**Rating:** Mature  
**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Category:** F/F, F/M, M/M, Multi  
**Fandom:** Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim  
**Relationship:** Female Dovahkiin | Dragonborn/Ralof, Female Dovahkiin | Dragonborn/Farkas, Female Dovahkiin | Dragonborn/Vilkas  
**Character:** Ralof (Elder Scrolls), Ulfric Stormcloak, Original Nord Character(s), Original Female Character(s), Balgruuf the Greater, Kodlak Whitemane, Farkas (Elder Scrolls), Vilkas (Elder Scrolls), Galmar Stone-Fist, The Greybeards (Elder Scrolls), The Companions (Elder Scrolls), Various Skyrim Characters, Lydia (Elder Scrolls), Whiterun Characters  
**Additional Tags:** Fluff and Smut, Developing Relationship, Arrogance, Badassary, Vilkas always complicates things, Deviates From Canon, I hate how Whiterun is handled, Stormcloaks for the win, Skyrim Main Quest, Period-Typical Sexism, Multiple Relationships, Multiple Sex Positions, Romantic Fluff, Betrayal, Fate & Destiny, Feminism  
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**Dragonborn's Journey**  
by Jmags2016

**Summary**

Disclaimer: I DO NOT own any original characters. BETHESDA in all its glory thought these people up. This is just my personal fantasy and my take on how things should go. Comments are awesome as I am just getting into this kind of thing.

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Also check out my other ongoing Elder Scrolls: Skyrim story: A Taste of Shadows  
https://archiveofourown.org/works/14037591/chapters/32332830

**Notes**

I will be deviating from canon during the main quest line. I hate how you end up betraying Whiterun, so screw that. This is chapter 1 of......many? It follows the opening scene.

Farkas is my favorite marriable character but my heart belongs to Ralof. He's so sweet.

__________________________________________________________
And So It Begins

The cart lurched, bumping Saeja Skyborn’s bruised head hard against the wood siding. She moaned and tried rubbing the offending area, but found her hands bound together, the rough rope chafing her skin. Her eyes flew open as she jerked her head around, causing her to see spots.

“Here now, you’re awake. Best take it slow.” Came the soothing advice from her left. “The guards stunned you with a very powerful sparks spell. Don't know where you were heading but you walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there.”

She blinked rapidly trying to bring the world back into focus. She turned her blurry gaze to the left and saw what appeared to be a fellow Nord, with butter yellow hair, sky-blue eyes that were tinged with worry and a short, scraggly beard just a shade darker than his hair. He gave her an encouraging smile as she continued to stare mutely, trying to gather her bearings.

To her right, across the carriage she heard another man begin to complain. “Damn you Stormcloaks, Skyrim was fine until you came along. Empire was nice and lazy. If they hadn't been looking for you, I could've stolen that horse and been halfway to Hammerfell.”

Saeja turned to look at the scruffy thief, finding him to be completely unremarkable. He must have felt her gaze because he called out to her, “You there. You and me, we shouldn’t be here. It's these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.”

Saeja smirked at the man for assuming where her loyalties lay. She was about to answer when she heard the first man reply cryptically, “We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief.”

The cart hit another bump in the road, throwing her off balance and against the solid body sitting directly beside her. She turned her gaze and found herself staring into the iciest blue eyes she had ever encountered, remarkable even for a Nord. She swallowed hard, realizing she sat beside Ulfric Stormcloak, the leader of the resistance, the man she'd admired for as long as she could remember. The Jarl grunted, unable to say anything with the filthy gag in his mouth, and turned his eyes back to his feet, ignoring the rest of prisoners sitting in the wagon with him.

The darker man apparently wasn’t done talking. “And what's wrong with him?” he asked, gesturing towards Ulfric.

“Watch your tongue! You’re speaking of Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King of Skyrim.” Replied the blonde man, with a touch of pride in his voice.

The horse thief visibly shrank in terror as the reality of his situation sunk in. “Ulfric? The Jarl of Windhelm?” He paused, his body starting to shiver slightly. “You're…you're the leader of the rebellion. But if they captured you… Oh gods, where are they taking us?

The blonde man seemed less than inclined to lie and take pity on the other man. “I don't know where we're going, but Sovngarde awaits.” he grated.

He turned his eyes back to Saeja, taking in her appearance before addressing her again. “I am Ralof of Riverwood. Who might you be? A Nord, by the looks of you, with that winter white hair and those lovely azure eyes. “

Saeja couldn’t help but grin at his gall, the man was flirting with her on their way to their deaths. “Saeja Skyborn of Kynesgrove. Pleased to make your acquaintance Ralof, even if it is only moments before our shared demise. For surely our Nord heritage has ensured our deaths at the hands of the
Imperials.”

Ralof threw his head back and laughed heartily, with nothing held back. He was cut off sharply by the cart driver turning around to swat the back of Ralof’s head and yell, “Shut up back there!”

Ralof muttered in reply, “Damn Imperial bastards.” He looked back to the horse thief. “What about you thief, what village are you from?”

“Why do you care?” came the listless reply.

“A Nord’s last thoughts should be of home,” Ralof replied.

“Lokir of Rorikstead. I’m from Rorikstead” the thief replied dispassionately.

The wagon rounded a curve in the road and suddenly the towering city walls of Helgen came into view. Ralof started reminiscing about a girl he used to be sweet on in the city, but she ignored him when she heard the imperial soldiers call out to General Tullius about the headman being ready. Lokir started to stammer the names of all the divines, pleading for them to save him. Saeja could see a small group of robed elves staring at the wagons as they entered through the gates. The wagon came to a jarring halt beside the city square, where an executioner’s block was set up, stained a rusty brown by previous victims. A child protested as his nervous father pulled him back into their house and closed the shutters. Imperial soldiers approached their cart and gripped Ulfric roughly by his bound arms, pulling him off the wagon. Saeja stood and jumped to the ground, hearing the pained grunts of Ralof and Lokir as they did the same.

The captain of the guard gestured to another soldier holding a sheet of paper, indicating that he go stand in front of the group of prisoners. “Step toward the block when Hadvar calls your name. One at a time!”

Lokir stepped to the front of the group, desperately gesturing to the captain, “No! Wait! We're not rebels!”

Saeja heard Ralof’s disgusted mutter, “Face your death with some courage, thief.”

She watched Lokir turn and desperately grab Ulfric’s cloak, “You’ve got to tell them! We weren’t with you! This is a mistake!”

Ulfric’s reply was to shrug the thief off him, staring coldly. He stepped forward as Hadvar called out his name, “Ulfric Stormcloak. Jarl of Windhelm.”

As the Jarl took his place in line near the executioner's block, Ralof proudly declared, “It has been an honour, Jarl Ulfric!” Saeja thought she saw a few bystanders nod in agreement, careful to not be caught by the city guards, or judgmental neighbours.


Lokir was cowering beside her. At the call of his name, he began to scream, his eyes wide with panic. “No, I'm not a rebel! You can't do this!” She felt the tension in his muscles as they bunched, seconds before he started running towards the closing gates as fast as he could. Saeja screamed at him to stop as the Captain simultaneously shouted for him to halt.

Mad with fear Lokir shouted, “You're not going to kill me!” just as the Captain called for the archers. Saeja cringed, turning her head away as she heard the snap of bowstrings and the thud of the thief's body hitting the ground with multiple arrows sticking out of his back.
The heat emanating from the Imperial Captain’s body seemed to burn Saeja's skin as she leaned towards her and menacingly asked, “Anyone else feel like running?” Muted by the horror she witnessed she shook her head in reply. The Captain moved away from her, going to stand beside the smirking Thalmor.

Hadvar checked his list again then gazed at Saeja, confusion apparent in his mud-coloured eyes. “Wait, you there. Step forward. Who are you?

Squaring her shoulders, she solidly met his eyes and replied “Saeja Skyborn of Kynesgrove.”

She watched his eyes scan his list, turning the page over and then back again. “You picked a bad time to travel through Skyrim, kinsman. Captain, what should we do? She's not on the list?”

“Damn the list soldier, she goes to the block with the rest of them.” The captain replied, her patience clearly beginning to thin.

“I’m sorry. At least you'll die here, in your homeland. I’ll arrange for your remains to be sent to Kynesgrove.” Hadvar said sincerely and directed her to stand with the rest of the prisoners.

She stepped in line with the rest of them, quaking until she felt Ralof’s arm brush up against hers in a comforting manner. She gave him a quick smile, then leaned closer to him for comfort when General Tullius suddenly appeared in front of them, his menacing eyes fixated on Ulfric Stormcloak.

The tension was thick and uncomfortable as Tullius tried to stare Ulfric down. To his credit, Ulfric met his gaze without flinching, his own eyes cold and filled with malice.

“Ulfric Stormcloak.” Tullius’s voice suddenly pierced the silence, ringing loudly through the square for all to hear, “Some here in Helgen call you a hero, but a hero doesn't use a power like the Voice to murder his king and usurp his throne.”

Shouts of agreement came from many in the crowd and many began jeering the Jarl, who gagged, was unable to do more than grunt in protest.

Tullius continued “You started this war, plunged Skyrim into chaos and now the Empire is going to put you down, and restore the peace.”

The loud, cheering response was suddenly cut off as low roar echoed off the mountainside in the distance. It was unlike anything Saeja had ever heard, and her body throbbed in response to it.

Hadvar visibly shuddered “What was that?”

Tullius waved his hand dismissively “It's nothing. Carry on.” He gestured to a dark elf, standing on the stone platform. Saeja guessed by her robes she was a priestess. “Give them their last rites.” Tullius sighed.

Stepping forward, with her arms raised, the priestess of Arkay began her mass benediction. Another Stormcloak soldier lost his temper and demanded they get on with it, walking up to the block and kneeling before it, placing his head over the stained basket. The cheering from the citizens became louder as they were gripped by the morbid excitement of a public execution. Saeja's stomach bottomed out as she heard the axe swing, the blade piercing flesh and the sound of the soldier’s head falling into the basket. She gagged, barely keeping the contents of her stomach down.

Two imperial soldiers dragged the body to a small cart, unceremoniously tossing it in.

Beside her she heard Ralof whisper softly “His ancestors are smiling at him today. As fearless in death as he was in life.”
Saeja's blood froze as she heard General Tullius call for the next prisoner, the Nord woman in rags, seconds before Hadvar stepped in front of her, gripped her arm and began pulling her to the stone platform, slick with the blood of the last man. Another roar echoed off the mountainside, this time much closer than before. She stumbled as another pulse ran through her body, making her knees weak. Hadvar’s head whipped around frantically as he searched for the source. “There it is again”

“Soldier, I said next prisoner. If you aren’t willing to do your job, then by the divines you can take her place” Tullius spat out, though he too was searching the area for the source of the roaring.

Saeja lifted her head a little higher, turning to give Ralof a quick wink and smirk, then she took the last few steps to the chopping block before Hadvar could lead her to it. She knelt and placed her head over the basket, turning to look directly at the headsman as he lifted the axe high in the air. Just as he was about to bring the axe down, a large creature swooped through the air, the accompanying roar deafening.

Tullius leaped onto the platform screaming “What in Oblivion is that?”

The Imperial Captain began issuing orders to the crowd to disperse while yelling at her soldiers. “Sentries! What did you see?”

Hadvar was looking skyward and numbly replied, “It's in the clouds!”

The headsman dropped the axe to the ground, desperately trying to cover his ears against another roar as the creature landed on the tower beside them. The chaos that ensued was more than Saeja could process. The dragon, for she suddenly knew without a doubt that it was a dragon, opened its mouth and directed its next roar at the headsman as he lifted the axe high in the air. Just as he was about to bring the axe down, a large creature swooped through the air, the accompanying roar deafening.

Saeja felt her body throb again and without knowing why, she fell back against Ralof, pushing him back down a few steps. He started to yell at her but was cut off by the wall of the tower suddenly crumbling inward as the dragon’s head crashed through. Another Stormcloak, unlucky enough to be in the way, was killed instantly by the rubble. Flames licked through the opening, so hot Saeja felt the skin on her arm begin to blister. As the fire receded and the dragon withdrew its head she could swear she heard it speaking in some ancient tongue, but she shook her head, thinking she must have hit it hard when she passed out. There was no way she could understand dragon speak.

Ulfric and Ralof stepped up beside her. Ralof pointed to a hole in the thatch of some building below. “See the inn down there? Jump through the roof and keep going! Go!” Saeja turned to Ralof and asked where he was going. “Look, we’ll follow you when we can!” he replied.

Saeja caught Ulfric's gaze turn to the blonde man, a questioning look in his eyes, but then the world
was nothing but a blur as Ralof shoved her out the hole, towards the burning roof of the inn. She landed hard, feeling the thatch give under her weight, dumping her to the floor of the inn. She stumbled, falling onto her knees, and landing on her side. She gasped desperately for air as the wind was knocked out of her. Distantly she could hear Ralof above her screaming at her to get up and keep running.

Saeja struggled back to her feet and crossed the floor of the inn. She had to duck through the doorway to keep her hair from catching fire and limped into the open. She was looking around wildly for her next move when she saw Hadvar directing other soldiers in the attack on the dragon. The creature looped back again and flew over them, roaring. Saeja opened her mouth to scream in agony as it’s cry reverberated inside her skull.

She felt someone take her head in their hands and lift her gaze to them. “Still alive, prisoner? Keep close to me if you want to stay that way.” He turned to another soldier and pointed in the direction of a small boy cowering beside the inn. “Gunnar, take care of the boy. I must find General Tullius and join the defence. Stay close to the wall.”

He turned and gestured to Saeja to follow him. She stepped quickly behind him, ducking when he did as the dragon flew past them again, breathing a steady stream of fire. Again, she thought she heard it saying something, but it passed quickly, flying outside the walls, then banking to pass over the city again. Hadvar started moving again, so Saeja crept behind him, following every footstep of the man who clearly knew the city inside and out. Reaching the main gate, she could see more imperial soldiers blasting magic and arrows at the dragon, though it was obvious to anyone that they were outmatched. Tullius began to yell at the men, telling them to get inside the keep. Hadvar started to pull her alongside him when suddenly he crashed into Ralof, who was also trying to reach the keep doors.

“Ralof, you damned traitor! Get out of my way.” Hadvar gripped the other man as he tried to move away. They grappled briefly as Ralof shouted, “We're escaping, Hadvar! You're not stopping us this time.” Ralof threw a particularly vicious punch to Hadvar’s rib cage, causing him to gasp and let go.

“Fine. I hope that dragon takes you all to Sovngarde.” He growled and began to back away.

Ralof shot her a quick glance and exclaimed, “Saeja, let’s get out of here, come on! Into the keep!”

At the same time Hadvar gestured to her, “No, come with me, prisoner! Let's go! Come on! We need to get inside!”

She turned to Hadvar and replied, “You tried to keep me off the list, so for that, if I ever see you again, you will walk away from that encounter. You also blindly followed orders to have me executed, when I am neither a Stormcloak or a criminal so I don't trust you to keep me alive.”

She turned on her heels and dashed after Ralof, hearing Hadvar reply, “Divines protect you.”
Saeja dove through the door of the keep, slamming it shut with her shoulder. From the corner of her eye, she could see Ralof bent over the corpse of another man, dressed in Stormcloak armor. He ground out a soft prayer for his fallen comrade. “We'll meet again in Sovngarde, brother.”

He turned back to Saeja and smiled sadly. “Looks like we're the only ones who made it. That thing was a dragon. No doubt. Just like the children's stories and legends. The harbingers of the End Times.” He shook his head, then stood and walked up behind her. His hands were warm on her skin as he slipped a dagger between the ropes on her wrists. “We better get moving. Let me see if I can get those bindings off.”

As soon as her hands were free Saeja rotated her shoulders a few times to check for any damage from her fall. She was sore in so many places and her ankle, which she had unknowingly twisted in her fall, twinged painfully as the adrenaline began to wear off.

She watched Ralof begin to strip the dead man in the keep with them. He tossed the armour and the weapon from the man’s body towards her. “There you go. May as well take Gunjar's gear, he won't be needing it anymore.” He pivoted to face away from her to give her some privacy. “Alright, get that armour on and give that axe a few swings. I'm going to see if I can find some way out of here.

He walked around the keep to all the exits and tried the doors. “Damn!” he shouted, slamming his fist against the door. “This one's locked and so is that gate. Curses! There’s no way to open this from our side.”

Saeja slipped behind him and covered his mouth with her hand. “Quiet, I can hear someone approaching from the tunnel behind the gate. If they are Imperials perhaps they have a key to the door. Take the other side of the gate and take cover. We have the element of surprise on our side.” She released him and scurried to the opposite side of the gate that she indicated to him and crouched down low, gripping her new weapon tightly. She wished she had her bow, but in such close quarters the enemy would have the advantage.

As the group got closer she could hear the familiar voice of the Imperial Captain issuing orders to get the gate open and keep moving through the keep. As the gate opened Saeja screamed with rage and swung her axe hard into the neck of the nearest Imperial soldier. Before he could even have registered his death, she ripped her weapon from him, blood spraying everywhere and brought it down in another arcing swing towards the belly of another. This man had just enough warning to unsheathe his sword and catch her axeblade with it, deflecting the blow, but he didn’t expect her to shift her weight to one foot and kick out at his knee with the other one. She kicked him hard enough to dislocate the kneecap and send him sprawling to the floor. Her blood pounded through her temples as she swung the axe into the back of the fallen man again and again until she was sure he wouldn’t
move again. Wiping the blood from her eyes, she saw Ralof finish off the Captain. She had landed a
blow to his arm, delivering a shallow cut to his bicep before he tripped her and sat on her back. He
pulled her head up by the hair and drew his dagger across her throat. Saeja gagged again as blood
spewed from the wound and the woman gurgled away her last breath. She had to keep telling herself
it was no different from the animals that she hunted and butchered for food. If she kept telling herself
that lie, she might make it through this ordeal.

Swallowing hard, she forced herself to search all three bodies. She took a dagger and a sword from
one soldier, a coin purse off of the other, and found a keyring on the body of the captain. She
fumbled with the keys at the door until she found one that fit the lock. She turned it, heard a soft click
and the door swung open. “That's it!” Ralof cheered, giving her a soft pat on the back, “Come on,
let's get out of here before the dragon brings the whole tower down on our heads.

They stepped into the hallway, sprinting toward the next door. Seconds before the ceiling came
crashing down on them Saeja again felt a weird throbbing wrack her body and grabbed Ralof’s
cloak, pulling him backwards, narrowly keeping him from being crushed. Ralof shot her a strange
stare, obviously finding it to be a bit more than just lucky that she seemed to know when another
attack was coming. Before he could say anything, she pushed open another door beside her and
pulled him in. She could hear another group of Imperials talking. They were grabbing everything of
importance and trying to escape. Saeja put the axe away and closed her eyes as she gathered flames
in her palms and set forth a blast of fire towards the soldiers. They screamed as the leather of their
armour was suddenly alight, giving her and Ralof enough time to end their lives with their swords.
She stamped out the flames and grabbed what she could off the bodies, placing it in a knapsack she
found on a table. Ralof suggested they look for anything useful such as healing potions. She quickly
searched the room, finding a few bottles, as well as two magicka potions and a stamina restorative.
She placed them in the knapsack as well.

They continued down the passageway keeping a sharp eye out for any other Imperials. When they
came to an archway with some stairs leading down to another room, they heard loud shouts and the
air was filled with the acrid smell of ozone. Ralof pushed her into a crouch and they tiptoed to the
doorway. He peered inside and cursed. “Troll's blood! It's a torture room.”

She crept closer to also look in the room and saw an Imperial wizard throwing lightning and a group
of Stormcloaks who has already made it this far. As they kept the wizard busy she snuck up behind
him and rammed her sword deep into his side, pulling it through his belly. The man fell to the floor.
Before he could cast a healing spell she brought the back of her axe blade down hard against his
temple, crushing his skull.

Ralof spoke to the other Stormcloaks, asking about Ulfric and swearing when the reply came that no
one had seen him since the tower. Saeja looked around the room, again searching for anything that
could help them in their escape. She grabbed a strange covered book from a small table, thinking it
may have useful information and then rummaged through another knapsack. It contained more gold
and three lockpicks.

Ralof came up beside her again and gestured to the line of cages along the wall, “Wait a second.
Looks like there's something in this cage. See if you can get it open with those picks. We might need
that gold once we get out. Grab anything useful and let's go.”

Whispering a soft prayer that she could do this Saeja began to work at the lock. It had been a long
time since she'd had to pick a lock and she was rusty, but luckily, she only broke one pick before the
lock clicked open. She pulled off the robes of the dead prisoner, collected his gold, a magicka potion
and a spell book. She backed out of the cage and continued to follow the larger group of
Stormcloaks.
The rest of the escape was a blur. They encountered more imperials, and she collected daggers, managed to find a bow with iron arrows and a few more swords. All of them fit into the knapsack, but it grew heavier as they progressed. Once they reached the outer wall of the keep they found a tunnel underground, and they could tell by the drafts of fresh air that it led to somewhere outside.

They forged onwards, fighting off a few frostbite spiders. Remembering her mother’s teaching, she scrounged for their eggs, pocketing them for later. A few more coin bags were snatched of soldiers and skeletons alike. Soon they could see the end of the tunnel and she was just about to make a run for the sunlight when Ralof grabbed her hand and pull her back against him.

“Hold up. There’s a bear just ahead. See her? I’d rather not tangle with her right now. Let’s try to sneak by. Just take it nice and slow, and watch where you step. If you’re feeling lucky, you can use your bow. Might take her by surprise. Go ahead. I’ll follow your lead and watch your back.” he whispered against her ear.

Saeja lowered herself as far as she could and crept silently around the slumbering beast. She froze in place as she heard it grunt, it’s nose rising to snuffle wetly against the air, trying to pick up their scent. She held her breath until she saw it curl back up and resume its early spring hibernation. She gestured to Ralof to move again and didn’t make another sound until she was well past the bear and stepping into the sunlight a short distance from the walls of Helgen. Ralof pulled her into a nearby copse of bushes just as she heard the mighty wings of the dragon overhead. They stared wide-eyed as it continued away towards the mountains near Whiterun until it was nothing more than a speck on the horizon.

Ralof stood and pulled her up to stand beside him. “There he goes. Looks like he's gone for good this time. No way to know if anyone else made it out alive. But this place is going to be swarming with Imperials soon enough. We’d better clear out of here.” He took a rag out of his pocket and used it to wipe some blood off her forehead. “My sister Gerdur runs the mill in Riverwood, just up the road. I’m sure she'd help you out. It's probably best if we split up until we reach the village. I will meet you there and help you explain what happened. Good luck.”

Saeja nodded, smiling at him. “Thank you for all your help Ralof. I’ll see you soon. I owe you a drink for helping me out of that tower.”

He laughed, and she admired his ability to be so jovial after a day like today. “I wouldn't have made it without your help today. You know, you should come with me to Windhelm and join the fight to free Skyrim. You've seen the true face of the Empire here today. If anyone will know what the coming of the dragon means, it's Ulfric.”

The pain that shot through her heart was excruciating. She saw the smile fall off his face as he saw the sudden tears that came to her eyes. “I’ll think about it,” she replied tersely. She swallowed hard, plastering a smile back on her own face. “We should get moving. You take the high road and I’ll take the low road, and whoever gets there last will owe the other that drink.”

Ralof nodded then pointed down the road slightly. “Just follow this road until you see the pillars of the ruin Bleak Falls Barrow. I never understood how my sister could stand living in the shadow of that place. I guess you get used to it. Just over that hill, there are the Guardian Stones, three of the thirteen ancient standing stones that dot Skyrim's landscape. Go ahead and stop at them. If you touch one of them, it will give you an edge in acquiring skills associated with that stone. No judging, but the Warrior Stone is the best choice.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, placing a delicate kiss on her fingertips. “Remember, this isn't Stormcloak territory. If we're ahead of the news from Helgen, we should be fine if we don't do anything stupid. I’ll see you in Riverwood.”
Ralof took off up the higher path toward Riverwood. She watched him until he disappeared and then waited a few more minutes so if she was caught he’d be far enough way that no one would suspect they escaped together. She began the short walk to Riverwood, familiar with the surroundings from her brief trips to the larger village.

She made a quick stop at the guardian stones and debated her choices. She rejected the mage stone first off. She had been about to touch it, filled with a sudden desire to be able to fling lightning and frost like the mages at Helgen, but she remembered when her father had discovered she had learned a flame spell from a guest at the Inn. He had been angrier than she had ever seen him before. Her father’s words came back to haunt her. “Magic, bah! Mages destroyed my hometown and beggared my family for generations. My parents barely made enough to leave that cursed place.”

She pulled her hand back quickly and turned her attention the remaining stones. Ralof had said the Warrior stone would help lead her to greatness and glory. The way he talked about Ulfric and a Skyrim, free from Imperial rule, reminded her so much of her brother it hurt her heart. Her parents had also encouraged her, so she lived in Shor’s Stone for a few years training to be a warrior great enough to join Ulfric’s army. She was called home when her brother was killed in a skirmish near Morthal. Her father had been devastated and never spoke of her brother again. One Autumn, merely two years later he was killed in Steamscorch mine when a tunnel had collapsed without warning. She half believed he hadn’t tried to escape when the cave-in began because he could not bear the sorrow of losing his son, and could not be man enough to comfort her mother, who still sobbed over the smallest reminders of her brother. She had stayed with her parents before out of loyalty and the need to help them through their grief, but always held on the hope that even with the danger they would eventually give their blessing for her to join the Stormcloaks as well. Once her father had passed, Lilja Skyborn refused to let Saeja go to Windhelm, making her help at the Briarwood Inn with the cooking and occasionally singing for the enjoyment of the guests.

As that first winter without her husband or son progressed, Lilja’s spirit continued to decline. She took ill one night and even with all her alchemy skills she could not, or would not, cure herself. The illness took less than a week to send her mother to join her brother and father in death, leaving Saeja with no family and no real home. Her uncle inherited the Inn and soon made it quite clear that if Saeja wanted to stay she had to do more than sing to entertain guests. In fact, he had tried to insist she prove her skills at entertaining men, and she gagged at the memory of his sour breath and groping hands. The man still walked with a limp after that encounter. She had stabbed him in the thigh with a dagger she always kept hidden in her skirts. She had run to her room, packed her bags and disappeared into the night, leaving him swearing and cursing her name and threatening her if she ever showed her face in Kynesgrove again.

With her painful past still fresh in her mind she placed her hand on the Thieves Stone. Her palm tickled as magic gathered around her and then flowed through her body. Perhaps Nocturnal would take pity on her and help her survive in this world alone. She had never needed to steal before but knew she may have to in the future and surmised that rich folks were always thieving from the poor anyway, so she would just be paying them back what they deserved.

She smiled crookedly and began the short sprint to Riverwood. She followed the River’s path and absent-mindedly collected the mountain flowers growing on the banks. She has some basic alchemy training thanks to the small apothecary her mother had run in the cellar of the Inn. She knew enough to make poultices and weak health and magicka potions, but she wanted to find a master alchemist to teach her more. Knowing she could never afford the Mages College fees she had been on her way to Falkreath to try and obtain an apprenticeship at Grave Concoctions when she was ambushed by the Imperials.
When Saeja came upon a mud crab that took offence to her presence she dispatched it quickly with a blow from her axe. She collected its legs and chitin and then walked along the bank of the river the rest of the way to Riverwood, letting the cold water relieve the swelling in her ankle.

Climbing the small hill from the river to the guard arch of the village she saw Ralof walking down the slope of the hillside from the higher pathway. He waved energetically at her and sprinted the last few steps down the slope and grabbed her in a quick, but strong, hug. “I'm glad you decided to join me. We made it to Riverwood and it looks like nobody here knows what happened yet.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her along behind him, “Come on. Gerdur is probably working in her lumber mill.”

As they always did when she entered a larger village, Saeja’s eyes widened as she took in her surroundings. There were a few new homes since her last visit and a few new faces. Children that would have just been babies when she was here last ran between the buildings playing tag. She followed Ralof behind the smith’s house to the sawmill where she saw an elf chopping wood. A large Nord man with rippling muscles and a tangled beard was pushing logs through the mill and near a small table was a woman that she identified as Ralof’s sister, their similarities apparent when she turned around to stare at them. She had the same butter-yellow hair and sky-blue eyes, but her face was more closed off, lacking the natural humour that was obvious in Ralof smile.

Ralof dropped Saeja's hand and raced towards his sister, picking her up in a strong hug and twirling around with her while yelling with joy. “Gerdur, oh Gerdur how I have missed you all”

The defensive look dropped from her face and she broke out into a genuine smile. “Brother! Mara's mercy, it's good to see you!” She laughed and then chided, “Put me down you great oaf and let me look at you.”

Ralof placed her gently on the ground in front of him. She took in his appearance and those worry lines came back. She reached up and hugged him again then pulled back and murmured softly, “But is it safe for you to be here? When we heard that Ulfric had been captured...” she trailed off, unable or unwilling to end that sentence.

Ralof took her hands in his and brought them to his face so she could assess his injuries. “Gerdur, I'm fine. At least now I am.”

She gingerly touched his left eye which was now black and starting to swell. “Are you hurt anywhere else? What's happened?” Gerdur turned to Saeja without even pausing for a breath and continued, "And who's this? One of your comrades?"

Ralof turned his smile to Saeja as well, his eyes sweeping over her body and she blushed slightly. His interest in her was already clear. "Not a comrade yet, but a friend. I owe her my life, in fact." He leaned closer to Gerdur and whispered, "Is there somewhere we can talk? There's no telling when the news from Helgen will reach the Imperials."

Gerdur eyes widened, "Helgen? Has something happened...? When he only shook his head in reply and looked around she sighed, "You're right. Follow me." She began to walk to a secluded little cove near the mill where a huge tree gave them some cover from prying eyes. She cupped her mouth with her hands and yelled to the bear of a man who was just about to load another log. "Hod! Come here a minute. I need your help with something."

The man hefted the log into the sawmill feeder, then turned around, his irritation expressed clearly on his face when he caught sight of the blonde man with his wife. "Ralof! What are you doing here? Ah, I'll be right down." He ambled down the ramp and as Saeja walked over to join Ralof and Gerdur she could hear the man grumbling about someone named Sven and wondering if he was
drunk on the job again, why was that Stormcloak here and wondering why he couldn’t have just one
day's peace and quiet.

Gerdur pulled Hod into a quick embrace and stood on tiptoe to give him a kiss on the cheek. Saeja
smiled at the affection they shared. Ralof gripped arms in greeting with the man and opened his
mouth to begin his tale and a young boy, no more than 9 came running up crying out Ralof’s name in
joy. "Uncle Ralof, uncle, you're here. Can I see your axe? How many Imperials have you killed? Do
you really know Ulfric Stormcloak?"

Gerdur pulled the boy aside and whispered urgently. "Hush, Frodnar. This is no time for your
games. Go and watch the south road. Come find us if you see any Imperial soldiers coming."

The boy's face fell into a pout. "Aw, mama, I want to stay and talk with Uncle Ralof!" His eyes were
filled with such boyish admiration that Saeja couldn’t help but smile at his antics. Ralof must have
felt it too because he patted the child on the head, mussing his hair and crouched down to the child's
eye level.

"Look at you Frodnar, almost a grown man! Won't be very long before you'll be joining the fight
yourself. Now look, boy, if you do as your mother says, I promise the next time I come to visit I will
bring you a sword and I will start to teach you the basics." He raised his hand to shush Gerdur’s
protests. "Do we have a deal?" he asked looking directly into the child's wide gray eyes.

"Deal" the boy replied solemnly, and he shook Ralof’s hand. "Don't worry, Uncle Ralof, I won't let
those soldiers sneak up on you." The boy then took off, running to the road and then down it to the
guard’s outpost to watch for any travellers.

Ralof stood back up and stretched, rubbing his aching back. "Now I am sure you have questions
when I show up with a stranger, and we both look like this." He smiled ruefully and looked at Saeja,
“You deserve an explanation for the earlier events of this ordeal as well.” He shook his head and
began his tale. “I can't remember when I last slept. Where to start? Well, the news you heard about
Ulfric was true. The Imperials ambushed us outside Darkwater Crossing. Like they knew exactly
where we’d be. That was two days ago, now. We stopped in Helgen this morning, and I thought it
was all over. Had us lined up to the headsman's block and ready to start chopping.

He paused to sit down on a nearby stump, and patted the space beside him, silently indicating to
Saeja that she should sit down as well. He was starting to lose his strength and knew she would be
exhausted herself. She limped over to him and sat, leaning on him for support.

"They wouldn't dare give Ulfric a fair trial. They had him bound and gagged like a common
criminal, and Tullius just walked up to us and accused him of treason." Ralof shook his head,
"Treasure, for fighting for your own people! All of Skyrim would've seen the truth then. They were
about to send us one by one to the chopping block, they even had Saeja here kneeling, with the
headsman’s blade about to fall. But then, out of nowhere...a dragon attacked!"

Gerdur gasped and Hod wrapped his arms around her protectively. "You don't mean to say a real..."
he trailed off as Ralof and Saeja both nodded.

"I can hardly believe it myself, and I was there. As strange as it sounds, we'd be dead if not for that
dragon. In the confusion, we managed to slip away. Saeja here saved my life multiple times during
our escape. Are we really the first to make it to Riverwood?" Ralof continued, his eyes scanning the
area for any unknown villagers. Gerdur confirmed they had been the only ones on the road as far as
she knew. " Good. Maybe we can lay up for a while and heal. I hate to put your family in danger,
Gerdur, but..."
She cut him off quickly. “Nonsense. You and your friend are welcome to stay here. Let me worry about the Imperials.” She turned to Saeja and gripped her hands in gratitude, “Any friend of Ralof’s is a friend of mine. Here’s a key to the house. Stay as long as you like. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know.”

Saeja, who had stayed silent during the entire story, spoke softly as if it took all her waning energy just to form the words. “A bed, does the inn have a bed? I can hardly think, let alone move at this point and all I want to do is fall into a warm bed and sleep.”

Gerdur shook her head, "The Inn always has beds, but if any Imperials come looking for you it’s a sure thing they will leave a few soldiers at the Inn. I have some extra beds in the cellar of our home. As I said before, you and Ralof will stay with us until you are well enough to travel.” She turned to her husband and touched his arm gently. "Hod can you please carry the girl inside? She’s limping and obviously needs a healing. I can help Ralof stumble down there as well."

Hod nodded and picked Saeja up, ignoring her weak protests. He held her tightly against his chest, noting that while her slender frame was solidly built and hard, like a warrior, she could use a few good hot meals. He whispered in her ear, "Settle down now like a good girl. We will take care of you. It’s safe now.” Saeja closed her eyes, cradled in the big man’s arms and fell soundly asleep before he even reached the door to his home.
As per always, I don't own any of the Bethesda characters.

Here we get more insight to Saeja past and a glimpse at how she starts determining her future. Ralof is such a sweetie she can't help but open up to him.

SMUT warning for the end of the chapter.
Also the feedback has been awesome and I love the Kudos.

Saeja woke with a start, slightly panicked by the strange surroundings. Her hand reached for her dagger and she was dismayed to realize it wasn’t there, and neither were her clothes. She lifted the soft hide blanket and saw she was clad only in a pair of small clothes, that weren’t hers. She craned her neck to look about the room and saw Ralof sleeping in a bed nearby, snoring. Beside her bed was a maroon dress made from the softest linen and small iron dagger with a note. She opened the slip of paper and smirked when she read "SO YOU FEEL SAFE."

She rose from the bed silently, to not wake up Ralof and slipped into the dress, pulling the outer dress over the pale shift and then lacing the front bodice. On the floor, there was a set of sturdy leather boots that were a touch too big. She felt odd walking in them but remembered there was a smithy in town from when she arrived. He should carry some boots she could purchase if she could find her coin purse from the escape yesterday. Grabbing the dagger Saeja slipped it into a pocket in the dress and slowly ascended the steps to the main floor. She opened the trap door and squinted against the sunlight streaming in from the windows. The mouthwatering scent of rabbit stew and fresh bread filled the air.

"Ah, you're awake," Saeja turned to look at Gerdur who was sitting at a small table by the fire. "Sit down here and let me get you a bowl of stew. I also have fresh goat cheese to spread on some bread that Hod made this morning."

"Thank you," replied Saeja, sliding onto the chair and placing a few slices of bread on her plate. "You're being very kind to a woman you don't even know."

"Nonsense. I love my brother desperately, and have worried about him non-stop since he joined the Stormcloak army." Gerdur replied, filling a wooden bowl with the thick stew and carrying it over to Saeja. Once she had returned to her seat she looked over Saeja. "You know, I think he's too kind to make a good soldier. Too full of life to lose it to this senseless war." When Saeja didn’t reply, she
continued. "It's not that I don't support Ulfric. I have no love for the Empire and its ban on Talos worship, but the resistance has been going on for almost a decade now with no end in sight. I have lost good friends and our neighbours are at each other’s throats over who supports which cause."

Gerdur leaned back in her chair and sighed. "My brother was suited to be a good Innkeeper or a farmer. He should have a loving wife and a passel of children right now. Not be running off to war and risking his life. He should be free to smile and travel and laugh and love. You saw how he was with Frodnar yesterday. He should have his own family."

Saeja's mouth was unfortunately full of stew when Gerdur paused and looked at her for some sort of reply. She swallowed hastily, "I'm sorry, I was so hungry, and this is delicious." She had the good grace to look sheepish, "I barely know you brother, having only met him yesterday, but he struck me a kind-hearted fellow. He is truly brave and loyal, and while I can understand your concern, I think he feels he needs to do this. He admires Ulfric very much, it's obvious to see that. Perhaps Ralof is the one to help tip the scales in Ulfric's favour. He is a brave warrior, with just enough compassion to make him a good leader."

Gerdur smiled at her. "I know you are right. But he is my younger brother and I worry." Gerdur dug into her own stew and the two women ate comfortably in silence for a few moments. She reached for more bread as Gerdur began to speak again. "There's something I was hoping you can do for me. For all of us here. The Jarl needs to know if there's a dragon on the loose. Riverwood is defenceless. We need to get word to Jarl Balgruuf in Whiterun to send whatever soldiers he can. If you'll do that for me, I'll be in your debt."

Saeja sat back for a moment thinking. "Do you want me to leave immediately? I was really hoping to stay one more day. My ankle is still very sore, and I was going to see if I could trade a few things for some travelling gear and food."

Gerdur shook her head, "Oh no, no, no, you don’t have to leave today. You slept most of it away anyways. It's late afternoon. It's best to head out in the morning. I will help supply you with anything I can spare. I know Ralof plans to head to Windhelm tomorrow. There is still no word on Ulfric, but if he didn’t make it, his housecarl Galmar Stone-Fist will be planning a strike against Tullius as soon as he can manage it."

"Then I would be happy to help, but you really shouldn't say you'll be in my debt. I owe Ralof a great deal for helping me yesterday. If nothing else, he made the prospect of my death more bearable and truly I haven’t seen this much kindness from strangers in a long time." She took Gerdur’s hand and gripped it tightly in thanks.

Saeja rose and began trying to clear up, but Gerdur shooed her on her way. She gave Saeja her knapsack that she had hidden in a false cupboard and pointed her in the direction of Lucan Valerius at the Riverwood Trader and to the blacksmith just down the road.

The first stop she made was to the blacksmith. She pulled out a collection of swords and daggers from her pack, as well as a few Imperial armor pieces. She haggled with him on the price until he finally relented and offered her 350 gold septims for the whole lot, as well as a quiver of steel arrows she could use with her bow. With her gold she bought some worn leather boots and some old hide armor he had lying around. It was both comfortable and common enough garb for travelers so she knew it would draw less suspicion if she passed any soldiers. The blacksmith was also kind enough, or perhaps bored enough to offer her some lessons in smithy work.

As she packed away her newly crafted dagger and helmet, Saeja crossed the road, trying to remain unnoticeable. She pushed open the door and was surprised to hear loud arguing between the merchant and another woman in the room. They hadn’t spotted her yet, and she could garner from
the argument that something had been stolen from the shop. She surmised that the sister, Camilla wanted to go and find the artifact and Lucan was firmly against it. He feared his sister may be hurt if she went adventuring, and he couldn’t afford to pay someone to go after the thief.

“Excuse me,” Saeja interjected. “I was told I could trade some things here.”

The two merchants turned to look at her and the man broke into a bright smile almost immediately. “Welcome stranger, of course you can make a trade here, and I offer a variety of merchandise if you’ve got the coin.”

Saeja walked up to the counter and pulled out some things from her pack. She had collected a few vintage bottles of alto wine and a silver amethyst ring off a guard from Helgen. She also had some herbs and ingredients from her walk along the river. “I can offer you 10 septims for everything.” Lucan said after viewing all her items.

“That’s not very much if you are including the silver ring in that.” She retorted. She knew this game. Her mother might have been a novice alchemist and innkeeper, but she had been a master trader. She pouted slightly and leaned forward, simpering, “Can’t you do any better than that. This ring is the most valuable thing I own.”

Lucan smiled at the pretty young Nord, who he thought was now flirting with him, “I suppose I could give you 25, but I can’t go any higher than that. We were just robbed, and a very valuable heirloom was stolen from us. An ornament, solid gold. In the shape of a dragon's claw.”

“I can find it for you” she replied, sounding more confident than she felt. She gave herself a mental kick for offering to help so quickly. She had plans. Go to Whiterun, inform the Jarl about the dragon and then take a carriage to Falkreath and become a better alchemist. She wasn’t an adventurer. She had absolutely no experience hunting down thieves, yet she still smiled at him, encouraging him to take her up on the offer.

Lucan looked her up and down, obviously trying to decide if she could even pull off the job. She didn’t like how his gaze lingered on her hips before travelling back up to meet her eyes. “You could huh? Well I have some coin coming in from my last shipment. It's yours if you bring my claw back.” He paused, as if he suddenly thought of something. "If you're going to catch those thieves, you should head to Bleak Falls Barrow, northeast of town. I overheard one of them mention the Barrow as they bolted from the shop."

Camilla interrupted. "I think your helper will need a guide"

Before Lucan could consent or argue Saeja responded "I appreciate your offer, but I have some preparing to do before I leave town. I won’t be leaving until the morning." She turned to face Lucan and thanked him for his help with her trades and promised she would be back soon with his claw.

As she was leaving the shop she paused and looked at Camilla. “Excuse me, do you know if there is anywhere near by that I could use to make up some potions. I’m passing through but have some ingredients to stock up my supplies”

The younger girl replied quickly, “There is an alchemy lab in the Sleeping Giant Inn. Delphine usually allows guests to use it, but just in case I could come along and put in a good word for you.” The girl jumped up and sprinted to the door.

“Camilla sit down!” thundered Lucan. “There are things to do today beside bat your eyelashes at that ridiculous bard!”
The brunette crossed her arms and pouted, but obediently returned to her chair to finish inventory. Saeja shook her head, opened the door and stepped outside again. She walked to the outskirts of the village, down to the river and waded into the shallows of a small bend in the flow. She patiently waited for some blue dragonflies to come to close and snatched them out of the air, stuffing them in with the rest of her ingredients. She also found some imp stools growing in the shade and picked some more blue mountain flower. Once she felt she had stocked up a sufficient supply, she trudged back into town, her energy starting to wane. She reached the steps of the Inn and opened the door. From the rear of the inn came a lovely tenor voice, singing an old folk song. She looked at the bard and grinned. She could see why Camilla was interested in the man, he was talented. Not only could he sing, but he accompanied himself with the lute.

She stepped further inside and walked up to the brawny man behind the bar. “Excuse me, I was told you may have an alchemy lab I could use.”

The man barely spared her a glance waving her toward the small glowing alembic. “Yeah, I suppose you can use it. Just don’t blow anything up.”

It took her a good half an hour to craft 5 minor healing potions, and when she straightened, rubbing her back, she saw several local villagers had entered the inn for their evening meals. A familiar, smiling face sat at the table beside her.

“Hello, you looked hard at work and I didn’t want to disturb you. I’m impressed. I know nothing of potion making and regard it as foreign as magic, but you seem sure of yourself.” Ralof patted the seat beside him as she stuffed her potion bottles into her pack. She returned his smile and sat beside him. He had ordered some venison chops, grilled leeks and a loaf of fresh bread with melted cheese. “Dig in, I took the liberty of assuming you would share a meal with me, and since we arrived at the same time, the first round is on me, but you get the next round of mead.”

Saeja couldn’t help it, she was caught up in his infectious laughter, and spent a good portion of the evening flirting with the handsome Stormcloak. She was careful to not get drunk, taking her time with her mead, but felt more relaxed than she had in years. They swapped childhood anecdotes; he told her about how Gerdrur used to push him around and laughed as he spoke of the pranks he played on his mother. She in turn spoke of her trips all over Skyrim with her doting father as he sold the ore from his mine. She lost herself in the memories of the cities and villages they’d visited, life travelling the roads, and bathing in the hot springs around Kynesgrove. For the first time in months she was able to speak of her family without choking on sorrow. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt this kind of comradery, since her family members passed away, if not before then.

“Your brother Fjolli, he sounds like quite the character. Is he still in Kynesgrove with your family?” Ralof asked innocently. “I am surprised your family is allowing you to travel unaccompanied.”

The laughter caught in her throat and she had to swallow a large swig of mead before she could trust herself to speak. “Fjolli died, so did my parents. My whole family is gone. I have no close relatives, just a lecherous uncle, who inherited everything my family worked for, and told me I could stay if I earned my keep by entertaining travelers.”

Strong arms circled her in a hard hug as Ralof whispered softly. “I am so sorry. I’m an ass! We were having a good time, and I ruined it by asking hard questions.”

She pulled away from his comforting embrace slowly, wiping her eyes. “It's not a problem Ralof. You couldn’t have known. Fjolli joined the Stormcloaks early in the rebellion. My family was so incredibly proud of him. My father had fought in the legion and mother was a camp healer, but they felt as betrayed as Ulfric did when the Empire signed the concordat. They were always devout worshipers of Talos. They encouraged my brother to travel to Windhelm and join the rebellion.”
She took another swallow of mead and then stared at the bottle for a moment before continuing. "I wanted to go with him so badly. I idolized my brother. He was 4 years older than me, and so eager to join the army. I begged my mother to let me go as well. I could train as a healer, or learn to fight. My parents thought I was still too young at eighteen to join, so my they agreed to send me to Shor's Stone to train with an old friend of my father's from the legion. I spent three and a half years there learning sword fighting, how to improve my accuracy as an archer and close combat fighting with daggers. Filnjar had been helping me prepare to go home to Kynesgrove and see my family before I was to volunteer with the army when we got the news. Fjolti had been killed in a skirmish near Morthal. I raced home to be with my parents, but it still took me two days to travel. I wish I had been there, and maybe things would have been different. They had given up all hope. I was forbidden to join the Stormcloaks, my father hid my weapons and my mother's tears were enough to guilt me into staying at the Inn and helping her run it."

She sniffled again and turned to look at him. "Can we go back to your sister's place. I don't really want to continue this here in public."

Ralof rose and said a few brief words to the innkeeper, tossing him a few coins. He crossed swiftly back to her and took her hand, leading her back to Gerdur's. They said a short good night to everyone before retreating to the cellar again. Saeja sat down on her bed, placing her pack beside it. Ralof sat on the end of her bed and looked at her encouragingly. He took her hand, stroking it softly with his thumb, sensing her need for a comforting touch.

"My parents slowly began to come out of their grief. It took two years before Dad started going on his excursions to other towns again with his malachite ore. He had been sending my uncle Kjeld out to run those jobs. Then one day he and my uncle were in the mines and we felt the tremors, even above ground. One of the mine shafts collapsed. My father never made it." She shuddered, holding back sobs. Ralof shuffle closer to her. He pulled her into his arms and held her, his strong hands stroking her hair like one might do to comfort a child.

She lost herself in his embrace for a moment, desperate for comfort, before continuing. "That was the last straw for my mother. She retreated to her bed in mourning, and basically never left. She left running the inn to me, only rising occasionally if we got too busy for me to handle alone, or settle disputes. Dad died in the fall and in midwinter my mother contracted Ataxia from a guest. Even with her alchemy knowledge, she could not or would not, as I suspect is more likely, craft a potion strong enough to save herself. She lasted no more than a week after the illness took hold. I lost both my parents in the span of two seasons. Kjeld inherited the inn and the mine and if he dies, my cousin will inherit. He let me stay with him for another half year, running the place, before he began to make it clear I had to do more to earn my keep. One night he pulled me into his room and told me I had to show him how I was going to keep him and the guests happy. He ripped my bodice and was pushing me towards the bed, but I stabbed him in the thigh and raced to my room. I packed my belongings, a few memento's, and some food, then I snuck out the window and never looked back. My uncle couldn't follow me with his injuries, I hear he still walks with a limp, but he hurled obscenities at me as I ran. The last words he yelled at me were to never show my face in his inn again. That was 4 months ago."

Her voice broke as all the painful emotions she had been steadily pushing down deep inside her finally ruptured, rising to the surface. The pain and loneliness of losing her family, the fear of trying to make it on her own, and the horror of being pawed at by man twice her size burst forth and she began to sob. She curled into a small ball, her face buried in his chest. Ralof cradled her firmly but gently and whispered soothing noises into her ear. As her sobs subsided, she felt his lips press softly against her hair and he hugged her close.

"I'm so sorry for your loss Saeja. That is a lot for a young woman to deal with in such a short time."
Say the word and I will visit Kynesgrove on my way back to Windhelm and destroy your despicable uncle." He declared.

His voice was so sincere she had to laugh. "Please don’t. Either he’d kill you, and your death would be on my conscience, or you’d be arrested for his murder and your death would be on my conscience. Either way, I lose a friend and perhaps still have a horrible uncle." She wiped her eyes of the last remnants of her tears and looked up at him.

She felt his gaze burn through her, and then he slowly lowered his head to hers and pressed a soft kiss on her lips. Her body responded to his touch like oil to a flame. She tilted her head to get a better angle and pressed her mouth against his more firmly. Her skin burned when his hands touched her, one at the small of her back and one cupping her chin, his thumb stroking her cheek. Without breaking contact Saeja rose to her knees in front of him, pushing him backwards against the wall. He brought his hands to her waist and guided her over his legs to straddle his hips. He pushed her dress further up, exposing her thighs, but when she felt his maleness, hard and pressed against her, she pulled back, breaking the kiss and breathing hard.

"Sorry, I shouldn’t have pushed you this far. I was caught up in the moment, but it's no excuse. I should have asked if you wanted any of this." Ralof gasped, trying to catch his breath.

She blushed crimson and replied, "I want this, I do. I just..." she ducked her head, blushing. "I haven’t done this before. I don’t know what I am doing, and I don’t want to be a disappointment."

A satisfied growl rumbled from his throat before he ground out, "There is no way in Oblivion you could be a disappointment to me. I can go slow with you sweetheart. I promise you will enjoy this as much as I do." He slid his body sideways along the wall until he was able to lie on the bed and pulled her down beside him. He kissed her again, slowly this time, and letting her build the pressure as her desire grew. He guided her onto her back and leaned in, trailing his mouth along her jawline and nape until he could nip at the crook of her neck and nibble on her ear.

Saeja whimpered, heat gathering at the apex of her thighs. Her skin tingled and her breasts tightened almost painfully, her nipples forming peaks. When Ralof slid one hand to her ribcage and cupped the underside of her breast, she couldn’t help the low moan that escaped her. She arched into his palm, needing to be closer to him, but not sure how to achieve it without melding their flesh into one being.

Ralof leaned up on one arm and used his free hand to unlace her bodice. He helped her push the sleeves of her dress down her arms and then worked it over her hips. Once off, he threw it to the side, where it puddled on the ground. Left in only a linen shift and her small clothes, she felt goosebumps run up and down her skin, both from the cold and the anticipation of what he would show her next. She sat up and pressed her lips to his again, desperate to feel his mouth against her once more. He groaned and then wiggled the hem of her shift from under her and pulled it over her head leaving her only in her small clothes.

Saeja hands itched to touch something but she was still unsure of what to do. When her fingers tentatively stroked his chest over his shirt, she heard his breath catch and he moaned. Emboldened, she slipped her hands beneath his shirt, placing her palms directly upon his chest. His skin was warm to the touch, as though his body was running a fever. She stroked her fingertips over his sensitive chest and stomach, delighted by the light patch of hair that surrounded his belly button and trailed below his belt.

Ralof removed her breast band and then leaned against her, pushing her back onto the bed. He dipped his head to trail feather light kisses along her jaw, down her neck and chest. When the he took one nipple into his mouth, suckling gently, her body bowed towards him and she couldn’t suppress a surprised cry of pleasure. His hand cupped her other breast, his thumb caressing her other
nipple lightly, swirling around it and causing it to tighten even more. Her whole body quivered, and her soft cries were music to Ralof's ears. His mouth switched breasts and he laved her nipple. He slipped his thumbs into the band of her loin cloth and slid this last piece of clothing she had over her hips, down to her feet and off, to join her dress on the floor.

Suddenly shy again, Saeja brought her hands down to her curls, trying to cover herself. Ralof stopped kissing her and gazed into her eyes, his own darkened with desire. "If you want to stop, you only have to tell me. I don't want to push you past where you are willing to go with this Saeja. I will never hurt you. If you want this to stop, it ends here."

Saeja blushed and then leaned up on her arms. "It's not that I want to stop. I'm just not sure what I am supposed to do the first time someone sees me in nothing more than the skin I was born with."

"You are lovely Saeja, and more than I could hope for. Just react to what you feel. Don't hold back or think about what a maiden should do her first time. Just let yourself enjoy what I am doing and ask me for anything you think you want.” He smiled suggestively, “I'm more than happy to fulfill requests."

"Then kiss me," she responded breathlessly. "I want to feel you mouth all over my body."

Ralof smirked, "As you will it my lady." He pressed his mouth to the underside of her breasts, running his tongue along the sensitive skin there, trailing down her ribs and over her taut belly. Every so often he would lightly nip the skin at her belly and hips, causing her body to spasm in pleasure. When his lips pressed against her thighs, Saeja responded by spreading her legs slightly and Ralof groaned at the smell of her arousal. He slid down the bed, gripped her thighs firmly and pulled her legs even wider apart. He saw her eyes fly open before he bent his head and pressed a firm kiss upon her lower lips, darting his tongue out to part her slit. Their moans mingled in the air as he tasted her excitement on his tongue. She was so wet, her body was quivering as she moaned his name over and over.

The strength flowed out of her legs, leaving them boneless and spread wide on either side his head. She gyrated her hips slightly in response to his tongue, her breath catching when he created a gentle suction. She cried in protest when she felt him pull away but, it died on her lips when she felt him nimbly slide one finger inside her and begin thrusting it back and forth, curling as he pulled back so that his fingertip pressed firmly on that sweet spot inside her.

When he felt her walls loosen slightly as they began to accommodate one finger, he slid a second finger inside of her, pumping slowly. He placed his other hand just above her curls and pressing firmly downward, he stroked his thumb back and forth over her clitoris, eliciting frantic moans and wild writhing. Every so often he would remove his fingers and just run them up and down the length of her folds, circling that sensitive bud and then dip them back inside.

When her breathing became more rapid and her cries started becoming shorter and more frequent, Ralof began to whisper to her softly. “That’s it Saeja. Just let go. I want you to enjoy this.” He could feel her body start to coil, the tension reaching unbelievable heights. “You are so amazing. I want to be inside you so badly,” he cooed, “I want to bury myself inside you and lose myself all night long. You are so incredible.”

He thrust one last time and it all came to a head. She shrieked in pleasure as wave after wave of sensation burst inside her core and spread rapidly outward. Her body spasmed, nearly bowing off the bed, while her hips jerked wildly. Her hands dug into the covers on the mattress and her toes curled so tight her arches hurt. Ralof slowly decreased the pressure of his thumb, but kept making wide circular strokes around her throbbing clitoris, slowing them as her cries dissipated and she began to take deep breaths as the spasms subsided. He finally slipped his fingers from her and stood at the foot
of the bed. Through hooded eyes she watched him remove his tunic, breeches and small clothes. She was past being embarrassed, feeling too languid to look away from his body. He slid back onto the bed beside her and took her lips in another firm kiss. Driven by the pleasure she had just experienced she rolled closer into his warm embrace and kissed him back. When she felt his tongue outline her lips, a natural inclination caused her to part them and let him slip inside her mouth, caressing her tongue with his own. His hand went back to her taut breast, plucking at her nipple and running his fingertips along the underside, cupping her gently.

Saeja had overheard her brother talking to friends one night when she was younger and was scandalized when they mentioned how they loved to feel a woman's mouth on their manhood, her hands stroking them firmly. She let her fingers trail down Ralof’s chest, toying with the yellow hairs near his belly button and following the treasure trail to the nest of curls above his length.

Ralof gasped when he felt her place a timid hand on him, cupping him and giving a tentative but firm stroke. “Divines preserve us Saeja.” He growled, and willed his body to be still as he let her explore his body as he had done hers. Every molecule in his body screamed to press her into the mattress and plunge himself inside her, to lose himself in her embrace. His body shook with the effort to lay there as she trailed her mouth down his nape and chest, venturing closer and closer before he heard her take a steady breath, then run her tongue along the head of his shaft. He tensed and cried out, digging his fingers into the headboard above him. He felt her pull back, suddenly unsure of herself. “No Saeja, please don’t stop. It felt amazing. I never want you to stop!” he ground out between clenched teeth.

She felt a stab of pure satisfaction and smirked. Emboldened by his admission she leaned in again and this time ran her tongue down the entire length of his shaft and then up again, swirling her tongue around its head. She heard him hiss as he involuntarily pumped his hips closer to her questing tongue. When she slid his head into her mouth and began to delicately suck at him, he swore and clenched the wood frame above him even tighter. Ralof was in a state of pure ecstasy, his eyes rolling back as he felt her increase the suction around him and bob her head up and down, trying to take more of him inside her with every downward stroke. Her nimble tongue swirled around him and when she instinctively cupped his throbbing balls it was all he could do to not lose himself right then. It had been over a year since the last time he had been with any woman and he had never slept with a virgin before. He didn’t want to scare her but didn’t trust himself to last under her ministrations.

Her dug his hands into her snowy tresses and pulled her off him with a slight popping sound. “Enough, please Saeja, enough, or you will unman me here and now.”

She crawled up the bed to lay beside him, smiling. “I liked that a lot Ralof. It was funny at first, but I love the salty taste of you and the feel of your satiny skin inside my mouth.”

He groaned and kissed her again, gripping her shoulders tightly, but she pulled away and continued. “I don’t know how the rest of this works. My mother told me some of the basics, but I don’t know what you want me to do” she whispered.

“Are you adept at riding, sweetness?” He queried. At her nod, he lay back on the bed and pulled her astride him. “Take me at your own pace my sunrise. It may hurt, a woman’s first time can, but if you set the pace, I will be gentle, and you can always say no.”

He gripped her hips and positioned her above him, sliding just the tip of himself inside her velvety passage. She placed her hand on his chest to support herself and then began to lower herself onto him, rocking her hips slowly to allow him to slide in inch by inch. When he was inside her halfway she felt the tip of him meet a slight resistance. Her talks with her mother about childbearing and marriage had given her some idea about this and knew to get it over with quickly.
“Pull me down quickly Ralof” she begged, and then she relaxed her arms and thrust herself down upon him as she felt his hands clutch her thighs and push himself inside her. She gasped sharply, the discomfort more from her body stretching to accommodate his girth, than the tearing sensation her mother said some women experience. She collapsed above him, her chest meeting his as she tucked her face into the crook of his neck. Impaled on him she breathed the scent of him in deeply as she allowed her body to relax around him. Ralof kept his hips perfectly still, embracing her tightly, and whispering sweet words of endearments and encouragement into her ear.

When the ache subsided slightly Saeja pulled herself up from his embrace and gave a tentative rock of her hips. She slid easily along his length and the feeling of being filled completely began to replace the discomfort. “Help me Ralof.” She whimpered as a tingling began between her thighs. “Help me please you. I want to know what you like.”

Ralof sat up, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissed her. He moved backwards slightly, pulling her along with him still buried inside her and leaned back against the headboard, angling his upper body. He began to thrust his hips shallowly, encouraging her to rock back and forth in time with him. She gyrated her hips in time with his thrusts and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, bringing her breast temptingly close to his mouth. His hands were busy digging into her hips, helping guide her movements. When a nipple brushed his lips, he turned towards it and took it into his mouth, suckling hard and making Saeja wail in pleasure. The tension began to build inside her again as she ground against his firm torso, the hairs on his pelvis rubbing against her sensitive nub. She felt his arms move around to pull her in tightly against him as he began to thrust deeper and faster inside her. Saeja arched her back, trying to press her hips in harder against him and the angle allowed him to slide even deeper, pressing against that small cluster of nerves inside of her sheath. She shuddered hard and felt her eyes roll back into her head and she shrieked as another orgasm ripped through her core.

As her passage began to throb around him, Ralof let out a guttural shout and let his own orgasm sweep over him. He thrust hard and fast, pouring himself deep inside her. He hugged her tightly as their writhing ceased and their senses came back into focus. Sweat glistened on their bodies and mingled where their flesh connected. Saeja relaxed against him, until she felt his arms loosen and he shifted beneath her. She felt him grow soft and slide out of her, making her murmur softly as it tickled her already over-sensitive flesh.

Too exhausted to speak, Ralof rolled to the side and pulled the covers from underneath them and lay down, curling Saeja into the crook of his arm. They snuggled together tightly under the blankets as they began to drift off, both whispering words of endearment until it was nothing more than nonsensical mumbles and sighs.
First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Saeja makes her way to Whiterun and meets some interesting characters on the way. First impressions aren't always accurate either.

My second favorite character joins us in the chapter. I have a thing for Nords. As always comments are appreciated. How are you liking the story so far?

I have a bunch of chapter completed, just editing them and making some adjustments. Once they are all posted my updates may slow down.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: As per always I DO NOT own any of the original characters. Bethesda and it's employees are geniuses.
**edited****

Fear ripped Saeja out of dreamland the next morning and she opened her eyes with a desperate sob. Instantly Ralof's strong arms tightened around her and he murmured against her ear, "It's alright sweetness, nothing here but us. Nothing is going to get to you."

The panic that had glazed over her eyes dimmed, and she let herself relax in his arms and snuggle closer, enjoying the warmth of his body before she had to get on the road again. "I'm sorry to have woken you. I was having nightmare about the other day. I could see that dragon again and no matter how fast I ran he was always on my heels, shouting something at me. It's like I understood the words, but didn't at the same time."She nuzzled his chest. "If that makes any sense."

"It doesn't really, but nightmares never do." he replied sleepily. He was enjoying her hands on his body, her curves pressed against him. He placed a soft kiss on her lips. "You should go back to sleep."

Saeja could feel his length harden against her thigh and she felt her own desire begin to rise. "If I am awake, I should probably start getting ready to make for Whiterun, since I was too preoccupied to pack last night." She teased, wiggling her hips to push up against him, then reached down and took his throbbing length in her hand, squeezing gently. "Or, I suppose I could use a warm up before I start my morning run."

It was even more amazing this time. Ralof spent a few brief moments caressing her breasts before rolling over her and fitting himself between her legs. When he entered her, she was already hot and wet and moaning for him. As he thrust inside her she lifted her hips to meet him and clawed at his back as the pleasure between them grew. When her reached between them and brushed his thumb over the sensitive bud between her thighs, her orgasm hit her hard and she bit his shoulder to keep
from screaming. Ralof thrust once, twice, three times more and then collapsed against her as his own pleasure sapped him of his strength. A low, rumbling moan tore from his throat as he pumped against her, spilling his seed inside.

When he could finally move, he rolled off her smiling. “Gods woman. You are amazing.”

Saeja smirked, and then rose gingerly from the bed. He knees were weak, but she walked over to the water jug and poured some of the cool liquid into a basin. She grabbed a soft piece of hide, soaked it and began to wash herself, ridding herself of the sweat and smell of sex. Ralof rolled onto his side, and she could feel his eyes watching her. When she came back to the bed, she leaned in and kissed him, then turned and began to pick up her discarded clothing. She pulled her small clothes back on and secured her breast band.

"Do you really have to leave so soon?” Ralof asked, his voice deep with satisfaction and sleepiness. "Gerdur said we could stay longer. I don’t want to see you go."

"I have to Ralof, and so do you." she smiled at him, wishing she could stay here with him as well. "I promised your sister I would get to Whiterun with news of the dragon. You said yourself you must get to Windhelm as quickly as possible to flesh out the details of the ambush and dragon attack. If Ulfric didn’t make it, his house-carl will need to know everything."

Ralof sighed and rose from the bed as well. "You're right of course. Damned if I didn’t bed a virgin with common sense instead of girlish obsessions." He washed off as well and began to shove his armor into a pack. "Better to travel in plain clothes if I am going to try and hail down a carriage. They packed in silence, but Saeja couldn’t help but watch him as he dressed in breeches and a light green tunic. She bit her lip as his strong arms pulled the shirt over his head. He caught her watching him and winked. "Truly, this body is yours to command whenever you have need of it."

Saeja laughed and stuffed the last of her gear into her pack. Dressed in her newly acquired hide armor and leather boots, she strapped on her dagger, hid her helmet in her pack and shouldered her bow and arrows. "So, you want me to come to Windhelm and find you when I am finished with the Jarl then?"

Ralof walked over to her and pulled her into a fierce hug. When he leaned back she could see the humor had left his expression and his eyes were more serious than she had seen over the last few days." Even if you don’t want to be a soldier, I think you should come find me. We could use a potions master for healing." He trailed off looking down at his feet. "It would also give me hope during these dark times. I want to see you again."

Saeja pressed soft kisses against his lips, cheek and neck. "I'm hardly a master alchemist." she protested between thier kisses. "I'll be careful," she promised when she broke away from another sizzling kiss. She knew he was worried and would have come with her, but he was a good soldier till the end and his loyalty to Ulfric was absolute. "I will find you when I come to Windhelm. I promise" she whispered and hugged him close.

Such was their goodbye. They walked up the stairs to the main floor and Ralof grabbed some supplies as he headed out the door, hoping to flag down the carriage coming from Falkreath. "I'll see you soon I hope." he said as he left, giving her hand one last squeeze, and hugging his sister goodbye.

Gerdur and Saeja exchanged a few brief pleasantries before she left, with Gerdur making her promise to come to them any time she needed help, supplies or a place to hide. She was handed another small pack filled with food and pointed in the direction of Whiterun.
As the high towers of Dragonsreach became visible in the distance, Saeja released a sigh of relief. Given the events of the last few days she had almost been anticipating more problems on her run to Whiterun. She didn’t really consider two bold, but scrawny wolves a problem and had dispatched them with ease. Yet as she approached a farmstead near the city walls she suddenly realized she may have been too quick to count this as an uneventful trip. Just a few yards ahead a giant was swinging a nasty looking club towards the head of a woman dressed in full battle gear.

Saeja opened her mouth to warn the woman, but she didn’t need to. The redhead dove out of the club’s path, rolled, and sprang to her feet again. Saeja loaded an arrow in her bow and let fly, aiming for the giant’s eyes. She released arrow after arrow in quick succession, hitting her target every time. A man with long black hair charged towards the giant as it fell to its knees, roaring in pain, her arrows embedded in its eyes. With a quick swing of his war-axe, the man beheaded the giant, diving out of the way as it collapsed, dark black blood gushing from its neck.

Saeja moved up beside it and stared. She’d never seen a giant up close before. Her father had given them a wide berth when they came upon them on their travels. She knew they were generally peaceful unless provoked, or if their precious mammoths were in danger. The redhead was pulling some items out of a purse on the giant’s belt. "Here," she said, tossing a bag of coins towards Saeja, who caught it nimbly. "Nice shooting. Blinding the creature gave us a distinct advantage. I think you deserve that."

The woman stood and looked her over critically before handing back a handful of salvaged arrows. "You handle yourself well. You could make for a decent Shield-Sister"

Saeja looked at the two warriors in front of her. The redhead was tall and graceful looking, but had a certain fierceness in her eyes. The man, another Nord, had a far off, dreamy look in his eyes that almost, but not quite, masked the blood-lust still lurking in their depths.

She cocked her head to the side before naïvely asking, "Shield-Sister? So, you are both members of that mercenary group?"

The redhead literally growled at her like a mad dog and the Nord bellowed in reply. "We are not mercenaries! We have honor! We have standards! We have a history that dates all the way back to Ysgramor."

Saeja bowed her head in apology. "I’m sorry. My father didn’t speak highly of the companions when I was a child. I was trying to understand your perspective."

The redhead only smirked and sheathed her sword as the dark-haired Nord replied. "We are an order of warriors. We are brothers and sisters in honor and we show up to solve problems if the coin is good enough."

Saeja looked at him for a moment, trying to decide if he was being funny or not. He looked dead serious. She only replied. "Of course." but she thought to herself it was strange that he denied being a mercenary, and then literally said he was for hire if the pay was right.

She pulled a rag from her pocket and wiped some of the sweat off her brow. "So, you think I’d make a good addition to the companions? Can I join?" she asked, surprising herself. With every passing moment she seemed to be less likely to make it to Falkreath as she had originally planned. Finally, out in the world, she relished the idea of finding somewhere she could prove herself, and be her own person.
The redhead shook her head and began to walk away, following the man as he began to walk back to the city. "It's not for me to say. You'll have to talk to Kodlak Whitemane up in Jorrvaskr. The old man has got a good sense for people. He can look in your eyes and see your worth. If you go to him, good luck."

"I've got an errand to run at the Palace, but I will come by if I get the chance." Saeja called after them. She returned to the spot she had dropped her pack, hefted it over her shoulder and began to trudge towards the city gates.

As she drew closer a female guard stopped her. "Halt! City's closed with dragons about. Official business only."

Saeja sighed. Her body ached with weariness and she wanted nothing more than to slide into the nearest bed. Bringing news to the Jarl was becoming more time consuming than she had anticipated. "Look," she started, "I have news from Helgen about the dragon attack. Riverwood calls for the Jarl's aid."

The guard stepped back in surprise, "Riverwood's in danger, too? You better go on in. You'll find the Jarl at Dragonsreach, atop the hill."

Saeja used the last of her energy to sprint through the city and up the steps of the imposing palace. She repeated the same story to the guard at the doors, and he pushed them open without any further questions. As she walked up the steps of the great hall towards the throne, she could hear the Jarl arguing with his advisers about sending troops to fortify Riverwood. She watched as his one adviser, a weaselly, timid little man, with an irritatingly nasal voice, argued for caution at being too hasty. She snorted to herself, thinking him a coward. The Jarl was arguing that he needed to do something. As the weasel was about to reply, he was cut off by a sour faced Dunmer woman, who suddenly spotted Saeja and raced towards her, sword drawn menacingly.

"What's the meaning of this interruption? Jarl Balgruuf is not receiving any visitors." Saeja stood her ground and repeated her story for the third time. The Dunmer sheathed her sword and responded wearily, "Well, that explains why the guards let you in. Come on then, the Jarl will want to speak to you personally."

Saeja was lead to the dais where a thin looking man with graying yellow hair lounged in his throne. His beard was also peppered with gray and hid what she imagined was a weak chin. Though he still had definition in his arms and chest, she could see his age and the years away from battle were beginning to show. He eyed her suspiciously and asked, "What's this about Riverwood being in danger?"

She stepped before him and gave a slight bow. "Jarl Balgruuf, it is an honor to meet you, but the news I bring from Riverwood is grave. A dragon destroyed Helgen. Gerdur is afraid Riverwood is next."

The Jarl didn't reply for a few moments, and stroked his beard thoughtfully. Saeja wanted to scream in frustration, but she held her tongue and waited, silently, not wishing to offend the man. The weasel beside him leaned in and jogged the Jarl's memory. "Gerdur, your grace. She owns the mill."

The Jarl's eyes brightened as comprehension dawned. "Ah yes, Gerdur and Hod own the mill. Good man that Hod. His wife is a pillar of the community and not prone to flights of fancy." He turned to gaze at her again. "So, you were at Helgen? We've heard the rumors, but you claim you saw this dragon with your own eyes?"

She nodded in reply. "The Imperials were about to execute Ulfric Stormcloak. Then the dragon
attacked."

The Jarl snorted in disdain, "I should have guessed Ulfric would be mixed up in this."

She continued as though he had not replied. "The dragon destroyed Helgen. Last I saw it was heading this way."

By this point the Jarl was sitting up in his seat, his hands gripping the arm-rests. "By Ysmir, Irileth was right! What do you say now, Proventus? Shall we continue to trust in the strength of our walls? Against a dragon?"

The Dunmer woman stepped closer to the Jarl, but kept her eyes locked on the weasel as she spoke, "My lord, we should send troops to Riverwood at once. It's in the most immediate danger. If that dragon is lurking in the mountains..."

Proventus cut her off. "The Jarl of Falkreath will view that as a provocation! He'll assume we're preparing to join Ulfric's side and attack him! We should not..."

The Jarl bellowed, silencing them both. "Enough! I'll not stand idly by while a dragon burns my hold and slaughters my people! Irileth, send a detachment to Riverwood at once."

Irileth smirked at Proventus and did as the Jarl commanded, walking towards the doors to the barracks barking orders. Proventus huffed and excused himself to return to his duties. Saeja looked at the Jarl in a new light. If he truly cared about his people as much as his display of concern indicated, he couldn’t be that bad.

The Jarl gestured to her to come closer. She walked up the few steps to stand beside the throne. "Well done. You sought me out, on your own initiative." The Jarl beamed at her and took her hand in his. "You've done Whiterun a service, and I won't forget it. Here, take this as a small token of my esteem." He reached to his side, and handed her the small axe that had hung from his belt. It glistened with an enchantment. As she gripped it she yelped and nearly dropped it. The handle was icy to the touch.

The Jarl chuckled, "You'll get used to it and I dare say it will come in handy." He paused and looked at her thoughtfully before continuing. "There is another thing you could do for me. Suitable for someone of your particular talents, perhaps. Come, let's go find Farengar, my court wizard. He's been looking into a matter related to these dragons and the rumors surrounding them." Saeja sighed quietly and turned to follow the Jarl to small room on the side of the dining hall. She spotted a man draped in wizard’s robes standing at a table, looking at a map of Skyrim. He looked up when the Jarl called his name and his eyes, when they fell upon her, were distracted.

"Farengar, I think I've found someone who can help you with your dragon project. Go ahead and fill her in with all the details. She’s come from Helgen.” The Jarl turned and left the room, ascending the stairs to his personal quarters, his use for her apparently complete.

The wizard glanced at her with some interest now. "So, the Jarl thinks you can be of use to me? Yes, I could use someone to fetch something for me. Well, when I say fetch, I really mean delve into a dangerous ruin in search of an ancient stone tablet that may or may not actually be there."

Saeja strained to not roll her eyes. "What does this tablet have to do with the dragon I saw at Helgen?" she asked, desperate to retreat to the inn and sleep.

The wizard looked at her sharply, "Ah, so you are no mere brute mercenary, but a thinker. Perhaps you have the aptitude to even be scholar?" He picked up a pile of yellowed papers, scanning them,
"You see, when the stories of dragons began to circulate, many dismissed them as mere fantasies, rumors. Impossibilities. One sure mark of a fool is to dismiss anything that falls outside his experience as being impossible. But I began to search for information about dragons."

Saeja could tell he would drone on without end if she didn’t stop him. "All right. Where am I going and what am I fetching?" she asked placing her hands on her hips to display her impatience.

The wizard, cut off mid-explanation stammered, "Ah, yes well, straight to the point, eh? No need for tedious how’s and why’s. Leave those details to your betters, am I right?"

"Farengar!" she shouted, now beyond annoyed. The man was a rambler and it annoyed her. She liked conversation as much as the next person, but this was grating on her already exhausted nerves.

"Right. Sorry." The wizard mumbled. "I, ah, learned of a certain stone tablet said to be housed in Bleak Falls Barrow. It’s a Dragonstone, and is said to contain a map of dragon burial sites. Go to Bleak Falls Barrow, find this tablet, which will no doubt be in the main chamber, and bring it to me. Simplicity itself."

She nodded and turned on her heel, striding out of the room towards the palace doors. She practically stormed down the steps of the palace to the Plains District, where the small, but cozy looking Bannered Mare Inn was located. She trudged over to the tired looking innkeeper at the bar and slumped onto a stool. "Please tell me you have a room available to rent."

Before the innkeeper could reply she heard a familiar voice interrupt. "Why don’t you come to Jorrvaskr like we suggested and speak to Kodlak. There are plenty of empty beds that won’t cost you a single septim."

Saeja turned and found herself staring into the silver-grey eyes of the Nord from her encounter with the giant. He was still in full battle gear, but had obviously found a place to bathe. His face and armor were no longer coated in black blood and it looked like someone had taken a comb to his hair. She could still see the shadow of stubble on his chin. He had a faint scar under his left eye that was barely noticeable under his war paint.

"Companion,"

He interrupted her, "The name’s Farkas."

"Fine. Farkas. I am exhausted. I have been up since the break of day, I traveled from Riverwood and just held audience with the Jarl to warn him of a potential dragon attack. I start out tomorrow on a job to find some 'mystic' " she waved her hands mysteriously for emphasis, "stone that apparently will help that rambling court wizard figure out where they are coming from. I want a bath and I want my bed, in that order."

"Our beds are softer than anything here, no offense Hulda," he said, ducking his head in apology. When she shrugged in response, he continued, "Look I know you’re tired, but not everyone would have jumped in to help against a giant. It speaks to your courage and abilities and I would hate it if my yelling chased you away. We could use new blood, despite what my brother Vilkas thinks." He handed her a tiny green bottle filled with a stamina potion. "Drink this, speak to Kodlak and my brother Vilkas, and I will personally see to it you have a private room to bathe and sleep in tonight."

She stared at the tiny bottle. Stamina potions were not cheap, which spoke volumes to the man’s desire to have her speak to their leader. "Fine," she acquiesced, grabbing the bottle and swallowing the bitter liquid. Instantly she felt more alert, as though she had the energy to keep moving for days. "Let’s get this over with."
Saeja has to prove herself to the Companions, and not everyone is as inviting as Farkas. Still she's up to the challenge of her first job.

Farkas is such a sweetheart. Seriously, it's why I marry him pretty much every time I start a new character. I wanted to flesh out his personality a bit though.

She followed Farkas to the hall of the companions, Jorrvaskr, as they called it. If she hadn’t been so annoyed with the man, she would have marveled at the building, which looked like an ancient Nord sailing ship that had been upturned over the walls of the hall, providing its roof. The detailed dragons head carvings that had been added to the ship's bow were as ancient as the ship itself, and a testament to their maker's craftsmanship.

As Farkas opened the door she could hear shouting and flesh hitting flesh. The reason why was quickly revealed, her eyes drawn to two of the companions beating each other viciously. A crowd had surrounded them, and the onlookers were cheering them on. She shook her head and continued in the direction Farkas had pointed her in before he joined the crowd, admitting he wanted to see who would win.

She reluctantly trudged down the steps to the living quarters of the hall and walked towards the two men sitting at a table in what was clearly the harbinger's personal rooms. The younger man, who resembled Farkas quite closely was speaking to the silver haired man in hushed tones. "But I still hear the call of the blood."

The older man frowned in sympathy, "We all do. It is our burden to bear. But we can overcome."

The younger man nodded, clearly unhappy with the conversation. "You have my brother and I, obviously. But I don't know if the rest will go along quite so easily."

She cleared her throat to get their attention. She felt the older man staring at her, his gaze steady, but surprised. He turned back to the younger man and replied. "Leave that to me Vilkas."

He returned his gaze to her and gave her a slight smile. Encouraged, she asked to join their ranks, adding that Farkas had been the one to suggest she come speak to him, convincing her that she would be an asset to the companions.
"Did he now? Here, let me have a look at you?" the man looked her over, his eyes thoughtful. "Hmm. Yes, perhaps. A certain strength of spirit."

Vilkas was also looking her over and apparently didn't like what he saw. "Master, you're not truly considering accepting her?" His disdain for her was visible in his grimace.

Saeja thought about sticking her tongue out at him, but figured it would be considered insolent and probably wouldn’t help her chances. She itched to go one on one against him and take his ego down a peg. She eyed him harshly. He had almost identical features as his brother. That same wiry black hair, though he wore his much shorter, high cheek bones and silver-grey eyes surrounded by black war paint. Unlike Farkas, his mouth seemed to be permanently drawn into a scowl and his frame was leaner and more defined.

Kodlak sighed deeply and gave the younger man a sour look. “I am nobody's master, Vilkas, and last I checked, we had some empty beds in Jorrvaskr for those with a fire burning in hearts.

Vilkas had the good grace to look ashamed of himself. “Apologies Kodlak. But perhaps this isn't the time. I've never even heard of this outsider.”

The older man turned his head to her, grinning and she felt her chest swell. He reminded her of her father, commanding the same presence, and appearing wiser than his years. “Sometimes the famous come to us. Sometimes men and women come to us to seek their fame. It makes no difference. What matters is their heart.”

“And their arm.” Vilkas snorted. The sarcastic reply set her on edge.

Kodlak chuckled. “Of course. How are you in a battle, Skyborn?”

She knew she could lie, and claim greatness, but likely they would make her prove it, and she’d make an ass of herself. She regarded them both for a moment before sighing. “I have formal training, but I have much to learn.”

She heard Vilkas snort again, but Kodlak smiled kindly at her. “That's the spirit!” He gestured to the sulking Nord beside him. “Vilkas here will get started on that. Vilkas, take her out to the yard and see what she can do.”

“Aye” the dark hair Nord replied, rising from his seat and walking past her without even acknowledging her presence, as though he expected her to just follow him.

She rolled her eyes before she could control herself and she heard Kodlak chuckle again. She looked at him and he gave an encouraging nod, before waving her off to follow Vilkas.

By the time she reached the top of the stairs she could see Vilkas stepping out the rear doors of the hall. She sprinted to keep up, still cursing Farkas silently. She could be asleep by now if he hadn’t been so pushy. She dropped her pack and bow beside a pillar in the courtyard and joined him in the training circle.

“Do you even know how to use a sword?” he asked, turning to face her.

“Yes, she replied. “I know how to use one, but I prefer the bow and my daggers.”

He scoffed, and it took every bit of self control she possessed to refrain from deckin him. He reminded her of one of Fjolti’s childhood friends. That boy hadn’t believed she was capable either. She bloodied his nose. She watched Vilkas pick up two swords from the weapons rack and he handed her one of them. She gripped in in her hand and gave it a few swings, testing its weight and
balance. Scrunching her nose in frustration she walked over to the rack, hung the weapon back up and picked up another one. This one fit in her palm comfortably and she noticed that while it was clearly beat up, the balance was correct and the blade sharp. Her skin burned as he scrutinized her, she was certain this was a test. She turned back to him and smirked.

“You may want a blacksmith to look at that blade. It’s so flawed I wouldn’t allow a child to practice with it.”

His face gave away his astonishment before he plastered his scowl back into place. “The old man said to have a look at you, so let's do this. Just have a few swings at me so I can see your form. Don't worry, I can take it.”

Saeja regarded him with patience as they squared off. Vilkas charged at her with a bellow, putting her on the defensive immediately. She stepped back and dodged the first swing, then met his second. The force of his blow forced her to collapse and roll to the side. She jumped to her feet, balancing her weight delicately, never taking her eyes off her opponent. He raced at her again and swung his weapon again, but she dodged it easily.

Take a swing at me whelp!” Vilkas yelled. “You’ve done nothing but show you’re light on your feet.”

Saeja's blood boiled. She was getting really sick of his attitude and decided to put him in his place. The next time he lunged at her, she responded with a proper parry and used her weight to push him off balance. She twirled away from his next thrust and then began to fight back, countering each of his strokes without even breaking a sweat.

He was a fierce opponent, and she admired his strength, but he was going to start making stupid moves if he couldn’t control his temper.

From the corner of her eye she could see a crowd gathering in the courtyard and she could hear other companions yelling advice and encouragement. She never took her focus off Vilkas as he began another barrage of attacks.

She ducked another blow but then felt his quick recovery blow to her side. The wind was knocked out of her, but she used the momentum of her fall to roll to the side and bring a heavy sweep of her own sword towards him. The blow landed on the shoulder piece of his armor and glance off, the tip of her sword scraping his face. She stepped back quickly seeing a thin line of blood begin to bead on his jaw.

Vilkas was breathing hard as he touched the scratch. He lowered his sword and nodded. “There you go! Not bad.” He stared at her thinking he may have underestimated her skill, but refused to lose face. “Next time won't be so easy! You might just make it, but until then, you're still just a whelp to us new blood. You do what we tell you to, when we tell you to.

Saeja nodded in reply and then walked to the weapon rack and hung her sword up. When she turned around he was standing directly behind her. “Here's my sword. Go take it up to Eorlund and have it sharpened. And be careful, it's probably worth more than you are.”

She was about to sass back to the man when Farkas ran up and grabbed her hand in a firm shake. “I knew you’d make it. Might make my brother think twice about mouthing off before he’s seen what someone can do as well. He won’t admit it, but I think you impressed him.”

Saeja snuck a glance the retreating companion. She lifted the sword in her hand and replied sarcastically. “Yeah, so impressed he thinks I’ll break his precious sword.” She turned from him and
began the walk up the stone steps to the Skyforge. Farkas followed behind her silently. She got the impression he wasn’t much of talker but liked the silence.

A beefy man with hair as snow white as her own was sitting at the grindstone at the top of the stairs, putting a razor-sharp edge on a steel dagger. He was bare to the waist, clad only in the bottom half of his hide armor which gave her a good view of his muscles. This man was a beast, larger than any other Nord she had ever met. His hair placed him in his early sixties, but she would imagine he could still spar with a man half his age.

She greeted Eorlund and handed him Vilkas’s sword. He stared at her face for a long time before speaking. “You’re Geirolf’s daughter, aren’t you?” Saeja looked at him sharply, then nodded. “Don’t look so shocked girl. You look like him and he spoke fondly of his daughter when he came to town to sell his ore. Good man. I was sorry to hear about his accident.” He took the sword from her and turned back to the forge.

“A word of advice girl. Stand up for yourself. Vilkas may say you need to obey the Circle without question, but don’t jump at his every command. They were all whelps once. They just might not like to talk about it. And don’t always just do what you’re told. Around here, you’ll want to live your own life. Remember, nobody rules anybody in the Companions.”

“Thank you. I will keep that in mind.”

She began to walk away when the smith called her name again. “I have a favor to ask girl. I’ve been working on a shield for Aela. My wife is in mourning and I need to get back to her soon. I’d be much obliged if you could take this to Aela for me.

She laughed in reply. “Didn't you just tell me not to be a servant?

He scowled at her, but his eyes glinted with amusement. “This isn't a command, just decency. Help an old blacksmith out. I've got to get back to my wife.”

She nodded, taking the shield and began to walk back down to the courtyard. She stopped to grab her pack and weapons and turned to look at Farkas, who still had not uttered a word since his congratulations after her fight. “Alright, I did what you asked, I made the cut. If you will show me who Aela is, I want to deliver this to her and then go to bed. Can you show me this private room I get tonight so I can bathe and then pass out?”

Farkas took a moment to reply, “You’ve already met Aela. She was the one with me fighting that giant. She’ll be in the room on the left of the living quarters. I can’t be sure which one though. She either be in her own room, or in Skjors and their rooms are across from each other in that alcove. My brother and I have the rooms in the alcove on the right side.” He continued walking towards the hall. ”I will sleep with the whelps tonight. You can have my room since the other beds are in the shared room across from the entrance.

Saeja stopped following him and stared at his back. When he realized she wasn’t beside him anymore, he whirled around. “You gave up your bed to get me to join the companions, after I had insulted you? What person does something like that?” she asked him.

“A nice person.” He responded, then continued into the hall. She followed mutely behind him. “You just looked like you might need a place to stay. Like I said before, I only know a few people who would willing to take on a giant, even with us there. That kind of courage is something we could use in the companions.”

They walked in silence to Aela’s room and she could hear hushed whispers. As she stepped into the
door she realized the occupants were laughing about her match with Vilkas. Saeja handed the shield
to Aela, who smiled and congratulated her on the sound thrashing she gave Vilkas. The man with
her was Skjor and he was intimidating. He was powerfully built and had a scar crossing one white
eye where he must have been blinded years ago. He regarded the two women with his remaining
green eye before advising them not to mention it around Vilkas if they wished to live. Aela laughed
and asked Saeja if she thought she could take Vilkas in a real fight.

“I don’t care for boasting.” Saeja replied with a yawn.

“A woman who lets her actions speak for themselves. I’m going to like you.” She called to Farkas
who hung back in the doorway. “Hey Ice-brain. Show this new blood where the rest of the whelps
sleep.”

“She’s staying in my room tonight.” He replied.

Saeja blushed crimson as Aela and Skjor sent her matching leering smiles. “Why Farkas, I didn’t
know you had it in you to seduce a girl so fast.” Skjor laughed.

Saeja started to stammer, and Farkas protested quickly. “No, it’s not like that. I’m staying in the
whelps room. She won the bet. I promised she could have her own room tonight and some privacy if
she made it into the Companions.”

The two circle members continued to laugh as Saeja pushed her way past Farkas and stormed across
the hall. She would have slammed the door to her room, but they were both closed. She didn’t know
which one belonged to Farkas and would hate to storm in on Vilkas by mistake.

Farkas tapped her shoulder and raised his hands in an apology when she whirled on him. “Skjor and
Aela like to tease, but they’re good people. They challenge us to be our best. After tonight you can
join the rest of the new-bloods in the quarters over there. Just pick a bed and fall in it when you’re
tired. Tilma will keep the place clean; she always has.” He opened the door on their left and pushed
her inside. “Sorry for the mess. I’ve asked Tilma to bring you some hot water and a tub, so you can
bathe. The bedsheets were changed this morning.”

He chucked her under the chin gently. “Come see me in the morning and I’ll see if we can get you
your first assignment. Good luck. Welcome to the Companions.” Having apparently run through his
entire litany of words for the day he turned and walked down the hall and retreated upstairs.

Saeja sighed and tried to calm down. She should have known Aela and Skjor didn’t mean anything
by their teasing. She was just embarrassed by the idea of jumping from one man’s bed to another, but
now she felt as though she overreacted. They couldn’t possibly have known about her morning. A
light knocking alerted her to Tilma’s arrival with the bathing supplies. The older woman had two
younger servants bring in the tub and fill it with hot water. She handed Saeja a hide towel and a bar
of soap which faintly smelled like lavender and snowberries.

“Just because you live with all these brutes doesn’t mean you have to smell like one, the old woman
tesed as she left, closing the door to ensure Saeja’s privacy.

Saeja stored her pack by the bed and slid out of her armor. She pulled off her linen undershirt and
placed it on the wall of the tub to wash out after she was done. She could hang it to dry overnight so
it would be fresh for her travels tomorrow. Saeja sighed as she stepped into the small wooden tub as
the warm water began to ease away her aches and pains. She lay back in the tub for a few moments,
letting the heat sink into her bones and wash away her worries. Her thoughts drifted to Ralof and
their morning escapades. Her only female companion growing up had married when she was
seventeen and had complained of the pain she had felt for days after her marriage was consummated.
Saeja certainly felt different, but the ache was minimal as she began to cleanse herself beneath the water. She was delighted by Tilma’s thoughtfulness and began to soap her body, thoroughly scrubbing away the day’s dirt and grime from her skin. She lingered in the water as long as possible, knowing it may be her last real bath for a while, then forced herself from the cooling water, standing to reach for her towel.

“Brother, I have a bone to pick with you. What were you thinking bringing that woman here to join us?” The door slammed open as Vilkas barged through it, anger written all over his face. He was so angry it took a moment to realize Farkas was not in the room and he was staring at the very angry, very naked, recruit in question.

Saeja shrieked and lost her balance trying to cover herself with the hide towel. She landed on the side of the tub and it tipped over, spilling its contents and her to the floor in a wet heap. She flopped around like a horker for a second, trying to stay covered, but get off the floor at the same time. "Divines curse you Vilkas. You oaf! Get out of here you beast!” She screeched. When she realized he still hadn't looked away, she threw the bar of soap at him.

The man stammered, backed out of the room, and slammed the door. Finally, able to regain her footing she grabbed her towel, hastily dried off and pulled on her linens. She threw on her armor, snatched up the axe she had received from Balgruuf and stormed into the hallway.

"Where is he?" She yelled at the first person she saw stumbling around. The drunk man looked bewildered as he stammered he had no idea what she was talking about.

Farkas appeared in the doorway of the whelp room clad only in his small clothes. "Saeja, what's wrong?" He could smell the anger radiating from her.

"What's wrong? Your brother is an inconsiderate, bumbling meat-head, that is what's wrong." She barked. "He barged into your room while I was bathing, scared me so badly I fell out of the tub spilling water all over the floor. Then he didn't even have common decency to turn his gaze as I tried to cover myself. He has the manners of a Falmer. I’ve encountered farm animals who could control themselves better than he did."

She was livid, her heart pounded furiously, and her face was turning red and blotchy. "I didn't come here to be insulted at every turn. When he barged into the room he was bellowing at you for inviting me to join. I will not stay here if I am to be treated with so little respect.”

She marched up to Farkas, planted herself firmly with one hand on her hip and she began to thrust her fingers against his chest after every sentence to make her points that much clearer.

"I get that I am the newest member here. I can accept I have to prove my worth. I will do my best to make sure I am not an embarrassment to you for recommending me. But I refuse to be treated as though I was some milk-drinking merchant's wife!" she bellowed, poking him one last time for good measure.

She turned on her heel, stormed back into the room and slammed the door. Farkas just stared at the spot she had been with his jaw hanging open. Nobody, not even Aela, would dare to speak to him like that. Several the new recruits had crowded their door when the yelling started, and they were all stunned by the fury they had heard in her voice. Skjor and Aela were snickering down the hall.

"That little bit of a thing..." Aela sniggered.

"She couldn't be even six feet tall..." Skjor chortled.
“Did you see her rip his head off like that? Where does she even get the stones to even...” She suddenly stopped when she heard Farkas snarl at her.

The drunk leaned against Farkas, the only one oblivious to his growing ire. "What a woman. She'll give us all a run for our money. I like 'em fierce."

"Shut up Torvar. Don't you go chasing her off." Farkas muttered viciously.

"Ha, as if. If she hasn't packed her bags by now because of your brother, she ain't going nowhere." the drunk hiccuped, then pushed past the other recruits to his bed.

Farkas climbed the steps to the dining hall and saw Vilkas sitting in a dark corner, slamming back a bottle of Honningbrew mead. He didn't even try to muffle his steps, he just stormed over, wound up and punched his brother in the face. "What in Oblivion did you do?" Farkas yelled, shaking with anger.

Vilkas pick himself of the floor, rubbing his jaw. "How was I to know she was in your room brother? She's a whelp, she should be sleeping in the whelp's room."

"Horse-shit Vilkas. My room reeks of lavender and other feminine smells. I could smell it from down the hall. There is no way you could have known it was her in there." he said, waving his hands for emphasis.

"I was angry, and had already finished off two other bottles of mead. My senses were not as they should have been." Vilkas muttered. "I'm sorry for my behavior Farkas, but when have I ever knocked on your door before entering?"

Farkas's rage was reduced to a low boil at his brother's explanation. “I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. I promised her privacy and she claims you walked in on her when she was naked. She is livid. If you didn't hear her downstairs, then your ears must be full of tundra cotton. She tore a strip off my hide.” He crossed his arms and looked at his brother who was flushing with embarrassment. Vilkas was rarely called out on his thoughtlessness, so Farkas was enjoying his discomfort. “What's your problem with her anyways? She is a good fighter. She's strong and brave. She smells like sunshine and sweet rolls, and that was even before she had her bath.” His eyes clouded with that fair off dreamy look again as he recalled how amazing she had smelled even as she was screaming at him.

"She smelled of sex and inexperience." Vilkas spat back. "Get her out of your mind brother. She had the scent of another man all over her this evening.” He didn't want to see his brother suffer a broken heart and hoped to drive the girl off sooner than later before the attachment deepened. “You've never asked another to join the companions before. Why her?"

"She charged right in when she came across us and the giant at Pelagius farm. Most men would cower in fear, and she jumped right into the fray. She blinded the creature and didn't miss a single mark. She has a courage I haven't seen in a woman since I met Aela."

"Ha, we both know how that turned out. You followed Aela around for months like a royal lapdog and then tore apart that cave of bandits single handedly when she turned you down to bed Skjor." Vilkas reminded him.

"Oh, shut up." Farkas protested, smacking his brother in the arm. "So, at best I find a mate with courage, who isn't afraid of me like the rest of the women in Whiterun, and at worst, I'm take on more jobs than normal."
Vilkas sighed, seeing it for the lost cause that it was. "Fine. I'll apologize in the morning. I hadn't meant to invade her privacy like that." He sat back in his chair and chugged the remaining mead from his bottle. "Be careful brother. We know nothing of this stranger. We don't need any trouble right now."

Saeja paced the room frantically once Tilma had been fetched to clean up the water. She had also provided Saeja with a sleep shirt when asked, so she didn't have to wear her armor all night. There was no way she would be disrobing in Jorrvaskr ever again. Finally, she managed to wear off her nervous energy and she guessed the stamina potion had finally worn off. As she climbed under the sheets of Farkas's bed she thought seriously about returning to her plan to travel to Falkreath once she had obtained the Dragonstone for the Jarl. She had been teased before, and had dealt with men who questioned her worth since she was a child. She didn't know why Vilkas affected her so, but now every time she thought of him her skin prickled with fury.

She tried to banish him from her mind, thinking of Ralof instead, and how he fared. She wondered if he would make it to Windhelm, or if he would be caught by Imperials. It was a three-day journey at least from Riverwood to Windhelm and so much could go wrong. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on her memories of his kisses as she fell asleep, but for some reason she could only see silver grey eyes and war paint as she drifted into dreamland.

Despite the events of last night keeping her from a restful sleep Saeja’s eyes opened at the break of dawn out of sheer habit. Her vertebrae popped and cracked as she stretched the sleep from her limbs and crawled out of bed. She reached for her linen undershirt, which Tilma had returned to her, damp, but clean, last night while the young serving girls had helped her clean up the spilt water. She had impressed the old serving woman, when she had got on her hands and knees and helped clean up the mess. Saeja had gotten the impression Tilma was more like a surrogate grandmother to this rambunctious group of warriors when Tilma had huffed and puffed and declared Vilkas should be here cleaning up this mess he caused instead of hiding like a puppy with his tail between his legs, drinking himself to Oblivion.

She shivered in the cold morning air as she got dressed in her armor. Packing her gear again she checked her food supplies and tucked her coin purse into a special pocket in her hide leggings. She walked into the hallway and grinned at the sound of multiple bodies snoring, the loudest coming from the room across from her. She sighed in disgust but felt grateful she didn’t have to interact with that lout again this early in the morning.

As she entered the dining hall she saw that Tilma was already placing loaves of fresh bread and fruits on the table. She smiled when she saw Saeja approach the table. “I’m surprised you’re awake this morning my dear. I figured after all the events of last night and tearing a strip off Farkas’s hide the way you did, you would sleep the day away.”

Saeja ducked her head a bit in embarrassment. “I’m sure Farkas wants me out his room as quick as possible after last night. I feel awful that I yelled at him when it was Vilkas I was so upset with. I’m going apologize if I see him before I head out.”

Tilma frowned, “Don’t tell me you’re quitting already girl? Vilkas is hot tempered and hates change, I’ll admit that, but those boys are real sweet deep down and loyal to a fault. I’m sure if you give him a chance he’ll come around.”

Saeja thought affection might be clouding the old woman’s judgement when it came to Vilkas but
smiled in assurance anyways. “Oh, I’m not quitting. I’ve a mission from the Jarl to complete in Riverwood. I’ll probably be gone a few days at most. There is some relic in Bleak Falls Barrow the wizard thinks may give him some insight into the dragons and since I’ve escaped one they're sending me.”

Tilma gestured to one of the younger girls to bring over a bowl of hot grains with fresh cream and snowberries. She placed it in front of Saeja, “A dragon dear. That must have been terribly frightening. We’ve heard the rumors from Helgen, but I didn’t put much stock in legends. Eat this then if you’re off this morning. A good porridge will stick to you and keep your energy up.”

Saeja obediently lifted a spoonful to her lips and then murmured her appreciation as the sweet, creamy flavors exploded on her tongue. Tilma left to continue getting breakfast ready leaving Saeja to enjoy the hot meal. She poured herself a tankard of fruit juice from a pitcher on table and served herself a few slices of steaming bread, smearing on fresh goat cheese and apple slices.

“That looks like it would taste good. I’ll have to try it myself” rumbled a familiar voice.

Saeja jumped in surprise and then turned to see Farkas easing himself into the chair beside her. She silently watched him prepare a few slices of bread with the same toppings and take a bite. “Hey this is good.” he murmured as he chewed. He looked at her and grinned. “You must have used all your words up last night huh?”

Saeja blushed. “I’m sorry Farkas, you didn’t deserve that last night. I was just so angry. It was Vilkas that I was upset with, but I was tired and cranky and when I saw you all I could think is I could have been sleeping hours ago at the inn, but instead I had some jumped up, bird-brained oaf barging in on me when I was coming out of the tub. Those hide towels don’t cover much.”

Farkas swallowed hard as his mind conjured an image of the woman beside him climbing out of the wooden tub, dripping with water and then patting it off her pert breasts and thighs as he lay on his bed watching her. When his imagination had her join him and his tongue began to lick stray water droplets off her stomach he had to give himself a shake and focus on things like skeevers and bears to keep his arousal from becoming apparent.

“Oh, it’s not an issue.” He mumbled. “Fact is it probably helped prove your worth. Not many people would be brave enough to yell at me, let alone hit me in the chest. Not if they wanted to remain conscious.”

“I didn't hit you, I poked you. Besides, you don’t scare me Farkas.” She replied confidently, taking a bite of her meal, delighting in the tart taste of the cheese and sweetness of the apple. She didn't notice the dumbstruck smile now plastered to his face and the affection in his eyes as he stared at her.

“So what made you join the companions Farkas? What made you want to stay here?” she asked a few moments later.

“Oh, Vilkas and I have been here since we were little whelps. Our father, Jergen, raised us here. Even Vignar can't remember Companions younger than us.” he laughed, “As for staying, well I never thought of going anywhere else. Skjor says I have the strength of Ysgramor, and my brother has his smarts. I’ve never been a smart one, but the companions welcome anyone with the heart of a warrior. Since I grew up here, the companions are my family.”

“Is it just the family aspect?” she inquired.

“Well no, not only. I like helping people. We fight so that other people don't have to. Every villager I help by killing bandits and lawbreakers makes this life worth it.” he replied.
“That’s really sweet Farkas. Still, don’t sell yourself short. I disagree with Skjor. I’d rather deal with you any day.” she replied, flashing him a smile.

She returned to her food, relishing every bite. Farkas watched her eat, hypnotized by her mouth as she licked her fingers clean.

“So, any chance you figured out my first assignment?” she asked, wiping the remnants of cheese from her lips.

Farkas jumped, startled out of his daydream about kissing those lips and feeling them pressed against his skin. “What? Oh, sorry.” he struggled to get his thoughts in order. She was smiling at him and it made it hard to think. “Uh, yeah. I figured since you’re going to Riverwood anyways, we got a job. Word is a citizen there has been causing trouble. I need you to go out there, look tough and scare that milk-drinker into submission. I don't wanna hear a word about killing anyone.”

“You got a name for this guy?”

“Yeah, Sven the Bard. Pretty much lives at the inn, but he’s rumored to be chasing after a local merchant girl and sniffing around where he isn't welcome.”

“I doubt that.” she scoffed as she stood and walked over to the bench she left her gear on. She put a few apples, a wedge of cheese and a small loaf of bread in her pack and tied it tightly.

“What do you mean by that?” Farkas asked, looking confused.

“I’m just saying I've met the merchant girl in question and if Sven is sniffing around her skirts, she’s more than welcoming it. I’ll go look tough, but I bet it’s her brother who hired us because he’s tired of her taking off from work to go flirt with the bard.”

Farkas watched as she prepared to leave and then followed her out the doors. “Leaving already?” When she nodded he grabbed her arm to slow her down, “Look I talked to Vilkas. I know he plans to apologize to you. You should stick around.”

She sneered in reply. “No, that’s the last thing I should do. He can apologize until he’s blue in the face Farkas. I’m not ready to hear it from him, especially when I know he doesn't want to apologize to me, you’re putting him up to it.”

When he started to protest she snapped at him. “Save it Farkas! He can apologize once he sees he was wrong about me and I impress him with my deeds, or when I kick his butt to Oblivion and he can't pretend he’s better than me anymore” She stormed off, ignoring his calls for her to wait.
Completing Her First Quests

Chapter Summary

Saeja has two quests to complete and this is her first real chance to prove herself to the Jarl, the Companions and to herself. How will she deal with a request to scare Sven when she knows Camilla is enamored? Will she be strong enough to complete Bleak Falls Barrow? What was that strange chanting? Find out in this chapter of The Dragonborn’s Journey.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Again, I dont own any of the original characters. I try to stick to much of the original dialogue, but obviously have to add to get the story across.

The sun was barely in the sky and the city guards glared at her when she asked to pass, but they hurried when she mentioned she could report them to the Jarl for impeding official business. As she traveled the road back to Riverwood she spent a good deal of time collecting flowers and ingredients. Years of her mother pointing out useful plants for healing, disease resistance and pain relief had her stuffing her pockets with posies, thistles, mushrooms and berries as she traveled, singing old folk songs her grandmother used to sing to them as babies.

It was midday by the time she could see the towers of the barrow in the distance. She quickened her steps until the entrance to the village was visible. When she arrived, she went headed back to the black smith and stocked up on more arrows, knowing she may need them in the barrow, then she headed to the inn, looking for Sven. She wanted to observe for a few hours before deciding it was worth it speaking to Camilla about how she felt.

Luck was in her favor. Camilla was sitting by the fire completely enraptured by the young bard. It was clear as day the girl wanted him. Her green eyes followed his every movement and she sighed every time he glanced her way. When he began to sing about lost lovers in ancient times, Saeja had to roll her eyes because the pair never took their eyes off each other. She was about to go give Lucan a piece of her mind for being so obstinate about his sister and her affections when she caught sight of a scowling Bosmer slumped in a shadowed corner, staring icily at the bard. There it is, she thought to herself. This wasn’t an overprotective brother. This was a love triangle. She sighed. She couldn't really pass judgement on the girl for being popular, but she hoped Camilla wasn't one of those women who played two men off each other to feel pretty.

Saeja spent the next few hours watching Camilla. At one point the Bosmer approached the merchant girl and asked her to dance. She laughingly excepted and they completed a spirited reel around the hearth. Camilla was laughing, but Saeja didn't like how the Bosmer never took his malicious eyes off the bard. If he was really interested in obtaining the girls’ affections he should have at least met her eyes as they danced. When the villagers finally began to leave the inn, retreating to their homes for
the night Saeja sighed and realized she would have to figure out something to both complete her task from Farkas, but also make sure that Camilla was warned of the possessiveness the elf felt for her.

She made her way to Gerdur and Hod’s place. They welcomed her with smiles and hugs and thanked her for meeting with the Jarl. Guards had been dispatched and arrived yesterday and already the villagers had relaxed and felt safer in their homes. Gerdur had warned that a small company of imperial legionnaires had passed through town on their way to Helgen, but she hadn't heard any rumors about escaping prisoners who looked like Saeja or Ralof.

“Have you heard from him?” Saeja asked hopefully, still wondering if he would make it safely to Windhelm.

Gerdur shook her head. “No, but I don't expect anything for a while. Once he arrives he will be swept up to give his statement to the court advisers and war generals. They may even want him undercover if he is a wanted man and he wouldn't be permitted to send word.” Gerdu’s heart went out to the girl, who looked utterly dejected at that prospect. “I’m sure he is fine. My brother is a resourceful man. It will take more than official orders to keep him from letting you know he is safe.” Saeja smiled and then excused herself to bed. She was as asleep as soon as her head touched her pillow, but her dreams were anything but peaceful.

The feeling of being engulfed in fire woke her up before dawn. She cried as she dashed at flames that were not there, as the echoes of broken shouts rang in her ears. This was the second time she dreamed of fire and wings chasing her all through Skyrim and she didn't understand it. She wondered if the other survivors of Helgen had these nightmares as well.

She dressed quickly and crept up the steps. Hod was awake this time and he offered her some hot stew and then handed her a package of meat pies and apples. As she was about to leave he handed her a lined leather cloak. “It’s colder up there. You may need this.” She thanked him gratefully before she left to start her climb to the barrow.

She was expecting the bandits. Three were guarding the entrance to the ancient tomb, but the cold air had made them grumpy and careless. They wanted to be back by the fires inside, and it made them easy targets. She was able to pick them off with her bow one by one, without alerting anyone inside. She dragged each bandit to the doors of the barrow, to keep them out of sight. She relieved the bodies of their gold and lockpicks and grabbed all their arrows. She would return and collect remaining weapons to trade in town when she was finished. If she finish, she thought to herself as she crept inside. The next two bandits were a bit harder handle. She managed to down one with her arrows but the other one charged at her, sword drawn and got too close to make her bow effective. She threw down her weapon and grabbed the war axe at her side, barely blocking the downward swing of the bandit. She crouched low and used her weight to bring the woman to the ground, grappling with her until she managed to grab her dagger with her free hand and plunge it into the bandit’s chest. She rolled off the corpse, panting with the effort and lay there momentarily as the reality of her kill set in. She had just fought and won against her first opponent on her own, and won.

She rolled over to her knees, forcing herself to stand. Her arms hang heavy at her sides and her knees were weak. She needed a moment to compose herself. Spying a nearby chest she decided it would give her a chance to regain her energy before proceeding. She used one of her precious picks to get the chest opened and was rewarded with a healing potion, two stamina potions, some lockpicks and a handful of septims. She searched the bodies and added their coin purses to hers, and took their daggers and arrows. Grabbing an open bottle of wine by the fire she took a long drink, nibbled some cheese. Deciding she was sufficiently rested she stood and resumed her search for the inner
The barrow was a tricky maze and it took her a full day to find the bandit Lucan said took the claw. She had been lucky that another bandit had alerted her to an ancient Nord puzzle when he pulled a lever, setting off a trap and wound up as a pin-cushion for a hundred arrows. It took the afternoon to figure that puzzle out, but she had finally succeeded. She approached the next chamber cautiously, alerted to the danger by the frostbite spider cobwebs that covered the walls when she had heard yelling. Peering between the strands she saw the source of the cries. A Dunmer elf had become entangled in a web that covered the other exit. She could see the claw hanging from his belt and was trying to decide the best way to get it from him when he must have noticed her, because he began to beg her for help. She stepped into the chamber, thinking she could cut him down when he suddenly screamed. “Watch out!”

She managed to dodge the giant spider that suddenly descended on her. She rolled to the side and grabbed her axe, swinging it with all her might into one of its larger eyes. Frost sprang from her axe and the creature’s eye burst, but the cold didn’t seem to have any effect. She cursed herself for her foolishness and flew backwards away from its fangs. It was a FROSTbite spider. The cold wouldn’t have any effect on it.

Taking a chance, she waited until it fired its poisonous blast at her to dodge the goo and roll underneath the creature. She stabbed her daggers into its thorax and ripped them through the underbelly of the spider, disemboweling it. The noise it made could only be described as a screech and it began to convulse. As she emerged from the tail end of it, it caught her forearm with one of its claws as shuddered its last, defiant retaliation before it lay still.

Saeja swore as the claw sliced her arm to the bone. She ripped open her pack with her good arm, grabbing a healing potion. Using her teeth to pull out the stopper she poured some directly into the wound and drank the rest when she the muscle begin to knit itself back together and her blood stopped dripping to the ground. The Dunmer kept screaming at her but she ignored him, hissing through clenched teeth for him to shut up and give her a second. Once her arm was mended she gathered her weapons and strode over to him.

“You did it. You killed it. Now cut me down before anything else shows up. He whined, staring at her with cold eyes.

“Give me the golden claw.” she replied, leaning back on her heels.

The elf gave her a blank look. “What are you talking about? What claw?

Saeja smirked and brought the edge of her dagger to his throat. “Wrong answer thief.”

“No, no, no!! Let’s not be too hasty.” The Mer cried, “Yes, the claw. I know how it works. The claw, the markings, the door in the Hall of Stories. I know how they all fit together! Help me down, and I’ll show you. You won’t believe the power the Nords have hidden there.”

She sighed and used her daggers to slice away the sticky cobwebs. As he slowly descended back to the floor of the tomb he sucker-punched her in the face and bolted, screaming he wasn’t about to share the treasure with her.

“You son of a skeever.” she yelled after him and gave chase. She was only steps behind him when he entered another room, and she thought she had him for sure when she suddenly felt she had to pause. A loud cracking sound echoed in the chamber and two shriveled draugr burst from their crypts and began attacking the elf. A third one ran down a wooden ramp leading to an upper floor of the chamber. The thief managed to kill all three but was heavily wounded. “Help me.” he begged.
“I’m not that nice a second time.” she replied, loading her bow and ending his misery. She
rummaged through his pack and took a journal and his coins and potions. He also had 2 small shiny
purple gems that pulsed in her hands as if they were breathing. She grabbed the claw and continued.

By the time Saeja reached the Nordic puzzle door she was down to her last 3 healing potions, was
cursing the wizard to Oblivion and was praying the Divines would send him some nasty little
surprise. Gods she hated draugr. Her neck ached from when one had blasted her into a wall with its
shout and her arm still hurt from the spider. Even though the skin had mended anything that deep
required a few days rest to really heal properly. She read over Arvel’s notes again and briefly
debated camping overnight in the hall of stories. Everything behind her was dead, and everything in
front of her was trapped behind a locked door.

Finally, she shook her head and began to move the rings on door to match the symbols on the claw.
She was tired, but if she slept she could leave herself open to other daring bandits looking for
treasure. As the door clicked the wall began to descend revealing an underground cavern with stone
carving and a platform in the distance. She stepped across the threshold and moved as silently as she
could into the cave, eyes searching for any movement. She crossed a bridge over an underground
river and she could see a huge carved wall at the end of the chamber, with strange runes and the face
of a dragon carved into it. She could hear a low chanting hum and a blue light glowed from the
ancient runes. She was entranced immediately and felt herself stepping closer to it to place her hand
on the stone. Suddenly all she could see were streaks of blue light and the chanting intensified,
growing louder. The bolt of blue light shot from the wall into her hand, journeying through her
whole body, and she choked back a sob, her bones crackling with energy. A blinding pain in her
head caused her to fall to her knees, but just as suddenly as it assailed her, the pain disappeared
leaving her mind sharp and focused, with one word, FUS, echoing in the back of her head. All her
aches melted away and even the bruising on her arm vanished.

As she turned to walk to the raised platform, she heard a familiar cracking sound as the lid of the
sarcophagus resting on it flew open. A heavily armored draugr crawled out and with a snarl rushed at
her.

She shot arrow after arrow at it, but the creature didn’t even slow. She ran for her life, crossing back
over the bridge trying to think where she could hide from it when she noticed a small natural ledge
on the side of the cavern wall. She raced towards it and jumped. She clung to the ledge and heaved
herself on top of it. Scrambling to her feet she could see the creature staring at her. It growled and
waved its war axe at her but didn’t seem to be able to comprehend a way to reach her. Taking the
last of her arrows from their quiver she shot it over and over until it had slumped to its knees, still
snarling at her. When it opened its mouth to shout at her she ducked the blast, just barely, and called
forth the energy to blast flames from both her palms directly at the creature. It tried to run but the
flames turned its dried flesh to ash and it faltered, snarling until it no longer moved.

Saeja waited a few moments before dropping down from the ledge. She approached the burning
corpse and saw an odd shaped stone sticking out of its armor. She grabbed the stone knowing it must
be the artifact she was looking for. She also took the creatures weapon and a few coins it had in its
armor. Walking back to the stone platform she palmed a few vials of liquid from the table beside the
sarcophagus and then tried the lid on the large chest there as well. Gasping she removed an Elven
shield, a few small amethysts, a large bag of coins, which she promptly counted, and an ancient
looking book that contained a spell to generate wards. Her pack was almost full, but she managed to
rearrange her spoils and stuff it all inside. She stood, determined to leave the tomb and spend the
night in a real bed. She was about to start back through the crypt when she felt a draft sweep by her.

Glancing the direction it came from she noticed stone steps leading to a small tunnel. At the top of
the steps she found a lever on the wall. When she turned it she heard a soft click, followed by a
grinding sound and another hidden passage was revealed as a section of the wall sank into the floor. She followed the tunnel, coming to a ledge, which dropped down into a small alcove where another chest was sitting against the wall. She pocketed the gold, a silver necklace and the healing potion inside and then stepped through the mouth of the cave into the moonlight. Below she could see the torch lights of Riverwood, so she slowly made her way down the rocky ledge until she found the path to the village again.

When she arrived at Gerdur’s, they hurried her inside and stuffed her full of fresh food and ale, celebrating the success of her first adventure. This time when she fell asleep she was too exhausted to dream.

The next morning, she headed back to Alvor the smith and bartered with him until he finally gave her a decent price for all the weapons and armor she had carried down the mountain. She thought he was going to cheap out until she saw the excitement in his eyes as he viewed the Elven shield and she knew she found her bargaining chip. They settled on 500 septims and he sharpened her weapons for her. She stocked up on her supply of arrows and splurged on a matching pair of Elven daggers.

She decided to check in on Sven before returning to the Riverwood Trader, but the Bosmer from the night before caught her eye. She asked Alvor who he was.

"Faendal. He works at the mill sometimes. Other times he's off hunting and sells his kills to the inn for coin. He's been sweet on Camilla for months now, so he tries to stick closer to town."

"And how does Camilla feel about him?"

"She would flirt with a skeever if it paid her a compliment." Alvor snorted. "But she gets along with the mer. I don’t like him myself. Seems more like he's interested because Sven is."

An idea formed in her head. She raced back to Gerdur’s and shrugged off her linen undershirt. Without it her hide armor revealed a healthy portion of her cleavage. Slipping on the silver necklace she had found she adjusted it so it the pendant rested right in the valley of her breasts. She pinched her cheeks to bring some color to her face and bit her lips until they were red and swollen. She stepped out and began to search for the elf. When she found him, he was chopping wood under the watchful eye of Hod.

"Excuse me." she called to the elf, trying to sound as breathy as she could. "Excuse me, the smith told me you might be willing to give me a short archery lesson. You see, I can handle a dagger, but I am just rotten with a bow." she pouted.

Faendal looked up with an annoyed expression, which melted into an appreciative leer when he saw her. "Of course, my dear. Anything for a lovely adventurer such as yourself. I'll even halve the fee for you. 100 gold coins and I’m all yours." he replied, giving an exaggerated bow.

Oh boy, what a sleaze she thought as she collected the gold from her pouch. For a half hour she pretended to be a terrible archer, missing target after target on purpose. She flirted and simpered and found every excuse to touch his arms, commenting on his strength. When she finally hit the target, she jumped with glee and cried out. "Yay, thank you! I think I'm getting it now."

"I could spare more time giving you private lessons," he suggested.

She disguised her gag as a bashful gasp. "I don’t know Faendal. I wouldn’t want to step on any toes. I saw you dancing the other night with that pretty merchant girl Camilla."

He scowled. "I adore that woman, but she spends most her time with that ridiculous bard. He thinks
his ballads and sonnets are going to convince Camilla to marry him. As if such an intelligent and beautiful woman as she would say yes. She wouldn’t fall for that nonsense."

Saeja couldn’t stop her sarcastic reply, playing it off like jealousy. "You're right. When have words ever inspired feelings of romance?"

"I've been thinking of a plan to make Camilla see him for what he really is. Could you deliver this letter to her, I think I matched his lack of cleverness perfectly." he asked, handing her a piece of paper.

Saeja nodded and ended the lesson, telling him she would return once she had delivered it. Once she was sure he was occupied chopping wood again she raced to the inn and approached the bard.

"What can I do for you?" he asked once she stood in front of him. Silently she handed him the letter watching his expression as he read. "That skeever pile! Does he really think he can get away with this? I'm going to find that bastard and beat him senseless."

"I have a better idea." she replied, taking his arm and leading him to a chair. Sitting beside him she explained. "I am part of the companions and I was hired to come here and intimidate you to leave Camilla alone. I’ve met Lucan before and figured he was being an overprotective brother, but I saw the way Faendal glares at you and then he pulls this trick. I think he's the one who hired us to warn you off, leaving him open to woo Camilla."

"How does all this help me? I mean obviously, you want to help me, or you wouldn't be telling me this." Sven replied, dragging his fingers through his messy blonde locks in frustration.

"Well, I'm new to the companions, so when they say jump I have to ask how high. If I go back without completing this job, I might not ever live it down, so I'm sorry, but I have to rough you up." Sven jumped to his feet and raised his fists." I'd like to see you try."

She grabbed his arm before he could react, pulling him back down into his chair. "Calm down lover boy and let me finish." She let him go and smirked as he rubbed his arm when she had gripped him. "I'm going to go give this letter to Camilla and tell her what Faendal is up to. That girl is smart. She will never want to have anything to do with him again, but I am going to tell him it worked, and that Camilla was so furious she asked me to rough you up for her. We're going to stage a beating. I'm going to have to hit you pretty good to make it convincing. " Sven started to protest but she cut him off. "Listen, being injured gives you an excuse to have Camilla fawn over you and nurse you back to health. Once we've done this I'll get Camilla to happen upon me telling Faendal about her being done with you and having me rough you up. She can pretend she just happened to figure it out when she followed me to thank me for my services. You get the girl and he leaves you both alone for good."

"I still don’t see why I have to be beat up."

Saeja sighed deeply, his inability to pick up on her plans was frustrating. "It's a good thing you sing so pretty cause you're not too bright, are you? If I don't beat you up, Faendal doesn't pay the companions and I lose face with them. If he thinks I also double crossed him to help you win Camilla, well he's a pretty good archer. You still get Camilla to tend to your wounds, and I'll give you my health potion to deal with the bruises."

It took some convincing, but Sven finally agreed.

Saeja made her way to the Riverwood trader immediately and gave Lucan back the claw. He was delighted and handed her the reward he promised and invited her to do business whenever she was
in town. Camilla, hearing the discussion came downstairs and thanked her as well.

"I have something I need to speak to you about Camilla." Saeja said. Once she had the girl's attention she launched into her explanation of Faendal's lies, her plan to beat up Sven and the ploy to catch the elf in the act. Camilla was fuming.

"I can't believe he would be so underhanded. Of course, I'll help you. I'll stay outdoors until I see you heading to speak to Faendal.

In mere moments the whole village could hear her fight with Sven. She gave him a few solid punches, a black eye and more bruises than he could count. When he finally fell to the ground, she knelt beside him and slipped her healing potion into his pocket. "I'm so sorry, but remember Camilla will be all over you after this." she whispered, before bellowing out for everyone to hear. "Let that be a reminder to you to stay away from where you don't belong. She wants nothing to do with you anymore."

Saeja walked away leaving him groaning in the dirt. She shook her head at Camilla as she passed, seeing that the girl wanted to rush to his side immediately, but gestured for Camilla to follow her to the mill and stay out of sight.

"It's done." she said when she reached the elf. "And as luck would have it Sven was a contracted target of the companions, so I hit him doubly as hard when Camilla hired me to beat him up as well."

Faendal grinned manically, his eyes filled with glee and laughed as he handed her a purse full of coins. "Excellent. Here is the agreed upon amount for the companions and some extra for you. I can't believe that letter worked. He must not even know what hit him. All it took were some dopey lines and she never wants to see him again."

Just then Camilla appeared from around the corner of the forge. "Faendal, you wrote that letter? That was awful! And you contracted the companions to beat up Sven? He's a bard, he can't protect himself from seasoned warriors like that. You brute! I was coming to thank this woman for letting Sven know what I thought of him, but now I know the truth." She started to cry. "How could you Faendal? I never want to speak to you again. I have to go apologize to Sven."

Camilla turned and ran towards the inn, sobbing loudly. Saeja thought she might be laying it on a bit thick, but admit it had the desired effect. Faendal stammered and sputtered, then cursed and stomped his feet. He turned on her. "This is all your fault. Give me my money back."

"I don't think so elf. I beat him up as hired to do so, I delivered your letter, Camilla didn't want anything to do with him. All this was in accordance to your desires and the contract. You lied and got caught. That's not the problem of the Companions." she glared at him, letting her eyes display her disgust with him. "Unless you want to make it our problem?"

The elf backed away slowly, hand up in surrender. "No! No, just take your money and go. Don't speak to me again, ever!"

Saeja turned and walked back to Gerdur's house. As she neared the main road she saw Camilla crying over Sven, pressing kisses to his face and using her handkerchief to dab away the blood on his lip. He caught sight of her and gave a quick wave before Camilla led him through the door of her home and they disappeared.

Later that evening when Hod came home for dinner, he caught her eye and chuckled. "I don't know what you did to Faendal today, but he's never worked so hard in his life."
She laughed and spent the evening telling tales of the barrow and the situation with Faendal, Camilla and Sven.
Taking on A Dragon

Chapter Summary

Seaja discovers she's the Dragonborn. It's some pretty heavy stuff. Her first epic fight against a dragon instead of running for her life from one. How will she be repaid for saving the city?

How are you liking the story so far? I promise it picks up speed soon. :)

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I Do Not Own any original characters

I should also note that as more chapters come, I will be giving away main quest and companion quest spoilers. I will be deviating from canon and I play modded, so some items come from my modded games specifically.

Since the guards recognized her now, getting into Dragonsreach was much easier this time. She walked into the small alcove where Farengar bent over his desk, in deep conversation with a solidly built woman dressed in combat leathers and a hood that covered her face. Saeja squinted, thinking she may recognize the woman but couldn't quite place her. She only caught the tail end of their conversation, but the woman's voice was full of concern. “Time is running, Farengar, don't forget. Dragons have come back.”

The wizard waved his hands dismissively. “Yes, yes. Don't worry. Although the chance to see a living dragon up close would be tremendously valuable. Now, let me show you something else I found, it is very intriguing. I think your employers...” The woman pointed to her, cutting the wizard off. “Hmm?” He looked up and beamed when he saw Saeja “Ah, yes, the Jarl's protege! Back from Bleak Falls Barrow? You didn't die, it seems.

“Not yet. she replied as she pulled the odd shaped stone from her bag. “I hope this is what you wanted. I don't want to have to go back again.”

As she handed it to him Farengar’s eyes widen with glee. “Ah! The Dragonstone of Bleak Falls Barrow! Seems you are a cut above the usual brutes the Jarl sends my way.”

She chose to ignore his insult and asked. “I got you the Dragonstone. What next?”

He couldn't even be bothered to glance back at her when he replied. “This is where your job ends and mine begins. The work of the mind, sadly undervalued in Skyrim.” Saeja rolled her eyes at his arrogance as he continued. “My, ah, associate here will be pleased to see your handiwork. She
discovered its location, by means she has so far declined to share with me.” He turned to the woman in question and held out the stone. “So, your information was correct after all and we have our friend to thank for recovering it for us.”

The woman stared at the stone in disbelief. “You went into Bleak Falls Barrow and got that? Nice work.” She sent Saeja an approving smile then turned back to the wizard. “Just send me a copy when you’ve deciphered it.”

Any further discussion was cut short by Irileth, who raced into the room yelling for Farengar to follow her because a dragon had been spotted near Whiterun. The wizard’s eyes gleamed with excitement and he opened his mouth to speak but Irileth cut him off. “I’d take this a bit more seriously if I were you. If a dragon decides to attack Whiterun I don’t know if we can stop it. Move it.” The housecarl turned to Saeja and continued. “You should come, too. Your insight could give us the edge we need.”

Saeja followed quickly behind, running up the stairs just in time to hear a very pale, shaking guard reply to Balgruuf. “I was on patrol at the western watchtower. We saw it coming from the south. It was fast sire, faster than anything I’ve ever seen before in my life.”

The Jarl gripped the man’s arm, “What did it do? Is it attacking the watchtower?”

“No, my lord. It was just circling overhead when I left. They told me to get to the keep and warn you. I never ran so fast in my life. I thought for sure it would come after me.

Balgruuf patted the soldiers back, his face grave. “Good work, son. We’ll take it from here. Head down to the barracks for some food and rest. You’ve earned it. Irileth, you’d better gather some guardsmen and get down there. Don’t fail me.”

Irileth nodded and departed as quickly as she could.

Saeja stepped closer, knowing what was coming next. The Jarl turned to her with pleading eyes. “There's no time to stand on ceremony, my friend. I need your help again. I want you to go with Irileth and help her fight this dragon. You survived Helgen, so you have more experience with dragons than anyone else here.”

“Yes my lord, I’ll head out with Irileth.”

The Jarl nodded in approval but called her back before she got more than a few feet away. “Wait! I haven’t forgotten the service you did for me in retrieving the Dragonstone for Farengar. As a token of my esteem, I have instructed Proventus that you are now permitted to purchase property in the city. And please accept this gift from my personal armory.” He took off his own finely crafted hide helmet, and handed it to her. It glistened in the light, suggesting it was enchanted. “One last thing, tell Irileth this isn't a death or glory mission. I need to know what we're dealing with.”

Saeja nodded and quickly departed, listening to the Jarl and Farengar argue about the wizard joining. Frankly she didn't want him there. He'd be in the way or get himself killed. She ran after Irileth, ignoring the greetings from two of the companions as she passed Jorrvaskr, until she finally met up with the company just outside the stables. They moved quickly to the watchtower, the rising smoke they could now see making their stomachs clench in fear. A lone soldier ran from the burning tower as they approached. “No, get out, it will kill us all.” The man screamed and pointed to the sky. “Gods no! It’s coming back!”

To say it was a difficult battle would be an understatement. With every pass it made around the tower the dragon released columns of fire, burning everything in its path. One guard wasn't quick enough
to get out of the way and was disintegrated by the flames. The arrows that Saeja and the guards shot over and over at it barely pierced its scales, but a group of soldiers that could utilize magic seemed to make a little progress with bolts of frost and lightning.

“Tool Shur!” the creature shouted seconds before a burst of flames erupted from its mouth.

Saeja’s body jerked in response to the dragon's roar. She wasn’t crazy, that dragon was speaking real words that she could vaguely understand. She didn't know how but she had an idea of what those words meant. She watched it as it rounded about again flying straight for her. She loaded her arrows and focused on its underbelly, releasing arrow after arrow to no avail.

“Yol Tool Shur!” it shouted again, and landed on the ground, crushing one unfortunate soul beneath its powerful body and releasing a blaze to keep anyone else from drawing closer.

Saeja whole body thrummed with energy. Every time the creature spoke, she could hear it casting Inferno Sun, seconds before its fire would emerge from its jaws. The beast was using magic, she was sure of it.

That’s not fair! She thought. She threw down her bow and grabbed her axe in one hand and her dagger in the other and began racing towards the creature. She heard the dragon shout another spell, rolled out of the way of its fiery blast and then kept running full tilt at its head. The creature was covered in blood and she tell that its shouts were getting weaker by the way the fire didn't last as long and it was snapping at the guards trying to crush them with its jaws rather than turn them to ash.

She saw her opening as it turned to strike at Irileth, who was trying to get close enough to use her sword. Saeja ran towards its head and just before it caught sight of her to turn she leapt in the air, jabbing her dagger into the side of its face, between the scales. The dragon roared in anger and began to fling its head about, trying to dislodge her. She hooked the blade of her axe between another set of scales and pulled herself up on its crown.

Balancing delicately on the balls of her feet, knees bent for stability she threw down her axe and grabbed her other dagger. “For SKYRIM!” she screamed, and then aiming for either side of its head, she drove the tips through the dragon’s skull, deep into its brain.

The creature collapsed, struggling for breath. She leaped from it and landed in a heap, staring into its eyes as it screamed. “Dovahkiin? NOOOOO!” The dragon thrashed one last time before coming to rest before the disbelieving eyes of the Whiterun guards.

A glow began to form around its body and everyone tensed, praying it would not awaken and begin its attack anew. Instead it burst into flames, its scales turning to ash and the glow began swirling with energy. Saeja’s senses prickled and then her bones screamed in agony as she felt that energy flow into her body, stretching her skin until she felt she may explode. She screamed as she felt the energy crystallize inside her head and then burst, causing her to see stars and stumble to her knees.

“By the Divines, I can't believe it.” the guard who rushed to her side to help her up was stammering. “You, you are Dragonborn.”

She stared at him, trying to focus as she came back into her own body. “No, I couldn't be Dragonborn.”

The guard helped her to her feet and let her lean on him for support. “So you know of the stories then? In the very oldest tales, back from when there were still dragons in Skyrim, the Dragonborn would slay dragons and steal their power. That's what you did, isn't it? Absorbed that dragon's
Saeja thought for a moment, what he was saying suddenly seemed to make sense. “I think you might be right, but the Dragonborn is supposed to be a legendary hero.” she replied. “That certainly isn't me.”

The other guards chimed in, arguing amongst themselves. She noticed that any guards who were Nords believed she had stolen a dragon's soul, but the elves and Bretons scoffed and belittled the theory as Nord myths and stories. Even Irileth was hesitant to agree with with Nord guards when asked her thoughts.

“Hmph. Some of you would be better off keeping quiet than flapping your gums on matters you don't know anything about. Here's a dead dragon, and that's something I definitely understand. Now we know we can kill them. But I don't need some mythical Dragonborn. Someone who can put down a dragon is more than enough for me.”

The man Saeja was leaning on spat in reply. “You wouldn't understand, Housecarl. You ain't a Nord.”

She gave him an icy glare before replying. “I've been all across Tamriel. I've seen plenty of things just as outlandish as this. I'd advise you all to trust in the strength of your sword over tales and legends.”

A word rushed to the forefront of Saeja’s thoughts. Fus….Fus...FUS! She couldn't hold it back. Opening her mouth to form the word she shouted “FUS!” and a burst of wind flew forth, staggering the guards around her.

Her helpful guard smiled and said. “There, now there is no doubt. You are Dragonborn!” Most of the other guards hurried to agree with him.

Irileth approached, her expression guarded. “That was the hairiest fight I've ever been in, and I've been in more than a few.” She paused and then reached for Saeja’s hand, shaking it. “Look, I don't know about this Dragonborn business, but I'm sure glad you're with us. You better get back to Whiterun right away. Jarl Balgruuf will want to know what happened here.

She nodded in reply and began the weary walk back to Whiterun.

Saeja had just reached the top of the stairs at Dragonsreach when suddenly her whole body was rocked by the force of a tremendous shout, which echoed across Skyrim. “DO-VAH-KIIN!”

She fell to her knees and a guard at the palace doors had to help her to her feet. She thanked the man and then walked into the place, legs shaking with exhaustion and strain. As she approached Balgruuf she could hear he was in a heated debate with Proventus and another man. She heard the word Greybeards tossed around few times before the other man caught sight of her and beckoned her forward.

“Good. You're finally here! We were just talking about you. My brother needs a word with you.” the man stated.

Saeja approached the throne, and the Jarl smiled at her, but his expression was guarded. “So what happened at the watchtower? Was the dragon there?”

She nodded her head, “The watchtower was destroyed, but we killed the dragon.”

The Jarl waited for her to continue her explanation. When she didn't he smirked. “I knew I could
count on Irileth, but there must be more to it than that.”

Saeja sighed, wishing she didn’t have to explain, but she owed the Jarl that much at least. Perhaps he knew more about what was happening to her. “Turns out I may be something called Dragonborn.” she swallowed hard, “At least, that’s just what the men called me. When the dragon died, I absorbed some kind of power from it.”

Balgruuf sat back in his chair and regarded her for a moment, while his brother exploded with excitement. “So it’s true. The Greybeards really were summoning you.”

Saeja sent the man a questioning look. “I’ve heard the legends of the Dragonborn. My father loved to tell us tales on winter nights, but what are Greybeards?”

Balgruuf was the one to answer that for her. “Masters of the Way of the Voice. They live in seclusion high on the slopes of the Throat of the World.” When she only continued to look puzzled he continued. “The Dragonborn is said to be uniquely gifted in the Voice, the ability to focus your vital essence into a Thu’um, or Shout. If you really are Dragonborn, they can teach you how to use your gift.”

“Didn’t you hear the thundering sound as you returned to Whiterun?” the Jarl’s brother asked. Saeja nodded in reply. “That was the voice of the Greybeards, summoning you to High Hrothgar! This hasn't happened in centuries, at least. Not since Tiber Septim himself was summoned when he was still Talos of Atmora!”

Saeja head swam with information. The man was looking at her with awe, and she could barely process how much her life had changed in less than the span of a week. Both Balgruuf and his brother were looking at her expectantly, as if waiting for some eloquent words of wisdom to pour from her lips, but she was speechless.

Thankfully the weasley advisor Proventus spoke up. “Hrongar, calm yourself. What does any of this Nord nonsense have to do with our friend here? Capable as she may be, I don't see any signs of her being this, what, Dragonborn.” His voice was so full of scorn that Saeja was immediately reminded why she couldn't stand the man. Not only did he insult her personally but he was insulting Nord culture and their Gods at the same time.

She was saved from sneering at the man when the Jarl’s brother started stomped towards Proventus and snarled at the advisor, “Nord nonsense? Why you puffed-up ignorant... These are our sacred traditions that go back to the founding of the First Empire.”

Balgruuf held up his hand to halt his brother from doing damage to the cowering man. “Hrongar. Don't be so hard on Avenicci. He was not raised a Nord, he shouldn't be expected to understand our legends.”

Proventus shot Hrongar a smug look. “I meant no disrespect, of course. It's just that, what do these Greybeards want with the girl?”

Balgruuf looked at Saeja and could see she was on the verge of collapse. He suddenly realized how much she had been through today alone and took pity on her. “That's the Greybeards’ business, not ours.” he told Proventus, waving his hand in a dismissal.

He beckoned Saeja close and when she stood in front of him he took her hand. “Whatever happened when you killed that dragon, it revealed something in you, and the Greybeards know it. If they think you're Dragonborn, who are we to argue? I suggest you rest and when you are ready, you should travel to High Hrothgar. There's no refusing the summons of the Greybeards. It's a tremendous
honor.”

Saeja watched as a far off look clouded the eyes of the Jarl. “I envy you, you know. To climb the 7,000 steps again. I made the pilgrimage once in my youth. High Hrothgar is a very peaceful place. Very, well, disconnected from the troubles of this world. I wonder if the Greybeards even notice what's going on down here. They don't tend to involve themselves in the matters of Skyrim. Still, go to High Hrothgar and learn all the Greybeards can teach you.”

Saeja nodded, “Of course Jarl Balgruuf. May I take my leave? There is a bed in the city calling my name.”

The Jarl laughed and nodded. “One last thing Saeja Skyborn. You've done a great service to me and my city. By my right as Jarl, I name you Thane of Whiterun. It's the greatest honor that's within my power to grant. I am giving you Breezehome in the Plains district.

Saeja couldn't help it, her mouth fell open in surprize even as the Jarl continued. “I have already instructed Proventus to see to furnishing it for you and have assigned Lydia to you as a personal housecarl. I will also have a weapon from my armory sent to you to serve as your badge of office. My guards will be notified of your new title. Wouldn't want them to think you're part of the common rabble.”

The Jarl smiled at her, a genuine, friendly smile and shook her hand that he had been holding. “We are honored to have you as Thane of our city, Dragonborn.”

Saeja swallowed back tears of gratitude and thanked the man, bowing deeply. She left him gesturing to Proventus to meet him in his quarters to begin planning defenses for future attacks. A woman met her at the door of the palace, introducing herself as Lydia and began to explain how she was to serve as housecarl.

Saeja smiled at the woman, but her patience was starting to fray. “Lydia, please, I appreciate that you wish to live up to your duties, but I wont get Breezehome for a few days and I am exhausted. I have a bed in Jorrvaskr and I don't want them to think I need protection when I am supposed to be a noble warrior, so can you please stay here until the house is mine? I just want to go check in with Kodlak and fall into my bed.”

The woman across from her nodded and advised where she would be staying if Saeja needed her.
When Saeja pushed open the door to the Hall of the Companions, she was immediately assailed by questions from nearly every companion in the hall. She looked about wildly, trying to field all the questions. Yes, she had been at the palace, and yes, she had fought the dragon that was seen outside the walls. No, she was not now engaged to the Jarl and she didn't think he had fallen in love with her. Finally she was saved when Kodlak appeared and bellowed. “Leave the woman alone you whelps! If you are all so overburdened with free time then get to the training yard and prove to me you are worthy of being companions!” He gestured to Aela and Skjor, who had been sitting in the corner watching the whole mess. “Aela! Skjor! Get out there with them and drill them till they drop.”

The newer members scattered to collect weapons and race outside. Once Aela and Skjor also dissappeared, following the pack, Saeja smiled inwardly. They may claim to have no leader, but no one dared question Kodlak when he spoke. The hulking man turned to her, a wide smile spreading across his face. “So, not only did you complete the job in Riverwood for us, but you completed the task from Farengar and defeated a dragon all in your first week here.”

“How did you..?” she sputtered.

“My dear, when you are as old as I am you pay attention to everything. Vignar Gray-Mane was at the Palace when the dragon was spotted and brought news of it. Ria and Athis saw you rushing behind Irileth, so it was easy to put two and two together. Eorlund saw the guards returning, carrying the fallen with them and overheard Irileth speaking about the incident. He came and told me not a half-hour before you got back here, so of course the news of the dragons’ defeat is now common knowledge to everyone in Jorrvaskr.”

The old man looked her over, noting how her body shivered with exhaustion. She was dead on her feet and he didn't know how she had managed to remain conscious this long. “We have much to discuss Saeja, but for now I want you to get some rest. You are in no shape to continue this until you’ve slept and eaten. Farkas is away on a job right now, so use his room. I cannot guarantee the whelps will leave you alone if you stay in the common room.”

Saeja managed to reach Farkas’ room, though she could not remember walking there, stripped off her armor and fell into the bed. She was out before her head hit the pillow.
Farkas just stared at the woman sleeping soundly in his bed. He had arrived back in Whiterun after
the midnight call of city guards and everyone else was already asleep, so he had crept silently to his
room without notifying anyone of his return. He had just placed his gear on the counter in his room
when her smell reached him, the faint scent of snowberries tickling his senses. He turned to look at
the bed and as his eyes adjusted to the dim light in his room he saw a pale leg peeking out from
under the dark hides of the covers. The small groan that escaped his throat must have disturbed her,
because she murmured softly in her sleep and rolled onto her back, dislodging the hides and fully
revealing her shapely form. Her linen undershirt had ridden up, barely covering the juncture of her
thighs, and he could see her nipples tighten under the fabric as the warmth from the hides
disappeared. His loins hardened painfully causing him to gasp. He decide it may be best to leave, but
then she began to whimper.

“No, please no.” she cried, firmly gripped in a nightmare. “Stay away please.” She tossed and
turned, holding her hands out to ward off the darkness of her dreams. “Look out, it’s coming back!”
she sobbed, her body rigid with fear.

Farkas starred helplessly, wanting to protect her from her night terrors, but not wanting to be caught
invading her space like Vilkas had been. When she cried out again in fear, begging the entity to leave
them alone, Farkas strode the the side of the bed, gripped her outstretched hand and stroked her head.
“It’s ok, you’re safe here.” he whispered.

Her body relaxed at his touch, her crying ceased. Sleeping soundly still, she turned towards
the warmth of his body and rubbed her face into his hand.

“Ralof.”

It was the softest whisper, but it broke his heart. He rose to his feet, backed out of the room, silently
closing the door.

“Now who is invading her privacy?” came the low chuckle behind him.

Farkas turned to face his brother. “I didn't realize she was in there until I was inside. I was going to
turn right around and leave when she started crying in her sleep.” Vilkas could see his brother’s pain
in his eyes. “I told her it would be ok, trying to make her feel safe. It worked, she stopped panicking,
but she called out some other man’s name.”

Vilkas cursed silently, realizing too late that his brother’s affections ran deeper than he had originally
thought. He wanted to spare Farkas the heartache, but knew he’d be useless for weeks without hope.
“Don't take it so hard brother,” he replied, clapping Farkas on the back. “Your recruit has had a lot to
deal with the last few days and has a right to a few nightmares. Could be the man was a friend or
maybe a brother.”

“I’d never your whisper your name like she did his.” Farkas replied dully.

“You’d never whisper my name, period.” said Vilkas, making Farkas chuckle. “Here, I’ll pile some
furs on the floor in my room. Get some rest brother. You can speak to her in the morning if she
rises.”

Saeja didn’t rise the next morning. In fact she slept the entire day and night away, not waking until
the second morning of her return. Her entire body screamed as she crawled from the bed. She spied a
pile of folded clothes that hadn’t been there when she arrived and she reached for the pale green shirt
Confirming it would be far too small for Farkas, she decided they must have been left for her, so she slipped into the shirt and soft leather leggings. She secured her daggers to her belt and exited the room. The lower hall was empty, save for Kodlak sitting in the rear alcove of his quarter. She walked to him when he waved at her. Without any prompting she joined him at his table and began to fill in the details of the last few months, starting with her escape from Helgen to reaching the Jarl, then backtracking to explain more about her family. Kodlak kept food and drink coming as he listened, urging her to eat between sentences, knowing she was probably ravenous by now.

“You know the rest Kodlak. The Jarl made me Thane, granted me Breezehome and recommended me to visit the Greybeards.” she said, finishing her story.

Kodlak laughed, “Well girl, I knew I had done right by having you join us. What a brilliant solution in Riverwood, both honoring the contract and robbing that elf of his prize. You see things differently than most here. I know you have a home in the city now, and I am sure Farkas wants his room back, but you are still welcome to make your home here and a bed will always be available to you.”

Saeja smiled and nodded, responding to the affection in the man’s invitation. Again she was struck by how much he reminded her of her father, his concern coming across as familial, the same way Tilma reminded her of a stern grandmother.

The old man leaned back in his chair and smiled back at her. “I agree with the Jarl, I think it is important that you meet with the Greybeards. However, I think if you’re destined to become a dragonslayer of old, you could use more training. You are good, but from what you tell me, it has been a few years since your training in Shor’s Stone. Now, Skjor had a mission lined up for when you returned, a job meant to prove your worth to the companions. If passed, it will allow us to welcome you into the inner circle of the Companions.”

“But I’ve only just joined. Ria and Njada were both her before me, and Athos as well. Why would I be allowed into the circle before them.” she protested.

“I insisted.” Kodlak admitted. “Only the Harbinger can make the decision to allow new members to join the circle. I had a feeling about you and asked him to find a job worthy of making it official. I think killing a dragon more than proves your worth to the companions, but some may argue it was a group effort with the city guard. None of us were truly there to verify the event.” When he saw her raise her eyebrows at him he laughed. “I believe you girl, but this task will leave no doubt in the minds of the other Companions. Go see Skjor and he will give you the details.”

As Saeja rose from her seat he added. “Saeja, one thing I want you to keep in mind, that Ralof fellow you mentioned, the one that helped you escape Helgen. I presume you became, well close with the man?”

Saeja blushed and nodded, embarrassed he had figured it out, even though she had left that part out of her tale.

Kodlak had been awake the night before and his sharp ears had picked up the conversation between the brothers. Hoping to avoid future pain for all parties involved he tried to impart some wisdom from his own experiences.

“A warrior’s life is harsh and filled with danger. Relationships are difficult to maintain, families hard to raise. I’m not discouraging you from following your heart if that is what you truly want, but consider this. Many of us, men and women alike, take our comforts where and when we can get them. He won’t be the only man to care for you, and you may be happier if you remember you can care for more than one person. There is no shame in sharing your bed with others.”
Saeja nodded, thankful for his tactful advise, but still embarrassed by it. She bowed and then slipped off to find Skjor leaving Kodlak alone with his memories.

When she reached the dining hall Saeja saw Farkas sitting at the table with a bowl of hot stew. She paddled over to him, unaware of how his shoulders tensed when he heard her footsteps approaching him. “That smells amazing. Now I realize why all the Companions stay in Jorrvaskr. No one wants to eat anything but Tilma’s cooking.” She said, sliding into the chair beside him.

“Skjor was looking for you earlier.” he replied trying to remain aloof.

“Oh I know. Kodlak said I should go find him.” She replied. “I’ll get to him in a second. I wanted to say thank you again for the use of your room the last two nights. Kodlak told me to use it when I got back to avoid being disturbed by the other new-bloods, but I didn't expect I would end up sleeping the whole day away, so I’m sorry about that.” When he didn't look up at her she added. “I missed seeing you the other night.” There was no reply. “I think I spoke to everyone but you and Vilkas. Kodlak said you were out on a contract. How did it go.” she probed.

“Ah well, nothing I couldn't handle.” He replied, still avoiding her eyes. “Just took a bit to get back from Falkreath. Look, I don't know what Skjor wanted. He just said he needed to talk to you before you do anything else. I don't like making him angry, so I’d get out there soon if I was you.” He finished his stew, stood and strode from the room without looking back.

Saeja starred at the door for a few minutes, trying to figure out what she had done wrong. Thinking about the job he gave her she wondered if he disapproved of her methods. Kodlak had thought it insightful, but perhaps Farkas was more of a by the book kind of man. She sighed deeply, and began to think of ways to apologize. He had been kind to her and she didn't want to lose his respect.

She found Skjor in the training yard with Vilkas, putting Ria and Torvar through drills. Skjor looked up and beckoned her over.

“So, you’re finally awake new blood.” he growled. “Bout time. We have a job that is time sensitive.”

“So where am I going now?” she asked, “Do I have time to replenish my supplies?”

“Last week a scholar came to us. He said he knew where we could find another fragment of Wuuthrad. He seemed a fool to me, but if he's right, the honor of the Companions demands we seek it out.” he replied.

“What is Wuuthrad?” she asked, tilting her head to the side, watching Vilkas from around Skjor. He was doing a grand job ignoring her as well.

“Our founder was the hero Ysgramor, Wuuthrad was his weapon. This is a simple errand, but Kodlak agreed it was right for it to be your Trial. Carry yourself with honor, and you'll become a true Companion.” A rare smile cracked across his face. “Way less exciting than a dragon though.”

“Can I make a quick trip to the market? I need to get a few things to replenish my supplies.” she asked, noting he never answered her about when she was expected to leave.

“Yes, that will be fine. The two of you can leave at first light tomorrow.”

“Wait! She called, as he turned to walk back to the other recruits. “The two of us?”

“I have to inform Farkas that he’ll be your Shield-Sibling on this venture, whelp. He'll answer any
questions you have. Try not to disappoint, or get him killed.” the man replied.

Saeja’s smile grew. She’d have the whole trip to find out what she had done to upset him and try to rectify it.

“If my brother is hurt in any way on this job, you will answer to me Dragonborn,” Vilkas growled her from right behind her, emphasizing her new title with venom in his voice.

He had approached silently and she jumped in surprise. Whirling on him she hissed, “I’m sure he would be pleased to know you lack such faith in his abilities that you believe me capable of hurting him. Farkas may be upset with me right now, I don't know why, but he knows I belong here. You should tell Skjor to send you instead, so that when I complete this task without incident, you won't be able to doubt my worth.” She slapped the front of his armor in defiance and then stormed back down to Farkas’ room to get her supplies.

“God’s she’s fierce.” he mumbled, rubbing his armor where she'd hit him as he watched her walk away, a smug swagger causing her hips to swing enticingly. He shook that thought from his mind and then returned his attention to the training yard while muttering a soft prayer to Talos to look out for them both.

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Saeja spent the afternoon stowing her supplies in her new home. It was a wonderful set up with two bedrooms and a sitting room on the upper floor, and a large kitchen and dining area on the lower floor, just inside the entrance.

Near the back of the dining room a small door led a room that had been filled with shelves and a small alchemy lab, complete with a few hard to find ingredients. The Jarl must have really been impressed with her, as some items were incredibly expensive. Come the evening, before the shops closed up for the night, she decided to explore the market and seek out the merchants to trade for a few items. She bartered with the owner of the Drunken Huntsman for a three quivers worth of Nordic arrows and a new hunting bow. Belathor was stingy man and she hoped she wouldn't have to do much business with him in the future after he refused to haggle on the price of a travelling tent, bedroll and extra hide. His leer as she handed over her coins made her skin crawl.

She stopped in at Arcadia’s to replenish her stocks and add to her ingredients she found were lacking in her house. She made a fast friend in the woman, as they shared tips and recipes for common illnesses. With Vilkas’ warning still repeating in the back of her mind she spent a fair bit on stronger healing potions, but hoped she wouldn't have to use them. Finally she stopped over at fresh fruit stand in the square and introduced herself to the two merchant women standing there.

“Wait, aren't you the new Thane?” asked the younger girl, who had introduced herself as Ysolda.

“Yes,” she replied in hushed tones, not wanting to draw too much attention. It was common knowledge the new Thane was the Dragonborn.

“Oh you are so lucky,” the girl whispered, “ I admire the fact that it’s a strong Nord woman who is the Dragonborn. They say there's nothing a Nord woman can’t do if she puts her mind to it. We're tough and strong as stone. I spend a lot of time around these stalls trying to learn more of the merchant trade. I need more experience if I am going to run my own inn one day.”

Saeja smiled at the girl. “It’s difficult, but rewarding. My mother ran Braidwood Inn in Kynesgrove until she passed away.”

The girl almost swooned at that information and began pelting her with questions. “Wait wait,
Ysolda, I have to leave tomorrow on an errand, so I need to get packed. I promise I will swap trade secrets with you when I return.”

The girl nodded. “Oh, but Saeja, one of the Kahjiit caravan leaders, Ma’dran, said he would help me get my business started if I could get him a mammoth tusk. I haven’t had any luck finding one.”

Saeja grinned at the girl. “If I find one before you do, it’s yours.” She said, replying to the question in the girl’s eyes.

The girl thanked her and sprinted off. Carlotta, the older woman who ran the fruit stand, smiled. “Oh to be young again.” she said, handing Saeja her order, a basket with some vegetables and green apples. “I might even have the energy to deal that bard.”

“What do you mean?” Saeja asked taking her purchase.

“I’ve got a hungry daughter to feed, so selling my produce is really the most important thing for me right now. Still, I am a single woman in Whiterun. Life is hard enough with half the men of Whiterun proposing, or propositioning me, but Mikael is the worst. I’ve heard him in the Inn, bragging to everyone who will listen about how he’ll conquer me as a true Nord conquers any harsh beast.” She rolled her eyes. “I can handle the others, a Whiterun woman learns to deal with men at an early age, but I have a feeling Mikael will only stop once someone puts a dagger to his throat and I’ve got Mila to worry about.”

“Wait here a moment would you?” Saeja replied, absolutely seething. She left her basket with Carlotta and stormed into the inn, making a beeline for the bard, who sure enough was boasting of his prowess over a mead with friends.

“Bard, I have a warning for you.” she stated, as she planted herself in front of him, her hands resting on her hips by her daggers. “You will refrain from speaking to Carlotta again if you value your hide.”

Mikael looked up from his bottle and flashed her a charming smile she was sure worked on travelers, but she had seen it on the face of every guest at Braidwood who had tried to convince her to share their bed at night. She was immune.

Seeing that his smile didn't soften her mood at all the bard drawled, “I’m sorry but that fiery widow is mine, she just doesn’t know it yet.”

“She isn't yours. Stop this nonsense.” she demanded again.

“I’m sorry, what did you say? All I heard was the sound of jealousy.” he replied, making his friends around him laugh.

Saeja ripped her dagger from her belt and had it pressed to his throat before he could even tell she had moved. The sharp blade sliced a shallow line across his neck and a small rivulet of blood dripped down to stain the collar of his tunic. “Hey wait.” he stammered, sweat appearing on his brow, as he tried to avoid swallowing too hard. “Don’t be hasty”

“Leave her alone or else.” Saeja hissed, her voice filled with dark promises. “Any man who doesn’t take no for an answer is no true man. You are a pathetic coward and if I hear you have bothered her in any way, even a sidelong glance that lasts too long.” she paused sadistically, trailing her dagger to his groin. “Well lets just say you’ll be singing in a higher octave.”

She turned to leave the inn but halted when she heard Mikael calling to some off duty guards. “Why did none of you move to arrest her. She attacked me, you idiots. I thought you were supposed to
protection of the people of Whiterun.”

She rolled her eyes. Some men just don't know when to stop, she thought to herself. She swirled on him, about to teach him a lesson when one guard interrupted her, asking incredulously. “You wanted me to stop the Thane of Whiterun from protecting another citizen from unwanted attention? Been hitting the mead pretty hard tonight Mikael. Best you quit early and get some sleep.”

“Thane?” The bard paled, and began to look ill. “On my honor, Carlotta won't have to worry about me ever again.” he stammered.

Saeja sneered, then continued out the door and returned to Carlotta. “He won't be a problem again if he values his future progeny.”

Carlotta started to tear up. “Now I can focus all my attention of making a better life for Mila and myself. I’d thank the Gods, but I’ll thank you instead,” she said, handing Saeja a coin purse. When she protested, Carlotta placed the purse in the basket of food. “I insist you take this. Come visit me anytime.”

Saeja returned to Breezehome with her supplies. Just before she reached the house she saw Farkas standing in front of the door, arguing with Lydia. “Just tell me where she went then.” he demanded, scowling menacingly at the housecarl.

Saeja smiled as Lydia pulled herself up to full height and replied just as dangerously. “She didn't leave instructions on who can know her whereabouts and that includes you.”

Wanting to avoid the confrontation coming to blows Saeja called out. “Lydia, he is fine. He’s a friend of mine who is welcome anytime, unless I direct you otherwise.”

Lydia nodded and retreated back to her room with a sour glance at Farkas, as Saeja closed the distance to her doorway. He turned to look at her. He had been determined to finalize their plans for the morning and leave without talking more than necessary, but when she called him a friend his resolve shattered. He leaned against her house and she imagined she could hear it groaning in protest. She realized just how small he made her feel. “A friend am I?”

Saeja didn't answer for a few moments as she regarded him seriously. “Yes, a friend, if you would still consider me one. I didn't know taking your bedroom again would anger you so much.” she replied, pushing past him to enter her house and placing her basket on the table. When he continued to lounge against the door frame, she waved him inside. “Well come on, the house may be free, but the firewood isn’t.”

Farkas grinned and followed her inside, closing the door. He sat at the table and grabbed an apple from the basket as she retrieved two tankards from a nearby shelf and filled them with ale. She joined him, placing his tankard in front of him as she searched his eyes. They were still guarded, dark grey instead of the silver they were when he was smiling. She looked at his lips to confirm he was scowling, noticing how full they looked in the low light of her home.

Farkas cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to his entire face. “I assume you’ve made yourself ready for traveling tomorrow?” At her nod he continued, “I’d like head out at dawn. The sooner we get this over with the sooner you become a true Shield-Sister.”

Saeja nodded her agreement to leaving at dawn, and then remembered Skjor said Farkas could give her more information on the job. “Where exactly are we heading, can you tell me more about the artifact and who exactly was this scholar?”
Farkas shrugged, “I don’t know much about it other than that Wuuthrad was Ysgramor’s axe. He came from the ancient homeland and killed a bunch of elves, but not all of ‘em, because some of ‘em are still here obviously.” He paused for a moment trying to remember the scholar. “A smart man came and told us about a piece of Wuuthrad hidden in Dustman’s Cairn. Skjor thinks you should find it, and I’m supposed to watch you to make sure you’re honorable in combat. If you are honorable and strong, you’ll join the circle and I can call you sister.”

He stopped and finished his ale in large gulp, trying to hide his distaste. Farkas didn't like the way that sounded to him. What he felt for his wasn't brotherly at all.

Saeja finished her ale and dropped both takards in the wash basin by the fire. “Well then, I suppose we should make haste then brother.” She was trying to tease him, but didn't laugh. She didn't like the way it sounded in her mind either. Farkas certainly didn't make her think of Fjolti.

Farkas frowned at her again, and she wished she could see his smile instead. “Yeah well, I’ll meet you here at sunup.” he replied, standing and striding from her home. The door didn't exactly slam, but it wasn't closed gently either.

Saeja shook her head in confusion, then set about washing her dishes and picking at a wedge of cheese and bread as she packed her gear for the morning. She cleaned her armor and tested the sharpness of her blades. Satisfied she placed them by the door. She was starting to get sleepy again but headed to her alembic to whip up a few extra potions, excited to try a few recipes that she had received from Arcadia.

Within the hour she had gathered the successful attempts of a disease curative and resist magic potion and placed them with her other bottles of healing potions she had purchased. Those went into the front pocket of her pack, then she added another dagger, an extra linen shirt to fit under her armor, a second set of small clothes and another pair of hide leggings. At the top of the pack she stored enough food for 2 days travel and two canteens of fresh water. She attached her sleeping gear to the bottom of the pack and set the whole thing at the door as well, with her bow and arrows.

Saeja grabbed a pitcher of hot water and a hide cloth, then walked up to her room, saying good night to Lydia as she passed by. She closed the door to her own room and filled the empty wash basin near the bed with the warm water, adding a few drops of lavender oil. Slipping out of her clothes and folded them, leaving them beside her bed. She grabbed the hide cloth and began to wash herself, the smell of the lavender oil permeating the air, the tension in her limbs easing away with warmth of the water. She dried off and then slid her body under the hide covers of her bed, sighing as the soft mattress cradled her body. She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to clear, and fell into a deep sleep.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

YAY!! First kisses. Saeja and Farkas battle their way through Dustman's Cairn. Secrets are revealed, hurt feelings are confronted and kissing ensues.

Chapter Notes

I DO NOT own any original characters. BETHESDA in all its glory thought these people up. This is just my personal fantasy and my take on how things should go. Continued comments would be appreciated as I am just getting into this kind of thing. I always want to see what people think of my style.

I want to make it very clear that Saeja challenges sexist ideals that still run rampant through the game. (ie: Haelga's bunkhouse...confronting Haelga for sleeping with 3 men...like come on, I wanna side with her) So When Farkas gets backwards, she takes him to task.

The sun had just began to turn the sky a brilliant shade of pink when Saeja heard the knock at her door. She motioned to Lydia to return to her breakfast, knowing who was on the other side. She grabbed her gear and opened the door, a brilliant smile on her face, only to see a very red-eyed, grumpy Farkas.

“Gods Farkas, you look as though you never slept.” She turned to Lydia and bade her to get a stamina potion from the lab and then turned to look at the man once more.

“Couldn't clear my head last night,” he grumbled, “which is usually not a problem for me. It’s not like I have much going on upstairs anyways.”

“Why are you always so hard on yourself Farkas?” she asked as Lydia returned and handed her a small bottle. “Here drink this. I made it, so you don’t have to worry about the cost. I want to be sure we are both alert for this.” She handed him the bottle and stared him down until he drank the potion.

He made a face as he swallowed the last drop. “Fine, let’s get going. It’s gonna take us half the day to get there. I figure once we find the shard, we can spend the night and return tomorrow.”

With no further discussion they left the city, and Saeja found herself studying the big Nord. Kodlak’s words from yesterday still nagged at her. Had he meant other men from the Companions would care for her, did he think Farkas might be one of them? He had been sweet and friendly from the moment he invited her to try her luck with the Companions, even giving up his own privacy as incentive for her to join them. She had insulted him at their first meeting and then had blown up on him when he had done nothing wrong, simply because he was Vilkas’ brother. Still, he'd remained friendly with her up until yesterday, when he'd rebuffed all her attempts to speak with him, and even though asked
if he was her friend last night when he had come to plan their trip, now he seemed cold and distant again, barely sparing her a glance. She had thought they were friends, and perhaps there had been some indication he might fancy her, but perhaps his interest in her was gone after the way she'd treated him. She was no longer sure how he felt about her. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about him.

As they walked silently along the road, past the now ruined watchtower, Farkas finally turned to look at her. “A dragon truly did that?” he asked, pointing to the rubble and scorched earth.

She stopped walking and took in the scene before her. She nodded, her mind replaying the fight over and over, making her relive the deaths of five guards. Her memories so vivid she could feel the heat of the dragon’s breath once more.

Farkas gave a low whistle, surveying the damage. “Impressive. I don't know why Kodlak wants you to do this job then. If you killed a dragon then you’ve done more than any of us ever have. I figured the Dragonborn would get a free pass.”

Saeja tore her gaze away and she shoved past Farkas to continue along the road. Her nerves were too raw, the horror still too fresh to even begin to appreciate the privileges her new title might grant her. He caught up to her easily. “Hey I’m sorry ok. I don’t always know what to say, and sometimes I end up saying the wrong thing. Of the two of us, Vilkas is the talker.”

“That’s not saying much for either of you.” she replied sarcastically, thinking of how bull headed Vilkas could be. “Let’s just keep moving ok?”

It was mid afternoon by the time they reached Redoran’s Retreat. They agreed a quick rest and something to eat now would ensure they had the energy to explore the cairn this evening. Though the cave was notorious for bandit activity, they had lucked out and there was no one else about. Saeja sat down on a wooden crate and dumped her pack beside her, digging around in it to find her rations. She handed Farkas an apple and one of the water canteens. He rummaged in his own sack and produced a two meat pies.

The air was thick between them and Saeja hated it. He’d pricked her ire earlier with his comments about her being Dragonborn, but she realized he was just as in awe as anyone else, unable to understand the turmoil she still felt inside. They all just saw a legend come to life, they didn’t see the woman behind it.

“I didn't want all this you know.” she whispered, playing with the apple in her hands.

Farkas head turned sharply to gaze at her. “What do you mean?”

“I wanted to become an alchemist. I was going to Falkreath to learn more about potion making when this whole mess was set in motion. I have people who wanted me to join the stormcloaks, now I have being the Dragonborn to deal with as well. I’m only one woman Farkas. How am I supposed to take on dragons and the Empire?” she explained. “I don't feel like I can do all of this.”

“So don’t.” he replied shortly.

“What?”

“Don't do it all.” he replied. “I mean, I think you can handle it, but I think you’re too worried about the big picture right now and that makes it scary.”

He paused, trying to find the words to explain what he meant. “It’s like, if we were going to clear out a cave of bandits right now. If you start thinking about every single bandit that might be in the cave,
maybe you won't go in. They don't get stopped and they attack a whole village. When I go into a
den, I think about the bandit I come to. I deal with him. Then I find the next one, and the next. Pretty
soon the whole cave is clear and the village is safe. Besides, no one said you had to take on
everything by yourself.”

Saeja mulled over his words, breaking down the steps she knew were expected of her. “I guess
Kodlak did say he will help make sure I get more training before I have to see the Greybeards. The
Jarl said they will take the time to help me learn about my new abilities.” She smiled brilliantly at him
and leaned over, placing a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thanks Farkas. Don't let anyone tell you you're
not smart. You give the best advise.”

Farkas flushed, but then frowned at her, his brow creasing with anger. “I don't think your Ralof
would like you kissing other people.”

“Oh I don't think he’d mind, it’s not like we’re…” she trailed off as his words registered. She jumped
to her feet and backed away. “Wait! How do you know about Ralof. I’ve never said anything about
him.”

She watched him turn red and duck his head. “Farkas! How do you know about Ralof. What did
Kodlak tell you?” she demanded again.

“Kodlak? He never said anything.” replied Farkas. “Look, the other night when you were in my
room again, I got back late and didn't know you were in there. When I saw you on the bed I was
about to leave but you started crying in your sleep and you looked terrified. All I did was grab your
hand, tell you you were safe and you calmed down, but you whispered the name Ralof and nuzzled
my hand.” He looked at her imploringly, trying to make sure she didn't get the wrong idea. “I was
trying not to wake you cause you got so mad at Vilkas, but you were scared.”

“I take it back. You are an idiot Farkas.” she spat. She started pacing in front of him, biting her
thumb. “Ralof is my friend, and yes, I did sleep with him, not that it should concern you. Would you
apologize to every woman you meet about the women you previously slept with before meeting her?
I sincerely doubt that. You can’t hold my past against me when I didn't even know you existed a
week ago.”

“Well, no I guess I wouldn’t. Seems unfair to that women get a reputation for having lovers.” Farkas
admitted sheepishly. “How did you end up meeting him anyway? Was he an old friend?”

Saeja shook her head, her frustration dying down. “When my parents died I had nothing, so I was
making my way to Falkreath, like I said earlier. I was going to go through Shor’s Stone to visit a
family friend and let him know where I was heading, then I planned to stop in Riften and take a
carriage the rest of the way. Long story short, as I was traveling near Darkwater Crossing, an
imperial ambush was staged to catch the Jarl of Windhelm and I got mixed up in the attack. I was
mistaken for a rebel and taken to Helgen to be executed with the rest of the Stormcloaks they'd
captured. Ralof helped me get out of there when the dragon attacked.”

She returned to her wooden crate and bit into her apple, angrily munching on it as Farkas processed
her words.

“Everyone knows Helgen was destroyed, but there isn't much detail. So what happened there?” he
finally asked, his tone kinder again, less melancholy.

“I was on the block, the axe raised above my head when the dragon attacked. In the confusion, Ralof
helped me escape the city. We didn't know if anyone else made it, but since I haven't heard any news
of Ulfric's demise I am starting to think he made it out alive as well. Ralof and I saved each other I
guess, and when we finally got outside the walls he asked me to go to Riverwood with him. He said his sister could help us. Gerdur let me stay with them, helping me until I was recovered, and then asked me to let Jarl Balgruuf know about the dragon. I stayed with her when I went back to Riverwood for the job you gave me. I like her and her husband Hod. Their son is adorable as well, he’ll make a strong fighter one day.” she smiled, remembering how the boy had bombarded her with questions about fighting with daggers. “Farkas, a lot has happened to me in a very short amount of time. I've lost my family family. I have very few people I can say are close to me, but Ralof is one of them.”

Farkas sighed. “Yeah, I’m sorry.” He stood and grabbed his pack, swinging it over his shoulder. “We should keep moving. I’d like to get through the ruin before nightfall if possible. We can make camp tonight and then head back to Whiterun tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure.” she replied softly, grabbing her pack and letting him lead the rest of the way to Dustman’s Cairn.

Once they arrived at the ruins they dropped their traveling gear, hiding it behind some tall grass and flowers. Saeja grabbed her bag of potions and lock picks, checked that her daggers were in place and grabbed her bow.

“Alright,” said Farkas. “You go first. I’m here to give you a hand if things get too hairy in there, but this is your Trial.”

Saeja nodded and pushed open the doors to the ruin and crept inside, eyes sharp, listening for signs of trouble. In the first chamber the draugr were already dead. Their caskets were broken open and the corpses lay still, strewn across the chamber floor. Saeja rubbed the back of her head, remembering her last encounter with the creatures. Spying a chest she opened it and found a dagger and handful of septims. On the stone table she found a spellbook and decided it would fetch a nice price, so she stuffed it in her pack.

“Looks like someone’s already been digging here, and recently. Tread lightly and look for anything out of the ordinary.” Farkas warned.

They continued to trek through the tunnels and it wasn't long before Saeja began to feel like something was wrong. In nearly every room they entered most of the draugr had already been dispatched, with only a few rising from their sleep, but nothing of value was removed. She fought off three draugr wights in one room, but they barely represented a challenge. She shook her head in disbelief when she found a small coin purse and a few gemstones on one table. She had already found multiple potion bottles, coins and gemstones.

Her unease grew when they entered another empty room that had a locked gate blocking the only passage forward. When she searched the chamber she found an ebony sword, clean of dust and a coin purse on one table, with a sack of fresh food beside it. “Farkas, are you sure you don't know anything else about that scholar? This whole place seems off. We’ve barely encountered any live draugr.” she whispered quietly, her stomach beginning to knot. She pointed to the sack she picked up. “Also, look at this. Fresh bread and vegetables.”

“Probably treasure hunters cleared it out a bit ago. It would explain the digging. They probably didn't find a way to open this gate and left.” he said as he stood in front of it. He gripped the bars, trying to lift it open. “See if you can find something that can get this open.” he said with a grunt.

Saeja surveyed the room and checked shelves and the tables, looking for a key or lever. Finally in a small alcove she found a locked chest and a bottle with a very powerful healing potion inside. She made quick work of the lock and was rewarded with a large emerald, some loose septims and a pair
of leather gauntlets unlike any she had ever seen before. The wrist guards were covered in spikes and when the wearer clenched their fists there was a set of vicious looking claws that protected the knuckles and added extra damage. They shimmered bright red with an enchantment. She placed everything in her pack and then scanned the room. Near a corner there was lever, covered in rust, that was almost disintegrated with age. Gripping it tightly she pulled as hard as she could until she felt it give ever so slightly, then grate to the other side of the mechanism.

She was about to yell with excitement when she heard a metal gate slam behind her. Her exit from the room was completely blocked. She tried the lever again, but it refused to budge. She was trapped and Farkas was left smirking at her from the other side of the gate.

“Now look at what you’ve gotten yourself into. I guess it’s a good thing I’m here. Sit tight, I’ll find a way to get you out.” he chuckled.

Saeja’s eyes widened as she suddenly saw movement from the other exit that was no longer blocked. “Farkas watch out!” she cried as a group of five men and women swarmed into the room and surrounded him.

“It’s time to die dog!” yelled the one man, dressed in hide armor.

“We knew you’d be coming here. That was your mistake Companion.” that came from the only orc in the group.

“Which one is that one?” asked a woman, her sword pointed at Farkas’ chest.

“Doesn’t matter. He wears that armor he dies.” replied the first man.

Another one called out. “What of the woman?”

“Maybe we take her with us. She’s pretty enough. But maybe we leave her to starve in that cage slowly, beast.” the orc leered at her, licking his lips. He looked back to Farkas. “Killing you will make an excellent story”

“To bad none of you will be alive to tell it” Farkas growled.

The group descended on Farkas, weapons drawn and slashing. Saeja started screaming at them to stop and banged on the bars of the gate in a futile attempt to help him. One of the men landed a blow to Farkas’ arm, causing him to yell in pain, and bend forward. Saeja cried out again. “Farkas, no, please!”

Suddenly she saw his body start to quake. His armor burst off his form and his muscles contorted as dark fur began to tear through his skin. His arms bulged, claws grew from his fingers and his legs bent awkwardly. Finally he threw his head back, snarling as his face stretched to accommodate sharp fangs. The intruders took a step back as the hulking creature before them released a snarling howl. The beast glanced back to her and then attacked the group.

Saeja watched, mesmerized, as they fell, torn apart by sharp claws, and fangs. The last to die was the orc who taunted Saeja about leaving her to starve. His belly was laid open and he staggered to his knees as his intestines spilled to the floor.

Unable to move from that spot, she watched as the creature sprinted from the room, disappearing down the tunnel. Her breaths came in short, shallow gulps and she could feel her head starting to spin. The gate barring her from the main chamber raised with a grating squeal. She took a cautious
step towards the disemboweled corpse, whimpering.

“I hope I didn’t scare you.” came a soft voice beside her. In her shock from witnessing this massacre she hadn't even noticed Farkas had returned.

She jumped and then fell into his arms, her body quaking. “I thought they were going to kill you.” she cried. She knew she should be horrified by him. He had turned into a creature worthy of her nightmares, yet she couldn't help the way her body shook when she thought he was about to die.

Farkas wrapped his arms around her tightly and breathed in deeply, allowing her scent to intoxicate him. “I wouldn't be worthy of calling myself a companion if I had let myself be killed by that bunch of skeevers.”

The feeling of flesh under her cheek alerted her to the fact Farkas was now only clothed in his loincloth. She blushed and pulled away slowly. “Um, I'll just let you get your armor back on.”

She turned around, listening as Farkas retrieved and put on his armor. “So what was that?” she asked tentatively.

“It’s a blessing given to some of us. We can become like ferocious wild beasts. Wolves specifically.” came the reply. “You can turn around now.”

His expression was guarded when she turned around to face him. “Who else?” she murmured.

“Only the members of The Circle have the beast-blood. It was a well kept secret until now.” he replied solemnly. “We should keep moving. Still the draugr to worry about and we need to get the shard.”

“Farkas. Who were they?”

“Bad people who don’t like werewolves. So they don’t like us Companions either. They call themselves the Knights of the Silver Hand. You can see the weapons they carry are made of silver. It's the one kind of weapon that is really does damage to us.”

Saeja nodded. “Ok then. Let's get moving.”

As she moved past him towards the next part of the crypt he grabbed her hand, pulling her back to face him. “Are you sure you are ok? I don't want you to be scared of me.”

“I'm not afraid of you Farkas.” she replied, staring into his eyes, noting they were storm grey with concern. She squeezed his hand and they instantly the brightened again. “Still the sooner we get out of here the better.”

Working closely together Saeja and Farkas made their way through the remainder of the crypt. With every silverhand they encountered Saeja ended their life as ruthlessly as they threatened to end hers. She found the best way to deal with the remaining draugr was to sneak up to the ones that still slumbered and slit their throats, or roasting the ones that patrolled the halls with her flames. By the time they reached the innermost chamber her hands were coated in blood and dried flesh and she felt weak from all the energy she used to power her flames.

The room reminded her of Bleak Falls Barrow. The room was clearly the main tomb, with sarcophaguses lining the walls around the steps that lead to a stone platform with a large table resting on it. Behind that stood a familiar sight. A tall curved wall stood with runes and a dragon’s head
carved into the stone. The runes glowed blue and that low chanting hum echoed in her ears. As she walked up the raised platform to the stone table she could see the shard of Wuuthrad. The table also contained a few potions and another one of those purple gemstones that pulsed when she picked it up. Remembering what happened in the last crypt she had been in, she first went to the wall and place her hand on the carvings. This time the power only whispered through her, causing a tickling sensation as it gathered again in her mind. When it crystallized into one focused thought, it formed the word YOL. That fire magic the dragon from Whiterun kept shouting. She thought to herself.

She felt Farkas wrap his arms around her as the world came back into focus. “I don’t know what that was all about, but warn me if you do that again. You disappeared for a second, surrounded by blue light. I thought it was a trap.”

“I’ll explain once we get out of here.” she replied and walked back to the table to grab the shard. “Before I touch this, be alert. The last time I was through one of these crypts there was a really nasty draugr lord I had to take down.”

Sure enough the second her hand touched the shard and pocketed it, there was a thundering crack that echoed endlessly as multiple draugr pushed the lids from their sarcophagus and snarling, rushed the duo. Unable to draw any more magic to her hands Saeja struggled to kill the draugr with her daggers. She aimed her hits low, taking out as many of them at the knees as she could. Once they couldn't support themselves she went for the kill by plunging her daggers into their head, or ripping through their throats.

With every swing of his battle axe Farkas ended each creature that rushed him. One draugr, covered head to toe in ancient nord armor, including a helm with large pointed horns, proved to be more difficult. The creature sucked in a deep breath and then growled a shout at Farkas, throwing the man against a empty sarcophagus. Saeja heard the sickening crack of his head against the side. When he didn't move Saeja panicked and began to shoot arrows at the creature from the top of the steps where she had been forced by her last foe.

The draugr lord whirled on her, and began advancing up the steps. Just as she saw it begin to prepare to shout at her, she remembered her own abilities. “FUS!” she bellowed at the creature, staggering it and forcing it back down the steps. When the creature recovered it looked at her with it’s icy blue eyes that glowed with the magic that animated these creatures. It didn't advance again, seemingly surprised by her ability to shout as well. Taking the opportunity she loaded her bow again and began pelting it with arrows. The creature roar with anger and stomped forward. Shooting her last arrow, she saw it stagger backwards, but it refused to go down.

Saeja sent a silent prayer to the Divines and concentrated on her flame magic again. Putting all her energy into it, she shot a short burst of fire at the draugr and watched as it was engulfed in the flames. It snarled defiantly, but was done in, its dried flesh flaking to ash leaving nothing but a burnt out skeleton.

She collapsed to her knees, body quaking uncontrollably. She managed to crawl slowly to Farkas and pulling his head into her lap she uncorked the powerful healing potion she had found, pouring some of the mixture on the the growing lump on his head and then coaxing him to swallow the rest of it. After a few minutes she could see the swelling begin to reduce and he opened his eyes.

“How are you feeling Farkas?”

He blinked rapidly as her face came in into focus. She was smiling at him and his stomach knotted. “Better now, but I think my head’s gonna hurt for a while. That one was tough. How did you manage to kill it?”
She chuckled at him. “I shouted back at it. I don’t think it expected that, so when it hesitated I set it on fire.”

She helped Farkas sit up and rest against the stone casket. As he became more focused and his head stopped spinning, she drank a stamina restorative and went to check the bodies of the draugr, pocketing loose septims and weapons. One was carrying an enchanted sword and another had boots that glowed green. By the time she finished she had a purse full of coins, more weapons and armor, two silver necklaces and a gold ring. She also found three more purple stones. When she returned to Farkas he had managed to stand, though he admitted to her his vision was still a bit blurry.

She held out the purple gems, which glowed and pulsed. “What the heck are these Farkas? I’ve never seen them before. They aren’t jewels, but I can’t figure out what they’d be used for.”

“Soul gems. I think Aela called them soul gems. You’ll have to ask her more about it, but I think they’re used with enchanted items.”

She added the gems to her pack and then wrapped her arm around Farkas. “Come on big fella, let’s get out of here and I’ll set up camp. I don’t know about you but I’m ready to get the heck out of here and see the sky again.”

She looked around the chamber, paying close attention to the upper ledge of to her right, seeking the exit she was sure would be here. When she spotted the false back that had fallen away on an upright sarcophagus she told Farkas to lean on her for support. They made their way up the wooden ramp to the ledge and traveled the length of the secret tunnel to the chamber they started in, then exited the ruin.

As they stepped into the night air Saeja sighed with relief. “Ok Farkas, can you managed the stairs? I’ll go get camp set up.”

He nodded and she left him to climb the winding steps to of the ruin as she grabbed their packs and set up their tents. By the time Farkas emerged, she had their camp set up and had a small fire burning for warmth. As he approached she handed him another healing potion. “Drink this, it will help with the concussion.”

Grimacing he downed the bitter liquid in one swig, then settled onto his bedroll. She handed him some bread with cheese and another apple. He grabbed his back and pulled out a few venison chops. “It’s better if I eat meat after a fight like that.” he grinned.

“So, does this mean I have to become a werewolf to be part of the companions?” she asked after a few bites.

“No, it’s a gift to be given. It would be monstrous to force it upon someone. Just because the rest of the circle took the blessing doesn’t mean you have to.” he replied. “I can understand how frightening it must be to an outsider.”

“Well it certainly was a surprise.” she responded. “To be honest Farkas, I was terrified.” She hung her head when he looked at her.

“I thought you said you weren’t afraid of me.” he accused.

“I’m not afraid of you Farkas. I mean, well, not anymore.” she picked at a loose thread on her shirt before continuing. “That form, it’s terrifying. At least at first. The change seemed so violent, and I didn’t know what was happening. I’ve never seen anything that killed so viciously before. I didn’t think you would kill me, but I’ve never seen a werewolf before. I didn’t know if it was still you in
there, or just the beast.”

“I’m always in complete control Saeja. We all are. Some lesser beings can’t control it and become mindless beasts, but not us.”

Saeja nodded and then continued with her meal. They sat in silence until, having finished her food, Saeja licked her lips and rose up to her knees. Shuffling closer to him, she probed his head wound, checking to see if the swelling had gone down any more. She wanted to keep him awake until she was sure the concussion was healed.

Farkas moaned when she ran her fingers through his hair, over the bump, but it wasn't entirely in pain. He clenched his fists to keep from hauling her into his lap. Satisfied that the swelling seemed to be going down, she told Farkas she would be right back, then ran back down into the tunnel and brought back a pile of the armor and weapons she had left near the exit of the chamber. Once she had it all piled beside her pack she returned to the fire.

“What’s it like?” She asked as she sat back down beside him, closer this time so she could lean against him. She was tired too and oblivious to the tension that filled the air. “The change, being a werewolf?”

“Well, I think that there… Wait.” he pulled away slightly. “We can’t talk about it. You’re not full-blooded yet. I shouldn’t have even changed in front of you. You have to keep it a secret, the other new bloods can't know.” He groaned loudly, “Damn, especially don't tell Vilkas about my changing. He’s gonna be angry.”

“He doesn't scare me either” she replied. “He’s all talk, even if he did threaten me before we left.”

“Threatened you? He was supposed to be apologizing.” Farkas grumbled. “Man he is really out of it around you.”

Saeja shrugged, “He thought I’d hurt you somehow. Like I could do that. You’re twice my size and can change into a werewolf. I don't even think the shouts I’ve learned would save me if you decided I needed to die.” She shuddered, thinking of the orc left to rot in the tunnels below them.

Farkas grabbed her chin and turned her face to look at him. “I don't know how many times I have to tell you. I won't hurt you.”

Saeja was about to make a snarky reply but then she saw how his eyes had become as dark as the shadows of twilight with intensity. Swallowing hard, she thought about Kodlak’s advice. “Farkas, I’m not afraid of you. Never you.” she whispered, then she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

When she pulled back she saw the desire and confusion in his expression. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I wanted to. Didn't you want me to?” she asked.

In reply Farkas bent his head and kissed her softly. When he felt her lean into the kiss, deepening it, he growled in approval. She ran her fingers up his armor, twisting her body to face him and pushed him slowly back onto his bed roll without breaking the kiss. Her body hovered above his. His hand came up to grip her waist tightly and her pulled her atop him, with her legs on either side of his hips. When his tongue lightly traced her lips, she whimpered, allowing him to slip inside and twirl it around her own. Without thinking Saeja slid her hands into his hair.

“Damnit!” Farkas ripped his head away as her finger made contact the lump on his head.
“Oh Farkas, I’m so sorry.” she cried. Then she started to laugh. She couldn't help it. “Oh, don’t tell Vilkas. I promised I wouldn't hurt you”

Farkas shot her a dirty look before breaking into laughter himself. “This might not be the best time for this anyways.”

Saeja climbed off him and crawled over to her own bedroll, to resist temptation she told herself, and pulled her covers over her to ward of the spring chill. “I guess you had questions about the blue light?” she said as she settled in.

“Wanna start from the beginning? Seems like there’s a lot I don't know about you. I figure before any more of whatever that was continues,” he said gesturing between the two of them, “maybe I should know more.”

Saeja nodded, then began to tell her story again, from the beginning, starting with losing her family all the way to her fight with the dragon. “You know the rest. The Jarl gave me breezehome and Kodlak sent me on this trail to prove my worth to the Companions. I think the dragon walls have something to do with being Dragonborn. The first time it happened it hurt, really badly. Thank goodness I touched it before the draugr woke up or I wouldn't have been able to defend myself. This time it just flowed through me and then centered in my head, revealing a word to me. I’m hoping the Greybeards can tell me more about this. Right now I feel like I’m stumbling around in the dark.”

“Might not have hurt cause now you know you’re the Dragonborn, so you’re mind can accept the words.” he replied.

“I don't know why everyone teases you about not being smart Farkas. You always seem to have very insightful things to say.” she responded, smiling back as she saw a grin spread over his face.

They chatted long into the night, until their fire was burning low. Farkas heard her fall asleep first, her breathing soft and steady. As he drifted off as well he couldn't help but sigh with pleasure. His head was beginning to feel better, and Saeja had passed her Trial honorably. Tomorrow she would become a full member of the circle. His last thought as he closed his eyes was if he could just convince her to keep him around, everything would be perfect
When Saeja and Farkas arrived back at Jorrvaskr the next evening Vilkas was waiting for them at the top of the steps. “Well brother?”

“She completed her Trial with honor, brother.” Farkas replied, nodding his head.

“Fine, follow me new-blood.”

Saeja and Farkas trailed behind Vilkas as he led them to the training yard behind the hall. The sun was setting, but even in the shadows she could make out Kodlak, Aela and Skjor. Vilkas and Farkas took their places in the circle, while Kodlak gestured to her to stand in front of him. She shot Farkas a quick look and he responded with a reassuring smile.

"Brothers and Sisters of the Circle, today we welcome a new soul into our mortal fold. This woman has endured, has challenged and has showed her valor. Who will speak for her?” Kodlak’s voice rang out across the courtyard, low and powerful.

Farkas replied, "I stand witness for the courage of the soul before us."
"Would you raise your shield in her defense?" Kodlak queried.

"I would stand at her back, that the world might never overtake us."

Saeja looked at the faces of the circle members. Their reverence for this ceremony clear in their serious expressions. Kodlak and Farkas continued back and forth, inducting her into the inner circle.

"And would you raise your sword in her honor?"

"It stands ready to meet the blood of her foes."

"Would you raise a mug in her name?"

"I would lead the song of triumph as our mead hall revelled in her stories."

"Then this judgment of this Circle is complete. Her heart beats with fury and courage that have united the Companions since the days of the distant green summers. Let it beat with ours, so the mountains may echo and our enemies may tremble at the call."

Saeja felt the the air thicken with a type of old magic, binding her to the companions as all five of them responded. "It shall be so!"

Her heart swelled with pride as as Skjor and Aela congratulated her by patting her on the back or shaking her hand in comradery. Aela laughed as she stated she was glad to have another woman in the circle and invited Saeja to hunt with her sometime.

“I owe Kodlak a drink and you an apology.” she heard Vilkas say as he approached. “I didn't think you would make it.”

She smirked. “I think you owe me an apology for more than that.”

The man scowled. “Yes, I suppose I do. I didn't mean to invade your privacy like that the first night you were here. In my defense, you were in my brothers room, and I never knock.”

Saeja rolled her eyes, knowing it was as much of an apology as she was going to get from the stubborn Nord. She extended her hand to him, shaking it firmly when he grasped it. She felt his grip tighten, trying to overpower her, but she held her ground. Before she let him go she yanked him closer and whispered in his ear. “I hope you enjoyed the show, cause it’ll be the only time you ever see me in that state of undress”

Vilkas pulled back abruptly. She laughed as he hurried inside the hall without looking back.

“Well my dear girl, you’re one of us now. I trust you won't disappoint.” Kodlak beamed at her.

“Live you life as you see fit, but live it such that your Shield-Siblings would be proud to fight at your side.”

“I won’t disappoint.” she replied confidently.

Seaja glanced around the courtyard, ensuring no one else remained. “Can I speak to you about something?” she asked quietly. When he nodded she took a deep breath, hoping Farkas would forgive her. “Is it true the companions are werewolves?”
Kodlak’s eyes widen with surprise. Frowning he responded. “I see you’ve been allowed to know some secrets before your appointed time.”

The old man sighed, and Saeja suddenly realized how weary he looked. His voice held bitterness as he continued. “Yes, it’s true. Not every Companion though, only members of the Circle share the blood of the beast. Some take it to more than others.”

“You sound as if you no longer wish to be gifted as such.” she replied solemnly.

“Well, I grow old. My mind turns towards the horizon, to Sovngarde. I worry that Shor won’t call an animal warrior as he would a true Nord warrior. I relished in the power it granted me as a young man, but I was blinded by my thirst for glory.” he replied, sitting himself down in one of the tables under the veranda.

“The blood lends you strength and the instincts of of a wolf. Our family is like a pack, providing comfort and security in numbers, but as all packs, there are disagreements. Living as beasts draws our souls closer to the Daedric lord, Hircine. There are some who prefer eternity in his hunting grounds, but I am first and always a true Nord. I crave the fellowship of Sovngarde and long to see it’s hallowed halls.”

Saeja sat beside him and looked at him, really looked at him. He was ill, she realized suddenly. Even in the shadows of dusk she could see it in the yellow tinge of his skin and the almost imperceptible shake in his hands. “You’re ill Kodlak, dying even. Do the others know?”

“No, and you are not to tell them.” he replied fiercely, “Aela and Skjor respect me but will insist on my stepping down and there is still too much for me to do. Vilkas and Farkas are like sons to me. My own son was lost to me and those boys filled my life with joy. They would be devastated if they knew.”

Saeja nodded, tears gathering in her eyes. She would miss the old man too and she’d only known him for a week. She couldn't imagine how much it would kill the brothers to lose him.

“So you wish to find a cure for the beast blood before the rot takes you.”

“Yes, but it’s no easy matter.” The man place a hand firmly on her shoulder. “ But you don’t need to share the worries of an old warrior. This day is to rejoice in your bravery! Go, join your siblings in the mead hall and revel in your triumph. Oh, and speak to Eorlund for a better weapon than whatever those are.” he advised, pointing to her daggers.

Saeja raced up to the forge and allowed Eorlund to congratulate her. Once he finished saying he knew she would make it, he offered her a choice of Skyforge weapons. She oooo'd and awe’d over each weapon, but ultimately chose a sword, knowing she should improve her skills with one. She bid the smith goodnight as he returned home to his wife and she made her way down to the hall.

The celebration was in full swing as she entered. Torvar was three sheets to the wind and following Njada around like a lost puppy. Ria and Athis sat with Vignar and Brill, eyes wide as Vignar regaled them with tales of his youth.

Looking around the room for Farkas she spotted him sitting in the corner with Vilkas in what looked to be a heated argument. Grabbing a bottle of mead she joined Skjor and Aela and was invited to fill them in on the details of her trial. When she reached the part where the silver-hands had ambushed them, she left out the fact she had seen Farkas change. Instead she told them he had taken on all five
of them at once and succeeded, making her envious of his skill.

Aela and skjor exchanged skeptical looks. “Did he tell you who the silver-hands are?” demanded Skjor.

Saeja pasted on an innocent expression. “He implied they are a group of bandits who hate the companions because you’ve fought with them before and had them running like frightened children” she replied, eyes completely blank.

The pair seemed to relax at this and asked her to continue, inquiring more about the draugr they encountered in the final chamber. As she finished up she felt a strong hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Farkas smiling at her and holding another bottle of mead out to her. “You need to catch up,” he urged, “The rest of us are already in our cups.”

Aela and Skjor excused themselves and Farkas sat in the empty chair across from her. Vignar and Brill joined them and Saeja was delighted when Vignar began his tales of his youthful pursuits. The mead flowed freely for hours and soon Saeja was feeling the effects herself. She spoke to all the members of the companions as the night wore on, swapping stories and trading fighting tips. Torvar promised her some lessons in swordsmanship, but Saeja declined, seeing the jealousy in Njada’s eyes. “I appreciate it Torvar, but Vilkas has already promised me lessons.”

The man in question was walking by, seemingly on his way to bed. Hearing her words he turned to glare at her. “I have, have I?”

Standing, she sauntered over to him and poked his chest. “Yes, you have. Don't you remember? As part of your apology for barging in on me the other night.” she giggled at his frown. “Not that I understand why. I whupped your butt last time. I figured you’d have been humiliated enough.”

Njada, Athis and Torvar roared with laughter, but Saeja saw the fury rising in him. Farkas jumped up, “I think you’ve had enough to drink Saeja. Perhaps I should get you home.”

“Your stupidity could have gotten my brother killed. Trapping yourself in the catacombs. If he hadn’t been there, or if those damned silver-bloods had killed him, you wouldn't be here to celebrate. You would be rotting away, a lost legend of history. I told you if you put him in danger you would answer to me.” Vilkas spat.

“What is your problem with me Vilkas? I have done nothing to you and you have scorned me from the start. I killed a bloody dragon.” she cried, “I retrieved a shard of your most treasured artifact. Sure, Farkas helped me in there, but it’s my understanding that that is the point of being shield-siblings. You have each other’s back when needed. You fight beside one another, not with each other. What will it take for you to stop being such an bull-headed ass about me joining the companions?”

Silence filled the hall. Even Skjor was staring at her with an open mouth. Though the circle was thought of as equals, Vilkas commanded a lot of respect around Jorrvaskr and she was still new to the pack.

Saeja was right in his face by this point, standing on her tiptoes to confront him. “You don't have to like me Vilkas, but at least treat me with the same respect you would any of the other companions.” she pleaded.

When he only stubbornly growled in response she sighed. “Fine, just remember you asked for this.” Before he could guess her intent she leaned back and then headbutted him in the face, catching his nose with her forehead and causing him to stagger backwards, blood gushing.
Even in her drunken state she could see the man begin to lose control. Now that she had seen one transformation she recognised the signs of his hold slipping. She watched as his nails grew sharp points.

“Brother no!” yelled Farkas.

Saeja braced herself for the punch she knew was coming but before he could land a single hit Kodlak’s voice bellowed through the hall. “That is enough!”

The man approached them all. “That is enough.” he said again, calmer now, and waved off the rest of the companions. The new-bloods slunk to their room, with Aela and Skjor close behind. Vignar and Brill had departed hours earlier. Kodlak stood in front of Saeja and Vilkas, disappointment digging deep lines in his face.

“Saeja Skyborn, I told you not to disappoint and here you are provoking fights with a Shield-brother.”

Saeja hung her head in shame, refusing to meet the man’s eyes. No doubt they had woken the old man from his much needed sleep.

“And you Vilkas, how dare you come so close to losing control like that. She may know our secret but the rest of the new-bloods do not!” Vilkas whipped his head up to stare at her in shock.

“This will not do,” Kodlak continued in his tirade. “This silly feud ends NOW. You both bring dishonor to your names by acting like pups! Shake hands and sleep on your anger. It WILL be a thing of the past by morning.” The old man’s tone brooked no argument.

Saeja turned to Vilkas and extended her hand to him. He grasped it firmly, this handshake lacking the same power struggle as their last one. She couldn't be sure, but she thought there may be a glimmer of grudging respect in his eyes now, but she couldn't fathom why, when they had both just been reprimanded in front of each other.

Kodlak stared at them as they turned to face him again. “Vilkas, you will be giving her personal lessons in swordplay. I promised we would train her before she starts her journey as Dragonborn, and by the Divines she will be trained by the best swordsman in the companions.” He turned to her, “And you will listen to every word he says. He deserves your respect as an experienced fighter. I will not have this become a battle of wills. Now get to bed the both of you before I begin to think I am being too lenient.”

Vilkas followed behind the old man, but took a moment to spare a glance at his brother, who was following Saeja out of the building, calling after her. He shook his head, releasing a sigh and retreated to the solitude of his room.

Saeja raced out of the doors of Jorrvaskr, and was halfway down the steps when she felt Farkas grip her arm and swing her around to face him. “I know, I’m sorry!” she cried, refusing to look at him. “I pushed him too far.”

“Why?” he demanded. “What made you keep teasing him like that? Even after I tried to stop the fight before it began. Our control isn't good when we are angry or threatened and you made him feel both.”

“I don't know Farkas. Something about your brother gets under my skin. He is always trying to put me in my place. I don't mind being new and having to prove myself, but he treats me like I’m some
doe eyed teenager who wants to play at greatness. I have proven myself against a dragon, and draugr. I thought the whole point of accepting me into the companions was to show I had proven myself a warrior?"

“He’s not himself Saeja and I don't know why.” Farkas sighed and wiped his hands down his face. “My brother is as loyal a man as you will ever meet. He is honorable and a fierce warrior, but lately he is moody and short tempered. I think he spends too much time cooped up with Kodlak and not enough time running jobs to burn off energy.”

Saeja went still with sudden insight. Gods, he knows. He’s guessed the same as I have. Suddenly she felt sorry for him. The burden of Kodlak’s illness must be awful for him to shoulder alone.

She took Farkas’ hands in her own and rested her head on his chest. “I’ll apologize in the morning Farkas. I promise you. I’ll even do my best to ignore what a pest he is and try to learn from him as Kodlak demands.” She stood on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “I should get home to bed.”

“I’ll walk you there.” he replied, quelling her protests with a kiss. “Let me makes sure you get there safe. I know you are more than able to handle yourself, but let me pretend just this once”

She laughed, hugging him close. “Alright, lead the way.”

He took her hand in his again and led her through the streets of Whiterun to her house. No candles burned inside, indicating Lydia was abed for the night. She unlocked the door, opening it silently and stepped inside, pulling Farkas in behind her. Stepping into his arms she pulled him close, lifting her lips up for a kiss. When his lips met hers she sighed, letting him deepen it as his arms wrapped snugly around her waist. Moments passed before he pulled away.

“I should go. You need your rest.” he said softly.

“Please stay?” she requested, pressing her lips to his chin.

Farkas nodded and closed the door behind them, checking the lock. When they reached her room, it was bathed in moonlight, casting shadows on the walls. Farkas knew what she wanted from him, but could also tell she was incredibly tired and needed rest as much as he did. He helped out of her armor, then shrugged off his own while she found her night shirt and climbed into bed. He joined her, sighing at the softness of the mattress and the warmth of her body beside his.

Their lips met again softly, as she curled into his arms. His hands gently rubbed her back as she pressed light kisses on his jaw. When she yawned he pushed her away, tucking her into his arm and laying back against the bed. “Go to sleep my dragon-slayer. You can barely keep your eyes open. I’m too tired to be of much use anyways.”

Her protests were weak this time as sleep overcame her senses. The last thing she remembered was playing with the hair on his chest as she cuddled closer to his warmth, and feeling his lips on her forehead.

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When Farkas opened his eyes the sun was streaming through her bedroom window. He could feel her body curled around him, her leg thrown over his and her arm resting along his chest. He felt his body responding to the way she was pressed against him and stifled a moan. He heard her yawn and felt her nuzzle his chest. He thought she was still asleep until his thigh tingled as she traced her fingers lightly over his skin, brushing the tip of his erection.

“Ah! By the nine, that feels amazing.” he moaned as she clasped him in her hand and began to stroke
him and nibble his neck.

Farkas shifted, turning towards her and captured her mouth in a deep kiss. His hand slipped under her nightshirt, running along the small of her back. He moaned quietly when he felt her slide her tongue inside his mouth as he had done to her the other night. He rolled onto his back, pulling her along, so that she sat astride him. Sitting up, he lifted the hem of her shirt over her head, and dropped it to the ground.

He stared in awe once he finally saw what was beneath her clothes. Her body was muscular and hard with curving hips and pale skin. He could see a light smattering of freckles on her shoulders that ran down her chest, over her small, but firm breasts, which were tipped with pale brown nipples. They tightened into firm peaks as he gazed at them. He pulled her closer, lifting his head and took one bud into his mouth, sucking gently at it, drawing a low moan from her lips. His hand came up to cup and knead her other breast as he licked and kissed the flesh of the first one.

Saeja mewled and arched her back to allow him better access to her breasts. The juncture of her thighs ached with longing and her folds became damp as her pleasure mounted. She moved her hips against him, running her silky folds along his manhood, inviting him take her. She dug her nails into his shoulders, biting back a sharp cry as he bit her nipple firmly in response.

“Please Farkas, please.” she begged softly, crushing herself against him and nibbling his jaw line.

He law back down and gripped her hips firmly, guiding her movements until he was able to slip his tip inside her. Saeja’s face contorted with pleasure as she tilted her pelvis slightly, allowing her to slide down the length of him. She let out as low moan as her walls stretched to accommodate him. If she hadn't been so aroused already it might have stung, but as he began to move his hips, he slid in and out of her easily.

Farkas let her set the pace, loving the way her breasts bounced with every thrust. He reached up, cupping them both with his hands, massaging the soft flesh, causing her to gyrate her hips faster. He hands rested on his chest and he felt her begin to use her arms to lift herself off his manhood and then plunge herself down on him, hard and fast. Her breathing began coming out in gasping cries. Farkas’s vision swam as his pleasure overcame him. He grabbed her hips and began to thrust into her, pulling her down against him with every thrust, ensuring he buried himself as deeply as he could. He roared as he came inside her, his hips jerking spasmodically.

Saeja whimpered, her own release still just out of reach. She tried not to be too disappointed as Farkas pulled her down to kiss her. “I’m sorry Saeja, I couldn't stop myself.”

Before she could answer he slid her off him, pushing her onto her back and knelt beside the bed. He gripped her waist and pulled her hips to the edge of the bed, and placed her legs on either side of his head, resting them on his shoulders. “I’ll be better next time.” he swore, then he lowered his mouth, closing it over her entrance, making her yelp when he drove his tongue deep inside her. He lapped at her entrance over and over, parting her folds and making her cry out in pleasure.

When she looked up at him so see why he hesitated, her eyes were midnight blue with desire. Farkas smiled at her before he lowered his mouth, closing it over her entrance, making her yelp when he drove his tongue deep inside her. He lapped at her entrance over and over, parting her folds and making her cry out in pleasure.

When he dragged his tongue over over the bundle of nerves at the top of her slit, she bucked her hips
involuntarily. Closing his lips over the bud, he sucked at it, then nibbled gently. Her moans grew louder and more frequent as he alternated between sucking and licking.

Saeja fingers ran through his hair, then fist a handful when he slid one of his thick fingers inside of her. Her skin burned and she writhed about in ecstasy as he slowly pumped his finger in and out of her. When he added a second finger she began to move her hips in time with his fingers, meeting his thrusts. Just when she thought she couldn't take any more he slipped his fingers from her and stood. She cried out in protest until she felt his hand lift her rear off the bed slightly. She shrieked in pleasure as she felt him sheath himself inside her again, pumping furiously. He pressed his thumb against her clitoris, swirling it around her engorged nub. All the tension inside her gathered in her loins until she couldn't take it anymore. Her body tightened and her climax exploded inside her, ripping a scream from her throat.

Farkas felt his own climax begin when her sheath tightened unbearably. His own roar echoed her as he pressed her against the mattress, pounding his seed deep inside her. They lay there, unmoving for a few moments, Farkas still buried inside her and trapped between her legs.

When he could move, he lifted his face from her chest and pressed hips lips against her neck making her whimper. “Please, it’s too much right now.” she murmured.

Farkas slid himself out of her, and moved to lay beside her on the bed.

“I hope I’m not dreaming, because I never want to wake up.”

She curled her body around his. “This is no dream you dummy. I’m right here.” she replied kissing his cheek.

“Dummy huh? Some people don’t think I’m smart and those people get my fists. But you I like, so I’ll let it slide this time.”

She laughed and hugged him tightly. “Anyone who calls you dumb will have to answer to me. I’ll see they are punished swiftly for their insults.”

“So what are we going to do about your punishment then? You called me dumb.” he teased.

“I thought you said you’d let this one slide?” she replied cheekily.

“I did, didn’t I. Pity, I can think of a hundred ways to punish you.” he responded, pinching her nipple and smothering her moan with a kiss.

Just then a knock at her door caused them to jump apart. “My Thane, a very insistent man is at the door telling me to inform you to get your rear out of bed and meet him at the training yard in 10 minutes, or you will regret it.”

“Tell him I said to stop being an ass and I’ll be there in fifteen.” Saeja called back. She kissed Farkas one last time and rose from the bed, her body aching in a good way.

“I’ll be away tonight,” he said as they dressed. “There is a skeever horde out near Rorikstead causing havoc. I’ll be heading out to take care of it.”

“Of course,” she replied, but secretly she was disappointed he would be leaving her so soon. “If I have to leave before you get back, I’ll leave my location with Tilma.”

“I’ll be leaving this afternoon. I want to stop at Warmaidens before I go. I’ve been waiting for Ulfberth to get in some gear and I hope it came in on his last shipment.”
Saeja grabbed her weapons and the two headed back to Jorrvaskr. Once they reached the entrance, she reached up, pulled his head down for a deep kiss and waved him inside as she walked around to the training yard. When she came around the corner she could see Vilkas standing there, sword in hand with a scowl on his face.

She approached, trying to gauge his mood. When he didn’t immediately snap at her she made the first move of truce. “Look, I’m sorry. I should not have provoked you last night. It was a childish response to being angry at you and I could have handled it better.”

Vilkas’s brows rose in surprise. “I’m sorry too. You were right last night. I haven't treated you fairly from the beginning. I have had a lot on my mind the last while, but it was no excuse to take out my frustrations and worries on you.”

Saeja nodded her acceptance of his apology. “To be honest, I do prefer taking sword training with you instead of Torvar. I was really impressed with your skills when you tested me. Filnjar concentrated my training on daggers and stealth due to my size, but I should be able to handle a sword better.”

Vilkas swallowed his growing surprise and extended his hand. “How about we start this over, fresh? I’m Vilkas, welcome to the companions.”

She flashed him a brilliant smile and returned the handshake firmly. “Saeja Skyborn, Dragonborn of legend. I shall try to bring honor to the companions by learning what I can from my shield-siblings.”

“Well then, since you claim swords are your weakest skill we will concentrate on that.” Vilkas stated and pointed her to the weapons rack and indicating she pick up a practice sword.

They spent the better part of the morning sparring. Vilkas launched attack after attack on her, to sharpen her defensive skills. Every time he made a kill move he would stop and explain how he broke through her defense, and gave her tips to defend against it, then ran her through the drill again.

As the morning waxed into early afternoon, Saeja was damp with sweat and cranky. Vilkas saw her losing focus and aimed a blow to her head, making her lift her arms to block him but leaving her lower half open. Vilkas changed mid attack, hooking his leg behind hers knees and swept the legs from under her. She yelped as she fell hard on her hip then looked up into his steely grey eyes when he stood over her, sword blade under her chin.

“You lost focus whelp. A mistake like that during a real battle will get you killed.” He scolded her.

“I know” She grumbled and used her sword to knock his away from her neck. “I’m out of practice and I’m still tired. It’s not an excuse, but could we break for lunch? I didn't eat this morning.”

Vilkas sighed but grudgingly agreed. Truth be told he had skipped breakfast this morning too and his stomach growled. She sat at one of the outdoor tables that was piled high with fresh fruit and salmon steaks. The bread was fresh and hot and the goat cheese soft and smooth. Vilkas joined her and watched as she crafted her favorite snack, bread with goat cheese and apple slices.

“That looks tasty.” he said, grabbing some bread and spreading the cheese over it. “But if you add snowberry jam to it, I think it may be better.” As if to prove his point he added the bright red jam and then sliced apples over it. “Here, tell me what you think.” he said, holding the bread out to her.

Saeja took a tentative bite, chewing slowly to savor the sweet burst of jam. “Hmmm, I think I prefer mine the way it is. Yours tastes good, but I think the jam overpowers the tart apples.” She returned the favor by holding out her meal for him to try. As his lips closed around the bread this tip of his
tongue brushed her finger. Saeja jerked slightly in surprise as a small jolt of pleasure ran through her.

Vilkas had closed his eyes as he chewed, missing her reaction. “I think you’re right,” he conceded, “but I will enjoy mine anyways.”

Saeja served herself some salmon and poured a tankard of cold, clear water. She watched Vilkas as he ate, enjoying the silence and feeling as though the air was beginning to clear between them.

Aela entered the yard from the hall and approached them. “Have you seen Farkas? We received more details about Rorikstead that I wanted to pass on before he leaves.”

“He wasn’t in his room this morning when I awoke.” replied Vilkas. “He must have left early this morning.”

Without thinking Saeja replied. “He told me he was leaving this afternoon after stopping by Warmaidens to see if Ulfberth had received an item he requested in the last shipment. I think he was going to stock up on some healing potions at Arcadias as well.”

Aela chuckled, “And how is it you saw Farkas before Vilkas did this morning?”

Saeja blushed vividly, but lifted her chin and replied. “He walked me home last night, and didn’t return to his own bed.”

Aela burst out laughing. “Good for you Dragonborn. I’ve always wondered about him. You’ll have to share secrets with me sometime.”

Vilkas tamped down the sudden burst of anger that raged through his body. “She will do no such thing. I will not have my brothers personal life bandied about for all to see.” He stood abruptly and stormed away.

Saeja shrugged at Aela, who seemed shocked by his outburst. Apparently Farkas had been correct, Vilkas was not himself lately and the other companions were starting to notice. She excused herself and raced after the man. She waylayed in the market by Ysolda, who asked if she had time to discuss inn management yet. Saeja mumbled an apology, promising another time and scanned the crowd looking for her quarry. Vilkas had reached the city gates and was disappearing beyond the walls.

‘Vilkas wait!’ she called, dashing towards the closing gates. “Guard, hold the gate.”

“Yes, my Thane” he replied.

Saeja caught up with him as he reached the stables. She grabbed his arm, whirling him around to face her. “Vilkas stop!” she gasped. “What is your problem? We were finally having a moment of peace and you just blew up.”

“I do not need to deal with my brother’s broken heart on top of everything else I am dealing with!” he bellowed at her.

“What makes you think I would break his heart?” she asked solemnly as she stepped back and crossed her arms.

“I know about your other man. You jumped so quickly from the arms of one to another.” When she would have protested, he cut her off sharply. “And if not him, it will be another. You are the Dragonborn, you’re strong and powerful and beautiful.” he cried. “You will have men following you to the ends of earth to please you. Where will that leave Farkas then? When he feels, his emotions
run deep and disappointment cuts deeper. I will have to pick up the pieces of a broken man.” He turned and continued to storm off, trying to work off some of his anger.

Saeja stood unmoving for a moment, processing his words. She hadn’t considered the idea of attracting a following but knew the truth of his words. She had attracted men before, but as the Dragonborn she would be in high demand, both romantically and politically. All she could hope for was becoming strong enough to control her own destiny. She looked up to respond, but seeing he had put a fair distance between them already, she dashed after him again. She got in front of him and stopped dead.

“Vilkas, listen to me.” He tried to walk around her so she stuck out her foot and tripped him. “Losing focus like that will get you killed.” she teased.

He rose to his knees and growled at her again.

“Oh for love of the Divines Vilkas! Is that meant to terrify me into submission? I’m not afraid of you Wolfboy.”

So stunned by her choice of insult he sat back on his heels. “Fine, say your piece, then leave me alone.”

Seaja paused for a moment, trying to find the words to make him understand. He looked at her expectantly. “I am not ashamed of my time spent with Ralof. The man saved my life in Helgen. He is kind and attractive and was full of a spirit I have not seen since my brother. We grew close while I stayed with his family and recovered for that first dragon attack. Yes, I slept with him. I could have died Vilkas, and have never known the touch of another person. As i told Farkas, I won’t apologise for sleeping with another man when I had never even met your brother.”

She looked at him sternly as he tried to cut her off. “ I slept with Ralof and would make the same choice again. I’m fond of him and concerned for him. I don't know if he made it to Windhelm or not, but all of this just reinforces my decision to not hold out too much hope. We made no real promises to each other, other than mine, to find him if I go to Windhelm, but that doesn’t mean anything more than finding him. He is a stormcloak. The chances he will die before this war ends are high and my chances of seeing him again are low. I lost my brother to this war. I watched my mother fade until there was nothing left after my father died. I don't have a lot of girlish illusions left in me.”

Pausing, she wiped away a stray tear that snuck past her lashes. “I have already spoken to Kodlak about this and I think I agree with his wisdom. He told me that a warrior’s life is harsh and filled with danger. Relationships and families aren’t always in the cards for us, so there is no shame in taking small comforts where and when we can get them. I like your brother very much.” She smiled at Vilkas, who had risen to his feet and was staring at her, seriously considering her words.

“When the silver-hands attacked, he utterly destroyed them when they threatened me. When he opened that locked gate he was more afraid that he had scared me than he was concerned for himself. I am well aware of how kind hearted he is and I promise you, I will do my best not to hurt him, but I am not all seeing or all powerful. I’m just a woman with a lot of unknowns in my life and he makes me happy. I will do my best to ensure I do the same for him. I don't know if I can promise him forever, but I can offer him all of me, here and now.”

Vilkas grimaced, rubbing his temples. “I suppose it’s all I can ask of anyone. I don't like it, I think my brother is the kind of man to want a family life, and children, but you have a point. You are want he wants at this time, and there are no sureties in our line of work.”
Though she could see him accepting his logic she could see the strain in movements. This was a man on edge and for his brothers sake she wished she could help him. A thought came to her, she knew she risked the ground she had just gained, but pushed him further to bleed the anger from him.

"Farkas was right. You need to get out and blow off some steam. You should take a page from his book and find a willing woman."

Vilkas screamed with rage, bending at the waist and gripping his hair in both hands. “There is no time!” He dropped to his knees, staring at her with despair in his eyes. “I’m running out of time.”

She knelt beside him, searching his eyes, black with pain. “You do know.” She stated with complete surety. “Kodlak doesn’t know you know, but you figured it out as well.”

Vilkas nodded and began to sob. Away from the prying eyes of the companions and Whiterun citizens, the man let go of his composure, tears streaming down his face making trails in his war paint. He wept like his heart was breaking. She pulled in him into a firm hug, resting her head on his, rocking slightly. Kodlak was correct. His illness was having a devastating effect on Vilkas.

Once he was able to regain his composure Vilkas sniffed and pulled away from her, scowling. “How did you know? Kodlak wouldn’t have told an outsider.” he stated matter of factly.

She wiped the last of his tears off his cheeks, encouraged when he didn’t protest. “I figured it out last night after my initiation. We spoke of the beast blood and he revealed his desire for a cure. The way he spoke of Sovngarde made me really take a look at him. It’s not obvious, so I was surprised when I realized you know as well. My mother was an alchemist, mostly self taught, but she showed me things to watch for that indicated illness. His skin is yellowing and you can see his hands shake if you watch closely enough.”

Saeja stood and offered him a hand up. Rising up he replied. “Then you understand why I am so concerned. No one can know.”

‘Yes I know, he told me that as well. Skjor and Aela will force him to step down as Harbinger and Farkas will be devastated. He thinks you blind to it as well you know. When I figured out you must be the only one who knows I realized how difficult that burden must be for you. Farkas implied he is like a father to you both.”

When he nodded in reply, his eyes downcast, her heart went out to him. “I wont say a word to Farkas, I promise, but you need to let some of this go. Farkas and Aela are both shocked by your behaviour and that alone will eventually give this away. I know how difficult it is to lose your loved ones. My whole family is gone and I have only just begun to heal, but holding all of the pain and responsibility within yourself will just make it harder.”

Vilkas took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, wrapping his stoicism around him like a protective cloak. “I’ll consider your words. For now, I wish to be alone. If anyone asks, I’m out hunting and will return this evening.” As he was turning to move on he stopped and looked at her again. “A real apology this time Dragonborn. I saw you as a threat to his health. When it became clear who you are, I thought perhaps you would burden him with more worries during his final days. I see now you have his best interests at heart.”

Saeja smiled sadly and nodded, accepting his apology. She watched him turn and walk away towards the thick trees in the distance. She headed back to the city gates, trying to process everything that had happened.

Knowing she need a break from high emotions, she sought out Ysolda, inviting her for a drink at the Bannered Mare. They spent the afternoon chatting, with Seaja amusing the young woman with
stories of growing up in an inn. She imparted her best tips for discouraging the advances of male guests, some of the best recipes that were inexpensive to make but were time honored favorites, and the best places to trade for supplies. She left the girl with a promise to continue looking for a mammoth tusk for her and exited the Bannered Mare with a peaceful smile. It felt good to to speak of familiar things when her life was so chaotic right now.

She walked up the steps of Jorrvaskr and entered the main hall. Spotting Ria, she wandered over to the table and sat down to share dinner. They swapped fighting techniques while they ate until Saeja had stuffed herself with Tilma’s cooking. She was just about to leave when she heard the doors open and saw Vilkas enter. He nodded in her direction as he passed her and she saw that he had drawn all his suffering back inside, but that it didn't appear to weigh as heavy on him anymore. The stress lines around his eyes had softened, though his war paint was also good at hiding those.

As she returned his nod, she heard Ria speak up. “Wow, after last night I didn't think the two of you could be civil towards each other.”

Vilkas picked up Saeja’s answer and smiled discreetly as he continued to the lower quarters. “Meh, we worked it out. We’ll never love each other, but I think we can handle working together without killing each other.”

As he disappeared, Saeja excused herself and headed home. Climbing into bed that night she lay awake for a long time letting her hand rest where Farkas had slept last night. Her bed still held his smell and she wished he was here with her tonight. Sleep eluded her for many hours. After her conversation with Vilkas this afternoon she did feel slightly guilty for bedding another man so quickly, especially when she was still so worried about Ralof. She also felt torn. She had told Vilkas about her continuing affection for Ralof, which was true. She would chose to bed Ralof if she could repeat her life again, but she did agree that Farkas seemed the type to want only one partner and expect the same. Her mind raced long into the wee hours of the morning, worrying about things she couldn't change and wondering what life would throw at her next. When sleep finally did reach her, she dreamt of strong hands, silver eyes and dragon fire.
Preparing For the First Task

Chapter Summary

Farkas comes home and Kodlak is getting tired of Vilkas's hovering. It seems like a pretty good time to send Saeja out into the world to start her destiny. A pair of hunky twins won't make it any harder right?

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: As per the usual. I do not own any of the original characters from Skyrim. Bethesda is a collective genius and I am humbled by their talent. This is just a character I tend to play over and over and what I wish happened (or could happen)

Upcoming chapters will slow down as I reach the end of my completed material. I am also looking for some input. I'm debating on whether I should connect her to the Thieves Guild or not. It's one of my favorite quest lines, but I always feel like its a bit far-fetched that the Dragonborn is like spectacular at EVERYTHING. I am doing the main line and companions line right now. What is the collective opinion? Should she join or not?

It took almost ten days for Farkas to return to Jorrvaskr. The information Aela had been unable to pass on to him would have been a great warning that the Skeever infestation was three times the size they had initially thought. He had to enter the cave three separate times to find all of them because they hunted in smaller hordes. If he had left even one of the vermin alive they would be thriving again in mere months.

He stumbled to his room and stripped off his armor. Tilma had seen him come in and sent down hot water and a wash basin for him. The water was scented with pine oil, which left his skin tight and tingling as he washed the sweat and grim from his body. He wanted to fall into his bed, but his desire to see Saeja had him grabbing his leather breeches and a soft tunic made of deerskin. He stuffed his feet into his heavy leather boots and trudged back up the stairs and asked one of the serving girls if she had seen his brother or Saeja. She directed him to the training yard.

As he opened the doors to the rear courtyard he could see both of them engaged in a skirmish. The sound of their swords clanging against each other rang across the distance, as did their grunts of exertion.

“Good,” he heard Vilkas say when she landed a blow to his arm. “Come at me again.”

Farkas watched as Vilkas aimed a strike at her left leg, and nodded in approval as she parried it with ease. She moved swiftly into a counter attack, swinging the sword at Vilkas’ head. He leapt back and
began to circle her. Vilkas brought his sword down in an arc, aiming for her shoulder, but she easily blocked his sword with her own.

Their blades locked causing Saeja to struggle against him, trying free her weapon. While she was focused on freeing her weapon, Vilkas swept his leg low, catching her knees and pushing against their locked swords with all his might. She lost her balance and felt herself begin to fall backwards. Flailing, she reached out to steady herself and she grabbed the straps on his armour and pulled him down with her. They landed, Vilkas on top, crushing the breath from her.

"You keep making the same stupid mistake Saeja. If you are going to ignore your feet then you need to avoid locking blades with a larger opponent. It’s too easy to bring you to the ground." He said growled at her.

She nodded trying to catch her breath. “I get it, I get it. Now please get off of me. I can't breathe” she gasped.

She saw him blush and he rolled to the side, but not before she felt a slight hardness pressing into her hip. She squeaked in surprise, and flushed.

Farkas strode up to them, “I see you two can finally stand to look at each other.” he chuckled as he approached.

Vilkas’s expression became impassive as he watched Saeja leap up and sprint towards his brother, crying his name with excitement.

Farkas caught her in his arms, swinging her in the air, then kissed her breathless as he set her down. Pulling away from her he approached Vilkas and gripped arms with him, pulling him into a hard hug.

“You look good brother. It’s good to see you in a better mood. I trust it has something to do with that fact you aren't at each other’s throats?” Farkas mumbled before letting Vilkas go.

Vilkas chuckled. “Well, she’s a pain in the ass, but when she isn't heatbutting me in the face, she makes a decent fighter. We'll make a true companion of her yet.”

Saeja flushed with pride. It was true compliment coming from Vilkas and she savored it. When Vilkas told her to call it a day she didn't protest. She returned their weapons to the racks, securing them carefully and then turned to search for Farkas again.

The brothers had moved to the veranda to speak, sitting in the shade and Vilkas had poured only two tankards of mead. She took that to mean it was a private conversation. Instead she walked back into the hall, thinking to find Aela and ask if the older woman wanted to go hunting. As she entered the lower chamber she saw Kodlak, sitting at the end of the hall. When he looked up and saw her approaching her smiled and waved her over.

“Saeja, I have a job for you. Word has come from Riften. They need a bandit gang taken care of. I’ve been watching you and think this would an excellent time for you to visit the Greybeards. As you know they dwell at the Throat of the World and the only access to the steps is from Ivarstead in the Rift. Once you clean out the bandits, you can travel there on your way back.” he said, handing a sheet of parchment with the details of the job on it.

"Of course Kodlak. I'll leave at first light.” she replied, bowing her head.

“And take the twins with you.” the old man suggested. She looked at him sharply, and he smiled. “I may be ill but I’m not blind girl. I know you would prefer to have just Farkas to accompany you, but
I need Vilkas out of my hair for a bit. I don’t know what has gotten into him lately, but he hovers all the time, and I’m finding it harder to keep things from him. They can continue your lessons as you travel. I’ll inform them. You go prepare.”

The look he sent her was so pleading she couldn't help but agree to his request. She briefly debated telling Kodlak the reason Vilkas was hovering, but decided it may make things awkward for the old man if he knew just how poorly Vilkas was controlling himself around the others while he was concerned for the old man. Sighing she kept her mouth shut and nodded. "It's not a problem Kodlak. Besides, he's good in a fight and it will let us work more on my sword skills if he travels with me."

Saeja exited Jorrvaskr and made a quick trip to her home to take stock of her supplies. Vilkas had been drilling her dawn till dusk during the week and she had been too tired to deal with her spoils before. As she emptied her pack her eyes strayed to the spell book she had picked up in Dustman’s Cairn. The ones she had found in Helgen and Bleak Falls Barrow sat on a shelf in her laboratory. She had meant to sell them, but her curiosity got the better of her. She placed them together, wanting to read them in the evening once she finished resupplying.

Deciding it may be best to pay a call to the court wizard she made the trek up the stairs to Dragonsreach. She found Farengar bent over some ancient tome, deep in thought. She had to clear her throat twice to get his attention.

"Ah Dragonborn, welcome back. What can I do for you?” he asked, smiling at her.

She pulled out the armor pieces she thought were enchanted and the purple gemstones. “ I wanted to know more about these. I can tell the armor is enchanted, but I don't know what enchantments are on them, so I don't want to use them yet. The enchanted axe the Jarl gave me no longer works and I don't know why.” She held out the gemstones her her hands. “Also, what are these. I found a few of them in the barrow and one of the companions said something about soul gems, but I don't really know what they do.”

The wizard chuckled and waved her over to a glowing table beside his alchemy set. He then spent a good portion of an hour explaining how enchantments work, how to learn enchanting and the purpose and history of the soul gems. He used one of the filled gems she had found in the Barrow and used it to recharge her axe. She let the man look over her other pieces.

“Well the helm the Jarl bestowed upon you is enchanted to give you added protection against magic spells. It would be a good one to keep unless you have a favored headpiece you would like to enchant yourself.” When she shook her head he shrugged. “Then I recommend you keep this. The boots muffle your steps, making you harder to hear. A good enchantment for sneak thieves. The sword inflicts fire damage but it's the gauntlets that you really lucked on to. This is a very powerful enchantment. When you wear them, they add damage to your unarmed attacks. You could hit someone with just these and not only will your opponent be wounded by the claws and spikes, but suffer further damage without the use of weapons.”

“How much damage are we talking about here? She asked him.

“A lot of damage.” he replied. “I've never seen an enchantment this strong.” The man paused, trying to find an accurate example. “You hang out with the companions. Think of the damage those brute brothers and their harbinger could do if all three were fighting the same opponent at the same time. The wounds will also be more resistant to magical healing.”

Saeja grimaced just thinking about it. She was strong but Vilkas alone had covered her in bruises and cuts during their practices. “Well then, I think I’m going to keep these.” she said, tucking them back into her pack.
She had Farengar show her how to unenchant the boots, they didn't fit her anyway, and then she used a soul gem to enchant the silver necklace she had taken to wearing all the time. She did notice her footfalls were muffled and smiled, thinking about how much easier scouting would be. Finally she unenchanted the fire sword and added the new power to her skyforge sword.

She wanted to know more, but the mage finally huffed. “Really I am not a teacher. If you want to know more about magic and enchanting you should head to the Mage’s College in Winterhold. They are better equipped to handle all your questions. Otherwise, keep practicing and your skills will improve. Now, leave me be if there is nothing else.”

She left the mage to his books and found Eorlund at his forge. She presented him with the ebony sword she had found in the ruins before the silver-hands had attacked. The old man whistled as he looked over the weapon. “It’s a beautiful weapon lass. I make the best steel in all of Skyrim, but this is a class of its own. You should keep it.”

She shrugged. “It’s pretty, but a lot heavier than I am used to. I prefer daggers in general, so I don’t think I would get much use out of it. I was just hoping you could tell me how much it’s worth.”

The old smith regarded the blade for a few moments before answering. “I can offer you five hundred septims for it. My son Avulstein is coming of age soon. This would make an excellent gift for him, better than the one I crafted for him. I have no doubt he’s going to break his mother’s heart by joining the Stormcloaks as soon as he is able to sneak away, like his brother did. The least I can do is assure her he will go out in the world protected.”

Saeja gladly relinquished the sword to Eorlund and pocketed her gold. He wished her the best on her journey and returned to the forge. Finally she made it to the market. She spent the next few hours in the shops grabbing what she would need for the trip. She stocked up on her potions and ingredients at Arcadia and was overjoyed when she found the woman had started carrying potion belts and apothecary satchels which would allow her easier access to her supplies and bottles. She purchased one of each, happy to find they fit around her armor perfectly. Next she visited the Drunken Huntsman, knowing Elrindir had started shipping in Nordic arrows for her when he learned of her preference and willingness to pay for them.

“Ah, it’s good to see you again friend. I presume you are here for your usual purchase.” the bosmer greeted her warmly.

“Yes, as many Nordic arrows as you have. I’ll be away much longer this time and don’t know the availability of them in Ivarstead.” she replied, stepping up to the counter.

The Mer sniffed disdainfully at the mention of the small village. He pulled the arrows out from under the counter, then leaned close, and whispered “I have something else for you to look at. After I noticed you carry an enchanted axe I got to thinking. Those need soul gems to stay charged and I managed to get my hands on this little beauty.”

The elf pulled out a beautiful bow, Nordic in design, that glowed a faint purple. “This bow is enchanted to capture the souls of creatures you kill, which allows your to then recharge your items. I can do the arrows, the bow and throw in a few soul gems for four hundred septims.” he gave her an hopeful look.

Saeja ran her fingers over the bow, lifting it up to test its weight. It fit comfortably in her grasp and was a good weight. She pulled the string back, testing the tensile strength and sighed. It really was a beautiful tool. “Two hundred septims.” she offered, placing it back on the counter.

The elf sputtered in false outrage. “Two hundred! Two hundreds septims? What do you think I am
“Come on Elrindir, you can do better than four hundred for me.” she coaxed.

The elf smirked and began the negotiations. They finally settled on everything for three hundred and twenty five septims, her hunting bow and a promise that he had first choice of her weapons next time she explored a ruin.

She waved a cheerful goodbye to the elf as she stepped out into the open air, but her mood instantly dampened. She could see Vilkas standing in front of her house, lounging against the door frame, much like Farkas had done the night before their trip. She had wanted the evening to herself to pack her supplies and maybe convince Farkas to spend the night, but seeing the scowl on his face deepen as she approached she knew would have to deal with whatever bug was up his bottom. She crossed the road and smiled at him.

“To what do I owe the honor of having you grace me with a visit Vilkas?” she asked, unlocking her door and stepping inside. The man followed without asking, and surveyed her house before answering.

“What did you say to Kodlak? He’s sending me out with you to Riften.” the man demanded, scowling.

“Seriously? You come into my home with that attitude?” she scolded, setting her baskets on the table. “I didn't tell him anything. I didn't want you along any more than you want to be forced to come. I was looking forward to having Farkas to myself. Kodlak insisted you come too. Something about you driving him mad and him needing some time to himself.”

Vilkas punched the wall of her home, cracking the plaster near the window.

“Hey! Cut that out you idiot.” she screeched. "I don't need my house falling in around my ears when I sleep just because you’re in a mood. I told you before people are starting to notice your behavior. Did you really think Kodlak wouldn't get tired of your hovering?” She stomped over to him and pushed him towards the table, away from the walls.

“Does he know I know?” the man grumbled, grabbing an apple and taking a large bite.

“I’m sorry Saeja, I didn't mean to break your house.” she mocked in a oafish voice.

Vilkas rolled his eyes at her, his fist clenching. He took a deep breath and released it slowly and she watched his as his whole body relaxed. Sighing, he sat at the table and looked at her. “I’m sorry Saeja. I didn't mean to break your house.” he repeated sincerely.

“Good, you’re getting the hang of this.” she smirked. “Now if I can just teach you not to do things you need to apologise for in the first place.”

She picked up her baskets and set them on the counter so she could join him. She sat in the chair opposite of him, eyeing him carefully. “Kodlak said he doesn't know why you are acting like you are, just that you are always about and he needs some time to himself. I’m sure you know he is searching for a cure for the beast blood?” she asked.

“Yes, it consumes him. I am trying to help but he’s so secretive all the time now.” replied Vilkas.

Saeja rolled her eyes at him. “Probably because you are pestering him so much. He told me it's getting harder to hide things from you and he needed a reprieve.”
When he gave her a sour look she held back a growl of frustration. He could be so deliberately dense sometimes. "Look Vilkas, I understand you want to make his remaining days comfortable and free of worry, but the man has his dignity. You are probably making him feel feeble and weak, and he is working very hard to appear as strong as he always has. He can't be worrying about you as well as his health and finding a cure."

Vilkas rubbed his temples wearily. "I want you to be wrong. I really do, but you're not. I can not treat him like an old man. He would have years ahead of him if not for the rot that grows stronger every day."

Vilkas leaned back into his chair and eyes her steadily, finishing his apple whole. “Alright, so we leave in the morning. I assume we are taking the carriage, or did you want to walk to Riften?”

Saeja grimaced. “We are taking the carriage. I have to walk up seven thousand steps, up a mountain, to reach the Greybeards. I could use the rest before taking on that challenge. Once we locate the bandits, I think we should be able to eliminate them quickly. We’ll rest up at the Bee and Barb before walking to Ivarstead.”

Vilkas grinned. “You’ve been to Riften before then?”

She nodded, “My father owned the mine in Kynesgrove. He took me all over southern Skyrim when he delivered purchases, so I have seen Riverwood, Helgen, Falkreath and Riften before, as a maiden.”

She was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. A familiar voice called out, “Saeja, it’s me. I wanted to discuss the trip for tomorrow if you’re home.”

“Come in Farkas.” she called to the door. “We’ve been discussing things already.”

The door swung open and Farkas stepped inside. In one hand he held a bottle of alto wine and in the other a bunch of wildflowers.

Saeja rose from her chair smiling. “Flowers? That is so thoughtful.”

Farkas turned several shades of red when he saw his brother seated at the table as well. “Uh yeah, well. I thought they looked nice and maybe you could use them too. You know, in your potions”

She caught Vilkas rolling his eyes and she punched him, hard, in the arm. She turned back to Farkas and kissed his cheek as he approached her. Taking the flowers she placed them in a bowl of water, gesturing for him to join them at the table.

“Vilkas came by earlier to discuss the trip. I was just saying I want to catch the carriage to Riften so I can save my legs for the stairs to High Hrothgar.” She explained as she came back to the table to sit beside him.

“Sounds like a plan. Are you packed yet?” he inquired awkwardly as Vilkas tried to keep his mirth under control.

“I actually just got back from running errands. I was coming home from the Drunken Huntsman when I saw Vilkas at my door. He wanted to get a better idea of the plan before packing.” she replied, pointedly staring at Vilkas so he would get the hint and leave her alone with his brother.

“I find it amazing how you always seem to know what I'm doing before I do. Training you in swordplay, still needing to pack.” Vilkas replied drily. He was amused by her hint and choose to ignore it.
“Fine. I'll make this as simple as I can.” she sighed. “Vilkas. Go pack or run errands or visit people. Do what you must before we leave or if you have nothing to do, find something. I have every intention of dragging your brother to my room to enjoy every moment alone that we have before you join us for the next few weeks.”

Farkas gaped at her, while Vilkas burst out laughing. “I get it. I'll go.” He chuckled. Turning to his brother he clapped Farkas on the back proudly. “Bed her well brother. You have a wild night ahead of you.”

Vilkas left the house, closing the door behind him. Farkas hasn't moved, staring at her in shock. Saeja stood, smirking and grabbed his hand, pulling him out of the chair and towards the stairs to her room.

“I don't know which disturbs me the most, the fact he laughed or the fact you told him to go away so we can fool around and he just left.” He said as followed her into her room.

Saeja didn't reply, she just shut the door to her bedroom and began to pull off her tunic. Farkas managed to catch a quick glimpse of her creamy flesh before she blew out the candles and then proceeded to show him how much she had missed him.

Dawn arrived as Saeja finished packing her gear. She had awoken in the wee hours of the morning, sated and lazy in Farkas’ arms and had not wanted to get up, but the knowledge she had not finished preparing for their trip had her rolling out of bed. She categorized and prepared health potions and had added the magic potions she’d purchased from Arcadia. She packed the recipes for magic and stamina potions she had purchased in her new satchel, adding some ingredients and coins. As she packed her dwindling lockpick supply, she made a mental note to try to find a reliable source for them.

She had just finished scarfing down her breakfast when there was an insistent knock on the door. She waived Lydia away and grabbed her gear. When she had woke, she had also sent Farkas back to Jorrvaskr to finish his own packing. When she opened her door, both brothers stood before her, dressed in matching wolf armor, armed to the teeth.

Farkas smiled at her. “Ready to go?”

“Of course. Let’s go catch that carriage.” she smiled brilliantly at him, hiding the stab of anxiety that caused her stomach to clench. She didn't know if she was truly ready to face her destiny at High Hrothgar.

She turned to Vilkas, oddly comforted by his familiar scowl. He just grunted his acknowledgement of her and turned towards the gates of the city. She fell into step with the men as they made their way down to the stables. The men climbed into the back of the carriage as she paid the driver. Vilkas closed his eyes immediately and fell into what appeared to be a deep sleep. Farkas grinned at her when she climbed in beside him.

“Don’t mind Vilkas, he’s never been a morning person. I know we didn't get a lot of sleep last night, so if you wanted to rest awhile, I can keep watch.” he offered, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close.

“Thanks Farkas, but I’m going to read these spell tomes I found. I want to learn a bit more about magic” she said, pulling the first book from her pack. She knew once she had read it, she could call forth the spells at will.
Frakas nodded then turned to lean against the corner of the cart. “Well then I might take advantage of this time to catch up on my own rest. Wake us if you see anything worth mentioning.”

Saeja smiled, shaking her head in disbelief as he too fell asleep before her very eyes. Smiling she opened her first book and delved into the world of destruction magic.
Plans That Go Awry

Chapter Summary

The trio reaches Riften and plots how to deal with the bandits. Still plans never go as they should, and Saeja learns that the hard way.

Triggers: sexual assault, violence and past assault near the end of the chapter. You have warned.

Chapter Notes

As per always, Bethesda owns all the original characters and is created this amazing world.

Farkas is a bit of a shit in this one, and we will be delving further into the twins past with the coming chapters.

It took five days to reach Riften, traveling south, then east along the road. It was relatively uneventful, just a few bears which Vilkas and Farkas took care of with little effort. However they were all silent as they passed Helgen, out of respect for the dead.

Though he didn't say anything to her, Vilkas's respect for Saeja grew when he saw firsthand the destruction and violence she had survived, evident in the wreckage of the city. The smell of death was strong, and smoke still rose from a few of the burnt out shells of the abandoned homes. Sections of the city walls were crumbled and the city was picked clean of any valuables left by the fleeing citizens. He was acutely aware of how she shook as they passed, and how she spent that night avoiding everyone, crawling into her tent alone, before dusk has even settled on their camp. Farkas seemed oblivious to her discomfort, having joined the carriage driver in a bottle of mead while Vilkas had spent the evening in quiet contemplation, staring into the fire.

When they finally arrived at the Riften stables Saeja was more than ready to take on the bandit clan plaguing the Rift. She was wound tight with anxiety and needed release of some sort, and she also wanted a chance to practice her newly learned sparks spell. She had been practicing candlelight every evening and was able to call the light whenever she needed it. She walked up to the city gates, intent on obtaining a rooms at the inn for them all when she was stopped by the city guards.

“Hold there, before I let you into the city, you need to pay the visitors tax.” The tall lanky guard smirked, as he held out his hand. “For the privilege of entering the city.” He continued when she eyed him skeptically.

“This is obviously a shakedown.” she replied, as she heard Vilkas and Farkas approaching behind her. “I suggest you let us pass.”
The guard cowered when he saw her male companions. Farkas and Vilkays were tall, even for Nords, both topping in at six and a half feet, with muscles to spare. Despite the fact Vilkas was a leaner than his brother, he was no less imposing and she could picture their twin scowls, making them look more intimidating than ever.

“Alright, keep your voice down, do you want everyone to hear you?” he replied, scrambling to find the keys. “I’ll unlock the gate.”

They entered the city and she sent Vilkas to acquire the rooms, while Farkas headed directly for the blacksmith, looking to sharpen his blades before they set out to find the bandits. She was about to head to the center market when a deep voice reached her ears from the shadows under a balcony to her left. “I know everyone in this city, but I don’t know you. You in Riften looking for trouble?”

She turned and saw the source of the voice, a stocky Nord, with a wide nose and dark hair, dressed in a full set of steel armor with a greatsword strapped to his back.

“What’s it to you?” she replied, squaring off with the man and crossing her arms across her chest.

He frowned, his eyebrows furrowing with displeasure. “Don’t say something you’ll regret. The last thing the Black-Briars need around here is some troublemaker trying to steal a piece of the action.”

“I know that name. Maven is the matriarch of that family is she not?” Saeja replied, recalling a vague memory of a woman, with raven black hair and frown lines around her mouth, insulting the blacksmith when she had come with her father on one of his trading trips.

The Nord stood a little straighter, surprised by her answer. “Yeah, Maven has Riften in her pocket and the Thieves Guild watching her back. If you know her by name then you know to keep your nose out of their business.” He smirked at her and pointed to himself. “Me, I’m Maul. I watch the streets for them. If you need dirt on anyone, I’m your guy, but it will cost you.”

“I’m not exactly squeaky clean myself,” she replied, happy she didn’t have to lie. She assumed the Empire had more to worry about than the escaped prisoners from Helgen, but one couldn’t be too careful. Having contacts with an organization that could help her disappear could be useful. She had been listening to him carefully since he had mentioned the thieves guild, but didn’t want to waste good coin on bribes unless she had to.

“Then we’re speaking the same language.” he replied, “What did you want to know?”

“Know anything about the thieves guild?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

The man laughed, “Are you kidding. My brother Dirge works in their hideout. I used to run with them myself, but took a job with Maven when they started hitting a rough patch.” He looked around, ensuring no one could overhear them and then leaned in closer to her. “You don’t look like a thief, but if you want in on that action, find Brynjolf in the market. Nobody does anything shady in Riften without him knowing about it.”

She wanted to ask more but saw Vilkas emerge from the Bee and Barb, heading in her direction. She nodded to Maul and moved on, meeting the companion on the bridge. “So did you secure the rooms?”

Vilkas peered around her shoulder at the other Nord, who scowled and walked away, towards the temple. “I was able to get one room at the inn, but it only has one bed. I’ll stay at the bunkhouse while we are here. Farkas can stay with you.”

She shook her head. “No, take him with you. We’re here as Companions, not a couple. I had my
own tent the whole trip here. He is welcome in my bed at home, but on the road I need to stay focused and well rested. Not to mention it would be unkind to make you feel like the odd man out.” she replied. “It’s only one night. We head to Broken Helm Hollow first thing tomorrow.”

She strode past him and entered the inn. Vilkas shrugged and went to find his brother. Once Farkas had his weapon sharpened the two of them procured beds at the Bunkhouse. Vilkas had been correct. As soon as they has stowed their gear for the evening Farkas began to complain. “I don't get why she wouldn’t let me join her. At the very least she could have found a bed here with us.”

Vilkas sighed deeply, rubbing his temples with one hand. “As she pointed out, you didn't share her tent the entire trip here, and we are on official business. She just wants to maintain the image of being professional. Aela and Skjor do not bunk together when they go out on missions. You’re awfully attached to a woman you just met. Perhaps slowing it down would be a good idea.”

Farkas snorted. “Don’t give me that. I’m not the only one who hoped into a willing women’s bed without a second thought. You’ve had your fair share of trysts with women you only saw once.”

Vilkas chuckled. “Key words being, saw once, Farkas.”

“What about that merchant’s daughter who spent the summer in Whiterun when we are 17. You had no problem sneaking her off to your room when you knew she would be gone in a few months. Then when she left you jumped to Hulda’s daughters bed. You have been as reckless as you accuse me of being Vilkas.” his brother replied, a smug grin on his face.

Sighing, Vilkas sat on his bed and looked at his brother. “Fine, I get it Farkas. Stop parading my past in front of me to prove your point.” He paused to rub drag his hand down his face. “To be honest I don't think she was even thinking about this yet but there is another reason she shouldn’t be sharing a room while on the road.”

Farkas snapped his head up to look at his brother. “What do you mean? Why shouldn’t we be sharing a room? We’re lovers, what’s wrong with sharing a bed?”

Vilkas shook his head. “There is nothing really wrong with it, but she is the Dragonborn, and while it relatively unknown as of yet, she will become famous. She will have an image to maintain if she is going to survive the political cesspool she will be dealing with soon. Perhaps no one knows her right now in Riften, but when she completes her training with the Greybeards she will become more recognizable. It is best she maintain an untouchable level of respectability, as it will open needed doors for her once every political faction begins to try and use her for their own end. If they think she's a whore, they will treat her like one. If she acts weak, they will try to use her as a puppet.”

“The companions don’t join political movements or causes.” Farkas huffed.

“She will. It will be unavoidable.” Vilkas replied. “Are you coming to the inn with me? I was going to find food.”

“No.” came the curt reply. “I just want to be left alone to think about this. It sounds as if she doesn't want me around right now anyways.”

“Don't do anything stupid while you pout Farkas. You'll end up regretting it.” Vilkas cautioned as he descended to the lower level of the bunkhouse and out the door. Saeja was nowhere to be found when he entered the inn. He asked the Argonian innkeeper where he might find his traveling companion and was directed to Mistveil Keep. He has just reached the steps of the Jarl’s home when he saw snow white hair exiting the castle doors.
She joined him at the bottom of the steps and gestured for him to follow her back to the inn while she shared her new information. “Vilkas, good. I got more information from the steward. It’s not a large group of bandits, but they are deadly. The group of them have been attacking the road for months and their leader is especially skilled. The steward thinks if we hit them at mid morning we may have a good chance of surprising them. They reportedly raid all night and then return to their cave at daybreak to sleep all day. The guards report a total of five bandits, so I am hoping stealth will give us the advantage we need.”

They entered the inn and Vilkas motioned to the innkeeper to bring them some ale as they sat at a nearby table to plan. “I like this idea but we will need to leave early in the morning if we want to pull it off.”

“That shouldn't be a problem” Suddenly Saeja stopped and looked around the room. “Where is Farkas? Is he still dealing with the smith?” she inquired.

Vilkas sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, “No, he’s pouting, like I told you he would. I tried to explain why you would want to to keep things professional, but he didn't want to listen.”

She rolled her eyes and groaned in frustration. “No wonder my mother didn't encourage me to find a suitor at a young age. Men are exhausting.” She grabbed a slice of the bread sitting at the table and took a bite. “Is he going to be ready to fight tomorrow or will he still be acting like a child?”

“He’ll be ready whelp,” Vilkas replied, reverting back to name calling when her insult of men stung his at pride.

They spent the rest of the evening leaned over a map depicting the Rift, planning their movement against the bandit cave. Vilkas hadn’t been expecting her sharp mind or tactical knowledge of scouting and field work. He knew she was a skilled fighter, though less experienced, but her ability for planning an attack added to his new found respect for her and he was starting to feel more sorry for her than his brother when he thought of them together. He was quickly realizing the woman was head-strong and intelligent and he began to worry that her practicality would not be what his brother truly wanted in a woman, despite his attraction to her.

As the light began to disappear from the sky Saeja finished the last bite of her snowberry pie, and patted her stomach. When their host, a male argonian, came to clear their plates, she smiled at him and complimented the food and drink, pressing extra coins into his hand. He flashed her an awkward smile and thanked her for her kindness.

She smiled at Vilkas, feeling more like her old self than she had in years. It had been so long since she had someone to discuss a plan of attack with and after the last few successful jobs she had taken she was feeling more confident of her skills again. Since Vilkas was letting her take the lead on this job she was getting a chance to test out her knowledge. “Well, I think we should head to bed to catch up on some rest before we have to head out. Oh and Vilkas, please tell Farkas I am sorry I’m not staying with him tonight and I will miss him.”

Vilkas nodding, promising to pass on her message, but his gut was burning with sudden and unexpected envy at his brother’s luck. He walked back to the bunkhouse, his mind heavy with guilt over the stab of longing he’d felt when he watched Saeja climb the steps to her room. When he stepped inside there were people still sitting in the common dining room. He could smell sickly sweet scent of spilt mead as the owner of the bunkhouse passed around tankards to her patrons, who were all in various stages of drunken debauchery. He was about to head to his bed when he caught sight of Farkas in a darkened corner of that room with the pretty little maiden that helped out around the place, the owner’s niece if he remembered correctly, sitting on his lap laughing with him. It was clear Farkas was imbibing too much.
When the barmaid placed a kiss on his brother cheek, Vilkas saw red. He stormed over and picked the woman out of Farkas’ lap, ignoring both her surprised yelp and Farkas’s protests, then hauled his brother out of his chair and towards the stairs to their beds.

“Of all the stupid, irresponsible things you’ve done. We have a job to do tomorrow morning, so I need you sober and focused so we don’t get our asses handed to us.” he growled, shoving his brother towards his bed. “What were you thinking anyways? She asks you to spend one night out of her bed so you turn to the first willing woman you find?”

“I didn’t find her, the girl was flirting with me.” Farkas slurred pulling back the hides and falling into the straw mattress. “What do you care anyways? You didn’t like the idea of her and me from the beginning. Even if you can work with her, you don’t like her much, or you’d be nicer to her.”

Vilkas stopped short realizing Farkas had a point. Though they had been amicable during their travels to Riften he had still be distant, sullen and irritable. Farkas didn't need to know that had more to do with Kodlak’s illness than it did his feelings for Saeja.

“She might not be my favorite person in the world, but we dealt with our differences. She cares about you, you idiot. She said she would miss you this evening and here you were, allowing another woman to paw at you.” He replied.

Sighing, he sat down on the bed and stared at his hands. “Look, you were right about her. She is a good fighter, she’s smart and incredibly caring and I think with some more experience she will be a boon to the Companions. Don’t do anything stupid to drive her off.”

There was no reply. Vilkas reached over to push Farkas’ shoulder, then rolled his eyes when he heard a loud snore. Vilkas let out a frustrated snort, angry at his brother, but also relieved he hadn't revealed his feelings about his brother’s woman to him. Vilkas climbed into his bed, but sleep eluded him. He’d been so worried someone might fall for Saeja and steal her away from Farkas. He hadn't counted on being captivated by her himself.

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Saeja rose just as the sun was turning the dawn a pale pink. She dressed quickly and grabbed her weapons and quietly made her way to the main level of the inn. Spying the argonian innkeeper, she approached the counter, digging coins out to secure the room for another night. The delicious aroma wafting through the inn from the kitchen had her splurging on 3 meat pies. Her skin prickled in the cold morning air as she left the inn, heading across the bridge towards the gates where Farkas and Vilkas were waiting. She handed them each a piping hot pie, smiling when they thanked her and dug into their food. Neither of the men would meet her eyes, but she brushed it off as early morning sleepiness and continued to the gates.

As they headed out, Saeja filled Farkas in on the details she was given by the jarl’s steward. Again he avoided her eyes and grunted his responses, but she didn't think it too odd, given his propensity for silence. When they reached the road leading up to the cave Saeja instructed Vilkas and Farkas to scout ahead to try and confirm if the numbers she was given were correct. When they returned, Vilkas gave her a nod as he whispered. “Two out front guarding the entrance like you were told. They both look pretty irritated and sleepy.”

Farkas nodded in agreement. “I noticed five horses tethered nearby. It’s possible they double up, but it seems unlikely, so I think the steward was right.”

Saeja bit her bottom lip and her brows drew together as she mulled over the situation. She waved them forward, getting as close to the camp as possible without giving away their location. She
watched as one bandit approach their fire, squatting beside it, to warm his hands. He muttered something to the other man who chuckled. She turned back to the brothers, an idea beginning to take shape.

She removed her necklace and handed it to Vilkas. “You can get closer with my enchanted necklace on. Get behind the cave and wait for me to signal, then take out the guard closest to the entrance.” She began unbuckling her armor, removing it piece by piece.

“What are you doing?” Farkas asked, swallowing hard as she placed her armor to the side, and stood, clad in only her linen shirt and leather leggings.

Saeja looked up and smiled. “Becoming bait.”

She set her armor and pack against a group of rocks, hiding it. “Vilkas go get into position and wait for me to enter the camp. Farkas, watch my back and be ready incase this all goes to Oblivion.”

She waited until she could see a glimpse of dark hair by the side of the cave and then nodded to Farkas. She quickly walked back to the road, careful not to seen, then using some dust, coated her face and shirt, giving her the appearance of travelling a long time. Taking a deep breath and sending a quick prayer to the divines she walked timidly toward the camp, calling out to the guard by the fire when he came into view.

“Thank the divines I found this place. Please, I saw your fire from the road and thought you could help me.” she pleaded when the man stood abruptly, sword drawn.

“Stay back. I’m warning you.” the guard threatened.

“No, please, I mean no harm.” she called back, lacing her voice with feigned terror and exhaustion. “Please, I need help. I’ve been traveling from Falkreath for three days with no food. I just want to warm myself and then I’ll be on my way.” She raised her hands, showing she carried no weapons.

The bandit slowly lowered his sword and looked back at his partner, smirking. “Sure, you can share our fire.”

She approached cautiously and crouched down by the fire. “Thank you. It’s been days since I’ve seen anyone else.”

“What’s a pretty little thing like you doing out in the woods all by herself?” asked the bandit, coming to stand directly behind her.

Saeja felt his hand on her shoulder and forced herself not to shudder in revulsion. “My husband and I were travelling, but we made the mistake of sheltering in a cave that housed a bear. He tried to defend us but was killed. I’m just trying to get to Riften. I have family there.”

The bandit’s hand began to rub her back. She stood quickly, pulling away slightly. “Sir, please. I…”

He cut her off, grabbing her hair and pulling her close. “Family in Riften huh? Who?”

Saeja cried out loudly. “Please, let me go.” He only gripped her hair tighter. “My sister. Grelka. She runs a stand in the market square.” she whimpered, thinking quickly of the merchant women who had come in for dinner the other night, complaining about the lack of business.

“Hey, let her alone.” yelled the other bandit. “We’ve got another hour on our watch.”

“There's not another soul around.” he captor replied. “I don't need more than 10 minutes anyway.”
He laughed cruelly and pulled a dagger from his belt. He used the blade to slice open the front of her shirt, cutting through her breast band as well. When her breasts spilled from their binds, visible for all, the man whistled in appreciation.

“No please. I don't want this.” she protested, as she began to focus her energy into her palms.

“Shut up.” he ordered. He dropped his dagger to the ground and used his free hand to grope at her breast, pinching her nipple harshly. “What did you expect, walking into a camp of bandits?”

The man bent her backwards slightly, lowering his lips to a nipple, sucking hard. She screamed and brought her hands up to his head, trying to push him away. Before he could stop her, she pulsed a bolt of electricity from her hands into his temples. The man slumped to the ground instantly, knocked out by the blow.

To her right she heard the other man cry out, only to be cut off by the sound of Vilkas’s shout as he drove his sword through the man’s back. Saeja grabbed the discarded dagger on the ground and plunged it into her foe’s neck. She stood there for a moment, unable to move, overwhelmed by the feelings of hatred she felt for the dead man. She was instantly reminded of her encounter with her uncle, the feeling of helplessness all too similar. It wasn't until she heard footsteps racing towards her that she was able to tear her eyes away from the corpse.

Vilkas reached her just moments before Farkas. She turned to him, forgetting about her ruined shirt, giving him time to see her breasts in all their uncovered glory. Remembering himself he averted his eyes, but not before the perfection of her was burned into his memory. Farkas caught her up in a strong hug, enfolding her in his arms.

“That was crazy.” he scolded as he kissed her forehead.

She reveled in the comfort of his touch for a moment before pulling back. “But it worked.” she replied. “Thank you for not charging in and ruining it.”

He had brought her armor and pack with him. She turned her back on them, donning her armor and securing her weapons again. She searched the bodies, pocketing the gold and lockpicks, deciding to take their weapons and armor when they finished with the rest of the bandits.

“Let’s get in there an hope the steward was right and they are asleep. There should only be three of them in there, so everyone pick a bandit and be silent. This will be easier to accomplish with stealth.” she advised once she was ready.

Vilkas and Farkas entered first, silently taking position beside the bandits sleeping by the fire. Saeja looked around for the chief, unable to locate her until Vilkas finally pointed to a ledged just to their left. She found a narrow path up the the ledge and crept silently towards the heavily armored woman. She was about to crouch down to slit the woman’s throat when she heard Vilkas and Farkas end their targets. One man woke, just as Farkas brought his axe down, giving him a moment to scream before it died in his throat.

The chief woke instantly and suddenly Saeja felt a burning pain in her side. She looked down and saw an ebony dagger buried between her ribs.

The bandit chief gave her a chilling smile. “You shouldn’t have gotten so close, little girl.” she taunted.

She heard Vilkas roaring at her attacker just as the sadistic woman twisted the blade and then ripped it from her body. Saeja hit the floor of the cave, unable to stop the blood gushing from her side, as
her world began to turn black.
Chapter Summary

Our brave heroine may have escaped death but sometimes the twins make her wish for it. How will she deal with Vilkas ire or Farkas confession?

_________________________________________________

DISCLAIMER: Bethesda owns all the rights to the original characters. Everything else is just a fantasy I have in my head for how my character interacts with their world.

_________________________________________________

Chapter Notes

I had a lot of fun writing about the twins past. Farkas calls Jergen their father but Vilkas always sounded so jaded in the game, so this always came to mind. Kodlak of course it the epitome of patience and kindness. For me this resolves how two men could end up so much a like but so completely different.

I've been loving the feedback I get as the story goes on. Thanks for the Kudos and the comments. They've been helpful and motivating.

_____________________________________________

Her vision was dark and blurry when she opened her eyes, only coming into focus when she blinked rapidly. Her chest was burning, every breath brought tears to her eyes. She moaned, handed moving to her ribs, rubbing against rough bandages.

“Thank the Gods, you’re awake.”

She turned her head to see Farkas sitting beside her. He reached over and handed her an open healing potion, holding her head up as she swallowed the bitter liquid. Within minutes the pain in her chest began to fade, leaving a dull ache, rather than the piercing stabs that had assailed her.

“What happened?” she finally asked when felt she could speak again. “I remember getting stabbed.”

“Vilkas got to her before I could and took her head off in one swing. I don't know that I would have been that nice.” Farkas growled, rage surging through his body. “She got you good, twisted the blade and tore it out. Vilkas managed to slow the bleeding while I found healing potions. You weren't swallowing anything so he had to pour it on the wound. That seemed to at least stop the bleeding and start the wound closing,” he gestured to her bindings. “We got ya wrapped up and I’ve been watching you, waiting for you to wake up.”

Saeja sat up slowly and gingerly peeled away the wrappings. Her side now sported an uneven scar, still swollen, tender and an angry red in color. “Where is Vilkas?” she asked. She had looked around, grateful when she realized the men had the sense of mind to move the dead body away from her, but
had not seen Vilkas.

Farkas glanced away. “He kind of freaked out. He changed as soon as he saw you weren’t dying and dashed out the cave. Haven’t seen him since. I’d be worried about him, but he’s smart enough to stay out of sight. I couldn’t leave you alone.”

Saeja flushed with pleasure learning that Vilkas might be so upset over her injury that he would lose control. Suddenly she frowned. Stop that, she thought, he’s probably upset that the plan went sideways. He’s not upset about you, and he doesn’t care that much. It shouldn’t matter if he does anyways.

She looked back to Farkas and noticed he wasn’t meeting her eyes. “What’s wrong Farkas? I’m ok now, this will mend and I’ll be good to leave in a few hours.”

The man sighed deeply. “I’m sorry Saeja. I got something I wanna say. I’ve been sitting here thinking about what a jerk I am and was worried I wouldn’t be able to tell you. I thought I had lost you.”

Farkas paused to take a deep breath and continued. “I was mad last night that you didn’t want me to stay with you. If Vilkas hadn’t come to the bunkhouse when he did, well,” he looked away and flushed. “I would have ended up with the barmaid in my bed. I got drunk and didn’t say no when she climbed onto my lap. Vilkas got back in time to peel her off me and gave me hell. Told me you said you were missing me.” He paused, looking down at his clenched hands. “I’m sorry. It’s no excuse, but I was drunk and being stupid last night.”

Saeja waited for the pain, then felt bad when it didn’t sweep over her. She liked Farkas well enough, he was sweet and had been the one of the first to really believe in her within the Companions, but it was almost a relief to know he wasn’t so obsessed with her that he ignored all other women. She cared about him, she realized, but she’d never waste away without him, he wouldn’t break her heart. She reached for his hand. “It’s fine Farkas. It’s not like we have been together long, and we haven’t really set up any expectations.”

“You’re not mad?” he asked, jerking his head to look at her.

She paused, trying to word her response carefully, she didn't want him to think he could jump from one bed to hers without consequences. “I’m upset Farkas. I don't like knowing you would bed another woman just to spite me. I don't expect you to only see me, but I would hope you wouldn’t go find any willing woman simply because I am unavailable.” She watched the emotions play over his face from shame, to puzzlement and finally to understanding.

“This doesn't apply to just me does it? If I bed other women, you’ll be able to take other lovers as well right?” he stated, a frown creasing his forehead.

She nodded, watching him closely. “Kodlak told me something once. It makes a lot of sense, especially if I’m going to be the Dragonborn.” He cocked his head, the question clear. “Kodlak said warriors find happiness where we can find it. Our work could keep us apart for months at a time, possibly longer if I have to fight dragons as well.I wouldn’t want either of us to miss out on moments of happiness and pleasure.”

He didn't respond, and she could tell he was struggling with the idea. She reached out and stroked his cheek. “Farkas, I love being with you, I want you in my bed. I’m just saying we should live life as it comes. Be it a pretty barmaid or a young maiden, grateful for your protection, why should you deny yourself that pleasure?”
Farkas took her hand from his cheek and brought it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her fingertips. “I don’t know that I like it, but your words make sense, so you won’t have any trouble with me.”

“Please don’t think I don’t care for you. I really do Farkas.” she replied, leaning in to kiss him, to reassure him. “You mean a great deal to me and I would hate to lose you as both a lover and a friend.”

He nodded, pulling her into his arms, her back pressed hard against his chest, and pressed hard kisses to the back of her neck and hair. He smiled when her body melted against him, and her head rolled back to rest on his shoulder. “I’m yours as long as you will have me Saeja.” he murmured against her ear.

She was still in Farkas’s arms when Vilkas finally returned to the cave, sleeping peacefully now that her wounds were closed. He was carrying two fat rabbits and some wild gourds which he dropped by the fire.

He crouched down beside his brother. “I assume she woke up at some point?” gesturing to the fact she had moved from where she had been when he fled.

Farkas nodded, “A couple hours after you left. She drank more healing potions and fell back asleep. She doesn’t look as bad anymore.” He gingerly moved her off him, lying her back down on the furs, then stood, facing Vilkas. “We should camp for the night, won’t make it back before dark anyways.”

Vilkas nodded. “Get some sleep brother. I’ll stand watch. I’m not calm enough to rest yet anyways.”

Vilkas watched as Farkas unpacked his sleeping roll and lay it out beside Saeja. It didn’t take long before Vilkas could hear soft snores coming from both of them. Turning his attention to his kills he quickly skinned the rabbits, skewered them and set them up to roast by the fire. He cut the gourds in half and set them by the flames to soften in the heat. As he worked, his body slowly unclenched, his worry and rage ebbing away. His blood had become icy with fear when he’d seen her collapse. The bandit had been lucky his main concern had been saving Saeja or her demise would have been much worse than decapitation. It had taken every ounce of his control not to turn and rip her to shreds. He growled, snapping a branch for the fire with his bare hands.

“That branch must have done something pretty bad for you to mangle it like that.” came a soft voice behind him.

He turned to stare as Saeja climbed out from under her furs and came to sit by the fire beside him. She took the branch ends from his hand and fed them into the fire, watching as the flames jump higher. He didn’t know what to say to her, unable to put into words how wounded he felt when he thought she had been killed or how the smell of her blood had both enraged and intoxicated him.

“Thank you, by the way.” she said, finally breaking the silence. “Farkas told me you killed the chief and then you tried to stop the bleeding while he looked for healing potions. I owe you my life.”

“It was nothing.” he muttered, irritated by her gratitude.

She smiled brilliantly at him when he turned to look at her. “Nice to know the thought of my demise made you lose control. If you’re not careful Vilkas, I might start to think you actually like me.” She laughed when he flushed and stammered, unable to respond cohesively. “It’s fine, I know you don’t. Probably just worried what Kodlak would do if he found out the Dragonborn died under your watch. It’s enough to know we can work together.”

“Yeah, that’s what it was.” he muttered in agreement, reminding himself that he had no right to be as enamored with her as he was. “Are you hungry?” he asked, poking the gourds to ensure they were ready.
“Famished actually. The smell is what woke me in the first place. A healing always does that to me.” she replied, as the sound of her stomach rumbling echoed it’s agreement. She accepted his offer of some of the food, but grimaced when she took a bite. The man obviously didn't know much about flavoring herbs. She swallowed hard. “Thanks. I imagine after changing back to human form you also need meat.”

He nodded, digging into his rabbit. “So I take it you two recovered from your night apart? You seemed fairly cozy when I got back.” he grumbled, keeping his eyes averted.

“We didn't really talk about it.” she replied with a frown. “You know, it must be exhausting judging everyone you meet.”

He turned to snarl at her but she cut him off. “No, you listen here! Whatever is going on with your brother and I is not your business. We will sort out our issues without your help and we will continue to enjoy each other's company with or without your blessing. I don’t understand what your problem with me is anyways. Every time I think we have settled our shit, you have some new reason to pout.”

“I wasn't worried about him this time. I was worried about you.” he protested weakly.

“Because of the barmaid incident?” she asked. When his eyes widened with surprise she smirked. “He already told me about it and apologized. Look, you and I work together well when we aren't fighting, and I hope we could be friends someday, but I don't need you watching out for me like some father figure.”

Vilkas grimaced, knowing full well his feelings for her were anything but fatherly. He sighed, choosing to ignore her and go back to eating his meal. While he knew his reputation was that of the talkative twin, as of late, he often found himself unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings around her. Finally he glanced at her and retorted. “I don't pout.”

Saeja burst out laughing. “That’s what you take exception with? The fact I called you out on your pouting?” She held her stomach as the giggles rolled out of her, until it began to hurt her newly healed muscles. “The first time I ever met you you were pouting because Kodlak agreed to give me a chance. Vilkas, if things don't go your way you throw worse tantrums than a child.”

Vilkas went to cross his arms then realized he would just be proving her point. “So what if I like things going my way. It's called leadership.” he grouched. “I've always been more of a leader than my brother.”

She shook her head and smiled sadly at him. “You only think that because none of you have given him a chance to be a leader. It’s sad that you don't give your brother more credit. He told me one night you're twins, so this isn't an older brother watching a younger sibling sort of thing. He might not be as logical as you, but he is a grown man, capable of making his own decisions about his life and facing the consequences of said decisions.”

“I know that. Farkas a fierce warrior, with years of battle experience. He is honorable and fearless, but he’s always had a softer soul and I worry about him thinking with his heart rather than his head.”

Vilkas bit out.

“I don't call him stupid.” At her sardonic look he protested further. “I don't call my brother stupid.”
“But you do call him dimwitted or an idiot, and Skjor calls him an oaf, Kodlak calls you the smarter twin, and Aela calls him Icebrain. No wonder he hasn’t tried very hard to be a leader, his confidence is probably shot. Farkas can take care of himself.” she shot back at him. “For the record I think he’s smarter than you all give him credit for. He has a different way of looking at things and can be really insightful. He probably doesn’t voice his thoughts very often because you’ve all made him feel dumb any time he does.”

Vilkas looked away from the accusation in her eyes. He’d never imagined his protectiveness of his brother may have shaped how he grew up. Their mother had died of rattles when they were eleven, leaving them with Jergen, a big brute of a man, who was more inclined to bellow and strike out at mistakes than to teach two young boys the correct way to fight. Their mother had sworn he was their father, even though Vilkas had vague memories of another man caring for them as children. Jergen had dropped them off at Jorrvaskr soon after and left for the war, never returning for them. Vilkas wasn’t sure if he died, or just couldn’t be bothered raising two boys who may or may not have been his own offspring. Farkas had cried almost unendingly during that time. Vilkas spent much of his time answering for his brother, who refused to speak to anyone by him. To lose his mother and the man he considered his father in such a short time had been difficult for his brother.

Vilkas had done the opposite. He never cried, and had thrown himself into learning how to fight from the older companions. When other children in Whiterun had made fun of Farkas, Vilkas quickly showed them the error of their ways with the blade of his daggers. It took six months of kind words from Kodlak and convincing from Vilkas for Farkas to join him in the training yard. He remembered his brothers desire to impress Kodlak had been the driving factor for him to become the warrior he was today. Vilkas also wanted to prove himself to Kodlak, because the man took the time to show him proper techniques, and coaxed, rather than yelled when Vilkas had fumbled his stances or techniques. The man never raised a hand to either of them other than to teach them how to defend themselves. Still, Vilkas spent years treating his brother as if he was still the scared little boy who cried when he was left alone, or stared mutely when people spoke to him.

“Just because you are a companion now doesn't mean you know anything about us.” Vilkas growled, suddenly furious at her. She had a point, but she had not been with them long enough to know their history and her judgement came from a place of ignorance as far as he was concerned. “Just because you are bedding my brother doesn't mean you know him. You have no right to judge myself, Farkas or any of the others when you haven't been there with us. You don't know what we have been through, so don't you dare accuse me of disrespecting my brother.”

Saeja's eyes widened and she quickly stood, backing away from his rage. “It’s just an outsider’s perspective Vilkas. You’ve all lived this way for years. I don't think you treat him that way out of disrespect, more out of habit. I'm only trying to suggest he'd be capable of so much more if given the chance.”

“Leave it alone Saeja, I will not be talked down to when you know nothing of our past. I will not argue with woman who jumps into the beds of the men she just meets.”

He wasn't expecting the punch when it connected with his jawbone, but in retrospect he knew he deserved it the minute her fist connected with his face. The force was strong enough to send him sprawling backwards. He yelped and sprang to his feet, ducking as she swung again.

“You miserable skeever. I don't even know why I bother trying to empathize with you. You do nothing but put me down. I genuinely enjoyed your company the other night, and I thought maybe, just maybe, we might end up friends.” She threw another wild punch to his gut, which he narrowly avoided.
“My love life is not your business. Who I sleep with is not your business. If I choose one man for the rest of my life, or choose to win the civil war by sleeping with the entire bloody legion, you have no right whatsoever to judge me, you self righteous troll! Don't even try to tell me you haven't had your fair share of torrid love affairs. You’re brother and I do more than sleep together you know!” she hissed, jabbing a left hook towards his temple.

Vilkas grabbed her wrist, then her other one when she tried to hit him with her free hand. He backed her against the cave wall, her furious heaving breaths matching his own. He stared deep into the abyss of her icy blue eyes before lowering his mouth to hers, claiming it in a deep kiss.

Saeja melted against him for all of ten seconds. She wouldn't deny her attraction to him physically, but her mind screamed at her and she began to struggle in his arms. He held on tightly, pressing against her body, then raised a hand to her neck to deepen the kiss. Once her hand was free she sucker punched him in the side.

Vilkas pulled back with a curse. “What was that for?”

“If you have to ask then you’re a fool Vilkas. You can't just insult me then try and kiss me. You can’t condemn me for having lovers and be worried I wont be faithful to your brother, then try to seduce me yourself. What does that say about you as a man?” she growled, pushing him away from her. “Go home Vilkas! When I head to Ivarstead I want you to go back to Jorrvaskr.

“You kissed me back for a second there Saeja. What does that say about you?” he retorted, his face flushed equally with rage and desire.

“It means that yes, I do find you attractive you idiot. I’d be lying if I said otherwise, but I’m also sleeping with your twin brother. You have many of the same attractive qualities he does. That doesn't mean I want to be with you and it doesn't give you the right to man-handle me.” she snarled.

“I think you’re jealous of your brother, and the fact I fell in to bed with him first. As if I would share myself with a man who thinks I’m a whore. Your brother's compassion and kindness are what makes him more desirable than you. You never would have invited to join the companions like he did. Don't touch me again. I’m serious Vilkas, keep your hands off me or you will regret it.” she hissed. She glared at him as she stormed off, grabbing her daggers from beside her bed roll, and heading for the darkness beyond the cave.

Vilkas cursed himself, and hit the cave wall with his fists. He looked over to his brother, still asleep on the ground and whispered. “Forgive me brother. I’m such a fool.”

He lay down beside the fire, staring into the flames, deep into the night before sleep finally claimed him through the guilt.

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It was hours before Saeja finally returned to the cave. Her clothes, already stained with blood from yesterday were covered in mud and her legs bore thin scratches from running through the brambles all night, trying to escape her thoughts. Neither Farkas or Vilkas were awake yet, so she grabbed a clean shirt and breeches, then slipped back into her armor. She quickly cleaned her weapons and was just sheathing her daggers when she heard both the men begin to stir. They packed their gear in silence and made their way back to Riften. The tension between Seaja and Vilkas rippled through the space between them, but Farkas seemed to pay it no mind, drawing Saeja into light-hearted discussion about some of his past jobs, when he was no more than a whelp himself.

Saeja went straight to the Bee and Bard when they arrived back at the city, finding Keerava and
paying for her room for one more night. She wanted a decent sleep before heading to Ivarstead. She stowed her gear and her armor, then went out to the market square. She had grabbed a bunch of the weapons and armor off the bandits when they left and stopped over at the blacksmith first.

“Welcome traveller. Come to see me perform miracles with steel?” The man smiled at her.

“I have some pieces to sell sir.” she replied, hefting a large sack off her shoulder. She pulled out a set of hide armor, and a full suit of Nordic heavy armor, that she had taken from the bandit chief’s corpse. She figured she deserved the coin since that horker had tried to end her.

“No sir attached to me girl. Name’s Balimund.” he replies, picking up the pieces of the nordic armor, eyeing it critically. “Not a bad set, but surely you want to keep this for yourself. That gear you have on is hardly protection at all.”

“I prefer light armor. It’s what I’m used to and I will be travelling some distance soon, I want to have as little weight as possible.” she replied.

The man flashed her a pointed look and she flushed. She realized the state her armor was in, but was loathe to wait for new armor to be made for her.

“If you aren't willing to keep the heavy armor, I would suggest at least spending some coin on something decent. The junk you’re wearing looks like you found it on a corpse, which means two things. One, it was not effective armor to begin with, and two, it wasn't made for you.” he smiled when she looked sheepish.

“I see. Look, I will take the hide armor and the nordic armor and give you eleven hundred septims. If you let me make you some say, scaled studded armor, that I fit to your frame, I could give you seven hundred septims for the trade in.” he offered, watching her as she thought it over.

“I am leaving for Ivarstead tomorrow, you couldn't possibly have it done by then.” she protested weakly, picking at the matted fur of her hide armor.

“I believe I mentioned I can perform miracles. If you let me take your measurements, I will have this complete before dawn.” he replied. He knew he’d have to work all night, but he wasn't busy and had no other orders at the moment.

Saeja hesitated for a brief moment, then nodded. She followed the blacksmith into his shop, let him take her measurements and left with promises of the most amazing armor she’d ever seen, and her coin purse seven hundred septims heavier. She sold the weapons she had collected to Grelka, but kept the ebony dagger that had almost killed her.

Farkas was waiting for her when she entered the inn. He was sitting at a small table with food for two spread before him. She smiled as she joined him, relief relaxing her tense muscles when she noted Vilkas was nowhere to be seen. The food was hot and filling and again, Saeja slipped a generous tip to the argonian who cleared their dishes away. When she finally sent Farkas back to the bunkhouse, she was barely able to keep her eyes open. As she approached her door she noted the argonian innkeeper was exiting her room and she called out to the creature. “What are you doing in my room?”

The argonian froze, then threw her hands up. “Only adding more straw to the bedding. Talen-Jei told me of your ongoing kindness as a patron, so I wanted to make the room more comfortable for you.”

Saeja nodded, it was not in her nature to be overly suspicious of others, but warned the argonian anyways. “Thank you, but keep in mind I know of everything I kept in that room, argonian.”
“Keerava.” the creature replied. “My name is Keerava and it would do me no good to be stealing from customers. I’d lose business.”

Saeja let Keerava pass and then closed the door to her room. She checked her gear and packs, happy to see that nothing appeared to be missing, and when she finally lay down on the bed, it was indeed softer than she remembered from previous evening she spent in it. Despite this, she found she couldn't sleep. Her issues with Vilkas were keeping her from resting. She tried in vain to plan a way to explain to Farkas why she didn't want Vilkas to continue with them. After a few hours she finally beat her fists against her pillow, then used it to muffle a cry of frustration.

“Oblivion take you Vilkas.” she growled, throwing her pillow against a wall. “First he accuses me of having too many lovers, then he tries to become one. He thinks I’ll break his brother’s heart, then he tries to tell me he is concerned for mine.”

She began to pace the length of her room, muttering to herself about the stupidity of men. “I should tell Farkas. If he could tell me about his barmaid, I should tell him his brother kissed me.” She shook her head. “No, I can't tell him that. I didn't kiss Vilkas, he kissed me. It’s not the same thing at all. Besides, Farkas will be so angry at Vilkas, and they are family, but then again, Vilkas should know better than to kiss me.”

Finally she flopped back onto the bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. It was hours before her eyes finally closed, her mind calm and focused on her new plan.
A Castle in the Sky

Chapter Summary

Saeja manages to slip away, but there is no escaping Farkas when he means to follow. Making their way up the mountain Saeja prepares to meet with the ancient Greybeards and learn more of what is expected of her.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I DO NOT own any original characters.

OMG guys, I passed my insurance level 2 license exam and can now get back to writing. If you follow my works you can see I started writing one from the perspective a Bosmer Dragonborn, so I will probably switch back and forth, so if updates slow down, dont worry. I am just working on another storyline. I promise to complete the work. Saeja is my favorite character I have ever written about and she wont let me quit on her.

Vilkas took the advice and went home, but I promise he will be back. I love him too much to permanently exile

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cool air tingled along her skin as she crept out the door into the predawn darkness. She had left a note for the twins with a bleary-eyed Keerava, who grumbled until Saeja had pressed multiple coins into her hand.

The silence surrounding her was broken only by the slow slap of water in the canals of the lower city. As the residents of Riften still slept soundly. Saeja did her best to keep to the shadows until she reached Balimund’s forge. The smith was bent over his workman’s bench, putting the finishing touches on her armor.

“Gods girl, don't tell me you are leaving right now?” the blacksmith grumbled.

“You did say before dawn Balimund. I need to be on the road before it gets busy.” she replied, annoyed that she may have to leave her new armor behind.

“It’s done, but I wanted time to have you try it on and test it.” he argued, holding up the beautifully crafted set, which included a specially crafted potions belt in dark brown leather and a soft belt pouch in a much lighter brown.

“Oh Balimund, it is beautiful.” she replied, stroking soft fur skirt of the lower armor. “Fine, if we are
quick, I will try it on, but need to leave before people start waking. I am avoiding someone.”

Balimund lead her into his home, directing her to a room to put on her new armor. When she emerged he spent a few moments adjusting the fit, then gave her a few test hits with his sword. Satisfied with everything he waved her on her way, pointing out the gates that lead to the docks, rather than going past the bunk house. She waved goodbye, promising to come back the way when she was finished her journey and let him know how the armor worked for her.

She arrived in Ivarstead two days later, taking more time than she wanted to, but knowing it was safer to be cautious when travelling alone. She had seen a small party of Imperial troops leading a nord man in rags through the woods. She didn't know if Imperial scouts might still be looking for her, so once she had ascertained that the Nord in question was not Ralof, she had given them a wide berth.

The Vilemyr Inn was small but cozy, and the innkeeper, who introduced himself as Wilhelm, was kind enough to throw in a hot meal with her room. She locked her gear in the small chest at the end of her bed, then went back to the common room to ask Wilhelm for more information about the Steps to High Hrothgar.

“Well miss, the Greybeards are a solitary lot. I don't think they’ve ever ventured outside their monastery. We get the occasional pilgrim passing through here on their way to the summit, but almost all of them have returned disappointed.” He replied when she questioned him about the men at the top of the mountain. “Truly you should find Klimmek. He knows more about them than anyone else. You can find him by the river, or on the bridge to the mountain pass.”

Saeja thanked him with a wide smile, then hurried outside to find her next source. She saw no one by the river, except a bewildered looking man in torn and dirty rags, muttering nonsense to himself as he circled the dilapidated shell of an old home. Figuring that couldn't be the man she was meant to find she moved on, towards the bridge where she saw two men conversing.

She wasn't sure which was Klimmek until the Bosmer addressed the Nord. “On your way up the 7000 steps again Klimmek?”

Shaking his head he replied, “Not today. I’m just not ready to make the climb to High Hrothgar. The path isn't safe for me right now.”

‘Excuse me,” she interjected politely, “The innkeeper said I should find you Klimmek. I was looking for information about the steps.”

The Nord smiled at her. “Passing through on your way to High Hrothgar? I’ve been trying to talk myself into making my delivery up there.”

Saeja cocked her head to the side, “Deliveries to the Greybeards? What do they need delivered?”

He scratched his bald head, deep in thought. Talking didn't seem to be his strong suit. He reminded her of Farkas that way and her stomach clenched with guilt. Finally her grinned at her “Mostly food supplies like dried fish and salted meats. You know, things that keep fresh for a long time. The Greybeards tend not to get out much, if you catch my meaning.”

Saeja coaxed him along with a smile, really hoping the man would divulge some useful information. “Do they give you anything in return? It seems like a lot of work to get supplies up to them.”

Well, it's kind of an understanding between us. I mean, it just wouldn't feel right to charge them for a bit of preserved food.” the man flushed, and she had the feeling he was incredibly kind hearted,
which may result in him being taken advantage of from time to time. “Trouble is, my legs aren't what 
they used to be and climbing the 7,000 Steps takes its toll.”

“Well, I have business with the Greybeards, so I will be making the trip tomorrow. Perhaps I could 
take their supplies to them this time.” she offered kindly, “Maybe let your legs rest up a bit before the 
next time you have to go.”

The man’s face brightened instantly. “Really? That would be kind of you.”

He led her to a small house a few yards away and directed her to wait outside. A few minutes later 
he emerged, holding a bulging knapsack. “Here, take this bag of supplies. At the top of the steps 
you'll see the offering chest. Just leave the bag inside and you're done”

Saeja promised she would and then asked if he had any other tips for the climb. Klimmek thought for 
a moment. “Well, there's the occasional wolf pack or stray, but that's all I've ever had to deal with. 
Shouldn't be a problem for the likes of you.” he noted, taking in her fierce appearance and newly 
crafted armor. “Other than that, watch your footing. The wintry conditions up there can make the 
stairs quite treacherous.”

When she got back to the inn she ordered some hot stew and vegetables and a cup of spiced mead, 
then retired to her room, determined to get a better night’s sleep before leaving in the morning. As it 
had the last few nights, her guilt at leaving Farkas behind with his brother, with only a note as an 
explanation, ate at her. The whole situation made her feel like a coward, but she wasn't ready to deal 
with Vilkas, and didn't know how to explain that to his brother. She was just about to doze off when 
she heard a familiar voice growl outside her door. “A nord woman with white hair and eyes as blue 
as a winter sky. Have you seen her come through town or not?”

Jumping up quickly Seaja rushed to the door and cracked it open. She had to give the innkeeper 
credit. He stood behind his counter, polishing a tankard, his face a blank mask, “Most patrons value 
their privacy sir. I’ve nothing to tell you.”

“It’s alright Wilhelm. I know him.” she called out, flinging the door wide. She crossed over to the 
counter and handed him a bunch of septims. “I trust this covers it to have him join me?”

The innkeeper nodded and his shoulders visibly relaxed as the tension left him.

She walked back to her room, feeling Farkas’ eyes bore holes into her shoulders as he followed her 
and closed the door behind him. The room felt smaller, almost claustrophobic as she turned back to 
face Farkas, making an effort not to cower in the face of his fury. “I said I wanted to do this alone. I 
told you to go back to Jorrvaskr.” she accused, placing her hands on her hips.

“Not a chance whelp! Kodlak sent me to accompany you to High Hrothgar so that’s what I’m doing. 
You don't have the authority to send me home.” he snarled.

She didn't reply, she just threw her hands in the air groaning and turned towards her bed. She was 
whirled around instantly, to stare into his eyes, that had changed to molten silver with concern. “How 
could you? How could you just leave with just a note and not expect me to be worried about you. 
Everything seemed fine between us and then you just left me.”

Her face burned with shame. “I'm sorry Farkas, I didn't want you to worry. I said I would be fine. I 
just thought you would go home.” she replied lamely.

“Don't lie to me. You didn't want me here for some reason. Is it because of the girl at the bunkhouse. 
I thought we dealt with that?”
“I told you I’m not upset about that.” she protested, closing the space between them to place her hands on his chest. “It has nothing to do with that”

“Then why? What did I do!” he pressed, grabbing her arms and giving her a small shake.

“You didn’t do anything Farkas” she cried out, the pain in his voice breaking her heart. “It’s that idiot brother of yours. He kissed me the other night in that cave and I’m pissed off at him. I didn't know how to deal with him anymore and I didn't know if I should tell you, or even how to tell you. I didn't want to cause problems between you two, but I didn't want to be stuck with him anymore either. It made more sense to send you both home.” she cried softly, watching his face as he absorbed her words, their meaning dawning on him.

“Is that all? You were worried about telling me that Vilkas kissed you? I saw that in the cave, I also saw you pushed him away and told him off.” he stated, his smile spreading ear to ear.

“You saw that? But you didn't...you didn’t say anything.” she stammered, surprised by how calm he appeared. “Why aren't you furious with us?”

“I already told ya, I heard you tell him to keep his hands off ya. Called him an idiot too, that was nice for a change.” he replied, smirking at her when she blushed. “I can't be angry at him for falling for the same amazing woman as me and if you truly wanted him I wouldn't blame you either. Women tend to like Vilkas a lot.”

“I don’t” she responded vehemently, ducking her head to avoid his eyes.

Farkas lifted her chin until he could see into her eyes. “Then there’s nothing to worry about is there? Still, it explains why he didn't come with me. Made some excuse about wanting to get back to work rather than sit in some musty old castle while you learned to talk.” He stepped away from her and began to strip off his armor. “So do you think we can share that single bed comfortably, or do I have to find my own bunk for the night like in Riften?”

Saeja chuckled as she climbed back under the covers and patted the small space beside her. “No, you can stay with me tonight, but I need real sleep tonight. It’s a long climb.”

Icicles were hanging from her nose by the time Saeja was forced to admit they needed to stop and take cover from the storm brewing on the mountain. Not even her Nord blood could continue to stave off the rapidly dropping temperatures. They has just passed the halfway point of the climb when the wind began howling violently, tossing up snow and reducing her visibility to almost nothing. Cursing colorfully they managed to pitch a sleeping tent, piling snow on the corners to keep it from blowing away, and spent the evening spooned together for warmth.

It was mid afternoon the next day when the storm finally abated, allowing them to continue towards the summit of the mountain. Saeja spent the remainder of their trip cursing the cold, her dragon’s blood and destiny in general, while Farkas bit back his laughter. Once they reached the final steps Saeja dropped the supply pack into the large chest with a huff. Having made the climb herself, she was convinced that Klimmek should be charging them for the service, making a mental note to tell him so when she got back to Ivarstead.

At the doors of the ancient castle she hesitated, biting her lips with uncertainty. Farkas stepped behind her and wrapped her in a warm hug. “No matter what happens in there, I’m here for you.” he whispered.
“Well then, I suppose I should go meet destiny.” she muttered, pushing open the door and stepping into the dimly lit hallway.

She was met with a comforting silence and the smell of aging books and lavender. Small fires lit the hall into a central chamber, the only indication the castle was occupied. She heard Farkas’s questioning grunt, and shrugged her shoulders in response. She didn't know where to start looking for the greybeards either, and it seemed rude to just wander the hallways.

Finally she saw an aging monk approaching them from a side hallway, so she made her way into the inner chamber to meet him.

“So, a Dragonborn appears, at this moment in the turning of the age.” the old man remarked gravely, his voice a deep whisper.

Saeja bowed to the man, “I am answering your summons.”

The man eyed her critically. “We will see if you truly have the gift. Show us, let us see if you truly are Dragonborn. Let us taste of your Voice.”

Saeja closed her eyes, focusing on the feeling of that word that constantly pressed against the back of her mind. She inhaled deeply, then let it tear from her throat, staggering the old man. “FUS!”

The monk’s eyes sparkled with delight as he righted himself. “Dragonborn. It is you. Welcome to High Hrothgar. I am Master Arngeir and I speak for the Greybeards.” He gestured to the three other monks who had silently joined them in the alcove. “I am sure you have some questions for us. We are the Greybeards, followers of the Way of the Voice. High Hrothgar sits on the slopes of Kynareth's sacred mountain. Here we commune with the voice of the sky, and strive to achieve balance between our inner and outer selves. Now tell me, why have you come here?”

She thought for a moment before replying. “I want to find out what it means to be Dragonborn. I have answered your summons.”

Arngeir nodded. “We are here to guide you in that pursuit, just as the Greybeards have sought to guide those of the Dragon Blood that came before you.” He cut her off before she could question him further. “You are not the first. There have been many of the Dragon Blood since Akatosh first bestowed that gift upon mortalkind. Whether you are the only Dragonborn of this age, well, that is not ours to know. You are the only one that has been revealed thus far. That is all I can say. We are honored to welcome a Dragonborn to High Hrothgar. We will do our best to teach you how to use your gift as you discover your destiny and attempt to fulfill it. For now you are welcome here as long as you wish. I can see you and your companion are cold and tired. Perhaps you wish to warm yourself and sleep before we begin your training.”

She nodded. “I wish to learn.” she replied. “But I do not wish to insult the teaching of the Greybeards by falling asleep during my lessons.”

Arngeir nodded and directed one monk of the other monks to escort them to their room. As she turned to follow he left her with a final remark. “You have shown that you are Dragonborn. You have the inborn gift. But whether you have the discipline and temperament to follow the path laid out for you, well that remains to be seen.”

It took the better part of a week for Arngeir to answer all of her questions, as it seemed she had a new one for him every few hours. She knew the old man would never admit it, but he enjoyed having someone new to impart his wisdom to. He was astounded by how quickly she mastered new Thu’ums but he refused to teach them to her as quickly as she wished. Instead he spent hours...
teaching her the philosophy behind the Way of the Voice, their history, about past masters and about Dragonborn’s of old. Farkas passed the time by clearing the mountain of wolf packs and trolls or holding her tightly at night as her dreams caused her to shake with fear, or shout in triumph.

One evening, after she had mastered the Whirlwind Spirit shout, Arngeir joined her by the blazing fire as she read through an old tome. “Your quick mastery of a new Thu’um is astonishing Seaja. I’d heard the stories of the abilities of Dragonborn, but to see it for myself, it’s nothing short of awe inspiring.”

“The way I learn shouts, I thought it would be this easy for everyone. Especially knowing Jarl Ulfric had learned Thu’uums as well.” she replied, smiling at the old man and pouring him a glass of spiced wine.

“Thank you.” he said, accepting the glass from her “No. Indeed not. It took Ulfric many years to master even the basic words. He was meant to be a Greybeard, but felt beholden to his father and his city when the Great War broke out. We lost a talented young man, but he turned away from our teachings when he used the Thu’um against another. Beware that your own skill does not outstrip your wisdom Dragonborn.” They sat in silence for a few moments before the old monk continued. “You are now ready for your last trial. Retrieve the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller, our founder, from his tomb in the ancient ruins of Ustengrav. Remain true to the Way of the Voice, and you will return.”

“Master Arngeir, we’ve spent much time discussing the Way of the Voice, and your history, but I do need to ask something before I begin my trial. Do you know why are the dragons returning? Does it have something to do with me?” she asked quietly.

Arngeir sighed deeply. “No doubt the appearance of a Dragonborn at this time is not an accident. Your destiny is surely bound up with the return of the dragons. However, you should focus on honing your Voice, and soon your path will be made clear.”

She shook her head, angry that he was keeping something from her. “That isn't everything you know. Surely there's more you can tell me than that.”

“There is indeed much that we know that you do not. That does not mean that you are ready to understand it. Do not let your easy mastery of the Voice tempt you into the arrogance of power that has been the downfall of many Dragonborn before you.” the monk replied, his own anger creeping into his voice, making the room shake.

She bowed her head as an apology. “I didn't mean any disrespect Master Arngeir, I only wish to know more so I can help the people of Skyrim and perhaps understand my destiny."

The old man only smiled sadly. “You have not yet met our leader, Paarthurnax. He lives alone on the peak of the Throat of the World. Once you are ready, when your Voice can open the path to the summit, you will be ready to speak to him. He can answer the questions that I cannot. When you go to Ustengrav, you must do so alone. If you survive, return to us once you have found the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. We shall see if you are ready to face your destiny then.”

With that cryptic remark the man stood and shuffled off to find his bed, leaving Saeja feeling anxious and alone. She hadn’t been preparing herself to complete this task on her own and she knew Farkas would not be happy once she told him. No longer able to concentrate on her book, she set it down and returned to her room to prepare to leave in the morning.

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Farkas complained the entire trek down the mountain, despite her attempts to pacify him. It got so
bad she refused to let him join her to seek out Klimmek once they returned to Ivarstead, sending him
to the inn, instead, to cool off and have some mead while she went off in search of the man she’d
delivered supplies for. She walked to the bridge and down by the river, but could find no sign of
him. Finally she stopped a young women who was walking towards the inn if she knew where
Klimmek could be found. The girl giggled as she pointed Saeja towards the man’s home and asked
her to tell Klimmek that Fastred would be waiting for him at the inn.

After she finished telling Klimmek that his supplies were delivered, and stressing that he should be
charging the Greybeards for the deliveries if he had to do them more than once a year, she walked
back to the inn with him. His eyes had lit up when she mentioned Fastred’s name and she could see a
spring in his step as he walked beside her. She left Klimmek to go flirt with the young farm girl and
found Farkas sitting at a table in the back, brooding over his tankard of ale.

“You know, I won’t be leaving for Ustengrav for a while.” she said, sitting beside him and helping
herself to a rabbit haunch on his plate. “If Dustman’s Cairn was any indication of what I will be up
against I want more training before I take on a tomb myself.”

“You shouldn’t have to do it alone at all Saeja.” he replied as he watched her eyes roll back with
pleasure as she munched on her food. They Greybeards meals were limited to breads and hot grain
cereals with dried apples and vegetables, so the fresh meat was a treat to be savored.

“All the legends of old tell tales of solitary heros who defeat evil and become famous. Think of
Ysgramor.” she countered, licking her lips. “Arngeir stated I have to find the horn on my own
Farkas. I don't know. Maybe the magic surrounding the dragonborn becomes void if I cheat at this.
It’s not a chance I am willing to take.”

“Ysgramor still had a small army. His own sons helped him defeat the elves and you know it. Talos
didn't unite Tamriel on his own. The legends forget to include the tales of the armies behind the
heroes. Ulfric Stormcloak isn't going to defeat the Empire on his own, but even if the stormcloaks
win, it will be his name remembered, not the names of the men and women who fought beside him.”
Farkas replied, still frustrated by her refusal to allow anyone to help her. “The companions are still
around because we know the merit of having our shield-siblings at our backs, rather than trying to
obtain glory for ourselves!”

“I’m not doing this for glory Farkas.” she yelled in reply. “I’m doing this so I can fight the dragons
and keep Skyrim safe. I am doing this to stop the nightmares I have where everyone I know and love
is turned to ash by dragon fire.”

Too stunned to reply he just looked at her, wide-eyed and concerned.

She groaned, rubbing her temples, trying to relieve the pressure in her head. “It’s moot point at this
time anyways Farkas, I already said it’s going to be a while before I head out and I’ll let you help
train me until you’re more comfortable with the idea of me going it alone. I promise I am going to be
careful, so please just stop fussing.”

Farkas sent her a frustrated glare and stood, grabbing the last of his food and strode to their room,
slamming the door. Her mood deteriorated from there. She stomped out of the inn, desperate for the
calming effect of the chilly night air. She made her way to the back of the inn to sit beside the river
stream, where she stripped off her boots, sat on the rocky ledge and dipped her feet into the fast
flowing water.

She gazed up at the stars, trying to recall the images of the faces of her family. As time went on it
was getting harder to picture them and it broke her heart. Now when she thought of those closest to
her, she could see the icy white hair of Kodlak, and Hod, the summer wheat hair and blue eyes of
Ralof and Gerdur and the molten silver eyes of Farkas and Vilkas, despite how angry she was with him still. The thought of losing any of them was as painful as the loss of her parents and brother. She could not lose anyone else. Her heart would break permanently and never recover.

She picked up a small stone and chucked it into the water, smiling at the angry splashing sound it made. The fact that Farkas thought she was trying to gain glory for being the Dragonborn annoyed her to no ends. Being Dragonborn meant she was the only one who could truly kill a dragon. It wasn't glory she sought, it was survival. It was the desperate need to protect those she cared about that drove her to find out all she could about why the dragon's were coming back and if Arngeir said she had to find the horn by herself to prove her worth, then by Oblivion she was going to do it. She refused to allow harm to come to anyone else if she could stop it. She sat there long into the night, silent tears streaming down her face.

When she finally returned to the warmth of the inn, she crept into her room and saw that Farkas must really be upset with her. Rather than sharing the bed with her as he had been doing for weeks, he had rolled out his pallet onto the floor and was facing the wall. She tired to speak to him but he was either sleeping too soundly or was ignoring her. Giving up she slipped under the covers, laid her head on the pillow and fell into a restless sleep.

Her screaming woke Farkas instantly a few hours later. Wordlessly he slipped under the covers with her, pulling her into the warmth of his arms and stroking her back until her sobs quieted and her trembling ceased.

“You didn't tell me what your nightmares were about before and I didn't ask because you always seemed so terrified. I suppose I'd wake up screaming every night as well if I had to watch my friends and family be consumed in flames.” he whispered against her ear. “I'm sorry I didn't understand before.”

She only pulled him closer, the comforting strength of his arms reassuring her of the safety there. She breathed deeply, calmed by his unique scent of pine, leather and iron. “Please don't think me stupid or that I am trying to be a legend. I didn't want to be Farkas, you know that. I just can't see anyone else I care about die if I can prevent it.”

“I know. It's just maddening. I don't want to lose you either.” he replied softly. “I'll have your back until the end of days. If you need help you only have to ask it of me.”

She nodded, and held him close until sleep finally found them again, in the early hours of dawn.

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Chapter End Notes

PS. I know you can have a follower in Ustengrav. I choose not to have a follower very often, so I liked the idea of her having to do that alone.
Apologies and Impossible Choices

Chapter Summary

Saeja and Farkas finally make it back to Whiterun and the companions. She'll be faced with some tough choices and heart wrenching information about the twins past. Will she be ready for the changes coming her way?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not OWN any of the original characters.

OMG guys, sooo sorry for the wait. Its been more than a month, and I thought I was going to have more time to write. I do start to deviate from cannon and plot lines a bit here and it will only continue. It's still pretty close, but I have some ongoing disappointment in the civil war and companions quest lines. I'll try to keep pointless plot explanation to a minimum and stick with the action, but the next few chapters I have planned are important to character development. I do have a bunch of later material already written, I'm just working on the stuff in between.

Thanks for reading and as always, feedback is appreciated.

Their return to Jorrvaskr was a loud affair with calls for mead and a litany of questions about High Hrothgar and the greybeards. Saeja was tired after the trip back, but smiled and drank mead along with the other companions and answered questions without complaint. It was late afternoon when the crowd around her finally receded and the others went back to their errands, or headed out on other jobs. Two people had been noticeably absent though. Vilkas was nowhere to be seen but she expected that he would be hiding with his tail between his legs rather than confront her in front of everyone. Kodlak too had not joined her, but she expected he was still conserving his strength. Farkas had returned to his room to wash up and sleep, but instead of returning to Breezehome to do the same, she made her way down to Kodlak’s chambers. She found him in his usual spot, at the small table that made up his study.

He smiled brightly as she approached and stood, opening his arms wide in greeting. Without hesitation she stepped into the embrace, basking in the warm affection she felt there. She could feel the rumble in his chest as he spoke. “I am glad you are home girl. We were starting to wonder if you were planning on growing a beard so you could live in exclusion up there. It is good to have you back safely.”

She chuckled and stepped back, letting her eyes flow over him, looking for signs of his worsening condition. Satisfied that there wasn’t any physical changes she smiled. “I missed you too Kodlak. I am glad to find you well.” Lowering her voice to a hushed whisper she asked. “How have you been feeling?”
The smile faded from his eyes as he replied. “The same, but I tire easily. Don’t worry about me girl, I’ll be fine.”

She reached into her potions bag and pulled out a number of large vials, pressing them into his hands. “Please, I crafted these for you. I don’t think I can cure this, but I can make sure you are as comfortable and energetic as possible. Don’t make me watch you waste away like my mother did. Let me help.” she pleaded, tears glistening.

Kodlak slipped the vials into a pouch on his belt and nodded. “I welcome any thing you recommend, but don’t hover like Vilkas is,” he replied. “Now, come and tell me all about your visit to the mountain. I haven’t made the pilgrimage since I was a young man. What were the Greybeards like?”

She slipped into an easy conversation with him and spent the rest of the afternoon telling him about what she learned, and the quest they sent her on. She also filled him in on the events of their encounter with the bandits in the Rift. As Tilma brought a tray filled with dinner for them she finished up. “I suppose I would be dead if Vilkas hadn’t been there.” she said grudgingly, filling a plate first for Kodlak and then one for herself. She was still so furious with him, but had to admit she missed his cool head and advice on training. She didn’t know who else could continue her training with the sword, but she needed more practice. It was still her weakest skill.

“I hear he put his foot in it again with you.” Kodlak replied, picking up a tankard of mead and taking a long drink to hide his grin.

She jerked her head to look at him. “What do you mean exactly?”

Kodlak sighed and put down the tankard. “Farkas came down earlier to speak to me and mentioned Vilkas came home early because you sent him away. Vilkas didn't really answer me directly when I asked why he has returned without you. Farkas explained.”

She flushed, casting her eyes down to avoid looking at him. “I suppose sending him home seems childish.” she murmured.

“Not at all my dear. Vilkas is an honorable man, and a good warrior, but he has flaws, the same as anyone else. He can be arrogant, overprotective, short tempered and explosively reactive, jumping into action rather than thinking things through. It’s my fault I think. I allowed him to speak for Farkas when they were young, but it seemed to be the only way Farkas would engage with others. You may have heard Farkas talk about his father Jergen. A child’s memories often color the truth. The man was a waste of skin. I don't believe he was even their real father, from things Vilkas has mentioned, but a either way father does not abandon his children with strangers, then run off, never to return. Their mother died when they were young and Vilkas took charge of protecting Farkas, who took it much harder. Vilkas isn't used to anyone telling him no, or not allowing him to get his way eventually.” Kodlak explained, his eyes far away as he remembered how the boys used to be. “I wasn’t best father, to my own son, or to the boys. I feel I did a disservice to them all, but I can't change the past. I can only try to guide them now in the present.”

He took her hands in his own, making her look up at him. “I think you have given Vilkas much to think about and I doubt he will underestimate you again. I hope you will allow him to apologize for his behavior. He will be a good ally to have on your side in the future.”

She nodded reluctantly, knowing it would have to be a damned good apology, but she respected Kodlak and would not deny his request outright.

“Good. Now, I think it is a good idea for you to take some time to train more and build your strength. Farkas informs me you are not permitted to bring anyone with you to find Jurgen’s horn. I agree it
seems to be a test of your ability to face your destiny, but there is no reason you can’t prepare for it. I know you probably want some sleep so why don’t you head home and I’ll speak to Aela about taking you out on some hunting trips to work on your bow skills. Taking out your targets from afar is more practical in those tombs.” he suggested.

She nodded and bid the man goodnight, heading for her home. The cool night air filled her lungs when she stepped outside. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply the familiar smells of the town; sweet hay, lavender, sweat and mead. As she walked down the dusty steps she heard Belethor laughing with Arcadia near the well. Ysolda was pestering Carlotta for more information on running her own trading stall. She waved back at Elrindir and Jenassa as they entered the Bannered Mare. A smile ghosted across her face as she was filled with a sense of calm. Home, she thought, I am home.

Home was not going to remain calm for much longer. As she opened the door to step inside she was confronted by an obviously agitated Lydia. The dark haired woman was shifting from foot to foot, wringing her hands.

“Are you alright Lydia? I don’t think I have ever seen you lose your composure like this?” Saeja said, letting her pack fall to the floor as she began to shuck out of her armor.

“My Thane, please, you can’t leave me here like that again. I am sworn to your service and it is my responsibility to ensure your safety. I overheard your companions talking about how you almost died in Riften. I can’t protect you if I am forced to stay here every time you go out adventuring.” she replied, her voice wavering, indicating her discomfort in speaking to her Thane in such a manner.

Saeja paused, and looked into her housecarl’s eyes. Lydia was probably the same age as her, and as a women sworn to the service of the city, she would have also been training for most her life. She knew housecarls went into battle beside their Jarls and Thanes but she hadn't really put much thought into how that would affect her when Balgruuf had assigned Lydia to her. Frowning she thought for a moment before responding. “I appreciate that Balgruuf assigned you to me Lydia, but I don't really need other coming along with me.”

The pout that spread across Lydia’s face was almost comical. “But my Thane, you took the two brothers with you and they barely kept you alive. I insist you need to bring me along next time.” she retorted petulantly. “Besides, it’s terribly boring here when you are gone. No one comes to visit, and there are only so many books I can read in one day before wanting to throw them against a wall.”

Saeja smiled. “You are more than welcome to leave the house Lydia. You don't have to stay in here all day. You can go to the palace, or visit the Bannered Mare.” She finished removing her armor and placed it on the table to tend to it later.

Lydia sat in the chair across from her and rolled her eyes. “That’s not the point and you know it. I want to join you on your adventures. I want to do my job!” she replied.

Too tired to argue anymore Saeja sighed. “Fine, the next time I go out I will bring you along. I'll be speaking to Aela tomorrow for another job. Get your gear ready because we will probably leave tomorrow afternoon.”

A knock at her door had her groaning in frustration. All she wanted was some sleep, but it seemed she would never find her bed. She rose, striding over to the door and yanked it open. “What?” she barked.

Farkas frowned at her as he jumped back. “Sorry Saeja, I didn't mean to bother you. I came to see if you wanted to join me for dinner at the inn?” His took in the sight before him and knew the answer before she even opened her mouth. The circles under her eyes had darkened, and he could see how
her lids drooped with fatigue. While he may have gotten a few hours rest, she clearly had not.

“No Farkas, I don't right now. I'm sorry, but after you went to bed, I visited with Kodlak for hours. Right now I just want my bed.” Suddenly feeling a bit spiteful, she smiled mischievously. “Take Lydia with you. She was just complaining to me that she felt cooped up here in the house.”

Lydia sputtered behind her, protesting. “My Thane, that isn't what I…”

Farkas’s stammer interrupted her. “Well I mean, I was really looking for you.”

Saeja wicked grin widened. “Nonsense you two.” She stepped back, grabbed Lydia’s wrist and pulled her from the chair towards the door. Despite her fatigue, her grip was as strong as iron. “I insist you take Lydia to dinner Farkas. It will give me a few hours of quiet in my house, Lydia will get a few hours reprieve of her terrible boredom, and you don't dine alone. This is truly the best solution,” she continued, sarcasm dripping from her lips. Slipping behind Lydia, she gave her a hard shove out the door and slammed it shut while saying. “Go on and enjoy yourself now.”

She heard the two arguing loudly on the other side of the door, but eventually their footsteps moved away, indicating they were actually going to follow her commands. Saeja groaned in relief and shuffled up the steps to her bed. She rinsed off, slipped into her night shirt and was asleep before she had even pulled the covers over her prone form.

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When she awoke the next morning, Saeja was less enthused about taking another job from the companions. She was tired, her body ached from travelling and knew that with every job she completed she would be one step closer to to entering Ustengrav. Grumbling as she rose, she grabbed a pair of soft deerskin breeches, a green linen shirt and pulled her hair back with a leather tie. She strapped her potions belt around her waist, tucked her daggers into the specialty loops that Balimund had added to it, and exited her room.

She stopped dead at the top of her stairs when she noticed Farkas sitting on a chair in the dining area, slumped over the table snoring. As she descended, Farkas woke with a snort, staring at her with bleary eyes.

“Hey, what are you doing sleeping at the table?” She asked quietly, as the snores from Lydia’s room continued.

“Hmm?” he replied, still trying to orient himself. “Oh well, um, Lydia and me ended up drinking too much. I got her home and to her room, but I guess I didn't make it out the door. I didn't want to come into your room cause you were sleeping.”

She bent over and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. “Thank you. I did need my sleep last night.”

As she pulled away she noticed he was sporting a black eye and blood had dried on his puffy lower lip. “So did you enjoy Lydia’s company last night? Do I want to know who the two of you beat up?”

She heard him snort. “It didn't go so well until we both had a few bottles of mead in us. Then she challenged me to a brawl. Seemed to think she could take on a companion.”

“Well unless she looks worse than you, she succeed. That's a nice color on you.” she replied, brushing her fingers against the swollen skin of his left eye. “Luckily your war paint will cover that up. Vilkas won't let you hear the end of it otherwise.”

“It pretty much came to a stand still. She conceded first, but I don't think I could have handled
another punch. She has a vicious left hook.” he mumbled, casting his eyes down.

“Well I certainly hope you got it out of your systems. She’s coming on the next job. She’s insisting that as my housecarl it’s her job to protect me.” she giggled. “So you two will see a lot more of each other.”

She pressed her lips against his in a soft kiss, mindful of the split in his lower lip. When she pulled away she smiled at him. “I’m going to head over to Jorrvaskr and speak to Aela about a job.”

“Skjor was looking for you last night when I woke up. I’d talk to him first.” he replied smiling.

“Did he happen to mention what it was about?” she asked, grabbing an apple from the table and taking a large bite.

He only smiled and shook his head. “I think it’s best if you hear it from him.”

She shrugged, grabbed her bow from beside the door and exited her home, following the path to Jorrvaskr, greeting people as she passed them. When she entered the hall, her mood sank. Vilkas was sitting at the end of the main table and there was no way for her to get to the lower chambers without passing him. She silently cursed him to Oblivion then stepped forward. When he saw her he stood abruptly and started towards her but was cut off by Skjor’s loud bark.

“Ahh, Saeja there you are.” the man said, emerging from the staircase to the lower chambers. He muscled past Vilkas and strode towards her.

‘Yes, Farkas told me you wanted to see me.” she asked, relieved she could put off speaking to Vilkas for at least a bit longer.

“Yes, I have something a little different planned this time.” he threw a quick glance around hall. Noticing Vilkas watching them he stepped closer and whispered against her ear. “This isn't for everyone to hear. Meet me in the underforge tonight. We will speak more later”

Her look of confusion had him chuckling softly. “Sorry. I forget you’ve never seen it. Meet me below the Skyforge after dark and I will show you the way.” He moved away and gave her a quick nod. “We'll speak more later Saeja, I’ll let you know where I am sending you.” he said a little louder as exited the building to the training yard.

As she stood unmoving, still very puzzled by his evasiveness, she felt, more than saw Vilkas approach her. “What was that about?” she heard him ask.

Shaking herself mentally she glanced over to him. “Skjor has a job for me, but is working out the details. I’ll know more later.” she replied, trying to keep him focused on business. She took a moment to really look at him. Despite the war paint on his face she could see how sunken his eyes were. His armor hid a lot of it, but she could tell he had lost some weight from the gauntness in his face and he hadn't saved in days, his scruff growing into a short beard. He looked awful, and a little part of her was pleased that their last encounter had haunted him this much.

She turned to walk away but he gripped her arm. “Saeja, wait! Please.” She could hear the pleading in his voice, and it gave her pause. Vilkas never pleaded, he demanded and pouted to get his way. “Please let me talk to you.” he continued.

She forcibly pulled her arm from his hand and growled at him. “I believe I told you to keep your hands off me Vilkas!”

He took a step back, holding his hands up to indicate he wouldn’t touch her again. “Sorry, I won't
touch you again. Please, I’m just asking for a moment to speak to you.” he replied.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you want? I have nothing to say to you right now.” she said, trying to walk past him.

“Saeja, stop.” he pleaded again. “Please, just meet me downstairs. I want to apologize and speak with you alone.”

She stopped walking, cursing him and Kodlak for making her deal with this. “No.” she replied, not looking at him. “You come to Breezehome. If Lydia isn't up we can go beyond the city walls and speak privately. I don't want to be anywhere near your bedroom.”

He fell into step beside her as she exited Jorrvaskr, but whether it was his own guilt or her anger that kept him silent as they made their way to her home she didn't know. She unlocked her house and slowly opened the door. Lydia sat at the table, her head in her hands, moaning softly. As Saeja entered, she jumped up then groaned, stumbling to the side. She pitied the other woman’s hangover but was not in the mood to mother her. She tossed a few gold coins at Lydia. “Here, go to Arcadia’s and buy yourself a health potion. I need privacy, so when you are done please go to the Drunken Huntsman and have Elrindir replenish my supply of arrows. Tell him I will be by later to settle my purchase with him.”

Lydia could tell Saeja was not in the mood to argue, so she grabbed the coins and darted out the door as quickly as her throbbing head would allow. Vilkas followed her into the house and shut the door carefully. He waited until she had poured herself a tankard of water and sat at the table, looking at him expectantly, then began to speak.

“I don't really know where to start.” he began.

Rolling her eyes, she cut him off. “Then you shouldn’t be wasting my time.”

“Cut the sarcasm for a moment would you.” he snarled. “This isn't easy for me and I would appreciate a little empathy instead of your ongoing sass.”

“And there it is.” she smirked. “You can't even apologize without losing your temper around me.”

She laughed under her breath as she watched him turn red, spin around and start counting down from ten. Once he reached one he let out a deep breath and his coloring returned to normal. He turned again, his expression contrite. “There is no excuse for my behavior. There simply isn’t. All I can say is I am sorry, I am more sorry than I can even express!” he began. “I did a disservice to you and to Farkas. You were right, I haven't given you the respect you deserve, even after you proved yourself. I know you’re mad at me and you have every right to be. I’m only asking that we can try again, or at least work together without constantly picking at each other.”

She sighed deeply, annoyed with him still, but impressed with the sincerity in his apology. “I don't know Vilkas, I just know. You’ve had a problem with me since the moment you laid eyes on me. Even when we agree to start over, you cant let go of your prejudice towards me. Everytime I think we might be able to overcome our differences, your temper gets the better of you and you go off on me. I have tried many times to extend my friendship, for the sake of the companions, for the sake of Kodlak and for the sake of your brother.” she replied seriously. “Why do you have such a problem with me? I mean, at this point I am almost past the point of caring. I’ve tried, but you keep pushing me away, so I won't try again if you can't tell me what it is that upsets you so much.”

“I don’t know!” came the curt reply.
“Well then, I guess you have your answer.” she stated.

“Saeja please, give me a chance to prove I am better than the person you have seen over the last few months.” he pleaded again.

“Then talk to me you bull-headed ass!” she yelled, finally angry enough to raise her voice. “Oblivion take you Vilkas! Be honest with me and maybe we can make this work, but until then, I am tired of being your verbal sparring dummy. Fakas might be willing to give you a pass, but I am not.”

Vilkas whipped his head up to stare at her. “Farkas knows I kissed you? How? Did you tell him?”

Jutting out her chin in defiance she glared back. “Of course I did. A relationship takes trust. He already knew though, he saw you kiss me in the cave and the ensuing fight. He pretended to be asleep when I left. You should have told him as well. He deserves that from you!”

He buried his face in his hands groaning. “He gave me no indication he knew. He acted no differently when I saw him last night.”

Saeja took a long drink from her tankard, watching him. He dragged his hands down his face, allowing her a glimpse of the torment in his eyes and it tugged at her heart strings despite herself. “He wasn’t upset with us. He thought it was amusing that I hit you and called you an idiot. Said it was nice to hear it being directed at you for once. He said he didn't blame you either, for falling for the same person he did. In fact he told me if I did have feelings for you he couldn't blame me, since women tend to fall for your charm. I fail to see said charm, but he assures me you possess it.” she replied bitterly.

“I’ll apologize to him as well. He deserves better than a brother would sneak behind his back to kiss the woman he is seeing.” he replied.

“I’m still waiting for an answer to my question Vilkas. Talk to me. Truly talk to me. I know you have your pride, sometimes it’s warranted, but I need the truth from you to be able to forgive you.” she urged, her voice soft and encouraging.

Vilkas sighed and joined her at the table, but wouldn’t look her in the eyes, staring at his clasped hands instead. “I don't even know why you get under my skin like you do. At first it was my concern for Kodlak. I didn't think we needed any more recruits for him to be worried about. When you followed me that day and told me you knew about his illness as well, it was a relief that someone else knew and I could tell you cared about his well-being. He still hasn't said anything to me, but last night I caught a glimpse of the potions you gave him. Arcadia doesn't create them in those quantities or potencies. He closed his chest, hiding them, and I didn't mention I saw them, but Farkas has told me about your alchemy skills so I know they were from you. I actually wanted to thank you as well for caring for Kodlak during his illness. Is there no way to cure the disease?”

Saeja frowned, her heart heavy with sorrow. “No, I wish there was, but I don't even know what it is exactly. I have tried health potions and disease curatives, stamina potions, everything I can think of and it is only progressing. I think his strength is the only thing keeping the illness from advancing further than it already has. I don't know how, but his sheer determination and stubbornness is keeping it at bay.” She paused for a moment, tears gathering in her eyes. “I wish my mother had possessed even half of his will to live.”

“I didn't think there was anything else you could do that you hadn’t already tried, but I had to hope.” he replied quietly.

The silence grew between them, awkward and oppressive. She hesitated to break it, wanting to see if
he would continue exploring why he seemed to be so bothered by her. Finally after several long
minutes, he sighed and looked her in the eyes. “It’s jealousy, pure and simple.” he said. “I’m jealous
of the easy relationship you developed with Kodlak almost instantly. The man cared for Farkas and I,
but it took years to feel comfortable around him. The loss of his own son was hard on him, and while
he essentially adopted us, he still holds back his affection. Less so now as he gets older, but for a
long time the only way he knew how to show us he cared was by praising our deeds and giving
advice. The man treated you like a long lost daughter almost from the moment he laid eyes on you.
He told you about his illness without hesitation when you asked him, and he insisted you be tested
after only a week among us. It takes a normal recruit years to be accepted like that.”

He stood, pacing the length of the room, feeling the weight of her eyes on him. “It’s not even just
with Kodlak. My brother doesn’t normally accept outsiders without question. He also insisted on you
joining the companions when he first met you, and he was enamored by you from the beginning.
Normally he listens to my advice when it comes to women, but this time he ignored me when I
expressed concerns, and he took me to task that first night you were with us when I burst in on you.
Normally he would have laughed at my mistake. Instead he told me to make sure you didn't leave the
companions. I was concerned that for the first time, someone would get closer to him than I am.” he
growled in frustration.

“They when I finally let my guard down and got to know you I was utterly ashamed by my attraction
to you and my envy of Farkas. Your combat skills are impressive, and you never argued with me
when we sparred, you just accepted my advice and corrected what you needed to. Many of the circle
rely on our strength or our supernatural abilities, but you truly work at improving your skills. Riften
was also an eye opening excursion Saeja. I only understood the danger of the dragon attack on the
western watchtower when I saw the fallen city of Helgen. You survived both. Then you impressed
me with your tactical knowledge and planning abilities the night we spent preparing to fight the
bandits. Your on the spot thinking allowed us to kill the lookouts easily. Aela would have just
attacked, you lulled them into a false sense of security. You knew the plan could go wrong, but you
still used your body to your advantage, and trusted us to help you out if everything went sideways. I
was crazed when you nearly died. I would have desecrated that woman’s body if I hadn't been
focused on getting you healed.”

When he paused he could see her eyes had widen as she listened to him explain his feelings to her.

“I had no clue you felt this way Vilkas, that you felt threatened by me. I thought you resented me for
arguing with you all the time, and for not being intimidated by your commands. I didn't think you
respected me” she said softly.

He nodded, then sat on the bottom steps of the staircase. “I thought my brother a fool when I caught
him flirting with that maid in the Bunkhouse. I felt he didn't deserve your affection, your intelligence
and you unwavering support. When I came back to the cave and saw you curled up against him, I
barely controlled my envy. Then you told me you had worked things out with him, that his flirting
didn't bother you and you took me to task for sheltering him like I have, treating him as though he
was less capable. With every word that came out of your mouth you both captivated me more and
made me hate you for your insight. No one has ever championed for my brother like that and you
made me ashamed of my treatment of him. Even knowing he’s never resented me for it, I still felt
guilty because you were right, I just never noticed it until you pointed it out. I wanted to hate you so I
thought it would be better to make you hate me, but I still wanted you so much, so I kissed you. It
fulfilled both desires. I got the kiss I had been wanting, and you hated me, which gave me a reason to
put distance between us. Implying you were a loose woman gave me a flaw to focus on rather than
admit how amazing you truly are, Dragonborn or not.”

He fell silent again, dreading her response. He felt as though a weight had lifted from his chest, but
settled in his stomach. He watched her eyes, hoping for a glimpse of anything that would give him hope. She didn't answer him for a long time, then she sighed.

“I shouldn't forgive you. I should stay mad at you, but that was a good apology. You'll have to work hard to earn my respect again Vilkas, and an apology to your brother will be a good start, but I'll give you one last chance to prove you can be something other than an arrogant bastard.” she stood, striding over to stand in front of him and poked him hard in the chest. “But this is your last chance, so don't blow it, or no matter how much Kodlak pleads your case, I won't forgive you again.”

“I'll take my leave Seaja. Let me know if you need me for anything, or come to me for work. If you'd like we can resume your sword training.”

“Perhaps. I’m going to be brushing up on my archery skills if Kodlak has his way.” she replied, holding her hand out to shake his. He surprised her when he clasped his hand around her forearm, a show of more respect and camaraderie than a simple handshake. Then he left, leaving her with much to think about. He was more sensitive than she gave him credit for and her heart went out to the young boys he and Farkas had been. She supposed his arrogance and pride had been developed as a defense against the pain and loss of his loved ones and loss was something she knew all too well. Sighing she went to take care of restocking her supplies before she met with Skjor.

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Once the light had faded from the sky, she made her way back to Jorrvaskr, sitting at the bottom steps to the forge to wait for Skjor. She was only there a few minutes before she heard the hall doors open and saw him crept out into the yard. Once he reached her he extended his hand to help her stand then led her to few paces toward the stone cliffside that made up the Skyforge platform. It was only then she noticed shallow indent in the rock, and a near invisible seam, indicating a hidden door. Skjor pushed on the door and it slid open, revealing a cave beneath the forge.

“What is this place?” she asked softly, staring into the darkness within.

Skjor chuckled. “This is all you need to know. Jorrvaskr is the oldest building in Whiterun, but the Skyforge was here long before it was. The underforge taps into an ancient magic that is older than both men and elves. I brought you here to make you stronger new blood. Now follow me.”

She began to feel sick, as she began to understand where this could be going, but she needed to be sure. “I am prepared for whatever test is next”

This is no test Saeja, this is a gift. I’m glad you came. It’s been a long time since we had a heart like yours among our number.” he stated, guiding her into the cavern, to a small chamber. “That pitiful ceremony behind the hall does not benefit warriors such as us, and you are due more honor than some ancient words and calls and feasting.”

Saeja was about to reply that she didn't understand what he meant, but shock stole the breath from her lungs. She knew what was being offered to her now. Inside the main room of the cave stood a werewolf, it’s dark pelt gleaming in the moonlight that slipped through a few openings in the stone walls. This creature has a slightly smaller stature than Farkas’s wolf. She knew Kodlak would not take part in continuing the tradition of making the circle members werewolves, and that Vilkas would most likely be similar in size to Farkas as wolf, so she could only assume that the creature before her was Aela.

Skjor turned to look at her. “I would hope you recognize Aela, even in this form. She has agreed to be your forebearer.”
Finding her tongue again she replied. “I don't understand, why the secrecy?”

Skjor regarded her with his one good eye. “We do this in secret because Kodlak is too busy trying to throw away this great gift we’ve been granted. He thinks this is a curse, but we’ve been blessed. How could anything that gives this kind of prowess be a curse?”

She couldn't be sure, but she assumed the grating rumble from Aela’s jaws was laughter. “So you go against his wishes to cleanse the circle of the beast blood?”

He smirked in reply. “We take matters into our own hands, offering the gift to any we think are worthy of it. To reach the full heights of the companions you join with us in the shared blood of the wolf. Are you prepared to join your spirit to the beast world my friend?”

She was horrified, truly horrified by the idea of becoming a wolf. Her blood ran cold as ice in her veins as he looked at her expectantly. She knew Farkas would accept her no matter her choice, but she remembered the conversation she overheard between Vilkas and Kodlak when she first came to the companions. They both viewed the beast form as a curse.

“Well new blood, I need an answer. We don't have all night.” Skjor urged.

She felt the panic rising up inside her chest. She didn't want to do this. She wished Vilkas was here, to support her refusal, but she didn't want to cause problems between the circle members with Kodlak being as sick as he is. Finally an excuse came to her. “No, I am not ready. I can’t become a werewolf like the two of you.” she replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “As the Dragonborn, I don't know how the beast blood would react to the dragon soul. I have a destiny already linked to one beast already, I do not know if I will be at a disadvantage if I take on the blood of another. Until the Greybeards help me uncover more of my destiny, I cannot accept this.”

The frown deepened and he sighed. “I see Kodlak has already gotten to you with his ideology. It is your choice of course, we won't force you, but you can't be a true member of the circle if your blood is not as ours. Meet us here if you change your mind and wish to possess the same power as us. I trust you can see yourself out. Aela and I are going hunting.” he continued with a sly grin.

Saeja nodded, and slowly backed away as Skjor allowed the wolf to over take him. She trusted Farkas and Vilkas with her life, but was less confident about her safety where Skjor and Aela were concerned. She kept silent as his bones cracked and his muscles twisted with the change. She reached the door of the underforge as he face finally morphed into the jaws of a beast and he let loose a joyful howl. The last she saw of them as she stumbled out of the cave was the two creatures striding down another tunnel in the opposite direction. She ran full tilt back to the safety of her home, locking the door behind her as if the wood could keep her safe from the nightmares she knew would plague her sleep. Trembling she made her sat in the chair beside her table, facing the door with her bow in her hand and wept. It would be a long night.

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Saeja deals with the aftermath of refusing the beast blood and the demands of her ever increasingly demanding housecarl. Kodlak sends her on a real job, on that tests her abilities in a new way.

Chapter Notes

So more deviation from here on in. I'm hoping some people pick up on some foreshadowing from this point onwards.

I'm struggling to get through the parts of the story leading up to the chapters I have completed because they wouldn't get out of my head. Encouragement would be appreciated.

It appeared there would be no repercussions for her refusal to join the circle completely. When she arrived at the companions hall the next morning she found Aela in the training yard shooting lazily at a target.

"Hunting went well I take it?" Saeja asked quietly as she approached.

The redhead turned and smiled. "It always does when Skjor and I go out. I wish you have been there Shield-Sister, but I respect your decision."

Relief washed over her like a cool breeze on a hot summer day. Her body relaxed and she returned Aela’s smile. “I have a favor to ask of you then. A task I have to complete for the Greybeards will have me going into another tomb. I’d like to spend some time working on my archery skills. Kodlak said he would speak to you about it, but I was hoping perhaps we could do some hunting.”

Aela’s smile widened. "I’d be happy to help you. Tilma was just suggesting someone should bring back some more game. She is tired of haggling with Anoriath."

“I'd like to bring Lydia along as well.” she replied with a frown. “I didn't really want someone assigned to my services, but here we are and she’s getting bored with me leaving her alone all the time. I feel like I owe her a few adventures.”

Aela laughed. “You’re too kind hearted. She is lucky to be the housecarl for the Dragonborn. These days, most Thane’s stay home and work as glorified merchants and investors. Most never see battle in their lives. If she volunteered her services to the Jarl, she had to know she may never see another fight. Still it’s admirable you wish to include her. Bring her along. We will leave at noon.”
Saeja returned home to give Lydia the news. Once the woman had turned to start packing her gear, Saeja made a quick stop at the Drunken Huntsman to square up her tab with Elrindir, then had Adrianne sharpen her daggers for her. Rather than spending the time crafting potions she stopped by Arcadia’s and purchased some stamina, health and magic potions, then left for home again after promising the merchant she would keep her eyes open for some ingredients she was having difficulty obtaining.

Lydia was packed by the time she got back to her house, her excitement palpable. Saeja had just enough time to collect her gear before Aela pushed open her door, calling for them to get going.

After a successful first night out Saeja, Aela and Lydia decided to make their outings a regular passtime. They spent the next four weeks going out every afternoon, hunting and clearing out some local bandit hideouts, unless they were called out to other small jobs. Lydia’s mood improved as she got to know the other companions. The circle had decided since Lydia was Saeja’s housecarl she would be welcome at Jorrvaskr any time she wished and she took advantage of the invitation. More oft than not Saeja could find her practicing in the training yard with Athis and Ria, drinking with Aela and Skjor in the evening.

If Saeja was honest with herself, she was relieved that Lydia now had more occupying her time than following her Thane around. She in turn spent most her evenings visiting with Kodlak, resupplying his potions and listening to the history of the companions. Some nights Farkas and Vilkas would join her, telling her of their own exploits. Vilkas was keeping his word. His confession seemed to knock the chip off his shoulder. Both Farkas and Kodlak commented on how much easier he was to be around, and how much his relationship with her had improved. More often than not she caught herself laughing at his jokes, charmed by his stories of his and Farkas’s childhoods.

The night Farkas came by to thank her for making Vilkas apologize to him was when her anger fully melted away. The sheer gratitude in his eyes told her how much it meant to him to hear his brother’s apology. The dynamic of their relationship changed after that and she was certain Vilkas wouldn't take his brother’s easy going nature and compliance for granted any more.

One night, as she and Kodlak shared dinner with the twins in his study, he looked over at her with a wry smile. “Well now girl. You have been hunting and clearing out bandits for weeks now with Aela. You’re sword skills improve daily with your training. I think you need to be sent out on another proper job.”

“Clearing out bandits isn't a proper job?” she replied with a cheeky grin as she finished her salmon steak.

“Housekeeping, simply sweeping the plains of Skyrim clean my dear.” he retorted with a chuckle.

“Where are you sending her this time old man?” asked Farkas, finishing the last of his mead.

“Southfringe Sanctum.” Kodlak replied, his expression changing into one of disgust. “The Jarl of Falkreath contact us to report a coven of mages have taken up residence there and are terrorizing travellers and taking advantage of the chaos this war has created. I am sending all three of you on this one. Not because I don't think you can handle it Saeja, but these mages are rumored to be necromancers. They like to play with the dead. I want them eliminated, down to the very last man. No one can be allowed to escape.”

Farkas and Vilkas both swore viciously and Saeja swallowed hard, her stomach turning over at the thought of becoming a plaything for necromancers. “Lydia will want to come as well. To be honest, this is one job I feel it would be beneficial to have as much help as possible.”
Kodlak nodded, “I agree with that. Take the girl along with you if you wish. Saeja, will you stay a minute. I’d like to speak to you privately.”

She nodded and bid the twins goodnight as they stood and left to pack. “What is it Kodlak?”

His face was unreadable, putting her on edge. She couldn't remember a time when he appeared so guarded with her. She shifted under his gaze, as he stared at her for a full minute before answering her.

“Eorlund mentioned he saw you meeting Skjor at the underforge a month back. Neither Farkas or Vilkas have mentioned anything to me, so I assume you haven’t mentioned it to either of them. I wish you had been the one to tell me. Skjor and Aela think they are clever, sneaking around behind my back, but I know they invited you to become a full member of the circle. I would ask that you tell me if you took them up on their offer.” he stated with an edge of bitterness.

Shame flooded her body in a cold rush and she paled, horrified that she had still disappointed him.

“I can smell your fear on you Saeja. I also don't detect the smell of wolf on you, but some have a natural ability to hide their scent, and with my failing health, I wouldn’t doubt my senses are dulled as well.”

“I didn’t do it!” she blurted out, unable to stop the tears that began to well up in her eyes. “I swear I didn't!”

She felt him reach across the table to take her hand in his. “It would be your choice Saeja. I would never be angry at you for choosing your own path. I am disappointed that you didn't tell me about it sooner. I am disappointed that Skjor and Aela continue to promote the beast blood, but that too is their choice. If you choose that path, I will not care any less for you.” he said reassuringly, patting her hand.

She shook her head. “I can’t. I am happy to be part of the companions and I care a great deal for you and Farkas, and even Vilkas if I’m being honest with myself, but…” she trailed off, hesitant to continue with her thoughts.

“But what Saeja? You can tell me,” he urged her.

“It’s too much.” she confessed. “That form is just too much for me to handle. I know Farkas would never hurt me, I don't think Vilkas would intentionally, but I find that form horrifying. It was all I could do to not run screaming from the Underforge when I saw Aela. I feel different enough knowing I'm Dragonborn and can take the souls of dragons. The idea of becoming a literal beast was repugnant.”

She took a steadying breath and looked up at Kodlak. There was no condemnation in his eyes, only understanding and it gave her the courage to continue. “I didn't tell you because I didn't want to worry you that Skjor and Aela are offering this behind your back. I haven't told Farkas or Vilkas because I didn't want Farkas to think he repulsed me, and Vilkas would be be as upset as you because I know he supports your desire to find a cure.”

“How did…” Kodlak started.

“I overheard a bit of that conversation when I first asked to join the companions. I remember him saying he tries to avoid the change and I know he wants to help you find a cure too.” she replied honestly.

“Ah my little dragonette, you are so determined to take on the world all by yourself. I can handle
myself. I am still Harbinger of the Companions, I can deal with things I find unpleasant.” he replied, leaning back in his chair.

“As I said before, if you were to choose the beast blood, I would not begrudge you, but I am pleased you would take my opinions into consideration. You do an old man proud. Now, get going and prepare to leave for Falkreath. Come back alive you hear me?” he teased, a smiling tugging at his lips.

She returned his smile with a warm one of her own. Standing, she leaned down and placed a kiss on his forehead. “You wont rid yourself of me so easily old man.”

As she ascended to the upper chamber of the hall she spotted Lydia visiting with Ria and Athis and called out to her. Lydia jumped up and followed her out the doors. “What is it my Thane?”

“Kodlak is sending me out with the twins. You’re coming with us, and we leave first thing in the morning. Get your gear ready and prepare yourself. We’re facing down a coven of necromancers. This is going to be a bloody one so I want your weapons and armor in peak condition.” she replied fiercely.

Lydia’s eyes lit up with glee. “Yes my Thane, I will be ready.” she replied and took off running back to the house to prepare.

Saeja spent last hour the market place was open shopping for more supplies. Arcadia complained that she had only just resupplied her stock of healing potions and magicka potions, and was now to be without a single one again. Saeja laughed and threatened to start making all of her own potions again, causing the shopkeep to sputter about Saeja being her best customer.

A quick stop at the Drunken huntsman had her quiver brimming with arrows, and she purchased a few soul gems he had lying around to keep her bow charged. She was about to head home when she noticed Belethor’s assistant waving at her.

“Sigurd, hello. What did you need?”

“Farkas was by earlier and mentioned the companions will be going off on a job against some mages, is that right?”

“Yes, We leave in the morning.” she replied.

Sigurd leaned in close, whispering in her ear. “Look I know the others don’t much care for magic and spells, but I’ve seen you cast a candlelight spell when it’s dark and you’re trying to get home. Belethor got a few spell books in with his last shipment and a ring I think you should look at. Come quick before he closes.”

She shrugged her shoulders and followed meekly behind him, repressing a shudder when she entered the shop. Belethor made her skin crawl, but he would take anything in trade and wasn’t afraid to remind anyone of that fact.

“Ahh, if it isn't our lovely Thane. What can I do for you friend?” he oozed when he caught sight of her.

“Cut the flattery Belethor, it never makes me spend more. You know that. I heard you got some spell books in your last shipment and I’m in the mood for some heavy reading.” she replied with a grimace.

“Yes well, I have a few of them.” he replied, “If you’ve got the coin.”

Sigurd interrupted. “He got in a two healing spell books and you should ask to see the ring. It’s
enchanted. Farengar was by earlier and said it’s dual enchanted to boost your magical abilities and help protect you from spells.”

She turned interested eyes to Belethor. “Well that might be worth my time. I’ll take a look at it all.” she quipped.

Belethor grinned and pulled the items out from a locked box behind the counter. He handed her the ring which pulsed in her hand. Her eyes skimmed the titles of the books and she had to keep from whistling. She was impressed. One would help her self heal, the other could be used to heal others. She looked up, meeting Belethor’s leer with her own passive expression.

“Well, what do you want for them?” she asked without emotion, refusing to let him see how much she wanted everything.

“I want two thousand for all of it.” he replied. “And that is because I like your face.”

“Ha!” she laughed. “Try again Belethor. No one in this city could meet that demand, it’s highway robbery.”

“Eighteen hundred,” he responded, with a sneer. “But that’s the lowest I’ll go.”

She shook her head. “Not interested. Besides, knowing how much Nords tend to hate magic, I know you’ll have a hard time selling these off. I’ll give you eight hundred, and that’s out of pity.”

“Now who’s attempting highways robbery?” he stammered, outrage causing his complexion to turn bright red. “I wouldn't even recoup what I paid for them. Sixteen hundred and not a septim less.”

“A thousand and not a septim more, you greedy bastard.” she replied, crossing her arms across her chest in defiance.

“What a miser. You’re impossible. Fourteen hundred and that’s my final offer Saeja.” he stated, banging his fist on the counter in frustration.

Saeja turned and began to walk towards the door. “That’s disappointing Belethor. I hope I didn’t keep you too long after hours.”

“Now wait a minute dammit!” he called after her. “Twelve hundred and fifty”

She turned back and smiled at him. “Now you’re being reasonable.” She opened the pouch on her belt and pulled out a coin purse. She counted out the payment and piled it in front of him. “Pleasure doing business with you, you oily sack of ooze.”

“Likewise you miserly skeever.” he grumbled, gathering up the coins and locking them up in his strongbox. “Until next time wench.”

Once she was home she slipped the ring onto her middle finger and admired it. It was polished silver with a small sapphire gem, surrounded by intricate carved runes. She smiled and conjured up her candlelight spell, casting it in the darkened corner of her home. It shone brighter than ever before, and she didn't feel as strained as the other times she cast magic. Her hearth fire was getting low, so she added a log and sent a blast of fire towards the dying coals. Instantly the fire roared to life, the log almost fully consumed. Unable to contain her yelp of excited she danced around her home, feeling more powerful than ever. A niggling memory in the back of her head gave her pause, guilt coming in a rush. Her father would be so disappointed in her. He hated magic. Wasn't she about to go fight mages who wielded their powers in the most vile, unnatural ways? Would she become like them?
Feeling utterly dejected all the sudden, she slumped into a chair, tears threatening to escape. Lydia chose that moment to come down the stairs to set her pack at the door. “My Thane, what is wrong? Did someone offend you?”

She brushed the tears away with rough movements and took a deep breath. “No Lydia. No one has offended me. Sometimes memories of my family come to me at the worst times. I miss them. I feel like I am dishonoring my father and it upset me.”

“How could you be dishonoring your family in any way my Thane? You are the Dragonborn, a Nord Heroine of legend. If anything they are in Sovngarde beaming with pride.”

“I am embracing magic. The rush of power is intoxicating Lydia. I want to know more, but my father hated magic, feared it even. When he found out I had learned a basic flames spell from a guest at our inn, well it was the first time he had ever been so angry with me. I was sent to bed without dinner, and had dish duty for a week. Now I am learning spells and buying jewelry to help my magical abilities. I feel like I am becoming someone he would hate.” she whimpered, coming close to tears again.

Lydia stepped in front of her, shoving a hide cloth into her hands. “I think it makes you a braver warrior than he was if you embrace magic. ” she replied. “Nords fear magic and it is notoriously used against us, yet our Jarl’s all keep a court wizard in their counsell. If you learn it’s secrets and use it to your advantage, are you not just conquering your fear and utilizing another weapon at your disposal? Doesn't it just make you a more capable fighter by bettering your defense against magic?”

She sniffled, blowing her nose before she grinned. “I suppose I’ve never looked at it that way. My father’s family came from Winterhold. He was incredibly biased.”

“My mother was the same. I’ve no talent for magic, but I know a few spells that I use from time to time.” Lydia replied. “Now, I’ve finished with my gear and am heading to bed. Is there anything else I can do for you my….:”

Saeja cut her off. “Please Lydia, I would prefer if you use my given name, and no, I require nothing else. I will finish packing and head to bed myself”

As you will my... Saeja.” Lydia nodded, then ascended to her room.

Saeja packed her gear, checked her armor and weapons, choosing the best equipment to bring. She wished she had more time to enchant more of her armor, but it would have to do. She had her gauntlets, helm, necklace and ring, as well as her bow and war axe from Jarl Balgruuf. Surely it was fair to go mage hunting with enchanted gear.

Just as she finished up she heard a soft knock at her door. She opened it and smiled up at Farkas, pulling him inside. “Will we even get any sleep tonight?” she whispered.

“I hope so.” he replied. “Mages give me the creeps. I’d like to just hold you close tonight before we head out.” he replied softly, the vulnerability clear in his expression.

Her heart melted and she pressed a kiss against his cheek. “Anything for my mighty warrior.” she stated as she led him upstairs to her room.

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They would have reached Southfringe Sanctum earlier if it hadn't been for the dragon. It found them half a days walk south of Riverwood and had taken all four of them to bring the beast down. Vilkas
had struck the killing blow, but even he was humbled as he watched its soul, the glowing light, speed towards Saeja and surround her causing her to shriek with pain. Taking a soul still hurt as it raced through her body.

When she collapsed, shaking with the effort it took to claim the dragon soul, they had agreed to camp for the night to allow her to rest before the coming fight, even though everyone was eager to wipe a cave of spellswords.

Once they reached the cave the next day, Saeja pulled out instructions from the Jarl of Falkreath, which had included a messily scrawled map, created by the local hunters before the cave had been taken over.

Resting a safe distance away Saeja conferred with the twins, putting together a basic plan together knowing it would go to Oblivion inside.

Saeja took out the guard at the entrance to the cave silently, with an arrow to the wedged between two vertebrae in her neck. The group moved forward, the twins taking the path to the right, ripping through the mages with their greatswords, while Lydia and Saeja took the path on the left, their bows picking off mages and the spiders they seemed to control, until the came to a small path jutting up and to the right.

Casting her candlelight spell she peered into the darkness, making out the outline of a body trapped in spiderwebs.

The body began to struggle against its bonds. “Please cut me down!” the elf begged. “Please, help me!”

“My Thane, it could be a trap.” Lydia cautioned as she stepped closer.

Saeja looked closely at the mer trapped in the webbing. She was a dark elf, but looked far more gaunt than even those who lived in the Gray Quarter in Windhelm. Her cheeks were sunken in, lips dry and cracked and her eyes were glazed with fear.

“You aren't part of this band of mages are you?” Saeja asked as she began to slice through the webbing with her daggers. “Surely they wouldn't leave one of their own to suffer like this.”

As the elf tumbled to the floor she shook her head. “Not any more. Thank you for saving me. Bashnag’s coven chased me out and left me for dead down here. Nobody lasts too long with the spiders.”

“Bashnag and his coven? You mean those spellswords we’ve been taking care of?” Saeja asked, handing the mer a waterskin.

“Yes. We, well they, live here. They made it pretty clear that I'm no longer welcome. If you've killed any of them I am impressed. These are no dainty college mages. Bashnag has the skill of a magister and the mind of a warlord. This is a dangerous bunch. They were good company if you want to study necromancy in peace, though.” the elf replied.

Lydia took a step closer to Saeja, gripping her sword tightly. “So you are a necromancer too?”

The elf raised her chin proudly. “I am, and I don't want to hear your moral judgments about it, either. I wouldn't have had to study in secret in the old days.”

“Why would Bashnag turn on you?” Saeja asked. “What did you do to earn his wrath?”
“I left for a few days to go to Riften. When I came back Bashnag accused me of trying to sell him out to the Thalmor. I was cursed and chased off.” The elf replied. “I didn't of course. My daughter was sent to the orphanage there when I stood accused of illegal necromancy. I had no choice. Run or die. I joined with Bashnag then, but I thought of Savela every day. So I snuck off, hoping to find and steal away with her. Only, she was gone. Shipped away to another orphanage, or adopted, or…” she trailed off with a sob. “I didn't know what else to do, so I came back, hoping nobody noticed I left.”

“Obviously he had.” Saeja replied.

“Yes, and he cursed me. I can't cast a spell to save my life right now. I can't even leave now that I'm free. I'll have to wait until the way out is safe, like when he sleeps.” the elf stated.

“No need for that. His fate is sealed. You can follow us and wait till the way is clear.” Lydia responded, her voice brimming with anger at the knowledge that Saeja was going to let the elf go.

Saeja nodded. “Come along elf, but know that if you help him in any way I will gut you like a fish.” she threatened.

The three women continued up the path, ending the the lives of the last mage they came across before Bashnag’s chamber.

There were growls of anger and howls of pain coming from the other side of a locked wooden gate. The sounds of spells being cast echoed off the walls of the cave.

“No. Farkas! Vilkas!” Saeja cried, realizing they must be fighting with Bashnag on the other side. From the sounds she heard she was certain they must have changed to their wolf forms. She fumbled with her lock picks, breaking two before she was able to open the gate. “Stay here!” she demanded then raced inside.

The sight before her was pure chaos. The twins were losing against the spells and war axe Bashnag wielded with equal skill. One had a deep slice in his torso, the other, Saeja could not tell them apart like this, had his right arm near cut away, the forearm dangling uselessly from the elbow.

The rage that blossomed in her chest threatened to consume her. She refused to let them be killed on her watch. Everything faded into the back of her mind as she focused on one thing only.

“FUS RO!” The shout tore from her lips like thunder, hitting Bashnag squarely, throwing him against the wall of the cave. She heard Lydia and the elf gasping behind her while both the wolves whined in pain, cringing away from her.

The elf has not exaggerated the orc’s strength. He rose from the ground shaking away the dazed look in his eye. “Lucky shot Nord, but if they can't handle me,” he said, gesturing towards the twins. “How do you expect to?” He growled and flung a sparks spell at her.

Her throat hurt too much to scream as the electricity danced along her flesh. Before she could crumple, the pain stopped, her ring and helm flaring to life as they countered the magica.

A roar to her left was the only warning she got before a two blurs of fur slammed into the mage in front of her. She watched as the orc retaliated by setting them alight.

Farkas and Vilkas howled in pain retreating to roll on the floor, trying to extinguish the flames. Suddenly Saeja remembered the dragon they had killed and the soul she’d absorbed. Focusing again she forced that energy into her mind, unlocking the word she had found in Dustman's Cairn

“So you like to play with fire huh? ” she yelled. “Well try playing with this.”
“Yol!” Fire poured from her mouth directly at the orc, he tried to cast a ward spell but the dragon fire tore through engulfing him in flames hotter than anything he could have produced.

The orc screamed, a high pitched, tortured sound as he too dropped to the ground, trying to roll out the flames that licked at his flesh, but it was no use. By the time he managed to put them out he was nothing more than charred flesh, unable to move or even speak the words of a healing spell that could have saved him.

Saeja rushed to the sides of the twins, who weren't in much better shape. Tears streamed down her face as she cast multiple healing hands spells on them, trying to save their lives.

Lydia was suddenly at her side, pulling healing potions from the bag on Saeja’s hip. She uncorked the bottles, pouring them down the throats of the wolves, watching as the burnt flesh flaked away, revealing dark new skin and fur.

Seaja let out a joyful yell as the arm of the one werewolf began to form sinew, tendons and muscles before her very eyes. She cast another spell on him before exhaustion caused her world to go dark.

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A stamina potion brought be back to consciousness moments later. As she mumbled her thanks to Lydia she took a moment to take in her surroundings.

Farkas and Vilkas were back in human form, leaning against the wall of the cave as they shivered uncontrollably, exhausted from the rapid healing. The elf stood over Bashnag, looking utterly lost while Lydia was grabbing healing potions out of her pack, pouring the contents over Farkas’s mending arm and ordering Vilkas to drink the other one as the flesh across his chest knit back together.

Once she could stand Seaja walked over to the crispy orc who was moaning softly. Even as furious and disgusted by his actions as she was she couldn't bring herself to allow him to suffer anymore. Her dagger supplied the mercy stroke across his neck to end his pain.

The elf spoke softly. “I'm not sure how to feel about this. I know it's for the best, but they were all the family I had left”

“I suggest you find your real family. You have a daughter out there somewhere. Just know that if I hear any rumors of necromancy in this area I will hunt you down and slaughter you.” Saeja warned.

“Thank you for sparing me. When I find my daughter, it will be thanks to you.” the elf replied. “I'm feeling better now that he's gone, but Bashnag's curse won't wear off for weeks. I won't be myself for some time. I just need to get out of here and recover. I think it will be better if I give up on any necromantic pursuits from now on. Oh, and you won't hear a word from me about your furry friends.”

With that she began to head for the exit, leaving the worn out, injured group to sort themselves out.

Saeja returned to the twins, dropping to her knees and throwing an arm around each of them, hugging them tightly. “I thought I was going to lose you both.” she whispered.

“Nah,” replied Farkas weakly. “We’re too stubborn to die.” He pressed a soft kiss to her cheek.

“Way to show up late to the battle and steal all the glory for yourself.” Vilkas teased.

She pressed a sisterly kiss to his forehead. “Sorry, I shouldn't have assumed you puppies could handle it on you own.” she shot back.
Once she was satisfied their wounds were healing as they should she stood and turned to Lydia who was staring with unabashed interest.

“I trust that your service to me forbids you from revealing this to anyone?” she asked, her voice a thinly veiled threat.

“Of course my Thane.” the housecarl replied with a bow. “Still why keep it a secret? I would think they would be proud of power like that.”

Vilaks frowned. “The Companions have enough trouble fending off the attacks of the Silver Hands as is without having half the citizens of Skyrim know we are monsters.”

Lydia was about to reply, but Saeja’s dark frown caused the response to die on her lips. Instead she followed Saeja through the cave, ensuring it was cleared and looting the bodies of the mages.

When they returned a half hour later the twins were fully healed and had donned their armor.

Farkas pulled Saeja into his arms, pressing a hard kiss against her lips. “Werewolves heal faster than humans. Even without your spells and potions we would have eventually been as good as new. Thanks for speeding up the process, even if it was with magic.”

“I'm glad you are both safe.” she said as she pulled back, then threw her arms around Vilaks in a tight hug.

After they ate and set up camp inside the cave, they divided up the loot; weapons, armor jewelry and coin evenly. Saeja requested a book they found in a chest near Bashnag’s enchanting table. She also got permission from the others to disenchant a few items after she promised to enchant any gear they needed in the future. There was a necromancer robe that taught her how to fortify magic, a ring that provided a smithing enchantment and a necklace that provided a boost to the wearers health. The book contained a spell to detect lifeforms which she read in the light of the campfire, her desire for more magic keeping her from her sleep. Only when she had finally managed to cast the spell correctly, causing the bodies of her friends to glow a pale purple did she allow herself to drift off, as she made a mental note to pass by Riverwood on their way back to try her luck with the Mage Stone.

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The Circle is Broken

Chapter Summary

One should always take a shield-sibling with them when you go hunting. Horror befalls the Companions, but Seaja cannot put off her destiny any longer.

Chapter Notes

TAGS: Torture, blood, mild sexy stuff (unrelated to the torture...i dont do that shit)

Again this deviates from cannon and I am starting to interject more of what I wish happened in Skyrim. It will still follow most of the questline stuff, but little details will change and I will flesh out the fairly 1 dimensional characters a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Though Saeja felt she was ready to take on Ustengrav when she returned to Whiterun, after this last successful excersion, she was to be delayed again by a frantic Aela. Less than an hour after they returned to Whiterun and gave their report to Kodlak, Aela was banging on the door of Breezehome, the panic in her voice causing Saeja to run down the stairs to let her in.

“Saeja, we need to go, you must come with me.” the woman begged. “Skjor went out on his own. Normally I wouldn’t worry, but he should have been back two days ago and he hasn't returned.”

Seaja took the hand of the older woman in her own. “Why would you be worried. Sometimes a job takes longer than expected. Kodlak didn't seem worried when I spoke to him earlier.”

Aela ducked her head in embarrassment. “Kodlak wouldn't know to worry. Skjor did not tell him the nature of this job. It was personal. Skjor has been upset about the Silver Hands tricking us into sending you to Dustman’s Cairn and ambushing you. He’s been pursuing them for months now. He finally found one of their main fortresses and went on his own to clear it out. I don’t doubt his strength, but I have a sick feeling in my stomach. I can't ask anyone else. The other companions don’t know about the circle and Farkas and Vilkas would not approve of Skjor leaving on his own, betraying Kodlak’s trust like that.”

Exhausted as she was, Saeja still agreed, repacking her gear. Aela had already bought out Arcadia’s new stock of potions and the two women headed out immediately. The took the carriage to Windhelm, with Saeja requesting they be dropped off at Anga’s Mill, then headed south to Gallow’s Rock.

The signs of a struggle were everywhere around the fort. Blood frozen to the ground, not completely covered by the new snow, looked almost black in the dusk, but that wasn’t what had Saeja’s stomach clenching with dread. There were three guards at the entrance. If there were guards, then Skjor had not succeeded in clearing the fort. Aela shifted her weight uneasily from foot to foot, probably
realizing the same thing.

Saeja sent her a silent nod, nocking her bow. Aela did the same and they let their arrows fly, picking off two of the guards as silently as possible. The third saw them just as her companions dropped. She drew a sword and charged at them, screaming about their ultimate end, but Aela loosed another arrow, shooting it directly into the woman’s eye, dropping her like a rock.

Making their way to the door Saeja reached out and touched the other woman’s shoulder. “Aela, I need to know you can be focused in there. No matter what we find, I need to know you’ll have my back inside.” she said, knowing Aela was probably beside herself with worry for her lover.

Aela swallowed hard and nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

In the first room they found the path blocked by a set of spike bars. As Saeja pulled the chain to lower them, Aela mumbled. “The cowards must have locked this place down after Skjor charged in. You can taste the fear.”

Saeja didn't think it was fear that had them blocking the way inward. The pull chain was on their side. She didn't have the heart to tell Aela she thought it was to keep Skjor inside.

It took forever to reach the innermost chamber. Opting for stealth over speed they picked off the Silverhand guards as quietly as possible to keep them from alerting their leader. Every time they came to a cell in the fort that contained a werewolf, Aela checked to see if it was Skjor, but every time she was disappointed. The two of them put the creatures out of their misery. Most were half starved and crazed, tortured until their human minds broke, leaving them little more than raging beasts. The only consolation was that Aela confirmed none of them were known to the Companions. In one cell, when Saeja spotted a set of torture tools, her stomach to rebelled, emptying itself of her meager breakfast.

When the retching stopped she felt Aela’s hand on her back. “I was the same the first time I cleared out a Silver Hand fortress.” she murmured encouragingly.

“By the Nine Aela. When Farkas told me they were bad people who hated werewolves he never indicated it was this bad.” she moaned, wiping her mouth. “Aela, I’m so sor…”

“Don’t say it. Right now I need to concentrate on finding him, not worrying about the condition I will find him in.” the redhead replied fiercely.

They reached the bottom most chamber of the fortress, a wooden door the only thing separating them from the leader of this Silver Hand faction.

Aela turned to her and whispered. “This is it, I can smell it. Skjor is in there. Be careful Saeja, their leader is a tricky one. They call him the Skinner, and I don't think I need to tell you why.”

Though there were tears glistening in her eyes, Aela’s face was devoid of emotion. Saeja nodded. “I’ve got your back Aela.” she replied and they pushed open the door.

For a moment luck, if you could call it that, was on their side. The leader and his guards didn't notice them right away. They were too busy concentrating on the body laid out on the floor between them.

Aela and Saeja shot arrows at the four of them over and over, killing two guards immediately. The remaining guard turned and ran at Aela, leaving Saeja to deal with the Skinner. The man advanced on her with a wicked looking steel war axe. His eyes were glazed over with blood lust, his lips twisted into a maniacal smile. “Ha, I love a challenge!” he yelled at her, swinging wildly.
She ducked and dodged the swings as best as she could, but he landed a shallow cut across her left bicep, rendering her unable to use her bow. It didn't matter much anyways, he was too close for her to get a decent shot. She threw it down and grabbed her sword.

She dove around a pillar, ducking as the axe blade swung over her head and thrust the sword up and to the left, driving it deep between the seam of his armor into a lung. The fire enchantment cauterized the wound as she ripped the blade from his chest and flames danced along his skin.

He screamed in agony but kept advancing on her. From the corner of her eye she saw Aela take the head off the other guard.

“It won’t be that easy you whore! I’ll kill every last one of you!” the man bellowed.

“I don’t think so!” she yelled back, then let loose her shout. “FUS RO!”

He flew across the room, hitting the wall with a sickening crunch. As he landed she could see his arms and legs bent at unnatural angles. He would not be getting up from that, if he survived at all.

From her side she heard Aela scream Skjor’s name as the redhead flew to his side. “No! Saeja, help me please. He’s still alive.”

Saeja hurried to join her, then sent a silent thanks to the Divines that she had already thrown up before. Skjor was alive, but just barely. The Skinner had lived up to his name. The body in front of her was almost unrecognizable, a bloody, pulpy mess that quaked uncontrollably. They had smashed the bones in his feet, legs and the one arm and hand still attached to his body. His good eye was hanging from it’s socket, his face crushed by too many punches. He couldn't even scream anymore, his throat raw from days of torture. Three silver daggers protruded from his feet and remaining hand, pinning him to the floor of the chamber. Aela crumpled to her knees beside him, her breathing frantic and uneven, a constant whine coming from her throat. Her hands trembled as she restrained herself from touching his body.

“Skjor no!! Please, no!” the woman wailed hysterically.

Without pausing for a second Saeja ripped open her belt bag, dumping every potion she had on the ground. Kneeling beside him she tore the corks from 2 bottles and dumped them over him, praying she had the strength and energy to help him. She cast a healing spell on him, dejected when nothing appeared to happen. When his body began to jerk, violently, ripping the dagger tips from the floor, Saeja’s stomach bottomed out, causing her to dry heave until she could control herself.

She turned to Aela who was whimpering on the other side of Skjor, her hands shaking.

The slap echoed through the chamber. “Aela! Focus, I’m going to need your help if we want to save him.” she screamed. She would worry about the traumatized woman’s feelings later. Now she needed all the help she could get. “Check that chest for any other healing or magica potions you can find.”

Aela pulled herself up with a sob and ran to the chest. Saeja, cast another healing spell and then drank a potion. Over and over she switched between pouring healing potions over Skjor’s body, and casting healing hands on him. She focus on his upper body, needed him to be able to drink a few of the healing draughts if he could manage it.

Aela came back with two more healing potions, a large stamina potion and the strongest magica potion Saeja had ever seen. Without being asked the woman began to uncork the bottles, handing them to Saeja as she requested them. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Saeja began to see results. When
she ran out of healing potions, she just cast spell after spell on him until she could see shiny pink flesh developing over the raw exposed nerves of his body.

“Anela, get me hot water. If you have to fill a cooking pot with snow, do it, but get it over a fire fast. I’m going to have to take a break soon. I can’t keep up these spells much longer.” she rasped.

The redhead nodded, seemingly more in control again, then ran out a side door, that appeared to take her directly to the entrance of the fortress.

Skjor’s breathing was shallow and raspy, but his face had regained some of its shape, the bones reforming slowly. She had managed to get his eye back into its socket and focused the last of her energy casting the spells on his upper body.

“Stay with me Skjor. I can’t even imagine how much pain you’re in right now but I will do my best to take it away. Just stay with me, ok?” she murmured. She fumbled at her potions belt, grabbing an a small black vial she kept with her. Her mother had used these potions on her an Fjolti when they were sick and unable to sleep. A sleeping draught, made from a tincture of canis root and diluted nightshade would put him to sleep, but she was worried about administering it to him before Aela came back. The woman was barely holding herself together, and if Skjor appeared to be dead, Saeja wasn’t entirely certain she wouldn't be next.

Agonizingly long minutes past before Aela rushed back in with a cooking pot and set it over a nearby fire. She knelt back down beside Skjor and pasted on a trembling smile. “He looks a bit better.” she stammered.

“Aela, I need to rest and I am out of magica potions. I have to regenerate my reserves naturally and it could take a while. I have something I can give him for the pain. It will knock him out and I wanted you to know before I gave it to him.”

“You should have given it to him already. Do whatever you need to.” the woman replied dully.

As gently as she could she tipped the contents of the tiny vial into Skjor’s mouth, holding his head up until he swallowed. Almost instantly his body went limp, muscles relaxing. Saeja heard Aela’s gasp.

“I understand why you waited now. It slowed his heart beat as well. I’d have thought he was dead.” she muttered bitterly.

“I cant promise you anything Aela, but I will do my best to get him through this.” Saeja replied softly.

Once the water was boiling Saeja removed the pot from the fire and began to soak clean strips of hide in it. Once it had cooled she began to gently wash the newly formed skin, being careful not to contaminate any of the open wounds still on his body. Once she had cleaned away the blood and dead tissue she took a look at his left arm. The Silver Hands had cut it off above his elbow and had somehow cauterized it without heat, as there were no blisters. “Aela, look at this? I’ve never seen this before.” she murmured.

Aela went white. “It’s a myth that werewolves can regenerate limbs, but those bastards made sure he couldn’t. They used a silver sword to cut off his arm. Cuts with silver heal very slowly, but this looks like they kept the metal against his skin to aggravate the wound and prevent the healing.”

With that statement she rushed from the room and Saeja heard the sounds of retching. While Aela composed herself, Saeja bandaged the stump of his arm. She had just finished when the other woman returned. She sat on the floor beside Skjor, pulling her legs up to her chest and stared at him in silence for a long time while Saeja cleaned up and looted the bodies they had left in their wake.
When Saeja came back, her belt was purse loaded with the other potions she found, gold and lock picks and a book about forging weapons that she hoped would take her mind of the horror she had just witnessed. She went to Skjor and poured another healing potion down his throat, as well as a cure disease potion she had found, hoping it would help with any infection that may fester in the still open wounds on his chest and legs.

Aela swore beside her. “Those bastards. I can’t believe the managed to do this to Skjor. He’s the strongest member we have, but numbers can overwhelm. He shouldn’t have come here without a shield-brother.” Her voice broke and she buried her face against her knees. When Saeja sat beside her and pulled the grieving woman into her arms, the normally hard woman broke down and sobbed as if her very soul had been ripped from her. Saeja held her long into the night, because there was little else she could do.

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It took them nearly a week to get Skjor back to Whiterun. Seaja didn't dare move him at first. He was too weak to transform to help speed up his healing and it took two days for his bones to set themselves back together enough that they could lift him onto a wooden plank that Aela had ripped from a table. Once the managed to get him to the stables at Windhelm they hired a carriage home, paying extra to keep the driver from taking on any other customers and to keep the trip as smooth as possible. Saeja spent all her time pouring her magic into Skjor, watching for signs of infection and resting as best as she could.

After the first sleeping draught, Saeja no longer needed a potion to keep Skjor unconscious. He had not woken up yet, but she remained hopeful as his breathing evened out, the rasp disappearing, and his heartbeat stabilized, becoming stronger every day. When then reached Whiterun Aela had the stable-master help them take Skjor to the Temple of Kynareth. Once the priestesses had taken him into their care Saeja collapsed to the floor of the temple, her body finally too worn out to stay conscious.

She woke up alone that evening in Farkas’s room. Beside the bed sat a change of clothes, and a basin of water to cleanse herself. She did so quickly, then donned the soft breeches and tunic. She pulled on her boots and opened the door to the room, stepping into the hall quietly. The normally loud hall was eerily quiet. She peered around the corner to Kodlak’s study and wasn't surprised she she saw all the members of the circle sitting around the small table. Vilkas was the first to spot her.

“Saeja!” his voice echoed down the hall.

Farkas turned, jumping out of his chair and raced towards her. As his arms enclosed her she buried her face into his chest, hugging him tightly as she tried not to be sick. She was still dizzy with fatigue. Vilkas had grabbed another chair, positioning it between himself and his brother’s chair.

“Bring her here Farkas.” Kodlak’s low voice carried from the table.

Farkas whispered in his ear. “It’s fine, he’s not mad at you. He was worried. So was I.”

She stepped out of his embrace and walked toward Kodlak. He stood, looked down at her with a frown. “I hope you know what you did was reckless and rash. You and Aela should have told me what was going on. You were gone for almost two weeks with no word to anyone, your housecarl was frantic and has been here every single day looking for you. I couldn't even send Farkas or Vilkas out to find you because there were no clues as to where you two had gone.” he roared, anger turning his face red.

Seaja chanced a glance at Aela who was hunched over, shoulders tense. Clearly she had already
heard this tirade.

I expect this recklessness from Aela. She has always been headstrong, rushing into battle before she thinks, but I expected more from you Saeja.” he continued, his frown deepening. He sighed deeply and sat back down, gesturing for her to do the same.

“However, Aela tells me you were instrumental in ensuring Skjor was returned to us alive rather than in a coffin. I’ve had a chance to see him, and Aela explained the extent of his injuries. Had you not gone with her when you did we may have well found his corpse. So we have you to thank for saving his life.” he continued, his tone softening with gratitude. “The priestesses tell me they believe he will recover, including his eye. They have told me if you are ever interested in joining their ranks, they would be happy to have you.”

Aela finally lifted her head and smiled, “Thank you again for saving him. I don't know how much use he will be to the companions without his arm, but he lives and that is all I care about.”

“He will have a home here regardless of if he can work anymore Aela. His experience is indispensable as a teacher and he will always have a home with us. Now, I want everyone to to get some rest.” He stood, waving them all off. “Aela, get some sleep. It will be a while before he wakes up, and it will be better for him if you’re rested and the first person he sees.”

Aela stood and hugged Saeja as she passed, before her stern mask fell back into place. Vilkas patted her head as he walked past her, while Farkas took her hand and tried to lead her from the study.

“I’ll be right with you. I want to speak to Kodlak privately.” she whispered, squeezing his hand.

When the room was empty she stood, facing Kodlak, his gaze steady and unwavering. “You’re right and I know it. It was stupid of us to leave without telling anyone. You have every right to be angry with me.”

“There isn't a warrior in the history of the Companions who has never made a mistake and that includes me Saeja. I just hope you have learned from it. Skjor got too confident and nearly paid with his life. You wont need help in everything you do, but you should rely on it when you need it. It will always be here for you.” he replied. He held open his arms and she stepped into them, returning his hug with a fierce grip of her own.

“One thing is for certain my little dragonette. You are ready to take on Ustengrav. Your success against the necromancers and the Silver Hands is proof enough. I wouldn't delay it much longer. There was another sighting of a dragon in Whiterun hold. It appears they are returning faster then the Jarl’s wizard thought. Balgruuf was asking for you the other day. You need to find that horn and return to the Greybeards for more answers as quickly as you can.”

She nodded, but tears began to fall, causing her pale skin to glisten. “I’m so tired Kodlak. I never wanted to be a hero.” she cried softly.

“The gods rarely care for the wants of mortals child. All we can do is try our best to live with the deal they dealt us. I have faith in your abilities dear. Akatosh would not chose you for no reason.” he said with a smile wiping her face with his thumbs. “Now, go home and reassure that housecarl of yours that you are safe.”

As Saeja left the study Farkas stepped out of the alcove to his room, taking her hand in his. “Stay with me tonight?” he asked, pressing a soft kiss on her cheek.

“My bed is bigger.” she replied, pulling him towards the stairs.
Her screams ripped through the tranquility of dawn, causing Farkas to jump from the bed, grabbing at his waist for a sword that wasn’t there. When he realized there was no attacker, he climbed back into her bed, gathered her up in his arms and rocked her back and forth like a one might a child. When Lydia burst through the door, clad only in a breast band and breeches, sword drawn he waved her away, promising he had it covered.

Slowly, his soft words against her ear broke past her terror and her sobbing subsided. Gently he pushed her back down against the mattress, lying on his side and pulling her close so he could rub soft circles on her back. “Want to tell me about it?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head against his chest. “I don't want to relive it.” came a muffled reply. She pressed a soft kiss against his skin. “Thank you for calming me down. I’ll be fine now.”

When she began to nibble along his collarbone he had to stifle a moan. “Not, that I'm complaining.” he rasped, “but is this the best time for this?”

“There has been so much violence in my life the last few weeks Farkas. Right now I don't want to think. I want to do something that make me feel alive and loved.” she replied.

“You don't have to ask me twice.” he grinned, rolling her onto her back and settling his weight between her legs.

She reached her arms up around his neck, pulling his head down to her and pressed a desperate kiss against his lips. When he moaned she slid her tongue inside his mouth, twirling it around his before darting out so she could nibble his lower lip.

Instinct took over and ground himself hard against her pelvis, his length growing firm against her thigh. Farkas pushed himself up onto his knees, pulling her with him and pulled her nightshirt over her head, leaving her naked before him. When his hungry eyes roamed over her flesh she felt a stab of desire in the low parts of her stomach. She smiled seductively at him. “Please Farkas, I need you.” she whispered.

With a groan he pushed her back again, laying down between her thighs. He spread her legs further apart and pushed forward, sliding between her slick folds, burying himself inside her. She answered him with a cry of her own, wrapping her legs around his hips to pull him closer. It was a hard, fast coupling, with Farkas thrusting frantically inside her. She wasn't the only one who needed reassurance that they were alive and loved. When he reached between them to rub his thumb over the pulsating little nodule of nerves at the apex of her thighs, she whimpered in delight, letting the pleasure race through her until it exploded in a burst of stars behind her eyelids. When her legs tightened against his hips and he felt her spasming around him, he roared with pleasure as it waved over him as well. He jerked against her as rope after rope of his hot seed spurted deep inside her.

He collapsed against her as she threw her arms around him, holding him close, as they came down from their sexual high together. When he finally caught his breath, he turned his head into the crook of her neck and kissed it, murmuring sweet nothings.

It was late afternoon before they managed to rise from her bed, both exhausted, but in a good sort of way. Saeja dressed in a simple blue dress and headed to the market, while Farkas returned to Jorrvaskr to help some of the newer members with an evening practice.

Despite her distaste for the man she went to Belethor first. She haggled with him for more spell books and bought his entire supply of soul gems. She then stopped at Carlotta’s food stand and
purchased some apples and potatoes. At Anoriath’s stand she purchased 3 days worth of dried venison jerky and a wheel of goat cheese. Finally she made her way to the Drunken Huntsman and the Warmaiden, buying both their stocks of Nordic arrows. When she got home she began a list of everything she needed before she would head out to Morthal.

The next morning she went out beyond the gates of Whiterun and began to collect as many ingredients as she could find to make health potions. When she got to Arcadias the woman already had her stock of potions out on the counter for her. “A little bird told me you were preparing to leave again.” the woman smiled.

“A little bird or a squawking hawk?” she replied with a laugh. She didn't understand Arcadia’s attraction to Belethor, but kept her opinions to herself. The man seemed to make her happy.

“I have something else for you.” Arcadia stated, motioning her to come closer. The shopkeep pulled a large belt from behind the counter. “A bandolier, to carry more potions with you without the weight of them all being in one bag. It spreads the weight out across your chest. I stocked up on magica potions after Belethor told me you’ve been purchasing spell books from his.”

“That’s why you’re my favorite alchemist.” Seaja replied with a smile. “I’ll take everything.”

Her efforts to keep her plans secret until she left for Ustengrav didn’t succeed. The next morning Lydia confronted her when she came in with a bear fur cloak in her arms.

“You’re planning on leaving again and you haven't asked me to prepare. I thought you promised you would stop leaving me here alone.” the woman accused with a pout.

Saeja groaned inwardly and rolled her eyes. “I told you before I don’t need someone with every time I go out. In this case I have to go alone. It’s kind of in the rules.” she replied.

“First you left me here when you and Aela went to find Skjor. Now’s you’re leaving me here again while you go off to find glory and adventure.” Lydia raged, throwing her hands in the air in frustrations.

Seaja whirled on her, unable to contain her anger any longer. “Would you like to change places Lydia? Would you like to be the Dragonborn instead so you can find glory and honor? Would you like to spend your nights like I do, watching your friends and family engulfed in flames so hot it melts the flesh from their faces. Do you want the agony I endure when you absorb a dragon soul? How well would you deal with the ever growing fear your reputation will make you a target for assassination or political manipulation. Would you prefer to have lost all your family?” She hurled her questions at her housecarl.

The cloak was flung to the floor as she advance on Lydia whose expression had changed to one of pure regret. “I have to do this one alone. I don't have a choice. The Greybeards specifically told me I have to do this alone to prove my readiness to learn more about my destiny. Shall we commune with Akatosh and inform the God a mistake was made, we can see if we can trade places?” her tirade continued. “I am tired of every decision I make being questioned by you Lydia and you can cut the attitude immediately or by the Nine I will tell Balgruuf to take you from my services!”

Lydia bowed her head but not before Saeja saw the flash of resentment in her eyes. “Yes my Thane. As you wish.” she replied, then left the house, slamming the door on her way out.

Still fuming Saeja grabbed the cloak and stormed up to her room to finish organizing her supplies. She planned on leaving in two days and wanted to be sure she was ready for anything. When she
was finally satisfied that she had just about everything she needed her mood had finally improved. She grabbed a few items she planned on adding enchantments to and headed out the door to the palace. Farengar greeted her with a disinterested wave, busy creating potions for the palace inhabitants and ignored her from then on.

She had two rings she wanted to enchant to fortify the wearers health. The smaller ring silver ring with an amethyst she slid onto her forefinger on her other hand. The larger golden ring she had found on a bandit in Southfringe Sanctum she planned to give to Skjor. On her boots she decided to add a muffle enchantment. The hide thong on her necklace was fraying and she was afraid to wear it much longer. She didn't want it to fall off at a crucial moment. Once she had completed that, she asked Farengar if he had any other enchanted items she could purchase. Muttering in frustration about being interrupted, he shambled to his room, searched through his chest and came back with a gleaming onyx circlet.

"This has a resist frost enchantment on it." he grumbled. "It protects your from frost magic or enchantments on weapons. If you are travelling North it could come in handy."

She bit her tongue when he named his price, happy to learn another enchantment that would be perfect for her cloak she had purchased, specifically for the warmth it would provide the further north she traveled.

She was just finishing up when she her a jovial voice behind her. "Saeja, it's good to see you. I was told you were at the palace. I wish to speak to you."

She turned, smiling at the Jarl as she gave him a bow. "Jarl Balgruuf, it's good to see you as well. I am at your disposal."

"Come now, no need for all that pomp. You helped save my city. Dinner will be served soon, please join me in my chambers." he replied returning her smile as he took her hand in his, leading her out of the mage's quarters.

The Jarl’s quarters were huge, housing himself, his children and brother, Irileth and Proventus. He gave her the grand tour, even leading her out to the enormous balcony at the back of the palace, telling her tales of how in ancient times a Jarl actually captured a dragon, keeping it yolked on the balcony, hence the name of the palace. When he lead her to the dining room outside his room they were the only ones seated.

"I've asked the other to dine in the main hall this evening because I need to speak to you privately." he stated when she questioned as to the whereabouts of his children. "Vignar tells me you travel north at the request of the Greybeards to find a lost artifact."

"Yes Jarl Balgruuf, I plan to leave in in two days. I am hoping Skjor will have regained consciousness by that point, but with the dragons appearing in greater numbers I need more answers from the Greybeards, and that artifact is the key to unlocking their secrets." she replied as she dug into a bowl of steaming beef stew.

"Yes, it is troubling to hear the reports. We’ve been lucky that we’ve only seen one attack so far, but I have doubled the guards and have them practicing new drills to keep their combat skills sharp. I want to help you with this. The dragon threat is bad enough that I could use more help protecting Whiterun, but if I allow the Empire to garrison more troops here, it will indicate that I have chosen a side. It will provoke Ulfric. If a join with Ulfric, I will have the threat of the Imperials attacking my city and Ulfric doesn't have soldiers to spare. The sooner we have answers about the dragons the better off my people will be." he grimaced, taking a large swallow of his mead.
Saeja frowned, asking him. “Then you haven't picked a side?”

“If it is the war you’re referring to, I’m on the side of Whiterun. No doubt General Tullius and his friends in the Empire will tell you that I owe them my loyalty, and perhaps I do.” he replied solemnly. “Ulfric Stormcloak would say that I owe my allegiance to the Nord people as they fight for Skyrim’s independence, and perhaps that is also true. The day might come when I am forced to draw my sword for one side or the other, but that day has not yet come.”

“I don’t understand what you can do to help Jarl…” she began.

“Please, you are a true friend to me and my people. You can dispense with my title in casual company.” he requested, cutting her off.

“Balgruuf then.” she acquiesced with a smile.

He took a quick glance around his chamber, then, satisfied that there was no one else about, he reached into a small pouch in his robes. “You will take this. The Dragonborn should have a talisman meant to aid her against the dragons. Legend is that an amulet of Talos will shorten the length of time it takes to recover between your shouts. I’ve never been able to test out the myth myself, but if it’s true it could be the difference between life or death in a battle against the dragons.” he whispered as he pressed a silver axe shaped pendant into her hands. “This has been in my family for generations and I want you to have it. May it keep you safe.”

Her jaw dropped as she peered at the necklace he’s handed her. The chain was the purest silver, with enough length that she could tuck the amulet beneath her shirt. The pendant itself wasn’t a crudely carved steel design. It was burnished silver, with intricate knot work and runes, indicating great skill in the person who crafted its mold. “Balgruuf, I couldn't. This is priceless. It should go to your children.” she protested weakly.

“I love my children dearly, but I fear they hold no love for my Nord heritage. Their mother, bless her soul, was an Imperial and I fear they take after her more than me. They would not understand the meaning of that pendant, but I believe you will. I also believe it should belong to a Dragonborn. Give it some history eh? Just don’t go spreading the word I still hold Talos in my heart.”

She slipped the chain over her head, tucking it beneath her tunic. She smiled as she felt the metal grow warm against her skin. “My mother had a pendant like this when I was a child. She wore it even when Talos worship was banished and only stopped when my brother died. I don't know what she did with it after that. I will cherish it, and if it gives me the power to defeat my enemies, I will always remember who gave it to me.” she said, taking his hand and squeezing it in gratitude.

When they finished their dinner Balgruuf accompanied her back to the main hall. “Keep me apprised of your findings Saeja. Any information you can provide to help me protect the people of my hold will be indispensable.”

Once again Saeja was struck by how genuinely concerned Balgruuf seemed to be for those who lived in his hold. She bowed. “Of course Balgruuf. If I can't bring word to you myself, I will send a courier, I promise.”

“Shea journey Saeja. It is my hope to see you back here soon.” he replied, his voice indicating his concern.

She descended the steps to the Wind district, making her way to the temple. Inside she was given an update on Skjor's condition. He hadn’t woken yet, but his heartbeat continued to grow stronger and all the open wounds had finally disappeared. She found Aela, sitting silently at his side, her eyes
never moving.

“I have something for him.” Saeja said quietly, startling Aela, who whirled to look at her. Saeja reached for his hand and slid the golden ring onto his middle finger. “I enchanted this with health magic. I’m hoping it boosts his own ability to heal.”

“Thank you. Kodlak says you are leaving soon. I wish you luck on your quest Saeja. If you need anything at all you need only ask.” Aela replied, a sad smile curving her lips.

Saeja was about to turn when Aela gripped her hand tightly. “His breathing changed. His breathing changed. I can hear it.”

Sure enough Saeja saw the man’s eyelids twitch and a soft moan escaped his lips. Aela shouted with excitement when he opened his eyes fully and looked at her, before he closed them again, slipping back under. Aela was so disheartened that Saeja sent the priestesses over to watch her when she left.

The next morning Saeja made her way to Jorrvaskr after she finished the remainder of her packing. Her pack contained all her gear, a small tent and hide bedroll, and a weeks worth of rations. When she arrived the hall bustled with excitement. Skjor had finally woken and stayed conscious. Once the priestesses had checked him over they helped the Companions bring him home to his own room, insisting he would do better surrounded by his shield siblings. It was hard to watch as they put him back in his own bed. Skjor was devastated by the loss of his arm, and still felt as though his flesh had been peeled off. The nerves would take longer to fully heal under his new skin. When Kodlak joined the members of the circle in his room and closed the door Skjor was finally able to tell them, through gritted teeth, what had happened to him. The Silver Hands had goaded him into changing, then had cast a paralysis spell on him. They captured him and kept him drugged with skooma while they tortured him for days. He had been too disoriented to change back. On the day Saeja and Aela had finally made it to Gallows Rock and had wiped out the Silver Hands, the Skinner had lived up to his name. They had paralyzed him again, in werewolf form and skinned his coat with silver knives. The shock had been too much for his body, causing him to shift back to human form. The had then beat him, breaking all the bones in his limbs and face, then took his arm. He hadn’t even known he had been rescued, couldn't remember the healing potions they had forced him to consume. He only knew he was alive when he had woken up in the temple.

With a sour face he turned to Saeja. “I’ve been told I have you to thank for my life new blood. I wish I could be more thankful, but right now I wonder if it wouldn't have been kinder to leave me to my fate.”

She couldn't fault him for feeling that way and told him so. She only hoped he would come to appreciate it in the future. “I know Aela does.” she added with a smile, before exiting his room.

A few moments later Kodlak followed her. “Come, I need to sit and I wish to speak with you.” When they were seated he continued. “You are leaving tomorrow correct? What is your plan?” he asked.

“I’m catching carriage to Morthal.” she replied. “Once I get there I will head east to the tomb the Greybeards marked on my map. Depending on the depth of the ruins, it could take a few days to get through it. Once I have it I will head straight to High Hrothgar. When I pass through a large enough town I will send a courier.”

“Good, good.” he replied absently. “How are you feeling? Skjor is disheartened now, but I believe he will regret what he said once he is back on his feet.”

She smiled sadly. “I don't begrudge him his resentment. He is a warrior, used to commanding his body to do everything he willed it to. He will mourn the loss of a limb, but I suspect, as you do, that
he will eventually come to see it does not hinder him as much as he expects. It's the memories of his torment that worry me. That isn't something take lightly. He will need help. The nightmare of what I witnessed will haunt me forever, and he had to live through it. I hope neither he or Aela will regret that he survived.” she replied seriously.

Just then Farkas and Vilkas joined them. “Aela is staying with him for now. The priestesses left plenty of potions, so we will keep an eye on him while you are gone.” Vilkas informed her.

“Gone?” Farkas exclaimed. He turned to stare at her accusingly. “You’re going somewhere?”

“I leave for Ustengrav tomorrow. You knew I would have to go soon. It’s already been almost two months since we returned from High Hrothgar.” she replied.

“You didn't give me enough time to pack.” he stated, turning to rush back to his room.

“Farkas, you aren't coming.” she retorted. “I meant it when I said I had to do this alone. I’m not taking anyone with me.”

“You can’t seriously mean that Saeja. You will need help with this. I’m coming with you.” he stated, his voice hard.

She rose from her seat, standing to confront him. “I am serious. I was serious when I told you in Ivarstead that I would be doing this alone and I am serious now. I am going tomorrow, alone, end of discussion.” her volume slowly increasing.

“That horn isn't worth your life Saeja. No one will know if you take back up.” he shot back angrily.

“I'll know!” she shouted. “I will know Farkas and that is not how I am doing this. If the Greybeards said I have to do this on my own then by the Nine I will do this on my own and prove I am ready to be the Dragonborn. I didn't ask for this ability but I have it and I will be damned if I fail at my destiny.”

He threw his hand in the air. “Bah! You are the most stubborn creature I have ever met!” he declared. He grabbed her arm, pulling her close so he could whisper. “At least take the beast blood. It can give you powers beyond what you can imagine.”

“No!” Her voice brooked no argument. “I refuse to do that. I was offered it once already and refused. I do not want it.”

Farkas and Vilkas just stared in disbelief. “When were you offered the chance to become of of us?” Vilkas hissed.

Kodlak replied for her. “Shortly after they returned from Ivarstead. Skjor and Aela orchestrated a midnight ritual, which Saeja declined to be a part of.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Farkas demanded.

“I didn't know how you would feel about me refusing.” she replied quietly, her face flushing with guilt.

“I told you before it is a gift and I would never force it on you. You’re free to refuse it if you want to. Why were you worried?” he asked again.

She buried her face in her hands. “Because I will never be able to unsee you ripping those men and women to shreds in that form. It will stay with me forever. I don't ever want to become like that. I
couldn't stand it.” she cried.

“You told me I didn't scare you.” he bellowed, his face crumpling at her admission.

“I told you that you didn't scare me. You don't scare me, in this form or the other, because I know it is you. I don't believe you or Vilkas or Kodlak would ever hurt me, but I have no idea to tell if it's you if I were just to come upon you unexpectedly. I had no idea which one of you was which in Southfringe. Face it Farkas, that form was designed by Hircine to terrify mortals and I am no exception. I never want to be like that. I don't care if it would give me the strength or speed I can only dream of. It didn't help Skjor any when he was outnumbered and it will only put a bigger target on my back.” she argued, her voice beginning to sound panicked.

“You just proved my point about not going alone Saeja!” He yelled back, “Skjor went alone with no shield-sibling and look what happened to him. You need help, I’m coming and that is final!”

“You are not coming Farkas. I don’t need you!” she shrieked.

Those were the wrong words and she knew it instantly. He looked as though she stabbed him through the heart. He opened his mouth to reply but Kodlak cut him off.

“I'd stop before you say something you will regret Farkas. Sometimes destiny must be faced alone, so leave her to it and be glad she lets you be a part of it when she needs you. The gods choose their champions carefully and Akatosh would not chose her to be his mortal child, then lead her to her death as quickly as this. If the Greybeards said she must do this alone then you must accept their demands. We have prepared her as best as we can, and must now leave her to her fate.” he declared.

Farkas didn't say anything for a long moment, he just stared at her, unblinking. When he finally spoke his words were bitter and said with the intention to hurt her. “Fine, I’ll leave you to it then. Since you don't need me, I will collect my things from Breezehome and spend the night here. Try not to prove me right.” he snarled.

She managed to keep a passive face, only letting go of her tears when she heard the door to the upper level slam. Strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a tight hug. “Now do you see why we call him an idiot?” Vilkas teased.

She couldn't help but laugh through her sobs. She wiped her eyes, sitting back down in the chair Vilkas led her to. She felt Kodlak take her hand in his squeezing it tightly. “He’ll come around. He never stays mad for long.”

The two men distracted her long enough that they heard Farkas come back and slam into his own room. By this time Saeja had regained her composure and her anger. When Vilkas gave her a pitying look she responded by telling him if his brother wished to act like a child, he could stay in his room till the end of days for all she cared. She finalized her plans with Kodlak, then wrapped her arms around the old man, planting a kiss on his cheek. “I'll be back before you know it.”

“I have faith in you. Be safe my little dragonette.” he replied, chucking her under the chin.

Vilkas fell into step beside her, accompanying her home. When they reached her door he pulled her into a firm hug, then ruffled her hair when she stepped back. “Make sure you come back. He’ll be insufferable if you don’t.” he said as she unlocked her door. Just as she was about to step inside she felt him grab her wrist. “Seaja, do me a favor.”

“What?”

“He doesn't know it yet, but what he really needs is a woman who will let him protect her. When he
does figure it out, pretend he let you down easy.” he replied.

She should have been angry, but she couldn't help but feel the truth of his words. “I'll do my best.” she replied solemnly, then closed the door behind her.

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Chapter End Notes

HOLY CRAP GUYS. This was hard to write. What did you think of the changes to events of the game?
A Surprise Encounter

Chapter Summary

As Saeja sets off to find the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller she will be faced with an unexpected challenge. Will her training pay off, or will this be the end of it all? A surprise encounter eases her worries, but with so much riding on her success, can she afford the distraction?

Chapter Notes

TAGS Warning: Mention of torture, strong language in line with time period prejudice.

If you've made it this far, you already know my story is smutty, so from here on there wont be warnings for it unless there is something super out of the ordinary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Saeja made her way out the city gates to the stables her stomach tossed and turned with nervousness. Her bravado at declaring she would do this alone was waning as she thought about everything that could go wrong. Her pride was the only thing keeping her from admitting that perhaps she could have at least brought someone to Ustengrav and then made them wait above ground for her. She had just handed the carriage driver her fare for the trip to Morthal when she heard her name being shouted from the ramparts.

She looked up to see Farkas waving at her frantically, calling for her to wait a moment. She turned to the carriage driver who shot her a smile and nodded. She jogged up the road back towards Whiterun to meet him as he raced down to her.

He said nothing as he wrapped his arms around her in a crushing hug. After a long moment he loosened his grip. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t let you go thinking I was still mad. I don’t like this, but you’re right, you have to do this alone and I should respect that. Just promise you’ll come back to us.” he said, kissing her forehead.

Saeja tilted her head to look him in the eyes and ran her fingers across his cheek. “I shouldn’t have said I don’t need you. That was the wrong way to put it. I need to do this alone and I need your support in that. I need all of you. No matter what happens you are my family and I need every single one of you, I’ll always come back to my home.” she replied seriously. She shifted her weight to her toes to press a kiss to his lips.

When she broke the kiss and stepped back he smiled at her. “Get going woman. The sooner you leave, the sooner you come back and we can celebrate your success.” he teased, giving her a push towards the carriage. As she climbed inside and the driver snapped the reins, she resisted the urge to call for him to join her, instead she just waved as he became a speck in the distance.
The ride to Morthal gave her more than enough time for her nervousness to bloom into full blown anxiety. She had worried at the inside of her cheek until it bled. As she checked into the inn for the evening she went over everything she had been reciting in her head about traipsing through a tomb. Watch for traps, be on the lookout for draugr and take the out at a distance if possible, check for secrets chambers so there was no chance she would miss the horn. She ordered dinner from the innkeeper, not particularly hungry, but she wanted to be sure she wouldn’t regret not eating when she had the chance. The stew was bland and unappealing, but she forced herself to finish it, unenthusiastically chewing the stubborn chunks of elk. When the inn’s bard began to caterwaul she decided to save her ears, and those of the other patrols by striking up a conversation with him, asking him for information on the local terrain surrounding Morthal to Ustengrav, passing herself off as an adventure seeker. He advised her to stay away from the large cave directly northeast of Morthal. It gave him the creeps and there were rumors of strange noises coming from it’s direction.

“Go about two hours east of town then turn north,” he said, taking her map and marking the location of Kjenstag Ruins. “If you reach those you’ve gone too far and it will bring you close to the imperial scouting camp. Not that they are dangerous mind you, but lonely soldiers have a habit of bothering young ladies such as yourself.” he continued with a wink.

She laughed, protesting that she was no lady, but would heed his advice.

She slept fitfully, much to her dismay in the morning when her body protested her early rise. She purchased a small loaf of bread and cheese, then headed out. As she departed, she heard a muffled cry from the house closest to the inn. She paused, but could see no movement in the windows, she could only hear muffled, raised voices. She shrugged her shoulders, it wasn't her place to barge in on domestic arguments.

After a few hours, with the sun shining high above her, she managed to find a dry spot in the marshes to sit and take lunch. Earlier she had seen a patrol of imperial soldiers and had given them a wide berth, wanting to avoid the possibility of conflict, or as the bard had put it, them bothering a young lady. She estimated she had another two to three hours before she would reach Ustengrav. Her small tent was weighing her pack down on her shoulders but was glad she brought it, having chosen to get another night of rest before she ventured inside. The cold damp air rushed by her in the swamp and she shivered beneath her cloak as she licked her fingers clean of her mid-day meal. Sighing she rose and continued North.

As she walked she reached beneath her armor, pulling the amulet of Talos out to admire it again. She wanted to test out the Jarl’s claim, wondering if it would decrease the amount of time it took for her to shout again, but with the imperials nearby she didn't dare. Instead she ran the pendant back and forth along the chain as she walked, trying to recall if her grandmother had ever told any stories indicating the same. She was so distracted she didn't hear anyone approaching until it was too late.

A patrol of Thalmor Justiciars were headed south, a blonde haired prisoner in tow. She knew she should just keep her head down and continue forward but her curiosity caused her to be careless. She had still not heard anything about Ralof and she needed to know if the prisoner in rags was him. She dropped her hand from her amulet as she got closer, letting it hover by her daggers, and only realized her mistake when the eyes of the one Altmer, dressed in dark Thalmor robes, fell on the amulet and he sneered in disdain.

“Rimiron, Terindil, look what the Gods have delivered to us this afternoon. A lone heathen, not even hiding the fact.” he cried, shoving the prisoner to the ground. She had a less than a moment to realize it wasn't Ralof when the Thalmor who had spoken blasted him with a lightning spell. The man
screamed, then went silent.

The other agents smirked at her as they drew their swords, adopting a careless, relaxed stance, as if one woman would not be a problem for them. They began to circle her, stepping closer as she tried to keep them all in her line of sight. She drew her sword, hoping they didn't have any armor with fire resistance.

“Well Artinel, if we can catch one more traitor today we will all get a chance to do some interrogating. I think she will be fun.” laughed the tallest elf.

“There will be no interrogations at all today you despicable creatures!” she yelled at them, clutching her sword. “Today I will end you.”

All three burst out laughing, a cruel, mocking sound that grated at her ears. “Listen to the wench roar like the heathen creature she is.” laughed Artinel. “I think you’re right Rimiron, this one will be amusing to play with as we ‘extract’ information from her.”

The emphasis he put on the word "extract" caused a bolt of fear to course through her. She had heard tales of how the Thalmor extracted information, none of it was pleasant. Determined to avoid such a fate she concentrated on the elf closest to her, the one Artinel had called Terindil. This one, dressed in gleaming, golden eleven armor rolled his eyes at his companions. “All this talking bores me.” he smirked. “They all make the same sounds in the end, and I doubt she’ll last long before she breaks and begs for death.”

Fears confirmed Saeja lashed out at him with a shout. “FUS RO!”

He flew backwards, hitting an old tree stump behind him. Momentarily dazed he rose to his hands and knees shaking his head. The other two were no longer laughing. Artinel had a calculating look in his eyes while Rimiron was scowling at her. The both looked less enthused about fighting her.

“What are you two waiting for? Get her!” Terendil screamed.

Rimiron rushed at her first, sword swinging wildly. She blocked his downward swing with her sword and sent a blast of flames from her left hand hurtling towards him. She saw his face blister from the heat but he jumped backwards and sent a bolt of lighting at her. She dove left, narrowly avoiding the sparks and jumped back to her feet in time to throw up a ward against the frost that Artinel blasted at her. Her teeth chattered, but her enchantments kept the blast from doing more than allow a rime of frost to develop on her armor.

She heard Rimiron charging her from behind. He swung his sword high, aiming to slice through her neck, so she crouched, twisted on the balls of her and thrust her sword upwards, catching a seam in the side of his armor and running him through. Disbelief filled his eyes as he realized too late that the little creature he had taunted, had sharp claws. The life left his eyes and he slumped to the side, her sword still embedded in body.

“You’ll pay for that you filthy Nord!” she heard one of them scream to her left. She got both her hands up in time to cast a ward against another bolt of lightning.

Artinel was advancing on her, eyes wild with fury. She retreating quickly, trying to locate Terendil, but he seemed to have vanished. Her breathing was shallow as cast flames and lightning at the elf, dismayed when his ward deflected them both with ease.

“Give up heathen.” he demanded as he stalked forward. “You have a small talent for magic, surprising for a Nord. However you are no match for me, a true wielder of destruction.”
Sweat was dripping into her eyes, making her vision blur. She ripped a dagger from her belt and threw it at him, but he knocked it away with ease. “Face it little manmer, you’re done in, you have nothing left. You’re nothing but a tavern whore with illusions of glory.” he mocked as he stepped in front of her. “We heard the rumors of the Dragonborn returning and scoffed, but your ability to shout such as Ulfric does lends truth to conjecture. You don’t look old enough to have studied for the length of time it took Ulfric to master one silly shout. Too bad you’ll be dead long before you get a chance to show the world you are anything more than a rumor.”

Enraged Saeja threw a swing at his chin. To her surprise, the elf crumpled to the ground. Without a moment’s hesitation she dropped to her knees, straddling his prone body. She wrapped her left hand around his throat and squeezed with all her might, and began to hit him, over and over with her right fist, until his nose split and his cheekbone was shattered.

She felt the life fade from his body, going limp beneath her. “Nothing left huh?” she asked the corpse as she pushed herself to feet. Farengar had been right, the unarmed enchantment on her gauntlets was lethal.

A voice screamed her name, many feet away, causing her to whirl around, just as the handle of Terendil’s dagger cracked against her temple. She had a momentary glimpse of something blue before her world went dark.

Saeja awoke to the sounds of men laughing and the smell of wood smoke. Her head throbbed and she was having trouble focusing her vision, even as the fogginess in her brain began to dissipate. She brought her hand up to her head and felt stiff bandages wrapped around it, and the large bump beneath them. Panic gripped her momentarily, until she realized she was warm, clothed and unbound. Still, she had no idea where she was, other than in some camp, which she guessed was inhabited by a number of men and woman from the voices just outside the tent flap. She tried to sit up but was overcome by a wave of dizziness and nausea. Groaning, she leaned to the side, her body violently rejecting the contents of her stomach. A sudden light blinded her as the tent flap was pulled open, making her cry out in pain.

“I'm sorry girl. I didn't know you were awake” said a soft voice. The flap closed and the light was immediately blotted out.

Footsteps approached her and a small vial was placed her her hand. “I promise you are safe.” the voice murmured. “Drink this. It will do you a world of good.”

With help from the yet unknown person, Saeja brought the vial to her lips and poured its contents down her throat. Instant relief caused a sigh to slip past her lips as the pain flowed away from her brain and her vision came back into focus. She turned to look at the man who had entered the tent. He was dressed in a stained white tunic and simple leather breaches, giving her no indication of who he may be. “Thank you. Um, I'm sorry I don't know you.” She said as he stood and moved to a corner of the tent.

“No apologies girl. Can't fault you for not having met me before. My name is Sordis Lonely-Fire and you are safe in a stormcloak camp.” He replied rummaging through a chest for some gauze and another healing draught.

She didn't protest when he came and removed the soiled dressings, cleaning her head wound. When he started picking up the wrappings to dispose of them, she gathered the nerve to ask. “Where is this camp and how did I get here. The last thing I remember was a Thalmor patrol attacking me.”
“You were lucky. Wearing an amulet of Talos out in the open like that. You’re either incredibly brave, or impossibly foolish.” he replied, pointing to the pendant hanging from a silver chain around her neck. She blushed and tucked it beneath her shirt. “You were really close to this camp so our scouts heard the fighting. We arrived just as the last Thalmor caught you with the handle of his dagger.” He replied, smiling at her. “I’ve seen seasoned soldiers who couldn't hold their own against one elf, but you killed two of them. I am impressed girl.”

“Saeja.” She replied. “My name is Saeja. I should thank you then, for saving me.”

He chuckled. “Well Saeja, when I said we, I meant the soldiers. I am a healer so I don't join any battles. Our field commander was the one who took out the remaining elf and brought you back to camp”

“Then will you extend my thanks to you commander? What is his name?” she asked.

“About that.” the man grinned. “He asked that you be sent to speak with him personally once you were awake and healed. If you can stand, now that my potions have had a chance to work, you can find him the the big tent to the left of camp. He'll introduce himself.”

She flashed him a confused smile in response to his evasive answer, then pushed herself from the straw pallet, stumbling until he caught her, helping her to get her bearings. Once she was steady on her feet he held open the flap allowing her to step through. All around her were men and women dressed in the bright blue uniforms of Ulfric’s army. As she stepped into the sunlight a few soldiers glanced her way but then turned back to their tasks. Sordis pointed to the large tent situated at the other end of the camp backed by a natural alcove in the mountain. She approached slowly, still nervous about entering a tent alone with no weapon, but her gear had been nowhere to be found.

“Hello Commander, I was told you wanted to see me.” She called from outside the closed tent flap.

“Enter, and keep the flap closed when you come in.” replied a voice, muffled by the hide tent.

The tent had half a dozen candles to light up the inside, easing some of her nervousness. A tall man was standing beside a small table with a map on it, his back turned to her.

“Sordis said you wished to speak to me sir.” She said quietly

The man turned and smiled at her. “I'm hoping the feeling is mutual Saeja.”

There was no mistaking those eyes and that grin. She cried out in joy and raced into his arms. “Ralof! By the Nine, it’s really you. I wasn't sure I’d ever see you again!”

His strong arms gripped her in a tight hug as he lifted her and spun her around. She laughed at his antics as she whirled through the air. When he set her back down she took a small step back so she could get a better look at him. Even in the harsh conditions of war he had put on weight, his muscles even more pronounced than she remembered. He had a faint scar on his cheek that was new. The most noticeable change was his eyes, though still bright blue, they had lost some of their carefree sparkle. She reached up brushing a lock of his hair from his face, running her hand along his cheek she lowered it.

Ralof coughed and stepped back. “I’m glad to see you awake and well again. You gave me quite a scare when I saw you collapse.”

She gazed into his eyes for a moment, confused by the distance he had suddenly created between them. Then lowering her gaze she replied. “Sordis says I have you to thank for killing that justiciar that almost killed me. It seems that this is becoming a habit. You saving me that is.”
She stepped back to sit in a chair near the tent wall. She felt awkward of all the sudden, and didn't know how to rectify it.

Ralof leaned against the table he had been standing at, staring at her intently. The uncomfortable silence between them grew until finally he shook his head. “I thought our first meeting after everything would be a bit different.” he admitted. “I didn't expect to be so frustrated that you didn't come to Windhelm. Then to see you traipsing the marshes of Morthal, of all places. There’s nothing out here Saeja, it doesn't make any sense. I spent weeks telling Ulfric that you said you would come, if for no other reason than to add your thoughts on the dragon attack.” He threw his hands up in frustration, grumbling. “I think that is why I got command of this camp, in the middle of nowhere. Ulfric got tired of waiting.”

Saeja listened to his tirade, becoming more astonished with each word. When he finally concluded venting his feelings she felt both horrible and frustrated at the same time.

“Ralof, I am sorry I didn't come find you. I was truly planning on it, but things got complicated once I went to Whiterun to warn the Jarl about the dragon.” she explained, “Honestly, joining the army has been the last thing on my mind for months. Last I saw Gerdur, she told me she hadn't heard from you, that may not even be in Windhelm anymore.” Opening his mouth to cut her off, she held up her hand and continued. “I know you think nothing could be more important than the war efforts, but this surpasses any role I could play in the army Ralof.”

He shook his head in disbelief and began to pace the length of the tent. “What could possibly be more important than ridding Skyrim of those damn Imperials? I know you have the talent for fighting. You took down two of those thalamor bastards before the third one knocked you out. We need those kinds of fighting skills.”

“I can’t explain it Ralof, please trust me that this is important.” she pleaded with him as she rose, striding across the tent to stand in front of him.

“We need more help Saeja. We need skilled fighters to win this war.” he replied, taking her hands in his and holding them tightly against his chest.

Saeja looked away from the intensity in his eyes, biting her lip. “You’ll need me doing this more Ralof, I swear it. I’m here to do something that will help all of Skyrim’s people equally, from the Jarls and soldiers to the farmers and beggars.”

Ralof grumbled in frustration, dropping her hands and storming back to his table. Saeja approached him from behind, wrapping her arms around him to hold him close, feeling his body shake with anger. “Ralof please, I promise you this is important.”

He turned in her arms, hugging her close, resting his cheek on her head. “Then explain it to me Saeja. Help me understand what is so important that you would forget to come find me.”

It hit her then, hard. The realization that he had been more enamored with her than she originally thought. When she told him she would come find him, he had been certain she would keep her word. He had even admitted he waited weeks for her to come to Windhelm like he she had promised.

“Ralof, I didn't forget about you. My life changed so drastically, in an instant and all I can think about is trying to stay ahead of this entire mess.” She looked up into his eyes, her own begging him to understand. “I can't tell you about it right now.” When he looked about to protest she continued hastily. “Please, I can't tell you here, not when there are dozens of people to over hear it and I know none of them.”
Ralof cracked a crooked grin. “You drive a hard bargain. Tell you what, I have a few hours to spare before I have to get back to my duties. If we go for a walk, call it a patrol, can you explain it to me then, away from nosy busibodies?”

She hesitated, still concerned about word getting out about her, but after a moment she nodded, eliciting another infectious smile from the man. He released her, striding over to the chest at the end of his pallet and opened it. He pulled her gear from inside it, handing it to her as he said. “Put your armor on. As you know this is a volatile area, so I can't promise it will be a peaceful stroll. I'll let you change and gear up while I go speak to Knut to explain what I’m doing.”

He strode from the tent, closing the flap to give her some privacy. After slipping into her armor, she fastened her potions belt and belt purse, checking the contents of them. Satisfied her gold, lockpicks and soul gems were still stored correctly she strapped on her quiver, sheathed her daggers and equipped her bow. Someone had been kind enough to clean the viscera from her sword. By the time she had finished she was feeling woozy again. She stowed her knapsack beside the chest, knowing she wouldn't need it right away, then grabbed a few potions from her own belt, downing them quickly. She sighed again, feeling energy flow into her weary bones. Shaking her head to clear the last of her dizziness, she left the tent, mentally scolding herself for nearly dying again.

It didn’t take long to find him, speaking to a young man who barely looked old enough to grow a beard. The young man’s eyes were wide as he took orders from Ralof, repeating the instructions back to his commander. Ralof nodded to her and indicated she follow him once he was done, heading down a narrow footpath towards the marshes.

The walked in silence until she could no longer see or hear anyone from the stormcloak camp. Just ahead there was an old fallen tree, so she sat down on it and patted the space beside her, inviting Ralof to sit as well. She quickly looked around then, deciding caution was best, cast a detect life spell.

Ralof sucked in a startled gasp as a purplish glow surrounded them, but Saeja was satisfied that there was no one else around.

“I see you have been advancing your magical knowledge.” he stated uneasily.

She noticed him eyeing her warily and chuckled. “Oh Ralof, this is just the beginning of the strangeness.” she replied.

She turned to face him, her expression becoming serious. Casting her eyes downward she wrung her hands, unsure of where to start with her story. He waited patiently for her to begin, but as the silence grew he took her hands in his. Using one hand he cupped her chin, bring her face up to look at him. “Come now, it can’t be that bad.”

She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly, then shook her head. “It’s not bad per say, but so much happened it’s hard to know where to start. You know that when we were in Riverwood your sister asked me to take word to the Jarl?”

“Of course, it’s why you didn’t come with me in the first place.” he replied.

“When I reached Whiterun I spoke to Balgruuf. He sent a squad of men to Riverwood, but he also asked me to speak with his court wizard. Farengar was looking for an artifact that he believed may provide information about the dragons appearing.” she stated. “Since I was already planning on helping Camilla and Lucien out by going to Bleak Falls Barrow to retrieve their heirloom that was stolen, I told him I could search for the artifact as well.”
Ralof interrupted her. “You agreed to help Lucien find that gaudy claw he likes to show off?”

She nodded, then leaned back on her hands, kicking her feet to release her nervous energy. “When I got to the Barrow I found the thieves, the golden claw and then went deeper into the ruin trying to find the Dragonstone that Farengar was convinced would be in the innermost chamber. Well I found it, and inside there was this ancient looking wall with runes all over it. I couldn't look away from it, something happened when I touched it. This magic, I guess it’s magic, flowed into me causing me to almost pass out.”

She looked at him, trying to see if he was passing judgement, but he just stared at her silently, hanging on every word. “After I cleared the Barrow and returned the claw to Lucien, I went back to Whiterun, to give the stone to Farengar. I was planning to just spend a few nights resting before trying to get to Windhelm, but before I could go, another Dragon attacked the western watchtower.

“Another dragon?” he asked, astonished, “Not the same one that attacked us in Helgen?”

“No it was a different one, it’s scales were a different color and it had a different head shape.” she replied.

“So now there’s more than one.” he rasped, his mouth going dry with fear.

She winced, looking away from him. “I’ve seen three separate dragons Ralof, and Jarl Balgruuf told me of another one spotted in his hold. You and I escaped the one in Helgen, the one at Whiterun, I helped to kill it, and the third I I killed with the help of the Companions just a few weeks ago.”

Ralof jumped up, drawing in a surprised breath. “So they can be killed? You faced down two of them? How did you do it? My men are terrified by the rumors of the dragon attacks. If you know how to kill them I could prepare my men.”

She gripped his arms, trying to get him to calm down and focus again. “Ralof, slow down!”

As he sat back down beside her on the log, she continued to explain. “The Jarl sent me with his men to fight the dragon because I was the only person in the city who had ever seen one. It was terrifying. More so than escaping from Helgen because we weren’t running for our lives, we were trying to defend the lives in the city. Even though the battle only lasted less than an hour, it seemed to drag on forever. We finally managed to forced the creature to the ground and finish it off. It burst into flames and....” She trailed off, the memories flooding her mind, then took a deep breath before continuing. “Something happened to me Ralof, and it changed everything. I absorbed its soul. I felt its very life source flow into me, filling me until I thought I would burst. When it was over, I knew some of it’s language.”

Ralof slid off the log to his knees in front of her, taking her hands in his. “You are Dragonborn.” he stated simply, looking deep into her eyes, his own filled with wonder. “That’s why you seemed to know when that dragon was about to attack every time in Helgen. You pushed me down the stairs, and you pulled me away from that collapsing hallway.”

“I didn't know it at the time.” she replied, blushing. “Every time I thought I heard it speaking I assumed I had hit my head really hard when I fainted. I dream of dragons and death every single night. I’ve never told anyone else this but I think I’m connected to them all. I can feel their rage if they are close by.” She pulled Ralof off his knees, a bit embarrassed by the look of awe in his eyes.

“So you have been killing dragons since we parted?” he asked her, pulling her off the log to walk beside him as they continued their patrol.
She shook her head in response. “Not entirely. I joined up with the companions kind of by chance before I went to the Barrow. When I first arrived at Whiterun, I helped them fight a giant that was bothering a nearby farm. One of their members asked me to join. Since I really had no place to call home, I decided to try, since it would also give me a chance to train with them and regain skills I had lost since my brother died. After the dragon fight I was summoned to High Hrothgar, but Kodlak Whitemane made sure I was back in fighting condition before sending me to Ivarstead to climb the mountain to speak to the Greybeards.”

He chuckled beside her. “So that is what that shouting was all about. Ulfric was surprised they tried to contact anyone outside their castle. He speculated about it for days.” He turned to look at her again, his eyes softening. “So if you are no longer up on some mountain learning to be a Greybeard, then you must be on some journey right now?”

She giggled. “I don't think the long beards they all have would suit me. I’m on my way to Ustengrav to retrieve an ancient artifact for the Greybeards. They are wise beyond measure, but rather cryptic. They said if I can retrieve it, I will be ready to take on the challenges of being Dragonborn and discover my destiny. They promised to tell me more when I return.”

“You should not be travelling alone Saeja, this is a dangerous area, as you have found out. Where are those Companions you spoke of? Why aren’t they here watching your back?” he asked.

Saeja picked up a stone and threw it into the marsh, scattering the fish gathering there. “I was told I needed to do this on my own. I can't prove myself if my housecarl Lydia, or Farkas and Vilkas help me in anyway within the crypt. They tried their best to argue, I think Lydia is still pouting, but ultimately I won.”

The truth of the matter was that Lydia had been upset with her, accusing her of trying keep all the glory for herself and leaving everyone else behind to died of boredom in that polite way housecarls are trained to, so they can keep from seeming insubordinate. However it paled in comparison to the fit Farkas had thrown when she told him she wouldn't let him accompany her. He hadn’t really believed her the first time she told him when they had been in Ivarstead. He’d even begged her to take the beast blood, to give her an edge against anything she might come up against, but she had refused. That had been long argument. She had pointed out that the beast blood hadn’t kept Skjor from being outnumbered, he had pointed out that the man had been surrounded with no back up, just like she was planning to do. It had ended when Kodlak stepped in on her behalf and told Farkas to leave her to her destiny, that the Gods choose their champions wisely, that Akatosh would not bless her, only to lead her to her death so quickly. Farkas couldn't argue with that, but he had moved back to his own room in Jorrvaskr. It was only when he had caught up with her outside the city walls the next day, pulling her into a hard hug and telling her to return to them, that she knew he had only been sulking and wasn’t truly casting her aside.

“I wouldn’t have been attacked if I had been paying better attention and not playing with this.” She continued, pulling her pendant from beneath her shirt with a cheeky grin. “I got too close to that patrol. They were transporting a prisoner and I always check to see if it’s you. When they saw this they attacked.” she paused, suddenly looking distressed. “I’m not even sure if the man got away or not. The justiciar hit him with a lightning bolt just before he attacked me.”

Ralof pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her in a hard hug. “It’s nice to know you worry about me.” he said, as he pulled away, “but I hate that you put yourself in danger like that. As for the prisoner, his name is Roald and he is fine. He awoke before you did so we got him geared up and back in the ranks. He’ll want to thank you when we get back to camp. He was on patrols when you woke up.”
She sighed with relief. “Thank Talos for that. I didn't mean to cause him more trouble than he was already in.” They had finished walking a wide circle and were coming up on the narrow footpath back to the encampment. She looked up at the sky, noticing the position of the sun. “I need to get back and get my gear Ralof. I have been delayed enough. I need to get to Ustengrav.”

“Stay the night Saeja. The day is almost done anyways, you could use the rest and food. We aren't far from those ruins. Tomorrow you can set out early and be there in less than an hour.”

She bit her lip, anxious to get moving, but also tempted to grant him his request. She hadn't seen him in months and realized now just how much she had missed his smile. “Only one night. I have to get moving.”

“Wonderful.” he cried, before he bent slightly and captured her mouth in a soft kiss. Too quickly he pulled back, the corner of his mouth twisting up in a half grin. “Yell at me all you wish, but I have been wanting to do that since I saw you locked in battle with the elves.

Her only response was to dig her hands in his hair and pull his head down for another kiss. When he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer, she whimpered softly, nipping his lower lip. Groaning, he tore his mouth away. “I can't do this right now. I have to get back to my duties for the evening, but join me for dinner. I’ll have Sordis keep you company, or you help our quartermaster. She could use a hand repairing weapons and I know Alvor gave you some training back in Riverwood.”

She nodded, hugging him tightly. “I look forward to dinner time then. I’ve missed you.”

They made their way up the path, Saeja heading straight for the woman he pointed to when they reached the safety of the tents. She introduced herself to the smith, who grunted that her name was Ruki, then proceeded to ignore her while they sharpened swords. Once Ruki realized Saeja actually had some skill with smithing she opened up a bit and they spent hours discussing the war, their families and the challenges facing the stormcloaks this far from Windhelm.

It was dark when Sordis came looking for her, stating Ralof had returned and was waiting for her in the command tent. Just jumped up quickly, a smile spreading across her face which caused Ruki to shoot her a wink. She blushed deeply as the smith’s laughter followed her all the way back to Ralof’s tent.

She pulled back the flap of the command tent, walking over to join him at the small table in the corner, where two plates of food and a pitcher of ale resting on top of it. He had grabbed another chair for her from somewhere and he pulled it out for her to sit.

As he settled in his own chair, Ralof blushed. “It’s not much I know, but we make do with what we can find out here. The venison is fresh, the gourds are hot and the ale will make you forget there isn't much else available at this time.”

She laughed, taking her seat across from him and digging into her plate. “It’s better than the stale bread and dried meat I had in my pack.”

They sat in relative silence as they ate, with Ralof watching her closely. Once they had finished their meal and their dishes had been cleared away, Saeja leaned back in her chair and returned his unwavering stare. “Do you plan to tell me what is on your mind?” she asked, unnerved by his silence.

“It suits you I think. Being the Dragonborn.” he replied in a low murmur. “But you have to know how important you will be in the coming months. Not only because you can face dragons, but do...
you realize what you could represent to Skyrim if you joined us?”

Saeja sighed, rubbing her temples. “I do know that Ralof and it is precisely the reason I’ve not gone
to Windhelm. I support Ulfric, I do. Please don’t ever think I would join the Imperials.” she pleaded.

“I have no doubt where your loyalties lie Saeja, but I still don’t understand why you didn’t come to
Windhelm immediately after finding out what you are.” he replied, reaching across the table to take
her hand in his, rubbing his thumb against her skin.

“I haven’t told many about my abilities, and those I have, I’ve asked to keep my secret. The truth
about my being the Dragonborn hasn’t seemed to travel beyond Whiterun yet and I need anonymity
to move around so I can find out why I am like this. I need to get to Ustengrav. If I return with the
Horn of Jurgen Windcaller the Greybeards will tell me more about the destiny of the Dragonborns. I
could meet with their leader and hopefully find out why the dragons are returning now of all times.”

Ralof sputtered in protest. “But with you at our back no one would dare question Ulfric’s claim of
being High King.”

“I know that!” she replied harshly. “And I refuse to be used that way by either side. If word gets out
that I am the Dragonborn, then I will be hunted down by both Ulfric and Tullius to become face of
their army. I will be a political prisoner until the end of this war, and I will be a target for
assassination, abduction and will lose whatever free will I have when they begin to order me about to
serve their purpose. I need to be able to move freely to deal with the dragon issue.”

Ralof was scowling deeply at her now, anger turning his eyes darker than the ocean at night. “You
don’t know that.” he snapped, letting go of her hand.

“I do know that Ralof.” she said with unshakable certainty. “I am not saying Ulfric himself would
keep me prisoner, but his council will, in one way or another. If Tullius finds me, he will have no
qualms about using me for his personal gain. His lack of respect for Skyrim’s citizens was proven to
me the day he ordered my death, without even questioning who I was when my name wasn’t on
their damn list. With either side, perhaps I will be given a home in the city, but I will be watched at
all hours of the day. I will be paraded along the front lines, used to demoralize the opposite army. If I
remain neutral and give no indication of picking a side, perhaps they will both leave me alone to do
try and deal with the dragon issue.” she snapped, starting to become frustrated with his lack of
foresight.

“I can’t believe that Ulfric would allow a citizen of Skyrim to be used in that manner.” Ralof cried,
“It goes against everything he stands for. The man fights for freedom, he wouldn’t cage you.”

His optimism was endearing but she wasn’t sure he saw the situation clearly enough. “Ralof, until I
know more about why the dragons are coming back, I cannot commit myself to any other cause. I
am the only known Dragonborn in existence at this time. I am the only one who can permanently kill
a dragon.” she replied, her voice hard with frustration. “Think about it rationally for a second.
Wouldn’t it be better for Ulfric if I learn more about the dragon threat before throwing my support in
with him? Wouldn’t it look better if when I find a dragon and kill it, that I mention Ulfric would
never leave his citizens unprotected? That I was a special agent protecting the citizens of Skyrim,
rather than being part of the Stormcloaks, fighting the imperials in the day to day skirmishes?” she
asked quietly, standing and pacing the length of the tent.

He rose from his chair, blocking her path and putting his arms around her shoulders. “But you’re not
a special agent for Ulfric are you?” he replied with a smile. “He doesn’t think you even exist as a
person.”
She laughed, her arms rising to wrap around his waist. “He saw me with his own eyes at Helgen. He
knows I am a real person, he doesn’t know I am the Dragonborn.” she replied in a hushed whisper.

“He doesn't believe me anymore that you support him.” Ralof replied seriously, rubbing her neck
and shoulder, easing away the tension he felt there. “What if we work something out. I go back soon,
to give my reports. What if I tell Ulfric the Dragonborn seeks an audience with him, without his
council. I can send word to you of his reply. Would you come to meet him then? I would never
presume to make promises for a Jarl, but I think he will be reasonable. Your idea has merit and I
think he will agree. He probably knows more about the Dragonborn than most, having grown up
among the Greybeards. I think he will see that you can better support him by protecting Skyrim’s
people.” he implored.

He could see the hesitation in her eyes, the uncertainty and knew she was probably struggling with
her new found purpose and her old desires to follow in her brother’s footsteps. He knew it was an
underhanded tactic, but pressed his advantage anyways. “Please Saeja, say you will consider it.
Imagine how proud your family would be if they knew what you have become and that you still
helped the Stormcloaks in your own way.”

It had the desired effect. He watched as her eyes filled with tears, felt her head bury into his chest as
she fought to contain them.

“That was a dirty move Ralof.” she murmured against his shirt. “That was exactly what I wanted to
hear, but it hurt. You didn’t need to guilt me into coming to Windhelm.”

She felt his arms tighten around her as he whispered an apology against her ear. “Forgive me.” he
begged, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. His fingers found their way under her chin, lifting her
head so he could see her eyes. “Please forgive me.” he repeated, pressing his lips to her cheek.

Seaja tilted her head as he drew back, lifting her lips to his, whimpering when he responded by
kissing her softly. Her hands slid up his chest, around his neck and fisted in his hair. She felt her
knees go weak as he deepened the contact, running his tongue across her lips, delving inside when
she parted them. She gasped when she felt Ralof grab the back of her thighs, hoisting her into the air.
She wrapped her legs around his hips, holding on tightly as her turned and walked her back to the
table, setting her down gently on it. She let her legs dangle on both sides of his hips as he stepped in
closer between them, her hands immediately finding their way under his tunic, nails scouring his
back.

Ralof groaned, breaking the kiss as he pulled away. “Here, now?” he asked hoarsely.

She smiled, desire brightening her blue eyes. “Here, now!” she replied and pulled his mouth back to
her own.

Their armor flew off in record time, falling in a messy heap beside the table. Seaja cupped him as her
tongue danced with his inside her mouth. She felt him moan as he thrust against her hand, hot, hard
and heavy.

RALOF gripped her hips, pulling them to the edge of the table, then ran his length against her slit,
spreading the wetness he found there, opening her folds to receive him. When he sheathed himself
inside her it ripped a shriek from her throat and he growled in response. Gone was the soft sweetness
she remembered from their last joining. He thrust desperately into her, driving deep, as though to
merge them as one. Her fingernails scratched vicious red lines into his back as she clawed at him,
tilting her hips to allow closer contact.

The pleasure and her nervous tension came to a head when Ralof slid his hand between them to rub
at her engorged bud. She bit his shoulder, leaving deep impressions in his skin, to muffle her scream as she came, her body writing in ecstasy. As she spasmed around him he let his own pleasure consume him, spilling deep inside her, his knees threatening to give out. His own cry echoed hers as she fell back across the table, pulling him down with her. It was a few moments before either of them could calm their breathing enough to speak.

Ralof slowly straightened back up, their bodies making a slick sound as they pulled apart. He looked down and grinned sheepishly when he saw the pale bruises on her hips where he had gripped her. When she saw them herself she began to laugh, pointing at the indents on his shoulder, noting a few of her teeth that had brought blood to the surface of his skin. “I’m sorry Ralof. I couldn’t stop myself.” she chuckled.

“I’ll wear your mark with honor.” he responded with a sly smile. “Glad to know I still have that effect on you.” He pulled her up to a sitting position on the table and leaned in for a kiss, moaning when she returned it with enthusiasm. “That was more amazing then I remembered. You are incredible Saeja.”

She leaned her head against his chest, sighing with contentment before she replied. “It’s a good thing I bit your shoulder. The alternative would have been embarrassing.”

“What do you mean sweetness?” he asked. “This is a small camp, hearing shouts of pleasure are commonplace.”

She grinned. “It’s not that Ralof. You know what Ulfric is rumored to have done to King Torygg?” He nodded. “Well I was about to do that to your tent. Shouts may be commonplace, but I doubt mine are.”

Ralof stumbled back, “I never even thought of that, you could shout me to pieces. Each time with you could be my last.” he murmured. When he saw her frown he hurried to continue. “It’s a thrill Saeja, only makes it that much more enjoyable. If I die, it will be a happy man.”

She chuckled, smacking his chest lightly. “You’re an ass Ralof. Still, I am so glad you found me. I’ve been worried about you since you left Riverwood.”

That admission got her kissed thoroughly again, until she could barely catch her breath. “Stay with me tonight Saeja.” he begged when he pulled away. “Stay with me as long as possible.”

She slid off the table into his arms. “Till morning light. I promise.” she replied, pulling him close, relishing in the heat of his flesh against her own. “I leave at dawn, so lets make the most of our time.

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Chapter End Notes

So before anyone cries foul....please remember the conversation Saeja and Farkas had in Ivarstead. They established that neither of them have to remain exclusive and as stated in earlier notes, Ralof is my favorite, so he always gets a pass. She would always choose to bed him again.

ALSO....YAY!! I have been waiting to write more for Ralof....seriously I absolutely frigging love his character in the game.
Saeja And The Blade Thief

Chapter Summary

Ustengrav has it's challenges, but the surprise ending has Saeja at her wits end. Revenge is sweeter than a Sweet Roll and no one can convince her otherwise.

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Chapter Notes

So sad to see her part from Ralof, but he will be back. This chapter was hard to get through and it went longer than I originally planned. Going to try and incorporate the civil war quest line into the coming chapters the way I wished it could have happened/works with my character. As always feedback is appreciated and I love answering questions.

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NEW NOTE: July 12, 2018. If you read this chapter please be advised I discovered a continuity error and had to change something in the part where she learned the new wall word. She had not killed enough dragons to learn become ethereal....so I fixed that. Sorry.... :( 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saeja was standing beside the worktable in Ralofs tent, staring at the map and comparing it to the small one she carried herself, when he awoke. The sun was not yet up and she had lit only a few candles so she could see, but her movements, though quiet, had been enough to rouse him. She felt him, rather than heard him when he stepped in behind her, his arms encircling her waist in a loose hug. He pressed a kiss to her neck then mumbled a sleepy good morning against her ear.

“So, you’re leaving me again so soon. Will I actually see you again, or will you disappear without a trace once more?” he asked softly, nuzzling her neck.

She turned in his arms to face him, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “You know where I will be this time.” She paused, “Well, sort of anyways. You can always send word to me at Jorrvaskr. Even if I am away, I will go back there.

“If anyone comes for you, I’d defend you with my life.” he replied seriously, rubbing her hips.

She turned in his arms to face him, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “You know where I will be this time.” She paused, “Well, sort of anyways. You can always send word to me at Jorrvaskr. Even if I am away, I will go back there. If your letters are intercepted, one might think twice about trying storm the Companions Hall to find me.” she replied with a wide smile.

“If anyone comes for you, I’d defend you with my life.” he replied seriously, rubbing her hips.

Absently she replied. “You’d have to fight Fatkas first for that honor.” Realizing what she had just said, she paled, dreading his response.

Ralof surprised her when he only chuckled. “I’d take all the help I can get to protect you sweetness. Just make sure he doesn’t kill me. You mentioned Farkas yesterday as well. A lover amongst your companions yes?” She nodded, trying to gauge his response.
He hugged her tightly. “He’s a lucky man. I hope he knows that and appreciates you. I’m fighting in a war Saeja. I hope to make it to the end of it, but there are no guarantees in life. I would not ask you to beholden yourself to an uncertain future. If you choose to share your company with me, it only make my life that much sweeter. Just make sure he treats you well and I’m content to see you when I can, whether or not you share my bed.” he stated. He brought his hands up to her face, holding it gently while he looked deep into her eyes. “You saved my life in Helgen. I’d say that merits a lifelong friendship. One you can trust was there before all this Dragonborn business.”

Their kiss was short, sweet and full of longing, tainted by the bitter understanding that this was goodbye for now. He helped gather her gear, making plans with her to send word to Whiterun once he spoke to Ulfric. Then, as the first rays of sunshine lit up the camp, he waved her off.

Saeja was on high alert during her hour long trek to Ustengrav, but she was fortunate enough to avoid any other Thalmor or Imperial patrols. As she approached the tomb, she noticed smoke wafting from a campfire. She crouched low behind a nearby tree, watching the campsite. She saw two bandits and a mage patrolling the the entrance to the tomb, so it was a safe bet there would be more inside.

“You couldn’t have hid the horn inside a tomb no one cared about, could you Jurgen?” she muttered to herself, nocking her bow and taking aim at the mage. The man went down with an arrow in his throat, unable to even shout a warning. One bandit whirled around, looking wildly for where the arrow had come from and she quickly shot him in the leg, crippling him, then sent another one through his eye.

The third bandit spotted her and came rushing forward. He had only a moment to scream as she released her fire breath shout at him, catching his fur armor alight and burning him to a crisp. Breathing heavily she approached the camp, looting the bodies for more potions, gold and lockpicks. On the mage she found type of soul gem she’d never seen before. It was small, but heavy, and gleamed a dark purplish black color in the sunlight. She placed it with her other soul gems, figuring she could ask Farengar about it when she returned to Whiterun. She also grabbed the two water skins the bandits had been carrying. She didn’t trust water sources in old, mouldy tombs.

She peaked over the edge of the tomb, checking for anyone else, but seeing it was empty she made her way down the stone steps to the old wooden doorway. As she opened the door she was overwhelmed by a wave of stagnant air. She staggered back, resisting the urge to cough so as not to alert any inhabitants to her presence. She entered quietly, keeping to the shadows as best as she could as she moved down the hallway. Just ahead she heard muffled yells. She sighed inwardly. She’d been right, there were more people down here, just her luck.

She took aim from the shadows, downing the first mage. Suddenly she was surrounded by a swirling purple light that flowed into her belt pouch, blinding her and giving the second mage a chance to throw a fire spell at her. Saeja cursed as it blasted over her skin, causing painful blisters to appear. Out of the corner of her eye she saw two bandits shambling towards her, their gait and moans tipping her off that they were thralls.

“I’ve seriously had it with necromancers.” she yelled, sending another arrow flying at the mage, piercing her heart. The mage went down screaming, but Saeja rushed over and slit her throat to keep her from casting a healing spell. The thralls disintegrated into ash, swirling in the draft coming from a tunnel to her left.

She cast a quick healing spell on herself, sighing in relief as her blisters faded. She tore open her belt pouch, and pulled out the black soul gem. It now pulsed with life and her stomach turned uneasily as
she realized these gems must capture the souls of humans and elves. She swallowed hard and placed it back into her pouch, trying not to imagine the soul of that mage, trapped inside the cold gem.

A table to her right had a chest with some lockpicks in it. Beside that sat a few bottles of mead and a loaf of day old bread. She grabbed both, stuffing them in her knapsack, pocketed the lockpicks, then began her trek down the tunnel. She came across a trail of corpses, both human and draugr, and just ahead she could hear the sounds of a battle. She peered around a corner, choking back a gasp at the sight in front of her. Two mages battled with four draugr, the hallways lit up with multiple spells. She crouched down, waiting for them to tear each other apart and do her job for her. After a few moment, all by two draugr were dead, but they showed clear signs of damage.

“FUS RO!” she shouted, sending them flying into the wall. She charged in with her sword and hacked the stunned corpses to pieces as the enchantment sent flames licking up their dried flesh.

She pressed forward, checking for traps and hidden doorways. Two rooms contained nothing but nearly empty urns, but she found a beautiful silver and sapphire circket, glowing with an enchantment. Another hallway to her right contained a switch that opened a secret panel, but she was disappointed when all the room contained was a chest of gold.

In the next chamber she killed three more draugr, but not before one of them landed a hit the broke her collarbone. She screamed, tears streaming down her cheeks as she reached for her potions belt with her good hand. She worked the cork out of the vial with her teeth, then swallowed the bitter red liquid down. Once the pain began to subside slightly she cast healing with her good hand. She felt an overwhelming amount of pity for Skjor as the feeling of her bone growing back together turned her stomach. Her eyes swept the chamber, and when she felt it safe to do so she sat down, allowing the healing to progress slowly, rather than using another potion, so she wouldn’t lose her own breakfast.

A few hours later, with the pain completely gone and her mobility restored, she debated pressing forward. She had climbed the stairs to an alcove at the top of the chamber and crossed the stone bridgework to the other side, which lead to an iron door. She couldn’t tell the time in the tomb, but knew at this time the way behind her was clear, and she was beginning to tire. Deciding caution was best she set up her bedroll on at the top of the tunnel, scarfed down some bread with cheese, a few slices of dried horker meat and a few mouthfuls of water and then fell asleep.

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She awoke, with no idea how many hours had passed. She swung her arm around a few times, then satisfied it was mended she packed up her camp and pushed open the iron door. The air in this new chamber was damp, carrying a faint rotting smell. If she listened hard enough she could hear the roar of a waterfall and a natural opening in the rock wall revealed an immense underground cave, complete with trees and a stream trailing through the rocks below. Its beauty was marred by movement below, as skeletons shambled around the cave floor. Tightening her grip on her bow she pressed forward.

This new level of the tomb was a winding maze of traps, draugr and skeletons. A pressurized floor shot streams of fire up at her, causing her to jump backwards, but not before burning through her leather leggings. She managed to get past it by inching along the side of the wall, keeping her feet off the tiles of the floor. She was thrown into walls by the shouts of draugr she came across, sliced by their ancient axes and swords and frozen by their icy blasts. One chamber contained a enclosed room, which was only accessible once she killed the two draugr patrolling. She had better luck with these ones when she shot the fire pot hanging from the ceiling into an oil spill on the floor. The mindless creatures had rushed across the blaze towards her and burned to ash, growling until the bitter end.
The small room revealed another chest and an enchanting table. She pulled out her circlet, eager to learn its secrets. As she unenchanted the jewelry she realized it would help her keep her stamina up, allowing her to recover more quickly. She quickly applied it to her armor, knowing she would need the boost to finish the tomb.

As she descended the old stone steps to the next chamber she saw the underground cave open before her. Massive pillars and stone bridges connected the tomb to the cave. The chamber was even bigger than she had thought, with three separate levels. On the lowest portion of the cavern was a large dragon wall, set beside a flowing pool of water, fed by the waterfall she had heard earlier. The sheer beauty in the immense cavern threatened to overwhelm her, but a familiar snarl from a skeleton below wrenched her attention back to her task at hand. She raced down the broken stone bridge, meeting the skeletons with a brutal attack, leaving them all in a pile of shattered bones and ash. Once it was clear she made her way down the narrow footpath to the dragon wall.

The chanting grew louder as she approached it, her eyes transfixed to the swirling energy. She reached out her hand to rest against the cold stone, delighted to feel the tingling sensation as the energy poured into her, filling her body and crystalizing in the back of her mind.

“FEIM!” she yelled as her head cleared. Nothing happened. She tried again with the same result. She could say the word, yell it even, but could not utilize the shout. Deciding it must be because she was tired, she took a break. She sat against the dragon wall and pulled out a bottle of ale, a hunk of bread and an apple, munching hungrily. Through a small hole in the roof of the cavern she could see the dark pink of the sky, but she wasn’t sure if it was dawn or dusk. As a yawn escaped her she decided it didn’t really matter. She had ventured enough since her last rest, so she rolled out her bedroll, climbed under the covers and was fast asleep in moments.

She awoke, feeling refreshed and felt certain she was almost through the tomb. There was a faint amount of light coming from the hole in the roof, so she determined it was likely mid morning now. She wasn’t sure how long she had slept, but she felt ready for anything the tomb had left to offer.

A short time later she was less certain. She had crossed the wide bridge above the dragon wall and was stuck staring at the 3 stone structures that enclosed the pathway forward. Just beyond them was a tunnel, completely blocked by three portcullis’. She could see that walking past the stones raised each correspondent portcullus but the slide quickly shut before she could get through them. She had searched all the walls for a hidden lever or latch, moved to the upper walkway and searched there, turning up nothing as well. Sighing heavily she sat down on the ledge of the walkway and tried to think about how to get through.

“I tried running past them.” she said out loud to herself, hoping if she verbalized it she could spot the answer. “I tried leaving something beside each stone. There are no levers anywhere and the pull chains are out of reach on the other side of each door.”

Frustrated she jumped down to the stones, but missed her footing and turned her ankle. She cried out as the pain shot up her leg, her cry echoing throughout the cavern.

She clutched her ankle, rocking back and for, the pain diminishing and an idea forming as the echo faded. “That’s it. By the Nine, I’m so stupid. The horn is meant to be found by a Dragonborn, and what can I do that others can’t?” she muttered to herself.

She cast a healing spell in her ankle, pleased to see the swelling recede immediately. Standing quickly, she retreated a ways back from the stone, then began running towards them. She passed the first one, the second, then as she hot the third stone she shouted with all her might. “WULD!”
She felt herself shoot forward, passing under the closing portcullis’ second before the slammed shut. She was left gasping on the other side, clutching her left shoulder where one of the deadly spikes on the bottom of the gate had caught her. She pulled out another health potion, hoping to save her magical reserves for any other surprises.

The next chamber held another pressurized floor, the square plates with small circular holes between them tipping her off. She made her way along the walls of the chamber, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end as she noted the wispy spider webbings changing color as she progressed, getting brighter and denser. Sure enough ahead she spotted two frost spiders patrolling a raised platform.

“FUS RO!” she let loose her shout, knocking them into the wall behind them, temporarily stunning them. She was about to blast a fire spell at them when a larger, more vicious looking spider began to drop from an opening in the ceiling, camouflaged by a mass of webbing.

A mass of frost poison shot from it’s mouth, landing on her left arm and leg. She screamed as the cold raced through her body, numbing her side and impeding her movements.

Gritting her teeth, she sent a silent prayer to Talos, hoping that Balgruuf was right about her amulet reducing the time it took for her to recover between shouts. “YOL!” she shouted.

Fire burst from her mouth, engulfing the enormous arachnid. The creature let out a piercing screech, convulsing as it’s exoskeleton cracked from the heat. She blasted her fire spell at the other two smaller spiders that were cowering in a corner, multiple eyes transfixed on their larger counterpart. The spell caught one of them alight, but the other scuttled away from the blast, charging at her, it’s fangs flailing at her. It crouched and pounced on her at the last second, landing on top of her, coming dangerously close to crushing her. She couldn’t angle her sword enough to stab the creature, its weight preventing her from moving her arms at all.

The spider lowered its mouth, poison dripping to land on her neck. The pain was unbearable, a cold burn spreading across rapidly over her skin, preventing her from drawing a breath. When it’s fangs pierced her right shoulder she thought for sure she would die, never completing her destiny. She would fail those who were depending on her to come home, they would be left without knowing how she met her demise.

Just as she closed her eyes, readying herself for the next bite that would end her life, the spider moved a back leg, shifting its weight to trigger a plate on the floor beside the cave wall, sending a blast of fire up its limb. The spider shrieked, scuttling as close to the wall as it could, giving her a brief chance. With visions of the companions and Ralof’s face lending her strength she ripped her dagger from her side and plunged it into the spiders soft abdomen, over and over, as it tried to scurry away with little success. It was trapped between her blade and the fiery floor. With one final thrust up into its belly, the spider let out a death cry, curling in on itself. It rolled onto the pressurized floor, sending a blast of flame skyward to consume its corpse.

Saeja pulled herself to her knees with some difficulty, her right arm hanging uselessly at her side. Her whole body shook uncontrollably, the frost poison coursing through her veins. Her throat was still constricted from the poison, making hard to swallow. She cast her healing, her throat loosening, allowing her to suck in air greedily. She tried for another spell but she couldn’t call forth the magic needed, her reserves tapped out. She wept when she pulled open her belt pouch and was confronted with the mess of broken vials and bottles inside. Gingerly she searched it and found one healing potion intact. She gulped it down, whimpering as the pain in her arm receded, but didn’t disappear. Her skin began to knit itself back together, slowly, and the bleeding became sluggish, but didn’t quite stop.
A few moments later she was able to stand, as long as she leaned against the wall for support. She forced herself to continue along the wall of the cave until she was able to reach the raised platform that was blissfully without floor plates. She rolled out her bedroll and sat down, grimacing as she threaded a small needle with sinew. She used a bottle of ale to wash out the spider bite, biting her tongue against the pain, then began to sew up the gaping wound. Once she had completed that she ate some her rations to keep up her strength and lay down, pulling her hide blanket over her to combat the unrelenting shivers wracking her body.

She slept fitfully, unable to tell for how long, but when she awoke she was able to cast spells again, and her body had finally stopped shaking. The healing spell made short work of the wound in her shoulder, but she was left with a jagged, red scar running over her collarbone. After repacking her gear, she retrieved her sword and dagger, wiping away the drying goo as best as she could.

Taking a deep breath, she hacked through the webbing that blocked the way forward. Once it was clear she pushed open the wooden door behind them and wait, listening for anything that might indicate more spiders down the way. When she could detect nothing she continued forward, slowly, even more cautious of traps. Another portcullis was blocking the end of the tunnel, a barrier between her and the next chamber. She pulled the chain to raise the gate, crouching low, her eyes sweeping the chamber for any movement. When nothing rushed out into the open she made her way tentatively into the chamber, towards the stone pathway surrounded by murky water.

The instant her foot hit the first step down to the middle of the chamber the ground began to quake, the water on either side of the pathways bubbled up, roiling as 4 massive stone structures rose up from its depths. She shrieked, flinging herself backwards to the upper platform, sword drawn and eyes wide with fear. The stone statues shuddered to a halt, the ground ceased its shaking and silence returned to the chamber, save for the sound of her frantic breathing. A long moment passed before she felt brave enough to attempt the stair again. She tiptoed down slowly, then relaxed when nothing else happened. At the end of the stone pathway was a massive stone crypt on a raised stone platform. At each side were golden burial urns, and jutting out from the middle of the lid, an outstretched stone hand that held...a slip of paper.

Disappointment flooded through her as she reached for the folded parchment. Rage replaced the disappointment as she opened the note and read its contents.

**Dragonborn,**

I need to speak to you. Urgently.
Rent the attic room at the Sleeping Giant Inn in Riverwood, and I’ll meet you.

~~ A Friend.

Her scream of fury echoed through the chamber. “After all of this, someone just waltzed into this god’s forsaken tomb and took the horn right out from under me? I wasn’t allowed to bring someone with me, so that I could prove my worthiness and some unknown walked out of here with my artifact?” she raged, throwing her sword to the ground and stomping her feet.

If anyone else had been with her they may have laughed at the comical sight of the Dragonborn throwing a tantrum like a small child, but fate was kind enough it seemed that she was without company so she could sulk, kick her feet and throw things without an audience. When she had finally vented enough of her rage that rationality returned, she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly and collected her sword. Dashing tears away from her eyes she walked past the crypt to the wooden door behind it. The treasure in small room behind the door barely made up for the effort she had put in to reaching Jurgen’s final resting place, but it did help. Once she had searched all the urns and the chest, she had a large sum of gold in her coin purse, a few more potions for the journey home and a
new spell book that she couldn’t wait to read. Following the tunnel leading from the small chamber, she made her way to the beginning of the tomb emerging near the entrance. When she finally exited the ruin, she laughed with joy when the first rays of sunshine lit up her face.

When she arrive in Riverwood she went to Gerdur’s home first. Ralof’s sister was delighted to see her, and had wept with joy when Saeja informed her that Ralof was alive and well the last she had seen him. She stayed with Gerdur and Hod for two full days, allowing herself time to rest and recover fully from her ordeal in Ustengrav. She helped Hod around the mill, avoiding Faendal as best as she could. The elf eyed her angrily every time she passed him. Camilla and Sven were delighted by her visit, telling her all about their upcoming nuptials. In the evening volunteered to help Halvor around the forge, helping him catch up on an order of iron daggers and swords for Whiterun. On her third day in Riverwood she finally had to admit to herself there was no one around that she didn’t recognize. She even knew some of the guards, who were on rotation from Whiterun. That afternoon she entered the inn and walked up to the counter, eyeing the blonde Breton woman who was wiping down tankards.

“I know you.” the woman said, eyeing Saeja suspiciously. “You’re that vistor’s been poking around. Got your eyes on everyone in town.”

“I’ve been visiting Gerdur.” Saeja replied. “If I enjoy people watching that’s my own business.”

“Well I’m the innkeeper. It’s my business to keep track of strangers.” the woman replied sourly.

“I’d like to rent your attic room.” Saeja replied with a shrug. “Gerdur’s been putting me up, but I need a night away from Frodnar and his million questions.”

The Breton’s eyes widened, almost imperceptibly, then her placid expression slid back into place. “Attic room eh? Well we don’t have an attic room, but you can have the one on the left. Make yourself at home.”

Saeja nodded and made her way over to the room. She shut the door behind her, then drawing her sword she faced the closed door, waiting for the attack she was certain would come.

A knock at the door gave her pause. The innkeeper opened the door and stepped inside, shutting it firmly. She bore no weapons and her stance was unthreatening, but her eyes went wide with shock when she saw Saeja poised to strike. “Mara’s mercy, you’re a jumpy one.” she remarked, holding out her hand to indicate she was no threat.

Saeja was lowering her weapon when the tone of the women’s voice changed. “So you’re the Dragonborn I’ve been hearing so much about.”

Saeja raised her arm again as the woman reached into a pouch at her side. “Whoa, whoa, I think you’re looking for this.” she stated, holding out a dull, weather beaten bull horn, wrapped in soft black leather. “We need to talk, follow me please.”

Saeja bit back her angry retort and sheathed her sword. She took the horn from the Breton, who shot her an encouraging smile and turned to stride from the room. Saeja followed her, cursing the woman silently, her eyes shooting daggers at the back of the older woman’s head.

The innkeeper entered the large room beside the alchemy set and shut the door when Saeja followed behind her. Opening the large wardrobe, she pressed against the wooden back and Saeja heard a soft clicking sound as the back panel popped open, revealing a hidden stairway to the cellar. She
followed the Breton down the steps and had to hold back a sigh of envy when she saw the interior of
the room. It was equipped with an enchanting table, a alchemy lab and the bookshelf was weighed
down in some of the rarest alchemical items Saeja had ever heard of. Wraith’s teeth were almost
impossible to get unless you hunted them yourself and this woman had three sets. To her right there
was a weapons rack that held an array of weapons one would not think an innkeeper would need.

“Now we can talk.”

The woman’s voice brought Saeja’s mind back to the present. The woman was eying her, taking
note of her armor and weapons. “So, the Greybeards seem to think you’re the Dragonborn.” She
sighed deeply, shaking her head. “I hope they’re right.”

Saeja eyed the older woman. “You, you’re the one who took the horn?” she asked, skepticism clear
in her voice.

The woman grinned. “Surprised? I guess I’m getting pretty good at my harmless innkeeper act. My
name is Delphine.”

Saeja retreated to a chair in the corner of the room, sitting down and watching Delphine closely. “
Why all the cloak and dagger? Why did you take the horn and leave me a note to find you here?”

Delphine flushed, but leaned over her work table, her gaze steady., “You can't be too careful.
Thalmor spies are everywhere. I didn't go to all this trouble on a whim. I needed to make sure it
wasn't a Thalmor trap.”

“Pretty elaborate trap if you ask me but fine, it got me here. The Greybeards say I am Dragonborn,
and I need to get the horn back to them to get more information from them.”

“I hope they’re right, but you'll forgive me if I don't assume that something's true just because the
Greybeards say so. I made it through Ustengrav, and I just handed you the Horn of Jurgen
Windcaller. Does that make me Dragonborn, too?” Delphine pointed out.

Saeja opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again without utter a word. She could mention she
could take the soul of a dragon, but she knew well enough if she hadn’t seen it, or experienced it
herself, she would be skeptical too. Even her ability to use the Thu’um didn’t prove she was
dragonborn, Ulfric stormcloak could shout as well. There was no way to prove it to Delphine
without killing a dragon in front of her.

“I see your point, but you better have a good reason for dragging me here. I’m only here for the horn.
I wouldn’t have bothered if you hadn’t stolen it out from under me.” she replied, unable to conceal
the frustration creeping into her tone.

“And now you have it. No harm done.” Delphine impatiently. “I knew the Greybeards would send
you there if they thought you were Dragonborn. They're nothing if not predictable. When you
showed up here, I knew you were the one the Greybeards sent, and not some Thalmor plant. Taking
it was the only way I could be sure this wasn't a Thalmor trap.”

“Again with the Thalmor. Other than their hatred for anything to do with Nord culture, I don’t see
what they have to do with any of this.” Saeja retorted.

“Look, the Thalmor and I, or rather my organization, we have history. You could say we're very old
enemies, and if my suspicions are correct, they might have something to do with the dragons
returning. But that part isn’t important right now. What is important is that you might be Dragonborn.
I’ll won’t tell you more until I know it’s true.”
Saeja resisted the urge to pick up the iron dagger on the table beside her and hurl it at Delphine for being so closed mouthed about what was going on. She waved her hand at Delphine, urging her to continue. “Go on then, get to the important part. I’m listening.

Delphine rubbed her temples, frustrated by Saeja’s lack of comprehension. “Like I said in my note, I’ve heard that you might be Dragonborn. I’m part of a group that’s been looking for you. Well, someone like you, for a very long time. Before I tell you any more, I need to make sure I can trust you.

“Trust me?” Saeja cried. “I’m not the one withholding information. How do I know I can trust you?”

Delphine stared at her as if she lost her mind. “If you don't trust me, you were a fool to walk in here in the first place.”

“Call me a fool then, because I don’t trust you. There’s more to this then you’re letting on. What's the part you're not telling me?” she exclaimed.

The Breton let out a frustrated grunt. “Dragons aren't just coming back, they're coming back to life. They weren't gone somewhere all these years. They were dead, killed off centuries ago by my predecessors. Now something’s happening to bring them back to life, and I need you to help me stop it. That is if you are the Dragonborn at all. I know what most don't, that the Dragonborn is the ultimate dragonslayer. You're the only one that can kill a dragon permanently by devouring its soul. Can you do it? Can you devour a dragon's soul?”

“It’s more common knowledge than you think. A guard in Whiterun told me the Dragonborn is the only one who can slay a dragon and steal their power. That being said, taking a dragon soul was how I first learned I was Dragonborn. I can also learn shouts by reading the dragon walls.”

Delphine clapped her hands happily. “Good. And you'll have a chance to prove it to me soon enough. You may be the only one that can stop these dragons. But you'll understand that soon enough.”

Saeja began to laugh, a hollow bitter sound as the enormity of what Delphine was saying washed over her. “What makes you think dragons are coming back to life rather than returning?”

Delphine smirked, “You should know. You got the map for me. The dragonstone you got for Farengar, remember?” she replied, pointing to the map on the table. “This shows all the ancient burial sights. I wouldn’t be surprised that the Greybeards didn't tell you anything. They’re tight lipped, the lot of them, guarding their secrets with pacifism.”

Saeja frowned at Delphine, annoyed by her insult against Arngeir, but she did now recognize the woman from Fargengar’s study. “Right, you were at Dragonsreach when I returned. He gave you the tablet.”

“So you were paying attention. I arranged to have Farengar recover the dragonstone for me. It's what I do. I make things happen from behind the scenes. After all, here you are. The tablet is a map of
ancient dragon burial sites. I've looked at which ones are now empty. The pattern is pretty clear. It seems to be spreading from the southeast, starting in the Jeralls near Riften. The one near Kynesgrove is next if the pattern holds.”

Saeja’s jaw dropped. “Kynesgrove, you mean that old mound everyone avoids is about to release a dragon?”

Delphine looked up sharply. “You know it?”

Saeja scowled. “I am familiar with Kynesgrove she replied sourly.

“Good.” Delphine replied, unaware of the sudden mood change in the cellar. “If we can get there before it happens, maybe we’ll learn how to stop it. We should get moving. There's no time to waste.”

Saeja left Delphine to get her gear prepared, running to Gerdur’s to grab her own pack. She left Gerdur with instructions to get word to the Companions if she wasn’t back within a week. When she returned Delphine was leaving instructions with Orgnar to watch the inn. The women left quickly, The walk to Ivarstead took all day, but they were fortunate enough to catch a ride on the carriage that passed them on the just outside the village on its way to Windhelm. Once they got to the city stables they took off at a jog, south towards Kynesgrove. Saeja’s stomach churned with dread at the likelihood of seeing her uncle again. If Delphine noticed her apprehension, she wisely made no mention of it.

As they approached Delphine turned her head and suggested they speak to the innkeeper to see if anything unusual had happened near the mound.

“Ask him yourself Delphine, I’m not stepping foot in that inn.”

“This is no time to be stubborn Saeja.” She retorted.

Saeja stopped jogging abruptly. “I said ask him yourself. Do not push me on this one Delphine.”

Before the Breton could respond Saeja heard a terrified screaming coming from the direction of the mine. Shouts of fear and confusion followed closely behind and a trail of men and women running full tilt towards them. One woman ran into Saeja, gripping her arms tightly. “You don’t want to go up there. A dragon….it’s attacking.” she gasped, trying to pull in air.

Delphine gripped the woman’s hand, drawing her attention away from Saeja. “A dragon is attacking Kynesgrove? Are you sure?”

The woman ripped her hand from Delphine’s indignantly. “Well I don’t know. Not yet, I guess. It flew over the town and landed on the old dragon mound. I don’t know what it’s doing up there, but I’m not waiting around to find out.” With that the young woman took off running again, making her way to Windhelm.

“ Damn!” Delphine cried. “Come on, hurry. We might be too late.

She took off running with Saeja racing behind her, up the rocky, uneven roadway to the dragon mound. A loud shout almost stopped her in her tracks.

“Sahloknir! Ziil gro dovah ulse!” the voice was familiar and it filled Saeja with dread. Her blood ran cold with fear as the massive dragon lifted itself into the air, swooping back and forth over the burial mound. She knew that creature, the one that haunted her nightmares, who stole her friends and family from her nightly, it's laughing roar tormenting her before she awoke as she felt his flames
engulf her body.

“Lorkhan’s eyes! Look at that big bastard! Keep your head down, let’s see what it does.” called Delphine as she slowed her pace up the hill.

“Sahloknir! Ziil gro doovah ulse! Slen Tiid Vo!”

Saeja and Delphine reached the crest of the hill just in time to see the remains of a dragon begin to drag itself out of the ground, it’s maw opened in a silent roar.

“This is worse than I thought.” Delphine hissed at her, “There’s two of them.”

The growing fear in her stomach solidified into something more solid, more paralyzing as they watched flesh and scale appearing over the bones of the reanimated dragon corpse. All the while the black dragon in the sky chanted.

As a tongue formed in the mouth of the emerging dragon Saeja could hear it speak.

“Alduin, thuri! Boaan tiid vokriiha suleysksejun kruziiik?”

Alduin screeched his reply. “Geh, Sahloknir, kaali mir.”

Without warning the Alduin’s eyes fall on Saeja and she was unable to tear her own eyes away from him.

“Ful, losei Dovahkiin? Zu’u koraav nid nol dov do hi. You do not even know our tongue, do you? Such arrogance, to dare take for yourself the name of Dovah. Sahloknir, krii daar joorre.”

She ripped her sword from her side, brandishing it at Alduin. Before she could scream a reply Delphine shouted at her. “Look out!”

The newly risen dragon unfurled his wings and took to the air taunting her. “I am Sahloknir! Hear my Voice and despair!”

Saeja took a deep breath and shouted at the moss colored dragon. “FUS RO!”

The shout hit Sahloknir dead on, the force pushing his wings back, making him falter in the air. He dipped slightly as he fought to maintain his flight. Before he hit the ground he managed to spread his wings, gliding over top of her and back into the air. “Dovahkiin, your Voice is no match for mine!”

Suddenly he roared in pain. Saeja whipped her head around and saw that Delphine was shooting elven arrows at the creatures wings, tearing holes in the thin skin. Saeja dropped her sword and pulled out her bow, took aim and let fly, hitting Sahloknir where his wings met his body. “I don’t have to match your voice Sahloknir. I just have to get you to the ground.” she screamed as he swooped overhead again.

Steel arrows joined her Nordic ones and she shouted her thanks to the two guards had stayed in Kynesgrove, sworn to protect Ulfric’s citizens with their lives. Alduin had disappeared, choosing to leave his newly risen companion to his own fate. Saeja hurled shout after shout at Sahloknir as the guards and Delphine concentrated their aim on his wings. When Sahloknir finally collapsed to the ground, bleeding and shouting weak flames at her, his wings were in shreds.

“This is the end dragon.” Saeja stated as she walked up to him, clutching her sword in both hands. “I do not fear you.”

Sahloknir let out a great wheezing laugh as his lifeblood poured onto the ground. “Kovir hin
With a loud cry she thrust her sword into his gaping maw, breaking through the roof of his mouth. As she ripped her sword back out his eyes rolled back and his body collapsed into a limp heap on the ground. Saeja watched as he began to burn, turning his scales to ash and lifted her arms to the glowing energy that began to swirl around her and the dragon bones. The familiar feeling of it’s soul filling up her body, stretching her skin until she felt she may explode caused her to stumble. Then all at once the pressure was gone, all that remained was the knowledge of some of the everyday language of dragons.

As her vision cleared Saeja looked for Delphine, her eyes spotting the corpses of the two guards who had perished in the fight. One body was burned beyond the point of recognition. The other was crushed under the weight of the dragon when it fell.

She felt a hand on her shoulder “I’ll be damned, you did it! That was well done.” Delphine approached the skeleton, all that was left of the magnificent monster. “I’ve been wanting a closer look at one of these buggers.” After a few moment she turned back to Saeja, her eyes wide with wonder. “So you really are.. I mean it's true, isn’t it? You really are Dragonborn. I owe you some answers, don’t I? Go ahead. Whatever you want to know. Nothing held back.”

“Who are you, what organization do you belong to that has been searching for a Dragonborn and what do you want with me?” the questions came out in a rush.

Delphine sighed, her answer heavy with old memories. “I'm one of the last members of the Blades. A very long time ago, the Blades were dragonslayers, and we served the Dragonborn, the greatest dragonslayer. For the last two hundred years, since the last Dragonborn emperor, the Blades have been searching for a purpose. Now that dragons are coming back, our purpose is clear again. We need to stop them. That’s where you come in, and why I have been searching for you for so long.”

Saeja was about to ask another question when Delphine smiled, “Come on, let’s head down to see if we can find a drink.”

As the women made their way back down the hill to the inn, Delphine filled her in on the history of the The Blades and how they were protectors of the Septim Emperors, how they had been searching for a new Dragonborn to serve and how their numbers had been dwindling steadily until she was one of the last.

They had just got back to the town when Saeja suddenly heard a familiar, grating voice yell her name. She froze, her whole body going numb as she spied her uncle coming towards her with a small mob of miners.

“I told you not to step foot in Kynesgrove again you ungrateful bitch. How dare you show your face back here after what you did.” Kjeld screamed at her.

Delphine stepped between them, eyeing that man as he turned red with rage. “How dare you. This woman just killed that Dragon, while you and your men there stayed down here, cowering like children in a thunderstorm.” she accused.

“That girl assaulted me, robbed me and snuck away in the middle of the night.” the man screamed. “After I took her in, gave her a place to call home. A generous offer too what with her family history! Traitors to the Empire, the lot of them.”

Anger at his lies finally gave her the courage to speak. “Traitors? My parents fought in the Legion
Delphine whirled to look at her, sympathy and rage in her eyes as she realized how much Saeja had already faced in her life. Turning back to Kjeld, she sneered. “I could take you before the priestess of Mara for such behaviour innkeeper. This is the Dragonborn and you will show her the respect she deserves.”

The miners behind Kjeld suddenly looked uncomfortable when they heard that, some eyeing Saeja with suspicion, some with awe, but most with guilt for listening to Kjeld when he had told them about his thieving niece returning.

“Miss, did you really kill that there dragon, you really are dragonborn?” one of them asked.

“Yes.” she replied, causing many of them to murmur amongst themselves.

“Lies, all of it. You would take the word of some traitor thief, over a respected businessman of Skyrim,” he cried, feigning innocence. “Boys catch that lying tramp.”

Uncontrollable fury raced through her, causing her to lose her control. “YOL!” The shout ripped from her throat, sending a column of fire past her uncle and the miners, catching in the dry thatching of the inn’s roof. Kjeld screamed in fear and the miners scattered.

Her uncle raced towards the inn as the fire spread, eyes wide with disbelief. “You tramp, you slut, you destroyed my inn. It will take months to rebuild this.”

The miner who had spoken before turned and angry face to her. “There’s no doubt you are Dragonborn now girl, but if I was you I’d be on your way. That was the only shelter for miles, Kjeld supplies our food. Now it will be back to sleeping in the mine.”

Delphine pulled on her arm. “Come on Saeja, lets head back to Riverwood.”

As they walked away, Saeja felt something inside her heart break as she watched her family home go up in flames, but a satisfied smirk still made its way to her mouth as she heard Kjeld cursing her existence. He got what he deserved, and no one could convince her otherwise.

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Chapter End Notes

Stupid Kjeld. He always rubbed me the wrong way in game. I know he has a son, and I didn't mention her cousin, but for story lines he's an ass too and she doesn't have anything to do with him.
Duty Calls

Chapter Summary

Saeja returns the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller to the Greybeards, finally being accepted as one of them. Now all she needs to do is get to Windhelm, keeping her promise to Ralof, so many months later. Too bad others have expectations of her and duty calls.

Chapter Notes

TAGS: Smut....so much smut. Anal play, fingering, enthusiastic consent.
Brief reference to previous torture.

She didn’t return to Riverwood as Delphine had suggested. They decided the best course of action was for Delphine to get in touch with her contacts to set up the next move against the Thalmor. The older woman felt certain they knew something about the Dragon’s returning and wanted to find a way to infiltrate their network for information. Saeja was so drained, both emotionally and physically that she just wanted to go home and sleep for a week, but she also had to get the horn back to Arngeir. Delphine had understood and promised to get word to Whiterun once she planned the next step, letting her know it may be a month or two before she would have everything in place.

Saeja made her way down to Shor’s Stone, both surprising and delighting Filhjar when she stayed with him for two days, filling him in on why she had not been returning his letters for so long. When she told him about joining the companions he had beamed, pride written all over his expression at learning how quickly she had joined their ranks. He drilled her, impressed by the improvements he saw in her, claiming she was in even better fighting form than when he had sent her home to her parents. He had openly wept with joy when she told him about being the Dragonborn.

The morning she left she caught the carriage travelling between Windhelm and Riften, thankful for the extra rest it provided. She sent a courier to Kodlak, as she promised, from Riften, before she set out for Ivarstead. This time she made the trip in just over a day, able to take the main roads this time.

Wilhelm was all smiles and greetings as she entered the tavern. “Ah miss, back again are ya? Don’t tell me you didn’t get your fill of the mountain last you were here?”

She laughed. “I had my fill of the mountain, but not of the Greybeards, and unfortunately they live atop that blasted rock. I’m surprised you recognize me, it’s been months since I was last here.”

“True enough miss, but we don’t get many women here asking so many questions about the Greybeards and certainly less of them with a mop like yours.” he confessed. “Blonde women are common enough, but you’ve got hair as white as fluffy, summer cloud. So then, are you back up the
mountain tomorrow?"

“As soon as the sun rises.” she replied with a smile.

“Well then, I best feed you up well tonight. You’ll need the energy.” he replied as he shuffled her off to her room.

The climb the next morning was uneventful, the cold mild compared to the last time, allowing her to reach the summit just as the sun was setting. She pushed open the door and shook the frost from her cloak.

Soft steps on the stone floor alerted her to Arngeir’s presence before his words reached her. “Saeja, it is good to see you have returned.”

She smiled at him, nodding her head in respect. “I have something for you Master Arngeir.” she replied, pulling the horn from her satchel and handing it to him. “I had to face a dragon to recover it.”

The old man’s face lit up with joy and wonder as his wizened hands gently caressed the ancient vessel. “Ah! You've retrieved the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. Well done. You have now passed all the trials. Come with me. It is time for us to recognize you formally as Dragonborn.” he stated, shuffling further into the castle

Saeja followed him silently, the other monks gathering around her in the main chamber, their gaze solemn and unwavering as she stood between them. Arngeir turned to her. “You are ready to learn the final word of Unrelenting Force, ‘Dah,’ which means push. With all three words together, this Shout is much more powerful. Use it wisely. Master Wulfgar will now gift you with his knowledge.”

Wulfgar spoke the word, and Saeja felt the power flow through her, gaining the understanding of the shout from the ancient scholar. She stumbled as she absorbed the knowledge, falling to her knees as she comprehended the intensity of the shout. It took her a second to gather the strength to stand back up, but the Greybeards nodded with approval when she did so.

“You have completed your training, Dragonborn. We would Speak to you. Stand between us, and prepare yourself. Few can withstand the unbridled Voice of the Greybeards. But you are ready.” Arngeir stated. He clapped his hands together, then raised them in the air, the other monks following suit. They began to chant, their voices ringing through the air, shaking the very foundations of the castle. Dust was unsettled from every crack and crevice as their combined voices thundered around her.


She didn’t know how she managed it, but she remained upright as the floor shook beneath her feet. She didn’t understand what they were saying to her, but similar to the night she was accepted into the Circle, she could feel the magic seep into her body as they completed the ritual, binding her to destiny, much the way the dragon souls bound themselves to her very bones. When they finished, Borri, Wulfgar and Einarth stepped forward to clasp hands with her, expressing their pride at accepting her as Dovahkiin. They shuffled off, leaving her alone with Arngeir.

He bowed before her, as low as his weathered body would allow. “Dovahkiin. You have tasted the Voice of the Greybeards, and passed through unscathed. High Hrothgar is open to you.”
“It was a powerful ceremony Arngeir, but what did it actually mean for me?” she asked.

“We spoke the traditional words of greeting to a Dragonborn who has accepted our guidance. The same words were used to greet the young Talos, when he came to High Hrothgar, before he became the Emperor Tiber Septim. You are now another link in the long history of Dragonborns” he replied.

She nodded, but pressed for more information. “But what is it you were Shouting at me? I didn’t recognize much of it.”

The old man flushed with embarrassment. “Ah, forgive me Saeja, I sometimes you forget you are not versed in the dragon tongue as we are. This is a rough translation: "Long has the Stormcrown languished, with no worthy brow to sit upon. By our breath we bestow it now to you in the name of Kyne, in the name of Shor, and in the name of Atmora of Old. You are Ysmir now, the Dragon of the North, hearken to it.”

“That is really beautiful Arngeir. Thank you, you’re guidance has been invaluable to me.” she said.

“But what is it you were Shouting at me? I didn’t recognize much of it.”

He sighed, “Eager as ever I see. As you are well aware, Dragons have the inborn ability to learn and project their Voice, as well as the ability to absorb the power of their slain brethren. A few mortals are born with similar abilities, though whether this is a gift or a curse has been a matter of debate down through the centuries. What you have already learned in the short time you have been at High Hrothgar took even the most gifted of us years to achieve. It has long been believed that Dragonborn are sent into the world by the gods, at times of great need.”

“So there is great need in the world right now? Does it have something to do with the war, or why the dragons are returning?” she pushed.

“My dear girl, all will be revealed when you are ready. As I said to you before, do not let your easy mastery of the Voice tempt you into the arrogance of power that has been the downfall of many Dragonborn before you.”

Saeja squinted at him, as his words triggered an understanding in her. “The downfall of Dragonborn before me. Did one of them become to powerful and had to be destroyed.”

“Enough Saeja, do not push the matter any further.” he admonished. “Concentrate on the words you know and protecting the citizens of Skyrim from further attacks. We will speak of this more when you are ready. I told you before, there is much we know that you do not. That does not mean that you are ready to understand it. You cannot depend on us for easy answers. This is your destiny and you must discover it on your own.” At her disappointed look Arngeir patted her shoulder sympathetically. “Fear not Dragonborn. You have a good heart, and I feel you are capable of carrying the burden of being a child of Akatosh.”

“Can you at least tell me why I couldn’t use the shout I learned in Ustengrav?” she asked, desperate for more answers. “I absorbed the knowledge of Feim. I can speak the word, I can yell it at the top of my lungs, but it doesn’t work. I know what it is supposed to do, but I can’t actually make anything happen.”

Arngeir chuckled softly. “Have you tried since your fight with that dragon you mentioned?”
She thought for a moment, then realized she had not. “No, I suppose I was too focused on getting back to High Hrothgar without losing the horn.”

Arngeir didn’t reply, he just smiled knowingly and gestured with his hands for her to try shouting. She hesitated, then remembered of all places, High Hrothgar was the only one where she didn’t have to be worried about harming anyone, and the Greybeards would understand what was going on.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the word. Taking a deep breath she shouted. “FEIM!”

At first she thought nothing happened. There was no visible evidence of a change, but then she looked at her hands, she cried out in surprise when she could see Arngeir’s amused expression through her transparent flesh. “As you can see Saeja, you will be able to unlock the power of each Thu’um by absorbing a soul of a dragon. It has always been thus.”

“This is amazing!” she shouted, her joy echoing inside the castle. A few of the other Greybeards shuffled back to the main room, smiling as they watched her try and hit herself and laugh when her hand passed through her face. Arngeir laughed aloud when the inevitable happened. The next time she tried to hit herself, she succeeded as her body became corporeal again.

“Ah to be young again, when the wonders of the Way of the Voice were new and exciting.” Arngeir lamented. “Now, will you join us for our meal and rest for the night before heading down the steps again.

Saeja rubbed her cheek and smiled. “Of course Master Arngeir. I am eager to return home and let my friends know I am safe, but will gladly share a meal with you and the others before tomorrow.”

The guards at the city gates told her Balgruuf wished to speak to her when she returned. She wanted nothing more than to see Kodlak and then sleep undisturbed for a few days, but told them to tell the Jarl she would be up in the evening to speak to him. The man had gifted her the amulet around her neck, an amulet that lived up to the legends and had saved her life in Ustengrav. He deserved to be heard.

Jorrvaskr was quiet when she pushed open the doors. Neither Farkas or Vilkas were anywhere in sight, the newer recruits were outside training. The only person sitting inside at this time of day was Skjor, looking tired as he stared silently into his tankard of mead. He looked up at the sound of her footsteps, focusing on her with his one good eye, that appeared to have healed completely. He surprised her with a grin. “Saeja, it is good to see you came back safely. The others were beginning to worry.”

She smiled back, glad to see him in a better mood that the last time she spoke to him. “The others? Were you not worried as well?” she teased, clasping her hand around his good arm to shake it in greeting.

“No, I wasn’t.” he replied seriously, his good humor disappearing. “I know what you are capable of. I’ll never question your abilities again.

Her eyes filled with sympathy. “How are you? Truly?” she asked.

He grunted. “It’s the damnedest thing Saeja. I am as healed as I can get, the priestesses of Arkay telling me I have made a full recovery thanks to you. They don’t know about our condition though,
and I can’t exactly tell them I’m a werewolf that can’t change into my beast form.”

At her pained expression he hurried to reassure her. “Not your fault. I don’t blame you. I wanted to apologize for my parting remark. I will probably always have days where everything that has happened is hard to accept, but Aela has shown me, there is much I can still do and much to live for.” He flashed a suggestive smirk, indicating exactly how Aela had been proving he had much to live for.

She laughed, glad to see his sense of humor was still intact. He waved her off, telling her to go reassure Kodlak she was safe. Saeja hurried down the stairs to the lower chambers, making a beeline for Kodlak’s room.

Kodlak emerged from his bedroom, dressed in a plain tunic and leather breaches, a change from the armor he normally wore even within the walls of Jorrvaskr. Spread his arms wide for her, embracing her tightly when she stepped into them, wrapping him in a tight hug. “Seaja, I’m so glad to see you have returned. I hear you returned they Greybeard’s artifact to them. I trust there were no problems?”

She hesitated. She had not reported everything when she sent the courier to Kodlak from Riften, just said she had found the horn, was returning it to the Greybeards and would be back before the week was out. “Well, there were, but it’s a long story.” she replied honestly.

“I have time dragonette. Nothing but time. Most of the circle is out hunting, so we will not be disturbed.” he said with a laugh. “Come, regale me with the tale of your adventures and I will have Tilma bring us something to eat.”

She passed the rest of the afternoon with Kodlak, telling him everything about the last three weeks while he punctuated her tale with suggestions of how she could have done things differently, or comments about how proud of her he was. When she got to the part where she had been confronted by her uncle, she could visibly see the rage pouring out of Kodlak and almost regretted telling him, worried he might send someone after Kjeld, whom she just wanted to forget existed. She finished up by telling him about her new shout.

“The newest one is interesting because it basically turns me into a spirit. I can’t be harmed, nor can I harm others until I become corporeal again. I learned the hard way when I smacked myself in the face without realizing the shout had worn off.” she said with a laugh.

Kodlak chuckled. “My dear, you warm this old man’s heart with your tales. I am glad you were accepted by the Greybeards, and I think your Master Arngeir is right. Akatosh could have chosen anyone, but you’re the right woman for the job. You can bear the burden of whatever this destiny entails.”

She flushed with pleasure, smiling widely at the man who had become like a father to her. “Thank you Kodlak.” she looked around the hall, finally noticing the ongoing lack of activity. “Where are the others. I was expecting to be crushed by Farkas and Vilkas when I returned.”

Kodlak frowned, shaking his head. “Off avenging Skjor as I understand it.”

“I don’t understand.” she stated. “Avenging Skjor? Aela and I decimated that fortress.”

“They claim to be reclaiming shards of Wuuthrad, they have even brought home a few of them to back up their statements, but I know an excuse when I hear one and they are slaughtering the Silver Hands. They have retrieved two shards out of at least five raids. Mind you, it's no business of mine
what each Companion does, but this sneaking around, it doesn't befit warriors of their stature. Aela
knows this, and so should the boys.”

Saeja held back a grin at his description of the twins, who had grown out of boyhood many years
ago. “Surely Farkas and Vilkas have not lied to you. They both worship the ground you walk on.”
she teased.

“It’s no laughing matter Saeja. They have taken more lives than honor demanded. The cycle of
retaliation may continue for some time.” he replied seriously.

“What will you do?” she asked.

“Not much I can do at this time. I am not their commander, only the Harbinger. I can only suggest
and attempt to guide them. I cannot demand they end their retaliation, but I hope to bring a
permanent end to this shortly. I am close, and I will explain more when I can. I’ve no right to ask this
of you, but will you please speak to the boys. Aela is heartsick over what happened to Skjor, and he
will never try to curb her activities, out of affection, more than his own need for revenge, but the
boys, they might listen to you. Your opinion matters greatly to the both of them.” he begged.

“You have every right to ask it of me. You gave me a place to call home, you believed in me from
the start and have helped me without ever asking anything in return. The companions are my family,
and I will help you in any way I can. I’ll speak to Farkas and Vilkas” she promised, taking his large
hands in hers and gripping them tightly.

Kodlak smiled gratefully, looking as though a great strain was lifted from him. “The Divines blessed
us when they sent you here. Now, two things my dear.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a
folded but sealed letter. “There was a courier that stopped here with this letter for you a week ago
and I am sure the Jarl is getting impatient. Run along and attend to your business. I’ll claim more of
your time when you have it again.”

Saeja stood, placed a soft kiss on his forehead and took the letter. She returned to Breezehome and
managed to clean herself up before donning a pair of soft doeskin breeches and a long, flowing blue
tunic that brought out the color of her eyes. She plaited her long white hair, wrapping the braid into a
large bun, then sat on the bed to read her letter.

Dearest Saeja,

I have made it to Windhelm unharmed and obtained an immediate audience with Ulfric
Stormcloak once I explained my need to speak to him. He has agreed to meet with you, without
his council, as you requested, but he has demanded his housecarl Galmar Stonefist and I be
present for his protection. I shall be at Candlehearth Hall awaiting your reply to this missive. I
hope to see you soon.
All My Affection,
Ralof of Riverwood

She smiled, feeling her heart flutter when she read his signature. She asked Lydia to bring her some
parchment and a quill, scribbling a brief reply.

Ralof,

I am relieved to know you are well, I have worried about you since our parting. Please tell Ulfric
Stormcloak I am leaving Whiterun in 4 days and shall come directly to Windhelm so seek audience with him. His terms of having you and Galmar Stonefist present are acceptable to me. I look forward to spending time with you again.

Ever your companion,
Saeja Skyborn

She sealed the letter and headed to the Bannered Mare, looking for a courier to take her letter directly to Windhelm. For and extra eight septims the young lad she found agreed to take the evening carriage to get her letter to Ralof as quickly as possible. Once she had paid the boy she headed up to Dragonsreach to see what the Jarl needed.

Balgruuf was sitting on his throne reading daily missives when she arrived, and his smile at seeing her was wide. “Hello there my friend, it’s good to see you. I am glad to see you well after your journey.”

She bowed low, aware that the members of his court were all staring at her. “Thank you my lord, your friendship honors me. I was told you wished to see me.”

Balgruuf waved off Irileth and Proventus with a grunt. “I did, I would speak with you in my private quarters, away from prying eyes.” he replied, pushing himself to his feet and offering her his arm.

She accepted his arm and followed him to the privacy of his sitting room, keeping her questions to herself as he ordered a light meal be brought to them. Once it was served he banished his servants and all but one guard. Once they were relatively alone the Jarl broke into a wide grin. “Sorry for all the secrecy, but I wanted to hear the tale of your recent quest in full detail, including in you had a chance to make use of my gift.”

She chuckled. “I can confirm the legends are true Balgruuf and I am even more in your debt for giving me the amulet. I can say truthfully that it saved my life in Ustengrav.”

“You are not in my debt Saeja, and never shall be. You have done more for this city and my people than you will ever realize. That amulet is the least I could do for you.” he replied seriously. He dug into his meal, a plate of roasted chicken, smothered in tomato sauce, with mashed gourd and wilted elves ear. “I am content to know the stories of it’s powers are true and that it saved a life of a young woman I count among my allies. Now tell me about your quest. I haven’t been tombraiding since I was a boy. I want to hear all about it.”

She spent the next half hour filling him in on the details of her excursion through the tomb, having to find the Delphine their trip to Kynesgrove, Delphine’s theory that the dragons were coming back and finally her decision to meet with Ulfric in Windhelm.

Balgruuf frowned as they finished their meal. “So you support Ulfric’s claim to the throne then?” he asked when she finished her tale.

“From your tone, I take it you do not?” she retorted. “Last we spoke you indicated you have no chosen a side.”

“I have not given an answer to either Tullius or Ulfric, neither man is worthy of my respect, but Ulfric and I have had problems between us since we were young lads. Do you think Ulfric really cares about Skyrim's independence, or the welfare or its people? I promise you, he doesn't. He's nothing more than a barbarian renegade, whose lust for power has cost the lives of countless innocents.” he growled in reply, his face turning red with fury.
Saeja stared at the Jarl for a moment, trying to formulate her reply. She wanted to be honest with him, but did not wish to offend him. His distaste for the Jarl of Windhelm was evident, but he clearly also rebelled against the rules of the Empire, given his possession of the amulet he’d given her, and his ongoing tolerance of Heimskr preaching the word of Talos openly next Jorrvaskr. “I support his rebellion against the Empire, Balgruuf. As far as I am concerned the Emperor unleashed the horrors of the Thalmor on Skyrim, and I will fight to the bitter end for my right to worship whichever Gods I chose. I know very little of the man, he had long been away from Windhelm by the time I began to understand or take an interest in politics. My parents fought in the Legion, and were devout Talos worshipers. My brother joined the Stormcloaks and lost his life among them. I think the Stormcloaks are Skyrim’s best bet against an Empire that allows the Thalmor to round us up like cattle for slaughter. Whether he would make a good High King or not, I have yet to decide, but his appointment to the throne will be dependant on the moot once the war is over.”

He sneered but his tone was one of understanding. “I disagree with you, but I can see your point. He has many allies among the Jarl’s, but there is no reason to assume he will have the majority vote at the moot. I hope for your sake he does not disappoint you when you finally meet him.”

She nodded, accepting the fact they would continue to disagree. “Now my lord, I am certain you did not ask me here only to entertain you. Did you need something?”

“Oh no. Rorikstead sent a courier reporting a dragon that has been terrorizing the countryside. It has not yet attacked the village, it seems content to harass the goats and cattle, but the village leader has requested aid. I sent extra guards that direction, but I would prefer to have the problem dealt with permanently.”

Saeja smiled warmly. “Duty calls. I can leave immediately.”

He chuckled in reply. “And have Kodlak in here demanding my head. Leave in the morning. I know you have not rested since your return. There are others who will wish to see you as well.”

She shared an apple pie with him, then left, promising to report back when the dragon was dispatched. At her home she spent some time restocking her healing and magicka potions, packing them with great care, and tending to her weapons and armor. She was running low on arrows, but could get more from the Drunken Huntsman in the morning before she left. Lydia pouted, knowing she was not invited on this excursion either, but wisely kept her mouth shut this time. Saeja was just about to climb the stairs to her bedroom, when there was a loud knocking at the door.

Strong arms wrapped her in a hard hug when she opened it. The familiar smell of pine and leather filled her nostrils and she turned her head up, eager to feel Farka’s lips against her own. The kiss went on long enough that there came a loud cough from behind him that had her pulling away.

“There will be plenty of time for that later brother. Kodlak said she wished to speak to us.” Vilkas grunted.

Saeja laughed and stepped into his arms as well, hugging him hard. “Missed you too, you cranky puppy.” She invited them in, clearing her pack from the table and setting it beside the door.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving again already. You only returned this morning.” Farkas stated with a childish pout.

“Yes, Balgruuf is sending me to Rorikstead to deal with another dragon. I leave first thing tomorrow. I didn’t realize you would be back today as well.” she replied as she sat down in the chair beside him.
“I suppose that’s a good enough excuse for you to be running off again.” Vilkas teased. “Get used to her absences Farkas, she is a Companion and the Dragonborn. She will likely be away more often than us.”

Farkas grunted, still obviously put out by the fact she was leaving again. Not wanting to deal with his pouting she added. “I’ll be yours until morning, if you are spending the night.”

He cracked a smile. “Oh alright. What did you need to speak to us about anyways?”

She frowned, not anticipating this conversation happening so quickly before she had time to plan for it. “Truth be told I didn’t know you’d both be back so soon, so I wasn’t really prepared for this. I suppose being straightforward is the best course of action. Kodlak tells me you’ve both been joining Aela in taking revenge on the Silver Hand.”

The silence in the room was deafening. Both their eyes were wide with shock as they stared at her, mouths open as they tried to formulate a reply.

Vilkas spoke first, his words chosen carefully. “We are gathering pieces of Wuuthrad.”

Farkas chimed in. “Bringing honor to the companions as we do so.”

She cocked her eyebrow and looked pointedly at them both. “Please don’t insult my intelligence, or Kodlak’s for that matter. Killing the Silver Hand while looking for those shards is an excuse. Kodlak says you’ve gone out five times and have only found two pieces. He’s concerned, as am I, that this reckless slaughter will lead to retaliation. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to either of you.”

Farkas growled, his frustration clear as he slammed a fist against the table. “They deserve what they are getting. The skinned Skjor alive, nearly killed him. How can you not want revenge?”

“Because I care more about you then I do for revenge.” she replied, her expression pained. “They tricked us before with Dustman’s Cairn, and ambushed Skjor. That was without provocation. What are they going to do to pay the companions back for attacking their forts and hideouts? I have buried enough of my family. I don’t want to lose you too. Kodlak would be devastated by your loss. You know he thinks of you both as his own sons.”

That arrow hit home for both of them. Farkas went pale and Vilkas frowned deeply. For a moment she thought she may have overstepped herself, but finally Vilkas shook his head. “You’ve made your point Saeja. We will stop going out with Aela, though I do not know if you will be able to convince her to stop.”

Farkas whirled his head to stare at his brother. “You agree with her, just like that? She can’t know what it must be like for Skjor, trapped inside himself like that. She didn’t take the blood.”

Finally losing her patience she slammed her fists against the table. “And there it is. You’re mad at me for not taking the blood when it was offered aren’t you Farkas? When I asked you if I had to become a werewolf to be part of the circle you said no. You made me think there was a choice, but really there isn’t is there? You wanted me to be like you. Aela and Skjor accepted my reasons for refusing, but you resent me for it.” she accused.

“I resent that you lied to me” he yelled back. “I resent that your reasons for refusing are because you
are scared of that form, after telling me I don’t frighten you!"

Vilkas was quietly trying to slide his chair back from the table to get out of the line of fire. Saeja clenched her fists, trying to calm down so she could explain herself better. “You don’t frighten me Farkas, even in that form. I know you would never hurt me. I know Vilkas would never hurt me, but asking me to become a werewolf is too much. I fear what I will become in that form. I fear tearing apart some innocent like a wild animal because I lose control. I have enough trouble handling the energy I get from killing dragons. What if I took the blood and absorbing a soul causes me to lose control and I go on a rampage? I don’t want to ever be in a position where I am not in control of my own head.” she replied quietly.

She was surprised when Farkas reached for her hand and stroked it softly. “If you had explained it like that from the beginning I would have understood. I never considered your other beast.” he said soothingly, his voice deep with empathy. He frowned when she looked at him. “For what it’s worth I wasn’t condemning your choice before, I’m was only saying you have no idea what it must be like for Skjor.”

She snorted, rolling her. “Did Skjor ask you to destroy the Silver Hand or did Aela?” she asked.

“Ahhh….” he paused, mulling it over. “Actually Aela did. Skjor hasn’t said anything.”

“No, now that you mention it, Skjor hasn’t said a word about it. I imagine it pains him to mention it.” Vilkas added, his silver eyes focused on her.

“He thanked me for saving his life.” she said, matter of factly. “I know he still suffers, he told me, but he also said Aela is giving him much to live for, and I know all of you lend your support every day. He will heal, even if he never has the ability to change again. Do not bring death down on the companions after I spent that much time saving his life.” she fumed. “If you can’t do this for me, then do it for Kodlak.”

She stared pointedly at Vilkas, her eyes sending a message to stop worrying a dying man. He paled, looking ill and nodded. “You have my word we will stop going after the Silver Hand for now. I cannot promise more than that if they decide to attack us again.”

“Same” replied Farkas.

“I’m not asking you to not defend yourselves. I’m asking you not to go looking for a fight, unless it’s a paid contract.” she said with a smile. “Now, I do need to be on the road early. I need to go to bed. Unless you’re sharing it, get out.”

Vilkas winked. “Was that an invitation?”

She threw an apple at his head. “Get out.” she replied laughing.

After he left Farkas followed her up the stairs to her room, closing the door behind them. She felt him behind her as she began to pull off her tunic, the warmth of his body, his breath on her bare skin. He placed his hands on her hips, kneading them and pressed a firm kiss against her neck.

“That feels wonderful” she murmured, leaning her weight against him.

“He was only partially kidding you know.” Farkas said against her ear. “He’d have joined you if you asked. He likes to pretend he doesn’t feel more than a friendship for you, but he didn’t shut up about
you the whole time you were gone.”

She stiffened in his arms, turning slowly to face him and look into his eyes. “And that doesn’t bother you?” she asked, watching for his reaction.

“I told you before, I wouldn’t be surprised if you wanted him too.” he said, running his hands up her sides to cup her breasts.

“I can’t think when you’re doing that.” she gasped.

“I don’t want you to be able to think.” he grinned, leaning in to capture her lips in a searing kiss. She moaned against his lips when his thumbs began to circle her nipples, which had stiffened into firm peaks. She felt him nibble her lower lip, then his tongue followed, caressing the soft sting. He growled, thrusting his hips against her as his desire mounted.

Saeja pulled away and smiled at him, her eyes darkening with desire. She began to pull at the buckles and belts of his armor, laughing when he began shrugging out of it at record speed. She pulled his tunic from his leather breeches, reaching beneath it to scour his skin with her nails. He made a low sound in his throat, his eyelids fluttering shut as he threw his head back. “By the Gods you drive me crazy.” he muttered.

He stripped the remaining articles of clothing from them both and swept her into his arms, carrying her over to the bed. Without a word he tossed her onto her stomach, then knelt beside the bed and pulled her hips back until she was on her knees before him, her rear high in the air. “Farkas, what are you…” His tongue diving between her legs to lap at her folds cut off her question. Her eyes closed and she cried out as he devoured her, his tongue delving deeply, then running the length of her, lapping at the nodule of nerves hidden at the top of her slit.

He tormented her, biting gently at her lower lips, his hands kneading the back of her thighs. When he ran his tongue higher upwards, pressing against her rosebud she gasped, eyes wide at the new sensation. “Did you like that?” she heard him ask.

“I’m, um, well. I’m not sure.” she stammered, her face flushed with pleasure and a hint of embarrassment.

She felt him grin against her. “Want me to do it again?” he asked cheekily.

She buried her face in the covers of her bed and mumbled her reply. “Yes.”

He started at her clitoris, swirling his tongue around it then dragged it upwards, parting her folds, pulling her own slick up and coating her rosebud with it. He heard her soft moan as he used the point of his tongue to press firmly against her, pushing the tip inside. Her legs trembled and she was mewling in pleasure and he did it over and over, each time pressing his tongue slightly deeper, his one hand between her legs, thumb slipping inside her as his fingers played with her clit.

Farkas couldn’t make out much of what she was mumbling incoherently into the mattress, but he could hear her moaning, “So close,” so he trailed his tongue back down and wrapped his lips around the bundle of nerves he’d been playing with, biting down lightly. She screamed, her body stiffening, back arching as her climax ripped through her. Farkas stood and pulled her hips closer, sliding himself inside, groaning as he felt her walls clench and throb around him. He pulled out slowly, then slammed back inside her, picking up the pace with every thrust. She screeched and panted, her hands fistling the the covers on her bed as she tried to catch her breath. “By the Nine Farkas, please,
I’m so close again.” she cried.

Too focused to reply Farkas picked up the pace, thrusting furiously, as the pressure began to build in his pelvis. He heard her repeating “please” over and over against, her walls tightening around him as she drew closer to a second completion. Farkas brought a finger to his lips, sucking her slick off it and coating it in saliva, then he placed it against her rosebud and pushed it inside. She squealed, undulating against him as he timed his finger with the thrusts of his hips. He saw her move her left hand beneath her body, to stroke herself as he pounded against her and he heard her cry when her pleasure washed over her, her walls gripping him, trying to suck him deeper inside. He let go with a roar of pleasure, slamming himself against her and jerking uncontrollably as he gripped her hips and poured his seed deep inside her. She felt him collapse against her and trapping her on the bed and reveled in his weight on top of her.

Long moments later he pushed himself up and slid out of her, both moaning at the sensation of their already sensitive flesh. Farkas washed his hands in the basin near her bed, then crawled in beside her, pulling her against him as he nuzzled her neck. “Liked that did you?” he asked quietly as he leaned up to blow out the candles on the wall.

The darkness hid her blush, but he felt the heat in her face as she nodded against his chest. “I don’t even know how to describe how amazing it felt.

He smiled, a pure masculine smile of pride at a job well done. He leaned back against the pillows and held her tightly. He was just about to drift off when he heard her whisper. “Your comment from before, about Vilkas. Are you truly not jealous of him? Understanding if I find him attractive is a lot different from being ok with it.”

“I’m not allowed to be jealous of your other lovers, remember?” he teased.

She smacked his chest lightly. “Be serious for a minute. I said you can’t be possessive, telling me I can’t have them if you have them too. That’s not the same as being jealous of some of them, or requesting that I don’t see certain people you feel strongly about.”

Farkas thought for a moment before replying. “Do you like Vilkas?”

“When I first met him, no I didn’t. Then we became friends, then he made me angry. Since he apologized and has made an effort to actually be my friend instead of butting heads with me on everything, well then yes, I suppose I could say I like him well enough. He reminds me a lot of you, and he has many qualities I admire. I suppose I do find him attractive, he’s just so damn smug about it.” she replied, remembering how he accused of her wanting him when he’d kissed her all those months ago.

Farkas shrugged. “It wouldn’t be the first time we felt the same about a woman, wouldn’t be the first time we shared one either.” he replied.

“Shared one?” she asked, not understanding.

Farkas chuckled. “I think you might be a touch to innocent for that discussing yet.”

He felt her jump as she realized what he meant. “At the same time? How is that...? You know what, no, not tonight. I’m too tired for that conversation right now.” she muttered, settling back into his arms and pulling the covers up around her.
The last thing she heard was Farkas chuckling to himself as she drifted off to sleep.

A few days later Saeja stumbled through the gates of Whiterun, exhaustion and the pain in her ribs making it difficult to walk. One of the guards near the stables had seen her and offered to help her to the temple. Danica whistled when she saw the extent of her wounds. “Didn’t pack enough healing potions?” she asked as she cast multiple healing spells, mending the broken and bruised ribs, healing frostbite burns on her sides.

Saeja shook her head. “And not enough magicka potions.” she replied, wincing as bone shards grated back into place. “The dragon at Rorikstead wasn’t too bad, it breathed frost instead of fire, so that’s where those burns come from. I managed to kill it with the help of the guards and figured I could handle the superficial wounds when my magic stores regenerated, but on my way home I got attacked lone fugitive, asked me to hold on to something he stole. I refused and the damn fool hit me with some lightning.”

Danica winced in sympathy. “There went any magicka you had stored up.”

Saeja nodded. “Exactly. He managed to hit me square in the chest with his mace and it broke my ribs. I killed the bastard, and found the owner of the stolen merchandise. The owner was kind enough to give me a ride back on his horse, but I feel like I’ve been pounded like salt fish for days. His horse does not have a smooth gait.”

Danica handed her a healing potion and a stamina potion. “I’d keep you here, but with the war going on, our beds are scarce as is. The stamina potion will give you enough energy to get home before you collapse.” Danica paused, a no nonsense from crossing her lips. "And go home." She admonished. "Do not go find your hulking lover before those ribs heal entirely. He’s liable to break them again with a hug.” she directed with a smile.

Saeja's laugh changed to to a moan and she grabbed her sides. “I have to go home anyways. I’m leaving for Windhelm tomorrow. I’m late getting there already.” When she saw the look Danica shot her she put her hands up in defense. “I’m taking the carriage and I’ll brew my own healing potions before I got.

She napped for a few hours when she got home, then reported to Balgruuf at the palace. Her reward was more than enough to finance a new hardened leather curiss for traveling. She purchased more arrows and dropped her sword and daggers with Eorlund to be sharpened. Kodlak was feeling ill when she visited, so she didn't stay long. Vilkas was up near Dawnstar taking care of a nest of trolls, Aela and Skjor had traveled to Solitude to intimidate some milk drinker and Farkas was in Riften helping the local guards deal with some more bandits. She returned home to pack, sending Lydia with a note to Jorrvaskr to let everyone know where she was going.

She slept fitfully that night, the nightmares that plagued her returning. Alduin taunted her in in the dreamscape of her mind, burning down Whiterun, turning her her lovers and friends to ash. Ralof’s cries of agony as he was consumed by flames brought her to full wakefulness biting her fist to keep her screams silenced. She curled her knees up to her chest, sobbing until she was finally able to catch her breath. They were getting worse, the horrors her mind unleashed upon her, with each passing month. It was nights like this, when she was alone, with no one to hold her until the images faded, that she truly cursed Akatosh to the foulest planes of Oblivion.
Shattered Illusions

Chapter Summary

Saeja has finally made it to Windhelm, fulfilling her promise to Ralof, but what she finds has her questioning everything she thought she knew about the man her family had idolized. Can Ulfric live up to her childhood impressions or will the last vestiges of her dreams be shattered and left broken on the flood of the palace hall?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that Saeja was nervous was an understatement. The carriage had reached its destination and the driver was urging her to disembark so he could move on to the next city. She remembered this city vividly. Her family had spent many days here trading with the various merchants and the blacksmith when she was a child.

In the shadows of dusk, the walls of Windhelm had never looked so uninviting, or so full of painful memories. Sighing she stood, threw her pack to the ground and leapt from the wagon. She waved a farewell to the other travelers as the wagon continued onward, then collected her belongs and made her way down the long bridge to the city gates. The guard’s bored expressions didn't change as he let her inside. He just gave her the standard warning to not make trouble before shooing her inside and pulling the gate closed behind her.

Nothing could have prepared her for the changes she saw around her. This was not the Windhelm she remembered. Ulfric’s father had cared about his people, took pride in the fact this was the oldest cities in Skyrim. She remembered that it had seemed a bit more run down the last time she’d been here with her father. She'd been about 15 and perhaps her memory was colored by childlike innocence but she remembered she had felt understandable at the time. Ulfric had just been released from prison, had taken his father’s throne after years of it standing empty and being a ruler would certainly be more difficult in practice than in theory, but this was more than her heart could bear. The city reeked of despair, tension and fear. The streets themselves were filthy, cold as a winter's night and just as gloomy. The fires lighting the dark walkways were few and far between and the cities less fortunate we huddled around the one in front of the inn, trying to ward off the chill. She was shocked by the rundown state of the city. It hardly seemed fitting that this place housed the front running candidate for High King.

A couple of Nord men pushed passed a dark elf, shoving her to the ground and jeering her as they stumbled along. When Saeja bent down to help her up, the elf shrank back, eyes full of distrust and anger. One of the men shouted back at her. “Elf lover!”

Saeja’s eyes widened in shock, but she grabbed the woman’s hand and pulled her to her feet. “No, I don't hate your people.”
The elf snorted, dusting herself off. “You've come to the wrong city, then. Windhelm is a haven of prejudice and narrow-minded thinking, unworthy of one such as you.”

“Looked like those Nords were giving you trouble. What did they say to you as they pushed past you? Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m Suvaris, and it was nothing I haven’t heard before. Most of the Nords living in Windhelm don't care much for us, but Rolff is the worst by far. He likes to get drunk and walk around the Gray Quarter yelling insults at us in the small hours of the morning. A real charmer, that one. His pal Angrenor wouldn’t be as bad if he didn’t consort with Rolff.”

“I don’t understand, I don’t remember things being this bad the last time I was here. What happened?”

“Ulfric happened.” Suvaris replied. “Some Nords will come up with any excuse to despise us, it’s just a way of life in Skyrim, but in Windhelm, that hatred is amplified by the Jarl’s open hostility for elves, and it isn't just the dark elves he hates, his disdain for anyone who isn’t a Nord makes a target of the Argonians as well. In fact, just about anyone who isn't a Nord is fair game for bullies in this city. Rolff accuses us of being spies.”

“Why would anyone think you’re a spy?” Seaja asked, her stomach sinking as she came to the realization that perhaps Balgruuf had not been wrong in his dislike of Ulfric.

“I’m an elf.” came the bland reply. “I am aware Ulfric was captured by the Thalmor, and I pity him for what he must have went through under their care, but his hatred has spread to all races other than men, and he makes no effort to hide the fact from us. Our taxes are highest in the Gray Quarter, crime and poverty is a plague on us, but he makes no effort to help us. He just focuses on his war and freeing Skyrim from the Empire.”

Suvaris smiled sadly at her when she saw the look of distress that had crossed Saeja’s face. “I can see this is a bit of a shock for you. I take it you fell for his cries of a free Skyrim, a land free from Empirical rule and tyranny?”

Saeja blushed. “Well yes, I feel the Empire is an obsolete government that bends to the will of the Thalmor and cannot protect its people. I was coming to Windhelm to offer my support.”

Suvaris patted her arm. “Better you find out now that not all rulers are as glorious as their reputations make them out to be. No one likes the Thalmor, and perhaps some good can come from throwing off the yoke of the Empire, but Ulfric has many flaws and people will suffer no matter the winner of this war. Remember that and you won’t be quite as disappointed with the outcome.”

The elf walked away, leaving Saeja to digest this new information. Ralof and Fjolti, her parents, they had all spoken so highly of Ulfric, of his cause. She’d spent most of her early adulthood eager to join his rebellion and help him win back her province from the Empire. Now the state of his city, and the conditions she saw around her made her want to weep. A ruler’s first concern should be that of their people, all their people, not just certain races.

With a heavy heart she ascended the steps of Candlehearth Hall, entering it silently so that only the innkeeper realized she was there.

She walked up to the woman and politely asked for a room, piling her coins on the counter. After being handed a chest key and her room key she headed to her room and stowed her gear. She changed out of her armor, then spent a few minutes picking at a loose thread on her dress. She wanted to run, she wanted to find more people to speak to about Ulfric before she agreed to join his
war, but it was too late. She couldn’t leave Ralof to suffer the consequences of her abandoning him again. Realizing she couldn't put it off any longer, she climbed the wooden ladder to the upper floor.

“So, you made it this time.” came the slightly resentful remark to her left.

She turned her head and locked eyes with the grumpy Nord sitting at the corner table. She smirked and joined him, sitting in the chair opposite of him. “Don't give me that attitude Ralof. You knew I was coming, I sent a courier ahead of me to let you know. There were unexpected complications after Ustengrav and I had to put down another dragon or I would have been here sooner.” She caught one of the serving girls walking by and ordered a hot spiced mead and a meal.

Ralof snorted. “I thought you were coming last time I was here as well. You can't fault me for wondering if I was being played the fool again.”

She would have protested, but he had a point. “So, Ulfric is willing to give you another chance if you can produce the Dragonborn huh? You told him I'm not officially joining the Stormcloaks right? I can't guarantee my ability to fight in an army when I also have to worry about dragons.”

“I am aware of that and I told them. Ulfric and Galmar will take some convincing. Galmar seems certain the Dragonborn will help the cause simply because there is no way a true Nord wouldn't help our cause and there is no way the Dragonborn isn't a true Nord.” Ralof replied, finally cracking that smile she had been waiting to see.

She loved his smile. She loved the way lit up his whole face, wiping away the stress lines from months of fighting and spread to his eyes, making them shine. His words however made her frown. “No offense Ralof, but I despise that True Nord stuff so much. Plenty of Nords took Imperial or Redguard partners, Bretons are literally the descendants of men and elves. There’s thousands of mixed children all over Skyrim. This is as much their home as any pure blooded Nord and they have just as much right to be here, to fight for their home.”

“Ulfric takes that into account. Usually we call them true sons and daughters of Skyrim, those who long to live without the chains of the empire binding us to its will.” he replied. “However, Galmar doesn’t believe that the Dragonborn could be anything but a pure blooded Nord, and no offense, but you won’t be helping disabuse him of that notion anytime soon. You’re so Nord you probably burn in the southern holds.”

She made a face at him, conceding his point. “Still, it’s bad enough he banished the Dunmer to the Snow Quarter and won’t even let the Argonians into the city. They don't even call it the Snow Quarter anymore, it's the Gray Quarter, the name itself if an insult. How can he claim to be the champion of the people of Skyrim when he doesn’t even consider half of its people to be legitimate citizens?”

Ralof sighed, leaning back in his chair, his blue eyes focused on her face. “This doesn’t sound like the woman I met in Helgen.”

Her dinner arrived, so she paused before answering. “The woman you met in Helgen was naive, and had very little exposure to anyone other than Nords.” she snapped. “I know Bretons and Imperials, Bosmer and Dunmer who have been here for generations. I’m friends with humans and mer alike. This is their home too. I support the rebellion against the Empire, but it has no chance of succeeding if the people don’t feel as though Ulfric acknowledges their history here as well.”

“Our military has plenty of members that aren’t Nords.” he protested. “My current second in command is a woman of Imperial descent.
“Do you let elves join?” she asked, digging into her chicken.

“I...I don’t know actually.” he replied, his face a mix of confusion and frustration. “Could be they don’t ask.”

“Could be it’s no secret that Ulfric hates elves.” she replied, chewing her food and watching him digest that accusation.

“He was captured by the Thalmor and tortured for months. Of course the man hates elves.” Ralof replied slowly, taking a sip of his ale.

“Key description being Thalmor. He was captured by the Thalmor and was tortured during times of war. I remember Fjotli’s letters. The Stormcloaks are not above torturing their captives any more than the Thalmor are.” she replied, watching him flush with guilt, seeing the truth of her words in his expression. “Ulfric appears to hate all elves and if rumors are to be believed, the Dunmer of city suffer terribly because of it. The Snow Quarter was a a poorer part of the city even when I was a child, but I’ve been told it’s basically a slum now and nothing is being done to improve the Dunmer’s quality of life. The Argonians can't even enter the city.”

“He has a rebellion to win Saeja, the plight of the Dunmer pales in comparison.” he shot back.

“Tell that to the Dunmer.” she hissed.

Silence fell between them, stretching for a long moment before Ralof sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. “You’re not pointing out anything I haven’t heard before, though I admit, words like that are not usually uttered within the walls of Windhelm.” he conceded. “Ulfric is hard headed when it comes to these matters. You can simply ask Brunwulf Free-Winter how much headway he has obtained, arguing for better protection for the elves.”

She sat back in surprise. “Then you understand my concerns?” she asked, her blue eyes wide.

“I understand them, I even agree with them to an extent, but you haven’t been fighting this battle Saeja. There is plenty you do not understand about war.” he grumbled.

“If the war is not being fought for all the people of Skyrim then what is the point? The empire segregates it’s citizens and mocks our beliefs. If we treat others the same way, then we are no better and Ulfric is no more qualified to rule than Emperor Mede.” she replied with conviction.

“Please don’t say that to Ulfric’s face.” Ralof pleaded. “I’d prefer not to see your head rolling in the streets.”

Her only reply was to cock her eyebrow and stare at him, as if to say his comment simply proved her point.

Ralof chuckled. “Yes, yes. Enough of this. This meeting is to introduce you and let him know he has your support.” he paused. “Unless of course you changed you mind, in which case we should run away together. If I don’t deliver you tomorrow, my future is mud.”

She winced. “Don’t worry, I still support his cause and will discuss how I can be of help to the rebellion. I’d never do anything to endanger you further.” she replied. “When am I meeting with him? Did they give you a time for me to be there?” she asked, her eyes roaming his body. His laughter did things to her insides that she couldn’t ignore and she was eager to share his bed again.

“Noon. Plenty of time to rest and prepare.” he replied. He caught the hungry look in her eyes and his smile spread. “Or enough time to amuse yourself and get up to no good.”
“You don't have to report back that I arrived?” she asked.

Ralof turned to the next table and gestured to a armored Stormcloak sitting there. “Tell Ulfric that Saeja Skyborn has arrived and will meet with him as planned tomorrow. Not a word of our conversation, or I’ll put you to latrine duty permanently when we get back to the field.” The man stood and exited the in without a word.

Ralof turned back to her and his seductive grin turned her insides liquid. “No.” he replied.

She smiled and took him by the hand, leading him down to her room. It was the last night she felt certain that she would be able to retain her anonymity, the last night she would still feel relatively safe. She wasn't ready to face this night alone.

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The Palace of Kings was as dark and imposing as the city that surrounded it. She was standing in front of the palace doors while a guard eyed her suspiciously. She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly and forced her legs to move her forward.

“State your business outsider.” the guard demanded when she reached him.

“My name is Saeja Skyborn and the Jarl is expecting me.” she replied politely. She knew the best way to deal with city guards was to be assertive but polite. The man nodded and opened the palace door.

She bit her tongue to stop a gasp from escaping, but her eyes went wide in wonder as she saw the main hall for the first time. The chamber walls all bore multiple copies of the vibrant blue and gold Stormcloak banners depicting a roaring bear. The room itself was brilliantly lit by the sunlight filtering through the many windows and the vaulted ceilings gave the hall an appearance of more space than it truly possessed. At the far end of the hall was Ulfric, sitting on his stone throne, two fires burning brightly on either side of him. His housecarl was standing to her left and his stewart to her right as she approached the throne. Standing beside the housecarl was Ralof, who was trying to hold back a grin.

Saeja stopped directly in front of the throne, at the bottom step of the dias and bowed deeply. She held her position until she finally heard the Jarl command her to stand.

“So, Saeja Skyborn, Ralof tells me you claim to be the Dragonborn and a good friend of his.” the Jarl commented after taking in her appearance.

“She tells the truth Jarl Ulfric.” she replied, staring into the eyes of the Jarl.

“His story rings false, woman. You did not come to Windhelm after your visit to Whiterun as you promised him you would. He tells me you trained for years to join the Stormcloaks, but this is the first time I have seen you.” he remarked. “This doesn't inspire much faith that you actually support our cause.”

“It’s not my place to to argue with a Jarl, but this is not the first time you have seen me, my lord. I don't suppose I would have been worthy of much note the day we were both to be sent to Sovngarde, but I sat next to you in the carriage on the way to Helgen and I escaped into the tower with you when the dragon attacked.” she replied.

“So, you were a prisoner on the way to her execution. How do I know your criminal activities will remain in the past?” he asked, sneering.
Saeja flicked a quick look at Ralof who was frowning at the Jarl. She knew Ralof had told Ulfric her history. He had asked permission to do so, which struck her as thoughtful since during times of war, privacy was often overlooked for the good of the realm. She turned her own frown back to the Jarl. “It’s not a matter of keeping criminal activities in my past, there were never any activities to begin with. I lost my family, I had nothing, not even a home. I was travelling to Falkreath to try to convince their alchemist to take me as an apprentice. I was only near Darkwater Crossing because I wanted to make a stop in Shor’s Stone and tell a family friend where I would be travelling to. I was captured and sentenced to death with no trial, the same as you.”

The Jarl’s eyes widened in surprise, but he allowed her to continue. “By all rights Jarl Ulfric, you are the one with a criminal past. I hold no love for the Emperor, but by his account, you’re a traitor to the Empire. I am guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. As far as I am concerned, your war has killed my entire family, it nearly killed me and yet here I stand, ready to throw my support behind you as best as I can. I support your cause because I believe the Empire has grown lazy, weak and apathetic to the hardships of its people, but you have yet to prove to me you will be any different.” she snarled.

Galmar grabbed for his war axe and advanced towards her. “You go too far woman! Who are you to question Ulfric’s right to rule.”

“Galmar that is enough!” the Jarl roar, surging to his feet. He rubbed his temples and turned to Seaja. “I apologize. I wanted to verify Ralof’s claims. He told me of your loss and I saw you act honorably when you helped us escape Helgen.” He grinned at her, an cheeky apology in his eyes. “The life of, a, fugitive Jarl, is difficult and we have had a rash of spies in our midst. I was only being cautious.”

He descended from his throne and walked towards her. “I am curious as to why it took you this long come to Windhelm though. The Greybeards called you months ago. There has been plenty of time to meet them and come to join the Stormcloaks.” he pointed out, standing directly in front of her.

Saeja frowned. “I joined the companions because they offered me a home when I had none. The Harbinger welcomed me and offered me more training. I had not lifted a sword in more than two years since my brother’s death. After I became a member of their organization, I finally made it to High Hrothgar and spoke with the Greybeards. I am aware of how long you lived with them Jarl Ulfric. Do not tell me you forget how slow those men are to reveal their secrets and impart their knowledge.”

Ulfric smiled at the memories. “Yes, I can almost picture the face Arngeir makes when he is avoiding answering questions. Even with all my years of training, I only know one shout in its entirety. You have a point Dragonborn.”

She was struck by how much younger he looked when he smiled. He seemed almost approachable like this, but she didn't fully trust the man yet, and was still upset by the state of his city, so she didn't return his smile. “After they deemed my ready, they sent me to Ustengrav to retrieve an artifact. I was on my way to the tomb when I ran into Ralof again. He convinced me to come to Windhelm once I had found the horn of Jurgen Windcaller.”

“No!” he interrupted, disbelief tingeing his voice. “That would imply you are here because you found it. That relic has been lost for ages. Are you claiming to have found the Horn?”

Saeja chuckled. “Yes and no my Jarl. I found it’s resting place, but it had been taken by another. I had to track her down and listen to her demands before I could returned it to the Greybeards.”

She could see the confusion and questions in his eyes. “I will tell you everything Jarl Ulfric, but the tale is long. Could we perhaps sit somewhere?”
The Jarl nodded and led her to a side room, indicating to Galmar and Ralof to follow them. Even the grumpy housecarl seemed intrigued and Ralof was grinning again, having heard the story last night as they engaged in hushed pillow talk. Ulfric ordered more chairs to be fetched and placed around a small table that sat against the wall. He leaned against the larger table that contained his map of Skyrim and stared at her intently, willing her to continue.

“As I said my Lord, after traversing the depths of Ustengrav, I found the resting place of Jurgen Windcaller and the shrine where his horn should have been. All that was left was a note, indicating the writers need to speak to the Dragonborn and directions to meet up with the unknown adventurer in Riverwood.” she began, leaning back against her chair so she could see the faces of all the men staring at her.

“You say depths, but how far down was the tomb?” the housecarl interrupted. “You couldn’t have just walked in and found it, there must have been many chambers to explore and treasures to find.”

“Galmar, this isn't the time to be interrogating her. If she wants to help us we can fill her in on the details another time,” the Jarl interjected his face drawn into hard lines. “Please Saeja, continue.”

Saeja smiled. “I don't mind adding flourishes Jarl Ulfric.” She turned to Galmar and smiled. “To put it in perspective it took me three full days to find the main chamber of the tomb, from the time I entered Ustengrav, to when I plucked the note off the shrine. I faced countless Draugr and undead, maneuvered around booby-traps and collected treasure as I found it. The history recorded in the walls is a treasure all on its own. I did however find a word wall on the last few days of my excursion which opened up another shout to me, which was incredibly useful.”

This time the Jarl was the one to interrupt her. “You mean to say you can learn the shouts by reading them? You don't need the guidance of the Greybeards to learn new words?” he exclaimed, his skepticism written all over his face.

Saeja shook her head. “It’s not that easy. I can learn the word from the walls and understand the meaning of the shout, but I can’t utilize the shout without fully unlocking the knowledge behind it.” she replied.

“And how do you do that?” the Jarl pressed, “I assume you don’t run up to High Hrothgar every time you learn a new word. The Greybeards would be reluctant to allow you to access their understanding so easily. They guard their knowledge as closely as a mother bear guards her cub.”

She finally flashed him a brilliant smile. “You know them very well my Lord. They would have me meditate on each word for decades such as themselves if they could demand it. I gain my understanding by taking the souls of the dragons I kill. I figured this out when I learned the word in Ustengrav but I couldn’t actually use the shout until after I defeated Sahloknir. I can’t really explain the process as I don't understand it myself, but the energy in their soul seems to awaken the knowledge within me. I was granted the knowledge of a few words by Wulgar as part of my training, but everything else will have to come from the dragons themselves.”

Galmar grunted, but the Jarl nodded, his eyes fixated on her, and she wasn’t sure she like the way he seemed to be calculating the meaning of her words. Still she pressed on, detailing the events that had finally led her to Windhelm. “Once I reached Riverwood, I met with the woman who had taken the horn. She belongs to an ancient organization and believes dragons are actually coming back to life. It is her goal to obtain more information about dragons and she wants me to help her with it.”

She paused, taking a deep breath. “I am sure you have heard by now, about the dragon attack at Kynesgrove?”
The Jarl nodded. “Yes, the Dragon was dead by the time my guards arrived. I cannot express how disappointed I was that you were already gone by the time they arrived. I wanted to meet the Dragonborn, but I am glad you were able to destroy it. Still, it’s a shame about the damage it did to the inn.” he remarked.

“The dragon damaged the inn?” she asked, surprise written across her face.

“Yes, the innkeeper said that the dragon destroyed the inn before it was killed. A number of the miners confirmed his story.” Ulfric said, a knowing smirk ghosting across his lips.

“Of course he did.” she muttered. Her Uncle’s pride had obviously kept him from revealing he had been bested by a young woman. “But truth be told, I set fire to the inn. Kjeld is related to me, and he’s worse than a skeever. He tried to have me detained by his miners after I helped save them from the dragons. I refused to spend any more time in Kynesgrove than was necessary. I am not welcome there and if my conscience had allowed it, I would have let the dragon burn it to the ground before killing it.” she replied bitterly, looking away from his probing eyes.

Her rage still burned that her Uncle had tried to order his miners to catch her when he realized she had been the one to kill the dragon. She had lost her temper and lost control of her her newly learned firebreath shout. If she had garnered any sympathy from the miners, she lost it when she damaged the one place they could get a drink in Kynesgrove. Their gratitude in being saved was the only thing that kept them from following her uncle’s orders. She was surprised her uncle wasn’t muddying her name for the damage, but she supposed it would be embarrassing to admit he had been bested by her more than once.

“My contact and I defeated the dragon, then moved on to avoid my identity becoming common knowledge. Keeping a low profile allows me better movement through Skyrim to find and kill the dragons. Frankly I worry about the possibility of the Legion discovering my identity, so I have avoided sympathetic cities as much as I can. I am to meet her back in Riverwood next month to plan our next move. I returned the horn to the Greybeards and then went home to rest a few days and to send a courier to inform Ralof I was coming to Windhelm. I asked him to inform you of my intentions.”

“And here you are, swearing you stand with our cause, yet also refusing to join the army.” the Jarl remarked.

“The Dragonborn must become a Stormcloak.” Galmar demanded. “With her at your side, we would rally any wavering loyalties and end this war.”

Saeja shook her head. “No. I will not join the army, Jarl Ulfric. It is very clear to me that while I can be of assistance to you, I need to dedicate most of my time to ending the dragon scourge. Neither side benefits from dragons returning to the skies of Skyrim. People are dying that have nothing to do with the war. Farmers, merchants, hunters and fisherman, all those who help supply the armies with food, are defenseless against the dragons. If I am constantly being sent on missions for the war efforts, I think it will enrage the people, knowing that a man claiming to be the rightful High King cares more about winning than the plight of his people.”

Galmar turned red with fury and raised his fist. “Why you…” he sputtered. “You….disrespectful whore! That is the last time you will malign Ulfric’s character in front of me.”

The sound of a fist hitting flesh echoed through the room, followed by a deathly silence. Galmar was left holding a hand to his one eye and staring incredulously at Ulfric with the other.

“I love you like a brother Galmar, but you know damn well my opinions on hitting a woman outside
of combat. You raise a hand to her again and I will bar you from the palace.” he threatened, his voice
deadly soft.

Once again, Saeja found herself staring at the iciest eyes in all of Skyrim. While she was sure Galmar
and Ulfric did not adhere to a typical Jarl and Housecarl relationship, she was certain Galmar knew
he had overstepped his bounds as he bowed low and muttered a low apology to her.

Ulfric sighed deeply. “It is not maligning my character, as you so charmingly put it Glamar, to point
out a fact. We both know my victory depends on the support of the citizens of Skyrim. It is no secret
that war is the hardest on those who live in the shadow of the fighting. She speaks the truth. The
people will never accept me if I leave them to die, surrounded by dragon fire.” He turned to face her
and flashed a crooked smile, the ice in his eyes melting into friendliness. “How is it I never knew of
the wise woman living a stone’s throw from Windhelm? I remember your father from when I was a
boy, I met him a few times when he came to supply our old blacksmith and his apprentice, Oengul.
He was a good man.”

She flushed with pleasure, but with it came a pang of grief. She loved to hear all the good things
people said of her father, but still missed him terribly. “Thank you for that. I suppose you don’t
remember me, because I only saw you once when I was in Windhelm, and who would remember the
tiny brat who followed her father on his trips to the city?” she replied, returning his smile. “You were
captured not long after that, my lord. You were a man long before I became a woman.”

“Yes, yes, remind me of my age.” he said with a soft laugh. “There is a final matter I wish to discuss
before I make my decision on accepting your help.”

“You wish me to prove it to you.” she replied matter of factly, standing and squaring off with him. “I
can claim to be Dragonborn until I am blue in the face, but a boast of that nature needs to be backed
up.”

Ulfric simply smiled and leaned back against the table he stood in front of, crossing his arms across
his chest.

She smiled back, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. “Well Jarl Ulfric, would you prefer to see fire,
force, speed or temporary invincibility?”

He thought for a moment before replying. “I know unrelenting force myself, so it would be unwise
to consider it proof if your claim. My palace is made of stone, but I’d prefer not to burn out my
creature comforts. I have seen Masters Arngeir and Borri race on the top of High Hrothgar, though
they never did teach me how, so show me something new Dragonborn. Show me this invincibility.”

She bowed and turned to Galmar with an innocent smile. “Stone-Fist, you get your wish. Hit me.” she
said

“What?” he asked, his eyes widening with surprise.

“Are you going deaf in your old age?” she taunted, watching Ralof swallow a laugh. “I said hit me.
Do your worst.” She held up her fists and gestured him forwards.

His eyes darkened with rage and he stood slowly, a grim smile spreading across his expression. “Oh
girlie, you asked for it.”

He stepped forward, fists raised and threw a fast punch at her stomach. Before it made contact she
wink at him and shouted. “FEIM!”

Ralof was too startled to laugh when Galmar’s fist passed through her and he stumbled, falling to the
Ulfric’s eyes went wide with shock and excitement, his mouth dropped and he let out a soft cry of envy. Galmar growled and looked up from his hands and knees, then went silent as he took in her form, shocked that he could see the wall behind her through her ghostly image.

“What witchcraft is this?” he exclaimed.

“That is if the power of the Dragonborn.” Ulfric replied quietly. “You say this is temporary?”

Saeja nodded, thought it was difficult to tell she was smiling. “Yes, luckily or I would still be a ghost after discovering this ability at High Hrothgar. Master Arngeir and the others had quite a laugh at my expense when I became corporeal again and hit myself in the face.” she replied, waving her hand through her stomach. “I am invulnerable to harm for a brief time, but it doesn’t last.”

Slowly she became corporeal again, her eyes bright with glee. Once she was fully herself she looked up into Ulfric’s eyes, “Is this proof enough for you Jarl Ulfric?”

He stepped forward and took her hands in his own, lifting them to his lips, kissing the tops softly. “Well I consider it more than enough. Thank you Skyborn, your support is a blessing of Talos, and I will not waste it.” Ulfric nodded, a grim frown crossing his lips. He lowered her hands and gestured to Galmar. “That being said, as Galmar is leading my armies, it is him you need to convince of your abilities. While I have no doubt of your claim, we need proof of your capabilities beyond the Thu’um.”

She felt a wave of hot annoyance surge through her, but schooled her expression into soft smile. “Of course my Jarl, I will pass any test your housecarl wishes to give me.”

“Good, speak with Galmar and complete his test. Then we will speak of how you can be of service to my cause. I will be waiting Dragonborn.”

As Ulfric left the room, retiring to his own chambers, Saeja felt as though she could breathe again. His aura of his power and presence was overwhelming. She was still in shock that she had finally met the Jarl of Windhelm and would be throwing her support in for the civil war, but was frustrated by his insistence that she be sent on some test that would take time away from uncovering more of the dragon mystery. She sunk slowly into a chair and left out a shaky breath.

She heard Ralof chuckle. “Aye, he’s a bit much to take in the first time. How are you feeling?” he asked as he crouched down beside her and took her hand in his own.

She shot him a weak smile. “Overwhelmed to say the least, but I suppose I should get used to it. My life has been nothing but overwhelming for months now.”

Galmar cleared his throat. “Enough chit chat children, you have an ice wraith to kill.” Galmar interrupted, walking over to her and handing her a bottle of resist cold. “I’m sending you to Serpentstone Island. If you survive, you pass. If you die, well, you weren’t going to be much use to me anyways.”

“Does every recruit have to pass this test or am I special because I am the Dragonborn?” she replied with a sneer. Her opinion of the Jarl’s housecarl was not high.

“No, only a recruit I’m not sure about.” he growled. "I don’t trust you yet Skyborn. This will prove your abilities, but more importantly it will prove your commitment and your loyalties. No one braves the island unless they’re sincere about their pledge to Ulfric.”

She nodded, happy he hadn’t lied to her. “Fair enough. My brother didn’t ever tell me about a test, but perhaps your found him more trustworthy.” she replied.
Galmar looked at her thoughtfully. “Ralof mentioned you had a brother with us. Died in a skirmish near Morthal a few years back?”

She nodded, fighting to keep the pain from her voice. “Yes, Fjotli Skyborn. He’d just been promoted and was second in command at the camp near Morthal. He died in when a company of legionnaires, moving from Solitude to Markarth, discovered the camp a few years ago. I understand it’s why it was moved.”

Galmar looked about to say something else, but he shook his head and waved her off. “Sorry for your loss. Get going. When you kill that ice wraith then we’ll talk about you joining the rebellion.”

Saeja nodded and stood, leaving the room without a word. Ralof waited a minute but when it became clear Galmar no longer needed his services either he jogged after her. He caught up with her just outside the palace doors. “Well, what do you make of all of it?” he asked as he fell into step with her.

“I don’t know what to make of them. Ulfric is as awe inspiring as my brother described, but that was an underhanded trick. Make me think my ability to use the Thu’um would be enough for him, then telling me I have to convince Galmar. The housecarl has no use for me. I can see it. He’s hoping I fail.” she replied, clenching her fists.

“He has a right to doubt you. You didn’t come to Windhelm the first time you said you would and there are spies all over Skyrim. I know you’re not working for the imperials, but they don’t. Sending you to Serpentstone Island is a good plan. If you weren’t serious about joining Ulfric you wouldn’t bother with this test.” he replied cryptically.

“What is that. Surely an imperial spy would do anything to gain his trust.” she pointed out.

“Serpentstone Island is impossible to get to unless you swim there. Boats can’t pass the ice that builds up on the ocean due to the amounts, but equally the ice is too thin to walk on.” he explained, taking her hand in his as they reached Candlehearth hall.

“So it’s damn near a suicide mission for anyone other than a Nord.” she snapped. “Does he send anyone that isn’t a Nord on this test?”

“No, just the ones he has gut feelings about. I’ll admit that Imperial recruits are watched very closely, but as I said we have Imperials in the army. We take anyone willing to support our cause.” He replied as he pushed open the door. “Saeja, I know he wasn’t what you expected, but he’s a good man.”

She nodded and was about to follow him into the Inn, but remembered she had not asked Galmar to mark the island on her map. “You go ahead and order food. I forgot something, I’m just going to run back.”

He chuckled. “Be quick sweetness, or I’ll eat your share.”

Saeja pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, then turned back to the palace, jogging up the steps to the doors. The guards now knew who she was, so they let her inside without question. The main hall was empty but she could hear voices carrying from the small side room she’d just left. As she approached the conversation became clearer.

“If he’s not with us, he’s against us.” Galmar bellowed.

“He knows that. They all know that.” She recognized Ulfric’s commanding reply, his voice edged with weariness.
“How long are you going to wait?” the housecarl demanded

“You think I need to send Balgruuf a stronger message.”

“If by message you mean shoving a sword through his gullet.” Galmar sneered.

Saeja bit back a gasp, knowing they would crucify her if they knew she was listening to this conversation. She should turn and run as fast as she could to Candlehearth Hall, but she couldn’t tear herself away from anything involving Balgruuf. She counted him among her friends, as much as a Jarl could be friends with a commoner, and she owed it to him to warn him if Ulfric was planning to assassinate him. She crept closer, keeping to the shadows along the wall, slowing her breath to avoid alerting them to her presence.

“Taking his city and leaving him in disgrace would make a more powerful statement, don’t you think?” Ulfric replied, his voice grim.

She could hear the grin in Galmar’s reply. “So we're ready to start this war in earnest then?”

“I still say you should take them all out like you did Dead King Torygg.”

“Torygg was merely a message to the other Jarls. Whoever we replace them with will need the support of our armies. I can’t risk Tullius slipping in Imperial sympathizers.”

“Bah, fine. We're ready when you are.”

She heard the men walk further away from her, likely to stand beside the map and analyzing the odds against them. Ulfric sighed loudly. “Things hinge on Whiterun. If we can take the city without bloodshed all the better. But if not…”

“The people are behind you.” came the insistent reply.

“Many I fear still need convincing.”

Galmar scoffed. “Then let them die with their false kings.”

Saeja clenched her hands so tightly her nails bit into the palms, creating half moon wounds that began bleeding. She’d never been so enraged. That Galmar could so callously condemn those who still wanted to avoid the bloodshed made her sick to her stomach. Skyrim had been ravaged by war for years and people were weary of it, desperate for peace.

“Galmar, we've been soldiers a long time. We know the price of freedom. The people are still weighing things in their hearts.” Ulfric replied, his tone warning, as though he too was becoming frustrated by the line of conversation.

“What's left of Skyrim to wager?” Galmar demanded.

“They have families to think of.”

“How many of their sons and daughters follow your banner? We are their families. We work to free them from the tyranny of the elves.”

There was a long pause before Ulfric sighed. “Well put, friend. Tell me, Galmar, why do you fight for me?”

“You question me? I'd follow you into the depths of Oblivion, you know that.” came the puzzled reply.
“Yes, old friend, but why do you fight? If not for me, what then?”

“I’ll die before elves dictate the fates of men. Are we not one in this?”

The long moment before Ulfric replied had Saeja’s stomach clenching with dread, but his reply went a long way to repairing her shattered illusions about the leader of the Stormcloaks. “I fight for the men I’ve held in my arms, dying on foreign soil. I fight for their wives and children, who’s names I heard whispered in their last breaths. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find our country full of strangers wearing familiar faces. I fight for my people, impoverished to pay the debts of an Empire too weak to rule them, yet brands them criminals for wanting to rule themselves! I fight so that all the fighting I’ve already done hasn’t been for nothing. I fight because I must.”

His voice broke with emotion and Saeja blinked back her tears. That was the Jarl she’d spent years learning to fight for. That was the Jarl her brother had pledged to support, and her parents had spoken highly of his cause. A man who cared for his people and would continue fighting for their freedom. A man she could continue to support, even if she did not agree with everything he believed.

Galmar’s reply was soft and calming, as though he realized his mistake in questioning Ulfric’s motives. “Your words give voice to what we all feel, Ulfric. And that’s why you will be High King. But the day words are enough, will be the day soldiers like us are no longer needed.”

Ulfric’s sigh was deep and held all the war weariness that resided in his heart. “I would gladly retire from the world were such a day to dawn.”

“Aye. But in the meantime, we have a war to plan.”

Saeja slipped back from the door and made her way silently across the hall to the main door. She turned, pretending to enter the palace, just as Galmar and Ulfric returned to the throne.

“Dragonborn, what are you doing here? Didn’t I give you a task to complete?” Galmar’s booming voice carried across the hall.

She bowed her head. “I came back because I realized I did not have you mark my map to show the island. I know it is North of Winterhold, but there are many ice islands in the ocean.”

Ulfric smiled at her indulgently as Galmar grumbled and walked over. He grabbed her map from her hands and used a small nub of charcoal to mark a small island. “There, now get out of here before I change my mind about you.”

She bowed again to them both and then scurried through the door, her mind swirling with a maelstrom of emotions as she tried to make sense of all she’d learned.

When she returned to the inn, she picked at her meal, replying to Ralof’s conversation in short, monotone sentences. She knew he’d just assume she was still sulky about her test, rather than ask what had made her so upset. She couldn’t tell him what she’d overheard. He still idolized the Jarl and his housecarl and should not be privy to the coming attack on Whiterun.

When they crawled into bed that night, she feigned exhaustion, claiming it had all been too much and that she needed sleep when he began to kiss the nape of her neck. Ralof chuckled, kissed her cheek and pulled her close against his chest. “You’ll defeat any test they throw at you sweetness. I believe in you.”

As she snuggled close for his warmth and comfort her last thought before he fell asleep beside her was that a choice between Ulfric and Balgruuf might be the test she failed at in his eyes.
Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the update.

I have real issues with Ulfric. I totally get the man was imprisoned and tortured by the Thalmor, but his racism still bugs me, especially since the Dunmer aren't allowed to live outside the Grey Quarter, but Niranye and Nurelion are both permitted to own and run shops/ stalls in the market place? Like what kind of messed up logic is that. Galmar is also pretty much always an ass as far as I am concerned.

Tell me what you're thoughts are on the matter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!