Ruminations of a Thief and Assassin

by FusRohDontMessWithMe

Summary

My flatmate and I decided we would both write Skyrim stories about our current Dragonborn characters and so this is basically the novelization of my Dragonborn's adventures in Skyrim as the unwilling heroine. She finds herself quickly entangled with the Dark Brotherhood and the Thieves Guild much to her initial reluctance, though she eventually finds a deeper connection to her work. All characters and story belong to Bethesda and everyone who contributed to making the Elder Scrolls games. I own nothing except my Dovahkiin. I hope this is as enjoyable to read as it was for me to write! I'm thinking that Saturdays or Sundays will be the days I post.
Along an old cobbled road a rickety carriage ambled slowly and painfully. The passengers—well, prisoners, really—were bound in the back of the cart, sitting silently together. They jostled about uncomfortably, each filled with a nervous energy, a sense of dread hovering over them all. The three men sat minding their own business, each staring pointedly away from one another. One young man found himself looking at the fourth prisoner across from him. She had been unconscious since she had first been hauled into their carriage.

After a while of rumbling almost aimlessly along the road, the young woman began to stir. Her eyes opened groggily and she blinked furiously against the dreary, though bright, sunlight. She sat up a bit straighter and looked around slightly, more towards the front of the carriage, towards wherever their destination may be.

“Hey, you. You're finally awake. You were trying to cross the border, right? Walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there,” the young blonde man said, his accent thick, though manageable, even to the young woman’s mostly asleep brain. She looked at him silently, wondering what the hell was actually going on.

“Damn you Stormcloaks. Skyrim was fine until you came along. Empire was nice and lazy. If they hadn't been looking for you, I could've stolen that horse and been half way to Hammerfell. You there. You and me -- we shouldn't be here. It’s these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.” another, desperate man insisted. His voice was shaking and he himself seemed to be shaken.

“We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief,” the blonde man sighed, sounding resigned to whatever fate it was that they had been assigned.

The young woman remained silent as the guard driving the cart ordered them to remain silent and she glanced at the blonde man curiously, almost cautiously. That was right. The Stormcloaks… The Imperials… They’d all just shown up. She had been resting for the night, guarding her small campsite away from the main road when the fighting started. She hadn’t known was was going on, but then she had been surrounded. Since her weapon was drawn, mostly as a precautionary measure (damn bandits could sneak up at any time), she had been threatened and taken into custody. When she made a break for it, she had been grabbed and knocked out. She tuned back into the conversation as their final destination was being discussed.

“A Nord’s last thoughts should be of home,” the blonde man across from her said to the horse thief gently. He seemed to be fully resigned to die. After all, it was what he pledged to do when he enlisted with the Stormcloaks. He would defend his homeland with his life if the need be, though it seemed as if it wasn’t optional any longer.

The horse thief began to stammer out the names of the Divines, hoping to achieve mercy by some holy intervention. The girl would have given a bitter laugh had she not been secretly praying herself.

She locked eyes with the young man across from her and he gave her a grim look before saying, “Look at him, General Tullius the Military Governor. And it looks like the Thalmor are with him. Damn elves. I bet they had something to do with this… This is Helgen. I used to be sweet on a girl from here. Wonder if Vilod is still making that mead with juniper berries mixed in. Funny… when I was a boy, Imperial walls and towers used to make me feel so safe…”

She couldn’t disagree with the man. She remembered the days when the Imperials represented
stability, happiness even. It wasn’t until the Stormcloaks rose up that she realised how dissatisfied the people of Skyrim were. Of course, many of the problems with the Imperials began simply because the Stormcloaks rose up in the first place. Everywhere she went she was confronted with questions of her allegiance to the Empire or to her fellow Nords, pressured to pick one side over the other in a choice where both halves were the wrong answer. Neither side was perfectly right, but neither was entirely wrong. Though to be fair, from where the stars currently sat, she was honestly more inclined to favor the Stormcloaks; at least they hadn’t attempted to execute her yet.

“Why are they stopping?” The horse thief asked, sounding as if he was ready to faint out of worry.

“Why do you think?” the blonde man asked, looking at the horse thief with a hard, unyielding stare. “End of the line.” The man turned and looked at Ulfric Stormcloak— the god damn leader of the Stormcloaks, and arguably the reason they were all set to be executed— as if he were awaiting orders from his fearless leader. The gagged man simply stood and turned to exit the wagon, a steely look in his eyes as he did so. The blonde man across from her gritted his teeth slightly and let out a small sigh of forbearance and looked back at the young woman saying, “Let’s go. Shouldn’t keep them waiting for us.”

“No!” the horse thief shrilly exclaimed, “Wait! We’re not rebels!”

“Face your death with some courage, thief,” the young man chastised, sounding exasperated from the man’s constant grovelling, though it did seem somewhat acceptable considering the circumstances. However, the man’s stern words did nothing to sway the thief as he begged for someone to explain how he was never with the Stormcloaks, that it was all just a big mistake.

“Step toward the block when we call your name. One at a time!” the Imperial Captain barked sternly, her dark eyes glaring at the group of prisoners in what could have easily been disgust.

“Empire loves their damn lists…” the blond man grumbled beside the young woman.

She did her best to remain calm. She hoped that if she remained silent and made herself as unnoticeable as possible, she wouldn’t be called; that she might be able to get away. Ulfric Stormcloak made his way towards the block and his soldier expressed his admiration of the man in life. He went quietly when his name— Ralof of Riverwood— was called, stepping towards the block without a glance at anyone else. The horse thief— Lokir of Rorikstead— made a run for it, shouting about his innocence. He was shot down almost immediately. He dropped to the ground with a groan, his life rapidly leaving his body.

“Anybody else feel like running?” the Imperial Captain asked, sounding as if she had just asked that question a hundred times already that day, though the venom in her tone was near on palpable.

“Wait,” the man reading the lists said, looking directly at the young woman in rags. “You there. Step forward.” She slowly made her way forward, trying not to stumble, though she was certain her knees were shaking. She looked up at him expectantly, though her expression was well guarded.

“Who are you?”

She stood silent for a moment, looking down at her feet. It had been a long while since anyone had asked her that question. She wasn’t even sure she knew a proper answer to give him. She tilted her head slightly, a lock of her auburn hair falling into her face. She flicked it away with a short huff of her breath as she raised her green eyes to look at the man. She squared her shoulders slightly, her small frame not intimidating in the slightest as she responded, “Raisa Pilkvist.” Her voice was hoarse and her throat felt as if it were tearing when she spoke.

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“You picked a bad time to come home to Skyrim, kinsman,” the man said with a sigh. “Captain,
what should we do? She’s not on the list…”

“Forget the list,” the Captain said without hesitation. “She goes to the block.”

“By your orders, Captain…” the man— Hadvar— said, sounding almost reluctant as he did so. “I’m sorry,” he said to Raisa, sounding surprisingly sincere, “At least you’ll die here, in your homeland. Follow the Captain, prisoner.”

Raisa turned and made her way to stand with the other prisoners. As she approached, the Imperial General, Tullius, was speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the disdain apparent in his voice, “You started this war, plunged Skyrim into chaos and now the Empire is going to put you down, and restore the peace.”

A loud noise sounded in the distance, causing the entirety of the village to look around in confusion. After a moment, General Tullius instructed the executioners to get on with their work, stating that the sound was nothing of their concern, which is certainly shouldn’t have been. A priestess of Arkay stepped forward to give the prisoners their last rights. Raisa glowered slightly at the priestess. What good would their last rights do them in Sovngarde if mercy wasn’t shown to the innocent in life? Another prisoner—a nameless Stormcloak soldier— expressed as much, invoking the name of Talos in his impatience.

As the man was beheaded—a solid, clean swing— Ralof sighed, “As fearless in death as he was in life.” His voice sounded somewhat choked, as if he was really beginning to understand the certainty of their situation.

“Next, the Nord in the rags!” the Captain shouted. As Raisa was called, her eyes fluttered closed briefly as she allowed herself a moment to mourn her misfortune. She briefly considered making a run for it but another loud sound—much closer this time— sounded over the mountains, and her gaze fell on the fallen horse thief. No, she would not die a coward.

“There it is again. Did you hear that?” Hadvar asked the Captain, sounding somewhat nervous.

“I said, next prisoner!” the Captain spat out, glaring at Hadvar.

The man, in turn, turned to face Raisa said, “To the block, prisoner. Nice and easy.”

Raisa stepped forward, her heart racing in her chest. Her senses felt as if they had been kicked into overdrive. As she knelt down, her head resting on the freshly used chopping block, she could practically smell the iron in the man’s blood, his lifeless eyes staring up at her from the head basket. She felt bile rising up in the back of her throat, but she swallowed it back, feeling a light breeze on her face. She heard the mountain flowers and thistle rustle in the breeze as it blew a bit harder. She opened her eyes, looking out towards the sky over the mountains, trying to make her horrible last memory at least a small bit more bearable. It was almost a comfort to know that no one would be around to mourn her loss. It made her feel less guilty about losing her life so soon.

At that moment, as the executioner prepared himself to swing, a large creature swooped into view coming over the ridge. Yelling erupted from those in charge, unanswered questions and unquestionable orders. The creature—a dragon, it appeared— landed roughly on the watchtower behind the executioner. The force of its landing caused everyone around it to stagger in the shock waves. Raisa looked up at it, fear apparent in her eyes, though she was paralyzed on the spot. The dragon let out a roar rather like a shout and she felt herself careening away from the block as if she were physically shoved. She tumbled about a bit before collapsing on the ground, feeling rather faint.
She felt the heat of the flames build as she lay on the ground, wishing that axe had swung just a few moments earlier, but at the same time, never feeling more grateful in her life, even if her savior was a dragon. Even if there was still every chance she would die in the ill but oh so perfectly timed attack.

“Hey, kinsman! Get up!” she heard loudly in her ear as a pair of rough hands pulled her to her feet and began dragging her along through the smoke and already smouldering rubble of the town. “Come on, the gods won’t give us another chance!” she now recognized the voice as Ralof’s as he shoved her towards a mostly in-tact watchtower at the center of the town. She coughed, attempting to expel the foul smoke from her lungs as she collapsed against the stairs inside of the watchtower gratefully.

“Jarl Ulfric! What is that thing? could the legends be true?” Ralof questioned the Jarl without pause, as if the man had all the answers locked away in his unfathomable mind.

The older man seemed almost solemn as he stood near the door, glancing at the carnage outside. Raisa looked over at the two men, curious despite her current terrified state of mind. They were both Nords through and through, and warriors to boot. They both were strong, though rather lean, Ralof more than Ulfric in that sense. They both had their shares of scars and their expressions were haggard. “Legends don’t burn down villages,” Ulfric mused in a low voice, his expression dire. “We need to move, now!”

“Up through the tower,” Ralof suggested. He turned and grabbed Raisa by the arm and hoisted her up, urging her up the stairs, “Let’s go! This way, friend! Move!”

Raisa hobbled her way up the stairs as best she could with her hands bound. The stairs were steep and tall and Ralof was soon ahead of her. As they neared the top landing below the upper floor, the wall in front of them exploded in a rain of fire and smouldering rock, flames bursting through the newly made hole.

“Get back!” Ralof hollered, retreating down several stairs, dragging Raisa down with him. Again she was grateful for his thoughtful actions, but she was still so dazed by what was going on. She was still stuck on the fact that she hadn’t yet died. It was almost like the rest of what was going on was simply an afterlife hallucination. This was her road to the Great Hall of the Fallen Heroes in Sovngarde. A rough road, but one she would reach the end of eventually. She hadn’t realised she had been such a despicable person to deserve a final journey as harsh and horrible as this. Not that she had been much of a hero at all to begin with.

Ralof made his way back up to the top of the tower, beckoning for Raisa to follow him quickly. He observed the village from above, a worried expression on his face. He pointed out the hole in the wall and said, “See the inn on the other side? Jump through the roof and keep going!” Raisa looked at him as if he were absolutely insane. Ralof gave her an exasperated look and insisted, “Go! We’ll follow you when we can!”

Ralof retreated down the stairs once more to go and help his brothers in arms who were injured. Raisa looked down the stairs after him, hesitating to strike out on her own. She wondered how they would all follow, while still taking their injured along. They were good men. They would never leave a brother behind.

She looked out and took a deep breathe before taking a few steps back. It wasn’t too far. She could do it… She knew she could. It was all in the knees. She ran the few steps to the opening, ducking her head as she did and leapt into the open air. She felt the air rushing past and she hit the top floor of the inn with a grunt, rolling onto her shoulder. She winced as she forced herself to her feet, flames consuming the collapsed portions of the roof behind her. She coughed once more, her heart
pounding as she stumbled through the wreckage. She dropped down to the bottom floor through a hole in the ceiling and hovered in the door of the inn, peeking out hesitantly. The dragon wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Haming, you need to get over here now! Thataboy. You're doing great! Torolf! Gods...everyone get back!” the list-reader exclaimed as the dragon touched down on the other side of the building. Raisa ducked back behind the doorframe of the inn with a small shriek. The dragon took off, and Raisa stepped out into the open, figuring she might find a way out into the wilderness if she followed someone who knew the town.

Hadvar glanced back and smirked slightly as he caught sight of Raisa lurking in the background. “Still alive, prisoner? Keep close to me if you want to stay that way. Gunnar, take care of the boy. I have to find General Tullius and join the defense.”

Raisa quickly followed the man without protest, wondering if it was possible for a heart to beat too fast. He led her down some stairs between two buildings and ordered her to stick close to the wall as the dragon landed on the building behind them. She crouched low in a sneak position, blood rushing through her ears. She winced and let out a gasp that was drowned out by a near deafening roar from the beast above. Then the dragon was off into the air once more, hell bent on wreaking more havoc. Hadvar barked over at her for her to follow him once more. “It’s you and me prisoner,” he shouted above the roars of the dragon as they ran through the burning streets of Helgen, “Stay close!”

As they neared the keep, Ralof burst away from another burning road, looking flustered, though his face was hard and determined. “Ralof! You damned traitor, out of my way!” Hadvar roared as he advanced towards the keep.

Hardly breaking stride, Ralof hammered back, “We’re escaping, Hadvar! You’re not stopping us this time!”

“Fine,” Hadvar spat back as the two men came to a stand still twenty feet away from one another. “I hope that dragon takes you all to Sovngarde.”

“You, come on!” Ralof shouted, beckoning to Raisa as he continued his trajectory towards escape. “Into the keep!”

“With me, prisoner! Let’s go!” Hadvar growled, barrelling towards the keep. “Come on! We need to get inside!”

Raisa stood for a moment, each man still on their way to their respective entrances, unsure of what to do. After a moment’s hesitation, she turned and dashed towards where Ralof was waiting, holding open the keep door. Once inside, Ralof slammed the door shut and made his way into the central room cautiously, a solemn look on his face when he approached the fallen soldier on the ground.

“We'll meet again in Sovngarde, brother…” Ralof sighed as he bent down and checked the body. He straightened after a moment of silence and turned to face Raisa, who was looking around the keep cautiously, lingering on the outskirts of the room. She flinched slightly as the keep rumbled. Sounded like that dragon wasn’t anywhere near done with his rampage. Ralof began again, “Looks like we're the only ones who made it. That thing was a dragon. No doubt. Just like the children’s stories and the legends. The harbingers of the End Times.”

He cleared his throat slightly and nodded almost to himself, “We better get moving. Come here, let me see if I can get those bindings off. There you go. May as well take Gunjar's gear…he won't be
needing it anymore. Alright, get that armor on and give that axe a few swings. I'm going to see if I can find some way out of here. This one's locked. Let's see about that gate. Damn. No way to open this from our side…"

He kept his back turned while she pulled on the Stormcloak cuirass over her prisoner’s rags and hefted the axe in her hand a few times, judging the weight with a slight frown on her face. She sighed slightly; it would have to do for the time being. Not like she was exactly in a position to complain.

“Come on, soldier! Keep moving!” a voice echoed through the stone halls. Raisa looked sharply over at Ralof who looked back at her with a slightly panicked expression. He dashed over to her side of the room and backed himself up against the wall, keeping quiet as he told her to take cover as well. The Imperial Captain who had meant to oversee their executions stalked through the archway once her soldier unlocked the gate. Ralof glanced over at Raisa and gave her a small, reassuring smile before he leapt out and swung his axe at the foot soldier with a yell of “Imperial dogs!”

The Imperial guard and the soldier were ready almost at once, both moving to flank Ralof. Raisa took a quick breath and leapt out to intercept a swing by the Captain with her axe, making sure to shove the woman while she was recovering from the unexpected deflection. Raisa was quick, swinging her axe again, but ever the soldier, the Imperial Captain leapt back with a snarl. She went at Raisa now, swinging her sword almost wildly. Raisa side stepped and placed a well timed kick to the side of the Captain’s knees, kicking it sideways and inward. There was a loud crack and the Captain staggered down onto one knee as Raisa’s axe swung once more, this time finding it’s mark.

As Raisa tugged the axe from the woman’s neck, Ralof spoke again, bending down to search the bodies, “Maybe one of these Imperials had the key. Let’s see here... Here we are, found a key. Let’s see if it opens that door…” He straightened and held up a key dangling from a thin leather strip with a slight smirk, swinging it back and forth slightly. But Raisa wasn’t paying him much attention. She was staring at the now lifeless bodies of the Imperial Captain and nameless soldier in an almost trancelike state. She swallowed hard and tightened her grip on her axe as Ralof started to speak once more, his voice a tad more gentle this time, “Come on, let's get out of here before the dragon brings the whole tower down on our heads.” After a moment she dropped the axe and grabbed the Captain’s sword off the ground where it had fallen and tested it in her hand a moment.

She nodded, her brow furrowed as she jogged off after him through the gate opposite their little battle. They tore down the stairs when the foundation of the building rumbled dangerously. The two stopped and stumbled backwards as a few imperial soldiers began to run at them. Luckily (sort of) the ceiling suddenly caved in and the two backed up, tripping over their own feet as large boulders rained down from above.

“Damn, that dragon doesn’t give up easy,” Ralof mused slightly, and Raisa almost let out a laugh at that. He certainly wasn’t wrong about that.

“Grab everything important and let’s move! The dragon is burning everything to the ground,” a harsh voice snapped from the next room over.

“Just need to gather some more potions!” another, slightly more frantic voice responded quickly. There was a sound of scuffing and the sheathing of weapons as Ralof nodded towards the room silently. Raisa grimaced, knowing what would come next. She readied her new sword and dashed into the room after Ralof, attempting to prepare herself mentally this time for the sight to come. Still two on one, Raisa stabbed at the opponent with her sword, accidentally overextending her reach. She whipped herself back as the opposing imperial almost stabbed her in the neck. Luckily
Ralof was there with a well timed swing of his axe, having just dispatched his opponent moments earlier.

“A storeroom,” he said after he caught his breath, not even waiting for her words of thanks. “See if you can find anything useful. We might need it later.”

Raisa snooped around for a bit, as did Ralof. She managed to scrounge up a few of what seemed to be stamina potions. She handed one to Ralof and uncapped hers, already feeling far too drained. She tipped the contents of the small bottle into her mouth and almost gagged when the vile green liquid touched her tongue. Somehow both sour and bitter at once, she felt like the strange liquid seared the back of her throat raw. But it did help her stand a bit taller, her limbs loose and her fatigue leaving her almost instantly. Ralof followed suit, discarding his bottle with a grunt and a nod before saying a simple, “Let’s get moving,” before heading down year another set of stairs where a few Stormcloaks were quickly dispatching a set of Imperial torturers.

“Is Jarl Ulfric with you?” Ralof asked, a serious frown on his face as he sheathed his weapon once more.

One of the remaining soldiers shook her head bitterly, “No; I haven’t seen him since the dragon showed up.”

Ralof nodded grimly and looked around the room, a look of disgust apparent on his face. Raisa wandered around the room quickly, grabbing a leather rucksack and checking the contents. A few lock picks… a bit of gold… more potions… and a book about some old Norse legend… and a dagger. At least she had a few septims to her name now. Not that it would do much good buried underground.

“Wait a second,” Ralof said as the Stormcloaks made to leave the room. “Looks like there’s something in this cage.” He tried the door to no avail, though Raisa would never have expected it to be unlocked in the first place. “It’s locked,” he said with a disgruntled sigh. “See if you can get it open with some picks. We might need that gold once we get out. Grab anything useful and let's go.”

While the other Stormcloaks chose to search the room, Raisa padded over to the hides black iron cage and pulled out one of her lockpicks. She hadn’t done this sort of thing in a while, but she was certain she still knew her way around a silly little lock. The triggers clicked into place and she pulled the door outwards toward herself, standing up straight as she did. She stepped into the cage and snatched up the gold and the small vial of blue potion next to it. After a moment, she picked up the strange book next to it and shoved it all into her bag, tightening the flap closed before stepping out of the cage, being sure to avoid the corpse of the mage that resided there. She turned and her eyes met with Ralof’s once more. She nodded and he turned to lead the way down.

After dispatching yet another room full of soldiers, Ralof nodded towards a rough tunnel through the mountain side over his shoulder, “Let’s go on ahead. See if the way’s clear.” Raisa nodded and began to follow him. “Let’s see where this goes.”

They walked along, crossing a small bridge open to the sky. They skirted around along the walls and ducked through the archway on the other side, and not a moment too soon, as a large boulder smashed down behind them.

“No going back that way now…” Ralof said quietly once the ground had stopped shaking. Raisa knew he must be thinking about his fellow Stormcloaks back in the underkeep. “We’d better push on,” he continued after clearing his throat, “The rest of them will have to find another way out.”
They pair walked along a stream in silence, stepping carefully along the algae covered rocks of the shore. Raisa paused near a lantern, grabbing a small sack of gold that was stuffed into an obvious crack in the rockface.

“Hmm,” she heard Ralof grumble from up ahead, “That doesn’t go anywhere. I guess we’d better try this way…”

Of course, ‘this way’ led straight into the middle of a den of Frostbite spiders. Raisa lingered behind slightly, feeling bad for Ralof at first, but less so when the beasts were dead in a timely fashion. He glanced at her with a slight smirk, “I hate those damn things. Too many eyes, you know?”

Raisa gave him a wry smile as they continued on. Suddenly, Ralof grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down behind a large boulder. “Hold up…” he whispered, “There’s a bear just ahead. See her?”

Raisa glanced over the boulder cautiously, a small frown on her face. She wasn’t too fond of bears. They always seemed to pop up when they were needed the least. Not that they were ever really needed. No, she’d rather they just not pop up at all.

“I’d rather no tangle with her right now.” Ralof whispered in her ear carefully, his blue eyes stuck on the sleeping figure. “Let's try to sneak by,” he suggested lightly. “Just take it nice and slow, and watch where you step.” Raisa didn’t respond, still watching the bear and musing over how horribly inconvenient its timing was. Then again, after a dragon, a bear wasn’t too big an issue. Unless it killed her. What would that say about her? Escaped a dragon only to be mauled by a bear. Not the best way to go… After a moment Ralof continued, “Or… if you're feeling lucky… you could take this bow… Might take her by surprise. Go ahead. I'll follow your lead and watch your back.”

He pressed the bow into her hand and stuck a quiver of arrows into her rucksack quietly as possible. Raisa glanced at him slightly while he looked back at her expectantly. Why he trusted her so much, she figured she would never know. To be fair, it was probably because at this point, he didn’t have much of another choice. They were all each other had until they could reach civilization. If they could reach civilization. If the dragon didn’t get there first…

She crept forward slowly, stretching an arrow along the bow and looking down its shaft towards the bear, taking her time to aim it properly. She could always sneak by, yes. But she would rather be certain that nothing unsavoury would pop up behind them when they were farther along the cave system. She let out a slow breath and took another in, holding it briefly as she steadied her arms. She let out the breath quietly as she let the arrow fly. It struck the bear, jerking it out of its slumber. It lurched unstably to its feet. Ralof pulled out his sword, ready to defend them and probably cursing her for attempting to attack the beast instead of avoiding the fight altogether. The bear sniffed and limped towards where they were hiding. Raisa reached in the quiver for another arrow, drawing back the string and letting the projectile fly quicker this time. By some miracle, or perhaps even some hidden talent, the arrow struck the bear in its right eye, buried deep in the socket. The bear stumbled a bit before falling to the ground with a crunch, twitching as its life force slowly drained away.

Raisa’s chest felt tight, but it was nowhere near as bad as when she first saw how she had butchered the Imperial Captain. She sighed and follow Ralof forward past the dying bear, still creeping along the caves low and slow. Up ahead, a natural, bright light began to grow and her hopes began to soar. They had done it…

“That looks like the way out!” Ralof exclaimed, clapping a hand joyously on Raisa’s back. “I knew we’d make it!”
Raisa nodded slightly, taking a deep breath of the fresh air, a sense of relief and a creeping feeling of disbelief seeping into her chest to replace the nauseated feeling she had from before. A roar tore through the air as the dragon swooped over the mountain, heading off to ravage some other village.

“Wait!” Ralof exclaimed, dragging Raisa behind a large rock and creeping over it as the dragon flew away. “There he goes. Looks like he's gone for good this time. No way to know if anyone else made it out alive… But this place is going to be swarming with Imperials soon enough. We'd better clear out of here.” he continued, “It's— it's probably best if we split up… Good luck. I wouldn't have made it without your help today.”

Raisa looked at him skeptically and let out a noise of something close to disdain for the very thought. She wasn't about to strike off on her own just yet. She didn't even know what the hell this part of Skyrim was. She'd never made it this far south before.

After a moment, Ralof turned back to look at her with a small smile, “My sister Gerdur runs the mill in Riverwood, just up the road. I'm sure she'd help you out.”

Raisa jogged a bit until she caught up with him, walking beside him, feeling a bit tired once more. After a while of walking in silence Ralof glanced over at her and said lightly, “You know, you should go to Windhelm and join the fight for free Skyrim. You've seen the true face of the Empire here today. And, if anyone will know what the coming of the dragon means, it's Ulfric.”
“See that ruin up there? Bleak Falls Barrow. I never understood how my sister could stand living in the shadow of that place. I guess you get used to it….”

They had been walking along for a long time. Raisa was sure it had been more than an hour, and it didn’t help that the paths down the mountain twisted every which way, sometimes causing them to double back the way they’d come for a short while. Ralof tried to keep their spirits up as best he could. It wasn’t easy, and she was certain it was just to fill the silence. It wasn’t as if he was really expecting a response from her at all. Though she did suppose she should at least say something to him. He was being terribly kind, offering her shelter until she could decide where to go or what to do with her time, even if it was only for a short while.

“Do you really think I should join up with Ulfric Stormcloak?” she asked hesitantly. Her throat was still sore, but it was better than it had been before. She supposed the potion she drank had done enough to revitalize her in that regard as well.

“Damn right,” Ralof nodded vigorously. “We’ll show those Imperial dogs that Skyrim belongs to the Nords. Only true sons and daughters of Skyrim will join the fight.”

“I’ll have to think about it…” she said quietly, looking up and over at the mountains the dragon had disappeared behind. There hadn’t been a peep from that direction since it had disappeared, and it left her wondering where the hell it had come from in the first place. Dragons hadn’t been seen in well over a century. At least, not in Skyrim, as far as she knew. And word of this creature would surely travel far quickly.

“Yeah, sure,” Ralof nodded, slightly less enthusiastically, “I understand. No need to decide now. But… I know that after you think about it… what you saw here today… you’ll realise that Skyrim deserves to be free.” The tone of conviction in Ralof’s voice was almost enough to sway her. He truly believed what he said, and she admired him for that, and for his loyalty to Ulfric, despite the man’s faults.

“How did you end up as Imperial prisoners?” she asked after a few more moments of silence. “I understand that generally it’s because you were a Stormcloak and you ran into some Imperials, but, it might be one hell of a story. And since your skirmish is the reason I got hauled away in the first place, I think it might be nice to know exactly how this all happened.”

Ralof chuckled slightly and replied, “I was assigned to Ulfric’s guard. We were on our way to Darkwater Crossing, in the south of Eastmarch. The Imperials were waiting for us. As pretty an ambush as I ever saw.” Here he grimaced and let out a sharp sigh. “We were outnumbered five to one, at the very least. Ulfric ordered us to stop fighting. Didn’t want us all to die for nothing, I suppose… I thought they were taking us south to Cyrodiil. Parade us in front of the Emperor… But then we stopped in Helgen, and… well, you know the rest…” he finished with a sigh.

Ralof slowed his pace and stepped off the path briefly, beckoning Raisa to follow. She did so cautiously and saw three stones with ornate carvings on them.

“These are the Guardian Stones, three of the thirteen ancient standing stones that dot Skyrim’s landscape. Go ahead, see for yourself,” Ralof grinned.

Raisa stepped forward cautiously, observing each. Thief… tempting… Mage… intriguing… Warrior… worrying… She didn’t think she could stomach much more fighting than she already
had. At least, not when the enemies you fought were so similar to yourself. That was part of the reason she had avoided choosing a side in that damn war. Thief… She had always had an aptitude for sneaking around places, though she doubted it would do much for her conscience in the end. Mage… It seemed to be the best option of the three, despite prejudice against the dangerous practice of magic. After a moment more of thought she gently reached out and touched the mage stone, activating its blessing on her soul.

“Mage, eh? Well, to each his own,” Ralof commented, sounding a bit surprised. “It’s not for me to judge.”

“What did you choose?” Raisa asked him as they set off along the path once more.

“Warrior stone. The only choice I could ever easily make,” Ralof said. “So far it’s guided me well. It’s said that those stars will lead you to honor and glory.”

Raisa could hardly say she was surprised. She had expected nothing less from her companion. He was, after all, a good enough soldier to be assigned to the personal guard of Ulfric Stormcloak. Outlaw he may be in the mind of the Imperials, he was still Jarl, though his claims to the throne of High King were questionable.

“Remember, this isn't Stormcloak territory. If we're ahead of the news from Helgen, we should be fine as long as we don't do anything stupid. If we run into any Imperials, just let me do the talking, alright?” Ralof said as they continued along the uneven road. Raisa gave a short nod to acknowledge that she had in fact heard him. He looked at her briefly, a small smile on his face as he said, “I’m glad you decided to come with me.”

Raisa gave him a small smile back, choosing not to voice a response. The man looked forward again and cleared his throat, seeming slightly embarrassed by his words, “We're almost to Riverwood.”

Raisa looked up ahead towards where he had pointed. She’d never been to Riverwood. Well, never really heard of it, either. But that was hardly an uncommon thing. Most Nords didn’t get around outside of their holds unless they were traders or run out of the stronghold by force. Neither of which were common. Each individual hold could fend for itself, they each had their own Jarl, and there wasn’t much need to go to any others when you had everything you needed right at home.

Riverwood was a sleepy little town. A sawmill sat along the river bank and a rather shabby stone wall surrounded three sides of the village. There were maybe seven or eight buildings at the very most. Raisa figured that it probably housed no more than five or six families total. A few children played in the road as Ralof led Raisa across a small plank bridge to the mill, which Raisa assumed belonged to his sister, as he mentioned earlier. “Looks like nobody here knows what happened yet. Come on. Gerdur’s probably working in the mill now,” Ralof said. He quickened his pace slightly as he spotted someone walking around.

“Gerdur!” he called, jogging over to the woman.

The woman turned and Raisa saw that she had the same eyes as her brother, her blond hair pulled back away from her face, though worry lines creased her forehead. Something in her brightened and a smile broke across her face, “Brother! Mara's mercy, it's good to see you!”

“Gerdur…” Ralof began, but the woman barrelled on again.

“But is it safe for you to be here? We heard that Ulfric had been captured…”
“Gerdur, I’m fine!” Ralof exclaimed, a chuckle escaping his lips, as the woman hugged him. “At least, now I am.”

“Are you hurt? What’s happened?” Gerdur asked, pushing her brother away and holding onto his shoulders, concern written across her features. Here she caught sight of Raisa lingering a little bit away from the happy reunion. “And who’s this? One of your comrades?”

Ralof glanced back at Raisa, a small smile growing on his face, “Not a comrade yet, but a friend. I owe her my life, in fact.” He looked back at his sister quickly, “Is there somewhere we can talk? There’s no telling when the news from Helgen will reach the Imperials…”

“Helgen? Has something happened…?” Gerdur asked, a look of confusion crossing her features before she shook her head lightly, “You’re right. Follow me. Hod! Come here a minute. I need your help with something.”

Gerdur had a brief conversation with her husband while Ralof lead Raisa over to a secluded area of the mill for the group to talk. He turned to say something to her but was cut off by a small child.

“Uncle Ralof! Can I see your axe? How many Imperials have you killed? Do you really know Ulfric Stormcloak?” the boy rattled off, practically bouncing around in excitement.

“Hush, Frodnar,” Gerdur chastised as she made her way over. “This is no time for your games. Go and watch the road. Come find us if you see any Imperial soldiers coming.”

“Aw, mama,” Frodnar whined, a pout growing on his face. “I wanna stay and talk with Uncle Ralof.”

Ralof chuckled and clapped the boy on the shoulder, bending down so he could be at eye level with the kid, “Look at you, almost a grown man! Won't be very long before you'll be joining the fight yourself.”

The boy positively lit up at the praise from his uncle, “That's right! Don't worry, Uncle Ralof, I won't let those soldiers sneak up on you!” With that the child ran off, his dog following after quickly.

Hod, a tall man, crossed his arms and looked firmly at Ralof with a nod, “Now, Ralof, what’s going on? You two look pretty well done in…”

Ralof sighed and sat down on a large tree stump, “I can’t remember when I last slept…”

Raisa blocked out the rest of the conversation, taking the time to look around. She often forgot how beautiful a place Skyrim really was. The river flowed next to them, rumbling and rushing softly along. The wind was blowing slightly and she rubbed the back of her neck with a quiet sigh as her hair flitted around her forehead gently.

“Nonsense. You and your friend are welcome to stay here as long as you need to. Let me worry about the Imperials. Any friend of Ralof’s is a friend of mine. Here’s a key to the house. Stay as long as you like. If there's anything else you need, just let me know,” Gerdur said loudly, calling Raisa back into the conversation, pressing a key into her hand firmly.

After a moment the woman sat down across from Raisa, a worried look on her face, “There’s something you can do for me. For all of us here. The Jarl needs to know if there's a dragon on the loose. Riverwood is defenseless… We need to get word to Jarl Balgruuf in Whiterun to send whatever soldiers he can. If you'll do that for me, I'll be in your debt.”
Raisa nodded silently before clearing her throat slightly and saying, “It’s the least I can do in return for your hospitality.”

“Thank you, sister,” Ralof said, reaching forward and placing his hand on top of his sister’s. “I knew I could count on you.”

“I ought to get back to work before I’m missed, but...did anyone else escape? Did Ulfric…” Gerdur asked her brother quietly.

“Don’t worry,” Ralof said placatingly. “I’m sure he made it out. It would take more than a dragon to stop Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Raisa made a conscious effort to not pull a face at the statement, considering it didn’t seem like Ulfric did much more than talk in riddles.

“I’ll let them into the house, and, you know, show them where everything is,” Hod said with a nod.

Gerdur smacked him, a knowing smile growing on her face as she looked at her husband, “Hmph, help them drink up our mean, you mean... Good luck, brother. I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t worry about me. I know how to lay low,” Ralof called after his sister as she and her husband walked off hand in hand. He turned and smiled at Raisa, putting a hand on her shoulder in companionship before saying, “I told you my sister would help us out.”

“She’s lovely,” Raisa said with a small smile. “And her hospitality is admirable...”

Ralof looked at her silently for a moment, before looking down at his feet with a heavy sigh. “But you aren’t going to stay.” Raisa shook her head after a moment, realising it would be futile to lie to the man. She opened her mouth to respond but he cut her off, “You don’t need to explain. She asked for you to do her a favour and I can’t ask you to stay, considering what we just went through. Even if I might like to.”

Raisa smiled at the man silently. “I don’t think it would matter much if I rested up a few hours before heading off. If I sleep for a few hours now, I should still make it there before it gets too late.”

Ralof nodded, a small smile on his face. “Good. I’m sure Frodnar would love to hear about Helgen from someone other than his brave old uncle.”

“Brave?” Raisa asked as they made their way towards the house. “Old, I could believe. Uncle, as well. But you, brave?”

“Now see here,” Ralof laughed, waving a chastising finger at her in amusement, “I’m not that old just yet. And you saw the way I vanquished those Imperials back there. I’m as brave as they come.”

“Not how it seemed against that dragon back there,” she pointed out, one eyebrow quirked slightly.

“Oh of course you would say that,” Ralof said, rolling his eyes as they entered the small home. “Though to be fair you weren’t faring any better than I was. You could hardly keep on your feet!”

“You weren’t the one whose head was on the chopping block when that thing swooped down,” Raisa pointed out. “Besides, Hadvar did all the hard work, getting me to the keep.”

“And yet for some reason you didn’t go with the milk drinker from there,” Ralof countered, sitting
himself down at a table next to Hod and grabbing a bottle of mead from the shelves behind him. He took one and handed it across to where Raisa had taken a seat.

For a moment she was silent as she took a pull from the bottle thoughtfully. “Did you know him?”

“Know who?” Ralof asked, pulling apart a piece of bread to eat.

“The list-reader,” Raisa said. “He knew your name.”

“He was the list-reader. Of course he knew my name,” Ralof said.

“He heard my name too, but he only called me prisoner,” Raisa said. “But he called you by name. Recognised you, even.”

Ralof was silent for a moment before sighing, “I take it lying to you won’t convince you. I knew him, once. We grew up together. Here. His family owns the forge near Gerdur’s mill. We were thick as thieves. Until we came of age, of course. His family had always been loyal to the Legion. Ours has always been one for the freedom of Skyrim, and Ulfric is the way to that freedom. I guess I never really considered anything else. And I suppose neither did Hadvar.”

Raisa took another drink of her mead and remained silent. She ate the food offered to her and finished her mead almost in silence, taking the time to thank Hod for all he offered. As Frodnar was still watching the road, they offered her a rest in his bed before her journey to Whiterun. She slept fitfully, feeling as if the dragon would appear in her dreams as well.

As the sun was setting, she hoisted her pack onto her back once more and thanked Hod and Gerdur for their hospitality once more, even ruffling Frodnar (who had taken quite a shine to his uncle’s new friend) on the head affectionately before leaving the friendly home. Ralof escorted her to the bridge leaving the city, a solemn silence hanging over them.

“What I told Gerdur,” he said, “about owing you my life, it’s true. I don’t think I would have made it out alive without your help and friendship.” He looked at her with a somewhat hard expression before letting a hopeful, but wry, smile slip past, “I hope to see you in Windhelm. Good luck.”

Raisa smiled in kind, clasping his right forearm in hers, giving a firm nod, “Good luck, Ralof. Perhaps we will meet again.”

Ralof nodded, “Whiterun isn’t too far from here. Just follow the road until you reach the meadery. You should be able to see the city from there. May the gods watch over your battles, friend.”

And with that, Raisa turned and followed the path over the river, leaving behind a sense of companionship and safety as she struck out into the wilds of Skyrim. Luckily there was enough light leaking across the mountaintops that she was able to make good time through the wooded paths along the river.

Eventually rock and tree and the rushing of water gave way to rolling hills and Raisa continued along the stone road, her eyes on the horizon where a city rose up out of the hills, glowing slightly orange in the twilight as the torches around it were lit. The walls were high and the buildings were stacked, leading up to the highest part of the city, the castle hold of Whiterun. Raisa quickened her pace as she past the meadery, just where Ralof said she would. She continued along the road, hoping that she wouldn’t be given much trouble at the gates.

“To me, Shield-Brothers!” A yell sounded through the darkness, causing Raisa to slow her pace. She gripped her sword a bit more firmly as she came to a stop nearby the entrance to a farm, the crumbling walls giving way to rows of vegetables and a giant.
Of course, it was now a dead giant, but it was a giant nonetheless. A tall, rough looking woman in fur and leather armor leads a small group of fighters away from where the giant lay dead. Her gray eyes glared at Raisa as her companions passed by. She, however, stopped in front of Raia, looking her up and down critically. “Well, that's taken care of. No thanks to you,” she said almost dismissively.

Raisa frowned at the woman disapprovingly, “You didn’t look like you needed any help. Besides, it was dead by the time I even knew there was a fight.”

“Certainly we did not,” the woman agreed tersely. “But a true warrior would have relished the opportunity to take on a giant. That’s why I’m here with my Shield-Brothers.”

“What’s a Shield-Brother?” Raisa asked, her frown growing.

“An outsider, eh? Never heard of the Companions? An order of warriors. We are brothers and sisters in honor. And we show up to solve problems,” the woman said, “…If the coin is good enough.”

“Sounds like a waste of time to me,” Raisa said. “You’re hardly any better than the common mercenary if the money’s your main issue.”

“Well nobody asked you. If you think you're better than we are, go talk to Kodlak Whitemane. See what a warrior of true mettle is like,” the woman snapped, crossing her arms standoffishly.

Raisa glared at the woman and turned to leave calling over her shoulder, “Maybe I will. And even if I don’t, it would do you some good to learn to keep your ego in check. You aren’t giving your people a good name.”

She continued on her way, hearing a few chuckles from the large man who had been with the cross woman as she left. Slightly flustered but mostly irritated by the previous encounter, she found herself soon passing the stables and at the gates of Whiterun. As she approached, she was halted by a guard.

“Halt! City's closed with dragons about. Official business only,” the guard said, drawing his sword on her.

“Riverwood calls for the Jarl’s aid,” Raisa said quickly, “I have news from Helgen about the dragon attack.”

“Riverwood’s in danger, too? You better go on in, but we’ll be keeping an eye on you. You’ll find the Jarl at Dragonsreach, atop the hill.” And with that, the guard stepped back into position and Raisa was left to open the large and heavy gate on her own.

She trekked her way up the hill and up several flights of stairs to Dragonsreach, certain that someone would stop her, but instead she wasn’t apprehended at all. No one paid her any attention as she entered Dragonsreach, feeling entirely out of place.

A balding, nervous sort of man with a pinched face and upturned nose was discussing something in earnest with the Jarl who was spread widely across his throne, a bored expression on his time-worn features.

A dark elf, her black eyes shining, approached Raisa with her weapon drawn, a permanent sneer on her face, “What’s the meaning of this interruption? Jarl Balgruuf is not receiving any visitors.”

“I have news from Helgen.” Raisa said, holding her hands up in a surrender motion. “Gerdur from
Riverwood sent me to ask the Jarl for his aid.”

The dark elf stood and sheathed her weapon, “As Housecarl, my job is to deal with all threats that could endanger the Jarl or his people. So you have my attention. Now explain yourself.”

Raisa looked at the woman almost skeptically, “A dragon has destroyed Helgen. Last I saw it was headed this way. Riverwood calls for the Jarl’s aid…”

“You know about Helgen? The Jarl will want to speak with you personally. Approach,” she said, stepping aside and moving back to her original position at the Jarl’s left hand side.

“So you were at Helgen? You saw this dragon with your own eyes?” the Jarl asked, his brown eyes watching Raisa critically as she stood before his throne.

“Yes,” she said, almost bitterly, “I had a great view while the Imperials were trying to cut off my head.”

The Jarl raised an eyebrow skeptically at this statement. The snide little man to his right let out a noise of disapproval and the dark elf scoffed, shifting slightly as if she was considering reaching for her weapons again. “Really?” the Jarl asked. “You’re certainly... forthright about your criminal past. But it’s none of my concern who the Imperials want to execute. Especially now. What I want to know is what exactly happened at Helgen.”

“A dragon destroyed Helgen,” Raisa said. “I don’t know how many people survived. Last I saw the dragon, it looked like it was heading this way. Gerdur is afraid the Riverwood is next.”

“Gerdur? Owns the lumber mill, if I’m not mistaken… Pillar of the community. Not prone to flights of fancy…” the Jarl nodded slightly. “By Ysmir, Irileth was right… What do you say now, Proventus? Shall we continue to trust in the strength of our walls? Against a dragon?”

“My lord, we should send troops to Riverwood at once. It's in the most immediate danger. If that dragon is lurking in the mountains…” Irileth started.

The snide little man’s face was pinched in irritation as he cut the elf off, “The Jarl of Falkreath will view that as a provocation! He'll assume we're preparing to join Ulfric's side and attack him! We should not—"

“Enough!” the Jarl snapped firmly, “I’ll not stand idly by while a dragon burns my hold and slaughters my people! Irileth, send a detachment to Riverwood at once…”

Both Irilieth and Prevents excused themselves and returned to their duties, leaving Raisa where she stood, wholly unsure of what she was supposed to do then.

“Well done. You sought me out, on your own initiative. You've done Whiterun a service, and I won't forget it. Here, take this as a small token of my esteem. There is another thing you could do for me. Suitable for someone of your particular talents, perhaps. Come, let’s go find Farengar, my court wizard. He’s been looking into a matter related to these dragons and… rumors of dragons,” The Jarl said, standing before Raisa with a grateful look on his face.
Bleak Falls Barrow

Chapter Summary

Happy Birthday flatmate Clara here is a chapter just for you!! Happy 21st!!!! It is short but soz, you know I wrote it like a month ago so eh =P

Raisa trailed after the Jarl, wondering what exactly in her life had led her to this situation. Never would she had thought that she would wind up doing personal favours for a Jarl. She remained silent as the Jarl spoke briefly to her about the man he was taking her to meet, but she didn’t listen much. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to accept his assignment in the first place, but at the same time, she was unsure that this was a task she was really in a position to refuse.

“Farengar, I think I found someone who can help you with your dragon project. Go ahead and fill her in with all the details,” the Jarl said, coming to a stop in a room off to the side of the main hall. There was a large map off to one side of all of Skyrim. There was an alchemy lab and an enchanting table up against the wall across from them. A young man, clad in black mage’s robes turned from the enchanting table, an irritable expression on his face.

He looked critically at Raisa, as if trying to get a read on her. “So the Jarl thinks you can be of use to me? Oh yes, he must be referring to my research into the dragons. Yes, I could use someone to fetch something for me. Well, when I say fetch, I really mean delve into a dangerous ruin in search of an ancient stone tablet that may or may not actually be there,” he said, sounding somewhat bored.

“What does this have to do with dragons?” she asked almost hesitantly. He didn’t seem quite like the type she would want to really be around.

“Ah, no mere brute mercenary, but a thinker— perhaps even a scholar? You see, when the stories of dragons began to circulate, many dismissed them as mere fantasies, rumors. Impossibilities. One sure mark of a fool is to dismiss anything that falls outside his experience as being impossible. But I began to search for information about dragons— where had they gone all those years ago? And where were they coming from?” the man began to rant and ramble on.

“That tells me nothing,” Raisa said with a sigh. “Where am I going and what am I fetching?”

“Oh,” Farengar said, standing up a bit taller. “Straight to the point eh? No need for tedious hows and whys. I like that. Leave those details to your betters, am I right?”

Raisa glared at the man, her eyes narrowing. She was greatly interested in what the purpose of it all was. He just hadn’t told her anything useful. Regardless, she remained silent, figuring it would do her no favours to upset the court wizard of Whiterun, considering her own practice of magic was minimal at best and she was certain Irileth would have her head if she so much as looked down at her sword.

“I, ah, learned of a certain stone tablet said to be housed in Bleak Falls Barrow— a “Dragonstone,” said to contain a map of dragon burial sites. Go to Bleak Falls Barrow, find this tablet— no doubt in the main chamber— and bring it to me. Simplicity itself.”
“Well… what can you tell me about Bleak Falls Barrow?” Raisa asked him curiously, hoping for something a bit less wordy than his speech about nothing from the first time she asked a question.

“An old tomb, built by the ancient Nords, perhaps dating back to the Dragon War itself. Ah. Maybe you just want to know how to get there. It's near Riverwood, a miserable little village a few miles south of here. I'm sure some of the locals can point you in the right direction once you get there,” Farengar said dismissively.

“And how do you know this stone tablet is in Bleak Falls Barrow?”

“Well,” the man said brusquely, “Must preserve some professional secrets, mustn’t we? I have my sources… reliable sources. Off to Bleak Falls Barrow with you. The Jarl is not a patient man. Neither am I, come to think of it.”

And this was how Raisa found herself hiking up a mountain in the freezing cold, snow swirling past her in an almost endless stream. She had never really been bothered by the cold. She supposed it was due to her Norse blood. Skyrim was always cold, but she and her brethren had always endured. Even their crops were generally unaffected by the near constant frost that the land endured.

She’d switched her sword for the bow Ralof had given her. She liked it; it was a good fit for her. She had already taken care of five bandits on the way up to Bleak Falls Barrow and she now stood before the giant iron doors, a nervous flutter settling in the pit of her stomach. She’d stopped in Riverwood on her way up, hoping to maybe thank Ralof once again for his help, and to see if he would perhaps accompany her up to the Barrow. She’d found that she didn’t like travelling alone, particularly when she seemed to be in a situation where her life was at stake.

With a sinking feeling she opened the crypt, her heart pounding. She sunk into a low position, creeping along, an arrow drawn back in her bow. She kept to the shadows, hiding herself as best she could in the rubble. Up ahead were two bandits, one of them favouring a great sword, the other a hunting bow. She steadied her arrow, training it on the woman with the bow, figuring she would cause more troubles if she spotted Raisa’s hiding place.

“The dark elf wants to go on ahead, let him. Better than us risking our necks,” the man was saying as he kicked another log onto their fire.

“What if Arvel doesn’t come back? I want my share from that claw!” the woman snapped, wagging a dagger at the man in irritation.

“Just shut it and keep an eye out for trouble,” the man growled back at her.

With a silent breath, Raisa let the projectile fly, silencing the man with an arrow to the neck. She drew again quickly,ducking behind a fallen column as the woman came running to search for the intruder rather than check on her comrade. Figures that would be the case; they were bandits, after all. The woman ran past where Raisa was, muttering threats under her breath, though she sounded fairly shaken. Raise waited until the woman’s back was turned before she let her arrow go, sinking it straight in the woman’s back.

When the bandit didn’t get up, Raisa crept forward and took the extra arrows from her quiver, finding a few extra septims buried at the bottom of it. She made her way over to their camp site. She checked the man’s items as well, taking what little gold he had there in addition to a few more lock picks. She quickly picked the chest and took its contents, beginning to think that perhaps she could make a decent fortune that way. She always wanted to make a name for herself. Perhaps if she survived, and if working for the Jarl of Whiterun didn’t work out she could become a renowned thief. Always a good idea to keep her options open.
She continued through the tomb and was disturbed to hear a continual string of moans and pleas from deeper down. She crept along, keeping her bow at the ready, eventually coming upon a doorway covered almost entirely in spiderwebs. She took the dagger from her boot (another parting gift from Ralof’s family, this time from his nephew Frodnar) and did her best to cut it open.

“Is… is someone coming? Is that you Harknir? Bjorn? Soling?” the voice asked, unmasked terror apparent in his voice. “No… Not again! Ah! Kill it! Kill it! Get me out of here!”

As Raisa peered around the corner of the archway, a giant frostbite spider dropped from the ceiling and spun around, seeking its next piece of prey. Her eyes wide, she finally understood Ralof’s statement from before: there really were too many eyes. And every single one of them, by some miracle, passed over her as it turned back to the man—who Raisa assumed was Avrel, the dark elf the bandits were speaking of before—to finish its kill.

She stepped out as quietly as she could and released a few arrows at the spider. They made contact, successfully injuring the beast, but doing little else other than to infuriate it. It spun around as she released another short volley and began charging her. She let out a small scream and discarded Ralof’s bow, drawing her sword instead. She dodged out of the way and it streamed past her, crashing into the webs behind her. She slashed with the sword almost desperately; definitely not her forte. With a grunt, before it could ready itself for another attack, Raisa plunged her sword into its abdomen. It let out a shriek and spun around faster than she could have predicted, knocking her to the floor. It would have crushed her had she not shoved her sword into its head beneath the pincers and crawled her way out from underneath as it thrashed and twitched, its life leaving its body.

Now covered in spider’s blood, her arms stinging lightly where its poison had made contact, she tugged her sword out from the spider’s head and turned to face Avrel the Swift.

“You! Over here! You did it! You killed it! Now cut me down before anything else shows up,” the man said frantically, still struggling against the thick webs.

Raisa grabbed the bow from where she had tossed it before and drew an arrow, pointing it directly at the man where he hung, “Where’s the golden claw?”

“Yes, the claw. I know how it works,” the man said quickly, eyeing her bow warily. “The claw, the markings, the door in the Hall of Stories. I know how they all fit together! Help me down and I’ll show you. I promise. You won’t believe the power the Nords have hidden there.

Raisa hesitated a moment before lowering her bow and stowing the arrow away. “You try anything and my arrow will find a nice new home in your skull, you hear me, elf?”

“Sweet breath of Arkay, thank you!” the man implored gratefully.

Raisa pulled out her dagger once more and began to hack away the webs binding the dark elf carefully.

“It’s coming loose! I can feel it,” the man said, sounding eager. He began to wiggle some more, attempting to help free himself. However upon becoming entirely free, the man straightened and made as if he were going to thank Raisa before shoving her down and dashing further down the corridor, shouting over his shoulder about why in the world she thought he would share the treasure with anyone when he could take it all for himself.

Raisa gritted her teeth and pushed herself to her feet with a grimace. She was a fool. Avrel was right about that. Sadly. Well, at least she could rest assured knowing he wouldn’t be able to really
get out of that cave with the treasure before she could catch up to him.

She caught him sooner than she expected to, finding him dead surrounded by several undead creatures with glowing white eyes and decaying skin. They were the guardians of the Nordic tombs, the draugr. But, for once, they proved to be less trouble than she was expecting. She made quick work of them, looting quite a decent amount of gold from their bodies. She continued along through the ancient barrow, and eventually found herself defeating a draugr warlord. With a sigh of relief, she took the Dragonstone from the corpse and took what she could from the large chest waiting there. And then, relief flooding through her and fresh air in her lungs, she was out in the wilds of Skyrim.

After another uneventful trip to Whiterun she strolled through the doors of Dragonsreach, intent on reaching Farengar and demanding a nice meal and bed at the very least for her troubles. Outside of Farengar’s workroom though, she found herself hesitating.

“You see? The terminology is clearly First Era or even earlier. I’m convinced this is a copy of a much older text. Perhaps dating to just after the Dragon War. If so, I could use this to cross-reference the names with the other later texts,” the man was saying quickly, bending over a book and pointing our notes to a hooded, armored female.

“Good. I'm glad you're making progress. My employers are anxious to have some tangible answers,” she replied with a nod, her voice soft, but cold.

“Oh, have no fear. The Jarl himself has finally taken an interest, so I'm now able to devote most of my time to this research,” Farengar replied with what was almost a scoff, a cocky attitude creeping into his demeanor.

“Time is running, Farengar, don't forget. This isn't some theoretical question. Dragons have come back,” the woman snapped, cutting back on his moment of what could have been pride almost instantly. It seemed Raisa wasn’t the only one unimpressed by the man's ranting and raving.

“Yes, yes. Don't worry,” the man said, waving a hand back and forth dismissively, “Although the chance to see a living dragon up close would be tremendously valuable... Now, let me show you something else I found... very intriguing...I think your employers may be interested as well... Hmm?”

It was now that Raisa decided to make her presence known, walking up to Farengar with a bored expression and her head held high. The wizard looked up at her approach and said in a somewhat demeaning tone, “Ah, yes, the Jarl's protege! Back from Bleak Falls Barrow? You didn't die, it seems.”

Raisa glared at him briefly before pulling the Dragonstone out of her bag and holding it up for him to see. The man’s eyes went wide and Raisa could have sworn that the woman with him let out a soft gasp of excitement as the wizard exclaimed, “Ah! The Dragonstone of Bleak Falls Barrow! Seems you are a cut above the usual brutes the Jarl sends my way.”

“I got you the Dragonstone. So what next? What about my reward?” Raisa asked, handing the stone over to Farengar with an impatient look.

“You'll have to see the Jarl about that. Maybe his steward, Avenicci. I'm sure one of them will pay you appropriately,” Farengar said with a tone that said clearly that he really didn’t care. “My… associate here will be pleased to see your handiwork. She discovered its location, by means she has so far declined to share with me. So, your information was correct after all. And we have our friend to thank for recovering it for us.”
The woman now stood up straight and looked at Raisa appraisingly as she took the Dragonstone from Farengar, inspecting it with a ravenous sort of curiosity. “You went into Bleak Falls Barrow and got that?” she asked, a small smirk on her face. Raise might have even said she looked impressed, even though her tone was nonchalant and practically indifferent. “Nice work. Just send me a copy when you've deciphered it.” She directed this last part to Farengar, just as Irileth ran into the workroom.

“Farengar! Farengar, you need to come at once. A dragon's been sighted nearby,” the dark elf commanded, her voice firm and cold. She glanced around at the other people in the room, her eyes resting on Raisa a bit longer before she said, “You should come, too.”
“A dragon! How exciting!” Farengar practically squealed in delight, “Where was it seen? What was it doing?”

Irileth gave the man a scathing look as she turned to lead Raisa and the wizard to where the Jarl was waiting for them. “I’d take this a bit more seriously if I were you. If a dragon decides to attack Whiterun I don’t know if we can stop it. Let’s get going.”

When they arrived in the upstairs portion of the great hall of Dragonsreach, Raisa noted that Proventus was present, as well as nervous looking guard. Well, nervous was a bit kind in a description of him. He looked like hell, if Raisa was being honest. She imagined though, that she didn’t look much better.

“So, Irileth tells me you came from the western watchtower,” the Jarl said surprisingly gently to the soldier.

“Yes, my lord,” the boy said with an affirmative nod.

“Tell him what you told me,” Irileth commanded, more firm than the Jarl. “About the dragon.”

The guard shifted from one foot to the other then back again, clearly highly uncomfortable with his current situation. “Uh… that’s right,” he stammered, “We saw it coming from the south. It was fast… faster than anything I’ve ever seen.”

The Jarl nodded, “What did it do? Is it attacking the watchtower?”

“No, my lord,” the guard said quickly. “I mean, it was just circling overhead when I left. I never ran so fast in my life… I thought it would come after me for sure.”

“Good work, son. We’ll take it from here. Head down to the barracks for some food and rest. You’ve earned it,” Balgruuf said to the guard, dismissing him before continuing, “Irileth, you’d better gather some guardsmen and get down there.”

“I’ve already ordered my men to muster near the main gate,” the woman said, sounding a bit proud of her efforts thus far, within reason.

“Good. Don’t fail me,” Balgruuf nodded before turning to face Raisa, a grim expression on his face. “There’s no time to stand on ceremony, my friend. I need your help again. I want you to go with Irileth and help her fight this dragon. You survived Helgen, so you have more experience with dragons than anyone else here. But I haven't forgotten the service you did for me in retrieving the Dragonstone for Farengar. As a token of my esteem, I have instructed Avenicci that you are now permitted to purchase property in the city. And please accept this gift from my personal armory.”

Here Proventus came forward and offered Raisa an enchanted axe with the seal of Whiterun engraved on the handle. She accepted it gratefully.

“I should come along,” Farengar said quickly. “I would very much like to see this dragon.”

Raisa resisted from rolling her eyes at the man’s eagerness. No one should be so willing to risk their life to anything so dangerous and unfamiliar as a dragon.

“No,” the Jarl ordered. “I can't afford to risk both of you. I need you here working on ways to
defend the city against these dragons.”

Farengar bit his cheek irritably, bowing low, “As you command.”

“One last thing Irileth,” the Jarl said with a frown. “This isn’t a death or glory mission. I need to know what we're dealing with.”

“Don’t worry my lord. I’m the very soul of caution,” she said with a bow before she straightened, jerking her head towards the exit and leading Raisa away quickly. Down by the gates of the city a small group of Whiterun’s finest stood waiting, their weapons already drawn and ready for a fight.

“Here’s the situation,” Irileth said bluntly, “A dragon is attacking the Western Watchtower.”

“What?”

“A dragon?”

“We’re in for it now…”

“You heard right!” Irileth exclaimed, “I said dragon. I don’t much care where it came from or who sent it. What I do know is it's made the mistake of attacking Whiterun!”

“But Housecarl… how can we attack a dragon?” one of the guards asked hesitantly. They were all skeptical, all scared.

“That’s a fair question. None of us have ever seen a dragon before, or expected to face one in battle. But we are honorbound to fight it, even if we fall. This dragon is threatening our homes... our families. Could you call yourselves Nords if you ran from this monster? Are you going to let me face this thing alone?” Irileth barreled onwards.

“We’re so dead…” one guard muttered under his breath, a bitter tone to his voice.

“But it's more than our honor at stake here. Think of it-- the first dragon seen in Skyrim since the last age. The glory of killing it is ours, if you’re with me! Now what do you say? Shall we go kill us a dragon?” the woman shouted.

To Raisa’s mild surprise, the guards suddenly rallied their spirits and followed Irileth out of the city, ready to go and most likely die for their homes. The very soul of caution? More like spirit of the dramatic arts. Raisa quickly followed the group out and followed them to the Western Watchtower. She wished that she wasn’t so unfamiliar with this part of Skyrim, but then, she hadn’t ever planned on staying in Skyrim at all. The damned civil war was the reason she’d been trying to leave, but instead it stuck her in an impossible battle with a dragon. What luck.

Irileth slowed the pace and hunkered down behind an outcrop of rock rising up near the hilly roads, “No signs of any dragon right now, but it sure looks like he's been here. I know it looks bad, but we've got to figure out what happened. And if that dragon is still skulking around somewhere. Spread out and look for survivors. We need to know what we're dealing with.”

The guards got up warily and started to pick their way through the burning rubble, hoping to find any signs of life. Raisa approached the tower, hoping that there wouldn’t be too great a carnage inside, though the smell of burning flesh and hair was thickening in the air. At that moment a frantic guard fled from the ruins of the tower, a petrified look on his face, “No! Get back! It's still here somewhere! Hroki and Tor just got grabbed when they tried to make a run for it!”

“Guardsman! What happened here? Where’s this dragon? Quickly now!” Irileth demanded,
picking her way through the destruction to meet the guard where he was cowering cautiously.

The guard glanced about nervousy and practically moaned, “I don’t know!” His eyes darkened and
the man looked as though her were about to be sick when he pointed a finger frantically,
desperation breaking through his voice, “Kynareth sae us, here he comes again…!”

The guards on the ground spun around frantically, searching for the creature in the dark night, but
Raisa stood still, practically petrified as she watched the dragon crest over the nearest mountain,
making a beeline for the watchtower and the humans panicking out in the open there. She had
hoped that she would never have to see one of the beasts again, but the Divines seemed to laugh at
her. With a sinking feeling, she realised that this dragon was not the same as the one that had
inadvertently saved her life barely a day prior. She readied her bow and ducked into the shelter of
the building’s ramp, wedging herself into a spot that was practically hidden from view but that still
gave her a good angle on where the dragon decided to land.

“Find cover and make every arrow count!” Irileth shouted as she herself dove behind a
smouldering chunk of the watchtower.

The battled was, all in all, surprisingly short. The dragon continually would take off, its powerful
wing beats sending the soldiers careening to the floor from the sheer force of the driving winds.
When it attacked it sounded almost as if the dragon were speaking words, but Raisa would simply
shake her head and dismiss this notion. Dragons breathed fire and ice, but did not speak, least of all
to mortals such as them. When the beast was grounded permanently, the guards continued to berate
the beast with arrows, only to have it charge at them and snap ferociously before spouting such
powerful fire that it practically melted the skin from their bones.

The air thick with death, the battle suddenly stopped and Raisa heard nothing. Not a soul breathed.
The dragon had manoeuvred its way around to the other side of the ramp where she couldn’t quite
get to it without revealing herself. There was a heavy silence, broken only by the crackling of fires
and a hot breeze. With a sinking feeling, Raisa realised that the situation was truly futile. They
were dead. All of them. They had to be. But was the dragon? She doubted any of them wound be
that silent unless they were dead; throughout the battle the soldiers had been shouting taunts and
abuse at the beast, as if mere petty words would cause it to keel over dead.

After what felt like hours, but what was probably closer to a few minutes at most, Raisa carefully
crept out from her hiding spot, wondering what to do. If she made a run for it, she would probably
— almost certainly— be killed. If she stayed were she was, it was the same case. She moved
almost silently around, her breath shaky and uneven, her bow string tight and loaded.

Then from behind her a low rumble began to grow, a clicking muffled by thick hide and strong
muscle. Slowly she turned around, her knees practically giving out on her, knowing that she was
about to die for real this time, to face the dragon. Its luminous golden eyes glared back at her, an
unholy— and thoroughly unjustified—rage boiling beneath the surface, no doubt about to fuel the
inferno that was bound to consume her earthly body. But it did not strike her immediately. Instead
it reared itself back, as if preparing itself, and roared and screeched right in her face, causing her to
let out a yell of terror as she fell to the ground and raised her bow, letting the arrow fly without a
second thought, terror feeling her every move.

A guttural sound then emitted from the dragon as it reeled backwards, an astonished sort of look in
its eyes, if that was even possible. “Dovahkiin! No!!” it roared, though the voice sounded faint
behind a proper roar. It wobbled slightly before crashing down towards Raisa, who scrambled
away as best she could.

She remained frozen on the ground, staring at the lifeless dragon, her heart racing. Was it really
dead? Was it over? Had it really been speaking? These and many other questions flooded through her mind in a seemingly endless torrent that kept looping back to a singular thought: she was still alive.

“Let’s make sure that overgrown lizard is really dead,” Irileth shouted, coming out of the watchtower with her men as others rose from behind chunks of debris across the entire area. “Damned good shooting, boys!”

The dark elf was slowly making her way to where Raisa was sprawled, propped up on her elbows in the grass and soot, a petrified look on her face. As she lay there she started at the dragon’s face, and a name sprung into her mind: Mirmulnir. And as suddenly as the battle had ended, the dragon’s body began to turn to flame, its flesh melting away into some ethereal thread that rushed at Raisa, consuming her body in its embrace, a flow of power far beyond her comprehension flooding her still racing mind.

Cries of “What’s happening?!” and “Everybody get back!” were drowned out by the whispering of words of power, the understanding of the Thu’um, and the roar of dragons that was swirling about in the cocoon of light that Raisa was bound in. And then, as suddenly as it started, it was over and she was sitting in the ground, frozen to the spot, staring into the skull of what was once a dragon.

“I can’t believe it!” A guard said, racing over to Raisa after a few moments of measured silence. “You’re… Dragonborn…?”

Raisa looked at him, a bewildered expression on her face as she stood up, putting away her bow with sharing hands. “Dragonborn…? I— I don’t… What do you mean?”

The guard looked at her in what appeared to be awe, “In the very oldest tales, back from when there were still dragons in Skyrim, the Dragonborn would slay dragons and steal their power. That’s what you did, isn’t it? Absorbed that dragon's power?”

Raisa looked at the carcass of the dragon, a ghost of a frown of worry on her face, “I… I don’t know what happened to me.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” the guard said, shifting nervously, “Try to Shout… that would prove it. According to the old legends, only the Dragonborn can Shout without training, just like the way the dragons do.”

Dragonborn? What are you talking about?” another guard asked skeptically, the disbelief saturating his voice.

“That’s right!” the first guard insisted. “My grandfather used to tell stories about the Dragonborn. Those born with the Dragon Blood in ‘em. Like old Tiber Septim himself!”

“I’ve never heard of Tiber Septim killing any dragons,” another guard grumbled.

“There weren’t any dragons back then, idiot,” the first guard snapped, though he looked reasonably cowed. “They’re just coming back now for the first time in… well, forever.”

“But the old tales tell of the Dragonborn who could kill dragons and steal their power. You must be one!” a fourth guard said, coming to the aid of his comrade.

“What do you say, Irileth? You’ve been awfully quiet?” the second guard said, looking to his superior in curiosity.

“Come on, Irileth, tell us, do you believe in this Dragonborn business?” the third guard asked,
sounding as if he was ready for her to back him up and disagree with the claims.

The dark elf stood with her arms crossed, an intense half-glare on her face as she stared at Raisa, who was paying hardly any attention to the proceedings at all, still staring in shock and concern at the dead dragon. The woman looked at the guards and said, “Hmph. Some of you would be better off keeping quiet than flapping your gums on matters you don't know anything about. Here's a dead dragon, and that's something I definitely understand. Now we know we can kill them. But I don't need some mythical Dragonborn. Someone who can put down a dragon is more than enough for me.”

“You wouldn’t understand Housecarl,” the fourth guard mumbled, almost irritably. “You ain’t a Nord.”

“I've been all across Tamriel. I've seen plenty of things just as outlandish as this. I'd advise you all to trust in the strength of your sword over tales and legends,” the elf snapped, her charcoal eyes glinting in the light of the fires.

The first guard looked at Raisa, almost concerned, “If you really are Dragonborn, like out of the old tales, you ought to be able to Shout. Go on; try it.”

Raisa looked around at the other men who, regardless of their stance on the issue, were all watching her with rapt attention. Even Irileth looked mildly curious behind her cold and indifferent demeanor. She shifted her stance slightly and stood silently for a short while, trying to dig something up out of the back of her mind, remembering something she had seen not long ago, but what felt like ages had passed since. She suddenly felt something rising up from the pit of her stomach, worried that her adventures had caught up to her and she was going to be sick, she opened her mouth and out came a powerful, shockingly loud, “FUS!”

The guard in front of her staggered and she was surrounded by a series of gasps. Even Irileth sounded impressed.

“By the gods!” What manner of power is that?” the second guard asked, a somewhat horrified look on his face as the first guard steadied himself.

“That was Shouting, what you just did!” the man exclaimed, looking at Raisa as if she had stepped right out of the legends he heard as a child. “Must be. You really are Dragonborn, then.”

“That was the hairiest fight I've ever been in, and I've been in more than a few. I don't know about this Dragonborn business, but I'm sure glad you're with us. You better get back to Whiterun right away. Jarl Balgruuf will want to know what happened here,” Irileth said gently, clapping Raisa on the shoulder in companionship and surprising her with the minor praise.

And so, using the distant torches of the city, Raisa found herself wandering alone through the darkness to Whiterun. As she approached the gates, a thundering chorus of voices rang out, “Dovahkiin!!” causing Raisa to stumble slightly in shock. That was what the dragon had cried when it was dying. Her spirits rattled, Raisa continued up to Dragonsreach, hoping that this would all be over and done with soon. All she really wanted now was a good long sleep and a nice hot meal. She’d be much happier with a belly full of mead.

She approached Jarl Balgruuf, her mind still reeling, unable to fully comprehend what had happened in the past three days.

“You heard the summons. What else could it mean? The Greybeards…” Balgruuf was saying.

“We were just talking about you,” a man named Hrongar said to Raisa kindly as she approached. “My brother needs a word with you.”

In the back of her mind, Raisa felt a pang of irritation. What did these people think she was there for in the first place? Did they think she had just taken a casual stroll into the keep because she felt like it instead of the fact that she had been sent to battle a dragon. What did these people take her for?

“So what happened at the watchtower? Was the dragon there?” Balgruuf asked quickly once Raisa stopped before him.

“The watchtower was destroyed, but we killed the dragon,” Raisa said simply, her patience wearing thin for all these questions.

“I knew I could count on Irileth,” the Jarl beamed, “But there must be more to it than that.”

“When the dragon died, I absorbed some kind of power from it…” Raisa said slowly, choosing her words carefully.

“So it’s true,” the Jarl said with a solemn expression. “The Greybeards really were summoning you.”

“The Greybeards…?” Raisa asked, sounding unsure.

“The Dragonborn is said to be uniquely gifted in the Voice -- the ability to focus your vital essence into a Thu'um, or Shout. If you really are Dragonborn, they can teach you how to use your gift,” Balgruuf explained to her.

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

Proventus scoffed slightly and said dismissively, “Hrongar, calm yourself. What does any of this Nord nonsense have to do with our friend here? Capable as she may be, I don't see any signs of her being this, what, 'Dragonborn.'”

Hrongar looked like he was about to deck the pernicious little steward for what he said, “Nord nonsense? Why you puffed-up ignorant... these are our sacred traditions that go back to the founding of the First Empire!”

Proventus backed up slightly as the engraved man took a rather threatening step forward, only to be stopped by his brother. “Hrongar. Don’t be so hard on Avenicci,” Balgruuf said with a chastising look.

“I meant no disrespect, of course,” Proventus said hesitantly, though he sounded wholly insincere. Rather, he sounded as if he were offended by how Hrongar had reacted to his so-called off-hand comment. “It’s just that… what do these Greybeards want with her?”

This was the moment that Raisa decided that she really didn’t like Proventus Avenicci. If she was a more ruthless sort of person, she wouldn't care if he were suddenly found dead. Hell, if she was a more ruthless sort of person, she would take care of him herself.
“That's the Greybeards' business, not ours. Whatever happened when you killed that dragon, it revealed something in you, and the Greybeards heard it. If they think you're Dragonborn, who are we to argue? You'd better get up to High Hrothgar immediately. There's no refusing the summons of the Greybeards. It's a tremendous honor. I envy you, you know. To climb the 7,000 Steps again... I made the pilgrimage once, did you know that? High Hrothgar is a very peaceful place. Very... disconnected from the troubles of this world. I wonder if the Greybeards even notice what's going on down here. They haven't seemed to care before. No matter. Go to High Hrothgar. Learn what the Greybeards can teach you,” Balgruuf instructed.

Raisa decided not to respond but instead turned to leave and find herself a place to stay, but Balgruuf spoke to her once more, “You've done a great service to me and my city, Dragonborn. By my right as Jarl, I name you Thane of Whiterun. It's the greatest honor that's within my power to grant. I assign you Lydia as a personal housecarl, and this weapon from my armory to serve as your badge of office. I'll also notify my guards of your new title. Wouldn't want them to think you're part of the common rabble, now would we? We are honored to have you as Thane of our city, Dragonborn.”

Raisa turned and bowed, expressing her gratitude briefly before continuing on her way to the inn, more than ready to sleep for a few days. The Greybeards waited an age for the Dragonborn to return; they could wait a little while longer.
The Horn of Jurgen Windcaller

Raisa had been walked for what had felt like days, though it had only been a few hours. She had paid a visit to the Greybeards, but it seemed that they had hardly welcomed her into the monastery before they were eagerly pushing her out once again, eager for her to fully prove herself. She hadn’t had much sleep since, moving swiftly from the monastery back down to the village of Ivarstead where she was rewarded with 1000 gold septims for carrying a sack of supplies up the mountain for a kind and generous man named Klimmek. From there she made her way past Whiterun once again, finally starting to get a general grasp of the hold around her, much to her satisfaction.

She now found herself approaching the village of Morthal, a surprisingly cold and misty little village built almost directly on the water, marshland surrounding it to the North with a small mountain range to the immediate South. She decided to spend the night there and made her way to the inn, where she rented a room for just ten gold. She left her things in her room and locked the door behind her, keeping a wary eye on the patrons of the tavern, really not eager to be robbed, especially after she got such a good deal for helping Klimmek out.

She sat down at one of the tables and ran her hands through her hair in mild frustration. Everything was happening so quickly. It seemed like yesterday she was being unjustly sentenced to death, and now she was one of the most important heroes in all of Skyrim. She was the first person to kill a dragon in practically forever. She was now the Thane of Whiterun, housecarl and badge of office included. She was steadily growing a decent fortune. Her life was— surprisingly— looking up. And she had no idea how any of it had happened. She imagined that perhaps the Divines— for once— were smiling at her, though she wasn’t entirely sure she appreciated having her life practically snatched away from her every other day. But then, so long as she survived and good things kept happening, it didn’t seem like too bad a trade, all in all.

“That’s my seat,” a gruff voice rumbled from behind her. Raisa looked around and saw a rather large, strong man standing there, a grumpy look on his face.

“Sorry, mate,” she mumbled, turning around and continuing to eat her food in an almost draugr-like fashion.

“Hey,” the man snapped, shoving her shoulder, “I’m talking to you.”

Raisa turned around and glared at him, “Look I’ve had a rough couple of days. I’ll be gone by tomorrow, just leave me in peace for one night for the love of Talos. You can handle a single night without your ass in this chair.”

The man shoved her again, “I’ll show you rough. You looking for a fight?”

Raisa stood up abruptly, her fists clenched tightly at her side, her marsh green eyes glaring into the man’s dark brown ones furiously. “I’m not looking for a fight,” she snapped through gritted teeth. “I just want to finish my meal and get to sleep. I have a difficult journey ahead and I want to be on top form for it.”

“You milkdrinkers are all the same,” the man grumbled, glaring back at her. “You talk of grand adventures but fail to prove yourselves when it really counts.”

“And what, a drunken brawl with you in this inn is when valor really counts?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow skeptically, scoffing slightly as she spoke.
“A drunken brawl with me in this inn will tell me if its worth asking to accompany you,” the man replied. “I been asking for them to make me a guard, but they haven’t said yes.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Raisa replied with a smirk and a derisive roll of her eyes. “You’re a real charmer.”

“You’re going somewhere good, and I want in,” the man continued, jabbing a thumb at his chest forcefully. “Fight me. I’m the best fighter in all of Morthal, and that’s no boast. Think you’ve got what it takes to beat me, you milkdrinker?”

“The best fighter? In all of Morthal?” Raisa asked skeptically, letting out a solid laugh this time. “Is that so?”

“Want me to prove it? I bet a hundred gold I can take you, bare-handed.”

She looked at him silently for a moment before sighing and throwing her hands up in frustration, “Why not? I could use the practice.”

“Just your own two hands. Weapons and magic are out. Now let’s see what you got!” and just like that he lunged at her. She barely had time to dance out of the way and push herself away from his back, effectively shoving him into the table. He pushed himself up and threw up a hand to wave away the innkeeper who was starting to come out from behind the bar, a mild look of concern on his face.

Raisa did her best to assess the man quickly before he could make another attack. He seemed to rely on brute force more than anything. He was certainly very strong, and much bigger than she was. But then, she was smaller and therefore, she was generally quicker. She could use his strength and momentum against him, throw him off balance and get in a few well aimed hits.

Just as she expected, he lunged towards her again. She ducked under a wide swing and rammed her elbow sharply into his side, causing him to stagger. She ducked back under the way she had come when he whirled to face her, getting in a similar hit on the other side, causing the man to groan in irritation. He aimed a decent punch her way and she just barely got away, the blow brushing her arm painfully. She wobbled but as he was recovering she flung a leg out and kicked him square in the chest with a loud grunt. The man, surprisingly, stumbled backwards and nearly fell, only just catching himself on the bar. Raisa danced forward and clapped her hands over his ears sharply and swiping a leg down to take his feet out from under him. As he tumbled, she followed him down, pinning him.

She was thoroughly surprised that she had won the brawl so successfully. The man looked up at her, equally surprised by what had happened. “Now that was a punch,” he said in his gruff voice, the extent of his surprise extending to his tone as well as he looked up at her. Raisa quickly got off of him and moved away cautiously, wondering if he would do anything underhanded to steal the victory out from under her.

He approached her again, an impressed smirk on his face, “You’re a real fighter. I like that.” He handed her a small pouch of gold “ You ever need my steel by your side, you just ask.”

“You mentioned wanting to get out of town,” Raisa said with a small frown. “I’m making my way to Ustengrav tomorrow. Perhaps you’d be willing to watch my back down there?”

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before nodding with a smirk, “I say I take odd jobs, anything that comes along. This sounds right up my alley.”
“I’ll see you tomorrow then, friend,” she said with a brief nod before turning to go into her room.

“Benor,” he said when she was unlocking her door.

She turned around and gave him a small smile, “Raisa.”

Benor nodded and sat down in his seat, turning to talk to another patron of the inn for the rest of the evening.

The next morning Raisa rose early, purchasing a nice meal from the innkeeper Jonna before making her way out to the main road where Benor was waiting, iron warhammer strapped to his back. The two set out and soon arrived at the ruin fairly soon, as it was only around an hour or so walk from Morthal. As they approached, Raisa spotted movement and ducked behind a fallen column. Benor followed her lead and pressed himself up against a still standing column, watching her carefully for any sign to attack.

She notched an arrow and let it fly, bringing down a mage with surprising ease. With that to serve as a distraction, Benor charged out from behind the column and barrelled towards the enemies, smashing them quickly with his heavy weapon. The two checked the camp for any nice loot before heading down into the crypts, neither of them seeming terribly excited about the prospect.

“These thralls of yours are slower than Argonians in a blizzard,” a conjurer was complaining, rather loudly for someone hiding out in an abandoned crypt.

“Feel free to grab a pick and help them out. I prefer not to sully myself with manual labor,” a necromancer drawled, his voice filled with disdain and pride all at once.

“There goes another one…” the conjurer mused briefly, motioning to something out of Raisa’s sight.


“They seem less intelligent each time you raise them, if that’s even possible.”

“As long as they can swing a pickaxe where I tell them, they’re as smart as we need them to be,” the necromancer reasoned.

Off along the tunnel a few booming sounds were heard. Raisa and Benor shared a brief frown before observing the other two from their hiding places once more.

“You hear that?” the conjurer asked, excitement apparent in her voice. “The others must have found something!”

The necromancer nodded in agreement, “We’d better go see. These can tend to themselves for a few minutes.”

Raisa and Benor smirked in unison, eager to prove the snooty man oh so wrong. Once the reanimated dead were taken care of, they followed quietly along the path after the two mages. Several draugr were spread throughout the crypt. Eventually, after killing the two slave-driver mages, Raisa and Benor reached their destination. However, when the two entered the tomb, there was no fight.

Cautiously, Raisa lowered her weapons when she noticed—with a surprising yet thorough
disappointment—that the guardians of the tomb had already been slain. She approached the pedestal careful to avoid any leftover traps while Benor checked the corpses to be certain they were really dead. As she expected, it was barren. She felt a wave of anger roll through her when she snatched up the note left in the horn’s place.

She snatched the note up and paced back and forth as she ripped it open and read it.

**Dragonborn**

I need to speak to you. Urgently.
Rent the attic room at the
Sleeping Giant Inn in Riverwood,
and I’ll meet you.

--A friend

Raisa let out a swear and turned to face Benor in irritation. “Looks like someone beat us to it.

“So what now?” Benor asked, not sounding in the least bit irritated, much to Raisa’s surprise. She had expected him to gripe and groan about the inconvenience and immediately say he was heading back to Morthal. To be fair, there was still time for that to come, but she didn’t expect that he’d be up for trekking all the way back to Riverwood. Not that she really wanted him to.

She briefly wondered why that was. She also simultaneously was wondering if perhaps Ralof would be in the area again. She wanted to tell him about the unbelievable circumstances of the past couple of days since they parted. Then again, she thought with a sinking heart, she may never see him again. For all she knew, he could be already dead.

“Someone wants to meet me at Riverwood,” she said with an exasperated sigh as she read the note again. “The Sleeping Giant Inn. What bastards.”

“How do you know the note’s for you?” Benor asked as they made their way out of the crypt.
“You don’t strike me much as the kind to have friends. Least, not friends who would go out of their way to get a secret note to you.”

“It says its for the Dragonborn,” Raisa said offhandedly. “Don’t know who sent it, but whoever it was says they’re a friend. Don’t know how much I trust that, all things considered. But I need that horn. So it seems I’m heading back to Riverwood.”

“You’re heading back?” Benor asked, sounding surprised. “I think you mean, we’re heading back to Riverwood.”

“You’re coming with me?” Raisa asked, somewhat skeptically.

“You seem like you could use the company,” Benor shrugged as he put away his warhammer.
“Besides, I’ve been looking for a good fight. Guards won’t accept me into their ranks, so I take the odd jobs. This certainly seems like an odd job if you ask me.”

“I hope you know I won’t be paying you,” Raisa said with a laugh.

“You’re paying me in experience,” Benor said. “I’m not much of an adventurer, like you. I usually stay put in one place. It’s been a few years since I left Morthal. I figure it’s time to change that. So if you want me along, I’ll come.”

Raisa thought for a moment before smiling slightly, “That would actually be kinda nice. I’d
probably sleep better on the road knowing my throat wasn’t necessarily going to be slit if I let my guard down.”

“Could still happen,” Benor pointed out.

“Somehow you don’t strike me as a vicious sneak killer,” Raisa said. “I think it would impugn your honor to kill me in my sleep. If you wanted to kill me, you would have done already. No one would have asked questions down in that crypt. No one would ever know at all.”

“You seem to know a lot about getting away with murder and thievery,” Benor said lightly, though there was a note of suspicion in his voice. “You got any associates I should know about?”

“Associates? No,” Raisa laughed. “I just think a lot. And recently a lot of thought has gone into death.”

“New to the game, huh?” Benor asked, an almost sad note in his voice.

“You could say that…” Raisa said as they carefully made their way through the marshes back to Morthal.

“For what it’s worth, you fight well for fresh blood,” Benor said. “I can’t think of a half dozen people more experienced than you who could have made it through that crypt in one piece like that. Even if the final challenge was unjustly stolen from us.”

“I appreciate it,” Raisa said firmly. “It’s been a rough couple of days. I shouldn’t even still be in Skyrim, but those plans were cut short.”

“Well, you’re stuck here for a bit now,” Benor pointed out. “If we get moving, we could make Riverwood by nightfall, I reckon.”

And that they did. The pair stomped into the Sleeping Giant Inn looking worse for the wear, having been ambushed by both bandits and a few stray wolves. Raisa made her way up to the bar to talk to the tall man standing there, watching them enter almost warily. Before she could reach him, however, a blond, hard looking woman came up and stopped her.

Raisa looked at her curiously as she spoke, wondering where in the world she had heard her voice before. “I’m the innkeeper. It’s my business to keep track of strangers,” she snapped coldly, surveying the pair with narrow eyes.

“I’d like to rent the attic room,” Raisa said gruffly, tired of being a suspect. She just wanted to sleep and find the damn horn so she could wash her hands of everything.

“Attic room, eh?” the woman smirked, glancing over at the barkeep momentarily, giving him a half nod before turning back to the newcomers. “Well, we don’t have an attic room, but you can have the one on the left. Make yourself at home.” The woman glanced at Benor then and added, “You can take the one on the right.”

The two shared a small frown before turning to their respective rooms and stepping inside. Raisa heard the door open behind her once she had settled and, expecting it to be Benor, started to speak, “Rent the attic room, the note said. I’m not crazy. That’s definitely what it said. But there is no damn attic room. Honestly, Benor I think we’ve been had.”

“So you’re the Dragonborn I’ve been hearing so much about,” the innkeeper mused, leaning against the doorframe. Her tone was nonchalant, as if she was pretending to not have heard Raisa’s irritated rant. “I think you’re looking for this,” she continued, tossing an ornate horn at Raisa where
she sat on her bed. “We need to talk. Follow me.”

Raisa watched the woman turn and exit the room, walking into the private room directly across from the room she had given to Raisa. After a moment, Raisa stowed the horn away in her bag before getting up and closing her door quietly and following the woman across the inn. She would have to delay her return to the Greybeards for just a little bit longer it seemed.
“Close the door,” the woman snapped as Raisa entered the room. Hesitantly, Raisa obeyed and the woman turned to open a secret passage hidden in the back of her wardrobe. She led Raisa down into an under chamber filled with training dummies, weapon racks, and a large planning table. Several chests lined the walls and an alchemy table bubbled and gurgled in one corner.

“Now we can talk,” the woman said with a relived sigh. “The Greybeards seem to think you’re the Dragonborn. I hope they’re right.”

“You’re the one who took the horn?” Raisa asked, though it was almost more of a statement. Her patience was wearing thin and she just wanted answers. And a nice, long sleep. And a decent meal for once. So really, she wanted a lot of things. But they were all simple things. And yet, regardless of their simplicity, they all seemed hard to come by lately, and that was what she was really getting sick of.

“Surprised?” The woman smirked, sounding proud. “I guess I’m getting pretty good at my harmless innkeeper act.”

Raisa snorted slightly to herself as she realised where she had met the woman before. She was the same one who had been meeting with Farengar when she had returned with the Dragonstone. But her statement was made even more amusing by this fact. She had all but jumped at the pair when they arrived, all suspicious looks and guarded speech. But Raisa decided this was not the best time to voice her opinions of the woman’s so-called “convincing” act.

“What’s with all the cloak and dagger?” Raisa asked.

“Can’t be too careful,” Delphine said, her paranoia shining through. “Thalmor spies are everywhere. But I didn’t go to all this trouble on a whim. I needed to make sure it wasn’t all just some Thalmor trap. I’m not your enemy, if that’s what you’re worried about. I already gave you the horn. I’m actually trying to help you. All I need is for you to hear me out.”

Raisa looked at the woman, trying to keep her snark in line. “It’s not as if I really have a choice in the matter, so go on. I’m listening.”

Delphine looked at Raisa appraisingly, somewhat surprised by the tone with which the Dragonborn addressed her. “Like I said in my note, I’ve heard that you might be Dragonborn—.”

“I am,” Raisa interrupted, giving Delphine a deadpan expression. Delphine glared at her, somewhat at a loss. “There’s no ‘might be’ about it,” Raisa said firmly, a bit of acid in her tone, “I am the Dragonborn.”

Delphine nodded after a moment, clearly not pleased by Raisa’s interruption. She was certain that Delphine had prepared some long-winded spiel about the ifs and whys, full of purpose and destiny. Some small part of her was more than pleased that she had stopped the woman in her tracks. “I’m part of a group that’s been looking for you… well, someone like you, for a very long time. If you really are Dragonborn, that is.”

“I already told you that I am,” Raisa said irritably, her voice somewhat louder this time.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t assume that something’s true just because the Greybeards say so,” Delphine snapped. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Clearly Raisa had done a good job of riling her up. “Before I tell you any more, I need to make sure I can trust you.”
“So what’s the part you’re not telling me?” Raisa demanded, sensing her patience levels dropping—surprisingly—even further than before.

“Dragons aren’t just coming back, they're coming back to life. They weren't gone somewhere all these years. They were dead, killed off centuries ago by my predecessors. Now something’s happening to bring them back to life. And I need you to help me stop it,” Delphine said, a small smirk on her face as she leaned across the planning table towards Raisa. Raisa took back what she thought about the housecarl Irileth being overly dramatic. Delphine definitely took the cake on this one.

“What makes you think dragons are coming back to life?” Raisa asked, deciding to humor the woman briefly.

“I know they are,” Delphine said with utmost certainty. “I’ve visited their ancestral burial mounds and found them empty. And I’ve figured out where the next one will come back to life. We're going to go there, and you're going to kill that dragon. If we succeed, I'll tell you anything you want to know.”

“So the dragonstone was some kind of map?” Raisa asked, folding her arms as she turned her attention to the planning table’s map and notes.

“You remember,” Delphine nodded approvingly. “Yes. A map of ancient dragon burial sites. I’ve looked at which ones are now empty. The pattern is pretty clear. It seems to be spreading from the southeast, starting in the Jeralls near Riften. The one near Kynesgrove is next if the pattern holds.” She pointed accordingly at the corresponding locations on the map.

“So that’s where we’re heading?” Raisa asked, pointing to Kynesgrove on the giant map.

“Kynesgrove. Right. There’s an ancient dragon burial mound there. If we get there before it happens, maybe we’ll learn how to stop it,” Delphine said with an affirmative nod.

Raisa sighed and felt a knot of frustration settle in her stomach once more. Looked like there wouldn’t be any sleep for her tonight. At least, not in a decent bed. Benor was not going to be pleased. At least they hadn’t paid for their rooms yet. “Let’s go kill a dragon,” she grumbled irritably.

“I need to get into my traveling gear. Give me a minute and I’ll be ready. I’ll meet you upstairs,” Delphine said, dismissing Raisa with a brief wave of her hand before she turned to get herself ready.

Raisa made her way up the short staircase and out into the main inn, making sure to close the door behind her. She ran a hand through her hair, her fingers getting caught on several snags and knots as she did. She knocked firmly on Benor’s door and waited for him to open it, which he did promptly, a somewhat irritated look on his face. Maybe that was why they seemed to get along so well. They were both perpetually irritated by everyone else around them.

“I don’t like the look on your face right now,” Benor said, a resigned frown of disappointment on his features. “We’re leaving now. Aren’t we?”

“Delphine is demanding that we head out to Kynesgrove tonight,” she said, matching his level of irritation well, keeping her voice low.

“Why?” Benor asked, his gruff voice carrying a bit in the empty main hall of the inn.

“Something about timing it right,” Raisa said with a shrug, rolling her eyes slightly. “She wants to
stop a dragon from coming back to life or something. Don’t know what help we’ll be in that, or what the hell she even plans on doing to stop it. But I have a feeling she might not let us just walk out of here without at least trying to help. Besides. Maybe there’ll be a reward or something we can scrounge up from this.”

Benor nodded silently, rubbing the back of his neck with a sigh before turning and getting his things ready again. Raisa in turn went back to her room and got her things together and returned to the dining hall where Delphine and Benor both waited, glaring at each other several feet apart.

“Let’s go,” Raisa said.

“Just a moment,” Delphine said before turning to the man who was still standing vigil behind the counter. “Orgnar, I’m traveling. You’ve got the inn ’til I get back.”

“Happy trails,” the man grumbled before setting to work scrubbing the bar.

As the trio made their way through the wilds of Skyrim, Benor kept surprisingly quiet, not that Delphine made a point of speaking to him. She would occasionally speak to Raisa, though she didn’t afford her much room to return the favor.

“You said the Thalmor are after you?” Raisa asked when they had stopped for a brief rest and meal of dried meats, cheese, bread, and a hardy Nord mead.

“Yes. We’re very old enemies. And if my suspicions are correct, they might have something to do with the dragons returning. But that isn’t important right now. What is important is that you might be Dragonborn,” Delphine said. “I hope you're Dragonborn, I really do. But we'll find out soon enough. We may both end up dead, but at least it gets me out of Riverwood. I don't really think I'm cut out for the quiet life. I doubt the Thalmor are aware of you yet. So we should be safe from them, at least.”

Raisa nodded slightly, not knowing how to respond to the potential threats they faced so she changed the topic. “Where do we go from here?”

“Once we reach Valtheim Towers we’ll cross the White River and follow it to Windhelm. Then we can swing south to Kynesgrove. There's an inn near Kynesgrove-- the Braidwood. I hear they serve a nice dark ale. Nothing on the Sleeping Giant, of course. I'm glad you were willing to trust me. I know it probably wasn't the best way to introduce myself. But old habits... you know.”

Raisa nodded slightly once again. It wasn’t really that she trusted Delphine at all. It was more that she had become resigned to the fact that her destiny was to be put into horrendously dangerous and futile situations and somehow survive. This mission fit with the pattern. And maybe once it was over and done with, she could make her way to Windhelm, now that she knew where it was. She wondered if Ralof would be there, or if he had been reassigned to another outfit.

Eventually they came upon the village of Kynesgrove and Delphine slowed their pace, holding up a hand, a worried expression on her face. “Wait,” she cautioned, “Something’s wrong…”

A farmer then ran up to them, glancing frantically behind them, terror written in his features. He looked warily at the weapons the trio had readied and shook his head, “No, you don’t want to go up there! A dragon… it’s attacking!”

“A dragon is attacking Kynesgrove?” Raisa asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” the farmer stammered. “Not yet… it flew over the town and lands on the old dragon mound up the way. I don’t know what it’s doing up there, but I’m not waiting around to
“Come on, Hurry,” Delphine exclaimed, rushing up the hill, not waiting for her companions. “It might be too late!”

As Raisa and Benor raced after Delphine, Raisa heard shouting, and Shouting. The dragon’s words boomed over the land, whispering their meanings in her ear as she raced towards it.

“Sahloknir! Ziil gro dovah ulse!” a dragon hissed as it hovered over the mound. Raisa threw herself down behind a rock before the dragon could notice her bumbling along. Delphine and Benor each ducked down alongside her, watching the dragon with a sort of morbid fascination.

“Lorkhan’s eyes! Look at that big bastard!” Delphine breathed. “Keep your heads down, let’s see what it does…”

“Shor’s beard…” Benor swore gruffly, keeping his voice down for once, though the astonishment was glaringly obvious in his tone.

Raisa, on the other hand, was remaining utterly silent. She had no words of astonishment or terror to express. Instead she had been almost violently transported back a few days in her memory and she felt the heat of the fires at Helgen burning her skin as she stared at the metallic, spiky dragon with the red soulless eyes full of hate. The beast roared and spouted flames before invoking once more, “Sahloknir! Ziil gro dovah ulse! Slen Tiid Vo!”

“Steady,” Delphine cautioned as Raisa notched an arrow, still lost in a trancelike state to her memories. “I don’t know what’s happening. Let’s watch and wait…” However, as she said this, an enormous skeletal dragon began to claw its way out of the earth with crackling and hollow roars. “This is worse than I thought…”

The dragon on the ground looked up at the master dragon and Shouted back, “Alduin, thuri! Boaan tiid vokriiha suleysksejun kruziik?”

“Geh, Sahloknir, kaali mir.” the master dragon—Alduin, Raisa determined—roared back in what seemed to be satisfaction.

Suddenly Alduin’s head whipped up and stared directly at where the group was hiding. Benor and Delphine both swore rather loudly, though they were both entirely frozen in place from what Raisa assumed was terror. She was all too familiar with the fright that came from sitting under a dragon’s watchful gaze.

“Ful, losei Dovahkiin? Zu’u koraav nid nol dov do hi. You do not even know our tongue, do you? Such arrogance, to dare take for yourself the name of Dovah. Sahloknir, krii daar joorre.” he roared at her. She didn’t fully understand what he was saying, but as she listened, some bits became clear to her to her great surprise and mild horror. Alduin’s gaze bore into her briefly for a moment longer before he flew off and disappeared.

However, the newly risen and fully fleshed Sahloknir threw himself up into the air, the wind filling his wings for undoubtedly the first time in over a century. He directed his attention to where Raisa and her companions were still standing, mostly hidden behind the boulder. “I am Sahloknir! Hear my Voice and despair!” the dragon Shouted.

Delphine leapt up and over the boulder and charged towards Sahloknir, her bow drawn, followed quickly by Benor. Raisa retained eye contact with the dragon and somehow mustered a glare at him, but the dragon laughed, “Dovahkiin, your Voice is no match for mine!”
Cursing slightly, Raisa raised her bow and let an arrow fly at the dragon in anger. Noticing the two fighters below him, Sahlkínir made to land quickly and smash them, but they both dodged out of the way, swearing as they did so. Benor took the opportunity to bounce back and swing at the dragon with his warhammer, causing the creature to roar and shrink back just a little bit. Delphine pulled out double blades, discarding her bow for a melee attack. Raisa continued a barrage of arrows, taking the time to poison some as she went.

Eventually they felled the dragon, Raisa’s supplies of arrows almost completely depleted at this point. Delphine sat down on the ground, dropping her blades on either side of her as she sat, her head in her hands, her arms resting on her knees. At first it looked like she was crying, but as Raisa approached, she realised that the woman was laughing. It was then that Raisa lost a small degree of respect for the woman. How she got a rush of enjoyment from fighting a dragon, Raisa was certain she would never understand.

“I’ll be damned; you did it!” the woman shouted, leaping to her feet and rushing towards Raisa who had moved to confirm that Benor was alright in the aftermath. “That was well done. Come on. I’ve been wanting a closer look at one of these bastards.” She hit Raisa on the arm in a congratulatory fashion and made to rush towards the dragon carcass when she stumbled slightly, backtracking. “Wait. Something’s happening…” she exclaimed, looking at the dragon with wide eyes as it dissolved, “Gods above…!”

Raisa felt the burning rush of power embrace her again and the whispered words of understanding flood her conscious mind. She was left gasping when it was all over and had to lean on Benor for support. He wasn’t discouraged by the freakish power devouring events that seemed to follow her around. Not like Delphine, who looked like she had just been given the best present she could imagine.

“So you really are…” Delphine stuttered, “I… it’s true, isn’t it? You really are Dragonborn. It appears I owe you some answers, don’t I? Go ahead. Whatever you want to know. Nothing held back.”

“Who are you and what do you want with me,” Raisa demanded as Delphine began making her way back into the town so they could sit in the tavern instead of stare into the face of the now skeletal dragon.

“I’m one of the last members of the Blades. A very long time ago, the Blades were dragonslayers, and we served the Dragonborn, the greatest dragonslayer. For the last two hundred years, since the last Dragonborn emperor, the Blades have been searching for a purpose. Now that dragons are coming back, our purpose is clear again. We need to stop them,” Delphine said.

“Sorry, who are the Blades exactly?” Raisa asked as they sat at a table a back corner of the inn.

“Sounds suspicious to me,” Benor grumbled as she arrived back with a round of mead for the three of them. “They’re bringing us some grub as well in a bit, so keep an eye out for unsavory eavesdroppers.”

“Exactly,” Delphine said, slamming her fist on the table in a somewhat gentle manner. Her tone turned almost bitter as she continued, “Nobody even remembers our name these days. We used to be known across Tamriel as the protectors of the Septim Emperors. Those days are long gone, though. For the last two hundred years, we’ve been searching for the next Dragonborn to guide and guard, as we are sworn to do. But we never found one. Until now.”

“What makes you think the Thalmor are bringing dragons back?” Raisa asked before taking a long drink from her tankard.
“Nothing particularly solid,” Delphine admitted. When Raisa and Benor gave her incredulous and accusatory looks she quickly continued, “Yet. Nothing solid yet. But my gut tells me they’re the only ones who could be responsible.”

“Why?” Benor asked, sounding skeptical. Raisa couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t really sure how Delphine’s train of thought made sense so far. She hoped that the woman’s explanation was a good one.

“The war was basically over,” Delphine said. “The Empire had captured Ulfric. Then the dragon attacked and Ulfric escaped. The war is suddenly back on. And now the dragons are attacking everywhere, indiscriminately.”

“Skyrim is weakened, the Empire is weakened…” Raisa mused slightly.

“Who else gains from that but the Thalmor?” Delphine asked, not expecting an argument.

“Do you know anything for certain about the dragons coming back?” Benor asked, sounding concerned.

“Not a damn thing,” Delphine commented, sounding more reluctant to respond to the man than she was to the fabled Dragonborn of legend that was Raisa. “I was just as surprised as you both to find that big black dragon here.”

“I wasn’t that surprised,” Raisa admitted quietly when their food arrived. “I’ve seen that dragon before, the one that got away.”

“Really?” Benor asked, just as Delphine demanded, “Where?”

“It was the one that attacked Helgen,” Raisa said quietly, “when— when Ulfric escaped from the Imperials…” She decided to keep her part in the story to a minimum. She didn’t fully trust Delphine and the reality of everything was that she didn’t know Benor all that well either. She didn’t need to broadcast her harrowing week to them.

“Interesting,” Delphine mumbled, retreating instantly into the recesses of her mind to figure out what was going on— probably to figure out how the Thalmor had befriended the large master dragon. “Same dragon… Damn it, we’re blundering around in the dark here! We need to figure out who’s behind it all!”

“Any ideas?” Raisa asked, exhaustion settling in now that she had food in her belly.

Delphine thought for a long while, mulling over the stew Benor had bought for them. “If we could get into the Thalmor Embassy…” she started slowly. “It’s the center of their operations in Skyrim… Problem is, that place is locked up tighter than a miser’s purse. They could teach me a few things about paranoia…”

“So how do we get in?” Raisa asked, ready for a good long rest by this point. She really couldn’t care less about Delphine’s schemes and paranoid vendetta.

“I’m not sure yet,” Delphine admitted once more. “I have a few ideas in the running, but I’ll need some time to try and pull something substantial together.” She finished her stew quickly and stood up saying, “Meet me back in Riverwood. If I’m not around when you get there, just wait for me a bit. I shouldn’t be long. Keep an eye on the sky. This can only get worse, my friend.”

And with that Delphine disappeared, leaving Benor and Raisa to sit together in exhausted confusion. As Raisa bought herself a room for the night, her tired mind was slugging through
recent events. She wondered if she should follow through and meet up with Delphine again. She considered asking Benor what he thought of the whole situation but she figured he would award the thought with a raucous laugh and a disdainful comment about Delphine and her blatant paranoia rather than with anything innately helpful to her predicament.
Raisa and Benor stayed four days in Kynesgrove, picking up the odd job or two settling nicely into the inn. Benor helped out at the lumber mill some days, spending others working in the Steamscorch Mine. Raisa would occasionally stand in as a bard during long nights at the inn, spending most of her time catching up on sleep and trying to determine what course of action she planned to take.

On the one hand, they had definitive proof that the dragons were returning. She still needed to return the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller to the Greybeards and so complete her training with them. She hadn’t been told anything specific yet, but it was beginning to dawn on her that, as the one and only Dragonborn discovered in that age, the responsibility of quelling the dragons fell to her and her alone. On top of it all, she had Delphine on her back, eager to bring her into the Blades, probably as a full member. Then of course there was the ever-present and ever-growing tension that stemmed from the damned civil war.

She found herself contemplating the war a lot recently, wondering how many people had already become victims to the fighting. So far it didn’t seem as if it was entirely violent in nature. There were minor skirmishes that travellers would muse over and dramatise when they passed through the Braidwood Inn. Everyone loved a good battle story, but Raisa was beginning to really wonder what at all was appealing about them.

She sat nearby the forge, making arrows to resupply herself, finding her consciousness drifting back towards her childhood. It was a time that was far more simple. Mostly. She hadn’t remembered much about her parents. She knew that they had been around for the early years, but her earliest memories were from a time when they weren’t around. She wasn’t even sure where she really came from originally. She was a Nord, through and through. That was all she really needed.

Her thoughts travelled forwards in her timeline to when she had just come of age. Her awareness of the world had skyrocketed by this point. Wars were real and happening out across Tamriel, there was more to Skyrim than Rorikstead and Markarth, and the young men who rolled through town were rather handsome. Rorikstead was basically home for her. Some of her fondest memories stemmed from that small village. Rorik was her father’s cousin and had taken her in when her parents had gone.

A small smile jumped to her face as she remembered her times there. She had been working the farm for an awful man, Lemkil. At the time, the man’s wife had been around and he hadn’t been quite so awful. Raisa had actually been made to help the woman deliver their twin daughters, Britte and Sissel. That had been a day of both great happiness and great sadness, but it had changed Lemkil for the worst. He urged more difficult labor on the farm, yelled at his young daughters, and became bitter towards everyone. Eventually, Raisa had decided to leave the village, mostly due to the man’s unending and unjust cruelty.

But regardless of his depressive nature, Rorikstead was still home to many fond memories, and the closest place she had to a home to begin with. But then the Stormcloaks had come through. They
hadn’t been horrible during their stay, but they brought the troubles of the outside world right to her front door. And everyone had been thrilled. And eventually, after they were gone, the Imperials made their way into town as well, and the ones who didn’t like the Stormcloaks were over the moon. Before she fully grasped the severity of the conflict, she had been pleased as well.

But childhood fantasies fade, and she now understood the truth behind any conflict. There wasn’t a single battle that was glorious. She figured this was part of the reason that she was reluctant to perform certain songs as a bard. She wasn’t spectacular at the lute, but she would rather struggle her way across the strings than have to force out the Age of Aggression or the Age of Oppression. Sadly, those two songs were often the most requested in any inn across Skyrim, signifying a love for the Imperials or the Stormcloaks respectively. They were even set to the same tune, with tweaked lyrics. The thought of singing them to inspire the hopeless wanderers who came through almost made her sick to her stomach. It wasn’t fair to depict battles and ‘heroes’ with such honeyed words when the reality of the matter was brutal and unforgiving. Death wasn’t beautiful.

“Dragonborn!” one of the townspeople called, striding over to where Raisa sat, hard at work. She looked up as the man approached, a large sack slung over his shoulder.

“Would you mind bringing these gems to the market at Windhelm for me?” the man asked. “I’m certain your charming smiles would fetch a higher price for these than this haggard old mug. I would do this myself, but my knees are acting up again. Can’t manage the hike today.”

Raisa nodded and said she could help the man out. She wished, though, that they would instead learn her name. Slaying a dragon in their backyard didn’t help to exclude her from a hero’s status. She and Benor would always be welcome in Kynesgrove after the service they performed. Of course, that also meant that to these villagers, she would always be the Dragonborn, not Raisa. She put her newly finished arrows into her quiver, finding making her way over to the lumber mill to let Benor know she would be away for a few hours, maybe the night.

“You want any company?” he asked her as he loaded another tree onto the saw rack.

“I’ll be fine,” Raisa said with a dismissive wave. “Just figured I should let you know so that you don’t think I’ve run out on you.”

“You wouldn’t be able to run out on me,” Benor said. “I’m involved now. I’d just go to Riverwood and wait for you and that blond woman to show up again.”

“Good thing I don’t hate you,” Raisa said with a chuckle. “I’ll see you either later today or tomorrow then.”

“You know where to find me,” Benor said, turning back to his work without a second glance her way.

Raisa liked Benor. He wasn’t one for dallying about. He always needed to be doing something, whether it was participating in a friendly drunken brawl, chopping lumber, or wooing young and innocent female villagers. He wasn’t the most morally sound person, but at the same time, he was fiercely loyal, from what she had seen of him so far. And he was a good fighter. He didn’t pick sides. He was on the side of his comrades, and sought his own personal glory. It was a slightly convoluted world view, but Raisa could respect it.

She arrived in Windhelm a while later and made her way along the long stone bridge to the entrance. She entered, not knowing what to expect. It was far colder here than in Kynesgrove. The stone was covered in both ice and snow making every step she took a minor hazard. The skies were dreary and bleak, making the city look foreboding and unwelcoming. A small pang of worry
passed through her as she made her way into the city.

The first thing she saw was what she assumed to be the inn, sitting raised up above the level she stood on. She looked around the area and decided it would be best for her to make her way inside and ask for directions to the market. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, relieved to be in the warm and out of the freezing wind. She approached the counter where a hardened looking woman smiled at her and introduced herself as Elda Early-Dawn. Raisa was welcomed with surprising kindness to Candlehearth Hall, considering the dismal first impressions she had already made of the city. The woman directed her to the market, but advised that if she was selling anything of particular worth, she should really go and visit Calixto Corrium in his House of Curiosities.

Raisa thanked the woman for the advice and informed her that she would be back later to rent a room for the night. The woman nodded and turned back to her work, mostly unconcerned by having a new customer. Raisa took no offense though, assuming that the woman merely had more important things. She made her way over to Calixto’s shop and put on her best poker face. She had reservations about going to see a specialist as opposed to the proper marketplace, but she figured the gems from the mine would be better paid for by a specialist. She just couldn’t let this man swindle her.

Some time later, and after a rather heated set of negotiations, she found herself wandering almost aimlessly through the streets of Windhelm, unsure of what to do. She had enough time to get back to Kynesgrove before it got too late, but she really didn’t fancy walking through the wilds of the north in a blizzard at night after having just finished her journey in the first place. As she walked, she heard an excited child babbling on to a tall dark elf.

"Then it’s true, what everyone is saying?" the boy asked hurriedly, his eyes wide with either fear or astonishment, or—more likely— both. "That Aventus Aretino is doing the Black Sacrament? Trying to summon the Dark Brotherhood?" The boy almost whispered the titles, stammering slightly as he spoke.

The woman sighed, sounding a bit strained as she responded, "Oh, Grimvar… always with the nonsense. No, no, of course not. Those are all just silly tales. Rumours and nothing more, child."

"Fine. Then I’ll invite him out to play," the boy said, crossing his arms and stepping towards a door that Raisa wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. "He lives right there. I’m going to knock on his door…"

"No, child! Wait!" the dark elf exclaimed, rushing forward to drag the boy away, "That boy… that house— they’re cursed.

The little boy smiled smugly, "Ha! Then I am right. I knew it. He’s trying to have somebody killed!"

"All right. I won’t deny it, child," the elf sighed as she led the boy away from the door, glancing at the upstairs window where candlelight flickered ominously. "What you heard is true. But Aventus Aretino walks a dark path. His actions can only lead to ruin. Now. Enough. We will speak no more of this, or your mother will have me dismissed."

Raisa stepped forward as the boy scampered off back towards the other side of the city. "Excuse me," she said carefully, trying to be polite. "I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. I’m sorry to have eavesdropped, but, is all that true? What would drive a little boy to have someone killed?"
“Hmm, yes it is quite sad,” the woman nodded. “The boy lost his mother recently and was sent to an orphanage. But he had returned home of his own will, and people have heard strange chanting. They say it’s the Black Sacrament.” At Raisa’s confused look the woman clarified, “The ritual to contact the Dark Brotherhood. Why exactly a little boy would want to contact a group of murderers is beyond me, but he is doing nothing more than inviting evil into this city.”

“Something must have happened at the orphanage to bring him back…” Raisa frowned, looking up at the window sadly, though she felt the curiosity growing within her the longer she lingered there.

“Whatever it was, I can only hope he does not bring ruin upon us all. Times are dangerous enough as it is,” the woman sighed. “Have you ever tried taking care of children? It can be a nightmare. When Grimvar asks me why people are being killed here I don’t even know what to say to him. I can’t imagine what would happen if more of those people came here to fulfil the will of a mere child…”

“Nothing good could come of it…” Raisa mumbled, her brow creased as she nodded solemnly. The woman bade her farewell and followed after the boy Grimvar at a slower pace. Raisa however, remained planted to the spot. She tore her gaze away from the upstairs window after a long while and found herself staring at the door to the house rather than turning to go and seek lodging for the night. As she stood there, she cursed herself and made her way to the door, glancing around to make sure no guards or townsfolk were nearby before she quickly picked the lock and slipped inside. It was fairly dark inside, only a few candles lighting the way. It was cold, too, and Raisa wondered how that poor boy could even stand to stay there with his family dead and gone. As she entered the main room of the house, she heard a tired child’s voice wavering its way through a chant, a hollow monotone echoing throughout the desolate home.

“Sweet mother, sweet mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear.” The chant continued moments after it was finished and Raisa was filled with a sick sort of revulsion at the thought that the boy had been at this for days, long enough for the townspeople to be spreading rumours and concerned whispers. On the table, Raisa noticed a note and picked it up silently, hoping to keep her presence in the home a secret until she knew what to say to the boy.

Master Aventus Aretino,

Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak wishes to express his deepest sympathies at the death of your mother, Naalia.

Unfortunately, because you are fatherless, and have no other known relations, the jarl cannot allow you to remain in your home unsupervised. Therefore, in no more than a week's time, you are to report to Honorhall Orphanage in Riften, where you will reside until your sixteenth birthday.

The Aretino family home in the city of Windhelm will, of course, remain your property. The building will be securely locked and ready for your return six years hence.

Note that I am unsure of the education
provided to you by your recently deceased mother, or if you possess the ability to read the letter I am currently composing. Therefore, a member of the city guard will call upon you in one week, at your home, and provide escort to the orphanage. Hopefully, his arrival will not come as a complete shock.

With greatest respect,

Jorleif
Steward to our most noble jarl, Ulfric Stormcloak

Raisa felt another stab in her chest as her heart broke further. This poor boy… His family dead, and he was forced to move halfway across Skyrim. It was no wonder he wanted to run away from the orphanage. Raisa herself would have been sent to the orphanage had she not had any next-of-kin willing to take her in until she came of age. She understood his pain, having been forced to move from wherever it was she had called home. Though she didn’t understand her pain much at the time. She had been much younger than young Aventus was, if he was still only ten years old. She carefully placed the letter back on the table where it had been and turned to confront the boy.

She stepped out from behind the wall and into the light, her footfalls causing the wooden floor to creak and groan slightly. The boy’s head whipped up and Raisa had a hard time discerning his features due to the multitude of candles behind him. On the ground encircled by candles was a mass of bones reconfigured to resemble a human. There were also two massive chunks of rotting flesh, one an indiscernible bit of meat, the other a human heart. Where the boy had gotten these items, Raisa hoped to never find out, horror seeping into her bones. In the boy’s hand was a dagger, a pile of Nightshade petals scattered around him, looking pinched and limp. The words of the chant were still on his lips, though his mouth moved without sound for a few moments.

He then leapt to his feet, the dagger clattering to the ground as he raced towards Raisa, a look of absolutely wonder and joy spreading across his tired little face. His cheeks were sallow and there were bags under his eyes. Raisa wanted nothing more than to give this boy a hot meal and see that he was alright.

“You’ve come at last!” he cried, his voice breaking as he spoke, stopping a few steps away from Raisa. There were tears springing to his eyes, though he did not let them fall, “I knew you would!”

“Are you all right…?” Raisa asked, her voice gentle.

“It worked! I knew you’d come, I just knew it!” he continued, ignoring her question. He glanced back at ritual repeatedly, a somewhat worried and harrowed expression on his young face, “I did the Black Sacrament, over and over! With the body, and the… things… And you came! An assassin from the Dark Brotherhood!”

Raisa couldn’t decide what horrified her most: that a boy of ten years old was able to procure human bones, flesh, and heart and perform such a disturbing ritual not once, but repeatedly, or that he was privy to the information necessary for performing such disturbing ritual in the first place. Her knowledge of the Dark Brotherhood was limited to the fact that it existed at all. She had lived a surprisingly quiet life until recently and was astonished that such an organisation would exist in the first place.

Aventus took her thoughtful silence as her waiting for him to continue and he grinned again, “You don’t have to say anything. There’s no need. You’re here, so I know you’ll accept my contract.”
“Contract?” Raisa asked, a frown on her face. She had assumed that the boy would realize that she really was not a part of the Dark Brotherhood, but he showed no sign of giving up.

“My mother, she... she died. I... I'm all alone now. So they sent me to that terrible orphanage in Riften. Honorhall. The headmistress is an evil, cruel woman. They call her Grelod the Kind. But she's not kind. She's terrible. To all of us. So I ran away, and came home. And performed the Black Sacrament. Now you're here! And you can kill Grelod the Kind!” Aventus said, shuffling from side to side almost uncomfortably, as if the memories were hard for him to consider. “Please hurry! To be honest, I'm kind of lonely here. As much as I hated getting sent to Honorhall, I really miss my friends there…”

Raisa took the boy by the shoulders and steered him to his bed, sitting him down before dragging a chair over and sitting on it herself. She looked at him with a frown on her face. He looked almost confused, but he still gave her a face full of admiration.

“Tell me about your mother,” Raisa prompted after a moment. “What happened?”

Aventus looked down at his hands almost sadly before speaking in a soft voice. Raisa imagined his throat must be raw from how much he had performed the Black Sacrament. “She got sick, last winter, when the snows came. And she just... she never got better. Not all year. One night she just fell asleep and... never woke up. So now I'm all alone. And the Jarl said I had to go to Honorhall Orphanage. It's not fair!”

Raisa nodded and rubbed the boy’s back soothingly, “I agree it’s not fair. But surely you could be happy there for a time? Surely someone would love to adopt you…”

Aventus shook his head, “Grelod won’t let anyone adopt us there. She says we’re good-for-nothings and that no one could ever want such disobedient brats…”

After a moment Raisa sighed and looked at Aventus with a steady gaze, “Are you sure about this, boy? About murdering this woman? Killing people isn’t the best way to solve your problems. All it causes is more death in the world, and Divines know there's already enough of that.”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my entire life,” Aventus said firmly, his brow furrowed, a desperate but steady tone to his voice. “Someone like Grelod doesn’t deserve to live one more day. She’s a monster.”

Raisa sighed and looked down at her feet, a pained expression on her face as she squeezed her eyes tight. “Alright,” she said, making up her mind. The boy looked up at her, elation practically written all over his face. He was about to rejoice when she said, “But, Aventus Aretino, you must return to the orphanage once this business has been concluded. A contract is a contract, and it must be honored. But This can no longer be a home to you. It will only bring you to ruin, boy.”

Aventus nodded quickly, “Oh please hurry! I swear, I’ll go back. But please don’t kill Constance Michel! She really is kind. She’ll take better care of us than Grelod ever could!” Raisa stood and instructed the boy to sleep. His part in this was over, and she would return upon completion of the contract before exiting the Aretino residence, wondering just what she had gotten herself into.

The next morning she rose early and ate a full meal in the Candlehearth Hall, still mulling over the promises she had made the day before. She wasn’t sure what exactly had convinced her to agree to help the boy. She had felt almost drawn to the situation. Perhaps she believed what he said, that Grelod was a terrible woman, that she truly deserved death… Perhaps she felt sorry for the boy’s loss, having experienced the pain of separation before herself… Perhaps both were true. If killing Grelod the oppressor helped this boy become healthy and stray from the dark path he set himself
down, would it be worth it? End the life of one who lived many years to prolong the life of one who lived few?

Before she knew it, she was back in Kynesgrove. She made her way to the inn and sat down at the table she and Benor had unofficially claimed for themselves. She ran her fingers through her hair with a sigh, taking a moment to untangle her braids and let her scalp relax for a while. Iddra the innkeeper brought her a plate of food and a strong, dark ale to accompany it.

“Are you alright, Dragonborn?” the woman asked after a moment of lingering at the table, observing the stressed woman. Raisa looked up at her a few moments after she was addressed and nodded slightly, forcing a small smile to her face. The innkeeper smiled back reassuringly, “Hard work, fighting dragons. And here I was thinking life as an innkeeper was difficult. I hope you know you are always welcome here Dragonborn if you are ever in need of a nice rest or escape from your work.”

Raisa smiled again, a bit more fully, thanking the woman for her kindness and hospitality before turning to her meal. Soon Benor made his way into the inn, covered in dust and small scrapes from pieces of rock flung around in the act of mining. He sat down at their table after getting the same kind treatment from Iddra that Raisa had.

“How was Windhelm?” Benor asked. “Still as dismal as I remember it being? Still swarming with those grey skinned bastards?”

Raisa frowned at his slur but nodded, still contemplating the turn of events, “Do you know how to get to Riften?”

Benor stopped, his spoonful of stew halfway to his mouth, “Why would you want to go there?”

“There was a boy in the city,” Raisa said. “He came from the orphanage. He refuses to go back. Says it’s horrible there. I want to see how bad it is. See if there’s anything I can do about it.”

“You? The charitable type?” Benor asked, sounding surprised. “I would never have guessed it.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Raisa said. “And I mean, I would normally keep my distance from this sort of thing, but I can’t help but worry about this boy. He needs help.”

Benor looked at her and shrugged, “I know how to get there. I take it that means you’re looking for company?”

Raisa nodded, “I don’t like travelling alone. Too quiet. Too risky.”

Benor nodded, “I got nowhere to be. Least you didn’t just up and leave like some people would have. Maybe we’ll find a nice crypt to explore along the way. Sounds like it could be a profitable experience for both of us.”

“So long as no crazy cultist steals the prize for herself before we get there,” Raisa smirked.

The pair laughed slightly and took identical swigs from their tankards before making a plan to set out once they had rested for the night. Benor returned to the mines for a few hours and collected the pay they owed him for his work before doing the same at the mill. That night Raisa was enlisted to act as the bard before they departed the next morning. Luckily, few travellers had arrived and she was able to simply fiddle idly with the lute they had loaned her for her services. When the pair arose the next morning, the innkeeper gave them each a little sack of food and a bottle of their best wine for the road as a token of their gratitude. As they set off, Benor informed Raisa that if conditions were fair and the roads kind, they would be able to reach Riften in around
nine hours if they decided to walk.

Instead, though, the pair trekked back to Windhelm to catch a carriage ride down to their destination—Raisa’s idea. They each gritted their teeth as they paid the man 20 septims each and climbed up into the back, ready for a somewhat relaxing ride down from Eastmarch into the Rift. Raisa couldn’t help but muse over the fact that the last time she had ridden in a carriage, she had been lead to her death, and ultimately, to what would be her destiny, the dragon Alduin. She didn’t know what exactly made her think this, but she was certain of it. Alduin seemed to choose her as his enemy for a reason, and who was she to deny the determination of a dragon?

Raisa thanked the carriage driver as she jumped down and handed over an extra few septims for the trouble, bringing a smile to the old man’s face. She and Benor walked up to the gates, expecting to walk just in, considering Riften was a center of commerce; any all travellers were welcome to trade in the marketplace. However one guard stepped forward and stopped the pair quickly saying, “Hold there.”

Raisa and Benor shared a quick glance, both frowning as the guard continued, “Before I let you into Riften, you need to pay the visitor’s tax.”

Raisa raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms, “What’s the tax for?”

“For the privilege of entering the city? What does it matter?” the guard scoffed, his voice deep and disinterested.

“This is obviously a shakedown,” Raisa said, letting a bit of anger seep into her voice, but not too much. She just needed the guard to back off.

“All right,” the guard grumbled, though he was considerably kinder, “Keep your voice down… you want everyone to hear you? I’ll let you in, just let me unlock the gate…” He turned and unlocked the gate before stepping back and saying, “There. It’s unlocked. You can go in whenever you like.”

“Thank you,” Raisa said scathingly, “You’re very kind, sir.”

She and Benor slipped into the gates, making their way into the half-water city. They hardly got twenty feet into the city before a rough looking man leaning against a house stilt greeted them with a harsh sounding, “Hey.”

Raisa stopped and turned to face the man, wondering why he was so up-at-arms. He looked her up and down as if he were assessing an enemy, “I don’t know you. You in Riften lookin’ for trouble?”

“What’s it to you?” Raisa asked almost snappishly. Her business was her own, and she really didn’t appreciate this man speaking to her so threateningly, especially considering what her business was. She had to kill a woman here and get away scot-free. It was a daunting task, considering the place in question was full of children, as well as a watchful assistant.

“Don’t say something you’ll regret,” the man growled. Beside her, Benor crossed his arms, flexing them oh so slightly to warn the large man to back off. He continued regardless, saying, “Last thing the Black-Briars need is some loudmouth tryin’ to meddle in their affairs.”

“Who are the Black-Briars?” Raisa asked curiously, cocking her head to one side as she stepped over to his side of the road.

“The Black-Briars have Riften in their pocket and the Thieves Guild watchin’ their back, so keep your nose out of their business,” he said, lightening up ever so slightly. “Me? I’m Maul. I watch the
streets for ‘em. If you need dirt on anythin’, I’m your guy… but it’ll cost you.”

Raisa nodded slightly and said, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Maul nodded and turned his attention back to the streets, watchful eyes noticing every detail they could. Raisa and Benor continued along, crossing a small bridge where a beautiful brunette woman was leaning with crossed arms and a steely look on her face. A worried looking Regard man sat on a bench across from her. It seemed the two were at odds, the woman in control. Raisa and Benor stepped through them and quickly continued on their way, not wanting to get caught up in someone else’s problems yet again.

As they walked past the market, Raisa observed the stall workers curiously. As they continued around the outer circle to the forge, Benor kept a lookout for Honorhall. As Raisa walked aimlessly beside him, her eyes fell on a rather carefree looking man, a warm, almost amused smile crossing his features as he held up a bottle of some potion or elixir to a potential customer. His eyes darted her way and his eyes looked her up and down and his smile softened slightly, a playful look in his eyes.

Raisa felt an eyebrow quirk as she passed the man, a half smirk making its way to her lips. The customer was obviously not impressed, but she heard him insist on the potency and brilliance of the concoction to no avail, a hearty laugh rising from his chest as the customer slowly changed his mind. Raisa wanted to observe the man a little while longer, but as they approached the forge a blond, armoured woman began speaking rather loudly and the two were drawn in out of curiosity.

“I had another run-in with the Thieves Guild,” she said irritably.

“Be careful, Mjoll. The Thieves Guild has Maven Black-Briar at her back. One snap of her fingers and you could end up in Riften Jail… or worse…” a young man cautioned, glancing around the marketplace.

“They represent the reason I’m here,” she sighed.” I can’t just ignore them, Aerin.”

“I know,” the man sighed in turn, “I just don’t want you to leave; you’re the only good thing that’s happened to this city in a long time.”

The woman smiled as Raisa and Benor approached, “You’re a stranger here too, eh? Visitors like us are rare in this part of Skyrim, it would seem.”

“You’re not from Riften?” Raisa asked, pretending as if she hadn’t just eavesdropped on their entire conversation.

“I’ve been adventuring across Tamriel since I was a fresh-faced young woman barely able to swing a blade. My travels have taken me from High Rock to Valenwood, Elsweyr to Morrowind and all points in between,” the woman smiled proudly.

“Why are you here, then, if you could be anywhere else?” Raisa asked.

“Seems like a Skeeverhole of a city if you ask me,” Benor grumbled, glancing around distastefully.

“Many years ago I lost my blade, ‘Grimsever,' within a Dwarven ruin. I took it as a sign that I was wasting my time in search of wealth. You and I are alike. We seek challenge and great fortune. But for me, that's where the similarities end. You see, Riften is my great beast to be slain and my fortune comes from gratitude and trust,” Mjoll said, sounding almost bitter at first, but warming up towards the end of the statement.
“So you’re Riften’s protector?” Raisa asked curiously.

Mjoll sighed and gave a little shrug, “It’s been difficult, I’ve taken the burdens of this city’s problems upon myself and I keep running into impossible obstacles. Corruption, lies and deceit are the order of the day here. If it wasn’t for Aerin, the young man who saved my life, I think I’d already have given up long ago.”

Raisa smiled at Aerin kindly as Mjoll praised him. Benor was a bit less impressed by the boy, but had an intense interest in the beautiful, strong woman they had just met. “You seem like a fighter,” he said, folding his arms, intent on getting to know her a bit better.

Raisa smiled and excused herself, turning to and look for the orphanage alone. It was probably best that Benor was distracted anyways. She hadn’t told them the true purpose of them arriving in Riften yet, and she wasn’t sure that she ever would. It didn’t seem all that important in the grand scheme of things. She kept reminding herself that it was to serve a greater purpose, that it would make a better life for several people if she could just end one herself.

As she walked towards where she spotted the orphanage, she felt a pair of eyes watching her. She turned and scanned the square as she continued, her green eyes meeting the handsome redhead’s silvery blue eyes. A slight frown was present on his face, his brow just slightly furrowed as he watched her. She supposed, though, that it only seemed as if he was frowning because she had only ever seen him jovial. She gave him a nod, her eyebrow quirking once again against her will, the smirk returning to her face as she entered the orphanage. She was entirely unsure of why that was her immediate reaction to the man, and almost wished that it would stop. Why him?

Regardless of any reason, as she entered the orphanage there was no one to greet her. Instead, from the other room, she heard, “Those who shirk their duties will get an extra beating. Do I make myself clear?” The voice was harsh and almost shrivelled, as if it were stuck that way after years of yelling abuse. An immediate seed of dislike rooted itself in Raisa’s stomach as she began to step forward to make her way into the room.

“Yes, Grelod,” a chorus of sad, small voices replied dejectedly.

“And one more thing!” the horrible woman droned on, sounding even more angry than before somehow, “I will hear no more talk of adoptions! None of you riff-raff is getting adopted. Ever! Nobody needs you, nobody wants you. That, my darlings, is why you’re here. Why you will always be here, until the day you come of age and get thrown into that wide, horrible world. Now, what do you all say?”

“We love you, Grelod. Thank you for your kindness,” the voices said, a not of hatred burning in their little throats.

“That’s better,” the woman snapped, not sounding pleased at all. “Now scurry off, my little guttersnipes.” Raisa stepped into the doorway and looked around the orphanage, a hard look on her face, conflicting emotions warring in her mind. The horrible woman caught sight of her and Raisa knew immediately that this was the intended target; the horrendous object of her contract. A contract she knew she had to fulfil. “What do you want?” the woman sneered, looking disdainfully at Raisa from where she stood. “You have no business here.”

Raisa glared at the woman and said carefully, “Aventus Aretino says hello.”

Around the room, little voices gasped and whispered, obviously recognising the name of their friend and most likely hoping and guessing at the reason Raisa was acquainted with him. She glanced around, not knowing if it would be right for her to kill the woman in front of all of these
children. It could ruin their lives forever, taking away their childhood in an instance, innocence lost.

“Aretino? Why that little bastard!” the woman swore, sounding even more furious than before, “You tell him I’m coming for him! And when I find him, it will be the beating of his miserable little life!” The children around the room flinched at the thought and all doubt was erased from Raisa’s mind.

She remained silent as she started hatefully at the woman before her. The woman in turn snapped, “What are you staring at, you worthless piece of gutter trash? I simply must start locking the doors again…”

In an instant, Raisa had drawn her bow and let an arrow fly, lodging itself in the woman’s throat, her raspy, revolting vocal chords shredded to nothing. The woman stood for a moment before collapsing to the ground, guttural sounds coming from her as she died, choking on her own vile blood.

There was silence in the orphanage before the children erupted in excited cheers. They rejoiced at Raisa’s actions, laughing and hugging one another. Some congratulated Aventus on his success, babbling about how they were finally free from the tortures of Grelod the Kind. Raisa, finally realising what had just happened, took a few steps background, sheathing her bow quickly before exiting the orphanage as calmly as she could.

She felt the strange man’s eyes on her again and she met his gaze steadily, nodding once again, this time allowing her eyebrow to tilt itself upward again, though the smirk was not present. She made her way over to where she had left Benor to find that Aerin was watching almost worriedly as Mjoll and Benor struggled against one another in a fist fight. Raisa permitted this distraction, allowing herself to get lost in the outcome of the fight, a smile and laugh escaping her as she watched the match. She still felt the set of silvery eyes on her, but she did not return the gaze. Her task here was done and she would soon be gone. She needed to get back to Aventus and inform him of the deed she had committed. All the better to forget the beautiful man with the useless elixirs.
With Friends Like These

“Well?” Aventus asked, his eyes shining excitedly in the dark house, “Grelod the Kind. Is she… you know?”

“Grelod the Kind is dead,” Raisa said firmly.

The boy jumped up and hugged her tightly around the middle, an excited laugh escaping him as he did so, “Aha! I knew you could do it! I just knew it! I knew the Dark Brotherhood would save me!” He broke away from the embrace to quickly rummage in a small chest that he yanked from below his bed. As he dug around, Raisa noticed how much better the boy looked in the short time that she had been away. He looked well-fed and he had certainly seen some sunlight, at the very least. The bags under his eyes were gone and he was filling out a bit more, not burdened by the necessity of the Black Sacrament.

He jumped up and shoved a plate at her excitedly, “Here, just like I promised. This should fetch you a nice price. It’s a family heirloom, but I don’t have a use for it. And, thank you. Thank you again. And I swear I’ll go back to the Orphanage in a while. I’ll give them some time to, you know… clean up the mess… Will you come and visit me?”

Raisa was surprised, holding the heirloom delicately, feeling as if she couldn’t accept it. The fact that he was moving on from this whole ordeal was reward enough for her, considering what she had done to secure his safety in the future. She thought for a moment before saying, “I can try to. I wouldn’t want anyone to get suspicious. Besides, you know how it is. Contracts, assassinations… I keep busy.”

The boy nodded, seeming somewhat dejected so she sighed and said, “I’ll definitely have to stop by at some point though, just to make sure you hold up your end of the bargain. We can’t have you going back on your promise, now can we?”

The boy grinned excitedly and said, “No ma’am, we can’t. I’ll see you there!”

Raisa departed the home, packing the plate in her bag. She didn’t think that she would ever part with it. It was a reminder of a good thing she had done for a little boy. One more death on her conscious was nothing at this point. She had faced three dragons and lived to tell the tales, having devoured the soul of two of them.

As she exited Windhelm, a courier ran up, sounding breathless, “I’ve been looking for you. Got something I’m supposed to deliver— your hands only. Let’s see here…” The tired man took a moment to rummage in his messenger bag before straightening and handing a piece of paper to Raisa, “Yeah, got this note.”

“From who?” Raisa asked as she hesitantly took the note from the man, holding it delicately.

“Don’t know,” the guy shrugged. “Creepy fella, black robe. Couldn’t see his face. Paid me a pretty sum to get that into your hands, though. Looks like that’s in though. Gotta go now.”

And with that he hurried off, leaving Raisa alone to ponder the mysterious note. She opened it curiously and saw nothing but a black handprint and two hastily scrawled words: We know.

A slight frown on her face, Raisa couldn’t shake the feeling that perhaps she was being watched. But she only can to one decision from the encounter: She couldn’t stay in Windhelm, instead leaving immediately and paying a small fee to make her way down to Whiterun. From there she
made her way to Riverwood to meet up with Delphine. Benor had opted to stay in Riften for a while, having found a good friend in Mjoll the Lioness and her savior Aerin. Raisa expected she would see the pair of them soon enough.

Upon arriving, Delphine was waiting behind the bar. “I don’t think you were followed,” she said, “Come on. I have a plan.” Raisa had already forgotten about how paranoid the woman was, but it was no point trying to reassure her; Delphine would think what she wanted, regardless of what anyone else had to say. To say she was dedicated was an understatement.

“I figured out ow we’re going to get you into the Thalmor Embassy,” Delphine said excitedly once they were in the secret basement.

“You’re not coming?” Raisa asked, only slightly surprised. Considering Delphine’s past vendetta with the Thalmor, it wasn’t all that shocking a revelation, but she hadn’t really grasped that this would all be on her shoulders. She was already regretting following through with this whole ordeal.

“That would be a bad idea. I’d be too likely to attract the wrong kind of attention. But they don’t know you at all, yet,” Delphine explained.

“So what’s your plan?” Raisa asked. “How am I supposed to infiltrate the Thalmor Embassy without getting myself killed in the process?”

“The Thalmor ambassador, Elenwen, regularly throws parties where the rich and connected cozy up to the Thalmor. I can get you into one of these parties. Once you're inside the Embassy, you get away and find Elenwen's secret files. I have a contact inside the Embassy. He's not up for this kind of high-risk mission, but he can help you. His name's Malborn. Wood elf, plenty of reason to hate the Thalmor. You can trust him. I'll get word to him to meet you in Solitude, at the Winking Skeever-- you know it? While you're doing that, I'll work on getting you an invitation to Elenwen's little party. Meet me at the Solitude stables after you've arranged things with Malborn. Any questions?” Delphine rattled off.

“Who’s this contact of yours?” Raisa asked, shifting from side to side as she thought for more questions. “You’re certain that I can trust him?”

Delphine looked somewhat surprised before she turned reassuringly dismissive. “Don't worry about Malborn,” she said, waving a hand to shake any thoughts of mistrusting him away. “He's not a dangerous character like you, but he hates the Thalmor at least as much as I do. He's a wood elf — the Thalmor wiped out his family back in Valenwood during one of their purges that we never hear about. Luckily they don't know who he really is, or he’d be dead instead of serving drinks at the Ambassador's parties.”

“So how am I going to get into this party?” Raisa asked curiously, wondering if she would need to prepare anything for the venture into what was apparently enemy territory.

“Let me handle that,” Delphine continued, “You'll have a real invitation, don't worry. As long as you can act the part of a Thalmor toady, you'll get past the guards.”

“Alright, so assuming this all goes according to plan and I get inside without being discovered, then what?” Raisa asked her, trying to be as thorough as possible. It was only her life on the line after all.

Delphine smiled an almost twisted sort of smile, “That's when the fun starts. You'll have to slip away from the party without raising the alarm. Then you'll need to find Elenwen's office and search her files. Malborn should be able to point you in the right direction.”
Raisa sighed, “I didn’t expect anything less, if I’m honest. I suppose I’ll be seeing you in Solitude then, once I’ve met with Malborn.”

“Sounds good,” Delphine said with a devilish grin. “Your room’s free for you to rest up before you head out. I’ll meet you at Katla’s Farm, just before Solitude. Be careful.”

And with that, the Blade disappeared up the stairs and out of the inn. Raisa made her way up the stairs and into her room, kicking her bag under her bed and falling onto the bed in exhaustion, thinking she could probably sleep for a week and still not be entirely rested.

Raisa opened her eyes blearily. She was surprisingly sore as she stretched her limbs, her back popping slightly as she moved to sit up. The first thing she saw was blood. Lots of it. The rafters creaked and groaned in the wind, the air inside the building moist and clammy.

“Sleep well?” a smooth, alluring female voice asked, a tone of amusement just barely noticeable as she spoke. Raisa looked up, noticing an armor clad woman sitting casually on top of a dresser, just out of the light, her leg dangling carelessly in the air.

“What?” Raisa asked, still disoriented. Her head was reeling and she knew that she must have been drugged. Normally in a situation like this, abduction being rough and uncommon, she would have been awake instantly by sheer force of survival drive. “Where am I? Who are you?”

“Does it matter?” the woman snapped, a bite of venom in her voice now. “You’re warm, dry… and still very much alive. That’s more than can be said for old Grelod. Hmm?”

Raisa was immediately cowed and she shifted uncomfortably where she sat. “You know about that?”

The woman shot her a glare through the mask she wore, only her eyes visible to Raisa, “Half of Skyrim knows. Old hag gets butchered in her own orphanage? Things like that tend to get around. Oh, but don’t misunderstand. I’m not criticizing. It was a good kill. Old crone had it coming. And you saved a group of urchins, to boot. Ah, but there is a slight… problem.”

Raisa chose to remain silent at the woman’s short speech, waiting for her to get to the point. What could be so important that she needed to be abducted in the middle of the night, drugged, and taken to the middle of god-knows-where.

“You see, that little Aretino boy was looking for the Dark Brotherhood. For me, and my associates. Grelod the Kind was, by all rights, a Dark Brotherhood contract,” she continued, “A kill...that you stole. A kill you must repay.”

“You want me to murder someone else?” Raisa asked incredulously. “Who?” She was totally flabbergasted at the turn of events. She had just wanted the poor child to return to his normal life. Or rather, what could pass for normal. He would have driven himself mad repeating that horrendous ritual over and over again. She was certain he would have run himself to death before he stopped performing it. She had just wanted the boy to be safe. She never wanted to murder anyone else.

“Well now,” the woman almost purred, “Funny you should ask. If you turn around, you'll notice my guests. I've 'collected' them from...well, that's not really important. The here and now. That's what matters. You see, there's a contract out on one of them, and that person can't leave this room alive. But… which one? Go on, see if you can figure it out. Make your choice. Make your kill. I just want to observe... and admire.”
Raisa decided that this woman was horribly demented. Getting pleasure out of the death of others? She quelled the part of her that argued against her revulsion, a small part that had revelled in the power she had felt when she sunk the arrow into that horrid, licentious woman’s neck. The only thing between that woman and her demise had been Raisa and her compassion. But she had lost control of herself, letting instinct and drive take over, ending the pitiful life before it could do any more harm. And she hated to admit that it had felt good. She remained silent as she thought things over, a seed of anger settling into her stomach, though where the sentiment was directed, she was unsure. Was she mad at Astrid for forcing her to give into her ruthless side? Was she mad at the Aretino boy for his contract, or the dark elf for explaining everything to her and setting her on this dark road? Was she mad at herself for the part that agreed with the snake-like woman on top of the shelves?

“Am I to take your silence as acceptance?” the woman asked impatiently, sensing Raisa’s indecision. “If so, then you know where we stand. Make your kill, and we're square. Repayment of your debt is but a discreet knife thrust away.”

Raisa turned around and faced the other side of the shack, her stomach rolling uncomfortably as she looked at the potential victims. She walked over and crouched in front of the prisoner on her right, a Khajiit by the looks of his bushy tail.

“Whoever this is, clearly we got off on the wrong foot. Ah, but no worries. This is not the first time I have been bagged and dragged. Come now. Whatever the problem, we can talk about it like civilized folk, hmm?” he purred through the sack that had been unceremoniously shoved over his head. Raisa kept her distance, a frown crossing her face.

“Who are you?” she asked bluntly, hoping to spar whatever lives she could.

“Ahhh…” the cat mused, his face turning towards where he had pinpointed her voice, “Vasha, at your service. Obtainer of goods, taker of lives, and defiler of daughters. Have you not heard of me? Perhaps I will have my people carve my name into your corpse, as a reminder.”

“Big talk for someone bound and about to die,” Raisa said shortly, “Just tell me.”

“Don’t you get it?” the Khajiit hissed, “I live in the shadow of death every day. A knife in the doorway, a nocked arrow on every rooftop! If one of my enemies wouldn’t pay to have me killed, I would take it as a personal insult. The real question is, ‘Would someone pay to have me killed… again.’ A day goes by without someone trying to gut me in the street, I get disappointed.”

Raisa stood and considered his words, irritated by the heckling nature of his words. As she made to move on to the next target, the Khajiit added, “Tell you what. You release me, and I promise my associates won’t hunt you down like an animal and butcher you in the street. It’s a win-win.”

She stopped in front of the woman who was constantly voicing her displeasure, “Get these things off me! Cowards! Stealing a woman from her home! For shame!”

“Who are you?” Raisa asked, remaining standing this time as she looked down at the woman.

“None of your damned business who I am!” the woman spat, “If you're going to kill me, just do it already! With Mara as my witness, if I didn't have this hood on right now I would spit right in your face…”

“Would someone pay to have you killed?” Raisa asked the woman firmly.

“Excuse me?” the woman snapped, as if Raisa had insulted her beyond belief, “What kind of
question is that?"

“Just answer the question,” Raisa said. “The sooner you give me what I need to know the sooner you can get the hell out of here.”

“I’m kneeling here with my hands bound and a sack over my head and you have the gall to ask me that? I’m a woman living in Skyrim with six children and no husband. I don’t have the time or the patience to be "nice". Do some people look down on me? Have I made some enemies? You're damn right. What do you think, genius?” the woman spat, the venom in her voice almost tangible.

Raisa turned to speak to the final victim, a large, brutish looking man as the woman muttered under her breath, “I don't have time for this nonsense. I've got a home to keep and children to feed. Now let me out of here!”

“I... I can hear you talking out there. Please, let me go. I've done nothing to you. Is this about that raid last week? I told Holgrim there was no honor in killing sleeping men, but he wouldn't listen! It wasn't my fault, I swear!” he stammered, his head swivelling from side to side nervously.

“Who are you?” Raisa asked. She could sense the woman behind her getting impatient.

“My name is Fultheim. I'm a soldier. Well, mercenary, really. You know, a… a sellsword. I've lived in Skyrim all my life. That's all! I'm a nobody, really. So can't you just let me go?”

“Would someone pay to have you killed?” Raisa asked.

“What?” the man asked, sounding panicked. "Oh gods, I don’t want to die…"

“Just answer me,” Raisa said. “That’s all you need to do.”

“I don't know! I mean, I was a soldier. I've killed people. When I was ordered to. Maybe there were some times... some times I got carried away? But war is war. Right? Nobody could blame me for that. Could they? I mean, I guess it's possible. I've been selling my sword arm for years now. Killed a lot of people. Could be someone wanted revenge. But... But you're not going to kill me. Right?” the man stammered through, trying his best to recall everything. “What did I do? Please, whatever it is, I'm sorry!”

Raisa made her way into the center of the room, thinking things over. She drew her bow—grateful that the woman had allowed her to keep her things when she was abducted. She looked at the three victims, recalling the words that they had said, their tone, how they treated her. She didn’t want to be in this position. It wasn't where she was meant to be. And yet she had been treated as the scum of the earth regardless of how gently she spoke to them. She nocked an arrow and drew it back before allowing it to fly directly into the angry woman’s face. However, before the woman behind her could even start to muse over the choice, Raisa drew another arrow and shot the Khajiit before stowing the bow. She couldn’t be certain of her choices, but she was confident that the other two would better serve the void than they would anyone else in Skyrim.

“Hmm. The fearless wife and mother, and the underhanded Khajiit. Had to be one of them, right? Interesting choice,” the woman smiled, satisfaction clear in her voice.

Raisa remained silent, staring at the still alive barbarian in the corner. He as trembling, and she was still worried that his life was in danger. The woman continued, sounding a bit curious, “Hmph. When most would speak, you listen. You think. You understand that the only thing that matters is you following my orders. To kill.”

“So who was it?” Raisa asked, glaring at the woman, “Who had the contract?”
“Guilt, innocence, right, wrong… Irrelevant. What matters is that I ordered you to kill someone, and you obeyed,” the woman said firmly, sounding just the slightest bit disappointed now.

“So… I’m free to go?” Raisa asked uncertainly.

“Of course. And you’ve repaid your debt, in full. Here's the key to the shack. But why stop here? I say we take our relationship to the next level. I would like to officially extend to you an invitation to join my Family. The Dark Brotherhood. In the southwest region of Skyrim, in the Pine Forest, you'll find the entrance to our Sanctuary. It's just beneath the road, hidden from view. When questioned by the Black Door, answer with the correct passphrase: "Silence, my brother." Then you're in. And your new life begins,” the woman sighed. Her eyes crinkled slightly and one might have thought she was smiling, though Raisa was certain that she was smirking devilishly behind the mask. “I'll see you at home.”

Uncertainly, Raisa glanced back at the bound man, knowing for certain that he would die. She looked up at the woman and asked, “Who are you?”

The woman stared at Raisa for a moment before replying, “Your sister in blood. And death.”

“I meant your name,” Raisa clarified.

“Astrid.”

As it turned out, the abandoned shack that Astrid had stolen Raisa away to was quite close to Solitude, but to Raisa’s relief. She would be able to make it to meet Malborn and Delphine in plenty of time. As she hiked up the massive hill towards Solitude, she took a moment to admire the natural structure of it all. A large palace stood on an outcrop of rock that created a massive, natural archway over the inlet below where the docks spread outward into the water. The rest of the city sprawled along top the archway and rambled down onto the mountainside. It would have been a beautiful sight, if Raisa had not been so distracted by the events at hand.

However, all aspects of beauty seemed to disappear as Raisa entered the city to see a crowd gathered at the gates, watching what appeared to be an execution. A small child tugged on her father’s arm, looking up at the man with a confused expression. “They can’t hurt uncle Roggvir!” she exclaimed. “Tell them be didn’t do it!”

“Positions!” a guard captain shouted. Raisa was filled with a sudden sense of sadness and fear. She knew what the man on the block must have been going through. The thoughts that plagued his mind about how his life had led him to this exact moment, this particular death.

“Svari, you need to go home and stay there until your mother comes,” the man nearby said, shaking his daughter off and pushing her away from the crowd quickly.

“You should tell her that her uncle is scum that betrayed his High King. Best she know now, Addvar,” a woman snapped rudely at the man, disdain clear in her tone. The pair continued to bicker slightly as the execution proceeded.

“Roggvir. You helped Ulfric Stormcloak escape this city after he murdered High King Torygg. By opening that gate for Ulfric you betrayed the people of Solitude,” the guard captain sentenced.

“There was no murder! Ulfric challenged Torygg. He beat the High King in fair combat!” the accused man, Roggvir, exclaimed, sounding resigned to his fate, though desperate to convey his belief. “Such as our way! Such as the ancient custom of Skyrim, and all Nords!”
And with that the man got down on his knees, placed his head on the block, and was executed before the city for something that may or may not have been a true crime. This was why Raisa was so adamant about ignoring the civil war. It turned families against one another, caused unrest where none need be. She had almost let Ralof convince her that it would be good to choose sides, to choose the Stormcloaks. She had every reason to hate the empire, but as a man, Ulfric had never earned her respect or loyalty. He challenged the High King to fair combat, and yet he did not win in a fair way. Had the man been a practitioner of the way of the Voice as Ulfric was, Raisa could understand claims that it was fair combat. But Torygg wasn’t, and it had not been.

Raisa sighed and walked away with the crowd, stepping into the Winking Skeever, wondering at the name of the establishment vaguely as she made her was through the large room to meet her contact. She spotted the wood elf sitting along, seemingly seep in his cups, munching on a fine bit of salmon steak as he did so. “Our mutual friend sent me,” she sighed, sitting down in the chair opposite him.

“Really?” the elf asked skeptically after taking a moment to look her over, “You're who she picked? I hope she knows what she's doing. Here's the deal. I can smuggle some equipment into the Embassy for you. Don't plan on bringing anything else with you. The Thalmor take security very seriously. Give me what you can't live without, and I'll make sure it gets into the Embassy. The rest is up to you.”

“I’m ready now, actually,” Raisa said, handing over the items she needed to smuggle in. “Here’s what I’ll be needing.”

“Excellent. I’ll make sure this gets there safely,” Malborn said before standing up. “But remember, we’ve never met before. I have no idea who you are.” And with that he was gone. Raisa waited a short while longer before making her way out of the city and down to the farm she had passed on her way up. As she walked around, Delphine approached her, her arms crossed. “Have you given Malborn the gear you want to smuggle into the embassy?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” Raisa said. “He’s all set.”

“Good,” Delphine said sounding satisfied with the work so far. “I have your invitation to the party. But the only way you're going to get past the guards is if they really believe you're an invited guest. Which means you need to look the part, and not be armed to the teeth. Here, put this on. When you're ready, I'll keep the rest of your gear safe until you get back. You'll only have what Malborn smuggled in for you, plus whatever you can pick up inside.”

Raisa reluctantly took the set of clothes that Delphine offered her and ducked into the silo with the grinding stone and changed quickly into the party outfit. She walked out feeling like a rather puffed up milk-drinker. Definitely a good disguise.

“Hmm,” Delphine said thoughtfully, looking at Raisa critically, “I guess that will have to do. You should pass for a real guest, at least until you open your mouth. Ready to board the carriage to the embassy?”

Raisa nodded, thought she didn’t really feel ready to get moving. “I’m ready. Keep the rest of my things safe for me, will you?”

“Don't worry, it will all be waiting for you when you get back. Just make sure you get back out of there alive with the information we need. Good luck,” Delphine said, giving Raisa what seemed to be a genuine smile as she made her way into the carriage, stepping up and sitting down for the journey up the mountain and into the snowy fortress of the Thalmor.
As Raisa stepped out of her carriage and looked up at the daunting stone villa that was the Thalmor embassy, a drunken man off to the side exclaimed at her appearance saying, “Ah! A fellow latecomer for Elenwen's little soiree. And arriving by carriage, no less! I salute you, sir! My lateness is due more to getting lost on the way up this gods-forsaken mountain than to any desire to actually arrive late. I prefer to arrive early. Often the day before the party. So as not to miss out on any of the drinking. There's not enough drinking in the world today, wouldn't you agree?”

Raisa smiled and laughed at the man before turning to face the Thalmor wizard that was acting as a bouncer at the entrance to the lodge. “Welcome to the Thalmor Embassy,” the man said, his voice soft and drawling, his words elongated and almost snide sounding, as if he viewed her disdainfully. But then, Raisa remembered, that was how all elves seemed to address her, regardless of their stature. “Your invitation, please.”

Raisa produced the invitation, keeping her mouth shut, remember Delphine’s snide comment about giving herself away. The Thalmor read it over before handing it back to her with a curt nod, “Thank you, madam. Go right in.”

Behind her, she heard the drunken man dealing with the bouncer, “Now then, here’s my invitation. I don’t have a poisoned dagger strapped to my thigh, et cetera, et cetera…”

“I’m just doing my duty, sir,” the Thalmor explained, sounding impatient, “Everything’s in order. Welcome back, sir.”

“Go right on in,” the Thalmor urged the man. “The party has already started.”

“Inside, my friend! Inside!” the man urged as he caught up to Raisa, leading her into the embassy quickly, “Where only the women and drinks are cold!!”

Once inside, the man disappeared, attempting to convince the servers to give him more alcohol. Raisa watched him move away with an amused smirk before taking a few steps inside the party herself. However, she didn’t get very far in the doorway when she was greeted by a tall, suspicious looking elf woman.

“Welcome,” she said, looking Raisa up and down critically. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I am Elenwen, the Thalmor Ambassador to Skyrim. And you are…?”

Raisa had a brief moment of hesitation. It might not be prudent to inform the woman of her name, but at the same time, it would be a mistake to simply avoid the question of identity posed to her. “You’re Elenwen?” she asked, throwing a bright smile of admiration onto her face, “I’ve heard so much about you!”

“Have you?” the woman asked, sounding surprised and aloof. “All good, I trust. But you seem to have me at a disadvantage. I’m afraid I know nothing about you… Please, tell me more about yourself. What brings you to this… to Skyrim?” The way Elenwen looked when she said Skyrim, was how Raisa would imagine a chef would look at a skeever nest in their kitchen.

“Madame Ambassador, I’m so sorry to interrupt…” came Malborn’s voice, and Raisa knew that he was worried Elenwen would discover her.

“What is it Malborn?” the woman snapped, sounding thoroughly irritated by the interruption.
“It’s just that we’ve run out of the Alto wine,” Malborn said timidly, “Do I have your permission to uncork the Arenthia red…?”

“Of course,” Elenwen huffed indignantly, “I’ve told you before not to bother me with such trifles.”

“Yes, Madame Ambassador…” Malborn said, thoroughly cowed as he went to retrieve the wine in question.

The elf turned back to Raisa stiffly, “My apologies. We’ll have to get better acquainted later. Please, enjoy yourself.”

Once Elenwen had moved away to mingle with more important party guests, Raisa approached Malborn under the pretence of ordering a drink from him. “You made it in. Good. As soon as you distract the guards, I'll open this door and we can get you on your way. Let's hope we both live through this day.”

“I’m ready now,” Raisa said. “No use dallying about, is there?”

“Of course,” Malborn said. “Let me see if we have another bottle of that.” He lowered his voice suddenly and said, “I’ll be waiting by the door for everyone to be distracted.”

And so Raisa turned and searched for a suitable distraction. Her eyes fell on the funny drunk man from before and a smile crossed her features. She walked over and sat beside him, taking a drink from one of the serving trays for herself and a spare one for the man, though she trusted he wouldn’t notice it immediately in his drunken stupor.

He looked at her blearily, his eyes not entirely focused, “What does a fellow need to do to get a drink around here?”

“You look thirsty,” Raisa laughed.

“My friend, you are very perceptive!” the man grinned, a snort of a laugh emitting from him as he spoke, “I have a powerful thirst that cannot be slaked! And none of the waiters will bring me a drink. Elenwen must have told them to cut me off, the frigid bitch. Afraid I'll cause another scene, I suppose…”

“Actually, I brought you a drink,” Raisa said, pressing one of the cups into the man’s hands firmly, so that he wouldn’t drop it or spill it on anyone.

“Ah, the one generous soul among a gathering of pinch-pennies and lick-spittles! If there's anything I can ever do for you, do not hesitate to call upon me!” he exclaimed, excitedly slurping at the brandy.

“Actually, there is something you could do for me,” Raisa said quietly.

“Wonderful!” the man exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear, “I can begin to repay your generosity immediately. Say on, friend.”

“I actually need you to cause a scene,” Raisa explained. “Get everyone’s attention for a few minutes.”

“Is that all? My friend, you've come to the right person. You could say that causing a scene is somewhat of a specialty of mine. Stand back and behold my handiwork,” the man giggled, winking at her slightly before standing and making his way to the center of the room. Raisa stood as well and made her way to the outskirts of the room, where no one could notice her. She approached
Malborn as the distraction commenced.

“Attention, everyone! Could I have your attention, please! I have an announcement to make! I propose a toast to Elenwen! Our mistress! I speak figuratively, of course. Nothing could be more unlikely than someone would actually want her in their bed. Although... most of you are already in bed with her! But again... I speak figuratively, of course! Fine, fine. Get your hands off me. I'll be a good boy now. Wouldn't want to offend our Thalmor overlords, would we? Someone bring me a drink, quick!”

By the time his little spiel had ended, Raisa and Malborn were already through the kitchen to the chest were Raisa’s equipment was hidden. Once she made her way inside the forbidden areas of the embassy, Raisa realised that she honestly had no idea about where she was supposed to be going. It wasn’t as if Delphine or Malborn had been able to provide her with a map of the place, though that would have been immensely helpful.

With Ralof’s trusty bow, she managed to shoot down whatever Thalmor soldiers were present in the area and find her way to the Solar. Her pockets were getting quite full of the gold that she found, and she was mildly pleased with the job at that point. Of course, this was just the easy part. Robbing people blind once they’re dead and can’t be bothered is nothing. Robbing someone who could easily catch you is another matter entirely.

After what felt like hours, but was in reality only a few minutes at most, Raisa dispatched a few of the remaining Thalmor guards and managed to acquire a few dossiers on Ulfric Stormcloak, Delphine, and the dragon investigations. Though she was curious about the matter, she did not deem it wise to peruse the writings at that time, choosing instead to stow them away and make her escape.

However, upon entering the dungeon, she found that she had walked in on a torture session, where a man named Etienne was being hurt in exchange for information on a strange man who may or may not have been Esbern. Once the torturer left, Raisa carefully made her way down the stairs to where the man, Etienne, was shackled up. His head head forward limply and he did not look up as she approached, his breathing ragged and his limbs lax as he was painfully supported by the shackles.

“I told you, I don’t know anything else about it…” he said, desperation in his deep voice.

“I’m not here to torture you,” Raisa said quickly, stepping forward to inspect his binds.

He raised his head to look at her in surprise, “What? Who... what do you want then...?”

“No time to explain,” Raisa said quickly, focusing on picking his locks as efficiently as she could. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, sure, okay. Come on, this way. I’ve seen the guards use it to get rid of bodies. It must lead somewhere,” he said quickly, sneaking past her and heading towards a trap door.

“Sounds good,” Raisa said. “I’ll follow you, but we’ll have to part ways immediately, friend.”

“No problem,” he said with a grin, “Thanks for springing me. I owe you. Look me up in Riften if you make it away.”

“Listen up spy,” a loud voice boomed in the room. Etienne and Raisa both froze in place, thankful that they were shrouded in the darkness by the body dump. “You're trapped in here, and we have your accomplice. Surrender immediately or you both die.”
“Never mind it! I’m dead already!” Raisa heard Malborn shout before a swift punch to his gut and a few harsh words silenced him.

Angrily, Raisa pulled her bow from her back and shot the guard holding Malborn before the man rushed down the stairs to meet her, quickly pursued by the remaining two agents. Malborn and Etienne both began attacking the Thalmor agents almost desperately while Raisa fired another set of arrows to incapacitate the soldiers enough that they wouldn’t be much of a struggle for the two prisoners to overcome. Their enemies dispatched, the trio unlocked the sewer and made their way out of the Thalmor Embassy.

“Now the Thalmor will be hunting me for the rest of my life…” Malborn mused bitterly. “I hope it was worth it…” He then began to make his way elsewhere, seeming to wander aimlessly around.

“You didn’t have to help me, so… thanks,” Etienne said, clapping Raisa on the shoulder. “You’re pretty good, you know. Sneaking, lockpicking. You’d make a good guild member. If you’re ever in Riften and need a good word put in for you, you let me know and I’ll see what I can do. I owe you my life, friend.”

Raisa nodded and smiled as the man set off southward, aiming to make it back to Riften sooner rather than later, and hopefully in one piece. Raisa, however, set her sights on Riverwood. She made her way quickly to Solitude and caught the next carriage back to Whiterun, where she stopped briefly to sell a few costly items and fill her purse a bit more before making her way to Riverwood once again.

When she arrived, Delphine was waiting for her anxiously, pacing around her basement endlessly. She glanced up when Raisa plodded down the stairs, thoroughly exhausted once again. “You made it out alive, at least. And your gear is safe in this chest, as promised. Did you learn anything useful?”

“The Thalmor know nothing about the dragons,” Raisa said with a grimace as she handed over the dossiers.

“Really? That seems hard to believe,” Delphine said, eyeing the books skeptically. “You’re sure about that?”

“Why’d you send me in if you weren’t going to believe me?” Raisa snapped impatiently. She was really getting sick of Delphine’s inability to trust her, after all she had done to prove she was in fact trustworthy.

Delphine sighed and shook her head slightly, “You’re right, you’re right. I just… I was sure it must have been them. If not the Thalmor, who? Or… what?”

“I don’t know,” Raisa admitted. “But the Thalmor are looking for someone named Esbern. I heard them torturing one of their prisoners for information on him.”

“Esbern? He's alive?” Delphine asked sounding amazed and thoroughly pleased. “I thought the Thalmor must have got him years ago. That crazy old man… Figures the Thalmor would be on his trail, though, if they were trying to figure out what's going on with the dragons.”

What would the Thalmor want with Esbern?” Raisa asked curiously.

“You mean, aside from wanting to kill every Blade they can get their hands on? Esbern was one of the Blades archivists, back before the Thalmor smashed us in the Great War. He knew everything about the ancient dragonlore of the Blades,” Delphine rattled off almost defensively. “Obsessed
with it, really. Nobody paid much attention back then. I guess he wasn't as crazy as we all thought…”

“So the Thalmor think the Blades know about the dragons…?” Raisa asked with a slight snicker.

“Ironic, right? The old enemies assume that every calamity must be a plot by the other side…” Delphine sighed, practically waxing poetic. “Even so, we've got to find Esbern before they do. He'll know how to stop the dragons if anybody does. Do they know where he is?”

“They seem to think he’s hiding out in Riften,” Raisa said.

“Riften, eh? Probably down in the Ratway, then. It's where I’d go. You’d better get to Riften,” Delphine nodded. “Oh, and when you find Esbern...if you think I'm paranoid...you may have some trouble getting him to trust you. Just ask him where he was on the 30th of Frostfall. He'll know what it means.”

From Riverwood, Raisa did not go to Riften. In fact, she was more than eager to keep well away from Riften. The Thalmor were after her now. And if she was one of their targets, it probably wouldn’t do to lead her directly to another one of them. Particularly one that was apparently extremely important. Instead, she decided to wander towards Falkreath. She couldn’t help but admit that Astrid’s cloak and dagger lifestyle had intrigued her. The fact that an entire brotherhood of assassins existed was baffling. That she had been invited to join them was even more incredible.

But… she couldn’t help but fret over the morality of it all. She had killed three defenseless people in cold blood, no threat to her own life or safety. She had killed them because she was told to, not out of necessity for her own survival. It was purely a carnal act. She couldn’t keep but feel sickened with herself. But at the same time, she was more sickened to discover that she wasn’t sickened enough by the acts. She was calm, collected. She was entirely unbothered by them in her every day life. She had expected that killing Grelod would follow her for years, not disappear in a short matter of days.

In a way, it excited her. And she hated it. She took solace in the fact that it was entirely possible that she would not even be able to find the secret sanctuary that Astrid had described to her. It wasn’t exactly as if Raisa knew the area well. Certainly, she knew nothing. She barely even fully knew the path to Windhelm, and she had made that journey several times now.

And yet, against all odds, Raisa found herself standing in front of a black door, a skull staring straight back at her. A small skeletal body was perched in the carving underneath the skull. On the large skull’s forehead was a red handprint encircled on its forehead. Curious, she stepped forward and placed her her hand on the handprint there, unsure of what motivated her to do so.

Immediately the door came to life, a loud, whispering voice humming, “What is the music of life?”

Raisa jumped back slightly, surprised, though she then replied in a rather quiet voice, “Silence, my brother…”

The door hummed quietly as emitted, “Welcome home,” before shining inward, allowing Raisa access to the sanctuary. Cautiously, she stepped inside, her eyes taking a while to adjust to the dark. The air inside was heavy, as if it carried a great burden apart from the massive mountains the sanctuary was carved out of. She took a deep breath before descending the stairs and making her way into the sanctuary, entirely baffled by the turn of events the Divines had thrown her way.
“Ah,” she heard a sultry voice purr as she entered the front room. Astrid stood across the way, leaning in a doorframe, her mask gone, revealing a beautiful face and soft looking blond hair. “At last. I hope you found the place all right…”

“So what happens now…?” Raisa asked, keeping her distance.

“Well,” Astrid smirked, “what happens now is you start your new life in the Dark Brotherhood. You're part of the Family, after all. This, as you can see, is our Sanctuary. You won't find a safer place in all of Skyrim. So get comfortable.”

Raisa frowned, keeping her thoughts to herself. Astrid watched her for a moment before smiling, “Hmmm... Yes, the silence suits you. Gives you an air of mystery. Now, down to business. I'm arranging a job for you. But in the meantime, go talk to Nazir. He may have some smaller contracts to tide you over. Soon, the Night Mother will arrive. And things around here are sure to get even more interesting. Ah, but one last thing. A welcome home present. The armor of the Dark Brotherhood. May it serve you well in all your… endeavors.”

Astrid nodded towards a set of shelves behind Raisa. She turned and collected the armor, moving to a separate room to change into it. When she came out, Astrid was lounging behind a desk. She approached hesitantly and said, “You said something about the Night Mother… Who is she?”

Astrid smirked slightly and explained, “The Unholy Matron, the Shrouded Lady, the Mistress of the Void. She goes by many names. Ages past, Sithis gave a woman five children. She killed them to win his favor, thus becoming the Night Mother. If you believe that sort of thing. Today, she's...well, she's a skeleton. An ancient corpse. But, more importantly, a corpse that's being brought to this Sanctuary by her Keeper.”

Raisa nodded silently and looked hesitantly further into the sanctuary. Astrid noted her hesitation and said, “Be sure and introduce yourself to your new Family members. They're all very eager to meet you.”
Sanctuary

Raisa stepped further into the sanctuary, her previous misgivings about visiting slowly disappearing. The new red and black armor fit her like a glove and she found herself comfortable in it. The butterflies in her stomach seemed to transform from creatures of a nervous nature to ones of curiosity and excitement. She wondered where this desire welled up from, having only recently been disgusted by death in general.

A green skinned Argonian male was laughing as she entered the large main room of the Sanctuary, looking around in awe. “Again! Again!” he urged, hardly containing his amusement. “Do the part where he tries to buy you some candy!”

“Oh, okay,” a little girl laughed. Raisa was someone taken aback at the sound of the young voice. The girl’s back was to Raisa from where she stood on the outskirts of the group. “Here we go,” the little girl started before switching to a mocking voice of a much older man, “Ooh, you’re such a pretty little girl. Would the sweetie like a sweetie? Oh yes, how about some chocolate?”

She spun slightly and looked at the dark elf woman standing with a smirk on her face, “Oh yes, please kind sir! My mama and papa left me all alone, and I’m so very hungry. I know a shortcut to the candy shop. Through this alley!”

The girl began to turn in a slow circle as she finished out her tale as the old man, “Oh ya, very good. Very good. My it is dark down here. Oh, but you are so beautiful. Such a lovely smile. Your teeth… your teeth! No! Aggghh!!!” At the end she jumped around and faced Raisa and a Redguard man who let out a deep chuckle at the display, and Raisa saw that the girl had soulless black eyes and pointed teeth. An undead child. Figures. At least they weren’t letting any regular child join the Brotherhood.

The group let out a round of laughter and the dark elf commented, “Oh Babette, but you are so wicked…”

“What about you, Festus? How did that last contract turn out?” the Redguard asked, his hands folded.

“As, yes, please, old man. Regale us with your tales of wizardry…” a tall, bearlike man with bare feet mocked, a grin crossing his haggard face.

“Oh, the young and stupid,” an old, cranky sounding man said, looking at the Redguard and the tall man respectively. “Always mocking the experienced and brilliant. My contract went very well, I’ll have you know. Tried a new spell. Little something I’ve been working on in my spare time. Came ‘this’ close to turning that priest inside-out. Damned messy.”

“And what of your latest, Arnbjorn? Something about a Khajiit? Merchant, was it?” the dark elf asked, a smirk on her pointed features.

“Oh! A big doggy chasing a little kitty!” The demon child exclaimed, bouncing around in a somewhat excited nature. “How adorable!” she cooed. The entire group let out a round of raucous laughter at the statement before the bear-like man interrupted it.

“I am not adorable, it was not funny, and he wasn’t a merchant. He was a Khajiit monk, a master of the Whispering Fang style. But now he’s dead… and I have a new loincloth,” the man, though stiff, seemed to have a very dry sense of humor, as everyone erupted in fits of laughter at his words,
though he balked at the child’s descriptions of him.

The group then decided to disband and Raisa found herself standing alone with the Redguard man. He turned to her and looked her up and down briefly before continuing, “So, you’re the newest member of our dwindling, dysfunctional little family. I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

Raisa nodded, not sure how to express what she was thinking; part of her wanted to remain silent, but she knew whatever effect Astrid thought it had would be lost on this man. “I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

“Good. Save the niceties for now. I’m Nazir. And I have no intention of getting invested in someone who may be dead tomorrow. If you’re still breathing in a few weeks, I’m sure we’ll be the best of friends,” the man nodded.

“Astrid said you’d have some work for me,” Raisa said simply, realising that Nazir was not the best conversationalist.

“Eager to get started, are we?” Nazir smirked. “I like that. As it turns out, there are a few lingering we haven't had the chance to complete just yet. And more, dribbling in from time to time. I'll assign them to you as they become available. To be completed at your leisure.”

“Sounds simple enough, I suppose,” Raisa said with a slight frown as she followed Nazir deeper into the Sanctuary.

“It is. These aren't particularly glamorous assassinations, I'll be honest. Don't pay much, either. But they'll keep you busy. Just do them as you're able. There's no real time limit-- the targets aren't going anywhere. You can turn each one in as it's completed, or wait and turn in the whole group when all the targets have been eliminated. Whichever works for you.”

“Lay em on me then,” Raisa said, unsure of where the sudden burst of confidence came from.

“Well then, let's get started. We’ll start you off easy, shall we? I’ve got three available right now. Your targets are the beggar Narfi, an ex-miller named Ennodius Papius, and Beitild, a mine boss. Should be straightforward enough. When you've completed all those, we'll see if I might have some more.”

Raisa nodded and enquired more about where each could be found, discovering that Narfi resided in Ivarstead, Ennodius in Anga’s Mill, and Beitild in Dawnstar. From there she decided that it would be best if she made her way back up into the world above. She needed some fresh air. The presence of death in the Sanctuary was almost unbearable, hanging over each individual like a cloak of darkness.

As she made for the exit, she heard Astrid call her back. Raisa paused and turned to face the woman where she stood in a different doorway. “If any of your contracts take you out towards Riften, I want you to look into selling this useless hunk of junk for me,” the woman said, tossing a small gilded box at Raisa, who— thankfully— caught it. She opened it and saw a peculiar magenta gemstone resting on the soft fabric that lined the box. She nodded and stuffed it into her bag before turning to leave the Sanctuary.

Once outside, she collapsed against a rock, the tight feeling in her chest evaporating. She felt… different… Once she stopped gasping for the open fresh air of Skyrim’s wilds, she felt almost, invigorated, though a heaviness sat in her chest. She thought about the contracts she had been assigned and knew that they needed to be completed. Why was irrelevant. She had been assigned to the task. If she didn’t complete it, she was certain that Astrid and her new brothers and sisters
would have no trouble hunting her down in the slightest. Whatever her path was originally meant to be had changed. She was now a member of the Dark Brotherhood for better or worse. It was time she owned up to that responsibility.

She completed the first two jobs with little trouble, only almost getting caught in Dawnstar as she made the mistake of approaching the woman in the hopes of discovering what on earth had possessed someone to seek a contract ordering her death. Of course, the woman had realized—somehow—that Raisa was an agent of the Dark Brotherhood and turned hostile. Raisa managed to dispatch her, but not before the guards had been alerted. She had managed to sneak away though behind their homes. She’d even managed to nick a horse and be out of the area before any trouble caught up to her.

Considering it was closest to the Sanctuary, Raisa made her way to Ivarstead last, where she easily dispatched the beggar Narfi. It hadn’t taken much. She hadn’t even spoken to the man. Instead, just shooting him in the chest from a distance, making sure to keep herself hidden from any watchful eyes. As he fell down dead, a small weight was lifted off her chest and she, for some unimaginable reason, felt better.

She put away her bow and quickly headed back to Falkreath hold to inform Nazir of her success. And so, her purse full of blood money, she set out on the road towards Riften. She figured that while she was in the area, she might as well pay a visit to Benor, if he was still around then. She wondered what he would think of her new lifestyle. To be fair, he didn’t even know about her original purpose in going to Riften, other than to check out the orphanage to see if it was truly as horrible as the boy from Windhelm had insisted it was. She wondered how long she would be able to deny her association with the murder of Grelod. Benor was a clever man; surely he would have sussed out the truth by then, particularly if he remained in Riften.

Regardless of what job she was doing, her path was urging her back to Riften. First she had accepted a contract to kill a woman in Riften. Then she had rescued Etienne, who offered her help whenever she was in Riften. Then almost immediately after that, Delphine insists that she must go there. And now Astrid had enlisted her in a personal task that led her to Riften. Clearly, she was meant to be in that city. And who was she to deny a Blade, a thief, and a master assassin?
Raisa arrived in Riften, finding it much the same as when she had first arrived; still riddled with crime and vague threats. As she walked along, she spotted Maul standing off to one side, keeping to himself, though at the same time managing to make everyone’s business his own. He caught sight of her and nodded briefly in acknowledgement before she made her way over to him.

“Heard about what you did for Etienne,” he said. “That took some real guts.”

“You said I should come to you if I ever needed any dirt, yeah?” Raisa asked, cutting straight to the chase. She didn’t need to go into any details about her association with the break-ins and robberies at the Thalmor embassy. Least of all in that cesspool of a city.

“That’s right,” Maul said, looking down at her, only vaguely interested in what she had to say.

“Got any dirt on this?” she asked, surreptitiously showing him the unusual gem that Astrid had entrusted to her.

“Only way you could have found one of those is by stealin’ it,” Maul said carefully, eyeing the gem warily. “Guess you’ll fit in around here better than I thought. So what do you want to know?”

“Any idea what it’s worth?” Raisa asked. “I’m supposed to sell it for someone. Don’t wanna get cheated if it’s worth anything good.”

“Do I look like a merchant to you?” Maul asked gruffly, though his tone wasn’t rude, just blunt. “You’re going to have to take that up with Vex in the Thieves Guild. Get in good with them and you might just find her.”

Raisa nodded and tucked the gem way quickly, lest any sneak thieves think they could make an easy target of her. She made her way to the inn and booked herself a room before enquiring about a man named Benor being around at all. The innkeeper, Keerava nodded and informed her that the man was currently staying with Mjoll the Lioness and Aerin in the latter’s home near the entrance of the city. Raisa thanked her and made her way into the market, hoping to find someone who knew anything more about the unusual gem. She wasn’t too eager to get caught up with the Thieves Guild if she could help it.

“Never done an honest day’s work in your life for all that coin you carrying, eh, lass?” an accented voice asked smoothly from behind Raisa as she perused the stalls. She whirled around almost defensively. She looked at the man who stood before her, recognition dawning across her face as she looked him up and down. He dressed fairly nicely for a merchant resident of Riften. So far, Raisa hadn’t seen many people in better dress than ragged tunics and trousers. He had bright red hair that fell down to his shoulders and a decently kept short beard. His silvery eyes looked a dark gray in the light of the day, but as he moved about, they seemed to almost change colors, from silver to green to blue and back again. He had a light smirk on his face, a knowing look.

“I’m sorry what?” Raisa asked, almost standoffishly.

“I’m saying you’ve got the coin, but you didn’t earn a septim of it honestly,” he clarified, confirming what she thought he might have said. “I can tell.”

“My wealth is none of your business,” Raisa said after looking him over a moment, a slightly cold edge to her voice.
“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong, lass. Wealth is my business,” he said this almost cockily. “It’s all about sizing up your mark, lass. The way they walk, what they’re wearing. It’s a dead giveaway… Maybe you’d like an example. A taste, if you will.” He began to lead her across the square to the stall she had seen him at before, when she had first come to Riften. She wondered if he recognised her at all, if that was why he had approached her…

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, picking up one of the bottles that lined the shelves of his stall, pretending to take an interest in it.

“I’ve got a bit of an errand to perform, but I need an extra pair of hands. And in my line of work, extra hands are well-paid,” he said. Raisa didn’t really need any more jobs, though she was intrigued. If this man meant what she thought he might mean, then this could in fact be very profitable. Astrid’s gem would be sold in no time.

“What exactly would I have to do?” she asked, eyeing him warily as he watched her.

“Simple… I’m going to cause a distraction, and you’re going to steal Madesi’s silver ring from a strongbox under his stand. Once you have it, I want you to place it in Brand-Shei’s pocket without him noticing,” he explained, looking at her, his silvery eyes wandering all over her face. She almost regretted removing her hood before she arrived in Riften. She didn’t like the way he looked at her; it was almost as if he was looking straight through her, like he knew what was going through her mind.

“Why?” she asked, turning the bottle over and reading the labels that had hastily been stuck on there.

“There’s someone that wants to see him put out of business permanently. That’s all you need to know. Now, you tell me when you’re ready and we’ll get started,” the man said shortly. She looked at him with a slight frown.

“No. Tell me why,” she said, placing the bottle back on the counter with a dissatisfied frown. He looked at her, a brief expression of exasperation crossing his features before he sighed and relented.

“We’ve been contracted to make Brand-Shei remembers not to meddle in affairs that are not his own,” he explained, careful to avoid being overheard. “Now, since we’re not the Dark Brotherhood, we’re not going to kill him; we’re just going to make sure he sits in the prisons for a few days.”

“You say that so disdainfully,” Raisa commented, observing the look of distaste that had crossed his features before he sighed and relented.

“Killing isn’t really in our line of work. That’s their territory,” he said. “And I can respect that. I just think it takes more skill and tact to force someone out of the game rather than take them out directly.”

She nodded slightly, understanding what he meant a bit. “Then let’s get this show on the road.”

The man smiled and clapped his hands together, having turned to face the crowded marketplace as Raisa walked away, playing the part of the unconvinced customer. “Everyone! Everyone! Gather ‘round! I have something amazing to show you that demands your attention! This way, everyone! Over here! No pushing, no shoving. Plenty of room!”

A crowd began to form around the man’s booth and she set to work, crouching low behind the stall
she had been instructed to rob. She got the ring quickly, keeping an eye out as the man kept the crowds occupied. She closed the cabinet and strongbox quickly before making her way around to the back of the crowd.

“Come on, Brynjolf…” a bored looking man asked impatiently. “What is it this time?”

“Patience, Brand-Shei,” Brynjolf exclaimed, putting a just noticeable emphasis on the man’s name. “This is a rare opportunity, and I wouldn't want you to get left out.”

“That's what you said about the Wisp Essence and it turned out to be crushed Nirnroot mixed with water!” the argonian Madesi scoffed as Raisa snuck around behind Brand-Shei’s stall to place the ring in his pocket, his back facing her as he paid attention to Brynjolf from where he sat.

“Well, that was a simple misunderstanding, but this item is the real thing. Lads and lasses, I give you, Falmerblood Elixir!” Brynjolf pitched almost effortlessly, though the crowd seemed adamantly against him. Raisa crept back to the edge of the crowd and stood straight, making eye contact briefly with Brynjolf, one of her eyebrows raising slightly, the usual half smirk on her face, before she turned and made her way into the inn for a nice hot meal and a pint of strong mead.

Soon enough, the chair across from her slid back and the emptiness was replaced by the handsome failure of a merchant. He smirked at her, a satisfied look glimmering in his chameleon-like eyes, “Looks like I chose the right person for the job. And here you go… your payment, as promised. The way things have been going around here, it's a relief that our plan went off without a hitch.” He placed a small coin purse on the table between them and she took it after a moment of thought, placing it in her bag.

“A relief?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow. “What, did you think I’d screw it up or something?”

“Bah!” he exclaimed, waving a hand dismissively as he leaned back in his chair, “My organization's been having a run of bad luck, but I suppose that's just how it goes. But never mind that, you did the job and you did it well. Best of all, there's more where that came from… if you think you can handle it.”

She looked at him, both eyebrows raised this time, “Is that a challenge, sir?”

“Sir?” he laughed, looking at her expectantly as he waited for her definitive answer.

“I can handle it,” she said firmly, taking a bite from her meal, grateful for good food and at least somewhat decent company. She had yet to really decide on the latter bit.

“Alright, then. Let's put that to the test,” the man chuckled, leaning forward towards her as he explained the situation, “The group I represent has its home in the Ratway beneath Riften… a tavern called the Ragged Flagon. Get there in one piece and we'll see if you really have what it takes.”

With that he rose and made his way out of the inn, hopefully not to continue failing to sell his false elixirs. Although, Raisa found that she was at least a little bit relieved to find that it wasn’t an actual job that he held seriously. He had more lucrative opportunities hidden away.

“Raisa!” a loud shout came from the entryway. She looked up and a felt a grin spreading across her face as Benor came striding towards her. She rose and clasped his arm in a friendly manner, clapping him on the same arm with her free hand.

“It’s good to see you my friend,” Raisa said. “I almost hadn’t expected you to still be here at this point. It’s been a few weeks now, hasn’t it?”
“It has,” Benor nodded. “I been keeping busy round here. Helping Mjoll keep the peace. Almost went home a few times, but she convinced me to stay each time.”

Raisa smiled, “She’s a good woman.”

“That she is,” Benor said almost wistfully. “Strong too. I applied to become a guard here, bout a week and a half ago now. Seems like the money would be decent. And I’d keep busy. You know, for a while I expected that I wouldn’t be seeing you around here again after you left for Windhelm. You ever get that boy’s problems sorted out?”

“Yes, actually, I think I did,” Raisa said with a careful nod. “With any luck he should be here by now, in the orphanage again. I intend to go and check up on him soon. He promised he could come back, and if he hasn’t, I’ll have to go and drag him back here myself.”

“Might as well adopt him, at that rate,” Benor said. “If he’s gonna be that much trouble that you have to go and bring him to the orphanage, you may as well just give the boy a home.”

“Oh, yes,” Raisa nodded. “But that requires a home to go back to and a line of work that pays well enough to support a child. It would require education and stability. No moving around, no more adventuring… My lifestyle… It wouldn’t be ideal for a growing boy… Especially considering the way his life has been going so far.”

“Fair enough,” Benor sighed. “I wouldn’t make much of a father in that sense either. Hell, if you said, ‘Hey, there are some bandits out near Ivarstead,’ I’m be ready for a fight almost immediately I’d drop anything to get out there again.”

“So why don’t you?” Raisa asked. “Other than the fact that you enjoy Mjoll’s company?”

“It’s not an easy life, as I’m sure you know,” Benor said. “Always tired, always hungry, always cold. It’s rough. And I’m not as young as I once was. Can’t always keep doing that. Besides, my life wasn’t going anywhere in Morthal. The guards wouldn’t have me and odd jobs just barely kept me going. Here I can serve a real purpose for a while. Hopefully.”

“Well, I’m glad for you,” Raisa nodded, smiling at her friend. “Sadly, whatever purpose I chase after seems to land me into trouble. And that trouble led me across Skyrim and back straight to here. I think I might try and stick around a while; see what’s going on… Figure out why the hell I’m getting stuck back here every time something happens on the other side of Skyrim.”

“Maybe this is your home now?” Benor suggested before downing the ale he’d ordered and shaking his head, “I’ve got to get back out there. Keep an eye on the streets. The bloke Maul’s been training me up to be more observant. Says I could do well under the Black-Briars.”

Raisa nodded and watched him leave, a small smile on her face. At least someone’s life was making sense these days. She finished her meal alone and in silence before standing and stretching a bit. She figured there would be plenty of sneaking in her very near future, and if she was being forced to join the Thieves Guild to get a little dirt on some weird little gem, she might as well get started on it immediately.
I got my wisdom teeth removed a few days ago. Have another chapter because I'm feeling not great. And because I'm pretty sure I'm a week behind my original schedule. Also because it's a shorter one as well. Also on a side note, sorry if there are some random switches between spelling variations (s instead of z, ou instead of just o); my computer likes to change words to the UK half of the time and I don't always catch it.

Raisa entered the Ragged Flagon with a small sense of relief. She hadn’t been expecting to have to navigate the maze that the Ratway turned out to be for so long. Nor did she expect to have Skeevers knowing at her ankles every step she took. She had expected there to be ruffians and beggars living down in the ratway though, and she felt bad about killing them at first, attempting to sneak by silently and stealthily. That all changed when the first person she met tried to shove his axe into her skull. After that, she didn’t much care either way. She was just passing through; she didn’t even want to be there. But she had to.

“Give it up Brynjolf,” a man sighed, cleaning a mug behind the counter. A few members of the Guild were scattered around the room, lounging in chairs or leaning against large crates, all of them watching Brynjolf. “Those days… those days are over, my friend.”

“I’m telling you, this one’s different,” Brynjolf insisted. Raisa felt her face flush from where she stood, leaning against a stack of crates just out of sight of the group. She figured there must be some sort of shrouding spell on her armor for them to not have noticed her enter the place yet, or to hear her walking along. It was a cavernous room; there should definitely have been some echoes.

“We’ve all heard that one before, Bryn,” a man who looked spectacularly like Maul said with a shake of his head, “Quite kidding yourself.”

“It’s time to face the truth, old friend,” the man behind the counter said with a pointed look. “You, Vex, Mercer… you’re all part of a dying breed. Things are changing. And it isn’t looking good.”

“Dying breed, eh?” Brynjolf asked, a laugh escaping him. “Well what do you call that then?” Here he gestured to where Raisa was standing. She remained where she was, leaning against the crates silently, looking back at the astonished Guild members with some small sense of accomplishment and satisfaction working its way through her mind.

Brynjolf approached her and stood with his hands on his hips, a wide smile on his face, “Well, well… color me impressed, lass. I wasn’t sure I’d ever actually see you again!”

“You belie yourself,” Raisa said with a roll of her eyes, crossing her arms, “Getting here was easy.”

“Reliable and headstrong? You're turning out to be quite the prize!” there was a surprisingly playful tone to his voice when he spoke to her. He continued, “So… now that I've whetted your appetite with our little scheme at the market, how about handling a few deadbeats for me?”

“Deadbeats?” Raisa asked, raising an eyebrow curiously. “What’d they do to get on your bad
“They owe our organization some serious coin and they’ve decided not to pay,” Brynjolf said. “I want you to explain to them the error of their ways.”

“Sounds good,” Raisa replied without much thought. She mentally cursed herself; this was not her purpose in coming here. But the man before her was rather persuasive, even if he wasn’t actively trying to sway her into a life of crime. She was already neck deep in murders; thievery wouldn’t exactly be a step up from there. “Who are they?”

“Keerava, Bersi Honey-Hand and Haelga. Do this right and I can promise you a permanent place in our organization,” Brynjolf said.

“So what’s the catch?” Raisa asked. “How do you want me to handle it?”

Brynjolf shook his head, “Honestly, the debt is secondary here. What’s more important is you get the message across that we aren’t to be ignored. A word of warning, though… you seem like a… capable lass. I don’t want any of them killed. Bad for business, you see…”

Raisa quirked an eyebrow but nodded and conceded saying, “Consider it done.”

“Good. If you need any details on your marks, I’ll be here,” Brynjolf said.

“One last question,” Raisa said, putting a hand on his arm to stop him as he turned away. He looked down at her hand in surprise, clearly not expecting the contact, though he didn’t move to smack it away. He looked up at her expectantly and she continued, “Will I get a cut?”

His face broke into a jovial smile and he laughed slightly before speaking as if it were obvious, “Of course you’ll get a cut. We take care of our own here. Now, get going.”

“Oi, no,” she said, following him to a table. He looked at her with an amused expression as she sat down across from him. “Gimme the information on Haelga. If I’m gonna do this, I might as well do it right.”

“Very well,” Brynjolf said, smothering his smile behind a flagon for a moment before speaking again. “She’s a devout follower of Dibella and dotes over the statue to the Divine which she keeps at the Bunkhouse. Use it as leverage and she’ll cave.”

“What about Bersi?” she asked, taking mental note of everything he told her.

“He’s as pig-headed a man as you’ll ever find,” Brynjolf said. “Never liked him much, myself. The key is that ugly dwarven urn in his shop. Smash that thing to bits and he’ll change his attitude in no time.”

“Keerava?” Raisa asked. “I’d really not like to piss her off, considering I give her good business these days.”

“She’s stubborn, but she’s got a soft spot for her family. Talk to Talen-Jei at the Bee and Barb and see if you can get something out of him. They’re… well-acquainted, if you catch my meaning,” Brynjolf said, waggling his eyebrows slightly before adding, “And if you get these things done right, you won’t have to worry about paying Keerava for room and board; you’ll have a place here in the Cistern with us.”

Raisa nodded for a moment before standing and excusing herself. She had work to do. Up above, she followed Brynjolf’s instructions to the letter. One priceless urn destroyed, one statue held for
ransom, one empty threat at the distant family. She had three new purses added to her collection, though she made a point of keeping them separate; it wouldn't do to accidentally give her own money over to the Guild. What a waste, considering she didn't plan on staying with them long. Just long enough to sell Astrid’s gem and then she was back to the Sanctuary.

She tossed the three bags onto the table in front of Brynjolf, disrupting him from his reading. He looked vaguely troubled, but it was none of her concern so she sat down across from him with a sigh and opened a bottle of mead with a satisfying pop.

“So, job’s done and you even brought the gold,” Brynjolf smiled wryly. “Best of all you did it clean. I like that. Dumping bodies and keeping the guards quiet can be expensive.”

Raisa felt a wave of pride well up inside her, though she kept herself calm on the outside. Why should he know that his praise was a welcome thing. She was just there to get the job done, and then she would be gone. No need for her to start making friends.

“That’s all they owed us,” she said, nodding towards the bag, irritated mildly with her self for referring to the Guild and herself as ‘us.’ She wasn’t one of them. Not really.

“Well done,” Brynjolf nodded. “And it would seem I owe you something in return. Here you go, I think you’ll find these quite useful, if I do say so myself.” He slid a set of three potions across the table towards her. She raised an eyebrow, looking at the three potions. He smirked, “Not the kind of payment you were expecting then? The red one’s health, the maroon one’s a poison, and the blue one’s a magica poison. Just in case.”

“What’s next then?” Raisa asked, wanting for him to keep talking. She rather liked it when he spoke. He had a pleasant sort of air about him. He wasn’t rough and irritable like Benor. He had an easy laugh and seemed to smile a lot, though she could tell there was something that troubled him more than most. His eyes were sad, though not mirthless.

“Well, judging from how well you've handled those shopkeepers, I'd say you've done more than simply prove yourself.” He looked at her carefully, his gaze steady and sincere, “We need people like you in our outfit.”

She clucked her tongue almost thoughtfully before responding, far more playfully than she intended to, “Well, I suppose if there’s more gold involved, I might be able to stick around a bit longer.” She rolled her eyes slightly and looked at him, a friendly smirk on her face.

“That’s the spirit,” he laughed. She wasn’t sure if he was laughing at her or with her, or which one of the two would be a better option in the long run. “Larceny’s in your blood… the telltale sign of a practiced thief. I think you'll do more than just fit in around here.”

“If you spoke like that to all the new recruits I’m sure your organization would be a much cheerier place,” Raisa said with a chuckle. She looked at her hands for a moment and sat up straighter, less lounging, more business. “Before I go I have to ask…”

“What’s on your mind?” Brynjolf asked patiently, though the pair of them knew exactly what she was going to ask about.

“Word is your outfit isn’t doing too well recently,” she sighed. “True?”

“We've run into a rough patch lately, yes,” Brynjolf admitted. However, he simply smiled once more and spoke with his shockingly charming voice soothingly, “But it's nothing to be concerned about. Tell you what: you keep making us coin and I'll worry about everything else. Fair enough?”
“That was the politest, ‘mind your own damn business,’ I’ve ever received,” Raisa smiled wryly, amusement plain in her voice, “But fair enough. I can do that.”

“Now, if there are no more questions, how about following me and I’ll show you what we’re all about down here,” Brynjolf said, rising from his chair and walking towards the back of the room. Raisa bit back a grin and rose from her chair, following him back through a secret passage hidden by a cupboard eagerly. She knew she would be kicking herself for this soon enough.
“Mercer?” Brynjolf called to a man standing at the center of the large, dome-shaped room. Raisa trailed behind her guide slightly as she looked around. There were a few beds scattered around the room as well as a few other skill-based areas, such as archery and alchemy. At the center of the room, and surrounding the majority of the circumference was a pool of water, as there was with almost every part of the Ratway. A set of four bridges arched up and met in a large circular platform at the middle of the pool. This was their destination.

A haggard and rude looking man stood at the center. He had been making his way across the room to an important looking desk area. He turned to face then, a thoroughly disgruntled look on his face as they approached. “This is the one I was talking about,” Brynjolf said. The man’s face showed no recognition and Brynjolf’s smile faltered slightly, “Our new recruit.”

“This better not be another waste of the Guild's resources, Brynjolf,” the man grumbled irritable before rounding on Raisa, “Before we continue, I want to make one thing perfectly clear. If you play by the rules, you walk away rich. You break the rules and you lose your share. No debates, no discussions… you do what we say, when we say. Do I make myself clear?”

She glanced at Brynjolf who nodded almost imperceptibly before she looked Mercer square in the face, “Crystal.”

“Good. Then I think it’s time we put your expertise to the test,” he said with a somewhat mocking sneer.

“Wait a moment,” Brynjolf frowned, putting up a hand to halt Mercer briefly, “You’re not talking about Goldenglow, are you? Even our little Vex couldn’t get in there.”

“You claim this recruit possesses an aptitude for our line of work. If so, let her prove it. Goldenglow Estate is critically important to one of our largest clients. However, the owner has suddenly decided to take matters into his own hands, and shut us out. He needs to be taught a lesson,” Mercer snapped, causing Brynjolf to back off rather quickly. “Brynjolf will provide you with the details.”

“Mercer,” Brynjolf said firmly as the man moved to return to his pervious occupation. He turned and glared at Brynjolf impatiently. “ Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Hmm?” Mercer asked distractedly. “Oh, yes… Since Brynjolf assures me you’ll be nothing but a benefit to us, then you’re in. Welcome to the Thieves Guild.”

Brynjolf smiled and threw an arm around Raisa’s shoulders, steering her back the way they had come, “Welcome to the family, lass. I’m expecting you to make us a lot of coin, so don’t disappoint me.”

“So how do I get my cut?” she asked, her bright mood turned sour by the rude encounter with the Guild master.

“Simple. Do as you're told and keep your blade clean. We can't turn a profit by killing. You should talk with Delvin Mallory and Vex. They know their way around this place and they'll be able to kick some extra jobs your way. Oh, and talk to Tonilia in the Flagon… she'll set you up with your new armor,” he said, releasing her.

“I like my current armor,” Raisa said with a small frown.
“Bit ostentatious for a thief, though, innit?” Brynjolf frowned, taking the moment as an excuse to look her up and down carefully. Not that she really minded.

“Like your armor is any less well known,” Raisa said. “At least they won’t be expecting me to steal from them in this.”

“I mean, I suppose,” Brynjolf shrugged half-heartedly. “It does suit you, lass.”


If he had been flustered by her turning his comment against him, he didn’t show it, “Goldenglow Estate is a bee farm; they raise the wretched little things for honey. It's run by some smart-mouth wood elf named Aringoth. We need you to teach him a lesson by burning down three of his estate’s hives.”

“And the catch is?”

“The catch is that you can't burn the whole place to the ground. That important client Mercer mentioned would be furious if you did,” Brynjolf said.

“Makes sense,” Raisa nodded.

“Aye, the last thing we want to be doing is crossing our clients,” he continued.

“What should I do about Aringoth?” Raisa asked, a frown crossing her features. If there was a contact on the man, that would be an entirely separate matter and she could kill two birds with one stone, but of course, this didn’t seem to be an option.

“Maven prefers that Aringoth remains alive, but if he tries to stop you from getting the job done, kill him. The Guild has a lot riding on this. Don't make me look foolish by mucking it up,” he said firmly.

Raisa bristled at the comment and shot the tall man a glare. There was no need for that sort of talk. She wasn’t going to muck anything up. That wasn’t her way. She was efficient and tactful, like a dagger in the dark. “I want to know what happened last time then, since there’s every chance I could muck this up for you,” Raisa said snappishly, crossing her arms while she waited for an explanation.

Brynjolf looked reasonably guilty for the idle comment but continued nonetheless, “Goldenglow Estate brought in a mountain of gold for the Guild. You could almost call it our sweetest deal. Then out of the clear blue, Aringoth stops sending us our cut. Mercer was… well, angry, to put it kindly. So we send in Vex to find out he's hired a bunch of mercenaries to guard the place.”

“Wait, mercenaries?” Raisa asked, sounding slightly surprised. “Not the regular Riften guards?”

“Aye,” Brynjolf nodded grimly. “Aringoth sent the city guard packing and fortified the entire island. In fact, Vex barely made it out of there alive. You should talk to her about it before you go.”

“That was actually one of my original reasons for coming to Riften,” Raisa said. “I need something appraised and I was directed to her.”

Brynjolf nodded, “Well she’s the blonde Breton back in the Flagon with eyes like daggers and daggers what could slash you before you even know you’re in trouble. Easy goes it, lass.”
Raisa nodded and made to head back into the Flagon before Brynjolf grabbed her arm and pulled her back a moment, pointing across the Cistern to a rough looking wooden ladder, “If you ever need a quick way in… or out, lass. And you watch yourself on that island. Those mercenaries don’t take prisoners…”

“One last thing,” she asked before she turned to leave.

“Yes?” Brynjolf asked, raising an eyebrow slightly at her inquisitive nature.

“Is Mercer always that…?” she struggled to find a single word to describe the man that wasn’t inherently offensive.

“We’ve been having a rough time, lass, like I told you before,” Brynjolf said, shaking his head slightly. “He’s got more on his plate than any of us. It seems we just caught him on a bad day.”

“You mean there’s days when he’s not being so…”?

“I mean that I’ve known him for years now, and he’s always been a solid leader,” Brynjolf said. “He may not be the most… sensitive of people, but he makes sure the jobs get done and they get done right.”

“So I take it he wasn’t pleased about Goldenglow?”

“To say the least,” Brynjolf grimaced, “But now we’ve got you to give it a go. Don’t disappoint me lass, or I might have to leave you to deal with Mercer on your own.”

“You wouldn’t…” Raisa muttered, narrowing her eyes at him slightly.

“Oh, I might be tempted,” he said, leaning forward slightly, returning the look she was giving him, “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“You won’t have to wait and see because I’m going to do this job perfectly.”

“And if you don’t?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

And with that, Raisa turned with a smirk on her face and a single eyebrow raised., heading back into the flagon to talk to Vex about the assignment, but more importantly, about the gem. She was really starting to miss the Sanctuary, to her great surprise.

She approached the blond woman leaning against the stack of crates almost hesitantly, “I heard you ran into trouble at Goldenglow…”

“Hmph, yeah, I did,” the woman snapped, glaring at Raisa as she inspected the fresh meat of a guild member. “That wood elf s’wit… he’s a lot smarter than I expected. Can you believe that fetcher had more than tripled the guard? There must have been eight of them in there. It was like he was daring us to come and get him.”

“Any tips?” Raisa asked hopefully.

“Well, there's an old sewer tunnel that dumps into the lake on the northwest side of the island. That's how I slipped in there. Should still be unguarded,” Vex offered.

“While I’m here, you mind giving me a read on this?” Raisa asked, offering the stone to Vex.
“Been a while since I've seen one of those. What you've got there is a Stone of Barenziah,” she explained, looking at the stone curiously, “And before you ask, no, it isn’t worth anything. At least, not like this it isn’t. The stone was pried off of Barenziah's ceremonial crown by a thief in order to cover his tracks.”

“How many are there?”

“I think there were twenty-four in all. Most people keep them as a curiosity. Some of the Guild members have tried to locate them over the years, but they haven't been successful… well, until now. Look, I only buy things I can turn around quickly for a profit. And no one wants those stones unless they have the whole set. Tell you what, if you find the rest of them, talk to me again. Otherwise, keep it and maybe it'll bring you luck,” she said, shoving the stone back at Raisa quickly. So much for turning over a profit.

She stowed the stone away again, decided that it might be best to keep the news from Astrid. Instead, she would make something up. Tell her that it wasn’t worth much. Give her two hundred septims for it and keep it hidden away for herself. If she found anymore stones along her travels, she was certain she could get a better price for them, even if Vex wasn’t interested in buying any from her. She made her way out of Riften quickly, making her way towards Goldenglow. She decided that regardless of the job, she would complete it and let it simmer for a while. She would head back to the Sanctuary in Falkreath and bide her time. Eventually, she would need to go back, but she couldn’t spend all her time away anymore. Despite her previous misgivings, the Dark Brotherhood was beginning to feel like home to her, her brothers and sisters almost like family. Almost.

She surveyed the area, thoughtfully, deciding that it would be best to save burning the hives until after she had gotten what she needed from Aringoth. That way she could make her getaway there and head straight back to the Dark Brotherhood instead of waiting for the mercenaries to calm down enough for her to sneak in.

She made her way quietly through the house, ducking through rooms and moving almost painfully slowly, her heart pounding in her ears out of fear from being discovered. She was almost caught more than once, but she managed to conceal herself long enough for the mercenaries to figure it was nothing more than just their imagination. She picked the lock on Aringoth’s room, hearing the pistons snap into place, a sound almost painfully loud to her on-edge nerves. She glanced around at the thug in the room, but he continued to sit at the table, reading his book disinterestedly. She quietly opened the door and slipped inside, closing the doors silently behind her. She turned and faced the room, noticing immediately that the elf was nowhere to be see. She crept forward and pressed herself up against the closest wall before peering around it. She saw the man crouching with his back to the door, hidden behind the same bookshelf she was using for cover.

She swore inwardly but crept forward. Pickpocketing wasn’t her greatest skill, especially considering the man was so on edge and defensive. She was entirely exposed where she stood, but it wasn’t as if she had much of a choice now that she was there. What she wouldn’t give for some invisibility potions…

She spotted the key hanging on a loop attached to his belt. She cursed her luck and reached forward, gently untying the strap, praying the man wouldn’t see her. And by some miracle, he didn’t. She pulled the key away slowly and slunk back to the entryway to the door, where she slipped the key into her boot before creeping out again, a bit less carefully than the first time. From there she made her way into the basement and got into the safe no problem, satisfied with her progress so far. From there she exited through the sewers, as Vex suggested she do. She popped up near enough to the hives that she was able to steal over carefully.
Luckily she’d managed to convince Festus to teach her a few spells in her time at the Sanctuary, and so instead of grabbing a torch, she simply whispered the incantation and blew on the spark that appeared in her hand until it became a flame. Carefully, she set fire to three of the hives. She remembered that Brynjolf had been very insistent over that. She then stole away and hid herself, knowing that the mercenaries were going to be on their way to investigate.

Where she hid, she managed to get a good look at the proceedings. The fires were bright and grew quickly. With a seed of horror in her stomach, she watched as two another of the hives caught fire before the mercenaries were able to quell the violent flames. She cursed inwardly, knowing this would cost her in the end. Still though, she was done until she needed to speak with Brynjolf, which, given the circumstances, she wasn’t too eager to do. And so instead of mulling over what would be interpreted as a failure on her part, she made her way back towards Ivarstead, hoping to reach the Sanctuary before she was missed.
As Raisa scurried down the stairs into the Sanctuary, she was surprised to see that no one was present in the main room to greet her. Usually Astrid was there and would comment on the work she’d done, but this time the room was empty, and tense, muffled voices were floating up the stairs. She made her way down into the main chamber, curiosity written all over her face.

“But the Night Mother is mother to all! It is her voice we follow!” a shrill voice was nervously trilling, the words echoing throughout the chamber unchallenged, “Her will! Would you dark risk disobedience? And surely… punishment?” A jester of sorts was talking, though he seemed fully mad. His eyes a golden brown darting around the room suspiciously, his hands twitching slightly as he hopped from foot to foot.

“Keep talking, little man, and we’ll see who gets ‘punished,’” Arnbjorn growled, stepping towards the jester threateningly. The man jumped back a bit, towards the large crate that stood behind him.

“Oh be quiet, you great lumbering lapdog,” Festus snapped, stepping forward to smooth over the tense moment Arnbjorn caused. “The man has had a long journey. You can at least be civil. Mister Cicero, I for one am delighted you and the Night Mother have arrived. Your presence here signals a welcome return to tradition.”

“Oh what a kind and wise wizard you are!” the Jester Cicero trilled, a pleased look on his impish face. “Sure to earn our Lady’s favor!”

“You and the Night Mother are of course welcome here, Cicero,” Astrid said, her smooth, convincing voice sounding somewhat strained. “And you will be afforded the respect deserving of your position as Keeper. Understood… husband?” At this Arnbjorn grumbled distastefully but nodded curtly his agreement. And though he ceased his verbal protestations, it didn't stop him sending murderous looks towards the newcomer.

“Oh, yes yes yes!” the jester cackled, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“But make no mistake,” Astrid snapped, glaring at the jester suddenly and almost territorially. “I am the leader of this Sanctuary. My word is law. Are we clear on that point?”

“Oh yes, mistress,” the Jester bowed, a devilish grin crossing his demented face, “Perfectly! You’re the boss.”

Slowly the crowd dispersed to their usual spots around the Sanctuary, leaving the jester to look after his crate. Raisa remained where she was in the stairwell as Astrid approached her, “Ah, there you are. Good. I was done speaking to that muttering fool anyway. We’ve got some business to discuss.”

“Do you have a contract for me?” Raisa asked, a small frown of surprise on her face.

“I do indeed,” Astrid confirmed, leading the way up the stairs again. “You must go to the city of Markarth, and speak with the apothecary's assistant. You'll probably find her in the Hag's Cure, when the shop is open. The girl's been running her mouth, wants an ex-lover killed. She's apparently performed the Black Sacrament. Her name is Muiri. I need you to talk to her, set up the contract, and carry it out.”

“Anything else? Raisa asked, unsure of how exactly she should get to Markarth. It was a long journey and she hated travelling alone. She’d gotten into a habit of being alone again, and it wasn’t
a habit she particularly enjoyed having.

“Just do whatever the contact wishes. Be professional, represent us well, and get the job done. Since it’s your first contract, I’ll let you keep whatever Muiri pays. She’ll be generous, I’m sure. They always are,” Astrid said. “If you like, I’m certain your brothers and sisters would love to discuss the matter further with you. It makes for good… bonding…”

Raisa nodded and made her way back down into the main area. She considered who to ask, deciding that it would be good to chat with Gabriella, the dark elf. The young woman always tended to be nice and respectful to Raisa, regardless of how new she was. The first time they had spoken it hadn’t gone terribly well, but once the first set of contracts had gone well, the elf had warmed up to Raisa in no time.

“Any advice on my current contract?” Raisa asked, sitting down at the table behind where Gabriella was mixing potions at the Alchemy lab.

“You’re being sent to meet with the contact directly, is that correct?” Gabriella asked curiously, “What a most unusual occurrence. Astrid usually performs this duty herself. I can only assume she wants to test the full breadth of your abilities. So. Be polite, and professional, and represent us well.”

“You’re going to the Hag’s Cure, right?” Babette asked lightly. “It’s a good shop. You might find some useful items there, if you know what to look for. Never pass up the chance to buy a good potion or poison.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Raisa nodded.

“Nonsense,” Festus grumbled from the arcane enchanter. “Just because you’re now a professional assassin, don’t think you have to skulk around in the shadows like a skeever and stab people. That’s Thieves Guild territory if ever I saw it. Just do what I do.”

“And what’s that?” Gabriella asked, glancing across the room at the man in amusement.

“Walk up to your target, introduce yourself, melt their skin off, and then run like the wind,” Festus rattled off, causing all three of the girls to laugh. “Works every time.”

“So, what do you all think about Cicero?” Raisa asked, “And the Night Mother?”

“Without the Night Mother, there is no Dark Brotherhood. The Matron deserves our unwavering support and respect. Though I admit, I find her Keeper a bit too exuberant for my liking,” the else said, crinkling her nose in dislike.

“Two hundred years ago, I would have lain down my life for the Unholy Matron. But that age has long since passed. Astrid is my matron now,” Babette expressed, glancing at Gabriella with the slightest hint of a frown.

“I for one think that their arrival is the best thing that’s happened to this Sanctuary in years,” Festus said gruffly, “Don’t get me wrong, Astrid is an effective leader, but we’ve been rudderless for too long. Scrounging for contracts, abandoning the Tenets. The Dark Brotherhood has been reduced to a group of common cutthroats. Frankly, it’s embarrassing.”

Raisa nodded thoughtfully.

“And what about you?” Babette asked, eyeing Raisa curiously.
“Me?” Raisa asked, surprised. “I don’t know. I haven’t formed an opinion yet. I haven’t really met Cicero yet, and I know next to nothing about the Night Mother. It wouldn’t be right for me to make an opinion based off nothing. That’s why I asked you all what you thought.”

“So you prefer to listen, eh?” Festus cackled, causing Babette to snicker as well.

“I have noticed you prefer to ask the questions than be asked yourself,” Gabriella said. “It’s almost as if you have something hide, sister.”

“You can ask, but the answers won’t satisfy you,” Raisa said honestly. “Everyone’s the same in that sense. Who you were before the Brotherhood hardly matters, does it? We’re all equal and together now.”

Gabriella nodded, “Fair enough. But you’d better get on your way to Markarth. Best not to leave a contact waiting, especially with a contract on the line.” Raisa nodded and stood, bidding her family goodbye before heading back into the main chamber. Leaving meant walking past Cicero, who was dancing around in excited circles, reciting morbid limericks and clapping his hands, the bells on his shoes and hat jingling ominously.

As she made to leave, he spotted her and stopped in his tracks, “Another member of the Family!! Hello, hello! So very good to meet you!”

Raisa stopped, surprised that he had spotted her and sought to single her out in this way. She remained silent, not knowing how to respond to volatile jester.

“Oooh…” he said, looking at her with wide eyes before cackling with a wide grin, “So silent. So menacing. A true assassin of the old ways! Cicero likes you. Oh yeah, Cicero likes you, indeed!”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that either. She supposed it was a good thing to remain on the jester’s good side, considering she knew so little about him. She’d rather he liked her instead of not. “It’s good to meet you too, Cicero,” she said after a moment, allowing a grim smile to cross her features.

“So polite! So nice! Cicero likes you,” he repeated. “The Night Mother is sure to like you to. Oh, we’re going to be fast friends. Fast friends…”

“What can you tell me about yourself?” Raisa asked after a moment of uncomfortable silence passed between the two of them.

“Me? Oh, Cicero is just the Keeper!” Cicero exclaimed, seeming surprised that someone had taken an interest in him personally, “I… keep! I look after our matron, you see. The Night Mother. I keep her clean, and protected, and happy… But I am not the Listener. Oh no. There is no Listener. Not yet! But some day…” Cicero mused, spinning in circles slightly. He refocused on Raisa then and waved his hands about, “Farewell, sister, farewell! Farewell, farewell!”

And with that confusing interaction swirling about her mind, Raisa made her way up the stairs, nodding goodbye to Astrid before heading out to Falkreath to catch a wagon to Markarth.
The Stone City rose up high above her as the wagon approached its destination. Carved directly into the side of the mountain, it spread far back into the stone face, walled in by a massive wall of rock. It seemed truly impenetrable. Raisa thanked the carriage driver, grateful she didn’t have to run the whole way there herself. She made her way up to the city gates and proceeded in, unnoticed by the guards.

Instead of dallying around, Raisa made her way directly to the Hag’s Cure, only just beginning to worry about the repercussions of screwing up this contract. She already knew she would be in deep trouble when she got back to the Thieves Guild. She didn’t need to be told off by Astrid too. Getting a lecture from Brynjolf would be embarrassing enough as it was. Raisa slipped into the building, spotting a pretty young woman sweeping the floor. She walked over and stood before her, her mask covering everything but her cool, green eyes.

The girl straightened, looking at Raisa nervously, and asked, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“The Dark Brotherhood has come, Muiri,” she said shortly.

“The Dark Brotherh… Oh,” the young woman began to ask before she understood. Her eyes widened and she straightened up a bit taller, clearly shocked. “Oh! I… my goodness, you’re really here! The Black Sacrament… It… It actually worked?”

“Obviously,” Raisa said. She was almost certain that it hadn’t worked. The Black Sacrament was linked directly to the Night Mother. And if what Cicero said was true, there was no Listener to relay the information from the Night Mother. So even if the Black Sacrament had worked, there would be no way of knowing. Of course, Muiri didn’t need to know that. “Now tell me what it is that you need.”

“What I need? What I need is for Alain Dufont to die!” the girl said, her soft eyes growing suddenly fierce. “I want him hunted down and murdered like the dog he is!”

Raisa chose at this point to remain silent, waiting for the girl to elaborate. Given a few moments, she did, saying, “I didn’t know when we were… with each other… but Alain is actually a leader of a band of cutthroat bandits. They’re holed up in some old dwarven ruin— Raldbthar. It’s near Windhelm. They use it as their base. It’s where they stage their raids. I want you to go to that ruin, find Alain Dufont, and kill him. I don't care about his friends. Do whatever you want with them. But Alain has to die!”

“It will be done,” Raisa said with a short nod.

“Excellent,” the girl said, practically beaming. “Once Alain is dead, I’ll pay you. In gold. I’ve saved up a bit. I hope that’ll do. But, well… There is one more thing. If you’re interested?”

Raisa quirked an eyebrow slightly and said, “I’m listening.”

“If you can… I want you to kill someone else, as well. You don't have to— it's not part of our deal. But if you do… I’ll pay you even more. It's Nilsine Shatter-Shield, in Windhelm. If Nilsine dies, too… I'll make it worth your while.”

Raisa took a moment to sit down at a small table in the shop, pulling one foot up onto her chair, resting an elbow on it nonchalantly. She gestured to the seat in front of her vaguely, “Tell me the full story. Why do you want Alain dead?”

The girl looked hesitant, though she obliged and sat in front of Raisa. Raisa wasn’t sure why she
cared to be so damn thorough. She had enough information already. Perhaps she needed a reason
to be angry at the victim. It had certainly helped when she decided to kill Grelod for Aventus.
Perhaps this was how she should handle her contracts. Dig until she finds the root of the inspiration
for the contract. Make their pain her own, and complete the job. A bit sadistic really, she though,
but thoroughly effective.

“I went to Windhelm to see the Shatter-Shields. They were old and dear friends, and… in
mourning. Friga was killed recently. Murdered… I met Alain at the tavern, while I was… drinking
my sadness away. He was handsome, and charming. He said I was the "beautiful lily" of his
dreams. Alain made all the pain just… go away. But it was all lies! Alain used me. He ruined my
name, destroyed my friendship with the Shatter-Shields… Do you know why Alain was in
Windhelm? He heard about Friga's murder. He wanted to befriend the family in their grief… and
rob them blind. Alain used me to get close to my friends. And now they all think I'm some kind
of… monster. Alain Dufont took my life. And now I'm taking his,” the girl explained, sounding as
if she were close to tears at the memory.

“And Nilsine Shatter-Shield? Why must she die?” Raisa urged.

“Don't you see?” Muiri asked, sounding almost indignant. “I was like a daughter to Tova. A sister
to Nilsine and Friga. But the family refuses to believe my innocence. No matter what I say.
Couldn't they understand that I was used? That I was grieving for Friga, too? No… they treated me
like garbage, threw me away. With Nilsine dead, maybe then Tova will realize what she's lost,
hmm? Maybe then she'll see that I was just as much a daughter as the others. And if not, may she
drown in her own tears.”

“That tastes strongly of bitterness, child,” Raisa cautioned. “But I will do as you ask. Is there
anything else before we conclude our business here?”

“I planned to kill Alain myself, you know. Nilsine, too. But lost my nerve. I even brewed a special
poison, Lotus Extract. Maybe you could use it? Just coat your weapon with it. Then… you get the
idea,” Muiri said, sheepishly handing over two small vials of the poison.

Raisa smirked slightly. The girl certainly had that spark in here, even if she was too soft to embrace
it. She had once thought the same of herself, but time and circumstance had proven her wrong in so
many ways. As Raisa made to leave the Hag’s Cure, she heard the girl speak again, her voice
cracking as she spoke, “Make them al pay for what they’ve done to me…” Raisa paused, her hand
on the door and nodded curtly before leaving, silent as the Night Mother without a Listener.

It took her two weeks to really track down her targets. She had taken her time with this contract. It
was her first proper contract. It was all under her control, and Astrid had clearly believed she could
make good work of it. Raisa planned to be more than satisfactory. She had spent time researching
the Shatter-Shield family while she was in Windhelm. She had picked the lock to the Aretino
household only to find little Aventus still living there all alone. He’d tried to attack her with a cast
iron pot. Luckily she was quick and had sidestepped a few of his wild swings before he’d realized
who it was that had broken into his home.

After that he had been delighted for her to stay with him, especially considering she had not one,
but two separate contracts to fulfil while she was in the area. As it turned out, the boy proved
immensely useful in determining her plan of action. As a child, he was able to be seen and not
heard, and no one suspected him of anything at all anymore, apart from a broken heart from his
loss of family. If anything, they pitied the boy and were more likely to welcome him in. At first,
Raisa felt bad exploiting the boy, but he was more than happy to help her. In fact, he volunteered.
He even asked if he could be taken to the Sanctuary to join the Brotherhood immediately.

That, of course, Raisa vetoed almost immediately. She didn’t want the boy to grow up an assassin. She wanted him to live his life as normally as was possible at this point without dreams of destruction and grandeur clouding his ambitious and talented little mind. But now the contracts were over and she was preparing to make her way back to Markarth to deliver the news to Muiri and to collect payment. She had almost been disappointed with how simple the assignment turned out to be. The hardest part was taking out the dwarven machines. That had been a tough spot. But luckily she was quick and good at hiding. And though the machines were fascinatingly advanced, they were not sentient or smart and she was easily able to lose them in the ruins.

Upon leaving the city, she informed Aventus that after her business in Markarth was concluded, she was heading straight back to Windhelm to escort him to the orphanage in Riften. When he began to protest she insisted, reminding him of his promise to her from when they first met and insisting that it was no trouble at all, considering she had some business to take care of down that way regardless.

Entering the Hag’s Cure, Raisa heard a broom clatter to the ground and the scuffling of eager feet as Muiri came to meet her at the bottom of the stairs. “Well? What news?” Muiri asked impatiently. Is Alain…?

“Alain Dufont now lies dead,” Raisa confirmed.

“That bastard got exactly what he deserved,” Muiri smiled, looking thoroughly relieved. “And… I heard about Nilsine. You have more than fulfilled your part of the bargain. Please, take this—as payment, and a symbol of my affection. I'll never forget you and what you have done for me.”

With her business in Markarth concluded, Raisa found herself back in Windhelm two days later, having booked a room at the inn in Markarth for the night instead of heading back immediately. She hated the constant travel work forced on her. She enjoyed the simple things in life, like a good meal, a vintage mead, and a nice warm bed after a hard day’s murder. It was things like that which made life so much more enjoyable for her, and of course, she was often deprived of such luxuries.

It was all too soon before she and Aventus arrived in Riften. She took him straight to Honorhall where she was bombarded with hugs from the other children, though Constance Michel eyed her warily. She was amazed that the children recognised her, but she attributed their joy at her appearance mostly to the fact that she had brought Aventus back to them as well. And who else would bring Aventus back than the last person who they knew for certain he had spoken to?

Raisa made her way through the Ratway to the Ragged Flagon, not wanting to use the back entrance because it would undoubtedly lead her directly to Brynjolf. As she made her way past the tables, she heard Delvin chuckle slightly and say, “Oh but you’re in for it now, Pilkvist. We’d been thinking you left us for good this time.” Raisa gritted her teeth and continued, ignoring Delvin’s taunts. She already knew she was in trouble. That much was for certain.

As soon as she entered the Cistern, Brynjolf was reprimanding her. It was almost as if he’d been waiting for her to walk through that door. It was almost too coordinated how prepared he was. She figured some of the eyes above had snuck in the back entrance to let him know she was back in town. There had certainly been enough time, what with her paying a visit to the orphanage and all.

“Where the hell have you been all this time?” Brynjolf demanded. “You’ve made a mess and Maven is furious. I told you not to burn more than three of the hives! I’ve smoothed things over with her for now, but you can forget your cut. It was hard enough as it was a while ago, but you’ve been gone for weeks now. What the hell, lass?”
“Sorry,” Raisa grumbled bitterly, shoving the bag of Aringoth’s things at Brynjolf irritably. “Here’s what was in the safe.”

“At least you remembered one of the things I asked,” he grumbled back as he began to inspect the contents of the bag.

“Hey, I remembered exactly what you said,” she snapped. “I followed the orders to the letter. I got the contents of the safe. Hell, I even got the key from Aringoth without him noticing. I didn’t kill a single soul on that island save a few bees. I even used the sewers to get in like Vex suggested I do. And for what it’s worth I only set fire to three of the hives. But you know what? It was a bit too windy on that island and those mercenaries were dumber than a damn mudcrab. They couldn’t put the fires out before they spread to a fourth hive. So pardon me if I respectfully disagree with your harsh opinion of my work,” she snapped, glaring at Brynjolf coldly.

She hadn’t meant to fly off the handle like that. But the way he was looking at her was just so satisfying. He looked genuinely apologetic for once. Not mildly sorry, not generally regretful of what he said. He looked like he had made some terrible mistake, and she loved it. An embarrassed glow rose into his cheeks and she let out a deep breath, the anger slowly leaving her face.

“I take it you’ve had a rough couple of weeks then…” Brynjolf said carefully, his now silvery-green eyes watching her intently, with something akin to concern shining in them.

“You could say that,” she said stiffly, not particularly eager to go into any details. “New family members moved in back home. Had to escort a boy to the orphanage. I’ve been away on family business since I finished Goldenglow. Near constant travelling. Here, Falkreath, Markarth, Windhelm, Markarth, Windhelm, here. Just cut me some slack this time, please.”

Brynjolf nodded, concern still written across his face, “Alright, whatever you say lass.” He turned back to the items she had brought him before clearing his throat slightly. “You know, if you need it, we can cut back on the jobs we’re throwing at you… I know I said you’re one of us here and that we look after our own, but if you’re having family troubles, I… I understand how difficult that can be, what with this lifestyle…”

“It’s not an issue of frequency or content,” Raisa said with a sigh. “It’s a matter of managing my life to balance it all. It wasn’t too bad until I joined up with you here. At the time I didn’t really worry about spreading myself too thin. I’ve been… alone a long time. And then suddenly, my life was ripped out from under me and there’s pressure to do good things… like, truly good things… And I balked under the pressure. Part of the reason I found my way down here. But I know there’s about… four other people, aside from yourself, that are asking me to lead their conquests in Skyrim. Bring their goals to fruition. Save the world…”

She was slightly horrified with herself for telling Brynjolf all these things. She still didn’t know much about him. And yet, here she was telling him about all her hardships. Not that she really needed to acknowledge the hardships. Part of her wanted to explain it all to him. Helgen and the dragons… Whiterun and the dragons… The Greybeards, the Blades, Kynesgrove, and the dragons… The Dark Brotherhood and her family there… But then, she didn’t want him to know either. That was her life outside of the Thieves Guild. She didn’t want Brynjolf to think of her as the Dragonborn, as a dragonslayer. She didn’t want him to think of death and murder and the Void whenever he saw her in her Dark Brotherhood armor. She didn’t want him to know about that part of her because she didn’t want to admit to it herself at times. If she couldn’t accept herself for all the things she was meant to be, she couldn’t expect him to.

Brynjolf cleared his throat after a moment and said, “Lass, if you ever need to… let it all out, so to speak… I’d be glad to help you out there. We all have trouble down here. We all start off with a
hard adjustment... But you’ll get there. I mean... I hope you know that we’re all family here too. And we operate entirely based on trust. If you say you’re fine and you don’t want to talk about it, which I expect you will because you’re a fighter and I admire that, I won’t push the matter. But it won’t stop me being concerned and keeping a closer eye on you. Now, let’s take a look at what you found.”

He opened a thick sheet of parchment that had been folded carefully and sealed in wax. Breaking the seal, he read through it quickly saying, “Aringoth sold Goldenglow? What's that idiot thinking? He has no idea the extent of Maven's fury when she's been cut out of a deal, but I'm certain he'll find out. If only the parchment had the buyer's name instead of this odd symbol. Any idea what that may be, lass?”

Raisa shook her head, leaning close to peer over his shoulder at the letter. As she did, she was horrified to notice that her heart rate seemed to increase sharply due to the proximity. She didn’t like it. She did like how clean Brynjolf smelled though. Like a mixture of cinnamon and honeyed mead mixed with dragon’s tongue. Sweet and strong, with a certain bite to it. She shook her head and stepped back, feeling much calmer once she had put some distance between them.

“Blast...” he muttered, “Well, I'll check my sources and ask Mercer. But for now, you're off to speak with Maven Black-Briar. She asked for you by name.”

“Sure, but will I come out of there alive?” Raisa asked, sounding somewhat hesitant.

Brynjolf laughed slightly, “If it was like that she wouldn’t be asking for you; she’d be calling the Dark Brotherhood. It’s just business this time.”

Raisa smirked slightly, sounding somewhat more amused than she should have at the comment. The idea of one of her brothers turning on her was ludicrous. It made her wonder if that was actually possible. If a contract was made to take revenge on one of the members of the Brotherhood, would the contract have to be honored?

“What do you think Maven wants from me?” Raisa asked curiously, looking at the man thoughtfully as he perused the rest of the contents of Aringoth’s safe.

“That’s between you and Maven, and to be frank, I prefer to keep it that way,” Brynjolf said. He looked up at her suddenly, and she felt her chest tighten just the slightest bit. “Don’t worry about it. Just keep your ears open and that smart mouth of yours shut and you’ll do fine.” As he said this he reached forward and tweaked her chin almost playfully and Raisa could swear that her heart skipped a beat. He looked thoroughly surprised by his own actions but he rolled with it, remaining entirely unfazed by the incident. “Besides, Maven’s business dealings usually involve quite a bit of gold for her people.”

“I guess that’ll be nice, considering I get nothing this time,” Raisa said with a wry smile.

Brynjolf sighed and pressed a small amethyst into her hand with a matching wry expression, “Your pay. I can’t deny that you did your job flawlessly, even if the parameters were bent against you. You’re smart as a whip, lass. Keeping doing right by us and there’ll be plenty more where that came from.”

Raisa smiled and pocketed the amethyst, a warm feeling flooding through her chest at the man’s kind words. She thanked him and made her way over to the bed she’d claimed for herself the last time she’d been around and all but collapsed onto it, eager for a proper rest before facing the dragon of Riften, Maven Black-Briar.
“So you’re the one who burned down Goldenglow Estate,” Maven Black-Briar sniffed disdainfully as Raisa took a seat across from her. “Do you have any idea what that little stunt you pulled is going to cost me? I’m amazed you even bothered to show your face here.”

A number of sarcastic retorts crossed Raisa’s mind but Brynjolf’s warning (and subsequent chin grab) crossed her mind and she remained silent. Instead she said calmly and evenly, “My apologies, Lady Maven…”

“The only reason we’re having this conversation is due to Brynjolf’s assurance that you won’t botch another assignment,” Maven said curtly. Raisa felt a flush of pride roll through her; she hadn’t doubted that Brynjolf had smoothed things over, but considering the way Maven was treating her, she realized he must have practically grovelled to change her mind. “He claims you possess some sort of uncanny aptitude for your line of work. Quite frankly I find that hard to believe.”

“I did the best considering the circumstances,” Raisa said. “And considering that more experienced guild members couldn’t get the job done the first times.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Maven snapped. “Once again Brynjolf sends me someone with no backbone, no determination.”

“Regardless of whether you think there’s a backbone or not it’s generally not wise to show the extent of determination,” Raisa said. “There must be some air of mystery for a job to be impressive. If we were to show you the true extent of our abilities you would eventually become unimpressed.”

“You have to understand,” Maven said with a sigh, her tone a bit less stand-offish than before, though she still wasn’t pleased. Raisa was unsure if she was ever actually pleased. “It’s been a long time since Brynjolf’s sent me anyone I can rely on.”

“So you have no faith in the guild? Raisa asked, bristling slightly, struggling to keep her tone from getting angry and defensive.

“Faith?” Maven scoffed. “I don’t have faith in anyone. All I care about is cause and effect. Did the job get done and was it done correctly. There is no gray area there. Certainty is a must.”

“You won’t have that problem with me,” Raisa said. “Where do I begin?”

“I should hope not,” Maven said coldly, her eyes flashing slightly. “This is an important job. I have a competitor called Honningbrew Meadery that I want to put out of business. I also want to know how they got the place up and running so quickly. Head to the Bannered Mare in Whiterun and ask for Mallus Maccius. He’ll fill you in on all the details.”

“Who runs Honningbrew?” Raisa asked curiously.
“Some layabout named Sabjorn. Been a thorn in my side for the last few years now,” Maven complained bitterly.

“Sounds like Sabjorn’s a bit more than just friendly competition…” Raisa said with a slight frown. She figured she might be pushing her luck with Maven Black-Briar, but if the woman didn’t wish to reveal any of the information, she didn’t have to in the first place. It was worth a shot getting some firsthand dirt for free rather than paying Maul an arm and a leg for secondhand.

“Not a day goes by that I don’t regret letting Sabjorn get as far as he did. In only a few short years, he’s taken that bile he calls mead to market and a chunk of my profits with it! I can’t imagine where he found the gold to take it to market so quickly,” Maven elaborated, looking exasperated, though it seemed more directed towards her business troubles than at Raisa and her pointed questions.

“So get rid of him and he’s no longer a threat,” Raisa said, understanding the intent behind her oh-so-mysterious assignment.

“Exactly,” Maven said with a nod as she leaned back in her chair. “With Sabjorn in prison, his meadery will be forced to close. Then I swoop in and take over the place. No more competition.”

“So why strike now?” Raisa asked.

“The Goldenglow Estate job has undoubtedly interrupted the supply of honey that I need to make my mead. Sabjorn could use this interruption to his advantage and take a larger share of the market. I can’t have that,” Maven said, looking at Raisa almost critically.

“How did you become allied with the Thieves Guild?” Raisa asked quickly. Maven shot her a look that showed she really was pushing her luck. Raisa looked at her steadily, “I like to be informed when I start a job. I’ve found it to be exceedingly helpful in my line of work. Makes it easier to get the job done.”

Maven narrowed her eyes slightly but obliged, responding, “The Black-Briar family has always been allied with the Guild. Our connections with the Empire and within Skyrim make for a perfect fit. I dare say the Guild owes its survival as much to my family as it does to its own people.”

Raisa nodded and stood, “Thank you Lady Maven. You will not be disappointed.”

“One more time in case I wasn’t clear,” the woman spat, “You butcher this job and you’ll be sorry.”

Raisa bowed and exited the inn, making her way out of the city. She didn’t want to go back down into the Thieves Guild. She didn’t want to have to see Brynjolf again just yet. She was still flustered from their last encounter. And now knowing that he had played down his influence on her behalf with Maven so significantly, she couldn’t think of how she could repay him. Especially considering it got her a job directly from the woman in the end.

She arrived in Whiterun after dark, having left in the afternoon. She made her way directly to the inn and purchased a room before enquiring about Mallus Maccius. The innkeeper pointed her towards the man and handed over a flagon of mead. Raisa thanked her and made her way over to the man, sitting down at his table, much to his displeasure.

“Can’t a man drink in peace?” he snapped at her, preparing to get up.

“Maven said you’re expecting me,” Raisa said quickly, shooting him a glare.

The man sighed and leaned forward, keeping his voice low, “I'm going to keep this short 'cause
we've got a lot to do. Honningbrew's owner, Sabjorn, is about to hold a tasting for Whiterun's Captain of the Guard, and we're going to poison the mead.”

“You have the poison?” Raisa asked.

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head and pulling a face. “That’s the beauty of the whole plan. We’re going to get to give it to us. The meadery has quite a pest problem and the whole city knows about it. Pest poison and mead don’t mix well, you know what I mean?”

Raisa decided that she didn’t much like this man or Maven Black-Briar. It seemed to be a common occurrence during her time with the Thieves Guild. Most of the people she had to deal with were wholly unsavory. They didn’t care about the costs that came from their own personal benefits, if they were even really aware of them.

“How do I fit in?” Raisa asked, a frown growing on her face. She really wasn’t going to enjoy this. It wasn’t a burglary in any sense. It was an infiltration and unjustified takeover. If Maven’s brews were really as good as she claimed, and Sabjorn’s were really as dismal as she made them out to be, it wouldn’t matter if he was still in business. It shouldn’t be hurting her profits.

“You're going to happen by and lend poor old Sabjorn a helping hand. He's going to give you the poison to use on the pests, but you're also going to dum it into the brewing vat,” Mallus explained.

“Clever…” she said, fighting the urge to roll her eyes, her tone struggling between sarcasm and disdain.

Luckily, Mallus took no notice of it continuing, “Maven and I spent weeks planning this. All we need is someone like you to get in there and get it done. Now get going before Sabjorn grows a brain and hires someone else to do the dirty work. Both of the buildings are connected by tunnels made by the pests infesting the meadery. There's an entrance to it in the basement storeroom of the warehouse that used to be boarded over. I've already removed the boards so the meadery would be infested. That's where you should start.”

“What about just going in through the brewery?” Raisa asked.

“Sabjorn keeps that locked up tight. If you can get through that way, go right ahead,” Mallus said.

“So why are you involved in all this?” Raisa asked, trying hard to keep herself from glaring at the man.

“I made the mistake of borrowing coin from Sabjorn. He's allowing me to pay it back, but he's working my fingers to the bone! He treats me like a slave… I have to do every nasty, dirty job in the meadery,” Mallus explained, “If this plan works, not only is my debt gone, but I'll be set up for life. Maven and I worked out a little deal. If Sabjorn ends up in jail, she's going to take over his meadery. And guess who gets to run the Black-Briar Meadery in Whiterun? You're looking at him. Once Sabjorn is out of the way, Maven has plans for this place. One way or another, we don't want the pests coming back. Consider it just more of the dirty work. I did my part getting them in there, now you need to clear them out.”

Raisa nodded and began to make her way to her room, having heard enough. “Remember,” Mallus called after her, “Sabjorn will be needing a helping hand. Make it look good.”

The next day Raisa made her way down to the meadery, wondering what sort of person Sabjorn would turn out to be. That answer came almost immediately as she made her way into the meadery. The man stood staring at a couple of dead skeevers near his bar. When she entered he looked up an
irritated look on his face. He glared at her and snapped, “What are you gawking at? Can’t you see I have problems here?”

Raisa frowned instantly, wondering when she would actually have a reason to smile at a contact. “Is something wrong?” she asked, feigning curiosity.

“Are you kidding me? Look at this place. I'm supposed to be holding a tasting of the new Honningbrew Reserve for the Captain of the Guard. If he sees the meadery in this state, I'll be ruined,” the man moaned.

“I might be able to help,” Raisa suggested calmly, stepping further into the meadery.

“Oh really? And I don't suppose you'd just do it out of the kindness of your heart, would you? I hope you're not expecting to be paid until the job's done,” the man snapped, not seeming entirely grateful for her offer. “Because that’s not how I operate.”

“So if that's what I wanted you would refuse my help?” Raisa asked incredulously.

“Of course.”

“Well, I advise you to reconsider,” Raisa said, folding her arms. “I yell “skeever” and you can kiss this place goodbye.”

“Okay, okay. No need to make rash decisions. Here's half. You get the rest when the job's done,” the man conceded, shooting her an unsurprisingly irritable look. “My only demand is that these vermin are permanently eliminated before my reputation is completely destroyed.”

“So how do you want me to handle this?” Raisa asked, waiting expectantly.

“I bought some poison. I was going to have my lazy, good-for-nothing assistant Mallus handle it, but he seems to have vanished. If you plant this in the vermin's nest, it should stop them from ever coming back,” Sabjorn said, tossing a few vials of poison into her hands.

She caught them and nodded, heading down into the basement, where the skeever nest was located. She made her way into the depths, killing many a skeever. She decided that she really hated those little buggers. Once she got into the cavern with the nest, she perched up on a large rock, investigating. On her way down, she had swiped some cheese from the kitchen. The skeevers in the area began to sniff about and she knew she needed to work quickly. She uncapped one of the bottles of poison and poured it all over the cheese. She knew it probably wouldn't work exceedingly well, but it was the best she could do, considering there was a crazed, mumbling mage hiding out near the nest. She tossed the cheese wedges in her hand, getting a feel for them before lobbing each of them into the skeever nest.

She hopped down from the rock and skirted along the outer wall as the skeevers scurried towards the poison cheese filled nest. The mage, luckily, seemed to be distracted by the sudden activity of his skeever companions and turned to investigate, giving her the perfect opportunity to sneak past him and into the meadery. Once inside, she poured the other three vials of poison into the vat of mead and quickly exited the brewery before Sabjorn could come and check on things.

She pranced into the main hall of the meadery and said, “Job’s finished.”

“Well, it’s about time!” Sabjorn growled irritably. “I had to stall the captain until you were finished.”

“And what about the rest of my pay?” Raisa asked, her decently good mood dashed almost
immediately by the sour mood of the man.

“You’ll have to wait until after the captain’s finished. I suppose you can wait around if you must,” Sabjorn sneered. Of course she was going to stick around. At this point, she’d decided that Sabjorn was just as bad as Mallus was. She wanted to see her efforts come to fruition. She’d decided that this man somewhat deserved what was coming to him.

At the same time, she felt sad knowing that a few weeks prior she would have been far less pleased with the work she had done. She would never have undermined a relatively innocent man, regardless of how horrendously he acted. But that person, though a small part of her remained, was mostly gone, replaced by an assassin and thief.

The rest of the mission went off without a hitch and she found herself heading back to Falkreath instead of to see Lady Maven in Riften. Though it probably should be her priority, she needed to get back to the Sanctuary and inform Astrid of her roaring success with Muiri’s contract.
Whispers in the Dark

“Ah, you’re back,” she heard Astrid purr, though there was a tense note to her tone. “So how went our first real contract? A bit more exciting than what Nazir’s been offering, I’d wager.” Raisa let a smile slip past but said nothing, glowing with pride and confidence. Astrid nodded, looking her up and down approvingly, “Very well. I respect your discretion.” Her relatively jovial expression turned dark and serious suddenly and she said, “Now, I need your assistance with matter of a more… personal nature.”

Raisa frowned, a seed of unrest settling in the pit of her stomach. Astrid certainly knew how to put a damper on her good mood. “Personal? Is something wrong?”

“It’s Cicero,” Astrid sighed in exasperation. “Ever since he arrived, his behaviour’s been… Well, erratic would be an understatement. I do believe he is truly mad.” Astrid began to pace, her frustration leaking out in waves, and Raisa felt as though she was somewhat out of her depth. Certainly Astrid should be speaking to Arnbjorn or someone she knows better as opposed to her newest assassin. “But it’s worse than that. He keeps locking himself in the Night Mother’s chamber, and talking. To someone. In hushed, but frantic tones,” Astrid barrelled on, her paranoia beginning to take root in Raisa as well. “Who is he speaking with? What are they planning? I fear treachery…”

Raisa remained silent as Astrid continued, “You must understand. If Cicero is turning the others against me… against us… Our Family would not survive such division…”

“Astrid, I think you’re being a bit… a bit paranoid…” Raisa frowned, watching Astrid carefully, not sure how the woman would respond.

“Maybe so, but healthy paranoia has saved this Sanctuary before, and my gut’s telling me the demented little fool is up to something,” Astrid said firmly, an angry look on her face.

“What do you expect me to do?” Raisa asked, unsure of what was even really going on. So Cicero was talking to himself. Did Astrid really expect him to do anything else with his time? He barely spoke to any of the other Brotherhood members. He spent his time caring for their mother, all the while muttering seemingly to himself. It was hardly that abnormal for the jester.

“Dear sister, I need you to steal into that chamber, and eavesdrop on their meeting. It’ll be no use clinging to the shadows. They’ll see you for sure. No, you need a hiding place. Somewhere they’d never think to look,” Astrid thought, though Raisa knew exactly where the woman’s spiel would take her, “Like inside the Night Mother’s coffin…”

“But that seems so… disrespectful…” Raisa said in surprise, crinkling her nose up in disgust.

“Be that as it may, we have no other choice. You need to remain unseen and this is the only way to be positive that happens,” Astrid said. “Now go, before they meet.”

And so Raisa made her way into the main hall and up the stairs that led to Cicero’s and the Night Mother’s chambers. Keeping an eye out for the slippery little jester, Raisa felt sick to her stomach as she slunk into the main room and up to the coffin. She quickly picked the lock of the coffin, disgust welling up inside her as it swung open, revealing the Unholy Matron. She stepped inside as she head the jingling of bells and sing-song words signalling Cicero’s approach. She quickly pulled the doors closed and did her best not to think about the corpse she was forced to practically spoon inside that coffin. As she hid there in the dark she heard the doors to the room close with a gentle
“Are we alone? Yes… yes… alone. Sweet solitude. No one will hear us, disturb us. Everything is going according to plan. The others… I’ve spoken to them. And they’re coming around, I know it. The wizard, Festus Krex… perhaps even the Argonian, and the un-child… What about you? Have you… have you spoken to anyone? No… No, of course not. I do the talking, the stalking, the seeing and the saying! And what do you do? Nothing! Not… not that I'm angry! No, never! Cicero understands. Heh. Cicero always understands! And obeys! You will talk when you're ready, won't you? Won't you……sweet Night Mother.”

The speech was frantic, as Astrid had suggested it would be, but in the pauses there were no other words spoken. He was utterly alone. As she stood there, frozen in the darkness, a deep red glow seemed to flare up inside the coffin and she worried that she had been discovered, or that Cicero would spot the light and soon discover her.

“Poor Cicero,” a soft whisper came trickling from the darkness as Raisa started silently into the Night Mother’s eye sockets. “Dear Cicero… Such a humble servant. But he will never hear my voice.. For he is not the Listener…”

Outside the coffin, Cicero’s shrill voice was still barrelling on, wholly unaware of what was happening on the other side of the iron coffin doors. “Oh, but how can I defend you? How can I exert your will? If you will not speak? To anyone!”

“Oh… but I will speak…” the whispers came again. The most disconcerting thing was that Raisa heard it in the back of her mind, almost as if it were a subconscious thought of her own. “I will speak to you. For you are the Listener.” Raisa balked at the idea, wishing that she had never agreed to help Astrid out. “Yes, you,” the voice whispered, the glow pulsating as the Night Mother spoke to her, “You who shares my iron tomb, who warms my ancient bones. I give you this task—journey to Volunruud. Speak with Amaund Motierre.”

“Poor Cicero has failed you. Poor Cicero is sorry, sweet mother. I've tried, so very hard. But I just can't find the Listener,” Cicero moaned from outside the coffin, desperation entering his voice.

“Tell Cicero the time has come,” the voice whispered. “Tell him the words he had been waiting for, all these years: 'Darkness rises when silence dies.’”

The doors behind Raisa gave way as Cicero opened the coffin doors to tend to the Night Mother, causing Raisa to tumble backwards out of the darkness. She collapsed on the ground and scuttled backwards quickly, worried about the reaction her appearance would earn from Cicero.

“Wh… What? What treachery!” he shrieked. “Defiler! Debaser and defiler! You have violated the sanctity of the Night Mother’s coffin! Explain yourself! Speak, worm!” As he shouted his abuse, he paced towards her, his hands shaking in rage, his words heavy with acid and revulsion.

“Sh-She spoke!” Raisa squeaked, still backing up. “The Night Mother spoke to me! She told me I was the one!”

Cicero faltered slightly, thinking over her words rapidly. “She… spoke… to you?” he asked, a look of confusion briefly crossing his face before the rage was back. “More treachery! More trickery and deceit! You?! You lie! The Night Mother speaks only to the Listener!” He continued to advance on her as she pressed her back up against the wall in terror. “And there is… no… Listener!” he shrieked, spittle flying as his crazed eyes decided what to do with her.

“Darkness rises when silence dies!” Raisa shrieked, still pressing her back up against the wall, as if
hoping she could simply melt through it.

Cicero paused and looked at Raisa suspiciously, “What?”

“She said to tell you, ‘Darkness rises when silence dies…’” Raisa repeated, feeling somewhat faint, her heart pounding in her chest.

“She… she said that?” Cicero asked, sounding as if he could scarcely believe his ears, “She said those words… to you…? ‘Darkness rises when silence dies’? But those are the words… The Binding Words. Written in the Keeping Tomes. The signal so I would know… Mother’s only way of talking to sweet Cicero…” He spun in frantic circles for a moment, pacing slightly as he smacked his head and crushed his jester’s hat in his hands, causing the bells to jingle erratically. “Then… it is true! She is back! Our Lady is back! She had chosen a Listener!” Cicero exclaimed, looking at the Night Mother before jumping up and clicking his heels and doing a jig, cackling maniacally. He turned suddenly and looked at Raisa with wide, still crazed eyes, though they were full of joy, and just a bit of what looked like disappointment. “She has chosen you!” he mused. “All hail the Listener!”

At that moment Astrid burst into the room, daggers drawn, “By Sithis this ends now! Back away, fool! Whatever you’ve been planning is over!” Startled, Cicero jumped back towards the Night Mother, almost protectively before resuming his joyous dance. Astrid turned to Raisa and helped her quickly to her feet, speaking quickly and quietly, “Are you alright? I heard the commotion. What was Cicero talking to? Where’s the accomplice. Reveal yourself, traitor!”

“I spoke only to the Night Mother!” Cicero cackled. “I spoke to the Night Mother, but she didn’t speak to me! Oh, no. She spoke only to her! To the Listener!”

“What? The Listener?” Astrid asked, confused. “What are you going on about? What is this lunacy?”

“It’s true, it’s true!” Cicero trilled, jumping about in celebration once more, “The Night Mother has spoken! The silence has been broken! The Listener has been chosen!!”

Astrid ignored him and turned to Raisa once again, “When I heard Cicero screaming, I knew you’d been discovered. I feared the worst. Are you all right?”

Raisa, still in shock, said nothing at all.

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost. Please tell me you haven’t…” Astrid said, still trying to get Raisa to respond to her. “Cicero said he spoke to the Night Mother… but she spoke to you?”

Raisa nodded, “It’s true.” Astrid looked at her skeptically but Raisa nodded more firmly, “The Night Mother poke to me. She said I was ‘the one.’”

“What? So Cicero wasn’t talking to anyone else. Just… the Night Mother’s body?” Astrid asked with the hint of a scoff, clearly not buying the story. “And the Night Mother, who, according to everything we know, will only speak to the person chosen as Listener… just spoke… Right now… to you?”

“Yes.”

“By Sithis,” Astrid swore, and Raisa was unsure if she was pleased or angered by the situation. “And… what did she say?”

“I must speak to someone named Amaund Motierre, in Volunruud,” Raisa said as Cicero raced out
of the room to spread the news through the rest of the Brotherhood.

“Amaund Motierre? I have no idea who that is,” Astrid said thoughtfully. “But Volunruud… that I have heard of. And I know where it is.”

“So I should go to Volunruud?” Raisa asked, unsure of how Astrid was taking the news. “I should talk to this man?”

“Hmm?” she asked distractedly before shaking her head vigorously, “No. No! Listen, I don’t know what’s going on here, but you take your orders from me. Are we clear on that? The Night Mother may have spoken to you, but I am still the leader of this Family. I will not have my authority so easily dismissed. I… I need time to think about all this. Go see Nazir— do some work for him. I'll find you when I'm ready to discuss the matter further.”

Raisa watched as Astrid left the room, stomping around with her fists clenched in anger. She lingered for a moment before going and speaking with Nazir, glad to have avoided the overjoyed Cicero. The Redguard looked up and smirked as Raisa approached, “You reek of death, my friend. I salute you.”

“Astrid wanted me to see you about some more work,” Raisa said, sitting down on a chair across from the large man.

“Well then, your timing couldn’t be better. As it turns out, I’ve got two new contracts. One rather easy assignment, and another that should prove quite a challenge. Your first target is an orc bard named Lurbuk. The other is a vampire by the name of Hern. Happy hunting,” he smirked with a nod.

Raisa figured she didn’t have much better to do with her time and set out for Morthal immediately, glad to avoid her new family for once. She figured she should head back to Riften soon, but she found herself almost reluctant to face Brynjolf. She enjoyed his company almost too much, she found. As she picked the lock to Lurbuk’s room, she broke three picks getting distracted by wondering how he would advise her on improving her skills.

Soon enough though, she managed to get in, finding the man singing terribly to himself as he watched himself in a mirror. He spotted her behind him in the reflection and whirled around, not seeming frightening in the least. “Ah, a fan!” he exclaimed, his tusked face breaking out into a debonair grin. “What is it you want?”

Raisa remained silent, just looking at the bard in disappointment. His smile barely faltered and he continued, “What's the matter, friend? Khajiit got your tongue? Maybe you need a little ditty to loosen your gob, hmm? ‘There once was a stranger, with eyes full of danger, he spoke not a word, but his meaning was heard… Sing on, sweet Lurbuk, sing on!’”

Raisa let out a disgruntled noise, her face screwed up with dislike of the song, unsheathing a dagger before throwing quickly, hitting the bard in the neck and silencing him forever. She grabbed the dagger and wiped it off on the man’s clothes before sheathing it and taking a peek around the room, picking up a few expensive looking trinkets, as well as a nicely sized bag of gold.

On her way back to the Sanctuary, she swung by Anga’s mill and dispatched Hern with surprisingly little effort required, stealing several good potions and ingredients to sell to Babette once she got back home. However, as she went to deliver the items and report her successes to Nazir, she was stopped by Astrid.

“We need to talk,” she said curtly. Raisa wished that she could ask to speak another time, but
knowing the state Astrid’s been in since the Night Mother arrived, she said nothing. “Look. Something is happening here. I’m not entirely sure what that something is, but... Well, we need to find out. If the Night Mother really did give you an order to talk to a contact, we'd be mad to ignore it. And I think we both agree, Cicero's brought quite enough madness to this Sanctuary. So go. Go to Volunruud. It's a crypt, pretty far to the northeast. Talk to this Amaund Motierre. And let's see where all this leads, hmm?”

Raisa nodded silently and slipped past Astrid to speak to Nazir, dropping the potions and ingredients off with Babette on the way. As she sat down across from Nazir she said, “Both dead.”

The man looked impressed for once and said, “No sarcasm this time. You faced a vampire, and lived to tell the tale. Well done. And if you contracted Sanguinare Vampiris, be sure to get that taken care of. Else you'll end up like our own Babette. Unless, of course, that was your goal all along. Here are your payments.”

Raisa thanked him and got up, deciding her next course of action. She should probably try and find Esbern, as his life is in danger because of the Thalmor… But at the same time, she couldn’t help but think that it may already be a lost cause. And besides, going after Esbern meant that she would have to go to the Thieves Guild, and to Maven Black-Briar… She mentally cursed herself. They all welcomed her there; she didn’t need to feel like such an intruder. Or be worried about running into Brynjolf. He was her boss, her patron in the Guild as it were. She should be seeking him out, not avoiding him; there was still much she could learn from him about the Guild and her purpose there. She chastised herself for worrying so much, deciding that it was time to own up to her place in the Thieves Guild. She knew from her experience with the Brotherhood that if she committed herself to the work, she could be happy in it. It was time to find her second home.
Scoundrel's Folly

Chapter Summary

I'm going to be out of town this weekend with no internet so preemptive chapter for this coming Saturday now.

Raisa looked at Lady Maven as she read the promissory note she had found at Honningbrew meadery. “This doesn’t tell me much,” the woman sighed in disappointment. “The only thing that can identify Sabjorn’s partner is this odd little symbol…”

“Yes,” Raisa nodded. “I’ve seen that symbol before, I think…”

“Well, whoever this mysterious marking represents, they’ll regret starting a war with me,” Maven said fiercely. “You should bring this information to the Thieves Guild immediately. There’s also the matter of your payment. I believe you’ll find this more than adequate for your services.” She handed over an enchanted dagger. Raisa accepted it with a small bow and made her way down into the Cistern through the back entrance, pressing the button on the tomb in the graveyard after making sure that no one was around to notice.

At this point it was late at night and it appeared as though the other guild members were either out working jobs or asleep in their beds. Not seeing Brynjolf around, Raisa made her way into the training room with all the different kinds of chests they’d come up against. She sat down with a pile of picks and started to work at improving her lockpicking skill, which in reality, should have been much better than it was currently.

“Word on the street is that poor Sabjorn had found himself in Whiterun’s prison,” an accented voice mused from the doorway, startling Raisa into breaking yet another pick. She glared up at Brynjolf who had a somewhat playful smirk on his face, “How unfortunate for him.”

“Yet very fortunate for Maven,” Raisa agreed with a sigh as she dropped the broken pick and retrieved yet another fresh one before setting to work again at the lock.

“Exactly,” Brynjolf said, moving to sit on top of one of the chests she’d already figured out. “Now you’re beginning to see how our little system works here. Maven sent word that you’d discovered something else while you were out there. Something important to the Guild.”

“For the record, it isn’t a difficult system to work out. I understand it perfectly fine; it’s just a matter of the morality of some of the actions when you stop to consider that my job required no thievery whatsoever. I literally sabotaged a relatively decent batch of mead and killed some giant rats. Not very honourable, if you ask me…”

“I suppose that’s a fair way of looking at it, Brynjolf agreed, nodding slightly at her words. “I would have expected something more subtle from one of Maven’s personal assignments. But then I suppose subtlety isn’t really her forte…”

“The same symbol from Goldenglow was involved,” Raisa murmured finally as she struggled to get the lock undone.
“Then this is beyond coincidence,” Brynjolf said thoughtfully. “First Aringoth and now Sabjorn. Someone’s trying to take us down by driving a wedge between Maven and the Guild.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Raisa asked after a few moments of silence.

“Mercer thinks he knows a way to identify this new thorn in our side. He’ll be wanting to meet with you right away, now you’re back. I wouldn’t go right now, but first thing in the morning, for certain. And if I were you, I’d hurry about it. I’ve never seen him this angry before…”

“He’s angry?” Raisa asked, frowning slightly, pausing her work to glance up at Brynjolf curiously.

“Not at you lass,” Brynjolf said reassuringly. “More just that he didn’t see this coming. Even more so that he can’t figure out who’s behind it all. Whoever it is, they’re proving difficult to catch.”

“And I suppose these symbols showing up aren’t helping the matter,” Raisa mused.

“Aye,” Brynjolf nodded with a heavy sigh. “If anything I’d say that they’re really just making matters worse. It’s like whoever it is is just toying with us…”

“I suppose that could work to our advantage,” Raisa said carefully toying with the lock only to break another pick. She let out a noise of irritation before picking up another fresh pick and getting back at it. “The mysterious contact gets comfortable enough to leave behind clues, if means they’re getting cocky. It’s only a matter of time before they muck up and I’m certain you’ll be right there to catch em when they do.”

“Me?” Brynjolf asked, slightly surprised. “I think you over estimate me. Mercer’s the genius behind the operation down here. He’s the one in charge.”

“Just because he’s guild master it doesn’t mean he’s the best there is,” Raisa said simply, finally getting the lock to give way. She sighed in satisfaction and stretched for a moment before moving onto the next level of difficulty.

“You’ve never seen him in action, lass,” Brynjolf pointed out somewhat sheepishly.

“Exactly,” she said, glancing over at him with a slight smirk, though her eyes were tired from staring intently at the locks for a long time. “Old man never does anything but gripe and moan about how the Guild’s in the gutters— figuratively and literally— yet he doesn’t go out of his way to help the cause. Unlike some.”

She heard Brynjolf shift on the chest behind her, but didn’t see the small, rather sheepish smile that came to his face at her subtle praise of his work. She leaned towards the lock some more and gently tweaked the lock, almost snapping the pick. She let out a soft sigh to release the growing tension she felt in her hands and neck before trying again. Then again, it was a bit distracting having Brynjolf in the room. Even more so when he decided to move from his perch on the chest to sit on the floor beside her and observe her lockpicking technique.

“I’m surprised you know so much about his habits, lass,” Brynjolf chuckled, “Considering you joined two months ago now and you’re hardly ever here.”

“Has it been two months?” she asked, sounding rather surprised. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Has it not been that memorable for you then, lass?” he chuckled, his tone mock offended.

“Considering everything else that’s gone on, I’d have to say it’s not particularly high on my list…” Raisa mused, almost snapping the pick once again when he called her lass. It always startled her,
and it didn’t help that it excited her in a way. She’d never heard him call Sapphire or Vex or Tonilia lass in all the time she’d spent in the Guild. But then again, as he pointed out, she wasn’t exactly there very often.

“And how has everything else been going?” Brynjolf asked somewhat hesitantly.

She glanced at him briefly, a confused look on her face, and was startled to see how close he was to her. Then again, she reminded herself, the space around the chests didn't provide room for more than one person at a time. It would have been a tight squeeze with almost anyone. But that short look told her that he did mean what she thought he meant. He was referring to her outburst the last time she’d seen him.

A pang of guilt struck her. She hadn’t meant to fly off the handle so much, but it had all been too soon. There was too much on her plate at the time… There was still too much on her plate, if she was entirely honest. But right now she was keeping it all separate. She didn’t need to rush into anything else. The Dark Brotherhood was, first and foremost, her home and her family. The Thieves Guild… well for now it was just a lucrative hobby. The favours for Delphine… well, they were optional… mostly. The dragon problems weren’t getting any better. She would have to face those problems eventually…

“I thought you’d have forgotten about that…” she said quietly, tensely.

“When one of the kindest and quietest guild members rants and spits venom about problems right to your face… Let’s just say that’s not a sight one could easily forget.”

Raisa’s cheeks turned the faintest shade of pink at his words. She tried to block them out, keeping them from taking root. She wasn’t sure if she should be flattered by his concern or embarrassed that it had made such an impression on him. “Everything else has been fine…” she said after a short hesitation, though she knew she had waited too long for the statement to be convincing.

“Lass…” Brynjolf started.

“It’s been… fine…” she repeated, trying to find more convincing words. “It’s just… stressful. But it’s fine. I’m fine…”

“You’ve broken eight picks since you started this lock, lass,” Brynjolf said. “I know you’re better at this than that. Whatever it is that’s on your mind, it’s distracting you. And I don’t think you should try and bottle it all up. It’s not safe.”

Raisa looked at him, her brow pinching together slightly, her lips turned ever so slightly downwards, “Not safe for the job or not safe for me?”

Brynjolf shrugged, his now mostly dark green eyes watching her with a similar expression. “Either. Both. More the latter, I suppose.”

They sat and looked at each other for a few more moments before Raisa turned and went back to work at the lock, her heart racing so fast she thought he might have been able to hear it. Part of her hated being so close to him, but there was another part. It protested every time she chose to look away or ignore his presence, and it bugged her. Try as she might, she couldn’t keep this little nagging part of her from popping up and rejoicing any time the man glanced her way.

“I’m sorry if I dragged you into this, lass,” he said finally, after several minutes of silence.

“Hmm?” she asked, still intently working at the lock.
“I said I was sorry. If I forced you into the Guild,” he elaborated. “We’ve been a bit… desperate, I suppose. And I just thought, anyone who could get away with offing that old woman surrounded by children without anyone knowing could have a great career in this line of work.”

At the mention of Aventus’s contract, Raisa went rigid, snapping the pick in the process. She sat up straight and looked at him with a frown, “I thought you would have forgotten about that…”

Brynjolf smirked slightly, a chuckle escaping him, “No, it seems that when it comes to you my memory is quite sharp. But I notice you didn’t deny it was you.”

“You were there in the market,” Raisa said slowly. “As you said, it’s your job to notice people, to size them up. Even if you’re selling some shitty liquid to foolish customers, I’m certain you keep your eyes on everything that happens. You’d know that I was the only person who went into the orphanage. I was the first one to go in there aside from newly orphaned children and Constance Michel. There were only so many people who could have done it.”

“Fair enough,” Brynjolf nodded. “Eyes everywhere… Useful… Do you mind me asking why you did it?”

Raisa moved to lean against the chest she had been working on to better face him, though she stared across the room at one of the many practice dummies. “I met someone,” Raisa said slowly, choosing her words carefully. “Someone who had grown up in the orphanage. In a somewhat drunken state, we began to discuss the orphanage. I’d almost been sent there as a child myself, so naturally I was quite curious about it. And the things he told me… About Grelod the Kind… About the way the kids were treated… About how they would never be adopted, about how she abused them all… On the one hand it made me grateful I hadn’t been sent there. On the other… it just made me angry… Determined…”

“But regardless, we continued our discussion, mostly about Grelod and the young man, for some ungodly reason, asked me if I would do him a favor. Not my finest moment, but I agreed. And two days later I found myself here in Riften,” Raisa said. “I don’t know what I intended when I first came here… Certainly not to kill the woman. I mean, I’d promised that I would, if I was able… But I… I wanted to see for myself if what he told me was true. And it was. And I did it. I don’t really know what happened. But she’d insulted me, threatened the children, and berated them for no reason all in the short span of moments I had been in there. And it took nothing else to solidify in my mind what sort of person she was. And then I had my bow in my hands, and there was an arrow in her throat…”

Brynjolf had remained silent throughout her story but once she finished speaking, he reached forward and took one of her hands in both of his. It was a small comfort, and Raisa hadn’t bee expecting it. She showed little outward response, afraid that her imagination would take hold of her if she did. The longer the contact lasted, the more difficult it became for her. After a while he released her hand and sat back, leaning against the chest opposite her.

“I’ve spoken with Etienne,” he said after a while. “He says you saved his life. Sprung him from a Thalmor torture prison. That true?”

Raisa hesitated a moment, but nodded the affirmative. If Etienne was around, there was no sense in denying it. She made a mental note to speak to him at some point to ask why they had chosen to take him when they could have taken anyone from the Flagon. Particularly when they had been so close to finding Esbern in the first place.

“Thank you, lass,” Brynjolf said kindly. “See, you were meant to be one of us before you even knew about us. We look after our own here, and you went out of your way to send Etienne home to
us. He owes you his life now.”

“He owes me nothing,” Raisa said dismissively. “While I appreciate the sentiment, I don’t want him attempting to return the favor. Divines know I get into far too much trouble to try and keep a weather eye on.”

“If you were around more I’d be certain I’d have a hard time of it. I almost like the idea of the challenge you’d present if you were here all the time,” Brynjolf laughed slightly, the jolly sound echoing around the training room heartily. Long after the sound had died, Brynjolf stood and offered Raisa a hand up, which she took gratefully. “Probably best if we got some shut-eye, eh lass?” he mused, placing his hand in the small of her back and leading her out of the training room. “I’m certain you’ll need the energy when you meet with Mercer tomorrow.”

Once they got into the main chamber of the Cistern, he let his hand fall rather quickly before turning and heading to his own bed while Raisa collapsed on hers moments later, falling asleep rather quickly considering the way she’d spent half her night. She’d expected to run over every second of her time with Brynjolf in her head until she fell asleep, but even as her eyes closed for the last time that night, she felt his hand on hers, his hand in the small of her back, his laugh echoing in her ears. And for once, it made her smile.

The next morning she rose fairly late, and was surprised that Mercer hadn’t come to force her awake. She stood and stretched before grabbing a bottle of mead to start her day. Normally she would have scolded herself for the choice of beverage, but really, it was a good pick-me-up for the morning, particularly after her recent travels and her late evening with Brynjolf. The faintest heat rose to her cheeks at the thought of their conversations, but nothing too unbearable. So she stretched once more before making her way over to Mercer where he stood, as she assumed he would be, grumbling and groaning over a few scraps of paper.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, glancing up as she approached. “I’ve consulted my contacts regarding the information you recovered from Goldenglow Estate, but no one can identify that symbol.”

“Well that’s not good, considering I found the same marking at Honningbrew,” Raisa said before taking a large gulp from her bottle of mead.

“It would seem our adversary is attempting to take us apart indirectly by angering Maven Black-Briar…” Mercer said. “Very clever…”

“Brynjolf figured as much,” Raisa nodded in agreement. “Makes sense… you admire them?”

“They’re well-funded and they’ve been able to avoid identification for years. I’m surprised it reached this point, honestly,” Mercer admitted. He looked up at her sharply though, “Just don’t mistake my admiration for complacency; our nemesis is going to pay dearly for this.”

“How?” Raisa asked simply, taking another long pull from the bottle. The more she drank, the less horrible Mercer seemed to be.

“Because, even after all their posturing and planning, they’ve made a mistake. The parchment you recovered mentions a ‘Gajul-Lei’. According to my sources, that’s an old alias used by one of our contacts. His real name is Gulum-Ei. Slimy bastard.,” Mercer grumbled.

“Where do I begin?”

“Gulum-Ei is our inside man at the East Empire Company in Solitude. I’m betting he acted as a go-between for the sale of Goldenglow Estate and that he can finger our buyer. Get out there, shake
him down and see what you come up with. Talk to Brynjolf before you leave if you have any
questions,” Mercer said quickly, turning back to his usual occupation with a glower and a grumble
of, “Aringoth was a fool to think he could get away with this…”

Raisa made her way into the Ragged Flagon immediately, eager to be off, considering it gave her
ample opportunity to stop by Volunruud on her way either to or from Solitude. She spotted
Brynjolf sitting at a corner table near where Vex was standing— did that woman ever move? She
only paused half a second before making her way over and sitting in the chair beside him. He, for
once, looking a bit surprised at her appearance. Normally he was the one sneaking up and startling
her.

“I suppose you’re here about the job then?” he asked, glancing up at Vex with a slight frown,
causing the Breton to smirk before pushing herself lightly off the crates and wandering over to
where Tonilia sat with her wares over the water. “I can't believe Gulum-Ei’s mixed up in all this;
that Argonian couldn't find his tail with both hands. Don't get me wrong. He could scam a beggar
out of his last septim… but he's no mastermind.”

“Think he’ll give me trouble?” Raisa asked.

Brynjolf chuckled slightly, “Trouble? He’s one of the most stubborn lizards I have ever met.
You've got your work cut out for you lass.”

“So how d’you think I should get him to talk?”

“You're going to have to buy him off; it's the only way to get his attention. If that fails, follow him
and see what he's up to. If I know Gulum-Ei, he's in way over his head and you'll be able to use it
as leverage,” Brynjolf said.

Raisa sat thoughtfully for a moment, absentmindedly eating bits of bread as she did. “I’m not
supposed to kill him then,” she concluded. “He’s going to owe us for this betrayal…”

“Aye, he will indeed… and with his fingers in the East Empire Company's pie, we'll make good
use of that debt. For now, just keep on his tail and he's bound to step in something he can't scrape
off his boot. And keep that little temper of yours to yourself,” Brynjolf said. “We don’t need him
riling you up and getting himself into even more trouble.”

Raisa smiled slightly, a light snort of amusement coming out as she thought about what he said.
“So the East Empire Company, huh?” she asked. “Who’re they exactly?”

“A mercantile group that has established ports all over Tamriel. They pretty much dominate the
whole shipping industry. The Emperor himself supposedly backs them, which means they have
fairly unlimited resources… so don't get their feathers in a ruffle,” he replied.

“So I take it that means no killing as well…” she grumbled.

“Blood-thirsty are we?” Brynjolf chuckled. “Might as well join the Dark Brotherhood if you’re so
eager. Unless your life is in danger, try to avoid killing anyone important, alright?”

Raisa bit back a laugh at the Dark Brotherhood comment and nodded her understanding. “You
really think he’ll give me trouble?”

“There are thieves and there is Gulum-Ei. No honor, no code at all. He'd shake your hand and stab
you in the back at the same time. The cut he's supposed to provide the Guild has dwindled as of
late. He says pickings in the warehouse are slim, but I'm certain he's lying. Keep your eyes on him;
he's quite crafty,” Brynjolf advised.
Raisa groaned in exasperation, “Why is every contact I’ve met a complete bastard? Can’t a get a
job where the people are at least somewhat tolerably decent?”

“We operate underground, lass,” Brynjolf laughed, “No one’s a decent contact.”

“I’d beg to differ on that one,” Raisa said, meeting his eyes briefly before she looked away,
shifting in her seat slightly as she came up with a distraction, “If I get information from Gulum-Ei,
what then?”

Brynjolf had a moment of pause where he seemed to be a bit flustered— though Raisa figured this
was just her imagination running wild— before responding, “Just head right back to the Guild and
get the information to Mercer. Nothing else is more important. If you discover Gulum-Ei’s holding
out on us and has more loot stashed away than he claims, we’d find that information quite valuable
as well.”

Raisa nodded and stood up quickly, eager to be off. As she moved away, Brynjolf reached forward
and grabbed her arm lightly, leaning back in his chair to say, “Good luck in Solitude, lass. Keep
Gulum-Ei alive, but remind him just who we are.”

From Riften, Raisa caught a carriage— a pricey one, much to her irritation— straight to Solitude.
She decided that she would go and find Volunruud on her way back before swinging straight to the
Dark Brotherhood with the information. She wondered how long she would be able to keep up the
charade that she only belonged to one. It didn’t much matter to her if her family found out she was
in with the Thieves Guild. If anything, it would probably benefit them. The Thieves Guild… well,
they would probably not look so favourably on her position in the Dark Brotherhood, particularly
now that she had been given one of the most important roles the Brotherhood was even able to
offer. She had been chosen by the Night Mother and, most likely, by Sithis himself. Though to be
fair, she didn’t care too much what the rest of the Guild though so long as they trusted her. It was
Brynjolf’s opinion that worried her though.

When she arrived in Solitude she let out a heavy sigh, remembering what had happened the last
time she’d been there. The executed man’s body had long since been cleaned up, but the scent of
death was still heavy in the main square. Being a part of the Brotherhood, living in the Sanctuary,
extending the Night Mother and by extension, Sithis, the Void himself… it made her aware of that
sort of thing… Shaking the dark thoughts from her mind, Raisa reminded herself that she was there
on Thieves Guild business only. There was no time to consider the Brotherhood in that moment.

And so she entered the Winking Skeever for the second time in her life, finding the slippery
Argonian quickly. She sat down in the chair beside him and he looked at her appraisingly, “So,
what do we have here? Hmm… let me guess. By your scent, I’d say you were from the Guild. But
that can’t be true, because I told Mercer I wouldn’t deal with them anymore.”

“I’m here about Goldenglow Estate,” she said simply.

“I don’t deal in land or property,” the lizard hissed. “Now if you’re looking for goods, you’ve
come to the right person.”

“You can drop the act now,” Raisa said, narrowing her eyes at him slightly. “Gajul-Lei.”

The lizard straightened slightly, seeming somewhat nervous, “Oh wait… did you say Goldenglow
Estate? My apologies. I’m afraid to say I know very little about that… bee farm, was it?”

“You acted as a broker for its new owner,” Raisa said, staring at him hard.
“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t,” the Argonian mumbled. “I can’t be expected to remember every single deal I handle.”

“So what would it take to identify the buyer?” Raisa asked, leaning forward and putting on her best negotiator tone.

“Well,” the lizard trilled in satisfaction as he pondered, “Now that you mention it, there is something I’ve been trying to get my hands on. I have a buyer looking for a case of Firebrand Wine. There just so happens to be a single case in the Blue Palace. Bring it to me, and we’ll talk about Goldenglow Estate.”

Not even an hour later, Raisa found herself presenting a case of Firebrand Wine the Argonian, surprised to find that he had remained where he was instead of disappearing like a snake in the grass. She sat in the seat she had so recently vacated and said, “There’s your wine. Now talk.”

“Good,” Gulum-Ei grinned, baring his pointed teeth, “Can’t have the buyer getting impatient and looking elsewhere for this, can we? Here, take this. I certainly can’t use it, but I suppose I need to pay you something for the goods.”

She glared at the man irritably, “What, you’re trying to bribe me now?”

“Not at all. I consider it an investment in prolonging my life,” he clarified, though Raisa saw no difference, “As far as Goldenglow Estate goes, I’ll tell you what I know. I was approached by a woman who wanted me to act as the broker for something big. She flashed a bag of gold in my face and said all I had to do was pay Aringoth for the estate. I brought him the coin and walked away with her copy of the deed.”

“Did she mention why she was doing this?”

“Not at all. I tend not to ask too many questions when I’m on the job. I’m sure you understand. However, I did notice she was quite angry and it was being directed at Mercer Frey,” he said. “In this business we rarely deal in names; our identity comes from how much coin we carry.”

Raisa regarded him coldly for a moment before saying, “I think you’re lying to me.”

“Look,” the lizard said, “That’s all I know. I never promised you I’d have all the answers. Now, since our transaction is done, I’ll be on my way.” And with that he stood and made his way out of the tavern. Irritably, Raisa made herself wait until he had at least gotten out of the city before she went and tailed him. She followed him to the East India Company Warehouse and, without much trouble, thanks to her late-night practice session, picked the lock and slipped inside before any guards noticed. She snuck along after Gulum-Ei from above, having noticed that there was no way she would be able to follow him normally without getting herself caught.

It was lucky she kept such a close eye on him or she would have lost him in the labyrinthine shelving of the warehouse, especially when he managed to slip into a secret passageway behind one of the massive storage units. Following him as quietly as she could, she tailed him to a large storeroom. She felt a swell of pride within her, though she quickly quelled it, changing it into mild irritated towards the Argonian. managing to sneak on top of one of the supply areas, she used her bow to pick off the only mercenary that was keeping an eye on Gulum-Ei from above, having noticed that there was no way she would be able to follow him normally without getting herself caught.

She hopped down and sat on one of the shelves above the Argonian before leveling her bow at him threateningly. “You ready to talk yet?”
“Now, there’s not need to do anything rash… This isn’t as bad as it seems. I was going to tell Mercer about everything, honestly! Please… he’ll have me killed!” the Argonian gulped, eyeing her bow worriedly.

“I may be a part of the Guild, but I’m sure it won’t surprise you to know I’ve got friends who’re a lot less noble than the Guild. And we aren’t afraid to spill a little blood,” Raisa said. “Now tell me the name and Mercer doesn’t have to find out.”

“Alright, alright… I see you wish to be… reasonable,” the Argonian said, flinching when she relaxed her bow and looked at him expectantly, “Perhaps I misjudged you… The name of the person you want is Karliah.”

“You say that name like I should know it.”

“You mean Mercer never told you about her?” the Argonian seemed surprised, to say the least. “Karliah is the thief responsible for the murder of the previous Guild Master, Gallus. Now she’s after Mercer.”

“And you’re helping her?” Raisa asked, making it seem as if she were about to raise her bow again.

“Help…?” he asked confused, before seeing what she meant, “No, no! Look, I didn’t even know it was her until after she contacted me. Please, you have to believe me!”

“Where is Karliah now?”

“I don’t know. When I asked her where she was going, she just muttered, ‘where the end began.’ Here, take the Goldenglow Estate deed as proof. And when you speak to Mercer, tell him I’m worth more to him alive.”
The Silence has been Broken

When Raisa arrived in Volunruud, she didn’t know what to expect. She was grateful that she had at least some experience with brokering a contract for the Brotherhood. But she hadn’t been expecting someone so well dressed. She’d expecting some rough thug to greet her. But instead, there was a Penitus Oculatus agent behind her client, who was clad in what appeared to be the finest of clothing.

“By the Almighty Divines, you’ve come,” the man breathed, sounding awestruck. “You’ve actually come. This dreadful Black Sacrament thing… it worked…”

At least this contact seemed to have some moral compass in him. Then again, that did seem to be the way with the Dark Brotherhood contacts. They were driven by what they saw as right, rather than just for their own personal gain. Usually. Raisa chose to remain silent, standing a good ways away from the two men, staring at them intently through the gloom of the crypt.

“Right then,” the man continued. “You prefer to listen, is that it? Well, you must represent the Dark Brotherhood. I certainly wasn’t expecting anyone else, so I’ll cut right to the chase. I would like to arrange a contract. Several, actually. I daresay, the work I am offering has more significance than anything your organization has experienced in, well, centuries.”

“Go on,” Raisa said, trying out the sultry tone that Astrid favored when she wanted to be intimidating and mysterious, aloof even.

“As I said, I want you to kill several people. You'll find the targets, as well as their manners of elimination, quite varied. I'm sure someone of your disposition will probably find it enjoyable. But you should know that these killings are but a means to an end. For they pave the way to the most important target. The real reason I'm speaking with a cutthroat in the bowels of this detestable crypt. For I seek the assassination of…… the Emperor.”

Raisa almost chose to remain silent but after a moment of thought she deemed that course of action unwise, given the man’s confident and cocky nature. He needed a response that would show the determination of the Brotherhood, not a response easily mistaken for fear or weakness.

“Leaders rise and fall,” she said, keeping up with her Astrid impression. It seemed to suit her quite well, if she dared say so herself. “Business is business.”

Motierre positively lit up at her response, “Oh, wonderful! You don’t know how happy I am to heard you say that. So much has led to this day. So much planning, and maneuvering. It's as if the very stars have finally aligned. But I digress... Here, they need to be delivered to your, um...superior. Rexus. The items.”

Here the Penitus Oculatus agent stepped forward to bring her the items. Raisa stepped forward as well to accept them before retreating to her previous position. As the exchange happened, Motierre continued speaking, “Rexus will now give you two items which must be passed along to your superior. The sealed letter will explain everything that needs to be done. The amulet is quite valuable— you can use it to pay for any and all expenses…”

When Raisa arrived back in the Sanctuary, Astrid was anxiously waiting for her, “You’re back. Good. All right, so? Did you meet this Motierre? What did he want?”
“Motierre wants us to... to kill the Emperor,” Raisa said, scarcely able to believe the assignment though she had been mulling over it for at least a day now.

“You’re joking,” Astrid said, beginning to chuckle, until Raisa held out Motierre’s letter and amulet.

“The letter explains it all. The amulet is for expenses.”

“By Sithis, you’re not joking,” Astrid said with her eyes widening incredulously as she snatched the letter and tore it open as quickly and gently as she was able. “To kill the Emperor of Tamriel... the Dark Brotherhood hasn't done such a thing since the assassination of Pelagius. As a matter of fact, no one has dared assassinate an Emperor of Tamriel since the murder of Uriel Septim, and that was two hundred years ago...”

“Surely the Night Mother wouldn't misdirect us...” Raisa said, watching Astrid curiously.

“No she certainly wouldn’t...” the blonde woman mused. “And, for whatever reason, she chose to relay Motierre’s information to you. I don’t know exactly what’s going on here, if you’re the Listener, or if this is some kind of fluke, or what. But what we now have before us...”

“So we’ll accept the contract?” Raisa asked, somewhat surprised.

“You’re damn right we’ll accept it. If we pull this off, the Dark Brotherhood will know fear and respect like we haven’t seen in centuries,” Astrid exclaimed. “You think I’d abandon and opportunity to lead my Family to glory? But this is all so much to take in. I need time to read the letter, and figure out where we go from here. And this amulet. Hmmm...”

“What are you thinking?” Raisa asked curiously as the woman fell silent.

“I'm thinking we need that amulet appraised. I want to know where it came from, how much it's worth, and if we can actually get away with selling it. And, there's only one man who can give us what we need— Delvin Mallory. He's a fence, a private operator. Works out of the Ratway, in Riften. Give me the letter. Bring Mallory the amulet. Find out everything you can, and sell it if he's willing. He'll offer a letter of credit-- that's fine. Delvin Mallory and the Dark Brotherhood have... history. He can be trusted.”

Raisa soon found herself sneaking into the Ragged Flagon through the Ratway, knowing Mercer wouldn’t be caught dead in there. As she entered, she was hardly shocked to find Brynjolf waiting by the door, a smile already on his face when she noticed him. “Welcome back, lass. How’d the slimy scale-tail treat you?”

Raisa hesitated a bit too long before saying, “Don’t know. Haven’t met him yet.”

“Lass...” Brynjolf started, the look of a tired and scolding parent crossing his face.

“I’ll get on it soon,” she said quickly. “Family business came up. Unbelievably important. I need Delvin. Where is he?”

Brynjolf looked surprised, watching his protege shift anxiously under his gaze, glancing away into the Flagon behind him. This was, surprisingly, a first. He’d never seen her this edgy before, and he wasn’t entirely sure he liked it. What bothered him most was how she was so eager to speak to Delvin. He hadn’t realised the two were that close. He frowned, crossing his arms before nodding back towards the Flagon, “He’s in his usual spot, but lass—”

“Thank you, Brynjolf,” Raisa said quickly, placing her hand on his arm gratefully as she hurried
past, not giving him time to finish his statement.

A chuckle came from behind the door Raisa had just entered through, where Sapphire sat perched on a set of crates, amusement written across her smooth features. “She seemed eager to get away, now, didn’t she?”

“She’s a busy lass,” Brynjolf shrugged, though Raisa’s behaviour had bothered him. He’d bugged her about not being in the Flagon and the Cistern often enough, but he wondered if perhaps she was there, and she just avoided him. Perhaps she was off talking to Rune or Vipir or Delvin while he was up top attempting to sell his wares. No… he would know if she was in the city. He’d made that his business ever since he first saw her. Even kept tabs on her friend, Benor, just in case she somehow managed to be in Riften without any of his eyes or ears noticing.

“Ah, yes. Busy,” Sapphire hummed suggestively with a click of her tongue. “Bet that ruffles your feathers a bit, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve no feathers to be ruffled in the first place,” he said with a playful roll of his eyes, though his mood was anything but. He couldn’t help but glance back into the tavern where he saw Delvin smiling up at Raisa in amusement.

“You say that,” Sapphire said, “But I definitely don’t believe you.”

“Somethin’ you need, dear? Anything for the Guild.” Delvin grinned devilishly as Raisa approached him.

“Actually, I’m here on Dark Brotherhood business,” Raisa said hesitantly, her voice low. Instantly the joking nature was gone from Delvin’s face.

“Oh,” he said. “Oh I see. Well, you’re makin’ friends, ain’t ya? So, uh… how is Astrid doin’ these days? Tell her to stop by some time. We can have a drink. Catch up. Ah, but business! Of course. What kind of business?”

“What can you tell me about this?” Raisa asked, placing the amulet on the table in between them, waiting for him to pick it up.

“Let’s see… Where oh where did you get this? Don't answer— I don't want to know. This is an amulet of the Emperor’s Elder Council. Specially crafted for each member. Worth a small fortune. Ain't somethin' you'd give up lightly. Look, it ain't my business to tell the Dark Brotherhood its business, but if you killed a member of the Elder Council, you'd better belie—!”

“Will you buy it?” Raisa asked quickly, not wanting to linger long, lest someone inform Mercer she was back already. She had a hard enough lying to Brynjolf; she couldn’t imagine how she’d manage it with Mercer. She practically hated Mercer; at least she had a reason to lie to him. But keeping secrets from Brynjolf was different. She actually cared about him. She cursed herself inwardly, not allowing her sentiment to show through. She needed efficiency right now, and Brynjolf was the opposite of efficiency for her.

“Buy it? This? An Elder Council amulet? Oh yes. Oh yes, indeed. Wait just a moment… Here. It’s a letter of credit. Usable, by Astrid only, for any service or item I can provide. As per our standard arrangement. You bring that back to your lovely mistress. With my regards,” Delvin said, sliding a slip of wax-sealed paper across to Raisa after a moment of scribbling.

“Thank you, darling,” Raisa said, smirking at him as she took the letter. She stood quickly before
saying, “Also, do you have any extra jobs you need done? I’ll need something to do to keep me away from the Guild for a while or Mercer will have my head for the delay. Make it seem like I needed to disappear for a little while, or something.”

“I’ll cover you,” Delvin said, waving a hand dismissively at her worries. “I’m sure Brynjolf would be more than willing to spot you with me.”

“Don’t…” Raisa started hesitantly, “Don’t let him know about… my family. Please.”

“Not my place to tell.” Delvin shrugged. “You’re secret’s safe with me love.”

Raisa nodded, a pleased smile crossing her face as she turned to leave.

“Oi, lass,” Brynjolf tried again, grabbing her arm as she tried to slip past him again, “What’s got you all bothered?”

Raisa glanced at Sapphire for a moment, noting the curious smirk on the woman’s face before she turned to face Brynjolf, who was standing now, quite close to her. Closer than he’d ever actually been to her before. Raisa opened her mouth to respond a few times, but wound up gawking slightly. At some point during the short interaction, Sapphire had slunk away, sensing she was unwanted there.

“Look, just slow down a bit, alright?” Brynjolf said, placing both of his hands on her upper arms, trying to calm her down. “What’s so important that you’re rushing in and out in just a few minutes? You can tell me, lass.”

She looked up at him hesitantly, seriously considering telling him everything. “Look, Brynjolf, I would love to chat, I really would. But I just can’t right now. Some things have come up. More things, I mean. I can’t be distracted right now, as nice as that would be.”

“Lass…”

“Don’t let Mercer know I was here,” she said quickly before rushing quickly out of his grasp, goosebumps running up and down her arms, her heart beat wild from the proximity. As she headed for the Sanctuary once more, Raisa shook her head, trying to get the handsome thief out of her mind. This wasn’t the time for fanciful hopes that he might just care for her.

She was still considering how simple it would have been to tell him everything, how easy it would have been to simply reach up and run her fingers through his soft-looking ginger locks, to admit how big of a distraction he was for her… She shook her head, having gotten off track, nearly tripping down the stairs of the Sanctuary as her mind wandered from its original purpose to the chameleon eyes of her mentor and friend.

“Good, you’re back,” Astrid said firmly when Raisa came stumbling down the stairs, still mostly distracted. She handed over the letter as Astrid asked, “Well, what did Mallory have to say? Is the amulet authentic?”

“Yes, and specially made for members of the Elder Council.”

“The Elder Council… Oh, now that explains quite a bit. Motierre, you naughty, naughty boy. Hiring the Dark Brotherhood to help you rise beyond your station. Delicious. Was Mallory willing to buy the amulet?” Astrid mused maniacally.

“That’s a letter of credit,” Raisa said, nodding at the paper she’d handed to Astrid before.
“Splendid. Then we're ready to begin. Or, specifically, you're ready to begin. After all, you're the one the Night Mother spoke to. Now then. I hope you have something nice to wear. Because you're going to a wedding,” Astrid grinned devilishly.

“A wedding?” Raisa asked, somewhat surprised.

“Well, more like the public reception. It should be a lovely affair. You'll mingle with the guests, eat some cake… stab the bride. Oh yes. You've got to kill the bride. At her wedding. And they say romance is dead…” Astrid laughed darkly. When Raisa didn’t speak, she carried on, “Your target's name is Vittoria Vici. She oversees the East Empire Company's business holdings in Solitude. The wedding is being held in that city, at the Temple of the Divines. Her death will cause an uproar, which is exactly what we want. Vici is likely to address her guests frequently, as is the wedding custom. Kill her when she does that, and I promise you a significant bonus. Now go. And give the city of Solitude a celebration they're not likely to forget.”

Raisa sighed bitterly, “Always Solitude… I’ll see you once Vittoria Vici is dead… But, what’s her connection to the Emperor?”

“An excellent question. Vittoria Vici is the first cousin to our dear Emperor, Titus Mede II. Vici has obvious Imperial connections. Her husband has ties to the Stormcloaks. Their union is a step toward reconciliation. So if there's a murder at the wedding… Not only will it stall the peace process—it will send shockwaves throughout the entire Empire. The Emperor's hand will be forced. He'll have to travel to Skyrim to deal with the aftermath...and he'll find the Dark Brotherhood waiting,” Astrid said.

“I take it the Emperor is not attending the wedding?”

Astrid grunted almost irritably at this question, “He had a trip to Skyrim planned for months, and canceled at the last minute. Much to his cousin's dismay. Seems the Emperor realized his presence would necessitate a more direct role in the ongoing hostilities. A role he was, obviously, unwilling to take. All that will change with his cousin's murder. Everyone will think it was motivated by the conflict between the Imperial Legion and Stormcloaks. And the Emperor will be forced to come clean up the mess. Now, off to Solitude with you. Time to give the Emperor some real motivation to visit Skyrim.”
Raisa had spent a few moments discussing the contract with her family members before making her way to Solitude. They had given her much to consider as she approached the kill. It needed to be flashy, but controlled enough that she would be able to get away with no problem, considering both the guards and the general public were likely to turn against her once the woman was dead and they understood what had happened.

Eventually, Raisa had determined it best for her to take Gabriella’s advice. There were a few bottles of potent poison sitting up on a parapet opposite the balcony where Vittoria Vici would give her speech to the people. Killing her in the middle of her speech would be pure genius, and it would certainly cause a riot. Gabriella had even left her an enchanted bow. Raisa wasn’t sure if she was ready to part with Ralof’s bow, but once she picked up the new one, she knew that it would serve her purpose well. She stowed Ralof’s bow on her back, planning on keeping both until she could stow Ralof’s bow away in a safe place. It had been through so much with her; she felt like it was almost part of her.

It had been a beautiful ceremony, from what Raisa had heard. She’d camped out on the parapet for the night, so as to avoid being spotted ascending there. She hoped to have a wedding as nice as this one, one day. She wondered if she would ever reach that point in her life, while simultaneously chastising herself for allowing such distractions while on a mission. She needed all of her focus for this task, and her mind was wandering down a treacherous path there.

“Good people of Solitude. I just wanted to thank you all for being here. To thank you for sharing this wonderfully happy day with myself, and my new husband. Today, the problems of Skyrim are not my problems. Nor are they yours. Today we are joined in peace and ha—!”

A pretty speech. Probably. It was a pity they would never hear the end of it, as an arrow blossomed from the young woman’s throat. She stood still, shock written all over her face as her eyes found where Raisa hid on the parapet, watching her kill silently. And then she collapsed, and all hell broke loose. Knowing she would soon be discovered, Raisa vaulted over the parapet and rolled into a stand before darting away, managing to sneak out a back door that let out past the marina. From there she made her way to the stables and hitched a ride back to Falkreath.

“Ha ha!” Astrid cackled upon Raisa’s reentry to the Sanctuary, “The news is everywhere! Vittoria Vici, the Emperor’s cousin, butchered at her own wedding! Well done! Let’s see his eminence try to ignore this. With Vici’s murder, you’ve started us down a path the Dark Brotherhood hasn’t traveled in centuries. The assassination of an Emperor. And now, your reward. A unique spell to summon a legend of the Dark Brotherhood. His soul serves us now in death, as his body once did in life. Ah, and of course, the bonus, for killing Vici while she addressed her guests, as instructed. Gold...simple and pure. Spend it as you will. Now then, time to proceed to the next stage of the plan. Go and speak with Gabriella. She’s been helping me arrange your next contract.”
Breaching Security

Chapter Summary

So yeah, shortest chapter ever was 19 and I feel bad just throwing up a few paragraphs. Honestly, I considered combining these two quests into one chapter, but I really prefer keeping quests separate to be honest, so two short chapters this week.

“Dear sister,” Gabriella smiled, “I’ve been waiting for you. Your next contract awaits, as I’m sure Astrid indicated.”

“She did indeed. What are the details?” Raisa asked, sitting down on one of the benches in the Alchemy room.

“With the Emperor's arrival in Skyrim now a certainty, his security service, the Penitus Oculatus, will need to begin its preparations immediately. Security is being handled by a Commander Maro. Astrid and I have devised a plan to break the man, and in doing so, cripple the Emperor's protection. You are to slay the commander's son, Gaius Maro, and once he is dead, plant false evidence on him, implicating him in a plot to kill the Emperor.” Here Raisa chose to remain silent, waiting for Gabriella to finish listing the assignment for her. “He is set to leave the Penitus Oculatus outpost at Dragon Bridge, and inspect the security of each city in Skyrim. Go there now. Observe Gaius Maro's departure, and follow him. Waylay him in one of the cities, and send his soul to Sithis. Once he's dead, plant the incriminating letter on his body, and let fate take care of the rest. Oh, and one final thing…” The dark elf droned on, looking at Raisa with an almost proud sort of expression.

“Yes?” Raisa asked, smiling demurely at her sister in death.

“To earn your bonus, do not kill Gaius Maro in Dragon Bridge, or on the road. Kill him in one of the other major cities he'll be visiting. There, the body will be discovered quickly, as will the letter implicating Gaius Maro in the plot to assassinate the Emperor. Do that, and Astrid has authorized me to grant you a rather unique bonus. It is a special token, to be given to Olava the Feeble, in Whiterun. Olava is an old and dear friend, and a powerful seer. The token entitles you to a reading of your future. It's an opportunity one should not pass up,” Gabriella said, a small smile crossing her pointed features, her dark red eyes flashing at the prospect. “Now, sister, walk in Gaius Maro’s shadow, and deliver him to the judgement of Sithis.”

“Hail Sithis,” Raisa said, bowing her head slightly out of respect before making her way out to Dragon Bridge, knowing she had her work cut out for her.

It took her two weeks to get a chance to kill Gaius Maro. He travelled fast and alone, but Raisa was after the bonus. She’d nicked his schedule from the outpost in Dragon Bridge, but had been at a loss for where to kill him. She couldn’t go back to Riften— not yet. Mercer was sure to know she’d been back by now; word travelled fast in that city. She was not eager to return to Solitude, considering things were still on high alert after the murder of Vittoria Vici. Eventually though, she decided to return to Solitude and greet the Commander’s son with an arrow to the neck.

She’d sat on top of a secluded rooftop for over a day, having stolen some food before retreating to her hiding spot. She was certain that no one would be able to find it. Having arrived well before
Gaius Maro, she’d had ample time to plot out a course of action should she be discovered.

“Open the gates!” A loud call came. Raisa scrambled slightly to draw her bow and readied it, leveling it at Gaius Maro as he strut through the gates. She let out a short breath and released the arrow, hitting her mark. She flattened herself on the roof, behind the slightly raised sides around her. She waited there for a few hours before slinking into the hall of the dead, where Maro’s body was being kept. After planting the false evidence on his body, she strolled out of Solitude once again, no one paying any attention to assassin. She made her way back to the Sanctuary, feeling a bit less stressed than before. It turned out murdering people could be terribly therapeutic.

She flounced into the Sanctuary, right as rain, surprised to see Gabriella waiting for her in Astrid’s usual spot. The dark elf smiled at her, though a worried expression was on her face, “Ah, at last. I’ve been anxiously awaiting your return, sister.”

“Gaius Maro is dead,” Raisa smiled proudly.

“Yes, I know. As does Astrid,” Gabriella nodded. “You have done well, and have earned both your reward, and a bonus, as I may have mentioned. But you should know that we have a more pressing matter to deal with. It’s… Cicero. There’s been an incident. You should proceed into the Sanctuary. I'll let Astrid explain.”

A pang of worry and unease settling in the pit of Raisa’s stomach, surprising her. It was more shocking to realise that she wasn’t sure who to worry for, whether it be her family, or the jester himself. She quickly descended the stairs and saw her brothers and sisters grouped around where Veezara, the Argonian, normally sat.

“Just try to relax, Veezara,” Babette was saying, far gentler than Raisa would have expected from the ruthless undead child. “Let the elixir do its work. You’ll feel better, shortly.”

“Achh…” the Argonian hissed, “Thank you, dear. You are most kind… The jester’s cut feels as bad as it looks, I’m afraid.”

“Damn it, this never should have happened!” Astrid yelled suddenly, having been pacing about in anger. “We knew better. We knew better, and still we let our guards down.” With a yell of rage, she spun and slashed open a training dummy, pulling her blade out faster than Raisa imagined possible.

“I’ll admit, even I’m having a hard time disagreeing with you…” Festus mused solemnly. Raisa was surprised at this. What the hell had happened? Festus was a proud, obstinate man. He would never admit to having been wrong… about anything. Whatever happened must have been unthinkably terrible.

Astrid caught sight of Raisa lingering uncertainly on the outskirts of the group. She walked over, conflict written all over her face, “Maro is dead, I know. But we’ve got bigger problems right now!” Raisa jumped slightly, not expecting to be yelled at from so close.

“Gabriella mentioned something about Cicero…?” Raisa asked carefully, feeling somewhat nervous around the furious assassin.

“The fool went absolutely berserk! He wounded Veezara, he tried to kill me, and then he fled. I knew that lunatic couldn't be trusted,” Astrid rattled off, though she didn’t seem to be in the best state of mind. Raisa looked around at the rest of the Brotherhood for confirmation, worry and confusion spread across her features.
“It’s true, I’m afraid,” Festus said, a grim expression on his old and wrinkled face. “Cicero was a little whirlwind, slashing this way and that. It would have been funny, if he weren't trying to murder us all.”

“Don't forget the ranting and raving. About the Night Mother, how she was the true leader of the Dark Brotherhood and Astrid was just a 'pretender,’” Nazir added from where he sat, helping Babette to tend to Veezara.

“Look,” Astrid snapped suddenly, “We’ve got to deal with this situation. You’ve got to deal with this situation.”

“What? Me?” Raisa asked, completely floored by Astrid’s order. “What the hell do you expect me to do about this?”

“That little puke trusted you. He must have mentioned something. I want you to find that miserable little fool and end his life! But first… find my husband. Make sure he's all right. After the attack, Arnbjorn flew into a rage. When Cicero left… Arnbjorn went after him. They disappeared into the wild.” Astrid said irritably. “Search Cicero's room. Maybe there's something in there that sheds some light on where he might have gone. Let me know the minute you find something. I've got to see to Veezara, and calm everyone down.”

“Bested by a fool…” Veezara muttered bitterly. “Who’s the fool now, hmm?”

“Hush Veezara,” Babette cooed. “You were very brave. Astrid may well be dead if not for you…”

“She’s right,” Astrid sighed after a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose as she tried to calm herself. “I’ll forever be in your debt, dearest brother. Now be quiet… Just… just rest.” Astrid then walked off, making her way up the stairs to her usual spot. Raisa quickly followed, desiring more information.
The Cure for Madness

Chapter Summary

Out of town for a week and would be missing regular update time so getting a chapter up before my flight leaves early morning tomorrow.

“Did something set Cicero off?” she asked once Astrid had sat down and opened a bottle of wine, taking a long drink straight from the bottle.

“No, nothing. At least nothing I'm aware of. Well… If I'm being honest, I haven't exactly been discreet lately in expressing my frustration with this whole situation. Obeying the Night Mother. You being the Listener. It's ridiculous. No offense. Cicero may have heard me talking to one of the others about the Night Mother. It's possible I was… not entirely respectful. But to go this far… To attempt to murder the leader of the Sanctuary… Cicero must pay with his life. There is no other option.,” Astrid said, venom lacing her cruel words. “Damnable jester…”

Raisa left her then made her rounds in the Sanctuary to question the others. She started in her usual haunt, where Gabriella had joined Babette and Festus. Instead of watching over her pet spiders, Babette was sitting at the table with the other two. Raisa sat down quietly and sat with them in silent companionship for a while.

“I suppose you’re here to listen then, right?” Festus grumbled somewhat sarcastically. “I still say it’s unfair the Night Mother chose you; I’ve been here for years. I’m clearly a much better choice…” Normally Raisa would have countered the old man with a joke and a smile but the air was solemn and there were dark deeds afoot. His wry smile fell after a few moments and he said, “Boy did you miss all the excitement…”

“It was a truly terrifying scene,” Gabriella agreed. “Beautiful, in some respects…”

“I believed in Cicero,” Babette added bitterly, her young voice cold, “But he’s betrayed us all.”

“All right, so maybe I was wrong. Maybe Cicero coming here wasn't the best thing that could have happened. But even I didn't anticipate this. Well, you know the old saying. When life gives you lemons…… go murder a clown. Burn that little jester alive,” Festus continued, looking around at all of them, his attitude rather defeated.

“Cicero destroyed any sympathy I may have had for him when he wounded Veezara. Kill the fool and be done with it. Go. Do what has to be done,” Babette snapped, hatred burning in her black eyes.

“I for one feel only pity for Cicero,” Gabriella said, earning herself incredulous looks from the other two. “He must die, of course,” she continued, “but can any of us truly blame him for his actions? We mocked him, disrespected the Old Ways. Our actions were shameful. Surely the Night Mother weeps this day.”

Raisa nodded in agreement. She had grown to be appalled by the way the Night Mother was being regarded in the Sanctuary. The Brotherhood seemed more concerned with what was eating away at Cicero than with what the will of the Night Mother was. They’d grown wild in comparison to the
original ways of the Brotherhood; a dangerous thing it seemed.

She rose and made her way back to where Nazir still sat with Veezara and sought their opinions.

“It only hurts when I laugh,” The Argonian chuckled before groaning in pain.

“Should have figured the little lunatic would completely snap,” Nazir spoke in his deep voice. “Going after Cicero now would be a fool's errand. That little jester is currently being digested in Arnbjorn's stomach, mark my words.”

“No,” Veezara said shaking his head in disagreement. “Do not underestimate Cicero,” the Argonian insisted firmly, “A man like that, small and foolish, is easy to mock. To underestimate. Do not make the same mistake I did.”

Raisa then made her way into Cicero’s chambers and began her search, entirely unsure of what she would find. She sat on one of the chairs, having collected a series of four small journals. Unsure of what she would find therein recorded, she began to read.

Several hours later, if someone were to ask Raisa her opinion of Cicero, she would be unable to voice her thoughts. Instead, she would have handed over the journals he had kept of his time with the Brotherhood, both in Skyrim and in Cyrodil. She had learned so much about the jester in so little time, she was unable to fully comprehend what her opinion of him was. She didn’t believe him to be a fool— a jester, a madman for sure— but not a fool. He’d been driven mad by the silence of the Night Mother, pulled deeper into the Void than any other who had come before, driven over the edge by his devotion to his duties, deprived of his original joy and companionship in the Brotherhood for a solitary existence, purposed only with caring for their Unholy Matron.

With a heavy heart full of conflict, Raisa made her way up to see Astrid once again.

“Have you found something?” Astrid asked quickly, upon seeing Raisa enter.

“Yes, Cicero’s journals…” Raisa said. Astrid did no ask for them.

“Good, good,” Astrid nodded. “Does it say where he may be headed?”

“Yes,” Raisa said, almost reluctant to reveal the information. “An abandoned Sanctuary in Dawnstar. I have the passphrase…”

“The Dawnstar Sanctuary? Whatever for?” Astrid asked, sounding surprised, though she quickly shook her head and refocused, “Never mind, it doesn't matter. You need to leave. Now. Every moment counts, so I want you to take my horse. His name is Shadowmere. You'll find him outside, by the pool. Let's just say he's… one of us. Find Arnbjorn. Make sure my husband's all right. And then send that jester's twisted little soul to the Void, in as many pieces as possible.”

“What do we know of the Dawnstar Sanctuary?” Raisa asked curiously.

“Oh, it's ancient. Apparently one of the first Sanctuaries in Skyrim. It hasn't been used by the Brotherhood in close to a hundred years. If you say Cicero has gone there, then it stands to reason that he's familiar with the place. That means you'll be fighting him on his own ground. Tread carefully.”

“Isn't there any way to work this out?” Raisa asked quickly, not wanting to go along with the assignment given to her.
“Look, the Dark Brotherhood is a family. This Sanctuary is a family. And, we’ve always welcome those… shunned by society. Werewolves, wizards, eternal ten-year-old vampires… what does it matter? In truth, I’ve rarely met a lunatic I haven’t liked. Cicero’s problem isn’t his madness. It’s an adherence to an ancient, outmoded way of life. The Night Mother’s ways… simply are not our ways. He just couldn’t accept that. And now he’ll have to pay the price,” Astrid said coldly.

Raisa was immediately set against Astrid here. What she suggested was blasphemous. She was fond of the mother, their makeshift Matron, but she could not abide her one-track mind on this matter. She was foolish to assume that her knowledge and power should be honored above that of the Night Mother, a long-standing instrument of Sithis himself. However, instead of protesting, Raisa simply left, her mind already made up.

Outside, as instructed, she befriended Shadowmere, a beast of darkness and embers of a long-lived passion, a true embodiment of the Brotherhood. As she rode across the countryside, she found herself almost flying along. The horse’s stamina exceeded that of any mortal horse she had ever had the pleasure of stealing. Sooner than she would have thought possible, she found herself approaching the Dawnstar Sanctuary, having ridden through the night. She dismounted and her feet crunched on the sandy, snowy coastline outside of the Sanctuary. The sun was just creeping over the horizon, casting a beautiful, but cold golden glow over the area.

“Should have figured Astrid would send you…” she heard a grumpy voice grumble from one side. She hurried over to Arnbjorn and took a look at his wounds, finding them similar in severity to what had happened to Veezara.

“You’re hurt,” she said simply, unsure of how to speak to the werewolf. He’d never seemed much for conversation before, and considering the current circumstances, he somehow became even less so.

“What gave it away?” the large man chuckled darkly, “Yeah, got to admit that little jester's good with that butter knife. But don't worry, I gave as good as I got.”

“Where’s Cicero now?” Raisa asked quickly, glancing around nervously.

“Little imp ran inside,” Arnbjorn said bitterly. “Through the door. Some old Sanctuary, by the looks of it. I would have followed him, but I don’t know the phrase…”

“I know the phrase,” Raisa said reassuringly. “I’ll get Cicero— you go home.”

Arnbjorn nodded slowly and said, “All right, you convinced me. Doubt I’ll be much good to you, anyway. The little fop cut me pretty deep. But I slashed him good. Pretty sure I severed an artery. Don't know what you're going to find in there… but you can probably just follow the blood. Do me a favor and kill that little jester twice. Just to make sure.”

Raisa approached the door and placed her hand on the skull with a shaky breath, knowing it would activate at her touch. “What is life’s greatest illusion?” the door murmured softly. Raisa wondered mildly who had given voice to the door, though feeling it in her heart that it was Sithis himself speaking to his children.

“Iinnnnnnnntener! Is that you? Oh, I knew you’d come!” Cicero’s shrill cries echoed through the ruined, dark sanctuary. “Send the best to defeat the best. Astrid knew her stupid wolf couldn’t slay sly Cicero.”
As she made her way though the Sanctuary stealthily, she head the man ranting and raving almost constantly, sometimes loudly, sometimes softly, always practically nonsensical. It at least reassured her (for the most part) that the jester wasn’t lying in wait, hoping to catch her off guard. Still, just to ease her mind she moved slowly, checking thoroughly for danger before allowing herself to move forward.

“Oh, but this isn’t at all what mother would want. You kill the Keeper or I kill the Listener? Now that’s madness…” She had to admit, there was a small bit of sense in what he said. But then, she supposed, she only though so because she understood a small bit of how his mind worked.

“Oh! Pointy pointy! My home is well defended. I always have been a stickler for details. Get it? ‘Stick-ler.’ Ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, I slay me!” Under less dire circumstances she may have been amused. Maybe. Instead she found a frost troll lurking right in her path.

“You’re… still alive. Cicero respects the listener's abilities, of course, but could you at least slow down a bit? I'm not what I used to be. Heh,” he echoed, sounding surprised. Clearly the jester thought that a meager frost troll would prove troublesome for Raisa. No, she was used to those beasts by that point. They were hardly more than an overgrown pest. The spirits of the assassins who once roamed the halls of the Sanctuary in life did throw her off a small amount though, she had to admit.

“All right, so Cicero attacked that harlot, Astrid! But what's a fool to do, when his mother is slandered and mocked? Surely the Listener understands!” She did understand… What’s more was that she agreed. She would never have sought to attack Astrid, certainly not… But at the same time, she could see where the Family was being led astray from the necessary dogma. Astrid should have been thankful for a more reliable source of contracts. No one would doubt the power of the Brotherhood. There would be no forgotten or unanswered contracts. They would be feared and respected, a thing of times long past, enduring through the ages.

“If it's any comfort, I do feel slightly bad about Veezara. Stupid lizard got in my way! But please tell me that hulking sheepdog has bled to death,” Cicero mused. Raisa knew that he must be close by. His voice was loud enough to be beside her as he called out to her. She could hear his ragged breathing and winces of pain as he attempted to tend to his wounds. She stopped outside the final door, only a thick slab of wood separating her from her prey.

“And now we come to the end of our play,” he said bitterly, a sad note in his voice which was barely above a whisper at this point. “The grand finale.”

Raisa paused, doubt crossing her mind at his words. It was the quietest she had ever heard Cicero, and his words echoed with a heavy regret. It wasn’t a regret for his actions, in the distant past or in recent events. It was a regret for the end he would almost certainly receive. It was as if part of him longed for his service to be ended, but the stronger part-- the man who was originally Cicero-- knew he needed to survive, to fulfill his services as Keeper. Gritting her teeth slightly, Raisa entered the final door, looking at him from where she stood in the doorway, entirely uneager to attack the jester. He looked so pitiful. Yet Veezara’s warning echoed in her Listener’s ears, and she knew she would not underestimate the man bleeding out before her eyes.

“You caught me!” he exclaimed, cackling slightly. “I surrender!”

Raisa remained silent, watching the Jester carefully.

“Oh, you prefer to listen, eh? Of course, of course! The Listener listens! A joke! A funny joke! I get it. Then listen to this— don't kill me. Let poor Cicero live! I attacked the strumpet Astrid, I did! And I'd do it again! Anything for our mother! Return to the pretender, tell her I'm dead! Tell her you strangled me with my own intestines! Ha ha! But lie! Yes, lie! Lie, and let me live!” the jester
pleaded through his madness. Raisa watched him carefully, thoughtfully. When she did not respond, Cicero simply nodded and said, “Do what you will, Listener. Cicero has no fight left. In the end, Sithis will judge us all... will judge us both.”

Raisa simply turned, her expression placid, and left the Sanctuary without speaking a word or raising a blade against the Keeper. She had more important things to do than to kill a brother.
“Arnbjorn is safe, and for that, you have my thanks,” Astrid said, pulling Raisa into a surprised, tight hug upon her arrival back in the front room of the Sanctuary. “But what of the fool? Is Cicero dead?”

“Yes,” Raisa said. “Cicero is dead.” It wasn’t entirely untrue. For all she knew, he could have bled to death from the wounds inflicted upon him by Arnbjorn. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be a true fool and return to the Falkreath Sanctuary and reveal her treachery to the rest of the Brotherhood. But regardless of whether or not he had departed that world, the man who was Cicero was no more. He was the jester, the Keeper, the Laughter…

“Excellent. Once again, you’ve proven yourself a born assassin. Tell you what. Why don’t you hold onto Shadowmere a while longer? He's a fine steed, and hasn't been ridden as nearly as much as he should lately. And now that this Cicero mess has been mopped up, we can get back to the matter at hand, hmm?” Astrid asked, her grateful mood disappearing almost instantly.

Raisa sighed, having been hoping for a brief respite. “Right. So what’s my next task?”

“There's just one more target before we strike out at the Emperor. Have you by chance heard of the ‘Gourmet'? Read his cookbook? It's become quite a phenomenon. The Gourmet is scheduled to cook for the Emperor at a special dinner. You'll kill him, steal his Writ of Passage, and assume the role of master chef. Festus has been spearheading this part of the assassination plan. He's close to discovering the identity of the Gourmet. You should report to him,” Astrid said, dismissing Raisa and turning to go tend to her wounded husband.

“There you are,” Festus said, looking up from the Alchemy table as Raisa entered. “Took your sweet time dealing with Cicero, hmph? Now let’s get down to business. Astrid told you about the Gourmet, I hope? Not moping over her giant lapdog?”

“That I need to kill him and take on his identity,” Raisa nodded. “Then she went back to pining over her lapdog.”

“Quite so,” Festus nodded curtly, “But first you'll need to learn who he is. Assuming, of course, that the Gourmet actually is a ‘he.’ Could be a woman for all we know.”

Raisa chose to remained silent, expecting further elaboration from the crotchety old wizard. He was another one with a dramatic flair, and for once, she enjoyed it. His demeanor was well suited to the attitude it required.

He looked over at her appraisingly for a moment, almost as if he were seeing her for the first time and said, “You know, maybe I was wrong about you after all. Anyone who's smart enough to shut up and listen can't be all bad. In my, um, investigations, I came upon this. It's a copy of the Gourmet's cookbook. Ah, but not just any copy. It's signed you see! Seems to be a message from the Gourmet to one Anton Virane. I've tracked Virane to the keep in Markarth. It would seem he's the cook.”

“And this Anton Virane knows the Gourmet’s true identity?” Raisa asked uncertainly.

“I believe so. Therefore, you need to obtain that information from Virane— who the Gourmet is, and where he can be found. Oh, and when you're done with Virane, kill him. Loose ends and all that. Next, you'll have to… Are you still paying attention?” the man snapped suddenly, looking at
her where she appeared to have a glazed sort of look, though in reality she was doing her best to internalise the instruction so it wouldn’t need repeating.

“Oh, I’m waiting with bated breath…” she said with a slight smirk. The older man harrumphed in mild amusement, though he seemed to think her sarcasm was tedious. Raisa found her thoughts drift towards Brynjolf, who would have appreciated her witty response and countered with one of his own. The Sanctuary felt somewhat empty then, a serious air hanging in it. She missed the easy-going nature of the Thieves Guild very suddenly, and very intensely. Though she was left to ponder if it was because of the Guild itself, or because of a very particular member of it…

“As I was saying… You'll need to kill the Gourmet, of course. But what's more, you'll need to get his Writ of Passage, so you can take his place. Oh, and if you can, hide his body. The longer it takes for anyone else to determine his real identity, the better. Now off with you!” Festus said.

“I have questions,” Raisa said quickly before the man could block her out.

“Hm?”

“Tell me about the cookbook.”

“Not a question, but fine,” Festus grumbled, “‘Uncommon Taste.’ It was published a few years ago, and became a sensation throughout the Empire almost overnight. The recipes were hailed as both practical and decadent. I've made a few of the Gourmet's dishes myself, actually. His roast mutton with Redguard berry sauce is to die for. But his chocolate pate gives me the runs…”

Raisa let out a laugh, something uncommon those days, “So the Gourmet is in Skyrim?”

“Yes. Gaius Maro, on orders from his father, arranged for the Gourmet to come to Skyrim months ago. To serve as the Emperor's personal chef. But the Emperor cancelled his journey at the last minute. Maro was smart, kept the Gourmet around, in case things changed. And so, the Gourmet has remained in seclusion, somewhere in Skyrim… on indefinite hold. Probably feels like a prisoner. But you'll fix that. Remember, the Markarth Keep. That's where you'll find Anton Virane. Probably cooking up all of the Gourmet's recipes, passing them off as his own.”

Raisa snickered slightly but made her exit, finding herself once again on the road. She slept little on the cart ride there, finding the pressure of everything to be an effective sleep deterrent. She stared up at the stone city, remembering the first time she'd been there; it had been Dark Brotherhood business as well. She almost longed for the days that a city remained untainted by unholy deeds. Did such a place exist in all of Tamriel? It was unlikely. Nothing more than a hopeless wish.

She entered the kitchen up at the keep, surprised that she had been allowed to enter unchecked into the stronghold. She stood silently and watched the chef prepare the latest meal for a short while before clearing her throat.

The chef groaned and exclaimed, “Yes, yes, for the hundredth time, I am a Breton. I was born in High Rock. And then I came here. I am not a Reachman!” Raisa remained silent as he watched her distastefully. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“The Gourmet,” Raisa said. “Who is he? Where is he?”

“The… the Gourmet?” Virane stuttered, his eyes going wide. “Never! I don’t know what led you here, but nothing will betray my trust. I’ll take the secret of the Gourmet’s identity to my grave.”

“Well you see, my friend,” Raisa said, sitting on top of a nearby table and crossing her legs slightly, “for the Dark Brotherhood, that can easily be arranged.”
Virane’s eyes, if possible got wider, though this time with fear as opposed to shock and anger. “The Dark Brotherhood? Now...now wait a minute. Let's not be hasty. I mean, surely my friend wouldn't want me to endanger my own life. Right? Look, his name is Balagog gro-Nolob. He's an Orc! The Gourmet's an Orc! He's staying at the Nightgate Inn! That's all I know! Now... now you'll let me go. Right?”

Raisa remained silent, her mossy green eyes staring at the man almost blankly, blind to the relief that flooded through him. Did he really think she would allow him to live, just like that? He had given away his best reason to remain among the living. But he’d squandered that chance for life, and would soon understand that mercy for cooperation was not the way of the Dark Brotherhood.

“So... we’re done?” the man asked, sounding relieved. He quickly turned to go back to his work and Raisa checked to make sure they were alone before she took the dagger from Maven Black-Briar and threw it, embedding it in his neck, just at the base of his skull. She stood with a sigh and stretched slightly before going and yanking the dagger out of the man’s neck. She dipped the blade into the pot of strew that was cooking and swirled it around a bit before wiping off the enchanted blade and stowing it away once more. She then made her way quickly out of the city, ready to hunt down the Gourmet.

It was easier than she had expected, to kill the Orc. He was standing at the edge of a dock, staring out over the lack. She pressed her back up against the inn he was now residing in and aimed her bow, killing the Gourmet in her usual style. She glanced around the corners before rushing over and taking what she needed from the corpse before pushing it with some difficulty into the water. She gave a sharp whistle once she was away from the inn and Shadowmere stepped out of the shadows cast by the thick forest.

With the Void horse carrying her, Raisa found herself back in the Sanctuary in almost no time at all. Festus smirked as she came down the stairs, “So, the prodigal murderer returns. And the Gourmet?”

“Dead,” Raisa stated simply. She was still relieved that Astrid had been too preoccupied with Arnbjorn to greet her as she came home this time. She had determined it best to keep her personal friendship with Astrid to a minimum. Else wise it would come up eventually that Raisa’s loyalty remained, first and foremost, with the Night Mother. Even if Astrid was acting as Matron, she was not the true authority in the Dark Brotherhood.

“So I gathered. It seems a certain Orc has disappeared. Which means you not only killed the Gourmet, but disposed of the body as well. You’ve got the Writ of Passage too, I see. Splendid, splendid… Ah, and word has come in from Markarth that the keep’s cook has met an untimely demise. You performed your duties to the letter,” Festus nodded, a genuine half-smile coming to his face for the first time since Raisa met the man. “I was wrong about you. I see that now. Maybe we all were. Here’s your payment. And... a little something extra, as well. From me. Consider it my way of apologizing. For being so damned curmudgeonly! It's called the Nightweaver's Band. I wore this for years. I want you to have it now. It'll give your magic and stealth some much needed ‘oomph.’ Now, you better get a move on and see Astrid. It's time! Time for the final stage of this grand and glorious operation!”

Raisa slipped the ring onto her finger gratefully, positively beaming at the old wizard who was doing his best to not look proud and glared at her in return before moving to inspect that the Alchemy lab had been properly cleaned from its last use.
Raisa returned to the front room, where Astrid now waited for her, sitting behind the desk. The map on the table had a dagger stabbed into seemingly random locations, but Raisa had come to learn that each successful kill was marked in such a way. She was proud to know that it currently kept track of the work she had done, several daggers harming the old wooden table and the crinkled, fading map.

“So it’s done,” Astrid said, a devilish grin crossing her face, “You’ve killed the Gourmet. And now Titus Mede II is as good as dead.”

“So it’s time then?” Raisa asked, feeling as if it couldn’t be true. “We’re ready to assassinate the Emperor?”

“Oh yes,” Astrid mused in her sultriest of tones, “And I’ve decided you will have the honor.”

Raisa was struck speechless by the assignment, but she felt as if a great weight had been put upon her. This was more than a mere assassination mission, this was no adulterous farmer or ungrateful widow. This was the Emperor. He was the highest power they knew. And she was meant to kill him.

“Hmph,” Astrid mused, looking at Raisa approvingly, “Looks at you. So calm… so confident… I do believe you were born for this task. So… Let us begin.” She leaned forward and said, with an unwavering stare, “Go now to Castle Dour in Solitude. Present the Gourmet's Writ of Passage to the officer in charge, Commander Maro. I'm sure you remember him. You'll gain unrestricted access to the kitchens, and then the Emperor. You're posing as a chef, so you'll be able to poison his meal rather easily.”

“Which poison?” Raisa asked curiously. She figured it would probably be best to ask Babette her opinion, though then she would get a four hour long discussion that she was not prepared to handle.

“Here, take this— it's called Jarrin Root. All it takes is one taste, and the effects are quite immediate. The Emperor will be serving Sithis before he even knows he's dead. Once Mede has been killed, escape through the upper door, and across the bridge. I've ‘arranged’ for it to be unguarded once the alarm is sounded. Now go, my friend. Go, and fulfill your destiny as Listener,” Astrid said with a certain note of finality. The look she gave Raisa was a bit unsettling, but she assumed it must be some sort of pride or affection.

“Anything else then before I set off?” she asked hesitantly. There was something nagging at the back of her mind that she couldn’t name, but it gave her a sense of certainty. However this mission ended, it would change the future of the Dark Brotherhood forever.

“It took all the favors, bribes, and blackmails I could muster, but I've secured your exit out of the keep. Just follow my instructions, and the Dark Brotherhood will be back on top. All thanks to
you… Listener,” Astrid said, giving no other words of advice or parting.

Raisa turned and made her way back into the Sanctuary to meet with the rest of the family, who were gathered around Nazir listening to a story. However, as she approached, they all broke apart and welcomed her to them kindly. For once, she felt as though she were truly and fully accepted into their little family. She smiled back at them and asked, “I’m getting ready to leave… Anything you think I should keep in mind going into this?”

“You get to kill the Emperor,” Arnbjorn said incredulously. “The bloody Emperor. You’d better enjoy this one. You owe us all that much, at the very least. So make it bloody, painful, and spectacular.”

“Don’t take any chances with this one,” Babette added. “Use the Jarrin Root to poison his food. You’re disguising yourself as a chef—it only makes sense. And maybe if there’s any left over, you’ll be interested in selling it to me. It’s been a while since I’ve gotten my hand on Jarrin…”

“Don’t screw it up,” Nazir said with a slight chuckle, “You’re killing the Emperor himself, kid. The Dark Brotherhood will only get one shot at this, and you’ve been given the honors.”

“It is an honor,” Gabriella nodded. “And all because you are the Listener, favoured by the Night Mother, anointed by Sithis himself… I am so very happy for you sister… if not a bit envious.”

“Exciting times. Exciting times, indeed. Well… While it’s true I prefer sorcery’s more destructive nuances, we mustn’t forget the many spells with simpler, more practical applications,” Festus remarked sagely, “Sure, you poison the Emperor, but what then? Why not summon an atronach and cause some chaos? Or turn invisible and slip away? Use your imagination!”

“On the contrary,” Veezara added, “Astrid has arranged for your escape, no? Then you have nothing to worry about. Get in, kill the Emperor, and get out. Then, we celebrate.”

The others added their agreement, nodding and clapping her on the back supportively. She even received a hug from Babette and Gabriella before she departed. Astrid said nothing to her as she passed her, causing Raisa to worry that perhaps something was wrong, that maybe she knew that Cicero lived… But that would be preposterous. Arnbjorn surely would have decided to hate her again were that the case… Unless Astrid was hiding something… Raisa shook her head to clear her mind. Now that was preposterous. Astrid would never lead them astray, even if she herself was a bit misguided. She would do anything to protect her family. Something the two women certainly had in common.

As the cart stopped in front of Solitude, Raisa felt a tremor of fear roll through her. She was to enter Castle Dour in the late evening to provide supper for the Emperor. She had the Writ of Passage tucked safely away where no one could get to it. She hesitated, looking up at the city as she did for the first time, wishing she could admire its beauty, but her worry overcoming the awe inducing visage. As she made to step forward, she heard a surprised and confused, “Lass?”

She whirled around, feeling sick to her stomach. This was the worst possible time to be hallucinating about him. But lo and behold, there he stood, having just come up from the docks. He must have been waiting for the carriage… No… he wasn’t really there, was he? What did it matter if he was just in her head. With a sinking feeling, Raisa watched as he walked over to her, his look of pleasant surprise slowly disappearing into mild concern.

“Are you alright lass?” he asked when he reached her, placing a hand on her shoulder in a friendly though slightly concerned greeting. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”
“Oh I think I might be,” she muttered, sounding somewhat panicked to find that he was, in fact, real.

“Let’s get you inside then,” Brynjolf said, guiding her up into the city. She remained silent, unsure of what to do. She hadn’t ever seen him outside of Riften. She’d hardly even seen him outside of the Guild headquarters, even. And now, on possibly the biggest, most dangerous day of her entire life, he shows up in the same city. She remained silent until after he had sat her down at a secluded table in the Winking Skeever and had returned with two pints of mead and a platter of meats and cheeses.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, feeling the suspicion creep into her voice. It was too random to be anything but a coincidence. Why would Brynjolf be around? Especially in Solitude… Surely there were important Guild matters to attend to down south, back in Riften. Oh, for once she almost wished he was back in Riften…

“Mercer sent me to check up on Gulum-Ei, considering he still thinks you haven’t been back to the Guild yet,” Brynjolf explained good-naturedly, though she could hear the curiosity behind his casual tone. “And what about you lass? What brings you to Solitude?”

“Family matters,” Raisa said shortly, hoping the thin excuse could hold up.

“Lass, I think we both know there’s more to it than that,” Brynjolf said with a sigh as he turned to face her directly. “What with your quick jaunt into the Flagon, sneaking in and hoping you don’t get spotted. It’s the Thieves Guild, lass. You’ll obviously be found out if you try and sneak about.”

“I’m not trying to keep hidden,” Raisa said. “If anything I’m trying to avoid the Guild for as long as possible. But you’re right there is far more to it than simple family matters…”

“Any chance I can convince you to tell me?” Brynjolf asked, looking at her grimly, for he already knew what her response would undoubtedly be.

She sighed and looked down at her hands thoughtfully for a while before looking up at him with a sad sort of smile. She really had considered telling him everything. She wanted to, quite badly. He was trustworthy, and she knew it. But she couldn’t afford to risk anything with her mission drawing to a close so soon. “Perhaps another time,” she said shortly, not closing the door forever, but shelving the matter for another day. “And I’m sorry if I wasn’t… pleased, by your appearance just now. It’s… I’ve had an interesting few weeks to say the least.”

“I take it these interesting weeks fall under the off-limits category?” Brynjolf asked. She smiled wryly and nodded the affirmative.

“I… I really am glad to see you,” Raisa said, her brow furrowed slightly in worry. “And I do mean that. It’s just… Today is a very big day for me, and my family is counting on me, and I’m just really very nervous. And seeing you… well, it didn’t exactly help too much…”

Brynjolf shifted slightly, unsure if he should be flattered by her words or cowed. Noticing the somewhat conflicted look on his face, Raisa began to explain herself, “And I mean, I don’t mean that in a really… bad, sort of way, I promise it’s just… I wasn’t expecting you. You startle me enough as it is, and to have you suddenly appear all the way across Skyrim, it was… shocking…”

Brynjolf chuckled slightly at how flustered she seemed to have gotten, “It’s alright, lass, I understand. I felt much the same way when I spotted you. I’d recognise you anywhere. Even if you’re not fully clad in armor. But it was still surprising, considering how little I get to see of you these days.”
“Not like you really got to see me much in the first place,” Raisa mused, frowning slightly as she pulled the tankard towards herself, her sickness dying the longer she spent with the man. He relaxed slightly as well, seeing her begin to unwind. She was glad she’d remembered to change out of her armor into something more fitting for an anonymous yet famous chef.

“Not my choice, I’ll remind you,” Brynjolf said. “It’d be wonderful to have you around more often. But I understand the whole family first dogma you’ve got going… It is important… Most important…”

Raisa suspected there was a story there, but she knew that time was passing faster than she wanted it to. She would have loved to stay and pick at Brynjolf’s beautiful mind, figure him out… but she had an Emperor to murder. She nodded and downed her mead as quick as she dared before putting the tankard down to find Brynjolf watching her thoughtfully. She wondered what was going on in his mind, what he thought of her… if he thought of her…

She forced a smile to her face and said, “As much as I would love to stay and catch up, Brynjolf, I must be on my way.”

“Ah, ‘family matters’?” He asked, sounding disappointed at her departure.

“I’m afraid so,” she said with a grimace.

“Here,” he said, placing an ebony dagger on the table between them. “For luck.”

“Thank you…” Raisa said, genuinely surprised at the gift, accepting it gratefully. “But, I’ll see you back in the Flagon. Soon. I promise.”

Brynjolf smiled slightly, “I take it soon isn’t soon enough for my liking?”

Raisa, surprised by the statement, hesitated for a moment before smirking slightly and quirking a brow at the red-head as she always did, “You’ll just have to wait and see.” With that she turned and made to leave, but instead he reached out and caught her arm, like he had in the Flagon so long ago. She looked down at him with much the same look of surprise as she had before.

“I wouldn’t have to wait if you stayed now, lass,” he said, his silvery green eyes looking up at her searchingly.

Raisa felt an unhindered blush rise to her cheeks and she bit back a smile before pulling herself from his grasp gently and making her way out of the inn. The man had almost had her convinced to stay. And if he had said that at any other point in their growing friendship… partnership…?… she would have immediately stayed behind with him.

She made her way up to Castle Dour, her nerves slowly returning. She didn’t feel as sharp as she had entering the city before Brynjolf… Her senses were dulled, and it was not due to the alcohol, that was for certain. The man was like a drug. He dragged her out of the Brotherhood mentality so easily. But she couldn’t afford the distraction of his company— his very existence even— at that moment. She needed to become was Festus had deemed her so kindly: The prodigal killer. She was an instrument of Sithis himself, deadly and powerful. And right now, she needed to play the part of famous chef.

She approached Commander Maro almost hesitantly. He glared at her and snapped, “Stop right there. The tower is off limits until further notice.”

Silently Raisa handed over the Writ of Passage she had nicked off the Gourmet’s body before disposing of it.
“What's this now? …order of his eminence……possessor of these papers… the ‘Gourmet’… By Azura. The Gourmet! I… I'm sorry! I didn't realize! We… we had no idea when to expect you, you understand,” Commander Maro stumbled through. “Your clothes… of course… I should have realized… But please, don’t let me keep you. Proceed to the kitchens straight away. Gianna, the castle chef, has been eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

Raisa thanked the man and proceeded into the kitchen where an anxious redguard woman was pacing about. When she looked up she groaned in what appeared to be exasperation, “Not another delivery. I told you people, or stocks are fine. Now put whatever you have over there, then get out!”

“You misunderstand,” Raisa said, reaching inside herself to find that certain dramatic flair that Delphine and Astrid portrayed so perfectly, "for I am… the Gourmet!”

“The… Gourmet?” the woman asked, not quite believing what she was hearing, “Oh! Finally! When I heard the Gourmet was being brought in to cook for the Emperor, I could hardly believe it. It’s just…”

“Yes?” Raisa asked as she moved to make a show of observing the kitchen.

“You’re a Nord!” the woman laughed nervously, “I never would have guessed it! But where in the world did you learn to cook like that? Here in Skyrim? Or maybe somewhere less…”

“Silence,” Raisa said with a cocky air about her, “I am ready to prepare the grand feast!”

“Oh uhm, Well, actually… you’re not.” Gianna said hesitantly. Raisa shot the woman a sharp look and she began babbling to cover her rude words, “Wearing a chef’s hat, I mean. There’s one right over there on the shelf. You can’t very well cook without it.”

Instead of moving to grab the chef’s hat from where Gianna pointed with a shaking finger, Raisa produced one from a pocket in her trousers. She’d laboured for a while over what she should parade as the Gourmet in, eventually deciding that trousers would serve her better than a gown or skirt. She would be able to make a quick getaway under the pretence of easy mobility in a busy kitchen. She shook the hat out sharply before placing it delicately on top of her head.

“Oh, just look at you,” Gianna practically squealed in delight. “Absolutely brilliant. Now… now you’re just as I imagined!”

“Enough,” Raisa said, allowing an arrogant sort of smile onto her face. She was quite enjoying her new role; too bad it was only a short play. “The Gourmet is here to cook, not talk. Let us begin!”

“Oh! Yes, but of course. Ahem. The Emperor has requested your signature dish— the Potage le Magnifique. I've taken the liberty of getting it started. But the cookbook only says so much, and everyone makes the Potage differently. I would be honored if we could make it… the Gourmet's special way. The base broth is already boiled. We can get started right now,” Gianna rattled off, moving to stand across from where Raisa was inspecting the broth. “So… Which ingredient should I add next?”

“Carrots,” Raisa said, sniffing slightly. Such a shame she had to ruin such a tasty smelling dish.


“You must now add a splash of mead,” Raisa said firmly.

“Ah, of course. I suspected as much,” the chef nodded in agreement.
“The next ingredient is… vampire dust,” Raisa said, blanking momentarily on the next ingredient.

“Vampire dust? Seriously? Hmm… Yes, I guess I can see how that would add a more… earthy texture. And, oddly enough, we do have some on hand… All right, what next then?”

“One nirmroot,” Raisa commanded.

“Really? Oh, I use Nirnroot as a special seasoning all the time as well. What a wonderful idea. Okay, now what?” This woman certainly was talkative…

“Diced horker meat,” Raisa said after a moment’s thought and a long sniff of the stew.

“Hmmm… horker. So delicious. I swear, is there a soul alive who doesn't enjoy the taste of…” Raisa looked sharply at the woman, her brow somewhat furrowed, as if she were tired of hearing the woman drone on meaninglessly. “Sorry, I didn't mean to get carried away. There we go, one cup of diced horker meat. I have to say, the stew seems done. Add anything else and we may dilute the distinct flavors. So… is that it?”

“There is one final ingredient,” Raisa said. “It is rare, and it is potent. I advise you use the utmost caution with this.” She handed over the Jarrin root gingerly.

Gianna held it as if it would explode at any second. She looked at it skeptically and said, “Oh? What is this, some kind of herb? Are you sure? The Potage tastes perfect as it is. Any other ingredient might…”

“Now, now, Gianna…” Raisa chuckled, a slight tone of derision in her voice, “Who’s the Gourmet here?”

“Heh, I’m sorry. Of course. It’s your most famous recipe, after all,” Gianna conceded sheepishly before adding the root in its entirety. “All right then, your secret ingredient’s been added. And I may say so… it has been an absolute honor, getting a chance to prepare a meal with, well… the best chef in the entire Empire!” Raisa bowed graciously at the chef’s words of admiration. “I’ll carry the stew pot, and lead the way up to the dining room. I’m sure the Emperor and his guests are dying to meet you.”

Gianna and Raisa waited at the top of the stairs and Raisa felt her palms begin to sweat. She clasped her hands tightly behind her back to stop them shaking and to give herself a more professional looking demeanor. “Here we are,” Gianna gushed nervously, “God’s, I’m nervous. We’ll go in in just a moment. Please, I’ll serve. You just stand there and… be amazing..!” And all too soon, Raisa found herself walking into the room, her head held high. She walked around the table to where her exit supposedly would be open. She turned, her hands clasped behind her back, and bowed low in the direction of the Emperor before she straightened.

The target sat at the head of the table, all fine clothes and even finer jewels. A circlet sat atop his balding head, his blue eyes somewhat drooping, though they were still sharp. He had a slightly portly frame from years of sitting on a throne. All in all, he didn’t seem a terrible person, but that didn’t stop him being a dead man. It was far too late to turn back now. He gave Raisa the Gourmet a slight bow of appreciation before booming in an arrogant sort of tone, “Aha! Here we are. Honored guests, I present to you— the Gourmet! Ah, the Potage le Magnifique. So delicious. My friends, as Emperor, I of course reserve the right of first taste.” A smattering of laughter passed around the table as Gianna served the Emperor with shockingly steady hands.

“Oh…” the Emperor mused, not suspecting a thing. “Oh how marvellous. Just delicious,” he mused, taking a few more bites of the stew. “It’s everything I hoped it would be,” he admitted, greedily eating a bit more. “It…” he stuttered, finally realising what was happening as the Jarrin
root did its work, “I… I think something’s… wrong… I…ugh…” And with that, the Emperor Titus Mede II died, face first in a bowl of the Gourmet’s most infamous dish yet.

The dining room erupted in chaos, but Raisa didn’t stick around to witness the rampage. Instead, she slipped out of the back door as quickly as she could while the guests and guards were too busy tripping over themselves. She began a mad dash across the skybridge to the escape tower Astrid had mentioned. However, as she drew near, several guards stepped out from within the tower and she faltered, coming to a stop as Commander Maro stepped out from above, clapping his hands together slowly.
Death Incarnate

Chapter Summary

So I had a stressful test and now that I am free from my recent studies, I am celebrating by uploading a less than happy chapter, so woohoo!

“That man was, by far, the most insufferable decoy the Emperor has ever employed. I'm glad he's dead. Ah, but I'm even happier that you killed him. You, an assassin for the Dark Brotherhood, have just made an attempt on the Emperor's life. Would have succeeded, had it been the real man. Surprised? So was I, when a member of your ‘Family’ came to me with the plan. We worked out a deal, you see. An exchange. I get you, and the Dark Brotherhood gets to continue its existence. But you know what? I've changed my mind. How about this: I kill you, and butcher each and every one of your miserable little friends? Your Sanctuary's being put to the sword right now. That's what I think of this ‘deal.’ You killed my son! All of you! And now you'll pay the price. Kill her. And make sure there's nothing left to bury.”

Raisa had never felt such a powerful flood of emotions in her entire life. One thing was for certain: this man would die if she had her way with things. But she shoved that decision from her mind as she processed the most important factor of his little speech: They had been betrayed by one of their own. Raisa had been feeling uneasy since she had returned to the Sanctuary after sparing Cicero. There had definitely been something awry and yet she’d been too foolish to see it. She’d felt it, she definitely had... But now they were all in danger, and it was her fault— no... not hers...

In an instant she dashed forward and slipped past the swinging blades of the Penitus Oculatus agents. From there she barreled down the spiral stairs at breakneck speed, surprised that they hadn’t barricaded the exit, considering they knew this was he exit. She burst out onto the road near the docks and gave a shrill whistle. Shadowmere burst into existence galloping towards her at a full gallop. She hauled herself up as the Void horse whisked past her and was immediately on her way home, praying to every Divine she could name that things would still be alright, knowing that she was in for the worst day of her existence.

As she sped through Falkreath Hold towards her only true home in all of Skyrim, she felt her heart tearing into pieces as black smoke rose steadily from the mouth of the Sanctuary. There were Penitus Oculatus agents everywhere, hidden, waiting for her. She pulled out her bow and shot as many as she could before she was able to dismount, bringing up a spell for sparks in one hand and drawing the dagger Brynjolf had given her so recently in the other.

She shocked a few agents into submission before slashing their throats, desperation in her every move. Another attempted to sneak up on her from behind, but she was a human weapon, under the full influence of Sithis, her every instinct honed to a sharp edge. She spun around, her shocking hand clutching the man’s neck as she stabbed him in the gut with a hiss of anger. She turned around and made to dash into the Sanctuary when she noticed Festus’s corpse tied to a nearby tree. She stumbled slightly, falling onto her hands and knees, a strangled cry of total anguish escaping her as she looked at the man she’d come to consider as something almost resembling a father filled with enough arrows to be mistaken for a training dummy. She felt her anger roll and boil inside her, causing her to very nearly be sick. She was on her feet in an instant, storming into the Sanctuary, rage in her heart.
She stormed down the stairs, knowing that she’d never felt hatred like this before. She paused at the bottom of the stairs, sneaking and hiding behind the turn into the first room. There were two agents standing in the burning room, burning oils sloshed across the floor from leaking barrels on Astrid’s table.

“Which one was the rat?” one was asking.

“Dunno,” the other replied gruffly, “One of these corpses. Does it matter?”

Yes.

“Suppose not. But what's taking the others so long? The sooner we get out of here, the better. Smoke's getting bad. This place'll be raging soon,” the first said in response.

“Arcturus took some men deeper in, wanted to be sure. We should maybe… assist them,” the second agent suggested.

“You assist all you like. And get roasted for your trouble. I'll guard the exit,” the first scoffed.

As the two unfortunate soldiers went to part ways, Raisa ignited the oil around their feet, destroying their lives in an explosive inferno. It was better than they deserved, the scum. As she made her way across the room, she stumbled slightly and fell near the stairs as she tripped over some large object. She let out a yelp of sadness when she turned to see what had caught her foot, finding herself staring into Veezara’s empty eyes. She pushed herself to her feet and raced into the main room, seeing Arnbjorn struggling in his werewolf form to fight off advancing Penitus Oculatus agents, having been trapped in a silver-strung net. Raisa attacked the agents, but she was too late and the werewolf collapsed, dead and bound.

With those agents dispatched, Raisa stumbled through the smoke and flame to the Alchemy room where she found Gabriella with her throat slashed and several stab wounds, dead, along with Lis, Babette’s pet spider. She barrelled into the next room, praying that she wouldn’t find Nazir the same way. She wasn’t sure if she could handle losing them all in one brutal moment. Luckily, Nazir was still alive and fighting. Upon entering the dining hall, Raisa heard his deep voice bellow threateningly, “If I am to die today so be it! But you’ll not soon forget the Dark Brotherhood!” as he threw himself into the fight once again.

Raisa raced to his aid, shocking the Captain, Arcturus from behind and racing up the stairs to assist Nazir as wholly as she could. Upon seeing an opening, she leapt in close and slashed with the ebony dagger backhand, just missing the man’s throat, but causing him to stumble backwards unstably to avoid the blow, allowing for Nazir to sink his curved blade into the enemy’s gut with a rather satisfying— though disgusting— squelch.

Nazir turned to her and clasped her arm in his gratefully, “So you are alive. I was starting to wonder.”

“The Emperor…” Raisa stammered, her mind racing, unable to focus on anything at all, her mind flashing up with images of her butchered and burning family. “It was all… all a trap. Someone set us up…!”

“Considering most of us are now dead, I assumed as much,” Nazir said, bitterness saturating his tone, though his words sounded hollow, heartbroken. “And before you ask, no— I don’t think it was you. Well… Maybe I did, but you saving my sorry hide just now sort of erased any doubts. So thank you, Listener.”
“We need to get out of here!” she said quickly; her only instinct now was to flee. Get away, and never, ever return.

“You’ve got that right,” Nazir agreed, running off. “Only a matter of time before we’re roasted. Come on!”

Raisa went to follow him but stopped in her tracks as she heard the whispering in the back of her mind once again, a sensation she had all but forgotten in the turmoil since she attained the blessing of Sithis.

“Listener… I am your only salvation… Come…… Embrace me…”

She didn’t know where Nazir went, but she knew somehow—prayed, more like it—that he would survive. She raced into the room where the Night Mother’s coffin still stood and scarcely hesitated before she raced into the embrace of the Night Mother’s corpse, closing the coffin doors behind her. The last thing she remembered was the shattering of glass and the whispers of “Sleep” echoing through the Void.

She didn’t know how long she slept. But eventually she woke, and she lay in the darkness. She didn’t know how long she stayed awake, the images of her fallen family members flashing before her mind, seared there permanently. She didn’t want to have to see them dead any longer. She wanted nothing more than to go back to the beginning, to walk away from the Aretino household and mind her own business. None of this… none of this would have happened had she just kept to herself. If she had just left Skyrim once she and Ralof had escaped Helgen…

But could she really want that? Could she go back, knowing what she did about having a real family? About loyalty? But she would never know. She wasn’t the same person she was back then; was she justified in her wish? To begin again, even if it meant that she abandoned everything she held dear now? She would never have to see their dead bodies flashing before her consciousness if she never knew them at all… Her words from just a few weeks prior floated back to her, causing her to let out a strangled sob as she was transported back in her memory, to her conversations with Festus, and Babette, and Gabriella.

“Who you were before the Brotherhood hardly matters, does it?”

And she lay in the dark, her heart torn to shreds, with only the Night Mother for comfort. In that moment, she understood why Cicero embraced the Void. The Void was, quite simply put, nothing. It was nothingness in the purest sense. Light, joy, love, pain, anger, fear… all meant nothing in the Void. And feeling nothing was far better than feeling everything.

Some time later, she began to hallucinate, hearing Babette’s frantic little voice urging Nazir to hurry. The coffin began to jostle about and Raisa wondered how long it would take her to die in there, or if the hallucinations would ever leave her. She actually believed the mental projections when they said they were freeing her from what would certainly be her coffin.

“You must speak with Astrid,” the whispers came again. She clutched at her head and let out a string of miserable moans. She just wanted it to end. “Here, in the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary.”

And as suddenly as there had been darkness, there was light. Raisa remained frozen where she was as she adjusted to the brightness. She stumbled out of the coffin blindly, caught in the strong arms
of some large man. Part of her hoped that it was Brynjolf, but the rest of her was certain she
couldn’t be so lucky. She would never see the thief again.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down,” Nazir said as she began struggling to stand on her own. He
steadied her, keeping one hand on her in support, a worried and incredulous expression on his face.
“It’s alright. You’ve been through a lot. Maybe you should just sit down for a bit…”

She took a moment to find her words, her voice sounding somewhat muted and unfamiliar to her
ears. “I’m fine. But the Night Mother has another task for me,” she said.

“Oh,” Nazir said, surprise written on his face. “Well in that case, go. Babette and I will look after
the Night Mother for now.”

Raisa walked slowly through the ruined sanctuary, her heart in shreds, a dull ache throbbing in her
chest. She walked up the stairs, averting her gaze from the bodies of Arnbjorn and Veezara, not
wanting to go into shock, though she wanted nothing more than to melt into the Void. She made
her way into Astrid’s bedroom, seeing a cupboard broken apart, revealing what once had been a
hidden room. She stepped towards it, worried over what she might find therein.

On the floor, surrounded by candles and nightshade flowers was a hideously burned body. Disgust
welled up in her briefly, and Raisa wondered what was going on. Why would the Night Mother
send her—

“All right,” the mass of burnt flesh gasped and wheezed, “You’re alive… Thank Sithis…”

“Astrid…?” Raisa asked as she approached, dropping onto her knees in horror and despair as she
recognised the former Matron.

“Sshhh… Please. There is much… I have to say. And… not much time…” Astrid gasped
painfully, “I’m sorry. So very sorry. The Penitus Oculatus… Maro… He said that by giving you to
them, he would leave the Dark Brotherhood alone. Forever. By Sithis, I was such a fool. All of
this… it’s all my fault. You are the best of us, and I nearly killed you… as I’ve killed everyone
else…”

Raisa remained silent, what was left of her heart breaking even further. Astrid looked up at her
desperately, “Don’t you see? It was me. I set you up, wanted you dead. I betrayed you, the Night
Mother… everything I hold dear. And now Maro has betrayed me. Fitting… I just wanted things…
to stay the way they were. Before Cicero, before the Night Mother. Before… you. I thought I could
save us. I was wrong. But you're alive! So there's still a chance. A chance to start over, rebuild.
That's why I did… this. Don't you see? I prayed to the Night Mother! I am the Black Sacrament.”

“What are you saying?” Raisa asked, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

“I’m saying you were right. The Night Mother was right. The old ways… they guided the Dark
Brotherhood for centuries. I was a fool to oppose them. And to prove my… sincerity, I have prayed
for a contract. You lead this Family now. I give you the Blade of Woe, so that you can see it
through. You must kill… Me.”

Had Raisa been who she was when she first escaped Helgen, she would have refused. Had she
been who she was when she first met Astrid, she would have refused. Had she been who she was
when she entered that Sanctuary, she would never have needed a contract. But now, facing the
prospect of killing the woman who had shaped her into the assassin she was at that moment, the
young Nord wanted nothing more than to refuse. She wanted to leave Skyrim and never return. She
wanted to become one with the Void so she wouldn’t feel the pain. She wanted to kill every last
member of the Empire twice over for what Commander Maro had done to her family.

But she could do none of those things. With a sinking heart, she took the dagger from where Astrid had dropped it. Clutching the cursed blade in both hands, Raisa lifted it above her head and let out a soft sigh before plunging the dagger into Astrid’s burnt body.

“Thank you…” a soft whisper came from Astrid as her breath left her.

Raisa sat there for a long while, frozen to the spot, her hands still clutching the blade, unable to bring herself to pull it out and leave Astrid lying there, a true Black Sacrament. She felt her shoulders shaking, and felt the tears slip down her cheeks, but inside she felt nothing but emptiness, the Void filling her up, preventing her from feeling the deep, hardened pain of loss.

Eventually she pulled herself up, taking the Blade of Woe with her as she went, and made her way out to speak with the Night Mother and her remaining family.

“Astrid is dead. It is as it should be. May she find redemption in the Void. But while you live, the Dark Brotherhood lives. We must fulfill our contract. Emperor Titus Mede II must be eliminated. Speak with Amaund Motierre at the Bannered Mare in Whiterun. He will know the true Emperor's location. But first, inform Nazir of your plans. For you are the Listener, and must bind this Family together,” the Night Mother whispered in her mind.

“By Sithis, what a mess…” Nazir sighed, his voice strained. “I guess this is the end…”


“I must speak with Amaund Motierre once more,” Raisa said.

“Amaund Motierre?” Nazir asked, confusion crossing his dark-skinned face. “But that would mean…”

“You mean… there’s still a chance? But how? Our plan has gone to ruin, everyone is dead, the Family… The Family……” he trailed off, grief welling up in his tone.

“Our Family lives on, Nazir,” Raisa said confidently. “You must trust me.”

The man remained silent for a time before sighing and saying, “Hmph. All right, then. Go. Go, my Listener. Find out what that slimy bastard Motierre has to say, then send the Emperor to Sithis. Ah, but when you're done, there's no use returning here, is there? I was thinking… the Dawnstar Sanctuary. We could make a proper home there. Listen, when you're finished with this Emperor business, meet Babette and me there. I'll find some way to move the Night Mother. Don't worry! Now go! And come back with a barrel full of gold, hmm? Babette, my girl— pack your things. We're moving.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” the little vampire grinned wickedly, though Raisa could tell that she was eager to be away from their previous home.

Raisa herself was finding it hard to remain composed. The only thing keeping her together at all was the fact that her family was counting on her. She couldn't allow herself to break down in front of them. They needed strength more than anything right then, and her losing her mind wouldn’t do anything to help their predicament. So she chose to bottle her feelings inside, putting on a brave
face though inside she felt herself dying as the images of her fallen family members flashed before her and Astrid’s parting words echoed alongside them. She was the head of their Family. The prospect was daunting and far more terrifying than she ever would have imagined.

When she finally left the Falkreath Sanctuary she didn’t know where to go. She felt more lost than she had when she’d woken up in the back of the prisoner wagon so long ago. It was night and the normally bright sky seemed devoid of all its usual ethereal light. And as the fires from the Sanctuary had died, so too did conscious thought from her mind. In a single day she had lost practically everything that was dear to her in all of Tamriel. There was nothing left for her in Falkreath hold. And so she started left, wandering with a purpose though she didn’t know where she was heading. Though for once she truly understood Cicero as the darkness closed in; she was alone and she felt what was left of her mind shatter.
Brynjolf was worried about her. She’d always been gone for weeks at a time. Each time he saw her, she seemed just a bit more unhinged, a bit more nervous, a bit more busy. And then he’d run into her at Solitude. He’d been fond of her from the start; she had a natural affinity for their line of work, she was eager, and— he couldn’t help but notice— she was beautiful. But it was more than that. She never ceased to impress him with her work.

And then suddenly she’d stopped. She hadn’t been back to the Guild since he’d seen her last. It had been close to a month since then, and he began to wonder what sort of ‘family matters’ could steal her away so thoroughly. He worried less about the job itself, concerned more with how it seemed to be affecting her. She was almost always flitting in and out, but she’d stopped doing even that.

Mercer had given her up as a bad job. It didn’t even take long for him to come to that determination either. A week after she’d shown up to speak briefly with Delvin, Mercer had decided that she’d gone and run off with whatever money Gulum-Ei had promised to ensure his safety. Which was why he’d sent Brynjolf out to Solitude in the first place. The little skink had balked at Brynjolf’s sudden appearance, insisting that he’d told them all he knew and subsequently promising a share of spice shipment profits for the next season and a half. Brynjolf had accepted the deal, but had failed to get the lizard to restate what he had told Raisa when she visited.

And so, when Brynjolf had been preparing to leave Solitude and came across a beautiful young woman who seemed to look an awful lot like his protege, of course he had taken an interest in her. As it turned out, it had been exactly her and he’d found himself shockingly overjoyed at the random happenstance. He’d been all smiles until he saw the look on her face. Nothing short of panic crossed her soft features, her brow furrowing instantly in disbelief. And then she’d tried to shake him off as well… and she had been rather flustered… The thought had pleased him, and amused him even more when he recalled all the past times he had inadvertently startled her. She always reacted as though she had been doing something she ought not to have been doing and would get in trouble with him for.

He hadn’t been entirely sure what had happened from there. They’d gotten talking, her anxious to leave, him anxious for her to stay. She seemed to be full of turmoil, flitting from one thought to the next, her leg bouncing rapidly under the table every now and then. Her fingers absently drumming a beat on the time-worn, alcohol stained wood. Getting her fingers stuck when she would run her hands through her wild mane of hair. Her every action was seared into his mind. And the more he thought about it, the more it concerned him, and he was entirely unsure if that was him thinking as her mentor, or as someone else.

He’d mentally berated himself for days after their encounter, feeling foolish for speaking so hastily, so without thought. But he’d wanted her to know that he enjoyed her company, that he desired more of it. And she hadn’t seemed to disagree with the sentiment. If anything, she seemed flattered. He could have sworn she almost moved to sit down across from him again when he practically asked her to stay. But she hadn’t. She’d hesitated, of course, but she had, as always, left him behind.

And then she’d stumbled into the Flagon in the middle of the night, nearly a month later. He’d thought she’d been frantic when she hurriedly met with Delvin before brushing him off so thoroughly. But oh was he so wrong. First thing she did upon entering the Flagon was somehow manage to fall into the pool of water, flailing wildly and shrieking bloody murder.

Vekel and Delvin had been the first to react, leaping into the water to help her out before she
managed to drown herself there. By that point, the rest of the Guild who weren’t out on jobs had been alerted by the commotion. Brynjolf had been— for once— resting in the Cistern. When he realized what was happening, he’d rushed to help, taking her struggling form from Delvin and Vekel, who were both thoroughly soaked. He’d carried her into the Cistern quickly. He’d held her tightly to stop her breaking free, feeling his heart clenching uncomfortably in horror at what could have happened to make her act this way.

Eventually her fit had calmed and he still held her, stroking her hair gently, his heart beating rapidly while his mind raced. Though, he had eventually been made to release her so that Sapphire could get her changed out of her soaking wet and thoroughly singed black and red armor. She’d protested vehemently at the removal of the gloves, all because of a ring that she’d been wearing. It was returned to her and she immediately put it onto her shaking finger. Brynjolf had sat with Delvin and Vekel discussing what had happened when she arrived and was disappointed to find that they knew as much as he did.

After Sapphire had finished with Raisa, Brynjolf and Delvin went and sat with her for a while, trying to get her to explain what had happened to her while they treated the old burns that had blossomed along her arms and cheeks some time ago. Though some would leave scars, it seemed that her armor had spared her from any real damage. There seemed to be little danger of infection, though it was clear her wounds had been hastily and poorly treated. Regardless, she would be sore for some time yet. She refused to speak for a long while. Eventually, Delvin had hesitantly turned to Brynjolf and requested that he let him give it another go, alone this time. Seeing no excuse to refuse other than a small patch of jealousy, Brynjolf excused himself and went to the other side of the Cistern where some other guild members who had missed the commotion were watching in confusion.

He glanced over his shoulder often and saw that she was, surprisingly, talking with Delvin. At times it seemed as if she were crying, and he wanted nothing more than to go over and comfort her, but a small part of him knew that she wouldn’t speak if he did, and he needed, desperately, to know what had happened to her after she left him in Solitude. Regardless, he couldn’t help but feel jealous, as much as he wished he weren’t. He wanted her to speak with him. He wanted to help her through whatever it was that plagued her.

When Delvin finally rose and made his way into the Cistern, Brynjolf had followed eagerly, only to find the man with his face in his hands, mourning written all over his posture. When he asked what had happened to her, Delvin had simply shaken his head and said, “Family matters, mate. S’not my story t’ tell.”

Brynjolf had left him to his own devices, instead going to watch over Raisa, who was curled on her side on the bed they’d designated as hers so long ago. Somehow, Sapphire had seen fit for her to keep hold of the nasty looking Blade she’d had strapped to her hip when she first arrived. She clutched it now, a devastated look in her eyes. She twisted the ring on her finger slightly and closed her eyes, her face crumpling in despair, but no tears leaked out. Eventually, it seemed as though she had fallen asleep. Yet still, Brynjolf watched over her. He desperately wanted her to be alright.

She had been this way for over a week. Sometimes Delvin would come and take supervision out of Brynjolf’s hands, sitting with Raisa as she remained in bed, practically catatonic. Sapphire made sure that she ate and drank and… everything else. Rune would come sometimes and sit and strum on a lute he’d stolen. He wasn’t a great bard, but he wasn’t absolutely horrible and it seemed to relax her at the very least. But all in all, it was a nice change from the silence and muttering. Mercer was less than pleased at her return. All he cared about was the information Gulum-Ei had bestowed on her, and was constantly glaring over at where Brynjolf sat vigil over her. Everyone else in the Guild did their best to give her space and time, though they all cared for her, knowing
that whatever happened must have been a terribly harrowing experience.

One night, he sat on a chair beside her bed as she lay still, still holding on to the sinister looking dagger she’d shown up with. It had taken a few days, but she’d stopped muttering to herself constantly. Brynjolf wasn’t sure if this was a good thing or not. On the upside, it meant that she wasn’t mumbling about betrayal and murder. On the downside, it seemed as if she was slowly tumbling away from him. Every now and then, it seemed as if her eyes would flicker up at him before darting away. It felt as if she was trying to reach out to him, but she was still drawn to the running away.

“Can I tell you a story lass?” Brynjolf asked quietly, leaning forward slightly. Her eyes glanced at him then immediately away, but she seemed to be listening. “When I first joined the Guild, I was told a story” Brynjolf started slowly, “There was this lad that an old Guildmaster used to know. He lived on a farm, just down the way with his parents. He grew up running the streets of Riften. When he was old enough, Gallus, the former Guildmaster, and a long time family friend— though I assume the boy’s parents weren’t entirely aware of his line of work; As far as they were concerned, he was a potion maker and alchemical merchant— he spotted the boy’s potential, just like I spotted you. He took the kid in and showed him the ropes. Eventually, he took over his gig as a scam artist. But as far as the boy’s parents knew, he was apprentice to a talented potion maker and skilled businessman. A good life was being set out for him, by their standards.”

“So good, they thought it’d be a decent idea to start considering getting him hitched,” Brynjolf continued. “And he hated the idea. He hated the idea of his family choosing who he would spend the rest of his life with. He clung to the Guild even more from there on out. It was a safety net and he was wanted there. He knew everyone, He knew his place. and man but he was good. One of the best Gallus ever trained, he said.”

“So a few months go by and his parents find someone they think’s suitable for their darling potion selling boy. They arrange a meeting for the kids and surprisingly, they hit it off.” Brynjolf said. “But the girl, she was every bit as sneaky as the boy, and twice as obstinate too. She didn’t want her parents to know she fancied him, and he didn’t want that either. They wanted the choice. So, naturally, they went to the Guild. Gallus was more than happy to help out his favorite apprentice and the love of his young life.”

“The plan was… simple, to say the least. If both families were to come into some money, neither would see the benefit of forcing their children to marry. They’d be able to court one another on their own terms, in their own way, and in their own time, marry. But as with all things simple, it didn’t go to plan. The… sudden income came from a particularly shady contact, and the transaction led back to the girl and her family. It led back to his family. By the time the mistake had been realized, it was too late. The boy never knew what happened. At that point in his young life he’d never seen that much blood before. He couldn’t bring himself to go inside. He never saw them… their bodies… He’d just collapsed outside the house. The Jarl would have tried him for murder if Gallus hadn’t been able to frame the shady contract. But either way, their family name was ruined, and the girl was gone… dead. Because of him and his foolishness. Thinking it would be better to live independently, follow his own rules. That he could handle anything the world threw at him.”

“But he didn’t leave the Guild. As always, it was his safety net. He grew reckless, stealing more than he should have, and doing a sloppy job of it too. After all, he had nothing to lose. He’d already lost it all. And he mourned softly, in the back of his mind. He tried to convince himself that the short romance wasn’t a real thing. That it was nothing more than young, foolish impressions of what love could have been. But he couldn’t do it. Her death was his fault, and now he would never know. But he made himself a promise, after he’d straightened himself up a bit, gotten back on his feet in the Guild. He promised himself he’d never let personal attachments grow past the Guild.
The Guild was safe. They were his family. He didn’t need the companionship that came from love or affection outside of his family there.”

“He lived this way his whole life,” he said with a sigh. “And for a while it worked. It was a good method. It helped that no one particularly caught his eyes. But then one day, someone did. And he pulled her in, just like Gallus had done for him, and oh but she was good. But he saw what could happen. What was happening... And so he tried to distance himself. And she seemed to do the same. So it still worked. Until they were alone together, which happened a decent amount, when she bothered to show up at all. And he found himself just waiting every day for her to saunter in through those doors throwing sacks of coins down on the table in front of him, startling him for once with that splendid smirk on her face...”

The man trailed off, staring at his hands, a troubled frown on his face. “I don’t know what happened to him. He used to be around, but now he’s just not. And I don’t think about that lonely boy much anymore. But I think you’re going to be alright. In the end, he turned out alright, and you’re far stronger than he could ever be.”

If his story had any effect on her, he couldn’t tell. Her eyes didn’t dart around or peer at him again. She was still. After a moment she let out a quiet sigh and rolled over to face the wall. Though it was a normal reaction from her now, Brynjolf couldn’t help but feel a bit rejected. He’d sat back, dejected, but didn’t have much time to dwell on the circumstances. He was relieved of his vigil by Delvin, which was well enough, considering he’d hardly done any work for the Guild since Raisa’s recent arrival and had a few scam opportunities to fulfill. And though he went about his business as best he could, he couldn’t help but worry for her.

Brynjolf wondered if she would ever be the same young woman that he’d come to care for again. Knowing it was unlikely she would ever be wholly alright again, he felt his chest tighten in sadness. With a sigh, he made his way from his seat in the Flagon and made his way into the Cistern to check on her for what seemed like the thousandth time that evening before getting some rest. Rune, who had volunteered to watch her, was fast asleep on the bed opposite hers. He’d chuckled wryly with a shake of his head before turning to her bed, which he found— much to his horror— was empty.

His first thought was to check the water, but the surface was still and empty, and he’d only left her a short time ago. Besides, any sign of struggle would have alerted any number of Guild members who were sleeping around the room. They were all terribly light sleepers by nature, and it could sometimes cause an issue. The only time it was helpful was when there was some sort of trouble about. He quietly made his way around the Cistern, searching all the hiding spots for the object of his affection. Finally, he came to the training room where he found her sitting in front of the practice chests. He wondered why he hadn’t checked there in the first place; he’d found her there more often than not in the past when she’d been in the Guild.

“What’re you doing out of bed, lass?” he asked gently, leaning against the entryway. His appearance, he noticed with some small amount of disappointment, didn’t seem to startle her in the least.

“I can’t wallow anymore.”

It was the first time he had properly heard her voice since she had returned. It was so different from the jovial lilt she’d had in Solitude. Now it was empty, a hollow sound. It made every inch of his heart ache painfully, and he couldn’t for the life of him explain why. “Why are you picking locks?” he asked her, wanting nothing more than for her to keep speaking to him. He found, not to his surprise, that he’d missed her.
“It’s a distraction.”

“Lass,” he started, feeling his heart crumple somewhat.

“Don’t ‘lass’ me,” she snapped suddenly, almost sounding like herself for a moment. “It’s distracting.”

“Didn’t you just say you were trying to distract yourself?” Brynjolf asked, moving to sit on one of the chests, feeling a wave of familiarity wash over him.

“That’s a different kind of distraction,” she explained quietly as she completed a lock. “In this case, one I’d rather not consider at the moment…” Brynjolf couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed, feeling as if she had rejected him yet again. Sensing his change in mood, Raisa sighed and said, “Call me lass all you want. I like it. But don’t look at me with those big sad eyes of yours. I don’t want your pity. Especially not now.”

“Why not?” he asked, trying to keep her going. The more she spoke, the more he needed to hear her. She was right. It was distracting. She was distracting.

“Because a lot has happened,” she said stiffly. “And I need to stay strong. If I see that look on your face again, I’ll crumble and then I’ll never be helpful to anyone. I would never leave the Guild again. I’d be stuck here, and you would be stuck with me, and… Everything would just stop. My Family—what’s left of it—they’d stop… And I can’t do that to them. Not after…”

“You’re tougher than you give yourself credit for,” Brynjolf said slowly, stopping himself from rolling into the ‘lass’ as he usually would have.

“You say that, but you saw how I was, how I’ve been…” she said, a strangled half-laugh escaping her, a desperate sort of sound.

“You had good reason, I’m sure,” Brynjolf said quickly.

“You believe that?”

“I trust you,” he said with a slow nod.

“You probably shouldn’t,” she said sharply, shortly.

“Why do you think that?” Brynjolf asked, a slight frown on his face.

“You don’t know me,” she said simply, her voice hollow.

“Nonsense, lass—”

“You know the thief. Your protege. The person I have to be to survive in the Guild,” she listed. “But you don’t know me.”

“Then enlighten me.”

Raisa hesitated. She had already lost so much. She couldn’t stand the thought that she may yet lose Brynjolf as well. She wanted nothing more than to let go of her past. Lose herself in whatever work he and Mercer wanted to throw her way. She wanted to disappear. She had spent a long time alone, keeping her thoughts and feelings and everything to herself. She had tried to embrace the Void wholly. To simply cease to be. But Sithis would not accept her. She needed to lead their Family into the future, to greatness or to ruin. But even then it would not be over.
Though she hadn’t given him any hint earlier, she had listened to every word of his story with rapt attention, feeling the pain and regret leaking through his every syllable. And then the confused joy towards the end had come out suddenly, strongly. He had made her feel something. And she liked the way it felt. She’d been focused on removing everything so that nothing could harm her. And yet here was her silver eyed thief using a silver tongue to coax her away from the Void. And he made her feel again. And oh but how she loved him for that.

The scars on her heart were too fresh for her to continue, too abundant. She had felt too much and then suddenly nothing at all. How could she explain all this to Brynjolf and still keep the part of her that belonged to him in tact? Surely he would wind up breaking that part of her too… and then what would she be? Empty? A vessel solely intended to vanquish the dragon threat? At least with reckless abandon for her life she would be unstoppable. So long as she still had a destiny to fulfill she wouldn’t be left alone. The Brotherhood would always be there. The Thieves Guild and Brynjolf would still be there. The Greybeards, the Blades, The Stormcloaks, the Imperials, the Dragons, they would all still be there, looming over her like a crushing weight.

But maybe…

Maybe she wouldn’t have to bear all that alone. She shouldn’t have needed to in the first place.

She looked up at Brynjolf suddenly, her eyes still empty as her former home. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to ‘lass’ her again, but somehow, he managed to keep himself in line. And she began to talk. And once she’d begun speaking, she found she couldn’t stop. And she wouldn’t stop, until the whole story had been told. Until Brynjolf knew who she was, why she was always rushing about, why she was never around, why her Family was so important.

And he listened. He didn’t want to stop listening. He wanted to know her, to know all about her. And yet, all stories have an end, and when hers concluded the pair sat in two sets of silence. His, astonishment, hers, immense worry. Their silences conflicted, creating a dance of sorts, an invisible battle where neither could conquer the other.

He turned to look at her with a firm look in his eyes, “What say we go catch us whoever’s been making our luck run dry, eh lass?”
Raisa rose early the next morning, having slept better in one night than she had for the past month combined. As she sat up and stretched she looked around the Cistern, ready to begin her work. She quickly changed into the stealth enchanted Thieves Guild armor that Tonilia had given to her, and couldn’t help but feel a nagging sensation in the pit of her stomach. It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like home to her. But her Brotherhood armor had been taken from her and it had been burned beyond proper usefulness. It represented a painful part of her history now, and it would be of little use to her.

Of course, she was well aware of the contract she needed still needed to fulfill for the Brotherhood — her Brotherhood. She couldn’t— wouldn’t— abandon them to ruin. They needed her, and she had come to realize that she too needed them. They were a Family. And Family was something irreplaceable. She planned to return to her duties in Whiterun immediately, but first she had some long awaited news for the Guildmaster.

“I see you aren’t catatonic anymore,” Mercer said gruffly as she approached in her Thieves Guild armor. “Nice to see yo’ve finally accepted your lot in life and joined us in our misery. Now do you have the information? Did Gulum-Ei give up anything on the identity of our mysterious buyer?”

Raisa took a bottle of Black-Briar reserve from a nearby barrel and opened it with a satisfying pop before she answered, “He said Goldenglow was purchased by someone named Karliah.”

As she took a drink, she could have sworn that she saw the faintest flicker of fear cross Mercer’s face before he snapped back, “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” Raisa said, savouring the crisp mead.

“It… it can’t be,” Mercer growled in frustration. I haven’t heard that name in decades. This is grave news indeed. She’s someone I hoped to never cross paths with again…”

“Gulum-Ei mentioned she was a murderer,” Raisa said, sitting on top of the barrel now, making herself comfortable for Mercer’s soon-to-come spiel over who exactly the mysterious woman was. “What’s the deal with that?”

“Karliah destroyed everything this guild stood for. She murdered my predecessor in cold blood and betrayed the Guild. After we discovered what she’d done, we spent months trying to track her down, but she just vanished,” Mercer explained with surprising patience.

“Why’d she come back now?”

“Karliah and I were like partners. I went with her on every heist. We watched each other’s backs. Until we didn’t. But I know her techniques, her skills. If she kills me, there’ll be no one left that could possibly catch her. If only we knew where she was…” Mercer was musing, seemingly lost in memories of decades past, a harrowing look on his face.

“Gulum-Ei mentioned that too,” she said. “He said she told him she was heading, ‘Where the end began.’ What’s that supposed to mean, eh?”

“There’s only one place that could be. The place where she murdered Gallus… a ruin called Snow Veil Sanctum. We have to go out there before she disappears again,” Mercer said quickly.

“Wait, ‘we?’” Raisa asked, thoroughly surprised by the sudden turn of events. The assignment
unsettled her somewhat, her fight or flight instincts warring inside of her. Something didn't seem to sit right, but she shook off the feeling. She was just jumpy because of everything that had happened. It was an honor to work directly with the Guildmaster. She shouldn't be so paranoid, even if she didn't like the man. He was in charge for a reason, after all.

“Yes, I'm going with you and together we're going to kill her. Here's your payment for Solitude, even though I’m not entirely sure you deserve it after taking so damn long. Prepare yourself and meet me at the ruins as soon as you can. We can't let her slip through our fingers,” Mercer instructed before setting off to prepare himself.

Raisa, shocked, pushed herself off the barrel and made her way into the Ragged Flagon, confusion written across her features. The rest of the Guild members, though shocked to see her up and about so suddenly, didn't mention her previous state at all—Divines bless them. She found her way to where she saw Brynjolf sitting with Delvin, chatting with tired but happy expressions.

“Ah, here’s the lass,” Brynjolf smiled, his usual nature back with him once more. Raisa smiled slightly at him and Delvin patted her hand reassuringly.

“What’s the plan then, dearie?” he asked. “You getting back into the swing of things yet?”

She frowned slightly. “It’s just… I don’t know. I feel… strange. Not being in uniform…” The Thieves Guild armor was comfortable, but it didn’t fit her the same way as her Dark Brotherhood armor had. It was loose and lighter than anything, practically just a set of regular clothes. And the hood, well, it could scarcely be called a hood. When she had it up, it fell over her eyes and made it damn near impossible to see anything. And when she needed to take off running, it’d fly back and reveal her face. Not ideal when you’re out and about attempting to murder people. Terribly inconvenient.

“Well, good thing you’ve got me around, eh?” Delvin smirked, producing a new set of the Dark Brotherhood’s red and black studded armor. Her mouth fell open and she started at him in shock before leaning forward abruptly and hugging him with one arm while grabbing the set of clothing and boots with the other. She placed a grateful kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you so so much,” she said, sounding almost impossibly grateful for the small act.

“Don’t bleedin’ go and kiss me over a set of boots,” Delvin grumbled, a disgruntled look on his face. “Besides, it was the old fox here what asked me to do it. Bleedin’ woke me up in th’ middle of the night for it,” he said, gesturing vaguely at Brynjolf across from him, “Kiss ‘im if you’re gonna be kissin’ anyone.”

Raisa looked over at Brynjolf a small smile on her face, though her brow was furrowed in what could be mistaken for sadness, reaching over and clasping his hand in hers tightly. But he knew differently. It was undying gratitude, a gratefulness that she wouldn’t be able to express any other way. She continued to give him that look as he smiled back at her knowingly, neither of them having to say a word. She squeezed his hand gently.

She hadn’t wanted to let go of it, once she started to hold it. His hands were rough and worn, but gentle. Small calluses lined his fingers from the way he held his lock picks and blade. They were warm and they were safe. On the flip side, he didn’t want for her to let go, but for all intents and purposes, nothing between them had really changed. They just knew one another much better than they had before, and it had only served to heighten their feelings, which both were still almost totally oblivious to. But she stood abruptly, standing there for a moment with Brynjolf still keeping hold of her hand. He let her delicate hand slide from his grasp as she grabbed up her armor and made her way back into the Cistern to change and head out.
She made her way to the stables of Riften and began to wander her way along the walls of the city in search of a nice shadowy area when she heard a short, “Lass!” from behind her. She turned around and spotted Brynjolf jogging towards her. She paused and waited for him to catch up to her, wondering what he was going to say or do. She’d scarcely begun to hope that perhaps it was time for them to really discuss whatever it was that was going on, when he stopped and handed her a traveling bag.

She took it, somewhat surprised. “There’s a new bow in there. And arrows. Lots of them. A bit of food for the road— Vekel insisted— and a bit of mead. I had Delvin write out a few jobs for you out there in case you needed a distraction along the way. And that… blade, it’s there too. Figure it belongs with the Brotherhood instead. And my— well, your dagger, as well. Found it strapped to the old armor when we went to dispose of it. Which, sorry. But it was… well… in scraps by the time Sapphire managed to get you out of it.”

Raisa placed the bag on the ground and stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Brynjolf gratefully. “Thank you,” she said. There was far more to it than just those two words, and she knew he knew it. She wasn’t just grateful for the travel bag. She was grateful for him, and his concern, and most of all that he listened to and understood her. Her position in the Dark Brotherhood had done nothing to hinder their… friendship… relationship… whatever it was. If anything, it strengthened it, because now he knew, and he didn’t push her away. He’d pulled her closer and returned the sentiment and his own difficult journey. And she couldn’t be more thankful for that.

He hesitantly wrapped his arms around her, surprised at how small she felt, and how nice it was having her so close. It had been nice enough having her around, and now she’d embraced him as well. He was still at war with himself though. Try as he might to forget the foolish boy he’d been when he was younger, he couldn’t shake the fear that came with the lessons he’d learned back then. He couldn’t deny the wisdom his troubles had brought him instead. But he hugged her still and said, somewhat strained, “Anything for you, lass,” before releasing her. And oh, the way she smiled at him just then. She heaved the bag onto her shoulder with another round of thanks before giving a sharp whistle. Shadowmere trotted into place beside her, looking at Brynjolf briefly with his glowing red eyes before tossing his head about, shaking his mane impatiently. He was ready to be off, and just like that, Raisa was gone once again, though he knew with some degree of certainty that she would, eventually, come back.

When Raisa arrived back in Whiterun, it felt as though years had past. In reality, it’d only been just under half a year, but so much had happened that she felt certain it was ageing her prematurely. She felt tired and sore and about ready to sleep for the entire season. She walked briskly through the inn, barely containing the seething rage she felt surge up when the Penitus Oculatus servant of Motierre exclaimed at her sudden appearance. She ignored him as best he could and proceeded unhindered into Amaund Motierre’s room.

“What is it? I said I didn’t wish to…” the man started before trailing off at the sight of Raisa, “be disturbed…” She stared him down silently and he continued incredulously, “By the gods. You… you're alive! But I had heard… your Sanctuary… Please! You mustn't think I had anything to do with that! I wanted the Emperor dead! The true Emperor! I still do! It was Maro. He…”

“The Emperor,” Raisa said coldly. When the man looked at her, his face showing he was at a loss for words, “The real Emperor. Where. Is. He?”

“You mean, after all that's transpired, the Dark Brotherhood will still… honor the contract? Why, this is astounding news! Wonderful news! The Emperor is still in Skyrim, but not for long. He's onboard his ship, the Katariah, moored offshore in the Solitude Inlet. But you must hurry! If you can get onboard that ship, and kill Titus Mede II, as contracted… I will reveal the location of the
dead drop that holds your payment,” the man rattled off, almost gleefully.

“Commander Maro,” Raisa demanded. “Where is he?”

“Ah, yes, I can imagine you'd want to settle that score. Last I heard, he was at the Solitude docks, conducting the Emperor's departure,” the man said, a sly grin crossing his face.

“What sort of security should I be expecting?”

“Surely you're joking?” the man laughed.

“I’ve learned to take no chances,” she said coldly.

“This is the true Emperor, not some half-Septim lookalike. He’ll be surrounded by elite bodyguards, I'm sure. You'll have your work cut out for you. Still… everyone assumes the Dark Brotherhood has been completely destroyed. They may be a bit more lax than usual,” Motierre said, clearly unnerved by her tone of voice. “Please, make haste. The Emperor’s ship won’t stay moored forever. We won’t get a chance like this again.”

Commander Maro, as Motierre had mentioned, was at the docks when Raisa arrived. She had thought long and hard about what her plan of attack would be. She wanted him to know who it was that killed him, though she knew there was every chance he would alert his guards. At this point the Brotherhood couldn’t handle losing another member, so she shouldn’t take unnecessary risks… But she wanted the man to understand the power of the Brotherhood. Before he died, he would regret what he had ordered and wish he’d never let himself get involved with Astrid and her betrayal scheme.

Raisa stood on one end of the docks. It was a foggy evening when she arrived, and she knew Maro would be making his way back to his quarters soon. There was no moon out, the only light cast being that of the stars and the few lanterns spread around the docks. Soon enough, Maro exited, carrying a torch out with him. He looked out toward the end of the dock, seeing a figure standing there. He approached with the intent of asking whoever it was to leave or be arrested. However, as he approached he was overcome with a sense of familiarity and unease. He slowed his pace and looked at the figure in confusion before realisation dawned on him.

“By the gods… you?” He asked, sounding astonished before fear began to creep into his voice. The Dark Brotherhood coming back to haunt him, he cried in protest, “But it can't be. You're dead. You... Yeaaaggghhhh!”

When Maro’s body was discovered down stream with an arrow sticking out of his neck several hours later, word began to trickle around Skyrim, whispers of the true power of the Dark Brotherhood, how it had exacted vengeance for its persecution, and more importantly, that it had seemingly risen from the dead to do so.

Raisa spent the better part of the night dispatching the entire crew of the Katariah, making it a ghost ship until she found the Emperor himself, sitting peacefully behind the large desk in his quarters. He stood, an almost unconcerned look on his face, as she entered. He stepped around the desk with a sigh of resignation and said, “And, once more, I prove Commander Maro the fool. I told him you can't stop the Dark Brotherhood. Never could. Come now, don't be shy. You haven't come this far just to stand there gawking.”

Raisa once again chose to remain silent. She had nothing against the Emperor. If anything, she
admired his ability to understand that he was not long for that world. He wouldn’t go down whimpering in terror like Commander Maro. She definitely respected him, but he was a contract, and she would never break one, particularly after all that had transpired because of this contract.

“You and I have a date with destiny, it seems. But so it is with assassins and emperors, hmm? Yes, I must die. And you must deliver the blow. It is simply the way it is,” he nodded. He took another step forward and asked hesitantly, “But I wonder… would you suffer an old man a few more words before the deed is done?”

“I’m listening,” Raisa said, taking her bow off of her back and giving the string a few pulls to ready herself as she waited for the man’s last request.

“You will kill me and I have accepted that fate. But regardless of your path through life, I sense in you a certain… ambition,” he explained, “So I ask of you a favor. An old man's dying wish. While there are many who would see me dead, there is one who set the machine in motion. This person, whomever he or she may be, must be punished for their treachery. Once you have been rewarded for my assassination, I want you to kill the very person who ordered it. Would you do me this kindness?”

“I’ll…” she said, “I’ll consider your request.”

“Thank you,” the man said sincerely. “Now, on to the business at hand I suppose, hm?” With those final words he turned to face the window, making his last view a good one as the sun began to rise over the calm and foggy waters.

She had almost come to expect more of the moment. It had been a good death, of course. But her Family had spoken of it like it would be some spectacular feat, some dastardly event that would change them all forever. And perhaps it would have been, but there was something more… rough about it than she had been expecting. She had expected pomp and grandeur when in reality it was a quiet kill, a peaceful death, and understated ending to a heartbreaking and brutal lead up. It wasn’t fair, if she chose to be childish about it, but as she knew well by this point, life wasn’t fair.

The news of the Emperor’s death spread quickly throughout Skyrim, and by the time she returned to Motierre about two two days after the fact, her client was already well informed of the situation. “Aha!” he clapped gleefully when she entered his rented room, “You’re back!”

“Titus Mede II lies dead,” she said simply.

“I know! I know! I received the news not moments ago! Ha ha! This is glorious! My friend, you may not realize it, but you have served the Empire, indeed all of Tamriel, in ways you cannot possibly imagine. Ah, but you care little for politics, am I right? You want money! And money you shall have! Your payment waits for you at a dead drop. It is inside an urn, in the very chamber where we first met, in Volunruud. Now please, go. Collect your money, and let us never look upon one another again. Our business, thank the gods, is concluded,” the man said quickly and happily, though dismissively.

“Actually, Motierre,” Raisa said after a moment’s thought, “there is one more thing…”

“And what might that be?”

“Just… a favor,” she said, “for an honorable man.”

“You assassins and your riddles. It really does get very annoying, you know. Now if you'll excuse me…” The man said irritably, attempting to exit the room. However, as he tried to pass her, Raisa whipped out her dagger and stabbed it into Motierre’s neck just above his collarbone. A look of
anger crossed his face as he gurgled, “But… we had a… deal…”

She retrieved the dead drop, pleased to see that Motierre hadn’t been holding out on them in the least. As she entered the Dawnstar Sanctuary, still mostly in ruins, Nazir eagerly greeted her, “Well? What word of the Emperor?”

“Titus Mede II is dead,” Raisa said, “by my hand.”

“Truly? Could you have brought us more wondrous news? Recent events notwithstanding, this is a happy day for us, my friend. Despite your misfortunes, you stayed true to the Dark Brotherhood. You’ve saved us all, and for this you have my eternal thanks. Now, of course I must ask… Killing the Emperor… how much did Motierre pay for such a thing?”

“Five thousand gold,” Raisa said, looking down in disappointment.

“Oh. Is that all? Really? Come now! You’re joking with old Nazir! Surely the Emperor's life was worth more than that,” Nazir asked, sounding shocked.

“GOTCHA!” Raisa grinned, bouncing around him in a joyous circle, “It was 20,000 gold!”

“Ha! I knew it, you rascal!” the Redguard laughed heartily, clapping her on the shoulder in pride, “By Sithis, the old man was worth the trouble. Now, might I offer some advice? You should go to Riften and find Delvin Mallory. I believe Astrid had you visit him once before?”

“Delvin’s actually a good friend of mine,” Raisa said with a small smile, realising that it was a true statement at this point.

“Mallory is an expert ‘obtainer of goods.’ We can use this money to repair and refit this Sanctuary. Make a true home for us, eh? You do that and I'll see what I can do about recruiting some new additions to our Family…” Nazir grinned. It was a strange sight, the stoic Redguard cracking a smile, but Raisa was grateful to have him as part of her Family.

As she made her way out of the Sanctuary, already beginning to consider it as her new home, a shrill voice sounded nearby, “Listener!”

Startled, she spun around, her bow drawn and ready to fire as Cicero revealed himself, running up to her excitedly. “What in the name of Sithis…?” she mused, somewhat pleased to see the jester had lived, somewhat hesitant to let her guard down around him.

“Oh yes, it is Cicero! You were a fool to spare me. What, did you think I would be grateful? Cicero should be Listener! Not you! Now you will die!…” the jester trilled, a certain crazed sort of rage glistening behind his glassy eyes. There was a long and tense silence and Raisa almost thought that he was serious until he doubled over, cackling like the madman he was, “Ahhh… gotcha! Oh, Listener, you should see the look on your face! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, Cicero has returned! Not to kill the kind Listener, but to serve, until one of us dies horribly, in service to our Mother! Best friends forever! In the meantime, I'll make myself at home in the Sanctuary. I'm sure Mother needs… tending.”

With that he flounced into the Dawnstar Sanctuary and she found herself laughing. Some of what he said was true. They would certainly get along much better now she understood the way he worked. She also found that she was excited for him to become an official part of their dysfunctional little Family. She only hoped the others wouldn’t murder him before she got back from her other assignments.
Clases just started again, I was on a GoT kick, and I’ve been terribly sick. Basically a rough two weeks all around

It had taken her a while, but Raisa was eventually able to find the Snow Veil Sanctum near Winterhold. She’d not wanted to brave the frozen waters so she’d had to take a detour around the city, and so in turn, around the mountains it sat on. So when she approached Mercer outside the ruins, his attitude was not appreciated.

“Good,” he’d gruffly said, “you’re finally here. I’ve scouted the ruins and I’m certain that Karliah is still inside.”

“You saw her?” Raisa asked.

“No, I found her horse,” Mercer said, as though it were the obvious answer. “Don’t worry, I’ve taken care of it…” Raisa balked at the statement, having ridden up on Shadowmere just a few moments prior to that. “She won’t be using it to escape,” Mercer continued, attempting to somewhat justify his horse murder. “Let’s get moving, I want to catch her inside while she’s distracted. Now take the lead.”

“Wait, what?” Raisa asked, surprised yet again. “You want me to lead?”

“I’m sorry,” Mercer snapped sarcastically, “I was under the impression I was in charge. You’re leading and I’m following. Does that seem clear to you?”

Raisa bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from responding with an equally sarcastic tone. In the back of her mind, she heard Brynjolf reminding her to watch her mouth around Maven, though she found that advice better applied to Mercer Frey. “Understood.”

“Just make certain you keep your eyes open. Karliah is as sharp as a blade. The last thing I need is you blundering into a trap and warning her that we're here,” Mercer grumbled.

Raisa wasn’t worried about herself in that respect. She was quite proficient when it came to sneaking about, thanks to the Brotherhood, and in some small part, the Guild. She could even roll about silently and avoid setting off traps and trigger plates. She only hoped the same could be said for Mercer. As they made their way up and over the mound and into the pit where the entrance was, Raisa took the time to ask some of the questions that had been bugging her ever since Mercer had reacted so coldly to Karliah’s name. There definitely was something more to the story than he originally let on.

“How did Gallus die?”

A man with a knack for the dramatic arts, Mercer complied and regaled her with the tale, “Twenty-five years ago, I was standing outside these very same ruins. Gallus told me to meet here but he wouldn’t say why. When I arrived, Gallus stepped from the shadows. Before he uttered a sound, an arrow pierced his throat. Before I could even draw my blade, her second arrow found its mark in
my chest.”

A brief flood of fear laced through Raisa as he mentioned the style of the kill. She wondered how he would react knowing it was her favoured way of dispatching her enemies? Probably with suspicion. She made a mental note to aim a bit lower when he was around. “So Karliah took on both of you alone?”

“Karliah was a master marksman and her greatest weapon was the element of surprise. I was lucky… she missed my heart by mere inches. I staggered away from the ruins and my vision began to blur. It's then that I realized the bitch had poisoned her arrows,” Mercer spat irritably. “The last thing I saw was Karliah dumping his body into an opening atop the ruins; an unceremonious end for a remarkable man. To this day, I've regretted letting her escape, even if it had meant I died trying. I owed Gallus that much.”

“What happened after Gallus died?” she asked with a frown.

“The Guild was thrown into disarray. Several stepped up and tried to claim Gallus' former position as Guild Master. Sides quickly formed behind these men and the Ratway became a bloodbath. I saw what they did to Gallus. I wanted to use the Guild's resources to hunt down Karliah. The others didn't even care he was gone. Fortunately, I persevered and the other groups were either killed or they left Skyrim.”

“And what of Karliah?”

“The in-fighting had taken months to subside, which gave her time to go into hiding and carefully cover her tracks. I spent thousands of septims and used every contact at my disposal, but it was as if she had simply vanished… like I said before, she was the best,” Mercer mused. “She was a stubborn Dunmer… always had to do everything her way. But she was also the best… bringing in more coin a month than some thieves heist in a year. Gallus trusted her too much and let her get too close.”

“So they had a relationship?” Raisa asked, feeling slightly uncomfortable due to the surprising similarities between herself and Karliah. There were many differences, it seemed, but still… It was a bit unnerving to say the least.

“If you want to call it that, yes. Me? I think she was softening him for the kill. Gallus would call her his ‘little nightingale’. He was absolutely smitten by her,” Mercer sneered, a tone of disgust clear in his words. “Which is exactly why we tend to frown up on any long-term in-house relationships. Too messy. Too dangerous. You’d do well to remember that. Lass.”

“Why’d she kill him?” Raisa asked, not rising to his warning… or was it a threat? “If she cared about him so fondly, that is. And isn’t murder Brotherhood territory?”

“Greed? Jealousy? Spite? Who can say what drove her to such an iniquitous act. One thing’s certain: I intend to find out before she draws her last breath,” Mercer said firmly. “And I have a long-standing arrangement with the Dark Brotherhood. If I need someone in the Guild taken care of, we do it ourselves. We both agree it’s best to keep these matters in-house.”

When Raisa didn’t immediately respond, Mercer snapped, “Let’s get going. I want her head on my mantle.” He turned and observed the large iron door to the ruins. He tried the handle, finding that it was closed tight, locked and immovable. “They say that these ancient Nordic burial mounds are sometimes impenetrable. This one doesn't look too difficult. Quite simple, really. I don't know what all the fuss is about these locks. All it takes is a bit of know-how and a lot of skill. That should do it. After you.”
It seemed now that he was just showing off. Why tell her to lead if he was going to jump in and take control of the situation. She surely would have been able to unlock that door herself if he’d given her half a second. Still, she wasn’t the best lock picker in Tamriel, so it was probably best that she didn’t make a fool of herself in front of the Guild master.

“The stench in here… this place smells of death,” the man grumbled sourly. Raisa couldn’t disagree with him. It was old death, not the scent of a fresh kill, or a recent murder. It was full of undead from times past, which made it all the more dangerous for them. “Be on your guard. Pull the chain over there and watch out for the spikes. Looks like Karliah reset all the traps.”

As they made their way down into the depths, Raisa couldn’t help but feel frustrated as she avoided the traps and made certain not to alert the undead of her presence in their tomb. Behind her, Mercer trotted along noisily, as if he really couldn’t care less about the traps, or the draugr, or alerting Karliah. If they needed the element of surprise on their side, why the hell was he being louder than a horker in the bard’s college?

“Karliah always was a nimble minx… slipping past these draugr must be child's play for her. We're on the right track. She's been through here as well,” Mercer muttered after they’d dispatched the last round of draugr he had awoken with his stomping and yelling of war cries. How had he exactly become the leader of the Thieves Guild?

It took them a while to reach the end of the crypt, seeing as they had to fight nearly every single guardian around as they went. They came to a long tunnel that ended in a half-moon door. Raisa walked up to it without hesitation and began inspecting it. “I’ve seen these before,” she said.

“Ah, it’s one of the infamous Nordic puzzle doors. How quaint. Without the matching claw, they're normally impossible to open. And since I'm sure Karliah already did away with it, we're on our own,” Mercer mused as he came up beside her. “Fortunately, these doors have a weakness if you know how to exploit it. Quite simple, really.”

“Is there any way you could show me?” Raisa eagerly asked as they entered the main room of the crypt.

“Karliah’s close, I’m certain of it,” Mercer frowned, attempting to dismiss her request. “Now let’s get moving.”

“I mean, I’ve found quite a lot of these in my travels and finding the claws can be so difficult,” Raisa rattled on quietly as they proceeded. “It’d be really useful to j—!”

As she’d been speaking, she felt a sharp pain in her side. Her breath rattled as she stumbled to the side, eventually collapsing onto the cold, hard stone floor of the crypt. It was hard to take in a deep breath… It was hard to move at all. Something was terribly wrong, and she knew that she was in deep trouble. Mercer drew his sword and looked out into the main room, clearly on high alert, his sharp, cold eyes looking around at every detail of the ruin.

Across the way, a woman descended a set of stairs, a black hood covering her eyes. It was Thieves Guild armor for sure, though it had been faded and worn over years of use. She had her bow drawn and pointed directly at Mercer, clearly ready to strike the man down. It must have been her who had shot Raisa, who had doomed her. Though she was one of his own, Raisa didn’t expect Mercer to haul her body back up through the ruins after she’d died. Oh what would her family say when she never came home?

“Do you honestly think your arrow will reach me before my blade finds your heart?” Mercer asked the woman condescendingly.
“Give me a reason to try,” she spat back, drawing the string even further back to emphasise her point.

“You're a clever girl, Karliah. Buying Goldenglow Estate and funding Honningbrew Meadery was inspired,” Mercer mused, putting his sword away after a moment’s thought.

Karliah didn’t lower her bow as she responded, “‘To ensure an enemy's defeat, you must first undermine his allies.’ It was the first lesson Gallus taught us.”

“You always were a quick study,” Mercer chuckled darkly, his hands on his hips.

“Not quick enough,” Karliah snapped, her words heavy but fierce. “Otherwise Gallus would still be alive.”

“Gallus had his wealth and he had you. All he had to do was look the other way.”

From where she lay, Raisa managed to roll her head slightly to get a better look at Mercer. Her mind was slowing down. It wouldn’t be long until… But… he had lied. If what Karliah was saying was true… Not just to her, but to the entire Guild! His family, who counted on his leadership and judgement. Raisa felt a seed of hatred settle into the pit of her stomach for this man. Not as intense as she had so recently felt, but enough that she could easily recognise what that intense feeling was. She wanted this man dead.

“Did you forget the oath we took as Nightingales? Did you expect him to simply ignore your methods?” Karliah asked incredulously, as if Mercer were being ridiculous, which it seemed he was.

“Enough of this mindless banter!” Mercer groaned, drawing his sword again. “Come, Karliah! It's time for you and Gallus to become reunited!”

Instead of letting her arrow fly, Karliah drank what appeared to be an invisibility potion. “I'm no fool, Mercer. Crossing blades with you would be a death sentence. But I can promise the next time we meet, it will be your undoing.”

With his prey seemingly gone, Mercer turned and walked slowly towards where Raisa lay, twitching and gasping. She couldn’t feel anything at all. Her body was frozen, and she wondered how long she would have left in that world. It seemed the Divines were done laughing at her. She wouldn’t be escaping from her death this time. It was time for her to serve Lord Sithis in the Void for eternity…

“How interesting. It appears Gallus's history has repeated itself,” the man mused, crouching down and grabbing her by the chin, pulling her limp body up so he could glare right into her face. “Karliah has provided me the means to be rid of you, and this ancient tomb becomes your final resting place. But do you know what intrigues me the most?” he asked, a malicious grin rising up on his wrinkled face, “The fact that this was all possible because of you. Farewell. I'll be certain to give Brynjolf your regards.”

At the mention of Brynjolf, Raisa felt the hatred for Mercer she was nursing explode into full bloom. Oh she wasn’t about to give up just because she was paralized. No, they still needed her. She wouldn’t allow Mercer to get away with whatever it was he was planning. With what little feeling she had left she managed to spit out Unrelenting Force straight into Mercer’s face, causing him to fly backwards in surprise and release her. Her skull hit the ground with a sickening crunch as the power of her Thu’um pushed her away from her enemy slightly, but she didn’t feel a thing. She could only watch as Mercer leapt up and charged over to her, stabbing her in the gut with his
sword and stepping over her, leaving her to die on the floor of the cold, Nordic crypt.
Hola dudeskis, so I have many more chapters written, I just haven't had much time to post recently. I'm five weeks into school, my birthday was a week ago so my sister surprise visited me here in Scotland, and my classes actually require time put into them this year. I've just finished an essay and we have a week off next week, so I'm going to do a mass post this weekend to make up for not posting anything for practically a month now, then hopefully I'll get back on the usual schedule of every Saturday!
The first thing Raisa became aware of was the pain. A sharp ache radiated through her side when she tried to move. She moaned slightly, wondering why death was so painful. The next thing she noticed was the breeze. It was cold, salty, and to be honest, quite refreshing. It reminded her of her home in Dawnstar… Home… the Dark Brotherhood… No… Riften… the Thieves Guild… Mercer… no… Brynjolf…

She sat up suddenly, a blinding pain rushing through her as she did, causing her to see spots as she gasped for air and for lack of an ability to cry out, the pain was so intense.

“Easy, easy,” a low voice said reassuringly, slowly helping Raisa into a sitting position. “Don’t get up so quickly. How are you feeling?”

She looked around once her vision had cleared and saw a rather concerned looking dark elf woman kneeling beside the bedroll she had been placed on. She looked the woman up and down suspiciously; she didn’t seem to know her… She then caught sight of the bow and arrows resting on a nearby tree stump and she exclaimed, “Hold on… you shot me!”

“No,” the woman corrected quickly. “I saved your life. My arrow was tipped with a unique paralytic poison. It slowed your heart and kept you from bleeding out. Had I intended to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation.”

“Why save me?” Raisa asked curiously.

“My original intention was to use that arrow on Mercer, but I never had a clear shot. I made a split-second decision to get you out of the way and it prevented your death,” Karliah admitted.

“Why should I believe you?” Raisa asked, a frown on her face.

“Without the antidote I administered, you'd be as still as a statue. I treated your wounds and didn't leave you defenseless,” Karliah told her patiently.

“Then I am in your debt,” Raisa sighed. “You’ll have to forgive me if I’m not quick to trust you. I’ve had a rough couple of weeks.”

“I’d imagine so,” Karliah nodded. “The Dark Brotherhood have seen some dark times these last few months. Slaughtered in their own Sanctuary and yet they still managed to kill the Emperor. Well done.”

“Thank you,” Raisa nodded, unused to getting praised for her work outside of the Brotherhood. Her identity in Skyrim was hardly common knowledge. Her breath got caught in her chest as Karliah so calmly mentioned what was quite possibly the darkest day of her entire life. She sensed the sadness and concern in the dark elf’s voice with a small degree of gratitude. “How did you know I come from the Brotherhood?”

Karliah looked at Raisa with a patient expression, “When you live in the shadows you tend to recognize those who reside there as well. Not everyone is ignorant of what marks the Brotherhood.” Raisa shrugged slightly in response as the dark elf smiled wryly and continued, “It also helps that the last time I was welcome in the Guild Delvin Mallory was caught between being a thief and an assassin, much like you are now.” The dunmer shifted her position slightly, any went of a smile leaving her face. She clasped her hands together almost tensely as she looked at Raisa seriously, a slightly exasperated huff escaping her. “The poison on that arrow took me a year to
perfect,” she sighed. “I only had enough for a single shot. All I had hoped was to capture Mercer alive.”

“Why alive?” Raisa asked. “Why not just kill the two-faced bastard?”

“Remember, you must think as one of the Thieves Guild now,” Karliah said. “Mercer must be captured alive so he can be brought before the Guild to answer for what he’s done. He needs to pay for Gallus’ murder.”

“I still say it couldn’t hurt to at least maim him a bit beforehand,” Raisa grumbled. “How will you prove it now?”

“My purpose in using Snow Veil Sanctum to ambush Mercer wasn't simply for irony's sake. Before both of you arrived, I recovered a journal from Gallus' remains. I suspect the information we need is written inside.”

“What’s the catch?” Raisa asked, looking at Karliah curiously. “There’s always a catch…”

“The journal is written in some sort of language I’ve never seen before.”

“Could it be translated?” Raisa asked, hoping that the answer was yes. The sooner they figured this out, the sooner she could be allowed to murder Mercer Frey and clear her name. He would undoubtedly try and spin this all around on her, make her out to have been Karliah’s ally all along.

“Enthir… Gallus' friend at the College of Winterhold. Of course…” Karliah muttered thoughtfully. “It's the only outside Gallus trusted with the knowledge of his Nightingale identity.”

“There’s that word again,” Raisa muttered. “Nightingale.”

“There were three of us: Myself, Gallus and Mercer. We were an anonymous splinter of the Thieves Guild in Riften. Perhaps I'll tell you more about it later. Right now, you need to head for Winterhold with the journal and get the translation. Here, take these as well, they may prove useful for your journey,” Karliah instructed. “Remember, speak only to Enthir. Trust no one else.”

Raisa had never been so far north as Winterhold before. Windhelm had been the farthest, or perhaps even Dawnstar. Certainly Winterhold was the farthest to the north and west for her in Skyrim. But regardless, she managed to find it without too much trouble. She wondered if she would find Enthir in the College, entirely unsure of whether or not she would have to enter the college itself just to meet the man. She figured it at least wouldn’t hurt to ask about him at the college. And if she was mistaken, it wouldn’t have been entirely in vain. Regardless of where she found him, she wouldn’t rest until she met with him and saved the Thieves Guild from the likes of Mercer Frey.

She made her way into the inn, ready to rent a room for the night and find her contact the next day. She had, after all, been shot and stabbed all in a matter of minutes scarcely more than a day previously, and she had been riding on Shadowmere for much of the time after she’d woken up from her brief injury induced coma. As she entered, she heard an old man grumbling about the happenings at the college, much to the displeasure of a few other patrons. It didn’t seem that the town was entirely fond of the reputation the school of magic had brought them. As she made her way to purchase a room, she paid some small manner of attention to the man.

Upon further inspection, he seemed to match the description Karliah had given her to help in her search for Enthir. After the group of villagers were dispelled, she made her way over to the man and asked, “Excuse me?”
“Yes, yes, what is it?” the man asked impatiently, gathering up a small pile of books so that she might be able to sit in the chair nearest him.

“I’ve been sent by Karliah,” Raisa said hesitantly, hoping that the man hadn’t been coerced by Mercer as so many others had.

“Karliah?” he asked, sounding surprised. “Then she’s finally found it. Do you have Gallus’s journal then?”

“Yes,” Raisa nodded, “but there’s a small problem.”

“Problem?” the man asked, frowning sharply. “Let me see it…” she produced the journal and offered it to him with only the slightest hesitation. The man snatched it up carefully and began to flip through it idly. He chuckled deeply, a sound that warmed the room marginally, in spite of the blizzard that roared outside. “This is just like Gallus. A dear friend, but always too clever for his own good. He’s written all of the text in the Falmer language.”

“The Falmer have a language?” Raisa asked, ashamed to be somewhat surprised at the fact. “Can you translate it?”

“No. However, I know someone who might. The court wizard of Markarth, Calcelmo, may have the materials you need to get this journal translated. A word of warning: Calcelmo is a fierce guardian of his research. Getting the information won't be easy,” Enthir mused, a deep frown on his face.

“What exactly is a Falmer?” Raisa asked, not exactly eager to rush off to Markarth after she had only just arrived. Besides, it was getting dark and the blizzards were bad enough in the daytime. She shuddered to think what would come of her in the night.

“In the time before man, they were known as the snow elves. They lived in the sunlight and had a very prosperous society,” the man informed her easily.

“So they were like your kind?” she asked, trying to be gentle about the topic. She knew that most Nords beheld other races with contempt—a stupid generalisation brought on by the racist Stormcloaks. She didn't want to be considered one of those sorts of Nords at all. She was simply curious.

“Like the Altmer?” Enthir asked, somewhat surprised, though he nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I would say their culture quite possibly rivalled our own.”

“What drove them underground?” Raisa asked, a small frown on her face as she made herself comfortable, moving as gently as she could so as to not irritate her wounds any further.

“The Nords went to war with the Falmer in the First Era. Killed them by the thousands to drive them from their snowy homeland. The Falmer retreated underground and forged an uneasy alliance with the dwarves, who ended up betraying them. This betrayal made them what they are now… horrible, blind monstrosities with a burning hatred of any but their own kind,” Enthir said, bitterness and sadness saturating his words.

“They sound more like victims to me…” Raisa said with a small frown. “You appear to despise them…”

“And why shouldn't I? The Falmer have killed more than a fair share of my acquaintances. They're animals… they show absolutely no pity or remorse,” Enthir snapped before reigning himself in with a slight nod. “Yes… yes, I suppose you may be right… Forgive me… Loss tends to distort the
view of the beholder…"

“What can you tell me about Gallus?” Raisa asked. “I’m… sort of new in the Guild and… well, everything’s been changing… quite fast. I’ve not had much time to really get myself up to speed yet…”

“He was a dear friend of mine and a surprisingly astute pupil of academia… I was devastated when he was killed. I suppose that risk always coexisted with his line of work; I just never thought his luck would run out,” Enthir sighed.

“He was an academic, yet he chose a different path,” Raisa mused. “I can’t help but wonder why…”

“Why’d you join?” Enthir asked. “Think about it, girl. For the thrill, of course. He was quite clear that he felt more in his element climbing through a window than hunched over a dusty tome.”

“How’d you wind up meeting him?” she continued.

“Ah, yes, quite an amusing anecdote actually. I caught him trying to break into my laboratory. I was about to show him the error of his ways when he made a curiously astute comment about my research notes. I was astounded and it in turn lead to a conversation. Who’d have imagined it would lead to such a strong friendship?” Enthir chuckled, though a dark shadow passed over his face and Raisa was certain he was reliving the moment he knew his friend was dead.

“Do you know why Gallus scribed his journal in Falmer?” Raisa asked. “Seems kind of… counterproductive, I suppose? If I were Mercer I’d have burned it regardless of if I could read it…”

“Then let us be glad you aren’t,” Enthir said with a small smile. “Besides the fact that there are only a handful of people in Tamriel that even recognize the language? I’m fairly certain he was planning some sort of a heist that involved a deep understanding of the Falmer language. Sadly, we never had the opportunity to speak about the details. Besides, no one expects to be murdered…”

Raisa would have protested, citing the Emperor Titus Mede II as a source, but then again, no one else had been there and the man himself was surely burned and buried by now. Her word alone wouldn’t do to prove anything, lest she admit to her newfound leadership of the Dark Brotherhood to a complete stranger. “How’d he even find the knowledge to use it? It seems like something that’d have been long forgotten, even before his time.”

“Ironically, I pointed him in the same direction I pointed you, to Markarth and Calcelmo. I’m only hoping whatever means he used to learn the language will still be available to you,” Enthir admitted almost sheepishly.

“Thank you for your time, Enthir,” Raisa said. “But if you’ll excuse me, I have a long journey ahead of me tomorrow and I’ve had a rough couple of days. I think it’s time I retire for the evening.” The old man bid her farewell and gave a few words of caution about the court wizard and his stubborn nature, advising that she be careful when she spoke to him.

And with that warning in mind, she found herself yet again in the Markarth’s keep, entirely ready to be gone. She didn’t want anyone recognising her there, especially considering that the only times she’d been around previously had been on business for the Brotherhood.

“Look, I’m very busy, so this better be important. What are you doing here? The excavation site is closed. I don’t need any more workers or guards,” the court wizard snapped from where he stood poring over old and dusty tomes.
“I was looking for you, actually,” Raisa said carefully.

“I told you I’m not hiring any more guards. Why do you people always bother me when I’m trying to finish my research? You idiot. Do you even know who I am? The most recognized scholar on the Dwemer in all of Tamriel, and you people keep bothering me! I… I’m sorry, I… I got too excited. I’m in the middle of some very… stressful work, and I shouldn’t have yelled. How can I help you?” the old man had practically shouted at her.

When he raised his voice sharply, Raisa had stumbled against one of the tables in what had been surprise, but seemed to come off more as fright. She stooped, not facing the man as she hastily picked up the things she had sent flying to the floor. In the pile, she found a key, slipping it up her sleeve as she picked everything else.

“I hear you’re the authority on the ancient Falmer,” she said casually.

“Then you were well informed. I am at this very moment on the cusp of completing my magnum opus on the subject. I’m calling it ‘Calcelmo’s Guide to the Falmer Tongue’. It will revolutionize the way we understand those ancient beings,” the man said, an arrogant tone entering his voice as he spoke.

“Perhaps I could view your work?” Raisa asked hopefully. She was really just received that a way to read the journal still existed at all. It didn’t matter if the man allowed her access; she would grant herself access if it came down to it.

“Preposterous! That research represents years of personal toil in some of the most dangerous Dwemer ruins in Skyrim! You must be mad to think I’d allow anyone to see it before it’s completed,” the man huffed in irritation.

“Forget it,” she sighed, equally irritably, “Maybe I’ll come back later.”

“Very well,” the man replied curtly. “Perhaps when my research is complete, I’ll feel more comfortable discussing my findings with you.”

Raisa stalked away, her boots hitting the floor loudly and angrily. However, she made her way across the keep, resisting the urge to smirk in triumph as she felt the key in her sleeve. She talked her way past the solitary guard outside the museum before slipping the key into the keyhole and busting into the museum in the most casual way. She slunk low and skirted around displays, careful to avoid the guards. Eventually she found herself up in Calcelmo’s laboratories, hastily creating a rubbing of the translation stone with paper and charcoal. She stuffed the paper as carefully as she could into a bottle, corking and wax sealing it so that it would be as safe as possible for her grand exit. She’d made quite a ruckus in-between the labs and the museum, and she was certain they would be after any intruders in full force.

She was about to make her way down and out when she heard a door open ahead of her. She peeked around the stone and saw five or six guards making their way quickly towards the stairs to the offices she had just come out of. Luckily, it was a one way route and she could sneak down once they’d past. They left a single man to guard the one exit. She dispatched him easily from afar and made a mad dash for the exit. Once she was outside, she was certain they would be right on her tail. Seeing no other safe option, she turned and slipped past the safety rails along the walkway and slunk out to the edge. She peered out over the edge, looking at the high jump with the waterfall, unease spreading through her. She knew it was going to hurt. It would have hurt anyone, but she was still recovering from her wounds. It was going to hurt like hell. But she jumped anyways, hoping it was deep enough at the bottom that she wouldn’t die immediately.
By some miracle, she escaped the city without much trouble and rode instantly for Winterhold with her findings. As she entered the inn she saw Enthir glance her way before heading down into the cellar of the inn. She followed quickly, practically racing down the stairs after him. She spotted Karliah at the opposite end of the cellar and approached her quickly.

“Back eh?” The man asked, “And how was our friend Calcelmo?”

“This,” Raisa said, dangling the bottle in front of Enthir and Karliah briefly before placing it down on the table, “should help translate Gallus’s journal.”

“I suppose it would be inappropriate of me to ask how you obtained this, so I simply won’t,” Enthir sighed. “A rubbing, eh? Odd. I expected notes…”

“I’m a thief,” Raisa said bluntly, “From the Thieves Guild. It isn’t as if it’s some big mystery how I got it. But regardless, its the best I could do. I was… pressed for time.”

“I understand. Now, let me take a good look at this. Over here, please. Hmm… This is intriguing, but highly disturbing. It appears Gallus had suspicions about Mercer Frey’s allegiance to the Guild for months. Gallus had begun to uncover what he calls an ‘…unduly lavish lifestyle replete with spending vast amounts of gold on personal pleasures,’” Enthir muttered as he translated.

“Does the journal say where this wealth came from?” Karliah asked eagerly.

“Yes…” Enthir mumbled, “Gallus seems certain that Mercer had been removing funds from the Guild's treasury without anyone's knowledge.”

“Anything else, Enthir? Anything about… the Nightingales?”

“Hmm. Yes, here it is. The last few pages seem to describe ‘the failure of the Nightingales,’ although it doesn't go into great detail. Gallus also repeatedly mentions his strong belief that Mercer desecrated something known as the Twilight Sepulcher,” Enthir informed the pair of thieves.

“Shadows preserve us…” Karliah swore, sounding astonished. “So it’s true…”

“I’m not familiar with the Twilight Sepulcher…” Enthir mused. “What is it? What’s Mercer Frey done?”

“I’m sorry, Enthir,” Karliah said quickly, “I can’t say. All that matters is we deliver your translation to the Guild immediately. Farewell, Enthir… words cannot express…”

“It’s alright, Karliah,” the man said gently, patting the elf woman on the arm consolingly. “You don't have to say a word. Listen, all I want is the truth to be revealed to the Guild. They respected Karliah, and she deserves better. Do whatever you can and I'll consider it a personal favor.” He directed the last bit to Raisa who nodded somewhat hesitantly her agreement.

“Thank you Enthir,” Raisa added as the man turned to leave.

“And if you ever manage to gain entry to the College, and you find trying to rid yourself of stolen goods becoming a burden, come visit me. I’ve been known to handle items of questionable interest from time to time and I'll see what I can do,” he smiled as he left. Raisa nodded her thanks once again.

“We must hasten to Riften before Mercer can do any more damage to the Guild,” Karliah told Raisa firmly.
“Gallus’s journal mentioned the ‘Twilight Sepulcher…’” Raisa said hesitantly.

The dark elf was silent for a long while before she sighed and faced Raisa, “You’ve come this far, so I see no harm in concealing it any longer. The Twilight Sepulcher is the temple to Nocturnal. It’s what the Nightingales are sworn to protect at all costs.”

“Why should it require that sort of protection?” Raisa asked, unfamiliar with temples and the ways of the Divines… apart from one, of course.

“Everything that represents Nocturnal's influence is contained within the walls of the Sepulcher. Now it seems Mercer's broken his oath with Nocturnal and defiled the very thing he swore to protect,” Karliah explained.

“Thieves and temples…” Raisa chuckled slightly. “It doesn’t add up for me…”

“I admit I felt the same when Gallus first revealed these things to me,” Karliah said rather gently. “I think, given time, you'll understand what I mean.”

“I’d understand better if less mystery was involved,” Raisa said. “At least with the Brotherhood we know what we’re supposed to do all the time…”

“As a Nightingale, I’ve been sworn to secrecy regarding the Sepulcher. I know the Guild doesn't do much to foster faith, but I'm going to have to ask that you continue to trust me,” Karliah said, already knowing what a difficult task that was for Raisa, given her recent past. “I'll make for Riften and scout the situation; see if I can discover what Mercer's up to. When you're ready, meet me at the Ragged Flagon. In the meantime, I wanted you to have this. It belonged to Gallus, but given the circumstances I think he'd approve…”

She handed Raisa a black sword then. Raisa took it and found that though it was nicely balanced, it was surprisingly heavy. It hummed at her touch and she was certain that it had some form of enchantment or other on it to make it react in such a way. She thanked the dark elf with a grateful smile, sheathing the blade and saying, “I’ll put it to good use.”

“If the Guild isn’t willing to listen to reason, you might have to,” Karliah said firmly.

Raisa felt her stomach drop then. She hadn’t entirely considered the effect this entire situation would have on the Guild. She knew that Mercer would make up some lie about how things went down at Snow Veil Sanctum but for the first time since she’d been shot, it seemed to dawn on her that she may not have been welcome had she simply returned. She hated the idea that her friends would have turned on her. The idea that Brynjolf…

She drew in a sharp breath but nodded curtly at Karliah, feeling sick to her stomach as she made her way into one of the rooms, stopping to pay quickly before she settled down. She lay herself carefully down on the bed, feeling as if she wanted to cry, but at the same time, knew she wouldn’t. She was still too optimistic. She’d been a fool, to think that the Thieves Guild would be a safety net for her in the fallout of the Brotherhood. Of course there would be a betrayal. Of course she would get caught up in the mess. And of course, it would be her job to fix things, yet again. She only hoped that the others would be able to see reason.
Pretty Lies

Brynjolf couldn’t believe was he was hearing. It’d been almost two weeks since Raisa had gone off to finish her contract to kill the Emperor when Mercer came back form Snow Veil Sanctum, noticeably alone. To be fair, Brynjolf had thought that perhaps they’d simply travelled separately. They’d traveled there without one another, perhaps she’d had more family matters come up that delayed her return. But from the look on Mercer’s face as he demanded that the entire Guild assemble in the Flagon immediately, Brynjolf could tell that something was very, very wrong.

He’d gone and gathered Rune and Sapphire from the training room and ambled his way into the Flagon. He stood near the crates that Vex favored, though the woman was sitting at the bar with Vekel and Tonilia for once when Mercer called everyone to attention. Brynjolf folded his arms and waited somewhat anxiously for whatever it was that Mercer was about to tell them all.

“We’re a family down here,” he started. The Guild looked shiftily around at one another at these words. These sorts of talks were never reassuring and were a telltale sign of horrific news. Something they’d all become more than used to since their luck began to run out a few years back. “We look out for our own. I don’t think that any one of you here would deny that fact. We keep our heads down, our ears sharp, and our fingers in everyone else’s pockets. And with good reason; so that we can weed out anything that could harm us or our Guild.”

The man glared around at the group, “I’ve thought a long while on what I was going to say to you all when I got back. But you’ve all been seeing the signs. Our outfit is failing.” Brynjolf bit his cheek to stop himself from interrupting the man. They’d heard this speech many times before, and each time it served to dishearten them further. This wasn’t the sort of leadership they needed. “But some good has come of our misfortune, it seems, and we’ll soon be on the rise again, my friends.”

“You see, all these… seemingly impossible jobs,” Mercer continued, “Goldenglow, Honningbrew, the East Empire Company… They’ve been done. They’ve been done exceedingly well. All thanks to your newest guild member, to Brynjolf’s little protege.” The way Mercer said it, it sounded like an insult, a backhanded sneer at her ambition and her talent. It was enough to make Brynjolf gnash his teeth in anger. It wasn’t fair of Mercer to treat her like that, after all she’d done for the Guild, especially after all she’d been through…

“Yeah yeah, the girl’s got spirit,” Vex said, rolling her eyes, “Can we go now?”

“If by spirit you mean bloodlust, then yes I’d have to agree with you,” Mercer snapped. “The point is that she’s been lying to us all this whole time. Her little stunt at Goldenglow, burning all the hives, breaking the rules… it was all part of a much bigger plot to undermine the Guild. We only started finding the clues that led us to our main opponent when this infiltrator showed up. She’d been in league with Karliah the entire time she’s been here.”

“Oh come on, Mercer,” Brynjolf snapped now, causing almost every head in the Flagon to turn and look at him. He’d never been one for speaking at the meetings in the past. When he did speak, it was always because he thought something was really out of place. “She’s one of the best we have. What proof have you got that she’s betrayed us?”

“She is an assassin for the Dark Brotherhood,” Mercer said. “She’s been assigned a contract to assassinate me so that Karliah can obtain leadership of the Guild.”

“Karliah’s been trying to create a wedge between us and Maven,” Brynjolf protested. “That doesn’t mean that Raisa’s had anything to do with this at all.”
“I thought that too,” Mercer snapped, glaring at Brynjolf coldly from his position across the Flagon. “Until we reached Snow Veil Sanctum. As… as you all may know, that was where Karliah murdered Gallus in an attempt to seize his power for herself. And as you know, she almost succeeded. Going back there was… tough enough already, knowing what had happened. But the Guild was depending on it, so I went. And I brought Brynjolf’s little protege with me to determine her goals, though by that point I’d become almost certain. What with her little meltdown and all, it hardly left any room for imagination, what with her talk of murder and betrayal. It seems her… attachments in the Guild were distracting her from her true objective. Killing me.”

“And what, they admitted this all to you?” Brynjolf demanded, still not buying Mercer’s story. 

“When we reached the main crypt of Snow Veil Sanctum, she turned to me and showed me the contract she’d made with Karliah asking for my head on her mantle,” Mercer said coldly. “She attacked me and I managed to subdue her. It was then that Karliah revealed herself, an arrow aimed right at me. Having been in that situation before I knew I didn’t have much time. I drank an invisibility potion and hid myself away as best I could. Thinking I was gone, Karliah ran immediately to the girl, checking to see if she was alright. It was certain, then, that we had been betrayed. I waited until Karliah had taken the girl away before grabbing the contract and making my escape.”

“When you got away why didn’t you immediately come back here?” Brynjolf demanded once again.

“That’s exactly what she would have wanted me to do,” Mercer growled. “Think, boy. You’re a thief, an agent of stealth and strategy. Use your goddamn head. If I’d come back here immediately, it would have been the death of me, and likely many of you.”

“I just don’t believe it,” Brynjolf said, shaking his head incredulously. “She would never do any of this. She wouldn’t betray the Guild like this…”

“I have the contract here, if you need further proof,” Mercer offered, pulling out the piece of paper delicately and holding it up. “I hope your silly little feelings aren’t getting in the way of you being able to see reason, Brynjolf. I know you were… fond of the whelp, but whatever she told you… it was all just part of her act.”

Brynjolf silently read the contract, unsure of what protocol in the Dark Brotherhood was for contracts, especially now considering they were still so unstable after all that had happened to them. He felt a slow burn rise to his cheeks at Mercer’s words. He had never been certain of things in that regard himself, and the fact that Mercer needed to remind him of his priorities was bad enough as it was. He felt reasonably cowed, but he still couldn’t quite convince himself of Raisa’s guilt.

“Still not enough?” Mercer asked, sounding irritated when he saw the look in Brynjolf’s eyes. “As for where I was between the revelation of her betrayal and returning here, I did some old fashioned burglary. I managed to track Karliah to the base she and your little thief were using. They didn’t stay long. I managed to gut the assassin pretty good when she attacked me, and I knew she wouldn’t last long without any sort of treatment. Luckily Karliah realized it too and took her back to Windhelm to seek a healer. I managed to steal these while I was there.”

He threw a stack of parchments down on the table. “Letters,” he said. “from our soon-to-be-deceased assassin, to her employer Karliah. Everything I’ve told you is in those letters. If you really don’t believe me, be my guest and read it all for yourself. Why else do you think she spent so much time away from the guild if not working for the Dark Brotherhood? Why else join the guild than to get at me on Karliah’s orders?”
The Flagon was silent. No one moved, everyone looking down into their mugs or at the letters. Brynjolf found himself struggling to find an excuse. He was desperate for a reason to call Mercer a liar, to say he forged the letters, to say she wasn’t an assassin… But he couldn’t. He knew about her past. He knew her… But he couldn’t help himself remembering what she’d said to him not so long ago:

“You had good reason, I’m sure;” he’d said.  
“You believe that?” she’d replied… skeptically?  
“I trust you,” he’d promised.  
“You probably shouldn’t;” she’d warned him.  
“Why do you think that?” he’d asked.  
“You don’t know me,” she told him.  
“Nonsense, lass, I—”  
“You know the thief. Your protege,” she’d replied. “But you don’t know me.”

It turned out that he hadn’t known her. Mercer had been right all along. She’d told him she was an assassin… She’d revealed all that to him, and more about herself. But now he doubted whether any of it was true. He knew the day he’d seen her entering the orphanage that there was something about her. The way she’d looked at him… it had been a knowing sort of look… Like she knew exactly what she needed to do to get him to lower his guard, to wrap him around her finger and hold him there so she could get to Mercer. He had to admit; she’d certainly played her part well. She’d managed to drag him away from his life of solitude to actually want something more from someone else. She had some impossible power over him. And he’d been thrilled by it, by her, by the prospects of having someone else to be there with him.

But that was all just an illusion. Just a load of cloak and dagger. And he’d been the fool who’d been stabbed. But the Divines had been merciful. Mercer was alive and back with them once again. Karliah had been exposed, and Raisa would soon be… He found it hard to think of what Mercer had said without feeling a sharp ache billow through his chest in powerful throbs. He steadied his mind somewhat and the pains subsided momentarily, only to flare up once again when he let his guard slip. He turned then and exited the Guild, making his way topside for a bit of space to think to himself.

There was nothing he could think of to prove her innocence. And even if she were innocent in the first place, she… she would soon be dead by Mercer’s hand. Brynjolf couldn’t bear to think of her like that. Injured… dying… dead… It caused the pains in his chest to intensify with every breath he took and he knew that she had really done her job well to have him so ensnared. He was all too familiar with what he was experiencing now, thinking of how much he had come to care for her, and how much he wished he hadn’t.
Her hands were shaking. Why were her hands always shaking now when she got nervous? It hadn’t happened before. She’d always seemed to rely on adrenaline to keep her steady. But now, she was shaking like a leaf in the windy season. It was entirely inconvenient and it made her even less eager than usual to return to the Guild. But it was depending on her, even if it didn’t know it yet. Karliah was depending on her. Brynjolf…

She could only hope that he hadn’t believed the lies that Mercer had undoubtedly told about her. She’d had to sneak in through the Ratway again; Mercer seemed to have somehow changed the locks for the back entrance. She hadn’t a clue how it was possible, but it refused to open when she went to check it. What’s worse though, was that she’d have to parade past at least half the Guild in the Flagon before she even reached Delvin or Vex or Mercer… or Brynjolf…

She entered the Flagon, her heart pounding in her chest. Though it hadn’t been long since she’d last been there, it still felt every bit as intimidating as her first time. What’s more, she was reminded swiftly of the dire purpose she was there about when Karliah stepped towards her quickly, glancing warily at the seating area of the Flagon before muttering, “I’m glad you’re here. I think some of these people are beginning to suspect who I am. Are you ready to face the Guild?”

What a loaded question that was… “What if Mercer’s there?” Raisa asked worriedly. She wasn’t exactly eager to greet the man who’d tried to kill her.

“Then we’ll show them Gallus’ journal and hope for the best,” Karliah shrugged as they began walking. “Remember, we’ve got proof and all he’s got is his word.”

“Then I’m as ready as I have time to be,” Raisa sighed. “Let’s get this show on the road…”

They walked past the Flagon’s seating area as discreetly as they could. A difficult feat, and one that they likely failed at miserably. When they opened the false cabinet to proceed into the Cistern, they found Garthar waiting for them, a wary and angered look on his face. “They’re waiting for you in the cistern,” he said. “No tricks.” When they entered the Cistern, the pair were met by several guild members, all armed and ready to attack if they showed any sign of treachery. Vex and Delvin stood side by side, identical furious looks on their faces, though Delvin was looking at Raisa intensely, almost questioningly.

Brynjolf stood between them, his arms crossed, the only one without his weapons drawn. His stance was deceiving though; Raisa knew he favored daggers to larger, more cumbersome weapons. One wrong move and he could cut them down in an instant. “You better have a damn good reason to be here with that murderer,” he growled, glaring at the newcomers. Raisa was wholly unsure of who exactly he was speaking to then. He refused to meet her gaze when he looked her way, instead fixating himself on Karliah. In the pit of her stomach, Raisa felt a twinge of pain, almost sickness, spread through her. Mercer had turned him against her…

“Please, lower your weapons so we can speak,” Karliah said, holding up her hands in a surrender motion. “I have proof that you’ve all been misled.”

“No tricks, Karliah,” Brynjolf warned, his tone dark, and his silver-green eyes darker. “or I’ll cut you down where you stand.” The venom in his voice was undeniable and heartbreaking. This was a man that Raisa was afraid of. He wasn’t the charming thief with the easy laugh that warmed every fiber of her being. This was someone else entirely, someone dangerous, someone betrayed. “Now what’s this so-called proof you speak of?”
“I have Gallus’s journal,” Karliah said. “I think you’ll find its contents disturbing, to say the least.” She stepped forward slightly to hand over the translated journal before stepping back to remain with Raisa.

Brynjolf eyed the pair carefully before he began to read the journal, “We’ve been given proof before that contradicts whatever you could have brought us…”

“Slander,” Raisa snapped, glaring at him sharply. The man’s attention jerked to her suddenly, as if he were reluctant to face her, as if he had perhaps forgotten his anger in a brief flash of sentiment or insecurity. He tore his gaze away from hers as quickly as he could, that ache spreading through his chest a thousand times worse than just at the thought of her now she was once again near him.

“Let me see…” he muttered as he read. A perplexed frown crossed his face and he seemed torn, “No, it… it can’t be. This cannot be true. I’ve known Mercer for too long…”

“It’s true, Brynjolf,” Karliah said firmly. “Every word. Mercer’s been stealing from the Guild for years, right under your noses.”

“There’s only one way to find out if what the lass says is true,” Brynjolf said slowly before turning to Delvin. “I’ll need you to open the Vault.” Raisa felt a sharp pain in her chest at Brynjolf’s use of ‘lass.’ She’d always been Lass to him. And now he used it for Karliah. She knew it was just his way, but it still didn’t help the pain from reaching her. She supposed that he could perhaps be speaking about her, but she could hardly see how he would still consider her his Lass if he could scarcely look at her anymore.

“Wait just a blessed moment, Bryn,” Delvin said quickly, tearing his gaze away from where Raisa stood, a somewhat tormented look on her face, “What’s in that book? What did it say?”

“It says Mercer’s been stealing from our vault for years,” Brynjolf gritted out, “Gallus was looking into it before he was murdered.”

“How could Mercer open up a fault that needs two keys? It’s impossible. Could he pick his way in?” Delvin wondered as they meandered over to where the Vault was situated. Raisa made sure to keep close to Karliah throughout the exchange, though she wanted nothing more than to be closer to Brynjolf. At the same time, however, she found she couldn’t get within five feet of him without feeling ill, as if his apparent hatred of her was actually causing her physical pain.

“That door has the best puzzle locks money can buy,” Vex cut in sharply. “There’s no way it can be picked open.”

“He didn’t need to pick the lock,” Karliah interjected.

“What’s she on about?” Delvin asked, looking over at her suspiciously.

“Just use your key on the vault Delvin,” Brynjolf ordered firmly. “We’ll open it up and find out the truth.” With a grumble and a skeptical look, Delvin fulfilled his role, unlocking the door. Brynjolf followed suit and paused slightly before pushing open the large doors. The entire party stood around the entrance with baited breath as they took it all in. It was Brynjolf who spoke first.

“By the Eight…” he exclaimed, horror spreading through his voice. “It’s gone… everything’s gone! Get in here, all of you!”

The others followed him into the Vault. Raisa kept to the outskirts. She didn’t belong in such conversations. She didn’t belong here at all. She’d surely been fooling herself when she thought that Brynjolf had actually begun to care for her. His mind had so easily been swayed by Mercer
that it raised mountains of doubt across her mind, causing her to shrink back. She already felt herself bottling everything back up once again. She was better off on her own anyways. She had her family, she had the Night Mother, and she had Sithis… She didn’t need Nocturnal, the Thieves Guild, or Bryn… She stopped herself there, sitting down on one of the empty chests in despair and refocused on the matter at hand.

“Delvin, Vex… watch the Flagon,” Brynjolf said. “If you see Mercer, come tell me right away.”

Raisa remained where she sat, her fingers knotted in her hair as she forced herself to calm down and just think. When she looked up, she was startled to see Brynjolf watching her, a hurt sort of expression on his face. When he realized she’d caught him staring, the look was instantly replaced by one much harder, much colder. He walked towards her and sat on another one of the chests almost hesitantly.

“Look,” he said. “Before I help you track Mercer down, I need to know what you learned from Karliah. And I mean everything.”

Raisa took a moment to just glare at him, hoping that he could see just how hurt she was that he had so little faith in her. She had poured her entire heart out to him— debatable; she was sure he was unaware of her true feelings for him (Thank the Divines)— and he had dismissed all of that in favor of whatever lies Mercer had cooked up in the time she had spent attempting to preemptively clear her name.

“Mercer killed Gallus, not Karliah,” she said simply.

“Aye, I feared that was the case. From that last entry in Gallus’s diary, it looks like he was getting close to exposing Mercer to the Guild,” he noted solemnly. “Anything else?”

“Gallus, Karliah, and Mercer were Nightingales,” she replied shortly.

“What?” Brynjolf asked, sounding surprised, “Nightingales? But, I always just assumed they were a tale… a way to keep the young footpads in line. Was there anything else she told you?”

“Karliah was behind Goldenglow and Honningbrew,” she added, wishing that he would just let her go now. It was stressful enough being around him before he treated her with such contempt. But now it was just unbearable to be around him, a thought that practically shattered the remaining parts of her heart big enough to shatter. It seemed that despite all her best efforts, she had managed to lose him anyways.

“Trying to make Mercer look bad in front of Maven, eh?” he chuckled slightly. “Clever lass…” Raisa bristled at his use of the term again, noticeably stiffening. “Was there anything else she told you?”

“No that’s it,” Raisa said, moving to stand up and leave, but Brynjolf caught her gently by the arm and urged her to sit back down again.

“Good,” he said with a firm nod, “Then, I have an important task for you. I need you to break into Mercer’s home and search for anything that tells us where he could have gone.”

“Aye, a gift from the Black-Briars when they kicked the previous family out… place called Riftweald Manor. He never stays there, just pays for the upkeep on it. Hired some lout by the name of Vald to guard the place,” Brynjolf told her, letting go of her arm, having realized he hadn’t released his hold on her. His hand tingled from the contact and he scolded himself inwardly; this
was no time to get caught up in her again. They had important work to do.

“I’ll take care of it,” Raisa said simply, getting up swiftly, now that he had released her. He stood up quickly and blocked her path out of the Vault, holding her in place by the upper arms, his grasp gentle and almost hesitant, though he seemed nearly desperate to keep her there.

“Be careful, lass,” he said quietly, forcing her to meet his gaze. “This is the last place in Skyrim I’d ever want to send you. Just find a way in, get the information and leave. And you have permission to kill anyone who stands in your way.”

Raisa bit her cheek, chewing over several sharp responses before saying, “Didn’t plan on letting any of Mercer’s brutes live anyways. What’s the best way to get into Riftweald Manor?”

“Good question. I’ve only set foot inside a few times myself and that was in Mercer's company. If you can get past his trained watchdog, I think your best bet might be the ramp to the second floor balcony in his backyard,” Brynjolf admitted.

“And I don’t suppose this ramp is easy to access,” she grumbled slightly as he lowered his hands, glad to have her attention now.

“No. It's some sort of crazy contraption commissioned for quick escapes. I'd wager a well-placed shot at the ramp's mechanism would lower it in a hurry,” he told her, watching her face carefully, though she was looking anywhere else but at him. It wasn’t as if he could blame her though. She had every right to be mad at him, all things considered.

“What’s missing from the vault?” she asked, surprising both Brynjolf and herself. She wanted nothing more than to move from the Vault and get her jobs over and done with now that she had enough information.

“Better question would be ‘what did he leave,’” Brynjolf grimaced, looking around at the empty vault. “Mercer took everything. Even all of our plans are gone.”

“Plans?” Raisa asked, a frown on her face, “Plans for what?”

“Before Mercer took over, Gallus started collecting every bit of material on locations the Guild could heist,” Brynjolf explained, “Museums, keeps, private estates… you name it. By the time Mercer took over the Guild we must have had a few dozen.”

“So how could he have opened the vault door alone?” Raisa asked, stepping around him, her arms folded as she took a moment to inspect the door.

“I don’t have a clue,” Brynjolf admitted. “That door is impenetrable. Without two keys it’s impossible to open… Or, really it should be… I have a key, Delvin has a key, and Mercer has a key. That’s it. There are no other copies.”

“Could he have nicked either of yours at any point?” Raisa asked. “Returned it when you weren’t expecting…”

Brynjolf shrugged, “Could have done, I suppose. It’s highly unlikely though. It’s not like Delvin and I are so easily distracted that we wouldn’t notice them missing.”

“Didn’t notice your leader was a bastard though,” Raisa muttered bitterly.

Brynjolf opened his mouth to retort, but he closed it again without responding. She was right. They hadn't noticed. They’d been completely fooled by the man. Raisa paused and looked at him
suddenly, “What did he have to say to convince you?”

“What?” he asked, not expecting the question, turning to face her again.

“What exactly did Mercer have to say to convince you that Karliah killed Gallus? To convince you that I betrayed the Guild?” she asked, her eyes coldly observing him.

Brynjolf sighed and gave a small shrug, “The first time… Mercer was injured… His story was… extremely believable. We’d all seen how Gallus had changed, since he and Karliah… became close. It wasn’t a hard thing to sell. And then all the fighting… The Ratway was a war zone. We needed a strong leader and Mercer provided that. We trusted him. As far as we knew, he’d never shown any sign of betraying us, or leading us astray. He got us all back on our feet when we needed help the most. Sometimes you need that, even if it turns out to be the wrong choice eventually.”

“That answers one of my questions,” she said after a moment, still staring at him with a hard sort of look.

Brynjolf moved and sat back down on one of the chests, running his large hands through his hair in what seemed to be a mixture of guilt and frustration. “I didn’t want to believe it, lass. Ask anyone…”

“I’m not asking anyone,” Raisa snapped. “I’m asking you.”

“Lass…”

“Don’t ‘lass’ me,” she snapped, crossing her arms and leaning against the door to the vault in irritation. “Just answer my question, Brynjolf.”

“When Mercer got back, he was livid. He called a gathering, and made a grandiose speech about how in the Guild we look after each other, we take care of our own. I just dismissed it as a scare tactic, just Mercer reminding everyone how important trust is… reminding us to pull our weight and keep the Guild plugging along. But then he started talking about the jobs you did at Goldenglow and Honningbrew, how our luck was suddenly starting to turn around. He said we were fools if we thought it was a happy coincidence. And again, he was right. There is no coincidence in this life. Everything has a reason. Cause and effect are tangible points,” Brynjolf explained slowly. “Then he started making claims that you’d been allied with Karliah all along. That you two had forged a contract, that you had been hired to kill him and that your participation in Guild business was nothing more than an act to get close to him. That… that’s when I started protesting. I didn’t believe him. Then he gave us a paper that was supposedly your contract, and… letters between you and Karliah about your progress… It was… it was a solid case…”

“Didn’t seem to take much convincing then…” Raisa frowned bitterly.

“Do you think I wouldn’t have questioned you if you’d shown back up?” Brynjolf asked her suddenly, “As you know that wasn’t exactly possible considering you’ve only just returned.”

“If I’d been able to, I would have come back,” Raisa said. “But it’s a good thing I didn’t. Even if we’re… even if there’s a lot of tension in the Guild now. If I’d come back immediately I’d probably be dead. Besides, we came back and you were all more than ready to gut us…”

“Did Mercer really hurt you then?” Brynjolf asked quickly, knowing that she was right.

“Yes, but not badly enough to kill me,” Raisa said, shaking her head slightly, “Karliah shooting me hurt worse. But it wouldn’t have been any of that that killed me. It would have been you and the
Guild. If I’d come back right away I’d have murdered Mercer. Which would have confirmed his story about me and you would have killed me and we wouldn’t be having this conversation now.”

“For what it’s worth,” she added after a few moments of silence passed between them. “I wanted to come back. I wanted to let you know I was alive, that I didn’t do whatever Mercer claimed I had. But Karliah talked me down. She insisted we needed evidence. It’s a good thing she was there with me.”

Brynjolf nodded and went to say something in response but Raisa cut him off and said, “You mentioned a watchdog?” Brynjolf looked up at her with a small frown. He had a lot that he wanted to say to her now that she was back, but the look in her eyes that he caught when she looked away again said that she wasn’t in the mood to discuss anything further than that. She’d heard all she needed to for the moment, and he would respect that, shelving the issue for later.

“That'd be Vald. A real piece of work, that one. Mercer's holding something over his head, keeping him loyal. Talk to Vex. She used to know him very well… if you catch my meaning,” Brynjolf said after a moment. “Be careful at Mercer’s place, lass, I don’t want to lose anyone else to that madman…”

Raisa looked at him silently for a moment before going and handing him the blade that Karliah had given her. She pressed the hilt into his hand firmly, her heart dancing about at the contact and how close they were. “Karliah said this was Gallus’s when he was alive. She wanted me to have it. She thought Gallus would approve…” she said carefully, avoiding eye contact. “I think it would be much better in your possession. You knew him, looked up to him… You’re fighting to avenge him. I think it’s only fitting that you wield this in his honor.” She hesitated a brief moment before bringing his hand up to her lips. She pressed a quick kiss there before setting off immediately, leaving Brynjolf to limply hold the Nightingale Blade, his hand still dangling in the air where she had left it.

Raisa walked quickly through the night, well aware that the guards would be on high alert, searching for thieves just like her. She slunk around the back, hiding when any guards approached. She glanced up over Mercer’s back wall, spotting Vald leaning against the wall across the yard, his watchful eye peering about. She drew her bow and shot the mechanism that lowered the ramp to the upper floors. She waited until Vald came round to investigate the ramp. When he was looking the other way, she readied another arrow and shot him in the back of his neck. As she stepped over his dead body and made her way up the ramp to the top floor, she couldn’t help but pray to every divine she knew of that Mercer Frey wouldn’t be in that house. She’d barely survived a scrape with him before, and she doubted he would take kindly to her rising from the dead and breaking into his house.

She crept through the house with her heart pounding in her chest. There were a few mercenaries spread here and there, but she dispatched them with ease, certain that she shouldn’t really be surprised by the universal lack of intelligence they all seemed to embody. She searched the house thoroughly once she was certain it was free of mercenaries. She stood in what seemed to be Mercer’s office, irritated. She wasn’t bothering sneaking about at this point. It was clear that Mercer wasn’t around anymore— figures he’d already have made his escape. She turned to inspect the wardrobes, feeling a bit suspicious. It was like Mercer to cover his tracks; they’d all expected it. But there was genuinely nothing in this place. Nothing at all that could really incriminate him.

However, after some time, she managed to find a secret passage down into a part of the Ratway that Raisa was certain she’d never been in before. She slunk along the corridors, warily avoiding
several high-grade traps, eventually coming to what seemed to be a secret office. Luckily, Mercer didn’t do a fantastic job of covering his tracks there. Highly unlike him, but then, Raisa was almost certain he still thought she was dead and the Guild hadn’t figured anything out. He’d be long gone before they managed to find him if he had his way. Of course, yet again, he underestimated her, but even more than that, he underestimated the Guild.

She collected the papers that were scattered across the abandoned desk. As she turned to go, she took a moment to nick a decently sized coin purse and made a mental note to let Delvin know about the large and heavy bust of the Grey Fox that Mercer had been keeping down in the Ratway. He’d probably get a decent payday from it.

As she exited the tunnels and into what she vaguely recognized as the Ratway Vaults, she herself surrounded by a few more of who she assumed were Mercer’s mercenaries. She briefly considered dashing back into the door she’d just exited, but there wasn’t enough time before they grabbed her and covered her head in a burlap sack. She was as good as dead if they were Mercer’s men.

It was understandable that when the hood was taken from her head, she found herself standing in front of the Jarl herself. Raisa frowned and looked around quickly, marking exits, counting potential threats, anything that could do with a quick swipe of her practised hand. Though she noticed after a moment that she still possessed everything she had upon exiting the underground lair of Mercer Frey.

Laila Law-Giver looked across the fire pit at Raisa appraisingly before saying simply, “She’ll do.”

Raisa opened her mouth to demand what in the hell was going on but the Jarl raised a hand to silence her before she could start to protest. “It has recently come to my attention that there is an illegal skooma operation being operated out of one of our warehouses on the docks,” the Jarl said, her voice brusque and final sounding. “We need someone to get in there and take them out.”

“And?” Raisa asked, peering through the flames that separated her from the Jarl, unsure of why this was a good design for a main hall in the first place.

“Like I said, we need someone to go in there and clear the warehouse of the operation,” the Jarl repeated, a note of exasperation in her tone. “If I were to send any of my men in there to clear them out, they’d panic and abandon the outpost. They’d escape and inform their suppliers that we’re on out way to find them. They’ll wait for a while then come back. The black market is like a pest. You can scare it off for a while, but eventually it comes back. So what do you do? You exterminate the root of the problem. We need you to go in and kill this operation and return with information on the supplier.”

“I suppose I haven’t got much of a choice in this matter?” Raisa sighed in exasperation, crossing her arms with a glare. She really didn’t have time for this right now. Of course, she couldn’t very well tell that to the Jarl, especially since she was starting to realize she would be in Riften a lot more than she had been before, if she survived her next encounter with Mercer Frey that is.

“Certainly not,” the Jarl said. “This task must be performed at once. There is no time to delay. My men will escort you to the docks and bring you back once this initial assignment has been finished.”

“I’m perfectly capable of getting to the docks by myself,” Raisa said sourly. “I don’t need a chaperone.”

“On the contrary,” the Jarl sniffed irritably. “You were found in the Ratway, a place riddled with thieves and shifty types. I would be foolish to trust you to do this task and return of your own
With a wave of her hand, a pair of guards took Raisa by the arms and escorted her from Mistveil keep, down to the docks. They were surprisingly attentive; she almost expected them to follow her through the building. Regardless, she would have been more irritated had it been a more difficult, labor intensive job. She killed two separate people, both probably drunk off the potent skooma. It was strong enough to burn the hairs out of your nose as soon as you tried to breathe in the place. It was a wonder they’d only just discovered the operation.

When she returned to the Jarl with her unnecessary guard escort, she shot an eye roll at Maul, hoping that he might let Dirge know down in the Flagon that she’d gotten caught up in something. Eventually the information would get back to Brynjolf and Karliah and she wouldn’t feel like she was getting in trouble or delaying the Guild’s revenge on Mercer Frey.

Much to her intense displeasure, she was not released from her service to the Jarl immediately upon her return with the adequate information. Instead she was sent off to Cragslane Cavern to clear out the supplier of illegal skooma and moon sugar that was hidden there. She was escorted there as well, much to her irritation. Why the Jarl was so suspicious of everyone, it was a mystery to her. Though to be fair, she was the leader of Riften, the most crime-active city in any hold across Skyrim. It was a bit understandable, Raisa figured, but at the same time, she couldn’t be bothered bending to the Jarl’s every whim. Once she’d cleared the cave and began to make her way back with three guards.

It wouldn’t have been nearly as bad as she made it out to be had she not had more important things to deal with. It was made significantly worse by the fact that each time she glared at the guards, it would earn her a mocking retort ranging from, “Let me guess; someone stole your sweetroll,” to “No lollygaggin’,” to “Disrespect the law, and you disrespect me.” Each time she would glare at them harder, letting them know she didn’t appreciate their commentary.

Raisa walked up to where Jarl Laila Law-Giver sat on her throne, a bored expression on her face. She didn’t bother to bow before approaching the woman saying simply, “The Cragslane operation has been stopped.” She was beyond ready to be done with this quest. She needed to get back to the Guild as soon as possible. It had already been a full day since she left Brynjolf. She’d spent hours combing through Mercer’s place and now running errands for the Jarl had deprived her of any decent night’s rest.

“Well done!” the Jarl exclaimed, sounding almost genuinely impressed. “Your continued efforts have been of great benefit to the people of Riften. Allow me to present you with this compensation for your selfless efforts. I’ve been informed by my steward that you’ve made quite the impression in the Rift. Several of our citizens have expressed their admiration of you and your work. Much like Mjoll you’ve become a champion of our hold; helping people with their difficulties and providing assistance for their needs.”

Raisa was surprised, wondering what sort of ‘efforts’ were being reported. Part of her suspected that Benor or Mjoll (at the man’s urging) were behind the praises, considering Maven Black-Briar certainly wasn’t about to talk her up to the Jarl, especially considering the woman only desired power for herself. The Jarl continued, “As the Jarl of Riften I feel it’s my duty to honor your selfless behaviour by honouring you with the title Thane of Riften. Before I can present you with the title, there is but a single requirement you must fulfill. A thane of Riften is expected to maintain permanent residence within the city walls. My Steward has such a home available to you for purchase. I think you’ll find the accommodations to be most pleasing. When the house is yours, return to me and I will present you with the title officially.”

“Can we just get this over with now?” Raisa asked. “I have business to attend to outside the city
and I’m afraid I may not have enough coin when I return from my travels.”

“Certainly,” a friendly sounding elf chimed in from beside the Jarl. She smiled kindly at Raisa and handed over the key to the home while Raisa paused to write out a letter of credit for the purchase of the home. She stuck the key into her boot and turned back to the Jarl somewhat impatiently.

“There we go,” Raisa said. “I’ve purchased Honeside.”

“Then allow me to officially welcome you to Riften,” the Jarl beamed. “You will make a find addition to our City. All that remains now is to bestow the title upon you.”

“Thank you,” Raisa said with the slightest bow.

“I should be the one thanking you,” the Jarl said firmly, “You’ve solved more problems in the short time you’ve been here than anyone in my court has their entire career. You’ve been a beacon of hope in these dark times for my people and I will never forget that. Therefore, by my authority as Jarl, I pronounce you Thane of Riften, and award you all the benefits befitting your station. Congratulations.”

There was the slightest smattering of polite clapping around the hall as Raisa bowed and left the keep, hearing the Jarl call out, “Good journey to you,” as she exited. From there she immediately strode into the gates by the Temple of Mara and under the archways to the cemetery. There she quickly ducked into the large sepulcher and pressed the button to open the secret entrance to the Thieves Guild. She hadn’t had much opportunity to use it before, but she was always baffled by just how loud the entrance was, the stone grating against more stone… It was a wonder no one had made it in before.

Once inside, she made her way directly to where Brynjolf was standing behind Mercer’s desk. She hesitated slightly, her heart practically skipping a beat at the sight of him. She wasn’t sure she knew what she was getting herself into, admitting her feelings to herself. They had business to see to; this wasn’t the time for frivolous affairs of the heart. She forced herself to continue forward, rather than turning and leaving the Guild forever. It would have certainly made her life easier if she had, but she knew she would hate herself for not seeing this through to the end otherwise.

When she was near enough, Brynjolf looked up from his pacing, a look of relief and mild irritation crossing his handsome features. “Where the hell have you been lass?” he exclaimed coming to a stop in front of her. “I’d been starting to think the worst…”

“You have no faith in me,” she sighed, shaking her head slightly. “I suppose I’ll have to regale you with the tale some other time. But rest assured I am perfectly fine. Let’s get on with it then. What’s been going on while I’ve been out?”

“I’ve scoured the town and I’ve spoken to every contact we have left. No sign of Mercer,” Brynjolf said with a sigh, looking at her carefully. “Any luck on your end, lass?”

“He wasn’t there,” Raisa told him, placing the papers she’d stolen on the desk, standing across from him. “But I did find these plans.”

“Shor’s beard,” Brynjolf swore as he read through the papers, “He’s going after the Eyes of the Falmer? That was Gallus’s pet project… If he gets his hands on them you can be certain he’ll be gone for good and set up for life…”

“Like hell he will,” Raisa scoffed almost viciously, “We have to stop him.”

“Agreed,” Brynjolf nodded. “He’s taken everything the Guild has left, and to go after one of the
last greatest heists is just an insult. I’ve spoken to Karliah, and made amends for how the Guild’s treated her. Now she wishes to speak with both of us.”

“Any idea what about?” Raisa asked with a small frown on her face, her brow scrunching slightly in concern.

“Wish I knew, lass,” he sighed in response, looking at her with a matching frown. “But I’m sure it can only help us.”

Raisa sighed in frustration and ran her fingers through her hair, chewing her lip slightly in thought. Brynjolf wondered if she knew that she was beautiful, even when she was stressed like this. He wondered if she knew how much he wanted to make her smile again, like when she first joined the Guild. He hesitated slightly, leaning across the desk, making to place his hand over hers as she leaned up against the table. “Lass…” he started, only for Karliah to interrupt him just then. He came around the desk and stood close to Raisa as the woman turned to face the dark elf at the greeting.

“Brynjolf,” Karliah said, looking back and forth between Raisa and the tall thief as she spoke, a hard look on her face, “the time has come to decide Mercer’s fate. Until a new Guild Master is chosen, the decision falls to you.”

“Aye lass,” he frowned, glancing down at Raisa as he felt her stiffen slightly beside him. She turned to inspect the plans she’d delivered, avoiding his gaze. He continued, somewhat perplexed by her behaviour, “And I’ve come to a decision. Mercer Frey tried to kill you— both of you— he betrayed the Guild, murdered Gallus, and made us question our future. He needs to die.”

“It’s better than he deserves…” he heard Raisa mutter softly and viciously under her breath.

“We have to be very careful, Brynjolf,” Karliah warned forcefully. “Mercer is a Nightingale, an agent of Nocturnal. There’s no knowing what power he has at his command.”

“Then it’s all true,” Brynjolf mused in disbelief, “Everything I heard in the stories. The Nightingales, their allegiance to Nocturnal, the Twilight Sepulcher…”

“Yes,” Karliah nodded. “That is why we need to prepare ourselves and meet Mercer on equal footing. Just outside the city, beyond the Southeast Gate, is a small path cut up the mountainside. At the end of that path is a clearing and an old standing stone. I’d ask you both to meet me there.”

Without leaving much room for response, she turned and exited the Guild, presumably making her way to the meeting place. Brynjolf looked down at Raisa again, realising how close he was to her. She was still diligently reading through Mercer’s plans.

“Lass?” he asked gently. She either ignored him or was too engrossed in the writing to notice he’d spoken. Though he didn’t like it, a large part of him feared that the former was true. He took a moment before repeating the pet name and placing his hand in the small of her back, leaning forward and down to see her face better around the papers she held up close. “Lass?”

“Oh, you mean me?” she asked, turning to face him, her tone somewhat sharp, one hand propped on the desk, the other on her hip.

Confused, Brynjolf let his hand drop. “Course I mean you,” he said, frowning slightly. He wasn’t quite sure how she’d gotten so irritated, but he understood enough to determine that she was not pleased with him. Why exactly was a separate issue. “What do you make of all this?” he asked her, his green-grey eyes searching her face carefully.
“Honestly haven’t had the time to stop and think it all through,” Raisa said, shaking her head slightly, “But I’ll see you later outside the city.”

“Got somewhere to be, lass?” he asked, feeling his frown deepen slightly.

“I need to talk with Delvin a bit,” Raisa said simply. She felt almost bad being so abrupt with Brynjolf. But speaking to him seemed to also be a constant reminder that she wasn’t his lass; it wasn’t some special name just for her like she’d hoped. This was business. At least until she wasn’t as involved with the Guild. That was one thing she’d started to consider. She was getting in too deep. She needed to step back a while. The Brotherhood was still limping on and needed her full attention. She couldn’t let her growing affections for the man beside her take control, not yet.

She glanced up, seeing the disappointed look on his face. In this was what she almost prayed was a hint of jealousy. She was hooked on the thought that perhaps he did feel the same way and that her dealing with other men would make him jealous. But it was probably just wishful thinking and she looked back down at the papers quickly, shuffling them around to organize them a bit, just to avoid getting lost in him. “My family members are freezing their asses off up in Dawnstar right now and I’ve not been back since before…” she faltered slightly, remembering the fallout from Astrid’s betrayal, “that time I was… down for the count. I’ve got a home to run now.”

“I’m sure they’ve been getting along well enough,” Brynjolf said reassuringly, eager to try and keep her there with him a bit longer. She’d almost died because of Mercer and he’d lost her then. Then he thought she’d betrayed everything the Guild stood for and he’d lost her then too. He didn’t want to lose her again, even if it was for the Brotherhood.

“Doesn’t matter how well they get on,” she said. “We need each other. And we had a decent payout from our last contract. I can’t have them thinking I’ve abandoned them and run off with it.”

“Lass…”

“Don’t lass me,” she huffed indignantly. “Besides, I left them alone with Cicero and the Night Mother. And all the new recruits…” she let out an exasperated sigh and knotted her fingers in her hair at the roots on top of her head in frustration.

“Everything’s going to be fine, lass,” he said carefully, rubbing her arm comfortingly, taking a half step towards her, speaking softly and gently as he did so. She seemed to stiffen slightly once again, and he wondered if she knew he could tell. Her mossy green eyes glanced up at his green-gray ones, a hesitant, almost worried look in them. His hand moved of its own accord, finding its way back to her waist. Neither seemed to know what was happening. They weren’t about to pull away from each other, but neither made a conscious effort to proceed. Just as Brynjolf made up his mind, someone cleared their throat nearby causing Raisa to jump slightly and Brynjolf to straighten himself up, a steely look aimed at the intruder, his jaw clenched irritably. Raisa turned away from him, wishing that her hood was up to hide the rising glow in her cheeks.

“Interrupting something, was I?” Delvin asked, a devilish, though somewhat embarrassed look on his face.

“No,” Raisa sighed after the briefest pause, sounding slightly flustered. “I was actually just on my way to come and find you. I’ve got some Brotherhood business I need to sort out.”

Delvin nodded and started to leave. Raisa hesitated a moment before turning back to Brynjolf, looking like she was about to say something. Before she could, he sighed and pulled her into a brief hug, quickly pressing his lips to her forehead, a quick kiss, before releasing her in Delvin’s direction, glad that the man had turned away already as he said, “Go. Help your family.” Before
she could respond, he turned and made his way to prepare himself for whatever it was that Karliah had in store for them later.
Raisa approached the standing stone almost warily. There was a light breeze tossing leaves about with a scarcely noticeable rustle. She felt like she was standing on the edge of a cliff. She stood staring into the darkness, seriously considering leaving now, running and never looking back. She was close to making that thought a reality when Karliah’s voice came softly out of the darkness ahead of her, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“What’s the significance of this place?” Raisa asked, walking forward now as Karliah stepped towards her. She stopped near the stone, spotting Brynjolf emerging nearby. She refocused on Karliah, feeling his bright eyes on her.

“This is the headquarters of the Nightingales, cut into the mountainside by the first of our kind,” Karliah told her, “We’ve come to seek the edge we need to defeat Mercer Frey.”

“What kind of edge?” Raisa asked, a frown on her hooded face as Brynjolf came and stood beside her. She felt her heart beat a bit faster but chastised herself. Her focus was required now more than in the past when it came to Guild business, and yet she still found it difficult to focus on the woman in front of her as opposed to the man beside her.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll try to explain on the way,” Karliah said, turning and leading them to a secret passage in the mountainside.

“Tell me about the Nightingales,” Raisa said, following quickly, feeling Brynjolf follow behind her.

“Gallus, Mercer Frey and I were once members of what is known as the Nightingale Trinity. The Trinity disbanded twenty-five years ago when Mercer Frey betrayed us by slaying Gallus and dumping his body in the ruins of Snow Veil Sanctum,” Karliah said. “Were they a part of the Thieves Guild?” Raisa asked curiously, wondering if she might still be able to leave the Guild. She wasn’t sure where the idea came from, but it was one that was growing on her far quicker than she had hoped it would. She didn’t want to disappoint the Guild, or Karliah, or Brynjolf, but she felt like she was drowning in her responsibilities and she couldn’t handle another thing on her plate.

“Indirectly,” Karliah said with a nod, “The Trinity is usually selected from the ranks of the Guild, although its existence is a closely-guarded secret.”

“And their purpose?” Raisa asked. “The Nightingales protect the Temple of Nocturnal, a place known as the Twilight Sepulcher,” Karliah said. “Nocturnal is the mistress of night and darkness and the patron of every thief in Tamriel.”
“I’ve never met a thief that worshiped anything,” she said offhandedly.

“Nocturnal isn’t one for worship and reverence. There are no priests and no sermons, no services and no alms. She influences our luck and in return demands payment,” Karliah informed.

“Sounds like a contract to me,” Raisa muttered as she looked around the dimply lit cave passage.

“You’re closer to understanding than you realize. The only difference is she doesn’t demand payment in the traditional sense, and sometimes the cost can be quite high. Whether you know it or not, Nocturnal dictates how well we perform as rogues,” Karliah said.

“Yeah well if time has taught me anything, it’s that I rely on whatever skill I have,” Raisa said. “Not special powers or magic. I’m not a proper mage anyways…”

“Again, you have to think differently,” Karliah insisted. “Haven’t you ever noticed how our luck behaves? Like a novice picking an impossible lock or a blind man suddenly turning to face you as you reach for his pocket? It's through these subtle means that Nocturnal influences us. Nocturnal's whim is the greatest mystery to everyone. There have been volumes written on the subject. Does she exact payment when we die? When we suffer does she revel in our misery? No one knows. The return certainly seems worth the risk though.”

“So the point of all this,” Raisa asked quietly, “Am I to become a Nightingale?”

“It’s my hope that you will, yes,” Karliah nodded.

Raisa fell silent, falling behind a few steps, walking beside Brynjolf now. They walked along the cave and she felt his hand bump into hers at a narrow point in the path. He mumbled an apology as the continued, falling behind her half a step until the path widened and opened into a large, somewhat decrepit cavern.

“So, this is Nightingale Hall. Gallus told me about this place when I joined the Guild, but I never believed it existed,” Brynjolf said, awestruck as they stopped to admire the once great hall.

“The assumption that the Nightingales were just a myth was seeded within the Guild on purpose. It helped avert attention from our true nature,” Karliah said, before shooting a glance back at the pair, “What’s wrong, Brynjolf? I can almost hear your brow furrowing.”

She wasn’t wrong; Raisa could practically feel how uncomfortable and trapped Brynjolf was starting to feel. It was almost identical to the feeling that was rising up in her chest as well and she wondered briefly if she was confusing his feelings for her own, but she shook her head slightly to clear her mind and tuned back into the moment at hand.

“I’m trying to understand why I’m here, lass,” he said, sounding thoroughly confused, “I’m no priest, and I’m certainly not religious. Why pick me?”

“This isn't about religion, Brynjolf… it's business. This is Nightingale Hall. You're the first of the uninitiated to set foot inside in over a century. Now, if you'll both proceed to the armory to don your Nightingale Armor, we can begin the Oath,” Karliah said firmly before walking off into the hall with an air of confidence about her, though Raisa knew that the elf was on high alert.

Brynjolf turned to Raisa with a small frown and muttered, “I think we should trust the lass and take the deal…”

She looked at him with a small frown, her eyes somewhat cold. She saw him balk slightly at the look she gave him and felt instantly sorry for it. It wasn’t a response she chose to use; it just
happened. It was her defense mechanism. She’d hoped she would get used to him calling Karli
lass by that point, but she definitely hadn’t reached that point yet. She nodded her head briskly in
the direction Karli had wandered off to, ready to get this all over with.

Raisa walked up to the armor stone almost hesitantly. She placed her hand on the cold stone face
on the emblem of the Nightingales. There was a flash of light which temporarily blinded her. When
her vision cleared, there was a spectacular set of armour on the stone, black as the darkest shadow.
She stared at the armor which was as shrouded as Sithis and the Void, undoubtedly an extension of
Nocturnal’s blessing.

All signs of hesitation gone, she reached forward and touched it briefly before shedding her Dark
Brotherhood armor. She ignored the other two as she donned the new armor, surprised by how
comfortable the new set of armor felt to her. It fit her better than her Dark Brotherhood armor,
much to her disappointment and sense of sentimentality. She pulled the hood up over her head,
slipping the mask into place as she turned to face the other two. Karli waited off to the side,
-facing away from them, already wearing her armor, identical to Raisa’s in every way. Brynjolf
hesitated slightly before pulling on his hood and Raisa could sense his unease. He turned to face
her briefly and she knew her assumptions as to his confusion were correct.

“You appear ready for the Oath,” Karli said, looking at the other two with an appraising tone in
her voice.

“We’ve got these getups on,” Brynjolf said almost gruffly. “Now what?”

“Beyond this gate is the first step to becoming a Nightingale,” she said simply.
“Whoa there, lass,” Brynjolf said quickly, a brief tone of panic flitting through his words. “I
appreciate the armor, but becoming a Nightingale? I think you’ve got the wrong man.”

“To hold any hope of defeating Mercer, we must have Nocturnal at our backs,” Karli said
insistently. “If she is to accept you as one of her own, an arrangement must be struck.”

“What sort of arrangement?” he demanded warily. “I need to know the terms.”

“The terms are quite simple, Brynjolf. Nocturnal will allow you to become a Nightingale and use
your abilities for whatever you wish. And in return, both in life and death, you must serve as a
guardian of the Twilight Sepulcher,” Karli informed the pair.

“Aye, there’s always a catch,” Brynjolf muttered almost bitterly. “But at this point, I suppose there
isn’t much to lose. If it means the end of Mercer Frey, you can count me in.”

Brynjolf and Karli looked at Raisa now. Her mind was racing. She had known this would
happen; Karli had already told her about the situation. But could she promise herself to another
Divine? Sithis already owned her soul upon her death. This was yet another responsibility that
transcended her ability to choose. Her back was to a wall now, and she knew that no matter what
she wished, she would soon be a Nightingale.

“There’s no going back after this,” Raisa asked quietly. She looked up at Karli, her brow
furrowed, though the woman couldn’t see it behind the mask, “Is there?”

“Once the Oath has been struck, the terms are binding. By transacting the Oath with Nocturnal,
you’re entering into a business deal. You’ll be provided all the power and knowledge befitting a
Nightingale. In return you’ll be required to defend the Twilight Sepulcher and everything within
when the need arises. Upon your death, your spirit will be bound to the Twilight Sepulcher as one
of its guardians.” Karli informed them solemnly. “Knowing this, are you ready to undergo the
ceremony?”

“The Divines’ll have to hold a raffle by the time I die,” Raisa mumbled almost bitterly before nodding, “But yes. I’m ready.”

The three proceeded to the deepest chamber of the hall and made their way into the room. There was a center circular platform, much like the Cistern, with four slender bridges making joining with it. Three platforms rose slightly above the center ring side by side. Karliah proceeded immediately towards the one in the center. Brynjolf and Raisa glanced at each other nervously and proceeded to the platforms on either side of Karliah’s spot and turned to face the center of the room.

“I call upon you, Lady Nocturnal, Queen of Murk and Empress of Shadow. Hear my voice!” Karliah shouted out, her shaky voice echoing back at her from the cavernous room.

For a moment all light in the room vanished before a glowing, purple ball of energy manifested on the center platform, filling up much of the room. Raisa’s breath caught in the back of her throat as the Divine spoke, her voice a bit sharp sounding, though it flowed smoothly across her mind.

“Ah, Karliah. I was wondering when I’d hear from you again. Lose something, did we?” Nocturnal mused, a scathing sort of tone to her voice, though the words felt rather mischievous to Raisa.

“My lady,” Karliah continued, sounding both surprised and relieved, “I come before you to throw myself at your mercy and to accept responsibility for my failure.”

“You are already mine, Karliah,” Nocturnal purred almost dismissively. “Your terms were struck long ago. What could you possibly offer me now?”

“I have two others that wish to transact the Oath; to serve you in life and in death,” Karliah said quickly, bending to her knees to appease the Divine.

“You surprise me, Karliah,” the Divine mused after a moment of silence and the swoosh and buzz of energy in the cavern. “This offer is definitely weighted in my favor.”

“My appetite for Mercer’s demise exceeds my craving for wealth, Your Grace,” Karliah admitted almost reluctantly.

“Revenge?” the Divine balked slightly, “How interesting… Very well, your conditions are acceptable. You may proceed.”

“Lady Nocturnal, we accept your terms. We dedicate ourselves to you as both your avengers and your sentinels. We will honor our agreement in this life and in the next until your conditions have been met,” Karliah cried out.

“Very well. I name your initiates Nightingale and I restore your status to the same, Karliah. And in the future, I'd suggest you refrain from disappointing me again,” Nocturnal hummed. Tendrils of glowing energy shot out and engulfed the trio suddenly, knocking the wind out of Raisa. She found herself falling to her hands and knees. As suddenly as the power surrounded them, it disappeared, Nocturnal dissipating into nothingness with it.

Raisa stood slowly and made her way into the center pedestal on shaky legs, feeling almost sick to her stomach. Brynjolf appeared to be in much the same situation as she was. Karliah seemed less shaken, though she did seem a bit calmer than she had before the ceremony.

“Now that you've transacted the Oath, it's time to reveal the final piece of the puzzle to you;
Mercer's true crime,” Karliah said solemnly.

“For Sithis’ sake, he’s done more?” Raisa asked incredulously, leaning forward with her hands propped on her knees, her head swimming slightly.

“Mercer was able to unlock the Guild's vault without two keys because of what he stole from the Twilight Sepulcher… the Skeleton Key. By doing this, he's compromised our ties to Nocturnal, and in essence, caused our luck to run dry,” Karliah said.

“So this key,” Raisa asked slowly, “It unlocks any door?”

“Well, yes. But the key isn't only restricted to physical barriers. All of us possess untapped abilities; the potential to wield greater power, securely sealed within our minds. Once you realize the key can access these traits, the potential becomes limitless,” Karliah said.

“So, Mercer could be all powerful?”

“He’s had it long enough,” Karliah nodded grimly, “It’s entirely possible he’s accessed these abilities already. If the Key isn't returned to its lock in the Twilight Sepulcher, things will never be the same for the Guild. As time passed on, our luck would diminish to the point of non-existence. And whether you know it or not, our uncanny luck defines our trade.”

“First time I ever set out to return something for you people…” Raisa muttered with a slight snort of amusement.

“Very true,” Karliah chuckled. “In our line of work, it’s quite rare we set out to return a stolen item to its rightful owner.”

“Let’s get going then,” Raisa sighed, eager to be done with Mercer Frey.

“Before we depart, Brynjolf has some business to discuss. I suggest you listen to him,” Karliah said, glancing over at the man before making her way to her pedestal, kneeling down to process recent events.

Brynjolf and Raisa made their way back into the main chamber of the Nightingale Hall before speaking, not wishing to disturb Karliah. They sat down, both still out of sorts from transacting the Oath.

“Listen, lass,” he started, “There’s one last piece of business we need to settle before we go after Mercer… the leadership of the Guild.”

“Why tell this to me…?” Raisa asked hesitantly, already guessing and dreading at what would come next.

“Karliah and I had a long discussion before you arrived here,” Brynjolf continued, “Thanks to your efforts, Mercer's treachery has been exposed. After we deal with him, all that remains is restoring the Guild to its full strength. As a result, we both feel that you have the potential of replacing Mercer as leader of the Thieves Guild.”

“Me?” she asked, somewhat horrified. “What about you?”

“I've been at this game a long time, lass,” he sighed, “A long time… I’ve stolen trinkets from nobles and framed priests for murder. I'm good at what I do, maybe even one of the best. But it's all I know. I’ve never been one to lead. Never desired it, never cared for it. Don’t want it.”
“And what makes you think I do?” Raisa asked incredulously. “I’m not a leader. I’m barely keeping myself together as it is. The Brotherhood is already depending on me more than I’m capable of handling. I can’t lead the Guild too!”

“Lass,” Brynjolf started once more.

“No!” she exclaimed, “No, Brynjolf. It’s not right.”

“Look,” Brynjolf said firmly, “Everyone in the Guild admires what you've done. Maybe they won't come out and simply tell you, but I promise you it's true. And now they know Mercer never genuinely cared about the Guild. He lacked the loyalty you obviously possess. I can't think of anyone better.”

“Practically anyone else would be better!” Raisa exclaimed. “The Guild adores you, Brynjolf. Any one of us would follow you into Oblivion if you asked. Delvin has the most contacts outside the Guild; he could do splendidly! Karliah! She orchestrated every move she and I made once Mercer betrayed us. She deserves the praise and the position. All those things you and the Guild supposedly admire me for? That’s just me following orders. You, or Delvin, or Karliah… You deserve the position. Not me.”

“Lass,” he tried again.

“No,” she snapped. “That is my final answer, Brynjolf. This isn’t something I can agree to, especially since it’s something based off my loyalty alone.”

“We need a Guild Master to replace Mercer or the Guild will fall into chaos,” he insisted.

“Don’t you try and pin this on me.”

“I’m not!”

“Yes, you are,” Raisa said firmly. “Pointing out the consequences… I have duties I can’t abandon for your cause. I may be one of the Guild, I may be a Nightingale, but I am the Listener first. I will always be the Listener. I don’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice lass,” Brynjolf said with a small frown as he pulled his hood and mask away from his face.

“No,” she repeated. “The choice was made, but it wasn’t my own. Sithis chose me, the Night Mother chose me, the Brotherhood chose me. I cannot deny them. They are a higher power than I am able to refuse.”

Brynjolf gave her a hard look, “And you can refuse Nocturnal?”

“I’m not refusing Nocturnal,” Raisa said, snapping at him slightly. “I’m giving myself a choice for once in my life, and I am choosing to deny your request.”

“Lass, you can choose anything you want,” Brynjolf repeated, confusion crossing over his handsome features. “Your life is your own.”

“No, it really isn’t,” she exclaimed. “The last time I made a conscious choice, I was on my way out of Skyrim, choosing to get away from the damned civil war. But the Divines weren’t having it. No, the Stormcloaks and Imperials started fighting and I got caught in the fray. I was nearly executed without any sort of trial, just because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then some horse thief prayed to the Divines, Akatosh, and then a damn dragon appeared and nearly killed me. Then
I find out I’m the dragonborn of legend. It’s my duty to quell this dragon uprising. I can’t refuse that responsibility. It will follow me until I die or until I finish that quest. Just now it’s looking like the former will wind up happening first. Sìthís claimed me long ago, and now Nocturnal has as well. I’ve been forced to head the Brotherhood and now you’re insisting that I lead what should be your Guild. I’m flattered that you think I would be a good choice, Brynjolf, I really am. But you’re wrong. And I just want the choice to be my own. I don’t want this thrown at me as well.”

She felt close to tears, hearing her voice cracking almost desperately under the pressure. She was amazed by the outpouring she had just produced, somewhat horrified with herself, though she could also feel relief. She was almost glad that someone knew about her true destiny now, that someone aside from her knew the weight of the fate hanging above her.

Brynjolf was silent after her short speech. He hadn’t expected such a vehement refusal from her. He genuinely felt that she was the best contender for the job, his personal feelings for her aside. Then again, he hadn’t known as much about her as he thought he had. He scarcely believed that she was the Dragonborn, but he knew now that she had never given him a good reason to mistrust her, and he would take her at her word. Regardless, it was no wonder she was always away from the Guild. And he had the nerve to complain about not wanting to lead anyone. At least he wasn’t being thrust into some great destiny without warning.

“Choice is a luxury,” she said quietly once she’d managed to calm herself, though her voice still shook slightly. She was glad that her mask was still on; she didn’t want him to see how upset she was, thought she was certain he could hear it in her voice.

“Choice is a luxury…” he sighed with a small nod. “I’m sorry, lass…”

“Don’t be,” she said quietly. “You didn’t know…”

“And here I thought I knew everything when you told be about the Brotherhood…” he chuckled slightly.

“I probably should have told you…” she said with a soft sigh. “I… don’t want to accept it. It wasn’t something I was prepared to commit myself to…”

“And now you are?” Brynjolf asked with a concerned frown.

“No…” she said with a sigh. “But it takes precedent over my duty to the Thieves Guild even so… Which, I’m sorry for, of course but I… Just don’t ask me again…”

“If I did would you hate me?” he asked after a moment.

“No,” she said softly. “I’d just disappear. Can’t find me, I can’t be Guild Master… I’d probably never go back, even when you did choose a new one… But then, I’d never see you again, and what’d be the point of that?”

“I’d be disappointed if you gave this all up that easy,” Brynjolf said honestly.

“I never said I’d stop thieving,” she said. “I wouldn’t give it up entirely… I just wouldn’t be in it for the Guild. I’d be in it for myself.”

“That’s a lonely life, lass,” he said with a small frown.

“I’ve got friends,” she said with a shrug. “I’d make do… But things would be at least a bit quieter without the Guild…”
“It’d be a lot quieter around the Guild without you,” Brynjolf admitted, looking at her still masked face, wishing she would take down that barrier.

“Losing one of the best, eh?” she smirked, chuckling slightly at the thought.

“Losing you’d be worse than losing any old thief,” Brynjolf said, shaking his head. “I’ve already experienced that twice now, and I don’t think I’d stand to go through that again. I’d miss you too much lass, to just let you go like that.”

Raisa turned his words over in her head for a few moments as she thought. She felt a small stab of remorse, knowing that her decision had already been made. She couldn’t continue with the Thieves Guild. Not in the same way as before. She needed to keep herself distant from these problems. They weren’t hers to care about, once Mercer Frey was dead and gone. She was silent for another moment before she said, “Don’t go getting sentimental on me now… We still have a job to do.” She thanked Nocturnal for the mask that hid the sudden blush that had sprouted up on her cheeks at his words. But she was even more grateful that it hid her face from his, as the sadness and guilt washed over her. She was leading him to believe that everything would be as it had been— better even— though she knew it was a future she couldn’t want to be a part of.

“Aye,” he agreed solemnly, “And after that I’ll have a Guild to rally. A new leader to find…”

“Like I said before,” Raisa said. She wanted to slap herself for saying it, but it was true. She wouldn’t deny him that small truth, considering the new lie she’d set out for him. Her heart clenched painfully as she continued, “I’d gladly follow you into Oblivion if you asked it of me.”

“You mean that, lass?” he asked after a moment, looking over at her almost hopefully.

“Of course,” she said, pushing herself to her feet, “I’ve been told my loyalty is quite impressive.”

“Then let’s get to it,” he grinned, “I’ve been pouring over the plans you brought us, and I’m convinced the Eyes of the Falmer are in the dwarven ruins at Irkngthand. Karliah and I will meet you there. Prepare yourself, lass. This will surely be a fight to remember.”

“I guess we’re Nightingales now…” she sighed with a small sigh as she looked around the Hall.

“Aye, and some of what Karliah said is starting to make sense. Mercer may have damaged our reputation and raided our coffers, but this goes well beyond even his twisted form of larceny. Old Delvin kept calling it a curse and we all laughed at him. Looks like the joke’s on us,” Brynjolf nodded. “This is a lot to wrap my head around…”

“Brynjolf?” she asked, sitting down close beside him again briefly, removing her mask and looking at him curiously. He looked at her expectantly, a slightly crooked smile on his face. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him properly smile. It set her stomach fluttering about and she found herself returning the soft look. “Do you really think we stand a chance against Mercer?”

“If you’d asked me that yesterday, I’d have said no,” he said thoughtfully. “But now I think our chances have improved. Look, call me crazy if you like, but I trust Karliah. I don't think she'd lead us down a suicidal path. Besides, I'd rather die with some of Mercers blood on my blade than spend my life regretting that I ran the other way.”

“If you’re crazy for trusting her then what does that make me?” Raisa asked. “The woman shot me with a poisoned arrow. Yet I trusted her almost immediately after that…”

“Regardless of our questionable sanity, we have a job to do now,” Brynjolf sighed. “I’ve got your back lass.”
Somehow, his sincere words did little to comfort her.
Raisa sat on one of the snowy rooftops of the old dwarven ruin, feeling the wind brush past her, sending small flurries of snow and sleet into the rough and icy mountainside. She had slid down the side of a cliff to gain a decent vantage point, hoping that whatever enemies she might encounter would have already perished. Having remained unnoticed, Raisa didn’t feel like pushing her luck, sliding and dropping down as carefully as she could until she stood before the large doors to the ruin of Irkngthand. She was unsure of what to expect from the path she was on. She was afraid, of course, but she wasn’t entirely certain it was fear for herself at that point.

Fighting the wind, she shut the doors behind herself with a small grunt before sinking into a sneaking position. She made her way carefully around the edge of the atrium, keeping to the shadows and peering out towards the bright campfire in the main room. There were a few bandits lying around, presumably sleeping. Feeling that perhaps she was at least a bit lucky, she crept forward, hoping to not disturb the ruffians. She was somewhat horrified to discover that the bandits were, in fact, dead, not resting. There was a large amount of blood splattered across the center of the room, bandits lying with blank and glassy eyes endlessly, the flames reflecting coldly back at her.

She continued across the room after a moment, making her way towards the way forward when a loud, grating noise sounded nearby. A large golden sphere dropped to the ground from what appeared to be a hole in the wall, hissing out steam as it began to roll around wildly for a bit. She readied her bow, just in case, and was immensely glad that she did, as the sphere unwound itself and began to barrel towards her with impressive speed, readying a heavy and sharp looking arm to presumably bash in her skull. She fired three arrows in quick succession, her heart in her throat and was relieved to watch as the sphere crumbled mid roll, bits flying off in several directions.

She took a moment to steel herself, not entirely eager to proceed any more. If she was disarming these traps, had Brynjolf or Karliah even arrived yet? And if they had, were they both safe? All things considered, it wasn’t the most important thought, considering what their aim was in the first place. She slowly made her way forward into another large room. She noticed that there were a few more sphere dispensers along the walls and readied her bow as best she could while still keeping herself mobile. She walked slowly, worry creasing her brow behind her mask.

She paused, looking forward into the next room from her perch on the top layer. There was one sphere already roaming about, undoubtedly triggered by some unlucky bandit, her friends, or her enemy. It whizzed about and she turned her gaze past its patrol. There were rings of fire spinning viciously in the next room. The room appeared to be in total ruin. Really, there was so much debris across the cavernous room that Raisa was impressed that the traps had survived at all.

She heard a long series of clicks as the remaining dispensers began to emit their deadly spheres. It was hardly difficult to see that she was outnumbered. Instead of fighting any of them, Raisa leapt off of the top level and down to the next before leaping over the small flight of stairs and darting into the next room followed by a swarm of dwarven spheres. She leapt and ducked around the flames, only getting minority singed in the process, scrambling around debris and tucking herself away in a dark corner. She watched with wide and worried eyes as the spheres searched for her. She knew by now that they probably had some special detector in their design that had allowed them to spot her in the first place.

Her worry was in vain as the spheres returned to their original positions. She let out a sigh of relief and crept towards the next door, just barely skirting around the flaming pinwheel at the gate. She
hurried her way up the stairs, keeping an eye out for any more mechanical contraptions. Finding none, she scurried up the steps and into the ancient elevator, pulling the lever with a bit of nervous flutterings in her stomach as the contraption lurched downwards.

The elevator ground to a crunching halt and she took a moment to regain her balance. She crept forward towards what she assumed was a flight of stairs and proceeded to peek over. It took her a few moments but she eventually spotted her fellow Nightingales blending smoothly into the shadows. She stood up straight and scampered down the steps towards them, her heart practically beating in her throat.

Raisa let out a sigh of relief as she met Karliyah and Brynjolf at the bottom of the stairs. She stopped a few steps above them as Karliyah stepped up to meet her. Brynjolf stood to the side, his arms crossed against his chest.

“Mercer’s been here,” Karliyah said, sounding worried. “I hope we’re not too late…”

“Those bandits back there…” Raisa said, sounding unsure.

“Brynjolf and I found them like that. Mercer’s doing. We have to catch up to him before it’s too late,” Karliyah said, turning to lead them into the depths of the ruins, “We should tread carefully. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s left a few surprises for us.”

“Do you think he knows we’re here?” Raisa asked looking back and forth briefly between her friends, her gaze lingering just slightly longer on Brynjolf.

“Mercer’s been careful so far. I don't think he'd just leave those plans behind unless he had his reasons. For someone in possession of the Skeleton Key, stealing the Eyes of the Falmer would be child’s play. No, he means to ambush us down here, I'm almost certain of it,” Karliyah said with an affirmative nod, the distaste apparent in her tone.

“The lass seems to think old Mercer is pulling a fast one on us… leading us here and letting the dwarven constructs wear us down. I've learned to trust her lead at this point,” Brynjolf nodded in agreement. She felt his eyes on her and turned to meet his hooded gaze. His demeanor seemed only slightly distant as he said, “After all, we Nightingales need to stick together, eh?” She felt a small pang of guilt in her chest again and she nodded about a half second too late in agreement.

Karliyah paced about a bit, appearing deep in thought. “You two wait here a moment,” she said in her quiet voice. “I’m going to scout ahead a bit, see what we’re up against.” In a moment, she was gone, slipping through the set of doors they had been waiting by.

Raisa and Brynjolf stood silently for a few moments. She felt his eyes on her once more as she placed her bow back into its place and proceeded down a few more steps as they waited for Karliyah. “What are the Eyes of the Falmer?” she asked, clearing her throat slightly as she tried to dispel his somewhat suspicious air.

He looked at her carefully for a moment before telling her, “A few years before Mercer murdered Gallus, the Guild took in a thief who specialized in dwarven antiquities. The thief had broken into a nobleman's home somewhere in Windhelm and made off with a small figurine of a snow elf with crystalline eyes.”

“A snow elf?” Raisa asked, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise and recognition, though her tone was more confused than anything.

Brynjolf gave a nod saying, “Aye, that's what the Falmer were known as long ago… before they
became the blind monstrosities they are today.”

“I know,” Raisa said quickly. Brynjolf paused slightly and she felt as if she had been a bit too abrupt in her response. At the same time she criticised herself for bother the tone of her voice and the face that she was so concerned with Brynjolf’s feelings about her tone and attitude. This was not the time or the place for fanciful flirtations.

“When Gallus took one look at this statue, he knew it was something special. He took it right up to Enthir at the College of Winterhold. Didn’t take long for Enthir to find a book in the college’s library that told of Irkngthand and a great statue with gemmed eyes within,” Brynjolf continued after a moment.

“So the Eyes of the Falmer are gems?” Raisa asked, sounding somewhat angry. “All this, just because of some gems?” Her firsts were clenched and her voice was tight, the venom dripping off her words practically palpable.

“Not just ordinary gems. They’re said to be flawlessly cut and as big as a man's head. Can you imagine how much they're worth? Gallus and Mercer spent the better part of a month infiltrating Irkngthand, but the dwarves had protected the place far too well. There were just too many obstacles blocking the way. The plans were shelved and the rest is history,” Brynjolf said. “But regardless, crime is one thing, murder is another. Mercer will answer for all that he has done.”

“I almost wish Karliah had taken out a contract on Mercer,” Raisa said bitterly. “We wouldn’t have to be here otherwise. I can’t stand these ruins… Too dark, too cold…”


“That’s different. That’s home,” she said quickly. “This is… distant… I feel out of my depth.”

“That’s why there’s three of us, lass,” he said firmly. “We’re a family now, us three. We need to look out for each other. Down here, especially. We’ll all get out of this safe and sound. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” Raisa said carefully, her voice guarded.

“I can promise that you’ll at least get out,” he said after a moment, looking at her searchingly. In this moment the masks they wore didn’t matter. It was like they were reading the pages of a well-read book. She knew he was being entirely honest with her, and he knew she wouldn’t leave without him. He supposed Karliah was in there as well, but it didn’t matter. She was concerned about him.

They heard an astonished and angry gasp from up ahead and they darted through the doors, following along the passage to where Karliah was crouched, looking down on an impressively massive room. They followed her gaze and were both thoroughly astonished.

“Wait a moment,” Raisa said quickly. “What is that?”

Down below were several falmer, lurking about their home almost aimlessly. A figure crept out from the shadows, slinking towards one of the falmer and stabbing it silently. The figure meticulously went through a large number of the guards before scurrying away, deeper into the dwarven city.

“It’s Mercer!” Karliah hissed, her voice shaking in anger. “Look! He’s toying with us.”

“I’m on it lass,” Brynjolf said quickly, and Raisa did her best not to bristle at his latest use of her
name on Karliah. He rushed along the room to the caved in door closest to their way down to Mercer. Finding no way through he exclaimed in quiet frustration, “Damn it! There’s no way through.”

“He wants us to follow,” Karliah insisted.

“Aye, lass,” Brynjolf nodded, walking back to the other two. “And we’ll be ready for him. Let’s just keep moving.”

Karliah forged the way forward, Brynjolf and Raisa following close behind. Brynjolf crept close beside Raisa. After a short while of walking, he brushing his hand out to touch her arm. She glanced at him briefly before continuing on her way, though he knew he still had some small degree of her attention. “Look at the size of this place;” he said softly as they continued along the paths. “Have you ever seen anything like it in your life, lass?”

Raisa opened her mouth to respond but felt a small wave of anger as Karliah immediately replied, “Can’t say that I have. Imagine the riches hidden within these walls…”

Raisa at this point chose to remain silent, creeping around Karliah and pushing their pace faster. The sooner she was free of this burden, the sooner she wouldn’t have to deal with the fact that she wasn’t some special lass after all. Brynjolf didn’t let up though as they made their way into yet another massively large chamber. As they stood in the shadows, surveying the area, he stood close to Raisa, placing his hand in the small of her back as he said quietly, “Looks like we can take the low road or the high road across this chamber. Your choice lass.”

Looking around, Raisa frowned slightly. “We should split up.” she said after a moment, glancing across the narrow hallway at Karliah. “That way nothing can sneak up behind us from below or drop down on us from above.”

“You take the high road, lass,” Brynjolf muttered in her ear, “I’ll take the low.”

“I’ll go with you,” Karliah said to Brynjolf. The dark elf crept out along the path, keeping herself hidden. Brynjolf hesitated slightly before brushing gently past Raisa to follow their companion. Raisa swiftly crept up along the higher path, shooting down whatever falmer she spotted, clearing the way for her fellow Nightingales down below. As the three made their separate ways along the hall, they heard a great rumbling noise, causing them all to pause in slight worry for whatever Mercer Frey had planned for them.

Raisa rejoined her companions on the far side of the chamber. “So this is what we heard,” Brynjolf was saying, “The entire tower collapsed…”

“The only reason to do that would be to block pursuit,” Karliah mused. “It must be Mercer. We’ll have to find another way around.”

And that they did, coming into a chamber of a few falmer and a massive dwarven construct that stood dormant, though Raisa was certain it served as a guardian of the depths they were exploring.

“Shor’s bones!” Brynjolf breathed behind Raisa in awe, “Look at that monstrosity…”

“It’s a Dwarven Centurion. Very tough,” Karliah said, “And very deadly.”

“We can take the beast on or sneak around,” Brynjolf said to Raisa. “It’s your call lass. We’re right behind you.”

Knowing that they would still have to fight Mercer, Raisa opted to sneak around the metal giant,
Brynjolf and Karliah carefully following her lead. Eventually they came to a raised platform. After a short battle with a few stray falmer, Karliah piped up, “This is where we saw Mercer. We must be getting close…”

The winding downward path only grew smaller, darker, and more dangerous as they went on. They were close on Mercer’s tail and Raisa was certain he knew it. They eventually came to the deepest chamber yet where there was only a single door between them and their prey. Raisa looked around, noticing some writing on the wall above a few ransacked chests.

One step ahead
-Mercer

Angered by his cocksure nature, Raisa turned towards the final door and approached it with what felt a bit like confidence, though she was filled with a massive sense of dread.

“He’s close,” Karliah said, walking up beside Raisa almost breathlessly, “I’m certain. We must prepare ourselves.”

“We’re as prepared as we’re going to be at this rate,” Raisa muttered.

“Then this is it,” Brynjolf said, coming up on Raisa’s other side. “We do this for Gallus and the Guild.”

The trio entered their destination. Raisa felt almost weak at the knees. She had faced Mercer before, though under admittedly more helpless circumstances. Regardless of the relatively more even odds, she couldn’t help but feel a pang of fear as they approached the end of their journey. She hoped that Mercer would be the only one taking the low road that day.

“He’s here, and he hasn’t seen us yet,” Karliah whispered softly to her companions as they watched Mercer attempting to pry the giant gems from the enormous Falmer statue. “Brynjolf, watch the door,” Karliah commanded firmly.

“Aye,” he said with a nod. He shifted next to Raisa and she felt as though this time he was addressing her more than their companion, “Nothing’s getting by me, lass.” As he moved back towards the door, he briefly reached for Raisa’s hand, pausing to look at her carefully, though they both still wore their masks. They both felt much less distant than they had upon the trio reuniting in the ruins originally. But regardless, there was no time for anything more than that one small gesture.

“Raisa,” Karliah said quietly, “Climb down that ledge and see if you can—“

“Karliah, when will you learn you can’t get the drop on me?” Mercer’s voice boomed harshly across the room, echoing around long after he finished speaking. A massive rumble sounded as Mercer turned to face the trio in the shadows. Raisa wasn’t sure how, but she was certain that the ledge falling out from beneath them was Mercer’s doing. Karliah had leapt back in surprise, but Raisa was already tumbling down to the cavern floor with a gasp, her fingers slipping from Brynjolf’s grasp. He lunged forward in an attempt to save her, his hands scrabbling to catch a hold of her as she travelled downwards dangerously. Karliah held him back from the dangerous edge as best she could, though it proved a difficult task.

Raisa hit the ground hard, her breath knocked out of her. She felt a brief rush of relief that she
hadn’t been crushed by falling debris. She wheezed and gasped for air as she forced herself quickly to her feet, facing Mercer as best she could. There were spots in her vision that were slowly fading, and her heart was racing even faster than before, faster than when Brynjolf lassed her.

Mercer stood up on a platform, looking down at her with anger and what felt like resignation. “When Brynjolf brought you before me, I could feel a sudden shift in the wind. And at that moment, I knew it would end with one of us at the end of a blade,” Mercer said, a steely look on his face. “To be honest, I’m impressed you even survived our last encounter.”

“Give me the Key Mercer,” Raisa snapped, glaring at the man above her.

“What’s Karliah been filling your head with?” Mercer sneered, “Tales of thieves with honor? Oaths rife with falsehoods and broken promises? Nocturnal doesn’t care about you, the key, or anything having to do with the Guild.”

“This isn’t about Nocturnal,” Raisa spat out. “This is personal.”

“Revenge is it?” Mercer scoffed. “Have you learned nothing from your time with us? When will you open your eyes and realise how little my actions differ from your? Both of us lie, cheat, and steal to further our own end.”

“The difference is I still have honor,” Raisa replied coldly. "Besides, I've always believed in fairness. You stab me, I stab you."

“It’s clear you’ll never see the Skeleton Key as I do... as an instrument of limitless wealth,” he mused. “Instead you choose to fall over on your own foolish code.”

“Regardless of how I see it, what matters is that I choose to return it rather than use it for myself alone,” Raisa glared, her hands balled up into fists. “If anyone falls, Mercer Frey, it will be you.”

“Then the die is cast, and once again my blade will taste Nightingale blood!” Mercer roared down at Raisa. He turned to the other two coldly and said, “Karliah, I'll deal with you after I deal with your irksome companions. In the meantime, perhaps you and Brynjolf should get better acquainted.”

Raisa spun around, trying to get a view of her companions as Brynjolf let out a strangled cry of pain and confusion, “What... what’s happening... I can’t stop myself.” Mercer chuckled maliciously behind Raisa as he took control of Brynjolf, causing him to attack Karliah.

“Fight it, Brynjolf!” Karliah exclaimed as she attempted to dodge his advances. “He’s taken control of you!”

“No!” Raisa cried out as Karliah drew her sword to combat Brynjolf’s attacks. She was hardly aware of her exclamation, but it gave Karliah a slight pause before she continued parrying Brynjolf’s attacks as best she could.

“I’m sorry, lass,” she heard Brynjolf grit out, “I... I can’t...!”

Raisa’s heart broke a small bit as she spun around to face Mercer in a rage. “Damn you, Mercer!” she heard Karliah shout.

“Enough of this!” Brynjolf roared from up above. “Fight me!”

Raisa pulled her bow from her back and drew back an arrow, firing it quickly at Mercer. The faster she could kill that man, the faster Brynjolf and Karliah would both be safe. But Mercer, using the
power of the Skeleton Key, vanished from where he stood, reappearing nearly across the room, further from Raisa. She drew another arrow and fired it quickly at him, only for him to disappear again. She let out an angry roar and spun around, looking carefully for the man.

She heard footsteps splashing about in the new pools of water that dotted the floor thanks to Mercer’s destructive efforts. She spun around, spotting Mercer briefly. She ran towards him at a dead sprint, only for him to disappear and reappear a bit further away. As he continued to avoid her, he made sure to taunt her, only serving to fuel her determination. Mercer made a few passes at her, knocking her over, carving a deep slice up her arm, only teasing her with a fight. She whipped out the dagger Brynjolf had given her and slashed wildly, grunts of anger and frustration escaping her. Lucky shot that she was, she managed to stab him in the knee, though he kicked her away and disappeared once more with a hiss of fury and pain.

Raisa soon found herself up high above the cavern by the head of the giant snow elf edifice, still caught in the cat and mouse game Mercer seemed to love. She stared around carefully, drawing back her bow without an arrow notched, pretending to fire at Mercer. As usual, he disappeared. Calming herself, Raisa took a few slow breaths and she notched an arrow and readied her weapon once more. The sound of footsteps echoed around over the battle noises of her fellow Nightingales. It was then that she realized that Mercer wasn’t teleporting at all. He was toying with her, using invisibility to keep himself safe. A ripple caught her attention, just barely in her peripheral vision. A cracking and fizzling noise sounded, confirming the man’s location, and she readjusted her aim, letting her arrow fly as the former Guild Master began to reappear.

The arrow struck him, to Raisa’s immense satisfaction, in the neck. She felt a greater weight lift itself from her chest and she felt as though she could either laugh or cry from relief. She leapt down from her spot and raced towards Mercer who was gasping and gurgling in an attempt to hold onto his life.

“Shadows take me…” he sounded genuinely shocked at the turn of events.

She stared down at him coldly, leaning closer as she hissed, "Hail Sithis."

Raisa immediately checked through his pockets, grabbing the Skeleton Key and the eyes of the Falmer, tucking them away as safely as she could.

“This place is coming down!” Karliah shouted over the sound of rushing water. “We need to get out of here!”

“No luck, lass,” Brynjolf grunted from the doorway. “Something must’ve fallen on the other side. It’s not moving.”

“We have to find another way out of here before the place fills with water!” Karliah said firmly, quickly making her way down from the ledge and moving to search the rest of the chamber. Brynjolf followed suit, though a bit more slowly, still feeling out of sorts because of his recent possession.

“Are you alright?” Raisa asked when he approached her, clasping his arms in concern.

“I’ve been better,” he admitted, one hand reaching out to take her waist, the other clasping her arm in return. “But we’ve bigger problems to worry about. How’re we getting out of here lass?” he asked her, his grey-green eyes staring back at her with a quiet confidence.

Raisa shook her head, releasing his arms quickly, “I don’t know. He did a damn good job of destroying our chances… the bastard…”
“So this is it then?” Brynjolf asked, sounding somewhat morose, a grim chuckle escaping his lips. “We redeem the Guild... We serve Nocturnal in life, and go to her in death now...”

“You’ll go to Nocturnal,” Raisa said, sounding somewhat bitter. “I’ve been long promised to the Void...”

“At least come and visit us sometime, lass,” Brynjolf said. “Eternity serving some deity I barely understand isn’t ideal. Doing it alone will be far less so still...”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” Raisa chuckled slightly as Brynjolf pulled off his mask. The water was rising quickly, and they moved up to the higher levels, towards the top of the cavern. “I don’t think they’d like to share the souls they’ve claimed.”

“At least say you’ll try, lass,” Brynjolf said. “We’re about to die, I think we can be a bit sentimental here.”

“Then for what it’s worth, I’m glad to have known you,” Raisa said, “Even if this is the outcome.”

Karliah was treading water now, still searching for a way out, as Brynjolf gave Raisa a boost onto the head of the snow elf statue before hoisting himself up as well. “Don’t talk like that, lass. You’re still getting out of this mess. You’re taking the high road. Your family needs you.”

“With me dead and gone they’ll have to wait for a new Listener. It’ll probably drive Cicero deeper into madness... Which will probably drive Nazir mad... They’d join me in the Void sooner than I’d like, probably,” Raisa mused as she looked at the rising water. Hopefully it wouldn’t be a particularly painful death. There were far more dangerous situations she had escaped from. Hopefully the streak would continue. Another pang of guilt fluttered through her. Her gaze turned back to Brynjolf, surprised to find him watching her as well. If she survived their current predicament, she wouldn’t find it entirely worthwhile if Brynjolf (and Karliah) didn’t survive as well. She’d have much rather died with them.

“Besides,” she said, “I’m not about to leave you or Karliah down here to die. Either we all get out or we don’t.”

“I’d rather it be the first option, if I’m honest lass,” Brynjolf sighed. The water was nearly to the top of the cavern now. Karliah was swimming towards them. Brynjolf smiled sadly at Raisa as they began to tread water. There wasn’t any more time for them. They took deep breaths as the water spilled over their heads.

Just when Raisa resigned herself to their fate, there was a loud rumble as a part of the ceiling collapsed. Immediately the Nightingale trio surged upwards toward it, bursting up into what she vaguely recognized as Bronze Water Cave. She remembered hearing a guard complain about bandits running about there every few months. What a relief that none were there now. The group remained silent as they took in all that had happened to them so far.

“I can't believe it's over. After twenty-five years in exile and just like that, it's done. All that remains is to ensure the safe return of the Skeleton Key,” Karliah mused, sounding out of breath.

“Please tell me that’s an easy thing to do,” Raisa groaned, already expecting the worst.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Karliah said with a grimace, “When the Skeleton Key was stolen from the Twilight Sepulcher, our access to the inner sanctum was removed. The only way to bring it back will be through the Pilgrim's Path.”

“I take it you’ve never used the Pilgrim’s Path, then?” Raisa asked.
“It wasn’t created for the Nightingales,” Karliah said. “It was created to test those who wished to serve Nocturnal in other wars. As a consequence, I have no knowledge of what you’ll be facing.”

“Then I guess we haven’t got any choice than to get started,” Raisa sighed, somewhat disappointed that this whole business was not yet finished.

“Brynjolf is needed back at the Thieves Guild to keep order while you're away. And I… I can't bear to face Nocturnal after my failure to protect the Key. I'm afraid you'll have to face the end of your journey alone,” the elf said nervously.

“Oh,” Raisa said, surprise evident in her tone. “I see…”

“Raisa…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll return the Key,” Raisa said. “And I’ll do my best to get it done soon.”

“Please hurry.” Karliah said, moving to stand. “Take this with you. I'm not certain if it will help within the walls of the Sepulcher, but I certainly don't need it as much as you. I’ve had this bow almost my entire life, and it's never let me down. I hope it brings you the same luck.”

Raisa accepted the bow almost reluctantly. Her bow was the last thing she had left of Gabriella. She wasn’t sure if she was ready to let go of that just yet. But she couldn’t refuse Karliah’s generous gift. “Why exactly won’t you come with me?” Raisa asked quietly as the trio made their way out of the cave.

“I've been a Nightingale for a very long time. I sold my allegiance to Nocturnal in exchange for many profitable years of thieving. Falling in love with Gallus was wrong. It was a distraction that allowed the Sepulcher to be desecrated and it likely cost him his life. Until the Key is returned, I will never set foot inside that place again,” Karliah said. Her gaze flitted critically from Raisa to Brynjolf and back again almost imperceptibly.

The pair stiffened slightly before Raisa gave a sharp whistle. Shadowmere trotted up suddenly, tossing his head as he circled around the group to stand close beside Raisa. “Time to get this over with, then.” She leapt up onto Shadowmere’s back, not looking at either of her companions.

“Lass—” Brynjolf started, reaching up to grab hold of her to keep her there for a moment. He wasn’t sure what he planned to say, but Raisa didn’t give him a chance. She flicked the reigns sharply, leaning low over the horse as it took off, disappearing into the surrounding forest quickly. Brynjolf let his arm fall, hand clenched into a fist, feeling a sense of unease in the pit of his stomach as he watched Raisa leave him once again.
So it's not actually a chapter like I wanted it to be. Turns out the save file I sent to my other computer so I didn't have to travel with my damaged one is corrupted. And I haven't yet figured out how to fix it. So it looks like the next few chapters (aka, all the ones I was planning on posting by now) will be posted roughly around the 20th or so of January when I return to my place in Scotland for school. My schedule this semester looks like it's going to be quite a bit more forgiving work-wise than it was last semester, so I'll definitely be better about posting. And I know I've said that quite a few times by now, but I actually mean in. It's gonna happen. If it doesn't, feel free to guilt trip me and call me out on it because motivation is always a good thing. So again sorry for the chapter delays, it'll definitely pick up at the end of the month, I swear.
Raisa let out a deep breath as she stood before the steps to Nocturnal’s Temple, a tight feeling in her stomach. This was the end of her journey with the Thieves Guild. She would make sure of it. Her family needed her. Hell, Skyrim needed her. Karlia had been right. She couldn’t let her feelings become a distraction from the higher purpose she was destined for.

As she approached the temple, a shimmering figure appeared before her, a slightly confused look on its face. “I didn’t recognize you,” the man mused, “but I sense you are one of us. Who are you?”

“I’d ask the same question of you,” she countered, stopping at the foot of the steps, staring back at the ghostly figure critically.

“The last of the Nightingale Sentinels, I’m afraid,” the apparition sighed bitterly. “I’ve defended this Sepulcher alone for what seems like an eternity.”

“The last?” Raisa asked, sounding somewhat surprised. “What happened to the rest?”

“We were betrayed by one of our own kind,” the man explained, a note of anger entering his words. “In fact, I’m to blame for what’s happened here.”

“How are you to blame?”

“I was blinded. Blinded by dark treachery masquerading as friendship. Perhaps if I had been more vigilant, then Mercer Frey wouldn’t have lured me to my fate and stolen the Skeleton Key,” the man grumbled, sounding as if he were chastising himself.

“Wait a moment,” Raisa exclaimed, “You’re Gallus!”

The ghost looked thoughtfully away, over Skyrim, his eyes somewhat glazed. He nodded slightly, a slight hum escaping him as he said, “I haven’t heard that name in a long time… How do you know of me?”

“I have the Key,” Raisa said, ignoring his question, skipping to what she thought would be most important to him. She pulled the key out with a slight flourish, showing it to the ghostly man with a small feeling of triumph swelling up inside her.

“The Key! You have the Skeleton Key!” he exclaimed, looking at the key with a sort of reverence. “I never thought I’d see it again! And Mercer Frey?”

“Dead,” Raisa said shortly, satisfaction filling her once again.

“Then… it’s over and my death wasn’t in vain,” Gallus nodded solemnly. “I owe you a great deal, Nightingale.”

“You owe me nothing,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “I didn’t do this for Nocturnal. I did this to honor the Guild, and to take revenge for the wrongs Mercer Frey did me.”

“You’ve done the Guild a great deed,” the ghost nodded slowly. “And although they may not show it, I’m certain they appreciate your sacrifices. My only regret is that you had to undertake this task alone.”
“Karliah helped me,” Raisa said quietly after a moment.

“Karliah… she’s still alive?” Gallus asked, his ghostly features almost glowing as his face lit up in joy. “I feared she’d befallen the same fate, ending up a victim of Mercer’s betrayal.”

“Then take the Key and right all the wrongs,” Raisa said, holding the key out towards the man. “I want nothing more to do with the thing.”

“Nothing would bring me more pride than to return the Key, but I’m afraid it’s impossible. From the moment I arrived here, I’ve felt myself… well… dying.” Gallus admitted.

“How can a spirit die?” Raisa asked, her brow furrowing skeptically at him.

“The Sepulcher isn’t merely a temple or a vault to house the Key. Within these walls is the Ebonmere… a conduit to Nocturnal’s realm of Evergloam. When Mercer stole the key, that conduit closed, severely limiting our ties to her,” Gallus explained, solemn once more.

“Then I’ll have to proceed alone,” she sighed, feeling frustrated.

“I’m afraid so. I’m weakening, and I can feel myself slipping away. The years without restoration of my power have taken their toll. Whatever damage has been caused can only be corrected by following the Pilgrim’s Path to the Ebonmere and replacing the Key,” Gallus continued, sounding as if he were genuinely sorry she had to proceed alone.

“Then I suppose I’ll see you when this is all over and done with.”

“Good luck, Nightingale,” he said with a nod, gesturing towards the entrance to the Pilgrim’s Path.

The following tasks hardly intimidated her. Much like the unholy rage she experienced when Sithis guided her hand at the massacre of her family, she found a deep calmness that led her through the dangers Nocturnal presented. Before she knew it, the key was returned, and the pulsating glow of Nocturnal’s power rushed into the room. Raisa felt herself frozen once again from the sheer power of the deity. She heard the voice in her head once more, louder, more forceful than that of the Night Mother, making her wish she could block the noise out, though she knew it was impossible.

“My, my. What do we have here? It’s been a number of years since I’ve stepped foot on your world. Or perhaps it’s been moments. One tends to lose track,” Nocturnal mused, sounding cold and critical. “So… once again the Key has been stolen and a ‘champion’ returns it to the Sepulcher. Now that Ebonmere has been restored, you stand before me awaiting your accolades; a pat on the head… a kiss on your cheek. What you fail to realize is your actions were expected and represent nothing more than the fulfilment of your agreement.”

Raisa grit her teeth together sourly. She didn’t expect anything anymore. She knew that her actions were predetermined at this point. The constant escape from impossibly deadly situations was hint enough. The fact that her life seemed to be laid out for her and her responsibilities constantly piling up sort of put the nail in the coffin for her.

“Don’t mistake my tone for displeasure,” Nocturnal continued, her tone casual, almost as if she didn’t care. “After all, you’ve obediently performed your duties to the letter. But we both know this has little to do with honor and oaths and loyalty. It’s about the reward; the prize. Fear not. You’ll have your trinkets, your desire for power, your hunger for wealth. I bid you to drink deeply from the Ebonmere, mortal. For this is where the Agent of Nocturnal is born. The Oath has been struck, the die has been cast and your fate awaits you in the Evergloam. Farewell, Nightingale. See to it the Key stays this time, won’t you?”
As Nocturnal disappeared, a figure approached. Raisa was somewhat surprised to see Karliah walking towards her as she said, “I’m glad you were able to bring the Key back safely. Nocturnal seemed quite pleased with your efforts.”

“Pleased?” Raisa scoffed slightly, “Didn’t sound like she could be more indifferent, if you ask me.”

“I wouldn't take that to heart,” Karliah defended quickly. “It's her way. Think of her as a scolding mother continually pushing you harder to be successful; outwardly sounding angry but silently content. I assure you, had she been displeased with you, we wouldn't be having this conversation.”

“What’s this about becoming an Agent of Nocturnal?” Raisa asked.

“The circles at the base of the Ebonmere imbue you with powers befitting a Nightingale Agent. The crescent moon represents the Agent of Shadow, the half moon for the Agent of Subterfuge and the full moon for the Agent of Strife.”

“Sounds like being all three would be useful…” Raisa muttered, looking at the symbols carefully.

“This is Nocturnal’s way of maintaining balance,” Karliah explained. “If you ever feel the need to change your abilities, you can return to the Sepulcher and step onto a different circle. Be warned that once you've chosen, you can't reselect for at least a day.”

“So what now?” Raisa asked her friend with a slight sigh.

“Now, your life as a Nightingale begins,” Karliah told her. “Should the need arise, you'll be summoned to the Sepulcher in order to defend it.”

“And you?”

“The Guild has welcomed me back with open arms. I feel like a void in my life has finally been filled. I only hope this isn't an ending to things, but actually the beginning,” Karliah said, a smile blossoming perhaps for the first time across her face since Raisa had known her.

“The beginning of what?” Raisa asked, a slight frown on her face.

“Why, perhaps the greatest crime spree Skyrim's ever known. There are pockets brimming with coin and coffers overflowing with riches ripe for the picking. We may be Nightingales, but in our hearts we're still thieves and we're damn good at what we do,” Karliah said. “All that’s left is for you to choose your path and your journey will be complete.” Here she gestured to the sigils on the floor.

Raisa stepped forward and stood on the sigil for the Agent of Stealth, feeling the embrace of darkness flow through her once again. She turned back to face Karliah, only for Gallus to return to the Ebonmere. She suddenly felt as if she were intruding on something terribly emotional and private.

“Karliah?” he asked, sounding rather breathless, for a ghost.

“Gallus!” Karliah exclaimed, her voice cracking somewhat. “I feared I would never see you again! I was afraid you’d become like the others…”

“If it were not for the actions of this Nightingale, your fears would have come true. She honors us all,” Gallus said, nodding gratefully at where Raisa still stood.
“What will you do now, my love?” Karliah asked, unable to tear her eyes from the ghostly figure of her deceased lover.

“Nocturnal calls me to the Evergloam,” Gallus said. “My contract has been fulfilled.”

“Will I ever see you again?” Karliah asked, sounding as if she might begin to cry.

“When your debt to Nocturnal has been paid, we’ll embrace once again,” Gallus said, his voice filled with certainty.

“Farewell, Gallus,” Karliah said after a moment, her voice shaking slightly. “Eyes open… walk with the shadows…”

“Goodbye Karliah,” Gallus said as he turned and disappeared once more, for the final time.

Raisa gave Karliah a few moments to herself before clearing her throat, shifting back and forth slightly on her feet. The woman looked over at her slightly, her face a cross between a cold and stony expression and pure joy. “How will I know if I’m needed here?”

“If this place is in danger ever again, the shadows will call,” Karliah said. “Should the need arise, a portal connects the Sepulcher and Nightingale Hall. Use it whenever you wish.”

“Where will you be from now on?” Raisa asked, a small frown on her face.

“I’ve decided to make my home at Nightingale Hall. Since it’s your home as well, I hope to see you and Brynjolf there. Of course, I may visit some of Skyrim's cities to ‘acquire’ things from time to time. Can’t afford to get rusty now, can we?” Karliah said, a slight smirk returning to her face.

“Perhaps,” Raisa mused slightly. “I think it might be best if I make myself scarce for a while… There are forces at work in Skyrim and in my own life that I cannot ignore. Should the shadows call, I will return, I promise… But until then, this may be the last time we meet, Karliah.” Karliah looked as if she wanted to protest, but she remained silent on the subject. She nodded instead and respected Raisa’s decision. “Where did Gallus go?” Raisa asked, changing the subject swiftly, feeling somewhat guilty for her choice.

“Gallus’s oath has been paid. His actions have satisfied the terms. Now his spirit becomes one with the Evergloam… the realm of perpetual twilight and the cradle of shadow,” Karliah explained.

“So, he’s gone?” Raisa asked.

“No, not gone…” Karliah said with a slight shake of her head. “He's become one with the shadows. This is the greatest honor a Nightingale can hope to achieve. In death, he's become part of that which we use to live.”

“They’re a part of the darkness around us?” Raisa asked, feeling a small part of her broken heart mend as she thought that perhaps her family had become one with the Void, waiting to welcome her home at the end of her journey.

“Absolutely. When we say ‘walk with the shadows,’ we are asking those Nightingales who have passed on to protect us. It’s believed that they are literally what guides our uncanny luck… by placing their hands in ours. That's why the Ebonmere needed to be reopened. Without it, there's no way Nocturnal was able to allow them through,” Karliah explained.

Raisa nodded slowly and gave Karliah a small smile before saying, “Walk with the shadows, my friend.”
Knowing that her mind was made up, Karliah smiled softly in return and sadly replied, “Walk with the shadows, sister.”
Raisa nervously poked her head into the Ragged Flagon, searching carefully for Brynjolf. Not spotting him, she quickly made her way over to the bar and looked at Vekel sternly. “Know of any old guy hiding out in Riften, name of Esbern?” She glanced towards the entrance to the Cistern almost nervously, worried that he’d find out she’d come back.

She felt somewhat bad avoiding Brynjolf so aggressively. But she didn’t want to have a repeat of what happened to Karliah and Gallus. If it did, one of them would inevitably wind up dead. And really it probably wouldn’t be her, considering her penchant for avoiding death. But she’d left him abruptly and with little explanation. She was certain at this point that Karliah had informed him of her decision to remove herself from the Guild and its activities. And though they’d come to an understanding about her reluctance to become Guildmaster, she knew that he wouldn’t waste another opportunity to try and convince her to take up the mantle.

“Lot of people looking for him,” Vekel said, glancing around carefully. “Don’t know his name, but he’s paid good money for nobody to know he’s down here. He’s holed up in the Ratway Warrens. Hardly ever leaves the place— has someone bring him food and such. Crazy old coot, from what I’ve heard. And for that to stand out down here he must really be off his nut…”

“Who else is looking for him?” Raisa asked, a frown on her face.

“Dangerous-looking elves who didn’t give their names,” Vekel said. “Take from that what you will.” Raisa nodded, a grim look on her face. “You alright then? You seem much jumpier than usual…”

Raisa shook her head and said, “Oh, it’s really nothing. Just need to be in and out quick is all. Don’t have time to get bogged down with another ten jobs because Brynjolf thinks I need to be kept busy…”

Vekel nodded, “Fair enough. Though you’re somewhat in luck. He ducked out earlier when Karliah got back. Something important I reckon. He hadn’t left the Guild in days.”

“Probably just some cleaning up after Mercer,” Raisa said, a bit of relief flashing through her, along with a new wave of guilt. “Thank’s Vekel.” The barkeep nodded as Raisa pushed away from the bar and made her way towards the path to the Cistern. Instead, however, she made to continue straight instead of turning. She heard the hidden cabinet moving, and it was clear someone was coming through into the Cistern. She instinctively crouched low and pressed herself back into the shadows, her heart fluttering as she saw Brynjolf stepping through the passageway and into the Flagon. His step faltered slightly and he glanced briefly into the corner she was hidden in, but she knew he couldn’t see her; not with Nocturnal’s incredible blessing, even if he was a Nightingale as well.

Once he turned and made his way into the Flagon, she slipped past the door and into the Ratway Warrens, a small sigh escaping her lips. She made her way slowly through the warrens, dispatching a few Thalmor Agents as she went, eventually coming to what could only be Esbern’s hideout. The massive door was made of solid, thick metal, with a sliding plate near the top that basically acted as a peephole. It certainly wouldn’t be easy for her to pick open.

“Go away!” she heard muffled from within.

“Esbern?” she asked, wondering just what she had gotten herself into. “Open the door. I’m a
friend.

“What?!” the man spluttered from within his stronghold. “No, that’s not me. I’m not Esbern. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Look, it’s okay,” she sighed in exasperation. “Delphine sent me.”

At this the sliding plate opened and she saw a pair of old suspicious eyes staring back out at her. “Delphine? How do you…” a sense of realization gripped the man’s expression suddenly and his eyes narrowed even more. “So you’ve finally found her, and she led you to me. And her el am, caught like a rat in a trap.”

“Look, I’m the one the Blades have been searching for. I’m Dragonborn,” Raisa tried again.

“Oh, how reassuring! Most likely you’re with the Thalmor and this is just a trick to get me to open the door,” the man said sarcastically.

“If I wanted you dead you already would be,” Raisa snapped, tired of the man’s dithering. “Delphine said to ‘remember the 30th of Frostfall.’”

“Ah… Indeed, indeed. I do remember. Delphine really is alive, then? And you’re… then… there really is hope after all? You’d better come inside. Quickly now. Thalmor agents have been seen in the Ratway.”

The plate slid shut with a decisive snap and she heard Esbern fumbling around a bit as he called through the door, “This’ll just take a moment… This one always sticks… there we go. Only a couple more. There we are! Come in, come in! Make yourself at home! That's better. Now we can talk.” The door swung open inwards and Raisa quickly stepped inside. Esbern shut it quickly behind her, not bothering to do up any of the locks again.

“You said something about there still being hope…?” Raisa asked after a moment.

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? What more needs to happen before you all wake up and see what's going on? Alduin has returned, just like the prophecy said! The Dragon from the dawn of time, who devours the souls of the dead! No one can escape his hunger, here or in the afterlife! Alduin will devour all things and the world will end. Nothing can stop him! I tried to tell them! They wouldn't listen. Fools. It's all come true… all I could do was watch our doom approach…” Esbern explained.

“Alduin… The dragon who’s raising the others?” Raisa asked, her brow furrowed deeply. “You’re talking about the literal end of the world?”

“Oh, yes. It's all been foretold. The end has begun. Alduin has returned. Only a Dragonborn can stop him. But no Dragonborn has been known for centuries. It seems that the gods have grown tired of us. They've left us to our fate, as the plaything of Alduin the World-Eater,” Esbern said. “Unless what you say is true.” Here Raisa gave an affirmative nod and the man nodded solemnly. “Then we must go, quickly now. Take me to Delphine. We have much to discuss.”

The man began to dart around his small dwelling, collecting what he could easily take. He rambled as he spoke, “But, give me… just a moment… I must gather a few things… I’ll need this… No, no, useless trash… where’d I put my annotated Anuad? One moment, I know, time is of the essence, but we mustn't leave secrets behind for the Thalmor… there's one more thing I must bring… Well, I guess that's good enough… let's be off…”

Raisa opened the large door a bit and peered out, crouching low when she spotted a few more
Thalmor agents running about, making their way towards where she and Esbern were still standing. She drew her bow and waited patiently as the agents ran up the steps and whirled about to make their way towards her. She let arrow after arrow fly, hardly needing to adjust her aim to strike with a killing shot. With the agents dispatched, Raisa quickly led Esbern out of the Ratway, ducking into the Ragged Flagon feeling a small sense of relief.

However, her relief was short lived as she found herself face to face with none other than Brynjolf. His expression looked somewhat confused, but realisation dawned on his face. He gave her a brief smile and said, “You know lass, no one really uses that door. I thought I’d seen someone lurking back here earlier, but I’d put it off as nothing. Just my imagination. But that was you, wasn’t it?”

Esbern shifted behind Raisa uncomfortably, leaning against the door and looking into the Flagon suspiciously. Old habits died hard, and he was as paranoid as they came. Raisa chewed her lip silently for a moment before she replied, “And here I thought you weren’t going to be in the Flagon today.”

“Are you avoiding me, lass?” Brynjolf asked, sounding a bit surprised, and just a touch suspicious. Luckily, Raisa was saved from having to answer him when an assassin decided to make an attempt on Esbern’s life. Gissur… From the Thalmor Embassy, by the looks of it. Raina just barely recognized the man and was disgusted that he would dare show his face in the Guild, particularly after what he had put Etienne through.

Esbern leapt out from behind Raisa and attacked his attacker, getting help from Vekel the Man, who had spotted the threat as well. Raisa pushed back Brynjolf, prepared to join the fight, only for it to end as soon as it began. She felt Brynjolf take a hold of her arm surprisingly gently, and she turned briefly to face him, her bright green eyes meeting his dark ones in the dim light of the Ragged Flagon.

“Lass, there’s still much that needs to be done,” he said in a low voice. “You and I…” he continued, though he faltered slightly, his eyes looking at her almost nervously as his gaze roamed across her face. She thought she imagined that for a brief moment he was looking directly at her lips. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head and a few rapid blinks he continued speaking once more, “The Guild still needs a leader.”

Raisa took her arm from his grip, feeling a rush of disappointment flood through her. She couldn't keep the sentiment from her expression as she gave a grim nod. “My answer is still the same,” she said shortly. “I won’t lead this Guild. Not now. Not in the foreseeable future.” She shifted slightly on her feet, itching to leave, but also to stay and give in to his persistence. “Brynjolf, I—”

“We need to get moving. Now,” Esbern interrupted, coming back and speaking quickly to Raisa. Brynjolf glared at the man slightly, wondering what it was that Raisa had been going to tell him. He couldn’t help but feel hopeful that perhaps she had fully forgiven him for his lack of trust in her, that she was ready to let him in again. But something about her expression but him on edge. Coupled with the nagging suspicion that she had been trying to avoid him, Brynjolf felt that he probably had more to worry about than nothing, and Esbern interrupting did nothing to help his brief anxiety.

Raisa nodded and glanced almost sadly at Brynjolf. “Walk with the shadows, Brynjolf,” she said quickly and quietly, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around him tightly, though briefly. She released him after a moment, not looking up at him. She didn’t want to see the confusion in his eyes. She didn’t want him to see the sadness in hers. She didn’t plan on returning. Not for a long time. And if he knew what she was planning, she knew he would do everything in his power to keep her there. And try as she might, she knew she wouldn’t be able to resist him forever if she
allowed him to see through her like that.

So instead of looking the man she had grown to love in the face, she kept her head down and stepped around him, leading her charge through the secret passage and into the Cistern. She led him up into the outside world for what had probably been the first time in several years. And the two made their way out of Riften quickly, so as to not draw too much attention from any potential Thalmor agents. At this point, anyone could be their enemy, and Raisa wasn’t too eager to meet any of them. Not when she felt so off kilter. It was something she would have to get used to, she told herself firmly. She had more important things to deal with than matters of thieves and lonely hearts.
Alduin's Wall

“Delphine!” Esbern exclaimed, sounding thoroughly relieved to be inside again. “I… it’s good to see you. It’s been a… a long time.” He stopped short of hugging the blonde woman, who was now staring at him with what seemed like nothing short of amazement.

“It’s good to see you, too. It’s been too long, old friend. Too long, Esbern,” Delphine said, the briefest of smiles crossing her face, her tone as serious as ever. “Well, then. You made it, safe and sound. Good. Come on; I have a place where we can talk.” She turned abruptly, leaning her broom up against the bar, “Orgnar, hold down the bar for a minute, will you?”

“Yeah, sure…” the man said, looking over Raisa and Esbern almost critically. The briefest look of recognition passed over his features as he spotted her and he gave a short nod before Raisa followed her two companions down into the hidden basement room.

“Now then,” Delphine began, “I assume you know about…”

“Oh, yes!” Esbern interrupted quickly, sounding excited. “Dragonborn! Indeed, yes. This changes everything, of course. There’s no time to lose. We must locate… let me show you. I know I had it here, somewhere…” Esbern began digging in his bag before producing a roughly bound book. It was certainly old and worn, but he opened it carefully and precisely before placing it down on the table.

“Esbern,” Delphine began, sounding almost exasperated.

“Come, let me show you,” Esbern said, waving the two women closer. “You see, right here. Sky Haven Temple, constructed around one of the main Akiviri military camps in the Reach, during their conquest of Skyrim.”

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” Delphine muttered to Raisa, sounding almost sarcastic.

“Your guess is as good as mine…” Raisa mumbled back, looking intently at the book Esbern had provided.

“Shh! This is where they built Alduin's Wall, to set down in stone all their accumulated dragonlore. A hedge against the forgetfulness of centuries. A wise and foresighted policy, in the event. Despite the far-reaching fame of Alduin's Wall at the time— one of the wonders of the ancient world— its location was lost,” Esbern said quickly.

“Esbern,” Delphine said firmly to gain the man’s attention. “What are you getting at?”

“You mean… you don’t mean to say that you haven’t heard of Alduin’s Wall?” he asked them, looking up in surprise. “Either of you?”

“Let's pretend we haven’t,” Delphine said after a sly glance at Raisa. “What’s Alduin’s Wall and what does it have to do with stopping the dragons?”

“Alduin's Wall was where the ancient Blades recorded all the knew of Alduin and his return. Part history, part prophecy. Its location has been lost for centuries, but I've found it again. Not lost, you see, just forgotten. The Blades archives held so many secrets… I was only able to save a few scraps…” Esbern explained a bit more.

“So you think Alduin’s Wall will tell us how to defeat Alduin?” Delphine asked skeptically.
“Well, yes, but…” Esbern stammered slightly, “There’s no guarantee, of course…”

“Sky Haven Temple it is, then. I knew you’d have something for us, Esbern. I know the area of the Reach that Esbern’s talking about. Near what’s now known as Karthspire, the Karth River canyon. We can meet you there, or all travel together, your call.” Delphine decided.

“What’s the best way to get there?” Raisa asked with a small frown.

“From Riverwood? The road south through Falkreath is the most direct route. Or you could catch the carriage from Whiterun to Markarth and then approach from the west. Either way, the Reach is wild country these days. The Forsworn are everywhere. Best be careful.”

“I’ll meet you at Karthspire,” Raisa said after a moment’s thought.

“Your call. Might be safer to travel separately— attract less attention that way. Don’t worry, I’ll get Esbern there in one piece. We’ll wait for you near Karthspire. Good luck.”

Raisa exited the inn quickly, not stopping to speak to either of her companions before she left. She wanted to make Whiterun as soon as possible. She made her way quickly out of town before summoning Shadowmere. Horses arising from the shadows was still a strange enough concept for her; she didn’t want to cause a panic in any town or hold that might inconvenience her. Although from the sound of Delphine’s brief conversation with Orgnar, it seemed like she was moving on for good. There wouldn’t be a need to visit Riverwood anymore once she left. But then, it seemed to fit. She was leaving behind a lot that day anyways.

She eventually reached Whiterun, deciding to push on a bit further before she rested. The journey was slow, but by midnight, she found herself riding tiredly into Rorikstead. A sense of familiarity washed over her and she found herself dismounting. Her legs were sore from riding most of the day and she wobbled her way into the inn, leaving Shadowmere to his own devices. The shade horse would keep himself out of trouble, that much she knew, and really, that was all she could be bothered about just then.

When she entered the inn, she found the main hall empty, though much of the inn remained empty. She pulled out the standard ten gold for her room, as well as a few extra septims for a wash and a good meal for the next morning. She scribbled down a quick note and place the coins under the bar before making her way into one of the open rooms and collapsing for the night.

She slept soundly, and upon waking, found a lovely meal waiting on her bedside table. She ate quickly, having not eaten on the road the previous day since she left Riften, even. Esbern had been too paranoid to rest for long, even when it was for food. She rose and upon exiting her room, was approached by the innkeeper, Mralki, who led her to the small private room where her bath was waiting. She thanked him profusely and quickly washed herself, glad for the chance to revitalise her weary body.

Once she was clothed in her Nightingale armor once more, she made her way out into the sunlight and considered her options for calling Shadowmere right then and there. There were children running about though, and she worried about frightening them with her dark horse.

“You look like you’ve seen your share of adventure,” a bright sounding voice said from behind her. “I envy you that.”

Raisa turned and spotted a young farm hand grinning at her in a surprisingly friendly way. “Yes, I suppose I have,” she said after a brief moment’s thought. “You want to be an adventurer, then?”
“Well, yes,” the young man nodded. “I’m Erik. I… Well, my father doesn’t agree. And I can see why. Lemkil’s farm needs my help— the harvest is good this year— and besides, we couldn’t afford to buy the armor, even if my father did agree with my dream.”

“Maybe I could change his mind,” Raisa said after a moment.

His expression brightened considerably at her words and he said, “Would you? That would be incredible!”

She frowned at him slightly, “I believe I remember you…”

Erik grinned again, “Did you live here?”

“I used to work for Lemkil, a few years ago. My uncle raised me here,” Raisa said. “But I left when he passed. When the war began.”

Erik nodded solemnly, “You must be a Pilkvist then. Shame about Hollen. He was a good man. I’m certain he would be proud of who you’ve become!”

Raisa frowned slightly, thinking about her uncle in that context for the first time. “I’m not entirely sure he would be…” She said quietly, though Erik, in his excitement, paid the comment no mind. “I’ll go and speak with your father then, before I head off. See if there’s not something I can do about your father.”

“Hurry back!” Erik exclaimed before scampering off with a bit of a spring in his step as he made his way back towards Lemkil’s farm.

Raisa made her way inside the inn once again and walked up to Mralki. “Hello again,” she said with a smile as she leaned against the bar. “I’d like to talk with you about your son.”

“My son? Erik?” the man asked, an intense look of worry crossing over his face at the mention of the young man. “What about him? Did something happen? Is he alright?”

“No! Nothing’s happened, he’s perfectly fine,” Raisa said quickly. “He’s actually a bit too fine, really. You should let your son choose the life he wants, Mralki.”

“But the world is a dangerous place,” Mralki protested. “You of all people should know. Erik has no idea what he’s getting himself into. What’s more, he’s got no armor. I’ll have to save up the money for it.”

“Use this to buy some armor,” Raisa said, pulling out a decently sized coin purse and holding it out to the man.

“You would give your own coin to help my son? I’m moved by your compassion. Your kind deed will not go unrewarded, my friend,” Mralki said, looking genuinely touched by her generosity.

“I don’t require any reward,” she said quickly. “It’s just money. It isn’t as if I’m living some sort of lavish lifestyle. Like you pointed out. I know how tough it is out there. Money helps, but it helps more at home. You keep whatever’s extra.

“Tell Erik I’ve changed my mind, and we’ll visit Whiterun soon to fit him for armor,” Mralki said gratefully taking the money from her.

She exited the inn quickly and made her way over to Lemkil’s farm, briefly wondering how differently her life would have gone had she stayed in Rorikstead after her uncle died. “Hey
Greenthumb,” she called over to Erik. He came bounding over in an instant, leaning on his hoe slightly, an excite and hopeful look on his face. “Your father’s agreed to get you some armor.”

“This incredible!” Erik exclaimed, his eyes brightening once more. “I’ll forever be in your debt! I hope you’ll come back to Rorikstead soon and pay me a visit! Maybe we can swap stories about our adventures over a mug of ale at the inn!”

Raisa gave a short laugh and nodded, “I’ll be certain to do that. Perhaps you could join me on a few. It wouldn’t hurt to have someone around to show you the ropes. I know that I would have appreciated someone like that when I was first starting out.”

“I’ll be seeing you, then,” Erik said excitedly. “But for now, back to farming. Next time you see me, I’ll be in my new armor, ready to start my new life!”

“I look forward to that,” Raisa grinned before giving a sharp whistle. Shadowmere trotted up once more and she mounted him, her legs aching in protest. She made her way westward, towards Markarth, wondering what she should expect upon her arrival.

In short, she found that she should have expected the dragon. And the cannibals. Just as Delphine suggested, the hills were swarming with Forsworn. She found herself fighting practically as soon as she reached Karthspire. Figures the Blades’ secret base would be in such a dangerous area. Eventually, she found Esbern and Delphine waiting at the mouth of the cave.

“The power of the dragon is yours!” Esbern exclaimed gleefully. “There can be no doubt that you are the Dragonborn of prophecy.”

“You mean to tell me you watched me fight a dragon and all those Forsworn, and you didn’t bother to stop and help me out? Are you serious?” Raisa asked, more than a little bit annoyed with the pair of them. Neither responded, making their way into the caves, almost as if they were avoiding her accusations.

“This looked promising,” Delphine said, looking up at the old ruins that surrounded them, seeming to blossom out of the mountain itself.


“We’ve got to get this bridge down,” Delphine said, quickly running up a short flight of stairs. “These pillars must have something to do with it…” There were three pillars, each with a different symbol on their face.

“Yes,” Esbern mused, looking carefully at the pillars, “These are Akiviri symbols. Let's see… you have the symbol for ‘King’… and ‘Warrior’… and of course the symbol for ‘Dragonborn.’ That’s the one that appears to have a sort of arrow shape pointing downward at the bottom…”

As he explained the symbols to Delphine, Raisa switched each of the pillars to the Dragonborn symbol. They didn’t have time for a history lesson. Not when there was every chance more Forsworn could show up hungry and ready to butcher them. After dismantling a few more puzzles they came to the hidden temple’s front gate.


“Esbern’s probably right. Try using your blood on the carved seal on the floor,” Delphine urged Raisa eagerly. The young woman looked up at her companions with a clearly disgruntled expression.
Noticing her reluctance, Esbern jumped in again, “Look here! You see how the ancient Blades revered Reman Cyrodiil. This whole place appears to be a shrine to Reman. He ended the Akiviri invasion under mysterious circumstances, you recall. After the so-called ‘battle’ of Pale Pass, the Akiviri went into his service. This was the foundation stone of the Second Empire.”

Wanting nothing more than to avoid Esbern’s eager attitude for informative speeches, she slit her hand and squeezed a bit of blood out onto the seal.

“That's done it! Look, it's coming to life! You did it!” Delphine exclaimed as the temple doors unlocked and swung inward. “There's the entrance. After you, Dragonborn. You should have the honor of being the first to set foot in Sky Haven Temple.”

“There’s no telling what we might find inside!” Esbern exclaimed, sounding incredibly eager for Raisa to hurry herself along. She stood slowly and managed to summon up a bit of magic to heal her sliced hand. She sighed as the magic tingled along her arm and gave off a warm, golden glow. She made her way up the steps to the temple and entered, Esbern and Delphine close on her heels. “Fascinating! Original Akiviri bas-reliefs...almost entirely intact! Amazing... you can see how the Akiviri craftsmen were beginning to embrace the more flowing Nordic style…” Esbern rattled on as they made their way into Sky-Haven Temple.

“We’re here for Alduin’s Wall, right, Esbern?” Delphine asked, reminding the old man of their true purpose.

“Yes, of course,” Esbern mumbled, “We’ll have more time to look around later, I suppose. Let’s see what’s up ahead.”

Prominently featured in the enormous main hall was what they all knew had to be the wall. “Shor's bones! Here it is! Alduin's Wall... so well preserved...I've never seen a finer example of early second era Akiviri sculptural relief…” Esbern gasped as he inspected the wall eagerly.

“Esbern,” Delphine said sharply. “We need information, not a lecture on art history.”

“Yes, yes. Let's see what we have…” Esbern grumbled, sounding a bit like a child who was told off for sneaking a sweet roll before dinner. “Look, here is Alduin! This panel goes back to the beginning of time, when Alduin and the Dragon Cult ruled over Skyrim. Here, the humans rebel against their dragon overlords—the legendary Dragon War. Alduin's defeat is the centerpiece of the Wall. You see, here he is falling from the sky. The Nord Tongues—masters of the Voice—are arrayed against him.”

“So, does it show how they defeated him?” Delphine persisted impatiently. “Isn't that why we’re here?”

“Patience, my dear. The Akiviri were not a straightforward people. Everything is couched in allegory and mythic symbolism. Yes, yes. This here, coming from the mouths of Nord heroes—this is the Akiviri symbol for ‘Shout.' But... there's no way to know what Shout is meant.”

“You mean they used a Shout to defeat Alduin? You’re sure?” Delphine asked eagerly.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Presumably something rather specific to dragons, or even Alduin himself. Remember, this is where they recorded all they knew of Alduin and his return,” Esbern mused.

“So we're looking for a Shout, then. Damn it. Have you ever heard of such a thing? A Shout that can knock a dragon out of the sky?” Delphine asked Raisa sharply.

Raisa shook her head, “I've never heard of anything like that. But the Greybeards might know.”
“I was afraid you were going to say that. I guess there's nothing for it. We'll have to ask the Greybeards for help. I hoped to avoid involving them in all this, but we have no other choice,” Delphine sighed in exasperation.

“What do you have against the Greybeards anyways?” Raisa asked, feeling as if it was a somewhat touchy subject.

“If they had their way, you'd do nothing but sit up on their mountain with them and talk to the sky, or whatever it is they do. The Greybeards are so afraid of power they won't use it. Think about it. Have they tried to stop the civil war, or done anything about Alduin? No. And they're afraid of you, of your power. Trust me, there's no need to be afraid. Think of Tiber Septim. Do you think he'd have founded the Empire if he'd listened to the Greybeards?”

“The Greybeards have a point,” Raisa said quickly, looking at Delphine almost coldly. “Power is dangerous. This damned civil war is what happens when people take advantage of power.”

“Only if you don't know how to use it. All the great heroes have had to learn to use their power. Those that shrank from their destiny… well, you've never heard of them, have you? And there are the villains— those that misused their power. There's always a choice, and there's always a risk. But if you live in fear of what might go wrong, you'll end up doing nothing. Like the Greybeards up on their mountain.”

“I'm not afraid of my own power,” Raisa said sharply. “But that doesn’t mean I'm not wise to keep it under control.”

“Good. The Greybeards can teach you a lot, but don't let them turn you away from your destiny. You're Dragonborn, and you're the only one who can stop Alduin. Don't forget it,” Delphine reminded her.

“As if I could forget it,” Raisa snapped, almost glaring at the woman. “It's not as if I have a choice in the matter.” The older woman opened her mouth to respond but Raisa cut her off before she could get started, “I'll ask Arngeir if he knows what Shout they used.”

“Right. Good thing they've already let you into their little cult. Not likely they'd help Esbern or me if we came calling. We'll look around Sky Haven Temple and see what else the old Blades might have left for us. It's a better hideout than we could have hoped for. Talos guard you.”

Raisa felt a surge of anger rise up inside her. Delphine would do well to watch her tongue. She was too biased, too cold. The Greybeards were right to keep themselves separate from the rest of the world. Their power could tear her apart with just a whisper. Part of Raisa wished that she was that powerful. At least then it would put Delphine’s ignorant views into perspective for the woman. Caution and control were more valuable than the extent of power itself.

“Look, here. In the third panel. The prophecy that brought the Akiviri to Tamriel in the first place, in search of the Dragonborn. Here are the Akiviri— the Blades— you see their distinctive longswords. Now they kneel, their ancient mission fulfilled, as the Last Dragonborn contends with Alduin at the end of time. Are you paying attention, Delphine? You might learn something of your own history…”
“Ah!” Arngeir exclaimed upon Raisa’s return to High Hrothgar. “You’ve retrieved the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. Well done. You have now passed all the trials. Come with me. It is time for us to recognise you formally as Dragonborn.”

“By the Nine…” Erik the Slayer exclaimed, looking around the monastery in awe. On her way back towards Ivarstead, Raisa had stopped in Rorikstead for a few days. Erik had gotten his armor and a new name to boot. And she always made good on her word, so he had accompanied her back to meet with the Greybeards. She had forgotten to mention to him that she was Dragonborn, and the first time she’d had to use a Shout (Unrelenting Force. A pair of vicious Sabre cats had converged on them. It did a good job of sending the cats flying, frightening them into beating a hasty retreat once they’d managed to get to their feet again.) nearly had the young adventurer cowering behind a boulder. To his credit, Erik had recovered quickly, eager to be on their way again.

Arngeir and the other monks gathered in the vestibule. The old man nodded and said, “You are ready to learn the final word of Unrelenting Force, ‘Dah,’ which means, ‘Push.’ With all three words together, this Shout is much more powerful. Use it wisely. Master Wulfgar will now gift you with his knowledge of ‘Dah.’” Once the transfer of power was finished Arngeir nodded in satisfaction. “You have completed your training, Dragonborn. We would Speak to you. Stand between us, and prepare yourself. Few can withstand the unbridled Voice of the Greybeards. But you are ready.”

Together, the monks Spoke to Raisa. The combined power of their voices was practically unbearable. It felt as though she were suffocating, but she managed to withstand the force of their power. “Lingrah krosis saraan Strundu'ul, voth nid balaan klov praan nau. Naal Thu'umu, mu ofan nii nu, Dovahkiin, naal sulyk do Kaan, naal sulyk do Shor, ahrk naal sulyk do Atmorasewuth. Meyz nu Ysmir, Dovahsebrom. Dahmaan daar rok.”

“Dovahkiin. You have tasted the Voice of the Greybeards, and passed through unscathed. High Hrothgar is open to you,” Arngeir said solemnly, as the monks bowed to Raisa where she stood. Erik let out a low whistle, seemingly awestruck by the things he had witnessed in his first day of adventuring.

“What was that ceremony all about? Were you Shouting at me?” Raisa asked curiously once the other monks had returned to their previous haunts.

“We spoke the traditional words of greeting to a Dragonborn who has accepted our guidance. The same words were used to greet the young Talos, when he came to High Hrothgar, before he became the Emperor Tiber Septim,” Arngeir informed Raisa.

“What did you actually say?” she asked with a frown.

“Ah. I sometimes you forget you are not versed in the dragon tongue as we are. This is a rough translation: ‘Long has the Stormcrown languished, with no worthy brow to sit upon. By our breath we bestow it now to you in the name of Kyne, in the name of Shor, and in the name of Atmora of Old. You are Ysmir now, the Dragon of the North, hearken to it.’”

Raisa nodded thoughtfully before saying, “I’d like to learn the Shout used to defeat Alduin.”

Arngeir looked at Raisa sharply, a worried expression on his face. “Where did you learn of that?
Who have you been talking to, Dragonborn?"

“It was recorded on Alduin’s Wall,” Raisa said simply.

“The Blades! Of course. They specialize in meddling in matters they barely understand. Their reckless arrogance knows no bounds. They have always sought to turn the Dragonborn from the path of wisdom. Have you learned nothing from us? Would you simply be a tool in the hands of the Blades, to be used for their own purposes?” Arngeir practically sneered at her, his disdain for the group clear.

“The Blades are helping me,” Raisa said sharply, returning the glare at the old man. “I’m not their puppet. No more than I am yours. Or anyone else’s for that matter.” She said the words fiercely, though she felt the bitter lie hidden within them. In most matters she was a puppet, a fact she was trying her hardest to rectify where she could.

“No, no, of course not,” Arngeir sighed, recognising his folly. “Forgive me, Dragonborn. I have been intemperate with you. But heed my warning—the Blades may say they serve the Dragonborn, but they do not. They never have.”

“Regardless of who they serve, the Blades are focused on the defeat of Alduin,” Raisa said. “Aren’t you?”

“What I want is irrelevant,” Arngeir said sharply. “This Shout was used once before, was it not? And here we are again. Have you considered that Alduin was not meant to be defeated? Those who overthrew him in ancient times only postponed the day of reckoning, they did not stop it. If the world is meant to end, so be it. Let it end and be reborn.”

“So you won’t help me?” Raisa asked, almost incredulously.

“No,” Arngeir said firmly. “Not now. Not until you return to the path of wisdom.”

Raisa turned and motioned to Erik that they were leaving. Before they could exit the monastery, a voice suddenly shook the very foundations of the monastery, “Arngeir. Rak los Dovahkiin, Strundu’ul. Rok fen tinvak Paarthurnax.”

“Dragonborn… wait. Forgive me,” Arngeir sighed, sounding as if he was struggling to get the words out. “I was… intemperate. I allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment. Master Einarth reminded me of my duty. The decision whether or not to help you is not mine to make.”

“So, can you teach me this Shout?” Raisa asked hesitantly.

“No. I cannot teach it to you because I do not know it. It is called ‘Dragonrend,’ but its Words of Power are unknown to us. We do not regret this loss. Dragonrend holds no place within the Way of the Voice.”

“I thought you knew all the Words of Power,” Raisa said bluntly.

“But not Dragonrend. The knowledge of that Shout was lost in the time before history began. Perhaps only its creators ever knew it. But I am not the one to speak of it to you.”

“What’s so bad about it then?” Raisa asked. “You must have a reason for responding so strongly to it.”

“It was created by those who had lived under the unimaginable cruelty of Alduin's Dragon Cult. Their whole lives were consumed with hatred for dragons, and they poured all their anger and
hatred into this Shout. When you learn a Shout, you take it into your very being. In a sense, you become the Shout. In order to learn and use this Shout, you will be taking this evil into yourself,” Arngeir explained.

“I’ve faced things far worse, I can assure you,” Raisa sighed. “And yet I’ve managed to remain focused and fair so far. I believe that I can handle it. But, if the Shout is lost, how can I defeat Alduin?”

“Only Paarthurnax, the leader of our order, can answer that question, if he so chooses,” Arngeir explained.

“Who is Paarthurnax?” Raisa asked with a growing frown.

“He is our leader,” Arngeir said carefully. Raisa felt as though he was hiding something from her, but she was not in a position to wheedle the information from him. “He surpasses us all in his mastery of the Way of the Voice.”

“Why haven’t I met Paarthurnax yet?” Raisa asked curiously and carefully, sensing it was a touchy subject.

“He lives in seclusion on the very peak of the mountain. He speaks to us only rarely, and never to outsiders. Being allowed to see him is a great privilege. Your companion will need to wait here,” Arngeir said, looking critically over at Erik who was still staring in awe at the monastery.

“I need to speak to Paarthurnax, then,” Raisa said with a decisive sigh.

“You weren’t ready,” Arngeir sighed, “You still aren’t ready. But thanks to the Blades, you now have questions that only Paarthurnax can answer.”

“I never asked for this, Arngeir,” Raisa said after a moment. “I never wanted to be Dragonborn, to be caught up in this war. I’ve never had a choice in any of this. My destiny, whatever it is, has already been laid out for me. Regardless of who I gain support from, regardless of what I wanted for my life, this journey will end with me facing Alduin. But I plan to be ready when I face him. As ready as I can be. So how do I get to the top of the mountain to see Paarthurnax?”

Arngeir looked and the young woman almost sadly. For the first time, he noticed just how young she truly was. She should have been settled and preparing to raise a family. She should have had a safe and normal life. She had been so soft, so hopeful, the first time she had come to them. Now she was hardened, her eyes colder, more calculating. But her heart was the same.

He sighed in resignation and said, “Only those whose Voice is strong can find the path. We will teach you a Shout to open the way to Paarthurnax.” Raisa and Erik followed Arngeir outside into the back courtyard, followed by the rest of the monks. They halted at the foot of steps that led up and out into a powerful blizzard. “The path to Paarthurnax lies through this gate. I will show you how to open the way. Lok… Vah… Koor…” Arngeir explained, imprinting the words into the ground for Raisa to learn them.

“I will grant you my understanding of Clear Skies. This is your final gift from us, Dragonborn. Use it well. Clear Skies will blow away the mist, but only for a time. The path to Paarthurnax is perilous, not to be embarked upon lightly. Keep moving, stay focused on your goal, and you will reach the summit,” Arngeir continued.

And with that, Raisa set off on her own. Erik was more than happy to stay behind in the relative warmth of High Hrothgar while she met with the mysterious leader of the Greybeards. She reached
the summit, confused when she found nothing of note. No shelter, no fire, no caves. Only a half-
moon wall with what looked like the dragon language scrawled across its face. As she approached
she heard the unmistakable whoosh and rumble of a dragon preparing for an attack.

Instinctively, she reached for her bow, but instead of attacking, the dragon landed on the strange
wall and stared at her coldly and calculatingly. She removed her hand from her weapon and simply
waited.

“Drem Yo Lok. Greetings, wunduniik. I am Paarthurnax. Who are you? What brings you to my
strunmah… my mountain?” the dragon hummed, stretching its neck low towards the ground,
reaching forward to look at her curiously.

“I think you already know who I am,” Raisa said. “I wasn’t expecting you to be a dragon.”

“Yes. Vahzah. You speak true. Forgive me. It has been long since I last tinkaak with a stranger. I
gave in to the temptation to prolong our speech,” Paarthurnax. “I am as my father Akatosh made
me. As are you… Dovahkiin."

“Why live alone on a mountain if you love conversation?” Raisa asked after a moment’s silence.

“Evenaar bahlok. There are many hungers it is better to deny than to feed. Dreh ni nahkip.
Discipline against the lesser aids in qahnaar… denial of the greater,” Paarthurnax mused. “Tell me.
Why do you come here, volaan? Why do you intrude on my meditation?”

“I need to learn the Dragonrend Shout,” Raisa said carefully, cautiously. “Can you teach me?”

“Drem. Patience. There are formalities which must be observed, at the first meeting of two of the
dov. By long tradition, the elder speaks first. Hear my Thu’um! Feel it in your bones! Match it, if
you are Dovahkiin! Yol… Toor… Shul!” Here, the dragon breathed fire on the nearby Word Wall,
empowering it for Raisa to learn from. Paarthurnax looked at her silently for a moment, noticing
her shake her head slightly, as if trying to shake away the whisperings of power. “The Word calls to
you. Go to it.”

The human looked up at him, a hesitant look on her face. She approached the wall cautiously,
absorbing the Word. “A gift, Dovahkiin. Yol. Understand Fire as the dov do,” Paarthurnax. The
dragon then allowed Raisa to tap his knowledge of the power of fire. “Now, show me what you can
do. Greet me not as mortal, but as dovah! Do not be afraid. Faasnu. Let me feel the power of your
Thu’um.”

Raisa stood for a moment, feeling the power churning in the pit of her stomach. It made her feel
somewhat ill, but she knew it was because she was holding back. She slowed her breathing and
allowed herself to relax for once. She doubted she would ever completely become used to the
sensation. However, she was thrilled with a strangely satisfying thrill when the Word ‘Yol’ burst
out of her and called into being a burst of flame. Her heart raced as she realized what she had done,
excitement coursing through her, adrenaline flooding her veins.

“Aaah… yes! Sossedov los mul. The dragonblood runs strong in you. It is long since I had the
pleasure of speech with one of my own kind. So. You have made your way here, to me. No easy
task for a joor… mortal. Even for one of Dovah Sos. Dragonblood. What would you ask of me?”

“You know what I wish,” Raisa said, still somewhat wary of the dragon.

“Ah. I have expected you. Prodah. You would not come all this way for tinkaak with an old dovah.
No. You seek your weapon against Alduin. Alduin komeyt tiid. What else would you seek? Alduin
and Dovahkiin return together. But, I do not know the Thu’um you seek. Krosis.”

“The Greybeards didn’t want me to come at all…” Raisa said. “Well… Arngeir didn’t…”

“Hmm. Yes. They are very protective of me. Bahlaan fahdonne,” Paarthurnax hummed thoughtfully. “It cannot be known to me. Your kind— joorre— mortals— created it as a weapon against the dov… the dragons. Our hadrimme, our minds cannot even… comprehend its concepts.”

“How can I learn it then?” Raisa asked, sounding frustrated.

“Drem. All in good time. First, a question for you,” Paarthurnax said slowly. “Why do you want to learn this Thu’um?”

Raisa was silent for a long while as she thought over the question. “The prophecy says that only the Dragonborn can stop him… Stop Alduin I mean.”

“You do not seem certain,” the dragon pointed out. “Yes. Alduin… zeymah. The elder brother. Gifted, grasping and troublesome as is so often the case with firstborn. True… But qostiid— prophecy— tells what may be, not what should be. Qostiid sahlo aak. Just because you can do a thing, does not always mean you should. Do you have no better reason for acting than destiny? Are you nothing but a plaything of dez… of fate? But why? Why must you stop Alduin?”

“Destiny… fate… mine’s already been written. But I like this world,” Raisa said shortly. “I don’t want to see it end. Not while there’s a chance it might be saved.”

“Pruzah. As good a reason as any. There are many who feel as you do, although not all. Some would say that all things must end, so that the next can come to pass. Perhaps this world is simply the Egg for the next kalpa? Lein vokiin? Would you stop the next world from being born?” the dragon asked.

“The next world will just have to take care of itself,” Raisa said with a slight shrug.

“Paaz. A fair answer. Ro fus… maybe you only balance the forces at work to quicken the end of this world. Even we who ride the currents of Time cannot see past Time's end. Wuldsetiid los tahrodis. Those who try to hasten the end, may delay it. Those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer.”

“Then so be it,” Raisa said. “My life has been full of choices made for me. I’ve learned to expect this sort of thing…”

“And so, perhaps, your destiny will be fulfilled. Who can say? Dez motmahus. Even to the dov, who ride the currents of Time, destiny is elusive. Alduin believes that he will prevail, with good reason. Rok mul. And he is no fool. Ni mey, rinik gut nol. Far from it. He began as the wisest and most far-seeing of us all,” Paarthurnax mused, looking down at Raisa thoughtfully. “But you have indulged my weakness for speech long enough. Krosis. Now I will answer your question. Do you know why I live here, at the peak o the Monahven— what you name Throat of the World?”

“I never thought about it…” Raisa said after a moment. “Dragons like mountains, right?”

“True,” the dragon rumbled, a sound almost like laughter. “But few now remember that this is the most sacred mountain in Skyrim. Zok revak strunmah. The great mountain of the world. Here the ancient Tongues, the first mortal masters of the Voice, brought Alduin to battle and defeated him.”

“Using the Dragonrend Shout?” Raisa asked. “Right?”
“Yes and no. Viik nuz ni kron. Alduin was not truly defeated, either. If he was, you would not be here today, seeking to… defeat him. The Nords of those days used the Dragonrend Shout to cripple Alduin. But this was not enough. Ok mulaag unslaad. It was the Kel— the Elder Scroll. They used it to… cast him adrift on the currents of Time.”


“Hmm. How to explain in your tongue? The dov have words for such thing that joorre do not. It is an… artifact from outside time. It does not exist, but it has always existed. Rah wahlaan. They are… hmm… fragments of creation. The Kelle… Elder Scrolls, as you name them, they have often been used for prophecy. Yes, your prophecy comes from an Elder Scroll. But this is only a small part of their power. Zofaas suleyk,” Paarthurnax explained.

“Are you saying the ancient Nords sent Alduin forward in time?” Raisa asked after a moment of silence spent absorbing the dragon’s words.

“Not intentionally. Some hoped he would be gone forever, forever lost. Meyye. I knew better. Tiid bo amativ. Time flows ever onward. One day he would surface. Which is why I have lived here. For thousands of mortal years I have waited. I knew where he would emerge but not when,” the dragon continued.

“How does any of this help me?”

“Tiid krent. Time was… shattered here because of what the ancient Nords did to Alduin. If you brought that Kel, that Elder Scroll back here… to the Tiid-Ahraan, the Time-Wound… With the Elder Scroll that was used to break Time, you may be able to… cast yourself back. To the other end of the break. You could learn Dragonrend from those who created it.”
Raisa stood on top of the Throat of the World, staring up in wonder and confusion at the only dragon she had ever properly met. There was a bit of desperation in her tone and her mind was reeling. The revelation of a higher power in the Greybeard hierarchy had been expected, but she had never thought that a dragon would be her teacher. She shivered in the cold as the blizzard swirled around them, though the dragon remained unfazed by the cold and the wind.

“Do you know where I can find an Elder Scroll?” she asked, hoping that she could bring some useful information back to Delphine and Esbern. She’d gone through enough trouble with Arngeir already as it was.

“Krosis,” the dragon hummed, “No. I know little of what has passed below in the long years I have lived here. You are likely better informed than I.” Paarthurnax tilted his head and angled his neck so he could look down at her curiously, his enormous, dark eye unblinking.

“The Lorekeeper at the College of Winterhold might know?” she suggested, feeling incredibly out of her depth once again. She felt doubt creeping through her mind, affecting not only her thoughts on the Elder Scroll, but all the choices she had made to lead her there in the first place. Paarthurnax leaned forward on his perch, his head roughly a foot away from her. His ancient eye stared almost entirely through her and a low growl drilled out in the back of his throat.

“Trust your instincts, Dovahkiin,” he told her. “Your blood will show you the way.”

“What would I do with the Elder Scroll if I even managed to find it?” Raisa asked. “It isn’t as if there are books on how to use them just lying around Skyrim…”

“Return it here, to the Tiid-Ahraan. Then… Kelle vomindok. Nothing is certain with such things. But I believe the Scroll’s bond with the Tiid-Ahraan will allow you a… a seeing, a vision of the moment of its creation. Then you will feel— know— Dragonrend, in the power of its first expression. You will see them… wuth fahdonne… my friends— Hakon, Gormlaith, Felldir,” Paarthurnax replied.

“Hakon?” Raisa asked, her face screwing up slightly in confusion. “Gormlaith, Felldir? Who are they?”

“The first mortals that I taught the Thu’um— the first Tongues. The leaders of the rebellion against Alduin. They were mighty, in their day. Even to attempt to defeat Alduin… sahrot hunne. The Nords have had many heroes since, but none greater,” the dragon hummed thoughtfully, seeming far away in his thoughts.

“How could an Elder Scroll cast Alduin through time?” Raisa asked. “It sounds utterly insane. It shouldn’t be possible. It’s barely plausible in the first place.”

“Vomindok. I do not know. Perhaps in the very doing they erased the knowing of it from Time itself. The dov are children of Akatosh. Thus we are specially… attuned to the flow of Time. Perhaps also uniquely vulnerable. I warned them against such a rash action. Even I could not foresee its consequences. Nust ni hon. They would not listen,” Paarthurnax informed her, a brief tone of bitterness breaking through his wizened and calm voice.

“You mean to say you were there?” Raisa asked, sounding somewhat impressed, but mostly skeptical. It seemed so long ago; considering dragons were practically legends alone in her time.
was hard to think that Paarthurnax had lived in solitude for so long after the Dragon war ended.

“Yes. There were a few of us that rebelled against Alduin's thur… his tyranny. We aided the humans in his overthrow. But they did not trust us. Ni ov. Their inner councils were kept hidden from us. I was far from here on the day of Alduin's downfall. But all dov felt the… sundering of Time itself,” Paarthurnax told her. He did seem to enjoy speaking, even if the subject matter was such an important and harrowing memory.

“Before I go,” Raisa said finally, looking up at the dragon, feeling oddly at ease with the giant creature. “What does the Dragonrend Shout actually do?”

“I cannot tell you in detail. I never heard it used. Kogaan. It was the first Thu'um created solely by mortals. It was said to force a dragon to experience the concept of Mortality. A truly vonmindoraan… incomprehensible idea to the immortal dov,” Paarthurnax attempted to explain.

Raisa nodded slightly. She figured it was similar to how she couldn't entirely wrap her head around the fact that Paarthurnax had taught some of the first dovahkiin. That he had survived for so long and continued despite adversity and loneliness. She thanked the dragon and made her way back down the mountain in a slight daze. She made her way into High Hrothgar and found Erik waiting with a tankard of mead warmed by one of the many fires in the monastery.

As she spent a short while thawing herself out from her recent trip up and down the summit of the mountain, Arngeir came and sat beside her. She felt somewhat tense in his presence. She knew he couldn’t approve of her actions, but she knew she was in the right. Paarthurnax had told her to trust her instincts. She intended to do just that.

“So… you spoke to Paarthurnax. The dragonblood burns bright within you. Did he tell you what you wanted to know? Did he teach you the Dragonrend Shout?” Arngeir asked, looking over at Raisa almost hesitantly and critically.

“No,” Raisa said with a sigh, shaking her head in mild disappointment. “But he told me how to find out.”

“So be it,” Arngeir sighed almost bitterly. “If he believes it is necessary for you to learn this… then we will bow to his wisdom.”

“I need the Elder Scroll the ancients used. Do you know where I'd be able to find it?” Raisa asked hopefully. She didn’t particularly want to make her way all the way to Winterhold again. It was a dire little place and it reminded her of her first meetings with Karlia. When Brynjolf believed she was a traitor. Needless to say, the place didn’t hold much in the way of happy memories for her.

“We have never concerned ourselves with the Scrolls,” Arngeir said sharply, his voice a bit harsher than he meant for it to sound. “The gods themselves would rightly fear to tamper with such things. As for where to find it… such blasphemies have always been the stock and trade of the mages of Winterhold. They may be able to tell you something about the Elder Scroll you seek.”

“Fair enough,” Raisa sighed almost tiredly. “If I truly believed there was a better way to do any go this, I hope you know that I wouldn’t be seeking this Shout out. I never asked for this power. I’m far too young to have the weight of the world on my shoulders. I just want to be done with this so I can return what little normalcy is left in my life.”

With that, she stood and motioned to Erik that it was time for them to leave once more. As they exited the temple the ex-farmhand looked at her with a slightly worried expression. “You seem troubled, friend,” he said simply, not expecting an answer, though acknowledging her discomfort in
case she wished to discuss it.

In that sense, Raisa was grateful for Erik’s company. Though he liked to refer to himself as Erik the Slayer, the boy was anything but. He was kind and surprisingly gentle. His eyes filled with wonder at the smallest, most insignificant things. Despite his desire for adventure and danger, he was still young and hopeful. She shook her head slightly and said, “There’s just so much happening in Skyrim, Erik. So many troubles plague us, and they all seem to involve me. After a while it… it just wears you down a bit…”

“Well, we’ll take what we can get then,” Erik said reassuringly. “We’ll do some damage and sort it all out if we can. Take it one step at a time. It’s like we always said back home: Can't harvest the crops until the rains have stopped.”

“Can’t reap the reward until the job’s done,” Raisa sighed in agreement. “I suppose that’ll have to do. Let’s just hope it’s enough then, eh?”

“So where are we off to this time?” Erik asked with an excited grin. “Somewhere a bit warmer I hope?”

Raisa let out a laugh that was taken away by the swirling blizzard around them, “If you consider the village of Winterhold to be warmer, maybe. Though, the circumstances don’t look favourable on that front.”

“It’s times like these I almost miss farming…” Erik sighed, causing Raisa to let out a short laugh. He’d barely been gone a week at most and he was already complaining like a veteran adventurer. At least he was a positive bugger. Otherwise she might’ve had to send him home by then.

They took a leisurely two days to travel up to Winterhold. Luckily, the pair managed to avoid any random encounters with dragons. It was a relatively easy journey until they got close to the small village. It was remote enough to begin with, but the constant snow made travel slow and difficult. As they approached the village, by some miracle the snow cleared for a short time and they beheld the College in all its magnitude.

A once glorious piece of architecture, the Mage’s college appeared to falling to ruin. The long bridge was suspended over a large cavern. A closer look revealed that the College of Winterhold was settled atop a precarious bit of rock, almost in the shape of an upside-down pyramid. In comparison to the massive building, the village was in shambles. A few stray buildings were dilapidated and caving in on themselves. There was an inn on the right side of the road across from the Jarl’s Longhouse. Apart from that there were few homes around the village. Raisa wondered how it managed to stay alive as a town at all with how few residents there were. She supposed the college was at least a bit of a help to them in that regard.

“That’s… that’s… wow…” Erik said, staring off at the College as they made their way into village. The end of the bridge stood at the end of the road and the edge of the cliffs. An Altmer stood vigil at the top of the ramp, staring almost suspiciously at Raisa and Erik as they approached. She stepped forward and blocked the way. Raisa came to a stop a few feet away and looked up at the elf with a frown on her face.

“Cross the bridge at your own peril,” she said sharply, her voice loud over the howling wind. “The way is dangerous, and the gate will not open. You shall not gain entry!”

“Why are you out here?” Raisa asked the woman curiously.

“I am here to assist those seeking the wisdom of the College. And if, in the process, my presence
helps to deter those who might seek to do harm, so be it. The more important question is: why are you here?” the woman explained shortly, looking the pair up and down critically.

“May I enter the College?” Raisa asked, hoping to get by to fulfil her intention of obtaining the Elder Scroll with little difficulty.

“Perhaps,” the woman mused. “But what is it you expect to find within?”

“I seek the knowledge of the Elder Scrolls,” Raisa said simply, unsure if she should trust the woman.

“Do you?” the woman asked, sounding both surprised and intrigued. “It is true there are some here who have spent years studying the accumulated knowledge of the scrolls. But what you seek does not come easily, and can destroy those without a strong will.”

“I don’t think it’ll be much of a problem for me,” Raisa said shortly, looking at the elf with an unwavering confidence. “I’m the Dragonborn.”

“Dragonborn?” the elf scoffed slightly, a short laugh escaping her as she looked at Raisa even more curiously than she had before. “If you truly are Dragonborn you should be able to Shout like the dragons. Prove this and I shall allow you to pass.”

Raisa gave a slightly huff and tried to calm herself down. It wasn’t that she was worked up or anything; it was just that she found it easier to connect to her inner Dovah when she let her guard down, when she was vulnerable. She took a few deep breaths, sinking deeper into her subconscious mind, feeling the words of power swirl around inside her chest. She allowed them to fester, to grow in strength, until they were ready to burst out of her chest without restraint. However, she managed to catch herself, noting that it wouldn’t be in her best interest to miscalculate her ability and injure, or even kill, the woman waiting for her demonstration. She reigned in what she could of the shout and shortened it to a simple “Fus” instead of the entire Shout.

The elf staggered backwards, barely managing to catch herself on the low walls of the bridge, a look of utter surprise crossing her golden brown skin. Her thin eyes narrowed in slight irritation as she straightened herself once again, though Raisa could sense a bit of admiration in the woman’s gaze as she collected herself.

“Well done, indeed,” the elf praised lightly. “I think you’ll be a superb addition to the College. Welcome, Apprentice.” She looked briefly at Erik, as if considering demanding a demonstration from him as well. Instead, she turned her attention back to Raisa, as if she had decided that Erik wouldn’t cause any trouble if he went across. “I’ll lead you across the bridge. Once inside you’ll want to speak to Mirabelle Ervine, our Master Wizard. Please, follow me.”

Raisa followed closely after the Altmeri woman and asked, “Is there anything more you can tell me about the College?”

“We are the only group left in Skyrim dedicated to study of the arcane. There are those who study, to be sure, but they do so in private, and often in secret,” the elf said. “The residents of Skyrim are skeptical of magic enough as it is. You can hardly expect them to be open with their practices of it.”

“My name is Raisa,” Raisa said after a few moments of silence. “This is Erik.”

“The Slayer,” he added quietly. Raisa smothered a grin

“Faralda,” the elf said shortly, stopping in front of the now open gates. “You’ll find Mirabelle
inside.”

Raisa thanked Faralda and walked through the college gates, Erik following behind her somewhat hesitantly. The massive statue in the center of the grounds towered above them as they approached the entrance. Raisa slowed at the sound of loud and irritated voices, sending a nervous glance back at Erik, who simply shrugged uncertainly at her.

“I believe I’ve made myself rather clear,” a short woman said firmly, her voice somewhat tight. The irritation in her tone was obvious as she glared coldly up at a Thalmor agent.

The elf glared back at the woman, his displeasure apparent immediately, though his demeanor was that of a conciliatory nature. His voice was pinched and somewhat nasally, his words dripping with something akin to attempts at charm. “Yes, of course,” he replied, “I’m simply trying to understand the reasoning behind the decision.”

“You may be used to the Empire bowing to your every whim, but I’m afraid you'll find the Thalmor receive no such treatment here. You are a guest of the College, here at the pleasure of the Arch-Mage. I hope you appreciate the opportunity,” the woman— Mirabelle— snapped sharply.

“Yes, of course,” the elf sneered, clearly displeased with the situation. “The Arch-Mage has my thanks.” With that said, the Thalmor turned and left with a flourish, taking his bad attitude and suspicious glare with him.

“Very good,” Mirabelle said tersely before turning to greet Raisa and Erik where they stood nearby. “Welcome to the College.” Her eyes looked at them almost critically though there was a projection of what was supposed to be a warm welcome in her voice though it was somewhat tight and insincere sounding.

“I was told to come see you,” Raisa said.

“Another new student…” the woman started quickly, looking between the two newcomers in slight surprise. “I'm surprised at how many of you there are lately. Well, first you'll need these. While you're not required to wear them, you may find them more to your liking than your current clothes. I'll give you a brief tour, and then we'll get you to your first class. Are you ready to begin?”

“I, uhm…” Raisa began, sounding somewhat unsure. She glanced at Erik who was still entranced by the large statue in the center of the grounds. “I’m not really ready for that just yet,” she said. “I need to see the Lorekeeper. Immediately.”

“There will be time for that later,” Mirabelle said dismissively, leading Raisa back the way she had come from. “Please follow me, and do not wander off. Keep your… companion under control.” Raisa followed after the woman, hitting Erik on the shoulder to get his attention away from his surroundings and back on the situation at hand.

Mirabelle didn’t give Raisa another opportunity to slip away, instead rushing into the tour as if there hadn’t been any protest in the first place. “The College of Winterhold has been a fixture in Skyrim for thousands of years. The prominent feature here is the Hall of the Elements. It's our primary location for lectures, practice sessions, and general meetings. The Arcanaeum is located above the hall, and the Arch-Mage's quarters above that. While technically in charge of the College, the Arch-Mage's responsibilities often keep him occupied. Thus, I run the day-to-day operations. Now, if you'll please follow me, I'll show you to the living quarters. Unfortunately, we've had to implement more stringent entry procedures, due to some problems with the local Nords. We don't anticipate any real violence, but it never hurts to be prepared.”
“How reassuring…” Raisa heard Erik mutter slightly. She hadn’t considered exactly how uncomfortable visiting the Mage’s College might make him, considering how their people viewed magic. She hadn’t given thought to whether or not he was as bigoted as most of Skyrim was when it came to learning to use magic. Luckily, he seemed more awestruck than anything.

“Our newest members are housed here at the Hall of Attainment. I’ll ask that you please keep your voice down while inside, as others may be working on research or… delicate experiments. Now, I'll show you to your quarters. You're going to be sharing space with your fellow Apprentices, who you'll meet shortly. This is where you'll be staying. This bed and desk are yours. Please try and be considerate of others. Now, let's go back to the Hall of the Elements, where most of the members gather for lectures and study sessions,” Mirabelle said stopping outside a tower off to the right of the entryway they had just proceeded through. “Initially, you'll be learning from Tolfdir, one of our most esteemed Wizards. Tolfdir is likely already addressing the new Apprentices. Go on in, and if you have any problems, let one of our senior members know.”

“What's expected of me here?” Raisa asked. “I was just here to use the Arcanaeum.”

“There are no expectations,” Mirabelle told her, ignoring her denial of apprenticeship. “The College is a place to study and practice magic freely. Hopefully any discoveries made in your pursuits will be shared with members of the College first. That way we all benefit.”

“Where can I learn new spells then?” Raisa asked after a brief moment’s thought. If she was being roped into being a student, she might as well utilise all the resources available to her. She may not be the best at magic, but she had the blessing of the mage stone and Festus’s brief training on her side.

“Well, that depends on what you're looking for,” Mirabelle said, looking at Raisa with a look similar to confusion, as if the question was far-fetched or hard to fully understand. “Faralda can teach Destruction spells, and offers training in that school. Phinis is one of the best Conjurers in all Skyrim, and can help with spells from that school. Don't let Tolfdir fool you; he's the pre-eminent scholar in Alteration. One of the best in Tamriel, and always willing to pass on his knowledge. If you can find him and focus his attention, there's a great deal Drevis can teach you about Illusion magic. And finally, there's Colette. She may be… difficult to get along with, but she's very knowledgeable when it comes to Restoration magic.”

“Thank you,” Raisa said quickly before grabbing Erik’s arm and bringing him back to the main hall of the College. They’d wasted enough time already and she wasn’t about to waste any more. The problems of Skyrim wouldn’t be solved by passivity and inaction.

“Are you going to go to the class?” Erik asked her as they pushed open the massive and incredibly heavy doors. “Sounds like it could be awfully fascinating, doesn’t it?”

“Not today,” Raisa sighed. “I really need to get some information on this Elder Scroll.”

“Fair enough, I suppose,” Erik shrugged. “But surely knowing some magic could help with this whole business?”

“I already know some,” Raisa said. “If I ever feel the need to learn some more, I’ll seek out instruction. But my biggest priority is ending this whole business with the Greybeards and the Blades and the Dragons. I want my life back in my control and finding this Elder Scroll is the first step to achieving just that.”

Raisa glanced into the large circular room past the atrium in the Hall of Elements before resuming her path towards the stairwell that would take them up to the Arcanaeum. She stepped into the
circular room and was greeted by dim lighting, a similar shade as that of the Thieves Guild. She found her heart aching once again and attempted to quell the bitter taste that rose up in her mouth. She didn’t need any more reminders of what she was running from. She shook herself free from her brief reverie and made her way to a desk across the room where an Orc was intently studying a number of ancient looking tomes.

“Excuse me,” Raisa said, placing her hands on the desk gently, making sure to keep her voice low and gentle so as to not get a scolding for being too loud in a place of study. “I’m looking for an Elder Scroll. It was suggested that I come here to search.”

“And what do you plan to do with it?” the orc asked, looking grumpily up from his work, clearly displeased at being interrupted. “Do you even know what you’re asking about, or are you just someone’s errand boy?”

“Can you tell me more about the Elder Scrolls?” Raisa asked with a sigh, knowing that he had a point; she didn’t know much about what she was after. But then again, that was the whole point of coming to the college in the first place.

“I knew it,” the orc grumbled, straightening and looking at her almost disapprovingly. “Everyone comes in here, expecting my help, but they don’t even have the proper questions.”

“Pardon me,” Raisa began carefully, “But the whole purpose of the College is to learn. The point of the Arcanaeum is to seek and collect knowledge. I wouldn’t have asked about the Scroll unless I wanted to learn about it.”

“An Elder Scroll is an instrument of immense knowledge and power,” the orc told her after a moment of grinding his teeth thoughtfully, his mood still evidently sour. “To read an Elder Scroll, a person must have the most rigorously trained mind, or else risk madness. Even so, the Divines usually take the reader’s sight as a price.”

“A price for what?” Raisa asked.

“The simplest way to put it is ‘knowledge,’ but there's nothing simple about an Elder Scroll. It's a reflection of all possible futures and all possible pasts. Each reader sees different reflections through different lenses, and may come away with a very different reading. But at the same time, all of it is true. Even the falsehoods. Especially the falsehoods,” the lorekeeper explained.

“Who wrote the Elder Scrolls?” Erik asked, his curiosity finally getting the better of him. He may have just been a companion along for the ride, but he wasn’t immune to the lure of potential knowledge.

“It would take a month to explain to you how that very question doesn’t even make sense,” Urag said, rolling his eyes slightly in what seemed to be exasperation. “The Scrolls exist here, with us, but are also beyond and beneath. Before and after. They are bits of Divine made substance so we could know them.” He paused for a moment, seeming to calm himself somewhat. “Sorry. Talking about the Scrolls, you usually end up in irritating and vague metaphors like that. Some people who study them devoutly go mad.”

“Do you have one here?” Raisa asked, scarcely allowing herself to hope that he did.

“Ha!” the orc exclaimed in a short, barking laugh. “You think even if I did have one here, I would let you see it? It would be kept under the highest security. The greatest thief in the world wouldn’t be able to lay a finger on it.”
“What about the Dragonborn?” Raisa asked, leaning forward slightly and staring the orc down pointedly.

Urag looked at her with a frown, his heavy brow furrowed slightly, “What about… wait. Are you? Were you the one the Greybeards were calling? I’ll bring everything we have on them, but it’s not much. Don’t get your hopes up though. It’s mostly lies, leavened with rumor and conjecture.”

Raisa nodded with a grimace as the orc turned and shuffled away to inspect his shelves for the information she sought. She turned and looked at Erik who was absentmindedly flipping through a book that was on the desk for perusal. He grinned up at her and pointed out how lucky it was that he was willing to cooperate.

Raisa smirked slightly, “If there’s one good thing that comes out of being the Dragonborn, it’s that simply owning up to my identity opens doors and works wonders for earning at least some degree of respect. A small sliver of a benefit in this new world of strife I’ve been shoved into.”

“Here you go,” the orc said, handing over two single books. Raisa handed one to Erik who eagerly began skimming through it, though it was already clear that he wasn’t going to find anything deeply helpful to their cause. “Try not to spill anything on them.”

Raisa opened the second book, ‘Ruminations’ by Septimus Signus. She sighed and instantly felt as if her head was swimming. Much like how it had felt the first time she had absorbed a dragon soul, her mind felt somewhat unstable, as if she were having a powerful head rush. Of course, it was an entirely different sort of mental uncertainty this time. This time, she simply couldn’t comprehend what was scribbled about on the pages before her. She sighed and looked at Urag almost irritably, “This ‘Ruminations' book is incomprehensible.”

“Aye,” Urag grimaced back at her. “That’s the work of Septimus Signus. He’s the world’s master on the nature of Elder Scrolls, but… well. He’s been gone for a long while. Too long.”

“Where did he go?” Raisa asked, frowning deeply.

“Somewhere up north, in the ice fields. Said he found some old Dwemer artifact, but… well, that was years ago. Haven’t heard from him since.”

“So, he’s most likely dead then?” Raisa asked, feeling that small seed of hopelessness starting to take root inside of her chest.

“Oh no,” the orc protested. “Or at least, I hope not. But even I haven’t seen him in years, and we were close.”

“Well, Erik,” Raisa sighed, returning the books to Urag gratefully. “It seems that we have a madman to find.”
Discerning the Transmundance

Chapter Summary

*attempts to slowly and quietly slink back into Skyrim* Not really, I'm about as subtle as literally any NPC companion when you REALLY need to be sneaking and hey bring the rage of every enemy in a five mile radius down on you.

Raisa sat in angry bundle in the small boat she and Erik had managed to scrounge up from one of the villagers of Winterhold. She decided then that she really did not like the cold. Not only was it snowing, but the northern seas around Winterhold were more than a bit colder than the warm marshes around Riften. It wasn’t as if she were exactly familiar with the cold. Sure, she’d been to Winterhold before, but that was always in the warmth of an inn, rather than the frigid and icy winds.

“Remind me to never come back here,” she grumbled as she and Erik rowed into the wind. “I can’t stand this weather.”

“Could be worse,” Erik pointed out. “Consider it as bracing more than as intolerable.”

“There,” Raisa said, pointing towards a large iceberg with another boat half sunk near it. “That’s where we’re heading. The sooner we get over there, the sooner we’re back at the inn defrosting.”

It took them a little while to be certain that their boat wouldn’t float away or be crushed by the ice floes nearby. To Raisa’s immense disappointment, entering into the little hovel dug into the iceberg did not serve to warm her up at all. True, they were out of the wind, but at the same time, they were still inside of an iceberg.

“Dig, Dwemer, in the beyond. I’ll know your lost unknown and rise to your depths. The fundamentals. The Dwemer lockbox hides it from me. The Elder Scroll gives insight deeper than the deep ones, though. To bring about the opening,” he replied matter-of-factly.
“You have an Elder Scroll?” Raisa asked calmly, hoping to maintain a somewhat casual air. “Here?”

“I’ve seen enough to know their fabric. The warp of air, the weft of time. But no, it is not in my possession.”

Raisa hesitated slightly, glancing at Erik, who simply looked confused by the answer. She was glad. Or at least, it helped to validate her confusion as the correct response to such a strange comment. “So, where is the Scroll?” she asked, frowning now.

“Here,” the man said simply. “Well, here as in this plane. Mundus. Tamriel. Nearby, relatively speaking. On the cosmological scale, it’s all nearby.”

“Can you help me get the Elder Scroll or not?” Raisa asked, giving up on civility at this point. The man was mad, she needed to be direct to get anything substantial out of him.

“One block lifts another. Septimus will give you what you want, but you must bring him something in return,” Septimus mused, looking at Raisa and Erik now with a cunning air.

“How do I get in?” Raisa asked through gritted teeth. She really needed to find something to keep herself from getting too angry. She figured that she should probably bring Cicero along on her journeys more often. She would more easily be able to handle people like Septimus if she had Cicero around.

“Two things I have for you. Two shapes. One edged, one round. The round one, for tuning. Dwemer music is soft and subtle, and needed to open their cleverest gates. The edged lexicon, for inscribing. To us, a hunk of metal. To the Dwemer, a full library of knowings. But… empty. Find Mzark and its sky-dome. The machinations there will read the scroll and lay the lore upon the cube. Trust Septimus. He knows you can know.”

“So, what do I do with the cube?” Raisa asked, trying to clarify everything before she left.

“To glimpse the world inside an Elder Scroll can damage the eyes. Or the mind, as it has to Septimus. The Dwemer found a loophole, as they always do. To focus the knowledge away and
inside without harm. Place the lexicon into their contraption and focus the knowings into it. When it brims with glow, bring it back and Septimus can read once more.”

“And the sphere?”

“The deepest doors of Dwemer listen for singing. It plays the attitude of notes proper for opening. Can you not hear it? Too low for hearings?”

“And what do you want with the Elder Scroll?”

“Ooooh, an observant one. How clever to ask of Septimus. This Dwemer lockbox. Look upon it and wonder. Inside is the heart. The heart of a god! The heart of you. And me. But it was hidden away. Not by the Dwarves, you see. They were already gone. Someone else. Unseen. Unknown. Found the heart, and with a flair for the ironical, used Dwarven trickery to lock it away. The Scroll will give the deep vision needed to open it. For not even the strongest machinations of the Dwemer can hold off the all-sight given by an Elder Scroll,” Septimus mused, a twinkle appearing in his maddened eyes.

“What is an Elder Scroll?” she asked, curious about how the man would respond, though she knew it would be mad however he chose to reply.

“You look to your left, you see one way. You look to your right, you see another. But neither is any harder than the opposite. But the Elder Scrolls… they look left and right in the stream of time. The future and past are as one. Sometimes they even look up. What do they see then? What if they dive in? Then the madness begins.”

By the time Raisa found herself rowing back out to the iceberg, she had decided quite thoroughly that she did not like Septimus Signus. She could have potentially handled the fact that he was mad, but the fact that he had her traversing across and under Skyrim in a semi-futile quest to transcribe a lexicon that may or may not help further the cause which drove him mad in the first place. He also spoke in riddles. Mostly though, she hated him for Blackreach. It was a terribly large and complex myriad of dwarven ruins practically overflowing with falmer and chaurus.

“I've inscribed the lexicon,” Raisa said as she produced the sphere and the lexicon.

“Give it, quickly. Extraordinary. I see it now. The sealing structure interlocks in the tiniest fractals. Dwemer blood can loose the hooks, but none alive remain to bear it. A panoply of their brethren could gather to form a facsimile. A trick. Something they didn’t anticipate, no, not even them. The blood of Altmer, Bosmer, Dunmer, Falmer, and Orsimer. The elves still living provide the key. Bear you hence this extractor. It will drink the fresh blood of elves. Come when the set is complete.”

“Why are you so eager to open this damn box?” Raisa asked, feeling her irritation with the man growing steadily. It seemed like another trip was in order.

“The box contains a heart. The essence of a god. I have devoted my life to the Elder Scrolls, but their knowledge is a passing awareness when compared to the encompassing mind of divinity. The Dwemer were the last to touch it. It was thought to have been destroyed by the Nerevarine, but my lord told me otherwise.”

“And your lord is…?”

“The Daedric prince of the unknown. Hermaeus Mora. I thought there were no secrets left to know. Until I first spoke to him. He asks a price— to work his will. A few murders, some dissent spread,
a plague or two. For the secrets I can endure. In time, he brought me here. To the box. But he won't
reveal how to open it. Maddening.”

“Oh…kay…” Raisa said hesitantly, before turning and making to leave the cave once more, her
irritation growing. She was beyond ready to be finished with this madman. Yet it seemed she
needed to put up with his insanities for a while longer. She wondered vaguely if she might be able
to collect the needed ingredients from someone up at the College.

Suddenly, her vision darkened and her breath was taken away. She let out a gasp and whipped out
the dagger that Brynjolf had given her, instinct taking over. Her vision returned momentarily, and
it appeared that both Erik and Septimus were frozen in place. A flash of light startled her, and
when she turned to face the source of the light, she saw a swirling abyss full of tentacles and
floating eyeballs hovering in the way of her exit.

“Come closer,” the mass of power whispered, its voice sinister, yet not threatening in nature, “Bask
in my presence.”

“Who are you…?” Raisa asked, her curiosity demanding satisfaction.

“I am Hermaeus Mora,” the abyss oozed, “I am the guardian of the unseen, and knower of the
unknown. I have been watching you, mortal. Most impressive.”

“What do you want of me?” she asked, a deep frown on her face.

“Your continuing aid to Septimus renders him increasingly obsolete. He has served me well, but
his time is nearing its end. Once that infernal lockbox is opened, he will have exhausted his
usefulness to me. When that time comes, you take his place as my emissary, What say you?”

Raisa stood for a moment, her dagger still raised, her mind racing. It wasn’t the first time a daedric
prince had sought her help. It was still a humbling experience to greet them. But she wasn’t
entirely sure how long she could manage serving so many different powers and still maintain
control of her own life. She was already on the verge of tumbling down a path of blind servitude
elsewhere in the world. Serving yet another lord of darkness wouldn’t exactly do her any good.
Then again, if she refused the dangers increased as the benefits decreased.

“I am your servant, my lord,” she said firmly, sliding her dagger back into its sheath, staring
directly into the floating mass of darkness.

“Indeed,” it mused, sounding pleased. “Speak with me when the box has been opened, and all shall
be revealed.”

And as suddenly as the daedric prince had appeared, he vanished. She stood at the top of the path
to exit the iceberg, her head spinning. Erik stood behind her, catching her slightly as she stumbled
backwards.

“Are you alright, my friend?” he asked, concern laced in his voice.

Raisa blinked rapidly and looked around, her eyes falling on Septimus, who was standing close to
the lockbox, cradling the lexicon in his arms, a suspicious look piercing her. He observed her
almost coldly, and Raisa could have sworn that he knew what had her all out of sorts. With a shiver
she shook her head slightly and smiled at her companion and reassured him that she was in fact,
alright.

“We have some blood to collect,” she sighed, looking at Erik with a wry smile. “How do you feel
about murder?”
“What?”
Raisa walked into the Hall of Elements up at the College of Winterhold, searching for some member of staff to help her locate the resident alchemist. She was certain that Babette might have some of the ingredients Septimus had requested, but she didn’t want to have to trek farther than she needed to. Thought Skyrim was, on the whole, a small part of Tamriel, travel did take an inordinate amount of time, particularly in the colder, more frigid regions.

“Welcome, welcome!” A voice called. She hesitated slightly as she spotted a small group of people off to one side of the hall. The eldest member of the group was beckoning her over excitedly. She assumed this was the man she’d been informed of that taught classes there. She had skipped the initial lesson she’d been told about. She didn’t find much use for magic herself, and she began to shake her head no, only to be beckoned more insistently. “We were just beginning for the day. Please, stay and listen. So, as I was saying, the first thing to understand is that magic is, by its very nature, volatile and dangerous. Unless you can control it, it can and will destroy you.”

“Sir, I think we all understand that fairly well,” a young woman replied stiffly, sounding impatient. “We wouldn’t be here if we couldn’t control magic.” Raisa frowned slightly, not entirely capable herself. Her magic seemed to have a direct link to powerful emotion. She hadn’t been able to create sparks of the same magnitude since her experience rushing back to the Sanctuary to discover Astrid’s betrayal. Control was something not entirely classified as a strong suit of hers. She had, after all, gotten access to the College purely because she was the Dragonborn.

“Of course, my dear Brelyna,” Tolfdir said patiently, “Of course. You all possess some inherent magical ability. That much is not being questioned. What I’m talking about is true control, mastery of magic. It takes years, if not decades, of practice and study.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” the khajiit exclaimed in his exotic, purring accent. “Let’s get started!”

“Please, please!” Tolfdir called out as the other students began to chime in excitedly. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. Eagerness must be tempered with caution, or else disaster is inevitable.”

“But we’ve only just arrived here— you’ve no idea what any of us are capable of. Why not give us a chance to show you what we can do?” another student added.

“You’ve been quiet so far,” Tolfdir said, turning towards Raisa where she had been attempting to surreptitiously slip away while he was distracted by the other students. “What do you think we should do?”

“I’m not really sure what to think,” she began.

Tolfdir cut her off a bit preemptively, causing her to shoot him a look as he lectured her, “Not going to weigh in either way? I admire your restraint, but there are times when you must make
decisions, even without all the facts. Rely on instinct.”

“We’re all pretty new at this, right? Let’s just give it a chance. What’s the worst that could happen?” Onmund exclaimed.

“You could accidentally turn one of us inside out and set us on fire,” Raisa said, remembering one of Festus’s favorite stories with a pang of bittersweet sadness. “If Master Tolfdir had allowed me to finish my thought, I would have agreed with him that safety should be more important than anything. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I have important things to do with my life before I die. I’d rather not be ended by any of you before I get done what I need to.”

“Your classmates certainly seem to disagree with you,” Tolfdir pointed out, seeming decently cowed by her response.

“Oh, don’t listen to her,” J’zargo scoffed. “We can do it, just give us a chance!”

“All right, let’s settle down,” Tolfdir sighed, scratching at his beard thoughtfully. “I suppose we can try something practical… In continuing with our theme of safety, we’ll start with Wards. Wards are protective spells that block magic. I’ll teach you all a ward, and we’ll see if you can successfully use it to block spells, all right? Would you mind helping me with the demonstration? Are you at all familiar with ward spells?”

“I uh, have a ward spell, but I’ve never really used it,” Raisa said. “When magic happens, it’s usually the uh, uncontrolled and dangerous types…” Her classmates shifted somewhat uncomfortably, looking at her with curiosity and what may have been a little bit of fear. Raisa bit back a smile. Festus would have been proud of her. He was always one for a flashy bit of magic.

“That’s what this lesson is for. Perfect time to try that ward out,” Tolfdir nodded with a bit of satisfaction. If he was concerned about her ability to use magic that wouldn’t kill anyone, he didn’t show it. He seemed a bit used to the notion, if anything. “Now, if you’ll just stand right over there, I’ll cast a spell at you, and you block it with the ward. Here we go. Over there, please. Just opposite me. Wouldn’t want anyone else in the way. Now, cast the ward spell, and keep it up. You’ll have to keep your ward up, or else this won’t work. I don’t want to hurt you. Hold still…”

Raisa did as she was told and tried to reach deep inside herself for the anger she’d felt when she was fighting the Penitus Oculatus agents. However, no ward appeared from her with that motivation. She instead ran through her mind quickly as Tolfdir prepared himself, struggling to come up with anything that gave her a strong enough memory to protect herself from the fireball. Oh, she should have just stayed in Riften…

In the back of her mind, something flickered to life and the air around her shimmered with a powerful whitefish blue glow as the ward burst to life and Tolfdir’s fireball roared towards her. Despite the onslaught of his spell, Raisa couldn’t help but feel unnaturally calm and safe. She wasn’t sure what had brought about this sudden burst of magic, but she was grateful for it. As her ward dropped as suddenly as it had flared to life, she felt the warmth that had risen up inside her lingering slightly though it began to diminish. Her heart skipped along a little bit and she felt her stomach clench happily and nervously. Tolfdir was talking again, but she barely heard what the man was saying. Her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Riften and the handsome thief who resided there.

At the direct thought of Brynjolf, she could practically feel the magic welling up inside her. This was a much different feeling to the one that she’d had when Sithis guided her. This was something else entirely, it seemed. Her anger fueled her destructive magics. A pang of guilt struck her when she questioned what drove her protective magics. Unable to admit the answer to herself, she forced
her attention back to the class at hand.

“The College has undertaken a fascinating excavation in the ruins of Saarthal nearby. It's an excellent learning opportunity. I suggest we meet there in a few hours, and see what awaits us inside. That's all for now, thank you,” Tolfdir said.
Hey, yo, so, I'm graduating in a few months. So the past 8 or 9 months have been super hectic. I was emotionally blindsided and devastated for a good chunk of the summer. I spent the last semester working on my dissertation on fantasy subgenres and reading series novels like Wheel of Time, which took a solid 3 months to get through at top speed. My brain was subsequently both dead and completely occupied for the past five months in all of that. So now I've got at least a little bit more free time. So I'm going to reread this story so I can get back in the mindset and then I'm gonna continue writing it. And hopefully people will still be interested in it. And hopefully I'll keep it up more this time. I'd hate to say new years resolution... buuuut.....?
“And here we all are,” Tolfdir smiled as Raisa approached the small class group with a sullen look on her face. She was really starting to hate this kind of heavy, frigid cold. “Shall we step inside?”

As she followed the teacher inside she decided to speak with him. Since she'd been dragged into this class unwillingly, she might as well get as much from it as she could. “What's so important about this place?”

“We're particularly interested in the prevalence of magical seals placed on the tombs here. It's rather unlike anything we’ve encountered,” Tolfdir said.

“And we’re looking for…?”

“Oh, anything!” the man chuckled. “Anything at all that might be of interest. That's why I adore this location— we have no idea what we're going to find. And if, along the way, my message about the dangers of magic should happen to sink in for a few students, that would be a happy coincidence.”

Raisa let out a laugh at this. It seemed as though she had misjudged Tolfdir a bit. She'd been irritated that he had forced her to join his class, though she originally had no intention of doing any such thing. All she needed was blood, not life lessons from a safer, less crude version of Festus. And yet, she found herself rather amused by the old man, even if he wasn’t her original mentor.

“As some of you may know, Saarthal was one of the earliest Nord settlements in Skyrim. It was also the largest. Sacked by the Elves in the infamous "Night of Tears," not much is known about what happened to Saarthal. This is an exciting opportunity for us. To be able to study such an early civilization, and the magics they used… Well, are there any questions before we begin?”

“I’ve no more questions. What would you like me to do?” Raisa asked as her classmates gathered around.

“Oh, yes. Hmm. Well, why don't you see if you can assist Arniel Gane? He's one of our scholars, here working on cataloging our finds. I expect he'd appreciate some help in locating any additional magical artifacts here in the ruins. Any enchanted items will do; the usefulness of the enchantment is irrelevant. If you find anything, the class can look it over,” Tolfdir said thoughtfully, shooing her off. “Now, let's see. What shall we have the rest of you do? Brelyna, my dear. Why don't you search for warding magics? Anything designed to keep people out. Don't interact with them, just identify them. All right, everyone. Onmund, please search that area over there. See if you notice any… residual energies. Alive or undead. J’zargo… what shall we have you do… Ah! Why don't you verify that we're the first ones here? Look for any amount of tampering with the tombs. All right, everyone. Let's be careful, but have fun!”

Raisa made her way down into the depths of the tomb system cautiously. The structures seemed to be holding well enough, but she was hesitant to trust her life to long-dead ancient Nord architects.

“Excuse me?” Raisa called, spotting a man hunched over a desk lit up by a large number of candles.

“Don’t touch anything!” the man exclaimed, not even looking up from his work.

“Tolfdir told me to help you,” she said quickly, not wanting the man to send her away before she could get her job done.

mess of my work. I've only looked through a portion of this section. You, uh, you can look around
in the chambers just north of here. Try and be careful, all right? We don't want to damage
anything.”

“What do you need me to do?” Raisa asked.

“Just round up the rest of the magical artifacts so that I can catalog them,” the man said.

Raisa sighed and set to work, picking around in the stones and rubble for misplaced or hidden
artifacts. A few rings in hand, she spotted a strange plinth with a necklace perched delicately on top
of it. She delicately made her way over to it and plucked it off its display, inspecting it curiously. A
loud shudder and clanking noise sounded suddenly from behind her and she whirled around to find
a gate trapping her inside the tomb.

“What in the world was that racket?” she heard Tolfdir ask Arniel. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m trapped in here!” Raisa called, rushing towards the gate.

“How in the world did that happen?” Tolfdir asked, approaching warily, peering into the tomb with
an avid curiosity.

“I pulled an amulet off the wall,” Raisa said with a frown, holding it out for him to see.

“Really?” he asked with a slight frown. “Perhaps the amulet is important somehow. Is there some
way you can use it?”

Hesitantly, Raisa clasped the necklace on herself and was surprised to notice a strange red aura
leaking from the niche where the amulet had originally been residing.

“Do you see that? Some kind of resonance…” Tolfdir mused, “you and the wall. It must be
connected to the amulet! I wonder… what effect might your spells have?”

Raisa frowned and summoned the willpower to form a bolt of lightning, aiming in the general
direction of the plinth, hoping that this wouldn't wind up backfiring on her at all. When the spell
made contact, two separate things happened all at once. The plinth broke away, crumbling under
her spell to reveal a passageway previously hidden in the wall. Behind her, the gate raised itself,
freeing her from the trap she’d unknowingly sprung.

“Did you see that?” Raisa asked as the dust settled and Tolfdir moved forward into the little room
she was in.

“Well would you look at that!” the old man exclaimed curiously. “This appears to lead somewhere.
Let’s see where it goes. Well, this is highly unusual. And very interesting. Why in the world would
this be sealed off? What is this place? I’m not sure what to expect here. Please be on your guard.”

Tolfdir started forward at a cautious pace, Raisa following behind somewhat impatiently. She had
to admit it, she had had her misgivings about visiting the old ruins, but they had suddenly gathered
a large portion of her attention in a very short span of time. The pair exited the tunnel in a small
room with what might have been an alter in the center of it, no apparent entrances around it. Tolfdir
was rambling once more about the importance of safety and caution in exploring such places, but
Raisa was hardly paying attention. A shimmering image of a man had just appeared in the room
with them.

Time seemed to stand still, Tolfdir’s words silenced as the man was frozen by an overwhelming
wave of power. A feeling of dread filled Raisa as the image began to speak to her, its ethereal gaze
boring into her very being.

“Know that 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. Judgment will be passed on your actions to come, and how you deal with the dangers ahead of you. This warning is passed to you 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.”

The mage disappeared as quickly as he had arrived and time seemed to catch up to its proper flow,

“I… I swear I felt something rather strange just then…” Tolfdir mused, sounding out of sorts.

“What just happened?”

“Some sort of… apparition, or ghost… something appeared,” Raisa said with an irritated sigh. “It spoke to me.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t see anything…” Tolfdir frowned, a look of concern blooming across his withered features. “Can you tell me more about what you just saw?”

“It said something about danger ahead, and the Psijic Order,” Raisa replied, hoping she’d remembered the name correctly. She’d gotten into a bad habit of paying less attention every time some strange creature or deity appeared to her. There had to be other worthy people of such visitations. Surely it couldn’t just be her all the time?

“The Psijic Order? Are you quite sure about that? That's very odd. And danger ahead? Why that doesn't make any sense at all. The Psijics have no connection to these ruins. And no one's seen any of their order in a long time. Perhaps we should take a look inside these coffins… Now please do be careful. Who knows what we're going to find.”

The pair continued to make their way through the crypt, making slow progress to ensure they weren’t putting themselves in more danger than they already had.

“What exactly is the Psijic Order?” Raisa asked after a short while, her questions eating away at her more than she was happy about. She wanted nothing more than to avoid involving herself in yet another divine conflict.

“They were a group of mages with a history that pre-dates the Empire. Very powerful, very secretive. No one’s seen them in well over a hundred years. They vanished, along with their sanctuary on the Isle of Ataeum. I have no idea what connection they’d have to this place.”

“Well, do you know why they’d try and contact me?” Raisa asked. “This sort of thing happens a lot and I’d very much like to avoid it in the future.”

“I have no idea, but it’s fascinating—Assuming it’s true, of course,” Tolfdir said curiously. “The Isle of Artaeum disappeared over a hundred years ago, and no one has seen them since. And yet now, suddenly they have chosen to contact you? Why, it’s intriguing! Perhaps the veil between the divine and mortal is thinner around you than the rest of us here. If nothing else, I’d take it as a compliment. The Psijics have only ever dealt with those they feel worthy.”

“I’d rather they didn’t, to be completely honest,” Raisa grumbled irritably.

“Ah, such a humble spirit,” Tolfdir smiled almost wistfully, “Oh to be young again.”

It was then that they stumbled into another chamber of coffins. As they stepped further into the room, the coffins burst open revealing a veritable hoard of draugr. Raisa had drawn her weapons
swiftly, only to find that Tolfdir had already begun slinging spells at the undead, as if this were the sort of thing he encountered everyday. She supposed she should give him a bit more credit. He was a professor at the College of Winterhold, after all. He probably saw a number of impossible things every day. He did take it in stride that Raisa had been contacted by a long dead and mysterious order of wizards.

The following chamber featured more of the undead than the last, but hardly proved problematic for the pair, flashing blades and bursts of flame taking down draugr left and right. Once they were certain that the creatures would not be waking up again, Tolfdir and Raisa made their way into a larger chamber.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in Nordic ruins before,” Tolfdir said, peering curiously around the room, his scholarly nature getting the better of him. “Why, just look at all these coffins! This bears closer inspection…”

“What if there are more of the dead lurking about?” Raisa asked. “We should probably keep moving…”

“I’d like to stay a while and examind this,” Tolfdir said, shaking his head at her suggestion. “If we were going to be attacked here, we would already be fighting. You should press on. See if you can find whatever this vision of yours mentioned. But if it is truly dangerous, be careful.”

“If?” Raisa scoffed. “We’ve been attacked more than once down here, I can’t imagine that there’s nothing dangerous ahead.”

“Go on ahead,” Tolfdir instructed more firmly this time. “I’ll be sure and catch up with you before long. I’ll only be a moment.”

Raisa sighed but turned and began winding her way deeper into the secret crypt. She didn’t think that there was much further to go, but she still didn’t turn back to fetch Tolfdir. Her recklessness was beginning to grow and she didn’t much care to keep it in check anymore. What she wanted didn’t seem to matter, so what did it matter that she was afraid?

She almost reveled in her fear then, alone and in the deep darkness. Usually she gave up those feelings to the Void in order to cleanse herself of their influence. Fear could stop an assassin in her tracks and ruin her chances of ending her mark. But for once, she wasn’t working for someone else. It was almost as if she was a new adventurer again, on a small quest to retrieve something insignificant to herself. She recalled the time she spent between Riverwood and Whiterun, clambering up the mountain to Bleak Falls Barrow. She returned a golden dragon claw key to a village merchant. To say it was a simpler time was an incredible understatement. Raisa could barely remember what it felt like to be that young woman…

“Hold on, young lady. Hold on!” she heard puffing down the hallway behind her as she made to open yet another door. “I thought it high time I caught up with you.”

Raisa nodded silently, still wrapped up in her thoughts, and pushed open the door less carefully than she probably should have.

Inside was an enormous chamber that made Tolfdir gasp in surprise and wonder. The room was fairly plain, for a crypt of its size. There as a table a floor below where they entered and barred walls to the side blocked off large torches. However, the room was lit primarily by an enormous floating sphere that took up most of the room. It spun slowly, emitting a bizarre hum just within their range of hearing. It glowed with a mist-like pale blue-green light, pulsing almost as if it were breathing, as if it had a heartbeat of its own.
“Well now… would you look at that.” Tolfdir said after a few moments, stepping gingerly into the room. “I never imagined we’d find something like this. Why is this buried so far within Saarthal?”

A coffin lay below the giant sphere, its top breaking outwards as the two scholars stepped into the room, as the sphere’s guardian returned to life to defend the deep magic from outsiders.

Raisa whipped out her bow and unleashed a quick volley of arrows. A few embedded themselves in the rotting corpse, while some were swatted away with the unnatural speed and precision of a magic pulse. Tolfdir, likewise, threw a few spells in the direction of the draugr to no effect.

This went on for a good while before Tolfdir cried, “Nothing seems to work! Keep it busy; I’ll try to drain some of its power!”

Tired and frustrated, Raisa entered into a bit of a cat and mouse game with the draugr, slashing at it with her knives and jumping back, keeping its back to the old teacher. She had no idea what the man was doing, but she knew he needed to concentrate for it to work. So she did her best to fend off the powerful attacks of the draugr. It Shouted at her once more, prompting her to Shout back in anger and frustration as she grew more tired. Luckily, whatever Tolfdir had done to decrease its power had worked, and her flame Shout caused the corpse to crumple to the ground, lifeless once again.

As Raisa inspected the dead man, Tolfdir descended the stairs and came to join her, staring up in wonder at the giant floating sphere. “I’m not the only one seeing this, am I?” he asked, a slight chuckle in his voice, “Why, I believe that this is utterly unique!”

“What is it?” Raisa asked, standing and observing the sphere for herself.

“I have no idea!” Tolfdir exclaimed gleefully. “This is amazing! Absolutely amazing. The Arch-Mage needs to be informed immediately. He needs to see this for himself. I don’t dare leave this unattended though.”

Raisa grimaced, knowing what came next.

“How do you want me to tell him?” Raisa asked with an exasperated sigh. “We found a glowing thing?”

“Let him know that we’ve unearthed something… Well, I’m not sure. Something unique, let’s say. It’s clearly magical in nature, but like nothing I’ve ever seen before. He should be most interested.”

“Are you going to be alright by yourself down here?” Raisa asked, nudging the dead draugr with her foot, as if she were checking that it was properly dead.

“Oh, I think I’ll be fine. We seem to have eliminated the most pressing threat,” the old man chuckled. “It certainly seems that whoever placed this here intended for it to be well guarded. I wonder why…” With that, Raisa knew she’d lost the old scholar, as he began to shuffle over to the crowded table near the draugr’s now empty coffin. It was littered with books, gold, gauze, and gems. Knowing she was unwanted, Raisa began the trek back to Winterhold.

Her classmates tried to tell her off for leaving the ruin with Tolfdir but she told them she would be fine. The Khajiit did not believe her and went so far as to follow her out of the ruins into the snow, attempting to call her back. Once again, she told him that she would be fine and that he should be a good student and wait for teacher, she was running an errand. With that, she whistled for Shadowmere and he appeared, whisking her off swiftly through the blizzard, leaving the Khajiit
suitably impressed and freezing cold.

Back at the College, Raisa quickly located the Arch-Mage, thought she swiftly realized that she was, once again, out of her depth.

“‘You are relatively new here, are you not?’” the wizened wizard asked her briefly, inspecting her carefully. “I have noticed you, but we have not spoken before. You brought that Nord boy here with you. He’s been sitting in the main hall for a very long time now.”

“Yes, sir,” Raisa said carefully, hoping that Erik was staying out of trouble.

“‘Sir?’” he laughed, “‘How quaint. I am Savos Aren, Arch-Mage of the College of Winterhold. I am quite content to see nearly any aspect of magic explored and investigated here. But I do not and will not approve of any research or experiments that cause purposeful harm to your fellow members of the College. Are we clear?’”

“I understand, but I need to speak to you about Saarthal,” Raisa said insistently.

“Please don’t tell me that another one of the apprentices has been incinerated. I have enough to deal with right now.”

“Is… is that a common problem for you?”

“What’s happened at Saarthal?” The Arch-Mage seemed eager to move past the problematic disappearance of apprentices once Raisa revealed that that was not actually the issue.

“We’ve found something in Saarthal, some sort of… orb,” Raisa said uncertainly. “Tolfdir thinks it’s important and wanted you to see it.”

“I… see.” The man said, sharing her tone, “I trust that Tolfdir will provide a more… specific explanation. I trust he would not have sent you were it not significant. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Tolfdir normally looks after your little group, yes? Since he's apparently occupied, and I will need to see this discovery for myself, I think perhaps you should begin researching the subject. Speak with Urag in the Arcanaeum. See if he is aware of anything that matches your discovery. And… Good work.”

The man turned to go but Raisa quickly said, “Arch-Mage?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever met with the Psijic Order?” she asked, hoping he could shed some light on her mysterious experiences.

“Personally?” he asked, “No, not I. One of their number used to advise the Arch-Mage when I was but an Apprentice here. But that was a great many years ago, before all the members of the order were called back to the Isle of Artaeum and it disappeared entirely.”

Raisa nodded, having expected as much. She thanked the Arch-Mage for indulging her curiosity and made to leave, only to be stopped on the stairwell by Faralda.

“I’ve been trying to find you,” she said breathlessly. She clearly had been running around for some time. “I just wanted to let you know Ancano’s been asking about you. I think he’s looking for you.”

“Why would Ancano be looking for me?” Raisa asked, her brow furrowed. “I’m barely an initiate. I only got in her in the first place because I can use the Words of Power.”
“I’m not sure. Just… Well, mind what you tell him, all right?” Faralda said firmly.

“What does it matter what I say to him?” Raisa asked. “I’m no one special here.”

“Between the two of us, there are rumors about him,” Faralda said quietly, peeking around the stairwell corners just to be safe, “Rumors that this ‘advisor’ position he has is a sham. An Excuse. That what he’s really doing is spying for the Thalmor, trying to feed them information. Whether it’s true, I can’t say. But it never hurts to be a little suspicious, does it?” The woman eyed Raisa up and down briefly, as if weighing Raisa’s trustworthiness for a moment.

“Thanks for the warning,” Raisa said, returning the woman’s slightly suspicious gaze.

“You’re welcome.”

With that, Raisa shuffled around the young woman, determining that it was time for her to find Erik and get on with her hunt for different bloods. Maybe at least they’d be able to get into a warmer part of the country for a change. She was growing tired of having to dry her boots every time she came inside.

Her plan was put on hold when she entered the main hall, accidentally smacking an impressively tall elf with the door. He turned his golden eyes to her and sneered, “You there. I have questions for you.”
“You were in Saarthal, yes?” the elf snapped quickly, impatient for answers. “It has come to my attention that something was found there.”

“What does this matter to you?” Raisa asked, choosing her responses carefully.

“Something was discovered in Saarthal that was significant enough that Tolfdir sent a new member of the College, alone, to deliver word. That sounds precisely like the sort of thing that should matter to everyone. Especially me.”

Raisa had already decided that if a contract mysteriously appeared for this man, she would happily take care of him herself. “If it were important information, he would have brought it himself, or sent a group. I’m not even a part of this College. I’m here on an errand for the Greybeards and nothing more. Tolfdir wouldn’t have trusted something incredibly important with me of all people. How do you know anything about this stuff anyways?”

“It is my job to know these things,” the elf sneered again, “My role as advisor to the Arch-Mage is aided by knowing everything that transpires here.”

“And nothing transpired here,” Raisa said snappishly, disliking his derogatory tone. “If you have an issue, take it up with Tolfdir or the Arch-Mage. I’m done answering your questions.”

“The Greybeards have no business in Winterhold,” the elf quipped sharply. “I believe that you’re lying.”

“You know that there’s a rumor going about that you’re spying for the Thalmor, don’t you?” Raisa asked, narrowing her eyes accusatorily at the elf, seeing if he would own up to it. “You do work for them, don’t you?”

“I am a simple advisor,” the elf crooned, deeply offended by her words. “The Thalmor wish to promote relations with your College. I am at the Arch-Mage’s disposal if he requires advice. Those rumors are preposterous and just the sort of thing that I would expect from mages who have nothing better to do with their time. I have made it quite clear that I have no ulterior motive and simply exist here to serve the Arch-Mage and provide sound council.”

“Does the Arch-Mage often ask for advice then?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“Perhaps not as often as he should,” the elf sniffed dismissively. “In time, I believe he will be more trusting.”

“Unlikely,” Raisa said. “He probably doesn’t think you give good advice.”

She then turned and made her way into the main hall to search for Erik once again. Not finding him, she made her way to the Arcanaeum instead. When she entered, she earned herself another speech from the Librarian. She hoped he wouldn’t do this every time she entered the College Library.

“You are now in the Arcanaeum, of which I am in charge.” The orc said sternly, almost reprimanding her. “It might as well be my own little plane of Oblivion. Disrupt my Arcanaeum, and I will have you torn apart by angry Atronachs. Now, do you require assistance?”

“I need to learn about something we found in Saarthal. Also, I’m looking for a blond kid, not
magical, responds to ‘Erik the Slayer.’”


“How do you all keep finding out about that?” Raisa asked, exasperated. “I just got back and the rest of the class is still at the ruin with Tolfdir!”

The orc continued on as if he didn’t hear her outburst, “You don’t even need to ask about the books. I don’t have anything for you. Not anymore, anyway.”

“You don’t have anything that can help?” Raisa asked, honestly surprised.

“I said not anymore.” The orc said grumpily. “Orthon stole a number of books when he ran off to Fellglow Keep to join those Summoners. Some kind of peace offering. I think one of his columns may have had some relevant information. If you want them, you’ll have to talk to him.”

“Who is Orthorn?”

“He was an Apprentice here at the College. Not very skilled but got involved with a group of mages who took a liking to him. When they left, he took off after them. Stole supplies and books from the College, I suppose as a way to ingratiate himself.”

“Doesn’t anyone care that he stole things from the College?” she asked, seeming surprised that Urag hadn’t gone out to murder the apprentice for his thievery.

“Not enough to bother with it. Arch-Mage Aren's approach to these things is to just let them sort themselves out. Although now it looks like you'll be doing the sorting. Good luck with that.”

“Why are there mages in Fellglow Keep anyways?” she asked sourly, tired of sorting things out for everyone else instead of for herself.

“Let’s just call it a ‘difference of opinion’ with the College. They were interested in research that goes outside the bounds of what the College allows, so they were… persuaded to leave,” the Orc shrugged before turning back to the book he was working on fixing.

Raisa sighed and went back to town to find Erik and grab a drink for herself. She was already getting tired of Winterhold and was dreading her inevitable return. Being an adventurer sure felt a lot like being a simple errand girl these days…

She supposed she shouldn’t complain. She wasn’t having to deal with fighting dragons or fending off the romantic advances of a handsome thief. One of those was considerably more enjoyable than the other, but the choice between the two was shockingly difficult. She scowled to herself and pulled her fur cloak tighter around herself against the brutally cold ice rain that was beginning to fall on the depressing little town.

She better get used to running errands. It was a far cry better than dying completing some quest she never agreed to. Besides, how hard would retrieving a few stolen library books actually be?

Very hard, actually. She should have listened more carefully when Urag was discussing the mages.
Fellglow Keep was overflowing with them, and they were giving her a hard time. Sure, she was barging into their stronghold, bumbling boy mercenary right on her tail, but they stole from the College of Winterhold and whatever she’d found in Saarthal was in those stolen books. It wasn’t even righteous stealing; it was just plain selfish, born of a lust for power.

Eventually, the pair came across a small block of cells.

“Please! Help me! Don’t leave me here!” a voice frantically called from one of the prison blocks.

Raisa approached cautiously, peeking through the bars. Inside was a disheveled mage, clutching at the bars with dirty, scabby hands, a desperate look in his eye. She glared at him and put her hands on her hips, a scowl crossing her exhausted face. “So you’re Orthorn?”

“Yes, yes!” the mage gasped, pointing emphatically towards her. “Did Arch-Mage Aren send you? He sent you to rescue me, didn’t he?”

“I’m just here for the books you took from the College,” Raisa said. “In fact, I was expecting to have to fight you for them. This is a nice change of pace.”

“What?” Orthorn asked, his face scrunching up in confusion before the memories hit him again. “The bo… Oh. Oh dear. I shouldn’t have taken them, I know! It was stupid. I was stupid. It won’t happen again. Help me get out of here, and I’ll help you find them. Please!”

“You know where the books are?” she asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“I don’t have them anymore,” Orthorn sneered, knowing it was obvious. “She took them… The Caller. She’s the one who put me in here! Please, let me out of here!”

“Why exactly are you in the cage to begin with? Maybe I shouldn’t let you out.”

“Raisa, you should let him out,” Erik said quietly. “He said he’s sorry and that he’d help if we did.”

“Yeah, that’s nice and all, Erik, but the last time someone said that to me they ran away as soon as I freed them. You can’t take imprisoned people at their word like that unless you know them extremely well,” she explained, thinking back to that Swift bastard in Bleak Falls Barrow.

“They threw me in here until they were ready to use me in one of their experiments,” Orthorn explained quickly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I thought they wanted my help— my talents — not to use me as a test subject!”

“Is there a key for this cage?”

“No, it’s the levers in the center there. Just make sure you don’t pull the wrong one. Please, hurry. I really don’t like being in here!”

After some careful thought, Raisa released the man, though she kept her guard up.

He took a step towards her, wringing his hands together tightly. He seemed grateful enough but looked nervous all the same. “Thank you, thank you!” he exclaimed, shaking slightly. She wondered how long he must have been in that cage. “I promise I’ll help you. And then I’ll go back to the College and I’ll beg them to let me back in.”

“Now where are the books?
“Yes, of course,” he nodded. “I said I’d tell you, didn’t I?” He shifted back and forth on his feet for a moment before saying quite matter-of-factly, “The Caller will have them. She was most interested in one of the volumes. Although, not interested enough to keep me from being locked up.”

“That isn’t new information,” Raisa said, her voice rising slightly. She saw him flinch, but she couldn’t care less. “You already told us they would be with the Caller. That’s not exactly helpful when we can’t reach the Caller.”

“She’ll be in stronghold center, surely,” Orthorn protested, though he stammered, bashful at being caught in a blatant misdirection.

“You should get yourself to safety,” Raisa said sourly, deciding that the man wouldn’t be of any real help if this was how he thanked them for rescue.

“Don’t you need my help?” he actually sounded shocked at that turn of events.

“I’m sure we can handle this—” she began.

“You’re right. We could use some help,” Erik intervened, cutting Raisa off mid sentence. She turned and shot him an indignant glare. He noticed and shrugged at her in exasperation, “Look, we’re both exhausted. And while he might not be much better off than we are, he’s fresh for fighting. Two against god knows how many seems a lot more difficult than three against the same.”

“I shall do my best,” Orthorn promised, standing up a little bit straighter than before. He set off through a door off to the left of the room and began leading them through the keep once more. Eventually they came to a large circular room with small parapets on three sides.

A woman stood in the center, tall, powerful and stern. Her features soured as she looked upon the intruders. “So, you’re the ones who barged into my home and laid waste to my projects. How nice to meet you.”

“Who even are you?” Raisa asked, looking the woman up and down with a bored look on her face.

“Names no longer matter. You may refer to me as The Caller. Now, do you have a reason for making such a mess?”

“I’m here for the boos from the College,” Raisa said.

“So… You’re just one of Aren’s lackeys? That’s disappointing. You show real promise…” she said appraisingly. She snapped back to her original disposition swiftly, “You come here, kill my assistants, disrupt my work… You’ve annoyed me, so I don’t think I’ll be giving you anything.”

“May I please have the books?” Raisa tried.

“Oh, now we’re all please and thank you, are we?” the Caller scoffed. “I’m afraid we’re well beyond pleasantries. I’ll allow you the opportunity to turn around, walk out that door, and never come back. I suggest you move quickly.” She began to turn back to the books, but Raisa spoke up again.

“Perhaps we can come to an arrangement?”

“An arrangement? After you’ve destroyed so much?” The Caller asked, turning to look at her skeptically for a moment before her eyes locked onto Orthorn. She glared at him for a moment
before looking back at Raisa with a cold smile. “Fine. Leave me the elf. You may go with your books.”

“I— uh— Wait—what?” Orthorn stuttered, backing towards a wall nervously.

“She gets the books, I get you,” the Caller explained slowly. “It’s very simple.”

“But why?” Orthorn demanded, sounding panicked again.

“This little adventure of yours has cost me a number of test subjects. I need more, and you’ll do nicely.”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you? You wouldn’t leave me here with her! You freed me! You were going to let me go!”

“I’m waiting. Well, what’s it going to be?”

Raisa stared at the ground for a moment, picking at a loose thread on her armor thoughtfully. Erik stayed silent this time, thankfully. Though she knew he wasn’t going to be pleased with her.

“It’s a deal,” she said firmly, locking eyes with the Caller, giving her a cold and indifferent stare. “You can have Orthorn. He’s caused me nothing but trouble. I wouldn’t experiment on him though. You’ll be needing new assistants.”

“How could you just leave me here?” Orthorn asked, sounding angry now.

“If you really want to leave, get out of here yourself,” Raisa snapped. “This is your mess to sort, not mine.” She walked forward and took the offered books from the Caller and avoided Erik’s gaze as the Caller opened the exit door for them.

Once they were outside, they didn’t speak. They mounted their horses in silence and started their long journey back. After a while, Erik stopped his horse, still remaining silent. Raisa turned Shadowmere towards him and looked back at him with a distant stare.

“How could you do that to him?” he demanded. “How could you just turn him over? You saw what she was doing to him before! He doesn’t deserve that!”

“There are a lot of things people don’t deserve,” Raisa said carefully. “Being locked in a cage isn’t pleasant, but if you don’t want to be in a cage, you break free. That man was a selfish coward who would rather delve into dark matters beyond his control because someone told him he shouldn’t.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Erik exclaimed. “You were ready to give him up immediately to achieve your goal. Doesn’t that make you feel despicable?”

“I’ve done far worse than turn a blind eye,” Raisa snapped, her steely eyes sharp as a dagger. “It’s the easiest act I’ve had to stomach this past year. And if you’re feeling weepy about a man who you knew for an hour being left behind to finish a job, you are not cut out for mercenary work. Clients will demand that you murder a man’s family in front of him and expect fulfillment.”

“That’s disgusting!” Erik shouted. “I would never do that.”

“Then you aren’t cut out for mercenary work,” Raisa said sharply. “If you truly want to be Erik the Slayer, then you have to slay people.”

“I can, and I do!” Erik said firmly, “But I refuse to do someone else’s dirty work.”
“Then what are you doing here helping me?” Raisa asked. “We just took on an entire keep of mages and you didn’t bat an eyelid at fighting them. What did they ever do to you? Only one of them stole the books we needed.”

“You needed,” Erik glowered. “I didn’t need anything. I wanted to slay dragons and rescue fair maidens, fight bandits and giants… Not… this…”

“Yes, I needed those books,” Raisa said. “And you helped because you chose to. I am not responsible for your actions and decisions, Erik. If you want to fend off bandits in Rorikstead all your life, then that’s what you should do. Don’t follow along with me, and then get angry with me for doing what I deem necessary.”

“What you deemed necessary was cruel,” Erik said firmly. “Do you really not feel any remorse?”

“I regret many things, Erik,” Raisa said, “And all of them hold more importance than the life of a single man I do not know.”

“How can you say that?”

“I’m not blinded by illusions of morality,” Raisa snapped. “I know what a monster I am. I don’t need to be reminded of that.”

Erik looked like he wanted to continue to fight her, but Raisa had decided that she’d had enough of a shakedown for one day and turned Shadowmere back towards Winterhold with a cold look on her face. When Erik made no move to follow she snapped, “Don’t worry about deciding whether you want to join me any longer. You’re dismissed. Go back to Rorikstead. I’m sure your father will appreciate your help on the farm again.”
Raisa handed the books over to Urag silently, her mood still poor from her parting with Erik, “Here are those books that were stolen.”

The Orc looked at her with an almost impressed expression. “Well, well,” he said, inspecting the books carefully. “And you seem to be in one piece! Thank you. I’ll look these over and inform Mirabelle if I find anything relevant. Night of Tears, eh? I remember this one. Well, isn’t that interesting… Did you read it yourself? If I recall correctly, that has some interesting implications. You should mention that to Tolfdir…”

Raisa nodded silently and made her way back into the Hall of Elements, lost in her thoughts once again. She really shouldn’t have shouted at Erik like she had. The boy was young, and he couldn’t understand her experience and why it influenced her choices so drastically. But then, he didn’t need to push her so hard and he had.

She found Tolfdir standing in the center of the hall, staring up at the large floating orb, much in the same way she’d last seen him in Saarthal. She stood next to him, looking up at the orb warily.

“Urag suggested I come and see you,” she said after a moment.

“Did he now?” Tolfdir asked, sounding surprised, as always. “Does he have information about our wonderful discovery?”

“I found a certain book that he thinks you should read— Night of Tears…” she explained.

“Is that the one about something buried beneath Saarthal?” Tolfdir thought aloud. “Something that men and mer fought over? I’ll have to make a point of re-reading it. I don’t recall the details anymore…”

They stood in silence for a moment before he continued once more, “I just can’t seem to tear myself away… Whatever this is, its beauty is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. If you’d allow me to indulge myself for a moment, I thought I might make a few observations…”

Raisa gestured towards the orb and said, “Be my guest.”

“I’m sure you’ve already noticed the markings. They’re quite unlike anything we’ve seen before. Ayleid, Dwemer, Daedric… Not even Falmer. None of them are a match. Quite curious indeed…” Tolfdir mused, pointing towards some of the glowing runes on the surface of the orb to illustrate his point. “Now, I’m not sure you’re quite as attuned as I am, given my extensive years of experience, but can you feel that? This marvelous object. It practically radiates magicka, and yet it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. Arch-Mage Aren is already hard at work, and hopefully we’ll have more information about all of this very soon.”

Almost inaudible footsteps approached them from behind. Raisa turned sharply as Ancano moved closer, and he seemed slightly taken aback at being heard, though he hid it well. “I’m afraid I must intrude,” he said coldly. “It is urgent that I speak with your associate immediately.”

“This is most inappropriate!” Tolfdir protested. “We are involved in serious research here!”

“Yes, I’ve no doubt of its gravity,” Ancano said drily, “This, however, is a matter that cannot wait.”

“Well, I’m quite sure I’ve never been interrupted like this before… the audacity!” Tolfdir
continued. He sighed and looked at Raisa apologetically, “I suppose we’ll continue this at some later time, when we can avoid interruptions…” He shot Ancano a particularly rude look, one that was shocking from someone so calm and kind.

“I need you to come with me immediately,” Ancano snapped at Raisa. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Raisa said simply, following along behind the elf.

“Really?” Ancano asked, sounding like he was mocking her confusion. “Well, allow me to clarify the situation. I’d like to know why there’s someone claiming to be from the Psijic Order here at the College. More importantly, I’d like to know why he’s asking for you specifically. So we’re going to go have a little chat with him, and find out exactly what it is he wants.”

“Why does this concern you?” Rais demanded.

“I’ll be the one asking the questions. All you need to know is that the Psijic Order is a rogue organization, believing themselves to be above the law. They have clashed with the Aldmeri Dominion before, and I have no intention of allowing that to happen here.”

“And here I thought you were just an advisor,” Raisa muttered sarcastically.

“Technically, that is true,” Ancano replied. “But I still report to the Aldmeri Dominion, and I cannot ignore this situation. Don’t worry, you can return to your petty squabbles and meaningless research as soon as this matter is resolved. Now, you are going to speak to this… Monk… and find out why he is here, and then he will be removed from College grounds immediately.”

The pair entered the Arch-Mage’s quarters, where Savos Aren and a man in a golden robe stood waiting. For a moment, everything was normal, apart from a heavy sense of unease in the atmosphere. Then, Raisa felt as though she’d stood up too fast as her head spun wildly. A film crossed over her vision, and she recalled the last time this had happened in Saarthal.

“Please do not be alarmed,” the man in the golden robe said calmly, “I mean you no harm. It is good to meet you in person.”

“What’s going on? Why do you keep doing this to everyone?” Raisa asked, looking back and forth between the Psijic Monk and their two now frozen companions.

“I’d simply like to talk with you,” the man said. “I’ve given us a chance to speak privately, but I’m afraid I can’t do this for long. We must be brief. The situation here at your College is of dire importance and attempts to contact you as we have previously have failed. I believe it is due to the very source of our concern. This object… the Eye of Magnus as your people have taken to calling it. The energy coming from it has prevented us from reaching you with the visions you have already seen. The longer it remains here, the more dangerous the situation becomes. And so, I have come here personally to tell you it must be dealt with.”

“If this is dangerous, then why don’t you do something about it?” Raisa asked, a frown on her face.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” the man said, a small laugh filtering through his serious tone.

“Then what does any of this have to do with me?” Raisa asked.

“You set this chain of events in motion at Saarthal,” the monk said simply. “You must understand, the Psijic Order does not typically… intervene directly in events. My presence here will be seen as an affront to some within the Order, and as soon as we have finished, I will be leaving your
College. I’m all too aware that my presence has aroused suspicion, especially in Ancano, your Thalmor associate. Nevertheless, my Order will not act directly. You must take it upon yourself to do so.”

“So what exactly is the problem?”

“As you may have learned, this object… The Eye… is immensely powerful. The world is not ready for it. If it remains here, it will be misused. Indeed, many in the Order believe it has already… Rather, something will happen soon, something that cannot be avoided,” the Psijic monk said. “We believe that your efforts should be directed toward dealing with the aftermath, but we cannot predict what that will be.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Raisa said. “I don’t know that I can help you…”

“Unfortunately, the future is as obscured to us as it is to you. The overwhelming power of the Eye makes it difficult for us to see,” Quaranir said, sounding somewhat apologetic, “I fear I have already overstepped the bounds of my Order, but I will offer this: seek out the Augur of Dunlain here in your College. His perception may be more coherent than ours.”

“Who?”

“He was once a student here at the College. Now he is… something different.”

Raisa shook her head, “Where would I even find him?”

“I… I am unsure,” Quaranir said with a shake of his head. “He is somewhere within the College. Surely one of your colleagues must know his location. I am sorry I cannot provide you with further help, but this conversation requires a great deal of effort on my part. Now, I am afraid I must leave you. We will continue to watch over you and guide you as best we can. It is within you to succeed. Never forget that.”

“Why should I trust you or your Order?” Raisa demanded quickly, knowing that their frozen time was coming to an end.

“I presume you refer to Ancano’s distaste for the Psijic Order? The Thalmor see our Order as a threat because we have power, and we will not allow them to control us. I assure you that we mean you no harm.”

Raisa felt her mind go dizzy once more and, in a moment, reality returned to normal.

“I’m sorry, were you about to say something?” Savos Aren asked, looking at Quaranir questioningly.

“Well?” Ancano demanded. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Quaranir said, a bemused smile on his face.

“Don’t play coy,” Ancano snapped, stepping towards Quaranir almost threateningly. “You asked to see a specific member of the College. Here she is. Now what is it you want?”

“There’s been a misunderstanding. Clearly I should not be here. I shall simply take my leave.” Quaranir tried again.

“What?” Ancano spat, “What trickery is this? You’re not going anywhere until I find out what you’re up to!”
“I’m not ‘up to’ anything. I apologize if I have offended you in any way,” the mage said, stepping around Ancano’s imposing figure smoothly.

“We’ll see about this…” Ancano grumbled, leading the monk from the quarters.

“I’m… I’m not sure what happened,” the Arch-Mage said thoughtfully. “A monk from the Psijic Order, here, after all these years, and then he just leaves… I hope we didn’t offend him somehow…”

“Arch-Mage, have you ever heard of the Augur of Dunlain?” Raisa asked quickly.

“Has Tolfdir been telling stories again? I thought I made it quite clear that this was a subject inappropriate for conversation. Please don’t allow him to continue to discuss the subject,” the Arch-Mage warned.

“Tolfdir hasn’t said anything sir,” Raisa said quickly. “I just read it somewhere and was curious, that’s all…”

While the discussion with the Arch-Mage was not a success, she at least knew where to get her answers. She made her way to the Hall of Elements to corner her teacher, and he did not disappoint.

“Well now, there’s a name I haven’t heard in some time. My goodness, it’s been years since I’ve spoken with him,” the old man mused. “I suppose he’s still down in the Midden, but I haven’t checked. Are you going to see him? Do tell him ‘hello’ for me, won’t you?”

“What can you tell me about him?” Raisa asked hopefully.

“Well, I suppose he probably wouldn’t mind… It was all before my time, you understand,” Tolfdir said. “I’ve heard the stories, the same as anyone else. He was a brilliant student, an accomplished wizard. Delved into magic in a way none had seen before. But, I think, he became too focused on just how much power he could acquire. That’s what led to the accident…”

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The Midden wasn’t exactly difficult to get into. It was through a nondescript floor grate in a dark corner of the main College courtyard. It led into icy tunnels full of wraiths and draugrs, twisting paths and old altars for the study of magicka. Eventually, she found herself approaching an old wooden door.

As she reached out to open it, a gravely voice boomed, “Your perseverance will only lead to disappointment.”

She barely hesitated before putting her hand to the door and began to push it open.

The voice called again, “Still you persist? Very well, you may enter.”

Inside the room was a floating orb, shining with a bright, sickly blue glow. It pulsed and sparkled as she approached.

“So, you’re the Augur of Dunlain?” She asked, not fully knowing what she had expected.

“I am that which you have been seeking. Your efforts are in vain. It has already begun. But those
who have sent you have not told you what they seek. What you seek.”

“I was just told to find you,” Raisa said, frowning deeply. “Was that a mistake?”

“Indeed, you were. And so you have come looking, though you do not know why. Like others before you, you blindly follow a path to your own destruction. The Thalmor came seeking answers as well, unaware they will be his undoing. Your path now follows his, though you will arrive too late.”

“And what is it you think I’m seeking?”

“You seek that which all who wield magic seek: Knowledge,” the orb flashed brightly. “You shall find this: Knowledge will corrupt. It will destroy. It will consume. You seek meaning, shelter in Knowledge. You will not find it. The Thalmor sought the same thing, and it shall lead to his end as it has so many others.”

“Thalmor?” She asked sharply, her defenses rising once more.

“The one who calls himself Ancano. He seeks information about the Eye, but what he will find shall be quite different. His path will cross yours in time, but first you must find that which you need.”

“I’m not the first to come see you then?” she asked.

“No, though you may be the last. The one who calls himself Ancano has sought my knowledge as well, through very different questions. Your path differs from most. You are being guided, pushed toward something,” the orb glittered. “It is a good path, on untraveled by many. It is a path that can save your College. I will tell you what you need to know to follow it further.”

“What do I need?”

“You, and those aiding you, wish to know more about the Eye of Magnus. You wish to avoid the disaster of which you are not yet aware. To see through Magnus’s Eye without being blinded, you require his staff. Events now spiral quickly towards the inevitable center, so you must act with haste. Take this knowledge to your Arch-Mage.”

Then the Orb shrank and grew silent, still pulsing gently, almost as if it were breathing. Raisa left it to its solitude. It seemed to prefer the cold silence of the Midden, and certainly was finished conversing with her.

Raisa quickly made her way back up to the Arch-Mage’s quarters, walking in without so much as knocking. The elf looked up from his desk, surprised and somewhat irritated.

“I have important information for you,” she said quickly.

“Really?” the mage asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically, sitting back in his chair to humor her. “And what might that be?”

“We need to find the Staff of Magnus.”

“I’m sorry, what?” the man asked. “Well… I’d certainly love to have such a powerful staff, but I’m not really sure that any of us need it…”

“It’s connected to the orb we found in Saarthal,” Raisa told him insistently.
“And how exactly do you suddenly know this?”

“I spoke with the Augur of Dunlain,” she said, fully expecting to be reprimanded for it.

“Did you really?” he sounded surprised, more than angry. “And he specifically mentioned the Staff of Magnus? I… I’m impressed with your initiative. Of course, someone will need to follow up on this.”

“You mean me, don’t you?” she sighed as the elf watched her thoughtfully. She should have expected this. It was always her.

“I certainly do,” he nodded. “Since you went so far as to seek out the Augur for advice, I thought you’d be more enthusiastic.”

“I’d be more enthusiastic if I wasn’t here trying to learn more about the Elder Scrolls and the dragon menace. That does take precedence for me, sir.”

He chose to ignore her reasoning, continuing to task her with finding the staff despite her protests. “Something as specific and ancient as the Staff of Magnus… I’m not sure we’d ever find something like that… I seem to recall Mirabelle mentioning the staff somewhat recently. Why don’t you see if she can tell you anything? I’m quite pleased with your progress, you know. You’ve certainly proven yourself to be more than a mere Apprentice. Well done.”
“Do you know anything about the Staff of Magnus?”

Mirabelle looked up from her plate of food, not answering immediately. She didn’t answer Raisa immediately, seeming to weigh her options first. “Well now that’s an odd question,” she said. “Why in the world would you be asking that?”

“Arch-Made Aren said you’d mentioned it recently.”

“I see,” she said, sitting back, laying her utensils on the table thoughtfully. “Well, yes, I suppose I did mention it, though I’m not sure what he expects me to tell you. I only brought it to his attention a few months back when the Synod showed up here looking for it. They were apparently under the impression we were keeping it in a closet somewhere.”

Raisa slid onto the bench across from Mirabelle and picked up an apple for later. “It may be connected to the Eye of Magnus,” she explained. “It’s kind of important, I think.”

“The Eye of Magnus?” Mirabelle laughed. “I can appreciate that this… thing, this Orb… It’s very impressive. Very unique, and definitely worth studying. But let’s not jump to any conclusions, or assing it importance beyond what we’re certain of, which to be quite honest is very little.”

Raisa bit the inside of her cheek in annoyance. She didn’t appreciate Mirabelle’s condescending tone at all. “The Augur referred to it as the Eye of Magnus. Not me,” she said tartly. “I don’t think he was just guessing.”

“The Augur?” Mirabelle asked, almost knocking her goblet over as she reached for it, distracted by Raisa’s response. “Just what have you gotten yourself involved in? Whatever is going on, whatever you’re up to… Be very careful…”

“So that Staff of Magnus?” Raisa asked. “The Arch-Mage put me in charge of retrieving it.”

“Well, it’s said to be very powerful. Has the capacity to store an incredible amount of magical power, as the story goes. But it’s more myth than anything at this point. I’ve no doubt it actually exists, but no one has seen it in what, decades? Longer?” Mirabelle mused. “I’m not sure. The only time I’ve heard it mentioned was when those Synod characters showed up some months ago looking for it.”

“Who exactly are the Synod?” Raisa asked quietly, leaning forward slightly.

“Mages based out of Cyrodiil. They fancy themselves the Imperial Authority on magic these last few hundred years. My understanding is that all they really do it make noise in an attempt to curry favor from the Emperor—Divines bless his soul. Lots of politics, little magic. I was quite surprised to find them on our doorstep. They seemed amiable enough, but their line of questioning made me… uneasy. It became clear they’re trying to hoard powerful artifacts, looking to consolidate power.”

“So no one actually knows the Staff’s location?”

“No one here does,” Mirabelle corrected. “The Synod seemed convinced it was somewhere here in Skyrim. They inquired about the ruins of Mzulft, but that’s all I remember. It sounded like they were heading out there, though they were rather secretive about why. I suppose if you’re intent on looking for the staff, there’s a chance they might be in Mzulft yet. Just don’t expect them to be
“What else can you tell me about the Staff of Magnus?”

“I’m not really sure,” Mirabelle sighed. “Made and used by Magnus himself, if you believe those sorts of things. I believe I’ve heard it said that it’s the only think that could adequately contain his power. The sort of embellishment wizards of ancient times loved to make.”

“My mentor always said those sorts of stories were Hogwarsh.” Raisa said. “He’d rather have been known for turning someone inside out instead of for making a powerful artifact though, so I suppose he was still one for grandeur.”

Ignoring the horrified look on Mirabelle’s face, Raisa shrugged and pushed herself away from the table with a yawn. She figured that it was too late in the day to bother getting the carriage towards Windhelm. Most drivers refused to come to Winterhold at all as it was, and they certainly wouldn’t take kindly to having to travel in the middle of the night through blizzards and Saber cat country.

Leaving the next morning around dawn put Raisa arriving in Windhelm shortly before lunch. She almost wished that she’d let Aventus remain in the Aretino home last time she was here. It would have been nice to have some company in the miserable city. But then, she was confident the house would still be empty and full of fresh wood for a fire. She also had a short letter tucked away that Aventus had written for her, giving her express permission to use the house on short visits. He had been very insistent that he wasn’t giving her the house, which she found quite amusing. She didn’t think she’d ever want to live in a city like Windhelm, but she knew that Aventus loved the city, and had subsequently promised to check on his holdings for him from time to time.

She slid her way through the city as best she could. She would have rather been unnoticeable, but the icy roads made it difficult to maintain her balance at times, given the steep stairs and sloping roads the cobble city boasted. She was breathing heavily by the time she reached the Aretino estate, and was fumbling at her picks with frozen fingers when an accusatory “Hey!” came from behind her.

She spun around, the frost nearly throwing her legs out from under her. A Stormcloak soldier was approaching, and she slipped her picks up her sleeves. A few paces away, the man’s demeanor changed and she was greeted with a jovial, “Ha! It’s you!”

She paused for a moment, still reciting different lies she could tell to get herself out of trouble, before she realized that she was, in fact, not in trouble at all. She looked at the man with a furrowed brow, a slow smile creeping up on her confused face.

“Ralof?” she asked, allowing a slight laugh to come out. “Ralof of Riverwood, is that you?”

“In the flesh,” he replied, holding his arms out appraisingly. “Are you here to enlist?”

Raisa stifled an indignant laugh and shook her head, “No, no. I’m not here to enlist. Not today.”

Ralof chuckled, “Well, I’m sure we’ll get you some day. True Nords like us can’t resist the call of our brothers and sisters in arms.”

“Be that as it may,” Raisa nodded, “I’m better at resisting than most. I happen to like living.”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Ralof asked, raising his eyebrows challengingly, though there was a jovial twinkle in his eye.

“For now,” Raisa smirked, her gaze flicking over his face momentarily.
“If you aren’t swearing your allegiance to Ulfric, what are you doing here?” Ralof asked.

“At the moment, freezing,” she replied deftly.

“I can show you the way to the inn, if you’d like?” he offered, hesitantly holding out an arm to her. She stared at it for a moment and he started to draw it back, sensing she was offended. “The roads can be tough here. Wouldn’t want—”

She reached out and took his arm, deciding it was better to have some sort of escort to cover her presence in an area of the city she likely shouldn’t be caught in. The closeness would make her seem more trustworthy, with any luck—and not to mention, it would be slightly warmer than walking alone would be.

“It’s been a long time, my friend,” Ralof said as they began their slow walk to Candlehearth Hall. “What have you been up to since Riverwood?”

“Too much,” she sighed. “I think I’ve likely been to every hold in Skyrim at least twice since I last saw you. Popped into Riverwood a few times. Your sister doesn’t remember me, which was extremely awkward when I went to return the key to her house a while back. Nearly sawed my arm off.”

“That would have been unfortunate,” Ralof grimaced. “I apologize for her. She’d a naturally mistrusting woman. Understandable really, when one remembers that she almost married that bastard Hadvar…”

“That does add some clarity to the situation,” Raisa laughed. “Explains part of your animosity towards him.”

“As if him nearly beheading me isn’t reason enough on its own,” Ralof laughed loudly.

“Nearly beheading you?” Raisa retorted, “Your head wasn’t the one on the block!”

“Oh, details, details, my friend,” Ralof said, waving his other hand dismissively. “In five years we won’t remember the details of who was closer to death at the time.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Raisa agreed. “But while my memory lasts, I won’t let you forget it.”

They were walking up the steps to Candlehearth Hall when Raisa spotted two beggars huddled near one of the flaming sconces. One was an old woman, dressed only in rags. The second was only a beggar at a glance, a man removing his thick fur cloak to wrap around the old woman, holding out his hand expectantly. The old woman reached up and patted his face, saying something with a wide smile as she handed him a small sack of coins with the other. It struck Raisa as strange, but she was distracted by the warm call of the inn as Ralof shoved open the door for her.

She stepped inside, momentarily forgetting the exchange outside. The door swung slowly shut on them as the man turned, distracted by the noise and light from the inn. He saw a young woman step through the doorway, her back to him. He gave her a cursory look up and down, but stopped himself for a moment, shocked at the chances. He’d know that ass anywhere.

A few hours later, Ralof stumbled out of the inn, a few too many meads inside him, but his spirits nice and high. He didn’t notice the man in the shadows near the entrance to the city. But the man certainly noticed him. Alone.
The tension only lasted a moment, though, and the man’s true prey stepped out of the inn shortly after the doors closed. She slowly made her way down the steps, clinging to the wall for some hope of balancing on the treacherous ice. She let out a laugh when she reached the bottom and wrapped her arms around the man in a close hug. She pulled away quickly and began walking alongside the young blonde.

The man in the shadows skirited along behind them, keeping his distance, and keeping to the shadows, trying to catch snippets of their conversation. It seemed to be about… nothing, if he was understanding them. The man was trying to convince her to join him in something or other and she gracefully declined him. Despite her rejections, the man still smiled at her kindly, his looks lingering longer than those of a friend on her flushed face.

Every now and then the young woman would glance over her shoulder, a puzzled look on her face that slowly grew more suspicious as time went on. But the pair came to a stop at the barracks and remained silent for a heavy moment before the pair let out a set of nervous laughs.

“I would invite you inside, but… public barracks and all…” the man trailed off.

Raisa laughed and shook her head, “It’s no trouble. That isn’t the most ideal situation. I’ll just return to the inn, I think. Much more accommodating. Wouldn’t want to be mistaken for a soldier, anyhow.”

“That’s fair enough,” the man nodded, a kind smile on his face, though he did seem to be just the smallest bit disappointed. “Next time you’re in town, I’ll try and have better accommodations. It’s not right to leave a friend out to dry like this.”

“More like freeze,” Raisa corrected. She grasped his arm tightly for a moment before turning and carefully making her way towards the inn. The man stared after her for a short moment or two before entering the Stormcloak barracks.

When the door shut, the man stepped out of the shadows, an easy smirk sliding onto his scruffy face. “You trying to rob the cradle, lass?”

Raisa sighed and turned towards Brynjolf, a wry smile on her face. It didn’t seem as kind for him as it had for the Stormcloak, but Brynjolf tried to push it down.

“It’s been a while,” he continued.

“It has,” she said as he fell into step beside her. He held out his arm, and Raisa took it with little thought, though she did notice that her hand trembled a bit before making contact with the cold worn leather of his armor. She hoped that he thought it was just evidence of the cold, rather than anything else. After a short silence she said defensively, “He’d older than I am.”

“Young enough that he considered bringing you inside despite the open barracks,” Brynjolf teased. “A wild one, that.”

“I can’t believe you decided to stick your nose in my business,” she said insincerely. “What are you even doing here?”

“Sweet Silda’s been offering pickpocket lessons, and I was seeing what she could do. She’d a kind old soul, if a litty batty. Always knows a good mark,” he told her. “Too selfish, driven by coin. Corruptible, and ready to corrupt others.”

“So you’re searching for a Guild Master,” Raisa commented, piecing together the puzzle. “The search can’t be that dire, can it?”
“You’d think,” Brynjolf joked, “But for some reason, no one is responding to our postings at the inn.”

“Shame,” Raisa sighed. “Maybe you should start selling elixirs again, just to get a side hustle going in case things go bottoms up again.”

Raisa led him past the inn, towards the Aretino home. At the door, she slipped her picks out of her sleeves again and bent down to carefully unlock the door. Her hands shook, and her fingertips were numb with the cold. After nearly breaking her pick on the first latch, Brynjolf placed a hand over hers and deftly slipped the tools from her fingers. In seconds he had the door open and had ushered her inside.

He closed the door behind them as she darted up the stairs to light a fire. He looked around the home casually, wondering about its history and why she led him here in particular.

“This all yours?” he asked, settling down on a bundle of furs near the hearth.

She shook her head, a gentle smile on her face. “This is the home of Aventus Aretino,” she told him. “The boy who ran away from Honorhall. The one who asked me to kill Grelod the Kind. He lets me stay here when I’m in town.”

Brynjolf nodded, thinking back to the first time he’d seen her. It should trouble him that she had been on her way to murder a woman, but he knew that the Brotherhood was not all she was. She was much more than an assassin.

A point that was further proven as she screwed up her face in concentration and held out a hand towards the stack of wood in the fireplace. She exhaled sharply and a small burst of flame shot out from her hand, igniting the wood swiftly. She sat back with a smug little smile on her face, watching the flame grow steadily in the hearth.

“Since when have you been able to do that?” he asked.

She glanced at him and then back at the fire. He half expected some witty remark, but she instead gave him a simple answer. “I learned a few tricks from Festus… before. I’ve been North for a while. Searching for Elder Scrolls. Got unwittingly wrapped up with the College of Winterhold too. That’s actually why I’m here.”

“You, a mage?” Brynjolf laughed slightly. “Seems a bit out of place, lass.”

“That’s only because you think of me as a thief,” she pointed out. “I am a poor student though, make no mistake. They only let me inside because I can use the Words of Power. Somehow they haven’t exactly put two and two together to realize I’m the Dragonborn.”

“Few people do,” Brynjolf said. They sat in the silence of the crackling fire for a few minutes before he asked, “Who is he?”

Raisa looked at him, surprised. She tensed slightly but relaxed quickly, shrugging thoughtfully at his question. “No one, I suppose.”

“You suppose?”

“He helped me escape Alduin in Helgen. Gave me refuge in Riverwood,” Raisa said. “He grew up there. He has a sister and a nephew there. He’s a soldier. A hot-headed Nord. His name’s Ralof. I don’t really know much else about him. But nearly dying together tends to form unusual bonds for people. If we were in danger, I’d trust him to have my back.”
“Danger makes the heart grow fonder?”

Raisa looked at him resting her cheek on her knee, her arms wrapped lazily around her leg. She hummed thoughtfully and smiled gently, “I suppose you could say that.”

“Aye,” he said back. His heart was pounding, and he tried to change the subject, remembering Karliah’s warnings. “I can’t imagine the College has sent you here for something. Windhelm isn’t exactly a font of knowledge.”

Raisa laughed, “No, I’m heading to some ruins along the road to Riften, actually. Mzulft, I believe. It’s not exactly glamorous, but I think I’m the only suitable option for the job. Scholars don’t seem to make the best errand-runners.”

“That’s a dwarven ruin,” Brynjolf frowned. “You hate those.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “But it’s where I have to go. I’m sure it will be fine. There are supposed to be some mages there from the Synod, but I’m not too sure they’ll still be there. Those ruins could be quite dangerous.”

“I need to head back to Riften soon,” Brynjolf said quickly. “I could come with you, if you’d like. Watch your back and whatnot. I could really use a break from headhunting.”

“I’d like that,” she said quietly. “I… don’t like travelling alone.”

“You’ve been alone?” he asked, frowning slightly in concern.

“Not the whole time,” she corrected. “I met a young man named Erik. He wanted to become a mercenary, but his father didn’t think he was cut out for it. So I invited him along. He did well…”

“But?”

“But he wasn’t ready for more… difficult decisions…” she said slowly. “I made a call he didn’t like. He fought me on it. I told him he was being naïve. He told me I was being cruel. I told him I knew that and didn’t need him to remind me of it. Then I told him to go home.”

Brynjolf nodded along silently. “It sounds like he didn’t understand the path he was looking at. Tough decisions are tough for a reason. Neither option is good in the end.”

Raisa nodded and let out a big sigh of what seemed to be relief. “It’s nice… being understood. For a little bit I thought I was just being stubborn over it… But I believe that my choice was ultimately irrelevant. The same thing would have happened regardless.”

“I won’t ask,” he said quickly. “I don’t need to know. You know I trust your judgement without question, lass.”

She looked at him fondly, “And I’d happily follow you into Oblivion. I’m not going to lead your Guild.”

Brynjolf smiled wryly, glad that she didn’t linger on his sentiment, though his face burned at her words. Thankfully the glow of the fire concealed it well enough. “You caught me,” he said, putting his hands up in mock surrender.

“You… You don’t have to come with me tomorrow,” Raisa said after a while. “I’m perfectly capable of handling it myself.”
“Oh, I know that,” Brynjolf agreed. “You’re just a busy lass, and I’m interested in spending time with you when I can.”

Raisa nodded, “I suppose I have been making myself scarce.”

Brynjolf laughed, “With the way you ran out last time I saw you, I was beginning to think I’d done something to offend you. You run off a lot, actually.”

“I’m just… anxious,” Raisa said. “So much to do…”

Brynjolf looked at the fire sadly before looking back at her with the same expression. “Do you think it’ll ever end?”

There was a heavy silence before Raisa croaked out, “It’s getting late. Tomorrow’s a long journey for both of us.”

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