

Ake's Backstory

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You walk into the tavern, and amidst the hubbub and general unruliness of the place, you see a Nordic man wearing dragon-bone armor and a sword that gives off a bluish light. Staring intently into his mug, he seems completely unperturbed by the din around him. His white-and-gray hair obscures some of his face, but what you can see makes him look to be younger than his hair would have made you guess. Curious, you approach him.

"Is this seat taken?" you ask.

He glances over at you, quickly sizing you up, and indicates that the seat is free. You sit next to him and order an ale.

"I don't think I've seen you around here before," you say to him as your ale arrives. "What brings you to town?" You turn your body to look at him inquisitively, leaning on the bar with one arm.

"Oh, just passing through," he replies.

Something in his eyes, a faint spark of eagerness, piques your interest.

"Oh? Where to?" you ask, lifting the mug of ale to your lips and taking a deep draught.

He turns his head and regards you with a wry smile. "Curious one, aren't you?" he asks.

You shrug. "Not much to do in a small town like this one," you reply. "And strangers make for good conversation."

The man chuckles and turns to face you. "I'm Ake," he says, extending his hand.

You grin, shake his and warmly, and introduce yourself.

"So, where to?" you ask again, now that the introductions are over.

"Going to see an old friend," he replies, smiling to himself. He looks at you and frowns. "How about you?"

"Oh, I live here," you say with another shrug. "The tavern is a good place to meet interesting people and pass the time. Say," you add, a thought coming to your mind, "You look like an interesting person. If you're here for the night anyway, how about telling me about yourself? Provide my entertainment for the evening?"

Ake laughs and shakes his head. "You're pretty incorrigible," he says, "But all right. It's not like I have anything else to do tonight. What do you want to know?"

You brighten and consider your question. "Well, let's start off with the basics," you say at last. "What do you do?" You eye his sword. "Something involving fighting, I'd guess?"

He nods. "I'm a bounty-hunter," he says.

Seeing your interest in his weapon, he takes his sword off his back and holds it out for you to feel. It's amazingly sharp, and on closer inspection, you see that it's covered in fine scrollwork and ancient runes in a language you don't recognize. You frown curiously.

"What language is that?" you ask.

"Dovahzul," he replies.

You frown and squint. That word sounds familiar, but you're not sure why. You look at him helplessly.

"Dragon-tongue," he explains.

"Oh! Right," you say, suddenly frowning. "Are you a dragon-born?"

He glances discreetly from side to side and nods. Your face lights up.

"Wow, that's awesome!" you beam, but your enthusiasm is cut short when he puts his hands up to quiet you.

"I don't like to advertise that," he says under his breath.

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You nod slowly. "Oh, okay," you say, lowering your voice. "Sorry! It's just not every day that a dragon-born comes through these parts!"

He smiles and nods. "I'm here looking for the last word of a Thu'um, an ancient dragon shout," he says. "I heard that it's supposed to be nearby, and the friend I'm going to see says he knows where it is."

But you're only half-listening. Wow, a dragon-born! Here!

"So where did you grow up?" you blurt. "What was it like?"

Ake looks at you in surprise, taken aback at the impromptu question. "That's a long story," he says.

You signal for another round of ales for yourself and your new friend. "I've got all the time in the world," you say.

He blows air out through puffed cheeks. "Hmm, where to begin," he murmurs, running his hand through his hair. "Well, uh, I was born and raised just outside of Solitude. My mother—rest her soul—was Lady Lovani."

You nearly spit-take at hearing the name. "Lady Lovani? The merchant?"

He nods.

"Really wealthy? And she was a...what was it, a sorceress, witch, something?"

"She was a mage," he says, nodding again.

You frown. "Something happened to her, right? She—she's not around anymore?" you say uncertainly.

He sighs. "She's dead," he says somberly. "She was accused of funding the Stormcloaks and executed."

You put your mug down slowly. "I'm—I'm sorry," you say.

He shrugs. "Not much to be done about it now," he says. "At least I got the bastards who set her up."

"Oh?" you ask, glad for the change of topic and curious.

"It took a while, but I finally hunted them all down. I poisoned the first one's wine and then watched him slowly expire. It was the best kind of death for him: slow and agonizing."

You glance at him out of the corner of your eye and exaggeratedly cover your mug and move it away from him. He laughs.

"Not to worry, my friend," he says, patting you on the shoulder. "Those wretches had it coming. They left me orphaned when my father went to try to save my mother."

You nod slowly, pursing your lips. "But what about the others?" you ask.

"The second one I had executed in much the same way he had my mother executed: I spread some lies about him. By then, I was well-known and had enough clout to denounce him publicly."

"Well-known?" you ask. "Are you famous?"

He smiles. "I used to be," he says, "Before I stepped out of the limelight. It gets...tiring."

He takes a big swig of his beer as you look at him curiously.

"Maybe we'll talk about that a bit later," he says. "Anyway, the third one had an 'accident.'" He smiles cruelly. "One should always be careful to avoid tiger pits."

You cringe and take a swig of your beer.

"Heh, I'm glad I'm not on your bad side!" you joke.

He nods. "It's best not to cross me or those I care about," he says, squeezing the grip of his sword. "I'm not afraid of much, and I'm a vindictive bastard," he chuckles.

You smile, but something's bothering you. "You said your father died trying to save your mother," you say. "Who was he? What did he do?"

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"Aevarak was my father. He was a bounty hunter, too," Ake replies. "He taught me a lot of what I know. My childhood days were spent adventuring with him and learning to sword-fight—I was *really* good with one-handed weapons—and still am. My nights were spent with Earl, my Breton tutor." He smiles wistfully. "I'd say that between the two of them, I had a pretty first-rate education."

He stares off into space, and you look at him inquiringly, raising your eyebrows.

"Uh, Ake?" you ask, waving your hand in front of his face. "Ake?"

He comes to with a start.

"Sorry," he apologizes. "I was just remembering the trips to the ocean, playing hide-and-seek with my parents in the dense forest around our home..." he trails off and then shakes his head sadly. "I lived a mighty privileged life," he says, smiling wanly.

You nod and pat his arm. "I'm sorry for your loss," you say, "But you *seem* to be mostly all right now, right?"

He nods thoughtfully. "Yeah, it's possible I might never have become who I am today if it weren't for those conspirators.

"When did it happen?" you ask.

"When I was 16," he replies. "I'll never forget it: it was a sunny day, and my mom and I were outside, enjoying the weather. We suddenly heard the gallop of horses, and we both stood up to see what was happening. Imperial Legion soldiers came and seized her without a word as to why. It took my father three days just to figure out what she was accused of."

As he speaks, Ake's face begins to look angrier and angrier, and his grip tightens on his mug.

"It all happened too fast. They set the date of her execution for two days later. There was no time for us to prepare a legal defense, and my father...did what my father does best—went on an adventure."

He sighs and takes a gulp from his mug, draining it, and you hurriedly request another one for him.

"One man versus the entire Imperial Legion? He must have been out of his mind. Love will do that, I guess," he says, shaking his head. "After that, I had to flee. The conspirators who planned it intended to take Lovani Manor for themselves, and they came in the day after my father's death and began killing anyone they could find. Earl narrowly escaped and returned to High Rock—thank heavens. However, High Rock would not have had me, and I had to live on the run for quite some time before I ran into the Companions."

"Companions," you murmur, frowning and annoyed. You *know* that term, but it's...escaping you right now. "Look, I'm sorry," you apologize. "Would you refresh my memory? It seems like I ought to know who they are."

Ake chuckles and raises his eyebrows incredulously. "The Companions?" he says, "Skyrim's warrior guild?"

"Oh!" you laugh. "Duh!" You glance at your empty cup and signal for another one. "Not enough ale," you explain sheepishly.

Ake grins and shakes his head, rolling his eyes. "Thanks to my father, I was pretty skilled with a blade, and they immediately took a liking to me. They invited me to live with them in Jorrvaskr, where I trained until I was 21."

"And is that where you learned dragon-tongue?" you ask.

"No," he says, shaking his head. "That was all Earl—well, at first, anyway. He was pretty excited that I picked up on it so well." He chuckles. "I guess it makes sense now, being dragon-born and all."

You frown. "But if you were a promising student, couldn't he have put in a good word for you at High Rock?"

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Ake shrugs and puts his hands up helplessly. "Times were different," he says. "Things were tenser between the Nords and Bretons than they are now. In any case, he just told me he couldn't, and so I struck out on my own."

You nod and eagerly dive into your next ale, looking at him encouragingly.

"I trained with the Companions for several years, and then when I was 21, I got hold of my father's old journal. It kinda reminded me who I was, you know? And I have to admit, I wasn't too keen on becoming a werewolf."

Now you *do* spit-take. "Werewolf?!" you gasp. "What do you mean?"

Ake laughs. "The Companions have an inner circle—their leadership—appropriately named 'The Circle.' They wanted me to join and mentor the new guild members, but each Circle member has to voluntarily get infected with lycanthropy as a pledge of allegiance. I had been considering it, but it never really felt *right* to me. And when I found my father's journal and saw all of his exploits, well...it made it a done deal."

You raise your eyebrows. "Wow, having to become a werewolf to become a member? What's next? The plague?"

You and he both laugh, and he shakes his head and runs his hand through his hair as you take another drink of your ale. As he pulls back his bangs, you see a scar over his right eye.

"No, no plague," he says, continuing, "But they were kinda upset when I told them I wasn't interested. They got over it—we're practically brothers in honor, after all—but things were a little tense at first. Fortunately, I got my first bounty-hunting gig shortly thereafter, and it kinda put an end to it. I was off picking up bounties and wasn't around to talk about it." He leans forward, his face suddenly lighting up. "Incidentally, that first hunt was what put me on the trail of the conspirators who set up my mom. It turned out to be a real stroke of Providence. I slowly pieced together the clues as I collected more bounties. I made a bit of a name for myself, and the bounties just kept rolling in. Not all of them were directly related to my parents, but they did all come with hefty sums of money. I eventually knew everything I needed to know, and, well, the rest is history."

"That's quite the story!" you say, impressed and nodding. You gesture to his face with your finger. "Hey, uh, what's that scar?"

Ake snorts. "The one over my eye? Oh, that's another long story."

You give him a significant look, and he laughs.

"That was actually when I realized I was a dragon-born," he said. "Not long after I finally avenged my parents' death, I was walking along a road when I heard a scream from someone behind me, turned, and saw a massive dragon swooping down after me."

Your jaw drops. "A dragon?! After you? But why?"

He held up his hands helplessly. "I don't know," he replied. "I assume he knew I was a dragon-born before I did. Had he not attacked me, I probably would still be none the wiser. In short, *they* started this!" He slammed his fist on the bar, but his eyes twinkled with mirth. "I dodged, and the dragon swooped back in after me. Save for the woman who screamed, there was nobody around, and so I was pretty much on my own. I fought like my life depended on it—I don't know that I've ever fought that hard again, not even when..."

He trails off, shakes his head, and starts again. "I fought hard, is all I meant to say," he says.

You frown but let it go—for now—this guy really *is* interesting, and he's definitely worth the ales you're buying him. Speaking of which, you flag down the bartender and request another round.

"You were saying?" you prompt.

"Oh, yes," Ake replies, continuing. "So, this dragon comes after me, and I'm just hacking and slashing at it the best I can—but come on, it's a freaking *dragon*! I'd never even *seen* a dragon before that. But anyway, he keeps coming at me, biting at me, clawing me. He even picked me up and dropped me from quite a height. The fall broke both my legs, and I was beginning to think, 'This is it. *This* is how I die: torn

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to death by a dragon while minding my own business.” He snorts and laughs. “But I guess it wasn’t my time to go. I’m lying there, can’t get up, and the dragon swoops again. I take what I think will be my last breath and find myself glad that at least I managed to avenge my parents *before* I died. But then I see it: an opening in the dragon’s armor. I figure there’s no harm in trying. I’m gonna die if I do nothing, and there’s a hint of a chance I might live if I succeed. So as the dragon swoops in, aiming to disembowel me, I thrust my sword up between those two scales as hard as I can and then hang on for dear life. The dragon crashes to the ground, almost crushing me, and then begins rolling end-over-end, with me still hanging onto my sword like an idiot. Damn thing broke almost every bone in my body!”

He holds up a finger, requesting a moment while he takes a drink to moisten his dry mouth. Too much story-telling, perhaps!

“Anyway, the damn thing finally comes to a stop, and I’m just lying there on my back, still holding my sword, or, rather, the hilt of it; the blade broke off when the dragon stopped. I think to myself, ‘Okay, as ways to die go, this one was pretty awesome.’ Then I close my eyes—I mean, come on: my body is practically a bag of organs at this point; there’s *no* way I’m gonna survive—but then I realize I’m not in pain. Actually, I feel kinda *good*. I think I’m already dead and open my eyes. The sword hilt is still there, and so is the dragon—or rather, his skeleton—but I’m not dead.”

He shook his head and took another drink.

“Some men from the village where the woman screamed came rushing up and thanked me for slaying the dragon. They said it was a wonder I wasn’t dead—believe me, I was thinking the same thing!—and carried me to a healer. The healer said that as best he could tell, I’d absorbed the dragon’s soul, and that had kept me alive—incidentally, that’s also what caused the dragon’s corpse to dissolve, leaving only his bones. There was still a ton of work to do to get me put back together, but after several months of recovery, I was good as new. The guy was really top-notch. I’d recommend him to anybody.”

You reel at the information. “So, wow—that must have been life-changing, right? I mean, having *all* that power! Did you go nuts with it?”

He shakes his head. “No, no...it’s not like that. I mean, yeah, finding out that I was a dragon-born was really exciting, but I didn’t know anything about it. It’s not like you suddenly just *have* all this power. You have to study, travel, slay dragons, and seek out the words of the dragon shouts. It’s...not an overnight thing.”

A grin crosses your face. “Hey,” you say excitedly, “Can you do a shout right now? I mean, could you bring this whole place down if you wanted to?”

Ake laughs. “Well, yes, but then where would you go to get your entertainment?”

You purse your lips, kind of disappointed. “Oh, yeah...good point.”

He glances around and then whispers in a low voice, “Finish your ale.”

You frown, glance at the little bit left in your mug, look at him, and then shrug and finish it off.

“Act casual if anybody sees anything,” he warns.

You frown. Act casual? What’s he up to?

“*Zun*,” he whispers, the word barely audible.

The wooden mug flies from your hand and crashes against the wall. The bartender looks at you incredulously, and you gape in astonishment.

“I—I am so sorry!” you say, swallowing nervously. You’ve known Eric for decades, but he’s a *big* guy.

“If you wanted another ale, you could have just asked,” the bartender says wryly, putting another mug down in front of you. He winks and nods to you and to Ake.

Your jaw still hanging open, you turn to look at your companion, who raises his eyebrows and smirks in merriment.

“Yes,” he says, “I *could* level this place if I wanted to. But I won’t.”

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"Uh—buh—buh," you stammer. "That was...wow. Yikes!" You frown. "But, Eric—does he know you're a—a...?"

Ake glances at the bartender and gives a barely-perceptible nod. "Yes. He's part of the Companions."

You spit your ale back into the mug. "He is?"

Ake nods and smiles.

"Whoo, okay," you say. "Wow, that's a *lot* more information than I expected to find out in one night!"

Your companion grins and shrugs helplessly. "You asked!" he says.

"Yeah, I did," you say ruefully, shaking your head. "But you were saying it's not an overnight thing?"

He shakes his head. "No, it takes a long time, and I've been working on it for almost ten years now, ever since I was summoned to High Hrothgar." He leans forward and continues his story. "Word traveled fast, and right about the time I had finally healed, I received a missive from the Greybeards summoning me. The Greybeards, you may know, are a group of monks dedicated to using Thu'um for worship, and not for fighting," he adds for your benefit.

You nod, and he continues. "So off I go. The Throat of the World—where High Hrothgar is located—is right in the middle of Skyrim, and the dragon attacked me in a village near Leyawiin in southeastern Cyrodiil. But a summons from the Greybeards isn't something you want to ignore, and so off I went."

"I gotta admit, I was kinda nervous. I mean, the fact that they knew about me from all that distance away was kinda spooky, and if they were as powerful as they were said to be, I mean, if they didn't like me, it'd be pretty easy for them to just end me right then and there. But I headed out and made it to the foot of the Throat of the World a few weeks later. Now imagine me going up the Seven Thousand Steps, having *just* recovered from a dragon attack. I felt like an old man, all creaky and aching—especially with the cold!—but I finally made it to the top."

You take a drink of ale and lean forward. "So, how'd it go?" you ask.

Ake chuckles. "About what I expected," he says. "They teased me for being so out of shape and asked me if I wanted learn to put the Dovahzul I knew to use." He grins. "That was a no-brainer! Of *course* I wanted to learn that! I had been curious ever since Earl started teaching me, but he wasn't a dragon-born himself and couldn't really teach that. What he knew was useful for reading old books, not using Thu'um."

You nod understanding. "I guess the training went well?" you ask. "You certainly seem to have a lot of power if just a whisper could fling that cup from my hand!"

"It was tough," Ake admits. "They train very hard and have very strict rules. And Paarthurnax is not someone to take lightly!"

You frown. "Who?"

"Paarthurnax? The Old One?" Ake shakes his head. "You live a very closeted life, my friend," he says, patting your shoulder. "He's a dragon and the leader of the Greybeards."

"Oh!" you gasp, suddenly confused. "But—aren't you trying to *kill* dragons?"

Ake grows silent, brooding. You frown and look at him uncertainly. "I—did I say something wrong?" you ask.

Ake comes to and shakes his head. "No, just—the notion of killing Paarthurnax is reprehensible to me," he says.

"But I didn't say you *should* kill him," you protest.

He puts his hand up conciliatorily. "I know. I'm not saying you did, but...*someone* did at one point."

You frown. "Why would you kill the leader of the group that trained you?"

Ake scoffs. "Exactly!" he agrees, becoming animated. "He's the one who *taught* mankind how to use the Thu'um! Why would I kill him?"

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"But why would someone ask you to, then?" you ask.

"The Blades—a powerful secret network of spies and protectors of dragon-born—found out that he was Alduin's lieutenant during the Dragon War," Ake murmurs. "They said that he committed many atrocities—including killing many, many men, women, and children—and must be brought to justice." He shakes his head. "But he turned on Alduin, and that's when he taught us how to use the dragons' own words against them. We could not have won the war if it weren't for him. The Blades see it differently; they say that while helping us is commendable, he should still be put to death for his past crimes." He sighs. "I can see both sides, I have to admit, and because I can't see him as *just* a villain, I can't bring myself to kill him, even if I do have the power to do it."

You raise your eyebrows in surprise. "Mighty big words, aren't those?" you chide him. "I mean, if he's that powerful, what makes you think you can take him on?"

Ake smirks wryly. "Because I defeated Alduin."

You put your mug down in disbelief and wrestle with the idea. Finally, you shake your head.

"Well, I wanted a good story," you say at last with a wry grin, "But here all this time, I thought it was a *true* story! You sure do spin a good yarn!"

Ake frowns and cocks his head at you. "It is a true story," he replies slowly.

You raise your eyebrows at him skeptically. "Really? *You* single-handedly defeated Alduin the World-Eater?"

Ake shakes his head emphatically. "No, not single-handedly! Gormlaith, Felldir, and Hakon all helped bring him down." He chuckles. "No, *no* mortal could take him down alone!"

"Whatever you say," you tell him, unconvinced. "But hey, it's a good story anyway!" you say, clapping him on the shoulder.

Ake purses his lips. "I don't *have* to prove myself," he says thoughtfully, "And it would be wise if I didn't. However, I am nothing if not honest, and I'll not be dishonored." He stands and beckons for you to follow him.

You feel like you probably could have done without the last ale as you unsteadily get to your feet, but your indefatigable curiosity is once again burning, and you follow him outside.

"Is this the part where you leave me for dead?" you ask, half-joking.

Ake chuckles. "No," he says. "This is the part where I convince you that I'm telling the truth. *Hun.*"

A mist appears out of nowhere and quickly coalesces into the form of a Nordic woman, stoutly built, and dressed in armor. You jump back and look at her quizzically. Ake turns to you.

"You may not have heard of me," he says, "But I'll *bet* you've heard of her."

"What is this, Ake?" she demands, looking around. "Who is this?"

"Just bear with me," Ake says to the misty woman. "What's your name?"

"Gormlaith Golden-Hilt," she says, looking at him quizzically. "Did you forget?"

Ake laughs as your jaw drops.

"No. I know I was always bad with names, but I just wanted to show *this* one"—he gestures to you—"that I'm not just spinning yarns."

The stout woman raises an eyebrow, crosses her arms, and glares at him. "Really? You summoned me to prove a point?" She rolls her eyes. "Goodbye, Ake," she says as she began to vanish.

"Bye, sweetie!" Ake replies, grinning and waving as she disappears.

He turns to you. "Convinced?" he asks.

Your jaw is still hanging open, and you consciously close it as you nod. "Uh, huh."

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He winks. "Good!" he says as you both go back inside.

"So, there you have it," Ake says in conclusion as you both settle down with your ales—freshly refilled by Eric. "I sided with Paarthurnax and keep a low profile so that people won't bother me constantly about saving the world. Nowadays, I slay dragons on occasion for fun and profit—it pays really well—and because I need their souls to help me learn the rest of the Thu'um."

You shake your head. "That *is* quite the story," you say, "But wait: if you're super-famous and all that, how are you still single? Surely the ladies must be lining up around the block for such an eligible bachelor as yourself?"

Ake spits his ale back into his cup abruptly, blushing fiercely. "I—erm," he stammers, "I'm not into the ladies."

You nod slowly. "Oh—you're...gay?"

He nods.

You shrug and clap him on the shoulder. "All the more power to ya!" you say, taking another drink.

You stop, consider your mug, and hold it up. "Here's to you," you say.

"Here's to good company," Ake replies, smiling and lifting his cup.

You clink mugs and both take a big drink just as you hear a rooster crow outside.

"Oh, wow," Ake says, "Is it really dawn already?"

You glance out the window and blink in amazement.

"Yeah, I guess it is," you say, turning back to him.

You both chuckle.

"Well, I didn't mean to talk your ear off all night," Ake replies apologetically. He reaches into his pouch to grab some coins. "Here, you've been quite the listener."

You recoil and shake your head vigorously. "Ake, no! You've made my night, and I've been the one ordering all the drinks! It's the least I can do to treat an out-of-towner!"

"What are you guys arguing about?" Eric asks, coming over. "It's on the house!"

You both stare at the bartender. He winks and walks off.

"Well, all right, then!" Ake laughs, extending his hand. "It was nice meeting you. I've got to get on my way."

"You, too, Ake," you say, shaking his hand warmly. "Feel free to talk my ear off anytime! I'd love to hear how you killed Alduin."

"Maybe on my way back through," Ake laughs, "but that's a long story!"

You watch him walk up the road. He's mighty unassuming for having taken down Alduin. But as you down the last of your ale, you think to yourself that you can't wait for him to come back through and tell you another tale.