

## Come Hell or High Water

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# Come Hell or High Water

by [jjgremlin](#)

## Summary

When Luthes Malena took his oath to serve and protect as a member of the Whiterun guard, he had no idea he'd be faced with a dilemma like this one. But by the Nine, he was going to get that stolen apple back, even if it meant charging straight into a dragon fight.

This is the story of a foolhardy guard who, through one reckless decision, becomes the Dragonborn's biggest pain in the ass—and somehow also his closest companion.

## Notes

Hi there! This is just a fun little shortfic idea I dreamed up one evening and thought I'd give writing it a shot. The story features two original male characters and loosely follows the trajectory of the main quest, with some additional shenanigans on the side. I hope you enjoy and thanks for reading!

# Yer a Dragonborn, Ruhnjolf

## Chapter Summary

And it all started with that damn apple...

Luthes Malena had felt relatively certain in the solidity of the ground below him up until the moment when all of Nirn shook as if it was coming apart and what looked like a giant lizard emerged from behind the clouds.

No, that was no lizard...it was a *dragon*.

His heart, which had been beating rapid-fire in his chest just minutes ago, stopped in fear. He froze in the middle of the cobblestoned path he'd been following outside the gates of Whiterun and stared up into the sky as the dragon soared overhead.

Dragons. He remembered his mother telling him stories about them terrorizing the land all those years ago, the enslavement of Skyrim's people and the ensuing Dragon War with the triumph of the Tongues. They were stories that his Imperial father would wave away with a hand, admonishing his wife for filling their son's head with silly Nordic fantasies. He preferred to tell stories of his homeland of Cyrodiil and the great Septim dynasty.

Luthes never once thought he'd see the object of his mother's bedtime stories in actuality, though. The dragon swooped down from the sky and landed on the ground, kicking up a circle of dust around his feet. Fearsome, coal black eyes surrounded by blue scales looked at Luthes with loathing, and a shiver ran through his body and caused him to tremble.

Up ahead, the thief he'd been chasing brandished a broad, two-handed sword stained with blood and charged ahead to face down the scaly beast. His long, blonde hair, tugged back into a ponytail, rushed out behind him as he sprinted and yelled some battle cry that Luthes vaguely recalled some of his fellow guards using when they chased after criminals.

Nords. So predictably valiant.

This one, though, seemed trickier. He had the warmongering mentality of the race, but at the same time saw no issue with stealing a piece of fruit from a law-abiding shop owner. That was something that Luthes couldn't accept—the law was the law, no matter how small of a crime. As a member of the Whiterun guard, he had a duty to protect and serve the people. It was what his family had been proudly doing for generations; he came from a long line of guards who had served in the Imperial City in Cyrodiil.

In a split second decision, Luthes retrieved his steel sword and readied his trusty shield adorned with the crest of Whiterun hold. By the Nine, he was going to get that stolen apple back.

After they defeated the dragon, of course.

The Nord swung at the beast's snout, landing a blow that left a slash across his features. The dragon stumbled back, but quickly regained his composure, advancing forward. Even so, the Nord stood steady and true, ready to face the oncoming threat.

Luthes approached the dragon from the side, sinking his sword into it. He struggled to push the blade through the resistance of reptile's scaly skin, but the black blood spilling out from the puncture drove him to keep going.

The Nord stopped slashing for a brief moment to stare incredulously at Luthes, eyebrows furrowed. "You're still chasing after me?" he said, a mixture between a question and an angry statement.

Luthes narrowed his eyes. "I know you stole that apple, you fuuuuuu—"

With a sudden jerk, the dragon's body moved and Luthes found himself flung forward, clinging onto his sword with a tight grip. When he finally steadied himself, he yanked on the handle as hard as he could and pulled out the weapon, stumbling backwards.

Right as the dragon turned to face him.

He stood with his mouth open, staring slack jawed into the face of the dragon and unable to move. The dragon opened his jaw to reveal a full set of sharp teeth, and Luthes could see flames beginning to form at the back of the throat. Still, he remained frozen to the spot.

From his side came a bellow. "What in Oblivion are you doing just standing there?"

Then a force like a battering ram hit him as the Nord pushed him out of the way just when the dragon unleashed a stream of white-hot fire. Luthes could feel the heat radiating from the dragon's breath as he and the Nord tumbled to the ground out of reach of the fire, panting. As they scrambled to their feet, the dragon mercifully closed his mouth and batted his wings towards the sky, soaring back up into the clouds.

"Thank you," Luthes said, turning to face the Nord, who nodded in response. His face was stoic and serious. He stayed silent as he clutched his sword tightly, knuckles white, and watched the dragon's movements.

It was then that Luthes had an idea. Tucking his sword into its sheath, he pulled out the long bow behind his back along with a steel arrow from its quiver. He felt the string of the bow stretch as he aimed his arrow up above, tracking the flight patterns of the dragon. The timing had to be just right on this one.

The arrow shot into the sky and pierced the dragon's skin, just around where Luthes guessed his heart was. The dragon let out a screech of pain and dove back towards the ground where he landed with a skid.

The Nord was suddenly by Luthes's side, lips close to his ear as he shouted instructions. "I have an idea," he said. "Distract him with the arrows while I get a good shot at him."

Luthes nodded and began to pelt the dragon's body with arrows as he ran around the creature. Each time an arrow landed, the dragon would crane his neck to follow Luthes, trying to keep up with guard. The hit he'd made earlier through the heart seemed to slow his movements down, though, and he couldn't match Luthes's pace.

In one sudden move, the Nord charged at the side of the dragon's face, raising his sword and plunging it through the head. The dragon cried out and struggled as the Nord held on. After several moments of fighting, the dragon fell to the earth in a crumpled heap, wings fluttering sadly one last time before his eyes closed. Then, as if never there to begin with, the dragon's scales vanished and left only a mass of bones in their wake. Luthes blinked several times as if to confirm that what he was seeing was real.

"Well," the Nord said with a grunt. "Guess he's dead now."

He stepped forward to inspect the bones, running a hand along one of the thick, white ribs sticking up into the air. As he did so, a rush of purple and blue lights streamed out of the dragon's carcass and enveloped the Nord in their radiance. Luthes watched his face in the glow; it was as if the Nord was no longer in the present moment, but instead traveling in some distant land receiving enlightenment. When the colors dimmed and faded at last, he slowly turned to face the stretching fields that surrounded them and opened his mouth.

"FUS."

That single syllable sent ripples across the plains, causing blades of grass to flatten in the winds. A rush of air slapped Luthes's cheeks and nearly sent him reeling backwards.

The stillness after the Nord spoke touched everything, and it felt like time slowed to a trickle. Something about that word, 'fus,' and what it had done sparked Luthes's memory of a story his mother once told him. Of what they used to say about the Septims. Then he realized what it was.

Luthes gasped. "You're..."

The Nord looked at him with frightened eyes. "I'm..."

"Dragonborn," they whispered in unison.

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Stealing the apple hadn't been a conscious decision on Ruhnjolf's part—his stomach rumbled while he was going about his business in town, and the apple sat there so invitingly on that little table in the general store that he didn't think Belethor would miss it. When he was on the job, he was used to just taking things when he needed them.

"I'd even buy one of your relatives, if you're looking to sell," Belethor was saying to another customer as Ruhnjolf eyed the apple. When the customer made no response, Belethor added that he was just making a joke; Ruhnjolf had no doubt that the greedy little Breton would do something like that, though.

He waited until the owner's back faced the counter before reaching out and plucking the fruit from its position on the table. Ruhnjolf rolled it around in his hand for a brief moment, then stuck it in the bag of supplies he carried around with him.

"Stop right there, criminal scum." Ruhnjolf had made it halfway to the exit when he heard the cry from behind him, and he turned around to see an Imperial in the tan tunic and armor of the Whiterun guards. He had his helmet off, and Ruhnjolf could see the fire in his dark brown eyes.

Criminal scum? He thought that phrase had gone out of use an era ago. Who was this bastard? And who even gave this much of a rat turd about an apple?

"Don't know what you're talking about," Ruhnjolf said, raising his hands up in defense. He kept his tone calm and steady, with a hint of a threat; the gravelly edge to his voice always helped with that part.

"I saw you pick it up," the guard said, exasperated. "It doesn't belong to you. Put it back, or by the right of law I will have you arrested."

Ruhnjolf snorted. "You really think you can have me arrested for a piece of fruit?"

The guard stared him in the eyes, unblinking. It was unnerving. "I'm willing to bet there's other stolen goods in that bag of yours," he said, pointing at the brown pack slung over Ruhnjolf's shoulders. "And the jarl doesn't take too kindly to thieves."

"Well." Ruhnjolf pinched his beard between his fingers, which was styled into a tiny braid. Moving along the ridges of the twists helped him think. "You're going to have to get them from me, then."

The milk drinker was faster than Ruhnjolf had thought when he first decided to sprint out of the shop and through the gates of Whiterun. It wasn't long before he found himself winded and out breath, struggling to maintain a pace faster than his pursuer. The members of the Khajiit caravan that loitered outside the hold snickered as he ran by with the guard in tow.

"I remember those days," one of them said.

When the dragon interrupted their chase, Ruhnjolf was already so full of adrenaline that he didn't think twice before getting out his sword and charging into battle. The Nord blood pumping through his veins made him battle hardened and ready to face the beast. He'd expected to have to fight for his life in that scenario; it was what Nords did.

What he didn't expect was for the guard to enter the clash, fighting with more valor than he'd seen in a long time. Even Ruhnjolf had to admit that they'd worked well as a team.

And when they'd finally vanquished the dragon and that brilliant light appeared from the corpse...it was like unlocking some part of his brain that he didn't even know existed. He could hear whispers in a language previously unknown to him.

He'd only heard the same sounds one other time in his life, when he took on a contract that led him to Bleak Falls Barrow, an old Nordic ruin outside the village of Riverwood. There, a series of ancient letters written on a stone wall produced the same color of light as the dragon bones did. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him then that he might be a Dragonborn, even after all the stories and legends he'd grown up hearing from his relatives.

Even the guard figured it out faster than he did, and now he was stuck with a nuisance of an Imperial yammering at him about being Dragonborn when Ruhnjolf could barely wrap his own mind around the concept.

"So you're Dragonborn. Just like Tiber Septim! You're basically a living prophecy," the guard said, speaking at breakneck speeds unheard of before that moment. "You should really go and see the Greybeards, the ones who live at High Hrothgar. I remember reading a book about them and how they study the way of the voice and—"

"The Greybeards?" The Nord felt like his head was spinning, and there was a distinct sensation of churning in his guts. Suddenly he was angered at this Imperial who acted like he knew more than him about Nordic heritage and traditions. "Of course I know who the Greybeards are. By Ysmir's beard, I'm a Nord. I know the history of my people."

The guard opened and closed his mouth, taken aback by the harshness in Ruhnjolf's voice. "Well, what do you think, then?" he said finally. "About going to High Hrothgar. You have such power, you should really learn how to use it. And maybe...well, maybe you can learn how to stop the dragon attacks that have been happening."

The dragon attacks. That was right. Ruhnjolf remembered hearing about a dragon that had ransacked Helgen just a few weeks ago, right as the Imperial Army had Ulfric Stormcloak leaning atop a wooden stump with an axe hanging over his head.

"I can come with you, if you'd like," the guard offered, eyes hopeful. "I'll even forget about the whole apple thing. Just this once."

Ruhnjolf narrowed his eyes. Who was this guard, anyway? Why did he care so much? He was just another uptight, obnoxious Imperial. Not only that, but Ruhnjolf didn't even want this ability he'd been given. He knew all the stories of the Dragonborns, of the power and glory they wielded just by being able to absorb dragon souls—benefits that came with the burden of fulfilling an age-old prophecy and potentially letting down his people if he wasn't able to complete his destiny.

It all seemed like a lot of pressure, and Ruhnjolf wasn't sure he could face the prospect of failure.

"I don't need your help," he snapped. "I'll figure this out on my own."

With that, Ruhnjolf turned and headed down the long road back to Whiterun, leaving a stunned guard behind him.

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The evening sun dipped lower on the horizon as Ruhnjolf and his companion, Kharjo, trudged past the farms on their way back to Whiterun. Ruhnjolf could feel his eyes starting to grow heavy as he walked, and dried sweat and dirt caked every inch of his face. He longed for nothing more than a stiff pint of mead and a spot by the fireplace at the Bannered Mare.

“If anyone sneaks up on us, I’ll smell them coming,” Kharjo said and cracked a grin, exposing sharp feline teeth. “Or I might not. We will see.” He followed it up with a strange throaty laugh that sounded like a mix between a cough and a chuckle.

Ruhnjolf reached up a hand to rub his temples and sighed. Kharjo was a reliable partner and certainly one hell of a fighter, but he told that joke at least once every time they went on a job together, and it made Ruhnjolf want to take a sword to his throat.

Stupid cat.

The two of them had been working mercenary contracts together for several months now, after Kharjo tired of guarding the caravans and craved a more exciting, adventurous life. Ruhnjolf hadn’t been sure if he could trust the Khajiit at first—after all, they had slippery reputations—but Kharjo had shown himself to be fair when it came to splitting profits.

At last they came to the entrance of Whiterun. After they split the Septims from the days’ work, Kharjo parted ways to join the rest of the Khajiit near the gate, while Ruhnjolf entered the hold.

Just inside the gates, a guard patrol made its way past Ruhnjolf. They all wore the face-concealing helmets of the uniform, but he could sense that the guard from the dragon fight was among them. As if reading his mind, the guard on the end turned to get a second look at him as he walked by.

He shook his head and tried to rid his mind of what had happened the other day. Even so, he couldn’t help the way that thoughts about the Greybeards and dragons and destinies entered his head. The feeling of exhilaration that ripped through him as he’d uttered that one word in dragon tongue was impossible to forget, and he’d spent more time than he wanted to considering the guard’s offer to go to High Hrothgar with him.

As he moved through town, he tried to rid himself of these thoughts. Ruhnjolf heard Heimskr, the local preacher, far before he saw the man. His exaggerated speech and decibel-shattering volume gave Ruhnjolf the urge to start a fist fight with the nearest person in town. “WE ARE BUT MAGGOTS WRRIIIIIIIIIITHING IN THE FILTH OF OUR OWN CORRUPTION.”

He ducked into the inn as quickly as he could to avoid hearing the rest of Heimskr’s spiel; he believed in Talos as much as the next Nord but by the Nine was the priest annoying.

The Bannered Mare’s warmth calmed him instantly as he stepped foot inside, taking in the sounds of clinking glasses and idle chatter. The barkeep slid a glass of mead across the counter for him, and he picked it up, retreating to his usual corner at the back of the inn.

In the center of the room, the bard, who Ruhnjolf vaguely recalled being named Mikael, plucked at his lute and began to sing. It was Tale of the Tongues. Of course it was—why



would the Divines spare him reminders of his internal dilemma?

Ruhnjolf didn't know how long he sat in that corner, sipping pint after pint of mead, before the doors opened and in walked the guard. His head was ducked down as he shuffled his way to the counter, body language the polar opposite of the confidence he'd shown when confronting Ruhnjolf. He ordered an ale and sat down on one of the benches around the fire pit. Reflected in the dim light of the flames, the Imperial's face looked worn down and haggard.

As Ruhnjolf stood up and walked over to the guard, he blamed the decision he was about to make on the mead running through his body.

"Hey," he said gruffly.

The Imperial glanced up in surprise, but it was half-hearted; his eyes still looked downtrodden. "What do you want?" he said, a hollow echo evident in his voice.

Ruhnjolf shrugged. "Just wanted to say I thought about what you told me," he said. "Think we should go to High Hrothgar."

The guard tried to hide it, but Ruhnjolf could tell he was pleased. He looked down into his drink and swirled the liquid around in it. "Well, okay," he said. "Only if you're sure."

"I'm sure," he said, even though he'd never been less sure of anything in his life. "Meet tomorrow at the gate. Sunrise."

A nod from the guard gave Ruhnjolf his signal to leave, but before he left, he decided there was one more thing left to say that night.

"Name's Ruhnjolf, by the way," he grunted. "Ruhnjolf Wulfharth."

"Luthes Malena," the guard replied, taking a long sip and studying Ruhnjolf over his drink. "Pleased to meet you."

# The Sounds of Silence

## Chapter Summary

When the Nords speak of the journey to High Hrothgar, they often forget to mention the excruciating silence that occurs when you walk up the seven thousand steps with someone that you just met three days ago.

The barracks clamored with noise as the members of the Whiterun guard prepared to turn in for the night, but all Luthes wanted to do was get to sleep right away—a simple task that grew impossible as the banter continued into the late hours of the night. He sat down on the edge of his bed lined with old matted furs and tried to block out the sounds around him.

As he reached to tug off his helmet, he thought about the day ahead of him. At dawn, he would leave to go to High Hrothgar with a man he'd just recently tried to arrest. Ruhnjolf's face flitted in and out of his mind as he thought about the journey to come, the Nord's grumpy countenance almost making him regret having offered to come with him.

Almost. Deep inside Luthes was an itch to prove himself a hero that he couldn't avoid anymore.

Releasing his head from the metal prison that was the guard helmet calmed him. He took a deep breath in and out as he shook his light brown hair, running his fingers through the greasy strands. A yawn escaped from his mouth, and he knew he was ready for a night of rest.

Now if only he could just get some damn peace and quiet.

"Ah, I used to be an adventurer," one of the guards cracked, hitting his friend on the arm. "But then I took an arrow to the knee. Eh? Eh?"

The room exploded into howls of laughter, and Luthes fought the urge to punch something. He'd heard that joke in every iteration and variation, yet it still somehow amused the rest of the guards, no matter how many times it was told. He gritted his teeth as he bent over to remove his armored boots.

"What's wrong, Imperial?" Luthes's head shot up. He knew that tone of disdain could only mean they were talking to him. "Milk drinker like you can't take a joke?"

He held back a sigh. Ulfric's little rebellion against the Empire had ensured that Luthes's days in the guard, made up of mostly natives to Skyrim, would be filled with comments like that. Every day he was on the job, he encountered some Nord with Stormcloak sympathies that had a vested interest in making sure he knew how terrible his race was.

“A joke implies that what you said is actually funny,” Luthes mumbled.

The Nord who’d insulted him, an older man with a missing tooth and smeared war paint across his face, sneered. His gray eyes seemed unhinged, and for a moment, Luthes regretted what he said. Normally, he had no problem with standing up for himself, but the thought of showing up battered and beaten for his adventure tomorrow was humiliating.

As he contemplated giving the man a feigned apology, he felt himself being swept up by fists grabbing his collar. The burly Nord lifted Luthes until his toes just barely scraped the ground, and he wished he’d spent more time praying to the Divines because he was pretty certain he was about to be turned into horker dung.

“What did you just say to me?” the man said, and Luthes felt a drop of spittle land on his right cheek. He said nothing in response, instead staring into those psycho gray eyes with a small amount of resolve, trying to keep his fear under control.

The sounds around Luthes and his attacker had faded to a din, everyone speaking to one another in hushed tones as they watched the scene unfolding before them. Luthes still said nothing, even as the Nord yelled at him about how Skyrim belonged to its people.

Eventually, his assailant grew bored and set Luthes down on the ground. The latter stumbled backwards as he was released from the tight grip, but he composed himself quickly, brushing hands over the front of his guard’s uniform and going quietly over to his bed. The bag was slung over his shoulder, and he didn’t dare look at any of the other guards as he walked out of the barracks and into the night.

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Luthes awoke with a shudder, the cold of the ground he’d slept on running through his body like ice. He pulled himself up slowly and rubbed a hand over the cramps in his neck and shoulders, trying to work out the soreness in his muscles that had settled overnight. Bursts of color exploded behind his eyes as he tried to contain the disoriented feeling that swept over him.

Even at dawn, the signs of Whiterun coming to life could already be found throughout the city. A horse’s hooves clopped against the cobblestones as a carriage made its way through the gates, and the sounds of metal being struck came from over near the blacksmith’s forge; Adrienne Avenicci, the steward’s daughter, was always hard at work.

Two guards stood near the entrance to the city, muttering to one another and looking at Luthes.

“Wait, I know him,” one of them said a bit too loudly. “Isn’t he a guard? I swear I’ve seen him before.”

The other one shushed her. “Probably just had a rough night. Too much mead or something. Leave him be.”

He squinted into the sun, which had just begun its rise over the tops of the shops and houses in the hold. Up above, he could see the brilliance of Dragonsreach, stretching tall above

everything and reflected in the morning light.

The sun was suddenly blocked by a shadow hovering over him; Ruhnjolf had arrived, and he looked understandably confused by the sight of the man in front of him sitting on the ground. His blonde, bushy eyebrows furrowed and gave him the appearance of being even angrier than he normally looked.

“Did you...did you sleep out here?” he said, voice gruff and laced with sleep. The dark circles under his eyes and messy hair pulled back hastily gave him the appearance of having just woken up.

Despite himself, Luthes felt a blush creeping over his cheeks, and he scrambled to his feet. His legs cried out in relief as they finally had the opportunity to stretch after being tucked in towards his body for the entire night. “I, uh...didn’t want to be late.”

Ruhnjolf eyed him suspiciously, but didn’t say anything further on the matter.

Embarrassment stuck with Luthes as they walked out of the gates and into the somewhat barren plains of Whiterun hold, and he couldn’t figure out why he cared so much about this Nord’s opinion. He was the Dragonborn, but he was also, well...kind of a jerk, and Luthes didn’t usually like Nords who were rude to him like the guards he worked with. Yet, there was something different about Ruhnjolf that made him slightly nervous.

“So, um. You scared?” Luthes asked. There it was again, that questioning yet judgmental look on Ruhnjolf’s face. He gave Luthes the side eye. “About seeing the Greybeards, I mean. Must feel pretty crazy to be the, uh, Dragonborn.”

“Yep,” Ruhnjolf said, popping the ‘p.’ “Pretty crazy.”

So they weren’t going to be making much conversation, then.

Luthes figured it was just as well as they hoisted their bags over their shoulders and headed out on the road. It was a rather pleasant day, he noted; chirping birds made their presence known in the growing daylight, and there were few clouds in sight. Perfect weather for traveling a long distance.

And boy, what a long distance it really was, especially when neither man really had anything to say to the other. The journey to the base of the mountain passed by in a quiet haze, both of them tangled in their own thoughts.

Ivarstead was a sleepy sort of village, stuck in an eternal autumn with its leaves a vibrant orange color, and the grass a dull yellow. People milled around in their fields, tilling soil and planting seeds. Luthes thought it must be a simple sort of life, maybe even peaceful, compared to having to patrol all the time and flag down bandits that seemed to have endless stamina.

“Bassianus, I need you to catch more fish than this,” a bald Nordic man was saying to a long-haired one. The former held up a bucket full of slimy looking aquatic creatures. “The Greybeards are expecting another delivery soon.”

Bassianus offered nothing but a shrug, his face apathetic, or perhaps even slightly annoyed. “Don’t know what more I can do, Klimmek. Fish just aren’t biting.”

“Yeah, but Fastred sure is,” Klimmek mumbled, causing the other man to frown.

“What did you just say?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Hello there,” Luthes said, deciding that moment was the opportune time to interject in their conversation. “Did you say you make deliveries to the Greybeards?”

“Aye,” Klimmek said. “What’s your business with them?”

“We’re um.” Luthes darted his gaze over to Ruhnjolf, who stared back at him with a blaze in his eyes. Okay, so they weren’t going to tell people he was a Dragonborn just yet. “Pilgrims. Yeah, we’re making a pilgrimage to High Hrothgar.”

Klimmek gave them a nod. “Ah, we get a lot of those. The Greybeards are a solitary lot, though. Don’t really communicate with the outside world,” he said. “So you’re better off just visiting the emblems along the way, that’s what most do.”

“Right,” Luthes said. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Klimmek said and gestured to Ruhnjolf. “And tell your friend here it wouldn’t kill him to smile every now and again.” He walked off with his bucket of fish, and Luthes tried to pretend he didn’t notice the way Ruhnjolf clenched his hand into a fist.

“Stupid milk drinker,” he muttered.

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When he was a wee little Nord, Ruhnjolf’s relatives had often regaled him with the tale of Tiber Septim being called to High Hrothgar and the journey of the seven thousand steps. It always filled his heart with a certain kind of excitement, this idea of going on such a grand adventure to somewhere far away. Sometimes, Ruhnjolf would even dream about walking the steps himself. Now, it seemed his childhood dream was coming true at last.

What he hadn’t counted on, though, was the painful awkwardness of having to walk up the steps with someone who’d tried to have him thrown in jail just three days ago. They had little to say to one another, and the stone slabs seemed to stretch on for miles and miles. What could Ruhnjolf even say to him, anyway—what are the prisons like in Whiterun? How do you breathe in those iron helmets that cover your entire head?

The only time either of them had spoken was when they ran into a pilgrim at the base of the path to High Hrothgar, a man by the name of Barknar who immediately called out a greeting and introduced himself; already, he was too chatty for Ruhnjolf’s tastes.

“Watch out for the wolves,” he said as he bent down to inspect the text on one of the emblems that dotted the way up the mountain. “They’re crawling all over the place, and they’ve got a nasty bite, too.”

Ruhnjolf grunted and found this to be an acceptable response, but Luthes took it upon himself to strike up a conversation with the man. “Thank you, we will,” he said in that overly polite and diplomatic way Imperials sometimes had about them. “Are you headed to High Hrothgar as well?”

Barknar shook his head. “No, I’m just here to meditate on the emblems,” he said, glancing up at the steps with a wistful expression on his face. “I never go that far up the path myself, although some people come by to make deliveries on occasion.”

“Ah, okay.” Luthes paused for a moment. “I wish you the best of luck, then.”

“Gods be with you.”

Not a word was exchanged after that, even as Ruhnjolf and Luthes kept moving up the mountain.

If they had to travel in excruciating silence, at least the view was pretty. Snow went from growing on the grass in patches to covering the ground in a thick layer as they ascended the mountain, and the frost-tipped pine trees and bunches of red berries that lined the path made for peaceful surroundings. The air was clean and crisp going into Ruhnjolf’s lungs, and it gave him the strength to keep walking.

But the higher up they went, the harder the wind blew, slapping across their skin and making Ruhnjolf’s fingers feel numb. He guessed it must have been affecting Luthes too, because his companion stopped to open his fist and wiggle his fingers around.

“What in Oblivion are you doing?” Ruhnjolf grumbled. He could no longer feel his nose or any of his other extremities—the cold was getting to him, even as a thick-skinned Nord. “If we stop moving, we’ll freeze to death.”

Luthes didn’t say anything, instead continuing to move his hand. Slowly, little sparks began to form that grew into a small flame about the size of his palm. “Here,” he said quietly. “Come closer, it’ll help keep us warm.”

Ruhnjolf’s mouth fell open and closed a few times before he finally shuffled over towards the Imperial. Even though the fire wasn’t big in size, its heat radiated out and warmed his body instantly. “How did you learn how to do that?”

The flames continued to dance and lick the air as Luthes flexed his fingers. He shrugged nonchalantly. “I read sometimes.”

He studied Luthes in the light of the fire. His face was long and gaunt, with a smattering of stubble across his strong jaw. As he stared into the embers he’d conjured, he had a resolute expression on his face. Ruhnjolf wondered how much concentration it took to cast a spell like that.

“Don’t know much about magic, honestly,” Ruhnjolf suddenly confessed. “My whole family is afraid of wizards. Nord thing, I suppose.”

Luthes gave a close-lipped smile, with one end of his mouth curled upward more than the other. “Magic isn’t so scary once you learn the principles behind it,” he said. “I really wish I’d had the opportunity to study at the College when I was younger. You know, in Winterhold? But my family, they’ve been guarding the Empire for generations. I had to follow the family trade.”

“Well, you didn’t have to,” said Ruhnjolf.

“No, but I like being a guard anyway. Makes me feel useful, and I get to make Skyrim a better place, one piece of criminal scum at a time.” He laughed, but it faded quickly, replaced by a wistful look. “You’re lucky you have such natural magical gifts. Speaking in dragon tongue is a form of magic, you know. And you get to be a big hero, too.”

“Truthfully, I don’t know if I can any of this alone,” Ruhnjolf said, tugging on the end of his braided beard. His voice was unusually soft and contemplative as he said it, and he wanted to punch himself in the throat for showing weakness. In his family, revealing your emotions earned you a lifetime of mockery. “It’s overwhelming, suddenly being a...a Dragonborn. A hero of my people, I guess. But I’m glad you’re with me.”

Their eyes locked as Luthes looked up, and Ruhnjolf felt a brief moment of camaraderie with the Imperial, just a small spark that passed between them. Luthes opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by the most ear-shattering noise either of them had ever heard.

“DO-VAH-KIIN.” The shout came tumbling down towards the pair, blowing them backwards with its force and causing snow to shake from the branches of the trees as the ground trembled.

A hush fell abruptly after the noise faded, and the mountain grew still and quiet. Ruhnjolf bent over, breathing hard, and tried to slow down his thumping heart. The flames in Luthes’s hand had gone out, and he now stood with his arms pinned by his side, frozen with eyes wide and frightened.

Tentatively, slowly, they both started to move forward again, back to climbing the endless steps—only to be interrupted by another roar, this one distinctly non-human. Thumping footsteps followed the noise, and Ruhnjolf and Luthes whipped their heads around, searching for the source.

They didn’t have to search for long; a frost troll emerged from behind the trunk of a nearby tree and pounded on its chest. Beside him, Ruhnjolf could feel Luthes start to shake just a bit.

With adrenaline starting to circulate through his body, Ruhnjolf reached behind for the hilt of his greatsword and brought it to the front of his body. Nords didn’t run from fights, and Dragonborns certainly weren’t supposed to, either. But as he moved to charge forward, Luthes’s arm shot out and blocked him, pushing him back.

“I have an idea,” he shouted. “Stay back.”

In one swift move, Luthes curled his hands into fists and reopened them, causing fire to sprout from both of his palms. He held them up to face the frost troll, who was rapidly

gaining speed, and emitted a steady stream of magic towards the beast.

The frost troll screeched in horror as the flames hit its chest, leaving burn marks across white fur. Within several seconds of Luthes roasting it, the creature sunk to its knees in defeat. Satisfied, Luthes made the flames disappear and walked past the troll towards the final stretch of steps to the monastery. Then, he stopped and turned around to face Ruhnjolf, who hadn't moved, his face stuck in permanent shock.

"Nothing to it," Luthes said. "Come on, let's go."

With a shake of his head, Ruhnjolf moved to join Luthes, the guard who kept surprising him at every turn.

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High Hrothgar towered before them in all its glory, with two spiraling staircases that led to a set of ornate stone doors marked with ancient sketches and symbols. As they approached the entrance, careful footsteps going up the stairs, the sides of the doors parted to reveal the inside of the monastery as if their presence had been expected.

They headed inside, and their footsteps echoed throughout the room. It was empty, save for a few statues and stone carvings.

"Hello?" Luthes called out. No answer but his own words bouncing off the walls.

A man in a gray robe stepped forward, face half obscured by the hood over his head. He had his hands tucked into the sleeves so that it looked like he had one long arm. "Welcome, Dovahkiin," he said, looking only at Ruhnjolf. "I see you answered our call."

"How did you know it was me?" he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I can sense the dragon blood within you," the man said. "My name is Master Arngeir, I speak on behalf of the Greybeards. Their Thu'um is too strong for them to speak without unleashing its power."

"Wow," Luthes said, awestruck by the sheer magical power that seemed to radiate from Arngeir. "So you can all speak in dragon tongue?"

Arngeir looked at Luthes with an amused smile playing at his lips. "Yes, we can," he said. "But only a Dragonborn can absorb the soul of a dragon and harness it in a Thu'um. The Greybeards study for years to master it."

"Oh, you study the Way of the Voice right? I remember reading a *fascinating* biography about Jurgen Windcaller, who founded your religion, and it was just eye opening, really, and I—" Luthes cut himself off, heat rushing to his face as he realized he'd been rambling. "Oh, of course you already knew that, though."

The Greybeard eyed him with a wary look before continuing to speak to Ruhnjolf. "We can teach you how to master your Thu'um, how to control it. I can tell you all about the history of your kind, and the reasons why you should use your power with great responsibility."



Ruhnjolf's face suddenly lit up, and he looked intrigued by the wisdom Arngeir had to share with them. "Tell me, then," he said. "I would like to know more about what being a Dragonborn...means."

Arngeir launched into his history of the Voice, speaking at a pace that seemed absolutely glacial to Luthes. As he spoke, Luthes couldn't resist interjecting with his own opinions and pieces of information he'd gathered from his readings on the history of dragons. Since meeting Ruhnjolf, he'd taken it upon himself to read up on the subject.

After several minutes of Luthes talking about a complete historiography he'd read about dragon study in the third era, Arngeir turned to face Ruhnjolf. "Does he always talk this much?"

Ruhnjolf gave a half shrug. "Don't know. This is more than he's ever spoken to me."

Still, Luthes was not deterred—he was a man with knowledge that needed to be shared.

"And of course, the Dovahkiin in the second era were—" Luthes's monologue was cut short by a sudden shout from one of the nearby Greybeards. It emitted a green pulsing light that engulfed Luthes and caused him to stiffen, all the muscles in his body suddenly feeling as though they were made of heavy metal. The weight caused him to topple over onto the ground, cold stone rubbing against the side of his cheek. When he tried to open his mouth, he found that nothing came out except air.

Fuckers had paralyzed him.

From his position on his side, Luthes watched as Arngeir instructed Ruhnjolf on how to use the second part of the phrase he'd unleashed after they defeated the dragon. At least his godsdamned ears still worked, Luthes thought.

"FUS RO." The walls of the monastery shook with each shout. "FUS RO. FUS RO."

Maybe it would've been better if they'd shut off his hearing, after all.

Eventually, Luthes regained control of his limbs and stumbled to his feet just as Ruhnjolf was wrapping up his little Dragonborn training session.

"Remember," Arngeir was saying. "It is important that you take care with your new power. You must train your Thu'um to use it responsibly, not for selfish, prideful reasons."

Ruhnjolf nodded solemnly. "I will try my best, Master Arngeir." Luthes had never seen the Nord more transfixed than he seemed in that moment; he was soaking in every word the Greybeard spoke like it was the most important thing he'd ever heard.

"If you would like to continue your training with us, there is one more thing you must do."

"What is it?" Ruhnjolf asked.

"We would like you." Arngeir paused for dramatic effect, even though his manner of speaking was already dragged out enough to provide that same sense of tension. "To retrieve

the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller.”

# A Night to (Not) Remember

## Chapter Summary

The Greybeards want Ruhnjolf and Luthes to retrieve the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller. Naturally, the dynamic duo gets massively sidetracked from this goal.

The depths of the old Nordic ruin were so quiet that it was possible to hear the drip, drip, drip of water coming from the ceiling of the cave. More water rippled in pools on either side of a long walkway, and as Ruhnjolf and Luthes passed through the room, four large, stone statues emerged from the ground with a groan. Although momentarily startled, they kept making their way down the path, eyes fixed on the ornate coffin ahead.

Over the last two days, the pair had traveled north of Morthal, entered the dangerous tomb of Ustengrav, and slain endless draugr—a sight that always made Ruhnjolf uneasy. He wasn't afraid of many things, but there was something about entering the tombs of his ancestors that always sent a slight shiver up his spin, and he was grateful that they were approaching its end. All that was left was to retrieve the illusive Horn of Jurgen Windcaller...

...which appeared to be currently missing from the coffin.

“By Talos, what is the meaning of this?” Ruhnjolf said. His voice came out at a noticeably higher volume than normal as his dragon shout edged into his speech, and a few loose pieces of rock and dirt crumbled from the walls of the cave.

“It's not here,” Luthes said, scratching his head.

“Thank you for pointing that out, Luthes.” Ruhnjolf threw his hands up in exasperation. “And thank the Divines for blessing you with such wisdom.”

Luthes ignored Ruhnjolf's sarcastic comment, a skill he seemed to have become quite talented at during his time traveling with the Dragonborn. “Someone must have beaten us to it,” he said. “I have no idea who else would be after the horn, though. Maybe the Greybeards would know, we could ask them.”

Ruhnjolf ran his hands over the face, calluses on his fingertips rubbing against the skin. “We can't go back to High Hrothgar a failure,” he said. “Master Arngeir told me they wouldn't train me anymore unless I retrieved the horn.”

“Seems kind of silly that you have to fetch this stupid artifact just for them to teach you.” Arms folded across Luthes's chest, and he let out an indignant huff. “You're the first Dragonborn in ages.”

“Says the man who spent twenty minutes waxing poetic about the history of their religion,” Ruhnjolf said with a roll of his eyes.

“I’m going to ignore that.” At least Luthes was admitting it now. “I mean, honestly Ruhnjolf, did you notice that Arngeir never even talked about why the dragons are coming back? The Greybeards were kind of useless, if you think about it. The end of the world could be coming for all we know, and all he did was teach you a shout to run really fast.”

Ruhnjolf tugged on his beard once, then twice, then three times in rapid succession. Annoyance tickled at him, and he felt frustration at Luthes’s know-it-all attitude. The Greybeards had shown him the Way of the Voice, the history of his kind and his people—who was this Imperial to dismiss the ancient traditions of the Nords? “You’re just mad because they had to force you to shut up for once,” he said.

Luthes huffed again, visibly irritated at the mention of his being paralyzed at High Hrothgar. “Hmph,” he said, then changed the subject. “How’s your cut, by the way?”

As Ruhnjolf reached up and moved his fingers over the dried blood that covered the slash on his face, a grimace formed. A draugr had gotten a good shot at him back in one of the halls in the crypt. “I’ll be fine,” he said.

Luthes shook his head. “Let me see,” he said and moved closer to Ruhnjolf so that he could take a good look at the wound. Gently, he reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, and Ruhnjolf felt his face immediately heat up.

“W-what are you doing?” he said. His voice had an odd, slight shakiness to it, and he hated himself for not being able to control it.

“I’m going to try healing you with a spell I learned recently,” he said. “Hold still.”

White light emitted from Luthes’s hand and started to swirl around, cooling the area where the cut was and bringing much needed relief. As Luthes cast the spell, his face softened, and Ruhnjolf couldn’t tear his eyes away. The tenderness of this gesture was unnerving to him, and he found himself speaking before he had a chance to think about it.

“I wish my people were more accepting of magic and...healing,” he said. “All we ever talk about in our legends is bloodshed and war and fighting til the death. Never about the honor of saving someone’s life.”

Luthes didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to. He shifted his gaze from where it was focused on the cut to meet Ruhnjolf’s eyes, and the Nord felt like his entire body was suddenly filled with the same light that was healing his cheek.

Recently, there had more and more moments like that one, where, in between their bickering and petty fighting, the two of them had points of clarity. During those times, Ruhnjolf felt like there was some kind of connection between them. Like there was someone who finally saw him for who he was.

But that was a completely ridiculous thought. What was he, some kind of milk drinker with...feelings? No, that could never be him.

As soon as the cut fully healed and Luthes moved his hand away, Ruhnjolf stepped back to put more distance between them. “So what are we going to do now?” Luthes said. “Since we can’t go back to High Hrothgar.”

Ruhnjolf sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe we should just call it a night. Get a drink in Morthal.”

“Yeah.” Luthes nodded. “That sounds good to me. We can figure out what to do about this problem later. Best to let your wound sit for a while before we go out spelunking again.”

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Morthal, capital of Hjaalmarch, lay at the mouth of the Karth River in northern Skyrim and was covered in swampland and marshes mixed with a thick fog that surrounded the hold. It made Luthes, even under the thin guards' armor, feel sticky and humid.

The Moorside Inn was small and cozy, with a crackling fire in the middle. Long tables stretched out along the walls, but few patrons were in the establishment to use them. The tavern reminded Luthes of a different inn he’d been to long ago in another winter; come to think of it, the inn reminded him of more than one place he had spent the night in throughout Skyrim.

While Ruhnjolf parked himself at one of the benches upon walking in, Luthes made his way to the bar to order from the Redguard behind the counter. She had a disgruntled look on her face and kept darting her eyes towards the back corner of the inn. Luthes turned around briefly to see an orc in the corner, who began to pluck at a lute and warble in the most off-key voice he’d ever heard come out of a bard’s mouth.

The Redguard woman sighed and rubbed a hand over her forehead. “Ignore the orc, please. I keep tryin’ to tell him his singing is going to get him a knife to his throat, but does he listen? No.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, what can I get you?”

“Um.” Luthes pulled some Septims out of his bag and dumped them on the counter. “Two pints of mead, please. Honningbrew, if you have it.”

The innkeeper frowned. “Honningbrew? They went outta business a couple weeks ago. Only selling Black-Briar now.”

“Oh.” Luthes felt his face heat up. In their time spent hiking to High Hrothgar and tracking down the illusive horn, he and Ruhnjolf must have fallen behind on the latest news in Skyrim. He figured Maven Black-Briar must’ve done something to take out Honningbrew—they were her biggest competitor, after all, and people like her didn’t take competition very well—and felt his blood boil at the idea of such a crime occurring. “Black-Briar is fine, then.”

“Coming right up.”

As the innkeeper pulled out two flagons, Luthes turned to glance over his shoulder at Ruhnjolf. His traveling companion was slumped over the table, face in his hands. Luthes had never seen him look so defeated, and it made his heart sink for a reason he couldn't quite figure out. He took the drinks from the Redguard and walked over to sit next to Ruhnjolf.

He looked up as Luthes sat down and immediately took a long swig of his drink. "Gods, I've already failed at this hero thing already."

"We can figure this out," Luthes said. "You haven't failed at being a Dragonborn yet." He offered a tentative smile and placed a hand on Ruhnjolf's shoulder, but upon realizing the physical intimacy of such a gesture, quickly removed it. Ruhnjolf seemed startled for a moment, but was back to his grumpy self in a matter of seconds.

"Dragonborn, eh?" A voice nearby startled the pair, causing both of them to jump slightly in their seats. Next to them sat a Breton, who Luthes could've sworn wasn't there a moment ago, with rosy patches of skin on his face and beady, red eyes. "Haven't had one of those in a long time. I thought there might be something to it when I heard those rumors about Helgen and the Greybeards' call."

"Who the hell are you?" Ruhnjolf said, clenching his jaw, while Luthes just watched in stunned silence.

The Breton calmly raised a bottle of ale to his lips, took a slow drink, then wiped a hand over his mouth before speaking. "Name's Sam. Sam Guevenne," he said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Did you...were you...here before?" Luthes could barely get the words out, so strong were his feelings of shock about the man who seemed to have formed out of thin air.

"Nah," Sam said with a shrug. "I'm a Breton, kid. We know magic."

Luthes furrowed his eyebrows. He didn't remember reading about any spell that could make you materialize in another location like that.

"Oh, well this is just great," Ruhnjolf said with a groan. "Now everyone will know I'm Dragonborn by sunrise tomorrow. That's the last thing I need, expectations and prophesies and...and nosy assholes."

Sam wagged a finger back and forth slowly as he took another drink. The bottle made a clattering noise on the table as it was set down. "Ah, ah, ah," Sam replied. "Who said I was gonna tell anyone, huh? But, I do have a proposition for you."

"What are you, some kind of wench?" Ruhnjolf snapped and turned his body away from Sam to stare into the contents of his flagon. "I'm not interested."

Sam barked with laughter that seemed like far too much mirth for Ruhnjolf's wisecrack—at least, that's what Luthes thought, but then again, Sam was a very strange man. "No, no, nothing like that, I promise." He paused for several beats, then raised his eyebrows. "But what if I told you that I had some information you might find very valuable. About how to

find someone who knows quite a lot about dragons and why they might be coming back. Would you be interested in that?"

"Tell me the name first," Ruhnjolf insisted. "I need to know you're not just messing with me."

"Well, I can't guarantee the second part. I'm always messing with everybody," Sam said with a grin. "But this person, they're one of the last Blades in existence."

Luthes gasped. "The Blades? As in the protectors of the emperor? The dragon slayers? I thought they were all wiped out."

"All but two," Sam said. "And I know where one of them is hiding."

Ruhnjolf slammed a fist down on the table, causing Sam's drink to spill out the top a little bit; the bottle had somehow refilled itself. "By Ysmir, you tell me where this person is. This is not a joke, it's a matter of saving Skyrim and her people."

"Hm, you don't know me that well, do you?" Sam tapped a finger on his chin, thinking, pondering. Ruhnjolf's fist tightened. "Tell you what. You both beat me in a drinking contest, and I'll give you what you're looking for."

"Pah, drinking contest? Nords can drink Bretons under the table," Ruhnjolf said and clutched his flagon. "You're on."

Luthes wasn't sure this was such a good idea, but it might be their only hope at getting out of the mess they'd found themselves in when the horn went missing. He grabbed his drink and chugged, praying that this bet wouldn't backfire on them.

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When Luthes woke up, the world was spinning.

"Hey, wake up, horker brains." A blurry outline of a woman wearing robes hovered above him. As his vision began to sharpen, he could tell she looked angry.

With aching pains, Luthes sat up, and he watched Ruhnjolf do the same. The Nord didn't look like he felt much better than he did, hair sticking out all over the place and circles under his eyes.

They were in some kind of stone temple with golden statues arranged all around it. Underneath the statue were offerings, and several women in the same colored robes milled around the room, pretending they weren't watching what was happening in front of them.

"Who are you?" Ruhnjolf grumbled as he rubbed his temples. "Gods, my head is killing me."

The woman placed her hands in fists on either side of her hips and shifted her weight to one side. "I'm Senna, one of the priestesses of Dibella." She paused and pursed her lips for a moment before speaking again. "You do know what happened last night, right?"

Luthes rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, which seemed incredibly high up to him in that moment, and squinted as he tried to recall what happened after Sam challenged them to that drinking contest. Nothing remained, though. It was like the night had been swallowed up by a...a...horker with a really big mouth (his brain wasn't quite functioning enough yet to make an apt comparison).

"I...we don't know," he said, looking back down at the very angry priestess in front of him. "I'm sorry."

"Well, where do I even begin?" she huffed. "Let's recap: you both charged into our temple rip-roaring drunk." She pointed at Ruhnjolf first. "*You* fondled one of our shrines to Dibella." Then she jabbed her finger in Luthes's direction. "And *you*...you had the audacity to put your...rear end on our lady's most delicate countenance after your friend here finished with the statue."

"Oh dear," Luthes mumbled and stared down at the ground. Had he really done that? What kind of a guard was he, just mindlessly breaking laws left and right in a drunken stupor? "I am so sorry."

Beside him, Ruhnjolf howled with laughter, and Luthes glared at him. "By the Nine, the noble guard was the most depraved of them all!" The Dragonborn's shoulders were shaking with laughter and he looked almost joyful, a fact that didn't seem to please Senna at all, but it did make Luthes start to smile. Just a bit. But it couldn't make the feelings of embarrassment and shame leave him.

"I don't find it very funny at all," Senna said, drawing the attention back to her lecture. "We want compensation for the damage you've done, and an offering for our lady."

"I think Luthes's ass is all the offering you—"

Luthes clamped a hand over Ruhnjolf's mouth before he could continue speaking. "We're very sorry. How much do you want us to pay?"

Senna thought for a moment. "A thousand Septims should be sufficient," she said and held out her hand.

Luthes dug around in his bag, his movements feeling clunky and uncoordinated, until he found enough money to give her. He threw in extra to make up for the lack of an offering. "Here," he said. "I can't apologize enough."

"Thank you," she said, and her voice eased up just a little. "I'd go see Kleppr at the inn when you leave here. I heard he's pretty mad about a scene you two caused last night, and the Silver-Bloods don't take too kindly to that sort of transgression. Just a little advice."

"Oh gods," Luthes said. For the fourth time that morning, he felt like he was going to throw up. They'd made fools of themselves in another establishment, too, and not only that, but the name Silver-Blood meant that they'd somehow ended up in the Reach. And where the hell was Sam in all of this?



Right as he thought it, Luthes could have sworn he saw the Breton poke out from behind one of the statues to give him a wink. Luthes almost called out, but within seconds, the man was gone.

Just what in Oblivion was going on here?

“Oh, and congratulations, I guess,” Senna said, lips curled up in the slightest of sneers as she stared at something on Luthes’s tunic. “Here at the temple, we preach an acceptance of forms of love outside monogamy in the name of Dibella. But I suppose it wouldn’t be very accepting of me if I didn’t acknowledge your commitment to Mara.”

“To Mara?” Luthes’s mind felt like it was swimming, and he placed a hand on his forehead to steady it. “What are you talking about.”

Senna gestured towards the front of his body. “The amulet you’re both wearing. The Amulet of Mara?”

Eyes widening, Luthes clutched wildly at his neck. Sure enough, he could feel the grooves and patterns of a necklace—by the Nine, they’d given each other Amulets of Mara in their drunken stupor. He turned to look at Ruhnjolf, whose face, with mouth gaping and eyes wild, was a mirror of his own. Ignoring the blush that flamed his cheeks, Luthes ripped the necklace off and watched Ruhnjolf did the same. The Dragonborn looked like he was being strangled.

“W-we’ll, uh, we’ll be taking our leave now,” Luthes said, dazed. Ruhnjolf nodded vigorously in agreement. “Sorry again.”

Ruhnjolf struggled to his feet, stumbling to the side as he did so, and Luthes followed suit. Together, the pair made their way out of the temple and into the bright sunlight of the morning. It hurt Luthes’s eyes.

“What the hell have we done, Ruhnjolf?” Luthes moaned as they made their way through the stone paths of Markarth. “We caused so much trouble last night.”

To his surprise, the Nord only offered a nonchalant shrug in reply. “I don’t think it’s that big of a deal,” he said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “It seems like we had fun, and I... kind of needed that after the last couple weeks. Aside from the Amulet of Mara business.”

Luthes felt his face flush as he remembered the feel of the amulet heavy around his neck. Like he did with many things, he decided he would ignore the implications that little stunt had. “But don’t you get it?” he said, his voice rising. “We caused damage to at least two places in Markarth that we know of, we broke gods knows how many laws, and we lost Sam and our only hope of finding out why the dragons are coming back.”

Ruhnjolf studied him curiously. “Don’t you ever loosen up and have fun? Go out for a drink with the other guards?”

“I...” Luthes opened and closed his mouth a couple times, his face suddenly sheepish. “No. They don’t really like me that much.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, they aren’t too fond of Imperials,” Luthes said with a small laugh and stared down at his hands. “Doesn’t help that my family were all part of the guard at the capital in Cyrodiil, makes them all think I’m stuck up. They don’t understand the pressure I’m under to be diligent like they were. Live up to the family name.”

“I’m sorry,” Ruhnjolf said, and it was one of those rare moment where sounded truly genuine; Luthes wouldn’t admit this to him, but he enjoyed those occasions.

“It is what it is,” Luthes said and reached out to push open the door to the inn, cutting the conversation short.

Given that it was only a few hours past sunrise, the inn was deserted, save for a man in tattered rags trying to cajole one of the bartenders into giving him a drink for free. Behind the counter, a gray-haired, crabby looking man awaited them.

“Oh, if it isn’t the dynamic duo,” he said. “Surprised you decided to show your faces again after last night.”

A glance around the inn revealed that the main room was in complete disarray. There were pieces of broken glass, items of food, and other miscellaneous objects scattered around the floor, and a young man who looked vaguely like the innkeeper was sweeping with a broom.

Luthes grimaced. “Did we do this?”

“What do you think?” the man said, placing his hands on the counter and staring down the pair. “You morons cost me potentially thousands of Septims in damage.”

“KLEPPR.” A shrill female voice called out from the other end of the inn, a sound that could rival Ruhnjolf’s shout. “DID YOU REMEMBER TO PICK UP THAT SHIPMENT OF ALE THIS MORNING?”

Kleppr yelled back just as loudly. “DAMMIT, WOMAN, PUT A LID ON IT FOR ONCE. I’LL GET TO IT LATER, I’M ONLY ONE MAN.” He coughed before speaking to Luthes and Ruhnjolf again. “One of these days my wife is going to be the death of me, I swear.”

From over by the fireplace, an older bard started to sing a tune that plucked at Luthes’s memories and pulled him away from the conversation at hand. “Our hero, our hero, claims a warrior’s heart. I tell you, I tell you the Dragonborn’s come.”

Ruhnjolf’s eyes grew wide, and for the second time that day, he looked like he was being strangled. “How does...what is that song he’s playing?”

A smirk appeared on Kleppr’s face. “What, you don’t remember?” he sneered. “You came in here announcing that you were Dragonborn and demonstrated your special talent to us. That’s what caused all this damage to my inn.”

Well, shit. That wasn’t good.

Ruhnjolf started to sputter. “I...so everyone...they all know? And all of Skyrim, by the Nine, all of Skyrim...they’ll know too.”

Luthes shot Ruhnjolf a panicked look. He knew how much keeping their Dragonborn business a secret meant to his companion, and the immense pressure he felt to live up to the legends he’d heard his entire life. It was a feeling Luthes was intimately familiar with, but his expectations were not nearly on the same level as the Dragonborn’s were.

Appearing out of thin air again, as he seemed wont to do, Sam suddenly stood behind them to interrupt the moment—to save them, perhaps. Or maybe just to confuse them. Either way, Luthes was startled.

“Miss me fellas?” Sam said with a toothy grin and slung his arms over both of their shoulders; the height difference made this motion incredibly awkward in addition to scaring the living daylights out of them. “Why don’t you come with me for a second?”

Before either of them had a chance to respond, the inn was gone, and they now stood in a misty clearing with throngs of people enjoying drinks and food together. Sam had taken them to...a party?

Except, it wasn’t Sam standing in front of them now, but rather a heavily armored, red-skinned, horned creature. “My name’s not actually Sam,” he said, as if that explained everything.

Ruhnjolf swore under his breath. “Gods give me strength,” he muttered. “This is all insanity.”

“Name’s Sanguine. Daedric prince of debauchery,” the figure in front of them said, the grin stretching across his face the same one that Sam wore. “Boy, you two sure were a lot of fun last night. And that bit with the Amulet of Mara? Priceless. You thought it was a joke then, but I have a feeling you two will be wearing it for real someday. You’ve got a lot of chemistry.” Sanguine winked at them.

“No, that’s—”

“No way in Oblivion would that—”

“Ever happen.”

“Riiiiight.” Sanguine grinned again. “Well, anyway, you did drink me under the table last night, so I figured I’d hold up to my end of the bargain. You can find the last Blade in the town of Riverwood. Look for Delphine at the Sleeping Giant Inn.”

“And then what?” Luthes asked.

Sanguine didn’t answer. Instead, he bid them farewell (“Toodles!”), and the misty grove disappeared as they found themselves dumped out onto a cobblestoned path. A village stretched out before them, with wooden houses that looked kind of like huts. Wheels spun in the river that flowed in the distance, and the sounds of lumber being chopped filled the air.

Riverwood.



# The Subtle Art of Denying Your Feelings

## Chapter Summary

The pair journey to Riften, where they come into contact with the infamous Thieves Guild. Luthes has many moral objections to stealing and claims he's never done so himself—little does he know he's already stolen our little Dragonborn's heart.

“I saw a dragon. A draaaaaah-gon, Sven, I swear I did.”

When Luthes and Ruhnjolf managed to sit up and gather their bearings after being unceremoniously dumped in the middle of a backwater town, the shrill voice of an old woman was the first thing they heard. She stood on the porch of one of the wooden houses, pacing back and forth as she raved at a young man standing beside her, who was rolling his eyes.

“Mother, you've said that no less than fifty times this morning and there's no dragon up there,” the man said as he pointed towards the sky. Presumably, this was Sven. “You sound insane.”

“Well the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know.” A snide-sounding wood elf approached the mother and son with a bow on his back and a sneer on his face. He looked up at where they were standing.

Sven leaned over the railing and spit in the direction of the wood elf, who stepped out of the way to let the offending spittle fall to the ground. “Shut up, Faendal,” Sven said. “Don't you have anything better to do?”

As the two continued to bicker about various things, a girl that they both had feelings for being the most heated subject of debate, Ruhnjolf and Luthes took in their surroundings. The town of Riverwood was charming and peaceful, a small oasis in the harsh lands of Skyrim. Babbling water and the chirping of birds filled the air, and lush trees circled the village.

“Excuse me,” Luthes said, interrupting the argument taking place in front of him. The fighting continued anyway, voices growing louder by the second.

Luthes coughed and tried again. “Excuse me.”

Faendal and Sven immediately stopped speaking and turned to face him; the Imperial blood in Luthes's veins gave him the unique and powerful ability to make people shut the hell up and listen to him, if he so desired.

“Can you tell us where to find the inn? We're looking for Delphine,” Luthes said, voice commanding, yet gentle at the same time.

Faendal and Sven blinked a couple times, as if trying to figure out why they suddenly felt compelled to listen to Luthes. “Sleeping Giant?” said Faendal. He pointed down the road. “That way. It’s on the right.”

“Thank you very much, gentlemen.” Luthes smiled, and the spell was broken. Ruhnjolf watched him with a look of awe.

“I play at the Sleeping Giant Inn, you know,” Sven said with an air of pretentiousness. Just like that, he was back to his old self, all arrogance. “I’m a bard. One day, I’m going to travel to the Bard’s College and leave all of you behind.” He shot Faendal a pointed look. “And then I’ll come back famous and have my way with Camilla.”

Faendal gave him a sour look. “Fat chance, asshole. You play like a Skeeever that somehow found itself in possession of a lute.”

Ruhnjolf leaned down to whisper in Luthes’s ear. “Let’s go. These milk drinkers are just getting started, and I don’t want to listen to that nonsense.”

Involuntarily, Luthes shivered at the feeling of Ruhnjolf’s breath hot in his ear. He’d been having trouble as of late figuring out why the Nord’s presence near him made his heart beat in double time; the man was a grumpy, brash, rude individual with a penchant for driving Luthes insane.

Even so, Luthes caught himself watching Ruhnjolf sometimes, studying the lines of his face in softer moments together or the way his muscles rippled underneath his undershirts when they stayed at inns for the night. For Luthes, there was no denying that Ruhnjolf was a rather attractive man, and he himself had never been under any pretenses of being interested in women.

He didn’t know how Ruhnjolf felt, though, and until he did he certainly wasn’t going to say anything. The risk of a fallout between them was too great—they had a world to save from dragons, and there was no time for awkwardness from unrequited feelings.

Together, they walked down the road and examined the identical wooden buildings until they found one with a sign above it for the Sleeping Giant Inn. They pushed the door open and headed inside.

The interior of the Sleeping Giant looked much like that of the inn they had stopped in during their visit to Morthal, when they first encountered Sanguine. A fire crackled in its center and wooden beams lined the perimeter. There was no one in the building except for two people: a haggard and disgruntled man standing behind the counter and a blonde woman sweeping the floors.

“We’re looking for Delphine,” Luthes said as they approached the back of the inn. The woman’s face shot up from where she swept back and forth idly. Luthes briefly wondered if she was actually cleaning anything at all, since she’d gone over the same spot multiple times in a row.

“I’m Delphine,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“We need to speak with you,” Ruhnjolf said. “In private. It’s about...dragons.”

Delphine narrowed her eyes, studying Ruhnjolf and Luthes, then gave a slow nod. “Alright,” she said. “Follow me.”

Ruhnjolf’s eyebrows knitted together, and he moved closer to Luthes to mutter under his breath, “That’s all it took? I thought one of the last Blades would be more secretive than that.”

Luthes shrugged. “She’s also using her real name and not a code name so she’s clearly not the sharpest sword in the armory, if you catch my drift,” he said.

Ruhnjolf let out a low chuckle, which caused Luthes to blush. Godsdamn his inexplicable attraction to that man.

They followed Delphine through a secret entrance into one of the rooms, which contained maps of potential dragon burial sites plastered around the walls. There was also a sizable collection of swords and armor tucked into the back corner, along with clusters of books on the topic of dragons and dragon cults.

“How did you know who I am?” Delphine said as she picked up a sword and examined it. She paused with it in the air, then fixed the two men with a hard stare.

“We, um, heard it from a strange man,” Luthes said. “He never told us his name, but he thought we should know because...” He glanced up at Ruhnjolf, hesitant to continue.

“I’m the Dragonborn,” Ruhnjolf said. His voice was more confident than Luthes would have expected. “We’ve come to find information on the dragons and why they’re coming back. We thought the Blades might be able to help.”

“I might know some things,” Delphine paused, then fixed the pair with a serious look. “But I need you to do me a favor first.”

“Are you a psychopath, woman?” Ruhnjolf roared, bringing his fist to smash against the wall. Luthes and Delphine jumped at the sudden move and the anger radiating off the Dragonborn. “Dragons are terrorizing Skyrim and her people, and you want me to do some petty errand for you?”

“It’s not petty,” she said with a defensive expression on her face, wrinkles forming on the hardened skin. “On the contrary, it’s rather urgent, and I need you to—”

Mid-sentence, a rumbling caused the buildings to shake and tremble, and all of Riverwood felt like it was shifting at the same time. Shortly after, a beastly roar sounded out. Luthes had only heard that sound in one other instance: outside Whiterun, the day he met Ruhnjolf.

A dragon was coming.

Ruhnjolf sprang into action, turning and sprinting out the door of the inn. Luthes followed behind him with adrenaline boiling his in his blood, leaving no time or room for fear to settle in him. They had a village to save.

As they dashed out onto the streets, they watched as the green-scaled dragon circled directly above the inn, as if he had somehow sensed that one of his kin had been inside. Luthes took the arrows out from behind his back and began firing them into the air, praying that they would pierce the dragon's thick scales. It had worked the first time he'd fought a dragon, after all.

To his right, Faendal and Delphine pulled out their bows and arrows and started to shoot alongside Luthes. He could hear the cries of the dragon as they hit his underside, arrows in his skin appearing like a constellation on his torso.

On the ground, Ruhnjolf had his sword brandished, ready to launch at the beast as soon as he landed. Fortunately for him, the dragon flew overhead a few times before coming to a stop.

Unfortunately for everyone in Riverwood, the dragon decided to perch on the roof of one of the buildings and unleash a stream of fire directly onto the house across from him. The house immediately burst into flames that shot into the air, and smoke clouds formed rapidly above the burning structure. The fire spread next door, creating a chain of destruction as the wood was turned to a crisp.

Luthes watched in horror as the houses began to crumble to the ground, unable to stand against the heat. All the villagers, who had run out into the open as soon as the dragon attack began, started to shriek and cry at the ruin.

"You need to run," Ruhnjolf bellowed at the group of villagers, who stood motionless in their terror. A little bit of his Th'um edged into his voice, and Luthes could see some of the people in the crowd stumble backwards. "Get out of here now, go to Whiterun and get the Jarl."

The villagers scattered, sprinting out of the dragon's line of sight and disappearing into the distant wilderness to hide. Ruhnjolf turned back to face down the dragon and unleashed a shout that stunned the creature for a few seconds, allowing Luthes, Faendal, and Delphine to sink more arrows into his hide.

Around them, the buildings of Riverwood continued to burn and turn to ash as smoke filled the air with thick, swirling clouds. It burned Luthes's lungs, and he coughed and sputtered, trying to see through the wall of darkness that surrounded him.

When the smoke finally parted enough for him to see through to where the dragon was, Luthes's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he watched Ruhnjolf scale the side of the building. He reached the top and hoisted himself onto the edge of the roof to stand next to the dragon. His sword raised into the air, then came down to thrust into the side of the dragon's neck.

The dragon screeched in agony and thrashed his head back and forth in an attempt to shake Ruhnjolf off, but the Dragonborn wouldn't yield. He stood firm-footed on the ground, digging the sword in deeper. Luthes could tell by his face, though, that he was struggling to maintain his grip.

Down on the ground, Delphine and Faendal rolled out of the way of another blast of fire. Riverwood continued to go up in blazes.



Without thinking twice, Luthes sheathed his bow and sprinted towards the building, grabbing onto a railing. He pulled himself up until he too was on the roof, next to Ruhnjolf and ready to fight.

“What in gods’ name are you doing?” Ruhnjolf yelled. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”

Luthes drew his sword and stuck it into the dragon’s side. Another loud cry came out of the dragon’s mouth. “I could say the same for you, Dragonborn,” Luthes shouted. “You can’t be a hero of your people if you’re dead.”

Still, neither of them moved. The combination of their swords pushing into the dragon proved too much for the beast, who began to thrash slower and slower before growing still.

The pair looked at one another before taking their swords out of the scales, both weapons now coated in that strange black blood. Luthes watched, speechless, as that same light as before surrounded Ruhnjolf. The Dragonborn closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, and the sight caused Luthes’s heart to nearly flip over.

When the light finally faded, the magical moment was gone and they turned their gazes out towards the town. Everything had crumbled underneath the dragon attack, save for the building that the creature had been stationed on. Soot and rubble covered everything. Riverwood had been completely destroyed.

With a somber feeling in the air, Luthes and Ruhnjolf climbed down from the building and landed on the ground with a quiet thud. Luthes’s legs felt shaky underneath him. Across the way, Delphine and Faendal were assessing the damage with solemn expressions on their face.

“Divines help us,” Delphine whispered. Faendal placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and bit his lip, holding back tears.

For a few minutes, the four of them stood in silence with a terrible stillness filling the air. They mourned for a village lost, a whole town’s worth of homes burned down in one day.

When they spoke again, it was Delphine who broke the silence first. “Now more than ever, it is crucial that you do as I say.” She stared down Ruhnjolf as she said it, and he nodded, not wanting to fight back this time.

“What do you need me to do?” he said. “I can’t sit by and watch the dragons destroy our homes one by one. I won’t stand for it.”

“There lives a man in the sewers of Riften, where the Thieves Guild resides,” Delphine said. “They call it the Ratway. There, you’ll find a man named Esbern. I need you to find him and bring him to me in Whiterun. He’s the only other remaining Blade in existence.”

“And our last hope,” Luthes said, “I assume.”

Delphine nodded gravely, glancing around at the rubble. “Indeed.”

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Riften always had a distinct, well, odor about it. The smell of garbage and murky, polluted water drifted up from the canals into the marketplace where Luthes and Ruhnjolf stood, waiting for a Thieves Guild contact that the latter insisted was about to show. Around them, the marketplace bustled with activity. People stopped by various stands to haggle with the shopkeepers over prices while ignoring the tugs of emaciated beggars at their clothing.

“You can take those two hundred Septims and shove them up your ass as a dragon rips you to shreds for all I care,” a particularly angry female shopkeeper was saying. “You’re not buying my high-quality armor for that price.”

Across the way, an Argonian selling jewelry eyed the interaction with an amused look, while the Dunmer in the booth next to him huffed in annoyance and shook his head.

Luthes pointed to a Breton crouched behind one of the patrons at the marketplace, whose pocket was currently being rifled through by said Breton. “Is that him?”

Ruhnjolf grunted. “No. I’ll tell you when he gets here.”

Luthes always did a fine job of irritating Ruhnjolf, but today he was outdoing himself with his constant questions and worries about getting involved with the Thieves’ Guild as a member of the guard. Since they’d started on the road to Riften, Luthes had mentioned his internal moral dilemma no less than a thousand times, and it was beginning to make Ruhnjolf wish he’d ditched the annoying little prick back in the burning remains of Riverwood; Ruhnjolf ignored the small part of his brain that told him he’d feel quite lonely if Luthes were gone.

“How do you even know this guy, anyway?” Luthes nagged. At least, it felt like nagging to Ruhnjolf, the Imperial’s voice ringing like a hagraven’s speech in his ears. “You’re a mercenary, not a thief.”

“My line of work brings me into contact with people like that sometimes,” Ruhnjolf said with a shrug.

“How are you so casual about this whole thing?” Ruhnjolf thought Luthes’s eyes were going to bug out of his eyes, and he almost laughed at the thought of them popping out and rolling around on the wooden boards beneath them. He had to amuse himself somehow. “These are some of the most hardened criminals in Skyrim and you don’t even care. Might as well just give them your coin purse now because they’re probably going to steal it.” Luthes looked up at the sky and shook his head.

Ruhnjolf narrowed his eyes and tugged on his beard. “Stop acting like they’re going to rob us the second we introduce ourselves.”

Luthes substituted his response for a defensive cross of his arms over his chest.

“I believe I’ve got a shipment of genuine Falmer’s Blood for you lads,” a distinct and thick-accented voice said behind them. Luthes jumped as a hand clapped his shoulder, and they both turned to see a red-haired Nord with a smirk playing at his lips.

Luthes frowned. “Falmer’s Blood? We didn’t order that, what in gods’ name are you talking about?”

“This is the guy, Luthes,” Ruhnjolf muttered under his breath.

“Oh! Oh, I’m sorry,” Luthes said with a laugh. His cheeks heated up and turned red.

“It’s good to see you again, Brynjolf,” the Dragonborn said with an air that made it seem like he and Brynjolf were old friends; he wanted to see how uncomfortable he could make Luthes.

“Ah, it’s my pleasure, Ruhnjolf.” Brynjolf winked, then turned to Luthes. “But who is this, if I might ask?”

Ruhnjolf looked over at his companion, who glanced back at him with a questioning look in his eyes. It was a surprisingly gentle and open look, and it did something weird to Ruhnjolf’s insides that he decided he would suppress way the hell down in his subconscious.

“He’s a friend of mine.”

Luthes smiled softly.

Brynjolf whistled, causing both of the men to blush a furious red, and then laughed. “Well, alright then,” he said. “What can I do you for both today?”

“Well, I’m, uh...” Ruhnjolf swallowed, suddenly feeling, for the first time in many years, nervous. For whatever reason, his mouth always dried up whenever he tried to talk about being Dragonborn. He stared down at the ground.

“We need your help finding someone. We think he might be hiding out in the Ratway, which we’ve been informed is sort of your group’s...hideout, so to speak.”

Ruhnjolf looked up at the sound of Luthes’s voice, partially in shock and partially in gratitude. It was as if Luthes had sensed how Ruhnjolf was feeling and jumped in to save him. The connection between them made him think of when they’d first fought that dragon together outside of Whiterun, how they hadn’t even needed words to work together as a seamless team.

“Ah, I see.” Brynjolf paused and tapped his chin with a smirk. Ruhnjolf always wondered if his face would get stuck in its permanent lopsided smile. “So you need access to the Ratway, eh? I think I might be able to arrange for that, but I need to know what’s in it for me.”

In one smooth motion, Ruhnjolf untied the bag over his shoulder and pulled out a coin purse filled to the brim with smooth, shiny Septims. The eternal language of the Thieves’ Guild.

Brynjolf clicked his tongue in appreciation. “That’ll do, lad. Follow me.”

The pair followed Brynjolf as he wound through the streets of Riften, his presence warding off the various beggars and pickpockets that prowled the streets. There was no denying the power of the Thieves’ Guild in the hold. Ruhnjolf watched Luthes’s face carefully, growing discomfort evident on the Imperial’s face.

Eventually, they came to a stop in the cemetery at the edge of town as they ducked underneath a small tomb. Brynjolf reached out and tapped the symbol of the Septim dynasty emblazoned on its coffin, then stepped back. A few seconds later, the stone slab began to slide backwards, making an excruciatingly loud sound as it raked across the ground to reveal a set of stairs going down.

“This is your secret entrance?” Luthes said. “Gods, might as well buy a bell to chime across town when you open it, too.”

“Watch your tongue, lad,” Brynjolf said, although it looked as if he was suppressing a smile.

If Riften smelled bad aboveground, it stunk twice as much underground. As they slunk further down into the depths of the sewers, the stench of rotten food and waste filtered through Ruhnjolf’s nose and made his eyes water.

At the bottom of the stairs lay a rickety wooden door that Brynjolf pushed open after several moments of fiddling with the lock. It made a long, creaking noise as it moved to reveal a circular platform with beds arranged on its perimeter. People in leather armor, all with hoods pulled up over their heads, milled around. As Luthes and Ruhnjolf passed by, some of them looked up at them with a slight, suspicious sneer on their faces.

“They’re with me, lads and lasses,” Brynjolf announced to the room after several minutes of this occurring. His words bounced off the walls and echoed throughout the cistern. The other thieves ducked their heads at his command.

“Brynjolf,” a nasally voice called out. It belonged to a bald man with a look on his face like he was perpetually amused by something. “What are you doin’, bringing these idiots in ‘ere like it’s some kind of bed and breakfast?”

Brynjolf snorted and just held up the bag of Septims the pair had given him. “Contain yourself, Delvin,” he said. “They’ve got coin.”

Delvin gave a tight-lipped smile and slowly nodded his head. “As you were, gentlemen,” he said and turned to walk back out a door on the far side of the cistern.

Brynjolf led them to another door and smacked the wood with his hand. “Alright lads,” he said. “Just through this door is the Ratway. You’ll find your man in there.”

Luthes frowned. “Wait, you’re just going to let us go off by ourselves, then?”

“Well, I said I’d get you access to the Ratway, didn’t I?” Brynjolf said with a shit-eating grin. “Never said I’d come with ya.”

“Of course,” Luthes muttered. “Thieves Guild scu—” Ruhnjolf punched Luthes in the shoulder, causing the latter to yelp and discontinue his train of thought.

“Thanks for your help,” Ruhnjolf said and pushed open the door.

“Anytime,” Brynjolf called out as Luthes and Ruhnjolf made their way into the Ratway, closing the door behind them.

The depths of the Ratway were somehow even dirtier than the rest of the sewer, walls lined with unidentifiable brown substances and strange green mosses that grew in clumps on damp areas. Odors of waste nearly made Ruhnjolf gag as they headed down the hallway ahead of them.

Shadows danced along the the surface of the walls and floor, which made Ruhnjolf start to feel a bit jumpy, and he couldn't shake the feeling that someone might be following them. He picked up the pace, causing the shorter Imperial to struggle to keep up with him.

"Slow down, would you?" Luthes said.

Ruhnjolf shook his head. "I think we might be being tailed," he whispered. Luthes's eyes widened and he started to speed up too.

They had just turned the corner to see a large metal door with a viewing slot when the pursuers finally made themselves known. "In the name of the Thalmor, I demand that you stop right there."

Luthes and Ruhnjolf spun around to see three high elves in decorated brown robes staring them down. Two of them held one-handed swords, while lightning crackled out of the hand of the elf on the left. Ruhnjolf stiffened with hatred and fought the urge to spit in their faces—he hated the Thalmor and the Aldmeri Dominion with every ounce of his Nordic blood.

"We heard you've been asking around about a man named Esbern," the one in the middle said, snide expression on his face as he appraised them. "We have a vested interest in making sure that he comes back with us, so it's in *your* best interest to tell us what you know about him."

A spark of defiance flew through Ruhnjolf's body. "We're not telling you anything," he said. He thought Luthes was going to protest his hasty decision to be aggressive, but instead his companion said nothing, his face equally filled with hatred for the Thalmor.

"I strongly suggest." As the high elf in the middle spoke, the one on the left raised her hand and shot a bolt of lightning into the wall next to Ruhnjolf and Luthes, making them both jump. "That you cooperate with us."

Ruhnjolf stepped forward and pulled his sword out slowly.

"Never," he said and unleashed a shout that sent all three of the Thalmor flying into the air. Their backs slammed into the wall, and they slid down to collapse on the ground.

"The nerve of—" one of the elves was saying as they all scrambled to their feet. Arrows flew suddenly towards Ruhnjolf and Luthes, and they ducked just in the nick of time, the tips grazing the tops of their heads.

As they dodged the arrows, a shock of lightning grazed Luthes's arm with a sizzle, causing the Imperial to yelp and grab his arm in pain. "Shit," he cried and stumbled off to the side.

At the sight of an injured Luthes, Ruhnjolf's field of vision clouded with red and he charged towards the elves with a fierce battle cry and his weapon raised in the air. He slashed his sword at the one who had spoken earlier, creating a deep cut across his torso that bled through the robes. The elf stumbled back, doubled over with his arms clutched over his belly.

Luthes had recovered from his injury—at least for the moment—and had plunged his sword into the side of the elf with the magic abilities. “Curse you,” the elf screamed as her face contorted in pain.

Ruhnjolf turned back to face the elf he'd been fighting. “I strongly suggest,” he said, dragging out each word. “That you leave and never come back.”

“We'll be watching you,” the elf hissed in response and spat on the ground.

The Thalmor stumbled off into the Ratway, blood trailing behind them. As they left, Ruhnjolf and Luthes watched and tried to catch their breath. Ruhnjolf placed a hand gently on Luthes's arm, just above where the burn from the lightning was.

“We need to get you to a healer,” he said quietly.

Luthes pulled his arm back as if he'd been shocked for a second time, blush running up his neck and onto his cheeks. “I'm fine,” he mumbled.

Ruhnjolf just shook his head. “We're going to a healer after we get out of here, whether you like it or not,” he said. Then he walked over to the metal door.

“Esbern, we know you're in there. Delphine sent us,” Ruhnjolf said, knocking loudly. The door made a clanging noise that moved through the sewers. “I'm...the Dragonborn.”

The slot at the top of the door slid open to reveal a pair of eyes surrounded by wrinkles. “Did you just fight off all those Thalmor out there?”

From where he had come to stand beside Ruhnjolf, Luthes nodded.

“Give me a moment to unlock the door.”

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Sky Haven Temple was bigger than Ruhnjolf could have ever imagined, with an impossibly high ceiling and open space for miles. The journey had taken them almost a week since the day they met Esbern and reunited him with Delphine, but now it seemed worth all the effort, if only to be able to take in the sights.

In front of them was what Esbern had deemed ‘Alduin's Wall,’ a large stone wall with intricate carvings that depicted the stories of Nordic legends. When he first laid eyes upon it, Luthes had let out a little gasp, reaching his hand out to trace the lines of the engravings.

Then, he'd turned to look at Ruhnjolf, his gaze filled with wonder. Stormy blue eyes met deep brown ones as the pair looked at one another, and Ruhnjolf swore for a moment that he could hear their hearts beating as one...

By Ysmir's beard, he was turning into a character from one of his aunt's inane books about love! What was that one she always used to read, about an Argonian maid? Gods, this was terrible.

Ruhnjolf ripped his gaze away and focused on the carvings in front him. "So, old man," he said a little too loudly, "what are these engravings supposed to mean?"

Esbern glared at the Dragonborn for a moment before speaking. "This is a depiction of Alduin's reign and the formation of the Dragon Cult." He gestured towards the middle. "Down here, you can see the battle of the Tongues against Alduin and their eventual defeat of the World-Eater."

Ruhnjolf stepped towards that side of the wall, taking in the pictures before him. These were his ancestors, his lineage.

His destiny.

He swallowed and stared down at the ground, a feeling of panic overtaking him. He still didn't know if he had it in him to defeat the dragons.

"What about this part at the end?" Luthes said, pointing towards the far right side. "I don't remember reading about this."

Esbern walked over to inspect the pictures. A dragon, larger than any that Ruhnjolf had ever seen, flew in the sky while a man faced him down. He realized with a start that the man looked exactly like him, down to the braided beard.

"It's me," Ruhnjolf said.

"By the Divines, I think you're right," Esbern said. "It can't be...if this wall is correct, then that means...Alduin has returned."

Luthes's eyes widened. "And it's up to Ruhnjolf to defeat him, just as the Tongues did," he said, voice barely above a whisper. He looked over at Ruhnjolf, whose face was now paler than normal.

A trembling overtook Ruhnjolf's entire body, and he thought for a moment that he might throw up on the stone beneath him. The World-Eater had returned to enact his revenge, and he was to defeat him once and for all. The prophecy was real and the tangible, concrete proof of it staring him in the face. He would have to face down Alduin himself if there was any hope of saving Skyrim and her people.

Luthes came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You're stronger than you think you are," he said so that Delphine and Esbern couldn't hear him.

Ruhnjolf said nothing and just shook his head feebly instead.

"You are," Luthes insisted. "Just remember that you're not alone, okay? I may not be much, but...you have me. You always have me."

At those words, Ruhnjolf turned to look at Luthes with his heart pounding in his chest. This time, as they locked eyes, he didn't dare look away. In that moment he felt, for the first time since discovering he was Dragonborn, that he might actually be able to fulfill his destiny. So long as he had Luthes by his side.

Alduin didn't stand a chance against them.



# Tale of the Tongues (In More Ways Than One)

## Chapter Summary

A dark cave crawling with vicious Falmer out for blood is definitely an ideal location for confessing your feelings.

Luthes and Ruhnjolf's second trip to Ivarstead was markedly different from the first, not only because they were now burdened with the knowledge that the World-Eater himself had returned but also because of the newfound notoriety of "the Dragonborn." Upon walking into the local inn to spend the night before traveling up the seven thousand steps once again, the pair were greeted by a rousing rendition of "The Dragonborn Comes" by a pretty Nord with a pleasant voice and a well-tuned lute.

"By the Nine, can't they give it a rest already?" Ruhnjolf muttered to Luthes. "I swear none of these so-called bards know how to play any other damn song."

Luthes just chuckled. For better or for worse, he was used to Ruhnjolf's grumpiness by now. Sometimes he even found it endearing depending on the mood he was in.

The two sat down at an empty table. It had been just the two of them again since traveling to Sky Haven Temple, as Delphine and Esbern had insisted they stay to establish the Blades' old hideout as a base for everyone to return to. Luthes didn't really mind the lack of company, though, as it meant he and Ruhnjolf could talk in peace and be alone together.

Not that Luthes would ever admit to enjoying that. At least, not yet.

He couldn't quite tell how the Nord felt about him. Some days Ruhnjolf give him nothing but frowns and grumpy comments. But then there were those moments when they truly connected that seemed to be happening more and more frequently. Luthes couldn't help himself from developing feelings under those circumstances, but he was not about to tell Ruhnjolf until he knew it would be reciprocated.

Besides, they had a world to save.

Luthes handed Ruhnjolf a flagon of mead and enjoyed the small shock he experienced when their fingers brushed. They drank in comfortable, easy quiet for a while.

From the next table over, a pair of men that Luthes recognized from the last time they'd visited Ivarstead were discussing recent dragon attacks.

"Heard Rorikstead got hit pretty hard by a dragon last week," the man Luthes remembered as Klimmek said. "Apparently a few buildings burned down, some people's houses."

The red-haired Nord—Bassianus, Luthes recalled—just shook his head. “Damn shame,” he said. “First Riverwood...now this.”

“At least there’s a new Dragonborn, right?” Klimmek said.

“If there really is a Dragonborn,” Bassianus said and shook his head again, “he sure as hell isn’t any kind of legendary hero.”

When Luthes turned to look at Ruhnjolf, he was staring into his pint of mead with glassy eyes and fingers wrapped so tightly around the flagon that his knuckles were white. Luthes reached a hand out to place it gently over Ruhnjolf’s. The Nord didn’t stop him and instead seemed to soften just a little bit, so they stayed like that for a while until it was time to retire for the night.

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Their second trip to High Hrothgar was also markedly different from the first, mostly because they were now standing on the Throat of the World—the highest point in all of Skyrim—face to face with a dragon. A *friendly dragon*. Or at least, as friendly as a dragon could get.

Of all the things Ruhnjolf expected the Greybeards to show him when he and Luthes returned, seeking guidance on the prophecy they’d seen on Alduin’s Wall, a dragon was the last thing he’d anticipated. But beggars couldn’t be choosers, he supposed, and he needed all the help he could get at this point.

“Dovahkiin. You are finally here.” The green-scaled dragon spoke at a slow crawl, rivaling the speech patterns of Master Arngair. Ruhnjolf tugged at his beard somewhat impatiently. “I sense you are impatient, my brother. Do not be of haste. We are both as Akatosh has made us, and therefore we must try to understand.”

“Um.” Ruhnjolf was at a loss for words, unsure of how to properly address an extremely powerful dragon. “Right.”

“My name is Paarthurnax,” the dragon said and followed it with a series of phrases spoken in dragon tongue. Ruhnjolf felt the words inside of him, winding their way through his body and mind, and he inherently understood their meaning. He still hadn’t gotten used to that feeling, of understanding a language he’d never even learned.

“Can’t you just tell us what we’re supposed to do about this whole ‘Alduin coming to destroy the world as we know it’ thing?” Luthes waved his arms around as he spoke. Ruhnjolf could tell that the Imperial didn’t enjoy feeling like a third wheel to the conversation, and he would take any opportunity to interject himself into the situation.

Paarthurnax turned his head and gave Luthes what Ruhnjolf thought might have been a look of annoyance (it was hard to read dragon facial expressions), then refocused his attention on Ruhnjolf. “The elder knowledge is what you must seek,” he said. “Your answer lies in the scrolls of old.”

The scrolls of old? What in Oblivion was Paarthurnax talking about? Ruhnjolf just stared blankly at the dragon and blinked a couple of times.

After a few moments, Luthes suddenly gasped and clutched Ruhnjolf's shoulder. "The Elder Scrolls!" he exclaimed. "We need to find an Elder Scroll, that's going to tell us how to defeat Alduin."

Paarthurnax stretched his mouth into a grin, baring dozens of sharp, white teeth. "Your partner here is smarter than I expected."

"Hey!" Luthes said with a huff.

"He's *not* my partner, not like that," Ruhnjolf said. He could feel his face burning up. It wasn't like that, and he was tired of everyone they met insisting that it was. "Just a friend."

"Is that so?" Paarthurnax said. He leaned back on the rock he perched on and looked deep in thought for several seconds. Then he started to speak once more in dragon tongue with words intended only for Ruhnjolf to hear. "Dovahkiin, it does not do to deny a deeper connection such as the one you share with your partner here."

Ruhnjolf didn't know how to respond back properly in dragon tongue, but he did know that he'd never had the urge to strangle a dragon before that moment.

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It didn't take much effort for them to get into the College of Winterhold. At first, the perpetually annoyed High Elf that stood at the entrance to the school had eyed them with suspicion as they approached clad in armor and baring swords. But all it had taken was one shout of Ruhnjolf's mouth, and she was practically begging them to stay.

"The Thu'um is quite a powerful form of magic, you know," she was saying as they trudged up yet another set of stone steps. "We could really use someone with your talents here at the College. Haven't had a lot of new pupils since, well..."

Ruhnjolf and Luthes both raised their eyebrows.

"...since about half the College of Winterhold and most of the hold fell into the Sea of Ghosts, but really I think everyone just blew that one out of proportion." The High Elf added a laugh to her statement, but it wasn't particularly convincing.

"You mean the Great Collapse? That minor event?"

Ruhnjolf turned his head to stare at Luthes, who had grown steadily more annoyed since reaching Winterhold. The final straw, he supposed, had been when the Imperial's basic fire spell failed to gain them access to the College, and Ruhnjolf had to break out his dragon shout. The downcast look in Luthes's eyes had made something stir deep inside Ruhnjolf. Something like...pity. And maybe a certain kind of sadness, too, of knowing that someone he really cared about just had his lifelong dream of studying magic crushed in front of him.

Ruhnjolf shook his head. He needed to stop thinking of Luthes in that kind of way. They were friends, nothing more. Close friends who sometimes not-so-secretly admired one another's asses, but that was all in a day's work, right?

Right.

Ruhnjolf moved his gaze away from Luthes's (nicely defined) profile and over the stone wall of the staircase they were climbing. They were up high enough now that it was impossible to see the ground below amidst the swirls of snow that flurried around, and the wind grew biting and cold. He thanked his Nordic ancestors for providing him with thick blood to withstand at least some of the lower temperatures, but he couldn't deny that he still felt a little chilly this far north.

"So you really should consider continuing your studies with us." The High Elf's voice called Ruhnjolf back to attention. *She's still going on about that?* he thought.

Luthes huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, we can't exactly stay here, now can we?" he said. "We're busy saving the world from being engulfed in dragon fire or whatever."

The High Elf pursed her lips and gave a tight nod. "I see," she said before focusing her full attention back to Ruhnjolf. "At any rate, the College of Winterhold would be pleased to provide you with whatever assistance you need."

She left them standing in the middle of the College's main courtyard, insisting that she had to get back to guarding the entrance in case anyone decided to show up.

Then it was just Luthes and Ruhnjolf, surrounded by stone walls and paving everywhere they looked. In the center of it all stood a menacing-looking statue of a powerful wizard. A brilliant blue light shot out of the statue's middle and into the sky above to pierce through the clouds and snow.

"I guess we're on our own now," Luthes said with a sigh. Ruhnjolf tried to give him a reassuring smile, but he was pretty sure it looked like he had digestive trouble instead. He wasn't particularly good at being comforting, especially not when the sight of Luthes sad made his insides twist for the second time that day.

"Let's just ask someone for help," Ruhnjolf suggested.

Standing just behind the statue was a group of three figures dressed in plain robes. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a Khajiit, a Dunmer, and a Nord having an intense discussion.

The Khajiit reached his arms out and handed the Nord a set of scrolls with a toothy grin. "Ahh, J'zargo is pleased to present you with his latest and greatest spell," he said. "Would you mind testing it out for me?"

The Nord furrowed his brow and reached out to grab the scrolls, but before he could, the Dunmer placed a hand on the Nord's arm to stop him.

"Don't do it, Onmund," she hissed. Then she cast an accusatory glance towards J'zargo. "Is this gonna be like last time, when your dumb scrolls almost burned down the entire dormitory and killed us all?"

J'zargo shrugged and grinned even wider, baring his sharp teeth. "The only promise J'zargo makes is that he will one day be archmage."

Ruhnjolf and Luthes looked at one another, shrugged, and moved towards the group, their approaching footsteps ringing through the courtyard's open space. The trio turned their heads to stare down the new arrivals, eyes narrowed in suspicion. Once spotting Ruhnjolf, though, Onmund seemed to soften a bit.

"Can we help you?"

"Who are you?"

"J'zargo senses inferior magical talent to him. This both disgusts and pleases him."

Luthes held up his hands as if in self defense. "Sorry, we're not trying to intrude or anything. Um, I'm Luthes, and this is..." He glanced at Ruhnjolf with trepidation.

"I'm the Dragonborn," Ruhnjolf said, swallowing thickly. In the weeks since visiting Sky Haven Temple, he'd tried to become more comfortable in his role as hero. It seemed inevitable that he would have to fight Alduin, whether he liked it or not. "We're here to seek guidance from the College."

"That explains the shout we heard earlier," Onmund said with a nod.

"Also, J'zargo thinks one could hear your shout all the way in Cyrodiil."

Brelyna rolled her eyes. "Insightful addition as always, J'zargo."

The three fell into another round of bickering that lasted until Luthes interrupted them. "Can you help us find the library?" he said loudly over the sound of J'zargo boasting—yet again—about his magical capabilities. Ruhnjolf couldn't tell if he knew any other topics of conversation.

"The Arcanaeum? It's just over there, through the Hall of the Elements," Onmund said and pointed straight ahead. "If you hit the Archmage's Quarters, you've gone too far."

"Thank you," Luthes said, and the two of them bid the apprentices farewell to head to the Arcanaeum, much to Ruhnjolf's relief.

The Arcanaeum was the largest library that Ruhnjolf had ever seen, with books wrapping around the circular room and shelves stretching up to the impossibly high ceilings. He thought that Luthes might wet himself from the excitement of it all. The Imperial gasped and immediately dashed over to the stacks to start flipping through titles.

"Look at this, Ruhnjolf," he said, shoving a thick, leather-bound book in Ruhnjolf's face. "They have all the volumes of a Brief History of the Empire."

Ruhnjolf just placed a hand on top of the book and lowered it back down.

Just as quickly, another book appeared in front of his face. “And they even have Chimarvamidium! I’ve been searching for the sixth book in this series for weeks.”

The pages flip-flopped between Luthes’s fingers at the same rate as Ruhnjolf’s heart as he watched pure joy spread across the Imperial’s features. Then, after a few moments of soaking in the book, Luthes realized that Ruhnjolf was observing him and looked up to lock eyes. A faint flush covered his tan cheeks, and it made Ruhnjolf feel warm all over.

“What?” Luthes said, voice hardly a whisper and a smile starting to cross his features.

A threatening, grisly voice boomed from the center of the library, breaking both Luthes and Ruhnjolf from their reverie. “If you so much as leave a single mark on one of those pages, I will personally ensure that atronachs rip every limb from your body.”

Luthes’s skin grew pale, and Ruhnjolf thought that he might be ill and stepped back just in case. Luthes gently placed the books back on the shelf and managed to squeak out an “I’m sorry.”

Standing behind a wooden desk was an orc in mage robes who had his hands up and poised to cast a spell with some kind of dark, purple, swirling orbs dancing in his palms.

“Name’s Urag gro-Shub. Now that you’re done testing my patience, how can I help you?” he said, voice still just threatening as before, as Ruhnjolf walked over to the desk. Luthes followed after Ruhnjolf but stayed just a little bit further back, apprehension evident on his face as he eyed the spell in the orc’s hands.

“We need to find an Elder Scroll,” Ruhnjolf said.

Urag started laughing. “An *Elder Scroll*?” he said. “I have the greatest collection of books in Skyrim, but if I had an Elder Scroll lying around, I wouldn’t just hand it to you, that’s for damn sure.”

Ruhnjolf stared down the orc, one steel gaze matching another. “Would you give it to the Dragonborn?”

Another laugh. “You? Dragonborn? Try me.”

“Want me to test my powers on these books?” Ruhnjolf said and started to open his mouth. As he did so, the energy in the room began to shift and crackle with power, and some of the pages of nearby books started to flutter on their own.

Urag’s eyes widened, and his whole demeanor shifted to that of panic. “Alright, alright,” he said. “I’ll tell you what I know. Just stop doing that.”

Ruhnjolf closed his mouth, satisfied, and the books stopped moving.

“Elder Scrolls are incredibly powerful. People spend their entire lives training to absorb their knowledge, and even then, the Divines make most of them blind after reading one.” Urag shifted from one leg to the other, clearly uncomfortable by Ruhnjolf’s presence. “But, I suppose it might be different for the...Dragonborn.”

He pulled out a set of keys from inside his robes and used them to unlock a safe beneath the counter with six different locks on it. After opening the safe, he placed its contents—a round metal sphere and a cube-shaped object—in front of Luthes and Ruhnjolf.

“You’ll need these to get to the Elder Scroll,” he said.

Luthes picked up the metal sphere and held it up to inspect. “What is this?”

The orc shrugged. “Not entirely sure, to be honest. They were left behind by a scholar named Septimus Sigmus. Used to do his work at the College until he left and secluded himself somewhere up north,” he said. “Passed away a few months ago, and we found these in his outpost. Batty old man, but he did a lot of great work studying the Dwemer.”

Luthes furrowed his brow. “The Dwemer?” he said. “Their race died out a long time ago, right?”

“Correct,” Urag said, “but there’s still a lot to be found in their old cities, and from what I’ve gathered from Septimus’s old notes, there’s a possibility that an Elder Scroll might be located in one of those ruins.”

Urag reached under the counter again and retrieved an ancient-looking map weathered and crinkled with time. Ruhnjolf recognized the lines on it as defining the different holds in Skyrim, along with markers for notable locations. One in particular stood out: a large, glowing circle in the middle of the map.

“I think that this ruin might be where the scroll is,” Urag said and pointed to the circle. “But it looks like you can only enter it through one of these three locations.” He traced his finger over three lines that spanned out from the glowing circle and led to separate markers, one near Winterhold, one near Dawnstar, and one near Windhelm.

“So we have to go through one of the other ruins to get to this location,” Luthes said as he stretched forward and tapped the center mark.

“Correct.”

Luthes took the map from off the table, looked at Ruhnjolf, and squared his shoulders. “Looks like we’ve got a long journey ahead of us,” he said.

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The cold, steel walls of the Dwemer ruin—Alftand, was what the map had called this particular place—left Luthes with the distinct feeling of being unsettled, and the sensation continued as he stepped inside with Ruhnjolf. Their careful footsteps clattered against the floor and scraps of metal and were loud despite their attempts at soft footfalls. A steady clanking noise, like metal on metal, followed them throughout the halls.

“Gods, this place gives me the creeps,” Ruhnjolf said, echoing Luthes’s thoughts.

“Tell me about iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiT—”

Luthes's sarcastic statement turned into a yell as a whirring sound, followed by a bang, rang out nearby. Before he could even blink, he was shoved to the ground by a copper-colored metal figure with some kind of sphere for legs.

"FUS RO."

Ruhnjolf's shout blasted the sphere...metal...thing into the wall behind Luthes, and it smashed into smaller bits of metal as it crumpled to the ground in a heap. Luthes was still on the ground, panting and trying to regain his breath. When he looked up, Ruhnjolf was standing over him with his hand outstretched.

"Are you okay?" Ruhnjolf asked. The Dragonborn's forehead wrinkled with concern as he looked Luthes over.

Luthes grabbed onto Ruhnjolf's callused hand, feeling a jolt from the skin contact, and abruptly pulled away after he was on his feet. "Yup," he said, voice suddenly too high. "Totally fine. I'll probably just have a bruise or something."

Ruhnjolf gave him a strange look but didn't say anything, and the two kept moving in silence. Eventually, after winding their way through the twisting passage and fighting a number of different sentient metal machines, they emerged into the largest cavern that Luthes had ever seen.

At first, all Luthes could see was darkness speckled with spots of light. Then, as they stepped forward, the cavern began to reveal itself. Luminescent, mushroom-like plants clung to the walls and cast a blue glow around the entire area, which was filled with abandoned buildings made of Dwemer metal. Above the ground stretched miles-long stone bridges that reached to meet the gaps between towers, and in the center of the cavern, most dazzlingly of all, hung a brilliant yellow orb that resembled the sun.

No—this was no cavern. It was a city. And it was absolutely breathtaking.

"Wow," Luthes said.

From beside him, Ruhnjolf had a similar reaction, and they both spent several moments openly admiring the scene before them. Then they looked at one another and headed into the depths of the abandoned city—Blackreach, was what Urug had called it.

Blackreach was eerie in a way that Luthes hadn't experienced before in his life. He could feel the energy of the once-bustling city thrum in the walls of the cavern, but it appeared to be empty besides the two of them. He struggled to find ways to fill the silence between himself and Ruhnjolf just to feel a bit less alone in such a strange place.

"Hey," he said.

"What?" Ruhnjolf said, characteristic annoyance flooding into his voice. Of course Ruhnjolf would prefer walking in silence if given the choice.



Luthes felt heat flush to his face as he realized how well he'd memorized the Dragonborn's habits, and a knot coiled in his stomach that tightened when Ruhnjolf turned to look at him. Luthes found a confession of feelings bubbling on the tip of his tongue.

"Do you ever, um, think about us, maybe, you know, uh..." Luthes stammered.

Ruhnjolf's eyes widened, as if in anticipation of what Luthes was about to say, and tripped over a rock in front of him. He swore loudly and bent down to rub his foot. Luthes stopped to wait for him.

From up ahead, Luthes could suddenly hear a faint noise like something was hissing at them, and then the pitter-patter of feet running towards them. Off in the distance a group of shriveled-looking white figures sprinted towards them with spears and swords in hand.

Falmer. Luthes remembered reading about them in a book about the Dwemer. They were blind, but would kill trespassers without thinking twice and were adept warriors and mages.

"Ruhnjolf, we need to get out of here," he yelled.

The pair whirled around on the bridge only to discover another group of Falmer heading their direction from the opposite side. They were trapped.

"We have no choice but to fight," Ruhnjolf said, and that Nord foolhardiness made itself known in every bit of his body language. His face looked determined as he reached behind and pulled out his two-handed sword. Then he charged forward into the fray, stabbing the closest Falmer to him straight through the stomach without hesitation.

Watching him, Luthes was momentarily transported back to their first fight together. The Nord had barely stopped to process the dragon in the air before heading into the fight and had shown more valor than anyone Luthes had ever met.

By the Nine, what an absurd situation it all was—Luthes had tried to have Ruhnjolf arrested that day and now, here he was, falling in love with the man. What in Oblivion was he thinking?

"Are you going to do something or just fucking stand there?" Ruhnjolf's voice jolted Luthes out of his musings and back into the life threatening situation they'd found themselves in.

He shook his head and reached for his bow and arrow. As Ruhnjolf picked off the Falmer on his side one by one, Luthes focused on shooting down the ones coming from the far side. They went down with one or two piercing shots to the heart, letting out a high pitched screech as they died; the noise gave Luthes the shivers. After several minutes of picking the horde off with his bow and arrow, Luthes had considerably thinned out the group of Falmer that had been advancing on his side.

Ruhnjolf, however, was not faring as well. Luthes heard a yell from behind him and turned to see the Dragonborn completely surrounded by Falmer. There was a deep scratch on his cheek, and he looked like he was about to collapse. Behind him, a Falmer raised its sword

and was about to strike in the middle of Ruhnjolf's back. Luthes's heart dropped into his stomach.

Without a moment's hesitation, Luthes fired an arrow at the Falmer before its sword came down, causing it to writhe in pain and stumble back. His vision turned red, and he surged towards the Falmer with his sword in hand, easily cutting down the monster.

He slashed to the side with his sword, feeling the adrenaline thrum through him like a drumline, and took two more Falmer with him. Ruhnjolf seemed to feed off Luthes's energy and got his second wind. The two of them fought side by side, just like that first encounter with the dragon outside of Whiterun and the tragedy at Riverwood and every other time they'd had to defend themselves. It was a rush that Luthes would never quite get over, and he never wanted to stop experiencing. It made him feel alive.

When the last Falmer finally fell to the ground, they both let out a sigh of the relief at the same time, and the noise echoed across the the bridge. In the quiet of Blackreach that followed, Luthes thought he could hear a pin drop.

"You saved me." Ruhnjolf's words were soft, kind, not harsh and gruff like they usually were. The two of them locked eyes, and warmth radiated from Ruhnjolf's normally cold blue eyes. It touched every part of Luthes's body and made him tingle all over.

Then, without warning, Ruhnjolf grabbed the front of Luthes's robes and yanked him up to meet his lips. Luthes was too shocked to respond at first, but then he grew frantic in his response, reaching up to tug on Ruhnjolf's long hair while the Nord reached up to cup his cheeks. The effect on Luthes was dizzying, and he lost touch with everything around him, only focused on the sensations coursing through his body as he kissed the obnoxious and grumpy man he'd somehow fallen in love with.

When Ruhnjolf finally pulled away, Luthes blinked a couple of times, feeling dazed and unsure if what just happened was a hallucination on his part. The Nord leaning into him was breathing heavily, eyes ablaze.

"Um, that was uh...that happened," Luthes said.

Ruhnjolf seemed to snap out of his reverie, or whatever it was that came over him, and he stepped back to put space between them. "We'll...we'll settle this after Blackreach," he sputtered. "We have to get the Elder Scroll."

No. This wasn't over yet. Luthes would make damn sure of that.

"You're right," he said slowly. He stepped forward and wound his hands around Ruhnjolf's neck, playing with the soft hairs on his neck. "But it is...kind of dark in here. And there's perfectly intact beds in that room up ahead for no discernible reason."

Ruhnjolf's eyes clouded over, and Luthes damn near fell over from all the feelings (and lust) that hit him in that moment.

“I...” Ruhnjolf swallowed, looked away, and then found his way back to Luthes’s eyes.  
“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but...”

“Say no more,” Luthes said and placed his hand in Ruhnjolf’s.

To his surprise, the Dragonborn surrendered completely at last, letting Luthes lead him into the the next room over and possibly into a new beginning for the both of them.

# Are You There Talos? It's Me, the Dragonborn

## Chapter Summary

Ruhnjolf negotiates a truce with two of the most annoying factions in Skyrim and goes to face his capital-d Destiny.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Luthes gave Ruhnjolf approximately two minutes before he started throwing punches at both Ulfric Stormcloak and General Tullius, judging by the scowl on his face and the clenched fist on the table in front of him.

Spread out alongside a table in the middle of High Hrothgar were representatives from both the Imperial Legion and the Stormcloak rebellion. The Imperial delegation consisted of General Tullius, Legate Rikke, and Jarl Elisif the Fair, and all three of them stared down Ulfric and Galmar Stone-Fist in a stand off for the ages.

Jarl Balgruuf, Delphine, and Esbern remained firmly in the middle of not just the conflict but also the table itself. The other neutral party, Master Arngeir, shifted uncomfortably in his seat next to them; the Greybeards typically stayed out of Skyrim's political conflicts, but the direness of Alduin's return necessitated an intervention. At the center of it all was Ruhnjolf, who sat at the head of table facing everyone.

Shortly after Ruhnjolf and Luthes opened their Elder Scroll on the Throat of the World, Alduin had appeared to threaten the Dragonborn. Luthes would never forget the pure hatred that radiated from Alduin's eyes as he'd addressed Ruhnjolf: "Dovahkiin. Though you have grown strong, you are no match, for I cannot be defeated. I will outlast you, and your soul shall be my finest feast at Sovngarde."

Then, like a mirage that had appeared for only a moment, Alduin flew away without so much as a lasting fight. The dragon left Ruhnjolf shaking and Luthes unsure of how to comfort him. The two of them had embraced for a while on the mountain as the wind whipped around them.

Now, according to Paarthurnax, they needed to trap one of Alduin's henchmen—another dragon—at Dragonsreach in Whiterun and convince him to betray his master. It was the only way to get to Alduin.

"Not a chance," Jarl Balgruuf had said when they approached his throne and asked for permission to use Dragonsreach. "My people are already at risk with this...civil war on our hands. It's too risky to leave the city so vulnerable."

The Imperial blood running in Luthes's veins had given him an idea that was sure to make Ruhnjolf hate him for at least the next week.

"Your Honor, if I may offer a suggestion," Luthes said. Ruhnjolf stared at him as if he'd lost his mind, but it was a look the Nord had given him lots of times, so he chose to ignore it and continue. "What if you knew that the Stormcloaks and the Legion wouldn't try to attack while we trapped the dragon? We... Ruhnjolf and I could negotiate a peace treaty between the two parties."

It was at this point that Ruhnjolf reached over and yanked on Luthes's arm to pull him closer. "What in Oblivion do you think you're doing? Are you insane?" he said.

Jarl Balgruuf stroked his beard a few times, contemplating, then nodded. "I like this idea," he said. "Go speak with the Greybeards. I trust that they have an interest in this matter of dragons, and High Hrothgar is one of the most impartial places in Skyrim."

As soon as they walked out of the throne room, Ruhnjolf had promptly socked Luthes in the arm so hard he still had a bruise.

Despite the peace conference being his idea, Luthes had been ordered to stay silent during the negotiations, much to his frustration. Luthes knew he would have been the right man for the job, having come from a line of Imperials involved in diplomatic affairs and the royal guard. He also wasn't above using his ancestral powers to get people to listen to him.

But alas, the Dragonborn was the one who was supposed to act as the "mediator" of the treaty. However, given that Ruhnjolf had the temperament of a sabre cat and the communication skills of a giant (as in, he preferred to solve conflicts by clubbing people with his weapons), he wasn't doing a particularly good job. The only thing that Ruhnjolf had done so far was dismiss the Thalmor representative, Elenwen, when she tried to join the negotiations. To Ruhnjolf's credit, though, this was done to no one's dismay.

"If I may offer a proposition," Jarl Elisif said and cleared her throat. "We would like you to consider giving us possession of—"

Galmar, true to his name, pounded his fist on the table. "Spit it out, Legion scum," he growled. "We haven't got all day."

Ulfric rested his hand on Galmar's arm. "Easy, Galmar," he muttered. "We need to play this smart. Understand me?"

From beside him, Luthes could see Ruhnjolf roll his eyes up to the ceiling. "Gods help me," he said. Then he turned to Luthes with an almost pleading look, as if begging the Imperial to save him. "How long have we been doing this?"

Luthes smirked. "The fun is only just beginning, my friend," he whispered. Underneath the table, Ruhnjolf's other hand rested on his thigh. Luthes reached over and placed his own hand on top of it and squeezed, watching as Ruhnjolf turned slightly red at Luthes's touch.

The two of them hadn't exactly talked about what happened in Blackreach. Really, it turned out that talking was not exactly their forte—Luthes discovered that Ruhnjolf was much better at other forms of communication. Even just thinking about it during the peace conference made Luthes's skin flush against his will. He stretched the fabric on the neck of his guard tunic, suddenly feeling hot all over, and tried to bring his attention back to the matter at hand.

"We want the Rift." Tullius's voice was cutting, sharp, and nothing resembling Elisif's diplomatic platitudes. He formed a small mound with his hands, one over top of the other, and leaned forward. "It's that or no truce."

Ulfric leaned back in his chair with arms over his chest. "Then we want the Reach," he said. "An eye for an eye."

From where she sat on Ruhnjolf's other side, Luthes could just barely make out Rikke talking to Tullius. "Tullius, there's no way we can do that," she hissed. "It would be tactical suicide."

"Let me handle this, Rikke," Tullius replied.

Rikke did not, in fact, let Tullius handle the situation and interjected before he could talk.

"Dragonborn," she said, voice echoing off the stone walls of High Hrothgar; Luthes thought they must've been able to hear her all the way down in Ivarstead. "What do you think we should do? Who gets what?"

Everyone turned their heads to face Ruhnjolf, faces expectant. The Dragonborn squirmed in his chair, and his fist, still on the table, tightened so that his knuckles lost their color.

"I think," Ruhnjolf began slowly, "that we should all remember the real reason that we're here, which is not some petty civil war, but the fact that Alduin is about to destroy our entire fucking—"

Luthes clamped a hand over Ruhnjolf's mouth, and despite his orders to stay quiet, started to talk in the Dragonborn's place.

"What he means is that we shouldn't lose sight of the end goal here," he said. As he spoke, he could feel his ancestor's spirit coursing through him. "We're all in danger because of Alduin's return, and while we hope both sides walk out of this negotiation with an equal agreement, the reality is that this war needs to be put on hold until we can figure out how to defeat the World Eater."

Ruhnjolf nodded in agreement, content to let Luthes do the talking.

"Who is this...this guard?" Tullius said with a slightly stronger sneer than normal. He looked Luthes up and down, appraising him. "And why should we listen to him?"

The clenched fist finally came down on the table, and Ruhnjolf unleashed a shout that caused everyone's hair to whip back in a sudden wind. "He has a name, you absolute milk drinker," Ruhnjolf said. "It's Luthes, and don't you dare talk to him that way. Understand?" People

looked at one another, simultaneously confused at Ruhnjolf's sudden outburst and terrified of his shouting abilities.

"Ruhnjolf," Luthes muttered. "It's really okay."

Ruhnjolf's eyes were wild and defiant, a storm brewing behind his irises. "You want a negotiation? You want a godsdamned peace treaty? I'll give you one." He jabbed his index finger at Ulfric and Galmar. "You two bastards get the Reach," he said. Then he pointed at Tullius, Rikke, and Elisif. "And you lot get the Rift. Everyone happy now?"

All parties involved looked at one another, nervous expressions still on their faces, and nodded hesitantly.

"Good." Ruhnjolf sat back. The smile on his face was smug and satisfied. "Glad we've reached an agreement."

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The top of Dragonsreach was a lot higher up than Ruhnjolf had thought from looking at it on the ground, and he experienced a vague sense of nausea as he peered over the balcony to the plains of Whiterun hold below. Beside him, Luthes had a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Ruhnjolf just nodded. He couldn't bring himself to tell Luthes that his nerves about the battle to come were eating him alive.

It also didn't help that the two of them had avoided discussing the night they shared in Blackreach. Ruhnjolf couldn't bring himself to acknowledge that he'd never felt the way he had that night before in his life; the thought of that scared him to the core. Every time he opened his mouth to say something, it was like an invisible little hand clamped over his mouth to keep the words from coming out.

Maybe it was better this way, Ruhnjolf thought. If they never confessed their true feelings, he could pretend there wasn't a real possibility that he might not come home.

A loud cough came from behind, and both Luthes and Ruhnjolf turned to look over their shoulders at the crowd assembled to watch the dragon entrapment. About a dozen or so Whiterun guards gathered in a pack, huddling close together. A few of them recognized Luthes and said hello in an almost reverential way, as if they couldn't believe he was traveling with the Dragonborn now. Jarl Balgruuf was at the front of the group flanked by his housecarl and his court wizard on either side. Off in a corner, Esbern and Delphine conversed in nervous tones.

"This is such an exciting opportunity." Farengar, the court wizard, had looked like as if he was going to wet himself from the moment he heard they were trapping a dragon on the roof of Dragonsreach. "To see a real life dragon! I can't believe it. I can finally perform all the experiments I've been thinking of and run all those tests I'm—"

“Keep it in your pants, Farengar, would you?” Irileth, the housecarl, snapped. “People’s lives are at stake here.”

Jarl Balgruuf held up a hand to interrupt his court members’ squabbling. “Whenever you’re ready, Dragonborn.”

Ruhnjolf and Luthes turned back towards the skies. “So this is it,” Luthes said. He let out a long exhale. “What we’ve been working towards. We’re almost to Alduin.”

The Nord tugged at his beard and frowned. Normally, Luthes’s softer side put him at ease, but he suddenly felt hot and itchy and irritated all over. “I know that, Luthes. By the Nine, give it a rest for a minute.”

Luthes pulled his hand away from Ruhnjolf’s shoulder and tucked it into his own chest like he’d been electrocuted. “I’m just trying to help, you bastard,” he said. Then he sighed. “Let’s just get this over with and call the damn dragon.”

“Fine,” Ruhnjolf managed to spit out between clenched teeth. He tilted his head up towards the sky, squared his shoulders, and let out a call for the dragon. “OD. AH. VIING.”

The shout released itself from Ruhnjolf’s mouth, then faded. Nothing happened. The people behind him started to murmur in confusion and impatience. He did his best not to look back at them and kept his eyes trained on the skies.

“Where in Oblivion is that dragon?” he muttered.

A few more minutes passed by with no sign of the dragon. This time, when Luthes placed a hand on his lower back, he didn’t fight him. Ruhnjolf let his head drop to his chest in defeat.

“Wait.” Luthes’s arm stiffened. “I see him. Look, beyond the clouds over there.”

He gestured wildly towards the west to where a large, dark figure flew through the clouds towards Dragonsreach. Ruhnjolf’s heart leapt—Odahviing had headed his call after all.

“Gods, this is really happening.” Ruhnjolf tugged on his beard, then ran a hand over his forehead. He looked at Luthes, internally pleading for Luthes to save him somehow. But he knew he was beyond the point of that. This was his destiny alone.

Luthes gave Ruhnjolf a strange look, almost as if he was being strangled, and barely managed to choke out his next sentence. “Ruhnjolf, I need to tell you something.”

Before Ruhnjolf could respond, the dragon landed on the stone roof, and debris scattered in a mini storm around his feet. Upon landing, Odahviing opened his mouth to unleash a stream of fire that caused the crowd behind Ruhnjolf to dive out of the way. Irileth immediately sprang into action, brandishing her sword and shield as she charged forward towards the dragon, unafraid of any man or dragon.

In a sudden move, Luthes shoved Ruhnjolf out of the way with more force than he’d ever seen the Imperial exert and sprinted towards a lever off to the side, which was meant to release the dragon trap. It was unmanned since the guard watching it had panicked in the



chaos and ducked into a corner with his head between his knees. Luthes pulled the lever down with a resounding clamp, releasing a large wooden bar that fell down to rest on top of Odahviing's neck, preventing the dragon from moving.

The silence that followed the dragon's entrapment did not last long at all, as Farengar immediately took it upon himself to interrogate the dragon. In his hands he held a leather-bound book that he furiously scribbled notes into with a quill.

"What would you say your main diet consists of? Decaying animals? Human souls?" Farengar chuckled, and Ruhnjolf thought that might have been the first time the court wizard had ever expressed any sense of humor. "Don't worry, I won't judge. This is all purely for intellectual purposes."

Odahviing ignored Farengar, who was now being pulled aside by Irileth and given a stern talking-to, and turned to face Ruhnjolf.

"Dovahkiin," he said. "I see I was too eager to heed your call for battle. You seem to have gotten the best of me using such, how do I put this...low tactics."

Ruhnjolf thought that was a bit rude of the dragon to say, but considering he lacked the ability to shoot dangerous fire out of his mouth, he decided to stay quiet on that matter.

"I need you to take me to Alduin," Ruhnjolf said and puffed up his chest. "It's my destiny to defeat the World Eater."

Odahviing let out what Ruhnjolf assumed might have been some type of dragon laugh. It rippled through the crowd, who were beginning to stir and talk amongst themselves. "You are a foolhardy one, Dovahkiin. But I must admit, I admire your courage," he said. "I will take you to Alduin. He has escaped to Sovngarde, but I know the way to get there."

Sovngarde? What in Oblivion could Alduin be doing there? Ruhnjolf felt his knees weaken just thinking about it.

"Fine," he said. "Take me to Sovngarde."

Luthes tapped him on the shoulder. "What is he saying?" he whispered.

"I have to go to Sovngarde," Ruhnjolf said in a low voice. Then, much louder, he turned to the crowd of people watching and repeated himself. "I have to go to Sovngarde."

A collective gasp rippled through the people, but all Ruhnjolf could focus on was the worry etched in every line of Luthes's face.

"So I can't come with you," Luthes said with a sigh. He stared down at his trembling hands and lifted them up as if to place them on Ruhnjolf's shoulders but stopped in mid air. "I guess I always knew it was going to come down to this."

"Don't worry about me, okay?" Ruhnjolf said sharply. "We don't even know if I'll come back alive."

Luthes jerked his right arm back and punched Ruhnjolf on the shoulder. “Don’t you *dare* say that,” he hissed. “I can’t even...I don’t even want to think about that. I’m...” A tremor entered his voice, and he sounded like he might cry. “I love you, Ruhnjolf. I don’t want to lose you.”

Ruhnjolf froze and couldn’t bring himself to look Luthes in his eyes—those warm brown eyes he’d spent so much time pretending not to admire—for fear of feeling something deeper than he wanted to deal with. But still, Luthes kept searching for Ruhnjolf’s gaze, yearning for him to say he felt the same in return.

“Luthes, I might not come back alive,” he said, an edge to his words that he knew he didn’t mean. But it made his heart hurt less to act as if he didn’t care at all. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Of course,” Luthes said. He huffed, turned to face out towards the plains, and shook his head. “Of course. You’ll never tell me how you really feel, even if you’re about to potentially die. You son of a bitch. I can’t even believe this.”

A coil of anger rushed through Ruhnjolf’s body. “I don’t have fucking time for this right now, Luthes. The entire damn world is depending on me stopping that thing, that godsdamned dragon, and I don’t need you getting in the way.” Ruhnjolf said and gestured wildly towards the sky.

Then he straightened up and walked towards Odahviing. “Goodbye, Luthes,” Ruhnjolf said. He turned to the dragon. “I’m ready to go to Sovngarde.”

As Ruhnjolf mounted Odahviing’s back, Luthes rushed forward and launched one last insult towards him. “By the way, you look like a fucking mountain troll, anyway. Don’t know what business I had sleeping with you in the first place.”

Ruhnjolf was too hurt by the look of pain and heartbreak on Luthes’s face—his mouth was pressed into a thin line, and his eyes were downcast and weary—to fire back. As Odahviing flapped his wings and took to the skies, Ruhnjolf closed his eyes and tried to imagine anything else but the image of his own heart falling to the ground and shattering.

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Ruhnjolf had never felt more disoriented in his life than when he stepped off of Odahviing’s scaled back and onto the soft grasses of Sovngarde. The scene in front of him tilted for a moment, a dizzying sensation enhanced by the faint layer of mist rising up from the ground. Up above, the sky swirled with nebulas of purple and blue.

This was the land of his ancestors, his people. The ones he was supposed to somehow save.

He gulped and took a tentative step forward, and as he did so, he could feel vibrations beneath his feet. They started small, then grew until a steady beat wound itself through his body. It sounded like the chanting of a thousand voices, their words laced with dragon tongue and the wisdom of those who had come before him.

*Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin*  
naal ok zin los vahriin  
was dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal

(Dragonborn, Dragonborn,  
by his honor is sworn,  
to keep evil forever at bay)

Entranced, Ruhnjolf walked along the path laid out before him and soaked up the words of his ancestors. *Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin*. They filled him with something like...hope. Like power. Like strength.

From above him came an ear-shattering roar that shook the heavens and caused Ruhnjolf to stumble back. Ahead, a deceased Stormcloak soldier turned to face Ruhnjolf, his mouth hanging open in a silent scream. In less than a second, a dragon swooped down to snatch the soldier between his jaws.

“Dovahkiin. You cannot defeat me.”

That was no ancestor of Ruhnjolf’s—it was Alduin, here to bait him. Rage flooded through Ruhnjolf at the idea of the World Eater stealing the souls of his brethren for his own amusement. He brandished his sword and charged forward with as much speed as he could muster, but it was too late; Alduin had already flown away, circling overhead in a ceaseless taunt.

Panting, Ruhnjolf stopped and bent over his knees. He needed to conserve his energy going forward. This was going to be a long journey, and he couldn’t waste his time chasing down Alduin before he even made it to the Hall of Valor to find the ancient Nord heroes he’d seen in the Elder Scroll. That was exactly what Alduin wanted, for him to be defeated before he even had a chance.

As he walked, his thoughts found themselves drawn to a particularly infuriating Imperial. Luthes, confessing his love. He hated the idea of Luthes being in love with him only for Ruhnjolf to never return from fighting Alduin. The look on Luthes’s face, that expression of pure heartbreak as Ruhnjolf departed for the skies, almost convinced him to turn around and beg Odahviing to take him back to Whiterun.

He was so lost in his own racing thoughts about Luthes and the battle with Alduin—and his potential death—that he didn’t notice at first that he’d reached his destination. The Hall of Valor, which was just across a long bridge, stretched out before him in all its glory. The stories that all his Nordic family members used to tell him as a child about the beauty of Sovngarde, a place where true heroes belonged, were all true.

With shaking hands, Ruhnjolf opened the bag on his back and pulled out the Amulet of Mara that he and Luthes had exchanged all that time ago during their drunken escapades. When he had denied that the warmth he’d felt coursing through his body upon realizing their ‘mistake’ was something more. He pressed the amulet to his lips briefly.

“Gods give me strength,” he whispered. Then he stowed the amulet away and stepped onto the bridge that separated him and his destiny.

The bridge creaked at first, then gradually grew steadier as Ruhnjolf crossed the wooden planks one by one. How many heroes of his people had walked on this very bridge? The thought almost made him as dizzy as he’d been on Odahviing’s back, when they’d soared through the air at impossible speeds.

At the end of the bridge, a man at least as tall as the doors to the Hall of Valor stood before Ruhnjolf. The Dragonborn considered himself to be in pretty good shape and thought he had some decently sized muscles, but he had nothing on this man, who possessed arms the size of tree trunks and thighs that could quite possibly shatter a rock between them.

As Ruhnjolf approached, the tall man stared down at the Dragonborn as if he were something small and insignificant. “What living mortal passes through the fields of Sovngarde and seeks entrance to the Hall of Valor?” His voice was rumbling and fierce, like an earthquake building below the surface.

The words that Ruhnjolf had struggled to say since the day he discovered he was Dragonborn rolled off his tongue as if they’d meant to be spoken all along:

“I am the Dragonborn. I have come to defeat Alduin, the World Eater.”

The man broke into a slow-spreading grin, and Ruhnjolf thought he saw a glimpse of admiration in his eyes. “Ah, it has been far too long since a hero of dragon blood has come to the Hall of Valor,” he said. “I am Tsun, and it is my pleasure to welcome you into the Hall of Valor. You are the savior we have been waiting for.”

Ruhnjolf blinked a couple of times, still reeling at being called a hero by the gatekeeper to heaven. “I...thank you,” he said. He puffed up his chest, trying to seem more powerful and confident—or maybe he was just trying to make himself feel that way. “I won’t let you down.”

Without another word, Tsun stepped to the side to allow Ruhnjolf to enter the ornate doors that led to the Hall of Valor. They creaked as Ruhnjolf pushed open the heavy wood with all of his body weight and entered the home of his ancestral heroes.

He let out an involuntary gasp as he took in the sight of the hall itself, its long tables stretched along the sides with every fine food and drink imaginable. The hearth crackled with bountiful flames, and as Ruhnjolf walked past it and into the center of the hall, he could feel its warmth in every inch of his skin. Stone etchings depicting the legends of his childhood crawled up the walls and onto the impossibly high ceilings, and he felt like he could have spent an entirety just trying to absorb all of the ancient stories.

As he was busy gaping at his surroundings, a Nord with long blonde hair and a beard almost as long as the Dragonborn’s approached Ruhnjolf. He had a battle-ax strapped to his back and wore heavy-plated armor, just like Ruhnjolf’s.

“Dragonborn,” he greeted. There was a regal air about the way he spoke that made Ruhnjolf feel like he should bow. “It has been many years since we have had one of your kind. I am Ysgramor, Atmoran king and leader of the Five Hundred Companions in the great battle against the snow elves.”

“Ysgramor?” Try as he might, Ruhnjolf couldn’t contain his shock, and his jaw dropped. “*The* Ysgramor? Legendary Harbinger of the Companions?”

Ysgramor offered a wry smile in return. “Yes, I suppose some think of me that way,” he said. “I prefer to think of myself as someone who simply does what needs to be done. And you, Dragonborn, will do the same.”

Ruhnjolf barely had time to get a word in response before Ysgramor gestured towards a trio of Nords that stood in the center of the hall. “They are the ones you are searching for, Dragonborn,” he said. “The first heroes to defeat Alduin.”

As Ruhnjolf approached the trio on Ysgramor’s command, he knew he didn’t have to say anything to them. They turned, faces aglow in the faint light of Sovngarde’s spirit, and nodded at him.

A woman who had war paint slashing across her cheeks bowed in greeting. “Dragonborn. We have been waiting for you,” she said with a voice like honey and strength all at once. “We sent Alduin forward in time all those years ago. The time has come to fix our mistakes and end his reign for good.”

Once they left the Hall of Valor and emerged onto their battleground. Ruhnjolf planted his feet on the ground, trying to remain steady, and kept his head tilted towards the sky, watching, waiting, searching.

A figure darted through the sky just moments after they came out of the hall and unleashed a roar louder than anything Ruhnjolf had ever heard before. The ancient heroes began to take out their weapons and shields, brandishing swords, battle-axes, and bows, but Alduin circled overhead in an eternal taunt, refusing to land.

“Dovahkiin.” The ground rumbled as Alduin spoke. “There is no one to save you now. Not even your little guard friend.”

The anger that had been steadily thrumming through Ruhnjolf’s body began to build the longer Alduin flew circles above them and spoke to the Dragonborn. As he talked, the dragon detailed all of the horrific ways he could kill Luthes and use his soul for his own pleasure, images that sent a bolt of fear through Ruhnjolf’s heart.

This was all part of the World Eater’s game, Ruhnjolf reminded himself. He squared up his shoulders and, just like the Elder Scroll had taught him, unleashed the shout that was to be Alduin’s undoing.

“JOOR. ZAH. FRUL.”

Startled, the World Eater stopped mid-speech and spiraled down to the ground in a screech of fury to skitter across the ground, creating a storm of dirt around him. As he landed, the Nord heroes charged forward without wasting any time. Two of them stuck their swords deep into Alduin's belly, causing black blood to weep from his scales, while another stayed back and pelted his hide with arrows.

As the heroes attacked from the sides, Ruhnjolf faced the dragon head on, refusing to let his fear overrun his adrenaline. The eyes that stared back at him were just as soulless as the first time they'd met on the Throat of the World, but Ruhnjolf focused instead on the delicate patch of skin above the nose. In one swift move, he lunged towards Alduin's face and plunged his sword in between the eyes.

Alduin let out a roar of pain and thrashed around, causing Ruhnjolf to lose his grip on his broadsword. With one more shake of his head, Alduin flung Ruhnjolf across the clearing, where he skid to a stop on the dirt. Alduin stumbled forward with the sword still stuck in his face, opened his mouth, and unleashed a gust of fire headed directly for Ruhnjolf.

In later years, Ruhnjolf would recount this particular moment as the one where he was almost certain he was going to die. The flames shot towards him, and he swore he could see the end coming as he froze and couldn't find the strength to run away.

A familiar set of hands yanked Ruhnjolf by the shoulder and tossed him to the side just out of the way of the flames. Ruhnjolf looked up to see Luthes crouched on the ground beside him, holding out his hands as if ready to cast a healing spell on the burn that now marred Ruhnjolf's arm. Could it really be Luthes? Had he found a way to Sovngarde to save him from being killed?

Ruhnjolf blinked a few times. The figure next to him wasn't Luthes at all; it was one of the Nord heroes.

Even though he knew it wasn't really Luthes who had saved him, Ruhnjolf found that he wouldn't have been surprised if it really was the Imperial in the flesh. The guard had shown himself time and time again to be one of the most courageous and valiant people he'd ever fought alongside.

It was then, after Ruhnjolf watched a mirage of the man who had stuck by him save his life, that he realized a truth within himself that he'd denied for so long:

He loved Luthes—that infuriating, uptight, meddling man, yet somehow also the most compassionate and intelligent human he'd ever met—for better or for worse.

The tremors in his heart grew into a furious rhythm that drove Ruhnjolf to pull himself up off the ground and keep fighting. He knew now, more than ever, that he had to return home to Luthes—no matter what.

On unsteady feet, Ruhnjolf dragged himself off the ground and sprinted towards Alduin. The three Nord heroes had the dragon surrounded and were chipping away at his defenses. Black blood still ran down the wound in his face, where Ruhnjolf's sword stuck out. In one move, he dashed past the dragon's snout, pulled the sword out, and took cover on the side.

After Ruhnjolf retrieved his sword, Alduin broke free of his attackers and launched himself into the sky once more to taunt him.

“You may have weakened me, Dovahkiin,” he warned. “But I am stronger. I will outlast you all.”

“No,” Ruhnjolf replied in perfect dragon tongue. “I will defeat you.”

Then he raised his head towards the sky and shouted into the unyielding, purple sky: “JOOR. ZAH. FRUL.” It came out of every nerve in his body, sending shockwaves from his head all the way down to below his feet, and the force of his Thu’um rippled through the air and swept over Alduin’s circling figure.

Once more, Alduin came falling down from the sky as if dragged by an unseen force, and the ancient heroes rushed into the fray again, delivering their blows from every side. Ruhnjolf descended upon the dragon with a battle cry that would have made his ancestors proud. He dug his sword into one of his eyes—those demonic, soulless, merciless eyes—and held on tight as Alduin writhed around in agony.

Then, Alduin started to do something that Ruhnjolf never would have expected: beg.

“Dovahkiin,” he pleaded. “Dovahkiin. Please do not kill me. My kind will be without a leader if you vanish me from this world.”

Ruhnjolf pushed his sword in deeper. “The time for mercy,” he said, “has passed.”

Just a few minutes later, Alduin’s movements started to slow to a crawl, and it wasn’t long before he was no longer fighting back. The ancient heroes backed off to let Ruhnjolf finish the fight. The Dragonborn held on until Alduin drew one last shuddering breath and stilled.

Ruhnjolf extracted his sword, which was coated in dragon blood, and stumbled backwards. A sudden heaviness filled his limbs, and he found it difficult to stand upright. Then Alduin’s soul shattered into a million pieces, emitting that familiar purple light that swirled around Ruhnjolf and shot through his veins. Its power, though, was much stronger than that of the other dragon souls he’d absorbed before, and the force of it almost knocked him completely off his feet.

He’d done it. He was a hero after all.

The quiet that followed Alduin’s death was one that permeated every inch of Sovngarde. Finally, one of the Nord heroes, a man clad only in a simple robe, broke the silence.

“Dragonborn,” he said. “It was an honor to fight beside you. Will you join us for a celebratory feast in the Hall of Valor before you return to the mortal plane?”

“I would be honored,” Ruhnjolf said, “but I need some time first.”

“Of course,” the hero replied. “We understand. Join us when you are ready.”

When the Nord heroes left to return to the hall, Ruhnjolf lay down on the ground and stared up at the sky for a long while, watching the nebulae swirl around and around with the biggest grin he'd ever had on his face.

Alduin was defeated.

He could go home.

And he would see Luthes again.

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By the twelfth hour he'd been at High Hrothgar, Luthes could tell the Greybeards were getting tired of the sounds of his pacing across the stone floors. At one point, Master Arngeir had suggested he try meditating, while another monk pointedly held a finger to his lips whenever he passed by Luthes.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," he spat the fourth time he passed that particular monk. He pointed up towards the ceiling. "How would you feel if your best friend and possibly your soulmate was up there fighting the godsdamned *World Eater*, huh?"

The monk ducked his head and turned to leave.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Luthes said with a huff.

He ducked into one of the rooms down the hallway and sat down on one of the beds. It felt hard under him, as if he was sitting on top of a stone slab. Luthes combed his fingers through his hair and tried not to think too hard about Ruhnjolf fighting Alduin. Or Ruhnjolf getting hurt. Or Ruhnjolf dying and having his soul eaten by a dangerous immortal being.

The worst part of this hypothetical scenario was that the last thing Luthes would have said to the love of his life before he died made an unfavorable comparison to a troll.

As the clock struck on the thirteenth hour of his stay in High Hrothgar, the walls began to rumble under the force of distant roars, and Luthes dashed out of the back entrance to see what was going on. Outside, the clouds painted the sky a dark gray, and even darker figures flew in circles around the peak of the mountain.

Luthes dashed up the side of the mountain towards the Throat of the World, eyes stinging from the bitter cold. He didn't know if these dragons were heralding Alduin's defeat or his victory, but he didn't care; he needed to see if Ruhnjolf was alive—or die trying.

Just when he thought his hands were going to freeze and fall off, he reached the peak. Through the snow, Luthes could detect a streak of blonde hair among the falling flakes. His heart stopped as Ruhnjolf descended from Odahviing's back.

The Nord turned to face Luthes, who lunged forward and embraced him. Ruhnjolf hugged him back, and Luthes could feel the Dragonborn's shoulders sag with relief at Luthes's touch.

Luthes pulled back but kept his hands wrapped around Ruhnjolf's neck as he examined the Dragonborn's face. A vicious red slash marred his right cheek, and his eyes seemed wearier.



But they also seemed more tender as he looked back at Luthes.

“You’re alive,” Luthes said and reached up to place his hand on Ruhnjolf’s cheek. The faint glow of his healing magic emanated from his hand as he worked to stitch up the wound.

“Is...is Alduin gone?”

“He’s dead. He’s gone, and I...I did it. I’m a hero,” he said. “No, that’s not right—we did it. Together. By the Nine, I couldn’t have done this without you.” His mouth began to spread into a grin, and Luthes couldn’t help but smile along with him.

Ruhnjolf stepped back to place some distance between them and then reached into his bag with deliberate slowness. He emerged with an amulet dangling from his fingertips. Luthes’s breath halted for a moment. It couldn’t be...

Ruhnjolf stepped forward to close the gap and slip the amulet over Luthes’s head. Although the necklace was light, it felt to Luthes as if it held an enormous amount of weight, landing against his chest like a hammer.

“Are you sure?” Luthes said, his words almost lost to the bitter winds and dragon cries around them. He held the amulet up. “About this?”

Ruhnjolf held his gaze silently for a moment, those storm-filled blue eyes nothing but determined and loving. “I thought I was going to lose you up there,” he said as he pointed up towards Sovngarde. “Never again.”

Luthes responded by placing his hands on Ruhnjolf’s shoulders and yanking him down to lock lips, the metal of the Dragonborn’s armor clanking against his own armor as they collided. He felt as though he was floating, far above the mountains and into the heavens where Ruhnjolf had just returned from.

Ruhnjolf kept one arm behind his back as they kissed and fiddled with his bag again. Confused, Luthes pulled away and frowned. Calmly, coolly, Ruhnjolf moved his arm back in front of him and revealed an apple in his hand to take a bite out of it.

“Oh for gods’ sake, Ruhnjolf,” Luthes said, throwing his hands up into the air. His eyes rolled up towards the sky. “Where did you get that from?”

Ruhnjolf just grinned and bit into the apple again. “Don’t think you want to know that one.”

“You bastard,” he said as he shoved Ruhnjolf. “You’re lucky I like you now, otherwise you’d definitely be going to jail this time.”

“You couldn’t even catch me the first time,” Ruhnjolf said and planted a kiss on Luthes’s cheek. He brushed his thumb over the side of the Imperial’s cheek and jaw, causing goosebumps to sprout on the skin there. “What makes you think you’d be so lucky the second go-around?”

Luthes let out a chuckle that slowly built into a belly laugh and gently swatted at Ruhnjolf’s arm before reaching down and taking the Nord’s free hand—the one not holding the stolen

apple—in his. Then, together, they descended down from the Throat of the World as dragons swirled overhead, to where the promise of a new day awaited them.

**The end.**

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and making it to the end of this silly fic and ship idea I dreamed up all those months ago. It's been awesome to bring my love of Skyrim to such a fun project. It was an absolute blast work on from start to finish, and I really appreciate each and every one of you who took the time to read. If you have any feedback, I'd love to hear it. Otherwise, thanks for checking out my work and I hope you enjoyed the story!

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