when Sinding showed up. That sot had no excuse to be there. He was barely a decent hunter, let alone fit to number himself among accomplished highwaymen like the others.

Again, it was the Champion that insisted he was useful, trying to use him as some sort of go between with Jarl Siddgeir. The men had relaxed their hostility since that seemed to mean it was more likely they'd get Siddgeir to agree to their own terms, and soon would be again working for the Jarl.

Joffvel scratched his head before stretching and standing up.

Shaking the cobwebs of sleep from his mind, the man was startled to find himself facing the stern but amused visage of Rigel Strong-Arm.

He couldn't say he knew her very well, only that she wielded a Battle Axe decently, and that most of
the men surmised that despite the face paint and wild hair arrangements she was prone to, that she was actually a fine looking woman under all the heavy armor and furs.

"Seems awfully quiet. It can't be that late in the day, can it?" groggily asked the man, a little uncertain of his fellow bandit's intentions.

"We had a visitor while you were sleeping" she replied, eyeing him over more carefully before leaning off to one side against one of the bunks.

"What...sort of visitor?" he asked, growing uneasy with the scrutiny.

"Oh, you know him well. It was Sinding, the one who caused all the trouble at Knifepoint Ridge"

"Please tell me you skinned his sorry arse" spat the man with genuine venom while glancing around for his armor and weapons to suit up.

"We would have, if he hadn't run off first" she stated, watching more intently than normal as he put on his armor.

"Well?" wondered the puzzled man as he finished armoring up and wondering why Rigel was prodding him with bits and pieces of information.

"No need for you to run off after him. Rochelle already took most of the bunch out with her to chase him down" she replied as she continued to eye him over.

"So why do I get the feeling this has nothing to do with Sinding?" sneered the bandit, beginning to get a sense of what this was about.

"Let's just say...I've made some...arrangements of my own" Rigel replied, withdrawing an apple from somewhere before taking a large bite out of it.

"What sort of....arrangements?"

"Let's just say that I have a...friend or two in Falkreath that can ensure that Rochelle never returns from this foray" she smiled deviously before taking another bite of the apple.

"And you're...sure...that these friends of yours can deliver" queried the bandit cautiously.

"Oh yes, they do this sort of thing for a living" she replied as her grin grew wider "They can even make it look like an accident"

"And, of course, if she doesn't come back, it leaves all of us with no leader...." intimated the man as he leaned back and looked both ways suddenly, realizing their discussion could be dangerous to their health if the wrong ears heard it.

"I will be the new leader. Most of the men that have been here know my skill and cunning in a fight. They'll support me" she assured him tossing the apple up and down momentarily.

"If it were a foregone conclusion, why are we talking about this then?"

"You've been in all three of the bandit groups, The Champion, Feorus, and Rochelle's. We've taken in half a dozen men that used to belong to the other groups. They don't know much about me, but they all know you. You're more familiar with the terrain, trails, and roads than most here, and you've done this sort of work for longer than some of the other lads. Once Spring thaw hits, it will take some doing to avoid that rascal of a Jarl and his Imperial cronies, but with some good men and multiple
camps to hide, we can milk this area for years" she retorted, fixing him with a confident smirk before tossing him the partly eaten apple "Whadda ya say?"

The man eyed the partly eaten apple for a moment before bringing it to his mouth and taking a luscious bite from the uneaten part as he returned her confident smirk.

"If...Rochelle's out of the picture and if I can get certain...perks, I guess I'm in" he replied, making sure to that he would get something in return for his prowess and experience.

"What sort of perks might those be?" Rigel's countenance seemed to fall for an instant, inconvenienced by the thought of having to give up something in exchange for his support.

Now it was the man's turn to smirk and take another bite of the apple as his mind turned over all the different things he might demand as a favor.

He was about to start naming the things he wanted when a loud noise from further up the passage made both of them freeze.

Immediately, both of them snatched up their weapons before holding still a moment and listening.

For a few seconds, it was deathly still.

Then they heard a blood curling scream from a man further up the passageways, then the scream was abruptly cut off.

"Could that be Sinding?" hissed Rigel.

They were both quiet for a moment as sounds of melee fighting broke out far ahead.

The sound of melee fighting was something far more familiar to both of them, and they plucked up their weapons and quickly headed toward whatever fight had broken out when a loud and thunderous shouting noise silenced all the fighting.

"That's...not a werewolf making that noise...." muttered Joffvel, pulling up to a dead stop in the passage as they both listened intently.

"What else could it be?!" Rigel hissed.

They were both silent for a few moments as another scream echoed down the passage, followed by pleas for mercy that were abruptly cut short.

Rigel and Joffvel slowly found themselves retreating backward down the passage, an unknown feeling seeping into them as blade slices and more screams echoed down the passage.

Someone....or something was slaughtering anyone and everyone who hadn't gone out to hunt down Sinding.

After another roar silenced the sound of fighting much closer to them, they soon took off running further back into the passages.

"Is there a way out?!" hissed Joffvel as they ran.

"No, but there is Rochelle's private room. We can lock ourselves inside!" murmured Rigel in between breaths as they ran, her confident swagger from earlier completely gone.

Once they'd locked themselves inside Rochelle's quarters, Rigel led him over to one side and pulled a
lever, opening a hidden wall, where another heavier locked door lay.

Whipping out Rochelle's keys, Rigel opened it and let them in just as they heard another series of screams from the passageways.

Closing it with a loud THUD, Rigel locked the heavy door with Rochelle's keys.

Normally, Joffvel would've had all sorts of questions about Rochelle's vault, the goods piled next to them, and how Rigel had obtained keys that only Rochelle was supposed to have, but instead, they were both riveted to the noises coming from the passageway, watching the door.

For what seemed like a long time, it was dead quiet, and they both wandered if whatever or whoever had been out there had gone, but then a loud roar pounded against the Heavy Door to the vault, making both of them jump.

Their habits took hold, and immediately both of them moved to ambushing positions to attack whoever came through the door.

After another Roar that shook the door again but failed to break it, it was silent for awhile before another pounding noise stunned them for a moment as the Heavy Iron door caved inward and was sent flying.

After all this, they were expecting to see a huge Troll, a Giant of an Orc, or maybe even a Werewolf, but instead, the black outline of a man in heavy armor appeared in the doorway, apparently just having punched the door in.

Joffvel was so stunned by this, he failed to attack when Rigel did, paralyzed in his ambush position by the wall.

Springing from her nearby position with a war cry, Rigel brought her war axe down on the intruder for what should have been at least a maiming, if not killing blow.

Instead, the impossible man in mostly ebony armor simply seemed to vanish from in front of Rigel and immediately appear behind her, cleaving off her head with a flaming longsword with the same movement.

Watching his comrades cut down without any contest, Joffvel was stunned, his heart beating wildly in his chest as he tried to think of something to appease the monster that had appeared in front of him.

"WH-WH-WHO ARE YOU?!!" he more screamed than asked as he stumbled backward, the dark clad figure slowly advancing on him.

"OH...I...I KNOW! I KNOW! YOU...YOU WANT SINDING!" he sputtered, the armor finally sparking a light of recognition in his mind as he recalled that the appearance of this man was just like described by Sinding when they were sent out to see where he had fallen off the cliff at Knifepoint Ridge. He just...he couldn't remember the man's name.....Darkborn...Dragonone.....Drowborn....

"Where is Sinding?!" the man hissed, still advancing.

"I...I...I can tell you where....b-b-but you have to l-l-let me go!" Joffvel tried not to sound like the frightened rabbit that he felt like.

"You'll tell me now" hissed the man, closing on Joffvel and batting away what he thought was a skillful faint and parry with his longsword before seizing him by the neck and raising him off the ground.
"If you...kill...me,...you'll...never...find...him" gasped Joffvel, straining against the steel vice around his neck.

"No...today, you are all prey!" growled Arn before stabbing a mortal wound into the stunned Bandit's chest with Dawnbreaker.

Tossing the dying Bandit aside like he weighed nothing, Arn whirled and trudged out of the Bandit secret vault.

He did not stop to gaze on the stolen treasures. He did not stop to eat from the food stores.

All he cared about was the remaining bandits and if they had any captives.

Marching back through the passages that wove their way far below Pinewatch Cottage, he stepped over all the Bandits he'd killed on the way in. Emerging outside, he winced slightly at the windy snowfall that had begun.

Looking around for a few moments, he finally settled on the many sets of tracks headed south and east before assuming the Aspect of Dragon again and leaping off into the snow as he resumed his chase.

Half a day later, heavier snow began to fall as Arn was still tracking the Bandit group chasing Sinding.

Arn considered finding shelter somewhere, particularly since it wouldn't be too long before darkness fell, but then he looked up and was surprised to see the White Stag, same as before, looking at him from a distance through the falling snowflakes.

Just like before, it pawed the ground and seemed to huff at him intently before turning and bolting off into the woods.

Arn took off after the White Stag, their chase resuming the same pattern as it had been when he'd chased it before.

It went on like this for another couple of hours, with Arn taking a few breaks to rest, the White Stag seeming to do the same before they resumed the chase.

Next thing Arn knew, he was standing outside a massive wooden palisade of sorts with a thatched roof over it.

The entryway was littered with tracks of the men he was chasing, but it was also filled with other tracks...Giant tracks.

Creeping forward, it was easy to stealth his way in with the gusting winds easily covering any noise he made.

It wasn't far before he heard raised voices and saw a mass of huddled men cluttered around several bonfires.

He tried to get nearer to see what the dispute was about, and if there was any sign of Sinding, but he was careless and in his focus on the argument among the Bandit group with what appeared to be several Giants in front of them, he neglected to spot a lone Bandit spotter by one of the Palisade sides.
"Intruder!" came the call that surprised Arn for only a moment before he stood to his full height and let loose a Dragon Shout.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The Unrelenting wave of force plowed over half the Bandit group through the flames of one of the bonfires, crushing, maiming and burning the lot.

Arn exchanged sword blows with a nearby Bandit briefly before slowing down time to slice the throats of the three others that were taking positions to surround him.

He was about to dispatch the original attacker when time sped back up and a large shadow swung through air from a Giant that had approached faster than Arn had expected.

Hopping backward, Arn barely missed the swing of a massive club, it's near tree-like girth pulverizing his original attacker into the snow in a crunch of bone and flesh.

"Yugush Urzag!" bellowed the Giant angrily at Arn, raising his club and bringing it down again at him.

Arn wasn't sure how the Giants were involved in all this.

He had not wanted to get involved in a fight with them, but he had hoped that the two groups would end up squaring off against each other, and indeed, two other Giants seemed happily going after the remaining Bandits further up from Arn, but Arn couldn't understand their language and they apparently thought he was with the Bandits, or that he was equally to blame for any animosity.

"MUL QAH DIIV!"

Assuming the Aspect of a Dragon, Arn sidestepped the thundering blow into the ground of the Giant's Club. Then, jumping onto it and using it a platform, he leaped high into the air and forward, stabbing the un-armored Giant in the rib cage with Dawnbreaker.

Giants, however, did not die near as easily as men did.

Arn found himself dangling some six feet off the ground as the Giant bellowed and swayed one way and then another as it tried to dislodge Arn and his blade.

Finally wrenching Dawnbreaker free, Arn plopped down on his feet amid the snow and bodies to find himself facing a badly wounded Giant and another approaching from behind it rapidly to aid.

Then a blur of movement went running by Arn.

As it jumped through the air, it materialized itself into a man.

He was tall and strong with thick, bulging muscles poking out anywhere that was not covered in ornately decorated Animal Skins.

As the newcomer leaped high in the air on his own, Arn saw he was wielding two spears, one in each hand, and he wore the headdress of a massive Elk.

Arn had no idea who the newcomer was or what his stake in the fight was, but whoever it was, certainly had no shortage of nerve or skill, landing both spears in a stab into the throat of the Giant rushing toward Arn before planting his feet on the Giant and flipping off and backward, scything the throat on the remaining Giant with both spears on his way down, coming to a perfect landing amid
the carnage on the ground.

Arn had no chance to watch any more of it since he had to duck under another club swing from the wounded Giant, still growling angrily at him.

Sidestepping another Club pound into the ground, Arn got around the side of the wounded Giant and slash fiercely across its left calf, bringing it down for him to finish off.

He had just wrenched Dawnbreaker free from the killing blow when he got a moment to behold the unknown new arrival was easily finishing off the remaining Bandits like they were nothing.

Wielding both spears as if they weighed nothing, he spun this way and that, parrying blades away, running bandits through the midsection, slicing throats, and reaching out to brain any runaways through their helmets with long downward chops of the Spearheads.

Arn would've watched more, but at that moment, a blur of Brown and gray bolted from the back of the area past all the commotion and out toward the entrance.

Arn got just enough of a glimpse to see a brown haired Werewolf careen through the snow wildly in an attempt to escape.

"Sinding!" Arn bellowed, his desire for vengeance rekindled as his quarry bolted.

Arn knew Sinding would outpace him, even with the aspect of Dragon to even the speeds since Sinding would have much more stamina, and Arn was in no mood to continue chasing.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force plowed into the fleeing Werewolf, flinging him against the Palisade walls with a loud THUD that reverberated through the Wintery wilds.

Taking a long leap toward the opening, Arn intended to cut off the fleeing werewolf, now clambering to his feet.

Seeing Arn land in his path out of the Palisade opening, Sinding turned to leap up, but froze when he saw the newcomer perched atop the Palisade, standing proudly with a spear out to either side.

Arn wasn't sure how he had gotten up there, much less so quickly, but the sight of him immediately changed Sinding's behavior.

"Nooo!......NOOOOO!" Sinding howled, stumbling back from the Palisade at the sight of the stranger before turning and running back inside the unknown structure further in.

Arn was going to follow, but cast a quick glance up at the newcomer, intending to find out who he was and what his stake in this was.

"He is cornered now, and will be more dangerous than ever" the burly man declared, preempting Arn's question as he gestured Arn inside with a Spear in his right hand "The kill is yours".

Not really knowing who the man was and unsure if there was a way out or not that Sinding might be using even as they spoke, Arn opted to give chase instead of having a lengthy conversation outside.

There was....something....familiar about him that Arn couldn't place.

Rushing through the middle of the camp and into a cave in the back, Arn was surprised to find it opened out into an underground Grotto of sorts, filled with plants illuminated by softly flashing
fireflies that had taken refuge there due to the hot springs that sent steam up into the air, warming the lengthy cavern to a balmy temperature.

Arn began sweating as he moved further in, not allowing himself to be mesmerized by the beautiful plants and softly flowing stream that the hot springs created before it flowed down somewhere into the rocks.

As he came toward the end of the cavern, he spied Sinding, crouched down by a hot spring, probably hoping to avoid being seen.

Carefully moving toward him, Sinding sensed the game was up.

Rising slowly to his full height with a low growl, he would've cut a fearsome figure in the misting light of the Grotto, but Arn still remembered being flung off a cliff...still remembered Lydia being captured...still remembered the children huddled and starving in cold barren caves.

"Why?" Arn snapped with a growl of his own as he advanced on Sinding.

"The price is too much...I cannot stop!" came the barely intelligible words from Sinding's growling werewolf form, not making much sense to Arn.

Arn might have said more, but Sinding lunged and attacked with his claws.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force plastered Sinding back among some vegetation, with Arn dashing quickly in to take advantage.

Sinding recovered faster than Arn expected, and craftily rolled himself and spun around, launching an upper cut with his a large clawed hand.

Fortunately, Arn had dashed in with his shield at the ready, and Sinding's blow caught the bottom of his shield only, but Sinding carried through with a massive lunge, launching Arn upward in the air, spinning end over end.

Arn knew he was in trouble if he landed wrong, and Sinding would be all over him regardless of what state he landed.

"WULD NA KEST!"

Arn tried to time his burst of speed so that he would be perpendicular to the ground, and fortunately, he was close enough to slide to a stop on his knees through some vegetation some thirty feet away.

Rising to his feet, he turned to find Sinding bearing down on him, jaws bared.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Arn sidestepped around the lunging werewolf and stabbed through the back into what he hoped was the heart.

Werewolves were not easy to kill, and much like Vampires, unless you had a potent battlemage at your disposal, or a good silver weapon, there was no way to stop them from regenerating any wound you inflicted on them. The only way to kill them with normal weapons was to behead them, or get a stab through the heart.

Beheading a Werewolf was much harder since their necks were rather large and well muscled. So a
heart shot it would have to be.

Unfortunately, Arn must have missed the heart, or not gotten enough of it.

As time sped back up, Sinding howled in pain, spinning and unleashing a torrent of scything claw attacks, Arn barely able to keep his shield up under the barrage.

His shield and parts of his armor glinted with sparks from the claw marks left behind by Sinding’s blows.

"TIID KLO UL!"

Arn slowed time down again, if only to give him a respite from Sinding’s blows, moving around the Werewolf again and tried again to find the right spot for a stab at the heart.

This time, he got it right.

As soon as time sped back up, Sinding’s howl of pain was cut short as his entire body seized up and he slumped to his knees before falling forward on the ground.

Arn wrenched Dawnbreaker free and watched with caution for a moment to ensure there was no trickery involved before he finally let a sigh out.

"A fitting end for a Betrayer"

Arn yanked his head up to see the Stranger from the Palisades fight standing atop a rocky outcropping not far away.

"How do you know he was a betrayer?" queried Arn, trying to place who the Stranger might be.

"The man betrayed everyone. He betrayed himself by making a pledge he could not keep. He betrayed his Lord by breaking his pledge. He betrayed the Beast blood in his veins when he would not hunt. He betrayed his wife and child when the Beast finally forced itself out. He betrayed his own brethren of the forest by taking you to them, and finally....he betrayed you....Dragonborn" declared the Stranger, growing in volume as he hopped lightly up some more stones until he was at a higher rocky perch.

"How do you know all this, and how did you know he would be here?" Arn quipped, beginning to put some of the pieces together about Sinding.

"I followed you, Dragonborn. You do take some prodding, but when you finally set your will to it, there is nothing that stops you" returned the Stranger, a small smile spreading on the Stranger’s face that Arn could see was a bushy bearded one inside the regal Elk headdress he wore.

"Are you one of the local hunters?" Arn asked, somehow knowing that the Stranger definitely wasn’t.

"Oh, I am much more than that. I am the Lord of the Hunt, and this Hunt has been most satisfying, watching you track your quarry across the land, not foiled by the elements, nor by other men, nor by Giants or even the Betrayer himself! Truly, a Child of Akatosh is a supreme Hunter!" marveled Hircine, for Arn could think of no one else who went by that title, and it explained all the question marks surrounding his knowledge of the matter and his appearance.

"I enjoyed it so much, that I decided to partake in it myself for a bit" Hircine continued, his gaze pointed off at nothing as if recalling a fond memory.
"Is this the part where you ask me to become one of your worshipers?" Arn asked, the knowledge that he was speaking to a Daedric Prince giving him an uneasy feeling.

"Of course not. I do not hunt for followers. Followers hunt for me" quipped Hircine with a wide sweep of his arms, which still had a spear in each hand.

Arn relaxed a little bit, worried for a moment he would be butting heads with another Daedric Prince.

"Still....a word of caution, Child of Akatosh" Hircine declared, reigniting Arn's unease.

"There are only two types of creatures in the plane of Nirn...those who are Hunters, and those who are Hunted" he continued, leaning against one of his spears that had the other end implanted somehow in the rock.

"You've seen how well I hunt" retorted Arn.

"But you are sometimes loath to do so. A creature what will not hunt will eventually become the hunted" Hircine warned, his tone no longer merry or proud.

"Those who've hunted me have regretted it" Arn sneered, more than a little annoyed.

"Indeed, but will you always prove such a fearsome prey?" Hircine challenged, a small smirk returning to his face.

"We'll just have to wait and see" Arn replied, his confidence refusing to budge.

"Then on that day, I will enjoy watching as well" Hircine replied, watching him closely for a second before his countenance brightened again at the prospect of something impressive to look forward to before he continued "However, the World Eater is not a Hunter to be ignored, and many have become his Prey. Today has been a good Hunt, and for that I am grateful to you"

As he finished, Hircine stood and launched one of his spears in the direction of Sinding's body.

Thudding into the ground, Arn noticed the quick glow of magicka around the spear as something magically appeared on the pole end of it.

Casting his glance back up at Hircine, Arn saw that the man's face was gone, and now the headdress he wore had now turned into his head and shoulders as he grinned at him.

"My gift to you for such a fine Hunt. If you want to become a true Hunter, you will need it" Hircine replied through the Stag-like head he had now assumed before Arn turned and walked over to the Spear to see what had appeared on the end of it.

A fur cuirass of some sort was hanging on it, glowing with a faint golden aura.

Carefully picking it up, Arn was surprised to see a small golden ring also sitting on the top of the Spear handle.

Inspecting it, he noted the small symbol in the shape of a wolf head and nothing else on it.

Connecting the puzzle pieces, Arn walked over and glanced at Sinding's body.

Sure enough, there was the distinct wearing and impression of a ring on one of his clawed fingers.

Worried about its effects, Arn avoided touching it, and instead stowed it in a small pouch inside his pack with Hircine's Cuirass.
While Arn was curious about the armor and worried about the ring, he was excited about the Spear itself.

On closer inspection, it was quite well made.

It had a full metal core that extended from the spear head that went the entire length of the spear, but it was encased in a magically imbued sheath of hardwood that allowed his hand to slide up and down the handle easily.

He wasn’t sure what metal the Spearhead was made of, but it certainly seemed imbued with magical properties and glowed a dull green as Arn carried it out of the Grotto with him.

Arn was just beginning to marvel about his encounter with yet another Daedric Prince as he walked out when a sudden cry arrested him in his place.

"I-is anyone there? C-can anyone hear me?" came a timid sounding woman's voice from off to one side of the Grotto entrance.

Apparently, Arn’s surprises weren't over.

Chapter End Notes

1. This is the last chapter that will be posted on FF.net. From here on out, everything is getting posted here.
2. Sorry for the longer delay than normal, I have to take my time with Daedric Princes whenever they show, to do them justice and make sure they don't come across as just another character. Also, my creativity has been running more toward Star Wars of late (will start posting a fic in that fandom soon), but have no fear. I am not abandoning my stories.
3. Next chapter will be a game changer. Don’t miss it!
It was a strangely shaped blade, to be sure, Arn thought as he picked up the black, slightly curved katana he’d found among the scattered remnants of the unlucky travelers’ belongings.

As he did so, it hummed with a magical energy that indicated a powerful enchantment of some kind.

The shuffling of clothing and clattering of belongings behind Arn distracted his examination of the strange blade for a moment as he glanced back to see if the starving Dunmer woman he’d freed from the Giants’ cage had finished clothing herself or not.

Emerging from one of the makeshift huts, the aforementioned Dunmer woman now wore a menagerie of furs and cloaks that severely bloated her size in an almost laughable way, but Arn knew she was in no mood for jests.

She had been so ashamed to be seen naked that she couldn’t look him in the face while he was releasing her, and she had barked fiercely at him for daring to approach her without anything for her to use as clothing.

She had then rushed into one of the adjacent huts without so much as a “thank you”.

“So why didn’t they eat you?” Arn demanded of her, while kicking aside one of the many human bones littering the floor of the Giants’ makeshift camp.

Sylvana Nethri, as she had called herself, had opened her mouth to say something to Arn before he’d cut her off, but instead of immediately responding, she readjusted the furs she wore and looked away angrily.

“They…thought the color of my skin meant that I would be poisonous to eat” she hissed back when she finally did speak.

“And the Giants didn’t just kill you outright then because…?” Arn skeptically trailed off.

Sylvana sighed and sat down on a large stone, crossing her arms defensively.

“The Bandits would bring the Giants captives that they’d caught, in exchange, the Giants would give the Bandits any goods they found on the captives the Giants caught from south of here”

“What did they think you had to offer?” Arn followed up.

“I…told them I was from one of the Great Houses of Morrowind and that a large ransom would be
“paid for me” a sarcastic smile briefly played on her lips as she answered.

“But Nethri isn’t one of the Great Houses” Arn remarked, partly in observation, and partly to apprise her that the same ruse would not work on him.

“Those brutes didn’t know that, though” Sylvana replied after a short silence where her smile disappeared.

Arn considered interrogating her further, especially given the strange way she had been trussed up, but decided it wasn’t important. What was important was to get back to Knifepoint Ridge where Lydia and the children were before the Winter weather got too much worse.

The strangely unthankful and somewhat irascible Dunmer woman seemed like she would be happier on her own.”

“You’ll be fine on your own, I take it?” Arn queried, stashing away the enchanted blade and some of the journals he’d found in the Giants’ stash.

“Actually….I….don’t suppose….you’re headed to….Falkreath, are you?” Sylvana reluctantly asked.

Arn stood quiet for a moment. He should just go back to Knifepoint Ridge, but then again, he had a few questions for the Jarl and if he confronted him now, he could avoid putting Lydia or anyone else in danger.

Also, he didn’t want the Dunmer woman to know anything about Knifepoint Ridge.

“Yeah” Arn replied slowly “you coming with?”

“I wouldn’t mind some company for the trip there” the proud Dunmer replied as she retrieved a dagger to strap on her waist.

Their trip to Falkreath should have been uneventful, but Arn found that Dunmer could not withstand the Winter weather very well, and it wasn’t long before the Wintery gusts, blowing snow, and dropping temperatures proved too much for the proud Dunmer woman, reducing her determined march to a hunched stumbling among the snow drifts.

“P-P-Please” she begged between chattering teeth as Arn watched her slump to her knees in the blowing snow.

Arn moved to help her, but made sure to remove her dagger first.

To his surprise, she made no move to fight or protest, but simply huddled and shook violently in the cold, despite the furs she’d bundled herself in.

The remaining trip to Falkreath proved more troublesome since Arn had to more or less carry the shivering woman the rest of the way, and it wasn’t until well past nightfall that they arrived.

They were greeted at Falkreath by the same bewildered Guards that Arn had met when he and Lydia arrived the first time, but this time, despite all the same fanfare for their arrival, Arn refused to go see the Jarl.

Instead, he made a direct route to the Dead Man’s Drink and booked two rooms for the night, leaving the exhausted and shivering Sylvana in one of them before he retired for the night.
Arn’s morning was started much sooner than he wanted when Guards beat on his door, shouting that his presence was required before the Jarl immediately.

Waking drowsily, it took Arn awhile to armor up and remove the traps he’d placed by the door.

As he marched across to the Jarl’s longhouse, he balked for a moment, wondering if and how to confront Siddgeir with what he knew.

Fully armored and with his full compliment of sword, shield, and bow, he took a deep breath and pushed into Siddgeir’s longhouse.

The steward, Nenya, seemed to pick up on the shift in Arn’s intent as her eyes widened in an alarmed manner before returning to her calm demeanor, announcing Arn’s arrival to the oblivious Siddgeir, who was arguing with Legate Forius Moldak over something on a ledger.

Looking up from their argument, both men eyed Arn with some degree of scorn for the interruption before Siddgeir brightened and rose to his feet.

“Ah, I take it this means you have been successful in your task!” he exulted with a growing smile, seemingly glad to discuss something other than what he and the Legate were arguing about.

“I was” Arn replied brusquely before Siddgeir interrupted him.

“Oh yes, indeed. I knew I was right to hire you! I hope you made those swine pay dearly!” Siddgeir exclaimed happily before taking a seat and looking off at nothing, as if delightfully imagining their demise in his mind.

“The Champion, Feorus the Cyclone, and Rochelle the Red…I killed them all…along with their minions” sneered Arn, watching Siddgeir turn quickly and eye Arn with some measure of concern before attempting to return to his jovial manner.

Arn felt his neck begin to itch as he continued to speak, never taking his eyes off Siddgeir.

“It wasn’t very easy. The man you sent us to be our guide betrayed us”

“Oh, well, your reward shall be sizable indeed” Siddgeir stuttered before recovering some of his confidence “Nenya, bring Rayya here!” he commanded.

This gave Arn pause as he wasn’t expecting anyone else to be brought into the discussion.

“You said ruling was difficult work” Arn began again.

“Yes, quite. You have no idea” Siddgeir snapped faster than he meant, glancing nervously at Arn before looking off at nothing again.

“So difficult that you must sell your own people out?” Arn raised his voice louder for everyone in the hall to hear.

“Don’t be absurd. Slavery is illegal here, though the Redguards believe otherwise” Siddgeir replied in a calmer tone as their confrontation was interrupted by the return of Nenya with a Redguard woman that Arn could only conclude was the aforementioned Rayya.

They were closer to the border with Hammerfell. So Arn wasn’t surprised to see a Redguard, but he was surprised by both how beautiful she was and how docile she seemed to be acting.

She wore a gauzy headdress that both hid and revealed the raven black braids of hair trussed around
her head. As for the rest of her outfit, it was a combination of gauzy white material and shiny metal supports that accentuated her curvy figure as well as highlighted her dark brown skin through the material.

It looked like an ornate set of small clothes one might see on a garishly attired noble or a scantily clad dancer on a stage in Cyrodiil, not a servant in the Court of a Nord Jarl.

There was one thing that Arn noticed almost right away. There were two sword handles sticking up past her shoulders with exotic markings on the handles.

“As a reward for your service, I name you Thane of Falkreath, and as an accompanying bonus for your service, I name Rayya here to be your Housecarl. She will swear loyalty to you for as long as you wish!” declared Siddgeir with less excitement than he had shown as he threw Arn a glare meant to silence Arn’s complaints.

Rayya immediately kneeled on the floor and muttered something Arn didn’t hear since his gaze was locked on Siddgeir.

“Whatsoever issues you may still have, you may take them up with my steward, Nenya. I have other matters I must attend to” Siddgeir waved his hand at Arn dismissively while Nenya approached Arn and attempted to hand him a sizable bag of septims.

Fed up, Arn angrily swatted away the bag of Septims, which fell to the floor and burst open, the coins clinking loudly against each other as they rolled every which way.

The hall fell completely silent, interrupted only by Nenya’s sudden fleeing of the room.

“I know what you did” he hissed at Siddgeir.

“Come now, don’t be ridicu-“ Siddgeir began to dismiss him before Arn interrupted him again.

“I have their journals. I know you were using them against your own people!” Arn declared.

“Bandits are scum. I’m sure they’d say anything to absolve themselves of the guilt that was theirs alone!” Siddgeir retorted loudly, though speaking obviously more to the hall than to Arn.

“They would have no reason to lie in their own journals” Arn replied with quiet menace.

“This is preposterous. You can’t accuse ME of—” Siddgeir barked angrily at him before Arn interrupted him in an even louder tone.

“DENY IT ALL YOU LIKE! BUT THE HIGH QUEEN OF SKYRIM WILL LIKELY THINK DIFFERENTLY ONCE SHE AND THE OTHER JARLS SEE THE EVIDENCE!” Arn boomed back before turning to leave, seeing it was a lost cause.

“That CUNT is no HIGH QUEEN and she never will be!” came the snarl from Siddegeir just as Arn turned to leave, making him pause as he wondered what else might be in play that neither he or even Elisif might be aware of.

Arn’s neck was itching severely now to the point of burning, and he was only half paying attention when Siddgeir reined his demeanor back down to the fake benevolence of earlier and resumed talking.

“It’s really a simple choice, Dragonborn. Take my rewards as thanks, the title and privileges that entail it, along with this fine wench to use as you please” Siddgeir ordered more than entreated as he
rose to his feet and marched down a few steps to the still prostrate form of Rayya.

“I grant you she’s foreign born, but still possesses a very pleasant body, easily able to keep you warm for many nights this winter and indeed many after” he continued, stopping to pull some of the gauzy material aside and run his hand across the smooth, dark skin of her back.

“Or…make an enemy of the true Ruler of these lands, a mistake you would live…to regret” Siddgeir finished ominously as Arn had turned to leave again.

Arn’s neck was burning now.

It suddenly occurred to him that Legate Moldak had said nothing this whole time, neither had any of the other Legionnaires accompanying him. Considering both that and Rayya’s presence, Arn surmised that Siddgeir must have other schemes in play of some sort.

Perhaps he should have considered the offer closely. Perhaps he should have done more to avoid the attention and trouble. Perhaps he never should have returned to Falkreath.

But none of those things were occupying his mind. All he could think of were children starving and freezing to death as their families were butchered, raped, and sold off to be devoured by Giants and all for what….a few more coins in someone’s pocket.

He suddenly felt like he was back in Cyrodiil again, begging local magistrates to investigate the murders of the Starblades, only to be rebuffed because someone more powerful told them to, leaving Arn with only his own two hands to seek Justice.

“Damn you” Arn muttered, turning to fix an angry glare on Siddgeir.

Sensing this shift in Arn’s demeanor, there was a brief silence in the room as Siddgeir sat back down on his throne before he suddenly pounding his fist on the armrest violently.

“GUARDS!” he shouted, loudly.

On his command, four city guards and a few Legionnaires fired bows and crossbows from hidden positions on the balcony and the adjacent room below.

It had all been planned in case the meeting with the Dragonborn went awry.

Eight arrows flew through the air toward Arn, aimed mostly at the most vulnerable parts of his armoring, but when they arrived, Arn was not there.

“WULD NAH KEST!”

As soon as Siddgeir had shouted the signal, Arn had exploded forward faster than any of them had thought possible.

Crossing half the distance of the Hall in an instant, Arn had Dawnbreaker out and scything a wicked sideways slice that cut clean through the side of Siddgeir’s abdomen and through the back of his throne chair.

Coming to a stop just behind the throne, Arn turned to see Siddgeir slump and fall out of his throne, clutching the side of his stomach to keep his guts from spilling out as blood poured from the wound.

There was a stunned silence for a moment as the occupants of the room realized what just happened before Legate Forius Moldak finally reacted to the scene that had played out.
“MURDERER!” he screamed while both he and the remaining Legionnaires drew swords and made to attack Arn. But Arn was no longer in the same place.

“WULD NAH KEST!”

Moving halfway across the room again in the blink of an eye, Arn avoided the second volley of arrows and got himself in perfect position to hit the bowmen with a wave of unrelenting force.

“FUS RO DAH!”

With Arn’s anger and frustration poured into his Thuum shout, the wave of Force that exploded out and upward devastated the upper balcony completely, shattering wood, bone, flesh and armor of the half dozen assassins unlucky enough to have been there.

The wave of Force carried on and upward, throwing the remaining guards back into the room and burying them in debris before blowing a hole in the thick roof thatching and beams of the Longhouse roof.

“MUL QAH DIIV!”

Assuming the aspect of a Dragon, Arn turned to deal with his melee attackers, but was surprised to see Rayya, the formerly kneeling Redguard woman, had intercepted all five of them and was keeping them at bay with two sizeable scimitars wielded skillfully in each hand as she pirouetted and pivoted back and forth in an almost dance-like motion to avoid their attacks.

A little unsure of the woman’s intentions, Arn moved in to flank the guards and Legionnaires.

With the power of a Dragon at his disposal, Arn easily made short work of most of the remaining attackers, batting away their attacks and defenses as though they were a twig he might snap underfoot.

When Legate Moldak realized he and another Legionaire were all that was left, he bolted, leaving Arn to take the head off the unfortunate Legionaire that had no idea his comrades were dead and his commander had fled.

As Arn finished the Legionaire off, he turned to regard Rayya for a moment.

“I swore myself to YOUR service” she stated solemnly with a nod, as though reading the question in his mind.

Worried less about her now, Arn turned to track down the fleeing Legate, who had only gotten as far as the front door.

Flinging the door open, he turned and looked over his shoulder to check Arn’s progress, but they were all surprised when someone else’s blade sliced the Legate across the neck from the other side of the doorway.

Arn froze for a moment as Legate Moldak stumbled back away from the doorway clutching at his neck, helplessly trying to hold back the spurts of red.

An older, balding Nord man stepped through the doorway, kicking the hapless Moldak to the floor before finishing him off with a stab through the neck.

It took Arn a moment before he recognized the man as Dengeir of Stuhn, the former Jarl who’d been hanging around in Dead Man’s Drink and had warned them away from availing of the Innkeeper’s
“extra” services.

He also noted the bloody spatters on Dengeir’s armor and now that the door was open, he could hear shouts and the clashes of weapons in the distance.

“What’s going on?” Arn demanded, putting the puzzle pieces together in his mind while adopting a defensive stance and eyeing around suspiciously for anymore would be attackers.

“Nice of you to leave the runt for me to finish off” Dengeir stated as he stepped over the dead Legate and moved forward to where the gurgling form of Siddgeir was attempting in vain to crawl forward toward where his crown had rolled to on the floor.

Siddgeir was desperately reaching for the ornate crown, now half covered in blood, when Dengeir stepped on his hand.

With a choked gurgle of pain, Siddgeir’s wild eyes looked up into the cruel sneer of Dengeir.

“I warned you this day would come” Dengeir growled before slicing down with his longsword and cleaving Siddgeir’s head in a splatter of gore.

Arn was slowly moving towards the door and noted that Rayya was moving with him.

“Dragonborn, I appreciate your aid in returning Falkreath to its rightful rule” Dengeir announced, not looking at either of them while he marched up and plopped himself on the new bloody and cracked throne.

“Spare me your politics” Arn retorted, half turning to Dengeir while still keeping his ears tuned to what was happening outside.

“Unlike my nephew, I do not repay good will with treachery” Dengeir smiled, as though recalling a fond memory, before continuing “You will retain the position of Thane in my Court. You may keep…the..uh…Redguard wench as your Housecarl, and I grant you the Valley known as Raven’s Folly for your domain.”

“Am I free to leave at least?” Arn queried, not terribly worried about titles or lands at the moment.

“Most certainly. In fact, I would welcome your counsel in my Court anytime” Dengeir replied in a more merry manner than the situation warranted before his tone grew stern “But….I would be careful to avoid any…Imperial entanglements.”

“Sure” Arn replied gruffly before quickly leaving the hall, Rayya trailing after.

The sounds of battle had died down, but there were several bodies laying in the streets and bloody trails that ran this way and that between the buildings as various groups of men moved back and forth shouting to each other and more shouting in the distance.

Arn needed to get out of there. The Legion outpost was bound to know what was going on by now and retaliate. Frankly, Arn wasn’t sure why they hadn’t done so already.

Running to one of the slain Legionairres, Arn procured a set of skins for Rayya to wear, given she was attired in garments that simply wouldn’t do for the Winter weather. It wasn’t going to be enough, but it would be enough until they could make it back to the Bandit Camp below Pinewatch Cottage. They could get adequate supplies there to make it back to Knifepoint Ridge.

Rayya made no complaints about wearing a dead man’s attire, and simply put it on hurriedly as Arn
noticed she was already shivering with cold.

As she finished and they moved quickly toward the Northeast gate, they were stopped in their tracks by a high-pitched scream.

It was not a scream made by a human. Arn had heard them plenty…from Aldmeri elves as they died.

Motioning for Rayya to follow, Arn ducked into a side alley and didn’t have to move far before he found the source of the scream.

A group of men attired in plain armor were huddled gleefully around a screaming, muddy form that writhed in the bloody snow as the men tore, spit, kicked and snarled at the unfortunate victim who Arn realized must be Nenya, the Altmer steward for Siddgeir.

He considered leaving her to whatever fate awaited her, given that she had been at least passively complicit in Siddgeir’s schemes, but then he remembered her interceding to protect Nari, the Nord maid, and wondered if she had been a mitigating influence to Siddgeir’s schemes.

Another scream wretched out of her, and Arn had had enough.

“ENOUGH!” he bellowed, causing the group of men around her to suddenly stop as they turned to regard the new arrival.

As Arn stepped out with the most intimidating posture he could muster, he noticed an even more gruesome scene just past the group that he couldn’t see from his previous hiding place.

The body of a young woman, stretched into a hideous twisted posture and frozen in a bloody state of agony lay strapped to some wooden device just off and behind the group around Nenya.

“What goes on here?” Arn demanded since the group of men seemed to dumbstruck for the moment to say anything.

“Don’t be an arse. She’s one of them high and mighty knife-ears. We’re just taking her down a few notches before we put her down” replied one of them, turning and crossing his arms haughtily as Arn approached.

“Is that what happened to her too?” Arn nodded at the frozen body strapped to the wood behind them.

The haughty Guard looked back at the frozen body before turning back to Arn, as if taking extra time to come up with an answer.

“Oh no, that was Siddgeir’s doing. Now that the rightful Jarl Dengeir is back in power, we’re just setting things right. Isn’t that right, men?” the man replied before he turned back, as if addressing the men instead of Arn.

“There is no need of further punishment. Besides, I have need of her skills” Arn postured, a plan forming in his mind, deciding a violent encounter here would only complicate his leaving further.

“And just who do you think you are to be taking prisoners from us? We serve the true Jarl—” the man began working himself up before Arn cut him off.

“And I am his newly appointed Thane. Do you wish to ignore an order from a Thane in Dengeir’s Court?” Arn snapped.
The Guard seemed suddenly unsure of himself for a moment before collecting himself again.

Arn thought it might come to violence anyway, but then the men holding Nenya released her and backed away.

The Guard seemed to have been ready to refuse, but once he realized the others had backed off, he shrugged and moved aside with a gesture of disgust.

“Fine…take the filth then” he muttered as they backed away and Arn was able to see Nenya’s condition for the first time.

The proud, stately Altmer woman that Arn had seen before looked nothing like the shivering huddled form covered with mud and blood that cowered before him, sobbing into a tattered sleeve.

“Come, I have need of your skills” Arn declared, glaring at the men until they moved back a few more paces before he moved in to help her get up.

But Nenya was in no state to be moved. She stayed in a huddled ball and beyond dragging her, Arn couldn’t get her to move or even respond to anything he said.

Knowing they needed to leave and soon, Arn finally decided he could wait no longer.

“MUL QAH DIIV!”

With a surplus of strength, Arn easily picked up Nenya and threw her over his shoulder, surprising both the group of men as well as Rayya, who’s eyes grew wide at the display of power before quickly falling in behind Arn as he moved quickly back to the street and out of the City through the unguarded gate.

Once they were out of eyesight of the City, Arn took the time to set down Nenya to check the extent of her wounds.

The typical pointed ears of the Altmer had been cut off, and were now just bleeding masses of flesh on the sides of her head, which was swelling and beginning to show some nasty bruises.

Her fingers were badly cut and mangled, several of them nearly cut clean off, likely when she tried to stop them from cutting her ears.

It would be harder to tell what bodily injuries she had since she was still covered in a layer of bloody muck from the ground.

Arn knew Lydia would scold him, but he used the two healing potions he had on her. One he had her drink, while he used the other to dab onto her mangled ears.

She still said nothing and seemed unable to move. Arn could see her shivering wildly and noted Rayya was doing the same, though she was trying not to show it.

To his surprise, he discovered Rayya was well versed in battlefield medical practices, and had managed to craft some bandages that served adequately to keep Nenya’s fingers in place and protect them from infection.

“We need to get to shelter fast, or this will only get worse” Arn said to Nenya as he looked overhead to the cloudy skies.

“Whatever you ask is my command. You have only to say it” was Rayya’s stoic reply.
“I’ll need to carry both of you if we are to make speed to shelter” Arn replied, unsure how she would respond to such a request.

Rayya simply turned and nodded.

As Arn assumed the Aspect of Dragon again, hoisted a woman on each shoulder and bounded off through the snow toward Pineview Cottage, he grimaced at the thought of how easy it would be for the gossips to turn his actions into something salacious.

The Dragonborn killed the Jarl, collected his title and reward, and then ran off with a woman over each arm…

Well, if Lydia didn’t kill him, Delphine certainly would lose her mind over it.

Then again, he’d all but stopped caring about Delphine’s opinions.

Once they had made it to the old Bandit hideaway beneath Pineview Cottage, Arn tried to get some proper healing for Nenya’s hands and anything else that was afflicting her, but she was in such a state that he nearly had to fight her to get her to let him help.

“She is in shock” Rayya declared stoically, appearing at Arn’s side after scouring the area.

She demonstrated by waving her hands across Nenya’s eyes, pointing out that she didn’t follow her fingers even when right in front.

“We need to get healing on these soon, or scarring and injuries may take on a more permanent hold” Arn surmised out loud, wishing he had some sort of sleeping poultice, but knowing there would be no vegetation growing right now that might help.

“Here, allow me” Rayya replied, sitting down cross legged across from the huddled form of Nenya.

Arn wasn’t sure what she was doing, but after several seemingly silent moments with her eyes closed, Arn noticed her lips were moving in words and chants, though he could hear no sound.

After what seemed like a few minutes, he noticed symbols and designs on Rayya’s arms and legs beginning to glow a dull white, accentuated more since they were set against the backdrop of her dark brown skin.

He didn’t recall noticing any tattoos on her earlier at all. These had to be magical, and he wondered for a moment if they covered her body, if there were any side effects to having them, and what sort of abilities they encompassed.

Those questions vanished from his mind when Rayya suddenly reached out and gently touched Nenya on the forehead.

A slight pulse of energy flared on Rayya’s tattoos before Nenya immediately passed out into a peaceful slumber, collapsing backward and nearly hitting the hard, wooden floor before Arn could catch her.

Once Nenya was peacefully sleeping, Arn and Rayya could finally apply the healing she needed, which was a lot.

Broken ribs, a broken leg, mangled fingers, and a wide assortment of cuts and bruises covered her tail, and previously elegant form.
They also cleaned her up and found some better clothes among the supplies to attire her in.

Arn was surprised again by how skilled and experienced Rayya seemed at dressing and cleaning the wounded woman, and he was thankful he wasn’t alone in the endeavor.

Still, she was surprised when she saw him placing sound traps around the entrance to the hideaway.

“The new ruler gave his word there would be no treachery” she puzzled, a slight frown worrying her features.

“Not sure how things are in Hammerfell right now, but here, it’s not as easy as that. Besides, something tells me that treachery runs in the family” Arn muttered, sighing with exhaustion and considering what he’d seen in Falkreath.

Many questions swirled in his mind as they bunked down in bedrolls for the night.

Why had it been so easy for him to kill a Legionaire, something he’d never done before? And why didn’t it bother him more now? Where was the Legion’s response to the attack? How had Dengeir known the exact time to cause his uprising? What had Siddgeir meant when he said Elisif would never be High Queen?

But the more Arn thought about them, the less he liked the possible answers.

Looking over at the sleeping form of Rayya in her bedroll, Arn surmised her skills would come in handy, and her presence was probably the only good thing to have happened from his visit to Falkreath.

One thing was for sure, Arn would be glad to get back to Knifepoint Ridge and far away from Falkreath.

Chapter End Notes

1. I’m BACK! Sorry for the loooooooong hiatus, but my job has me on the go all the time and I just now got a laptop. So now I can actually work on writing projects instead of wishing I was at home to work on them. While I can't promise updates often, I'll try to get a chapter out every few weeks.
2. Finally done with Falkreath!....or are we?

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