The Song of Deirdre: A Memoir of Skyrim
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Summary

Deirdre Morningsong returns to Skyrim seeking vengeance on the Nords who murdered her parents, only to be captured by Imperial soldiers who mistake her for a Stormcloak rebel. After escaping both the Imperial dungeons and the destructive return of the dragon Alduin, she resolves to discover what strange power is within her, and what the dragons have to do with it.

Follows the main quest lines, weaving them into a riveting story of adventure and romance, with numerous twists on the canon. Feel free to skip the "Editor's Introduction," although you might want to come back to it later, as it helps explain how and when Deirdre is writing this memoir.

Reviews from Fanfiction and the author's website: "One of the best Alduin battles I've read!" "Love, love, love! The changes you've made to the storyline are fantastic." "I woke up my brother in the next room with my laughing!" "Insane and awesome!" "Magnifique!" "Up there with my all time favourite reads." "Ohhh, my heart, she breaks!" "Your writing is one of the most fluid and gripping I've ever read."

Trigger warnings: rape is mentioned, one is attempted and prevented, but none are completed. Some other sexual assault.
Editor's Introduction

The discovery of the collection of scrolls that have come to be known within the Imperial Palace Library as the Deirdre Manuscripts, but which I have chosen to title The Song of Deirdre: A Memoir of Skyrim, has ignited great controversy in scholarly circles. Apparently preserved for decades in several potion bottles adrift on the Sea of Ghosts, and discovered at various points on the shores of Skyrim in and around Dawnstar by one Lars Ice-Beard and other fisher-folk of those northern regions, the purported provenance of the manuscripts raises several questions. Are these authentic documents attributable to the hand of that historical personage known as Deirdre Morningsong, widely famed throughout Skyrim and beyond? Or is this all a clever fake, weaving bits of history and the protagonist's own extant writings with strands of rumor, myth, and outright fancy? None can know for certain, which explains the years-long delay in the manuscripts' publication – and the fact that even now they are being published without the permission of the Imperial Palace Library, and at great personal risk to this editor.

But whatever their provenance and ownership, and whether fact or fiction, this is a story too important to go untold. (And indeed, should you find this academic introduction a bit tedious, feel free to jump ahead to Chapter 1. You will find Deirdre Morningsong's writing style much more vivid and lively than anything this dusty old scholar can conjure.)

The central question, of course, is why one such as Deirdre Morningsong should ever have felt the need to scribble her story in cramped handwriting on whatever scraps of paper came to hand, some of them already used and erased many times over, then roll them tightly, stuff them into the largest potion or wine bottles she could find, and finally cast them adrift on the Sea of Ghosts? And, assuming all of this to be true and not some hoax, from whence were they cast onto those waters? (Studies are ongoing of currents in that sea, correlated with the spots where the bottles were found. The research so far suggests a location far north and west of Solitude, which, of course, is absurd, as that part of the sea features nothing but a few uninhabited bits of ice-covered rock.)

Another possibility – to which this editor does not ascribe – is that these manuscripts are indeed the creations of Lars Ice-Beard and the other "discoverers," whether working as co-authors or as co-conspirators in this hoax, with Ice-Beard as the scribe. That Nord, a fisherman out of Dawnstar – a hideously bleak and desolate little burg if ever this editor saw one – does have some small skill with the Common Tongue, having penned the little-known tome, A Natural and Personal History of the Fishes of the Skyrim Coast (Complete with a Dozen Recipes for both Hearth and Campfire). But for that author to go from such a humble volume to the present work? No, it is not to be credited. In the first place, the author of the Deirdre Manuscripts clearly had access to the major libraries of the land, the Arcanaeum at the College of Winterhold, the shelves of High Hrothgar, the Mystic Archives of the Arcane University, even the Imperial Palace Library itself, while there is no evidence that Ice-Beard has ever gone farther from Dawnstar than his tiny feræringr would take him. As well, Ice-Beard and his co-discoverers – the rest of whom are coarse Nords even less familiar with their letters than Ice-Beard – have asked for little in return for passing these discoveries on to the Imperial Palace Library. Indeed, they want no more than the present acknowledgment upon publication. Who ever heard of authors so disinterested in receiving acclaim for their works, not to mention gold?

And now to the work itself. Fiction or nonfiction, The Song of Deirdre is quite a tale, combining adventure, warfare, and swordplay; the arcane arts; dragons; bold deeds and harrowing escapes; a celebration of the natural beauties of Skyrim; histories natural, human, and merish; discourses on religion and the mystery of existence; meditations on the nature of power in a land governed by the might of the sword and the Power of the Voice; and not a little romance. The story centers on those
momentous events just after the turn of the third century of the Fourth Era – or the Dawn of the Fifth Era, as the Council for a New Age would have it – when the dragons returned to Skyrim, Civil War raged, and the World Eater sought to destroy all of Mundus.

There is something in these pages to delight both those already familiar with this history and those completely unaware of it (and, I must ask the latter, have you been hiding under a standing stone of the Druadach Redoubt? Or perhaps you inhabit a plane of Mundus other than our own?). In a remarkable achievement, the author has taken great pains to appeal to both camps. Those familiar with the story will find much to appreciate in this fresh perspective, as it provides twists both humorous and dramatic on the accepted version of history. For those who are new to this material, I will not spoil the story by saying more than that you are in for a treat.

This editor is in possession of the complete First Manuscript, which arrived on Skyrim's shores in four separate bottles, neatly dividing the tale into four separate parts. The second of these is the longest, perhaps not only because the author happened to have a larger wine bottle at hand at the time. (If further proof of the factual nature of these documents is needed, surely an author of fiction would have trimmed some of the more excessive digressions, speeding the story along for the impatient reader. But such license with events is not possible in a factual account. Thus the four parts of the manuscript comprise 780 closely written pages, or some 350,000 words, rivaling the most compendious tomes of our age.) Part II was also the first to be discovered, causing not a little confusion when it was delivered to Skyrim's College of Winterhold and thence to the Palace Library in the Imperial City in Cyrodiil. Eventually the other three parts came to light and all was put in a semblance of order, though much remains to be done.

A fifth part of the manuscripts exists in a very sketchy state, hinting at further chapters remaining to be found that would comprise a Second Manuscript. Cursory as it is, this glimpse goes beyond the events in Skyrim to those that took place in other provinces of Tamriel, when the one we know as Deirdre Morningsong began her … but no, I must say no more for fear of spoiling the story. Suffice to say, if taken as fact, this account does much to bolster the arguments of the Council for a New Age, which holds that Deirdre's deeds and achievements should mark a new era, the Fifth Era, beginning in or about the year 203 of the present one.

Finally, it is almost a requirement in these days to warn readers of content that might be found objectionable by this or that segment of society. While this editor believes in the salutary and broadening effect of reading widely and without prejudice, learning of those whose beliefs and practices differ from our own, neither does he wish to offend. So heed these warnings – herein you will find considerable blood and gore, though none of it presented in the heedless manner so common in today's tales of high adventure and suspense. Indeed, putting an end to the necessity of such bloody events is central to the narrator's purpose. As the world once more teeters on the brink of war, with barbarism of a variety of stripes arising throughout Mundus, Deirdre Morningsong's is a voice that must be heard.

As for romance, while the author depicts loving relationships regardless of racial or gender boundaries, it is all done in the utmost taste, appropriate for any reader who has attained to his or her middle teens (and who younger than that would be interested in such a voluminous history?). Of course, each reader will respond in their own way. Devotees of Dibella may find the scenes of romance so tame as to entice a yawn, while Vigilants of Stendarr may find themselves reaching for their flint and tinder. The editor trusts that a wide audience exists between these extremes.

And so, without further ado, and at considerable risk to his own head – quite literally, if the warrior-scribes of the Imperial Library catch up to me! – the editor presents The Song of Deirdre: A Memoir of Skyrim, appending only the following epigraph, taken from an unknown poet of another time and place:

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*The Song of Deirdre: A Memoir of Skyrim*
... Behaviour that's admired

is the path to power among people everywhere.

—Beowulf

—Laurentius Aaronius
Silverhome on the Water, Bravil
late of the Imperial Palace Library

P.S.: Readers unfamiliar with the geography of Tamriel may benefit from this map of that continent, and also this map of Skyrim. Those who would like more detail may find these interactive maps more helpful.

P.P.S.: As I finished writing this, I heard a commotion on the stairs of the inn in which I have taken refuge. If it's the warrior-scribes from the Imperial Library, then I doubt I will get the chance to publish the second and third volumes of these manuscripts. Deirdre's story will remain incom...
"So, what do you think they'll do with this one?" The voice was male, Nord by the accent.

Another Nord responded, closer this time. "A slip of a lass like her? It's some mistake. They'll let her go when they realize she's not with us."

I realized they were talking about me. I tried to open my eyes, but it was like trying to wake from a dream – all remained dark, and the dream went on. Yet the swaying of the wagon was real enough, every bump in the road sending a pulse of pain through my temple. I tried to remember where I should be, how I got into a moving cart, but couldn't. I felt cords cutting into my wrists. I couldn't explain that either. I remembered a deer. I was chasing it after my arrow missed its mark, then there was some confused movement off to my left, the glint of sunlight on metal. But what did that have to do with me? Was that part of the dream?

"Ach, I'm not with you either," the first voice said, "but the damned Imperials haven't shown any sign of releasing me."

"Quiet back there!" came a rough voice up ahead. That one spoke in the accents of Cyrodiil.

With an effort, I opened my eyes, then quickly shut them against the glare of harsh sunlight off granite.

"Hey, lass, you're finally awake."

Awake? I didn't feel awake. I tried opening my eyes again, slowly this time. We were in a forest now, and the sunlight wasn't quite so harsh. Across from me sat a Nord fighter in a uniform I didn't recognize. His hands were bound in front of him. With his red hair, square jaw, and well muscled arms, he reminded me of a boy I once knew. He wore his hair in the Nord fashion, like mine, but with just a single braid at the temple. His clear blue eyes regarded me with concern.

"You were unlucky," he was saying. "You stumbled right into that Imperial ambush along with the rest of us, and that thief there." He nodded toward the man sitting next to him.

I stumbled? I hadn't survived three years on my own by stumbling into squads of Imperial soldiers. They had never come near me before – I was far too stealthy for that.

It was the hunger, I decided. Two hard days of cold and starvation on the high passes between Cyrodiil and Skyrim, no game, not a berry or a leaf to eat. I didn't usually go after quarry as large as deer, but when a yearling presented itself, I took my shot. Hunger must have made me rush, the arrow missing high. It all came back to me now. Need drove me blindly into that willow thicket where the Imperial soldiers lay in wait. It must have been easy for them to knock me out then, if only to silence me as their true quarry approached.
The man sitting next to the Nord soldier turned to us. He wore a ragged tunic much like my own. "Hey, you and me, we're not supposed to be here," he said. He had a panicked look. "We're not with these Stormcloaks. We have to tell them."

Stormcloaks – so that explained the strange uniform. Last I'd heard, the Stormcloaks were a few ragged followers of Ulfric, one of Skyrim's nine jarls. He had been agitating against the Empire for years, to no avail. But this fighter was well outfitted in mail and a padded cuirass wrapped in a blue surcoat, as if Ulfric's birth had grown into a full-fledged army. I could see that much had changed in my time away from Skyrim. Living on my own in the woods of Cyrodiil, I didn't get much news.

"We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief," said the soldier. Then they began arguing about who was at fault for our predicament.

With the pounding in my head, it was hard to pay attention. I started working at the cords around my wrists, trying to stretch them and wriggle free. What I'd do after that I had no idea. Up ahead was another cart, filled with more Stormcloak rebels in identical uniforms, Nords all. Mounted soldiers of the Imperial Legion surrounded the carts – those uniforms I did recognize. They were a more diverse lot, Nords, Cyrodiilians, and several Redguards from Hammerfell.

At the head of the column rode an officer in more elaborate regalia with his own guard. All were armed with stout Legion swords, and some with bows. Which made me wonder, where was my bow? My dagger? My knapsack with all my possessions, few as they were?

"What's wrong with him, huh?" The thief nodded toward the man seated next to me. This one was not only bound but gagged.

"Watch your tongue, thief," the Stormcloak snapped. "You're speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King."

The thief didn't take this revelation well. "Ulfric? The Jarl of Windhelm? You're the leader of the rebellion!" Ulfric just looked at him impassively.

So this was Ulfric Stormcloak? The name raised dim echoes from my childhood. I would sometimes overhear my parents talking about Ulfric and something terrible that happened in Markarth before I was born. I remembered the fear in their voices, and the way they changed the subject when they realized I was listening. Later, we would hear of Ulfric's speeches advocating the rights of Nords to worship their own gods. My father was a Nord too, and he kept a secret shrine to Talos in our cellar. He said that giving up the Nord religion was too great a price for peace with the High Elves of the Aldmeri Dominion. Yet he wouldn't take up arms against his own brethren over it, nor against the Empire in Cyrodiil. Whenever there was talk of Ulfric, my father would shake his head and look into the distance, lost in thought.

Ulfric didn't look so fearsome, sitting next to me in that cart. He was older than the rest of us, with long, silver-streaked hair and a dark beard. I thought there was something wolfish about him. He wore a mud-stained cloak of fur over chainmail. Now he went back to staring dejectedly at his boots. Maybe the Stormcloak soldier was right – we were all equals now, jarls, warriors, thieves, and half-wild girls like me.

The thief went on, growing more agitated. "But if they've captured you... Oh, gods, where are they taking us?"

"I don't know where we're going," replied the rebel, "but Sovngarde awaits."

With this news the thief began calling to the gods. "Shor, Mara, Kynareth, Akatosh... help me!"
There was no answer, though the thief kept scanning the skies as if expecting one.

We rode in silence for a moment, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Then the Stormcloak looked at me again. "That's some fearsome warpaint you have there," he said.

Reaching up with my bound hands, I touched the spot over my left eye. The tattoo was new, but I had almost forgotten it. I had it done just before returning to Skyrim. I had asked for a thick vertical stripe above my eye, and two curving strokes below it. I had hoped to look fierce for my homecoming, but when it was done the two curving stripes reminded me of tears.

"Why would you mar such a pretty face, lass?" the Nord asked. I shrugged.

"Flirting! That's just what we need," said the thief.

The gates of a walled village appeared ahead. Beyond the gray ramparts I could see several towers – they were bringing us to an Imperial keep. "This is Helgen," the Stormcloak said. "I once knew a girl from Helgen." Then he said something about juniper berries in their mead, but that was nothing to me. I'd never tasted mead in my life. My father wouldn't allow it because I was too young, and then ... after... I was more interested in laying hands on solid food, eggs from hen houses, cheeses from dairy barns, a hung fowl when I could get it.

As we passed through the gates, the officer at the head of the column broke off, joining a group of Imperial soldiers who had been waiting for us. Three High Elves were there as well, two of them resplendent in gold-colored armor, the third wearing dark mage robes.

The Stormcloak cursed them as we rolled past. "Damn Thalmor, I bet they had something to do with this." The Thalmor of the Aldmeri Dominion had free run of Skyrim since the war, their justiciars patrolling the province, snuffing out any hint of Talos worship. My parents had taught me to avoid them, and never to mention Talos outside our home.

"General Tullius, sir!" one of the soldiers greeted the officer. "The headsman is waiting!"

"Good, let's get this over with," Tullius replied.

The Stormcloaks must have known this was our fate all along, but the gravity of our situation was just dawning on the thief and me. "Gods, no!" the thief screamed. "It was just a horse! Put me in jail if you want, but don't kill me!" Then he turned to the Stormcloaks. "This is your fault! You deserve the axe, not us!"

"Calm yourself, thief," said the Stormcloak. "Sovngarde is the only place we're going. You don't want your last thoughts on Nirn to be ones of fear and cowardice do you? Meet your end like a man." Typical Nord – steady as the stones they use to build their keeps.

I struggled with my bonds with greater urgency, but the truth was sinking in. All of the running and hiding of the last three years would be for naught. My parents would go unavenged, their story untold. I might as well have died with them in that burning house.

As the carts came to a stop, I vowed I wouldn't let them take me without a fight. Maybe I could take out one of these Imperial soldiers, if not escape entirely. Leave the stoicism to these Stormcloaks. What kind of fighters were they anyway? But for all my bravado, the cords around my wrists seemed all the tighter.

A Nord soldier was calling our names off lists now. He was tall and blonde, the classic son of Skyrim. He called Ulfric first, and another soldier led him down from our cart.
"What kind of a Nord are you, Hadvar?" the Stormcloak opposite me demanded. "You should be standing here with us!"

The soldier ignored him.

"Ach, the Imperials and their damned lists!" the rebel muttered. "Hadvar and I used to be friends, grew up in Riverwood together. But now look at him, crossing names off lists like a damned scribe. I'll gladly die a Stormcloak rather than sink so low."

Then Hadvar called his name – Ralof of Riverwood. True to his advice to the thief, Ralof marched proudly to the lineup in front of the block, head held high. The thief acted according to type as well, running as soon as his feet hit the cobblestones. "Archers," called the female captain, and they shot him down before he had gone twenty paces. I stared in surprise – he had fallen just like the rabbits and squirrels I had killed over the years. I thought watching a man die would be different somehow.

"Anyone else want to try running?" barked the captain, a Redguard. "Next, the Breton!" Ah yes, Nord, Cyrodiili, or Redguard, they always noticed the Breton features and small stature I inherited from my mother, remnants of the mingling of elves and men long ago. Never the blonde hair and fair skin that came from my Nord father. "Breton, get down from the cart, now!" This captain certainly was used to giving commands.

I glared at her and gripped the rail at the back of the cart with both hands. At that moment I must have looked more like a wild animal than a young woman. Finally one of the soldiers climbed into the cart to pull me out, while the tall one tapped the list impatiently with his quill. But this one underestimated me, grabbing me by the shoulders instead of the wrists. Maybe he thought one good pull would loosen my grip. Instead, I swung my body back and forth, pulling him off balance. Then I jammed my shoulder into his chest. In the second it took him to regain his footing, I grasped at the knife he kept in his belt. Then I looped my hands over his head and swung up onto his back. Stealth and agility – without them, I never would have survived three years on my own in the forest. I had the knife nearly to his throat, but with bound hands it was awkward. He grabbed at my wrists, trying to keep the blade from his flesh.

"Free me or I'll kill him," I shouted.

"Fine," the captain replied with a grim chuckle. "There are plenty more Nord soldiers where he came from."

That gave us both pause. I could feel the soldier's arms relax as he turned to stare at his superior.

"Kill him and we'll shoot you down like the thief," the captain went on. "Oh look, he's still twitching. A painful way to die, arrow through the back. Wouldn't you rather a good quick death at the hands of our headsman? I can promise he keeps his blade sharp."

Another soldier must have climbed over the back of the cart while she talked, because now I felt arms grabbing me from behind. In a moment I was disarmed and the two soldiers grappled with me, the one cursing at the nick I had made in his neck. He had his arm around my leg as I struggled and kicked, his hand grinding up into my crotch as he lifted me off the cart. The other had me from behind, arms encircling my chest. I felt him squeezing me through my course tunic. I wondered if they'd laugh about that tonight in the inn, a good joke to end the day of killing.

Then it struck me that this was how it all started – the murder of my parents, the flight from Dragon Bridge, the three years of fear and loneliness while living on my own – with a Nord boy who I thought was my friend, his hands on my body and a hardness in his breeches. Then I had to
wonder at the strange symmetry of events. Did time move forward, or was life just a series of experiences repeating in perpetual cycles? Strange thoughts to have when meeting one's death.

The soldiers dumped me on the ground in front of the officers. "This one's not on the list, Captain," said Hadvar. "You, Breton, what's your name?"

I looked around at the soldiers and my fellow captives, at the general and the headsman, at the elves and the priestess standing nearby, at the villagers looking on from their porches. They might as well know who they're killing this day, I thought, though I was a girl of no renown.

"My name is Deirdre Morningsong," I said in as strong a voice as I could muster. "My mother was Fiona Morningsong, a Breton from Jehanna. My father was a Nord, Sven Silver-Tongue, a trader of goods between the provinces of Tamriel. We lived in Dragon Bridge, where Nord and Breton alike hated us as mixed bloods. The filthy Nord bigots burned our house with my parents in it." I left out the other reason they'd burned our house: their superstitious, ignorant fear of things they couldn't understand. "I fled to Cyrodiil under my mother's name. Now I have returned to Skyrim seeking justice, but I see there is none under the Empire. May Oblivion take all Nords, and the Empire as well!"

This speech elicited chuckles from the soldiers and sarcastic clapping from the elf wearing the hooded mage robes. "My good General," she said, "Why don't we just leave Skyrim to the Nords? Let them tear each other apart like the wild beasts they are."

"What should we do with her, Captain?" asked Hadvar. "She's not on the list."

"Damn the list, Hadvar. She's a threat to Skyrim's peace, just as much as these Stormcloaks. Take her with the others."

"I'm sorry, Deirdre," said the soldier, and he really did seem sympathetic. "We'll make sure your remains are taken back to High Rock."

"I told you, Dragon Bridge, here in Skyrim. But there's no one there to bury me."

As another soldier dragged me over to the line of Stormcloaks waiting for death, the general began a speech. "Ulfric Stormcloak. 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." Ulfric had murdered High King Torygg? So that was how he had started his rebellion! The Voice was a power that took years to master, and few could stand against it – it hardly seemed a fair match. Still, what did I care for the high king's death? Hadn't I been one of his subjects? Where was he when my parents and I needed his protection?

Ulfric tried to make some response through his gag, but no defense would be heard this day. "You started this war," Tullius continued, "plunged Skyrim into chaos, and now the Empire is going to put you down and restore the peace." He motioned for the executions to begin.

The first Stormcloak marched bravely to the block, not even waiting for the priestess of Arkay's benediction. He said some words about Talos and Sovngarde, then his head rolled and the ring of the axe echoed across the keep and his blood gushed onto the ground in great pulsing spurts. In one instant he was a person and in the next a mere object – two objects – lifeless, lying in the dust. The captain used the heel of her boot to shove the body aside and called, "Next, the Breton!"

My mind went numb then. I had been through much in my young life, but this was the first beheading I'd witnessed. And I was next. I couldn't think. I had been saving one more trick for the last, desperate moment. I wasn't even sure it would work. But before I could act, they had dragged
me to the headsman's block, forcing me to kneel with my neck across it, ready for the axe. The smell of blood was strong, and I began to feel nauseated. If only I could turn over, I thought. But I knew I had missed my chance. I would go like the rest of them.

I turned my head to the side, watching the headsman. The axe was rising…

And that's when the dragon attacked.

Many stories have been told of that day, when Alduin swept down upon Helgen out of the clear blue sky of a summer's morning. But most of them get it wrong. Some say I summoned Alduin to Helgen, that I called him down on my captors. Or worse, that I brought the World Eater back to Skyrim to wreak my revenge on the Nords. But no one called Alduin – he just came. And the truth is, no one in Helgen was more surprised or frightened than I.

Now, you may find it strange that at one minute I could be nearly resigned to my death, and in the next fear for my life with greater intensity than at any time before or since. But in that moment, I could do nothing. I could not move. I could not scream. My mouth was suddenly dry and my limbs numb. I could only watch, sprawled there on the executioner's block, as an immense winged shape lit on the keep's central tower. The monster was so huge it could barely find purchase on a platform made to hold a dozen archers. Its hide was intricately scaled, and two massive horns curved in S-shapes from the back of its head. Now that head was swinging back and forth on its long neck, blood-red eyes searching for its first victim.

In that instant I knew it was a dragon – though of course I didn't know it was Alduin, that would come later – a dragon come to life out of the books of myth and legend my father read to me as a child. Many were the stories of the sky-serpents, winged corpse-makers that haunted Nords' dreams. The ancient Nords even worshipped them, it was said. They had certainly left enough of their dragon carvings all across Skyrim. Indeed, how could I not recognize this beast, having grown up in Dragon Bridge, walking under the bridge's two fierce dragon heads every time we crossed the river? Yet, as ominous as those carven images had seemed, they were mere effigies in stone, while this one was irrefutably alive. And now it was looking directly at me.

The courtyard had gone silent, the soldiers and prisoners and villagers too stunned to move. No dragon had been seen in Skyrim in thousands of years. Many thought they were a myth, creations of the dragon priests to keep the ancient Nords in thrall. Yet here was a beast as mighty as those in legend. How could any of us know what to do next?

Then it spoke. It didn't breathe fire or frost, it just shouted a word so powerful that the blast made the ground roll underneath me, knocking soldiers and captives alike to their knees. Suddenly people were running and screaming all around me, while I could only lie there, helpless.

So you see, it's absurd to think that I called Alduin down on Helgen. Although, if I dig deeply in my memory, there was something strangely familiar in that word he spoke. Of course I didn't understand it, but I felt as if I should have. Why had he returned at the exact time and place appointed for my own death? Only Akatosh, Master of Time, can know. And though events worked in my favor that day, it was a touch-and-go thing. Scores of innocent people, and some not so innocent, lost their lives. Even had it been in my power to make such a thing happen, would I have traded all those lives to save my own? Perhaps on that day I would have. I had come to wreak my vengeance on the Nords, hadn't I?
When the ground finally stopped shaking and I regained a portion of my wits, I heard Ralof, the Stormcloak, calling me. "Hey, Breton. Get up! Come on, the gods won't give us another chance!"

I struggled to my feet and followed him as well as I could. The dragon had begun blasting everything in its path with fire. Everywhere it breathed, homes and shops and fortress walls exploded in blazing ruin. But more than the destruction wrought by the dragon, the sky itself rained fireballs down all around us. What kind of beast was this, that could command Nirn itself to do its bidding?

With my hands tied in front of me, I waddled more than ran to keep up with Ralof. He reached the south tower first. Yet he waited at the door, holding it open for me as I dashed inside. I had never been so glad to enter a building, Imperial keep though it was. I looked thankfully at Ralof as he slammed the door shut on the destruction taking place outside.

And then I caught myself. I had just vowed my revenge on all Nords, hadn't I? And wasn't Ralof a Nord? It didn't help that he reminded me so much of that other boy, the one I thought was my friend. How long before this one also betrayed me?

Ulfric and several Stormcloaks were already inside, two of them wounded and burned. Two more had freed themselves from their bonds and were helping the others.

"By Ysmir, what is that thing?" Ralof demanded. "Could the legends be true?"

"Legends don't burn down villages," said Ulfric. Then he nodded toward me. "Why did you bring the lass?"

"She was helpless out there, my jarl." Ralof had his hands free now. "I couldn't leave a defenseless girl to die all alone."

"She's as like to knife us in the back as help us get out of here," Ulfric replied. "Or maybe she's an Imperial spy."

"Come now, Ulfric," said one of his warriors. "She's just a lass."

"That's right. What help could she be, anyway?"

"Untie my hands and I'll prove my use," I said, meeting Ulfric's gaze. Nords or no, I'd show them I was no defenseless girl.

Ulfric looked at me doubtfully. "All right, you can come with us, but your hands stay bound."

The sounds of screams and rending wood and shattering stone suddenly grew louder outside the door. We weren't going back out that way. "We've got to get out of this tower before that thing brings it down on our heads," Ulfric yelled.

There was just one other way out – up the circular stairway to the top of the tower, then somehow down the other side. Ralof had the same idea. "Quick, up the stairs!" I followed him.

Another fighter was farther up the stairwell, trying to clear some rubble. He was there above us at one moment, and then the wall exploded inwards and he was gone. Fire filled the empty space, its heat forcing Ralof backward into the Stormcloaks below. Yet while the blast set Ralof's cuirass to smoldering and singed his eyebrows, it had less effect on me. I felt warmth and that was all.

When the flame and smoke cleared I found myself looking through a hole in the tower wall, directly at the dragon. For the second time, it seemed as if he had singled me out. We held that
gaze for a long moment, and I felt a sense of recognition. Deep in my memory there seemed to be something about dragons, and not from the books I had read as a child. The dragon seemed to recognize something about me too. Or maybe I was just imagining that. By all rights, that was the second time I should have died that day. It could have easily reached in with its powerful jaws and snapped me in two. Yet the dragon just flew away, off to find other prey.

The way upward was now blocked. "Through the hole, lass," Ralof shouted. "Jump down through that gap in the roof of the inn." I looked doubtfully below me. It was a dozen-foot drop through broken rafters onto the inn's second floor – that was dangerous enough in itself. But worse, flames licked here and there at its timbers. There was no telling what I would find on the ground floor – a way out or a wall of flames.

I stepped into the opening in the wall and did my best to aim my jump into the hole in the roof. I dropped through the rafters, then tucked and rolled as I hit the floor. I came to rest against a shattered wall and lay there for a moment, expecting the Stormcloaks to follow. But when I looked back at the tower, everything was obscured by smoke. Fool, I thought. That was just their way of getting you out of the way. They didn't want a lass slowing them down. They had probably found some way out of the tower and over the wall by now.

I began to cough, and I knew I had to get out of the building. The stairs leading down to the first floor were a blasted tangle of splinters and protruding nails. I roamed the second floor, looking for an escape as the smoke grew worse. Finally I found a wide opening in the floorboards with clear space below. Another drop and roll and I was running outside, onto the roadway where we had entered the village.

Helgen had become a scene of carnage. Broken, charred bodies lay scattered amid the wreckage of houses and carts. The gray stone walls of the town and much of the keep were still standing, but the dragon was doing its best to smash it all to bits. From somewhere behind me the dragon was roaring, then he swooped down, scooping up a fleeing Imperial soldier in his talons. Like a giant cat playing with a mouse, the dragon threw the soldier into the air. The man screamed as he cartwheeled through space, then went silent as he hit a buttress with a clank of armor and dropped to the ground.

"Prisoner, over here!" It was Hadvar, shouting at me from across the village street. I noticed he no longer had his list. "Run for it! You won't get another chance." I hesitated. It seemed ludicrous to follow one of the people who had almost killed me, but I saw no other choice. I didn't know Helgen, and I was disoriented. Hadvar at least seemed to know where he was going. "This way! We have to get into the tunnels below the keep!" I followed.

As we passed through an alley between two buildings, the dragon landed on the wall above us. His body blotted out the sky, and one great talon clasped the wall not a yard in front of me. It looked razor-sharp, the skin around it ornately scaled. But he paid no attention to us, aiming a blast of fire at someone beyond us on the other side of the building. Then he flew off. As we rounded the building, I saw his victim, an unfortunate soldier lying crumpled and burnt.

Death – in half an hour I had seen more than most would in a lifetime, and the dragon showed no sign of ending its reign of carnage any time soon. But our way forward was clear.

Stepping over the fallen soldier, we found ourselves in the space in front of the town gate. It was closed. General Tullius was there, along with several Imperial soldiers. One of them was a mage, and he was aiming fireball spells at the dragon, to little effect. "Into the keep, soldier," Tullius yelled. "We'll regroup there for another assault on this monster." Once again, I had no choice but to follow Hadvar, much as I had hoped the gate would lead to freedom.
I tried to keep up with Hadvar as we passed through an archway into the north courtyard of the keep, but it was difficult with my hands still bound in front of me. Now Ralof, the Stormcloak, came running up, making for the keep as well. He had found an axe somewhere.

Hadvar confronted him. "Ralof, you damned traitor, drop that axe and get into the keep!"

Ralof brandished his weapon. "You're not taking me prisoner again, Hadvar. We're escaping."

For one foolish moment I thought these two might put aside their differences and work together to escape the dragon. But it was not to be. "Fine," said Hadvar, "may the dragon gnaw your bones." He seemed resigned to letting Ralof go. "Prisoner, the barracks are through here."

Ralof headed to a different door, beckoning me to follow. "Come on, this way, into the keep!"

Just then, the dragon landed in the courtyard near us and spoke in a language none of us could understand. "Pahlok joorre!" His voice rumbled and shook the ground, and he snapped his razor-sharp fangs at us as he spoke. "Hin kah fen kos bonaar."

We stood there, speechless, for a moment. Then the dragon was drawing breath and Ralof and Hadvar were running for different doors. There was no time to choose between them, yet I found myself running after Ralof, the one who hadn't tried to kill me that day.
Ralof entered the keep and I followed. Inside, we found a hastily deserted guard room. Chairs had been kicked aside and playing cards lay strewn across a table. A workbench on the wall opposite held a scatter of weapons, as if a soldier had been polishing them before running out of the room. We found daggers and an axe, and a shield on the floor. Ralof picked up one of the dirks.

"Here, let me get those cords off you." He paused and gave me a grim smile. "As long as you promise you won't slit my throat." Then he stepped closer and carefully cut the cords binding my wrists. He had a closely trimmed beard with a three-day stubble on his cheeks. "Take what weapons you need, and I'll think what to do next," he said.

"I thought you were trying to get rid of me back at the tower," I told him as I rummaged through the gear. I stuck one of the daggers in my belt, and picked up the shield and the axe.

"No," he said. "I was about to follow you when flames shot up on that side of the inn. I thought we'd sent you to your death. But I'm glad you made it." He watched me taking a few practice swings with the axe. "You haven't used one of those before, have you?"

I shook my head. "Only for chopping wood, but that's a different kind of axe." This one was heavier than the hatchets I’d used. I imagined chopping at people would be quite different.

We couldn't go back out the way we had come in, not with the dragon still smashing the walls to bits outside. The room had two other exits. The open doorway on the left wouldn't do, since it led in the direction of the barracks Hadvar had entered. An iron gate barred the one to the right, beyond which there was a wide hall. "Ach, it's locked!" Ralof exclaimed, rattling the bars. "There are steps leading downward at the end of that hallway."

"Hadvar said something about tunnels beneath the keep," I said.

Just then we heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall to the left, and the unmistakable commanding voice of the captain.

"Quick," Ralof whispered. "Get under cover. We'll take them by surprise, and just hope they aren't too many." I flattened myself against the wall next to the doorway. The captain was in the lead, followed by one soldier. They spotted Ralof first and didn't stop to ask questions. Their single-mindedness was impressive – not even a dragon attack could keep them from killing Stormcloaks.

Ralof backed away from their onslaught, blocking expertly and keeping close to the wall. Still, they looked to be too much for him. Creeping up behind the captain, I aimed a blow at the back of her helmeted head. My aim was none too good, and the side of the axe glanced off her steel helmet. She wheeled on me, and in an instant I was backed against the wall, blocking slashes and thrusts as best I could with my shield. I barely deflected one thrust, and her blade grazed my temple, drawing blood. Then she bashed me with her shield, forcing me to one knee. I was off balance, leaning to
my left with my weight supported by my shield. I raised my axe as a feeble defense against her next swing, but I thought it would be my end.

She never got the chance to make that killing blow. Her arm went limp before it could begin its downward arc, and a dazed, disbeliefing expression came over her face. Pink foam burbled from her mouth. Then her eyes went blank and she dropped to the floor, Ralof’s axe buried in her back. The Nord had saved my life.

"Are you all right, lass?" he asked, coming over to check on me. I nodded as he helped me to my feet. He took a cloth from inside his cuirass and daubed at my head wound. It was shallow but bleeding freely, dripping into my eyes. "Here hold this on that cut while I look for something to clean it with." He found a flask of water dropped on the floor in the soldiers’ haste to get outside.

"I owe you my life," I told him as he rinsed the wound.

He waved me off. "I was in a tight spot myself, until you distracted the captain. That was brave." He tied the cloth around my head. "There, that should stop the bleeding. You were lucky though. You don't have much battle experience, do you?"

I shook my head. "I used to play at sword fighting with the boys in our village, but that's all." I could remember the boys' shouts now. "Come on DeeDee, play swords with us." I just wanted to roam the woods and fields around Dragon Bridge, but the boys were my only playmates. "Come on," they'd shout, "we just need one more to make it fair." They meant they needed someone small like me. I took more than my share of bruises and scraped knuckles, but maybe I had learned something.

Ralof picked up the captain's sword. "Here, maybe this would suit you better than that axe. Try some of her armor too. That tunic isn't doing you any good. And look, maybe one of her keys will open that gate," he said, holding up a ring with several keys he had found in the captain's satchel.

The captain's singlet was too large, its mail skirt hanging below my knee. It felt awkward and heavy. I tried on her steel helmet. That was heavy too, but it fit. By the time I was ready, Ralof had found the right key and opened the gate.

"We've got to keep moving," Ralof said. "Tullius and the rest of the Imperials could be on us at any moment."

Just then the sounds of mayhem outside grew louder, with the dragon roaring and people screaming. Then there were shouts and the sound of many booted feet entering the barracks and the crashing rumble of walls being torn apart. The walls around the doorway where we had entered began to tremble, the mortar between the blocks of stone giving off puffs of dust.

We rushed into the hallway. "Wait," I said. "Shouldn't we lock that gate behind us?"

Ralof paused. "Ulfric and my comrades may still be alive out there and may need to come this way..." But there was no time to consider further as the wall around the entry door gave way in a cloud of dust and flame. "Quick, down those stairs!" Ralof shouted.

The rest of that awful day passed in a blur that I hardly remember. We fought from room to room, fortunate to encounter just one or two Imperials at a time. We used the same pattern of attack that had worked in the guard room. Ralof went first, then I launched a sneak attack, Ralof finished his opponent, then came over to help with mine. Along the way, I managed to fill a knapsack I had found with a good deal of loot – some potions and food from a store room, a few coins left lying about, and bits of armor and weapons from the dead or unconscious soldiers we left in our wake.
Even in my dazed state I wasn't about to let loose gear go to waste. Three years living from hand to mouth had taught me that much.

But amid the blurred details of that long, grim day, one room of Helgen Keep is burned into my memory. We were descending a stair when we heard low moaning coming through a doorway beyond.

"Deirdre, sneak up there and see who's making that noise," Ralof said. I did as he asked, though I no longer felt so stealthy in the heavy armor. I crept to the edge of the doorway and peered around. What I saw then, I hoped to never see again – in vain as it turned out. Cages hung from the ceiling, casting eerie shadows in the dim light of candles and braziers. Barred cells lined one wall, and iron manacles dangled from another, some clasped around the wrists of skeletons. The cages held corpses in various stages of rot. Some of the bodies had been disemboweled, their entrails hanging from the cages like silver snakes. Blood was everywhere, and the stench was overwhelming. I had to fight down a powerful wave of nausea.

The smell didn't seem to bother the two wardens of this level of Oblivion. They were taking a break from their torturing, sharing a flagon of ale at a table in the center of the room, heedless of the destruction going on above. Fortunately, they were both facing away from me, toward the Stormcloak prisoners in their cages on the far wall. Amid all the gore and horror of that room, one absurd detail stood out, staying with me all these years. The gaolers were eating peaches. They had quite a pile of the pits between them, and now they were throwing them at the prisoners, laughing. The grim business of torture seemed just a schoolyard prank to these two.

Then I noticed movement coming from one of the cages. This was also the source of the moaning. The victim was rolling from side to side as if to escape his pain. When he shifted toward me I could just make out the blue of a Stormcloak's uniform.

"Quit your moaning," barked one of the torturers. He was a gaunt man with a pair of tongs and an awl looped into his belt. "You're going to tell us all about Ulfric's troops, numbers, placements, and what his plans were. The sooner you do, the sooner the pain will end. Meantime, shut up and let me enjoy my ale or I'll hurt you again."

"He won't talk, you Imperial dog!" The speaker was in a part of the room I couldn't see, but he sounded in much better shape than his comrade. "True sons of Skyrim don't fear your coward's tools."

"That was Galmar Stone-Fist," Ralof said when I crept back to him with the report. "He's the marshal of Ulfric's forces. He and a couple of Ulfric's top commanders were with us when we were captured, but the Imperials must have brought them here ahead of us. We've got to save them."

"All right," I said. "But I think I have a better idea this time." Some madness had taken hold of me. The Imperials would have beheaded me with no cause, and now to witness this pit of Oblivion … all I knew was that I wanted that torturer dead. And I had had enough of making inept swings with my sword, then hoping to defend myself until Ralof could rescue me. I took off the armor and the helmet, careful to avoid them clanking and alarming the torturers. Then I took the dagger from my belt. "Let me go first," I told Ralof.

"Deirdre, are you sure you can do this? Those two could be tougher than the guards and foot soldiers we've met so far."

"I'm sure," I said. "I've practiced this a thousand times." That much was true. I could creep up on animals in the forest, rabbits, squirrels, marmots and such, and get within striking range before they noticed me. I had also practiced with a group of thieves I traveled with for a time. We would
sneak up on each other from behind, pull the victim's head back and put a stick to their throats. I was successful nine times out of ten. For years I had imagined sneaking into Dragon Bridge and doing the same to my parents' killers. Now this torturer would pay for his crimes.

Still, I thought, practice with a stick must be different than actually slitting a man's throat. But I kept such doubts from Ralof. "Just make sure you get into the room quickly after I take care of the first one," I told him. He looked at me uncertainly, but nodded.

I crept back to the room. The Stormcloaks in the cages had turned their backs on their captors' foolery, so I didn't have to worry about them giving me away in their surprise at seeing me. I snuck toward the table until I was behind the nearest Imperial, making myself focus only on him. I knew if I looked again at the rest of that room's contents, the horror might weaken my resolve. The stench was already threatening to overwhelm me with nausea.

With one practiced movement, I pulled the torturer's head back with my left hand while I drew the razor-sharp dirk across his throat with my right. I could feel the blade passing through muscle and sinew and the more resistant windpipe, then the gush of hot blood on my hand. It was different than practicing with a stick.

The torturer slumped to the floor, gurgling and clutching his throat while I stared at him, shocked at my own deed. I had come to Skyrim to kill, and now I had succeeded. I watched as his struggle lessened and he finally lay still, and I felt only numb.

Fortunately, the other gaoler was just as stunned by my action, and that was his undoing. Ralof was halfway into the room as the torturer was rising from his chair; he swung his axe before the torturer could draw his sword. That quickly, it was all over. New blood atop old, layers and layers of it, how many years deep?

Now I just wanted to leave, but Ralof remembered his companions, who were shouting to be freed. I went to the room's far door and used the cloth Ralof had given me to wipe the blood from my hands.

Soon Ralof had removed a key from the head torturer's belt and opened all the cages. The two healthy Stormcloaks helped the third out of his cage and over to the table where they could look at his wounds while Ralof explained about the dragon.

"Gods, a dragon?" exclaimed Galmar. "How could that be?" He was an older warrior with long blonde hair and graying beard. He wore hardened leather armor rather than the standard Stormcloak uniform.

"You didn't hear anything down here?" Ralof asked.

Galmar shook his head. "And what about Ulfric?"

Ralof explained that he had gotten separated from Ulfric and his companions when they escaped the first tower.

I watched all this from the doorway, wishing they would hurry. I wanted only to be out of that place, whatever this soldier's wounds were. I wanted to forget what I had seen here, and what I had done. Meanwhile, Ralof was checking the rest of the chamber for useful gear. A knapsack and some coins lay on a table.

"They put our weapons in there," Galmar said, nodding at chest against one wall.

Ralof found it locked, then checked the gaolers' pockets for a key, with no luck. Neither did any of
the captain's keys fit it. "Deirdre, are you any good with a lock?" He held out a couple of picks he had taken from the satchel.

"I'll try," I said doubtfully. Considering that I had just shown myself to be rather an adept assassin, I don't know why I was shy about my skill with a lockpick. I had never been comfortable as a thief, though I had stolen only to survive. I became skilled enough with a pick that the rustic locks the villagers of Cyrodiil used were no deterrent.

As it turned out, this one was even easier. Perhaps the gaolers thought strong locks were wasted when the prisoners were all behind bars. The lock turned with ease, and the lid of the chest swung open. Inside, I found more coins, several potions, and a book that appeared to be some sort of magic tome. Galmar came over and retrieved the Stormcloak weapons.

Finally the Stormcloaks had bandaged the wounded soldier as best they could. He had a cloth around his head to stanch the bleeding where the torturers had cut away most of his ear. His left hand was bandaged where they had used tongs to pry off two of his fingers. He had bled a lot and looked pale. I pulled one of the healing potions from my satchel and it seemed to revive him as he drank it down.

"Can you walk, comrade?" Ralof asked. "We have to get out of here. We're not safe from the dragon even here."

Galmar looked at the wounded soldier. "You go and scout ahead, we'll follow as best we can."

Even after we left that chamber, we could see that the connecting hallways and rooms were used for the same dark purposes, with hanging cages filled with skeletons and blood stains on the stone floor. I imagined the place full of prisoners screaming and moaning, and shuddered at the thought of becoming one of those captives myself. I doubted I would be as brave as Galmar had sounded back in his cage. But maybe he would have broken eventually, despite his brave words.

I was glad when we came to the end of those chambers, at a place where a masonry wall had been torn away to reveal tunnels beyond. Whether this passage was a natural feature of these mountains, or roughly hewn by human hands, I couldn't tell. But here and there were stoneworks – support columns, archways, and stairs – that were vastly more ancient than the keep itself. The work looked to be thousands of years old, while the keep could only have stood a few centuries.

After a few twists and turns of the passage, we came to a stone archway and the sound of voices from the cavern within. More Imperial soldiers, arguing about whether they should investigate the noises they had heard from above or wait there as Tullius had ordered them.

"The general told us to stay here in case the Stormcloaks send a war-band up through these tunnels to rescue Ulfric," said a commanding voice, "and that's what we're going to do!"

I peered through the archway to see that there were more Imperials this time, mostly archers, occupying a cavernous chamber with a stream flowing down the middle. There were stone supports for the ceiling and a stone bridge crossing the stream, but the rest was natural rock and earth, with mosses and hanging ferns growing from the walls. A natural skylight let in sunshine and snowmelt from somewhere above. It also let in the roars of the dragon still attacking Helgen.

When we had regrouped, we agreed that the wounded Stormcloak would remain outside while we took the room, where the Imperials were still arguing. "Deirdre, we'll go first and get the attention of the main group down by the stream," said Ralof. "But there are two archers on the opposite bank. You sneak over the bridge and take them out or they'll shoot us like ducks on a pond."
The three Stormcloaks went first into the room, sneaking at first, and then shouting as they charged the Imperials standing by the stream. Soon the clash of swords and axes filled the cavern. I sneaked over the bridge, keeping my eye on the two archers across the stream. They had their arrows notched, looking for open shots, but hesitated to risk wounding their comrades. From the sounds of the battle, the Stormcloaks were having no easy time of it.

The archers still didn't notice me as I crept closer. How I wished I had my own bow and quiver of arrows! Then I saw that the archers were standing next to a long pool of oil on the floor, one of them with his feet right in it. I had heard about oil traps like this. The ancient Nords used them to safeguard their crypts, to the dismay of many a grave robber. The builders of Helgen must have kept this one filled to prevent enemies from coming up these tunnels and caves into the keep itself. But these archers had forgotten all about it, they were so focused on the battle below them.

Now how to light the oil trap? There were no candles or torches in this naturally lit chamber. The time had come, I knew, for my last, desperate trick. I put down my shield and cupped my hands in front of me. I concentrated as hard as I could on the word and idea and feeling of fire. My hands began to feel warm, there was a faint glow, and then … nothing.

"Deirdre, the archers!" Ralof shouted. One of the bowmen had taken a shot and was notching another arrow. I hoped he hadn't hit one of the Stormcloaks, but I couldn't worry about that now. I concentrated harder.

Why wasn't anything happening? It had worked before … sometimes. I didn't know how it worked or why it worked or how to make it work every time, but I knew if I just concentrated harder, it had to happen. I tried again, concentrating, thinking and whispering and feeling fire. My hands began to feel warm again, and warmer still, then they began to glow, and suddenly a jet of flame was flowing from them. I aimed it at the pool of oil. It caught fire and went up in one whoomp! of heat and light and black smoke. Flame engulfed the first archer, and his screams were terrible to hear. He dropped his bow, running from the fire as far as he could go, but there was no escaping. The cloth of his tunic had caught and it wouldn't go out. Finally he slumped to the ground and was silent.

The second archer hadn't been standing in the oil, and he stepped farther back before the flames reached him. But now that the smoke and fire obscured his view of the melee, he couldn't get in a shot. Finally, when the smoke and flame died down, he faced three armed Stormcloaks just a few feet from him. He didn't even have time to drop his bow and draw his sword.

"I yield," he shouted. "I plead mercy, by the warrior's code."

Galmar stepped forward, ready to strike with his axe. "Like the mercy you Imperials were showing us in that torture room? I spit on your mercy."

The Imperial cowered, but Ralof put a hand on Galmar's arm before he could strike. "Wait, Galmar … my captain. He's a Nord too. Maybe he'll join our side if we give him a chance."

Galmar turned on Ralof. "You dare question me, Ralof? You're just a pup. Get out of my way."

"Or maybe he could be worth something to us alive. Maybe we could trade him. The Imperials could have recaptured Ulfric for all we know."

That gave Galmar pause. "Well, by the great god Stuhn, maybe you're right, " he said, scratching his beard. He turned to the third soldier. "Find something to bind him with. I'll go see if Eimar can walk on his own now. And you two," he said, gesturing to Ralof and me, "scout on ahead and see what other horrors this day has in store for us."
I grabbed the captured soldier's bow and quiver, and followed Ralof into the next tunnel. He stopped me when we got away from the others. "What you did back there ... was that ... magic? Are ... are you a mage?" It was dark in the tunnel but I knew I would see fear in his eyes if the light were better. Just as there had been fear in Osmer's eyes that day three years before.

"I don't know what I am," I told him. "I don't know what it is, or how I do it, but I guess it must be magic. I can't always get it to work though." He didn't respond, and I could tell he was still afraid. "You don't have to worry. I won't hex you. And I haven't blown myself up yet."

"Well," he said at last. "We Nords don't much like magic, it's true. But I've heard the Jarl of Whiterun keeps a mage, and Ulfric even hired one at Windhelm, so it can't be all bad. Without your magic, we might all be dead back there. That was a good move." He clapped me on the shoulder as if I were one of his hirth-fellows. "Come on, let's find the way out."

As we descended another flight of stairs to a lower level of the cavern, we heard a loud crash behind us. The rock walls of the tunnel exploded inward blocking the passage. When the slide had settled, we could hear the roar of the dragon from far above. Whatever he had done up there must have triggered this cave-in.

"Well," Ralof said grimly. "We're not going back that way. The others will have to find their own way out. Maybe they'll join up with Ulfric." He turned and continued down the stairs. They ended at a path that rejoined the riverbank.

From here on, the tunnels of Helgen offered little to challenge a girl used to living on her own in the woods. One chamber was filled with frostbite spiders. I probably could have gotten past without bothering them, but I knew Ralof in his creaking leather and mail would attract their attention. I drew my bow and had the three small ones down before the two mother spiders descended from the ceiling. These were average for frostbite spiders, about the size of a large hound, but rounder and with more legs. I took out one while Ralof dispatched the second with his axe.

"Ugh," he said as I collected my spent arrows. "I hate spiders. Too many eyes, you know?"

After that, we spotted a bear in a large cavern. Ralof didn't have to tell me to try sneaking around it. I just hoped he could follow his own advice. I crept ahead and the bear just dozed on. But the bear stirred when Ralof followed, and I thought we would have to fight. I stifled a groan. Not another thing to kill! Besides, I liked bears. No bear had ever bothered me, which was more than I could say of men. But this one just rolled over in its sleep and I let Ralof push ahead while I made sure the bear stayed asleep.

"Whew, that was close," he said when I rejoined him.

"For you maybe," I said, and for a moment I forgot he was Ralof, not Osmer. I punched him in the arm. "Clumsy Nord." There was enough light in the mouth of the cave for me to see him grinning sheepishly. What had happened to all my plans for revenge?

We emerged from the tunnels of Helgen bruised, filthy, and exhausted. But fear was not done with us that day, for at that moment the dragon flew overhead, casting its immense shadow over us. We crouched, trembling, under what small bushes we could find. The dragon appeared not to see us,
making a straight course down the valley, finally receding to a tiny dot in the sky before rounding the shoulder of a mountain.

"I think he's gone for good," said Ralof. He looked around, peering back in the direction of Helgen. "There's no telling where Ulfric and the others got out, if they got out at all. And the Imperials will be storming the hills soon, looking for any escapees." He looked uncertain for a moment, and then turned to look at me. "We need to get down to Riverwood. That's the most likely direction for the others to head. My sister Gerdur lives there, and I'm sure she'd help you. Soft beds, hot food and some strong ale would put us both right."

I hadn't needed anyone's help in three years, but I couldn't deny the appeal of a home-cooked meal and an actual bed. I didn't remember what a mattress felt like, and all I had in my knapsack were a few cabbages and carrots pilfered from a storeroom in the keep. If Ralof knew the way to food and a bed, I was with him. The road led downhill toward a deep valley carving through the mountains.

Weary though I was, I couldn't help noticing how beautiful these forested mountains were. It was a lot like Dragon Bridge, only more so – the mountains taller, the streams merrier, the forest more verdant. The pines and cedars along the road exhaled their tangy scents to the warm afternoon breezes. It was good to breathe fresh air after hours in the bowels of Helgen Keep. Boulders dotted the forest everywhere, some as large as houses, and farther up the slopes ramparts of stone rose to the highest summits, still clad in snow this late in summer.

Soon our road joined the course of a river, the water playing merrily over the stones and falls on its way down the valley. Countless birds sang out from every bush and tree. Butterflies flitted from sunlight to shade. Flowers were out in their summer profusion – red columbines, blue asters, purple clover, orange paintbrush, yellow wood poppies. The bees buzzed happily, and I couldn't help thinking of honey dripping over good bread, hungry as I was. I thought of my childhood too, when all I'd wanted was to roam the forests and fields, looking at the flowers and learning their names, listening to the birdsong and feeling the sun on my face. But then thinking of my childhood made me think of my parents, and I knew I would never be that carefree, innocent girl again – not after what had happened to them, and not after the events of this day.

We rounded a bend in the road and Ralof pointed at an old ruin high on the mountainside across the river. Its gray stone archways soared into the sky like the steepled fingers of two hands growing from the mountain itself. "Bleak Falls Barrow," Ralof said. "When I was a boy, that place always used to give me nightmares. Draugr creeping down the mountain to climb in my window at night, that kind of thing. I admit, I still don't like the look of it."

The beauty of the country had made me forget for a while the dark events of the day, but now they came rushing back. Suddenly the sunny afternoon didn't seem quite so bright. The dragon had disappeared quickly, and who was to say it wouldn't return just as fast?

Ralof must have noticed how somber I'd become because he turned to look at me then. "Were those the first men you've killed, lass?" I nodded. "Aye, I know how you feel. My first time – it was awful. The soldiers I killed would haunt my dreams – they still do, sometimes. Of course, some of the fighters are women, and that's even harder. I hoped never to kill a woman, and now I have. Some of the older soldiers say you get used to it, that killing a person becomes as easy as killing an ox, but I'd hate to think that's true. What kind of person can kill with no remorse?"

He looked harder at me then. "What do you think, Breton, do you still want to take your revenge on the Nords? You dispatched a good few today, Imperials too."

I shook my head. It was hard to speak, partly because I was so unaccustomed to being with other people, partly because I no longer knew how I felt. It was ironic – I'd come to Skyrim seeking
vengeance on the Nords, and now I owed my life to one. He seemed a decent person too. And the fighting, the killing – it wasn't what I'd imagined it would be. The smell of blood and charred flesh, the gouts of gore spread on the ground, the screams of terror and pain. Worse, the look in the eyes of that dying soldier as she realized her end was coming, and then the light fading into a blank, sightless stare.

But worst of all was that torrent of rage that had come over me when I cut the torturer's throat. My whole being rebelled against it now, even though the Imperials would have killed me without a second thought. It was just wrong, as killing my parents had been wrong. And my hatred for the Nords – was it any better than the Nords' hatred for Altmer and Bretons and mixed bloods? I had come into Skyrim convinced of the justness of my cause, but now I didn't know what to think.

"I think I'm done with killing," I said finally.

"Well, I hope you get your wish, lass. I wish I could be done with it too. But it will be long before killing is done in Skyrim." We both looked at Bleak Falls Barrow then, wondering how many more barrows this war would fill. With a shudder, we turned toward Riverwood.
Chapter Summary

-- refuge and rest -- the Stormcloak rebellion -- a request -- Deirdre tells her tale --
Gerdur's advice -- a deepening friendship -- Deirdre sets off to discover her destiny --

"Deirdre, what are you doing out here?" It was Ralof's sister, Gerdur, and she was shaking my
shoulder.

Once again I awoke in an unfamiliar place. That was nothing new. This time I knew where I was
and how I got here, and that was something. After years of sleeping on the ground or sneaking into
stables, the bed in Gerdur's house had proved too soft, the indoor air too stifling. I stumbled out of
the house in the small hours and burrowed myself into the straw in the stable where Gerdur kept a
cow and two draft horses. The livestock didn't seem to mind my company. I slept like a stone.

Ralof and I had arrived in Riverwood in the early evening, both of us reeling with fatigue. "Did you
see the dragon?" a crone asked us as we shambled past her porch. The laughter nearly had us both
on the ground. "She wants to know if we've seen the dragon," Ralof gasped, tears running down
his cheeks.

When we had recovered, I turned to the woman. "Yes, I believe we did see a dragon, ma'am. Why,
did you see one here too?"

"Flew right over this afternoon, high up in the sky. I'm sure it was a dragon. Everyone tells me it
was just a big vulture and my vision is going."

"Your eyes are fine, Hilde," Ralof told her and we continued on.

We found Gerdur at the sawmill she ran with her husband Hod. Stacks of milled planks filled the
yard, and the scent of sweet pine resin was thick in the air. She ran to Ralof when she caught sight
of us, wrapping him in her arms. "Ralof, I was so worried about you. We heard you'd been
captured."

"It's all right, Gerdur," he told her, stroking her hair. It was golden, where his was red, and done in
a single braid down the back. "I'm fine. It's more than I can say for a lot of those Imperials back in
Helgen."

"But you're hurt," she said, looking him over. A particularly deep gash on his upper arm caught her
eye. "We have to take care of that."

"A scratch, it can wait. Have you seen any other Stormcloaks pass through, or Imperials either?
Ulfric – have you seen Ulfric Stormcloak?"

Gerdur shook her head. "No, but you won't believe what we did see. A great beast flew overhead. I
think … it must have been a dragon." Her eyes grew wider at the memory.

"I do believe it. That dragon attacked Helgen. Many people died, but if it hadn't been for the
dragon, we … Well, we wouldn't be here talking to you now. My friend and I barely escaped, but I
thought some of my comrades would come this way too. They know the Imperials aren't so strong
in Whiterun Hold." He looked troubled as he thought of the companions he had left behind in Helgen.

"If you have Imperials on your trail, we'd better get you inside. I'll have Hod keep a look out on the road for friend or foe." Only then did she look at me.

Ralof made a belated introduction. "This is Deirdre. She helped us escape the keep. Pretty good in a tight spot, and sharp with a bow, too. I told her you'd feed her and give her a place to sleep, if it's no trouble."

"No trouble at all. Anyone who helps save my brother is part of the family." Then she gave me a warm welcoming hug. "You look done in, girl. Let's get you some dinner and a warm bed."

Now the sun was high and Gerdur was here to milk the cow. I lay for a while listening to the noises from outside the stable, chickens clucking as they pecked about the yard, birds singing, the whine of the sawmill off in the distance. Hod must already be hard at work, I thought. But I just wanted to lie there as long as I could. It was strange, I thought I would never forget the events of the day before, but already a night's sleep had covered over those terrible memories like gauze on a wound. Now I was simply glad to be alive. My senses seemed sharper and I looked forward to the new day more eagerly than I could remember. Given all of the innocent people I had seen killed yesterday, and all the killing I had done, it seemed a bit obscene.

"There's breakfast for you inside," Gerdur said. That sounded good. I had been too tired to eat much last night, but now I was ravenous. "Go on in whenever you're ready. Ralof is still dead to the world."

I winced at her turn of phrase. Then I winced again as I tried to sit up. Every muscle and joint ached, and my arms and legs were a welter of bruises. The cut on my temple stung under the bandage Gerdur had applied last night.

"I have something for your aches when you're ready," she said as the milk splashed into the bucket. "A local woman makes it from willow bark. It does wonders when you rub it on sore muscles. Maybe after you've had a bath?"

A bath? I hoped she meant a hot one. I missed hot baths more than hot food and soft beds. We had stopped at a quiet spot along the river to rinse off the sweat, blood and spider spit, but it would take more than cold stream water to wash away the filth of Helgen Keep. I doubted I'd ever rid myself of that stench completely.

It was too bright a morning to dwell on these dark memories, so I pushed myself up from the straw, aches or no.

Hod and Gerdur's house was built of stone and timber, unlike my home in Dragon Bridge, where the buildings were mainly of wood. But like my childhood home, it had a thatched roof. I couldn't help thinking how little protection it would provide if the dragon chose to attack here. Still, the thick stone walls gave me some sense of security, false though I knew it to be.

Inside, Ralof was up, moving as stiffly as I was. "You look like you were trampled by an ox," I told him.

"Eh, you're looking like death warmed over as well, lass." I winced once more. Why did these Nords keep bringing up a subject I would rather forget? "Didn't sleep too well in here, did you?"

"I've grown too used to barns and cold ground," I said.
We broke our fast on dense black bread slathered in butter and honey and a big rasher of bacon Gerdur had toasted over the morning fire. After that, Ralof raided the cellar for planks of smoked salmon. We finished with the first of the year's apple crop. The fruit was small but juicy and tart. Ralof helped himself to a bottle of mead, but I was content with cold spring water. After yesterday, I couldn't get enough of it.

As we ate, we talked about whether the day would stay warm, how long we could expect good weather here in the mountains, then about life in Riverwood and some of the people Ralof knew. Anything to avoid the events of the previous day. Ralof seemed as if he would ask about my past, but I steered away from that too. So he told me about growing up here, dreaming of far places and heroic deeds as he spent his days in the family sawmill. When he was seventeen, he had gone off to Whiterun to join the city guard. After five years he grew bored with that city and moved on to Windhelm. Joining the guard there was as good as joining the Stormcloaks, and he'd been with Ulfric for the last two years.

"You should think about going to Windhelm and joining our cause," Ralof said. "You've seen the Imperial brand of justice in Helgen. By Ysmir, it's time we threw them out. We could use your help."

"But why are Nords rising up now?" I asked. "It's been a quarter century since Talos worship was banned."

"You mean you never heard of our rebellion when you were in Cyrodiil?" I shook my head. Then he told me about Ulfric Stormcloak challenging High King Torygg in single combat, an old tradition in Skyrim. That was back in the spring, and Ulfric's victory had rallied thousands of Skyrim's people to the Stormcloak banner. Nords loved anyone with power and prowess. Many of them viewed Torygg as a weak puppet of the Empire, and the Empire as puppets of the Aldmeri Dominion. The way Ralof told it, Ulfric's action had sparked a new fervor for independence in Skyrim's people, and for the god they named Ysmir, known as Talos in the rest of Tamriel.

Yet I had my doubts. Other than my father, I'd never met another Nord who would even mention Talos by his Nordic name. Thanks to the Thalmor, a whole generation of Nord children had grown up learning only that Talos was a great man who had united all of Tamriel, but not that he had gone on to achieve the status of a god. To the High Elves, or Altmer, the idea of Talos' godhood was heresy. In their view, humans were far beneath the mer – how could a mere man surpass the elves by becoming one of the Divines? The Great War began when the Aldmeri Dominion demanded that the Empire ban Talos worship and cede certain lands. It ended two years later when the exhausted Empire agreed to those very demands, despite having won a great battle to liberate the Imperial City from the occupying Altmer. The Empire survived, but at a price the Stormcloaks deemed too high.

The Emperor even gave the Thalmor, the ruling faction of the Aldmeri Dominion, free reign to enforce the ban across Skyrim. Thalmor justiciars had criss-crossed the land, rooting out Talos worship wherever they found it. Even uttering "by the Nine" rather than "by the Eight" when swearing an oath could draw suspicion. Suspects were snatched from their homes, never to be seen again. Soon, Nords were divided against Nords, afraid even to mention the name of Ysmir outside their homes, never knowing who might turn them over to the Thalmor. There were stories of whole families taken when a son or daughter let slip that they believed in Talos' godhood. After twenty-five years of suppression, it was hard to find a family in Skyrim that would admit to worshipping Talos, even to their closest friends. I had grown up thinking my father was the only Talos worshipper in all of Dragon Bridge.

"I'm surprised Ulfric found any followers of Ysmir to rise to his call," I said.
"But Deirdre, don't you see?" said Ralof. "There were many families like yours, keeping the love of Ysmir alive in secret, just waiting for the right moment to rise up. Ulfric provided the spark that ignited their fervor. When he shouted down Torygg, it was as if Ysmir had come again." Of course! Talos was said to have an innate ability with the Voice, the power he had used to conquer and unite Tamriel.

Yet, as Ralof went on about which of the nine holds supported which side and my head began to swim with the details, one thing became clear: many Nords still sided with the Empire. They had grown up not knowing about Ysmir the god, or had chosen to forget. They were far from ready to take up arms in 'Talos' defense. These milk-drinkers, as Ralof called them, believed Skyrim couldn't stand on its own without Imperial protection. Better a few Thalmor patrolling Skyrim, this faction believed, than a full-scale Aldmeri invasion. Many had joined the Imperial army to help quell the rebellion. It seemed Ralof was right about one thing – it would be long before Skyrim had peace.

Ulfric had not declared himself high king, but Ralof thought the jarls would crown him as soon as the war turned in the Stormcloaks' favor. I had to wonder where the other races that inhabited Skyrim fit in to the Nord plans for self-rule: the Dark Elves and the Wood Elves, the Argonians, the Khajiits, and the Bretons. And what about mixed-bloods like me? I couldn't remember how many times I had heard the shout "Skyrim is for the Nords!" I'd heard it too many times on the night my parents died. Too, Ysmir had been my father's god. My mother had followed Y'ffre, the elven god of the forest, and they had never forced me to choose between the two. My father had never responded to Ulfric's speeches, and I was even less inclined to follow him now. But I kept these doubts to myself, giving Ralof a different excuse for my hesitation.

"What could the Stormcloak army do with a girl like me?" I asked. I had some woodcraft, true, but I was no soldier. I had proven my ineptitude with a sword in Helgen Keep.

He looked at me as if I couldn't be more stupid. "Well, let's see, you're a dead-eye shot with a bow. Not sure what your range is but you'd be a natural in a line of archers. You're small but you have heart, and that's more than a lot of soldiers can say. And the Stormcloaks don't just need soldiers for open battle. There's sneaking into camps and Imperial forts, ambushing supply caravans, spy work, maybe even some jobs for an assassin."

"I told you. I think I did enough killing yesterday to last the rest of my life."

"Well, but there's your magic," he said. "That could be useful."

"Great. I can roast people alive. Very nice. That is, when it works."

"There are other branches of magic aren't there? I've heard of mages using healing spells. You could be a healer. Then you could help the Stormcloaks without hurting anyone."

"Well, maybe so," I said, pondering Ralof's idea. Though I still doubted the Stormcloak cause, the offer was tempting. No one had needed me for anything in a long time. And Ralof had appealed to my sense of pride. I had kept myself going by thinking of myself as the girl the Nord bastards couldn't kill, then the girl who survived three years on her own. Now I was the girl who escaped Helgen Keep. I was proud of my skills, and Ralof thought I could be useful in the Stormcloaks' great cause. I was nearly halfway to signing up, despite my reservations about Ulfric. But I didn't want Ralof to know that. "I need to learn more magic before I can do anything useful," I told him. "I wonder where mages learn their art?"

"I bet the mage in Dragonsreach – that's the jarl's hall in Whiterun – would be able to tell you. There's some sort of college in Winterhold, but I've never heard anything good about it. Some say that a college experiment pushed half of Winterhold into the sea. Others say it's filled with High
I punched him well and hard in the arm. His muscles were hard as rocks, but he pretended to wince in pain anyway. "And Bretons, you were about to say? It seems I'll fit right in."

"I'm sorry, Deirdre," he said, giving me that sheepish grin again. "You know I didn't mean anything. It's just hard to know if they're working for the good of Skyrim, or someone else."

"The good of Skyrim," I said. "What is the good of Skyrim? That's the question."

"If dragons really are coming back, that's not going to be good for Skyrim."

I had almost forgotten that part of yesterday's horrors. The fighting with the Imperials and what I'd witnessed in that torture chamber had eclipsed the earlier carnage. That, and I still had trouble believing what I had seen and felt. I said as much to Ralof.

"I can hardly believe it either," he said. "I thought dragons were just a legend. But I saw too many of the dragon's victims to think it was just a dream or a vision. Have you ever seen anything so powerful? Now I think the stories about the Ancient Nord's worshipping them must be true. How did they ever defeat the monsters?"

"I don't know," I said. "But maybe the dragon won't have anything more to do with us." I knew it was a vain hope even as I spoke. "Maybe it was just passing through and it's moved off to distant lands."

"From your mouth to Akatosh's ears," Ralof said.

I spent the rest of the morning bathing, spending an hour luxuriating in the hot water, then tending to my wounds and sorting my gear. I went to Riverwood Traders to sell the extra gear and weapons I had looted the day before. Ralof had assured me that Lucan would take Imperial armor, no questions asked. When I arrived, he and his sister Camilla were discussing a robbery that had happened the day before. They couldn't understand why a thief would break into their store only to steal one thing: a golden claw.

I was more interested in lightening my load and fattening my purse, so I turned his attention to business as soon as I could. I sold what gear I didn't need, then showed him the book I had taken off the mage. Its cover bore a symbol that looked like a hand with fingers of fire. On the inside were more runes I didn't understand. "Have you ever seen one of these?" I asked.

"That's a spell tome," he told me. "It will teach you a spell, if you know how to read it. I'll buy it off you, or I have others I could sell you."

"Can you teach me how to read it?"

"No, lass," Lucan said. "I'm no mage, I only sell the things. Not much call for them 'round here, truth be told. If you want to learn magic, try the court mage in Whiterun. Farengar, I think his name is."

I decided to keep the book. Maybe it was a healing spell. I left the store richer than I'd been in my young life, though that wasn't very rich at all.

When I returned, Gerdur had just prepared the mid-day meal. "This is what I miss about working the mill," Ralof said. "Gerdur knows we get hungry from all that hard labor…"

"I know it because I do the same work, brother," Gerdur interrupted. "I work as hard as either of
you, and I cook the meals." Then she turned to me. "My brother is a big lunk, but he's got a good heart."

"Well, whatever the reason," Ralof said, "Gerdur keeps us well fed."

RALOF was not wrong about his sister's cooking. The meal was served cold, yet it was delicious. There were boiled eggs, a spread made from smoked trout, a wheel of good Eidur cheese, pickles, black bread, ears of corn that had been left roasting on the coals of the morning fire, and fresh peaches at the height of their summer sweetness. As much as I had eaten for breakfast, I ate more now. We washed everything down with mead, the first I'd ever had. It was sweet and tasted like summer and it made me a bit light-headed.

"Girl has a healthy appetite," said Hod. He was a taciturn fellow.

"What was the news at the store?" Gerdur asked.

"Lucan says they were robbed. But the thief took just one thing, a golden claw."

"First a dragon flies overhead," said Gerdur, disbelief in her voice, "and then the store is robbed, both on the same day. What is Riverwood coming to? We need to tell Jarl Balgruuf to send us more hold guards. What if the dragon comes back?"

RALOF and I looked at each other. We both knew how little good a few guards would do against the dragon. "They could keep you safe from thieves, at least," Ralof told her.

There was a pause then, as each of us pondered the risk of the dragon returning to Riverwood. "RALOF says I should join the Stormcloaks," I said as a way to break the silence.

GERDUR seemed glad of the distraction. "He does, does he?" she said, grinning at him. "Wants you to go with him to Windhelm, eh? I'm not surprised, a bonnie lass such as yourself."

We both reddened. "No, really, Gerdur," Ralof stammered. "You should have seen her. The lass is like a wildcat in a fight. Not too skilled with a sword, maybe, but I wouldn't be here without her. She saved my life many times."

"As did you for me," I replied. "I owe you my life." I didn't know where to look, so I looked at the ground.

"And what about you, lass? Do you want to join the Stormcloaks?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Do you think I should?"

GERDUR looked at me thoughtfully. "Well, no one would be happier than me if the Stormcloaks win and we are able to worship Talos without these elves snatching us from our homes. But it's a hard road. Many Nords side with the Imperials, even many here in Riverwood. It's going to be a long war. Still, the more help the Stormcloaks have, the sooner it will be over and I'll have my brother back safe and sound."

RALOF would have none of her caution. "Gerdur, it's only a matter of time before Nords wake up and recognize that Ulfric is their true high king. Especially when they learn of the villainy we witnessed in Helgen."

"RALOF," his sister replied, "I know Ulfric is your lord and your hero, but he is not high king yet. That will have to wait until the jarlmoont names a new ruler." She turned to me. "It may be we haven't answered your question very well. But tell me, do you want to join the Stormcloaks?"
I looked from one to the other. They had both been so welcoming, and I owed Ralof my life. I didn't want to offend them. But I was troubled. "It's just that … there's something about Ulfric. Something from the past, when I was a small girl." Then I told them of the fear the name Ulfric stirred in my parents, how my father would go silent, Talos worshipper though he was, whenever people praised Ulfric as a hero of Skyrim. "I don't know what any of it was about, but I know my parents feared him for some reason."

If I had expected them to react with anger to this criticism, I was wrong. Gerdur was more interested in my parents. "You poor child," she said. "Ralof told me you lost your parents – at such a young age, too. And you've been on your own ever since?" She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "Do you want to tell us what happened?"

Her eyes were so kind, how could I not give in? I realized I had never told anyone the details, keeping my past a secret from the few people I had fallen in with during my travels.

Ralof seemed concerned too. "Go ahead, lass. If Nords are part of this villainy, I'd like to know."

After keeping it pent up for so long, my story burst forth in a torrent of speech, more words than I had spoken in all of three years.

"It all begins with my father," I began. My father was a Nord, born in Whiterun. Unlike most Nords, he was fascinated with all the different peoples of Tamriel, and he always dreamed of traveling to far places. So he became an itinerant trader of goods between the continent's provinces. He traveled from Skyrim to High Rock and Hammerfell, down to the Imperial City in Cyrodiil, even as far as Elsweyr, the land of the Khajiits far to the south. He thought he was promoting understanding between the different peoples of Tamriel by letting them share bits of each others' cultures. He believed his own people would benefit the most from that exchange. That was before the Great War.

Once the war broke out, he traveled mainly between Skyrim and High Rock. "He met my mother there, in Jehanna," I said. "She was a dress-maker's daughter. He had delivered a wagon load of Cyrodiilian silk when she was tending the store alone. To hear them tell it, it was love at first sight, as if someone had slipped them both a potion."

But my mother's parents were displeased at their daughter falling in love with a big, gregarious Nord and threatened to disown her. So my parents eloped and then tried to continue my father's trading business for a time. But my mother didn't take to the traveling life, and my father knew he needed a place to settle down. They chose Dragon Bridge because of its mixed Nord and Breton population.

"They thought the Bretons would appreciate a shop with goods that reminded them of home," I said. "Too, Father thought Mother would be happier among her own people. So they set up a shop, Specialties of High Rock, and lived above it. A few years later I came along. I'm sure they hoped that as I got older, I could help around the store. They couldn't have been more wrong."

For I was willful, a wild child. Never was a daughter more poorly matched with her parents. While their work kept them in the shop much of the time, I only wanted to be out of doors. "From the time I could walk," I said, "I was always toddling outside to see the horses in the stable, or watch butterflies in the fields." As I grew older, instead of sweeping the store or helping sort the
merchandise, I was roaming farther into the forest and mountains. I loved the trees and the flowers and every wild thing. The forest was as much my home as Dragon Bridge, or so it felt to me.

"But Deirdre," Gerdur put in, "weren't you afraid a wild animal would attack you? There must be bears and wolves around Dragon Bridge. We have plenty of them here, the Nine know."

I almost cried then, Gerdur reminded me so much of my mother. "Mother thought the same," I said. "Don't go out there, Deirdre, a wolf will eat you,' she would say. But as strange as it sounds, no wild animal ever bothered me. It was as if I were one of them. When I was with my playmates, we were too boisterous a bunch and wild animals avoided us. But when I was alone, I could sense when the wolves and bears were near. I learned to steal silently through the forest so they didn't notice me.

"Only once was I ever surprised by a predator. I came around a corner in the trail and found myself facing a bear. I must have been only nine or ten, but I wasn't afraid. The bear looked at me, and for some reason I thought to shush it, as you would a baby. 'Sshhh,' I said, with my finger to my lips. The bear turned and ambled off. I never feared bears after that." As it turned out, the wolves and the bears were not the most dangerous things in the forest.

The years went by. As I grew older my parents became more impatient with my poor work ethic. The worst was when my father was off on one of his purchasing trips. Then my mother truly needed my help, but the most I could manage was an hour or two waiting on customers or dusting shelves before I was out the door again. If only I had been a woodcutter's son, I told myself, or an alchemist's daughter, then I could help my parents and still be in the forests and fields.

The best times were when my father would take me on his trips, though that was rare enough. It was good to be out of the store, riding along beside him in our wagon, traveling through open country. I loved seeing the new places. I remembered the salt marshes of Morthal with all their strange water plants, the seashore near Dawnstar, the open tundra of Whiterun, the mountains of High Rock, the warm uplands of northern Cyrodiil. Though we never had time to get off the road and explore those places, it was far better than being cooped up.

Once, I begged my father to take me to the Imperial City, I had heard so much about it. I imagined it filled with life, with shops and palaces and bold fighters and great bards. But he just laughed, and explained it was far easier to order goods from Tamriel's capital by boat. The Solitude docks were only a half-day's ride from our home.

There was one thing that could keep me inside when I was young: a good story. Father would tell me tales when I was very small, or read to me from our library. He was always bringing new books home from his travels. Then I learned to read for myself and found it just as easy to read outside on a sunny day as it was indoors. I liked nothing better than to go down by the Karth River with a book and lie in the sun reading, listening to the water splashing over rocks. I would collect flowers and press them between the pages. And not all of the books told tales of adventure and romance. From some, I learned the names of the flowers I admired, lupine and heliotrope and bitterroot. From others, I learned of the history of the Nord and Breton peoples, and of the elves and of life in Elsweyr and Black Marsh, of the great catastrophe that had sundered Morrowind. "It's strange now that I think of it," I said to Gerdur and Ralof. "There were no histories of the Great War. I wonder why."

Being mostly out of doors, most of my playmates were boys. The girls in our town were nice enough, but they didn't like being outside. They wanted to play dolls, or later learn handicrafts, sewing and baking and such. None of that was for me. But neither were the boys an exact fit as playmates. They were never content to just explore the forests and fields, looking at the birds and
collecting flowers, or sitting quietly reading books. There always had to be a game, a goal, a purpose. They always wanted to climb a peak, build a fort, or most often play at being soldiers. Boys and their swords! I would play along for a while. I became good at climbing and wrestling and fighting with sticks. I was agile and quick, though the boys soon grew to outmatch me in height and weight. When I grew tired of these games, I would go off on my own again.

As we grew older, the boys had to join their parents in the family trade. Osmer the woodcutter's son was off in the forest with his father, cutting and hauling trees. The same with the miller's son and the brewer's son and the farmers' sons. All my former playmates were busy with their family work, or apprenticed off to other families, and I was more and more alone. Everyone wondered why I wasn't doing the same for my family. We were all in our teens now, almost grown, and we had to learn to accept our responsibilities. "But the truth was, I was a negligent, willful daughter," I said. "I'll regret those hours I missed sharing with my parents until the day I die. For I did love them, little as I obeyed them."

Everything changed one beautiful summer's day, shortly after I turned fourteen. I was out rambling through the forest as usual, enjoying the warm sun, the cool shade and the bright blue sky, when I came across my old friend Osmer. He was by himself, marking likely trees for his father's woodcutters, who were not far away. I could hear the sound of their saws through the woods. Osmer had been one of my best friends, and I was glad to see him. Also, a little confused. He had grown into a strapping youth – he was a year older than me – with long red hair and the beginnings of a beard. He had a quick smile and a handsome face and a body grown strong from all the wood cutting.

"I'm sure all the girls in the village found him quite fetching," I said to Gerdur. I couldn't look at Ralof during this part. "But I didn't know what I felt." All I could think of was my former playmate, a little boy my own size. I used to tussle with him as if he were my brother. Now he stood more than a head taller than I.

We fell into talk about old times, but it was not easy. I kept looking bashfully at the ground, and he was uneasy too. Finally, more to break the awkwardness than anything, I suggested a race to the nearest tree. We were off in an instant, running hard. His strides were longer, but he wore big lumberman's boots that slowed him. We reached the tree at the same time and fell to the carpet of pine needles, laughing.

"Let's wrestle," he said. It seemed so natural. We had wrestled dozens of times before, all in innocence. I had won most often, too, but now it wasn't much of a contest. I nearly got him in a headlock, but he was able to throw me onto the forest duff and pin me on my back. He was laughing, and then his face grew more serious. He was still smiling, looking at me intensely. I looked away. "Deirdre," he said, and he began stroking the bare skin of my arm.

"I suppose you might think that was the perfect romantic moment," I said, again looking only at Gerdur. "And it might have been, for another girl and boy. It might have been for us, if only … He started hugging me and I felt his scratchy cheeks against mine and then I felt his..." I stared at the floor, remembering. I could feel the flush rising on my face. "... his manhood. It was hard and I could feel it against my thigh. He still had me pinned down and he had grown so much bigger than me. That's when I panicked."

I didn't tell them about the wave of revulsion that swept over me. Maybe if I had been speaking to Gerdur alone, but not with Ralof there. He reminded me too much of Osmer. In that moment, with Osmer on top of me and his manhood pressing needfully against me, I felt nothing but disgust. Of course, no girl can grow up without once or twice glimpsing her father's privates. I had always found them grotesque. I knew the rudiments of what men did with women, but I couldn't imagine
letting that thing – those things – near me. I had asked my mother about this, and she assured me that every girl felt the same squeamishness, that once I met the right young man, it would all feel natural and right. And now here I was and it didn't feel natural, or right, just disgusting.

Ralof broke in to my tale. "That lad was wrong. Every Nord boy is taught the consequences of mistreating a lass. Even touching a girl without permission, or stealing a kiss – everyone knows there are punishments for such things, and even more for what he did."

I looked at Ralof. He seemed ready to go off and fight Osmer right then. "I don't think he meant anything by it," I said. "Looking back, I can see that he just got carried away. If only I had just asked him to stop! But I panicked, because I was frightened and I didn't know if he would stop if I told him no, and I knew I couldn't stop him if he kept on, and there was no one else around."

"You shouldn't have had to tell him to stop in the first place! No lad, even one that young, should put a lass in such a position!"

"Brother, let Deirdre finish her story," Gerdur said.

"As it was," I went on, 'I yelled at him, 'No!' as loud as I could. And that's when it happened. I was pushing against his chest, and he was blasted away from me. He flew through the air and hit a tree and crumpled to the ground."

That was the only way I could describe it. Something happened then, something I didn't understand while I told the story. I still don't understand it completely, with all I've learned in the years since.

I sat there for a moment in disbelief. Then I started to cry. I ran over to him, shouting at him through my tears. "What have I done? Osmer, I didn't mean to! Wake up, you have to wake up!" Or some such. This part all becomes a blur. He was still breathing, but unconscious. He had a scrape and his tunic was torn where his shoulder had hit the tree, but he seemed unhurt otherwise. I kept crying and pleading with him to wake up, slapping his face. Then the woodcutters came running.

"We heard a noise. What happened?" They were shouting and asking questions and trying to help Osmer and I could only cry and shake my head. Osmer's father pushed me aside and tried to wake his son, examining his body for wounds. "What happened?" he repeated. I was becoming hysterical.

Finally, Osmer opened his eyes. He looked around for a moment, as if trying to remember where he was. Then he looked at me, and his eyes grew fearful. That's almost the worst part of all – the fear in his eyes and then the accusing look that came over him as he remembered what had happened. "She … she hexed me!" he said, and shrank away.

The woodcutters turned to look at me. "Witch!" said one. "Breton witch!" said another. "There's always been something unnatural about you," said a third, "roaming about the woods on your own. What are you doing out here?"

"I'll wager her mother's been teaching her magic, and necromancy and who knows what all!"

"You never should have come here, Breton! Skyrim is for the Nords!" Never mind that I was half-Nord, born and raised in Skyrim.

I crept back away from them. They looked like they wanted to grab me, but they also looked afraid. I turned and ran. They didn't follow. I suppose they wanted to get Osmer back to the village. "You'll pay for this!" Osmer's father yelled after me.

I didn't go far. Whatever had happened to me, whatever I had done, it had weakened me. I
collapsed in the shelter of a hawthorn bush and sobbed. I didn't know what I should do or when I could go back to the village. I must have slept then, because when I opened my eyes it was dark. "Maybe it's safe to go home," I thought.

But as I was nearing the village I saw the first torches. The villagers were out looking for me. It was easy to keep to the shadows where they wouldn't see me. I kept looking for my parents among them. Wouldn't they be out looking for me too? But I only saw Nord faces in the torchlight. "We'll catch the witch," I heard one of them say, "and then we'll show all these Bretons what we think of their magic."

Closer to the village I could see a bright glow. I grew even more fearful then. I crept around on the hillside above the town, and my fear was confirmed. Our home and shop were aflame. Great jets of fire poured from the windows and out through holes in the roof. Occasionally, a popping sound would come from inside: a bottle of ale bursting, or maybe one of the potions my father sold. A crowd stood around, doing nothing, oohing and aahing with each explosion. Then with a loud crash the upper story fell inwards, sending sparks and billowing smoke into the night. That pushed the crowd back. By the firelight I could see that they all were Nords. The Bretons of the town knew to stay inside. But surely my parents had been able to escape the fire? I held on to this hope all through that long dark night, as I watched the fire die down, waiting for the dawn.

By this point in my story I had begun to cry. I hadn't cried in years, why now? Gerdur squeezed my hand to give me strength for this last, most difficult part to tell. Tears rolled down her cheeks too.

"I waited on that hill for the villagers to go back to their beds. But they posted a watch, thinking to catch me when I tried to return home."

Morning came and a crowd gathered again around the smoldering ruin while I remained hidden on the hillside above. The men returned from their fruitless search for me. Then the Nords went back to their business. When the streets seemed clear, a few of the Bretons who had been friendly toward my parents gathered around the house, discussing what to do. Finally, they began sifting through the ruin. When they hauled two charred bodies into the street and off toward the cemetery, my despair was complete.

"Even from a distance, it was awful," I said. "I wished I had a chance to say goodbye. No, I wished I had died in their place. I was the one who brought us this ruin, I should have been the one to pay the price."

Gerdur came around the table then and took me in her arms. "There, there, sweet child, don't say that. No one deserves a death like that. You can't blame yourself." I sobbed and sobbed then, until the front of Gerdur's dress was soaked with tears, while she stroked my hair. It was the first time in three years that I had cried. It was the first time in three years that I felt loved.

Once I had no more tears left in me, the rest of my story was quickly told – how I crept away from that hillside above Dragon Bridge with grief and revenge in my heart. How I nursed that hatred as I fled south, living from hand to mouth on edible plants I knew, berries, mushrooms, the occasional frog or fish I could catch with bare hands. I crossed into Cyrodiil before the first snows closed the high passes. I knew the climate would be warmer there, more forgiving to those who must live by their wits in the forest. That, and I wanted to be shut of the Nords for a time while I plotted my revenge.

Along the way I stole a bow and learned to make my own arrows. I became a good enough shot that I could catch small game, rabbits, squirrels and marmots, even a young deer sometimes. I learned some measure of control over my magical power. I learned to produce flame just by thinking about it, maybe because the fire that killed my parents was burned so intensely in my
memory. I fell in with a group of thieves for a while, learning some of their arts. But I left them soon enough because I didn't enjoy thieving, and they stole more than they needed to survive. And one of them was always eyeing me in a way I didn't like. He knew I had magic or he might have tried to do more than look. I decided I felt safer in the forest than anywhere men were.

And so, when I felt ready to take my revenge, I returned to Skyrim. I was headed for Dragon Bridge to find the ones who set our home on fire. I assumed Osmer's father was chief among them. I had recognized one or two faces standing around the burning house, and I had them on my list as well. But in truth, I didn't care which Nords would pay for these villagers' crimes. Nords would pay, that's all I cared about.

"And how about now," Gerdur asked. "Do you still seek your revenge?"

I stared long and hard at the floor. I realized my voice had grown louder during this last part of my story, my breathing more rapid. I felt my old anger returning. The vow I had made yesterday seemed far off. Why had I ever given in to such weakness? Then I looked at Gerdur. Her kind face was full of concern. I looked at Ralof and remembered he had saved my life.

"No, I ... You and Ralof have shown me that not all Nords are like the ones in Dragon Bridge. Ralof saved my life yesterday, even though Ulfric wanted to leave me. And you've been so kind, almost like my..." I let the thought go, not trusting my voice to say the word, "mother."

"And what about your father? He was a Nord, too."

"My father was a great man, not like most ... Well, there weren't a lot of Nords like him in our town."

"Yet you must have met other Nords on your trading trips. Were none of them as honorable and educated as your father?"

It was true, I had liked some of my father's Nord trading partners. If they were surprised when he showed up with his half-Breton daughter, they didn't show it. They had always treated me with courtesy and respect. But these were men of the marketplace and the cities, used to dealing with all sorts, Khajiits, Dunmer, Argonians, as well as Bretons. In the villages and towns of Skyrim it was different.

"There are good people and bad people everywhere, child," Gerdur told me, "no matter what race. Most people are a bit of both. And even good people will do bad things if they're scared enough. Seeking revenge in Dragon Bridge can only lead you to a bad end. You nearly lost your life yesterday. Don't throw it away now." She squeezed my hand again.

She was right, I told myself. My anger had come and gone like a summer rain shower. Now I saw that taking indiscriminate revenge on Nords would make me no better than the villagers who killed my parents. Then those Nords' families would want their own revenge on the Bretons, and where would it end?

"I still want justice," I told Gerdur. "Where were the guards when the villagers were setting our house afire? And where are the people who did it?"

Ralof spoke up then. "Deirdre, burning people out of their homes is not the Nord way. That was the work of cowards and milk-drinkers, and they should see justice. It was the jarl in Solitude's fault, High King Torygg. He was supposed to keep all of his people safe, but he was weak. And now that his queen, Elisif, is jarl, I can't imagine things will get much better in Haafingar Hold."
Mention of the jarl turned the conversation back to politics. I was glad to change the topic. Telling my tale had been exhausting, and I doubted we would easily resolve what should be done about my parents' killers. I soon excused myself to see if Gerdur's guest bed might be more comfortable in the daytime.

That evening, Hod and Gerdur were making plans for the next day. They had a load of planks ready to take down to Whiterun. While Hod was dealing with the delivery, Gerdur would go up to Dragonsreach and try to speak to the jarl or his steward about more guards for Riverwood.

She turned to me. "Why don't you come to the city with us, child? I'm sure the jarl will want to hear what happened at Helgen."

Me? They wanted a seventeen-year-old who had spent three years in the forest to speak with the jarl? "Why not Ralof?" I asked.

"They know I'm with the Stormcloaks," he replied. "Jarl Balgruuf has tried to maintain his independence from the Empire, but he still takes their money and their troops when need be. He can't be seen to harbor rebels. He'd probably have me arrested, though I served him faithfully for five years."

"You're the only other who saw the dragon up close," Gerdur said. "Jarl Balgruuf needs to hear your story. Besides, you're a well-spoken young lady for all your time living in the forest. Must be all those books."

"And there's your magic," Ralof said. "You want to know more about your power and how to control it, right? Maybe you could meet the court mage after you talk to the jarl."

What else was there to do? Somehow, all of the events of the last three years began with my magic, or whatever had happened that day with Osmer. The more I thought about it, I didn't even know if it was magic. It seemed more like what the dragon had done in Helgen. That was even more disturbing. Suddenly, I didn't know who or what I was. Finding out seemed the most important thing I could do. There would be time for justice for my parents later. Magic or dragons, one of them held the answers I sought, and we were going to talk about both at Dragonsreach. "I'll go," I said, "if you think it will help you get more aid here in Riverwood. And if it will help me discover more about who I am."

And so the next morning we stood around the loaded wagon saying our goodbyes. Hod and Gerdur had already climbed in. Ralof gave me a long hug, looking at me as if he had something important to tell me. But then he looked off into the distance for a moment before saying, "I hope you'll think about joining the Stormcloaks one day, lass." He looked down at his boots, and muttered, "I'm … I'm going to Windhelm myself in a few days."

I looked at him seriously too. "I'll think about it, Ralof, my friend." I gave him a playful punch in the arm. "Don't let those Imperials get you, eh? Or the dragon, either."

Then I was in the cart and we were off. I turned back to see Ralof waving goodbye, still looking as if he had more to say.
I was out of breath when I reached the top of the stairs to Dragonsreach, the great hall that crowned the city of Whiterun. But the climb wasn't the reason my heart was racing. I would have to speak to the jarl on my own, and I was nervous. I hadn't been in a great city for years, and I had never spoken to a jarl before – unless I counted meeting Ulfric in Helgen, and that hardly seemed the same. There, we were all "brothers and sisters in binds." Now I was supposed to face a different jarl in his great hall, the imposing building with lofty peaked roofs looming in front of me. How would I be received, a mere girl dressed in a tattered tunic and fur boots?

I wished Ralof were here. He knew Dragonsreach well, and he was known to Jarl Balgruuf. But there was the possibility of a price on his head in Whiterun. Even I would have to be careful with what I said about my time in Helgen – yet one more reason to be nervous, at least until I learned where the jarl stood on the Civil War. But how would I do that? It all seemed too difficult. Surely this was a job better suited to someone familiar with the ways of great palaces and courts, not a girl who had been living on her own in the woods.

Already the guards standing on either side of the great hall doors were looking quizzically at me. To steady my nerves I turned away and pretended to take in the view.

And a spectacular view it was. East to west stretched the great Plains of Whiterun far below Dragonsreach, a high expanse of tundra dotted with pools and streams sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Bordering the plain, snow-clad peaks thrust skyward. To the east stood the greatest mountain in all Tamriel, the Throat of the World, with the mighty White River flowing at its feet. Even from the lofty summit of Dragonsreach, that mountain seemed to stretch into the sky forever. I had to tilt my head far back to view the summit, but it was lost in a ring of cloud. To the south were the lesser but still imposing Brittleshin Mountains around Riverwood, with the White River flowing out of them.

That had been the course of our journey, down from the mountains along the river, then west across the plains for a short distance to Whiterun. From here it was easy to pick out each of the spots where our progress had been delayed. First, the wagon had lost a wheel. It took hours to retrieve it from the deep gorge into which it had rolled, then to fashion a lever to raise the wagon and all of its load, and finally to reattach the wheel and set the wagon down again. Then, as we approached Whiterun with its three levels looming over us, we came across a group of fighters battling a giant.

Giants are harmless if left alone, but fearsome when roused to anger. They live on their own away from towns and cities, and are usually no trouble as they tend their herds of mammoth. But this one had wandered onto a farm, wreaking havoc as he went. Carts were overturned, fences broken and the livestock long fled. The giant stood twice as high as the tallest fighter facing him. He wielded a mammoth-bone cudgel and wore rough mammoth-hide armor reinforced with mammoth bones. One blow from that club would likely crush any fighter who came within reach.
Unfortunately for us, the giant had taken his stand in a field near the road. Hod stopped the wagon well back to avoid getting caught in the fight. Already the horses were whickering with fear.

The three fighters were having difficulty. Two of them took turns darting in and out with their two-handed swords, always remaining cautious of the giant's club. An archer stood farther back, firing over and over again. Her arrows seemed to enrage the giant more than harm it. The fight went on like this for a minute or two and it seemed the giant was finally tiring. Then the archer ran out of arrows.

"I'll be right back," I told Hod and Gerdur, and I jumped down from the wagon before they could stop me. I only meant to give the archer the arrows from my quiver, but adventures seemed determined to find me wherever I went. Before I could reach her, the giant had come between us. It was very near the road now, swinging its club wildly at the two sword-wielders.

I notched an arrow and let fly at the giant's back. The missile pierced his shoulder. It didn't seem to hurt him much but it did get his attention. He turned and took a step toward me. One of the sword-wielders took advantage of this distraction, plunging in and giving a great blow to the giant's lower leg, right above his calf-high boot. The giant threw his head back in a howl of pain and rage, exposing the soft flesh of his throat. My next arrow flew true, and then the giant was pawing at his neck while a fount of blood gushed forth. The fighters were on him then, and he soon fell – right across the road.

That quickly, I had broken my vow that I was done with killing. Why couldn't the giant have stayed at his mound, tending his mammoths and keeping out of harm's way? But who knew? Maybe this one had killed the farmer or his family and deserved death. It was sad either way.

The archer came over. She had long brown hair with red highlights. Her leather armor seemed designed more to provide freedom of movement than protection, it left so much flesh exposed. Her blue eyes were piercing, and her war paint was three diagonal stripes that made her look fierce, as if she had been raked by a sabre cat's claws. "Thanks for your help, stranger," she said. "That was a good shot."

"It was there, and I took it," I said. "You were doing fine until you ran out of arrows. I only wanted to give you some of mine."

"It was a good thing you chose to shoot instead. Giants are dangerous even for us Companions. We are in your debt. I'm Aela, and this is Vilkas." She nodded at one of the sword-wielders who had come up to join us, a dark-featured Nord with black hair, dark circles under his eyes, and a three-day beard. He wore stout plate armor inset with the head of a wolf on the chest plate.

"Companions?" I asked as Hod and the other fighter began trying to drag the giant clear of the road.

"You haven't heard of us?" Aela asked. "You must not be from around here. We are an ancient order of brothers and sisters in arms, founded by Ysgramor when he sailed from Atmora to retake Skyrim from the elves. I'm descended from Hrotti Blackblade, one of the original Five Hundred Companions who accompanied Ysgramor. Now we help people and solve problems, if the coin is right. You look like a good fighter. You should think about joining us."

"I'll think about it," I told her. "I'm new here, and I could use some friends."

"You can find us at Jorrvaskr, our mead-hall in Whiterun's Wind District," Vilkas said. "You can't miss it – it looks like an upturned boat."
It took us another hour to haul the giant out of the way and reopen the road. By the time we reached the stables, the sun was slanting low in the west.

"Deirdre," Gerdur said as she got down from the wagon, "I said I would go with you to Dragonsreach, but now I'm needed here, and we have to warn Jarl Balgruuf today. I know you'll do just fine delivering the message to him. Anyone in Whiterun can point you the way to his hall. You can't miss it, right at the top of the hill."

She didn't need to tell me the way to Dragonsreach. It had been long since my last trip to Whiterun with my father, but its shops and houses and mead halls seemed familiar. It even felt a bit like a homecoming. My father had known many of the townspeople, having grown up here. I thought I recognized one or two of the people I passed on the street, but none recognized me. Five years had changed me more than they had changed the city. I remembered looking up at the long flight of stairs leading to the Great Hall atop Dragonsreach. It had seemed impossibly high and imposing then. It still did. But I climbed those steps and now found myself at the jarl's doors. Would he listen to me, or would his thoughts be on his fast-approaching supper? I took a deep breath and approached the guards.

"I bring news for the jarl," I told them.

"We don't get many teenage girls petitioning the jarl, lass," the taller one said. "Were your parents too busy to come?"

"I have news of a dragon that attacked Helgen two days past. I was there, I saw it."

The guard laughed. "A dragon, you say. You've been listening to too many old tales."

"No Badnir, wait," said the other guard. "I heard the steward say something about dragons before I started my watch. We had better let her in."

"All right, you may pass," said the first guard, and the great doors swung open at his push.

Inside, the hall was almost as imposing as without. It was built all from wood, with great timbers rising to the vaulted ceiling far above. At the center of the ceiling, a skylight let in shafts of sunlight, sending rays of brilliance through the rafters. The room had three levels, starting with the lower entry where I stood. Up a half flight of steps was a banquet area lined with long tables and rooms off to either side. As I climbed those steps several warriors sitting at the tables looked up to stare at me. Beyond them, up a shorter set of stairs, was the jarl's dais. He sat there on his throne, counselors and guards surrounding him, and a dragon's skull looming on the wall above, its jaws opened wide. Dragonsreach was aptly named, it seemed.

It was a long walk up that hall, with so many eyes on me. The fighters at the table, a large man in a full set of steel armor and a shield-maiden with jet black hair, nodded as I passed. Through the side door to the right, I could see a man in hooded robes poring over a stack of books. Finally I approached the dais. A female Dunmer in full armor descended the steps to confront me, but not before I overheard the jarl.

"What you say is true, Avenicci," he was saying. "The Empire has helped us immensely. Yet I will not plunge my city into this Civil War, on either side. Many good people here support the Stormcloaks, and many more yearn to once again worship Talos freely. If we enter the war on the Imperial side, there will be bloodshed in our streets. Let the Empire deal with Ulfric and the other jarls who support him. Leave me and my city out of it."

"I say again, what is your business here?" I had forgotten about the Dark Elf, the jarl's words had
so distracted me. She glared at me now, her eyes a bright red that matched her magenta hair. "Receiving hours are almost at an end, and the jarl will be going to his dinner. I am Irileth, Jarl Balgruuf's housecarl and marshal of his hall-troops. Whatever your business, you can conduct it with me."

"I bring news for the jarl from Riverwood and Helgen," I told her.

"Helgen! What do you know of Helgen?"

I looked at her stern face. Would she believe my story? I almost didn't believe it myself. I took a deep breath. "There was a dragon. It destroyed the town and the keep, along with many lives."

The jarl must have heard me. "Come closer, lass," he said. Up close, he was not that imposing. Though he was dressed regally, with a golden circlet around his long blonde hair, a thick fur mantle about his shoulders, and a richly woven surcoat draped over his tunic, he slouched on his throne taking his ease. In the books, jarls and kings always bore themselves proudly erect, but so far that had not been my experience. I stood two steps below the dais, and met him at eye level.

"If you tell true, lass," the jarl said, "then you were one of the few who made it out of Helgen alive. We had the news just this morning, though I didn't want to believe it. Yet I don't know what could have caused such destruction other than some beast out of legend. And you saw the dragon with your own eyes?"

"Yes, my lord, as close as I am to you right now."

The jarl drew a quick breath and his eyes grew wider. "And what did you think when you saw this dragon?"

"I … I could hardly believe it though it was right in front of me. I've read about dragons in storybooks, but I thought they were all dead long ago, if they ever existed. I thought I was having a dream, or a vision, right before…" I was going to say before the Imperials beheaded me, but then thought better of it. "But then everyone was running and screaming and fire was raining from the sky, and I knew it was real."

The jarl looked at me as if appraising my story, then looked up at the dragon skull, its jaws wide above his head. "Many say the dragons were always just a myth, but I cannot sit beneath this skull and doubt they once existed. But for one to come back to life now, it's almost too much to believe."

He turned back to me, and his voice became stern. "Now tell me, how comes it that a slip of a girl such as yourself survived when so many others died?"

This was not what I expected. I thought my challenge would be to convince the jarl there really had been a dragon. Now I had to explain how I had survived, without mentioning the help the Stormcloaks had given me. He seemed neutral toward the rebels, but it would do no good tempting fate.

"Well," I began. "I … I escaped through the caverns below the keep. And I … someone helped me."

Jarl Balgruuf looked at me more kindly. "I didn't mean to frighten you, lass. I'm just a gruff old man. We have had but a few lines in a message this morning. If you were there, you can tell us much more. If there is a dragon in Skyrim, we need to learn as much as we can about it. Now, tell me your name."

"Deirdre, my lord," I said.
"No need to call me my lord, Deirdre. Jarl Balgruuf will do. And are you from Helgen, Deirdre?"

"Dragon Bridge."

"Ah, I've been through there several times when visiting Solitude. I always admired those carven dragon heads on the bridge. Tell me, was this dragon much like those?"

"Very like, only this dragon's head was larger."

"Larger? And how did it compare to the one above me here? This is the skull of Numinex, the dragon that was imprisoned in Dragonsreach by my predecessor of long ago, Olaf One-Eye."

I looked at the skull, trying to imagine how large it would appear when covered with flesh and scales. "Larger, I believe, Jarl Balgruuf."

He thought about that for a moment. "And what were you doing in Helgen, Deirdre? Were you there with your parents?"

"My parents died three years ago, sir. I live on my own now. I was … just passing through Helgen when the dragon attacked."

He looked at Avenicci and then at Irileth, then back at me. "Something else was happening in Helgen that day. Did you see anything out of the ordinary before the dragon attacked?"

"I was in the inn. Some Imperial soldiers came into town, and there was some shouting, but I didn't pay it much attention. I was busy packing to leave."

"And where were you headed?"

I said the first thing that came into my head. "Winterhold, Jarl Balgruuf. The college, I mean."

He looked surprised. "Winterhold! Do you have some skill with magic?"

"A bit, sir. I want to learn more."

He looked at the knapsack I carried. "And does it take you long to pack, Deirdre?"

Avenicci had been growing increasingly impatient with the jarl's lengthy questioning, fidgeting and shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was balding, and dressed in fine garments from Cyrodiil. Now he spoke up. "What if we told you that Ulfric and a band of his Stormcloak brigands were scheduled for execution on that morning? And that Ulfric escaped when the dragon attacked? Surely the whole town had turned out to view the spectacle. And you're telling us you remained in the inn because you were too busy packing a small knapsack? Her story smells to Aetherius, my jarl."

I tried to look at him as calmly as I could. I pretended I was the girl of three days before, the one who didn't even know what a Stormcloak was. "Do you mean those warriors with the blue uniforms? Are they some sort of rebel war-band?"

"You mean you don't know Skyrim is in the midst of a civil war with Ulfric and his Stormcloak traitors?" Avenicci frowned at me.

"I've been living in the wilds of Cyrodiil for the past three years. I've had no news of Skyrim in that time. When I heard the roar of the dragon, I thought to stay hidden in the inn. Then it set the inn on fire and I ran out into the street. A soldier was standing there. He said to follow him into the keep,
so I did." Then I told them everything I could of the dragon attacking, keeping silent on the fighting between the Imperials and the Stormcloaks and my part in it.

"You say the walls of Helgen couldn't withstand the blasts of the dragon's fire breath?" the jarl asked me when I was done.

I shook my head. "Many of the tower walls lay in rubble when we entered the keep. I can only imagine how much more the dragon destroyed after we descended into the caverns."

"What do you say now, Avenicci? Do you still think our city walls will defend us if the dragon comes here?"

"Still, my jarl, this is no time for rash action. We need more information."

"And that's what this girl is giving us." He turned to me again. "I've heard there are frightening things in those caverns – spiders and bears. How did you get past them?"

"I've survived on my own in the forests of Cyrodiil, Jarl Balgruuf. Frostbite spiders and cave bears hold little fear for me. I saw far worse things in the dungeons below Helgen." I looked him square in the eye. Remembering the horrors of Helgen suddenly made facing a jarl seem a small thing. Did he know of that chamber of Oblivion beneath the keep, and the methods the Imperials employed on their enemies?

"You are a brave girl to have made it out of Helgen and through its caverns alive, Deirdre. I thank you for bringing me this information. I had hoped you might have seen a weakness in the dragon's defenses. Yet you say nothing the soldiers did seemed to harm it?"

"No, sir," I replied. "They used arrows, bolts, fire arrows, and even a mage's fire spells. Nothing seemed to slow it."

"We will have our hands full then, if the dragon attacks us. Still, it is good to know what we are facing. You've shown initiative in coming here on your own. Avenicci, see that she gets a new set of studded armor as a token of our appreciation."

"My jarl, I have to protest," Avenicci said. "For all we know this girl was with the Stormcloaks when they escaped. She still hasn't said which soldiers helped her out of Helgen. Maybe Ulfric sent her here as a spy."

"Proventus," said the jarl, "why must you always be so mistrustful? Does this girl look like a warrior, or a spy? She's a Breton, too. Why would she side with them? And what could they hope to achieve, in any case?"

"They might learn what we know about the dragon. Or whether we plan to join the Imperials in the Civil War."

"It's no secret that I plan to stay out of the war. I've told both sides as much. And we know nothing of this dragon, what of it? No, I believe the girl speaks true. Now, Deirdre, was there anything else?"

"My jarl, someone did send me here – the people of Riverwood. When I passed there, they were in a panic about the dragon. They saw it flying over the town after it left Helgen. Also, there was a burglary at the Riverwood Traders. They request a detachment of guards to help protect them."

"My jarl," said Irileth. "We should send guards to Riverwood at once. They face the most immediate danger of attack. And a strong presence will deter thievery as well."
"Jarl Balgruuf, this is just what the Stormcloaks want," said Avenicci. "They would love nothing more than to see us weaken our defense of Whiterun by sending our fighters hither and yon. And Jarl Siddgeir of Falkreath will view the massing of Whiterun troops on his borders as a provocation. He may conclude that we've joined the Stormcloak rebellion."

"That's enough, Avenicci," Jarl Balgruuf snapped. "I will not sit idle while a dragon threatens any part of my hold. And I would rather fight the beast out in the countryside than here in the crowded streets of Whiterun. Can you imagine the carnage if the dragon attacked here? I will have those guards sent to Riverwood, understood?"

Avenicci knew he was beaten. "Yes, my jarl, as you wish," he said, bowing and taking his leave.

"Now, Deirdre, the people of Riverwood can rest more easily, thanks to you. Your experience with the dragon may prove useful to us as well, should it attack here. Will you be staying in Whiterun long?"

"I'm not sure I could be any help with a dragon, Jarl Balgruuf," I said, "unless your warriors need lessons in running from one." He smiled at that. "Helgen taught me that I have much to learn. I was wondering … does your court mage need help? Or maybe an apprentice?"

"I see you still plan to pursue your interest in the arcane arts. It could be that Farengar needs help, I wouldn't know. I've set him to learning as much as he can about dragons. It's strange, he was already interested in dragon lore, and he's beside himself with excitement now that one has turned up alive. He's a prickly sort, though, and I can't imagine he'd be a very good teacher. But feel free to talk to him. He'll certainly want to hear your story."

Balgruuf was right. Farengar Secret-Fire made me repeat every detail about the dragon, down to how big his scales were. "Dragons are such fascinating creatures," he said. "I'd give anything to see one up close. You should consider yourself lucky."

This one had a strange idea of luck. He was less interested in my desire to learn magic. "I'm no teacher," he said. "You should go to the College of Winterhold. Old Tolfdir is a wonderful teacher, even if he does keep his students on a short leash. And you'll meet people from all over Tamriel. Mirabelle Ervine is the Master Wizard, and she's a Breton like you. You should fit right in."

"But I have this spell tome," I told him, digging through my knapsack and pulling it out. "And I don't even know how to read it." I had been poring over the book I had taken from Helgen Keep, but no matter how hard I concentrated, the runes would not reveal their secrets to me. "Are you sure you couldn't just teach me this one spell?"

With his face hidden behind his dark mage's hood, it was hard to read Farengar. I couldn't even be sure where he was from. If I had to guess, I'd say he was from Cyrodiil. "Well, all right," he said. "I suppose I shouldn't be too hard on anyone with an interest in the arcane arts. Julianos knows, most Nords are too dense to understand their value. Here, let's see that tome."

I handed it over.

"Ah yes, Sparks. It's one of the most basic Destruction spells in the lightning branch. Won't really cause much damage, but it could distract an opponent enough to allow you to get away. Here, this rune means 'lightning.'" There were only five runes to learn in the whole tome, so within a few minutes he had taught me the words behind the spell. "Okay, now give it a try, over on that wall. Just let the words pass through your mind, you don't have to say them out loud. Eventually, you'll be able to simply concentrate on the result you want, and the spell will come."
I did as he said, holding my hands out toward the wall and thinking the words he had taught me. At first I felt only a tingle in my fingertips, then a few sparks flickered and died. Finally, I had a thin stream of sparks striking the wall. They made little black scorch marks where they struck, but the spell didn't seem likely to defeat anything larger than a fly. Then the sparks flickered out as the last of my magic power drained away. I felt weakened.

If I thought it was a poor showing, Farengar was pleased. "Excellent!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands. "Most students need several tries to produce even a few sputterings. Come, you must have had some magic training before now."

I told him about learning to produce flames on a cold wet night when I couldn't get the kindling to light, though it was literally to save my life. I had concentrated so hard that the kindling burst into flame on its own. Eventually, I had gained partial control over it.

"Extraordinary!" Farengar exclaimed again. "Most people with magic ability find it popping up sometime in their teens, moving objects from a distance, setting things on fire by accident, that sort of thing. But few are able to channel that power into a spell they can use at will, unless they get training. I'd say you have an extraordinary gift for magic, like many Bretons. You should make your way to Winterhold as soon as you can."

This was encouraging, but at that moment I was feeling drained from the spell, not to mention I hadn't fully recovered from the ordeal in Helgen. "I was hoping to stay here for a time and rest. I could earn some gold for the trip to Winterhold, and I imagine the college will charge tuition. Are you sure you don't have any tasks you could give me?"

"Well," he said, rubbing his cheek, "I suppose there are a few errands you can run. Here, why don't you take these frost salts down to Arcadia on the lower level of Whiterun. Do you know her shop, Arcadia's Cauldron? She may have some work for you too. Besides, Alchemy is one of the most important of the arcane arts for a young mage to master."

I did know Arcadia, but she didn't recognize me, fortunately. I couldn't bear to repeat the story of my father just then. Also, I didn't know what stories had been told about how my parents had died. I wouldn't put it past those Nords to claim that I burned my home, then fled. No, it was better to keep my identity a secret for now. "Deirdre Morningsong," I told her when she asked my name. She had known me as Deirdre Silver-Tongue, and she didn't make the connection now. She was just glad to receive the frost salts. Farengar had kept her waiting for them.

"Do you have any other errands," I asked her, "or chores around the store I could help with? I'd love to learn something about alchemy as well."

"There are always town boys available for simple deliveries," she said. "But if there are instructions that go with the potion, they sometimes get confused. I don't suppose you know anything about the different kinds of flowers, or how to tell the difference between a luna moth and a blue butterfly?"

I grinned. "I'm just the girl for the job, ma'am."

"Oho, you sound very confident. Can you tell me what these are?" She pointed to a glass jar filled with bright red flowers. After I had correctly identified ten flowers in a row, some of them in their dried state, she was satisfied. "I don't have much time to collect ingredients for my potions, the shop keeps me so busy. But I can't trust just anyone to gather items properly without getting them cross-contaminated. It will be wonderful to have your help. When can you start?"

We arranged that I would be paid a small amount of gold for everything I collected, and she would
teach me potion-making as well. She even gave me space to sleep on the floor in the back of her shop.

I found Gerdur at the Bannered Mare and told her the news. She was glad for me, and thankful that the jarl would send a contingent of guards to Riverwood. "You will learn much from Arcadia, and even more if you go to the college. Ralof will be glad too. I had almost hoped you'd decide to come back to Riverwood. Ralof grew attached to you after your experience together at Helgen, you know. I'm sure he wishes you'd go with him to Windhelm."

I didn't know what to say. "I know," I began, looking at the table in front of me. "I wish…" but my voice trailed off. I didn't know what I wished.

"Do you know what he told me this morning before we left? He said that if he had been one of those boys in Dragon Bridge he would have taken on the whole town to defend you and your parents. That's my brother – he always wanted to be the white knight protecting the innocent and undertaking dangerous quests. I think he sees you as a damsel in distress." She smiled when she said that, as if she knew how foolish her brother could be.

I laughed. Me, a damsel in distress? I was the Girl the Nords Couldn't Kill, the Girl Who Escaped Helgen. Surely, Ralof had helped me get through the keep, but I'd helped him too. What kind of girl did he think I was? "Give him a punch for me," I said.

When we said our farewells in the morning, part of me did wish I was going back to Riverwood. It was the closest thing to a home I'd had in three years, even if only for a day. But I had a new life to begin. I told Gerdur I'd try to visit when Arcadia needed flowers that grew only in the mountains.
The Plains of Whiterun

Chapter Summary

-- a peaceful interlude -- the beauty of Skyrim -- chance encounters and shadowy followers -- bounty hunters from Hammerfell -- Deirdre stands up for a bungling barmaid -- a dart in the dark --

The next two weeks were the happiest I'd been since my parents' deaths. My childhood wish had finally come true. I was spending my time in the fields and forests, picking flowers and catching butterflies, and earning a living to boot. It was a pleasure to be outdoors without having to worry if I would find enough to eat or a place to sleep. I was almost as carefree as I'd been as a girl. I would lie on the heath with my feet soaking in one of the many pools that dotted the plains about Whiterun. It was wonderful to feel the sun warming my face and hear the bees buzzing in the heather while the thunderheads built over the mountains. Sometimes those clouds would move out over the plains with incredible speed and I would race them to Whiterun. In the warmth of Last Seed it felt good to get soaked to the skin. I'd dry off in the Bannered Mare, the pungent smell of the peat fire redolent of the tundra where I just been roaming. I always had a coin or two for a bowl of beef stew and a cup of mead to take off the chill.

I even enjoyed working in the store, surprising myself by not growing bored. There was always something new to learn about potion making. Even dusting the shelves wasn't so bad. I would come across a vial containing a potion I didn't recognize, and Arcadia would tell me about its properties. Too, I had spent so much time alone for the last three years that waiting on customers was a pleasure.

Where at first I was shy and halting in my speech, I gradually grew better at conversing with people. I enjoyed hearing their stories about life in Whiterun and the surrounding farms. I learned a good deal about people's views on the Civil War as well. There were factions supporting both sides, both adamant in their positions. I was surprised that open feuding hadn't already broken out between the Gray-Manes and the Battle-Borns.

In my free time, I would wander the market stalls and poke my head in the shops. I even bought a dress, though I soon found I couldn't really be comfortable in it – it was too confining, and the long skirt only got in the way. I wore it only in Arcadia's shop, and only then when waiting on customers. When out of doors I'd wear the light armor and boots the jarl's steward had grudgingly given me. It made me feel strong, like some sort of shield maiden.

The armor even helped me to feel more welcome in Jorrvaskr. Sitting in the Companions' mead-hall with Aela and Vilkas, I'd imagine I was one of the original five hundred heroes traveling from Atmora to Tamriel across the Sea of Ghosts. It was easy to do – Jorrvaskr had been built from the upturned hull of one of the Companions' boats, hauled overland to this early Nord settlement. But then I would remember myself. I was no Nord hero, nor did I aspire to be one.

Arcadia proved to be a patient teacher and a kind employer. She even showed me plants I hadn't seen before. Most useful was tundra cotton, an ingredient in the potion to fortify magicka, the mage's store of magic power. She taught me how to make that potion and others of particular value to a mage, those that restored health and increased ability in a particular branch of magic. There
were also a few that could add to my skill in stealth, especially potions of invisibility and lockpicking, but those would come later.

When I wanted to apply to the college, she helped me write the message. My father had taught me my letters, of course, but after three years my handwriting was rusty. Farengar helped us with how to ask for admission and how much to say about my magical development so far. He even included a note attesting to my ability. I waited hopefully after the letter went off with the courier, wondering how long it would take the college to reply.

If Farengar hoped the dragon would show itself, he was disappointed. We saw no sign of a dragon for the fortnight. Nothing troubled the sky save the afternoon thunderstorms rumbling over the plains. Farengar kept studying his books on dragons. He was supposed to be looking for something that would help defeat one of the beasts, but he just enjoyed learning whatever he could about them.

I visited Dragonsreach often, since I was the only one Arcadia trusted with deliveries to the jarl and his court. Soon I was as familiar and comfortable in the great hall as I was in the Bannered Mare or Jorrvaskr or Arcadia's. The guards would greet me cordially, asking if I could brew something for them – usually an ale. I had gotten to know the jarl's hall-troops, the two I had seen that first day, Hrongar and Lydia, and several others. Hrongar was the jarl's brother. He and Lydia were both part of the jarl's hirth, the special war-band of skilled fighters and loyal retainers he had called up after the fall of Torygg. While the regular guard included several women, Lydia was the only shield-maiden accepted for this special service.

I would find the hirth-fellows sitting at table reliving some great exploit, then one of them would shout out to me, "Hey, lass," and want to tell the story all over again for my benefit. They asked often about Helgen, but I could not revel in the tale, however much they pressed for details. "Come, Deirdre, tell us how you escaped the dragon," one would say. I could see the lust for glory in their eyes, as they imagined themselves confronting the beast. Then I told them of the brave fighters I'd seen lose their lives that day, men and women battle-eager but death-bound, while I ran from the destruction like a frightened rabbit. What valor I had shown that day, I could not speak of – I still kept secret my temporary alliance with the Stormcloaks.

I could see the disappointment in their eyes. Nords were used to boasts and tales embellished to add to their glory, not stark confessions of cowardice. They found nothing in my tale to celebrate, no glory that would earn me entrance to Sovngarde, the eternal halls of the brave Nord departed. Bold deeds and a good death were all to these warriors.

Lydia would come to my defense then. She had heard me tell Jarl Balgruuf about the frostbite spiders and the cave bears beneath Helgen. "Anyone who can deal with frostbite spiders is all right by me," she said. Her comrades mumbled in assent. No one liked frostbite spiders. Then they would return to one of their own tales, more befitting a Nord's idea of valor.

As I listened to their stories, I admired the camaraderie among these hirth-fellows. They reminded me of my friends and myself when we were children, before the day I wanted to forget. They treated Lydia no differently than the rest. She would laugh heartily at the jokes and roar her approval for any act of valor, burnished though it was in the retelling. Even the most ribald jest couldn't make her blush. She would look over at me then and give me a wink, as if to let me know her fellows meant no harm.

Though she was only two or three years older than I, none of the men called her "lass" or "girl." I wasn't surprised. At nearly six feet, Lydia stood on a par with many of the soldiers and even taller than a few. She was strong of limb from the constant training and carried herself with quiet
confidence. I heard the men talk many times of her besting a male fighter in practice. One of the
hirth-men once made the mistake of calling her "wench" and ended up on the floor.

Yet I wondered if the men found her attractive. She wore her jet black hair in the Nord fashion,
with side braids like my own. I supposed a man would find her fair of face, with her high
cheekbones and dark eyes. Although she complimented me on the tattoo I wore around my left eye,
she had chosen not to mar her own face in similar fashion. And while she certainly wasn't plump, a
trait Nords found particularly attractive, there was something voluptuous about her that no amount
of physical training could take away.

During my years in Cyrodiil, I had forgotten about the Nords' predilection for plump women and
burly men. Yet few such comely figures were to be found. Skyrim's winters saw to that – no one
could manage to keep the weight on, they spent so much energy trying to stay warm. Cyrodiilians,
on the other hand, prized a svelte figure, though these were equally hard to find in that land, where
the warmer climes led to lethargy and weight-gain. Thus, the old adage, "The lass is always fairer
on the other side of the Jeralls." During my time in Cyrodiil, I grew accustomed to those few men I
came across ogling me, especially as I grew scrawnier from life in the forest. Now, I'd begun to put
some weight back on from regular meals at the Bannered Mare, and I could feel the Nord men
beginning to eye me in that certain way I found uncomfortable.

And if they thought me worth a second glance, how much more attractive must they find Lydia,
whose curvaceous figure couldn't be hidden even under her thick armor? No, I was sure that at
least one of her hirth-fellows had wanted something more from her than the fraternal camaraderie
on display in the great hall. Men always wanted something more from women, it seemed, like
Osmer, or Ralof. I wondered if Lydia had ever found herself fending off an unwanted advance as I
had, and what she had done about it. Or maybe she welcomed those advances? There was no way
to ask about this while they were together in a group – and they were always in a group – so I found
myself just getting more confused. After a bit more banter I would excuse myself and continue on
my errand.

Other than my confusion on the subject of men and women, only one thing darkened my time in
Whiterun: the feeling that I was being followed. It started on my second day working for Arcadia. I
was returning from a delivery to Jorrvaskr. Old Kodlak Whitemane, Harbinger of the Companions,
had been complaining of the rot, and Arcadia had something she thought might help. On my way
back I felt the back of my neck tingling. I knew that feeling. It was the one I got in the forest when
a dangerous animal was near. I looked around and saw nothing, except perhaps a shadow in a
doorway out of the corner of my eye. When I looked again, it was gone.

It happened again the next day, and the next. The sound of footfalls behind me when no one was
there; a tall, robed figure disappearing around a corner; glances passing between strangers I saw in
the street – these were the only hints my followers gave, yet I knew they were there just the same.
On the fourth day, I went to collect flowers on the tundra west of Whiterun and they were at it
again. A hunter passed near me in the morning, then later in the day I came across a fisherman at a
small stream, and toward evening I saw a man on horseback off in the distance on the road. I was
sure they were all the same man in different costumes.

For the moment, I pretended not to notice my watchers. I was confident that I could turn the
followers into the followed when I chose. But what would I do once I caught them at their game? It
seemed better to keep my suspicion hidden and see what their next move would be. I guessed they
were Imperial agents, or maybe the jarl's own men who suspected me of ties to the Stormcloaks.
So let them follow me. They would soon see I was no Stormcloak sympathizer – or so I thought.

Then one morning a strange thing happened. I was on my way to the mountains to collect lavender
and scaly pholiota. It was the middle of my second week in Whiterun, and the day had started off well, with a courier bringing a letter from the college during breakfast. The school had space for another student, as long as I could prove my latent magical skill. I was thrilled, of course, and I planned to leave at the end of the week. A few more gold pieces in my pocket couldn't hurt, and there were still a couple of potions I wanted to learn, especially the one that would make me invisible. While stealth was a valuable skill, becoming invisible was even better when you were being followed.

I was walking across the tundra toward the mountains, thinking about my good news, and whether I should make a trip to Riverwood to share it with Gerdur. I wondered too if Ralof was still there. Most likely not, I thought, not since the jarl had sent that detachment of guards. Then I felt the hair prickling on the back of my neck, and was certain I was being followed. I was just looking for an excuse to look around for my pursuer when I heard my name shouted from behind me, and turned to see Lydia on horseback. I paused to wait for her, and in a moment she had drawn even with me.

"Collecting flowers again?" she asked, smiling.

I nodded, holding her gaze, looking for any hint of deceit in her eye. Why would Lydia have followed me? If the jarl had put her on my track, she certainly wasn't being very stealthy about it. "I'm headed for the mountain forests," I said. And what are you doing out here?"

"I'm on my way to visit my parents," she said brightly. "They have a farm just over that rise."

"You grew up on a farm?"

"Aye. My parents hated to lose my help when I went into the city to join the guard. There's only my sister left to help them, but I try to visit as often as I can." She sounded wistful as she said it. Then she brightened again. "Would you like to meet them, see the farm?"

"No, really, I need to get about my collecting."

"The mountains rise up right behind the farm, and if we ride together it will shorten your journey. Come on, get up behind." She held a hand out to me, and I couldn't see a way to avoid accepting her offer. As I climbed up behind her, I tried to tell myself this was a chance meeting, and I was just being silly.

The farm was small, not more than a few acres scratched out of the tundra. The barn had plenty of places to let the rain and snow in. A few animals – horses, an ox or two, and several sheep – huddled forlornly in a small paddock. The house was small. I remembered Lydia mentioning brothers, and I wondered how they all had fit in such a place. I couldn't blame Lydia for leaving for life in the city.

Lydia's parents, Grimvar and Silda, seemed nice enough, though care-worn and a little distrustful of a half-Breton stranger. Their daughter Lisbet was several years older than Lydia, her face already lined from working outdoors in the blazing sun of summer and the bitter winds of winter. Her mouth turned downwards, as if it had been years since she had stretched it into a smile. She barely looked at Lydia and me when we arrived, while her parents greeted me stiffly. We exchanged a few pleasantries about the weather and the coming harvest, then I bid farewell to Lydia and went about my collecting.

I was still pondering the strange encounter that afternoon as I approached Whiterun, and was so lost in thought that I nearly walked into a commotion at the city gate. There were three guards rather than the usual two, and they were arguing with two Redguard men of Hammerfell, Alik'r warriors by the look of them, arrayed in garb appropriate for their desert land. With their dark skin,
turbaned heads and tunics with wide, billowing sleeves, they stood in contrast to the fair-skinned, mail-clad guards.

"You aren't welcome in the city," one of the guards said. His hand was on his sword hilt, though the Alik'r looked more suppliant than aggressive.

Relations between the peoples of Hammerfell and Skyrim had never been cordial, and they had deteriorated further when the Empire severed ties with Hammerfell at the end of the Great War. The White-Gold Concordat required Hammerfell to cede half its lands to the Aldmeri Dominion. When Hammerfell chose to fight rather than submit, Emperor Titus Mede expelled them from the Empire to maintain the treaty with the Dominion. Then the Redguards pushed the Aldmeri forces from their lands, and they liked to brag that they had won a true victory over the elves where the Empire had only managed a stalemate.

Now Hammerfell stood independent and isolated, surrounded by the Empire to the north and east and the Altmer of Summerset Isle across a narrow stretch of sea to the south. Individual Redguards still lived in and served the Empire. They were a people who liked to roam, and could be found in every corner of Tamriel, like that Redguard captain back at Helgen. There was even a Redguard woman waiting tables at the Bannered Mare. She had arrived in town a day or two before I had. Everyone guessed this was her first job in an inn; the common joke was you could die of thirst before Saadia brought you an ale. There was even some grumbling about why Hulda had hired her rather than a more competent Nord.

"You don't understand, Captain," one of the Alik'r was saying. "We must find this woman. She is wanted in Hammerfell for terrible crimes. I have an official warrant for her arrest bearing our queen's seal."

"I understand very well," said the older of the guards. It was a serious matter if the captain of the guard had been called out. "I understand that there is no treaty between Hammerfell and Skyrim allowing Redguards to hunt criminals across our lands. Your warrant is less than worthless here. To get permission you will need to go through channels at the Imperial City. Now be off and be glad I don't throw you in a cell."

"You're making a grave mistake, Captain. We have tracked her here and we know she is somewhere in your city. We won't be held responsible for any crimes she commits against your people." With that he and his companion turned and walked away from the gate. I made for the gate myself, but the Alik'r stopped me as I passed.

"Young lady," began the one who had spoken before. He was middle-aged and clearly used to wielding authority in his own lands. His eyes were stern but not unkind. "My name is Kematu of Taneth in Hammerfell. We are looking for a Redguard woman who has taken refuge here in Whiterun. We are representatives of the Alik'r Coterie and are here to deliver her to justice for crimes against our country. Yet these imbecile Nord guards will not allow us to search the city or even to speak with their jarl. If you help us, you will be rewarded. Have you seen such a one in your city?"

Of course I had. But what could Saadia have done? She didn't seem like a criminal. Maybe these two were the criminals and Saadia their innocent victim. Official documents could easily be forged. "A Redguard woman you say?" I replied. "I haven't seen anyone like that, but I'll be sure to let you know when I do. What did you say were her crimes?"

"Her crimes are a matter of official Hammerfell business," he said, sounding officious now. "It should be enough that we bear this warrant. We will camp on the plain west of Whiterun. I hope you will find us there if you happen to see her. Good day."
The guards looked at me quizzically as I approached the gate, but I just shrugged. "You meet all sorts these days, don't you?" I said, and they opened the gate for me.

That night in the Bannered Mare, I watched Saadia as she served a glass of alto wine and a plank of grilled salmon to me, then a mug of mead and a bowl of beef stew for Arcadia. As Arcadia and I switched our dishes, I wondered if Saadia could really be a criminal. She certainly wasn't a very good bar maid. At least our food had arrived at the right table, and still warm. That was better treatment than the guests around us had received. Nor did she seem the sort to become a tavern wench. She wore the typical low-cut blouse and flowing skirt of a bar maid, but she held herself with a poise more befitting a lady-in-waiting to a queen, and her manners were more refined than those typically found in taverns.

Though none of the Bannered Mare's patrons knew anything about her, there was much speculation. Most guessed that she came from a noble family that had fallen on hard times, maybe during the war with the elves. Much of southern Hammerfell had been razed before the Redguards had succeeded in driving the Aldmeri forces from their lands. She was the right age, at least thirty-five. But such guesses were the work of ale-addled imaginations. The only thing we knew for certain was that Saadia was a terrible bar maid.

She proved her inexperience again before we had finished our meal. She was waiting on three men at the table next to ours, two of the Gray-Mane brothers and another I didn't know. As she bent to serve a dish to the man across from her, Avulstein Gray-Mane put a hand casually on her rump. Now, most barmaids by necessity learn to deal with the constant advances they receive from their male customers. Many develop a playful way of admonishing their accosters that still manages to let the cads know they are serious. Many barmaids keep hidden knives, and since Nord law is on their side, most men know to go no further. Other serving girls take the random fondlings in stride, and some even encourage them. Saadia's response was neither of these. She quickly turned on Avulstein and slapped him across the face. "Unhand me, you filthy pig!" she exclaimed, as if he were the servant and she his mistress.

The Mare went silent. Avulstein jumped up, grabbed her by the wrist and twisted. "Someone ought to teach you your place, Redguard wench!" he shouted. The Nord loomed over her as Saadia sank to her knees. He raised a hand to strike her.

I couldn't help myself. I shouted, "Stop!" as I leapt to my feet and came around our table. I tried to make my voice as deep and commanding as possible. My hand was on the hilt of my dagger, but I did not draw it. "Let her go. Now."

The Nord looked at me with a mixture of surprise and curiosity, his fist still poised above his head. He stood more than a head taller than I, and was probably wondering what I hoped to achieve. Then he looked down at my hand on my dagger, and grew more serious. Meanwhile, his companions had gotten to their feet and were coming around the table toward us.

"What is this, some sort of rebellion of the outlanders?" Avulstein smirked. "Take your hand off that dagger, lass, or this could turn ugly." He still hadn't let go of Saadia. She knelt before him, her face wrenched in pain as she looked back and forth between us.

"It's gotten ugly enough already," said a voice behind us. For the second time that day Lydia appeared unexpectedly. I hadn't seen her come in, and she usually took her meals in Dragonsreach. She stepped forward to stand beside me, and Avulstein looked at her uncertainly. I could tell he was weighing his chances.

Then another voice spoke. This time it was Arcadia. "Deirdre's right, Avulstein," she said, stepping
around Lydia and me and walking up to him. "Let Saadia go. This is no place for such behavior."

Though she hailed from Cyrodiil, Arcadia was a respected merchant in the city, and her words carried weight. Even Avulstein, whose Stormcloak sympathies and Nord bigotry went together like ale and tavern brawls, paid heed. He loosened his grip, and Saadia got to her feet. "You saw what she did, Arcadia, she struck first." It seemed a lame excuse coming from such a hulking brute. Many in the tavern jeered him.

"And I saw what you did before that," Arcadia replied. "You should be ashamed. Nord men already have enough of a bad reputation without you making it worse."

Hulda came over finally. "I'm sorry for this disturbance everyone." She went over to Saadia. "Take a minute to calm yourself. If you can't learn to treat our customers better, you're going to have to leave. I've already had enough complaints about you."

Saadia rubbed her wrist and lowered her eyes. "As you say, ma'am." She turned and went into the kitchen, and the tavern broke out in debate about the event.

"It's all over folks," Hulda said. "Now, who needs another drink?"

That got some shouts of approval from the other patrons, but Avulstein still stood glaring at me. "You better watch yourself, lass," he said in a low voice. "You don't want to make an enemy out of the Gray-Manes. And if you're going to wear a knife, you best be willing to use it."

"Oh, I am, you can be sure of that," I said coldly. *Deirdre, your boastful mouth is going to be the death of you,* I told myself even as I said it. *Keep your hands to yourself and we'll get along."

Avulstein's brother, Thorald, came over. "Come on, Avy, let's drop it."

Lydia winked at me and went back to a table with a group of soldiers. Then Arcadia put her hand on my shoulder and suggested we finish our meal.

"I've lost my appetite," I told her. "I think I'll go check on Saadia. She's not the only one who needs to calm down." My heart was still pounding and my face felt flushed. My body had readied itself for a fight, and now I had nothing to do with all that energy.

I found Saadia in the kitchen, standing at the open doorway looking down toward Whiterun's main gate. While I still felt flustered, she hardly seemed bothered as she turned toward me, gazing at me curiously out of calm, dark eyes.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She held out her wrist. "Just a bruise, I think. I've had worse." There were no tears, no self-pity for her situation. I wondered how she could be so calm. "Thank you for trying to stop that brute. That was brave."

"You're not really a barmaid are you?" I blurted out.

Then I did see fear in her eyes. "Of course I am. Why would you ask that?"

I looked around to see that no one was listening. The cook was making too much noise with his pots on the other side of the kitchen to hear us. "Two men were at the gate this afternoon," I said, "two Alik'r warriors. They were looking for a woman from Hammerfell. They said she had committed terrible crimes."
As I spoke, Saadia looked more and more worried. She put her hand on my arm. "We shouldn't talk about this here. Come to my room."

I followed her up the stairs to the small cell above the kitchen Hulda had allowed her. As soon as the door shut behind us she took me firmly by the shoulder and pushed me up against the wall. I felt a knife at my throat, though I hadn't noticed her draw it. What had happened to the cowering tavern wench I'd seen on the floor below?

"What did you say to them?" she hissed. "You didn't tell them I was here, did you?"

I shook my head. "I wanted to hear what you had to say first." She looked hard at me and I held her eye. I was telling the truth, even if I had doubts about who she was.

"I'm sorry," she said, letting me go. "I had to be sure you weren't spying for them."

"So you are the one they're after," I said.

"Yes, but I'm no criminal. I belong to House Suda. We were prominent in the resistance against the Aldmeri Dominion. These Alik'r are only posing as officials of Hammerfell. They are really assassins in the employ of the Thalmor seeking the bounty on my head." Now she did seem the innocent victim, pleading with me. "You have to believe me. Don't turn me over to them."

I still wasn't sure I trusted her. She had appeared to be at least three different people in the last half hour. But I told her she had nothing to worry about on my account. The Redguards would probably decide she had never been in Whiterun and move on. The lie came easily; it seemed the quickest way to get out of that room and get on with my life. Why had I taken such a concern with this woman's affairs? It was hard to remember after having a knife put to my throat.

"I should get back to work," Saadia said, and went to open the door. As she did, I thought I heard the sound of footsteps outside. She heard it too. She pulled the door open quickly and we both looked out. A shadow was moving in the stairwell, as if someone was there, illuminated from below.

"I thought you said the Redguards weren't allowed in the city?" Saadia said.

"They weren't," I said. "Maybe they recruited someone else to their service." Or maybe it was my follower, I thought.

"Deirdre, I may need to leave the city at a moment's notice. Not tomorrow, but maybe the next day. There is no one else in Whiterun I can trust, so I'm choosing to place my trust in you. Will you help me to escape without the Alik'r knowing I've left?" I told her I'd think about it.

I still felt jittery when I left the Mare, so I said goodnight to Arcadia at the door and went for a walk through the Wind District, Whiterun's second level. I stopped at a bench under the old dead tree, known as the Goldergreen, at the center of the circular plaza. The tree had once been beautiful but now stood leafless, its bare branches making a lattice-work across the night sky. At least this way I could look up and see the stars. That was one thing I missed about sleeping out – I hadn't seen as many stars in the weeks I had been living in the city. It was like saying hello to old friends after time away.

Some said that the stars were formed from Anu's blood at the dawn of creation, others that they were holes in the fabric of Oblivion that let the light of Aetherius shine down on Nirn. I just thought they were pretty. Gazing at them had comforted me on many a lonely night after my parents died, the vast reaches of Mundus somehow making my own troubles seem small. Tonight
the Apprentice, patron of mages, was high in the sky. The Warrior was just rising. His eye, formed by the planet Akatosh, blazed particularly bright. Facing him was the Serpent, a malign constellation that wandered the skies threatening its neighbors. I wondered what that could portend.

Nearby, a giant statue of Talos loomed over the plaza. All was silent now, but in the daytime a priest of Talos would harangue the people about the evils of the Thalmor and the Talos ban. Heimskr would even encourage them to join the Stormcloak side. Jarl Balgruuf’s loyalties must truly be divided, I thought, for him to allow such seditious talk. I wondered how he had prevented the Thalmor justiciars from seizing the priest and tearing down the statue.

Then I felt that familiar tingling on the back of my neck, and I knew my follower was near. I had grown so accustomed to it by now that I would normally ignore it, showing no sign that I was alert to the watcher’s presence. But this time something made me move. And just as I did, I heard a whoosh in the air near my head and the thunk of a projectile piercing wood. I turned back to where I had been sitting and saw a three-inch dart sticking out of the bench, its feathers still vibrating.

I broke into a run and made for the houses to the north of the plaza. Whoever was following me now gave up on stealth, and I could hear the sound of footfalls coming behind me. I ran faster and darted around a corner. There was an alley between two houses just past the corner and I turned into it. Now I would have to employ all of my skill in stealth to evade my pursuer. I found some pebbles on the cobbled alleyway and quickly threw them farther down the street in the direction I had been running. They made a satisfying clattering sound as they bounced down the hill. Then I put my hood up, flattened my back against the house wall, and silently crept deeper into the alley, waiting for my pursuer to run past.

Seconds passed, then a minute. All seemed silent. Could they have given up the chase so easily? I decided to check the street. I crept around the corner, looking to my right, the way I had come. Suddenly, someone coming the other way ran into me, nearly knocking me over. Strong hands grabbed me by the arms. My attacker must not have realized my quickness because I whirled out of his grasp and turned on him, drawing my dagger.

Then I saw that it was Lydia.
Lydia took a step back, her hands up. "Deirdre, it's only me! What's the matter?"

I still hadn't put away the dagger. I held it in front of me, aimed at her chest. "You've been following me. This is the third time you've taken me by surprise today."

"No, really, I just didn't see you there. I must have been walking too fast, and not watching where I was going. I was looking at the stars, to tell you the truth."

"Then what about that dart?"

"Dart? What are you talking about?" If Lydia's surprise and confusion were feigned, then she had missed her calling as a traveling mummer. And she couldn't have shot the dart at me because she was coming from the wrong direction. I lowered the dagger.

"Well, where are you headed so fast?" I demanded. "You seem to be taking the long way around if you're headed back to the barracks."

"I wanted to stretch my legs a bit before going to my rest. That's why I was walking so fast. You're a bit out of your way as well." She looked at me more closely. I was still breathing hard, she had given me such a shock. "Are you sure you're all right? Why would anyone be following you? And what was that about a dart?"

I still didn't know whether I could trust her. I couldn't see her face very well in the dark, but her voice seemed sincere, full of concern. "Someone fired a dart at me, then chased me. I ran into this alley to get away from him."

"Who?" she demanded. "Who did this? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. Maybe he went away when he saw you coming."

She looked up and down the street. "Whoever it was, he seems to be gone now," she said. "Let me walk you home. Or should we report this to the guard?"

I put away my dagger. "Let's not involve the guards, I'm worried they … Lydia, do you think the jarl would have me followed because he thinks I'm with the Stormcloaks?"

"Jarl Balgruuf?" She pondered this for a moment as we began walking back to Arcadia's. "I'm just a soldier, but I don't think the jarl supports the Empire that much. There are many Stormcloak sympathizers here. Out of all of them, why would he have you followed? And even if he did have you watched, he wouldn't try to kill you."

"It was a dart," I reminded her. We were passing through the plaza now. I went over to the bench and pulled it out. It was feathered, with an inch-long tip. "I bet there's some sort of sleeping potion
on it. Maybe Arcadia can identify it."

"Jarl Balgruuf wouldn't do that either," Lydia said. "If he wanted to bring you in, he'd just have the guards arrest you."

We arrived at Arcadia's and I thanked her for accompanying me as she turned to head back to the barracks.

It was long before I fell asleep that night. Ignoring my followers had seemed the wisest course, but now they had turned hostile. What had I done to provoke them? Was it my conversation with Saadia? Could the Redguards be involved? But if they were, hadn't I just led them directly to her? Why would they attack me over that? And why did Lydia just happen upon me right after the incident? It was toward morning before I finally fell asleep, the questions still roiling my head.

The next morning, Arcadia needed more tundra cotton so I headed out to the plains west of the city. I took no chances after the previous night. I wore my light armor and slung my bow and quiver (outfitted with newly purchased steel arrows) over my shoulder. My sword dangled at my hip. In my collecting satchel I had two vials of fear poison that should send any attackers running. I didn't think they would approach me in broad daylight, and I felt better about facing them in the countryside than in the narrow city passages. It was my homeground.

The watchers were there, as I expected, but they kept their distance as usual. I gave no sign that I noticed them and went about my business. Maybe last night's adventure had been the work of a mere thief, I thought. It was another lovely day, with a soft breeze rustling the tundra grasses and the scent of the heather pungent in the air. The snow-covered mountains across the plain glinted in the sun. I picked a few blueberries and enjoyed their tartness, trying to forget my trouble.

It was around mid-day when Kematu came riding up on a handsome black courser. It was the most beautiful horse I'd ever seen. The trailing ends of the Redguard's turban billowed out behind him as he approached.

"Wonderful," I thought. Why wouldn't these people let me go about my business? He looked surprised when I notched an arrow and leveled it at his chest.

"Well met, young lady," he said as he brought his horse to a halt. "Have I done something to offend you?"

If last night's altercation had anything to do with my conversations with the Redguards, it wouldn't do to be seen talking to this one now. At least I could make it look as if I wanted him to go away. "Stay away from me!" I shouted, though my watcher was probably too far away to hear.

"I merely wanted to ask if you had thought about what I said at the gate yesterday. I will gladly give you more information here where we won't be overheard."

Keeping my voice low, I said, "Someone attacked me last night. I think it had something to do with you Redguards. I want you to stay away from me."

"Ah, more evidence that Iman is indeed in Whiterun. What name is she going by now? Saadia? Zhaheera? Her friends in Skyrim will do much to protect her."
"I warn you we are being watched from a distance even now," I said. "I told you, I can't be seen with you. Now go away."

He backed his horse off a yard or two, as if making ready to leave. "I know you would aid us if only you would hear me out," he said. "Iman is about to do something that threatens the lives of thousands of our people. She is in league with the Aldmeri Dominion. Come to our camp tonight, if you think you can elude your watchers. We are at Swindler's Den, just west of here. Can you find it?"

"I can, but don't expect me." Swindler's Den had an evil reputation. Why were the Alik'r holed up there?

"I expect nothing, but I will still hope. Remember, thousands of innocent lives rest on your decision. Farewell for now."

"Wait. I have to make a good showing for my watcher." I fired an arrow just over his head, then quickly notched another one. "Leave me alone!" I shouted. His horse shied, then horse and rider wheeled and bolted away. I hoped the watchers would believe I had rejected the Alik'r's questioning.

I returned to Whiterun at mid-day, my mind still wracked with indecision. Was Kematu telling the truth? He seemed sincere, yet how could I trust him? My instincts told me he was just what he seemed: a soldier on a mission. At the same time, Saadia was clearly more than she appeared. The woman who had put a knife to my throat was neither a simple barmaid nor a noble gentlewoman. But could she be this Iman Kematu spoke of?

It wouldn't hurt to hear Kematu out, I told myself. But if I was followed to his camp… If I would do this, I must do it secretly, sneaking out of Whiterun while my watchers thought I was asleep at Arcadia's. It could be done, but it was a risk.

That evening I waited in the shop for Arcadia to return from the Bannered Mare. When I heard her on the steps I drank a potion of invisibility, then slipped silently past her as she opened the door. To my watchers it would appear that Arcadia had come home while I remained inside. I had twenty seconds of invisibility to slink around the corner and away.

Once outside the city, I doubled back on my tracks several times to make sure I wasn't being followed. When I was sure I was alone, I set out westward for Swindler's Den. It was a beautiful moons-lit night. Both Masser and Secunda, Tamriel's twin moons, were full, so there was plenty of light by which to make my way. Here and there the moons-light glinted off ripples in the tundra's pools. It was quiet, the only sounds the breath of the wind, a few crickets, and the occasional music of water tumbling over stones when I passed a rill. The evening was warm, so the luna moths were out, their wings glowing white in the silver light. It was magical. I almost forgot I was on my way to the most notorious thieves' den in all of Whiterun Hold.

As I approached the cave entrance, I was disappointed not to see the Alik'r warriors I'd come to meet. Instead, the entrance was guarded by a single Nord wearing the bits of mismatched low-grade armor that marked him as a common bandit. I crept up behind him, thought "You're dead," then stole past him into the cave.
Inside, the cavern seemed to go on and on. Narrow passages led to lower and lower levels, each with a wide chamber containing two or three bandits. Some played at cards, while others were sleeping on mats – or passed out from drink, more likely. I crept past them all. Finally, the passageway entered a long, narrow pool of water. Seeing no other way to go deeper into the cave, I stepped in, the water rising to my thighs. Ahead, a waterfall fell like a curtain over the passage. As I approached it, I could see light from many torches in the chamber behind and heard the sound of voices muffled by the falling water. Well, I thought, in for a septim, in for a drake, as they say. I sank into the water and pushed myself underneath the fall. I came up with just the top of my head and eyes out of the water at the edge of the falls. I hoped my hood would help me blend into the darkness.

I counted two dozen Alik'r warriors in the chamber. It's not too late to turn back, I told myself. But curiosity got the better of me and I stepped out of the pool into the light of the torches. The Alik'r responded as if stung, shouting and grabbing for their scimitars. I saw Kematu standing at their center. He had doffed his turban. His skull was shaved close on the sides, leaving a shock of thick ropy hair in the style the Redguards favored running in a black stripe down the center. It gave him a fierce look. I could see why Saadia would be afraid of him, even when he wasn't surrounded by a band of warriors.

"Kematu, I have come to hear your tale," I called to him. "Have your warriors sheath their weapons. You're not afraid of a mere girl, are you?"

The men relaxed and Kematu came over. "I told the thieves guarding the cave to expect you and give you safe passage. What happened to them?"

"They're still out there. I know thieves too well to just walk right up to them. It seemed best to sneak past them."

"Very impressive," he said.

"Not really. They weren't very attentive. Most thieves aren't, in my experience. Why have you holed yourselves up with them?"

"They provide cover for us. We arrived here in twos and threes. A large Alik'r war-band would not be welcome in Skyrim." He handed me a large, thick cloth. "Here, dry yourself and come sit. Would you like a cup of mead?"

When we had settled ourselves, I said, "Now, what are the charges against this Iman, assuming she exists?"

"Young lady, your presence here is proof enough that you know of this Iman. Otherwise, why come at all? I will speak plainly, and I expect you will as well."

"Fine," I said. "You go first."

"Iman is not only a convicted traitor to Hammerfell. She is about to commit an even more heinous act of treason that could result in a renewed war with the Aldmeri Dominion."

"Go on," I said.

"In the Great War, when she was little more than a girl, a lass as you would call her, she betrayed her house, her city, and her country by selling secrets to the Thalmor, the ruling party of the Aldmeri Dominion…"

"Yes, I'm familiar with them."
"Well… Without her betrayal, the city of Taneth could have withstood the Aldmeri forces. Instead, the city fell and it took another five years of bloody conflict to drive the Altmer from our shores. By that time she had taken refuge on Summerset Isle, where no doubt she was richly rewarded."

"So Hammerfell wants her for treason. Why would she be foolish enough to leave Summerset and come here?"

"Five years ago, she returned to Hammerfell disguised as a servant. She worked her way into the service of one of our highest ranking generals, an officer with detailed knowledge of Hammerfell's troop positions. She used her feminine wiles to gain entrance to the general's bedchamber, his most deeply held secrets, and his document chest. She learned much from their pillow talk, and even more from the reports she stole. Armed with that knowledge, the Altmer may be emboldened to attack us at our weakest points, where thousands of our citizens are vulnerable. It's been twenty years since our part in the Great War ended. Peace, harmony, and prosperity have been restored only recently, and much still needs rebuilding. All of that will be lost and we will be plunged into war once again if she achieves her aims."

"Why did she come here instead of fleeing directly to Summerset with her secrets?"

"Fortunately, the general had moved to eastern Hammerfell, around Elinhir, before Iman could steal his secrets. Once he found her missing and his chest empty, his guilty conscience led him to report the crime immediately. Her trail was still warm when we began tracking her. All signs pointed to Skyrim. She was clearly hoping to make a quick connection with one of the Thalmor patrols now common here. Fortunately for us, chance was against her and she never made that contact. Then she tried sending messages to her masters in Summerset, but Thalmor field communications are not everything they could be. We intercepted a letter from her indicating that she would wait to be contacted in Whiterun."

"And what makes you think this contact hasn't been made by now?"

"We have monitored all of the approaches to Whiterun and have seen no Thalmor movement. Nor have we seen her leaving the city, though that would have been more easily hidden from us. So please, we must know if she remains in the city. If not, we must begin looking elsewhere and I fear our cause is lost."

I looked at the document Kematu held out for me. It detailed Iman's crimes and even bore a reasonable likeness of her. Truly, her fate and perhaps that of thousands of innocents rested in my hands. How could I decide?

Then I told Kematu about Saadia, that she had arrived only recently in Whiterun, and that she claimed to be a noble woman who had spoken out against the Aldmeri Dominion, while Kematu and his men were the real agents of the Thalmor.

"Ah, now you see the kind of manipulations she will use," said Kematu. "But her story makes no sense. The Thalmor want all of Hammerfell dead or enslaved. Why would they go to such trouble for one woman?"

I had to admit the story seemed flimsy. What had she said? That she had spoken out against the Aldmeri Dominion? Such speech must be common in Hammerfell now. "Still," I told Kematu, "it's her word against yours, plus this warrant with a seal that means nothing to me. How can I possibly make such a choice? I could easily be sending an innocent woman to her death."

"Young woman, you need only look in your heart. I believe you are a good judge of character. You trusted your judgment enough to come here and put yourself in my hands. Now think, is this Saadia..."
just what she claims to be, or is there something more hiding behind that façade? And when you look at me, do I seem anything other than what I claim to be, a servant of Hammerfell and my queen?"

He was right, Saadia had shifted from incompetent barmaid to weak victim to a confident woman who was good with a blade, and back to helpless victim, all in a matter of minutes. Kematu's behavior had been consistent throughout. But maybe that was because he wasn't the one running in fear of his life.

"All right," I said. "Hide yourself south of Whiterun after dark this evening. If I decide I can trust you, I will shine a light from the city walls. When you see my signal, make your way to the stables and I will have Saadia, or Iman as you call her, waiting there."

It was morning by the time I returned to Whiterun. I stopped by the stables and spoke with the drayman there. When I arrived back at Arcadia's, my purse was considerably lighter.

In my room I began gathering my things and packing them in my knapsack. If I went through with helping the Alik'r, it would only provoke whoever had attacked me. Besides, it was time I got myself to the college. Then I napped. I had been awake for nearly a whole sun's turn.

I awakened to the sound of horses' hooves in the street. They were moving fast, like single mounts, not the draft horses pulling wagons that were common in the Plains District. I looked out Arcadia's door to see three figures on horseback passing through the market stalls and up the steps to the city's second level. Two wore the elven armor of Thalmor justiciars and the third looked to be a Thalmor wizard. I pretended to sweep Arcadia's steps while I watched them disappear out of sight in the direction of Dragonsreach. If they had wanted to announce their presence in Whiterun, they couldn't have done it more plainly. It appeared that the jarl's days of holding the Thalmor at arm's distance were at an end.

I had slept into the early afternoon, but Kematu and his men wouldn't be in position until nightfall. If Saadia really was an Aldmeri spy, I would have to keep her from them until then, and convince her to come with me to the stables. But how?

I found her in her room in the Bannered Mare. Before she opened the door to me, I thought I heard the sound of pages being stuffed into a satchel. When she let me in I took her by the arm. "The Alik'r have found a way into the city," I told her, trying to inject as much fear into my voice as possible. "They're coming for you now. You have to hide in Arcadia's until tonight, when I can smuggle you out of the city."

"I can't leave now, there's something I must do," she said, shouldering the satchel. Her voice was quite calm for someone whose life was in danger. "The city guard will just have to protect me from them. What are they going to do, attack me in broad daylight? I'll meet you at Arcadia's at nightfall. Will your escape plans hold until then?"

I could only stare at her. Kematu had been right about everything. She had played me like a cheap wooden flute. What am I to say? I was but a seventeen-year-old girl, inexperienced with the wiles of foreign spies.

"Well, are you going to stand there staring, or get out of my way?" she demanded. I stepped aside
to let her pass. When she felt the dart pierce her neck, she turned in surprise, grabbing to pull it out. But it was too late. Her eyelids fluttered and she slumped to the floor. Arcadia's analysis had been correct – the dart was covered in sleeping potion. I dragged her back into her room and closed the door.

I searched Saadia's satchel. It was full of documents containing information on troop movements in Hammerfell and much else besides. I had prevented her from delivering them to the Thalmor, but now I somehow had to get her unconscious body down to the stables without being seen. Nightfall was still two hours off. I had that much time to devise a plan.

I went downstairs and ordered a cup of nettle tea. I had to think. I wondered if Hulda would miss Saadia, or if the Redguard woman had given an excuse for her absence. And what would the Thalmor do when she didn't appear at the appointed time? Probably begin looking for her here. I could only hope they had a bit of patience. Then the Gray-Mane brothers came in and I knew what I needed to do.

Back at the shop that evening, I said my farewells to Arcadia. She loaded my knapsack with a few potions and ingredients for more. Then I shouldered my pack and Saadia's satchel, grabbed a lantern and opened the back door carefully. If my watchers were about, they were well hidden. Night had fallen by now, but the moons had not yet risen. I kept to the shadows as I crept toward the guard post on the wall. This one was hardly ever guarded, and it proved empty now, perfect for my purpose. Even with the walls enclosing me on two sides, I used a wolf pelt to shield the lantern from the rest of Whiterun. I used a flap of the pelt to alternately cover and uncover the side of the lantern facing south. It would have been much easier to signal the Alik'r with a jet of magical sparks, but I wanted to maintain stealth as long as possible. It took a minute for the Alik'r to respond with their own flash of light.

Back at the Mare, I found a commotion going on inside. Saadia's limp form lay slumped across a table, the Gray-Mane brothers standing over it. The cook was talking to Hulda. "I found her unconscious like this, stinking of ale." As well she should, I had doused her with enough of it.

"This is the last straw," Hulda said.

"Wait," I called, going up to the table. "Can't you give her another chance? It was only this once."

"You were up in her room long enough this afternoon," said the cook. "What were you doing there?"

"We were just sharing a pint or two. We're both new here, so we became friends, especially after the way these ruffians treated her. I tried to get her to stop drinking so much, I think she was just upset. But she wouldn't listen. Finally I left, I couldn't watch her do that to herself."

"You've got a kind heart, Deirdre," said Hulda. "But my patience is at an end. Get her out of my sight." The Gray-Manes lifted her by the arms and began to drag her toward the door.

"What are you doing with her?" I demanded

"We're going to put her on the next wagon heading out of town," said Avulstein. "She'll wake up by the time she gets to Falkreath, then she can make her way back to Hammerfell from there, or plague the people of Falkreath for all I care."
"I don't trust you," I said. "I'm coming with you to make sure she's not hurt."

"Whatever you say, lass," said Thorald. "It's a fine night for a walk. You're welcome to join us."

I opened the door for them, and we walked down the steps, Saadia's limp feet bumping down the steps behind us.

Stealth was no longer an option. I had considered getting the guards involved in removing Saadia from the city. While there were procedures for deporting foreigners from Skyrim, turning them over to Alik'r warriors wasn't one of them. Nor did it seem likely that the guards would let two hulking Nords carry an unconscious woman, Redguard or not, through the gate without asking questions. I needed to be with them, and that meant my watchers would see my every move.

"Thorald! Avulstein!" the guards greeted the Gray-Manes. They hardly noticed me. "What's going on here?"

"Ah, Brond, good to see you," said Thorald. "This Redguard woman has served her last drink at the Mare. You can see she's dead drunk. Hulda doesn't need servants like that, and we're taking her to the wagon and sending her to the border."

The other guard chuckled. "I bet you have some other plans for her first, right? A fine-looking woman, Redguard though she be." Apparently the Nordic laws against molesting women didn't extend to foreigners.

"That's why I'm here," I said. "I knew I couldn't trust these louts with her. If they lay a hand on her, they'll answer to me."

The guard laughed. "You really think you're a match for these two?"

"We'll find out, should they dare touch her," I said.

"I told you, lass," said Avulstein, "we mean her no harm. We're just trying to do Hulda a favor."

"Deporting undesirables is our job, Avulstein," said Brond. "There are procedures, documentation."

"Well, it's your choice, Brond," Thorald said. "We just thought we'd save you a lot of work with quill and ink. But if you'd rather write reports than share a flagon of ale with us when your shift is done, it's all the same to me. There's a mug waiting for me at the Mare right now."

"Well, if you put it that way…" said Brond.

"Come on, no one cares about a Redguard wench," put in Avulstein, "except for Deirdre here."

As the guards opened the gates for us, I heard the sound of footsteps running back up the street toward Dragonsreach.

"Come!" I said to the Gray-Manes when we were through the gate. "We have to move quickly."

"What's the hurry? The wagon's not going anywhere."

"Don't argue," I said. "There's coin in it for you, but only if we get her to the stables safely."

We took a shortcut over the battlements that avoided a long loop of road. In another five minutes we were at the stables.
"The wagon's not here," Thorald said, puzzled.

"I know," I said. "Don't worry. Just bring her up here away from the road."

As we rounded the stable master's house, Kematu and two of his warriors stepped out of the shadow of the stables, the light of the newly risen moons turning them into looming silhouettes. The Nords dropped Saadia and drew their axes. "Alik'r!" Thorald exclaimed. "What kind of trick is this?"

"It's all right," I said. "Everyone put away your weapons." The Alik'r had drawn their scimitars. "Thorald, Avulstein, there is more I didn't tell you. This woman is a Thalmor spy. These Alik'r warriors are here to arrest her and take her home."

"Alik'r on Skyrim soil," said Thorald. "It stinks to the Nine."

"Hammerfell has done what you Nords could not," said Kematu, sheathing his scimitar. "The Thalmor still walk your lands. A true Nord would never side with them against any who oppose them."

Thorald lowered his axe and seemed to be pondering this. A true Stormcloak sympathizer, he was sure to hate the Thalmor more than these Alik'r, once the wheels in his mind began turning. That could take a while with a Nord, however.

"Thorald, you may have to make that choice sooner than you think," I said. "The Thalmor may be on their way here even now. You two need to get out of here before you're seen with us. Here's your gold."

Thorald took the bag I handed him and turned to go, but Avulstein paused. "There's more about you than I first thought, lass, I'll hand you that." Then he followed his brother.

I turned to Kematu. "I'm sorry, we were followed to the gate. If my watchers are in league with the Thalmor, they're surely on their way here now."

But I was too late. The two Alik'r warriors were just trying to get Saadia on her feet and I was about to hand her satchel to Kematu when we heard hoof beats on the road. Avulstein and Thorald had just started back up the hill and were the first to encounter the elves, while we remained hidden around the corner of the house and the stables. "We're looking for the Redguard woman," I heard one of the elves say. "Where is she?"

"Ain't seen no Redguards," came Thorald's reply.

"We know you brought her here," said the elf. "Speak, or die." I peered around the corner of the house to see three Altmer on horseback looming over the Gray-Manes. Three more elves were arriving on foot, as well as a couple of men. Those must be my watchers, I thought. Even in the moons-light they looked familiar. But where had those three additional Altmer come from?

"Let's see what you've got, you stinking elf!" Thorald shouted. Stupid Nord! He and his brother were both brandishing their axes, and the elves had drawn their swords. The Thalmor wizard on horseback dismounted, the better to cast spells. I looked back at Kematu and held up eight fingers. We had six. The odds didn't seem bad, but the Thalmor justiciars had an evil reputation. Then Kematu whistled and a dozen Alik'r warriors stepped out from the stables.

The fight was short but bloody. Before we could do anything, the Thalmor wizard had aimed a lightning bolt at Thorald, blasting him back against the house, unconscious or dead. The stable master foolishly opened his door to see what the trouble was, then shut it quickly.
Avulstein hesitated, not sure whether to go to his brother or face his attackers. The wizard was about to aim another spell at him, but my arrow caught him in the chest. Then the Alik'r were upon them. The second Thalmor wizard took out one of the attacking Alik'r but then it was close work with swords, staves, and axes. I held back and let the Alik'r fight their battle. The lightly armored mercenaries fell first, and in moments three surviving Thalmor were retreating up the road, whistling for the horses.

Several of the Alik'r wanted to give chase, but Kematu held them back. "We've got to get the woman and depart before the city guard arrives," he told them. A horn was sounding over the city, and we could hear shouts. Avulstein went over to check on his brother, who was stirring groggily. Two of the Alik'r picked up Iman and began to carry her down the road. The rest of the Alik'r followed them, with many glances back over their shoulders to make sure they weren't being pursued.

Kematu came over to me and I handed him Saadia's satchel. "All the documents should be in here," I told him. "I searched her room thoroughly."

"Gods praise you for your help today… Wait, I don't even know your name."

"Deirdre," I told him. "Deirdre Morningsong."

"Hammerfell owes you a tremendous debt, Deirdre Morningsong. Your name will not be forgotten among our people."

"And Saadia, or Iman, as you call her? She won't be harmed?"

"No harm shall come to her on our journey to Hammerfell. On that you have my word. After that, the queen and our courts will decide her fate."

We heard the sounds of approaching city guards and he ran off after his men. Soon I heard many horses thundering westward, the guard giving chase on foot.

Avulstein had helped his brother get to his feet. "Are you all right, Thorald?" I asked.

"Just a bit stunned," he said.

"We gave worse than we got," said Avulstein. "I never guessed you'd lead us into a fight with the Thalmor, Deirdre, but I'd do it again. Those Alik'r are bloody good fighters, too. This is one to tell the kids someday." Then they began making their way up the hill.

It was time for me to make my own escape. I headed stealthily cross-country, aiming to strike the north road near Battle-Born Farm. It wouldn't be long before the guards and maybe even the Thalmor were swarming the stables. There was nothing left for me in Whiterun. If the jarl had thrown in his lot with the Imperials and the Thalmor, he would soon have me in a dungeon – or worse, the Thalmor would take me to one of their own prisons. I should be safe from them at the college. I'd heard Winterhold was Stormcloak territory.

The wagon was waiting for me at the place I had arranged. There was a steep charge for this special service.

"Have you been to Winterhold before, lass?" asked the driver. "Best bring your heavy cloak. It's colder than a hagraven’s teat, pardon the expression, even in summer, so they say."

I looked back at Whiterun, crowned by the outline of Dragonsreach jagged against the evening sky. It was hard not to feel regret at my sudden departure. I had made many friends over the last
fortnight. I wondered when I would see Arcadia again, or Lydia, or Aela and Vilkas. Still, I was looking forward to the college. No doubt I would make many friends there. And more important, I would begin to find out about my magic ability and where it came from.

Tamriel's twin moons shone down upon us as we made our way north.
"No one drinks a Nord under the table!" Onmund exclaimed as he passed the bottle of Colovian fire brandy down the line. We were standing around a bonfire in the circular courtyard of the College of Winterhold.

"But we haven't got a table," said J'zargo, the Khajiit. He wrinkled his feline nose as he sniffed at the brandy bottle.

Onmund stared at the fire for a moment. "True," he said, as if he had just understood one of life's deep meanings.

The bonfire crackled and roared, lighting our avid faces. When it began to die down, one of us would hit it with a flame spell. The light played off the walls of the courtyard and the statue of Arch-Mage Shalidor looming above us, making giants of our shadows. We were all dressed alike in college robes, we four apprentices, two scholars, and a wizard. After spending the day inside studying old tomes and practicing spells, it felt good to be outdoors, even in the bitter cold of a Winterhold night. The wagon driver had not been wrong as I boarded back in Whiterun – I had arrived in Winterhold half-frozen, even under the fur blankets he lent me. And that was in the first days of Hearthfire; now, toward the end of the month, it was even colder.

The fire kept us warm, and so did the brandy we were passing around. It was a rare concoction, but Enthir had gotten his hands on it somehow. He was good that way. Everyone at the college and in the town of Winterhold knew, if you needed anything hard to find, especially anything illicit, Enthir was the Bosmer to see. The rumor was that Phinis Gestor, a Breton wizard at the college, was exploring necromancy, and used Enthir's services in acquiring certain banned agents. It was best not to ask where Enthir got any of the goods he had for sale.

No one was arguing with the provenance of the Colovian fire brandy. It had been a long week. Now, on Fredas night, with no classes in the morning, we were blowing off pent-up magicka. I'd taken several pulls, and the courtyard was already beginning to spin. Only then did I start to wonder if the college really allowed its scholars to get their subordinate apprentices drunk. The staff were lenient with any kind of magical investigation, as long as the results were shared with the rest of the college, and no one from outside the school got hurt. Maybe this was Enthir's idea of an alchemy experiment, investigating the various tolerances to alcohol of the different races. We were a mixed lot, Breton, Altmer, Dunmer, Bosmer, Nord, Cyrodiili, Khajiit, and me, the mixed-blood – a good cross section of Tamriel's people. We lacked only an Argonian and Orsimer to make the experiment complete. Urag gro-Shub, the college's librarian, was an Orc, but he had refused to join us.

Judging by how I felt, I thought the Bretons must have the lowest tolerance for drink. A glance at Colette Marence, a Breton scholar emphasizing Restoration magic, confirmed my suspicion. She was swaying where she stood even more than I. Maybe Onmund was right, and my Nord side was helping in some way. But Onmund was a Nord, and he was growing louder as the bottle made its
rounds, so maybe that wasn't true either. The only one not affected was Enthir, helped no doubt by his Bosmer's natural resistance to poison.

Clearly, Khajiits had no such tolerance – J'zargo was becoming almost as animated as Onmund. "This capacity to hold one's drink is so trivial," he said, his tail lashing back and forth behind him. "More important for those of us who aspire to greatness is magical capacity, no? And you shall see, none shall surpass J'zargo."

"Nitwit," said Nirya, the Altmer scholar. Like Faralda, her fellow High Elf, she had sharp features and a superior air. "No doubt your scant magical ability is very impressive in Elsweyr, but such bragging among true mages is unseemly."

"Tell us, Nirya," said the Cyrodiilian, Sergius Turrianus, "who are the true mages?" As a wizard, Sergius was the most senior of our group, a chaperone of sorts. His tone was notably frosty.

"Why, Sergius," said Nirya with even greater contempt, "it is well known that the Altmer are the most advanced in the arcane arts. Our greater magical power alone puts us far ahead, certainly far beyond a mere Imperial with no innate magical ability. No, only the Bretons can challenge the Altmer in magical prowess."

Brelyna, the Dunmer apprentice, cleared her throat. Her red eyes shown even brighter than usual in the firelight. "My family expects me to do well in Alteration, but I…"

Colette broke in, her speech mildly slurred, glaring at Nirya. "It ish true that you High Elves begin with a larger reserve of magical power, but anyone can increase their magicka through diligent training. If you focused on improving your skills rather than striving for position in the college, the rest of us would not be shurpathing you now."

"Dear Colette," retorted Nirya, "I've always wondered, does the Breton's natural resistance to magic mean that you have a greater resistance to learning magic? How else to explain your choice to focus on Restoration, the meanest and least useful of all the arcane arts?"

After a month at the college I had grown used to such bickering. While it was true the College of Winterhold was open to all of Tamriel's races and remained neutral in its wars, political and racial enmities were never far beneath the surface. That had been driven home to me on the day I arrived at the college. Two days before, I had been fighting Altmer justiciars, and who did I find guarding the college's entrance but another Altmer? Perhaps I was just being excessively cautious, but I assumed she was watching for me. Somehow the Thalmor must have gotten a message here ahead of me, I thought. I went back to the Frozen Hearth Inn in the town of Winterhold, and found that the college always posted a guard at the entrance. The arch-mage claimed this was to keep innocent bystanders from wandering onto the grounds and getting hurt. The villagers thought the real purpose was to defend the college from attack by the villagers themselves.

A divide between town and robe was common in any college community, but the split in Winterhold was extreme, symbolized by the crumbling bridge spanning a thousand-foot chasm between the town and the college. Everywhere I went in the village the people complained bitterly about the school, blaming a mysterious magical experiment for the catastrophe that had befallen Winterhold sixty years before. Prior to the disaster, the city had been one of the largest and most prosperous in Skyrim. Now, it was a small collection of houses and a few shops perched at the edge of a precipice above the Sea of Ghosts. Somehow the college had weathered the cataclysm better than the much-reduced city, giving rise to vicious speculation. Arch-Mage Savos Aren had tried to convince the townspeople that the college had nothing to do with the cataclysm. Perhaps it was a natural disaster, he told them, an after-effect of the eruption of the Red Mountain in neighboring Morrowind at the beginning of the era. But few had believed him, and the arch-mage
had limited communication between town and college after a particularly nasty altercation.

I returned to the college entrance still with trepidation in my heart. But Faralda showed no sign of outward hostility other than the usual tone of elven superiority. She was taller than I, so it was hard for her to look at me without looking down her prominent, aquiline nose. Her pointed chin jutted toward me like a dagger.

When she learned I wanted to study magic, she gave me a test. After three tries I was able to produce a feeble jet of sparks, so she grudgingly allowed me entrance. "I hope you do well at our college," she said as she led me across the narrow, crumbling bridge, "though I doubt you will."

Things improved when I met Mirabelle Ervine, the college's master-wizard and a fellow Breton. Savos Aren was constantly busy with his magical research, so Mirabelle saw to the college's day-to-day operations. She seemed stern, and especially concerned to guard against further taints on the college's reputation. But beneath her school master's demeanor and cultured Wayrest accent, she reminded me of my mother. She had the same dark hair, and she was around the same age.

First, Mirabelle gave me a tour of the college. It formed a walled circle, with three circular towers arranged around it. Two dormitory towers stood on either side of the entrance, with the main tower directly opposite. This larger tower contained the Hall of the Elements, where most of the classes and practice sessions were held; the Arcanaeum, the college's well-stocked library; and the arch-mage's quarters. Then she showed me my cell in the Hall of Attainment. It was small, with a single bed, a chair and a dresser. Still, compared to the floor in Arcadia's back room, this looked luxurious.

Finally, she handed me a new set of novice mage's robes and hood. The clothing was enchanted to add to the new mage's store of magicka and cunningly fashioned with many pockets and folds to store potion flasks, scrolls, and other magical items. Once I put them on, I felt I really was about to begin a new phase of my life.

After the introduction to the college, Mirabelle took me to my first class in the Hall of the Elements. This was a large, round chamber with tall windows and a sort of well in the center emitting a blue light. The class was already underway. Tolfdir, an Elder Nord wizard of Alteration, was leading J'zargo, Onmund, and Brelyna in a series of concentration exercises. His voice sounded like dry paper, but his dark eyes were full of energy. His face was gaunt, with deep-worn wrinkles like the grain of well polished wood.

When Tolfdir noticed me, he took time out to welcome me and explain the technique of concentration that was vital to casting any spell. We weren't just learning words, he said, we were channeling the power of Aetherius, the immortal plane. "The source of magic is inherently unstable, and dangerous. That's why it takes years of practice to master and control it."

Behind him, I could see my fellow students rolling their eyes. They had been doing nothing but these exercises for the past week, and were close to open rebellion. I couldn't blame them. After only an hour of "projecting our minds into Aetherius," as Tolfdir called it, my old restlessness was coming back. I wondered how long it would be before I could go off exploring on my own.

Finally, as Tolfdir was about to introduce a new breathing exercise, Onmund spoke up. "We've been here a week and you haven't even let us show you what we can do!" he exclaimed.

Brelyna and J'zargo spoke up in agreement. "It is time J'zargo demonstrated his greatness," J'zargo said. Like all the cat-people of Elsweyr, the Khajiit spoke with a seductive purr in his voice.

"And what about our newcomer?" asked Tolfdir.
"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to learn something practical," I said. Maybe we could at least move around if we practiced spell casting, I thought.

"Very well then, I'll teach you a spell that is both practical and will help keep you safe," the wizard said. "Are you all familiar with the lesser ward spell?"

We shook our heads, and he spent a few moments teaching us the simple incantation and the proper method for casting it.

"Now, Deirdre, why don't you stand over there and try casting the ward while I hit you with a flame spell?"

"This one thinks it is unfair!" protested the Khajiit, as if being blasted with flame were a rare treat. "J'zargo and these two have been here a week, why should this one be first?"

"Now, now," said Tolfdir, "we don't want to be unwelcoming to our new student, do we?" J'zargo grumbled, but grudgingly went over to stand with the other students behind Tolfdir.

"Over there, Deirdre, facing me," the old wizard directed. "Now cast the spell, and be prepared to block my flame."

I let the words of the incantation run through my mind, at the same time trying to concentrate on the energies of Aetherius, beyond the veil of Oblivion. I tried not to let doubts creep into my mind, but how could they not, when I wasn't even sure what Aetherius was? "The source of all magical power," Tolfdir had called it. How would I know I was tapping into it?

The answer came when I felt energy flowing into my hands. I held them out in front of me in the way Tolfdir had demonstrated, aiming directly at him. A blue, shimmering, transparent wall formed around my hands, growing larger and brighter as I continued casting it. Tolfdir cast his flame spell, and the jet of fire hit the magic shield. It spread out in an orange wall matching the shield's blue one, but it could not get at me. Finally, sensing that my magicka was weakening, Tolfdir relented and both our spells flickered out at the same time.

"Very good!" exclaimed Tolfdir. "That was an excellent ward for a first attempt." I looked at my hands, surprised at the power that had come from them and expecting to see some sort of change. But they were just my hands.

The other students were eager to try, and soon we were casting jets of ice and wards at each other. Tolfdir had brought plenty of magicka potions so we didn't have to wait for our own reserves to regenerate. He had healing potions too, for the inevitable mishaps. To my own surprise and the consternation of my fellow students, I was the only one who didn't need healing by the end.

At the end of the day, Mirabelle pulled me aside. "How did your first lessons go?" she asked. We were on the walkway between the Hall of Elements and the Hall of Attainment where I had my cell.

"As well as could be expected, I suppose," I said. In truth, it had been better than that. I told her about the day.

"Outstanding!" she said. "You clearly have a strong innate ability."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I don't think I made any friends among my fellow apprentices." The three had pointedly walked out of the hall without acknowledging my presence after practice was over.

"They'll warm up to you. We're all about sharing knowledge here. If you can help them by sharing
your knowledge and advice, I'm sure they'll come around. Tell me, how did your magical prowess first present itself?"

I gave her a shortened version of the account I had given Gerdur and Ralof. She looked at me with increasing concern as the story progressed, but she became thoughtful when I got to the part where my magic exploded out of me, casting Osmer away.

"The ignorance of these Nords is astounding," she said, sounding not so much contemptuous as angry at their treatment of me and my family. "It's good that you've come to study here. You're around people who understand magic now, and you'll never need to fear that kind of ignorant bigotry again. You'll learn to control your magic. Such accidents are common when young mages first discover their power. Except…"

"Except?" I prompted.

"When you pushed Osmer away from you, did you feel the power flowing through your hands?"

I pretended to think back, but I didn't really need to. The moment was etched in my memory. "No," I said. "I had my hands on his chest pushing him away, but I wasn't strong enough. When I shouted 'No!' at him, it was as if the word itself pushed him away."

She looked at me for several moments then, searching my face for the truth of what had happened that day. Her eyes were gray and showed a keen sense of judgment. I felt she was somehow measuring what I was made of. Then she seemed to come to a decision, saying, "Well, magic presents itself in all sorts of ways, and none of us can predict how it will first appear. Just keep working on the exercises Tolfdir assigns you, and accidents like that won't happen in future." Her voice sounded certain, but her expression was still perplexed. It was clear that she had as many questions about my powers as did I.

If my magical power had provoked fear in those around me before I came to the college, now it provoked envy. Winterhold was a seething bed of petty jealousies, personal striving, and one-upmanship.

The rivalry was bad enough among my fellow students, especially Brelyna and J'zargo, who viewed me as an interloper after that first day. And how could they not? They had been at the school longer, yet I matched them or even bested them in those first exercises. Our relations were not helped by J'zargo's inflated sense of his own skill, nor by Brelyna's diminished one. While J'zargo thought he could tackle expert level Destruction spells before mastering the novice ones, Brelyna struggled to learn the most basic Alteration spells, even though she was quickly mastering Destruction. Back home in Morrowind she had developed some sort of block to her magical powers. She had come to the college in hopes of overcoming it, only to find continued frustration. When I asked her about it, she dismissed my concern. But I could see that her parents had placed enormous pressure on her to succeed, since she came from a long line of wizard-lords from house Telvanni.

With this rough beginning, it took me the better part of three weeks to win their trust. Only Onmund, always so chipper and optimistic, seemed undisturbed by my sudden arrival. "More people to practice spells on," he explained. He was so glad to be away from his magic-fearing family that anything that happened at the college seemed an improvement.
Relations were worse among our superiors. Nirya and Faralda, the two High Elves, both thought they were next in line to be named arch-mage. We would often hear Faralda muttering that the college was due for a change in leadership. The facts that Faralda was not even a master-wizard and Nirya just a lowly scholar, one step above us apprentices, didn't keep them from plotting against each other or their colleagues. There were many stories of delicate experiments being tampered with, and Colette Marence, the Restoration scholar, complained constantly about her research materials being stolen. Arch-Mage Savos Aren seemed content to let things go on this way, apparently believing that a healthy climate of competition was good for the school. I found it odd that Mirabelle, who could seem so stern at times, let the petty infighting continue, especially when so much of it was aimed at her job.

To the surprise of everyone, I chose to focus my studies on Restoration and Illusion. The others thought Destruction magic was the obvious choice. But I already had significant skill in stealth, and the Illusion spells could make me nearly undetectable once I became an expert. They could also be used to calm or frighten an opponent into submission. And learning healing magic was the main reason I was here. With the right skills, I hoped to fulfill my vow to never kill again while making my way through this dangerous land. Even if I didn't join the Stormcloak rebellion, I doubted I could avoid the agents of the Aldmeri Dominion forever.

Colette was thrilled with my choice of Restoration, since so few chose to study it in depth. Drevis Neloran, the Illusion master, was nearly as glad, but he gave me a word of warning. "You realize, don't you, that Illusion can be a very powerful weapon, but it won't work on undead until you reach the highest levels?"

I shook my head.

"And on the machines left by the Dwemer, it won't work at all?"

Again I shook my head, but assured him that since I wasn't planning on exploring any ancient crypts or Dwemer ruins, this wouldn't be a problem. He seemed satisfied, though he did look at me oddly as he shook my hand to welcome me under his tutelage.

Our days consisted of practice with various spells and incantations. My fellow students would blast each other with Destruction spells, their orange firebolts, white ice spikes, and silvery forks of lightning darting about the Hall of the Elements. When their wards failed, I would heal them with a Restoration spell, and when their tempers flared I would calm them with an Illusion spell. The wizards were available to teach us new spells or provide spell tomes – for a fee. As we advanced, we learned dual-casting, using both hands to make a particular spell more intense. The college also provided magical staves for practice. It took some time to learn the trick of bending a staff to our will, but once we managed it we could draw on the staff's connection to the power of Aetherius, saving our own magicka.

Yet I recoiled from using staves – they were powered with soul gems, which I found disturbing. To charge a soul gem, the mage had to kill an animal and collect its soul in the gem. The energy of that soul could then be used to energize a magical staff. I had no trouble with hunting for food, yet I found the idea of killing an animal just to harvest its soul disgusting. And, of course, the dark art of harvesting a human soul in a black soul gem was banned. I decided to stick with channeling the power of Aetherius; it seemed cleaner somehow.

In addition to practice on the college grounds, I roamed the forest and mountains around Winterhold, looking for targets for my Illusion and Restoration spells. If a woodcutter had injured himself with an axe, I was there to heal the wound. If I came across a pack of wolves, common in these frozen mountains, I would use a calming spell on them, rather than simply sneaking by. I had
always admired wolves from afar – the way they worked together on the hunt, and the way they played together between kills. But with calming spells, I could get much closer. Once I aimed the blue ball of Aetherial energy at them, they would become as docile as lapdogs. I even petted one, amazed by the softness of its thick winter coat. Its eyes were piercing, but when calmed had none of the fierce malice I associated with the beasts. It licked my face for a moment, then bounded back to its companions. I wished I belonged to a pack as close as that.

Yet, slowly, the college was becoming my pack. Mirabelle took me under her wing, inviting me to weekly tea. "We Bretons need to stick together," she told me. The tea was fine – an excellent mint grown near Riften – and the conversation better. I enjoyed her stories of High Rock. I had only been as far as Jehanna, my mother's home town, but Mirabelle had traveled all over the province. She knew Wayrest best, having grown up there, but she also had stories of Daggerfall, Shornhelm, and Evermore. She had even seen the Adamantine Tower, the oldest structure in all of Tamriel. And she would ask me about my mother, and what stories I remembered her telling about Jehanna. It felt good to talk about her, even if it made me sad. I had never felt so in touch with my Breton side.

My fellow apprentices slowly came to accept me as well. Though we all had different backgrounds, we shared the common bond of being the lowest mages in the pecking order. We struggled together in those first weeks, even as I gradually surpassed the rest, and we soon began to rely on one another.

First, I helped Brelyna get over her block with Alteration by letting her cast spells on me. This led to a variety of mishaps. Once, I ended up viewing everything through a green haze. It took several hours for that to wear off. Then she transformed me, first into a cow, then a horse, and finally a dog. Her face, usually a rich, deep gray, became paler with each mistake until it was almost ashen. It was quite unpleasant sitting there on all fours, feeling fleas bite through my thick hair, resisting the urge to urinate on one of the hall's columns, and wondering whether Brelyna was going to faint before getting the spell right. But finally she put me back to my true form, apologizing profusely. "Thank you," she said. "This has been helpful. At least now I know where I need to focus my studies."

Brelyna helped me with my own tasks in return. She was a good subject for my Illusion spells. When she was feeling particularly anxious about the progress of her studies, a spell of calming improved her mood greatly. In a relaxed state, she was able to absorb lessons more easily, and she finally began to progress in her study of Alteration.

Onmund needed help of an entirely different order. Despite all his complaints about his magic-fearing family, he had underestimated their importance in his life. He had foolishly traded away an heirloom amulet to Enthir – for what, he seemed too embarrassed to admit. He begged me to intercede with the elf and get the amulet back.

But Enthir remained adamant in his refusal. "All trades are final," he said. He made it sound like a point of honor that he never reversed a deal. I tried persuading him, then bribing him, with no success. Finally, he came up with his own deal for me. If I retrieved a staff that he had lost in a foolish trade, he would give me the amulet. When I protested that this violated his own precept of the finality of trades, he chided me for my lack of subtlety.

"I suppose I shouldn't expect a mere apprentice to recognize the obvious differences in the two cases," he said.

"Fine," I replied. "Who has this staff?"
"Oh, just a group of necromancers in Whispering Grotto," he said.

When I returned with the staff early the next day, Enthir seemed surprised to see me. "I didn't expect you back so soon – or at all," he said. "How did you overcome the necromancers and their thralls?"

"They never knew I was there," I said. "Never underestimate the arts of the common thief."

"Well done," he said. "I thank you most sincerely."

"Now what about the amulet?" I reminded him.

"Ah yes, of course," he said grudgingly. "A deal is a deal after all," and he handed me a rather plain looking amulet. "I can't imagine why the boy cares about it so much."

Onmund was glad to get it back, as plain as it was. "They're not perfect, but they are my family after all," he said. "This is all I have to remember them by. Thank you for retrieving it for me." He still wouldn't tell me what he had traded it for, but he did offer me help if I ever needed it.

The Khajiit had his own favor to ask. "This one advances rapidly in his magical training. Developing new spells is a good way to progress, no? The problem is, J'zargo spends so much time developing spells for use on the undead, he has no time to find undead and test them. This is where you can help. J'zargo will give you scrolls, you find undead and try them. That way you get new spell, and J'zargo's methods are proven. It is win-win, yes?"

"We'll see about that," I said. "What's the spell?"

The Khajiit wrinkled his nose in that way he had. "It is a flame cloak," he said, handing me a bundle of scrolls. "It works just like a common flame cloak, but when undead come near, they get big surprise." I'd seen Onmund perform the flame cloak spell. It set a cloak of fire around the caster. Any enemies who came within fighting range received burns, freeing the spellcaster to wield a weapon or a shield. I wondered what the surprise was, but J'zargo wouldn't elaborate.

"Great, J'zargo," I said. "Next time I'm in a Nord crypt, I'll make sure to use it." I laughed, because I didn't plan on going into a crypt any time soon, even if I knew where to find one. I still remembered the way Ralof shuddered when he looked up at Bleak Falls Barrow.

Four weeks had passed quickly at the college. I had made friends among my fellow students and had advanced considerably in my magical abilities. I knew a range of Restoration and Illusion spells from novice to adept, and had increased my reserves of magicka enough to cast them with ease. Tolfdir's concentration exercises seemed to be working, because I had greater control over my magical powers, casting spells consistently and with precision. Gone were the days when I struggled to produce a simple flame or jet of sparks.

Yet I seemed no closer to solving the mystery of what had happened on that day with Osmer. I was born with innate magical power, true, but this was nothing extraordinary at the college. Other students could tell of awkward moments when their magic had burst out of them unbidden, before they learned to control it. But in their telling, it had always been one of the elemental forms of magic – fire, ice, or lightning. None had simply uttered a word to produce such a powerful effect. And if Mirabelle Ervine had developed any ideas about the source of my power, she hadn't told
Nor was I any closer to deciding what to do with my new-found powers. The college remained sheltered from events in the rest of Skyrim. Was the Civil War raging, unbeknownst to us? Surely we would have heard something if that were the case. I wondered what had become of Ralof. And had Jarl Balgruuf sided with the Empire? The presence of Thalmor justiciars in his city made it seem likely. Could Lydia and Hrongar and their hirth-fellows be fighting Ralof's war-band even now? If it came to it, how could I choose between them?

And I had other, darker thoughts. Though many Nords had shown me nothing but kindness over the past weeks, I could not forget my old plans for revenge. At odd moments, I would find that anger welling up within me. Waking or sleeping, images of our burning house would flash before my eyes, and worse, the charred corpses that had been my parents as our neighbors hauled them out of the wreckage. How had I so easily turned aside from my vengeance?

As I tried to stifle my rage, I told myself that I had been right to abandon my plans for indiscriminate revenge. But my parents' killers were still free, no doubt going about their business in Dragon Bridge. I began to have thoughts of leaving the college and traveling there. I had come here for power, and now I had it, or at least a measure of it. Though I hadn't focused on Destruction, I could do enough with ice and lightning to make the killers hurt. And with my Illusion spells I could strike fear in their hearts, or set them to attacking each other. Soon, I would return home and give those ignorant Nords a true reason to fear magic.

And what then? I struggled with this question, trying to master the irrational fury that had settled upon me, as if from nowhere. Would I kill them outright? But I had had enough of death, hadn't I? That's what I told myself in my calmer moments. Or capture them, and turn them over ... to whom? The jarl of Haafingar Hold? What help could I find there?

"You're awfully quiet, Deirdre," Sergius said now around the bonfire. "Yet as a Breton, you've done well in your studies, from the reports I hear. Don't you have an opinion on which race is the most magical?"

"I've always found a moons-lit night quite magical," I replied. Onmund guffawed at my feeble joke, so I knew he must be drunk. "But if you mean magical power, why bother talking about it? So many things can affect it other than innate ability. Look at Tolfdir. He was born a Nord, yet he is one of the most advanced Alteration wizards in Tamriel."

"A doddering fool," I thought I heard Nirya say under her breath, but I let it go.

"Why waste words on speculation, when actions are the true measure of a mage?" I finished.

"The proof is in the casting, eh?" Sergius replied. "Well spoken indeed."

"Aren't we all here to learn?" said Onmund. "I'm just glad to be here and improve what small magical ability I have."

Just then Mirabelle Ervine emerged from the Hall of the Elements. The statue of Shalidor glared down at her as she walked over to us. The sculptor had cast the famous First Era arch-mage in a serious pose, arms upraised, an expression of concentration on his face, his robes blowing in an imagined wind. He looked as if he were about to blast Mirabelle with a whirlwind spell.

"Relaxing after a hard week I see," she said as she came up to us. "You apprentices have earned it. Sergius, see that they don't wander down into town. Our reputation is already bad enough without drunken mages disturbing the villagers' sleep. And remember, students – inebriation is allowed;
"Incineration is not." With that she continued along the walkway bisecting the circular courtyard and entered the Hall of Countenance, the dormitory where most of the instructors had their chambers.

"She really cares about us, doesn't she?" said Brelyna. "I wish I could be more like her. I bet she never had any trouble learning these basic spells."

"Did you hear her arguing with Ancano?" asked Onmund. We all shook our heads. "I was walking past her chambers yesterday. Ancano had made some sort of request but I didn't hear what it was. He seemed upset that Mirabelle had refused him. Then she told him that he might be used to the Empire bowing to his every whim, but the Thalmor receive no special treatment here. She said he should appreciate the opportunity Savos Aren has given him."

"I don't like the way he looks at me," said Brelyna. "I don't think he trusts any of us. Why did the arch-mage invite him here?"

Ancano was a Thalmor wizard, ostensibly here to promote relations with the college and advise the arch-mage. Everyone suspected he was simply a spy for the Aldmeri Dominion, sent here to watch for signs that the college was siding with the Stormcloaks. If he was able to gauge the strength of the college's wizards and learn some of its secrets, all the better. I had kept away from him since arriving. It seemed just a matter of time until he heard from his Thalmor colleagues about the blonde half-Breton who had interrupted Thalmor war plans, so it was best to avoid him. But he seemed to be everywhere at the college, always popping up whenever anything of import happened.

"I wonder if he was asking for access to the basement," said Sergius. "He could learn a thing or two from the Augur of Dunlain."

"The who?" asked J'zargo, and we all looked at Sergius.

"Oh, just a wizard who likes to keep to himself," said Sergius. He seemed relieved when Nirya interrupted him.

"I don't know why you distrust Ancano," she said. "The war is long over. He just wants to help the people of Skyrim through this time of transition and lead them to a better future." Nirya might not have been a Thalmor agent, but sometimes she surely sounded like one.

"A future without Talos worship, you mean," said Onmund.

I took that as my cue to leave. I didn't want to get into a debate about Skyrim's politics. Instead of continuing with his argument, Onmund followed me from the courtyard and joined me on the circular walk around the perimeter of the college. It was often deserted since it was the longest route to anywhere else. We had the walk to ourselves.

"Deirdre, is anything wrong?" Onmund put a hand on my arm as he caught up to me. I stopped and looked at him. His eyes, though bleary with drink, showed concern. He had that slight frown he always had when he was nervous.

"No, I just didn't want to get pulled into an argument about the war or religion," I said.

I thought he would argue with me then, questioning my loyalty as a Nord, but he didn't. "You're right," he said. "We shouldn't be arguing with each other about the world outside. We should be working together to further our study of magic. I shouldn't have let Nirya provoke me."
"I can see how she would provoke you, with that superior attitude of hers."

"I'm glad she's not one of us apprentices," he said. "Brelyna is all right, but those Altmer are so condescending."

"They are," I agreed.

"I mean, I'm glad we apprentices have all become friends. Especially you, you've helped me a lot."

"Well, you helped me too. You let me practice that fury spell on you." That had been a bit of a disaster. My spell worked too well, and Onmund's ward failed to block it. The next thing we knew, he was attacking J'zargo, who happened to be nearest to him. Taken by surprise, the Khajiit couldn't cast a ward in time to block the Nord's fire spell. The smell of singed fur filled the air as they began to trade Destruction spells. Both of them had taken several wounds by the time I could cast calming spells on them, and we had to call on Colette to heal them.

"That didn't work out so well, did it?" Onmund said now, grinning. "Still, you got to show what you can do with an Illusion spell, and we're all friends again, right?"

"I suppose so," I said.

"And maybe some of us are more than friends," he said.

"Why..." I asked, "are you saying J'zargo and Brelyna, or you and Brelyna...?"

"No." And then he was kissing me, his arms wrapped around me, nearly lifting me off my feet. To my surprise, I found myself kissing him back. Maybe it was the fire brandy – my head was still spinning. But his mouth felt … nice. He was one of the few Nord men who didn't wear a beard, and he had shaved meticulously. There was none of that awful scratchiness I'd experienced with Osmer. His arms encircling me were strong, but I felt protected, not imprisoned. I kissed him back, and then everything was spinning and I felt myself tilting backward. Onmund barely caught us by throwing a hand out against the wall.

Then I realized that it wasn't just my head spinning – my stomach was too. I pulled away from him and turned and retched on the cobblestones. It was my first experience with hard liquor. I had seen drunks in Dragon Bridge emerging from the Four Shields Tavern to empty their bellies in a dark alley, and I had vowed never to become that inebriated, if I ever started drinking at all. It hadn't taken much to put me in the same state. Onmund stroked my hair as I brought up the last of the brandy.

"Come on, let's get you to bed," he said.

"Right, bed, tha's what I need," I said, and I tried not to think what else might happen when he got me back to my room.

In truth, there wasn't much privacy at the college. The doorways to our cells were all open, and the other apprentices were returning from the bonfire, the scholars heading up the stairs to their chambers. When Onmund put the covers over me, patted me on the shoulder and said good night, I didn't know whether I was disappointed or relieved.
Saarthal

Chapter Summary

-- the hangover -- an early start -- the Saarthal Excavation -- J'zargo and the ring -- an enchanted amulet -- Tolfdir and Deirdre forge ahead -- a mysterious visitor -- the dead awaken --

To say that the sun had not yet risen when Tolfdir awakened us on the morning after the bonfire would not be saying much – the sun was seldom seen in Winterhold. Yet it was ungodly early. The small window in my cell looking out on the courtyard showed a pitch-black sky.

"Rise and shine students," Tolfdir called merrily as he made his circuit of our tower. "We have a big day ahead of us. We're going to Saarthal!"

Saarthal – I tried to dredge the name from deep in my hungover brain as I struggled into my apprentice's robes. Wasn't it some sort of ancient Nord city? I thought it had something to do with Ysgramor and his five hundred brave companions, the ones Aela had told me about in Whiterun. I staggered out to the hall and saw my fellow apprentices gathered around the old wizard.

J'zargo was holding his head as if it hurt as much as my own. "This one needs hangover cure," he said, "but there's no time to make one."

"Now students, we have a wonderful treat in store for us. The chief archaeologist…"

"But I thought we didn't have classes on Loredas," exclaimed Brelyna. Her red Dunmer eyes were even more red than usual. "And it's so early. Doesn't the college plan its field trips in advance?"

"As I was saying, the chief archaeologist at Saarthal just sent word last night that the excavation will be available today for our exploration. We have to seize this opportunity! I'm especially eager to delve into the ancient Nord use of magical wards."

"We should let the dead rest in peace," said Onmund. "Who knows what we'll find down there? What about draugr? Wights? Skeletal walkers? I've heard all manner of powerful beings haunt these ancient ruins, guarding hoards of treasure. We shouldn't disturb them."

I had already faced much in my young life with bravery, yet the mention of draugr turned me cold inside. My father had told me the stories of draugr from Nord legend – corpses that come back to life to guard the treasure hoarded in their barrows, or to walk Skyrim terrorizing the living and dragging the young and innocent back to the land of the dead. There is nothing ghostly about a draugr. It is as real and solid as any mortal. More so, with all trace of soft human flesh wasted away, leaving nothing but rock-hard muscle and sinew stretched taut over bone. And in some places the bone shows through. Its eyes glow with a cold blue light. It remains clothed in whatever scraps of armor it wore to its burial and carries the weapons that were interred with it. When disturbed from its slumbers, it attacks instantly. In addition to its great strength, it possesses powerful magic and spreads contagion with its breath. There is only one way to kill a draugr for good – first by severing its head, then by burning the corpse to nothing but ash.

Suddenly my decision to focus on Illusion and Restoration didn't seem so wise. All the Illusion
spells I had learned would be little help, since I had yet to progress to the level where they would work on undead. A stronger fire spell, that's what I needed, or the turn undead spell, but I had neglected to learn either.

"Now, now, let's not let our imaginations carry us away," replied Tolfdir. "The excavation hasn't reached the level of the crypts yet. And these stories of draugr scourges and death lords, they're just that – stories. You have nothing to be afraid of, I'll be with you the entire time, and Arniel Gane is already on his way there to catalog items of a magical nature. No, the only thing you'll have to worry about is an empty stomach. We'll be gone most of the day, so get yourselves a hearty breakfast and pack a lunch. We leave in twenty minutes."

Saarthal was southwest of Winterhold. As cold as it was, it felt good to be outside. The crisp air cleared my head as we walked up toward the snowy pass separating the village of Winterhold from the lands to the west. The contrast to my home in Dragon Bridge, or even the plains of Whiterun, was stark. We were familiar with winter in the mountains of Haafingar Hold, the time when snow blanketed everything and all but the evergreens lost their leaves. All of my favorite flowers died back to nothing, waiting until late in the spring to grow again. And of my bird friends, only the black raven, the snowy owl, and the black-capped chickadee remained. The snow-clad mountains did have an elegant, stark beauty, but within a few weeks of the first snowfall, I would find myself pining for the green shoots of spring and the long, languorous days of summer.

But here winter kept its hold year-round, as the name implied. The few evergreens were laden with snow. Not even the bits of green showing through the frost could relieve the black and white tone of the place. The only bit of color was that of the perennial snowberry, a hardy shrub brave enough to bear fruit even in the depths of winter. The bright red berries were the key ingredient in a potion that lent resistance to fire. I suspected I might need such a potion one day, so I had been stocking up on the berries during my time in Winterhold. It grew more abundantly here than anywhere I'd yet been in Skyrim. I gathered more as we ascended to the pass, darting from side to side off the trail, then running to catch up with my companions, who seemed intent only on following Tolfdir up the steep route. For an Elder, he was remarkably spry.

The other side of the pass presented a scene even more bleak. Before us stretched an unbroken complex of ice sheets and crevasses stepping down to the Sea of Ghosts. Here and there, bleak outcrops of black rock punctuated the field of white snow and ice. A series of cairns, each with its flag flapping in the stiff breeze, marked the route.

As we walked, Tolfdir refreshed our memories of Saarthal. Onmund added bits of his own, for the ancient city was famed in Nord lore. It was the first settlement of humans in Tamriel, founded before recorded history began. They came by ship from Atmora and built homes beside the race of mer who inhabited the province, the Snow Elves. The relationship between elves and humans started out well enough, then deteriorated as the newcomers pushed into more territory that had once belonged exclusively to the mer.

Then, on the Night of Tears, a force of Snow Elves attacked the city. The Atmorans were routed, and only three survivors, Ysgramor and his two sons, made it back to Atmora. Ysgramor vowed to return, amassing a large fighting force – the Five Hundred Companions. They returned to Tamriel, and drove the elves from Saarthal. Eventually, the people that would become the Nords pushed the elves out of this northern portion of Tamriel and claimed it for their own, under the new name of Skyrim.

In the eons since, Saarthal was literally buried by the sands and rock and ice of time, and even its location was forgotten. Only recently had archaeologists rediscovered it and begun to reveal its secrets. Little was left of the portions of the city that had been above ground, Tolfdir told us, but
the catacombs beneath it remained for exploration.

After two hours' journey we arrived at the Saarthal excavation. It was a deep, square pit in the ground, a hundred feet on a side, with scaffolding and stairs leading down to an iron door. Looming over the pit was a massive stone archway, all that was left of the great city. Tolfdir led us to the bottom of the pit, gave us a short lecture about safety, then pushed on the iron door.

It creaked open and we entered Saarthal, or what was left of it. We descended a narrow tunnel carved out of the granite bedrock, the roots that hung down from fissures in the stone brushing at our heads as we passed. I was toward the back, but I heard gasps from my fellow students up ahead. Emerging from the tunnel, I saw the object of their surprise – a giant stone face confronting me. It was carved into a pillar of stone at the center of a large room. The face was bearded in the Nord fashion and gazed sternly at us as we made our way into the chamber. I wondered how long it had taken the stone-masons to carve it. And they hadn't stopped there, hewing similar faces into the three other sides of the pillar.

Stepping farther into the room, I saw that it was multi-leveled, and we had entered at the top. If there had once been stairs leading the two flights down to the main floor, they were long gone. Instead, the archaeologists had built wooden scaffolding that led down one level. From there, a stone bridge led to a platform encircling the middle of the central pillar, directly beneath the brooding stone faces. A circular ramp wrapped around the pillar, descending from the platform to the main floor. The archaeologists' tools, shovels, buckets and wheel barrows were strewn everywhere. Lamps and torches burned here and there, illuminating the chamber in a wavering light.

The pillar was not the only feature of the chamber that had been carved by ancient hands. Portions of the room's natural rock had been hewn with considerable skill into graceful arches and buttresses, and even adorned in places with elaborate designs. In other places the rock had been left in its rough natural state. The floor was laid with smooth flagstones to allow easy passage. We stood there for a moment, taking it all in.

"How the ancient Nords were able to delve so deeply and carve such elaborate stoneworks is still very much a mystery," Tolfdir told us. "It's nothing to rival the Dwemer, of course, yet these catacombs were created by people just arrived here from Atmora. Just imagine the time involved to create just one of these carvings! Our Nord ancestors are often looked on as barbaric, yet they clearly had an elaborate culture of artisans and craftsmen."

Then he led us down the spiral ramps to the main floor to gave us our final instructions. "What are we seeking?" J'zargo asked. "Powerful magical items? Enchanted weapons? Rare potions? J'zargo will find them!" Under his breath he added, "And J'zargo will keep them," but I was the only one standing near enough to hear him.

"We are looking for anything that might be of interest," said Tolfdir. "That's what I enjoy most about this place – you never know what you are going to find. And if my message about the dangers of magic sinks in during your search, so much the better."

"I still believe we should let the dead rest in peace," interrupted Onmund. "We've all heard how jealously the draugr guard their crypt treasure."

"Young man, you can see very well there are no dead here. These are merely storerooms. The inhabitants must have taken precautions to keep their goods safe. If we could find any magical wards in these halls, it would greatly advance our understanding of ancient Nord magic. Brelyna, I want you to look for those."
"Yes, master Tolfdir," she said, and wandered off into the passageway leading out of the chamber.

"Deirdre, I want you to search for enchanted items. You'll find Arniel Gane farther along these passages. He's cataloging the artifacts the archaeologists have already found. He can certainly use your help. And students, while the archaeologists will have cleared out most of the non-magical objects, there may still be one or two items of interest lying about. You are welcome to keep whatever stray gold pieces or other artifacts that have been overlooked, as a sort of payment for your services."

I followed Brelyna into the tunnel. Like the chamber, it was mostly rough-hewn stone with occasional carven arches and buttresses supporting the ceilings. There were wooden supports as well, whether placed by the archaeologists or the ancient Nords, I couldn't tell. But I was glad for them, because occasionally I heard the sound of rock falls from deeper within. The passageway twisted and turned and seemed to descend slightly. This really is quite a labyrinth, I thought. Had I only known I was just at the beginning of it!

Soon I caught up to Brelyna. She was examining the floors, walls and ceiling as she went. "I doubt we will find anything of use down here," she said. That was Brelyna – always the optimist. "The elves must have ransacked the place after the Night of Tears, and who knows who else has been through here since then?" Then she paused and put her hand on my arm. "Just think, eons ago my ancestors – or cousins of them, really – battled Onmund's people here in these passageways. Now here we are, exploring the place together."

"It is strange," I agreed. "I could have had ancestors on both sides of that battle. And the war continues to this day, doesn't it?"

"It seems so," Brelyna said. "I'm glad we are well out of it. Since the sundering of Morrowind we Dunmer have too much to worry about to bother with the wars of elves and men. Besides, we've never had much use for the self-styled 'High Elves,' always so full of themselves, labeling us 'Dark Elves.' Not that the Nords treat us much better."

We emerged into another chamber. It was much like the first, except larger, with three supporting pillars connected by stone bridges. Again we came into the room at the top level, and descended to the main floor on circular ramps and stone bridges. Though the room was larger, the main floor was more crowded with boulders fallen from the ceiling above and with the wide bases of the supports. I tried poking around in the debris on the floor, but didn't find much other than a few clusters of mushrooms I couldn't identify. I put a few of them in my satchel. Maybe Brelyna was right and we wouldn't find much.

I had noticed a passageway leading off of the platform at the second level, so I left Brelyna behind with Onmund, who had joined us by now, and went to explore it. This looked much more promising. Several passages branched off of this first one, and in each there were broken urns and other pottery, and even some whole ones. Looking inside one, I found a few gold coins. Those I could certainly use, since I had depleted much of my own store of gold pieces purchasing spell tomes and paying for lessons at the college. I wondered how thorough a job the archaeologists could have done. The place seemed to go on and on, and small items were easily missed.

I decided to sift through the piles of broken pottery. Who knows what the urns had contained before being broken? I moved from passage to passage searching in this way, finding a few gold coins and a few dried flowers along the way. Finally I found something that looked promising – a gold ring. After I brushed away the centuries of dust, it gleamed with a warm yellow glow in the flickering torch light. But was it enchanted? I had no way of knowing, having yet to take lessons in that branch of magic. I wondered why Tolfdir had set me this task. I needed to find Arniel Gane. I
was sure he would be pleased with my find.

I found him in an alcove off the next passageway ahead, bent over a table with his back to me.

"Sir," I called to him from the doorway, "I found this ring." Only then did I notice the piles of jewelry, weapons, and armor spreading across the table where he worked and spilling onto the floor into every corner of the room.

"Oh joy, a ring!" he exclaimed, turning to glare at me. "Aren't you special? Put it over there with the others." He nodded dismissively at a pile of a dozen identical rings. Mine looked no different than the rest.

"Yes sir," I said, feeling foolish.

As I turned to leave, Arniel spoke again. "Wait. I'm sorry I snapped at you, young lady. It's just that it is going to take forever to sort through all this." He sounded tired. "I really should take it all back to the college where I could study it properly and get help from Sergius, but that spy Ancano asks too many questions. I'm sure he wants to steal my research. I'll just have to carry on here as best I can, though I wish Sergius were here. He is our master of Enchantment, after all. Meanwhile, bring me anything else you find."

I promised him I would, but left with my enthusiasm deflated. Still, it wasn't long before I found another ring, identical to the first. It was lying in a dark corner, and I was lucky to spot it.

"What did you find there, Deirdre?" It was J'zargo, who had come up behind me just as I was picking up the ring. "Let J'zargo see. Maybe it will aid this one on his path to greatness!" His cat eyes shone brightly as he tried to see what I had in my hand.

Normally I wouldn't give in to such a request. Had I been unable to guard my own possessions, I would never have survived those months traveling with a pack of thieves. But the going rate for magic rings now seemed quite low. Let J'zargo feel Arniel Gane's ire when he added yet another ring to the pile. What did I care? I showed it to him.

The Khajiit gave a purr of anticipation. "That could be a ring of power! With it this one could... Give it to J'zargo!"

As I made to hand J'zargo the ring, something made me hesitate. I looked at it more closely. It suddenly seemed the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It had a solidity and a weight that surpassed its small size. And as I looked more deeply at it I had a vision of myself seated on a throne, my loyal subjects kneeling before me, waiting to kiss the shining ring I bore on my right hand. A voice whispered from within the shining band, "Put on the ring. It is your destiny."

The vision vanished as quickly as it had come, and I returned to my senses. A ring that spoke to me? That couldn't be good. Or maybe it was just my imagination. The smoke from the torches in these enclosed spaces was making me light-headed.

"Well?" J'zargo asked. "Will you give me the ring or not?"

"As you wish, J'zargo." I handed it over, curious to see whether it would have a similar effect on him.

J'zargo's eyes glowed more brightly as he examined it. "Yes, this will be the key to J'zargo's destiny," he said. Then he slipped the ring on.

The effect was immediate, and powerful. Within seconds, the Khajiit shrank to half his normal
size, lost all his feline hair, and grew a full white beard. His face took on a cherubic expression. "No, no, what is happening?!" he shrieked in a pinched, reedy voice. He had been transformed into a gnome.

I tried to suppress my laughter as I told him to take the ring off, but it was no good. The sight of him floundering around in his now much-too-large apprentice robes was just too ridiculous. He finally got his hands free from the sleeves to look at them. Gone were his clawed, fur-covered hands, and in their place were tiny human hands with pudgy, soft fingers. He began feeling at his face and his new beard. If only there had been a mirror! "No," he wailed again, and began to run around the room, but soon tripped over his trailing hem. The humor began to fade as I grew concerned that he would hurt himself. "J'zargo, take the ring off!" I said again.

But the transformation seemed to make him forget that he was wearing a ring. Finally, I grabbed the flailing gnome, wrestled him to the floor and began fumbling for his hand. A gnome's knuckles are surprisingly knobby, and the ring seemed to have shrunk along with the Khajiit. Finally, to the accompaniment of many gnomish shrieks, I pulled the ring free. J'zargo resumed his usual feline form and arrogant demeanor.

"You tricked J'zargo!" he said. "This one will not soon forget!"

"J'zargo, you demanded the ring of me," I told him. "Maybe you should learn to detect enchantments before you don magic items. Now, we should take the ring to Arniel and tell him what happened."

"Ah yes," Gane said when we told him the story. "A ring of humor. Very common when enchanters have nothing else to do. I hope this will teach you a lesson about putting on magic items willy-nilly. It could have been much worse."

With that task accomplished, the Khajiit and I went our separate ways. But before we parted he told me, "This one tested the magic ring for you, now you must test the flame cloak scroll for J'zargo. Surely we will encounter undead in these catacombs, no matter what the old wizard says." Perhaps I should have wondered then why he didn't just test them himself. He didn't seem to be doing much else.

I entered another chamber, the last that the archaeologists had opened on this level. The floor was bare, no broken crockery or cast-aside jewelry lying about. I looked at the rest of the room and noticed that a portion of the far wall seemed different than the rest. It was an arched doorway of carven stone, inset with elaborate designs – spirals and curves and circles. But if it was a doorway, there was no obvious way of opening it. In its center a kind of sloping shelf had been carved, and on it rested a gold amulet bearing designs similar to those on the doorway. Or maybe it wasn't a doorway after all, but an altar for displaying the amulet?

I hadn't seen anything like this amulet in Arniel's collection. It seemed just the kind of thing Tolfdir had set me to find. I plucked it from the shelf.

Immediately I heard the sound of metal scraping over stone behind me. I turned to see the entrance to the room blocked by iron bars. Inspecting them more closely, I saw that they had thrust upward from holes in the floor. I tried pushing one back down, to no avail. Why hadn't I noticed those holes when I entered the room? Each bar was tipped with a sharp metal point. Shuddering at what could have happened if anyone had entered the room at the wrong moment, I vowed to be more careful in future.

Tolfdir had heard the sound too, and soon appeared on the other side of the bars.
"Now how in Sovngarde's name did you get yourself into this predicament, young lady?" he asked. He seemed more amused than concerned.

I showed him the amulet. "I took this from the wall over there, and then these bars slid into place. I'm trapped here."

"The amulet must be enchanted," he said. "Is there some way you can use it?"

"You want me to put it on?" I had little interest in turning myself into a gnome, or something worse. "I thought we were supposed to be careful with magic?"

"Ah, I'm glad to see you're learning caution," said the old wizard. "Perhaps you are right. Let me see if I can find some sort of lever that will open the bars from this side."

Tolfdir began searching the walls on his side of the bars and soon disappeared around a corner. While he was gone, I looked more closely at the amulet. Now I saw that the swirling patterns made an almost human figure. It was wearing a tall crown, and where its face should have been there was but a single eye. It seemed ominous somehow, and the fang-like pieces of gold adorning the amulet's chain only added to the impression. The amulet had none of the attractive power of the gnome ring, no whispering voice encouraging me to wear it. If only I had focused on Enchantment during my time at the college!

Tolfdir returned. "I'm afraid there is no way to open these bars from either side," he said. He grasped them then and tried to move them, for show more than anything. But he was a master of Alteration. Couldn't he turn the iron of the bars into something we could break easily – ice, maybe, or glass?

"I'm afraid our only choice is to have you try on that amulet," he said.

"Couldn't we ask Arniel to examine it?" I asked.

"Arniel lacks the proper equipment here in the catacombs, and we don't have time to send the amulet to the college. Besides, nothing ventured nothing gained, as they say, eh? Where's your youthful sense of adventure?"

So much for caution and safety. Putting my last doubts aside, I slipped the amulet over my head. I didn't notice anything at first, but Tolfdir grew amazed as he looked into the room behind me. "Would you look at that!" he exclaimed. I turned to see a glowing red light emanating from the shelf where the amulet had rested. The streamers of light reached out toward me like tendrils. "There is some sort of resonance between you and that wall," said Tolfdir. "It must have to do with the amulet."

"What should we do?" I asked.

The old wizard considered for a moment, stroking his graying blonde beard. "I wonder what would happen if you cast your magic at the wall. It looks suspiciously like a doorway that has been sealed over. Why don't you try a flame spell?"

Tolfdir was right. When my flame spell hit it, the stone wall crumbled into blocks and fell inward, revealing a passageway beyond. At the same time, the bars slid down behind me and Tolfdir entered the room. "Well this is highly unusual and very interesting," he said. "Come, let's see where this goes."

"Shouldn't we tell the others where we're going?" I asked.
"Come now, young lady, you're with me. There is nothing to fear." I followed him into the passageway, rankling a little at the suggestion that I was afraid.

Unlike the previous passages, this one was merely a rough-hewn tunnel. After several twists and turns we came to another chamber. Tolfdir stopped before entering. Through the doorway I could see an altar and beyond it a stone coffin upright against the far wall.

"Astounding!" Tolfdir exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it! What is this place? And why would the ancient Nords seal it off like this?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe they wanted to keep their burial crypts safe from grave robbers?"

"Perhaps. There's only one way to find out. Let us investigate."

With that we stepped through the opening. Now I saw that the room contained two more vertical crypts on each of the side walls. Three burial urns rested atop the altar. So much for leaving the Nord dead in peace, I thought. But I had to admit, this ancient tomb had a grim allure. And no one had been inside it in thousands of years. What might we find in those urns?

Tolfdir took a step farther into the room but then froze. Surprised, I put a hand on his shoulder, but he was suddenly as immovable as stone. Then a glowing light appeared on the other side of the altar. It grew larger, and then a hooded figure appeared within it, whether human or elven I could not tell. The figure looked toward me and then spoke.

"Hold mage, and listen well. I am Nerien of the Psijic Order and I have stopped time for your companion so that I may communicate with you in private. You have set in motion a chain of events that cannot be stopped. Judgment has not been passed, as you had no way of knowing the danger here. Judgment will be passed as you deal with the dangers ahead of you. This warning is given because the Psijic Order believes in you. You mage, and you alone, have the potential to prevent disaster. Take great care, and know that the Order is watching."

Before I could respond, the robed figure disappeared and time returned to its usual pace.

Tolfdir looked around. "What was that?" he asked. "I sensed something just then." I told him what had happened. "The Psijic Order! But what could they want with this place? They've never been associated with Saarthal. And what could they want with you? Psijics only ever dealt with those they deemed worthy."

"They did say I was the only one who could prevent disaster," I reminded him.

"Disaster! What could they mean? Are you sure you heard correctly? Or that you weren't dreaming?" He looked at me closely, as if trying to decide whether I was in my right mind.

"I saw him as clearly as I see you now," I said. "But I have no idea what he was talking about. Who are the Psijics anyway?"

"Were, most likely," he replied. "A group of mages that predated the Empire. Very powerful, very secretive. They felt magic should remain in the hands of a select few. They would never approve of sharing magical knowledge as we do at the college. They wanted Tamriel to remain in the dark ages. But they vanished over a century ago, along with their sanctuary on the isle of Artaeum."

"Well," I said, "maybe we should heed their warning and leave." I edged closer to the doorway through which we had come.

"Nonsense," said Tolfdir. "We have nothing to fear here. Now let's see what's in these coffins. I'm
guessing they cover passageways to deeper levels of these catacombs. If there is a danger here, we had better find it before the archaeologists come to harm."

He stepped around to the coffin on the back wall and grasped the edge of the lid. It popped open a crack and Tolfdir stepped back in surprise. A pale, sinewy arm appeared in the opening. Skeletal fingers grasped the lid, then threw it aside as though it weighed nothing.

Before us stood the most hideous creature I had ever seen, the thing I most feared to meet in Saarthal: a draugr, come to life out of Nord legend. Its blue eyes fixed on me with an evil glow.
The reality of an actual draugr was worse than even the darkest tale. The remains of a scraggly blonde beard hung from the creature's skeletal cheek bones, and its desiccated lips were pulled back in a hideous sneer. Its ancient leather armor hung from it in tatters. A pestilential reek filled the chamber with the smell of rotting things.

The creature took a step toward me, then noticed Tolfdir to its right. It shouted, or tried to, as it closed on the old wizard. The sound was more like a cough or the bark of a dog. With one hand, the draugr grasped Tolfdir by the throat, shaking him as if he were a child's doll, then threw him across the room. At the same time, I heard the coffins on either side of the room crack open. Now three draugr fixed me with their baleful stares. Instinctively, I backed toward the doorway so they couldn't surround me.

Strangely, my fear had vanished and all I felt was anger. They wouldn't kill me this day, nor would they harm Tolfdir. It was all I could do to keep from rushing headlong at them. I had felt this before, in the forest when thieves first accosted me, at Helgen when faced with my own beheading, in the Bannered Mare when I foolishly stood up to Avulstein. It was the anger that had been burning inside me since my parents' deaths. Maybe it even explained what happened that day with Osmer.

I mastered the mad impulse to throw myself at the creatures, though grappling with draugr was the legendary way Nords dealt with the undead. Many were the stories of Nord heroes proving their strength and prowess by wrestling draugr to defeat, sometimes tearing them limb from limb. Yet that didn't seem possible for someone of my stature, especially against three of the creatures. I still bore the Imperial sword I had acquired in Helgen, but that was more for show than anything. My bow was useless against three in these close quarters. My two spells of Destruction, sparks and flames, were probably too weak. I chided myself for refusing to learn the higher level Destruction spells. My vow to avoid killing now seemed foolish, especially when facing draugr. Why should I hesitate to kill what should already be dead?

Tolfdir struggled to his feet, distracting the one on the right, but the other two advanced on me. I could think of nothing better than to pull J'zargo's flame cloak scroll from my pocket. He said the scroll contained a special surprise for undead, and I hoped he was right. Quickly I unrolled the parchment and read the words aloud. That's the advantage of a scroll – no need to practice an incantation or train the mind on Aetherius. I didn't even know what words I was reading, but their effect was immediate – and surprising.

The two draugr nearest me were just beginning to swing their weapons when they caught fire. So far so good. Then everything went bright orange as the draugr exploded and a fireball filled the room. I was blasted backwards and landed in the passageway, hair singed, robes smoldering, and skin blistered. I lost consciousness then, perhaps only for a few moments. Once I regained my senses I found it difficult to move. I looked at my scorched skin. It didn't hurt much yet, but I knew
that it soon would. Fortunately, using a scroll requires no magicka, so I had my full reserve left to cast a healing spell on myself. Immediately I felt better. Then I crept back toward the chamber, dreading what I might find.

Fortunately, Elders are tougher than they seem. Tolfdir was on his feet, looking nearly as burnt as I had been. He was using a ward to hold off the one remaining draugr. I notched an arrow to my bow and sent it between the draugr's shoulder blades, felling it where it stood.

Tolfdir turned on me, looking as if he were ready to attack. "Why in Talos' name did you do that, young lady? You nearly killed us both! It was a good thing I had cast stoneflesh on myself."

I told him about the flame cloak scroll, and the surprise J'zargo had mentioned. Then I noticed how slowly the old wizard was moving. "Here, let me heal your wounds," I said.

Tolfdir relaxed as the spell took its effect. "I forget you're just a lass," he said. "But there was no need to panic. Three restless draugr were nothing we couldn't handle between us."

There it was again – to the old wizard, I was a mere lass. And no wonder! Moments before, I had been filled with trepidation about the undead we might encounter and I had hesitated to put on the amulet. I had acted like a fearful young girl. But now the blood was rushing through my head and I was ready for anything.

"I beg your pardon, Master, but I didn't panic," I said. "I chose the best of my few weapons. Now, shall we get on with our exploration? We need to find this danger Nerien mentioned. And look, you were right about the coffins leading to further passageways." I pointed at the coffin on the back wall. Its back was missing, and through it we could see another tunnel leading deeper into the catacombs.

"A moment ago you were all caution," he said. "Are you sure you don't want to enlist the aid of your fellow students?"

Between Brelyna's difficulty with spell-casting, the near-disaster with J'zargo's flame cloak, and Onmund's concerns about exploring ancient crypts, I thought we might do better without them. "I'm ready to go. Are you with me?"

"Yes, by all means," he said. "No one is more eager to explore Saarthal than I." He looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. "But in case we encounter more draugr, it would be wise for you to have a more effective offensive spell. Your vow to avoid Destruction magic is laudable, but I believe you need have no such concerns when it comes to undead."

The old wizard taught me how to conjure a flame atronach. It was a simple incantation, and I was able to cast it successfully on my first attempt. First, there was a glowing ball of blue light, much like the one that had preceded Nerien's appearance. Then within the blue light a bright orange flame took shape, growing and transforming into the form of a female demon of fire. The ball of blue light was gone, and the atronach floated a few inches above the floor, occasionally turning a back flip. It could cast its own fireball spells and provide a distraction for any enemies we might encounter in the tunnels ahead. It followed us as we stepped into the passage.

After a few twists and turns, the tunnel opened into the largest room we had yet seen. It was circular, with coffins lining the walls and a bridge spanning a wide, grate-covered hole in the middle of the floor.

It was a good thing the atronach was with us. As we stepped into the chamber, four coffins burst open, two on each side of the room, a draugr stepping from each.
Tolfdir was ready this time. "I'll take the two on the right," he said.

"And these two are mine," I replied, notching an arrow to my bow. I felt remarkably calm considering these were only the second draugr I'd ever faced. My anger had now burned itself into an intense concentration and focus. It was as if the draugr moved in slow motion and I could see ahead through every step of the coming battle. All my movements were fluid and precise as I released my first arrow at the nearest draugr. At the same time, my flame atronach cast a firebolt at it, forcing it to stagger.

I turned my attention to the second draugr as it aimed an arrow at me. My arrow caught it first, knocking the bow from its grasp. It drew its battle axe and advanced on me. My second arrow hit it square in the chest, but it kept coming. The atronach, which by now had finished off the first draugr, cast its last firebolt, then vanished. Tolfdir had warned me that any conjured companion would remain for only a minute, and this one must have run its course. The draugr staggered and caught fire, then advanced again. I switched to a lowly flame spell, but it was enough to fell the creature just as it swung its axe at my head.

I turned to see how Tolfdir was faring. One draugr lay smoldering next to a wall, but the other had Tolfdir backed up against a coffin, hitting him with a spell of frostbite. The old wizard's ward was protecting him so far, but who knew how long that would last?

The draugr's back was to me. Without thinking, I crept up on it from behind, then leapt onto its back, dagger in hand. I drew the blade across its throat, expecting the creature to fall instantly. My plan would have worked, too, had the draugr been truly alive. But no blood flows through a draugr's veins. There was no feeling of the blade cutting through sinew and muscle, as there had been with that torturer in Helgen. Instead, it felt as if the blade were grating across solid rock. And instead of a gush of blood, there was a mere puff of dust from the draugr's throat as my blade came away.

Before I could react to this disappointing outcome, the draugr reached up and grabbed me by a shoulder, then quickly flipped me head over heels into the wall next to Tolfdir. I felt stunned, but there was no time to gather my wits. The draugr resumed its ice spell, which now sprayed across both of us. Tolfdir's ward partially shielded me, but I could feel the energy draining from the exposed side of my body where the chilling blast hit it.

Maybe it was the anger still burning within me that kept me from freezing on the spot. With my unfrozen hand I cast a flame spell. It met the draugr's ice spell, and for a moment the two spells met and blended between us, neither one able to reach its target. Then my spell began to win out, pushing closer to the draugr. When Tolfdir realized the ice spell was weakening, he dropped his ward and cast his own flame spell at the creature. The two spells together were too much, and the draugr dropped to the floor just as my magicka ran out. I was amazed that Tolfdir seemed still to have magicka in reserve, despite using spells throughout the battle.

"You acquitted yourself quite well there, young lady," he said after we had brushed ourselves off and healed ourselves with potions and spells. I felt my magicka slowly returning. "You act as if you've been fighting undead your whole life. I've never seen anyone attack a draugr from behind like that! I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't distracted it."

"Thank you, Master," I said. It felt good to receive praise from such a respected wizard. "I was in a fight or two before I learned any magic."

"Well, your magic skill is impressive as well. A few more months at the college and you will be a true Adept."
He turned and surveyed the room. More unopened coffins lined the walls. On closer inspection, the grate at the center of the room covered not just a hole, but a deep chasm. A strange blue light glowed from deep within it. We avoided standing on it, lest the grate suddenly open and send us plunging to our deaths.

"This chamber is remarkable," Tolfdir said. "Look at the stonework on these coffins! I've never seen anything like it. I feel I must spend more time studying this room. And someone needs to take care of all these corpses. It could take some time to burn their bodies to ash, which is the only sure way to keep draugr from coming back to life. It's likely that we have some time before they stir themselves again, but it wouldn't do to leave so many behind us as we advance."

"What about the rest of these catacombs, and the danger Nerien mentioned?" I asked.

Tolfdir's response caught me by surprise. "Push on ahead if you must," he said. "I will follow when I can. And a word of advice: use your illusion and stealth abilities. You are a skilled young mage, but I wouldn't want to see you confront a draugr death lord on your own."

I didn't stop to think about the old master's sudden change from caution to recklessness. I pushed open the door and stepped into the next level of the catacombs.

Looking back, that decision to continue without Tolfdir seems like one of the more foolish of my life – up until then, at least. True, I had learned a bit of magic, and my stealth, agility, and skill with a bow stood me in good stead. But who knew exactly what lay in wait deeper in the ancient catacombs? Already we had encountered more than Tolfdir had foreseen. And the Psijics had warned of a danger ahead. Surely they meant something more dangerous than the draugr we had already encountered. If a powerful group of mages felt it was dangerous, how much more dangerous would it be for me? Yet I persisted. Why could I not have waited for Tolfdir? I can explain it only through the recklessness of my youth, and the anger that facing the draugr had yet to quench. I would master these catacombs, and prove to Tolfdir and the rest that I was no mere lass.

The door shut behind me, and I was alone – except for whatever draugr lay ahead. I took Tolfdir's advice and cast the muffling spell on myself. Now I could move silently in addition to my natural stealth as I crept along the tunnels. The passage wound onward like the earlier ones. Here and there urns and pots lined the walls. Many contained a bit of gold or a potion. Yet somehow I began to think Onmund was right – maybe if I left the ancient Nords' possessions undisturbed, they would do the same for me.

I came to a corridor with coffins tucked away in alcoves along its walls. If the corpses within were restless, would I be able to sneak past? There was only one way to find out. I crept cautiously into the room, but before I had gone far, I heard the crack of a coffin lid opening and a barking sound, similar to the one that first draugr made. I backed quickly into shadows as a draugr appeared ahead. It was looking in my direction, but I remained well hidden.

As it turned to search the other way, I released an arrow that caught it in the back, just beneath the shoulder blade. This is the advantage of a stealth attack – you have time to aim at the quarry's weakest spots, thus dealing more damage. Whether draugr have weak spots I had yet to learn, but my shot stunned it for a moment before it turned on me. I got in another shot as it approached, then finished it with a burst of flame just as it spotted me. It didn't even get in a swing of its axe. I looted
its body. If the dead had no respect for the living, why should I have respect for the dead?

A little farther along the hall, I noticed a fire rune placed on the floor in a corner where the passage turned to the right. I peered around the corner, keeping clear of the rune, and saw two more draugr emerge from their crypts farther along the hall. My presence was enough to awaken them from their eons-long slumber, yet still they could not spot me. I backed around the corner and considered what to do.

I placed myself in one of the alcoves I had already passed, then loosed an arrow at the wall above the fire rune. My plan worked perfectly, the rune blasting both of the draugr as they went to investigate the sound, setting them alight. The ancient Nords had been cunning to place such magical wards, but not cunning enough to remember their location after years of undeath. It was an easy task to finish them with arrows and a further blast of fire.

Too easy, I began to think as I ascended a set of stairs to the second level of this chamber. Before I could get too carried away with confidence, I saw another draugr guarding a doorway beyond the top of the steps. He hadn't noticed me yet, which was fortunate, since he looked more formidable than my previous foes. He wore a helm with tall, crown-like spikes and wielded a wicked-looking two-handed sword. He was standing right in front of the only exit from the chamber. Anything I did to distract him would draw his attention to me.

Suddenly, I did wish Tolfdir were with me, or one of my fellow students. It was unspeakably lonely in here with the draugr my only company. This seemed silly for a girl who had lived three years on her own. How could I be lonely now? Perhaps these weeks of companionship in Whiterun and the college had softened me. Now the anger that had fueled me through the earlier passages of these crypts seemed to lessen, and fear was taking its place. I shivered, beginning to feel how cold it was this deep underground. Could anger work like magicka, a power that I drew down until it was gone? If so, my reserves were nearly exhausted.

Then I remembered I could have a companion, albeit one I could never truly call friend. I conjured my flame atronach, aiming the spell so she would appear as far away from me as possible, out on a balcony that overlooked the passages through which I had just passed. Her glowing orange flame cheered me somewhat.

She caught the draugr's attention as soon as she appeared, and he made his way toward her in that slow, awkward gait the draugr all seemed to have. Maybe being virtually ossified made them stiff. The atronach got in two firebolts as he approached. I remained hidden in the shadows at the top of the stair and began launching arrows at him as soon as he turned his back to me. Still, it was a tough fight, with the draugr dispelling my atronach then turning on me. He seemed in no hurry to die his second death.

I backed down the stairs, resorting to my flame spell. I kept blasting him while dodging blows from his sword as he descended after me. When I reached the first level, I nearly stumbled, and the point of his sword sliced my outstretched arm just below the shoulder. In the heat of battle I couldn't feel much pain, but the sleeve of my robes quickly became wet with blood.

Still the draugr pressed forward, raising his sword with both hands for another swing. I tumbled to the side just in time, and came up ready to cast my flame spell again. The move put some distance between me and the undead creature, and he took a moment to gather himself for another charge. Maybe he was tiring after all. I blasted him yet again with a jet of flame, and he quickly went to one knee then fell backwards, dead once more.

My magicka was nearly gone, so I used a potion to heal myself. I could feel the wound on my arm closing, and the flow of blood slowing, then stopping completely. I felt a measure of energy
returning too. I realized I had lost enough blood to begin to feel light-headed, though I hadn't noticed it during the fight.

I considered waiting there for Tolfdir, but only for a moment. My foolish pride wouldn't let me show weakness, though my enthusiasm for this project was waning. What was it the Psijic had said? That I was the only one who could prevent disaster. Then I had better get to the bottom of this mysterious danger, I told myself, even if I had to go to the deepest depths of Saarthal. I wouldn't have Tolfdir accusing me of cowardice again.

Beyond the door the draugr had been guarding, the passages continued twisting and turning deeper underground, and my wonder increased at the size of this place, and at the skill required to delve it. And all of this to honor the dead! The ancients had taken many safeguards to protect the possessions of their departed as well. I began to find more of the magical traps as I went. One, a lightning rune by the look of it, was spread right across the middle of the floor, with no room to pass on either side. It was too large to jump as well. I didn't want to try setting it off with a spell from distance, in case it awoke more draugr. Instead, I tried sneaking over it, my healing spell at the ready in case it went off. But my stealth worked, and I was able to cross it unharmed.

Next I came to a spot where a portion of the flagstones in the floor seemed different than the rest, with a wider groove outlining it. I had heard about these pressure plate traps. Surely something terrible would happen if I stepped on it. I looked at the walls nearby and saw holes from which darts no doubt would shoot when the plate was depressed. I would never have seen it if I hadn't been looking right at the floor as I crept forward. I crept carefully around it.

Now there were no coffins lining the walls, but sleeping draugr and skeletons lying in horizontal alcoves. It was like a dormitory for the dead. I muffled myself once again and hoped none of them would awaken. These must not have been quite so restless as the draugr in the earlier catacombs, because they slumbered on – or remained truly dead – as I passed.

Rounding a corner, I saw a portcullis blocking a doorway up ahead, and before it a series of pillars on each side of the room. Each pillar had three sides, each side bearing a skillfully carved engraving of a different beast: an eagle, a serpent, and a hwael, the great fish of the deep I recognized from childhood story books. A lever protruded from the floor directly in front of the door. I was ready to pull it when I noticed more dart holes in the walls on either side, pointing directly at me. Clearly the door was trapped, but how?

Guessing that the pillars had something to do with it, I examined them more closely. Each was set into an alcove, and the back wall of each alcove contained an image of one of the animals found on the pillars. I tested one of the pillars and found that it turned with just a slight push. The puzzle was too easy. I had only to turn the six pillars so that they matched the images on the walls behind them. That done, I pulled the lever and the portcullis rose from the doorway.

I was just beginning to hope that I had encountered my last restless draugr when I entered another large chamber. Two sets of stairs at the far end led up either side of a protruding balcony. A draugr, female this time, paced back and forth along it. Her yellow hair was braided in back, giving her a girlish look. Other than that, she looked formidable.

I was tired of fighting draugr, but I thought there was a way I could get around this one without a fight. When her back was turned, I fired an arrow into the far corner of the chamber. The steel arrowhead clattered against stone, and the draugr gave that distinctive bark as she advanced boldly down the left-hand stairs to face the threat. It seemed these ancient Nords were just as bright in death as modern Nords were in life. As she stared into the corner trying to puzzle out what could have made the noise, I crept up the other set of stairs and across the balcony, then through the door
that led out of the chamber.

Down another set of stairs I found a chest. As I stooped to loot it, I heard footsteps behind me. I spun quickly, flame spell at the ready, to meet my attacker.

"I thought it was high time I caught up with you," Tolfdir said, catching his breath. Then he noticed my startled expression. "What, did I scare you? Not a brave young lass such as yourself?"

"No, but I've been surprised by too many draugr so far to let myself relax," I said. I didn't want to admit how relieved I was to see him, even to myself.

"True – I saw the draugr corpses you left in your wake. I didn't have time to deal with them properly. By the way, it wasn't very polite of you to leave that last draugr wight."

"I'm sorry, Master," I said. "How did you get past it?"

"I have my ways," he said, and winked.

"You seem as if you've faced draugr before," I said, "even though you told us they were just legends." Tired as I was, I was feeling a bit put-upon.

"Well spotted, young lady! I have faced many a draugr in my day. Skyrim is full of the creatures."

"Then you lied to us."

"A bit of a school-master's trick, really," the old wizard said sheepishly. "You see, I planned Saarthal as something of a test – one that you have passed with flying colors, by the way."

"And what about the other students?" I couldn't help wondering what they had been doing all this time. "Shouldn't they have a chance to test their skill against the draugr as well?"

"Ah, you see, this is not just a test of skill, but also one of initiative. And you have shown more of both than I could have imagined. If your fellows had any initiative at all, they should have followed us by now. That was one reason I waited in that second chamber. I imagine they're still in those storerooms, brewing a pot of masterwort tea. Now, shall we continue?"

I took the lead as we pressed ahead, still moving stealthily but more rapidly than I had when alone. I didn't notice the pressure plate that I must have stepped on. I was too stealthy to set it off, but Tolfdir, following in my footsteps, received a barrage of darts. He had renewed his stoneflesh spell, or he might really have been hurt. I apologized for my oversight.

"Not to worry, young lady," he said. "Your ability to creep over these traps is quite useful, no doubt. But maybe I should take the lead."

Down another set of stairs we came out on a balcony overlooking the largest chamber yet. At its center was a dais encircled in a blue curtain of light. Within this wall, a large orb floated above the dais. It was taller than the tallest elf, and made of a lattice framework forming a perfect sphere. It was hard to see more detail with the blue shimmering light encircling it.

As I was taking all this in, Tolfdir spoke. "Amazing! What in the world is this thing? And why would the ancients seal it down here?"

While Tolfdir stared at the glowing ball, something else caught my attention, the thing we should have noticed first. Closer to the balcony where we stood, seated on an iron chair in front of a large stone table, was the largest and most fearsome draugr we had yet to see. He wore a viciously
horned metal helm and elaborate armor. I couldn't see his face because his head was down, as if asleep. I wondered forlornly if there was any chance he would remain asleep after hearing Tolfdir's words.

I soon had my answer. While Tolfdir remained oblivious to the danger, the draugr raised its head and looked at him. Then with that familiar draugr bark, he rose from his chair and made for the stairs leading up to the balcony on the right. As he advanced, a swirling cloak of white frost enveloped him

"Master, look out!" I shouted, but there was no need. The draugr's bark had roused Tolfdir from his reverie.

"Cast your atronach spell, Deirdre!" he called. "This fellow will have no chance against the three of us."

I did as he asked, but our attacks seemed not to affect the creature. I hit it with several arrows, and the atronach got in three firebolts. Yet it still came at us up the stairs on the right, blasting Tolfdir with a frost spell as it advanced.

"It must take its energy from that orb," Tolfdir said. "You keep him busy while I try to disable it."

The old wizard ran past me and down the other set of stairs, leaving us to do battle. Then the atronach disappeared in an explosion of flame, and the draugr and I had the balcony to ourselves. The creature advanced on me, preparing another frost spell.

I dashed down the stairs after Tolfdir. The draugr followed just as slowly as all the rest, and I knew I could evade it indefinitely. But I had to keep it away from Tolfdir without taking harm myself. I cast a new atronach at the top of the stairs, and we both kept it busy for a time, though our attacks had no effect.

"Now! Attack it now!" Tolfdir shouted. "The draugr should be vulnerable!"

Whatever the old wizard had done, it seemed to have worked, because the atronach's next firebolt staggered our opponent. I launched another arrow as the creature remained stunned. Then the draugr's defensive cloak changed from frost to fire, becoming a swirl of yellow flames whirling about its body. The atronach's next bolt did nothing. The draugr closed on it and with a swing of its axe dispelled the fire demon back to Oblivion. Then it descended the stairs, intent on attacking me. I backed across the floor, but not too quickly. I didn't want the draugr to attack Tolfdir. Whatever the old wizard was doing, he needed to keep doing it to sever the connection between the orb and the draugr. I narrowly avoided a blast of frost as I dodged around the table where the draugr had been sitting.

The draugr's cloak shifted to the lightning element, enveloping it in sparks and wisps of dark cloud. I conjured my atronach once again, hoping that its firebolts would now do some damage. Then I began climbing the stairs, renewing my rain of arrows as I went. We could go around in circles up and down the stairs all day if necessary, or until I ran out of arrows. Finally, the undead Nord weakened and went to one knee. The atronach's next firebolt blasted him into a corner beneath the stairs.

I went over to the draugr's body and looked down on it, wondering who he had been in life. Surely a prince or a king, he was so powerful in death, and to be locked away here with this magical orb. I searched his body, and among the other loot found a broken amulet and a note. It was labeled "writ of sealing" and it contained these words:

Be bound here, Jyrik Gauldurson, murderer and betrayer,
Whoever Jyrik Gauldurson had been, that mystery would have to wait for another day. Another mystery was the powerful-looking staff the draugr had left on the table in front of him. Why hadn't he picked it up and used it? I showed it to Tolfdir.

"That looks like it could be useful," the old wizard said. "Why don't you show it to Tergius to identify the enchantment for you? It seems a fitting reward for your efforts here today."

"Thank you, Master," I said, admiring the gem that crowned the staff.

"Now what about this orb?" said the old wizard. "It's even more of a mystery."

The curtain of light had disappeared now, and I could see the orb more clearly. It was covered in strange runes.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I have no idea! It's powerful, whatever it is. I dare not leave it unattended, but we have to alert Savos Aren to its existence right away. Deirdre, I want you to make your way back to the college as quickly as possible and tell the arch-mage of our find."

"Yes, sir," I said, and turned to head up the stairs. I was looking forward to finding the other students to see how they were faring and tell them of our adventure.

Tolfdir stopped me. "I believe you'll find that the quickest way out of a Nord catacomb is to continue to its end. The ancients almost always included shortcuts back to the surface just where you think you've reached the farthest point of the labyrinth. That door beyond the orb should lead you to your goal."

I took his suggestion and left through the doorway, thinking I would soon be back to the regular world of snow and trees and rocks. I had had enough of mystery and adventure for one day. But I had one more puzzle to encounter as I made my way into the next chamber. Down another flight of stairs stood a curved wall bearing more strange markings. As I approached I heard a distant chanting that grew louder and louder. Three of the runes on the wall began to shimmer, sending streamers of light toward me. Then I heard a word – or a single syllable – in a language I didn't recognize, though it seemed somehow familiar: "Iiz." The shouted syllable echoed in my mind as I stared at the wall. Then the chanting and the light faded, and everything seemed as before.

"Iiz," I thought. What could it mean? And what was this wall? Did it have the same effect on every passerby? How long had it been since any had come this way?

Standing there pondering these questions was getting me nowhere, so I continued along the passageway that ascended from the chamber. I soon found myself emerging through a door into the first room we had entered, the one with the stone faces. My friends were nowhere to be seen, and I guessed they must still be deeper within. As much as I wanted to see them, I had to get Tolfdir's message to Savos Aren.

I emerged from Saarthal into the frozen world of Winterhold in late afternoon, glad to breathe fresh air once again. Even the cloud-covered sky cheered me after that dark underworld. The walk back to the college didn't seem so daunting, tired though I was.
Keizaal

Chapter Summary

-- the dream -- what to do about the orb -- the mystery of Deirdre's power --
Mirabelle's advice -- a plea from Whiterun --

I was flying. The mountains and vales of Skyrim spread out below me like a map rolled out on a
table. Even the loftiest peaks seemed mere bumps from this great height, their summits blazing
orange with light from the newly risen sun. From this vantage, the sun rode high in the sky, though
the valleys below were still lost in the gray light of dawn. To the north lay the frozen Sea of
Ghosts, and to the south, across the Jerall Mountains, Cyrodiil and the lands of Tamriel beyond.
Westward I could see the red, burning plains of the Alik'r Desert. Eastward, smoke from a
smoldering mountain rose into the sky above Morrowind.

I flew on the back of a fell beast, a great sky-winger coursing over the land. I perched between its
shoulders as it glided, held aloft by the breath of the wind. It flapped its wings now and again,
rocking my seat. I clung to the scaled ridges along its spine to keep from falling. Its long neck
stretched before me, its head sweeping from side to side, the horns sprouting from it like two
double-curved scythes. We were at such a height that I couldn't judge our speed, but it must have
been prodigious, the wind buffeted me so.

Then the dragon folded those great wings and we were plunging down toward the jagged
mountains of Skyrim. I clung more tightly to the bony ridges, crouching low over its back and
bracing my feet behind its shoulders lest I plunge to the rocks below.

As the mountains rushed to meet us, the creature unfurled its wings and flew straight. We swept
through a narrow pass, jagged peaks rushing past on either side. The beast swung to and fro as it
carved its way through a twisting mountain defile, again threatening to throw me from my seat.

Yet I felt no fear, only elation. Never had I experienced such speed. Neither, it was safe to say, had
anyone in all of Tamriel. I had only ever walked or run, ridden in a cart, or once in a while galloped
my father's old cart horse. But nothing could compare to this. There was no measure for our pace as
we crossed a lake in a flash, then plunged down out of the mountains and streaked low across the
plains of Whiterun. To the east I could see Dragonsreach rising into the sky. We were flying but we
were below that lofty summit. I wondered if the denizens of that city could see us down here. A
grove of trees in front of us grew quickly larger, then blurred as we rushed past. I gave a whoop of
pure joy.

The dragon spotted a farm ahead and slowed. I could feel it gathering its breath as we approached.
Then it exhaled a great jet of fire, spraying the farm-house with flame as we passed over. Looking
back, I saw a woman gathering two children and making for the barn. They were all screaming.

I screamed too. "No!" I shouted to the monster. I beat its sides with my puny hands, to no effect.

Turning back toward the farm, we lit upon the roof of the barn. The beast cast its head to and fro,
looking for targets. An ox that remained trapped in its pen received a blast of fire and screamed
awfully as it died.
Then the farmer appeared, bow in hand, an axe strapped to his side. "Go away, dragon!" he yelled. "You'll not take me and my family without a fight!"

Stupid, stupid Nord! "No!" I shouted to him. "Run! Hide yourself! Save your family!" But like the dragon, he seemed not to notice me.

It was too late, in any case. The arrow from his bow bounced harmlessly onto the ground after hitting the monster's broad chest. He didn't get a second shot. The dragon stretched out its long neck and clamped its mighty jaws around the farmer. The man's scream seemed almost inhuman, a high-pitched wail. Then the corpse-maker shook him back and forth, nearly cutting him in half before dropping his lifeless form to the ground. The dragon curled its head toward me, as if it wanted me to see the blood dripping from its fangs. The eye that gazed coldly at me was round, with a single vertical slit at its center.

Then we launched back into the air. Something was different now. No longer did I ride astride the dragon. I was looking through the dragon's eyes. I was the dragon. My vast wings beat the air as I gained height, then circled back for another pass at the farm. No longer did I feel dread or horror at the devastation the dragon had wrought – that I had wrought. No, it was pure joy to soar through the skies, wreaking destruction from above.

The farmhouse was all ablaze and the farm-yard was empty. Then I heard the shrieks of the mother and children from the barn. If a dragon can laugh, I laughed then. I dove at the barn and plunged through its thatch roof and rafters with both clawed feet, but met only rushes and wood. I plunged a talon in again, but still my quarry eluded me. I gave a hot jet of fire that quickly set the thatched roof alight, along with the hay stored within. Then I launched back into the air once more, taking a lazy circle around the wreckage.

Now the mother and children burst out the back of the barn and began running across the fields. The children, a boy and a girl, were faster than their mother and soon outdistanced her. "Run, children, run!" she screamed. "Keep running!"

I spoke to them as they ran. "Fools! Your hopes wither! I am your doom!" But I did not speak in the Common Tongue. I used a language I didn't know I could understand, that I had heard only once before. "Meyye!" I called in a deep, roaring voice. "Him hinde liiv! Zu'u hin daan!"

I swooped down at them, the space between us closing swiftly. The mother looked back once, then tripped and fell. I lit on the ground a few yards from her. Her children, farther ahead, stopped and looked back in horror. It would be their doom.

The woman was crawling backward now, shouting at her children to keep running. I felt only elation as my jaws opened…

I woke screaming. My night clothes and sheets were drenched. Gray light filtered through the slit of a window in my cell, but it could not shake the reality of my dream, nor relieve the darkness I felt within. I kept screaming, then buried my head in my hands.

I heard someone rush into my room and looked up. It was Onmund, looking ready to fend off cave bears if need be. He stopped short when he saw me sitting up in bed. "Are you all right, Deirdre?" he asked, coming over to sit on the edge of the cot.
Brelyna appeared in the doorway too. "We heard screaming," she said.

I rubbed tears from my eyes. "I know," I said. "I'm sorry. It was just a nightmare."

"Some nightmare!" said Onmund. "You must have been dreaming about Saarthal. All those draugr! I warned Tolfdir not to lead us there. It's a wonder you survived!"

I looked him in the eye. I tried to imagine him or Brelyna or J'zargo in the tunnels with Tolfdir and me, fighting off draugr, but it was difficult. I saw the look of fear in Onmund's eyes, and Brelyna looked worried as well. As close as we had become over these weeks, I felt a great distance separating us at that moment.

"Draugr," I said. "Yes, that must have been it." I couldn't tell him I had dreamt I was a dragon and … I looked away as I remembered the end of the dream.

J'zargo was the next to appear in the doorway. "Yes, we heard from Tolfdir about your great exploits with the draugr. But this one wonders, why could you not share the glory with the rest of us? Why did you run off, leaving J'zargo and these two behind?"

This was the first I had seen of my fellow students since returning to the college. I had arrived in the evening and gone straight to the arch-mage's quarters. It was my first visit to that chamber and I stood for a minute at the threshold, gawking. The room occupied the entire top floor of the college's main tower. A well-tended alchemist's garden grew in an atrium occupying the center of the room. It looked to offer every herbal ingredient a potion-maker could hope for. There was even a juniper tree in the middle, reaching up to the arched tower ceiling far above. An arcane enchanter, an alchemist's table, and shelves and shelves of ingredients and soul gems lined the walls. And this was only part of that chamber. An interior wall beyond the garden screened off a good portion of the room's circumference – the arch-mage's sleeping quarters, I assumed.

Then I noticed Master Aren sitting at his desk near the chamber's entrance, looking at me quizzically. I quickly made my report. He was as surprised to learn of the glowing orb within Saarthal as we had been to find it.

"A powerful object, you say? Can you be more specific?" He looked at me with penetrating eyes, as if he had expected me to conduct a thorough analysis of the orb.

I handed him the note about Jyrik Gauldurson. "It made Gauldurson's undead corpse invincible until Tolfdir severed their connection," I told him.

"Jyrik Gauldurson! Now there's a dark name from ages long past. The orb must be powerful indeed. I'd best make my way to Saarthal and investigate your discovery. Meanwhile, I'm sure the Arcanaeum has something on the secrets buried within Saarthal. Please check with Lorekeeper Urag for anything he has in the collection."

I told him I would do that first thing in the morning, then went straight to my bed. Not even my fellow students returning later that evening could wake me from my slumber.

Now I looked hard at the Khajiit. "Just consider yourself lucky you weren't there to see the results of your flame cloak. That thing nearly killed us. Did you know the undead would explode?"

"Yes, that was the surprise J'zargo mentioned. But J'zargo made sure the explosion would kill the undead and not harm the caster – too badly."

"There were two draugr, J'zargo. Tolfdir and I took a double blast."
"Ah! J'zargo did not foresee that possibility. The spell needs more work." He looked disappointed. "J'zargo will make some refinements."

"Good," I said. "That scroll was worse than the draugr themselves."

"Well, you're quite the hero around here now," said Onmund. "None of the teachers can believe you had the courage to explore the depths of an ancient Nord city. And to find an object of such power!"

"Tolfdir was with me most of the time," I said. "He was the one who discovered how to sever the connection between Gauldurson and the orb."

"But no one expected even that much from a mere apprentice," Onmund said. "You faced draugr on your own! And what were we doing? Sitting in that storeroom having tea, wondering what was taking you so long!"

I didn't have the heart to tell them it had all been a test Tolfdir had set for them. The three students began to argue over whose idea it had been to sit and wait in that second chamber. I could only look on. After my nightmare – if that's what it was – such concerns seemed petty. How could I have dreamed I was a dragon? How could I speak in a language I didn't know? And the most distressing question of all, how could I take joy in such cruelty? What kind of person was I?

Onmund looked over at me, distracted from the argument. "Deirdre, you look worried. Are you sure you're all right? I think those draugr scared you more than you're letting on. Come now, you don't have to play the brave lass with us."

I looked at him doubtfully. Who could I talk to about my dream? "Mirabelle. I need to see Mirabelle," I said, jumping out of bed and throwing an old tunic over my nightclothes. The others looked surprised as I rushed past them out of the room.

But the master-wizard of the college was not to be found in her bed-chamber, nor in her offices. It turned out she was closeted with the arch-mage, who had just returned from Saarthal. They were making arrangements for transporting the orb to the college. I suppose it should have troubled me more that they were making these decisions without me, the one whom the Psijics had entrusted to avert the danger within Saarthal. But my dragon nightmare had pushed all thoughts of the orb and Nerien's warning from my mind.

While Mirabelle was preoccupied, I busied myself with restocking potions and cleaning the robes I had worn to Saarthal. I took the staff of Jyrik Gauldurson to Sergius so he could identify its enchantment. Everywhere I went in the college, I received the congratulations of the instructors and staff. I tried to look happy as I thanked them for their praise, but it was difficult. I shared a noon-time meal with my fellow students. They ate heartily while I picked at my food, and kept upbraiding me for my somber mood. Onmund even predicted that I would be promoted to the rank of Scholar. I could only smile wanly at this suggestion.

After our meal, I remembered the task Savos Aren had set me and went to see Urag gro-Shub in the Arcanaeum. The lorekeeper greeted me in his usual gruff fashion. It might seem odd for an Orc to devote himself to scholarly pursuits, but his war-like nature showed itself in his defense of his collection, and the dire threats he made against anyone who might harm one of his prize tomes. I told him about the orb and the arch-mage's request for any information the Arcanaeum might contain.

"I don't recall that we have anything much about Saarthal or any magic orb," he said. "But some texts were stolen a while back. Maybe one of those is what you're looking for."
"What were they?" I asked.

"Let's see, there was something about the Night of Tears, another tome titled *The Last King of the Ayleids*, and another on the isle of Artaeum. I suppose the Night of Tears might contain something, but as I remember it was very short."

This did not seem very hopeful. Still, I asked him where he thought the books might be. Urag told a tale of a student named Orthorn who had left the college suddenly to join a group of powerful necromancers in a place called Fellglow Keep. He had taken the books with him to ingratiate himself to his new friends.

"When do you plan on retrieving them?" I asked.

"Me? I have far too much to do here without running across Skyrim after stolen books. The arch-mage set you this task of finding information on that orb, so I suggest you get yourself to Fellglow Keep without further ado. You had such success against those draugr, I doubt a group of mages will be much trouble for you."

I left the Arcanaeum pondering this new task, wondering whether I could convince one of my fellow students to accompany me – and whether they would be any help.

Lost in thought, I nearly ran into Ancano, who was waiting for me in the library's foyer. He loomed over me, his long silver hair pulled back to reveal a high forehead and pointed elven ears. He wore heavy black robes adorned with silver fasteners and stout gauntlets inset with black gems. He seemed more prepared for battle than for magical study and academic exchanges.

"I heard you found something deep within Saarthal," he said. "Something powerfully magical. Please give me all the details."

I didn't trust the Altmer. No one did. I was still surprised he appeared to know nothing about what had happened in Whiterun. Perhaps he was too focused on snooping around the college. "Oh, you know how rumors spread," I said. "We only found the usual enchanted objects, a couple of magic staves, and other items of lesser importance. I imagine Arniel Gane is still cataloging the lot. Maybe he would be a better one to ask."

"Young lady, Tolfdir sent you back to the college, alone, with news for Savos Aren. Obviously whatever you found is too important to be left unattended. I will get to the bottom of this, and your lack of assistance will be noted. I can only do my duty as an advisor to the arch-mage if I know everything that happens here. Good day." With that he turned and walked haughtily from the room.

I headed in the opposite direction, to Mirabelle Ervine's offices. She was available, finally. She was seated at her desk when I entered, looking as if she expected me. "You had a big day yesterday, Deirdre," she said. "We're all very proud of you. Yet you don't look as happy and full of accomplishment as one might expect."

"No, ma'am. I…" I paused and thought for a moment, then began again. "When I came here, I thought the college would unlock the key to who I am. I thought it had something to do with magic, that one day I might become a great wizard, or at least put my magical ability to some use. But now… I'm not so sure. I think there's something else…"

"Are you saying you're thinking of leaving us?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's just, last night, I had this dream, or vision." Then I told her of the dream from beginning to end, as difficult as it was. I felt I could trust Mirabelle, that she wouldn't judge me
I waited for her to go on, but she seemed to think this was enough explanation. "Please, ma'am, can you tell me what it is?"

She looked at me searchingly, then said, "I cannot be sure what this power is, and it is not my place to tell you, even if I was certain. Only you can walk the path to your destiny, and anything I might say could lead you astray. But I believe you are right that you will not find it here. You may indeed rise to great heights among wizards and mages, and you may even return one day to aid the college. But the key to your destiny lies elsewhere."

This was mystifying. I knew no more than before. "But where?" I asked, trying not to plead with her.

"With that, I believe I can be of some help. We've had a rider." She drew an envelope from the folds of her robes. "He had been riding hard since just after dawn, taking every shortcut through mountain passes and across dangerous streams. When he arrived this afternoon, he had nearly ridden his horse to death. The letter is from Jarl Balgruuf of Whiterun. He calls for your aid. They have had another dragon attack."

I was stunned. "So my dream ... it was real."

"It seems so. You appear to have some sort of connection with the dragon. I believe that therein lies the key to your power and the mystery of who and what you are." She came around her desk then and took my hand. "But I say again: whatever it is, a mysterious power or a hidden part of yourself, I am certain you will use it for good and not for ill. If I am any judge of character, I know that much is true. And you can begin by going to the aid of Whiterun and helping them defeat this dragon. The rider is waiting to take you back to Dragonsreach."

My head was spinning. Whiterun! I had thought it would be long before I saw that city again, considering the manner of my leaving. Then I grew suspicious. What if this was a trap set by the Thalmor justiciars to lure me back into their clutches? Had Farengar revealed my plans to come to the college? He seemed to care little for Skyrim's politics, and I didn't think he would put me in danger. But who knew what methods the Thalmor had used on him? And what about the task the Psijics had set me? I was the only one who could avert disaster, they had said. How could I do that if I left for Whiterun? Unless the dragon was the disaster I was meant to avert?

I opened the letter, hoping it would guide me. Though it bore Jarl Balgruuf's seal, Farengar had written it:
Dearest Deirdre,

I hope this letter finds you well and that the college – but enough of that, I write in haste to urge you to return to Whiterun at once. The dragon attacked at dawn this morning, after remaining hidden since the events at Helgen. It destroyed a farm west of the city. The farmer and his wife were slain, but the children escaped, thank the Nine Eight. The jarl requests that you return to the city at once and aid us in whatever way you can. You are the only one who has seen the dragon and survived, after all. We would consult with the surviving soldiers from Helgen, but relations with the Imperial Army are … strained, shall we say?

You need have no worry about those Thalmor, by the way. The jarl expelled them from the city after the ruckus they caused, White-Gold Concordat or no. It's just too bad that the events precipitated your untimely departure. I had hoped to see you off on your great adventure to the college. I am sure you will have much to tell when you return.

Please don't write back. Just come straight away with the rider who bore this note.

Yours sincerely,

Farengar Secret-Fire

P.S.: If the dragon gives us a reprieve from its attacks, I have one task with which I could use your help. You wouldn't happen to have gained any experience in ancient Nord ruins, would you?

The dream decided me. It matched too precisely the events Farengar described. He must be telling the truth, not setting a trap for me. And Mirabelle was right – if I was to learn my destiny, I would have to start with that dragon. "I'll go to Whiterun," I told her.

"I knew you would, though I'll be sorry to see you leave so soon after joining us. Pack your things quickly. The rider is waiting in the village for you. I'll come to see you off when you're ready."

I hurried out of her offices and back across the courtyard to my cell. The other students were loitering around the hall outside their rooms, taking a day off after their exertions in Saarthal. They looked up in surprise as I rushed in.

"I'm leaving," I said, brushing past them into my room, to exclamations of "What?" and "You can't be serious!"

"I knew it," said Onmund. "Something has been bothering you since last night, and now you want out of here." He looked more distressed than the others.

"Where are you going, Deirdre?" asked Brelyna. "What will you do?"

I was busy shoving clothing, enchanted jewelry, potions and ingredients into my knapsack. My possessions had increased considerably since my arrival at the college and it was a tight squeeze. "I'm going to Whiterun," I told them. "The dragon is back."

"Dragon?" asked Onmund. "The one that attacked Helgen?"

"Is there any other?" Brelyna snapped at him. "Do you think more than one dragon has come back to ravage Skyrim?" She turned to me. "But what does that have to do with you, Deirdre?"
I had forgotten I had chosen not to tell them of the events at Helgen. With Ancano around, it just seemed too risky. The less they knew about that part of my past, the better for them and for me. I considered how much to tell them now, as I also considered how to carry my bow, quiver, and the staff of Jyrik Gauldurson at once. Sergius had discovered that the staff would deal a powerful bolt of lightning, doing considerable damage and also reducing my opponents' magicka. I had no time to learn more Destruction spells, and Farengar had mentioned an ancient Nord ruin. If I must face undead again, the staff would be invaluable. I consoled myself that the staff was already fully charged with Aetherial energy, and by using it I would release the soul energy trapped within.

Finally I had everything secured, but still could think of no sound explanation for my sudden departure. "I ran into the dragon right after it attacked Helgen," I lied. "I'm one of the few living who has ever seen one. And now the Jarl of Whiterun has asked me to help them slay the dragon." I knew I was making little sense, but I could think of nothing better.

"This one thinks the Breton girl is very full of herself since Saarthal. How could you help with a dragon?"

"There's no time to explain," I said as I gathered the last of my things and left the room, stuffing an apple into my pocket. "Wait! I almost forgot!" I turned to face them again. "Savos Aren and Urag set me the task of finding books that may have to do with the orb. I won't be able to do that now. You three will have to get them."

"Certainly," said Onmund. "Where are they? Who has them?"

"They're in a place called Fellglow Keep. It's home to a group of powerful necromancers. Nothing you three can't handle, I'm sure."

"Necromancers!" Onmund exclaimed. "What can we do against them?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something. Savos Aren needs as much information as he can get about that orb. I know you won't let me down. Urag can tell you more. Now I really have to go." I went out the door to the courtyard, and Onmund followed me.

"Wait, Deirdre. This really is goodbye then?"

"For now," I said. I couldn't stand these long, serious farewells, so I tried to lighten the mood. "I'll just pop down to Whiterun, slay the dragon, then come right back. How long could it take?"

"Then Akatosh speed your journey," he said and opened his arms for a hug, which I accepted. His arms felt good around me and I hugged him back. I almost wished I weren't leaving. There was no kissing this time, and I couldn't decide how I felt about that.

"I'll be counting the days until your return," he said as I turned away and walked through the archway out of the college. Mirabelle was waiting on the other side.

"I know you'll return to the college one day, Deirdre," she said. "I look forward to seeing what you have learned about yourself in the meantime."

"That Psijic monk's words still bother me," I said. "I'm the one who is supposed to prevent disaster from the orb we found in Saarthal. Are you sure I'm doing the right thing?"

"I wouldn't put too much stock in Psijic prophecies. They are often vague, if not incomprehensible. He didn't say exactly what the danger would be, did he?"

I shook my head.
"I'm not certain I would bring the orb here, if it were up to me," she said, a note of doubt creeping into her voice. She looked past me, up at the college's main tower. "I told the arch-mage as much earlier today." Then she shook it off. "But no, Master Aren is the most powerful wizard in Skyrim, and perhaps in all of Tamriel. Can you imagine a safer place for such a powerful magical object? Don't worry about us, you have bigger things with which to concern yourself. Now off you go. The Whiterun rider is waiting."

I found the rider in the village with two horses saddled and waiting. Jarl Balgruuf had sent him with gold to purchase fresh mounts for the return journey.

"The name's Horik, miss," he said. "I hope you're ready for a tough road. We go by Wayward Pass in the mountains above the old Alftand ruins. But at least you'll get some rest tonight in the Nightgate Inn – if we get there before sunup, that is."

I climbed onto my horse. Whatever the rough journey ahead, I was glad we would travel no faster than a gallop.
"The heat must have been tremendous," Farengar exclaimed. He held up a twisted scrap of iron that might once have been a scythe blade.

We were investigating the wreckage of the Sheep-Shearer Farm, Farengar, Irileth, two city guards, and I. The barn still stood, but a chimney and two blackened stone walls were all that remained of the house. Two days had passed since the dragon attack, yet the ruined house still smoldered, the smoke drifting away on the light breeze soughing across the plain. Nothing could have been more forlorn. The farm had been little more than a few acres scratched out of the heather and gorse of this tundra plain, the last, lonely dwelling between Whiterun and Rorikstead far to the west. And now it was not even that. A few sheep grazed in the distance, fated to become meals for the wildland wolves.

The trembling began shortly after we arrived. What else could I expect? I could not look on this burnt-out ruin without thinking of my childhood home after it was destroyed. And then there was my part in this devastation, imagined or no. I soon began to doubt the wisdom of this trip. What did we hope to find that could help in a fight against the dragon? The beast was practically invincible, with prodigious speed, a hide that turned away arrows, and the ability to attack with talons, fangs, and fire. Then I trembled all the more. What had happened to the girl who fought her way through Saarthal? I struggled not to let the others see my discomfort.

Now Farengar stood in what had been the livestock pen, sifting through bits of burnt and twisted metal that had once been farm tools. Nearby, the charred remains of the ox gave off a pungent odor of burnt flesh.

"Yes, quite impressive," Irileth said now, coming over to look at his find. "But remember, Farengar, we are here not to admire the dragon's power, but to learn how it attacks and how it might be stopped."

"Of course, of course!" exclaimed Farengar. "And judging by the heat that must have been applied to this piece of iron, our guards would do well to avoid the dragon's breath. I wonder if we could forge some sort of fire-proof shield for them?"

"But the farmer was not burned you say, Yngmar?"

"No, Housecarl Irileth," said one of the guards. He led us over to the spot in front of the barn where I – where the dragon had dropped the farmer's body. "We found him over here. It looked as if he had been bitten nearly in half." I was glad the guards had removed the bodies the day before, but the ground was still dark and damp from the blood.

"What did he think he was doing?" Irileth pondered.

"We found a bow nearby, ma'am, and he had a nearly full quiver of arrows on his back. Maybe he
thought he could slay the dragon with his bow." I was finding it more difficult to conceal my dread. To hide it, I began searching around in the grass in front of the barn. I soon found the arrow that had bounced off the dragon's scales.

"It seems he got one shot off at least," I said, showing them the arrow. Its shaft was cracked. "But I will hazard it must have bounced off." The jarl wanted any information I could give about the dragon, but I could never acknowledge its source.

"Then we'll need to outfit our archers with stronger bows," Irileth said, "and give them arrows with hardened shafts and the sharpest heads available. See to it that Adrianne at Warmaiden's gets a full order when we return. Now, what about the wife?"

"Over here," I almost said, but stopped myself. I let the guard lead us around the house's ruin to the spot where the woman had died. It was blackened with fire. Just before the burned area two talons had made deep imprints in the grass. They were so large I could have curled up and lain down in either one.

"Agna and the children ran out of the house. The boy says his mother fell and told them to keep running. The dragon flew after them and caught the mother here. She couldn't get away. What was left … it must have been an awful way to die."

Now we all shuddered.

"And the children?" asked Irileth. With her stern expression and red eyes, the Dunmer usually presented a grim visage, yet even she seemed shaken.

"That boy is a brave one," said the guard. "When his mother told them to run, he took his sister by the hand and wouldn't let her look back. They ran to a little cave they knew. By the time the dragon was done with their mother, it couldn't find them."

"I hope they got out of earshot before…" I said, but I couldn't finish the thought. Though I never heard them on the night they died, my parents' screams still echoed through my nightmares.

"So it seems the dragon can focus on only one foe at a time," Irileth said. "Then we must abandon our shield-wall and attack the dragon from many directions at once." As she continued to discuss tactics with the guards, I walked a few paces in the direction the children had run. Amidst the tufts of brown grasses and heather, I found a doll. I could easily imagine the girl dropping it as her brother dragged her away. It was missing an eye, and a bit of stuffing poked out a hole in the seam. I had never cared for dolls, but I guessed this might be a prized possession, it was so well used. I tucked it away in the folds of my robes.

Horik and I had arrived in Whiterun late in the afternoon of the day before. We had pushed our horses as hard as we dared over the snowfields and the crevasse-cut glaciers of western Winterhold, yet still were forced to bivouac in the Wayward Pass that night. In the dawn hours we descended the pass, stopping at the Nightgate Inn for a hot breakfast and hay for our horses. Then we rode hard once more along the good roads to Whiterun. Dragonsreach looked even more imposing when approached from this side, its great north face jutting into the sky, topped by the jarl's hall. I reported straight to Jarl Balgruuf, and found him closeted with Proventus Avenicci and Irileth, discussing their defensive preparations. The dragon hadn't been seen since the attack the
previous morning.

"The entire city guard is on full alert," Balgruuf told me. "I have sent patrols out across the 
countryside as well." I had seen Lydia and Hrongar preparing to leave on night patrol with the jarl's 
hirth as I came into the city. We barely had time to exchange a greeting. "I've even contracted with 
the Companions. You might think they would defend their city at no cost, but no. I'm glad you're 
here at any rate. I still hope you will have some insight for us if the dragon returns."

I couldn't tell him about my vision. Would he interpret it as Mirabelle had, as some sort of second 
sight? Or would he hold me responsible, thinking I was somehow in league with the beast? "I'll 
help in any way I can," was all I could manage.

"Good," he said. "And about that business with the Thalmor. I apologize for the trouble they 
caused you. I never should have let them into the city in the first place. I only wish you had come 
to me and told me you were being followed – and that you had been more honest with me about 
Helgen."

"So you know about the Stormcloaks?"

"Yes," he said. "The Thalmor brought me that report on the day you left the city so suddenly. It 
seems Avenicci's suspicions were correct."

"I'm sorry, Jarl Balgruuf," I said. "Being new to the city and Skyrim's politics, I didn't know who I 
could trust. You have to believe that I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time when I was 
captured along with the Stormcloaks. I make no apologies for fighting my way out of Helgen in the 
company of the rebels, since the Imperials would have beheaded me along with them. Still, I have 
no part in their cause."

"I believe you," said Balgruuf. "I was sure you were no Stormcloak on the day you came here, and 
I can't blame you for fighting for your life. But what about these Thalmor? That certainly made it 
look as if you're on the Stormcloak side."

"I never meant to cross the Thalmor," I said. "I only meant to help the Alik'r in their pursuit of a 
criminal from their own lands."

"Well, I can say nothing of the wisdom of that decision. You've certainly put yourself on the wrong 
side of the Thalmor, and pulled Whiterun into conflict with them as well. Avenicci is ready to flay 
you alive." I looked over at the steward, who was glaring at me. "But you aren't the only reason I 
had trouble with the Thalmor. I won't have them following my citizens and kidnapping them off 
the streets. Even Heimskr was in league with them. All of his preaching was just meant to lure 
Talos worshippers out of the woodwork, then the Thalmor would grab them. No, we're well shut of 
them."

Avenicci broke in. "We may have rid ourselves of them for a time, but they will be back, my jarl. 
Ejecting them from the city has put us in a difficult position with General Tullius and the Imperial 
Legion. We just received a message saying he wants to station one of his war-bands here."

Balgruuf pondered this news. "So you see, Deirdre, we are in a tight spot. I've tried to convince 
Tullius to leave Whiterun out of this war, but I don't know how long I can hold him off. You should 
be safe here for now, and I hope you will feel you owe me some service regarding these dragons in 
return for my protection."

"I'll do what I can, Jarl Balgruuf," I told him.
That night I found the Bannered Mare nearly full, with farm families having sent their women and children in to the safety of the city. Arcadia was there, taking her evening meal as usual. It was good to see her and remember that happy period that now seemed so long ago. I ordered a bowl of my favorite beef stew – the fare at the college had been meager, limited to bread, fruit and cheese – and began telling her of my travels. She was eager to hear of life at the college and whether I had any new alchemy secrets to share.

Then Thorald Gray-Mane came in. He looked exhausted from a day out on patrol for the dragon. It wasn't long before he spotted me.

"If it isn't Deirdre of Saarthal!" he exclaimed, making his way to our table.

Saarthal? I wondered how he knew about that.

It soon came out that he had the story from the stable boy, who had it from the courier, Horik, who had it from Enthir, who had coaxed it out of J'zargo. They knew only that we had discovered a powerful magical object, though in truth, we didn't know much more. "Your bravery and magical skill are the talk of the college, so says Horik." Thorald concluded.

The room had gone quiet while he spoke, and I felt all eyes turned on me.

"What are college mages doing delving into Nord ruins?" someone yelled from the back of the inn, where I couldn't see them. "What the Ancients sealed away should be left alone. Who knows what danger you've uncovered?"

"Aye," said another voice. "And what about that business with the Redguards and the Thalmor? You've stirred up a pot of trouble for Whiterun, you have."

Thorald brought his fist down on the table. "Shut your yobs, all o' you. Any lass who'll brave a crypt on her own is all right by me." He turned to me. "I knew you had spunk when you stood up to my brother. I'm glad you'll be on our side if that dragon comes back." He turned back to the rest of the room. "Now, does anyone have anything else to say? Good, I thought not."

I stared down at my half-finished bowl.

"Ah, pay them no heed, lass," he said. "Most folks in this town just want something to complain about. How about if I buy you a drink?"

I declined, pleading fatigue after the long day in the saddle, and retreated to my room, feeling the eyes of the tavern on me as I went.

Things seemed brighter in the morning, at least until we came in sight of the ruined farm.

Now, at the end of our search, it seemed we had gained but a little information on which to build a battle plan. Yet Irileth, Farengar and the guards found much to discuss as we headed back to the city. I was just glad to get away from that accursed place, and followed behind them, lost in my own thoughts.

As we entered the city gate, I suddenly thought of something, and caught up to Irileth. "Where are the children?" I asked.

"Danica Pure-Spring is caring for them in the Temple of Kynareth. That's where all our sick and wounded go."

"Then I will meet you back in Dragonsreach," I said.
I left my companions and went straight up to the temple, finding the head-priestess, Danica Pure-Spring, just inside.

"I can't have them bothered with questions about the tragedy," she said, barring my way. "They are both still in shock, especially the little girl."

She relented when I showed her the doll and promised I wouldn't pester the children for details about the dragon attack.

The main hall of the temple was lined with beds for the sick and injured. I found the children, Huldi and Harald, sitting on one of them. The boy was about nine years old, and was trying to interest himself in a picture tome. His sister, around six, just stared listlessly at the wall, humming a tuneless refrain.

"Harald," said Danica, "this is Deirdre, she has something for your sister."

"Hello," said the boy, looking up. His eyes were red from crying.

A nurse sat nearby. "Something to cheer her up, I hope," she said. "The wee bairnie just sits there all day, won't eat, won't speak. Waste away, she will."

I knelt in front of the girl. "Hello, Huldi," I said, but she didn't seem to know I was there. I reached out and stroked her hair. "My name is Deirdre. I brought something for you." I pulled the doll from within my robes.

"Poppet!" the girl squeaked and took the doll, clasping it to her chest with both hands. She rocked back and forth for a bit, then went back to staring at the wall.

The boy spoke up now. "That's the first word she's spoken since … since…"

I put my hand over his. "I know," I said. "Do your friends call you Harry?"

He nodded.

"You can call me DeeDee. My friends all called me that when I was your age." Then before I could think better of it, I went on. "You know, Harry, when I was not much older than you, I lost my parents too. I know how awful it is. I just want to tell you that things will…" and then I stopped to think if things had gotten better, if my grief had grown less, and I knew that it hadn't, and then I couldn't stop myself. The tears were flowing from my eyes and I was sobbing and pleading their forgiveness. I lowered my head and the sobs racked my body and I couldn't think what good I'd meant to do them.

Then I felt a small hand patting me on the shoulder. I looked up and Huldi was standing in front of me. "DeeDee," she said. Then she said it again, and I saw in her eyes that she was sad – for me. I was the one who should be comforting her. I hugged her to me as tightly as she held her doll. "I'm sorry," I said again, trying to control my tears.

"It's all right, DeeDee," I heard Harry say, and now he was patting my other shoulder. Then we were all hugging each other, the three orphans. I vowed – to myself; at least I had that much presence of mind – that I would find the dragon that killed their parents. I might not be able to find justice for my own parents' killers, I thought, but by Ysmir, I would wreak vengeance on theirs.

Then I let them go and tried to dry my eyes on the sleeve of my robe. Danica was looking at me sternly, but the nurse said, "At least you got her talking, praise Kynareth."
I turned to leave.

"Come back soon, DeeDee," Harry said.

"I'll try," I said.

In the next days, I found no opportunity to fulfill my silent vow to slay the dragon. I spent the time standing atop the walls of Dragonsreach scanning the horizon for soaring wings, or scouting the countryside with Hrongar and Lydia and their hirth-fellows. The weather was bright and crisp, the last of the summer snow sparkled off the mountains all around, and warblers and woodlarks sang on the heath. The soldiers were jocular, as if going dragon hunting were a great game. I held my tongue at their foolishness. They hadn't seen the destroyed farm. When we happened to pass by it, they grew more subdued.

On the afternoon of the second day, the jarl summoned me to his war chamber. Farengar was there when I arrived, and he and Balgruuf were arguing, while Irileth and Avenicci looked on.

"My jarl," Farengar was saying, "five days have passed since the dragon was last seen. Our patrols have had no luck finding it. That tablet may provide the clue to the dragon's lair."

"Very well, Farengar," said the jarl, "you go chase this wild goose, but I cannot spare any of my guards or hirth-men."

"Me?" Farengar seemed shocked. "What if something happened to me in that crypt? Who would read the tablet then?"

"Well then, what do you suggest?"

Farengar turned to me. "That's why I've sent for Deirdre," he said, turning to me. "Deirdre of Saarthal they're calling you now. You won't have any trouble going into a Nord barrow for us, will you?"

They all looked at me. "What's this about?" I asked, looking from one to another.

"Farengar," said the jarl, "it would be madness to send the lass alone into Bleak Falls Barrow. She may have proved herself escaping Helgen and exploring Saarthal, but she had help both times. And we've had reports that the place is thick with thieves."

"Let's let the girl decide, shall we?" said Irileth. "Perhaps she's made of sterner stuff than she looks."

"None of you are making this clearer," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I have reports of a stone tablet in Bleak Falls Barrow," said Farengar. "If my informant is correct, it is a map of dragon burial sites in Skyrim. This Dragonstone may lead us to the elusive beast."

The jarl interrupted him. "And if you would reveal to us the identity of your informant, and the quality of your information, I'd be more inclined to help you." He turned to me. "So it's up to you, lass. I cannot risk warriors on such an uncertain quest when the dragon could return at any moment. But if you are successful – and if this tablet proves useful – you will have the thanks of
Whiterun.

Anything seemed better than waiting idly for the dragon. And if the tablet could bring me a step closer to the monster that haunted my dreams… "I'll go," I said. Farengar began to give me directions. "I know the way," I interrupted. "I've seen it before. But can you tell me where in this barrow I can expect to find the Dragonstone?"

"I can only guess it will be hidden away in the deepest chamber," he said.

"Where else?" I said, smiling grimly.
"Deirdre! It's so good to see you," Gerdur exclaimed, hugging me, then pulling me into her house. "Hod, look after Deirdre's horse," she called to her husband, then turned back to me. "What are you doing here? We heard you had gone to the college. I expected your studies would keep you there for months, through the winter at least."

I had ridden straight to Riverwood after learning about the Dragonstone. Jarl Balgruuf gave me the use of the horse I had ridden from Winterhold, so I made good time.

"No, I came back to help with the dragon," I said, setting my knapsack and weapons by the door.

She nearly gasped. "We heard about the attack in the western hold. Such a tragedy."

When I told her my purpose, she did gasp. "No, Deirdre. You cannot go there, not alone. It's filled with thieves. Not even the guards will go up there. You must be joking!"

"I assure you I'm serious," I said. "I'm off at dawn. I was just hoping to spend the night."

We spent the rest of the evening and far into the night trading stories of the last months. For her part, there wasn't much to tell. Life went on in Riverwood much as before, but with more guards in the village. Ralof had set off for Winterhold shortly after I left for Windhelm. Gerdur had no news from him, but that was as expected. They both felt it was too dangerous to send letters back and forth, even between neutral and Stormcloak territories. The Thalmor could still be anywhere.

Her eyes grew wide when I told her about Saarthal. I tried not to boast but it was hard not to. Facing those draugr had been no easy task. Too, any Nord man would boast of defeating them, increasing his share of glory – why shouldn't I?

"All those draugr!" she exclaimed. "I can hardly believe it. Just hearing old stories about them makes Ralof tremble. And you fought them, by yourself?"

"Only some of them," I assured her. "Tolfdir was there to help with the others."

It was late before I went to my rest. I still found sleep difficult, despite all these weeks sleeping in a bed.

The sun was just lighting the highest peaks and spreading a gray light through the valley as Gerdur and I crossed the bridge over the White River the next morning. She had come to see me off after feeding me a hearty breakfast. Now she pointed out the path on the left that led up into the mountains across the river.

"Are you sure you don't want Hod to come with you, or one of the village lads?" she asked for the tenth time. Hod had looked a bit ill when she brought it up last night, although he had agreed to
Gerdur volunteering his company. I had rejected the offer then, as I rejected it now. I was planning to use stealth as far as possible, and I didn't need any hulking Nords lurching about.

"Gerdur, I've told you, I'll be fine," I said. "I'll come back as soon as I have the tablet." With that I turned and walked up the path.

It was a fine Frostfall morning in southern Skyrim, a welcome change from the permanent snows of Winterhold. The air was cool and crisp, but promised to grow warmer as the sun rose higher. The few beeches and maples that grew in this evergreen forest were a riot of reds and yellows, and the path was thick with fallen leaves. After all the riding I had been doing lately, it felt good to stretch my legs as I walked up the trail. It seemed a good morning for an adventure, and I tried to keep the brave face I had shown to Gerdur.

I had been walking for half an hour, climbing steeply as the path wound between boulders and around granite buttresses, when a stone tower came into view. It stood at a hairpin bend in the trail, and blended in to the gray rock of its surroundings. It was a simple matter to climb straight up the slope and meet the trail farther up, bypassing the tower and the two bandits outside it. They didn't notice me.

A short distance farther, the trail emerged from the trees into a patch of old snow directly beneath the summit ridge. Bleak Falls Barrow straddled that ridge, with tall stone arches leading to the main entrance, stone dragon heads adorning the peak of each arch. It seemed a good place to find a dragonstone tablet. Stairs climbed up through the arches, with three bandits standing watch along them. One passed back and forth in front of the great iron doors set in the face of the mountain.

This would bear some study. The stairs were open, with no walls or other obstacles to hide behind. I doubted that even my skill in stealth would allow me to climb the open stairway right in front of the guards in the growing daylight. I dared not spend an invisibility potion before I had even entered the barrow. Then I noticed a series of ledges to the side of the entrance. If I could make my way up them, I could come around to the doors from that side.

The climbing was easy, and I soon found myself peering around a corner at the walkway in front of the entrance. Now I had only to wait for the guard to pace off in the other direction, creep over to the door, open it a crack ever so quietly, and slip through it. That done, I found myself in Bleak Falls Barrow, with my eyes adjusting to the dim torch light.

At first glance, this barrow was much the same as the Saarthal catacombs – the same combination of carven arches and buttresses and rough-hewn stone. Time had taken its toll here, even more so than in Saarthal, with great webs of stout roots covering the ceiling and snaking across the floor, making walking difficult. Some of the stone work had tumbled from the walls. One was a dragon head similar to those on the archways outside. Unlike the realistic image of a dragon head that loomed over Dragon Bridge, this one was stylized, almost bird-like, its open mouth like a curved beak. Maybe it was a bird and I had let dragons take over my imagination.

Whatever it was, it made a good hiding spot from which to eavesdrop on two bandits at the far end of the chamber. They were arguing, something about one of their colleagues named Arvel, who had disappeared into the barrow and never returned. Another bandit had just been sent to fetch him back. The woman was concerned about getting her share of "that claw." Then I remembered the golden claw that had been stolen from Riverwood Traders, and how much Lucan the shop-keeper wanted it back. So much had happened since my first day in Riverwood that it had slipped my mind. Could this be the same one? At any rate, it would interfere with my plans for sneaking through Bleak Falls Barrow, for now I would have to contend with living bandits as well as sleeping draugr.
These two stood at a table near the only exit from the chamber, an archway leading to descending stairs. They were so rapt by their argument that I crept almost to the doorway before they had any hint of my presence. Then I heard one of them say "What was that?" and the unmistakable _snicking_ sound of a sword being drawn from its leather scabbard.

I had been practicing tumbling silently, and now I put the skill to good use. I rolled head over heels down the stairs, away from the bandits. A torch burned in a wall sconce at the top of the stair, but the hall beyond was lost in shadow. To the thieves, I would appear as just a flicker of movement seen out of the corner of their eye – or so I hoped as I crept deeper into the shadows and around a corner. I heard them following me partway down the stairs.

"Huh," said the man. "Must have been nothing."

"Probably just a rat, or a skeever," said the woman. Then they retreated to their entrance chamber.

If the rest of the thieves in this barrow were as dim as these two, I should have no trouble – as long as they didn't awaken every draugr in the place.

A twisting passage led deeper into the barrow. Black coffins rested in alcoves here and there, but if the thieves hadn't disturbed anything resting within, I doubted I would either. The dragon busts continued to adorn the walls here and there. Whoever had built this catacomb, dragons were constantly on their minds. Maybe they even worshipped them.

I soon came upon another bandit standing at a narrow bend in the passage. There was no way past without brushing against him. If it came to battle his shouts would attract the other two, and my prospects against three were slim. This one paced back and forth, a fearful look on his face. "Why'd they have to send me? Why did that Arvel have to run off with the claw?" Great – a cowardly thief was going to block me in my quest for the stone tablet. What did they want here, anyway? Surely not the Dragonstone? They must have heard of some valuable treasure buried here.

Finally, the thief pulled a flask from his pocket and took a long pull. A half smile spread across his face, and his eyes took on a faraway look. I guessed that was neither ale nor wine in the flask, not even brandy – but skooma, the banned concoction the Khajiits made in Elsweyr. I had heard that it brought on an instant state of bliss, but it would soon enslave its devotees in an endless quest for more and more of the drink.

Now the bandit walked off down the tunnel as if he hadn't a care in the world. I followed silently, but kept my distance, soon coming to a second chamber. A portcullis barred an archway at the far end. A pedestal with a lever sticking out of it stood in the center, and more of the three-sided pedestals I'd seen in Saarthal. Two carven Nordic faces overlooked the portcullis. These had gaping mouths and within each was one of the three animal engravings found on the pedestals. A third face with a serpent in its mouth had fallen to the floor, near the portcullis.

While I knew the method for getting past this gate trap, the bandit didn't seem to, or had forgotten in his drug-addled state. He walked up to the lever and pulled it before I could even think to warn him, and then think better of that. The portcullis remained closed and a hail of darts converged on the thief from four directions. He fell to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Solving the puzzle was simple, and I passed through the archway into the chamber beyond. Only then did I pause to wonder how the first thief had passed through here, leaving the door trap in place for those who followed. I found the answer in the form of a lever on the wall just beyond the doorway. I pulled it and the portcullis slid back into place, while the sound of pillars turning on their bases came from the room beyond.
On the opposite side of the chamber I found a circular flight of wooden stairs descending to the level below. Now the passages became thick with cobwebs and the bodies of small dead things wrapped in spider silk. I had battled plenty of frostbite spiders in the open forest, and I knew they were difficult to sneak past. I would have to be doubly wary here, where one could be hiding in any alcove or turning of the passage.

Finally I came to an archway blocked by a densely woven web. I burned it away with a flame spell, and crept into the chamber beyond. It seemed empty at first, but then the ceiling began to move. It descended toward the chamber floor and I quickly realized it wasn't the ceiling, but the largest frostbite spider I had ever seen. Gerdur and Hod would have had difficulty fitting it into their lumber wagon.

I had a moment to unsling my bow as it continued its descent. As soon as it hit the floor two things happened – I launched an arrow at it, and it spat a great green gob of poison toward me. I was the quicker, and ducked back through the doorway as the spot where I had been standing was splattered with toxic goo.

Now the spider's monstrous size proved its undoing. It charged toward the doorway but couldn't fit through. I stood off to one side where it couldn't aim its jets of poison and took the precaution of quaffing a potion of poison resistance. I drew my sword and hacked at one of its forelegs protruding through the opening. The spider drew back and I heard it scuttling back into its chamber. Switching back to my bow, I peered around the archway into the room, only to see more green poison flying toward me. I drew back just in time. Then I stepped into the room and let fly an arrow in the direction from which the poison had come. The arrow landed a solid hit and I darted back into the corridor as the spider launched itself at the doorway once more.

In this way the battle went back and forth. The spider struck me once with its remaining foreleg when I was too slow to retreat, but it was a mere flesh wound. Finally, when I had spent my eighth or ninth arrow, the spider shuddered to the floor and breathed its last poison-spittled breath.

I was retrieving what arrows I could from it, when I heard a voice.

"That took you long enough! Now get me down from here!"

I looked around the room and saw a doorway on the far side, blocked by webs. This time something was moving within them. I stepped closer and saw that it was a man. Only his head and one hand were visible.

"You must be Arvel," I said to him. "You appear to be in my way."

Now that he could get a good look at me, he saw I wasn't one of his band of thieves. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Never mind, just get me down from here. I have the claw, and I can show you how to use it."

There was that claw again. What was it, and why should I want to know how it worked? Still, it didn't seem like a bad idea to retrieve it for Lucan, and the thief was blocking the entrance. I drew my dagger and began hacking at the webbing, to many protests that the blade was coming too close.

Finally Arvel had the use of his arms and legs once more, and the passage was free of webs. But as soon as I sheathed my dagger, he turned and fled down the corridor. "You'll have to catch me before you get the claw," he called over his shoulder. "That treasure is mine!" There is honor among thieves, or so the old adage goes. For my part, I had found it to be mostly true, but perhaps Arvel had never heard it.
I nearly ran after him, but then stopped when I remembered what might be deeper within the barrow. The coffins had remained sealed so far, but who knew what lay ahead? It didn't do to go running and yelling through Nord catacombs. Perhaps Lucan would have to get his own claw back. It had nothing to do with me. I crept silently after the deceitful thief.

I had not gone far when I heard screams from farther down the passage, accompanied by the clash of weapons. Then all was silent once more. Arvel had found someone, whether dead or living I could not be sure. I crept ahead, using every bit of stealth I knew. The spider webs gave way and I came to another coffin leaning up against a wall. It remained undisturbed, but I guessed that the foolish thief had awakened a draugr farther along.

Peering around a corner into a wider hall, I saw that I was right. The chamber was lined with numerous alcoves containing sleeping draugr and skeletons. Two of them were empty. Arvel lay in a pool of blood farther down the hall, his leather armor rent in too many places to count. The two awakened draugr stood in the hall facing each other, one at either end, as if guarding the thief's body. Unfortunately, the one at the far end blocked the exit so completely I doubted even my invisibility potion would allow me to sneak past. And it seemed a shame to leave the dead thief in possession of the golden claw when Lucan wanted it back so badly.

If only Illusion worked on the undead! This would be a perfect spot in which to cast a fury spell and set the two draugr to fighting each other. Then I realized I could perhaps achieve the same result without magic. The draugr at the far end of the hall stood next to an open gate outfitted with vicious looking spikes. In the center of the floor was a pressure plate like the ones in Saarthal. Though it was an obvious trap, the draugr stood there, bow at the ready, oblivious to its peril. A plan began to form in my mind.

I crept into the room, ready to conjure an atronach should I be discovered. There was just enough space behind the draugr on my end of the hall for me to creep into place behind and just to one side of it. I thought the draugr archer at the opposite end might see me, but either my stealth was too good or the light was too dim. The two draugr kept staring at each other.

So I waved my arms at the one across the hall.

It was a risky move. My plan depended on the draugr just inches in front of me not detecting my presence. Fortunately, he ignored me, distracted by his partner raising his bow and firing an arrow that nearly hit him. I had rolled silently out of the way by this point, and the draugr nearest me gave an outraged bark, drew his sword, and charged the archer.

The archer stared, shocked, at his onrushing fellow, gesturing wildly in my direction. He appeared to have lost his power of speech in death. He looked as if he had something he desperately wanted to say, but just couldn't get the words out. Then he dropped his bow and reached for his sword. But he was too late, and his compatriot was on him. The archer almost blocked one blow that sheared off his left arm, managed a thrust or two, but then the other draugr ran him through.

The survivor of the battle was so busy exulting in his victory that he didn't hear me run across the room, all stealth abandoned. He turned only as I came down with all my weight on the pressure plate. I leapt quickly out of the way as the gate smashed shut with a great clang, catching the draugr full in the face and knocking him into the wall. He slumped to the floor, lifeless once again. The gate slowly swung back into place and the way forward was clear.

I relieved the draugr archer of his remaining arrows, then searched the thief. I found a journal and tucked it away for later reading, then discovered the golden claw. I was about to stuff it into my knapsack too when I noticed engravings on its palm. They were very like those on the stone pillars of the door puzzle, but the animals represented were a bear, a moth, and an owl. Could these also
be the solutions to a puzzle? I could only wonder. I wondered too when I would reach the deepest level of this labyrinthine catacomb. It already seemed as if I had been laboring here for hours.

As it proved, Farengar was correct – I would need to go all the way through the catacombs before I came upon the Dragonstone. And little did I know it as I stood there pondering the golden claw, but I was only half way through this maze of tunnels. The journey was long and my tale must needs be quicker. It will be enough to say that the bulk of the Nord dead remained in their slumbers as I crept through that barrow, and I was able to sneak past any who did stir. There were few obstacles other than ones similar to those I had already encountered.

And so, after hours of creeping and slinking and avoiding all danger in Bleak Falls Barrow, I came to a door. Set within it were four concentric rings made of stone, arranged in such a way that only the top third of each of the outer three rings showed. At the top of each of these circles was engraved one of the three animals represented on the claw, aligned vertically. Only the disc at the center of the rings was fully revealed.

Pulling the claw from my pack, I saw that the proper order for the three images was bear, moth, owl. I quickly rotated the rings so that the animals appeared in the same order.

Nothing happened. I pushed the door, but it would not budge.

I remembered that Arvel seemed to think the claw itself was important. Why not just have the clues drawn on a piece of parchment instead of carrying around this heavy metal object? Then I noticed three holes in the center circle. They were arranged in a pattern about the same size as the talons on the claw. I held the claw up to the holes, and my hunch proved correct – the talons fit perfectly.

With the claw in place, I turned the central disc first to the right, then the left. The disc moved inward, leaving the claw in my hand. Now I heard heavy blocks tumbling deep within the door, and it slid down into a slot in the floor. With that, I stepped through the doorway into Bleak Falls Sanctum.

I found myself in a vast cavern that began with a dark, low-ceilinged antechamber, but soon opened out into a sunlit space like a cathedral. Shafts of light streamed down from openings in the ceiling far above, and three waterfalls poured into the room. With the light turning their spray to silver mist, and green ivy and hanging moss draping their sides, they were anything but bleak. More water-loving plants grew here and there next to a small stream that flowed across the end of the chamber nearest me. If there was any place the ancient Nords could imagine as safe from the prying eyes and greedy fingers of the outside world, this chamber deep within Nirn must have been it. It had certainly been difficult enough to reach. Too, everything about the place seemed sacred – though to what deity I knew not.

But there was something darker here as well. Across a stone bridge and up a short flight of stairs was a dais with an altar-like table, large urns, and a huge stone coffin. Beyond that was another of those curving walls like the one at the very bottom of Saarthal. I had almost forgotten about it until now. The top of the wall featured a graven image of a dragon's face. Its eyes stared out at me with a malevolent gleam.

As I ascended the steps to the stone dais, I saw that a great chest stood on the other side, near the coffin. I stepped toward it but then was distracted by the chanting coming from the wall – or perhaps I was only hearing it inside my own head? The wall bore many strange runes, three of them at the center glowing with a shimmering light.

I hesitated there, wondering which to investigate first. I had seen one of these walls before, but I still didn't know what it meant. It was so puzzling, and there had been so much to ponder about
Saarthal, that I had neglected to mention the wall, or that word, *Jiz*, to anyone. On the other hand, I had been sent here to find the Dragonstone tablet, and I was sure it was in that chest. I crept slowly toward it lest I awaken a draugr sleeping in the nearby coffin.

The chest wasn't even locked. Within, I found much treasure — enchanted leather armor, an iron shield, an enchanted battleaxe, gold, gems, a potion or two, and a magic staff — but no Dragonstone.

This was perplexing. I had delved to the deepest level of Bleak Falls Barrow. I had checked every chest and urn along the way, finding only gold pieces and a few potions. Did I need to search every draugr body as well? A stairway led up to a doorway beyond the curving wall. Surely that was an exit, not a passage to yet another chamber? No, if I was going to find the tablet, this sanctum was the room where it was hidden.

Resigned, I went over to investigate the wall. Again, the chanting grew louder as I approached. Streamers of light reached out toward me as the single illuminated rune grew brighter. When I came within a pace or two of it, the chanting reached a climax and a single word echoed through my mind — *Fus!* A word I'd never heard before, whose meaning I could not guess, but which I somehow knew I would never forget. Then the chanting subsided and the light faded and I was left standing in front of a wall with runes on it. The carven dragon's face stared down at me, offering no answers.

Still perplexed, I turned from the wall and took a step toward the center of the room. And that was enough to rouse whatever was within the coffin. With a loud crack, the lid popped open and was pushed aside. Two hands grasped either side of the coffin, and the largest, most powerful draugr I had seen pushed itself up, then climbed out onto the dais. It wore chainmail beneath leather armor and bore a sturdy iron helm that covered most of its face. It turned toward me and brandished its sword and shield. Then it shouted. I had no time to be surprised that it could emit a sound other than the usual draugr bark. *Ro-Dah!* were the words I thought I heard. The force of the shout shook me, but I did not fall. I had felt that once before — when the dragon attacked Helgen.

I hadn't the time to ponder the strangeness of these events or what they meant for me. The draugr charged straight at me, its blue eyes blazing. I was backed up against the curving wall. As it swung its sword I tumbled to one side, then ran past it across the dais and down the steps to the bridge. Thus our battle began. We fought throughout that hall, and I was hard-pressed. This creature was quicker than the others I had faced. I barely stayed ahead of it as it pursued me over the bridge and along the stream. I knew I was no match for it with sword and shield, and my apprentice robes offered little protection against a slicing blade. I was saved by the stream. I could leap across it at two points, while the draugr's stiff, sinewy body forced him to cross by the little bridge. I leapt across the stream with the draugr hard on my heels, then turned and drew my bow. I was able to fire two shots at it before it crossed the bridge and came toward me.

I turned to leap back across the stream and heard the draugr shout once more: *Zun-Haal-Viik!* This time I didn't stagger, but the force of the shout knocked the bow from my grasp, numbing my hand. I watched in horror as my best weapon fell into the stream and was quickly washed down into the hole through which the torrent left the chamber. Then the draugr was nearly upon me, and I leapt from a standstill across the stream. As I jumped, my arm flung backwards and the draugr's sword caught it a glancing blow. Pain shot up my arm, but worse, cold spread through my body. By the time I landed on the other side, I was so frozen I could barely move.

I cast a healing spell on myself. It relieved the pain somewhat, but I remained stiff and slow. I
knew there was no way I could jump back to the other bank. The draugr had crossed the bridge once more and was advancing along the stream toward me. If I could get up onto the dais, I might have a chance of escaping it. There were no stairs here, and my stiff limbs wouldn't let me climb the smooth rocks.

In desperation, I conjured my flame atronach. It seemed silly now to have imagined I could fight this battle without her aid. With the fire demon occupying the draugr, I cast an oak flesh spell – I didn't want to take another chance with its sword. Then I pulled a flask of frost resistance from my robes and drank it off. The numbness in my limbs eased somewhat and I was able to climb up the rocks onto the dais.

I felt better now that I had a bit more room to move around, but I still lacked a weapon. My magicka was nearly spent. The draugr was shouting once more. This time, its "Ro-Dah" was directed at the atronach, which disappeared in a shower of sparks. It would be at least a minute before my magicka was replenished enough to conjure it again. I needed a weapon before the draugr could climb the stairs to the dais.

Then I remembered the staff of Jyrik Gauldurson. I ran to the edge of the dais and looked down to where the draugr was just beginning to climb the stairs. He paused to brandish his sword at me. He must be feeling pretty confident, I thought.

I blasted him with the staff. A bolt of lightning arced from the staff to the draugr, but had little effect. A second blast produced an equally poor result. Still, the draugr was advancing more slowly up the stairs, more from the damage my atronach had dealt than anything I had done. Its leather armor was blackened and what remained of its skin was scorched in places.

I retreated across the dais and went to the chest. The axe was much too heavy for me to wield, but I picked it up anyway. It was my last resort.

I turned to see the draugr arrive at the top of the stairs. It shouted once more and the battle axe was knocked from my hands, falling on the other side of the chest. What could I do against one so powerful, who could use his voice to disarm me?

And then a thought struck me, a thought so mad I had not let myself think it in the three years since I had knocked Osmer into that tree. It wasn't really a thought, more like a swirl of images and sounds running through my head in an instant – Osmer flying through the air; Mirabelle looking at me strangely as I told her how the power had come through my voice; the dragon at Helgen shouting Yol-Toor-Shul! as it breathed fire; General Tullius accusing Ulfric of using a shout to murder Torygg; the dragon's questioning look as it stared at me through the hole in the tower at Helgen; the way its fire breath struck me but didn't burn me; the feeling of flying on the dragon's back, but already knowing how it felt to fly; the chanting voices growing louder as I approached the rune wall, "Fus!" echoing through my mind; the carven face of the dragon staring down at me from the wall even now…

Of course I knew the meaning of the Thu'um – the Power of the Voice – every Nord did. Someone like Ulfric could study that power and develop it, slowly, over years. Only one person in history – as far as I knew – had been born with the Thu'um as an innate talent. And he was … the hero exalted above all others in Skyrim and beyond, the one we could no longer worship as a god. How dare I even think that I was born with the same gift? This was the thought I dared not admit, even to myself. But now it seemed my only hope.

"Fus!" I yelled, from the pit of my stomach to the top of my lungs. Yet it was only my voice, and the draugr just stood there. Then he laughed, a hoarse, barking chortle, and shook his sword at me. Could a draugr shed a tear, he would have cried for merriment then. I had been right to keep that
thought buried where it could not make me the laughing stock of my enemies. Now it looked as if my hubris would be my undoing. The draugr advanced on me, raising his sword for a death blow.

My mind might have been stunned by its grandiose imaginings and sudden disappointment, but my body was still interested in survival. I tumbled to my right, and the draugr's sword smashed into the banded wood of the chest behind me. As I came up in a crouch, I realized my magicka reserves had restored themselves somewhat. I conjured my atronach once more and let her do her work.

I ran around behind the chest where the battle axe had fallen. It really was much too heavy for me, but I hefted it to my shoulder. Distracted by the atronach, the draugr hardly noticed as I approached it from the side. I could not raise the axe over my head. Instead, I turned my back on my foe, then began swinging the axe sideways in a wide arc. The blade struck none too hard, but the draugr instantly caught fire. The battle axe was enchanted with a fire spell! The draugr had already taken several fire bolts from my atronach and now went to one knee. I dropped the axe and drew my dagger. The draugr wasn't laughing as I plunged my blade deep into its gleaming blue eye.

I dropped to the floor of the dais with my back resting against the chest. My atronach disappeared with a sizzling pop. Once more I was alone in the sanctum, but I needed a moment to collect myself. How many hours had I been in here? The light coming through the holes in the ceiling already seemed less bright. The dragon face above the rune wall grinned down at me as if it knew a secret.
The Western Watchtower

Chapter Summary

-- Farengar's mysterious visitor -- no time for a reward -- a dragon at the watchtower
-- Deirdre ministers to the dying -- the dragon returns -- Deirdre's rage -- a grim epiphany --

"The Dragonstone!" Farengar exclaimed. He and a woman in a hooded cloak had been poring over a tome together when I entered his chambers. "Where did you find it? Oh, and I'm glad you made it back in one piece, of course," he added.

"On a powerful draugr in the deepest chamber of Bleak Falls Barrow," I replied.

The woman hadn't looked up from her work when I entered, but she did so now, careful to keep her face shadowed by her hood. "You went into Bleak Falls Barrow alone? And you survived? Impressive."

Then I told Farengar of my adventure. I finished with the battle, leaving out the part where I tried to shout at my foe. I omitted the rune wall as well. I had taken the draugr's sword, thinking a blade of frost would be more useful than my simple Imperial sword, and then found the Dragonstone hidden on his body. It was a pentagonal tablet, engraved with a fearsome dragon head, and crude etchings that appeared to be a map of Skyrim. But instead of Skyrim's familiar cities and towns, star-shaped symbols were scattered across the landscape. Judging by the numerous cracks and chipped places along its edges, the tablet was ancient.

I emerged from the barrow's exit door high above Lake Ilinalta in the evening twilight. I scrambled down the cliffs by starlight and then the moons came out to illuminate my walk along the shores of the lake and the banks of the White River. There was a frosty nip in the air, so I was glad to see the smoke from Gerdur's house. When she opened the door, I saw she had been crying.

"Oh, Deirdre, we thought we'd lost you!" she cried, gathering me in her arms.

Even the taciturn Hod was moved. "Glad to have you back safe and sound, lass," he said, patting me on the back.

That night I actually slept well at Gerdur's – not even her hard mattress and close air could keep me from my rest.

Lucan was glad to see me with the claw the next morning. I traded some of the items I had found in the barrow for gold and a stout but supple bow to replace the one I had lost. The shopkeeper gave me a good discount in exchange for the claw, but he didn't have enough gold to meet what I thought the battle axe was worth. I strapped it to my horse along with the knapsack and other possessions, and said my farewell to Gerdur. I went straight to Farengar as soon as I arrived in Whiterun at mid-day.

"Ah, then it must have been a draugr wight lord," Farengar said when he heard about the guardian of the Dragonstone. "He must have been very powerful in life to be set to guard such a valuable object. Not as powerful as a death lord, or so I've heard, but he still must have had a strong shout."
Yet it didn't knock you over, blast you against a wall, anything of that nature? What words of power did it use?"

"I thought I heard it say "Ro Dah" when it tried to stagger me," I said.

"Ro Dah! That sounds like two of the words in the shout Ulfric used to kill High King Torygg! Shattered the poor boy, so they say. Now how did it go? What was the other word?"

The woman looked at him. "I believe you'll find the word is Fus, Farengar. Fus – Force; Ro – Balance; Dah – Push. Fus-Ro-Dah."

There it was. The word I had learned at the rune wall was a part of a shout. Perhaps this was nothing special. Maybe the word would have been revealed to any who happened by that wall. Still, I decided it was best to keep my mouth shut.

"That's right!" said Farengar. "I'm surprised you dare speak the complete shout aloud."

"Don't be silly, Farengar. Anyone can learn the words of a shout, but it takes years of study and mental training to channel one's whole being into a Thu'um. Unless of course … but that's so rare, we hardly need speak of it, do we?"

Farengar didn't want to leave the shout alone, however. "Two parts of the shout that killed our king, yet here you stand. How did you survive it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm small but sturdy, I suppose."

"Yes, well," said Farengar uncertainly, giving me an odd look. I could feel his guest's eyes on me too. "Let's have a look at the Dragonstone then. I'm sure D… my colleague here will have much to say about it."

I made to hand him the Dragonstone but then drew it back. "Wait. Don't I deserve some sort of reward?"

"Well, Balgruuf probably has a reward for you, but you have outdone yourself, I suppose. Why don't you take a tome of your choice from that chest over there?"

As Farengar and his mysterious guest bent over the Dragonstone, I began searching the chest. It contained only spell tomes, some for incantations I already knew such as the flame spell, and others I didn't – turn undead, raise zombie, stoneflesh, frenzy, lightning bolt, and more. I chose the ice spike tome, and set to learning it immediately. The battle with the draugr wight lord had finally convinced me that I needed another offensive spell. And if I was to battle a fire-breathing dragon any time soon, a spell of ice would come in handy, especially one I could use at a distance.

I had nearly mastered the spell when Irileth rushed into the room.

"The dragon has attacked!" she said breathlessly. "At the Western Watchtower! Balgruuf wants everyone in his war-room immediately." Then she noticed me. "Ah, Deirdre, it's well that you're back. The jarl will want to see you too."

We all rushed up the stairs to Balgruuf's war-room – all but Farengar's mysterious visitor. At the center of the room stood a table covered with a large map of Skyrim, dotted here and there with red and blue flags denoting Imperial and Stormcloak strongholds. The map and the war were forgotten for now. A soldier had just arrived and was reporting on the attack.

"My captain sent me to raise the alarm the minute we spotted the dragon," he said. "As I looked
back I saw the beast swooping and diving on the tower, and breathing fire. I don't know how the rest of my war-band could have survived such an attack."

"You've done all you could, soldier," said the jarl. "Now go get some food and rest – you've earned it, and we may call on you again before this is over. Irileth, take a war-band of your best fighters and go to the watchtower. Make sure they have those new shields and arrows, but don't meet the dragon in battle unless it forces you. I would confront the beast myself, for it is my duty to my people and my retainers. Find out what the dragon is doing, then report back here." If the jarl wanted the glory for himself, I wondered why he didn't march out with his hirth-men right away. Maybe years of sitting on the throne had tempered his lust for glory.

"Yes, my jarl," said Irileth, turning to leave.

"Jarl Balgruuf, I would like to go too!" Farengar said. "The chance to see a dragon up close…"

"You're staying here, Farengar. You're a scholar, not a fighter. Besides, I want to meet the dragon on my own terms, surprise it in its lair, if we can just learn where that is. Do you have that Dragonstone yet?"

"Deirdre just brought it to me, my jarl," Farengar said.

"Good! So the goose chase wasn't so wild after all. And is it everything you hoped it would be?"

"It is indeed a map of Skyrim, Jarl Balgruuf, and we are just beginning to interpret its symbols. I hope it will provide useful information."

"Excellent! Make haste in your study while we find out more about the dragon."

Farengar left and the jarl turned to me. "Ah, lass, it's good to see you've returned unscathed. You have done a great service for the people of Whiterun, and you will not go unrewarded. First, let me say that you can keep the horse you rode here from Winterhold, and that is only the beginning. But now I must ask for your assistance once again. Go with Irileth and her war-band. Aid them in any way you can. You're still the only one with first-hand experience of the dragon, and you've proven your skill as a fighter."

"You needn't have asked, Jarl Balgruuf," I said. "Nothing can keep me from that dragon. But mine is not a scouting mission. I mean to slay it, though it mean my own death as well."

Balgruuf looked surprised. "And your death it will be, if rash actions follow rash words. No, you will give Irileth what advice you can, and follow her commands. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Jarl Balgruuf," I said, though I doubted my powers of restraint when it came to it.

I found Irileth and her dozen warriors outside the gates of Whiterun. She had chosen the best of the jarl's hirth-men, plus several of the Whiterun guards, but no women. Though I recognized a few faces, I knew none by name. All were outfitted with the new bows and arrows and banded iron shields Warmaiden's had made for them.

"The jarl asked me to accompany you and give aid where I can," I told Irileth.

"Of course," she replied. "Your knowledge of the dragon will be useful, and you surely know how to fight if you survived both Saarthal and Bleak Falls Barrow."

"This seems a small war-band to take on a dragon hunt," I said as we mounted our horses.
"Yes, well, these were all of the new armaments Adrianne could manage on such few days' notice. And we are on a scouting mission, remember." She looked me up and down then. "And what about you? Those robes would seem to provide little protection. You have no shield, and that bow looks none too stout."

"Don't worry about me," I told her.

"Well, if it comes to it, I hope you can match those brave words with brave actions. But do nothing without my command. Now, do you have any last advice for us?"

I looked at her and her men. They looked strong and battle-hardened, but so had the Imperial soldiers I had seen flying through the air like child's toys at Helgen. "Just remember to spread out and fire from cover. No matter how frightened you become, keep in mind that you cannot outrun a dragon over open ground. And put those shields to good use if the dragon breathes in your direction." It was little, but maybe it would do some good.

As we rode, we spotted smoke on the horizon. In due time we came within sight of the tower, dismounting and taking shelter behind an outcrop of rock. The tower still stood, but its battlements were shattered in places, with great chunks of stonework lying about it. The smoke came from what little wood had been used in the tower's construction – the great front door that had been ripped from its hinges and a flagpole – along with some fencing and a wooden cart. The place seemed deserted, and there was no sign of the dragon.

"Not a pretty sight, is it, men?" said Irileth. "Such wanton destruction!" She sighed. "Ah well, our quarry seems to have eluded us once more. Spread out and search the wreckage and the tower. See if there are any survivors."

We did as she bade us. I came across the first body not far from the tower, just off the road. It was burned beyond recognition, but I went to check on it anyway. Every soldier carried a sturdy leather tag with their name inscribed on it. Surely this warrior's family would want to know where and how he, or she, had fallen.

Then I heard a burbling sound and I saw the man's chest – for now I thought it was a man, though it was hard to tell – rising and falling in gasping breaths. I cast a healing spell on him, bringing my hand near to his body.

"No," he gasped. "No good." He reached for my hand with his burnt one. The smell of charred flesh was strong. I concentrated on his eyes, the only human thing left about him, and covered his hand in both of my own.

"Are you a priest," he asked, "or an angel?"

"Just an apprentice mage," I said.

"Glad … glad you're here … with me. Not long now." Blood sputtered from his lips as he tried to breathe. I offered him some water from my flask, but he refused it. "I'm Olaf … Olaf Brittle-Spear. My wife, my babes, you'll…"

"I will," I assured him, struggling not to cry, but to soothe his last moments.

His last words were to call to the gods. "Mara … Arkay … Kynareth … Akatosh…" Then he looked at me with a question in his eyes, and I knew what he would ask.

"Pray as you will, my friend. Your family is safe with me. The Thalmor will never hear of it."
He closed his eyes, but squeezed my hand as best he could. "Ysmir … I am coming…” His next breath was his last, and then he lay quiet.

"Safe travel to Sovngarde, my friend," I said, and I folded his hands across his chest. I found his name tag still intact, and tucked it into my satchel. Then I stood up and surveyed the tower. How many more broken, burnt bodies lay around it, and within?

Then my rage was upon me. Fie on this cautious skulking! The dragon could not go on wreaking wanton destruction, nor could we go on trusting to chance to put the dragon in our path. I stood out on a little hillock of grass and shouted to the skies.

"Dragon! Vile serpent! By Akatosh, Master of Time, I call you here to meet your fate!"

Two or three soldiers a short distance off looked toward me in surprise, but I cared not. No more would the dragon cut down men in their prime, make widows of their wives and orphans of their children. No more would it force me to witness its depredations in my dreams. I would have vengeance for all. I would slay the dragon, and so slay that part of me that saw through its eyes.

I had not summoned the dragon to Helgen. But I believe that on this day, I did summon the dragon to the Western Watchtower.

I drew my bow and approached the tower. The soldiers were scattered around it, investigating blast marks and checking on fallen comrades. I ascended what was left of the ramp leading up to the great doorway, which gaped like an open mouth. As I neared the entrance a soldier appeared. He wore the uniform of a Whiterun guard. "Thank Talos you're here! But we've got to hide! The dragon could be back at any minute! We didn't stand a chance!" With that, he ran down the ramp and hid under the overhang of a great block of stone.

All was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if my plea to Akatosh would have any effect. Then a great shadow swept across the land and I heard the first shout from the other side of the tower. "The dragon! The dragon is come!"

Still I could not see it with the tower blocking my view. I backed down the ramp away from the tower. Then I saw it.

Great were the wings that spread across the sky, and terrible were the talons that gripped the parapet. Merciless were the eyes that looked down upon us from the tower's peak, and grim was the maw that opened to speak.

"Zu'u Mirmulnir," it spoke. "Wo draal zu daal?"

I did not speak the dragon tongue, but I guessed it had spoken its name: Mirmulnir. It wasn't hard to suppose what question the dragon had asked next.

I stood out on the ramp where the beast could see me. "Deirdre Morningsong is my name, foul wyrm," I called up to it, brandishing my bow. "Today, you die!" I notched an arrow and let fly, glad to see it pierce the dragon's dark scales, though the beast didn't so much as flinch. I had five more of the special arrows Adrianne had made, tipped with the Orcish metal, orichalcum. I doubted whether my remaining steel ones would do much good.

"Hio kos kril, balaan hokoron," it replied. "Hin viik drun zint!"

"Deirdre, get down from there!" called Irileth. "Everyone, take cover! Fire only when you see its scales!"
The beast took no notice of her, but opened its gaping maw in my direction. It sent a blast of fire down at me, and I leapt from the ramp just in time. As I tumbled, I thought I heard speech in the dragon's breath, "toor" and "shul." I came to rest near the block of stone where the guardsman from the tower was hiding.

"I told you it would be back," he said. "Now we're all going to die!"

The dragon took to the air and sailed out of sight. I could hear shouts from the other side of the tower.

"You shouldn't have insulted it," the guardsman complained. "Where did you learn that?"

"From the tales the bards tell of dragons," I said. "The bards also say that a warrior will sooner die than live a life of shame. What kind of Nord are you?"

"One who never should have left that tower," he said, cowering deeper beneath the overhang. He seemed a hale fighter, but the battle with the dragon had unnerved him.

"Here, this should help," I said. "Your comrades need you." He flinched as I raised my hands. "It won't hurt," I told him, then cast a spell of courage on him.

"What was I thinking?" he said as he scrambled out of his hiding place. "We have to fight that dragon!"

"Yes, let's go," I said. I knew the spell would only last for a minute, but maybe by then he would rediscover his own bravery.

"What's your name, guardsman?" I asked as we made our way up a ramp where we could see what was happening.

"Gunnar, ma'am."

"I'm Deirdre."

"I know, I heard," he said.

"Oh, right," I said, feeling a bit embarrassed now.

The ramp ended abruptly fifteen feet off the ground – the dragon must have smashed the rest of it to bits. Still, it was out away from the tower and high enough that we could get a good view of the battle. The dragon had landed on the ground out of our bow-shot, cornering two soldiers against a low tor. The fighters did as they had been trained and crouched behind their shields, which seemed to protect them from the dragon's fire blasts. Two other warriors were off to the sides, launching arrows from their stout bows. From this distance, we couldn't see whether the arrows pierced the dragon's hide. Then I saw Irileth. She was nearer to us, casting spears of ice. They made white, frozen splotches on the dragon's dark scales.

"Come on," I was saying to Gunnar, thinking to get closer to the fight, when the dragon took wing once more. It circled around the tower, and came toward us. I foolishly took a shot as it flew past, wasting one of the Orcish arrows. It circled back at us and I got in a hit to its pale belly as it hovered in front of us, its vast wings beating the air. Gunnar was firing arrows too, but his were the common steel-tipped issue. They bounced harmlessly away.

"Get down, Gunnar!" I yelled as the dragon drew its breath. "Take cover!" Was it my spell or his natural foolhardiness that made him stand with me, firing more pointless arrows? Yet who was the
bigger fool? I stayed there with him. I would not desert him after putting him up to this fight. Then the dragon breathed its fire upon us.

In Helgen, I had taken only a part of the dragon's fire breath. But I took this blast full force. It was a breath of both fire and speech, and now I heard the words: "Yol-Toor-Shul!" How could mere words harm me? And they didn't, or not much. Mirmulnir's fire breath was like a hot wind on the brightest day of Sun's Height. It was like the handle of a kettle set too long over the fire. It scorched but it did not set me alight. I couldn't stand many of those blasts, but this one alone would not kill me.

It was a far different thing for Gunnar. He had dropped his bow and put up his shield as the dragon drew breath. But it was a simple shield of banded wood and not nearly large enough. Crouch though he might behind it, parts of his body were open to the flame, and then the shield itself caught fire. He began screaming and threw the shield away, pawing at the flames licking his body.

I kicked his legs out from under him, as I used to do with my playmates when we wrestled. That sent him rolling down the ramp. I hadn't time to see if the rolling extinguished the fire, but at least now the dragon's breath could not get at him. I turned back to Mirmulnir as the dragon's breath subsided. I could see the shock in its eyes as it realized I still lived – shock and fear. Arrows flew at the beast from both sides, many of them piercing its hide.

I had dropped my bow during the blast of fire, so now I switched to spell casting. I got in one ice spike before it flew away, and saw the icy splotch it made on the dragon's scales. I screamed at the dragon in my rage, "This is the last day you terrorize Skyrim, wicked orphan-maker!"

My taunt must have caused him to redouble his efforts. Flying off for another turn around the tower, he landed with an earth-shaking crash near Irileth, facing the archers who had been tormenting him. Instead of attacking them, he took a great swipe with his tail that caught Irileth in the chest and sent her hurtling into the tower wall. She slumped there, dazed or dead, I could not tell. Then the dragon reached down with his mighty jaws and clamped his fangs into one of the archers. The soldier had crouched behind his iron shield, but that puny defense was cast aside. The dragon shook him back and forth in a display of fury and mayhem I could not bear to watch a second time.

Still, the remaining archers launched arrows from the sides, and now I remembered to cast my ice spikes. They were not as powerful as Irileth's icy spears, but they had their effect.

Dropping the soldier's lifeless body, Mirmulnir took to the skies once more. He looked to take another circuit around the tower but came shuddering to the ground near another group of fighters. Too weak for flight he might be, but he was still deadly. He breathed fire on two soldiers. At first, their shields held, but then one began to glow red and the man dropped it like a hot coal. He ran screaming from the dragon as his clothing and hair caught fire, then dropped in a smoldering heap.

The dragon's breath abated, and it turned to snapping and biting at the remaining fighter in front of it. The fellow was quick, however, and avoided the dragon for the moment.

"Now for him!" I called to the remaining men. I had noticed that the dragon had to wait a moment between fire blasts, and that last one seemed weaker than the others. Now was the time to finish him. We converged on the dragon from different directions, the Nords screaming their war cries. "You never should have come here, dragon!" I heard one call.

Three of us approached from one side. I cast ice spikes as I went, but my magicka was running low. At the same time, I saw that the soldier facing the brunt of the dragon's attacks was tiring. I doubted he would dodge another snap of the dragon's jaws.
I drew my sword of frost and called to the dragon. "Mirmulnir! Now face your death!"

The soldiers with me crouched behind their shields as the dragon turned on us, but I stood out a few paces in front of them. A kind of madness seized me as I brandished my sword in the beast’s eye. We were just feet apart now, and I could see the fiery blood streaming down the dragon’s sides.

"Go on, rank sky-plague, do your worst!” I challenged. Mirmulnir almost smiled as he reared his head back and bared his fangs. I saw them plunging at me, then ducked and rolled forward, the dragon's snout striking the ground just behind and to the side of me. As I came up I reached out with my left hand and grasped the beast's horn. I swung myself up onto its neck, directly behind its massive head.

Mirmulnir reared back, trying to throw me as he howled in rage. His shouts were spent and all that remained was his own impotent voice. Wildly he flung his head to and fro, but he could not shake me. My heels found purchase on the bony points around his neck, and my hand gripped the horn fast. My right hand, holding the sword, flailed about, lashing the beast's sides in its thrashing.

Finally, he was spent. I stood up, balancing, with one foot just behind the horns. I raised my sword with both hands. "Dovahkiin, niid!” I thought I heard him say, just before I plunged the sword deep into his brain. Hot blood met icy steel, sending a jet of steam into the sky. The beast slumped to the ground, dead.

All around me the men cheered. I saw Irileth getting up from where she had fallen and coming toward us. I raised my sword and gave a whoop of joy. I had vanquished my foe. I had avenged Huldi and Harry's parents, and it seemed as if I had somehow avenged my own. No more would the dragon haunt my dreams, and neither would it terrorize Skyrim.

It was only as I swung down to the ground that I noticed the horn I gripped in my hand. It was long, but not as long as that of the dragon that attacked Helgen. It made a single curve, where the Helgen dragon had double-curved horns. And this beast had a more protruding snout, I was sure. The other had a more ornately scaled hide, I remembered. I didn't remember any lighter patch on its belly, either.

This was not the dragon that attacked Helgen. Nor was it the dragon that attacked the Sheep-Shearer farm. There could be only one, awful conclusion: more than one dragon dwelt in the world, and my task had only just begun.
I stared dejectedly at the dragon as Irileth and the men crowded around, shouting my praises. "All hail, Deirdre Death-Dealer!" shouted one. I could not join in their celebration. I had avenged no one, and put a stop to nothing. The sky-marauder, the terror of my dreams, still lived.

I had not long to ponder my disappointment, however, because at that moment an even stranger thing happened. The dragon's flesh caught fire, swirling flame and wind enveloping its great body. Its flesh began to slough off and then turn to whirling smoke. The soldiers jumped back, but somehow I knew to stand there in the whirlwind, breathing it in. I felt no heat, only energy flooding every fiber of my being. Then it was over. All that remained of the dragon was a skeleton and a few trinkets beneath it, while I felt a greater power within me than I had ever felt before.

The soldiers exclaimed in surprise. "I've never seen anything like it!" said one. "You took its very soul!" said another. They shrank back from me while Irileth looked on, appraising the situation. Finally, one stepped forward, an older soldier with a grizzled red and gray beard.

"You ... you're dragonborn, aren't you?"

"What?" I asked. I was too shocked to know what to think.

"Dragonborn ... born with the soul of a dragon, able to kill a dragon and absorb its soul. Such a thing has not happened in ages, not since Talos, maybe."

"I don't know," I said. "How could it be?"

"There's only one way to find out. Dragonborn have an innate ability to focus their vital essence into a Thu'um. Can you? Can you shout?"

"What kind of Nord foolishness is this?" demanded Irileth. "Here's a dead dragon and that's all I need to know. Although how you turned it into a skeleton, I can't imagine."

"Begging your pardon captain, but it's not foolishness. Dragonborn are rare, but as real as you or me. Well, Deirdre? Can you shout? Try it."

My head was spinning. How could it be true? Me, dragonborn? Only yesterday I had dared to think it, and humbled myself before the guardian of the Dragonstone. Yet I could feel a new power within me, and somehow I knew the shout would work this time.

I turned to face what was left of the dragon. Should I just say the word very loudly? Farengar's guest had said that *Fus* meant force. Fine. I would shout with all the force I could muster from the depth of my being.

"Fus!" I shouted. I felt the energy projected through my voice, out into the world. It was just what I
had felt three years before, on that day in the woods with Osmer. The shout shook the dragon's bones, heavy though they were, and a soldier who happened to be standing beyond them staggered. I felt depleted, and knew it would be some time before I could gather my energies to shout again.

"The song is true!" the soldier exulted, coming over to clap me on the back. "You are the Dragonborn, come to rid Skyrim of its foes!"

"What song?" I asked. "You mean 'The Dragonborn Comes'? I thought that was just an old war song."

"No, it's much more than that. It's a promise from Akatosh to send aid to the people of Skyrim in dark times. Many expected a dragonborn to arise during the Great War, and when that didn't happen the song fell out of favor. Then too, no one dared sing it with the Thalmor around. But after the dragon came back the bards are singing it again, especially since the jarl threw the justiciars out. And look, the song must be true because here you are."

"Enough with these Nordic legends," Irileth said. "I don't know about this dragonborn business, but I'm certainly glad you're with us. It's well that we have slain the dragon. Now we have wounded to tend to."

"Gunnar!" I exclaimed. How could I have forgotten him? I went to the last place I had seen him and found him sitting up with his back propped against a piece of rubble. He had several burned places on his body, but he still lived.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep fighting, Deirdre," he said. "I grew so light-headed I fell over every time I tried to stand."

"Not to worry, Gunnar," I said. "You stood with me bravely." I cast a healing spell, and he seemed to revive.

"I heard them calling you Dragonborn, and your shout. So it's true then?"

"It appears that way," I said, offering him some water.

"So that's how you survived the dragon's breath! I couldn't believe you were barely hurt."

"I can hardly believe it either," I said.

"I think I can stand now, thanks," he said, and I helped him to his feet.

Our party reassembled and we began our slower progress back to the city. Irileth sent a rider ahead to bring news to the jarl and left two soldiers to guard the fallen. Wains would be sent out to bear them in honor to the Halls of the Dead.

Though we had lost three of our party to the dragon, the hirth-fellows were in high spirits from the victory. The fallen had earned an honored place in Sovngarde, they said. These Nords and their thirst for glory! And they insisted on heaping glory on me as well. "All hail, Deirdre Thu'um-Wielder!" they cried. It was all I could do to keep them from lifting me to their shoulders and bearing me in celebration up to Dragonsreach.

Finally I had to tell them that this was a second dragon and the first still lived. It wouldn't do to raise false hopes among the people once we returned to Whiterun and the soldiers began boasting of our victory.

"Dark words!" exclaimed Irileth. "Are you sure this was a different dragon?"
I explained the different markings I had seen on the dragon at Helgen.

"Then Farengar had best keep studying that Dragonstone," she said. "How many of the beasts are there?"

"Akatosh only knows," I replied.

"Hmm, I see that being dragonborn doesn't make one all-knowing. Still, if we can kill one serpent, we can kill more."

The soldiers were more subdued as we continued our march, with the wounded riding our horses. Ridding Skyrim of its only dragon had been a joyous occasion, despite our losses. The prospect of having to kill at least one more sobered them.

We were nearly to the city when the ground shook and a crack as of thunder echoed across the sky. With it came a loud, booming voice shouting "Dovahkiin!" The sound faded away and I looked around to discover its source. Many of the soldiers were doing the same.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The Greybeards!" said the old warrior. "Praise Talos that I was here to witness such an event! The Greybeards heard your shout and now they call you to High Hrothgar!" He pointed up to the summit of the Throat of the World, the highest peak in all of Tamriel. It made Dragonsreach look like a child's sculpture. The top was lost in cloud and seemed impossibly far away.

At that moment, it all seemed too much. I was the Dragonborn, and the people of Skyrim expected me to save them from their foes? It couldn't be.

"How am I supposed to get up there?" I said, and my voice suddenly sounded small to my own ears.

"You are the Dovahkiin!" the soldier said. "You will find a way."

"So I missed the great battle!" I was so lost in thought that I nearly ran into Lydia on the steps leading to Dragonsreach before she spoke.

I had left the others as we entered the city so I could fulfill my pledge to Olaf. The guard at the gate was able to direct me to the Brittle-Spear house. I found the family at home, a pretty young woman and two toddlers. She looked at me questioningly as she opened the door. Delivering my news was a far harder thing than killing the dragon. Before I spoke my dreadful words, she had a joyful life ahead of her. I could tell that this was a happy family by the bright looks on the children's faces and the quiet, confident way she treated them. My news would plunge her and her children into grief and tragedy, with no hope of joy to come.

The young woman grew more concerned as I asked that we speak alone, then she calmly sent the children up to their room. She took the news bravely, but the growing acknowledgment of grief in her eyes was almost too much to take. I could do no more than assure her that her husband had died well and that his last thoughts were of his family. "He'll have a hero's funeral, along with the rest of those lost to the dragon," I finished. I hugged her then, and took my leave, knowing that no words could comfort such a loss.
I was so preoccupied after that visit that I barely noticed the many stares and pointing fingers and whispers of people as I passed. No doubt I was a sight, with my singed hair, reddened face, and scorched robes. Or maybe the news had already begun to travel through the city. So when Lydia spoke, it jarred me from my reverie. She must have just reported for her shift, I thought.

"You look sunburnt," she said.

"Yes, a dragon's breath will do that to you," I replied.

"It's true then! I heard you got the chief part of the glory in slaying the beast."

"Many of us took part," I said. "I just dealt the killing blow." Looking back at it, I was awed by the madness that had seized me. It seemed nothing to brag about. "We could have used you there," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Irileth chose not to call on me," she said, and I could see she was disappointed to have missed a chance for glory. Then she brightened. "But I have been chosen for another duty."

"What is it?" I prompted when she didn't go on.

"Best to wait until it's announced," she said. Then her eyes grew wide. "Is it true you can shout, and…"

"Yes, that much is true," I said. "I don't know what to think about the rest of it."

"Who would have guessed?" she said. "You're so…"


"No, but…"

"Or is it that only true Nords can be Dragonborn?"

She had nothing to say to that. I don't know what had come over me. Lydia had only ever treated me with kindness. I turned and continued up the stairs to the doors of the Great Hall.

"Look, Badnir, it's her!" The two guards who had greeted me on my first day in Whiterun were guarding the door now. That day seemed as if it belonged to another age, though it was only two months before.

"We thought you were just a lass," said Badnir. "But you killed the dragon!"

Then they both bowed and opened the great door for me. I doubted I would ever grow used to such treatment. "Don't be too impressed," I said. "I still haven't learned to brew that special potion you call ale." I expected at least a smile from one of them, but they were too over-awed to allow for the easy banter we used to enjoy.

"So it's true?" the jarl exclaimed when he saw me. "The Greybeards have called you to High Hrothgar?"

We had just slain a dragon, and learned that at least one more still lived, yet this was what he wanted to speak of? Irileth and two of the soldiers from our party stood before him, and Hrongar, Avenicci, and Farengar were there as well – all now staring at me. "Well, I heard someone shout, 'Dovahkiin!' " I said. "And the dragon, I think he called me Dovahkiin just before he died."

"He recognized you were dragonborn!" Balgruuf said.
"You see, Deirdre, *Dovahkiin* means Dragonborn in the dragon tongue. And Irileth says you absorbed the dragon's soul and then demonstrated your power with the Voice."

"You see?" said the jarl. "That proves it! You are the Dovahkiin, lass."

"Enough of this Nordic superstition," broke in Avenicci. "If one dragon still lives, we should be hunting it down, not giving way to these fantasies."

"Superstition!" exclaimed Hrongar, the jarl's brother. Where Balgruuf was lean and regal, Hrongar was broad-shouldered and muscular – a true Nord. "These are our sacred traditions that go back to the founding of the First Empire. Tiber Septim was dragonborn and he is our greatest hero. No, the Dragonborn is no superstition."

"Perhaps Avenicci requires proof," said Balgruuf. "And I would be honored to witness the power of your Thu'um, Deirdre. Will you demonstrate it for us?"

"If I must," I said.

"Very well, stand over there, Avenicci, away from everyone else."

"But my jarl!" the steward protested, though he did as Balgruuf asked.

"Now, now, Proventus, there's nothing to be afraid of. Just Nord superstition, correct? All right, Deirdre, not too strong now."

I looked at Avenicci. I didn't want to hurt him, so I stood a good distance back. I remembered that soldier at the watchtower had only staggered when caught in the path of my shout. "*Fus!*" I shouted, hoping for the best. I heard gasps from the hall behind us – the crowd was growing with people coming up from the city. Avenicci stumbled backward and went to one knee, panting as if the breath had been knocked out of him.

"There, you see, Avenicci? All this talk about the Dragonborn and the Greybeards may be to purpose after all. Imagine what Deirdre could do to a dragon once she achieves her full power!"

"But who are the Greybeards?" I asked. "What do they want with me?"

"Ah, the Greybeards," said Balgruuf, and he looked off in the direction of the Throat of the World, though we could not see that mountain from the windowless hall. "I climbed the Seven Thousand Steps once, made an offering to the masters. Everyone should make that pilgrimage. Do you know they spend their entire lives in quiet contemplation? Strange, for men whose main practice is shouting. Such peace! Such wisdom! It's an island of calm in a sea of trouble."

Seeing that I was no more enlightened than before, he continued. "'Greybeards' is just the coarse term we use for them. They are the Masters of the Way of the Voice. Incredibly old, incredibly wise. They dwell at High Hrothgar, near the top of the Throat of the World. They have mastered the art of the Thu'um – how to develop it, but more important, how to control it. When a Dragonborn is revealed, they seek to guide him – or now, her. That's why you have been called."

"What about Ulfric?" I asked. "I heard he can use the Voice too."

"Yes, Ulfric!" The jarl's voice became almost a growl when he said the name. "It's a mystery how he convinced the Greybeards to teach him. But they soon saw their error. You see, any Nord can learn to shout, as Ulfric did, with enough training and years of practice. But only a true dragonborn can learn a shout instantly, as you did."
"Then why must I go to High Hrothgar? We still have another dragon to kill."

"Yes, Irileth told me the dragon that attacked Helgen is still out there somewhere. There could be more than one, for all we know. But even so, a sojourn in High Hrothgar will be time well spent – for you and maybe for us. Even with your innate power, the masters can make your progress faster. More important, they can help you avoid certain – errors – that can come with a power like the Voice. That is what Ulfric was too impatient to learn, or so I've heard. No, there's no refusing the summons of the Greybeards. It's a tremendous honor."

"But what if that first dragon attacks while I'm gone? What if there are more?"

The jarl looked at his housecarl. "What do you think, Irileth?"

"There's no doubt Deirdre aided us in killing the beast. Yet I think we can handle another one on our own now. We will make some modifications to the shields, and Adrianne will produce more of them. And if Deirdre returns to us with even greater power, all the better. We face more dangers than just the dragons, especially now that we've gotten on the wrong side of the Thalmor."

"Leave the Thalmor and the Imperials to me, Irileth. So you see, Deirdre, we can spare you for a time. But I hope you will come back to us when you have learned what the masters have to teach."

"I will try, Jarl Balgruuf," I said. "If that dragon still plagues Whiterun, I will be here."

"And now comes the time for your reward." The jarl stood, and motioned for me to stand beside him. "Deirdre Morningsong, for your invaluable service to our hold and its people, I proclaim you Thane of Whiterun, with all the rights and responsibilities pertaining thereto. These include a license to buy a house in our city, recognition by our guards as a person of importance, and the service of your own housecarl. In return, you will come to the aid of Whiterun when called upon. What say you?"

How could I hesitate to accept such an honor? I didn't pause to consider what this would mean for my reputation in other holds, or with Ralof and the Stormcloaks. In truth, I had almost forgotten about the rebellion, since there had been no news of the Civil War. All anybody knew was that Ulfric had sequestered himself with a few loyal followers in Windhelm.

"I would be most honored to become your thane, Jarl Balgruuf," I said, bowing. "And I will kill that dragon for you, should I have the opportunity."

"Good! And as a further token of our appreciation, I present you with this elven helmet of illusion. You played a part in its acquisition, after all."

"Thank you, my jarl," I said. I took the helmet from him, though I doubted I could ever wear it – I would look too much like a Thalmor justiciar.

"And now, let me introduce your new housecarl. Lydia Ravenwood has agreed to enter your service."

I turned to see Lydia standing at the foot of the dais. "At your service, my thane," she said, a half-smile on her lips. Then she didn't just bow, she knelt, laying her steel broadsword at my feet. "I will protect you with my life," she said. Something about the earnestness of her pledge made the breath catch in my throat. It had been three years since I could call anyone my protector, or even admit to such a need. But the need must have remained, Lydia's vow was so welcome.

"Thank you, my friend," I said, hoping to make up for my harsh words of earlier. "Now rise. There's no need to kneel before me. I'm still just Deirdre."
The jarl stood up. "Lords and ladies, people of Whiterun, I present to you Deirdre Morningsong,
Thane of Whiterun, and hero of the Western Watchtower!"

The people erupted in cheers and applause. The hall had filled with Whiterun's citizens, coming to
hear news of the dragon. "Hail to Deirdre, Deirdre Death-Dealer!" they chanted. "All hail to the
Thu'um-Wielder!" Even Avenicci joined in. I looked at all of them and bowed. Really, I was telling
myself all the while, I'm just Deirdre.

The jarl gave a speech to the people then, telling them the news about the dead dragon, and the
worse news about the one still living. He declared it a day of both joy and sorrow, for though we
had won a great victory, many brave men and women had perished in achieving it. He announced
the time for the great pyre of the heroes the following day and then bade everyone continue
making preparations for the next dragon attack, storing water in every home and the like. Then it
was over and the crowd began to thin, Jarl Balgruuf withdrawing to his war-room with his advisors
to plan the dragon hunt, the servants sweeping the hall and laying out a feast for the soldiers who
had returned from the watchtower.

I was about to join them when Farengar came up.

"Just think," he said, "in the summer you were just a timid lass looking for advice in magic. Now
it's fall and you're a dragon-slayer, a Thane of Whiterun, and the Dragonborn to boot. How the
lowly have risen! It was an honor to assist you in what small ways I could."

"I will always remember your kind help, Farengar," I said.

"Now, there must be more you can tell me about the dragon." Farengar had a long list of questions,
and it was half an hour at the least before he left us to join the jarl's war council. Lydia and I were
left to ourselves – the soldiers had finished their feast and gone off to continue celebrating
elsewhere, and the servants were clearing up the last of the dishes.

"I'm sorry I cut you earlier," I began.

"And I'm sorry if I offended you," she replied. "It's just that you have grown so great yet you seem
so humble. I've never heard of a hero who didn't boast about their prowess."

"I should not have blamed you for your surprise," I said. "No one is more surprised than I at all that
has happened. So all is forgiven, on both sides, I hope."

"It is not every thane who would care so much what their housecarl thinks," she said, pouring us
both a cup of mead from a pitcher on the table.

"Lydia, we were friends before we were thane and housecarl. I hope we can still be friends now."

"I hope so too, my thane," she said.

"I grew up in a village without thanes and retainers. What does a housecarl do?"

"I will aid you in any way I can, carry your burdens, polish your armor – though I see you have
none. Most important, defend you from all dangers."

"Did you mean it? Would you really give your life for mine?"

"It's part of the job. And what kind of shield-maiden would I be if I didn't come to the aid of any
friend? There is no glory without risk."
"As you are my friend," I said, "I will make the same vow – your battles are my battles and I will protect you with my life."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," she said.

"What, am I supposed to stand aside while you gain all the glory? I think not!" Lydia smiled at that. Then she looked around at the emptying hall. The servants had left us some dishes from the feast, but otherwise the long table was deserted.

"It grows quiet in here," she said.

"Let's go down to the Mare," I said. "It should be livelier there."

The place was crowded. Everyone in Whiterun seemed to have converged on the tavern to discuss the day's news. Several of the soldiers were there, reliving the battle, adding the first embellishments that would turn it into a tale of mythic proportions. I had only wanted a mug of mead and a bowl of stew, and maybe to relive a happier, less burdensome time – all of two months previous – but my pleasures would not come so simply, not on this night.

The crowd hushed as we entered. Somewhere in the looming silence, a mug shattered. I was just thinking the Drunken Huntsman would have been a better choice, but it was too late. It would be rude to turn around now. Then a great cheer rose up. "Deirdre Death-Dealer!" they chanted. "Deirdre the Dovahkiin!"

I stood there, not knowing how to receive their praise. If this is what glory entailed, I wasn't sure I would ever grow used to it. Finally, I bent my head in a bow of acknowledgment. "Thank you, my friends!" I called. "Now dragon-slaying has given me a hunger and a thirst!" I hoped that sounded sufficiently Nordic and boastful.

"Whatever you wish, Deirdre, it's on the house," said Hulda, the tavern keeper.

A group at a table in the center of the room made way for us, yet we could hardly enjoy our food and drink as one after another of the patrons came up to me with questions and compliments. Finally, the tavern singer broke into "The Dragonborn Comes," and soon the whole tavern was singing along.

"Our hero, our hero claims a warrior's heart," it went.

What I had told the older soldier was true. I had always thought the song spoke of the virtues of any Nord hero. My father had told me that bards sang it to rally Nord troops in battle. But now people seemed to think the song was about me. How could I claim a warrior's heart when I had vowed to stop killing both man and mer?

They came to the line, "It's an end to the evil of all Skyrim's foes," and now I saw that the tavern's patrons had divided themselves into Battle-Born and Gray-Mane factions, Imperial and Stormcloak. They glared at each other, slamming their mugs against the tables to emphasize the word "all."

Suddenly my burden seemed not only heavy, but confounding. Who were Skyrim's foes? The Stormcloaks? The Imperials? The Altmer? Anyone who wasn't a Nord? At one time, I might have been one of those foes, and might be again if I came across the people who killed my parents. I looked at the shining, expectant faces, all of them looking to me as their own particular hero. How could I satisfy them all?

And all I had wanted was to kill a dragon.
We spent the next two days preparing for our journey to High Hrothgar. Though the Throat of the World loomed above the Plains of Whiterun, there was no path up this side of the mountain. We would follow the course of the White River for a day, then turn south, travelling halfway to Riften before climbing back into the heights to Ivarstead. The road was perilous and wild, and no drayman could carry us to that village. There were no inns along the way, so we would sleep rough for at least one night. Beyond the village came the Seven Thousand Steps up the ice-clad flanks of the mountain to High Hrothgar. No horse could go there, and it took a hale walker all of a day to make the ascent.

Ivarstead was in Stormcloak territory, so we would need to travel as unremarkable pilgrims. Lydia discarded the uniform that marked her as one of Balgruuf's hirthlings and wore in its place a set of plain armor of leather and steel, with a hooded cloak over that. My apprentice robes and hood were plain enough, and fit for a pilgrimage to the masters. I stowed a woolen cloak in my pack for the ascent of the snowy mountain. As for weaponry, Lydia bore a stout bow, but she had only her steel broadsword for close fighting. I gave her the enchanted axe of embers I had found in Bleak Falls Barrow. She hefted it easily and took a few practice swings. "Nice balance," she said. "Thank you, my thane."

Lydia proved an expert at the details of our trip. She took her role as my housecarl seriously, insisting on making all the preparations herself. Where I would have considered a wedge of cheese and a few apples sufficient provision for a two-day journey through wilderness, and a thin blanket sufficient sleeping gear, Lydia had a soldier's idea of how to proceed. We would have tarps to rig for shelter in case of rain, stores of food and gear with which to cook it, and even soft bed rolls. Fortunately, the jarl had granted Lydia the use of her horse from the Whiterun guard stables while she was in my service, so we would have means to carry the baggage between the two of us.

We paused in the midst of our preparations to attend the funeral pyre for the fallen heroes of the Western Watchtower. It was a strange affair. The surviving soldiers seemed almost elated, and almost jealous of their departed comrades, so heroic had been the manner of their deaths. Yet for the wives, husbands, and sweethearts of the fallen hirth-fellows and guards it was far different. Some stood solemnly, trying to put on brave faces, while others wept openly. The wife of one soldier stood out and sang an ancient interment song in Old Nordic. Few of us could understand the words, but we knew it spoke of the sacrifices men must make for their families and their lords and of the treasures they would take with them on their journey to Sovngarde.

Yet who could know just what happened after death, since none had travelled those death-roads and returned to tell the tale? Perhaps one's soul just merged back into the energy of the all-soul that was Aetherius. Or perhaps there was merely nothing, just a blankness where before there had been life. I knew one thing for certain: Olaf's wife and children would rather he'd remained by their side, heroic death or no. Already the young wife looked thinner, her face drawn, lines of care etching her brow.

I spent the remaining time before our departure resting from my two days of trials. The day spent delving into Bleak Falls Barrow and fighting the draugr wight lord, followed by the dragon battle the next day, and everything that followed from that – it had all left me drained. When not resting in my cell in Dragonsreach or repairing the many singed spots on my robes, I went down to Arcadia's to refill my potion stocks. She gave me a salve which helped my burnt skin immensely.

I slowly grew accustomed to the many looks and greetings I received when out on the street, and
the people grew used to having me among them. At first I could not go anywhere without people stopping to thank me for saving them from the dragon, or to plead with me to save them from the one still on the loose. The Battle-Borns would waylay me to encourage me to go to Solitude and join the Imperials, while the Gray-Manes would accost me with pleas to join the Stormcloaks in Windhelm. I learned to accept the praise with good grace and to put off the pleas with vague offerings about the future's uncertainty. By the second day, people had grown more accustomed to having me among them, and would just tip their heads with a "Greetings, Dragonborn," or "Good day to you, Dovahkiin."

I was having more difficulty accepting that I was the Dragonborn. I had finally unlocked the mystery of that day with Osmer. It wasn't Breton magic that had burst out of me, but something far stranger, the power of the Voice. Yet that revelation only revealed a deeper mystery. For no one could tell me truly what it meant to be dragonborn, at least no one here in Whiterun. Mirabelle hadn't been able to explain it either, though I saw now that she must have had her suspicions. Legend had it that the Dovahkiin was born with the soul of a dragon. But how could that be me? True, I had always been a misfit in Dragon Bridge, a girl more comfortable with her own company in the woods, and more willful than most. But surely there were other girls like me in Skyrim, though I had met none in our little village. That couldn't have anything to do with having the soul of a dragon, could it?

But then there was my anger, which had only grown stronger since Helgen. That rage had saved me countless times, yet still I feared it. It was madness that made me challenge Mirmulnir so brazenly. And that dream about the dragon – I had felt only a vicious appetite for destruction. That was not me, I told myself. Yet I had to wonder: I had never been able to put thoughts of revenge against my parents' killers completely from my mind. It was as if something with a thirst for blood and murder lay buried deep within me. If that's what it meant to have a dragon soul, I would kill it, I would cut it out of me as I would the wormy part of an apple. Yet now the Greybeards would nurture that side of me. They must also have a way of taming my dragon soul, I told myself. Either that or I would throw myself into the White River, letting the water carry me and all my burdens out into the Sea of Ghosts.

In such moments I would look up at the Throat of the World, its summit impossibly far away, its monstrous bulk shrouding Whiterun in dusk until late in the morning. Somewhere at the top of that peak was our destination. How was I ever to get all the way up there? My heart misgave me. I felt I was stumbling blindly through deep shadows, with no dawn in sight.

End of Part I
The Road to Ivarstead

Chapter Summary

-- a gloomy start -- a refreshing dip -- an embarrassing encounter -- bandits -- the mages' tale -- campfire talk --

We set out for High Hrothgar on one of those rare Frostfall days when summer returns for a brief spell before the deep plunge into winter. It was a brisk, bright morning, with the Throat of the World's summit outlined against the blue sky and the promise of warmth ahead. Our destination didn't seem so far away after all. Strange, how a little thing like a clear sky could so lighten my mood.

The pleasant weather hadn't had the same effect on Lydia. She was quiet as she secured the last of our baggage onto our horses. A group of our friends had come to see us off – Farengar, Arcadia, Aela and Vilkas, Thorald and Avulstein, Adrianne Avenicci, and several of Lydia's hirth-fellows and city guards. Yet she barely acknowledged them, looking over their heads at the road west of Whiterun, as if expecting someone else. Then we mounted and were away, the shouts of our friends in our ears. We rode in silence for a time, Lydia staring down at the back of her horse's head.

By the time we reached the White River Bridge, I could take the silence no longer. "Lydia, is anything the matter?" I asked.

She looked up, trying to seem brighter, yet her brow was still knitted in a frown. "I shouldn't burden you with my cares, my thane."

"I told you not to call me that. I'm just Deirdre, and I hope I'm your friend. It will be a lonely road if we cannot tell each other our troubles."

She considered that for a moment before speaking. "Oh, it's my family," she said finally, her voice bitter. "There was no time to visit them and say my farewells. Who knows when I'll see them again? I'd hoped they would come to see me off, but they only sent a note."

As she didn't elaborate, I had to ask what message the note contained.

"I'd sooner forget it than repeat its contents. They nearly disowned me. Ever since I returned to Whiterun last year, they've been at me to leave the jarl's service and help them with the farm. Now that I'm your housecarl, they've given up hope, as they should have long ago. My parents are bad enough, but my sister is worse. She resents that I escaped the farm life where she could not. And to think, we used to be the best of playmates when we were small!" She shook her head.

"Yet you still looked for your family before we departed."

"More fool I. I hoped they might have a change of heart and come bid me farewell on our great journey."

"But what of your brothers? Don't your parents expect help from them?"

Lydia snorted with laughter. "They're off in the Imperial City making their fortunes, and that's fine
for them. Rustleif was in line to inherit the farm, but he wanted none of it. They never visit, they never write, nor do my parents expect it."

I didn't know what to say. As much as I missed my parents, I knew that, had they lived, I would have disappointed them in much the same way by now. How would they have treated me if I had left them to run their shop on their own? "Perhaps in time they will come to appreciate the life you have chosen and the honor you have gained," I said finally, though it seemed a faint hope.

She laughed again. "I will grow old before that day arrives. No, I must be content with my own pride in my achievements."

I rode closer to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "You're the only woman to be named to Jarl Balgruuf's hirth. Of course you should be proud, and I am proud for you."

She seemed to brighten, and again we rode in silence, though now it was a comfortable one. In time we moved out of the shadow of the Throat of the World and the warmth of the sun cheered Lydia further. Soon we were riding along, chatting about nothing important, as if neither of us had a care in all of Nirn. Whatever challenges I would face at High Hrothgar, they were three days off. Too, I had roamed so much on my own that I had almost forgotten what it was like to share the sights with a partner. Even with her troubles, Lydia made a better companion than the thieves of Cyrodiil. It took me back to the days of travelling Skyrim with my father.

By mid-day we had reached the White River Gorge, where the much-increased river carved its way in a narrow chasm through lofty peaks. The day had indeed grown warm, and the sun beat down. There was no wind. Few trees grew here, leaving the sunlight to glint off sheer granite cliffs. I was glad of my novice's hood, which shaded my dragon-burnt face without being too hot. Far below us the river sparkled blue and green in pools between white-foaming falls, taunting us with thoughts of cool water.

I looked wistfully down at the stream far below. "It looks inviting, doesn't it?" I said.

"Fancying a swim, my thane?" Lydia asked. I raised my eyebrows at her. "Deirdre, I mean." She looked as if she would enjoy a swim as well. She had shed her cloak and bracers, and undone the top fastenings of her leather armor. "I do wish we could get down there," she said, staring down at the pools.

We continued on the road, descending all the while. In the distance ahead, a pair of tall towers came into view, one on either side of the river, connected by a high footbridge. "That will be Valtheim Towers," Lydia told me. "They sit on the boundary between Whiterun and Eastmarch. I think we've abandoned them since the Civil War broke out."

We continued down the road, descending to a bluff just above the river. Now we had our wish – the bank was steep, but looked passable for our horses.

"Come on!" Lydia called and dug her heels into her horse's flanks. She guided it expertly down the slope to the water's edge, then up the stream a short distance. She stopped and looked back at me. "Come down, it's easy!" she called.

I wasn't the expert horsewoman Lydia was, and it didn't look so easy to me. I dismounted and led my horse by the reins, soon rejoining my housecarl on the bank of the stream.

"The water's too fast here," she said. "Let's find those pools farther up." A quarter-mile back upstream, the river made a bend, creating a sheltered alcove. The towers were lost from sight here and the rocks closed around a pool on this side of the stream. Across the river, an open slope led up
to steep, rocky peaks. We were quite alone – except for the mud crabs.

"Damn these pests," Lydia said as she dismounted. "They won't make good swimming companions." She was right – the smaller ones were merely a nuisance, but the giant mud crabs, about the size of a large dog, were a serious threat.

Lydia was reaching for her axe, but I interrupted her. "Here, it's easier this way," I said, and cast a calming spell at the nearest crab, which was already clacking its claws in our direction.

"As you will, my thane," she replied, a cool edge in her voice. She seemed disappointed to miss a chance at demonstrating her skill with an axe. Then she grinned. "You carry on with your spell-casting and I'll be the first one in the water." She sat on the bank and began unbuckling her boots.

By the time I had finished calming the rest of the smaller mud crabs and striking fear into the hearts of the giant ones, Lydia had stripped down to the light tunic she wore beneath her armor. Then she stripped that off too and stood there clothed only in an amethyst amulet she wore about her neck. Out of her armor, she was lean and well-muscled, with ivory-white skin that seldom saw the sun. Somehow, she managed to look strong yet womanly at the same time.

Suddenly I was embarrassed. I turned back to my horse and pretended to search for something in my baggage. Why should I feel such modesty? When I was small I would strip my clothes as fast as any of the boys for a summertime dip. We would laugh and frolic in the cool water, all in innocence. Then that had all changed, along with everything else when we entered our teens.

Perhaps it had just been so long since I had seen anyone naked that it was a shock.

"Well?" Lydia asked. "Aren't you going to get in?" With that she turned and plunged in, coming up with just her head poking out of the pool while she tressed water. Droplets streamed off her ebony hair, and she exhaled with a great spray of water. "Come on! It's fine!" she called.

I went around to the other side of my horse where I would be less visible and began taking off my boots. My already red cheeks felt even redder. I stripped off my gloves and my deerskin braies, and then pulled my robes over my head. Beneath that I wore a short shift.

I walked down to the pool's edge and waded in until the water came up to my knees. Lydia was swimming back and forth across the pool. I waited until her back was turned, then pulled the shift over my head, threw it onto the bank, and quickly sank into the deeper water.

Lydia turned to look at me quizzically once more. "Why such modesty?" she asked. "We're alone here, and both of us maidens. You looked like you were disrobing in the jarl's great hall."

I shrugged "Too many years living on my own, I suppose."

"You're a strange one, Deirdre Morningsong," she said, and looked at me as if I were a puzzle she was trying to solve.

I splashed her for her impudence.

Soon we were having a water fight, as the boys and I used to, and before long the cares and the burdens of the last weeks seemed to lift. I felt like a girl once again, having an innocent frolic. We splashed each other and dove to the bottom and made a contest of staying under the longest, our white bodies flashing in the clear water, distorted in that way of objects seen through liquid, lit by the bright sun above.

In truth, the water was frigid, it being snowmelt from the peaks of perpetual snow all around. We soon climbed out, shivering, all modesty forgotten, and found spots on the warm rocks on which to
sun ourselves. When we were dry and warm again we lay basking in the luxuriance of the summer-like day.

We must have dozed then, for maybe a quarter hour. I was just stirring, thinking that soon we would both be as red as my dragon-burned face, when I heard a shout from far up on the slope across the river. The voice sounded feminine, but I didn't stop to make sure. Lydia was awake too, and we both scrambled for our clothes. Lydia grabbed her tunic while I went straight for my mage robes, the shift forgotten.

When I was clothed to the point of decency, I turned to see who had called down to us. Three figures were descending the slope. As they drew nearer, I could see that all three wore apprentice robes like my own. Their hoods were thrown back, and I could see that one was a Khajiit, another was a Dunmer, and the last was human, Nord by his reddish-blonde hair. No, it can't be, I told myself.

"Deirdre Morningsong, is that you?" the elf called, and now I recognized her as Brelyna. The other two were Onmund and J'zargo – who else? It had only been a little over a week since we parted, how could I not recognize them?

"What are you three doing here?" I called across to them.

"We're just coming from Fellglow Keep," Onmund shouted, waving back up the slope to the mountain above.

The conversation was difficult with the river between us. "Wait there, we'll come across!" called Brelyna.

We finished dressing while the mages looked for a crossing downstream, disappearing around a corner. It took them some time, and I filled it by telling Lydia about the three.

"Great," she said, "now it's four mages when I was just getting used to the one."

My friends reappeared on our side and approached us. "We thought we had come across two maids of the forest," Onmund said, his eyes glowing. "But to think, it was you!"

Brelyna looked at him severely. "We would have passed you by undisturbed, but this was the only way down to the river. These letches would have snuck up on you quietly if I hadn't shouted." She cuff ed Onmund on the side of the head.

"Hey!" he retorted. "As I said, it's not every day you see two unclothed maidens in the wilderness."

"This one was surprised that such hairless bodies could be so … attractive," said the Khajiit with a purr. "J'zargo just wanted to … investigate further." Brelyna swatted him even harder than she had Onmund.

Then I realized we hadn't greeted each other properly. After hugging the three, I introduced Lydia.

"Your housecarl!" exclaimed Onmund. "Much has happened since you left the college!"

"It has, and I will tell you about it as we walk. I believe we're all headed in the same direction."

I gave them the briefest summary of events as we walked back along the river, Lydia and I leading our horses. I told them about the rune wall in Saarthal I had neglected to mention in the first telling, and about the similar wall in Bleak Falls Barrow. I told of the battle with the dragon, and what had happened after.
"You, the Dragonborn!" Brelyna said. "And you can shout!"

"Yes, I know. You're not the only one who was surprised." I looked at Lydia. "None more than I."

No one knew what to say for a moment.

"So, you were at Fellglow Keep," I said as the Valtheim Towers came into view once again. "I didn't know it was so close."

"Yes, right above us," said Brelyna, "but far up in those mountains. It was this blustering Khajiit who convinced us we could take a shortcut down to the road. He thought it would put us out beyond those towers and the falls, but that was not to be. The descent of those rocks was more perilous than the mages of Fellglow Keep!"

"Pfft," said J'zargo. "It wasn't that bad. We only had to bivouac one night on those ledges."

"You are a bit out of your way, if I'm not mistaken," I said. "Why not take the north road to Winterhold?"

"You are correct," said Brelyna. "We were forced to take the wilderness route to Windhelm because a group of vampires has taken over Fort Kastav. So we avoided the vampires but ran into those thieves."

"Thieves?"

"Bandits have taken over Valtheim Towers," she replied, pointing to the towers ahead.

Lydia spoke up for the first time. "It's these troubled times. The jarls are supposed to keep the roads open and the forts guarded, but with the Civil War and now the dragons, keeping the ways has fallen by the wayside."

"Someone should see to it," said Brelyna. "Another good reason for this bloody war to be over and done with."

"We should see to it now, my thane," said Lydia. "It is our duty as retainers of Whiterun. How many are there?"

"Six or eight, as far as we could tell," said Brelyna.

"And you three mages couldn't handle them?" Lydia asked.

J'zargo spoke up. "J'zargo wanted to fight them, but these two have the bravery of dormice."

"J'zargo the Cocky, we should name you," said Brelyna. "They had mages as well. They charged us two hundred gold for passage."

"Bandits and thieves usually seem tougher than they are," Lydia said. "Once one or two of them feel the bite of my axe, the rest will start running."

I thought about the band of thieves I had travelled with for a time. Did we deserve death? "I hope we can run them off without bloodshed," I said. We had come near the towers now, and we could see archers patrolling the bridge between them.

We left our horses out of bow range and approached the tower that guarded the road. A large fellow in a horned helmet emerged from it, along with three ruffians. Two archers looked over the parapet above.
"Oy! Back for more, I see," said the bandit chief. "And you've brought friends! That'll be three hundred gold. Group discount, we call tha'. Har!"

"We thought the two hundred gold we already paid would cover our return journey," Onmund said.

"Yes," put in J'zargo, "plus those flame scrolls this one gave you."

"Look, it's the same deal coming as going, and be glad we don't do worse."

I stepped forward as Lydia unslung her bow. "You don't seem to realize when you're outmatched," I said.

"Oho! Big words! That big lass has a bow, but what do you got? That dinky sword? Or are you a mage, like these three? You're not the only ones wot knows magic, lassie. Now, why don't you just pay up…"

"Fus!" I shouted before he could finish speaking. He and the bandits around him staggered. In the seconds it took them to recover, I cast my most powerful fear spell on the chief. He turned and ran past his compatriots into the tower, shouting, "No, please, have mercy!"

The other bandits stared in awe. "She shouted!" one said. "How could it be?"

They were already turning to follow their leader as I stepped forward to cast another fear spell on them. Just then an arrow whistled past my head, striking the ground where I had been standing a moment before. I looked up to see an archer aiming another arrow directly at me.

He never got a chance to release it. Lydia's arrow caught him in the chest, and he fell over the parapet to land with a thud at my feet.

"Everyone retreat!" the bandit chief called from within the tower. "We are routed!"

We soon saw the bandits fleeing across the bridge spanning the White River Gorge. I turned to Lydia, flushed with our success. "You see, Lydia, that's how we do it – only one dead, and the problem solved."

"For now," she said. "Until they regroup and begin robbing again. We should pursue them."

"We can only do so much. Our task is to reach High Hrothgar. We'll send a message to Jarl Balgruuf when we reach Ivarstead."

She still didn't seem happy. "You were lucky that first arrow missed you. His second would have done the job if I hadn't gotten him first. It isn't always so easy to avoid killing, my thane."

Putting my jocularity aside, I looked her in the eye. "I know, my friend. I owe you my life and I am thankful."

We held each other's gaze until Onmund broke in. "That's my Deirdre, always the peace-maker. Never wanted to learn any Destruction spells at the college, did you?"

"I've gone some way toward mending that oversight," I said. "Yet I hope to never use it on people, if I can help it." I pretended not to hear when Lydia gave a loud sigh.

After Lydia and I retrieved our horses and my friends retrieved their gold and J'zargo's precious scrolls, we continued our journey. "So," I asked, "what happened in Fellglow Keep?"

Onmund took up the tale. "The mages were no trouble, but their leader – she was a different
"A powerful necromancer known as the Caller," said Brelyna. "We knew that even the three of us could not hope to defeat her, and she had the books in her chambers."

"This one enjoyed the look on Orthorn's face when we traded him for the books," J'zargo said with a satisfied purr.

"Orthorn?"

"The mage who stole the books in the first place," said Onmund. "His offering didn't appease the necromancers and they had him locked in a cell."

"We thought to free him," said Brelyna, "and he did help us get to the Caller's chambers. But when she offered us the deal, the books for the mage, it seemed an obvious choice. He was the one who got us into the predicament, after all."

"Have you had a chance to look at the books?" We had entered a pine forest now, and begun a twisting descent to the foot of the falls beyond the towers.

"Certainly," said Brelyna, glaring at J'zargo, "we had plenty of time, as we were stuck on that ledge all night."

"None of them seemed important except for one, The Night of Tears," said Onmund. "The writer believed that the elves were looking for a powerful object when they sacked Saarthal, and when Ysgramor retook the city he had it sealed deep within."

"The orb!" I said.

"Yes," said Brelyna. "The Eye of Magnus, Savos Aren is calling it now. They believe it connects directly to the power of Aetherius."

"Where is it now?" I asked.

"It took some time, but Savos Aren and the other masters were able to move it to the college. It's in the Hall of the Elements. Why? You look worried."

"Ancano questioned me closely about what we found in Saarthal," I said. "Just think, if the elves attacked the city all those years ago to get the orb, what wouldn't the Thalmor do now to get their hands on it?" I thought of Mirabelle's reservations about bringing the orb out of Saarthal. Why hadn't the arch-mage listened to her?

"It's true, Ancano has been spending a lot of time studying it," Brelyna said. "What would you have us do?"

"I don't think the college is a safe place for the orb as long as Ancano is there. You must get back to the college with all haste and warn Savos Aren. He'll know what to do."

"Why can't you come with us?" Onmund asked. "You're the Dragonborn! Who better to help secure the Eye of Magnus?" He looked back and forth uncertainly between Lydia and me. "Your housecarl can come too, I suppose."

"No," I said firmly. "I must help fight these dragons. They are a bigger threat than any orb. And to do that, I must make this pilgrimage to High Hrothgar. Savos Aren and Tolfdir and Mirabelle will know what to do with the orb, and I think all of you together can handle one Thalmor wizard."
By now we had descended to the foot of the falls. A short distance farther, we came to a meeting of roads where my friends would head north toward Windhelm.

"But this is too short a reunion!" said Onmund.

"I know, it's good to see the three of you too," I said.

J'zargo was eyeing our horses. "J'zargo, is something bothering you?" Lydia asked.

"This one thinks we would make faster time if we had our own horses," he said. "All this walking makes J'zargo's feet tired."

"You might be able to rent some at the Mixwater Mill, just down the road here," said Lydia. "Although I don't know how well they'll take to three mages, and two of them foreigners at that."

"Ah, the people of Skyrim," said Brelyna, "always so welcoming."

I interrupted them before either could say more. "Well, my friends, it has been a happy meeting, though too short."

"When will we see you again?" Onmund asked.

"I will be at High Hrothgar for some days, I imagine, but who knows where my path will lead after that? I've learned not to make predictions in such uncertain times. Probably I'll be wherever there are dragons."

"I never thought I'd wish for a dragon to attack Winterhold, but if that is what it takes..." Onmund said. "Or maybe I could come with you and help fight them."

"No, my friend, you're needed at the college," I said. "Now come, I'm not one for long partings." I hugged each of my friends, and Onmund held me longer than the others. I tried to remember how good it had felt when he hugged and kissed me that night before Saarthal, but I couldn't. Was that just the drink?

We parted, with Onmund turning to look back before a bend in the road took them out of view. Then Lydia and I mounted our horses and made the best of what daylight we had left.

We camped on a bluff just above Fort Amol, finding a spot well screened by trees. The fort had been taken over by rogue mages, and we wanted to stay well out of their view. The deteriorating state of security in Skyrim bothered Lydia, but we were out of Whiterun Hold now, so clearing this fort was not our duty.

When it was time to set up camp, my housecarl refused my offers of help. I sat back and watched with amusement as she went about pitching tarps and rolling out our bedding.

"Really, Lydia, it's a fine night, I don't think we'll need those shelters."

"It's always good to be prepared, my thane," she said.

She gathered wood and went about setting a campfire. "Just let me hit that with a flame spell, will you?"
"I've got this, my thane," she said. She was such an expert with flint and tinder that she had the fire going nearly as fast as I could have.

She cooked us a stew of salted beef, onions and carrots. We washed it down with bottles of mead, and for dessert we shared a tart baked at the Bannered Mare that morning.

"Really, I could help with the washing up," I protested.

"No, my job," she said.

If I had been an old wizard, this is where I would have sat smoking my pipe, blowing smoke rings, and watching the stars. But as I was not, I found an excuse for idle talk.

"What did you think of my college friends?" I asked her.

"Hmm," she said, and I could tell she was searching for something diplomatic. "It seems it's true what they say about the college attracting all types."

"That's true," I said. "You don't think that's a good thing?"

"I don't know. I've been around Nords most of my life. A few Redguards when I was with the Imperial Legion. They were brave, if a little foolhardy in battle. And Cyrodiilians of course, but they're just like citified Nords."

"You were in the Imperial Legion?" I was surprised I hadn't learned that before, though I should have guessed. She seemed to have more experience than serving in the Whiterun guard, or even the jarl's hirth, would provide.

"I joined the guard when I was your age, seventeen," she said. "I served a year, then joined the army in the Imperial City."

"The Imperial City! I always wanted to visit there!"

"It's not Whiterun, let me tell you. That was a place where you would see all sorts, Argonians, Bosmer, Dunmer. But I stayed in the garrison, and in our off hours we Nords would gather in A Taste of Skyrim. That was a tavern for those of us who longed for home. I served a year there, then came back to Whiterun in the spring when Jarl Balgruuf called his hirth. So I've still mostly been around Nords."

"Yet now you take orders from Irileth, a Dark Elf."

"And a braver soldier and more inspiring hirth-marshal you won't find," she said.

"But do you think she's the exception? Brelyna is as true-hearted as any. J'zargo is prideful and covetous, but no more so than your average Nord braggart. And Onmund is a Nord through and through."

"Maybe so," she said, "though he's a little on the small side … and magical." She looked up from her scrubbing and grinned at me. "He seemed to like you. Did you and he … when you were at the college … ?" She left the question hanging, but I knew what she meant.

"He kissed me once. It was nice. I know he likes me, but…"

"Was that all?" she asked.

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "That was right before I left and … I don't know if I wanted anything
more. It all happened so fast, and then we went to Saarthal, and the next morning I was summoned to Whiterun. He really didn't want to see me go, I could tell."

"But there must have been others. You with your blonde hair. Nord lads like that."

I shook my head.

"Oh, I forgot," she said. "I'm sorry. I should have realized you wouldn't have many chances for romance as an orphan."

I had told Lydia and the other soldiers that I was an orphan, and I was glad when they didn't ask for the details. They had many orphans within their ranks, so it was unremarkable.

"Just some nasty thieves," I said, "but I stayed as far away from them as possible."

Now Lydia was finished with her washing. She stoked the fire and came over to sit beside me.

"What about you?" I asked. "Were there any special lads in the army? I imagine with sharing close quarters you had plenty of opportunities to inspect them."

She gave me a playful slap on my shoulder. "It wasn't like that!" she exclaimed. "They were my brothers!" She thought for a moment. "But there was one. His name was Sigurd, and he had long blonde hair. He was taller than me, which is hard to find, and strong. His stomach was as flat as a washboard." She smiled while remembering. "And he wasn't a ruffian like so many of the other soldiers. You might have noticed I'm a hale fighter, so I soon convinced them not to try anything with me."

"But I thought they were your brothers?"

"Well, they were, but you know how men are – or maybe you don't! But Sigurd was sweet."

"And, did you … ?"

"You're a nosy thane, aren't you?" She grinned again. "Let's just say that what I said earlier about being a maiden wasn't strictly true."

I hoped Lydia couldn't see me blushing in the firelight. Of course she had been with a man! She was twenty, a woman grown. I was a woman as well, but in many ways still a child. I knew that many of the girls my age back in Dragon Bridge must be married and have children of their own by now. There was so much I wanted to ask her. I could have told her about Osmer then, but I was feeling bashful again. "So, what happened?"

"Sigurd wanted to marry me, but I couldn't see becoming a housewife." She threw back her head and gave a laugh. "Can you see me, cooped in a house with a couple of bairns, waiting for my brave soldier to come home?"

"No, I can't," I said, thinking how little I would like that life either.

"I liked being a soldier. I hadn't gotten enough of adventure and glory – I still haven't. Most women want to leave their mark in the world through the children they raise. But not me. Give me glory and a song sung about me after I'm gone. Then word came that Balgruuf was calling his hirth, and I knew that's what I wanted to do. Sigurd wanted to stay in the Imperial City."

"Do you miss him?"
"Of course I do! But you know, having a mate is a lot of work, even without the bairns. You have to spend time with them, and you can't always do just what you want. I couldn't joke with the other soldiers the way I used to, Sigurd was so jealous. So I miss him, and I surely miss sharing his bed, but being single is all right too."

"Being single is all I've ever known."

"You've really only had that one kiss?"

I nodded. "You forget, I'm only seventeen."

"That's easy to do, and it's not just you being the Dragonborn. You've always seemed older to me somehow. I remember the way you'd listen so seriously to those stories in Balgruuf's mead-hall. You must have been through much in your life, I can see that in your eyes."

That would have been a good time to tell her about my parents, even about how I had felt about Osmer rubbing against me the way he did. But something held me back. Maybe it was that I didn't know how she would react to my anger against the Nords, which I still found bubbling to the surface whenever I thought of my parents. I just nodded.

Seeing that I wasn't going to elaborate, she went on. "Don't worry, someone will come along to make you happy. Maybe you will have a chance to see Onmund again. Or maybe we'll find a strapping young lad for you in Ivarstead."

Now it was my turn to punch her in the arm. "What kind of lass do you think I am?" I protested. Then I rubbed my hand. Her muscles were nearly as hard as Ralof's.

"Oww!" she whined mockingly.

"Well, there was one other," I said. "Did you ever know Ralof of Riverwood?"

"You mean the Ralof who used to be a guard in Whiterun? I heard about him. He went off to join the Stormcloaks, didn't he?"

"Yes. I never told you or anyone in Whiterun how I really got out of Helgen, but I might as well tell you now." Then I told her the story of how I found myself held captive along with the Stormcloaks and how Ralof and I helped each other escape once the dragon attacked. "After fighting together like that, he really was like a brother to me. Only, the day we parted, I could tell he wanted it to be something more. Men always want something more, don't they?"

"Usually," she said. Then she jumped to her feet and did her best impression of a Nord braggart, hands on her hips and chest out. "We're soldiers, eh, lass? We have to take our pleasure where we can, for tomorrow's sunrise might be our last. Now bring me my ale!"

We both laughed for a moment. "No, he wasn't like that," I said. "More like your Sigurd, really. After what we went through together, how could we not become close?" I paused, thinking back on that terrible day. "That was the first time I killed anyone. When I slit that torturer's throat, I was so overcome with rage, it was like someone else doing it. The others, it was self-defense, the heat of battle, and I didn't have time to think about it. But I felt such remorse after it was over. I'll never forget the look in that Redguard captain's eyes as she realized she was going to die. Even though she nearly had me put to death, I couldn't help wondering if she had a family who would miss her. So you see, that's why I didn't want to kill those bandits back there, if there was any way we could help it. And Ralof seemed to understand."

"That's rare for a hardened soldier," Lydia said. "For most, how you die is more important than
"You must have killed many."

"Only a few, but it's part of the job. Bandits mostly, those holed up out in the countryside where the city guard couldn't get to them. Then there was a Khajiit incursion near Leyawiin when I was with the Imperials. That's why I was a bit short with your friend J'zargo. The last Khajiit I saw, I had to put my axe in his skull. But I know that everyone I killed deserved death."

"But what if Balgruuf enters the Civil War on one side or the other? How would you feel about killing your fellow Nords, soldiers who are just doing their jobs, as you are?"

She looked at the fire for a moment. "That would be harder. But my allegiance is to my jarl. If he decides we must enter the war, then I will follow his command – as should you."

I pondered that for a moment. To whom did Lydia owe her ultimate loyalty, I wondered – me or her jarl? "I am glad Jarl Balgruuf has remained neutral then," I said. "You should know that I can't follow him if he joins with the Imperials – not after what I saw in Helgen. And I have my doubts about the Stormcloaks too, and their intentions for … people like me."

"Let's hope we never have to make that choice, then," Lydia said.

With that, we went to our beds. Lydia had placed our bedrolls near each other under the tarps, but I pulled mine out so I could see the stars. I didn't know how many more starry nights there might be before winter set in, and I wanted to enjoy them while I could. After a while all grew quiet. I could hear Lydia's soft breathing from her bedroll, and the occasional hoot of an owl. It had been long since I had enjoyed such an evening out in the wild.

Masser and Secunda were just rising in the east when everything seemed to freeze, and a blue whirling light appeared near our dying campfire. A hooded figure appeared, and soon Nerien stood there, just as he had appeared within Saarthal.

I stood up and he looked at me. "We have been attending your progress, mage. It seems you do not recognize the threat the orb represents. If it falls into the wrong hands – Thalmor hands – it will be the end of Tamriel."

"The end of Tamriel? That's going quite far. They already control most of Tamriel, or as good as. What else could they do?"

"You cannot see it. You think the Thalmor simply want control over men. But with the power of the orb, they could do much worse – wipe humans from the face of Nirn."

"No! They wouldn't! Besides, I am taking the threat seriously, that's why I sent my friends back to the college with all haste."

"Yes, your three fellow students. We have no confidence in them. A trio of bumbling fools. Just look how long it has taken them to retrieve those books. That was a fool's errand in any case. Anyone could have told the arch-mage that the elves have always sought the power of the orb. And he was a fool to let Ancano near it."

"But once they are warned, Master Aren, Tolfdir, Mirabelle, they'll know what to do. They'll lock the orb away where it can't be used, or banish Ancano from the college."

"No, Savos Aren is so bent on gaining knowledge that he is blind to the dangers of the orb and the threat Ancano presents. We Psijics have been quarreling with these mages since long before the..."
college existed, since the days of the Mage's Guild and before. Magic is too great a power to give to just anyone."

"Yet without the college, I would have no power at all," I said.

"On that you are wrong, Dragonborn. You have great power, more than you know. That is why we chose you."

"And I am on my way to develop that power further. These dragons are also a threat to Tamriel, and I mean to stop them."

"Yes, we have seen these dragons in our visions as well. They may pose a greater threat than even you realize. That is why we have withheld judgment on your actions. We see that you are beset on all sides, pulled in many directions. Even to us, your path forward is not clear. So, go to High Hrothgar, but just hope that your friends will persuade Savos Aren to secure the orb before it is too late. There is one at the college who may help them, though they haven't thought of him yet. Now I bid you farewell, and may you grow in power so you are ready to meet the danger ahead."

With that enigmatic statement, he disappeared and I could once again hear the sounds of Lydia's breathing and the birds in the trees. It was so peaceful, it was hard to imagine Tamriel was threatened from all sides.
The doors to High Hrothgar were locked. We had travelled for three days, climbed the Seven Thousand Steps, struggled through wind and snow and frost trolls, only to find ourselves shut out on the doorstep of the Greybeards' castle-like retreat. We were exhausted and half-frozen, and our only thoughts were for a warm fire and hot food. The purpose of my pilgrimage, to discover what it meant to be dragonborn, seemed but a distant memory, one that belonged to a warmer world where one could contemplate more than simple survival.

We had pushed on the doors, knocked on them, looked for hidden locks to pick, finally banged on them with Lydia's axe – all to no avail. If the Greybeards had called me here, why wouldn't they let me in? From the lintel above the door, a graven image of a dragon's face grinned down at us without pity.

What little light there had been was now fading, while the snow fell all the harder. The prospect of spending the night out was not pleasant. We had left our camping gear back in Ivarstead, carrying only bare necessities up the mountain. True, there was food in a great chest outside the doors, offerings for the Greybeards from the people of Ivarstead. We would not starve, and we could burn the wooden chest to keep warm. It would be a rough night but we would probably survive. Our chances were better that way than trying to make our way back down the icy path through storm and darkness.

I gazed hopelessly up at the carven dragon. Then I remembered the stone altars we had passed on the way up. Each contained a plaque engraved with a few lines about the history of dragons, mortals, and the Voice. I had insisted on reading every one, despite the blowing snow and streamers of cloud. Some of it was familiar from books I had read about the Dragon Wars of legend, when humans had rebelled against the dragons and the dragon priests who ruled them. Yet much was strange to me. There was one named Paarthurnax who sided with humans and taught them the Voice. And there was a hero named Jurgen Windcaller who chose silence after the great battle of Red Mountain. The final altar contained the lines:

*The Voice is worship*

*Follow the Inner Path*

*Speak only in True Need.*

Now, at the door to High Hrothgar, I realized our need was true, so I took the tablet's advice. "*Fus!*" I shouted at the door.

A moment later the door creaked open and there stood an old man in a thickly woven hooded cloak. His beard was indeed gray, flecked with its original blonde, and knotted at the end. His eyes regarded me steadily, reflecting depths of calm I had never before seen.
"Welcome, Dragonborn, if Dragonborn you be, to High Hrothgar. You must be tired from your journey."

We stumbled more than walked past him, we were that tired and cold. From the outside, High Hrothgar seemed an extensive stone palace, with a central tower flanked by two massive sets of doors. But within, it was close and dark, a low-ceilinged hall with chambers and passages extending on either side. Skylights were meant to illuminate the hall, but there had been no sun this day. Darkness seemed to seep from the very stones of the castle. Stone braziers along the sides of the hall gave off little heat and less light. Still, it felt warm to us, after the bone-chilling cold of the mountainside.

"I am Master Arngeir," said the old monk as we entered the great hall. "I speak for the Masters of the Voice." Three other monks stood nearby. "Let me introduce Masters Borri, Einarth and Wulfgar. They won't speak to you – they have taken vows of silence, apart from using their Thu'um. Now, let me show you to the refectory for some refreshment."

After we dropped our packs and weapons by the door, he led us down halls to a small room with a fireplace, a trestle table and cupboards. A pot of tea, masterwort by the smell of it, already stood steaming in the middle of the table. Arngeir poured us each a mug as we took our seats on benches around the table. He sat there with us silently as we sipped our tea.

When I had revived sufficiently, I told him my name and introduced Lydia.

"We weren't expecting two," Arngeir said.

"Lydia is my housecarl," I said. "I might not have arrived at all without her help."

I spoke true. The battle with the frost troll had been a close thing. I foolishly thought I could cast a fear spell on such a large beast. When that failed, I barely escaped with a glancing blow from its massive fur-covered fist. If Lydia hadn't come between us, the next hit would have finished me. We finally prevailed, but not before Lydia took an injury to her shield arm that I hadn't been able to heal properly. She still held her left arm awkwardly.

"Then she is welcome as well," the master said.

"I have answered your call, Master Arngeir. What do I do now?"

"All in good time, young lady. Tomorrow we will further test your powers to see whether you are indeed the Dragonborn. You have already passed the first test, with your shout outside the door."

"I thought it was obvious I was the Dragonborn," I said, then realized how arrogant that sounded. "At least, everyone in Whiterun seemed to think so, though I had my doubts."

"That may be. However, anyone can learn to shout, though you seem quite young to have put in the practice required. But we will get to that tomorrow. For now, you and your companion need food and rest."

After we had eaten a plain meal of salted fish and dried fruit, Arngeir led us to cots in the same dormitory where the masters took turns sleeping. I slept well that night, though I awoke once when one master came in to sleep, and another rose and left the room.

In the morning, we awoke to sunlight streaming in through the narrow slit of a window. We found our way back to the refectory before Arngeir came to rouse us. The fare was meager – bread, fruit, and water from snowmelt so cold it made my teeth hurt.
"Arngeir said he wants to test me further," I said to Lydia. "Do you want to come and watch?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything. Too, I'm supposed to protect you, and how can I do that if I'm not at your side?" She rubbed her shoulder, and I could tell it still bothered her. I had given her healing potions and tried more healing spells, but there was some deep injury my skills couldn't reach. Arcadia had given me a liniment that would have served better, but I had left it with our other gear in Ivarstead.

"I don't think we have anything to worry about here," I said. "You probably don't need to protect me every minute."

"I don't know, what if they start shouting at you? Arngeir already said they can't even speak to us, their Voices are so powerful."

"Then there's little you could do to help me. But we'll see if spectators are allowed."

Arngeir found us just as we finished breaking our fast. "Your housecarl is welcome to join us, though I doubt she will learn much in the way we will teach you. Perhaps we can arrange separate lessons for her in the usual way. With what you both may be facing, learning the dragon tongue could be useful, even if she doesn't learn to shout."

That sounded ominous, but Arngeir didn't elaborate, and I had other things on my mind. "Master," I said, "I have many questions."

"Of course you do. And how could you not? You must feel as if you've been taken over by some other being."

I was amazed at his insight. "Exactly!" I said. "At first, I wanted to root it out of me like a weed."

"Every Dragonborn who has come to High Hrothgar has felt the same way. It may be that others never arrived here before being driven to madness by this strange power within."

"Madness?"

"Yes," he said. "For you see, you have lived most of your life knowing only your outer self, the Deirdre Morningsong you know as you, the self you show to the world. But sleeping within is your inner self, your dragon soul, the one that has now awoken. And when those two selves meet, it can be quite disturbing."

Suddenly I knew that these Greybeards were the ones who would unlock the mystery of who I was and reveal my destiny. In a rush, I told Arngeir of the time I had first used the Voice. I left out everything that followed, worried it would be a distraction from the lesson at hand, and aware that I had never told Lydia that part of my past.

"Ah yes," Arngeir said sympathetically, "that kind of thing is all too common, and it must have put you in quite a pickle. Tell me, how else has your dragon soul revealed itself?"

I told him about the nearly uncontrollable bursts of anger that had overtaken me more and more, the madness that gripped me as I fought the dragon. "So this is what it means to be dragonborn?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. Whether being born with the soul of a dragon is a gift or a curse has been a matter of debate down through the centuries."

He looked as if he wanted to go on, but I interrupted him. "I even had a dream in which I saw
through the eyes of the dragon. That was the worst. It was as if I was suddenly a ferocious beast.”

Arngeir’s calm eyes grew concerned then. ”That is strange. I have never heard of such a direct connection in previous cases. Dragonborn have the innate ability to learn words of power and to project their Voice. They also can absorb the knowledge and life force of a slain dragon. But along with these abilities comes a great burden – one which you have already faced. Perhaps this vision was a boon, one that allowed you to recognize early on the dangers inherent in your dragon nature. I take that as a very good sign.”

”Why is that, Master?” I asked.

”Some who have been gifted with the Voice – or learned it – seek only power. They never become aware of this danger, and that can lead to disaster. With our guidance, you will learn to balance your two selves. For true mastery of the Voice comes only when your inner spirit is in harmony with your outward actions.”

”That is what I want,” I said. ”Can you help me tame my dragon soul?”

”To speak of taming is to misunderstand your dragon nature, as if it belonged to some wild animal. But dragons are no mere beasts. They are an ancient race, rich in wisdom, language, and culture. In fact, they view us mortals as the beasts.”

”So there is no hope for me? My dragon soul will overpower my own true self?”

”It will take much contemplation and hours of meditation, but you can balance your inner and outer selves. Follow our Way, and you will achieve harmony with your dragon nature. Now, the time for questions is at an end, and our testing must begin. There are formalities, ancient protocols that must be followed. We must ensure not only that you have the gift, but that you have the temperament and the discipline to follow the Way laid out before you. Come, to the Great Hall.”

The three other masters were waiting for us when we reached the hall. ”You have learned Fus, or Force,” Arngeir said, ”the first word of the shout, Unrelenting Force. Each shout comprises three words, and all three must be used to achieve the shout's full force and effect. Now, we will test your ability to learn a new word, Ro, or Balance, the second word in Unrelenting Force. It will sharpen and focus your shout. Master Borri will teach you the word.”

Master Borri spoke and a set of glowing runes appeared on the floor before us. They were very like the glowing runes on the two walls I had already encountered. I knew what to do. As I approached the runes, they began sending out streamers of light in that way now familiar to me – but not to Lydia.

”What's happening?” she asked, stepping toward me.

”It's all right,” I said. Then I heard the word Ro echoing through my mind.

”Deirdre has just learned a new word of power,” Arngeir explained to Lydia, ”taking it into the deepest part of her being. Such learning takes the rest of us years to achieve. The second phase of learning a shout is to attain a deep understanding of the word's meaning. This phase takes us even longer, but the Dragonborn can absorb that knowledge directly from the soul of a slain dragon, as your thane did to learn Fus. Lacking a dragon, Master Borri will now make his understanding of Ro available to Deirdre, and we will see if she is indeed able to absorb it. Prepare yourself, Lydia, this could be even more startling.”

Now Master Borri was looking at me, and jets of what appeared to be flame were sprouting from
his head. It looked very much like the whirlwind of fire that had come off the dragon. I drew it in, and I felt a powerful new energy coursing through me, along with a deep understanding of Ro, or balance. Then it was over and the four masters and Lydia were all looking at me expectantly.

"That is exactly how it felt when I absorbed the dragon's soul," I said.

"Good," said Arngeir. "Now it is time to put your new shout into practice. Only a Dragonborn could master a shout in such a short time. Master Einarth will cast a target for your shout."

Einarth spoke, and a spectral figure appeared in the middle of the hall. I gathered my breath and shouted, "Fus-Ro!" The figure staggered, then faded.

"Well done! Again."

We repeated the exercise twice more, with the same results.

"Impressive! Your Thu'um is precise. You show great promise, Dragonborn. Now we will continue your training out in the courtyard."

Outside, the day was bright but cold. Snow and ice glistened on the walls of the courtyard and on the mountain above. I noticed for the first time that High Hrothgar sat not at the top of the Throat of the World, but some distance below the summit. Exactly how far the mountain reached above us was hard to discern, with the dense, swirling mist that enveloped the peak, despite clear skies all around.

"Now we will see how quickly you learn a completely new shout," Arngeir said.

"Wait," I interrupted. "When will I learn the final word of Unrelenting Force?" If Ulfric had indeed used that shout to slay High King Torygg, I thought it must be useful against a dragon. I was impatient to gain this weapon and get back to hunting the beasts.

"All in good time, young lady," the master replied. He eyed me for a moment, as if appraising how serious I was about the task at hand. Then he gestured to the monk beside him. "Now, Master Borri will teach you Wuld, which means Whirlwind, the first part of Whirlwind Sprint."

Master Borri followed the same process to teach me this new word. When it was complete, Arngeir tested me by having me shout my way through a gate before it closed. When the gate opened thirty yards away, I shouted "Wuld!" and I felt myself pulled forward at a speed I had experience only one other time – in my vision of the dragon. When I came to a stop beyond the gate, I heard Lydia gasping in astonishment. It took me a moment to recover my breath as well.

When I rejoined Arngeir in the center of the courtyard, he was as enthusiastic as such a calm man could be. "Your quick mastery of a new Thu'um is … astonishing. I have heard stories of the abilities of the Dragonborn, but to see it for myself…"

Then he recollected himself. "We have seen that you have the gift, now we must determine whether you have the desire and the discipline to follow the Way. For although you can learn a new shout almost instantly, even you will have to practice patiently to balance the inner with the outer. We will teach you a series of meditations, and it should take you at least a week to complete them. After that, we will give you a quest in which you can demonstrate your understanding of the Way. When that is complete, we will accept you into High Hrothgar and you can begin learning new shouts."

A week, or more! I had known it might take some time to master the Voice, but this seemed absurd.
"Please, Master Arngeir," I pleaded. "Couldn't you teach me the final word of Unrelenting Force now? At least one more dragon yet lives, and Whiterun depends on me. Innocent lives are at stake. I promise, once I have slain the dragons, I will return for more training."

Arngeir regarded me closely. "Much more than the lives of the people of Whiterun may depend on you before the end. Thus will you be tempted from the Way, by a noble goal that lures you into fatal shortcuts. Beware that your skill does not outstrip your wisdom! No, I would not teach you a full shout before you are ready, not though Alduin himself threatened all of Mundus. We have made that mistake once before."

Alduin? Why did he mention the World Eater of legend just then? But I was too concerned with my immediate problem to question him. "Then what must I do?" I asked.

"Stay with us, spend your time contemplating the sky, meditating on balance. It is the only way you can achieve the inner harmony you say you desire. Only then can we trust you with a full shout."

"Then I am ready, Master."

"Good. Today is a fine day to contemplate the sky. Come, sit with Master Einarth and you can meditate together. Now, as you observe the sky, let its emptiness fill your mind. Concentrate on nothing but that. When you can tell me what sound the sky makes, we will move on to the next meditation."

I looked up at the sky and listened. I heard nothing but the wind, which blew through the sky. "That's easy," I said, full of confidence. "It's the sound of the wind."

"Impatience will not help you follow the Way, young Deirdre. No, the sound of the wind is but the sound of air moving over stone or through trees. The sky is a different thing entirely. Sit with Master Einarth and observe how deeply he contemplates the sky. He has been in contemplation his entire life, and he is just beginning to understand sky speech."

I looked at Master Einarth. How old was he, anyway? Would I have to grow that old before I could come down from the mountain and fight the dragons? It seemed impossible. "What of Lydia?" I asked. "What will she do while I meditate?"

"If she is willing, I will teach her something of the dragon tongue in the usual way. It may be useful as a defense against a dragon's breath. We will see you at dinner." He gave a slight bow. "Sky above, Voice within."

With that, he and the two other masters and Lydia returned to the Great Hall, Lydia looking over her shoulder at me just as they entered.

I sat down opposite Master Einarth and tried to do as he did. He sat in a completely relaxed but upright pose and simply stared at the sky. I watched him a long time, and he didn't even blink. I tried to do the same. The sky was clear today, that deep cobalt blue of the high mountains. An occasional cloud floated past, remnants of the recently departed storm. I tried to think only about the sky's emptiness, to fill my mind with it. But how could I fill my mind with nothingness?

Soon, other thoughts intruded. What was the sky, anyway? Was it just the same air we had down here on the ground, but higher up? Why was it blue? Why a deeper blue here than in the lowlands? What happened to the blue at night, when the moons and the stars came out? And what happened to the stars in the daytime? I had contemplated similar questions many a time as I slept out under a night sky. And what were clouds? How could they carry water up in the sky that then fell down as rain or snow? Then there were birds. They flew through the sky. Maybe their chirps and calls were
the sound of the sky? But no, the birds, like the wind, weren't the sky itself.

Long before time for dinner my stomach was growling and my body was growing restless. Emptiness hadn't entered my mind, but the cold, even on this bright day, had entered my body. I sat with my woolen cloak wrapped tightly about me. The stone bench was far from comfortable, even for one who had not been sitting on it for hours. How long had I been sitting here, anyway? I looked at Master Einarth. He hadn't moved an eyelid. A smile had spread slowly across his face, however. Whatever he was seeing up there, it made him happy.

Finally I could contain myself no longer. I got up and went inside, in search of an apple or a piece of cheese in the refectory. I found Lydia there as well, carving into a sausage.

"I don't know that this studying is for me," she said. "Have you discovered what sound the sky makes?" She couldn't suppress a smile.

"Far from it," I said, ripping a piece of bread from a loaf on the table. I took the slice of sausage Lydia handed me and sat down. We ate in silence, more out of dejection than because we were followers of the Way.

"Come on," Lydia said when we were done. "Let's get outside." I quickly agreed and we made for the front doors.

We found Master Arngeir waiting for us at the bottom of the steps outside. "Ah, escaping High Hrothgar so soon?" The skin around his eyes wrinkled just the tiniest bit.

"Just going for a walk," I said.

"Certainly. It is good to appease the body rather than forcing it to do what it will not. Many of us find that some exercise helps to relieve pent-up energy, allowing for more focused meditation and study. Why don't you run down as far as the seventh altar and back up?"

"Run?" Lydia repeated.

"Yes, run. Nothing like a little exercise to calm the body and sharpen the mind. You will find it easier to concentrate when you return."

I had to admit, it felt good to run down the path, even after yesterday's arduous journey. Lydia clumped along heavily in her steel boots, lagging behind. We had not gone far when a view opened out to the west and north.

"Whoa!" Lydia exclaimed as she came up beside me at the edge of a precipice. It dropped thousands of feet to the Plains of Whiterun. She kept well back from the edge. "I've never been up this high before."

Neither had I. Peak after snow-capped peak stretched off into the distance. Though each was lofty in its own right, we looked down on their summits from an even greater height. The air was crystal clear, revealing every detail in the landscape. Far in the north the water and ice of the Sea of Ghosts sparkled in the sunlight. And directly below us, there was Whiterun, with the White River flowing nearby. The three levels of the city were spread out for us, with the great hall of Dragonsreach seeming little more than a doll's house.

"Look, there's home," Lydia said wistfully. "It looks so tiny from up here – yet so close. I can almost see people moving around. And to think, it took us three days to get up here."

"It's beautiful," I said. "Just imagine how noisy those streets are right now, with the vendors
shouting and the children playing. But up here, we can't hear a thing."

We continued our run, surprised at how long it took us to reach the seventh altar. Its tablet bore the inscription:

_The Tongues at Red Mountain went away humbled_  
_Jurgen Windcaller began his seven-year meditation_  
_To understand how strong Voices could fail._

I had read about the Battle of Red Mountain, but I had never heard that Nords using the Voice were there. And Jurgen had meditated for seven years? Would it take me that long to acquire the power to fight dragons?

We were moving at far less than a run by the end. I returned to my meditating and Lydia to her studies. The sun was angling lower by now and the air grew colder. I wrapped my cloak tighter about me to keep the built-up sweat from causing a chill. Master Einarth was still there, immovable, staring up at the sky. I stared at the sky too. It didn't take too much longer to arrive at the answer.

I found Master Arngeir with Lydia at the great circular table in High Hrothgar's council chambers, a book open before them. "Shul," Lydia was pronouncing slowly.

"Silence!" I exclaimed, and they both looked up, startled. "No, I'm sorry Lydia, I didn't mean you. Excuse me, Master Arngeir. The sound of the sky is silence."

"Excellent!" said the master. "That is one of the best of the possible answers. Obvious, isn't it? Sometimes the simplest solution is the one we overlook."

"But why do you concentrate so much on silence here?" I asked. "It seems strange for ones who wield the Power of the Voice."

"Ah, I see you are not familiar with the story of our founder, Jurgen Windcaller." I shook my head. "And it's no wonder! Nords are a warlike race and have forgotten Jurgen the Calm, who should be their most exalted hero. Too, the history of Tamriel is confusing and contradictory. One day some great loremaster will straighten out the many conflicting narratives. For instance, what do you know of the Battle of Red Mountain?"

"I read about that one when I was a child. That was the battle between the Chimer and the Dwemer, or Dwarves, right? The one in which the Dwemer suddenly disappeared. And after that the Chimer were cursed and were transformed into the Dunmer."

"Very good! I see that you are a bit of a loremaster yourself. But did you know that before that there was another Battle of Red Mountain?"

I shook my head.

"About two hundred years before the battle of which you speak, in the early First Era, the Nords occupied Red Mountain in Morrowind. The Chimer and the Dwemer put aside their differences, uniting to drive the Nords out. Jurgen Windcaller commanded the Nordic defenses. He and many of the other Nord warriors wielded the Power of the Voice. Tongues, they were called, and Jurgen was the most powerful. But the elven forces defeated them! Jurgen went away from that battle and for seven years contemplated the meaning of the defeat. Finally he saw that the Nords' arrogant misuse of the Voice to gain power had assured their downfall. He realized that the only true use of
the Voice is to sing the glory of the gods. It is a gift that should only be used for true needs, not for mundane reasons – such as showing off for one's friends." He paused then and fixed me with a stern look, and I knew he meant the day we ran the thieves out of Valtheim Towers.

"Strangely, though Jurgen chose silence, his Voice only grew stronger. Seventeen other Tongues tried to turn him from his new Way by shouting him down, but they could not. He prevailed over them all, though he uttered not a word. That is the paradox upon which our order was founded. After that, he made his seat here at High Hrothgar. A group of Tongues followed him, becoming Masters of the Way of the Voice."

"Is that what I must do? Learn the Voice only to put it aside? I came here to gain a weapon that will help stop the dragons."

"The rules of our order do not apply to the Dragonborn. Akatosh gave you this gift for a purpose, and surely you must use it. Yet we would counsel you to speak only for True Needs. If you use your Voice only in service to the purposes of Akatosh, you will remain true to the Way."

I pondered this. How could I know the purposes of Akatosh, greatest of the Nine Divines?

Seeing my knit brow, he went on. "But come, it is late in the day for such weighty questions, and you have already achieved much insight. Now why don't you take some well-earned rest?"

I did as he suggested, returning to the dormitory and changing out of my sweat-soaked clothes in favor of my second set of robes. Then I took a long nap. Lydia thought it hardly fair, and said so, when she returned to find me sleeping after she had been struggling with the dragon tongue for hours. "I thought you were the one who was here to learn, not me."

"Arngeir says it will help you when we encounter a dragon." I told her about being able to understand Mirmulnir's fire breath as shouted words, avoiding much of its damage.

"I'll have my axe and my shield," she said. "Maybe that will have to do."

As she changed her clothes, I could see that her left shoulder still bothered her. "I wish I hadn't left that liniment down in Ivarstead," I said. "Or that the plants I need to make it grew up here."

"It's all right, my thane," she said. "I'll be fine." These Nords and their stoicism!

Then we went off to the refectory where we found the masters. We sat down to table and Master Arngeir said a few words of thanks to Kynareth for the food before us. Some might have questioned the amount of thanks to be given for a thin oat gruel accompanied by last year's shriveled apples and mugs of tea, but not I – I had spent too many a hungry night in the forests of Cyrodiil. It did seem that the Greybeards carried their asceticism to an extreme, however. Were we meant to fill our bellies with emptiness as well as our minds? Lydia and I finished our portions rapidly.

"Ah, I see the young people have worked up quite an appetite," said Arngeir. "Master Wulfgar, why don't you bring out that smoked salmon? And I don't think a goblet of wine would be amiss to honor the arrival of the Dragonborn."

The salmon was beautiful, and had been perfectly cured, neither too dry nor too salty. And the wine was like a dream of summer – I could practically feel the sun beating down on the grapes, bringing them to their peak of sweetness.

As we continued our meal, the silence lengthened. Lydia and I had always found something to chat about on our journey here, but such conversation did not seem fitting in the Greybeards' presence.
Finally, I asked Master Arngeir a question, more to relieve the silence than anything else.

"Master, why are the dragons returning now? Does it have something to do with me?"

Arngeir looked at me appraisingly, as if wondering how much to tell me. "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."

Now we were getting somewhere! "What is my destiny, Master? Can you show me? Is it to fight the dragons? Or to join in the Civil War? Or to follow the Psijics' request and help secure the Eye of Magnus?"

"I see that you find yourself pulled in many directions, a problem common to those who wield such power. Why else do you think we cloister ourselves up here away from the world? The demands placed upon you will only become greater when you go back into the world and your fame inevitably grows. That is when you must adhere to the Way at all costs. But no, to answer your question, we cannot show you your destiny. We can only show you the Way; it is up to you to discover your ultimate destination. You should focus on honing your Voice and soon your path will be made clear."

It was hard not to show my disappointment. "Oh," I said. "I hoped that ones as venerable and wise as yourselves would be able to tell me what I should do."

"It is part of our wisdom to know that we cannot predict the future. Unlike your friends the Psijics, we do not engage in divination, a precarious art at best. Nor do we seek to influence the course of events. But come, I believe that we have something that will help guide you."

Lydia and I followed him out of the refectory and down the hall to the council chamber. From among the dozen or so tomes on the chamber's circular table, Arngeir selected one and handed it to me. A stylized image of a dragon adorned its cover. The first page bore the title "Book of the Dragonborn, by Prior Emelene Madrine, Order of Talos, Weynon Priory."

"A book about me?" I asked.

"Well, yes, since you put it that way," said Arngeir. "Or rather, about the lineage of the dragonblood in Tamriel, of which you are the latest incarnation. It may provide clues to the manner in which you can fulfill your destiny. Now, I will leave you; it is time for my evening meditation."

"Thank you, Master," I said. "I will read it right away."

"More studying, eh?" said Lydia as we headed for the dormitory. "I thought it was time for a break! Even a round of 'Ragnar the Red' would be good about now." I could see her smile in the dim glow of the braziers in the hall. It was true, everyone groaned whenever the Mare's tavern singer played the opening notes of that song, they'd heard it so often. It was one of only three he knew, and he couldn't sing the third, "The Age of Aggression," without starting a fight between the Stormcloak and Imperial sympathizers.

"I'm sorry, Lydia, but I must do this," I said. "Besides, I have a terrible voice, and you don't want to hear me sing even a drinking song like that. Maybe we can find a book for you too."

High Hrothgar was filled with books scattered here and there on shelves and tables. After the strict control Urag had over the books in the college's library, it was a pleasant change to have so many tomes free to hand. I hadn't had an opportunity to go through them yet, but now we found they
were mostly histories and religious tracts. Finally we found a copy of The Oblivion Crisis.

"Here," I said, "this should tell of glorious deeds and fearsome battles. You might find it interesting." I knew a bit about the events that had brought about the end of the Third Age – just enough to know that it would involve plenty of heroic exploits.

"If you say so, my thane," Lydia said, resigning herself to an evening of quiet reading.

I had found so many books that interested me that I couldn't carry them all – The Dragon Break, The Dragon War, The Great War, The Mystery of Talara, and several volumes of Songs of the Return.

"Here," I said, "help me with these."

Lydia feigned a sigh and said, "I am sworn to carry your burdens," her tone dripping with ironic resignation. I nearly took offense, but her half smile showed that she meant no harm. I was still getting used to her wry sense of humor.

We returned to the dormitory with our "burdens." I was so tired that I went to bed immediately, reading by candle light, as I used to as a child in my parents' home. Lydia sat in a chair nearby, reading her own book. Although she kept humming the tune to "Ragnar the Red," she seemed quite engrossed. That was more than I could say. The Dragonborn book purported to "illuminate the history and significance of those known as Dragonborn down through the ages," but I didn't find it very revealing.

The book began well, with a discussion of the Covenant of Akatosh. "Akatosh, looking with pity on the plight of men, drew precious blood from his own heart, and blessed St. Alessia with this blood of dragons..." Alessia, as every human child knows, and many a mer as well, was the saint who freed humans from slavery by the Heartland High Elves. Akatosh granted her the Amulet of Kings. With that, she founded the first Cyrodiilic Empire, then formed the religion of the Eight Divines, with Akatosh as its chief deity.

After that, the book went into a long discussion of how this dragonblood was passed from one generation to the next, whether by hereditary or mystical means, and how the generations of the Empire's rulers related one to another. That's when I began to lose the thread of the history. There was mention of the Blades, the Emperor's bodyguards, having something to do with finding the next Dragonborn in succession. One thing became clear – all the Empire's "legitimate" rulers had been Dragonborn, from Alessia through Pelagius Septim IV, the emperor at the time of the book's writing in the year 360 of the Third Era.

I was just beginning to wonder if this meant my destiny was to rule Tamriel – but how could that be? – when my eyes grew heavy, the book dropped forward onto my chest, and I lapsed into a pleasant dream in which I sat on a throne in the Imperial City. My subjects came from far and wide to shower me with their affections, for there was no war, the dragons had been banished, and the land prospered. Somehow my parents had been brought back to life and stood beaming at me from a spot just below the dais. Lydia stood nearby, protecting me with her life as ever, resplendent in ebony armor.

Sometime later I must have awoken, because I heard Lydia yawn, then she came over and removed the book from where it had fallen. She blew out the candle and pulled the fur cover up to my chin, her hand resting lightly for a moment on my shoulder. "Good night, my thane," she said softly. It was just as it had been years ago, when I would fall asleep reading and my mother would tuck me in and blow out my candle. I snuggled deeper under the cover.
"Good night, my Lydia," I said, though that might have been part of my dream too.

In the morning I awoke early, while Lydia and the two masters who now occupied cots nearby dozed on. I took my book to the refectory and tried reading it over a cup of tea. Somehow, the history would not penetrate my sleep-fogged mind. What was happening to me? I could now learn the dragon tongue as if it were second nature, but a book written in plain Common Tongue was giving me difficulty? I soon put it aside in favor of *The Ruins of Kemel-Ze*. I found the adventurous tale of an explorer delving into an ancient dwarven ruin to be much more gripping.

Soon Lydia came in, rubbing her shoulder.

"It hasn't gotten better, has it?" I said.

"Worse," she replied. She had thrown her woolen cloak over her tunic and left her armor in the dormitory.

"You must be getting comfortable here," I said, "if you've left your armor behind."

She poured herself a mug of tea from the pot and sat down. "These old men seem harmless," she said, but then corrected herself – "or, they don't seem to mean us any harm, beyond making us run down a thousand feet and back up again."

I had to grin at that. "Surely there was mountain running in your guard training?"

"Yes, only the mountains around Whiterun are not so high." She looked at the books in front of me. "You didn't get very far in your book last night."

"No, and I still haven't," I said, pointing to the Dragonborn book that lay open to the fifth page. "How did you do with *The Oblivion Crisis*?"

"Finished it," she said, grinning. "It was exciting, although there could have been a bit more action. Every time it got to a big battle scene, the writer claimed that no one knew how the hero prevailed. I kept wanting him to just make something up to fill in the details."

"Then it wouldn't be history, would it?" I said.

"So? It would be more interesting! But it wasn't as dull as some of the military histories they made us read in training. And it was about your ancestors!"

"My ancestors?"

"Yes, Martin Septim, the last Dragonblood Emperor."

"I don't think I'm related to any Septims," I said, although I had to wonder. *The Book of the Dragonborn* had said that the heredity of the dragonblood was a divine mystery.

"How do you know?" Lydia said. "Martin didn't either. Unbeknownst to him until he was a grown man, he was the bastard son of Uriel Septim VII, who was assassinated at the beginning of the Oblivion Crisis."

"I knew Uriel was assassinated, but this sounds like one of those cheap romances they sell on the
"Yes, it was almost that exciting," she said, nodding appreciatively. "It has evil Daedric lords trying to break out of the plane of Oblivion and invade Tamriel. And it has a brave hero who tries to hold them at bay, the Hero of Kvatch, or the Savior of Bruma as he was later called. In the end, Martin gave his life by shattering the Amulet of Kings and taking on the form of the avatar of Akatosh – that must be a dragon, right? Then he did battle with the Daedric prince Mehrunes Dagon, with the Savior of Bruma's help."

"Wait, you said the Amulet of Kings was broken?"

"That's right. That's why Martin was the last Dragonblood Emperor. After the battle, Martin was turned to stone in his dragon form. You can still see him in the Imperial City at the Temple of the One. He was one big dragon."

"So none of the Emperors since then have been dragonborn?"

"I suppose not," she said.

Master Arngeir came in just then. "Good morning, young ones. Up early I see."

"We were just discussing the succession of the Dragonblood Emperors," I said.

"Ah, then I take it you made good progress in the book I gave you. Any interesting … discoveries?"

I shook my head sheepishly. "I'm afraid not, Master, but I promise to finish it today. It seems Lydia is the better student. She finished The Oblivion Crisis while I slept."

"Very good! But see that you do finish your book, Deirdre. I'm sure it will be helpful. Now, break your fast if you haven't yet. There is much to be done if you wish to complete your training in good time."

If there was much to be done, as Arngeir claimed, a casual visitor to High Hrothgar over the next week might have missed it. Mostly what I did was sit in quiet contemplation in various corners and hallways, or outdoors when the weather was bright. Master Arngeir had me meditate on a series of questions, each more difficult than the last. Soon that first question seemed a mere child's riddle. There was "How can the weak overcome the powerful?" and "How can silence speak louder than a shout?" and worst, "How can one do something by doing nothing?" – exactly what I wanted to know!

Mostly there was a lot of contemplating the nothingness of the sky, and trying to fill my being with that emptiness. "For only when the silence fills you," Arngeir told me, "can you speak truly. Only when the mind is empty, will you achieve wisdom." There were breathing exercises to be practiced out of doors, with a regular count of inhalations, held breath, and exhalations, all to fill my being with the Breath of the Sky.

Around mid-day, when all the sitting and contemplating was driving me to distraction, Lydia and I would run part way down the mountain and back up, trading stories of the masters' latest quirks and absurd requests. Yet it was all starting to make a strange kind of sense. On each run, Master Arngeir sent us to a different shrine on the Seven Thousand Steps. One day it was about Jurgen Windcaller choosing silence and defeating the seventeen disputants. I actually thought I understood that.

In spare moments between meditating and running, I would read from the retreat's many books.
Yet my assigned text continued to give me difficulty. Maybe it was something about Prior Emelene's writing style. When I got to the part about the Blades, who originated with the Akaviri warriors, I was reminded of a book I had seen on one of the shelves, *Mysterious Akavir*. I put the Dragonborn book down and went to find it. Of course I knew that Akavir was one of the five continents of our planet Nirn, along with Atmora, the continent from whence the Nords sprang, and our own Tamriel. Beyond that, I knew little. Taking up this new tome, I found much that was strange, yet fascinating. There was talk of a "Snow Hall" and a "Snake Palace," of monkey-folk and serpent-folk and a Tiger-Dragon. Though I understood little, it was certainly more interesting than the book about Tamriel's emperors.

So it was not until the third day at High Hrothgar that I came to the end of *The Book of the Dragonborn*. It concluded with a prophecy, said to have originated with the ancient Akaviri or in an Elder Scroll. The prophecy read:

> When misrule takes its place at the eight corners of the world
> When the Brass Tower walks and Time is reshaped
> When the thrice-blessed fail and the Red Tower trembles
> When the Dragonborn Ruler loses his throne and the White Tower falls
> When the Snow Tower lies sundered, kingless, bleeding
> The World-Eater wakes, and the Wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn.

I stared blankly at the page. I puzzled over the first five lines, but couldn't glean much. Yet the last line I understood clearly – it heralded my doom.

I put the book down and stared up at the black stonework of the ceiling. My fate was sealed. Alduin, the World Eater, God of Destruction, had returned to Mundus, and it was my doom to face him.

I had no doubt which of us would prevail.
I don't know how long I sat there pondering my fate, searching for some way out of it. Maybe the prophecy hadn't yet been fulfilled, or it referred to some other Dragonborn than I.

I read the lines over and over, to no avail. It seemed that the first prophecy had been fulfilled long ago – misrule had indeed swept across much of Tamriel. I knew nothing of the second line, but could the Red Tower trembling in the third line refer to the eruption of Red Mountain? I didn't know what the thrice-blessed meant, however. The Dragonborn Ruler losing his throne, surely that referred to Martin Septim, whose tale Lydia had just read? Then the White Tower would be the White-Gold Tower of the Imperial City. One could say that it had fallen to the Altmer during the Great War, though it had been regained by Titus Mede when he retook the city.

That left the Snow Tower, sundered, kingless, bleeding. I couldn't think of snow without thinking of Skyrim – it was certainly kingless and would soon be bleeding if Ulfric pressed ahead with his Civil War. Its people were already sundered from one another. The Snow Tower could refer to the very mountain on which High Hrothgar perched.

If the prophecy was being fulfilled, did that mean … No, it couldn't be … Alduin could not be among the dragons who had already returned, could he? Then I had a flash of memory, from that day in Helgen. At the time, I thought I couldn't understand dragon speech, but now the dragon's first words came back clearly: "Zu'u Alduin. Zok sahrot do naan ko Lein!" "I am Alduin." I couldn't make out the second part. Some dragon boast, no doubt. Then I remembered the way the dragon had looked at me, as if recognizing me – the Dovahkiin. Then why hadn't he put an end to me then and there?

This couldn't be. The task was impossible. Some viewed Alduin as one aspect of Akatosh himself. And it was my destiny to confront him? To stop him? That was impossible – wasn't it?

I ran out of the council chamber where I had been reading and found Arngeir meditating in the long hallway before a stained glass window. "Master Arngeir!" I exclaimed as I came to a halt next to him. "Is the prophecy coming true? But how can it be? I'm not … I can't … Alduin … It cannot be!"

"Ah, I see you have finally come to the end of The Book of the Dragonborn," Arngeir said, rising slowly to his feet. "I thought that part would get your attention."

"But it can't be true! I'm no match for Alduin, the World Eater."

"That remains to be seen. Did you understand the signs that would foretell his awakening?"

"Some of them," I said. I told him my guesses.

"Yes, very good, although I believe a true loremaster would quibble with your interpretation of the
eight points of misrule. The first four lines of the prediction came to pass in the last four decades of
the last era. The fall of the thrice-blessed refers to the Dunmer, whose three 'living gods,'
Amalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec were destroyed, leading to the eruption of Red Mountain at the
beginning of this era. It has taken nearly two centuries for the last omen to appear."

"But what about the Brass Tower? Maybe that hasn't come to pass yet," I said hopefully.

"I'm afraid it has, young Deirdre. The Brass Tower refers to strange events in the provinces of High
Rock and Hammerfell. Tiber Septim's Totem, the Dwemer machine known as the Numidium, was
revived. That event transformed the nature of time in that region, allowing several contradictory
outcomes to occur at once. Thus the Brass Tower walked and time was reshaped."

"So it's all true?" I said, sitting on a nearby bench. Suddenly I didn't even have the strength to
stand.

"It seems so. We have been expecting you since Ulfric murdered High King Torygg last spring,
leaving Skyrim – the Snow Tower – kingless. Even more so, since we heard Alduin's shouts at
Helgen. But come, you are agitated. Now is the time to follow the Way. Use your breath. Draw on
the power of the sky."

I did as he asked, breathing in, holding the breath, breathing out, three times in a row. It did make
me feel calmer. "So my fate is to confront Alduin in battle?"

"Perhaps. It is clear that if you do not prevent Alduin from destroying the world, no one will. That
is, if preventing the world's destruction is a thing you desire."

That caught me off guard. "Certainly, why wouldn't it be?" I said.

"It is said that our own world was created out of the World Eater's destruction of the previous one.
If the cycle is to continue and a new world is to be born, then our world must in turn be destroyed.
Would you interrupt that cycle? Just a thought."

"And that is what he wants? To destroy the world?"

"That is the role he has played in our creation story. It would be rash to assume the World Eater
will not live up to his name."

"Yet as you said before, I was given the gift of dragonblood by the gods for a reason. Surely I must
play my role and try to stop Alduin. But ... I cannot best a god."

"You have only begun to discover your full power. Follow the Way, hone your Voice, and you will
be ready for what is to come."

He left me there contemplating my fate. Soon Lydia found me in the darkening hallway – the sun
was sliding lower, dimming the stained glass window.

"Arngeir told me of your discovery, and the prophecy," she said.

I looked up at her, and for the first time I saw something like fear in her eyes. "I imagine you're
regretting being chosen as my housecarl," I said, "with what we face now."

"Didn't I tell you?" she replied. "I volunteered for the duty."

"You did?"
"Yes, of course. I vowed to protect you with my life, and I will stay with you to the end, World Eater or no." She reached out to put her hand on my shoulder – to buck up my courage, I thought – but it was her left arm. I saw her wince and her hand fell back to her side.

"I wish there was something I could do for you," I said, standing up, glad to have something to take my mind off the future. I had tried healing spells time and again, and had given her all the potions I carried up the mountain. Nothing seemed to work. "If only I had packed that liniment!"

"I suppose I could just run down to get it," Lydia said, grinning.

"You could, but you'd have to stay the night, of course. You couldn't make it down and back up in one day."

She grew more serious then, and wouldn't look at me. "Well, to tell you the truth, my thane, I could use a break from all this reading and silence. I don't think I'll ever get far with the dragon tongue. And, well, you seem pretty safe here."

"You're right. Listen, I hope my training won't take more than three or four more days. It would almost be a waste for you to come back up. Why don't you wait for me at the Vilemyr Inn and I'll see you when I'm done?"

"No," she said, her dark eyes growing stern. "I swore to protect you, and I mean to. I will return here to escort you down the mountain. Just name the day."

"You forget how long I lived on my own in the wild. This mountain holds no terrors for me. As your thane, I will rule you in this. I will not have you climbing the Seven Thousand Steps just to walk back down with me. Is that clear, housecarl?" I tried to sound as I imagined Irileth would when giving an order, but I couldn't help smiling.

"Yes, my thane."

"Good. Apply that liniment daily, and I will expect to find you in full health when I arrive four days hence."

She sighed, but I could tell that she was not altogether unhappy with the plan.

The next morning I watched from the steps of the retreat as Lydia began her journey down to Ivarstead. I stayed there until she turned and waved, just before going around a corner. I waved back, and then she was gone.

The next three days were some of the most difficult of my life. It wasn't just that the training grew harder each day. The weight of what I would soon face was settling on me, and it all seemed too much. "One step at a time," Arngeir kept saying to me. "The greatest journeys are accomplished by putting one foot in front of the other."

Too, the silence and the gravity of High Hrothgar weighed on me. I was a young girl surrounded by silent old men. Certainly they had wisdom, but where was the life? I longed for noise and the bustle of a city, the uproar of a tavern, or even just the babbling of some mountain stream. I was only seventeen and I wanted to laugh, and not to be burdened with achieving wisdom beyond my years, much less saving the world. Could I tell Arngeir a joke? No. I missed my friends from the college – as difficult as they could be, Onmund, J'zargo and Brelyna could bring a smile to my face. I missed having tea with Mirabelle and listening to her stories of my mother's home. I missed jesting with Ralof, though I had known him for just two days. What I wouldn't give to be able to punch him in the arm once more! And I missed Lydia, more than I had expected. With her here, the
solemnity of High Hrothgar had been bearable; without her dry wit to buoy me, my mood grew darker by the day. I stalked the dark, cramped halls of High Hrothgar, trying not to scowl, but no doubt failing.

Worse, a storm raged the day after Lydia left, and the mountain was cloaked in fog and rime ice the day after that. I was trapped indoors, and High Hrothgar began to feel like a prison. It seemed as if all light had been withdrawn from Mundus. I tried to concentrate on my meditations, but it was little use. The answers I gave to Arngeir's questions felt more than half made-up, though they seemed to satisfy him.

Finally, at the end of the third day after Lydia's departure, and the sixth since my arrival at High Hrothgar, Arngeir called me into High Hrothgar's council chamber, a large room with a long stone table in its center.

"Dovahkiin," he said. He only called me that when he had something formal to say. "This phase of your training is at an end. You have made good progress in balancing the inner with the outer. You already have developed a calm that you hadn't when you came here. Now we will see whether you can follow the Way when put to the test. The time has come for the quest I mentioned before. You are to retrieve the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller from the ancient fane of Ustengrav, in the wilds outside of Morthal. It is a dangerous journey to get there, and even more dangerous within. But the horn is sacred to us. If you follow the Way, you will return. And while your housecarl is welcome to accompany you there, she must not enter. The task is for you alone. She would not survive, in any case."

The truth was, I was more than ready for an adventure. Traveling through the wilds? Exactly what I needed. A catacomb filled with draugr and wights? A fine challenge. Anything to be out of High Hrothgar and back in the world!

"Don't worry, Master. I will return with the horn."

"Sky guard you," he said, and left me to pack for my journey.

The Vilemyr Inn was crowded and hot, a welcome change after my icy trip down the mountain. It was after dark when I arrived, and I was tired, footsore, and chilled to the core. To be sure, it was easier descending the mountain than climbing up it. But I had started late, having waited for the weather to break at the top. Half-way down, a freezing rain moved in, and I had to pick my way carefully over patches of black ice. Then an ice-wraith caught me unawares, giving me a chilling blast that froze my soaked robes to my skin. It took me some time to drive it off with a flame spell. So it was good to feel the rush of heat as I opened the inn's door, and to hear voices raised in song.

The place was filled with a smattering of townspeople, but mostly off-duty guards, both women and men. In the midst of the soldiers sat Lydia, singing along with the rest. She held a mug in her left hand, and occasionally she would clink it with her neighbors to punctuate the drinking song. She certainly looked in her element. I couldn't help wondering if this was what she had been doing, drinking and singing for three days, while I toiled away in the darkness and silence of High Hrothgar. I stood just inside the doorway watching her and her new friends, trying to put such thoughts aside. Yet somehow I couldn't just break in on their merriment.

Finally Lydia looked up and saw me. "Deirdre!" I saw more than heard her exclaim, since her
voice was drowned out in the din of the music. She stood from her place and came over to give me a hearty hug. "You're so cold!" she said, looking at me with concern. "I've been wondering when you'd arrive."

"Yes," I said. "It looks like you've been out of your mind with worry." I tried to smile, to hide the icy tone I couldn't keep out of my voice.

"Just passing the time until you got here," she replied.

"I'm glad you were having a good time," I said. "One of us had to, at least."

"Those old men were finally too much for you, weren't they? But come, let's get you a hot drink and some food, and you can meet my friends."

We went over to the table and Lydia began naming off her companions: Drahff, Garthar, Britte, Iddra, until I couldn't keep up. "Lads and lasses, this is Deirdre, whom I am proud to serve." Most of the guards at the table greeted me politely, if not too warmly – except for one, a large Nord down at the end of the table. He just sipped his ale and looked at me. His eyes were bleary from drink.

The tavern lass brought me a mug of hot cider and a bowl of steaming soup made from onions, potatoes, and peas in a beef broth. The cider was fermented and the first sip went straight to my head. I concentrated on the soup for a time, Lydia seated beside me drinking her ale and telling the guards about High Hrothgar. I could tell this wasn't the first time they had heard her tale. How much had she told them, I wondered.

"So you're learning the Voice up at the Greybeards' place, eh?" said the Nord at the end of the table. I had forgotten his name already.

"That's right," I said warily. The last thing I needed was this lot finding out I was the Dragonborn.

"So how 'bout it then? Give us a shout. Let's see what ye can do."

The other guards nodded and shouted in agreement. "I've always wanted to hear someone use the Voice," said one of the female guards. "Especially after Ulfric shouted down High King Torygg."

"The first thing the Greybeards teach," I told them, "is that the Voice is to be used only for True Needs. I can't use it just for show."

"Sod the Greybeards and their rules," said the large Nord. "What good's a weapon like that if you don't show people you mean to use it? You should be going to Windhelm and joining Ulfric's cause, that ye should."

"No," I said firmly. I held his gaze until he went back to his mug.

He didn't stay quiet for long. I was half way done with my soup and into my second mug of cider – feeling considerably warmer and even more light-headed – when the fool spoke up again.

"What are ye, anyway?" he said, glaring toward me. "Ye don't look like any Nord I've ever seen."

I took a breath. I could feel Lydia tensing next to me. "My mother was a Breton, and my father was a Nord," I said as evenly as I could. With difficulty, I refrained from asking if he had a problem with my parentage. I tried taking another deep breath, filling my mind with the serenity of the sky, but the hulking brute went on.
"A mixed-blood, eh? Pfft! We don't get a lot of that around here, nor none of the other races. Just true Nords here in Ivarstead. Never seen any but Nords go up the mountain, neither. I'm surprised they took ye."

My breathing wasn't working. I felt the blood rushing through my head and my heart pounding. My arms and legs felt numb. I don't know what would have happened if Lydia hadn't stood up just then.

"That's my thane you're talking about, Lars!" she said. Lars – of course! What else could his name be? Large Lars. I stood up too, trying to calm her down. I was still enough in my right mind to remember that we were supposed to be anonymous pilgrims.

"Thane, eh?" Lars said, tipping back in his chair and smiling. "Thane of what, some Nine-forsaken bit of Breton rock?" That got some laughs from his friends.

"Deirdre is as true-hearted and brave as any Nord you'll find, no matter who her parents were," Lydia said. "If you could only hear the stories they're telling in Whiterun of the day she fought…"

I stepped on her boot under the table before she could say more. "Come, Lydia," I said, taking her by the arm, "I think it's time we retired. We have an early…"

But Lydia would not be calmed, short of magic at least. "Speak of my th… my friend in that way again, and you'll have me to answer to."

Now it was Lars' turn to stand up. He really was large, looming over Lydia by more than a head. To me, he was like a giant. His muscle-bound arms rippled as he clenched and unclenched his fists. He jabbed a finger at her and said, "You had a sweeter tongue when I was rubbing that salve on your back!"

Everything seemed to stop then. The tavern had grown silent and I could feel dozens of pairs of eyes on the three of us. I could only stare at Lydia. She stared at Lars, blinking.

Finally, she said, "That was before you started insulting my friend."

Suddenly I wanted to be shut of all of them. Let Lydia sort this problem out. "Right then," I said. "I'll leave you to it. I'm off to bed."

I turned to leave the main hall, and I heard Lydia turn to follow, when one of Lars' friends spoke up. "Leave the lasses be, Lars. We've got ale to drink."

"Aye," Lars said. "What do I care who the wench hangs about with?"

I closed my eyes and groaned. By the time I could turn around, Lydia had rushed up to Lars, her finger thumping him in the chest. "What did you call me?" she demanded.

"A sharp-tongued wench, and I'll call ye that again."

Lydia moved so fast I couldn't see exactly what happened. In two blinks Lars found himself on his back, Lydia's knee driving into his belly, her dagger at his throat. With her left hand, she held his head down while jabbing a thumb into his eye. Her shoulder must be feeling better, I thought.

"I gave you a chance, you arrogant bastard, now tell me why I shouldn't cut out your tongue."

"I'm sorry," he said through gritted teeth. "Ow, not my eye! I just … I didn't mean any harm. I was just sportin' with ye, and the Breton lass."
"Sport is what you call that, eh?" she said. "I'll show you a few sports you won't much like. One's called 'Watch the Nord Chase his Balls.' How does that sound?"

"No, no, you're not serious!"

"Swear you'll go home and sleep it off and never bother my friend or me again!"

"I swear," he gasped. I could see the fear in his eyes, but there was also hatred. Finally she let him up off the floor.

"Go on home, Lars," said the tavern keeper, who was now standing nearby. "You've caused enough trouble for one night. How am I supposed to stay in business if you chase away every pilgrim who passes through?"

Lars staggered from the building. "About time someone taught that bully a lesson," said one of the female guards. Several other women, and even a couple of men, applauded. Someone spoke up in Lars' defense, and soon the whole tavern was debating the altercation. I turned and headed for our room.

I began to change out of my still-clammy robes. Lydia came in and we went about our business in silence. I dried my hair and re-braided my plaits. I was about to get into bed when I heard her give a half-suppressed grunt of pain. She had tried to take the bottle of salve down from the top shelf of the room's wardrobe with her left hand. "Gods!" she groaned, rubbing her shoulder.

"Is it no better?" I asked.

"It was, but I think I just reinjured it," she said. "By the Nine, how could I be so stupid?"

"You don't have to tell me about anger," I said. "It's a good thing you stepped in when you did. I wish you hadn't attacked him though – we'll have to return here soon enough. There are worse things to be called than wench."

"If they're calling you wench to your face, they're calling you worse behind your back, I reckon. I won't stand for any of it."

She pulled her cuirass over her head with difficulty, then undid the leather laces holding together the neck of her tunic, shrugging it down off her left shoulder. Then she tried awkwardly to apply the liniment with her right hand. I sat silently on the edge of my bed, offering no help.

Finally she got up and came over, holding out the bottle. "Here, would you? It's difficult to reach."

I took the bottle from her – it was already half empty. She sat down on the edge of the bed with her back to me and I rubbed a dollop of the salve into the spot just below her shoulder where she hadn't been able to reach. I noticed she was still breathing hard from the confrontation. I was none too gentle, telling myself the injury must be deep, and needed a good kneading. Lydia took her medicine without complaint.

"Is this how Lars did it?" I asked.

"Yes, very like," she said. "Actually, he was a bit gentler, though his hands are strong." She sighed.

"A minute ago you had him on the ground with your knife at his throat, and now you're sighing over his strong hands?"

"Yes, strange, isn't it?" she said.
I stood up, jamming the stopper back into the bottle. "How could you let that brute touch you?" I demanded.

She re-tied the laces at the neck of her tunic, then stood up too. "You're just a lass in many ways, my thane. What do you know of what a woman wants?"

She was right – I had no idea. I doubted I ever would. But surely not that – not Lydia and that lout. "You don't mean…?"

"What, me and Lars?" she said. Now her eyes flashed at me, as if I was the one who had called her a wench. "Not to worry, it was just the shoulder rub once or twice. You don't think I fall into bed with every rugged Nord who comes along, do you?"

"No, no," I said as she turned and began putting her armor back on. "It's just that, it was so lonely up there for three days with the Greybeards, no one to talk to or joke with, and then it was such a long cold trek down the mountain, and I was looking forward to seeing you, and then there you were, surrounded by your new friends. What was I to think, coming from three days of solitary meditation only to find you've spent those days making merry?"

Her voice became quiet then, and dropped half a register. "My thane," she said, tugging at the straps and buckles on her cuirass, "I have spent the last three days exercising the horses, which they sorely needed after five days cooped up in a pen. I laid in stores and sorted our gear in preparation for journeying to wherever we're off to next, which you still haven't told me. In between, the guards here allowed me to practice with them. I worked on my archery, my hand-to-hand, my axe-and-shield, and both one- and two-handed sword skills, all to be ready for whatever we might face. I even practiced some of the dragon tongue Arngeir taught me. If I could shout *Shul* at you now, I likely would. Now I'm going to bed before I say anything else. I imagine we have an early start tomorrow."

With that, she pulled her knife from its sheath and laid it on the table next to her bed. Her axe and shield were close to hand. Angry as she was, she still took her duty to protect me seriously. Then she got into her bed, facing the wall.

I went to my own bed, and lay there, staring at the ceiling and feeling more alone than I had at High Hrothgar.
The next days of traveling were difficult – and not because of bandits, rogue mages, or wild beasts we met along the way. We ate a silent breakfast that next morning, just the two of us in the silent tavern. We packed our gear onto our horses in silence and departed Ivarstead silently in a raw, gray dawn. Even the autumn leaves with their bright reds and golds couldn't cheer us, nor could the better weather we found as we descended the bench upon which Ivarstead sat.

I knew I should apologize. I remembered apologizing to my parents for my lack of diligence in their shop, but it had always been difficult. There was something prideful in me that couldn't admit to being wrong. It was the same now. But I knew I must make amends, or we would face many a difficult mile as thane and housecarl.

"Lydia," I began.

"I don't blame you for being angry with me, my thane," she interrupted. Her voice sounded stiff and formal. "No housecarl should ever speak to her thane the way I spoke to you. I am sorry for my words, and beg you not to release me from your service before it has truly begun." She must have been rehearsing that for some time, I thought.

"No, Lydia," I said. I tried to catch her eye, but she only looked down at her horse's mane. "No housecarl should hesitate to speak freely when her words are just. I am the one who must apologize. I shouldn't have doubted your sense of duty, and as for those with whom you keep company – and how you keep it – it is no business of mine or anyone else's. I hope you will forgive me, and agree to continue in my service." I held out a gloved hand. "Friends again?"

She looked up at me finally and reached across between our horses to shake my hand. "Friends," she agreed and smiled for the first time that day. It was a welcome sight.

Yet she remained quiet, even after we struck the main road between Riften and Whiterun. When we did talk, our conversation lacked the easiness I had grown used to on our journey to the Throat of the World. I tried pointing out the hardy late-blooming flowers along the roadside – a welcome sight for me after a week in the permanent winter of High Hrothgar – but nothing seemed to catch her attention or lift her mood. She didn't even protest when I proposed that we take the Windhelm road rather than the one that passed Whiterun. I knew Lydia would surely welcome a visit home, yet how could I show my face in Dragonsreach before gaining a weapon to wield against the dragons? She merely nodded in silent assent to my plan.

So we rode north mostly in silence, arriving at a junction of roads just west of Windhelm in mid-afternoon of the second day. It was my first view of the imposing city, with its high, sturdy walls of square-cut stone. The Palace of the Kings was set well back from those walls and loomed above them. Where Dragonsreach towered into the sky, this castle was solid and fortress-like. It was easy to see how it had survived the thousands of years since Ysgramor had it built. Its square-topped battlements were covered in snow, for we had traveled out of the country of autumn into the lands...
of permanent winter.

As we paused to take it in, I thought idly of stopping in the city to visit Ralof – it was not far out of our way. Then we heard a roaring from far off. At first I thought it was a bear, but it was much deeper. Lydia spotted it first, pointing to the north. "Look! A dragon!"

She was right. The beast's wings stretched out over the mountains north of Windhelm as it soared toward the city, its long tail trailing behind. When those wings flapped, we could feel their beating even from this distance. I remembered the feeling of my dream dragon flight, as we rushed through the mountain passes. Even now, as the sky-winger flew in a straight line toward the city, I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Was it Alduin? I couldn't be sure.

"It's going to attack Windhelm!" Lydia exclaimed. "Let us meet it!" She turned her horse toward the city. Her first view of a dragon, and she showed not a hint of fear, wanting only to rush into battle.

But as we watched, the dragon sailed high above Windhelm and continued its way south and east, disappearing over the mountains between Eastmarch and the Rift. In a few minutes it had covered ground that would take us half a day to ride over.

"Should we follow?" Lydia asked.

"We cannot chase a dragon that way," I said to her. "Nor do I think we are ready to face one on our own. But we must complete our task all the quicker!"

So we turned away from Windhelm. We pushed our horses hard and camped near Fort Dunstad that evening. The next morning we descended from the ice-clad mountains to the low marshlands of Hjaalmarch. Cedars and a few scrubby trees grew sparsely here, clinging to life in the boggy soil. The rest was bare, lichen-covered rock with a few sedges and the poisonous nightshade growing in between, interspersed with channels of open water. Though the sun was out, patches of low fog hung over the lowlands. We arrived at Ustengrav at mid-day.

It was not what I expected – neither a pit in the ground with a door leading to catacombs within, nor a mountain temple like Bleak Falls Barrow. It was an ancient walled fane with the remains of outbuildings around the perimeter. At its center stood the hof, remarkably well preserved for its age. It was built of stone, partly crumbling, with one supporting arch visible where the roof had fallen away. Tall gabled windows decorated its sides. The roof ends and one set of arches bore carven dragon heads guarding the four directions. With its great height and soaring buttresses, it must have struck awe in the people who once worshipped here. Now, the place seemed deserted.

Well preserved though it was, the whole place was sinking. Ustengrav sat next to one of Hjaalmarch's many wetlands, and water was reclaiming it. Its western wall stood a foot deep already, and the temple itself tilted to that side. Boggy patches spread across the temple grounds, and green growth covered every structure – moss, lichen, or mold, we could not tell.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Lydia said as we sat our horses on a low rise to the east, looking down on the place. She would not look at me, but I could tell she was worried for me. "This is wrong," she protested. "I am sworn to protect you from all danger. How can I let you go in there alone?"

"I must pass this test on my own," I said. "Arngeir must think I can survive, or why would he send me? But he was certain you wouldn't. I won't have you dying needlessly on my behalf."

"Swear to me you won't die in there, my thane," she said. "I couldn't show my face in
Dragonsreach if anything happened to you."

"Don't worry," I told her. "I will pass this test." Yet she still looked worried as I dismounted and made a final check of the potions and weapons I would take with me. Then I walked through one of the archways in the wall.

I was surprised that the place seemed so deserted, since bandits usually took up residence in ruins like this. The low wall with its openings to the four directions certainly wouldn't keep anyone out. I had simply walked in. Now I had to decide where in this compound to begin my search for the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. Little was left of the out-buildings but stone foundations and one or two arches where doorways had been. The rest must have been made of timber. I decided that the temple itself was the obvious hiding place.

I had taken only a few steps toward it when a spectral figure appeared before me. So this explained Ustengrav's desolation – it was haunted. The figure looked much like one of the Greybeards. It wore the same robes, but its hood was drawn so low I couldn't see the face, only a bit of beard tied in a knot. Perhaps this wasn't a ghost, but some sort of magical projection from High Hrothgar?

"Master, I am ready…" I began, but the figure shouted at me.

"Faas-Ru-Mar!"

The shout shook me, but I knew those words. The Masters had taught me only two shouts, but I had taken time to look at the book of dragon speech Arngeir had given Lydia to study. It was not the same as a rune wall etching a word into my mind, but it had to be good for something. They are only words, I told myself. "Fear. Run. Terror." They cannot harm me. I can ignore them if I choose. At the same time I breathed, filling myself with the emptiness of the sky. How could words hurt nothing? I felt fear creeping through me and my heart beating faster, but I did not run away.

"I do not fear you, Master," I said.

The figure gave a little chuckle. I had never heard Arngeir or the other masters at High Hrothgar laugh.

"Strun-Bah-Qo!" he shouted. Storm-Wrath-Lightning. Those might be just words, but now real clouds blotted out the weak noonday sun, and the wind began to blow. Soon real rain was falling, then hail. Lightning struck the hof, leaving a phosphorescent glow in the moss clinging to its sides. Thunder clapped a split-second later, shaking the air and ground.

I breathed again. "Kynareth, goddess of sky and the elements, I have devoted myself to you. Do not slay me now. Let me be empty like the sky and let the storm pass through me."

Lightning was striking all around, yet it did not come near me. But the hailstones had grown larger and my hood and mage's robes offered little protection from the sting of the pellets. I made my way over to one of the standing arches and huddled beneath its shelter, hoping to wait for the storm to pass.

Then I heard the clatter of hail on metal and turned to see Lydia. She had entered the compound the same way I had, and now crouched under her shield. Lightning flashed all around her.

"No!" I shouted, leaving my shelter and running toward her. "Go back! This storm will kill you!"

Before I could reach her, a thunderclap shook the air and everything around me lit up. I felt a vibrating power coursing through me. I had just time to think that this is how it feels to be struck by lightning before I hit the ground. But then it was over, and I was still alive. The bolt seemed not
to have hurt me at all, other than to leave a tingling at the ends of my fingers and toes. I gathered myself and got to my feet.

Lydia still crouched under her shield, her eyes wide as she gaped at me. Whether her luck or Kynareth had protected her, the lightning had not struck her, and now the storm grew less.

"You fool!" I said when I reached her. "That storm could have killed you."

"As it could have killed you, my thane," she said, though she still stared at me in wonder.

"Yet as you can see, it did not. Now go wait outside the walls before I cast a fear spell and make you run away." The sky was growing lighter within the walls, and beyond them it looked as if there had never been a storm at all.

She did as I asked, though she looked none too happy. Then I turned back to my task. The Greybeard's specter had disappeared, and the way to the temple was clear.

I reached the massive iron doors, only to find them locked, with no keyhole to pick. Making my way around the structure, I found no other entrances, just sheer walls and stone buttresses soaring into the sky. The windows were all too high to reach. Even then, they were too narrow to allow me passage. I quickly discarded the thought of climbing up to the opening in the roof – the stone blocks were so close-set that such a feat surpassed my skill. Surely the horn would be inside the hof, yet how could I retrieve it if I couldn't get inside?

Frustrated, I began exploring the rest of the temple grounds. I found stone foundations of what must have been dormitories, a large fireplace in what was once a kitchen, and a circular arrangement of stone columns forming an outdoor shrine. If there had ever been a statue or an altar within the circle, it was gone.

Then I saw five large, grass-covered mounds at the farthest corner of the compound. Paths sloped down to doorways set in their faces, all shut save one, which stood ajar. Of course! How could I explore a Nord temple without going into its catacombs?

The door creaked open as I pushed on it, revealing a stone chamber beyond. The weak sunlight illuminated only the first few feet. Beyond that, it was pitch dark. I took a step inside. A half-inch of water and green slime sloshed around my leather boots. Rats squeaked in the far corners of the chamber. I stood there for a moment expecting skeevers – or something worse – to attack out of the darkness.

I needed light. Heat wouldn't go amiss either, so I chose a torch rather than cast a spell of magelight. The rats scampered away as the light filled the room, but otherwise it was empty. The chamber formed a long hallway, with an arch supporting the roof halfway down its length. Stone crypts lined the walls, each in its own alcove. Fortunately, the caskets' occupants remained sleeping as I passed.

At the far end of the chamber, I descended a spiral wooden stairway, accompanied by the sound of water dripping down the stairwell. The water on the floor was deeper on the level below, which extended at a right angle to the one above it. That was good – the upper passage led away from the temple, maybe this one would lead toward it. The hall was lined with alcoves like the one above, but these contained no crypts, only the remains of ancient Nords lying in the open. These were no draugr, but skeletons whose flesh had rotted away long ago.

Of course I had read of skeletal walkers in many a storybook, but I still gasped as two of them awakened and began laboriously to unfold their limbs from the alcoves in which they had slept for
millennia. Blast the flame! I had been sneaking, but the heat or the light must have given me away. Still, the torch proved useful – I bashed the nearest walker with it before he could fully rise from his resting place. He exploded into a scatter of bones. A flame spell took care of the second one. I should have known that skeletons would be less formidable than draugr, but that had been too easy. I wasn't even breathing hard.

Still, it wouldn't do to awaken all of Ustengrav's undead denizens with a torch. I reluctantly extinguished it, but not before casting magelight at the far end of the corridor. The glowing ball stuck where it struck the wall. I drew my bow and hid in the shadows, waiting for anything else to awaken. When there was no sound, I crept to the end of the corridor, turned the corner, and cast another ball of light to its farthest end. In this way, I made my way along the hall as it twisted and turned in what I hoped was the direction of the temple. I disturbed no more skeletal sleepers.

After three or four turns in the passage, I came to a wider hallway containing neither skeletons nor crypts. Three stone pillars stood in a line and beyond them was a narrower corridor barred by three portcullises in a row. As I approached the pillars, I wondered if they could be a door puzzle like the ones I had seen before. But these had no markings, and they would not turn. Nor was there an obvious trap, no spiked gate and no dart-holes in the walls nearby. Then I noticed circles of stone in the otherwise irregular flagging next to each pillar. I put my full weight on the first one, and the first portcullis withdrew into the ceiling. The next two gates opened in similar fashion. An easy puzzle, I thought as I stepped toward the open passageway.

Then the first portcullis slid shut, followed quickly by the second, then the third. Not so easy after all. I tried running and then sprinting as hard as I could, but still the gates closed before I could get through. I sat down, leaning against my knapsack and the first pillar, pondering my predicament. If ever there was a place for the Whirlwind Sprint shout, this was it. Yet Master Arngeir said I must follow the Way, using the Voice only for true needs. Was this a true need? If I hoped to retrieve the horn, I could see no other way.

I stood once again before the first pillar, then sprinted toward the portcullises. The instant my foot struck the third plate, I shouted "Wuld!" I felt the same exhilarating burst of speed I had experienced at High Hrothgar, and in an instant found myself on the other side of the third gate.

Now I was in a larger, round chamber. Water dripped from its walls and a tangle of roots grew from the ceiling and along the floor. At its opposite end was a word wall, illuminated by dim rays shining through a skylight. I approached the wall and heard the chanting and saw the glowing runes. This time Feim was the word that echoed in my mind, etching its way deep into my memory. That was Fade, the first word of the Become Ethereal shout. That could be useful, I thought, but not until I absorbed another dragon soul or Master Borri shared its deep meaning with me. If I had to learn all the shouts in this way – first learning a word from one of these walls, then slaying a dragon or traveling to High Hrothgar – it would be long indeed until I was ready to face Alduin.

Only one narrow passage led out of the word wall chamber, and it was the wettest yet, with slimy green water up to my ankles. The leather uppers of my boots had soaked through. I guessed that the passages had taken me beyond the temple nearly to the open water of the marshes. The walls were dripping and covered with glow mushrooms. I didn't pause to collect them, I was that focused on my task. I was glad to see a ladder leading up a level, where I hoped it would be drier.

I emerged into a small ante-chamber. Beyond it was another long hall, its walls adorned with crude engravings of dragons, and the lintel above the far door with a carven dragon head, its jaws thrusting wide toward any who dared to pass beneath. But the mute dragon was not the doorway's only guardian. A spectral Greybeard blocked the passage, and there were two more masters, one on either side of the hall. They stood on low galleries raised two steps above the main floor. The one
at the far end beckoned me forward with a slow wave of his hand.

I took two deep breaths, then walked slowly forward, still focusing on breathing, though communing with the sky was difficult in such a dank place. Would all three shout at me at once? I needed to be prepared.

On my fifth breath, I drew even with the two masters in the middle of the hall. At first they only stared at me as I looked from one to the other. Then they drew breath at the same time and I knew they would shout. Taking shouts from two directions at once – that couldn't be good.

Without thinking, I dropped to my belly and flattened myself on the floor, breathing and trying to concentrate on the words of their shouts. But each spoke different words and I couldn't sort them out. I thought I heard *Iiz* from one, and maybe *Shul* from the other. How could I deflect the Words of Power if I couldn't understand them? Then the blast of the shouts came.

I don't know why I covered my head with my hands. I could feel one glove scorching and the other glove freezing. Either the main force of the shouts passed over me, or I was able to understand enough of each to deflect them, or perhaps both. One side of my body felt warm and the other felt cold, but I was neither burned nor frozen. Then the shouts met in the air above me, neutralizing each other. The fire turned the ice to vapor and a fine mist fell all around me.

As I got back to my feet, the two masters gestured for me to continue forward to the third, then disappeared. I walked slowly forward, trying to recover my breathing. The spectral Greybeard seemed to be inviting me forward. Then he too drew breath for a shout. We were on the same level. There would be no ducking beneath his voice. I could only stand and take it.

Maybe it was a lucky guess, but I thought I knew what this master would shout. "*Ro!*" I said to myself, and tried to let the meaning of the word, balance, suffuse my being. Breathe in, *Ro*, hold, *Ro*, breathe out.

When the master shouted, he put his whole body into it, taking a step toward me to add force and striking at the air with his fists. His face jutted out at me then, and spectral though he was, I thought I recognized Master Wulfgar. "*Fus-Ro-Dah!"* he shouted.

I had braced myself, but still the shout knocked me back a step and left me gasping for air. But it had not flung me across the room, nor had it torn me apart. I had survived. When I recovered my breath, the master stood aside and ushered me through the doorway, beneath the dragon's gaping maw. Beyond it I found a ladder leading upward, with natural light shining from above.

I emerged from the catacombs into a small ante-chamber. The sun must have come out now, because beams of light shone through the two narrow windows, creating shafts of brilliance separated by motes of darkness. A set of iron doors stood at one end of the chamber, barred by a stout oak beam. I realized I was in the temple. I had passed all of the tests and obstacles set for me by the Greybeards. Now where would I find the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller?

Brighter light came through the archway opposite the iron doors. I stepped toward it, thinking the horn must be somewhere within. Then all thought of my quest left me as I gasped at the sight of the temple's main hall. Shafts of light shone through the narrow windows, suffusing the carven stone buttresses and rows of stone pews in a warm glow. But what really drew my eye was the temple altar, illumined by the brighter light shining through the gaps in the roof. Mosses hung from the walls and ivy clung to the stone arch spanning the empty space where the roof had fallen in. All glistened with droplets from the recent rain storm.

The altar was a stone table with stylized stone dragon heads at each corner. But the dragons'
features weren't simply etched into the stone, they were inlaid with silver that reflected the sun's rays in dazzling radiance. High up on the wall behind the altar was another carven dragon head, this one worked in exquisite detail from white stone rather than the usual black. Short curved horns sprouted from its head, and there were more around its chin, rather like a beard. Its scales were inlaid silver and its eyes were red rubies. In the brilliant sunlight the dragon glowed with both fire and frost.

Beneath the dragon's head, raised up to a place of prominence on a tall dais, sat an elaborately worked chest, banded in silver and gold and rich with silver inlay, giving off its own radiant glow. Surely, the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller lay within it, I thought, and I began making my way up the long aisle toward it.

Then the spectral Greybeards appeared in front of me, one before the altar, and one on either side of the aisle and about halfway along it. I noticed too a pedestal in the center of the aisle between the two masters. Above it, floating in mid-air, was a large silver key, its handle encrusted in rubies. It revolved slowly, giving off flashes of light.

The three masters turned in my direction and bowed – but not to me, to someone behind me. I turned, and there was another Greybeard. His hood was far back on his head so I could see his face. It was incredibly old and reflected that same deep calm the other masters had, but it was one I did not recognize. He spoke to me.

"Dovahkiin, you have done well. You face one more test of your Voice, and one final challenge, then my Horn will be yours. You have only to take the key and open the chest you see on the altar. Do you understand?"

"I think so, Master Jurgen," I said. "But it must be more difficult than that, am I right?"

"Indeed," he said. "You must reach the key before Master Bolli, who stands before the altar. Since you know only the first word of Whirlwind Sprint, he will refrain from using it. You, however, should attempt to reach the key by whatever means necessary. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Let the race begin when the key drops to the pedestal."

I turned to face the pedestal and prepared myself to spring and shout *Wuld* at the same time. But Master Bolli just stood there calmly with his hands clasped before him. Then the key dropped and the race was on.

I lunged forward as Bolli took a slow and deliberate step toward the key. Then from behind me I heard a shout. It was not *Fus-Ro-Dah*, though it shook me just the same, it was so strong. "*Tiid-Klo-Ul!*" I heard. Time-Sand-Eternity. The Slow Time shout. Suddenly I was frozen. I was straining to run but my arms and legs barely moved. Across from me, Bolli continued his slow and deliberate stroll down the aisle to the key. He would reach it in less than a minute while I moved imperceptibly.

I tried to breathe, to call on the power of the sky, but my breathing was just as slow as my running. Only my thoughts moved apace with the rest of the temple's occupants. I gave a silent prayer. "Akatosh, Master of Time, if you hear me, remove this shout and let time return to normal." It was a weak appeal, but it was the best I could do in the time available. Master Bolli was more than halfway to the key.

Whirlwind Sprint was the only way I could beat Bolli now, slowed time or no. I couldn't utter the
shout, but I could think it. "Wuld!" I said to myself. I concentrated on the word as hard as I could, tried to let its meaning suffuse my being. I closed my eyes, because the sight of Master Bolli reaching toward the key was too distracting. "Wuld!" I tried to hear in my mind as loud as if I had actually shouted.

When I opened my eyes, my hand rested on the key. Master Bolli’s spectral hand was only inches away. Then he withdrew it, folded his hands together, and bowed. It was strange – I never felt the lurch of speed I had felt the two other times I had used the shout. Maybe Akatosh had intervened after all.

I turned back to Master Jurgen. "Very good, Dovahkiin. You have the key, and the way to the chest is clear." Then he disappeared. I looked down at the key in my hand. I had only to walk a score of paces and my quest would be fulfilled. I would have the horn to deliver to High Hrothgar. I turned and looked up the aisle. The three other masters had disappeared as well. The way really was clear. Yet somehow it seemed too easy. Had I really demonstrated my mastery of the Way of the Voice?

Then I heard a sound from behind me, in the temple's nave. I turned to look. The light was dimmer there, and it was hard to see, but it seemed I was no longer looking at the nave. Instead, I saw a house – my house, the one where I grew up.

A woman's voice called from the shadows beside it. "Deirdre, darling, is it really you?"

I knew that voice, but it couldn't be. I moved toward that end of the temple, but it was still difficult to see into the gloom. Then a man's voice: "Deirdre, lass, we've missed you."

Now I could see two figures. "Mother? Father?" I called. I took two more steps and finally I could see that it really was my parents. There was my father, with his long blonde hair and beard. He was dressed in the finely woven tunic he always wore on his trading trips. My mother stood next to him, petite, with dark hair. I saw her kind eyes and remembered how many times they had gazed gently down at me, as she soothed some hurt. I almost sobbed.

"Yes, dearest, we're here," she said. They took a step toward me.

I was about to run to them when another voice called out. "You there, Silver-Tongue!" A man stepped out from behind a stone column and I recognized Osmer's father. He was carrying a torch. Behind him Osmer cowered with his hands out, as if trying to restrain him, but afraid to do more than plead. "What kind of Breton witchcraft have you brought to our village? You should have seen what your daughter did to my son!"

"No, father, it's all right," called Osmer. I had never heard his voice sound so timid before.

Then there were more shouts and a crowd of men appeared behind Osmer and his father. "Breton witch!" they yelled. Then I saw my father turn to my mother and push her toward the house. I couldn't hear what he said to her over the shouting. Nor could they hear me as I shouted, "No, not that way, run to me!" It all looked so real, I wanted to run to them and save them. But something held me back and I just watched in horror as my mother disappeared inside.

Father turned back to the mob and began arguing with Osmer's father. I couldn't make out the words, but soon another of the Nords approached Father from one side and knocked him to the ground. Father was tall, but not as tall and strong as the woodcutters, and they were many. He got up and ran into the house.

I could not watch what I knew would happen next. The yelling of the men grew louder and angrier as they debated what to do. They passed a jug of some type of alcohol around between them. When
the first torch flew through a window, I turned my back on the scene, covering my ears. Now I saw that four spectral masters stood before the altar. There was no escaping the vision that way. I dropped to my knees and buried my face in my lap, stopping my ears with my arms. But still the screams I had heard in my nightmares came through, more real than I could ever have imagined, until I drowned them with my own screams.

Some time must have passed because quiet had come to the temple once again. The only sounds were those of the last flames flickering in the remains of the house. I rose and turned to look. I had no fear of it – the image was already seared into my mind. Then I saw three figures approaching – Osmer's father and two of his friends, even larger than he. Somehow, they were able to come closer to me than my parents had been able to do. They stopped just three paces away.

"This is all your fault, you Breton slut," Osmer's father almost spat at me. "You bewitched him! You lured my son away from his work and then you tried to kill him! Your foreign sorcery didn't work, and now your parents are dead. But it should have been you!"

His face was nearly purple with rage, and my own anger had risen to meet his. I was breathing hard, and not in a way that let in the serenity of the sky. My heart was beating fast and my fists were clenched. Just a shout, just a spike of ice, or a burst of flame, and my parents would be avenged. I was so angry I felt I could tear the three of them apart with my bare hands. And they were only three steps away.

I'll never know if I truly mastered my anger that day. Did I really find balance with my dragon nature, or did I simply realize that this was just a vision, and not my parents' murderers? Whatever the reason, my heart's beating finally slowed and I drew a deep breath. I turned to look up at the patch of sky visible through the hole in the roof. "Kynareth give me strength," I breathed. I took three more breaths, ignoring the men taunting me for my cowardice. Then I turned back to them.

"No, go away," I said in an even voice. "I will have justice upon you another day." The men said nothing, but simply vanished.

I turned back to the Greybeards' specters. "Was that really necessary?" I asked, though I knew I wouldn't get an answer. I realized my cheeks were wet and I tried to dry them on my sleeve. Surely I've passed the final test, I thought. As if confirming it, the masters bowed toward me, then vanished.

Key in hand, I went around the altar and approached the dais where the chest sat. Only then did I notice that the light from the windows and the openings in the roof had grown dimmer. What rays there were slanted in from the west, casting shadows far into the temple.

Climbing the steps of the dais, I quickly found the lock on the front of the chest. I inserted the key. It turned easily, with a gratifying tumbling of blocks, and the chest's lid popped ajar. I took a moment to admire the intricately inlaid engravings of shapes both dragon and human. Then I lifted the lid.

The chest was empty, save for a single piece of paper.
"Well," Lydia asked, "did you get it? Do you have the horn?"

I leaned against the arched opening in Ustengrav's outer wall and shook my head, holding the note out to her. Something about enduring the Greybeards' shouts, or perhaps the confrontation with my parents' killers, had sapped my strength.

"'Dragonborn, I need to speak with you,'" Lydia read from the message. "'Urgently. Meet me at the Blade and Dragon in Windhelm. Ask for the upstairs room. A friend.' What does this mean? Do we have to go to Windhelm now?"

"Yes," I said, "and as soon as possible. Whoever left the note must have the horn, though they don't..." Suddenly my legs felt weak and the world began to spin.

"Deirdre? Are you all right?" Lydia said, reaching out to steady me.

"Just tired," I said, "but we must keep moving."

"I'm guessing you didn't eat while you were in there, did you?" I shook my head. "That and whatever you went through – it must have been a trial, if it was anything like what I saw out here."

I shook my head. "No, worse."

"Well no wonder you're feeling weak. Could you eat anything?"

My belly felt empty, but also nauseated. "I don't think so," I said.

"I could set up camp, build a fire. You look awfully pale."

"No," I said, as sternly as I could. "I want to be away from here."

"All right, I know where we can go. Can you ride?"

She had to help me to my horse, and then I didn't have the strength to lift my foot to the stirrup.

"You can't ride on your own like that, my thane. Why don't we ride double and lead your horse?"

She wrapped my cloak about me before boosting me onto her mount. Even then it took all the strength I had to get myself into a sitting position. Then she got up behind me, grasping my horse's lead in one hand. She put the other arm around me to keep me from falling off, then pointed the horses eastward.

In a short time we were back in snow country, yet I began to feel warmer.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.
"To that Stormcloak camp we saw on the way here. It's not more than an hour away, and they'll have a fire and food."

I wanted to argue, but I was too tired. I didn't want to get involved with the Stormcloaks, but the thought of a warm fire and something hot to drink was too enticing. My head dropped back on Lydia's shoulder and I slipped into a dream. It must have been a pleasant one because I awoke with a smile on my lips. I wished I could remember what I had dreamt of – so many of my dreams had been disturbing of late.

I opened my eyes to see a fire blazing in a little hollow below us. A guard was challenging us. "We are travellers seeking shelter," Lydia responded. "My friend needs food and warmth."

"Well, come forward where I can see you," said the guard, lifting his torch to see us better in the dim light of dusk. He nodded toward Lydia. "You look all right, but we don't much hold with mages."

"Does she look like she's in any condition to hex a band of soldiers?"

The guard looked at us uncertainly. "Very well then," he said finally. "Let's take you to the captain and see what she says."

The captain, a short Nord woman wearing a cuirass that was too large for her, was more amenable – at first. She soon had us in prized spots before the fire, with steaming bowls of venison broth in our hands. She offered me a dram of brandy, which I declined. My strength was returning somewhat with the warmth and the food, but I doubted I could hold strong drink. As I began to regain my senses, I noticed that most of the camp's soldiers had gathered around the fire and were eyeing us watchfully. Only the cook went about his business, stirring a large pot over the fire.

Then the captain began to question us, and we had trouble convincing her we weren't Imperial spies. I let Lydia do most of the talking, as my head was still swimming.

"Come on, Captain," broke in the cook. "Can't you see they're adventurers? Back from plundering Ustengrav, I bet."

"Ustengrav!" exclaimed one of the other soldiers. "That place is haunted!"

"No more than most, I reckon," the cook replied. There was something wistful in his tone as he turned to us. "I used to be an adventurer like you. Then I took an arrow in the knee. Now look at me."

"But you make an excellent broth, my friend," Lydia said. "It's much appreciated."

"Yes, well, this is all very nice," said the captain, "but the title of adventurer can cover a multitude of sins."

Finally I mentioned Ralof's name, and told her I had escaped Helgen with him.

"That's right, Captain," one of the soldiers broke in. "When I was in Windhelm last, Ralof told me the story. Said he escaped with a blonde-haired Breton lass. Everyone else is calling her the Assassin of Helgen, after the tale Galmar told. But not Ralof. He hoped she would join our cause. Couldn't seem to stop talking about her, really. Come to think of it, he mentioned she had a tattoo around her eye. He couldn't get over how she had marred such a pretty face."

Lydia elbowed me in the ribs and I turned to see her grinning at me. At least her sense of humor was back, even if it was to tease me.
"Is Ralof still in Windhelm?" I asked. "That's where we're bound."

"Last I heard," said the soldier. "Anyway, Captain, her story matches Ralof's."

With that the captain agreed to let us go on our way, as long as I promised to report to Ulfric when we arrived in Windhelm. "Will you take some rest here?" she asked.

Lydia was ready to say yes, but I interrupted her. "No, we must press on. Our business in Windhelm will not wait." Ustengrav had taken its toll on me, but I knew we must hasten to find the horn. I felt I had regained enough strength to sit my horse for a few hours.

And so we left the Stormcloak camp an hour after we arrived. The captain still didn't trust us completely, and sent an escort part way with us, on the pretext of seeing us safely past the bandits who had taken over Fort Dunstad. It was pleasant riding cross-country through the snow with Masser and Secunda shining bright, Lydia bantering with the soldiers in that easy way she had. Once our escort turned back, she reined in beside me. We were back on the road east of Fort Dunstad, and our horses' hooves clopped along the cobbled roadway.

"It seems we're killing two birds with one stone by going to Windhelm," she said. "You'll get the horn, and get to see Ralof as well." I didn't need the moons-light to tell she was grinning at me.

"I do want to see Ralof," I said, "but he's a friend, nothing more."

"In Windhelm they said he was quite the ladies' man – strong, good looking, red hair. I'd like to lay eyes on him myself. That is, if you're sure he's not spoken for."

It had been long since I had felt jealousy – not since the days when two of my playmates would go off on their own, abandoning me. But this was a grown-up jealousy. Was this the only way to know I was in love – by growing jealous when someone else threatened to take my loved one away? But no, I was sure I didn't love Ralof, more than I would love a brother.

"Do as you please, I care not," I said, though I felt something cold in me as I said it. Then to change the subject, I said, "Really, we may kill three birds by going to Windhelm."

"Really? What's the third one?"

"I would look on this Ulfric, see if he is deserving of the esteem in which Ralof holds him. He seemed little worthy in Helgen."

"I thought you wanted to avoid getting caught up with the Stormcloaks?"

"I do, yet I feel that something began on that day in Helgen, and I must see it through. Too, I promised the captain that I would report to Ulfric when we arrived in the city."

Then we rode in silence, but this time it was a comfortable one, befitting the quiet of the night. Our horses clopped along the roadway and an owl or other night-bird called occasionally, but other than that, all was still. Occasionally I would remark on a flutter of luna moths or the moons-light striking the peaks in a particular way.

If I had hoped to journey all the way to Windhelm that night, it was not to be. No matter the urgency of my errand, I found my eyelids growing heavy and my shoulders sagging. By midnight I could hardly sit my horse, and I was ravenously hungry. Lydia looked tired as well. When the sign outside the Nightgate Inn, with its crescent moon and stars, came into view, we urged our horses ahead.
The place was as rustic as I remembered it, little more than a fishing lodge that happened to sit on the main road between Windhelm and the cities to the west. A pier jutted out into the waters of a small pond, and fish were strung out on drying racks nearby. I went inside to see about a room while Lydia tended the horses.

Inside, the place was equally crude. A plaque of a fish was mounted on the wall behind the small wooden bar, and various bits of fishing gear adorned the hall. There were two tables and a firepit, but not much else. The sleeping rooms adjoining the main hall lacked doors. The same drunkard I had seen last time sat in his usual spot. But tonight a lone woman sat at the one remaining table. She had dark hair and an exotic look, and wore a fine dress that could only have come from Skyrim's capital, Solitude.

Hadring, the innkeeper, greeted me as I entered. "Welcome, stranger!" I felt comfortable enough that I threw back my hood, and then he recognized me. "Ah, it's you!" he said. "Deirdre, wasn't it? I love getting repeat visitors. Have you come over the Wayward Pass again? You're late enough."

"No, from the west," I said, leaning on the bar top. "I'm headed to Windhelm this time."

"Windhelm! Well, you certainly get around. Weren't you travelling to Whiterun last time? In a bit of a hurry if I remember." Lydia entered just then. "I see your choice of travel companions has improved," Hadring said, smiling at her. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

"This is Lydia, my housecarl." As I turned to introduce her, I noticed the woman at the table was staring at us.

"Housecarl, eh? Haven't you come up in the world? And Talos strike me if I can remember the last time we had three women here at the same time. Maybe I'll have to put doors on the rooms after all. Your fellow traveller there gave me quite an earful about the lack of privacy." He gestured in her direction. She was still looking at us curiously. "My grandfather never put doors on when he built the place, so I figured, why should I? But maybe times are changing and we'll get more business. Lot of people moving about what with the Civil War and rumors of dragons. Now what can I get you? Feel free to order anything you like – as long as it's fish!"

It was a difficult decision, but we finally settled on the fish, along with ale for Lydia and mead for me. I paid for our meals and two single rooms, then we took our drinks over to the dark-haired woman's table. "Do you mind if we sit here?" I asked.

"Oh, sure," the drunkard called in our direction. "Ignore an old man. What's wrong with my company, I ask you?"

"Pipe down, Fultheim," Hadring called from the bar. "You haven't had a bath in a month and you stink of ale. Who would want to sit with you?" Fultheim went back to grumbling into his mug.

"It would be a pleasure," the woman said, and we both sat down heavily on the bench opposite her. I tried to place her accent – it reminded me of Cyrodiil. Up close she seemed slightly older than Lydia.

"I'm Deirdre, and this is Lydia," I said. A basket with sliced bread sat in the center of the table. I reached for a piece without asking, I was that hungry.

"I heard!" the woman said. "I'm Malukah. I'm so glad you're here. If you let me play a song for you, I get tonight's room and board for free."

"Really?" Lydia asked through a mouthful of bread. "This place looks too small to have a tavern
singer, especially one dressed so nice."

"Yes, certainly, but I'm just passing through," she said. "I'm headed for Windhelm. I come from the Bard's College in Solitude, and I've been going from town to town along the way, playing for my room and board."

"We'd love to hear a song," I said as Hadring brought our food over. "It's not every day we get to hear a true bard."

"Oh, good," she said. "Let me get my lute." We tucked into our food as she got up from the table.

Malukah returned from her room with a strange type of lute whose design I'd never seen before. She took a position at the head of the hall in front of the bar and plucked a few notes. It was a special instrument indeed, more resonant than any lute I'd heard.

"This is a song that's being requested all over Skyrim," she said, "but I've given it a twist." She looked at me meaningfully, then launched into the opening notes of "The Dragonborn Comes." I nearly banged my head on the table. Not that again! I'd had enough of it in Whiterun. Why couldn't she just sing "Ragnar the Red"?

But then she began to sing and I forgot my objections. She had the most beautiful voice I'd ever heard, as sweet as Mara's and as resonant as the lute she played. I imagined this is how singers in Sovngarde would sound. In a less-skilled musician's hands the tune to the song sounded awkward, but Malukah smoothed its rough edges and made it a thing of beauty. A look of joy came over her face as she sang, and anyone could see that she had found her true calling. By the second verse, she had me convinced that I would be the end to the evil of all Skyrim's foes, whoever they turned out to be. Tired as I had been, my fatigue lifted.

Then, just where the song usually ended, she brought in a different melody. There were no words, just the purity of her voice. She must have learned some sort of musical magic at the Bard's College, because instead of one singer, she now sounded like two, then four. It was as if an Aetherial choir filled the small inn.

New lyrics came in here too, but this time they were in Dovah. "Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, naal ak zin los vahrin." She went on like that for another verse, and her eyes bored into mine until I had to look away. She finished and both Hadring and Fultheim began to applaud loudly. Even Balagog, the Orc who lived in the basement, came up to give a cheer. I could only sit there, stunned. Lydia looked over at me, no doubt wondering what was happening.

"Would you like to hear another?" Malukah asked. "Maybe 'The Age of Oppression'? Or there's a new one written by one of my fellow bards, 'Legends of the Frost'."

I stood and went up to her. "No," I said. "But tell me what those words meant."

"You mean you don't speak the dragon tongue?" she asked, looking a bit surprised.

"No, why do you think I would? Please tell me what the song says."

"I can do better than tell you. Come to my room."

We followed her into the small chamber, and now I too wished for doors that we could shut behind us. As soon as we were inside, she put down her lute and turned on me. "I am surprised you are travelling openly … Dovahkiin!" she said in a low voice.

"How did you know me? Who are you?" Next to me, Lydia was loosening her dagger in its sheath.
"Don't worry, I am one who means you well – luckily for you. But I could have been anyone. An Imperial agent, or a spy for the Thalmor."

I looked her up and down. "I ask again, how do you know me? And why do you think anyone is after me?"

"Reckless girl! You've made too much of a name for yourself to go about undisguised – especially with that tattoo on your face. The Thalmor have broadsheets with your name and likeness all over Solitude and the western holds. Jarl Balgruuf was either a hero or a fool not to turn you over to them. Now the elves want his head too."

"But why do they want me?" I asked, though of course I knew.

"Officially, you're wanted for undermining the White-Gold Concordat and organizing an attack on a band of justiciars. The interesting part is that they want you alive."

"And the Imperials?"

"They were willing to overlook your escape from their executioner, but now they suspect you will side with Ulfric. And you had to give them your name at Helgen. Then Deirdre Morningsong is named Thane of Whiterun after some strange event with a dragon, and the Greybeards call the Dragonborn to High Hrothgar. They can't risk a power like yours going over to Ulfric's side."

"How do you know all this?"

"I sing at both the Winking Skeever in Solitude and at the Blue Palace. I hear a lot of talk. Bards travel about and bring news as well. The rest I put together on my own. When you walked in here, a young, blonde, Breton woman with a peculiar face tattoo, calling yourself Deirdre, and accompanied by your housecarl Lydia, it was easy to spot. No, you can be sure the Thalmor know exactly who you are, and they are even more afraid of you than the Imperials."

"Why is that?"

"They cannot bear to see another Ysmir rising to power. They are quite content to let this skirmish between Ulfric and the Empire go on indefinitely, but you are the one who can unite Skyrim against the Aldmeri Dominion. And not just Skyrim, but all of the Empire."

"Another Ysmir? You must be joking."

"I assure you I am not. It has been just ten days since you revealed yourself, but already the true Nords in Solitude whisper that you are Talos come again, in woman's form."

I mulled this for a long moment. "But I just want to stop the dragons, to keep Alduin from…"

"So it's true then? Alduin is the dragon that has returned? Akatosh save us!"

"Yes, it seems so. But how could you know about Alduin?"

"It's in the song. You wanted to know what the lyrics meant. Here, let me show you." She went to her travelling bag and pulled out a scroll. When she unrolled it for me I saw it was in Dovah, with Common Tongue translations side by side. It was much longer than the one verse she had sung for us.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.
"The master at my college discovered it ages ago in a barrow. He has labored over its translation, making many trips to High Hrothgar, where they know Dovahbest. He completed it only recently."

I quickly found the verse about Alduin:

And the Scrolls have foretold, of black wings in the cold,
That when brothers wage war come unfurled!
Alduin, Bane of Kings, ancient shadow unbound,
With a hunger to swallow the world!

"Yes, that's the prophecy," I said. "Do you know what it means, 'to swallow the world'?"

"He and his dragon followers will kill many and destroy their homes, maybe even returning us to the days of the Dragon Lords. It would be awful."

"No, worse," I said. "For the prophecy speaks of four towers. These are not just any towers – they support the very existence of Mundus. Three have already fallen – the Brass, the Red, and the White. That leaves one, the Snow Tower or the Throat of the World. If Alduin and his dragons can break that, our entire world will be destroyed. That is the meaning of World Eater."

"By the Nine, you have to save us!" she exclaimed. She pointed to the next verse, and sang the words softly. They spoke of Alduin being silenced forever. It ended:

Fair Skyrim will be free from foul Alduin's maw,
Dragonborn be the savior of men!

"So you see," I said. "It is Alduin I must face. That's quite enough, thank you, without also going to war with the Thalmor and the Empire."

"Ah," she said, "but you skipped this part, the chorus: 'Dragonborn, by his honor is sworn, to keep evil forever at bay.' That's the evil of all Skyrim's foes, remember? And if anyone is evil, it's the Thalmor."

"You sound like you actually want to help me. I thought everyone in Solitude was on the Imperials' side."

"I'm not from Solitude, as you might guess from my accent. I'm from Bravil, far to the south in Cyrodiil. Titus Mede was none too gentle with our city after it declared independence during the Stormcrown Interregnum at the beginning of this Era. My whole family was nearly wiped out back then, and we bear the grudge to this day."

"Then weren't you glad when the Aldmeri Dominion sacked the Imperial City?"

"How can you say such a thing? The Thalmor are far worse than the Medic emperors. Our problem is not with the Empire. It's that there hasn't been a legitimate ruler since Martin Septim."

"Wait," I said. "You're not saying…"

"Skyrim is not the only place where Talos is revered. My family, and many more throughout southern Cyrodiil, will not accept a ruler who is not Dragonborn. It's in the covenant Akatosh made with humans."
"But that covenant was broken with the Amulet of Kings."

"We knew Akatosh would not abandon us. For two hundred years our people waited, through the chaos of the Interregnum, through the depths of crime and violence to which the Empire brought our city, through the Great War. And still we waited. We could not abandon hope. At last Akatosh has heard us, because here you are."

I swallowed hard. This was too much to take in. "No, that is asking too much," I said.

"It is your destiny."

"Why were you in Solitude anyway, if you hate Imperials so much?"

"I came to study at the Bard's College, of course. And it was a welcome relief after the chaos that has befallen my city under the skooma trade. A secret plot of the Empire to weaken us, many believe. But I have grown sick of the Imperials and the Thalmor strutting about. General Tullius makes me ashamed that I am Cyrodilli with the way he treats the Nords and other races, and his groveling to the Thalmor. Too, it would be dangerous to sing this new song openly in Solitude. I am but a starving student, and I need to earn some gold. I hope by taking this song to Windhelm I can make my name and enough gold to return home. They can't have heard of your return so soon. I will be the one to bring them this news of our renewed hope."

"Please," I said. "If you want to help me, tell the people of Windhelm that I want nothing to do with the Civil War, but only to stop the dragons."

"Yet to do that, I would have to admit that I had met you, and that would be dangerous – for both of us." She thought for a moment, looking at the scroll. "I will emphasize the parts of the song that focus on Alduin, and omit the others that hint at a greater destiny. But one day I hope to add new verses of your victories over the Thalmor and this false emperor."

"That should be enough. If the Imperials and the Thalmor become convinced that Alduin threatens all Mundus, maybe they will let me go about my work."

"I'm afraid they view Alduin as little more than a Nord fairy tale. They know for certain that one dragon came back and one dragon was killed. They doubt the tales that there are more."

"But we saw one just the other day, flying in the distance. There can be no doubt that the dragons are returning, and even the Thalmor must realize that eventually."

"Until they do, promise me that you will be more discreet. I don't know what errand you are on, but I could have been anyone. I could have kept my suspicions to myself, discovered your destination, then handed the information over to Thalmor spies."

"You are right," I said. "It was foolish of me. In future, we will keep our faces hidden, use false names, and avoid towns and inns where we can."

"That is good. It would be a tragedy to lose our savior to the Thalmor before your work is even begun."

"I will try," I said, "but at some point I must go where the dragons are, no? If that takes me to a western city, so be it."

Malukah just shook her head, as if she didn't know how to counsel me.

"Would you like to travel with us tomorrow? Or should I say, later today? We'll be off at dawn."
She shook her head. "We bards never rise that early. Perhaps I will see you in Windhelm."

With that, Lydia and I retired to our rooms. I spent a sleepless night going over and over all that Malukah had said. I must have dozed at some point in the wee hours, because when I awoke in darkness I heard someone else's breathing in my room. I cast magelight and saw that it was Lydia, asleep on my floor, axe at her side. After Malukah's warning, she was taking no chances.

As late as we had gone to our beds, we did manage to leave just after dawn the next morning. We had not gone far when we came to a meeting of roads. A lone Khajiit in a traveller's cloak stood there, as if awaiting us.

"Greetings, friends," he said as we approached. "You look weary this morning. This one thinks you're in need of a lift."

"A lift?" I asked. He seemed the one who needed a lift, as I saw no horse nearby.

"Yes," he said. "You will find only the finest skooma here."

"That stands against the High King's doom, does it not?" I asked, intending to ride on.

His attitude changed instantly. "Ah, a snitch, eh? You're not going to report me to the guard!" He drew a sword from beneath his cloak. Now I saw he also carried a bow slung across his back. I'm not sure what he hoped to accomplish. He must have mistaken us for two unarmed, helpless women, since our cloaks covered our weapons and Lydia's armor. It would have been a minor incident if not for Lydia's bravado.

She leapt from her horse, drawing her axe from its scabbard at the same time. "You never should have come here, fur-face!" she yelled. "Skyrim is for the Nords!"

I had readied a fear spell to cast at the witless skooma dealer, but now I gaped at my housecarl. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. Lydia's bigotry had been there all along if only I had paid more attention. There was the way her family had treated me. They must have brought her up the same way. And then there was her treatment of my college friends, and the way she over-looked Lars' roughness. "No matter who her parents were," was all the defense she had been able to muster when he was accosting me. I felt anger rising in me. I didn't stop to think that I was perhaps being over-sensitive, having so recently relived the day when those awful words were directed at my parents and me.

As I sat my horse reflecting on all this, the fight had begun. Fortunately for the hapless skooma dealer, he was capable with a sword, or Lydia would have cloven his skull by now. Neither of them had yet to land a blow.

"Come, my thane," Lydia called. "I could use some small measure of help here!"

"Well, if it's help you want," I said, more to myself than to her. Then I cast the fear spell, not really caring which one of them it hit. Luck was with Lydia, however, as the glowing red ball of light skimmed past her and hit the Khajiit full in the chest. He turned and ran up the road in the direction of Winterhold, screaming, "No, no more, I cannot best you!"

Lydia turned to me, surprised. "That was close, my thane!"
I jumped down from my horse and ran up to her. "And it will be a lot closer," I said, jabbing her in
the shoulder for emphasis, "the next time I hear you utter words so disgusting" – *jab* – "bigoted" –
*jab* – "and vile!" – *jab*

She drew back, hurt and confused. "But that … it doesn't mean anything. Those are just words we
yell when we go into battle, or any fight. I never thought about what they meant."

"That's what's wrong with you, Lydia – you never think! Those are just the words my parents heard
when the filthy Nords burned them to death!" Her face, flushed from the fight, went pale then.
"What a mistake I made to think you were any different!" I jabbed her again in the shoulder, but it
didn't seem to be enough. My anger had risen and I doubted all the breathing in High Hrothgar
could keep it in. The words were right there, waiting to be shouted. With an effort of will I made
myself turn away and climb back on my horse.

"What are you doing?" Lydia called to me.

"It's time we parted ways, housecarl," I said through clenched teeth, almost spitting out the last
word. Then I dug my heels into my horse's flanks and we galloped down the road east.

"No," I could hear Lydia calling. "Wait! I'm sorry…" Then her words were lost in the clatter of
hooves and the rush of the wind.

I don't know how far we galloped, but eventually my horse tired and I let it slow to a walk. I could
barely see the road through my tears anyway. I turned the horse off the road and let it have its head
as we wandered down a shallow draw. I lost track of where we were going, seeing nothing but an
image of Lydia riding away toward Whiterun – I had sent her away, hadn't I? Finally the horse
found a trickle of meltwater in a small stream and began to drink. I got down and sat on the snowy
bank and buried my head in my arms.

Of course it was easy for Lydia to track us there. I think now that I must really have wanted her to
find me – I had done nothing to cover the horse's tracks, despite telling myself I never wanted to
see her again. I heard her horse crunching through the snow, then Lydia dismounting, but I didn't
look up.

"My thane, I am so sorry," she said as she approached. Then I felt her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" I exclaimed, jerking away. I looked up at her and saw only concern in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to…" she began, but I cut her off.

"I never told you how my parents died, did I?" I asked. She shook her head. Then I told her – all of
it, of Osmer's strong grip and his rubbing himself against me, the nascent shout that blasted him
away from me, the hateful tones of his father as he called me a Breton witch, the shouts of "You
never should have come here! Skyrim is for the Nords!" The sight of our house burning, my
parents' bodies being dragged out of it. The grief and anger I nurtured for three years until I was
ready to return to Skyrim to take my revenge – not just on my parents' killers but on Nords, any
Nords. Of getting my face tattooed in token of the depth of my resolve, every prick of the
tattooist's needle an inkling of the pain I hoped to inflict on Skyrim's people. Then my capture by
the Imperials and the dragon interrupting my plans. I learned then that there were bigger troubles in
the world than my own single story, that there was blind rage that had killed my parents and then
there was the true wickedness I had seen in the dungeons of Helgen. I told her of Ralof and Gerdur
showing me that Nords could be good and kind – which I should have known, as Sven Silver-
Tongue's daughter – and that maybe my life had a better purpose than revenge.
Before I was halfway through my story, Lydia's cheeks were wet with tears. Meanwhile, I had cried all mine out. By the time I finished she was weeping openly and took a moment to compose herself. "My thane – Deirdre – if I had known…"

She reached out to hug me but I held up my hand to stop her. "What you and the rest of your kind need to learn is that all people have the same feelings. It matters not whether you're a Nord, a Breton, a Dunmer or a Bosmer, a Khajiit or an Argonian, we all weep over the death of a loved one. What the Atmorans felt on the Night of Tears, the Snow Elves no doubt felt when the Nords pushed them out of Skyrim. Everyone feels the same pain. I want it to stop – all of it."

"Yes, but how?" she asked, looking hopeless.

"I don't know, but I mean to start with these dragons. If I can, I'll make sure that Huldi and Harry are the last children to lose their parents to the beasts. After that, I don't know."

"My thane, don't send me away, I will try to be better."

She reached out to touch me again, but I grasped her hand and held it to my forehead. "There, do you feel those ridges?" I said. "Those furrows in my brow come from my Breton side, and from the mer before that. You don't know how many times as a child I would sit in my room rubbing at them, trying to flatten them so I would look more like the beautiful Nord children in our village, the ones the adults were always calling pretty. I wanted to be called pretty too, not teased for my elvish features. My mother would find me rubbing at my forehead and I couldn't even look at her, I was so embarrassed."

I stood up. "If you esteem me – as I think you do – and if you respect me – as I think you do – then you must esteem and respect what is merish in me as well. And if you esteem and respect the mer in me, you will esteem and respect the Dunmer, the Bosmer, and yes, even the Altmer, and all peoples. Or, if not esteem and respect, at least show them the treatment you feel is due the Nords. For I will have no housecarl who harbors hatred and bigotry in her heart."

Lydia was crying again. "I will try to do better, my thane. I bear no ill will toward anyone, I promise you. It's just that, other peoples are so different. Maybe I just need to be around them more."

"I have heard that Windhelm is home to many Dunmer since the eruption of the Red Mountain, and many Argonians as well. It will be a good opportunity for you to practice your tolerance."

She brightened then. "You mean I can come with you? You're not sending me away after all?"

"Yes," I said. "You proved your value to me when you saved me from that archer at Valtheim Towers, and I may need you again." I could see the hurt in her eyes as she reacted to the coldness in my voice. "So you may continue to serve as my housecarl, as long as I never hear such vile words from your mouth, and you endeavor to banish all such feelings from your heart. For the time being, I feel it's best if we ride a bit apart. Perhaps you should take the lead, the better to guard me from danger."

I watched as she absorbed these words, mastering who knows what feelings. Then she went to one knee and took my hand. "It will be an honor, my thane," she said. "I will protect you with my life." Hurt as she was, she still said it in that same earnest way she had in Whiterun. I felt something flutter in my chest then, but I was determined not to let it show on my face. We mounted our horses and Lydia led up the slope. I followed behind, wondering how long this ice around my heart would last.
Windhelm

Chapter Summary

-- a nasty altercation -- Lydia makes amends -- an edifying tour -- an overheard conversation --

Up close, Windhelm was more imposing than when seen from afar, and its great age was even more apparent. While the city's walls were built of stout blocks of stone, ice had been working for centuries to accomplish what armies could not. Cycles of freeze and thaw had pried blocks loose, leaving gaping holes with hardy shrubs growing in the gaps. Ice clung to every eave and gutter, continuing the demolition. Yet the city somehow retained its impression of strength – its walls had been built of such a height and thickness that even in their decrepit state they seemed impregnable.

Towerimg mountains protected the city on the north, while the White River, now wide and deep near its mouth, guarded the south. As we crossed the massive walled bridge between the stables on the south bank and the city itself, I thought of the circuitous route I had taken to arrive here. My journey had begun near the headwaters of this very river, in that cart with Ulfric and Ralof. The waters flowing through Helgen on that day must have long since made their way past Windhelm, yet I was just now arriving here. Still, I must have known that my path would lead here one day, no matter how roundabout the route.

By rights, I shouldn't even be here, I told myself. I should be on my way to High Hrothgar, Horn of Jurgen Windcaller in hand. But the fates and whoever had written that note conspired to bring me here, where it seemed I was destined finally to take the measure of Ulfric Stormcloak. It was with mixed feelings that I watched the guard open the massive iron door to the city. Lydia stood stiffly beside me, the awkward silence of our journey still heavy upon us.

Within the city walls, the buildings were even more decrepit than without. Piles of rubbish lay in the streets and the stone walls were worn with age. Blocks fallen from those walls lay here and there. One featured a carven likeness of a dragon. It rested at an odd angle against the wall of Candlehearth Hall, the inn near the city gate. And now I saw that similar dragon heads topped the ends of every rooftop.

I had been seeing these dragon carvings all my life, yet they had always seemed mere decorations, relics of a long-forgotten, if not legendary, past. Now, the fact that the ancient Nords were dragon worshippers struck me with greater force than ever before. Not for them the divines over whom we fought our wars. They worshipped animals and the forces of nature, with dragons being the most powerful. Their dragon priests ruled the people alongside their kings, until the people rebelled, locking the priests away in ancient tombs at the end of the Dragon Wars, slaying the last of the dragons or driving them into hiding. It was odd to think that this city's ancient kings had worshipped beings with souls like my own.

My ponderings were interrupted by a man yelling from the steps of the inn. The object of his outrage was a female Dunmer. "You come here where you're not wanted, you eat our food, you pollute our city with your stink, and you refuse to help the Stormcloaks!"

I looked over at Lydia pointedly. She looked as angry as I felt.
"We haven't taken a side because it's not our fight," said the Dunmer.

Another Nord put in, "Hey, maybe the reason these gray-skins don't help in the war is because they're Imperial spies!"

"Imperial spies? Don't be absurd!" the woman replied.

The first Nord took a step closer to her. "Maybe we'll pay you a visit tonight, little spy. We got ways of finding out what you really are."

I couldn't stand to watch any more. "What's going on here? Why are you accosting this woman?" I demanded, approaching the Nord who had spoken first. He was dressed in old, dirty clothing, and his companion not much better. Both stank of ale, and it was not yet mid-day.

He turned on me and looked me up and down. "Woman? She's not a woman, she's just a gray-skinned she-elf. It's just like you outlanders to band together. You Bretons are as bad as her lot."

Then he looked at Lydia. "And what are you, a race traitor?"

"That's no way for a true Nord to behave," said Lydia. "You're a disgrace to our kind. And you will not speak to my th… my friend in that manner." Her hand was on her axe. I tried to calm her with a hand on her arm. This was no way to avoid attracting attention.

"Just leave the woman alone, and go on your way," I said to the Nord.

"Oh yeah, who's going to make me? Come on, let's fight. Bet you a hundred gold you don't land a punch. And none of that magic, neither."

I regarded him for a moment, thinking how easy it would be to cast a fear spell that would send him scurrying. But that would certainly draw a crowd.

Lydia stepped in. "She doesn't fight hand-to-hand, but I do. Let's make it two hundred gold, if you think you're man enough. I'll teach you some manners."

It wasn't much of a fight. The Nord looked strong, but the drink must have affected his timing. He went down after throwing a few futile punches. Lydia's skill was a thing of beauty – dodging and weaving to miss his swings, landing all of her blows – but the results were brutal. It took another minute for his friend to revive him.

"Wha' happened?" he asked, looking around blearily from his swollen eye.

"You lost the fight," said Lydia. "Now pay up. And don't forget you're not to bother the Dunmer, or it will go worse for you next time."

While Lydia retrieved her weapons, I went over to the elf and introduced myself, using my new travelling name, Fiona Pure-Spring.

"I'm Suvaris," she replied. "It looks like you've come to the wrong city. Windhelm is a haven of prejudice, narrow thinking, and bullies like those two."

"I have business here that I couldn't avoid. Why was that Nord giving you trouble?"

"Nothing new there. Most of the Nords don't appreciate our presence here, but Rolf is one of the worst. He likes to get drunk and roam the Gray Quarter late at night shouting insults and picking fights."
"The Gray Quarter?"

"We Dunmer arrived here as refugees after the Red Year. We had nowhere else to go. The Nords confined us to the eastern, lower portion of the city, and named it the Gray Quarter after the color of our skin. Such generosity, don't you think?"

Lydia spoke up. "Life here is hard for you, then?"

"I have it better than many of my kind. I have a good job with the Shatter-Shield clan's trading office on the docks, and I am one of the few Dunmer who dare enter the other quarters of the city. Many Dunmer have little or no work and spend their days on the streets or in the New Gnisis Corner Club, and their nights in the gutter. Some of the women make a living catering to the baser needs of men like Rolf."

"You mean … ?" I couldn't keep the look of shock off my face.

"Are you surprised at the hypocrisy of a man who will take his pleasure with a Dunmer while seeking to drive us out of Skyrim? Or does it shock you that the Dunmer would stoop to prostitution? That's just one sign of the depths to which this city has driven us. We do many of the city's dirtiest jobs, allowing the Nords to live in leisure. Yet still they treat us with contempt. So yes, for many of my kind life here is hard. Many wish they'd never left Morrowind, volcanic ash or no."

Lydia looked at me and then back at Suvaris. "Here," she said, holding out the bag of gold pieces Rolf had given her. "I don't want that lout's money. You may not be able to use it, but would you see that it goes to help your people?"

Suvaris couldn't have looked more surprised. "You're a rare kind of Nord!" she said. "Only Brunwulf Free-Winter has ever lifted a finger to help us, and never like this. Yes, I know two or three families who could desperately use this."

"I'm glad to be of help," Lydia said as Suvaris went on her way. She turned to me. "Should we go find the Blade and Dragon?"

"Trying to make amends for this morning are you?" I asked.

She grinned sheepishly. "Only partly. But it just seems unfair to make them live like that after what happened to their homeland. You have to believe me, my thane, those words I shouted earlier were just a battle cry, and I've never really thought about what they meant before."

"Well, I'm impressed, Lydia," I said. I was already beginning to regret my harsh treatment of her. I feared it would take years of study with the Greybeards to learn to control my anger. "But come, let's find this inn. We can't right all of Windhelm's wrongs, and I'm eager to meet whoever has this horn."

After asking for directions, we found the Blade and Dragon in the Market Quarter, next to the alchemist's shop. Its sign bore a katana – a thin, slightly curved type of sword I recognized from an illustration in *Mysterious Akavir* – crossed over the throat of a rearing dragon. Inside, we found a young Nord tending the bar.

"We're here for the upstairs room," I said to him.

He looked surprised. "Upstairs room? We don't … Ah, yes, the upstairs room! A common mistake. Our second floor is all used for storage. But we do have one room left down here, nice double bed and all. I'm sure travellers such as yourselves won't mind sharing."
I just looked at him, but Lydia spoke up. "That will be fine."

I paid the ten gold and the barkeep led us to the room.

"This is surprising," I said, closing the door on our host. "I imagined the horn's thief would be waiting for us."

"Maybe he'll show up later," Lydia suggested. "I know I could use some rest after the night and morning we had."

We couldn't have had more than four hours' sleep out of the last thirty. I could sorely use sleep myself, I thought.

Lydia saw me doubtfully eyeing the bed. "What, you don't have a problem sharing the bed do you? Are you still cross with me? I'll sleep on the floor if you insist."

"No, it's just that…"

"Ah, I forgot! You're an only child, you've never shared a bed, have you?"

I shook my head.

"It's fine, once you get used to it. Very common in the army, and in inns like these. I grew up sharing with my sister, so it's never bothered me. Just give me a shove if I start to snore." With that she got into the bed, armor, boots and all, and with her axe within easy reach. She slid all the way to one side, leaving plenty of room for me.

I sighed, then took off my boots and bracers and climbed in on my side. We were both soon fast asleep.

I awoke in mid-afternoon to find Lydia's arm flung across my shoulders. She was snoring lightly. As instructed, I gave her a push.

"Oh, beg your pardon, my thane," she said, sitting up. "I didn't mean to ... I must have rolled over in my sleep."

"It's all right," I said. I turned away from her, both to put on my boots and to hide my blushing. "Are you hungry? I'm half-starved." We had eaten only a couple of apples on the road.

"Yes," she said. "I wonder what they have here?"

"I was thinking of heading to that club Suvaris told us about in the Gray Quarter."

"What about Ralof?" she asked. "Don't you want to find him?"

"I do," I said, "but I know he'll ask me about joining the Stormcloaks, and before I have to answer that question, I want to see if what Suvaris said is true. Besides, you made some progress today, but you could use more experience with other peoples."

We made our way to the New Gnisis Corner Club in the Gray Quarter. As we progressed, descending to lower and lower levels of the city, the buildings became more dilapidated, with
beggars loitering here and there, Dunmer women and children, mostly. The higher levels of the city must have had an underground sewage system, but here it emptied into an open ditch running along the street. The stench was awful. A Dunmer woman came out of a building and emptied a night bucket into it.

Surprisingly, the Gray Quarter was the only area of the city making preparations for a dragon attack. We had seen no stores of water or other defenses in the Market Quarter or at the city gate. But here there was a constant stream of Dunmer carrying water in buckets from the docks and emptying them into every barrel and cistern they could find. Rows of buckets stood outside every building, no matter how shabby. The few city guards just looked on with disinterest.

We finally arrived at the club. I was glad to see that it was situated a level above the stench of the street. Inside, we found the barkeep in an animated conversation with a large Nord man in fur-lined battle gear.

"You're a war hero, Brunwulf," the Dunmer was saying. "Ulfric will listen to you."

"I promise you, Malthyr, I will speak with Ulfric," Brunwulf said. "But I can't promise it will do any good."

Then Malthyr looked up to greet his new patrons. "It's not every day that we have two Nords in the New Gnisis Corner Club at once, unless it's the guard here to harass us. And a Breton as well!"

"I hope you're not here to make trouble," Brunwulf said, eyeing Lydia and her weapons. "Are you one of them 'Skyrim is for the Nords' types?"

Lydia looked from Brunwulf to me. "Well, um … no, not really," she said. "I mean Skyrim is our home, but there's room for other people too."

We quickly fell into conversation with Brunwulf as Malthyr went to get our food. Brunwulf questioned us about who we were and where we were from. We were as evasive as possible, using our travelling names, Fiona and Gertrude (Trudi to her friends). Lydia tried to change the subject by turning the questioning on Brunwulf.

"So, you're a war hero?" She didn't need to feign her admiration for anyone who had achieved glory in battle.

Brunwulf looked Lydia up and down for a moment, eyeing her armor. "Aye, I fought in the Great War, and I didn't die. I killed many elves. Some say that makes me a hero, but there was no glory in it. It was just butchery, and what did it gain us? More war."

"So you atone for what you did in the war by helping the Dunmer?" I asked.

Brunwulf looked at me in surprise. "I suppose that could be it," he said. "I just think a true Nord should treat all people with honor and respect. That's a sign of our strength, not weakness."

"Well spoken," said Malthyr, bringing our food – hard sausages, fresh cheese and hard-tack bread – along with weak ale. "And Brunwulf's help is appreciated here in the quarter. He's the only Nord who will lift a finger to help us."

Then Malthyr told us the tale of his people's troubles since leaving Morrowind and of their grim life in the Gray Quarter. But it wasn't really necessary, since we had seen it for ourselves.

"But why does Ulfric keep you penned down here?" Lydia asked. "In Whiterun the Dark Elves and the Nords don't mix a lot, but the Dunmer can live where they want."
"Ulfric prefers that we live in squalor," Malthyr said. "He doesn't trust people he calls outsiders, and he thinks we'll just go away if life here is hard enough. And as hard as life is for us, you should visit the Argonians on the docks. They break their backs for a pittance, and the jarl won't even allow them into the city proper. Suvaris drives them pretty hard."

"Not Suvaris Atheron?"

Malthyr nodded.

"We met her when we came into the city this morning, and we stopped two Nords from mistreating her."

"Surprised that she treats the Argonians just as poorly as the Nords treat us? Excrement flows downhill, as they say. You should see where the sewer empties into the river near the docks. Hits the ice and solidifies into a giant mound of frozen you-know-what. And the Argonians have to live next to that filth. Still, the lizard people are hardly … human."

Malthyr didn't seem aware of the irony of his statement. "How do you expect anything to improve if you yourselves won't change?" I asked.

"Well, you have a point there," Malthyr said. Then he seemed to realize something. "Wait! Then you must be the ones Suvaris mentioned when she was in for her noon meal. I should have realized! Your generosity will not go amiss in the Gray Quarter!"

"Let's hope the generosity flows downhill as well as the excrement," I said. "Come, Trudi, let's investigate those docks." With that, we left the Corner Club. Malthyr wouldn't hear of us paying.

As we walked back up-hill to the dock gate, I reflected on Malthyr and Suvaris. This was Tamriel's problem – everyone had a complaint against everyone else, grievances that went back thousands of years, if not to the creation of men, mer, and the other peoples. Where would it end, if no one was willing to forgive past wrongs?

Malthyr was right about the docks. We left the city proper through another massive iron door, then descended a long flight of steps to the river side. Here were ships from Solitude and Dawnstar, and even Solstheim to the northeast across the Sea of Ghosts. The docks were heavily guarded, lest the Imperials attempt a surprise attack from warships disguised as trading vessels. Or maybe the guards were keeping an eye on the many Argonians scurrying about the docks, unloading and repairing the ships and the like.

We did not stay long, for it was clear we weren't welcome. That, and the stench of the nearby sewer outfall didn't tempt us to linger. The first Argonian we encountered, a male working at a whetstone, accosted us as we passed near.

"Do you need something?" he demanded. His scaled skin was green, and spikes grew from the top of his head, yet he was dressed in Nord fashion, with a simple tunic and boots. Perhaps the oddest thing about the Argonians was that, unlike all other peoples of Tamriel, their eyes were placed on the sides of their heads, allowing them to look in two directions at once.

Lydia looked at him with a mixture of revulsion and anger. I put my hand on her elbow to steer her past.

"Just looking around, friend," I said.

"I am far from being your friend, stranger," he replied with a hiss. "Look, we don't have much love for your kind down here. Probably best if you just left. And be careful – the docks can be slippery,
and the water is icy."

I could feel Lydia tensing, and I guided her away before she could say anything.

"How am I supposed to not judge him by his skin," Lydia demanded, "when he is so quick to judge us by ours?" I had no answer.

Farther down the dock we came to an old Argonian woman working at scraping a hide. "Greetings, strangers," she said as we approached.

"Hello," I said. "It's nice to find someone who is more friendly than that last fellow we met."

"You mean Neetrenaza? Yes, he has a large chip on his shoulder. But he is young. He has not yet learned that sometimes Fortune is with you and sometimes against you. It is true that Fortune has not favored us here in Skyrim. Me, I choose to be happy no matter what comes. My name is Shahvee," and she held out a clawed hand to shake.

"How can you accept conditions here so calmly?" I asked.

"Maybe it is payment for what my people did to the Dunmer of southern Morrowind after the Red Year. And that was payment for centuries of my people being enslaved by the Dunmer. As the saying goes, sometimes you're the master, sometimes you're the slave. But I know that happiness is in my own hands, no matter which way Fortune's wheel turns."

"That's remarkably wise," I said. "I wish I could live with such equanimity."

"Still," she said, "I pray that Fortune will shine on my people once again. It seems we have been in the gutter long enough."

"Best of luck, then," I said, and we took our leave. "You see, Lydia? People everywhere want the same things – a comfortable life free from fear and hatred."

"I suppose so," she said. "Except for those who want wealth and power."

"Yes, there are those," I agreed. But what about those who wanted revenge, I couldn't help thinking. Neetrenaza certainly seemed to want revenge against the Nords and the Dunmer. And was I any better?

"But they just look so strange, these Argonians," Lydia said as we passed through the city gate once more. "I can't stop thinking about that whenever I'm around them, and then I get nervous and can't say anything. It's hard to believe they can even speak our language. Have you ever heard them talking amongst themselves? It's little more than grunts, squeaks, and hisses."

"Yet I've heard that their language is as close to pure thought as possible," I said. "And they probably think we look strange too – no scales, hair on our heads, and we can't even breathe under water. But I don't think you'll find many Nords as wise as Shahvee."

"No, that's probably true," Lydia said. "It was nice, listening to her. I almost felt I could join the conversation … almost. You're so easy with everyone here. Where did you learn it?"

"It must have been travelling with my father. He dealt with all types and I watched how he treated them. He would try learning their languages, even Argonian. Sometimes they talked with me, too. Argonians, Khajiits, Redguards. They always had wonderful stories of their homelands."

I stopped and took Lydia by the arm, looking her in the eye. "Look, Lydia, I'm sorry I treated you
so harshly this morning. I was tired, and it was only yesterday that I heard those same Nord taunts hurled at my parents. I know you have a good heart, and I shouldn't blame you for your upbringing, where mine was so different. And I appreciate the effort you're making to see things my way."

"And I'm sorry I disappointed you, my thane. I will do whatever it takes to regain your respect and trust."

"Come," I said finally. "It's getting late. Let's find Ralof. I want to see what he thinks of all this."

Back in the city, we checked Candlehearth Hall, as it was the tavern most frequented by the Stormcloaks. They knew Ralof but they hadn't seen him. One of the drinkers guessed we'd find him in the barracks in the Palace of the Kings. "Or maybe out in the courtyard later tonight. The king … I mean the jarl is supposed to give a big speech."

We stopped back at the Blade and Dragon to see if we had any visitors. "No," said the bar-keep, "but I was sure you'd have had one by now."

"Why?" I asked. "Did you expect someone to come looking for us?"

He looked perplexed. "Can't say, really. Shouldn't have said as much as I did."

I was growing impatient. I should have been halfway to High Hrothgar with the horn by now. "Listen," I said, placing my hands flat on the bar and leaning forward. "We are here to meet someone on urgent business, and if you know anything about it, you'd best tell me now."

"All right, all right!" said the bar-keep, looking from me to Lydia and back again. "Someone was going to meet you here. Said you'd ask for the upstairs room. But Del … this person is away, I have no idea where, and that's the truth."

"When do you expect him back?" I asked.

"That I don't know either. You'll just have to be patient."

"Well, if this mysterious person comes in, we'll be up at the palace," I told him.

We made our way toward the palace through the northwest quarter known as the Valunstrad, with its well appointed houses belonging to the city's prosperous Nord families. It was quite a contrast from the Gray Quarter. The air was fresh, the snow sparkled white on the rooftops in the last rays of the sun, and the people looked prosperous and content.

Still, as we passed groups in the street, I heard worried talk of the dragon. Apparently, another one had been sighted south of the city just that morning. "We must go to Ulfric," one man was saying. "He must do something to protect his city."

"Maybe that's what tonight's speech is about," said another.

"Ach," said a third. "Just another speech telling us 'now is the time for war,' I'll wager."

"But this is a travesty! Even the Dunmer are more prepared for the dragon than we are!"

We passed through a long, arched passageway into the courtyard of the Palace of the Kings, once
known as the Palace of Ysgramor. The high walls of the castle loomed on all sides. The large iron doors were to our left. Above them the main palace ascended in six tiers constructed from massive stone blocks and arches. It made me feel small. And I had thought Dragonsreach imposing!

To our right, workers scurried back and forth, lighting torches and putting the finishing touches on a speaker's platform in a gap in the palace's south wall, the oldest part of the city. Ancient tombs were set within it, bearing the early kings of Skyrim, Harald on one side, Olaf One-Eye on the other. The dates of their reign and the inscriptions were so faded I couldn't read them. Maybe the first building blocks of this palace had been laid by Ysgramor himself, I thought. Windhelm, not Solitude, had once been the seat of Skyrim's kings. That same throne – the Throne of Ysgramor – was the one now occupied by Ulfric. And I was about to enter this ancient and imposing building. I hoped we could find Ralof and leave. If I had to meet Ulfric, I wanted to speak with my friend first.

I stated our business to the guard and he opened the large metal-plated doors to the palace. They looked as if they could withstand armies. "Wait here in the hall," said the guard, "and lay your weapons by the door. I will send a runner to find Ralof. No outsiders are allowed in the barracks."

Lydia and I took seats near the door. I couldn't help gaping at the large chamber. This was no mere jarl's receiving hall, for it had been built for a king. The Throne of Ysgramor stood at one end, empty and seemingly far away. The hall was lined with stone archways, some merely decorative, others leading to passageways beyond. Between each arch was a column with a protruding carven dragon-head. Blue and gold flags hung from the ceiling, with here and there a Stormcloak banner featuring a snarling bear. Even the ceiling bore intricately carved stone laid in a grid pattern and inset with diamond shapes.

The throne itself was a massive affair, more like a hearth and chimney, with a stone seat where the fireplace would be. The throne's tall stone back bore the graven likeness of swords crossed behind a shield showing the Stormcloak bear sigil. I wondered, did the bear go back to the first kings, or did the Stormcloak line add it when they took power in Eastmarch? One thing was certain – whoever sat on that throne would feel the weight of the ages on his shoulders. It was hard to remember that Ulfric was only a jarl and not a king – not yet.

Long wooden tables stood in the center of the hall. Servants hurried to and fro, readying them for a feast that would no doubt follow the jarl's speech. Over the bustle, I heard voices coming from a room just off the hall at the far end. I was sure they sounded familiar. They were having some sort of debate.

"Wait here," I said to Lydia, and I walked casually down the long hall, pretending to admire the intricate stonework and the banners as I went, in case a servant or a guard should question my presence there. When I drew near enough to hear the voices, I slipped into the shadows of a deep archway where I could listen without being noticed.

"I need to go out there and give the people one last rallying cry before we begin." That was Ulfric speaking, of course. "But they need to know who we're fighting. And to decide that, I need to know where Balgruuf stands."

"Balgruuf won't give us a straight answer," came the reply. I had heard this voice as well. It was the voice of an older man than Ulfric, gruff and hoarse, with little hint of submission to the jarl. Then I realized – it was Galmar Stone-Fist, Ulfric's hirth-marshall. I had last seen him in Helgen.

"He's a true Nord," said Ulfric. "He'll come around. That was brave, throwing the Thalmor out of his city. Why would he do such a thing if he doesn't mean to join us? I still say we should move against Falkreath first. It's on the main road from Cyrodiil."
"You know Whiterun is central to our plans," said Galmar. "And I wouldn't be so sure about Balgruuf. We've intercepted couriers from Solitude. The Imperials are putting immense pressure on Whiterun to let the Thalmor return, to station an Imperial garrison there. And Balgruuf's steward is Cyrodiili. Which way do you think he's pushing the jarl?"

"Then what would you have me do?"

"If Balgruuf's not with us, he's against us."

"He knows that. They all know that. You think I need to send him a stronger message?"

"If by 'message' you mean shoving a sword through his gullet. I still say you should take them all out, Balgruuf and any other jarl who dares disloyalty, the same way you did Deadking Torygg."

So this is how the Stormcloaks operated! I had seen and heard enough. Suddenly I was moving from my hiding place. I didn't stop to think of the wisdom of my actions, or if there was a better way to protect Balgruuf. I knew only that Galmar had just threatened my jarl, who had shown me only kindness.

Drawing a dagger that the door guard had overlooked, I stepped into Ulfric's war-chamber. Ulfric and Galmar stood on the other side of a large table with a map of Skyrim spread across it. They looked up in surprise as I entered.

I hadn't counted on the third soldier to the right of the door. He reacted quickly, grasping my wrist and twisting. I was no match for him in strength, and he soon had my own dagger at my throat.

Now Ulfric glared at me from across the table, weighing whether I should live or die.
"You!" the Stormcloak leader exclaimed, his eyes wide. "I told Ralof we couldn't trust you after your speech at Helgen, and here you are, dagger in hand! Tell me why I shouldn't have Hans finish you now."

"Do with me as you will, but I cannot stand by while you talk of shoving a sword in my liege lord's gullet," I said. I looked at Galmar. "I seem to remember sparing you a similar fate, Galmar, though I think that torturer would have made it slow and painful."

Galmar eyed me uncertainly for a moment, then relaxed. He now wore a head-dress and cowl made from the head and pelt of a bear. "The lass speaks true. I owe her my life. And if she hadn't saved us, we would never have gotten you out of Helgen, my jarl."

"Yes, yes, the Assassin of Helgen, as you call her. And Ralof says she's a good fighter and hoped she would join us. But now here she is, bent on killing again." He looked at me for a long moment while I pondered whether I could wriggle free of Hans' grip before he opened my throat. Finally Ulfric nodded at the soldier, who let me go but kept the dagger. "You were silly to think you could get anywhere armed only with a dagger, Deirdre … what was your name again?"

"My name is Deirdre Morningsong, Jarl Ulfric. In Whiterun they call me Deirdre Death-Dealer, after I helped slay the dragon Mirmulnir. For that, I was named Thane of Whiterun. They also name me Deirdre Thu'um-Wielder. The Greybeards named me Dovahkiin, after I absorbed Mirmulnir's soul."

Ulfric was speechless for a moment, his eyes having grown wider with each bit of news. "You? You're the Dragonborn? We'd heard of the events in Whiterun, and the Greybeards summoning the Dragonborn to High Hrothgar. But this cannot be. You're not even a full-blooded Nord!"

"No," I said icily, "that seems not to be a requirement."

"But how can I trust what you say is true? What proof do we have that you're the Dragonborn?"

"The Greybeards don't give out badges. Do you want me to demonstrate my Thu'um?"

"You can't tell me you've already learned a shout?" Ulfric said.

"Yes, that's how it works when you're the Dragonborn." I thought he would have known that, having had so much training in the Voice. "Should I test my Voice on you?"

"Yes, I would like to feel what you can do, if you really are Dragonborn." He still sounded skeptical.

Hans stepped forward. "No, Jarl Ulfric, it might be some kind of trick."
"It's all right, Hans," Ulfric said. "Her Thu'u'm cannot possibly match my own." Then he turned back to me. "Just one word, are we agreed? That will be enough to demonstrate your power."

"As you wish," I said. "Are you ready?" He went over to stand in an empty part of the room across from us and braced himself. "Fus!" I shouted.

The shout staggered him, and he took a step back. He was breathing hard as he straightened his fur cloak – the same one he had worn at Helgen – and returned to us. I could see he was trying not to appear shaken.

"That was strong, for just one word of the full shout. How long did it take you to learn that?"

"A day, maybe less," I replied. "It just takes learning the word of power, then killing a dragon and absorbing its soul."

"Oh, is that all!" mocked Hans.

"It took me years to learn that one word of power," Ulfric said, shaking his head. "You must know dozens of shouts by now."

"No, just two, although I am on my way to High Hrothgar to learn more, as soon as I retrieve … an object here in Windhelm. But the Greybeards won't teach me more quickly. They say I shouldn't get ahead of myself, that I should develop my wisdom along with my power."

"Yes, that sounds like the Greybeards. That's why I grew impatient and left their halls. But listen, with that kind of power…"

Just then Ralof came running in, with Lydia and several guards following behind. "Deirdre!" Ralof exclaimed. "I knew you'd come sooner or later, though I hoped it would be sooner!" He came up to me and grasped me by the shoulders, looking happily into my eyes. "Are you here to join us? And what was that shout I heard?" He looked around questioningly at the others in the room, then noticed Ulfric. "Oh, begging your pardon, my jarl!"

"No, I was just asking Deirdre the same thing. Are you here to join us? We could use a power like yours."

I looked at Ralof. He seemed older somehow. He looked confused by Ulfric's mention of my power. I only wished we could meet now under different circumstances. "I'm sorry, my friend," I said to him. I think I had known what my decision would be all along, from that first day when he had described the glories of the Stormcloaks to me.

Then I turned back to the jarl. "I had my doubts about you from the beginning, Jarl Ulfric, though your cause is just. In honor of my father, who was a worshipper of Talos, I would support that cause. But now I come to your city and see how you treat the Dunmer and the Argonians, and I see that the justice you seek does not extend to any beyond the Nords. And you would even murder your Nord brothers and sisters to achieve your aims. So I ask you, why are you fighting this war? Is it for justice, or your own ambition to be high king?"

"Damn the kingship," Ulfric snarled. "We have been ruled by these puppets of the Empire for too long. Now we will choose our own high king, a true Nord chosen by true Nords. Whether that's me, or someone else, I care not. But whoever it is, he will need the support of my armies, and of the people. So I will tell you why I fight, why we all fight, as I am about to go out and tell the people of Windhelm one last time before we start this war in earnest."

He took a moment to collect himself, as if rehearsing his speech in his mind, pacing back and forth.
behind the war table. Then he thought of something and came over and looked down at me. I was surprised to see gentleness in his eyes. I held his gaze.

"You told us about your parents in that speech you gave at Helgen," he said. "And Ralof told me more about how you lost your parents when he arrived back here. So you know the pain of losing those closest to you." I nodded. "But have you ever seen anyone die, up close, seen the light go out of their eyes?" I nodded again. I couldn't help thinking of Olaf Brittle-Spear. "And have you ever had to confront their loved ones, try somehow to comfort them when no comfort is enough?"

Again I nodded. Of course I was thinking of Olaf's wife, and of Huldi and Harry.

"Good," he went on. "Then you will understand why I fight."

Now he began pacing back and forth again, his voice rising higher and higher, as if delivering his speech to the crowd. "I fight for the men and women I've held in my arms as they died on foreign soil. I fight for their husbands and wives and children, to whom I had to deliver grievous news. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find our country full of strangers wearing familiar faces. And what did we gain from our sacrifice? Slavery to the Thalmor! That is why I fight – so that all the fighting I've already done won't be for nothing. Now I say again, in honor of your father, will you join us?"

I admit, I was moved. "Your words sound heartfelt, Jarl Ulfric," I said, "and I only wish you had similar compassion for all the peoples of Skyrim. For I too fight for those who have died in my arms. But my fight is with the dragons. They're returning to Skyrim, if you haven't noticed. And not just dragons, but the master of all dragons, Alduin, who would destroy all Mundus. You must realize this is a bigger threat than the Imperials or the Thalmor."

The room was silent then, as the Stormcloaks absorbed this news. I looked over at Ralof, who looked as incredulous as the rest. "Is it really true, Deirdre?" he asked. "You must fight the dragons? But how…?" He had missed the part about me being the Dragonborn, but it was too late to fill him in now.

"So the best I can say to you, Ulfric, is that you must let me fight my battle while you fight yours. As well, it would behoove you to make some preparation in case a dragon attacks here. And as Thane of Whiterun I tell you that Balgruuf does mean to stay neutral in this war. His hirth is loyal and well trained, and you will waste many lives fighting for Whiterun. It is a distraction you need not undertake. But if you carry through with this talk of assassinating my jarl, or attack his city, you must face my wrath."

"And mine!" shouted Lydia, reaching for her axe, only to remember she had left it at the door of the hall.

Ulfric sighed. "I thought that might be your answer. Yet I can't take the risk of letting a power such as yours fall into the hands of the Empire, or worse, the Thalmor." He nodded to the guards. "Take them," he said.

The guards moved in and Lydia made to fight. I shook my head at her, and for once she relented. "We will not fight you, but you will regret this," I said.

Meanwhile, Ralof was pleasing with Ulfric. "My jarl, Deirdre would never fight for the Empire, not after what we saw in Helgen."

"It's what they might force her to do that's the problem," said Galmar. "You saw their methods, Ralof. Besides, you've always had a soft spot for the lass."
"Galmar's right, Ralof," Ulfric said. "Now get out of our way. I've got a speech to make, and then we have a war to fight."

We walked out of the war-room together, Ulfric and his lieutenants heading to the large front doors of the hall, and the guards leading Lydia and me to the dungeon, whose door was near the front of the hall. I don't know why Ulfric didn't think to have me gagged – maybe he was preoccupied with the speech to come, or with Ralof, who was walking beside him, continuing to plead my case.

As the massive palace door opened I saw a clear path out to the courtyard beyond. A crowd had gathered for the speech.

"Wuld!" I shouted. The burst of speed pulled me from the grasp of the guards, and I hurtled through the door and halfway down the length of the courtyard beyond. The crowd gasped as I appeared in their midst, and the guards nearby were too surprised to do anything. I had only one chance for freedom, and it was to get the people on my side.

I broke into a run down the remaining length of the courtyard, the guards who had been with Ulfric giving chase and shouting for the others to stop me. It was full dark now and our torch-cast shadows leapt wildly after us. I arrived at the speaker's platform and climbed its steps before any could prevent it. Beyond the platform and down the steps toward Candlehearth Hall, more of Windhelm's residents had gathered to hear their jarl.

I raised my hands for quiet, though I didn't need to. I had already gotten their attention. "People of Windhelm," I said, "I am Deirdre Morningsong, and I am here to save you from the dragons, when Ulfric will not!"

They were silent for a moment, not sure what to make of me. Finally one voice rang out, "Someone's got to do it!"

"Seize her!" I heard Ulfric call from behind me. "Gag her!"

"Ulfric and his guard mean to stop me. Will you hear me speak?"

"Let her speak!" a few people shouted.

Two guards were climbing the steps toward me. I turned on them, hoping the power of my Thu'um had replenished itself by now.

"Fus-Ro!" The shout knocked them falling backward off the platform in a clatter of mail. The crowd gasped again.

"Your jarl is not the only one with the Power of the Voice," I said. "The Greybeards name me Dovahkiin." Surely, news of that event had reached the people here, if it had reached Ulfric. It was my only hope. "You have seen what I can do. It is my destiny to defeat the dragons. I pledge to you that I will do all in my power to prevent them from attacking here."

"The song has come true!" someone called out. "The Dragonborn is here to save us!"

"People of Windhelm," I asked, "has Ulfric done anything to protect you?"

"No! Nothing!" came the shouts. "Save us! Slay the dragons!" called others.

Halfway down the courtyard, Ulfric stood surrounded by his lieutenants and his guards, watching with a scowl as he lost the crowd. Nearby stood Lydia, still in the grip of two guards, though they seemed unsure what to do. Ralof was there too, a stricken expression on his face.
I raised my hands for silence once again. "Ulfric would detain me here because I will not join his war. But what say you, people of Windhelm? Should your jarl let me leave here and carry the fight to the dragons?"

"Yes," came the cries. "Save us! Slay the dragons!"

Then a familiar figure ascended the steps of the speaker's platform. It was Malukah, and she had her lute. "You really aren't very good at staying under cover, are you, Dragonborn?" she asked. I shook my head. She gave me a wink, and then broke into "The Dragonborn Comes." For once, I was glad to hear it. In moments the whole crowd was singing the tune.

I descended the steps and approached Ulfric. "It seems I upstaged your speech," I said.

"Yes," he growled. "I doubt they'll want to hear about the war now."

"You hear them, Jarl Ulfric. Will you let us go?"

He nodded to his guards to let Lydia free. "Just get out of my city before I change my mind," he snarled.

There was an awkward moment then as the guards retrieved our weapons from inside the hall and brought them to us. Ralof looked as if he would speak to me, but didn't know what he could say in front of his jarl. Galmar seemed ready to cleave my skull with his axe. Lydia stood next to me, glowering at him.

"And remember my warning about Balgruuf, Jarl Ulfric," I said. "Moving against Whiterun would be a mistake in more ways than one."

Then we were moving toward the city gate, the crowd's song ringing in our ears. We passed over the speaker's platform and down its steps. The crowd beyond parted for us, and now they were chanting "Dovahkiin! Dovahkiin!" over and over.

The massive doors opened for us and we came out onto the walled bridge over the White River. Only then did I realize Ralof had followed us. As the doors closed behind us and the sound of the crowd died out, he came up to me, but stood a pace or two apart, confusion written across his face.

"Long have I looked for your coming," he began, "but I didn't expect … I didn't know…"

"No, how could you, or anyone?" I said. "But come, is this any kind of greeting for old friends?" I opened my arms and we hugged. "Much has happened since we last met," I went on. "Too much to explain now." Then I realized Lydia was standing there patiently. "This is Lydia, my friend and housecarl. Lydia, this is Ralof."

"Well met," she said, with a tip of her head. "I've heard much about you." There was just the barest trace of a smile on her lips as she looked from Ralof to me.

Ralof was still full of questions. "I thought you were at the college. But now Balgruuf has made you a thane? And you're the…"

"My thane is full of surprises," Lydia interrupted. "For instance, I had no idea she could make a speech like that. Where did you learn it?"

I shrugged. I really had no idea. "Books, I suppose. I remember reading about the speeches of Bero."
"I'm not surprised," said Ralof. "I heard her give a speech once before, in Helgen. But I can't believe what you did back there. And you're the Dragonborn! How can that be? And you have to fight these dragons? And Alduin himself?" His voice was full of awe, and worry.

"It's true," I said. "A great task has been laid upon me." I didn't know what else to say. The Nine knew I was full of doubts, but I dare not express them, and anything else I could say would sound arrogant. I had already boasted enough in front of Ulfric.

Lydia rescued me. "Yes, Ralof, the fate of the world rests with our friend Deirdre. It takes some getting used to, doesn't it?"

We stood there looking at one another for a moment, none of us sure what to say or do next.

"Look," said Lydia, always practical. "In the rush we left our things at the Blade and Dragon. Why don't I get them? I'm sure the guard won't let you back in the city, my thane, not after the jarl ordered you out. I'll meet you at the stables."

The guard at the gate gave her some trouble about re-entering, but Ralof vouched for her. Then we began walking across the bridge.

"Deirdre," Ralof said, "you don't need to leave like this."

"You heard Ulfric. If I go back he'll throw me in the dungeon. I have a task before me, and I will be delayed no longer." Only then did I remember that we hadn't achieved our purpose in coming to Windhelm – to retrieve that blasted horn. How was I to proceed in my training without it? I paused, wondering what to do.

Ralof took this as indecision. "I could disguise you, sneak you back into the city. Ulfric will forget his displeasure in a day or two."

"No, my friend," I said. "I wish I had more time to spend with you, but it's not to be. Unless you want to come with us? The last time I killed a dragon, I needed the help of a squad of guards. Lydia and I would be glad to have you by our side."

Ralof considered the offer for a moment, but then set his jaw. "No, my place is here with Ulfric and my fellow Stormcloaks. I can't leave just when the war is about to begin."

"Come then, help me with the horses while you tell me how you have fared since last I saw you. And that reminds me, Gerdur sends her love."

"You've seen her?"

"Yes, a fortnight ago, on my way to Bleak Falls Barrow. She's worried about you, of course."

"Bleak Falls Barrow! Why on Nirn did you go in there?"

"Farengar had something that needed retrieving. Seems people are always asking me to get things for them."

"You didn't go in there by yourself, did you? And were there ... draugr?" He shivered a bit when he said it.

"Only a few. They're not bad if you can manage not to wake them. And one wight lord. He nearly did me in, but I squeaked through."
"I knew you were a good fighter, but you must have learned much at the college. And this Dragonborn business – how did you come about that?"

"It's incredible, I have to admit," I said. "I doubt you'll believe the half of it." We had arrived at the stables, and Ralof began helping me with our horses while I told him of the word wall in the barrow and the fight with the dragon.

"So you absorbed its soul! How that must have felt!"

"I can't describe it," I said. "But come, tell me how you have been. How go the war plans?"

"Ach, training and waiting, waiting and training. I'm glad this war is finally going to begin. Every day we hear of a new outrage of the Thalmor against our people."

"But you haven't seen any fighting?"

"There have been a few skirmishes between our advance camps and the Imperials, but nothing serious. It's taken time to amass our force. So many war-bands, coming from all over Eastmarch, Winterhold, Riften, and the Pale. And volunteers from the western holds. Many of the recruits are farmers, and they had to get their harvests in before they would join our fight. Too, I think Galmar wanted to wait until winter, thinking the colder weather would give us the advantage."

I cinched the last strap tight on my horse's saddle. "I'm glad I found you here, my friend," I said, turning to him.

"And I'm glad you came. You've put on weight since last I saw you. It becomes you well." He reached out and put a hand on my cheek. Then a bell rang in the city, and he pulled away. "Deirdre, that's my watch being called. I wish we had more time together."

"Maybe next time we will." I didn't tell him I thought that wouldn't be until the dragons were dead and the war was over – if either of us survived those calamities. We hugged, and he headed back over the bridge.

Lydia returned shortly after Ralof left. "Your friend looked downcast as I passed him," she said. "You're breaking hearts wherever you go, my thane."

"Is this any time for idle chit-chat?" a voice asked from behind us.

I turned to see a woman in a hood and cloak step round the corner of the stable. She was leading a horse of her own.

"Who are you?" I asked. Lydia had already drawn her axe. "What do you want with us?"

"That was foolish, what you did back in the city. The Thalmor have their spies, even here."

"If so, then they know I mean not to join Ulfric's cause against them. But again I say, who are you?"

"My name is Delphine," she said. As she reached into her cloak, a coat of mail beneath caught a glint of torchlight. She withdrew a large white horn and held it out to me. "I believe you are looking for this."
The horn was as plain as could be – just a ram's horn like many I had come across on my rambles in the mountains. I looked for runes, secret writing, hidden mechanisms, enchantments, but found nothing. It hadn't even been fashioned for use as a trumpet.

"This is the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller?" I asked the woman who called herself Delphine.

"Not much to look at, is it?" she replied. Her face was still hidden by her hood, but something about her voice seemed familiar. "I believe this is the Greybeards' idea of a joke, and you are the brunt of it. You'll have to get used to that, if you continue as their student."

"Wait," I said. "So you're the one who left the note in Ustengrav? Why would you take the horn?"

"The Greybeards are nothing if not predictable. When I heard that they had called the Dragonborn to High Hrothgar, I knew they would send you to Ustengrav. It's one of their favorite tests for their initiates, not just the Dragonborn. Most fail it abysmally. And as to why I took it, I had to contact you. I thought taking the horn would get your attention."

"Well, now you have it," I said. "But how did you manage to get into Ustengrav?"

"Most of the challenges you faced are meant only for the initiate. To anyone else, the place merely appears haunted. Cracking that chest was a bit of a challenge, but I am not without my own resources. I am the last survivor of the Blades. I wouldn't have escaped the Thalmor all these years if I lacked skills."

"The Blades!" exclaimed Lydia. "I read about them in The Oblivion Crisis. They used to be the emperor's private guard. But I thought you were replaced by the Penitus Oculatus and then the Thalmor wiped you out?"

I shuddered at the mention of the Penitus. They had a garrison in Dragon Bridge, yet they hadn't lifted a finger to help my parents when the Nords put our house to the torch.

"The Thalmor nearly did finish us, but I have survived on the run since the Great War. As far as I know I am the last of my kind. We were sworn protectors not just of the emperor, but of the Dragonborn. That is why I set out to find you, Deirdre."

"Then why didn't you meet us at the Blade and Dragon? You could have saved us much trouble. Or you could have found me at High Hrothgar."

"The Greybeards are no friends of the Blades. We are too active in the affairs of the world, while they content themselves with contemplating the sky, no matter what befalls Tamriel. No, they would not have let me near you. And as for meeting you here – I was delayed. It could not be helped. If I had known you would make such a spectacle of yourself, I would never have risked leaving the city."
"Why, what were you doing that kept you?"

"Investigating dragon mounds. The serpents were not vanquished in the Dragon Wars, you see. The dragon cult interred their remains, hoping they would one day rise again. And now the dragons are returning, coming to life from the ancient burial mounds where they have slept for thousands of years."

"How do you know that?"

"I have visited several of the mounds and found them broken and empty."

"And how did you find them?"

"I have a map." She withdrew a scroll from within her cloak and unrolled it. The torchlight was too dim for reading, so I cast magelight at the wall of the stable. The scroll was a map of Skyrim. Here and there were black Xs that I assumed represented the mounds. Some were circled in red with numbers next to them.

"This map looks familiar," I said.

"It should," said Delphine. "You're the one who brought it to me – or the version of it etched on a stone tablet."

I looked up from the map. Now that I could see her in the better light, I did recognize her. She drew her hood back and I saw that she was a Breton. The furrows in her brow were deeply etched with years of care. She wore her blonde hair pulled back severely in a single plait.

"You were in Farengar's chamber the day Mirmulnir attacked the Western Watchtower!"

"Yes, and had I known that the Dragonborn stood before me on that day, I never would have left Whiterun. But I knew I had to start tracking down these mounds before more dragons came to life. As you can see, I found five of them empty. The mounds seem to open in succession, moving from the southeast. If we're in luck we can stop the next rebirth tonight."

"What? Where? How?" Lydia and I asked all at once.

"Here," she said, pointing at a spot south of Windhelm. "Near Kynesgrove. If the pattern holds, that's where the next dragon will be reborn. I don't know how to stop it, but if we're in time, maybe we'll think of something." She went to her horse. "Are you coming?"

I nearly ran to my own mount. More than a fortnight had passed since we killed Mirmulnir. That had been difficult enough; and now to learn there were five more! I was tired of studying and being sent on foolish errantry. I was ready to kill a dragon, or even better, stop one from being reborn.

"Wait," said Lydia. "How do we know we can trust her? How do we know that really is the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller? And even if it is, maybe she stole it just to lead us into a trap."

"Your caution is commendable," said Delphine. "I only wish you had exercised it before drawing so much attention to yourselves. At any rate, I will make for Kynesgrove whether you're coming or not. Although I would dearly love the opportunity to see you absorb a dragon's soul. That would be the final proof I need that you are the Dragonborn."

With that she wheeled her horse and rode off into the darkness. I mounted my own horse. "Come, Lydia. Whether we can trust her or no, I cannot pass up a chance to confront a dragon. And you're always looking for glory. What better opportunity?"
"As you will, my thane," she said, and I could tell she was eager to finally see some action, despite her reservations.

We followed after Delphine and soon caught up to her. "Good!" she said as we drew abreast. "I knew you couldn't pass up this chance. Maybe you really are the Dragonborn, and not just a foolish girl who learned some parlor tricks with the Voice."

I let the insult pass. I was more interested in finding out what this woman wanted with me. "Why have you been looking for the Dragonborn?" I asked.

"As I said, my order has protected the Dragonborn since … well, for time out of mind. But more than that, we remember what most do not – that the Dragonborn is the ultimate dragonslayer, the only one who can kill a dragon permanently by devouring its soul. Can you do it?"

"Yes, that's how I learned to shout," I said.

"Good. Then together we will take care of these dragons. The Blades have been without a purpose since the death of Martin Septim. And if we can frustrate the Thalmor's plans at the same time, all the better."

"The Thalmor? What do they have to do with the dragons?"

"Who else could be behind their return? Anything that creates chaos for the Empire plays to their advantage."

"Maybe so," I said, though I knew better.

"You seem doubtful," she said. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"Nothing for certain," I said. "Just an old prophecy. But I won't speak of it until I know for certain."

"If only Esbern were here," she said, "he would help us interpret your prophecy, whatever it is. But I'm sure the Thalmor must have gotten to him long ago."

"Esbern?"

"The Blades' loremaster. He knew all the old prophecies and legends about the dragons. Fairly skilled in the dragon tongue as well. But he was getting on in years, and I doubt he could stay ahead of the Thalmor, skilled fighter though he was."

A mass of clouds was moving in from the north and covering the stars as we approached Kynesgrove. Fortunately, the moons still shone in the south to light our way. We found the hamlet in an uproar – if such a tiny place was capable of creating an uproar. A lone woman ran out of the inn as we were tying our horses at the stable.

"A dragon!" she screamed. "A dragon is attacking!"

"Where's the dragon?" Delphine asked. "I don't see one."

"Well, it flew over a while ago," the woman admitted. "It was headed toward the old dragon mound up the hill." She pointed to the east.

"Where are the guards?" Lydia asked.

"They headed up there right after the dragon flew by," she said. "They haven't been back since."
As we climbed the steep road out of the village, snow began to fall and the wind from the north picked up. The moonlight illuminated the snowflakes in brilliant swirls, but it was hard to see anything ahead. I thought I heard a familiar roaring above the groaning of the wind.

Then a shadow crossed our path and I looked up to see a huge, winged shape silhouetted against Masser. Even through the blowing snow, I could make out the dragon's long, double-curved horns and the intricate spines running down its back to its tail. It had to be Alduin. The dragon soared past us in a great arc and headed back up the hill.

"Gods, would you look at that monster!" Delphine exclaimed. I wondered if this was the first dragon she had seen.

When we came near to the dragon mound we found the body of a village guard lying in the road. The mound itself, a low dome of stone work and packed earth, sat in a large clearing. I had seen these here and there in Skyrim and never thought too much about them. Ancient ruins dotted the land, their original purposes long forgotten. I always thought the name "dragon mound" was just a bit of fanciful folklore.

I was about to learn how wrong I was. The dragon hovered above the mound, its giant wings beating the air to keep aloft, swirling the snow in great eddies.

Delphine stood gaping for a moment. "I never imagined..." she said quietly, her voice trailing off. If possible, her face looked even more pale.

But not even a dragon could daunt Lydia. She drew her bow and made ready to attack. "You never should have come here, dragon!" she shouted. The beast paid her no heed.

"Delphine, now's our chance," I said. "Let's spread out and attack it from range."

Lydia's shout had awakened Delphine from her stupor. "No, get down, you fools!" She took cover behind a rock, and gestured for us to follow. "We need to see what this dragon is doing. If it is going to revive another dragon from within that mound, we need to see how it's done."

I thought we had come here to stop the rebirth of a dragon, but I had to admit, the opportunity to see a dragon reborn was intriguing. Lydia and I joined Delphine in her hiding place.

Now the dragon addressed the mound: "Sahloknir, ziil gro dovah ulse!" I caught the words dragon and spirit, no more. My Dovah was still none too good. Then the dragon shouted. "Slen-Tiid-Vo!" Something about flesh and time.

The dragon mound burst apart in an explosion of stone and flame. Out of the rubble rose the skeletal shape of a dragon, smaller than the one hovering above, but powerful nonetheless.

Delphine gasped. "This is worse than I imagined," she said. Lydia stood on my other side, equally wide-eyed.

I would have been just as aghast as my companions, had the scene not seemed so familiar. Now flame was swirling about the dragon, and dark shapes formed within the flame. It looked very like the swirl of energy that had engulfed Mirmulnir when I devoured his soul, only in reverse. When the swirling fire ended, the new-born dragon stood replete with flesh and scales. It was lighter in color than the dragon hovering above, with fewer spines and a triangular tail.

So we had learned the dragons were being resurrected. It seemed slim knowledge to gain at the price of now having to face two dragons at once.
Then this new dragon spoke and my worst fears were confirmed. "Alduin, Thuri!" "Alduin, Master!" it had said. Then it went on in words I couldn't understand.

I looked at Delphine. She looked yet more pale. "No, this cannot be!" she exclaimed. Even she had Alduin's name.

Lydia had notched an arrow to her bow. "Come on!" she shouted. "What are we waiting for? This is the dragon we're meant to stop!"

"Wait!" Delphine hissed. "You'll get us all killed! And perhaps there is more to learn." Reluctantly Lydia lowered her bow. I could see how Delphine had survived all these years, if she constantly shrank from battle.

Alduin was speaking again. "Geh, Sahloknir, kaali mir." Then the great dragon's massive head turned toward us. "Ful, losei Dovahkiin? Zu'u koraav nid nol dov do hi."

How had he recognized me? I thought I was well hidden, though my companions had been none too quiet. I didn't know what he had said, other than to address me. Then he spoke in the Common Tongue, a language I didn't even know dragons could speak.

"You don't even know our tongue, do you? Such arrogance, to take for yourself the name of Dovah."

All my training at High Hrothgar was forgotten, as well as Delphine's warnings to stay hidden. This was the dragon that had killed Huldi and Harry's parents, the one that had somehow forced me to witness its marauding. "I'll show you arrogance," I muttered as I stood out from behind the rock.

"Deirdre, no!" Delphine shouted, but it was too late.

"Fus-Ro!" I shouted – it was all I knew of the Unrelenting Force shout. At the same time, Lydia fired her bow, only to see the arrow glance harmlessly off Alduin's thick scales.

Alduin just laughed, a deep, guttural chuckle of amusement. "So, you think you can shout? Your Thu'ums weak." He turned back to the reborn dragon. "Sahloknir, krii daar joorre."

I understood enough Dovah to know that Alduin had just ordered Sahloknir to kill us. Then the master dragon soared off into the sky. Sahloknir took flight as well, but not before Lydia hit him in the belly with an arrow. I was glad to see it sink up to the feathers.

Sahloknir took a wide turn around the clearing, perhaps feeling his newly resurrected power before joining the battle. I took this time to give my companions quick instructions, being the only one who had fought a dragon. "We need to spread out. Lydia, for Talos' sake, have that shield ready – you don't want to take a hit from its fire breath. Delphine, that studded armor isn't going to do you any good. Try to stay out of its line of fire and let Lydia and me take its breaths."

"I've never run from an opponent in my life," she said, but there was no time to argue. The dragon had turned at the end of the clearing and was now flying straight for us.

"Scatter!" I shouted. Lydia and Delphine ran to either side. I knew it was futile to run from an onrushing dragon, so I ran toward it. It swooped down at me and released a breath of frost rather than fire – "Fo-Krah-Diin!" I dove and rolled beneath the dragon, missing the worst of the blast, concentrating on the words of the shout.

The dragon spoke as it rose back into the air and turned for another pass. Like Alduin, he used the Common Tongue. "My master Alduin requires your deaths. I am happy to oblige him."
I could hear the twang of Lydia’s and Delphine’s bows off to the sides. "Slay the dragon!" Lydia called.

"Remember, friends, those breaths are just words," I called to my comrades. "Fo-Krah-Diin. Frost-Cold-Freeze. Words cannot hurt you! Keep concentrating on that." I hoped Lydia’s studies with Master Arngeir had helped.

Sahloknir swooped toward Lydia now. She fired one last arrow then quickly crouched behind her massive shield. The dragon’s breath still hadn’t recovered so it tried snapping at her as it flew past. Its jaws glanced off the strong iron of the shield, nearly knocking her over.

The beast circled again, and this time I summoned my flame atronach. We would fight ice with fire. Now the dragon hovered in the air in front of me. "Fus-Ro!" I shouted at it before it could get out a frost breath. Then I rolled to one side as the icy blast missed me by inches. When I came back to my feet I saw arrows and fireballs flying at the dragon from all sides. It looked this way and that, wondering which one of us to attack next. I drew my own bow and fired at its belly, drawing a gush of steaming blood.

"Ah, so it is to be a true battle," Sahloknir said. "Good!" He still sounded full of arrogance, but his wings beat with less energy as he flew off to make another circle.

We got several more arrows and firebolts into the dragon, then he came crashing down in the clearing, gouging a great furrow in the ground. He was too weak to fly, yet dangerous. Lydia happened to be nearest to him. She advanced toward his snapping jaws, axe in one hand, shield in the other.

"No, Lydia, watch out!" I called. I could see that he was drawing breath for another blast of frost. She was just getting her shield into place when the icy cloud enveloped her. Through the blowing snow and the frost of the dragon’s breath, I couldn’t see what was happening. The dragon took a step in her direction, snapping here and there.

Someone had to distract the dragon. If it felt my arrows stinging its sides, it gave no hint. I had lost Delphine in the confusion of the dragon’s circling and landing. My flame spell was the only thing I had left that could get its attention. But for that, I needed to be closer. "Wuld!" I shouted, and the burst of speed took me to within a pace of the beast. I began blasting it with fire. The plan worked: it turned on me with snapping jaws. Once it snapped, and I jumped out of the way. I hit it with the flame again, but its jaws opened wide once more and thrust toward me. Its fangs were longer than my hand.

Then I saw a glint of steel from behind the dragon's head and heard a cry: "Oh, no you don't, dragon!" Lydia’s axe plunged down, nearly severing the dragon’s head from its body. Sahloknir slumped to the ground and lay there, lifeless.

Lydia smiled triumphantly and sheathed her axe. Her hair and arms were coated in ice and her shield, which she had cast aside to wield her axe with two hands, had a foot-high cornice of frost along its upper edge.

Before I could move to thank her for saving my life or cast a healing spell on her, the soul-devouring began. Delphine, who had been exulting over our defeat of the dragon, now took a step back. "Wait, something's happening!" she exclaimed. Lydia backed up a pace as well. The dragon’s flesh dissolved in streamers of smoke and flame, and I felt power entering my being. I also found I had a new, deep understanding of "Iiz," or ice, that word of power I had learned so long ago.

Would I really need to slay one dragon for each word of power I learned? How long would it take...
to develop my power sufficiently to meet Alduin? The enormity of my task weighed on me.

When it was over, Delphine came up to me. "So it's true, you really are Dragonborn!"

"Of course she's Dragonborn," said Lydia. "Didn't she tell you she was?" Then she looked at the now fleshless dragon skeleton. "Although, I didn't quite believe it myself until I saw that. It's a wonder!" There was something new in her eyes when she looked at me. Wonder? Fear? Awe? I could not tell.

"Here, you must be frozen," I said to her. "Let me heal that."

As the glow of the spell enveloped her, she winked and said, "A healing spell! Are you a priest?"

This had been our little joke, ever since that first time I healed her after the fight with the frost troll on the Seven Thousand Steps. She asked me the same thing then, having never heard of a mage outside the priesthood who specialized in Restoration. She would repeat the question every time I healed her, poking fun at herself. Usually I would come up with some half-witty reply, "No, but I do accept tithes," or some such. Today I could think of nothing.

"Aren't you happy with our victory, my thane?" Lydia asked.

I didn't know what I was feeling. Shouldn't I exult at the victory over another dragon? But I couldn't. The task before us just seemed too daunting. At least five resurrected dragons still lived. And if Alduin could resurrect a dragon as quickly as we had just witnessed, how would we ever keep up?

Delphine still stared at me. Then she bowed. "As a Blade, it is my sworn duty to protect and guide you, as we hunt these dragons."

"I already have an able protector here, as you have seen. And isn't it the Greybeards' job to guide me? They were the first to hint that Alduin was behind the return of the dragons."

"But what will they have you do about it? Sit at High Hrothgar and contemplate the sky? Go on useless quests for worthless relics? I'm guessing they told you the World Eater plays a vital role in the cosmic scheme of things, am I right?"

I couldn't admit that she was, so I held my tongue.

"I see," said Delphine. "Meanwhile, I have led you to one dragon, and I can lead you to more. Let us work together and put an end to these monsters."

The offer was tempting, I had to admit. Glad as I was at slaying the dragon, flush with the feeling of power that came from absorbing its soul, I would eagerly repeat that victory again and again. Yet who knew how many dragons there were? Delphine's map showed more than twenty burial sites. And could there be more dragons beyond the ones in the mounds? We didn't know. How much destruction would they cause while we hunted each one?

"Can you tell me how we can stop Alduin?" I asked. "For that seems the only way we can put a stop to the dragons' return."

That put the Blade at a loss. "No," she admitted. "As you saw, Alduin seems impervious even to your attacks, and he's willing to let his dragon allies do his fighting. But if anyone knows about Alduin's return, my guess is it's the Thalmor."

"You still think the Thalmor have anything to do with this?" I asked, incredulous. "What control
"Could they have over the World Eater?"

"I don't know," she admitted, "but do you have any better guesses?"

I shook my head.

"Well then, it can't hurt to find out what the Thalmor know, can it?"

"I suppose not," I said. "How do you propose to do it?"

"I'm not sure yet," she said. "It bears some thinking. Meanwhile, we can study the Dragonstone map for more clues. If the pattern holds and the resurrections continue spreading north and west, the next one should happen west of Windhelm within the week."

I shook my head again. "I cannot go with you. I must return to High Hrothgar, whether or not the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller is important. Perhaps the Greybeards have some knowledge about Alduin they have yet to impart. And I need to develop my own power further, if I ever hope to defeat him."

Delphine sighed. "Always it has been thus, the Greybeards holding the Dragonborn back from his true destiny. If they had their way, Tiber Septim never would have united Tamriel. But I see that you are set in this, and I will not delay you."

Before parting we agreed that we would try to meet Delphine at the dragon mound near Anga's Mill, west of Windhelm. Failing that, we would send messages via the Blade and Dragon, which served as Delphine's base. With that, we made ready to depart, Delphine to Windhelm, Lydia and I to High Hrothgar with the mysterious Horn of Jurgen Windcaller.

After we had reclaimed our horses and were mounted for the journey, Delphine left us with a parting thought. "Be on the lookout for likely recruits for the Blades. I mean to fight every dragon that is resurrected, and to do that, it will take an army."
"The Blades!" exclaimed Master Arngeir. "Always meddling where they should not; always seeking to turn the Dragonborn aside from the path of wisdom. Tell me, how did you get caught up with them?"

We had just arrived at High Hrothgar and found the old master in the refectory. I had never seen him so disturbed. His brows knit together the tiniest bit as he stared at me. He didn't even seem to notice the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller, which I was holding out to him.

"Only one Blade remains, Master Arngeir," I said. "And I got 'caught up' with her when she stole the horn from Ustengrav. We had to travel to Windhelm to retrieve it."

He was even angrier with this news – I could see just the slightest flicker in the otherwise calm pools of his eyes. "And what did she want in exchange? To enter your service as your protector and guide? To go off and fight the Thalmor together? Did she fill you with dreams of one day becoming emperor like Talos before you?"

"No," I said, with a vigorous shake of my head. Then I told him about Delphine guiding us to Alduin himself and helping us put an end to Sahloknir.

"Ah, so you met your nemesis once more," he said. "And did you confront him?"

"My shout did not touch him," I said. "He told me I was unworthy of the name Dovah."

"As well he might. You are just coming into your power as Dragonborn. You do not yet know the full Unrelenting Force shout."

"There is a reason for that," I reminded him.

"Yes," he said. "We will not allow you to proceed more quickly than is prudent. But still, the World Eater underestimated you if he thought a newly reborn dragon could defeat you. And now you have absorbed that dragon's soul, making you all the stronger."

I remembered the horn in my hand. "I thought this would give me power somehow, or it would be a weapon I could use against the dragons. But it seems to be a plain ram's horn."

Taking the horn from me, Arngeir looked at it reverently, as if seeing it for the first time. "The Horn of Jurgen Windcaller is important to us precisely because it once belonged to our founder. But it has no use as a weapon; it has no magic."

"So Delphine was right, it really is just a useless relic. Why did you send me for it?"

"It is useful as an expression of our faith in the Dragonborn, that we would risk losing it in Ustengrav. And the reason we sent you was to provide you with a test."
"Couldn't you have found easier ways to test me, even here at High Hrothgar?" I asked.

"I believe Ustengrav was not the only test you faced on your journey, am I right? You came quite close to falling from the Way at one point."

He looked at Lydia, who had been quietly observing our conversation, then back at me. I could only nod in assent.

"Yet you passed the test," he said. "You have made good progress in balancing your dragon soul, and your Thu'um has grown stronger. So now it is time to formally recognize you as the Dragonborn. Come, to the entrance hall."

We gathered once again in the hall where I had first met the Greybeards and begun my training. The masters arranged themselves around us in a circle.

"Before we begin," Arngeir said, "Lydia, will you stand off to one side? We don't want anyone getting hurt. Now, Deirdre, Master Borri will give you his knowledge of Dah, or Push, the final word of Unrelenting Force. With all three words, you will find the shout much more powerful."

Borri waved his hand and three glowing runes appeared on the ground before me. When I had absorbed the word "Dah" from the runes, the glowing streamers of light flowed from Master Borri toward me. I felt the power coursing through me, and knew that Arngeir was right. If only there had been a dragon nearby to test my Thu'um upon!

"Now, to complete our recognition of you as Dragonborn, we would speak to you in the Dragon Tongue. Stand between us and prepare yourself, for our Thu'um is strong. But we know that you are ready."

When they spoke, the whole castle seemed to shake. The waves of force nearly buckled my knees, but I was able to ride them out and remain standing. Three times they spoke to me. I caught words here and there, Ysmir, suleyk, balaan, the names of gods, but I understood little.

When they were finished, Arngeir came up to me and gave a slight bow. "Welcome to our order, Dovahkiin. High Hrothgar is now open to you and your companion. You are free to come and go here as you please. You may make free use of our library, food stores, and other supplies you might need. And you will find we have arranged quarters for you next to the refectory. I hope that is satisfactory."

"Yes, it sounds fine," I said. "But is that all of my training? Certainly there is more that you can teach me. The rest of the Ice shout, for instance. I don't even know what it does, though I have learned a word of it."

"If you have questions, we will be here to answer them. And we occasionally hear of a source of power that could add to your array of shouts. But there will be time for that. It is late, and you must be tired from your journey."

"Wait!" I said. "My knowledge of the Dragon Tongue is still weak. I'd like to know what you said to me in that ceremony."

"Ah, yes, I forgot," he said. "Of course you don't. Roughly translated, we said that the Stormcrown has long languished with no worthy brow to sit upon. By our breath, we bestowed it on you in the name of Kyne, Shor, and Atmora of old. Now you are Ysmir, Dragon of the North – listen well!"

"Ysmir?" I exclaimed. "First you tutor me in humility, and now you name me Ysmir reborn, Talos come again? No, it cannot be, it is too much. How am I to bear such a burden?"
"By following the Way. By always striving to serve the will of Akatosh above your own ambition. And above all, by keeping your power hidden for as long as possible."

I wondered if I should tell him about my speech to the people of Windhelm. "I'm afraid it is late for that, Master" I said. "You are not the first to name me Ysmir."

"Where have you heard it before?"

"From a bard in a tavern. She said the people of Solitude have taken to calling me by that exalted name."

"And so it begins," Arngeir said. "The people will expect much of you, possibly more than even the Dragonborn can give them. And you can see the perilous position in which this talk puts you, given the Thalmor's view of Talos."

I was surprised the Greybeard was aware of the goings-on in the world outside High Hrothgar, and said so.

"We are not completely aloof from events in Skyrim," he said, "though it is not our place to intervene. But you walk a different path than ours, and it will take the utmost wisdom to navigate this world. Now is the time to stay true to the Way, and not let this talk of Talos fill your head with pride. Remember, your purpose is to serve the will of Akatosh."

If only I could know the will of a god, I thought. But I was too tired to argue. Lydia and I retired to the converted storeroom the Greybeards had provided us. There were two single cots, a wardrobe, two chests, and a small table.

"How long will we stay this time, my thane?" Lydia asked, surveying the cramped quarters. Her enthusiasm for High Hrothgar seemed equal to my own.

"Not long, I imagine," I said. "It seems there is little left for the Greybeards to teach me. But as long as it takes, I must stay here and learn what I can. I must prepare myself to face Alduin."

"I wish I could be more help," she said. "It seems we aren't making much progress."

We had been two days on the road to the Throat of the World. In that time the elation of killing a dragon had faded as we contemplated the destruction the remaining five could be wreaking. It did not help when we sighted one of the great sky-wingers far to the east, over the Velothi Mountains between Skyrim and Morrowind. It was too far to give chase, which only added to our feelings of impotence.

We were more somber now than we had been on that warm fall day as we set out from Whiterun. The weight of our task now seemed too great and too much had happened to allow for the light banter we had enjoyed at the beginning of our journey.

Yet things had grown easier between us. The morning after Kynesgrove found us in the blasted lands of Eastmarch. The fuming, sulphurous pools and barren, bone-strewn ground weren't much to look at, but here and there we found a strange plant with yellow flowers. It grew in thin stalks with spiny green leaves. At the top of each stalk was a large flower with yellow and orange petals like wings, out of the center of which grew a cluster of purple.

"Look!" I said when we encountered the first of these. "Those must be Dragon's Tongue! I've heard about them but never seen them before." I got down from my horse and went to see them up close. They looked strange surrounded by snow from the previous night's storm. Some of them still bore little crowns of frost. Nearby, the hot pools hissed as the cold meltwater hit them.
Lydia reined up nearby. "What are they used for?"

"A potion of fire resistance, if I remember correctly," I said.

"Well that will be useful," she replied. "I imagine some of these dragons will breathe fire and not just frost."

"Don't you think they're beautiful?" I asked, holding them up where she could see them better.

"Sure, I suppose so."

"Wait," I said. I ran around gathering up more of them until I had a bouquet. "Here," I said, handing them up to her. "For you."

She took them, allowing half a smile as she held them to her nose. "Mmm, they smell good. No one's ever given me flowers before."

"Really?" I looked at her in surprise. "And you've never gathered any yourself?" She shook her head. "Flowers are some of my favorite things," I said. I gathered another spray and climbed back on my horse, tucking the little bouquet under the strap of the bridle. Lydia did the same, and we continued down the road, our horses wearing little yellow and purple crowns.

"I thought you just picked flowers for their useful parts," Lydia said.

"No, not at all!" Then I told her of the many hours I had spent as a child in the forest looking at flowers, gathering them, and learning their names.

"You're a strange one, Deirdre Morningsong," she said when I had finished, but she smiled when she said it.

Both our moods were considerably lighter after that. We faced who knew what dangers ahead, in addition to the one certain, unimaginable threat of Alduin. It was good to have a companion with whom to face them.

Now, settling into our chamber in High Hrothgar, even the ever-stoic Lydia was chafing at our lack of progress. It must be something about these dark, silent walls, I thought.

"But you have helped!" I exclaimed. "You dealt the killing blow on Sahloknir. I might not be here now if not for you, thrice over."

"Still, it seems we must kill a dragon every day if we are to keep up with Alduin's resurrections. And how are we to do that if we're stuck up here?"

"I agree, it's frustrating," I said, sitting on the edge of one of the beds and pulling off my boots.

Then Lydia smiled. "Who knows? Maybe the Greybeards have the secret to defeating Alduin and they're just waiting until tomorrow to reveal it!"

"From your mouth to Akatosh's ears," I said, and prayed fervently that it was true as I tried to fall asleep.

But the next morning it soon became clear that Arngeir had no such plans.

"No, Alduin is far too great an opponent for you at this point," he said as he poured out tea in the refectory. "You should consider yourself lucky that he has not yet sought to confront you directly. Perhaps it is his dragon's arrogance that leads him to underestimate you, but you must avoid falling
into that same trap. Killing his lieutenants is one thing, killing Alduin himself, another entirely."

"Then how am I to proceed, Master?"

"Have you been practicing the meditations on your journey?"

I admitted that I had not. There had barely been time to sleep, much less sit and focus on my breath – a fact I was feeling all the more this morning after a fitful night in which I dreamt of facing five dragons at once.

"Getting back to your meditations would be a good place to begin," he said. "And when you are ready to develop your power further, I believe we know of a word wall from which you could learn the beginning of another shout. If along the way you happen to battle a dragon, that will not only be good preparation to face the World Eater himself, it will also allow you to absorb the word's deep meaning and use it in a Thu'um. And if you don't chance to find a dragon, Master Borri will be here to share his deep understanding of the word."

"A word wall!" I said. "What word? Where is it? And come to think of it, I don't even know what shouts there are, or which ones will be most useful against dragons."

"All will become clearer with time as you absorb each word of power. With luck, by the time you return here to receive Master Borri's understanding of the word, we will have heard of a new location of power."

"Wait," I said. "So I am to go in search of a word without knowing what it is? Then I'm to return here to finish learning it before I can get the location of the next unknown word?"

"Yes, that is the usual way. Learning them more quickly would be quite dangerous."

"But that will take a week or more for each word! That is time I do not have. And what if I learn a shout that's no good against Alduin?"

"Well, I must admit that the Aura Whisper shout won't help you against a dragon," he said, a flicker of doubt showing in his eyes.

"You are the Masters of the Way of the Voice, and you have been teaching it for Akatosh knows how long. Now you mean to tell me you don't know the locations of each wall in Skyrim, and which word each contains? No, this is not to be believed. I think you know exactly where each word is, and you just parcel them out one at a time to keep your students in check. But I am no ordinary student, and I will not be constrained by these rules."

Arngeir looked surprised – his eyebrows rose slightly. "Young lady, what you are proposing is highly unusual, and very dangerous."

"What's dangerous is a dragon attacking a defenseless farm," I said, before I could stop myself. Then I thought of something. "Master Arngeir, did you know your mother?" He was so old, it was hard to imagine him having a mother, but he must have had at least this in common with the rest of humanity.

He was silent for a moment, and his eyes looked not at me but deep back in time. There was hurt there, and sadness. "Yes, I knew my mother," he said. "But I never saw her after I left home in my teens and began following the Way. We were required to renounce all our ties with the world."

"And what happened to her?"
"I heard she lived to a ripe old age," he said very quietly. He must have been thinking of all that he had missed, because I thought I saw just the beginning of a tear forming in the corner of his eye.

"Master Arngeir, it is your turn to meditate. I would like you to concentrate on how that felt, leaving home knowing you would never see your mother again. Think about those early days away from her when you must have been terribly homesick." His eyes had lost their usual equanimity now. He looked profoundly sad. "Meditate on your mother, alone for all those years, wondering what had become of her Arngeir. And now remember, that was your choice." He gave a great sigh and tugged at his knotted beard.

"Now what if, instead of it being your choice, your mother had been ripped from you when you were just a boy, at an age when you depended on her the most. Imagine if she died a painful death in the jaws of the cruelest creatures that exist. And imagine if you had to witness her dying." He nodded his head, and he was trembling.

"Four children, maybe more, have already suffered that pain at the hands of Alduin and his dragons. Now imagine that pain multiplied many times as more and more dragons come back to life. The pain will swallow all of Skyrim. That is the danger, and that is what I cannot let happen." He rose from the table and paced over to the end of the refectory, as if he would escape my words. But I followed him. I would not relent.

"It is easy to maintain your equanimity," I told him, "when you cloister yourself away from the pain of the world. But those who have felt that pain realize something you don't: that it is our duty to prevent what pain we can, and to heal the pain of others, where we can. That is why I must stop Alduin, and that is why you will tell me the locations of all the Words of Power I need."

I wasn't shouting, though I wanted to. I spoke calmly and finished by laying a hand on his bony shoulder.

I was surprised when he whirled on me. Now he really was angry, his eyes narrowed to slits and his nostrils flaring. He shook with rage as he spoke. "None has dared speak to me in such a fashion for … for ever! I will leave you now and hope you regret your harsh words." With that he turned and disappeared into the hallway, leaving Lydia and me staring after him.

We spent the rest of that morning wandering the halls, wondering what we should do – leave immediately or wait for Arngeir to have a change of heart. But going away without further guidance in developing my power seemed pointless – I knew Arngeir was right that I was not yet ready to face Alduin, but I hadn't a clue where to look for more word walls or how else to strengthen my Thu'um. No, we would need the Greybeards' help, but Arngeir had disappeared, and the other masters went about their business, silent as always.

Our fruitless search for Arngeir did reveal one thing: a tome titled *The Rise and Fall of the Blades* lying on a table in the Greybeards' sleeping area. Thinking it might explain the hostility between Delphine and the Greybeards, I sat down to read it. I was disappointed to find nothing about interactions between the two orders, but I did discover something else. The Blades had grown out of a group of Akaviri warriors who had invaded Tamriel long ago. That explained the curved katanas, Akaviri swords that still served as the symbol of the Blades. But this had been no ordinary invasion: the Akaviri came to Tamriel pursuing *dragons*, which they had already exterminated in their homeland. No wonder Delphine felt she had found a purpose for the remnants of the Blades –
it was a return to their original mission. Of course the people of Tamriel, especially the Nords, weren't eager to accept an armed force in their lands. The Akaviri fought their way across Skyrim, and were finally stopped by Emperor Reman Cyrodiil at the Battle of Pale Pass on the border between Cyrodiil and Skyrim.

It was at this point that something exceedingly strange had happened. The Akaviri, it seemed, were not only hunting dragons, but also searching for a Dragonborn who could help them in their quest. Recognizing Reman Cyrodiil as the Dragonborn they sought, they knelt before him and swore him their allegiance. Thus was the order of the Blades established, protectors of the Dragonborn rulers.

This much I should have known from reading histories of Tamriel, but the surprising thing was the late date at which all of this had happened. The Akaviri invasion took place at the end of the First Era, thousands of years after the Dragon Wars. That meant that a number of dragons lived after the Nords had overthrown their rule – scores of them at least, according to the text. How had the dragons and humans coexisted for all that time? And if some had persisted after the Dragon Wars, perhaps a few had even survived to this day, escaping their Akaviri hunters. Could it be that we faced not just the dragons that Alduin was resurrecting, but others who had lived in hiding for all these ages? If so, our task was all the greater.

Lydia and I were in the refectory, sharing a desultory noon meal of old cheese and hard-tack bread, when Master Wulfgar came in. He gestured for us to follow him, leading us to High Hrothgar's little-used council chamber. It was larger than any other room in the monastery, containing a long oval table made of stone, with stone chairs ringing it. Arngeir and the other masters were seated around the table, and now Arngeir invited me to take a seat next to him.

Arngeir sat there silently for a time, looking at me. Something about him had changed – the calm was still there in his eyes, but behind it, a deep sadness. When he finally did speak, he lowered his eyes. "Dovahkiin, you must forgive me. Your words of this morning made me experience such feelings as I have not known for an age. I had almost forgotten the depths of such emotion." He paused, and his eyes were moist. "I have spent the last hours in silent meditation at the top of the courtyard tower. I have come to see that in removing ourselves from the world, we have gone too far in cutting ourselves off from all human emotion. But you, you are a true follower of the Way, for you would use your Voice in service to the gods. Only it is not the will of Akatosh you serve, but the will of Mara, goddess of compassion." He was silent once more, as a tear ran down his cheek. The other masters looked on, stoic as always.

"And so we have decided to help you," he said, finally. "What would you have us do?"

"I thank you, Master Arngeir," I said, dipping my head. "Without your help, we are lost. To begin, I will need to know what shouts are available. Then I ask that you advise me on the ones most suitable to stopping the dragons. Then show me where I will find the word walls for each shout."

He looked at Borri, Wulfgar, and Einarth. They must have silently assented because Arngeir nodded and said, "I will do that. But you will still have to absorb each word's deep meaning. How do you propose to do that?"

"I must kill the dragons in any case. I will use the knowledge I absorb from their souls to master what shouts I can. If there are too few dragons I hope I can return here and Master Borri will honor me with the gift of his knowledge for the words that remain."

"Very well," said Arngeir. "You run a great risk by learning the Words of Power so quickly, but perhaps the task of locating them, as well as hunting and slaying the dragons, will help you temper your growing power with growing wisdom. I must again remind myself that you walk a different path than any Dragonborn before you, for your task is that much greater."
Arngeir rose and went to a cabinet at the end of the chamber. Unlocking it with a key he kept in his robes, he withdrew two scrolls from it, one quite large. Returning to the table, he unrolled the smaller one for me. "This is a list of all the shouts you can learn from word walls," he said.

The list contained sixteen shouts, each consisting of three words of power. One of the shouts I already knew – Unrelenting Force. And I knew one word each of the Whirlwind Sprint and Ice Form shouts. I had already experienced both the Fire Breath and Frost Breath shouts, as well as Storm Call and Slow Time at Ustengrav. The list also contained details on the effect of each shout, how long the effect would last, and how long my Thu'um would take to recover after using it.

The larger scroll was a map of Skyrim with the location of every word wall marked on it.

"Thank you, Master Arngeir," I said, "this is exactly what I needed. I promise, you won't be sorry for showing it to me."

We spent the rest of the day going over the list, discussing which shouts would be most useful when confronting a dragon, and which might aid us in our travels across Skyrim. Lydia was invaluable here, with ideas about tactics combining a particular shout with each of our particular attacking skills. And Arngeir was unstinting in his insights into the subtleties of each shout's use.

In the end, we chose a list of four shouts that would be most vital, and four more that would help us along the way. The Marked for Death shout would weaken an opponent's defenses and drain its life force – vital against a powerful creature like a dragon. Slow Time would allow me to get in several attacks while my opponent was slowed to a near standstill. I had already experienced the power of that shout. Whirlwind Sprint would also let me move more quickly than my opponent, while not affecting Lydia. Become Ethereal would transform me into a spectral being, incapable of being harmed for the duration of the shout, or until I attacked another. Frost Breath and Fire Breath would be useful when my magicka ran low. Dismaying Shout and Disarm would be less useful on dragons, but could help when encountering bandits, rogue mages, or undead in our travels.

Then Lydia and I studied the map late into the night, laying out a plan for travelling from wall to wall, beginning in the east where we might also encounter the recently resurrected dragons. We would save the lands to the west for later, because we would need to keep our identities hidden and perhaps even invent disguises before venturing into lands controlled by the Thalmor and the Empire.

Several of the word wall locations on the map were marked with strange emblems that looked like masks. When I asked Arngeir about them his face grew grim. "Those word walls are guarded by the ancient Dragon Priests. They are the most powerful of the draugr, more powerful even than the Draugr Scourge Lords. They are not to be trifled with. Seldom, if ever, have we sent an initiate against them – another reason I resisted showing you this list."

I looked at Lydia. "They can't be more powerful than Alduin if they once worshipped him, can they? They'll make good practice in developing our power to eventually face the World Eater, am I right, Lydia?"

"Yes, my thane," she said, all eagerness. "Bring them on!"

Arngeir looked at us both appraisingly. "I can only hope your youthful bravado won't be the end of you." I think I saw fear in his eyes then – fear for us.

When we left in the morning, Arngeir was nowhere to be found.
The fire dragon slumped to the ground with a crash, Lydia's axe buried in its neck. She stepped back, panting from the effort, and looked at me expectantly.

I walked toward the dragon, feeling my magicka and my Thu'um slowly returning. Then the dragon's flesh began to dissolve and those familiar streamers of flame and smoke swirled toward me. I felt the power of the dragon's soul enter my being, and along with it, a deep understanding of Toor, the second word of the Fire Breath shout.

Lydia grinned. "Another day, another dragon," she said, then scooped up a gloveful of snow and began wiping the blood from her axe.

She was exaggerating, of course, but killing dragons was coming to seem a bit routine. This was the sixth we had slain in the fortnight since leaving High Hrothgar.

"Feeling cocky, are we?" I said. "Doesn't it concern you that they keep surprising us as we emerge from these ancient crypts?" This one had attacked just as we came out of Dustman's Cairn, where we had gone to get one of the words of Fire Breath.

"Ha! You sound like Arngeir," she replied, now polishing her axe with a cloth. "Surprise us where they will, these dragons have become almost too easy, with those new shouts you use."

"What, would you give them a more sporting chance?" I asked as I searched for spent arrows around the dragon's skeleton.

"No, but I would enjoy more of a challenge. We'll need sharper practice if we're ever to face Alduin." She paused then, distracted by something out over the Whiterun Vale. "Would you look at that!"

I turned to see where she was looking. It had been a gloomy, gray day when we entered the barrow, but now the sun broke through the clouds low in the west. Below us, the tundra was bathed in late afternoon light. The new-fallen snow and ice-covered pools sparkled like gems, while the rocky peaks across the valley basked in a warm alpenglow. It was good to be out in the fresh air after hours underground, and the spectacular sunset was a glad sight after days of dreary weather.

"I could just sit here for a minute and take it in," Lydia said. She sat on the edge of the circular pit that formed the entrance to Dustman's Cairn, giving a contented sigh as she continued burnishing the steel of her axe. The pillars around us cast long shadows.

I sat down next to her, trying to let the fatigue of the last two weeks' travels drain from my body. The truth was, we needed more than just a short break. Our journey had taken us south and east from Ivarstead, through the lands of eternal autumn around Riften, and north into the volcanic country of Eastmarch. Then we were back into the lands of permanent snow in Winterhold, where
Snow Veil Sanctum provided us our first test in a barrow. Next we crossed the high pass at Fort Kastav – Lydia insisted we clear out the vampires who occupied it – and then descended to a cluster of caverns and barrows west of Windhelm. The Nightgate Inn sat conveniently nearby, a fact we appreciated all the more as winter weather settled over the Pale. Hadring's fish stew warmed us after many a frost-bitten journey. We finished with the elaborate ruin of Korvanjund, then made our way back home to Whiterun.

Along the way, we had managed to slay five dragons, but we had seen many more flying off in the distance, too far to contemplate giving chase. Sometimes they even flew directly overhead, as if taunting us. They seemed to be popping up north and south, east and west. Perhaps Alduin had chosen to avoid a predictable pattern after we discovered him at Kynesgrove. Everywhere we went, people told of seeing the dragons, of a farm burned to the ground, or livestock carried off in a dragon's jaws. It was as Lydia feared – we could not keep pace with the resurrections by fighting the dragons singly.

The first dragon we faced on our own had been the most difficult. It guarded the word wall at Autumnwatch Tower, south of Ivarstead, blending in to the wall so well that we didn't notice it until it unfurled its wings and soared over our heads with a savage roar. As we fought it, I had to spend as much time healing Lydia as I did attacking the beast. Fortunately, it was a frost dragon, and it finally succumbed to firebolts from my flame atronach and blows from Lydia's axe of embers.

We were glad when Delphine joined us for our third dragon, at Bonestrewn Crest. She had discovered its lair after it swooped over Windhelm and marauded nearby farms. Afterward, she sought to embroil me in a scheme of sneaking into the Thalmor Embassy during a party Ambassador Elenwen planned to give for Skyrim's nobles. She thought I might uncover the Thalmor role in the dragons' return while they were distracted. Delphine's obsession with the Thalmorbordered on a mania, and I could not let myself be distracted from my purpose. She was none too happy when I refused, even claiming to have no further clues to the whereabouts of further dragons.

After Delphine left us, we worked on refining our battle tactics. Lydia insisted on moving in for the blade work while I stood back and shouted at the dragon, or launched Destruction spells at it and Restoration spells at her. "Those mage's robes won't do you any good if a dragon gets hold of you with its teeth," she said. She was right, of course, but I still found my heart leaping into my mouth every time a dragon's jaws snapped too near her or its breath enveloped her. I constantly had to restrain myself from running in with my own sword drawn.

Our early encounters with other opponents had their own mishaps. Once, when we surprised a group of bandits in a cave, Lydia charged in front of my calming spell. She could only stand aside, commenting archly as I faced five bandits on my own. They were smart enough not to attack her and break the spell.

"Gee, I wish I could help you," she said as I ducked under a vicious slash at my head.

"Give 'em Oblivion – Talos knows I can't," she shouted as my fear spell sent their leader running.

Finally, I had to give up treating them gently and unleashed my newly acquired frost breath on the remaining four. One went down and the other three were so surprised that they took flight after their leader.

"Well, that was a nice rest," Lydia said when they were gone. "Thanks for thinking of me. You wouldn't want to wear out your housecarl, would you?" She shook herself as if trying to shed the magic's effects. "How long does this spell last, anyway?"
I apologized over and over and promised that it would by the last time I made that mistake.

And it almost was – if not for the dragon priests, those most fearsome of all the draugr. If anything, they were more terrible opponents than the dragons themselves. They not only had powerful magic and a mighty Thu'um, they also flew. They would flit to and fro, making difficult targets for spells or arrows. We were battling our first dragon priest when it suddenly flew to the right. I tried to track its movement, an ice spike spell at the ready. Just as I released it, I saw Lydia out of the corner of my eye, moving into the path of the spell. Fortunately I was able to turn it aside just in time to avoid a direct hit, but the frost still caught her shoulder.

"Hey, watch it!" she yelled. We prevailed in the end and were able to laugh about it as I healed her. Still, I didn't want to think what would happen if I hit her directly with a more powerful spell, or a shout. As my magical power grew, such mistakes would grow more costly.

Our battles went better after that, and I could feel my power growing over the weeks with each new word I learned and each dragon soul I absorbed. My wealth grew as well, as we had acquired an array of weapons, magical items, armor, and gold along the way. Occasionally we found filled soul gems with which I could recharge the Staff of Jyrik Gauldurson – at least these trapped souls would be released back to Aetherius, I told myself. We found armor and clothing as well. I found a better set of mages' robes and Lydia found a good horned helmet of steel. From the same chest, she pulled a set of steel plate armor that made her laugh.

"What?" I asked, pocketing a healing potion I had just found. She held the armor up for me and I saw that the breastplate had been fashioned to fit a woman's form. "So?" I said. I knew nothing of heavy armor.

"Well, this is cunning metalwork, and very becoming, no doubt. But I'd sooner go naked than wear it."

"Why?" It looked to me as if it would fit Lydia well, and flatter her more than the padded leather and steel she now wore.

"Imagine if you were to take a fall in this, or a bash from a mace," she said, pointing to the individually shaped breast pieces. "These cones of steel around each breast would drive into your chest, maybe even cracking your rib-cage open. And in a fight with blades, you want your opponent's weapon to deflect away from the center of the body. The shape of this armor would do the opposite, directing thrusts straight to your heart and lungs. No, leave the cleavage to the tavern wenches. I want armor that will make me a better fighter."

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

She looked the armor over again. "It will take a forge and some steel, but I think I can," she said. A few days later, and a couple of hours spent at Balimund's forge in Riften, and she had a new set of steel plate armor that offered much better protection than her old leather and steel. The chest piece was now a single smooth curve, with a hard ridge running down the middle to deflect blade thrusts outward.

The armor was the only loot Lydia would accept of all that we found – she insisted that her pay from Balgruuf's treasury was enough, despite my attempts to share with her.

"But think of your family, Lydia," I said. "Perhaps your father could use a new plow." She only shook her head and turned away and would say no more.

By the time we returned to Whiterun at the end of the fortnight, I felt we deserved a break. With
my newfound wealth, I took Balgruuf up on his leave to buy a house in the city. It would serve as a base for our explorations to the west, but more than that, I wanted a place I could call home. It wasn't much to look at, and it would take a lot of cleaning, decorating, and furnishing before it truly was a home, but it had a nice bedchamber for me, a smaller room for Lydia, and a cozy fireplace. I had handed the gold over to Avenicci just that morning, and we were both looking forward to spending the night in our new beds.

If only our welcome back to Whiterun had been a little warmer. Fresh from slaying five of the beasts, I had expected something of a hero's welcome. Yet two more of the hold's farms had been attacked by dragons while we were away, and several people killed. Jarl Balgruuf seemed distant when I met him, as if regretting his advice that I go to High Hrothgar and develop my Thu'um. And most of what I heard as we entered the Bannered Mare that evening was grumbling.

"What good is having the Dragonborn on our side if we still get attacked?" one man asked.

"Maybe she's in league with the dragons," another one grumbled.

No matter how I tried to explain that I was still developing my power, and that we had already killed many dragons, it didn't do much good.

"Shouldn't a Dragonborn be able to fly out and meet the dragons where they live?" a woman in the back called out. A good question, I couldn't help thinking. If only I could face Alduin directly! But was I ready for that, even now? He was nowhere to be found, in any case. Gradually the grumbling died down and I had gone back to my stew, considerably chastened. At least Arngeir would be glad – Whiterun's citizens were doing their best to keep me on the path of humility.

Now the sun was sinking lower into a bank of red-tinged clouds, and my fatigue persisted. As difficult as our reception in Whiterun had been, my new home would let us get away from the people's grumbling and provide warm beds for the night. "Home is calling, Lydia," I said. "Let's see if we can get there before dark."

Just then we heard shouts from the path leading up to the cairn. I turned to see three hooded figures on horseback, riding fast. As they galloped up the hill toward us, I recognized the distinctive cut of mages' robes, and noticed that one of the riders had a tail. Another's eyes glinted red in the waning light. The third proved to be a Nord by his accent when he shouted up to us, "Deirdre, I'm so glad we found you!"

I looked over at Lydia. She shrugged and said, "At least we're dressed this time."

"Greetings, friends," I called to them as they dismounted a little way down the slope. "How is it that we keep running into you in the wilds?" As the three mages walked up the hill toward us I saw that each of their brows bore a shining jeweled circlet.

"The Psijics told us we would find you here if we hurried," Onmund said. He was out of breath, even having been on horseback. "And I'm glad we did!"

"Why, what's happened?" I asked, trying to keep any note of alarm out of my voice, but not entirely succeeding.

"The Eye…" Onmund said, but the short walk up the hill had winded him further. His eyes were
wide and he seemed to be in a panic. "Ancano … Savos … We have to go to … to Labyrinthian!"

"Labyrinthian!" I exclaimed. The place had an evil reputation. It had been one of the most important temples of the dragon priests, then grew into the city of Bromjunaar. Later, in the First Era, Arch-mage Shalidor built his maze in the city's ruins. From that, the whole place took the name Labyrinthian. Long abandoned, its exterior became a haven for frost trolls, and its interior was rumored to house powerful dark forces, perhaps the most powerful of the dragon priests. The main road between Whiterun and Morthal once ran through the place, but now even the bravest took the longer way around through Rorikstead. Yet it had a word wall I would need to visit. I had been saving it for later, when my power would be greater.

"I must go to Labyrinthian soon myself," I said. "But it is a fearsome place. What madness would lead you there? Please, one of you, tell me what has happened."

Brelyna stepped forward. "It is a long and grim tale," she said. Her voice was serious, even for her, the most serious of my three college friends.

"Well, why don't you tell it as we ride back to Whiterun? I am in sore need of food and rest."

"There's no time for that!" Brelyna snapped. "We must get the staff from Labyrinthian and return to Winterhold without delay. The fate of the college, and even the world, depends on it!" Both Onmund and J'zargo nodded in agreement.

"We need you to come with us," Onmund said. "We can't go in there without you – it would be suicide!"

I could see I wasn't going to get a straight story out of them until I got them to calm down. "If the tale is long, perhaps we could take time for a cup of tea. Lydia, would you mind building a fire and preparing it for us?"

"Not at all, my thane," she said, and went to her horse to unpack the necessaries.

"Now, would one of you start from the beginning, and tell me what is happening at the college? And at least we can sit down while the tale is told." I found a spot where I could lean my back against one of the standing stones encircling Dustman's Cairn, brushing away a thin layer of snow. As tired as I was, I suspected that sleep was yet farther in my future. My fellow mages took seats around me and Brelyna began the tale.

"After we last parted ways with you – what was that, a month ago?" We all nodded. "After our parting, we made for the college straightaway – that took us three days, travelling on foot as we were. We took the books and your warning to Savos and Tolfdir, but they made little impression."

J'zargo spoke up for the first time. "So wise, these college masters are supposed to be. This one thinks they cannot see the whiskers on their own faces."

"Yes, well, they seemed to think they could keep Ancano in check, if not exactly trust him," Brelyna went on. "And they were so obsessed with unlocking the secrets of the Eye of Magnus! A week went by, and they went on researching, and nothing happened. Ancano spent an awful lot of time with the Eye as well, when he wasn't skulking in and out of the college's basement."

"I didn't know the college had a basement," I said.

"Oh, it does, it does," Onmund said, and shivered.

"We'll get to that," said Brelyna. "At last, the strangest thing happened. The three of us were visited
by a Psijic monk named Nerien, or an apparition of him, at least. He was able to stop time for
the rest of the college and talk just to us. He said he had spoken with you in the same way."

"He did, twice," I said. "I told him I trusted the three of you to deliver the message, and the masters
to deal with Ancano and the Eye."

"We did, we did!" Onmund exclaimed. "If only you had come back with us!"

"Now, now," said Brelyna. "What's done is done. Nerien warned us once more how dangerous the
Eye was, especially with Ancano having access to it. Then he told us something passing strange.
He said there was someone within the college named the Augur of Dunlain. This person would
hold the key to what we should do next about the Eye. But Nerien couldn't tell us who or what or
where this person was. He seemed surprised we had never heard of such a person."

Nearby, Lydia had the fire going and was melting snow in a small iron kettle, listening intently to
our conversation all the while.

"So, who was this Augur?" I asked.

"A former student," said Onmund. "He had gone into the college's basement long ago, conducting
some sort of research, but something happened to him there…" The Nord shivered again.

"Yes, we did eventually find the Augur in the basement, or the Midden as it is called," Brelyna
said. "But that came after almost a week of pestering the masters and wizards about him. Master
Aren forbade us to bring up his name again. Finally Tolfdir broke down and told us to look for him
deep within the Midden. He warned us that it was a dangerous place and we should take all our
magic with us."

"And well he might," said Onmund. "There were skeletal walkers, frost trolls, ice wraiths…"

"Trifles!" J'zargo spat. "We handled them with ease, did we not? And this one proved that J'zargo's
flame cloak spell has been perfected. Undead get surprise, caster is not harmed. Is brilliant, no?"

"Yes, we did pass all the trials," Brelyna said, "with just a few singed spots from that infernal
flame cloak. Then we arrived at a final locked door. The Augur was within, but at first he didn't
want to let us inside. It seemed we were not the only ones who had visited him recently, and he was
tired of being pestered."

Lydia brought us our tea. We were short on mugs, so we would have to share.

"This one would enjoy a spoonful of honey in his tea," J'zargo said. He was back to purring.

"This one thinks we're in the wilds, not the Bannered Mare," Lydia replied, sitting down next to me
with her own mug. J'zargo gave a little hiss.

"So the Augur finally let us in, after much pleading on our part," Brelyna went on. "His chamber
was small, circular, and he filled most of it. He was … a glowing ball of light or energy or I know
not what. His explorations in the Midden had gone horribly wrong – we found a journal later that
said that several students were killed. But he was transformed into the form in which we found
him. And somehow it allowed him to know things."

"And did he hold the clue to your next step?" I asked. The tea was reviving me somewhat, but the
story didn't seem to be moving very fast.

"Yes, but not before he told us that what we sought would destroy us."
"Pfft..." hissed J'zargo. "How can knowledge destroy us? Knowledge is our path to greatness. This Augur was just too weak for the magic he uncovered."

"Maybe the Augur was right," Onmund said thoughtfully, more to himself than to us. "Maybe knowledge only corrupts. Maybe my parents were right too, and I shouldn't be fooling around with this magic."

"The Augur felt certain the Eye would corrupt Ancano," Brelyna said, "and it appears he was right. But we get ahead of ourselves. The most important thing the Augur told us was that we needed to get the Staff of Magnus. 'To see through Magnus' Eye without being blinded, you must use his Staff,' he said."

"What will the staff do?" I asked.

"We have no idea!" Onmund exclaimed. "But it's our only hope!"

"So, you knew you needed to get this staff," I said. "But that was two weeks ago, by my reckoning."

"The Augur couldn't tell us where to look for the staff," Brelyna said. "We hesitated to ask Savos Aren or the other masters, after we had been forbidden to even mention the Augur's name. We went to Tolfdir first, but he had never heard of it. Then we wasted some days in the Arcanaeum, hoping to learn something there."

"Finally, we did go to the arch-mage," Onmund said, "as we should have to begin with. He wasn't even angry. He was pleased with our initiative. He gave us these circlets that increase our magicka." He touched the jeweled circlet he wore on his brow.

"He didn't know anything about the staff's whereabouts either," Brelyna said. "But he did say that the college had been visited some months back by emissaries from a magical order known as the Synod."

"The Synod? How many orders of mages are there?"

"Many, apparently, and each jealous of all the others. This one is based in Cyrodiil. Neither Savos nor Mirabelle had anything good to say about them. Fancy themselves the Imperial authority on all things magical, according to Mirabelle. She said they mostly try to maintain the emperor's favor, but now they're trying to consolidate their power by gathering magical artifacts. She said they showed up at the college looking for the Staff of Magnus, as if we would have it stored away in a broom closet. They went away disappointed, saying they might have better luck in Mzulft."

"Mzulft! That sounds like a Dwemer ruin!"

"Oh, it is, it is," Onmund said, and he shivered again.

"So, you went there?"

"We did," Brelyna said. "What with preparations for the journey and travelling on foot, it took us three days to get there. It's in the mountains on Skyrim's eastern border, north of Riften."

"I think I've seen it!" I said. "We fought a dragon on the slopes of Northwind Peak and when we were done I looked across the valley and saw circular towers of stone high up on the mountain face. They were topped with bronze domes, and steam rose from them."

"That was it!" Onmund said. "Maybe we were there even as you were looking across at it." The
thought seemed to cheer him somewhat.

"The place is vast," said Brelyna, "and … amazing is the only word. Those Dwemer machines! They still function, guarding the place."

"This one has never seen anything like it," said J'zargo. "The Nordic catacombs, they are mere child's playhouses compared to the delving of the dwarves."

"But the Dwemer are all gone now," said Onmund, "and we found only their machines – and Falmer. Many, many Falmer."

"Falmer!" Lydia exclaimed. Now it was her turn to shiver. Every Nord child had heard stories of the blind, vengeful creatures that crept out of cracks in the ground and stole away with children who had misbehaved. They were the twisted descendants of a once mighty race of mer, the Snow Elves who had inhabited what was to become Skyrim. Defeated and pushed out of their lands by the Nords, they took refuge with their cousins, the Dwemer. But the dwarves tricked them, feeding them toxic fungi that turned them blind. The Snow Elves became the Dwemer's slaves. Over centuries of creeping underground, their blind, twisted forms became hereditary. Bitterness against the Dwemer and all who lived above ground grew in their hearts. Then, with the Dwemer's mysterious disappearance, the Falmer spread throughout the old dwarven ruins, and even began making forays above ground, becoming the stuff of many a nightmarish Nordic children's tale. I was glad my father had never indulged in telling those tales to me.

"And what of the Synod expedition?" I asked.

"Decimated by the Falmer, unfortunately," Brelyna said. "I imagine they wished they had spent less time currying favor at court and more time honing their magical skills, in the end. We found the first of them in the ruin's entrance chamber. With his last breath, he told us we needed to find a focusing crystal and take it to something called the oculory. Without it the project would fail."

"And we didn't even know what the project was!" said Onmund.

"But without that hint that we were on the right track, we might have turned back long before reaching the end. The place goes on and on, let me tell you." Brelyna's red eyes glowed with wonder as she remembered the place. "We were two days in there, fighting off the Falmer, the spiders, the chaurs – those are giant, poison-spitting insects with nearly impenetrable shells. And the Dwemer machines – the mechanical spider workers, the dwarven sphere guardians! They are fast, they pop out of the walls when you least expect them, and they are hard to stop with magic."

Onmund shivered again. "Frostbite spiders are bad enough, but mechanical spiders as well!"

"But you survived, or you wouldn't be here," I pointed out. "So you must have reached the oculory."

"Yes," said Brelyna, "although it's a good thing some of us were paying attention to Colette's lectures about the importance of Restoration magic." She gave a sidelong glance at J'zargo.

"This one says, leave Restoration to the women," the Khajiit said. "J'zargo is made for greater things."

Brelyna ignored him. "Along the way we found the crystal on the body of a Falmer we had killed. We found the bodies of several of the unfortunate mages as well. Finally, in the innermost chamber, we found the last of them, Paratus. He had survived by locking himself inside. It seems
that the first researcher we ran across had just returned from getting the crystal repaired in Cyrodiil. The cold of Skyrim didn't agree with it, and the adjustments to it could only be made in the Imperial City. Paratus was very glad we had found it, and took us into the oculory chamber straight away. He seemed more excited that the project could go on than upset over the deaths of his colleagues."

"The oculory itself was some sort of Dwemer observatory," Onmund said. "Paratus said the ancient dwarves channeled starlight through it to somehow gain insight into the nature of the divine. But the Synod had spent months adapting it to do something far different – reveal the sources of magical power in northern Tamriel."

"And did the crystal work?" I asked. I wondered how long it would be before I discovered why my friends had seemed in such a panic when they arrived. Perhaps the tea had calmed them too much. The tea had reminded me of all those times sharing a pot with Mirabelle, and I wondered … but no, they would have told me by now if something had happened to her.

"It did," said Brelyna, "but the machine was very complicated. It took some time for Paratus to move everything into position – mirrors, and even the domed roof of the structure itself. Finally, the oculory beamed a map of northern Tamriel onto the wall of the chamber."

"And?"

"It revealed something Paratus hadn't expected. There was such a large bright spot around the college that he thought we were somehow interfering with his project. That's when Onmund told him about the Eye of Magnus."

"Was that wise?" I asked.

"It was the only way to get him to tell us about the staff," Onmund said. "Otherwise, we would have had to race him here, and he never would have revealed the staff's location. But once he knew the college had the Eye, he was much more interested in it than the staff. He didn't mind telling us that the other bright spot on the map could only be Labyrinthian. The last we saw him, he was heading off to the Imperial City to report our news to his superiors."

"So once you knew where the staff was, you came straight here?"

"No," Brelyna said, "and this is the bad part." She looked at J'zargo and Onmund, but they both just looked at the ground. "We thought it best to return to the college, since Labyrinthian has such a fearsome reputation. We thought certainly Master Aren would want to send more experienced wizards on such a dangerous mission. It took us three days to return to Winterhold, and when we got there it was…"

"It was awful," said Onmund. "Ancano had barricaded himself in the Hall of the Elements with the Eye. He was somehow channeling its power to create a powerful shield wall all around the chamber. We found Savos and Mirabelle in the entry hall trying to get through it. They asked for our help when we came in, before we could even tell them about the staff. Maybe it would have been better if we had waited before confronting Ancano."

"Why, what happened?"

"We finally broke through the magical shield," Brelyna said. "I don't know about Savos and Mirabelle, but our magicka was completely drained. But we entered the chamber anyway, and Ancano said something about controlling the power of the universe, and there was no way we could stop him. Savos confronted him and aimed a spell toward him. Then there was a blinding
"When we came to," Onmund continued, "we had been scattered around the perimeter of the chamber like matchsticks. Mirabelle could hardly move. Ancano had put the barrier back up, though it covered a much smaller area. We didn't see Savos anywhere, and Mirabelle told us to find him. We went outside, into the courtyard. Tolfdir and the other wizards were there, standing around a body…"

"Savos Aren's body," Brelyna concluded. "He had been blown clear of the Hall of the Elements, and the blast killed him. We all stood there crying and tearing out our hair and hugging each other. Finally, Mirabelle staggered out of the hall. She could barely walk, but when she saw Savos she went over and knelt beside him. She had been a novice when Savos was named arch-mage, and she owed her rise through the ranks to him. But more than that, I think she had a deep respect for him. I thought she would go to pieces like the rest of us, but she didn't. She was strong!" Brelyna was crying even now, remembering it. I was too shocked to speak.

When Brelyna had recovered herself a bit, she went on. "Mirabelle took something from around the arch-mage's neck. She told the other masters and wizards to do what they could to contain Ancano and the Eye, but not to attack him. Then she took us up to the arch-mage's quarters and had us tell her everything we had learned about the staff. She was surprised when we mentioned Labyrinthian. It seems the place had been important to Savos – something had happened there that affected him deeply. She went over to his chest and took out a heavy iron torc – the Torc of Labyrinthian, she called it. She said Savos had told her of it long ago, saying she would know what to do with it when the time came. Then she gave it to us and told us it was up to us to get the Staff of Magnus."

"This one told her we would go right away," said J'zargo, "but these two said that Labyrinthian was beyond our abilities. Even after Mzulft, they have the bravery of little bunny rabbits."

"It's true, we did hesitate," said Onmund. "But then Nerien appeared, speaking to the four of us. He said events were proceeding just as the Psijics had foreseen. He said our only hope was to find you, Deirdre. That's when he told us we could meet you here."

I had to agree with Onmund – if only I had returned with them to the college! But what could I have done then? And who knew how much more destruction the dragons would have caused by now, had we not slain five of them? It was no good questioning myself. But now I had to help get this staff, and we had to return to the college and do what we could to save it.

I stood up. "So Ancano remained barricaded with the Eye when you left?" I asked. They nodded. "And how long were you on the road?"

"Mirabelle gave us gold to buy these horses in Winterhold," Brelyna said. "We left yesterday at mid-day, travelling over the Wayward Pass and cutting cross-country north of Whiterun."

"It seems we have no time to waste," I said. "Labyrinthian is just above us in the mountains north of here. We should be on our way."

Lydia had already packed our things. "What's another Nord ruin?" she said gamely. "We've faced dragon priests on little sleep, how bad could this be? Let's go!"

"Wait," said Brelyna. "Mirabelle gave us one other thing, once she knew we would be meeting you. She thought you could use it if you went into Labyrinthian with us." From within the folds of her robes she withdrew a simple necklace with a jeweled silver pendant. I had seen it before. It was the Amulet of Savos Aren.
"I don't need payment to go with you into Labyrinthian," I said.

"Take it," said Onmund. "It has great power. And we'll need all the help we can get, if this place lives up to its reputation."

The amulet flashed in the light of the newly risen moons as I placed it around my neck.
Labyrinthian

Chapter Summary

-- shades from the past -- in the footsteps of Savos Aren -- a voice from the labyrinth --
teamwork -- into the maze --

"Come on, we're finally here," said Savos Aren. "Let's not waste any more time!" Only it couldn't
be Savos Aren. Yet it was – a much younger Savos Aren, in spectral form. We were approaching
the great iron doors of Labyrinthian's main temple when the ghost of our arch-mage appeared to
us, followed by five more spectral figures, all in mages' robes.

"Master Aren!" Brelyna exclaimed. The ghostly figure paid her no heed, but she was right – there
was no mistaking that voice. I looked at him more closely. It was hard to tell with his nearly
transparent features, but he did look like a youthful Savos Aren, with a shorter goatee rather than
the long, knotted beard we had known him to wear.

Some of his companions were less enthusiastic about entering the temple. One, an Argonian,
questioned whether it was a good idea at all. But another, a Redguard, was even more excited than
the young Savos. "We'll be back to the college before they even know we're gone," she said.

"You would care about that, Atmah," said a Bosmer. "You always were the arch-mage's favorite."

"Now, Girduin," Savos said, "Atmah is taking the same risks we all are. After all, this was her idea
in the first place."

A Nord spoke up, brash as the men of Skyrim usually are. "Let's just get in there, see what's
inside."

With that, the six mages disappeared. We all looked at each other.

"Who were they?" Onmund asked. "Ghosts?"

"I don't know, but I've got a bad feeling about this," Lydia said. It wasn't like her to show hesitation
or fear, especially before we had even entered the place.

"Ghosts – or reverberations from the past?" asked Brelyna. "Long past, judging by Savos Aren's
age. He hadn't been named arch-mage yet, at any rate."

"But why are we seeing this vision?" I asked.

"I have no idea. But remember, something happened here that affected Master Aren deeply. Maybe
the psychic imprint of those events was so powerful that it can be triggered by our presence here –
or by objects that once belonged to him."

"What are we waiting for?" J'zargo asked. "Ghost of Savos Aren or no, we need to get in there and
find the Staff of Magnus. And who knows what else we'll find?"

"Yes, what else might we find?" said Onmund. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."
I turned and looked out over the marshes of Hjaalmarch, lit here and there where light from Masser and Secunda showed through gaps in the clouds. It was a beautiful evening, and it was difficult to think that we were heading back underground. Tired as I was, the tale my three friends had told seemed like a dream, one from which I could not wake. Could Savos Aren really be dead? How could Ancano have foiled the combined power of Savos, Mirabelle, Tolfdir, Faralda, and the rest? Why had they trusted him in the first place? Maybe J'zargo was right – despite all their magical prowess, they couldn't see what was right before them. I could believe it of the others, even Savos Aren, but not Mirabelle. She seemed to have such good sense about everything. It just didn't seem possible, it had to be a dream. Any minute, I'll wake up at home in Whiterun, I told myself.

Then I realized that my new house in Whiterun was not yet my home – the college was. Though I had spent only a month there, it was the only home I had known in the last three years. Mirabelle had even become something like a second mother to me, though she could never replace my own mother. I had lost one home; I would not lose another.

I turned back to my friends, trying to shake off my fatigue. "J'zargo is right," I said. "Let's get in there and get this over with. Our friends at the college are depending on us."

We approached the massive iron door of the temple and gave it a push, but it wouldn't budge. It had something like a handle in the form of an animal's head at its center, but it would not turn. Then I noticed indentations on either side of it. "Here, see if the torc fits in there," I said to Brelyna. She took off her knapsack and withdrew the heavy iron torc. It formed an almost complete circle, with heavy knobs where the ends nearly met. Once she had it in place, the torc looked like what it was – a door knocker. With no assistance from us, it gave two loud knocks. Then the doors parted to allow us entrance.

Inside, we found a chamber much like those in Saarthal – only much larger, and lit by dim moonlight shining through skylights in the ceiling. The ancient Nords had shaped and carved the natural rock into elaborate columns and arches. Carvings of dragons adorned the columns and a great archway over the chamber's far door. Grim Nordic faces peered eerily at us out of the gloom. The place grew brighter once I cast magelight, with emerald-green moss covering the columns. Then we saw the skeletons. More than a dozen lay scattered across the floor, all of them looking as if they had fallen while fleeing toward the entrance.

"What were they running from?" Onmund wondered.

I had been thinking the same thing. "Best to stay alert," I said. I cast my stoneflesh spell, and Lydia drew her axe.

We were halfway across the chamber when the spectral mages reappeared, clustered around a door at the far end. Onmund jumped, he was so surprised.

"I can't believe we're doing this," said the mage who hadn't spoken before.

"But Elvali," said the young Savos, "just think of the looks on their faces when we come back!" He sounded eager to prove himself, not at all like the old arch-mage we had known.

"You keep talking like you're sure we'll find something useful in here," the Nord said.

"We're bound to find something, Hafnar," said the mage Savos had called Girduin. "Given the age of this place, it's more than likely that some amount of power remains."

Savos practically rubbed his hands together in glee. "Enchanted weapons, tomes of ancient
knowledge, Shalidor's secrets themselves – who knows what we could find!"

I looked at my fellow mages. Onmund and Brelyna seemed as troubled by this young, ambitious Savos Aren as I was. Only J'zargo's eager face seemed to share Savos' lust for knowledge and power.

"What if there are ... things guarding this place?" the Argonian said. I wondered how the rest had convinced her to join the expedition, she seemed to have so little enthusiasm for it.

"Takes-in-Light," Atmah said to her, "we are six college-trained mages. I think we'll be fine." Then the mages disappeared once more.

"They certainly sounded confident, didn't they?" Brelyna said.

"Some of them, at least," Onmund replied.

"The rest sound like what you call, milk-drinkers, no?" said J'zargo.

"Reckless bravery will get you killed in a place like this, J'zargo," I said. "Now stay alert and let's see what's through this door."

Beyond the wooden door, a wide cavern led to a narrow passageway blocked at the far end by a portcullis. A lever at the tunnel's entrance seemed the obvious way to raise it. Beyond the barrier, we could see a much larger chamber.

I motioned for everyone to use stealth as best they could and then pulled the lever. The portcullis withdrew into the ceiling, and I led the way into the passage, Lydia and the others following behind. It was so narrow we were forced to go single file.

As Lydia and I entered the large chamber beyond, two things happened: nearly a dozen skeletal walkers emerged out of the gloom of the vast cavern, and the portcullis slid back into place, nearly impaling Onmund. He and the other two mages were trapped in the narrow passage. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that Lydia and I were trapped in the cavern with a dozen advancing undead. Many of them were archers, though none too skillful – arrows rained down around us, but none found their mark.

"Spread out and keep moving, or those archers will have us for sure!" Lydia yelled. She launched an arrow, felling one of the skeletons, then moved off to her right.

As I moved left and prepared to cast a firebolt, I called to my friends, "Quick, you three, pull that lever and get out here! We could use your help!" I hit one of the skeletons with a firebolt and kept moving.

Just then, a loud, cracking bang came from the center of the cavern. The place was so big that the middle of the room was lost in gloom, but we could still see a huge shape climbing upward out of its burial mound. It gave a distinctive roar that could be only one thing: a dragon. Unlike Sahloknir, this one remained in its skeletal form as it advanced toward the doorway. It turned in my direction, but I was sneaking so it couldn't spot me. Then it turned toward Lydia, who was to its left now, and blasted her with frost. She had her shield up just in time, but now she couldn't use her bow against the advancing skeletons.

The dragon charged toward the doorway just as the portcullis grated upward again and Onmund burst through. "Talos save us!" he exclaimed when he saw the dragon. He stopped in his tracks, blocking Brelyna in the narrow hall. The portcullis slid back into place before she could get past him.
"Stop praying and start fighting!" Lydia yelled.

The dragon was almost upon Onmund now. He stood there, frozen in fear.

"Fus-Ro-Dah!" I shouted, and the dragon staggered. Lydia went at it with her axe of embers.

Finally the gate was up again and Brelyna and J'zargo charged through it, pushing Onmund out of the way. Brelyna wasted no time, casting her flame atronach and then launching a lightning bolt of her own. J'zargo surrounded himself in his flame cloak and advanced on the skeletons, sword drawn.

A cold blast hitting me from behind distracted me from the action at the gate. I turned – slowly due to the freezing effects of the spell – to see a skeleton approaching. I had been sneaking, but had revealed myself when I shouted. Now it drew its sword and readied to swing it. I began to cast a firebolt but it was as if I were moving through a large vat of honey.

The skeleton was almost upon me when a firebolt from behind me caught it squarely in the chest. It exploded in a shower of flying bones. I turned to see Onmund a short distance away. "You picked a good time to recover your nerve," I told him.

"I'm sorry I faltered there," he said, coming over to me. "It won't happen again."

"Thanks," I said, "but we need to spread out. Let's get that dragon first."

I healed myself, then cast my own flame atronach, hoping it would deal with the remaining skeletons. Lydia, Brelyna, and J'zargo had dealt the dragon much damage already, but now three skeletons had cornered Lydia and the dragon was snapping at the mages.

"Krii-Lun!" I shouted. I hoped that even two words of the Marked for Death shout would weaken it to the point that we could finish it off. A firebolt from Onmund managed the job, and the dragon fell to the floor. This time there was no dragon soul for me to absorb. With the dragon vanquished, we quickly dealt with the remaining skeletons, then paused to heal our wounds.

"What was that thing?" Brelyna asked.

"An undead dragon, apparently," I replied. "I hate to think what powerful dark magic could conjure such a thing."

Now that we had a chance to look around, I realized how vast the place was. It was easily the largest cavern Lydia and I had encountered. It was mostly rough-hewn stone and native rock, with wide openings in the ceiling letting in just enough moons-light for us to see where we were going. The sky must be clearing, I thought, idly wishing I could be outside to enjoy it.

The dragon mound stood in the center of the chamber, but it was a long walk to reach it. Along the way, we encountered many more skeletons, some that we had just defeated, and others much older. Right at the edge of the mound we found a few bones sticking out of some old, rent clothing – a hand here, a foot there. A short distance away lay a femur and a skull. I examined the clothing more closely, lifting a hem carefully. Now we could all see that they were mage's robes. Inside, I found crushed glass and a stopper like the ones used on potion flasks at the college. I held it up for my friends to see.

"Gods!" exclaimed Brelyna. "The dragon must have gotten one of them."

"At least one," Onmund said, and shivered again.
"It's just like Mzulft," Brelyna said, "only, we knew nothing about those mages before we found their bodies."

"We didn't really know these, either," J'zargo said.

"Still, we just saw them talking to each other a moment ago," she replied.

"I wonder which one this was?" I said.

"We don't have time for this," Lydia reminded us. "We need to keep moving. This place must be vast if it has a cavern this large."

She was right. We continued to the other side of the cavern and through a door. There we found the spectral mages gathered around a pedestal. Now there were only five of them.

"We have to go back in after Girduin," Elvali said. "We can't leave him there."

"We barely made it out alive, and you want to go back in?" said Hafnar. He didn't sound so brash now.

"It's too late," Atmah said, her voice stricken. "There's not enough left of him to go back in after."

"Oh gods, what have we done?" exclaimed the Argonian they called Takes-in-Light.

"We can't go back," said Savos. "Might as well go forward. We can still do this!" Of all of them, he was the only one who still sounded eager to get on with their expedition.

"Savos is right," Atmah said with resignation. "We can make it if we just stay alert!"

"Gods!" exclaimed Onmund when they vanished again. "They were six, and we are only five. How will we make it if they couldn't?"

Lydia had heard enough of Onmund's whinging. "You call yourself a Nord? Stop talking like a milk-drinker!"

"We overcame that dragon where they could not," J'zargo pointed out. "This one thinks we will have no problems."

"J'zargo, the cocky Khajiit," Brelyna said. "Your hubris will be the end of you."

"What about Master Aren?" I said. "How could he be so callous? And how could they leave their friend behind like that?" My friends shook their heads. The truth was, none of us knew Savos Aren well enough to know how he would respond in a situation like this, much less the Savos Aren of three decades ago.

"That's not going to happen to us," I said. "No matter what happens, we will stick together. No one gets left behind. Agreed?" They all nodded their heads, but Onmund still looked pale. "Onmund, can we count on you?"

"Of … of course you can, Deirdre," he said.

"Here, this should help you." I cast my courage spell on him and his color improved.

"Time is wasting," Lydia reminded us. She gave me a look as we led the way down the next passage. She didn't need to tell me what she thought of my three friends.
We were halfway across the next chamber when a blue, swirling light reached out toward us from a doorway. A voice spoke, echoing from the walls all around us. "Wo meyz wah dii vul junaar?" it asked. My Dovah was still weak but I thought it had asked something like "Who goes there?"

"Did you feel that?" asked Brelyna. "All my magicka has been drained away!"

I had felt it too. I tried casting the simplest spell of sparks at the wall – nothing happened. My fellow mages tried their own spells, with similar results. I was glad of my new robes, which improved my magic regeneration.

"Did you bring a good supply of magicka potion?" I asked my friends.

"Only a few," Brelyna admitted.

"Here, have some of mine," I said, and shared with them from my own stocks.

"Humph!" Lydia remarked. "I guess there are times when it's better not to rely on magic!"

"You'll change your tune next time I heal you," I replied.

The exit at the end of the chamber was blocked not by a door but a wall of frost.

"Let's see what happens if I hit it with a flame spell," I said. My magicka had revived somewhat.

The frost and icicles disappeared, leaving the doorway open. I was about to step through when a spectral warrior appeared, charging toward me. He shimmered, as if he too were covered in frost.

I had no magicka left, so I quickly drew my sword. I was able to block his first blow, but the sword's frost enchantment would do little good against this frost spirit. Before he could land another blow, Lydia hit him with her axe of embers, and Onmund got in a firebolt. Then J'zargo advanced on him, cloaked in fire, and the warrior exploded in a shower of ice pellets.

"Thank you, my friends," I said. "We'll get through this if we keep working together like this."

Through the doorway we could see only darkness. From somewhere far below we heard the sound of running water. I risked casting magelight into it, the glowing ball travelling far across a large, deep cavern before striking the opposite wall and sticking there. In its light we could see stone ramps descending into the depths.

The voice spoke again as we stepped through the doorway and the blue light whirled toward us once more. Again, I felt my magicka draining away.

"Nivahrin muz fent siiv nid aaz het," the voice said. Something about cowardly men and no mercy. But what about women, I wondered.

A draugr wight stood on the descending ramp just ahead. It had its back turned, staring quizzically at the glowing orb of magelight.

"All my magicka is gone again," Brelyna whispered. "And I just wasted a potion restoring it. How are we to fight that draugr now?"

"Take cover and watch," I said. I felt I was in my element now. I drew my bow and notched a dwarven arrow. Sneaking a bit farther into the room, I aimed the arrow carefully, catching the draugr in the throat. He couldn't even bark as he turned to see where the arrow had come from. Lydia hit him with a second arrow that knocked him from the ramp. We heard a splash as he
landed in water far below.

Then the magelight spell ran its course, plunging the chamber into darkness once more.

"Lydia," I said, "you'd best light a torch. We're low on magicka and we need to save what we have."

"A torch!" she said. "How old-fashioned!" We heard the sound of Lydia rustling through her pack and then flint scraping steel, and soon we could see once more. But a torch wasn't much good for sneaking, so I went ahead and peered around the next corner before waving to my companions to follow. Only in the darkest corridors would I risk casting a magelight spell.

In this manner, we crept through the caverns and halls of Labyrinthian, fighting draugr, skeletal archers, and the occasional troll, all without magic, save a ball of magelight that worked to distract our opponents as often as not. Lydia and I would attack them from a distance, since we were the best archers. Brelyna had a bow, but it was mostly for show, as were J'zargo's sword and Onmund's axe.

Whatever being was speaking to us from deeper within Labyrinthian, it kept draining our magicka, so we avoided using our magic as much as possible.

"You do not answer," the voice said next, this time using the Common Tongue. "Must I use this guttural language of yours?"

"Wait!" I said as Onmund reached for yet another magicka potion. "We'll run out quickly at this rate. Let's wait for our magicka to restore itself before we forge ahead." Lydia stood nearby while we waited, tapping her foot and trying none too hard to suppress a yawn.

A little farther, the voice spoke again. "Have you returned, Aren, my old friend?"

"Should we try to answer?" Onmund asked. "Maybe we can find out who – or what – it is?"

"Better not to," I said. "The longer it thinks Master Aren is with us, the better. But I wonder why it called him a friend?"

Next the voice asked, "Do you seek to finish that which you could not?" Then, "You face only failure once more." Each time, our magicka was drained away.

"This doesn't sound good, if Savos failed here before," Onmund said. "And no wonder, if that thing kept sapping their magicka!"

"We don't know what it means," Brelyna said. "We don't even know what Savos was trying to do."

"It's strange though," I said. "The voice keeps addressing Savos, and not Atmah, though she was the leader of their expedition."

"I don't want to think about that," Onmund said, shivering again.

"You are not Aren are you?" the voice asked next. "Has he sent you in his place?"

Before our magicka could regenerate, the spectral mages appeared around us. Now there were only four, and Takes-in-Light looked in bad shape, sitting on the floor.

"Just another minute – please!" she said.

"Come on!" urged Savos Aren. "We can't stop now, we have to keep moving." He didn't seem to
have noticed that another of their group was missing, but Atmah had.

"Where's Elvali? She was right behind me!"

"Dead," said Hafnar, his voice heavy with fatigue and sadness. "Something grabbed her from behind, right after that thing drained our magicka. She was gone before I could do anything."

"This is insanity," Takes-in-Light said. "We never should have come here."

"You're right," Atmah said, her voice racked with guilt. "This is all my fault. Should we turn back?"

"I don't think going back is a good idea," Hafnar said.

"Going back would be the end of all of us," said Savos Aren. "We keep pushing forward and we'll make it. We will!" He sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

"Come on," Atmah said to Takes-in-Light, helping her to her feet. "You can make it. Let's go."

The spectral mages disappeared. We stared at the space they had occupied, too stunned to speak. Before we could rouse ourselves, the voice that had hounded us through these caverns and halls spoke again.

"Did Aren warn you that your own power would be your undoing? That it would only serve to strengthen me?"

"Damn you to Oblivion!" Onmund shouted back. "Does this power grow stronger each time it saps our magicka?" He was nearly ready to quaff another potion before I stopped him.

"Don't panic!" I said. "Nothing threatens us now. We'll just wait here until our magicka restores itself naturally."

"What for? Only so he can take more of our power to use against us? No, look what happened to Elvali and Girduin! Who knows if any of them made it? We should turn back before the same thing happens to us!"

If my magicka hadn't just been drained, I would have cast another courage spell on him. "Onmund, we're not here for mere treasure, or power, or knowledge, as they were. Perhaps Savos' group should have turned back, but we cannot. The fate of the college and all our friends there rests with us."

Onmund gathered himself for a moment. "You're right. I feel better now that my magicka is returning. I just feel so weak whenever that thing drains it."

I knew how he felt. A mage without magicka was like a naked person facing a pack of hungry wolves. I had my archery skill and my shouts, so I didn't feel quite so exposed, but for my friends, magic was their only defense.

When our magicka was restored, we made ready to push on. "Keep a sharp eye out, and stay close together," Lydia said. "If something grabs one of us, the rest will be right there."

"Lydia is right," I said. "I'll take the lead, and Lydia, you bring up the rear."

Beyond the circular chamber where we had seen the spectral mages, the passages became narrower, forcing us to walk in single file. Now, instead of being carved out of the living rock, the
walls were of masonry – smooth-cut stones mortared together. The ceiling was ten feet high, made of timbers and more mason work. Soul gems glowed from sconces in the walls. They gave enough light that Lydia could put away her torch.

We came to a meeting of passages, with no way forward and identical halls branching left and right.

"Which way?" Onmund asked from behind me.

"There's no telling," I said. "Let's try the right first. If it doesn't lead anywhere, we'll come back and try the left."

I led the way down the right passageway. After ten paces or so, we came to another T-intersection, again with identical passages leading left and right. It looked exactly like the first intersection. The walls were of the same rough-cut stone and the sconces occupied the same spots on the walls.

"Which way now?" I asked.

"Right's as good as any," said Lydia from the rear.

After another ten paces we came to another identical junction. "Right feels right," I said, and we turned that way a third time.

"Wait," Brelyna said, when we had gone another ten paces and arrived at a fourth identical intersection. "We turned right three times, so we must have gone around in a square. We haven't gone up or down, so we should be back where we started."

"But clearly we're not," I said, "or we would see the corridor where we came into this place, and that circular chamber beyond."

"Yes," said Brelyna, "if we did go around in a square, always turning right, then we should be able to turn left now and see the entrance."

We tried it and saw only another identical intersection.

"It must be some sort of maze," Lydia said.

"Yes, Shalidor's Maze, most like," Brelyna said.

"Shalidor's Maze?" Lydia asked.

"The ancient labyrinth built by Arch-Mage Shalidor in the First Era to test new mages. Legend holds that it was quite difficult and only the most astute mages could pass through it unscathed."

"Great," said Lydia, "which one of you is astute?"

We let the comment pass. "Going right hasn't gotten us anywhere, let's try left," I said. We turned left three times, with similar results. We didn't seem to be back at the beginning, but we weren't getting anywhere either. Each junction was identical, with blank walls and the gem sconces always in the same spot.

"Well, if you wizards don't have any better ideas," Lydia said, "I'm going to start marking each junction." She took a lump of coal from her pack and used it to mark an X at the intersection where we stood.

"Good idea, Lydia," I said. "This time, let's go right, then left." That brought us to yet another
identical junction.

"This has to be a new junction, doesn't it?" Brelyna asked.

"Talos help us, we're going to wander in here forever!" Onmund moaned.

"This one does not like these ancient Nordic mages, nor their mazes," J'zargo put in.

"Let's go left again," I said, but after we turned the corner I could see another intersection like all the others directly ahead.

"Not left again," Brelyna called from behind. "We don't want to go around in circles again – or squares, I should say."

"Okay, right it is," I said, leading the way around the corner.

But it was no good. After another seven or eight paces, I could see another identical intersection ahead. I turned to my friends for suggestions, but saw only Onmund following me.

"What happened to the others?" I exclaimed.

He turned, and looked as surprised as I was to see no one following him. "They were right behind me a moment ago," he said.

"Lydia!" I called. "Brelyna! J'zargo!"

"We hear you!" Lydia called back. Her voice seemed to come from ahead of us now, but muffled, as if it were on the other side of a wall. "Where are you?"

"We're over here!" Onmund yelled.

"How did you get to the other side of that wall?" Brelyna shouted.

"This shouting back and forth will never do," I said to Onmund. "Let's go see if we can find them."

Before we could move, that infernal voice spoke again, and I felt my magicka draining out of me. It must have sucked the power from the soul gems as well, because now the passages were plunged into darkness.

"Welcome to the Labyrinth," the voice said. "There is no escape."

I stood in the darkness, trying in vain to see through the inky blackness, and listening for any sound of our friends. Behind me, Onmund whimpered.

"Let's just wait for our magicka to restore itself," I said to him. "Then we can cast magelight and see what we're doing." We waited for a moment there in the dark, listening to the sound of our own breathing. I thought I could even hear Onmund's heart beating; my own was certainly pounding hard enough.

Then Brelyna screamed.
The echoes of Brellya's scream were just dying out when I heard a feline screech and the deep *whumps* of hand-to-hand combat. The sounds no longer came from directly ahead, but somewhere off to the right, and much farther away.

"Come on Onmund, this way!" I said. Groping my way in the dark, I took two steps forward, meaning to turn right at the intersection ahead.

Suddenly, the sounds of the fight were much closer, just to my right. Something was breathing heavily as well, and it was right next to me. I reached for my sword and spent the little magicka I had on a magelight spell. This was no time to be blundering about in the dark.

Brelyna stood two paces away, breathing hard and rubbing her throat. Beyond her, J'zargo stood over the body of a draugr with great rents in its armor.

"Thank you, J'zargo," Brelyna said. "I don't know where that thing came from."

"The night vision of the Khajiits comes in handy, no?" J'zargo said. "This one had no time to think when that draugr jumped out at you."

Brelyna and I looked at the torn figure of the draugr lying on the floor. "I forgot what you Khajiits can do with your claws," I said.

A glowing light appeared from back the way I had come, and then Lydia was there, carrying a torch.

"What happened?" she asked, surveying the scene. Brelyna told her, and Lydia nodded at J'zargo. "I'm sorry I wasn't here," she said. "It took me a minute to get my torch lit after the lights went out. How did we get separated, anyway?"

"It must be some sort of magical hall of mirrors," Brelyna said. "I could swear I saw Deirdre and Onmund go right, then when I turned the corner they weren't there. You heard them, Lydia, on the other side of that wall. Then the same thing must have happened to us when we tried to get back to them. You must have wandered far."

"I only took a couple of steps," Lydia said. "I thought you were the ones who went off without me. And what happened to you, Deirdre?"

"I've taken only ten steps since last I saw you," I said. "I was making sure to count."

"Something more is at work here than simple mirrors, then," Brelyna said.

And that's when I realized. "Wait, where's Onmund?" I exclaimed.
The three just looked at each other, then at me. "He was with you, last we saw him."

"We have to go back and find him. And let's hurry! Who knows how he'll react to being alone in the dark?"

"Back?" Brelyna said. "Where's back? We are thoroughly turned around."

"Onmund!" I called.

Instead of Onmund, we heard the voice of the malevolent power that had been toying with us. "Shalidor was devious in designing this labyrinth," it said. "Yet Aren was able to solve it, so I have improved on Shalidor's work. Don't waste your energy – sit down in the dark, relax, and wait for death."

"Not bloody likely!" Lydia shouted at the voice, waving her torch.

"Maybe he's this way." I turned to go back the way I had come, but Brelyna caught my arm.

"We can't go off wildly looking for him in this place," she said.

"There has to be some way to find him!" Then it hit me – the detect life spell. I had just learned it from a tome in Dustman's Cairn and hadn't had a chance to use it. I quickly drank a magicka potion – there was no time to wait for my magicka stores to replenish themselves. Then I cast the spell and saw a blue ball of light back the way we had come, and off to the right. "There!" I said, "That has to be Onmund."

I made to head in that direction, but now Lydia stopped me. "Wait! Let's not take any chances this time." She pulled a length of rope from her knapsack. "I thought I might find a use for this someday," she said. She showed us how to tie in so that we were all attached to the rope in a line, then we made our way in the direction where I had seen the blue aura.

It turned out Onmund was not far away – a right and a left brought us to him. He was crouched in a meeting of hallways and appeared to be mumbling to himself. "First they say to stick together, then they leave me. This always happens! Just like the time Bjorn and his friends took me grouse hunting."

"Onmund, we're here!" I said.

He looked up in surprise, but he didn't rise. "Was that some kind of joke, leaving me here in the dark?"

"No, we were all in the dark, you silly Nord," Brelyna snapped at him. "I nearly had my throat ripped out by a draugr – would have too, if J'zargo hadn't saved me. Why didn't you answer us?"

"You heard the voice," he said. "We're not getting out of here. Might as well just sit here and wait for the end!"

"Don't be a fool!" I said. "We just got separated, that's all. This is some sort of hall of mirrors – or something worse."

"Portals, I'm guessing," said Brelyna. "It's the only thing that makes sense, the more I think about it."

"Whatever it is, we need to find our way out," Lydia said.
"Here, Onmund," I said, holding out my hand to him and helping him up. "Tie into this rope so we don't lose you again. We'll get out of here, I promise."

"Which way now?" Brelyna asked.

"I think we backtracked to find Onmund," I said, "so let's turn around and keep pressing forward."

"But that can't be," Lydia said, "since we haven't seen any of the marks I've been leaving."

"Then which way?"

"I think forward is that way," she said, pointing to the right, past where Onmund had been sitting.

"Okay, we'll try it," I said, and took the lead once more. We took a left and then a right, and then I felt the rope go taught behind me. I turned to see Onmund looking just as surprised as I was. Beyond him, the rope disappeared into thin air, yet it was still taught. And beyond the rope, the draugr J'zargo had killed lay in the hall. I recognized the rents in its armor and the position in which it had fallen.

"No, this cannot be!" I exclaimed.

At the same time I heard Lydia calling from ahead of us, not behind us. "Where did you go?" she shouted.

"We're here!" I called back. "Where are you?" Now I could see light from her torch up ahead and to the right. "Wait, I see your torch." I tried to take a step in that direction.

"Quit pulling on the rope!" she called back.

"These portals must work in only one direction," I heard Brelyna say. "We'll have to cut it." Then the rope went slack.

"Wait there, we're coming to you!" I said, and Onmund and I made our way toward the light.

"These portals are cunningly designed," Brelyna said when I told them about finding ourselves transported back to the hall with the draugr. "I'm guessing that Shalidor enchanted them merely to lead unwitting mages in circles, but whatever malevolent power is here has added a twist. Now the portals go to more than one location, splitting groups like ours apart."

"This one thinks we'll be wandering around in here forever," said J'zargo. Things were bad if even J'zargo was losing his confidence.

"Don't talk that way!" I said. "We just have to avoid the portals from now on. But how do we do that?"

"If only there were a way to detect whatever magic is powering them," said Brelyna.

"You mean the detect enchantments spell?" Onmund said.

We mages turned to look at him in surprise, while Lydia looked at all of us in confusion. "I didn't know there were Enchantment spells," I said. "I thought you had to have an arcane enchanter."

"What, you didn't pay attention to Sergius' lectures at the college?" We looked at each other and shook our heads. "Detect enchantments is more advanced magic, to be sure, but very useful. You can't cart an enchanter around with you, after all." Suddenly, Onmund sounded confident of himself, even smug. It wasn't often that he could best the rest of us in magic.
"Well, let's stop standing around gawking at Onmund and see if this spell works!" Lydia exclaimed.

It did. We made our way back the way we had come. Onmund took the lead this time, casting his detect enchantment spell at every intersection. At first, nearly every junction lit up in a red, shimmering glow, indicating it had been enchanted. Every time it happened, we would turn around and look for another way forward. Just when we seemed to be making some progress, we found ourselves passing the marks Lydia had made, so we turned around and retraced our steps once more. Finally we managed to point ourselves in the right direction, and by entering only those junctions with no portal enchantment, we made our way out of the labyrinth and into a rectangular chamber.

"Well, we're through the maze at least," I said, pausing so we could collect ourselves. "Together, we added up to one 'stute, but it was enough."

"Stute?" asked J'zargo. "This one does not know what you mean by stute. Is it some Breton word?"
Lydia groaned. "That would get you thrown out of the Bannered Mare, my thane," she said.

"What?" asked Brelyna. "Did Deirdre make some sort of jest?"

"Remember, Brelyna?" Lydia said. "You said that only the most astute mages could solve the maze?" They still stared at her blankly. "And then I asked which one of you was astute?" There was a pause, then the rest of them groaned as well.

Feeble as my joke had been, our moods were a bit lighter as we made our way across the chamber. At the far end, we discovered the word wall I had come here to find. As the bright light swirled around me and I heard the word Klo echoing through my mind, my three college friends gasped in wonder.

"That was astounding!" Brelyna exclaimed.

"That, my friends, is how I learn a word of power. Then I need to take a dragon's soul to understand its deepest meaning and be able to use it."

"This one wishes he could gain knowledge and power so easily," J'zargo said.

"Easily!" Onmund replied. "It can't be easy to kill a live dragon!" He looked at me with increased wonder.

Lydia had seen it all before. Now she pretended to yawn. "Come on, let's get going," she said.

But before we could move, the voice spoke again.

"So, there is one among you worthy of meeting Morokei! But it makes no matter. Come, your end awaits."

Then the spectral mages appeared around us. This time there were but three.

Atmah spoke first, her voice filled with reproach for her two remaining companions. "We shouldn't have left her there to die!"

"What else could we do?" Savos Aren protested. "Stay there and die with her? She refused to go on, we didn't have any choice!"
"There is always a choice, Savos," Atmah replied.

While the spectral mages pondered this, Lydia nudged me. "This Savos Aren became the head of your college?" she asked. "He is no kind of leader!"

I wanted to tell her that Savos wasn't like that when I knew him – but how well did any of us know him, really?

"This is it, you know?" said Hafnar, his voice heavy with fatigue, or perhaps despair. "Through this door … can you feel it?"

"We're not going to make it, are we?" Atmah said, and she sounded even more dispirited than Hafnar.

"We stay together, no matter what, agreed?" said the Nord, trying to rally his own strength and that of his companions.

"I'll be right with you," Atmah replied.

"Agreed, we all stay together," said Savos Aren. I thought I saw him looking back and forth at his colleagues, as if taking their measure. Then they disappeared.

"I think Hafnar was right," Brelyna said. "Whatever we're going to face, Morokei or whoever it is, it's just on the other side of that door. I can feel its power."

"Then we should prepare ourselves," I said. We spent a moment sharing potions and casting enchantments that would help us in battle. I cast a courage spell on Onmund just for good measure.

"Mages," I said, "have your weapons at the ready, as well as those magicka potions. I imagine this Morokei will drain our power before facing us. Are we ready?" My companions nodded.

"I'll go first," Lydia said, and pushed the wooden door open.

The room beyond was large, though not as huge as the dragon chamber. It contained two balconies facing each other on opposite sides of the room. Between them ran a narrow strip of ground with a pool of water at the end, fed by a waterfall pouring out of the wall high above.

But the thing that caught our attention first was a glowing dome of light covering much of the balcony to the right. Within it was a being much like the dragon priests Lydia and I had already faced. Like the lesser draugr, its body was of desiccated flesh, sinew and bone, but it was clothed in flowing robes over which it wore an elaborate metal armature protecting its torso and arms. It had a grim metallic mask for a face and it bore a dragon circlet on its brow. Its skeletal hand held a staff – the Staff of Magnus, no doubt.

"Just another dragon priest," Lydia said. "And he can't even get at us. It looks like he's trapped in that glowing dome of light."

Two beams of energy stretched from the dome to the two-leveled balcony opposite. Moving closer, we saw that two spectral mages were casting the beams, one from each level.

"No!" I exclaimed in shock.

We moved still closer, descending a short set of stairs, and now Brelyna gasped. "It's them! It's Atmah and Hafnar! It looks like they're keeping Morokei imprisoned."
"But how…" I began to ask when Morokei interrupted.

"Yes, diabolical isn't it?" he said. "Aren enthralled the souls of those who called him friend, using their power to trap me here. And to think, there are those who call me evil!"

We all looked at each other in disbelief. "You don't think Aren killed them so he could enslave their souls, do you?" I asked my friends.

"I'll never believe that!" said Brelyna. "They must have died in the battle with Morokei before he would resort to such an extreme measure."

"But what kind of magic could he use to enthral them?" I asked.

"I don't know," Brelyna replied. "Necromancy? Some sort of soul trap? Whatever it was, it must have been dark magic indeed."

We all shuddered, looking up at the two ghostly mages, both of them kneeling, their arms outstretched, eternally casting the beams of energy that powered Morokei's prison. I wondered if they were aware of their existence, aware of time passing as the decades crept onward, contemplating an eternity of nothing but this. Could the depths of Oblivion hold a fate more bleak?

"We have to release them somehow," I said to my companions.

"Yes, release them," said Morokei, "and you will release me. Then our battle will begin. Come, face me, the most powerful of all the dragon priests!"

"Maybe…" Onmund began, "maybe we should leave him imprisoned, figure a way to get the staff without releasing him. Who knows what evil he will do if he gets loose?"

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Onmund!" I said. "We can't leave the souls of those mages trapped there. Can you imagine spending eternity doing that?"

"Besides," said Lydia, "I don't think we'll get the staff without breaking through that barrier somehow. And I didn't make my way through this labyrinth to come away empty-handed." She began climbing the steps to the balcony where the first mage knelt, the rest of us following.

When we reached the top of the steps we decided that Lydia and J'zargo would try to release Hafnar, the spirit on that level, since they were the strongest in close combat. Onmund, Brelyna and I would release Atmah on the second level and attack Morokei from a distance once he was free.

"I just hope you have a way to release them," Lydia said, then turned to J'zargo. "Are you with me?"

"Of course," said the Khajiit. "J'zargo must try his flame cloak on more powerful undead."

Both of the spectral mages knelt on platforms jutting over the space between the two balconies. As I came up next to Atmah and saw her face filled with the concentration of her eternal task, I felt as if I knew her, despite only getting glimpses of her in those impressions from the past. If she sensed me stepping up beside her, she gave no sign.

I tried reaching out to touch her shoulder. My hand passed through her spectral form, but she reacted as if she felt something, looking over in my direction.

"Atmah," I said. "I am Deirdre. I have come to release you."
The beam she was casting wavered. "I sense a presence," she said, her voice sounding far away. "Something is calling me back … but I cannot return until the beam is broken."

If only I carried a mirror, or a shield. But of the five of us, only Lydia had a shield, and she was on the level below. I took a deep breath, and then stepped between Atmah and the edge of the platform. The beam struck me square in the chest, but I felt only energy, magicka flowing through me and replenishing my stores. Perhaps it was my Breton heritage. It was said that Bretons could absorb spells and store their energy as magicka, but I had never experienced it until now.

The beam remained only for an instant, then faded away. Atmah got slowly to her feet, looking at me more closely. "You – you're from the college! Did Savos send you? It's been so long…" There was pain and deep sadness in her voice.

"I wish I could say he had," I told her. "But Master Aren is dead. We have come to retrieve the Staff of Magnus so we can stop the one who killed him."

"Ah, the staff, that was how Morokei defeated us. It's very powerful. It sapped all our magicka and we were defenseless. Be careful! He conjures a storm atronach and he will turn your own conjurations against you."

"We'll be careful," I promised, looking at Brelyna to make sure she had heard the warning about conjuring. We both relied perhaps too heavily on our flame atronachs.

"Thank you for freeing me, friend," Atmah said. "Now I go to my rest on the Far Shores." She turned and began walking toward the back of the chamber.

We moved along the balcony to where we could see Lydia, J'zargo, and Hafnar. The glowing dome seemed to have dimmed, but it still held Morokei imprisoned. "Touch him on the shoulder and call his name," I called down to Lydia.

Even from this distance I could see that Lydia was skeptical about touching a ghost, but she tried it anyway. He turned and looked at her. The beam flickered. "Now use your shield to block the beam," I called. "And be ready for Morokei to attack once he's free." Lydia cut the beam with her shield, then I could see that she was talking to Hafnar, though I could not hear their words.

The field of light around the dragon priest remained for another moment, though it flickered and grew yet dimmer. Then I had a thought. I cast a firebolt at Morokei still inside his glowing cage. It hit the shield and dissipated as it spread out around the glowing dome, leaving the dragon priest untouched.

As if in response, a blue ball of light shimmered toward us and I felt my magicka draining away. "Soft-hearted fools!" Morokei exclaimed as the shield surrounding him vanished. "Now I am free. Now you die."

I may have been out of magicka, but I could still shout. "Krii-Lun!" The Marked for Death shout hit him square, and he staggered. At the same time, arrows from Brelyna and Lydia struck him.

"Ah, your Thu'um is strong, Dovahkiin," Morokei said as he floated down off his balcony and toward the two below me. "Nearly as strong as the dragons we once worshipped. A pity you do not know all the words. For now the dragons return and the dragon priests will rule Skyrim once again!"

"No, Morokei," I said, thinking that the longer we talked, the more time for our powers to be restored. "It is Alduin himself who has returned. This time he means to destroy the world and you
with it. We might as well destroy you now." I had just enough magicka for a firebolt and used it on him. It hardly seemed to bother him, though his robes caught fire.

Then the dragon priest used his own Thu'um. "Zun-Haal-Viik!" he shouted at the three of us on the upper balcony. The shout only shook me, but it sent Brelyna and Onmund sprawling, knocking the bow from Brelyna's hand and a flask of magicka potion from Onmund's. The flask shattered on the hard stone floor.

"Blast!" he cursed as he got to his feet and reached for another potion.

Meanwhile, Morokei cast his storm atronach in Lydia and J'zargo's direction, then began floating up toward us. I drank my own potion to restore my magic power as Brelyna retrieved her bow and Onmund began shooting lightning bolts down at Morokei. I fired off another firebolt. If our spells were having any effect, it was difficult to tell.

The dragon priest had just reached the first-level balcony when we heard J'zargo shout from off to our left. "You can manage the atronach, J'zargo will take care of Morokei!" Lydia was going at the atronach with her axe of embers, while the conjured being hit her with lightning strikes. I hoped the potion of magic resistance I had given her was still working.

J'zargo ran toward Morokei, casting his flame cloak as he went. The dragon priest turned toward him and fired a bolt of lightning from his staff just as the two met. There was a fiery explosion, and Morokei was pushed backward. But the flaw in J'zargo's spell must have resurfaced because the explosion sent the Khajiit off the balcony. He landed in a heap near the pool beneath the waterfall, his fur singed and smoking. At least he could still move as he crawled away from his attacker. The dragon priest turned back down the stairs, intent on finishing the Khajiit off.

"No more, I yield," J'zargo moaned.

"Keep firing at Morokei, friends!" I shouted, and I leapt off the upper balcony, dropping to the floor below. I had to distract Morokei before he hit J'zargo with another blast from that staff.

"Zun-Haal!" I shouted, figuring to deal him a dose of his own magic. The Disarm shout gave him pause, but he did not drop the Staff of Magnus. Still, the shout distracted him. He turned and blasted me with the staff, intertwined branches of lightning arcing between us. Maybe my potion of magic resistance was still working, because I felt only a slight tingling at the end of my fingers. My magicka was draining away, yet not so fast as Morokei might have hoped.

"Your magic is strong as well, Dovahkiin. You should be groveling on the floor by now."

Just then a well-placed shot from Brelyna's bow caught the dragon priest in the arm that held the staff, breaking the arc of lightning.

I took advantage of Morokei's momentary distraction to dash past him down the steps toward J'zargo, who lay curled in a semi-conscious heap near the wall of the opposite balcony. I had no thought of saving my remaining magicka for a spell of Destruction. I had to heal J'zargo before the dragon priest's next attack finished him. My healing spell revived him enough that he could sit up and drink the potion I gave him.

I turned to see Morokei blasting Brelyna with his staff. Onmund was nowhere to be seen. Brelyna bravely fired a last shot, then fell back out of our sight, too weakened to continue fighting.

Morokei turned back toward me, but just then Lydia attacked him from behind. She must have finished the atronach, then crept up on him while his attention was on the two above. Her blow set
him afire once more, but he responded with a shout. "Krii-Lun-Aus!" The full Marked for Death shout sent her to her knees.

I had notched an arrow to my bow by this time and the shot caught him beneath his outstretched arm. For any other being, it would have been a death blow, but Morokei merely grimaced. "Your bows barely touch me," he boasted, then turned back to Lydia, who still hadn't gotten to her feet.

For the first time in the battle, I felt my dragon's rage rising within me. I had never before seen Lydia so injured. It was shocking. We had defeated dragon priests before – this one would not kill her! But I knew I had to master my temper. I drew breath for a shout, drawing on the energy of my rage, but not letting it overpower me. Morokei was about to hit Lydia with a blast from his staff.

Just then the ghosts of Atmah and Hafnar jumped down from above, landing on either side of the dragon priest. "For Winterhold!" Hafnar yelled, and they began pummeling the dragon priest with their fists. Their blows didn't seem to do much, but they distracted him from Lydia, and she was able to creep behind a pillar.

"Fus-Ro-Dah!" I shouted with all the energy I could muster. That knocked Morokei back against the wall of the balcony above, where he lay still for a moment. J'zargo came past me and up the steps, hitting Morokei with a lightning bolt. Onmund and Brellyn both revived themselves by now and reappeared on the upper balcony. They hit him with both fire and lightning before he could get up.

Morokei lifted his grim mask toward me. "After a thousand years," he said, "I have finally met my match." Then with a burst of energy he was transformed into a pile of ash covered by his singed robes and metal armature. His mask and the Staff of Magnus lay nearby.

My first thought was for Lydia. I found her, still on one knee, behind the column. When my healing spell surrounded her in a glowing golden light, she looked up at me and smiled. "I'm glad your magicka returned, my thane," she said.

"Remember when I said you would change your tune?" I said, and held out my hand to help her up. She seemed all right, if a bit shaky. Then we gathered around what was left of Morokei.

"Thank you, Atmah and Hafnar," I said. "We might not have prevailed without you."

"And thank you for freeing us," said Hafnar. "Three decades of casting that shield spell were enough. If only I could get my hands on Savos! I can still feel his soul trap spell hitting me as we did battle with Morokei. I never imagined he was capable of such treachery."

"Neither did we," said Brellyna. "But Master Aren is dead and beyond any of our reach."

"Then I go to be with my fathers in Sovngarde," he said, and both ghost mages disappeared.

We stood there staring at the space they had left, momentarily at a loss. It must have been the wee hours of the morning by then. The battle had got my blood up, reviving me while it lasted, but now I felt the fatigue come rushing back. Yet we still had to find our way out of here, ride hard to the college, then face who knew what with Ancano and the Eye of Magnus.

"Come friends," I said. "Our job is only half done. We have to get back to the college."

I went over to the remains of Morokei and picked up the Staff of Magnus. Its top bore an orb, a sort of miniature Eye of Magnus, floating within a cage of curved spikes. We could only hope that this weapon would somehow break the Eye's power. I strapped it to my back and we gathered the rest of our things, then found the chamber's exit at the back of the upper balcony.
But the ghosts of Labyrinthian weren't done with us yet. As we made our way toward the iron door, the specter of Savos Aren appeared once more. He was looking back toward the chamber where he had just left the souls of his two remaining companions.

"I'm sorry, friends," he said, and he really did sound sorry. "I had no choice! It was the only way to make sure that monster never escaped! I promise you, I'll never let this happen again! I'll seal this whole place away…"

When he was gone we all looked at each other. "Pffft!" was all J’zargo had to say. The rest of us were too tired to speak.
We were all of us swaying in our saddles when we arrived in Winterhold late in the afternoon the day after we emerged from Labyrinthian. We had ridden as hard as we dared in darkness cross-country, traveling north of Whiterun, through the Wayward Pass, down past Saarthal, then up over the pass above Winterhold. Lydia and I had been awake for thirty hours, and the mages for longer.

"Thank goodness you're here!" shouted a villager, running up to us as we dismounted. It was the first time I had received a warm greeting in the town. Usually they were suspicious of college mages, if not openly hostile. "Something terrible is happening up at the college! They need help! Please, don't let the rest of Winterhold slide into the sea!"

A glance at the college was enough to show he was right. A glowing cloud enveloped the circular walls, and here and there within it were flashes of light and bright, moving things.

"We're on our way there now," I said.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get going!" said the villager.

When we reached the foot of the walkway leading up to the college, J'zargo stopped us. "Wait, we're all tired. J'zargo has something that will revive us for what's ahead." I had been hoping for something to restore my flagging energy, a mug of mead or maybe just some strong tea, but I wasn't ready for what J'zargo withdrew from his pack: five small, identical bottles. "This one has been saving these for our uttermost need. Now J'zargo thinks we all need to take a drink."

"Is that … skooma?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, though not as fine as the skooma from my own land."

"But, it's outlawed!" I protested. "And won't we become addicted?"

"No, as J'zargo said, this is not the finest skooma, but watered-down Skyrim stuff. It will restore your energy, but you will not become addicted from just one drink. Besides, what's more important: saving the world from the Eye of Magnus, or keeping yourself pure?"

Reluctantly, I reached for one of the bottles. The taste was sweet, but there was also a burning sensation as it went down. It had a faint aroma of cloves. I felt instantly revived. The three mages each drank, but Lydia refused. "A Nord doesn't need skooma."

"Well I needed it," I said. "And now I'm ready for whatever is ahead."

Yet, as it turned out, I wasn't. I could never have prepared myself for what we were about to find at the college. So I led up the pathway, oblivious of what awaited us, confident in our powers and in the staff I carried.
The ascending walkway was narrow, punctuated by circular landings. At the first landing we found Tolfdir and Phinis Gestor battling strange balls of energy that dodged this way and that, occasionally swooping in to strike one of the mages. We helped the wizards defeat the last one, blasting it with lightning bolts of our own. Then Tolfdir turned to us.

"So you made it! Do you have the staff?"

I pulled the staff from its sheath on my back and showed it to him. "This is the Staff of Magnus. But what's happening? Where's Mirabelle?"

Tolfdir's eyes grew far away for a moment. "She … she didn't make it. When it became clear we were going to have to fall back, she stayed behind and made sure the rest of us were all right."

The floor beneath me seemed to tilt like one of the small icebergs in the Sea of Ghosts. I reached out to the landing's parapet to steady myself. "What? How could you let her do that?" I could barely speak.

"Believe me, I tried to convince her to let me stay and cover the retreat, but she would have none of it. And she is … was … a powerful wizard. Without her sacrifice we might all be dead."

I leaned with both hands on the low wall now. "Mirabelle was right! You should have left the orb where it was, sealed it away forever." I thought about Savos Aren's thirst for knowledge about the orb, coupled with what we had learned about him in Labyrinthian. How could Mirabelle have trusted such a man? I blinked back bitter tears.

Tolfdir put a hand on my shoulder. "Come, Deirdre, we will have time after this is over to mourn for Mirabelle. We all loved and respected her. But now we must fight to save the college, and the very world. Ancano doesn't know what he has unleashed. We have the staff now, and we need your help."

I knew he was right. I straightened myself and dried my eyes. I was glad I had drunk the skooma or I might have curled up in a ball right there and tried to find solace in sleep. "All right, what do we do?" I asked.

"Try the staff on that cloud. It's our only hope."

Usually it took some time to bend a staff to one's will, to discover just how to get it to unleash its effects with the merest of thoughts. I aimed the Staff of Magnus at the cloud and pictured in my mind the forked lightning that had come from it when Morokei wielded it. After a few moments of concentration, the ball of energy at the staff's tip began to glow brighter and then a streak of lightning shot from it. The branched lightning played over the cloud in an intricate network of energy. Just as it had done with me, the staff drained the cloud's magical energy. Soon, the way into the college was clear.

"I believe Ancano is still in the Hall of Elements with the Eye," Tolfdir said.

I didn't see any sign of Mirabelle's body as we crossed the courtyard – a good thing, or I might not have been able to go on. The statue of Shalidor glared down at us from its spot in front of the Hall of the Elements, battling an unseen wind. I cursed the ancient mage for his labyrinth that had so delayed us. Without it, we might have arrived in time to save Mirabelle. Then we entered the hall.

"There he is, just as we left him," said Brelyna.

"Only now there's no shield protecting him," Onmund pointed out.
The Altmer wizard stood just beyond the orb on the other side of the hall. The Eye of Magnus looked much as it had in Saarthal, only now it was suspended over the magical well at the center of the hall. It still glowed with that mysterious blue light coming from within its ornately patterned metal-work, rotating slowly this way and that.

An arc of lightning connected Ancano to the Eye. Whether he was doing something to the Eye or drawing energy from it, I couldn't tell.

He barely glanced in our direction as we stepped into the hall. "I wield the power to unmake the universe, and you think you can stop me?"

"Hit him now!" Tolfdir commanded, and the four mages hit him with different spells of Destruction. I tried the staff on him, and Lydia fired an arrow. None of it appeared to affect him. Lydia's arrow flew past him, as if the energy surrounding him had deflected her shot.

"Spells have no effect!" Tolfdir exclaimed.

"Ha!" Ancano exulted. "I am beyond your petty attempts at magic. You cannot touch me."

"The staff!" Tolfdir shouted. "Use it on the Eye!"

I did as he said. I aimed the staff at the orb and an arc of lightning leapt across the gap. It was hard to tell if it made any difference. Perhaps the Eye grew slightly dimmer, but that was all.

"Enough!" Ancano shouted and broke off from the Eye long enough to aim a spell in our direction. My five companions were all instantly paralyzed, and fell heavily to the floor. The staff must have protected me from his spell. Ancano reestablished his connection to the Eye and the sizzling, crackling bolts of energy returned.

"Still you persist?" Ancano asked. Then he seemed to recognize me for the first time. "You! You're that Breton who discovered the orb. But then you disappeared. Where have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, here and there, this and that," I said, trying to sound bolder than I felt. "I learned this, for instance." I used Unrelenting Force on him. Nothing happened. Then I grew truly afraid for the first time. That shout had staggered dragons, yet he was unharmed.

"You can shout! You have been busy. But little good it will do you. Look, see what I can do." He seemed to redouble his efforts with the Eye. The orb's outer covering began to come apart in segments like a carefully peeled apple skin, revealing the blinding light of Aetherius within. Then there was a burst of energy from the Eye.

"No!" Ancano shouted in surprise. Out of the openings in the orb's outer structure came more of the balls of energy Tolfdir had been fighting outside the college.

Before the situation could get worse, I began blasting the Eye with a steady stream of lightning from the staff. Slowly the walls of the orb began to move back together. While I tried to maintain my connection to the orb with the staff, one of the balls of energy began attacking me. I felt a shock every time it came near. I tried moving away from it, keeping the staff focused on the Eye. Ancano was having his own trouble with several of the magical entities and had lost his connection to the orb.

Finally the outer armature of the orb came back together and the Eye was once again a glowing ball. Ancano still hadn't attached himself to it, so I tried attacking him once more. This time my firebolts pushed him backward. My Thu'um had revived as well. I used it on him again, knocking
him into a pillar. The magical entities closed on him, attacking from all sides. Ancano screamed, then lay still.

With Ancano dispatched, my companions were released from their spell of paralysis. They got up stiffly and began dealing with the balls of energy. I was too tired to help. A great wave of exhaustion washed over me and I sat down on the steps surrounding the hall.

Of all that happened after defeating Ancano – of my friends and Tolfdir congratulating me for saving the college and the world; of the appearance of Nerien and two of his fellow Psijic monks; of Nerien praising me for doing exactly as they had foreseen and opining that I should be made arch-mage of the college; of the monks vanishing along with the orb – I would remember nothing. I only know these things because Tolfdir told me of them later. One thing only do I remember: Nerien's green eyes gazing at me as he told me that they would now remove the Eye of Magnus from Skyrim because it was too dangerous to exist on this plane of Mundus.

"Now you're going to step in?" I exclaimed. "Why not before, when Savos and Mirabelle were still alive? Why couldn't you have interfered then?" I felt my rage and grief boiling inside me, and I knew I could not control them. My anger spilled out in a shout: "Fus-Ro-Dah!" I bellowed at the monk.

But this was, after all, just a projection of Nerien from whatever plane the Psijics inhabited. The shout did nothing.

"You are tired, over-wrought…" he said, and waved his hand. A white light swept over my eyes, and I knew no more.

I awoke in a strange bed. The chamber was large and round, with an atrium in its center. A curving wall separated this sleeping area from the atrium and the rest of the chamber. I realized it could only be the arch-mage's quarters. I had been here once before. I had marveled at the garden of herbs, flowers and other potion ingredients growing in the atrium, but had never been past the wall to this private area.

I rolled over in the bed, and noticed I was wearing only my shift. Someone had stripped me out of my apprentice's robes, boots, and bracers. Lydia sat in a chair next to the bed. She was dressed for indoors for once, wearing a simple tunic and calf-skin slippers. She was engrossed in a book, her elbow propped on a crossed knee, below which her well-toned calf was bare. She bounced her foot nervously to some rhythm only she could hear as she read.

"Lydia, you're becoming quite the reader," I said.

She looked up. "You're awake, my thane!"

I sat up. I hadn't felt so well rested in weeks. If any dreams had troubled my sleep, I couldn't remember them. "What do you have there?" I asked. She showed me the cover: The Cabin in the Woods. "Well, your taste needs some improvement, but it's a start. How long have I been asleep?"

"Most of a day," she said. "The battle with Ancano was yesterday afternoon and now it's afternoon once more. I just awoke an hour ago myself."

Ancano – yes, he was the reason we had returned to the college, I reminded myself. But it was all
The covers on the other side of the double bed were undisturbed. "Where did you sleep?" I asked.

"Tolfdir had a bed brought up for me." She pointed to a small cot on the other side of mine, not far away. "They would have given me your old cell, but I told them I must stay by your side."

"My old cell? What am I doing here, anyway?" I could not think of a reason that I should be sleeping in Savos Aren's chambers.

"Tolfdir and the other masters named you arch-mage, my thane." She beamed with pride for me as she said it. "There was a bit of resistance from Faralda, but the rest of the staff overcame it."

"But why?" I asked. If I couldn't think of a reason for sleeping in the arch-mage's chambers, I certainly couldn't think why they would name me arch-mage.

"Why?" she repeated. "Because you defeated Ancano and saved the college! Because without you – and a little help from me, I do admit – your three friends never would've retrieved the Staff of Magnus in the first place."

Then it all came rushing back – the news about Savos Aren's death, the long crawl through Labyrinthian and the terrible things we had learned about our arch-mage there, the even worse news about Mirabelle's death when we arrived back at the college. But of everything after that, there were only bits and pieces – Ancano taunting us, the orb opening, the strange balls of energy converging on the High Elf. And then Nerien revealing that the Psijics had the power to deal with the Eye all along.

The reality just seemed too terrible to contemplate. "No!" I wailed, turning my back on Lydia. "I have failed! How can they reward me?" I sobbed into my pillow. A flood of guilt washed over me, and not just for failing to save Mirabelle and Savos. Now I remembered the bedraggled family of refugees we had met on the road here. A dragon had burned their farm, leaving them with nothing but their lives and the clothing on their backs. Where was this Dragonborn they had heard so much about, they asked. Why hadn't the Dovahkiin come to save them? When we stopped at the Nightgate Inn, Hadring told us there had been a constant stream of refugees from lands to the west, all asking the same thing.

"What good is it to be dragonborn if all I ever do is fail?" I buried my face in the pillow, my body racked with sobs.

I felt Lydia's hand on my shoulder, and her weight on the bed as she sat beside me. "But you did not fail, my thane! You saved the college! And more, Tolfdir says the Eye could've destroyed all of Nīrn itself. Or, if Ancano had found a way to control it, the Thalmor could control all Tamriel. You saved the world, my thane!"

"But Mirabelle!" I said. "And that family we met on the road! How many more have died since we became diverted by this business with the Eye? How many more dragons has Alduin resurrected?"

"Mirabelle was important to you, wasn't she?"

I nodded. "Like a second mother."

"I know it must be hard. But listen – Mirabelle gave her life valiantly to save others. And no battle is won without casualties, sometimes even those closest to us. Remember when I told you that I spent most of my time with Nords when I was in the Imperial Army?"
I nodded.

"That wasn't quite true. There was Lashana, a Redguard. We were new recruits together. We bunked together, ate together, trained together, fought together. She was as close to me as my own sister used to be." She paused for a moment. "Do you remember I told you Redguards are sometimes reckless in battle? When we met that Khajiit incursion, she foolishly rushed in and was impaled on the lance of one of their riders. It happened right in front of me, yet I had to keep fighting."

I turned to look at her. She sounded so sad, I expected to see tears in her eyes, but they were dry. "How did you go on?" I asked.

"In the moment, there wasn't time to consider what had happened. It seemed like a dream. But later, when I went back and found her body and realized I had truly lost her, then I had to ask myself what she would want me to do. Would she want me to quit the army and the life I had built as a soldier? And the answer was no. To honor her memory, I knew I had to go on."

I looked up at the ceiling far above the bed. Where would I find the strength to go on? It seemed I had made no progress in my task of stopping the dragons. I still had not avenged Harry and Huldi – and how many more orphans were there by now?

"You said Mirabelle was like a mother to you," Lydia said. "What would Mirabelle want you to do? What would your own mother want you to do?"

The answer was obvious. "They would tell me not to give up," I said.

"Of course," she said. "You have done all any one person could do, even the Dragonborn. You have slain many dragons. As for Alduin – short of learning to fly, how are you to confront him, if he will not come to you? No, no one could expect you to have done more than you already have. And if you keep battling the dragons and building your power, maybe you will find a way to confront Alduin himself."

"I suppose you're right," I said.

She gave my knee a slap through the covers. "But you're not going to do any of that by lying about in bed."

"I'm not lying about!" I protested. "I only just woke up."

She smiled that half smile of hers. I could tell she felt she had won a small victory by pricking my sense of pride. I would have to prove to her that I was no layabout. "But now it is time to start the day," she said. "Will you rise and break your fast with me? Colette brought up a tray of food. Then we must plan what we'll do next. The rites for Mirabelle and Savos Aren are tomorrow morning, and I imagine we should leave soon after."

I nodded. I knew she was right. "You're a hard task-master, considering you're my housecarl," I said.

"That's my thane," she said, and leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. Then she touched the wrinkled spot on my brow, gently. She looked as if she would say something more, but then she got up to see about the food.
The smoke from Mirabelle Ervine's funeral pyre wafted up into the cloud-covered sky as the snow came falling down. I watched the smoke melding with that other grayness. What would happen to her essence now? The Nords had their Sovngarde, the Redguards their FarShores, but Bretons had other choices. Would Mirabelle follow Y'ffre on the wild hunt, as my mother had hoped for? Or would she simply merge back into Aetherius, becoming one with the energy of Mundus?

Mostly, I simply wept inconsolably for my own loss. I held myself together through the service, through Tolfdir's moving eulogy for Mirabelle, and Faralda's more calculating comments about Master Aren. It was only when the torches were set in Mirabelle's pyre that I finally broke down. Lydia stood on one side of me, a consoling hand on my arm, and Onmund on the other. As the flames crept higher, I could watch no longer. I buried my face in Lydia's shoulder and abandoned myself to grief. When I looked up again, the fire was nearly out, and nothing was left of Mirabelle but ashes and smoke.

Savos Aren's body was nearby. He would be transported to Mournhold for interment in his family crypt. But Mirabelle had wanted her ashes to remain here at the college to which she had devoted so much of her life.

I was not the only one crying. There were few dry eyes in the college's courtyard by the end of the ceremony. Only Faralda seemed unaffected, remaining remarkably sanguine about it all. I couldn't help thinking it was because she still wanted Savos Aren's job. She had been fawning around me all morning – until she learned that I had named Tolfdir acting arch-mage.

That had been my one act as leader of the college: naming my replacement. I had taken Tolfdir up to the top of the arch-mage's tower and delivered my decision. He was none too happy about it, trying to convince me to stay.

"I may be the Dragonborn," I told him, "but I'm still only seventeen. What do I know about running a college?"

"If you stay, I will guide you," Tolfdir said. "You have great magical power, and you have experienced more than most of the college's wizards combined. You showed more wisdom about the Eye than did either Savos or I. The newer students look up to you as their leader. You are the obvious choice!"

"No, Master Tolfdir, my task lies elsewhere." I looked off to the lands to the west. Somewhere over those mountains were the lowlands near Morthal, where I must go next. "You will make a much better arch-mage than I. I will leave the appointment of an assistant to you, but I highly recommend Brelyna. She has gotten over her block with Alteration magic, and truly came into her own in searching for the Staff of Magnus. Too, she has never engaged in the petty games those higher up in the college have indulged in. I hope that you will be able to put an end to the infighting in the college."

"The college can survive some infighting," Tolfdir said. "But I wish you would reconsider. I feel awfully old to be taking on such a responsible position at this time in my life. But if I must, then an energetic young assistant like Brelyna will be a great benefit to me." Tolfdir leaned on the parapet and looked out across the Sea of Ghosts. "I still find it hard to believe your tale about Savos Aren. That was not the Dunmer I knew."

"Perhaps the experience changed him," I said. "He certainly sounded contrite as he left Labyrinthian."
"You must be right," said the old Nord. "He was always concerned for the safety of the college and its students, especially after the White-Gold Concordat, when the Thalmor began snooping around. He was quite skillful in fending off their interference, at least until this last episode with Ancano. Still, it does explain his rather loose attitude toward magical experimentation. I think he was in favor of anything that would add to the power and reputation of the college, not to mention his own. Perhaps I fell under that lust for knowledge as well, when it came to the Eye."

I was glad to see Tolfdir showing some bit of remorse for his and Savos' obsession with the Eye. Mirabelle had the right of it — if only she had spoken up! I hoped Tolfdir's new-found wisdom would last in his guidance of the college.

Now the funeral rites were over and it was time for Lydia and me to take our leave. Tolfdir and the three apprentices — now advanced to the rank of scholars — walked us to the bridge over the chasm between the college and the town to say their farewells. Onmund continued with us over the bridge and down the pathway.

At first he had little to say. "Those arch-mage's robes fit you nicely," he said finally. The robes were the one appurtenance of the arch-mage's position I could not turn down. They were too magically powerful and would be of great help against Alduin — if I ever discovered how to come face to face with the World Eater. Colette had volunteered to refit them for one of my size.

"Why?" I asked Onmund. "Do you mean they are becoming to my figure?" I held up my arms and spun around, mock-seductively. In truth, they were loose-fitting, heavy garments with a sewn-in hood that did more to hide than reveal their wearer's charms. Onmund seemed to miss the fact that I was teasing him, though Lydia did not.

She winked at me and said, "In that garb, it's hard to imagine any man withstanding your advances, my thane." She seemed to think teasing Onmund was good sport.

"No, I didn't mean they were attractive," he said, blushing.

"Well, that's a relief," I said.

"Not that you're not attractive! I just meant, you're so well suited to be our next arch-mage! Please, won't you change your mind?"

"Yet my magical power still cannot equal that of Faralda, Sergius or the other wizards. How would it look if I took this position ahead of them? Too, I am not finished with the task I set out to accomplish. I am anxious to return to it even now."

He looked down at the cobbled village roadway over which we walked. "I suppose it would be foolish to ask again if I could accompany you, after my behavior in Labyrinthian."

We had almost reached the stables now, and I turned to face him. "Yet you fought bravely in the end," I said. "And we never would have solved that maze if it hadn't been for your knowledge. So don't be so hard on yourself." I reached out to put a hand on his arm, but he mistook the gesture, and gathered me into a hug.

"So you will let me come with you? You'll see, two mages can work well together."

"No, I didn't say that," I replied, pushing him away. "A mage and a warrior make a better combination, I have found so far. Besides, you're needed here. Brelyna will need a friend and supporter if Tolfdir names her his assistant. Faralda and Nirya will give her no peace."

Onmund looked stricken. "Do you remember that night after the party? The night we kissed? I
"I'll go saddle the horses," Lydia said, too brightly, excusing herself before the situation could grow even more awkward.

Now I did put my hand on his arm. "My friend... Onmund... I cannot give you what you want. My head was full of strong drink on that night. I was confused. But in the sober light of day, I can only be your friend. I cannot love you in that way."

Onmund looked over to where Lydia was hefting a saddle onto one of the horses. "It's her, isn't it?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen the way you look at her. You turned to her for comfort this morning, when I was right there beside you. Don't think I don't know what's going on."

"What could you imagine is going on?" I demanded. "Lydia is my closest friend and companion. We have grown close over these weeks, how could we not? And it's not as if we haven't had our difficulties."

"Well, I hope you find her a better comfort than me. Now, I will say no more." He turned back toward the college.

"Onmund, don't let us part in this way!" I called after him. "We can still be friends!" But he kept walking away, not even glancing over his shoulder.

I went to help Lydia finish loading our bags onto the horses. "I suppose you heard all of that," I said.

"Couldn't help it, could I?" she replied. "It's absurd what notions men will get into their heads, isn't it?" Was there a twinkle in her eye as she said it? I couldn't be sure.

"It's beyond belief!" I exclaimed. My horse stamped its hoof as I cinched a strap a bit too tight.

"You could have just given him a kiss, you know, maybe a bit of hope for the future," she said.

"No, I couldn't, Lydia! How could I lead him on in that way when I know I'll never love him?"

"You know, the bards write songs about heartbreakers such as yourself, my thane," she said, and now I definitely saw a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, really?" I said as I climbed onto my horse. I tried to make it sound as if I were jesting as well, but I don't think I succeeded entirely. "And do they also write songs about housecarls who are sent home for offending their thanes?"

She had nothing to say to that.
Westward

Chapter Summary

-- Skyrim gripped by chaos -- the avenging maidens -- ungrateful Nords -- the Reach and the Reachmen -- a kidnapping --

We pushed our way west over the next fortnight, visiting word walls atop mountain peaks or deep within ancient crypts, and slaying dragons wherever we found them. My power was growing, I had a greater arsenal of shouts, and Lydia and I were learning to work better together. Not even the blood dragons, with their lethal, leaf-shaped tails and seemingly unending stamina, could stand against us now.

Despite these successes, I felt we were merely wandering, with little purpose to our efforts. We had seen neither scale nor talon of Alduin, ever since that night in Kynesgrove weeks ago. Time was a blur, and only the bitterness of the weather told me that we were getting to the end of the month of Sun's Dusk and onward to the very depths of winter. Wherever we went, we saw that our labors had not been enough. Refugees streamed along the roads, making for the larger cities. Many had lost their homes; some, their loved ones. A few had even fled their farms out of the mere fear of a dragon attack, having seen destruction wrought upon their neighbors.

Ulfric and his rebellion had played a part, too. For now the talk in the inns and at the stables was not just of the dragons, but of the first open hostilities of the war. The Stormcloaks had taken Falkreath, somehow attacking by surprise over the passes east of Helgen. No one had thought that possible with winter weather already settling in over the heights.

"Smart," Lydia said, and I could see she admired the tactical skill of the maneuver. "Falkreath is on the main supply line between Cyrodiil and Skyrim. Now the Empire will have to bring supplies and troops the longer way round by ship to Solitude. They'll face winter ice in the Sea of Ghosts, and worse."

I didn't know how to feel about the Stormcloak victory. I supposed I should be glad that the Imperial torturers and their Thalmor allies had suffered a loss, but then I thought about the Bosmer and other peoples living in Falkreath. How would life change for them under Stormcloak rule? Although, come to think of it, I remembered one Nord shopkeeper in Falkreath from travels with my father. He hated anyone who wasn't a Nord and always looked at me, the mixed-blood, with a malicious glint in his eye. It was a wonder he would stoop to do business with my father. So maybe the Stormcloak takeover of Falkreath wouldn't mean much of a change for its people – except for those loyal to the Empire. They were heading north, joining the refugees of dragon attacks on the roads and crowding the inns and stables along the way.

But if people talked of the war, it was mainly to grumble that it had taken all the good fighting men and women away, just when the towns and villages needed every defense against the dragons. And everywhere, people railed against the Dovahkiin, whose coming had raised hopes that the dragons would soon be defeated. With those hopes dashed, it was almost as if I were to blame for the dragons' maraudings.

I was glad for the disguises we had donned when we stopped over in Whiterun. The talk in the town was that Jarl Balgruuf was now forced to choose one side or the other in the war. Not only
had the pressure from both sides increased, but he had lost a portion of his hirth in a battle with a
dragon during my absence. The beast had raided a farm south of the city, and Balgruuf thought it
his duty to lead a troop against it. He had taken a serious burn and lost half a dozen of his best
fighting men, but prevailed against the dragon in the end.

Now I dared not climb the steps of Dragonsreach to see him. We stole into town in the darkness
and went straight to my new house, where we finally spent our first night. In truth, the floor of
Arcadia's would have felt more like home to me, and I'm sure Lydia would have felt more
comfortable in her old quarters in Dragonsreach than in the house's cramped second bedroom, but
we made do.

The next morning, we went to Arcadia's before she opened her shop for business. She made up a
dye that turned my hair black and a flesh-toned paste that covered my tattoo. It blended well with
my own skin, as long as one didn't get too close. I hoped that between my hood and keeping my
distance, no one would notice that I was hiding a mark on my face. I still wore the arch-mage's
robes, but covered them with my woolen cloak.

Lydia's disguise was riskier. Her steel plate armor would be obvious even beneath a cloak. She
chose instead to wear a plain dress to appear as a common traveler. This would leave her poorly
protected should fighting arise. I knew it would be difficult for her, accustomed to traveling armed
and armored as she was. Another problem was finding a dress that fit her. We had no time for one
to be tailored to her size. Fortunately, Belethor's General Goods had one that nearly fit. Then we
took it to the house of a woman nearby who did piece work.

Lydia seemed somber as she looked into a mirror, the seamstress making final adjustments to the
dress.

"You must feel half-naked without your armor," I said.

"No, it's not that," she said. "It's just, there was a time when I so wanted to wear a dress and be like
all the other lasses."

I almost laughed, but held it back. "What, you, in a dress, indoors, playing with dolls?" She had
told me a bit about her childhood, growing up on her family's farm. She had been much like me,
always playing outdoors with the boys.

"No, but when we got older, when the lads began to be more interested in the girls in their dresses
than play-fighting with me. The boys were my only friends since we were young, since I first grew
so much taller than all the other lasses. You can't imagine the names the girls called me. 'Large
Lydia' was the nicest. And then my best friends wanted only to be with them, and nothing to do
with me. I was still just one of the lads." Her dark eyes looked far away as she stared into the
mirror.

I was surprised. Lydia always seemed so wedded to the soldier's life, bent on gaining glory and
renown. "Do you wish you'd gotten married like one of those lasses?" I asked.

She smiled a wistful smile. "No. I saw where that life led. The other farmers would come around to
our house and eye me as a prize for one of their lads. 'She'll make a fine farm-wife someday,' they'd
say. 'Strapping girl, she'll do twice the work of any o' these other lassies.' I'm surprised none of
them ever checked my teeth like they were buying a horse. And I had done enough farm work
since I grew big that I knew it wasn't the life for me." She sighed. "No, I don't regret becoming a
soldier. I just wonder what the lads would say if they saw me now."

The dress was plain, but it outlined her figure well, small as it was. But did she see that? Or did she
just see "Large Lydia"? "Any of those lads would regret missing their chances with you, if they saw you now," I said.

Lydia kept looking into the mirror, but I thought I saw her blush.

We set out the next day, Lydia in her too-tight dress and a fur wrap, covered by her traveling cloak. She kept a short sword near to hand when on horseback, hidden by a blanket draped over the pommel of her saddle. She had her armor packed into one of her saddlebags. She would have to don it before approaching any dragon's lair, and we could only hope none would ever take us by surprise.

The disguises seemed to work. With our heads covered by our hoods, we passed for two anonymous women, just part of the steady stream of travelers on the roads. No one would take us for thane and housecarl, or "blonde mage and dark-haired sword-sister." That was the description the Thalmor gave out for us. Malukah had told us about those handbills, and we soon began to see them ourselves.

Yet traveling as anonymous women had its drawbacks. It was not long before we began to attract unwanted male attention. Everywhere there were bandits ready to take advantage of the weak, and brutish men ready to force themselves on any woman they thought defenseless. In normal times, Nord law exacted strict punishments for men who abused women, ranging from fines and the stocks for unwanted touching to death for rapers. The village guard and road patrols captured and punished any man who dared to break these codes, and prevented even more crimes from occurring.

But these were not normal times. Between the Civil War and the dragons, the norms of civil society in Skyrim were fraying. Rape and pillage were common in times of war, Nordic codes or no. Though Ulfric had ordered his soldiers not to treat the women in Imperial territory as spoils of war, there were always thugs and scoundrels ready to take advantage of the chaos.

Inevitably, we ran across brutes who confused us with their usual defenseless prey. They were more a nuisance to us than anything. We fended them off with ease, though not without risk of revealing our true identities. I knew I must never shout where anyone would hear it. But I was more worried about the innocent, defenseless travelers, the women and children who had lost their men to the dragons or the war, and who now found themselves beset by brigands and rapers. The refugees often traveled together in caravans for mutual protection, but this was not always possible.

We had not even left Whiterun Hold when we came across two louts accosting a woman while her two small children cried on the wagon seat. The men had somehow lured them out of sight of the road, but the woman's cries were enough to bring us to them. One of the men had her stripped to the waist and was unlacing his breeches when I slipped up behind him and slit his throat. The thrill of joy I felt at seeing him flopping on the ground – I put that down to my dragon soul. But in truth there was no part of me that could feel compassion for a raper.

His partner was so busy rummaging about under a tarp that covered the wagon, he didn't notice when Lydia stepped up behind him. She gave him a sporting chance, shouting "Ho there!" and allowing him to turn around to face her before running him through.

Another time, we came across a Khajiit trading caravan beset by a group of bandits. The traders
had a tough-looking, armor-clad warrior with them, but the bandits were too many and the battle was not going well for the Khajiits. One of the traders had already fallen, and the warrior was nearly surrounded. I sent a frenzy spell at one of the bandits at the edge of the fray and he began attacking his nearest comrade. That caused enough confusion that the Khajiits were able to gain the upper hand, along with the help of one or two of our arrows. The remaining bandits ran off before they could notice who had come to the aid of their victims.

"Thank you, friend," said the Khajiit warrior as we approached. "Without your help, we would all be dead. Such a thing has happened to other Khajiit caravans, but never to one Kharjo has guarded. These roads here on the boundary between Stormcloak and Imperial territory are most unsettled."

"What brings you to these cold lands?" Lydia asked, and she sounded truly curious, not at all hostile.

"Yes, Skyrim is much colder than the warm sands of Elsweyr, but I feel warmth in your presence," Kharjo said. He gave a little bow. "Ahkari released me from prison in Cyrodiil, and now I must repay the debt I owe her. A word of advice – never mix gambling and drink, my friends. And you are?"

I don't know why I decided to tell him our true names rather than our traveling aliases. Perhaps I felt the news would not likely spread beyond the Khajiits, who were rarely asked about anything other than the prices of the goods they carried.

"Well, Deirdre Morningsong, this one will return home one day. All of Kharjo's friends will hear that Skyrim is not without those willing to help a stranger from a distant land."

"That Khajiit was much more polite than J'zargo, I thought," Lydia said as we rode away.

"I believe you're right, Lydia," I said. "We'll make a cat-lover out of you after all."

"At this rate, my thane, we will gain notoriety despite our disguises. It won't take long for the Thalmor and the Imperials to learn our true identities."

She was right. The week was not out when we began hearing talk of the "avenging maidens" who came to the aid of defenseless travelers, and people we encountered began looking at us and whispering. When the Thalmor heard these stories, it wouldn't take them long to guess that the two maidens with the considerable fighting prowess were actually the Dragonborn and her housecarl traveling in disguise. And from there, how long would it take for them to track us down?

But it could not be helped. I could never pass by when the defenseless and the weak were falling victim to the venal and the cruel. Least of all when it was a dragon attacking a farm. That came to pass as we traveled north of Rorikstead. We saw a dragon swooping and diving on a barn just off the road, sending freezing blasts of frost all around. There was no time for Lydia to don her armor. And I would have to shout. There was no way around it.

"Hin laan krif?" the dragon asked as we stepped in front of it. "You would fight me?"

It looked surprised when I replied in Dovah, "Ahrk krii hio!" I had been spending evenings around our campfire studying the book on the dragon language Arngeir had given me.

The battle went quickly, but not before I noticed that this was a particularly beautiful frost dragon, its scales patterned in white on black. They really were the most magnificent beasts in all of Tamriel, I thought as I screamed Marked for Death at it. Then, just for a moment, I wondered why things had to be this way. Why did the dragons have to wantonly maraud and destroy? But I
quickly put this thought aside. I could not let myself feel compassion for the corpse-makers that had orphaned Huldi and Harry and slain Olaf Brittle-Spear and so many others. I felt no remorse at making the beast pay the death-price.

I had not finished absorbing the dragon's soul when the farm family burst from the root cellar where they had been hiding. The woman and children cowered in fear as the last bits of the dragon's flesh came away in a whirlwind of fire and the last wisps of dragon energy swirled around me. The man of the farm, a tall, dark-haired Nord clad in a plain woolen tunic, breeches, and tough hide boots, stood before them, unsure whether to thank me or keep me from his family.

"By the N... Eight!" he exclaimed at last. "You're the Dragonborn! We heard you shout. Then you..." he looked at the dragon skeleton again. "You saved our lives!" He paused, not knowing what else to say.

"You're quite welcome," Lydia said, her voice dripping sarcasm.

"You're right ... how could I not thank you? It's just that ... I've never seen such a thing!" He shook his head and looked back and forth between me and the skeleton. But then he frowned. "But where were you last week when the dragon killed Rongnar Red-Hand? It destroyed his farm and left his family fatherless and homeless."

Now he looked around at his own farm, surveying the damage for the first time. His ox lay on its side in its pen, encased in frost. "And it's killed our ox! How am I to plant in the spring?" He looked back at me angrily. "You're the Dragonborn! You were supposed to stop the dragons, but there are more and more of them, more and more farms and towns destroyed. Skyrim will not survive at this rate, between the Stormcloaks and the dragons! And you're not doing a thing to stop it!"

He spat on the ground in disgust, then turned to take his family back to their house. I wondered if he knew how lucky he was to still have a house, but I let the thought pass. I could not blame him. He was in shock, as were most of Skyrim's residents.

Lydia was less forgiving. "No, you're wrong!" she exclaimed. "She's doing all she can! Who knows how many more would have suffered and died were it not for the dragons we've slain!"

The farmer turned back to her. "Tell that to Rongnar's children. They're making their way to Rorikstead even now."

I spoke up before Lydia could say more. "Come, Lydia, we're not wanted here. And good farmer, the only thanks I ask is that you tell no one what you saw here. If anyone asks, we were already gone when you came out of your cellar."

The man looked perplexed for a moment then the realization broke across his face. "That's right! The Thalmor are after you! But you don't look much like your picture on the handbill I saw in Rorikstead." He came a step closer and looked at my face. "Ah, disguised, I see. Tell me, why shouldn't I go straight to the Thalmor?"

Lydia reached for her axe. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right now! That would keep you quiet."

I put a hand on her arm. "No, we won't do that. Yet if you would have me go on saving what people I can, and slaying what dragons I can, then you will remain silent. I can do no one any good in a Thalmor prison. As futile as my efforts may be, I seem to be Skyrim's one slender hope."
"Aye," the farmer said finally. "I do owe you that much at least. And I'm no friend of the Thalmor either, though I'm loyal to the Empire. But I warn you, my family comes first, should the Thalmor's questioning grow too sharp."

"I understand, and you have my thanks for that much." Then we mounted and moved on.

"You seemed so calm there," Lydia said when we were a distance from the farm. "Didn't he make you angry, the ingrate?"

"Not calm, Lydia, just sad. For the farmer was right – we are failing every day. Yet what choice do we have but to go on, though our hope is so slight?"

She had no answer for this, and we rode on in silence.

As our journey took us farther west, we approached those lands I had once called home. We came to the Karth River flowing through its rocky gorges. I was glad to see it, having spent so many happy hours on its banks. Then, when I thought that just a few hours' ride downstream was the scene of my life's happiest memories and also its greatest tragedy, I knew that I could not go there – not yet. I did not trust myself to control the anger that still burned within me. Too, finding my parents' murderers would take time, and I would not be distracted from my task.

So when it came time to visit word walls in western Haafingar Hold, we came at them by difficult fords across the Karth River and circuitous routes through rugged country, avoiding the easy road through Dragon Bridge. What paths there were roamed up and down over rocky fells and through boulder-strewn glens covered in snow knee-deep to our horses. It was wilder country than that around Whiterun, and my heart thrilled at the ruggedness of it. I only wished I could be here in spring and have the time to enjoy it. But we hurried through it as best we could.

The latter part of Sun's Dusk found us in the Reach, that still more rugged province of Skyrim hard up against High Rock. The mountains here were not so high as the Throat of the World or the other ranges around Whiterun, but there were more of them and closer together, each ridge separated by a narrow gorge with a boulder-filled stream. The ways went straight up and down the mountain sides and our horses struggled mightily. It was as if the land had been pushed by some mighty force up against the borders of High Rock, and had folded like a forge bellows. The vegetation changed here too. Now there were no lush cedars and pines, just hardy junipers with a few bitter, withered berries lingering from the fall and gnarled, leafless oaks, stunted by the incessant winds.

Some supposed the hold had earned its name when the Nords reached out and took it for Skyrim. The native Bretons, or Reachmen, continued to make up the bulk of the population. Some adapted to Nord rule, working the mines and doing other menial jobs. Those who resisted became known as the Forsworn, a wild tribe as gnarled and twisted as everything else in the hold. While their plight might have induced some sympathy, they had strayed far from traditional Breton ways and fallen into worship of the evil and debased hagravens, those hideous minglings of woman and crow. Whether the hagravens were the product of some twisted cross-species mating or the work of dark magic, no one knew. But they led the Forsworn in gruesome sacrificial rituals that would turn the most hardened Imperial torturer's innards to water.

For their worship of the hagravens more than their constant attempts at insurrection and petty mischief, the Forsworn were reviled throughout western Skyrim and even in High Rock. They
made the roads dangerous, ambushing any travelers they encountered. Off the roads, it was even more perilous. You never knew where you might stumble upon a Forsworn camp hidden in the folds of the land and find yourself fighting half a dozen barbarian warriors along with a deadly hagraven wielding powerful magic and bird-like, slashing talons. The reach-men and -women wore little armor, and indeed little clothing at all – just scraps of fur covering strategic areas of the body, and sometimes an antler head-dress. Woe to the unwary who assumed this lack of armor made them easy to kill.

And now our road led us through that country, into the Forsworn fortress of Hag Rock Redoubt. Long did we debate the wisdom of going there. It was deep in Imperial territory, near to the hold capital of Markarth as the crow flew, but a good day's journey distant by convoluted pathways. The Thalmor were rumored to have a strong presence in the Reach, as Jarl Igmund supported the Empire's alliance with Summerset. I remembered something about Talos worship having persisted here longer than anywhere else after the Great War. Perhaps that explained the Thalmor keeping a close eye on the place.

Whatever the history, our way was now threatened both by the Thalmor and the Forsworn. We would not have risked the journey to Dead Crone Rock if it hadn't contained the rune wall for Maar, or Terror, the last word of the Dismaying shout. I didn't think it would be much use against dragons, but the full shout would be a great help against other foes. Illusion magic worked to calm or cast fear into the hearts of one person at a time, but with this shout I could scatter many at once and avoid killing them.

Too, it was the last word on our list. Once I had it, we could return to High Hrothgar to finish my training. I had learned the forms of over twenty words of power, but I had absorbed far fewer dragon souls. I hoped Master Borri would share his understanding of those words whose deep meanings I had yet to learn. And I hoped that Master Arngeir would have some further insight into how I could lure Alduin into battle, or else stalk him to his lair. Or perhaps we could find Delphine and she would have learned something more of the dragons' movements. Then I could get on with hunting Alduin at last.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, my thane," Lydia said when I announced our destination. "It's a well known fact that a soldier's last mission before returning home is the most perilous."

"Well then, you'll just have to keep a sharper eye out for me, won't you?" I winked at her as I said it, but she did not take it as a joke.

We were on our way to Hag Rock, stopping to feed our horses in the mining village of Karthwasten, when we overheard an impassioned conversation nearby. A man who seemed to be the village elder was listening to a younger man, dressed in the dust-covered garb of a miner. Both were Bretons.

"I can't believe they took her!" the younger man was saying. "And just when she had been called to the temple! You have to help us get her back!"

"Enmon, it's all I can do to keep the Forsworn from raiding the village and closing the mines, even when the Silver-Blood mercenaries aren't occupying them. Maybe you can get some of those brigands to help you, but I can't spare my guards."
"But my daughter!" the younger man exclaimed. "You can't leave her to those savages!"

"Come Lydia, let's see what this is about," I said.

Loyal as my housecarl was, I saw her roll her eyes. "Don't they have hold guards for things like this?" But she followed me anyway.

"Can we be of help here?" I asked as we approached the two men.

They both looked at us, speechless for a moment. I thought about how we looked – Lydia in her dress and cloak that hid her fighter's physique, me with my mage's robes well covered, and both of us seemingly defenseless. No wonder they just stared.

"I don't see how," said the elder. "Two women, alone, what help could you be?"

"I am Fiona Pure-Spring, and this is my companion, Trudi. Why don't you tell us what has happened and let us judge whether we can help?" I asked.

"It's the Forsworn!" exclaimed Enmon. "They've taken my daughter, Fjotra. She's only ten. She was just named the Sybil of the Temple of Dibella. The priestess came to tell us yesterday afternoon, and we said we'd have to think it over for a night, great honor though it is. It's a big step, you see, giving up your daughter at such a young age. But Fjotra wanted to go and ... then in the middle of the night the Forsworn broke into our house and made off with her. There was nothing we could do to stop them. My wife and I are lucky to be alive."

"Do you have any idea where they've taken her?"

"Yes, we think it was to Dead Crone Rock, above Hag Rock Redoubt, southwest of here near Markarth. I heard one of them say Drascua would be pleased with their work. It's well known that Drascua is the hagraven that holds rites in that abominable place."

I looked at Lydia. "Well, isn't this a happy coincidence?" I said.

"If that's your idea of happy..." She left the thought unfinished.

"Why, how could that be a happy coincidence?" the elder asked.

"I was thinking the same thing!" said the younger man, as if I had taunted him.

"I only meant we also have an errand at Hag Rock Redoubt. We are on our way there now, and we will retrieve your daughter for you."

If the situation hadn't been so serious, I'm sure both men would have burst out laughing.

"The two of you?" the elder exclaimed. "Alone? Or do you have a war-band hidden about?" He made a great show of peering around at the nearby rocks and houses, as if searching for the hidden troops.

I ignored him and turned to Enmon. "I assure you, we will succeed in returning your daughter to you, trusting to the Nine that she yet lives. The only question is whether we should bring her here, or to the temple you spoke of."

The young man looked us both over, gauging whether we could be true to my words. He looked longest at Lydia. Even in her dress, her height made her an imposing figure. "I should come with you, it might be dangerous," he said at last.
"It will be dangerous," said the elder. "The Forsworn don't take kindly to travelers in their territory, especially Bretons who haven't joined their cause, and even less to Nords."

Now it was my turn to look the miner over. He seemed strong, of course. "What skill do you have with a sword?" I asked.

"Little," he admitted. "I spend my days in the mines, not fighting."

"You're right," Lydia said to him. "It might be dangerous. You should stay here."

The elder shook his head at us, but the younger man looked at us thoughtfully while considering. "Very well," he said. "I will trust that you can do what you say you can, since no one else can help us. My wife and I will wait for you at the Temple of Dibella in Markarth and pray for Fjotra's safe return."

"Markarth!" Lydia exclaimed. "We had no thought of going there!"

"It's all right, Trudi," I said. "I would look on the city of stone, since we are so near it. My father told me much of its beauty, though he would never take me there." I turned to the two men. "Now, the only thanks I would ask in return for our service to your village is that you speak to no one of our presence here. If anyone asks after two women traveling alone, you never saw us. Are we agreed?"

Both men nodded. "Few would believe the existence of two such boastful women, in any case," said the elder.

"Well?" I asked Lydia as we rode out of town. "It seems we now have no choice but to go to Hag Rock Redoubt."

Lydia looked at me thoughtfully. She knew I could not turn away from a child in distress, having seen the depredations of the many dragons we had not managed to stop. "As you will, my thane," she said. "More chances to protect you with my life – they are what I live for."

What was that I saw in her eyes? Resignation? Frustration at my bull-headedness? I could not tell.
The Reach

Chapter Summary

-- a tactical debate -- infiltrating Hag Rock Redoubt -- a savage ritual interrupted -- flight across the cliffs -- the Temple of Dibella -- a shocking discovery -- the assassin's blade --

Hag Rock Redoubt was an elaborate fortress, its stone columns, arches and towers blending in to the gray rock spires and outcrops of the box valley in which it sat. Eons of ice, wind and rain had weathered the stonework, eroding the dragon heads atop each column almost beyond recognition. From below, all we could see were the tops of these columns and towers ascending the valley in tiers to a lofty, mist-shrouded balcony standing above the rest – Dead Crone Rock, where I would find the word wall I was after. But would the Forsworn have Fjotra up there, or in one of the many stone towers of the redoubt?

We dismounted just out of sight of the first tower. I looked doubtfully up at the redoubt, thinking about the last time we had encountered the Forsworn. That was at Hag's End, and it had not gone well. They were so many, and so aggressive, that I could not cast calming spells quickly enough. My fear spells only sent them running deeper into the fortress to alert more of their comrades. With only two words, the Dismaying shout was not powerful enough to scatter all of them. I finally had to cast frenzy spells and let them annihilate one another while Lydia and my atronach took care of the rest. We ended by wading through bodies to reach the word wall.

"Lydia, I'm thinking it's best if you stay here, while I sneak inside," I said.

"What? No, my thane! My place is by your side."

"I know you want to protect me, but on my own I can sneak past them with ease. You must admit you're not equipped for stealth. You would alert every Forsworn in there, and then it would be another Hag's End. I cannot stomach that."

"But they are barbarians, my thane!" she protested. "How can you feel such compassion for those who would slaughter the innocent?"

"Slaughtering the Forsworn in turn makes us no better than they are. I will gladly kill any I find in the act of sacrifice, and they will feel my wrath if they've harmed Fjotra, but I will not butcher them wantonly. Perhaps one day they can be made to see the error of their ways."

"As you will, my thane," she said, "though it violates my vow to protect you with my life."

With that settled, I made ready to enter the redoubt on my own. I had acquired quite a few enchanted items in our explorations and now I donned a ring of sneaking. A shrouded hood I had pilfered from the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary would also help me go unnoticed. With these items, along with my muffling spell, my natural stealth, and a few invisibility potions, I hoped to sneak past all but the most alert of the Forsworn.

As it turned out, the Forsworn were no more watchful than the bandits I had encountered in the past. I made my way up to the first of the redoubt's terraces, finding only one oblivious guard.
Stone huts dotted the terrace, along with the hide-covered shelters of the Forsworn. Here and there I could see other warriors going about their business, making potions at an alchemy table or sharpening weapons at a grindstone. They didn't notice me as I crept to the door of a tower that would lead to the next level.

Inside, I found the tower more populated than the terrace outside, but the pillagers, shamans, and archers shared a common flaw; they looked, but they did not see. It would have been too easy to creep behind them and slit their throats one at a time, or to loot the many chests and shelves I passed on the way.

I did take the chance to pilfer a set of the Forsworn shaman armor. There was so little to it that I easily tucked it away within my own robes. I wanted to take it to an arcane enchanter and discover whether it had some sort of magical armament. That seemed the only explanation for such fearsome warriors wearing such skimpy protection. The men wore kilts, calf-high leggings, bracers, perhaps a fur cape over one shoulder. Now I passed a woman wearing even less: a short skirt that rode low on her hips and a skimpy halter that barely contained her. There must be some magic involved, I thought, just to keep that garment from falling off.

I emerged onto the second level of the fortress to see great stone stairways ascending the cliffs in tiers. It was a simple matter to creep up them to the final level of the redoubt and enter the last tower. My closest call came when I nearly triggered a gate trap that would have smashed me to bits. At the top I found a wooden stair leading to the level above – Dead Crone Rock.

I crept upwards and peered across an expanse of stone to see the word wall I was after. But my way to it was blocked. A hagraven had taken the space in front of it for her sacrificial altar. Two long slabs raised to table height stood parallel to each other. On one lay a Forsworn warrior, his hands gripping the edge of the slab so hard his knuckles were white. On the other lay a little girl wearing a plain dress. Her hands and feet were bound to the slab. Her eyes were closed, but I could see her lips moving, no doubt reciting a prayer.

Drascua, the hagraven, stood between the two tables reciting an awful incantation:

*Blood of virgin, bones of the wild,
heart of thorn, innocence of child...*

She was even more dreadful than the other hagravens we had encountered. She was dressed in rags that hung about her body. Feathers protruded here and there and formed a skirt around her waist, whether growing from her body or attached somehow, I could not tell. Her hair was mere wisps of gray, stringy, matted stuff that hung down her back. Her face might have been human once, but now it had the appearance of a bird's beak made flesh. Her fingers were awful talons, bird-like but many times the size and power of an actual raven's. She crept about on clawed feet, bent over like a crone. Yet I knew better than to take her for a frail old woman. I notched an arrow to my bow and waited for my moment to strike. I would have to be careful if I was to face both hag and warrior on my own.

As it turned out, I didn't have to. The hag took up a wickedly sharp dagger in one taloned hand, its edge glinting in the morning sun. Would she turn it on Fjotra? I pulled my bow taut, ready to let fly. But she kept up with her chanting, holding the knife aloft, then turned to the Forsworn.

*Heart of Briar for heart Forsworn;
This gift of life, in death reborn.*

Now I saw the briar heart on the slab next to the warrior – the red and yellow center of the briar shrub, so common on the heath of the Reach. Next to it, the poor fellow's body shook with fear, but
he kept his grip on the edges of the slab. Then Drascua placed one clawed hand on his chest, leaning her weight on it to hold him down. The other hand rose into the air, its talons clacking together, then with a cry she plunged it down into his ribs, just below his chest. Blood gushed out, and the man's screams were awful to hear. I looked over at Fjotra. She still had her eyes shut, but was praying out loud now. "Lady Dibella, save me!" she called to the skies.

The warrior had gone limp. With practiced motions, the hag twisted her claws in his chest, wrenched upward, twisted again, then jerked to the side. Even from where I crouched, the stench of blood was strong. There was a squelching sound, and her clawed hand came away, the warrior's still-beating heart clutched in its grasp. She placed it gently, almost reverently, into a bowl waiting to receive it.

So this was the hagraven's briarheart ritual! A Forsworn warrior would give up his life to achieve even more power in death, drawing on the life force of the briar heart. In exchange, the hagraven got the human heart for her own dark purposes. It wasn't a great leap to conclude that Fjotra's blood or even her own heart would somehow be used to enliven the dead piece of plant material. Perhaps the hagraven believed that the heart of one chosen by the gods would lend the warrior extra power.

A wave of nausea passed over me, similar to what I'd felt in the Helgen torture chamber. Yet I knew I could not falter – Fjotra was depending on me, though she didn't yet know it.

The hag began chanting again:

\[
\text{Heart of the thorn, blood of the child,} \\
\text{Power reborn from innocence defiled!}
\]

She began turning toward Fjotra, her taloned hand held aloft, and I knew what would happen next. My arrow caught her beneath the rib cage, entering at an upward angle that should have found her heart.

But maybe hagravens don't have hearts. Drascua screamed and turned in the direction from which the arrow had come. Only I was no longer there. I had crept off to one side, remaining as stealthy as I could. But she found me soon enough, hitting me with an ice spike spell. As I felt my blood run cold and my limbs become heavy with frost, I realized I had forgotten to cast stoneflesh on myself.

"Very well," I thought, "I'll fight your ice with my fire." I cast my flame atronach between us, taking advantage of that diversion to move farther to the side. Now the table where Fjotra lay was between us.

That's when the hag made her first mistake, moving out from between the tables to advance on the atronach. Now I could attack her without worrying about hitting the girl. My Unrelenting Force shout knocked her against the corner of the curving word wall. While she recovered herself and sought to rise, my atronach hit her with two firebolts and I launched an ice storm spell. The effect was to surround her in scalding steam. She stood there for a moment, paralyzed by the pain of her melting flesh.

Then she dashed toward me, claws outstretched. But I had drawn my sword of frost. Slowed though I was, I managed to get it pointed in the right direction just as she reached me. She ran onto the sword, impaling herself on it and pushing me backward. She screamed, raked out at my shoulder with a claw, then died.

As I withdrew my sword from her limp body, I looked over at Fjotra. She had her eyes open, staring at me. She looked even more frightened than she had with them closed.

"It's all right, Fjotra," I said, sheathing my sword. "Your father sent me for you."
"You're not ... one of them?" she asked, still frightened.

"No, child, I'm here to save you." It felt strange, calling her child. It wasn't that long ago that she could have been my playmate. "These two won't hurt you now." I looked over at the warrior. With no hagraven to revive him, he would never rise again.

"Dibella answered my prayers!" she exclaimed. "I knew she wouldn't let them hurt me."

I unbound the girl's feet and hands, and she sat up. "Are you all right?" I asked. "Did they hurt you in any way?"

She shook her head. Then she noticed the Forsworn with the gaping, bloody hole in his chest, and screamed, covering her eyes with her hands.

I hugged her. "I told you, it's all right. The bad man can't hurt you now, and neither can that hag." I lifted her down from the slab and made sure she could stand on her own.

"Come over here, there's something I have to do," I said. I took her by the hand and led her toward the word wall. "Now, don't be afraid. My friends tell me this can look a bit frightening, but it won't hurt you or me. Just stand right there." I let go of her hand and walked the rest of the way to the glowing runes. When I had finished absorbing Maar, or Terror, I turned back to her. Her eyes were wide with awe, but not with fear.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" I asked.

"What did you do?" she asked in return.

"I'll have to explain later. We have to get out of here now."

"Did you kill everyone in those towers?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not," I said. She looked frightened again, and her lip trembled. I knelt down so I could look her in the eye. "Fjotra, I can't imagine what you've been through, but you need to be brave for just a while longer. Can you do that?"

She looked at me for a moment then nodded. "I'll be brave while I'm with you."

As if to punctuate our conversation, I saw a Forsworn shaman's head pop up at the top of the stairs. She saw the dead hagraven first. Then she noticed us over by the word wall and made ready to cast some Destruction spell. I caught her with a calming spell first. "Carry on then," she said, and went back down the ladder.

"Come on," I said to Fjotra. "She'll be back soon. They must have heard my shout."

"I've heard about people who can shout. You ... you're..."

"There's no time for that," I said, taking her by the hand. "Let's see what's over here. Tell me, do you like to climb rocks, Fjotra?"

"I love climbing on the boulders by our house, but daddy tells me not to."

"Good lass," I said. Perhaps this would be easier than I had thought. From below, I had noticed a series of ledges to the right of Dead Crone Rock that looked like they led to the base of the cliffs. We came to the end of the stone platform, and I saw that the ledges were there, and they indeed looked passable.
"What do you think, Fjotra? How do these rocks look to you?"

"Easy!" she exclaimed. With practiced hands she reached down and tied her skirts up so they would be out of the way, then jumped up onto the first ledge. "Come on!" she called back to me.

I followed her, wishing my own mage's robes were as easy to tie out of the way. But we made good progress, disappearing around a corner just as half a dozen Forsworn came running out onto the terrace we had vacated. The ledges were wide, nearly four feet across, and though the drop was long, Fjotra showed no hesitation. Occasionally we would stop and confer about the best way forward. I let her take the lead lest I take a step that was too great for her. But I needn't have worried, she was so agile.

I wondered why the Forsworn weren't following. Surely they must know of this route down from the heights? Then we came to a blank spot on the cliff where our ledge disappeared into the sheer face of the rock. For a space of fifty feet there was nothing but vertical rock, with no ledges to walk across, nor even hand and toe holds for a skilled climber. Directly below, the cliff was equally sheer. Maybe the Forsworn knew there was no escape this way and were just waiting for us to come back – or fall to our deaths.

Beyond the gap, a grassy slope butted up against the cliff. This led down by roundabout ways to the path just below the redoubt where Lydia was waiting. Peering down, I could just make out our horses.

"What are we going to do now?" Fjotra asked.

"Let me think," I said. I examined the cliff face again. Now I noticed a horn of rock protruding from it, about thirty feet above us, and halfway across the chasm. "I have an idea," I told Fjotra. "I have a friend down there; maybe she can help."

I cast my candlelight spell, the blue ball of light hovering over my head. I only hoped it would stand out clearly on this partly cloudy day. Fortunately, the rock of the cliff face was of a dark color. It took a couple of tries, but soon I saw movement down by our horses. They were so far below us that I could barely tell that was Lydia moving around between them. Then I cast a ball of magelight at the grassy slope where I wanted Lydia to come to help us. I could just make out Lydia mounting her horse, then both horse and rider disappeared behind protruding boulders as they moved along the base of the cliff.

"There she comes," I said. "All we can do now is wait. Are you hungry?"

"Starved!" she said.

"How about an apple?" I asked. I always kept one or two hidden in the folds of my robes. She took the fruit and began devouring it greedily. "Your father tells me you've been called to the Temple of Dibella. What do you think of that?"

"It's a great honor," she said between bites. "I'm to learn to commune with Dibella. They say I'm the only one who can. Then when I'm a woman grown, they'll teach me – other things. They were a bit mysterious but they said I would understand when I got older."

"What do you know about Dibella?" I asked.

"She's the goddess of women and beauty, everyone knows that!"

That was about as much as I knew as well. "I hope you will be happy at the temple," I said, though I wondered how a girl who loved scrambling around on rocks would adapt to such an indoor life. I
knew it wasn't for me, at least. "Won't you miss your family?" I asked.

"I know I will, and they'll miss me too. But my brother wasn't much older than me when he was 'prenticed off to a blacksmith in Rorikstead. And besides, my family will be well taken care of."

We waited perhaps a half hour before we saw Lydia climbing the slope toward us, now on foot. She reached the edge of the precipice across from us and looked down at the long drop.

"She's ... she's a shield-maiden!" Fjotra exclaimed with admiration, looking at Lydia's shining plate armor. I wanted to ask her if she hadn't chosen the wrong profession, but I held my tongue.

"Looks like you've gotten yourself in a pickle, my thane," Lydia called from her side.

"I hope you brought your rope," I called back.

"Wouldn't be without it!"

It took her a couple of tries, but she finally managed to shoot an arrow with the rope attached over the horn of rock, landing it within our reach.

"Now, Fjotra, how do you like swinging on ropes?" I asked.

"My favorite!" she said. I helped her tie the rope around her waist, while Lydia tied the rope fast on the other side. With barely a glance at the drop below us, the girl swung out onto the cliff face, using her feet to bounce along it. She thought it was such a game that she had to swing back and forth several times. I was astounded by her resilience. It was as if she had never been through her ordeal with the Forsworn.

"All right," I said. "You've had your fun. Now it's my turn."

She finally swung up within Lydia's reach and was soon safe on the grassy slope. Then Lydia swung the rope back to me and I took my turn. It had been some time since I had done anything quite so daring of that nature, or at such a height. My heart was beating fast as I stepped off the ledge, and I almost forgot to breathe as I swung across and reached out for Lydia's outstretched hand. She put her other arm around me and hauled me in, spinning and setting me down on the grassy edge of the cliff.

She must have noticed how hard I was breathing as I sought to catch my breath. "A lot of trouble just to spare the lives of a few barbarians, don't you think?" she asked.

"What, and miss all this adventure?" I gasped.

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Markarth was everything my father said it was – a vast city hewn from the living rock. No wood or brick here. The buildings were all of stonework extending back into the bedrock itself. Everything here was vertical, with stone stairways leading this way and that to the city's many levels. Great waterfalls poured out of the rock at the head of the great cirque in which Markarth was built, their streams flowing through the city – all frozen now in winter. The waterfalls looked like giant icicles extending up the cliff face. The sun was already behind the peaks, but I imagined the frozen waterfalls and river must sparkle brilliantly on a clear winter day.
The city was laid out in two halves separated by a tall ridge of rock known as the Crag. Most of the houses, shops and businesses were on the Highside, where we entered the city, while the mining district occupied the other, or Riverside. But it was to the top of the Crag in between that the city guards directed us as we entered the gates. "Welcome to Markarth," one said, "the safest city in Skyrim."

We climbed steep stairs mounting the ridge, passing the shuttered Temple of Talos. Then after still more stairs, we came to the Temple of Dibella. It was a steep climb, but Fjotra had no trouble keeping up with us. I wondered again how she would take to her indoor life, but she seemed all eagerness. Finally we arrived at the temple's porch. Across a chasm and below us, we could see the great doors of the jarl's palace, the Understone Keep. One of the frozen waterfalls poured over the keep's façade, which was intricately hewn in a pattern I'd never seen before, with many straight lines and the suggestion of grim faces at the top of the columns. There were no dragons. It certainly wasn't Nordic stonework.

We all caught our breath for a moment, taking in the sight. "I've never seen anything quite like that," Lydia said in wonder.

A priestess in hooded robes stood before the bronze doors of the temple, apparently waiting for us. "Greetings, and welcome to the Temple of Dibella," she said. She was a pretty Breton woman. "And most especially, welcome to our new Sybil." She knelt before Fjotra, took her hand, and held it to her forehead for a moment. Fjotra looked as if she didn't know what to think.

"I am Sister Senna, a priestess of Dibella. Now, your parents and Mother Hamal are waiting within."

Then she turned to us, and I gave her our traveling names.

"Fiona and Trudi," the priestess said, "as the saviors of our Sybil, you are welcome as well, and we would not let you leave without reward. However, we allow no weapons of war within the temple, for we are devoted to love and beauty, not the arts of the battlefield." She looked at the Staff of Magnus I had strapped to the side of my pack. "Yes, and even that magic staff you carry."

I noticed she wore a dagger on her hip, and pointed it out.

"Yes, we do carry weapons of personal protection. It is a rare Fredas night that some drunken Nord doesn't stagger up the steps to the temple, hoping to have his way with one or more of us priestesses. You are welcome to keep any such daggers or small weapons you have about you."

Lydia and I looked at each other. Most of our gear could be replaced, but I was loath to leave the Staff of Magnus lying about. There was nothing else like it in the world.

"I'm not much for temples anyway," Lydia said. "Why don't I take our things down to that inn we saw near the city gate while you go in? Too, there are some things I would see to." She seemed quite eager to avoid entering the temple. It was strange, I had never known her to show any hostility to religion. I told her I would be happy to meet her back at the inn, but she insisted on returning to the temple in one hour, as she would not have me walking the streets of a strange city alone.

"I survived a Forsworn redoubt on my own, what could happen here?" I asked. "And the guards said it was the safest city in Skyrim."

Yet she insisted, and I thought it not worth arguing over. She hefted my knapsack and weapons along with her own. "Remember, just wait for me here, my thane, in case I am delayed," she said,
then turned heavily back down the steps.

Inside, the temple was laid out in a long hall with columns running down either side. At each column stood a statue of the Lady Dibella in her characteristic pose. I had seen small statues of Dibella, but these were large, at least twice the size of a living woman. She was naked from the waist up, her only covering a strategically placed swath of fabric that fell far below her navel, revealing the sensual curves of her belly and hip. Her arms were raised, showing her full breasts to best advantage, and above her head she held that universal symbol of womanhood, a many-petalled flower. The overall impression was one of voluptuous womanly beauty. Still, I had always thought it odd that the pose obscured the goddess of beauty's face.

Fjotra paused at the threshold, taking all of this in. Then, off to the side of the hall, we heard a woman's voice.

"I know you're worried, Enmon, but give them time. They could barely have traveled to the redoubt and back again by now."

"Mama! Papa!" Fjotra called out and ran around the corner to meet her parents in the side hall.

We followed and found Fjotra hugging her father and mother at once. When the tears and laughter of the reunion subsided, Enmon came over to me and took me by the shoulders.

"Thank you, thank you, for returning our daughter to us!" Then he couldn't restrain himself from giving me a hug. "How can we ever repay you?" he asked.

His wife came over and hugged me too. "You have my thanks as well," she said. "We brought this for you." She pulled a silver necklace from a purse she carried. "It was my mother's. It's the only thing we can use to repay you." She held it out and I saw that it was beautiful, with an amethyst set in its pendant.

"No, no, I couldn't possibly," I said, pushing it back into her hands. From the sound of it, this must be the one bit of silver these miners of silver owned. "As I told your husband, we had our own business in the redoubt. I would have saved your daughter regardless."

"Mother Hamal will have a reward I hope you will accept," Sister Senna said. "Come, we should make our way to the Inner Sanctum, where she is waiting to receive our new Sybil."

The way led down winding stairs until I knew we must be deep within the great ridge of rock upon which the temple sat. On the way, Fjotra and her parents talked of how they would miss each other and how often they would visit. I took the opportunity to ask Senna about Dibella and the temple's rites and practices.

"Dibella is the goddess of women and beauty and life's simple, natural pleasures," she said. "We spend our time communing with the goddess and instructing other communicants in the sensual arts. Fjotra already has a profound, innate connection to the goddess, and she will spend the next years developing it. She will become the conduit through whom we commune with Dibella. When she is of age, she will also learn the sensual arts and become an adept in their instruction."

"The sensual arts?" I asked. "This is an unusual sort of religion."

"There are many paths to the divines, young Fiona. Those of us who worship Dibella feel that when we experience erotic rapture we are seeing the true faces of the Divines. Haven't you found that to be so?"

I didn't know what to say. I just shook my head.
"You mean you haven't experience such pleasures ... not even on your own?" I shook my head, and she looked a bit shocked. "A poet once said that self-love is not so vile a sin as self-neglecting. And you're a woman grown! How old are you, eighteen, nineteen?"

"Just seventeen," I replied.

"Still ... and your parents, they never instructed you in these matters?"

I shook my head again. "I was orphaned when I was but fourteen."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she said. "But at fourteen, surely ... Well, you're not too old even now, but remember, the ability to experience sensual pleasure is a faculty like any other – it can be developed and nurtured, or it can wither and die. It is not too late for you. I only wish things were not so unsettled at the temple, but Mother Hamal has decreed that we will have no new communicants until our new Sybil is well along in her training. But we will talk more of that later. Here is Mother Hamal."

We had now entered the temple's inner sanctum. The chamber was smaller than the main hall, and darker, with braziers burning in its corners. There were more of the large statues of Dibella and a raised circular fount in the center.

Mother Hamal was an older woman wearing simple robes like the other priestesses gathered around her, though without a hood. She was also exempt from the temple's rule about weapons – she bore a one-handed axe on her hip.

She came toward us and greeted Fjotra formally. "The Temple of Dibella welcomes its new Sybil," she said, and knelt in front of the child, taking her hand and holding it to her brow. Fjotra looked around, uncomfortable with the new attitude toward her. Then Hamal stood up and smiled at her. "I know this must be a lot to take in. I am Mother Hamal, and I want to welcome you personally to your new home. We will do all we can to make you feel comfortable here." Then she gave Fjotra a hug and the child smiled for the first time. Her parents looked on with relief.

"But first," said Hamal, turning to me, "we have your savior to thank. You have done our order a great service..."

"Fiona Pure-Spring," I told her.

"Fiona Pure-Spring, it is our honor to welcome you to our temple. In thanks for your service we would bestow upon you the Blessing of Dibella. It will cure all ills and give you a defensive advantage if you ever find yourself in battle against one of the opposite sex."

"Thank you, Mother Hamal. I just might find myself in such a situation one day. But how do I accept this blessing? I've never prayed to Dibella before."

"It is quite simple," she said. "Come to the fount. Now, kneel before it and simply ask Lady Dibella for her blessing. Then dip your hand into her sacred waters and drink from them."

I walked up the few steps to the fount and did as she instructed. The water was cold and pure, almost sweet. I felt instantly energized, and my thoughts seemed sharper. Ever since the fight with the hagraven, my mind had felt sluggish and my magicka seemed weak. But now all such feelings vanished.

"Thank you," I said. "I feel much better."

Now it was time for me to say farewell to Fjotra and her family so they could have some time alone.
for their own goodbyes. I knelt down before the child and took her by the shoulders. "You are a girl after my own heart," I said, "and I hope you will be happy here."

"I think I will," she said, hugging me. "Thank you for saving me. And I still think I know who you are."

I had told her I learned to shout from the Greybeards. She hadn't believed me then and still didn't. "Well, I'm not saying you're right," I said, "but let's keep that part secret, all right?"

It would be some time before Lydia returned. Sister Senna accompanied me to the temple's main hall, where we spent the time admiring the artwork placed here and there in alcoves in the walls. The priestess commented on each piece as we came to it: sculptures and paintings and tapestries of women in various states of undress. Occasionally, rarely, a man was involved – a man and woman kissing, or a man offering a woman a goblet of wine or a bunch of flowers.

As we wandered through the hall, I couldn't help expressing my doubts about Fjotra's fitness for an indoor life.

"You've no need to worry on that score," she said. "A sound body is the basis of all our practice. You may have noticed Markarth has many levels connected by stairways. We walk them regularly and find that this satisfies the body's need for rigorous effort. Fjotra will join us in these outings at once. Later, when she is of age, the sensual arts provide their own form of exercise."

Now I realized something else was troubling me. "I have to say, it doesn't seem quite the right environment for one so young, to be surrounded by the sensual arts, as you call them."

She stopped and looked at me. "Hmmm. I'm not surprised you would view it that way, having had no education in these matters. But needless to say, we do not view intimate relations as sinful, as do some of the other orders of the divines – the Vigilants of Stendarr, for instance. Perhaps your parents were devotees of Stendarr?"

"No, far from it!" I said. "It's just that ... it seems, not quite proper somehow."

"Yet as I said, Fjotra's training in these adult matters will wait until she is of age, just as would happen in her own family. Our goddess abhors nothing more than one who molests another against their will. And of course, children are too young to know their will in these matters, so they are never to be touched in this way. In our order, the penalty for violating these rules is death, a more strict code than you will find in the world outside our temple. You may have noticed the axe Mother Hamal carries? Fortunately she has never had to use it since I have been here. No, you need have no fears about Fjotra's safety on that score."

Her words made me feel better. We continued our tour, passing more tapestries and sculptures. I began to wonder what was taking Lydia so long. Surely it had been more than an hour by now.

Then I came to a small sculpture that made me stop. It showed two nude women locked in an embrace, kissing passionately, their naked bodies pressing together, and on their faces, a look of the most intense rapture. My heart began to beat fast and my breathing became shallow, as if I could not get enough air. I felt I might be ill.

Senna went on in her commentary, oblivious to my distress. "Ah, here we have one of my favorites, the Dibellan Sisters of the Rose, engaged in an embrace of the purest erotic bliss. It's quite skillful, the way the artist has captured the moment of their rapture, don't you think?"

"I must leave," I said, turning toward the temple's door. "An engagement elsewhere ... I just
remembered." It seemed as if my legs could not carry me quickly enough out of the place, yet I
would not make even more of a fool of myself by running.

Senna followed me as I strode up the steps. "Why? What's wrong?" she asked. "Have I offended
you in some way?"

"No, not at all, I just have to go," I said.

"I hope you will return when things are more settled here," she said as we arrived at the door. I
paused there, and she reached out and caressed my cheek. "I quite look forward to instructing you
myself."

I pushed through the doors without a further word, and Senna did not follow. I grasped the marble
railing of the temple's porch and looked down at the frozen stream far below, trying to catch my
breath. The air was sharp and cold after the over-heated interior of the temple. My arms and legs
tinged, and I felt faint.

When I had recovered a bit, I turned to head down to find Lydia at the inn. The sooner we left
Markarth, the better. As I descended back into the Highside district, I thought of all that my parents
had taught me about sex, or the facts of life as they called it. It wasn't much, in truth. Mainly they
had let me watch farm animals in rut, and told me it was much the same with men and women,
only more loving and gentle. "Well, maybe not so gentle, sometimes," my mother had said, with a
twinkle in her eye for my father. That had made me think of the noises I sometimes heard coming
from my parents' bedroom, bangings and creakings, moans, sometimes a stifled scream. That was
frightening. Why would my mother scream? It was all still a mystery.

And if I knew little of the ways of men and women, I knew nothing of two women together. Of
course I knew that women in Skyrim, and less often men, sometimes lived together into old age,
but I had always thought that was more for companionship, for those who had never found a
partner of the opposite sex. Most in Skyrim viewed them as rather odd, tolerating them at best, but
more often whispering behind their backs. And I knew that these women sometimes had wedding
ceremonies in the Temple of Mara, the goddess of love. But I never thought that also mean that
they ... How could they? How would it work? And thinking about it, I began to feel that ill feeling
again. How could my parents have left me so uninformed? They were no prudes, at least I didn't
think they were.

And then I thought, this must be why Lydia wouldn't enter the temple. Perhaps she knew what
went on inside and was as sickened by it as I was – or bothered, or whatever it was I was feeling.

I was nearly to the inn now, and found myself jolted out of my thoughts by a man in miner's
clothing rushing toward me, blade drawn, and a wild look on his face. "The Reach belongs to the
Forsworn!" he shouted, the dagger held high, ready to strike.

There was just time to think that Lydia had been right to worry about my safety after all, and then
he was upon me.
I crouched to avoid a blow that never came. My attacker ran past me, knife still raised, toward a woman standing at a vending cart a dozen paces away. She was turning to see what the shouting was about, but seemed oblivious to her peril. Without thinking, I cast a calming spell on the assassin – if such he could be called, his work was so crude. The attacker's knife hand dropped to his side, and he turned to look at me.

"Oi, what'd ya do that for?" he exclaimed. He was a Breton, but he didn't look much like any of the Forsworn I had encountered out in the wilds.

Then the city guards were there. "What's going on here?" their leader demanded. He came over to me while two of his colleagues took the knife from the would-be murderer. "We don't allow magic in public places here in Markarth, mage," the captain said.

"Oh, but you do allow murder?" I asked.

"No, course not!" he replied. "Markarth is a safe city."

I heard a derisive snort from the growing crowd around us. "If you call a murder every week safe!" someone shouted. "He's a Forsworn assassin!" another called out.

The woman at the cart spoke up. "This man tried to kill me! I would be dead if it weren't for this mage."

The captain gave a sign to his subordinates and they laid hands on the attacker, tying his hands behind his back. "It's off to Cidhna Mine for you, Breton," the captain told the attacker. "We don't allow mayhem in the streets of Markarth." This brought more hoots and jeers from the assembling crowd.

A cluster of people had gathered in front of the inn to watch the commotion, and Lydia was among them, looking surprised to find me at the center of a group of guards and townspeople. She had changed into her dress and her hair looked damp, but I didn't have time to wonder about that.

"There are no Forsworn in Markarth," the captain of the guard was saying. "This is a safe city."

"So the miner gets to return to the mine?" I asked.

"Cidhna Mine is Markarth's prison," the captain explained. "No one escapes. That villain will probably spend the rest of his life in there. Now, about you. We don't allow anyone to disturb the peace, for any reason. You took the law into your own hands, now you'll have to come with us. The jarl will decide whether to show lenience." He nodded to two more guards who came up. "We'll have to bind your hands. We can't risk you using your magic again."

Lydia made to come over to us, but I shook my head at her. I knew we couldn't fight our way out of
the city. Too, she was unarmed and could do no good for me if she got herself arrested as well. I
was glad when she stopped and simply watched them lead me away, hands bound behind my back.
Now it was her turn to shake her head at me, in reproach for my failure to wait at the temple.

The guards led me up steep stone stairways following the frozen stream that ran through this half
of the city. At its head was the Understone Keep, its massive stone facade interrupted by the frozen
waterfall at its center, with sturdy doors of Dwemer metal on one side. Beyond the doors, the
guards led me into a large chamber of elaborately designed mason-work. But the masonry was not
the most astounding thing about this place. The chamber was large, at least four stories high.
Beneath that high ceiling ran intricate steam-powered pipe-work, jets of vapor escaping here and
there from spinning vents. I wondered if anyone now living in Markarth knew their purpose.

Strange contraptions, the human-shaped machines left behind by the Dwemer, stood on pedestals
at the top of the stone stairway we now climbed. Some had wheel-like bases, as if they could move
by rolling, and bore metallic crossbows. Others, twice the size of either man or mer, stood on two
legs, their giant arms shaped like axes and hammers. I remembered Onmund shivering when
Brelvna described battling them, and now I couldn't blame him – they looked invincible, clad in
bronze-like Dwemer metal. I hoped these would remain in their inert state.

The stairway gave onto a broad balcony, beyond which was the jarl's throne room. The guards led
me before Jarl Igmund, who reminded me much of Balgruuf. His dress was similar, and he had the
same way of slouching on his throne. He was very like in all ways but that he was bald, and he was
fiercely loyal to the Empire. So loyal that a Thalmor wizard stood among his advisors. I kept my
face down so my hood would shadow it, worried that the paste covering my tattoo was too
obvious.

The guards began recounting the events near the city gate. At least they were fairly accurate in
their account. When they were done, the jarl turned to me.

"What is your name, lass?"

"Fiona Pure-Spring, Jarl Igmund."

"So, Fiona, tell me why you saw fit to interfere with guards' business here in my city."

"That is easily answered," I said. "I would not see a defenseless woman savagely murdered, and I
saw no one else coming to her aid."

"Protecting citizens is the business of my city guard. We run a safe city here."

"Yes, that's what I keep hearing," I said. "But your people disagree. And the assassin shouted a
Forsworn battle cry before he attacked. Could it be that the Forsworn have brought their rebellion
to your city?"

The jarl looked sharply at his advisors, an elder Nord man with gray hair, a Redguard woman, and
the Thalmor. Something seemed to pass silently between them, I knew not what. Then the jarl
spoke. "Guards, leave us for a moment."

The captain looked as if he would argue, but then said, "Yes, my jarl," and he and the two other
guards retreated to the foyer.

The jarl's advisors moved closer to the throne, and beckoned me to approach a step closer as well.

"Perhaps this young lady could help you with your little problem, Jarl Igmund," said the Thalmor
wizard.
"You may be right, Ondolemar," said the jarl, looking at me appraisingly. "She does have some power if she could stop that assassin so easily."

"Not much of an assassin, truth be told," I said. "The Dark Brotherhood could teach that one a thing or two. But I don't see how I could help you with this sort of problem. I know nothing of Markarth or its intrigues. I am here only briefly, and have important errands elsewhere."

"What do you know about the Markarth uprising?" the jarl asked.

"A little," I said, wondering why we were discussing history. "The Reachmen took control of the hold during the Great War, correct?"

"That's right," Igmund said. "My father took the city back, with help from Ulfric Stormcloak – but that's another story." He glanced toward Ondolemar. "The point is, when it was all over, most of the Reachmen and their allies in Markarth were dead. But Madanach, their king, was pardoned at the behest of a prominent citizen here in the city, Thonar Silver-Blood. You may have noticed his name on the inn when you came into the city."

I nodded. That must have been the inn where Lydia had taken our gear.

"Thonar saw to it that Madanach was held in Cidhna Mine, the prison owned by Thonar Silver-Blood himself. Since then, Thonar's power has only increased. His competitors conveniently disappear or suffer unfortunate mishaps. Now he controls nearly all the business in our city, especially the silver trade, Markarth's life blood. This all seemed fine, as he paid taxes and levies to the hold. As he prospered, the Reach prospered, my family prospered, everyone was happy."

"All but Thonar's victims," put in the Redguard.

"Quite right," said the jarl, staring at her pointedly. "But then, a year or so ago, these murders began. Random killings, with the murderers yelling about independence for the Forsworn. Now our citizens lie sleepless in their beds for fear of the next attack. Meanwhile the Forsworn in the hills of the Reach have begun attacking every trade caravan that comes into the hold. At this rate, our city will starve. We cannot eat the silver from our mines."

"My jarl," the Redguard said, "it is time we put an end to this Silver-Blood treachery."

"Not without proof, Faleen."

"The Silver-Bloods?" I said. "I still don't understand."

"We believe that Thonar Silver-Blood and Madanach are somehow in league, that Madanach's people took care of Thonar's rivals in exchange for Madanach's life. But now Madanach has gotten out of hand and is orchestrating this rebellion from within Cidhna Mine. At the same time, Thonar has become so powerful that he has bought off much of my city guard, who do nothing to stop the killings. I will put an end to both Madanach and the Silver-Bloods, but first I need proof, and that is where you can help."

"What could I possibly do?"

"Go into Cidhna Mine. Earn Madanach's trust. Learn how he and Thonar operate. Find proof of their collusion so I can strike at them both with authority."

"Jarl Igmund," I said, "as I told you before, I am here only briefly. I have already been of some slight service to your city, aiding the priestesses at the Temple of Dibella, and saving the life of an innocent woman. Now I would be on my way."
"But I'm afraid you have no choice," Ig mund said. "You now stand convicted of disturbing the peace in Markarth. I sentence you to an indefinite term in Cidhna Mine. You will stay there until I see fit to release you, and that won't happen until you get the information I need. Guards!"

The guards returned and two of them led me back down the steps toward the keep's doors.

Ondolemar, the Thalmor, followed. "I will escort her out of the Palace," he said to the guards. They shrugged and walked away.

I stole a glance at the High Elf as we walked down the corridor and into the palace's cavernous ante-chamber. He was tall and had the Altmer's aquiline nose and jutting chin. His black robes and hood fit him well. Then he looked over at me and I quickly looked away. I could feel his eyes upon me as we walked.

Though he had requested to escort me, he didn't seem eager to begin a conversation. "Tell me," I asked, "why do you take such an interest in the affairs of this city?"

"Ah, that is a long story," he said. "What Ig mund didn't tell you was the way in which the Nords took back their city. Ig mund's father made a deal with Ulfric, who had just returned with a battalion from the Great War. Ulfric would drive the Reachmen out of Markarth in exchange for the freedom to worship Talos, even though this violated the peace treaty the Empire had just signed. How they hoped to get away with it, I don't know. Ulfric's assault on the city was quite a bloodbath, from what I heard. Then for a short period, the vile heresy of Talos worship continued here. But we put an end to it soon enough, and had Ulfric arrested."

I decided to play the innocent Breton. With my hair dyed black, nothing marked me as part Nord. "I've always wondered, why do you High Elves care so much about which gods these barbarian Nords worship?"

"I can't expect one of a mixed race such as a Breton to understand, but maybe you will be more proud of your merish side. Suffice to say, mer were created as superior to men at the dawn of time, closest to the gods themselves. So for a human to attain godhood? No, it is not possible, it is heresy. Snuffing out Talos worship is just one step in our campaign to prove the superiority of mer over man. And we will do it if we have to wipe humans from the face of Nirn."

There it was. I knew the High Elves felt themselves superior to all other races, especially their ancient nemesis, the Nords. But I had never before heard it put in such bald terms. I had no doubt that if Ondolemar and his ilk had their way, humans would be returned to the bondage they suffered before the coming of Alessia, along with the rest of Tamriel's non-elven races. The thought sickened me, but I couldn't let that show.

"Then why were you so eager to help these Nords send me into the mines?" I asked. "Really, I have better things to do." We had arrived at the large doors of Dwemer metal at the keep's entrance. Ondolemar stopped, but I still would not look at him. He reached out and put his hand on my chin, turning my head until I was facing him. Would he recognize me as the fugitive his colleagues were hunting? I held his gaze steadily while he studied my face. Then he seemed to come to some decision.

"I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I do feel some sympathy for these natives of the Reach. Barbarians though they are, the merish blood runs strong in them, and it pains me to see them crushed under the boot of the Nords. Too, the Silver-Bloods are notorious Stormcloak sympathizers, and they have gained far too much power in this city already. With the information you obtain, perhaps we can put a quick end to them. Far easier that way than bringing a Thalmor battalion. Now, enjoy your time in Cidhna Mine. I hear it's quite lovely at this time of year."
He pushed open the doors and turned me over to the guards outside, giving instructions to escort me to the mine.

"So, a Breton who can shout," Madanach said. "It is very strange. And you frightened one of my men half to death."

He eyed the shiv I held in my hand. Though it was just a bit of metal sharpened to a lethal point, the shiv was both a weapon and a symbol of power within the mines. It had not taken me long to acquire it.

The gaolers had made me exchange my arch-mage's robes for a tattered tunic and a pair of holey breeches, locked a collar of magicka draining around my neck, then led me to the pit they called Cidhna Mine. But no one was mining. The prisoners sat about in groups of two or three, some taking their ease, others playing at knucklebones or arm wrestling. Across the pit from the entrance, a large Orc guarded a gated tunnel.

"New prisoner!" the guard called out as he shoved me down the wooden stairs leading into the pit. Instantly the men – for they were all men – took notice, several of them jumping to their feet and approaching me. The others egged them on with cries of "Fresh meat!"

One fellow, a Breton with a long scar down his cheek, stopped a few paces away, the others coming to a stop behind him. He gestured with a shiv toward one of the many passages leading out of the pit.

"All right, you and me, sweetie, down that tunnel."

"I'm fine where I am, thank you," I said. "Where's Madanach?" The Breton was not that much taller than I, and I held his gaze.

"You don't have a choice, sweetie. But you be sweet to me and I can be sweet to you. Now let's go." He took a step toward me.

"I'm warning you, not one more step."

"You hear that lads? She says not one … more … step!" He took three more steps until we were face to face, the shiv pointed at my belly.

Though I had no weapons and no magicka, I still had my Thu'um. It only took one word of my Dismaying shout to send him running in fear for the nearest tunnel. He was so startled, he dropped his shiv as he went. The rest of the group who had stood with him shrank back. "She can shout!" someone exclaimed.

I dashed to pick up the shiv, then turned to face the men. "Anyone else want to have a go?" I demanded. They all shook their heads and stammered "No!" and "Wouldn't think of it!"

"Good. Now where's Madanach?"

No one answered, but the Orc at the gate grinned at me around his tusks, then turned and entered the tunnel, locking the gate behind him.
Madanach kept me waiting long. I tried to stay awake, keeping a vigilant eye on my fellow prisoners, who had retreated to corners of the pit or farther down the tunnels for the night. But after a time my eyelids grew heavy, and the next thing I knew I was awakened by torchlight. The Orc was back, standing over me. I leapt to my feet, shiv in hand as I drew breath for a shout, but the Orc just jerked his head at the open gate and said, "Madanach will see you now."

I soon found myself in a larger chamber at the end of the gated tunnel. It was nicely appointed compared to the rest of the mine, with a table and chair, a bed, and a chest. The back wall looked strangely cracked and fissured. A quill, ink jar, and a roll of paper lay on the table, as if Madanach had just been writing. I wondered if that could be a letter to Thonar Silver-Blood. Maybe it contained the bit of information I needed to get out of this prison.

Madanach sat in his chair, but did not invite me to do the same. There was only the bed, in any case. Borkul, the Orc, remained standing at the door as Madanach questioned me.

"I will not apologize for sending your man running," I said. "I felt his welcome wasn't all it could be, so I taught him a lesson in courtesy."

"Ha!" he snorted. "Too nicely put, when it comes to that lot. The truth is, I let them get out of hand. This prison life is too soft and they grow idle. But I've been busy with ... business." He gave the roll of paper a flick with his finger. It rolled against the ink jar and bounced back. "Running a rebellion is a never-ending task," he said, more to himself than to me.

I waited while he remained lost in thought for a moment.

Finally he turned back to me. "I care more about the assassination you prevented yesterday. Why would you, an outsider and a Breton as well, interfere with our rebellion?"

"I saw an innocent woman about to be murdered and I couldn't keep myself from stepping in. It's a bad habit I have, maybe one day I'll break myself of it. The gods know, my life would be simpler if I could look the other way."

"That woman is a wealthy noble from Cyrodiil, and we believe she is an Imperial spy. Her assassination would have sent a strong message about the power of the Forsworn. But you stepped in and the guards arrested both you and our assassin. They sent Weylin down here but took you to the keep. Then it all becomes murky. The jarl talked to you in private, sent you here, and then you demand to see me. It's all very suspicious."

"You know a lot, don't you?" I asked. He must have a spy within the guard, I thought.

"I have my ways," was all he would say. He couldn't resist looking at the paper.

"Well," I said, "no one was more surprised than I when they threw me in here. It was almost as if the jarl wished your plot had succeeded. He said spending some time in Cidhna Mine would teach me not to interfere with his guards. I don't think he expected I'd ever get out."

"So now you know how the Forsworn feel, living with the boot of the Nords on our necks. The more Bretons they throw in here on a whim, the more our ranks increase. But tell me, you were seen leaving the keep in the company of a Thalmor agent. What could Ondolemar have wanted with you?"

"I really have no idea," I lied. "He expressed some sympathy for the plight of the Forsworn. He hinted that he would be pleased if I helped you and your rebels escape from here, and so I asked to see you straight away. The sooner I'm out of here, the better."
"Curiouser and curiouser," said Madanach, thinking out loud now. "Could the Thalmor have an interest in our cause? What purpose would that serve? Igmund is loyal to the Empire and to the Aldmeri alliance."

"He said something about our common merish blood."

"Really? And I thought the Altmer only looked at us Bretons with contempt, mixed-bloods as we are." He eyed me for a moment. "So, what do you say? Will you join our cause? We Bretons need to stick together."

_We Bretons need to stick together._ I remembered Mirabelle had said the same thing, but she would never have approved of this King in Rags, nor his people's methods. Yet the sooner I won his trust, the sooner I might learn his secrets and get out of here. At the same time, I couldn't appear too eager to join his cause.

"So you think I can help you," I said. "But tell me, why should I? I don't hold with these random murders. They are the acts of cowards."

"Well then, you'll be glad to hear that I've decided it's time we left the mines. We'll rebuild the Forsworn out of Druadach Redoubt, then take the Reach by open war. I grow tired of this skulking and plotting."

"Yet there is another problem," I said. "I have been to your redoubts. I have seen too much of your people's vile practices with the hagravens."

"You encountered a hagraven and survived? Impressive!"

"Yes. The hagraven did not, however."

"A pity. The hags are our greatest allies and provide us with some of our fiercest fighters."

"And slaughter the innocent in the process. Your cause may be just, but your methods drive away those who might otherwise become your allies."

He grew stern. "You, a mere girl, dare to advise me, the King of the Forsworn? I was ruler here before you were even born! But I will tell you this: you make a great mistake thinking the Nords and the Imperials are any better. Tell me, what do you know of the Markarth Incident?"

Why did everyone keep bringing up this ancient history? This seemed no time to be debating the past. "I know that the Reachmen controlled Markarth during the Great War, and you were their king. Then the Nords threw you out."

"Well, there's more you don't know," he said. He went over to the chest at the foot of his bed and pulled out a book. "Here," he said handing it to me, "this should enlighten you."

The book was titled _The Bear of Markarth._ It was by an Imperial scholar named Arrianus Arrius. I skimmed it quickly. It described the period of Reachmen's rule over the hold as a time of peace and justice. Then it told the story of Ulfric besieging Markarth. When his men entered the city, they quickly overwhelmed the Reachmen. That was war, the book said, but what came after went beyond the bounds of combat. Any who didn't take up arms on Ulfric's side was put to the sword – women, elders, any child who could lift a weapon, Nord or Breton, it did not matter. Markarth's river flowed red before Ulfric was through.

I wish I could say I was surprised. I wondered for a moment how accurate this account could be regarding Ulfric, given its Imperial author. Then I remembered Galmar Stone-Fist's saying, "If
they're not with us, they're against us." And I remembered my parents growing silent every time Ulfric's name was mentioned. No, I didn't find it hard to believe that Ulfric had ordered this butchery.

"Is this true?" I asked nevertheless, looking up at Madanach.

"Every word, and more," he said. "Before Ulfric's atrocities, before we became the Forsworn, we retook the Reach with little bloodshed. I ruled our land with justice. If Nords bent their knee, I treated them well. And what did it get us? Death and butchery. But perhaps you need more proof. Borkul, bring Braig."

The Orc left the room. While he was gone I read more from The Bear of Markarth. I was shocked by Ulfric's blood-lust. It seemed all of Skyrim's rulers and would-be rulers were blood-thirsty and power-mad. Where was a leader who would treat the people with a just and benevolent hand? But perhaps that was nothing more than a child's fantasy.

Borkul returned with an older Breton I hadn't seen before.

"Braig," said Madanach, our guest here needs proof of the Nords' cruelty. Tell her the story of your daughter."

"Aethra?" he asked, looking from Madanach to me and back. "It is painful to relive, but if you think it will help our cause." He took a deep breath. "I did have a daughter. Aethra would be near thirty now, maybe married to some hot-headed silver worker or on her own, practicing the herb trade. But no, the Nords had to punish me, and for what? I had only spoken to Madanach once, I wasn't part of the rebellion. But that was enough for Ulfric and his men. They didn't care who was or wasn't a Forsworn. Instead of punishing me, they took Aethra. Made me watch while her head rolled from the executioner's block. I just thank the gods she was too young for the brutes to do anything else to her first. As if that wasn't enough, they threw me in here. You must understand, it's not just me. Every Breton family in the Reach has a story like mine."

I looked back and forth between Madanach and Braig. It was a sad story, sadder even than my own. It went against nature for a father to have to watch his child murdered. Then I felt my old anger against the Nords returning. Why had I ever let Gerdur and Ralof deter me from my revenge? They had convinced me that not all Nords were like the people who killed my parents, but could those good Nords outweigh the bad? And Ralof was fighting in Ulfric's army. What brutalities had he committed, I wondered? No, maybe it was best to wipe the Nords from all of Skyrim.

Then I remembered Huldi and Harry. They were the reason I was fighting Alduin and the dragons, Nords though they were. And Fjotra – Enmon and his wife would have had a story even more terrible than Braig's, had I not intervened. No, these Forsworn were no better than the Nords. My anger subsided, and I wondered at the dark corners where my thoughts had led.

"There is still the matter of the hagravens," I said.

Madanach sighed, and flicked the roll of paper back and forth for a moment, lost in thought. "Our alliance with the hagravens goes back to Red Eagle, Faolan as we name him, thousands of years ago. He was the first to make that bargain, trading his own life for greater power in undeath. Yet it brought his end. Then the practice fell out of favor among our people. Most viewed it as a vile and cruel practice not worth the power it gained us."

"They were right," I said. "These rites with the hagravens put you and your people beyond all human sympathy."
"Yet many of our people now feel that we brought our downfall upon ourselves when we forsook the old ways. And so they have taken up with the hagravens again. Perhaps it is a mistake. I will look into it, once we get out of here."

I looked at him carefully, weighing my options. "Very well," I said. "You have convinced me. I can help you escape this prison, at least. How do you plan to do it? Do you have some contact in the city?"

I knew by Madanach's look that I had gone too far. I was new to deception and guile.

"Not so fast, lass," he said. "True, I invited you to join our cause. But before I divulge any more of our plans, you'll have to prove your loyalty."

"And how am I to do that?" I asked.

"There is one in these mines I want dead. He's a Breton who has refused to join us and knows too many of our secrets. We cannot leave the prison while he lives. Take care of this problem, and I will consider you a part of the Forsworn."

"Madanach, I cannot murder a man I do not know on such flimsy evidence."

Madanach rose from his chair and faced me. "If you can't trust my word, you're no part of the Forsworn." I could hear Borkul giving a guttural growl behind me.

"Perhaps I can show my loyalty by helping you break out of here."

"And how are you going to do that? It has taken us years to get as far in our plans as we have."

We stood glaring at each other for a moment, but our standoff was interrupted by a tapping noise coming from the rock wall at the back of the chamber. At first the taps were faint, but then they became louder and more rapid.

"What's this?" Madanach exclaimed. "Could someone have found our tunnel?" He drew his shiv. I still had mine in my hand. I moved to keep my back against the wall, keeping an eye on both Madanach and Borkul. I had no idea what would happen next.

Then the wall split apart along one of the fissures and half of it fell into the chamber. Lydia stood on the other side of the opening, pick in hand, sweat pouring from beneath her horned helm. She looked into the room and saw me.

"Well met, my thane," she said.

"What is this, some sort of trick?" Madanach exclaimed.

"I told you I could help you get out of here," I replied. I turned to Lydia. "It's good to see you, Trudi." I supposed keeping up our disguises might still be worthwhile. If Madanach made anything of her calling me thane, he didn't show it.

"If you think this Nord stranger is going to help you gain my trust..." he began.

"It's all right, my king," came a voice from behind Lydia. "She's with us."

"Kaie? Is that you?"

"It is, my king. Just let us finish widening this opening and I'll explain."
Madanach relaxed. "Braig, help them," he ordered. Braig went off to find a pick and in a few more moments he and Lydia had made the opening passable.

Lydia entered the room followed by a man and a woman, both Bretons dressed in the Forsworn's usual skimpy, fur-lined battle gear. The woman looked fierce with her hair shaved at the sides and standing up in a shock on top.

"You're a week early by my reckoning, Kaie," Madanach said to her.

"Your position in Markarth is deteriorating, my king. Igmund is onto our alliance with the Silver-Bloods. He is about to make a move against them, and against us."

"So you completed the tunnel ahead of time. But why bring this Nord with you?"

"She was lurking about the entrance to the mine," Kaie replied. "She said her thane was unjustly imprisoned by the jarl and she would do anything to get her out. I don't know why, but I felt she was telling the truth, Nord though she is. She looked like a strong warrior, I figured we could use her if we have to fight our way out of here."

"And you trusted her?" Madanach demanded. "Do you know this one broke up Weylin's assassination attempt?"

"She says her master has always been a peace-maker, and knows nothing of Markarth's politics."

"Still, I smell a trap," Madanach said.

I was tired of waiting to get out of the mine. Kaie had just given me the proof Igmund wanted, but now escaping with Madanach and the Forsworn seemed the quickest way out.

"Look, if you don't trust us, we can fight it out now, and I promise you it will be bloody," I said. "Or we can work together to get out of here, then go our separate ways."

Madanach considered this for a moment. "Very well, but you and your partner will take the lead. I will not have you stabbing us in the back."

"The feeling is mutual," I said, "but as you will."

"Borkul, have the others prepare to leave right away."

Two more Forsworn came in through the escape tunnel, each bearing knapsacks full of gear. "My king, we raided the store room for the prisoners' gear. We found armor, but few weapons. And we found these as well." He held up my robes and the rest of my clothing.

"Those would be mine," I said.

Madanach nodded and the man brought them over to me. I went through them – the only thing missing were the potions and lockpicks I had hidden away in the robes, and my ring of sneaking.

Lydia came over and handed me my knapsack and weapons. "I brought your gear from the inn, my thane," she said. "The rest of our things are packed and the horses are ready to ride."

"Excellent work, Trudi," I said, then whispered, "and remember, I'm not your thane, I'm Fiona."

"Oh, right," she said. Then she saw the collar I was wearing. "Nice necklace," she said.

"It's a collar of magicka draining."
She put her hands on her hips and looked at me sternly, her dark eyes flashing. "I leave you alone for a moment and you get into trouble," she said as I began to put on my gear, throwing my robes directly over the tattered tunic and breeches. I certainly wasn't going to undress in front of Madanach and his men, though they seemed busy discussing plans for the escape. "You were supposed to wait for me in the temple, my ... Fiona. What happened?"

I was glad I was still pulling the robes over my head, because I was sure I was blushing. I had almost forgotten about my sudden flight from the Temple of Dibella. Now I was too chagrined to explain the reasons for my sudden departure. "It took much less time than I expected to get Fjotra settled," I said, sitting down to lace up my boots. "Then there was nothing else to do, and it seemed you took more than an hour to return." I remembered her delay, and I turned to face her. "Why were you late, anyway?"

"Oh, just ... things I needed to attend to," she said. Now it was her turn to blush, but she covered it well, looking even more stern. "But you should have stayed there, no matter how long it took me."

I could feel her eyes on me, as I went back to lacing my boots. Was she judging me? I couldn't tell, but I felt my face growing even redder. "Trudi, do you think I did the right thing, taking Fjotra to the temple?"

"Why? It's up to Fjotra and her parents, isn't it? I thought she wanted to go."

"Oh..." I said, now at a loss. She didn't seem to think anything one way or the other about the Temple of Dibella. "No reason, really. Listen, do you have any lockpicks?" I asked, trying to change the subject. "They've taken all of mine."

She fished in her own knapsack and brought out three. I took one and began fiddling it into the lock at the front of my collar. I didn't have much luck, not being able to see what I was doing.

"Here, let me," Lydia said, taking the pick back.

"I think I'm still the better lock-breaker, even when I can't see what I'm doing," I said.

"We'll see about that."

She stepped up to me and bent down so she could get a better look at the lock, lifting my chin with two fingers. Her face was just inches from mine, still flushed and glowing from her earlier exertion. Beneath the smell of sweat, there was the sweeter aroma of soap and lavender water. I noticed how smooth her skin was, and the sharp line of her cheekbone.

She really was making a meal of her task. The lock on a collar like this should not have been so difficult. "Just another minute," she said, "almost got it." I could feel her breath on my neck.

"There!" she said, and I felt my magicka resurging as the collar came free. Lydia stepped back and looked at me, the collar in one hand.

"Are you all right, Fiona? You look flushed."

"Oh, no, I'm fine," I stammered. "It was just hard to breathe with that thing around my neck." Again I could feel Lydia's eyes on me as I turned to see about the rest of my gear. It seemed to take forever to get my sword and scabbard, bow and arrows, Staff of Magnus, and knapsack all into place. When it was done, I felt more confident than I had in a day. Having my magicka restored helped as well. I turned around, and Lydia looked away, pretending she hadn't just been watching me curiously.
A crowd of a dozen or so Forsworn prisoners had crowded into Madanach's chamber now, spilling over into the tunnel beyond. The lout I had chased off wasn't among them. Madanach called for silence and stood on a chair to address them. He now wore a kilt decorated with human skulls, calf-high fur boots, and an elaborate headdress featuring the antlers of a deer. "Forsworn brothers and sisters, today is the last day of our imprisonment, and the beginning of our fight to free our people! No more skulking here in Cidhna Mine, no more petty murders. We will build a new army of Forsworn and fight for our liberty like honorable men and women!" The men and one woman roared their approval.

"But what about these two?" said one of the men, gesturing to Lydia and me.

"As you can see, we lack arms, but we may need to fight our way out of the city. These two are capable fighters and are as eager to leave this prison as we are. Does anyone have a problem with that?" There was a lot of head-shaking, then Madanach turned to us. "Ladies, you lead the way, as we agreed."

"Quickly, we're nearly there!" Kaie called from behind as we climbed yet another stairway. The escape tunnel had led us into the old Dwemer ruin within the cliffs of Markarth. We must be high above the mining district by now, I thought. Just then we turned a corner and found ourselves facing five Thalmor warriors.

Madanach already had his sword drawn and turned toward me. "I knew this was a trap!" He raised his sword, but before anyone could do anything rash, one of the High Elves spoke up.

"Wait, good king, lower your sword before there is any unfortunate bloodshed. I assure you, this is no trap, and you and your followers are free to go." He stepped aside and pointed the way down the hall from which they had come. "We only have business with Fiona Pure-Spring here, and her companion."

"Business?" I asked. "With me?"

"Yes, I bring word from Justiciar Ondolemar. He would reward you for your service. Now, if you will come with us."

"But I have done you no service, and I need no reward. I plan to accompany my new friends out of this city. And you can tell Ondolemar that his vile notions of elven superiority sicken me."

"But, don't you see, Fiona – or should I say, Deirdre Morningsong? – you will come with us whether you want to or no. Seize her!" he commanded, drawing his own axe.

The justiciars made for me, but Madanach stepped in front of them, with Lydia right beside him. Kaie and the rest of the Forsworn rushed forward, surrounding the elves. "You'll not be taking her anywhere, elf," Madanach said. "If there's anyone I hate more than the Nords, it's the bleeding Thalmor."

The elves lowered their weapons, then handed them over to the Forsworn fighters. "An alliance between the Forsworn and the Dragonborn? Now that is something we didn't foresee."

Madanach turned to me. "Dragonborn, eh? We had heard inklings of events in the east, but I never thought the Nords' Dovahkiin would be a Breton." He eyed me doubtfully for a moment longer.
"Well, Dragonborn?" he said at last. "Should we cut them down where they stand, or would you have me spare them?"

I looked at the five elves, now as defenseless as that Nord woman had been yesterday. "Had we met in open battle, I would gladly have slain you," I said. "But I will not lower myself to your level by slaughtering the defenseless. Bind them!"

"See?" Lydia said to Kaie. "I told you she is a peace-maker."

"But we have nothing to bind them with," Kaie objected. "Does anyone have a length of rope?"

Everyone looked at one another for a moment, then Lydia groaned. "All right, all right," she said, unslinging her knapsack and digging through it. "Waste of good rope, I say, just to save the lives of a few damned elves." She handed the rope to Kaie, then took me aside.

"My thane," she whispered, "are you sure this is a good idea? These elves know who you are. They'll be back to their superiors and on our trail as soon as they're freed."

"It cannot be helped," I said. "If I allow them to be slaughtered on my behalf when they are so outnumbered and defenseless, then I am no better than they are, no better than the Imperials who would have beheaded me for nothing." And no better than Ulfric, I couldn't help thinking.

"As you will," she said, looking glumly at the shortened length of rope the Forsworn handed back to her.

When we emerged from the tunnels, we found ourselves on a balcony high above the mining district. It was early morning, with no one about.

"It's the changing of the guard," Kaie said. "The night watch will be weary, and the morning watch groggy from their beds. There should be few others about."

"We will cut a bloody swath through them all," said Madanach, "and show these Nords their suffering has just begun!"

"Madanach," I said, "you want peace at the end of your rebellion, am I right?"

"And we will have peace, once we drive these Nords and Imperials and Thalmor from our lands."

"Not if you continue on this path. Butchery cannot bring peace. Darkness cannot drive out darkness. For every Nord you mindlessly slaughter today, you create ten rebels to undermine your future rule. You will never have peace."

"What would you have us do?" Madanach asked.

"Follow me out of the city. I will do my best to disable the guards and get them out of the way. Tell your men to attack only those who confront them directly. It will be your fastest way out of the city, and you will lose fewer of your fighters."

"Very well, we'll try it your way. But if it starts to go bad, I won't hold my people back." He leapt down the stairs, the rest of us in pursuit.

We were halfway across the mining district when we heard the first shout. An arrow landed on the cobbles right in front of Madanach.

"There!" Lydia shouted, drawing her bow and pointing to a guard on the steps leading to the closed
Temple of Talos.

"Now, watch this!" I said to Madanach. I loosed a calming spell at the guard, but he was far above us, and able to step out of the way of the glowing ball of light. Lydia, always alert, was ready with an arrow. Her shot hit the guard in the knee. She was such an excellent shot, I knew this was no mistake.

"Onward!" I shouted and we continued across the river and up the steps toward the city gates. We encountered two or three more guards, but these were close by and I was able to calm them all. Madanach's Forsworn were as good as his word, passing by as the Nord guards could only watch, dumbfounded. "Keep a sharp eye out," he shouted to those in back. "We don't want them taking us from behind when those spells wear off."

We rounded the corner of the Silver-Blood Inn and saw a group of a dozen guards at the gate, no doubt directed there after the first guard's shout. I paused and Madanach stopped next to me. I was almost out of magicka, nor did I have an Illusion spell strong enough for a dozen guards.

"Well, what now?" Madanach asked. "I think it's time we fight."

"Wait," I said and stepped forward. My Dismaying shout scattered eight of the guards. The four who remained saw that they were outnumbered and ran after their comrades. The echoes were just dying out when I heard exclamations of surprise all around. Some came from my Forsworn companions, but now I saw that we had other onlookers, shopkeepers and the workers at the Silver-Blood Inn, who had come out to see what the noise was about.

I had revealed myself as the Dragonborn to the citizens of Markarth. The Thalmor would soon be on our trail. And nearly as bad, it wouldn't be long before the story of the Dragonborn helping the Forsworn escape Cidhna Mine spread across the land. Skyrim's people already blamed me for my slow progress with the dragons. What would they think of this? But it couldn't be helped.

Now that the gate was clear, the Forsworn pressed forward and heaved it open. We all rushed through at once, the two guards outside staring as a dozen savage Forsworn ran past. One made to raise his bow after the Forsworn were out of sword range, but I managed to calm him with my remaining magicka.

While the Forsworn ran down the road, leaping and hooting for their new freedom, Lydia and I went to the nearby stables for our horses. They were saddled, loaded, and ready to ride. We mounted and dashed off after the Reachmen.

As we rounded a corner and the road turned eastward, the newly risen sun shone underneath the wintry cloud cover. Somewhere in that direction, it was lighting up the slopes of the Throat of the World, where I must travel next. My way forward was clear, yet the sun was blinding. I lowered my head against the glare and hoped our horses would find their way.
Once more I was riding on the back of a great dragon. A dream, I told myself. This has to be a dream. The dragon was Alduin, I was sure. We sailed over ice-clad peaks, the World Eater's vast wings stretched out on either side of me, beating now and then, giving a rolling motion to our flight. Once, he turned his head to the side – to look back at me, I thought. If a dragon could grin, he was grinning.

I did not recognize the land below us. The peaks over which we flew could have been anywhere in Skyrim. On my right, I thought I saw the valleys of the Rift. On my left, a great, lone mountain stood out, smoke billowing from the gaping crater in its side. Then Alduin began to descend, and I saw a large Nordic ruin below us, cradled in steep mountains. How the Nords had managed to build it up here, I couldn’t imagine. We circled the ruin once. It was a network of blocky walls and arches climbing the cliffs, and everywhere columns with those stylized dragon heads at the top.

We landed on a wide terrace. Somehow I knew to climb down from the dragon's back. But what would we do now? Fight? I backed away from him, and he turned his great body around to face me. We were just feet apart. Alduin's orange eyes narrowed to slits as he regarded me.

"Dovahkiin, at last we meet," he said in his gravelly, guttural voice. He even tipped his head slightly.

"This is not real," I said. "It is only a dream."

"Only a dream? You have much to learn of our Mundus, little child. There are many planes of existence and this place you call Nirn is but one of them. This dreaming is as real as what you call waking."

"And what if I slay you in this dream?" I asked, readying a firebolt spell.

"That you could not, in any case, but here in this dream, as you call it, we can only talk, we cannot fight."

I relaxed and let the fire die down. "Very well, what would you say to me, since I have nothing to say to you?"

"Only this: When I saw you at Helgen, I recognized something in you, though I did not know what it was. Perhaps that was my mistake, or perhaps you had not yet been revealed as Dragonborn. When you resisted my fire breath, I should have known. Then I made a second mistake when I underestimated you and sent Sahloknir against you, newly reborn as he was. And I have sent more of my dragon kin to fight you, yet you grow stronger."

"So that I may one day defeat you," I said. "And that day cannot come soon enough. You will not destroy the world while I live."
He gave a low, rumbling chuckle. "Ah, you truly have the soul of a dragon, you boast so well," he said. "But no one can defeat Alduin. The ancient Tongues could not defeat me, so they resorted to a trick. Now I am here and they are in Sovngarde. And neither can you defeat me."

"Those Tongues were not Dragonborn, were they?" I asked. "But it is my fate to meet you in battle, if only you will show yourself to me in the waking world."

"Yes, perhaps one day we will meet in battle. But I wonder, why must we fight? We are kindred after all, you and I. When I bring about the turning of the world, I can bring you with me. You have proven yourself worthy. You can be part of the new world’s creation, perhaps a queen of its new peoples."

"And what will happen to the peoples of this world?" I asked.

"Ah, I see you have this thing humans call, compassion. But fear not. For them, the world will merely end, and they will know nothing more."

"Yet I like this world as it is, with all its flaws."

"And so you would seek to stop change. As well, try to stop the blowing of the wind or the rising of the moons." He looked around at the temple in which we stood, at the weathered stone columns and fading carvings. "You would call this place ancient, crumbling and decrepit as it is. Yet the years from its building until now are just a blink of an eye compared to the ages of Mundus."

He paused then, surveying the ruin, as if remembering all that had happened in this place over the eons. Then he turned back to me.

"Our Mundus is nothing but change, Dovahkiin, nothing but a great wheel constantly spinning. Birth and death, summer and winter, creation and destruction, it is all a cycle. You would call me evil for turning the wheel. I call you evil for seeking to stop it."

"Enough philosophy. Akatosh, your father, sent me here to stop you, and I will play my role."

He smiled. "Akatosh, yes. It is interesting that you call the Master of Time my father."

"Forget Akatosh then. I would avenge two little children whom you orphaned. You somehow made me watch that, and I will not rest until you are gone from this world." I could feel my anger rising, and took a deep breath to control it.

"Ah, yes, you were there! That farmer died a good death. I look forward to finding his soul in Sovngarde." He swiped his long tail back and forth, relishing the memory. "But you were more than a witness. You were in me! And I felt your joy in their deaths, you urged me on!"

"No, it is not true, that was not me!" I began pacing back and forth before the World Eater, fists clenched at my sides.

"Yes, I remember now. I felt your bloodlust burning in me. You would avenge the murder of your parents, and these Nords were as good as any. And you used me as your instrument. Had you not been inside me, those Nords would yet live."

This could not be. I could not let this foul beast spout such lies. Any thought of controlling my anger was forgotten. "Krii-Lun-Aus!" I shouted at him.

He only laughed, a deep, guttural laugh. "Yes, you would have me suffer and die, as you wanted those Nords to do, as you want every Nord to do. We are more alike than I first thought,
Dovahkiin. You truly have the soul of a dragon, and a hunger to swallow the world!" He slapped his tail on the stone paving for emphasis.

"I will kill you, if it's the last thing I do!" I screamed at him. I was out of my head now, with anger and with fear – fear that he was right.

"Seek instead to kill your own dragon soul, for with every soul you absorb, that part of you which is dovah becomes stronger. Soon it will overwhelm you, and there will be nothing left of the one you call Deirdre Morningsong. Then you will wreak your revenge across Skyrim."

I stared at him dumbly then. Could this be the danger that Master Arngeir had warned me of? That I would be overwhelmed if my power increased too rapidly? Yet I had striven to master my dragon soul, to balance it with meditation and practice. I had shouted only for true needs, until now. I had mastered my dragon soul when tested by the Greybeards.

But I had shouted at Nerien. Had that been for a true need? And what about that raper I had killed? Who was that who drew the blade across his throat without a second thought? Who was it who exulted in his suffering and death?

Alduin could see the indecision on my face. "So you know it's true! But you have taught me compassion. I will save the world some misery before I end it for good – by putting an end to you now."

His massive head thrust toward me, and his jaws opened wide, revealing rows of sharp fangs.

"No, wait, you said..."

"It is time to rise, my thane," I heard Lydia say. She sounded far off. "It will be light within the hour, and we must be away before then."

I opened my eyes to see her leaning over me, shaking my shoulder. "You must have been dreaming," she said.

I tried to shake the dream from my mind. "Yes, a dream," I said. "That's all it was, just a dream." I almost had myself convinced.

"I risked a fire," she pointed out. "Would you like some tea?"

I nodded gratefully and felt the warmth spread through my hands as she handed me the mug, then through my body as I drank it down. The temperature had dropped in the night, and yesterday's cloud cover was gone. Now a bitter wind blew out of the north, guttering the little fire and rustling through the grasses and heather. The ground, though frozen, was bare of snow, the winds were so constant on this upland heath. We were camped behind a little outcrop that blocked the worst of the wind, as well as the view of our camp from the road.

We had arrived here in the afternoon of the day before, after fleeing Markarth with the Forsworn. A short distance north of the city, Madanach had called a halt. "Here we must part," he said. "We will take to the hills and travel by rocky ways where your horses cannot follow." He pointed up a steep slope, and I knew he was right. "Have no fear of traveling in the Reach," he continued. "I will send word to all the Forsworn that you and your companion are friends of our rebellion. And whoever
you are – Fiona Pure-Spring, Deirdre Morningsong, the Dragonborn – you are always welcome at Druadach Redoubt. Meanwhile, I will consider everything you said about the hagravens."

We watched them scramble up the slope, then considered what to do next. Our horses would leave no hoofprints on these cobbled roads. Our best hope was that any pursuers would follow the Forsworn into the rugged Druadach Mountains. And if the Thalmor looked for us, we guessed it would be on the direct road east, for they would expect us to make straight for the safety of Stormcloak territory. So we continued on the north road as it passed Karthwasten then bent east, reaching this hidden spot north of Rorikstead in mid-afternoon. From here, we would continue eastward, traveling cross-country over the Whiterun Plain, hoping to stay out of sight in its dales and hollows.

The day's journey had been filled with awkwardness. I found it difficult to chat in our usual bantering way, though Lydia tried to keep up her end. Something of my embarrassment about the Temple of Dibella remained. While she didn't seem to have any opinion about the temple, I couldn't help feeling she would judge me harshly if she knew more about the place. And there was still the mystery of what had delayed her return to the temple.

Finally she asked, "Is everything all right, my thane? You seem awfully quiet."

I didn't know what to say. I certainly didn't want to bring up the temple again. So I reached for something that would sound plausible. "In the mine ... there was a gang of men ... beasts, really. They tried to..." Why couldn't I say the word? It was as if saying it would make what nearly happened more real. "They tried to have their way with me," I finished. I wondered what had happened to that boasting, fearless girl who had faced down those louts. Now I felt that somewhere deep-down, I was still just the frightened, small child watching her house burn to the ground with her parents in it. It wasn't this child who had survived three years on her own, escaped Helgen, and now fought dragons. Did I owe all of my bravery to my dragon soul? Or was there another part of me, the grown-up Deirdre who faced challenges with courage? Where did my dragon soul end and the real me begin? How many Deirdre Morningsongs were there?

Lydia interrupted my thoughts, smashing the pommel of her saddle with her gloved fist. "By the gods, if they touched you, I'll..."

"No, no, my friend," I said, "I stopped them before they could lay a hand on me. And Madanach left the worst one behind in Cidhna Mine."

"Still, had I only been there, they would have tasted my axe!" She glowered for a moment longer, then looked at me. "Really, my thane, you should have waited at the temple for me."

"And you should have arrived within the hour, as promised," I reminded her. "I still don't understand what kept you. And when I saw you on the steps of the inn, you had changed your clothes, and your hair looked damp."

She looked down at a rock outcrop we happened to be passing as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. "I was taking a bath," she said at last.

"A bath."

"Yes. I thought I had the time. But you know how it is when the water is nice and hot and you don't want to get out. The time got away from me is all. And I was about to come get you when I heard the commotion outside. I don't blame you being cross, but you must believe me, I can hardly forgive myself for my lack of diligence."
This was unlike Lydia, always so conscientious in her duties. Still, she did have her girlish side, as I had discovered in these weeks of traveling with her. I was the one who had lived in the forest for three years, growing used to bathing even less often than soldiers. I could not feel angry with her. We rode on in silence.

Now, breaking camp before dawn, I had more to trouble me. If what Alduin said was true, if my dragon soul was becoming stronger, maybe Deirdre was becoming weaker. But I couldn't let my dragon soul overwhelm me, even if it was the only way to save the world. I was glad we were heading back to High Hrothgar. Master Arngeir would have advice for me, I was sure. At the least, Master Borri could teach me the deep meanings of the remaining words of power so I would avoid absorbing more dragon souls.

We descended from our camp and struck the road once more. A short while later we reined up at the junction with the road coming north from Rorikstead. Below us, the east fork of the Karth River plunged through its gorge, just growing visible in the light of dawn. We had only to cross it, then follow another tributary eastward onto the Whiterun Plain. "Tonight, we'll sleep in our own beds, in my house," I said. "Maybe we'll even raise a pint in the Bannered Mare."

"I look forward to it, my thane," Lydia said, smiling. Then her face darkened, and I knew she was remembering the less-than-cordial reception we had received on our last visit.

We were about to leave the junction and look for a ford across the stream when we heard the sound of hooves clattering on the road north of us. Before we could find a hiding place, a single rider came into view, riding hard up the steep slope. He slowed when he saw us, and I recognized a courier's livery.

"What's the hurry, friend?" Lydia asked. The rider stopped. His horse glistened with sweat and looked nearly done in.

"Dragons!" he exclaimed. "Near Solitude, and moving toward the city, burning and killing as they go. Jarl Elisif sends for aid to Markarth."

"Dragons, you say?" I asked. "How many?"

"Two, and they've already defeated a small war-band the jarl sent against them. She fears that even the Imperial garrison won't be able to hold them at bay." He looked at Lydia, still in her battle gear. "She says any able fighter who comes to the aid of Solitude will be well rewarded. Now I must be on my way." With that he turned onto the road west toward Markarth.

Lydia looked wistfully to the east. "I suppose we won't see Whiterun this day," she said. "Yet Solitude is far, my thane, at least a day's ride. The dragons may not even be there when we arrive. And do I need to remind you the Imperial Legion is headquartered there? General Tullius will be there, and many Thalmor, no doubt."

Everything she said was true. It was risky. "But Lydia," I said. "Two dragons! One of them could be Alduin. It is a chance I cannot pass up, no matter the risk."

With a sigh, she turned her horse northward, and I followed.

The truth was, I was equally loath to visit Solitude, and for an additional reason: the only route to the capital city led through Dragon Bridge. Even the thought of the place got my heart beating faster and I found myself clenching my teeth. Who knew? Maybe I would see Osmer's father, or Osmer himself, or one of the others I suspected of killing my parents.
And what then? Would I confront them? Strike them down? Faced with my newfound powers, they would tremble before me. None of them could stand against me – not even the whole town. It was but a dozen houses, an inn, and the headquarters of the Penitus Oculatus, who would surely have responded to Jarl Elisif's call for aid. The village guard might be preoccupied as well. This seemed the perfect opportunity to exact revenge on my parents' killers.

I thought of my return to Skyrim. That was three, nearly four, months ago now. I had been primed for my revenge then. What had happened to that anger I nursed all those years in Cyrodiil? Helgen happened. I had seen so much death that day that it unnerved me, sickened me against killing. Then Gerdur pled compassion, luring me with soft words of empathy and understanding. But what was compassion? It was for the puny, the weak, for mere ... mortals, I was going to say. And why shouldn't I? I was the Dragonborn! Nothing would come between the Dovahkiin and her revenge!

Then I thought of Lydia. Would she aid me in wreaking vengeance on Dragon Bridge? Dutiful housecarl though she was, I thought not. But would she try to stop me? And what if she did? Wasn't she a Nord as well? Hadn't I returned to Skyrim proclaiming death to all Nords?

I gasped and clutched at the pommel of my saddle. I had nearly fallen off at a steep bend in the road, so lost was I in my dark thoughts.

Lydia, riding ahead, turned her horse to look back at me. "Are you well, my thane?" she asked. "You are as pale as a wight!"

"Lydia, we cannot pass through Dragon Bridge," I said. My breath was coming fast and I tried to slow it, to breathe deeply. The cold air hurt my chest as it went in.

"Why? What is it?" she asked.

"My dragon soul – it grows stronger the closer we get to my home town. It feeds off my anger. I do not trust myself to come near the place."

"Yet we cannot avoid it if we hope to reach Solitude this day," Lydia replied. "If we go around by those mountain paths to the west, it will add a day or more. And we cannot ford the Karth River west of the town – it is too wide, and filled with ice at this time of year. No, if you hope to come to Solitude today, we must pass through Dragon Bridge."

"Then bind me," I said.

"What?" She looked shocked.

"I will pose as your prisoner," I said. "Bind my hands behind my back, so I can do no magic. Blindfold me so I will see no one who might raise my anger."

"Must I gag you as well, so you cannot shout?" she asked, her voice bitter.

"That might be best," I said. "If I heard a voice I recognized, I don't know that I could restrain myself from shouting blindly."

Her face darkened. "As you will, my thane, though I disgrace myself to do it. No housecarl should ever do such a thing!" She jogged her horse ahead, as if it pained her even to look at me.

The road led north along the east fork of the Karth River, crossing to its east bank at Robber's Gorge. We saw that the jarl of Hjaalmarch had been busy keeping the roads safe – the severed heads of bandits adorned the walls of their own hideout, impaled on spikes. I shuddered, but Lydia seemed pleased. "It will be many a year before another group of bandits thinks of opening shop
here," she said.

Around mid-day, the scenery began to look familiar. Pines and cedars appeared in the distance ahead. They were a welcome sight, but also a sign that we were drawing near Dragon Bridge. The day remained clear and the snow glinted off the surrounding peaks in the bright sunshine. A hawk soared overhead, using the sharp daylight to hunt for prey. It seemed a shame to go blindfolded on such a lovely winter's day – Talos knew we saw the sun seldom enough in Skyrim in the darkest part of the year.

But there was no help for it. I reined up and dismounted. "Let us stop here," I said. "There could be woodcutters I might recognize in those woods ahead."

Our horses needed a rest after six hours of hard riding, and so did we. We ate a cold noonday meal in strained silence while our horses ate their fill of the grasses all around.

Finally, we could delay no longer. "It is time, Lydia," I said. "You must bind me."

Lydia groaned, but got up and rummaged through her saddlebags, withdrawing two kerchiefs and a cord.

"Close your eyes," she said, walking up to me. It felt strange to submit willingly to being bound, but I did as she said. Her hands were gentle as she brushed a strand of hair from my face before putting the blindfold on me. "Turn around," she said, then tied the blindfold in place. "Is that too tight?" I shook my head.

"Before I gag you, what story shall I tell about your capture, should anyone ask?"

"Tell them you're taking me to the Imperial garrison at Castle Dour in Solitude," I said. "I'm a spy you're taking to General Tullius."

"Very well. Now open your mouth." In went the kerchief. "Is that too tight?" I shook my head again.

Then she led me back to my horse, guiding my hands to the saddle and my boot into the stirrup. When I was seated, she said, "Hands behind your back, my thane." I did as she requested and felt the cord loop twice around my wrists. She tied the binds too loosely, then asked for a third time, "Is that too tight?"

I knew I would wriggle free of her loose knot, if it came to it. I shook my head vigorously. "Ooo oof!" I exclaimed, trying to say, "Too loose!"

"You want it tighter?" I nodded and felt the cords tighten around my wrists as she re-knotted them.

"Is that all right?" she asked, and I nodded. "Is there anything else I can do for you before we start?" I had never had such an attentive captor.

Finally we were moving northward again, with Lydia leading my horse by the reins. Perforce, we traveled more slowly now, as it was difficult to keep my balance with hands tied behind my back.

It is often said that the four other senses become sharper in those who cannot see, and I now found this to be true – or perhaps I just paid them more attention. The clip-clop of the horses' hooves seemed louder. My sense of smell told me we had arrived in the pine forest. Even in winter the sap was running enough to give a hint of its tangy aroma. There weren't many bird sounds at this time of year, but I heard the screech of a jay and the rapid tapping of a woodpecker. Then the sound of running water grew louder and passed beneath us. We had crossed back over the east fork of the
Karth and were now on the long peninsula between the mighty river's two branches.

Some while later, I heard Lydia gasp. That and the sound of a larger river told me that we had come to the bridge for which my home town was named. Lydia must have spotted the two large-as-life stone dragon heads that greeted travelers in both directions on the bridge.

Then we had crossed the span and I realized we were finally back at the scene of my life's greatest tragedy, where my long journey had begun. Suddenly, this idea of being blindfolded didn't seem such a good one. Why shouldn't I look again on the place where my parents had been murdered? I tried to breathe deeply and put such thoughts aside, but the gag made it difficult to get a good breath. Then I thought, what if someone recognized me, defenseless as I was? But that didn't seem likely, between my blindfold, dyed hair, and gag. I almost wished I hadn't re-applied the paste to my tattoo in camp the day before.

A guard hailed us. "Hold there! Where are you taking this prisoner, and why?" I thought I recognized his voice. No, it couldn't be, could it? Maybe I should have had Lydia stop my ears as well.

"Castle Dour," Lydia said. "And she's a deserter from the Imperial Army at Fort Sungard. I'm taking her straight to General Tullius."

"Yet you wear no uniform," he challenged.

"My captain's idea, that," Lydia replied. "The better to avoid Stormcloak ambush, it being just the two of us. I was the only fighter he would spare, with the Stormcloaks so nearby at Falkreath."

"All right," said the guard. "Must be a mouthy one, eh?"

"Never knows when to keep her mouth shut," Lydia agreed. "Thought she could still boss me, since she used to outrank me. I finally had enough of it."

"But, what's wrong with her?"

"What?" Lydia said in surprise. Then there was silence for a moment. No doubt they were watching me as I sat on my horse, trembling. I tried not to cry, but the tears still flowed into my blindfold and down my cheeks. I mumbled incoherently through my gag.

"She gets these shaking fits occasionally," I heard Lydia say. "It will pass. We'd best keep moving, but first, tell me what you know of these dragon rumors."

"They are no rumors," said the guard. "I hoped never to see even one of the beasts, but then two passed over town early yesterday, flying wingtip to wingtip, just like pelicans over the bay. And huge! It's hard to see how they stay in the air. Luckily for us they passed us over, but worse luck for Solitude, they headed that way. Then last night the Penitus and the rest of the guard were called out. Worst luck of all for me! My brother is off killing dragons and I'm stuck here on guard duty. Too green, they said I was, though I'm eighteen and a man grown."

"Thank you for the news," Lydia said and I felt my horse move forward.

"They've probably got those dragons sorted by now," the guard called after us, "but I'd take care approaching the city if I were you."

We rode for a time in silence, and I began to calm down. Then my horse stopped and Lydia was beside me. "Are you well, my thane? May I unbind you now?"
I nodded and soon felt the cords about my wrists go slack. I shook the feeling back into my hands, then took the gag from my mouth and the wet kerchief from my eyes. A familiar scene surrounded us – the forests of home. On our right the great Karth River widened as it approached the Bay of Solitude. On our left the mountain slope rose steeply to the high ridge that formed most of Haafingar Hold. Solitude sat on the east end of that ridge, jutting out on a great arch of rock over the bay. It was now but a two-hour ride distant.

Lydia stood beside my horse, her hand on my knee. "My thane, Deirdre, what's wrong? What happened to you back there?"

I looked at the trees for a long moment, trying to compose myself. "The guard," I said finally. "He... his voice sounded just like Osmer's."

"Well, what did Osmer look like?"

"He had red hair, very like Ralof's."

Lydia's eyes widened. "That one had red hair too."

"And he said he was eighteen. It had to be Osmer." I made to turn my horse back toward Dragon Bridge, but the reins dangled from the front of the bridle, out of my reach.

Now Lydia grabbed them and held my horse still. "Deirdre, no! You cannot go back there!"

I looked at her and I knew she would not let me return to the village. For one mad moment I thought of shouting her away from me, as I had done to Osmer long ago. Then I would return and find him, and... But I looked at her and knew I couldn't do it. And what would I do once I returned? The truth was I didn't know, I felt such a bundle of sadness, frustration, and impotent rage. I thought I had left all my tears back in Dragon Bridge, but now I sobbed once more.

"My thane," said Lydia, consoling me with a hand on my arm, "the people of Solitude are depending on you. And remember Huldi and Harry – they depend on you as well. Would you have them go unavenged? Would you see more children orphaned? You cannot let yourself be waylaid by the past, you have work to do now, and you must gather all your strength for it. You cannot fight dragons in such a state."

I took a deep breath and looked around at the forest, as if the trees themselves could help me. I knew she was right. I thought not just of Huldi and Harry then, but of all the refugees we had met in our travels – orphans, widows and widowers, parents made childless by the dragons, hundreds whose lives and homes had been destroyed. Mine was not the only tale of woe in Skyrim, and not even the worst one at that. How could I be so selfish?

Then I remembered Alduin foretelling the vengeance I would wreak on Skyrim. And to think, I had been about to fulfill his prophecy! But no, I told myself, my dragon soul would not control me. Though I needed its power for what was ahead, I would master it.

I looked back at Lydia, who still gazed at me, her eyes full of concern. "You are right, as always," I said. "We must go on to Solitude and face whatever we find there."

"If I give you back the reins, do you promise not to go back to Dragon Bridge?" she asked.

I nodded. "I'm feeling better, now," I said, "but that was a close thing."

"Wait, I have something for you," she said, going over to her saddlebags and withdrawing a flask. "I got this at the Silver-Blood Inn. It's a tonic made from the juniper berries that grow around there,
only slightly fermented."

I took it and drank. It was bitter, but bracing. My head cleared and I felt revived, as if I had just awakened from some dark dream.

"Thank you, Lydia," I said. "I feel I can go on now. And thank Talos I had you to guide me."

"That's what a housecarl is for," she said, grinning. But then she grew more serious, taking me by the hand. "My thane," she said, holding my eye with great solemnity. "I promise, when this is over, we will return to Dragon Bridge, and you will have justice."

Then she mounted her own horse and we headed toward Solitude, uncertain of what we would find there. Strangely, I was content for once to let come what may, Alduin or no Alduin, one dragon, two dragons or none. For now I was certain that Alduin and I would meet – today, tomorrow, or who knew when. He would play his role and I would play mine, and we would see which way the wheel of Mundus turned.
We approached Solitude with the sun disappearing behind the western mountains, its last rays catching a towering column of smoke rising through the trees ahead, turning it blood-red.

Lydia looked over at me, as if appraising my fitness for what was to come. "It looks bad, my thane."

She needn't have worried. A strange calm had settled over me after my fit at Dragon Bridge. I had practiced my breathing as we rode, and now I felt even more composed, ready to face whatever lay ahead. Perhaps it was the feeling that my fate was at hand, or maybe the effects of that tonic Lydia had given me, but I also felt a bit giddy.

"However bad it is, we will meet it," I said. Then I winked at her. "Come, Lydia, this is our chance for glory! Victory or Sovngarde await!" I couldn't help grinning.

"Do not mock me, my thane," she said, still serious.

"I wouldn't dream of it! But I am expected to rally my followers, am I not? Let us meet our doom together, glad in our hearts for this chance to show our valor."

She shook her head at me. "Bravery is one thing, my thane, laughing at fate is another." She spurred her horse onward and I followed, only somewhat chastened.

Soon we came to the meeting of roads near the city. The spot was familiar to me from the many trips I had taken here with my father. One road ran straight up to the city gate. The other sloped down to the right, toward the docks of Solitude Harbor. Just below the junction, Katla's Farm was on fire – or what was left of it. The barn, stables, and stable-master's house were down to their last embers, the great blades of the barn's windmill smoldering to one side. I remembered my father chatting with the stable-master as we watered our horses there. Only the farmhouse remained untouched.

A crowd stood around at the junction – a couple of guards, a one-eyed man holding a lumberman's axe, farm workers, children, and Katla herself. The stable-master was trying to calm two frightened horses. One of the children held a white cat, stroking it and burying her face in its fur.

One of the guards approached us. "If you're headed for Solitude, I would turn back. The dragons are up there now."

So we were not too late! We would face the dragons this day. "Was anyone hurt here?" I asked.

"No, thank the Eight, but they only managed to save the two horses. Katla's Farm was the main stable for the city. I don't think I'll ever get the screams of the dying horses out of my head."

"How long since the dragons made for the city?" Lydia asked.
"About half an hour. But wait, you don't mean to go up there? Look, everyone is headed the other way."

It was true. People were fleeing the city in a steady stream, women, children, and the elderly mostly, but also a few well-to-do men – merchants, no doubt, who wouldn't know which end of a sword to hold or how to notch an arrow. Some carried knapsacks and bags, others had just the clothes on their backs. All looked terrified and kept glancing over their shoulders. As well they might. I doubted the wisdom of fleeing into the open, but then again, even the sturdiest house was no defense against a dragon.

The other guard approached us as we watched the procession. He looked at us briefly, then addressed his comrade. "Sven, if you can take care of things here, I will return to the garrison and see if they need help." The first guard agreed, and the other turned toward the city.

We dismounted and led our horses over to Katla and her family. The farm's horses calmed a bit when ours came near. Ours had seen much in their travels, including dragons and fire. Perhaps some of their even temper rubbed off.

"Ma'am," I said to Katla, hoping she wouldn't recognize me, "I realize this is a terrible time to ask, but we must leave our horses while we go into the city. Will you look after them and our baggage while we're gone?"

She kept staring at her destroyed farm and didn't seem to hear us. The one-eyed lumberman standing nearby spoke up. "The city? Why would you go to the city?"

"The dragons – we mean to stop them."

Katla looked at me then. "You must be mad, but if you do as you say, you can board your horses with me for as long as you like, though I haven't a proper place to put them. And if you don't return, as is more likely, I will have two more horses to re-stock our stable."

"Very well," I said. "We have provisions and camping gear in our baggage – feel free to help yourselves. But see that everything else is safe, and most especially a magical staff you will find there." I regretted leaving the Staff of Magnus with a stranger, but it would be little good against the dragons and would only encumber me needlessly.

With arrangements for our horses and supplies completed, we prepared ourselves for the battle ahead. Lydia took her large shield, her axe, and her bow and best arrows. I selected a variety of potions and scrolls, and took my sword of frost and my own bow and arrows. I gave Lydia a selection of potions as well, and we both applied frost and fire poisons to our arrows.

"Come. Let's see about these dragons," I said, still trying to sound bold, though my former giddiness was wearing off.

"I can't wait, my thane," she replied. "Fighting them one at a time was becoming such a bore."

The guard shook his head as we moved up the road. "It's your funeral pyre," he called out. Many of those fleeing gave us surprised looks as we passed them heading the wrong way.

It was dark now, with full moons lighting the city's stone walls. The buildings before the walls were aflame, the city gates knocked down in pieces. From the direction of Castle Dour, the Imperial fortress that stood above the heart of the city, we could hear the roar of the dragons. I wondered how the Imperial garrison was faring against them. They probably just needed a bit of help, I thought. All the better, because then I could avoid shouting and revealing my identity.
We passed through the gateway expecting the worst, but the shops and the Winking Skeever inn near the entrance were still untouched. A few foolish or brave onlookers stood gawking up at the castle. One vast winged shape perched on a castle tower, peering down at the bailey, which was hidden from our view. With its back turned to us, I could not tell if this was Alduin. The dragon just sat there, and I was surprised to see no arrows or other missiles flying toward it. It almost seemed as if it were waiting for something, but what?

I approached a nearby guard who seemed as helpless as the rest of the city dwellers. "They attacked the west gate this evening," he told me. "Then they burned a couple of houses farther into the city, but that was all. Many of our citizens fled, but many more are holed up in the Temple of the Divines. Since then the dragons have been perched up there on Castle Dour. That one you see there on the Emperor’s Tower – that's the fire-breather. The other one breathes frost."

The dragons we had met so far had scorched and killed with reckless abandon, following no pattern or plan. Yet these two were working together and seemed to want something more than simple devastation. What could they be doing? Then I remembered the dragons that had surprised us as we emerged from caves and barrows. Did Alduin have some way of tracking us? Was he luring us into a trap even now?

We climbed the ramp leading up to the castle and found the portcullis open and unmanned. "Where are the guards?" Lydia asked.

I had no idea either. We continued through the tunnel beneath the castle's curtain wall and looked into the bailey. But for two Imperial soldiers lying inert in the middle of the yard, it was deserted as well.

"This is very strange," I said. "Where are all of Tullius' troops? And the Penitus Oculatus? Why aren't they out here saving the city?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Lydia said. "It feels like a trap. You don't suppose Delphine was right about the Thalmor and the dragons working together, do you?"

In the weeks since we had last seen her, I had almost forgotten about Delphine's outlandish notion. "I'll believe Alduin and the Thalmor are working together when I see an elf flying on a dragon's back," I said. "Now, how are we going to attack these beasts?"

"Whatever we do, we must stay together," she said. "We can't let them separate us and then attack us singly."

I had to agree with her. I didn't know if either of us was ready to take on a dragon single-handed, since we had worked as a team so far.

The castle was built as a long, irregular rectangle hard against the sheer cliffs to the north. Large garrison towers and smaller guard towers stood along the high curtain wall. I knew the one called the Emperor's Tower must be almost directly above the spot where we stood.

We edged farther into the bailey and had our first view of the Temple of the Divines at the far end of the rectangle. It rose up into the sky beyond a low interior wall that crossed the rectangle, separating the bailey from the temple courtyard. Unlike the squat towers on the castle wall, the temple had steeply pitched rooftlines that soared to the heavens.

But we noticed none of that at first glance. No, it was the dragon perched atop the temple that first caught our attention. It was so large, it made the massive cathedral look like a child's toy beneath its taloned feet. Yet I could tell this was not Alduin. It had long, sharp spikes down its back and on
it's tail. The white patches on its hide gleamed in the moonlight, marking it for a frost dragon. It paid us no attention as we edged farther into the bailey, past the door to the castle. I wanted to go in and drag a few of the soldiers out to help fight the dragons, but I was distracted by a deep voice speaking the dragon tongue. "Dovahkiin, hio lost meyz," it said.

I turned to see the dragon sitting atop the Emperor's Tower right above us. It was not as large as some of the other dragons we had encountered, yet it looked powerful. It was the color of rust, with short, curving horns and bony bumps down its back. I was almost disappointed it wasn't Alduin.

Now the dragon spoke in the Common Tongue. "I am Nahagliiv, Dovahkiin. We knew you would come to save the city. We will show the world what you are – nothing but a mere mortal. Now, you will die, and your sword sister as well."

"I told you it was a trap," Lydia said.

"Then let us turn the trap on them," I said, and she grinned. I turned to Nahagliiv. "Who sent you here, foul wyrm?" I challenged.

"Why, my master, Alduin, of course."

"What if I choose not to fight you, vile corpse-maker?" I asked. "I would rather face Alduin himself. Is he too fearful to face me on his own?"

"Ah! My master said you were boastful. But if you do not face us, the city will burn. Those that do not die in my fire will freeze in my brother's ice. And all of Skyrim will know you for a coward."

"You both shall die before I let you destroy the city and its people. We have fought dragons before; we have no fear of you. Come, Lydia."

Lydia gave a great battle shout and readied her bow. "You should never have come here, dragons!"

We made our way to the steps up to the castle's north wall, where we could take better aim at our foes.

"Good," said Nahagliiv. "Your arrogance will be your undoing, puny mortal. For we are no ordinary dov. I have served Alduin since time began. Now, we fight."

We reached the broad walkway atop the castle wall and began to move along it. Then the dragons launched themselves. Lydia fired shots at each of them before they were upon us. The poisoned arrows made silvery trails through the night as they arced up to meet the onrushing beasts. The Orcish arrowheads must have found their marks, because both dragons screamed as they strafed us, giving us a dual breath of frost and fire. The blast staggered me for a moment, but I concentrated on the words of their shouts and was neither burned nor frozen. Lydia got her shield up just in time. Our training in the ways of dragons was working, for now.

As they veered off to avoid the cliff rising behind us, I returned fire with a blast of ice aimed at Nahagliiv. Fight fire with ice and ice with fire, they had taught at Winterhold. I could see Nahagliiv's red glow diminish as the spell took its effect.

The dragons retreated to their previous perches. This seemed too easy, I thought, but we took advantage of their positioning nonetheless. Lydia took shelter behind an arched tower that shielded her from the frost dragon. From there she had a clear shot at Nahagliiv on the Emperor's Tower. I moved closer to Nahagliiv, then began blasting him with ice spells. I was too far for the second dragon's frost breath to reach me. It was strange that these two dragons were allowing us to fight
them one at a time. At this rate, maybe I would be able to avoid shouting and revealing my identity. But I knew the dragons' strategic lapse couldn't last.

As it turned out, they were just drawing us further into their trap. My magicka had run low and I was about to switch to my bow when we heard a great crash from the temple. The frost dragon had smashed a hole in the roof of the cathedral with its long tail. Terrified screams came from the townsfolk inside as they realized their sanctuary was about to turn into an icy death chamber.

"Dovahkiin," said the frost dragon, "come feel my frost breath or these mortals die."

I saw no choice. "Lydia," I shouted, "hold off the fire while I get the frost."

She edged toward me, launching arrows at Nahagliiv as she came. "But we must stay together, my thane. I am sworn to protect you!"

"It can't be helped. You can protect me by distracting Nahagliiv while I follow this wall to the temple. If I can get to that first tower, I should be all right."

"I've got your back, my thane," she replied.

I felt safe from Nahagliiv as I crossed directly under his perch. Once I got out on the castle wall between the Emperor's Tower and the temple, I would be exposed. Fortunately, Nahagliiv concentrated on Lydia as I stepped out into the open space atop the wall. From there, I could see over the parapet and down into Solitude. A crowd had gathered in the roadway between the castle and the Hall of the Dead. They were gazing up in wonder at the battle before them, cheering every time one of Lydia's frost-tipped arrows arced through the night and struck the dragon.

I reached the intermediate tower and passed through the curving, arched tunnel that ran beneath it. Beyond, another stretch of wall led to the temple with the dragon perched atop it. Below the battlements and the temple, the cliffs dropped away a thousand feet to Solitude Bay.

"Now, prepare to die alone, Dovahkiin," said the frost dragon. It leaned down and gave me a blast of ice, but I concentrated on the words – Fo-Krah-Diin – and was unharmed.

"Ha, ice-breather, your breath leaves me unscathed! It is mere words, and words cannot touch me. But you will feel my magic!" I blasted the dragon with a firebolt and heard a hissing noise as the fire hit its icy scales. Yet the dragon seemed unharmed. It launched itself from the temple and landed on the curtain wall behind me, cutting off my retreat. The dragons had succeeded in separating us. I drew my bow and fired an arrow at it.

I couldn't see what was happening at the other end of the castle, but I could hear Nahagliiv's roar as he breathed fire, and Lydia's defiant shout of "Is that all you've got?" She sounded brave, but I knew she only said that when she'd taken a solid hit.

Now all my attention was taken by the frost dragon as it advanced on me, snapping its jaws and swinging its vicious tail. I had no choice but to shout. "Fus-Ro-Dah!" I screamed, with all the force the Greybeards had taught me. The dragon staggered, but did not fall. I used the momentary pause in its attack to conjure my flame atronach. Its flame spells would be more powerful than my own. The demon hit the dragon with firebolts, while I launched more arrows. Still, the dragon hardly seemed to notice our assault.

And now the serpent was moving again, forcing me back toward the temple door, its snapping jaws reaching out for me. I knew I wasn't likely to survive even one strike, my mage's robes gave me such paltry protection. Where was Lydia? I could still hear the sounds of her battle with
Nahagliiv at the Emperor's Tower. Why wouldn't the Imperials come out and help defeat the dragons? This was their city too. Even the crowd below was becoming less helpful. Their cheers had faded into dismayed "ohs" and "ahs" as the battle progressed.

Casting my bow aside, I drew my sword of frost and slashed at the dragon's face just before it bit down. It shrunk back, then drew breath for another frost attack. This time the blast more than staggered me, and I felt cold going through my body. My concentration was weakening. "They are only words," I told myself.

The dragon saw my weakness and came at me again with its jaws. But by now my Thu'um had recovered and I staggered it in turn. "Krii-Lun-Aus!" I shouted, marking the dragon for death. It stumbled then, and the icy sheen of its scales grew dimmer. I heard a cheer from below. A crowd had gathered in the courtyard of the Bard's College. Why weren't they up here helping to defend their city? Was everyone so content to let us fight their battles, or to watch us die trying?

Instead of pondering these unknowns, I should have been following my shout with more spells. The dragon was collecting itself as well, while my atronach disappeared in a fiery spray. Then a scream from the Emperor's Tower froze my blood even more than the dragon's breath. Lydia was hurt.

"Your friend is dying," said the frost dragon, "and soon you will be dead as well."

I had felt fear before, but that was nothing compared to the panic I felt now. A madness took me and I advanced on the dragon, pelting it with spell after spell, single-casting instead of dual-casting when my magicka ran low, then smiting it with my sword when the magicka ran out entirely.

The attack worked – at first. Weakened as the dragon was, it could still snap its jaws. As soon as I had no more magic, it advanced on me despite my slashing sword. The cheers and shouts of the crowd turned to groans as I backed toward the temple door once more. Then the dragon spun and caught me with its tail. Praise to the Nine that it was just a glancing blow, because a solid strike would have sent me over the parapet, if it hadn't killed me outright. As it was, the razor-sharp spike cut my left shoulder, ripping a deep gash and throwing me backwards to lie in a heap against the temple door. Then the dragon hit me with another frost breath. It froze down into my bones and my whole body felt as if it were carrying a hundred-pound weight.

Gone were my thoughts of Lydia and defeating the dragons. I could only think of warmth, and I raised my hands for one more spell. My magicka had restored itself just enough that I could conjure my flame atronach, this time right in front of the dragon. Then I reached up for the door latch and tumbled inside the temple.

A priest stood inside, and he slammed the door behind me. "Gods, it sounds awful out there!" he exclaimed. "How did you survive?" Then he noticed my wounds. "Come, you're hurt. We'll take care of you."

"No, I need to get back out there," I said, trying to regain my wits. I had only a moment to wonder if the atronach could hold off the dragon while I healed myself. I took two potions from my robes, one of health and the other of magicka, and began drinking them in long draughts. With my magicka restored, I cast the close wounds spell on myself and felt the gash in my shoulder knit together.

Then I turned to the priest. "No one else is willing to fight the dragons, not the city guard, not the Imperials, not the townspeople. If I don't stop them they'll kill you, they'll kill me, they'll kill ... everyone."
"What can I do then, my lady? How can I be of help? I'm no fighter."

"You can give me your blessing. You're a priest of all the divines, correct?"

"I am, my lady."

"Then give me the Blessing of Talos."

He almost gasped at this blasphemy. "The Blessing of Talos! You know that's outlawed, my lady. I dare not, not with the Imperial soldiers so nearby, and the Thalmor – they watch, they always watch."

I looked around the temple. We were alone in the priest's living quarters. "But you know the blessing, am I right? I need to strengthen my Thu'um if I'm to defeat these dragons."

"Your Thu'um?" he said, searching my face to see if I was serious. "Yet I cannot, my lady, even if it means my death and the death of everyone in the city. Ask me for any other blessing, but not that."

_Fool!_ I thought, as I tried to decide what other blessing I could use. The Thalmor must have a very tight grip on this city for the priest to prefer death by dragons. "The Blessing of Mara, then," I said finally.

"A fine choice, my lady. Mara is truly great, but how will her blessing help you defeat the dragons?"

"It won't. But my housecarl is out there still and she may be gravely wounded. I will save her, even if I can't save Solitude."

"Very well," he said, and performed the blessing on me. "What else can I do for you, my lady?" He shuddered as a great crash came from the wall of the temple. The dragon must have finished with the flame atronach.

"A flask of oil," I said, as I drew an Orcish arrow from my quiver, and began wrapping a strip of cloth around its head, just behind the deadly sharp point. This would be crude, but I was out of ideas to defeat this frost dragon.

When I stepped back out through the doorway, I had a flaming arrow notched and ready to loose. The frost dragon had obliged me by rearing on its hind legs to take another bash at the temple wall. I let the arrow fly and it struck the wyrm square in the chest, exploding in a bloom of flame across its icy scales. The dragon staggered and beat at the spreading fire with its winged talons. The thrust from the beat of its wings pushed it back, its clawed feet caught the parapet, and it plunged backward, spiked tail over horned head, tumbling to crash onto the rocks a thousand feet below.

A great cheer rose up from the crowd at the Bard's College, but I could not pause to watch the dragon's ruin. For in the silence left by the dragon's falling, I heard what I most dreaded. It was Lydia, and her voice was quiet, pleading. "No, not like this," I heard her say. I couldn't see her from the temple door. The view was blocked by the arched tower on the wall.

Neither could I see Nahagliiv, but I could hear him as well. "Do you hear me, Dovahkiin? Now I kill your little friend, then I come for you. You killed my brother. My anger burns within me and my breath grows all the hotter."

"Zu'u fen evenaar hin rahgol!" I shouted at him. I knew Lydia wouldn't understand the words, but maybe just hearing my voice would hearten her, and strike fear into the dragon. "Hio fen aus,
Nahagliiv!

I dashed along the castle wall and through the curving, arched tunnel that passed through the tower, only to find my exit blocked by the dragon's tail. I still couldn't see Lydia, and there was no way past the dragon. I dared not use my ice storm spell because it could easily travel past the dragon and strike Lydia as well. I tried an ice spike, less powerful, but more focused. It just glanced off the dragon's tail like a pebble hitting a boulder.

I ran back through the tunnel then along the top of the wall dividing the bailey from the temple courtyard. Now I could see Lydia cowering on one knee beneath the dragon, trying to drag herself away from it. She had dropped her shield and looked mortally wounded. I had seen her staggered before, but never had I seen her crawl. "Mercy!" she pleaded.

I had to distract Nahagliiv before he delivered the final blow. That, or get between her and the dragon. I still didn't trust my ice storm spell not to hit her, and I knew she couldn't get out of the dragon's reach in time. There was only one thing left to do.

I leapt to the parapet on top of the wall, aiming my body at the walkway between the dragon and Lydia. Then I shouted. "Wulda-Nah-Kest!" The dragon must have been near as surprised as Lydia when I arrived between them so suddenly, and even more surprised when I turned my back on it and faced my sword sister. I looked around for her shield, but it was nowhere to be seen. I would just have to block Nahagliiv's onslaught with my own body. I stood close to Lydia, looming over her as I cast the strongest healing spell I knew. I could feel the Blessing of Mara working through me to heal her, but it would take time.

Nahagliiv could have had us then if he had chosen to use his jaws or a smash from his tail. But in his arrogance he thought to match his Thu'um against mine, hitting us with his fire breath. I stood firm against the blast of the shout, and tried to concentrate on the words Nahagliiv was shouting – Yol-Toor-Shul. At the same time, I breathed in deep, letting the emptiness of the sky fill me. "Sky Above, Voice Within," I could hear Master Arngeir intoning. Deep in my belly I felt my Thu'um growing stronger, but I would not shout. I would use it to turn this dragon's puny Thu'um aside, just as Jurgen Windcaller had done when facing the Tongues long ago.

And it worked, for a time. The fire breath did not touch me and I was able to block most of it since I was standing so close to Lydia. Then I noticed her armor beginning to glow red at the edges, and I wondered if her skin was burning inside. The healing spell seemed to be reviving her and I focused all the harder on it. But it was too much to concentrate on all at once – my Thu'um, the words of the dragon's shout, and the healing spell. Then I heard the crowd again, cheering and gasping all at once, and I felt my focus slip. The edges of my robes began to singe as I felt the heat growing behind me. How much longer could Nahagliiv's fire breath last?

Then Lydia had found her strength again, just as the fire breath abated. She stood upright, axe in hand. "A healing spell!" she exclaimed, and I could swear I saw her wink. "Are you a priest?"

You should know by now that I'm not, I thought, but couldn't put the thought into words as I staggered out of the way.

Then she rushed past me, gripping her axe in both hands.

"Now you'll pay the death-price, dragon!" she shouted. "No one touches my thane!" Her fury was awesome to behold. She rained blows down on Nahagliiv's head, and fire dragon though he was, the blows of her axe of embers had their effect. He seemed to have no fire left in him, and this made him more vulnerable. He tried to parry with his jaws, but each time she leapt out of the way.
I had recovered enough by now that I could get to my feet. I had also regained enough breath for another shout. I moved to a small ledge that extended out where the Emperor's Tower met the castle wall. From this vantage I had a clear shot at Nahagliiv without fear of hitting Lydia. The next time she leapt back, I shouted "Fo-Krah-Diin!" and the force of the frost breath shout pushed Nahagliiv back against the tower wall, stunning him momentarily.

Lydia saw her chance and vaulted atop the dragon's horned and scaled head. He swung his long neck to and fro trying to get his jaws around to her, but she rode him as if she were breaking a wild stallion. When his thrashing grew less, she planted her feet behind his horns and plunged the axe into his brain. Nahagliiv slumped to the stonework of the castle and spoke no more boasts.

The crowd had swelled during our battle, and now it roared its approbation. Their city was saved. Then they gasped as Nahagliiv's flesh began to disintegrate in a fiery maelstrom, and the power of his soul rushed at me and into me. I felt my strength returning slowly as the dragon's soul entered my being, but I was still spent, my magicka low, my breath a ragged, wheezing thing. I looked over at Lydia. She breathed heavily as she stripped off her steel gloves. They must have been scalding-hot because now I could see scorch marks on her forearms. For an idle moment, I wished she could be the one to absorb Nahagliiv's soul. She had dealt the final blow, she deserved it.

When nothing was left of Nahagliiv but a bleached skeleton, the crowd below realized what had happened, and recognized me for who I was. They began chanting "Dovahkiin! Dovahkiin!" over and over again. Fireworks went up into the night from the Blue Palace at the east edge of the city, and I knew that Jarl Elisif and her court must also have been watching. I turned to the crowd and raised Lydia's hand high into the air, as if declaring her the victor in a tourney.

But she would have none of the glory. She twisted her wrist from my grasp and grabbed my own hand, holding it above my head, almost lifting me off my feet. She gestured for the crowd to applaud even louder than they had before. They responded with enthusiasm, and the shouts of "Dovahkiin!" were even more deafening.

Then Lydia removed her horned helmet, dropped to one knee and bowed her head before me. "Proud to be of service, my thane," she said, her voice catching.

I took her by the hand again. "Get up from there," I said. "You don't need to kneel." When she stood once again I saw tears in her eyes. My own eyes were wet as well. Then we hugged. I felt her arms around me. Feeling only the unforgiving steel of her armor, my hands moved up and found her loose hair. I looked up at her and then somehow we were kissing. Did I kiss her or did she kiss me? Then it didn't matter because she was kissing me back and lifting me off the ground in her strong arms.

Everything went away then for a while, the roar of the crowd, the pains in my body, our near brush with death. The whole world was Lydia's arms around me, her mouth on my mouth, her breath in my ear as she whispered, "It's about time, my thane."

"Deirdre," I whispered back. "I'm your Deirdre." Then she put me down and her smile gleamed in the moonlight.

We realized then that the crowd had grown silent. I had only time to think, "What have we done?" as I turned to look out over them. Then they burst into roars of approval once more.

It had only taken them a moment to pass from shock to acceptance. And it was because they knew something I realized only later – it was neither my magic nor my Thu'um that had saved them; neither was it Lydia's arrows, nor her axe. Our love had saved the city, though I had only just then learned to name it love. I saved Lydia, and Lydia saved me, and so we defeated not one dragon but
two, and two of the most powerful we had ever faced. Without our love, Solitude would have been nothing but ashes and icy rubble.

We raised our arms to the crowd once more, and soaked in their cheers. This was none of the grudging thanks we had received in the past, but full-throated approval. We were both so spent we had to lean against the parapet to remain upright, but it felt good just to enjoy the victory for the moment.

The roar of the crowd went on and on, still at deafening volumes, which must explain why neither of us heard the sound of boots on stone approaching from behind. The next I knew, a gold-gloved hand had popped a bag over Lydia's head, then all went dark as a bag went over my head as well. I could hear gasps and jeers from the crowd and even "Down with the Thalmor!" as the bottom of the bag was cinched tight. Then I felt myself lifted from my feet as darkness descended over my mind as well as my eyes.

End of Part II
General Tullius was a small man, lean but tautly muscled, with close-cropped gray hair and smooth-shaven cheeks, the style favored in Cyrodiil. He wore an elaborately decorated cuirass of hardened leather with the Imperial dragon symbol worked in gold chasing across the front, richly adorned with gold medallions at shoulders and belt. He regarded me coolly as we sat facing each other across a table in Castle Dour's interrogation room. I could only stare back at him, gagged as I was, my hands bound behind me.

"You must be hungry and thirsty," Tullius said. "I would remove that gag if I could trust you not to use your Voice."

He looked at me as if expecting an answer; I just glared back at him.

"Come," he said. "I convinced the Thalmor to leave you with me. You should be grateful. And I have an offer for you. So, if Legate Rikke removes your gag, do you promise not to use your Voice?" He nodded toward a tall Nord woman in a legion uniform standing at attention nearby. In contrast to the general's decorative armor, hers was purely functional: a full steel cuirass, steel-studded kilt, and steel bracers.

I had no interest in whatever offer the general might have, but I was parched and starved. A ewer filled with spring water sat on the table between us, along with a plate of fruit, bread, and cheese. I nodded in acquiescence.

As far as I could tell, it had been most of a day since I had come awake in the bleak cell in Castle Dour's prison. Or at least, I assumed that's where I was, judging by the Imperial guards patrolling in front of my cell. The place was circular, built of black stone blocks that reflected little light, with barred cells lining the perimeter of the prison chamber. Guards made rounds of the cells, and I could see more guards and the occasional Thalmor passing by on a gallery above. I had seen no sign of Lydia – the cells across the chamber from mine were empty – nor had I seen her when the guards brought me upstairs to this interrogation room.

Tullius gave a signal to the woman officer. "General, are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes, Legate Rikke. I believe Deirdre is a woman of her word."

The truth was, I had no particular compunction about breaking my promise. The guards had fitted me with a magicka collar, however, and I didn't think I could break out of this prison armed only with my Thu'um. Maybe I could talk my way out.

Grudgingly, the legate undid my gag and the cord around my hands, then stood behind me, dagger at the ready. I opened my mouth wide, working my jaw around and clearing my throat to regain my voice."Go ahead, you must be starved," Tullius said, gesturing at the table.
Hoarse though I was, I left the food and water untouched. "My housecarl," I said when I could speak. "Where is she? How have you treated her?"

"Your housecarl – and more, it seems." Tullius couldn't help smiling, though it didn't suit his stern features. "Well, to each her own, as we say in the Imperial City. I'm surprised these Nords are so tolerant. These hinterlands are usually breeding grounds of narrow-mindedness and bigotry."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"We haven't harmed her, traitor to the Empire though she is."

"She is no traitor."

"So you say. Now, help yourself while I make my offer."

I poured myself a mug of water, then chose an apple to break my fast, taking a careful bite. Though I was hungry, I wouldn't lower myself in Tullius' eyes by groveling at his trough.

Tullius rose from his chair and paced back and forth behind the table for a moment. "I have to admit, you have me puzzled, young lady. Don't think I don't recognize you from Helgen. It will take more than dyed hair and a bit of makeup to fool me. You swore vengeance on all Nords that day..."

"Perhaps I should have sworn vengeance on all Imperials as well, since you would have beheaded me for no reason."

"Ah, well. I was impressed with the tenacity you showed – attacking those guards, giving that little speech. But I never like to overrule my subordinates in public, so I let the proceedings proceed. Then Alduin intervened. And so, here is my question: did Alduin attack Helgen to save you? Are you in league with the World Eater?"

I nearly spit out my bite of apple. "You think I'm working with Alduin?"

"Look at the facts. You were about to be executed. The World Eater arrived at that same moment, allowing you to escape with your life while many others died. Then it turns out you're the Dragonborn. I thought it was all just Nord nonsense until I saw what you did on the castle walls yesterday. So tell me, why shouldn't I believe you and Alduin are in league?"

"I'm surprised you believe in the World Eater at all."

"Yes, some Nord prophecy is making the rounds, the Song of the Dragonborn or some such. Not many here believe it, especially the Thalmor, but I was at Helgen. We've seen what dragons can do since then, yet what happened at Helgen was far different. The sky itself rained fire. Flaming meteors demolished stone walls two feet thick. So yes, I believe Alduin has returned, though I thought he was just a Nord myth."

"If you believe the prophecy," I said, "then you know that I am here to stop Alduin. Why do you think I've been killing his dragons?" I tore a hunk of bread from the loaf in front of me.

Tullius regarded me for a moment. "Yes, you are fierce in your pursuit of the serpents. Last night I watched you from a window in this tower. I saw you fight with a fury I have rarely witnessed. Yet other reports show you have a peaceful nature. You refused to join Ulfric, by all accounts out of Windhelm. And you escaped Markarth with the Forsworn, leaving not a single dead guard in your wake. You even spared those Thalmor justiciars. You must know that was the mistake that led to your capture."
"Call me foolish, perhaps, but I don't see your point."

"Which is it – are you a fighter or a peace-maker? I am perplexed."

If he could only know that I shared the same quandary! But no, I couldn't let him see my inner turmoil. "General, I know the pain of losing those most dear to me, so I seek to stop the dragons from inflicting more pain on others. Yet I do not enjoy killing. I have learned that by now, having done enough of it. Revenge will bring me no peace, though I still seek justice for my parents. And I will fight if someone threatens my life or the lives of those I love. I regret the death of those I have been forced to kill. Well, nearly all of them. As for your torturer, I feel little sorrow over his death."

"Ah, you answered well. Dealing in life and death is not easy. And I hope to appeal to your compassionate side. You must see that the fastest way to end Skyrim's suffering is to make a quick end of this Stormcloak foolishness."

"No, I don't see that," I said. "The dragons have caused most of the suffering I have seen."

"But this uprising has hardly begun. Think of the blood that will be lost as Nord fights against Nord! The Stormcloaks' victory at Falkreath may embolden others to join them, even that fence-sitter Balgruuf."

"So what would you have me do? My plate is quite full with Alduin and his dragons."

"Just this, and I hope it will be a simple task for you: challenge Ulfric to single combat following these ancient Nordic customs. I saw the power you wield when you defeated those dragons. Use it on Ulfric! Shout him down as he shouted down High King Torygg. That will put an end to this Stormcloak nonsense."

"Why do you think I would do your bidding?"

"Self-interest, for one," he replied. "Just think what opportunities await the one who can shout down this pretend king! Nords admire nothing more than those who wield great power. Too, with the Stormcloak issue settled, I could put the entire Imperial garrison to the task of hunting dragons, even Alduin himself. Peace and tranquility will prevail across Skyrim, and you will be the one to usher it in."

I had to admit, Tullius' plan did seem to offer the quickest route to ending Skyrim's bloodshed. But at what cost?

"Tell me, General, do your peace and tranquility include an end to the Thalmor snatching Skyrim's citizens from their beds?"

"I thought you might raise that objection." He made a sign for Legate Rikke to move to the door. I heard her give a frustrated sigh as she left her position behind me. Then Tullius took up quill and ink and began writing on a scrap of paper. He kept speaking all the while, spouting the usual platitudes about peace and harmony between the Aldmeri Dominion and the Empire. "Young Deirdre, it is time for you and everyone else in Skyrim to realize that the Thalmor only seek to guide us through this transition into a new era of peace and prosperity for Summerset and the Empire, under the protection and guidance of the Eight."

He finished writing and pushed the note across to me. It read: "Don't you see that the Thalmor only benefit from discord in Skyrim? The Empire must remain unified and strong during these dark times, so that we will be ready for the next war with the Aldmeri Dominion. And we will need you on our side."
I looked up at the general. His expression reminded me of a hawk trying to guess which way its prey would run. But did I see some note of beseeching in that gaze? "Well," he demanded, "will you accept my offer?"

If I had possessed more wisdom and less youthful outrage over my treatment at Helgen, I might have accepted it. If he was serious, then it might indeed offer the quickest route to ending Skyrim's suffering, from the dragons, from the Civil War, and even from the Thalmor. Yet I could not trust the man who would have seen me unjustly executed without a second thought, the man who oversaw that Imperial torture chamber. It was probably just a trick, I told myself – once I deposed Ulfric, I would be back in chains.

It wasn't just my lack of trust in Tullius. It was my own self-regard. The truth was, I cared too much for my own reputation to kill Ulfric in cold blood, or to appear to be in league with the Imperials and the Thalmor, even if it was just a subterfuge. Vain girl that I was!

"No, General Tullius, I do not trust you," I said. "And though I do not seek to fight the Thalmor, I will do nothing to aid their cause. I want only to fulfill my destiny to face Alduin. Now I ask you to release me so that I may return to my task."

Tullius eyed me for a moment, and I thought I saw something of the battle-weary warrior in his expression. He gave a small sigh. "I tried my best to convince you. Your decision will plunge Skyrim into months, years, even decades of war. And I thought you were a peace-maker!" He nodded to Legate Rikke, who came up from behind and laid hands on me.

"But General, the dragons, Alduin!" I was suddenly desperate. "I am the only one who can stop them, if the prophecy is true." I managed to get that much out before Rikke had the gag back in my mouth and cinched tight.

"We will have to deal with the dragons on our own," Tullius said. "You are too valuable a weapon to risk the Stormcloaks using you, and after your rash words about the Thalmor we can't trust you not to go over to Ulfric's side. I'll let you stew over your decision for a day, but after that I won't be able to keep you out of Thalmor hands. You can rest assured that the justiciars will not treat you so kindly." He looked at me sadly as Rikke dragged me from the room, hands bound behind my back once more.

As we made our way around the gallery that encircled the second floor of the tower, I looked down into the prison chamber. Lydia stood behind the bars of her cell. "My thane, are you well?" she called up when she saw me. Whereas the Imperials had left me in my arch-mage's robes – though all the potions, scrolls, and lockpicks had been removed – they had taken Lydia's armor and replaced it with a rough-spun tunic. I only had time to nod before a guard rapped the bars of her cell with his sword, forcing her back. "You! No talking!"

Then we continued around the balcony until her cell was out of sight. On the way we passed a room whose door had been shut when we passed it earlier. I now saw that it was a torture chamber, complete with rack. An inquisitor stood within, sharpening some dark instrument. He grinned at me as we went past. I supposed the open door was for my benefit.

I spent a sleepless night going over and over my decision. I tried to convince myself I could trust Tullius, but I kept seeing him at Helgen, coolly watching the proceedings as I was about to be executed. And to kill Ulfric on behalf of the Empire and the Thalmor? No, it was too much.

My quandary about Tullius' offer was not the only thing keeping me awake. I couldn't stop thinking of Lydia, and that kiss. Kissing Onmund had been nice enough, though I hadn't cared to repeat the experience. But kissing Lydia – I wanted to kiss her again and again. A thousand times
wouldn't be enough. I remembered rubbing that lineament into her bare shoulder, the softness of her skin as my fingers kneaded it. I wanted to caress her skin again, run my fingers through her dark hair, kiss her lips, and ... then ... I knew not what. I only knew that I ached for her with my entire being – to hear her laugh or make a dry remark or vow to protect me with her life, even just to look at her face once more. Then it occurred to me that accepting Tullius' offer would be the quickest way to see her again. I was soon back to pondering whether I could trust him and betray all that I knew to be right.

I was awakened from these quandaries by a figure creeping up to my cell. It must have been the dead of night because it seemed hours since I had seen a guard pass by.

I heard a whisper: "My thane." I went up to the cell door, then I dearly wished I had not been bound and gagged. I could neither touch nor kiss the woman I loved. Lydia reached through the bars and caressed my cheek with the back of her hand, and that had to be enough. Even through my gag, I had to suppress a little laugh of relief at seeing her again.

"We can be glad the mason-work in this prison is none too good," she whispered, drawing something from within her tunic. She fumbled in the dark with the cell's lock, and I realized she must be trying to pick it. "There's a tunnel behind my cell," she continued. "It looks like it leads out of here. And I found the chest with the rest of our things."

She was having difficulty with the lock. "Let me," I tried whispering through my gag, but of course it came out as "Mmmm mmm." I turned around, hoping she would understand to unbind my hands so I could pick the lock.

Lydia was no thief, but she was stubborn. "I've almost got it," she whispered. Then the pick broke, a piece of it falling to the stone floor with a clatter.

"Oi, what was that?" we heard a guard call, and saw a flickering glow of moving torches from the stairwell.

"Here, quick!" Lydia said, finally reaching to unbind my hands, but too late.

Two guards and their captain ran into the circular chamber. In the light of the torch one carried, I saw that Lydia had armed herself with a short sword she'd found somewhere, and she now held it at the ready.

"No, Lydia!" I tried to shout at her. The words were unintelligible, but at least she looked at me to see me shaking my head. I heard the sounds of more guards running on the floor above and caught the gold glint of elven armor. She was far outnumbered, and to fight would be her death. If only she had thought to unbind my hands first!

Lydia relented and dropped her sword. Two guards grabbed her from either side. The one with the torch, the captain of the guard, stepped up to her and struck her across the face with the back of his hand. She was too proud to cry out, or even put her hand to her face.

"We'll teach you to try to break out of Castle Dour, Stormcloak bitch!" he said.

"I'm no Stormcloak," she spat back. "I'm Lydia Ravenwood, housecarl to Thane Deirdre Morningsong and retainer to Jarl Balgruuf of Whiterun."

"As good as a Stormcloak then," said the captain. "Balgruuf will soon regret his dallying, once we're through with him."

"That's enough, Captain," came Legate Rikke's voice from above. "Take the prisoner to a different
cell and do not mistreat her further. And find out how she escaped, or you will face the consequences."

"Yes, Legate," the captain said. As they took her away, Lydia kept looking back over her shoulder, as if to apologize for ruining our chance of escape.

I had felt my hopes soar upon seeing her again, only to have them dashed. But I only let myself feel dejected for a moment. I had seen Lydia again, I knew that she was well, and I had felt her touch once more. That was all the encouragement I needed. If her cell suffered from faulty mason-work, perhaps mine did too. I began feeling all around the walls for rotten mortar and loose blocks. It was slow work, requiring much squatting and stretching with my back to the wall.

By the time I finished my search, having found nothing, dawn light was shining down from a skylight in the prison's central chamber. Now I grew despondent once more, cursing myself for not accepting Tullius' offer. Though I would never kill Ulfric at his bidding, perhaps I could play along with the general's plan until I saw an opportunity to escape. I resolved to appear before the general with a feigned change of heart.

Then I noticed the shard of the broken lock pick lying just a few inches beyond the bars of the cell. It had broken off short, but its hooked point still seemed serviceable. I sat with my back to the bars, contorting my bound arms to get my fingers on it. I had just gotten back to my feet when I heard footsteps from the floor above, and then the sound of voices. I stepped away from the door and managed to drop the pick into a side pocket of my robes, thinking all the while of how to indicate to the guards that I would speak with their leader.

But I was too late. A voice came from the floor above. I recognized the accent and the superior tone of the High Elves of Summerset. It seemed familiar somehow. "General Tullius," the voice said, "since you can't keep our prisoners from escaping, we will do the job for you."

"Ambassador Elenwen," General Tullius replied, "we have checked all the other cells and they are inescapable. We are sealing up that tunnel even now. I still have one or two interrogation methods to try on the prisoners." I was disgusted by the obsequious tone this usually overbearing general adopted before the Thalmor.

"You mean the barbarity I see here?" Elenwen asked, and I knew they must have stopped before the torture chamber. "You humans and your racks, your tongs, your metal wires. Our methods are much cleaner, and far more effective. No, you've had your chance. The prisoners are still in one piece, I trust? Still in their right minds?"

"They are, Ambassador," the general said meekly.

"Justiciars, take them!" she commanded, and I heard metal-booted feet clumping down the stairs.

Two gold-clad justiciars appeared, and an Imperial guard opened my cell door for them. I could only sit helplessly as they placed yet another black bag over my head. The cloth must have been coated in an aromatic sleeping potion, because I fell instantly into a dream. It was not a good one, featuring much blind bumping along a rocky mountain road in the back of a wagon.

Lydia's screams were awful to hear. She had held out for many hours against the Thalmor torturer, a pinched little Altmer named Naris. Yet when the screaming came it was like nothing human,
more like the screech of a Skyrim wildcat crossed with the caw of some strange bird. Try as I
might over the long years since our interrogation by the Thalmor, I have never quite purged those
screams from my memory. I'll still wake sometimes in the dark of the night, Lydia's screams
ringing in my ears. I'll reach for her, and then remember ... but I get ahead of myself.

By my reckoning, this was our second day in the Thalmor dungeon. On the first, I had awakened
on a narrow cot whose mattress could have used a fresh bundle of rushes. I supposed I should have
been grateful for even this small comfort: the cells on either side of mine were bare, manacles
bolted to the back wall the only adornment.

Save for the iron bars that formed the front of each cell, everything in this dungeon was made of
wood. Paneling separated my cell from those on either side. If I stood at the bars of my cell and
looked to the left I could see a larger chamber beyond, also wood-paneled, with wooden stairs
leading to a gallery above. Square columns of stout timber disappeared into the ceiling at the center
of the room. There were no windows anywhere, and the only light came from torches and oil lamps
made of cow horns. Directly across from my cell was a small storeroom with a trapdoor in the
floor. I wondered where that led.

Elenwen, the Thalmor ambassador to Skyrim, treated us well that first day. Guards brought food
and water to the cell to my left, and I knew this was where they must be keeping Lydia. She tried to
call out to me once, only to be reprimanded by the guards. The cell on my right seemed empty –
there were no sounds from that direction, at least. Of food and water, I had none, because they
would not ungag me until I agreed to cooperate. Unlike Tullius, Elenwen didn't trust me not to use
my Voice. Yet at some point they would need to give me food and drink. I could be of no use to
them if I starved to death.

The ambassador was a tall, thin, almost gaunt High Elf in fine robes, with hair pulled back to
emphasize her tall forehead and pointed ears. As soon as she entered my cell and spoke, I realized
why she seemed familiar: she was the Altmer who had spoken to Tullius during the beheadings in
Helgen. And she recognized me.

"My, but you've risen high since last we met," she said. "Then, you were but a scrawny girl in rags.
Now, the Dragonborn and, judging by those robes, arch-mage of the College of Winterhold. And
you have thwarted us at every turn, with that business in Whiterun and then with our emissary to
Winterhold disappearing as well. Don't tell me you had nothing to do with that. The question is,
why?"

I only glared at her.

"Ah well, you will come around to see my point of view – one way or the other."

She left then, but it was not long before she was back. She would stand uncomfortably close to the
chair on which I sat, caressing the side of my face or stroking my hair and talking in a patronizing
voice as if showing concern for a small child. Or, if I was sitting on the cell's narrow cot, she
would sit beside me, her hand on my knee. Like a stern parent, she demanded my complete loyalty,
not just to her, but to the Thalmor cause. If I did her bidding in the smallest detail I would be richly
rewarded. If not, I would face the consequences, though these were yet to be revealed.

At first, she gave me many reasons for joining the Thalmor. I rejected them all, shaking my head
and mumbling through my gag. I still thought I could talk my way out, that perhaps Elenwen was
more reasonable than Tullius. Surely she would see that her people's self-interest lay in freeing me
to stop the World Eater.

Yet she gave me no opportunity to make my case. Instead she made her own offers, making her
first appeals to my Breton side. "You have merish blood in you, through your Breton mother," she said. Damn my loose tongue, I thought. She had learned all she needed to know about me from my speech in Helgen. "Surely, your merish lineage is the reason for your power. And we can give you a position in which you can wield it. Perhaps you will become greater than Tiber Septim one day..."

I thought of what my mother would say about Elenwen's proposal. The High Elves usually viewed Bretons with contempt, as a gross bastardization of their own people with the earliest humans of Tamriel. In return, my mother and many other Bretons nursed a hatred for the Altmer, diminishing the role the elves played as ancestors of their people. She would have laughed in Elenwen's face to hear her praise the elven blood running in Breton veins – as I did now, through my gag.

"And these Nords," Elenwen went on. "Surely you can see that we must put the barbarians down. A disgrace even to the name of man! I'm surprised that a Nord was able to produce such a powerful, capable child as you – that's your merish blood at work. And what do you owe them? Aren't they the ones who murdered your parents? Didn't you return to Skyrim seeking your revenge on them? And with us on your side, you can have it!"

My heart did beat a little faster then, and I saw for a moment my parents' faceless murderers brought before me by the justiciars. I took a breath, as deeply as I could through the gag. The vision passed. I had put thoughts of that kind of revenge aside in Dragon Bridge.

Yet Elenwen went on. "We would name you Marshal of Skyrim. You could mete out the Nords' punishment as you saw fit, or wipe them from the face of Nirn, for aught we care. Saving your sweetheart, of course."

My sweetheart – that's how she referred to Lydia. We must have put on quite a show for those watching from the safe windows of Castle Dour. "Or, we can find a more suitable bed-partner for you," she continued, her hand on my knee. "If your tastes run to the feminine, as it seems they do, we have many fine High Elven maidens we can present to you. Any – or several – of them would be happy to be the consort of the Dragonborn."

I turned away from her in disgust, and she rose to leave. "I will give you some time to reconsider my offers. But if you remain obstinate, you will force us to resort to more brutal measures. And I promise you, neither you nor your sweetheart will enjoy them."

She returned several hours later, after I had slept. "Well, have you changed your mind?" she demanded. I glared at her, not being able to speak. "Ah, well," she sighed. "We must do what we must do. Yet it is a pity. Your sweetheart isn't the sharpest blade in the rack, yet she is quite pretty, for a Nord."

_No, I told myself, she wouldn't._ Elenwen had called the Imperials' torture implements a barbarity. Surely she wouldn't torture Lydia to get to me.

"Ah, now I see the fear in your eye." She sighed again and caressed my cheek. "I understand completely. For you see, I too appreciate a comely face. It would be a pity to mar it beyond repair. But the choice is in your hands."

Could I pretend to relent to her demands, go along with her orders just long enough for us to make our escape? I had just decided this was my only recourse when she went on.

"Tell me, does your sweetheart touch you here?" Her hand went to my chest, groping my breast through my arch-mage's robes. They had left me in them, perhaps afraid to unbind my hands to strip me out of them. "Does she touch you here?" Her hand went to my crotch. With a groan of
repulsion, I wrenched myself away from her, tipping sideways in my chair and falling to the floor. Elenwen drew back, her face flushed, her breathing rapid, glaring at me.

Damn the arrogant pride of my dragonsoul! I should have relented then, but I could not. My breath came fast through my nose and my rage was upon me. I would have shouted her down then had I not been gagged, no matter the consequences to myself or to Lydia or to the very world.

When Elenwen had regained her composure, she spoke once more in those measured, haughty tones. "As I said, it is a pity. Those cheekbones, that fair skin, those dark eyes. I doubt you will recognize her when we are through."

With that she left and I heard the guards taking Lydia out of her cell and into the chamber beyond.

If they hoped that the mere sound of Lydia's screams would convince me to cooperate, they were wrong. For Lydia did not scream, not at first. She did manage to shout, "Don't give in, my thane, whatever hap..." before they silenced her with a blow. After that, she was so silent that I could not tell what they were doing to her. All I heard was a strange, crackling noise like the sound a staff of lightning makes as it hits its target, but much quieter. I could only imagine what that was, and what effect it was having.

Yet it took some time for my anger to subside, for my breathing to return to normal and my thoughts to rise above my feelings of revulsion and hatred for Elenwen. Then I played over all the possibilities of what they were doing to Lydia. Of all people, I should know of her stoicism in the face of pain, her aversion to crying out no matter how grievous the injury. I knew she would go to untold lengths not to scream and weaken my resolve.

Then I knew what I must do. I went to the barred door of my cell and began rattling it with my boot, yelling as well as I could through my gag.

"What's this?" I heard Elenwen say. "The Breton relents?"

The buzzing sound stopped and Lydia shouted, "No, my thane, you cannot..." Her words were interrupted by the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

A guard opened my cell and led me into the larger dungeon chamber. A gauntree jutted from the far wall, a pair of manacles dangling from it on chains, and Lydia hanging in the manacles, seemingly unconscious now, her head slumped forward. Above and behind her was another gallery, not connected to the one I had seen from my cell. Several justiciars hung about up there, watching the action below.

The guards sat me at a table in the center of the room, where I had an unobstructed view of Lydia. On the left wall was a desk, pushed up to the cell Lydia had occupied. Unlike the others, this cell had a three-foot wall on the side facing the torture chamber, atop which bars stretched to the ceiling. I supposed this allowed the torturer to observe prisoners closely, and to take notes while they were being interrogated in the cell. Next to the desk was a storage chest.

Now that I was closer to Lydia, I noticed the marks, red welts, running up and down her arms, legs, and neck. They had stripped her to her shift, the cloth covered in blackened singe marks, more concentrated beneath her arms and between her legs. Naris, the torturer, held an instrument like a small staff, a glowing ball of energy at its tip. I took a deep breath, trying to control my anger. It had already led to this treatment of Lydia, and I knew I must keep it in check before worse could happen.

Elenwen stood before me. "Well?" she demanded. "Are you ready to relent?"
I nodded vigorously, holding her eye to show the sincerity of my submission.

"Very well. I knew love would conquer your pride and your anger. That's the one thing it is good for." She turned to the justiciars hanging about on the gallery above. "You three, get down here and guard the Breton as she is unbound. And Naris, hold a knife to the Nord's throat in case young Deirdre has any idea of using her shouts on us."

Naris stood behind Lydia, pulling her head back and rousing her from her unconsciousness. Her left eye was already swollen from the torturer's blows. She looked blearily around at Elenwen, then at me, and finally at the justiciars gathered behind me, preparing to unbind my hands and undo my gag. Her eyes went wide as she realized what was about to happen.

"No, my thane, I'm begging you, do not shame yourself, do not shame me. These wounds are nothing." Her eyes pleaded with me, and my resolve melted. I knew she had taken many wounds worse than these while battling the dragons and draugr death lords. Yet to her, a warrior's shame was the worst wound of all. I sat back in my chair uncertainly, then shook my head at Elenwen.

"Ah, such a loyal housecarl!" Elenwen exclaimed. "She really is quite remarkable. I've seen strong men cry like babes under much less treatment. But if you insist, we will continue. Everyone has their breaking point."

The justiciars left me and went to stand next to the ambassador. Naris put down the knife and picked up the torture wand. He eyed Lydia up and down, choosing his next spot. He pressed the device to Lydia's side, over the shift, and a small spark leapt out of the tip. The fabric began to sizzle, then smolder. She pursed her lips and looked fiercely at me. Then her head went down and her body went taut against the manacles, but she made no sound. The device kept shooting its charge into her and I wondered how long it could last, and what Lydia was feeling as the energy went through her. At last, the torturer removed the wand and she took several panting breaths.

"You'll notice we've left her face untouched so far … except for those bruises, which are easily healed," Elenwen said. "I wanted to give you one last chance to reconsider before we do irreversible damage to a spot not easily hidden."

Lydia looked up again and shook her head as vigorously as she could.

The torture went on for another hour at the least. It seemed a century. I didn't know who would break first, Lydia or I. Yet I knew I had to be as strong as she was, since she was the one experiencing the pain.

At one point, one of the justiciars standing nearby stepped up to Elenwen and said, "Ambassador, if you command it, I will debase myself and rut with the Nord bitch. The she-Breton will not like that." He almost managed to sound reluctant.

Elenwen looked at him sternly. "No, Aldaril," she said. "I've told you, none of that." She turned to me as the torture continued, speaking in a quieter voice. "They wanted to strip her naked, supposedly so nothing would impede the wand's effects. And they wanted to do other things, but I wouldn't allow it. Not that I care a whit for her modesty, I just wouldn't give the beasts the pleasure." If there was molesting to be done, it seemed, Elenwen would be the one to do it.

Elenwen looked at him sternly. "No, Aldaril," she said. "I've told you, none of that." She turned to me as the torture continued, speaking in a quieter voice. "They wanted to strip her naked, supposedly so nothing would impede the wand's effects. And they wanted to do other things, but I wouldn't allow it. Not that I care a whit for her modesty, I just wouldn't give the beasts the pleasure." If there was molesting to be done, it seemed, Elenwen would be the one to do it.

The torture went on, the torturer holding the wand to the bottoms of Lydia's feet, the backs of her knees, and a spot just behind her ear. At one point, when she seemed to be slipping back into unconsciousness, one of the justiciars went over to a barrel of water that stood in the center of the room. He dipped a bucket into it, then threw the water over Lydia. She spluttered and came awake, and looked around at her inquisitors defiantly.
I was amazed at her endurance. So were Naris and the justiciars, who grew alternately tired, bored, then frustrated. Even Elenwen, who at first seemed so eager to witness Lydia's pain, went over to the desk and sat at it, writing in a journal. Finally one of the justiciars ran over to her and began striking her with his fists between bouts with the wand.

As awful as it was, I couldn't look away. I owed Lydia that much, as I was the one for whom she endured this pain. I was the one making her do it, because I had not agreed to Tullius' demands, nor to Elenwen's. Yet Lydia herself kept me from relenting. Every time she saw me tremble and look beseechingly toward Elenwen, she gazed sternly at me and gave a stern shake of her head. Though, each time, her head shook less vigorously, and a lost expression grew in her eyes, as if she were seeing something far away.

I could have stopped the torment sooner. I tell myself I should have done so every time I awake with Lydia's screams in my head. But she never would have forgiven me, not before she had tested her own limits to the fullest. It would have driven her from me, and our lives after would never have been the same.

Finally, the torturer gave the justiciar a second wand and they began using the two devices on her at the same time. They chose the two spots they had found most vulnerable: her armpit and her inner thigh, just below the parting of her legs. They held the wands there for just a few seconds. She threw her head back and out of her mouth emerged the most inhuman cry of anguish I hope never to hear again. On and on she screamed, her body rocking back and forth, her head flinging wildly from side to side. I don't know how she endured that pain, and I don't know how I endured her screams. Even the torturer seemed taken aback.

I stood up, but the guards on either side kept me from going to her. I was yelling too, if not screaming, through my gag. I looked around at Elenwen, but she just looked at Lydia with a satisfied expression. What kind of monster could take pleasure in the suffering of another?

Finally Lydia was done.

"Well?" Elenwen demanded. "What do you say now?"

I was nodding my head, trying to get them to remove my gag so I could speak, when I heard Lydia. "No, my thane," she said, her voice weak. "Do not..." I turned to look at her and her eyes again pleaded with me not to give in. She was still in her right mind. For that, at least, I could be grateful. I thought I had lost her, that her mind had broken beyond repair. But she was still Lydia, battered and weakened though she was. How could I give in, when she would not? My nodding head turned to shaking, and I sat back down in the chair, as if content for the show to continue, though my whole body trembled.

"Ah, well," Elenwen sighed. "Naris, we must resort to more brutal methods. You know I abhor such barbarity, but the prisoners have driven us to it. Bring the knives!" Naris grinned.

Another justiciar emerged from the door at the back of the chamber carrying a felt-covered box. He set it on the table in the center of the room and opened it to reveal knives of various sizes and shapes, most of them small. When Naris took one out, I saw that it was razor-sharp.

"Do your work, Naris," Elenwen commanded, "but slowly, so that this one can relish the pain of her decision."

"Yes, Ambassador," the torturer replied.
Elenwen turned to me. "Now you will find out why he is called Naris the Wicked."

The torturer approached Lydia with the knife, holding it up to her face. Meanwhile another justiciar held her head firmly with two hands so she couldn't turn away.

Now, you may think me selfish, that I was able to endure hours of watching Lydia experiencing the most dreadful pain, yet I was brought to the point of breaking only when I saw that they would scar her beautiful face. Likely you are right, but I also saw how this affected Lydia. For the first time, I saw fear in her eyes as Naris brought the knife up before her face. That, I could not endure.

We made it through the first cut. The torturer made a fine incision, about an inch long, from the hairline at her temple across to a point beneath the corner of her eye. At first there was no blood. Then the line grew red and began to drip down her cheek. Lydia didn't cry out. The pain must have been minor compared to what she had just endured.

Naris set the blade aside, then took up a cloth and gently, almost lovingly, wiped away the blood. Next, he took another knife from the case. This one looked like a barber's razor, but shorter. He tested its edge by slicing one of his own hairs in half just by brushing it across the blade. Then he held the blade up to Lydia's face, holding the skin taught around the first cut. He put the blade along the cut, and then I knew what he would do. Lydia realized it too, and now her eyes were closed, her chest heaving and falling.

I screamed. To my ears it was almost as shrill and inhuman as Lydia's, even through my gag. I couldn't look. I closed my eyes and screamed and went on screaming.
To be flayed alive – it was the worst of fates. Of all the tortments inquisitors had devised, it was said to be the most painful. I couldn't let it happen. I leapt from my chair and ran over to Elenwen, groaning through my gag and nodding my head emphatically.

"Wait!" she ordered. I could hear several held breaths releasing behind me, as Lydia and the two torturers relaxed. "Do you relent?" she asked. I nodded. "Will you answer every question I ask and perform every deed I require?" I nodded again. "Good. Naris, heal her sweetheart's wounds. Now, we must have words, and how are we to do that?"

It took the Altmer some time to arrange to unbind me. Elenwen trusted me even less than Legate Rikke had, sparing no precaution. Half a dozen wizards and archers stood about the chamber and on the balconies above, ready for any tricks I might pull. They put Lydia back into her cell, where I could see her through the bars. They had at least given her a stool to sit on. Naris was seeing to her wounds, while another guard stood behind her, weapon drawn. I knew that she would die the instant I made any aggressive move. They had gagged her as well – she wouldn't stop pleading with me not to relent, even after I had promised to cooperate. Then they seated me at a table in the center of the dungeon chamber. A guard removed my gag and unbound my hands, then stood behind me, blade drawn.

"Ah, that's better, you look much nicer without that kerchief in your mouth," Elenwen said. I tried to rub the feeling back into my hands after having them bound for so long. "Please, help yourself to food and drink," she said, gesturing at the bread, smoked fish, and jug of water laid out before me.

This time, I could not resist. Nothing had passed my lips for nearly two days now. I drank deeply from the ewer, not bothering to fill a mug, then ripped a chunk from the round loaf of bread, stuffing it greedily into my mouth. Elenwen chose not to sit, but paced up and down before me while I ate my fill. When my gluttony began to slow, she seated herself opposite me.

"Now, before we get to the specific service you can perform for us, I have questions. I trust that you will be completely forthright with me. We can always go back to torturing your sweetheart if I feel you are withholding."

I nodded at her as I bit into a slab of smoked salmon.

"First, whom do you serve? Is it the Blades? And do they have anything to do with the return of the dragons?"

"The Blades?" I said, keeping my face as blank as possible. I almost had to suppress a smile: the ancient enemies each suspected the other of doing the impossible. At least now I knew that the Thalmor had nothing to do with the dragons – unless Elenwen was trying to misdirect me.

"Yes, the Blades, and don't tell me you don't know who they are."
"Hmm," I said, striving to appear lost in thought. "I think I remember reading about them. Weren't they the emperor's guard, before the Penitus Oculatus took over that role?"

"Do you think this is some classroom test?" Elenwen demanded. "Do you think I am interested in ancient lore? The only bit of history I care about is that the Blades once acted as protectors of the Dragonborn. It stands to reason that any remaining Blades would seek you out."

"You mean they still exist?"

"Of course they do – well, one or two at least – or I wouldn't be asking you the question. We did our best to wipe them out during the Great War. Now tell me, has anyone contacted you since you were first recognized as the Dragonborn?" Her eyes bore into mine, her eyebrows like twin daggers making a V on her brow.

I was glad to have an honest answer at hand. "Certainly someone contacted me – the Greybeards. They shouted Dovahkiin from High Hrothgar shortly after I used my first shout."

"The Greybeards! Yes, we know about them. They hardly matter, sequestered far up on the Throat of the World."

"Yet you asked me whom I serve. If I serve anyone, it is the Greybeards – or perhaps they serve me, I don't know. And I owe my fealty to Jarl Balgruuf. That is the gods' honest truth."

"Yes, Balgruuf," Elenwen said, seemingly satisfied with my answer about the Blades. "What can you tell us of his plans?"

"That is simple. He plans to stay out of the war."

"Yet he threw my emissaries out of his city. And you interfered with our plans there, and possibly killed one of my justiciars. How can either of you claim to be neutral?"

"My jarl's primary duty is to the people of Whiterun. I'm sure he sought only to protect them from being snatched out of their beds, as any jarl should. As for me, I wanted only to help the officials of Hammerfell capture an outlaw from their country. They offered a nice reward, and it could possibly spare them war and grievous casualties. Preventing people from suffering and dying – call it a weakness of mine, but don't call it choosing sides."

"Well aren't you just too good to be true? But I have no doubt you act with the usual selfishness when you and your loved ones are threatened. And what of Ulfric? Tullius says he believes you have no part in the Stormcloak uprising, though you escaped Helgen with them. We know you have visited Windhelm. Tell me what you know of his plans."

"He shared nothing with me willingly, but I did overhear them planning to attack Falkreath. But that, you already know."

She looked at me for a moment, gauging whether I was telling the full truth.

I was growing tired of this interview. "Listen, Ambassador Elenwen, I can best serve your interests if you let me go about my business. You and the Aldmeri Dominion will have no world to rule if Alduin destroys it first."

"Ah, now we come to it," Elenwen said. "You would have me set you free to fight the dragons. And what of your housecarl?"

"I cannot defeat Alduin without her."
"How very convenient. Do you really expect me to set the pair of you free to battle some Nord myth?"

"A myth? How can you not believe in Alduin when you have the Dragonborn sitting before you? The prophecy foretells that we will appear at the same time."

"We do not credit Nord fairy-tales. This Alduin who is supposedly an avatar of Akatosh himself, the godhood of Talos, this Dragonborn business, it is all barbarian nonsense. And as for this power of the Voice that you wield, we do not fully understand it, but it cannot be from the gods. Akatosh did not send you here or give you this power. It is just some stronger form of magic. In fact, I expect you to help us understand the Thu'um and teach us how to use it. If a mixed-blood such as yourself can wield it, certainly a High Elf can."

"But what about the dragons?" I demanded. "Surely you cannot deny their existence, nor the destruction they are causing! They may not have brought any harm to you yet, but that day cannot be far off."

"Yes, the Nords and their dragons! We cannot explain the serpents' return, yet they are little more than a distraction – and a diverting one! It is quite refreshing to see the Nords and the Imperial Legion turn aside from their usual battles to fight the beasts. But if a dragon comes our way, I am confident my justiciars can handle it. So no, we will not be releasing you to fight dragons, mythical or otherwise. You are too powerful, and we have better uses for you."

"Such as?"

"All in good time. But first, I need a final promise from you. Do you swear on your sweetheart's life to do all that I command and serve the Aldmeri Dominion faithfully?"

"May I take the offer Tullius made, to do battle with Ulfric Stormcloak?"

"So that's what Tullius wanted from you?" She smiled at the thought. "And I don't doubt that you could do it. But no, that offer was never on the table. Tullius was foolish to think we would allow it. Unrest in Skyrim is all very well, whether by the Nords or the Reachmen, but an outright Imperial victory? That, we cannot tolerate. Now, do you swear your allegiance to the Aldmeri Dominion? Time is short and I grow impatient."

I hesitated only for a second. If I refused now, they would go back to torturing Lydia, and I couldn't stand that. "I do," I said, holding Elenwen's gaze. From within her cell, I could hear Lydia protesting through her gag. "So what is it you want me to do?" I asked.

"A simple task, really, one that will prove your loyalty and bind you to us for once and all. You will assassinate the Emperor of Tamriel."


"Certainly, for one of your skills," Elenwen replied. "You will pose as the chef known as the Gourmet. You will poison Titus Mede using this vial of Jarrin root extract." She set a tiny blue vial on the table between us. "When he is dead, you will declare your true identity, claiming you acted out of revenge for your recent capture. Then you will escape and return here by whatever means necessary. If you are captured, it will do no good to place the blame on us – well before the assassination, we will put it about that you have escaped."

I considered for a moment. The plot had a good chance of success, though I had no wish to kill the emperor. A weak puppet of the Aldmeri Dominion he might be, but I would not be the one who
decided his fate. Yet I saw no way out of it. Then I thought, if the emperor was the puppet of the Thalmor, why would they have him assassinated? I made the mistake of voicing this thought to the ambassador.

"You think I will reveal our motives to you?" she demanded. "You have much to learn about how this relationship works. Clearly, the Greybeards and this Dragonborn business have given you ideas above your station. What were you before you were called to High Hrothgar and named Thane of Whiterun? An orphaned mixed-blood shop-girl, wasn't it? Well, now you're our thrall, and if you are lucky you can return to being a shop-girl when this is all over. I gave you the opportunity for great power and you refused. Now you will grovel for what crumbs we give you."

While not forthcoming on the finer points of Thalmor strategy, Elenwen was happy to answer my practical questions and objections about her plot. The chef I was replacing was famous throughout Tamriel for his many cookbooks, yet no one knew what he looked like, or even whether he was male or female, a Breton, a Cyrodiilian, or a Redguard. Only the Thalmor had discovered his true identity: Balagog gro-Nolob, the Orc who was staying at the Nightgate Inn, waiting for his next job. The Thalmor had gotten him out of the way quietly, opening the way for an impostor to take his place.

The Gourmet was scheduled to cook for the wedding of Vittoria Vici of Solitude, Emperor Titus Mede II's niece. The emperor would attend the wedding, and the Gourmet was scheduled to prepare a special tasting course for him two days before the main event. The plans had been put in disarray by the dragon attack, but now the tasting would take place two days hence, in the Emperor's Tower in Castle Dour. The emperor had just arrived in Solitude the day before.

"But how can you expect me to prepare a gourmet meal consisting of many courses?" I asked. "I am no chef."

"Ah, good point," said Elenwen. "Yet you won't need to. Luckily for us, the Gourmet sent all his recipes ahead. He was only scheduled to arrive at mid-day on the day of the tasting to oversee the final preparations. Just taste the dishes, suggest a few additions, say a word here and there in Breton, smack your lips, bark at the kitchen staff, and drink plenty of wine while you work. You'll pass for a chef easily."

"Let's assume I carry out this plan," I said. "What makes you think I'll return here?"

"Oh, I am certain you will," Elenwen replied, "because your sweetheart's life depends on it. Several justiciars will accompany you to Solitude. Others will follow you, and you will be watched right up to the doors of the Emperor's Tower and into its kitchen. Remember, our emissaries have free run of the castle. We even hope to place one in the emperor's chambers during the tasting course. And once the deed is done, you will escape through a hidden postern door whose location I will show you. Then you will report immediately to one of the justiciars waiting just beyond the city gate. Should that prove impossible during your escape, you will return here by noon the day after the tasting."

"Where is here?" I interrupted. "I was unconscious and hooded when your soldiers delivered me."

She smiled at me. "I suppose we cannot keep you in the dark about your whereabouts if we expect you to return here on your own. You are in the basement of our embassy in Skyrim, just a two-hour ride from Solitude. Pay close attention on your way to the city, and you should be able to find your way back. And remember, if you do not, your sweetheart dies. I promise it will be a slow, painful death."

So there it was. I was trapped like a cave bear in a pit. I could think of no further objections to
wiggle out of my role in this plot. It seemed I was now fated to assassinate the emperor. Perhaps he wasn't as powerful as past emperors, now ruling only Cyrodiil, Skyrim, and High Rock, barely a third of the Empire's historic domain. Yet the emperor was still a powerful man. What was more, I had never killed anyone in cold blood before – at least, not anyone who didn't deserve it.

I spent the rest of the time before my departure restoring my disguise with black hair dye and fresh covering for my tattoo. It wouldn't do to walk into Solitude and be recognized as the one who had just been reported missing by the Thalmor. I rested and ate and drank heartily to restore my strength after days of fasting. All the while I pondered the strange twists my journey had taken. My quest to face Alduin now seemed but a distant memory. I chafed to think how many dragons had spawned or how the World Eater's plans had advanced in my absence. Yet outweighing all of these thoughts was my fear for Lydia. I saw no choice but to obey Elenwen's demands, since I had no doubt that her threats were sincere.

I shocked myself by this turn in my thinking. Would I really put the world in further danger for my housecarl? … my friend? … my...? I knew not what to call her. I was sure I could elude my captors once they unbound me and removed the magicka collar. Then I would be free to return to High Hrothgar and get back to my task. But I knew I couldn't do it. Lydia meant the world to me. I hadn't known what that old cliché meant, but now it was literally true. I would let Alduin bring about the destruction of the world before I let the Thalmor further harm Lydia.

I looked back over the previous weeks and months, the accidental touches while sharing camp chores, the idle glances as we rode along together. The many times we had saved each other's lives. Our trials and adventures had forged a deeper bond between us than the usual courtship rituals. Then I remembered her last words to me – "It's about time, my thane." Had she loved me in silence all this time?

They kept us apart while we awaited the time of my departure. Elenwen had me bound and gagged at night, and a close watch kept on both Lydia and me in the daytime. Finally the time was near, and I demanded to see Lydia before we left. "I need to know that she is alive and well treated before I depart on your mission," I told Elenwen.

The ambassador ushered me into Lydia's cell, stepping in close behind me. Lydia sat slumped over on the stool, two guards standing behind her, blades at the ready. She seemed to have suffered no further harm, though the many welts covering her arms and legs were still red and sore-looking, despite Naris' efforts to heal them. I wished I could have done the job myself.

Lydia looked up at me reproachfully as the guard took the gag from her mouth. "You have disgraced me, my thane," she said. "I should have died a good death for you, and I would have. If only I hadn't weakened and screamed."

"Yet little good your death would have done," I said, "for they would soon have turned their vile implements on me. I doubt I could have held out as long as you did. You were brave! You have lost no honor."

"We both should have died before betraying our jarl and the people of Skyrim."

"You are probably right," I said. "But imagine if the situation were reversed. Could you have watched as they flayed me alive?" I let her ponder that for a moment, seeing the doubt in her eyes. "I thought not. So do not judge me too harshly. Elenwen has promised to treat you well while I am away."
"I care not how I am treated, I am so ashamed," she said. "But I pray for your safe return."

"As do I, my ... friend," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I promise you, I will return." Her hands were bound, so we could not hug. I would not kiss her in front of Elenwen. I couldn't say what I wanted to – that all was not as it seemed, that I would get us out of this mess, but I tried to communicate as much with a long look into her eyes.

Elenwen interrupted us. "Ah, young love! How charming, really! Yet I believe you will find as you grow older, Deirdre, that the things we love are also the source of our greatest weakness. Better by far to take our pleasures where we can and move on, letting nothing gain too great a hold on us. But that wisdom can only come through years of bitter experience – experience which you are gaining even now." She gave a little smile as she said it.

It is often said that our greatest strengths are also our greatest weaknesses. But in that moment, as I pondered Elenwen's callous words, I wondered whether it could also be true that our greatest weaknesses were at the same time our greatest strengths. Talos knew, I needed strength from somewhere.

Our wagon pulled up directly before the doors of the Emperor's Tower. No getting down and walking from the city gate for the Gourmet, who was far too important for that. I sat on the front seat between the drayman – a human agent of the Thalmor – and an elf disguised as a chef's assistant. I wore a chef's hat Elenwen had given me and a smock over my mage's robes. In the back, under a tarp that made them look like lumpy sacks of potatoes, several Thalmor fighters lay hidden. I had seen many more justiciars ranging ahead, behind, and to the sides of our wagon as we made our way here. Getting the Dragonborn unwillingly to Solitude was quite an operation.

Even with all these precautions, Sanyon, the Altmer next to me, waited until just before we came in sight of the city to undo my binds and remove the magicka collar.

We got down from the wagon and I presented the guard outside the Emperor's Tower with my writ inviting me to cook for Titus Mede. While he went over it, I looked up at the scene of Lydia's and my last moments of freedom. The thrill of that victory over the dragons, the roar of the crowd, Lydia's and my first and only kiss – they seemed to belong to another lifetime. I wrenched my thoughts back to the present with difficulty. I needed my wits about me if I was to carry off this scheme.

"It's about time you got here," said the guard, an officer in the Penitus Oculatus, the emperor's special security force. "The cook is about out of her head with worry."

"I'm here now," I said. "The tasting will come off magnificently, or I'm not the Gourmet."

"I'll wait for you just outside the city gate," the drayman said to me before we went in. Then, under his breath, he added, "And don't be late, or you know what will happen." He leered at me as he said it, as if hoping I'd run and he would get to take part in whatever the Thalmor had planned for Lydia should I break my vow.

The guard led me into the tower and up a flight of stairs. Sanyon followed behind, doing his best to play the humble chef's assistant. At the landing on the second floor, the guard led us to the left into a bustling kitchen. To the right of the landing, twin oak doors closed off the room beyond – the
emperor's dining room, I assumed.

"Praise the Eight, you're here!" the cook exclaimed as we entered. She was a plump woman with blonde curls poking damply out of her cook's cap. "I've had so many questions for you!"

"Were my recipes unclear?" I asked, trying to adopt the haughty tones I imagined an acclaimed chef would use.

"No, very helpful," she said, taken aback. "But it never hurts to make double sure, especially if you can speak to an eminence such as yourself in person."

"Well, I'm sure everything will be fine," I said. "It smells heavenly in here." I wasn't feigning my appreciation for the smells coming from the kitchen. In one great fireplace, a whole suckling pig was roasting. In another, something wonderful was braising in a heavy pot. Assistant cooks ran here and there, sautéing onions on a wood stove, chopping vegetables, plucking herbs, rolling out pastry dough. A dozen blackbirds flitted in a cage nearby. I was so used to the hard fare of my captivity that my mouth began to water. And to think, this was all for the benefit of one man, and perhaps a few guests.

"Sanyon, help these cooks with their preparations," I ordered. "And chef..."

"Not a chef, ma'am, just a cook. Gianna's the name."

"Well, Gianna, bring me some wine, then we'll begin tasting and adjusting."

Gianna's modesty was unwarranted, as it turned out. She and her kitchen crew were well up to the task of preparing the Gourmet's tasting menu. And Sanyon had some skill with kitchen knives, playing the part of the chef's assistant well. He even flirted with Gianna's helpers. I had only to move from dish to dish, suggesting an addition here and there.

"How about a Giant's Toe in this braising liquid?" I said. Gianna looked at me skeptically, but Sanyon nodded with enthusiasm. "Go ahead," I said, appearing to take a long quaff from my goblet. "You don't doubt the Gourmet, do you? And let's try some vampire dust sprinkled over the blackbirds once you've got them in that pie." When her back was turned I dumped my wine into a dirty pot nearby. I still needed to keep my wits about me.

Finally, the hour for the tasting course approached and everything was nearly ready. "Now," I said, "you'll be serving the soup first, am I right?"

"Yes, chef, as you instructed," Gianna said. "Le Potage du l'Gourmet, your specialty."

"Excellent," I said. "And I have brought my secret ingredient, to be added at the very last moment." I pulled the vial of Jarrin root from my robes and handed it to Gianna.

"Hmm, what is it?" she asked, removing the stopper from the vial and sniffing at it.

"If I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret ingredient, would it?" I said. "Wait, don't taste it! It ... it's measured to the exact amount my recipe requires."

Gianna didn't seem to notice how flustered I was as she emptied the vial into the soup pot. I watched with deepening regret as she and a helper transferred the soup to a gold-filigreed tureen. Could I really go through with Elenwen's plot? Yet what choice did I have? Then I remembered Master Aren in Labyrinthian, pleading with the ghosts of his friends to forgive him because he didn't have a choice. Yet there is always a choice.
Gianna placed the tureen and a serving ladle on a tray and made to pick it up. "Wait," I said. "I always like to present the first course myself." I took up the tray and turned toward the door, Sanyon following me. Gianna held a hand out to the High Elf. "We should remain here. The emperor always says too many cooks spoil the party. He likes to dine alone or with just a few friends. I don't know how he'll manage the wedding banquet, with the throngs we are expecting!"

"But I am the Gourmet's trusted assistant," Sanyon protested. "I aid her in everything, even serving!"

"You heard the cook," said the guard outside the door. "No one goes in but the Gourmet."

"Come," said Gianna, "we need your help in here with the next course. Those blackbirds aren't going to fly themselves into that pie."

As I walked across the hall, the tray held before me, I thought about my predicament and Elenwen's words about love being a weakness. Yet I did not feel my love for Lydia was a weakness, though I knew it had helped to put me in this situation. My love for her was a glowing ball in my chest, sending warmth through my body, and with it, the certainty that we would soon be reunited. A great calm settled over me, and I knew that somehow I would get us out of this. With Sanyon out of the way, it would be easier.

The guard opened the twin oak doors for me and ushered me into the small dining room. "May I present the Gourmet," he said, and shut the door behind me.

The emperor was a tall man with a balding pate and a gray beard. He wore a closely-woven tunic with a rich fur collar, intricately decorated with fine needlework. Two young women were seated at table with him: a noblewoman with dark brown hair and another in robes even more fine than the emperor's. She wore a ruby circlet on her brow.

"Your Grace," I said, giving as much of a curtsy as I could manage while carrying the tureen on its tray.

"Ah, there you are," the emperor said, "the Gourmet herself. Strange, I wasn't expecting one so young ... or so female. But come, we are eager to try your creations. Oh, but I am rude, may I present my niece, Vittoria Vici, for whom we are throwing this to-do. And of course, Jarl Elisif the Fair, I don't think you've had the pleasure."

I bowed my head slightly to each. The Fair was an apt appellation for Elisif – she had fine features, striking blue eyes, and luxuriant honey-blonde hair. Though a widow, she was still young, not more than one or two and twenty. I could see why Torygg had chosen her for his queen. But did that qualify her to rule over the people of Haafingar Hold, much less Skyrim?

"I am pleased to serve my specialty, Le Potage du l'Gourmet," I said. I made to serve the emperor first.

"Now, now, ladies first," the emperor said.

"Of course, silly me!" I replied. "It's just that I've never served an emperor before." Would I end the night with not just Titus Mede's blood on my hands, but that of his niece and Jarl Elisif as well?

"So, even the famous Gourmet gets nervous on these occasions of state!" the emperor exclaimed as I held the tray so Elisif could serve herself. "Just relax. I don't bite, or not much anyway."

I took the tray to Vittoria and then to the emperor, letting them serve themselves from the tureen, as was proper in noble households. I had read that in a book somewhere. Then I set the tray on a
sideboard and waited. Elenwen had said that one tiny drop would kill the strongest man. My heart
beat rapidly while I pretended to wait on the emperor rendering his verdict.

First, there was a prayer. "Let us give thanks to the Eight for what we are about to receive," Titus
Mede intoned as the three held hands. When the blessing was done, the emperor took up his spoon
and plunged it eagerly into his bowl.

I could not help myself. "Wait! Don't!" I said, trying not to shout. I couldn't let Sanyon or any other
Thalmor hear me. I didn't really know what I was doing – I just had to trust that deep certainty that
all would come out right in the end, though at the moment, I didn't see how.

The three diners looked up at me in surprise. "Why?" demanded the emperor. "What is the
meaning of this?"

"The soup," I said. "It's poisoned."

Three spoons clattered to the table, and the emperor stared at me, perplexed. "But if you meant to
poison me, why speak up now?"

"Because I could not go through with it, though the Thalmor are forcing me to it."

If the emperor was surprised at this revelation, he did not show it. Elisif, however, could not
contain her shock.

"The Thalmor!" she exclaimed. "But the White-Gold Concordat! We are at peace!"

The emperor kept his eyes on me, as if assessing an opponent, while he addressed Elisif. "And a
strange, fitful kind of peace it is. But you are young, Elisif, and little of your training for the high
society of Solitude has prepared you to understand relations between the Empire and the Aldmeri
Dominion. I will have to explain more of it to you one day, especially if you are crowned High
Queen of Skyrim."

"I am learning, your grace, as fast as I can," she said, her head bowed. "My husband's death made
me see that being a queen is no childhood fairytale. I will learn what it takes to be a jarl, and to be
high queen as well."

"Excellent," the emperor said. "So you are more than just a pretty face. But now this one had better
explain herself," he said, rising stiffly from his seat and facing me. Now I saw how old he was,
weak even. He had once been tall, but now he leaned on the table for support. I had to remind
myself that this was the man who had rallied the Legion to drive the Aldmeri forces from the
Imperial City. Yet he was also the man who bargained away Skyrim's freedom to reach peace with
the elves.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I will hazard you're not the Gourmet."

"You are right," I said, doffing my chef's hat. "I am no chef. I am Deirdre Morningsong, Thane of
Whiterun, and the Dragonborn."

Now it was the emperor's turn to be shocked. "The Dragonborn! Tullius told me he handed you
over to Elenwen."

Vittoria interrupted. "You don't much resemble the likeness on those handbills."

I took up a cloth napkin and dipped it in a ewer, using it to wipe the paste from around my eye. It
felt good to be clean of it after so long. "Do you believe me now?" I asked. "I dare not shout to
Elisif spoke up. "I should have mentioned it earlier, but we received word at the palace just before I came here. The Dragonborn broke out of the Thalmor embassy this morning." She turned to me. "And now you would exact revenge for your imprisonment by murdering our emperor."

"That's what the Thalmor wanted me to proclaim once the deed was done. Anything to deflect the blame from them."

"Elisif," the emperor said, "young Deirdre here may be powerful, yet I doubt she has the resources to concoct such a plot: impersonating the Gourmet, gaining access to our kitchens. No, she at least had help in this. But why?" he said, turning to me. "Why would you do this, or even go as far as you did? You're free now, after all."

"Yet they still have my housecarl, whom I hold dear."

"Yes, the whole city saw," Vittoria put in. I ignored her.

"And a Thalmor agent is in your kitchen, disguised as the Gourmet's assistant. I'm sure he is wondering what is taking me so long to return. That poison is supposed to work instantly. If I am not back at the embassy by noon tomorrow having accomplished this deed, Lydia dies. Her life is in my hands, and now it is in yours."

"A pity ... but what would you have me do?"

"If you truly are the ruler of this Empire, then demand that the Thalmor free Lydia. As a loyal retainer of Whiterun, she is one of your sworn subjects."

For just an instant, I saw doubt and fear in the emperor's eyes. In that moment I knew he did not rule the Empire. It was as the Stormcloaks said – he was nothing more than a puppet king. Then his indecision passed and he looked at me more sternly.

"Yes, both of you are loyal to Jarl Balgruuf, but is Balgruuf loyal to the Empire? He can't sit on the fence during this rebellion and then expect Imperial protection for his retainers. Nor can you. You were foolish to reject Tullius' offer."

"That offer was not Tullius' to make. I believe Elenwen said he was foolish to even entertain the possibility."

The emperor waved his hand at me, then returned to his chair. He tried to make it seem the action of a ruler dismissing an annoying subject, but behind it I could see he was just a frail old man. Yet one not without his own power.

"I should clap you in chains for daring to question my authority," he said, frowning up at me.

"Your grace," I said, trying to soften my tone, but not entirely succeeding, "should I remind you that I spared your life just now?"

"Protecting the life of the emperor is no more than I expect from my subjects," he said with another wave of his hand.

"Yet this city owes its continued existence to Lydia and me. Surely both you and Jarl Elisif owe us some obligation."

Elisif looked down at the table. "I do," she said. "Yet how do I know I can trust you? You are
rumored to have formed an alliance with that barbarian who murdered my husband. And now you've attempted to poison our emperor."

"Even Tullius knows I did not join the Stormcloaks," I said. "I want no part of this civil war. I want only to free my housecarl and get back to hunting dragons. And you just saw me stop the emperor from eating that soup."

Elisif kept looking at the table, clearly at a loss. Meanwhile the emperor eyed me, making some calculation. "Perhaps it's time you learned you have to make choices in this life. It's a rare person who gets everything they want – Julianos knows I haven't. So, if it's hunting dragons you're after, then you are free to walk out that door and go about your business."

"That, I cannot do. The Thalmor will know I have failed in my mission, and Lydia will die a terrible death."

"So, you must appear to have made a faithful attempt at my assassination? I believe I can help you with that. Guard!"

I could only stare at the emperor as the guard rushed in. "Yes, your grace?" the guard asked, looking from one to the other of us.

Somehow I wasn't quite aware of what I was doing. I had drawn my breath and braced myself to shout at the emperor, all without knowing it. Elisif and Vittoria were in the path of my shout as well.

"What?" Titus Mede demanded. "Would you use your Voice on us? Tullius told me of your exploits on the castle walls, and Elisif and Vittoria witnessed it for themselves. I have no doubt that we are in your power. But would you use it?"

I admit it, I was sorely tempted. I had spared Titus Mede's life and saved Jarl Elisif's city, yet now they would hand me back to the Thalmor. The emperor waited calmly for me to make my decision, but Vittoria and Elisif both looked at me in fear. Could I murder them all in cold blood?

"By rights, your lives should be mine to do with as I will, since I saved you once," I said. "But I will not."

"Ah, so wisdom is not lost on your youth. You will come to realize that the greater one's power becomes, the more difficult the decisions one must make. Do you think it was easy for me to sign the White-Gold Concordat? I had just led the rout of the Aldmeri forces, yet at the cost of many lives, including both my sons. Do you think my hand was quick to sign that damnable piece of parchment? Yet it was the only decision I could make."

"So, what now?" I asked.

"I will hand you over to the Thalmor. If you tell me the name of the poison you used, I will claim to have detected it with my extraordinary sense of smell. But first, I will leave you with one thought, which may serve some use if you are able to escape the Thalmor's clutches. It is this: there is a war coming, though not the one you might expect. This Stormcloak business is but a senseless distraction."

Titus Mede gave a sign and the guard bound my hands behind my back.

"Junius," the emperor said, "tie up that elf in the kitchen, then send word to Rulindil in the Thalmor headquarters to come here immediately."
We sat awkwardly while all this was accomplished, the emperor asking me questions about my part in foiling the Thalmor plot in Whiterun. It seemed he knew all about my actions since I returned to Skyrim. "I sought only to prevent further war for Hammerfell," I said.

"Yet you unwittingly hastened the day when war will return to the Empire. We suspect that the Aldmeri Dominion will turn their attention to us, having had their aspirations in Hammerfell frustrated."

Just then Junius returned, ushering a justiciar in black wizard's robes into the room. I recognized him as one of the elves I had seen at the embassy, occasionally conferring with Elenwen in hushed tones. Behind him came another Imperial guard dragging Sanyon, his hands now bound like mine, followed by another Altmer guard.

"Ah, Rulindil," the emperor said, his voice taking on a commanding tone. Perhaps the Thalmor allowed the emperor to pretend in public that he retained some semblance of power. "I have uncovered a plot on my life and unmasked my assailant as the Dragonborn. I understand she recently escaped your dungeon. I expect you and Elenwen to be more careful with dangerous criminals in future."

He went on to outline the plot he had uncovered with his sensitive nose. It was fascinating, watching the dance he danced with the Thalmor emissary, each playing his part, the emperor pretending to know nothing of what I had just told him, and Rulindil pretending to be as shocked by the plot as the emperor. Elisif watched from across the table, no doubt learning valuable lessons in the treachery of diplomacy.

"To think, an Altmer was involved in such treason!" Rulindil exclaimed, cuffing Sanyon with the back of his glove. Sanyon played the part of an apprehended villain well.

"You may take the Dragonborn if you promise not to let her escape again," the emperor said. "We will see that her accomplice receives justice."

Rulindil had no choice but to let the emperor have his way – to protest in order to save Sanyon would raise the emperor's suspicions. Sanyon was loyal to the end, following the guard meekly from the room.

"I am surprised you have not gagged the Dragonborn," Rulindil said, eyeing me suspiciously. "How did you get one so powerful to relent?"

"Perhaps she knows that even she could not fight her way out of such a heavily guarded castle," Titus Mede replied, but Rulindil still didn't seem satisfied.

"Well, we had best gag her now," he said, and the Altmer guard slipped a kerchief over my head and forced it into my mouth.

The justiciars led me out of the Emperor's Tower and into a waiting wagon. Rulindil got up beside me, the drayman flicked the reins, and we were off, back to the captivity I had nearly escaped.

Rulindil looked at me with a mixture of disapproval and satisfaction. "Tut, tut," he said, shaking his head. "Elenwen will not be happy with your failure."
And indeed, Elenwen was far from happy.

"You had Titus Mede and that sniveling Jarl Elisif in your power, and yet they still live," the ambassador said, glaring across her desk at me as a guard removed my gag. She closed a thin tome she had been reading when we came in, then put it in a drawer and locked it.

We sat in Elenwen's solar, a floor above the dungeon. Rulindil stood nearby. I still had my hands bound behind my back and wore the magicka collar Rulindil had fitted around my neck after we left Solitude.

"I followed your instructions to the letter," I said. "I poisoned the soup and delivered it to the emperor myself. I cannot be blamed if he detected your poison with his sensitive nose."

"Jarrin root is reputed to be nearly odorless and tasteless," she said, her eyes boring into mine, searching for any hint of treachery.

"I see you've neglected your alchemy. Jarrin root is undetectable when mixed with water, but its response to other ingredients is unpredictable."

"You knew this was a fault in my plan, yet you didn't alert me to it? This is not the loyal service I expect from my thrall! Yet once the poison failed, you were in command of your full powers. Surely one who can dispatch two fearsome dragons can overcome a frail old man and his guards."

"You said nothing of using force against the emperor. I thought it best to follow your orders to the smallest detail."

Elenwen eyed me for a moment. "Disingenuity will get you nowhere. I know you committed some treachery in the Emperor's Tower. Now you will see the price your sweetheart has paid for your mistake." She paused, noticing the look of shock on my face. "What, did you think I had not heard of your betrayal before now? Rulindil sent a rider the instant he heard the emperor still lived. That message arrived here hours ago. And Naris can work quickly when he needs to. I am quite pleased with his services, though you may not be. Bring her!"

No, they couldn't have, I told myself as the guard pulled me to my feet. If they had murdered Lydia, then they had lost their hold over me. Or perhaps they had done something so terrible that death would seem merciful by comparison.

The guard led me downstairs, then pushed me into Lydia's cell. At first, it didn't seem too bad. She was manacled to the cell's back wall, her head slumped forward. She still lived, at least. New welts showed red up and down her legs, but that wasn't the worst. When she lifted her head, I saw that Naris had resorted to brute force in addition to his implement of pain. Her nose was bloodied and one eye blackened and swollen shut. And that was still far from the worst – those bruises could
easily be healed. Then I noticed her left hand. It was bandaged crudely, and blood dripped from it. Still, I thought she smiled when she saw me.

"I told you I would return," I said, trying to smile as well. She said nothing. "Your hand..."

"It's nothing," she managed to say, her voice hoarse and weak. "It's only my shield hand... My little finger ... they took it." Then her head slumped forward once more.

"Sparing her sword hand ... such mercy!" Elenwen said. "I'll have to speak with Naris about that."

"Mercy! You call that mercy?" I didn't know what was happening to my body. I was breathing rapidly, yet I couldn't get enough air. I seemed to float above the cell, looking down on myself and Lydia, trapped in a dungeon with Altmer all around us. A wild thought took me – I would turn on Elenwen, who stood behind me, and shout her out of the cell. Maybe her neck would break as she flew into the wall. Or a Fire Breath shout. Surely that would kill her, unprepared as she was. They would kill Lydia then, and I would fight them until they were forced to kill me, and then it would all be over.

But no, this was madness. I had felt so sure I was doing the right thing when I showed mercy to the emperor, and that feeling hadn't abandoned me entirely, even now. I wouldn't give up. I just needed to keep us both alive until I could discover how to get us out of here.

"I beg you," I said, "don't punish her further. I'm the one to blame – punish me if you must."

"Oh, there's no need to beg," Elenwen said. "I wouldn't dream of letting you off without tasting the consequences of your misdeeds. Take her!"

Once again they gagged me, then dragged me from the cell and into the larger chamber beyond, where they had tortured Lydia. Now it was my turn to be manacled to the torture tree, but first they stripped me out of my arch-mage's robes. This was quite a procedure – they feared to let my hands free even for an instant, lest I rip the gag from my mouth and shout them to death. One guard stood on either side of me holding my arms as another stood behind me and undid the binds on my hands. Then they held my arms outstretched as the third guard pulled the robes off me, throwing them hastily into a corner. The guards only relaxed once they had the manacles locked tightly around my wrists, then went about stripping me out of my boots and breeches.

I quickly discovered that when it came to torture, I was no Lydia. The rings were just that much too high, so that I had to stand on tiptoes or else hang from my wrists in the shackles. Even just standing was a torment. And that was just the beginning. Naris applied his wand to my inner arm. The pain was instantly unbearable. I clenched my teeth into the gag and tried not to cry out.

"Oh, very good, try to remain strong," the torturer said, removing the device from my arm. He held it aloft for a moment, pondering where to apply it next, then pressed it against my inner thigh. There was no tolerating this pain. I screamed. Through the gag it came out as a muffled shriek. And this, I knew, was only the beginning.

I was no stranger to pain. In battle I had been cut, burned, frozen, and shocked. Yet those hurts were as nothing compared to this agony. Perhaps the heat of battle somehow kept pain at a distance. Too, it seemed that the torture wand did something more than a mere weapon or spell. It delivered pure concentrated pain, most excruciatingly to the point on which it was pressed, but radiating throughout its victim's body. I was one vibrating being of torment, from the tips of my toes to the roots of my hair.

Elenwen broke in when Naris pulled the wand away. "Ah, I see you have nothing of your
sweetheart's constitution. She didn't even cry out as Naris sawed through the bone of her finger. But you – I can see that the pain will soon break your mind." She gestured to one of her guards to remove my gag. "So now you will tell me what I need to know, or Naris will make you feel pain a thousand times worse than you already have."

I didn't see how that was possible, yet I didn't want to repeat the experience I had just been through. "What do you need to know?" I asked.

"Tell me about the dragons."

"I already told you, I am not in league with them. I want only to stop them."

"Yes, you said that. Still, you held something back. Now, tell me all you know of them, and I will judge whether you are honest or no."

She said she wanted everything, and I gave it to her – or almost. I began with Alduin at Helgen, what it was like seeing the World Eater for the first time. Then the fight with Mirmulnir, and how it felt to absorb a dragon's soul. Witnessing Alduin resurrecting Sahloknir. Learning about the prophecy of the World Eater's return and my part in it. I even recited verses in Dovah from the Song of the Dragonborn. Then I gave her advice on how the justiciars might best defeat a dragon should they encounter one. It really was quite a long disquisition. Anything to seem helpful – anything to keep that wand of pain away.

"Yes, yes, enough!" Elenwen exclaimed, interrupting me as I went into detail on the exact size and materials for shields that would protect her fighters from dragon's breath. "I see you will talk forever if it keeps Naris away. But I know you still hold something back."

"What?" I asked. "I've told you everything I know about the dragons. There is nothing more." And it was true. I had told her everything I knew, save that the Blades had given me some of this information.

"Yet we now have proof that you are in league with the dragons."

"Proof? There can be no proof for a thing that does not exist."

"Yesterday, while you were pretending to be the Gourmet and failing to poison Titus Mede, a dragon attacked the justiciars who escorted you to Solitude. Could that be a coincidence? We have had no trouble with the dragons before now."

"But how could I have told the dragon where your fighters would be?"

"Of course I don't know, but that is what you are going to tell me. You have a connection with the dragons, you speak their language. Perhaps absorbing their souls gives you a means of communicating with them through the plane of Aetherius. I know not, but you will tell me. And the sooner you do, the less pain there will be."

"You have to believe me, the only thing I have to do with the dragons is to stop them. If I had been free, perhaps that dragon wouldn't have lived to attack your forces."

"So now you threaten me? Your freedom, or there will be another dragon attack? Naris, the wand!"

"No, wait!" I exclaimed, trying not to plead. My groping mind hit on something – something too devious to be true. Yet, could it be? "You're right," I said. "Alduin and I are connected, I know not how. He comes to me in my dreams. I do not control him, nor his dragons. Yet, somehow, he can track my movements. He must have seen that you held me captive, then sent his dragon against
your fighters in hopes that you would come to just this conclusion, then execute me in your anger. With me out of the way, his path to the world's destruction is clear."

"You think highly of yourself, don't you, with all this talk of saving the world? No, I don't believe it for a minute. I think you are working with the dragons, perhaps even the Blades."

"But how could I be working with the dragons? I have slain nearly a dozen of them. Your own emissaries saw us defeat two of the serpents in Solitude."

"Do you take me for a fool, that I would believe this Dragonborn legend you've invented for yourself? Who has seen these dozen victories of which you speak? It is true that you managed to slay two dragons at Castle Dour, but I believe that is part of the plot. Every leader knows that sacrifices must be made to achieve victory. Even last night, we sacrificed Sanyon to carry on this charade of cooperation with the Empire. It is no different with the Blades. Two of their dragons sacrificed themselves to give the appearance that you oppose them. How else to explain your victory? I don't believe this Dragonborn nonsense far enough to think you could defeat two of the beasts."

"Even if the Blades do control the dragons, why would they use them to wreak destruction on Skyrim?"

"Who knows how people will react when stripped of their last shred of power and pushed into a corner? The Blades always were a paranoid, secretive sect. Perhaps they want to get back at the Empire for replacing them with the Penitus Oculatus."

I was speechless. Elenwen had fit bits of truth together with bits of fantasy, concocting an explanation that made sense to her, no matter how far-fetched. But was it any less far-fetched to think that I was the Dragonborn, fated to face Alduin in a contest for the very world? No, in a time when the dragons had returned to Skyrim, nothing was beyond belief.

"So, one last time," Elenwen said, "tell me what you have to do with the dragons, and where the Blades fit in."

I could think of nothing else to say; that bit about Alduin was my last desperate attempt to say something that would satisfy her. "I can tell you no more, because there is nothing more to tell."

"Very well," Elenwen said, with a mock sigh. "Difficult as it is for me to witness the suffering of others, you've forced me to it. Just remember, this is your choice, not mine. Naris, you know what to do."

A guard jammed the gag back into my mouth and tightened it. Then Naris approached me again, a disgusting leer on his face, and slid the wand between my legs and up beneath my shift, toward my privates. "No, you beast, not like that!" Elenwen broke in. "You know I have forbidden it."

"But Ambassador," he said, almost pleading. "The pain is so much more intense when applied directly to her, and inside her."

Elenwen cuffed him across the back of the head. "No!" she said. "I will not have it! Too, this one will break without going to such extremes, I can feel it."

"Very well," Naris said, chastened. I shuddered as he took the wand away.

Elenwen turned to me. "You see, I can show mercy, and I would show you even greater mercy if you would only trust me. We females must stick together, whether Altmer or Breton. I would be your friend, yet still you deny me. Naris, proceed, and no more barbarity."
If applying the wand directly to my privates was forbidden, applying it through the flimsy protection afforded by my shift was not. Naris pressed the instrument against my belly, then slid it slowly down toward my crotch. The pain was intense, and grew from there. Just when I thought it was impossible to feel more pain, I found that I could. I shut my eyes against the horrible leer of the torturer and screamed. I went on screaming into the gag until it seemed I was nothing but a scream in the dark.

I said before that the pain I felt at the beginning of my torture was unbearable. And this pain was more unbearable still. In truth, we either bear our portion of pain, or we die. Yet I found a third way. I went off somewhere – to a place in my mind, or another plane of Mundus, I know not which.

I was with Lydia. We walked hand in hand in a beautiful sun-dappled forest, a mix of pine, beech, and maple. Somehow it was both spring and fall, with purple columbines and larkspurs sprinkled across the sunny openings and wet places amidst the trees, while the maple and beech leaves shone red and yellow. Warblers and thrushes flitted about, their songs filling the forest. Lydia wore a short tunic belted at the waist, while I wore the dress I had bought long ago in Whiterun. Lydia's hair had grown longer, falling to her shoulders, held in place by a simple silver circlet. It was warm, and we both went barefoot.

As we walked I looked often into her eyes. I felt I could hold their gaze forever. I knew not what we talked of, save that it was of happy things. I don't know how long this lasted; I only knew I didn't want it to end, though even in that dream-place I knew that it must, that eventually a darker reality would drag me back to the waking world.

Then something intruded that I did not expect. We came to a clearing, and in it was Alduin. "Dovahkiin," he said, "why do you suffer needlessly? Make a pledge to join me, and I will smash your captors and free you and your companion."

Whatever this dream-place was, I knew it was not real, or Lydia would have made some move to slay our adversary by now.

"You know I cannot join you, World Eater," I said. I felt quite calm.

"Still you would cling to this barbaric world? The bestiality of these elves astounds me. The dov make a quick end to our adversaries, none of this vile torture."

"I can think of one who did not die quickly at your dragons' hands."

He went on, ignoring me. "And these High Elves, such hubris, styling themselves as kin to the gods. One such as you should not be sullied by such barbarity."

"One such as I? I thought I was not worthy of the name, dovah. Zu'u koraav nid nol dov do hi, I believe you said."

"Ah, but you have achieved much since that day. What you did to my lieutenants in Solitude – I did not believe it possible. And you even begin to speak our tongue. No, you have proven yourself worthy of joining our ranks. Together, we will create a new world, one without suffering and pain."

I looked at him for a moment. His slitted eyes stared back at me, baleful as ever. "Alduin, destroyer of worlds, will create a world without suffering? No, this is not to be believed. My fate is bound to this world, come what may."

"Such idealism! It will lead you to a bad end. I do not see how you will escape these beasts. They
cannot let you live."

With that, the great serpent launched himself into the sky and was soon lost over the trees surrounding the clearing. I was just turning toward Lydia, hoping to continue our pleasant walk, when I came awake spluttering in the Thalmor dungeon. A guard was setting a bucket down next to the barrel, having just thrown water over me. My gag was soaked and I struggled to breathe through it, though I was glad to have any water at all. The extremity of pain was gone, and I now felt dozens of pinpricks all over my body, most especially on the inside of my thighs, on the small of my back, and on my neck just above the magicka collar.

"Ah, there you are," Elenwen said. "We thought we had lost you for a moment. It's good to see that hateful glare in your eyes. It means you are still in your right mind, and able to give us further information."

My look must have disconcerted her, because she stepped back and to the side a few paces, out of a clear line of my Voice. Then she had the guards bind my head to a board so I could look only straight ahead. Only then did they remove my gag. It took me a moment to recover my speech, while Elenwen paced impatiently about the room, always out of line of a shout.

I remembered she wanted something from me, but my dream had driven it from my mind. "Forgive me," I said, "but I've lost the thread of our conversation. What were you asking?"

"Oh, very polite," she sneered. "Do not mock me. The Blades! You were about to tell me what you know of them."

I feigned another coughing fit while I pondered what bit of information I could give her. There had to be something, anything to keep that wand away. I didn't think I could bear another trial. "Water," I croaked.

"Very well," Elenwen said, "I suppose we do need to leave you your ability to speak." A guard brought a dipper of water from the barrel and held it up for me to drink. Finally there could be no further delay.

"I believe I did meet one of these Blades. I'm not sure. She carried a thin, curved sword. Wasn't that the mark of their order?"

Elenwen couldn't keep the look of anticipation off her face. "Where did you meet this woman? What did she look like? Did she give you her name?"

"Riverwood. In a camp just outside the village."

"Riverwood? That seems an out-of-the-way place for the Blades. Still, they are in hiding. What did she look like?"

"Blonde. Breton. A strong fighter, though advancing in years. She told me her name ... what was it? Yvette, I think."

"Ha! Don't think you can play games with me. Or perhaps she wanted to keep her true identity hidden from you. That is Delphine, supposedly the last of the Blades, or I'm not an Altmer. So, she is in Skyrim. We suspected as much. Tell me, what did you have to do with her?"

"When I witnessed Alduin resurrecting Sahloknir, she was the one who led me to the dragonmound. She had a map, and could predict the locations of the next resurrections."

"So it's true! The Blades and the dragons, they are working together somehow."
"Yet she helped me slay Sahloknir."

"Hmmm. So you say. But who witnessed this battle?"

"Only Lydia."

"Very convenient. What else did she tell you about the Blades? What are their plans? What do they intend to do with the dragons? Did she mention a man named Esbern?"

"No, she told me nothing else. She wouldn't even tell me where she got that map. I knew she was hiding something from me. Believe me, I wanted to know what she knew about the dragons as badly as you do. I thought it might help in my hunt for Alduin."

She considered that for a moment. "Where is she now?"

"I don't know. The last I saw her was a month ago. She was headed back to her camp outside Riverwood, but she could be anywhere by now."

"Very well," Elenwen said, surprising me. I had expected the questioning to continue, and doubted I could satisfy her curiosity without revealing more than I wanted. "I still don't believe you've told us everything, but now we must question another prisoner. We will get back to you, have no doubt. While you nurse your hurts, ponder carefully the wisdom of withholding information from me. You think you have experienced pain so far, but we have only begun." She turned to a guard. "Gag her and return her to her cell. Then bring the new prisoner."

The guard did as she said. When he led me past Lydia's cell, I saw that she still hung by manacles from the wall, seemingly unconscious. The guard pushed me, none too gently, into my cell, then locked the barred door behind me. I was so glad to be free of the torturer I didn't mind being locked in this dank, cramped place. At least it had a cot on which to sit, and a slop bucket in the corner. Yet I found I had no need to relieve myself – that had happened at some point during my interrogation when I was too senseless to notice.

I sat on the cot and tried to collect my thoughts. I knew I needed to devise a plan to get us out of here, yet my mind kept drifting off, alternately to the horror and pain of my inquisition, then to the pleasure of that dream-place. For now, it seemed enough just to sit here and enjoy the relative lack of torment, though my welts still tingled and burned. I almost regretted not accepting Alduin's offer. To escape this pain forever and take Lydia with me, to put an end to these damned elves – it almost seemed worth the price of the world itself. A price others would pay, not I, I reminded myself. This is the sad truth: there was little heroism in my choice to deny Alduin. Had I trusted the World Eater to make good on his offer, I might have taken it.

My scattered thoughts were interrupted by the guard opening the door of the cell beyond mine. "You, prisoner! It's your turn."

"No, I've already told you everything I know!" came a male voice.

"Naris will see about that." A moment later the guard led a young Breton in a tattered tunic past my cell. His hands weren't even bound, he posed so little threat.

"No, please no!" the prisoner screamed, and I heard the manacles clamping shut. "I heard what you did to that poor girl. I'll tell you everything you need to know."

"Yes, you will," said Naris. "Everyone does, in the end. Let's begin at the beginning. What is your name?" I wondered where Elenwen was. Apparently this prisoner didn't merit her personal attention.
"Etienne Rarnis," the Breton replied.

"And what are you, Etienne? A common thief, by the look of you."

"A common thief?" Etienne said. "Certainly not! I'm with the Thieves Guild in Riften."

"I've heard of the Thieves Guild," the torturer replied. "I've also heard it has fallen on hard times. Confined to the Ratway beneath Riften, it seems."

"We get out and about," the thief protested. "That's how your justiciars found me. I never should have opened my mouth to that damned Gissur in Morthal. Nocturnal, the night mistress, must have forsaken me that night."

"All right, enough chit chat," Naris said. "You know we are looking for an elder Cyrodiili named Esbern. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing! Only what I told Gissur. There's a crazy old man holed up in the Ratway warrens. I only know about him because Vekel at the Ragged Flagon – that's the Ratway bar – sends food and drink to him. I helped Vekel out once or twice, delivered the tray myself. All I saw was an old man's eyes through a slit in the door, and I heard some raving about the end of the world. It was all madness. Although, with these dragons about, maybe it wasn't madness after all. Then he made me go away before he would open the door and get the tray. You have to believe me, that's all I know! I don't even know his name, but he could be this Esbern you're looking for."

Elenwen had returned, and she took up the interrogation now. "Tell me more about these ravings," she said.

There was silence for a moment, Etienne no doubt searching his memory for any scrap of information that would appease Elenwen and the torturer. "No, wait, let me think! There was something about ... the World Eater, that was it! The World Eater has returned,' he said. Then something about the end of the world. Then he said, 'If only the Dragonborn would come!' This was months ago, before we began hearing about the appearance of the Dragonborn."

"So this old man was getting news from somewhere, holed up as he was. Who was giving it to him?"

"I don't know! I only saw him that once or twice! The rest of the time I stayed out of the warrens. Dodgy place, that is. Please, I've told you everything I can remember."

"We'll see about that," Elenwen said. "But you've given us enough to be going on with. Naris, take him down."

"Should I feed him to the troll, Ambassador?"

"Not yet. There may be more he can tell us. Put him back in his cell for now. But remember, thief, if it turns out you've sent us on a fool's errand, you'll pay the price in flesh."

There was a pause in the conversation as the guard led Etienne back to his cell. Then Elenwen spoke. "Rulindil, round up as many justiciars as you can and make ready to set out for Riften with all haste. I'm sure this crazy old man is the Blades' loremaster, Esbern. We must capture him and find out whether he is behind these dragon attacks."

"But Ambassador, we cannot leave the embassy undefended, not with..."

"Esbern is still dangerous, ancient as he is – all the more so if his compatriot, Delphine, is with
him. I wouldn't send you against both of them with less than a full regiment. But Riften is deep in Stormcloak territory. You will need to travel in threes as usual, then regroup outside the city. And not to worry. Between Naris, the guards, and myself, we will manage during your absence.

"Yes, Ambassador." I heard the sound of many footsteps ascending the stairs leading out of the dungeon. Soon Elenwen appeared at the door to my cell. "So, we have found your friend Esbern. No, do not protest. If he was hoping for your appearance months ago, can I doubt he reached out to you as soon as your presence in Skyrim became widely known? Who knows how large an operation he is running from the bowels of Riften? Perhaps he and this Delphine have begun reviving the Blades, hiding under the cover the Stormcloaks provide with this rebellion of theirs. We've had little intelligence out of the Rift since hostilities began. But believe me, we will get every last bit of information out of you before the end. Think on that tonight. In the morning, we begin again. I believe I'll allow you the choice of giving your sweetheart a quick death by your hand or a much more drawn-out and painful one by Naris'. A choice like that usually helps concentrate the minds of even our toughest subjects. Sweet dreams for now."

With that she left me alone in the cell, with just a single guard patrolling back and forth outside.
I laid my aching body down on the cot. The pain of my hurts faded from an all-consuming torment to a mere persistent stinging. How long had it been since I last slept? Yet I couldn't sleep, my mind was so abuzz with what I'd just heard from the thief. Esbern lived! Delphine thought the Blades' old loremaster might know something about Alduin. Maybe he even held the key to finding and defeating the World Eater. I had to reach him somehow.

It was time to get out of this dungeon – far past time. Now the scattered state of my mind was replaced with a slow-burning anger at the Thalmor's treatment of me, and even more, of Lydia. They had not violated me in the worst way, yet the pain and humiliation had been enough. Almost as humiliating, it seemed that everyone would use me as a pawn – Ulfric, Tullius, Elenwen, even Alduin. I had let events push me about like a boat blown hither and yon on a storm-tossed sea. But no more! I was the Dragonborn. From now on, I would be the mistress of my own fate.

First, I would need to get us out of here. I don't know how long I lay there, pondering how this might be done. Finally it seemed I had but one desperate chance, and for that I would need to prepare myself.

I sat upright on the bed with my back to the wall, lest I fall asleep. I began breathing in, deep and slow, and slowly breathing out, meditating on the sky. My rage against the Thalmor for our mistreatment – it was dangerous, liable to trip me up, push me into foolish action. Yet if ever I needed the power of my dragon soul, it was now. That dragon's rage was a burning fire within me. I knew I must control it somehow, use it. I meditated on that fire, and on the sky, breathing in, breathing out, until the sky was still empty, but white-hot. It was the sky above some other world than Nirn, for nothing could live beneath that blazing emptiness. I let that burning sky fill me with its emptiness as I breathed.

After some time, I rose and paced back and forth the length of my cell. It wouldn't do for the guards to find me stiff from too much sitting. My body must be prepared for what was to come. Yet my limbs wouldn't quite cooperate, not after their mistreatment. The hurts came back as I moved, and at first I could barely limp about the room, each step sending bolts of agony through my legs. Yet it must be done. Slowly the aches receded and I was able to move more freely.

When the guards came into my cell the next morning – for I assumed it was morning, though I had no way of knowing – they found me sitting quietly on the edge of my cot.

"Up, Breton," the guard was saying as he unlocked my cell, "Naris and the Am..." He stopped short when he saw me. I know not how I looked, if my eyes were blazing, or my visage fierce, or what he saw that halted him. Maybe he was just surprised not to find me crumpled on the cot, after yesterday's treatment. "You're wanted," he stammered finally.

Two other guards came in and pulled me to my feet, one on each arm. Then they led me from my cell. All the while I continued to breathe deeply, in, out. As we passed Lydia's cell, I saw that she
still sat on the floor at the back, her wrists manacled to the wall above her. They hadn't thought to place a guard on her. Perhaps they deemed it unnecessary, since I would be in binds or manacled to the wall. That was good. Yet the commotion of the guards hadn't awakened her. That was less good.

We entered the main dungeon chamber and I saw Elenwen at the top of the stairs to the right. A wizard and an archer stood in readiness on the gallery near her. The gallery at the back of the room was empty. Naris stood at the table in the center of the chamber, his box of knives open. I also noticed my arch-mage's robes and other clothing, still lying in the corner where the guard had thrown them yesterday. Sloppy of them, I thought.

The guards on either side of me noticed my breathing now. "What are you doing?" one said, stopping in the middle of the room. I looked up at him calmly and continued to breathe. Silence was my power.

"Never mind what she's doing," Elenwen called from above. "Just chain her and let's get on with this." So they would question me and not make me do something awful to Lydia. Better and better.

The guards brought me up before the gauntree where the manacles hung. "Are you ready?" asked the guard behind us. The two on either side clasped me tightly by the forearms and nodded. Then the third guard undid the cords about my wrists.

If they were expecting a struggle, they didn't get it. I simply opened and closed my hands to work the feeling back into them as the guards stretched my arms out to either side.

We were still facing the wall, so the guards had to do a little dance to turn me to face the room. As we spun slowly about, I looked up at Elenwen, the she-elf whom I had come to loathe with all the malice of which my dragon soul was capable. Yet I had control of that hatred. I would use it, at the time of my choosing. And that time was now.

Jurgen Windcaller had chosen silence, and I would do the same. I shouted a soundless shout. \textit{Fus}, force, was the word I chose. I had meditated on that word all through the night, letting its deep meaning fill my being, along with the emptiness of that white-hot sky. Now it burst out of me silently in all directions, like the ripple a stone makes when dropped on a quiet lake.

The searing wave of force blasted the guards away from me. They took most of the blast's heat, but scorch marks made a ring around the chamber's walls at eye level. Little tongues of flame were already catching here and there.

I heard a shout of surprise from Elenwen, then the command, "Get her!" I dashed toward the nearest column, tugging the gag from my mouth as I went. Now I used the column and the barrel standing next to it as shields from the arrows and lightning bolts the justiciars were dealing from above. An arrow glanced off the corner of the column, sending a shower of slivers down on me. Yet the justiciars seemed reluctant to descend the stairs to face me. I stayed crouched, waiting for my \textit{Thu'um} to restore itself.

Elenwen and her justiciars could have had me then, if only they had thought to rush me together, yet still they hesitated to descend the stairs. Perhaps they were afraid of my \textit{Thu'um}, not realizing how much power I had spent on that shout. Even I had no idea how long it would be before I could use it again.

The fire was spreading, licking up the walls of the dungeon, filling the room with smoke. Even the column where I hid was smoldering. The thief began calling for help from his cell at the end of the hall. "Somebody! You've got to unchain me. Don't let me die down here!" Yet all was silent from
Lydia's cell.

The fire had one benefit: the smoke billowing up to the ceiling now shielded me from the view of the Thalmor up on the gallery. I poked my head out from behind the column and could see only shadowy figures through the haze. I had to hope they couldn’t see me, and that the smoke would drive them from the chamber.

I got down on all fours to stay beneath the smoke, then scrambled toward the corner where my robes lay. One of the guards had landed on top of them, so I had to roll his body away, pulling the robes from beneath him. There was no time to put them on or to collect my boots and other things. I fumbled for the side pocket where I had put the broken lock pick. I had to get the magicka collar off – it was our only chance.

Finally I found the pick and began fiddling it into the lock at my neck. It only took a moment of twisting and turning the pick before I felt the simple lock click open. Such a silly flaw in such a powerful device, I thought. Then I tore the collar from my neck, but made the mistake of casting it hastily aside. It clattered to the floor, and in the next instant a bolt of lightning illuminated the smoke above my head, striking the wall.

I snatched up my robes and crawled along the wall to my left. The chest I had noticed earlier was nearby. If I had any luck, it would contain a magicka potion or two. Pausing to check it was a risk, but it would be some time before my own magicka reserves restored themselves. I was still virtually defenseless against the Thalmor.

The chest was unlocked. I suppose the gaolers left it that way because they expected any prisoners either to be bound or chained to the walls. I couldn't see into it very well, the light in the room had grown so dim. Groping through its contents, I discovered a book and several phials and larger bottles. Trusting to hope, I pulled one bottle from the chest; I couldn't believe my luck when I saw it was just the potion I wanted.

I was pulling the stopper from it when Elenwen called out, her voice choking on smoke. "Naris, where are you? Seize the Breton!"

Naris! I had forgotten him in the commotion. Had he survived the blast? Where was he?

I had my answer when an arm went around my mouth from behind, dragging me to my feet. Another brought a knife up to my throat. "I am here, Ambassador," he said, his voice close in my ear. "And I have..."

But Naris was a torturer, not a fighter, too used to his victims remaining bound or chained to the wall. I smashed the potion bottle into his face, feeling a satisfying crunch of breaking glass. With a cry he relaxed his grip. That was the only opening I needed. I grasped his knife hand and pulled down hard on it, throwing my hip into his body at the same time, flipping him forward and landing him halfway across the open chest. Then I brought the lid down hard on his head, knocking him senseless. It was less pain than he deserved, but it would have to do.

"Naris, what's happening?" Elenwen shouted.

I ducked back down beneath the smoke, trying to suppress a cough, just as a lightning bolt struck the wall nearby. I had to keep moving, but I needed some way to fight off the Thalmor, if it came to it. I spotted the knife the torturer had dropped at my feet and took it up. Then I threw the robes on, not bothering to cinch the belt at their waist. I needed the extra magical power they would give me. And there were still potions in that chest. I rolled the unconscious torturer off of it and began pulling out vials and bottles one by one as quietly as I could. Many were useless – potions of water
breathing and true shot and sound sleep. I found no more magicka potions, but there were two potions of fire resistance and one draught of healing. I tuck those into my robes.

I heard Elenwen's voice from the gallery once more. "Tilmo, get down there and put your sword to the Nord's throat. That will stop the Breton."

"Yes, Ambassador," I heard a male elf say, then the sound of boots descending the stairs.

I crawled beneath the desk that was pushed up against Lydia's cell, then along the wall. I peeked around the corner just in time to see a flash of gilded armor disappearing into the cell. From the gallery above, I could see nothing, but heard coughing. Would the smoke force them down here with me, or would they leave by the door that led to Elenwen's solar? I could not let them surround me. My magicka had restored itself somewhat by now, and I used a portion of it to force their decision, sending a firebolt toward the top of the stairs. I saw flames leap up through the smoke, then turned to follow the justiciar into Lydia's cell.

He had nearly reached her when I threw myself onto his back, pulling his head around and drawing the blade across his throat. I remembered the last time I had slit a man's throat, but there was no gloating this time. I felt no particular rage at this soldier. It was just something I had to do, knowing that he would have done the same, or worse, if given the opportunity. I pushed the elf aside so he could contemplate his last moments in peace, then went to Lydia.

The smoke was getting bad, even down near the floor where she sat slumped against the wall. She coughed fitfully, yet seemed hardly awake. She looked gaunt, her cheeks sunken, as if they had given her neither food nor water in the past days. And how many days was it now? I had lost count.

I slapped her lightly on the face and chafed her wrists. The bandage on her left hand was soaked through, and there was a little pool of blood on the floor.

"Lydia, wake up, we must go!" I said. She hardly opened her eyes. I risked casting a healing spell. Her eyes fluttered open, then she recognized me and grinned. "Are you a..." she gasped, but then her chin slumped back onto her chest. I gave a sob. I couldn't get her out of a burning dungeon in this state.

First things first, I thought. I had to get her out of those manacles. These locks were trickier, but at last I freed her. I let her down gently until she was lying on the floor where the air was freshest, then chafed her wrists again. Her eyelids barely fluttered. I tried another healing spell, dual-casting this time, nearly depleting my magicka. She opened her eyes, and seemed awake enough to drink. I gave her the draught of healing, and that seemed to revive her further. Then I made her drink a potion of fire resistance. If I had to drag her through flames, she would need it. Yet it would do no good against the smoke, which was slowly choking us.

"Can you crawl?" I asked.

"I think so," she croaked.

We began crawling through the smoke out into the hallway, where we found it was much worse. The stairway to the gallery was fully engulfed. Now it came crashing down, and with it, a portion of the balcony. I saw no sign of Elenwen or her remaining justiciar.

We had to get out of here quickly, and there seemed only one way now – the trap door in the storeroom opposite us. But it shared a wall with the burning stairwell, and it too was ablaze. I wondered if this was how my parents had felt, with their house burning all around them, suffocating on smoke. Try as I might to push such thoughts from my mind, I knew we were about
to die in a trap of my own making – if I didn't do something.

I had just enough magicka for one more spell. I hit the flaming wall with a blast of frost, sending up a sizzling cloud of steam and smoke. The cold didn't extinguish the flames entirely, but maybe I had bought us enough time to get through that trap door. We crawled into the storeroom. It was only when we arrived at the trap door that I saw it was locked. And not with a simple padlock, but with a stout, circular lock set into the face of the door. I tried the shard of the lock pick on it, but it was far too short. A key! There must be a key, but who would have it? I could only hope it would be Naris, the master of this chamber of torment, and not Elenwen.

The smoke wasn't so bad in this storeroom. I left Lydia lying next to the trap door. I twisted the hood of my robes about to partially cover my nose and mouth and went back into the hallway between the storeroom and the cells.

So far, I had ignored the thief screaming to be freed, but now his choking pleas for help caught my attention once more. Could I leave him here to die? His cell was to my left, Naris' body to my right. The fire didn't threaten the thief's cell as yet, so I turned right. The smoke had now filled the two-story room from floor to ceiling, so crawling offered no advantage. Then I remembered the barrel of water. I groped my way to it and found the bucket sitting next to it. I dipped a bucketful of water and poured it over my head with a splash, hoping that the wet cloth of my robes would protect me from the smoke.

An instant later a lightning bolt seared into my right shoulder. That was bad enough, but it seemed a hundred times worse than any lightning spell I had encountered in the past. The pains from my wounds had until now receded to just a dull stinging sensation, no doubt muted by the mixture of fear and excitement that had come over me since attacking the guards. Now that pain returned, every welt on my body throbbing and vibrating with that jolt of lightning.

I looked up at the gallery behind the torturer's gauntree. I could see nothing through the smoke. Whoever was up there, they must have hit me just by luck, firing wildly toward the sound I had made. Then I saw the light of a ward spell flicker into being and aimed a firebolt at it. The spell hit the railing and the gallery exploded in fire. I heard the sound of boots running and a door slamming shut.

I was left alone in a world of smoke and flame. *I have to get back to Lydia* was all I could think, but I was choking on smoke. The wall in front of me was ablaze, and flames were creeping across the floor now. I pulled the damp cloth of my hood around to cover my face, and that seemed to help me breathe better.

I crawled the rest of the way to Naris and began searching his body for a key. Just when I had begun to give up hope, I found it in the last of his pockets. Now I just had to hope it fit the trap door. With my hood still partially covering my face, I ran back toward the storeroom, only to find that the wall separating it from the stairwell was engulfed in flame once more. Lydia was on the other side of that wall. I hit it with as many frost spells as I could muster, until only a few tongues of flame flicked here and there, and a pool of soot-blackened meltwater spread across the floor.

I was making my way to the storeroom when the thief cried out again. "Help!" he screamed. "Is anyone still out there? You can't leave me here to die all alone!"

I looked into the storeroom. Lydia was on all fours near the doorway. It looked as if she had tried to make her way out to aid me, but then was overcome with pain or smoke. She looked up at me apologetically as I came to the doorway. "My thane," she choked, "are you all right? I'm sorry…"

I helped Lydia back to the trap door. To my relief, the key fit in the lock and turned. It seemed
years since I had felt such joy. I heaved on the door, and Lydia helped me push it open. I could see the top rung of a ladder but only darkness below.

"Down you go, Lydia, I am going back for the thief," I said.

Lydia stared at me in surprise. "No, my thane..." she choked. "I cannot help you, but I cannot leave you..." Then she sat back down at the edge of the opening.

I groaned in frustration, but I knew I couldn't convince her, nor could I leave the thief. I would hear his screams in my nightmares to my dying day, if I didn't do something to help him.

I went back out into the hallway, not bothering with crawling this time. I found Etienne inside the last cell, chained to the back wall. Fortunately, the cell door stood open.

"Thank Nocturnal you've come!" he cried. "Now get me out of these manacles!"

The locks on the manacles opened more easily than Lydia's had. The instant they were off, the thief got up and ran past me into the hall. He stopped there, not sure where to go in the billowing smoke.

"How do we get out of here?" he screamed. "Oh gods, we're going to die in this fire!" He turned back to look at me as I caught up to him, his eyes wild. "What have you done?"

In the short time since I had left the store room the fire in the main dungeon chamber had grown far worse. It had burned all the way across the room and now blocked our way back to the storeroom.

I took the last potion of fire resistance from my robes and drank half of it, handing the rest to Etienne. "Drink this if you want to make it through that fire." I said. He did as I told him. "Now follow me, and keep your head down."

I closed my eyes and ran into the fire, my hood pulled over my face with one hand. There was no moisture left in that cloth; the heat had dried it and it was beginning to smolder. The potion protected me for the moment, yet I couldn't see where I was going.

"Deirdre, this way," Lydia called in answer to my cry. I followed the sound of her voice and felt the heat lessen as I entered the storeroom. I dropped to all fours and saw her crouched next to the opening in the floor.

Etienne saw the opening too. Pushing past both of us, he climbed down the ladder more quickly than I would have thought possible.

I made to help Lydia into the hole but she drew back. "After you, my thane," she said weakly.

I had no energy left for arguing. I got myself into position to climb down, one foot on the second rung, then gave Lydia a last look. Her face was bathed in the flickering light of the fire that grew ever closer. Then I began climbing down into the dark.

I was so tired, I nearly slipped once or twice. After eight or ten rungs, my bare feet felt cold, wet rock. "It's all right," I called up. "Come down!"

And she did, more quickly than either of us might have liked. I saw her silhouetted in the trap door opening against the flickering light, then heard her give a cry as she slid more than climbed down the ladder. I tried to stop her fall with outstretched hands but we fell to the floor of the cave in a tangle of limbs.
Fortunately, the spot where we fell was covered in damp moss, cushioning our landing. We lay there for a moment, too exhausted, stunned, and sore to move. Yet we seemed safe here. It was damp and cool, which felt wonderful on my overheated skin. My robes even sizzled at first, where they rested against the wet. We seemed in little danger from the fire. Though badly hurt and weakened, we were both alive. I could hardly believe it. And I had my arms around my Lydia. I could almost go to sleep right here, I thought. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw that she was drifting in and out of consciousness.

Then a flaming piece of wreckage from the room above fell through the opening and landed next to us, jolting us from our torpor. We quickly untangled ourselves and began crawling away from the opening, deeper into this cave or tunnel or whatever it was, making our way toward a dim light ahead. There was no sign of the thief.

"Lydia, can you stand?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. I helped her up, but I still had to support her under one arm as we walked.

We could see now that we were in a tunnel, the light coming from an opening far above. Snow had fallen through that opening as well, and the floor was lined with snow and ice. At least the tunnel seemed to tilt upwards, a good sign. From behind us we heard the crash of more debris falling into the tunnel.

I was just beginning to think we would escape the place alive when I noticed the first of the bones – a human hand. Soon we came across more of them, and blood spattering the floor and walls. A foul stench filled the place, and that could mean only one thing.

We heard a roar from up ahead. Then Etienne came running around a bend in the tunnel, looking even more frightened than he had in the burning building. Behind him there appeared the thing I had feared once I saw the bones and the blood: a frost troll.

The troll stopped when it spotted Lydia and me, its three eyes moving back and forth between us. The thief used this opportunity to run past us, cowering in the tunnel behind us. The troll began gesturing in that bellicose way they do before charging, flinging its long, fur-covered arms into the air and then pounding its fists on the ground.

I couldn't help myself. I began to laugh. Lydia looked at me as if I had lost my mind, and perhaps I had. "My thane, that is no joke, that's a frost troll. One swipe of its paw and... And I have no weapon... too weak..."

"Lydia," I replied, "where's your sense of humor? Twin dragons, imprisonment, torture, starvation, near death by fire and smoke, and now – a frost troll! It's just too much!" I went on laughing.

The troll was done with its gesturing and began to charge.

"You must stand on your own," I said. "I need to dual-cast."

The troll was closing on us fast. I let go of Lydia's arm and she braced herself against the wall. My calming spell hit the beast when it was ten feet away. It brought up short, looking around with a puzzled expression. Then it ambled past us, its hairy knuckles dragging the ground, to investigate the noises coming from farther down the tunnel. Etienne huddled against the wall, whimpering, as the troll passed him.

I looked over at Lydia.

"It's good to see you again, my thane," she said.
I almost sobbed then. "And it's good to see you, my Lydia." I reached out and stroked her cheek. Then I propped her up by the arm once more, and we made our way up the tunnel and out into a frozen Skyrim morning.
"Whoa!" I heard the wagon driver call to the horses, jostling me from my sleep. It was dark, but lights burned in a building nearby, and Stormcloak soldiers were dismounting all around the wagon in which we rode.

"We can't make Windhelm this day," the wagon driver said. "This is the Nightgate Inn. I hope it's not too rustic for your liking." I almost laughed.

Then I made to get out of the wagon and nearly screamed. Somehow, the welts covering my body had only grown worse in the two days since our escape, and now they cried out in a unison of pain as I moved. What wickedness had those torture wands contained? Lydia was stirring as well, and now she surprised me by giving a little cry of shock and hurt. She gritted her teeth and seemed to sink further within herself.

I rummaged hastily through my knapsack until I found the bottle of liniment. I had collected the ingredients for it during our flight across the marshes of Hjaalmarch, and brewed them into a salve at the Stormcloak camp where we sought shelter. It had to be ready by now. It seemed the only hope to cure these devilish hurts.

"Help!" I called weakly, and one of our captors or guards – for I knew not whether we were their prisoners or their guests – came over and helped me get Lydia down from the wagon. We hobbled toward the inn.

The past two days of flight from the embassy – limping, barefoot, up and over the great ridge that formed the backbone of Haafingar Hold; stumbling into the potato patch at the Solitude Sawmill; Hjorrun giving us shelter there and a boat ride across the Karth River, after returning us our things stored at Katla's Farm; the long, grim march across the marshlands, gathering ingredients for the liniment along the way; finally stumbling upon the Stormcloak camp – it had all been a blur, one long extension of the nightmare that had begun in the Aldmeri embassy.

Only one thing stood out for me in the fog of memory, just as it had stood out like a beacon above the fog of the swamps of Hjaalmarch: the brightly lit Blue Palace, high on its arch of rock spanning Solitude Bay. That promontory loomed ahead and to our left as we began our crossing of the marshes, then seemed to watch over our progress as we made our way past it on the south. The sight had made me think bitterly of Elisif, sitting up there in the light and the warmth, surrounded by all the comforts a queen could expect. And how she had treated us! Lydia and I had risked our lives and our freedom to save her city, yet she hadn't spoken even a word to the emperor to help us in our time of need.

Then a sky rocket had gone up from the palace, a golden streamer showering sparks of red and blue, and I realized it was the night of Vittoria Vici's wedding. No doubt the emperor was there as well. In that moment, as cold and miserable as I was, and after what Lydia and I had been through on the emperor's whim, I did wish I had spared none of them. Mara forgive me, but it's the truth – I
wished them dead, that Lydia and I might have avoided both the Thalmor's torment and that
dreadful journey.

"Are you well, my thane?" Lydia had asked me then, and I realized that I had stopped to stare up at
Solitude when the firework went up.

"It's nothing," I said. "We must push on."

But Lydia was staring up at the city too, not at the palace, but at Castle Dour. Despite her hurts,
weariness, and shivering from the bone-chilling damp of the marsh, she smiled then, and seemed
cheered somewhat. I knew she was remembering our kiss after the battle with the dragons. Then I
felt only chagrin. Why would I waste my time on bitterness and jealousy when I had so much for
which to be grateful? I still lived, Lydia still lived, and soon, trusting to the Nine, we would be out
of this dismal marshland. To love, and be loved in return – what more did I need? I took Lydia by
the hand and we walked that way for a time, until the rough ground made walking hand in hand too
difficult.

Hours later we had stumbled into the Stormcloak camp, in dire need of warmth and rest, receiving
a welcome even less cordial than on our first visit. After the events in Windhelm, Ulfric had been
wroth with the camp's captain, nearly relieving her of her command. Now she hesitated to let us go
on our way once we had rested and restored ourselves. But I hadn't bothered arguing with her, I was
that exhausted, and I could think only of mixing the ingredients I had gathered – willow bark, luna
moth wing, and two varieties of mushroom – and then going to my rest. Lydia had already fallen
senseless onto a pile of furs beneath one of the camp's lean-to shelters. It would take hours for the
salve to reach its full potency.

We had slept for a time, and then the captain presented me with a solution to our impasse. I had
told her we were headed to Windhelm to see Delphine at the Blade and Dragon, and now she
offered us a ride to that Stormcloak city in a returning supply wagon. I had been too insensible to
notice as we climbed in back, but now it struck me that a contingent of ten soldiers was surely a
very strong company to guard an empty wagon. But I couldn't think of that now. I could think only
of the pain coursing through my body and the relief I hoped to find in the bottle I held in my hand.

Inside the inn, we found Hadring at the bar and Fultheim at one of the tables, in his cups as usual.
It all seemed just as before.

"Ah! The lasses have returned!" Hadring exclaimed, but there was no time for more as I cut him
off.

"A room, we need a room!"

"And you'll be glad to know I've put those doors on for you," he said. Thank Talos for small
favors, I thought as the innkeeper showed me to the room. One of the Stormcloaks helped Lydia
along behind us and then set her gently down in a chair.

Hadring was about to go into the whys and hows of putting the doors on but I practically pushed
him from the room and closed his prized door behind him. Then I unstoppered the flask and turned
to Lydia. She was trembling in pain, her eyes closed, her lips quivering, trying not to cry out. It was
almost harder to see her like that than to see her tortured in the first place. Whatever pain I was
feeling, I could bear it, she was bearing so much more.

"I hope this works," I said, and couldn't quite suppress a sob of my own. With one finger, I smeared
a little of the liniment on one of the welts on her neck. Then another, and another. "Does that feel
better?" I asked.
She couldn't speak, but only nodded.

I pulled off her boots and applied the balm to the bottoms of her feet, where the welts were particularly red and nasty looking. They had taken a lot of abuse in all the walking we had done. She gave a little sigh as the salve took its effect.

I helped her over to the bed and stripped off her braies and applied the liniment to the welts on her legs. Then I had her sit up and helped her out of her leather armor, her padded tunic, and finally her shift. And there she was, as naked as that day we had gone swimming together so long ago, the day I had been dreaming about for a week now. Yet I almost cried out to see what that implement of torture had done to her. Countless welts covered her, from her arms, down her sides to her belly between the points of her hips, and all over her back.

I began applying the balm to all of them. Her skin was as soft as I remembered it from that day in the Vilemyr Inn. Yet, as much as I had anticipated how nice her skin would feel beneath my fingers, I could take no pleasure in it – she was in such pain, and my hurts still pained me as well. I concentrated on my task. When I was nearly done, I looked up at her. Her eyes were open and she looked at me with more recognition than I had seen in days. Wherever she had gone to escape her pain, she had come back, and now she was smiling at me.

Last, I rubbed some of the balm into the scar where her little finger had been. It was a normal wound and had responded to healing spells, but the liniment couldn't hurt. I kissed the spot and held her hand.

"Is the pain gone?" I asked.

"Not quite, but it's much better. Just the usual sting of a cut or a burn, not like before." She shuddered, then stretched herself to test the movement of her limbs. She flexed her left hand, getting used to how it looked with four fingers.

Then she looked at me. "But what about you? I can see you're hurt as well."

She took the flask from my hand and began applying the liniment to the spots on my neck that were most obvious. Then she began stripping me out of my clothes as I had done with her. The torturer had concentrated more on my back, and soon she had me lying on my belly, massaging the salve into my back and the backs of my legs. Her hands felt nice moving over my body. The pain went away slowly from each point she touched, and I thought I had never felt anything so good. She kissed my hurts here and there after she had applied the balm. Soon I began to feel a calm, drowsy feeling come over me and the pain subsided to just a slight stinging. I could only hope it wouldn't come back, because the liniment was nearly gone.

Lydia was done finally and set the flask on the bedside table, then lay down beside me. "You know what, my thane?" she asked, stroking my hair. I looked dreamily into her dark eyes, so close to my own.

"What?"

"I'm starved, aren't you?"

I realized it felt as if I had never eaten before. "Famished!" I said, giggling. I don't know if it was the liniment itself, or being nearly free of the pain after so many days living with it, or just being together after so much separation and torment and doubt, but we were suddenly giddy. We both jumped up from the bed and threw on our clothes, Lydia opting for her padded tunic and I for my mage's robes, the only choice at hand.
"You're going out amongst all those soldiers in just that tunic?" I asked. "You don't want your armor?"

"No, why not?" she asked. I didn't see why not, though it seemed remarkably unwary of her, and we went into the dining room, giggling.

The Stormcloaks looked up in surprise, we were so changed.

"Feeling better?" asked the wagon driver.

"Much," I replied. "Hadring, bring us your best fish, and a bottle of Alto wine." Then I remembered we had no money. In the desperation of our escape, we had thought it best not to burden ourselves with any of the gold we had left with our baggage at Katla's Farm. "And put it on these fine soldiers' bill." Lydia laughed out loud, she thought that was so funny.

We sat at table amongst the soldiers while Hadring regaled us with the story of the installation of the doors as he brought us our food and wine. "Best thing I ever did!" he said as we tucked into our fish and potatoes. "But that's not the only thing that's changed around here," he said, growing more somber.

I had just enough wits to ask what was wrong as I took a sip of my wine.

"I never thought I'd see the day that we'd have a murder in the Nightgate Inn."

"Murder? Who was murdered?"

"Balagog, more's the shame. Nicest Orc I ever met, and well spoken for an Orc, too. Paid for his room in advance. We thought he'd just gone missing a fortnight ago, then just last week we found his body stuffed in an empty ale barrel in the cellar. How anybody got in here and did that to him, I can't imagine."

"Do you have any idea who could have done it? Why would anyone kill Balagog?" These seemed obvious questions to ask, though I knew the answers. Giddy though I was, I couldn't see how Hadring would benefit from knowing that the Thalmor were behind his best paying customer's death.

"We haven't a clue who could have done it. But strange to say, as we were going through his effects, thinking to contact his next of kin and all, we found out that he was this famous chef everyone calls the Gourmet. I can't imagine what he was doing here. It's all a mystery!"

"I wish there was some way I could help," I said. Hadring took this as the usual kind of empty sentiment and went back to the bar. Lydia and I went back to our dinner, only a bit more somber. We already knew Balagog's fate, and this news of it couldn't really dampen our spirits. We ate like bears coming out of hibernation. We ordered more fish and another bottle of wine.

The soldiers stared at us with a mixture of awe and confusion. We had been two weak, wounded lasses when we staggered into their camp. Now, they didn't know what to make of us. They kept trying to engage us in conversation, asking us about the dragons we had killed and if we had learned anything from the Imperials or the Thalmor. But we only had eyes for each other, often giggling at some private joke between us as we answered the soldiers' questions. We found their ignorance of the dragons quite funny. Finally the soldiers left us alone, but kept glancing over at us as we stared into each other's eyes. When we had eaten our fill, we excused ourselves and retired to our room.

With the door closed behind us, we fell onto the bed laughing. I stroked Lydia's black hair and she
leaned over and kissed me. It felt even better than that first kiss on the parapet of Castle Dour. For one thing, she wore no steel armor. Only my robes and her padded tunic came between us, and she sought to remedy that straight away.

"You know, my thane, I believe you missed one or two spots on my back with that salve," she said, grinning. In an instant, she was up and stripping off her tunic and then her shift. I admired her lack of shame at her own nakedness. It was like that day we went swimming together. What had she said? "There's nothing to be ashamed of. We are both maidens after all." At the time, I thought there could be nothing between two maidens, but Lydia must have known better. Had she been wooing me since that very first day of traveling together?

"All right," I said and got the flask from the table. Lydia lay down on her belly, and I began applying the liniment to the few spots that were still angry and red. The others were nearly the color of the skin around them.

"Your skin is so soft," I said.

"Mmmm, feels nice," Lydia said. Her head was turned to the side, her hair covering most of her face, but I could see her smile.

"I never knew a woman could make me feel this way," I said. "Or a woman's body. I didn't know it could feel so good."

Lydia said nothing, so I put the flask aside. I began running my fingers up and down her bare back. "I suppose you think I'm naive," I said. "You said, 'It's about time,' after our first kiss. Which made me wonder, how long have you felt this way about me? Then there was the Temple of Dibella. I thought sure you wouldn't go in because you knew what kinds of things they taught there – things between two women. I thought the idea was revolting to you."

She was quiet, so I kept caressing her back and talking. "But then I wonder, how long have I felt this way about you? I surprised myself when I kissed you that night at Castle Dour, but then suddenly it seemed as if I've felt this way all along. Oh, my Lydia, I think I've loved you since you first said you would protect me with your life! And I mean love, not just whatever this is between your soft skin and my fingertips. Does that seem possible? Is it the same for you? Have you loved me all along?" She was quiet. And then I realized Lydia had never said anything about love. There had been no time for her to say much of anything. And then I began to regret my words, feeling I had said too much. "Do you even love me at all?" I asked, my voice quiet.

Then Lydia gave a soft snore. I pulled the hair back from her face and saw that she was sound asleep.

I awoke to find Lydia running her fingers through my hair. She smiled when I opened my eyes, then kissed me on the cheek. I had stripped down to my shift before getting in beside her, and I could feel her body warm against mine through the thin fabric. I felt I could stay there forever and just look into her eyes.

Yet I could see dawn light coming through the window. The Stormcloaks would want to be away soon – too soon.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep last night, my thane," she said, kissing me on the forehead.
"You have nothing to feel sorry for!" I replied. "We were both tired. And the liniment and the wine, they must have had a strange interaction. How are your hurts?" The welts on her neck were now just barely visible.

"Much better! I hardly feel them. I feel like I could slay a dragon." Then she gave me a mischievous grin. "Or better yet..." Then she kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were soft as I kissed her back, then I was surprised to feel her tongue touch mine. It was odd, but pleasurable at the same time. My heart beat rapidly as if I had run a league.

I broke off the kiss. "It is morning," I said. "We must leave soon."

"No, my thane, you are wrong, it is still night." She kissed me again, and I kissed her back.

"But the light, coming in the window, that must be the light of dawn."

"No, my thane, that is the light of the moons." She kissed me again, and once more I couldn't resist kissing her back. I felt a curious sensation in my belly and my thighs.

"But the chickadees, they are chirping outside our window. It must be dawn."

"Silly thane, chickadees feed at night," Lydia said.

I had spent enough sleepless nights in the woods to know this wasn't true. Yet her kisses were so sweet I couldn't argue. "Oh, I forgot," I said.

Lydia kissed me harder then. Her arms pressed me to her, her hips driving into mine.

Then she sat up and pulled me up beside her, reaching for my shift. As she did, the cover fell away from her, and I saw her naked once more – her black hair against the whiteness of her neck and shoulders, her round breasts swinging free as she tugged at my shift, the flatness of her belly, the curve of her hip, the black patch of hair peeking out between her legs. My heart felt as if it would burst out of my chest. I felt faint, disconnected from my body.

I turned away from her and swung my feet down to the floor.

"My thane, Deirdre, what's wrong?" Lydia asked, surprised, putting a hand softly on my shoulder.

What was wrong? I could not say. My arms and legs tingled, and I could not catch my breath. "I..." I stammered. "I... I'm afraid."

"How can you be afraid?" she asked, hurt in her voice. "It's only me, your Lydia. I am sworn to protect you. I can never hurt you."

"It... it's not that kind of fear."

"What, then?"

"I don't know." I couldn't explain it, I could only describe it. "My heart... it's racing."

She laughed then. "Oh, that!" She turned me toward her and put my hand over her heart. "Can you feel my heart? It's racing too."

I nodded. Her heart was beating near as fast as my own. "But I feel dizzy, faint almost, and a tingling sensation."

"It's part of making love," she said. "Especially the first time." She looked into my eyes and I
wondered how I could ever have been afraid.

But then a thought struck me, the question I had tried to ask her last night. "But Lydia, I thought … At the Temple of Dibella, when you wouldn't enter. I thought what they taught there … this, between two women … I thought you abhorred it."

She laughed in surprise, then shook her head. "How could you think that?"

"But then when you didn't return on time, and you told me you had been taking a bath … I thought that was just a silly excuse."

"Oh, that." She looked away from me, her face and neck turning a deep red. "It was silly, and for that, I am deeply sorry, seeing how much trouble it caused." She summoned the courage to look back at me. "But don't you see, I thought your visit to the temple might open your eyes, let you see how it could be between us. And I wanted to be ready when you returned, not covered in sweat, dust, and the blood of the Forsworn. I thought a little extra time at the temple would even be good for you. Why couldn't you have stayed with the priestesses? You never did tell me."

Now it was my turn to blush. I told her about the statue of the Dibellan Sisters and about the priestess's offer to train me herself, how it had made me feel almost as I was feeling now.

Lydia laughed. "Oh, my thane, you are such a child. What you were feeling then, what you're feeling now, the dizziness, the racing heart, the tingling, even the nausea you described – some call it lovesickness. But really, it's just lust."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Really. And I'm glad to know I make you feel that way. Because you make me feel that way too."

My hand was still pressed against her chest, and I could still feel her heart racing.

"Here, let's begin again," she said. "This is nice, isn't it?" she asked, and kissed me on the cheek.

"Yes," I said.

"And this is nice, isn't it?" She kissed me on the lips.

I could only nod.

"And what about this, is it nice?" She kissed me on the neck and nibbled at my ear.

"Yes," I could only whisper.

"And this is nice, isn't it?" She moved my hand from the place over her heart down to her breast.

"Oh, yes." I was looking down at the roundness of her breasts and the strangeness of seeing my hand pressed against one of them, but she tipped my chin up so I had to look her in the eye. Then she gazed at me searchingly, lovingly, to see if I had any objection as she pressed me with one hand back down onto the bed. I had none.

"And what about this – this is nice, isn't it?" She slid her hand up under my shift and pressed it against my belly, just below my navel.

"By the Nine, yes!" I gasped.
And she went on to show me all the ways she could be nice, until I learned why my mother might have had reason to scream sometimes in the middle of the night.

That was when the Stormcloak soldier burst in, slamming Hadring's brand-new door against the wall.
"What is it? Trouble?" the Stormcloak shouted as he charged in, then brought himself up short. "Oh…"

Lydia and I sat upright, clasping the cover about us. We must have been quite a sight, our hair tousled, our faces flushed, our breathing rapid from our exertions. For the soldier's part, he blushed a deep red from his cheeks down to the roots of his blonde beard.

"Umm…" he stammered. "It's time to be up. We leave in a quarter hour." Then he went out, closing the door behind him.

"I'm glad Hadring put those doors on," Lydia said, then we both fell back laughing. I was sure we would be the talk of the war-band, and even Hadring, but I didn't mind. Lydia was my love, and I cared not who knew it.

I regretted just one thing. "You were wrong, Lydia," I said.

"How so?"

"That was much more than nice. And I wish I could do the same for you, only…"

"Only?"

"Only, you'll have to show me how you did that."

"All in good time, my thane." She gave me a peck on the cheek and we got out of the bed and began to dress.

There was only time for a sweetroll and lukewarm tea before we were back in the wagon and headed for Windhelm once more.

Windhelm was as somber a place as ever – even more so on that gloomy winter morning. The ice had grown thicker on its square-cut rooflines and its walls seemed to drown in the snow that drifted against them as the guards shoveled the ramparts. Yet the place seemed even more broken down than before, with new-fallen blocks of stone littering the street at the city gate. Black scorch marks covered the walls nearby, and the wooden sign outside Candlehearth Hall lay in blackened wreckage.

"What happened?" one of the Stormcloaks accompanying us asked a guard.
"Dragon attack, last week. Two of my comrades died before we drove it off. Lucky for us this city is built of stone." Then the guard recognized me. He was about to say something, then caught himself and turned silently away.

"I believe I will visit Ulfric immediately," I said to Jorgen, the soldier leading the Stormcloaks. For the moment, I preferred to keep up the pretense that I was here of my own free will.

"Aye, that would be best," he said.

As we walked past the inn and up the steps toward the palace, I noticed a bustle of both citizens and guards refilling buckets and making other preparations for another attack. So Ulfric is finally awake to the threat the dragons pose, I thought.

Then one of the volunteers looked at us as we passed and recognized me. A dark look crossed her face, and she nudged the worker next to her, whispering something in his ear and pointing at me. Others recognized me and stopped to stare. It wasn't long before someone shouted out, "You pledged to stop the dragons, Dragonborn!" "What good are you?" another shouted. "Maybe we should call you Dragonfriend!" called a third.

Then they were following us and shouting, Lydia had her hand on her axe, and the Stormcloaks were pushing back at the growing crowd. A rock flew from among them and struck me on the arm. Lydia drew her axe and the soldiers had to hold her back as well. I kept my head down as we pushed our way forward, too chagrined to say or do anything. It was my walk of shame.

We passed through the archway in the wall containing the tombs of the ancient kings, and the crowd let us go on our way. The Palace of Kings loomed before us, long icicles dangling from its lofty eaves. The mighty doors opened for us and we entered Ulfric's throne room, nearly deserted now. Instead of a bustle of servants preparing for a feast, a solitary housekeeper dusted a suit of armor in one corner of the vast room, while two servants brought plates and cutlery to one of the long mead tables. The throne itself sat empty, as before.

"If you will wait here," Jorgen said, gesturing to the benches near the doors, "I will announce your visit to Jarl Ulfric, as befits one of your station."

"Gladly," I said, ignoring the touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"You'll need to leave your weapons by the door," he said, then turned away.

Lydia and I set our weapons and packs against the wall, then sat on the bench together as the soldier made his long walk down the hall to Ulfric's war-chamber. Quite some time passed, with the other soldiers mingling about the entrance, talking with the guards. Lydia and I spent the time looking up at the banners and carvings adorning the throne room, saying nothing. I was glad to have a chance to calm down after our greeting by the crowd.

Finally, Jorgen appeared once more, waving us toward him. As if by arrangement, two soldiers accompanied us across the hall. We are here of our own choice, not as prisoners, I told myself again.

We entered the war-chamber to find Ulfric and Galmar standing behind the map table. They glared at us as we entered. I had expected that, but I had not expected to see Ralof there as well. I thought he would be off fighting the war, maybe even leading his own war-band. He had been in battle recently, I could tell that much by the bandage on his forearm and a barely healed welt on his forehead. He would not look at me as we entered, but stared resolutely at the floor, his face flushed red.
My heart broke for him then. I had hoped to make an account of myself in person, yet now it seemed that Jorgen had made a very full tale of our time at the inn. I wished there was something I could say to him now to ease the hurt I had caused him, but this was not the time.

"So you received quite a reception on your way through the city," Ulfric was saying. "But no worse than you deserved. And don't think you'll receive a better one from me. I let you walk out of here once, but I won't do it again." He leaned toward me, his fists making balls on the table.

So he meant to challenge me? I looked over at Lydia. She still seemed pale and drawn. The lineament had cured her wounds, but only time could fully heal the effects of blood loss and starvation. Was she ready for a fight? "What do you reckon, Lydia?"

She looked around the room, counting up our opponents – Ulfric, Galmar, and Ralof made three, Jorgen and the two soldiers accompanying us made six, plus seven or eight others out by the palace doors. She looked back at me and shrugged. "All in a day's work."

The soldier standing next to her laughed. "What, an' you without a weapon an' all?"

An instant later he was on the floor, his axe in Lydia's hand. The other soldiers had no time to react. "I have a weapon now, don't I?" I was surprised that she was breathing hard from the exertion – usually such a move would cost her little effort.

The other Stormcloaks reached for their weapons just as Ulfric and I held up our hands, shouting "Wait!" at the same time. Then there was silence as everyone took stock of the situation, Ulfric and I glaring at each other.

"Deirdre, have you gone mad?" Ralof said finally. He was looking at me now, and I could hardly bear the look of anguish on his face.

"Aye, my friend. Imprisonment by the Legion and torture by the Thalmor may have driven me mad – mad enough never to submit to imprisonment again."

"All the more reason to join us, then!" he said.

"I will never join the Bear of Markarth!"

The soldiers exclaimed in surprise and confusion, but Ulfric and Galmar both narrowed their gaze at me.

"Where did you hear of that?" Ulfric demanded.

"From the Forsworn whose families you slaughtered when you took the city. And from a book."

"I know the book you mean. It should be burned, it is all Imperial lies," Ulfric said.

"Then tell me, how many innocents died when you took Falkreath?"

"None, Deirdre!" Ralof said. "You have to believe me. I led the second wave of attack on the town. You don't think I would let something like that happen, do you?"

"No, you wouldn't. But what about your leaders? Isn't their motto 'You're either with us or you're against us'?"

Ulfric waved my objection aside. "Young Ralof here has convinced me that we need the people on our side, even the milk-drinking loyalists. And we spare Nords from the Legion as well, hoping
they'll come over to our side. A fair few have, too. The other Imperials we put to the sword. We're not in the business of providing accommodations for enemy troops."

"How noble of you."

"I don't have to account for my actions to you, Dragonborn. You need to explain to me what you were doing in Imperial territory."

"Refusing to assassinate you, for one."


"Tullius wanted me to challenge you to a duel in the ancient way. He was quite sure I would win after seeing us fight two dragons at once on the ramparts of Castle Dour. But I told him I would not, at great cost to myself and to Lydia. Now, don't make me take back my words. I came here a free woman and I will leave here a free woman. I used a trick to get out of here last time, but I assure you, I need no tricks now." I leaned on the map table and glared at him eye-to-eye.

He stared back, measuring my resolve, and whether I did have the power I claimed. "Why did you come here, then?"

"I have a proposal. I have certain information about Thalmor movements. In exchange, I could use your help."

I could see I had piqued his curiosity. He eyed me a moment longer, then relaxed and stood up, his hands out in a gesture of peace. "We will speak, then, as … what? Friends? Allies?" He could not quite bring himself to say the word "equals." I doubt he ever considered anyone an equal, and certainly not a diminutive half-Breton lass, Dragonborn though I was.

"If nothing better, then as adversaries who share common aims. For I have as much reason to hate the Thalmor as you. And I can lead you to one of their war-bands, which travels in your territory even as we speak."

Galmar cut in. "No, my jarl, how do we know we can trust her? Maybe she was tortured, as Jorgen said, but maybe that's just a story. If she was in a Thalmor torture chamber, where are the marks?"

Ulfric looked us both up and down, his eyes resting on Lydia's left hand where it held the haft of the Stormcloak's axe. "This one's felt a Thalmor knife, I'll warrant. And they're both … changed, somehow."

"Lydia got the worst of it, more to my shame."

"As it should be, my thane," she said.

"It's true, my jarl," Jorgen broke in. "They were in a bad way when they walked into our camp, with welts on their necks and arms and who knows where else. The Nord lass could barely walk, she was that weak from her injuries. Then this Dragonborn made up some sort of salve, and an hour later they were right as rain … or almost," he finished, looking at Lydia's left hand.

"But Ulfric," Galmar said, "even if they were tortured, especially if they were tortured, the Thalmor could have turned them. Maybe they were sent here to lead us into a trap."

Ulfric looked from me to Lydia and back again. "Ralof, I likely shouldn't rely on your judgment when it comes to the lass, but you know her best. What do you think? Can we trust her?"
Ralof looked at me for a long moment. *Not in matters of love,* I'm sure he wanted to say, though I had done nothing to lead him on. Finally, he looked back down at the floor and nodded. "I think so, my jarl."

"Come, Galmar," Ulfric said. "Let's at least hear what the lass has to say. Put your weapons away, everyone. It's nearly time for the noon meal. Let us break bread together and see if we can come to an agreement."

We filed out of the war-chamber and sat at the jarl's mead table, Ulfric at the head, and Lydia and I nearest him, facing each other. Galmar sat to my right and Ralof to Lydia's left. My friend couldn't have looked more uncomfortable, while Lydia concentrated on her food as it came. I was glad to see her appetite was back – she would need it to regain her strength.

The meal was the best we had tasted in weeks, beginning with fresh-baked bread and a roasted squash soup seasoned with sweet peppers. Then came an herb-encrusted haunch of venison, roasted medium rare and sliced thin, served over root vegetables mashed with plenty of butter and cream and braised greens and leeks on the side. The two servants were kept busy refilling the flagons of mead. For dessert there was a tart made from the last of the stored apples mixed with snowberries. The food was certainly welcome, yet I couldn't help thinking about the Dunmer and the Argonians in the city, and wondering how they were faring through the harsh winter. And here I was, eating Ulfric's food and treating with him, one who seemed little better than the Thalmor themselves. Yet if Ralof had turned him aside from butchery, maybe there was hope for him yet.

We were silent as the meal began, then Ulfric began questioning me between courses. I told him about our battle with the pair of dragons, to looks of incredulity all around, then about our capture by the Thalmor, my interrogation by Tullius, then the worse inquisition by Elenwen and Naris.

"You realize that the Thalmor are Skyrim's greatest enemy, don't you, Ulfric?" I finished. "I have learned that they mean to enslave humans, if not wipe us out altogether. And the emperor realizes it too."

"The emperor? How do you know what he thinks?"

"We had a good opportunity for a chat when Elenwen sent me to assassinate him."

Ulfric's eyebrows went up. "Tell me you dispatched that weak fool, and I will name you Thane of Eastmarch!" He leaned forward expectantly.

"That I cannot do. I could not bring myself to murder a weak old man – again, at great cost to myself, and greater cost to Lydia." I looked over at her; she was having trouble managing her cutlery with her damaged left hand.

"You acted in the only honorable way, my thane," she said.

Ulfric stood up, his fist pounding the table. "To Oblivion with honor! We are at war! You had the one who sold Skyrim to the Thalmor in your power, and yet he still lives?"

"You do realize you sound just like Ambassador Elenwen. Why would you have me do the Thalmor's bidding? You might as well know that I spared Elisif too."

"And Elisif too! Talos save me from such madness. She is as bad as her husband, worse! And now half the jarls want to make her high queen." He paced up and down before the table, kicking aside his overturned chair. Then he turned on me once more. "I don't understand you, Dragonborn. You have great power, yet you refuse to use it against your enemies!"
I sighed. I was growing tired of explaining myself. "As I told you before, as I've told everyone who will listen, I want one thing – to get back to the dragons and Alduin. It is my sworn duty, and my role as the Dragonborn."

"Ach, the dragons! You swore to protect this city from dragon attack, yet you have failed. Dragons have attacked us weekly both within the city and without. We have lost many brave fighters, as well as common citizens. So why should I believe you can do anything about them now?"

I could only look down at my lap. Mara knew I was ashamed that I hadn't stopped every dragon that Alduin had resurrected. I couldn't help thinking of Huldi and Harry and the promise I had made them.

"Deirdre," Lydia said. "You know he doesn't speak true. Tell him of all the dragons we have killed."

I looked at the ceiling with its ornate stonework, but found no help for my distraught feelings there. Finally I looked at Ulfric. "You have to imagine how much worse it would be were there twice as many dragons. For Lydia and I have slain a dozen of the beasts. They will never again be resurrected, for I have absorbed their souls. We killed one in Kynesgrove the day we left here, and one on Mt. Anthor, which looks down on your city. Surely you can see things would be far worse if those dragons yet lived."

Ulfric pondered this for a moment. "You said when last you were here that you must face Alduin himself. Why haven't you had your great battle with him, as the prophecy foretells?"

"You must believe I have tried," I said. "I challenged him with a shout at Kynesgrove, yet he simply mocked me and flew away, leaving one of his minions to deal with me. As you can see, I don't have wings, though sometimes I wish I did. Too, the Greybeards said I wasn't ready to face Alduin, that I must develop my power before I meet him." I went on to tell Ulfric of my travels around Skyrim, of the shouts I had learned, and of the delay caused by Ancano and the Eye of Magnus. His eyes grew wider as he imagined the power I must wield with the shouts I had learned. He had felt my Thu'um when I knew only parts of Unrelenting Force and Whirlwind Sprint.

"But now I have discovered the location of an Elder loremaster of the Blades. He may hold the key to finding and defeating Alduin. I have business with one here in Windhelm, and then I mean to travel to see him."

"So how does this concern me or our cause?"

"Elenwen is after this Elder as well. She has sent a full war-band to capture him."

"A full war-band," Galmar put in, "traveling through our territory? Impossible!"

I explained their plans to travel in smaller bands, then regroup when they neared their target.

"And where is this loremaster?" Ulfric asked.

"In a place in Riften known as the Ratway Warrens."

"The Ratway!" Galmar exclaimed. "The place has an evil reputation. Home to the Thieves Guild, and worse. It's a perfect place for the Thalmor to spring a trap on anyone we send down there."

Ulfric eyed me warily. "So, what do you propose?"

"A temporary alliance of mutual aid. Send a war-band to help me deal with the Thalmor. You'll
never have a better chance to strike a blow against the Aldmeri Dominion. I'll have a clear path to Esbern. Then we'll go our separate ways. I will get back to hunting Alduin, and your soldiers can get back to the war."

Ulfric pondered this for a moment. I trusted that he couldn't pass up a chance to confront the Thalmor directly. "Well, I hope you find the key to defeating Alduin and his dragons in the Ratway. Talos knows we've had no luck in stopping them. We might have taken Morthal by now if not for their attacks."

"I may be able to help you there," Lydia said.

Ulfric looked at her in surprise. "Go on."

"Our armorers in Whiterun created special shields and weapons for use against the dragons. I lost mine when we were captured in Solitude. I'll give your armorer the designs as long as I get his first batch. With stout shields and specially tipped arrows, your soldiers will be able to do more than drive the dragons away."

"That sounds fair, and we will appreciate your help," Ulfric said. "See the master-of-arms in our garrison here in the palace for a requisition."

"You mean you're serious about working with these two?" Galmar protested.

"I am, Galmar. What did we think was the worst that could happen if we let the Dragonborn go? That the Thalmor or the Imperials would capture her. Well, that has happened, and if she tells true, then we're better off for it." He looked at me. "Besides, she has become a power unto herself. The Thalmor can't control her, and neither can we. Better to have her out there fighting dragons than in here fighting us to escape."

I tipped my head to Ulfric in acceptance of this praise. It was the closest he would ever get to a compliment.

"But don't think I trust you, Dragonborn. Your party will be followed by our cleverest spies. We have war-bands to spare in Riften, and one will be ready to move against you at the first sign of treachery."

I nodded again, then Ulfric made plans with his troops. He would send Jorgen and two soldiers with us to Riften, while the rest of Jorgen's party returned to the Hjaalmarch camp. Once in Riften, Jorgen would recruit one of the Stormcloak war-bands stationed outside the city to aid us in scouring Riften and the surrounding lands for the Thalmor.

The plans made and the meal finished, Ulfric and the rest of his retainers left the table, all except Ralof. Lydia cleared her throat and said she would seek out the Stormcloaks' master of arms, and left us alone in an awkward silence. He stared down at his half-finished plate and wouldn't look at me. I moved down one seat so I could at least face him directly.

"So, Jorgen told you all about Lydia and me?"

He nodded but said nothing.

"I wanted to tell you myself, I didn't want you to hear it like that. But the walls of that inn are thin…"

"How long?" He glared at me for an instant before looking back down at his plate.
"How long since… Last night was…"

"I don't want to know about last night! How long have you loved her?"

I thought about that for a moment. "I think I've loved her since the day she became my housecarl, maybe before. Something about the way she…"

"You don't need to tell me. Anyone can see she's a comely lass."

"Well, but I didn't realize it until the night we were captured, after we battled that pair of dragons. You see, I was confused about my own feelings."

"And now?"

"I'm as sure as I've been about anything in my life."

"So you weren't together the last time I saw you?"

"No! I certainly would have told you then, had I known my own feelings at the time."

He looked up at me again, his eyes boring into mine. "It's just, I thought I saw something in the way Lydia smiled at you then."

"I wish you had told me! Although it mightn't have done any good. Onmund tried to tell me the same thing, a fortnight later, but I was too blind to see it."

"Who's Onmund?"

"Another who loves me … or, loved me once. I think he hates me now."

"Well, aren't you the heartbreaker?"

"Ralof, you must understand…"

"I understand you love another. What more is there?"

I stared down at the table, taken aback by his anger. Then I had to tell him everything. "Do you remember when I told you about the day my parents died?"

He nodded. "How could I forget?"

"Remember, I said I panicked when Osmer pinned me to the ground? But there was something I didn't tell you. I felt only disgust when I felt his manhood pressing against me. I wanted as far away from it as I could get. I think I knew then, though I never quite admitted it to myself, that I could never love any man in that way."

Ralof didn't say anything, but looked at me, as if trying to puzzle out how this made him feel.

I reached across the table to put my hand on his arm. "It's probably small comfort, but if I could love any man, it would be you. As it is, I love you like my dearest friend, like the brother I never had."

He stood up, brushing my hand away. "Duty calls." He turned and walked across the hall, headed for the doorway leading to the garrison.

"Ralof, wait!" I stood up to follow him. "Let's not part like this. I've already lost one friend, I would
not lose another."

He didn't even turn to look back at me. "I return to the front in two days. Would that it were sooner."

Lydia emerged from the doorway to the garrison just as Ralof reached it, the two stopping to look at each other. "Ralof," Lydia said, tipping her head. He said nothing, but stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists. Then he continued into the garrison without a word.

"Ralof took it hard, I see," Lydia said as she came up to me. There was no trace of gloating in her tone, only concern. I could only nod, I was that close to tears.

She put her hand on my shoulder. "I know it's difficult. You don't regret…"

"No, no, how could you think that? It's just, I hate to lose any friends, I've had so few these last years. And especially Ralof."

"If he truly loves you, he'll decide your happiness is more important than his jealousy."

"You really think so?"

"Well, we can hope it's true, at least."

I looked up at her, wondering if Ralof could possibly love me that much.
Windhelm's market district was a bustle of activity. Even with my face shadowed by the deep hood of my cloak, I knew it was just a matter of time before someone recognized me. Lydia walked me straight to the Blade and Dragon, then went to deliver the master of arms' requisition to Oengul War-Anvil, the city's blacksmith.

As I entered the inn, the same young Nord who had greeted us the last time looked up. "You're back! Delphine … I mean, your acquaintance, had given up hope long ago." I don't know why he was trying to be so secretive – we were the only two in the place.

"I need to see her. Is she here? It's urgent."

"Let me see if she's available," he said.

He went to one of the wooden columns supporting the ceiling and tugged three times on a cord that hung from it. A few moments later a door behind the bar opened. Delphine stood there, looking shocked. She looked short on sleep, with dark circles beneath her eyes and disheveled hair. She wore a dress that seemed ill-suited to her. "Come in, quickly!" Her voice was raw.

I walked past her into a large bedchamber, and she closed the door behind me. I was about to speak when she held a finger to her lips. "I have a place where we can talk." She went to a bookcase on the far wall and removed several books, uncovering a lever. When she pulled it, the case swung away from the wall to reveal an open doorway leading to a steep set of stairs. She gestured for me to descend, then followed me down.

On the floor below, I found myself in a well-stocked war-room. A table stood at the center, piled with books and maps, the dragon burial mound map on top. Around the walls were weapon racks and chests; shelves with potions, scrolls, and soul gems; an alchemy table with plenty of supplies near at hand; and even an enchanting table.

I was still surveying the room when Delphine leapt on me from behind, throwing me face-first to the floor, twisting one arm behind my back. In the next instant I felt a blade at the back of my neck and Delphine's hot breath in my ear.

"Did you think I hadn't heard of your capture by the Thalmor, Dragonborn? Or of your attempt on the emperor's life? Tell me, how did the Thalmor turn you? Am I the only price for your freedom, or must others pay as well?"

Oh, for the love of the Nine, I thought, trying to control my anger. Yet I was in no mood for Delphine's suspicions.

"Let me go, or by Y'ffre you'll regret it!"

"I would sooner kill you, since you must intend the same for me, but first you'll tell me everything
you know about the Thalmor."

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already!"

She started to laugh, and that was the only opening I needed. "Feim!" It was the first time I had used the Become Ethereal shout. My Voice reached out to the Void, changing my form to one that could neither harm nor be harmed. Delphine lost her grip on me, and I spun beneath her, her knife unable to cut me. As I rolled I swept my left arm against her right, grasping her by the wrist and squeezing hard. That broke the spell of my shout, but now she couldn't get at me with the knife. I was surprised at how weak she seemed as the blade clattered to the floor. I brought the heel of my right hand up hard into her jaw, then clawed at her eyes with my fingers. She pulled back out of instinct, throwing herself off balance. I soon had her pinned on her back, her own knife at her throat.

"I told you, if I wanted you dead, your soul would be on its way to Aetherius even now. Why will none of you realize that Alduin is the only one I would slay?"

Delphine glared back at me. She was too much of a fighter to show fear, though her fighting skills seemed somewhat lessened since last I had seen her. "You don't really expect me to believe you escaped the Thalmor, do you?"

"I just escaped your clutches, did I not?" Doubt crept into her eyes, but then I heard footsteps descending the stairs behind me.

"Is everything all right, my thane?" Lydia asked. "I heard shouting."

The barkeep was right behind her. "I'm sorry, mistress Delphine, she just barged past me."

"It's all right," I said. "Delphine and I were just sorting out our differences. But I believe we can discuss them as adults now, am I right?" Delphine nodded after a moment and I let her up, handing her dagger back hilt-first. Lydia sheathed her axe.

"That will do, Lod," Delphine said, rubbing her jaw. "I'm fine." The barkeep headed back up the stairs to wait on the non-existent customers. "You're quicker than I expected. And that shout…"

"Feim, or Fade."

"I've never seen anything like it. It's as if you disappeared, but you were still there. Is that how you escaped the Thalmor?"

"No, but I wish I had thought of it." I had hesitated to use it ever since learning it. It didn't seem quite fair to Lydia to make myself impervious to attack but unable to attack our opponents without breaking the shout's effect. "Let's just say the Thalmor will need a new embassy. It was a mistake to build it entirely of wood."

"And yet you escaped alive!"

"By the tips of our singed hair."

"But what of your attempt on the emperor's life? You can't expect me to forgive that, or have you forgotten that the Blades are first of all protectors of the emperor?"

"So that news has spread this far? But let me remind you, the Blades are protectors of the emperors of the dragon blood. And before that, you were the greatest hunters of dragons. Have you forgotten whom you serve?"
She turned away from me and said nothing for a moment. I looked at Lydia, who was staring at me, her eyes wide.

"It's true, these are confusing times," Delphine said finally, her voice subdued. "Even when I took my oath long ago, the Blades had begun to lose their way – ever since Martin Septim's sacrifice and the breaking of the Covenant. And now I am the last of our once great order." She took up the map of the dragon mounds. Since I had seen it last, she had covered it with a cross-hatching of lines and arrows pointing every which way. Most of the dragon mounds were marked as open. She tossed it back onto the table. "I fear I haven't lived up to the memory of the Blades of old. I gave up tracking down the dragonmounds weeks ago, it seemed so hopeless. And then I didn't know what else to do. If only Esbern were here!"

"What if I told you Esbern may yet live, and I can take you to him?"

"Esbern? Where? How?"

I gave her the briefest account of our imprisonment and what I had learned from overhearing Etienne Rarnis. She was most surprised that the Thalmor suspected the Blades of somehow controlling the dragons, just as she had suspected the Thalmor, but then she laughed. "I suppose it makes sense – the ancient enemies each suspect the other of every calamity that befalls Tamriel. I should have known you were right that no one can control Alduin. If only we had some way of coming at him!"

"I'm hoping that Esbern will hold the key. You said that he was well versed in dragonlore, didn't you?"

"I did. If only we had paid more attention to him! But we wrote him off as a doddering old man, and we had more pressing things to worry about, with the war and the Thalmor. Concerning ourselves about some vague prophecy just didn't seem that important. But maybe he wasn't so weak of mind after all! No, if there's anyone who knows a way to stop Alduin, it's Esbern."

"Excellent! How soon will you be ready to leave?"

Delphine looked at the floor. "I … I won't be going with you. We cannot risk bringing the last two Blades together, not without great precautions. Too, it might be a trap. I'm still not sure I can trust you. Or perhaps the Thalmor allowed you to escape, letting you believe you did it on your own. Bring Esbern to me here, and I will know I can trust you."

I sighed. "I grow tired of people asking me to retrieve things or people for them," I said. "But I suppose you wouldn't have survived this long without an excess of suspicion."

"If you think I'm suspicious, wait until you meet Esbern! You may have trouble convincing him to trust you. Ask him if he remembers the Thirtieth of Frostfall. That should get his attention."

"It would be much simpler if you would just come with us."

Delphine looked at me thoughtfully. "I can see I've disappointed you. To make amends, I will open our war-room's stores to you. Feel free to take weapons, potions, scrolls, soul gems, gold, whatever you need. And of course, you are welcome to stay with us. Lod will see to your rooms."

We made good use of the Blades' stores, and were especially glad to find stout bows suited to our differing sizes. I chose a sword of frost as well, to replace the one the Imperials had taken from me. We thanked Delphine and left her thumbing idly through the maps and books spread across the table.
"You'll be glad to know we have plenty of rooms," Lod said when we returned to the inn's mead hall. "No need to share a bed!"

I suppressed a giggle, and Lydia said, "One double bed will be fine."

Lod looked a bit confused. "Well, to each their own, but I'm sure you'd be more comfor…"

Lydia stared at him pointedly and put her arm around me. Now I did giggle.

"Oh," Lod said. "I see! Well, perhaps you'll be wanting our Akaviri suite, still at no charge! Decorated as they used to on Akavir, so they say. Let me show you."

The room was large, with its own blazing fireplace and a circular bed surrounded by gauzy curtains. There were overstuffed chairs and a bear skin rug in front of the fire, and two bottles of wine chilling in a bucket. An adjoining room had a tub and wash basin. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a bath.

The last thing we noticed was that the door locked from the inside. We both laughed.

"Yes, this will be perfect," Lydia said.

We awoke late the next morning to find that Lod had laid out breakfast for us. He looked sleepy as he lolled behind the bar, greeting us with a "Good morning, ladies." We sat ourselves side by side at the long table.

"And how did you sleep, Lod?" Lydia asked.

"Slept like the dead! Didn't hear a thing!" He stifled a yawn.

Lydia smiled. "That's good. I thought I might have been a bit loud."

Lod turned a deep red. "Cheese! We need more cheese up here! I'll just pop down to the cellar…"

He disappeared through a side door as quick as he could without running.

Lydia laughed, then looked at me. "You learned your lessons well, my thane."

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" I said, trying to adopt a reprimanding tone, but I was feeling such a warm glow I couldn't quite manage it.

"Of course! For one so inexperienced, you were…"

"No! I meant just now. You enjoyed tormenting the lad." I couldn't understand why I wasn't as embarrassed as Lod; perhaps something of Lydia's frank and open nature was rubbing off on me.

"I admit it," she said, "I enjoy making a Nord blush." She leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Let's go back to bed and torment him some more."

"But don't you need to see how the arrows and shield are coming along?"

"There will be nothing to see until this afternoon. Too, we need our rest after our terrible ordeal. Who can blame us?" She gave me such a charmingly wicked grin that I couldn't argue with her.
We took our plates of food back to our room, locking the door behind us. We were not seen—though we were sometimes heard—until after noon.

By breakfast the next morning, we were well prepared for our journey. Lydia had her new shield and we each had a quiver of orichalcum-tipped arrows (with only a little complaining from Oengul about how messy it was to work with that orcish metal). The horses Ulfric had lent us were packed for an early start. Yet, as eager as I was to find the key to defeating Alduin, I was loath to leave the Blade and Dragon. Our nights in the inn had been so sweet, and now we were headed back into danger. I wasn't so worried for myself, but for Lydia, and how she would fare if it came to battle.

"My Lydia," I said taking her hand as we sat at the breakfast table, "are you ready for what's ahead?"

"Of course, my thane, why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just, you still seem so gaunt." I stroked her cheek. Color was returning to it, but she still looked drawn.

"My strength is returning. It is two days' journey to Riften. I'll be as fit as ever by then."

"And what if we do encounter the Thalmor, who had this done to you?" I kissed the scarred spot on her hand where her little finger had once been.

I felt her stiffen. "Bring them on!" She pounded the table with her right fist. "Nothing would make me happier than to take them on in the Ratway, or wherever we may find them. Let the bastards feel my bastard axe!"

She had selected a Dwarven axe of lightning from Delphine's armory. It was a hand-and-a-half axe, which a fighter of Lydia's strength could wield one-handed. But in some situations she would have to use both hands, and then her missing digit could affect her power and control.

"You are sure you're ready?"

"I practiced with it yesterday at Oengul's. It wasn't perfect, but I'll get used to it. I'll practice on the road, and by the time we reach Riften it will be as if nothing is amiss."

"Well, if you're sure," I said.

"I am. And the worst thing you can do, my thane, is to keep gazing at me with that expression of concern."

"I'm sorry. I just can't help worrying about you."

Her dark eyes grew darker. "Let me worry about you for a change, my thane. If anything happens to you, I..."

Just then the door to the inn opened. Ralof stood there, hesitating to cross the threshold. He took one step into the room, saw us, then looked down at the floor.

"Ralof!" I exclaimed.
Lydia made as if to rise, saying, "I'll just see to our things," but I put my hand on her arm and held her to the bench.

Ralof could not have looked more uncomfortable. He stared at his boots, then the ceiling, then the bar, anywhere but at us. Lod tried his best to mind his own business, polishing some tankards that didn't need polishing.

With a deep breath, Ralof walked slowly over to stand across from us at the table. He cleared his throat several times. At last he spoke, all the while fiddling with the dangling end of his blue Stormcloak sash. "I … I wanted to say … how I acted the other day … it was wrong, and will you forgive me?"

"Oh, Ralof!" I said, leaping from the bench and running around the table to embrace him.

Before I could say more, I noticed how stiffly he stood there. Then he unclenched my hands from around his neck and held me away from him. "No," he said, "not yet." His hands dropped to his sides and he went on looking at his boots.

"My friend, I cannot blame you. I know I wounded you, even without meaning to, and maybe in the worst way a heart can be wounded. So of course I forgive you."

He just stood there, nodding.

I stared at my own feet for a moment, then at the ceiling. Finally, not knowing what else to do, I gave him a punch in the arm. "Besides, I thought Nords were supposed to have hearts of ice!"

He grinned, and finally looked up at me. Then he laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"It's just my luck. Of all the lasses in Skyrim, I fall for one who doesn't go for the lads. I knew it was too good to be true. You were so easy to talk to, not like the other lasses."

Lydia spoke up. "A strapping, red-headed Nord like yourself, you're sure to find someone, someday."

Ralof looked at Lydia, but spoke to me. "At least you've chosen a brave and honorable Nord for a companion. You could hardly have done better."

"So we can still be friends?"

"Of course we can. I love you don't I? What kind of love would it be if I didn't want to see you happy? I will still love you and be proud to be your sword-brother."

I looked over at Lydia, who winked at me. "That's very … chivalrous of you, Ralof."

"Chivalrous?"

"Yes, it's an old Breton word my mother used to use. It means to be gallant, courteous, and honorable."

"Aye, it's my downfall. I'm too gallant, the lads all tell me."

"No, you're not. You're perfect the way you are."

"Would you join us for a cup of tea?" Lydia asked. "We're off to Riften in an hour."
"I know it, and I'm off to the front as well. Maybe a mug of mead would be better." A dark look crossed his face as he looked at me.

"Don't think such thoughts," Lydia said. "I know we'll see you again."

"I hope you know you're a lucky lass," Ralof said to her.

"Oh, I do know it. I'm the luckiest lass in the world." She beamed at me as she said it. I thought my heart would burst.

Soon Ralof and Lydia were trading war tales and memories of Whiterun like old comrades. I couldn't remember ever being so happy.
I had to laugh as we stood inside Riften’s city gate, surveying the scene of beggars, wastrels, and ne'er-do-wells loitering in dingy alleyways and shadowed alcoves, nearly all of them cloaked and hooded, as were we. "Well, Lydia, what do you think now?" I asked. "Will our cloaks make us look suspicious in this city?"

We had argued about whether to enter Riften rather than accompanying Jorgen to the Stormcloak troop encampment outside the city. Lydia felt it would be unsafe, since the Thalmor were likely prowling the place on the hunt for Esbern. But our road had been hard, especially on the first day, when a freezing rain beset us in the Bonestrewn Wastes south of Kynesgrove. A rough night out with little sleep hadn't helped Lydia's recovery, and I thought she needed a warm bed and better food than the Stormcloaks had provided.

I would appreciate the warm bed as well, and better yet, one with Lydia in it. Sleeping under a tarp on our separate bedrolls, with no privacy and Lydia in her leather and steel armor – it had been its own kind of trial. What can I say for myself? I was young and newly in love. What was a little danger compared to a night in Lydia's arms?

The improving weather on our second day hadn't helped my side of the debate. The morning dawned bright and cold. We had camped at the base of the uplands separating Eastmarch from the Rift, and by mid-morning we were climbing out of the shadows into the sunlight coming over the eastern mountains. We reached a promontory and had to stop for a look, letting our horses graze on grasses poking out of the snow nearby.

To the north and far below us now, the Bonestrewn Wastes sent up columns of steam from the many hot pools dotting that barren land. Streamers of cloud, golden in the morning sun, moved swiftly across the sky, dissipating as they reached the drier air of the lowlands. In the east were the bronze-roofed towers that must be Mzulft, the Dwemer ruin where Brelyna, J'zargo, and Onmund had discovered the location of the Staff of Magnus. South, higher on the steep upland face, we spotted the first maples and aspens, a few golden leaves clinging to the branches even now in winter. This was a peculiarity of the Rift – by a trick of the terrain or weather or maybe some Nirn-magic, it always seemed autumnal here, despite its elevation. The snows fell only lightly when they came at all, and the trees nearly always bore a riot of reds and golds.

To the west were the mountains at the heart of Skyrim, every crag and snow-fluted chute standing out in sharp relief in bright sunlight. Towering over all stood the Throat of the World, for once not shrouded in clouds except at the very summit. I had not forgotten that I must return there, and soon, to finish my training.

Lydia took my hand as we took in the view. The sun warmed our backs and glinted off the snow, making the day seem milder than it was. The color was returning to her cheeks and she did look hardier than I had seen her in days, though not well rested. She stretched like a cat now in the
growing warmth and put her arm around my waist. I rested my head on her shoulder and wished we could just travel together like this, taking in Skyrim's beauties, without a care in Mundus. But that was not to be. Our journey took us into danger and more danger, and it was time to get on with it.

By evening, as we approached Riften, I had won the argument. Lydia's fatigue had returned and she could not argue with the need for a bed. Now we had just entered the city gates and I had my own doubts. What kind of city was it where the people kept their faces and forms hidden under hooded cloaks? As if the fogs rising off Lake Honrich weren't cover enough for many a dark deed. And how many of these tall figures passing slowly by might be Thalmor in disguise? Every nook and doorway seemed to have its unconscious wastrel, passed out from too much drink, or worse. Riften was notorious for its skooma trade. Only the Riften guards went undisguised – them, and the obvious ruffians and sneak's of the Thieves Guild, who behaved as if they owned the town. One of them was eyeing us even now – a tall Nord with red hair in side braids. He wore leather armor with belts crossed rakishly over his chest.

"Come, Lydia, we're too obvious if we keep standing here. Let's try to blend in with the rest of these hooded figures." She only nodded, she was that tired.

We made our way along the wood-planked causeway spanning the canals over which half of the city was built, soon coming to the Bee and Barb Inn. Inside, the mood was less sinister than on the streets. Riften's citizens sat at tables and at the bar with hoods thrown back, as if the veiled threat of the city's streets didn't hold sway in this drinking hall. There were Bosmer, Dunmer, two strapping Nords, and a well-dressed, black-haired woman dining alone. I didn't see any obvious Thalmor spies, but that meant nothing. We kept our heads and faces covered as we approached the bar.

I had to laugh again when the innkeeper, an Argonian named Keerava, showed us to the only room she had left, a single. It was quite cramped, with barely room for a second person to stretch out on the floor.

"I'll take the floor, my thane," Lydia said when Keerava left us to make ourselves as comfortable as we could.

"Now, Lydia," I said, steering her toward the bed, "you need your rest if we have a fight ahead of us."

Tired as she was, she didn't put up much resistance. She barely had strength to take off her boots and steel gauntlets before falling back on the mattress. I put the fur coverlet over her.

"I'll go back to the stable and get my bedroll," I said. "I need to meet Jorgen as well, to make our final plans for entering the Ratway."

She barely opened her eyes. "I should go with … Dangerous …"

"Hush now. I'll be fine – just one more hooded figure in the crowd." I stroked her cheek. "Go to sleep, my Lydia … my love." But she didn't hear me – she was already asleep.

I took my supper in the inn's mead hall, hoping to overhear some gossip about Thalmor sightings. I heard no talk of suspicious Altmer strangers. Instead, the inn was buzzing with speculation about what had happened to the dragons. Everyone was relieved that none had been seen since the turning of Evening Star. Up to then the dragons had attacked the hold weekly.

A trader from Whiterun came in, and the well-dressed woman I had seen earlier accosted him. "You there, what news from Whiterun? Does the Honningbrew Meadery still stand?"
"Aye, Lady Black-Briar," he said. "Whiterun Hold has been free of the dragons as well." She looked somewhat disappointed at this news.

Had Alduin withdrawn his dragons after their defeat at Solitude? True, one had attacked Windhelm the week before the Stormcloaks escorted me there, but we had seen and heard nothing of them since.

If Alduin really could track my movements, surely he would have sent a dragon against us by now. It had been five days since we escaped the Thalmor, and if ever we had been vulnerable it was as we emerged from the tunnels beneath the embassy. Perhaps he was afraid to lose more of his dragons to us, after what had happened at Solitude. If so, this was a sure sign of progress. I felt things were moving forward – the day when Alduin must face me could not be far off. Now, if only this Esbern knew of some sort of weapon I could use against the World Eater! I almost wanted to search the Ratway myself at that very moment, Thalmor or no, but I managed to restrain myself.

With considerable time to wait until my midnight meeting with Jorgen, I went out into the Riften night, exiting by a different door. The city's market plaza was before me, empty now, and beyond it, up flights of stone steps, stood Mistveil Keep, the jarl's palace. It was the only stone structure in the place, the rest of the city having been built of timber atop ancient stone foundations. It was a wonder the dragons hadn't burned the place to the waterline by now.

To my left, over a little bridge spanning the canals, was the Temple of Mara. What safer place to while away the time until my meeting at Riften's back gate? Too, I remembered what Arngeir had said – that I served Mara, more than Akatosh, the one who sent me here.

Inside the temple, a statue of Mara greeted me from across the chapel hall. She was shown in her characteristic pose – hands out to the sides, her tear-stained face turned to the heavens in supplication. She was dressed modestly, in a full-length dress and a long cloak or shawl draping her from head to toe.

Before the statue was an altar with pews facing it on either side of a central aisle. A Dunmer priestess was sweeping up dried flower petals strewn over the floor and benches. She looked up as I approached.

"Oh pardon me," she said. "I was just cleaning up from a wedding. I am Dinya Balu, priestess of Mara."

"Turdas seems an odd night for a wedding," I said.

"Not at all! Life in Skyrim can be hard, and short. When a couple decides they want the comfort of love and companionship, they seldom waste time on courtship, and will marry at the first opportunity."

"And what of couples who do not marry, but still enjoy each other's … companionship?"

"Each other's bodies, I'm sure you mean. Ours is not to judge, but to show love, compassion, and understanding to all. Maramal, our head priest, differs with me in this, but I believe Dibella and Mara, as different as they are, are two sides of the same coin. One often leads to the other. But of the two, Mara is the greater, for she calls on us to love not just those special to us, but all beings of whatever race, appearance, belief, or custom, and yes, even our enemies. For we are all part of the greater All."

Mara seemed a remarkably compassionate and loving god, I thought, yet how could we humans live up to such a standard of tolerance? "What of those who commit great evil – cold-blooded
murder, for instance? Are we to love even them?"

"Justice must be served, of course, or society, such as it is even here in Skyrim, could not function. But even for them, we reserve the greatest compassion. All beings suffer, and having suffered, how can we not feel compassion and seek to ease the suffering of others? To forget this is the root of all evil actions, and we must work all the harder to bring Mara's light to those who have forgotten it."

It seemed to me that many in Skyrim, including myself, had forgotten this truth, if they ever knew it. "It seems we are all sinners, then. But Mara will redeem us?"

"Only acts of love and compassion can redeem acts of evil. Spread Mara's light in the world, help ease the suffering of others, show compassion to all beings, and you will receive her highest blessing. But you began by asking about marriage. Is there one who is special to you?"

"Yes, I love her with all my heart."

Dinya didn't so much as raise an eyebrow that my loved one was a woman. "And does she return your love?"

"I … I think she does, though she has never spoken it aloud."

"Then, if you are ready to be bound to her for the rest of your lives, you should propose to her. Are you familiar with Skyrim's marriage customs?"

I had to admit I was not – one more area in which my parents' teachings had been lacking.

"Let me show you." She went to a chest and withdrew a beautiful gold pendant with intricate knotting flowing into a central cross shape, in the center of which was set a turquoise stone.

"Wear this amulet in your beloved's presence. Assuming she knows more of our customs than you do, she will recognize it and ask if you are wearing it for her. Tell her that you are, and there you have it, you've made your proposal. But I would counsel you to wait until you are very sure of her love before putting the amulet on, in order to avoid embarrassment and heartbreak."

I took the amulet from her, admiring the intricacy of its craftsmanship. "I will take this," I said, "and I will remember your advice."

"That will be two hundred gold."

"Two hundred gold! That seems a bit expensive."

"We often hear that. Yet the expense satisfies three purposes: it defrays the cost of the amulet's exquisite craftsmanship; it furthers our good works among the poor, the sick, and the lost; and it demonstrates the seriousness of the wearer's intent."

I reluctantly handed over the gold and left the temple, amulet in hand. My mind was unsettled. Should I wear the amulet right away? Or was it too soon? Would I run the risk of driving Lydia away with talk of marriage? She hadn't even told me she loved me yet. But I could see no reason to wait – our lives seemed even more likely to be cut short than the typical Skyrim couple's.

Something else bothered me. Arngeir said he believed I served Mara, yet how could I possibly live up to Mara's principles? I couldn't imagine finding compassion in my heart for my parents' killers, or for the Thalmor who had tortured Lydia and me. And Dinya Balu had said that Mara's compassion extended to all beings. Did this include the dragons?
I pocketed the amulet and went on my way to meet Jorgen.

I was glad to have a baker's dozen Stormcloaks at our backs as we entered the Ratway in the wee hours of the following morning. We had hoped to find the Ratway's residents asleep or still in their cups at this hour, but we encountered two ruffians not a hundred feet down the first tunnel. Had it been just Lydia and I, they might have challenged us. I did not fear such lowly thugs, but it was gratifying to see them step meekly aside to let us pass. Lydia was fully recovered from her fatigue of the day before, and she seemed disappointed at this missed opportunity for a fight.

Two Stormcloak brothers, Hob and Lob, led the way further into the catacombs within the city's ancient stone foundations, which served as both the city's prison and sewer system. The brothers had been here before on recruiting missions, none very successful, given the nature of the Ratway's denizens: wastrels, the mad, and other of Skyrim's castoffs. The Thieves Guild had its headquarters here as well. The thieves' only loyalty was to each other, and to whatever gold they could purloin from unsuspecting victims. Yet the guild had a better reputation than the Dark Brotherhood, eschewing violence and murder at all times.

After uncounted twists and turns, Hob and Lob led us into the Winking Skeever, the Ratway bar frequented by the Thieves Guild. The stench of the place was incredible, as it occupied one side of a large circular chamber in the center of which was a pool of the most foul sewage. Yet the thieves must have grown used to it. Several of them lounged around the bar, men and women, all wearing the same leather armor I had seen on the ruffian when we entered the city. That gentleman stood among them, leaning against the bar.

"Steady on then!" he called out when he saw us enter the chamber across from the bar. "What's such a large group of Stormcloaks doing down here? And who are these two?" he said, nodding at us as we crossed a bridge over the pool's outlet stream and made our way up to the bar.

"We're not here to disturb your business, Brynjolf," Hob said. "We're hunting an old man who's said to live in the warrens, and any Thalmor who might be after him."

"The warrens! Lot's o' old men down there, laddie, and elves after 'em, too."

"Elves!" Jorgen said. "How recently? How many?"

"Three. They went through that door right before you got here." He pointed to a door behind the bar.

"Thank you. You've earned the Stormcloaks' gratitude."

"'Bout time we earned somefing," growled a man with a shaved head sitting at one of the tables. "Pickins've been mighty slim 'round 'ere of late."

Beyond the door we found a narrow hall leading to a large, three-storied chamber. Hob was immediately ahead of Lydia and me, and had just stepped out onto the gallery at the top of the chamber when there was a flash of lightning. The blast caught him in the shoulder and spun him into the wall. I peeked around the corner to see a black-robed Thalmor wizard standing in a dark alcove on the balcony opposite us. From the level below, I caught the glint of gilded elven armor. I ducked back into the hall just in time to miss a second lightning bolt.
The wizard shouted for his companions to join him, but the fight was soon over. Between my atronach, the Staff of Magnus, and the Stormcloak archers, the wizard could not stand. The warrior who came behind fell as he came through the doorway, before he could even see how many we were. The third was more cautious, lurking in the shadows where we could not get at him, occasionally launching a bolt of lightning at us, and shouting Thalmor boasts: "Kill me if you can, but the Thalmor will prevail!" and "The only truth is elven superiority!"

Perhaps it was the conversation with the priestess of Mara the night before, or perhaps my natural aversion to killing, but as I looked on the bodies of the two elves on the balcony opposite us I felt only a sickness in my stomach and a great sadness in my soul. I wanted no more of death, even the death of the Thalmor, yet death seemed to want more of me. But did it have to be this way? "There is always a choice," I remembered Atmah saying in Labyrinthian.

"Hold, friends," I said. When I caught a glimpse of gold, I launched a calming spell down the hallway where the elf lurked.

"Oi, keep your magic off me!" he called.

"Now for him!" Jorgen shouted, taking the lead. I made after him, Lydia and the rest of the Stormcloaks following us around the balcony to reach the passage where the elf was hiding.

"Jorgen," I called as we ran, "let us take him prisoner, we don't have to slay him!"

Jorgen slowed to look at me. "Aren't these the Thalmor pigs who tortured you and your companion?"

"Most likely, but … he might have vital information for us. Maybe they've found Esbern already."

"All right," he said, stepping over the bodies of the two dead elves. "We'll do this your way." He held up his hand for the others to wait. Lydia and I followed him through the doorway.

The elf stood calmly in a dark corner. "May I help you?" he asked.

I cast a candlelight spell. He wore a confused expression, as if he had wanted to say something more belligerent. Then I recognized him as one of the justiciars who had witnessed our torture, the very one who had hit Lydia over and over.

Lydia recognized him as well, and I knew what was coming next. His blows had been far from the worst pain she had endured, yet the shame was great. With a yell she was upon him, striking him with her steel-gloved fists about the face and head. Then she made to draw her axe.

The elf was reaching for his own sword, Lydia's blows having broken my calming spell. I calmed him again, then stepped between the two, reaching for Lydia's axe hand. "Lydia, I know how you feel, you must believe me. But we cannot. We should not lower ourselves to their level."

Her dark eyes went wide. "To their level! I will never understand it, my thane. We should vanquish our foes with courage and honor. This one should be glad to die a good death at my hands – it's more than they would do for us."

"Your thane is right, lass," Jorgen said. "This one can tell us if there are more of his kind here, maybe where your Esbern is."

"He's not my Esbern," she said through gritted teeth, and stalked back to the balcony with the other soldiers.
The elf proved uncooperative, however, swearing that they were the only three justiciars in the place, and that they had no idea where to find Esbern.

"What should we do with him?" Jorgen asked.

"Tie him up here and pick him up on the way out," I said. Hob still looked shaken, even after a healing spell, so we left him to guard the bound elf.

We continued our spiraling way down into the depths of the Ratway Warrens, always returning to the same rectangular chamber as we passed each level. Along the way, we found the mad, the wasted, and the lost, hiding in nooks and old cells, often rambling on about Daedric lords or the price of skooma or nothing at all. If any of them were Esbern, he would clearly be no use to us.

Finally we entered a larger chamber, with barred cells on either side. "This is the last chamber," said Lob, who was leading us now. "If he's down here, this will be the place."

The chamber had two levels. On this floor, all the cells and alcoves were empty, but we heard a woman raving from the balcony above. At the end of that gallery was a stout door, unlike anything we'd seen so far.

"Jorgen," I said, "wait with your soldiers here. I don't want to alarm him with such a large force." Jorgen did as I asked and Lydia and I climbed the steps to the gallery above. "Esbern!" I called, giving the door a rap. "Friends are here to see you."

A moment later the covering over a narrow eyeslit slid back and a pair of ancient Nord eyes looked out at us, reflecting the light of Lydia's torch.

"Go away! I don't know anything about any Esbern. You're disturbing my rest with all that commotion."

"It's all right, Esbern," I said. "Delphine sent us."

"Delphine? So, you've finally tracked her down … and she led you to me … And now here I am, caught like a rat in a trap. But it will take more than two of you to defeat me, old as I am."

"We're not here to fight. Delphine needs your help, we need your help, to defeat the dragons. She said to mention the Thirtieth of Frostfall. Do you remember it?"

The eyes grew sad, remembering some long-ago day. "Aye, I remember it, as should anyone who has suffered under the tyranny of the Thalmor." Then he looked at me more sharply. "So she really lives? And she trusts you? Who are you?"

"My name is Deirdre, and this is Lydia. We are working together with Delphine against the dragons, and Alduin most of all. We were hoping you know some way of defeating the World Eater, of forcing him into battle."

"Forcing Alduin into battle? You are quite mad!"

"Please, just open the door and let us talk."

He gave a grim chuckle. "Well, whether you're mad or just extremely foolish, I would like to hear more. Just a moment." With much scraping and grating of locks and bolts, he finally had the door open. He was a small man, balding, with a trim gray beard, dressed in a tattered tunic and leather boots. His chambers were quite luxurious by Ratway standards, with a bed, table, desk, and shelves containing books and maps, none of them in very good order. Potions, bottles of ale, and old crusts
of bread were scattered here and there.

He closed the door behind us. "So Delphine keeps up the fight after all these years? I told her it was hopeless long ago."

"What do you mean, hopeless?"

"After the elves sacked the White-Gold Tower, it was obvious to me that the ancient prophecy was coming true. It seemed just a matter of time before Skyrim would be kingless. Alduin would return. And now he has, and the world will be destroyed."

"But if you know of the prophecy, then you know that it foretells the Dragonborn's return."

He nodded. "Yes, but who dares hope for such a thing in these dark days? No dragonborn has been known these past centuries, not since Martin Septim broke the Amulet of Kings. And could even those dragonborn emperors defeat Alduin were they alive today? I think not. No, the gods have abandoned us to our fate as the playthings of the World Eater."

"Esbern, it is not hopeless," I said. "I am the Dragonborn."

He actually laughed. "And people say I am mad! You? A Breton? And a lass, no less?"

"I know it's hard to believe. Others have doubted it, to their regret."

Lydia stepped forward, stamping her foot. "She is the Dragonborn, I'll swear it on a shrine of Talos!"

"How am I to prove it to you?" I asked. "Zu'u Dovahkiin. Dov bovul ko maar ahst dii Thu'um."

"So you can speak the dragon language. But can you shout? Show me."

"I dare not shout here and attract attention. The Thalmor are about, and we may not have caught all of them."

"And they're after me?"

I nodded.

"Well, if you won't shout, tell me how many dragons you have slain."

"Nearly a dozen, by my count."

He looked at Lydia. "And you witnessed this?"

"I helped with most of them."

He looked back at me, unsure now. "And? Did you devour their souls?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but yes."

He looked at Lydia and she nodded. "You should see it! It's as if the dragon's body is on fire. Swirls of flame and smoke engulf my thane, but do not harm her. Then she takes that swirling energy in somehow, and the dragon is nothing but bones. She has absorbed its power, you can see it in her."

I looked at her. "You can?"
"Aye, my thane, I can see it in your eyes."

"So you learned to shout by absorbing the souls of the dragons?" Esbern asked. "That fits the ancient tales."

"Yes, and by absorbing words of power from walls scattered throughout Skyrim. And from the Greybeards, of course."

"The Greybeards! Of course they would get their hands on you, the pious fools. But the fact that they called you is one more proof that you are Dragonborn." He looked back and forth between us, then stepped up to me and stared for a long moment into my eyes. I held his gaze, wondering if he could see what Lydia saw there.

Then he nodded. "I choose to believe you are the Dragonborn, for what choice do I have? You have renewed my hope. And if I am wrong, if this is some Thalmor treachery, it makes little difference. I can die today at the hands of the Altmer, or tomorrow in Alduin's jaws. Come, we have much to do! Take me to Delphine as quick as you can." He began stuffing clothes and books and potions into a knapsack.

"Wait! Delphine said you might know a way we can defeat the World Eater, since you are the Blades' loremaster. I have to know I didn't come all this way for nothing."

"And I thought you came to free me! But no, I know of no such weapon. You're the Dragonborn. If you don't know how to defeat Alduin, who does?"

I can't tell you how my heart sank then. All of these months of wandering, and Esbern had been my last hope for finding a weapon against Alduin. I explained to him the difficulty I had in getting Alduin to show himself, and the failure of my shout even to ruffle one of his scales the one time we did meet.

As I spoke, the hope gradually faded from his eyes. "No, if the Dragonborn knows no way to come at the World Eater, what hope do we have?"

I hung my head.

Suddenly he crossed the room to one of his bookshelves. "Wait! Alduin's Wall! Why didn't I think of it before?" The shelves were in disarray, with books piled every which way. "Just a moment, it's here somewhere." Finally he pulled down a thick tome and brought it over to the table, pulling a candle nearer.

The book's cover bore the title The Annals of the Dragonguard. He opened it to a map of Skyrim with one spot marked in red, far to the west, nearly to Markarth. "Sky Haven Temple, hidden within the Karthspire at the site of an old Akaviri encampment. This is where we will find Alduin's Wall, the repository of all the Blades' accumulated dragonlore. If there is a clue to defeating Alduin, it will be there."

I groaned. "We've just come from there! Why didn't they just write down their dragonlore in a book – this one, for instance?" I poked at the page.

"Because books can easily be lost or destroyed. The Blades wrought Alduin's Wall in stone, built to last an eternity, sequestered deep within the Karthspire. But its location was lost for centuries, until I found it in this book. I rescued this tome from Cloud Ruler Temple, shortly after the Thirtieth of Frostfall. The Blades' archives held so many secrets … I was only able to save a few scraps."

"So you're sure this wall will hold the key to defeating Alduin?"
"Well, no, there are no guarantees. But the Blades used it to record all they knew of Alduin, his defeat in the Dragon War, and the prophecy of his return. The wall was famous, one of the wonders of the ancient world, though none remembers it now but an old man."

I pounded the table, Esbern looking at me in alarm. I wanted to cry, I was so frustrated. We had been so close to an answer! If only the fool Blades had written what they knew of Alduin in the book we had before us! Instead, we faced a journey of many days, through hostile territory. And even then, there were no promises.

"Is everything all right, my thane?" Lydia asked.

I took a deep breath and sighed. "As right as it's going to be, I suppose. We must do what we must, though I would not go back into Imperial territory." I looked at her to see if she was prepared for it. She seemed as eager as ever.

"We must take you to Delphine," I said to Esbern. "It will add days to our journey, but she will not trust us fully until she sees you in person." And just when I thought my wandering was at an end.

"Then we must make haste!" Esbern said, and returned to his packing. In moments, he was ready to leave, and we made our way down the steps to rejoin the Stormcloaks.

We had just emerged from the Ratway Warrens into the Winking Skeever and were making haste around the circular pool when I heard a cry from our rear. We turned to see a group of Thalmor justiciars ranged at the mouth of a passage to the side of the bar. I don't know why I hadn't seen that passage before, but I didn't have time to think about it – more elves were pouring out of it and two of our fighters were already down. The thieves huddled off to the side, wanting no part of the action.

"I knew there was treachery afoot!" Esbern shouted.

"Thalmor treachery, not mine," I said. "Now everyone, get down!"

They were glad to comply – all but Lydia, of course, who remained standing at my side. The Stormcloaks crouched behind their shields against a rain of arrows from four elven archers.

"Faas Ru Maar!" I shouted over the Stormcloaks' heads. But these were powerful Altmer – only a handful turned to run in dismay. The rest were merely staggered by the shout.

"The prophecy is true!" Esbern exulted. "The Dragonborn has returned!"

"Now for it, Stormcloaks!" Lydia called, advancing with her axe drawn.

I conjured my flame atronach before the elves could recover. The justiciars looked to equal us in number – too many to attempt to calm them all. A tall wizard in the middle of the group was the first to recover, and I recognized him as Rulindil. An anger I had not felt since the embassy threatened to overwhelm me, and I struggled to master it.

"It's her, the Dragonborn!" Rulindil called. "Get her, or all is lost!" I rolled to the side just as an arrow whistled past. I shot a spell of frenzy at the archer next to the wizard. The archer dropped his bow and drew his sword, turning on his leader.

Lydia and a group of Stormcloaks advanced on the justiciars not wielding bows and the melee began. Esbern and I dealt with the four remaining archers, my atronach hitting one with firebolts. I was amazed at Esbern's agility and power as he moved about the room dealing lightning bolts and dodging arrows.
Lydia dropped her shield – it was too large for fighting in close quarters – and wielded her axe two-handed. If her missing finger cost her any advantage, I couldn't see it. The Stormcloak next to her fell, and now Lydia whooped with battle frenzy as she was forced to take on two Thalmor fighters at once, whirling, blocking, and slashing with incredible speed and power. "You never should have come here, Thalmor scum! Skyrim is for the … for the rest of us!" Very good, I thought, and then had to remind myself not to stand and stare.

I drew the Staff of Magnus and aimed it at Rulindil, who was still fending off his comrade. I reckoned he was the strongest of the wizards; it wouldn't hurt to take his magicka down a notch or two. By the time he had subdued his compatriot, the staff had drained most of his power. Drawing his only other weapon, a dagger, he skulked against the back wall.

The tide of battle had now turned in our favor, so I began casting calming spells on the few elves still fighting. Esbern was resting near the bar, having exhausted most of his own magicka. Another Stormcloak was down, and Jorgen was seeing to her. The remaining Stormcloaks were advancing on Rulindil before his magicka could return. Lydia was pulling her axe out of a justiciar's chest with some difficulty.

Just then there came a shout from behind her. A justiciar who must have been hiding behind a crate after being wounded was charging at her, sword held high.

There was no time to think about mercy. "Fus-Ro-Dah!" I shouted, catching the elf well before he reached her. His body flew over a low railing and into the putrid water. Even in his light elven armor, he sank without a trace.

"Thank you, my thane," Lydia said. "That's the way to deal with Thalmor, if you ask me." She took out a cloth and began wiping down her bloody axe.

While Jorgen and the bulk of the Stormcloaks chased the dismayed elves down the corridor through which they had entered, the rest of the soldiers saw to binding the Thalmor prisoners. I went over to Rulindil, now under guard with his hands tied behind his back.

"You! How did you escape the embassy?" he demanded.

"By burning it to the ground. But not to worry, the Stormcloaks will provide you with alternate accommodations in Mistveil Keep."

"This isn't the end of it. You've only just awakened the might of the Aldmeri Dominion."

I was thinking of some suitably boastful reply when Jorgen and his soldiers returned, dragging a thief.

"The rest got away, with this one's help," he said.

The thief's eyes went wide when he saw us. "I never expected to see you again!" he exclaimed. It was Etienne Rarnis.

"I'll wager you didn't, or you wouldn't have dared leave us there to die in the snow," I said, grabbing him by those crossed belts of leather that were part of the Thieves Guild uniform. He was no taller than I, and he was too frightened to resist in any case. I pushed him up against a wall, none too gently.

"I'm sorry! You know what the Thalmor would do if I didn't cooperate!"

"Which way did they go?"
"We have a secret exit," he said. "They're fleeing through the city even now."

"Your Thieves Guild will pay for this, Brynjolf," Jorgen said.

"Oh, I doubt we will, laddie," Brynjolf replied, leaning casually on the bar. "You Stormcloaks aren't the only game in this town. There are other powers at work here in Riften, and we serve them all."

Wondering what he meant, we gathered our wounded and our prisoners and made our way back out of the Ratway.

An hour later we stood at the crest of a high bluff north of Riften and west of the road. With only Jorgen and three Stormcloaks accompanying us north, we thought it best to get off the road and cover our tracks, in case the Thalmor who had eluded us were on our trail. Now we were waiting while one Stormcloak shinnied up into the branches of a tree to spy out followers on the slope we had just climbed.

"I suggest we wait here for a time," Jorgen said, "to make sure no pursuers strike our trail. Also, a few of us have yet to break our fast."

We readily agreed, and I went to pull an apple from my saddle bags. Then I brushed the snow from a flat boulder and sat next to Lydia, who was munching on a hard roll. I remarked on the weather, clear for the second day running.

"Sometimes we get these snaps of clear, cold days in the depths of winter," she said. "It's the only thing that makes the season bearable."

This wasn't such a high promontory as our viewpoint of the day before, yet it was still impressive. To the south rose the great Jerall Mountains, forming the natural boundary between Skyrim and Cyrodiil. To the northwest stood the Throat of the World, seemingly smaller, but only because it was farther away.

"Look, Lydia, there's High Hrothgar. It seems but a short ride on a clear day like this."

Esbern overheard me and now he glowered up at the mountain. "High Hrothgar. Bah! You'll find nothing for you up there. The Greybeards would only teach you two shouts, I'll hazard."

"Actually, I was on my way there when I was waylaid by two dragons, then the Thalmor, and now this errand to find you. In fact, perhaps we should go there right now. They still have shouts to teach me. Look, it's right there, not much out of the way."

"I will not set foot within ten leagues of the place!" Esbern was almost shouting, and the Stormcloaks hushed him. "Too, they would not welcome a member of the Blades." He stalked off and said no more.

I sat looking at the mountain, pondering the animosity between the Blades and the Greybeards. Why did they distrust each other so?

As close as the mountain looked, I knew that it was at least a day's ride cross-country from the hill where we sat to Ivarstead. Then it would take another day to climb the Seven Thousand Steps, if
they were passable at all at this time of year. I remembered our first journey up those steps, and how difficult it had been, even in Frostfall. Yet I had insisted on reading every plaque on the way up.

And then, like sunshine breaking out from behind a fast-moving cloud, a thought struck me. How could I have been so blind, so forgetful?

I went to Esbern, who was fiddling with the straps on his horse's saddlebags. I had bought him the horse at the Riften stables out of Delphine's gold. "Esbern, does your dragonlore say anything about the ancient Nords defeating Alduin with the Voice?"

He turned to look at me, still angry. "No, not that I can recall. But perhaps Alduin's Wall will tell us. Why do you ask?"

I told him as much as I could remember of the inscriptions on those plaques describing the Dragon War. One said men rebelled against the dragons, only to be shouted down. Then something about Kyne taking pity on mankind, and someone named Paarthurnax teaching the Voice to the Nords, allowing them to shout Alduin out of the world. Esbern's face grew darker as the tale went on.

"Paarthurnax taught the Voice to men? That cannot be. But if it's true, then the Greybeards are not just foolish, they have allied themselves with a great evil."

"Yet you cannot deny that the Tongues existed and the Voice is real. You heard me use it."

"No, certainly not. But a shout that could defeat Alduin! Do you know of such a thing?"

I thought about the shouts I knew, and the ones I had read about. Only one, Marked for Death, seemed likely. Yet I had used it on dragons, and knew its effect. It didn't seem likely to vanquish one with the power of Alduin.

"No, I know of no such shout, but the Greybeards might."

"Ach, the Greybeards again! What makes you think they will help you prevent the end of the world? They've probably given you some claptrap about this world needing to make way for the next."

I stared at Esbern coolly. I had placed such hope in him, and all he could offer was an ancient wall hidden many leagues away. "Yet if there is a shout that can defeat Alduin, it seems more likely that the Greybeards will know it. Their order descends directly from the Tongues who vanquished the World Eater in the first place. And your Akaviri warriors who became the Blades only arrived in Tamriel thousands of years later, or am I mistaken?"

"No, that is quite correct," Esbern said, his voice equally cool.

"Then Lydia and I will part ways with you here. We will learn what the Greybeards have to teach, then catch up with you on your road to the Karthspire. In the meantime, you will find Delphine at the Blade and Dragon in Windhelm."

He glowered at me, and I knew my decision did not sit well with him. For some reason I felt I should make amends for my behavior. "And if it should chance that I am delayed and you find yourself accosted by the Forsworn in the Reach, tell them that you are a friend of Deirdre Morningsong's and you travel under my protection." Esbern looked too stunned by this to say anything, so I turned to Jorgen. "Can you see Esbern safely to Windhelm without us?"

"You needn't worry about us. I'm sure we've seen the last of those Thalmor. And Ulfric will be
Esbern had regained his power of speech. "I see your mind is made up in this. Do what you must at High Hrothgar, and I hope they do have the weapon you seek. But do not let them lead you into folly. The world needs you." He looked up at the Throat of the World. "It's a pity. My hopes rose higher than they have in many years … but for naught."

He turned away, but the disappointment in his eyes stayed with me all the way to Ivarstead.
Chapter Summary

-- catching up with the Greybeards -- Arngeir speaks for the dov -- Einarth intercedes
-- a last trial -- Deirdre sees Aetherius -- Arngeir's wisdom -- a surprise at the summit -

The doors of High Hrothgar swung back, and Master Arngeir stood there, squinting into a swirl of snow that swept in behind us. He hardly recognized us, swathed as we were in bearskin cloaks and leggings made from snow-hare pelts. We had bought them in Ivarstead with the last of Delphine's gold after hearing reports of raw weather on the Seven Thousand Steps. Yet he stood aside and allowed us entrance. "Come in, come in, you must be half frozen."

The door closed behind us and I threw off the cloak.

"Dovahkiin! It is you! You have returned!" For Arngeir, this was an outpouring of emotion.

There were so many things I wanted to say then, I couldn't think where to begin. I wanted to ask about the shout the Tongues had used against Alduin, but even more, I wanted to know why he hadn't mentioned such a shout on my first visit. Why had he sent me hither and yon, retrieving items of little value and learning shouts I could never use against Alduin?

My anger and impatience had only grown as we climbed the Seven Thousand Steps and the day’s journey seemed to drag ever onward, especially as we passed the plaques with the inscriptions:

Kyne called on Paarthurnax, who pitied man.
Together they taught Men to use the Voice;
Then Dragon War raged, Dragon against Tongue.
Man prevailed, Shouting Alduin out of the world,
Proving for all that their Voice too was strong.

But perhaps I was most angry with myself. Why had I not thought to ask Arngeir which shout the Tongues had used?

With these conflicting thoughts swirling through my head, I simply said, "Master," and bowed to him.

"No, no, it is I who must bow to you," he said, and did so. "For your power has grown great and the Dragonblood burns bright within you."

"Master, I must know…"

He held up a hand. "All in good time. But you and your companion are cold and weary. Come, warm yourselves by the fire, eat, and tell me of your travels. I'm sure the tales of your adventures will relieve the tedium of these dark days of winter." I was too tired and cold to argue.

In the refectory, we found Masters Borri, Einarth and Wulfgar laying out what amounted to a feast for High Hrothgar: bread, good Eidur cheese, and a rabbit stew. With steaming mugs of hot cider before us, we began telling our tale, each taking a turn so the other could eat. We began with the
earliest word walls, the ones where we had encountered dragons, and then our first combat with a
dragon priest. Lydia was particularly detailed in her accounts of our dragon battles, especially those
in which she dealt the killing blow. With each dragon, Arngeir grew more somber, and I
remembered my own sadness at having to slay such beautiful, powerful creatures.

I told him of my second and third visions of Alduin, and of Alduin telling me that every dragon
soul I absorbed would make my own dragon soul stronger. I had absorbed only one soul since then.

"And how many dragons have you slain?"

"Twelve, by my count, though I could not absorb the soul of the frost dragon at Solitude – it fell
from the battlements before that could happen."

"Twelve! I did not imagine such a thing was possible!" His face was pained, though he said no
more.

Then we came to Labyrinthian and the battle to save the college. "So now you have first-hand
experience with the hubris and folly of the Winterhold mages," Arngeir said. "I hope it is a lesson
to temper your thirst for knowledge. And they named you arch-mage! I can only hope that you, or
those you left in your place, will use more wisdom in future. The mages meddle with forces they
do not understand."

His eyes grew wide when we came to the battle at Solitude, then alarmed as we described our
capture and questioning by the Imperials and the Thalmor. "And how did you ever escape their
clutches?" he asked.

"By using all that you taught me here and what I learned in my testing at Ustengrav. I tried to
emulate Jurgen Windcaller. I used silence as my Voice."

Arngeir's eyes grew wider still. "Jurgen Windcaller used silence to withstand the Voices of the
other Tongues. But you used silence to shout?"

I nodded, then explained as best I could the night of meditation and intense concentration followed
by the silent wave of blistering force that had burst out of me. By the end of my tale, Masters
Borri, Wulfgar and Einarth were muttering amongst themselves, causing the room to vibrate. "Has
no one else done such a thing?" I asked. "Surely Talos…"

Arngeir shook his head. "No. No other Tongue before you, Dragonborn or no, has done such a
thing. It is unheard of." He looked at me for a long moment. "You truly are the One, fated to meet
Alduin at the Battle at the End of Time. And, it seems, you are nearly ready."

"Master, that is why I am here. I have several words of power whose deep meanings I hope to learn
from Master Borri, rather than by slaying more dragons. And I have to ask you…"

"There will be time to finish your training in the morning. But first, rest is in order."

As tired as I was, I could not argue. My anger and frustration over my slow progress had been
spent on the Seven Thousand Steps. Now, with warmth around me and food in my belly, sleep was
calling. Lydia was nearly asleep in her chair.

Arngeir led us to the converted storeroom we had slept in before. The place didn't have a door,
though the Greybeards had put up a curtain that could be drawn across the doorway. It didn't
matter. Lydia and I fell into our separate cots, fully clothed as we were, and were soon fast asleep.
In the morning, all the frustration over my slow progress had returned, and along with it, an eagerness to get on with my task. Arngeir didn't even have a chance to sit down in the refectory before I accosted him with questions.

"Master, it is time. I must know if there is a special shout the ancient Tongues used against Alduin, and if there is, why have you kept it from me?"

The old master stopped so abruptly, tea sloshed from the mug he was carrying. "Where did you hear of that?" he snapped. "You've been in touch with the Blades again, haven't you?"

"Yes, certainly, I thought they could help me. Two days ago, we located the Blades' loremaster, Esbern. I thought he might hold the key to defeating Alduin, but he knew nothing. He and Delphine should be making ready to search for Alduin's Wall even now. They say it contains all the ancient Blades' knowledge of the World Eater."

"So, the Blades have made you their tool. They were ancient butchers of dragons, bringing their genocidal hatred of the dov from Akavir to Tamriel."

"Genocide! That is a term better applied to the extermination of peoples than of beasts, is it not?"

"Beasts! Have you learned nothing since you came here, Dovahkiin? The dragons are not dumb beasts, but have a language and a culture to match our own. And while it may seem they are mindless marauders, this is not always the case. Look at your history, for thousands of years after the Dragon War, the remaining dragons of Skyrim lived in seclusion, bothering the people not at all. Then other dragons joined them, fleeing slaughter on Akavir. Only to be pursued here by the Akaviri, whose savagery nearly wiped the dragons from the face of Nirn. And what an upset to the balance of Mundus it would have been, had they succeeded! And now you have joined the Blades in their butchery." Arngeir dropped his mug, his hands were trembling with such anger. It broke with a clatter.

I ignored the sound, shaking with my own rage. I would not be called a butcher. "I only sought to prevent the savagery of the dragons! You know that."

"That may be, but as you know, the dragons do as Alduin directs. And perhaps we would have dragon allies against Alduin if the Blades had not wiped them out. The key is stopping the World Eater, if he can be stopped at all. But have you considered that he was not meant to be stopped?"

"The Blades predicted you would say that. And Alduin told me the same thing."

"He does not lack wisdom. Think! This shout you seek was used once before, was it not? And here we are, faced with Alduin yet again. Why should it be different this time?"

I wanted to tell him it would be different because I was here now, but I did not. "So you will not help me? You won't teach me this shout, whatever it is?"

"No, not if the very fate of the world depended on it, which it does. Not until you forsake the Blades, and return to the path of wisdom." He was shouting now, and the room was shaking. Lydia held on to the table to avoid toppling out of her chair.

"I've already told you. I have had little to do with the Blades, and they've been little help to me."

"No, you have slain enough dragons already. It appalls me to think what you could do with Dr…"
with the shout I will not name."

We stood there facing each other across the table as the last vibrations of Arngeir's shouting subsided, both of us drawing breath to shout at the other.

Then Master Einarth stepped into the room. When he spoke, the room shook even more, and this time Lydia did fall from her seat, taking refuge beneath the table. I stood there, shaken by the master's words. "Arngeir! Rek los Dovahkiin, Strundu'ul. Rek fen tinvaak Paarthurnax."

There it was again. A Greybeard had named me Stormcrown. But how could that be? The very name "Talos" meant Stormcrown in old Atmoran. And the Stormcrown referred to the emperors of Tamriel. It was impossible.

But those weren't the most surprising words Einarth had uttered. "I must speak with Paarthurnax? The one who taught the Voice to the ancient Nords?" I looked from Arngeir to Einarth and back again, dumbfounded.

Arngeir stood with head bowed before Einarth, like a repentant schoolboy. Then he nodded and turned to me. "Dovahkiin, forgive me. I have been … intemperate. I allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment. The decision whether or not to help you is not mine to make, but our master's."

"You mean Paarthurnax? Who is he? A god? How can this be?"

"He is the master of our order, surpassing us all in his mastery of the Way of the Voice. As to who he is, and what he is, you must find out for yourself. But not today."

"Why not? If this Paarthurnax knows the shout that will defeat Alduin, I would speak with him now."

"Dovahkiin, after my rash words, it must seem as if I have hidden this knowledge from you all along, that I am hindering you even now. But you must believe me, you weren't ready to speak to our master until now, nor to journey to his dwelling place at the top of this mountain."

"He lives at the top of the Throat of the World? Come Lydia, let us visit this Paarthurnax. I will be delayed no longer." I turned to leave, and Lydia crawled out from under the table to follow me.

"Dovahkiin, niid!" Arngeir shouted, staggering me, and knocking Lydia to the floor once more.

Arngeir held his hands out to pacify me. "I am sorry for that. But you must not seek the summit, not yet. It would be your death, and that of your companion."

"Then take me there yourself."

"I cannot, for we speak to our master only rarely. No, you must make your own way to the summit, but not until we teach you a shout that will open the way. And to learn this shout, you must prepare yourself. In two days' time, you will be ready, you have my word."

"Two days?"

"It is now two months since you came to us. Surely two more days are not too much time for this final preparation. Then all will be revealed, and you will have learned all that we can teach here at High Hrothgar. It will be up to Paarthurnax whether to teach you further."

I looked at Master Einarth, and he nodded.
"Very well, if there is no other choice. What must I do?"

Arngeir laid out my plan of study and preparation. First, I would spend most of this day with Master Borri, learning the deep meanings for those words of power I had retrieved from word walls but had yet to master. "You are right to fear absorbing more dragon souls," Arngeir said, "for your own dragon soul has grown strong. It will be better all around if Master Borri shares his knowledge with you. Then we must work to balance the inner with the outer."

The day went slowly. I had half a dozen words to learn, and we began right after breakfast. Borri would share the knowledge of a particular word, then I would practice with it in the courtyard, and finally I would rest and meditate. Then we would begin again with another word. I saw Lydia only at our break for the noonday meal, and she already seemed quite restless. I suggested several books I had seen on past visits, but nothing seemed to catch her attention.

By the end of the day I had acquired the full arsenal of shouts I had set out to learn at the beginning of Frostfall. The Greybeards gathered around me in High Hrothgar's entrance chamber, where they had taught me my first Word of Power. Then I used each shout on them in turn, Frost Breath, Dismaying Shout, Marked for Death, Slow Time, Disarm, Become Ethereal, and even Fire Breath, though I knew only two of its three words. For some reason, Arngeir hadn't shown me where the first word of this shout, Yol, could be found. We went out to the courtyard so I could demonstrate the full Whirlwind Sprint shout. Finally, the Greybeards used each shout on me, to test whether I could withstand their combined Voices. And I did – just as in Ustengrav, their shouts shook me but I did not fall.

At last Einarth spoke, "Rek kroaan mindoraan."

Arngeir turned to me. "Master Einarth is right: you have won much knowledge and are ready for the final preparation. You must balance your inner and your outer souls in preparation for what is to come."

"And how will I do that?" I asked, though I thought I knew the answer.

"With twenty-four hours of fasting and meditation."

I stared at him. I had expected to meditate, for a night perhaps, as I had done in the Aldmeri Embassy. But twenty-four hours? It would be evening again by the time I was done, and then we could not go to the Throat of the World until the following day.

Lydia had been watching the demonstration from a distance, having grown bored with what few amusements the Greybeards' home could offer. Now I thought I heard her exclaim to herself, "Talos save me!" I felt the same, though I said nothing to Arngeir.

After a silent meal shared with the Greybeards, my meditation and fasting began. High Hrothgar had four meditation alcoves the Greybeards used for their contemplations, each at a stained glass window facing the courtyard. Now I took my turn at each one, three hours of meditating, a break for water and a stretch of the limbs, then three more hours. Then I rotated to the next one, and repeated the routine.

By the middle of the second rotation, I thought I would lose my mind. My being was not only empty, but numb, my mind a thing of nothingness – no knowledge, no memory, no will, no desire, no shouts, no language. Only the masters tapping me on the shoulder, handing me a cup of water or ushering me to the next station, gave any hint of Time passing. Otherwise, Akatosh had stopped Time, for aught I knew.
But finally it was over. I don't know if it is right to say that I persevered, or that I just outlasted Time's inexorable crawling forward. I could barely walk as I rose to return to the refectory to break my fast. My head hurt, my neck and shoulders ached, my back was sore, and my legs were alternately numb and tingling. I sat down at the table and could hardly look at the food, my stomach was in such an empty knot.

Lydia came in to the refectory, and I could barely rise to greet her. She embraced me as if we had not seen each other in weeks, caring not at all what the Greybeards thought about this show of affection, then sat down next to me. She had spent a sleepless night on her lonely cot, then a restless day with the books scattered about the halls. She had even gone outside into the bitter Evening Star winds for relief from the boredom, running as far down the Seven Thousand Steps as the eighth plaque. I had seen her once or twice as I passed from one altar to the next, but of course we had been unable to speak.

Over dinner, Arngeir prepared me for what I should expect the next day. "Tomorrow, you will be ready to learn the shout that will open the path to Paarthurnax," he said. While he spoke, Lydia caressed my leg with her foot. She had taken to going barefoot in High Hrothgar's halls, wearing just the padded tunic that she wore beneath her armor. "Only those whose Thu'um is strong can find the way," Arngeir went on. Lydia's toes had wiggled their way beneath the hem of my breeches, rubbing up and down on the bare skin of my calf above the top of my leather boot. It was all I could do not to giggle and squirm, but to concentrate on Arngeir's words. "The shout is called Clear Skies, and its need will become apparent within a few steps toward the summit."

I knew I should have many questions for the master, but between having had nothing but two catnaps in the past thirty-six hours, the aches and pains from long sitting, and Lydia's distracting caresses, I could think of nothing. Fortunately, Arngeir himself gave me the only excuse I needed. "Ah, but you must be tired," he said, looking from Lydia to me. "Go to your rest so that you will be ready for the morrow."

We excused ourselves and made our way to our converted bedchamber. Lydia drew the curtains across the doorway as I flopped face-first onto my cot, too exhausted to move. Lydia came over and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing my aching shoulders.

"That feels nice," I said. "I ache all over."

"I can imagine, my thane. But this would be easier without those robes." She helped me undress, pulling off my boots first, then my breeches, then the robes from over my head. She gestured for me to lie face down once more. "Where does it hurt?"

"My neck and shoulders. My lower back." I closed my eyes as she went to work. Her hands were strong, and I could feel the tension and aches fading as they worked their way down from my shoulders to my back. As the pain subsided, I began to feel more awake, despite my lack of sleep. Then she began kissing my neck and shoulders.

"Lydia, this is not the Nightgate Inn," I said, as nice as it felt, "nor the Blade and Dragon."

"So? Those old men have kept you apart from me for long enough." Her hands were working their way farther down.

"But this is High Hrothgar!" I had to suppress a shudder of pleasure. If she went on, I knew I would not be able to contain myself. Her strong hands had lifted me to a place I didn't know existed, shown me a pleasure I never knew I could feel. How could I avoid crying out in the throes of that sweet agony?
"Shhh," she whispered, and now instead of kneading the aches out of my sore muscles, she ran her fingertips lightly up and down my back. "Is this all right, my thane?"

"Oh yes," I said, for I could not help myself. I focused on my breathing – deeply in, then deeply out. I had spent a day meditating on silence, and now I would be as silent as the sky.

The waves of pleasure were like the breath of the wind, at first gentle puffs, then stronger breezes, and finally a full gale that threatened to carry me away. Where did my body end and Lydia's begin? It seemed as if we were one body, one person. Then I was transported out of my body. I was in the sky. I was the sky. Then beyond that, to a place of nothing but glowing, swirling, ever-changing energy. I knew this could be only one place: Aetherius.

I saw or felt then, as I never had before, what every child was taught from the time they could understand words, what Dinya Balu had told me at the temple: that I was but a tiny speck of soul energy that would one day merge back into the All of Aetherius. And I felt it now: I was one with everything, and everything in Mundus – all of the different peoples, the animals, the plants, the trees, even the very rock of Nirn itself – was one, little sparks of Aetherius taken different forms. The energy swirled around me and I thought I saw shapes in it: Dibella, Mara, Kynareth, Akatosh himself. They were part of it, just as I was part of it, not separate, not different, just bits of the flowing All. I had never felt so accepted, so loved.

I opened my eyes to see Lydia smiling at me, her dark eyes all tenderness, her fingers stroking my hair. I looked at her for a long while, then down at our bodies twined together, the covers thrown back in our exertions. I still didn't know where mine ended and hers began. It still felt as if we were one being. I had never felt so content.

"Where did you go, my thane?"

"Your Deirdre, I'm your Deirdre. And am I not your love, my love?" It was the first time I had called her that, at least when she could hear it.

"Of course you are, my … Deirdre." She didn't look away from me, but something changed in her eyes, as if a veil had come over them. I decided to let it go.

"I saw Aetherius. And it was you, you made me see it! Did I cry out?"

"No, but your face had a look of the greatest joy and bliss, and for the longest time! Your body shook with wave after wave of rapture. In fact, I'm a bit jealous. I know I've never felt anything like it." She gave a little pout. I kissed it away.

"The things I felt and saw, Lydia! Everything is one. All of Mundus, everything in it, we are all part of the same great pool of spirit. And especially you and I. We are one. Oh, Lydia, dear heart, you are my one and all. Do you not feel it?"

She looked at me, trying to grasp what I was saying. "I know I feel wonderful when I hold you in my arms. I know I feel a thrill every time you touch me. I know that giving you pleasure makes me happy. Isn't that enough?"

Too soon, Deirdre, I told myself. Remember what Dinya said. Though we had known each other for months now, we had only been lovers for a little over a week. I was glad I had not been foolish enough to wear the amulet of Mara for her right away. That might have scared her off. Yet to feel that she didn't return the intensity of my passion – that hurt, but I tried not to let it show.

"Of course it is," I said, adding coyly: "For now. And you can go on making yourself happy in that
way whenever you want."

"What? Whenever I want? Even during breakfast with the Greybeards?"

"Well, maybe not then. But now it's time for me to feel happy in the same way you just did." I kissed her throat, running my fingertips over her hip and down her thigh. It was a long reach, she was so tall.

"Mmmm," she murmured. "You'll have to teach me how not to cry out."

"Just breathe," I said. "And if that doesn't work, I'll tell the Greybeards I was teaching you to shout."

We both laughed out loud, rolling in each other's arms, the sound echoing off the walls and down High Hrothgar's hallowed halls.

It was only later, as I was drifting off to sleep, that a stray thought drifted across my mind, and then it was gone, before I could quite make sense of it. I most often had seen pictures of Akatosh in his human-like form, an old man with a lush white beard. But in my vision, he had not taken that form. In my vision, he was a dragon.

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In the morning, Arngeir greeted us at the breakfast table with a twinkle in his eye. "Ah! You both look so refreshed. A night of ... sleep has done you good, I see." The corners of his mouth just barely curled into a smile.

"It did wonders for me," Lydia said, beaming at me. I could not help it, I felt myself blushing.

"I must say," Arngeir went on, "it is quite pleasant having young people about. Your presence enlivens our otherwise tedious existence." He tipped his head toward us.

I knew not what to say. Somehow, "Glad to be of service" didn't seem quite right. Instead, I changed the subject. "Master, last night I had a vision of the heavens, of Aetherius."

"I'm sure you did!" he said, still with the twinkle in his eye.

"Master Arngeir, I am being serious!"

"Oh, I did not mean to mock you. It's just that you reminded me of a song from my youth. 'When I Look Into Your Eyes (I See Aetherius).’ It was quite popular in the taverns. But go on."

"Yes, well. I saw Aetherius, and I felt a great oneness with everything. Everyone, everything in Mundus is but a spark of Aetherius. And when we die our spark merges with that great pool of soul energy."

Arngeir's eyes still twinkled, though now more with gladness than with merriment. "My child, this is one of the greatest realizations one can have in this life. It is the ultimate teaching of love and spiritual practice."

"Yet now I am confused. For how is my soul to merge with those who have done me wrong in this life? How can I be the same as them? And do not the Nords seek to keep their souls separate to live forever in Sovngarde? And when we trap an animal's soul in a soul gem, do we not prevent it from
merging with the All? Too, I have absorbed the souls of dragons. What of them?"

The old master looked at me for a long moment. "This is the deepest insight I can give you: All of Mundus, and all its many planes of existence, is but one great cycling of soul energy from one form to another. Sometimes it takes this form, sometimes another, sometimes staying in one form for many eons and sometimes for but a brief moment. It cannot be destroyed, nor can it be created, no matter how it seems to us mortals here on this plane."

"And this is why you say it doesn't matter whether Alduin destroys this world – because its energy will simply be reborn in the next?"

He frowned, seeking a way to explain it to me, looking around the room. He pointed to a pitcher of water on the table. "Take this ewer. The water within it is shapeless, formless, the same as water everywhere. The pitcher is what gives the water shape and form, but at the same time keeps it separate from all other water. The water is like the soul each of us contains, the pitcher is but our personality."

"The soul and the personality are separate?"

"Yes, and therein lies the paradox. In this life, we become attached to the pitcher, our personality, forgetting that it is this pitcher that keeps us separate from all other souls. Break this ewer, and I will feel sadness at its loss, for it is beautiful, and special to me because of the memories it stirs in me. Yet I will know that the water within has not been wasted. Whether the water evaporates into the air, or runs out through a drain and onto the snows of this mountain, it will one day find its way back to the sea and merge with the great All."

"So you're saying that what happens in any individual life, all the love and joy, all the pain and suffering, doesn't matter? That no one should strive to change the world, to make it better for those who suffer here now?"

"Well, yes and no. This is the greatest paradox, greater than any we have presented you so far. For, while we here at High Hrothgar focus most on the water, and the oneness and sameness of that water, we sometimes forget the importance of the pitcher, the personality, and the suffering all beings experience because of and through their personalities. This suffering takes as many forms as there are people, but at its root it is the suffering of souls finding themselves separate from other souls and from the great All. From this attachment and separateness comes most of the pain and anguish of life. We try to heal this separation through the love of a special person" – and here he could not help looking at Lydia – "or through family and friends, but in the end, we cannot merge with every soul, because our own separate personality, with all its selfish needs and desires, keeps us separate."

"And so, what is the solution?"

"Why, the very thing you showed me the last time you were here, Deirdre."

"And that was?"

"Compassion! If we recognize the root of our own suffering, and recognize that this is the same reason that every being suffers, how can we not feel compassion and seek to reduce that suffering? And in doing so, in recognizing our essential oneness, we lessen our separation. We create a little bit of Aetherius here on Nirn."

I found that I had tears in my eyes, and also that I was holding Lydia's hand. I didn't know what to say.
"And this is why I have decided to help you," Arngeir went on, "because you seek to reduce the suffering in this world, though some dragons may have to suffer for it. And I am sure Paarthurnax will help you, though I dare not speak for our master. Come, it is time to finish your training."

The masters led us into the courtyard outside High Hrothgar's main building, and across it to a great bonfire that burned next to a tall watchtower. The skies were clear once again, except for the top of the mountain, cloaked in cloud as usual. Stone steps led up into that swirling mist.

"Here is where the final ascent to the Throat of the World's summit begins," Arngeir said. "You will find Paarthurnax at the top. But these are no ordinary mists. You must remove them before proceeding, and to do that, you will need the Clear Skies shout. I will teach it to you myself."

Arngeir waved his hand three times, and three sets of glowing runes appeared on the flagstones around the bonfire. I went to each and absorbed the three words: Lok, Vah, Koor, or Sky, Spring, Summer. Then Arngeir gave me the deep understanding of those words, glowing streamers of energy flowing from his mind into my own, and I was ready to use the shout.

The four masters bowed to me. "Your training with us is complete, Dovahkiin. We have taught you all that we can. Go now, and may Kynareth and Akatosh guide your steps."

"Master, wait, may Lydia accompany me to the top?"

"Yes, for the mists are not the only danger on the path, and you may need her assistance."

I had one more question. "And can you really tell me nothing of the shout I am about to learn? Not even its name?"

Arngeir looked off into the sky beyond the walls of High Hrothgar. "The shout you seek is called Dragonrend. And do not ask me again to teach it to you, because I do not know it. It has no place in the Way of the Voice."

"Why, what is wrong with it?"

"It is not a shout of the dragons, but one created by mortals, by those who lived under the unimaginable cruelty of Alduin and the Dragon Cult. They poured all of their hatred and anger toward the dragons into this one shout. As you now know, when you learn a shout, you take it into your very being. In a sense, you become the shout. If you learn this shout, you will take this evil into yourself. After our discussion this morning, I am sure you can see why I did not want you to learn it – because of the damage it will do to your very soul."

He actually reached out and touched me on the shoulder then, his eyes full of sadness.

"We have lost others to dreams of power and their own hatred. I would not see it happen to you, the greatest Dovahkiin we have ever known. I can only hope, should our master deem it necessary to reveal this shout to you, that you will use it with wisdom and compassion, that there is enough love within you to balance its hatred."

"I will do my best, Master," I said.

Then all the masters said at once, "Lok, Thu'um," and Lydia and I turned to climb the steps.

"Lok-Vah-Koor!" I shouted just before we reached the mists, and they parted for a good way up the mountain. We climbed onward, rounding a bend of the mountain and losing sight of High Hrothgar. Then we came to a bank of cloud farther up, and I shouted again. In this way, we made our way upward. Once, I was too impatient and walked into the mist before my Thu'um had
restored itself. The cloud stung me worse than the bite of an ice wraith, freezing down to my bones and forcing me a step back down the mountain. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

And there were actual ice wraiths as well. I had just removed the mists from the stretch ahead of us when four of the creatures attacked us at once. It was well that Lydia was there, because I could not calm or frighten them away quickly enough, and my mage's robes offered little protection against them. But we handled them together and continued on. Higher up, we encountered a frost troll and ice wolves, but they were little trouble.

We approached the summit, thousands of feet above High Hrothgar, and paused to take in the view. We could see across the Velothi Mountains to the Red Mountain in Morrowind, second in height only to the peak on which we stood.

"Would you look at that," Lydia said with a satisfied sigh. "I never thought I'd see such a sight."

I took her hand. "My Lydia, my love, I feel we are nearing the end of the quest. Do you not feel it? Alduin must be near. Whatever happens, I want you to know, I am glad you are by my side."

"And I am glad to be by your side, my thane. But you sound as if you're saying goodbye."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say goodbye to you for a thousand years, if I had my choice. It's just that, we are about to meet a god or a daedra, or I know not what, and who knows what could happen? Or perhaps once I learn the shout that can defeat Alduin, the World Eater may want to face me without further delay. Either way, I feel the end, whatever it is, approaching.

Lydia kissed my hand. "Not to worry, my thane, we will not meet our end today, I can feel it. Besides, I am sworn to protect you with my life, am I not? The World Eater cannot have you, not today or any day."

"Oh, my Lydia." I brushed back a strand of her hair that was poking out from beneath her helmet. I wanted to lose myself forever in those dark eyes that gazed calmly back at me. Then we climbed the last few steps to the summit plateau. Across from us was a word wall. Before we could step toward it, a roar came from the sky, followed by the beat of great wings. I looked up to see the largest dragon we had yet to face swooping down.

I had just time to draw my breath, and then it was upon us.
The dragon landed just steps away from us, sending up a great cloud of powdery snow. It was nearly as large as Alduin, the color of milk mixed with dark honey, and bore the scars of many battles. One of its forked horns had broken off at the base. It had once sported two tusk-like horns sprouting from its chin like a beard, but one was reduced to a stump.

I was just wondering what opponent had done that to him when Lydia drew her axe, shouting, "You never should have come here, dragon!"

"Yet this is my strunmah, wunduniik," the dragon replied, "my mountain. Perhaps I should say the same to you. Yet one of you joorre has a strong Thu'um, or you would not have passed through the mists."

"Wait," I said. "You're Paarthurnax?"

"Yes, Paarthurnax is my name, and I have lived here for thousands of years."

"I should have realized you'd be a dragon," I said, motioning for Lydia to put her axe away. "The Dragon Wars said it was the dov who taught the ancient Nords to shout."

"Yes, long ago, Kynareth, whom the Nords name Kyne, urged me to take pity on the joorre, mortals, who were enslaved by the dragon priests."

"We need your help once again. Alduin has returned. I need to learn the Dragonrend shout."

"Yes Alduin's return is known to me. I predicted it long ago, and so I have waited here for long years – as I have waited for you, Dovahkiin."

"You know me?"

"Who else would come here at this time, seeking a weapon to defeat Alduin? As it was prophesied, you have appeared at the same turning of the wheel of time. But drem, patience."

"Patience! Two seasons have turned since Alduin returned, and many weeks since the Greybeards called me. Many have died in the fire and ice of the dov, and many more have felt their talons and their fangs. I am far from being patient."

"Yet there are formalities at the first meeting of two of the dov. Hear my Thu'um, feel it in your bones. Match it if you are indeed Dovahkiin."

He turned to the word wall across the summit plateau. "Yol-Toor-Shul!" he shouted, blasting it with his Fire Breath. A glowing rune appeared on the wall once the fire abated.

"Go, learn this Word of Power. Then use it on me if you can."
I approached the glowing rune and heard the word Yol echoing in my mind. Then Paarthurnax shared his deep understanding of the word, as Borri and Arngeir had done before. Yet this time, I felt I understood the word even more deeply – these were not just words I could shout, but a breath of fire was now part of my being.

"Now, let me taste your Thu'um," Paarthurnax said.

When I shouted at him, he basked in the ball of flame that enveloped him. "Yes! Sossedov los mal. The Dragonblood runs strong in you. It is long since I have had tinvaak, speech with my own kind."

"I have little time for tinvaak, I am afraid. I must learn this shout to use on Alduin, then find him somehow, before he destroys the world."

"Yet, I do not know the Thu'um you seek."

I stared at him. "But I thought … surely you … the one who taught the Voice to the Ancients…"

"This shout cannot be known to me, or to any of the dov. Your kind, mortals, created it as a weapon against the dragons. Our minds cannot even comprehend it."

"Then how does it work?"

"It was said to force a dragon to experience the concept of mortality, a truly incomprehensible idea to the immortal dov. Its power would force a dovah out of the sky, making it vulnerable to attack by other means. Do you see now why no dovah could use such a shout?"

I didn't know what to say, but Lydia could not contain herself. "What!? Your Greybeards have sent my thane hither and yon for the last month and more. They said it was the only way to prepare herself. Yet that wasn't enough. Now they've sent her here, and you can teach her nothing? Really, my thane, let us face Alduin with my axe and the shouts you already know. I grow tired of seeing you treated this way."

"Mey joor! It would be your dinok, your death," said Paarthurnax. "No axe, no matter how strong the arm that wields it, can touch Alduin. And as powerful as the Dovahkiin is, she is not yet ready to face the World Eater, not without this shout you call Dragonrend."

"Then what must I do?" I asked, though I thought our plight was hopeless.

"Drem. First, let me ask a question of you. Why do you want to learn this Thu'um?"

"Isn't it obvious? I want to keep Alduin from destroying the world."

"Yet some would say this world must pass before the next can come into being. Would you keep the next world from being born?"

"Yes, people keep telling me this, even Alduin," I said.

"You have spoken with my elder brother?"

"Yes, he comes to me in my dreams. And I'll give you the same answer I gave him. I like this world. The next world will have to take care of itself."

"Pruzah. As good an answer as any." He regarded me for a moment. "Ro fus," he said as if thinking aloud. "Yes. Perhaps it is so. It may be that our father, Akatosh, sent you into this world to balance
the forces within it, to slow those that would hasten it toward its end. Even we who ride the currents of Time cannot see Time's end."

"Enough philosophy!" Lydia snapped. "If you can't help us, dragon, why are we standing around talking?"

"Hin koriid lost hadrim do strunne. But perhaps I can help you, though I do not know the shout you seek."

"How?"

"Perhaps none but I now remember how the Ancient Tongues – Gormlaith, Hakon, and Felldir – defeated my brother. It was here, on this very mountain!"

"And that was when they used Dragonrend?"

"Yes, but it was not Dragonrend alone that allowed them to vanquish Alduin. No, for not even with that mighty weapon could he be slain."

"So, what was it?" Lydia demanded. "How many weapons does it take to kill this bastard?"

"It remains to be seen whether anything can kill Alduin. For he was only cast adrift on the currents of time, flung forward into the future which is your present."

"But how could they do that?"

"It was the Kel, the Elder Scroll."

"Oh, an Elder Scroll – is that all?" Lydia asked. "This just gets better and better."

My knowledge of the Elder Scrolls was hazy at best – ancient prophecies, I thought. I remembered they were housed at the White-Gold Tower, but scattered in the Great War.

"How to explain in your tongue? The dov have words for such things that joorre do not. The Scrolls are artifacts outside Time. They do not exist, yet they have always existed. They are fragments of Creation itself."

"That sounds dangerous," I said.

"They are. They have often been used for prophecy, but that is only part of their power. When the ancient heroes used this Kel to fling Alduin out of their world, they broke Time itself." He nodded at a glowing, shimmering column of light beyond the word wall. "There is the Tiid Ahraan, the Time Wound."

"So they sent him into the future so we could deal with him?" Lydia asked.

"That was not their purpose. Some hoped he would be lost forever. Meyye! I knew better. Time flows ever onward. I knew he must return someday to the Tiid Ahraan. And so I have waited. But when he returned, I was powerless to stop him. I have grown soft while waiting here these ages, while he retained his full power. Too, his wroth was great. I could not stand against him. And so I have waited for you, Dovahkiin."

"I still don't see how this helps us," Lydia said. "Shouts no one can teach, Elder Scrolls that only postpone our doom – what good are they?"

"Yes, Master, how can any of this help us to defeat Alduin?"
"If you brought that Kel here to the Time Wound, you could cast yourself back to the other end of the break. You could learn Dragonrend from those who created it, absorbing it in the power of its first utterance. In the hands of one as powerful as you, perhaps it would be enough to vanquish Alduin for all time."

"Yet even if I had that power, how will I force Alduin to face me? I cannot fly."

"Hmmm. Alduin's pride will be his downfall. When he senses that you have grown nearly as great as he, he will not be able to resist challenging you. That, and the very bones of creation will tremble when you bring that Kel here to the Time Wound. For this is the last pillar of creation. When Alduin senses its tremors, he will come here to complete his task. Then the Battle at the End of Time will begin, and we will see which of you will fulfill your destiny."

"I knew we were coming near to the end. Now tell me, where is this Elder Scroll?"

Paarthurnax bowed his head. "Krosis. Pardon. I do not know. I have not left this mountain in many ages of man, and I know little of what passes below."

How foolish could I be, I thought, to believe that the end was drawing near? Always it seemed but two steps away, yet always it receded into the future. "Is there no help you can give me in finding it?"

"No. But the Tongues had it once – perhaps the masters on the slopes below still keep it."

"Perhaps," I said, though it didn't seem likely. Then I thought of the only other person I knew who might possess such lore. "Urag, the lorekeeper at the College of Winterhold," I said. "Maybe he will know something. Maybe the Arcanaeum even holds one within its vaults!"

"Trust your instincts, Dovahkiin. Your dragonblood will show you the way."

I bowed to Paarthurnax. "I thank you for your help, Master, but I have one last question."

"Yes?"

"Why did you turn against your own kind?"

"Hmmm, some say it was merely the jealousy of a younger brother for the firstborn. But no. Kynareth spoke to me, because he is the god of the sky, the domain of the dov. But he carried the message of the other gods – Julianos, god of Wisdom; Stendarr, god of justice and mercy; and Mara, goddess of compassion. While they couldn't make me see what it meant for these mortals to die, they did make me feel their suffering over the loss of their loved ones. I saw the lovers crying for their sweethearts, the wives for their husbands, the children for their parents, and I understood their anguish. And so I took pity on mankind, though it meant the defeat of many of my brothers, and even Alduin himself."

"And now you know why I must stop Alduin."

He tipped his head so that his tusks brushed the snow. "Geh, Dovahkiin, Zu'u mindoraan."
altars. The last rays of the sun slanted through the stained glass window, bathing him in an unNirnly light. He looked up as we entered.

"Ah, I can see from your expression that Paarthurnax did not have what you seek."

"No. Somehow I think you knew he could never teach me Dragonrend."

He shook his head. "It is not for us to predict what our master can or cannot know."

"He says an Elder Scroll might help me learn Dragonrend. Do you know where we can find one?"

He stood up to face me, his face rigid. "No, we do not concern ourselves with such blasphemies. The gods themselves would rightly fear to tamper with such things."

"Yet the Ancients used one to cast Alduin adrift in Time. If they had an Elder Scroll, Paarthurnax thought it might have passed to you here at High Hrothgar."

"No, if Jurgen Windcaller possessed such a thing, he had the wisdom to dispose of it before he founded our order. Or perhaps the scroll was lost at the Battle of Red Mountain, falling into Dwemer or Chimer hands."

"And you have no idea how we might find it?"

"No, but the mages at your college might. Such blasphemies have always been their stock in trade. But I warn you, if you do lay your hands on this kel, you must use all your caution and all your wisdom, or it will destroy you. Tell me, what are you supposed to do with it once you get it?"

"I'm to bring it here to the Throat of the World, to the Time Wound."

He seemed to relax then, giving a smile of resignation. "Ah, so you will play your part in the prophecy, though perhaps not the one you expected. Do you not see that carrying this fragment of Creation to the Time Wound could be the very thing that will bring this world to an end?"

"Yet what else can I do? If I do not, then Alduin and his dragons will continue to bring untold suffering to the people of Skyrim."

He held out his hands. "I do not know. You can only play your role and follow the path set before you. But know this: the choice to begin the Battle at the End of Time is in your hands. Once you make that choice, you must defeat Alduin, or this world will end."
The bridge between Winterhold and the college was nearly impassable, the snows had drifted so deeply over it. Clearly, no one had attended to the regular duty of clearing it with flame spells. I wondered what else had been allowed to lapse at the college in my absence. It didn't seem like Tolfdir to be so careless.

Still, judging by the footprints leading away from the college, someone had made their way down to the village, and recently. We followed the tracks in reverse, though Lydia found the going difficult, weighed down by her heavy armor, sinking in up to her knees in places. The worst bit came where the walls of the bridge had fallen away in the great cataclysm, the snow forming a corniced arête. Even I, accustomed as I was to scrambling about at great heights, had to steady my nerves for a moment before starting out. For Lydia, coming behind, it was worse. She had never liked heights and now she used the haft of her axe for support as she made her way across, looking down once or twice to the Sea of Ghosts far below.

Finally she was across, and we entered the college, finding it quiet. I wondered what had happened to the usual bustle of activity. Yet it was late afternoon, so I supposed my classmates – I still thought of them as my classmates, though I had been named arch-mage – and the instructors were resting after a day of study and practice, or preparing for supper.

By habit, I turned left under the arched entryway. We entered the Hall of Attainment to find J'zargo and Brelyna taking their ease in the round common area. They looked up in surprise as we entered.

"Deirdre!" Brelyna exclaimed, smiling and embracing me. "We didn't expect you."

J'zargo tipped his head and gave a soft purr. "Greetings, Arch-Mage. This one is pleased to see you. The college has not fared well in your absence." He jumped as Brelyna elbowed him in the ribs.

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking back and forth between them. "What's happened?"

"J'zargo exaggerates," Brelyna said. "But you must have much to tell of your adventures."

"Much, and more. Too much to tell without food in my belly and a mug of mead before me. But that must wait until I've seen Urag."

"And what of the World Eater?"

"I feel I'm nearly ready to face him, but I need another weapon, and to get that I need an Elder Scroll. I hope Urag knows where to find one."

"Pffft," J'zargo hissed. "Sooner ask Rajhin, the Khajiit thief-god, to intercede on your behalf."

"I told her it was madness," Lydia put in.
"Your housecarl speaks true."

"Still, if the Arcanaeum's lorekeeper doesn't have one, or know where to find one, who does? But now you must tell me what has happened since I've been away. Why is it so quiet? And why isn't the bridge being kept clear?"

Brellyn looked back and forth between J'zargo and me. "I'll admit, things have been difficult in the month you've been gone. Relations with Winterhold are at an historic low, ever since the anomaly event."

"The anomaly event?"

"Yes. It seems the Eye of Magnus left ruptures in the fabric between this plane and Aetherius. About a week after you left, those same magical anomalies that came out of the Eye attacked the town. It was all we could do to defeat them and close the rupture. Yet, though we saved the town, the villagers still blamed us for it."

"Ingrate Nords," J'zargo hissed.

"Hey!" Lydia exclaimed. "How would you feel if mages opened up a rupture in your town?"

"Never mind that," I said, holding my hands up for calm. "And what happened?"

"Tolfdir thought it best to shut down communication between town and college entirely. And so, we've let the snow drift up on the bridge. Only Enthir goes into the town now, since he seems to have a good relationship with Dagur at the Frozen Hearth. He brings us what supplies we need."

"So that explains the bridge, but something else isn't quite right."

"You mean how quiet it is? With the college's reputation suffering, we've had trouble attracting new novices, though several spots are open since the four of us advanced."

"Well, at least that will change in time," I said, "as the Eye of Magnus tragedy is forgotten and the college returns to less dangerous pursuits. People still need Sergius' enchanting services, after all."

"Yes, but..."

J'zargo gave a hiss of impatience. "But the rest of these merish mages have treated Brellyn terribly."

Brellyn looked down at the floor. "It's true. Since we lost Mirabelle, we've realized how much she did to hold this place together. Tolfdir and I have not been able to quell the infighting. In fact, it's only gotten worse. Oh, Deirdre, you never should have named me Tolfdir's assistant!" She broke down in sobs, and J'zargo placed a consoling paw on her shoulder.

"Who is it?" I asked. "Faralda? I knew she would cause trouble when I left."

Brellyn dried her eyes, which were even more red than usual after the crying jag, and nodded. "Her, and Nirya. They've become as close as two yolks in a double egg, though they couldn't stand each other before. Since then, the mood at the college has been anything but collegial."

"Hmmm," I murmured, thinking out loud. "The two Altmer. That bodes ill. You don't think they could be working on behalf of the Thalmor, do you?"

Brellyn shook her head. "No, I'm sure it's just for personal advancement. They never sided with
Ancano, for instance, though Nirya did speak highly of him, once. In fact, they've hatched some idea that they are being discriminated against because they are Altmer."

"That's absurd!" I said, though I had to wonder if I hadn't let my feelings about the Thalmor and the Aldmeri Dominion color my decision to pass over Faralda. "But what of the rest of the wizards and scholars?"

"Colette stays locked in her room since Faralda and Nirya's nastiness toward her has only grown worse. Drevis Neloran can rarely be found when someone wants training in Illusion magic, he's so busy practicing his own invisibility spells. Sergius claims he has nothing to do now that we've shut off communication with the outside world and there is little for him to enchant. Phinis and Arniel are both busy with their individual research, and Enthir is most often in town, though I can't think what he finds to occupy himself there."

"And Tolfdir?"

"He still holds instruction for any who want it, but most of us have learned all the Alteration magic we need. With no new novices, he seems at loose ends. And as for leading the college, he has mostly given up on that. He stays in his cell or in the Hall of the Elements, hoping one of us will show up for a lesson."

"Not in the arch-mage's quarters?"

She shook her head. "No, as acting arch-mage, he didn't feel it was proper."

I looked around the Hall of Attainment, knowing there was one last person I must ask about. "And what of Onmund?"

Brelyna nodded in the direction of his cell, which I now noticed had a curtain covering the entrance. She lowered her voice. "He has been disconsolate since you left, either roaming the wilderness about Winterhold or shut up in his cell. He put up that curtain so we wouldn't have to see him so distraught. The only thing we could get out of him is a mad idea of his that you two are a couple." She looked back and forth between Lydia and me. "He kept going on about his lass being stolen by another lass."

I felt a sudden wave of anger, but tried to quell it. His lass! I was never his lass, I told myself. There had just been that one kiss, and it hadn't been my idea. No, I was only one person's lass. I looked at Lydia, and she nodded at me, smiling. I took her hand, then turned back to my friends. "Brelyna, J'zargo," I said, speaking quietly as well. "Onmund was right. He knew what I didn't even know myself – that I love my housecarl more than anything in the world."

Brelyna looked at us both for a moment, then exclaimed, "Happy tidings!" Then she went on in quieter tones. "At least someone should be happy in these wretched times. The two of you make a striking couple, and anyone can see you are good companions. Who could have anything against it? I'm sure you will be quite happy."

Lydia looked away, blushing.

"Rrrrrr," J'zargo purred with relish. "This one approves as well. Two females, together! It reminds J'zargo of that time at the river, a scene that often runs through this one's mind, when you were, how do you say, 'skin-dipping'. And now, J'zargo wonders, what else you were doing there, before we arrived?"

Brelyna cuffed the Khajiit on the back of the head. "Keep those thoughts to yourself, you
lascivious feline."

J'zargo gave a little hiss.

"You should go to him," Brelyna said, gesturing toward Onmund's cell.

"I know." I held Lydia's hand up to kiss it. "Wait here, my love. This could be ... a bit strained."

"Better yet," said Brelyna, "let's go upstairs where there is food and drink. You must be starved."

"Gladly," Lydia said. "This is one time I'll be glad not to have your back, my thane."

"Yes," J'zargo said as they turned to go. "Come with us and tell us all about your ... love life."

This time it was Lydia's turn to chastise J'zargo, though not as lightly as Brelyna had. "Careful, J'zargo, I was just beginning to change my attitude about you Khajiits. I bet you'd make a nice cat-fur stole for someone."

When they had gone, I tapped on Onmund's doorway, but got no answer. "Onmund?" I asked, drawing the curtain aside. He was sitting on the edge of his cot, staring into space. He looked drawn, as if he had hardly slept in the past weeks. His cell, usually so orderly, was a wreck of stale bread crusts, empty ale bottles, and discarded robes. He didn't look up as I entered and stood before him.

"How are you, my friend?" I asked.

"Is that what we are? Friends?" He still didn't look up at me.

"I hope so. Or, I hope we can be again. I'll never forget, you were the first to befriend me when I came here all alone."

He said nothing, but kept staring at a spot somewhere far away, though the cell was small.

I sat down beside him. "Onmund, I have something to tell you."

"I heard you come in and talk to the other two. But you didn't think to ask about me until the last, did you?"

"Only because I was so surprised you weren't with them."

"And then there was a lot of whispering, and something about happy tidings. I wonder what that could be about?"

"Onmund, my friend," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. "You were right. About Lydia and me. Only, I was too blind to see it until a fortnight ago. You knew more of me than I did myself."

He shrugged my hand off his shoulder. He tried to laugh, but it caught in his throat. "Is that supposed to make me feel better? That I was right about you? What kind of man am I, to have my place in your heart usurped by a woman?"

"Can't you see, it's only because you are a man that I cannot love you, and not anything about you yourself? I was confused on that night we kissed, and for that I am sorry. I should have known then what I know now – that I can never love any man as more than a friend."

Onmund was silent, staring at the floor.
"Come, cannot we be friends? Can you not be happy for me?"

He looked at me then, his eyes fierce. "Happy for you? How can I be, when you have torn my heart out as if it was some ritual of the Forsworn?"

I pulled back from his anger. "There is one who can do it. Ralof is happy for me, though I gave him the same answer I gave you."

"Who's Ralof?"

"A soldier with the Stormcloaks. We escaped Helgen together."

"Aren't you the heartbreaker," he sneered. "Yet he must not love you as much as I, if the loss of your love wounds him so little."

Or, his love is as great, I couldn't help thinking, but he bears the wound so much the better.

Onmund seemed to read my thoughts. "But this Ralof being a soldier, a True Nord and all that, I bet you love him more than me, male though he is."

I shook my head. "I will not answer that."

He stood up and paced about the room. "I knew it! Last among the jilted!" He went to the small table holding a clutter of empty bottles and cast-aside books next to his bed, tipping it over with a crash. "Damn the True Nords to Oblivion! I'm tired of being compared to the brutes, your Ralof and your True Nord sweetheart as well. I may not be brave, but I loved you in my own way. And you cast me aside, like a… like a…" He could not find the word, he was so angry. "Just get out! I don't want to see you again!"

"Onmund, please, it doesn't have to be this way."

"Out!" he shouted, smashing his fist against the wall, and instantly cupping it in his other hand.

"Here, let me heal that at least."

"Don't … you … dare…" he said, panting and glaring up at me, doubled over in pain.

I left, seeing that it was hopeless. Upstairs, Lydia and the two mages were quiet, staring every which way but at me. Onmund's shouts must have echoed up the central well of the tower. Lydia cleared her throat softly.

Brelyna sighed. "So much for amity at this college. Would you like something to eat?"

I shook my head, fighting back tears. "This tower seems suddenly too small. And I must see Urag."

Brelyna got up from her seat. "Do you mind if we join you?"

J'zargo got up as well. "Yes," he said. "Do let us. This is the most excitement this one has had in this waxing of the moons."

"Ha!" Urag gro-Shub's laugh was deep, guttural. "An Elder Scroll! That's the most excellent jest
I've heard in a long while. Got any more?" When he was done laughing, he looked at me and saw that I wasn't smiling. "Wait. You're serious."

I nodded. "As serious as the World Eater."

"I should have known. You never did have much sense of humor when you were here. But no, of course we don't have an Elder Scroll here. It would be kept under the tightest security. There would be guards, a vault of some sort. You don't see any of that, do you?"

I had dared to hope that the Arcanaeum would have the scroll I sought, and I could be on my way – just more wishful thinking. Always my goal receded before me.

"Well, do you know where I might find one, then? Or anything that might be helpful? If I do not get my hands on an Elder Scroll, I can never gain the weapon I need to face Alduin, and the world is doomed."

"Oh, is that all? Since you put it that way, I'll just go get one out of the cellar!" He gave another laugh, looking around at my companions, who remained silent. "What? No one? Arr, a pox on the lot o' you for your poor sense o' humor." He turned back to me. "Look, lassie, do you even know what you're asking? Do you even know what an Elder Scroll is?"

"Well, not exactly, but I know bits. They're part prophecy, part history, created before Creation itself. Some say they are the creation, or fragments of it. They never existed, but have always existed."

"Very good. Whoever told you that knew what he was talking about. And probably as mad as Septimus Signus."

"Who?"

"An Elder mage from the Imperial City. He spent some time here before disappearing somewhere to the west. That was years back. Obsessed with the Elder Scrolls. Was said to have peered at one in the White-Gold Tower, before it was ransacked. Madness! Or, it drove him mad, I should say, which is why you shouldn't go meddling with the things, even if you could find one."

"But aren't scrolls meant to be read?"

"Look, even the Moth Priests, those who trained their minds rigorously in order to read the scrolls, paid for their knowledge with a terrible price exacted by the Divines."

"What price?"

"Their eyesight. But they must have thought it worth the price for the knowledge they gained."

"Still, whatever the risks, I must have one. The Ancient Nords used an Elder Scroll to defeat Alduin the first time."

"Yes," Urag said, pondering this news. "That is probably what it would take. Very well. Septimus left some books on the scrolls. I'll see if I can locate them by morning." He gave a stretch and a yawn, as if to say he was ready to retire for the night.

"And what of Septimus himself? Maybe he can help us if he is a loremaster of the Elder Scrolls. Do you know where he went?"

"Bah! You'd be lucky to understand two words out of his mouth, even if you could find him. And
he seemed to have lost interest in the scrolls anyway. Kept nattering on about some Dwemer lockbox. That, and Lorkhan, Malacath save us."

"But do you know where he went?"

"West is all I know. Tolfdir may know more, he's been here the longest. And Enthir – he seemed to be cozying himself up to Septimus shortly before the old mage disappeared."

I thanked Urag and promised to return first thing in the morning to look at any books he could find. My hopes of a quick stop at the college were quickly fading.

We found Tolfdir in the Hall of the Elements, idly casting a steadfast ward. He brightened when we came in, led by Brelyna and J'zargo. "Ah, students! Are you ready for some training at last?"

Then he recognized me. "Oh. Arch-Mage! I don't suppose you are here for training?"

I shook my head.

"No, I thought not, you've grown quite beyond my aid, anyone can see that." He looked around the hall. "I suppose I should apologize for the state of the college. It seems I'm a better teacher than I am an administrator. The back-biting and the infighting! I was completely oblivious to it until you put me in charge. I don't know how Savos and Mirabelle put up with it."

"You just need time to get on your feet, exert your authority," I said. "Don't worry. We'll get this sorted out before I leave." I didn't quite believe it myself. I didn't have time to solve all the college's problems. "I believe we'll begin by reopening the bridge, if that's all right with you. You can hardly expect to attract new students if they can't get to the college."

"I suppose you are right. But do you mean you're not here to reassume your duties?"

I shook my head and told him my purpose.

"An Elder Scroll! Now that's a weighty matter, more serious even than the Eye of Magnus. I thought we were to avoid tampering with dangerous objects from now on?"

"It can't be helped. Now, what can you tell me about Septimus Signus?"

"Septimus? Well intentioned, a loremaster of the Elder Scrolls, but quite mad. He was obsessed with the Dwemer in his last years here, convinced he had found some as yet undiscovered Dwemer ruin. He would ramble on about spheres and boxes and secret towers and a hidden heart. It never made much sense. Then one day he went away, and hasn't been heard from since. Dead in some Dwemer ruin, I fear."

"Where did he go?"

"West, is all we know. Someone in Winterhold saw him disappearing over the pass toward Saarthal."

"And he never mentioned anything about an Elder Scroll?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, no."

I groaned. It seemed I ran as much risk of going mad from seeking an Elder Scroll as from reading one. "Very well, we'll just have to hope Urag has some useful books, or that Enthir knows something."
"Both will have to wait until morning, my thane," Lydia said. "It grows late, and you haven't had your supper yet."

I couldn't argue. I hadn't eaten more than an apple since leaving the Blade and Dragon in Windhelm that morning. We had gotten a late start because I had taken the time to write a letter to Delphine and Esbern explaining that I couldn't join them in Whiterun and they should go on without me. I had paid the courier double to ride fast, hoping to reach them before they gave up hope on me, or worse, went searching for me.

We repaired to the dining room in the Hall of Attainment, where Lydia and I regaled my two friends with stories of our adventures. The tale seemed more heroic and glorious in the telling, whereas the actual events had been filled with fear, dread, torment, and misery. Yet I suppose such is always the way with tales of perilous events. Brelyna and J'zargo oohed and aahed, their eyes growing surprised or angry or thrilled at each turn of the tale.

"Two dragons at once!" Brelyna exclaimed. "Yet you survived!"

"The Thalmor – pffft!" J'zargo hissed. "The next one I see will feel my claws." He extended and retracted the claws of his right paw for effect.

"A silent shout!" Brelyna said. "That must have been something to see!"

"I still don't quite know how I did it."

"And you spoke to a dragon? And you trust him?"

"What choice do I have? After all, he was the one who taught the Ancients to shout. Without him, we might all be thralls to the dragon priests."

"This one distrusts all of this business with the dragons. J'zargo is glad there are none of the beasts in his land."

I looked at my two friends, wondering if I should risk telling them my true thoughts about the dragons. And I looked at Lydia, for I hadn't shared this, even with her.

"Listen, my friends, why do we have to kill the dragons? They are not mere beasts, after all."

Lydia sighed. "Because they pillage both town and country, killing wantonly as they go? Seems a good enough reason to me."

"Yet perhaps they do so only at Alduin's behest. After Alduin is out of the way, maybe I can reason with the rest of the dragons. I've often thought, when seeing them flying off in the distance, or even up close in battle, that they are the most beautiful, awe-inspiring creatures in all of Creation. And my conversation with Paarthurnax showed me they can be wise, they can listen to reason. They are not mindless killers."

"That's our Deirdre," Brelyna said. "Always the peace-maker."

"And a tired peace-maker, by the sound of it," Lydia said. "Come, my thane, sleep is calling."

"Yes," said J'zargo, his tail flicking back and forth and his whiskers working up and down. "You'll have sweet, sweet … dreams, I'm sure."

"For one who looks so much like a cat," Brelyna said, her voice dripping acid, "you certainly are a pig."
"A pig who's going to get turned into bacon if he doesn't watch out," Lydia added.

I pulled Lydia away, saying goodnight to my friends. Leaving them in the Hall of Attainment, we began making our way across the college's circular courtyard toward the central tower and the arch-mage's quarters.

"You shouldn't be so hard on J'zargo," I said, taking Lydia's arm.

"Why not? It's disgusting, the way that Khajiit thinks about us. We don't exist for his pleasure."

"No, that's true. But I have to agree with him about one thing."

"What could that possibly be?"

"Well, he obviously likes to think about you with your clothes off – and so do I!" I put my arm around her waist and leaned up for a kiss, then we laughed as we pushed the tower door open together. We were still giggling when we noticed we weren't alone in the tower's foyer, and quickly separated.

"Oh! Arch-Mage!" It was Faralda, and Nirya stood beside her. Faralda was carrying a tray full of food, while Nirya held an armful of rushes. "We heard you were back, and wanted to help make you comfortable on your return – fresh rushes for your mattress, and a stock of your own food. I'm sure you'll no longer want to dine in the common rooms." Her voice was too bright, like those of vendors in the market. She went on before I could say a word. "How long will you be staying? I hope it's for some time, because I – that is, we – have ideas about improving this place. It's fallen into quite a state under Tolfdir's – ahem! – leadership."

"Yes," I said. "Well. Thank you for your consideration, though I have already supped. I doubt I'll be staying long, however."

Faralda, obviously disappointed, looked at Lydia, and then back at me. "I'm afraid that spare cot has been moved out of your quarters. Perhaps your housecarl would like to stay in your old cell?"

"We'll be fine," Lydia said. "And I'll take these, I'm sure we'll be needing them." She took the rushes from Nirya, giving her a wink. Both of the Altmer blushed a deep red. Then she pushed through the door to the stairwell that led up to the arch-mage's quarters, two floors above.

I said my goodnights to Faralda and Nirya, then left them standing there, still speechless.
The Mind of Septimus Signus

Chapter Summary

-- no luck in the library -- an unexpected encounter -- seeking aid from Enthir --
delving into madness -- the mystery of FalZhardum Din -- setting the college to rights --

I was in the Arcanaeum the next morning before anyone else was awake. There was no sign of Urag. I whiled away the time waiting for him by reading *The Ransom of Zarek*, a breathless tale of a kidnapping and daring escape, told in an archaic and stilted dialect of Tamrielic. I still wasn't sure why I should care about Zarek when Urag came shambling in, rubbing his eyes.

"Eager to get at it, I see. I can't promise you much." He went to a cabinet, unlocked it, and removed two tomes. "Here you are. I wish I could say happy reading, but I don't want to get your hopes up."

I took the two books to a reading table. One was titled *Effects of the Elder Scrolls*, written by a Justinius Poluhnias in the Second Era. I put it aside, thinking it couldn't help me find an Elder Scroll so many centuries later. I turned to the second, *Ruminations on the Elder Scrolls*, by Septimus Signus himself. I hoped one of the ruminations would be about the current location of an Elder Scroll. My hopes dimmed when I saw the subtitle: "A philosophical view on the role of the Elder Scrolls."

And inside, I found only madness. It began, "Imagine living beneath the waves with a strong-sighted blessing of most excellent fabric." It continued from there, making less and less sense as it went, and nowhere did it mention a particular location on Nírn.

I was just considering banging my head against the pages when Lydia, Brelyna, and J'zargo entered, taking seats around the table.

"Have you found anything?" Lydia asked. Her eyes were still heavy from sleep, and she had left her armor behind in our quarters, wearing a cloak over her padded tunic. Brelyna and J'zargo didn't look much more ready to face the task ahead.

"Only the ravings of a madman. Here, see what you can decipher from this."

She took the tome, glanced at it, then passed it along to Brelyna. "If this is what reading an Elder Scroll does to you, I'm not sure I want you touching one."

I took up *Effects of the Elder Scrolls*, hoping to understand how Septimus' mind had become so unsettled. Instead, I found a catalog of the varying degrees of blindness readers of the Elder Scrolls experienced, depending on their preparation for reading. "Look," I said to my friends. "I think it's safe for me to use an Elder Scroll, if we ever find one. It says here that those who have had no training in the nature of Elder Scrolls will find only an inert object. The scroll won't impart any information, nor will it affect them in any adverse fashion."

"What good is it then?" Lydia asked.

"I don't know. We don't even know how the ancients used their Elder Scroll. But we can't find out
until we get one."

Brelyna looked up from her reading of Septimus' book. "I believe you're too hasty in calling Septimus mad. Perhaps the Elder Scrolls themselves are irrational, contradictory objects, beyond mortal ken."

"Yes, that's how Paarthurnax described them."

"Well then, perhaps Septimus' writings are not madness, but apt metaphors for the nature of the scrolls themselves."

Lydia frowned at Brelyna. "If you say so, but either way, these things are insane. I will not have my thane touching one."

"Surely using an Elder Scroll can be no more dangerous than facing Alduin himself. But right now it seems there's little chance you'll have to worry about either."

I went up to Urag's desk, where he was munching on a sweetroll. "I told you not to hope for much out of those tomes," he said. "The Elder Scrolls were scattered to the winds in the Great War, and no one knows what happened to them."

"And you're sure you have nothing else on them?"

"Are you questioning the organization of my catalog system, young lady? I can assure you, I can lay my hands on every single tome among the thousands housed in the Arcanaeum. And we have nothing else on the scrolls."

"I'm sorry, Urag, I didn't mean to offend you. But I'm nearly out of hope. Can you think of nothing else that could help me?"

He thought for a moment. "I would talk to Enthir, if you haven't already."

I sighed. The prospect of getting anything out of Enthir without paying a high price seemed slim.

"Enthir? What do you want with him?" growled Dagur, the innkeeper at the Frozen Hearth.

"College business," I said.

"Ach! There's been too much college business around here! Bringing that orb up from Saarthal. Releasing those air worms, or whatever they are. And I still say the college had something to do with the Great Cataclysm. Things have been mighty slow around here ever since."

"Then I think you would appreciate additional custom." I placed a dragon coin on the bar. I had taken the liberty of restocking my supply of gold when we stopped at the Blade and Dragon. "How about tea and sweetrolls for my friends and me, plus a round for Enthir. Now where is he?"

Dagur eyed the gold, then picked it up and bit it. "He's down in the cellar, where he always is. Shady characters down there, too."

We were descending the stairs to the cellar when the door at the bottom opened and two hooded figures emerged.
"You!" one of them said, looking at Lydia and me.

"You!" I replied. It was Etienne Rarnis.

In an instant Lydia had the thief pressed up against the wall, her dagger at his throat. "Twice you've betrayed us. There won't be a third time. Now tell us, what are you doing here? Working with the Thalmor again?"

"No, no, believe me! I hate the damned Altmer as much as you!" Etienne's eyes were wide, flicking back and forth among the four of us. His partner stood back, unsure whether to come to his aid. "We're just here on a delivery. We were as glad to be shut of the Thalmor as you were. Bad for business and all. Too bad they broke out of Mistveil Dungeon."

"Wait!" I put a hand on Lydia's arm. She let the thief down off the wall but kept her weapon drawn. "What are you saying?"

"Just what I said. The elves broke out just a few hours after the Stormcloaks locked them up. No one could understand how they escaped so quick, figured they must have had inside help."

"But who would do that? Riften is a Stormcloak city."

"I'd … rather not say. Get in trouble with the boss. Let's just say that nothing is what it seems in the Rift."

I groaned. "All right, you can go." I watched the thieves disappear up the stairs, thinking about Esbern and Delphine, and whether they knew that the Thalmor were on their trail. Then I wished I hadn't sent that letter, or else that I had written it in a more coded fashion. The Thalmor had been known to waylay couriers and open the letters they carried.

We found Enthir in the cellar. The chamber had crude stone walls with two beds and a table – Dagur and Horan's sparse living quarters, no doubt, which Enthir had taken over for his business. He was just stuffing something red, wet, and glistening back into a sack as we entered.

"Ah, the arch-mage has returned, I see, and with friends. What can I do for you? I usually like to keep college business separate from village business."

"I want to hear anything you can tell me about Septimus Signus."

"Septimus! Now there's a name I haven't heard in an age. I'd almost forgotten about him."

"Urag said you were friendly with the mage."

"Yes, and why shouldn't I be, just because he was as mad as Sheogorath?"

"Befriending the mentally ill – I never knew you harbored such compassion in your heart, Enthir. Or did you hope to profit by it somehow?"

Just then, Haran brought in our tea and sweetrolls and set them on the table before us.

"Ah, very kind of you," Enthir said, sipping at his tea. "But it's going to take more than tea and a sweetroll to butter me up, if that's what you're hoping."

He took a bite of his sweetroll and I waited for him to continue. Sometimes silence is better at prompting speech than pestering. The technique worked. Enthir swallowed with some difficulty, looking back and forth between us, especially Lydia who was still in a grim mood after our
encounter with the thief.

"I will admit, the way Septimus kept going on about Dwemer ruins, I hoped he might come back with something valuable. Oh, not any of that Dwemer scrap metal, but maybe a working gyro or a dynamo core – they carry a high price from the right buyer. Or better yet, an exquisitely worked silver necklace or two. But it was all a waste of my time. Septimus disappeared without a trace."

"Do you have any idea where he went, or what he was looking for? I'm desperate for any clues."

Enthir's eyes narrowed. "I may have something of use. But why should I help you?"

"For old times' sake. I did get that staff back for you. And if we end up following Septimus into a Dwemer ruin, we'll bring back as many valuable Dwemer artifacts as we can carry. Now, do you know where he went or not?"

Enthir waved his sweetroll vaguely to the west. "Off over the pass toward Saarthal is all I know. Skyrim has Dwemer ruins to spare, as you know – domes poking up here and there, inaccessible, locked from the inside, or with broken lifts that will get you nowhere. He mentioned many of them – Raldbthar, Mzulft, Mzinchaleft, Mzark, Irkngthand – but he never said which one he was headed for. That, and something about a deep venue and a tower of learning. That was all I could make of his ravings."

"So any of half a dozen Dwemer ruins, and we don't even know what he was looking for. It doesn't seem much help."

"Well, there was one other thing. He left me his notes. Said he was done with them because he'd copied everything he needed onto a map. Wouldn't let me see the map, of course."

"And you still have these notes?"

"Certainly! In a chest in my room at the college, gathering dust. But I wouldn't get my hopes up. I gave them a quick glance – nothing but gibberish, if you ask me."

"If they're anything like his book, then they're likely useless. Still, they're our only hope. When can we see them?"

"Just let me finish my tea. I wouldn't want to delay your great quest, whatever it is."

"I'm seeking an Elder Scroll." Then I thought of something. "Enthir, you're known as an elf who can get his hands on rare items. Do you know where we can find one?"

"An Elder Scroll? Ha! Tell me another one! I never knew you had such a sense of humor." He drained his tea, his eyes still crinkling with amusement.

Half an hour later, we were just sitting down around the Arcanaeum's reading table, Enthir's small wooden chest before us, when Onmund appeared at the library's entrance. He stood there looking uncomfortable, staring at the floor, trying to clear his throat.

Brelyna rose to greet him first. "Onmund! You've left your cell! It's so good to see you up and around."
He approached our table, trying to look only at Brelyna and J'zargo, but his eyes kept darting over at Lydia and me, sitting close together. He stood before the table for a moment, his fingers idly tapping the back of an empty chair.

"I … I heard you talking last night, about what Deirdre and … Lydia … went through on their quest. And I realized, if they could go through such suffering to save the world, then I … it's bigger than me and my feelings. It's my duty to help in any way I can."

"Well spoken, Onmund!" Brelyna said, squeezing his arm. "Of course you can help us. We were just about to go through these notes."

"Onmund," I said, "does this mean we can be friends again?"

He still wouldn't look at me. "I didn't say that. I'm here to help defeat Alduin, that is all."

Lydia got my attention by kicking me under the table. I looked over to see her raising her eyebrows at me, as if to remind me what she thought of Onmund.

J'zargo gave a purring chuckle. "Well, this promises to be … awkward."

"Let's get to it, shall we?" Brelyna said briskly, opening the chest and pulling out scrolls and scraps of paper. "Now, what exactly are we looking for?"

"Any mention of an Elder Scroll and its location," I said, though I hadn't much hope.

Brelyna grew less hopeful as she pulled out more and more pieces of paper. "Disordered record-keeping – the sign of a disordered mind. No dates, no page numbers, no apparent order, just random scribblings." She unrolled one scroll and read from it. "Dig, Dwemer, in the beyond, I'll know your lost unknown and rise to your depths."

"That's nonsense!" Onmund said.

"Yes. However, we have no choice but to wade through this nonsense for whatever clues it contains." She began passing out scrolls and sheaves of paper to each of us. "We'd best get started – this could take all day."

And it did. It was an hour before we found anything – an hour filled with frustrated sighs and groans and many trips to a ewer of water Urag kept on a table well away from the books.

It was Onmund who found the first hint of a clue. "Here, what's this mean? 'Cast upon where Dwemer cities slept, the yearning spires hidden learnings kept'."

"I don't know," I said, wondering why so much of Septimus' writings were in verse. "But it sounds as if it refers to a location, vague though it is."

"Here," Brelyna said, taking the scrap of paper from Onmund. "Septimus may have been disorganized, but we don't have to be. We'll save anything that looks interesting in this pile." She certainly seemed in her element, organizing our research.

An hour later, Lydia found something else. I was surprised – she usually didn't have much patience for this kind of thing. "Damn this mage! Why can't he speak plain? Listen to this:

West of the Nords' saddest mourning,  
East of the bright light of morning,  
There 'neath glaciers' frozen shelving,
"He certainly wasn't a master of verse, but that must refer to a physical location," Brelyna said. "Let's add it to the pile and decipher it later."

We were taking our noon meal of dried apples and hard cheese – it took all of my powers of persuasion to convince Urag to allow us food in the Arcanaeum – when Brelyna jumped up from the table. "He was onto an Elder Scroll. Listen! 'The box is strong but the bones of creation are stronger. The scroll will break the box.' And here, a short while later: 'One escaped the Empire's clutches. In the depths, one yet lies. But how to get in?""

"That's the most rational thing he's said so far," I said, my hopes rising.

Brelyna added it to the pile. "Let's keep going. We're getting closer."

A short while later, J'zargo gave a satisfied purr. "'Dwemer Inquiries hold the key!' this says. Pfft. Isn't this all a Dwemer inquiry?"

"Perhaps that refers to a book," Brelyna suggested. "If Septimus felt it held the key, it could be important."

"Let's ask Urag," I said.

"Of course the Dwemer Inquiries are a book," Urag huffed. "Three volumes, actually, by Thelwe Ghelein, undated. I'll get them for you." The lorekeeper shuffled off into the stacks.

The litter of discarded scrolls and paper scraps around our table grew deep, while the stack of useful ones remained short – just four items. The late afternoon sun was slanting through the Arcanaeum's tall windows, my hopes sinking with it.

Then Brelyna leapt up once again. "A map!" She held up a scrap of paper. We gathered around her for a better look, Onmund pointedly walking around to stand on the side away from Lydia and me.

Yet it wasn't much. Just a label at the top, "FalZhardum Din," a familiar symbol, and then three dots, labeled "A," "R," and "M." No landmarks, no sense of scale.

"How do you even know it's a map?" I asked.

She pointed to the symbol. "This is surely the sigil of Dawnstar, crudely drawn though it is. Oh, and wait!" She took up the second scrap of paper in our stack. "'East of the bright light of morning.' That must refer to Dawnstar as well. Urag, pardon us once more, but do you have a map of Skyrim anywhere about?"

"Of course I do! Common as a septim. There's one in that urn full of scrolls right behind you."

Brelyna spread the map out on the table. "So, if it's east of Dawnstar," she said, her finger tracing the map's lines and symbols, "and west of … what?"

Onmund took up the scrap with the verse. "'The Nords' saddest mourning.' That has to be Saarthal."

"Of course," Brelyna said. "And between Dawnstar and Saarthal … here, Alftand. Although it's neither directly east of Dawnstar nor west of Saarthal, but somewhat south."

"You must remember Alftand from our travels over the Wayward Pass," I said. "It rests upon and beneath a vast glacier, which fits the verse's third line."
"But how could an Elder Scroll be hidden there? It must have been explored many times by now. There were even signs of an expedition the last time we passed it."

"I don't know. But for now, let's assume that the A on the map stands for Alftand. Yet there are other marks."

"Yes, and with no discernible scale on such a crude map, those marks could refer to a number of locations. And yet the whole map seems to refer to another location entirely – FalZhardum Din. That's surely the Dwemer language, but what can it mean?"

We stared at the map and the verse for a moment, but none of us could come up with anything else.

"Come on," Lydia prompted. "We're almost done with these notes, and suppertime draws near."

We plowed ahead, and in a short while Onmund leaned back in his chair and sighed. "My mind is so foggy, I'm not sure if this means anything at all: 'I've found the tools. Two shapes, one edged, one round. The round one for tuning. The edged, for scribing'."

"More gibberish!" Lydia exclaimed.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Brelyna said. "Anything Septimus thought of as a tool could be important. And I don't know about tuning, but scribing could have to do with the scroll. Add it to the pile."

The light was gone from the windows and we were reading by candlelight when I came to the next to last scrap in my share of the notes. "Thank Akatosh, this one finally has a date. And he sounds almost lucid: '12th of Last Seed, 4E 195. I have found Ursa's map. A few more preparations and I will be ready."

"Ready for what?" Lydia demanded. "Ready to go where? Damn him!"

"Yes, and who's Ursa?" Brelyna wondered.

"Could it refer to the map we have before us?" I asked.

"That hardly seems likely, it is so sketchy," Brelyna said. "And he probably would have taken it with him."

The last scroll in my pile contained nothing but gibberish. I sat back in my chair, pondering the scant information we had gleaned. It didn't seem much. We at least knew Septimus was after an Elder Scroll, and that was encouraging. And perhaps he went to Alftand, though we couldn't be sure. It seemed a slim hope.

When the others had finished their piles with no further success, we turned to the Dwemer Inquiries. These were a history of Dwemer building and tunneling practices, focusing on how the styles had changed as the Dwemer moved from Morrowind into Skyrim. As we read, I pondered Arngeir's suspicion that the Tongues had lost the Elder Scroll at their battle with the Dwemer and the Chimer on Red Mountain. Had the Dwemer brought the scroll with them into Skyrim? Or had the Nords lost it as they fled back to their homeland, pursued by the Dwemer? It was all guesswork.

We were deep into the third volume, our stomachs growling to be fed, when we finally came across something of value. The tome spoke of Deep Venues sometimes found in the deepest Dwemer ruins – vast natural caverns large enough to contain free-standing structures and even paved roads wide enough for ten soldiers to march abreast. It was hard to believe such a cavern could exist without the land above collapsing in on it, but the book mentioned one that had been
explored at Bthardamz.

Toward the end, the author grew less sure of himself, speaking of strange inscriptions found at the deepest levels of three ruins: Raldbthar, Mzinchaleft, and Alftand.

"Mzinchaleft and Raldbthar!" Brelyna exclaimed. "That completes our mysterious map." She marked in the names next to the dots on Septimus' map, then compared it to the map of Skyrim. "It's crude, but roughly accurate. Mzinchaleft is west-by-northwest of Alftand, while Raldbthar is almost due south. But then, why is this map labeled *FalZhardum Din*?"

And on the next page, we had the answer, or a partial one: "The inscriptions in these three underground ruins reference a geological anomaly or place known as 'FalZhardum Din' ... The words appear specifically on ornate metal frames in the ruins' deepest reaches... The most reasonable translation of 'FalZhardum Din' I have been able to decipher is 'Blackest Kingdom Reaches,' but I cannot imagine what that means." The tome concluded with a lament about the answer lying "just under my nose - or indeed, under my feet."

"Well, that doesn't make much sense," Brelyna said. "At least we now have a translation for 'FalZhardum Din,' though it's not much help."

"Wait," I said. "Something else is written here." I could see writing showing through from the back of the last page. Turning it over, I read these words, written in Septimus Signus' hand: "Under Deep, below the Dark. The hidden keep, Tower Mzark."

Under deep, I thought. Below the dark. Just more insane ramblings. But the author of *Dwemer Inquiries* felt the answer was right beneath his feet. The blackest reaches. "That's it!" I said.

"What?" Brelyna asked.

"What if *FalZhardum Din*, or these Blackest Kingdom Reaches, is a vast cavern that lies beneath all these other ruins, connecting them?" I took up the first scrap of paper Onmund had found. "A place 'where Dwemer cities slept,' a place to hide a whole tower – a place where an Elder Scroll could remain hidden for all these centuries."

"But that would indeed be vast," Lydia said. "Each of these ruins is half a day's ride apart."

"And if *FalZhardum Din* is that vast," Brelyna said, "as impossible as that seems, how is this Tower of Mzark to be found?"

"We can only hope that it will stand out somehow, or that we'll find Septimus and this map he spoke of. It seems clear that Septimus was concentrating his efforts on Alftand." I stood up from the table. "That decides it. Lydia and I will leave for Alftand in the morning."

Brelyna shook her head. "You're not going anywhere without us. Am I right, J'zargo?"

"Grrrr, what?" The Khajiit roused himself from some reverie. Perhaps he'd been dreaming of the dinner we had yet to eat. "Oh, yes, J'zargo will be glad to go with you. One more chance for this one to prove he is the greatest of mages."

"But it could be dangerous," I said.

"Of course it will be dangerous," Brelyna said. "And have you faced Dwemer automatons? Or the Falmer? No? Well then, our experience from Mzulft will prove invaluable. Onmund, are you with us?"
Onmund looked uncomfortable but finally stammered, "Yes, of course."

"Good, then what time do we leave?" Brelyna asked.

"I had hoped to leave at dawn, but I see now I must convene a meeting of the college. Master Tolfdir will need a new assistant. We will leave as soon after as we can manage."

It was a sleepy group of mages that answered my summons shortly after dawn the next morning. They stood around the Hall of the Elements, wondering what it was all about. Faralda and Nirya stood off to one side, whispering together and looking put-upon.

"Damnable time of the morning for a meeting!" Urag gro-Shub grumbled.

"Friends, my apologies for waking you so early," I began, speaking from the steps of the magicka fountain at the center of the hall, "but I must make an early start. I am leaving the college once again, for how long I do not know. Brelyna will accompany us, along with Onmund and J'zargo. Yet I realize that Brelyna's absence will have an impact on the college…"

"Hear, hear!" Nirya put in.

"It's about time we saw some changes around here," Faralda said.

"Yes, I must appoint a temporary replacement, so that Master Tolfdir does not go without assistance. But first, there are serious matters we must discuss."

"What, before breakfast?" Arniel Gane grumbled.

"I'm afraid it cannot be helped. My friends, these are troubled times, as you know. I have traveled far since last we met. I have been imprisoned by the Imperials, I have even spoken with the emperor himself." A murmur went through the hall at that revelation. "And Lydia and I have been the prisoners of the Thalmor." A louder murmur. "These Aldmeri were remarkably open with me in discussing their plans, their goals, and their ultimate aims. And it is now clear to me that the Thalmor seek to enslave all other races, if not wipe us from the face of Nirn – and most especially their ancient foes, the humans of Skyrim."

Shouts of "No!" and "They could not!" rang out through the hall. Nirya and Faralda were still quiet, whispering together.

"In such times, our college must stand united. And so I must ask a painful question of our Altmer colleagues. Faralda and Nirya, whom do you serve – the College of Winterhold or the powers that rule your homeland?"

The two Altmer looked at each other. Then Faralda stepped forward. "Arch-Mage, how can you ask such a question? I have devoted myself to the college for years. I am no Thalmor."

"It's true," Nirya said. "The Thalmor are but one political faction in Summerset, albeit the ruling faction at the moment. But I for one have never had anything to do with them. In fact, one reason I came to the college was to escape such politics. If I ever said anything complimentary about the Thalmor, it was only because I thought Ancano might be eavesdropping. Things are that bad in my home, we dare not speak openly about our rulers."
I looked back and forth between the two, gauging their sincerity. "Very well. Will you swear an oath to the College of Winterhold, that you will serve and protect it and all its residents, no matter what comes?"

"I swear it," Faralda said.

"As do I," Nirya agreed.

"Then I am prepared to trust you. What say the rest of you?" There was a bit of grumbling – neither of the Altmer had made many friends at the college – but in the end all of the mages nodded in assent.

"Good. Then I appoint Faralda temporary assistant to Master Tolfdir." There was a bit of polite applause, but even more grumbling. Faralda beamed as if I had jumped her straight to arch-mage.

"Now, with that settled, I implore all of you to put aside your differences and unite behind your leaders. I have the utmost confidence in Master Tolfdir, and know he will use his wisdom to shepherd the college through these perilous times. And even more, I urge you to work together, to continue your training and your studies, sharing your knowledge with one another, and reaching out to recruit new novices in any way you can."

Sergius Turrianus spoke up. "Why, Arch-Mage? What is the urgency?"

"War is coming, Sergius. There may come a time when I will call upon the college to defend not only itself but all of Skyrim from the Thalmor. Or it may be that we must enter the Civil War to keep the Thalmor at bay – I do not know."

"The college has always held itself apart from these wars and political affairs," Sergius objected.

"Can you not see that war is already upon us? We have lost two of our leaders, two of our dearest colleagues and friends, in this war. Or have you forgotten the tragic events of a month ago? Ancano was not just seeking power for himself, but for the Aldmeri Dominion. Wielding the power of the Eye, the Aldmeri could have extended their domination to all of Tamriel."

A tremor went through the hall, even a shout of "Down with the Thalmor!"

"You can see why we must put aside petty infighting and stand together. Who's with me?" I thrust my fist into the air. "For the college!" I cried. Lydia took up the chant with me. "For Winterhold!"

Faralda and Nirya were the next to join us, then Tolfdir and Colette, then more and more, until finally the entire hall reverberated with our chanting.

When we were done and the crowd was breaking up, Enthir came up to the five of us, a tome in one hand and a sack slung over his shoulder.

"Off to some Dwemer ruin, I presume?" he asked.

"Alftand."

"Ah, of course. I hope you're prepared to face many Falmer. Nasty creatures, though in ancient times they were the mighty Snow Elves. Several of my friends have fallen to the devils. I believe that must be what happened to Septimus."

J'zargo sniffed. "Some of us have faced Falmer before. They are but trifles."

"Ah. Still, I thought this tome on the Falmer might be helpful. It's been lying about the Frozen
Hearth for years now. No, don't thank me! Just protecting my investment." He handed me the book and went off after Phinis Gestor.

I looked at the book in my hand. The Falmer: A Study was the title. Then I opened it to the title page and saw who had written it. "Ursa Uthrax!"

"The one who drew Septimus' map?" Brelyna asked.

"It could be. Let's see what she has to say."

Much of the tome was familiar from the legends about the Falmer – that they were once Snow Elves who were driven underground after their defeat by the Nords. And literally underground, taking refuge with the Dwemer. Then this author named their retreat: Blackreach.

"That must be FalZhardum Din!" Brelyna said. "Blackreach – a shortening of Blackest Kingdom Reaches."

"Yes, and she claims to have been there." I pointed to the next lines: "Yes, Blackreach exists. I have been there, and unlike most of those who have witnessed its terrible glories, I have returned."

"I wonder what she meant by 'terrible glories'?" Onmund said.

"Probably just the vastness of the place," Brelyna said. "Let's just hope we find Septimus, and he has that map."

Lydia had grown tired of all this standing around and talking. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get going then!" She opened the door to the courtyard and ushered us out into a frigid winter morning.
Alftand was a wonder, an amazement, a miracle. Impossibly vast, filled with a beauty and craftsmanship we in this Fourth Era can only dream about, still alive with the mechanical creatures the Dwarves left behind. And everywhere, the clanking, spinning, and hissing of their machines, whose purposes remain a mystery. The Dwemer, known as a hard-headed, scientific people, would have scoffed at such descriptions, yet we cannot help but look upon them as gods, or next-to-gods, for they created new life – or something like life.

We had no trouble getting into the ruin, thanks to those who had come before. We found the Alftand Expedition camp abandoned at the edge of a yawning glacial crevasse. A small Dwemer tower stood nearby, inaccessible, like many similar structures that had tantalized and frustrated adventurers in Skyrim for centuries. Other turrets and towers poked out of the crevasse at odd angles, having been swallowed by the glacier long ago, revealed more recently by the splitting of the ice. A wooden catwalk, built by the recent explorers, led precipitously down the ice face into a vertical fissure within the crevasse. It was an easy thing for us to walk down it, and then into the ice itself, following the fissure that the expedition had widened, thus gaining access to the halls and chambers of Alftand.

It was in the first of these, a stone corridor into which the ice had partly intruded, that we found Septimus Signus.

"The crazy old mage didn't make it very far, did he?" Lydia said as we gathered around the black-robed figure sprawled on the stone floor. Her torch illuminated Septimus' body, shriveled, desiccated, his mage's robes rent in a dozen places and covered in dark splotches of blood that had dried and frozen years ago.

"Yet how he made it even this far is a mystery." Brelyna said. She pointed to the broken pieces of a Dwemer spider contraption lying not far away. "Clearly, one of those spiders killed him, but who killed the spider?"

"Yes, and who went through his pack?" J'zargo said. He held up an empty knapsack, and there was a scatter of books and other items at his feet.

"Probably the same people who tunneled through the ice to get here," Onmund said.

I groaned, not wanting to think about what might have been taken from Septimus' pack, but I guessed he was right.

"If the expedition had to do this much work to reach this passage, how did Septimus get here?" Brelyna asked.

"That mystery will have to remain unsolved for now," I said. "Let's see if he has that map of
Blackreach, or those tools he mentioned. Maybe the expedition left them, not knowing what they were."

But it was a vain hope. A thorough search of his robes’ pockets revealed nothing but some smashed potion bottles. And in the scatter of items spilled from his pack, there were copies of Calcelmo’s writings on dwarves, other books, and a journal. My hopes rose briefly when I saw Septimus’ handwriting, but fell again when I scanned the first two pages: nothing but gibberish. I nearly left it by his body, but decided to put it in my pack, thinking it might yield something useful when we had time to study it closely.

Brelyna saw that I was disappointed. "Those tools may not have been that important," she said. "Or maybe we'll find them up ahead."

I had to agree, and we began moving down the hallway. The glacier had intruded into the passage, breaking the pipe-works that ran along the ceiling. Fresh water poured from the broken end, and I wondered where was the heat source that kept the pipes from freezing. Steam escaped from metal vents in the ceilings and walls, a further mystery, like much else in this Dwemer ruin.

Yet even here, where the eons had done so much to damage the ancient city, I had to marvel at Dwarven craftsmanship. The walls of the passage were of close-set square blocks requiring the most highly skilled mason-work. The columns supporting the ceiling featured ornate carvings of geometrical shapes. And the floor, built of close-set flagstones, was smoother and more level than anything a modern mason could create. Here and there, chandeliers lit by soul gems illuminated the space, and scraps of old carpet showed that it had not been without comfort, for all its stonework.

I was just beginning to think we were making good progress when we rounded a corner into a larger chamber. Brelyna had insisted on taking the lead since she and the other mages had more experience in Dwemer ruins than Lydia or I. Now she stopped and gasped. "By the Eight, what happened here?"

I stepped around Onmund and witnessed a scene of carnage unlike any I had seen since Helgen. The room was strewn with bodies: a man in Imperial armor lay across a stone table, an arrow embedded deep in his eye. A Redguard woman lay in a pool of congealed blood at the foot of the table, her steel plate armor dented and most of one arm missing. The bodies of two strange, eyeless creatures I guessed must be Falmer had fallen before her, their pallid bodies a welter of blood spots, as if they’d been made to bleed from every pore. At the far end of the room, next to a barred doorway, lay the body of a female Orsimer. She wore only hide armor, and it hadn't done her much good.

"A Falmer ambush!" Onmund said.

"I believe you're right, Onmund," I said. "Let's search these bodies and the rest of the room. Maybe we'll find a clue about what happened to them. And be on the lookout for those items Septimus mentioned, especially the map of Blackreach."

A search of the bodies yielded nothing of much value, the Falmer having already looted everything they wanted. But on the table we found two items of interest: a journal left by the expedition leader, Sulla Trebattius, and a strangely decorated metal box, square, and about ten inches on a side. It was hollow, judging by the weight and the empty sound it made when tapped, but there was no obvious way to open it. Each side was engraved with the same rune or sigil inside a circle, but the circles could not be pressed or rotated. It was just an inert metal cube.

"That must be the edged shape Septimus described," Brelyna said. "I wonder what it does?"
"I haven't a clue, but maybe this journal will tell us something." The others gathered around, and I began to read aloud. The first pages were a manifest of the expedition, listing its seven members.

"What happened to the other four?" Onmund wondered.

I skimmed past the journal entries that described the first days of traveling to the site and setting up camp, then there was a gap of several weeks, and then the following entries:

**20 Frostfall**

Haven't had much time to write, we've been so busy opening the way into the ruin. Thank Akatosh for Yag's clumsy feet. If she hadn't tripped over that pickaxe half-buried in the snow, we never would have found the rope dangling from it. And that rope led us to the fissure. Whoever rappelled down it must have been very brave – or very mad.

It took us a week to build a catwalk to get down to the opening, and another week to widen it, stabilize it, and bridge the crevasses. One thing's certain: whoever put that rope down to the fissure couldn't have made it very far inside.

**28 Frostfall**

Tidings both good and ill. The good: the fissure leads into the Dwemer ruin. We should have it widened enough to get to more open passages by tomorrow. The ill: a storm hit yesterday and shows no sign of letting up. I've ordered most of the supplies moved into the tunnel entrance.

**30 Frostfall**

We found the fellow who left that rope. How he got this far down here I can't imagine. The fissure seemed too narrow to allow anyone through. And then there were the crevasses crossing the fissure.

But his efforts went for naught. One of the Dwemer spider contraptions must have gotten him, his robes were ripped to shreds. College mage by the looks of him, and he's been down here for years. Good riddance. If he had survived, the glory for the exploration of Alftand would have gone to Winterhold.

We found a strange box in his pack. I've no idea what it does. He also had an odd sphere in his pocket. It emits a soft music. I wonder if it could be an attunement sphere? If so, then the mage certainly knew what he was doing. I've heard the Dwemer used them as keys to their most sophisticated locking mechanisms. If this ruin contains a door with that kind of lock, I'm sure we'll find something amazing behind it!

Ach, I shouldn't get my hopes up. The mage was clearly mad. His journal is filled with nothing but gibberish. I gave up after two pages, and left it with him.

**2 Sun's Dusk**

We've set up camp in the first chamber we came to. It's large enough for all of us to sleep, though not comfortably on these stone floors. There are two stone tables where we can lay out our finds. I've been studying that strange box, hoping it will reveal some clue. But no luck so far.

One exit from this chamber is barred off. Of course the bars are made of Dwemer metal, so there's no getting through without the hottest forge known to modern smiths. The passage beyond looks like it's been caved in anyway. The other way out of the chamber is blocked by a glacial intrusion. We're busy tunneling through the glacier, hoping to reach the same hall farther along.

These Dwemer machines are astounding! They keep popping out of metal pipes and attacking anyone they see. Or perhaps "see" is not the right word – no one knows how they sense an enemy
and go after it with their metal claws. If only Umana and Yag wouldn't smash them before we've had a chance to examine them. Where they get their power is a mystery, as is their continued functioning after all these centuries. Soul gems are obviously part of it, but there must be something else. And an even bigger mystery: they behave as if they have the will of living creatures. How did the Dwemer accomplish that?

Addendum: I thought I heard the sound of some large machine from farther down the barred passage. And then right before I closed my eyes I thought I saw a human-shaped form in the same direction. Maybe a different type of contraption than the ones we've seen before? This is so exciting!

4 Sun's Dusk
Valie has disappeared. I thought we could trust the mage since she had no affiliation with Winterhold, but maybe the college got its hooks into her anyway. Whether she ran back to tell them of our progress, or somehow pushed ahead on her own, I don't know. Umana thinks maybe one of the contraptions got her. She's talking about going back, but I convinced her we can keep pushing forward. We're tunneling through the glacier, following the wall of the ruined hall.

7 Sun's Dusk
No sooner did we break through into the Dwemer hall past the blockage than the Khajiit brothers disappeared. We found them the next day in a side passage, J'darr standing over his dead brother. He'd obviously just murdered the poor wretch and kept going on about a hidden stash of skooma. He wanted to fight but we finally subdued him and tied him up. Umana thinks we should abandon the expedition, but there's no going back: we found the entrance to the fissure blocked by snow and ice. We cleared it away just enough to see that the storm is still raging and the catwalk is an icy death trap. I say let's keep pushing ahead.

8 Sun's Dusk
Endrast is gone too. We were on our way into the newly opened section of the ruin, hoping we'd finally come to Alftand's central area, when we realized he wasn't with us. There's no sign of him, but Umana found some drops of blood over by the barred doorway. We spent the rest of the day arguing about what to do. Yag is game to go on but Umana wants to go back, even if it means climbing up that icy rope. I told her I'd sooner take my chances with the Dwemer machines. I sometimes wonder if she doesn't want to convince us to give up, then come back on her own, steal all the glory.

Addendum: There's that mechanical sound again, from somewhere deep down in this place.

"So now we know what happened to the rest of the expedition," Onmund said. He didn't shiver when he said it, the way he would have in the past.

"And they found the round shape Septimus mentioned," Brelyna said. "Do you suppose he was right that it's a key to something?"

"I would guess so," I said. "Septimus said it was for tuning, and Sulla called it an attunement sphere. But damn these Falmer, they must have taken it. It could be anywhere by now."

"We'll find it if we have to slay every Falmer in the place," Lydia said. She poked at one of the Falmer bodies with her boot. "They don't look so tough."

I had to disagree. I thought they looked malevolent, with red scar-tissue where their eyes should be, bony nostrils instead of noses, and lips pulled back in a sneer.

"I wouldn't underestimate them," Brelyna said. "They possess unusual strength, though they are small, and seem smaller moving around in a crouch the way they do. They may be blind, but they
might as well have the night-vision of the Khajiits, their other senses guide them so well. Their mages have powerful magic, and they work together like packs of wolves, though usually in threes. And they're even more dangerous when they work in tandem with the chauruses, which they have somehow managed to train."

I shuddered, remembering a chaurus Lydia and I fought during our flight across Hjaalmarch. Onmund gave me a sidelong glance, and I tried to get a hold of myself.

"I'll heed your warnings," Lydia said, "but I think we'll be fine. It looks like that Umana felled two of the creatures. And they were only three while we are five."

"There's only one way to find out," I said. "Let's keep moving. And let's bring that box. Maybe we'll learn what it's good for farther along."

And so began our exploration of Alftand. Would that I had the space to describe all that we saw there, the glories of its architecture and the wonders of its many different machines. But as it is, I must be brief. Of the guardian contraptions, we encountered three types. The first of these, a spider-like machine, set upon us in the hallway beyond the chamber where we found the expedition. Just as Sulla had described in his journal, it popped out of one of the many pipes that ran along the walls. It leapt straight at Lydia, who was passing nearest, its claws clanking rapidly against the steel of her armor.

We would have dispatched it with ease had Onmund not rushed in, cloaked in lightning and wielding a sword. He gave a high-pitched battle-cry, something like "Aiieeee!" Then it was cut short, his sword clanking off the metal dome of the spider's body as one talon slashed his robes. He stepped back, stunned, a line of red blooming across his chest.

"Onmund, are you mad?" Brelyna yelled. I attended to Onmund while the rest took care of the spider. He was sitting down now, staring blankly at the action before him. My healing spell closed the gash in his chest, and a healing potion revived him further.

"Thanks," he said, looking up at me and then quickly back to the others, who had just finished their fight. Two spells of lightning and fire from the mages and a blow from Lydia's axe had smashed the contraption to pieces.

"Onmund, what were you doing?" Brelyna demanded. "And you have experience with these Dwemer contraptions – were you trying to get yourself killed?"

"No one's going to think me a coward ever again," Onmund said, his jaw set, staring at the floor in front of him.

"Pffft!" J'zargo hissed. "There's a difference between bravery and foolhardiness, my friend."

We all looked at J'zargo for a moment. "What happened to J'zargo the cocky Khajiit?" Brelyna wondered.

Lydia stepped over to Onmund and stretched out a hand, helping him to his feet. "That may have been brave," she said, "but it's not the best battle tactic. You mages have no defenses against these contraptions. It's best for me to go in front, taking any attacks with my shield and armor. You mages attack from range, and for Talos' sake, don't miss with those spells. My thane, since you are the most highly skilled in Restoration magic, your task will be to heal the rest of us during battle."

We all nodded, yet it felt strange to take on the role of healer. Wasn't this what I had set out to do when I went to the College of Winterhold in the first place – to heal, not to kill? Now, after so
many months of fighting on my own or with Lydia at my side, I wasn't so sure. Still, it was a sound battle plan, so I didn't object.

We found the second type of contraption, the Dwemer sphere guardian, in the chamber the expedition had opened just before meeting their ends. Here the air seemed warmer, heavy with steam, and the ice had not intruded this far into the city.

Lydia caught her breath as she entered the room. "I've never seen anything quite like that."

Nor had I. The place was huge, three, maybe four stories high, with lofty, vaulted ceilings. Yet, large as it was, every inch of the walls, floor, and ceiling was of hewn, closely fitted stone. How many ages had it taken the Dwemer just to build this one chamber? And that was not all. Metal pipe-work ran along the ceiling, extending along the walls and down to the floor in places, exuding steam from numerous vents. Here and there on the walls and floors, great metal gears spun around.

"I wonder what those are for?" Onmund asked.

"I don't know," Brelyna said. "This place is a wonder, even after Mzulft."

All of these mechanisms, their purposes long forgotten, yet still working after all these centuries – perhaps that was the greatest wonder of all.

We were so busy gawking at the room around us, we barely noticed the two metal ports in the walls on either side of us, nor the pool of oil on the floor, until Lydia stepped in it.

"Quickly, back away!" Brelyna called, but it was too late. The metal coverings over the ports slid back and out of each rolled a metal ball about the size of a prize pumpkin. Brelyna had the presence of mind to cast a flame spell on the oil pool the instant that Lydia stepped away from it. The metal balls, whatever they were, rolled toward us, undeterred by the flame.

I could hardly believe my senses when each ball seemed to bloom with the fire, cracking open into two halves that served as wheels. From within arose a human-like shape with arms and a long, narrow head. They were fast, rolling across the floor toward us at an unbelievable speed. In the seconds before they reached us, I noticed that the Dwemer had taken the time to cast each with the likeness of a Dwarven face, complete with beard, nose, and cheekbones – and blank, blank eyes.

Then they were upon us and I noticed one more ghastly detail: instead of hands at the ends of their arms, they bore weapons, a crossbow on the left and a sword on the right. But not just any sword. This one had pulleys and gears that thrust the blade forward as the arm extended, doubling its force and speed. Lydia was able to block the charge of the first guardian with her shield, but the second one got under her swinging axe. She grunted in pain as the sword struck her breastplate with more power than she had expected.

Still, while two sphere guardians were a sterner test than a single spider, we were five and they were only two, and Brelyna and I cast our atronachs for added measure. She had taken to conjuring a frost atronach, a tall, stout creature of ice that could take much damage and smash its opponents with an icy fist.

Yet we did have one close call. I tried to use Unrelenting Force on the contraptions when they had backed Lydia up to a wall, forcing her to one knee. The shout had little effect on them. One continued its attack on Lydia, while the other turned on me.

I rolled to my right just in time, narrowly missing a thrust of that mechanical blade. Yet the sphere stayed with me as I rolled back onto my feet, and it prepared to strike me again. Just then a firebolt
spell blasted it backwards. From the corner of my eye I saw Onmund readying another spell, and I hit
the machine with a blast of lightning from my staff. The combined effect of our spells burst the
sphere guardian into pieces.

Lydia gave a battle cry. "This will teach you!" and with a mighty swing of her axe, she smashed the
second into bits.

We stood for a moment gathering our breaths. "Your spell pushed that thing back, where my shout
did nothing," I said to Onmund when I could speak again.

"One of the advantages of specializing in Destruction magic," he said. "I've worked hard to become
powerful enough to achieve that pushback effect. It makes an offensive spell defensive as well." He
didn't give me a chance to thank him, but wandered off to gather soul gems from the machines.

"At least you learned that lesson at little cost," Brelyna said. "Perhaps your Fire Breath will work
better next time."

We found an exit from this large chamber and continued through several more halls and rooms,
some of which looked like sleeping quarters with hard stone beds. Occasionally we would come
across chests where my lockpicking skills came in handy. Inside we found potions, pieces of
armor, and valuable jewelry, some of it enchanted. The Dwemer were not known for using magic,
but they had taken to collecting magical objects for study.

The deeper we went, the more ornate became the halls and chambers through which we passed.
One hall featured grim Dwarven faces carved into its supporting columns.

"Not a very cheerful people, by the look of it," Brelyna observed.

"Too much living underground," said Onmund. "How happy would you be?"

"Not very," Brelyna said, "but the Dwemer must have enjoyed it, or why would they have chosen
such a life?"

At last we came to a doorway barred by a portcullis. Fortunately, there was a lever nearby that
opened it. Stepping onto the platform beyond, we all gasped. We had entered at the top of a vertical
natural cavern, one so deep we couldn't see to the bottom. Yet it was not entirely natural, but filled
with Dwemer pipes and turrets set in its walls, and stone ramps descending down into the gloom. It
must have taken the highest skill, magic even, to construct the ramps, which descended in steep
curves with few apparent supports. The walkway curved down to the middle of one turret and
appeared to enter it, but beyond that it was too difficult to see where it led.

"One of those Deep Venues mentioned in the Dwemer Inquiries, I'm guessing," Brelyna said.

"You must be right," I said. "A natural cavern large enough to hold towers. Could this be
Blackreach?"

"That's wishful thinking," she replied. "It's large, but not large enough to hold an entire city. I think
we're still in Alftand."

"Whether we're in Blackreach, or still in Alftand, we'll have to stop here," Lydia said. "I don't know
whether it's day or night, but my body tells me we need rest. This cavern will take a day to explore
at the least."

We had to agree she was right and retreated to one of the sleeping quarters for our rest.
Yet after taking our refreshment from our supply of provisions, I didn't feel ready for sleep. I took Septimus' journal from my pack and began idly flipping through it. It was still just more of the usual gibberish. "To harness is to know. The fundament. The Dwemer lockbox hides it from me." Frustrated, I fanned through the pages, the last of which were blank. Then a scrap of paper fell out of the last pages. I reached down to pick it up, thinking it would only be more ravings. Then I turned it over.

Like the scrap of paper we had seen before, this one was labeled *FalZhardum Din*. But it was no mere scribble. It was a detailed depiction of an underground city – no, more than a city, a province, a nation.

"Look!" I exclaimed and the others got up from their bedrolls, gathering around the stone table where I sat.

"What is it?" J'zargo said sleepily. "This one needs his rest."

"That's a map of Blackreach, or I'm no mage," Brelyna said.

In the bottom corner we found a signature with this testament, "I, Ursa Uthrax, drew this map during my expedition to, and upon my return from, Blackreach, also known as *FalZhardum Din* in the Dwemer tongue. I can attest to its full and complete accuracy."

It showed a place that was roughly square, though narrower in the south than in the north. Fittingly for a place named Blackreach, it was drawn in shades of black and gray, with the darkest color outlining its perimeter. That must be the bedrock of Tamriel, I thought, within which the vast cavern was depicted in lighter shades. A dark streak meandered across the map from northeast to southwest – an underground stream, judging by the streaks of white that crossed it, marking cascades.

Lighter lines depicted what must be roads criss-crossing the place. They connected the numerous circles, squares, and rectangles dotting the map: towers and other buildings. The largest collection of these stood just left of the map's center, labeled *The Silent City*.

"Where Dwemer cities sleep," Brelyna quoted by memory from a scrap of Septimus' notes.

"And here are the Dwemer ruins named on the maps of Skyrim," Lydia said, pointing at circles marked *Alftand* in the northeast, *Raldbthar* in the southeast, and *Mzinchaleft* in the northwest. "I still don't believe it. Those spots are a half-day's ride apart in the best of conditions. It could take us days to cross this place."

"Then that's what we'll have to do," I said. "Here's our destination." I pointed to a circle in the map's southwest corner. It stood on an island of rock in the middle of the river, surrounded by cascades. "Mzark. It's the farthest landmark from Alftand, and these roads make anything but a straight line to it. We must be ready for a long journey."

"But we have to get in there first," Brelyna said. "The more I think about it, the more I think we'll need that attunement sphere to open the way to Blackreach."

I groaned.

Onmund spoke up. "It does no good to think on such things. Let us to our beds, and hope we make good progress on the morrow. My guess is we'll find the entrance to Blackreach at the very bottom of that cavern."

With that we went to our beds. Lydia and I had placed our bedrolls close together, and she had no
qualms about putting her arm around me. It wasn't quite comfortable, since she couldn't remove her armor when enemies might be about, but it was comforting nonetheless. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "Good night, my thane."

"Good night, my love," I replied.

The last thing I remember before falling asleep was Onmund giving a "Harumph!" and moving his bedroll as far from ours as he could get.

In the morning – or whatever time of day it was, as we had no way of knowing – we returned to the cavern and began its descent, hoping to find the entrance to Blackreach at its bottom. Yet it seemed to go on and on, with too many levels to count. The ramps snaked back and forth dizzily across empty space between the towers set in the walls. Sometimes a passage led within those towers, then reemerged at another point in the cavern, where a ramp would continue the descent.

Or at least that had been the plan of the Dwemer architects. Time had ravaged some of those passages within the cavern walls, and at one point we found ourselves faced with a twenty foot drop from one ramp's end to a platform below.

"What do we do now?" Onmund said.

"I know a trick," I said.

Lydia groaned. "Have I told you my thane is a show off?" she asked the other three.

"It's simple," I said. Then I shouted, "Feim!" and leapt from the broken ramp, plunging the twenty feet to the platform below. The landing jarred me, but I took no harm in my ethereal state.

"Ha!" J'zargo exclaimed. "That might be simple for the Dragonborn, but it is even easier for a Khajiit." With a swish of his tail, he dropped casually from the ramp, landing lightly on all fours.

"Well done," Brelyna called down, "but what about the rest of us?"

"That's what ropes are for," Lydia said. "And the handles on that door behind us will make a good anchor."

In a few moments she had passed the rope through one of the handles, then tossed its doubled length down to the platform where we stood. Luckily, it reached the floor with a coil to spare, so we would be able to pull the rope through the door handle when everyone was down. Then she showed Onmund and Brelyna the proper technique for rappelling. "Lightest first," she said to Brelyna.

Brelyna made it to the bottom with just a few curses in Dunmer, followed by Onmund, who seemed not at all frightened by the height and the awkwardness of letting his body go over the edge of the ramp. Then Lydia started down, showing little hesitation, though I knew she didn’t like the height.

She had nearly reached the platform when an arrow shot past her head.

"Falmer!" Brelyna exclaimed. "Everyone down."
Lydia fell more than rappelled the final few feet, then drew her bow.

"Let's get the bastard," she said, leading us down the ramp that descended from the platform. It was not long before we saw the culprit. "Ha, got you!" Lydia called as her arrow hit the Falmer archer square in the chest, its force pushing him backward off the ramp. He gave out a piteous cry as he fell, a cry that went on and on until it ended abruptly far below.

My heart broke for him then. How could I blame him for defending his home from those he saw as invaders? No doubt any of us would do the same. And then to think of what had happened to his people – driven out of their homes by the Nords, forced into underground refuge with the Dwemer, only to be enslaved, deformed, and blinded by those same cousins. How could I blame them for their hatred of every living thing?

*Deirdre, this is no time for compassion,* I told myself. And it certainly was not. A second after the poor wretch's screaming ended so abruptly, a cry went up from below – a cry of surprise and hatred. There was a banging of swords on shields and then all was quiet once more.

"Let's move," Lydia said. "It sounds like we've roused the lot of them. They could be on us at any moment, and I would not meet them in numbers on this ramp."

We continued down the ramp as quickly and quietly as we could. I tried to get a grip on my emotions as we went, to still myself for the battle that was likely ahead. If we had to cut a path through the Falmer to get to the Elder Scroll, so be it, I told myself.

But it was no good. As we continued circling down the ramp, a Falmer mage came into view. Before I had time to think, I had cast a calming spell on him. He relaxed and stood up, turning his back on us.

Lydia groaned. "My thane, what are you doing? This is no time for mercy. We don't know how many more we'll have to face." She cast aside her bow and drew her axe, pursuing the mage down the ramp.

"Wait, you cannot slay the defenseless creature!"

"He's only defenseless because you calmed him!"

"I couldn't help myself. You know their history as well as I. I cannot help but pity them."

"My thane, this is madness," she said, turning back to me. "Perhaps no one can blame them for their hostility, but neither can anyone reason with them. He'll slit our throats the minute our backs are turned."

As if to prove her point, the spell wore off. The Falmer turned on us and made to cast another spell, but I calmed him once more.

"Lydia is right," Brelyna said. "Your spell will wear off and he'll be after us again, possibly with others. Nor can we manage a large number of prisoners."

"Let us bind him then. I will not have him killed. They are not our enemies, just obstacles on our way to the Elder Scroll."

"A bloody waste of rope," Lydia huffed, but turned back up the ramp to retrieve the rope we'd left dangling from the door handle.

When the Falmer mage was bound, we continued down the ramp, encountering two of his kinsmen
and treating them the same way.

The ramps finally led down to another door and beyond it to a passage untouched by the cave-ins above. We found ourselves in a chamber much like those we had already encountered, save that its wide floor contained several crude huts made from bone and hide. We approached them carefully and found them empty.

"Probably made from the bones of the chaurus," Brelyna said. "Look, those chests are made in the same fashion."

J'zargo was headed for one of the chests when I waylaid him. "We don't have time for that, J'zargo. The Falmer could be on us at any moment."

"Where are they, then?" Onmund asked.

"Laying a trap to take us by numbers, is my guess," Lydia said. "Be on your guard."

Yet her warning did us little good. We had just descended a narrow stair and Lydia had set one foot into the chamber beyond when a bolt of lightning struck the wall just past her head. She drew back, but we heard the sounds of many creeping feet coming from around the corner, along with the clank of steel weapons and the creaking of a bow being drawn taught. At the same time, a high-pitched cry came from that direction, and was immediately answered from behind us. I heard the sound of rushing feet and a hiss from J'zargo, who was bringing up our rear.

The Falmer had surrounded us.
The Falmer ambush was a close thing. But for a lucky hit on our part or a poorly aimed arrow on the Falmer's, there might have been none to remember our expedition, and none to save the world from Alduin. But as it was, I rushed into the room at the foot of the stairs, an arrow narrowly missing my head, and shouted "Faas-Ru-Maar!" at half a dozen approaching Falmer. Four ran off, cowering, around a bend in the hallway, while two resisted the shout: a hardy warrior and a powerful crone with her silver hair bound up in knots like horns. But that was enough – I cast my atronach and left it for Lydia and the fire demon to deal with these two.

Back up the stairs, I found that a group of fiveFalmer had divided my college friends, yet one Falmer warrior lay dead at the top of the steps. I cast a spell of rout into the remaining four, sending three of them running past Brelyna and J'zargo. One of them fell to the Khajiit's claws as he ran past, then we quickly dealt with the powerful gloomlurker who had resisted my spell.

In the end, we managed to capture four of the weaker Falmer, while we were forced to slay six. The last, the crone, turned and ran when she saw the four of us coming to Lydia's aid, retreating into a circular room and pulling a lever in its center. The floor rose beneath her feet, a great shaft of Dwemer metal lifting the platform up to levels of the ruin somewhere above.

It took us some time to catch our breaths, heal one another's wounds, and bind the four calmed Falmer, using the last of Lydia's rope. Then we went after the crone, pulling a lever in the wall to retrieve the lift.

"Be ready to fight," Lydia said as the platform descended from a wide hole in the ceiling. Yet it was empty when it reached us. We stepped in and followed the crone upward. We stood at the ready for an attack, but she was nowhere in sight when the lift came to a stop in a tumbled-down chamber. We rounded two corners and then found ourselves in the chamber where Sulla Trebattius' expedition had been ambushed.

"So that explains how the Falmer were able to take them by surprise," Brelyna said, "except, where is the crone?"

There was no sign of her.

"We can't chase her through all of Alftand," I said.

"Certainly not," Brelyna replied. "But we can close this portcullis on her, and anyone else she brings this way."

We stepped back through the doorway and Brelyna pulled a lever in the wall. We watched as the portcullis bars slid back into place with a satisfying clank, then descended in the lift to continue our journey through Alftand. The four bound Falmer trembled in fear as we approached and passed
into the chamber beyond.

Lydia, in the lead once again, stopped short. We didn't have to ask why, as the stench of blood and rotting flesh assailed our senses. The room had once been some sort of Dwemer work area, with four stone crafting benches arrayed around its perimeter. Now the Falmer had turned it to other, more gruesome purposes. A body lay on each of three of the benches, a female Altmer on one, a male Bosmer on another, and a Khajiit on the third. I will not describe the state they were in, for I cannot bear remembering it, even all this time later. I will say only that, by comparison, Lydia's and my treatment by the Thalmor had been a holiday to the Imperial City.

"And you still say they deserve our mercy?" Lydia demanded, staring down at what was left of the Bosmer. J'zargo gave a growl of agreement as he looked at the remains of his countryman.

I turned away, shaking my head. "It only makes me sad that there is such malice in the world. Slaying these prisoners in our anger will not cure it, but only ensure that the malice continues." I looked at the four Falmer sitting trussed together against the wall. They still trembled in fear, no doubt expecting the same treatment they had given the Alftand Expedition.

Then my eyes lit on the first workbench in the room. We had almost overlooked it, we were so preoccupied with the horror on the other tables. It was cluttered with objects – loot from the Falmer's victims, I guessed. There were scrolls of paper, quills and inkwells, soul gems, dried flowers and other alchemical ingredients, jewelry – and a small metal ball. It bore an engraving of the same rune or sigil we had found on the mysterious box, and it emitted a faint, Aetherial music.

"Look, my friends!" I took up the ball and held it for them to see.

"The attunement sphere!" Brelyna said. "Now we are prepared to discover Blackreach."

"Let's get moving, then," Lydia said. "We'd best leave this place before that crone comes back with reinforcements." I knew she was thinking of the Falmer we had left bound on the levels above.

Passing through another doorway, we returned to the great vertical cavern. It was even more impressive from near the bottom, with the towers and ramps ascending upward into the blue light cast by the soul gem lamps. Now it was the top of the cavern that was lost to our sight, while we had just one level to descend to the cavern floor. We found the rest of the cavern empty, and a metal door leading out of it.

"Do you suppose that's the door to Blackreach?" Onmund asked.

But he was too optimistic. Alftand had yet more to show us. We passed through more hallways and into another cavern, not so large as the last, yet even more impressive. We came into it through a stone-roofed space like a foyer. Beyond, the cavern was well-lit with soul gem chandeliers depending from pipe-work spanning the space between the cavern walls. A large stone- and metal-work structure filled the back half of the cavern, leading up in a series of terraces to an ornate tower, lit by another chandelier. Spinning cogs and wheels adorned its walls, serving some purpose we could not guess.

"Would you look at that?" Lydia exclaimed.

"It is impressive," Brelyna agreed. "It equals anything we saw in Mzulft. I know the Dwemer were not a spiritual people, yet this chamber has the feel of a temple."

"I think we're nearing the end," I said. "Surely this is the deepest level of Alftand."

A portcullis blocked the only way into the temple, as Brelyna had called it, and at first we found
no way to open it. Then we spotted a large lever protruding from the roof of the foyer by which we had entered. This balcony afforded an even better view of the stone structure, as if the Dwemer architects wanted to force visitors up to this vantage to enjoy their handiwork. Now we could see the intricate series of turrets that lined the back of the cavern, the farthest of which extended far up to the roof, illuminated by that Aetherial light of the soul gems. An apron of metalwork ran around the base of the turrets.

"It must be some sort of altar, or cathedral," Brelyna said. "It certainly seems a holy place. But to what gods?"

We pulled the lever and the bars of the portcullis descended into the floor of the cavern.

"Let's hurry," I said. "We must be almost there."

We ran back down the steps and through the gateway, then up one set of stairs to the first landing, where steps led up left and right. Above was a second landing with low turrets on either side. We chose the stairs on the left.

Lydia had just reached the second landing, with the rest of us right behind, when we noticed two things: first, over by the turret on the right, the wreckage of a large Dwemer contraption like the ones we had seen in Markarth, the ones they called dwarven centurions; and second, the sound of metal clasps releasing in the turret nearby on our left.

"That sounds like a live one!" Brelyna called. "Fan out, mages!"

We ran onto the landing just in time to see a second centurion coming to life. It was easily twelve feet tall, crafted from Dwemer metal in the shape of one of their warriors, with two mighty armored legs, a crossbow for its left arm and a huge hammer for its right. A red spinning ball in its chest began to glow brightly, and puffs of steam escaped from vents in its cuirass. Lydia didn't wait for it to move before charging it with her axe. The centurion staggered under her blow.

"Watch out for its steam breath!" Brelyna called. Lydia stepped back, raising her shield just in time to block a jet of steam issuing from the centurion's mouth.

Had it been any one of us, the centurion might have been victorious, but with five we made short work. The centurion toppled to the stone floor with a metallic crash.

"Well done, everyone," Brelyna said. "Let's see if its dynamo core is still functioning. That should be sufficient payment for Enthir."

"Yes," said J'zargo, "then we keep the rest of the valuables we have found."

While Onmund and Brelyna began to extract the core from the centurion's chest, Lydia examined her axe. "These contraptions are Oblivion on a blade. I'll need a grindstone to take care of all these chips and nicks." While she did what she could with a small whetstone, I examined the centurion more closely. Its face bore the most lifelike metalwork I had ever seen. I half expected the stern dwarven visage to begin an animated conversation, metallic though it was.

When Brelyna had the dynamo core stowed in her pack, despite J'zargo's claims that he would rather help carry it in his, we continued up the next wide set of stairs. Now we saw that what had looked like an apron of metalwork from below was actually a half-circle of ornate metallic fencing guarding the inner stand of turrets. Yet formidable as it looked, the gate at its center opened without a key.

Within, we found ourselves in a chamber in the center of the line of turrets. Four columns
supported the low ceiling, each featuring both intricately carved stone and metalwork. In the middle of the chamber stood a low dais, two steps high, with carved flagstones and a low altar or table in its center. A set of four concentric metal rings was set in the table, with blue gemstones in its center.

"What could that be?" Onmund asked.

"You were hoping we'd find the entrance to Blackreach, Onmund," said Brelyna. "I'd say we've found it."

We approached the square table, and then my pack began to emit an Aetherial music. The attunement sphere! I had stowed it in there when we left the torture chamber, and now its music grew louder. We gathered around the table and saw that one side featured a round receptacle.

"What are we waiting for?" said J'zargo. "Put the sphere into that mechanism!"

"Prepare yourselves, everyone," Brelyna said as I pulled the sphere from my pack. "We have no idea what this thing does. If it opens a portal to Blackreach, who knows what might come out?"

"But where is this door?" Onmund asked.

"There's only one way to find out," I said, and put the sphere into the receptacle. The rings of metal lifted up and spun around, coming to rest with arrows on the four rings aligned. Then my companions gave cries of alarm as the flagstones surrounding the table gave way beneath them, and the solid floor transformed itself into a set of descending stairs. Fortunately, the steps moved slowly, or Onmund, standing on the lowest step, would have taken an injury.

"Onmund, what do you see?" I called, looking directly down on the top of his head some dozen feet below on my left.

"A beautiful set of doors," he said. "The craftsmanship is amazing!"

"That must be the entrance to Blackreach," Brelyna said. She had been on the other side of the table from me and I couldn't see her where she stood, halfway down the stairs.

"Let us go then!" J'zargo said.

The doors were indeed the most beautiful we had seen so far, with deeply etched geometrical shapes that must have been created by casting the molten metal.

"Are we ready?" I asked. The mages cast stoneflesh spells and other charms on themselves, and Lydia readied her axe, then they all nodded. I took a deep breath and pushed open the doors.

I needed all of that breath for the gasp I gave when the view beyond the doors was revealed. We all did – we couldn't help ourselves. Brelyna was the first to find her voice. "Now that must be Blackreach."

We could only nod in dumb agreement.

We stepped through a carved archway and out onto a balcony to get a better look. Beyond was not just another cavern, but another world. Were we still on Nirn, or was this a different plane entirely? We could make out the dark shapes of black bedrock vaulting far overhead and receding into the distance. There was no hope of seeing to the other side of this vast space, but we could see the dim outlines of towers in the far distance, and a smaller building closer to us.
But the size of this place was not the most amazing thing, for we had expected it. No, what had us all standing there gaping were the giant, glowing mushrooms that seemed to float in that vast space, supported by tall, slim stalks, illuminating the cavern in an eerie light. They were of different sizes, the largest as big as houses, and taller. Long tendrils of light hung down from the giant fungi and more of these tendrils protruded from the roof of the cavern far above.

And that was not all. The air itself seemed alive with Aetherial light emanating from tiny specks that glowed like the mushrooms. "Spores of the glow-mushrooms," Brelyna guessed. From somewhere off to our right came the roar of water going over a fall. Whether the falling water stirred the air, or the place was large enough to have its own wind, the glowing mushrooms moved back and forth on their stalks as if shifting in a light breeze, and the motes of glowing light swirled about. The air currents brought the pungent odors of roots and damp earth and things that grew beneath the ground.

"Well, where is this Mzark?" J'zargo said after a few moments of gaping.

"J'zargo's right," said Lydia. "We should keep moving."

I pulled the map out of my pocket and we tried to orient ourselves. "Here's where we are, the mark for Alftand," I said, pointing at the spot on the map. "And look, the building just across from us is marked as well: Sinderion's Field Laboratory."

"A field laboratory!" J'zargo said. "What might we find in there!"

"There's no time for that, J'zargo," Brelyna snapped. "If this place is as vast as it appears, we have to make straight for the tower of Mzark."

"Yet that will be difficult, the roads are so winding," I said. "Look, if we go past the laboratory then turn right, that road will lead us by a winding way, with no turnings, nearly to Mzark. We'll have only to turn left and pass over a bridge once we see the tower." I traced the route with my finger, and everyone agreed to the plan.

We descended from the balcony onto a wide cobbled road. Ursa had been right: an army could easily march ten abreast along it. But we had little time to ponder its construction because a sphere guardian rolled at us from the steps of the laboratory, unfurling itself as it came at us. When we had defeated the contraption we continued down the road, my friends using all the stealth they could muster while moving quickly, then turned right at a meeting of roads.

The road sloped downward and we could see towers and other structures in the distance, including a bright yellow glow straight ahead. We moved cautiously down the road, ready for anything that might attack. Yet we didn't know what to expect. If the place had giant glowing mushrooms, who knew what else we might find?

Time passed and whoever were the denizens of this vast place, they left us in peace. Hours seemed to go by as we marched down that road, yet the towers in the distance seemed to grow no nearer. Then suddenly one was right in front of us, a set of twin towers with a walkway spanning the road as it passed beneath them. This was the way of Blackreach: time and space seemed bent out of shape somehow.

We passed underneath the towers, all of us looking at them forlornly, wondering what treasures they might contain. Even more so, the cluster of towers and other buildings that stood in the distance straight ahead: the Silent City. A wide set of steps led up to it, passing through the imposing walls that protected the rest of the city. Above it, a large, glowing orb explained the yellow light we had seen from afar. From the map, we knew that the road curved to the south of
this city, bypassing it entirely. What wonders would we miss by not visiting it? Yet it couldn't be helped: an archaeologist or a treasure hunter could spend a lifetime in here, it seemed, but we must make haste.

That was when doubt about my quest began to seep in. I had been so long on the way, traveling hither and yon to slay dragons, to retrieve one item or another, to increase my power, or to receive learning from those wiser than I. Yet it seemed I was still just as many steps away from confronting Alduin. When would all of this end? And if the journey was never-ending, why not take time out to explore this place, learn of its glories, and pocket some of its treasures? I looked over at Lydia. Chances were, I would perish in my confrontation with the World Eater. Why not postpone that day, spend as much time as I could exploring Skyrim with the one I loved?

I can excuse my selfishness only by saying that I was tired from weeks of travel, fighting, and imprisonment. Or possibly that the strange atmosphere of Blackreach was having some effect on me. Whatever the reason, my thoughts were anywhere but on our immediate surroundings when an arrow struck the cobbled road next to Onmund, its tail feathers pointing back toward the twin towers we had just passed beneath. At the same time, several Falmer attacked us from either side.

"I'll take the one in the tower," Lydia called, notching an arrow to her bow. "You handle these!"

I had been walking in the middle of the company and so had been protected from the onslaught, but Brelyna had taken a blast from an ice spike and was down on one knee, while Onmund was awkwardly deflecting blows from a Falmer's war axe with his sword. I dared not cast my spell of Rout, for fear of what other allies or creatures the Falmer might alert in their flight. I calmed the Falmer attacking Onmund while J'zargo cast fire spells at those closest to Brelyna. I noticed he was bleeding from a wound to his forehead.

Remembering my role as healer, I pulled a scroll of close wounds from my robes. It took me only a moment to recite its incantation, then Brelyna was back on her feet and casting her frost atronach.

The battle seemed to be going our way, so I stepped back a step or two to see where I could help. Then I heard the sound of rushing, clicking feet coming from behind me, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. I turned just in time to see a great green gob of poisonous goo flying at me, hitting me square in the chest and flying up into my face. My vision blurred and I grew dizzy, as two chauruses charged at me. Before I could react, one had clamped its sharp pincers around me, the serrated edges cutting into my arms and back. Then with a great shake of its head it threw me back toward my companions.

I landed in a heap, with just enough presence of mind to roll over to face their next attack. But my limbs were numb, and I couldn't find my Voice. The last things I remember were the second chaurus bearing down on me, and then the sound of Lydia's voice coming from behind me: "You'll regret that, you stinking bugs!" As my sight grew dim, I thought I saw her shape hurtling over me, battleaxe swinging above her head.

My body hurt everywhere. There was not one inch that did not throb, or sting, or ache. Yet along with that, I felt as if I were wrapped in some gauzy fabric so that I did not quite feel my surroundings. I thought I was lying on my back, but whether in a bed or on the ground, indoors or out, I could not tell.
From somewhere far off I heard a familiar voice saying, "I've done all I could. She is the healer among us, after all."

Then I felt a hand slapping my face. "Come on, my thane … my Deirdre … my love … you must wake up."

I opened my eyes. Everything was blurry, but gradually I could make out Lydia leaning over me. She had removed her helmet and her side braids had come undone, hanging down in her face. With an effort, I reached up and smoothed her hair back. As she came into sharper focus, I saw that her brow was knit with worry, and tears had tracked her begrimed cheeks. Then she smiled, and I felt a warmth spreading through me.

"You called me 'my love'," I said. "You've never said that before, without prompting."

"No, but I'll say it again as often as you like, if only you won't die."

"What, am I dying?"

"Not if you take this poison antidote, now that you're awake," said Brelyna, kneeling down beside Lydia. "I didn't want to risk drowning you with it."

Lydia propped my head up in her lap and helped me drink from the potion flask. The numbness in my limbs and the buzzing in my head went away somewhat, only to be replaced by a searing pain in my arms and back. "Do you have a healing potion?" I gasped. "I fear mine have all been smashed."

"Right here." Brelyna handed the potion bottle to Lydia, who tipped it up to my mouth.

The pain eased and I sat up. I looked down at my robes. They were torn around the arms and soaked in blood.

"I was able to cast the close wounds spell on you while Lydia fended off the chauruses and the others dealt with the Falmer," Brelyna said. "Otherwise I fear you would have bled to death. But I'm no Adept in Restoration. You will probably want to cast your own healing spell as soon as you feel able."

I looked around at the scene of battle. The two chauruses lay not far away on one side, their limbs hacked away and great rents in their chitinous shells. Three or four Falmer lay on the other side of the road, their bodies burnt by flame spells. Onmund and J'zargo stood nearby. Onmund looked as worried about me as did Lydia, but he turned away when he saw me looking at him.

I turned back to Brelyna. "Maybe just a moment or two more," I said. "And a flask of water. I am parched."

While she went to fetch the water from her pack, I leaned back in Lydia's lap and looked up at her.

"Oh, my love," she said, stroking the side of my face, "I thought I'd lost you."

"You saved me," I said. "I saw what you did. You protected me with your life, just as you always said you would."

"It is my sworn duty."

"Only your duty?"
"No, it is my deepest desire. I love you and nothing will take you away from me."

"That's what I wanted to hear." I reached up and pulled her head down for a kiss.

"Ahem." Brelyna had returned with the water, which I drank greedily. "We should probably keep moving. Who knows how much farther we have to go?"

"She's right, my thane," Lydia said, all business once more.

I looked from one to the other. "Where are we going?"

The two looked at me for a long moment. "Oh, gods!" Onmund exclaimed.

"What?" I asked.

"The poison has just left you temporarily befuddled," Brelyna said. "Or perhaps it's the blood loss. I'm sure your memory will return soon enough."

"Remember the Elder Scroll, my thane?" Lydia asked. "It's in the Tower of Mzark, somewhere farther ahead. You'll need it to face Alduin."

"The World Eater? I'm to face the World Eater?" I remembered something about that. Yet I must have dreamt it, it seemed so unlikely.

"Yes, my thane. You're the Dragonborn, remember?"

I laughed at her. "You shouldn't jest with me, not after what I've just been through." Yet I seemed to remember something about using a shout on a dragon, and then feeling its power flowing into me.

Lydia looked over at Brelyna. "What are we to do?"

"I know not. We'll just have to hope that she recovers herself as we keep moving. Deirdre, can you stand?"

I nodded and got shakily to my feet. I felt a bit dizzy, and my limbs felt a bit numb, but I thought I could walk. I looked around at my friends, all staring at me with such serious looks. Whatever our mission, it must be an important one if we had come to such a dangerous, foreboding place.

We began making our way down the road, with Onmund taking my knapsack along with his own. Lydia supported me with one arm tucked beneath mine, and then I remembered doing the same for her as we crossed the marshes of Hjaalmarch. Then I gasped, remembering our treatment by the Thalmor before that. I reached for Lydia's left hand to see if my memory was accurate. Seeing the little finger of her glove, bound with a piece of string so it would be out of the way, I knew that it was.

Next I laughed, as I remembered that morning in the Blade and Dragon, and the way the barkeep turned beet red.

"What?" Lydia asked.

"Oh, nothing. I was just remembering the way you like to make young men blush."

"So your memory's returning?"

"In pieces."
By the time we had drawn even with the south side of the Silent City and the great steps leading up into it, much had returned. Yet why I had to be the one to face the World Eater, and how an Elder Scroll would help – it was all still hazy.

"Can't we just go explore that city?" I asked. "Why am I the one to face Alduin?"

"Because you are the Dragonborn, my thane," Lydia said. "It is prophesied. If you don't stop Alduin, no one will. And remember, you told Paarthurnax that you like this world and you don't want it to end? But more than that, you must remember Huldi and Harry. You would avenge the deaths of their parents."

"Yes, I do remember," I said. But I remembered more. I remembered being inside Alduin, and how he made me watch as he slaughtered an innocent man and woman. Worse, he made me feel as if I had done it. That was the true reason I had to stop Alduin – to make sure that nothing like that happened ever again.

I looked up at Lydia, who still supported me along the road. I felt that old anger burning within me. "Yes, I will slay the World Eater if I must use my dying breath to do it."

"That's my thane. But I hope it doesn't come to that. You will have me by your side."

We traveled through Blackreach for an untold number of hours. Nothing further molested us as we journeyed down that wide, winding road. Time seemed to stretch on, and we knew not whether it was day or night. We were stumbling with fatigue, and we guessed we must have been awake for at least a day. Yet we could not pause for rest, not in such a dangerous place, and not when our goal seemed so near.

And then we arrived opposite the Tower of Mzark and had only to cross a wide bridge over a roaring fall to reach it. Across that bridge, we reached a door of bright Dwemer metal. It opened easily with a push. And thus we left Blackreach, having discovered it, then rushed through it, and finally having seen hardly anything at all of that wonder-filled place.

Inside the tower, we found a lift and rode it up many levels, finding ourselves at the entrance to a round chamber occupied mostly by a large, spherical structure. A ramp climbed upwards between the round chamber wall on the left and the wall of the metal sphere on the right. Brelyna led us up it. I was still too dazed to offer much initiative, and Lydia still needed to help me along.

Arriving at the top of the ramp, we came to a floor that encircled the top half of the sphere. The top portion of the ball was covered in concentric rings, similar to the ones in the table back in Alftand, save for their size, which covered most of the room. Above it, a contraption of many metal arms and mirrors hung from the ceiling.

Steps led up to a balcony at the back of the chamber overlooking the dais. Climbing them, we found ourselves faced with a series of pedestals topped with what looked like buttons. There were four of them, two on either side of what looked like a star map. To the right of these was another receptacle, but unlike the one in Alftand.

"Look," Brelyna said, "that cube could fit in there."

Lydia removed the cube from her pack and tried it, finding that it fit perfectly. As soon as it was in place, a shaft of light poured in from a pentagonal skylight, illuminating the metal structure. At the same time, shutters over the two buttons to the right slid back and the buttons glowed with a turquoise light.
"Which should we push?" J'zargo asked, all eagerness.

"Let's see," Brelyna said. She tried pushing the right-most button. Nothing happened. "Hmm." She thought for a moment, then pressed the button next to it.

We shouldn't have been surprised when the contraption moved, it was so similar to the smaller one in Alftand. Yet J'zargo gave a hiss and Onmund jumped back as the rings on the dais rotated wildly, lifting up and over each other as they settled into new positions.

"Well, that was productive," Brelyna said. "Let's try it again." She pushed the same button and once more the rings shifted and spun. With two more presses, and more spinning and gyrating of the rings, the next button to the left lit up.

"Let's try them in order," Brelyna said. She pushed the newly lit button and the arms swung down from the ceiling and took positions above the dais, reflecting turquoise light from somewhere far above. "That worked well. Let's try it again." She pushed the same button and the arms moved to a slightly different position. Now the left-most button was lit. Brelyna pressed it.

An egg-shaped sphere of blue crystal descended from the contraption, flipped sideways and cracked open. Inside was a metal cylinder about two feet long, with ornate silver handles.

"The Elder Scroll!" we all exclaimed at once.

The mirrors now focused the beam of light at the Elder Scroll and then the crystal shell of the sphere reflected those beams directly at the cube in its receptacle. It began to vibrate and glow, and then was still once more. But changed: pinpoints of Aetherial light now glowed from its surface.

"Well, I don't know what that cube is about," Brelyna said, "but it seems the Elder Scroll is ours for the taking."

"Yes, and what insights J'zargo will have with it!" the Khajiit said, bounding down the steps and up onto the dais. He removed the Elder Scroll from the sphere, then grasped the spine of silver that held the edge of the parchment. He pulled it out to its full length, then there was a flash of light and J'zargo dropped the scroll, clutching at his eyes. The parchment somehow wound itself back up into the metal housing, and the scroll clattered to the foot of the dais.

"Fool of a Khajiit!" Brelyna yelled, descending the stairs. I thought she would go to retrieve the Elder Scroll, but she went to check on J'zargo first. I followed and picked up the scroll.

"No, my thane," said Lydia, right behind me. "Do not open it!"

"I wouldn't dream of it," I said. The thing was quite heavy, so I handed it to her. "I believe I'll wait until I've brought it to the Time Wound. That's where I'm supposed to take it, am I right?"

"Your memory has returned!" Lydia said

J'zargo was squinting into the dim light of the room and wrinkling his nose. "Everything is blurry," he complained.

"You're lucky you can see at all," Brelyna said, "and that you haven't gone mad. Then again, how would we know if you had?" She cuffed the back of his head.

"Look," said Onmund. "I believe I've found the way out."

Lydia stuffed the Elder Scroll into her pack, and I saw that she had already retrieved the cube,
although we had no idea what purpose it would serve now. Then we entered the passage Onmund indicated and passed through a door at its end, finding a lift beyond. Lydia pulled the handle in the center of the floor and we rose up and up for what seemed an eternity. I couldn't tell which of us was more surprised when we emerged into a tower on the surface. Through its gate we could see a starry Skyrim night, and I shivered at the sudden cold.

Pulling the handle that opened the gate, we walked out of doors for the first time in what seemed like weeks. At the foot of the steps leading down from the low turret was the remains of some adventurers' camp. How long they had waited here trying to get in, how long ago that had been, and where they had gone – these were questions we did not consider. We collapsed onto their bedrolls and slept like the dead.
I whooped with elation as we stepped onto the familiar path above the Seven Thousand Steps, with High Hrothgar not far away. The sun was just setting far to the west, turning the rocks and snow about us a deep red. I turned to look back at what we had just climbed. "See, Lydia," I said. "We made it, and shortened the trip by two days."

"Shortened my life by two days, don't you mean?" she said, pausing to catch her breath.

We had just accomplished what none had done before: climbing straight up the western face of the Throat of the World to High Hrothgar. Lydia had called it a mad idea, but after an extra day in Whiterun, I had insisted on making for Paarthurnax's retreat by the straightest route possible.

It had been two days since we emerged from Blackreach. We had awoken that next morning to find ourselves on a high ridge, not far north of Whiterun, amazed at how far we had come in such a short time.

"Blackreach must create some sort of warp in the fabric of existence," Brelyna said. "I think we all felt it in there, the way we would seem to walk forever toward a landmark, and then suddenly it was right on top of us."

I proposed that we split up then, my three friends returning to the college, where J'zargo could have his eyes looked after. Brelyna looked disappointed. "You are right, I suppose. Someone will need to help this invalid back to Winterhold." She was bathing J'zargo's eyes with a damp cloth in the light of the sun that had just risen over the Velothi Mountains.

"But what about your horses?" Onmund asked hopefully. "I could fetch them for you from the Winterhold stable, then meet you somewhere along your road."

"My friend, there's no need," I said. "We will purchase new mounts out of our share of the treasure. Or perhaps Jarl Balgruuf will want to aid us when he knows that we have a weapon with which to defeat Alduin."

His face fell, but he did not disagree.

"Are we friends again?" I asked.

He looked at me and nodded. "Last night, seeing you near death, I realized I would rather have you in this world and my friend than … not."

Then Lydia and I watched as our three friends disappeared down a path heading north, J'zargo leaning on Brelyna's shoulder.

We reached Whiterun easily by noon, where we were met with an unexpected hero's welcome. We
were trying to steal quietly into town when Adrianne Avenicci recognized us, despite our cloaks and hoods. "The heroes have returned!" she exclaimed, and soon a crowd had gathered around us, chanting our names and lifting us onto their shoulders.

"But wait," I called out. "What have we done to deserve this treatment?"

"Why, stopped the dragons, of course!" Adrianne replied. "There hasn't been an attack on Whiterun in all of six weeks, nor not so much as a sighting of one during all of Evening Star. And we've all heard how you slew two dragons at once. If you didn't stop them, who did?"

Then the crowd bore us on their shoulders all the way to Dragonsreach, where Jarl Balgruuf greeted us with many boons. I was sorry to disappoint him by telling him that Alduin still lived. Yet he was pleased with the number of dragons we had slain, and even more so with our escape from the Thalmor. "Setting fire to the Aldmeri Embassy!" he said. "That was a bold move, and one I approve of greatly."

Lydia had insisted that we take an extra day of rest in the city, as I was still weak from my encounter with the chauruses in Blackreach. It was while resting on the back steps of my house – our house, as I already thought of it – that I spotted the snow chute leading directly up the west face of the great mountain above me. Its edges stood out clearly in the light of the westering sun.

Lydia had gone to Warmaiden's, where Adrianne had been making alterations to a new suit of steel plate armor Jarl Balgruuf had given her. When she returned, armor slung over her shoulder, she found that my mind was made up and none of her sensible arguments would dissuade me.

By the middle of the following afternoon, we found ourselves sitting on a flat shelf of rock next to a chute that had ended in a blank cliff-face. Lydia looked doubtfully up at the rocks above us. "This chute will lead us straight to High Hrothgar,' you said. 'We'll cut two days off our journey,' you said. Really, my thane, sometimes you should just listen to your housecarl."

"We'll still get there today," I protested.

"I don't see how," she said. The cliff above us was beyond vertical, with countless daggers of ice hanging from it, now dripping in the afternoon sun. "The day is far advanced, and if we retreat here, we won't have time for a second attempt – if a chunk of ice or a rock doesn't kill us first," she added as an apple-sized rock broke free somewhere far above and whizzed past us, nearly hitting her head.

"Very well, let's sit here and think for a moment," I suggested, and sat down with my feet dangling over the edge of the shelf. Lydia sat down next to me, but a little farther back. We sat in silence as we munched apples and enjoyed the view. I found it thrilling to look straight down to the gorge of the White River, and then up again to the summits of the Brittleshin Mountains, now on a level with us. But not so for Lydia. She could only look in trepidation at the drops all around us.

Just then a white-tailed eagle soared past us to light in a grove of pines a distance farther along the cliff. Then I noticed that those pines grew out of a level bench across the chute from us.

"That's it!" I said, jumping to my feet and coiling the rope connecting us so that it would feed out rapidly without snagging. Then I stood on the very edge of the shelf.

Lydia reached for my arm. "By Talos, it scares me when you stand that close to the edge."

"Oh, that scares you does it?" I said, winking at her. "Watch this. Wuld-Nah-Kest!" The Whirlwind Sprint shout carried me across the chute to the plateau, where I skidded to a halt in deep, powdery
snow. I laughed at the exhilaration of it. "See," I said, "it was easy!"

I couldn't quite hear Lydia then, we were so far apart, but I thought she said, "Oh, my thane, you are such a child sometimes."

From there, it hadn't taken us long to scramble up snowfields and over rocks to this spot on the pathway, with High Hrothgar a short walk away. Yet Lydia was still cross with me for this unnecessary adventure.

"Well," I said, putting an arm around her, hoping to lighten her mood, "after this, Alduin will be a bit of child's play, won't he?"

"Hubris will bring you to a quick end, young lady."

We spun around to see Arngeir standing behind us.

"Master Arngeir! We didn't see you there!"

"I've been expecting you since I heard your shout. Do you have it?"

"It's here in Lydia's pack."

"Well then, our doom approaches. Come inside and rest yourselves for the trial ahead."

"But I thought to go straight to the summit. I would not delay this battle a moment longer."

He looked us both over carefully. I tried to stand straight and strong, to show more energy than I felt. The day of rest in Whiterun had done much to restore me after the events in Blackreach, yet I could not deny that it had already been a long day.

"You have just climbed the western face of the Throat of the World, a feat no one else has accomplished. If Paarthurnax is right that Alduin will come as soon as you bring that Elder Scroll to the Time Wound, then you will need all of your strength, and that of your companion. Too, it will do no good to face Alduin in the dark. The Battle at the End of Time can wait until morning."

And so we followed the old master up the steps and into the ancient hall, to spend what could be our – and all of Creation's – last night on Nirn.

A light snow fell as we set out the next morning – it seemed too much to ask that the run of good weather continue for one more day. We carried no packs, just what weapons we would need. Lydia had her axe and shield, and her bow and a quiver full of the arrows made for her in Windhelm. I carried a second quiver for her, for I carried no bow, just the Staff of Jyrrik Gauldurson slung across my back. It would deal more damage to a dragon than the Staff of Magnus. On my hip, I bore the Sword of Frost, more for show than anything. My pockets were stuffed with potions and scrolls, and I held the Elder Scroll in its metal casing in my left hand. We were as ready as we could be.

Once again I used the Clear Skies shout to open the way to the peak. In two hours of climbing, we neared the summit plateau, where the snow fell harder, swirled by the wind whipping over the mountain. I pulled Lydia into the shelter of an overhanging rock and hugged her to me.

"What is it, my thane?"
"We're back to 'my thane,' are we?" I said. "We go to what may be our deaths, if not the end of the world. Just once before then I would like to hear you say 'I love you' unbidden."

"Of course I love you, my ... love."

I sighed. "Somehow that's not very satisfying."

"Don't I prove it to you every day and every night?" She grinned. "Especially every night." She leaned down and kissed me.

Once again, I decided to let it go. She showed she loved me with her every action and her every look – why was it so important to me that she say the words? I thought of the Amulet of Mara, stored safely in a chest in my house back in Whiterun. I had thought about wearing it for her the night before we left, to finally propose that we plight our troths together for all time. But then I thought, it could wait until after we faced Alduin. Either we would go to our deaths and the world would end – and then none of it would matter – or we would vanquish Alduin and then decide what to do with the rest of our lives.

"You're right, of course," I said. "It's just that I would not have you face what could be your end without knowing I love you."

She took me by the shoulders. "I do know it, and you are silly to doubt that I love you in return, with all my heart." She kissed me again. "Now let's go slay this bastard, if he dares show his face, for we both have much to live for!"

I stepped back out onto the path with gladness in my heart. A lifetime with Lydia was the only reason I needed to stop Alduin from destroying the world. I felt my anger rising within me at the thought of the World Eater putting an end to our love, which had barely begun.

Then Paarthurnax was speaking to us. We nearly missed seeing him where he sat atop a crag at the edge of the plateau, he blended so well with the swirling snow. "You have it, the Elder Scroll. Tiid motaad ahst niil qalos. Time shudders at its touch. There is no question, you are doom-driven. Kogaan Akatosh! The very bones of creation are at your disposal. Go then, fulfill your destiny."

"What must I do?"

"Take the scroll to the Tiid-Ahraan. Open it and look on what is inscribed within. Do not delay. Alduin will be coming. He cannot miss the signs."

"Very well, Master Paarthurnax."

The Time Wound was farther along the plateau past the word wall, a spot where the air itself swirled and shimmered and seemed to bend, with tiny motes of light joining the swirling snow.

Before opening the Elder Scroll, I handed Lydia a scroll of protection and several potions. "Take these," I said. "The potions will protect you from fire and frost. I suspect Alduin will use both. And you have only to read that scroll to grant us both extra protection should I be blinded."

"But if you are blinded, how can we hope to defeat Alduin?"

"I do not know. Perhaps J'zargo's Khajiit eyes are more sensitive to light and it will have less effect on me. We can only hope. Are you ready?"

She nodded, axe and shield in hand.
I grasped the metal rod that held the edge of the paper and pulled. For an instant I saw what looked like a star map imprinted on the scroll, and then there was a blinding flash and the map was imprinted on my vision. A whirl of color surrounded me and I grew dizzy. When I regained my footing, I saw that I was still on the Throat of the World, but everything was tinged in red, and it was as if I was seeing through that star map. Lydia and Paarthurnax were gone, but the mountain was littered with dragon and human bodies. I knew that I had traveled to the other end of the Time Wound, to the closing of the Dragon War in the Merithic Era.

Then I saw a Nord warrior before me. I tried calling to him, but I could neither move nor speak.

A dragon landed before him, taunting him in the way dragons do.

"For Skyrim!" the warrior shouted and struck out at the dragon.

Then there was a shout from behind me and a woman warrior hurled herself at the dragon, slashing and weaving with a strength and agility I had seen matched only by Lydia, among women fighters. Then she vaulted onto the dragon's back, shouting, "Know that Gormlaith sent you down to your death!" Her axe clove the dragon's skull and the great beast slumped to the snow.

Gormlaith was still boasting about the kill and her partner, Hakon, was warning her about her cockiness when an old mage approached. Then the three fell to arguing about whether Alduin would come, whether their new Dragonrend shout would kill him, and whether to use the Elder Scroll the mage carried. It all seemed too familiar. All the while I kept wondering if Alduin had arrived in my own time while I wasted precious moments here observing ancient history. When would they use Dragonrend so I could learn it and return to my own time?

Then a roaring came from far up in the sky and Alduin was descending upon them. "Fools!" he taunted in the dragon tongue. "Such treachery! Your hopes wither. I am your doom."

Gormlaith would not be cowed. "Let those who watch from Sovngarde envy us this day!"

Then Hakon shouted. "Joor-Zah-Frul!" I felt the shout, both the form of its words and their deep meaning, enter the very core of my being: "Mortal-Finite-Fleeting!" I felt the fragility of life as I never had before. Forcing that understanding on a dragon, who had no concept of mortality – yes, that would be devastating. Yet I could not understand why Master Arngeir had called this evil. To give immortal beings an understanding of the fleeting nature of mortal lives, of those whom they treated as playthings – it seemed to me a valuable lesson for the dov. A lesson I had been teaching them all this time, for while I lived no dragon was safe from permanent death, not even Alduin – or so I hoped.

I was ready to return to my own time, but I had no control over my travel through the Tiid-Ahraan. What if, I thought then, I could slay Alduin now, in the Merithic Era, so that he would never return in my own time? I didn't stop to think that this would make my own existence moot, but it didn't matter. I could not move, I could only watch as Alduin landed, the shout having forced him to the snow-covered plateau.

"What have you done?" he said in the Common Tongue. "What twisted Words have you created?" And then he said something truly terrible. "You will die in terror, knowing your final fate… To feed my power when I come for you in Sovngarde!"

Alduin could travel to Sovngarde? No, it could not be, though now I remembered he had said something about it in one of my dreams. And the souls of the Nords would feed his power? I was horrified, yet how could I judge him? How many dragon souls had I devoured? It was the way of the dov.
Gormlaith still was not frightened. She advanced on the great dragon, lashing out at him with her axe as she lashed him with her tongue. "If I die today, it will not be in terror. You feel fear for the first time, wyrm, I see it in your eyes. Skyrim will be free!"

But she was too sure of herself and her power. Alduin dodged a mighty swing of her axe, then lunged at her while she fought to regain her balance. His jaws clamped around her, then he shook his head from side to side, finally flinging her lifeless body against the nearby word wall.

Hakon looked on in disbelief. Then he called to the mage. "Felldir, use the scroll! It is our only choice!"

While the warrior distracted Alduin with a series of feigned strikes and dodges, Felldir unfurled the scroll, then recited an oath of banishing upon it. "Begone, World Eater. By words with older bones than your own we break your perch on this age and send you out! You are banished! Alduin, we shout you out from all our endings unto the last!"

"Gaal kel? Nikrinne..." Alduin said as a blue light began to whirl about him. "An Elder Scroll? Cowards..." Then he seemed to merge with that swirling light and he was gone.

"It worked, you did it," Hakon said.

"Yes, the World Eater is gone … may the spirits have mercy on our souls."

Then the red-tinged gauze through which I saw this ancient scene began whirling and I felt the dizziness once more. The spinning ceased and I regained my balance, but now all was white, as if I had been blinded. And now I heard voices.

"My thane, are you all right? You must recover yourself. Alduin is here!"

The next voice I heard was Alduin's, and now it was as if I was looking through his eyes, down at Lydia and myself. I stood down there, staring blindly around for the beast.

"My belly is full of the souls of your fellow mortals, Dovahkiin."

So that explained where Alduin had been all this time – hiding in Sovngarde! How such a thing could be, I knew not. But I had a greater problem: How could he force me into his own mind?

As if to answer, Alduin spoke again. "This is how the dov communicate, Dragonborn, by speaking into each other's minds. This is how I sent my dragon allies against you, even as I had my way with the mortal souls in Sovngarde – the more mortals my dov killed, the more souls to feed my power. You have this ability as well, but you know not how to master it. And so, your mind is my plaything."

I tried forcing my mind out of his, to see from my own eyes and body, but it was no good. Alduin only laughed. "I see you have learned Dragonrend, those foul words created by the ancient Nords. And you have the Elder Scroll! Both were used before, to little purpose. For none can defeat me, not even the Dovahkiin."

"Then I will use the Elder Scroll to cast you adrift once more on the currents of time. Let another age deal with your villainy."

He laughed again. "Break Time where it is already broken and you will break Mundus itself. This world will come to an end, and my goal will be achieved, with your aid. What could be more fitting? Our father Akatosh was wise, dooming us to come into this world together!"
Then I heard Paarthurnax. "Dovahkiin, time is running out. Use Dragonrend if you know it."

"Joor-Zah-Fru!" I shouted from within the mind of Alduin, and I felt a shudder go through him. "You have heard those words before, World Eater, but now you understand them in your deepest being, for you heard them from one who can make them good. Soon you will walk the death-road."

As Alduin roared in horror, I felt myself cast out of his mind, returning to my body as the mists were clearing from before my eyes. Just as I regained my vision, the World Eater came crashing down beyond the word wall.

"That shout will do you little good, Dovahkiin. You cannot defeat me. I will kill you and your little friend, then I will sunder the World, here where the Nords first entered it, using the Tiid-Ahraan they created."

"Little!" Lydia exclaimed. "I'll show you little, foul wyrm … little mercy!" She advanced on him, axe held ready to strike.

"Lydia, my love, do not close on him! I saw him make a plaything of one as strong and valiant as you!"

"Then I will die a good death, my thane. Let us throw everything we have at him while he is vulnerable."

These Nords and their lust for a good death!

Alduin opened his jaws wide as Lydia rushed at him. Before they closed with each other, Paarthurnax launched himself at Alduin. "Hi fen dir dahsul, wuthiik zeymah," he shouted, striking Alduin with his talons and then flying away. Lydia got in a blow with her axe as Alduin launched himself into the air. Too late, I thought to use Dragonrend again. My Thu'um had restored itself more quickly than I expected, but now Alduin was swooping this way and that, chasing his brother.

The two dragons battled across the sky above the Throat of the World. In the swirling snow, it was often difficult to distinguish the two, so much of the color had washed out of the day with the gray light. Lydia sheathed her axe and drew her bow now, looking for a clear shot at Alduin. Yet none presented itself and she was loath to waste an arrow, as I was loath to waste my magicka. And in any case, while in flight Alduin seemed impervious to our attacks.

Finally Paarthurnax tired and retreated to his original perch. "Ah, brother," said Alduin, "you have grown weak sitting up here all these years, while I have returned as strong as ever."

"Now!" shouted Paarthurnax. "Use Dragonrend once more. It is now up to you and you alone."

Alduin had made the mistake of hovering in the air to taunt his brother, and I hit him with the Dragonrend shout before he could move off. He came crashing back to the plateau, and I cast a frost atronach directly in front of him. I had learned the spell while in Whiterun, in hopes that it would provide a better distraction for Alduin than my fire demon. It didn't last long in the face of Alduin's fire breath, but that was long enough for Lydia to get off an arrow that pierced him behind the front shoulder while I launched two ice spikes at him. I cast my flame atronach a bit farther off, hoping to keep him busy that way. He stretched his wings to take flight once more, and I hit him with Dragonrend again, pinning him to the snow.

The battle went on in this manner for several more rounds, yet Alduin didn't seem to weaken. "How many arrows can this bastard take?" Lydia asked. She had already gone through all of her
"Ah, you are worthy opponents," Alduin said. "But none can withstand my Dragon Storm Call. Die now, and I will see you in Sovngarde. Strun-Bah-Yol!" It was like the Storm Call shout the masters had used on me in Ustengrav, but instead of lightning and rain, burning rocks the size of melons fell from the sky. This was the shout Alduin had used to destroy much of Helgen.

Lydia had no choice but to shelter beneath her shield, rendering her unable to attack. I ran to an overhanging rock, seeking what shelter I could while still within view of the World Eater. He began advancing on Lydia, but I blocked him with another flame atronach, then began blasting him with the Staff of Jyrik Gauldurson to preserve my magicka, which had run quite low.

Alduin spread his wings to fly once more just as a flaming rock landed in front of me. He was in the air before I could recover enough to shout at him. I followed him out from my shelter, hoping it would give a clear path for my shout, but another meteor, a small one this time, hit me in the right shoulder. It knocked me to the ground, and I dropped my staff as a searing pain shot through my back and down my arm. I was sure my shoulder was broken. I crept back to the shelter, casting a healing spell on myself with my left hand. Even after that, my shoulder was stiff, and I could barely raise my arm.

Alduin had his way with us for a while then, swooping and diving on us with his breaths of fire and frost. I drank potions of resistance to each and struggled to center my mind, concentrating on the words of his shouts. Lydia had no recourse but to shelter beneath her shield. Sometimes he swooped on her with jaws or talons, yet her shield was too large for him to get a grip with either, and he was only able to knock her to the hard-packed snow. She bounced back up quickly at first, then more slowly as Alduin's game tired her.

I grew tired of seeing her knocked about as well, and felt my anger rising within me. I had kept it in check all this time – I could not let it overwhelm me. The fire storm had ceased, and I stepped out from my shelter. Alduin could not help but notice me standing there, virtually defenseless. He swooped toward me, blasting a great breath of fire as he came. I took that breath, turning it to nothing but a warm breeze in my mind, then shouted, "Joor-Zah-Frul!" full in his face just before he reached me. I ducked and rolled forward and he passed over me and crashed into the snow beyond.

Instantly I was up and firing ice spikes at him. Lydia was up too. I looked on in fear and dread as she charged at the World Eater, axe held high once more. Paarthurnax would not be coming to save her this time. I cast my frost atronach, which advanced on Alduin from the left while Lydia charged from the right. Yet Lydia was the quicker, reaching Alduin first, with a cry of "For Mundus!" He was ready for her, greeting her with a gaping maw. But she was too wily a fighter to rush in unprotected. She bashed at his snapping jaws with her shield, using the speed of her charge to push his massive head back, then lashed out with her axe, drawing a line of black blood across his throat. For the first time, the great dragon howled in pain and fear.

My frost atronach joined the battle, smashing Alduin with an icy fist. Lydia took advantage of the dragon's momentary distraction, tossing aside her shield and using one of the dragon's curved horns to vault up onto his neck. He reared up, but she rode him as she had ridden Nahagliiv, clinging stubbornly to his horns. My heart was in my throat, fearing she would come flying off, yet no matter how he thrashed, she would not lose her grip. Every time he reared back I hit him with an ice spike in the chest. Meanwhile, my frost atronach was free to pummel him from the side, until Alduin turned and smashed it into a spray of icy shards with his tail.

Lydia must have sensed Alduin weakening, because his thrashings grew less and she planted her
feet behind his horns to stand upright. Then she raised her axe with both hands, driving it straight and true into his brain. The great dragon's body went limp, his head came crashing to the ground, and then he lay still.

Lydia pulled her axe from Alduin's skull with some difficulty, then jumped heavily down from his back. "You see, that wasn't so difficult," she was saying as she walked toward me.

Then I was pointing in horror at what I saw behind her, too dumbfounded to speak or act.

"Wha…?" she said as she turned, but not quick enough. Alduin was not dead. He reared up and clamped his jaws around her, shaking her as he had done to Gormlaith. Lydia's axe fell from her hand, but I thought I saw the other beating at his knobby snout. Then she was flying through the air, hitting the word wall and crumpling at its base.

It took every ounce of my will not to run to her then. Let us both perish by Alduin's fangs, part of me said – if she was dead, I would be too. But another part, my dragon part, said, not without slaying this vile wyrm first.

"Krii-Lun-Aus!" I shouted, and my Thu'um staggered him as he advanced. Then I cast a fireball spell. I rarely used it since it spread fire across a wide area, and Lydia would often be in its way. But now she was out of range – or dead, I did not want to think – and so I risked it, using the last of my magicka. I drew my sword of frost, though my sword arm was still too stiff to raise it. I had little hope that it would do any good, after all that we had done to him already.

Yet it was enough. "You have become strong, Dovahkiin," Alduin said, tipping his great head toward me. "But I am Al-Du-In, Destroyer-Devour-Master, Firstborn of Akatosh! Mulaagi zok lot! Though you have defeated me in this battle, I cannot be slain here, by you or anyone else. I go to Sovngarde, where I will become strong once again. I will outlast you, mey joor!"

Then he launched himself into the air, disappearing behind the mountain's highest crag.

We had defeated Alduin, but we could not kill him? It made no sense. But I could not ponder these imponderables then. I could think only of one thing.

I ran to where Lydia lay crumpled against the wall, pulling potion bottles from within my robes as I went. I drank off an Elixir of Magicka, then cast a spell of Grand Healing as I reached her. With a cry of relief, I saw that she still breathed. Her steel plate armor was dented but not pierced – I would kiss Jarl Balgruuf's feet a thousand times in thanks for the gift that saved her life.

Yet still she would not wake. I kept working on her, loosening her cuirass so she could breathe more easily, forcing some drops of healing potion between her lips. Perhaps only time could awaken her.

While I was busy with her, Paarthurnax flew over and landed on the word wall above us.

"You must track Alduin to Sovngarde. It is the only place he can be slain."

I looked up at the ancient dragon, confident now that Lydia would live. "How am I to travel there? No mortal can visit Sovngarde, it is for the souls of the Nords' honored dead."

"I know not. Alduin did not travel to Sovngarde in my time with him. Yet maybe one of his lieutenants knows."

I was distracted by Lydia stirring. I cast another healing spell on her for good measure, and she opened her eyes, smiling at me. "A healing spell! Are you a priest?"
"No, I am Lydia Ravenwood's one and only true love, if she will but realize it. I will not let her die, much as she seeks a glorious death."

"And Alduin – is he slain?"

I shook my head. "We stopped him from destroying the world. Time is not ended – for now. But we must track him to Sovngarde."

"To Sovngarde! How is that possible?"

I had no answer for her. Yet if Alduin had gone to Sovngarde, then to Sovngarde I must follow.

End of Part III
"Ha!" Jarl Balgruuf laughed. "You must be as mad as King Olaf!"

"You believe One-Eye was mad?" It was a strange statement for the jarl to make, considering his throne sat under the skull of Numinex, the dragon Olaf had defeated and imprisoned in Dragonsreach. The palace's Great Porch had been built just to hold him.

"Trapping a dragon in a palace built of timber? What else could he be? He had the Great Porch built mostly of stone, but still. Too, there was that time he imprisoned a bard just for writing a verse critical of his reign."

"Yet trapping a dragon here is the only hope I have of learning where Alduin has gone."

He looked at my companion. "And what say you, Master Arngeir?" He tipped his head slightly as he said it.

Now I was glad that I had asked Arngeir to accompany me in order to help persuade Balgruuf, and gladder still that he had agreed to come. It was an extraordinary thing, a master of High Hrothgar leaving that ancient seat, and Balgruuf was honored by his presence. The jarl had already described his own journey up the Seven Thousand Steps with fond relish. Yet Arngeir and I had chosen the direct route, so loath was I to spend three days on the road to Whiterun. Lydia and I had parted, Lydia taking the longer way by road, while Arngeir and I used our Ethereal shouts to protect us as we plunged and glissaded straight down the mountain to Whiterun.

"I haven't had this much fun in years!" the ancient master exulted after one particularly long drop down a sheer rock face. "The trick is, never fall longer than your shout can last." We had arrived in Whiterun late in the afternoon after the battle with Alduin, and had gone straight to the palace.

"The Dragonborn is right," Arngeir said now. "Trapping one of Alduin's allies seems the only way to discover how the World Eater travels to Sovngarde. Our master has decreed that we assist the Dragonborn in any way we can, and so I have broken our long-standing habit of avoiding affairs of the world. It seems that in such times we must all bend our wishes in service to the greater cause."

"And I would assist in that cause in any way I can," Balgruuf said. "Yet I have my people to think of. I have risked much to keep my city out of this civil war thus far…"

"Indeed," Arngeir said. "That you are a man of peace is the only reason I agreed to come here."

Balgruuf nodded. "Thank you for that, master. Yet now I expect one side or the other to attack at any moment. I cannot afford to distract my forces from their defense of the city."

"My jarl," I said, "your concern for your people is admirable. But think of your people's ancestors, of the honored dead who even now are suffering Alduin's cruelty."
"And you really think he has gone to Sovngarde? How can such a thing be?"

"I know not, my jarl," I said, "just as I know not how he could still live after Lydia and I defeated him. Perhaps it is true the World Eater is like a god, or an avatar of Akatosh himself."

"And you think you can follow him to the land of the dead?"

"Again, it is a mystery, much as my being the Dragonborn is a mystery. But the only way to find out is to speak with one of his allies."

The jarl considered for a moment. "Defeating Alduin in this world was a great victory, one for which you will be remembered for all time. It won't be long before the bards are singing of it across the land. And I would not have it said that Jarl Balgruuf did not aid the Dragonborn in her time of need. So, I will grant you the use of Dragonreach's Great Porch, on one condition: that the Stormcloaks and the Imperials declare a truce while a dragon is caught here."

"A truce! Why would either side submit to that?"

"It does seem unlikely, especially now that we have had no dragon attacks for a month. Alduin eating the souls of our dead — that will not concern Tullius at all, and if I know Ulfric, he would give his own mother's soul to Alduin if it meant he could become high king."

"Then how are we to convince them?"

Balgruuf turned to Arngeir. "If a master of the venerable Greybeards called a peace council, both sides would have to listen. High Hrothgar is respected, even by the Imperials."

Arngeir's eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. "This is why we stay out of worldly affairs — one entanglement leads to another. Yet I cannot deny an opportunity to promote peace, much as I fear these war-mongers will only use it to prepare for the next blood-letting."

"It's decided then," said Balgruuf. "Your call to the peace council will be sent by our fastest couriers. The meeting will take place four days hence, allowing time for messages to pass back and forth and the participants to arrive."

"Four days!" I said. "How many souls will Alduin devour in that time?"

"It cannot be helped, lass. It will take that long to ready the trap, which has seen no use in thousands of years. And you must wait two days at the least for your housecarl to arrive. Or would you confront a dragon without her?"

I had already considered this. I felt I could handle one dragon on my own, or with the help of the jarl's hirthlings, but I didn't know whether I could withstand Lydia's anger once she learned I had been so rash. "No, my jarl, I will wait for Lydia, and then two days more for this council."

"Good. Now, how do you propose to trap this dragon? Dragonsreach was built to hold a dragon captive, not to lure and subdue it."

"Master Par… the grand master of the Greybeards, that is … taught me a shout to call a dragon. It happens that every dragon's name is itself a shout. He suggested I call Odahviing, whose name means Winged Snow Hunter, a dragon he believes is most disposed to help us."

"This master knows much of dragons then, and much of my own palace, if he suggested you trap one here."
"It is as you said, my jarl, the Greybeards are incredibly old and incredibly wise, and none more so than their grand master. Few are granted an audience with him in his home at the very summit of the Throat of the World. It was a great honor to be admitted into his presence, and I would not violate his privacy by revealing his identity."

"Well, if he is the one who commanded that the Greybeards help you, then we owe him a debt. Now, what will you do if and when this Odahviing answers your call?"

"I won't know until I look on this trap of yours."

The jarl rose from his throne and led us up the stairs to his war-chamber, then through the double doors onto the Great Porch of Dragonsreach. This was something like a barn, but much taller. The jarl was right: the place was built mostly of stone, except for the wood that made up the ceiling. It was easy to imagine that a fire could spread from there into the attached palace, made mostly of wood. The far end of this porch had no wall, but opened onto a balcony where the cliffs fell away to the plains north of Whiterun.

Halfway down the hall, a system of great wooden beams and stout chains stood on either side of the room. Suspended from the ceiling and spanning much of the room's width was a stout yoke, like those used to harness oxen, only far larger. "This is the yoke with which Numinex was held captive," Balgruuf said. "The chains need oiling and the wheels that raise and lower the yoke need repair, but I promise that all will be in order in four days' time, in anticipation of a truce being settled."

"Thank you, my jarl," I said.

"Then it will be up to you. If you can get this dragon to enter here, my soldiers will be able to clamp the yoke on his neck. But how will you do it?"

We walked out onto the great balcony, which seemed to float in the sky above the Plains of Whiterun. "Once he lands here," I said, "We can lure him into the trap as he pursues us."

"The two of you defeated two dragons at once. I have no doubt that you can manage one. Just see that he doesn't set fire to the palace. And you're certain he will answer your call?"

Arngeir spoke up. "Dragons are prideful creatures and can seldom resist the challenge of hearing their names shouted. Too, Odahviing will be curious to set eyes on the one who defeated his master and maybe even to test his own mettle against her. I am confident he will come when the Dragonborn calls him."

"Then let us hope this Odahviing has the knowledge you seek."

From your mouth to Akatosh's ears, I thought. Once more, my path to Alduin lay in the hands of others – Tullius and Ulfric and a dragon named Odahviing. But, as Balgruuf had said, it could not be helped. I settled myself in for a wait, busying myself with decorating my lonely house in anticipation of Lydia's arrival.

A stiff breeze ruffled the tent where the peace council was to be held, the colors of Whiterun snapping straight out above it. Lydia, Arngeir, and Balgruuf stood with me outside the tent, ready to greet the meeting's participants. Now we saw two figures approaching on foot from the west,
"Who would be traveling here afoot?" Balgruuf asked.

"I know not, my jarl," I replied.

It was a mystery – both the Stormcloak and Imperial contingents would surely be mounted, wanting to waste as little time on this meeting as possible. Balgruuf had first suggested High Hrothgar as a neutral meeting ground, but all parties had objected to the delay of traveling there, and Arngeir had refused to sully those sacred halls with the presence of war-mongers. And so we had chosen this spot, a pine-covered knoll west of Whiterun. It was a central location, easily reached by all parties, with no need for long travel through enemy territory by either side.

Now the figures drew closer, and I was surprised to see Esbern and Delphine. No one had expected them.

Arngeir must have recognized Delphine's Blades armor and curved sword, because his response was immediate. "What are you doing here? The Blades were not invited to this council. Nor are you welcome." He looked at me sidelong, as if I had something to do with their presence.

"We have as much right to be here as you do, old man," Delphine snapped as they came up to us. "We are the ones who set the Dragonborn on the path to discovering her true identity and her destiny to defeat the dragons."

"The path of folly, don't you mean?" Arngeir replied. I had never heard such venom in his voice. "It is only the path of wisdom that keeps me from shouting you out of this camp!"

"Peace, friends, peace!" I said, raising my hands for calm. "If we can't maintain amity between ourselves, how can we expect the warring parties to reach an agreement?"

"You show more wisdom than I, Dragonborn," Arngeir said. "Forgive me. Your friends are welcome here."

"But what brings you here, my friends?" I asked. "I thought you were exploring the wonders of Sky Haven Temple. Did you find it?"

"We did, and we have much to tell you," Esbern said. "In private. We had hoped to reach you before the council began."

"If you've learned of this meeting, then you must know that the Greybeards helped me discover how the ancient Nords defeated Alduin. There is nothing I would keep hidden from Master Arngeir."

Just then we heard the sound of hoofbeats coming up the slope from the south.

"But I'm afraid this will have to wait," I said.

"Yes," Esbern replied, regarding Arngeir coolly. "After the meeting then." He and Delphine stepped into the tent.

Now Ulfric and Galmar Stonefist were climbing off their horses and handing the reins to Whiterun guards waiting nearby.

"Let's get this nonsense over with," Ulfric said, ignoring our greeting as he approached the four of us. "Where is Tullius?"
"Not here yet," Balgruuf answered. "His road is both longer and more difficult."

"Still impatient as always, I see," Arngeir said to Ulfric, his tone hard. "It always was your great weakness as a student."

Ulfric bowed his head to the Greybeard. "Master, I apologize. My respect for you is the only reason I am here." It was almost shocking to see Ulfric showing deference to anyone.

"Then show these proceedings the respect they deserve," Arngeir replied. "It is only the hope of peace that brings me here amongst war-mongers."

"War-mongers, eh? We would make a quick end of this war if it weren't for would-be peace-makers like Deirdre here." He glared at me. "That was a foolish thing, lass, capturing those Thalmor instead of slaying them in battle. They escaped into Imperial territory before we could catch up to them."

"Peace-makers and fence-sitters," Galmar growled. He stepped up to Balgruuf now, so that their chests were nearly touching. "Fence-sitters are as good as traitors."

Lydia could not help herself. She stepped between them, pushing Galmar back with one hand, while the other went to her axe. "That's my jarl you're addressing. You will show him respect while I have command of my axe."

"Please, please," said Arngeir, raising his hands for calm. "This is no way to begin a peace council."

"Fie on your peace, old man," Galmar said. "But I will let my jarl do the talking, for now." He turned to Lydia. "You may be tall and strong, but you're still just a lass."

"Lydia," I said, seeing the color rise in her face.

"Aye, my thane," she said as she returned to my side. "Let's leave the talking to the jarls."

Arngeir opened the tent flap for Ulfric and Galmar. "Won't you step inside and help yourself to some mulled wine?" Ulfric grumbled his assent, and the two went in.

Soon we saw four figures on horseback approaching from the north. As they came closer, we recognized General Tullius and Legate Rikke, as expected – and Ambassador Elenwen and her justiciar, Rulindil. I had last seen him in Riften, as the Stormcloaks led him away in chains.

Tullius barely had time to dismount before I was at his side. Rikke mistook my meaning, drawing her sword, and then Lydia was drawing her axe. I ignored them. "What are they doing here," I hissed at Tullius.

"I might ask you the same question," Elenwen said, strolling over to us. "It's certainly none of my business how you police the province, general, but I'm surprised that you're letting this criminal roam free. She nearly murdered your emperor after all." She gave a little sniff.

"I think we all know who sent me to the Emperor's Tower," I said.

Elenwen's eyes widened in mock surprise. "I assure you, I don't know what you're talking about."

Then we heard the tent flap open behind us, and the Stormcloaks and the Blades stepped out. For a moment all was silent as everyone took stock of the situation: the elves glaring at the Blades, and both the Blades and the Stormcloaks glaring back. Beside me, Lydia was trembling, and I could
tell she was struggling not to turn her axe on Elenwen.

Then everyone was shouting about double-dealing and false pretenses, Ulfric threatening to leave if the Thalmor remained, Delphine drawing her bow and aiming an arrow at Elenwen while Rulindil readied a spell, Elenwen demanding the arrest of both the Blades and me, Balgruuf and Arngeir pleading for calm.

"You won't take my thane with less than an army!" Lydia shouted at the Thalmor.

"Oh, there is an army, you needn't worry about that," Rulindil said, still threatening Delphine with a spell. "Or maybe you should worry about it." That got everyone's attention.

Elenwen looked at him sharply. "He means the battalion Tullius brought for his – and our – protection, in case this is some sort of trap."

Tullius nodded. "They're up in the Labyrinthian Pass, with scouts well placed between here and there, so I suggest everyone put their weapons away." He pointed up the slope from the edge of the plain where our camp was situated. The pass was not far off.

"You brought an army to a peace council?" I asked, incredulous.

"The general would be a fool not to," Ulfric said. "As would I. I have my own war-band stationed at Fort Greymoor." Looking to the south, we saw the Stormcloak banner flying over that fortress.

"You moved your soldiers into my hold without permission?" Balgruuf demanded.

"It's better not to leave your forts to the bandits, Balgruuf. Now, what is this Thalmor bitch doing here? You've lost your minds if you think I'm going to negotiate with those who would enslave our people."

"Ulfric, Ulfric, why the hostility?" Elenwen asked, her tone falsely sweet. "It is not the Aldmeri Dominion that has opposed your forces at every turn. And I am not here as a participant, merely as an observer, to ensure that nothing that is agreed to here violates the White-Gold Concordat."

"Ach! The very sight of the damned elves sickens me!" Galmar shouted, his hand on his axe. "As it ought to the two of you," he added, looking at Lydia and me. "You've been their prisoners."

The sight of the Thalmor did sicken me, and I could hear Lydia breathing rapidly next to me. What must she feel, looking upon the elf who had caused her such pain? As Ulfric and Tullius fell to arguing once more, I thought how easy it would be to avenge all the wrongs they had done to her. I found myself gathering my breath and moving into a position where my Unrelenting Force shout would hit the elves but none of the others.

"Drem!" Arngeir's exclamation of "Peace!" was not a shout, but his voice was strong, staggering me and knocking the others from their feet, while the horses picketed nearby bucked wildly.

"My apologies for losing my temper, friends," he said as the others rose to their feet, brushing the snow from their cloaks. He regarded me sternly as he spoke, as if he knew what I had planned to do. "This is why we dislike entanglement in the ways of the world. But really, we cannot go on arguing like this, if we are to achieve this council's true purpose. Let us put aside our differences and focus on the threat we all face."

"For once, the Greybeards live up to their reputation for wisdom," Esbern said. "Do none of you understand what is at stake here? While you stand here arguing, Alduin gains more and more power, feasting on the souls of our Nord ancestors."
"Bah! Nord superstition!" Tullius exclaimed, but Rikke leaned over and said something to him, and he seemed to relent.

"Superstition or no," Esbern said, "the dragons are still a threat, and none more so than Alduin. It is not just Nord superstition that says he will destroy the world. The Akaviri believed it as well, which is why they came to Tamriel and founded our order. They were not just hunting dragons, but seeking a Dragonborn."

"If the dragons are such a threat, where are they?" Tullius demanded. "We haven't had an attack all month."

"The dragons are still more than a threat, Tullius," Ulfric said. "They attacked Fort Kastav just before we left to come here."

"Ha! A good choice of victims then," Tullius said.

"Begging your pardon, general, but the news probably hasn't reached you yet," Lydia said, stepping forward. "The morning I was leaving Ivarstead, three days ago now, two of your soldiers came limping into town, Stormcloak stronghold though it is. They claimed to be the only survivors of a dragon attack on their camp south of the town."

"You dare to place a camp in the Rift?" Ulfric demanded of Tullius, who was looking stunned.

"Of course I do," the general said. "As do you in Imperial holds, no doubt. A whole scouting party, gone! That changes things."

"Yes," said Ulfric. "The question is, why have they returned? It's very convenient for the Dragonborn's plans for this peace council, it seems to me. And it seems we have taken the larger hit."

"Larger than you know," Esbern said. "A dragon attacked Fort Sungard yesterday, just before we passed by. Your forces still held it, but they had taken many casualties."

Ulfric turned to me. "What do you have to say to that? Have you turned the dragons against us?"

I looked at Ulfric, and then at Tullius and Elenwen. How long I had been hearing this accusation! I took a deep breath. "You should all know by now that I have no control over the dragons. And you should know from the letters inviting you here that Alduin fled to Sovngarde after I defeated him in this world. He is feasting on the souls of the honored Nord dead even now. The more brave souls his dragon allies send to Sovngarde, the stronger he will become. And where better to find Nord heroes than in your armies?"

"So you see," said Esbern, "the sooner we settle this truce, the sooner the Dragonborn can set about putting a permanent stop to Alduin. Either that, or there will be no more soldiers left to fight your war."

From that moment, reaching a truce was a simple matter. The parties barely had time to finish their mulled wine before they were signing an agreement that the Imperial and Stormcloak forces would stay behind their present lines. There would be no hostilities, and any soldier violating the agreement would be punished by death.

Then the meeting was breaking up, the Stormcloaks and the Imperial-Aldmeri alliance eager to be shut of each other as quickly as possible.

"It is a long road back to High Hrothgar," Arneir said. "I must be on my way."
I thanked him profusely for his help. "We couldn't have done this without you, Master," I said.

"I will accompany you as far as the White River, if you will allow me," Balgruuf said, and the two left the tent.

That left Delphine and Esbern, who seemed in no hurry to leave.

"Come Lydia," I said. "Now that the truce is in effect, I would not delay calling Odahviing from the Great Porch."

"About that private word you promised?" Esbern said.

"I will see to the horses," Lydia said, and left us to ourselves.

"Well, what is it?" I said. "I am impatient, as you must know."

"Quite understandable," Esbern said. "But I cannot let you go without this word of warning: you have allied yourself with a greater evil than you know. Trust no one, and watch your back at all times."

"Who, Ulfric? I have not allied myself with him. Or have you been listening to those rumors that I forged a secret alliance with the Thalmor?" He shook his head both times. Then it struck me. "You mean the Greybeards! But this is just petty rivalry. If I cannot trust them, who can I trust?"

"I assure you, this goes much deeper than mere rivalry, but…"

"Come on, Esbern," Delphine interrupted. "Let's just tell her and get it over with. We've discovered that the leader of the Greybeards is a dragon named Paarthurnax."

I laughed out loud. "Well, of course he is! And a wiser and a gentler sage you will not find. Of all who helped me defeat Alduin, he did the most. He even bears the scars and broken horns of ancient battles, which must have come from contending with his dov brethren."

"You know nothing of the great evils he committed as Alduin's chief lieutenant," Esbern said, his voice rising. "He slew many of our ancestors and helped the dragon priests keep them in chains. Whatever he has done since, it cannot atone for those great wrongs."

"Yet without Paarthurnax, the Tongues never would have learned to shout. They never would have won the Dragon War or gained their freedom from the Dragon Priests. Paarthurnax took pity on humankind. Surely such an act of compassion should redeem his past actions?"

"It only proves he is a traitor as well as a tyrant," Delphine said. "Who knows how long it will be before he turns colors once again? As for redemption, let Akatosh and Stendarr worry about Paarthurnax's soul. Justice demands his death, and as Blades we are sworn to hunt dragons wherever we find them."

"Yes, I've been meaning to speak with you about that," I said. "Why must we hunt the dragons so relentlessly? Wiping an entire race of creatures from the face of Nurn is an evil unto itself – and even more so, creatures as beautiful and awe-inspiring as the dov. There was a time, before the Akaviri invasion, when dragons lived in seclusion and left mortals in peace. What if we could persuade them to return to that way, to stay in the wilds and the high mountains, and to prey only on wild beasts?"

"They've gotten to you, haven't they?" Delphine demanded, her nostrils flaring. "Or is it your dragon soul that makes you sympathetic toward them? You've become a regular dragon-lover, at
any rate. But I will have Paarthurnax's head, if I have to climb the Throat of the World to get it!"

I tried to keep my voice low and my emotions in check, but I felt my face flushing and my heart beating rapidly. My palms were sweating as I clenched and unclenched my fists. "You could not get that far through the deadly mists. And if you did, you would find me there to protect him." I took a step closer to her, glad for once to face an opponent I could meet eye-to-eye. I lowered my voice to a harsh whisper. "And don't make the mistake of thinking you would win." I remembered something Paarthurnax had said: my purpose in the world was to balance its opposing forces. I wasn't doing a very good job of it at the moment.

"Come now, anger will do none of us any good," Esbern said, placing a hand on my arm. I jerked away with more force than I intended, and he took a step back. "You see, Delphine, it was a mistake to tell her the truth so soon." Then he turned to me. "We will continue to aid you in your quest for permanent victory over Alduin. But be on your guard – we fear this plan to catch a dragon may be a plot to capture you. And know that, once this is over, you must make a choice between the Greybeards and the Blades."

"I need no more of your help, such as it's been."

Lydia stepped into the tent just then. "What's the shouting about? Do you need me?"

"It's fine, Lydia. Esbern and Delphine were just leaving. And we need to go capture a dragon."
That same afternoon, Lydia and I stood on the Great Porch of Dragonsreach with Balgruuf and Irileth.

"Are you sure you know how to trap a dragon?" Balgruuf asked again.

I wanted to tell him that I hadn't been sure of anything I had done since that day at Helgen, that instinct and blind luck had carried me through. But I didn't think that would comfort a jarl who was about to give his palace over to dragon-trapping.

"Lydia and I will have no trouble managing one dragon. You and your soldiers should stay well back. We don't need to send additional souls to Alduin."

"Very well," said the jarl. "And may Akatosh guide your steps."

When everyone was in position, Lydia and I stepped to the edge of the balcony. "Lydia, why don't you wait inside by the trap?" I said. It will only take one of us to lure the dragon into the porch."

"My place is by your side, my thane."

"Very well. But remember: we are luring this dragon, not slaying him. Are you ready?"

"Aye, my thane, let's trap a dragon!" She banged her axe against her shield.

"Let us hope Paarthurnax was right about this dragon call." Then I turned my face to the skies. "Od-Ah-Viing!" My shout rippled across the plains and returned as an echo from the mountains to the north.

For a moment all was quiet. "Well? Is it working?" the jarl called from his station on the gallery on one side of the Great Porch. Then a roar came from off in the distance to the east and soon a great pair of wings soared around the side of Dragonsreach making straight for us.

"Dovahkiin, het Zu'u los," the dragon said as he swooped down.

"Joor-Zah-Frul!" I shouted back, jarring him so that his grasping jaws missed me.

He took a short turn out over the rocks below, making for us once again. We backed toward the opening of the Great Porch as Odahviing settled on the balcony's parapet. He was red, with tall spikes down his back and eight horns sprouting from his head like a crown.

"You would teach me the meaning of death? Come near my jaws, and I will teach it to you!"

"I defeated your master," I said as we kept backing away. "I will have no trouble defeating you."

"Is this how you fought him, by running away?"
The dragon drew breath to blast us with fire. Lydia stepped in front of me, using her shield to protect us both. The flames flowed up and over it as I continued moving back.

But now Odahviing was upon her and she was standing her ground, warding thrusts of his jaws with her shield and striking him with her axe when she could.

"Lydia, no!" I called to her, but it did little good. The morning's forbearance had tested her patience and now the battle-lust was upon her. She was just within the opening of the Great Porch and Odahviing still out on the balcony. At this rate, we would never get him into the trap. I thought for one mad moment of casting a fear spell on her, but then realized she would never forgive me the humiliation.

"Lydia, your place is by my side!" I called to her.

"Aye, my thane." She was backing toward me at last.

"What kind of Nord retreats?" Odahviing taunted her. "I have had many worthier opponents in my time."

The dragon drew another breath. I moved to my left to avoid hitting Lydia, then shouted "Fus-Ro-Dah!" The shout staggered him before he could blast us with his fire, giving Lydia time to draw even with me.

"Ah, your Thu'um is strong, Dovahkiin, stronger even than that of my master. But I have you cornered in this jil hofkiin. You will not escape my jaws, no matter how powerful your shouts."

We were even with the yoke now. "Just a few more steps," I whispered to Lydia.

"Come any closer and you'll feel my axe once more!" Lydia shouted at him as we moved back.

That was too much for the arrogant dovah. He rushed at us and Balgruuf called for his men to release the chains. With perfect timing, the yoke plunged down, landing across Odahviing's neck, a spring-loaded collar clamping around his throat. The whole contraption was so heavy that it forced his head down to the floor.

In rage and frustration, Odahviing blasted us with his fire breath. Lydia sheltered behind her shield, but I stood in the middle of that blast, hearing only "Yol-Toor-Shul" and feeling only a warm breeze. When it was done the dragon looked at me. Was that admiration I saw in his eyes?

"Use your fire breath again and I will be forced to slay you," I said. "But speak with me and I may set you free."

"You withstood my strongest shout. And here I am, caught like a bear in a trap. Why have you done this? Why not slay me as you have done to many of my brethren?"

"Because I believe Alduin has gone to Sovngarde, and I must know how to follow him there."

Seeing that all seemed safe, Balgruuf and Irileth and several soldiers descended from the galleries on either side of the porch and stood behind us. Farengar emerged from the palace, along with Proventus Avenicci. "A dragon!" the mage exclaimed. "How I have waited for this day!"

Odahviing regarded him dolefully.

"You are indeed relentless in your pursuit of my master," Odahviing said to me. "Many of the dov have begun to question Alduin's authority and the strength of his Thu'um, and all the more once you defeated him at the Throat of the World. If you set me free, I will tell them I have met one
who is worthy of our respect. And you will free me if I tell you where Alduin has gone?"

"If your information proves correct."

"Well then, I will tell you that his door to Sovngarde is in the ancient fane of Skuldafn."

"I've never heard of it," I said. I turned to the others, who all shrugged and shook their heads.
"Where is this place, and how do I get there?"

"It is high in the Velothi Mountains. The ancient Nords chose the site for its remote location. Time and the elements rendered it inaccessible to all but us sky-wingers. For this reason Alduin chose it for his sanctuary. The portal to Sovngarde is on its highest balcony."

"If it is inaccessible to land-striders, how can I get there?"

The dragon seemed to smile. "If you set me free, I will fly you to Skuldafn."

"My thane," Lydia whispered in my ear, "this could be the trap Esbern spoke of! I do not trust him."

I knew she was right. Trapping Odahviing had seemed almost too easy. Yet how could I not trust Paarthurnax? He had helped me defeat Alduin. Why do that, and then set a trap for me?

"What choice do I have, Lydia?"

"We could find a way to this Skuldafn on our own. No mountains are that inaccessible."

"No, I would not waste the time, even if it were possible."

"Ah," said Odahviing. "I see that you do not trust me. An interesting predicament, no?"

"I have no choice but to trust you, dragon. But my housecarl will come too, to make sure this is not a trick."

"No," he growled. "Only you, one of the dragonblood, may ride on my back."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Lydia said.

"So do I, but it can't be helped. When do we leave?"

"As soon as you remove this yoke from my neck."

"No, my thane," Lydia protested. "The hour grows late, and who knows how long it will take to fly to this place, or what you will find when you get there?"

"Your companion is wise," Odahviing said. "Skuldafn is large, and many of the Nord dead roam it, ruled by the Dragon Priest Nahkriin. They have awakened since Alduin's return, and they still serve him. They will not take kindly to any mortal seeking the portal. And you will find my dov brethren there as well."

"Very well, we leave in the morning. But I promise you, if this is some sort of trick, I will hunt you until my dying breath."

"As will I," Lydia said.

The dragon smiled once more. "Until morning then. And tell your friends not to get too close," he
said, turning his head to look at Farengar. The mage had stepped up near his horns and was making notes in a leather-bound journal. "This one will not withstand my fire breath as well as you."

That evening, I was upstairs in Breezehome going through my knapsack one last time. What did one pack for a journey to the land of the dead? I was tempted to leave it all behind and carry only what potions and bits of food I could stuff into the pockets of my robes. But Lydia pointed out that I might find myself trapped in Skuldafn, with no way out of the mountain cirque. A supply of a few days' food would be prudent. And, in case I found myself in need of better protection than my archmage's robes offered, a spare set of scaled hide armor would be useful. It was enchanted to increase my magical power, but not as much as my robes. "It's a worthwhile tradeoff," Lydia said. "You won't have me to absorb the attacks of your opponents."

I grudgingly agreed, seeing how worried she was for me, though I hated to slow myself with the added weight. I was not particularly worried for myself. I had survived Bleak Falls Barrow on my own, before I could even shout. How much worse could Skuldafn be? So it had a dragon priest – we had faced them before. Even Morokei would not have been able to stand against me with the power I had now. And once I got to Sovngarde – who knew what weapons and armor I would need to confront the World Eater in that place?

No, it was not fear for myself that I felt, but anticipation of loneliness. The thought of parting with Lydia filled me with a greater sense of dread than any dragon could cause. The recent separation of three days had been difficult enough, but going into danger without her seemed worse. I would miss her rallying cries and dry remarks as much as her aid in battle.

Now I turned to laying out my robes across a chair in the bedroom, checking their pockets one last time. Downstairs, Lydia was cooking a venison stew, my favorite dish. We could have gotten the same at the Bannered Mare, but we both wanted to spend this last night alone together. The town was already abuzz with the news that we had captured a dragon in Dragonsreach, and I knew we would have no peace in public. Too, Lydia had been somber all evening, fearing I would never return.

I took off the Saarthal Amulet, which I still wore for its properties of magical fortification, and set it on top of the robes. Then I took a deep breath and went to the chest where I stored my valuables. I took out the Amulet of Mara and put it around my neck. I wore a simple tunic, and I left the laces on the front untied, so that Lydia would not miss the gold emblem that said I was interested in marriage.

I took another deep breath and went downstairs. Lydia was scurrying about the kitchen. "It's almost done, my love. Just a few more touches."

At least she had taken to calling me "my love." It was a start. I went up behind her and put my arms around her waist. She turned partway around and I kissed her deeply. Still she didn't notice the amulet.

"Have a seat while I finish up. Would you like a cup of Alto wine?"

"That would be lovely," I said, going around to the other side of the table so I was facing the cooking area. Lydia poured two cups from a bottle and then brought them to the table.
"Thank you," I said, taking the cup with my right hand, my left going to my throat.

"An Amulet of Mara!" Lydia's own cup was poised halfway to her mouth. She looked back and forth from the amulet to my face. "Are you wearing that for me?"

"Who else, my love?"

She sat down across from me, still staring at the amulet, saying nothing.

Finally, the silence was too much. "What do you say, my Lydia?" I asked, reaching across for her hand. "Say you will marry me before I go off to face Alduin alone. I do not know if I can best him, and even if I do, who can say if I will return from Sovngarde?"

"But my love, certainly we cannot marry before tomorrow." She still kept her eyes on the amulet.

"No, you mistake me. But before I go to face my destiny, I would have the promise of your hand in marriage" – and here I pressed my lips to her fingers – "the hand I love the most in all the world, along with every other part of you, body and soul."

Now she looked up at me, her eyes filled with the pain of indecision. She covered my hand with both of hers. "Oh, Deirdre, you know I love you. But you are so young. How can you know that I am the one you want to spend the rest of your days with? Perhaps you will find someone you like better as you travel and meet more people."

I looked at her for a long moment. "You and I have traveled the length and breadth of Skyrim together. I have met many women in that time – from tavern wenches to Aela the Huntress in her scanty armor to Elisif the Fair, the fairest lass in all the land, many say. And none have I seen that could make me turn my head from you, none with whom I can laugh and jest and talk about nothing or share my deepest secrets, as I can with you. No, it is you I love and none other. Now stop being silly and give me your answer."

She looked at the table and then around at the walls of our home, and finally back at me. "My love, how can you put me in such a position? You know I wouldn't send you off to face Alduin with doubt in your heart. Yet how can I make such a choice so soon? We have only been together as lovers for a matter of weeks."

"You know as well as I that long courtships are not the way of Skyrim. Life is often hard, and short, and couples grasp what happiness they may, while they may."

"As we have, my love. But why do we have to marry so soon?"

"For me the choice is easy, why not for you?"

Now she would only look at the table. "It's a more difficult choice for me, and I think you know why. You are not interested in men at all, nor in the … things a man can offer a woman. But you know that I have loved men in the past. Sometimes I just want to feel like a lass, as only a man can make me feel. Never having that feeling again, nor the possibility of children – it is a big decision, and I ask that you give me time to make it."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I can think of only one thing men have that I do not."

She drew back at that, stung. "No, it's not that, and how could you think it?" She looked away for a moment, shaking her head. Then she took up my hand once more and held my gaze. "Oh, my love, don't you know that you make me feel better than any man ever has?"
"Then what in the name of Mara is it? Wait, does this have to do with those men in the market?" We had visited the market on our way home from Dragonsreach to buy some venison and other goods for dinner. We were holding hands, an unusual display of public affection for us, but we were both feeling the need for each other's comfort in light of our pending separation. The people of Whiterun were used to seeing us together and no one paid us much mind, except for the occasional query of "Is it true, you captured a dragon in Dragonsreach?" Then two drunkards outside the Bannered Mare began making comments. They must have been new to Whiterun, because I had never seen them before.

"Hey, Kuvar, there goes an odd couple."

"You're right, Roggi. Which do you suppose is the lad and which is the lass?"

"Hic, tha's plain to see – the big one! She's more man than woman."

The two were dressed in ragged tunics, with no armor. Kuvar had a dagger stuck in his belt, and Roggi wore a chipped sword on his hip. It was almost funny that these two would choose us for their targets. The crowd went quiet as I stepped up to them. I tried to look down my nose at them, but it was difficult, given my height.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," I said. "I'm sure I'm more of a man than either of you, were a man something I aspired to be."

"The lass talks brave enough," said Kuvar.

"Another word from you and you'll be crying like wee girls," Lydia said, walking up beside me.

"You're only provin' my point, lass … or lad, should I say?"

My fear spell sent them running away, howling pleas of "No more! I cannot best you!" They ran down the path between the Mare and Arcadia's, then began scrabbling at the city walls, so desperate were they to escape.

The crowd in the market laughed. "Serves those louts right," someone said.

We returned home and I had thought no more of it until now. Maybe Lydia wasn't ready to put up with such bigotry. Even in Whiterun we heard whispers behind our backs, as much as the people seemed to tolerate us. And I wondered how it would be for another couple, one to whom the people did not owe their lives?

Yet now she denied it. "You don't know me very well if you think I'd let louts like that change how I live my life."

"Then it must be that you do not love me."

"How can you say that, my love? I do love you. If you will only…"

"You either love me or you don't. If you loved me as I love you, you wouldn't hesitate to bind yourself to me forever. You wouldn't cling to the hope that someone better might come along. Now what is your answer, yes or no?"

Lydia's lower lip trembled, and she removed her hands from mine, placing them flat on the table, as if for support. "If you force me to answer now, then my answer must be no."

A pain went through my chest as sharp as if she had stabbed me with her dagger. Now I knew how
Onmund had felt, and Ralof. And I was as unreasoning as they had been, only more so. Mara forgive me, it was the foolish, wounded pride of my dragonsoul that sent a burst of rage through me, forcing me to my feet. My vision went dark, and I struggled to control myself, turning away from her before I did something I would regret forever.

"Go then," I managed to say, my voice tight with the weight that crushed my heart.

"What? No, my love..."

"If you love me so little, you need not trouble yourself to share a roof with me ... or a bed."

"No, you do not mean it."

"I assure you, I do. In fact, since I must face Alduin alone, I no longer require your services as housecarl. I release you from your duty."

There was a long silence then, but still I would not turn and look at her.

"I'll be up at my old quarters in Dragonsreach then." Her voice quavered.

"Go where you will, I care not."

"Very well." She walked up behind me. "It has been an honor to serve you, my..."

"I am no longer your thane."

Then I heard her sob, and a moment later the door opened and closed behind her. Lydia was gone, and with her, my reason for fighting Alduin, for living, for ... everything.
Someone was pounding on my door. It seemed as if people had been pounding on it all night long. Arcadia had been the first. "Deirdre, are you all right?" she called through the door. "I saw Lydia, and she looked in an awful way. Come child, open the door and tell me what happened."

At last she went away, and I returned to my crying and my drinking. I was already into my second bottle of Alto wine. I had never done such a thing before. Later, I awoke to find myself sprawled across the table, with Thorald Gray-Mane shouting at my door. "Lass, open up. It's no good shutting yourself up like this. Come and have a drink with the lads and you'll feel better. Hulda's got a right sympathetic ear if you want to tell her what happened 'tween you and Lydia."

Why wouldn't they leave me alone? Nothing they could say would make this pain go away. Two bottles of wine hadn't made it go away. Only in sleep could I find respite. Finally Thorald went away too.

Now it was morning, with bright rays of sunshine slanting in the window and sparkling off the snow outside. The pounding kept on going, both in my head and at the door. "Deirdre, open up," a voice called out. "We have come all the way from Winterhold to see you off to Sovngarde." It was Brelyna, of course.

"Are you sure this is the right house?" a feline voice asked.

"The jarl's steward said it was."

"Go away," I called back. "I would see no one, not even my friends."

"Deirdre, it's Onmund. If anyone knows what it is to have a broken heart, it's me. But you have to buck yourself up. The world is depending on you."

Yes, the world. The long-suffering, helpless world needed saving, and I was the one to do it. But what if I didn't feel like saving it? Hadn't I already defeated Alduin once? Let someone else travel to Sovngarde and face the World Eater. Or better yet, let Alduin return and bring the world to an end and with it, this unendurable pain.

I thought maybe they would go away like all the rest, but then I heard the sound of a lockpick at the door. A moment later my three friends were standing around me, J'zargo congratulating himself on his lockpicking skills. I couldn't look at them, keeping my face buried in my arms on the table.

"Oh, dear," Brelyna said.

J'zargo sniffed loudly. "Too much drink, this one can tell. In Elsweyr, we have an excellent remedy for skooma hangovers. I wonder if the butcher of Whiterun keeps pig intestines?" A moment later the door closed behind him, and Onmund and Brelyna pulled up chairs on either side of me.
"Now, tell us what happened," Brelyna said. I sat upright and looked at her. "Oh, I see you're wearing an Amulet of Mara." I nodded, choking back a sob. "And she said no?" I nodded again, my tears flowing all the faster. "But why? You seemed like such a perfect couple."

I threw my head back and looked to the ceiling, as if I would find an answer there. "Oh, I was a fool! It was too soon. She was not ready to give up men forever. But I was weak. I could not face Alduin without having her promise." I broke down in sobs once more, my two friends patting me on the back. When I had recovered, I said, "If she loved me, she should have said yes, even if she wasn't sure – shouldn't she?"

"I cannot say," Brelyna said. "Some might think it kind to humor one who is facing her doom. But Lydia could not lie to you, she has such an honest and a noble heart."

"Yes, it's too true!" I wailed and broke down in sobs once more.

J'zargo returned, carrying a sack filled with several foul-smelling ingredients. In moments a horrid odor filled the room as a pot bubbled thickly over the cookfire.

"Are you sure this is going to help her and not kill her, J'zargo?" Brelyna asked.

"With the pain in her head, most certainly. The pain in her heart? Probably not."

While the concoction went on bubbling, I told of our encounter with Alduin at the Throat of the World, the ensuing peace council, and the trapping of Odahviing. News that the Dragonborn would travel to Sovngarde to face Alduin had spread across Skyrim, but it had taken three days to reach the college. My friends had ridden as fast as they could to reach Whiterun this morning, bringing Colette, Faralda, and Drevis with them.

"But why, my friends? You cannot go with me. I am the only one Odahviing will allow onto his back." And if not for that restriction, I thought bitterly, I never would have made my foolish proposal.

"We brought the instructors, in case you need last-minute training," Brelyna said. "I am only glad we got here in time."

"Here, have your remedy," J'zargo said. "They're growing impatient outside, most especially Faralda."

I took the cup he handed me. It contained a grayish, gelatinous liquid that smelled like a dead skeever decaying in a Hjaalmarch swamp. It stung my eyes and made my nose run. "What's in it?"

"Sheep's intestine, fiery hot peppers from the south, imp stool, and just a touch of moon sugar. It is not quite the dog that bit you, but this one thinks it is close enough."

"And I have to drink all of it?"

"But of course!"

I took a deep breath and tried to pour it down my throat without letting it touch my tongue. I managed to do it without gagging. The room seemed to spin for a moment, and then the splitting headache and the nausea went away. I felt better. I even felt energized.

"That worked!" I said.

"Of course it did, or J'zargo would not have given it to you."
As fast as my physical pain went away, that other pain returned with even greater ferocity. I turned to Onmund. "Can you tell me, what is the cure for a broken heart? How can I possibly bear this?"

Onmund could easily have taken this opportunity to gloat, but he did not. "I'm afraid there is none – none that I have found, at least. Certainly not wine – believe me, I tried it. And not time either. The pain doesn't really go away, you just learn how better to bear it."

I would never learn to bear this pain, I was sure. Life had torn everything I loved from me – my parents, my home, and now, Lydia. I set my jaw. "I know one way to make this pain end," I said. I got up from the table and made for the door.

"Wait, where are you going?" Brelyna called after me.

"To Sovngarde, of course." I opened the door and squinted into the sunlight glaring off the snow. The three college wizards stood on the threshold, growing wide-eyed as I pushed my way through them.

"You can't go to Sovngarde like that," Brelyna called after me. "You'll catch your death of cold, in the first place."

"I'll be dead long before illness can take me," I said. The cobbles of the street were icy on my bare feet.

"J'zargo, find her robes ... and her boots!" Brelyna called into the house. "We'll try to stop her."

I walked with grim purpose up the street toward Dragonsreach, six college wizards in tow, Brelyna and Onmund walking beside me, pleading with me to at least prepare myself for the ordeal ahead. But to me their words were like the droning of insects. I could think only of losing myself in the fire of the World Eater's breath.

Whiterun had never seen such a sight – seven mages walking through its streets, arguing and pleading. Some of the city folk shouted out words of encouragement, "Good luck, Dragonborn!" and "Send the World Eater to Oblivion!" but they grew quiet when they saw the fey mood I was in. "Her doom is upon her," one crone said as I passed. "That is the face of one who goes to her death, I haven't a doubt."

Halfway up the steps to Dragonsreach, Onmund stepped in front of me, putting his hands on my shoulders to bar my way. "Deirdre, stop this madness!"

I glared up at him, a step above me. "Out of my way, Onmund. Don't make me shout you off these stairs."

"Listen to her, Onmund," Brelyna said. "She knows we cannot stop her."

"At least put on your arch-mage's robes," J'zargo said, holding them out to me. He was panting from running to catch up.

I brushed him aside and stepped around Onmund, continuing up the steps. Now the wizards chimed in as well, with more pleas to let them help me, and not to throw my life away.

We entered Dragonsreach and passed straight through the hall, then up the stairs and through the jarl's war-chamber, and finally out onto the Great Porch. Balgruuf was there waiting for me, along with Irileth and Farengar.

"Ah, lass we've been expecting…" Balgruuf began, but then stopped, seeing the state I was in.
"Release the dragon!" I called up to the gallery, where a guard stood by the lever that would release Odahviing.

"What does this mean?" Balgruuf demanded, his eyes scanning the faces of the wizards who had poured onto the porch behind me, and then back to me.

"Jarl Balgruuf!" Brelyna said, stepping forward. "You can see the Dragonborn is in no state to travel to Sovngarde and face the World Eater. Please, keep Odahviing in chains until she comes to her senses."

I looked around at Balgruuf and his guards, then up at the gallery, calculating whether I could get to that lever and release Odahviing before they stopped me. I had been friendly with many of those guards during my time in Whiterun. I would not harm them, even in my grim mood.

"If you're looking for your lass," Balgruuf said, "she's shut herself up in her old quarters. She won't come out for anyone. She came in last night, cursing the day she met you, and cursing me for granting her request to become your housecarl. You two must have had quite a row."

"Let her curse Talos for aught I care. Now what do I have to do to leave here with Odahviing?"

The jarl looked at Brelyna.

"Array yourself as you would for any perilous journey," she said. "And accept the training offered by our instructors."

J'zargo had his hands full with my robes and bits of armor I had left lying next to them, and my pack and weapons were slung across his back. On top of the pile he held out to me, I saw the Saarthal Amulet. Then I remembered the Amulet of Mara I wore about my neck. I ripped it from its cord and threw it across the hall. "I won't be needing that accursed necklace again."

I let Brelyna dress me as if I were a queen and she a maid-servant. My robes went on first, then my breeches and boots and gloves and bracers, and a cloak over it all to keep out the chill of the winds over Skyrim. Finally she put the mage's circlet on my brow and said, "Now, will you let our instructors train you?"

I would only take the time to receive one lesson. I chose Drevis to tutor me in Illusion, much to the consternation of the other instructors. It was a haphazard choice, to be sure. In truth, I was only humoring my friends so they would let me depart. Yet it worked for the best, as I found when I cast my rout spell on Drevis, after taking half an hour to read *The Mystery of Talara, Part IV.*

"Yes, that should turn the undead," he said. "Your Illusion magic has grown powerful indeed. You are now a Master of the Mind, and I have no more to teach you."

Brelyna took the knapsack from J'zargo's shoulder and held it out to me. "Lydia must have felt these items were important, this pack is so heavy," she said.

I groaned and took the pack from her and slung it across my back. Then I took up my weapons – my sword of frost, my bow and arrows, and the Staff of Jyrik Gauldurson.

"Now I am ready at last," I said to Jarl Balgruuf when all was in place. "Will you give the order to release Odahviing?"

"Aye, lass, but I can only hope that this fey mood will bring you to victory and not to an untimely death."
He gave the order and the guard threw the lever that released the collar about Odahviing's neck, while two others turned the great wheels that pulled the yoke up to the ceiling far above. Now the dragon was free.

"I'm ready to shout Dragonrend at you if you try to escape," I said to him.

"Ah, the dov are not trustworthy beings, but I will be true to my word and take you to Skuldafn." Then the great dragon turned awkwardly in the hall and lumbered out onto the balcony, the rest of us following. Balgruuf, Irileth, Farengar, and the college mages arranged themselves at the balcony's low parapet while I approached the dragon.

"Are you ready to see Keizaal as only a dovah can?" he asked.

"In just a moment," I said. As eager as I was to be away, I could not leave without a last goodbye. "Well, my friends, I am off to meet my doom. Perhaps only Akatosh knows if I will return. I thank each of you, for you have all helped me in some way. If I do not return, you will find a good portion of treasure in my home. I ask that the majority go to the college, to further magical training for Skyrim's people, in the hope that they will grow less superstitious and less afraid of magic users. And I ask that some portion go to L..." My voice caught in my throat. "To my ... Oh, damn it to Oblivion!" I turned away from them, wiping at my tears with a sleeve.

"Yes," Brelyna said coming up beside me and putting a hand on my shoulder. "We will make sure that Lydia gets a portion of your wealth, should you fail to return. But something tells me this is not the last we will see of you."

"Thank you," I said. "Goodbye then." I stepped up onto Odahviing's neck and grasped his horns for handholds. "Now take me away from this city I would never look on again."

"Is this any way to see the Dragonborn off to her greatest battle?" Balgruuf demanded. "This isn't a funeral!" He thrust his fist in the air. "For Skyrim! For the Dragonborn!" Soon everyone assembled on the balcony was chanting along with him, but their words meant nothing to me.

Then Odahviing spread his wings and launched us out over the parapet, the cliffs of Dragonsreach dropping away so that we were instantly hundreds of feet in the air. With a lurch that nearly threw me from my seat, the dragon turned to the right, eastward. I looked down at the courtyard on that side of the palace and saw a lone figure standing there. She was already growing tiny, but I could see her black hair blowing in the wind. She did not wave.

I had no time to think about this, because then something else caught my eye, farther out on the plains far west of Whiterun – a thousand points of glittering sunlight reflected as if from burnished metal. And then I could look no more because my eyes flooded with tears once again, this time from the icy wind of our great speed. I crouched low over the dragon's back, seeing nothing of Skyrim as we raced toward my doom.

And so I came to Skuldafn, caring not whether I lived or I died. As Odahviing's winged shape receded into the distance, I saw that this was the same fane where Alduin had brought me in my dream, a many-leveled temple with high walls and terraces scaling the cliffs, decorated here and there with those crude dragon-head carvings set on columns of stone, all of it set in a natural bowl within the mountains. I looked around at the steep cliffs and the corniced ridges and knew that
Odahviing had been right: not even the most agile squirrel could find its way out of this cirque, let alone those who walked on two legs. If I was ever to leave this place, it would have to be through the portal to Sovngarde – wherever that was.

I was alone here, as alone as I had ever been, with only the draugr patrolling the temple walls to keep me company – and a dragon, which now launched itself toward me from one of the temple's high balconies.

Odahviing had set me down some distance from the fane itself, across a wide frozen pool spanned by a bridge and fed by frozen waterfalls pouring down from the heights. The dragon closed that distance in a matter of seconds. I had just time to shout Dragonrend at it before it swooped past and settled on a rocky promontory beyond me. I threw my knapsack aside, not wanting it to slow me in battle. Then the dragon blasted me with a shout of Yol-Toor-Shul. I felt the heat, but it did not burn.

"Hin Thu'um los sahlo," I taunted him.

Now my instinct for survival took hold, broken heart or no. I conjured my flame atronach to distract the dragon, then began launching whirlwind frost spells at it. When my Thu'um restored itself, I shouted Marked for Death, just as the fire demon exploded in a spray of flames. I could see that the dragon was already weak. I drew my sword and charged at him, dodging his snapping jaws and plunging the point of the sword down into his brain. I laughed as I felt the power of his soul enter my being, and felt my sorrow turning to anger and the reckless joy of battle.

An arrow landed next to me and I looked across the pool to see a draugr wight aiming another shot at me. The undead are usually oblivious to all but their most immediate surroundings, but this one couldn't help but notice the swirls of flame and energy that had just enveloped me. I dodged to the side, avoiding the arrow easily.

Very well, I thought, let's see if Drevis was right about these Illusion spells. I cast frenzy on the draugr and he turned his arrows on one of his fellows nearby. Then I heard a shout of "Ro-Dah!" to his right and knew that the frenzy spell was working. Soon three draugr – two wights and a death lord – were fighting each other. I crossed the bridge onto the platform where they battled, conjuring my atronach to join the fray. When only the death lord was left standing, I shouted Marked for Death at him, then rushed him. My sword skills were still weak, though Lydia had practiced with me often in camp. Yet I wanted to feel the joy of combat as I thrust and parried and felt my sword bury itself deep in the death lord's chest. It was as if I had cast a frenzy spell on myself. My sorrow and my anger would carry me through this awful place, and I fought with a recklessness and an abandon I had rarely known. The death lord fell at my feet, and I felt only elation.

I moved along the wide promenade skirting the base of the temple walls, looking for an entrance to the fane itself. Another dragon flew at me, but I vanquished him as easily as the first, then reached the steps leading up into the temple. Now I noticed a column of golden light shooting into the sky from the temple's highest level. It hadn't been there before. That must be Alduin's portal to Sovngarde, I thought. Why it had been activated now, I could only guess – perhaps as an alarm to the temple's guardians that an intruder was present?

Above me, walkways and steps led to higher levels. The place was huge, easily as large as the Plains District of Whiterun, laid out in a rectangular shape. Most of it was open to the skies, with a large, square building at the end opposite me, and the portal at its top. No steps scaled the outside of that fortress – I would have to enter it and find my way up from inside. But before that, I would have to get past the many wights and scourges and death lords patrolling the terraces and walls in between.
The silence of this place was oppressive. Perhaps it was a madness that took me, or a death wish, or perhaps I just missed Lydia's rallying shouts. I stood out in the middle of a wide plaza surrounded by the temple's walls, abandoning all stealth, and called out, "Hear me, servants of Alduin! I am the Dovahkiin, and I am making for the portal to Sovngarde. Stand aside or I will destroy you!"

Suddenly the place filled with the sound of many shambling feet and a wight appeared on the causeway above me. He shouted Unrelenting Force at me, but I only laughed – it barely made me stagger and hurt me but a little.

"Ha! Your Thu'um is weak, dead one," I shouted, then hit him with a frenzy spell.

Instantly he turned his attention to another draugr who was nearer to him. I moved farther up into the temple, passing beneath suspended walkways where I cast frenzy on any draugr I saw. One surprised me coming around a corner and I sent him scurrying away with a spell of rout. Soon the whole place was echoing with the harsh Ro-Dahs of the Nord dead.

And so I swept through Skuldafn like a fire through the dry grass of Cyrodiil. By the time I reached the great metal doors, a dozen draugr wights and death lords lay strewn about the temple's terraces, and I had fought only one of them myself. Within the tower, it was the same. I crept through its passages and halls, setting the draugr on one another, and sometimes using my own flame atronach as a distraction. They were already dead, so I felt no guilt about dispatching them once more. Nor did I worry about them coming back to life if I didn't sever their heads and burn their bodies to ash. If they proved so persistent, I would just set them to fighting each other once again, I felt such elation in their destruction. It had been long since I had let my anger come unleashed.

The tower had several door puzzles and hidden door levers, but I was used to the tricks of the ancient Nords by now. Skuldafn's doors opened as easily as its inhabitants fell. I passed through a chamber with a word wall where I learned to use Strun as a shout – it would call down the power of Skyrim's storms on my enemies. At last I came to a lone draugr guarding a door that required a dragon claw to unlock it. With no other draugr to set him after with a frenzy spell, I attacked him on my own, luring him into an oil trap which I then set alight. By the time my flame atronach and I were done with him, he was nothing but a pile of ash, with the dragon claw lying nearby. I quickly had the engravings on the door aligned in accordance with those on the dragon claw, and then the door opened.

I came back outdoors on the temple's highest level save one. I entertained myself by sending two death lords over the edge of the balcony, watching their bodies hurtle end over end, smashing into the frozen pool far below. My frenzy spell took care of two more.

Now I had only to ascend the stairs to the portal. Odahviing had mentioned something about a dragon priest guarding it, so I crept silently up the stairs and peered over the top. The summit of the temple was a long terrace flanked by two walls. On the top of each wall sat a dragon, one of them gray, the other red. Luckily, they hadn't noticed me yet. A tall dais stood in the center of the terrace, and just beyond it the column of light shot up into the sky.

I thought about making a dash for the portal, but the dragon priest Nahkriin must have expected me, I had created such a disturbance below. Now he floated up to the top of the dais and removed a staff from its center. Instantly the column of light disappeared. If I wanted to enter the portal, I would have to take the dragon priest's staff from him.

He turned and began looking about for me, but I had made myself invisible once more. Illusion magic having served me well so far, I cast a frenzy spell on him, and he began blasting one of the dragons with a lightning bolt from his staff. I crept back down the stairway and watched as the two
dragons launched themselves into the air, then landed on the terrace above me. I heard the roar of their fire and frost breaths as they blasted the dragon priest.

I crept back up the stairs and watched the battle unfold. Nahkriin was blasting one dragon then the other with his staff, to little effect. At the same time, he had backed himself into a corner and could not fly past the hulking dragons to escape the fury of their onslaught. In a few moments, he was reduced to a pile of ash, with the staff lying next to it.

If I thought I had remained hidden from the dragons, I was wrong. They both turned to me, and I drew breath for a shout.

Then one of them, the gray, spoke. "Hin Thu'um los mul, Dovahkiin" – your Thu'um is strong, Dragonborn.

"Alduin gevatzen rok los aan vobahlaan in," said the red one – Alduin has proven himself an unworthy master.

"Then travel to Sovngarde and help me defeat him."

"No, we will not follow you there, for we would only devour the souls of the mortal dead, as Alduin does."

I was surprised at their forbearance, but then I had a thought: how would I close the portal behind me? That seemed to be the function Nahkriin had served for Alduin.

As the two dragons resumed their stations atop the walls on either side, I went to the spot where the dragon priest had met his end. Within the pile of ash was one of those metal armatures that give the ghostly priests form, and next to it a grim-faced mask of metal, with down-turned mouth and eyes narrowed to baleful slits. I picked it up and felt the magical power emanating from it. It was certainly more powerful than my mage's circlet, and its grim features matched my mood. Yet it was heavy, and there was something else about it – a darkness, as if evil magics had been used to enchant it. I tossed it aside and took up the dragon priest's staff.

Ascending the dais, I saw that the tip of the staff would fit into a hole in its center. Beyond the dais was a circular patch of stonework decorated with engravings of two stylized dragons, nose to tail. There was no sign of anything that would emit a column of light. But once I placed the staff in its receptacle, the stonework swelled upward, then broke apart and began whirling around in a glowing maelstrom. The golden column shone upwards into the blue sky once more.

What would happen when I stepped into that portal? Would I become a spirit like the inhabitants of Sovngarde? Or would it transport me bodily to the land of the dead? How could that be? And how could I travel back to Nirn once I passed this way? But maybe it didn't matter. Perhaps in Sovngarde my suffering would end and I would choose never to leave. Or Alduin would win, and then nothing would matter. Come what may, I had to step into that column of light.

I turned to the dragons. "Will you destroy this portal after I enter it? No one will be left to guard it, and I doubt the rest of the dov will refrain from using it."

"We will do your bidding in this, Dovahkiin," said the gray dragon.

I turned back to the portal. If I didn't step into it now, I never would. I gave a little laugh. It is said that mortals have only one death to give, and so they should make it a good one. If to travel to Sovngarde was to die, then I would die well.

"To Sovngarde!" I shouted, then jumped down into the column of light.
I felt myself lifted up as I entered the swirling light. I could see nothing but ever-changing colors and flashes of what looked like stars. This went on for some time, whether long or short, I could not tell. Then my feet touched solid ground once more, and the swirling light gradually cleared. I stood at the top of a set of steps leading down into a mist-filled valley ringed with jagged peaks. Across this valley the rooflines of a great hall loomed above the fog – the destination of the souls of the Nord dead, I guessed. A path began at the foot of the steps, lined with gargantuan statues of hooded figures – the grim-faced kings and heroes of old.

It had been day when I stepped into the portal but here in Sovngarde the stars shone bright. Directly above was some sort of light, bright like the sun, but shimmering white like the light of the moons, ringed with swirling clouds. Perhaps this was the other end of that column of light on which I had traveled.

And now I heard a roaring coming from within the mist, the familiar call of a dragon. Out across the valley a winged shape appeared above the mists for just a moment then plunged back in. It was Alduin, and he was hunting the souls of the dead. I dashed down the steps, eager to challenge him to our final confrontation. Many months I had waited for this moment, and now I would tarry no longer.

Only then did I stop to consider in what form I had arrived in Sovngarde. I held my hands out in front of my face. They looked solid enough. I clapped them together. They felt solid enough. I slapped my cheek. I felt pain, just as I had in the land of the living. I took a deep breath and felt the air going in and out as my heart went on beating as usual. I was no ghost, but had traveled to Sovngarde with my body intact, just as that glimpse of Alduin showed that he was a corporeal being and not some shade of a dragon.

I continued down the steps and into the mist. It was so thick I could barely make out the way, finding myself clambering over rocks instead of following the path. Then I remembered I had a way to clear this fog. "Lok-Vah-Koor!" I shouted. The mists parted ahead of me and I soon found the path, but then the mists closed in again. I continued groping my way forward, waiting for my Thu'um to restore itself.

A figure loomed out of the gloom, so close that I nearly ran into him. He was a Nord, dressed in a Stormcloak uniform.

"Aiieee!" he cried, cringing, when he saw me.

"It's all right, friend," I said, and reached out to touch his arm. I was surprised to feel solid flesh. He was as real and alive as I was, save for one thing – he was cold, colder than any mortal could be and still live.
His eyes widened when he felt the warmth of my hand. "You've come from the land of the living! How did you come here if not on the death-road?"

"I followed Alduin through his portal from Nirn. I am here to challenge him."

"You are doom-driven indeed to dare travel here – and to face Alduin! He hunts us here in this mist-covered vale. I have been fortunate to escape him so far. He has already feasted on many of my comrades."

"How did you come here?"

"In the usual way. My war-band was ambushed by the Imperials. We fought bravely, holding our shield wall steady and felling many of their warriors. But an arrow took me and I never learned how the battle turned out. Still, it was a good death, and it put me on the path to Sovngarde. Yet now I doubt I will reach the Hall of Valor, these mists are so thick."

"What causes them?"

"They spring from Alduin himself. He shouts and they spew forth, snaring us in this valley. He is cunning. I have heard the dying screams of many of my comrades. They are more awful than the deaths of the living, for it is a death more awful and final than any known to mortal kind. There is no comfort for a soul facing Alduin's jaws, only the grim knowledge that he will soon become one with the World Eater. I dare not go on."

"Come, follow me, and I will clear these mists and keep Alduin at bay. I will lead you to the Hall of Valor. What is your name, friend?"

"Stenvar," he said, and made reluctantly to follow. I used the Clear Skies shout again. When the mists parted, Alduin was there, not twenty paces away. He leapt into the air before I could think to attack, and I could not shout Dragonrend at him until my Thu'um was restored. Next to me, Stenvar trembled.

"Ah, you have followed me, Dovahkiin," Alduin called down. "You are persistent in pursuit of your doom. But you cannot prevent my feasting on the souls of your countrymen, these mists are so thick." Then he was gone, disappearing into the fog once more.

"You see, Stenvar, Alduin runs from me. You have nothing to fear." But a moment later Alduin made my words folly, swooping down silently from behind us and grasping Stenvar in his talons. I shouted Dragonrend at him, to no effect. Either my shout missed him, or something in this mist shielded him from me. It was too awful. I had promised to protect Stenvar, and yet I was helpless. Alduin disappeared into the mists, and Stenvar's screams were awful to hear. Then, abruptly, they ended.

I walked farther into that valley, cursing my boastful mouth, still groping through the mists and saving my breath for Dragonrend, should Alduin show himself again. When he did, I would be ready and I would not miss him this time. The path wound between crag and tor, with here and there another of the grim statues, ominous guardians of the way. Yet they could offer no help to those of us who walked this vale. I could still hear Alduin's roaring, farther ahead now.

Time passed and I had yet to arrive at the hall, though it had seemed but a mile distant when I first saw it. Then another figure appeared from out of the mists, this time a woman in Imperial uniform. She told a story much the same as Stenvar's, having died in battle with the Stormcloaks.

"Careful, my friend," she said, "for Alduin hunts us in these mists. Make your way to Shor's Hall, if
you can, and tell them of our great peril. Ysgramor and the heroes of old, the great god Tsun, even Shor himself – all are within. Surely they will not deny us once they know of our need."

I was about to argue with her, to tell her that I was here to face Alduin, not to meet the gods in their hall, when Alduin roared again. Now he was much closer, right behind us. I turned and shouted Dragonrend in the direction of his roaring, the rippling shockwave of my shout hitting him as he emerged from the mists. Again it had no effect. I hit him with a fireball spell as he closed with us, but it too did nothing. He hung his head down on his long neck, jaws open as he swooped past, snatching the Imperial soldier from where she cowered next to me. The buffeting of the World Eater's wings knocked me from my feet. When I stood up, nothing but fog and silence surrounded me.

I had wanted only to throw myself against Alduin's might, yet he would not let me near him. "Come out and face me, vile wyrm!" I screamed into the mists. "Why do you fly away?"

There was no answer. It seemed I was at the World Eater's mercy, since my attacks had no effect. Yet he had taken the Nords and avoided me, twice now. Did the mists make it impossible for us to attack each other? It was a mystery.

I walked on. Again it seemed I should have come to the Hall of Valor twice over by now. I used Clear Skies again, since Dragonrend seemed useless. The mists parted for a short distance, far enough for me to see a set of steps leading up a slope, with paths leading off to left and right around the crag. I began climbing the steps, hoping to rise above the mists.

I had been climbing upwards for some time, thinking the fog would never end, when I heard a voice off to my left. "Who's there? By Ysmir, tell me Alduin has gone away!"

I walked toward the voice and soon encountered a man crouching beneath an overhang of rock. He was dressed in the plain tunic and rough boots of a farmer. He looked familiar.

"You!" he said when he saw me. "You come from the land of the living!"

"I do," I said, though I wondered how he could know it.

"Was that you I heard shouting?"

"It was."

"Who are you?"

"I am Deirdre Morningsong, and some call me the Dragonborn. I am the one who defeated Alduin and sent him here. Now I aim to put an end to him once and for all."

His eyes grew wide. "You slew Alduin in the world of the living? Then you are a better fighter than I am. It was this very dragon who sent me here. I died protecting my family from the World Eater."

"I know you! You're Bjorn Sheep-Shearer!"

"How do you know that?"

I faltered then. I hated to think how I had last seen him. "Your name ... it is well known in Whiterun after you fought to protect your family."

"I fear my efforts did little good."
"Yet they were not in vain. You bought time for your children to escape."

"Harry and Huldi? They still live? How do you know that?"

"I … met them in Whiterun, at the Temple of Kynareth. Danica Pure-Spring was caring for them."

"My wife, Agna, she didn't…?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," he said. "Yet I haven't seen her here…"

"Come," I said, "we should ponder the vagaries of the afterlife later. I must get to the Hall of Valor, in hopes of finding some way to conquer the World Eater. Maybe Shor himself will come out to help us. Follow me if you can, and I will do my best to protect you. But I warn you, I could do little for the other souls I have encountered on the path."

We set off up the steps, Bjorn looking around warily. Soon we emerged from the mists and saw that we were on a broad tor that kept rising in the direction we were walking. I turned to look the way I had come. This mist-filled valley stretched to the mountains and the steps where I had entered this place. Alduin was busy over there, swooping and diving into the mist.

"Come, let's make haste," I said, "while Alduin is elsewhere."

We kept climbing up the slope and soon came to the crag's summit. Beyond it was the Hall of Valor, very close now, its imposing roofline on a level with the peak where we stood. This side of the crag plunged steeply down to a wide terrace, and from there a bridge made from the skeleton of some gargantuan beast spanned a chasm to the hall itself.

"Quickly! Let's get down there," I said. We found our way down through the rocks, the mist enveloping us once more. I used the Clear Skies shout to open the way.

 Ahead of us, across a clearing, steps led up onto the terrace and from there a path led to the entrance to the skeleton bridge, a narrow passage created by the beast's upright hip bones. The mists did not reach this far. The way to the hall was clear – save for the brute of a Nord warrior guarding the entrance. He was huge, more than eight feet tall, his muscled torso bare from the waist up, and a broad axe slung across his back. He had shoulder length brown hair and a short beard.

We approached and he addressed me, ignoring Bjorn. "What brings you to Shor's honored halls, grim wayfarer? Seldom do the living wander here in Sovngarde, soul's end. And it has been many turnings of Nirn since any have passed through Alduin's mists."

"I am the Dragonborn, and my doom is to pursue Alduin to his end, or mine. Yet somehow I cannot come at him in these mists."

"A fateful errand! No few have chafed to face the wyrm since first he set his soul snare here on Sovngarde's threshold. But Shor restrained our wrath. Perhaps, deep-counseled, he foresaw your doom."

"Perhaps Shor will know how I can defeat Alduin in this place. I seek entrance to his hall. It took me a moment to realize how strange it was – I had just asked for an audience with a god. But what the Nord warrior said next was even more strange."

"You will not find him here, for his mien is so bright that not even the souls of the dead can look
on him. I am Tsun, shield thane to Shor."

Tsun! One of the divines of the Old Nordic pantheon, the god of trials against adversity. Next to me, Bjorn sank to his knees.

"Will you help me defeat Alduin?" I asked. "Or show me how I may do it?" Surely between the two of us we could vanquish the World Eater!

He shook his head. "No, that is not my role. But there are those within who may assist you."

"Then may I have entrance?"

"Living or dead, worthy errand or no, by decree of Shor none may pass the whalebone bridge until I deem them worthy by the Warrior's Test."

In the next instant he was pulling the broad axe from behind his back and shouting at us. "Fus-Ro-Dah!" His shout staggered me and sent Bjorn flying – fortunately for Bjorn, because it got him out of the way. Then Tsun was upon me, his axe raised for a mighty blow. My own Unrelenting Force shout caught him square in the chest, staggering him in return. I hit him with a fireball before he could recover, knocking him back another pace. It cannot be this easy to best a god, I thought.

I was right. I was readying another spell when he shouted again, surprising me with how quickly his Thu'um had restored itself. The shout interrupted my spell-casting, and then he was upon me again. This time I could only dodge to my right. But not quite in time. The axe's curved blade caught my upper arm as I turned with it, slicing deep and knocking me to the stone terrace.

At least I had the presence of mind to roll with the fall, putting some distance between us as Tsun lumbered after me. Then I was on my feet and running toward the head of the stairs. Reaching them, I turned and blasted him with another fireball. But now I could only single-cast, my left arm dangling limply at my side. He did not stagger but kept coming toward me, his armor and his hair ablaze. I began backing around the terrace, moving slowly over the rock slabs, blasting him as often as I could. Still he kept coming. Blood ran down my arm, yet I dared not take time to heal myself.

Then I backed into a standing whale bone. Tsun raised his axe for a final blow.

So this is how it would end, I thought. I would never reach the Hall of Valor. I would never face Alduin. I would die here at the hands of Shor's gate-keeper. Then I felt my Thu'um restore itself. "Fus-Ro-Dah!" I shouted, and Tsun staggered as I crumpled to the ground with my back against the standing bone.

Tsun stood upright and sheathed his axe across his back. "You fought well, Dragonborn. Your Thu'um is stronger than any I have felt in many an age. I find you worthy to enter the Hall of Valor." He reached a hand down to help me up, and I took it.

I cast a close wounds spell on myself, then reached into my robes for a healing potion. That stopped the bleeding and muted the pain. I felt better, but a bit light-headed. Then I looked around for Bjorn. He was watching from some distance away, crouched behind a rock. Now he rose stiffly and made his way over to us. He was bruised and there was a gash over his right eye. He had survived Tsun's shout, but I knew that he would not survive a battle with the god.

"Great Tsun," I said, adopting my humblest tones. "I can vouch for the valor of this man, Bjorn Sheep-Shearer. I saw him fight Alduin bravely and die in the World Eater's maw, all to protect his family."
"You saw it?" Bjorn asked. "But how…?"

I shook my head at him, then turned back to Tsun. "I ask that you allow him to enter the Hall of Valor along with me."

Tsun considered for a moment. "It's true that he survived my shout. Not every soul who comes here can say as much."

"Wait," Bjorn said. "Have you seen my wife, Agna? We died on the same day, yet I fear she couldn't get past you, even if she found herself on the path to Sovngarde."

"None has come this way since Alduin set the soul snare. And I would remember a farm wife, since never before has such a one walked this way."

"Yet she showed a kind of valor," I said. "It's true she did not confront Alduin, but she shouted at her children to run, even as the dragon bore down upon her."

Bjorn looked at me quizzically once more. Then he turned back to Tsun. "It is a hard thing that Shor's gift to the honored dead separates them from their loved ones. Tell me, what happens to those who fail your test?"

"Their souls merge into the All-Soul of Aetherius," Tsun said, "along with all those deemed unworthy to walk this road."

"Then I would have you send me there, so I can be with my Agna."

"Wait," I said, putting a hand on his arm. "Do you know that you will forget who you were in life, just as Agna will? It will be no happily ever after with your loved one, if that's what you were imagining."

"Better an eternity of blissful nothingness than one without Agna. Not all the mead and songs of Shor's Hall could heal the bitter loss I feel."

At that moment, I envied him his choice. If only I could choose that nothingness as well, I thought. And I could have, if I had let Tsun defeat me. Yet my doom drove me on – that, and pity for the souls Alduin was devouring even now.

"Very well," said Tsun. He turned to me. "You may make your way across the Whalebone Bridge."

"If you live to see Skyrim once more," Bjorn said to me, "tell my children I love them."

"I will," I said, then passed through the passage to the bridge. The whale's spine formed the bridge itself, with its massive ribs making steps like a ladder laid flat.

I came to the doors of the great hall. Within, it was as grand as without, far larger than any palace in Skyrim. A throng of Nords filled the place, men and women in hide armor toasting and singing war songs. A long table ran the length of the main hall, laden with roast pig, bread, honey, fruits of all sorts, and tankards of mead. Beyond the table, two whole oxen roasted on large spits set over pits of blazing coals. More wings of the hall were to the left and right, one with rows of large barrels, no doubt filled with mead, ale, and wine. For a hall of the dead, the place certainly catered to Nirnly delights.

Before I could take in any more of the place, a grizzled old warrior approached. He was stout and hale, with a full beard that grew down to his chest and long gray hair. I recognized him as
Ysgramor from his statue in Jorrvaskr.

"Ah, Dragonborn. Long has our door stood empty, since Alduin first set his soul snare. Many here would meet the foul wyrm in battle, but Shor forbade it until your arrival."

"Where is the lord of this hall? I see his throne sits empty." It was on a raised platform beyond the roasting oxen, the pride of place at the high table. "I seek his advice and aid."

Ysgramor gave the same answer as Tsun. Apparently he was nowhere to be found. "Yet three heroes await you here. From them you will find aid."

He gestured to a group of Nords standing near the entrance to the barrel hall – two warriors, one male and one female, and a mage. I recognized them as Hakon, Gormlaith, and Felldir, the Tongues who had used the Elder Scroll on Alduin.

I descended the short flight of steps into the hall and began making my way toward them through the crowd of drinking and singing heroes. The revelers must have sensed that I was one of the living, because they became quiet and their eyes grew wide as I passed, as if they had seen a ghost.

The hall was silent by the time I reached the three heroes of the Dragon War. They looked at me with as much surprise as all the rest.

Felldir the Old spoke first. "The lord of this hall told us to expect a doom-bound hero, but we didn't expect…"

I groaned. "A Breton? I do have some Nord blood as well."

"It is passing strange," said Hakon One-Eye. "None but true-blooded Nords have passed these doors since Shor first gave his gift to the people of Skyrim."

"Never mind that," said Gormlaith Golden-Hilt. "Give me one of noble heart over pure blood any day. And this day we will be thankful of her dragonblood."

"Yes, no one can know the mind of Akatosh," Felldir said.

"Neither do I know why Akatosh chose me as the Dragonborn, yet here I am. I will make Alduin pay the death-price, if only he will let me near him, and for that, it seems I need your aid."

"It is the mists he has woven in the valley," Felldir said. "They make him immune to all attacks."

"Then what can I do?"

"Let us join our Voices together," said Gormlaith. "This Dragonborn's Thu'um must be strong if it has brought her here. Together we will shout the skies of Sovngarde clear once more! Then Alduin must face us, as he did long ago."

"Gladly will I join you in battle, Dragonborn, Breton or no," Hakon said. "Long has my axe been silent. Now I would let it taste of Alduin's blood once again!"

A great cheer rose up in the hall. "Down with Alduin!" they cried out. "Let the souls of our dead walk the path to Sovngarde without fear!"

Gormlaith was looking at me. "You look wan, Dragonborn. Are you sure you're ready to face the World Eater? Would you take some refreshment before we confront him?"

I knew she was right. I was still feeling light-headed and weak after my encounter with Tsun.
"Perhaps just a sweetroll," I said. "And a cup of mead."

We sat at the great table in the middle of the hall, the three Tongues watching me as I ate, and the rest of the hall silent once more. The mead was the sweetest I had ever tasted.

Finally Hakon One-Eye spoke up "What's the matter with all of you? Is this any way to send heroes off to battle?" Then a bard broke into "The Dragonborn Comes."

*Our hero, our hero claims a warrior's heart.* Somehow the song didn't bother me as much as it once had. If ever there was a time to sing it, it was now.

Then Felldir asked me how it happened that I had stalked Alduin to Sovngarde. I told them of retrieving the Elder Scroll, of witnessing them using Dragonrend on Alduin, and then my own battle with the World Eater.

"And you defeated him on your own?" Gormlaith asked, her voice skeptical.

"No, I had the help of Paarthurnax and my … housecarl."

"Paarthurnax!" Felldir exclaimed. "So he still helps mortalkind?"

"Yes, though some say we cannot trust him, that he must pay for the atrocities he committed before the Dragon War."

"Then they are fools!" Hakon said, pounding the table with his fist. "Without Paarthurnax, Nords would still feel the dragons' talons on their necks. We never would have won the Dragon War." His two companions nodded in agreement.

I drained the last of my mead.

"Come, my friends, it is time, if the Dragonborn is ready," Gormlaith said. "Let us go out and face the World Eater with gladness in our hearts."

"I am indeed ready to have this over and done," I said. "But there is no gladness in my heart, and I doubt there will be ever again. Yet I am content, whether I go to victory or to my end. I will have rest from my long questing – either the rest of Aetherius' eternal sleep, or the well-earned rest due the victors in battle."

"Then you are doom-driven indeed," Gormlaith said. "Come, brothers, let us help the Dragonborn to make such an end that the bards will sing of it for a thousand years!"

With that we rose from the table and left those hallowed halls. Outside, it was still the eternal night of Sovngarde, lit by the light of Aetherius. In the shadowed vale, the mists still stirred and Alduin still roared. We crossed the Whalebone Bridge and met Tsun once more.

"The eyes of Shor are upon you this day," he said. "Defeat Alduin and destroy his soul snare."

Shor was watching? Then why didn't he come down and slay Alduin himself? Or, better still, why didn't Akatosh? He was the one who had set me on this path. Were we just the gods' playthings? I felt like a warrior in the Imperial City Arena, whose life or death served only as entertainment for a drunken throng. But I couldn't bother with that, not now. I must fulfill my destiny, whether I was just a toy of the gods or no.

We descended the steps to the edge of the fog. "Let us try our Voices on this mist," Felldir said. "Together!"
"Lok-Vah-Koor!" we shouted, and the mists parted. But then we heard an answering shout from farther along the valley, where the crag in front of us blocked our view. "Ven-Mul-Riik!" The mists returned, as thick as ever.

"Again!" Hakon commanded, and again we shouted. But again Alduin answered us and the mists returned.

"Is there no end to his power?" Hakon said.

"No, he is weakening," said Gormlaith. "Let us shout once more!"

Again we shouted and the mists cleared. This time there was no answering shout, but a roar of frustration and rage. Then we heard the beating of vast wings and Alduin was there on the crag above us. "Pahlok joorre," he said. "Hin kah fen kos bonaar!" He had said the same thing at Helgen. I hadn't understood him then, but now I did. "Foolish mortals, your pride will be humbled!" he had taunted us.

"You said that to me once before, World Eater, but still I am not humble!"

"Now for him!" Gormlaith shouted.

Gormlaith and Hakon drew their bows and began shooting while Felldir and I blasted Alduin with spells of frost and lightning. Then Alduin hit us with his fire breath, forcing us back.

"Spread out!" Gormlaith said.

Alduin launched himself from his perch and began swooping on each of us in turn. I tumbled out of his way just as his talons were about to close on me, but Hakon was not so lucky. The World Eater snatched him up and carried him to the top of the crag. Then, in full view of us, he clamped his fangs across Hakon's neck and torso and the Nord hero was no more. All that was left of him – his soul – swirled up in that familiar whirl of flame and energy and entered Alduin.

The dragon grinned down at us. "Ah, your friend's soul was powerful indeed. I am nearly strong enough to return to Nirn and finish my task. Perhaps next I will feast on the soul of the Dragonborn!"

Gormlaith stared at the World Eater for a moment, too shocked to speak. Then something seemed to snap inside her. "No!" she roared. "I will have vengeance for my sword-brother." Then she shouted, just as Alduin again took wing. "Joor-Zah-Frul!" The World Eater came down in the clearing between the terrace and the crag, and Gormlaith was charging at him, sword held high.

Felldir and I hit him with our spells, which now had better effect. Alduin shrank back under their impact and could not parry Gormlaith's attack. She bashed his snout with her shield, then slashed at him with her sword. He snapped at her again and again, but she dodged his jaws, countering each time with sword and shield. Yet, as effective as her attacks were, we dared not shout and hit her as well. Then the dragon blasted her with his fire breath and for that she had no defense. She went to one knee.

Instead of finishing her, Alduin launched himself into the air. Felldir and I both shouted Dragonrend at him the moment he was clear of Gormlaith, while she tried to crawl away. The World Eater came crashing back to the ground, this time close to Felldir. I hit him with spell after spell, staggering him each time in hopes of keeping him off the mage. Felldir was backing away while casting his own spells. Then our magicka ran out at the same time, and Alduin shouted "Yol-Toor-Shul" at the old mage, enveloping him in fire. Like Gormlaith, Felldir went to one knee and
tried to scramble away from that fearsome blast.

Alduin could have finished him then, yet he took flight once again. I shouted Dragonrend, but too late, the World Eater was moving so fast.

"Now, Dovahkiin, see if you can catch me before I reach the portal," he said as he circled above the terrace, and then he was flying toward the other end of the valley.

"No!" I shouted after him. Gormlaith and Felldir were still on their knees, but I had no time to help them. I had to stop Alduin before he reached the portal. If he escaped to Nirn, then all was lost.

I ran down the path circling the crag, Gormlaith calling after me, "No, Dragonborn, wait!" But I could not wait. I used Whirlwind Sprint to cover the distance more rapidly and then I was out of earshot of the two surviving heroes.

I rounded the crag and saw that Alduin had landed near the head of the valley, at the foot of the steps. He wasn't making for the portal after all. He had tricked me into meeting him on my own.

"Now we face each other as equals," he said.

I've got my wish at last, I thought as I walked toward him. After so many months of doubt and wandering, I had come to this end. I tried to summon that passion and outrage that had fueled me thus far – my vow to Harry and Huldi and Olaf's family that I would have revenge on their loved ones' murderer. But now that all seemed far away, mattering little here in Sovngarde. And preventing the world's end – it was just too big a task. No, I was likely to lose myself in the fire of Alduin's Thu'um, and I did not care, as I had cared about nothing since that moment Lydia walked out of my door.

But then a great revulsion swept over me. To let Alduin devour my soul, to become part of him – it was too awful. He had made me see through his eyes once before, and I would not do it again, certainly not for all eternity. Just the thought of it kindled my anger. If I was ready to let my life slip from me, my dragon soul would not give up so easily.

Then I felt something else contending with the anger and the hatred for Alduin. It is said that those about to die see a vision of their lives flash before their eyes. And I saw, not my whole life, nor its most traumatic events, but those sweetest moments I had shared with Lydia in the past weeks. And only then did I realize what a fool I had been. Why did I need to bind her to me forever? Why could I not be content with the joy I felt at each moment in her presence?

Then I vowed to myself that if I came through this trial, and if the gods allowed me to return to the mortal plane, I would go to Lydia and plead her forgiveness, her mercy even. I knew in my heart that she would pardon my youthful foolishness. She would take me back, she had to. And then our future life flashed before my eyes. I saw us living a quiet life together in Breezehome. We could travel Skyrim together, but only in good weather, and I would teach her the names of the flowers, and at night we would lie on our backs on soft grass and look at the stars. Or we would travel to Cyrodiil and she could show me the Imperial City, which I had longed to see since I was a child.

And with that vision, hope was kindled within my breast, and a great gladness. And that gladness mingled with my anger. I entered that contest with Alduin as one whose doom is certain – to defeat the World Eater and return to the love of my life.

Lydia was not here to shout rallying cries, so I did. "For Bjorn and Agna!" I shouted as I approached Alduin. "For Olaf! For Lydia! For all of Mundus!" Now we were just paces apart.
"You have grown arrogant, Dovahkiin," Alduin said. "Now we will contend as dragonkind do, with our Voices."

And so our contest began. Some call a battle between dragons a deadly debate between those whose words are fire and ice, death and dismay. And so it was with us. The statues of the ancient heroes looked down on us as if judging the merits of our arguments. Alduin's were perhaps more glib, with shorter pauses between shouts, for he seemed to have an inexhaustible Thu'um. But mine were the more cogent. His shouts of Fo-Krah-Diin and Yol-Toor-Shul washed over me like summer rain followed by warm sunshine. He could not shake the silence I had taken deep within me. But my Thu'um shook him to the core. He staggered under each shout, and each time a look of fear grew in the baleful orbs of his eyes.

We traded several shouts of Fire and Frost and Unrelenting Force. Then, sensing that he was on losing ground, Alduin sought to intensify the argument. He called fire out of the sky, and great blazing boulders began raining down all around. His other shouts I could treat as mere words, but these flaming rocks were too real – if one hit me it would be my end.

"Lok-Vah-Koor!" I heard from behind me, and the rain of boulders ceased. Gormlaith and Felldir had recovered and come to my aid.

"I thank you, friends," I said, keeping my eyes on Alduin, "but that is the only assistance I need. This is between Alduin and me."

"As you say, Dovahkiin," said Felldir. "It is as prophesied."

I heard Gormlaith clashing her sword and shield together, and I knew she was not happy with this.

"Your arrogance will be your end, Dragonborn," said Alduin, hitting me again with Unrelenting Force. I did not stagger.

"Krii-Lun-Aus!" I shouted at him. He did stagger, and the glow in his eyes became less bright.

"Your Thu'um is strong," he said when he had recovered. "But you cannot match the strength of my jaws or the sharpness of my claws." He lunged out at me with his fangs, but I jumped back.

"So, you would change the terms of this debate?"

"You think there should be rules of mortal combat? That there can be fair play when the fate of the world is at stake?"

"Well, if there are no rules..." I said, and hit him with a fireball spell. It staggered him for a moment, then he came rushing at me. "Feim!" I shouted, and I laughed as his jaws bit down on my ethereal form. I took the opportunity of his confusion to run behind him, conjuring my flame atronach as I went. He spun around, searching for me, but became distracted by the fire demon, though it was no more than a gnat to one of his power.

I cast invisibility on myself and ran up the slope at the side of the narrow valley. The atronach disappeared in a burst of flames.

"Where are you, nivahriin joor?" he demanded.

"Here!" I called as I sent another fireball down at him. I followed that up by shouting "Kaan!" It was the first word of the Kyne's Peace shout, meant to calm wild animals.

"What's this?" Alduin demanded, indignant. "You would treat me as a beast of the wild? You
humans are the beasts compared to the *dov*, firstborn of Akatosh!” Then he gasped as he sought to
draw breath for a shout. My calming shout had at least slowed his attack. I thought of him as a
beast, and in shouting I had made it so.

He screamed, an utterance unintelligible to mortal or *dov*, then sought to launch himself into the
skies. I had used only one word of the Kyne's Peace shout, and my Thu'um was ready. The World
Eater came crashing back to the ground under the weight of my Dragonrend shout.

I began hitting him with spell after spell, staggering him each time as he tried to come at me. I
retreated after each blast, backing carefully over the rough valley floor. I hit him with another
Marked for Death shout, and he appeared to grow weaker. Still, it seemed his life force was
inexhaustible. I kept hitting him with fireball and ice storm spells, forcing him back and weakening
him further. There was desperation in his eyes now, as he faced his true end. Never had I felt so
little inclined to mercy.

Then my magicka ran out and he was rushing at me. My Thu'um had not restored itself, and there
was no time to reach for a magicka potion. I only had time to draw my sword. I would end this
journey as I had begun it, as a mere girl of the woods, fighting for my survival with tooth and nail.

The World Eater kept his head low and his snapping jaws thrust forward as he charged. I timed my
movement perfectly, rolling to my right as his jaws clamped down on the space where I had just
been. In the next instant he was rearing up to look for me. He spotted me, and this time I rolled
directly at him, tumbled past his plunging jaws and coming up with my sword thrust upward into
his exposed neck.

There was a hiss of steam, and then fiery black blood poured out of him, covering me. That was the
first time in the battle that I was truly hurt, scalded by Alduin's lifeblood. Perhaps only the cooling
effect of my sword of frost saved me.

I let go of the sword and dove out from beneath him as he slumped heavily to the ground. I looked
for him to rise again, knowing I couldn't defend myself from further onslaught. But Alduin was
done. He would rise no more.

Gormlaith and Felldir began cheering, "All hail the Dragonborn, hail her with great praise!" I
ignored their cheers and waited, expecting to absorb Alduin's soul, as I had done with every other
dragon I had slain. But this time, the dragon writhed as if in agony as the swirl of fire and energy
enveloped it. That swirling was not aimed at me but toward the sky. Alduin's scales began cracking
and coming off in great chunks, revealing a smaller dragon form within, not quite a skeleton, but a
kind of *dovunculus*, black as ebony and smelling of death.

Then I heard Alduin's voice, as if from far away. "No, Dovahkiin, though you have vanquished
me, you will not devour my soul. There is no need. I am already within you. For I am nothing but
the principle of destruction, the will to annihilation that lives within every being. You cannot
defeat me."

Then his blackened form burst apart, sending a shockwave of energy through Sovngarde, nearly
knocking the three of us from our feet. When it was over, nothing of the World Eater remained.

The heroes of old came up to congratulate me with words of praise and adulation that should have
stayed with me for an eternity. Yet I could barely heed them, with Alduin's final words ringing in
my ears, words that haunt me to this day.
Fort Amol

Chapter Summary

-- return to Nirn -- balancing dark with light -- the possibility of redemption --
Odahviing bends the knee -- journey towards home, and Lydia -- Deirdre dreams of the future -- shocking news -- an attack on Whiterun -- a search among the refugees --
Deirdre loses all hope --

A blizzard raged as I stepped out onto High Hrothgar's front porch. It had been snowing since my return from Sovngarde the day before. It promised to be a rough trip down to Ivarstead, but this didn't much concern me. I was on my way to Lydia, and that's all that mattered. The storm made it impossible to glissade down the mountain's west face – even my strongest Become Ethereal shout couldn't save me from plunging to my death down those rime-iced cliffs hidden in the whiteout. Yet not even the addition of two days to my journey could dampen my spirits. I didn't care how long my road was, as long as Lydia was at the end of it.

A short distance down the path, I smelled smoke. That was strange, I thought. I looked around for its source, but could see nothing in the whiteout. Even nearby crags were lost in the swirl of snow. Still the smell of smoke persisted, borne on the wind from the west. Probably just pilgrims caught out by the storm, I told myself, though where they had found wood this far above tree line, I couldn't explain. Nor could I explain why they were so far off the path to the west, where there was nothing but couloirs and cliffs. I resolved to keep my eye out for travelers in need of help, then thought no more of it. Instead, I pondered Paarthurnax's words to me on my return to the Throat of the World.

I had not tarried long in Sovngarde after defeating Alduin, I was so eager to get back to Nirn and Whiterun and Lydia. When Tsun offered to shout me back to Nirn, I accepted it without hesitation. Yet before I could depart, he shared another shout with me, Hun-Kal-Zoor, the Call of Valor, which would bring a hero from Sovngarde to fight for me. Then Gormlaith and Felldir made their farewells, and Tsun shouted "Nahl-Daal-Vus!" I felt the same feeling of flying up into the swirling Aetherial light, then sometime later felt my feet land on the solid ice plateau at the Throat of the World.

I could just barely make out Paarthurnax through the swirling snow, sitting atop the word wall. Dark shapes, dragons, circled about in the whiteout, exulting over Alduin's death.

"Mu los vomir!" one said. "We are free!"

"Alduin has fallen! Our mighty overlord is vanquished!" cried others.

Then finally, "Dovahkiin los ok dovahkriid!" "The Dragonborn is his dragonslayer."

I still could not quite believe it was true. My task was over. Yet all I could think of was finding Lydia and pleading for her forgiveness. Still, I couldn't leave the Throat of the World without having a word with Paarthurnax. I had yet to tell him of the Blades' plans to kill him.

"Hail, Dovahkiin," he said as I approached. "So, it is done. Alduin is vanquished, he who came before all others, and who has always been."
"That may be so," I said. "Yet I cannot be sure." I told him of the swirling energy that had left Alduin's body and risen to Aetherius.

"Hmmm," Paarthurnax pondered. "It may be that Alduin will return to fulfill his role at the end of days. But you have postponed that day – for how long, I cannot tell, but no doubt for many ages of man."

"Yet there is something more. In his last moments, he said he could not truly be defeated, that he is the universal principle of annihilation that lives within us all."

"This is no more than you already know. You have contended with your dragon soul since first you came to High Hrothgar, and even before that."

I wondered how he could know that. Had he and Arngeir been discussing me? I looked down at the packed snow on which I stood, not daring to look at the old dragon as I spoke. "I had hoped that slaying Alduin would also put an end to my own dragon soul."

"Have you learned nothing of what the Greybeards taught you? You cannot defeat your inner self. You can only balance the inner with the outer, the dark with the light. You can never drive out the dark entirely, for even the brightest light casts a shadow. Even the sun blinds those who look on it too long. No, it is only by balancing the two, by looking neither too much into the light nor too long into the shadows, that one can see truly."

My head remained bowed. This was hardly comforting. "I thought my struggles would be at an end once I vanquished Alduin, that now I could live a life of contentment and peace. But you describe a life of constant discipline and effort. Must I always feel divided against myself?"

"You will struggle for all of your days, Dovahkiin, as have I. I strive daily to balance the forces within me. We of the doovah sos were made to dominate, you see. The will to power is in our blood. You feel it within yourself, do you not?"

I nodded. I had to admit that I did, though I kept it well hidden, even from myself.

"I have overcome my nature only through meditation and long study of the Way of the Voice. No day goes by when I am not tempted to return to my inborn nature. Zin krif horvut se suleyk – there is honor in fighting the lure of power."

I looked him in the eye then. "The Blades say you deserve to die."

He regarded me for a long moment. "And what do you say, Dovahkiin?"

"I do not know," I said.

"Hmm. They are wise not to trust me, as I do not trust my dov brethren. Only the Greybeards, and now perhaps you, know that I can be trusted."

"Yet it's more than that. They say you can never be forgiven for your deeds from before the Dragon War."

If a dragon's eyes could show sadness, he showed it then. "Krosis. It is true, I was a loyal follower of Alduin, and humans suffered greatly under our rule. I knew no other way. And I did not fully understand the suffering we caused. But I turned aside from that path, as you know, and have sought to redeem the great evil I did. Which is more worthy, to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?"
"I do not know, yet I believe you have redeemed yourself. I will not be your judge. I will leave that to Akatosh and Stendarr."

"There is one thing I can yet do to redeem myself," Alduin said. He stretched his wings. With one great beat of them he was airborne, circling above me in the swirling snow. "The dov rejoice in the vanquishing of their overlord. Yet who knows what mayhem they will wreak without guidance? With Alduin gone, they may bow to the rightness of my Thu'um. I may yet make them followers of the Way."

"I wish you success," I said. "I would be glad never to slay another dragon as long as I live. I am looking forward to a quiet life."

"You have won a mighty victory, Dovahkiin, and gained great power. Rest and a quiet life are not for those who have been granted such gifts. Savor your triumph, but this is not the last of what you will write on the currents of time."

With that, he was gone, and one by one the rest of the dragons followed him. All save one, a red dragon with horns radiating in a circular pattern from his head. He descended and landed before me in a swirl of snow. It was Odahviing.

"Ah, so the old one goes to teach his Way of the Voice to the dov. I wish him luck, but I doubt they will listen."

"And what of you?"

"I have come to pay homage to your Thu'um, Dovahkiin. You have gained a mighty victory. I now name you Thuri, Overlord. Call me, and I will come when I can and when I may. But do not call too often, or expect me to stay too long. I am still a dovah, after all." And with that, he flew off after the rest of his kind.

Now, descending the Seven Thousand Steps, the thought of Alduin's soul energy remaining at large in Mundus troubled me. Had I only put off the day of destruction once more? And worse was the thought that he might yet live within me. Would I never be free of him? These were mysteries I couldn't solve.

Instead I tried to divert my thoughts by wondering what Lydia was doing. Going about her renewed duties with Balgruuf's hirth? Or pining away for me in the barracks? I preferred to think it was the latter, entertaining myself with visions of Lydia running into my arms the moment she saw me. I knew it was just a fantasy, but it was better than contemplating the rest of my life without her. If that was to be my fate – well, there were many convenient cliffs nearby.

Contemplating the more pleasant possibilities made the time go quickly. It was late afternoon before I realized it, and Ivarstead was just below me.

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I had hoped for a quiet evening in the Vilemyr Inn and an early start in the morning, but it was not to be. It was the Festival of Old Life, celebrated on the last day of the year. The inn was filled with revelers already deep in their cups. Lars was seated near the door with a group of his friends, and they grew quiet as I entered. We exchanged a terse greeting, but not even the sight of him could disturb the calm happiness I felt, so sure was I that Lydia would have me back.
"Where's Lydia, then?" Lars asked.

"In Whiterun, since she could not follow me to Sovngarde." I don't know why I said it. It was the simple truth, yet it could not help sounding like a boast.

"Sovngarde! You don't look like one of the dead – or a hero. Besides, Sovngarde is for the Nords."
The inn grew quiet as he raised his voice.

"I was there to confront Alduin," I said evenly. "He fled there after I defeated him on this plane of existence."

"Ya, everyone knows that the Dragonborn was supposed to travel to Sovngarde to confront Alduin. But you want me to believe you're her? No, it's not true – a little scrap of a thing like you."

"It's true, Lars," said a Stormcloak soldier seated a table away. "She's the Dragonborn, I saw her when I was in Windhelm." He turned to me. "Is it true? Is Alduin really dead?"

"As dead as I can make him," I said, still thinking about his final moments.

"You've saved us all!" the Stormcloak exclaimed. He raised his mug for a toast, yet only a few of his comrades joined in. Lars and the other men at his table remained stubbornly silent, while the rest of the inn's regulars seemed hesitant to take sides.

"Bah! I still don't believe it," Lars said. "If you're the Dragonborn, how come we've never heard you shout?"

"As I told you before, Lars, followers of the Way of the Voice shout only for true needs."

"I'll give you a true need then. How 'bout I challenge you to a fight?"

"Are you that desperate to feel my Thu'um?"

"Heh, heh. You hear that, lads, she wants me to feel her thoom." He tipped his chair back and looked me up and down. "There're many parts o' you I'd like to feel, lass, though you keep them well hidden under those robes. But what's this thoom?"

"It is merely the dragon word for Voice," I said.

"Well aren't we fancy, speakin' in other languages?" He mimicked my words back to me. "No. I've got a score to settle with you. Me and Lydia were gettin' along just fine that time, until you showed up. Now I'm going to make you pay." He got up from his chair and took a step toward me.

I held my hands out to him, pleading for calm. "Look, I had to battle Tsun, Shor's shield-thane, to gain entrance to the Hall of Valor. He's eight feet tall, and a god, so I fear you but little. Yet neither do I want to hurt you. So please, sit back down and enjoy your revelry."

This speech elicited chuckles from half the room. "Ya, Lars, you'd better watch out for her!" someone chided him. His face grew red.

He took the remaining two steps that separated us. "Look at you – you're just a child. I should turn you over my knee and give you a spanking." He reached to grab for my arm.

I could have used magic on him, a calming spell or a fear spell. But Nords are afraid of magic, as none knows better than I. The Voice, however – they respected its power, especially those living here at the foot of the Seven Thousand Steps. And so I used it, though I couldn't say I had true need
of it. I didn't even raise my voice. I just spoke the word "Faas" at him, yet instantly he cringed and covered his head with his hands.

"No, no more, I cannot best you!" he yelped, and ran through the crowded inn to find a corner where he crouched, trembling. The crowd burst into laughter.

I went over to him. I had caused his humiliation once before. It would not do to drive this second humiliation any deeper. His trembling did not last long, as I had used only one word of the shout. When it was through, I held my hand out to him. "Come, let us be friends."

He looked at my outstretched hand then jumped to his feet, looming over me once more. The inn went silent. He looked around at his neighbors and his friends, who were all still looking at him to see what would happen next, then back at me, with my hand still outstretched to him. Then he laughed and took my hand.

"That was amazing! You can really shout! I've never felt anything like it! Made me shiver down in my bones!" He turned to the crowd. "And it would do the same to the rest o' you, and here's my fist for anyone who says different." Then he clapped me on the back so hard I was glad our altercation hadn't come to blows. "Come on, Wilhelm, bring the lass a drink, on me! Come, sit at our table and tell us how you defeated Alduin."

And with that ended any thought I had of an early start on the morrow, with everyone in the village having to shake my hand and offer me a drink. It was late before they would let me depart the mead hall and go to my room.

As late as it was when I went to my rest, it was later by the time I dragged myself out of the Vilemyr Inn's hard bed, my head pounding from drink. I wished for a dose of J'zargo's hangover cure, as foul as the stuff was, and vowed to swear off strong drink in future. From now on, only mugwort tea or maybe a cup of watered mead.

Any hopes I had of reaching Whiterun that day were now dashed. By the time I had bought a horse from a local farmer – Ivarstead not having a formal stable – and purchased a few supplies for the road, it was already late morning. I hoped the Stormcloaks would take me in at Valtheim Towers, if I could reach that fortress by nightfall. If not, it promised to be a rough night out, with the temperature falling and I with only my cloak to keep me warm. Ah well, what was one more day, really, and a rough night out, when Lydia and I had the rest of our lives together? It was the first day of the new year, and I promised myself it would be the first day of a new life for both of us.

I smiled at this consoling thought despite my headache. I pointed my horse north out of Ivarstead, aiming for the winding trail that would strike the main road near Fort Amol. It was a steep descent, but the trail was in good condition. The snow hadn't begun falling at this elevation yet, and the hard-packed old snow made for good riding. My new mount, a dappled gray, was sure-footed, cantering with ease on the level stretches.

The leaves were off the trees, even here in the land of eternal autumn. It gave the landscape a somber aspect, yet the sun shone bright and glistened off the snow. And as lifeless as the trees looked, life still dwelt deep within them. In just two months, each branch would sport countless swelling buds, and a month or two after that, those buds would burst forth in resplendent green.
Lydia and I were like that, I thought. Our affair had begun in autumn, and now it was dormant. But come spring, it would grow again – or sooner, if I had my way. Once more I entertained myself with pleasant imaginings of my future with my true love. On this cold day, the warmer climes of Cyrodiil seemed particularly enticing. I knew several secluded pools where two maidens could swim together undisturbed by friend or foe, where we could splash in roaring waterfalls and sun ourselves on water-polished bedrock – and find other ways to entertain ourselves. At that thought, a flush of warmth spread from the base of my spine down into my thighs. I found myself urging my horse onward more quickly.

But then I thought, this war might prevent us from traveling freely. We were both marked women wherever the Thalmor had free rein to enforce the White-Gold Concordat. Very well, Hammerfell then. It was free of both the Empire and the Thalmor. I had always wanted to see its deserts and had heard there was more to the country than those arid lands. Perhaps we could find Kematu and he would show us around his homeland. Then when this war was finally settled – assuming we were still welcome in Skyrim – we would return to our home in Whiterun. I envisioned quiet nights by the fire while the snow fell softly outside, or merry evenings at the Banneled Mare with Arcadia, Aela and Vilkas, even Thorald and Avulstein. Maybe I would open a second mage's college in the city, and teach the Nords that magic could be used for good, that they need not fear it.

Whatever the future held for us, I would put aside my wish for marriage. I would be content with our life together as it was, for however long that lasted. Then if Lydia decided she was ready to make our relationship permanent, she knew I was ready as well. Suddenly it all seemed so simple. Why hadn't I seen it before? I laughed out loud at the greed of my own heart, startling a flock of finches in a bush as I passed it. I had been like a person who would not eat a sweetroll today, for fear that she wouldn't have sweetrolls every day for the rest of her life. It seemed absurd now.

And so the miles went by quickly once again, and before I knew it, it was the middle of the afternoon and I was nearing the junction with the main road southeast of Fort Amol. I was still so lost in my daydream of a happy future that even the sight of a Stormcloak soldier riding Oblivion-bent toward me could barely perturb my thoughts.

"What's the rush, friend?" I called out brightly as he approached.

"I am on my way to summon reinforcements to Valtheim Towers. Whiterun has been attacked!"

And with those words, my world tilted. Gone was any thought of a happy future, replaced now by fear for my friends – those from Whiterun, my friends from the college, and most especially for Lydia. For not only was she dearest to me, I knew she would be in the vanguard of Whiterun's defense. My heart was beating so fast now, and it was so hard to breathe, that I could barely get out the questions I had to ask.

"Who attacked it? And does it still stand?"

"I know little. I had just returned from patrolling the road north of Fort Amol to find the fort filling with refugees. The next moment, the commander sent me out with only the information I just gave you. Now I must away!" With that, he pushed his horse on up the path.

Refugees! Then the city had surely fallen. But if any had made it to Fort Amol, then there was still hope! But only a little hope. It was not in Lydia's nature to retreat, as well I knew, not when there was fighting still to be done, and not if she was in the same fey mood that I had taken with me to Skuldafn. Now, instead of envisioning our future together, I could only see her lying dead on a field of battle.

I struggled to push those thoughts out of my head as I urged my horse on to Fort Amol, where I
found a scene unlike any I had ever witnessed. The fortress was not built to house a city, yet an entire city's populace had descended upon it, and more of the cityfolk were yet arriving. Wagons had been left helter skelter across the space outside the fort's walls, the exhausted horses still standing in their traces, shivering. More wagons were coming down the road, bearing wounded soldiers, children, the elderly and the infirm. People stood about in the trampled snow, waiting, hopefully or hopelessly, to see if their loved ones would yet arrive.

I dismounted and walked up to a Stormcloak who guarded the road east of the fort. "Can you tell me what happened?" I asked, trying to sound calm.

He looked at me suspiciously, no doubt because I was approaching from the wrong direction, or maybe it was my mage's robes. "And who might you be?"

"Deirdre Morningsong, thane to Jarl Balgruuf and Whiterun."

"Then you're thane to no one and nothing. Whiterun is overrun and Balgruuf dead, by all accounts. Serves the fence-sitter right."

"What? Do you mean Ulfric … you Stormcloaks …" I could not finish the thought.

"What? No, of course not. Ulfric wouldn't leave this many refugees, as his enemies well know. No, it was the damned Thalmor! If Balgruuf had come over to our side, this never would have happened."

The Thalmor! But how could that be? They only had a few units of justiciars here in Skyrim. And why would they do it? But such questions would have to wait.

"Tell me, do you know Lydia Ravenwood? Have you seen her? Or a group of mages from Winterhold?"

"Never heard of her. Never heard of any o' these folks, but there sure are a lot of 'em."

It was even more chaotic inside the fort. The people of Whiterun, mostly women and children and the elderly, were huddled in groups about the bailey, frightened, some sitting, some standing, some lying directly in the snow. The refugees were mostly Nords, yet they looked frozen despite their cold hardiness. The few Dunmer – the innkeeper from the Drunken Huntsman was one of these – and a Redguard here and there fared worse. There were few soldiers, and of these, only those in the uniform of the Whiterun guards. I saw none from the jarl's hirth, and an icy feeling began to grow in my heart, as cold as the snow on the ground.

A great bonfire burned in the center of the bailey, a mass of people crowding around it, yet it seemed to offer little comfort. A great moaning came from every quarter, and children crying, some wailing for parents who would never come again. Others were going through the crowd, calling out the names of loved ones, hoping their separation was only temporary.

The Stormcloaks were moving among the people, handing out blankets to those most in need, ladling out hot drinks to any with containers to hold them, setting up temporary shelters. They were doing their best, but they were overwhelmed. Soldiers guarded every door into the fort, arguing with those pleading to enter. "We're full, I tell you!" I heard one say. "There's not an inch to spare inside!"

I began moving among the people, looking for Lydia or anyone I knew. I saw a few familiar faces, but none I knew by name. They couldn't help but recognize me. "The Dragonborn!" one said. Then another repeated it, louder, and soon a murmur rippled through the bailey, everyone turning and
pointing. The place grew quiet as all eyes turned to me.

"Well?" one man said finally. He was old, too old to lift a sword. "Did you slay Alduin?" There was no hope or enthusiasm in his voice. He could have been asking about the weather.

I nodded. I did not know what to say. I had no comfort for them. The people turned back to their little groups without comment, and the wailing and the moaning and the calling out of names resumed. I wondered how many of them wished now that I had failed in my quest, that the world had ended, and their suffering with it. I almost wished it too.

But no, I still had hope, I told myself. I kept moving through the crowd, looking for any familiar face, for my friends from the college, or one who might know Lydia and what had happened to her. Yet as eager as I was to find her, I could not overlook the suffering before me. When I came across any who had been wounded, soldier or citizen, I would stop to administer a healing spell. Then I would ask, "Have you seen my Lydia? Lydia Ravenwood, of the jarl's hirth?" To a man and a woman, they shook their heads and looked away from me. Yet some looked as if they knew more than they would say, and the icy fingers grew tighter around my heart. "The mages from the college?" Again they shook their heads.

Finally I found Arcadia. She had set up a makeshift alchemist's table inside the blacksmith's shed and had just emerged from the fort with an armful of ingredients. "Deirdre!" she exclaimed, dropping her supplies on a table, then wrapping me in a tight hug. "At least there is some good news on this terrible day!" It was long before she relaxed her hold on me, though I didn't object – I needed the comfort as much as she.

She released her grip, but then held me by the arms. "Oh, Deirdre." She didn't have to ask for whom I was searching. "She was in command of the shield-wall protecting our retreat."

"And? Do you know what happened to her?"

She shook her head. "The last I saw, there was a battle at the bridge over the White River. It was too far away for me to tell what was happening. Then we had to keep moving, and I could see no more. We've had no news of her since, nor any news of your friends from the college. But take heart. Wagons are still arriving, and stragglers on foot. Look to the road west, toward Valtheim Towers."

I thanked her, though now it felt as if my heart could barely beat, the icy fist held it so tightly in its grip. I did as she said, leaving the fort and retrieving my horse. Then I continued west, crossing the bridge over a tributary of the White River, then starting onto the road that would take me up by long switchbacks to the Valtheim Towers. I passed no wagons, and only a few stragglers on foot. None knew Lydia's fate. Then I saw two soldiers in guard's uniforms limping toward me. I recognized Badnir, who often guarded the door to Dragonsreach.

"Deirdre!" he called out when he saw me, and I dismounted. His head was bandaged with a strip torn from his Whiterun surcoat.

"Have you…" I began.

"Tell me you have some good news for us on this dark day," he said. "Did you do it? Did you slay Alduin for good and all?"

"I did, but…"

"Thank Talos! Then our fallen heroes will have a chance to enter Sovngarde!" He looked as if he
would hug me.

"There's no time for this! Can you tell me where I'll find Lydia?"

His face fell, and now he couldn't even look at me. "Behind…” was all he could say, his voice choking. "If only I had been as brave as her – and the mage!"

"The mage? What mage?"

He shook his head and would say no more, but gestured up the road toward the towers, then continued hobbling along with his comrade.

And with that, my heart seemed to cease beating entirely. My limbs went numb and I moved as if within a dream. I even forgot about my horse, leaving it there in the road, while I stumbled blindly up toward the towers. Amidst all this tragedy, even as I fought to quell my growing sense of dread, I had somehow clung to the hope that none of it would affect me. I had just slain Alduin, had I not? I had saved the world. I had returned to Nirn with renewed hope in my heart. And now … this was not how it was supposed to be.

I continued upward, and now a light snow began to fall, growing heavier as I climbed. But I barely noticed. I knew only that I had to get to Valtheim Towers, or beyond. I would go all the way to Whiterun and pick over the field of battle, if that's what it took to find Lydia, alive or dead.

Then I heard voices from the slope above me, just around a switchback. And not just voices, but a great grieving and wailing, a feline hiss, and even something like a howl.

Then a gruff Nord voice cried out, "No, it cannot be!"

"By Azura, I did everything I could!" That had to be Brelyna.

I stepped around the corner and saw a group gathered around a crude sled pulled by a single horse. I could not see what was on the sled. Neither did the people see me, with their backs to me and their heads bowed in grief. I made myself walk toward them, though I didn't want to see for whom they cried their tears. I recognized J'zargo, Avulstein Gray-Mane, Aela, and Vilkas. Avulstein was blubbering like a baby. I remained silent as I approached within a pace or two of the sled, too terrified to speak.

Then Aela shifted to one side, and through the gap I saw Lydia. She lay inert on the make-shift sled, her body covered in thick furs. Brelyna was kneeling on the other side of the sled, her tear-streaked face turned to the heavens. "The gods cannot be this cruel!" she cried out.

Lydia was not breathing. She was still as death, her face a ghastly white, tinged with green. A white foam covered her lips, flecked with red. The falling snow was collecting on her hair and in her eyelashes, and even on her face, she was that cold.

I was too late. My love had passed from this world, and now the only thing left was for me to follow.
The White River Bridge

Chapter Summary

-- Deirdre plots her own end -- hope renewed -- a sorrowful reunion -- a city under siege -- the Hero of Whiterun -- Onmund's sacrifice -- Balgruuf defends his people -- Deirdre the healer -- out of the mouths of babes --

I turned away from my friends without a word. What was there to say? They would only stop me from carrying out the plan that was already forming in my mind. I would call Odahviing, and the red dragon would take me to Whiterun. Together we would rain down such catastrophe as the elves had never imagined. When Odahviing grew tired of carrying me, I would have him set me down in the middle of the ruined city, where I would finish any Altmer that yet survived, or they would finish me, I cared not. Surely Lydia had died a good death – we would be together forever in the afterlife.

I laughed then, a mad, hysterical laugh. If only I had remained in the land of the dead for another day, Lydia and I would be together even now!

A voice called after me. "Deirdre! Thank the gods you're alive! But where are you going? Lydia needs you!"

Choking back a sob, I turned to see Brelyna staring after me. "She still lives?"

"Just barely. It's poison. I've tried everything, but the only cure I had was too weak, and now her breath grows more faint. Hurry, you must do something!"

Avulstein made way for me, and I knelt beside my love, removing a glove and feeling her cheek. It was deathly cold. I could not believe she still lived, and struggled to hold back my tears. I put my fingers to her neck – someone had removed her armor and she wore only her padded tunic beneath the furs. I had to convince myself I felt something there. I bent my cheek to her lips and felt just the faintest warmth issuing from them. I waited, for far too long it seemed, and it came again.

"She fought bravely," Avulstein said, his voice choking. "None more so. Her name will be remembered forever in song as the Hero of Whiterun."

"Damn your songs, and damn your honor and your glory! It means nothing if she doesn't live!" I pulled a poison cure from within my robes and tried to get a few drops of it between her lips. She did not stir, or choke the potion back up. She was as insensate as a rag doll. The few bubbles forming in the film of potion at her lips gave the only hint that she still lived.

"How was she poisoned?" I asked.

Brelyna drew back the blankets from Lydia's right side, and there was the stump of an arrow protruding from just below her shoulder. Her armor had been well fitted – it was a lucky or cursed arrow that had found the narrow gap between cuirass and arm piece.

"Some damned elven witchcraft," Aela said.

"I dared not remove the arrowhead," Brelyna said, "not in the crude facilities of Valtheim Towers."
We hoped to find better at Fort Amol."

"A wise choice," I said. "Yet that arrowhead could still be poisoning her." I considered for a moment. "I will try a healing spell, then we will make haste to the fort."

Brelyna put a hand on my arm. "You are a powerful healer, but you will be yet more powerful with this." She held out the Amulet of Mara. "I retrieved it from the Great Porch, in hopes that you might want it again, but I had no idea it would be for such a purpose."

I sobbed then, and couldn't keep the sobs from coming for a few moments. Avulstein bent down and patted me on the back. "There, there, lass."

With an effort I choked back my tears and dried my eyes. Crying wasn't doing Lydia any good. I removed the Saarthal Amulet and tossed it aside, taking the Amulet of Mara from Brelyna and fixing it around my neck. Then I cast the strongest Restoration spell I knew, the spell of grand healing. Lydia's breathing became the tiniest bit stronger, and a bit of color returned to her cheeks. I tried putting a few more drops of potion between her lips.

I bent over and kissed her, then whispered in her ear, "Don't die, my love. I've come back only for you. You cannot die!" I had done all I could and I gave myself over to tears for a time.

Only when they subsided did another dread begin to grow in my mind, as I realized who was missing from this group. "What of our friends from the college? What of Onmund?" I could only stare down at Lydia – I could not bear to look up at my friends for the answer.

"Our instructors returned to the college immediately after you left," Brelyna said, her voice trembling. "The three of us stayed to await your return."

"And Onmund?"

There was silence, and finally I had to look over at Brelyna. She shook her head. "No," was all she could get out before tears took her once more.

J'zargo spoke up for the first time. "Never did J'zargo think to see the Nord do such a brave and noble thing."

"Yet none of us here is without loss," Aela said. "Farkas was a sword-brother to me, and Vilkas' twin, yet he fell." I looked up into Vilkas' dark-circled eyes and saw it was true. "And neither did Thorald walk away from that bloody field." I looked to Avulstein, and knew this too was true.

Suddenly I felt how selfish I had been. Everyone here had lost someone, while my love still clung to life. I got up and hugged each of my friends in turn. But we could not give ourselves over to our grief, though we all had tears in our eyes as we got the crude sled moving once again, each of us weeping for our lost friends and loved ones, and praying to our own gods that Lydia might survive.

Finally we had cried all the tears we had in us. We walked beside the sled – really just a frame of fresh cut poles with hides stretched over it for Lydia to rest on, the ends of the two longest poles dragging through the hard-trodden snow – and were silent for a time.

"What of Whiterun itself?" I asked finally. "Our homes? The Bannered Mare? Jorrvaskr?"

They all shook their heads. "Everything was ablaze when the evacuation began," Aela said.

Then I remembered my duty as Thane of Whiterun. "And Jarl Balgruuf?"
"Gone, as far as we know," said Aela. "Along with his closest retainers who stayed behind – his brother, Irileth, Farengar."

"Gods! Then I have failed in my duty as Thane of Whiterun."

"How can you say that?" Brelyna demanded. "Balgruuf wanted you to protect the city from the dragons, did he not?"

I nodded.

"Then you did not fail. Even the Dragonborn could not be in two places at once."

I had to agree, yet it was a bitter thought. But for the blizzard atop the Throat of the World, I would have returned to Whiterun before the elves attacked.

"Tell me the story from the beginning," I said. "I would know everything."

The siege had begun two days before, just after my return from Sovngarde, the elves attacking out of the westering sun, the glints and flashes off their gilded armor blinding the defenders on the city walls.

"So that explains the flashes of light I saw as we flew out of Dragonsreach," I said. "They must have been massing on the plains west of the city."

"Yes," Aela said. "The elves brought a force that could have numbered with Ysgramor's Five Hundred, maybe more. They put their force before the city's western walls, then sent out war-bands in the wee hours of the next morning to burn the farms around the city. All of the farm families had fled within the city walls by then."

"I smelled the smoke from those fires when I left High Hrothgar yesterday morning," I said.

"Yet the walls held through all that day and into the night," said Avulstein. "The elves began throwing themselves at the western walls. We were dumping boiling tar down on them, fending off their ladders and their grappling hooks. Even where the walls are low, on the west side, we were holding 'em back, though they were many. Irileth had us concentrate on defending the gate, keeping the elves well away from it in case the jarl called for an evacuation. Yet, looking back, it was almost too easy to keep them from that gate. It was like they wanted us to retreat that way."

"But why did they attack at all?" I asked. "I thought they wanted to prolong the chaos of Skyrim's rebellion."

"Yes," said Brelyna, "that's just the debate your steward was having with the housecarl, Irileth. Balgruuf had summoned us, so we heard the whole thing. Irileth believed as you do, Deirdre. The only explanation she had was that the scales had tipped too much in the Stormcloaks' favor, and the Thalmor sought to tip them back."

"And Proventus?"

"He blamed you for the attack."

"Me?"
"Yes. He told the jarl that the Altmer had certainly attacked Whiterun for harboring one of their enemies, one who had foiled their plans not only in Skyrim but in Hammerfell, and who had burned down their embassy, killing many."

"But that makes no sense! They wouldn't attack an entire city over the actions of one person."

"Deirdre, I'm afraid it does, though it pains me to say it. This was an act of retribution. The Thalmor meant to inflict the maximum possible suffering on Jarl Balgruuf and his people, as you'll soon see. And a Whiterun in rubble will weaken whichever side wins the Civil War."

"But how did they get so many soldiers into Skyrim? We saw no sign of them in Solitude or at the embassy."

"Irileth guessed that they landed them at Northwatch Keep, on the coast northwest of Solitude. It's a secluded spot, and they could have done it without even the Empire's knowledge."

Avulstein continued the tale. "After dark of the second day, yesterday that is, they brought up catapults. Flame pots filled with pitch and pine shavings began landing in the city. It's been so long since a dragon attack, all the buckets meant for puttin' out fires had frozen over. We couldn't get water out o' the well fast enough. Fires were blazing everywhere in no time."

"With so many fighters called off to douse the fires," Aela went on, "we couldn't hold the elves back so easily. They began making it over the walls and we had to fight them in the streets. We slew them all, but we knew it was just a matter of time."

"Then Jarl Balgruuf came out to survey the battle," Brelyna said. "The three of us from the college were with Lydia, shooting down lightning and fire as she rained arrows. Balgruuf and Irileth told Lydia it was time to evacuate the city. They would divide the jarl's hirthlings, Lydia leading half of them, along with all of the city guard and any able fighters, to protect the citizens as they retreated. The jarl and Irileth would stay with the rest of the hirth, just enough to keep the gate clear and keep the elves engaged."

"But Lydia hated the plan," said Aela.

"This one has never heard such pleas to stay in harm's way," J'zargo said over his shoulder as he led the horse. "She wanted only to die beside her jarl."

"Yet her pleas fell on deaf ears," Brelyna went on. "Irileth said that Lydia was the best fighter to lead the forces protecting the retreat, the captain of the guard having already fallen. But still she was not convinced. Then Balgruuf asked her to think of the old women, the children, the sick and the wounded, and the orphans. I think that last was what convinced her. She knew how much Harry and Huldi meant to you."

I stopped in the middle of the road. "Tell me they survived. If they didn't, I'll…" I looked down at Lydia. "I'll…" I didn't know what I would do, my heart was so heavy from so much tragedy.

"Deirdre, they're fine," Brelyna said, and I felt myself begin to breathe once more. "They remain at Valtheim Towers, where Proventus is looking after all those who could go no farther today."

"We left the city before dawn," Avulstein said. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do – running. Proventus had ordered that every wagon and every horse be used to move the injured and the infirm, but still the progress out of the city was slow, with so many elderly and wee bairns having to walk, and women carrying their babes. The day was dawning by the time we got them all past Pelagia Farm. We could see the Aldmeri army to the west. They were just watchin' us, like
wolves tracking their prey."

"Then we saw the great fault in Balgruuf's plan!" Brelyna said. "It depended on the Thalmor aiming to take the city for its strategic value in the war. But their goal was far different. They divided their force, more than half of it following us, while the other portion attacked the gates."

"Lydia was a wonder, Deirdre!" Avulstein said. "Soon as she saw what was happening, she formed us into shield walls of twenty fighters each, then she ranged us across the space between the stream that flows out of Whiterun and the farms on the other side of the road. We began moving backward, keeping the retreating people on the road behind us. She was on horseback, the better to keep an eye on everything and move about giving orders. But at the last, just before the elves were upon us, she got down and stood with us. The first of the cityfolk had reached the bridge, but it was a bottleneck. We knew we had to hold the elves off until everyone was across. She joined the central shield wall, where the onslaught fell the hardest."

"That battle was the most terrible thing I have ever seen," Brelyna said. "Men and women screaming, blood streaking the snow, death everywhere. And the smell! None of us mages had ever been to war, of course. The three of us positioned ourselves in the gaps between the shield walls, trading spells with the Thalmor mages. It was a wonder none of us took an arrow."

"Lydia held us all together," Aela said. "She shouted rallying cry after rallying cry. A rank of Altmer would crash against her shield wall, yet it always held, and one or two elves would fall every time. Yet it didn't go so well for the shield walls on either side – they began to give way, and our warriors began falling as well."

"That's when we lost Thorald," said Avulstein. "A giant of an elf charged us, and his axe clove Thorald's shield in two, and went right on into his skull. I was too shocked to even think. I just lashed out with my sword and paid the elf in kind. He fell across my brother, and we had to leave him there as we were forced backwards."

"Then Lydia was like a woman possessed," Aela said. "She would dart out from the shield wall as a wave of elves fell back from the attack. She hacked and spun and bashed with her shield, strewing the field with gilded bodies lashed with bright stripes of red. Then she would retreat and join a different shield wall to shore up its remaining fighters. Everywhere she went the warriors took heart and stood with renewed strength."

"And so we fell back toward the bridge," said Avulstein, "standing firm with each onslaught, then retreating again. But each time, we retreated with fewer fighters, and the dwindling shield-walls had to merge together. By the time we reached the bridge, we were but one band of twenty, plus the mages, facing a hundred elves or more. And still not all our people were across."

"And now comes the worst part," said Aela, her voice grim. "The road runs along the White River for some way beyond the bridge, hard up against the mountains. The river there is not wide. The elven mages stood on the bank downstream from the bridge and began launching spells at the retreating refugees on the other side. These were the slowest of the city's people, the elderly and the infirm and the smallest of the orphans. Most of the adults and the able-bodied had crowded past them in their panic to get to the bridge, leaving them to come last. We fighters could do nothing, we had to hold the shield wall."

"It was awful," Brelyna said. "We saw the priestess from the Temple of Kynareth trying to crowd them all behind her, trying to protect them with a ward spell as they moved slowly along the road. Yet she couldn't shield them all. So J'zargo and I left Onmund to shoot spells at the mages, while we made our way over the bridge to help shield the defenseless ones. Together we created a ward large enough that all the children and elderly could fit behind it. But some had already fallen to the
Thalmor attack, and their moans and cries were pitiful. Azura save me, we could do nothing to help them, we had to keep casting our wards." She broke down in tears and could say no more.

"Now Lydia was more than possessed," Aela said. "She became like one of those berserkers of legend. The battle frenzy was upon her. She broke out of the shield wall and rushed at twenty oncoming Thalmor fighters. She was screaming at them, 'They're children, damn you! They're only little children!'"

I looked down at Lydia. She looked almost serene, yet I could easily imagine her uttering those cries. I could almost hear them even now.

"As Ysmir is my witness," said Aela, "the elves stopped their charge and then gave way before her, all save one. He must already have seen many of his comrades fall to Lydia's axe, yet he chided her for being a mere woman. That was the last chiding he ever did. Lydia had just pulled her axe from deep within his chest when that lucky or accursed arrow caught her beneath the shoulder. Her armor had already turned countless darts, but that one found a gap."

"We thought she'd make it back to us," Avulstein said. "We could see the arrow hadn't gone deep, and it wasn't in a vital spot. Yet after just a few steps, she faltered and soon went to one knee. The poison must have been takin' effect. But she kept on crawling toward us. Then Aela and Vilkas went out to get her, even as the elves were advancing again."

"We couldn't leave Lydia out there," Vilkas said, "not while she still had breath in her. She was... is... like a sister to us all. We'd o' gladly had her in the Companions if she hadn't already been part of Balgruuf's hirth. But by the time we got to her, she couldn't walk at all. We had to drag her, and the elves were almost upon us. We were just about to drop her and stand and fight when your friend, Onmund, dashed past us. He had a big heart, little fellow though he was."

"He planted himself just beyond us," Aela went on. "He shouted, 'For Lydia!' Then he began firing spell after spell, fireballs and ice storms and chain lightning, shouting 'For Skyrim!' All the while we were dragging Lydia backward. Then his magicka ran out just as an arrow pierced his side. Still he would not relent. He drew his sword and charged straight at the elves." She put her hand on my shoulder. "Deirdre, he shouted your name at the end."

"It's true," Brelyna said. "He knew it would destroy you to return from Sovngarde and find Lydia dead."

I thought I had no more tears left in me, but now I was sobbing again as I thought of what my friend had done.

"Onmund gained us the time to get Lydia back behind the shield wall," Aela said. "We had to leave her there at the far end of the bridge and return to our positions. We twenty fighters were all that stood in the way of certain death for Lydia and countless innocents streaming along the road farther ahead."

"We took our stand in the middle of the bridge," said Avulstein, "and we stood long. We made a goodly pile of elves before us, so that the ones who came after had to clamber over the bodies of their fallen comrades to get at us. But one by one our shield-band began to falter, while we could still count a hundred elves waiting to renew the attack. Finally, we were down to ten, exhausted, and we knew we couldn't stand much longer."

"We were just looking at each other," Aela said, "trying to decide whether to fall on that bridge one by one, or go out with a last glorious charge, when we heard Balgruuf's warhorn. Then we saw his banner, moving against the elves from the north."
"I still don't understand how they got out of the city, with the elves at the gate," Avulstein said.

Aela and Vilkas looked at each other. "They must have used the Companions' secret exit from the city," Aela said. "Kodlak must have led them through it. We heard his and Farkas's ... battle cries along with the jarl's horn."

"From where we stood," Brelyna said, "it looked like a gale going through a field of corn, or a pack of wolves going through a flock of sheep, as Balgruuf's force met the Altmer." Aela and Vilkas exchanged another glance. "The elven force at the bridge had to turn and face them."

"None of Balgruuf's fighters could have survived," Vilkas said. "Valiant though they were, they were caught between two armies. I was ready to fight my way to them, but Aela convinced me to take their gift, in case we were still needed to shield the refugees."

"And a noble gift it was," said Avulstein. "Our jarl might have seemed fearful to join the war, yet he always had his people in mind, as he proved in the end. All that was left was for us to retreat across the bridge and get the elderly and the injured and the children away from there as quick as we could."

Vilkas clapped Avulstein on the shoulder. "This one picked Lydia up, steel armor and all, and carried her half way to Valtheim Towers."

"It was the least I could do," Avulstein said. "She was the reason any of us lived to tell the tale."

With that thought we grew silent, and continued our slow progress down the switchbacking road, the poles of the sled skittering along in the frozen snow. All our tears were gone, leaving only a bitter emptiness for our missing friends and dread for the one still clinging to life.

The arrowhead was stuck. I didn't dare pull harder, for fear of doing Lydia an irreparable hurt. Already a fresh flow of blood was streaming from the wound and onto the stone floor.

"You'll have to turn the shaft," Arcadia said. "The arrowhead must be caught underneath her collarbone."

We were in the commander's chamber in Fort Amol, Lydia sprawled across his double bed, and Arcadia and I sitting on either side of her. Our friends had crowded themselves into the small room as best they could. Still, it was the largest and cleanest space within the fort, and the commander had gladly given it over to the Hero of Whiterun.

I gripped the shaft firmly with my right hand and held Lydia's shoulder with my left. We had cut away the top of her tunic to better view the wound. The skin around it was the color of a bruise, but shriveled rather than swollen. I turned the shaft one way and it barely moved. I tried the other direction, with better success.

"Oww!" It was the first sound Lydia had made since losing consciousness on the bridge. She said it in that mock-plaintive way she would when jesting with me. Yet her eyes remained closed, and there was nothing humorous about her pallid green face.

"Try it now," Arcadia said.
I pulled, a bit harder this time, and the arrow started to come free.

Lydia's eyes popped open, her face a grimace of pain. "Deirdre?" she said when she saw me. Her eyes were wide for a moment, then she squeezed them shut to push the pain away. "Gods!"

"Quick, Brelyna, bring that bottle of poison cure," Arcadia said. "Here, love," she said to Lydia, "I know it hurts, but you'll have to drink as much of this as you can. That elvish poison is a tricky one."

Lydia drank as much as she could in her prone position.

"Now, a sleeping draught. Just a few swallows. You won't feel the pain when Deirdre pulls the arrow out."

Lydia did as she was told, then lay her head back, her eyes still closed. "I thought you had come back to torture me. No more..." Then she was asleep once more.

"Do it now," Arcadia said. "We have to get that arrow out of her and stop the spread of the poison."

I pulled on the shaft again, firmly but slowly, and finally the arrowhead came free, followed by a gush not only of blood but of a greenish-black fluid. I made to cast a close wounds spell on it, but Arcadia stopped me.

"Wait, we have to clean out the wound before you close it, or we'll never get the poison out." Brelyna brought her a damp cloth and she began cleaning away the blood and that other fluid. "Now, the basin." Brelyna brought her a bowl filled with warm, fragrant water. "This bathing water has been steeped with beehive husks and thistle branch. It's the best thing I have to help her resist the poison. If only we had some dried Falmer ear!" She began bathing the wound, making sure the infusion got deep down inside. Lydia grew restless, her shoulder shrinking from the cleaning cloth, but she remained asleep.

"That is all I can do," Arcadia said, and I cast the healing spell on Lydia's shoulder, watching the wound knit itself shut. Yet the flesh around it remained that greenish-black color. Her face had slightly more color than before, but her breathing was still weak and irregular, her pulse barely there, and her skin icy cold.

"We'll leave you now," Arcadia said. "The best thing for her is rest. Keep her warm, and if she wakes, give her more of the poison cure."

I thanked her and my friends. "She'll be better in the morning, I know it," Avulstein said. "She's a strong lass."

My friends had just left when Lydia's mother, Silda, appeared at the door with Lisbet behind her. "She's gone and done it then," said Silda, entering the room. "I knew that soldiering would kill her one day."

"She isn't on the death road yet," I said. "I hope to save her."

"And where were you? Whiterun could have used the Dragonborn."

"I was away. I had just returned from slaying Alduin. You must believe I would have been there if I could."

She looked at me doubtfully. "And why couldn't she go with you?"
"Odahviing … it's complicated, but she could not make the journey. And if she hadn't been in Whiterun, no one might have survived, everyone says so."

"Lot of good it did her, or my Grimvar. To lose them both in one day!" She broke down in sobs.

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry for your loss, and Lydia's."

"We lost Lydia long ago, mother," said Lisbet, her eyes flashing, reminding me of her sister. "I told you it would do no good to come here!" Then she led her mother away.

When they were gone, I stoked the fire, then removed my boots and robes and got into bed beside my love. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was really proper, considering that we were no longer a couple. But no, this was certainly the best way to warm a chilled body, as every child in Skyrim knew.

It was hard to believe how cold she was. Her body, which had warmed me on so many cold nights, was like a block of ice. I slipped my hand beneath her tunic and tried to feel her heartbeat. I couldn't help remembering our first night together, when she had put my hand on her chest. Then, her heart beat fast and strong; now, I could hardly feel a thing, just a faint, irregular skittering. How could it possibly keep her alive?

I wrapped myself around her, trying to warm as much of her body as I could with my own, and pulled the fur cover tighter around us. Then I began speaking into her ear, choosing to believe she could hear me even in her sleep. I spoke the apology I had been planning since returning from Sovngarde, telling her I was hers as long as she would have me, with no bonds of matrimony attached. Then I began describing the life I envisioned for us, traveling together, having adventures only when we wanted them, and then returning to our quiet home, where we could spend the long winter nights.

And then I remembered, our home was no more. Should Lydia survive this poison, and should she take me back, our future would include dealing with the Thalmor. It was long before I fell asleep.

Lydia was no better in the morning. "You'll have to take her to Riften," Arcadia said when she saw her. "There's an alchemist there who knows every poison cure known to man or mer. Even the Argonians have been known to consult with him."

"Yet Windhelm is closer," I said. "And Nurelion is a capable alchemist. Too, Brelyna and J'zargo will be traveling that way, and companionship may soothe our grief."

"Windhelm is the more dangerous choice," Aela put in. "The Stormcloaks fear the elves will attack there next, they have such a large force. The north road from Whiterun into Eastmarch is poorly defended. Reinforcements are being sent west to Valtheim Towers and north to Windhelm even now."

"It's decided then," said Arcadia. "You must take Lydia to Riften." She used that tone she took with her more recalcitrant assistants, and since I had only recently been one of those assistants, I did not argue.

"We'll go with you," Brelyna said. "I dread returning to the college with news of Onmund. And I would stay with you to see how Lydia fares."
I could not argue with that either, though I was tempted to send them to prepare the college for war. I couldn't see how it could stay out of the conflict now. But I could surely use the company of my friends, especially if Lydia … but no, I couldn't let myself contemplate that possibility.

We soon had Lydia laid out on a cot in the back of a wagon, well wrapped in furs. "Give her a healing spell every hour, and whatever poison cure you can get past her lips," Arcadia said. She seemed alarmed that Lydia still hadn't awakened.

Avulstein, Vilkas, and Aela were also there to see us off. "With everything that's happened," Avulstein said, "I never got to thank you. You saved the world, and cleared the road to Sovngarde for Thorald. I'm forever in your debt, lass."

I just nodded and accepted his bear hug.

"And you have our thanks as well," Vilkas said, "though I know Farkas isn't traveling the road to Sovngarde." He and Aela exchanged a glance. I was about to ask why, but the Stormcloak driver was impatient.

"Beggin' your pardon, Dragonborn, but I've got to get this wagon down to Riften and then get back with reinforcements as quick as I can."

We exchanged hugs, then Brelyna, J'zargo, and I got in back, seated on benches on either side of Lydia and the wagon moved off.

Yet there was still one more unlooked-for farewell to be given. The wide area outside the fort was a confusion of wagons filled with refugees going this way and that, some off north to Windhelm, others like ours headed south, and still others returning with the last stragglers from Valtheim Towers. From one of these last, I heard a child's shout: "DeeDee!"

I turned to see Harry and Huldi in the back of a wagon approaching us. I called for our driver to halt and jumped out, running over to the other wagon as it pulled alongside. I climbed in back and knelt before the children, scooping them both up into a hug. "Oh, little ones, it is so good to see you!"

"I'm glad you're back, DeeDee," Harry said. "I thought we'd never see you after you flew off on the dragon's back."

"Is that Liddie," Huldi asked, looking over into our wagon. "She doesn't look very good."

"She's hurt," I said, and found my voice catching in my throat.

"She saved us," Harry said. "Her and the mages." He nodded at my friends, and they both waved back. "I saw her. She's a good fighter."

"I know it," I said, tears rolling down my cheeks now.

"Is she going to get better?" Huldi asked, her eyes wide as she looked at Lydia's deathly pale face.

"I … I hope so …" I broke down in tears and hid my face. Now they were hugging me and patting my back. Why was it that these children were always the ones consoling me?

"Don't worry, DeeDee," Harry said. "She'll be all right. She's a strong lass, everyone says so." He kept patting me on the back, and I could only wish I had his optimism.

Then I dried my eyes and took each by the hand.
"Listen, I have news for you." I tried to sound happier, even if I didn't feel it.

"What?" they both asked, eager for any bit of good news.

"You know I went to Sovngarde. Well, I saw your father there."

"Papa? He was there?" Harry asked.

I nodded. "On the path to the Hall of Valor. He sends you both his love."

Harry gave a shout of joy. "I'm going to be a hero when I grow up, and then I'll go to Sovngarde and be with papa!"

"Me too, me too!" Huldi exclaimed.

"Silly," said Harry, swatting her knee. "Girls can't grow up to be heroes!"

"But Liddie's a hero," Huldi protested. I had to smile at her then.

"Your sister is right, Harry. The Hall of Valor is filled with the souls of many brave sword-sisters. Except, your mother wasn't among them."

"Why not?" Huldi demanded. "She was brave, too."

"I know, but it is difficult to explain. And then your father made a big decision. He chose to go to Aetherius to be with your mother."

"Aetherius?" Harry said, his face falling. "Where everyone goes?"

I nodded.

"Aetherius! Aetherius!" Huldi shouted. "I want to go there when I grow up!"

"Stupid girl," Harry said, "you go there when you die, not when you grow up."

"Now, now, be kind to your sister, she's only young," I said. "But listen, I have other news. I have slain Alduin, your parents' murderer. They have been avenged, and the World Eater will never hurt anyone ever again."

Harry just looked at me, unmoved. But a light of hope shone in Huldi's eyes. "Will mama and papa come back from Aetherius now?" she asked.

I looked at her, wondering what answer I could possibly give.
"Falmer Ear!" exclaimed Elgrim, the old alchemist.

"Falmer Ear?"

"Yes, you heard me right, if only I had it in my shop. I don't suppose you'd like to go exploring into any Dwemer ruins, would you?"

"I've quite had my fill of the Dwarven constructs, thank you," I said, thinking of all the dead Falmer I had left with ears intact, "but I'll do whatever it takes to cure Lydia of this poison." I stroked her hand, which was still icy cold. I had been sitting with her all night, ever since we arrived at Riften's Temple of Mara. The main hall had been turned into a makeshift hospital, with pews that folded ingeniously to become cots.

Elgrim twirled one end of his mustache, which hung down below his jaw. "Hmm, we probably don't have the time. Charred skeever hide will do nearly as well. Plenty of those in the Ratway. I've always said they should rename it the Skeeverway. Hah! Now, where is that Ingun?"

He went off to find his apprentice, who was administering a potion to a Whiterun guard not far away. She was a dark-haired lass not much older than I. "What?" she exclaimed. "You want me to harvest skeever hides for you? Let me remind you that I am a Black-Briar. We don't go to the Ratway, the Ratway comes to us."

Just then, Brelyna and J'zargo entered the temple, followed by the priestess, Dinya Balu. "What's the trouble?" the priestess asked. "Shouting will do no good for our patients."

"Apologies, Priestess Dinya," Elgrim said. "My apprentice and I were just discussing how to get skeever hides from the Ratway."

"I'll get them," I said, going over to my friends. "It should be little trouble."

"Don't be silly," Brelyna said. "Have you had any sleep at all?" She and J'zargo had spent the night in the Bee and Barb.

I shook my head. "I might have dozed off on the floor for a moment or two."

"Then we'll get the hides Elgrim needs," Brelyna said. "How difficult could it be?"

J'zargo wrinkled his nose. "Hunting skeevers – it is beneath this one's dignity."

"Maybe you've finally found your calling, silly Khajiit." I thought she was going to give him a swat as she usually did, but then she simply laid a hand on his shoulder. "Come, Lydia needs that potion as quick as we can get it."
"Watch out for the Thieves Guild," I warned them as they left. "They'll have your purses without you even knowing it."

"Aye," said Elgrim. "And keep an eye out for the Dark Brotherhood as well. Rumor is they've been seen in town lately."

The Dark Brotherhood! They were a league of assassins notorious across Tamriel. I had infiltrated their sanctuary near Falkreath to get at a word wall it contained, and had barely escaped with my life. Why would they be here in numbers, and letting themselves be seen as well? They usually operated singly, and in the shadows.

But I was too tired to ponder such mysteries. Brelyna and J'zargo left for the Ratway and I returned to my vigil with Lydia, who seemed neither better nor worse since we had put her in the wagon the morning of the day before. I had cast a healing spell on her every hour as Arcadia had suggested, and once or twice awakened her long enough to take a mouthful of the poison cure. But the cure didn't seem to match the elvish poison, and Elgrim had spent all night analyzing the sample Arcadia had taken from Lydia's shoulder. I hoped it wouldn't take him too long to brew the potion once he had the ingredients.

"I see you still wear the Amulet of Mara." Dinya Balu had followed me over to Lydia's cot. "And this must be your loved one. Did she accept your proposal?"

I shook my head.

"It's obvious that you love her dearly. Does she not return your love in equal measure?"

I looked at Lydia. She seemed thinner already after two days in this insensate state. Yet as pale and thin as she was, she was still beautiful. "I think she does," I said. "But she wasn't sure she was ready to give up men forever."

"Ah, a common problem among those whose attractions run in both directions. And so what happened?"

"I became angry and sent her away. Mara save me, it's my fault she was injured at all!" I buried my face in my hands.

"Why? How can you say that? It was an elvish arrow that struck her down, by all accounts."

"Then you have not heard how she fought like a madwoman. I'm sure she sought to throw her life away in some last heroic act, just as I did when I followed Alduin to Sovngarde."

"Then you do love each other greatly! And to think – such heartache, over an amulet and a ceremony."

I looked up at her. "What? Are you saying we should have stayed together without getting married?"

"As I told you before, we leave the judgment to the Vigilants of Stendarr. We promote love wherever it grows, whether it has official sanction or not. What is in your heart is more important than any piece of metal or any ritual, no matter how sanctified. The question is whether your heart is big enough to accept your loved one without the security, or bonds if you will, of matrimony. Where love is great, love will find a way."

"Yes, that's just what I decided when I was in Sovngarde, or I never would have returned to Nirn at all. But now…"
"Stay with her. Your love is keeping her alive as surely as the healing spells and the poison cures. When she recovers, you can begin your love anew." With that she left me to my solitary vigil.

Sometime later I found myself coming awake, slumped over on the cot, my head resting across Lydia's chest, which barely moved with her breathing. J'zargo and Brelyna had returned from the Ratway.

"We delivered the skeevvers to Elgrim at his shop," Brelyna said. "He went to work on them straightaway, but it will take him some time to get the hides prepared and infused into the potion. That was several hours ago. We had to repair to the Bee and Barb to clean off the filth of the Ratway." She gave J'zargo a look I couldn't interpret.

"Disgusting place," J'zargo sniffed. "Although, the skooma trade is thriving here in Riften. J'zargo begins to see … possibilities." Brelyna gave him a look but said nothing.

I sat up and stretched. My neck was stiff.

"You should get outside and get some fresh air," Brelyna said. "We can sit here with Lydia while you're gone."

I could not argue. I had to keep my strength until Lydia was better. I needed to stretch my legs, and get something in my stomach, though I could hardly think of food at the moment. I cast one more healing spell on her, then went outside.

Riften in the daytime was only slightly less sinister than at night. Thieves Guild cut-purses still loitered about as if they owned the place, but those other shadowy figures looming in the doorways had retreated to darker haunts out of sight of the city-folk. Perhaps the bands of Stormcloaks marching through the streets had scared them off. The soldiers were on their way to Fort Amol and beyond to shore up the western defenses against the new elven threat.

I wandered aimlessly at first, passing through the market plaza where vendors of several races sold armor and weapons, jewelry, and a variety of other goods. I was surprised to see Brynjolf of the Thieves Guild among these, hawking a troll-fat salve. "Try Brynjolf's miracle cure to ease what ails you – aches, pains, nausea, gout, vapors, warrior's foot." I doubted his claims, having never heard that troll fat had any such properties, but he had attracted a small crowd.

I was about to move on when he waylaid me, stepping away from his stall and the people gathered there. "Ah, you're back in town, lass. I can see that your step is light, and I'm guessing your fingers are lighter. I've got some work for you, if you're interested." Was my thieving past so obvious?

"Don't look so surprised that I spotted you," he went on. "I've been in this business long enough to recognize a fellow thief when I see one."

I adopted my most haughty expression, though it was difficult with the Nord towering over me. "I only stole out of hunger and necessity, but my days of consorting with thieves are over."

"Well haven't you grown high and mighty. But I hope you won't forget where you came from."

I moved on, stopping to admire the work of Balimund, Riften's blacksmith. Lydia would need new armor when she recovered – but that seemed a long way off, so I put it from my mind. Then I visited Honorhall Orphanage to check on Harry and Huldi, who had arrived just that morning. They
looked bewildered to be around so many children like themselves. The other children had a docile
look, and responded meekly to Grelod the Kind, the orphanage's headmistress. She seemed
pleasant enough, but I wondered how she managed to keep such a collection of children of all ages
so quiet. I got an inkling just before the door closed behind me -- I heard her reprimanding a child
in tones that were not kind at all. I would have to keep an eye on that, I told myself.

Having walked enough to raise something of an appetite, I made my way to the Bee and Barb for a
quick bite, then went to check on Elgrim's progress. His shop was somewhere in the city's lower
level, next to the half-circular canal that cut through the middle of the town. I made my way down
to the wooden causeway that ran next to the canal and began looking for the shop. I had just
decided that I had gone too far toward the Ratway entrance when I heard hushed voices from
around a corner up ahead. I had been moving quietly, as was my habit even when not sneaking, and
they continued their conversation, unaware of my presence.

"I'm telling you, Maven, we're the Thieves Guild. We don't do muscle jobs." It sounded like
Brynjolf, though his voice was barely above a whisper. And I had only heard Maven Black-Briar
speak once before, but I guessed the woman's voice that responded must have been hers. She
certainly sounded like one used to wielding authority. The Black-Briars were the most powerful
family in town, and Maven was its matriarch.

"The Dark Brotherhood is here to do the knife-work. They'll play their role, you'll play yours, and
the whole thing will come off with little bloodshed. Your lofty Thieves Guild principles will
remain intact. And just think -- the theft of an entire town! When will you get another such
opportunity?"

"Very well, but if things get messy, I'm pulling our people out. Now we'd better go our separate
ways, before someone sees us."

"Relax, Brynjolf. Who would dare object to Maven Black-Briar associating with anyone she
pleases?" Then I heard footsteps coming my way and in another moment, Maven Black-Briar was
passing me. But the Dark Brotherhood were not the only ones skilled at blending into the shadows.
I watched her as she walked past, a middle-aged woman in a richly detailed tunic, her dark hair
swept back from her forehead with no adornment. At her hip, she bore a small sword.

When she was gone, I tried to decide what to do. I should really go to Mistveil Keep and report
what I'd heard to the jarl's steward, or at the very least the captain of the guard. But such things
take time, and I wanted to get back to Lydia. That, and my fatigued state may have affected my
judgment. I found the nearest guard and told him what I'd heard, omitting that I recognized the
speakers. "We'll look into it, lass," he said. "Don't worry about it a moment longer."

Very well, I thought, I've done my duty. I continued to Elgrim's Elixirs, where I found that the
potion wouldn't be ready until at least the morning. In the temple, I found Lydia just the same, with
Brelyna and J'zargo seated on a now-empty cot next to her, whispering together quietly.

"What happened to the Whiterun guard who had this spot?" I asked.

"He took a turn for the worse while you were gone," Brelyna said. "We thought he'd just gone to
sleep, but then Dinya noticed he wasn't breathing."

"Oh," was all I could say. It was very odd. He had seemed to be improving over the course of the
night and early morning. I had even cast a few healing spells on him myself. I had only known the
fellow by sight, but he had known Lydia well and kept asking about her when he was awake.
"What did Dinya say?"
"She was beside herself. She couldn't understand how a patient under her care had deteriorated so quickly. Maramal, the head priest, tried to comfort her, saying that no one can predict the course of a wound taken in battle."

I was shocked as well. I had learned of the deaths of many of my friends in the siege and retreat from Whiterun, but none of it seemed quite real. But I had been talking with this man only this morning, and somehow that made the news worse. It defied belief. I took a seat next to my friends. We sat there looking at Lydia for a time, and I thanked Aetherius that she yet lived when those all around her had died, and were still dying.

Brelyna and J'zargo sat with me for an hour or two, then made their excuses to leave. But at the door of the temple, Brelyna turned back, telling J'zargo she would follow soon.

"To tell the truth," she said to me, "I may return here to spend the night, even if there's just a pile of rushes on the floor."

"Why?"

"J'zargo snores loud enough to wake the draugr. I hardly slept last night."

"Wait. You're sharing a room with J'zargo?" I had difficulty picturing it, the two bickered so constantly.

"Yes, a room with a double bed was all Keerava had left when we arrived. It was either that or sharing with strangers." She looked away from me. "I won't say it wasn't nice. J'zargo makes an excellent bed warmer, with all that fur. And I needed the comfort after the horror of the siege and the retreat, and Onmund…" Then tears were welling in her eyes and she threw herself into my arms, crying uncontrollably. "I'm sorry," she said when she had recovered somewhat. "It's just that J'zargo won't hear of grieving, he's so cock-sure of himself. He insists that Onmund died a good Nord death. So I had no one else to go to with my grief. Now it seems that you and J'zargo are the only friends I have left in the world."

"There's Lydia. She's your friend."

She looked at Lydia for a moment. "Oh, look at me, burdening you with my grief, thinking nothing of how worried you are for your Lydia. No, I really should stay at the inn with J'zargo. I think he needs me more than he lets on. If it wasn't for the snoring…"

Was she telling me what I thought she was telling me? It didn't seem possible. They had done nothing but argue since I had known them. And a Dunmer and a Khajiit, together, as a couple? I had never heard of such a thing. I seemed to remember reading in the book *Racial Phylogeny* that it was unlikely that the two races could produce fertile offspring. But did that matter? Lydia and I could produce no offspring, fertile or otherwise.

"Lydia has me give her a solid push to wake her up," I said, trying not to show my surprise at this apparent change in my friends' relationship.

"Lydia snores?" Brelyna said, drying her eyes.

"Yes, but I still wouldn't throw her out of my bed for it." I looked back over at Lydia. "Nor would I throw her out of bed for any other reason, now that … now that it's too late!"

"Oh, don't say that, Deirdre. She will recover once she gets Elgrim's poison cure. And when she does, she'll have you back. I saw how devastated you both were, each to be apart from the other. No, you were meant to be together, anyone can see it, if not the two of you."
I nodded, hoping she was right.

By the next morning I was beside myself with worry. It was a good thing I was not the patient, because I had none. This sitting around and waiting for a cure would drive me to distraction. And if it kept up much longer, Lydia would waste away to nothing, if the poison didn't kill her first. As soon as Brelyna and J'zargo arrived from the Bee and Barb – looking quite happy and content, I couldn't help noticing – I made for Elgrim's potion shop.

I found him bent over his alchemy table, cursing under his breath. He looked as if he had been at work all night, with deep bags under his eyes as he looked up at me.

"Is there a problem with the poison cure?"

"Of course there is, or would I have been up all night? It's lacking in the sulfurous principle. It's too mercurial to fight the elvish poison."

"So what can be done?"

"Troll fat would fix it, but I have none. It's all mysteriously disappeared."

"Brynjolf," I said.

"Yes, but none dares challenge the Thieves Guild in this town."

"But I thought that troll fat salve was a fraud."

"Oh, it is, for the purposes Brynjolf claims for it. But troll fat is excellent both as a poison preventative and remedy."

"You probably can't stomach buying back your own supplies. I'll buy as many bottles of his salve as you need." Or steal them back, I thought.

"No, he's undoubtedly bollxed it up with a lot of other cheap ingredients. I need the pure stuff." He took me by the arm. "Look, you're someone who can get things done. There's a troll east of town, he's been making trouble for travelers headed for the Black-Briar Lodge, but not even Maven's best could best him."

"It sounds easy enough," I said. "I'll have no trouble slaying the troll, but how do I extract the fat?"

"Just bring me a piece of him – a leg should do."

My stomach, already in knots from worry over Lydia, gave a lurch. I had butchered game with little trouble when living on my own, but had little occasion to do it since returning to Skyrim. And a troll was a different thing entirely. They were so human-like in form, like large, long-armed men covered in dark fur. Of course, they behaved like beasts and worse, so people treated them as such, but still. The thought of cutting the leg off one of the man-like beasts repulsed me.

And so it was that I readily accepted Brelyna and J'zargo's offer of assistance when I returned to the temple to get my bow and arrows. We set out from the city's south gate, asking the guards if there had been any troll sightings lately. They informed us that a troll had been lurking about on the road less than a mile east of the gate.
It was another bitterly cold but clear day as we followed the road through the hardwood forest east of town. The trees were mostly leafless, giving the wood a somber aspect, yet buds at the tip of each branch and twig were already beginning to show. The sun shone brightly, sparkling off the thin layer of snow on the ground and illuminating a still-yellow leaf here and there. I tried not to feel guilty over how good it felt to be out in the woods while Lydia remained in the temple, dead to the world. Brelyna and J'zargo were enjoying the day, too. J'zargo was pleased to have an adventure, while Brelyna, not much of a huntress, seemed to enjoy being out with J'zargo. It was odd to see how their relationship had changed. She didn't even reprimand him when he boasted, "J'zargo will track this troll down and have his leg in a bag in no time!"

And J'zargo's prediction was not far off. We had gone but a short distance down the road when we came to the remains of a cart that had been demolished by something with incredible strength, its boards shredded like so much paper. There were blood stains on the snow covering the cobble road, and I wondered what unfortunate traveler had met his end here. But there wasn't time for wondering because we now heard the distinctive grunting of a troll coming from a spot off to the right of the road, shielded by a stand of snow-berry and hawthorn.

I motioned for J'zargo and Brelyna to remain where they were while I snuck up on the beast, but J'zargo insisted on following me. I could not take the time, or risk the noise, of arguing with him over who was the stealthiest. We crept toward the copse together, then edged our way around it until we had a view into a small clearing at the base of steep cliffs. The troll had taken shelter beneath an overhang of that cliff, and was worrying at a bone even now, occasionally bashing it against the rock wall to get at the marrow. I didn't need to ask what type of bone it was. I had seen too many troll caves not to know that they preferred human flesh.

I drank off a potion of true shot, then looked at J'zargo to make sure he was ready. Then I took careful aim, lodging the arrow deep beneath the troll's left shoulder blade. The troll roared and turned to charge at us, but J'zargo hit it with a double firebolt while I readied another arrow. The beast was only halfway across the clearing when it fell. I was glad it made it that far – I truly did not want to enter the shelter and see the remnants of the troll's grisly meal. My stomach was already churning at the thought of the task ahead.

"We'd best get to it," I said after Brelyna joined us in the clearing. I drew my dagger from my belt.

"You look far from thrilled at the prospect," Brelyna said. Judging by the way she looked down at the troll's body, neither was she.

"This one will be glad to take care of the butchery," J'zargo said, extending the claws of his right paw for both of us to see.

"That's very kind of you, J'zargo, but really it's not necessary." I don't know why I still felt the need to prove my survival skills.

Still, I was glad when Brelyna put a hand on my arm and began moving me away from the clearing. "I'd rather not witness it, myself. Come, keep me company while we let J'zargo get to his work."

I relented and we began strolling slowly through the woods east of the clearing. The land fell away steeply here. It was odd to contemplate. The city sat on the banks of Lake Honrich, and even partly over the lake itself, of which the city's canals were but an extension. The lake stretched west from the city, then its waters flowed gently down to Lake Geir near Ivarstead, before turning north to plunge steeply down to the White River. Yet east of the lake, the land rose only slightly before it started sloping steeply east and north. Really, it would seem more natural for the waters of the lake to flow eastward where it could run downhill most freely. But the gods have ordained the shape of
the land, and who are we to question them?

As we made our way slowly eastward, the trees opened up, revealing a gap in the mountains even farther east. Brelyna eyed the gap wistfully. "That is the Rift Pass. Through it lies my people's homeland."

"Do any of your relatives yet live there?"

"None so far as I know. Maybe a few daring souls have braved that blasted landscape to see if it might be re-inhabited, yet none have returned. No, my family comes from Solstheim, the island far to the north, given to the Dunmer by the Nords after the eruption of the Red Mountain. It is the only home I've ever known, yet I've always wondered about our original homeland, Vvardenfell, in Morrowind."

We walked in silence for a moment, Brelyna peering ahead to get a better glimpse of the pass into Morrowind. Then we heard a noise and stopped to listen. We were on a gentle slope but just ahead was a rock outcrop, beyond which the land fell away more steeply.

"That was a clank of metal, perhaps armor," Brelyna said.

I nodded, and then the sound came again. A moment later, we heard what sounded like many trampling feet, and the creak of a wagon. I motioned for Brelyna to follow me quietly, and we made our way over to the tor, the sounds growing louder as we went.

Peering over the top of the rocks, we saw the last thing I had expected – Imperials, lots of them, coming up the steep slope toward us. In the instant I had to take in the scene before ducking back down out of sight, I realized this was not just a war-band, but a full-fledged army. There were soldiers on foot, far too many to count, and oxen labored to pull their loads up the steep slope – not wagons, but wheeled catapults. Riften was about to be put under siege, and the soldiers who could have defended it had just been sent north and west. The Imperials would take the city, and my love with it.
"We've had no word of Imperials approaching," growled Unmid Snow-Shod, housecarl to Jarl Laila Law-Giver. "Why are you running through the streets and raising the alarm?" He was a fierce-looking Nord with a tall sheaf of red hair running over the top of his skull and a spiral tattoo on the right side of his face. His menacing aspect was undercut somewhat by his elven armor, with its sinuous lines and bright gold color. Next to him, Jarl Laila sat on her throne, her eyes wide and her hand to her mouth.

"Because your city is blind to the east, and the Imperial army is approaching that way," I replied. I was desperate to get him to raise the city's defenses. Evacuating Lydia from the city would do her little good, since the potion still wasn't ready. I had sent J'zargo and Brelyna straight to Elgrim with the troll's leg, while I raised the alarm.

Unmid was still lost in thought when a Riften guard ran into the throne room. "The Dragonborn speaks true! We sent a scout up to the peaks southeast of the city and he saw the Imperial army moving up the slopes from the east. They were having difficulty traveling off of the road in such steep country. He reckoned two hours until they arrive in force before our walls."

"But how could they have come from the east?" the jarl asked. Laila Law-Giver was a petite woman, clad in a fine dress embroidered in gold, with a silver and sapphire circlet on her brow. She wore a sword at her hip, yet she seemed far from ready to command her troops in the city's defense. Even Elisif the Fair, whom many mocked as little more than a pretty face, seemed made of sterner stuff.

"Begging your pardon, Jarl Laila," said her housecarl, "but there is a pass south into Cyrodiil near Stendarr's Beacon. Still, it's a difficult route and I never knew the Imperials to be mountaineers."

"There are many Nords in the Imperial Legion," I reminded him.

"True," he admitted. "Stieg, how many Imperials, would you say?"

"The scout counted hundreds, and still they kept coming."
"Hundreds! And our barracks depleted. There is just a single war-band of Stormcloaks left, and the city guard."

"Whatever the numbers, you need to make ready the city's defenses," I said. Did I have to tell these people their duties? "I will assist in any way I can."

"Praise Ysmir, the Dragonborn will save us!" I heard one of the servants say.

The jarl's steward, a Wood Elf named Anuriel, spoke up for the first time. "Jarl Laila's safety should be our first priority. My jarl, the escape plan we laid out in case of dragon attack is ready to put into action."

"If only Maven were here to offer her advice!" the jarl said. "But I haven't seen her since last night's banquet." She looked back and forth between Unmid and Anuriel. "Well, it is only right that the jarl be saved. I will make ready for the boats." She rose and headed toward her chambers.

I could not believe what I was seeing. These were the rulers and protectors of the Rift?

"Our thoughts go with you, Jarl Laila," Unmid said, turning toward the barracks.

"My dear," said Anuriel, "you can't send the jarl into the wilderness without an escort."

The housecarl, at first so fierce, turned meekly to the steward. "Yes, of course, Anuriel, I will send half a dozen guards, though I hate to lose them. Now I must see about the defenses on the walls." Again he turned to leave.

"My dear," said the Bosmer, her tones all honey and seduction. "Don't you feel it would be better to meet the enemy in the open, and keep those horrible catapults away from the city? Isn't that what you always said during our … combat training sessions? That a stout thrust of the sword is always better than a limp defense? A leader who led his troops to victory in such a bold stroke would be well rewarded at home." She batted her eyes suggestively.

"Yes, but…" Unmid looked sheepish now. "A siege is different … and the numbers. … Still, I will take your words into account." Then he came to some resolution. "If I should not return, I hope you will always remember our … training sessions."

"Oh, I will never forget them, I assure you." She seemed quite happy to send her lover off to a battle with such poor odds.

Unmid did leave this time, and I turned toward the keep's front door. Only then did I remember the strange conversation I had overheard the day before. I turned back to the steward and told her everything I had heard, including the names of the speakers.

"Yes," she said, "your report was most appreciated, and we are investigating it thoroughly. I have long known of the Black-Briar family's growing power, and this time we may actually do something about it. Now, I am sure Unmid could use you on the front lines."

I made my way quickly back to the Temple of Mara and found it in a state of uproar. Lydia was fine – or as fine as one who remained near death could be – and Brelyna and J'zargo were sitting with her. But two more Whiterun refugees, a guard and a member of Balgruuf's hirth, had passed away. Maramal and Dinya Balu were distraught, arguing about what could have happened.

"I couldn't be with them every moment of both night and day," the priestess protested.

"No one expected it of you, but who else has administered their care?"
"Elgrim, at first," she said, "then young Deirdre here, and Elgrim's apprentice, Ingun."

"I wish Elgrim had been here the whole time, but he's been so busy with that poison cure. Could Ingun have made some sort of mistake? Where is she now?"

"I haven't seen her since morning."

Maramal looked to me. "She was administering cures in the wee hours last night," I said.

The priest turned to Dinya. "See what Elgrim has to say. I want to get to the bottom of this."

More distractions for the old apothecary – that was the last thing Lydia needed. Then I remembered that Ingun was part of the Black-Briar family, and a dark thought crossed my mind.

I turned to Brelyna and J'zargo. "Friends, I must go and aid in the battle that is to come."

"We'll come with you," J'zargo said without hesitation. Brelyna, seated next to him, nodded.

"No, something strange is afoot in this city. The threats within are as great as those without. I would have you stay here and guard Lydia, and do not let Ingun Black-Briar, or any other Black-Briar, come near her. And if things go ill, as I fear they might, get Lydia out of the city, and take Elgrim and his entire alchemy shop if you have to. She needs that cure."

"This one will see about a boat before they're all taken," J'zargo said, heading for the door.

I knelt by Lydia and took her hand. Brelyna discreetly withdrew to investigate the altar at the head of the temple. "I'm off to battle, my love," I said, stroking her ice-cold forehead. "I know not whether I'll return. Brelyna and J'zargo will take good care of you."

I was shocked when she opened her eyes. "No, my thane," she whispered, the words barely audible. "I should … protect you … with my life…" She reached up and ran her fingers over the Amulet of Mara. I insisted on wearing it, despite the many propositions from the worst sort as I walked about the town. Then her hand fell back, hanging limply off the edge of the cot, and her eyes closed once more.

I choked back a sob and put my cheek close to her lips to make sure she was still breathing. "No, my love, you protected an entire city. Now it is my turn to protect you." I kissed her on the forehead.

I had returned to Nirn with hope in my heart, only to see it smashed, first by elvish poison and now by the Imperial Legion. I knew only two things: I could not let Lydia die, nor could I let her fall back into the hands of the Imperials, who would surely turn her over to the Thalmor. I felt the fires of my anger kindling within me. There would be no meditating for balance this time. I would unleash the full force of my dragon soul's fury on any who opposed me. No army would come between the Dragonborn and her love.

The defenders of Riften were a proud group of warriors, but too few. They were but one war-band of Stormcloak soldiers, and fifty or so city guards. The Stormcloaks stood proudly in their ranks, their captain standing in front of them, conferring with Unmid over battle tactics. "Today is a day to die a good death!" one sword-sister called out heartily. The city guards were a different story,
glancing often to the east, where they expected the first Imperials to appear. We were ranged across the slopes east of the city walls, at a low crest where the land steepened. We would have the benefit of charging downhill at the laboring Imperial forces. Still, the strategy seemed unlikely to succeed.

"Housecarl Unmid, this is madness," I interrupted as I came up to the two leaders. "You should defend the city from within its walls. You will not stop such a large force out in the open."

The Stormcloak captain, Torvar, looked at me. "What do you know of warcraft, lass? Riften was once a proud city, with mighty walls, but then it was destroyed in the uprising against Jarl Hosgunn Crossed-Daggers. It was rebuilt hastily, and poorly, with little thought to its defenses. There are no murder holes, no crenels, no catapults, and no pots of boiling oil, nor even battlements, save above the gates and in Mistveil Keep. No, our only hope, albeit a slim one, is to strike a solid blow at the heart of their force, making the city appear well defended."

"Besides," said Unmid, "we have the Dragonborn on our side!"

"I don't know how many soldiers you think I am worth, but it is as your comrade just said – I know nothing of the ways of warcraft. I have never fought in a battle of this type."

"Just hit them with whatever you have as we charge, magics or shouts or what-have-you, and then pick off any mages or archers you see. And here," he said, going over to a wagon loaded with a weapon-hoard. "Take this shield. Those robes will do you little good against a volley of arrows."

I took the shield and fit my left arm through its straps. It was heavy, and I thought it might hinder as much as protect me.

Then the first Imperials appeared at the bottom of the steep slope. They were marching in ranks as best they could through the irregularly-spaced trees. Their leader, an officer in ornate Imperial armor, rode a jet-black charger. It was unlike the horses of Skyrim, tall and lean but well muscled, with a prancing gait, pulling at its halter, eager to run free. But the officer reined his mount to a stop, then put his fist in the air to call for a halt. No doubt he was surprised to see us out here in the open and hadn't counted on a fight in the wood.

Unmid was still looking with awe at the officer's mount. "How did they get a horse, and such a horse as that, over that pass?"

"Aye, and catapults as well," said Torvar. "They've had help from within Skyrim, there's no doubt. But never mind that. We need to form up our ranks for a charge. Are you going to lead it or shall I?"

Unmid seemed to recover himself. "As housecarl to Jarl Laila Law-Giver, it is my duty to lead the defense of the city." He began moving up and down the ranks, making an impassioned speech meant to rally the troops, while the Stormcloak captain formed them into three shield walls, mixing Stormcloaks with guards.

"We may go to our deaths today, brothers and sisters," shouted Unmid, but they will be good deaths, ones that will make our fathers in Sovngarde proud. If it is our fate to join them, let us do it with a song in our hearts! A song of freedom for Riften! For Skyrim!" It was thin gruel, but the soldiers shouted lustily in response.

I stepped away from the city's defenders, taking several paces out into the space between the two forces. Little more than a hundred yards separated them now. The Imperials had ranged their ranks out across the slope below us. I counted two hundred easily, and more kept coming. Their leader
sat his charger, quietly eyeing the proceedings. His troops ranked behind him were as silent as death. Even from this distance, I thought I saw a mocking smile on the commander's lips.

Then I knew how it would go. There was no hope for the city's defenders. Unmid's rallying speech droned on, little more than the chattering of a squirrel to my ears.

And with that, my anger was unleashed. "Od-Ah-Viing!" I shouted in the Imperials' direction. The shock of it rippled across the space between us, the commander's mount whinnying and rearing, the first ranks of soldiers taking a step backward. For one dreadful moment, all was quiet once more.

Then the Imperial commander spoke a single word. "Volley!" he called. Bows pointed skyward in the second ranks of the Imperials, and the twang of their strings was loud, even from this distance. Then a whistling and a skittering of arrows through trees swept toward us, and we were all ducking beneath our shields. Some of the arrows found their marks, despite the trees and the shields, and several of our soldiers fell.

"Let's pay them in kind," shouted Unmid. Our archers let fly, and in a moment we saw soldiers falling on the other side, but fewer than on ours.

A minute had passed since my call to Odahviing, and now both sides paused at the unmistakable roaring of a dragon. "By Ysmir, what now?" I heard one of the Stormcloaks say.

"Be easy, my friends, and hold your onslaught," I said, looking to the skies. Then I saw him, his vast wings skimming over the treetops toward us. Soldiers on both sides gasped.

Odahviing found a small clearing in which to land not far from me. "Thuri, Dovahkiin," he said, as the flurry of snow and dead leaves settled around him, his head bowed slightly. "What do you require?"

"To the skies, my friend," I said, leaping onto his back. "I will teach these Imperials not to trespass in Skyrim."

"Dinok wah joorre!" he shouted as we shot upwards.

For a long moment, there was nothing but silence and the wind in my hair as we circled above the field of battle. This time I had a chance to glory in the feeling of flying and the power it gave me. This is how it must feel to be a dragon, I thought.

Then a battle cry went up from below, and I looked down to see Unmid leading his force in a charge down the slope, dodging this way and that amongst the trees.

"Now, Odahviing, let's give the Imperials a taste of our Thu'um!"

We plunged down from above, skimming the treetops along the Imperial front lines, both of us shouting "Yol-Toor-Shul!" Odahviing's shout lasted longer than mine, spraying fire across the breadth of the Imperial ranks. The screams of the falling soldiers were glorious to hear, and mixed in with them was the louder shriek of the commander's horse. I imagined the officer wasn't smiling now.

"Again!" I called, and Odahviing wheeled dizzily in the sky, returning for a second pass. His
Thu'um was ready, while mine was not, so I cast a fireball spell, using my shield to protect me from the archers that had now regained enough wits to retaliate against their airborne attackers. Again the screams of the dying Imperials were sweet to my ears.

Now Unmid's force crashed into the broken lines, cutting a swath deep into the Imperial force before meeting resistance.

"Strike farther down the slope, Odahviing," I called. "We must avoid the city's defenders." The dragon flew farther downhill, where the troops were still marching upwards. They tried to scatter as we descended upon them, but not quickly enough. Dozens died screaming under our combined shouts.

We circled in the sky once more, and I looked back to survey the action. We had divided the Imperial force, the smaller part remaining at the fore, though the survivors were now retreating from the defenders' swords and axes. The two sides seemed to have even numbers here, but the Imperials were routed while the Nords fought with the glee of victory close at hand. Down the hill, the scene was confused, with many Imperials running downhill, and others coming up behind, unaware of the destruction ahead. Farther along where the slope flattened into a valley, a narrow bridge over a river had become a bottleneck of retreating and advancing troops.

"Ah, Dovahkiin," said Odahviing, "I will gladly serve you if it provides me with such sport. It has been too long since I unleashed my Thu'um on the joorre."

Looking down on the destruction we had wrought, I had to agree – it was sweet to be one of the dov.

The voice, when it came, was soft, little more than a whispering in my mind. A woman's voice, speaking quietly to me. Then it grew in strength, and I recognized it. No, it could not be! I did not want to hear her, not now.

"Deirdre," my mother's voice said. "Deirdre, this is not you. Where have you gone?"

Mother, I am right here, I thought. And look how great I have become.

"No, this is not you, Deirdre. You are not this cruel. Come back to us, Deirdre. Come back to yourself."

I looked down on the battle, at the burnt corpses and the wailing and moaning wounded. They had brought this on themselves, hadn't they? They would have slain us just as gladly.

"It is an awful way to die, Deirdre. Those are our screams you are hearing, as you have heard them in your thoughts since the day we died."

Now it was as if I heard the soldiers' screaming anew. Now they filled me only with horror.

"Come back to us, Deirdre," she said again. "Come back to yourself."

I sobbed. "What have I done?" I cried aloud. "I wanted only to protect my love!"

Now I heard my father's voice. "Then protect her, my daughter, but do not destroy yourself to do
"It." Then they were quiet, and somehow I knew they would speak no more.

"What's this?" Odahviing asked. "Is this grieving I hear? Why do you not revel in our power?"

"Because I am no dragon," I said, hoping it was true. But maybe Alduin had been right, maybe he did live on within me.

"Look," Odahviing said. "While you debate with yourself, the army regroups."

He was right. The Imperial captains had restored order to a portion of their troops and were marching them uphill once more. Meanwhile, the city's defenders still contended with the remnants of the front lines. It seemed from above that they had the upper hand, but they couldn't match the larger force advancing on them. Riften, and Lydia, still needed my aid.

Very well, I thought, we can rout the Imperials without slaying them. I had done it before, on a smaller scale. Now I would learn if I could do it from the back of a dragon.

"Sweep down on them once more, Odahviing," I said. "But stay your Thu'um. Use neither talon nor fang."

"Where is the sport in this?" he demanded.

"You will see," I said as we dove toward the advancing force. "Faas-Ru-Maar!" I shouted as we came near them, and the force of the Dismaying shout knocked twenty soldiers to their knees, sending countless others running back downhill. For the rest, just the sight of the swooping dragon made them turn and flee. I cast a spell of rout for good measure.

Again and again, we dove on the Imperials, driving them back toward the bridge. We circled over it for a time, ensuring that they would all cross it and not return to the attack. Then the city's defenders were harrying them from behind, and we flew farther down the valley toward the Rift Pass, chasing the bulk of the Imperial force before us.

"Look, armies flee in our wake!" Odahviing exulted. "Is it not glorious?"

"It is … useful, I cannot deny it," I said. "But I will not glory in such dreadful power." I trembled to think of it, for I had just proven it was a power I could not control.

Near Stendarr's Beacon, a tower high up on the steep slopes south of the valley, the force divided, some continuing down the valley toward the pair of towers at the Rift Pass. Another portion made for the high pass near the beacon, but they found it more difficult going up than it had been coming down. They had fixed ropes at the steepest point of the passage, and the going was slow. A hundred or so fighters had gathered at the bottom of the pitch, all clamoring to be next on the ropes. Others were scrambling up unaided, then falling back down.

I bade Odahviing to land on a rocky promontory nearby, and the scramble at the base of the climb became all the more intense.

"Imperials!" I called to them. "Drop your weapons, and we will harm you no more!" To a man and a woman, they dropped sword, axe, and bow, then stood trembling before me. "I have been merciful to you this day … all things considered. Between his Thu'um and my magic, Odahviing and I could easily have sent all of you to Oblivion. Yet we did not. You are free to go, to Morrowind or Cyrodiil, as you choose. Tell me what other commander on a field of battle would let such a hostile force escape unharmed?"

Even to my ears it sounded like a justification, but a murmuring went through the crowd. "Your
freedom comes on one condition: that the Cyrodiillans, Redguards, Orsimer, and other races among you never again set hostile foot in Skyrim. And to you Nords, I say this: Your homeland is under attack by the Thalmor, though you may not know it. The city of Whiterun, of which I was once proud to be called thane, lies in ruin. Countless of your kin lie dead within its broken walls and on the plains without. And so I say, join us in driving out the Aldmeri invaders, and any Imperial forces that stand in our way. Return unarmed to your homeland, and you will be welcomed by the Stormcloaks."

With that, there was a greater murmuring, the Nords and the other soldiers looking at each other with growing suspicion.

And then we launched into the air, Odahviing soaring to a great height just for the pleasure of it. "Ah, it is wonderful to soar the skies of Keizaal after a great victory, is it not?" I gave him his head, for the moment not caring where we went.

The day remained clear and we could see much of Tamriel. To the east, a broken, jagged peak rose from Vvardenfell, in Morrowind – the Red Mountain, Dagoth-Ur. To the north, the jagged peaks of Skyrim gave way to the icy waters of the Sea of Ghosts. West, beyond the mountains, a golden glow lit the haze above the burning Alik'r Desert. And to the south, in Cyrodiil, set within a series of lakes connected by vast rivers flowing even farther south to the sea, there rose a single spire, impossibly tall – the White-Gold Tower in the Imperial City. And closer at hand, looming over Skyrim, the place where I could not look: the Throat of the World.

From this height Tamriel seemed but a small place. Too small, certainly, to contain the tides of grief and remorse now washing over me.
Moaning. Screaming. Whimpering. Appeals to Kynareth and Mara, Ruptga and Malacath. Smoldering trees and singed leather and bodies burned beyond recognition. The foul stench of voided bowels and warm blood and spilled entrails, mixed with the sweet aroma of cooking meat. For the awful truth is that the smell of burned human flesh is like that of any other roasting game. The very fact that I could find it appealing turned my stomach.

I watched as Odahviing soared away from the battlefield and wished he could take me anywhere other than here. But no, I was the author of this atrocity and I must look on it. I had commanded that he set me down here, and then sent him on his way.

"Help me," a nearby soldier croaked. "For the love of Morwha, help me." Morwha is the name used in Hammerfell for Mara. The fellow was a Redguard from the Imperial side. He had escaped the onslaught of fire, but had a great rent across his leather cuirass. The snow nearby was stained bright red.

I cast the close wounds spell on him, then gave him a healing potion. The grimace of pain on his face eased somewhat and he seemed to breathe more easily. "Water," he croaked, and I gave him a sip from my flask.

"That will have to do," I said, and went to another soldier nearby. In this way I moved among the wounded, healing all those I could, Imperials and Stormcloaks, Nords, Redguards, Cyrodiilians, and Orsimer alike. Some were burned over most of their bodies, little more than living corpses, beyond the aid of any healing potion or restoration spell. Others had gaping wounds from which their lives slowly ebbed. Some recognized me from the dragon's back, at first recoiling in fear, then looking at me in confusion as my healing spell washed over them. Others pled with me to give them quick deaths. I could not deny them, once I determined they were beyond my healing powers. It was grim work, yet how could I turn away from them?

And so the returning city defenders found me: healing friend and foe alike and giving quick deaths to those beyond my aid, with tears running down my cheeks and freezing to the front of my robes. I was so intent on my task, I hardly noticed their approach. Then they were lifting me up to their shoulders, shouting, "Hail, Dragonborn! Hail, Savior of Riften!"

"No, put me down," I demanded. "I am no hero. I cannot celebrate this atrocity!" Looking around at them, I saw that less than two score had returned from battle.

Unmid looked up at me. He had rents in his elven armor and a gash across his clean-shaven scalp. "An atrocity? This is a great victory, and you have won it for us, you and your dragon."
"But there was no need for this butchery! Between us, Odahviing and I had the power to rout their army while harming none – had I but known it! No, I underestimated my power, and let my anger get the better of me."

Unmid laughed. "You can't fight a battle without anger. And our anger was righteous! Enough of this nonsense. It's time to celebrate!" Around him the soldiers and guards shouted in agreement.

"Wait! There are wounded here who still need our help."

Torvar surveyed the field, where the soldiers from both sides were looking around, wondering what to do. Some of the Stormcloaks and city guards came over to join us, while the Imperials eyed us warily. "Aye," the Stormcloak captain said, "you've healed our wounded, and for that I thank you. As for the rest, I see naught but Imperial scum. We will give them quick deaths."

This remark roused the Imperials, many of them reaching for their scattered weapons.

"No!" I shouted. "I healed them, and their lives are now in my keeping. You will take them prisoner and treat them according to the warrior's code. Many are Nords and may join your cause when they learn of the attack on Whiterun."

"Whiterun?" said one of the Imperials from Skyrim. "That's my home!"

"Was your home, traitor!" shouted one of the Stormcloaks. "You should have been there to defend it when the elves attacked!"

"Enough!" Unmid ordered. Then he looked up at me. "Very well, it's your victory. The Imperial survivors will be well treated, and their wounds seen to."

Then we were moving back uphill toward Riften, the victorious soldiers chanting my name as they carried me away from that bloody field, where I still had much to do to repair the harm I had done. But that egg was already broken, and there was no getting the yolk back into the shell. How had I let it happen? The battle seemed like a dream now. I remembered my anger at the threatening army, and before that, fear for Lydia, fear for the loss of my true love. And there it was. This tragedy had grown out of my love for Lydia, and my fear of losing her. I was no better than my parents' killers.

I was in the midst of these thoughts as we approached the city gate, still borne along by the soldiers, paying attention only to the ground in front of me.

"Where's the guard?" a soldier asked. Those who carried me began lowering me to the ground, and then I heard an arrow whistle past my head, followed by a cry from behind me.

"What the…?" Unmid, who had been walking beside us in the fore of the group looked up at the battlements above the gate. The second arrow caught him between the eyes.

For a moment there was nothing but running boots going in every direction as the soldiers scattered or flattened themselves against the locked gate. I tumbled to one side in case the archers above us still had their arrows trained on me. Coming up into a crouch, I spotted two archers atop the battlements above the gate. I couldn't bring myself to kill them, given the mayhem I had already caused that day. I cast a calming spell on them.

Yet my mercy was wasted as archers on our side took advantage of their attackers' defenselessness, sinking arrows deep into their chests. One slumped backwards, while the other toppled from the battlement, landing on his back on the cobbled roadway in front of us. Only then did I notice that he wore the uniform of a city guard, but with a different surcoat, one that bore an emblem of a
"What in Oblivion is happening?" Torvar shouted as he tried to open the gates, without success.

"By Talos!" exclaimed one of the guards looking down at the fallen archer. "That's Stieg! I was having a mug of ale with him just a few nights ago. And what's he wearing?"

"It looks to be a poor depiction of a briar bush," I said. "My guess is that Maven has taken the city in your absence, no doubt planning to hand it over to the victorious Imperial army, who would install her as jarl." I told them of the plot I had overheard.

"That would explain why some of the retreating Imperials made for the Black-Briar Lodge. They must have used it as a staging area." He looked up at the city walls and the locked gate for a long moment. "Gods!" he exclaimed, smashing his axe against his shield. "Do we have to lay siege to our own city?"

Just then we heard the sound of spells of lightning and fire being cast on the other side of the gate, a brief clash of steel, and a feline hiss. Then the gates themselves shuddered as something heavy hit them from the other side.

A moment later I heard a familiar female voice. "By Azura, these oafs are heavy. Come on, you lazy Khajiit, help me with them! And you two loitering about there, get over here and lend a hand."

Then the gates opened and there stood Brelyna and J'zargo, with two members of the Thieves Guild standing behind them, looking contrite. Beyond, the bodies of two guards wearing the Black-Briar colors lay in the gutter.

I ran up to my friends. "Tell me Lydia is all right!"

"She's fine," said Brelyna, "or still the same, I should say. But it was well that you had us watch over her. A Dark Brotherhood assassin and two Black-Briar guards came to the temple to finish off any survivors from Whiterun, the ones Ingun hadn't managed to poison."

"And?"

"All three dead," said J'zargo, polishing his claws on the cloth of his mage robes.

"What's happening in the city now?" Torvar demanded.

"The townsfolk remain indoors. There are few guards about. Some were slain by the Dark Brotherhood or by their colleagues who had been turned by the Black-Briars. The Thieves Guild has been lurking about as usual, like these two, serving as lookouts for the insurrection. Maven is in Mistveil Keep, no doubt preparing to welcome a victorious Imperial Army. She will be surprised to see you – as were we!" she exclaimed, turning to me. "You'll have to tell us how you managed it."

"There's no time for that," said the captain. "We're going to take back this city. Let's go!"

"Brelyna," I said. "I'll be forever in your debt if you watch over Lydia for me one more time. As J'zargo is the better fighter at close quarters, he should come with us." She agreed, though she looked after J'zargo with concern as she accompanied us as far as the temple.

We had but twenty fighters as we made our way through the streets of Riften, the rest having stayed behind at the field of battle to see to the wounded and the prisoners. Yet our ranks swelled
as we went. Doors and windows opened a crack as we passed the city's houses and inns, then we heard shouts of "They've returned!" and "We're saved!" The people poured out onto the streets behind us, some armed with whatever they could find, cleavers, hatchets, even frying pans.

As we proceeded, another figure in Thieves Guild attire broke out of the shadows of a doorway to join us at the head of the procession. It was Brynjolf. "I want you to know, the Thieves Guild had no part of this, or only a little part," he said, addressing first the captain and then me. "We've just been watching … mostly. You have to understand, we can't operate without the protection of the powers that be, and we support those powers – whoever they might be."

"Tell us what we'll find inside the keep, sneak thief," said the captain. "Your fate depends on the accuracy of your report."

"Maven is inside the keep, along with her daughter and Anuriel. She has her mercenaries with her, about half a dozen, plus another half dozen of her converted guards. Our people are there too, but they'll give you no trouble."

"And the Dark Brotherhood?"

"They've melded back into the shadows. They want no part of open combat. Maven was paying for their services when I last saw them."

"Very well. But if even one of your thugs lifts a weapon against us, I'll make sure Skyrim is wiped clean of your little guild. Now lend us a hand."

We continued toward the steps leading up to Mistveil Keep. Two guards stood before the doors, also wearing the new Black-Briar sigils. They made to flee as soon as they saw us, but my calming spell halted them. They looked on passively as the Stormcloaks bound their hands behind their backs.

The doors to the keep weren't even barred. Maven must have been making ready to welcome the Imperials to the keep, because she was raising a goblet in a toast, her daughter Ingun on one side and the turncoat Anuriel on the other. Servants were filling cups on the long table that ran down the length of the throne room. It was a large chamber, and the throne on which Maven Black-Briar now sat was quite far away, yet I could see the smile freeze on her face as we burst through the doors. In the next instant, she leapt from the throne, her goblet clattering to the floor. She dashed for a doorway behind the throne, Anuriel and Ingun close behind.

J'zargo and one of the Stormcloaks took out the two inner door guards while I cast a pacifying spell on a cluster of mercenaries and Black-Briar guards standing about near the table. A few of them escaped its effects, but they had little enthusiasm for a fight with their comrades calmed and their employer fled. Neither did a group of thieves gathered about in the middle of the room, once they saw Brynjolf come through the door, shaking his head at them.

"Quickly! After Maven!" he shouted at them.

"Follow those thieves and make sure there's no treachery," the captain said, and several Stormcloaks followed Brynjolf and the other thieves after the jarl.

The soldiers were just dragging away the last of the mercenaries when the thieves returned, leading Maven and her two accomplices at sword-point. I don't know whether Maven was more angry or confused. "How is it possible?" she demanded, looking straight at me. "That was an entire army. No ragged band of Stormcloaks and city guards could have stood against it, even with the aid of the Dragonborn, or so I thought. I did not know your power."
"Nor did I," I said. "But it is indeed awesome, what one can do from the back of a dragon."

"I should have had Ingun poison you when I had the chance."

"You won't get the chance to make that mistake again, Maven," Torvar said. "It's the executioner's block for you at dawn. Your daughter and the elf will spend the rest of their lives rotting in a cell."

A great cheer rose up from the crowd of townsfolk who had poured into the keep behind us. "Serves her right," one said. "Selling that damned over-priced mead. Always tasted like honey laced with lye to me."

"And what of Unmid?" Anuriel had the gall to ask.

"He survived the suicidal tactic you goaded him into," I said, "but not the treachery of his own guardsmen." She actually looked sad at the news.

J'zargo and I entered the Temple of Mara to find Elgrim administering Lydia's poison cure.

"I've only been able to get a few drops past her lips, but already she seems better," he said.

I looked at her and saw more color in her cheeks than I had in days.

"I must get back to my shop," Elgrim went on. "To think! My apprentice, a poisoner! It could be the end of my trade. Just give Lydia as much of the potion as she will take until the bottle is empty. If my potion can cure the Hero of Whiterun, I may be able to save my reputation!"

Elgrim left, and I sat on the edge of Lydia's cot, taking her by the hand. J'zargo and Brelyna sat on the cot next to hers, and Sister Dinya was nearby. I put the potion bottle to her lips, but she spluttered when I tipped it too far. I corked the bottle and sat chafing her wrists, willing her to get better. It seemed that only Lydia opening her eyes and smiling at me could wash away the bitter remorse I still felt.

"I have to say," said Brelyna, "I was never more surprised and pleased than when I saw you and the soldiers returning through the woods from the temple's bell tower." It was the only structure overlooking the city's eastern wall, but somehow, no one had thought to make it a lookout. "I truly thought we'd seen the last of you when you left here, the odds seemed so against you. Yet you don't seem happy with your victory."

I kept looking at Lydia as I told them what had happened – what I had done. I could not look at my friends, and certainly not at Dinya, who had tried to teach me about love and compassion – for naught, as it turned out.

"Pfft," J'zargo hissed. "Those Imperials would have done the same to you, without even a first thought. It is the way of war."

"For once, the Khajiit speaks true," said Brelyna. "You cannot blame yourself. You did not set these events in motion."

"But you don't understand! You can't imagine the hatred I had in my heart. I felt only joy at those soldiers' deaths. And I felt only glory in the greatness of my power."
"Oh dear," was all Brelyna could say.

"I still can't understand how my love for Lydia led to such rage, and such horror."

"It is as I told you when last you were here," said Sister Dinya. "Love for those closest to us – our lovers, our spouses, our families – it is only a start. We must expand that love to include our neighbors, our fellow townsfolk, our countrymen, all beings. For all beings feel this same love, and suffer at its loss. I know you already have this compassion within you, you just forgot it for a moment."

I looked up at her. "Do you really think so?"

"You may think it was your parents who spoke to you, but I say it was your own heart. You turned aside from the evil you had caused, from the evil voice inside you, and found your compassion. You should not be so hard on yourself. Most would have done worse, given the same power."

That seemed small consolation. I did not know what to say, and kept looking at Lydia.

"Come," said the priestess. "Receive Mara's blessing. I will not say it will wash away the evil you think you have caused, but it will help restore your compassion. And it will strengthen your healing efforts."

I let her lead me to the temple's altar, where she had me kneel. I looked up at Mara's statue, with its tear-stained face looking to the heavens. I couldn't help wondering how much more suffering I had added to her burden of woe on this day. Yet I felt the blessing wash over me just the same, and I felt some of the guilt and remorse ease.

Then I returned to Lydia and tried putting a few more drops of the potion between her lips. Her color was improving and her breathing was stronger. I put my ear to her chest and felt her heartbeat, now strong and regular. Then we sat with her, awaiting further improvement.

In another hour, she opened her eyes and looked at me. I thought I had never seen such a glad sight as the smile that crossed her face when she saw me. Then I was able to get her to swallow a whole mouthful of the cure.

"My thane," she said. "You returned."

"And so did you, my love," I said, stroking her hair.

By evening she was able to sit up and drink the rest of the potion, then begin taking sips of broth sent over from the Bee and Barb.

"Where am I?" she asked, becoming more alert.

"You're in Riften, in the Temple of Mara."

"And the battle you spoke of?"

"The Imperial Legion tried to take the city."

"And you held them off?"

I nodded.

"That's my thane," she said, smiling. Then the smile was replaced with sorrow. "The elves, they attacked Whiterun!"
"I know."

"We lost so many! We couldn't hold them off, more just kept coming. My comrades and friends kept falling all around me and the shield walls could not hold."

"Yet you saved the people of Whiterun, my love. Nearly all of them got to safety."

"Really?"

"Yes, thanks to you. Everyone says that without you, the elves would have had a slaughter not seen since the Night of Tears. And also thanks to Aela and Vilkas and Avulstein. And J'zargo and Brelyna here, they helped to protect the children."

"And the children? They survived?"

"Most, not all."

"Harry and Huldi?"

"They're fine."

She looked around at the wounded on the cots surrounding us. "And Onmund?"

I shook my head. "He gave his life so yours could be saved, Mara bless him."

She looked away from me, crying bitter tears. "I should have fallen there with my brothers and sisters, so many of them fell around me, and I was their captain!"

Brelyna came over and sat beside us, taking Lydia's hand. "Do not say that. It was Onmund's gift, and a noble one, to you and to Deirdre. You cannot reject it."

Lydia closed her eyes and her tears gradually waned. Then she looked at me. "You pursued Alduin to Sovngarde. I thought never to see you again, whether you returned or no."

"But I did return, and only for you, my love." Then I knew it was time to make my apology. I reached behind my neck and undid the clasp on the Amulet of Mara.

"What? You no longer want to marry me?"

"I am giving the amulet to you, my love." I put the necklace into her hands. "For my part, I will love you for as long as you will have me, whether it is for an hour, or a day, or a year. I would not force you into the bonds of matrimony, and I am forever sorry I tried to do so. Perhaps one day, if you decide the time is right, you will wear the amulet for me."

Lydia held the amulet before her and gazed long at it. Then she spoke. "It seemed an eternity that I walked the death-road. I thought I saw a light up ahead. Whether it was Aetherius or Sovngarde, I knew not."

"Sovngarde, surely!" Brelyna and J'zargo exclaimed at once.

"Yet always I heard a voice, your voice, calling me back. And I would come back, but I could not. I turned my back on the light and tried to follow your voice, and for a long time it seemed it got no closer. Sometimes it faded to nothing at all. But then it did grow nearer, and now here I am, with you." She looked for a long moment at the amulet. Then she put it around her own neck and looked at me and waited.
"Is that … is that an Amulet of Mara?" I asked, following the ancient forms, though I was barely able to speak.

"Fancy me, do you?" she replied, also following the custom, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Let's not waste any time. Let's get married right away!"

"Oh, my Lydia!" I fell into her arms, burying my face in her breast. I cried and cried, all of the anger and worry and sadness of the last days flowing out of me, and more, the strain I had felt since the Greybeards had first called me Dovahkiin and laid that heavy burden upon me, and even more, the grief and rage I had borne within me since losing my parents and my home – all of it washed away in my tears. By the time I was done, the front of Lydia's tunic was soaked.

"Oh, my love, I was a fool!" I exclaimed. "I never should have pushed you into marriage so soon."

"No, I was the fool," she said. "I should have accepted you right away, as my heart bade me. And now I would never be parted with you ever again."

We kissed then, a long, deep kiss that made the temple seem to spin.

"Ah," said J'zargo. "Two fools in love. This one thinks you should get a room at the Bee and Barb."

"They are hardly the biggest fools in this room," Brelyna said acidly. Lydia and I laughed as she cuffed J'zargo's ear, but more playfully than usual. Then they were kissing as well, Brelyna wrinkling her nose at J'zargo's whiskers.

"Ah, love!" Dinya Balu observed happily. "It always finds a way."
"You!" came a harsh voice from behind me. I felt a hand on my shoulder, spinning me around. I turned to see Proventus Avenicci, a knapsack slung over his back and an expression of rage on his face.

Lydia and I had been walking through Riften's market plaza, crowded this morning with cityfolk returning from Maven's execution at Mistveil Keep. I had wanted no part of it, choosing this moment instead to walk Lydia from the temple to the Bee and Barb, where I had found us a room. She was still weak, and had to lean on my shoulder.

Proventus seemed to have aged a score of years since last I had seen him, with new lines of grief and worry marking his brow and his hair several shades more gray. "You!" he said again. "It's your fault! And now my daughter … she was all I cared about in the world!"

Lydia gasped. "Not Adrianne! She was a hale fighter! She was in my shield wall, and Ulfberth." Adrianne and Lydia had been close, Lydia often going to her for armor or weapon repairs, and learning much smithing from her.

"Yet, she fell, and Ulfberth too, along with many that day. Oh, no one is blaming you, Lydia Ravenwood. Without your leadership none of us would be here, we all saw that. But this one … None of it would have happened without her." He turned to me. "I knew you were trouble the day you walked into Dragonsreach. But Balgruuf paid me no heed, to his ruin, and our city's."

"Balgruuf's decisions were his own," I said, "and none of them justified the atrocities committed by the Thalmor. Nor did any action of mine. Or would you have Lydia and me languishing under the torment of the Aldmeri torturers? Should I have delivered my head to the Imperials after my interrupted execution? No, I will apologize for none of my actions, though I am deeply saddened by your loss, and everyone's losses. Direct your anger instead at the Thalmor, the perpetrators of that slaughter."

He looked back and forth from Lydia to me, finding nothing to say to my speech. Then he turned away.

"Wait!" Lydia said. "What will you do now?"

"My time in Skyrim is done. I have discharged my duties to the people of Whiterun, seeing that they are cared for in Windhelm and here in Riften."

"But Whiterun will need rebuilding once we take it back from the elves," Lydia said. "We could use your help."

"That's as may be, but either way, it will happen without me. I want nothing more of politics or
war. I have property outside Bruma. I will return there and lead a quiet life and try to forget.” With that, he turned and walked toward the city gate.

"Adrianne too!" Lydia cried, looking after him. "And her husband! Why didn't I think to ask after them sooner? But there are so many! So many lost and scattered!"

She looked to the skies then, and her eyes had something of that lost look they had worn during her torture. I wondered how she could bear this new grief. Telling her of her father's death had been one of the hardest things I'd ever done, yet she had already known of it, having seen him fall in the first defense of the city. And when she learned the news of Balgruuf, I thought she would never rise from her bed in the temple. The jarl had been like a second father to her.

I reached up and stroked her hair and turned her face to look at me, to let her know that I at least was still with her. Then she leaned on my shoulder and wept, the only cure for her grief. The people in the plaza, both friends from Whiterun and strangers from Riften, came up to offer their condolences. And all the time I could only think how many other families in Cyrodiil, Hammerfell, and Orsinium would be crying similar tears once they had news of the Battle of the Rift Pass.

Finally Lydia dried her eyes. "Look at me, eating my words," she said. "Do you remember I told you that we soldiers learned to accept death? Yet I never thought to see so much of it, to see so many of my family and friends and comrades fall all around me. May they be received with honor in Sovngarde! And, thank Akatosh, you made it safe for them to travel there, my love." With that thought she tried to smile, yet it seemed a small comfort.

And that was the way of it, during the fortnight we spent in Riften waiting for Lydia to recover from her poisoning. There was much to mourn, but also much to celebrate, not least our impending wedding.

Now, you might think we would be eager to set out for Whiterun and drive the elves from our home, and we were. Yet two considerations counseled patience: Lydia's weakened state, and the deep snows that had closed the passes leading into Whiterun Hold. Too, I did not trust myself to go near Whiterun – not until I felt a greater measure of control over my dragon soul. To gain that, I would have to travel once again to High Hrothgar. There too the snows were deep, and I would not leave Lydia behind so soon after our reunion.

And so we settled in to plan for the wedding, which grew from an intimate occasion into a grand affair seeming overnight. "Let's get married right away!" Lydia had said, but this would take time. Still, nothing could have been more joyous than spending time together in the planning of it, going over our vows with Sister Dinya, deciding what we each would wear, whom to invite, and what to feed the guests at the wedding feast. The truth was, we would have been happy stringing hagraven claws into necklaces, as long as we could do it together.

Yet it was a somber time as well, as we remembered all the friends who would be absent from our celebration – Onmund chief among these for me, as well as Mirabelle Ervine, who had been like a mother to me, and Thorald, who had stood up for me when few others would. And of course I could not think of those missing from my life without thinking of my parents. It was worse for Lydia, having lost both her father and her liege lord, and so many of her hirth-fellows and friends from the Whiterun guard. Often I would look up from making out an invitation to see her staring into space, a tear running down her cheek.

And so we made out our guest list that first day after her recovery, unable to forget those we could no longer invite, but trying to be glad for all those we could. We fell into bed, exhausted, still unaware of what such an extensive guest list would entail. It was still quite early. Lydia remained weak, despite eating three gargantuan meals in the inn's mead-hall. For my part, it seemed I had not
had a proper night's sleep since returning from Sovngarde. We could do no more than lay in each other's arms, yet it was the sweetest feeling I had ever had – to know that these were the arms that would hold me for the rest of my life.

As the guest list grew, we soon realized that the wedding could not be held until the following Loredas, allowing everyone time to receive their invitations and travel to Riften. And as the time until the wedding lengthened and word of it spread, so did its complexity. We received offers of assistance from all quarters – from bakers and butchers and fishmongers; from chefs and winemakers, from musicians and mummers and jugglers, from dress-makers and flower-arrangers. Everyone wanted to be part of the wedding of the Dragonborn and the Hero of Whiterun. This would not be just our wedding, but a celebration of the salvation of Riften.

As the list of details involved with the wedding grew, we began to feel overwhelmed. I had no experience with such an undertaking. Lydia had an excellent head for the logistics of expeditions and battle tactics, but not for the finer points of seating arrangements and the proper order of courses in a banquet. "I'd almost rather fight a dragon priest," Lydia said. Our heads were spinning by the time J'zargo and Brelyna found us late one day, still going over lists at our table in the inn.

"You two look like you've been herding dogs," J'zargo said.

"I never knew a wedding could be so complicated," I moaned.

Brelyna sat down next to me. "Look, I often helped my family's steward plan lavish events for the rest of House Telvanni. Why don't you let me organize the wedding for you?"

"Really?" I asked.

"Of course! It's your day. The two of you should enjoy it, and you won't be able to if you've worked yourselves half to death arranging the event. And Lydia, you still need to regain your strength after your ordeal. Fresh air and exercise would be better for you than spending your days cooped up in the inn, going over lists."

It was true, Lydia's strength had returned but slowly over the few days since her recovery, and she still seemed alarmingly thin. Her cheeks remained hollow, which accentuated her cheekbones all the more, yet it was not an effect I appreciated. Worse, she had thoughtlessly given the Riften tailor her old measurements, and now was in danger of having her wedding dress hang off her like a sack. It would take some serious work at table to allow her to fill it out properly.

Now Lydia smiled at Brelyna. "Your college friends are growing on me all the time, my love," she said. "Shall we retire upstairs for some … rest?"

I couldn't help smiling. "Gladly, my love," I said. Then I turned to Brelyna and J'zargo. "And what about the two of you? Shall we have a double wedding? They're very popular in stories."

My friends choked on their mead. "Err, no," said Brelyna when she could speak again. "I could not marry without my parents' blessing. They would send me to the Sisters of the Tribunal if I dared even to bring home a Dunmer from House Redoran. And a Khajiit? They would disown me, and send my brothers after J'zargo."

"Besides," he said, "many are the females across Tamriel who have yet to experience the greatness
of J'zargo. This one would not deny them."

The thwack of Brelyna boxing J'zargo's ears brought conversation to a halt at the tables nearest us. "Arrogant cat," she said. "No, as you can see, things must remain as they are until fate – or this one's lascivious nature – parts us."

With Brelyna's kind offer, we took advantage of our free time, going for long walks in the winter woods or riding along the shores of Lake Honrich. Winter in the Rift was mild, and we would pack food for a noonday meal on a tor overlooking the lake. Returning to the city, Lydia would spend several hours practicing with the guard at Mistveil Keep, working on archery and blade skills. At first, she could barely draw back the string on her stout bow, but over the days her strength returned. She sometimes enlisted me as a sparring partner, always insisting that I work on my own poor sword skills.

As the days went on, Lydia seemed to forget her grief. She was voracious at table, even more so in our bed-chamber, and she fought in the yard as if her life depended on it. She laughed out loud at every joke and jested with equal gusto, her eyes bright. But I didn't trust it. She seemed too determined to be happy, and her laughter had a hollow ring to it. She was living every day as if it were her last, and I could only guess why. Yet I shouldn't have wondered, for I felt much the same. I seized these moments of happiness, hoping they would allow me to forget my dark deeds at the Rift Pass.

One afternoon, as we were returning from the keep, I heard Grelka the arms seller say, "That's the Dragonborn right there." I turned to see a young Nord making for us. He wore a simple tunic and no arms or armor, only a dagger at his belt. But his boots were of the type worn by Imperial soldiers – I had seen enough of those on the battlefield.

He looked at me cautiously as he approached. "Are … are you … the Dragonborn?"

"Please, call me Deirdre."

"You … you seem smaller than you did on the back of that dragon."

"You were at the Rift Pass?"

"I was. And I owe you my life." He went to one knee before me. "Many of my comrades died brave deaths that day, but I was not given that opportunity. Now I must offer you my life in your service."

These Nords and their morbid hunger for death! I wanted to tell him there was nothing particularly heroic about dying in a dragon's fire. Cowards could do it as easily as the brave. But I refrained, saying only, "I accept your gratitude, but I command no followers. If you would do my bidding, then join the Stormcloaks and help them push the Aldmeri Dominion from Skyrim."

"Aye," he said. "I heard of the butchery at Whiterun. I see now that I have been on the wrong side. I will gladly serve with the Stormcloaks, but still I will owe my allegiance to you." With that, he turned and headed toward Mistveil Keep.

When he was gone, I noticed Lydia looking somberly after him. "What's wrong, my love?" I asked.

"It is always sad to see a soldier so humiliated."

"Humiliated? I thought he was grateful for the mercy I gave his army."

"No, it was his duty to pledge his service to the one who spared his life. Yet he will always resent
you in some measure for robbing him of the chance to die a good death."

"I will never agree with that part of your warrior's code."

"But my love, you told him something else that is not quite true. You do command one follower. I am still your housecarl."

I turned to her and took her by the arms. "Then I release you from my service."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"We are companions, partners, and soon to be woman and wife, wife and woman. I will not have you serve me, but share in all things equally, as we may."

She looked at me with confusion for a moment. "May I still protect you with my life?"

"As I will protect you," I said.

"And may I continue setting and striking camp on our journeys in the wilderness?"

"If you insist. But you must allow me to help with the washing up."

"Very well," she said, smiling, then we walked arm in arm back to the Bee and Barb, where she finished a roast leg of goat on her own, washing it down with several mugs of ale. She was making excellent progress regaining her lost weight. As she became more jovial, talking with the inn's regulars, they asked her once again to tell the story of the Retreat from Whiterun.

She cast her eyes down at the table. "No. Ask me instead to tell of battles with dragons and draugr, but I will never speak of the day when duty bound me to die with my jarl and my hirth-fellows, yet I did not."

Fredas arrived, the day before the wedding. I had lost count of the Nord soldiers who had returned from Cyrodiil offering me their service, and now the guests began to arrive for the wedding as well. This brought many happy meetings. Tolfdir came from the college, along with Colette, Nirya, and Drevis. I was surprised that so many of them cared to make the journey. I had told them the news about Onmund in my invitation, and I was glad not to have to repeat the tale now.

Our friends from the Whiterun guard who had gone to Windhelm also began to arrive. Among these was Badnir, who clasped Lydia in a bear hug when he saw her. "I thought we'd lost you, lass. I gave this one quite a fright, I'm sure, when she came looking for you. I thought you'd already begun walking the death road. But you look right as rain now, if a little thin."

To my surprise, Esbern and Delphine did accept my invitation. With the Blades came the other guests from the Reach: Enmon, Mena, and Fjotra, accompanied by Sister Senna. Meeting them at the city gate, I knelt before the child. "I am honored that the Sybil of Dibella would make time for our wedding."

"But you saved me," she said, "you, and Lydia too. I couldn't miss it!"

I turned to Sister Senna and smiled, though I could feel the color rising in my cheeks. "And you are most welcome as well."
She gave me a knowing look. "I am so glad to be part of this happy occasion," she said, "since I feel I had some small part in bringing it about. When you dashed out of our temple, I knew it could not be long before you realized your true nature."

"It is amazing how much I didn't know about myself," I said, wondering how much I still didn't know.

"My only regret is that I could not give you instruction before your wedding day. Perhaps you would like a group lesson before the ceremony?" She looked back and forth between Lydia and me.

Lydia took my arm. "We're fine without any lessons, aren't we my love?"

"Well, as you wish," Senna said, looking at me regretfully.

Fjotra interrupted just then, wanting Lydia to tell her parents about her bravery and skill with ropes on the day of her rescue. I took the opportunity to greet Esbern and Delphine. "Thank you for coming, and for protecting these friends on their road. I know we have had our difficulties."

"We felt it our duty," said Delphine. "And we wanted to congratulate you on your victory over Alduin. The entire world is in your debt."

It was strange, with everything that had happened since my return from Sovngarde, the fulfillment of my destiny and the saving of the world seemed but small things, already part of the distant past. "Surely now we can put aside our differences and forget about punishing Paarthurnax," I said.

"Certainly not!" said Esbern. "Your victory over the World Eater is but the beginning. Without their leader, the dragons are vulnerable, and we can finally wipe them from the face of Nirn. We hoped you'd have a change of heart with Alduin out of the way."

"We must continue to disagree," I said. "I spoke with Paarthurnax on my return from Sovngarde. He went off to coax the dov into more peaceful ways. And this city owes its freedom to another dragon, Odahviing."

"Ah, so your alliance with the dragons is deeper than I suspected! Know then that we will continue our hunt for the dragons wherever they may be. We are amassing a force of dragon hunters at the Karthspire."

"Then you will undo the peace Paarthurnax is trying to forge between the dov and the joorre."

"There can be no such peace! Not when the dragons still have blood on their talons! Now we must bid you good day before we both say something we cannot take back. We will attend your wedding out of respect for your status as the Dragonborn and for your victory, then we will take our leave."

"That was not such a happy meeting," Lydia said when they were gone.

Another less than happy meeting took place later that day when we met Silda and Lisbet in Haelga's Bunkhouse, where many of Whiterun's less fortunate refugees were staying. It was the first they had seen of Lydia since Fort Amol, yet there were no hugs or kisses or exclamations of joy at her recovery. She greeted them stiffly as I stood off to one side.

"I thought we'd seen the last of you when they put you in that wagon," Silda said. "But I'm glad you made it through."

"Thank you for that, mother," Lydia said.
"I wish I could say the same for your father. You couldn't have saved him while you were saving the rest?"

Lydia seemed to crumple then. "There were many I couldn't save that day…"

It took everything I had not to come to my love's defense, but I knew it would do no good.

After a stiff silence, Silda went on. "And now you intend to marry this one." She didn't quite sneer as she said it.

That roused Lydia from pondering the loss of her father. "Deirdre saved this city, not to mention all Mundus! How could you have anything against her?"

"She's a great hero, no doubt. Oh, Lydia, why couldn't you have stayed with us and married some nice farm lad?"

"We've been over that before. Deirdre and I hoped we would have your blessing, mother, since father cannot give it."

Her mother was silent, but Lisbet spoke up. "At least we'll get a nice meal out of it, better than the gruel they serve here. Come, mother." The two turned their backs on us and returned to the bunkhouse's dormitory.

"Would it help if I paid them your bride price?" I asked as we left the building. Lydia gave me a look that told me never to mention such an idea again.

Evening came, and guests were still arriving. Gerdur and Hod stepped into the Bee and Barb, looking careworn and footsore. "Gerdur!" I exclaimed, jumping up to hug her. "I'm so glad you received our invitation! I wasn't sure if the courier would get through."

Yet Gerdur looked surprised to see me. "Invitation? No, we left Riverwood right after news reached us of the Thalmor attacking Whiterun. We knew we couldn't stay there, and Riften seemed the only safe place where we could seek shelter. But we were waylaid by bandits in the ruins of Helgen. Once we escaped them, we got caught in the winter snows on the pass into the Rift. But what are you doing here? The last news that reached us was that you had trapped a dragon in Dragonsreach and meant to fly off on it."

When all was explained, Gerdur looked at Lydia appraisingly for a moment, then clasped me in a hug. "I am so happy for you." Then she looked at me more seriously. "I still remember that morning you left for Bleak Falls Barrow," she said. "And to think how scared I was for you! But now look how mighty you have grown."

"Oh, Gerdur," I said. "Many times I have wished I could have stayed there with you in Riverwood, maybe helping with the mill, or with Arcadia in Whiterun, helping her with her potions. How often have I wished that I could lead a simple life, that none of this had happened! Save only for meeting my Lydia, of course."

She looked at me with those same gentle eyes that had turned me aside from my plans for revenge, so long ago. "No, lass, you were meant for great things. I could see it the first day you came into Riverwood, you had such a fire in your belly. I only hoped … you and Ralof …"

"I know. Ralof is like a brother to me, and I hope you will still consider me part of the family."

"Of course I do. And, have you seen him?"
"We sent an invitation to Windhelm. Whether he can get away from the war…"

And just then the door to the inn burst open and Ralof walked in, a group of soldiers behind him. He didn't know who to hug first, but chose Gerdur, it had been so long since they had seen each other. Then I saw who followed him: Ulfric Stormcloak. Ralof picked me up in his usual bear hug and I tried to smile happily as Ulfric watched us with an expression I couldn't read.

Ralof put me back down and looked at me, holding me by the shoulders. "Ah, lass, it looks like saving the world hasn't changed you a bit," he said, though there was something doubtful in his eyes that showed he saw some change in me.

"I am glad to see you, my friend. And I am glad you were able to take time out from the war."

"Not even the Thalmor could keep me away from your wedding!" He turned to Lydia. "And such a bride! We have all heard what you did at Whiterun! It is an honor to be in your presence, Captain Ravenwood."

I had forgotten – Lydia had earned the rank of captain when Balgruuf put her in charge of the retreat.

"Please, Ralof, I hope we're friends. You can call me Lydia."

I put my hand on Ralof's arm. "Will you stand with me at my wedding, my brother?"

"I will, gladly."

"And I will stand with Lydia if there's no one else," said Gerdur. I thought my heart would burst then.

Finally I turned to Ulfric, who stood there glowering at me. "Welcome to our wedding, Jarl Ulfric," was all I could think of to say.

"I don't know whether to reward you for the victory you won for us here, or to clap you in irons for letting a battalion of Imperials escape unharmed. I don't know what to make of you, lass."

"No one does, it seems. I hardly know what to make of myself."

"Still, it's a great power you wield now, with that dragon at your call. We could use your help."

"And I will help, if the goal is to drive the Thalmor from our shores."

"Aye, and the Imperial dogs and every damned milk-drinker as well."

"Enough of this talk of war on Deirdre's wedding eve," said Brelyna. "Surely there is time for that when the celebrating is over."

"Very well," Ulfric said. "But then we must make plans."

The wedding was like a dream, but someone else's dream, not my own. Unlike the other girls in our village, I had never spent much time imagining this happy day, and I certainly never could have imagined it like this. The event had come to serve as a celebration of the salvation of Riften, and
the entire town had turned out, along with much of the surrounding hold, thronging the streets. Lydia and I rode to the temple in separate wagons decorated with rich fabrics, the crowd calling out our names as we passed.

I arrived at the temple first, the crowd clapping and cheering and calling out, "The Savior of Riften!" I wore a richly decorated tunic for the occasion. It had been so long since I had worn a dress, I couldn't imagine donning one now. I considered my suit quite fancy, with gold threading down the legs of the breeches, boots of the softest leather with gold buckles, calf-skin gloves, and a hat with a single feather that the tailor insisted went perfectly with the ensemble. It was a fine set of clothes, but nothing to draw particular attention, and I liked it that way. I waved to the people gathered on the left and right of the stairs as I made my way up to the temple, shaking the hands of those I knew. Then I turned at the landing to await my love, Ralof standing beside me.

A gasp went through the crowd when Lydia's wagon came into view and the crowd finally got a glimpse of her. She wore a stunning gown, unwilling as she was to pass up this opportunity to be a lass for a change. The dress was of white silk – certainly not for purity, she said, but to set off her jet black hair. The skirt was wide and flowing, nearly touching the ground, but the bodice was laced tight, with long sleeves and a plunging neckline. She had once said she would leave the cleavage to the tavern wenches, but now the most well endowed mead-hall lass might be envious. She had done well at table to fill out the gown to such advantage. On her brow she wore a silver and sapphire circlet, and she carried a bouquet of flowers in purples and golds, dried, of course, at this time of year. The overall effect was stunning.

But there was something more than the dress. One might expect a woman of such size and strength to have some coarseness to her movements. But as she took the drayman's hand to step down from the wagon, she showed that dancer's grace that, when brought to battle made her a formidable opponent, but now in this setting made her seem elegant.

The crowd was silent for a moment, then erupted in applause as Lydia began walking slowly toward me, smiling at the crowd all around. I spotted little girls at the edge of the steps, looking up at her in awe, and I wondered what they dreamed of as they saw her – the glowing bride, or the mighty Hero of Whiterun? Some of our friends from the guard were gathered on the steps as well, the men looking as if they had been struck between the eyes with the haft of an axe, their jaws slack. They knew all about their sword-sister's battle prowess, but this was a Lydia Ravenwood they had never seen.

For my part, I glowed with pride for my soon to be warrior-wife, loving her equally in all her parts. I could not have been more happy as I watched her climb the steps, her eyes beaming up at me.

And then came the one moment that marred the day. The fellow who spoke must have thought I couldn't hear him over the applause of the crowd. "Well, knock me over with a feather! Look which one's wearing the dress."

"Told you, Haming," came a woman's voice. "It was easy to see which of them wears the breeches. Now hand over that gold."

I couldn't imagine what they were saying, but I knew I was blushing. Was there some rule that we had to play roles of male and female at our wedding? Or in our lives together? I had never heard of such a thing. We had chosen to wear what made us comfortable. Although, looking at the tight lacing on Lydia's bodice, it didn't seem likely to be comfortable at all. But she was enjoying the attention it brought her, and why shouldn't she? I knew those charms were all for me. But did that make me a man? No, I was a woman, though I had never cared for girlish things, and a woman who happened to love Lydia Ravenwood. Looking at her coming up the steps toward me, I couldn't
imagine anyone, man or woman, not loving her as I did.

She arrived at the landing and I put the rude words from my mind. I took her hand and we went inside for the ceremony.

I thought I was done with surprises, but the day held one more. We had gathered in the throne room of Mistveil Keep for the wedding banquet, this being the only space large enough to hold such a throng of guests. Even then, the courtyard of the keep and the city's market plaza had been given over to the celebration for all those who could not fit inside. Food and drink stalls had been set up and there were musicians and jugglers and dancers and a great bonfire.

Inside the keep, Lydia and I sat at the center of the high table that had taken the place of the jarl's throne, with Ralof and Gerdur on either side of us. Sister Dinya, who had married us, was there, and Fjotra out of respect for her sacred status, and Silda and Lisbet, who for the first time in my experience didn't wear sour expressions. Harry and Huldi sat next to Fjotra, since they were of an age with her. Brelyna and J'zargo were a little further down, and Arcadia, and some of Lydia's closest hirth-fellows. Jarl Laila Law-Giver occupied a high seat at one end of the table and Ulfric Stormcloak the other, carrying on a desultory conversation with one of Lydia's soldier friends.

Our other guests and friends perforce had to sit at the lower tables – our friends from the guard, Avulstein, Vilkas and Aela, my other colleagues from the college. Then there were the Stormcloaks and Riften guards with whom I had defended the city and an array of the most prominent townspeople. Even Brynjolf was there, at the lowest end of the lowest table, having earned his and the Thieves Guild's way back into the jarl's good graces. Delphine and Esbern were there too, looking grim and speaking only to each other.

Before the feast began, we paused to pay homage to those lost in the defense of Riften and the retreat from Whiterun. The hall grew silent as we pondered our losses and said our own private prayers for the dead. Then we turned to feasting, making as merry as we could.

Course after course came out of the keep's kitchen, as well as from the Bee and Barb. Brelyna and the jarl's cook must have worked closely to plan such a feast. First there was a slaughterfish pie, then roasted squash stuffed with nuts, raisins, and the last of the year's dried apples, followed by squabs baked in individual clay pots, filled with onions, herbs, and the wild grain that grew around the edges of Lake Honrich. There were two soups, a broth of leeks, sausage, fennel, and preserved tomatoes, and a chowder of shellfish brought over from the shore near Windhelm, made rich with cream and sweet butter. The height of the feast was roast pig drowning in a reduction of tart berries and Black-Briar Mead – the Black-Briars might be traitors, but their brew was the best to be had – served with roasted potatoes.

Lydia and I alternated between talking with those friends closest to us and waving down to our friends and acquaintances at the low tables, but mostly we took turns feeding each other bites of food, wiping smears of sauce from each other's faces, and smiling happily into each other's eyes. Midway through the feast, she asked me to loosen the laces on her bodice, she was getting so full, prompting a cry of "Now, now, save that for later!" and uproarious laughter from the low tables. Even those closest to us smiled, and Ralof blushed deeply.

The servants were clearing away the last trenchers of roast pig and preparing to bring out the cake when Jarl Laila rose from her seat and called for silence. "Honored guests, as we are gathered here
today not just to honor the marriage of Deirdre and Lydia, but to celebrate the preservation of our city, I have arranged for a special entertainment." She gestured toward the doorway at the back of the throne room and out came Malukah, the bard. Judging by the applause she received upon her introduction, she was well known in Riften, yet this was the first I had seen of her.

She approached the jarl, lute in hand, and asked if she could have a word with me before beginning. Jarl Laila nodded and Malukah came over to me. I rose to greet her, a bit unsteady on my feet from the many goblets of wine. She tipped her head slightly when we were face to face.

"You are well on your way to fulfilling your destiny, Dragonborn," she said.

I had to laugh. "I thought I had already fulfilled it, surely!"

She smiled too. "You have made an excellent start, but I still say you are only halfway to all you will achieve."

"But why are you still in Skyrim? I thought you'd be home in Bravil by now."

She rolled her eyes. "So did I. But before I could earn my passage, the ice made travel by sea too dangerous for my liking. And so I came south by land, but here in Riften I was robbed by one of those Thieves Guild cut-purses. Since then I've been playing all over the Rift and even as far as Falkreath. I will go home when the high passes open in the spring, and tonight's engagement should help pay my way."

"Excuse me one moment," I said to her, then turned to look down at the far end of the low table where Brynjolf was sitting. "Oi, sneak thief!" I called, harking back to my days of bandying about with thieves. When I had his attention I nodded at Malukah and gave him my sternest look of disgust. He hung his head, then rose and left the keep. "I believe you will receive full reparation," I said to her.

"Thank you. Now, I hope you can keep your eyes from your lovely bride long enough to pay close heed to my song. It's especially for you. And remember, bards don't just sing about history, sometimes we make it."

She returned to her spot near Jarl Laila's end of the table, where everyone could see her. The jarl called for silence by rapping a spoon against a goblet.

"I would like to dedicate this song to the Dragonborn, and to her bride, who is both valorous and lovely. It is a song of many parts, old and new, Common Tongue and Dovah Zul, some of it well known, some recently discovered, and some of my own composition."

Then she began. It was "The Tale of the Tongues," at least at first. This was a lay of the Dragon Wars, telling of Alduin's rule over the Nords, followed by their rebellion using the Voice. It ended with Alduin vanquished from the world and the dragons wiped out. In hindsight, it seemed historically inaccurate, or at the least premature, yet the bards of Skyrim had taken to dedicating it to me since I had defeated Alduin. I had even heard it sung badly in the Bee and Barb.

But Malukah's version was far different. There was her voice, of course, unmatched in all of Skyrim, accompanied by her resonant lute and the magical effect that made it sound as if an Aetherial choir sang behind her. Then there were her additions to the song. After the first verse, all about Alduin's terrible reign, she added a chorus in Dovah from "The Song of the Dragonborn," the part that said I was bound to keep evil forever at bay. Then she moved to the song's last verse, changing it to tell of my victory over the World Eater.
A savior has freed us from Alduin's rage,
A hero on the field of this new war she waged.
And now that Alduin's gone, we are safe in this world,
Freed from the shadow of black wings unfurled.

Then she added two verses of her own, the Aetherial choir growing louder, the strumming of the lute more insistent, the register a step higher.

But now comes a new threat to Tamriel's shore,
The Aldmeri Dominion would rule men once more.
Fair Whiterun they pillaged, and its walls could not hold,
Now the people owe their lives to brave Lydia the Bold.

So Tamriel must rise up and fight as if one,
From Skyrim to Blackmarsh, until the battle is won.
The Dragonborn will unite us, bring the freedom that we crave,
For the elves will not rest 'til we're all in our graves.

The last notes of the lute faded from the hall. There was no applause, no cheering – only deathly silence, and Ulfric glaring at me from the end of the table. A moment later, the great doors of the keep clanged shut behind him.
"Need I remind you that this is no game?" Arngeir demanded, his eyes narrow slits boring into my own. I had just told him of the events at the Rift Pass, his expression growing more alarmed with each turn of the tale. Now I could only look away under his stern gaze, I was so ashamed.

"No, master, of course not," I stammered.

"You are no schoolgirl whose teacher has given her mere busywork."

"No, I realize that, but…"

"Have you been meditating daily? Contemplating the sky? Doing your breathing exercises?"

I could only shake my head. There had been those moments of extreme need, as in the Aldmeri Embassy, when I had drawn on the contemplations I had been taught at High Hrothgar. But I had let my regular practice lapse. Somehow, there had never been enough time.

"Look at me, young lady." Slowly I raised my head to look at him. He regarded me for what seemed hours as I struggled to hold his gaze.

Lydia, seated nearby, couldn't help clearing her throat. I could only imagine what she thought of all this, as she had never wanted to return here.

"High Hrothgar is no lover's retreat, my love," she had said as we lay in each other's arms in the Bee and Barb the day after our wedding. "I had hoped for more than one day of honeymoon."

"But an excellent day it's been," I said, and she had to agree. We had barely left our bridal chambers, emerging only long enough to wave farewell to departing friends from the balcony outside our room.

"It has been the happiest day of my life, my love," she said. "But how many more days do we have before…" She paused and would not look at me.

"Before what? Before we retake Whiterun and begin rebuilding our home?"

She could only shake her head and wouldn't answer.

Lydia was not the only one who doubted my decision – none of our friends could understand my insistence on returning to High Hrothgar. Only I knew the bloodlust I had in my heart, the glory I felt in my ever-increasing power. The more power I gained, it seemed, the fewer qualms I had about using it. If I lost myself to it, I would become worse than the Thalmor. My dragon soul would swallow me, and then swallow the world. Alduin would win.

Yet now, with Arngeir glaring at me, I too began to doubt the wisdom of my choice.
"Well," the old master said at last, "the best that can be said is that you turned aside from that butchery and spared a portion of your would-be victims. But it was a grievous wrong, a violation of every tenet of the Way of the Voice."

"I know it, Master."

"When last I saw you, you still struggled with your anger, yet you kept it in check. What happened in the meantime?"

I thought back. "It was when I went to Skuldafn. I unleashed my anger on the Nord dead, believing that it mattered little, since they already walked the death-road."

"No, what matters is what is in your heart. You gave free exercise to your dragon soul, and then it overwhelmed you at the Rift Pass."

I could say nothing, for I knew that Arngeir spoke true. Twice I had fallen from the Way, and both times out of love for Lydia: first when my broken heart made me reckless, and then when fear of losing her fueled my rage.

Arngeir went on. "You have been given a great power, and a fearsome weapon. It is up to you to decide how you will use them. Will you turn to evil, seeking to amass power only for your own glory? Or will you use your power for the benefit of Tamriel's people? The choice is in your hands, but if you do not follow the Way, you will become no better than the many tyrants this land has seen."

"No, I do not want that," I said. "What must I do?"

"You must renew your meditation practice today, and continue it daily for the rest of your life."

I swallowed. "I will, Master, if that is what it takes."

"Myself, I would counsel you to remain in seclusion with us here at High Hrothgar. The world is filled with too many temptations to use your power unwisely."

"But Master Arngeir, I cannot. Paarthurnax said I was sent into this world to balance the forces contending over it. If ever there was an opportunity to fulfill that purpose, it is now. You must know, I aim to help the Stormcloaks in driving the Thalmor from Skyrim."

"So you will join your power to that war-monger's? Then I see little hope for you."

"I hope to quell Ulfric's ferocity and take Whiterun with little bloodshed."

"But these are armies, little better than bloodthirsty savages. I don't see how such a thing is possible."

"I hoped you would be able to aid me in my purpose. There can be no peace while the Thalmor occupy the Nords' homeland. Neither can there be peace if Ulfric slaughters them. Is there nothing else you can offer me?"

"Only the meditations we have already mentioned."

We could only gaze doubtfully at each other, and then I went to my evening meditation.
Once more I was flying astride a great sky-courser, racing over Skyrim at a prodigious speed. But this could not be, I told myself, I had not called Odahviing. And then I saw it was not Odahviing on whose back I rode. Yet below us the wooded slopes descended toward the Rift Pass, and there marched the Imperial Legion. The dragon dove toward them and I knew what would come next.

"No," I shouted, beating at the beast's great neck with my puny hands, but it did no good. The dragon's fire breath caught the Imperials just as it had in my waking life, sending them scattering, men and women and horses screaming as they died. Then we soared upwards and wheeled about for another pass.

"Dovahkiin, I told you I would live on within you," Alduin said. "See how they run and die! Is it not glorious? Why do you resist your dragon nature?"

"Because I am sick of death. I would cause no more suffering if I can help it."

"Your compassion is misplaced. You were made to rule these puny joorre. They are not worthy to sweep the ground on which you walk." He dove again and again the Imperials scattered as fire engulfed them.

"No, I vanquished you. You cannot make me watch this again."

"You will be watching this in your dreams for the rest of your life, I made sure of it."

I had to put a stop to this somehow. "Joor-Zah- Frul!" I shouted. We plummeted toward the trees, Alduin somehow finding a clearing in which to come to a skidding halt, throwing me over his great horned head.

I got up and turned to face him.

"Yes, keep using Dragonrend on me and you will take death deeper into your own being. I will only grow stronger."

"Faas-Ru-Maar!"

Alduin didn't so much as blink. "No, Dovahkiin, there is no shout that can drive me away without also letting me gain power over you."

Then I knew what I must do.

I turned and walked away from him, toward Riften.

"No, you cannot turn your back on me! Stand and face the World Eater!"

"I defeated you twice already," I said over my shoulder. "I do not need to face you again." I entered the forest where the trees grew too thick for him to follow. With a howl of rage, Alduin released his fire breath on me. The trees all around exploded in flame, but I felt nothing. I walked on, out of the fire.

Still the World Eater would not relent. Now he circled above the treetops, taunting me. "You cannot run from me. I am within you. I will always be with you."

"Yes, I know that now. And I am glad."

That brought him up short. He hovered in front of me, peering down through gaps in the trees.
"You are glad?"

"Yes. Without the will to annihilation within me, what I called my anger, I never could have survived this far. But the time for destruction is past. There is something greater than hatred and ruin."

"And what could that be?"

"Love."

The World Eater chuckled. "Yes, I have heard of it. It is an emotion highly prized by the foolish joorre. But we dov have no need of it."

"Yet it will be your end. Now be gone. You are nothing but a midge buzzing in my ear. When I have need of you, I will call on you."

I awoke before dawn and returned to my meditations without stopping to break my fast. Only now I contemplated something far different than the emptiness of the sky. What good was it to attain equanimity if I could not use it in the world?

Instead I meditated on those whom I most hated – on Elenwen and her torturers, on Tullius and his bending the knee to the Thalmor, on Ulfric and his treatment of anyone who was not a Nord. Most of all, on my parents' killers. For Mara called on us to have compassion even toward our enemies. As I contemplated each one, my heart began to race and my breath came faster. Only then did I turn my thoughts to the eternal, indifferent sky, striving to feel some of that indifference toward those who had wronged me. By the end of the day I could contemplate each of them without the rush of anger I so often felt. Not quite love and compassion, but it was a start.

"Ah, Dovahkiin," Arngeir said when we met in the refectory that evening, "was today's meditation productive?"

"Yes, Master, but I have a question."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Little though you respect the art of mages, we do have spells that promote peace and harmony. Why is there no similar shout among all the words of power?"

"That is easily answered. The words of power come from the dragons and from the first Tongues. Neither side pursued peace."

"Very well then, how can I create a new shout?"

"A new shout? That is a mystery locked in the depths of time. We know the Tongues created some of the shouts that have come down to us, because they could be of no use to a dragon – Kyne's Peace, for instance, or Aura Whisper. And of course we know of Dragonrend, which the so-called heroes of the Dragon War created. But how it is done – that is an art that is lost to us."

"Then what must I do?"

"I can suggest only that you meditate deeply on the words in the dragon language you would use in
this shout. Concentrate on them as you have never done before."

I went to my rest that night pondering what words I could use. The dragon language was filled with words to boast of one's greatness and to taunt one's enemies; few were the words embodying compassion. But at last I had selected three and went to sleep dreaming of how they might be used in a shout.

In the morning I returned to my meditations, bringing quill, ink, and parchment with me. I inscribed the runes for those words on separate scrolls of paper. Then I stared at each set of runes until they were burned into my mind. Could this be much different than looking at runes on a word wall? Was it the wall that imbued the words with their power, or was it something within me? I was the Dragonborn, able to absorb these words with more facility than any other mortal. If any could create a new word of power, it was I.

All day and all night I sat meditating on those words until I felt I had absorbed their deepest meanings. To learn a shout is to take its words into the very depths of one's being, or so Arngeir had said. Now I would let the compassion of these words fill my heart and mind. But I wouldn't know if the words had truly become a shout until I could use them on my enemies. Nor would I know if I had truly gained balance with my dragon soul until I could confront my enemies without anger.

The first light of dawn was peeking through the stained glass windows as Lydia and I prepared to take our leave.

"My heart misgives me," Arngeir said at the door. "I mistrust this plan of yours. Yet the Dragonborn is not bound by our rules, and perhaps you must follow a different path. May Mara guide your steps. Sky Above, Voice Within."

"Thank you, Master. I promise you won't regret the help you've given me."

Lydia and I stepped through the doors into the east courtyard.

"Wait, my love, this is not the way down," she said.

"It is if you know a shortcut," I said, stepping up onto the parapet and looking down at the snowfield below. "You brought your rope, didn't you?" I said, and dropped off the edge, shouting Become Ethereal as I fell.

Two hours later we spotted the Stormcloak camp in a hanging valley not far below us.

"You see, Lydia, we cut two days off our journey once again."

"You mean two years off my life, don't you, my love?"

"I thought the descent went quite well. You only tumbled into a snowbank once."

"It was the thousand-foot drop on the other side of that snow bank that worried me. I may be fated to die, but not by falling off a cliff."

I let the comment pass. Lydia's mood had only grown darker during the days at High Hrothgar.
"Well, we're here safely now. I wonder if Ulfric will give me a warmer greeting than did the Greybeards?"

But that proved a foolish thought.

"Ach! You're finally here," Ulfric growled at me as we entered the command tent in the Stormcloak camp. "But you'll get no hero's welcome from me, whatever my troops think of you."

The shouts of "Hail to the Dragonborn" and "The Hero of Whiterun!" as we walked through the camp certainly hadn't helped Ulfric's mood. And he was certainly remembering the thunderous chants of "Dovahkiin! Dovahkiin!" that had broken out in Mistveil Keep the moment the door had shut behind him. Now he looked as if the sound of that chanting had followed him all the way here. I was only glad that he hadn't seen the salutes I had received from two or three recent recruits from the Imperial side. It seemed I would need every ounce of the equanimity I had gained at High Hrothgar to deal with his anger.

I was glad to receive a warmer greeting from Ralof, and from Brelyna and J'zargo, who had traveled with him from Riften to meet us here at the camp. Even Galmar tipped his head to me.

"So," Ulfric said when we were all sat around a central fire with mugs of warm mulled mead, "the people love you for vanquishing Alduin, and for saving Riften. But now that's done, and I expect your loyalty. This is my war and we will fight it the way I see fit."

"Which is?" I tried to keep any hint of a challenge out of my voice, but Ulfric sat forward and looked at me even more fiercely.

"I shouldn't even have to explain myself to you, a mere lass. Help us if you want, but one way or the other I will have such a victory that no Nord can question my right to rule, and no Thalmor or Imperial dog will dare set foot in Skyrim again."

"And how will you achieve this?"

"We will put all of the bastards to the sword. I heard what you did at the Rift Pass. You will sweep over the city with your dragon, burning or calming the elves as you see fit, then we will take care of the rest."

"Better to leave the city to the Thalmor than commit such an atrocity," I said.

"Very well, we will do it without you." He held my gaze, trying to convince me that he and his army were capable of such a thing. I looked at Galmar, who was equally impassive.

"I see two hundred fighters here," I said. "The Thalmor have four hundred, if reports are true. No doubt they will have spent this time rebuilding the fortifications they destroyed. You cannot hope to take the city quickly, not without grievous losses to the bulk of your army. And even if you were capable of mounting a long siege, you would be vulnerable to attack by Imperial reinforcements."

"We have another hundred fighters coming from Windhelm."

"I know, I asked our college mages to join them. But still, you do not have the forces to take the city."

Ulfric and Galmar exchanged a glance. Then Ulfric turned back to me. "How can you care so much for the damned Thalmor, after everything they've done to you and your city and your … wife?"

I tried explaining the compassion that Mara demanded from her followers, for one's enemies as
well as for one's loved ones and friends. He might as well have been born without ears. But Ulfric thrived on war, and peace meant little to him. Finally I offered him something he could understand: a tactical advantage.

"And what would you know of tactics?" he demanded.

"Only this: the four hundred elves in the city must be a significant portion of all the Aldmeri forces. Think what a bargaining chip that army would be, if you could capture them!"

I saw a spark in Ulfric's eyes then. He looked at Galmar, who considered for a moment. "We could ransom them in exchange for Imperial retreat from Skyrim," he said. "But how could we hold an entire army hostage? No prison in Skyrim is large enough. And we haven't the soldiers to guard a Thalmor refugee camp and fight the Imperials at the same time."

"I believe I know a place they can be safely housed, though they will not like it," I said. When I revealed my idea, even Ulfric had to smile at the wickedness of it. The Thalmor would not go unpunished. "So, do I have your word that those opponents who do not resist will go unharmed?" I asked.

"Aye, lass," Ulfric said, his eyes boring into mine. "We'll do it your way. But only if you can get them to flee or stand down. Any damned elf who raises his sword to us will lose his head."

I thought we were done and raised my cup of mead, but Ulfric held up his hand. "There's one more thing. If you will not swear fealty to me, then swear that you have no desire for the kind of power that bard in Riften would give you."

I smiled calmly at him. "You can be assured, now that Alduin's vanquished and I am happily married, my fondest wish is to live a quiet life in Skyrim." It was the truth, if not the whole truth, for I didn't tell him what my second and third wishes were. And I knew it was a rare lass who saw all of her dearest hopes come true.

"We're in agreement then." He raised his cup. "To a short and mutually beneficial alliance, followed by many happy and quiet years for Deirdre and Lydia in a free and peaceful Skyrim." We drank off our cups of mead. "Now, tell me, how can you and your dragon work with our army?"

The battle planning went on late into the night.

The army set out the next morning, Lydia leading her own force of Whiterun soldiers, with Galmar and Ralof leading their war-bands on either side of her. Even this had been a point of contention with Ulfric, who wanted only his own people at the fore. But Ralof had finally convinced him it was proper that the Hero of Whiterun take a leading role in recapturing the city. J'zargo, Brelyna, and I rode alongside the leaders. We descended from the camp in its hanging valley to the road along the White River. Soon we neared the summit that would put us in view of Whiterun. It was time for me to call on Odahviing.

"So, you will make me watch you fly off on a dragon's back once again," Lydia said, stepping off to the side of the road with me. Below us, the usually roaring White River cascades were a picture of frozen white and silver.

She seemed even more somber than she had at High Hrothgar. I had been foolish enough to think
that our wedding could make us happy forever. Yet this wasn't one of those cheap romances Lydia enjoyed so much, and there would be no riding off into the sunset for us. Not even our marriage could soothe all of Lydia's grief.

"What is it, my love?" I asked, stroking her cheek, hoping to bring back the smile that had been there on our wedding day.

She looked at me with an expression that made me catch my breath – not quite sadness or grief, but something deeper, the loss of all hope. Gone was the boisterous shield-maiden I had met in Dragonsreach, boasting of feats in battle or in the practice yard. Gone too, was that too-bright happiness she had put on like a cloak to mask her pain. Now she was grim, doom-driven, as I had been when I set off for Sovngarde. "I do not believe I will survive the coming battle, my love. I owe Balgruuf a death, and I mean to give it to him."

"I thought we were done with this! You did as our jarl ordered. Without you, his people would never have escaped slaughter. You owe him nothing more than to retake the city for his people."

"So many of my comrades fell on that field, and my jarl as well. My place is with them. I owe them that, or many Thalmor lives in repayment for theirs."

I looked down at the White River. "Lydia, do you remember that first day when we rode out of Whiterun?"

"I remember it well, my love." Yet not even the memory of those happier times could bring a smile to her face.

"I never told you the dark thoughts I carried with me that day. I didn't know what this dark thing was inside me. I thought I would throw myself into the White River if I couldn't learn how to rid myself of it."

"We made a better use of the White River, as I remember." She looked down at the river now, though the pool where we had our swim was hidden from view.

"Yes, it was you who drew me out of that dark mood, not just with our frolicking, but with your companionship as we rode together, and in camp. But I still haven't rid myself of my dragon soul. It is a bit of Alduin within me. The last week has helped me gain better control over it, yet I remain untested. So tell me, why shouldn't I throw myself down these cliffs, or throw my life away in the battle to free Whiterun?"

"No, my love, you mustn't! You're the Dragonborn! The world needs you! Skyrim needs you! ... I need you!"

"Yet you will be dead if you get your wish, and then what do I have to live for?"

She could say nothing, her face fraught with confusion.

"Come, let us make a pact. We will vow to come through this battle for each other, if not for ourselves. Will you do that for me, my love?"

She looked at me for a long time, then nodded.

"I will hold you to that promise," I told her, "if I have to follow you to Sovngarde to do it." Finally she gave a wan smile, her eyes still haunted by doubt and fear.

I called Odahviing, vowing that together we would quell Whiterun's defenses so that Lydia would
come to no harm.
Beneath Whiterun's Walls

Chapter Summary

-- Whiterun in wrack and ruin -- herding soldiers like sheep -- Deirdre's plea for peace  
-- the siege begins -- the elves spring their trap -- a wounded dragon -- Deirdre faces  
an army alone -- Mara's peace -- a clean death for a friend -- Lydia's absolution --

No description could have prepared me for the devastation I saw in Whiterun as Odahviing and I rose above the White River, approaching the city from the east. The farms outside the city were blackened splotches on the snowy landscape, the farmhouses and barns and windmills having been burned to the ground. But the most dramatic change was within the city itself. The lofty, gabled roofs of Dragonsreach, once the dominant landmark for miles around – gone. Jorrvaskr, the Companions' mead-hall, built from the great upturned hull of the vessel that had carried them from Atmora – gone. As we came nearer I looked for the Bannered Mare, Arcadia's Cauldron, the Temple of Kynareth – all gone. And of Breezehome, my home, our home – nothing remained but one stone wall.

I struggled to maintain my new-found equanimity as I viewed the scene. And what must Lydia be feeling as she marched with the Stormcloaks, just now coming within view of the city? Worse, what of Ulfric? Would he use the sight as an excuse to go back on the promises he had made me?

The Aldmeri tactics made little sense. They had certainly meant to level the place when they attacked the city with their flaming arrows and fire pots hurled from catapults. But if so, why had they stayed? Armies engaged in a campaign of retribution usually wreaked their havoc, then moved on.

Galmar believed that our victory at the Rift Pass had changed the Thalmor calculations. With the Imperial Legion decimated and driven back, and with few reinforcements arriving in Solitude over the ice-choked seas, the Aldmeri Dominion had little choice but to dig in and aid the Empire at this strategic stronghold. They may have been content for the Civil War to drag on, but not for the Stormcloaks to gain a free and independent Skyrim.

Yet I was not convinced. As I passed high over the city, I could see that the elven occupation had not been easy. Even with what was left of Dragonsreach – the blocky stone structure of the Great Porch and the prison beneath it – there wasn't room for hundreds of soldiers. They had resorted to tents pitched here and there amidst the devastation, sometimes within the very foundations of the houses the elves had burned to the ground. It had to be a miserable existence for ones not inured to Skyrim's winters. The heavy snows that had fallen immediately after the attack surely hadn't helped.

Good, I thought. Maybe they were ready to go home. And we were ready to send them there, one way or the other.

I had Odahviing circle back to the east, toward the White River Bridge. The Stormcloak forces were nearly in place. Facing them from across the bridge was an Imperial war-band, a meager few dozen fighters facing two hundred. The elves had thought it proper to make Imperial forces the first line of defense, and the Imperial commander could hardly argue. I almost felt sorry for him, whoever he was. Yet if all went according to plan – and if Ulfric kept his word – they would come
The Stormcloaks halted fifty paces from the bridge, forming a half-circle between the river on one side and the mountain slopes on the other. The trap was set.

"Now, Odahviing, as we agreed – swoop down on the Imperial war-band, but do not harm them. Drive them toward the bridge."

"This is a trying service, Dovahkiin," Odahviing grumbled. "I would rather take them in my talons and hear their screams as I teach them how it feels to fly through the air."

Despite his grumbling, the dragon did as I said. We made short work of the Imperials, driving them before us as we had done at the Rift Pass. The Stormcloaks waited across the river to bind the hands of the cowering soldiers as they spilled across the bridge. It was child's play. There was a moment when it looked as if the fear-filled soldiers would trample each other in their haste to flee, but I cast pacifying spells to calm them. In half an hour, the Imperials were bound and set under guard.

Now the Stormcloaks began their march along the main road toward Whiterun, while I headed north to pacify the defenses at Whitewatch Tower. This effort went as easily as the first, opening the road for the northern contingent of Stormcloaks to descend on the city. I could see the army below me. Avulstein, Aela, and Vilkas were down there somewhere, along with mages from Winterhold, Drevis with his powerful Illusion spells and Colette, who could heal the wounded and use her wards to shield against spells from the elven battle-mages.

By the time I returned to the main road, the Stormcloaks had set up their forward position near what had been Pelagius Farm. Draymen were hauling catapults and a huge battering ram closer to the city walls. I had Odahviing land some distance away, then walked over to where Ulfric and Galmar were marshaling their forces.

Lydia, Brelyna, and J'zargo stood nearby, their faces grim, as they surveyed the scene of the Retreat from Whiterun. Mercifully, the snows had covered the battlefield in the days after the siege, but here and there were lumps that had to be fallen soldiers.

"You did all you could," I heard Brelyna say as I approached.

"Yet it wasn't enough," Lydia said, still staring out at those mounds in the snow.

Before I could say anything, Ulfric came over. "And you're sure you still feel compassion for these vermin, Dragonborn?" he demanded.

Lydia was gripping the haft of her axe in its sheath, her jaw set, as she looked from Ulfric to me. "I must ask the same thing, my love. If I cannot give my own life, I must repay my debt to Balgruuf with the lives of many elves."

"At least one of you's talking sense," Galmar put in.

I sighed. "We will never have peace if we keep dealing death for death. Yet peace must begin somewhere. As the Altmer are not likely to show mercy to those they consider beneath them, it must begin with us."

Yet Lydia did not seem convinced, still gazing at the inert mounds in the snow. I looked out at that silent battlefield, wondering how I could convince her. I thought of all the unending sufferings of war over the thousands of years since humans first arrived in Tamriel from Atmora. How many countless mourners, both man and mer, had stood on just such a battlefield, feeling what we felt to no harm.
now? Would it never end?

I took her hand from her axe and made her look at me. "I know this is a trial for you, my love," I said. "I remember you once mentioned the possibility of children. We may not be able to have any of our own, but we could adopt, maybe even Harry and Huldi. And if we did, what would you want for them? Would you want them to face perpetual war with the Altmer? And what of their children? How long must this go on?"

She shook her head, but said nothing.

"Freedom for Skyrim is a worthy goal, but how much worthier is freedom with lasting peace? Skyrim's children will never know the pain we're feeling at this moment."

Still she could not speak, but this time she nodded.

Ralof approached our group then. "All is in readiness, my jarl," he said.

"Ach, very well," said Ulfric. "It's time to get started, even if the Dragonborn insists on being a damned peace-maker. The northern force should be nearly in position."

Still Lydia looked haunted by doubt. "Be careful of wayward arrows, my love," she said, looking over at Odahviing.

"And you as well. Remember, I will hold you to your promise."

"Come, you two," said Ralof. "Everything's going to be fine. Look how easily we captured the Imperials! By this afternoon we'll have the city, and four hundred Thalmor hostages to boot."

"This one thinks one should not count the Altmer before they are in binds," J'zargo said.

"Well I am impressed," said Brelyna. "J'zargo the Cocky Khajiit really has learned caution."

"You two just keep those Thalmor battle-mages off our backs," Ralof said.

I wanted to promise to keep them all safe, but I had learned by now that promises were often empty, and only actions counted for anything. I returned to Odahviing and the assault on Whiterun commenced.

Both Stormcloak forces were to attack the weak defenses outside the city's western wall. From the south, Ulfric's force would face a stout barred gate. But from the north it was a mere rock scramble to penetrate the outer defenses. There was a drawbridge over a rushing stream, but this could be circumvented by a narrow walkway to one side. Then the two forces would meet in the bailey beyond and go to work on the massive main gate in the city's western wall. With the defenders on those walls routed or pacified, it should be an easy task.

That was the plan, at least, and at first it seemed to work.

In a matter of moments, Odahviing and I were soaring over the city walls, arrows flying harmlessly up at us. "There, to the catapults," I called, and the dragon swooped down on one of the defensive emplacements along the city's walls. I used the Dismaying shout and the four or five soldiers manning the catapult scattered. Again and again, Odahviing dove on the walls and lookouts of the outer defenses, and each time I used a combination of spells and shouts to scatter and pacify the defenders. Soon I had calmed or routed every Thalmor fighter and wizard lining the road as it wound up the hill toward the main gate, as well as many on the main western wall.
Meanwhile, the Stormcloaks had arrived at the south gate, but there was still no sign of those approaching from the north. The gate was barred, of course, and now the Stormcloaks went at it with their axes. Galmar shouted for the battering ram to be brought up. Casting one last pacifying spell on the defenders above them, I called for Odahviing to fly across the city and look for the northern force approaching from that direction.

Too late I realized my mistake. I heard the creaking release of a catapult and looked down into the circular courtyard between Jorrvaskr and the Temple of Kynareth, or what was left of them. I saw something dark launching up to meet us, then it bloomed outward – a net! Odahviing shrieked and turned to the left, but not in time. The net, with large rocks attached to its edges, caught the dragon in his legs and wrapped partway around his tail. With another beat of his wings, the claws of his right wing were entangled in it, and then we were falling.

The dragon's momentum carried us some way over the city. For an instant it looked as if we would hit a guard tower set on the wall, but with one last beat of his left wing the dragon lifted us over it. Then we were spinning down toward the rocks below, Odahviing hitting the top of the cliff jutting out from the city's foundations. I just had time to shout "Feim!" as I was thrown from his back. I felt myself falling, the sky and the ground changing places, and then I was tumbling through the bunch grass and heather of the tundra.

I was dizzy but unhurt by the time I came to a stop. I got to my feet, clinging to a boulder for balance, and looked around. Odahviing was not far away. He had come to rest a distance from the base of the cliff and was now thrashing about, trying to release himself from the netting. I made my way over to him, regaining my sense of balance as I could.

"Odahviing, hold still, and I will cut the net from you."

He quieted then and turned to look at me. His eyes, once baleful, now saw only their own end. "It will do little good," he said. "My wing…"

"First things first," I said, going to work on the netting with my dagger and a flame spell or two. Finally he was free.

Then he tried to spread his wings, rising on his hind legs. Only his right wing beat at the air while his left lay crumpled. He fell back to the ground, listing to the left where his wing and claws could not support him.

"It is no use," he said. "Now I truly know the meaning of death, as mine soon approaches."

"Maybe I can heal you, though I've never healed a dovah before."

Before he could respond, we both heard the sound of marching feet, and an arrow buried itself in the scales of Odahviing's neck, releasing a gush of fiery blood. The dragon roared in outrage as I turned to see an elven war-band approaching from the city. They had come around the cliffs and were advancing from the south.

Odahviing blasted them with his fire breath, pushing them back, several at the fore falling to the ground in shrieks of agony. I cast a spell of rout into their midst, then shouted Dismay at them to drive them away and give me time to think. This made no sense. Why would the elves leave the well-fortified city, placing themselves between two advancing forces? I had to know what else was happening.

I moved farther out away from the cliff, climbing a small tor from which I could view the city. We had fallen below the main western wall, just north of the outer defenses. This was where I had
hoped to find the Stormcloaks' northern contingent, but there was no sign of them. Instead, rank after rank of Thalmor warriors and battle-mages were pouring from the city. There had to be hundreds of them, all headed in our direction. At this rate, the city would soon be undefended. The elves were risking the city, and their very lives.

Then it dawned on me. The Thalmor hadn't remained in the city because the Empire was at risk of losing Skyrim. No, all of it was meant for me. With Odahviing at my command, I had become too great a power, a greater threat even than the Stormcloaks. They had hoped to lure me back to Whiterun to get my revenge. Their plan had nearly worked, though they must have preferred that we fall within the city's walls. Now they were risking an entire army to finish me off.

Still the elves kept pouring out of the city, those in front moving around to my right to descend the rocks, others moving left across the top of the cliffs where they could fire down on Odahviing.

Well, Deirdre, I thought, now we will see whether compassion is possible in the face of certain death.

I took a deep breath, concentrating on the words as hard as I could. "Drem-Aaz-Fahdon!" I shouted, aiming it at the heart of the elven forces. Peace-Mercy-Friend were the words I had used. It was a bit of a cheat, of course. Drem was already a Word of Power, used in the Kyne's Peace shout. That worked only on animals, but now I would learn whether it, combined with the two new words, would work on people.

I was glad to see the force of the shout rippling toward the army. It seemed to be working so far. Those in front only staggered under its force, too far away to be knocked over by it. But their forward advance was halted, and they began milling about, uncertain of what they were doing. Those who had just climbed up over the rocks to leave the city were caught in the shout as well, blocking those coming behind, who were still eager for battle. The shout had missed those to right and left, and I cast pacifying spells into their midst, subduing most of them.

Then I heard a battle cry off to the right, from beyond the elves. It was Lydia. "Lay down your weapons and you won't be harmed!" came another voice – Ralof's. From our left, belatedly, I heard a warhorn. The northern force of Stormcloaks had finally arrived, moving along the base of the cliffs where they were shielded from the city's walls. Others were moving toward the elves on top of the cliffs.

From that moment, it was just a matter of keeping the Thalmor pacified while the smaller Stormcloak force bound them in long lines for the march ahead. I worked my way over to where Lydia and Ralof were overseeing the capture of the bulk of the elven force, casting spells and repeating my new shout, which I now resolved to name Mara's Peace.

Lydia couldn't have looked more relieved to see me, but I only had time for a brief greeting. Already the first lines of captured Thalmor were being led away toward the northwest.

"Ralof, can you manage the prisoners for now?" I asked.

"Certainly, Deirdre."

"And Lydia, you must go into the city and see what Ulfric is up to. Take the Whiterun guard with you, and see that he commits no atrocities."

"Why, where are you going, my love?"

"I must see to Odahviing!" I called over my shoulder as I dashed toward the cliffs.
The dragon remained where he had fallen, the Stormcloaks keeping their distance from him. He eyed me woefully as I approached.

"Let me try that healing spell," I said. I used grand healing, the strongest Restoration spell I knew, yet he seemed no better. "Again!" I said, and cast the spell once more.

"It is no use, Dovahkiin, your spells have no effect."

"Then what can I do?"

"You once tried to teach me the meaning of death with your Dragonrend shout, but now I understand it as well as any mortal. You must put an end to me."

"No, I cannot!"

He nodded his great head. "My name means Winged Snow Hunter in your language. How can I go on if I can no longer hunt the skies? A dovah who cannot fly is no dovah at all. You shouted mercy at your foes, now I ask that you show me the mercy of a quick death. And I will be glad to accept it at the hands of the Dovahkiin."

I looked at the great dragon and knew that he was right. "You have served me well," I said, drawing my sword of frost. "You will live on within me, my friend."

"It is my fondest wish," the dragon said, and I could not tell if he meant it, or if this was one last bit of dov-ish sarcasm. Yet he lowered his head so I could strike the blow.

Lydia found me there sometime later. I looked up at her through tear-blurred eyes as she came and sat beside me, next to Odahviing's bleached skeleton.

"I am sorry, my love," she said. "I … I never thought to see you so saddened by the death of a dragon."

"Neither did I," I said, drying my eyes on the sleeve of my robes. "Yet he served me well, and I almost thought of him as my friend."

"It is a great loss, but you did well. The city is ours. Ulfric has sent the remaining Thalmor soldiers and justiciars out to join the others while he scours Dragonsreach for the leaders. I left my guardsmen to watch over the search. Few other lives were lost. The northern force was delayed by an ambush north of the city. A score of elves were hidden in a cave, and fought to the death in an effort to delay our comrades' march. Yet we lost only three or four soldiers."

"I suppose I should be happy, then," I said, and I tried to be.

We returned to the city, leaving Ralof to finish overseeing the roundup of the prisoners. By now those left free were too few to think of resisting their captors. We found the main gate in the western wall standing open. Inside, the devastation appeared even worse than it had from above. Lydia gave a groan, seeing it now for the first time. "There's nothing left of our city!" she said.

We saw no one, neither Stormcloak nor Thalmor, until we arrived on the steps of Dragonsreach. The graceful archway resembling a dragon's spine was no longer there to greet us, just the blank
stone battlements of the Great Porch, which had once been the back wall of Jarl Balgruuf's throne room. The throne was burned away, but in the ashes there remained a skull – the ancient skull of Numinex, the dragon captured here by Olaf One-Eye.

Seeing no one there, we made our way around to the side of the rubble, finding Ulfric and Galmar's war-band in the space in front of the prison. They had gathered the last of the Thalmor justiciars and wizards, the leaders of the siege on Whiterun. I recognized Rulindil standing among them, looking out at his captors defiantly. The Stormcloaks had their weapons drawn. Lydia's guards stood nearby, along with Brelyna and J'zargo, all looking uncertain what to do.

"What is happening?" I demanded.

"Ah, lass, you're just in time," Ulfric growled. "You may show mercy on the common soldiers, but surely not on these who gave the orders for the slaughter."

Would this argument never end? I looked to the skies to gather my calm. "And there are those above them, Ulfric, the ones who gave them the orders, all the way up to the rulers on Summerset Isle. We had an agreement that all would be spared, and I will hold you to it. Or do I have to pacify you and your soldiers as well?"

"What agreement?" a voice croaked. I looked beyond Ulfric to see Jarl Balgruuf, supported by Stormcloaks on either side. He was horribly transfigured, so emaciated that his skin hung from his bones like an empty sack. The Thalmor had blinded him in one eye, leaving the gaping hole to fester.

"My jarl!" Lydia and I both shouted, rushing forward and kneeling before him.

"That's right," Ulfric said. "These beasts captured your jarl and threw him in his own prison. I'm tempted to say he deserved it for all his fence-sitting, yet none deserves the kind of torment they put him through."

Then Lydia spoke. "My jarl, I have failed you. Many under my command fell in the retreat. I should have fought beside you, to the death if need be. Now my life is in your hands." She held her axe out to him, though he was far too weak to wield it.

Balgruuf looked down at her from his one good eye. "Ulfric told me what you did. My people are safe, are they not?"

"They are, my jarl – most of them."

"Then you did not fail. You did as I bade you, and you succeeded, though at a great price. So do not talk of failure. Rise now, and I hope you will continue serving me for many years."

She did as he asked, tears streaming down her cheeks. I hoped that Balgruuf's forgiveness would finally convince her that she deserved to live.

"Now what's this agreement you mentioned?" Balgruuf asked.

"That we would take the city with the least bloodshed, my jarl," I said. "I am sick of death and want no more of it, whether it's of my enemies or my friends. And we have taken the city with few losses on either side, save for Odahviing, my faithful companion."

"Why don't we let the jarl decide what to do with these prisoners?" Ulfric said. "It's his city, after all."
"Please, Jarl Balgruuf, I beg you to show mercy. If we hope to avoid such slaughter in the future, we must set the example. And remember, Lydia and I have been tortured by these same elves. Yet we showed them mercy, and I beg you to do the same."

"Please listen to her, my jarl," Lydia said. "We never would have taken the city without Deirdre leading the way with Odahviing." Ulfric stifled an exclamation at this remark.

Balgruuf looked back and forth between Lydia and me. "Very well, since you're the ones who saved me and freed the city, you'll have it your way. And I won't have the Stormcloaks committing atrocities in my city. The Thalmor are bad enough."

"If you insist, Balgruuf," Ulfric said. "Take the prisoners away."

"Ah, it's the Dragonborn," Rulindil said as he passed me. "You had reason to regret showing us mercy once before, and I'll make sure you regret it once again."

"You won't have Maven Black-Briar to aid you this time, Rulindil," I said. "And I think you'll find it quite difficult to break out of the prison we have in mind for you."

"What's wrong with the prison here?" he demanded. "It seems perfectly suitable. And where are they taking us?"

"To Labyrinthian," I said, and his face fell. The place had an evil reputation even in Summerset, it seemed. "But not to worry, we've cleared out most of the draugr, though you may yet encounter a few ghosts."

Brelyna and J'zargo laughed at that, and soon we were all laughing as we watched the last of the Altmer being led away in chains.
Four hundred elves in Labyrinthian, and no one wanted them. Two weeks had passed since the liberation of Whiterun. Messages had gone back and forth between Ulfrec, Elenwen, and Tullius, with nothing but threats on either side. Meanwhile, the captured Altmer subsisted on short rations. Even then, the Stormcloaks couldn't keep feeding them forever. Winter was always a lean time in Skyrim, and trade with the south had been disrupted by the war.

I kept well out of the negotiations. Lydia and I busied ourselves around Whiterun, helping where we could with its restoration. Balgruuf was installed once more in what was left of Dragonsreach, sharing the war room and remaining living quarters uneasily with Ulfrec. Yet for the first week Balgruuf was too weak to do more than rest. He named Lydia his new housecarl, Irileth having fallen defending him. I became an informal steward.

The first of our tasks was a grim one. The bodies of the fallen, both within the city and without, had to be collected and given proper funeral rites. Lydia's mood grew darker as more of her friends were uncovered. Fortunately, the deep snows had kept most of the scavengers at bay, though it made finding all the bodies difficult. Lydia had many friends among the fallen, as did I – Farengar, Thorald, Vilkas’ brother Farkas, Adrianne. And then there was Onmund. We found him, along with the rest of the Nords who had fallen on the bridge, tossed onto the iced-over river like so much refuse. It took me a long moment after we found him to remember why we had spared the lives of the elves.

After the great funeral pyre for the fallen Nord heroes, we turned our attention to happier tasks, rebuilding and finding shelter for the returning refugees. Many were the long faces and cries of dismay as Whiterun's citizens saw their destroyed homes for the first time. Yet this was always followed by a determination to rebuild, and this time from stone rather than timber. Stone cutters and quarrymen fanned out across the western face of the Throat of the World, where the granite was particularly well exposed. The road between the White River and the city became a bustle of ox-drawn wagons going to and fro. Masons from Windhelm and even Markarth, hearing of the demand for their skills, began arriving to help the effort. Meanwhile, Gerdur and Hod had returned to Riverwood and were busy hauling loads of sawn and cured timber for what woodwork was still needed, and felling fresh trees to meet the future demand.

While their homes were being rebuilt, Whiterun's citizens made do with the military tents left by the elves or took shelter in the prison, the covered portion of the Great Porch, and even the Hall of the Dead. Food was a different matter. Some stores still remained in the cellars of the destroyed houses, what little was left after two weeks of occupation. But of the large granaries on which the city subsisted throughout the winter, nothing remained. The Thalmor had destroyed them in the initial assault, not planning on a long residence. The other holds, those controlled by the Stormcloaks, sent what supplies they could, yet it was not enough. And the shipments from
Cyrodiil and High Rock on which Skyrim also depended had been cut off for months. It promised to be a lean spring in the province.

As well as helping with the rebuilding, Lydia began organizing her guard into hunting parties. I was eager to join them, glad to get out of the city and return to the simpler life of living on my wits in the woods. I would even separate myself from Lydia and the other soldiers – too much Nord clumsiness there – and relish the solitude as I stalked game on my own. We fished as well, finding the salmon thick in the few open pools downstream from Whiterun.

When not out looking for food, we each had our own tasks in the city. Lydia spent her time training up the new recruits to the Whiterun guard. These were many, fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds mainly, both lads and lasses. To Ulfric's chagrin, the guard was getting more newcomers than the Stormcloaks. Lydia put it down to hometown loyalty, but everyone knew it was because everyone wanted to serve under the Hero of Whiterun. Already bards were singing of Lydia's exploits during the retreat. The young recruits just hoped some of that notoriety would rub off on them.

I spent my time walking the streets, listening to the needs and complaints of the citizens, sorting out conflicts among the builders, and reassuring them that they would get paid – eventually. Balgruuf's coffers were quite meager. The elves had pocketed much of Whiterun's treasure, then the Stormcloaks had Reclained it, taking a portion as a finder's fee. Even then, Balgruuf suspected he was being robbed. The arguments went late into the night, Balgruuf and I pointing out that Ulfric's war had led to Whiterun's destruction, so Windhelm and the other Stormcloak holds should contribute to the city's rebuilding. Ulfric countered that if Balgruuf hadn't sat so long on the fence, his city would still stand.

"Ach," he said, "when we take Solitude, there will be gold aplenty for the rebuilding of Skyrim."

Balgruuf was right to be wary of Ulfric. One day, I overheard the Stormcloak leader talking about installing someone more to his liking as jarl, but when I stepped forward and made it plain that I had heard him, he dropped that talk. When Balgruuf was strong enough to climb up and down the steps of Dragonsreach – he refused to be carried – he began making daily tours of the city and the guards' garrison, announcing that he was pleased with our efforts. And seeing their jarl gave the citizens hope. As he grew stronger, so the city was gradually restored.

Ulfric couldn't be bothered with these mundane tasks of looking after the people's needs. He stayed cloistered in Dragonsreach, hearing reports from scouts, plotting troop movements, and negotiating by courier with Solitude. He could have done much to win the support of the people then, but he chose to ignore it. The Battle-Borns and other Empire loyalists blamed him outright, while the Stormcloak sympathizers like Avulstein still supported the cause, though their praise of their leader grew more muted.

As for me, I still didn't trust Ulfric. Neither did he trust me. The tension between us had only grown worse since the day he marched into Whiterun unopposed. He knew he owed that bloodless victory to me. Had he only wanted to push the Imperials out of Skyrim and restore Talos worship, he should have been happy with this outcome. But he could not mask his deeper ambition to become high king. He was jealous of my power, and could accept my aid only grudgingly. For, as much as the Nords celebrated their jarlmoot, in truth they revered only power and those who wielded it. The most fearsome warrior, the most able leader of armies, was always the one chosen as high king. It had been so since the days of Ysgramor. And if there was one more powerful in the realm, one to whom Ulfric owed his greatest victory, how could he claim a right to the throne?

It didn't help that the bards who entertained those gathered around the nightly bonfires kept singing that accursed tune, "The Dragonborn Comes."

Our hero, our hero claims a warrior's heart. Wasn't
Ulfric supposed to be the people's hero? He was the one setting them free from Imperial oppression. In our daily meetings he would stare at me with a sour look, his eyes drilling into mine as if searching my deepest soul for hidden ambition. He knew that if the common people could choose, they would make me their queen. The knowledge ate at him.

And did I have such an ambition? I had wrestled with this question on many a sleepless night. I had honed my powers only to defeat Alduin. It seemed I had little choice in the matter. The dragon would have destroyed our world, and who else but the Dragonborn could have stopped him? Then I had put my power in Ulfric's service, but only to drive out the evil of the Thalmor, and the Imperial pawns through whom they controlled Skyrim. But did that mean I wanted to be high queen?

I couldn't deny the thrill of a crowd chanting my name or singing songs in my honor. Part of me, the dragon part, found it intoxicating. I could only imagine how it would feel to be queen and to receive the people's love daily. Yet I also knew how fickle the people could be. Only four years before, the same people sought to burn me for a witch. Now they loved me because I had used those same powers to save their hides. Who knew how they would feel a few years from now if there was a bad harvest, perhaps, or if the Thalmor attacked? No, only one person's love mattered to me.

What I really wanted, or so I told myself in more sober moments, was for Ulfric to learn compassion, to be the kind of king Ralof believed he could become. But every day as the negotiations continued, I could see that he had not changed. He demanded absolute loyalty, and the alternative was death. He could not keep from talking about teaching the people of Solitude a lesson for housing the Imperial Legion and the Thalmor. He was still the Bear of Markarth. He would never become the king Ralof hoped for.

After two weeks of negotiating, Ulfric and Galmar had had enough. "Let's just kill the damned elves and take Solitude by force, as we always planned," Galmar said.

"Aye, my friend," said Ulfric. "I'm nearly ready to do that myself, but for Deirdre here. Elenwen needs an ultimatum, not empty threats. We'll give her until next week, then we'll begin cleansing our country of the Thalmor, one way or another. You can't argue with that, can you lass?"

I had to admit, I never expected Elenwen to force Ulfric to make good on his threats against the captives. Surely they couldn't afford to lose hundreds of fighters and mages? Maybe they were just bluffing, and Ulfric's deadline would force them to capitulate. But what if they refused? I had no doubt that Ulfric would go through with the slaughter of four hundred defenseless Altmer. The question was, could I stop him?

As it turned out, I didn't have to face that test. On the day before the deadline, a letter arrived, not from Solitude, but from the Imperial City. It was from the emperor himself. He had agreed to cede all Imperial claims to Skyrim. He asked only that the Imperial Legion be allowed free passage out of Skyrim by the shortest route, either to High Rock or Cyrodiil. Any Imperial soldiers who still resisted Stormcloak rule could be put to the sword, with no retaliation by the Empire.

"You've got what you wanted," I said, handing the letter back to Ulfric. "Yet you don't seem pleased."

Ulfric and Galmar exchanged a grim look. "Use your head, lass," Galmar said. "What's this bit about soldiers still resisting? Why wouldn't every Imperial follow the emperor's orders? And he didn't mention Tullius, or Solitude. No, there's some treachery afoot."

"Galmar is right," Ulfric said. "This is no time to celebrate. We march on Solitude as soon as can be. Then we will learn the meaning of Titus Mede's strange words."
Just then a courier entered the war chamber. "Jarl Ulfric, here, I have something for you," he said, fumbling in his shoulder bag. "Let's see, ah, yes, a letter from the Aldmeri Embassy." He pulled the letter from the pouch and handing it to Ulfric. "That's it, got to go." The courier turned and left the room.

Ulfric ripped the letter open, his face growing darker as he read. Galmar, reading over his shoulder, exclaimed, "The fool! Has he gone mad?"

"What's happened?" I asked.

Ulfric handed me the letter. It read:

_Ulfric,_

_We have met your every demand. It took negotiations at the highest levels between Summerset and the Empire, but we have arranged for your little provincial backwater to gain its independence. You can ask no more. I demand that you begin the release of our prisoners at once. Failure to do so will be considered an act of war on Summerset. Rest assured, we have merely amused ourselves thus far with this petty squabble. If you test our patience further, you will learn what it means to feel the full wrath of the Aldmeri Dominion._

_As for Tullius, he now operates on his own. He has declared martial law in Solitude, claiming that the city is the last stand for the Empire in Skyrim. No one is allowed in or out of the city, lest his soldiers and the people learn the truth of the Empire's capitulation. He has them convinced that the Bear of Markarth will arrive any day and put every man, woman, and child to the sword. The citizens are arming themselves accordingly, seeing no other option but to fight for their lives. Much as I enjoy seeing Nords slaughtering one another, it is really quite appalling. I wish you luck cracking that particular nut._

_Our ships will be waiting off Dawnstar to receive the first of our prisoners three days hence. Ignore that meeting at your peril._

_With all the cordiality and respect due to you,_

_Elenwen_

I handed the letter back to Ulfric. Could the ambassador's words be true? Tullius had always appeared nothing but a loyal servant of the Empire. Why would he ignore a direct order from his emperor? Yet there had always been something else beneath that soldier's mien. I remembered that day long ago in Helgen, and the lecture he gave Ulfric before the execution. There was venom in his voice, a suppressed rage, and utter contempt for the rebel leader. "We will put you down like a dog," he had said.

Now, the prospect of defeat at the hands of that same dog had driven Tullius mad. There was no other explanation.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"This changes nothing. We will march on Solitude as planned. This will be the battle that puts the stamp of righteous might on our victory."

"And what of Solitude's people?"
Galmar pounded his fist on the table. "They're either with us or they're against us. We will teach all Skyrim what it means to defy Ulfric Stormcloak."

"Aye, my friend," said Ulfric, an eager light in his eyes. "That we will. And send a letter to Elenwen telling her that no Thalmor will go free while any Imperial still resists us." Then he turned to me. "Well, Dragonborn, we have got this far with your help, and for that I must thank you. But this will be a battle for armies. We can take care of Tullius and his legion ourselves."

I tried to smile coolly at him, but I'm not sure I succeeded entirely. "Ulfric, you underestimate me. I will assist with the liberation of Solitude in any way I can. Wild bears couldn't keep me from marching at your side." I kept my voice level, but Ulfric couldn't overlook the threat beneath my words. We eyed each other for a long moment before I turned and left the room.

We were a thousand strong as we marched on Solitude. Ulfric rode in the lead, with Galmar and the captains of his war-bands riding behind him. Lydia was there too, leading a contingent of her city guards. I rode along with them, sometimes by Lydia, sometimes by Ralof, but mostly on my own off to the side. Behind us marched the hundreds of foot soldiers, some of them battle-hardened from the years of war, others green recruits who had just joined the cause. Successive victories had been good for Stormcloak recruiting, with many Nords breaking from the Imperial ranks as the bulk of the Legion returned to Cyrodiil. In the rear came great wagons filled with supplies, as well as the catapults and a great battering ram with which we would break into the city.

In Whiterun, I had reluctantly said goodbye to Brelyna and J'zargo and the rest of the college mages who had helped with the liberation of Whiterun. The college needed them, but even more, Ulfric would not have those he regarded as my allies marching with us. Even Lydia's presence had been contentious, yet Balgruuf had insisted on Whiterun playing its role. I knew he did it as much for my sake as for his own pride.

Our slow progress across Skyrim had been uneasy. Sometimes we would meet retreating Imperial war-bands, and the two forces would eye each other tensely as the Imperials marched south or west, their swords and axes in their scabbards. But worse was the tension between Ulfric and me. In every village we passed, crowds of Stormcloak supporters would turn out to greet the advancing army, yet always the loudest cheers were for me. Sometimes a bard would even break into Malukah's new version of "The Dragonborn Comes." Ulfric would look over at me then, a dark scowl on his face and a warning in his eyes. In camp, Lydia rolled her bedroll out beside mine, her axe at the ready, though her place was with her own war-band.

Even my friendship with Ralof grew strained. He would often make light of the crowds' regard for me. One day, he rode his horse over near mine, a wide grin on his face. "The people around here seem to like you, lass."

"Try slaying a couple of dragons, my brother, then the people will shout your name as well."

"Now, now. Don't let it go to your head," he replied, still grinning. "I still remember the scared girl I saved back at Helgen."

"Girl you saved! I'll show you who needed saving." I tried to punch him in the arm, but he shied his horse out of the way. I nearly lost my seat.
"Watch it. You don't want to let the people see you biting the dust before the battle even begins."

He laughed, and Lydia laughed with him, and soon the others around us had joined in. I joined in too – if I could no longer laugh at myself, I would know all of this adulation truly had turned my head. If only the morning could go on like this, friends riding along on a crisp winter's day, joking together. I wanted the merriment to go on and on, and to forget about war.

I drew Ralof aside, looking at him more seriously. He straightened his expression like an obedient school boy. "There may not need to be a battle, my friend." I looked over at Ulfric. "How goes it with your leader? He looks to be in a foul mood."

He looked at Ulfric too, and I could see the concern written on his face. "Our leader you mean, lass. I admit, these chants for you put him in a black mood. He's beginning to question who's really leading this rebellion, and maybe the people are too."

"You know he means to regain his reputation as the Bear of Markarth," I said. "He fears that he appears weak after the mercy he showed in Whiterun."

"No, I will never believe those stories from the Reach, they are all Imperial lies. Ulfric may show little mercy for his enemies, but he would never slaughter innocent women and children."

"But what if Tullius has convinced the people they must take up arms? Will he send his soldiers against shop-keepers and old men and young children, if they dare to raise swords against him?"

"They would be foolish not to surrender."

"Even if they are convinced Ulfric will slaughter them anyway? You know he has sworn to kill any holding a sword, man, woman, or child."

"No, he would never do it," Ralof said, but there was doubt in his eyes.

"The day is coming when you must make a choice, my friend."

He frowned at me. "You mean between my loyalty to Ulfric and my loyalty to the Dragonborn?"

"No, I would say your loyalty to me as a friend, but I would never ask you to betray your oath of service for that. I meant between Ulfric and doing what you know is right." He shook his head at me, and then rode away. We kept apart after that.

Finally, the battlements of Solitude appeared through the trees ahead. Much had been done to repair the towers that the dragons had destroyed. The gates in the main wall had been rebuilt, and they were shut against us. At last, the day of reckoning was at hand. Ulfric would either prove himself worthy of the lordship of all Skyrim, or … I didn't want to think about the alternative.

That glimpse of the city also brought back grim memories. I couldn't help looking over at Lydia, who was also lost in thought. She had not set foot in the city since the battle with the dragons and our capture by the Thalmor. I wondered if the same dark reflections were going through her mind. Yet there were sweet memories in Solitude – the flush of our victory over the dragons, the roar of the crowd, our first kiss. And now we were returning at the head of a conquering army.

Lydia must have read my thoughts, because she rode her horse close to mine and took my hand. "Have no fear, my love," she said. "The people of Solitude love you. They will open their gates for us. We will take the city without a fight."

"Maybe they will … to me, but to Ulfric? And what of the remnants of the Imperial Army? Lydia,
no matter what happens, we cannot let Ulfric go through with his plans for slaughter."

"No, we cannot. And at least half the soldiers will not follow him in it – they would follow you." I looked at her doubtfully, wondering whether she judged true – and whether I would lead an army, against Ulfric or any other foe.

No one guarded the lower watch tower near Katla's farm. Ulfric sent scouts up it, and they could see no sentries patrolling the city's walls a quarter mile ahead. Solitude appeared deserted.

Ulfric brought his troops to a halt just beyond the tower, out of bow shot of the narrow slits for archers in the city walls. "Does Elisif think she can hide from us?" he demanded.

"We'll give a knock at her gate she can't ignore," Galmar said. "Bring up the battering ram!"

The ranks of soldiers began shuffling to the side so the heavy ram could be brought up from the rear. It was an elaborate affair, like a shed on wheels, with a great tree trunk suspended on chains from the shed's rafters, its end sharpened, fire-hardened, and capped with steel. Horses pulled the contraption now, but they would be unharnessed once it came within bow-shot. Then soldiers would stand beneath the shed's roof and push the great ram forward. It would take some time to get the thing in place and braced for the attack.

I reigned my horse over to Ulfric and his officers. Ralof shook his head at me as I approached, but I ignored him. "Ulfric, the city appears undefended," I said. "Why not send a negotiator to learn what the city intends and persuade them to open the gates?"

The Stormcloak leader scowled at me. "If they meant to admit us to the city, the gates would be open. Those murder holes are likely filled with archers. I will not risk my troops approaching the gate to negotiate."

"Then let me go and I will persuade them to open it for you."

He said nothing for a moment, but rode over so that we were nearly face to face. "No, Dragonborn," he said, his voice quiet but dripping with menace. "You have gained enough glory. I will not have you taking this victory from me. When the fighting begins, you can help where you can – heal the wounded, or pacify those citizens who are foolish enough to take up arms against us. But the Imperials are mine, do you hear? None of those dogs deserves mercy. Go against me and you will get an arrow in the back. Now, are we agreed?" Lydia was too far away to hear his words, or fighting might have broken out then and there.

I looked at him. Could I trust him to spare any citizens I calmed? Or would he make me an unwilling participant in his slaughter? "I want no part of a needless battle," I said. I looked over at Lydia. Once again we would be separated, and there had been no time for a goodbye. I gave her a nod, then rode my horse to the side and dismounted, as if removing myself from the coming battle. "Good," said Ulfric, "it's best you stay out of this, Dragonborn, as I've said…" Then he stared as I cast an invisibility spell on myself and disappeared. "What is this treachery? Find her!"

The nearest troops came running over to my horse, but I was no longer there. I had padded silently in the direction they least expected – right up to Ulfric where he sat on his horse. He was intent on his soldiers searching for me, as were all those around him. Now all my years of thieving came back to aid me as I slipped my hand into a leather pouch Ulfric kept behind his saddle. I thanked Nocturnal, the thieves' goddess of luck, as I found the thing I was after on the first try – a tightly wound scroll bearing the emperor's seal. I had seen Ulfric take it out and replace it several times on the road here. I pocketed it and slipped quietly away.
"To the gate!" Ulfric shouted, seeing that the searchers were having no luck. "She means to go over to their side!"

They found no sign of me there, of course. While they searched about the gate and the walls nearby, fumbling for my invisible form like blindfolded children in a game of hide-and-seek, I made my way past them to the watchtower that stood out from the corner of the city wall. With a bit of rock scrambling I made my way around the corner, following a narrow path atop the cliffs that fell precipitously to the Bay of Solitude far below.

Soon I found what I was looking for – a postern door cunningly fashioned to blend into the wall around it, hidden from view of the road leading up to the gate. I only knew of it from my preparations to assassinate the emperor. The city's defenders could use this sally port to take a siege force by surprise, and Elenwen had intended that I use it to make my escape from the city if I could. Now I hoped to gain entrance by it.

I gave a rap on the door, hoping the soldiers around the corner wouldn't hear it over the clanking of their mail. Then I stepped back as my invisibility spell wore off, lowering my hood so the guards peering out of the peep-holes above would recognize me. In a long moment a cover was drawn back from a peep-hole in the door.

"Dragonborn!" the guard within exclaimed. I could see only a pair of eyes peering through the hole. "What do you want?"

"To avoid a needless battle and senseless death. What is happening in the city? Does Tullius mean to defend it or not?"

"Elisif is in command of the city. Tullius has withdrawn with the last of his troops to Castle Dour."

So there was still hope! "Then I must speak with Elisif."

"You must wait there. Elisif would have my head if I let the Dragonborn into the city. Everyone was shocked by your plot on the emperor's life, after you saved our city from the dragons. And now here you are, marching with Ulfric."

"Very well, but hurry! You must have seen the battering ram approaching your gates."

"Aye, that we did," and then he was gone.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened just enough to allow me entrance to the tower. I found myself surrounded by soldiers with drawn swords and axes and archers stationed on the stair leading up into the tower, their arrows pointed at my heart. Across from me stood Elisif herself, flanked by a red-bearded man in a fine tunic.

"Elisif…" I began.

"I told her it was madness to let you into the city," said the red-beard. "One wrong move, even a deep breath, and you're dead, Dragonborn or no."

"Let's hear what she has to say, Falk," Elisif said. "Why have you come, Dragonborn, and in the company of that rebel scum? I thought better of you."

"I am here only to prevent a massacre. Between the two of them, Ulfric and Tullius will have the great Karth River flowing red."

"I will never open my gates to the Bear of Markarth, not while he threatens any of my people."
"Yet if you do not open your gates, he will slaughter all that he finds within."

"So that's why you have come, to threaten me until I surrender to the dog who murdered my husband?"

"Let's take her hostage," said the man named Falk. "Perhaps she is worth something to the Stormcloaks."

"Elisif," I said, "the war is lost, though Tullius doesn't want you to know it. The emperor has granted Skyrim its independence."

"What?" Elisif demanded. "But why?"

I showed her the scroll I had lifted from Ulfric – it was the emperor's decree releasing Imperial claims on Skyrim. Then I gave her a brief account of the capture of the Aldmeri army and the negotiations with Elenwen.

"So Titus Mede sold us out to appease the Thalmor?" Falk asked.

"And not for the first time," I reminded him. "That's what this war is about, you will recall."

Elisif gazed at me, her eyes wide. "You … you have the power to quell armies!"

"I promise you, if you open your gates, no harm will come to your people."

"No, Elisif!" Falk said. "Why should we trust her?"

"You forget, Falk, Deirdre spared my life and the emperor's, at great cost to herself." Then she turned to me, her face grim. "Yet at that time you told us you were not allied with the Stormcloaks. And here you are, marching in Ulfric's van."

I felt the color rising to my cheeks. "I spoke true, at the time. It was only after narrowly escaping the Thalmor dungeon with our lives that I resolved to do everything in my power to push the Aldmeri forces from Skyrim. And not just because of their treatment of Lydia and me, but because they mean to wipe all humans from the face of Nirm. If I have allied myself with the Stormcloaks, it is only because I saw that no help would come from the Imperials in that effort."

"And now you've won your victory over the Thalmor, yet here you are."

"Only to prevent Ulfric from doing what we all fear he might. You must believe me."

"And if we open our gates, you're sure he won't take his revenge on my people?"

"I have seen him let Imperial war-bands march back to their homes as we made our way here. I trust that he will spare your people, as long as they don't take up arms against him."

She gazed long at me, weighing all that I had said. "We will open the gates," she said finally.

"But not yet," I said. "I must speak with Tullius. Tell me, why has he removed to Castle Dour?"

Then I learned what a skillful leader Elisif had become. Seeing the madness of Tullius' plan to arm the people against the Stormcloaks, she had persuaded him to take his stand in Castle Dour, which was more easily defended in any case. He agreed to leave the defense of the city to Elisif's city guard. He had little choice – already he had suffered a large number of desertions. Only in Castle Dour could he keep up the pretense that these were the last of the Empire's defenders in Skyrim, and that they had only to hold out a bit longer to receive reinforcements from High Rock.
With Tullius out of the way in the castle, Elisif had spoken directly to her people from a balcony of the Blue Palace, calming the fear that the general had instilled in them and explaining her plan for their deliverance. As soon as Ulfric's force had appeared on the road approaching the city, the evacuation had begun. A circular stairway descended from the center of the city through the cliffs on which Solitude was built. It came out at an unremarkable gate that opened onto the beach north of Solitude Harbor. Even now the evacuation was proceeding, yet slowly, for the stairway was narrow, and it was a thousand steps down to the exit. Those too aged or infirm to make the journey were sheltered in the Blue Palace.

"So you can see why I am reluctant to open my gates, while my people are massed around the stair's entrance, loaded down with as much of their worldly goods as they can carry. I will never trust Ulfric Stormcloak."

"You have served your people well, Jarl Elisif," I said. "Now I must ask you to take me to Tullius. He will never open Castle Dour to me without you there."

"And what of Ulfric and his battering ram?" Already we could hear the grunts and groans of the Stormcloaks outside the walls, pushing the heavy contraption up the slope to the city gate.

"Your steward can debate with Ulfric from the walls. The truth should suffice to slake Ulfric's impatience – you are evacuating the city to give him a clear route to Tullius. That should gain us the time we need."

Elisif and I left the tower and walked through Solitude's deserted streets, accompanied by two guards. As we ascended the ramp leading to Castle Dour, I saw the crowd around the entrance to the stairwell. They were laden with bags and packs, jostling one another for entrance, while the city guards struggled to maintain order.

One of the townspeople caught sight of us and called out, "Look, it's the Dragonborn!" There were several screams then, and the crowd jostled in an even greater panic to reach the exit.

Elisif went over to the wall overlooking the street where the crowd was gathered. "It's all right," she called. "Have no fear! The Dragonborn is here to help us, not to slay us."

Several in the crowd looked up at us with confused expressions, then went back to the business of fleeing the city, though with less urgency.

"Tullius spread the story that you have been flying around Skyrim on your dragon's back, burning to death any Imperial holdouts. I knew it wasn't true."

I didn't want to tell her there was a kernel of truth behind that rumor. "I'm still surprised you trust me after such stories."

She put her hand on my arm. "Anyone could see what a difficult position you were in when you came before us in the Emperor's Tower. Yet you acted honorably, and I owe you my life twice over. I only wish I could have done more to help you, rather than letting the emperor treat you the way he did."

"You were in a difficult position as well. No one wants to cross the Thalmor, it seems."

We had now arrived at the long passageway beneath the walls of Castle Dour, the same where Lydia and I had entered to fight the dragons. A portcullis barred the way halfway along it, and an Imperial soldier stood on the other side.

"We need to see Tullius," Elisif said. "The Dragonborn is here."
In a moment the general appeared at the end of the tunnel, signaling to the guard to wait there, out of earshot, before approaching us.

"So you still mean to keep the truth from your troops?" Elisif asked.

"I mean to shield them from Stormcloak lies, especially those spread by this one," Tullius said, a wild light in his eyes. He was greatly changed since last I had seen him, his hair grown longer and unkempt, his jaw unshaven, the straps of his ornate armor haphazardly fastened. "Why have you let her into the city? Do you forget her attempt on the emperor's life?"

"And do you forget I was there as well?" Elisif replied. "I have already told you the truth of what happened that day."

He looked down at her patronizingly through the bars of the portcullis. "Elisif, you are young and unused to the wiles of deceivers, spies, and assassins. She has been working for the Stormcloaks all along, since the day I first saw her in Helgen." He turned to me. "Do you deny it?"

"If I have worked with the Stormcloaks it is only because you and your emperor pushed me to it, sending me twice into the Thalmor torture chambers. But that is history. Your game is over, Tullius. The Empire has capitulated, and you can no longer pretend that reinforcements are just around the corner. Surely you've had couriers from the Imperial City?"

"Impostors bearing forgeries! I had them all beheaded!"

I looked over at Elisif, shocked, but it was clear that even she hadn't been aware of the depths of Tullius' madness.

"Do you deny that this is the emperor's seal?" I demanded, showing him the scroll, but keeping it out of reach.

"Another forgery, no doubt," he said, his eyes darting back and forth between Elisif and me.

"Tullius," said the jarl, "that is the emperor's seal, and the letter within bears his hand. I know them both well. You know the truth of it as well as I."

He could only shake his head, looking down at the cobbled passageway.

"You were our sworn protector," Elisif went on. "I trusted you. Now tell us, why have you kept up this charade, risking the lives of my people?"

He finally looked up at her. When he spoke, there was defiance and anger in his voice, and a sense of relief at finally admitting the truth. "It was that appeaser, Titus Mede," he said, his voice quiet. "I was a young captain in the Great War. I was there at the retaking of the Imperial City. Mede led us valiantly, devising one of the greatest victories this world has ever seen. And we bought it with many lives. I watched over half my battalion fall that day, brave men and women all."

He began pacing back and forth before the portcullis, his voice rising higher.

"And then what happened? Mede as good as spit on my fallen comrades' graves with his peace treaty, acceding to the very Thalmor demands over which we had fought the war. Oh, I didn't care a whit about Nord superstitions, but Talos was the founder of our empire. Watching the damned elves drag his name through the muck – it was too much to bear. And the destruction of the Blades, ceding half of Hammerfell, watching the Redguards stand strong against the Dominion where we could not…"
He paused, looking around at the brick of the tunnel, trying to master his own anger. Then he
straightened his shoulders. "I was nothing if not a good soldier. I remained loyal to the Empire and
our emperor, appeaser though he was. But I swore then that never again would I be part of such a
surrender. And now Mede has done it again, selling off Skyrim to keep the damned elves happy. If
only he had sent me the reinforcements I needed! Oh, he sent a war-band or two from High Rock,
but they were slaughtered by Madanach's Forsworn, thanks to this one." He glared at me.

"General," said Elisif, "if you care nothing for your own life, don't throw away the lives of your
soldiers. Surrender, and Deirdre will see that Ulfric spares you." She looked over at me and I
nodded.

Tullius didn't pause to consider Elisif's advice. "No. I will die rather than watch that dog, Ulfric
Stormcloak, take this city unopposed."

He turned and marched back up the passageway.

"Tullius, wait!" I called after him. "You cannot do this!" But it was too late. He disappeared into
the bailey. We heard him giving orders to his troops, and then he seemed to be giving them a
rallying speech for the hopeless battle ahead. We couldn't make out his words, but could hear his
voice rising and falling in the time-honored cadences of a battle-leader spurring his followers to
give their lives to a noble cause.

"No, do not believe him!" Elisif tried calling through the gate, but her words could not reach the
Imperial troops. Then we heard the sound of marching feet coming up the ramp below the castle
wall.

"What now?" she asked glumly. "It seems we have no way to stop this slaughter. And perhaps
Tullius deserves it."

"He may, but not the troops he has duped with his lies. No, I will stand here between the two
armies if that's what it takes."

Elisif looked at me. "But why? You have gotten everything you wanted. You defeated Alduin,
earning the everlasting love of the people. You have driven the Thalmor from Skyrim, paying
them for their treatment of you. Why not let the soldiers have their battle, as lop-sided as it is?"

"Because I know that Ulfric never would have gotten as far as he has without my help. The blood
of any he slaughters today will be on my hands. Believe me, there is enough blood on them
already. Perhaps by preventing a slaughter today, I can wash them clean. But you should go, before
the Stormcloaks arrive. Your people need you, and you need not risk your life."

The sound of marching feet was growing louder. She looked to the end of the passage, where her
husband's murderer would soon appear. There was fear in her eyes, and her voice trembled as she
spoke, yet she remained where she was. "No, I will gladly stand here with you. I should have stood
up to Tullius sooner, questioned him in front of his troops. Legate Rikke would have listened.
Perhaps she would listen to me now if I could only speak to her."

Now the Stormcloaks did appear around the corner, Ulfric and Galmar in the lead. There was no
sign of Lydia or Ralof, but Falk was trailing along next to them. They stopped short when they saw
us standing within the passage, the troops filling in behind them.

"My jarl," said Falk, "I am sorry, I could keep them out no longer. It was either that or they would
slaughter all they found within."
"It's all right, Falk, you may go."

"But Jarl Elisif…"

"See to the needs of our people. There is little shelter on the beach below the city."

He still stood there. "Do as your jarl says, Falk," I said. "She is perfectly safe." Finally, he turned and left, shaking his head in dismay.

"Ach, milk-drinkers!" exclaimed Ulfric. "What kind of people quail at the approach of the army that will liberate them? This city life must have made them soft."

"Your reputation precedes you, Ulfric Stormcloak," Elisif said. "And you are neither liberator nor hero, but a vile usurper."

"Stand aside, Elisif, before I cut you down, as I did your husband. Skyrim has had enough of false jarls."

"Yet she has remained true to her people, where some jarls have not," I said.

"You … I don't know what meddling you've been up to here, but you'd best step aside. You've stood in my way long enough."

"And where are Lydia and Ralof?"

Galmar grinned. "We sent them around to the other entrance to the castle. Your wife won't be here to protect you, and neither will the pup. Anyone could see which side he's on."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You think I need protecting?" Calm down, Deirdre, I told myself, this is no time for idle boasting.

Just then I heard the portcullis grating upwards behind us and Tullius' voice. "Now for it, Legionnaires!" I turned to see him standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Legate Rikke, while dozens of soldiers crowded in behind them. Tullius brandished his sword. "We'll make them pay ten-fold for our every one. The mead-halls will ring with lays of our deeds this day. And Ulfric is mine!"

"Tullius!" Ulfric countered. "You'll pay for our treatment at Helgen, and for every Nord kidnapped under your watch. Now, Dragonborn, stand aside. I won't warn you again."

"Stand aside, Elisif," Tullius said. "What can you hope to accomplish with the Bear of Markarth at your gate?"

"I hope to avoid a senseless massacre. Rikke, I beg you, stand down. The war is lost, the emperor has given our homeland over to the Stormcloaks."

Rikke lowered her sword, a look of disbelief on her face as she glanced back and forth between Ulfric and Tullius.

"No!" screamed the general. "The Dragonborn has turned her with her Stormcloak lies. Loyal Legionnaires, to me!" He charged at us, and Rikke had no choice but to follow. Ulfric and Galmar charged from the other end of the passage their soldiers rushing in behind.

Elisif cowered beside me. The passage was narrow and there was nowhere to run. We were caught between two charging war-bands.
The Temple of the Gods

Chapter Summary

-- calming the frenzy -- Ulfric's unabated bloodlust -- Deirdre challenges the Bear of Markarth -- a contest of the Voice -- no honorable death -- cheers for the victor -- the blessing of Talos -- acclaim for Ysmir reborn -- an appeal to Akatosh --

It was madness – two armies clashing in a narrow passage. Tullius could have held out long against the Stormcloaks behind the castle's stout defenses. But he had driven his remaining soldiers into a frenzy of fear, convincing them it was better to go out in a final, futile assault than to cower behind the castle's gates. And Ulfric's soldiers were eager for a fight, having been deprived of one for so long. There would be many losses on both sides – Elisif and I the first, if I didn't do something to stop it.

A spell of harmony was what I needed, but I hadn't the time to cast it. Unless … "Tiid-Klo-Ul!" I shouted, and suddenly the soldiers were running at us as if through water. Then I cast the harmony spell, the most advanced of all Illusion spells, calming everyone within the tunnel and many beyond. When time returned to its usual pace, Tullius and Ulfric came to a halt just inches from us, lowering their weapons and looking around with dazed expressions.

Then Ulfric realized what had happened. "What is this witchcraft?" he demanded.

"The same magic that worked on the Thalmor can work on you as well, Ulfric Stormcloak."

Beside him, Galmar stamped his feet, his face red with rage, but he could do nothing with his axe. "This is treachery!" he shouted.

I turned to Elisif and handed her the letter from the emperor. "Show this to Tullius' soldiers. They will trust you more readily than me. But hurry, we only have moments to convince them to stand down."

She did as I said, Tullius looking on in growing despair, unable to do anything to stop the truth from spreading.

"How did you get that letter?" Ulfric demanded.

I turned back to him. "My years as a thief in Cyrodiil served me well. If only I had known magic back then, I might not have gone hungry so often."

"You will pay for this, Dragonborn, when this spell wears off. You can't keep us magicked forever."

"Ulfric, you have everything you wanted. Skyrim is yours, Solitude is yours, the castle will soon be yours. These Imperials will flee Skyrim, thankful for their lives. What more could you want?"

"A victory! One that my followers will not question! But instead you have sought your own glory at every turn."

We were interrupted by Legate Rikke stepping up to Tullius, her sword drawn. The spell had worn
off, and her soldiers had their swords pointed at Tullius as well. "General Tullius," Rikke said, "in the name of Emperor Titus Mede the Second, I relieve you of your duties and place you under arrest. Tomorrow you will face the headsman for disobeying a direct order from our ruler and needlessly endangering the lives of your troops and the citizens you were sworn to protect."

Tullius brandished his sword at her. "No, I … I … All I wanted was a glorious death."

"And death you will have, though not an honorable one. Now put down your sword."

"Here, let me help you," I said, casting a calming spell on Tullius.

Rikke took his sword, then turned to Ulfric. "Jarl Ulfric, the castle is yours, greatly though it pains me to say it."

"Then stand aside and let us enter," Galmar growled.

Rikke turned to her troops. "Into the bailey!" They began filing out of the passage, the legate marching Tullius ahead of her at sword-point. Elisif and I followed, stepping to one side to give the Stormcloaks free entrance to the keep. Soon Galmar was grouping his war-bands in ranks in front of the Emperor's Tower and along the circular curtain wall of the castle. Rank after rank, they filed in until several hundred Stormcloaks stood ranged around the Imperials. Tullius' troops numbered but three score. They stood in the middle of the bailey, eyeing the Stormcloaks uncertainly.

"Rikke," Tullius said, loud enough for all in the bailey to hear, "you're a fool if you think Ulfric will honor a piece of paper."

"Quiet, Tullius," said Ulfric. "You are the first who will receive justice this day."

"What do you mean, the first?" Rikke demanded, facing Ulfric, her sword still drawn.

"I mean that you and your soldiers were loyal to Tullius to the end, and now you will die with him."

"But free passage out of Skyrim was part of the agreement! Why else would we stand down?"

"And we have given free passage to any who didn't resist us. Yet there you stand with your sword drawn." It was a mean trick, beneath even Ulfric.

Elisif took a step forward. "Legate Rikke, have your soldiers drop their weapons, I beg you. It is your only hope."

Ulfric gestured at the jarl of Solitude with his own sword. "And you, Elisif, you can stand with the Imperials you love so much."

"No!" I called out, stepping in front of Elisif. "Stay where you are, Jarl Elisif. Ulfric, you will not do this."

"And what will you do to stop me, Dragonborn? You cannot stand against my entire army."

"You think not?"

Now there was grumbling among the troops, and soon it grew to shouting and scuffling. I heard calls of "Save the Hero of Riften" and "No one touches the Dragonborn!" The commotion was greatest near us, for the war-bands Ulfric and Galmar led into the castle were their most loyal soldiers, while those who had come after were more mixed, with many new recruits and even some
of those whom I had spared at the Rift Pass. Now many of these broke ranks and moved to stand with Elisif and me.

Into this commotion came Lydia and Ralof, each leading their own war-band, through the same passage by which we had entered. Ralof stopped his troops at the mouth of the passageway, but Lydia marched hers over to stand near me.

"I ordered you to enter by the other gate!" Galmar screamed.

"We found it locked, my captain, so we rushed back here," Ralof said. "What is happening?"

Ulfric eyed Ralof warily. "Your Breton lass seeks to thwart me once more."

"And your jarl seeks the slaughter he has wanted all along," I countered. Ralof looked back and forth between us, wracked with pain and confusion.

"Careful how you go, young pup," Galmar said. "None who are disloyal will survive this day."

The three forces stood eyeing one another, unsure what would happen next. Between Lydia's band of Whiterun guards and the soldiers who had broken ranks, half a hundred fighters stood with me. I truly did not know which way Ralof's band would go. But whatever happened, it looked to be a bloodier mess than even Ulfric could have imagined.

I took a step toward Ulfric. "Perhaps you are right that I cannot stand against your entire army. Instead, Ulfric Stormcloak, I challenge you to single combat in the ancient Nord tradition."

A murmur went through the bailey. Lydia stepped up beside me and put a hand on my arm. "No, my love, let me stand for you."

I took her hand. "I must do this. Do not worry. All will be fine." Then I turned back to the Stormcloaks. "Ulfric, you lack both honor and virtue. You are responsible for untold evils in the ghettos of Windhelm. And now you have wasted your last chance to become the noble king Ralof and your followers hoped for. I wish now that I had played no part in your rise to power. You will not rule Skyrim as long as I live. What say you to my challenge?"

"Why should I submit to such a trial? Without your dragon, you cannot hope to defeat my army, even with all your power. Why shouldn't I have my soldiers wash these flagstones with your treacherous blood?"

"Where's your thirst for glory now, Ulfric?" I demanded. "Would you hide behind your army? You bragged of your victory over Torygg using the Voice. Now try your Voice on me!" I knew his pride would yet be his downfall.

"Jarl Ulfric," Ralof put in, "my leader, you will dishonor yourself and our cause if you refuse this challenge."

"The pup is right, Ulfric," said Galmar. "You will lose the trust of your soldiers if you refuse to meet the lass in single combat."

Ulfric saw that he was trapped by his own pursuit of glory. "All right, we will duel. But no magic."

"As you will," I told him, "but I will not refrain from using my Thu'um. You have this power as well."

"So be it. Stormcloaks, stand back. My Thu'um is strong, and I would not injure you."
Lydia remained next to me, loath to see me stand alone. "Stand aside, my love," I said. "Ulfric's Voice is strong as well." She did as I bade her, though her lower lip trembled. She took a place next to Ralof, who put a brotherly arm across her shoulders. His face could not have shown more pain. I do not think he knew which of us he would rather see emerge from the duel.

And so Ulfric and I faced each other at last, across a gap of twenty paces. I bowed to my foe, but Ulfric did not keep to the ancient courtesies. He stood his ground, blustering and brandishing his sword. "Torygg insisted on these courtly customs as well," he called across the gap that separated us. "They did not avail him, and neither will they avail you. He was at least a man, a proud Nord, and you are but a girl, and half-Breton at that."

Ulfric was indeed wise in the ways of the Thu'um. He thought to provoke me to anger, knowing that the strongest shout could only be called out of a calm center. But taunts could not anger me. I just smiled at him. "No? Perhaps he was not polite enough. I will extend you the courtesy of the first shout." The gathered soldiers from both camps gasped at this. I heard a sob from Lydia, but I kept my eyes on Ulfric. Even he looked taken aback by my offer. The power of his Thu'um was legendary. I bowed once more, then planted both feet squarely on the flagstones, hoping to anchor myself to the strength of Nirn for the blow I knew was coming.

"Very well," he said. "It is your choice." He gathered his breath. "Fus-Ro-Dah!" he shouted.

Time seemed to slow once more, though I had not used the Slow Time shout. I watched the wave of Ulfric's shout rippling toward me, then I began gathering my own breath. When the shout reached me I took it in through my breath and through my feet. The force rippled from the flagstones up through my body. I took it in and added it to my own power, and I did not stagger. I stood before Ulfric, and he knew I was stronger than before.

The castle yard was deadly quiet – until Ulfric screamed in shock and disbelief. Then he charged, sword drawn.

He did not make it halfway.

I released my Thu'um upon him and sent him flying, smiting him against the castle wall fifty feet away. He crumpled in a heap at its base then lay still.

I looked around at the rest of the bailey. All the soldiers, Imperial and Stormcloak alike, had been knocked to the ground. Only Lydia remained upright, braced on one knee. She was the first to her feet. She jabbed the air with her axe and shouted. "Deirdre is victorious! Long live the Dragonborn!"

Ralof looked at his fallen master then at me. "Dovahkiin!" he shouted finally. "Long live Dovahkiin!"

The Imperials took up a different cry. "Finish him!" they called.

I looked back at Ulfric; he was stirring now. I walked toward him, drawing my sword as I went. By the time I reached him he had gotten to all fours. He had a bloody gash on his forehead and one arm appeared broken. He gasped for breath as I placed the point of my sword beneath his chin and made him look at me.

"You heard them," he said. "Finish me. Give me an honorable death."

"There is no honor in death, Ulfric, only death."
"But it will make a better story."

"You Nords and your thirst for glory! Haven't you learned this is not that kind of tale?" I sheathed my sword. "I know I promised not to use magic, but I hope you will not think me deceitful." I put my hands together to dual cast, and he actually cowered.

When the healing spell hit him, he gasped in disbelief. "You are truly wicked," he whispered. "First you robbed me of victory, and now you've robbed me of all honor." He reached to his belt with his good arm and drew his dagger, lunging upwards at me.

But I was too quick for him, leaping backward out of harm's way. He tried to follow, but he was still weak, and I easily eluded him. Then I heard the sound of boots running up behind me, and I turned to see Lydia charging at Ulfric with her axe ready to strike.

I caught her by the arm before she got past me, and she came to a halt, staring at me in disbelief.

"Still you would spare him? The villain is beneath mercy."

"We have had no bloodshed so far this day," I said, "and I would like to end it that way."

I turned back to Ulfric. He was breathing hard, and had crumpled to one knee from his effort. I approached him, one hand held out. Still he scowled at me in defiance. I wanted to use the Voice on him, but I doubted he would survive the impact. Instead I concentrated on my shout, repeating "Drem-Aaz-Fahdon" over and over in my mind until their meaning, Peace-Mercy-Friend, filled my being. I had come right up to Ulfric now, and I placed my hand on his brow, letting the meaning of the words flow from me into him. It was something like those times at High Hrothgar when the Greybeards had shared their knowledge with me. I hoped it would have the same effect on him.

I was not disappointed. Ulfric began to tremble and his scowl crumbled into a look of awe and confusion, tears coming to his eyes. "No, what is this? Your wickedness knows no depths!" Yet still he trembled and sobbed and finally bowed his head.

"What kind of world is it in which mercy is considered wicked?" I asked him, and held my hand down to him. "Rise, Ulfric Stormcloak. I declare your leadership of the Stormcloak rebellion at an end, but I spare your life. You may remain free as long as you renounce your ambition to be high king and pledge your loyalty…"

His submission was so quick that he cut me off. He didn't even rise, but took my hand and kissed it. "I swear by Ysmir that I will be your loyal and true servant as long as I live. For indeed you are Ysmir, returned in woman's form."

"No, Ulfric," I told him, "I do not ask for your loyalty to me. I was going to ask for your loyalty to Skyrim and its next chosen ruler, whoever he or she may be. More than that, I ask for your loyalty and service to Skyrim's people – all of its people, whether Dunmer, Bosmer, or Orsimer; Khajiit, Breton, Redguard, or Nord, and yes, even Argonian. I would have you pledge to protect them from whatever assaults Skyrim yet faces. And finally I would have you put your city and your hold to rights. Free the Dunmer and the Argonians to live and work where they choose, side by side with their Nord neighbors. Make the roads of Eastmarch safe for all travelers, of whatever race. Teach your people that Skyrim belongs not just to the Nords but to all people who cherish the freedom to live, worship, and love as they please while allowing those same freedoms to their neighbors. Pledge thus, and you may return to Eastmarch as jarl, with any who will still follow you."

He looked up at me, and I saw no treachery in his eye, only wonder. "I do swear it, and I will try to accomplish all you command, my … my queen. As much as you deny it, you will make a far more
merciful and just ruler than I. The people will love you forever."

A great cheer rose up from the gathered soldiers, taken up first by Lydia and the Whiterun guards, then spreading to Ralof's war-band and the Stormcloaks who had come to stand by me, then among Ulfric's loyal followers and even the Imperials, who were glad for their freedom. "Queen Deirdre!" they shouted. "Long live Queen Deirdre!" Even Elisif was clapping and cheering. Only Galmar Stone-Fist refused to join in, still staring in disbelief at his defeated leader.

Lydia led the chanting, her axe thrust to the skies, while she walked over to me. Then she embraced me, lifting me off my feet. "You did it, my love," she said. "You've won." She set me down and lifted my hand in the air.

It took me a moment to extricate my hand from her grasp, then I raised both hands for quiet. When they were finally still, I said, "Armies do not appoint rulers. That is not the way of Skyrim. The jarls will meet and choose the next ruler, and I urge that it happen in all haste. Much needs doing to restore our land and prepare for whatever the Thalmor have planned for us. For my part, I would not put my name forward as queen. What do I know of ruling a realm? Yet I can think of one who is both fairer and wiser than I." I looked over at Elisif.

"As you will," many of them said, but they couldn't help adding, "your Grace."

"While Skyrim does not yet have a ruler, it must look to its defenses. And there remains the matter of four hundred elves held prisoner in Labyrinthian. Someone will need to lead Skyrim's army and look to these concerns."

The crowd interrupted with shouts of "Deirdre! Deirdre!"

"No, no, I am even less fit to be a commander of armies than I am to become a ruler." I looked over at Galmar. "Galmar Stone-Fist, you led Ulfric's forces with skill and courage. The men and women know you well. Will you serve as Skyrim's first general?"

He kept staring sadly down at Ulfric, then shook his head. "Ach, no. I followed my jarl into this rebellion, I will follow him in defeat."

"Then I propose that Ralof of Riverwood lead Skyrim's new army, to be built from whatever Stormcloaks wish to continue their service and all those Nords in the Imperial Legion who wish to return to their homeland."

Another cheer rose up from the soldiers, with cries of "Ralof!"

Ralof stepped forward. "What of the rest of these Imperials, my que… Deirdre?" He gave me a wink as he said it.

I looked at Rikke, still holding Tullius under guard, and the soldiers behind her. Many of them were Nords, many more Cyrodiilians, with several Redguards, Bretons, Dunmer, and Orsimer thrown in. "I would welcome all of you into the new Skyrim Army, if you will pledge your loyalty to our land. To the Nords, I say that Skyrim needs you as never before. The rest of you, if you choose not to join us, I would have you return to your own lands. Tell all who will listen that the Thalmor seek domination over all of Tamriel. The Altmer view themselves as superior to all other races and will enslave us or wipe us out. Skyrim stands ready to fight them and seeks allies."

I turned to Rikke. "Legate, I leave Tullius to your justice. I say the same to you as to the rest of your soldiers. Return to your emperor and the Elder Council. Tell them that Skyrim has declared itself free of Imperial rule, yet we will work with the Empire against the Thalmor. Every day the
White-Gold Concordat remains in effect is another day in which the Thalmor strengthen their hold over the Empire, threatening all of Tamriel. I'm sure Titus Mede would not see his people enslaved. And when you have made your report to the emperor, I hope you will return and join us."

"I will, Dragonborn. You have proven true to your word, at the risk of your own life. While I mistrust this wish you have for Skyrim self-rule, I am glad that Ulfric the Usurper will not become high king. There are many fine jarls within Skyrim who will make decent rulers. I give you the honor of hoping that we may meet again one day in battle, and on the same side." She went off to organize her remaining troops.

I turned to Ralof. "I hope I didn't overstep my authority there, my friend. Did I do well?"

"All was wise and just, lass. Keep it up and you might make something of yourself one day." He winked at me, then he turned to the Imperials. "Who is with us?"

All the Nords, to the man and the woman, came over, and several of the Redguards as well. There was much back slapping, and even greetings among old friends divided by their loyalties. The others who chose not to join our cause began stripping off their Imperial armor. "Could use a pint after that, I could," I heard one say. "Let's go down to the Winking Skeeever."

I left Galmar and Ralof in charge of the disposition of the armies. "Come Lydia, there is one thing left to do." We walked over to where Elisif stood near the passage, beaming at us.

"You have delivered my city and the Imperial soldiers from Ulfric's threat," she said. "You are indeed the victor this day."

"It is time to have your people return to the city, Jarl Elisif. Have them gather in the Temple of the Gods. Something is about to happen there that has not happened in a generation."

"Aye, Dragonborn," she said, bowing to me before she left.

Lydia and I walked hand in hand through the temple garden, then into the great cathedral. Its vaulted ceiling soared far overhead, marred only by the spots where the holes left by the frost dragon had been hastily patched with planking. The winter sunlight shone through the stained windows creating beautiful shafts and beams of light. We approached the sanctuary, where eight shrines stood in separate altars arranged in a half-circle. One more altar stood empty. We knelt before the shrine of Dibella and asked her blessing, then lingered at the shrine of Mara.

The priest found us there. I rose to greet him. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Deirdre Morningsong, and under much less threatening circumstances."

"I will not forget your aid on that dark night, father. Now, tell me you haven't destroyed your shrine of Talos?"

"I think I might remember where I stowed it in the basement," he said with a mischievous look. "But…"

"Go and return it to its rightful place. Imperial rule is at an end, and we are now free to worship Talos." He still looked uncertain.

"Do as she says, Rorlund." Jarl Elisif had come up behind us. "The Thalmor are gone, and Tullius will be soon. For too long has that ninth altar stood empty."

When the priest had gone, she came over and hugged me. Her steward, Falk Firebeard, stood beside her, beaming. "Deirdre," Elisif said. "We are thrice indebted to you. Bowing to Ulfric would
have been the hardest thing I've ever done. I would much rather bow to you."

"No, do not kneel, my lady," I told her. "You are still jarl of Haafingar Hold, and may yet one day be queen."

"We will see about that," she said, smiling.

The people had begun filing into the cathedral. "Now, your people are here. Will you address them first, or shall I?"

"No, you do the honors, Deirdre. Today, the victory is yours."

The people had packed the pews by now. The news of my duel with Ulfric must have spread among them, because no longer did they turn sullen glances upon me. Instead, they beamed and shouted my name. "Deirdre! Deirdre!"

When I had quieted them, I spoke. "People of Solitude, I give you Elisif!" I gestured to Elisif, who stood off to the side, waving her hand demurely. "She protected your lives with wisdom and courage. She is still your jarl, and may one day be your queen!"

A great roar rose up from the crowd and they chanted, "Elisif! Elisif!"

When they were quiet again, I continued. "The Thalmor flee our shores and the Imperial army is vanquished. The war is over and Skyrim is free!" The cheering was somewhat more subdued now. Most of the people here had been quite comfortable under Imperial rule. "Many of the Imperial Army's brave soldiers have joined our cause. The Thalmor will no longer kidnap you off the street or steal you from your beds. No more need you speak with guarded tongues for fear of Thalmor spies." The cheers were heartier this time. "Most important, you are free to worship as you please."

With impeccable timing, the priest returned with the shrine of Talos. He was pretending to dust it, but it looked to have been well polished over the years. He displayed it to the onlookers, to thunderous applause.

"Father Rorlund, please put the shrine in its rightful place." As he carried the shrine over to the ninth altar, I faced the audience again. "It may be that I have received the blessing of Talos more recently than many of you. No doubt the younger among you have never received his blessing in the twenty-five years of the ban. My last blessing was only four years ago, yet its memory is most grievous. It took place in the secret shrine my father kept for Talos in our cellar. That shrine was lost the next night in a blazing inferno that also took my home, my childhood, and my parents from me. So I would ask that I receive the first blessing from this restored altar in honor of my father." They shouted their approval.

Through my tears I saw that many of them were crying as well. Then I saw Ulfric, standing over to the side, tears streaming down his face. I thought then that perhaps I had underestimated him – perhaps his devotion to Talos was more than just a cover for his ambition.

I approached the altar and knelt before it. The priest placed his hand on my brow and said the prayer to Talos. I looked up at the shrine and remembered those countless nights kneeling before our basement altar, with my father beside me saying the same prayer. I missed him then as I had not in the last three years. "Father, in Sovngarde or wherever you be," I asked him, "did I do well? Did I serve Talos and the rest of the Nine well in your name?"

The priest bade me rise then, and Lydia came and took me in her arms. I sobbed as I hadn't since I was a child. Not even my tears of joy at Lydia's recovery could equal it.
Elisif rose and spoke to the crowd. "My people, I would speak a word for Deirdre, thrice hero of Solitude. By ancient Nord custom she has proven herself the most powerful in single combat, and by rights should claim the throne of Skyrim. I for one am ready to swear my fealty to her. Tamriel has not seen her like since Tiber Septim, our lord Talos."

If the cathedral could have risen into the air, it would have then, so thunderous was the noise of the crowd. But I once again raised my arms and asked for silence. "People of Solitude, if I achieved any victory, it was not over a single man. Neither was it a victory for myself, but a victory of love over hatred. I did not vanquish Ulfric. He stands there among you and I aver he is a changed man. As for Elisif's kind words, it is too soon to decide on a new ruler. That day is not far off, but for now let us celebrate and receive Talos' blessing. May Talos guide us all."

Many in the crowd came forward then for their blessings. Elisif went first, and Lydia was next. When she was through she came over and we stood arm in arm watching the congregants file past. When it was Ulfric's turn he did indeed seem a changed man. He looked genuinely moved to receive Talos' blessing, but then he asked the priest to also give him the blessing of Mara. His shoulders shook and we could hear his sobs as the priest said the prayer.

The sun was slanting at a low angle through the windows by the time the last of the worshippers approached the altar. I smiled at Lydia. The war was won, we would have peace for a time, and I had the arms of the woman I loved around me. I was happy, and my tasks all fulfilled.

I wanted to stop Time, and never lose the feeling I had then. I even said a little prayer to Akatosh, the Dragon God of Time, that he might make it so. But I was just a foolish girl, and it was a foolish dream. Time flowed onward and carried me with it.
It was a bright afternoon when we arrived in Dragon Bridge. The morning's journey to my home town had been a pleasant one, the sun shining down through the pines, bright red snow flowers popping their heads up through the receding banks of white, the songs of warblers and thrushes newly returned from the south enlivening the air. Now the sun warmed our backs as we sat on a dais placed near one end of the town's famed bridge. Behind us, the mighty Karth River roared, its banks filled with snowmelt from the high peaks of the Reach. I told myself I should be glad on this lovely spring day.

Yet the day's somber purpose drove all thoughts of gaiety from my mind. I could not help looking down at the town's woodlot, where Horgeir usually spent his days splitting wood. Now a single short log was placed on blocks at knee height, a double-bladed axe leaning against it, and a large basket of woven rushes placed on one side, ready to receive the axe's grim produce. Nearby stood the headsman, his features hidden by a black hood. A dozen hold guards were placed throughout the town, and two archers perched on roofs nearby, observing the scene.

Lydia, seated next to me, squeezed my hand. "Are you not happy, my love?" she asked. "This is the day you've long awaited, the day your parents' killers will receive justice.

Still somehow I could not be happy. Even after the peaceful taking of Whiterun and Solitude, even after a spring of peace, I was sick to death of death.

Now Bolgeir Bearclaw, Jarl Elisif's housecarl, rose from his seat. "It is time! Bring down the prisoners!"

It took a few moments for the three men to be marched down from the quarters recently vacated by the Penitus Oculatus. Then the crowd parted, and there they were – Osmer's father, Oslaf, and two others I recognized from that night long ago. Behind them came their families, crying and pleading. Osmer himself walked among them, out of his guard's uniform. I saw he was now a man grown, with the same red hair and a thicker beard. His eyes sought mine as he took a spot at the front of the crowd, but I could not read his expression. Despite myself, I began to tremble.

"Be at ease, my love," Lydia said. "Or do I have to blindfold you again?"

I looked over to see her smiling. The jest was feeble, yet welcome. I took a deep breath and looked up at the clear blue sky. I would be as impassive as that blank, blue canvas. "No," I said, squeezing her hand in return. "I will be fine. I must see this through."

Now Bolgeir began announcing the dignitaries gathered for the trial. "Falk Firebeard, Steward to Jarl Elisif." The crowd applauded politely. "Jarl Elisif of Solitude." Louder applause now. The people of Haafingar loved their jarl, all the more after her husband's death – or murder as they...
would have it. "Lydia of Whiterun." This time there was only a scattering of applause, probably from the town's few Stormcloak supporters. "Hail, the Hero of Whiterun!" one fellow cried out, but his voice faded as none joined him.

Now Bolgeir had come to me. "Deirdre, High Queen of Skyrim!" The announcement met with silence from the crowd.

Few reading this will be unaware of my tenure, for a time, as queen of Skyrim. For those who do not know their Tamriel history, this is how it fell out:

A week after the liberation of Solitude, Skyrim's jarls gathered in Whiterun for the jarl moot. Usually the moot was merely ceremonial, confirming the hereditary Jarl of Solitude as high king. The city had been the seat of power for time out of mind, easily defended on its great arch of rock over the bay, while also located at a central point for shipping and communication with the rest of Tamriel. The city's close ties with the Empire had helped ensure that Solitude's jarl was always deemed the most powerful.

But things were different now. Elisif had a good chance of being elected, yet none of the jarls from the Stormcloak territories was likely to support her. Much depended on which way Balgruuf would go, or whether he would choose to put his own name in. It promised to be an interesting and contentious moot.

I would not have attended, save that I wanted to see how the rebuilding of my adopted city was proceeding – and I wanted to ensure that Ulfric's name was not put forward as high king. For, while I felt he had been sincere in his conversion, I meant to keep my vow that Ulfric would never be king as long as I lived. Once I the moot's assurances that Ulfric would not be a contender, I felt free to leave the moot to the jarls, instead helping Arcadia sort through a delivery of alchemy ingredients.

We were knee deep in boxes, pouches, and phials in her cellar – the only part of her shop yet to be restored to something like its normal function – when a messenger burst in. "Deirdre Morningsong," he said, addressing me formally. "The moot requests your presence. Your name has been put forward."

"What? But why? Who did this?"

"I know no more, but was told to bring you in all haste."

The climb up the steps to the remains of the palace seemed even longer than usual as I pondered what this could mean. The work to rebuild Dragonsreach proceeded all around me, with great blocks of stone being hauled up by an ingenious wheel and rope system. I reached the landing and walked through the recently finished doorway, though as yet there was no door. The walls of the palace were but little more than the height of my head, with work only now beginning on the great vaulting buttresses that would support what promised to be a soaring roof.

I found the moot beyond, gathered in chairs arranged in a circle in what had been Balgruuf's war-chamber. The nine jarls were seated there, with their retainers standing beside them. Lydia was there as well, in her capacity as head of the Whiterun Guard, and Ralof, as commander of the forces that would soon be taking orders from Skyrim's new ruler. They both beamed at me as I entered the
"What has happened?" I asked, looking from one face to another for someone to relieve my confusion. Ulfric was looking at me, his face impassive. Then he turned to Elisif. "This was your idea, you'd best explain to the lass," he said.

Elisif rose. "The moot has deadlocked. None of us received more than four votes."

"Deadlocked? But how, with nine jarls voting?"

"The closest ballot was between Balgruuf and myself. Yet someone" – and here she winked at me – "refused to vote, leaving the count four votes to four."

This made no sense. Five holds were now loyal to the Stormcloaks. Surely they could have chosen one other than Ulfric and put him or her on the throne. I looked over at Ulfric, but he just gave me a wan smile. Perhaps he could no longer control the jarls who had once been loyal to him. Or had he, too, voted to ensure a stalemate?

"Seeing that we could not choose from among our ranks," Elisif went on, "I put your name forward. I realize it is highly unusual. Most, if not all, of Skyrim's rulers have come from the ranks of the jarls. Yet these are unusual times. Who better to lead Skyrim than the one who gained its independence, and without bloodshed?"

"Some blood was shed," I reminded her, "and by my own hand."

"Still … We wait only to learn whether you will accept the throne before we vote."

"Queen of Skyrim!" I said, looking around the room. "This was nothing I ever sought."

Idgrod Ravencrone, jarl of Morthal, snorted at that. "You put up a good show of it, I'll give you that, but I'm not taken in by your little act."

Then I had to wonder if she was right. I remembered Paarthurnax saying to me, "You feel it within you, the will to power." I had continued to deny it even as my power grew and I recognized how dangerous it could be. I had finally tamed that part of myself that sought power, the dragon part – or so I hoped. Now power was being thrust upon me.

I almost laughed then. Working with Arcadia just moments before, I had indulged in the fantasy of a quiet life in Whiterun, Lydia fulfilling her duties as captain of the guard and Balgruuf's housecarl while we shared a newly rebuilt Breezehome. Perhaps I could purchase a share in Arcadia's shop, taking it over when she retired from the trade. I could imagine long summer afternoons of collecting ingredients in the forests and on the plains around the city, perhaps hiring someone to watch the shop for me. It seemed idyllic. But now that hope was gone. I was foolish even to have dreamt it.

Ralof spoke up. "The people love you, lass. You saved us all from Alduin, and at least half the people honor you for saving Riften from the Imperials and driving the Thalmor from Whiterun. The rest will come to love you as they learn of your kindness, fairness, and courage."

Jarl Idgrod stood up. "Speak for yourself, Stormcloak. I will never love the one who drove our only protectors from our shores. But at the same time I am glad that this one" – she glared over in Ulfric's direction – "will never be king." She turned to me. "So now it's on you, lass. You've put us on the wrong side of the Thalmor and the Empire, and now it's up to you to fix it. You cannot shirk that duty."
"I ... do not know what to say. I know nothing of ruling a realm. I … I must speak with my wife first."

Lydia came over to me and we went apart from the moot. She took both my hands. "You must accept this, my love. It is a great honor, and you deserve it."

"But your duty is here in Whiterun. And Skyrim has been ruled from Solitude for centuries. Surely I must take my seat there."

"We will sort that out as it comes. Skyrim needs you. The Aldmeri Dominion surely will not forget about us. There is rebellion in the Reach. Hammerfell may look to redress old wrongs if we appear weak. Even the Empire may seek to regain what it has lost. Who else will lead Skyrim in the face of such threats? Elisif?"

I looked over at the jarl of Solitude. She had done well for her people in a time of crisis, but I doubted Skyrim would unite behind her, and she certainly wasn't ready to command armies. "What of Balgruuf?"

"No, he is a changed man since the Thalmor tortured him. And he could not earn the votes. You are the only choice."

"But what of us, Lydia?"

"I would be honored to be the queen's consort, even if I have to renounce my duty as captain of the Whiterun Guard."

I could argue no further. We returned to the moot. "I will accept this honor, if I am chosen, though I do not seek it. But first I must ask permission of the jarl whom I still serve. Jarl Balgruuf, what say you?"

He looked at me, the skin around his one good eye crinkling. "It seems only yesterday you came before me, a frightened lass in a ragged tunic. Much has befallen us since then. You have grown great, and Whiterun owes you much. If the moot will not choose me, then I can think of none better to lead Skyrim. I release you from my service."

And so the vote was held. It went eight to one. Everyone knew Igmund, jarl of Markarth, was the lone dissenter. He could never forgive me for helping Madanach and the Forsworn escape Cidhna Mine, and he must have suspected what my plans for his hold would be, were I to become queen.

And with that it was done. The crown and scepter were brought forward, Lydia placed the crown on my head and Elisif handed me the scepter, and I was queen.

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The first attempt on my life came just two weeks into my reign. I had taken up residence in Castle Dour, leaving Lydia behind in Whiterun for the time being. I had no other choice if I was to manage this realm. All of the province's records were in Solitude, as well as its treasury and the many functionaries who managed Skyrim's affairs. Chief among these was Falk Firebeard, now steward to Jarl Elisif, but in former times the steward to High King Torygg. If any could advise me on the running of the realm, it was he. I had been glad to find him cooperative, yet his main duty was to Jarl Elisif.
I was just thinking I needed both a steward and a housecarl of my own as I walked down the steep road toward Solitude's docks, accompanied by two guards. I was on my way to discuss increased shipments with the merchants of the East Empire Company. As we passed beneath cliffs looming above the road, three assassins jumped out at us. I was able to calm them before anyone died, and it didn't take long to learn that they were from the Dark Brotherhood, sent by Elenwen herself. I guessed that future attempts would not be so clumsy.

That decided it. I needed a housecarl and perhaps even my own hirth for protection. Even more, I needed a steward to give me counsel as we set the realm to rights. For what I had told the moot was true – I knew nothing of overseeing a realm. At times the task seemed overwhelming. There were trade routes to be renewed, negotiations with the jarls to distribute what food there was to the holds most affected by the war, the distribution of troops to be overseen, repairs to the many crumbling forts to be undertaken.

The Forsworn Rebellion was particularly troublesome. "Look to the Reach, laddie," Galmar had said to Ralof before departing Solitude, and so far his warning had proved apt. Markarth's silver mines were Skyrim's chief source of wealth, but the flow of the precious metal had nearly dried up with the Forsworn attacking every shipment and harassing the miners. I had an idea for solving that impasse, but not without consulting someone whose judgment I trusted.

For one fleeting moment I thought of Esbern and Delphine. The Blades had always served as protectors of the Dragonborn. Delphine was a skilled fighter and could lead my hirth, while few were as wise as Esbern, save for his obsession with the dragons. But there was the sticking point. I could not have them as my protectors and advisors while the issue of Paarthurnax was between us. And their newly flourishing dragonguard was yet one more problem I must face. No dragon save Odahviing had been sighted over Skyrim since my return from Sovngarde. Paarthurnax must have succeeded in his negotiations with the dov, yet it would all go for naught if Delphine and Esbern managed to track down a dragon and kill it. No, I would have to look elsewhere for protection and counsel.

It was a happy problem in one way. Now I had no choice but to call Lydia to Solitude to serve once more as my housecarl. And who better? I could not feel more safe than with her sleeping beside me, axe at the ready. For the time being I would have to rely on Falk's counsel, though I did not have his undivided attention.

The weeks went by and the bitterness of the winter and its dark events gradually faded as the snows grew less and the sun climbed higher on its daily arc across the sky. Trade was once again brisk, even with Cyrodiil. Nothing short of war could keep the merchants from earning their gold. With the increased trade, Skyrim's larders began to fill. We even garnered aid from an unlikely source: Hammerfell. Relations between the two provinces had been strained ever since Skyrim annexed a portion of Hammerfell's territories in ages long past. Yet the Redguards were happy that another Imperial province had gained its independence, and saw the wisdom of the two working together. As well, Hammerfell's ruling houses had not forgotten the aid I had given in capturing Saadia, the Thalmor spy. Soon, wagons filled with exotic foods and other supplies began making the trek over the pass between Elinhir and Falkreath.

The training of Skyrim's army and strengthening of its defenses also proceeded apace. Ralof had moved the army's headquarters from Solitude to Whiterun, garrisoning the mass of his army in tents outside the city while Dragonsreach was rebuilt with enlarged barracks. He claimed that Solitude, while easily defended, was too remote from the rest of Skyrim to oversee the realm's defenses. Supplying a large force in Whiterun would be more difficult, but communications would be easier.
And so, as the first green shoots forced their way up through the melting snow, I turned my attention to troubles long past. It was not without trepidation that I, the High Queen of Skyrim, took the long walk from Castle Dour to the Blue Palace to plead with Jarl Elisif for justice for my parents.

When I finished telling my story, I could see that this was news to Elisif and her steward and housecarl. "You must forgive me, as well as my court," Elisif said, wiping away a tear. "This happened before my husband became high king. His father, King Istlod, must have been too distracted with ruling all Skyrim to concern himself with these tragedies in his own hold. But my parents raised me to believe that Nords are a just and fair people. Whether or not that has always been true, I would make it so now, in this hold at least. Bolgeir, go to Dragon Bridge, investigate these events, and bring these killers to justice."

It took only two weeks for the truth to come out, and now here we were on the day of the trial.

The silence that followed my introduction was broken by someone shouting from the back of the crowd, "What kind of justice is this? The plaintiff can't sit in judgment of the accused!" Shouts of agreement rang out all around.

Jarl Elisif rose and lifted her hand for quiet. "It is the jarl's duty to dispense justice in the hold. Due to the severity and sensitivity of these crimes, my steward and housecarl will join me in this duty…"

"You mean due to your youth and inexperience!" someone shouted out.

"As I was saying," Elisif went on, "the high queen is here merely as an observer."

"We know you're all on her side!" someone else called. "There'll be no justice in Dragon Bridge this day!"

Finally I stood before the crowd. I raised my hands for quiet, but the grumbling and cat-calling continued. "Peace!" I called out. It wasn't a shout, but my voice carried far, and I finally had the crowd's attention.

"People of Dragon Bridge, we must have peace within our borders if we are to meet the forces that threaten us from without. We must stand together or together we will fall under a worse tyranny than the Empire ever dreamt of."

"And whose fault is that? We were happy to have the Empire's protection!"

"What's done is done," I replied. "But I promise you, under my rule all will be treated equally and fairly, whether Nord, Breton, Redguard, Altmer, Dunmer, Bosmer, Orsimer, Khajiit, or Argonian. All will be protected under the law, and all law-breakers punished equally. Let this trial be your proof."

A few people clapped, then more, but only on one side. Then I realized that the crowd was divided between Nords and a smaller number of Bretons and Redguards, huddled to one side of the street. Their applause died away and all was quiet.

"Bring forth the witnesses!" Bolgeir called out.

Many were willing to testify, Nords all. Those who had merely watched the crime were promised immunity from prosecution in exchange for their testimony. They all agreed on what had happened. Oslaf had held the torch while his two friends splashed oil on the timbers and thatch of our house. Then Oslaf had set the fire. When the house was well ablaze, the three culprits and
several others had returned to searching for me, while much of the crowd stayed to watch the fire.

As each witness repeated the same terrible tale, I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying in vain not to see those awful images in my mind's eye. Lydia kept her hand on my shoulder.

When it was over, even the culprits confessed to the crime. "You have to understand," Oslaf said, looking directly at me, "we didn't know it was a shout you used. If you'd a told us, we might've understood. But as it was, we thought it was some Breton witchcraft."

It was all I could do not to stand up and scream at him that I had been a mere lass, that even I hadn't known what power was in me. Yet I managed to remain silent.

He turned back to Elisif. "Let the other two go. I was the one who threw the torch. Let your justice fall on my head."

"Wait!" came a voice from the crowd, and Osmer stepped forward. "If I had only been braver on that day," he said, "I never would have cried out, I never would have blamed Deirdre. And if I hadn't pressed myself on her, she never would have shouted at me to begin with. Please have mercy on my father. He was only afraid for me."

"We will consider your words as we deliberate," said Bolgeir. "But remember, someone must pay for the crimes that took place that day."

With that, Elisif withdrew with her court to one side to consider the case. It did not take long. In a few moments Elisif returned to stand before the accused and the crowd. "The facts of the case are plain. Cold-blooded murder was committed here that day, and those who committed it are confessed of their crimes. As fuel is just as necessary to start a fire as a torch, we find all three guilty, and subject to the same punishment – death. As they have had three years of undeserved life and liberty, the sentence will be carried out this minute."

A gasp went up from the Nords in the crowd, while the Bretons and Redguards looked on, obviously pleased, but too timid to applaud or cheer. The town guards laid hands on the prisoners and began marching them over toward the executioner's block. The day I had long awaited had finally arrived. My parents would receive their justice and I would have my revenge. I finally had what I sought when I returned to Skyrim.

I looked over at the headsman, who was testing the edge of his blade. I wondered if he was smiling beneath his headsman's hood.

Then I stood up and stepped to the edge of the dais. "Stop!" I shouted. The crowd went silent and the guards relaxed their grip on the prisoners as all eyes turned to me.

"Long have I awaited this day, when justice would be served on the murderers of my parents – whether by a worthy jarl or my own hand, I cared not. Nor did I care whether it fell just on these three, or on every Nord in this village, for I watched as you all cheered while our house burned, knowing my parents were inside. I found you all equally guilty of that crime." Another gasp went through the crowd.

"In your ignorance and your fear, you took my parents from me and you might have slain me as well, though I was just a child. You feared my Voice because you did not understand it – nor did I understand it. And it was that very Voice that saved all of you from Alduin and his dragons. It was that same Voice that defeated Ulfric and kept him from persecuting those among you who were loyal to the Empire. But I do not ask your thanks. For perhaps you were right to fear me. Even now some part of me urges that I take my revenge – and all gathered here know it is within my power!"
"Deirdre, no!" both Elisif and Lydia shouted, leaping up on either side of me. The crowd began to edge backward and some at the back turned and fled.

"But do not be afraid!" I said, raising my hands for calm. "I have quelled that part of me. I have learned that death solves little, and mercy is greater than hatred. For I too am stained with the blood of those I feared, having slain them needlessly. And so, I commute the sentences reached here today, from death to life in prison. And further, I say to the convicted, if you will help to teach your fellow Nords the error of your ways, help them not to fear and hate the other races of Tamriel but to treat them with kindness and respect, you may shorten your sentences and one day return to your families. For I must believe that all but the worst crimes may be redeemed by right actions." And how could I not, as I hoped for redemption for the wrongs I had committed?

A ripple went through the crowd, different this time. "Long live High Queen Deirdre!" came a shout, and soon it was taken up, the entire crowd clapping and cheering. Even the Bretons joined in, sensing that perhaps better days were ahead.

I raised my hands for quiet once more. "But wait, there is more! Today I announce plans for a new school here in Dragon Bridge. I name it the Onmund the Brave School for the Arcane Arts, in honor of my friend, a Nord mage and a fallen hero of the Retreat from Whiterun." The crowd was quieter now, with much whispering and muttering. "And now I will introduce the school's first headmaster." I gestured down to the edge of the crowd and a hooded figure in College of Winterhold robes came up to stand beside me on the dais. He drew back his hood and waved to the crowd, whose muttering only grew louder.

"I give you Tolfdir, recently of the College of Winterhold. As you can see, he is a Nord like yourselves. Under his leadership, this school will dispel the fear and suspicion with which the magical arts are currently treated. Tolfdir, please show the citizens what magic can do."

The old wizard sent a ball of magelight out over the crowd's heads. Many cringed as the ball of light came toward them, then oohed and aahed as it hovered above them.

"Imagine the streets of Dragon Bridge lit at night by magical light," I said. "Imagine no longer having to fear wild predators on the roads and in the far-flung fields, because magic has kept them away. These are just some of the benefits the arcane arts can bring. But most important, when any of your children show magical powers, you will no longer have to respond with fear, ostracism, and hatred, as you did to me on that day long ago. You can send them to a school where they will learn to control their powers for the good of all. Thus will you learn not to fear magic but view it as a natural element to be harnessed, just as you harness the power of wind and water."

The Nords in the crowd didn't quite know what to make of this, but applauded politely out of respect to Tolfdir, one of their own kind. The Bretons applauded and cheered with greater enthusiasm.

With that, the trial was over and the prisoners were led back to their cells, their families following behind while the people scattered back to their homes and labors. I approached Elisif and her counselors. "I hope I didn't overstep my bounds, Jarl Elisif."

"No, no, my queen," she said. "It is a ruler's prerogative to grant pardons."

"It was well done," said Falk Firebeard. "You've gained many an admirer in Dragon Bridge today."

Lydia gave me a hug. "I know that was hard for you, my love, but it's over now."

"The truth is, I feel lighter than I have in years," I said. "I never realized what a burden all that
hatred and anger could be. I feel as if I'm the one who has been set free."

"I'm glad, my queen," Lydia said, pushing back a lock of my hair that had escaped from under my crown.

"And also," I said, "I certainly could use a mug of mead."

There was laughter all around, and we headed toward the Four Shields Tavern.

But before we could arrive there, Osmer appeared before us and we halted.

"Deirdre, I mean your Grace…," he said, bending his head and barely looking at me.

"Kneel before your queen, lad," said Falk Firebeard, and Osmer dropped like a stone to one knee.

I was still getting used to all this kneeling. In the beginning, I would have none of it, but Falk said I must preserve the dignity of my station, despite my personal feelings.

"That will do, Osmer," I said. "Now rise, and say what you have to say."

Back on his feet, he still looked mostly at the ground as he spoke. "I just wanted to say thank you for sparing my father. I know you won't regret your clemency."

"You're welcome," I replied.

"And, I also wanted to say…" He looked from Lydia to me. "I am glad for all you've achieved, and I hope you will be happy in your life."

"Thank you again," I said. Still he stood there, looking at the ground. "And? Was there anything else?"

Now he looked me in the eye, though it was an effort. "Just that … On that day … I got carried away, I didn't know what I was doing. When I realized later, how that must have felt to you, I felt only shame. But you have to believe me, I would never have hurt you." He cast his eyes back at the ground once more.

So now we came to it. I thought of all the things that could have changed the outcome of that terrible day.

"Osmer, you have always been big and strong, since we were children," I said. "You had never felt the helplessness I felt in that moment, even if you didn't mean to make me feel that way. But since then I have learned something of the ways of lust, and I can see how one might get carried away by it. And I am sorry for the way I reacted. I lashed out at you in my helplessness. Then you must have felt as helpless as I, and you lashed out at me by naming me a witch. That was the hardest thing for me to forgive."

"I know it," he said, "and I've regretted those words every day since."

"So let us count it as a youthful misunderstanding. Neither of us has anything to be ashamed of. It was the adults who should have shown us more understanding on that day."

He went to one knee again. "I thank you, my queen. And you have my loyalty forever. I will do all that I can to help my father right this wrong."

With that, he went to see his father into his prison cell, and we continued to the tavern. It had been long since Faida the inn-keeper had welcomed a jarl and her court, let alone a queen. Tables were
vacated and pushed together for us, and the cellar's finest casks were tapped. We were halfway through our drinks when a singer from the Bard's College broke into "The Age of Liberation," a new version of "The Age of Aggression," the fighting song that had once been sung in these holds loyal to the Empire. It went:

We drink to our youth
  to the days come and gone,
for the age of oppression
  is over and done.

We drove out the Thalmor
  from this land that we own,
with your voice and our steel
  we did take back our home.

All hail to Deirdre,
  you are the High Queen!
In your great honor
  we drink and we sing.

We're the children of Skyrim
  and we fight all our lives,
and when Sovngarde beckons
  every one of us dies.

But this land is ours
and we've seen it wiped clean
  of the scourge that had sullied
our hopes and our dreams.

Now for the Empire,
  no rest till we've won,
with a Dragonborn queen,
  and all Tamriel one.

To the wrongs of our past
Deirdre opened our eyes,
  with respect for all people,
we must lead better lives.

We drink to the future,
  to the days yet to come,
for the age of oppression
  is over and done.

When the bard was through someone shouted out, "To Queen Deirdre!" and everyone in the inn drained their cups. For once, I was glad to receive this praise, and drank along with them.

On the road back to Solitude later that evening, Lydia and I fell behind the others as we rode under
a starry sky.

"Is everything well, my queen?" Lydia asked.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you needn't treat me with such formality. Call me 'my love' or 'my Deirdre'."

"But my love, you will always be queen of my heart. I will call you 'my queen' whether you are high queen of Skyrim or no." I could not argue with that. "But tell me, what is making you sad? Only this afternoon you seemed so happy. You got what you have long wanted."

"No, nothing is wrong," I lied. "I was just looking at the stars."

She rode over next to me and caressed my cheek, finding it wet. "It must be difficult to see the stars through eyes filled with tears."

"Oh, Lydia," I cried, "I am a fool! I am no wiser than Huldi, a seven-year-old! I tricked myself into believing that gaining justice for my parents would somehow bring them back to life. And now it's done, and I realize that nothing will bring them back. I am truly alone in this world."

Then I realized what I had said. I reached across and put a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, my love, I didn't mean that. Not alone, never alone with you at my side, and in my heart. But motherless, fatherless. I will never again have parents to love me as only a parent can, to guide me when I am uncertain, to reassure me when I doubt myself. It's a special kind of aloneness, one from which I will never recover."

"I knew what you meant, my love," she said, placing her hand over mine. She wore no gloves and her hand was warm. "I too have lost a parent."

We were silent for a time.

"I wish I could have known them," Lydia said.

"Nothing would have made me happier," I replied. "I know they would have loved you." She smiled then, and seemed content, and I resolved to be content as well.

I looked up again at the countless thousands upon thousands of stars in the sky, each a glimpse of Aetherius beyond the plane of Oblivion. I couldn't help wondering which of those twinkling lights was my mother and which my father. I hoped they were at peace.

We rode on in silence then, the stars so thick overhead they looked like a streak of fresh-fallen snow.

The End
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