The One from the End of the World

by kellym1410

Summary

An outsider arrives on the shores of Skyrim and sees a world where there are only bad choices and mixed outcomes. She will fall so fast and so far, and she will be called to rise three times to save a world that is not her own.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The year was 276 of the Third Era, and Uriel Septim V and his expeditionary forces had crossed the sea and conquered the island of Cathnoquey, a small landmass situated between the continent of Tamriel and the mysterious lands of Akavir, which the Emperor desired to conquer in his efforts to live up to the legacy of the great Tiber Septim. Cathnoquey, upon discovery, was seen as more of a convenience than a prize, as it was previously uninhabited and could hold military and colonial forces for a brief time before they departed to the ancient land of the dragons. To that end, the Emperor dispatched a small group of Bretons and Nords, with the stated goal that they would make the island livable before the races of Men crossed the Padomaic Ocean.

On the whole, this quest proved to be rather manageable for these settlers. The land, while not as fertile as the province of Cyrodiil, supported a few staple crops and livestock well enough to support this new population. The weather was mild and forest at the center of the island offered decent enough hunting. An ambitious rider could cover the entire perimeter of Cathnoquey in less than three quarters of a day, meaning that they were not spread too thin across the island, and no one was ever too far from the longhouse at the center, where those determined to lead the community gathered.

It was this last point that caused the most definitive change in the settlers and their descendents. It was assumed upon their landing on these new shores that this island was to be a temporary home for them, and the Bretons would return to High Rock and the Nords to Skyrim upon the success of the conquest of Akavir. Thusly, for the first few years of this experiment, the two groups kept to themselves, often refusing to interact for everything but the most serious situations. However, the disaster at Ionith and the death of Uriel V proved that it would be a very long time before Cathnoquey served its stated purpose in the conquering the lands to the East, if ever. Although the Empire never formally gave up on this prospect, for those left on the island, the idea of returning to Tamriel quietly morphed from expectation, to possibility, to dream, to absurdity. Though it was no one’s intention at the start of this project, Cathnoquey had become their home. Alongside this realization, the bonds that had restrained their two communities gradually fell away. As generations passed and families intermixed, Cathnoquey brought forth something Tamriel had never seen: a group of people that were not recognizable as entirely Nord or entirely Breton, while possessing the appearance and values of both groups. While the island did have a ship capable of crossing the ocean, it did so infrequently, only a few times a year, causing the politics of Tamriel to pass by the island like a distant dream as Nirn spun on for them.

On the side of faith, both original groups brought their original pantheons of deities with them. However, as time joined the two races, those on the island came to the agreement that tolerance towards worship of any and all of the gods was preferable to all. This attitude was spurred on by the Nordic belief that worship should be determined solely by the practitioners and gods, and not by outside influences. The people on Cathnoquey revered different permutations of the pantheons, but the end result saw an unquestioned devotion to Akatosh and Talos specifically. Those with greater ties to their past in High Rock initially resisted this invasion of Nord theology, but everyone on the island acknowledged that the success achieved on Cathnoquey was ensured not by magic, but by the cooperation of men, and so the Ninth Divine became an undisputed part of the island’s culture. Previous generations on Cathnoquey left behind statues of these two figures for their successors, and those on the island grew up with reminders of the Tamriel they had left behind, and the land of the dragons where they would never go.

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The year is 181 of the Fourth Era, and the Emperor of Tamriel, Titus Mede II, elected to take a small delegation to Cathnoquey to observe the living results of Uriel V’s journey to Akavir. To the outside observer, it was not entirely clear as to why this voyage was taken at this moment in time. Some suspected it was to take the Emperor’s mind off of Hammerfell surpassing the Imperial Legion, as it was able to drive the Aldmeri Dominion back from their lands. Others believed the rational was the same, but the crisis that Mede needed a distraction from was instead the uprising started by Ulfric Stormcloak in the Province of Skyrim.

Regardless of the reason, the people of Cathnoquey are delighted and enraptured by the visit, even if some of the more bitter among them remarked behind closed doors that this new dynasty is a mere shadow of the Septim line. When the leaders of the community lined up to receive the Emperor, a five-year-old girl was among them, bearing a basket of flowers and fruits in her arms. When Mede approached her, she held the basket up to him.

“Your Majesty, here are some gifts from our island to help you remember your time here.” Even though she had spent hours rehearsing this encounter with her parents beforehand, her delivery of the line sounded nervous and rushed. However, the smile the Emperor gave her was genuine, and he bent down to meet her eyes as he received the basket.

“Thank you, my daughter. Will you tell me your name?” After the toddler had introduced herself, Mede shook her hand and replied, “Well, it was very nice to meet you. I appreciate you welcoming me to your island.” As he moved to to approach the next person in the receiving line, the small voice piped up once more.

“Will you come and visit again?” This question went off of the script for the carefully planned encounter, and warranted some nervous laughter from the crowd present. However, Mede returned to the girl and smiled, replying, “Perhaps I will name a ship for you and return to Cathnoquey. Would you like that?” The girl nodded enthusiastically, and many smiles were had by those gathered. The Emperor moved along and his stay on the island continued as planned.

A few days later the Emperor sailed back to Tamriel, and commissioned work on his new ship. Unfortunately, many things were rotten in the province of Cyrodiil, and Mede never seemed to have time cross the sea and keep his promise to the girl from Cathnoquey. He always felt a nagging sense of guilt whenever he saw the ship docked, even though he knew that he would never see Cathnoquey, or that girl, the one from the edge of world, again.
The Day Everything Changes

Chapter Notes

As the sun rises twenty years later, a new day dawns that will change the course of all things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The year was 201, and Katariah was incandescently happy. By all accounts, this was the day that her entire life had been building towards, and from it she could move forward with one purpose and one direction. The last rite of passage for every adult on Cathnoquey was to hear their future from their local prophet, Ursula. At twenty-five years old, Katariah was a decidedly late-bloomer in receiving this ceremony, and had been prematurely welcomed to join the smiths and warriors of the island in order to give some meaning to her earlier days. Additionally, the death of her parents further motivated the island as a whole to adopt this child that had been left behind by tragic circumstances.

But no matter, thought Katariah, For by tomorrow, I will have my whole future before me. After hearing what her life had in store for her, Katariah could begin living as her own person, with a home, family, and a sense of belonging.

Unfortunately for her and her sense of impatience, her meeting with Ursula in front of Cathnoquey’s leaders was a whole ten hours away. Feeling anticipation mixed with fear in her stomach, Katariah scarfed down her breakfast and began her daily routine.

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Half a world away, a man rode alone towards the gates of Solitude, feeling that he carried the weight of his people on his back.

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For a people that had no real risk of entering a conflict, those on Cathnoquey truly enjoyed weaponry and fighting. While everyone agreed in principle that they should be ready for any danger that could come across the horizon, in actuality, this was purely a form of entertainment. From morning to noon, Katariah repaired weapons, shot at practice targets, and taught the children of the island how to swing a blade without falling over.
Her favorite part of her day was duelling with Liselle.

Liselle and Katariah had always been as close as sisters for their entire lives. When Katariah’s parents died, it was Liselle’s family that welcomed her under their roof, and when Liselle received her destiny from Ursula, Katariah followed her into her new home. On the island, it was Liselle’s role to serve as a crew member on the ship that crossed from Cathnoquey to Tamriel. Whenever Liselle left, Katariah felt the loneliness of her circumstances crushing her, but when she returned, she brought with her stories of the continent of the west, and of all its dramas and songs.

Bearing a sword and standing across from Liselle, Katariah saw all of her own faults in stark relief. Where Katariah saw every part of her being drawn apart by fears and anxieties, Liselle acted as though she commanded every aspect of her being and directed it towards whatever she desired. With her height and fair face, she could expect to control every situation that she walked into. However, Liselle’s kindness towards Katariah had left the smaller woman with no cause to resent her. Instead, Katariah shadowed Liselle, praying to whatever gods were listening that some of Liselle’s qualities would become apparent in her own actions.

“Put your weight into your attacks!”

One of these qualities was being a better warrior.

“Mind your eyes, Katariah! You are far too easy to read.”

It wasn’t that she was bad at weilding a weapon. In reality, she was the second-best fighter on Cathnoquey and had beaten Liselle a few times before this match.

“Watch the distance between us!”

It was just that Liselle was consistently better. This assessment of their abilities was confirmed when a sweep of Liselle’s ebony sword knocked Katariah off of her feet and onto her back, her steel sword clattering to the ground next to her.
“Jarl Ulfric! Welcome to the Blue Palace! Are you here to speak to my husband?”

“Yes, Lady Elisif. If you would, please escort me to High King Torygg.”

“Where is your mind today, Kat? You seemed half of a world away.”

After picking Katariah up off of the arena floor, the two warriors were sitting on one of the cliffs surrounding the island.

“I’m just worried about tonight, that’s all,” said the smaller brunette with a grimace on her face. She occupied her hands and avoided her friend’s concerned eyes by picking up pebbles and throwing them into the sea below them.

“Katariah.” When she attempted to turn away, Liselle spoke again and put her hands on both of her friend’s arms, “Look at me, sister, and listen to what I have to say: Ursula’s words this evening have no power over you or your future.” Hearing Katariah sigh, she continued, “I’m serious about this. Your destiny is yours alone. Personally, I think that Ursula’s abilities are more fancy than reality” Liselle’s eyes grew uncharacteristically distant as she looked out over the ocean. “Sometimes I wish I could whisk you away, and take you with me on one my voyages to Tamriel, and we could start our lives anew over there. We could be free of all of this nonsense and walk our own path”

From the outside the throne room, one could at first hear a few quietly spoken words. Then came a Shout like thunder, the sound of gasp as the air left the High King’s lungs, the sound of a steel sword clattering to the ground, and finally shocked silence as still as death.

“Don’t be silly, Liselle,” Katariah said, resting her head on Liselle’s shoulder. “No one leaves Cathnoquey forever.”
Elisif’s scream’s reached Ulfric’s ears as he approached the doors of the Blue Palace, and he broke into a full sprint as he entered the streets of Solitude, hoping to reach the city gate before the city guard mobilized.

After her conversation with Liselle, Katariah chose to spend her remaining hours as a child practicing her limited skills in the arcane arts with some of the island’s mages, and then stalking some unfortunate deer in the island’s forest. She and everyone she interacted with knew that she was just burning time before the sun sank below the horizon.

Talos must be watching over me, Ulfric mused as he reached the gate, for not a single arrow had struck him and Roggvir remained true enough in his conviction to help him escape. As the gate slammed behind him, he knew that nothing would be the same ever again.

Akatosh, guide me and steady my heart, Katariah prayed as she approached the Longhouse. Taking a few deep breaths, she stepped inside. As the wooden doors closed behind her, she knew that nothing would be the same again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was so much fun to write, so I hope you all enjoy!
False and True

Chapter Summary

In which two visions of a future are presented.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Katariah stepped inside the longhouse, she felt the eyes of everyone on her. At the center, she saw their leader, Roedan, called the Old, rise to greet her. “Welcome, Katariah. We are glad to count you among our number. Ursula has called us all here this night, as it is time to see what the gods have in store for your life.” At this cue, the tiny old woman sitting to Roedan’s right stood and crossed the room to the empty gulf at the center where the younger woman waited. In these last few seconds, Katariah tried to catch Liselle’s gaze for one last hint of strength, but she could not find her in the crowd.

The gods had not blessed Katariah with height but they had really withheld that gift from Ursula, as her silver-crowned head barely reached the other woman’s shoulder. “Come, child, and let me look into your destiny,” said Ursula, taking both of Katariah’s hands in her’s. The prophet’s eyes widened for a moment, but she then smiled gently. “I see nothing but happiness for you, Katariah. There is something like a wolf about your soul, and so you shall guide the warriors on this island.” She then dropped the girl’s hands, indicating to everyone that her words were at an end.

As the crowd dispersed, Katariah shook the hands of several people congratulating her on her future, and watched as everyone dispersed and returned to their families. Once alone again, Katariah found herself in a state of profound anticlimax. She didn’t know what she expected before this night, but being shuffled into a position where she was clearly second best was not it. While she knew that the low circumstances of her birth did not entitle her to some grand destiny, the treacherous part of her brain had hoped it all the same. Katariah saw no recourse for this evening except to sneak into the longhouse kitchen, siphon off some mead, and spend the evening drinking with Liselle.

Even though she moved as quietly as possible, a wiry arm with the force of iron grabbed her and pushed her to the edge of longhouse. Once again, Katariah found herself face to face with Ursula. But this time, an energy seemed to possess the old woman’s eyes as they darted over the younger’s face.

“Ask me three questions.”
“What in all of Oblivion is going on?”

“You must know the truth of what is to come. Ask me three questions so that you might prepare yourself.”

Katariah had no idea what this behavior meant, and did not want to risk addling the most respected member of their community further by questioning what could be a delusion. She felt that she had no other option but to follow the script that Ursula had given her.

“What is to become of me?”

“You will fall so far, but fly further than can be spoken. In defense of us all, you will be called to rise three times. For the first two challenges, you must stand alone. For the third, you must stand alongside your allies or face devastating defeat. While I see a wolf, something else overshadows it, and it carries power, and terror, and all of time in its being.”

“Who will I spend my life with?”

“You will find friends just as easily as you find enemies. However, there is one in particular, he will see you at your lowest, and he will desire you as you become his equal, and then love you as you surpass him in power. Together, you both could build everything anew, or you could tear down all that we have achieved.”

“Will I ever leave Cathnoquey?”

Katariah watched as the manic nature of Ursula’s gaze left, replaced by deep sadness.

“My dear, we will all leave Cathnoquey. Now go home, enjoy what time you have left, for danger crosses the horizon.”

The prophet then turned on her heel and left the now-adult with her swirling thoughts.

As she returned to Liselle’s home, Katariah made a choice to withhold this information from her closest friend until she knew what to make of it herself. After this long day, she did not believe she
could handle any more looks of concern, or worse, having Liselle doubt her own sanity. However, she did not expect the pain in her heart as she told her friend that she was fine and wished her a good night. It was the first time she had ever withheld information from Liselle, and in Katariah’s mind, this was tantamount to an outright lie.

As complete darkness of night fell over Cathnoquey, and Katariah found uneasy sleep, gold sails approached the shores of the island.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed!! Some new players are entering the fray in the coming chapters, so please comment with thoughts, suggestions, recipe ideas, whatever you like!
The Children of Time

Chapter Summary

Katariah does not have dreams of what has been or what is to come. Instead, she sees what could have been, and now must never be.

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in one night, this is simply craziness!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As Katariah slept, she had the same dream that had danced in her mind since she was a child.

She found herself standing on a cliff, surrounded by figures she had never seen before. Yet she recognized them with the same certainty that she would recognize her own face reflected in glass in front of her. At the same moment, she knew that she and these people could never, would never, should never meet in the land beyond dreams.

A green-scaled man she knows from her books to be something called “Argonian” dressed in the robes of a mage takes her right hand and says to her, “My skills are yours.” A Nord woman with hair the color of umber and haunted eyes takes her left and says, “My fears are yours.” An Altmer man dressed in leather armour smiles slyly, touches her face, and says, “My hopes are yours.”

There are countless others, from all races and all skills, each bequeathing to her what they had to offer. As Katariah received their gifts, she knew that she was giving what she could to them as well.

Just as soon as the dream began, it ended as a presence that embodied pure creation and destruction rose to face these children of time, and scattered and shattered them.

That morning, Katariah woke to someone shaking her arm and screaming her name.

Chapter End Notes
One of my favorite head cannons for the Elder Scrolls is that because the dragonborns are "children" of Akatosh, the god of time, they have the ability to "see across" the different timelines with other potential dragonborns. Please comment with any suggestions!!
Chapter Summary

Visitors arrive on the island with intentions unknown and purpose unclear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You have to wake up right now! Katariah, please!”

Katariah opened her reluctant eyes to find Jaina, one of the children she taught how to wield a blade. She often saw a lot of her own nervousness reflected in this tiny person, with her shaking hands and trembling lips, but Katariah had never seen terror like this before.

“Catch your breath and tell me what is going on,” Katariah said, extricating herself from her bed.

“There are elves in the longhouse!”

That statement rendered Katariah completely awake. “What do you mean by that, Jaina?”

“There are elves, I saw them. Pa says they’re called Alt-mer, but he sent me to look for Liselle and she’s not here, and I don’t know what to do!”

Katariah saw the girl’s words spiralling, and tried to act as self-assured as possible in order to halt the descent. “Let me pull on some clothes, and we can go back to the longhouse together. I’m sure Liselle is there by now, and you just missed her.” Jaina considered this proposal with almost amusing solemnity, and nodded. After tugging on a shirt, trousers, and boots, Katariah allowed the toddler to essentially drag her across the square to where the town was now gathered.

Upon entering the longhouse, Katariah saw four black-robed figures standing where she had received her destiny the night before. Jaina’s father was right, Katariah thought, with their height, high cheekbones, and gold skin, these were definitely Altmer like those that Liselle described from her travels. Speaking of which... Katariah glanced around the hall, but still could not find her friend. However, her attention was diverted by Roedan’s confused voice questioning the four elves.
“Can you explain again why you are here, unannounced?”

The one who seemed to be their leader, a man with a wrinkled, haughty face and white hair pulled back at the nape of his neck, spoke up with an exasperated sigh apparent in his voice, “We’ve told you, my lord, the Thalmor are here to research possible magical links to a plane of Oblivion on Cathnoquey. As you are part of the Empire and therefore bound by the White-Gold Concordat, you must comply. If you cooperate with us, we will be gone by nightfall.”

Roedan, clearly still confused as to the situation standing before him, decided to choose the solution that would get everybody out of the longhouse the fastest, “Very well, we will let you conduct your, ah, research with as little disturbance as possible. Please extend us the same courtesy and allow us to go about our days.”

With a smile that did not reach his yellow eyes, the Altmer replied, “Thank you for your acquiescence. We will take our leave.” With that, the four elves filed out of the longhouse. Seconds of silence passed as everyone on the island realized that no one knew had any knowledge about the situation at hand, and they realized that had no choice but to leave as well and begin their work.

Katariah, however, could not start her routine as she still had no idea as to where Liselle was. In all honesty, she hadn’t reached the point of concern or fear for her friend yet, and was merely looking to redeem herself for her embarrassing loss during their fight yesterday. Katariah scoured the training areas and hunting grounds, and realized that maybe she was with her fellow crewmates, near the island’s docks. Maybe discussing plans for another voyage soon, Katariah thought, preparing herself for future disappointment.

In the instant that Katariah turned towards the docks, it felt to her as though nature had turned in on itself.

First, she saw a blast of bright light. Next, there was a sound so deafening, it seemed like the sky was trying to tear itself free from the heavens. At the same time, Katariah felt a force pass through her that made her joints lock up, yet she could also feel her flesh and muscle trying to fly off of her body by the particle. In the midst of all of this, the only thing that kept her together was a small glowing point in the back of her mind, screaming at her to hold on, for the salvation of all, hold yourself together.

The event was over as soon as it began, and Katariah found herself collapsed on the dirt in the fetal position, stuck in stunned silence.
Hours or seconds passed, her mind was not comprehending the passage of time, when a gust of wind blew a cloud of thick dust into her face and down her throat. The hacking coughs brought footsteps and harsh voices.

“You said there would be no survivors!”

Before Katariah could struggle to her hands and knees, a sudden pressure that bloomed into pain on the back her neck plunged her into a black sleep.

Chapter End Notes

We are finally leaving Cathnoquey!! As devastating as this is for Katariah, I am practically shoving her to Helgen at this point. However, she still has a few more steps to walk before arriving in Skyrim proper. As always, comments, suggestions, advice are all welcomed and encouraged, and extra big thank you to those who left kudos!! You have no idea how much that means to me :D
Katariah finds no mercy upon entering Tamriel, and exists in a place where there is no darkness.

Content Warning: Mentions of torture and imprisonment. A quick note on geography as this might not come across in my writing: the ship that Katariah is taken on crosses underneath Black Marsh, and then up the river through the center of Cyrodiil. From there it’s a journey overland to the city of Bruma where the Thalmor have a prison.

Katariah found herself locked into a state between waking and dreaming, with all of her limbs feeling like they were weighed down with stones. When she gathered enough consciousness to turn her attention outside of herself, she could feel the wood floor she lay on swaying beneath her. She could feel the rags she was dressed in scratching her skin. She could feel the air around her plastering her dark hair to her forehead. Overall, she felt as though she were lying inside the mouth of a wolf. Occasionally, footsteps would approach, and hands would force her to sit upright, tilt her head back, and pour liquid down her throat. After that, she would slump over and blackness would take over again.

As time passed and the winds changed, the air grew cooler and dryer, and Katariah could hear voices from far away, talking, laughing, going about their business. She wanted to scream at these beings to save her, take her back to her home, or else run and save themselves. However, she could never seem to marshall the strength to make any noise.

During one of her more lucid stages, Katariah found that the swaying floor had been replaced with rough jumbling and the sound of wheels turning. The voices grew closer and then fainter again. Eventually, hands came down once again and slung her against a wall, and Katariah heard the sound of metal against wood as her spirit faded back into darkness.

“I wonder what she did to deserve this.”
“What did any of us do, anyway?”

“What even is she? She’s too short to be a Nord, but she doesn’t have the face of an Imperial or Breton either.”

“For the love of Mara, Amadus, stop crowding the girl and leave her in peace. Let her have a little more time before she has to face this.”

Meanwhile, Katariah’s mind was clawing her way toward these new voices, as though she were pulling herself up from underwater. Prying her eyes upon, she took in the long, narrow room around her. A dirt floor rested beneath her, and dark wood walls rose around her, lined with bright-burning torches. Scattered around the room like so many discarded playthings were people, from all races of Men, Mer, and Beast-Folk, all dressed in rags. On their faces they wore expressions that were across the spectrum from terror to resignation.

“Where am I?”

The scratchy quality of Katariah’s voice startled her, and the two men she heard talking quietly approached her, one with dark hair and pinched features, the other with fair hair and striking eyes.

Fair Hair found the courage to speak first, “You are in a Thalmor prison outside of the city of Bruma.”

“In Cyrodiil?”

Pinched face gave Katariah a grim smile, “I’m guessing you’re a long way from home, then, aren’t you?”

Katariah could only stare back in response.

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Time ebbed and flowed onward, with the torches constantly burning on the walls around them. Every so often, guards dressed in armor that shined like the sun would open the iron door and bring food down to them. As Katariah gulped it down, she felt a metallic taste rise in the back of her throat, like the rust she would rub off of her hands after working the forge back home. After eating, some of the prisoners would fall into sleep, and not wake up again. Hours later, the guards would come and collect the bodies.

A week had to have passed, and Katariah found herself staring at her reflection in a puddle, passively observing the changes that her time in this place had made upon her face. All the color had been drained from her cheeks and lips, and her limp hair, once dark brown, now was the color of snow. She looked like a corpse who had not realized that it was time to go in the ground. She now realized that destiny that Ursula had given her, so long ago, was just a merciful lie, sparing her from the knowledge that she would breathe her last in this living grave, surrounded by strangers.

Her reflections were interrupted by the guards storming down into the room, maces drawn and faces enraged. This was new. They surged toward the man whom Katariah had previously dubbed “Fair Hair,” screaming something about plots, dossiers, and rebellions. Katariah had watched this man shake in his sleep, and knew he would not last much longer.

Not quite knowing what her plan was, Katariah surged forward, planting herself between Fair Hair and the Thalmor. As one of the maces met her stomach and her spine connected with the ground, she saw a pair of young, kind eyes watching her from the door to the prison.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like saying "I hope you enjoyed" is in bad taste, but I at least hope you found this chapter compelling. Please comment and leave feedback!!
Once again, Katariah jolted awake in a place she did not recognize. However, her circumstances had clearly improved, as she felt a mattress under her back and blankets tucked around her. For a few moments she thought she was back home, back with Liselle, but as she caught sight of her ghostly reflection in a glass from across the room, she knew that events that led her to this point were not some fevered nightmare, but a cold reality. Katariah stepped out of bed into the sunbeams streaming in from the glass windows and slowly made her way to the door leading to a downstairs sitting room.

Looking down from the stairs, Katariah saw an Altmer woman wearing black robes sitting on a cushioned bench, going through various scrolls and tomes. Ever since Katariah had first seen Altmer, back at the longhouse on Cathnoquey, she saw no absolutely no appeal to their features, and her past experiences had done very little to change this prejudice. That being said, she begrudgingly had to admit that the girl she was looking at was pretty, with her heart shaped face, wavy hair, and features that looked inclined towards smiling. A floor creaked under Katariah’s foot, and the girl’s eyes shot up to meet her.

“Thank Magnus, you’re up! Come down and join me.”

Not knowing what to make of her host yet, Katariah carefully stepped down the stairs. As she approached the bench, the Altmer grabbed her hands and pulled her down to sit next to her.

“I’m so glad we have this chance to talk. Will you tell me your name?”

“Katariah.” Her voice sounded so faint to her own ears.

“Well, Katariah, it is so nice to meet you. My name is Aleyne. I suppose you’re wondering why
“You’re here.”

Katariah nodded.

“I saw your actions yesterday morning, defending that man. I may not agree with your motivations, but I think you and I can understand each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“You understand what it means to do what is needed as opposed to what is wanted. People like you are rare amongst your...kind. If you don’t mind me asking, where are you from?”

“Cathnoquey.”

This was the first time that a smile left Aleyne’s face, replaced by shock and intense fascination. “Truly? It’s you? You are the survivor from that island?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Katariah felt terror gripping her heart like ice.

“You couldn’t know, could you? Tell me, have you ever seen a soul gem?”

Katariah nodded, remembering how she watched Liselle enchant a sword that would slow her enemies.

“We have pioneered a new type of soul gem, one that is completely clear. However, it does not trap the souls of its intended targets. Instead, it takes them from their original bodies and returns them to their original state, before creation. Your people...they are now as the gods intended them to be.”

Katariah stomach turned inside of her as she remembered choking on ashes after the bright flash. Gulping to clear her throat and steady her reeling mind, she asked with a shaking voice, “Why Cathnoquey? We’ve never done anything to you.”
Aleyne took both of Katariah’s limp hands in her own and said, with a pitying expression on her face, “This wasn’t an act of violence, Katariah, but benevolence. Soon, everyone will have this ability to ascend. We chose your island for our first trials because of its isolated location. We weren’t still aren’t sure of a white soul gem’s effects, and we wanted to minimize potential damages. Our next target is Skyrim, the province to the north. Have you ever been?”

Katariah silently shook her head.

“It’s a fascinating, beautiful place, full of Men who are Oblivion-bent on destroying each other.” Aleyne’s gaze grew distant. “They need our help more than anyone else. By rooting out the worship of Talos amongst them and freeing their lost, violent souls, we can begin to leave this world and recreate the next one.” Her earnest gaze turned back to a shaking Katariah. “Please tell me you understand.”

“Why do you care if I understand?”

“Because you can help us. When put to the right use, I believe your selfless nature, your ability to see needs over wants, can turn the other races to our cause.” When met with silence, Aleyne continued, “While serving the Thalmor, you will want for nothing. You will be valued above others. You will have a purpose that will change the course of reality itself.”

Aleyne’s proposition was interrupted by a voice that sounded like door hinges that needed oil, coming from another room, “Aleyne! Come speak with me in the solar!”

The Altmer girl sighed, and called over her shoulder, “Yes, First Emissary Elenwen. I’ll be right there.” Getting up to leave, she turned back to Katariah, “Why don’t you stay upstairs and consider my offer? I believe that you and I will go far together, Katariah.” With that, she turned around and left.

With a blank face and mind, Katariah made her way back up the stairs. *Girl with no family. Girl with no friends. Girl with no home. Girl with no past. Girl with no future.* Her treacherous mind sang this litany to her as she walked back into the bedroom. *Perhaps...you could join Father...* Katariah looked at the ceiling above her.

As soon as these dark thoughts crossed Katariah’s mind, the ground began to shake, and upstairs portion of the house came crashing towards the ground.
Crawling out of the rubble, Katariah gasped her first breaths of air as a free woman on Tamriel. Turning around to face the wreck of the building she had left, she heard screams. Perhaps Aleyne was right about one thing: Katariah understood the difference between wants and needs. She wanted to help the other prisoners escape, but she needed to get to Skyrim. They need to know. I have to warn them. With that goal in mind, Katariah looked to the stars, determined what was north, and took off running.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the delay, I had a very long research paper due. I want to take this time to thank you all for not requiring me to include footnotes in my writing! The good news that came out of AO3 crashing tonight is that you all get two chapters instead of one. As always, comments, suggestions, kudos are all welcome with open arms.
Skyrim's Sky

Chapter Summary

Katariah faces despair, finds resolution, and then bitter failure.

Chapter Notes

Second chapter of the evening! Please direct all thank you cards to the AO3 crash and my insomnia!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A feverish energy seemed to possess Katariah’s limbs as she flew over the rough terrain, passing by a wooden sign painted with the words *The Pale Pass*. Her mind barely registered it, however, as it only new one purpose: Forward. Katariah witnessed the moons set and the sun rise, *forward, you have to warn them*. She felt the rocks cut the soles of her feet through her footwraps, *forward, you must do this for your people*. She shivered at the wind that snaked through her roughspun clothes, *forward, this cannot happen again*.

As night fell, she stood at a crossroads with one sign pointing to a place called “Ivarstead” and another pointing towards “Riften.” Staring at the sign post, Katariah realized a small flaw in her plan to warn Skyrim of the incoming threat: she had no idea where to go or who to talk to. Sitting down by the roadside, she realized that even if by some miracle she found someone important, they would have no reason to listen to a girl dressed in rags with the face of a ghost. Trying to hold off despair, Katariah looked back at the sky, praying for some sort of guidance. *Akatosh, Mara, Kynareth, Talos, whoever amongst you that looks after hopeless causes, I could really use a hand right now*.

As she turned her eyes upward, she saw something that drove the breath from her lungs: it looked as though the night sky was trying to tear itself apart, with streams of blue, green, purple, pure color seeping through the cracks. Katariah remembered what Liselle called it in one of her stories, *an aurora*, and was filled with resolution. *This must be Skyrim, I’ve made it far enough north*.

Her reverie was quickly ended by the sounds of a scuffle nearby. Darting into the trees, Katariah kept as still as possible. First there was yelling, war cries and military orders. Then came the sound of steel on steel, followed by the moans of the wounded and the dying. Finally, there was a sound like thunder, a dull thud, and then silence.
Katariah counted to sixty in her head, and decided it was safe to move from her hiding spot. As she turned her head to look for threats while stepping softly, she felt something metallic beneath her foot. Her weight shifted forward when she bent down to investigate, and that was enough to trigger the bear trap she had stepped in. Pain laced up her leg and Katariah let out a blood curdling scream.

“Looks we caught another one of Ulfric’s rebels!”

With the revelation that she had been captured once again, Katariah felt all of the determination that had driven her forward seep out of her all at once. As soldiers with clanking armour released the trap, bound her wrists, and led her towards a cart surrounded by figures dressed in blue and bronze, Katariah felt nothing but pure tiredness. As soon as she sat down, her head fell forward, and the world faded around her.

Chapter End Notes

Folks, we are en route to Helgen!! Please leave comments and suggestions below!!
At Helgen, Katariah prepares for Sovngarde and meets someone who will change the course of her future.

Welcome to Helgen, friends! This chapter is a fair bit longer than I intended, but I hope you enjoy!!

One of the wagon wheels skirted over a rock in the road, and the jolt in the cart was enough to bring Katariah back to the land of the living.

“Hey, you! You’re finally awake.”

Katariah looked across to see a blonde man with a youthful face, dressed in soldiers clothes, sitting next to a man dressed in rags similar to her own. To her right there was a man with golden hair dressed in the clothes of a noble, with a cloth covering the bottom half of his face. A soldier, a beggar, a lord, and a foreigner, Katariah mused to herself, This sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.

“You were crossing the border, right? Walked straight into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there. We tried to tell them that you weren’t with us, but they put you on the cart anyway.”

The man in rags, the thief, spoke up with a sneer in his voice, “Damn you Stormcloaks. Skyrim was fine until you came along. The Empire was nice and lazy.”

Stormcloaks, Katariah remembered the name from Liselle’s stories, and how they would debate the cause of the rebels fighting in the North. Liselle dismissed them, calling the rebellion short-sighted and tribalistic, but Katariah always felt a bit a bit of romance towards the movement, as they fought for the right to worship as they pleased. The debate on the cart continued around her, but she was soon drawn back in by the thief.
“You there, you and me, we shouldn’t be here. It’s these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.”

The soldier grimaced, and said, “We’re all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief.”

The thief, ignoring any calls to solidarity, nodded towards the noble, asking, “What’s wrong with him?”

The soldier, clearly upset, raised his voice and commanded, “Watch your tongue. You’re speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King.”

That remark sent shock through Katariah, The Empire caught the rebellions leader. Surely they’ll kill him. But what about the rest of us? She prayed to Talos for courage, as she did not wish to look like the thief sitting across from her. He wore an expression that she remembered well from the prison in Bruma, where desperation crossed into a place where there was no reason.

Currently, that man was pleading with some unknown power, “No please, this can’t be happening. This isn’t happening!”

The soldier, with a remarkable amount of serenity for a man captured, turned to the thief with pity in his eyes and asked, “What village are you from, horse thief?”

“Why do you care?”

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

Cathnoquey. Katariah tried to focus on her island as it once was to keep her from crying like a child. Remember the forest, the sound the ocean made as it broke against the black cliffs, how the soil felt soft beneath your feet.

Windhelm. Ulfric tried to focus on his city in order to keep his courage. Remember the sound of your people in the market, its fresh fallen snow the color of that girl’s hair, the Palace of the Kings standing guard over it all.
As they rolled towards a village, a voice called out: “General Tullius, sir! The headsman is waiting!”

“Good, let's get this over with.”

So this is it then. All my pain, all my loss, all my efforts, just to come to this. The two souls sitting next to each other simultaneously felt the same feeling of failure and uselessness.

The soldier scoffed in the direction of the stern sounding voice, “General Tullius, the military governor! And it looks like the Thalmor are with him. Damn elves! I bet they had something to with this.”

This last statement sent another wave of fear through Katariah. Are they here for me? Her spiralling mind was not set at ease by the voice she recognized from one of the black-robed agents.

“General Tullius, stop! We believe that one of these prisoners is an escapee from one our facilities in Cyrodiil. By the authority of the Thalmor, I'm taking custody of all them until we find her.” It was the squeaky voice that she heard from the next room when Aleyne was speaking with her, Elenwen. They followed me, they'll take me back, they'll destroy me.

Relief came from a strange source when the man with close-cropped hair, General Tullius, replied in a gruff voice, “I'm sorry, that's just not possible. It would cause far too many problems.”

“You’re making a terrible mistake! Your Emperor will hear of this transgression. By the terms of the White-Gold Concordat, I operate with full Imperial authority!” It was clear from her voice that Elenwen was not used to being refused.

“Thalmor bitch,” the soldier muttered.

“Where are we?” Katariah asked.

“This is Helgen. I used to be sweet on a girl from here. I wonder if Vilod still makes the mead with juniper berries mixed in.” His gaze became distant with recollection. “Funny, when I was a boy, Imperial walls and towers used to make me feel so safe.”
The cart slowed, and came to stop at a tall tower at the center of the village.

The thief swivelled his head, eyes wide, “Wait, why are we stopping?”

A female imperial soldier with an angry voice screamed, “Get these prisoners out of the carts, move it!”

The soldier’s face became grim. “Why do you think? End of the line. Let’s go. Shouldn’t keep the gods waiting for us. Face your death with courage.”

The thief, finding no comfort in this advice, began to shake, screaming at anyone who would listen, “Wait no, we’re not rebels! You’ve got to tell them, this is a mistake!”

The female imperial apparently was not moved to pity by this outburst. “Shut up! Out of the cart, now!” As they stepped onto the ground, she continued, “Step towards the block when we call your name. Don’t even think about running.”

As they lined up, the Stormcloak soldier stood at Katariah’s left. “Damn Empire loves their lists,” he grumbled.

The female soldier’s subordinate, a young man with brown hair in leather armor held a parchment in one hand and quill in the other. He began reading. “Ulfric Stormcloak, Jarl of Windhelm: Guilty of murder and high treason. Sentenced to death.”

The soldier bowed his head and murmured, “It has been an honor, Jarl Ulfric.”

The man with the parchment continued, “Next in line. Name?”

The Stormcloak strode forward and declared, “Ralof, of Riverwood. Proud Son of Skyrim.”

“Stormcloak. Sentenced to death. Next.”

The thief staggered forward, stammering, “Lokir, of Rorikstead, and I’m not a Stormcloak.”
“It says right here you are. Sorry.”

The thief’s eyes widened in panic, and he took off at a full sprint towards the village gate, screaming, “All I did was steal a horse, you can’t do this to me!”

The Imperial woman barked, “Archers!” and Katariah watched as three men on a guard tower nocked arrows and sent them flying. The second plunged into the man’s back and he collapsed onto the ground. With clanking armor, the Imperial wheeled back towards the prisoners and asked, “Does anyone else want to try running?”

The man with the parchment shook his head and looked towards Katariah. “Next in line. Name?”

“Katariah.”

His eyes softened. “You picked a bad time to come to Skyrim, girl. Captain, what should we do with her? She’s not on the list of rebels.”

“Forget the list, she goes to the block.”

Sighing, he gestured towards the growing crowd of people. “Follow the captain, prisoner.”

Walking towards the block, she found herself standing next to the man from the cart, Ralof. The air had a charged atmosphere about it, like lightning was about to strike, and wind with an unearthly sound rushed over the mountains. Katariah could feel her mind breaking apart as she looked at the curved axe the headsman carried. Gods, what did I do to deserve this? A death with no one to miss me? Her own prayers drowned out the priestess’ song-like voice as she spoke something about the Eight and Aetherius.

A Stormcloak, clearly not moved to religion in his last moments, strode towards the block and demanded that the headsman stop wasting his time. “My ancestors are smiling at me Imperials. Can yours say the same?”

Unable to witness what would very soon be her fate, Katariah instead looked towards the gagged nobleman, Ulfric Stormcloak, who turned to face her. As they locked eyes, she felt a wave of
comfort. At least for the few more minutes of life that this man has left, we are bound together, he will mourn me. That will have to be enough.

“Next, the girl in the rags!”

Katariah slowly stepped towards the block, knelt down, and gazed towards the sky above the tower, mentally preparing to see those from Cathnoquey again.

Chapter End Notes

Spoiler alert, next chapter there be dragons!! A lot of the dialogue changes came from the "Opening scene overhaul" mod on nexus. Please talk down below with any comments, suggestions, super cool dragon names, literally anything! BTW, my tumblr is wewillavengenewifanyofyouwantaffectsettalktomorrow. Until (hopefully) tomorrow!
Brave New World

Chapter Summary

Under the shadow of a dragon's wings, Katariah must cross new lines to enter new lands.

Chapter Notes

I'm still not sure what constitutes "graphic depictions of violence on AO3" but forewarned is forearmed. Alduin isn't very friendly :(  
Also, music suggestion for reading this chapter: 2WEI's cover of "Survivor"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ulfric watched as the girl with white hair walked with a limp over to the block. Surprisingly, the look on her face was not fear or anger, but instead profound disappointment. For a woman facing death for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no greater cause to center her, her demeanor was impressive. Courageous, even. Perhaps if they met in Sovngarde, he could ask for her forgiveness.

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Forcing herself not to cry, Katariah focused on the white clouds rolling by. In her head, she tuned out the voices of the townspeople, the Imperials and Stormcloaks cursing each other, the screaming sound the wind was making, and tried to find some happy memory to relive for just a few more moments.

“What in Oblivion is that?!”

Katariah watched from her kneeling position with her eyes wide as a black shape darted out from behind the mountains to land on top of the tower in front of her. It took the same form as the statues of Akatosh that she would pray in front of back on Cathnoquey.

“Dragon!”
The headsman flew backwards as pure force erupted from the creature’s mouth. Above it, the sky began to swirl, with fire raining down on the village. Another blast knocked Katariah onto her stomach, and she heard a voice calling for her.

“Come on, girl, get up! The gods won’t give us another chance!”

Katariah scrambled to her feet and ran after Ralof with fire at her heels. As she entered a stone building, Ralof slammed the door after her.

“Jarl Ulfric, what is that thing? Could the legends be true?”

Ulfric, now free to speak, shook his grimly. “Legends don’t burn down villages.” As he spoke, he took Katariah’s hand and cut the cloth binding her wrists. “We need to move, now!”

Not wasting any time, Katariah bolted up the stairs of the tower, only to stagger backwards as the dragon smashed through the wall, breathing fire that filled up the entire room. It then flew off as quickly as it came.

“ZU’U LOS HET FAH HI, DOVAHKIIN! KORAAV HIM DINOK!”

Observing the town through the hole in wall, Ralof pointing to a building with its roof torn off, “Jump across, I’ll catch up with you when I can!”

Choosing to act before her courage faded completely, Katariah backed up a few paces, and took a running leap into the destroyed cottage. Please let that be the craziest thing I will ever do, Katariah prayed after landing on her hands and knees. Clawing herself up, she forced herself to keep moving.

On the streets of Helgen, it looked as though all of Oblivion had broken loose. Soldiers were yelling orders and slashing weapons at the monster, a man was lying in the road with his insides strewn beside him, begging a child to leave his side.

You need to keep moving, you have to get out of here alive, you’re no good to anyone dead. Katariah repeated the lines like scripture as she ran through the falling village. Placing her back
against the walls, she shifted along, only to have one of the beast’s claws crash a breath away from her head.  *Keep going, you have so much you need to do.*

Through the smoke, she saw the blonde Stormcloak, Ralof, waiting by a door.

“Come on friend!  Into the keep!”

Ralof held the door open just long enough for her to dive inside.  As they turned around, they saw a collapsed Stormcloak with open eyes reflecting the torchlight.  Ralof knelt down to push the man’s eyes closed.  “We will meet again in Sovngarde, brother,” he murmured respectfully. Swallowing, he looked back at Katariah.  “Why don’t you take Gunjar’s gear?”

“Are you sure?”

Ralof smiled sadly.  “He won’t be needing it anymore.”

Katariah slipped armor off of the soldier’s body as respectfully as she could and slipped it on over her rags.  Taking the axe in her right hand, she gave it a few practice swings.  *This is a lot more unbalanced than what I’m used to,* Katariah thought, wishing for a blade.

It would have to do, however.

“Get this gate open!” a familiar voice commanded.

“Imperials!  Get to cover!” Ralof hissed as they moved to stand with their backs against opposite sides of the door.

When the female captain opened the door, Ralof was the first to act with a brutal warcry and a swing of his war axe towards a soldier in leather armor.  The captain had her sights set on Katariah, as she took several horizontal swings at the girl’s midsection with her sword.

Katariah, who had never been in a fight for her life, tried to block each of the swipes.  As a blow glanced her upper arm, a voice in the back of her head reminded her, *wants and needs, Katariah.*  With that council, Katariah put her weight into her next strike and drove her axe into the junction
between the captain’s neck and shoulder.

Grabbing the sword as it fell and dropping the axe, Katariah ran after Ralof into the next room before she had to watch the woman’s body stop spasming.

--

As they hacked and slashed through the small group of Imperial soldiers, Katariah tried not to think about all of the eyes she was personally darkening. In a moment of distraction when looting a storeroom for supplies, she found that she had a previously undiscovered talent: lockpicking.

“Maybe the Imperials were right to pick you up after all,” Ralof remarked in an attempt at humor that fell flat on its face.

Taking a last look at the room behind her, Katariah grabbed a black tome with a silver ensignia, titled “The Book of the Dragonborn.”  *Something to read as the sun goes down.*

After what felt like hours of walking through the underground keep, Ralof saw light, and the two of them strode towards the outdoors.

Katariah could say with certainty that the valley spread out below them at this moment was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Ignoring Ralof’s advice that they should split up, Katariah followed the Stormcloak to the village of Riverwood.  *Honestly, I think he could use the support,*  Katariah thought, and a wolf leaping out of the shrubbery confirmed her suspicion. Internally, she felt incredibly tired all of a sudden. Like a fire burning inside her went out.

As they walked through the village gates, Katariah faintly heard an old woman’s voice screeching about a dragon and Ralof asking if she felt alright. Absolutely, she wanted to reply, I’m doing fine. But her knees gave out from underneath her and she was unconscious before she hit the ground.
Adrenaline can only keep you up for so long. I'll promise to you guys that this will be the last time that Katariah passes out/gets knocked out for a long while now.

Translation for the dragonese in this chapter, in order of appearance: "ZU’U LOST DAAL.”=I have returned; ZU’U LOS HET FAH HI, DOVAHKIIN! KORAAV HIM DINOK!= I am here for you, Dragonborn! See your death!. Alduin is a little dramatic. As always, comment below with pros, cons, suggestions, and I'll see you all soon for a walk to Whiterun!!
Best Laid Plans

Chapter Summary

Katariah plans for the future and receives an unknown gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was as though she were underwater, listening to voices from the surface.

“I don’t know how she lasted this long.”

“Should we take her to the Temple of Kynareth, in Whiterun?”

“I don’t want to move her. By Talos, how can she have ataxia, whitbane, and rockjoint all at once?”

“At least the potions seem to be working.”

“At this point either she’ll make it through the night or she won’t.”

--

For Katariah, awareness returned suddenly as she catapulted herself forward from lying down. Gentle hands restrained her shoulders.

“Calm down, lass. You’re safe now.”

“Where am I? Who are you?”

A woman with thick blonde hair and a face that looked inclined towards laughing said, “You’re in
Riverwood, a small village near Whiterun. My name is Gerdur, you met my brother Ralof at Helgen. He had to report back to Windhelm, but from what he told me, you two have seen a lot. Here, apple-cabbage soup, you need to get your strength back.”

Taking the wooden bowl from Gerdur’s hands, Katariah began spooning the food into her mouth. “I’m sorry, I don’t have any money and I don’t know how to repay you for your kindness,” she said, feeling as if she had stolen from this woman.

Gerdur, however, smiled kindly. “It’s no trouble lass. If we don’t help each other, where would we be? Besides, any friend of Ralof’s is a friend of mine.” Her face grew serious, her smile turning into a thin line. “There is something you can do for all us here, though.”

“What is it?”

“Can you go to Whiterun and speak to the Jarl at Dragonsreach about you and Ralof saw at Helgen. The man’s in over his head as it is, but Riverwood is defenseless. He needs to send guards here in case of a dragon attack. It’s just up the road to the north.”

“Absolutely.” Katariah moved to stand up, which made Gerdur gasp.

“Are you sure you’re ready to leave? I’ve never seen anyone as sick as you were last night.”

“I feel fine. Besides, the sooner I leave, the sooner guards get here.”

Gerdur looked concerned, but eventually nodded, “I won’t try to stop you, lass. Here’s a bag with some bread and cheese for your journey.”

Slipping her fur boots on, Katariah turned to say goodbye. “Thank you again for your help. Before I go, I just have one question.”

“What is it?”

“Who other than Ulfric Stormcloak claims to lead Skyrim?”
Gerdur grimaced. “That would be Elisif. She married High King Torygg just before Ulfric killed him. The Empire supports her claim to be High Queen. I don't really have anything against her - not her fault that her husband Torygg was bought and paid for by the Empire. She's nothing but a puppet for the Empire now. But make no mistake, Ulfric will drive the Imperials out of Skyrim.”

As Katariah exited the cottage and headed north, her mind was troubled. How can a divided Skyrim hope to fight back against the Thalmor? Also, who of the two of them should I speak to? While pondering this, the castle on the horizon loomed larger. Katariah had never seen a building so tall. At least one consequence of this horrible misadventure is that I get to see a little more of Nírn, she thought to herself.

Her thoughts were halted by the sounds of a brawl nearby. As she made her way to the top of a nearby hill, she saw a man-like creature the size of cottage swatting with a club at a group of warriors. Praying that she was picking the right side in this fight, Katariah took the longbow off from around her shoulders, and let an arrow fly, striking the creature in the center of its back. Apparently that was the straw that broke the oxe’s back, as it crashed forward.

Katariah hoped that she could pass by without any interaction, but a woman with red hair and wild silver eyes strode up to meet her, with a wolfish grin on her face.

“You handle yourself well. You could make for a decent Shield-Sister.”

“A what?”

The warrior chuckled. “An outsider, then? Never heard of the Companions? An order of warriors. We are brothers and sisters in honor. And we show up to solve problems if the coin is good enough. Talk to Kodlak Whitemane up at Jorrvaskr if you want to join our number. We might be able to use you.” With that, she and the other two warriors turned and ran towards the city.

Katariah decided that there must be a law in Skyrim that whoever starts conversations with her is required to leave her with even more questions.

As she moved to the main gates, a guard held out a hand to stop her. “City’s closed to outsiders, traveller.”

“Riverwood calls for the Jarl’s aid!” Perhaps it was the pleading tone in her voice or her desperate eyes, something made the man in the bronze and yellow uniform decide that opening the city gate the easiest course of action for him.
Seeing Dragonsreach across the plains was one thing, standing in the streets of Whiterun was quite another for Katariah. She had never seen houses and shops put so closely together with so many people moving amongst them. Avoiding the myriad distractions, she climbed through the three levels of Whiterun, and pushed open the door to Dragonsreach.

On the interior, the palace reminded Katariah of the longhouse back home, although this was far grander. Looking up at the vaulted ceilings, she was quite enjoying the view when she felt a steel blade press against her throat.

“What's the meaning of this interruption? Jarl Balgruuf is not receiving visitors,” a voice hissed in her ear.

“A dragon has attacked Helgen and —”

“You know about Helgen?! The Jarl will want to speak with you at once!”

Feeling a sense of whiplash, Katariah sheepishly followed the Dunmer woman towards the throne at the far end of the room, where a man with grey-blonde hair dressed in richly colored robes lounged while to his left a bald man with a squeaky voice rambled on about caution. Catching sight of Katariah, the Jarl held up his hand to stop his advisor, and asked, “Who’s this, then?”

Katariah suddenly felt self conscious of the ragged state of her armor and the gashes up and down her arms. “My Jarl, I was at Helgen when the dragon attacked.”

Leaning forward, the man’s eyes gleamed. “So you were there? You saw this dragon with your own eyes?”

“The Imperial legion was about to execute Ulfric Stormcloak, then the dragon destroyed everything.”

Folding his arms, the Jarl muttered, “I should have guessed Ulfric was mixed up in all of this.” Getting up from his throne, he beckoned Katariah to follow him. “My court mage may have a task for someone with your initiative.”
As Katariah walked towards the city gates to head to Bleak Falls Barrow, she formulated a plan for her own goals. She would retrieve this dragon tablet for Farengar, pick up any treasure she found in the tombs, sell it to the merchants in Whiterun, and use the money to pay for the carriage ride to Windhelm and then to Solitude. Differences aside, they’ll have to work together once they know the extent of the Thalmor’s plan. Once that duty was fulfilled, she could maybe think about starting her life over in Skyrim, maybe join those Companions, like the warrior outside of the city. The difficult part will be over soon.

---

At Windhelm, Ulfric slumped through the doors of the Palace of the Kings with a small contingent of soldiers, feeling as though he might collapse any moment.

“You look like you’ve been dragged through a skeever nest.”

Giving his first genuine laugh in weeks, Ulfric clapped his housecarl on the back. “It’s good to see you too, Galmar.”

“Are the rumors true? Did a dragon truly attack Helgen?”

“Yes, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Sounds like it stopped you from becoming a foot shorter. Perhaps we should recruit it to our cause.”

Ulfric smirked at that remark. “Dragons or none, it’s time to begin this war in earnest. Are you ready?”

---

Katariah decided that she hated ancient Nord tombs without reservation. As a whole, they were populated with stupidly violent bandits, skeevers, giant spiders, and once you were through
hacking those, the dead would rise and try to make you join them.

Picking up the dragon tablet from the last coffin, she admitted to herself that her efforts hadn’t been entirely fruitless. She had five whole garnets and two sets of enchanted armor to pay for her campaign against the Thalmor. She could make that work.

However, as she turned to leave, something in the chamber called to her, and the air had that same charged feeling that she remembered from Helgen. Her eyes fell on a curved wall with etch marks and her heart began to race in her chest. Feet almost moving against her will, as she approached the wall, her vision began to darken. She wanted to be scared, but a part of her knew that this was right somehow. All of a sudden, energy lept off of the wall and flowed through her eyes, her heart, the tips of her fingers.

As soon as it began, it was over, and all Katariah was left with was a word reverberating around her head, *force, force, force*. Slowly backing away from the wall, Katariah opened the hidden door to Skyrim, and stepped back into the light.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed!! As always please comment/kudos with any thoughts down below, and I will update soon!!
Meditations are broken, and Katariah is seen for what she truly is.

Sorry for the long wait for an update, I was bone tired last night. Also, I have exams so updates might not be as regular for the coming week. I wish I could trade places with Katariah and I could fight the dragons while she handles my papers :)

Far above Katariah, at the Throat of the World, four men in grey robes stopped their meditations as a whispering word was suddenly silenced. As his fellows looked to him for guidance, Arngeir shook his head. “Patience and caution. We will know soon enough.”

Trudging back to Whiterun and Dragonsreach, Katariah turned the word over inside of her head, force. She was certainly no master of the arcane arts, but she had spent significant stretches of time training under the mages of Cathnoquey, and she had never heard mention of magic like she just seen. The idea of a word simply becoming magic didn’t fall into any of the eight schools. She would have to ask Farengar for information in exchange for the tablet. Perhaps he would know as little as she, but Katariah did not want to add to her list of unanswered questions.

When she entered Farengar’s work space at Dragonsreach, the mage was deep in conversation with a woman in hooded leather armor.

“You see? The terminology is clearly First Era or even earlier. I'm convinced this is a copy of a much older text. Perhaps dating to just after the Dragon War. If so, I could use this to cross-reference the names with other later texts.”

Even with her hood up, Katariah could see the intensity of the woman’s gaze as she studied the writing. “Good. I'm glad you're making progress. My employers are anxious to have some tangible answers.”
“Have no fear. The Jarl himself has finally taken an interest, so I’m now able to devote most of my time to this research.”

“Time is running, Farengar, don’t forget. This isn’t some theoretical question. Dragons have come back.”

The mage did not seem feel the same sense of urgency. “Yes, of course. Don’t worry. Even if the chance to see a living dragon up close would be tremendously valuable... Now, let me show you something else I found... very intriguing... I think your employers may be interested as well...”

Whatever Farengar wished to show the woman would have to wait. Something made the woman in leather armor look up and lock eyes with Katariah.

“We have a visitor.”

Farengar nearly jumped with surprise. “The Jarl's protege! Back from Bleak Falls Barrow? You didn't die, it seems.” Catching sight of the tablet in her hands, his eyes grew wide. “Ah! The Dragonstone of Bleak Falls Barrow! Seems you are a cut above the usual brutes the Jarl sends my way. My... associate here will be pleased to see your handiwork. She discovered its location, by means she has so far declined to share with me.”

The woman looked at Katariah with appraising eyes. “You went into Bleak Falls Barrow and got that? Nice work.” Looking back at the mage, she said, “Just send me a copy when you've deciphered it.”

If Farengar doesn't know, she might. Katariah stepped forward and began to speak. “Right where the tablet was, there was this wall—”

“FARENGAR!”

Irileth bolted into the room. “Farengar, you need to come at once! A dragon’s been spotted nearby!” the Dunmer turned to Katariah, and added, “You should come to.”

As the three of them ran up the stairs to the Jarl’s war room, Katariah looked over her shoulder to
see the woman in leather armor slip out of Dragonsreach.

Sprinting across the farmland to the Western Watchtower, Katariah took stock of her resources. With the sale of everything she had found in Bleak Falls plus what Lucan Valerius in Riverwood had given her for returning the Golden Claw to him, she had over seven hundred septims to her name. Additionally, if she didn’t die in the process, helping slay the dragon would raise her from anonymity in Skyrim and give her some respect and authority that she would need to convince Ulfric and Elisif of the validity of her cause against the Thalmor. *In Skyrim, might makes right*, as Liselle used to say.

*If anyone* can *slay it*, a nasty voice in the back of her head reminded her when she remembered how arrows glanced off of the dragon that had destroyed Helgen.

As Katariah approached the smoking remains of the watchtower, Irileth commanded her guards to search for survivors. From within the tower, a man with wild eyes yelled for them to stay back, but as soon as the words came out of his mouth, a bronze shape swooped down from the clouds.

“Kynareth save us, it’s back!”

Over the course of the fight, Katariah found out that running from an angry dragon and fighting an angry dragon comprised two very different feelings of terror. Knowing that a slight loss of focus could lead to someone’s body being swept up only to smash against the ground again made Katariah’s hands shake as she fired arrows into the beast’s wings. The good news was that, unlike Helgen, this dragon seemed to feel pain. After enough spells and arrows struck it, it crashed to the ground with a deafening roar.

Unfortunately, where it crashed was directly in front of Katariah who barely had enough time to put a dead guard’s shield up against the dragon’s fire breath.

“I had forgotten what fine sport you mortals can provide!”

Quickly drawing her stolen sword, Katariah struck at its mouth with a few clumsy blows. With a sound she could have sworn was sinister laughter, the dragon pinned her to the ground with one of its claws. However, after a moment’s glance at the squirming mortal beneath him, terror filled its eyes. “DOVAHKIIN?! NO!” It reared its head back in fear, and in this moment of hesitation,
Katariah threw her blade, plunging it into the dragon’s neck. It fell to the ground, dead.

Slowly shuffling to her feet, Katariah heard Irileth and the men celebrating their victory. However, her attention was taken with the dead dragon in front of her. She felt as though she had destroyed something terrible, but also ancient and beautiful. As its flesh began to turn to sparks, she faintly heard Irileth screaming at her to get back, but Katariah stood transfixed, coaxed onward by the voice in the back of her head, *Don’t be afraid, this is why you’re here, this must happen.* Like the word at Bleak Falls, a power flowed out from what remained of the dragon and into her body.

When she was able to tear her eyes away, she realized that all of the guards were clustered behind her with expressions of awe on their faces. One man who looked like he was about to burst with excitement, stepped forward and said, “I can’t believe it. You’re...Dragonborn.”

“I’m what?”

“In the very oldest tales, back when there were still dragons in Skyrim, the Dragonborn could slay them and steal their power.” Speaking as if Katariah knew what was going on, he asked, “That’s what you did, isn’t it? Absorbed the dragon’s power?”

Turning her hand over and trying to see if she felt anything different within her, she replied with a faint voice, “I don’t know what happened to me.”

Not willing to be dissuaded, the guard pushed onward. “You’ll have to try Shouting. According to the legends, only the Dragonborn can Shout without training, like the dragons do.”

Katariah decided that no harm would come from humoring this man. Looking towards the sky, she found the highest mountain top. Within her mind, she realized she suddenly understood the word upon the wall. As she knew it, it was the idea of *force,* but to make it reality, she would have to say—

“FUS!”

--

At this confirmation of their suspicions, Arngeir nodded at his fellow Greybeards. It was time.
While walking back to Dragonsreach, Katariah felt as though her heart was about to break out of her chest from its pounding. She remembered the charged atmosphere at Helgen, before the dragon arrived. Currently, she sensed that same energy, except now it was inside of her, crawling through her blood and her nerves.

In the middle of this clear dusk, Katariah heard what she thought was thunder and then:

“DO VAH KIIN!”

Across Skyrim, from Riften to Solitude, everyone heard the Greybeards’ Shout. Few knew what the words themselves meant, and no one knew the motivation behind it. However, everyone knew that something had shifted in the winds in Skyrim, and that strange days were ahead.

After getting directions to Ivarstead and High Hrothgar from the Jarl’s steward, Katariah left Dragonsreach like a dremora fleeing Oblivion. She thought she hated anonymity, but everyone acting as though she was about to hang new stars, grow a second head, or simply kill them all was worse. She gave the Axe of Whiterun to the housecarl that tried to follow her, and gently directed her to look after Breezehome, her new house. The gifts that Balgruuf bestowed on her felt as though they were weighing her down. With all of her new titles, fame, and property, Katariah felt that she was further than ever from the fight against the Thalmor. As she pushed the gate of Whiterun open, she realized with a pang of sadness that during her time in Whiterun, no one had ever asked her for her name.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as always please comment/kudos with any pros, cons, suggestions, music recommendations...Join us next time for adventures with the Graybeards!! For a quick point of clarification regarding breezehome, Katariah didn't magically raise 10,000 septims, but instead property is automatically given with the title of thane (I just really needed a place to stash Lydia)
By the time Katariah reached Ivarstead, it was past midnight. She decided that she would postpone her journey up the Seven Thousand Steps until dawn and ducked into the local inn. After ten septims clinked into the innkeeper’s hand, she went into her room and felt sleep crash over her.

*She was once again on the cliffside amongst the crowd of her almost-yet-never siblings. A Khajiit with clever eyes gave her wink and said, “My will is yours.”*

*Katariah found herself falling into the familiar cycle of giving and receiving. But this time, it felt less like a source of strength and more like a prison, like crabs in a bucket. If one tried to climb out, the others would drag it back down. She wanted to scream, cry, beg, but she was trapped in silence.*

*As if sensing her agony, the crowd of figures gave her looks with various levels of understanding. A Bosmer woman with a gentle smile said, “All things in their own time, my sister.”*

*Once again, something rose from beyond the cliff to stand against them, with fire and fangs. Except now, Katariah knew what it was. It was —*

“Excuse me, lass, you asked me to wake you at dawn.”

With a groan, she dragged herself out of bed and slipped her ragged Stormcloak armor back on over her clothes. While the weather had been clear yesterday, Katariah stepped outside to see gray clouds covering the sky.

Taking a deep breath, she began to ascend the mountain.
Emblem I

Before the birth of men, the Dragons ruled all Mundus
Their word was the Voice, and they spoke only for True Needs
For the Voice could blot out the sky and flood the land.

The first bit was easy. She passed a hunter and a few goats, and the air was still mild.

Emblem II

Men were born and spread over the face of Mundus
The Dragons presided over the crawling masses
Men were weak then, and had no Voice

Further up, the wind picked up a little. However, Katariah took comfort that other pilgrims were contemplating the stone tablets with her.

Emblem III

The fledgling spirits of Men were strong in Old Times
Unafraid to war with Dragons and their Voices;
But the Dragons only shouted them down and broke their hearts

At this point, she found the occasional lone wolf, but it was nothing that she couldn't handle.

Emblem IV

Kyne called on Paarthurnax, who pitied Man
Together they taught Men to use the Voice
Then Dragon War raged, Dragon against Tongue

Suddenly, drifting down from the sky was something Katariah had never seen before: snow. She held up a hand and watched the puffy flakes melt against her palm.
Emblem V
Man prevailed, shouting Alduin out of the world
Proving for all that their Voice too was strong
Although their sacrifices were many-fold

The wind started to howl and the snow began to pelt her skin.

Emblem VI
With roaring Tongues, the Sky-Children conquer
Founding the First Empire with Sword and Voice
Whilst the Dragons withdrew from this World

From underneath a ledge, a troll grunted and began to charge at the girl who had disturbed its slumber. Bracing herself for battle, Katariah drew her sword. It was clear that she had journeyed beyond any other traveller.

Emblem VII
The Tongues at Red Mountain went away humbled
Jurgen Windcaller began His Seven Year Meditation
To understand how Strong Voices could fail

Wiping the troll’s blood off of her blade, she continued up the mountain, pulling her boots out of the snow step by step.

Emblem VIII
Jurgen Windcaller chose silence and returned
The seventeen disputants could not shout Him down
Jurgen the Calm built His home on the Throat of the World

The wind calmed down and the snowfall began to slow as Katariah approached the stone monastery.
Emblem IX

For years all silent, the Greybeards spoke one name

Tiber Septim, stripling then, was summoned to Hrothgar

They blessed and named him Dovahkiin.

As she looked up at the statue of the warrior that loomed large before her, the clouds parted and the sun shined down on the snow, reflecting light back upwards.

Emblem X

The Voice is worship

Follow the Inner path

Speak only in True Need

Contemplating what she had learned, Katariah walked up the last few steps and pushed the door to High Hrothgar open.

Inside the lowly lit monastery it was so quiet that Katariah thought the sound of her own breathing was loud enough to deafen her. From the hallways, four men in gray robes walked into the main chamber. Three of them held back, while the other approached Katariah.

“So, a Dragonborn appears, at this moment, in the turning of the age.”

“I heard your summons, and everyone is calling me Dragonborn, but I don’t know what any of this means.”

“First, let us see if you truly are Dragonborn. Let us taste of your Voice.”

Channeling the energy within her, Katariah Shouted at the man, and started as he staggered backwards. However, when he caught himself, he looked overjoyed.

“Dragonborn, it is you. Welcome to High Hrothgar. I am master Arngeir. I speak for the
Greybeards. Now, tell me, Dragonborn, why have you come here?”

“I need to find out what this all means.”

“We are here to guide you in that pursuit, just as the Greybeards have sought to guide those of the Dragon Blood that came before you.”

“I’m ready to learn.”

--

For the next two weeks, Katariah studied at High Hrothgar. She learned Skyrim’s stories by the volume, like Ysgramor and his Five Hundred Companions, the legend of the High King in the Jagged Crown, the rise and decline of the Septims, how Finna killed the Snow Prince. She learned that she was named after an Empress of Tamriel, a Dunmer woman who ruled her people with kindness and wisdom. Most importantly, she learned two new Shouts, one giving her the ability to move like the wind, the other strengthened and gave balance to *force*.

However, High Hrothgar also forced Katariah to reckon with what had brought her to Skyrim. In the silence of the monastery, she recalled the bright flash of light that destroyed Cathnoquey, the drugged haze of the passage to Cyrodiil, the sickening lecture from Aleyne, the feeling of her neck against the headsman’s block at Helgen. She knew that accepting what happened to her was the first step to moving forward, but life in High Hrothgar made it seem like she was constantly living within those experiences.

Thoughts were louder here, and Arngeir seemed to sense her conflicting emotions approached her one day at dawn.

“We believe you are ready for your next trial, Katariah. the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller, our founder, from his tomb in the ancient fane of Ustengrav.”

“I’ll get going now, Master Arngeir.”

With sympathetic eyes, he advised Katariah. “Use this as an opportunity to find balance within yourself. Remain true to the Way of the Voice, and you will return here.”
She nodded, gathered a few things, and left, unaware that at that same moment, the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller was being lifted by an intruder.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for reading!! Next up, we'll be meeting our favorite innkeeper in disguise. As always, please comment with any thoughts at all. I'll update soon!!
Chapter Summary

Katariah meets a new ally, and identities are revealed

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, this chapter was a monster to write for some reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the Sleeping Giant, Delphine drummed her fingers against the counter, barely listening to Orgnar grumble about the latest shipment of mead coming in late. *Any day now, Dragonborn*, she thought to herself.

--

During her journey to Ustengrav, Katariah began to notice the effects of the dragon blood within her. She no longer felt the same sense of terror driving her on during fights, instead feeling vicious joy when she became fear itself in the eyes of bandits and murderers. While she could hold herself back from her anger when she wanted to, the fire burning within her served her well in battle and kept her from thinking too hard about her situation. She had also become very possessive, as discovered by a truly unfortunate thief who tried to steal her pack. Sometimes, in quiet moments, she wondered what her friends from home would think of her if they could see her now.

However, the moment she discovered that Jurgen’s Horn had been taken, she was not in the mood for self-reflection. She trudged back to Riverwood with the mysterious note crushed in her fist, carried onward by a fit of blood-boiling rage.

Barely stopping herself from kicking in the door to the Sleeping Giant, she strode towards the innkeeper, a diminutive-looking woman in a blue dress, and asked to rent the “attic-room” through clenched teeth. When directed to a room on the left, Katariah sat down on a wooden chair with a dagger hidden under her wrist.

“So you’re the Dragonborn I’ve been hearing so much about. I think you're looking for this.” The innkeeper placed the curved horn on the table in front of Katariah, who was bewildered by someone surrendering their bargaining chip so easily and by the thought of this woman breaking...
into Ustengrav on her own. “You can put that dagger away now, Katariah. I just want to talk.”

“How do you know—?”

“But not here, follow me.”

Confused enough to stay her blade, Katariah followed the innkeeper down steps hidden behind a wardrobe, leading to a room with an impressive stock of weapons and potions.

“Now we can talk. The Greybeards seem to think you’re Dragonborn, and I hope they’re right.”

Squaring her shoulders and trying to look as intimidating as possible, Katariah demanded, “Who are you and what do you want with me?”

“I didn't go to all this trouble on a whim. I needed to make sure it wasn't a Thalmor trap. I'm not your enemy. I already gave you the horn. I'm actually trying to help you. I just need you to hear me out.” The innkeeper used a tone best suited for scolding a quarrelsome child, which really rubbed Katariah the wrong way.

“You’re still not answering my question.”

“My name is Delphine, and I’m part of a group that has been looking for someone like you for a very long time. We remember what most don’t - that the Dragonborn is the ultimate dragonslayer. You're the only one that can kill a dragon permanently by devouring its soul. Can you do it? Can you devour a dragon's soul?”

“Yes, I can.”

Clearly annoyed by Katariah’s abrupt attitude, Delphine soldiered on. “Good. And you'll have a chance to prove it to me soon enough.”

“How could I possibly prove that to you?”
With a grim smirk, Delphine pointed to a map on the table at the center of the room. “Dragons aren’t just coming back, they’re coming back to life. They weren’t gone somewhere for all these years. They were dead, killed off centuries ago by my predecessors. Now something’s happening to bring them back to life. And I need you to help me stop it. Based on the map you retrieved for Farengar, the next dragon resurrection will happen at Kynesgrove, to the south of Windhelm.”

“So we’re going to go kill a dragon?”

“Glad to see you’re catching on. Before we leave, let’s get you ready. Can’t have you making the Civil War worse by marching around in Stormcloak armor with an Imperial officer’s sword. Here.” Delphine passed Katariah a set of leather armor and a sword unlike any blade that Katariah had ever seen before, slightly curved with a single edge. Noticing Katariah’s stare, Delphine explained with sad eyes, “These were the swords my comrades used. I have a lot of spares lying around nowadays.”

--

As the two ran towards Kynesgrove, Katariah, feeling more trusting towards the other woman, peppered Delphine with questions about the dragons and the Thalmor. When they stopped for the night near Gallows Rock, Delphine sat down next to her and flipped their roles. “Katariah, you’ve learned all about me that you’re going to. But what about you? How did you end up in Skyrim?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Then tell it, we’ve got all night.”

“I’m from Cathnoquey, an island to the East of Tamriel. One day the Thalmor showed up and killed everyone who lived there, except for me. They took me to a prison in Cyrodiil that I escaped from, and I assume that you already know about Helgen.” Katariah surprised herself with her dead-sounding voice. This was the first time that she had said out loud what happened to her, which made it real in a way that it wasn’t before.

With a sigh, Delphine replied, “I think I understand.”

“How can you?”
“About 25 years ago, the Thalmor hunted down every single one of my comrades and took their heads as trophies. Trust me when I say that I know what it means to hate the Aldmeri Dominion.”

Shaking her head, Katariah asked, “Why are they like this? They truly want to destroy the world so they can remake it in their image. I just don’t understand it.”

“They think they’re right without questioning themselves, and they let nothing hold them back. But you need to focus on the dragons. The fight with the Thalmor will come soon enough and we cannot afford a war with two fronts. I’ll take first watch, you’ll need your strength tomorrow.”

--

“By the Gods, you really are Dragonborn!”

Delphine became much more pliable with Katariah after they slayed Sahloknir, speaking freely about the Blades, her research into the dragon mounds, and her belief that the Thalmor were behind the dragons somehow. When asked about their next steps, she admitted that she needed time. “Go back to High Hrothgar with the horn. I don’t want the Greybeards to become alarmed. When I come up with a plan, I’ll find a way to get word to you.” With that, the two split up, Delphine heading back to Riverwood, and Katariah returning to High Hrothgar.

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Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Next up, the Thalmor will meet the dragonborn :D. As always, all comments/kudos/bookmarks are met with squeals of joy from me.
Masks On

Chapter Summary

Katariah assumes a new identity and receives an unwanted revelation.

Chapter Notes

Music Pairing Recommendation: "Everybody Knows" by Sigrid

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After giving the Greybeard’s Blessing, Master Arngeir approached Katariah. “Dovahkiin. You have tasted the Voice of the Greybeards, and passed through unscathed. High Hrothgar is open to you. However, we believe that your training should continue down below, in Skyrim. Your gifts are from Akatosh, and we cannot circumvent the gods will by keeping you up here.” Glancing at the sword on her hip, he continued, “Katariah, remember the lessons you have learned with us. Many will see the Dragonborn as a weapon to be wielded. Remain true to your destiny, whatever it may be, and you will be welcome among us.”

“Thank you Master. I will try to return soon.”

Deciding to get one last night’s sleep before striking out on her own, Katariah laid down on one of the stone beds and had a very strange dream.

She was no longer on the cliffside, but instead stood inside High Hrothgar. She saw Arngeir, Borri, Wulfgar, and Einarth in various poses of supplication. They looked through her like she was a ghost. Turning around to look down one of the monastery’s thin hallways, she saw someone she did not recognize. It was boy, barely older than eighteen, with gold hair and blue eyes looking down on the world spread out below them.

She could feel the conflict within him, to have power that must never be used, to see others suffer and bleed while staying your hand. It was killing him. As Katariah reached out to touch his arm, his eyes met hers, and the world fell apart around them.

Katariah slowly woke up to the sunrise’s light and the howling wind from outside. Slipping on her armor and boots, she gathered up some food and said a quiet goodbye to Arngeir before heading down the mountain.
Doing various odd jobs along the way, Katariah made her way towards Whiterun. However, she was not to stay in the city for very long. Someone had stuck a note to the door of Breezehome:

*Katariah,*

*Meet me at the Solitude Stables as soon as you get this. I have a plan.*

*D.*

*Delphine sure works fast,* Katariah thought to herself. Turning on her heel, she exited the city and hired a carriage to take her to Solitude. As the landscape rolled by, Katariah reflected on what she should do in regards to going forward. Being Dragonborn opened some doors and closed others. Remaining anonymous was now a priority and she had taken to wearing a hood to cover her white hair everywhere she went, leaving quickly whenever she killed a dragon in a populated place. Everyone in Skyrim knew that a Dragonborn lived, and according to several talkative guards, both Ulfric Stormcloak and General Tullius had sent out emissaries with the goal to find the Dragonborn and bring them into their cause. While images of the jarl sometimes sprang unbidden into Katariah’s mind, she could not afford to be drawn into another conflict now. The Thalmor hadn’t yet made a move, but they would soon. Katariah took cold comfort in the knowledge that Skyrim was much larger than Cathnoquey, and would take a larger effort to destroy in the same way. But like an executioner’s axe, the precise moment mattered less than its certainty.

The sound of the ocean drew Katariah away from these dark thoughts, and she looked over the edge of the carriage to see sprawling docks and the sea below. Grief for Liselle washed over her as she remembered how her friend had promised to take her here someday.

Hastily brushing away her tears, Katariah hopped out the carriage and waited for Delphine at the stables.

The Breton woman arrived about an hour later and wasted no time on getting to her plan. “The more I look into it, the more I believe the Thalmor are behind the dragons coming back. They stand to benefit more than anyone by weakening Skyrim. But we need more to go on than belief, and any valuable information is locked up in their embassy.”

“So are we fighting our way in?”

“And get our heads sent to the Summerset Isles? No, we need a more subtle approach, which is where you come in. The ambassador for the Thalmor regularly throws parties where the rich and connected cozy up to the bastards. I have a forged invitation for you get into the next party, tonight.”
“And you’re not coming?”

“Despite my best efforts, the Thalmor know my face. You’ll be fine, I’ve enlisted help. He's not up for this kind of high-risk mission, but he can help you once you’re inside. His name's Malborn. Wood elf, plenty of reason to hate the Thalmor and he works at their embassy. You can trust him. I'll get word for him to meet you in Solitude, at the Winking Skeever. Also, take some Septims and buy yourself a dress at the Radiant Raiment, right next door. We can’t have you stroll in wearing your armor. Move quickly, we only have one shot at this.”

Katariah walked up the hill and pushed the gate to the city open to see a crowd gathered in the dawn’s light, standing before a platform.

“Roggvir, you helped Ulfric Stormcloak escape this city after he murdered High King Torygg. When you opened that gate, you betrayed the people of Solitude.”

The crowd was clearly against the man condemned to die, screaming insults at him. Katariah began to feel chills going up and down her skin as her mind placed her back at Helgen.

“It was no murder! Ulfric challenged Torygg and beat him in fair combat! Such is our way! Such is the ancient custom of Skyrim, and all Nords!”

The jeers from the crowd continued, and Katariah closed her eyes as the man was forced to kneel before the block, only to open them seconds after she heard the axe fall. Avoiding the sight of the bloody mess that was currently being cleaned up, she darted into the Radiant Raiment to buy a noble lady’s dress. After settling on a green garment with silver trim, the dismissive Altmer woman who was working the counter waved her into a back room where she could change clothes.

When looking at herself in the mirror, Katariah barely recognized herself. Dresses, even simple ones, were rarely worn on Cathnoquey, and Katariah, being of low circumstances on the island, had never felt material so soft. For a few seconds, she could indulge in the fantasy of being a woman with no problems, no terror lurking beneath her skin, no black unknown looming in the distance. Shaking her head, she organized her armor, weapons, potions, and lock picks into a linen sack and crossed the street to the tavern called the Winking Skeever.

Inside the tavern, she caught sight of a Bosmer man with miserable eyes, hunched over a mug of mead. Approaching from his blindspot, Katariah quietly spoke. “Our mutual friend sent me.”
“Seriously? You're who she picked? Stendarr’s mercy, I hope she knows what she's doing. Here's the deal. I can smuggle some equipment into the Embassy for you. Don't plan on bringing anything else in with you. The Thalmor take security very seriously”

Trying not to take offense at the elf’s shocked tone of voice, Katariah wordlessly passed the linen sack to him.

Seeming a little comforted by her preparedness, Malborn continued. “Go down the hill to Katla’s Farm when dusk falls. There’ll be a carriage waiting for you. Once you’re inside the party, create a distraction and I’ll sneak you into the rooms where they keep the documents. If we do our jobs, we’ll both be alive by the end of the night.”

--

“Welcome to the Thalmor Embassy, your invitation please.”

To her surprise, Katariah found it easy enough to act like a lady. Maybe it was because she was standing next to a man so drunk he could barely keep himself upright that she looked courtly by comparison, but it seemed like the guards were convinced enough to let her stroll inside. However, her confidence was shattered by the woman who stood greeting her guests in the doorway.

"Welcome. I don't believe we've met. I am Elenwen, the Thalmor Ambassador to Skyrim. And you are...?"

Shit. With her heart in her throat, Katariah opted to stall. “You're Elenwen? I've heard so much about you!” For the love of Talos, get me out of this conversation right now.

Evidently not recognizing her, Elenwen continued on with her squeaky voice. “Have you? All good, I trust. But you have me at a disadvantage. I'm afraid I know nothing about you... Please, tell me more about yourself. What brings you to this... to Skyrim?”

Katariah felt like she was about to melt under the Altmer’s appraising squint when a voice came from behind the bar. “Madame Ambassador, I'm so sorry to interrupt…”
From the bottom of my heart, thank you Malborn. Not waiting for another opportunity, Katariah slipped into the party, with her face paling when she saw the guests assembled. Jarl Balgruuf sat on bench with a mug of mead in one hand. Across the room, the general she remembered from Helgen, Tullius, made conversation with a lovely looking women in richly colored robes that Katariah assumed was Elisif, called the Fair. It appeared that all of the fine folk in Skyrim were willing to break bread with the Thalmor. I guess I don’t need to worry about Skyrim being attacked. They’ve apparently already surrendered.

“Unless you want me to blow your cover, I suggest you wipe that bewildered expression off of your face.”

Turning to her right, Katariah came face to face with a woman with black hair and amber eyes. “What?”

“Listen girl, I don't recall seeing you at one of these before. And I know everyone who's anyone in Skyrim, so if you don’t want me to hand you over to that guard, I suggest—”

“Maven, give it a rest and let the poor woman enjoy the party.” Taking her arm, Katariah’s savior, a wizened-looking woman in the robes of a jarl, guided her over to a corner, a little apart from the others. “There are words spoken, and words unspoken, and those gathered here tonight are fluent in both languages. That Black-Briar bitch is right about one thing, though. You don’t belong here.”

“I don’t —”

“ Relax child, on my honor as Jarl of Morthal, I’m not going to turn you in. But it’s true. You don’t belong here, or anywhere in Skyrim, I can see it behind your eyes. You do what you need to do here, I’ll give you time to slip out of this adder’s nest.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“I see things that others cannot, child, and I see you walking a path that will shape all others. I will not stand in your way. Besides, an old woman like me can get away with anything, and I’ll take every opportunity to make these Thalmor bastards squirm”

While Jarl Idgrod drew a crowd by screaming about snakes, Malborn and Katariah silently slipped out of the party and into darkness.
So this chapter was going to be a lot longer, but I decided to split it half, so it'll be a bit longer until Katariah starts kicking Thalmor ass.
Remembrance

Chapter Summary

The past is not truly past, and Katariah sees the world that exists beyond the masks.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: Violence/torture/imprisonment. Also, this is a general warning for things going forward, Katariah has what we would call today Post traumatic stress disorder, so be aware of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After tugging on her armor and checking her weapons, Malborn slammed the door behind Katariah, leaving her alone in the embassy. As she peeked around a doorway, she heard a conversation.

“Perhaps the dragon will eat the mages, and we’ll have time to get away.”

Everything about the Thalmor soldiers in the next room placed Katariah back in the prison in Bruma, with their shining armor, arrogant voices, and sickly smiles that she remembered from when they gave their captives poisoned food. With eyes burning, she put her leather hood over her white hair, unsheathed her sword, and dove into the room. Before the first soldier could react, she drove her blade into his stomach. As his partner hurriedly tried to conjure a bound blade, Katariah wheeled towards him and drew a red line across his neck. Hearing the commotion, a black robed mage sprinted down the stairs into the room. Ducking behind a column to avoid a blast of lightning, she took her bow off of her shoulders and nocked an arrow. After counting to five, she steadied her hands, stepped out into the room, and loosed the arrow into the mage’s chest. Katariah watched with a blank stare as he fell forward with blood bubbling from his mouth. As his eyes clouded over, she stripped the hooded robes off of his body and put them on over her armor.

In the courtyard outside, the wind and snow were swirling around. Tugging the hood so it covered her face, Katariah tried to make herself taller as she walked across the garden full of dead flowers to Elenwen’s Solar. At the moment her hand touched the wooden door, an alteration spell took ahold of her legs and threw her up against the stone wall, leaving her sprawled next to the iron fence with her sword sent flying to the side. As a Thalmor mage approached her with an ebony dagger drawn, Katariah knew she had only one option:

“FUS RO DAH!”

She had never used a Shout on Man or Mer before, and the result stunned her. The force of her Shout sent the mage flying across the courtyard and over the fence. His screams ended with a dull thud as his body crashed down the mountainside.

When Katariah entered the Solar, the howling wind was replaced by dead silence, quickly broken by two voices, one overbearing and one snivelling.
“But I need that money! I earned it!”

“Silence! Do not presume, Gissur. You are most useful, but do not presume. We have more informants who are less...offensive. Now, there seems to be an awful storm outside. You can avoid it by either sleeping in one of the cells downstairs, or by getting out of my sight!”

“I'll get going, then…”

“That would probably be best, now get out!”

As the owner of the snivelling voice passed next to the counter that Katariah was hiding under, she could hear him muttering to himself. “He can't treat me like that. He needs me. One day, the shoe will be on the other foot. They're scared of the dragons, too, aren't they? Paying too well. They don't know anything.” Still grumbling, he exited the Solar. Across the room, a door creaked open and Katariah listened to the sound of footfalls going down wooden stairs.

Entering the now empty office, Katariah kneeled on the floor and looked inside a chest to find three documents that caught her eye. The first was a note, headed Dragon Investigation: Current Status:

We anticipate a breakthrough in our efforts to uncover the party or power behind the dragon resurrection phenomenon. An informant has identified a possible lead, whom we have brought back to the Embassy for a full interrogation. The subject is obstinate, but by all indications is holding back the information we seek. I have authorized Intermediate Manual Uncoiling - I do not expect more will be necessary, unless you feel time presses.

I know you prefer to be present for the final questioning; I will inform you immediately when the subject is fully receptive. Two days should tell the tale.

In the meantime, if you wish to audit our technique, your expertise is welcome, as always. I have placed the prisoner in the cell closest to your office stairs, for your convenience.

--Rulindil, 3rd Emissary

“Manuel uncoiling,” Katariah shook her head while reading the formal script, Just call it torture and save yourselves the ink.

Next to it was a larger journal, with Thalmor Dossier: Delphine written across its red cover. Not wishing to pry into her friend’s business, she put the unopened journal next to the letter in her bag.

The last item in the chest, a similar red journal, filled Katariah with unspoken and senseless dread, like the feeling of a presence over one’s shoulder in a dark, empty room: Thalmor Dossier: Ulfric Stormcloak. Her belief in a right to privacy fell to the side as her hands opened the book:

Status: Asset (uncooperative), Dormant, Emissary Level Approval

Description: Jarl of Windhelm, leader of Stormcloak rebellion, Imperial Legion veteran

Background: Ulfric first came to our attention during the First War Against the Empire, when he was taken as a prisoner of war during the campaign for the White-Gold Tower. Under interrogation, we learned of his potential value (son of the Jarl of Windhelm) and he was assigned as an asset to the interrogator, who is now First Emissary Elenwen. He was made to believe information obtained during his interrogation was crucial in the capture of the Imperial City (the city had in fact fallen before he had broken), and then allowed to escape. After the war, contact was established and he has proven his worth as an asset. The so-called Markarth Incident was
particularly valuable from the point of view of our strategic goals in Skyrim, although it resulted in Ulfric becoming generally uncooperative to direct contact.

Operational Notes: Direct contact remains a possibility (under extreme circumstances), but in general the asset should be considered dormant. As long as the civil war proceeds in its current indecisive fashion, we should remain hands-off. The incident at Helgen is an example where an exception had to be made - obviously Ulfric's death would have dramatically increased the chance of an Imperial victory and thus harmed our overall position in Skyrim. (NOTE: The coincidental intervention of the dragon at Helgen is still under scrutiny. The obvious conclusion is that whoever is behind the dragons also has an interest in the continuation of the war, but we should not assume therefore that their goals align with our own.) A Stormcloak victory is also to be avoided, however, so even indirect aid to the Stormcloaks must be carefully managed.

In addition to a rush of empathy for the man she briefly met at Helgen, the revelation that the conflict creating scars across Skyrim was completely manipulated by the Thalmor made Katariah feel physically ill. Not knowing what to do with this new information, she tucked the second journal into her bag and stood up on her shaking legs. With shallow breaths and eyes wide, she descended the stairs into the Thalmor dungeon.

From the balcony above the cells, she could hear the all-too-familiar sound of metal striking flesh. The same cold energy that allowed her to kill the three Thalmor earlier entered her mind again. She killed the mage with an arrow to the back of the neck and looked into the soldiers terrified eyes as she slashed her blade over her knees and into her chest.

The moans from the cell broke her out of her trance, and she rushed over to see an emaciated looking Breton man manacled to the wall. As she touched his wrists to loose the chains, he whimpered, “I’ve already told you, I don’t know anything else about it.”

“I’m not here to torture you.” She undid the chains and the man slumped to the floor.

“What? Then what are you—”

“I don’t have time to explain, we just need to get out of here.”

“Sure, alright. There’s a trap door, here. The guards use it to get rid of bodies.”

Katariah shuddered at the image. “You wait there. There’s still something I need to find.”

Turning around to the dead mage, she looked at the desk he still sat at. At its center lay another red book: Thalmor Dossier: Esbern. Not recognizing the name, Katariah read on.

Status: Fugitive (Capture Only), Highest Priority, Emissary Level Approval

Description: Male, Nord, late 70s

Background: Esbern was one of the Blades loremasters prior to the First War Against the Empire. He was not a field agent, but is now believed to have been behind some of the most damaging operations carried out by the Blades during the pre-war years, including the Falinesti Incident and the breach of the Blue River Prison. His file had remained dormant for many years, an inexcusable error on the part of my predecessor (who has been recalled to Alinor for punishment and reeducation), in the erroneous belief that he was unlikely to pose a threat due to his advanced age and lack of field experience. A salutary reminder to all operational levels that no Blades agent should be considered low priority for any reason. All are to be found and justice exacted upon them.
Operational Notes: As we are still in the dark as to the cause and meaning of the return of the dragons, I have made capturing Esbern our top priority, as he is known to be one of the experts in the dragonlore of the Blades. Regrettably, we have yet to match their expertise on the subject of dragons, which was derived from their Akaviri origins and is still far superior to our own (which remains largely theoretical). The archives of Cloud Ruler Temple, which is believed to have been the primary repository of the oldest Blades lore, were largely destroyed during the siege, and although great effort has been made to reconstruct what was lost, it now appears that most of the records related to dragons were either removed or destroyed prior to our attack. Thus Esbern remains our best opportunity to learn how and why the dragons have returned. It cannot be ruled out that the Blades themselves are somehow connected to the dragons' return.

We have recently obtained solid information that Esbern is still alive and hiding somewhere in Riften. Interrogation of a possible eyewitness is on-going. We must proceed carefully to avoid Esbern becoming alerted to his danger. If he is indeed in Riften, he must not be given an opportunity to flee.

As soon as she finished skimming the contents of the dossier, the door on the balcony above her opened.

“Listen, spy! You're trapped in here, and we have your accomplice. Surrender immediately or you both die.”

“What does it matter? I’m dead already.”

Malborn! Katariah scrambled to shadows behind the stairs as the Bosmer entered the dungeon, flanked by two soldiers. Steadying her hands, she ran one of them through with her sword. His partner wheeled around and struck Katariah in the stomach with an elbow, knocking her onto her back as she gasped for breath. With a war axe drawn, the soldier drew closer to her.

“Behold the future, spy! Behold the Thal—”

His speech was cut short as Malborn whacked him on the side of the head with a mace. With a sheepish smile, he reached down to help Katariah back onto her feet. As Katariah moved to take his hand, a blade exploded from his chest, and he collapsed next to her with a surprised expression frozen on his face. Feeling empty and cold, she ended the soldier with a Shout and guided the Breton through the cave to the outside.

--

“Esbern?! He’s alive? I thought the Thalmor must have got him years ago. That crazy old man... Figures the Thalmor would be on his trail, though, if they were trying to find out what's going on with the dragons. What’s wrong, Katariah? This is news worth celebrating, and you need to get to Riften, quickly!”

“Delphine, I am so sorry, there was a fight, and Malborn...he didn’t make it out.”

Putting her hand on Katariah’s shoulder in what could be seen as a comforting gesture, Delphine tried to console her. “He served his purpose, and he gave his life for a noble cause. Besides, your grief won’t do him any good.”

Later that night, Katariah made a fire. As the sparks began to jump towards the twin moons, Katariah dropped the green dress, the Thalmor robes, and the ring she had taken off of Malborn’s finger into the flames. Gods, whoever among you that looks after those with no home, guide his soul to rest...and protect me from what is to come.
Thanks for reading. Coming up next, we get to meet everyone's favorite red-headed thief. As always comments/kudos/bookmarks are met with unadulterated glee from me! Please make a girl happy during finals week :/
Katariah journeys underground to find acceptance and possibly new beginnings.

Music Recommendation: "Vagabond" by MisterWives
Sorry about the delay, this finals week is a killer

On the carriage ride through the Rift’s forests, Katariah turned the dossier on Ulfric over in her hands. He deserves to know, she thought to herself. But how would she even approach that conversation? Hello, we met briefly when we were both about to die and I found documents suggesting that the conflict that you and half of Skyrim are willing to give your lives for is based on a lie. Shaking her head, she moved to put the dossier back in her bag when a letter squeezed between its pages fell out onto her lap. Upon unfolding it, she made up her mind:

On the Subject of Cathnoquey,

While the white soul gems appeared to work effectively in the destruction of the island, the presence of a survivor indicates that more knowledge is necessary before widespread implementation. Unfortunately, the earthquake that injured Fourth Emissary Aleyne and destroyed our facility outside of Bruma also presumably killed the survivor along with the other prisoners, rendering further study impossible. At this point, research into the manufacture and usage of white soul gems is postponed for the foreseeable future.

By my Hand and Seal,

First Emissary Elenwen

Well that settles that. With the soul gems no longer a pressing threat to Skyrim’s people, her possibilities had widened. As far as she was concerned, being “dragonborn” was a destiny she never asked for and felt no particular obligation towards. The Greybeards had already left her to her own devices. In the case of the civil war, she was not willing to kill either Stormcloaks or Imperials for a conflict that would only serve the Thalmor. She would continue to slay dragons that threatened others, but Delphine could find another hero for her grand scheme. Unfortunately, the Breton had already packed Katariah onto a carriage bound to Riften, so she would have to plan her new life from there. Perhaps she could work at the fishery.
Not exactly enthusiastic at the prospect of handling dead fish for the rest of her days, Katariah turned her thoughts back to Whiterun and the Companions, but that path left her feeling cold inside as she remembered her mind leaving her body as she fought the Thalmor soldiers and Malborn falling dead next to her. *I cannot continue to be around fighting and death like that without losing pieces of myself.*

When the carriage rolled to a stop outside the gates to the city, Katariah felt completely lost as rain began pour from the sky. Sidestepping some guards who tried to shake her down for some septims, she hunted down the local inn and sat at the bar with the intention that she would not get up until she had come up with a plan. So far, her ideas consisted of dead fish, making a fool of herself as a bard, or becoming a priestess for one of the Divines.

As she was deciding which of these ideas sounded the worst, a figure emerged from the corner of her eye. A man with red hair and charming green eyes ambled across the floor and took the stool next to her. Katariah knew she looked like a drowned skeever at the present moment, so any romantic words that could come from this man would be either fraud or farce.

“Never earned an honest day’s coin in your life, have you lass?”

*Think like Liselle, act like Liselle, talk like Liselle.* “Do you say that to every girl alone at a bar?”

“Only the ones that look like they have potential. What are you doing here in the lovely city of Riften?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because my...organization could use new blood, and you look like a perfect fit. Let me pay for your room here tonight, and we’ll meet in the marketplace tomorrow morning for a bit of a trial run. Do we have a deal?”

--

The next morning, Katariah kept her eyes straight forward as the man she helped frame was escorted to Misteval Keep by the city guard. With a smile she could hear in his voice, Brynjolf, the man from the inn, whispered in her ear, “Meet us in the Ragged Flagon when you can.” With that, he silently faded into the crowd and out of sight.
The underground sewer made Katariah’s throat feel tight, but when she pushed the door to the Flagon open, the atmosphere was so different than the prison in Bruma in spite of their similar appearances. All of the thieves in their leather armor acted so alive with their quick movements and quicker eyes, and even though their banter was almost entirely sarcastic, there was sense of presumed trust that pervaded the establishment.

“Give it up Brynjolf. You, Delvin, Vex, Mercer...You’re all part of dying breed.”

“Dying breed? What do you call her, then?” Waving her over to the bar with a smile, Brynjolf introduced Katariah to the guild members that were gathered. The bald Breton man at one of the tables chuckled when she took her hood off.

“Look at this one, Vex! The two of you could be sisters!”

An Imperial woman with unhappy features and platinum-blonde hair scoffed at that suggestion. “Oh please, Delvin. I was born with my looks, hair that color only comes out of a bottle.”

Stunned at Vex’s quick assessment of her, even if some of the assumptions behind it were wrong, Katariah asked incredulously, “How did you know?”

That question earned uproarious laughter throughout the tavern, and while the joke was at her expense, Katariah took a great deal of comfort in the first moment of levity she had felt in a very long time. Placing an arm around her shoulders, Brynjolf guided her to the next room. “Come on lass, you can bond with everyone later. Let’s get you set up to work.”

--

It was an odd experience, being part of a family again. Over the course of the next few weeks, Katariah travelled the length and breadth of Skyrim doing various jobs for Vex and Delvin and chasing down the ghost that had earned the wrath of the guild and the Black-Briars, Karliah. Every time she returned, mostly everyone in the Flagon and the Cistern seemed genuinely happy to see her, even if the only language they spoke in always dripped with acid. It was different from Cathnoquey, where Katariah lived in the shadow of what happened to her family. In the guild, she was judged on her performance alone, a system that suited her just fine. Under the tutelage of Brynjolf, Delvin, and Vex, she had become a pretty talented thief, and had re-established business connections in some of the major holds.
As for the Dragonborn business, things had settled into an adequate equilibrium. She hadn’t heard anything from Delphine, Arngeir, or the Thalmor, and she kept a weather eye on the door to the Ratway Vaults in the Flagon to make sure nothing out of the ordinary came to harm the old man, Esbern. City guards were handling the dragon attacks well enough and the civil war continued on. Deciding to use her life in the guild as a opportunity to remake herself, Katariah kept that part of her identity under wraps. She hadn’t Shouted at all since that night in the Thalmor Embassy and she was happy enough to keep things this way. Her exploits sated her desire for victory and her need to possess things, even if during the nights as she lay in one of the Cistern’s beds she felt a nagging sense in the back of her mind calling her away from this life.

Speaking of things that nagged Katariah, one part of her life that annoyed her was her relationship, or lack thereof, with the current guildmaster, Mercer Frey. While she knew respect in the Thieves Guild had to be earned, that man offered her only disdain and sometimes outright hostility, even after repairing the guild’s relationship with the Black-Briars and increasing business within the Ragged Flagon. Brynjolf had told her not to read too much into this, but she could tell that he was troubled by the leader’s behavior in the face of newfound success. This background made Katariah jump at Mercer’s suggestion that she accompany him to Snow Veil Sanctum to track down Karliah once and for all. Perhaps this would be her chance to prove to him that she belonged with the guild.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next, Katariah makes a new, fire-forged friend and crosses a new line. As always, please please please comment/kudos/bookmark
Heart's Stop

Chapter Summary

Katariah asks for answers as she steps into betrayal

Chapter Notes

Now that I am back home, chapter updates might be back to regular schedule. Music suggestion for this chapter "Snake Song" by Isobel Campbell and Mark Lanegan

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While the two thieves ventured through the Ancient Nord tunnels, Katariah tried to show off her best combat skills, cutting down the draugr with precise strikes and using the skills that Delvin had taught her to sneak around the numerous pressure plates and tripwires. Perhaps Mercer took notice of this, as he insisted that she take the lead early on during their journey through Snow Veil Sanctum.

“You want me to lead?” Katariah was incredulous, after just having watched the Guildmaster slice through a draugr with a sword that seemed to drink the undead’s strength and use it to feed his own while sidestepping frost spells that made her feel as though she were made of stone. His skill in a fight was clearly beyond compare.

“I’m sorry, I was under the impression I was in charge. You’re leading and I’m following. Does that seem clear enough to you?” Mercer answered in his usual tone that always seemed like he was on the verge of strangling someone.

What Mercer did not know was that Katariah’s time in Skyrim made her a woman who would not back down from a challenge. Gods damn her to the farthest ring of Oblivion, she would get this man to appreciate her role in the Guild, or die trying. She remembered how she bonded with Delphine on their walk to Kynesgrove by discussing their past histories. With this strategy in mind, Katariah asked question after question about Mercer, the ghost they hunted, Karliah, and the previous Guildmaster, Gallus Desidenius.

Unfortunately, this plan didn’t seem to work, as the look behind Mercer’s eyes became more and more unhinged the further Katariah pushed even though he revealed very little to her. Finally, he pivoted towards the smaller thief with a sneer on his face.
“You remind me of her, that traitorous bitch.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re too clever by half and you don’t know when to stop. Now shut up, and keep moving. My blade will stop Karliah’s heart before the day’s end.”

Katariah slowly turned and continued walking silently, keeping Mercer in the corner of her eye. *Something’s not right,* she thought. The Guildmaster had told her that this was a housecleaning job, they would kill the traitor and life in the Guild would return to normal. However, the man two paces behind her had the look of someone who would pass through every lock and every rule to get what he wanted. He could not be reasoned with, if need be, and that terrified her to her core as they continued through the underground tunnels.

Turning the corner, they came across a wall with circles carved into the stone. Mercer, maybe realizing that he had unnerved Katariah previously, tried to strike a casual tone of voice. “Ah, it’s one of the infamous Nordic puzzle doors. How quaint. Without the matching claw, they’re normally impossible to open. And since I’m certain Karliah already did away with it, we’re on our own.”

Secretly relieved that she had an excuse to leave, Katariah moved to go back the way she came. “Looks like we’re out of luck then. I guess we’ll have to find another opportunity for you to exact justice.”

With a laugh that held no mirth, Mercer bent down to examine the door. “Once again, Katariah, you fail to live up to Brynjolf’s promises about your abilities. Fortunately, these doors have a weakness if you know how to exploit it. Quite simple, really. Karliah’s close. I’m certain of it. Now let's get moving.” Moving his hand slightly, the door’s circles spun and with a shudder, the wall slid open without breaking a single lockpick. As he stood back up, she caught sight of a glowing object that the other thief quickly slipped into one of his pockets.

The Guildmaster’s comment hurt her like a knife to the back, and Katariah felt compelled for answers of any kind. “Before we keep moving, I have just one more question.”

“By the shadows, you make a lot of noise. Now—”
“I need to know. Why do you hate me so much? I’ve done nothing but help the Guild since the day I arrived and all you is treat me like I’m an irritation, and I deserve to know why!” She tried to speak in a voice that brokered no argument, and was enraged with herself when it cracked halfway through her little tirade.

Mercer folded his arms and looked down at her. “It’s like I said. You are just like Karliah, never knowing when to back down and just accept things for what they are. Now, you’re going to go through that door, I am going to kill Karliah, and when we get back to the Cistern we’ll figure out what place in the Guild you deserve.”

The malice barely hiding under his last comment jolted the breath from Katariah’s lungs. Resting her hand on the dagger hidden under her wrist, she stepped over the threshold into a large chamber. As she looked towards a blur of motion ahead of her and up some steps, she heard a faint whistling sound and a quiet *thud*. Looking down with dull surprise, she saw an ebony arrow sprouting from her chest, next to her slowing heart. At the moment, she was more distracted by the sensation of ice water pouring through her body, stopping her muscles dead within her, and sending her crashing onto her knees, then her side.

Through a darkening, shrinking window, Katariah could only watch as Mercer approached a slight figure wearing Guild armor with a bow drawn.

“Did you honestly think your arrow will reach me before my blade finds your heart?”

“Give me a reason to try.” It was a woman’s voice, soft and lilting, but full of rage all the same.

“You’re a clever girl, Karliah. Buying Goldenglow Estate and funding Honningbrew Meadery was inspired.”

“*To ensure an enemy's defeat, you must first undermine his allies*. It was the first lesson Gallus taught us.”

“You always were a quick study.” Katariah could only imagine the sneer on Mercer’s face as he spoke.

“Not quick enough, otherwise Gallus would still be alive.”
“Gallus had his wealth and he had you. All he had to do was look the other way.” The dam had broken loose, and all of the jealousy and anger that Katariah had caught hints of during earlier conversations were now out in the open.

“Did you forget the Oath we took as Nightingales? Did you expect him to simply ignore your methods?”

“Enough of this mindless banter! Come, Karliah. It's time for you and Gallus to become reunited!” Leaning forward, Mercer dropped into a fighting stance and pointed his blade towards Karliah.

With a slight chuckle, she took a potion from behind her back and drank it all in one sip, blinking out of sight as she lowered the bottle. “I'm no fool, Mercer.” Her voice seemed to come from all corners of the room. “Crossing blades with you would be a death sentence. But I can promise you the next time we meet, it will be your undoing.”

Shadows began to cloud around Katariah’s eyes as she watched the Guildmaster walk towards her. He's going to leave me here, she thought while he glanced towards the exit. However, a glint entered his gaze, and he gave her a faint smirk. “How interesting. It appears Gallus's history has repeated itself. Karliah has provided me with the means to be rid of you, and this ancient tomb becomes your final resting place. But do you know what intrigues me the most? The fact that this was all possible because of you. Farewell. I'll be certain to give Brynjolf your regards.” With that parting shot, he plunged his blade into her stomach and stepped over her body as blackness consumed her.

For a brief moment, she was back on the cliff with her almost-yet-never siblings. A Breton woman with sad eyes turned to her, saying, “My lessons are yours, sister. This is first time you have tasted betrayal, yet it will not be the last time you drink from this cup.”

Chapter End Notes

Come back for adventures with Karliah, Bryn, and jackass-in-chief Mercer soon! I sound like a broken record here but pretty please comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed!
Eyes Opened

Chapter Summary

Katariah sees the effects of betrayal in herself and her companions.

Chapter Notes

Music suggestion: "Gold" by Sir Sly
I wasn't intending to spend this much time with the Thieve's Guild, but I forgot how much I love these guys!! Don't worry, Katariah will find a new band of compatriots to join our cast in good time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From a crackling fire, a spark brushed Katariah’s cheek, causing her to stir from her unconscious state. As she pushed herself up into a sitting position, a soft voice spoke to her.

“How are you feeling, Katariah?”

“I suppose you would know better than I do, Karliah, seeing as you’re the one who shot me.

With a wry smile, Karliah admonished the other thief. “No, what I did was save your life. My arrow was tipped with a unique paralytic poison. It slowed your heart and kept you from bleeding out. Had I intended to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation.”

“Why did you save me? You should have saved yourself the trouble and shot Mercer instead.”
Karliah stared into the flames with an unfathomable expression. “My original intention was to use that arrow on Mercer, but you were blocking my shot. I made a split second decision to get you out of the way and it prevented your death.”

“Why should I believe you? Even if Mercer is a traitor to me, that doesn’t clear your name.”

“Without the antidote I administered, you'd be as still as a statue. I treated your wounds and didn't leave you defenseless. The poison on that arrow took me a year to perfect. I only had enough for a single shot and yet I used it on you. All I had hoped was to capture Mercer alive.”

Marshalling enough strength to finally sit up, Katariah conceded to the Dunmer’s logic. “Then I am in your debt. But I still don’t understand one thing. You say you want Mercer’s blood and I would wholeheartedly join you in that venture after what happened. Why not just kill Mercer with an ordinary arrow to the eye?”

“Because what Mercer did to me and to the Guild goes beyond simple vengeance. It requires justice to set things right. Mercer must be brought to the Guild to answer for what he's done. He needs to pay for Gallus's murder.”

“How do you intend to prove this to the Guild? Mercer’s probably describing how he killed us two traitors to everyone in the Cistern right about now.”

Karliah withdrew two things from the pack sitting next to her. The first was Katariah’s own Guild leathers, freshly patched up. The next was a brown book with a strange symbol on its cover. “My purpose in using Snow Veil Sanctum to ambush Mercer wasn't simply for irony's sake. Before both of you arrived, I recovered a journal from Gallus's remains. I suspect the information we need is written inside.” In response to Katariah’s hopeful expression, she shook her head. “I wish I knew what it said. The journal is written in some sort of language I've never seen before.”

Katariah took back her armor and asked, “Maybe we could find someone to translate it. I don’t know about you, but I’m not exactly enthusiastic about living the rest of my life running from the Guild.”

As she slipped on her armor, Karliah’s gaze grew distant and she stood up. “Enthir... Gallus's friend at the College of Winterhold. He’s the only outsider Gallus trusted with the knowledge of his Nightingale identity.”
“I heard that word back in the Sanctum. What is a Nightingale, exactly?”

The Dunmer thief looked lost in memories, and took a moment before replying. “There were three of us. Myself, Gallus and Mercer. We were a anonymous splinter of the Thieves Guild in Riften.” Her expression hardened as she turned her attention back to Katariah. “Perhaps I’ll tell you more about it later. Right now, you need to head for Winterhold with the journal and get the translation.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stick together?”

Karliah nodded with tightly controlled sadness and anger in her face. “I'm afraid not. There are preparations to make and Gallus's remains to lay to rest. I promise to join you there as soon as I can.”

When Katariah stood up to begin her journey along the coast to Winterhold, Karliah used the snow to snuff out the flames, returning Snow Veil Sanctum back to a darkness lit only by the stars.

--

There is something about standing above a waterfall at the highest point of Markarth with a troop of clanking soldiers at one’s back and the only option being to jump that really makes a woman re-evaluate her life choices. However, pausing to reflect would have caused Katariah to lose her nerve. Instead, she squeezed her eyes shut, and took a running leap off of the balcony.

Aside from alerting the mage’s guards in the Dwemer Museum, getting the translation back to Enthir in Winterhold’s decrepit tavern was a rousing success. She and Karliah now had definitive proof of Mercer’s betrayal of the Guild that they could bring before Brynjolf, Vex, and Delvin.

Unfortunately, Katariah could not get rid of what had happened to her at Snow Veil Sanctum. Every time she lay down to sleep, the image of Mercer with a sinister smile and sword drawn would loom above her. Her solution to this was to remain awake for as long as possible until she could barely stand from tiredness. Even during these bouts of unconsciousness, when sleep was more surrender than choice, the nightmares continued, mixing images of Cathnoquey at its end, Aleyne advancing towards her, the black dragon destroying the ground she stood on, Malborn’s death. Overall, by the time that she and Karliah entered the Cistern to present the truth to the Guild, she felt like she was rotting from the inside out.

--
There was something truly awful about watching Brynjolf’s face crumble as he read Gallus’s journal detailing the previous Guildmaster’s death. In the face of their collective grief, something in Katariah’s heart fluttered when Brynjolf gripped her arms and told her to be careful when she searched Mercer’s home in Riften. Before she could climb the ladder to the city above them, Delvin and Vex blocked her path.

“There’s just one more thing, lass. We want to give our benevolent Guildmaster a taste of his own medicine” The darkness clouding the Breton’s face was something so out of character that Katariah could barely recognize him for a moment.

“When you steal everything that isn’t nailed down from Riftweald Manor, make sure you grab Chillrend, Mercer’s sword,” Vex demanded with a cruel sneer on her face. “Put it to good news when you three fight that rat bastard.”

Katariah nodded silently, and ventured into Riften as the sun crossed the horizon, dyeing the sky shades purple and lengthening the shadows on the city’s streets.

Chapter End Notes

Join us next time for a Daedric prince, blind eyes, and a coronation (maybe); As per usual pretty please with powdered sugar on top comment/bookmark/kudos with any thoughts, comments, concerns.
Chillrend

Chapter Summary

A transaction is made, and Katariah puts her new blade to use.

Chapter Notes

Music Suggestion: "Hardest of Hearts" by Florence + The Machine

As the cape of her new armor brushed against the back of her legs, Katariah fixed the ice blue glass sword to her belt. Through the hooded visor, the figures of Karliah and Brynjolf seemed to merge with the shadows in Nightingale Hall. Katariah could only hear the worried smile in her friend’s voice as he placed an arm around her to guid her down the hall, feeling united in their discomfort towards the ultimatum that Karliah had presented to them: Pledge themselves to Nocturnal, or face defeat.

“Come on, lass. Let’s get this over with.”

Brynjolf disliked the proposition because there were no finite terms to the agreement that they were about to enter into. That made Katariah ill at ease too, but there was more troubling her mind. Daedric worship was something that was never even considered on Cathnoquey. There, it lived only in whispered conversations about horrifying blood sacrifices under the moons or in prayers before the divines that the misguided souls would be turned back to the ways of the Aedra. While she had stopped praying recently as it had been made abundantly clear that she did not live in the favor of the Nine, making a deal with a Daedric Prince was crossing another line that she had never prepared to confront. Furthermore, while she and her kin back on the island were by no means Nords by blood, the belief in Sovngarde after death was commonplace, and the thought of sacrificing it for the Evergloam that Karliah mentioned left a lump in her throat. It was another piece of herself that life in Skyrim had chipped away.

When they took their places on the three pedestals, Karliah raised her hands and soft voice in supplication, and bright light filled their eyes.

“Ah, Karliah. I was wondering when I’d hear from you again. Lose something, did we?”
Katariyah had to admit, that this speaking ring of illumination did not match up with the images she had associated with the Daedra. However, it apparently terrified Karliyah, who looked frozen with fear as she replied, “My Lady, I’ve come before you to throw myself upon your mercy and to accept responsibility for my failure.”

“*You’re already mine*, Karliyah. Your terms were struck long ago. What could you possibly offer me now?”

“I have two others that wish to transact the Oath; to serve you both in life and in death.” These words implying possession and contracts and permanence made the youngest thief want to jump off of her pedestal and find a creative way to knife Mercer to death on her own terms. This dread only increased when the faceless presence appeared to turn to face her.

“*You surprise me, Karliyah. This offer is definitely weighted in my favor.*” In that moment, Katariyah was thankful that her new armor included a mask that covered her expressions, as panic was written across her face. *She knows what I am.* She had never told Brynjolf or Karliyah about being the rumored Dragonborn, and this new revelation could tear their new trinity apart at the seams and destroy the life of free choices she had built up for herself in the Guild.

Karliyah, not noticing the change in intonation, continued on. “My appetite for Mercer's demise exceeds my craving for wealth, Your Grace.”

“**Revenge**? How interesting... Very well, the conditions are acceptable. You may proceed.”

“Lady Nocturnal, we accept your terms. We dedicate ourselves to you as both your avengers and your sentinels. We will honor our agreement in this life and the next until your conditions have been met.”

“Very well. *I name your initiates Nightingale and I restore your status to the same, Karliyah. And in the future, I’d suggest you refrain from disappointing me again.* If that should happen, you bringing me this prize will not shield you from my wrath.” With that warning, the three thieves were left alone to begin their journey to Irkngthand.

As the trio rode along the path towards Eastmarch, Brynjolf pulled back next to Katariyah while the Dunmer took the lead. They had since changed back into their regular Guild leathers for the trip, meaning that Katariyah could see the questions and concern painted on her friends face.
“Katariah, is there anything you want to tell me?”

Being called anything other than “lass” or maybe “Kat” by Brynjolf was depressing in and of itself. However, her reply was even worse. “About what happened with Nocturnal? I’ve heard Daedra are cryptic by nature, so there probably isn’t too much to worry about.”

Katariah hated lying, and Brynjolf was definitely clever enough to realize that she wasn’t telling him the full truth. However, out of respect for her or a desire to prioritize Mercer’s death, he dropped the conversation, and the three made their way to the Dwarven ruins as clouds gathered above them.

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“The die is cast, and once again my blade will taste Nightingale blood!”

While Karliah and Brynjolf hacked at each other against their will, Katariah sprinted up the stairs up the Falmer statue, only to have Mercer vanish from view. Turning from side to side with Chillrend raised in defense, she heard a quick rush of footfalls and felt a searing pain as he struck her forearm. This dance was repeated over and over again until his blade came dangerously close to her throat. Looking over at the landing, she saw to her horror that Karliah had Brynjolf on his back with Gallus’s blade raised above his head. In a moment of terror, Katariah felt a word come to the forefront of her mind:

“FEIM!”

The shock of sprinting through Katariah as an ethereal form caused Mercer to become visible again, and the newest thief buried the glass sword between the former Guildmaster’s shoulder blades. Racing to his corpse, she grabbed the Eyes of the Falmer and the Skeleton Key before they were lost to the rushing water.

--

In spite of everyone’s insistence that she take the reins at the Guild, Katariah still didn’t quite understand why she had been chosen as Guildmaster, but stood in the center of the Cistern with her new black armor nonetheless. She couldn’t meet Brynjolf’s eyes when he slipped the Amulet of Articulation over her head. Karliah made no mention of what had happened and maybe didn’t notice her outburst during the fight with Mercer, but Brynjolf definitely did. While he didn’t place much stock in legends or myths, he was still a Nord and knew about the abilities of the Dragonborn. Other than voicing his support for her to become the new Guildmaster, they had barely spoken, but judging by the behavior of the rest of the Guild, he hadn’t told anyone else
Katariah gathered everyone in the Ragged Flagon to plan for the future of the Guild. Vex would continue to head infiltration operations, bringing wealth into their vaults, while Delvin would be in charge of all of the fences and keep a thorough accounting of their available septims to avoid what happened with Mercer before. Brynjolf would act as the second in command, overseeing Delvin and Vex and all of the thieves operating out of the Cistern. Karliah would operate out of the Twilight Sepulchre to keep their connection with Nocturnal alive. As for Katariah, she would take a more distant role, traveling the nine holds to make sure that the their connections in Windhelm, Solitude, Markarth, and Whiterun stayed viable and profitable. However, she left a standing order that the door to the Ratway Warrens be supervised, with word sent to her if anything odd came about. When this discussion was concluded, they all toasted to a bright new future. While the others filed off to celebrate for the rest of the night, Brynjolf nodded to Vekel, who left his post at the bar.

“Have a drink with me, lass.”

Looking at her boots, Katariah sat down at one of the tables and heard the clink of glass on wood as he placed a bottle of Black-Briar mead in front of her.

“So you’re the Dragonborn.” It was not a question meant to be debated or dodged, but a statement of fact.

She continued to study the tavern’s floor, watching a drip of water navigate its way through the stones. “Yes,” she replied, her voice distant to her ears.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” There was only resignation in usually lively voice.

“Because I never wanted that life. I just wanted something that I could control completely.”

Folding his arms and leaning back in his chair, Brynjolf sighed. “I understand that Kat, but I need to look out for the rest of the Guild. Our problems started because Mercer had abilities beyond an ordinary man, like you do.”

Katariah nodded sadly, and took Chillrend off of her belt, placing it on the table in front of her friend. “That’s why you’re my second, and why I’m giving you this. Should the Guild ever come to danger, I’ll trust you to do the right thing.”
The next morning, Katariah took a carriage out of Riften to Windhelm to check on the Cruel-Seas and Niranye. As the air grew colder around her, she remember how, back home, Jaina had a wooden doll that one day she threw to the ground during a tantrum. Its limbs bent at angles while its eyes remained wide open in a vacant stare painted onto a wooden face.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Kat :( Come back next time for an encounter with a killer of kings, and a very mysterious black handprint...As always, pretty please with a sweet roll on top kudos/comment/bookmark!!
Meet As Equals

Chapter Summary

Two meet under the eyes of Talos, and Katariah acts before considering the consequences of her actions.

Chapter Notes

Music suggestion: “Glass Heart Hymn” by Paper Route

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katariah drifted around Eastmarch, clearing up bandit rings that threatened Skyrim’s trade routes, dispersing the remnants of the Summerset Shadows, and assisting the Khajiit caravans in their travels. Once she was satisfied with her work, she made her way towards the city, pushing open one of the heavy bronze doors as while an aurora lit up the sky, only to hear a blood-curdling scream as soon as she stepped into the walled city.

--

Jorleif hated his job. It was bad enough that he was charged with helping Jarl Ulfric manage a city that seemed to crumbling from internal tensions, the news that young women were being knifed to death only added to the list of problems that just weren’t going to be solved, not in his lifetime. That strange woman dressed in odd leather armor could knock herself out trying to solve that mystery for all he cared.

Worst of all was watching the effects of all of this on Jarl Ulfric. Jorleif had known the man since he took his father’s throne after the Markarth incident, and had watched a charismatic and hopeful man become ground down by his people’s struggles over the years. Nords were not an easy people to lead, with their tribal ways and criss-crossing rivalries amongst themselves, but Ulfric was trying to give them something to rally around in their upholding of Talos and their hatred of the Aldmeri Dominion. Unfortunately, this didn’t seem to be enough, as the civil war was at a complete deadlock, with the Legion crushing the Stormcloaks on the open field, and the Stormcloaks depleting the Empire’s ranks through ambush tactics. Both sides were beyond talking, and it seemed that the war would continue like how a fire would burn through all of its fuel.

At least the day brought some good news: the girl from before had apprehended the butcher. Before he could offer her a reward or give her more bounties to lighten his load, she was gone, the
heavy bronze doors slamming behind her.

While Jorleif contemplated this over his supper, Ulfric tore himself away from Galmar’s battle plans, and quietly walked out of the Palace of the Kings to the Temple of Talos.

--

Katariah hated this godsforsaken city, with its stupid snow getting caught in her eyelashes and its dark alleyways constantly causing her to keep becoming turned around. So far her time in Windhelm consisted of questioning potential witnesses to a brutal murder, breaking the jaw of a bastard who spent the entire fight blubbering about how his brother had the jarl’s ear and that she would pay for this, spending the night at an (admittingly) lovely inn, tracking a murderer to a house that smelled and looked like the back end of a butcher’s shop, talking to a disturbing child who wanted an old woman murdered, and consorting with a mage who insisted that the murder wasn’t him, but that the next death would occur in the Stone quarter literally right now.

After booking it to the market square and running Calixto Corrium through with her sword before he could do the same to poor Niranye, Katariah was dead on her feet. That being said, the constant activity allowed her to mentally put aside the gossip that Niranye had given her along with the Guild’s cut: that back at the Cistern, Brynjolf and Tonilia were clearly in a relationship. That was fine. Katariah was fine with that bit of news. She slumped back to the palace to tell that overworked steward that the murderer had been "apprehended." As she walked towards the empty throne, she heard a familiar voice coming from the next room.

“I fight for the men I’ve held in my arms, dying on foreign soil. I fight for their wives and children, whose names I heard whispered in their last breaths. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find a country full of strangers wearing familiar faces! I fight for my people, impoverished to pay the debts of an Empire too weak to rule them, yet brands them criminals for wanting to rule themselves! I fight so that all the fighting I’ve already done hasn’t been for nothing! I fight... because I must.”

The earnestness of Ulfric’s voice and the passion behind his claim brought tears to Katariah’s eyes and made the dossier that was still at the bottom of her pack feel as heavy as a brick. Pulling on her hood to cover her eyes, she mumbled her news to Jorleif and turned on her heel to leave the palace. She had to get away from people for just a little bit, otherwise her emotions would burst out of her. Deciding against the songs that were constantly being sung at Candlehearth Hall, she entered the Temple of Talos and knelt near the shrine at the front. Ignoring the noise of someone entering the temple after her, she bowed her head in prayer.

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Talos, help me, your successor, in my battles. Allow me to avenge my dead and exact justice on the living. Give me the courage that will help me find my place in this world, and wisdom that will lift the burdens from my back. By your will as Ysmir and the Stormcrowned, help me.

--

Her prayers ending, Katariah kept her head down and eyes closed, reveling in the serene silence of the temple. She might have stayed there for the whole night, had she not felt the presence that approached her side.

“What do you pray for?”

Katariah looked up to see Ulfric Stormcloak standing next to her. Unwilling to be towered over, she scrambled to her feet. While the jarl still stood more than a head taller than she, at least there was now some semblance of equality between them. “I pray for advice on what to do next. What does a jarl pray for?”

Perhaps not appreciating her attempt at wry humor, he looked towards the statue of Talos that watched over them. “I prayed for the Dragonborn.”

“Really?”

“Whoever he is, Skyrim and I need him to drive out the Empire once and for all.” Turning back to her, he continued, “You look like you’ve seen a lot. Have you heard anything about him?”

Pushing down the lump in her throat, Katariah replied, “I heard that he’s an Orc Mage operating out of a camp near Markarth.” She noticed Ulfric’s dissatisfied expression, and muttered, “Sorry for the disappointment,” referring more to herself than the lie, and moved to leave the temple. However, the jarl caught her arm and held on as she attempted to step around him. He searched her face for a few agonizing seconds before he took his other hand and brushed the hood off of her head. Recognition dawned in his eyes.

“You’re the one from Helgen.”
“That I am.”

Still holding onto her arm, Ulfric looked her up and down. “Should I be concerned about a member of the Thieves Guild in my city?”

Something about this man made Katariah forget her fears for a moment. Refusing to break eye contact, she replied, “That depends. Should I be concerned about standing in the presence of a killer of kings?”

Ulfric’s face darkened at this display of open defiance. “Careful, girl. You are speaking to a jarl.”

With a twisted smile, she nodded towards the statue of Talos. “We are standing under the eyes of a god, and are therefore equals.”

Katariah wasn’t quite sure what she hoped to accomplish with this arbitrary rebellion, and the irate expression on the jarl’s face told her that it would be nothing good. However, before he could get a word out, an otherworldly shriek that they both recognized shook the stones of the Temple of Talos.

Silently agreeing to put their debate aside for another time, the pair raced out of the temple and into Windhelm to see a green dragon right in front of the city gate, spitting fire from its mouth. The city guard encircled the beast and fired volley after volley of arrows, led on by a man dressed in a bear’s skin brandishing a massive battle axe. Seeing the jarl, he roared, “Ulfric! Get back to the palace, now!”

Shaking his head, he drew his war axe and advanced towards the dragon. “I am not abandoning my people!” Across the courtyard, he saw the girl slash at the dragon’s wings with a long, thin blade. *We’ll see who among us is the more powerful.* Gathering his strength, he Shouted “FUS RO DAH,” sending a shockwave through the monster. The flaw in this plan was now the dragon saw him as the biggest threat. Wheeling towards Ulfric, flames gathered at its maw. Before he could come to grips with his own mortality, the girl sprinted at him and knocked him on his side. From the ground, Ulfric watched as she slashed at the dragon’s jaws, causing it to roar in pain. Just when he thought that this idiot was going to get herself killed, she shocked him again when she climbed on top of the dragon’s scaled head. One solid stab to the eye killed the beast, and Katariah hopped off to stand above the jarl as the dragon fell limp onto the stones.

*It’s been a while since I’ve done that,* Katariah thought to herself, pretty pleased with her performance and Ulfric’s stunned expression. Pride quickly turned to horror as the dragon’s corpse began to melt into sparks. *Oh gods no, I completely forgot about this part.* The city
watched in awe as the energy from the dragon’s soul wrapped around her body and flowed into her lungs. Once the transfer was complete, dead silence reigned in the city. Taking one last look down at the jarl, Katariah turned and sprinted out of the city gates.

“AFTER HER!”

--

Thank Nocturnal I choose the Agent of Stealth as my gift, she thought as she raced south into the Rift’s dense forests. Her ability to blend with the shadows allowed her to lose the Stormcloak soldiers after a bit of a chase. The danger may have passed, but Katariah kept running. He knows, now everybody knows, everything’s going to change. When she reached Riften, manic terror gripped her heart to the point where she needed to do something, anything that would set just one thing right in the midst of all this chaos. Thinking back to her conversation with the eerie child in Windhelm, she ducked into Honorhall Orphanage. A few moments of observation of the evil old woman confirmed the boy’s accusations, and Katariah cut a line into her throat in plain view of the other children.

Definitely not wanting to face Brynjolf after the day she had, she slammed a few coins in front of Keerava and took an empty bed at the Bee and Barb. It was only when she sat down that she realized the full extent of the possible consequences of her actions. She had just murdered a civilian woman with half a dozen potential witnesses ready to speak against her. Dragonborn or Guildmaster aside, Jarl Laila could justifiably take her head for this. Just like Helgen all over again.

In the midst of this breakdown, a note was slipped under Katariah’s door. Sitting down her bed to read its contents, she was left with only confusion. A black handprint dominated the page, with the words We Know scrawled at the bottom. As she leaned in to glean more information from the mysterious letter, fumes rose from the ink, sending her world spinning. After a few seconds of drugged flailing, Katariah fell back onto the bed, with the note still clutched in her hand.

Chapter End Notes

I’m back to my old ways of ending chapters with Kat knocked out at the end of the chapter :/ Join us next time for an abandoned shack, a jester, and a band of murderers! All fun things! As always, comments/kudos/bookmarks are worth 1,000,000 septims to me!!
Chapter Summary

After crossing a line, Katariah finds a new family.

Chapter Notes

Music to read by: "Evil" by Anthony Left

The first thing Katariah noticed upon waking up was that this was the first time in weeks that she felt well rested. The sleep she had succumbed to was steady and completely dreamless. The second thing she noticed was that the ceiling above her was definitely not that of the Bee and Barb. It also wasn’t the Cistern’s, the second most likely place in Riften where she would find herself. Dawn’s light leaked through the wooden planks, forcing her eyes further open.

“Sleep well?”

The civilized voice came from above her. Katariah swung her legs over the side of the bed to see a masked woman, lounging on top of a shelf, lazily swinging a foot back and forth. She was dressed in leather armor that made it look as though she were covered in blood.

Realizing the danger she was in, Katariah hurriedly examined her surroundings, and found to her relief that she was still dressed in her Guild Leathers, with her pack and weapons lying next to her, undisturbed. Her head still swivelling around, she asked, “Where am I? Who are you?” In retrospect, the latter question was a rather silly one to ask of a woman wearing a mask.

“Does that really matter to you, sweet Katariah? You're warm, dry... and still very much alive. That's more than can be said for old Grelod, right?”

“How do you know about that?”

“My dear, half of Skyrim knows by now. An old hag gets butchered in her own orphanage? Things like that tend to get around. Oh, but don't misunderstand. I'm not criticizing. It was a good kill. Old
crone had it coming. And you saved a group of urchins, to boot. Also, Riften’s finest haven’t put two and two together and realized that it was your work. But there is a slight... problem.”

“A problem?”

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

“How can I repay you for a kill? If it’s money you want—”

The woman interrupted Katariah with a chuckle. “Sweet girl, I’m not speaking of mere material possessions.” She flicked her wrist towards the other side of the shack. “Why don’t you have a look at our guests?”

Turning her head to the opposite wall, she saw two men and a woman kneeling side by side, hands bound with black sackcloth covering their faces. As Katariah opened her mouth to ask more questions and perhaps wake herself up from this nightmare, the masked woman leapt down from her perch and landed lightly on the floor beside her.

“I’ve collected them from... well, that’s not really important to us, is it? The here and now, that's what matters to women like us. You see, there's a contract out on one of them, and that person can’t leave this room alive. But... which one? Go on, see if you can figure it out. Make your choice. Make your kill, I just want to observe... and admire.”

The idea of killing a defenseless civilian caused Katariah’s stomach to flip. Grabbing her pack, she bolted towards the door and tried to open it, the skin on her hands burning as the handle refused to budge.

“My sweet sister, don’t leave so soon. You’re involved in this now, and you will not leave this room until someone dies. Now pick your guest, and send that poor fool to the Void. I'll give you the key to this shack, and you'll be on your way, perhaps to a new future with a new family.” As she spoke, she picked up Katariah’s Nightingale bow and pressed it into her hands.

The walls began to close in around her, and Katariah felt as though the air she was breathing couldn’t quite reach her lungs. Questioning the captives would be useless, they would all beg and deny and scream, and the guilt in her chest would only increase. A dark force seemed to move her
arms as she nocked an arrow and aimed it at the opposite wall. Closing her eyes, she aimed towards the target in the center and fired. With a woman’s scream, the slumped form hit the wooden floor.

“Ah, the feisty goodwife. Quite the mouth on her. Someone must have wanted her dead... right?”

Eyes and voice distant, Katariah asked, “So who was it? Who had the contract? Was I right?”

The other woman gently shook her head. “No, no, no. Don’t you understand? Guilt, innocence, right, wrong.... Irrelevant. What matters is I ordered you to kill someone, and you obeyed. Quite beautifully, I might add.”

“May I please leave?”

Pressing a key into her hand, the woman in red smiled in way that Katariah could see through the cowl. “Sister, call me Astrid. You can go now. And you’ve repaid your debt, in full. Here’s the key to the shack. But why stop here? I say we take our relationship to the next level. I would like to officially extend to you an invitation to join my Family. The Dark Brotherhood. In the southwest reaches of Skyrim, in the Pine Forest, you'll find the entrance to our Sanctuary. It's just beneath the road, hidden from view. When questioned by the Black Door, answer with the correct passphrase: ‘Silence, my brother.’ Then you're in. And your new life begins. I'll see you at home.” With a wink, she slipped out of the shack

Katariah felt as though she were outside of her body when she cut the bonds of the other two guests and told them to leave and never speak of what happened here. She sat down on the bed for an indeterminate amount of time. Regardless of the circumstances, she had just killed someone in cold blood. She was now a murderer, someone irredeemable, existing alongside but outside of the society of men. Life in Skyrim had made her drift further and further from the person she was before, but this last step meant that she could never go back.

In a moment of truly spectacular timing, the first thing she saw when she gathered the will to leave the shack was a notice, the parchment pinned to a tree with an iron arrow:

By Order of Ulfric Stormcloak, the True High King of Skyrim

WANTED

The woman calling herself Katariah

Description: Nord Female around 20 years, small in height with white hair
Brynjolf is going to kill me, Katariah thought while staring at the notice. In terms of bringing trouble to the Guild, an army marching to the door of Ragged Flagon definitely hit the mark. Even if the jarl mistook her for a Nord, this was still a devastating blow in her fight for anonymity. She couldn’t go into cities in Stormcloak territory now, and fear of the Thalmor made her very reluctant to stay overlong in Imperial-controlled lands. Katariah became jealous of Astrid in her masked cowl. She can go wherever she wants, Katariah muttered to herself, with jealousy.

In an effort to clear her head in the face of narrowing options, she ventured to the plains located a distance outside the city of Whiterun for a bit of hunting. However, her meditations were broken by a truly bizarre occurrence on the road next to her.

“Bother and befuddle! Stuck here! STUCK! My mother, my poor mother. Unmoving. At rest, but too still!”

Katariah was no stranger to random happenings on the roads of Skyrim. Some were violent and dangerous, others were just odd. But this man, who barely came up to her shoulder with lank red hair and dressed in the clothes of a jester definitely took the cake as the strangest thing she had seen in a while. Seeing the girl’s eyes on him, the little man hopped onto the back of the wagon so that when Katariah approached him, he stood above her like an actor on a stage.

“Poor Cicero is stuck. Can't you see? I was transporting my dear, sweet mother. Well, not her. Her CORPSE! She's quite dead. I'm taking mother to a new home. A new crypt. But... argh! Wagon wheel! Damnedest wagon wheel! It broke! Don't you see?”

Like the situation with the Aretino boy in Windhelm, the situation offered Katariah the opportunity to set one thing right, though this time without the far reaching consequences. “Can I help you with this?”

Apparently not expecting her good will, Cicero’s eyes grew wide, and he bounced down from the wagon and proceeded to hug Katariah around the waist. “Oh YES! Yes, the kindly stranger can certainly help! Go to the farm - the Loreius Farm. Just over there, off the road. Talk to Loreius. He has tools! He can help me! But he WON’T! He refuses! Convince Loreius to fix my wheel! Do that, and poor Cicero will reward you. With coin! Gleamy, shiny coin!” After this exuberant outburst, the jester began to circle his wagon, muttering to himself, “The farmer is at his farm! Where else would he be? The farmer at his farm...”
The aforementioned farmer took a bit of convincing, but Katariah persuaded him to do right by this addled man and help him out. The reasoning that broke his arguments completely was that if helped Cicero, the sooner he would be rid of the jester. When she gave the good news to him, he proceeded to leap from foot to foot around her after he dropped a surprisingly substantial bag of coins into her hands.

“You... you did? He has? Oh stranger! You have made Cicero so happy! So jubilant and ecstatic! But more! Even more! My mother thanks you! For your troubles! Shiny, clinky gold! A few coins for a kind deed! And thank you! Thank you again.”

In the midst of this errand, Katariah had been doing some soul searching. To protect her friends, she could not return to the Cistern to stay, nor could she live the life of a civilian in any of the nine holds. The life of an assassin suddenly became very attractive to her. Astrid had mentioned an underground sanctuary and a family that waited for her. This lonely wandering wasn’t good for her, and she didn’t want to end up like Cicero, talking to herself on the side of a road. Besides, she already was a murderer, she couldn’t possibly fall any further. The gods had probably made a mistake, and another Dragonborn would be called up to High Hrothgar in good time. She needed to cut the ties between her past life and herself, and she could be happy. Inhaling deeply, she began her journey towards Falkreath as soon as she made sure that Loreius made good on his promise to her to help the jester.

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“What is the music of life?”

“Silence, my brother.”

“Welcome...home.”

Taking off her hood as she stepped inside the Sanctuary, Katariah recognized the voice that greeted her. The now-maskless Astrid took her hand and guided her down the stairs.

“You’re here at last! Come with me, dinner’s on the table and your brothers and sisters are anxious to meet you.”

“I’m honored to be a part of your family,” Katariah said meekly.
“*Our* Family, my dearest. *Our* Family.”

Chapter End Notes

Of all of the characters in Skyrim, I enjoy writing Cicero the most. Coming up in chapter 23, assassinations, a corpse, and the prospect of answers. I sound like a broken record here, but please please please comment/kudos/bookmark!!
Embrace

Chapter Summary

Life in the Dark Brotherhood spins on for Astrid and Katariah, until a whisper is heard.

Chapter Notes

Musical Inspiration: "Way Down We Go" by Kaleo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After meeting everyone in the Sanctuary, Katariah completely threw herself into her work for the Dark Brotherhood. She had already severed her connections to all that is good in choosing the life of an assassin, so she might as well be a good one. As long as she kept moving, she would not feel the empty stares of those she killed boring into her heart. As long as she kept moving, she was a happy part of the strange family gathered just outside of Falkreath. Her friendships with Babette, Gabriella, and Veezara had been nearly instantaneous in their formation with them welcoming her into their lives without a second thought. Nazir didn’t seem to believe in the concept of friendship, but when he actually smiled at Katariah upon the successful assassination of the vampire Hern, she nearly burst with pride. Similarly, when Arnbjorn called her “tidbit” and ruffled her hair after forging her a new dagger, she almost started crying. Festus was...Festus, but unlike Mercer before everything had gone south, his grumpiness didn’t cover the same malice (towards her, at least). Over all of them, Astrid had the final word.

Perhaps it was because the Sanctuary’s matron looked similar to Liselle that made Katariah trust in the leader so quickly. Maybe it was just the relief that someone was looking out for her. Whatever the reason, Katariah had placed a lot of faith in her new sister.

She was trying to be happy. She really was. She had a talent for killing that could get her far so long as she stayed the course and helped her family. This path would make her forget herself, but maybe that was what she needed. Unfortunately, the voice in the back of her head didn’t agree with that assessment, guilting her after a lot of her kills and reminding her that Esbern was still in the Ratway Warrens, vulnerable to attack. When she silenced those worries enough to sleep, her dreams continued:

Back on the cliff, an Imperial man wearing the same red and black armor that she put on everyday took her face in both hands and pressed their foreheads together. “My sins are yours. Learn what you can here, sister, but beware. Sharp rocks lie ahead of you.”
Katariah started awake to the feeling of something calling her. Lighting a candle, she slipped out of her bed and padded to the main room of the Sanctuary. The energy residing in the word wall beckoned the Dragonborn over so it could share its knowledge. She begrudgingly learned the new word, unaware that eyes watched her from the shadows.

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Astrid did not know what to make of the newest addition to her family. Katariah, as she called herself, was skilled with a blade and a bow and had helped her and Nazir out with various contracts, all successfully. In spite of her skill, she apparently took no joy in killing, choosing to sometimes forego the bonuses in favor of keeping some stranger. The girl talked in her sleep, murmuring things about time, soul gems, and other dangers coming across the horizon. Clearly she was damaged goods, but that didn’t worry Astrid too much. Assassins went hand in hand with troubled (to say the least) backgrounds. In truth, when she arranged for Katariah to be sent to the abandoned shack, she was rather hoping to take the girl under her wing. All of that potential she saw needed a guide, a firm hand. It was for that reason she had posted the wanted poster she had found earlier practically outside of the door. Katariah needed to know that safety and a future lied with the Brotherhood. The revelation that this anxious girl was in all likelihood the Dragonborn of legend made Astrid ill at ease. She had to be on her guard, to protect herself as the leader of her family.

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The next morning, Katariah felt oddly relieved to see Cicero upon his arrival to the Sanctuary with what she now knew was the Night Mother’s coffin. The idea of the jester as an assassination was a bit of a shock, but at least he had a family looking after him, like did. What she couldn’t quite understand was the disdain that Astrid held him in. If the Matron could welcome her, why not the one who brought the Night Mother that they supposedly all served? The atmosphere in their home had undeniably changed, with some supporting the new additions, and others merely accepting them. Katariah had no clue where she placed herself in this dichotomy, and ended up feeling torn in two.

This tension came to head when she returned from a contract, only to be caught by Astrid seconds after she stepped through the Black Door.

“Katariah, I need your help. It’s Cicero. Ever since he arrived, his behavior's been... Well, erratic would be an understatement. I do believe he is truly mad. But it's worse than that. He's taken to locking himself in the Night Mother's chamber, and talking. To someone. In hushed, but frantic tones. Who is he speaking with? What are they planning? I fear treachery.”
“Astrid, I don’t think you have anything to fear from Cicero.”

“Maybe you’re right, but healthy paranoia has saved this Sanctuary before, and my gut is telling me that demented little fool is up to something. Our family might not survive the current division.”

The mention of protecting the family was enough to open Katariah up to Astrid’s plan. “What would you have me do?”

“Dear sister, I need you to steal into that chamber, and eavesdrop on their meeting. It’ll be no use clinging to the shadows. They’ll see you for sure. No, you need a hiding place. Somewhere they’d never think to look.” She paced around while she planned, but swung back to the younger woman when an answer came to her. “Like inside the Night Mother’s coffin.”

That made Katariah want to vomit. “Astrid, I really don’t want to do this.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, we have no other choice. You need to remain unseen! Now go! Before they meet. And report back to me with whatever you learn.” She gently pushed her into the room with the coffin, and opened the lid. Katariah gathered a deep breath, and stepped inside, placing her arms around the corpse’s shoulders in an imitation of an embrace. The lid was shut behind her.

Keeping her eyes fixed on a point to the left of the Night Mother’s head, she forced herself to listen to the room outside. The faint humming told her that Cicero had approached the coffin.

“Are we alone? Yes...alone. Sweet solitude. No one will hear us, disturb us. Everything is going according to plan.” Katariah could tell that the jester was right next to the coffin, whispering through the crack in the door. “The others, I’ve spoken to them. And they’re coming around, I know it. The wizard, Festus Krex... perhaps even the Argonian, and the un-child... What about you?” There was something odd about Cicero’s voice, aside from the fact that he was speaking to a dead body. He sounded more sane than usual. As he continued, his voice became almost pleading. “No, of course not. I do the talking, the stalking, the seeing and saying! And what do you do? NOTHING! Not... not that I’m angry! No, never! Cicero understands. Cicero always understands! And obeys! You will talk when you're ready, won't you? Won't you... ...sweet Night Mother.” If she didn’t know any better, Katariah would assume that the jester was almost crying.

Her concern for Cicero was shoved down her list of priorities when the Night Mother’s eyes began to glow like candle flames, and a raspy voice began to whisper in her ear, echoing around her head.
"Poor Cicero. Dear Cicero. Such a humble servant. But he will never hear my voice. For he is not the Listener."

Outside, he spoke his prayers to the coffin, oblivious to the horrifying whisper and the sound of Katariah’s pounding heart. “Oh, but how can I defend you? How can I exert your will? If you will not speak? To anyone!”

With a smile in its voice, the whisper continued. “Oh, but I will speak. I will speak to you. For you are the one. Yes, you. You, who shares my iron tomb, who warms my ancient bones, who has been surrounded by death for so long now. I give you this task - journey to Volunruud. Speak with Amaund Motierre, and you may finish what started twenty years ago."

Cicero had begun banging his head against the metal of the coffin, but Katariah remained as still as death, unable to process what had just occurred. The Night Mother began to rasp in a tone that implied urgency.

"Tell Cicero the time has come. Tell him the words he has been waiting for, all these years: 'Darkness rises when silence dies.'"

Everything became silent, and a cloud of dust rose from the floor. Katariah, who had been determined to breathe through her mouth for this entire eavesdropping mission, began to cough loudly, giving her position away. The door to the coffin swung open, and she spilled out, landing on her back with Cicero looming over her.

Before this instant, she had regarded the jester with quiet bemusement, the same way one would look at an unusually precocious child. Among the assassins, she thought he posed the least danger to her compared to the rest of her siblings. However, as he drew an ebony dagger and lunged towards her with his lank red hair loose and eyes wild, she could see that she was very wrong.

“What? What treachery! DEFILER! Debaser and defiler! You have violated the sanctity of the Night Mother's tomb! Explain yourself! Speak, worm!”

Looking up at him, she said, faintly, “The Night Mother spoke to me.”

“She... spoke to you?” Cicero asked flatly, before rising again to a fever pitch. “More treachery! More trickery and deceit! You LIE! The Night Mother speaks only to the Listener! And there is..."
With every syllable, he pushed his dagger closer and closer to her neck. When the tip pressed against her skin and threatened to draw blood, she closed her eyes and nearly screamed, “DARKNESS RISES WHEN SILENCE DIES!”

Looking surprisingly sane, he stopped completely. “She... she said *that*? She said those words... to you? *Darkness rises when silence dies*? But those are THE words. The Binding Words. Written in the Keeping Tomes. The signal so I would know. Mother's only way of talking to sweet Cicero…” He paced around the room as he spoke. Surprise, then glee dawned in his face, and he cast the dagger aside. Rushing up to Katariah, who was still sitting on the floor below the coffin, he threw his arms around her. “Then... it is true! She is back! Our Lady is back! She has chosen a Listener! She has chosen YOU!”

In an arrival that was nearly one minute too late in Katariah’s opinion, Astrid raced around the corner, her infamous Blade of Woe already in hand. “By Sithis, this ends now! Back away, fool! Whatever you've been planning is over!” Her battle cry trailed off when she saw the youngest assassin on the ground, her face as white as her hair, but her throat still un-slit. “Are you all right?” She looked around the room, eyes darting to every corner. “Where's the accomplice? Reveal yourself, traitor!”

The response to this question came from Cicero, who was at present spinning around the room, hopping from foot to foot. “I spoke only to the Night Mother! I spoke to the Night Mother, but she didn't speak to *me*. She spoke only to *her*! To the Listener!”

Her eyes curiously blank as they followed the jester’s movements, Astrid demanded, “*What*? The Listener? What are you going on about? What is this lunacy?”

The man, who was now standing behind Katariah, braiding her hair, began to sing. “The Night Mother has spoken! The silence has been broken! The Listener has been chosen!”

Perhaps sensing Katariah’s discomfort with the current situation, Astrid pulled her up to stand beside her. “Sister, what in Sithis' name is going on? Cicero spoke to the Night Mother, but she spoke to you? Is this just more of the fool's rambling?” She sounded hopeful that what had transpired was merely the rantings of a madman. Hope turned to what could be seen as fear when Katariah confirmed that, for once, Cicero was completely right.

“So Cicero wasn't talking to anyone else. Just... the Night Mother's body? And the Night Mother, who, according to everything we know, will only speak to the person chosen as Listener... just
spoke. Right now. To you?"

“Yes. May I go?”

Astrid, who had been staring into space while chewing on a thumbnail, looked up suddenly. “What?”

“The Night Mother told me to go to Volunruud and speak with Amaund Motierre about a contract. May I go?”

The Matron seemed confused, but then angry. “No. No! Listen, I don't know what's going on here, but you take your orders from me. Are we clear on that? The Night Mother may have spoken to you, but I am still the leader of this Family. I will not have my authority so easily dismissed. I... I need time to think about all this.” With a glare, she turned on a heel and stalked away.

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It took some convincing, but a combination of extra work for Nazir and a majority’s support of the Brotherhood softened Astrid’s heart towards the idea of Katariah being the Listener. Taking her aside one night after dinner, she said, “If the Night Mother really did give you an order to talk to a contact, we’d be mad to ignore it. So go to this crypt, and talk with this Motierre, and we’ll see where this all leads.”

In the tomb that smelled like dust and death, Katariah, with a mask firmly in place, stood across from a milky pale man who looked and spoke like he had never been around anything unpleasant in his life. “This dreadful Black Sacrament thing... it worked,” he said, more to himself then to her.

When met with silence, he continued in his squeaky, snivelling voice. “I want you to kill several people. But they are all a means to an end. The real reason I contacted you.. people is that I seek the assassination of the Emperor.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a whole hell of a lot longer than I intended, so it's for that reason and the NHL playoffs (GO CAPS!!) that there was a bit of a delay with this segment. Come back next time for preparations, an agreement, and a betrayal. Yet again, pretty please with Black-Briar mead sprinkled on top, comment/bookmark/kudos if you
enjoyed!!
Day and Night

Chapter Summary

Under the light of day, Katariah takes a life, and under the cover of night she tries to save thousands.

Chapter Notes

Music Recommendation: "Spirits," by the Strumbellas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Beloved of Mara we are gathered together on this beautiful day to witness the joining of two souls.”

One thing assassins don’t speak about is how boring the profession can be, Katariah internally grumbled as she on the parapet above the Temple of the Divines with the sun beating down on her, clutching the bow Gabriella had enchanted for her in one hand and one of Babette’s potions to improve archery in the other. While the music was pleasant enough to listen to, and the food smelled amazing, the priest’s droning was getting on her last nerve.

“It is by the grace of Mara that we first learned to love one another, and as her children, we save one another from loneliness.”

A wedding, back on Cathnoquey, had always been a distant part of Katariah’s vision for her future. She admired and loved Liselle, but a spouse would have given her the ability to stop imposing on her friend’s good will, and allowed her to start a home and family of her own.

“But, today we stand at the Temple of all Eight Divines, and so we ask for eight blessings on the marriage of Vittoria and Asgeir. May Akatosh grant them long lives together.”

Liselle, Nine bless her memory, had no shortage of potential partners pursuing her hand in marriage. For reasons that were never clear to Katariah, she turned every single one of them down with her signature kindness and good humor.
“May Arkay grant them constancy throughout the seasons.

Katariyah had had her eye on Forster, a young man with thick black hair and dark eyelashes, for months now. She thought her feelings were unreciprocated or simply not seen, until one night, he actually asked to meet her by the cliffs at sundown.

“May Dibella grant them joy from each other’s company.”

Liselle, saint that she was, arranged her friend’s dark hair into a graceful twist and gave her one of the dresses that she had picked up in Cyrodiil. Katariyah had left their cottage that evening with the belief that perhaps a new chapter in her life was about to begin.

“May Julianos grant them prudence in their disagreements.”

Looking at his silhouette against the sky that was lit up in hues of pink and purple, Forster cut a strong figure. Katariyah thought that he looked like a warrior hero from the tales that Liselle brought back with her, as she took measured steps to reach him, not used to the presence of a dress’ hem near her ankles.

“May Kynareth grant them the ability to lift each other up in times of need.”

Forster flashed a huge smile when he caught sight of her. “Thank you so much for coming to meet me,” he said, looking down at her. “I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

“May Zenithar grant them prosperity.”

“Absolutely, Forster. What is it?”

“May Stendarr grant them mercy towards each other.”

“Can you help me get closer to Liselle? I’ve wanted to marry her for years, and I know she trusts your judgement.”
“May Mara grant you children to fill your days with happiness.”

Katariah slammed a smile onto her lips when she replied. “Yes, of course, whatever you need, I’d be happy to help.”

“And with the exchange of these blessed rings, I pronounce you husband and wife.”

Back on the parapet, the assassin shook her head as the sounds of the crowd’s cheers made their way up to her. One could drown in her memories, and she needed her wits about her today. Besides, she could hear the couple begin to speak from the balcony not thirty feet away from her. Throwing back one of Babette’s concoctions, she felt the effects immediately as her hands steadied and her eyes quickened.

“Honored guests, I just wanted to take this time to thank you all for being here. To thank you for sharing this wonderfully happy day with myself, and —”

Katariah drew herself up to her full height, and for a moment thought she was looking into a mirror, or perhaps a window to the past. Vittoria now Snow-Shod, with her dark hair and eyes full of hope, reminded her of herself back on Cathnoquey, back when she was whole.

“Kill her and let the past die. Kill her and fulfill your destiny,” the Night Mother rasped in her head.

Before Vittoria had a chance to continue to address her guests, Katariah sent arrow flying across the courtyard and into the bride’s heart, killing her instantly. Chaos broke out as she leapt down from her perch.

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In spite of the Night Mother’s encouraging, the combined guilt from the murders of Vittoria Vici and Gaius Maro was weighing on Katariah. Based on her limited memories of his visit to the island twenty years ago, she also didn’t really want to kill the Emperor. He was kind to her when he had no outside incentive to act as much. What she really wanted was answers: Did the Empire know what was going to happen to Cathnoquey and did they recognize the threat that their cooperation with the Thalmor had created. However, it appeared that Astrid and Motierre’s plan for the assassination would not allow her much time to talk, even if she was the one to strike the final blow.
However, she would learn from her mistakes. Acting without thinking in the case of Grelod had landed her in this situation, with the voice of a thousands-year-old corpse whispering in her head. The death of the Emperor of Tamriel would undoubtedly cause a lot of turmoil, and some individuals would be more suspect than others. With that in mind, she bought a huge plate of incredibly rare goat’s meat. Bribe in hand, she asked Arnbjorn to forge her a grappling hook, something that would allow her to climb a tall, sheer, stone wall.

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When she climbed through the upstairs window at the Palace of the Kings, no moons or stars lit up the night sky. The only light in the room she stood in was the orange glow from a dying fire in the hearth. Katariah was hoping she found the right room to leave her note in when a traitorous floorboard squeaked under her foot.

“So you’re back.”

Katariah slowly turned to see Ulfric Stormcloak sitting slumped over in a chair in the corner of the room.

“I wish you could give me a night of peace. I grow tired of you coming, tormenting me, and leaving.”

*He thinks we are in a dream,* she realized with a blush creeping into her cheeks.

“You normally aren’t so shy when you come to me, Dragonborn. It’s not a becoming look on you.”

Face practically on fire at this point, she folded her arms and attempted to take a firm tone of voice. “This isn’t that kind of dream. This is a warning. Withdraw your troops from the border of Haafingar and recall any agents you have in Solitude.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because something is about to happen that could easily be blamed on you. If it is, you could have
all nine Imperial Legions on your doorstep, which is a fight you’re not prepared to win.”

The jarl’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then began to drift closed, his head falling downwards. Apparently Katariah’s astute military advice was not enough to keep him in the state between sleep and awareness.

She sighed softly to herself as she placed the note detailing what she had just said on the table next to him, just barely under his hand. “Act on this when you wake,” she whispered, before she slipped back out of the window and into the storm that was gathering on the horizon.

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When a clap of thunder shocked Ulfric back into the land of the living, he attempted to take a moment to contemplate the bizarre dream he had, only to notice the scrap of paper under his palm.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a lot shorter than I originally intended, but it seemed like a natural breaking point. Coming up next, a namesake and some answers for what happened on Cathnoquey. Once again, please kudos/comment/bookmark if you enjoyed, and also stop by my tumblr, wewillavenge-it if you want to talk. I'm super friendly! To my fellow Americans, have a lovely last day of Memorial weekend and don't forget to cheer on the Capitals tomorrow!
Namesake

Chapter Summary

Death comes for the Dark Brotherhood, but Katariah gains new life.

Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: "I Am The Fire" by Halestorm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything had gone to Oblivion and back. After getting trapped on the bridge above Solitude, Katariah had been struck in the calf by an arrow, and ran with a limp back to Falkreath, only to find her Sanctuary engulfed in flames. A familiar cold rage entered her body as she fought her way through the Penitus Oculatus agents, only to slowly realize that the battle had been lost long before she had arrived. When all seemed hopeless, Nazir, in a stroke of brilliance, dropped his blade and shoved Katariah with both hands into the Night Mother's coffin.

"Embrace me, Katariah. I am your only salvation. You must speak with Astrid, in the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary."

Seeing Astrid lying there, barely recognizable as human, was horrible. The feeling somehow became worse when she revealed that she was the one responsible for all of the fire and deaths, and that Katariah must be the one to kill her. The Listener felt like she was watching from above as a white haired stranger cut the Matron’s throat while the Redguard and the vampire quietly gasped.

Outside, the last trio burned the dead and watched as the ashes of friend and foe alike drifted into the sunset. Nazir, seeming almost choked up with emotion, went back inside to see if anything could be salvaged. Babette knelt beside Katariah and began to bandage her leg. “I pity her, you know,” she said.

“Astrid?”

Babette nodded, applying a healing potion to the wound. “Yes. She did what she thought was right for us. She couldn’t have known that all of this would happen.”

Tears began to well in Katariah’s eyes as she realized that while Commander Maro helped destroy
the family, she was the one that struck the killing blow. “I’m so sorry, Babette. I didn’t want to—”

“Hush, sister. You did what had to be done, and I don’t blame you for holding the blade that Astrid pointed at herself.”

Katariah was about to thank Babette for her kindness, when a rasping voice intruded into her mind.

“Astrid is dead, as she should be. May she find redemption in the Void.” The Night Mother’s voice started out in its usual whisper, but as it continued, it got louder and louder in Katariah’s head. “But while you live, the Dark Brotherhood lives. We must fulfill our contract. Emperor Titus Mede II must DIE. Do not defy me on this, Little Listener. Speak again with Amaund Motierre, at the Bannered Mare in Whiterun. He will guide you to the true Emperor’s location.” By the end of the Unholy Matron’s instructions, her presence in Katariah’s head drowned out the forest’s sounds and left Katariah with her hands over her ears, rocking back and forth.

“That was her, wasn’t it? The Night Mother spoke again, about the contract.”

Katariah could only nod, and watched as Babette pressed a small hand to her forehead and frowned.

“This isn’t good for you, you do realize that? Giving the Night Mother access to your mind is only going to get worse from now on.”

“I don’t know how to break the connection between us.”

The Vampire gave a compassionate smile that looked a little odd with her pointed teeth. “If anyone can defy the Night Mother, its you. Now go, finish the contract for Festus, Veezara, Arinbjorn, and Gabriella and give the Penitus Oculatus a show that they will never forget.”

Katariah opted to leave Shadowmere at Falkreath and journey on foot to the Northern shore of Solitude after receiving instructions from that snivelling Breton in Whiterun who didn’t understand why the assassin found the name of the Emperor’s ship so funny.
While she walked to the east, she had the Spectral Assassin guard her from wildlife and bandits so she could brood in peace. Katariah wanted to understand what precisely she did wrong this time, what could have possibly made Astrid sell her specifically out to Penitus Oculatus. Was it spending too much time talking to the other assassins? Was it spending too much time outside on contracts? Focusing on Nazir’s assignment’s over Astrid’s? The other way around? Did she find out that Katariah lied about killing Cicero? She had fought to keep her voice steady when reporting the jester’s “death,” and the Matron had seemed convinced enough, so that possibility didn’t seem likely. Could it be that Astrid found out about her being Dragonborn? She didn’t think that was possible either, as the only people who knew who she was definitively were the Greybeards, Delphine, Brynjolf, and now that bastard Ulfric Stormcloak, who at least had the common decency not to say she was the Dragonborn on the wanted posters. At least she had done one thing right by Skyrim in all of this. Ulfric must have taken her warning, as no Stormcloak activity in Haafingar had been spotted.

All and all, she felt like she was back in the exact same place she had been in with Mercer’s betrayal: caught flat footed with nothing to learn from the experience. When she killed Commander Maro, she felt no solace or vengeance, just emptiness. As she sat under a bridge, the voice of the Spectre telling the same tale of some Mathieu Bellamont over and over gently pushed her into sleep.

*Back on the cliffside, a Nord man with a vicious scar over his eye gave her a cold stare. “My wounds are yours. You have again tasted betrayal, and you will once more, as certainly as the moons follow the sun.”*

Katariah jolted awake and continued her journey, eventually reaching the sandy beach where the ship that bore her name drifted a little more than a stone’s throw away. *It’s twenty years late, but I am ensuring that the Emperor keeps his promise to me,* she mused as she dove into the ice cold water and swam towards the ship. By the time she climbed on board, quiet bemusement had been replaced with flat anger when she remembered what one of the Thalmor had said back at the Longhouse on Cathnoquey.

*“As you are part of the Empire and therefore bound by the White-Gold Concordat, you must comply.”*

She drove her sword through the first soldier’s stomach while the question, *did he know,* echoed around her head. Two more came charging down the narrow staircase, bows drawn. Catching one arrow out of the air, she quickly used it to stab the first archer in the neck and lobbed a fireball into the next’s head.

*“Use your anger, and send your target to Sithis,”* the Night Mother encouraged her onward,
through the Katariah’s crew. The assassin didn’t even need stealth on her side, she only needed to hurt and to kill. Anything that stood between her and the door to the Emperor’s chambers ceased to be human and became only an inconvenience to be cast aside. By the time she pushed open the door, every single member of the Penitus Oculatus lay dead, and Katariah’s armor was coated in blood.

Her first thought when seeing the old man behind the desk was that he was much smaller than the visitor she remembered from her childhood. The second was that for a man a man about to die, he seemed incredibly calm.

“Once again, I prove Commander Maro the fool. I told him you can't just stop the Dark Brotherhood. Never could.”

Katariah had planned on extracting answers about Cathnoquey with the tip of a blade, not having a civilized conversation.

“Come now child, don't be shy. You haven't come this far just to stand there gawking.”

The assassin took the cowl off of her head. “I’ve come further than you know.”

Mede looked confused, but chuckled to himself when he realized who exactly he was speaking to. “And I thought I aged poorly. Forgive me, my daughter, I just didn’t expect to see you again. I suppose this makes sense. You have come from the end of the world to kill me. I suppose it is what I deserve.”

“Then you know what happened to my island.”

His expression distant, as he sat behind the desk, the Emperor nodded. “I heard rumors. The Thalmor aren’t exactly open about their pursuits, but they did approach my court, demanding information on Cathnoquey.”

“How could you let this happen to us? You knew what they were, what they were capable of. We didn’t.” Her face became flushed while her eyes filled with tears.

Mede hung his head in shame for what he and the girl had become. “I’m not going to seek your forgiveness or make excuses, but there is something you need to understand: we may both be
killers, but the Thalmor are beyond what you and I can comprehend. They view themselves not as an conquering army or a political faction, but as the carriers of the future itself. They will not surrender to anyone because the future cannot surrender to the past.”

Gripping the Blade of Woe until her knuckles turned white, Katariah was not satisfied with this explanation. “But why ally yourselves with them? You had the option to stand and fight, and instead choose to cooperate with those murderers!”

“You’re too young, you could not remember the Great War.” He raised up a hand to halt interruptions when he noticed her exasperated expression. “I will not bore you with a history lesson, but I will tell you that thoughts of courage and final stands whither and die in the face of men, women, and children dying by fire that cannot be stopped. We survived, perhaps for too long.” Mede leaned back in his chair and regarded the girl he had met so long ago. “I regret the choices that have led us to this point, and I have a feeling you do too. However, when I look at you, I see potential and ambition that I no longer have. You are here to kill me, and perhaps that is the right course of action at this time, but I have two favors to ask, two dying wishes of an old man, if you will. These will put justice back into a world that has none.” He stood up and leaned forward on his desk, looking Katariah squarely in the eyes. “First, I wish for you to end the one who set this treachery in motion. Second, in the name of our dead in Cyrodiil and on Cathnoquey and the sacrifices of ourselves that we have made, you will stop the Thalmor. Do you understand, Katariah?”

She nodded.

“Good.” Titus gave a small smile. He turned towards the windows behind him and watched the gentle waves pass by. “I am glad that you had the chance to see your ship. Whenever you’re ready, I am.”

Katariah silently walked behind the old man, placed her left hand over his eyes and guided her blade between his ribs. The death was as quick as she intended. She wrapped the body in bed sheets she found in the next room and pushed one of the windows open. To his rest I send an honorable man, she thought as she pushed the body out into the sea below.

The swim back to shore washed the red blood off of her armor, and gave her the opportunity to think with clarity, as the Night Mother was apparently pleased enough with her actions to give her a few moments of peace. She fully intended to keep her promise, but she now that any hope of the rebellion and the legion reconciling was foolish. The armies standing now would not help her, so she would form her own. With the Dark Brotherhood and the Thieves Guild at her back, she would attack them from the shadows and underground. At her hands, she could create a future that the Thalmor would have no part in. She could prevent another girl from walking her same steps. With a newfound hope in her heart, she strode to Whiterun to fulfill the Emperor’s first wish and start the foundation for a new world.
Kat has some big dreams, but things don't really work out the way they're planned. I am so sorry for the delay, I just started a new internship and also watched a very amazing ice hockey game tonight (#allcaps), and time has a way of filling itself. Up next, a very fun party with a very unwelcome guest. As always, puh-leeze comment/bookmark/kudos if you enjoyed!!
The World Below

Chapter Summary

While Katariah tries to form a new alliance, an unwelcome guest arrives.

Chapter Notes

Multiple musical inspirations for this chapter: "This World or the One Below" by Brian Tyler, but switch to (you all will know when) "Thousand Eyes" by Of Monsters and Men midway through this chapter. The charming song that Cicero sings is “The New Knife Game Song” by Rusty Cage.

To the untrained eye, nothing had changed in Riften. The Black Briars still sold their overpriced mead, the fishery still smelled when the sun was out, and to go out after dark was asking to get your pockets lightened. But if someone were to watch closely, they could sense that something was on the horizon. Bribes were being passed to the more unscrupulous guards, while those who believed in their own honor were told in no uncertain terms that they had better make themselves scarce on one night in particular or face something a little more than a drunken brawl. Meanwhile, a carriage arrived carrying a Redguard, a tiny Breton girl, and a jester that the first two barely seemed to tolerate, but all three stinking of death.

While every civilian quickened their steps and locked their doors at night, Katariah wanted to scream from the rooftops of Misteval Keep that they had nothing to fear. Mara’s honest truth, all she and her friends were doing was planning a celebration. If it weren’t for the fact that they were celebrating in an underground tavern and that they were the most celebrated thieves and assassins in Skyrim, the party would be indistinguishable from any other. Unfortunately, guests have a way of creating the atmosphere of a gathering, something that became very clear from the entertainment provided by Cicero:

There is an old tradition,

A game we all can play!

You start by getting liquored up

And sharpening your blade.

You take a shot of brandy,

You grab your knife and pray
And spread apart your fingers,
And that is what you say:

I have all my fingers,
The knife goes CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!

If I miss the spaces in between
My fingers will come off!

And if I hit my fingers,
Blood will soon come out.
But all the same I play this game
Cause that's what it's all about!

The choice of song and matching demonstration apparently annoyed one of the Flagon’s patrons, a squirrelly looking man that, according to Brynjolf, had arrived only a few days ago (even though Katariah could have sworn that she had heard his voice somewhere before). He got up and left the bar as soon as the celebration got underway.

The odd behavior of a stranger aside, the meeting of the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood was going extremely well. Food, drinks, and a genuinely good time were being had by everyone in the Flagon, and conversation flowed naturally, as both factions had mutual friends and similar ways of looking at the world. Other than having to stop Vex from throwing a tomato at Cicero during his song, Katariah thought that her new alliance was taking off without a single hitch.

After desserts were served, Brynjolf stood and raised his glass. “Tonight marks the beginning of a new era, fair ladies and noble gentlemen.” The honorifics drew a few chuckles from the guests. “For the first time in centuries the toughest sons of bitches and actual bitches in Skyrim stand united.”

“Hey!” Vex interjected.

“It’s equality, love.” Delvin countered.
“Anyway,” Brynjolf continued, “Both the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood are enjoying periods of unprecedented success, and we all have one person to thank for that.” He gestured towards Katariah, who was sitting at the head of the table. “Here’s to you, lass. For everything.” With that, he downed his mead in a single swig while everyone echoed their approval of his toast.

Once silence fell again, Nazir rose and with yellow eyes gleaming, matched the thief’s sentiments. “We believe the same thing, little sister. Know that I will follow you until I am but dust in the wind.”

“Seconded, but don’t hold your breath on that!” Babette added with a dainty smile that showed her pointed teeth.

After the laughter died down, a chant of “speech, speech” began to rise up despite Katariah’s best attempts to wave it down. Sighing, she stood before all of her friends in Skyrim. “I’m not one for speeches, so I’ll try to keep this short. You can thank me as much as you want, but it is because of you all that we are here today. We have overcome so much, and together, I believe that we can create a new dawn for ourselves.” She raised her mug, but before she could drink from it, a slow clap came from the entrance.

“I always knew you had potential, Katariah.” Flanked by four soldiers in shining golden armor, a figure wearing the mages robes of a Thalmor stepped out from the shadows. When she took off her hood, she revealed a face that Katariah had prayed she would never see again.

The disaster that had freed one woman from the prison outside of Bruma had not been so kind to Aleyne. Her once pretty face was covered in scars, and an open black wound dominated the right half of her face. In spite of these imperfections, Katariah could still recognize her by the earnest look she still had in her eyes, the expression that implied that she saw and hoped for the best in those she met.

Upon hearing Katariah’s involuntary gasp and seeing the Thalmor soldiers, the thieves and assassins rose up with weapons drawn.

“You picked the wrong party to crash, girl,” Brynjolf growled while Karliah nocked an arrow.

“Please relax, don’t get up!” Aleyne waved a hand and paralyzed every single one of them at their seats. “Even if Katariah has captured my interest, we’re not here for her. Just the man hiding out in the sewers that you’re guarding.” She strolled past the table, slightly grimacing. “Of course, we can’t have word of this reaching the world above. As much as I loathe the violence, some things are simply necessary, I’m sure your leader would agree with me about that.” Turning towards her
entourage, she adopted a commanding tone of voice. “Kill every one of them, except her, we need her alive, along with the Blades agent.” Before she pushed open the door to the Ratway Vaults, she gave a last, disappointed look to Katariah, who was still frozen with her mug in her hand. “I’m sorry things had to come to this, but give it time. We’ll have plenty of opportunities to make amends and work together once we bring you under our wing.” Aleyne slipped through the door while the soldiers with bound weapons advanced on the paralyzed guests.

Meanwhile, Katariah was focusing on the glowing point in the back of her mind, where the dragon souls and Words of Power resided. While the Night Mother railed on about revenge written in blood, the part of her that was purely Dragonborn whispered, **strength, let the fire burn bright within you.** She felt a wave of heat pass through her muscles, leaving her to crash onto her hands and knees, but now free to move.

Hearing the clatter, the four soldiers turned to the kneeling girl with rising terror in their eyes. **Privacy be damned, this is the only way I can get us all out of this.** Katariah gathered her courage and resolution and channeled it towards the two Thalmor standing behind Babette and Karliah.

**“FUS ROH DAH!”**

The soldiers were sent flying across the Ragged Flagon and crashed against the stone wall with a sickening crunch. Katariah grabbed the fork from her place at the table and jammed it into the third soldier’s neck. The last soldier put up the biggest fight, forcing her to draw the sword Delphine had given to her back at Riverwood. Unfortunately for the Thalmor agent, his orders to leave her alive made him reluctant in his attacks, giving her the perfect window to hack his hand off at the wrist, and end his agonizing screams half a moment later.

The paralysis spell began to wear off, with Katariah’s friends stumbling back to a freedom that allowed them to give her shocked looks. She took a deep breath and gave orders to the speechless criminals. **“Thieves, guard the entrance in the Cistern. Assassins, you take the door from the docks. Nobody enters or leaves until I get back. If they don’t take no for an answer, end them. Does everyone understand me?”**

Surprise had given way to anger, and with determination to protect their home in their steps, those that lived in the world below Skyrim took up their posts while Katariah sprinted through the door to the Vaults.

All of the torches in the narrow tunnels had been extinguished, forcing Katariah to guide herself with her left hand against the damp wall, her sword grasped in her right. “It’s just you and me, Aleyne. Your men are dead and there’s no way you’re getting out of here alive.”
The other woman’s voice echoed across the tunnels. “Once again, you surpass expectations, Katariah. I can’t wait to see what you’ll do when you’re working with us!”

Hoping to use sound to aid her in her hunt, the Dragonborn decided to keep talking. “Why do you keep saying that I’ll join you, the people who murdered my island?”

The sincere voice came further down and to the left. “Because you need us! You have so many gifts, but you don’t know how to use them. Just look at yourself! With your first breaths of freedom in Skyrim, you break into an embassy and join not one but two bands of criminals. You need our help.” Footsteps came from further down the passageway. “I wasn’t even that surprised to learn that you’re the Dragonborn. After watching you in Bruma, I just knew that there was something extraordinary about you. But you’ve managed to squander that too! Dragons are still terrorizing the land while you wander around underground. We can put you to use and give you what you need to fulfill your destiny."

Katariah picked up her pace and raised her sword as she saw a ball of mage light glowing a short distance ahead of her. Got you. Aleyne, apparently not realizing the danger she was in, kept giving her argument.

“In spite of all these flaws, Katariah, believe me when I say that in the eyes of the Thalmor, even you can be loved. Even you can serve the future. You may have befriended the scum of Skyrim, but I saw you in Bruma. I am the only one who truly knows you. You'll realize that in time.”

Katariah reached the light only to find a brick wall before her. However, in her blade’s edge, she saw the reflection of green eyes from the alcove behind her. She only had a fraction of a moment to whirl around and raise her guard before Aleyne erupted from the shadows, brandishing an ebony dagger.

In contrast her magical talent, the Altmer girl possessed few skills in physical combat. She gave up all of the advantages that surprise had given her, while Katariah surged forward, slashes forcing Aleyne back against the wall. Grabbing her shoulder with her left hand, Katariah forced her to her knees and raised her sword, preparing to deal the killing blow.

“WAIT!” The Thalmor mage pleaded. “Even if you don’t believe me, you should know. There is another survivor from your home, Cathnoquey. If you kill me, you’ll never find out any more than that.”

Kill her, let the past die, walk alone with death, the Night Mother scratched against her thoughts. Katariah shook her head to try and quiet the whispers that were increasing in volume, with no
success. Mania growing behind her eyes, she screamed at the elf below her, “How can I trust you!?”

“Because I respect you too much to lie to you, Katariah. Remember that.”

In the moments of hesitation, the Night Mother grew louder and louder within her head, forcing Katariah to screw her eyes shut. *Make it stop, please make it stop.* Rantings about Sithis, disobedience, and the Void just kept going until the Listener crashed onto her side. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Aleyne ran back into darkness. Seconds or years later, she couldn’t tell, the phrase “The connection has been broken, silence falls again” flashed across her mind and left nothing in its wake. Katariah forced herself to her feet and revelled in the serenity she was left with. *No rest for the weary,* she reminded herself, as she called out, “Esbern? Are you there?”

A voice from behind a metal door responded, “Esbern? I...I don’t know any Esbern!”

Katariah sighed. *Got you, at least.*

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Before the sunrise, the factions’ leaders met with Katariah and Esbern at the docks behind Riften to dispose of the evidence from the previous night. Attaching stones to the soldiers’ armor, they watched the Thalmor sank to the bottom of the sea.

Turning back to her comrades, she asked, “Was anyone hurt?”

Brynjolf grimaced. “Etienne took a nasty scratch to the neck when reinforcements came to help your friend, the mage, but he’ll be fine. We looked high and low for her, but she’s vanished. Sorry about that.”

“And everyone knows now? About me?”

Nazir gave what was his rendition of a reassuring smile. “Babette and I have had our suspicions for some time now.”
Katariah looked back to Brynjolf. “And the Guild?”

“Delvin’s waiting for a good time to ask you about buying dragon scales. As for everyone else, they seem fine with it. Some are a little offended that you didn’t tell them sooner.”

Exhaling a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, she straightened her back. “Alright. There are some things I need to take care of, so I’m going to be out of reach for a while,” she said, glancing at Esbern, who was currently entertaining Delvin and Vex with stories from a time past. “Brynjolf, you’re in charge of the Guild. Nazir, you lead the Brotherhood now.”

“But you’re the Listener! You can’t leave us!”

Katariah looked down to see Cicero, who had apparently followed them out here. Kneeling to meet his eyes, she tried to explain what had happened last night. “I’m sorry Cicero, but I’m not the Listener anymore. The Night Mother decided to break her connection with me.” Before she could add that she hoped he could find someone worthy to take her place, the jester’s twisted expression broke, and he ran back to the Ratway, sobbing.

Babette gracefully wiped a single tear from her cheek. “Poor thing. I’ll look after him, sister, don’t you worry.”

“That is so sweet of you, Babette, thank you so much. By the way, Nazir is still in charge.”

Even in defeat, the vampire gave a mischievous smile. “Worth a shot. I will keep an eye on him though, I promise.”

Helping her to her feet, Nazir squeezed her hand. “I don’t want to see any tears from you, girl, because this isn’t goodbye. You have a lot of things to accomplish, but when you want our help, you need only ask.”

Brynjolf gave her one last hug. “Seconded, lass. You just say the word, and we’ll come running.”

Before the tears that Nazir had warned against could come, the Dragonborn gave a curt nod and beckoned for Esbern to follow her.
As they walked west towards Riverwood, the old man broke the silence Katariah was wading in. “I understand your grief, Dragonborn, in having to leave your friends, but please take comfort in knowing that you bring hope. You’re living proof that the gods haven’t abandoned this world.”

Katariah tried to force her lips into a smile, but she found that she cared less about the gods abandoning the world than the fact that she had abandoned her family.

Chapter End Notes

Aleyne's back and so am I!! Hope you all had a lovely weekend. I don't want to make guarantees, but since we are back on the main quest path, updates MIGHT come a bit faster. As always, pretty please with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top, comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed.
Chapter Summary

The trio journeys west, and Katariah grapples with taking her place in a shared history.

Chapter Notes

Song Inspiration: "Battle Scars" by Paradise Fears

Riverwood was truly a fascinating town, in Katariah’s opinion. From her perspective, the world was shattered and reborn again three times over, but in the month since she had last set foot in Riverwood, absolutely nothing in the town had changed. Skyrim could be burning down around them, and these people would go about their daily business as if they knew that the sun would rise again the next morning.

That is, everyone except for Delphine, who had been sweeping the porch of the Sleeping Giant when the Dragonborn entered the town, and was now angrily striding towards her. “Where in Oblivion have you been?! I’ve left notes, I’ve sent couriers, I even tried to track you down myself, and you just stroll back here like you—“

Katariah never got to hear the second part of what she was sure was a very creative simile, as Esbern stepped out from behind her. “I... it's good to see you, Delphine. It's been... a long time.”

In that moment, Delphine looked a lot younger and a lot less world-weary as she threw her arms around the old man. “It's good to see you, too, Esbern. It's been too long, old friend. Too long.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Katariah watched as the reunion drew the stares of some villagers and disrupted the staid atmosphere of the village. “Not to ruin the mood, but can we take this somewhere else?”

Collecting herself, Delphine straightened her back and, to Katariah’s disbelief, wiped a tear off of her face. “Right, you two have made it safe and sound, we should head inside. I have a place we can talk.” After barking an order at Orngar to hold down the bar, she opened the door to the wardrobe and pushed on the back panel, revealing the staircase to her secret armory. As the three headed down the stairs, she gestured vaguely to Katariah, while talking to Esbern, “Now then. I
assume you know about…”

The Nord man practically beamed when he heard mention of the youngest member of their trio. “Oh yes! Dragonborn! Indeed, yes. This changes everything, of course.”

*He always looks at me like he’s waiting for some gods damned religious revelation,* Katariah thought to herself while Esbern rattled around the room, casting his gaze over the maps and books. While he certainly took a kinder approach with her than Delphine did, Katariah was beginning to find his eternal hope in her as the paragon of heroism and the savior of them all equal parts exhausting and terrifying. *He’s really bet on the wrong horse,* she internally quipped as she recalled Aleyne’s disturbingly correct assessment of her activities in Skyrim.

Delphine seemed to be losing her patience with the man she had previously described as her mentor. “Esbern, what are you even—”

“Here it is! Come, let me show you.” As soon as the two women stood on either side of him, he pointed at an unindicated spot on the map in front of him. “Right here. Sky Haven Temple, constructed around one of the main Akaviri military camps in the Reach, during their conquest of Skyrim.”

Glancing around Esbern, the Breton asked Katariah, “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Not a clue.”

“Hush, you two. This is where they built Alduin's Wall, to set down in stone all their accumulated dragonlore. A hedge against the forgetfulness of centuries. A wise and foresighted policy, in the event. Despite the far-reaching fame of Alduin's Wall at the time - one of the wonders of the ancient world - its location was lost.” Esbern seemed to be talking more to himself than anyone else.

Delphine tried to draw him back. “*Esbern*. What are you getting at?”

That question shocked the man out of his lecture and made him turn and face the two of them. “You mean... you don't mean to say you haven’t heard of Alduin's Wall? Either of you?” He glanced at Katariah with that hopeful look once again.

Curtailing another long winded explanation, the Breton cut in. “Let's pretend we haven't. What's Alduin's Wall and what does it have to do with stopping the dragons?”
Turning back towards the map, a sort of mania entered the archivist’s eyes. “Alduin's Wall was where the ancient Blades recorded all they knew of Alduin and his return. Part history, part prophecy. Its location has been lost for centuries, but I've found it again. Not lost, you see, just forgotten. The Blades archives held so many secrets…”

“So you think that Alduin's Wall will tell us how to defeat Alduin?” Of the two of them, Delphine seemed the most focused on the various practicalities of their situation.

“Well, possibly, but there’s no guarantees. Right now, it’s our best hope.”

Almost beaming with joy, Delphine ushered him back up the stairs. “Sky Haven Temple it is then! I knew we could count on you Esbern.”

Katariah followed the pair up to the tavern, faintly hearing the Breton announce to Orgnar that she was probably never coming back. As she shut the secret panel behind the wardrobe, she had a similar feeling: that she would never see this place again.

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All things considered, the Reach could be quite peaceful. The mountains looked beautiful as they cut across the sky where fog and sunlight mixed, and the sound of wind rushing through the juniper trees made a sort of music. The region had the appearance of a place that existed thousands of years before civilization and would exist thousands after. The early morning hours of their travel meant that the road was theirs alone, and Katariah was enjoying the silence of her mind, now free of the Night Mother.

Delphine, on the other hand, clearly did not find the region as relaxing as she did, as she elected to take the lead on their journey and never allowed her hand to slip far from the hilt of her sword. Katariah didn’t really understand why that kind of paranoia was necessary. They hadn’t run into too much trouble, other than a sabre cat that they had disturbed from its slumber, and she was able to send it off of a cliffside with a Shout in an effort to get back into the habit of using her gift as a weapon. For the past month, she had lived a life where silence was strongly recommended, if not required, so she had been afraid that her Voice had faded alongside her honor.

To her surprise, her Voice was still strong. However, the knowledge that the black dragon that she had seen at Helgen and Kynesgrove was, in reality, Alduin, had caused her belief in her abilities to wane. The Greybeards never mentioned a word about slaying anything, Katariah grumbled to
herself, *but if Delphine and Esbern are correct, I am supposed to kill what could be considered Akatosh himself.* Her life underground as a thief and assassin had allowed her to avoid this knowledge, allowing to focus on gaining the skills and wealth she would need to take on the Thalmor in whatever way she could manage. On this path, she would have been able to combat the Aldmeri Dominion for as long as possible with the knowledge that someone would take up her cause after her end. With the Dragons rising and Alduin’s return, responsibility and fear dominated her future. If Esbern’s ramblings were correct, she was the only one who could possibly stand against the World Eater, in victory or in death.

In defense of us all, you will be called to rise three times. Katariah remembered Ursula’s prophecy from her last night on Cathnoquey and felt a little hope. *The deaths of Mercer and the Emperor certainly didn’t give me a feeling of rising,* she thought. *So facing Alduin must be the first trial. That must mean that will live on face the next two.* But live in what way? Even if she were to defeat Alduin, would the dragons destroy everything so that her next battles would take place on fields of ashes? Would Alduin keep returning, damning her to a life of fighting him, over and over again? Would the dragons take her away from her quest against the Thalmor, forever turning her gaze away from her island and the loved ones she had lost?

Perhaps not all of them. In a moment of lost focus, Katariah remembered how Aleyne had bargained for her life. The idea of another survivor, a piece of her past life, sent her thoughts spinning even further. Over the course of her journey, she thought about the idea of one of her friends being imprisoned as she was, and grew sick at the notion. She was torn between selfishly praying that the survivor was Liselle, and the desire to keep her friend’s character safeguarded within her memories as opposed to existing as one of the husks that the Thalmor left in their wake. She didn’t know which hope made her hate herself more.

In the midst of these dark thoughts, Esbern ambled up to her side. “Dragonborn,” he said, inclining his head to her.

Katariah had given up on trying to have the old man call her by her name and stop bowing his head whenever he addressed her, and decided simply ignore the offputting displays of deference for the sake of her own sanity. “How are you doing, Esbern? Are we getting close to Karthspire?”

“Oh yes, we’re very close,” he replied, with an exalted expression on his face. “We will soon see what our predecessors have said about you. You must be so excited!”

Katariah tried to quickly muster up an appropriate reaction, but Esbern carried on without needing a response from her. “Delphine tells me that you come from an island near Akavir. In a way, this must be like a homecoming for you.”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it. Esbern, may I ask you a question?”
“Anything, Dragonborn.”

*For the love of Talos, enough with the honorifics.* “About me being...Dragonborn...is there any chance that there is another one on Nirn like me, who can help me face Alduin?”

The Nord man looked aghast at the suggestion. “Absolutely not! Only you can finally defeat Alduin and avert the end of the world!”

“But the Septims were Dragonborn emperors, at least they were in my books. Wouldn’t that mean that at least two Dragonborns existed at once, a parent and a child?”

Katariyah thought she was being very clever, but Esbern shook his head, dispelling her last hope that she had a potential ally somewhere. “I’ll explain this more at Alduin’s Wall, but you are not Dragonborn in the same way that the Septims were.” Upon seeing her befuddled expression, he continued. “The Dragon blood within the ruling line was the result of a covenant between St. Alessia and the Aedra, allowing the emperors to light the Dragonfires that protected Tamriel from Oblivion. They served as a shield. With your Voice and the dragon souls you claim, you must be a sword.” He gave her a sympathetic smile. “But have courage, Dragonborn, upon our honor as Blades, Delphine and I will always be by your side.”

They had approached the cliff side where Delphine was waiting. “Karthspire should be at the base of the canyon, to the west, just over there,” she said, gesturing to a small opening in jagged rocks. “If we make our way down this way, we should—“

“FORSWORN FOREVER!”

A black arrow flew past the trio, nearly taking off Esbern’s ear. In the time that it took them to draw their weapons, eight more Reachmen emerged from behind rocks and trees.

“Nothing the Blades can’t handle,” Delphine boasted, her head held high. It was at this moment that they all heard roar of the Blood Dragon as it swooped over the mountains.
The battle actually wasn’t as hard as Katariah thought it would be. The Forsworn had taken it upon themselves to kill the dragon before their human enemies, giving her the opportunity to rush in and take its soul. In the rush of pure power she felt within her, she killed the last Reachmen and sheathed her sword. As she was mentally congratulating herself, she heard a rush of what she thought was feathers when wiry limbs and razor sharp talons pushed her onto her back.

“We will cut out your heart and offer it to the gods of the Reach!”

The hagraven dug one set of claws into Katariah’s sword arm and raised the other preparing to draw a red smile underneath her chin. Katariah was trying to kick the monster off of her torso when she heard the sound of glass smashing in front of her, beyond her view. The Oblivion-spawn became as still as stone for a moment before it collapsed forward onto her chest, allowing her see the ice spike protruding from its back and Esbern, standing with his hands raised.

Stammering out a thank you, Katariah shuffled to her feet and sheepishly followed the two Blades into Karthspire Canyon. They passed through the various stone traps and puzzles to find themselves standing above a series of concentric circles, with a stone dagger lying at its center. The Dragonborn found the display and the canyon as a whole ominous. The deeper they journeyed, she could have sworn she heard whispers, faintly, out of the corners of the rooms, but whenever she tried to focus and discern what they were saying, they would disperse and rise again in another place. Delphine and Esbern did not seem to notice anything odd, and the Nord man greeted the circles with rapturous delight.

“Wonderful! Remarkably well preserved, too. This is a blood seal, one of the lost Akaviri arts. It’s triggered by blood.”

“You don’t say, Esbern,” Delphine quipped, looking tired of having to hold the torch. She was silenced by the sour look her mentor gave her.

Turning back to the center of the circles, he beckoned to Katariah. “Your blood, Dragonborn. Whenever you’re ready.”

_I have a really bad feeling about this_, she thought as she knelt on one knee at the center of the seal. The whispers silenced as she reached down to pick up the dagger, and sliced a thin line across her left palm. A moment later, blood fell from her hand onto the stonework and clouds rose into her vision. She was peripherally aware of Delphine saying that the Dragonborn should have the honor of entering Sky Haven Temple first, which was all well and good, as Katariah’s feet seemed to be carrying her foreword in a trance that existed apart from her will.
She’s here, the Dragonslayer has come come home, she has brought the remnants, the Blades will rise again! She could now understand the whispers as they flew around her and carried her forward. At the center of the room, she saw what she assumed was Alduin’s Wall. She had seen stone and metal artwork before, but this was unlike anything she could have imagined. The carvings seemed alive and breathing, and the warrior at the left-half of the Wall seemed to shimmer. If she gazed at it straight on, it took the appearance of a typical Nord swordsman. But if she turned her head a little to the left, the carving appeared to portray the high-cheekbones and spellcraft typical of an Altmer woman. A little to the right, it became a Khajiit. Further still, a Redguard.

Come, take your gift from us. The voices tore Katariah from the wall, and guided her to a small chamber to the right, where, on top of a table, a sword nearly identical to the one Delphine had given her, sparking with a strange enchantment. When she grasped the hilt, the world around her faded, while she could still hear Esbern’s voice coming from the next chamber.

“When misrule takes its place at the eight corners of the world…”

She watched from a dimly lit hallway as a Bosmer mage with frightening red eyes lifted a staff with a green gem, while a Dunmer woman with a crown like the sun looked on in horror, realizing her mistake.

“When the Brass Tower walks and Time is reshaped…”

Turning around, she could hear metal scraping metal, and looked up to see a bronze giant rise from slumber, only to shudder and fall again as a force beyond wind, fire, or earth tore through its center.

“When the thrice-blessed fail, and the Red Tower trembles…”

Hearing screams, Katariah quickly turned and saw three beings, once gods, now humbled, with heads bowed while fire and ash rained down over a people.

“When the Dragonborn Ruler loses his throne, and the White Tower falls…”

“You’ve been a good friend, in the short time that I’ve known you. But now I must go. The Dragon waits.” A man with a contented expression and purpose in his steps walked past her with an
amulet in hand, and was consumed by winged fire.

“When the Snow Tower lies sundered, kingless, bleeding…”

To her side, she heard a Shout like thunder and the clatter of a steel sword, followed by the scream of a woman. From the shadows, two men she recognized emerged, striding towards each other with weapons drawn, a bloody scar forming on the land between them.

“The World-Eater wakes, and the Wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn.”

The sound of a dragon’s roar knocked Katariah backwards and out of her dream-state. She looked at the sword she was still holding. The word Dragonbane was etched into the hilt.

“Katariah! Come look at what Esbern found!” Delphine called from the next room.

Heart pounding, she took the Blades sword off her belt and placed it on the table and sheathed Dragonbane. Normally, she would have been disgusted by such dishonesty, but her experiences with Mercer and Astrid prevented her from completely trusting the Blades, despite their insistence that they lived to serve her.

In the main chamber, she joined Delphine and Esbern at the center of the Wall, where Alduin appeared to be writhing in pain while three warriors Shouted him down.

“Have you ever heard of something like this? A Shout that can knock a dragon out of the sky?” Delphine seemed skeptical towards the premise.

“The Greybeards might know.” Truthfully, Katariah had been looking for a good reason to return to High Hrothgar and its peaceful halls.

The Breton, however, only seemed resigned to that possibility. “You're probably right, I was hoping to avoid having to involve them in this, but it seem we have no choice.”

“What do you have against the Greybeards? They helped me find out who I am?”
Delphine folded her arms across her chest. "If they had their way, you'd do nothing but sit up on their mountain with them and talk to the sky, or whatever it is they do. The Greybeards are so afraid of power that they won't use it. They definitely shouldn’t be in charge of guiding someone like you.” She put an arm around Katariah’s shoulders. “Think about it. Have they tried to stop the civil war, or done anything about Alduin? No. And they're afraid of you, of your real power. But you can trust me, there's no need to be afraid. Think of Tiber Septim. Do you think he'd have founded the Empire if he'd listened to the Greybeards?”

*By Akatosh, someone has an agenda.* Keeping her face neutral and resting a hand on her new sword, Katariah replied, “It’s alright, Delphine. I’m not afraid of my gifts.”

The Blades agent seemed satisfied enough. “Good. The Greybeards can teach you a lot, but don't let them turn you away from your destiny. You're Dragonborn, and you're the only one who can stop Alduin. Don't forget it.” With that, she gently nudged Katariah out of Sky Haven Temple, and into the night.

Chapter End Notes

So me saying that updates were going to come faster was apparently an abject lie, super sorry about that, a lot of things came up at once. As per our usual arrangement, every comment/kudos/bookmark is worth one trillion sweet rolls to me!!
A war may be on, but appearances must be kept up. At least, that was the belief Jorleif subscribed to, as he had the servants scrub the Palace of the Kings within an inch of its life. Personally, Ulfric didn’t really see the point in putting on a mask of civility for this meeting. Nothing would come of it. The lines had been drawn and sides had been taken so early on, that one of his number switching sides and tipping the balance was simply too good to be true.

It was for this reason that Ulfric chose to remain on his throne with a disdainful expression frozen on his face when Jarl Idgrod Ravencrone entered the palace for diplomatic negotiations.

The elderly woman walked down the center of the hall, flanked by her housecarl and a steward.

“Jarl Ulfric. I wish I could that this is a pleasure.”

“Jarl Idgrod. What brings you from Morthal?”

In spite of making a long journey to the east, Ravencrone chose to not state her case immediately. “I would have thought that the man who considers himself the paragon of Nord nobility would stand in the presence of a lady.”

“I never realized you considered yourself to be one.”

That earned a dry laugh. “In the presence of a jarl, then.”
Ulfric conceded to her point and stepped down from his throne to stand face to face with her.
“Now, can we discuss why you are in my hold?”

--

Aleyne sucked in a breath, raised a hand to the wooden door, and knocked twice. *Fear will do you no good here.* It amazed her how the voice in the back of her head always sounded like—

“Enter.”

Her.

--

“You and I both know that there has been a change in the winds. Not only are there dragons and a Dragonborn to go with them, but now Mede is dead.”

“What does the death of an Imperial relic have to do with our cause?” Galmar growled to Ulfric’s left.

Idgrod let out a sigh. “You and your rebels may have burned all of your bridges to the outside world, but what happens in Cyrodil matters in Skyrim, whether you like it or not. There is no clear heir apparent to the Ruby Throne. The Elder Council is governing now, but with their squabbling and backstabbing, it’s clear that this is not a situation that is built to last.”

Ulfric narrowed his eyes. “And what would you have us do about that?”

“You know you’re not winning this war, Jarl Ulfric.”

“We’re not losing it either.”

--
Aleyne stepped into the upper room of the Thalmor Embassy in Solitude to see the First Emissary sitting at her desk, scratching away at various papers with a black quill.

“Back with good news, I trust?” Elenwen’s sarcastic lilt matched the cadence of the squeaking pen that had not stopped moving.

“First Emissary, despite the best efforts of both myself and the Prosecutorial Squad, both the Dragonborn and the Blades Agent Esbern escaped our custody.”

“Escaped, Fourth Emissary? That word would imply that you at some point were able to take control of your targets at some point. From the reports that the other survivors of the night have given to me, you were never in control of the situation. I might also add that you chose your moment to strike when all of the most dangerous criminals in Skyrim were in one place.” Aleyne felt her throat close up as she watched Elenwen drop the quill and set her eyes on her. “In short, you failed twice over and have left me with nothing to report to Alinor except news of your numerous shortcomings.” She jerked her head towards the opposite side of the room. “Lie down on the couch, Aleyne.”

--

Age had made Idgrod into a patient woman, a quality that benefited her service to her people as a jarl, but the man standing in front of her was truly testing her. “And are you willing to destroy your land, your people, your country for your quest against Tullius?”

Ulfric’s face became flushed with anger. “I would cut through every faithless Imperial and all of their laws if it meant protecting the soul and spirit of Skyrim!”

Her weathered hands balling into fists, Idgrod’s voice began to rise. “Oh, and when the last faithless Imperial lies dead, what is your plan after that? When the dragons come, or the Thalmor, or whatever other horrors Oblivion has in store for Skyrim, who will you stand beside to fight off the darkness? Skyrim is covered from head to foot with people willing to recognize that pride alone will not save them, and they are our greatest strength for the coming battles!”

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Her feet seemed to move of their own accord as Aleyne carried herself across the room. Put
yourself somewhere else, be anywhere else. She laid down and gripped the edge of the couch and firmly fixed her eyes on the wood paneled ceiling above her. Accept this and move on, it will all be over soon.

Footsteps approached her and she heard the sound of metal scraping metal as Elenwen unsheathed her Daedric dagger. She failed to stifle a flinch as long fingers ran over the damaged, blackened half of her face.

“What a bitter disappointment.”

A tear escaped her eye as the metal cut through the scar tissue to the flesh beneath. “Mother…” Aleyne cursed herself and the word that escaped her lips in a plea to the emotions of the woman standing above, just out of her field of view.

“Yes, against my better judgement.” Elenwen tilted her head to the right as she observed her work and judged where to carve next. “You were a wanted child, believe it or not. Your father and I, we tried so many times. So many failures.” She drew a red X over the cheek that was crushed during the earthquake. “We cast your elder brothers and sisters over the cliffs and into the sea below so many times that when the mage that placed you in my arms told me that you were worthy of carrying out the Thalmor’s will, I thought it was a cruel joke. I see now that it was.”

--

Seeing no other options, Idgrod took her right palm, and with speed she didn’t know she still possessed, slammed it against Ulfric’s temple. “See now what I see!”

For Ulfric, time had dilated. He could faintly see Galmar and the housecarl from Morthal reaching for weapons and bracing for combat before his vision faded and reformed. He now found himself on the steps of the Palace of the Kings before a cheering crowd. Spring wind drifted through the air mixing with sunlight and songs, and the weight of the Jagged Crown rested against his brow. To his side Galmar and Rikke, converted eyes filled with joy, stood beaming at him. In spite of all of his dreams coming to reality, he felt something was missing. His eyes traced over the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of white hair or shrewd eyes or a wry smile.

“You seek her approval because you see her as a legend. Though you may not admit it, you want her to see you as a legend as well. Do you think she will?” Idgrod’s voice came from no direction, and the ground began to tremble and crumble.
Ulfric frantically turned as the crowd of his people and his friends blinked out of existence. His city had been replaced with a ghostly ruin, littered with bloody corpses of his friends and foes alike. However, against the red sky, he could see her, the Dragonborn. He ran towards her, but as he drew near, beings began to melt out of the carnage and shadow. From the sky, the dragon as black as night hovered above, while a man with ghostly skin approached from one side, mirrored by a masked man in robes on the other. And all around her, their common enemy raised golden blades, ready to attack. As he yelled for her to raise her guard, to let him help her, the look of betrayal she gave him stopped him dead in his tracks.

“You could be her downfall.”

--

Minutes or hours had passed, and Aleyne’s vision had begun to blur as she listened to her blood drip onto the wooden floor.

Perhaps sensing that she was approaching a point she could not go back from, Elenwen had since sheathed her dagger and had begun stroking her daughter’s unmutilated cheek. “You don’t need to worry anymore.”

“What?” Aleyne’s voice had become faint, but she dimly noted with pride that she had not screamed once.

“You don’t need to worry anymore because I have a new successor, someone who isn’t such a profound disappointment.”

Hollow panic gripped Aleyne’s heart as she forced herself to sit up. “Who—"

“You know her.”

The younger Thalmor furrowed her brow in confusion before realization dawned on her. “You can’t be serious!”

“I am.”
“She knows nothing of loyalty. Moreover, that horrifying...practice with the souls...she is an abomination!”

“She absolutely is, and she will succeed where you have failed.”

The other reality of her replacement hit Aleyne like a fireball to the chest. “What is to become of me?”

Elenwen pinched the bridge of her nose before answering. “Honestly, I don’t particularly care about you anymore. The mages of the Dominion have declared you to be clean of blood, so killing you would be a sin. But beyond that, I wash my hands of you. Keep your meaningless title and live your life in the mediocrity that you seem determined to wallow in.” With that, Elenwen left the Fourth Emissary sitting, eyes fixed on her reflection in the puddle of blood beneath her.

--

Barely half a moment later, Idgrod removed her hand from Ulfric’s temple, and watched as he reeled backwards, barely catching himself.

“By Talos, what—”

Ulfric raised a hand and cut off Galmar before the housecarl could make use of his battle axe.

“Get out of my city and my hold, witch, and never return.” In his shock and rage, and undercurrent of a Shout crept into the jarl’s voice.

“Banish me to your heart’s content, Stormcloak, but know that it will change nothing of what is to come.” Idgrod turned on her heel and strode out of the Palace of the Kings, her housecarl and steward following close behind.

As soon as the brass doors closed behind them, Galmar pivoted towards his friend. “What was that?”

“Nothing. It was nothing.” He drew himself up to his full height and forced his face into a
focused expression. “We need to go over the defense of the forts in the Rift.”

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Later, Aleyne straightened her robes and practiced smiling in the glass in front of her, pushing past the splitting pain in her face and ignoring the black scars that didn’t look like they were healing.

This isn’t hopeless, everything is fine, everything is going to fine. The gods as her witnesses, she would push through this and show the First Emissary that she was worthy of the blood she carried. To do this, she saw only one possible option: she would find the Dragonborn and find some way to bring her into the fold.

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The rattled feeling that he managed to suppress since Ravencrone had left came back to Ulfric once he found himself alone in his chambers. The images that she had planted in his mind shook him to his core. While there were no promises that what he saw was the truth, he did know that he had to win this war definitively, and soon. To do that, he would have to change his present course and find a new path forward. He would have to recruit the Dragonborn to his cause.

Chapter End Notes

Song for Ulfric: "Human" by Rag'n'Bone Man; Song for Aleyne: "My Blood" by Ellie Goulding; So, gods willing, this chapter will be the darkest for this story, but I think this examination of Aleyne’s character and why she acts the way she does is needed for future chapters. As per usual, please please kudos/comment/bookmark if you enjoyed/want to talk!!
Summit

Chapter Summary

Katariah has a disagreement, and meets a new teacher.

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack recommendation: "Phoenix" by Olivia Holt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Katariah finished her climb up towards High Hrothgar, she would have staked her last septim on the suspicion that the Greybeards had added a few more stone slabs to the Seven Thousand Steps. Her thigh muscles burning, she took some solace that it was Middas: Borri was in charge of dinner. While there were limited options for ingredients at the secluded monastery, that monk could make an amazing beef stew. What she looked forward to the most, however, was the tranquility that High Hrothgar existed in. Of all the people and factions that she had joined or just passed by, the Greybeards stood alone in the fact that, other than retrieving the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller, they didn’t seem to expect anything specific from her. There were no hierarchies, no ancient orders, no threat of betrayals, just the opportunity to learn more and to be alone with her own thoughts. When she pushed open the doors to the monastery, the three silent monks barely looked up, as though she had only stepped outside for a moment to get some air.

She found Arngeir sitting by himself in one of the narrow hallways, pouring over a volume detailing the intacracies of the dragon language. He gave Katariah a serene smile when he saw her approach. “I see the wind has guided you back to us.”

“I’m glad to be back, Master Arngeir. I need your help with something.”

“Name it and it is yours, Dragonborn. No doors are closed to you here.”

“I need to learn the Shout used to defeat Alduin.”

In an instant, the calming expression was wiped off of Arngeir’s face, and was replaced by a steely look that reminded Katariah of the carvings at Sky Haven Temple. ““Where did you learn of that? Who have you been talking to?” The gentle counsel in his voice was gone, replaced with a tone that offered no room for negotiation.
Before Katariah had a chance to answer or even consider lying, the enchantment on Dragonbane let out a crackle of sparks. The sound had been barely noticeable to the Dragonborn on her journey, but in the silence of High Hrothgar, it was practically deafening.

“The Blades! Of course. They specialize in meddling in matters they barely understand. Their reckless arrogance knows no bounds. They have always sought to turn the Dragonborn from the path of wisdom. Have you learned nothing from us? Would you simply be a tool in the hands of the Blades, to be used for their own purposes?” Katariah felt her throat close when she heard the disappointment and anger in her teacher’s voice.

“The Blades just want to help me defeat Alduin. Don't you want that too?” Even to her own ears, her voice sounded like that of a whiny child.

“Surely you’ve noticed during your travels that what we want is irrelevant. This Shout was used once before was it not? And here we are again. Have you considered that Alduin was not meant to be defeated? Those who overthrew him in ancient times only postponed the day of reckoning, they did not stop it. If the world is meant to end, so be it. Let it end and be reborn.”

That expression of apathy enraged Katariah. The thought of the rest of the world ending and turning to ash as Cathnoquey had while she sat back and did nothing was inconceivable. “I'm sure Alduin would be delighted if everyone had that attitude,” she said, face twisted into a sneer.

“Do not confuse inaction with indifference. Often the wisest course is to wait and watch events unfold, until the time to act is clear.”

“I am not going to sit by and watch while my friends burn!” She realized from Arngeir’s shocked face that she had started screaming. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to collect herself. “You’re not going to help me, are you?”

“No. Not now. Not until you return to the path of wisdom. Perhaps you had best leave High Hrothgar until you do.”

Angry tears welling in her eyes, Katariah turned and practically ran out of the monastery, flinching as the door slammed shut behind her. The sun had begun to set, bathing the sky in hues of turquoise and pink. Not ready to embrace a climb down in the darkness of the coming night, the Dragonborn sat down on the steps, and buried her head in her hands while a toxic mix of anger and misery swirled within her. She wanted to curse Arngeir for denying her this one request, and
Delphine for setting her against a man she trusted. As tears streamed down her cheeks, Katariah barely turned when she heard the stones of High Hrothgar shake.

“Arngeir, Rok los Dovahkiin, Strundu'ul. Rok fen tinaak Paarthurnax.”

A few moments passed, and the Dragonborn kept her gaze fixed on the horizon as Arngeir approached her side.

“Katariah, forgive me, I was...intemperate with you.” Faced with her silence, he continued. “I allowed my emotions to cloud my judgement. Master Einarth reminded me of my duty. The decision whether or not to help you is not mine to make.”

Arngeir may be ready to hug and make up, but I'm not, Katariah thought. Keeping her face carefully neutral, she asked, “So, can you teach me this Shout?”

The monk shook his head. “No. I cannot teach it to you because I do not know it. It is called "Dragonrend," but its Words of Power are unknown to us. We do not regret this loss. Dragonrend holds no place within the Way of the Voice.”

“I thought you knew all the Words of Power.” Only a few drops of resentful sarcasm entered her voice.

“But not Dragonrend. The knowledge of that Shout was lost in the time before history began.”

“Then how can I learn it?”

“Only Paarthurnax, the master of our order, can answer that question, if he so chooses.” Arngeir explained further when he noticed Katariah’s furrowed brow. “He lives in seclusion on the very peak of the mountain. He speaks to us only rarely, and never to outsiders. Only those whose Voice is strong can find the path.” He gently took the Dragonborn’s arm and pulled her back towards the monastery and its courtyard. “Before I give you our final gift from us, I must warn you. Dragonrend was created by those who had lived under the unimaginable cruelty of Alduin's Dragon Cult. Their whole lives were consumed with hatred for dragons, and they poured all their anger and hatred into this Shout. When you learn a Shout, you take it into your very being. In a sense, you become the Shout. In order to learn and use this Shout, you will be taking this evil, this hatred, into yourself.” He looked towards the Throat of the World. “The path to Paarthurnax is perilous, not to be embarked upon lightly. Keep moving, stay focused on your goal, and you will...”
reach the summit.”

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“LOK VAH KOOR!”

As Arngeir promised, this new Shout cleared her path of stinging winds and opaque mists. It also served as a sort of catharsis. With every exhale, she reminded herself that she was an adult, and a childish grudge against the Greybeards would only hurt her in the long run. However, the argument was symptomatic of a larger undercurrent that she felt behind a lot of her interactions: that in spite of all the freedoms that Skyrim offered her, she was constantly at the mercies of those who believed they knew better than she, never giving her an opportunity to refuse. From helping a farmer retrieve his goat to agreeing to slay Alduin, she existed when people needed her, and faded when they did not.

Perhaps this Paarthurnax could offer her guidance in a way that Arngeir could not. He certainly had to be extraordinary man, to live up here by himself. How does he even get food up here? The exhaustion of the climb to the summit and the thin air left Katariah’s mind spinning as to the exact nature of the Greybeard’s master. If she didn’t know any better, his name sounded like—

A roar and rush of wind crashed across the mountain, and Katariah was left frozen in shock as a silver dragon glided into view and landed to close to her that she could feel the breath coming from its nostrils.

“Drem Yol Lok. Greetings, wunduniik. I am Paarthurnax. Who are you? What brings you to my strunmah... my mountain?”

From Katariah’s point of view, one of two things had occurred: either she had showed up five minutes too late and this dragon had eaten the master of the Greybeards, or Arngeir had left out a very impossible detail about who she would be meeting. She noticed the lack of carnage and the fact that the dragon was not moving to eat her, and said a quick prayer that it was the latter case. “I wasn't expecting you to be a dragon.” To her credit, her voice didn’t shake quite as much as she thought it would.

“I am as my father Akatosh made me. As are you...Mal Briinah.”

Only understanding about a third of what Paarthurnax was saying and feeling her fingers going
numb from the cold, Katariah decided to get right to the point. “I need to learn the words to Dragonrend. Can you teach me?”

“Drem. Patience. There are formalities which must be observed, at the first meeting of two of the dovs.” He wheeled towards the Word Wall on the edge of the mountain. “By long tradition, the elder speaks first. Hear my Thu’um! Feel it in your bones. Match it, if you are truly Dovahkiin! YOL TOOR SHUL!” Katariah nearly leapt out of her skin when the dragon exhaled bright red fire across the wall. Nodding for her to approach, he continued speaking. “A gift for you, Dovahkiin. Yol. Understand fire as the dov do.”

As she took in the scratches on the wall, she felt the usual transfer of knowledge into her being. However, this time, she also noticed a feeling of warmth spreading throughout her body, from her core to the tips of her fingers. It seemed to melt all of her anxieties and questions away and replaced them with a quiet certainty: You have a purpose here, and whatever you will, you can do.

“Fear not, and show me what you can do. Greet me not as mortal, but as dovah!”

Katariah thought it was more than little strange that she was to greet her new teacher by blasting him the face with fire, but she found herself almost laughing when the old dragon seemed overjoyed.

“Yes! Sossedov los mul. The Dragonblood runs strong in you. It is long since I had the pleasure of speech with one of my own kind.” Paarthurnax cocked his head to the side in an expression that struck Katariah as incredibly human. “So. You have made your way here, to me. No easy task for a joor. Even for one of Dovah Sos. Dragonblood. What would you ask of me?”

“Can you teach me the Dragonrend Shout?”

The dragon seemed disappointed but unsurprised by her request. “I have expected you. Prodah. You would not come all this way for tinvaak with an old dovah. No, you seek your weapon against Alduin.”

“How did you know that?”

“Alduin komeyt tiid. What else could you seek? Alduin and Dovahkiin circle each other. But I do not know the Thu’um you seek. Krosis. It cannot be known to me. Your kind - joorre, mortals, created it as a weapon against the dov. Our hadrimme, our minds cannot even…comprehend its
The fire Katariah felt within her began to go out. “I guess I’ll be on my way, then.” As she moved to head back down the mountain, Paarthurnax shifted, jutting his tail out so it blocked her path.

“Not so fast, Mal Briinah. Drem. All in good time. First, I have a question for you. Why do you want to learn this Thu’um?”

“Because I need to stop Alduin.”

“Yes. Alduin... Un Zeymah. The elder brother. Gifted, grasping and troublesome, as is so often the case with the firstborn. But why? Why must you stop Alduin?”

Truthfully, Katariah had never fully thought of that question, outside of the basic belief that action was always better than apathy. Logically, the answer was simple enough: Alduin was raising dragons that were disrupting life in Skyrim, and she had the responsibility to protect whoever she could. But she was not a Nord, she was never even meant to be here. She could take her gifts and her skills and live whatever life she wanted, wherever she chose. Around the summit, an aurora had begun, like her first night in Skyrim. As she looked into the colors, she thought of what her life had become since that night when she stood on the side of road with nothing in her mind but fear and questions.

She remembered the streets of Whiterun, and how every person and building in the city worked together like different notes in a song. Arngeir’s hopeful smile as he passed her another volume of Nord mythology. Delphine teaching her to wield a single-edged sword. Malborn’s sacrifice for her. Laughing with Brynjolf while Delvin and Vex bickered in the Ragged Flagon. Karliah pressing the Nightingale Bow into her hands. Babette bandaging her leg on the darkest day of their lives. Cicero dancing around the room while Nazir made biting comments with a glint in his eyes. Ulfric’s voice as he spoke about his cause.

Her arrival in Skyrim might have been a trick of fate, but a part of her had fallen in love with this place, with all of its bloody darkness and beautiful light, that she was now a part of.

“I love this world, and I don’t want it to end.”

Paarthurnax’s jaw twisted into what Katariah hoped was a dragon’s answer to a smile. “Pruzah. As good a reason as any. There are many who feel as you do, although not all. Some would say that all
things must end, so that the next can come to pass. Perhaps this world is simply the Egg of the next kalpa? Lein vokiin? Would you stop the next world from being born?”

The Dragonborn straightened her back and tried to look defiant in the face of time. “That’s the next world’s problem.”

He seemed to concede her point. “Paaz. A fair answer. Ro fus, maybe you only balance the forces that work to quicken the end of this world. Even we who ride the currents of Time cannot see past Time’s end—Wuldsetiid los tahrodiis. Those who try to hasten the end, may delay it. Those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer.” Noticing Katariah’s furrowed brow, Paarthurnax interrupted himself. “But you have indulged my weakness for speech long enough. Krosis. Now I will answer your question. Do you know why I live here, at the peak of the Monahven – what you named Throat of the World?”

“I thought dragons liked mountains.”

The dragon appeared to find that generalization funny, before quickly sobering. “True, Dovahkiin. But few now remember that this was the very spot where Alduin was defeated by the ancient Tongues. Vahrukt unslaad... perhaps none but me now remember how he was defeated.”

“Yes and no. Viik nuz ni kron. Alduin was not truly defeated, either. If he was, you would not be here today, seeking to... defeat him, would you? The Nords of those days used the Dragonrend Shout to cripple Alduin. But this was not enough. Ok mulaag unslaad. It was the Kel – the Elder Scroll. They used it to... cast him adrift on the currents of Time.”

Katariah’s total understanding of the conversation was dropping from a third to a quarter. “What’s an Elder Scroll?”

“It is difficult to explain in your tongue. The dov have words for such things that joorre do not. It is an artifact from outside time. It does not exist, but it has always existed. Rah wahlaan. They are...fragments of creation. The Kelle... Elder Scrolls, as you name them, they have often been used for prophecy. Yes, your prophecy comes from an Elder Scroll. But this is only a small part of their power. Zofaas suleyk.”

The Dragonborn finally began to understand Paarthunax’s idea. “So if I bring an Elder Scroll up
here, to the summit—"

“\You can learn Dragonrend from those who created it. Now go, Mal Briinah, before the wind takes you. I look to your return. Zul akrk morah.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, sincerest apologies for the delay :(. I completely forgot how *long* the first conversation between Paarthry and the dragonborn is, and it was difficult to take out of dialogue-tree format. If you all can find it within your hearts to forgive me, pretty please comment/kudos/bookmark!! As always, thanks so much for reading!!!
The Descent

Chapter Summary

In an innocent place, there is great darkness, and a weapon reflects on her purpose and her future.

Chapter Notes

Music Inspiration: "The Devil Within" by Digital Daggers

Few places in Skyrim were as idyllic as the city of Solitude. It was certainly appropriate that it was ruled over by a woman called “the Fair,” as it hosted well manicured gardens, charming houses, and the immaculate Blue Palace. Its bustling market and the Bards College marked the city as a commercial and cultural center of Tamriel, to the point where it could rival places like Daggerfall or Bruma, while still maintaining the rustic beauty integral to Skyrim’s identity. While Tullius’ Imperial Legion was based out of Castle Dour, the city itself was place untouched by war, and the fear and hunger that comes with bloody conflict. Every day, from dawn until dusk, one could hear the sounds of children playing neverending games of tag and hide-and-seek along the streets and in between the shops.

However, there was one place that everyone from the most foolhardy child to the most hardened city guard knew to never go. Their eyes glanced past its door and they moved quickly about their business, in the same way that one ignores the feeling of a malicious presence when walking across a pitch black room. Those with lips loosened by mead in the Winking Skeever sometimes said that they could hear odd noises coming from within the tower: sounds that spoke of pain, misery, and death.

In truth, most of these men were playacting for the sake of winning a free round of drinks. Very few Justiciers or soldiers frequented the Thalmor Headquarters, instead preferring to keep their activities in the Embassy proper, away from the prying eyes of the general and the jarl. If one were to go into the tower, they would see decor rendering the building indistinguishable from Emperor’s quarters or Tullius’ war room. There were no prisoners, no nightmarish torture devices, no plans for domination. If one wanted to truly understand the Headquarters, they would have to be willing to go deeper, and would have to know where to look. In the last, lowest room, covered in dust and cobwebs, there is nothing of note, except for a loose brick on the bottom right corner of the farthest wall. When pressed on, the wall would slide aside, revealing a wooden staircase, leading down to a room lit by ever-burning mage light. If one were willing to make the descent, that was where they would find her.
This was where she trained. This was where she bled. This was where she waited. Day after day, the elves in robes would send in elves in golden armor for her to practice on. As she slashed through them, she could feel the souls within her *wriggling*, crawling through her muscles, clawing towards her skin. They burned a sort of unending hunger into her being that she loved.

Occasionally, the one in charge, the Altmer with the pointed features and squeaky voice, would come to observe. She could see that this elf was certainly competent enough with brutality to match, but behind that competence and brutality was fear, intense and cutting. Fear of her comrades, and fear of the fall that could easily follow her rise to power. *Good, let her be afraid,* she thought as she locked eyes with the First Emissary while slitting the throat of one of the sacrificial soldiers.

On the days when the First Emissary was not there, she could expect to see her younger counterpart, the Thalmor missing half of a face. If the elder one was merely afraid, this girl was terrified, and growing more so as the days passed by. She wanted to regard this girl as pathetic, dismiss her completely as irrelevant, but she had some respect for how this girl was willing to work with her. The elf would cast mirage after mirage into the air, and she would slice through them. Some of them she recognized: the First Emissary, Ulfric Stormcloak, General Tullius, Elisif the Fair. But as time went on, one image surpassed them all. It had come to the point where she would recognize this girl’s face with its white hair and grey eyes before she would know her own reflection. The young elf said repeatedly that it would be their goal to capture this girl, not harm her, not kill her. But she knew better, even if was never meant to happen this way it would always come to this: she would kill the Dragonborn.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in two days?!? What is the punctual madness? I enjoy writing on this schedule, but don't get accustomed to it XD As per my usual, broken record request, please please please comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed!!!
Back to School

Chapter Summary

Katariah journeys to the North, and hears a voice from before her time in Skyrim.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So you spoke to Paarthurnax. The dragonblood burns bright within you. Did he tell you what you wanted to know? Did he teach you the Dragonrend Shout?” Arngeir seemed determined to keep his voice neutral.

Attempting to match his stoic expression and tone, Katariah replied, “No, but we made a plan for me to learn it.”

“So be it. If he believes it is necessary for you to learn this...ability, we will bow to his wisdom.”

The seconds of silence made the Dragonborn realize that Arngeir was done speaking, perhaps believing that any words beyond quiet resignation would help her towards a goal he fundamentally disagreed with. Unfortunately for the both of them, Katariah could not pull the information she needed out of thin air, and the Greybeards seemed unanimous in the belief that they must at least respect her, if not outright supporting her ideas: they were at an awkward impasse. Maybe a common goal would nudge them out of this deadlock. “I need the Elder Scroll the ancients used to defeat Alduin. Do you know where to find it?”

Arngeir’s impassive gaze remained. “We have never concerned ourselves with the Scrolls. The gods themselves would rightly fear to tamper with such things. As for where to find it... such blasphemies have always been the stock in trade of the mages of Winterhold. They may be able to tell you something about the Elder Scroll you seek.”

Well, so much for that idea, she thought. “I’ll show myself out, then.” As she moved to leave, Arngeir reached out and grabbed her wrist.
“Before you leave, Katariah, I have a question for you.”

Swallowing the urge to say that he had no right to demand anything of her, she nodded. She realized that the stony leader of the Greybeards, replaced by the teacher that she had once known, a man who seemed anxious to help her learn about herself and the new world that surrounded her.

“How do you see yourself, in the midst of the dragon risings and the civil war? What role do you believe you need to play?”

Katariah realized with exasperation that the monk was trying to resume their former argument, though this time in a calmer way. “The Blades are just helping me, I’m not their puppet.” She pulled her wrist back but could not bring herself to leave.

Arngeir appeared to realize just how much he had upset his student during their disagreement. “No, no, of course not. Forgive my earlier comments, Dragonborn. They were made in anger. But heed this warning - the Blades may claim to serve the Dragonborn, but they do not. They never have. But you have not answered my question: what do you believe your purpose is in Skyrim?”

She thought back to her conversation with Esbern on the way to Sky Haven Temple. “I need to be a weapon against Alduin. That’s my purpose.”

Arngeir sighed. “You and I both know that you can be so much more than that. Do not allow the Blades or anyone else reduce you down to something that you are not. Now go to Winterhold. I may not place much faith in the Mages of the College, but there is wisdom to be found everywhere. Sky above, Voice within.”

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Katariah had found that over the course of her travels, every city and town seemed to have a unique mood hanging over it, which could usually be observed through the interactions that provided a window into people’s lives: Every citizen of Markarth seemed to have a dark secret lurking beneath the surface, everyone in Windhelm appeared to always be afraid of each other, and all the townspeople of Dawnstar acted like they had been on their feet for weeks on end.

Winterhold broke this tradition as there was nothing for the Dragonborn to observe when she arrived in town on the first day of Sun’s Dusk. There were no conversations, no signs of life, just the sound of wind whistling through a few destroyed cottages. Katariah realized with a pang of
sadness that this must be what Cathnoquey looked like now, with every last aspect of her community’s existence collapsing against wind, rain, and time.

Perhaps the same fate would not befall Winterhold. As she walked down the road, she could hear activity coming from one of the buildings that was still intact, with a sign outfront reading *The Frozen Hearth*. Katariah hoped they were keeping themselves warm. One part of her life in Skyrim that, in the grand scheme of things, shouldn’t matter all that much but was wearing on her all the same, was the godsdamned weather. Her island was certainly not tropical, but she had never seen snow, nor had she braced herself against winds that seemed to want to bite her face off before her arrival in Skyrim. Now, as the months went on and the days grew shorter, she found herself wrapping herself in more and more furs, giving her another reminder that while she wandered amongst Nords, she was not one of them. If the patrons of the various taverns were to be believed, this winter was actually warmer than average, an observation that Katariah found absolutely absurd.

At the end of the road and on the edge of the cliff, the College had just barely come into view, with its black walls providing a faint contrast against the snowfall. From what Katariah had heard, setting one foot in the school would set her even further apart from the Nords of Skyrim. However, she found that she had begun to care less and less about that: she already was the Guildmaster and Listener *emeritus*, the chances of her integrating back into civilian life were pretty small at this point.

At the start of her journey in Ivarstead, her initial plan was to get information about the Elder Scroll (or the Scroll itself if she were lucky) and get out. Upon her arrival in Winterhold, she decided that she might linger for a while, and what the mages had to offer. As Arngeir said, there was wisdom to be found everywhere, and as the world around her seemed determined to drag her around, Katariah found that she needed to become more wise, and what better place was there to acquire wisdom than a college? The bridge across the chasm looked treacherous, but if she just put one foot in front of the other—

“Cross the bridge at your own peril! The way is dangerous, and the gate will not open. You shall not gain entry!”

Katariah stood frozen with one foot still in the air as an Altmer woman slowly approached, a cluster of sparks in one raised hand. Upon seeing the befuddled expression on the girl’s face, the mage opted for a more cordial tone. “Welcome to the College of Winterhold. I am Faralda, one of the senior Wizards here. I trust you found your journey to Winterhold not entirely unpleasant. Now, I must advise you that if your only purpose in being here is to complain, you would be far better off speaking with the Jarl of Winterhold. If, however, you seek something more, I will be happy to assist you.”

The Dragonborn felt a sense of intense whiplash from the two vastly different greetings. “May I
enter the College?” She found herself stammering out the question, partly from an effort to match the Altmer’s second tone, and partly from the cold making her teeth chatter.

“Perhaps. But what is it you expect to find within?” The mage had her head cocked to one side as she regarded the new comer.

Meanwhile, Katariah was mentally rifling through the reasons as to how she could explain her presence here. She considered flashing her title of “Dragonborn” and whisking by this woman, but remembered how luxurious her anonymity felt amongst the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood. *Surely I won’t be missed for just a few more weeks.* “I just wanted to see what it looks like inside.”

Faralda laughed at that response of apparent honesty. “Humor is often in short supply here. But I sense that perhaps you're after more than just that. We at the College are willing to help all who wish to delve into the arcane, provided they pass a simple test.”

“A test?” Katariah’s confidence wasn’t too shaken yet. She could cast a mean fireball along with a few other Destruction spells, and she could muddle her way through a couple basic Conjurations, so this couldn’t be too difficult for her.

The Altmer nodded. “Simply cast a basic Fear spell on the ground here, and I will guide you across.”

*Well shit.* Spells of Illusion and Alteration had always been her weakest, most poorly developed skill, and she hadn’t really had the time to sit down and concentrate on improving her skills. Even if she could remember the proper hand position for Fear, which was definitely not guaranteed, the spell would most likely drain her of all her magic with nothing to show for efforts. As she turned to her body towards the seal on the ground with dread forming in the pit of her stomach, she felt the graze of an amulet she forgot she was wearing underneath her skin. *Thank the gods for Brynjolf,* Katariah thought to herself. When she turned over the reins of the Guild to him, he had insisted that she keep the Amulet of Articulation. Locking eyes with the mage, she smiled slightly. “I think we both know I'll succeed here.”

A slightly glazed look came down over the elf’s eyes. “You know, I think you're right.” She shook her head, as though she were trying to organize her thoughts. “I think you'll be a superb addition to the College. Welcome, Apprentice. I'll lead you across the bridge. Once you're inside you'll want to speak with Mirabelle Ervine, our Master Wizard. Please, follow me.”
Night had fallen, and Katariah was standing in her new chambers, a tiny alcove barely lit by a single candle. She was absolutely exhausted from the day she had had with the other three apprentices, J’Zargo, Brelyna, and Onmund. Truthfully, she had forgotten what it was like interacting with potential friends that were not themselves members of a shadowy organization. It was nice, being on the same page as the people around her, even if J’Zargo had nearly taken off half her face with a bolt of lightning.

She sat down on her new bed and began to unpack her bag, placing her armor, a small satchel of gemstones, and a few potions in a drawer next to her bed. She had previously stashed Dragonbane and the Nightingale Bow in one of the storeroom’s barrels, underneath a layer of potatoes, opting to keep the Blade of Woe fastened against her wrist as her only weapon on her. All that was left was...Ulfric’s Dossier. You know that’s not just going to go away, the nasty voice in the back of her head reminded her. Whenever she laid eyes on the little red book, she felt a rising sense of panic. The information she knew it contained was too valuable to simply burn, but at the same time, her interactions with the jarl of Windhelm had been almost entirely antagonistic, to the point where she felt she couldn’t drop the book on the doorstep of the Palace of the Kings, slam on the door a few times, and run for the hills. She turned it over in her hands. Why is there never a good option?

At that moment, the door on the upper floor of the Hall of Attainment opened. Katariah could hear the measured tones of the Master Wizard, Mirabelle. “I believe I made myself rather clear.”

“Yes, of course. I'm simply trying to understand the reasoning behind the decision.”

The dossier slipped out of Katariah’s hand and landed on the floor by her feet, though she barely noticed. The voice she just heard, she would know that voice until her dying day.

“The Thalmor are here to research possible magical links to a plane of Oblivion on Cathnoquey. As you are part of the Empire and therefore bound by the White-Gold Concordat, you must comply. If you cooperate with us, we will be gone by nightfall.”

Slipping on her leather armor underneath her mage’s robes, Katariah remained sitting upright on her bed until dawn’s light rose, quietly reliving her memories of her last morning on Cathnoquey.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed that!! Come back sometime this week for buckets of fun with the College, the Psijics, and Katariah giving Ancano one hell of a scare. As per my usual song and dance, any and all comments/kudosis/bookmarks are met with my
rapturous delight. Hope you guys have an awesome week ahead of you!!
Still Alive

Chapter Summary

While discerning the location of an Elder Scroll, Katariah contemplates on what to do with a face from her past.

Chapter Notes

Music to read by: "Alive" by Rob Houchen

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hold, mage, and listen well... Know that you have set in motion a chain of events that cannot be stopped. Judgment has not been passed, as you had no way of knowing. Judgment will be passed on your actions to come, and how you deal with the dangers ahead of you. This warning is passed to you because the Psijic Order believes in you.”

Once again, Katariah found herself frozen in place without much understanding of what was going on around her, a circumstance that was becoming a depressing norm for her day-to-day life. However, the Altmer sorcerer that had materialized in Saarthal seemed to have no apparent malice towards her or the stone-still Tolfdir, so things could have been worse.

“You, mage, and you alone, have the potential to prevent disaster. Take great care, and know that the Order is watching.”

As soon as the apparition disappeared and her vision returned to normal, she sighed and thought to herself, what else is new?

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Upon the discovery at the bottom of the tomb, Tolfdir and the other more accomplished mages at the excavation declared Saarthal unsafe for the apprentices, who were ushered out with the instruction that they should report their findings to the Arch-Mage, Savos Aren. While the sun was shining and the sky was clear and crystal blue, the air was absolutely frigid. Onmund didn’t seem to mind, while Katariah and J’Zargo were busy bracing themselves against the icy winds. In spite of her biology, Brelyna was completely unaffected and was practically skipping her way through the ankle deep snow as the students made their way to the college. “I can’t believe we’re going to
get an actual opportunity to speak with the Arch Mage himself,” she called back to her friends, red eyes gleaming with excitement.

Onmund furrowed his brow and looked a little more skeptical. “Do you really think this... object is worth all the trouble? It could just be a creation that the Ancient Nords left behind.”

“J’Zargo does not think that we should give the Ancient Nords so much credit. These are the people that made puzzle doors with the answers engraved on the keys.” The Khajit turned towards Katariah. “I wonder, Ennis, what you think. You’re the one who found it, do you believe the glowing orb will make J’Zargo a more powerful wizard?”

There was a brief pause as Katariah wondered who in Oblivion J’zargo was speaking to, before she remembered the pseudonym she had adopted. “Oh, maybe, I mean, I sure haven’t seen anything like it,” she babbled, trying to sound natural.

“You’re from Daggerfall, right Ennis? You’ve probably seen a lot of magical artifacts before.” Onmund sounded envious of Katariah’s fictional upbringing.

“Definitely, I remember seeing a lot of magical...things there.” At that moment, the Dragonborn wished that she could conjure up a new backstory that fit more with knowledge she readily had available.

At the front of the pack, Brelyna gushed, “I loved Daggerfall when I visited there with my family. Do your parents live near the castle?”

“Oh no, we live outside near the coast, you’ve probably never been there.” Katariah had thought that her time sneaking through an embassy and joining bands of criminals would make her more adept in the art of lying, but even with the Amulet of Articulation, she was pretty hopeless. Unfortunately, during her journey to Winterhold, she realized that her circumstances were getting more and more dire. In every inn, Nord men with keen eyes and lots of questions were asking about girls with white hair, and unless the standards of beauty had radically changed since she arrived in Skyrim, she had to assume they were Stormcloak agents looking for her. Meanwhile, on the roads, Thalmor Justiciar patrols were becoming more frequent and aggressive. If they were stupid enough to approach her when there was nobody around, she could handle them fine, but when there were potential witnesses going about their days, she had to bluff or sneak her way around them.

Realistically, if she kept moving, she would be fine. She had the Agent of Stealth and the Amulet working in her favor, and if things became dangerous, she could carry herself well in a fight. But
extended stays in a single place required new, extreme measures. Hence, the introduction of Ennis, a Breton girl from the region of Daggerfall who insisted that her parents let her come to the College of Winterhold for vaguely defined reasons and who always kept her hood up.

“Are you alright, Ennis? J’Zargo senses that you seem troubled.”

One thing that her assumed identity did not account for was how Ennis could go from outgoing to reserved in a matter of a day. Before she could make up a reason, Brelyna landed on the truth. “It’s probably that Thalmor who arrived, Ancano. I know I don’t like the way he looks at me. I can’t tell if he expects me to blow myself up, or to try and murder him. But he clearly doesn’t trust any of us.”

Onmund nodded sagely. “He claims to be here simply as an advisor, but no one really believes that. I’ve been trying to avoid him, honestly. If you do the same, you’ll be fine. Us apprentices are beneath his notice anyway.”

Biting back the urge to remark that she was a little bit more than just another apprentice to Ancano, Katariah tried to look reassured. “I’ll stay out of his way.”

Brelyna gave her a comforting smile. “We’ll protect you if he tries to scare you, Ennis. We can give J’Zargo a chance to try out a lightning wall on him!”

Laughing at that vivid image, Onmund added, “Just give him one of the flame cloak scrolls, we could wipe out the entire Aldmeri Dominion in a day and a half with those!”

“J’Zargo is getting offended.”

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In spite of Brelyna’s wild hopes, the audience with Savos Aren gave them little information about the discovery under Saarthal. The Archmage had requested, however, that one of them investigate the College’s Arcaneum for more information. *Might as well try to kill two birds with one stone,* Katariah thought as she quickly volunteered Ennis’ services for the errand.

Within the seemingly never ending stacks of texts, she found Urag gro-Shub, the Orc librarian who had a face that suggested that he found the very notion of smiling, laughter, or general happiness to
be offensive concepts. When Katariah presented the Arch Mage’s request for information, he merely grunted in acknowledgement and beckoned for her to follow him around the shelves. As they walked amongst the books, he began piling text after text into her arms. By the time the books reached her chin, the Dragonborn was afraid she would have to quickly learn telekinesis in order to get the tomes up to Aren’s quarters. Fortunately, the librarian finished his selection, a fact that was indicated by him silently returning to his desk and the book he had been reading.

Mentally turning to the second reason she had ventured down to the Arcaneum, Katariah tried to add a persuasive lilt to her voice, an effort made more difficult by the requirement that patrons of the library only whisper their requests. “I was hoping to find an Elder Scroll, can you help me find one?”

That question was enough to Urag forget the rules of the library. His eyes snapped up from the text in front of him as he barked a laugh. “And what does an apprentice plan to do with an Elder Scroll? Do you even know what you're asking about, or are you just someone’s errand girl?”

*Essentially, yes,* Katariah was tempted to admit, but soldiered on nonetheless. “So do you have one here? I’ll only need it for about a week, and I can bring it straight back here.”

The Orc was apparently finding this interaction hilarious. “You think that even if I did have one here, I would let you see it? It would be kept under the highest security. The greatest thief in the world wouldn't be able to lay a finger on it.”

The Dragonborn bit back the urge to assemble Brynjolf, Delvin, and Vex with the specific intent of proving Urag wrong, and tried to keep the conversation on topic. “So you don’t have one here. Do you know where I can find one?”

“I am a mage of the College, I don’t going around giving dangerous information to just anyone.”

Katariah sighed and cast a quick glance over her shoulder confirming that the Arcaneum was empty except for them. *He doesn’t seem like the type to gossip,* she thought to herself. “What about the Dragonborn?”

The question wiped the smile off of the librarian’s face and replaced it with an expression of wide-eyed, nearly childlike shock. “Seriously? You’re the one the Greybeards were calling?”

She couldn’t think of a reply that would verify her identity in Urag’s eyes, and instead chose to
adopt the intense, self-assured stare that Delphine always wore, the kind that didn’t allow for much negotiation.

It worked well enough to convince the Orc, who had since shook himself out of surprise and began stack books on the desk between them. “Here’s everything I have, but it won’t be enough to definitively locate an Elder Scroll. To do that, you’ll need my colleague. Well, my former colleague.”

“Why former? Is he dead?”

Urag hurriedly shook his head. “By Malacath, no! At least, I hope not. He left to continue his research in the Ice Fields, just north of the College. His name is Septimus Signus. If you leave within the next two weeks, you’ll be able to get to his outpost without freezing to death.”

Stuffing the books into her bag, Katariah gave an appreciative smile. “Thanks for your help. Can I trust you to not mention this conversation to anyone?”

“Girl, they wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

As she walked up the stone staircase out of the Arcanaeum and towards Aren’s quarters, she was met halfway by Faralda, who was practically bouncing from foot to foot with excitement. “Ennis, give me the texts Aren wanted, and get yourself upstairs to the Hall of Attainment. Tolfdir is back with the Eye of Magnus!”

Katariah was passing the books one at time but stopped suddenly when she realized she had no clue what the Altmer was talking about. “I’m sorry, the what?”

“The glowing orb that you all found under Saarthal, we’ve taken to calling it the Eye of Magnus until we figure out what it is. But in the meantime, you need to be careful.”

“Why?”

“It’s the Thalmor mage, Ancano. He’s been asking questions about you and doesn’t seem satisfied with the answers he’s hearing. We tend not to enquire about the lives of mages before they enter the college, but you are a particularly blank slate, Ennis, and that seems to unnerve him. It’s best you stay out of his way, and everything will be fine. He’ll probably leave soon enough anyway.”
We’ve always been beneath the Dominion’s notice here, and that isn’t going to change anytime soon. Now get going!"

Walking towards the hall at the center of the College, Katariah felt her insides churning as she contemplated what to do about Ancano. The first steps of her plan were simple and certain, she would catch the mage off guard, extract whatever information she could about the white soul gems and the survivor Aleyne mentioned, and then…

Hesitation clouded the Dragonborn’s mind as she considered what to do with the one soul she knew to be personally responsible for the destruction of her island. She had no doubt that she could kill Ancano if it came to a fight, but she remembered how the assassinations she carried out for the Night Mother left her feeling hollowed out. However, if she stayed her hand, would she be saying that her friends’ lives were unworthy of justice? Perhaps the Thalmor would strike first, and Katariah would be forced to kill him in self defense. Perhaps Faralda was right, and he would leave of his own accord soon, giving Katariah no hard decisions, but at the same time, no answers.

A strange humming forced her to put aside her mental debate as the Dragonborn entered the Hall of Attainment. At its center, hovering a few feet off ground, floated the orb they had found. Katariah could see how the other Mages had chosen its name. With its otherworldly blue glow and the strange runes that covered it, it was certainly fitting of bearing the name of the Elvish god of Magic.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Tolfdir had sidled up to her and was currently beaming at their discovery. “I’m sure you've already noticed the markings. They're quite unlike anything we've seen before. Ayleid, Dwemer, Daedric... Not even Falmer. None of them are a match. Quite curious indeed. Now, I'm not quite sure that you're quite as attuned as I am, given my extensive years of experience, but can you feel that?”

Katariah closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. “It feels warm, like sunlight.”

The wizard was nearly shaking with excitement. “Yes, you understand! This marvelous object, it practically radiates magicka, and yet it's unlike anything I've felt before. Arch-Mage Aren is already hard at work, and hopefully we'll have more information soon. Now, I—”

“You. Come with me now.”

Katariah felt her blood turn to ice and the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end when she heard Ancano’s condescending voice. She was peripherally aware of Tolfdir turning to shoo away the elf. “Excuse me, but we are in the middle of an important project, please return another time.”
“I’m afraid I must intrude. I need to speak to your associate, the Apprentice Ennis, immediately.” While the Thalmor’s tone had become less aggressive, he made up the difference when he reached out and grabbed Katariah around the bicep, long fingers forming a steely grip.

In the midst of her panic, she could hear her teacher scoffing at the intruder about how unorthodox the interruption was before storming off. She wanted to plead with him not to leave her alone with this monster when the voice from the back of her head rose up. *Courage and fire, for you are a daughter of Time. Embrace your gifts, and you need not know fear.* The Dragonborn took a deep breath and turned to face Ancano.

The moment she moved, the Thalmor took off towards the Arch-Mage’s tower, half dragging Katariah across the floor, sneering at her from over his shoulder. “In case you’re confused by all of this, allow me to clarify the situation. I’d like to know why there’s someone claiming to be from the Psijic Order here in the College. More importantly, I’d like to know why he's asking for you specifically. So we’re going to go have a little chat with him, and find out exactly what it is he wants. *Understood?*”

As long as he doesn’t know that I am Dragonborn, I have the upper hand, Katariah realized, and decided to chip away at the elf. “Why do you care so much about this?”

His mouth twitched, ever so slightly. “I'll be the one asking the questions. All you need to know is that the Psijic Order is a rogue organization, believing themselves to be above the law. They have clashed with the Thalmor’s will before, and I have no intention of allowing that to happen here.”

As they climbed the staircase, Katariah noticed a bit of parchment sticking out of his robes. *Keep pushing him, you have him on edge.* “Aren’t you only an advisor here?”

They were nearing the door, and in one motion, she slipped the letter out of Ancano’s robes and down her sleeve while ripping her other arm out his grasp. The questions and open display of defiance proved to be enough of a distraction for her theft to go off without a hitch. Meanwhile, the concept of being interrogated and borderline mocked by a girl he perceived only as an apprentice caused rage to creep into Ancano’s voice. “I report to the Aldmeri Dominion, and I will not ignore this situation. You can return to your petty squabbles and meaningless 'research' as soon as this matter is resolved, but trust me when I say, *it will be resolved.*”

“Like how you ‘resolved’ Cathnoquey?” Any fear or regret from this shortsighted act was driven out by the cold satisfaction of watching all the blood run from Ancano’s face when he realized who he was speaking to.
“You...But the First Emissary said...when the prison collapsed during the earthquake...the survivor had to have died…”

“I am still alive, and I will never forget what happened to my island.”

From beyond the wooden door, they both heard the Arch-Mage calling, “Ancano, Ennis, our guest is waiting for you two.”

Katariah allowed herself a satisfied smile as she pushed the door open. “Let’s see what the monk has to say, shall we?” She did not spare a glance over her shoulder as a slack-jawed Ancano trailed after her.

Chapter End Notes

Well it's nearly been a month, but I am BACK!! Sincerest apologies for the unexpected mini-hiatus, external factors and the fact that this chapter was annoying as hell to write combined to form the perfect storm of me not writing at all for a few weeks :/. For things going forward, the new semester is starting soon, so I honestly have no idea the rate at which updates will come, but know that I haven't dropped this story. As per my usual request, pretty pretty pretty please comment/kudos/bookmark down below if you enjoyed. Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, for your patience!!
Chapter Summary

Katariah reflects on what to do with her newfound friendships, and faces her final confrontation with Ancano

Chapter Notes

Musical fun: "Bridges" by Generdyn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a perfect world, Katariah would have made her way back to her room in the Hall of Attainment to read through the letter she had stolen from Ancano’s pocket in complete privacy. However, when she got to her tiny alcove, she was greeted by three faces that screamed of rabid curiosity that was just barely restrained.

Onmund was the first to speak. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

Brelyna’s eyes gleamed in the mage light. “Everyone’s talking about you and Ancano. Enthir told Nirya who told me that you spat in his face during your fight in the Hall of the Elements!”

“J’zargo hopes that it is true, Ennis. I saw the Thalmor slink back to his quarters like he had just received a nasty scratch.”

Katariah sat down heavily on her bed “Sorry to disappoint you all, but there was no fight. We saw the Psijic monk, who said that he had made a mistake and left, and now I’m here.”

The three other apprentices glanced among themselves. “Liar, liar, cloak on fire,” Onmund sang to himself.
“What? I’m not—”

J’zargo grinned slyly. “Take it from one who knows, Ennis, you have an obvious tell. We’ve all noticed, whenever you’re nervous, you tug on your hood, like you want it to swallow you whole.”

Brelyna sat down next to Katariah. “Now spill. You’re among friends here.”

The Dragonborn found herself facing a crossroads of sorts. Her most obvious instinct was to remain silent and solitary, sort out exactly what the Psijics wanted her to do, deal with Ancano, and leave for Septimus’ outpost before the weather got too cold. But another half of her desperately wanted to talk about the obstacles she was facing. Not all of them, definitely not the parts about Cathnoquey or being Dragonborn, that would be too much, too soon, just about what was going on at the College. Ultimately, the latter side won out, and she found herself describing at length the apparitions of the Psijic monk, the Eye of Magnus, and Ancano to her fellow apprentices, adding as an afterthought that she had snuck a letter from the Thalmor agent.

“J’zargo knew there was a reason he liked you, let me see that.” The Khajiit took the parchment from Katariah’s hand. “Unbroken seal, nice work. Let’s see what it has to say.”

She held her breath as she tore the wax open and unfolded the letter, holding it so they all could read what it contained.

_Sixth Emissary Ancano,_

_I hope this letter finds you and your work at the College of Winterhold well. You and I both understand how important magical knowledge is to the identity of the Aldmeri Dominion. To get straight to the point, I am writing to inform you that I will be visiting the College in a week’s time. Our intelligence suggests that the Dragonborn is headed towards Winterhold, and, as you know, I have been tasked with ensuring her safety and security. While I doubt she would take shelter at the College, I must request that you keep an eye out for her regardless. Please refer to the information that has been previously circulated regarding her appearance and known behaviors to guide you, but also be aware that we have been unable to contain her, despite our best efforts. Treat any unaccompanied female traveller in the region with caution until my arrival._

_By my Hand and Seal,_

_Fourth Emissary Aleyne_

“Well that’s a shame,” Onmund muttered to Katariah’s left. “That held nothing of use to us.”
Katariah had been mentally tallying the waking hours she had left to complete the Psijic’s orders and leave the College without a trace when she realized what the Nord mage had said. “Sorry, ‘us’?”

The three apprentices nodded while Brelyna spoke for all of them. “Obviously we’re going to help you, Ennis. This business with Ancano and the Eye of Magnus is way too big for one person to face alone. Besides, we’re definitely not going to let you have all of the adventure to yourself. Now get up, if we’re quiet we can sneak down to the Midden and speak with the Augur of Dunlain while everyone else is asleep!”

--

Four days had passed, and Katariah found herself standing at the mouth of Labyrinthian with her friends by her side. In spite of the turmoil that always seemed to follow her whenever she joined a new group, the thing she most enjoyed about her time away from being only the Dragonborn was the feeling of having allies to turn to when things began to go wrong, and based on on the death of Savos Aren, Ancano sealing himself in the Hall of the Elements, and the apparitions of most-likely dead apprentices, things had definitely taken a turn for the worse.

“You coming, Ennis?” Onmund called from ahead of her.

Unfortunately the other half of adopting a secret identity was staring her in the face. Katariah knew that her time at the College was drawing to a close as a fight with Ancano became more and more inevitable. She would then have two options with her friends: tell them that she had been lying to them since the moment they met or leave Winterhold in the dead of night like a coward to avoid the confrontation altogether. The dreams that she had every night with the other Children of Time kept warning her of a coming betrayal, but in this moment she felt like a traitor whose word was worth nothing. At least with the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood, there was the assumption that everyone in Skyrim’s underworld held something up their sleeve that they would just assume not see the light of day, the revelation that she was the Dragonborn came easier to them, the painful conversation with Brynjolf on the night after her coronation as Guildmaster notwithstanding. Brelyna, Onmund, and J’zargo talked about wanting to acquire knowledge, power, maybe even change the world, but the reality was that they were innocents in all of this. They each had their own story to tell, but at the end of the day, Katariah did not expect them to handle the revelation well.

“Right behind you,” the fourth apprentice answered as she followed her friends into the darkness of Labyrinthian.

--
“J’zargo still cannot believe that we actually have the staff. If you would be so kind, Ennis, wouldn’t you let me hold—”

Onmund cast his eyes towards the cavern’s roof in exasperation. “I thought we already discussed this, the Psijic monks appeared to Ennis, so she gets to be the one to hold the staff.”

Brelyna and Katariah followed the pair of bickering males, the elf lightly clutching the Dragonborn’s arm. “Are you alright? Have the visions of Aren and the other apprentices stopped?”

Katariah nodded, still a little shaken by the image of the Arch Mage locking two of his friends into an eternity with a Dragon Priest.

“In that last chamber, how did you what that undead was called?” Onmund inquired over his shoulder. “My father told me about all sorts of Draugr, but never a type named, what was it, ‘Dragon Priest?’”

Katariah tried to quickly draft a lie within her head that did not involve her learning about Morokei and his kind from one of Arngeir’s books at High Hrothgar, when a black robed figure stepped in between the students and the tunnel to the surface.

“So, you made it out of there alive. Ancano was right... you are dangerous.”

J’zargo was the first to react, dropping into a fighting stance and readying destruction spells in his hands. “By the Twin Moons, who are you?”

“I am Estormo, and I’m afraid I’ll have to take that Staff from you now. Ancano wants it kept safe... oh, and he wants you four dead. Nothing personal.”

The tense standoff continued for a few seconds, until it was pierced by laughter. Brelyna practically had tears coming down her face as she clutched the cave’s wall to keep her from doubling over. “Seriously? Your name is actually Estormo? What are you, a lightning mage?”

The Thalmor looked genuinely bewildered as he slowly nodded, which caused Onmund to
comment, “Maybe we’ll meet his brothers, Enferno and Esnowmo. Then, we’ll really be in trouble.”

Estormo did not seem to want to turn this conflict into a battle of wits, as he launched a bolt of lightning towards Katariah’s head. Quickly dodging, she decided that now seemed as good a time as any to try out her new staff. “Look out, I think we made Estormo the Great and Powerful angry.” She felt the blue gem hum to life as it drained the magic from the Thalmor, who looked down as his hands in terrified confusion. In that moment, Onmund shoved him backwards with Telekinis while J’zargo ended him with a Thunderbolt to the chest. After the deed was done, the Khajiit casually brushed himself off. “Take notes, friends. This is what a true lightning mage looks like.”

As they filed out of Labyrinthian, Brelyna wiped her eyes and remarked to herself, “What a stupid name.”

--

By the time they made it back to the College, it became clear that the time for jokes was over, as Mirabelle was dead and the storm of magic had only grown larger in their absence. They raced across the bridge and only stopped at the door to the Hall of the Elements, where they were greeted by Ancano, who was drawing magic from the Eye of Magnus with a crazed expression on his face, which deepened when he laid eyes on Katariah. “You, you think you can stop me?! The power to unmake the world is at my fingertips, and I will use it to kill you first.” A burst of magic echoed through the room, and the three apprentices fell to the ground, paralyzed, leaving the Dragonborn standing alone.

Sprinting behind a pillar to avoid the onslaught of thunderbolts, Katariah took deep breaths as she readied the Staff of Magnus in her hands.

Ancano drew nearer and nearer, screaming at her the entire way. “You’re the reason I’ve been sentenced here, to this backwater of Nirn! If you had had the good sense to simply die along with the rest of your island, I could have written my own destiny within the Aldmeri Dominion.”

Katariah flung herself out from behind the pillar and pointed the staff at the Eye, and inwardly rejoiced as the field of magic around Ancano began to disappear. However, joy was replaced with terror as she attempted to drain the Thalmor of power, only to realize that the soul gem within the staff had dissipated from overuse. Casting the staff aside, she drew the Blade of Woe in the hope that the mundane would save her when magic failed. She never had the chance to use it, as a fireball knocked her onto her back.
Ancano lunged forward and pinned her shoulder to the stone floor with one hand, and closed the other around her throat. As he conjured a dagger, he whispered in her ear, “I shall take your blood as payment for my future.”

Weaponless and unable to Shout, Katariah squeezed her eyes shut and prepared for the end. But it never came. Instead, she heard a dull thud as Ancano’s body fell onto the floor, dead. Sitting up, the Dragonborn barely noticed as her friends recovered from the Paralysis spell, her attention was taken up by the mage that had saved her life.

Looking down at Ancano’s body, Aleyne muttered, “Magnus, what a moron.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm finally finally back!! This was my longest hiatus by far, I just started fall classes and am adjusting to life in a new city, so hopefully things should normalize soon! I cannot thank you all enough for your patience and kindness about the delay. I'll try to be back soon for a conversation with Aleyne and a relaxing stroll through Blackreach. Like always, please please please kudus/comment/bookmark if you enjoyed!!
Clash

Chapter Summary

Katariah comes to terms with the consequences of being a living legend.

Chapter Notes

Musical fun is in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I am so sorry about him, believe me when I say that he is not an accurate representation of us at all.”

The Eye of Magnus blinked out of existence, but Katariah’s mind seemed to remain in the moment where she was pinned underneath Ancano, and presently only possessed the ability to passively narrate the events that were going on around her, in the same tone that one uses to describe the weather.

You are taking Aleyne’s hand and she is helping you to your feet. That’s certainly strange.

“Poor thing, you’re shaking. Here, drink this, it’ll calm down your nerves.”

You are willingly ingesting something that was given to you by the woman who said your people were not worth the ground they stood on. That’s probably not your smartest move.

“Are these your friends? Do they need help?”

The Dragonborn’s soul snapped back to reality as Aleyne approached the entrance to the Hall of the Elements, where the other three apprentices were huddled. She threw herself in between her friends and the Thalmor Agent. “Get away from them,” she snarled with aggression she didn’t know she possessed.
Aleyne sighed. “There’s no need to be so dramatic, Katariah. I’m not looking to fight with you. In all honesty, I’m proud of you.”

That was unexpected. “What?”

“You’re finally taking a step in the right direction. As the one who has been tasked with keeping you safe and guiding you towards your destiny, that makes me happy. While the College of Winterhold has only a fraction of the combined magical knowledge of the Aldmeri Dominion, it is a nice enough place for you to hone your abilities until you decide to join us.”

Katariah found herself preferring the conversation where Aleyne tried to pull a knife on her. At least that dynamic made sense. “So you’re not going to try and bring me with you?”

“That didn’t work out so well for me the last time,” Aleyne said with a twisted smile. “Besides, I now know that you’re someplace safe and doing something productive with your time. I’m not going to interrupt your education. But for my own peace of mind, I have something for you.” She reached up one of her sleeves and pulled out a piece of topaz, carved into the shape of the sun. Reaching forward, she took hold of the Dragonborn’s right wrist and dropped the stone into her upturned palm. “I enchanted this myself. If you ever find yourself in trouble, or needing my help in any way, whisper barra apraxis to the stone.” Aleyne held up an identical stone in her other hand. “I have its twin and will be able to come to your aid whenever you need me.”

There were a few seconds of awkward silence while Katariah processed the interaction. “Aleyne, my friends are here and they are innocents in all of this, so I’m not going to risk injuring them by trying to end you, but I want you to understand that if I were ‘in trouble,’ you would be the last person on Nirn that I would want to see.”

“Dragonborn, as my mother always says, there is a very long time between now and never. Hold onto the stone, and we’ll see what happens.” With that, Aleyne turned on her heel and left the Hall of the Elements.

Silence reigned, until it was broken by the sound of a sob. Katariah spun around to meet the eyes of Brelyna, who promptly burst into tears and ran out the door at a sprint. Onmund looked like he wanted to say something truly scathing to Katariah, but only shook his head and followed the Dunmer.

“They’ll come around.”
Katariah turned to see J’zargo, who remained with a calming expression on his face.

“J’zargo will talk to them. I think I can make them understand.”

“So you’re not mad at me too?”

“Ennis...Katariah, I understand the need to run away, perhaps a little more than our friends do.” He gave her an appraising once-over. “You are a mess of contradictions, my friend. You have the face of a Nord, the height of a Breton, the eyes of a child, the hair of an old woman, and a will of iron.” His gaze turned serious. “Tell me, Dragonborn, have you ever been to my homeland, to Elsweyr?”

“I haven’t. I’ve heard it’s very beautiful.”

J’zargo had a faint, sad smile as he remembered. “During clear nights, the moons make the sands gleam like so many diamonds, and the thick air smells like spices and sugar, you can almost taste it. My family is from Alabaster, just near the River Malapi. About eighty five years ago, the Thalmor took our lands into their hands, though they won’t admit as much. Their grip only grew tighter as the years went on, until twenty years ago, when one of their puppets announced that no Khajiit was to leave Anequina and Pelletine again, and those who lived outside could not return.” He shook his head. “To not be allowed to wander freely, they might as well have cut off our feet at the ankle. That day, my mother put me on the last boat crossing the river to Cyrodiil. J’zargo has not seen his kin since then.”

“I’m so sorry. I know how that feels.”

The apprentice looked relieved. “You do, don’t you? That means you what you are up against, and that you can’t stay here.”

Katariah nodded.

“Gifts of the dragon aside, I believe you have the ability to stop the Aldmeri Dominion. You are almost as clever as J’zargo, but more than that, you have a loyal heart. Just keep wandering, follow the moons, and you will end up where you need to be.”

Katariah readied herself to go to the Hall of Attainment one last time to gather her weapons and put on her armor. Before she left, she turned back to J’zargo. “You’ll see your home again, my friend.
I promise.”

“So will you, Katariah. I know it.”

Several hours north of the College, Katariah plotted her course towards Septimus’ outpost in the ice fields. If she continued at her current pace, she would arrive at the edge of the forest by nightfall and could make camp there before she had to cross the frozen sea.

That thought had just crossed her mind when she saw a figure slumped against a tree, a few paces ahead of her. It was tall, but covered in loose, black cloth to the point where Katariah could not tell if it was a man or a woman. A black executioner’s hood covered its head that slowly turned upwards to face the Dragonborn.

Katariah hesitantly approached. “Are you hurt? Do you need help?” She reached down to uncover the figure’s face, when she heard the whistle of a blade cutting through the icy air.

In the instant that it took Katariah to leap backwards, the shadow was on its feet, coming towards her at a full sprint with a deadly-looking ebony sword drawn.

From the second their blades clashed, Katariah knew this battle would not fall in her favor. The business with Ancano had kept her from sleep, and she felt her joints cracking from lack of practice as she attempted to outmaneuver her opponent. Every blow she attempted to strike was instantly countered with intense precision, as if this figure had a window into her very mind.

The battle in the snow lasted for barely half a minute when a vicious kick knocked Katariah’s legs out from under her. As the mass of darkness stood over her, raising its blade and blocking out the sun, she realized that retreat was her only option for surviving this encounter. Calling upon Nocturnal, she felt the shadows wrapping around her like a cloak, hiding her away from this unknown threat as she ran away. This comfort was removed as she turned around to see the shadow, stood still but apparently staring after her, as if its covered gaze could pierce the powers of a Daedric Prince. Katariah chose not to wait and see if this theory was true, and took off towards the dusk, darting in between the pine trees as she went. Feeling the Dragonborn’s presence fading away, the shadowy figure resumed its position beneath same tree.

The sun barely had the time to sink towards the horizon when the shadow heard the dulcet tones of
her minder, Fourth Emissary Half-Her-Face.

“You idiot, you nearly killed her!”

She grinned to herself, beneath her hood. It was so rare to hear the girl speak beyond the tones of *everything will be fine* and *we just need Katariah with us*, it was like hearing a parent swear for the first time, it gave reality to an instinctual impulse that you knew was there all along, but had never entered the light before.

“You were supposed to make her want to call for help, not try to slit her throat!” She whipped around, coming nearly nose-to-nose with the black cloth. “You do still remember what death is, right? It’s a somewhat permanent condition that, if applied to Katariah, will mean very bad things for you!”

She bit her cheek to keep from laughing. It was simply adorable when the Fourth Emissary tried to be threatening, tried to be like her mother. It only called attention to the fact that the girl had clearly never held a torturer’s blade, and most like, never could.

The Thalmor agent took a breath to regain her composure and straighten her black robes before plastering that familiar smile on her face, only slightly wincing as the expression tore open the scars on her face, causing blood to drip down her neck. “I hope you’ve learned from this experience, now let’s get you back to Solitude to continue your training.”

*Fine, she thought to herself while the Fourth Emissary prattled on, let the Thalmor and the Dragonborn protract the inevitable, I’ll be ready when the time comes.*

--

Katariah pressed her palms against the wall of the rickety elevator as she viewed the mammoth caverns of Blackreach with wide eyes. As the bronze lift descended, her heart pounded against her ribs with apprehension. Her defeat at the hands of Ancano and then again with the spectre in the snowy woods had left her feeling completely out of balance and weak.

“You know lass, when you said you had a heist for us, I was thinking a nice, well-lit mansion in Solitude, or maybe Windhelm. Not another Dwemer ruin.”
Hence, her writing to the Ragged Flagon to ask for Brynjolf’s aid in retrieving the Elder Scroll. It was clear from her past two performances that she needed rest and practice with a blade, and in the meantime, backup. Besides, they were, in a way, stealing the Scroll from the Dwemer, it was within their ruins, even if the ancient race wasn’t present to lay claim to it. But a tiny, tiny part of her reason for asking for Brynjolf had to do with something else. “So I heard that there’s something between you and Tonilia,” she said, leaning against the wall and trying to sound as casual as possible.

Even though both were wearing hoods, Katariah could see his mouth twist into a grimace. “That didn’t quite work out, and now I’m being charged double for mead down at the Flagon.”

*Remain calm.* “Oh that’s a shame. Some things are just not meant to be, I guess.” The rational part of her mind was screaming at her that she was being silly, that she was in no way mentally or emotionally ready for a romantic relationship at the present time, and J’zargo was right that she needed to remain focused on her larger-than-life enemies. But in the week since she left the College, she felt the absence of Brelyna, Onmund, and J’zargo intensely. Whatever might happen with Brynjolf might not be what she truly needed, but gods damn her, it was something that could be entirely her own in this world.

The elevator reached its destination at the bottom of the cavern, and the two thieves walked out into the eerie clear blue light. As they stood on the ground, Katariah and Brynjolf realized the true scale of the silent Dwemer city. Blackreach was incomprehensibly huge, as though one could place every city and town in Skyrim edge to edge and have them fit with room to spare. The Dragonborn smiled at Brynjolf’s wide eyes. “Try not to grab too much treasure,” she advised, “We have to make it to the Tower of Mzark, according to Signus, and then you have to journey back to Riften and I am not helping you carry an armful of Dwarven scrap because you couldn’t resist leaving it behind.” She glanced at the scribbled map the slightly deranged mage had given her earlier. “It should be this way.”

The red-headed thief stepped forward. “I can’t believe this place was abandoned.” As he moved to take the lead, his boot became caught on a crimson plant, uprooting it entirely. Brynjolf fell forward, catching himself on a bronze pot that made a resounding clang that echoed across the ruin. They then realized in steadily growing horror that Blackreach was indeed not abandoned.

Twisted Falmer rose up from behind every column with weapons in hand, drawing closer to the source of the commotion with practiced accuracy. Down the pathways and towards the steps they stood on, terrifying scorpion-like insects crawled with talons and pinchers making a clicking noise that sounded like it belonged only in the world of nightmares. Worst of all, joining the Falmer were their man and mer slaves with blank faces so pale that Katariah could see the blue veins underneath their skin.

Katariah quickly calculated their odds and grabbed Brynjolf’s hand. “It’s too late for stealth,
Not bothering to draw their swords, the pair raced across Blackreach towards the base of the furthest tower as the Falmers’ arrows and acidic Chaurus spit glanced past them. When they made it to the tower, Katariah shoved Brynjolf inside and slammed the bronze door behind them.

Amazingly enough, they both made it. Neither of them looked down to find an arrow sprouting from their chest or a foot burned off from acid. At this revelation that the two of them had sprinted through a ring of Oblivion and come out the other side unscathed, the pair burst out laughing, only to awkwardly taper off as they both realized they were still holding hands. Brynjolf broke away first, with a wry smile.

“Let’s go get you your Scroll, lass.”

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“Try first, then fourth, then third!”

“Bryn, we did that combination already.”

In contrast with their intense run in with the residents of Blackreach, the final obstacle between the thieves and the Elder Scroll, a puzzle with four buttons, was almost comically safe by comparison. However, it nearly had the Dragonborn tearing her hair out with frustration as she spun the rings of the ceiling in pointless circles.

“Kat, let me try.” She stood aside while Brynjolf took the podium, and watched as he figured his way through the riddle and guided sunlight into the green glass.

Gathering her courage, she squeezed his arm as the Elder Scroll dropped into view. “What would I do without you?”

“Don’t worry about it, lass, I just wanted to redeem myself after I nearly got us both killed back there.” He nodded towards the center of the chamber with a sudden sadness entering his eyes. “Go and take it.”
Katariah felt a sudden shyness as she approached the Scroll, as though it would suddenly grow a voice of its own and say that she was not worthy to remove it from its perched. However, it only glowed happily as the Dragonborn took it in both her hands and walked towards the lift with Brynjolf.

Before they were back in the snowy mountains, Katariah decided to try and make her intentions clear one last time. “We make quite a pair, don’t we?”

Brynjolf refused to meet her eyes. “Katariah, I know what you’re asking, and I don’t think that will work out between us.”

She felt that angry blush creep onto her cheeks in spite of herself. “Why? I saw the way you looked at me, back before everything went wrong with Mercer. Why did things change?”

“Because of the distance between us! You were born a legend, the chosen champion of Skyrim, I was left on the doorstep of Honorhall.” He finally met her gaze and sighed. “You think you want this now, but in a year’s time, I’d just be another one of the people you’ve saved. I can’t have that. I will always be your friend, but nothing more than that.”

Katariah swallowed the lump in her throat and fought to keep her voice level. “Is that always going to be the case?”

“Yes, lass, it is.”

At the crossroads between Ivarstead and Riften, the two thieves parted ways with a strained embrace. Before make the climb up the Seven Thousand Steps, she glanced down at the Scroll in her hands. Stupid piece of parchment, she thought to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Song for Kat at this point: "Ready to Go" by Republica; Song for our shadow in the woods: "Golden and Green" by The Builders and the Butchers; In the words of Katariah herself, some things just aren’t meant to work out :(. Join us next time for a stay in Windhelm :). As per our usual arrangement, pretty pretty please comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed, and HOLY MOLY, over 60 kudos?! You guys are amazing!!
White Out

Chapter Summary

After fighting Alduin for the first time, Katariah enters a familiar place under the cover of a cloudy night.

Chapter Notes

Music suggestion for your reading enjoyment: "To Get To Know You," by Winterbourne

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, you have it. The Kel, the Elder Scroll. Tood kreh... qalos. Time *shudders* at its touch. There is no question. You are doom-driven. Kogaan uv dur Akatosh. The very bones of the earth are at your disposal. Go then, and fulfill your destiny. Take the Scroll to the Time-Wound. Do not delay, Mal Briinah. Alduin will be coming. He cannot miss the signs of your rise.”

Katariah could just make out the black dot of Alduin crossing the horizon before white light from the unfurled Scroll filled her eyes.

Ulfric Stormcloak had a tumultuous relationship with restful sleep. Night after night, he experienced different permutations of his past battles and was left feelings of rage, fear, and guilt when he woke, usually long before dawn’s break.

This was why he was so confused as to where he stood, in this dream. This place was no burning Cyrodiil, no razor-sharp Thalmor prison, no blood-soaked Markarth. This land was idyllic, with soft soil beneath his feet, forests of nearly black pine trees, and an ocean crashing against a cliffside. Moreover, the people around him, while they looked through him like he was a ghost, did not have the same scars that those of Skyrim did. There were no signs of hunger, terror, or blood here. These people were simply happy.

Ulfric thought that perhaps Vaermina had placed him on a distant part of High Rock for some gods forsaken reason when he looked up to see a statue of Talos looking down on him, which further confused the question as to the nature of these blissfully unaware people. In front of the
statue, at prayer, stood a wizened old woman, tiny in stature with wild grey hair. Surprisingly, she looked up and met the Jarl’s eyes with a knowing smile on her face. “Welcome to our island, visitor,” she said while turning back to face the statue, “Go and find what you seek, in the last house by the cliffside.”

In the unquestioning nature typical of dreams, Ulfric only nodded and felt his feet carry him towards the last house. He pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold as he felt a presence, silently calling him to climb the wooden stairs and enter the small room, an attic that was serving as a bedroom for the figure that was sitting by the window.

She was slight, short even by Breton standards. Yet there was a strength to her, even as she sat at rest. Her features looked refined, maybe even highborn, which stood in stark contrast with the rough spun shirt and trousers she was wearing. A sunbeam filtered through the window, turning her chestnut hair gold and bouncing off her grey eyes that were distantly gazing down on the island below her.

He could have sworn that he knew this girl from somewhere, but he couldn’t place where. As he moved to take a step closer to her, the wooden floor creaked, and the girl’s eyes snapped into sharp focus.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my bedroom?”

Ulfric recognized her the moment he heard her voice, though he had trouble reconciling this girl with her counterpart in Skyrim. “Dragonborn?” he asked, moving closer.

The girl, meanwhile, had dropped suspicion in favor of guileless aimity. “Are you looking for my friend, Liselle? I can help you find her!” She reached forward and grabbed the jarl’s hand and began to lead him downstairs.

“Dragonborn, wait, where are we, what’s going—” Before he finish asking all of his many questions, a flash of white light blinded them. As sight returned to Ulfric, he could just make out shadows carrying the girl away from him.

Ulfric woke up with a jolt just as the sun began to rise. Choosing to not even begin unpacking his dream from the night before, he made his way down to the war room, where he was met by Galmar, who looked positively elated.
“Our scouts brought us good news this morning, the Dragonborn has been spotted in Eastmarch and she’s headed north. I’m posting more guards along the city walls. The one who brings her to you is getting free mead at the barracks for the next month. We’ll have her in our ranks by week’s end.”

Ulfric sighed to himself. He had spoken to Galmar and Jorleif after the dragon attacked Windhelm about his desire to bring the girl into the Stormcloak cause. Galmar, with his love of Nord legends, agreed wholeheartedly, and had taken a rather direct approach: the Dragonborn would be treated like a wanted criminal until she was caught and brought to the Palace of the Kings. Jorleif stated his doubts with this course of action, saying that the Dragonborn might not appreciate being hunted like an animal, and Ulfric was inclined to agree with him. However, he did not see any better options. The girl seemed to be very adept at avoiding public appearances, outside of the few rumors that reached his ear, ranging from the plausible, like the slaying of various dragons or raiding the Thalmor Embassy, to the ridiculous, like leading the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood. If he took Galmar’s advice, he would have the opportunity to sort the false from the true and convince this Nord girl to fight for her land. That would have to be enough. That being said, he was not sure that his housecarl’s specific method would work. “Let the guards rest,” he said, “and I’ll handle the Dragonborn.”

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In an effort to “move on,” as Delphine put it, Katariah was trying to break down her feelings and find their roots so she could treat the cause as opposed to the symptoms. As she journeyed towards Windhelm, her hands were shaking. That meant she was nervous. Why was she nervous? Because she had to slay Alduin. There was the origin of her fears. She balled her hands into fists. She held two weapons against her foe, Dragonbane and Dragonrend, they had to help calm her down, at least a little.

Except they weren’t.

Every time she heard her blade let out a crackle of sparks, or the words *mortal, finite, temporary* echoed around her head, the memory of Alduin’s teeth tearing the flesh off of her sword arm quickly overshadowed it. If it had not been for Paarthanax’s help, or Alduin’s desire to play with his food, she would be dead.

Layered on top of that mortal terror was the business about Dragonsreach. Balgruuf insisted on at least a temporary armistice in the civil war before he allowed her use of his palace. “Perhaps you can stop the dragons and this war into the bargain,” he suggested. Right. And she had some land on the dark side of Secunda that she would be delighted to sell him. She had seen firsthand how committed both sides were to destroying the other, they weren’t going to lay down arms just because she asked nicely. But Balgruuf had insisted, so now here she was, standing behind the Palace of the King as clouds further darkened the night sky.
Her decision to visit Ulfric first was not motivated by her desire to see a man that she found objectively attractive, but instead by pure practicality. It was getting even colder, and fast. If she chose to call on Elisif at Solitude first, the winter weather in Eastmarch could delay her, and by extension the peace talks significantly. Even now, the snow was making travel difficult, and the wind was cutting through her fur wraps and leather armor. As she planned it, her conversation with Ulfric would barely last five minutes if it occurred at all. Her strategy for preventing total war after the death of Titus worked well enough, and she had every intention of using it again.

She unearthed the grappling hook from the bottom of her pack. *Sithis, Hircine, Shor, or whoever in Oblivion is looking after Arnbjorn’s soul, protect him and thank him for me,* she prayed as she climbed up the stone wall with note telling the jarl to come to High Hrothgar. Unlike the last time she did this, when she climbed through the window, the room was pitch black, without dying embers in the fireplace to light her way. As she was waiting for her eyes to adjust, a pair of strong hands grasped her shoulders from behind.

“Only the foolish or courageous approach a jarl without summons,” Ulfric muttered in her ear, “which are you, Dragonborn?”

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Ulfric lit a scrap piece of parchment on fire and cast it into the fireplace. The room was slowly cast in orange hues and the girl’s still-hooded face was covered in shifting shadows, making her cheeks look even more hollow. “You are aware that the Palace has a front door?” he asked as he brushed the hood off her head.

He watched as she attempted to make herself taller and keep her face neutral. “The wanted posters you fastened to every tree in Skyrim made walking into the city a little difficult,” she said with just a hint of bitterness, “And I couldn’t afford to be delayed. I have a message from the Greybeards.”

Ulfric felt his heart trip on a beat as she mentioned his old home. Confident that the Dragonborn did not see that brief slip of emotion, he matched her diplomatic tone. “It’s about time they turned their gaze from the heavens, back to our bleeding homeland. What do they want?”

"They want to negotiate a truce until the dragon menace is dealt with.”

“I have the greatest respect for the Greybeards, of course. And the dragon attacks are a growing plague. But the political situation is still delicate. Not all the Jarls are fully committed to supporting
me as High King. I can't afford to appear weak. I can't agree to this unless Tullius himself will be there."

“Gods damn the politics, Ulfric, Alduin has returned!”

The effect was instantaneous. The facade had been dropped, and rage, exasperation, and terror were written clearly across the Dragonborn’s face. Ulfric was not a man used to being yelled at in his own chambers, and certainly not by someone who would need a stool in order to stand eye level with him, but in that moment, he could see the woman who openly provoked him in the Temple of Talos and slew the dragon in his city, as opposed to this stiff creature that was carrying other people’s messages. However his satisfaction at seeing the Dragonborn as she truly was was quickly overshadowed when he realized what she had just said. “The dragon we saw at Helgen—?”

She nodded grimly. “The same.”

Ulfric took a breath as he mentally weighed his options. The idea of having to be civil with a man like Tullius tasted like poison, but the return of the World Eater of songs and legends could render his cause mute, if there was nothing left to fight. Besides, he could use these talks as an opportunity to evaluate the Dragonborn’s motivations and alliances. All in all, it would be a net positive. “Well, that changes the situation doesn’t it? Even Tullius may be forced to talk sense in the face of such a threat.”

A log in the fireplace dropped, giving off a shower of sparks as Ulfric watched the emotions flicker across the girl’s face.

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Katariyah was having a hard time believing her luck. Everything that she had heard about Ulfric Stormcloak, his stubbornness, and his political mind, suggested that she would have a nearly impossible time convincing him to come to High Hrothgar. However, as it stood now she would make it to Solitude in record time. Then there would only be reconciling two irreconcilable foes, capturing bloodthirsty dragon alive, actually riding said dragon across Skyrim, and defeating Alduin. One step at a time.

“Showing respect to the Greybeards will increase your prestige,” she said as Ulfric walked her down to the front door.
She heard the jarl give a quiet laugh behind her. “I don't need you to teach me how to play high politics in Skyrim. But, you're right. There's nothing to be gained by refusing the Greybeards' request.”

Grinning to herself, Katariah put her hood back up. “I guess I’ll see you at High Hrothgar, then.” She pushed open one of the heavy bronze doors, only to stop dead in her tracks. “What in Oblivion is this?”

When she had entered Ulfric’s window, the night had been black with clouds, but now the snow was falling so quickly and so heavily that she doubted she’d be able to see her hand if she held it out at arm’s length.

“You’d think that you’ve never seen a blizzard before, Dragonborn,” he said, gently pulling her back inside. “It should pass after a day or two, but you cannot travel in these conditions. Come, I’ll have Jorleif make you up a room upstairs.” As he spoke, once again, he pushed the leather hood off of her head.

Later that night, Katariah found herself lying in a far nicer bed than she was used to, trying to put aside how Ulfric had brushed her cheek each of the three times he had taken off her hood.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, Katariah and Sir Stormcloak find themselves together. Get excited for next time, as two deeply repressed and stubborn individuals try to figure each other out :) . As always thank you all so much for your patience, and please please please comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed reading!!
Snow Bound

Chapter Summary

While snowed in at the Palace of the Kings, Katariah and Ulfric begin to understand each other.

Chapter Notes

It's here!! The longest chapter so far! If you want to have a song from Kat's perspective, try "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" by Regina Spektor. For Ulfric, I recommend "Run" by Daughter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After her first dreamless night in weeks, Katariah woke up slowly to the sound of wind howling outside stone walls. Sitting up, she rubbed the numbness out of her feet as she remembered why she was in a palace’s bedroom as opposed to a cramped closet of an inn or a cave by the side of a road. She was not used to being someone’s guest, and was formulating a plan to sneak out of the castle when an overworked man carrying a tray entered the room.

“Good morning, my lady,” he said, setting the tray down by her bedside.

*That needs to be the first thing to go,* Katariah thought to herself as she dug around her mind to remember the steward’s name. “Jorleif, I know that I’m not a lady. But, I am curious as to whether or not I am a prisoner here.”

He looked aghast at the suggest. “Gods, no! The Jarl asked that I tell you that the Palace is at your disposal. Consider this your home until this storm blows over.” With that, he awkwardly backed out of the room at shut the door behind him.

Waiting a few minutes to make sure she did not hear the click of a lock closing, Katariah confronted the prospect of having a few entirely open days ahead of her. Even when she travelled from place to place, she still had to fight wildlife, hunt food, and brace herself against the elements, and during her stays at the Ragged Flagon, the Sanctuary, or the College, her time was pretty structured. The last time she had a day like this was that last Fredas of Sun’s Height, when she heard her destiny from Ursula.
Gulping down the tears that that realization brought, that in less than four months time she had forgotten what normal life felt like, Katariah mechanically reorganized her pack and weapons. Sword, bow, dagger, quiver, all present and accounted for. Now inside the pack. Coin purse with septims and gems, check. Potions and poisons, check. Lockpicks, flame cloak scrolls, keys to Breezehome and Honeyside, check, check, check. She felt around the bottom, and pulled out The Book of the Dragonborn. She faintly smiled as she traced her fingers over the silver dragon on the cover, wondering if some small part of her soul knew what she was before the dragon attacked the Western Watchtower, something that protected her from the flash of light on Cathnoquey, kept her alive in Bruma, gave her the strength to keep moving to Skyrim.

Shaking her head to disperse the pointless circling thoughts, she looked down to see the last two things in her bag: Ulfric’s dossier and the sun carved out of topaz that Aleyne had given her at Winterhold. The sight turned her of them turned her stomach into knots. They represented the worst parts of herself. They were emblematic of how she was tied into these problems that were bigger than life itself, but that she was too cowardly and too weak to do anything about them or even simply cut herself off from them. Hands shaking, she covered them with cloth and pushed into the furthest corner of her pack.

Desperate for something to distract her, she looked out her window. Beneath her, in the courtyard, she saw Stormcloak soldiers who were practicing with weapons in spite of the snowstorm that raged around them. When in Cyrodiil, do as the Imperials do, as Liselle used to say, Katariah internally quipped as she put her leather armor and fur wraps on and grabbed Dragonbane. She might as well make use of this blank time.

Katariah exited her room, quietly shutting the door behind her. She barely made it nine paces down the hallway when she came face to face with a Nord man wearing bear skin armor.

"What will Skyrim have become if her children submitted to tyranny?"

Katariah found herself a little thrown by this greeting. “Do you start every conversation this way?” she asked, mentally piecing together that this man was Galmar Stone-Fist, the infamous Stormcloak general and housecarl to Ulfric.

His brow furrowed as he looked at her. “Only with those I’m not sure about. I’ve heard a lot of rumors about you, Dragonborn.”

Not to be deterred, Katariah kept striding down the hallway, while Galmar matched her pace. “Really,” she said, not allowing her voice to rise into a question.
“Some say that you lead a band of thieves. Others claim that you run the Dark Brotherhood.” He seemed to not understand her lack of reaction to his words. “Do you have anything to say to that?”

“That perhaps, with all these rumors, you should speak more carefully to me.” Katariah grinned faintly to herself as she heard Galmar’s footsteps cease.

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“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Ulfric.”

“Galmar, you’ve spoken with her once. And it was your idea to bring her here in the first place.”

“She didn’t deny the suspicions about her. Any Nord with a scrap of honor to their name would have!”

Galmar had stormed into Ulfric’s chambers just after noon to voice his doubts about their guest. Ulfric sighed to himself. He would trust his housecarl with his life and soul, but there was one area of his cause that he knew he had to handle himself, and that was diplomacy. “How did you bring this matter up with her?” he asked, fairly certain of the response he would receive.

The housecarl seemed to realize his mistake, grimacing as he recounted their conversation. “I asked her about it as soon as I saw her this morning.” He looked out the window down to the courtyard below him. “If you think you can do better, she’s outside near the garrison.”

Ulfric meant to glance outside but found himself staring at the Dragonborn as she practiced. Lightly balanced on her feet, she cut her blade against the wind and moved like a breeze over water, like she was sparring against her own shadow. Breaking his gaze, he smirked at Galmar. “I’ll bet you a drink she’ll be on our side before this storm breaks. Just watch.”

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Katariah would not call herself a proud person. All of her life experiences had taught her, over and over again, that anything, down to her very face, could be taken from her at a moment’s notice, so she had best not place too much stock in what was material. However, there was one possession that she loved with all her heart and that was her swordsmanship. It almost served as a map of her past. In the way she held a blade, she could see Nazir’s teachings on the methods of the Alik’r
warriors, how Delvin taught her to move her feet in a fight without making a whisper of a sound, the way Delphine showed her how to cut against the wind so that she could hear the whistle of metal slicing through air. Beyond that, it existed as a part of her identity before Skyrim, before the Thalmor. Simply put, the space between her palm and the hilt of her weapon was her, daughter of Cathnoquey and child of Akatosh at once.

This was why she was a little miffed, that, in the midst of these thoughts, Dragonbane clashed against a war axe. Focusing her gaze, she locked eyes with Ulfric, the snow storm raging around them.

*If he’s looking for a thrashing, he’s found one,* she thought to herself, a smirk coming to her lips as she began slash forwards, more and more aggressively. However, she was surprised as the killer of kings and instigator of a civil war seemed content to block each of her strikes, never making an attack of his own. What surprised her even more was that she began to fall into his rhythm, and he her’s, as the sparring match became increasingly balanced.

The fight seemed endless, and the jarl’s eyes never left the Dragonborn’s. Desperate to tip the scales, Katariah attempted to kick Ulfric’s leg out from under him. However, he shifted his weight forward, causing her to fall towards him. A moment later, the pair found themselves in an award embrace, each blade held at the other’s throat.

Ulfric was the first to break away, lowering his axe. “Your hands are ice, Dragonborn. Won’t you come inside and join me for dinner?”

The energy from the fight quickly leaving her, Katariah began to notice the crowd of Stormcloaks that had formed around them and the numbness that had crept into her limbs. Only nodding, she allowed herself to be led inside.

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Later that afternoon, Jorleif informed Katariah that she and the jarl would be taking dinner in his chambers. Internally, she wanted to cry with relief. The idea of every eye in the main hall of the Palace boring into her made her skin crawl. Even now, her clothes were making her palms sweat. It was a simple blue wool dress, gathered at the waist, with a white shift underneath. She only bought it on the off chance that she would need to wear civilian clothes to avoid detection. It was, in two words, dirt cheap. Normally she wouldn’t give half of a thought as to what she wore, but this felt different, for some reason. She chalked it up to living outside basic social norms since she arrived in Skyrim. Dinner for every night before this one consisted of some haunch of meat cooked over a campfire, or a cheese wheel she had lifted from a tavern. This was sitting down at a table in a Palace, across from a man who expected her to be...what, exactly? A hero, a warrior, a redeemer, a saint?
She had just finished plaiting her hair into a tight braid, getting it out of sight, when Jorleif knocked at her door to tell that dinner was ready.

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Ulfric turned from the glowing fireplace when he heard the Dragonborn enter. It was strange, seeing her out of armor. The dress highlighted her slight figure, but he found himself wishing that she left her hair down. Quickly shaking those sentimental thoughts out of his head, he gestured to the place across from him.

The girl sat down, and a choking silence reigned for a few moments. Ulfric opened his mouth to say anything at all, when the Dragonborn spoke first.

“You probably have a few questions about me, and I have a few about you, so I propose an exchange.”

“I’m listening, Dragonborn.”

He felt his stomach lurch when she winced. “Could you not call me that?” she asked, refusing to meet his eyes.

That was an odd request, but he could honor it. “By all means, Katariah.”

She gave a one sided smile in return. “Thank you, Ulfric. I propose that we exchange a question for a question. You can refuse to answer whatever you want, and I’ll have the same right. Does that sound fair to you?”

This was a little stiff, but he could work with it. “Ladies first.”

Katariah looked like she was struggling to decide what ask first. “Is it true you studied with the Greybeards?”
Ulfric found himself more than a little surprised by this choice. “Yes. They chose me when I was just a lad. It was a great honor, of course.” He found his gaze growing distant as he remembered his last conversation with his father. “I was to become a Greybeard myself. I spent almost ten years at High Hrothgar, learning the Way of the Voice. Then the Great War came... I couldn’t stand missing it.”

“If you had to do it over again, would you stay or leave?”

There were some things that he was unwilling to discuss with someone he barely knew, legend or not. “I believe it’s my turn to ask a question. Why do you have a Dunmer name?”

The stunned look she wore was probably similar to what was on his face a few moments ago, but she recovered and pressed on. “Truthfully, I don’t know the full story behind that. Where I’m from…” She trailed off for a few seconds before speaking again “There wasn’t a lot of focus on historical context where I grew up. My parents probably opened a history book and picked the first name they thought would fit me.”

“And where are you from?”

She flinched, but hid it behind a small smile so quickly that Ulfric wondered if he had imagined it. “Now who’s breaking the rules? I’m pretty sure it’s my turn.”

A log in the fireplace fell, sending a crackling shower of sparks upwards.

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Three days.

It had three days since her first morning in the Palace of the Kings, and Katariah had fallen into a sort of routine. Her mornings were her own, but every afternoon, she found herself in a sparring match with Ulfric which led to dinner and their exchange of questions and answers. Her expectation was that the more she got to know Ulfric Stormcloak, the more she would dislike him, or at least have the ability to dismiss him. However, the more they talked, the more human he became in her eyes. The state of Grey Quarter, the law against Argonians entering the city, the killing of the High Kings, she definitely didn’t agree with these actions, but she was beginning to understand them, and quite honestly, she was not sure she could do much better if she found herself in his position. She would kill to know what he thought of her responses to his questions, about her
experiences with the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood. His eyes gave nothing away, but she prayed that he thought the same of her that she did of, that all of her past actions, even the reprehensible ones, were at least comprehensible to another soul.

She had tried to be honest with him, to the best of her ability, except she refused to breathe a word about her life before Helgen. That would open a door that she doubted she would be able to close. But she had felt something here that she had glimpsed in flashes at the Ragged Flagon, the Sanctuary, and the College. It was safety. This man, instigator of the civil war and all the strife that followed made her feel more safe than anyone else in Skyrim. Now it was just after midnight on the third day and all signs pointed to her leaving in the morning. The storm had broken that afternoon. After dinner, Katariah had found a tiny staircase leading up to the roof of the Palace, giving her a stunning view of the aurora over the ice fields.

From behind her, she head the door open and she smiled to herself when a part of her knew with certainty who it was. “Did you often come up here as a child?” she asked. It was her turn for a question, after all.

Ulfric approached her side so that she could feel the warmth coming from him as he placed a fur wrap around her shoulders. “Sometimes,” he replied. “It used to make me feel so small.”

She laughed as she looked up to meet his eyes. “That’s hard to imagine.”

“Katariah, I have one last question to ask you.”

“What is it, Ulfric?”

“Will you join us?”

Katariah felt her breath catch in her throat. “What?”

Ulfric took hold of both of her hands. “You and I both know that together we could drive the Empire.” Before she had a chance to reply, he turned his gaze to the land below them. “Think of it, you could fight for something bigger than yourself, something that could change the course of Nirn itself.”

*While serving the Thalmor, you will want for nothing. You will be valued above others. You will*
have a purpose that will change the course of reality itself.

Feeling her hands begin to shake, she pulled them out of Ulfric’s grasp. “I’m sorry...I need to go.”

“Dragonborn—”

She refused to look back as she raced down to gather her things and leave with the coming sunrise.

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Ulfric looked into what had been Katariah’s bedroom as it was bathed in the pale blue light of early dawn. There was no evidence that she had even been here in the first place. Wordlessly, he walked to the war room and placed a bottle of mead in front of Galmar.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank you all for your patience, these chapters get a little harder to write as they get further and further from the game. Join us next time for Katariah's stay in Solitude with Elisif, Rikke, and Tullius. Like always, pretty please with a sweet roll on top, COMMENT/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed reading!!
Katariah stared at her hands as the carriage she had hired crossed the border between Hjaalmarch and Haafingar. Gods damn her to every ring of Oblivion, she had been getting better before this. Her nightmares were fading in intensity, she could talk herself out of the unwanted memories that flooded her head, but one sentence from Ulfric Stormcloak, a man she barely knew, sent her spiralling back to the beginning. She should never have allowed him to stand so close to her, should never have had dinner with him, should never have spoken to him except for demanding that he come to High Hrothgar for the peace talks.

As the Solitude’s windmill came into view, she vowed that this would never happen again, she would not let anyone to make her feel like this again. The good news was that Elisif wouldn’t pose too much of a problem in that regard. She remembered how the woman stood in resplendent robes at Elenwen’s party, smiling and laughing with the other guests. Either she was too stupid to realize what the Thalmor were, or simply didn’t care. In either case, Katariah had nothing to say to her beyond that the Greybeards requested her presence on High Hrothgar.

Thankfully when she entered the city of Solitude this time, it wasn’t in the middle of a beheading. However, the presence of a headsman’s block and her memories of Helgen filled her with mind numbing dread as she walked towards the Blue Palace.

The second she pushed open one of the heavy wooden doors, she heard the shatter of glass and the wail of a woman. A red-haired man grabbed her arm and yanked Katariah over the threshold. “You’ll do, come on,” he said as he nearly dragged her to an upstairs corridor.

“I’m sorry, I’m looking to speak to—”
“We don’t have time for introductions, everyone in the court has tried to calm her, you’re our last option!” With that, he pushed her forward into a room and shut the door behind her.

The chamber was beautiful, with sunlight reflecting off of the polished limestone floor and a few delicate trinkets lining the mahogany shelves. Katariah had a feeling that there used to be more among their number as she felt a hunk of glass crunch beneath her boot. In the middle of the room crouched Elisif, called the Fair.

In the stories that Katariah and Liselle used to tell each other as night fell on Cathnoquee, there often were crying heroines, with silver tears gently falling down rosy cheeks. This was not how Elisif looked. Her face was splotched red as her body rocked back and forth with sobs and screams. It was as though she was trying to hug herself, and her fingers clawed against her shoulders.

“He’s gone! He’s gone and he’s never coming back!”

The first thing that Katariah noticed about Elisif beyond the woman’s very apparent grief was that she was younger than her own twenty five years. She appeared to be older than twenty, but not by much. She seemed to have run out of tears to cry when Katariah crouched down to meet her gaze.

“He’s lost, I can feel it. He’s lost in Oblivion and I can’t help him find his way.” Her arms loosened from around her chest and the Dragonborn could see that she was holding something next to her heart.

Simultaneously pitying the young woman and cursing herself for breaking hours-old pledge to herself to not allow anyone close to her, Katariah whispered, “How can I help?”

Elisif pressed the object into her hands. “Please...place his war horn in front of the shrine to Talos. I can’t...after what I’ve done, I can’t face the Ninth Divine.”

Katariah nodded. “Alright. I’ll be right back.”

Katariah scraped some Thalmor blood of her boot before stepping back into the Blue Palace. Elisif
seemed to have recovered some of her poise and was seated on her throne before her court. The Dragonborn noted that she did not look comfortable there. Most other jarls almost lounged when taking care of their hold’s business. Not Elisif. She sat bolt upright with her pale hands gripping her red robes. However, she beamed a smile when she saw Katariah.

“Approach, friend,” she said. After Katariah took a step forward, she continued. “You have my sincerest thanks for the favor you have done me. Name whatever reward you wish and it is yours.”

Taking the hood off of her head, Katariah tried to match the Jarl’s courtly tone. “It was no trouble, your grace. However, as Dragonborn, I must request that you come to the peace talks at High Hrothgar to discuss a potential armistice with Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Elisif’s eyes widened for a moment before she spoke again. “My husband found out the hard way that no good comes from talking to Jarl Ulfric. But, far be it from me to deny a legend her request. You will also need to convince General Tullius to come as well. I may be Jarl of Solitude and rightful High Queen, but the Imperial Legion is his.” She stepped down from her throne and looped her arm around Katariah’s. “Come, let me walk you to Castle Dour.”

A burly looking man in steel plate armor spoke up as Elisif made for the door. “My Jarl, I must insist that I come with you for your protection.”

The jarl waved down his protest. “I am perfectly safe in my own city, Bolgeir. Besides, should there be any trouble, I have the Dragonborn by my side.”

As they made their way through the city, Elisif was the first to speak. “I would swear, Dragonborn, that I’ve seen you somewhere before. Were you at one of Elenwen’s parties?”

“Yes, but only once and for a very brief period of time.”

Elisif laughed. “I knew it, I never forget a face. Goodness, the First Emissary is so delightfully clever, isn’t she?”

“That is one way of looking at it.”

“She has a daughter about our age, you know. I’d love for you to meet her sometime. I see no reason that three young women such as ourselves shouldn’t be friends.”
Katariah was wondering what poor soul had so profoundly lost the genetic lottery as to be Elenwen’s child when Elisif pressed a key into her hand. “What’s this?”

“It’s the key to Proudspire Manor, fully furnished, of course. I want you to feel welcome in Solitude, Dragonborn.”

“Thank you, your grace, but I really don’t need—”

“Don’t be silly, I want you to have it.” They stopped at the door to Castle Dour. “Here you are, I’m going to head back to the Blue Palace. Say hello to Tullius for me.”

Upon entering the Imperial Garrison, Katariah saw a man in Legionnaire’s armor and closely cropped grey hair that she recognized from Helgen as General Tullius speaking to a strong but tired looking legate, a Nord woman with thick red hair pulled back into a tight braid.

“You Nords and your bloody sense of honor.”

“Sir.”

*Forget the list, she goes to the block.*

Katariah quickly recovered her senses and cleared her throat. The general and the legate whipped around when they heard the noise.

“Are my men now giving free rein to anyone who wanders into the castle? Do you have some reason to be here, citizen?” Tullius growled.

The Dragonborn felt cold anger rise inside of her. “I believe we’ve already met, sir.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Have we?” Realization grew in his eyes. “Yes, of course, at Helgen. You were one of the prisoners, if I recall correctly.” His look became appraising. “Why don’t you have a chat with Legate Rikke? I suspect we in the Legion might have use for someone
resourceful like you. Not many survived Helgen. Besides, I'm sure your being imprisoned was all a terrible misunderstanding.”

*He can’t be serious,* Katariah thought to herself. “That is not why I’m here.” Straightening her shoulders, she attempted to sound intimidating. “As Dragonborn, it is my responsibility to inform you that the Greybeards are convening a peace council at High Hrothgar.” To her left, she heard Rikke stifle a gasp, but Tullis did not look impressed.

“Why? There's nothing to discuss as long as that traitor Ulfric is in arms against the Empire.”

*Try to play the role of the cool politician, gods know you’ll need to at the talks themselves.* “We need a truce in the war until the dragon threat is dealt with. That cannot happen without your participation.”

Tullius sighed. “They are getting to be a problem. But I wasn't sent to Skyrim to fight dragons. My job is to quell this rebellion, and I intend to do just that, dragons or no dragons.”

*Maybe convince him by saying something that sounds profound?* “The best time to negotiate is from a position of strength.”

“Fair enough. We're driving the Stormcloaks back well enough at the moment, but we're already overstretched. That's what comes of trying to win a war with a bare handful of legions.” He clenched a fist. “If Cyrodiil would just give me the reinforcements I've requested!”

*That* was interesting. “Why won't the Empire send more reinforcements?”

Tullius fixed his stare on the map displaying the positions of Stormcloak and Imperial forces. “Things in Cyrodiil have been an absolute mess since Mede’s death. Most members of the Elder Council are more concerned with their own personal advancement than with the good of the Empire. Right now, no one sits on the Ruby Throne, and to make matters worse, most of the Legion is tied down on the border with the Aldmeri Dominion. From the Imperial City, our war here is just a sideshow. An interlude before the main event against the Thalmor resumes.”

Pushing down a bit of guilt from her role in the current state of affairs, Katariah asked, “You'll come to the peace council, then?”
“Yes, fine, I'll come to this Greybeard council. For all the good it will do anyone.”

Feeling that this grudging acquiescence really didn’t deserve long-winded thanks, Katariah curtly nodded and turned on her heel and exited Castle Dour. A few moments later, she heard footsteps running up to her.

Catching up to her, Legate Rikke asked, “Care to get a drink with me, Dragonborn?”

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Moments before Rikke joined her at the bar, Katariah signalled to Gulum-Ei not to listen in, but to watch her back while she spoke with the legate.

Rikke approached from her left, bearing two mugs of mead. “Drink up.” She paused for a moment before asking, “Katariah, isn’t it?”

The Dragonborn smirked towards her cup. “You have capable spies.”

“You have to know your friends and your enemies,” the Legate said with a quiet laugh.

“And which am I?”

“That depends. Hopefully, a friend. There has been word that you’ve been spending some time in Windhelm, so I just wanted to take this time to make things fair and make my case for the Empire.”

Katariah grimaced. “That’s going to be difficult for you. My first encounter with Imperial legionnaires was when they were trying to behead me for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I’m not going to force you into Imperial armor and swear an oath to Tullius tonight, don’t worry about that. My only goal right now is to convince you not to join the Stormcloak cause. The true enemy right now is the Aldmeri Dominion, and our best hope for defeating them is the Empire.”
“Tullius looked pretty comfortable at a party thrown at the Thalmor Embassy.”

The legate looked a little annoyed before recovering herself. “It’s like I said, you have to know your friends and your enemies. Skyrim needs to be made whole again, Ulfric needs to be stopped, before the true fight against the Dominion can begin, and we can stop this charade of diplomacy.”

That was difficult for Katariah to believe. “You and I just heard your general. Cyrodiil isn’t doing too well right now. Hammerfell and Black Marsh are independent, and Morrowind is still recovering from the eruption of Red Mountain. What if you stop the Stormcloak rebellion, but the Empire still doesn’t have the strength or the willingness to rise against the Thalmor?” She began counting on her fingers. “Then you’re left with a ruin based out of Cyrodiil with no apparent leader, a bunch of dead Nords, and a Skyrim that sees the Empire as an oppressive force with a martyr to rally behind. That doesn’t seem like a true victory to me.”

“That’s where you could help us, Dragonborn. You could end the rebellion and help lead the Imperial army against the Dominion. It would be the stuff of legends.”

Katariah tried to imagine that. Avenging her island and preventing the Thalmor from committing another atrocity would fulfill all of her dreams. But, she remembered the dossier at the bottom of her bag. For once, it actually brought some semblance of certainty. To fight on either side was to become a pawn in a game controlled entirely the Dominion. Also, she still felt, almost phantom-like, Ulfric’s hands placing a blanket around her shoulders and brushing the hood off of her head. If put on the course Rikke had laid out before her, Katariah did not believe she could find the coldness within her heart to cut the throat of the first man who made her feel safe enough to be truthful, who made her forget her fears.

She gulped down the rest of her mead and stood up from the bar. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find someone else for that adventure.” Rikke started but Katariah spoke first. “Relax, I’m not running off to join the Stormcloaks. But I do have advice for you, Legate. I had this friend growing up, who used to travel the seas constantly, and she always brought me back stories of what life was like on ships.” She locked eyes with the Imperial soldier. “One thing that she told me that always struck me was how, when a ship goes under, most sailors don’t drown from exhaustion or the cold or anything like that. They drown because they’ve stayed aboard for too long and the ship drags them under.” She gathered her pack and put her hood up. “Thank you for the drink, Rikke. Take care of yourself.”

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Before leaving for Ivarstead to prepare for the peace council, Katariah made use of Proudspire Manor’s bed chamber.
Once again, she was back on the cliffside. However, the usual group of men, mer, and beast was not there to greet her. Instead, there were two women, each gripping one of her hands with an iron fist. The one on her left wore blue and bronze armor while the other wore leather covered in red trim.

Katariah realized with mounting horror that these two women were her. Identical in face and expression, they spoke in unison.

“My choice is yours.” They began to pull her in opposite directions. “And you must choose.”

The Stormcloak spoke first. “Is this even a debate? The Empire tried to kill you! Take your revenge by joining the rebellion.”

The Legionnaire sighed in exasperation. “Are you willing to risk destroying Tamriel because an idiot capitan made a stupid mistake? You have power, and with it comes responsibility. Join the Legion and look after Tamriel as a whole.”

“You said it yourself, the Empire as we know it is crumbling,” the Stormcloak countered. “You’ve found yourself amongst the Nords, help them and yourself by cutting Skyrim free.”

“Remember the Grey Quarter and the Argonian dock workers? Are you sure you want Ulfric Stormcloak in charge of reforming Skyrim?” The Imperial’s eyes narrowed. “But that isn’t what this is really about, is it? You’d throw away all of your convictions, all of your independence, because a handsome jarl smiled at you? You’re pathetic.”

“Why shouldn’t you take something for yourself? Gods know you deserve it.” The Stormcloak rejoined. “Besides, how can you be independent when you wear the colors of Cyrodiil, where you found yourself imprisoned?”

The debate continued swirling, until Katariah found the ability to speak. “I just won’t pick a side! Then I’ll be blameless in this.”

Both warriors screamed in unison, “NO!”
The Legionnaire gave a look that almost seemed gentle. “You remember the dossier, the Thalmor benefit from conflict, not victory, rebel or Imperial.”

“The only way the Dominion wins with certainty,” the Stormcloak said, with brow furrowed, “is for you to not pick a side.”

The two sides began to tug until Katariah was sure they would rip her in half.

Pain lancing down her body, the Dragonborn jolted awake, the sentence you must choose echoing in her head every step of journey to the Rift.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's back early!!! It's amazing how quick these chapters come when I have actual college work to do :/ Like always, Comments/kudos/bookmarks are met with me jumping up and down like a madwoman. Come back next time for everyone's favorite part of Skyrim, Season Unending! With a twist!
At High Hrothgar, Katariah faces equal parts victory and defeat.

**Music to negotiate by:** "Natural" by Imagine Dragons

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*This is it*, Katariah thought to herself as she stood in her rented bedroom at Vilemyr Inn, *the big day*. She could do this. She could reconcile the Stormcloaks and Imperials, capture a dragon, ride it from Whiterun, fall into Aetherius, and defeat Alduin. She could do this. The one thing holding her back now was that she had absolutely no idea what to wear to the peace talks.

She had gone to bed the night before thinking that maybe one of her dreams would provide her some inspiration as what would strike the right balance between *practicality and presence*, as Niranye put it. If Katariah had things her way, she would wear her normal leather armor with her hood. However, that just felt too casual considering the people she had to negotiate with. Her next choices would either be her College robes or her Guildmaster leathers, but she didn’t want to seem too affiliated with a divisive faction. The same went for the Shrouded armor, even if it did give her the possible advantage of terrifying whoever she faced.

Katariah was considering writing to Cicero asking to borrow a jester’s outfit when she saw the last set of armor to her name. It had felt like so long ago that she had received the Nightingale armor with Brynjolf and Karlia. She ran her hand along the black leather and went through the list of attendees in her head. None of them would know this as Daedric armor. She couldn’t in good conscience wear the mask, but the rest just might work. After slipping it on, she looked at herself in the mirror. The black armor covered every inch of her skin, leaving just her face bare. It contrasted starkly with her white hair, which, in spite of her best efforts, had become Skyrim’s way of identifying her. She plaited her it back in the style she had learned from watching Delphine, closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths, and looked in the mirror again. She looked like the substance of a shadow, something powerful but untouchable. She fastened Dragonbane to her waist and nodded. She could do this.
With purpose in her steps, she reached High Hrothgar with the rising sun, but judging by the faint voices she heard from inside the monastery, she was not the first to arrive.

“So, you've done it.” Arngeir turned his head towards the council room. “The men of violence are gathered here, in these halls whose very stones are dedicated to peace. I should not have agreed to host this council.”

Katariah felt a jolt of terror but pushed it down. “I can do this, they can agree to peace.”

The monk scoffed. “Peace? I doubt it. They may lay their weapons down for a moment, but only to gather strength for the next bloodletting.” He paused. “Do you remember the ancient Nord word for war?”

The Dragonborn bit her lip as she recalled the texts she absorbed here. “Suffering eternal?”

“Close. ‘Season Unending,’ and so it will prove, time and time again.”

Katariah could not think of a suitable counter to this point, and could only begin to make her way to the council table. However, she was only in the hallway outside the entrance, completely hidden by the shadows when she heard the doors open again.

Delphine and Esbern entered High Hrothgar with the wind swirling behind them, and stood facing the Greybeards. The Grandmaster of the Blades stepped forward first, the metal scraping of her Akaviri armor deafening. “So, Arngeir, is it? You know why we're here. Are you going to let us in or not?” she asked, head held high.

Arngeir responded in the tone that Katariah remembered well from when she first asked him about Dragonrend. “You were not invited here. You are not welcome here.”

Delphine narrowed her eyes. “We have as much right to be at this council as all of you. More, actually, since we were the ones that put the Dragonborn on this path.”

*That’s a bit of an exaggeration,* Katariah thought before the monk spoke.
“I know what path you have set her on, but I believe she will choose differently, and our order will be safe from your malice.”

The Breton smirked. “For now. The Blades' memory is long, as you know.”

*What in Kynareth's name are they talking about?* Katariah longed for answers, but before she could hear them, Esbern hastily inserted himself in the middle of the growing dispute.

“Delphine, we're not here to rehearse old grudges. The matter at hand is urgent. Alduin must be stopped. You wouldn’t have called this council if you didn't agree. We know a great deal about the situation and the threat that Alduin poses to us all. You need us here if you want this council to succeed.”

There was a long pause while the Dragonborn held her breath, before Arngeir spoke. “Very well, you may enter.”

Katariah quickly walked down the hallway to avoid being caught eavesdropping when, from the next room, she heard another conversation.

“Get away from me, witch!” She instantly recognized Ulfric’s voice and her heart began to pound in what she would almost call anticipation. However, the emotion turned to dread when she heard the reply.

“Ulfric, dear, I see no reason why two old friends such as ourselves shouldn’t be able to see each other. It will be just like old times.” The awful, scratch-like voice of Elenwen seemed to claw its way through the darkness towards Katariah.

“I will never be under your power again,” Ulfric growled.

“I’m sure you remember what I always say, anything can happen between now and never.”

*Dragonborn, as my mother always says, anything can happen between now and never.*

*She has a daughter about our age, you know.*
In her hiding place, Katariah slid down the wall and sat down, burying her face in her hands. As she made the effort to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth, she faintly heard Elenwen give some parting shot to Ulfric before entering the council room. If someone were to ask her, on any other day, how the revelation that Aleyne was Elenwen’s daughter would make her feel, she would answer *vindicated*. Maybe filled with a satisfied sort of contempt. It made sense, at its basest terms. Evil had beget more evil, and the battlelines were clear. But right now, on the stone floor of High Hrothgar, she just felt empty and cold. She imagined Elenwen’s scratching voice and talon-like fingers making their way towards a child, someone who had never asked for the Thalmor’s superior blood or whatever lies they had preached, but had received it all the same. She didn’t stand a chance.

The Dragonborn swallowed this odd sort of grief and pushed herself onto unsteady feet. Everyone was gathered in the council room. She could do this.

Katariah faintly heard Arngeir tell her to take her place so the negotiation could begin. She kept her eyes fixed forward as she made her way to the head of the table and sat down. A few grueling seconds passed as she wondered whether or not she would have to speak first, when Ulfric, standing to her right, beat her to it.

“No. You insult us by bringing her to this negotiation? Your chief Talos-hunter?”

To her left, Katariah heard Rikke mutter, “That didn’t take long.” The Dragonborn was inclined to agree, but something about Ulfric was keeping her from sarcasm. As he stood, he gripped the back of his chair to the point that his knuckles had turned white. *Something’s not right,* she thought to herself when she heard Arngeir speak to her from across the room.

“Perhaps this would be a good time to get the Dragonborn's input on this matter: Does the First Emissary remain at this council?”

*Finally an easy problem to solve.* Katariah kept her voice level as she spoke. “The dragons are problem that only Skyrim is facing. For that reason, I fail to see the relevance of having an official of the Aldmeri Dominion here. First Emissary, you are free to leave.”

Elenwen opened and closed her mouth for a few seconds, making her look just a little like a fish, an observation that Katariah would have found quite funny had the Thalmor not found her next sentence.
“I will not be spoken to that way by someone who comes from some...Akaviri back-water!”

All of the Dragonborn’s limbs went rigid. In the past, whenever thoughts of her island passed through her mind, she felt grief. Now, however, she felt ice-cold rage. Getting to her feet, she leaned forward on the table as she stared Elenwen down. “You misunderstand me. What I just said was not a request. You may either walk down the Seven Thousand Steps of your accord, or I can Shout you down. Your choice.”

Before she could restrain it, fear flashed across the Thalmor’s eyes. She stood up and straightened her robes and her expression. “Very well, Ulfric;” she snapped, “Enjoy your petty victory. The Thalmor will treat with whatever government rules Skyrim. We would not think of interfering in your civil war.” She turned her gaze to the Dragonborn. “As for you, Katariah, I know who and what you are. We will deal with you, in time.” With that threat, Elenwen turned on her heal and quickly walked out of the monastery.

Nobody spoke until they heard the doors to High Hrothgar open and shut again. The silence was broken by Galmar with a roaring laugh.

“That alone was worth the trip up. Did you see that Rikke? Skyrim will never bow to the Thalmor! Unlike your Imperial friends here.”

Katariah was concerned that the legate was about to leap across the table and throttle the housecarl. “You’re lucky I respect the Greybeards’ council, Galmar!”

Tullius shot an arm across his subordinate’s torso to block Rikke from advancing. “Legate! We represent the Empire right now!”

Arngeir sighed. “Now that that’s settled, may we proceed?”

Tullius took the floor. “I just want to make clear from the start that the only reason I agreed to attend this summit was to deal with the dragon menace. I have no authority and no particular desire to negotiate a permanent settlement, unless of course Ulfric wishes to sue for peace and turn himself over to Imperial justice. I consider the act of sitting down with these rebels to be more than generous.”

In the pause that Tullius made to take a breath, Ulfric spoke up. “Enough with this Imperial posturing. If you are here to talk, let’s talk.”
The general’s eyes narrowed. “Fine. Let’s get started.”

Forging ahead, Ulfric made the first demand. “We want control of Markarth. That’s our price for agreeing to a truce.”

Way to start out subtle, Ulfric, Katariah grumbled internally before Elisif spoke these thoughts aloud.

“So that's why you're here, Ulfric? You dare to insult the Greybeards by using this council to advance your own position?”

Panic entering his gaze, Tullius interrupted the young woman. “Elisif! I told you before that I'd handle it. Ulfric, you can't seriously expect us to give up Markarth at the negotiating table. You hope to gain in council what you've been unable to take in battle, is that it?”

“I'm sure Jarl Ulfric does not expect something for nothing,” Arngeir suggested.

Tullius turned to Katariah. “Tell me, Dragonborn, what do you think Markarth is worth?”

The two jarls of the Imperial delegation started. Balgruuf leaned forward to face the general and the legate. “Is this how the Empire rewards the loyal? Are our holds to be bought and sold as if we were at market?”

“Enough!” Tullius barked. “Let us be clear, I think this council is a waste of our time.” He jabbed a finger across the table. “You, Ulfric, are a traitor to the Empire, and you will face a traitor’s death. But I intend to negotiate in good faith, and so I ask you again, Dragonborn, what is Markarth worth?”

Katariah mentally went through the list of Imperial and Stormcloak territory that she could trade, and the Rift came to the top of her mind. It would be the perfect fit, as it was relatively equal in size and value to the Reach. Furthermore, she had a line of communication open with Riften through the Thieves Guild, so she could keep tabs on any potential Thalmor operations there. She had many problems with the woman most likely to replace Jarl Laila, Maven Blackbriar, but Katariah was comforted by the fact that while the Black-Briars were many things, they were certainly not idealogues. Maven could be negotiated with, and failing that, bought. She met Tullius’ glare. “Would you be willing to take the Rift in exchange for Markarth?” She refused to
acknowledge the sounds of Galmar’s gasp in response to this proposition.

He gazed into the fire pit at the center of the table, thoughtfully. “The Rift would secure our communications with Cyrodiil, and threaten Ulfric’s southern flank.”

Ulfric seemed disappointed, but not particularly surprised. “The Dragonborn has spoken, Tullius. Markarth will be ours. Now we shall see if there is any truth behind your talk of good faith.”

“You disappoint me, Dragonborn,” Tullius said, still staring into the fire. “I accepted your invitation based on your good name and in spite of the rumors surrounding your...liaisons with the Stormcloaks. However, it seems you intend to favor the rebels. I can now see that this is no negotiation at all.” He leaned forward. “I know you, Ulfric. If I hand over Markarth, you will be ready with a new demand. You’ll never defeat the Empire and you know it, yet you are willing to sacrifice thousands for your own ambition. Soon enough, I’ll have you back under the headsman’s axe, and this time there won’t be any dragon to save you.”

Katariah’s face had turned bright red while Ulfric folded his arms. “As always, the Empire’s gilded words are worth nothing. I—”

“STOP!”

Everyone at the table turned to see Esbern, who had leapt out of his seat and was now pacing around the room, in between the two delegations. “Are you so blind to our danger that you can’t see past your petty disagreements? Here you sit arguing about nothing! While the fate of the land hangs in the balance!” He came to a sudden stop and it appeared that all of the energy had left his body. Hanging his head, he continued, “Don't you understand the danger? Don't you understand what the return of the dragons means? Alduin has returned! Even now, he devours the souls of your fallen comrades! He grows more powerful with every soldier slain in your pointless war! Can you not put aside your hatred for even one moment in the face of this mortal danger?” Delphine got up and helped Esbern back to his seat.

While Tullius and Elisif looked unconvinced, Katariah heard every other guest at the table let out silent, personal curses at their own role in the current state of affairs. Ulfric looked as though he wanted to speak, but Tullius responded to Esbern’s speech first. “I’m only a soldier, I don't know anything about the end of the world, but this dragon situation has gotten out of hand. If this...truce will help the Dragonborn here put an end to that menace, we both gain. Remember that, Ulfric.” He paused before continuing. “It is for this reason that I will not seek true justice here, and will generously accept Riften in exchange for Markarth. But mark me, there will be a reckoning. Count on it.”
Arngeir stood at the head of the table. “It seems we may have an agreement. Jarl Ulfric, General Tullius, these are the terms currently on the table: Markarth will be handed over to Stormcloak forces, Jarl Igmund will step down, and Thongvor Silver-Blood will become Jarl of Markarth. The Stormcloaks will withdraw from the Rift, allowing Imperial troops unhindered access. Jarl Laila Law-Giver will step down, and Maven Black-Briar will become the Jarl of Riften.” He met the gaze of both sides. “Do you both agree to this?”

“The Sons of Skyrim will live up to their agreements, as long as the Imperials live up to theirs.”

“The Empire can live with these terms, until the dragon menace is dealt with.”

Katariah was faintly aware of Ulfric and Galmar leaving while the others discussed trapping this dragon, Odahviing, at Whiterun. It was as if she were underwater, not quite able to hear what was going on in the sunlight. She had actually done it. She had negotiated some sort of peace between the two factions. There was some hope for her and her cause after all. Now began the process of mentally and physically preparing herself for the journey to Dragonsreach, and after that, Sovngarde. She did not know if she should be laughing in joy or screaming in terror.

Everyone had stood up and filed out of the monastery, when she heard a voice from behind her.

“Katariah. We need to talk.”

Delphine stood in the empty corner of the room, arms folded. Katariah knew what this was about, she had promised to find more young warriors to join the Blades to help rebuild the order, she had just been so busy. She was just about to say as much and apologize when the Breton said something that knocked the breath out of the Dragonborn’s lungs.

“We know about Paarthurnax.”

Katariah chose to stall in order to buy herself just a few more precious seconds. “You know...what, exactly?”

“Don’t try to lie to me, Dragonborn, you’re terrible at it,” Delphine snapped. “We know that he lives on top of this mountain, and that the Greybeards are protecting him. He needs to die. He deserves to die. And it falls to you to kill him. Until he's dead... well, I'm sorry, but we would dishonor our oaths as Blades if we continued to help you.”
“No.”

The syllable was out of Katariah’s mouth before she could stop it, yet she meant it with full sincerity. So many things about her had been changed by the harsh realities of Skyrim, but she could still say with certainty that she was an honest friend. If she were to lose that last scrap of her identity, the woman who walked up the mountain to kill Paarthurnax would not be the same person who descended it. “You told me that the Blades existed to serve the Dragonborn, so I guess it’s time for my first command: Paarthurnax will live.”

Delphine scoffed. “This is not just any dragon. He was the right hand of Alduin. He committed atrocities so infamous they are still remembered, thousands of years later. You can choose to spare his life, but know that you will be considered a traitor to my order until you come around.”

“Delphine, when you told me to go to Kynesgrove to prove myself, I did. When you told me to sneak into Elenwen’s party, I did, even when it got Malborn killed. When you and Esbern asked for my blood to open Sky Haven Temple, I gave it. But when I refuse, just once, you call me a traitor?” Katariah could feel the built up resentment pouring into her voice. “You manipulate me, and drag me along for your own goals. Tell me, precisely, how you are better than the Thalmor?”

In a fraction of a second, nearly identical blades were locked against each other. Dragonbane crackled with Katariah’s rage, which caused Delphine to gasp. “You thief!” She pressed her sword forward, forcing the steel just beneath the Dragonborn’s chin. “You don’t deserve to carry our weapons, you don’t deserve to call yourself Dragonborn.” She hissed, “You don’t deserve any of this!”

Katariah felt blood trickle from neck into her armor. Daughter of time, save yourself, the voice in the back of her mind reminded her as her Voice rose within her.

“FUS!”

It was just one word, not nearly enough to send Delphine flying into the opposite wall. Yet it was enough to put the Grandmaster of the Blades on her back, defenseless. Katariah gripped Dragonbane tighter and took a step forward. As she moved, she saw several moments of her past spreading out around her. All at once, she was underneath the hagraven outside of Karthwasten, Ancano, the shadow in the woods. Right now, she must look monstrous, the stuff of nightmares. She was about to lower her sword and extend a hand towards Delphine, when an ice spike tore through her chest.

As Katariah fell into blackness, she could only barely make out a pair of strong arms holding her
cooling body.

Chapter End Notes

Shor, Kynereth and Talos, those negotiations are freaking LONG. If your favorite line or scene got cut, I apologize but I had to stop writing straight dialogue, it was getting unbearably dry. Next time, someone who stayed at High Hrothgar needs to find a solution for our current predicament. At this point I think "comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed" will be engraved on my tombstone, but I do mean it! It's a little nerve wracking when I post a chapter and it is met with dead silence. Also, my tumblr is wewillavenge-it if you want to talk there. Until next time!
It is amazing how an old home returns one’s mind to the state it existed when they lived there. Ulfric Stormcloak thought as much as he wandered the halls of High Hrothgar. He had felt a twinge of sadness earlier when he realized, realistically, that this would be the last time he would see this place in his lifetime. It was for this reason that he had sent Galmar down the mountain first to start the process of moving the Rift’s troops to the Reach. Maybe he would have the opportunity to speak to Arngeir, one last time, to explain his motivations for leaving the Greybeards. He doubted that his old mentor would understand them, or even agree to speak with him, but it was worth a try. He could at the very least see the initials that he carved into the stone bed that he used to sleep in.

He made his way down one of the narrow hallways. The negotiations had gone as well as could reasonably be expected, and he now held Markarth. May it go better than last time, he thought to himself. He had concerns about the Dragonborn before the negotiations began, but Katariah held herself well throughout the talks. That was an understatement, she had played the role of the politician admirably, even if she refused to side with him over Tullius. Her sending Elenwen from the table should be the subject of a song, one day. He was curious, however, about what the Altmer meant when she said, what was it, Akaviri-backwater? He remembered their conversations over dinner, and while Ulfric believed that Katariah was honest with him, she flatly refused to speak about where she was from or her life before she ended up on the cart next to him on the way to Helgen. The girl would willingly admit to assassinating an emperor, but dodged questions about where she was born like arrows. The desire to drag the answers from her weighed heavily on him, but he could not forget her face just before she left the Palace of the Kings that last night. He had unintentionally broken some chord within her mind that night on the roof and he was not anxious to repeat that mistake. That being said, he also did not want to give up on the prospect of bringing the Dragonborn into his cause, and to do that, he would need answers of some kind.

He had almost made it to the living quarters, if it could truly be called that, when he heard the sound of a scuffle. It would not sound out of place in any tavern in Skyrim, but here, the crash of two blades meeting was probably the loudest noise these halls had heard since the days of Jurgen Windcaller.
“FUS!”

By the time he had made it to the door of the council room, Ulfric could see the Breton he remembered well from the Great War, Delphine, on the ground in front of Katariah, who was still holding her sword limply by her side. However, the younger woman did not look murderous, or even angry. She just looked scared, frozen in place. Before he could take a step to enter the room, a vicious ice spike tore across the room and speared her through the chest. Time seemed to slow as her sword fell to the ground and her eyes widened in terror. With speed he did not know he still possessed, Ulfric bolted across the room and caught her before she crashed into the stone floor.

At the other end of the room, Esbern lowered his shaking hands. “I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry…”

In a terrifying voice, Arngeir whispered, “Get out,” as Delphine hurriedly shuffled to her feet and rushed over to support Esbern, who at that moment looked every second of his age. The monk began to yell, something so out character that Ulfric instinctively tightened his grip around Katariah. “Begone, before even my philosophy is tested beyond the breaking point. We are men of peace, and you are not!”

As the two Blades hurried out of the monastery, Ulfric looked down at Katariah. He remembered a healer from Cyrodiil saying that there were essentially two types of wounds: those that the afflicted could potentially walk away from and those that not even the Nine could help. Ulfric was certainly not a healer, but as he watched the Dragonborn’s blood trickle onto the stone floor and down her chin as she took breath after shuddering breath, he could not help but think that she was in the latter camp.

Arngeir laid a hand on his former student’s shoulder. “Do you remember the last Shout you learned with us?”

Ulfric slowly nodded as he remembered his last year at High Hrothgar. Arngeir and the other monks were concerned, even then, about the path he would take, and had chosen to teach him something ineffectual as opposed to a Shout that could be potentially used in combat. Compared to Disarm and Unrelenting Force, it was almost comically useless. All it could do was change the weather.

“Use it to clear your way up the mountain. Bring Katariah to Paarthurnax. Be swift, her time runs short!”
“LOK VAH KOOR!”

The winds parted around Ulfric as he ran up the Throat of the World, holding the Dragonborn against his chest. Her breathing was slowing as he grew closer and closer to the summit. Honestly, he was at a loss as to what another Greybeard, even the master of the order, could do for her. The name had always intrigued him, back when he was a student. He remembered seeing reading Kyne called on Paarthurnax, who pitied Man on one of the Emblems leading up the Seven Thousand Steps. Maybe Paarthurnax was a title, passed from one leader of the Greybeards to the next? That would explain why the name kept appearing throughout history.

He made it to the top of the mountain that was lit by the late afternoon sun. However, it was deserted. In his arms, he felt Katariah take one last shallow breath before she stilled completely. So this was it. Skyrim and everything he loved in it would come to an end because of his own failure. He felt the winds and snow close around him when he heard a ghostly shriek cross over the summit. Before he had time to react, a silver dragon lighted across the wind and landed just over an arms length from him.

“So, Arngeir has seen fit to allow another joor to my strunmah.” He cocked his head to the side. “And it appears that you have broken the Dovahkiin. You of all people should learn, Bronjun Strun Ahtiid, to be careful with your blessings.”

Ulfric found himself at a crossroads. Either the dragon before him was simultaneously conversational and murderous, or throughout all of his years at High Hrothgar, Arngeir had neglected to tell him something very important about Paarthurnax. He could not draw his weapon and hold Katariah at the same time, so he said a quick prayer to Talos that it was the latter case. “You need to help her, she’s not breathing.”

“With joy. Katariah passes under the miraad, the doorway between our world and Oblivion. Set her down, and I will retrieve her for you. Voth vosaraan, she draws close to a place where not even I may reach her.”

Ulfric knew that time was of the essence, but he could not bring himself to release the Dragonborn from his arms. “She stays with me.”

An odd expression entered the dragon’s eyes. “Pruzah. Pah daar los gro naal Bormahu, aal nid kren. Ready yourself.” Paarthurnax blinked slowly before he exhaled a long breathe. His eyes then shot open. “DAAL LAAS ZII!”
The Shout passes through the two of them, nearly knocking Ulfric off of his feet, however wild joy entered his heart as Katariah’s eyes flew open as she took a gasping breath. The resurrection was over as soon as it began, as the Dragonborn fell back unconscious, chest rising and falling evenly.

“Let her rest, Strun Ahtiid. Carry her back to Keizaal, where her trials await her.” Paarthurnax moved to spread his wings, but before he left, he whispered, “Dein ek nahl. Keep her safe.”

As Ulfric entered High Hrothgar, he nodded to Arngeir, who guided him to the bed Katariah normally slept. He laid her down gently against the grey stone, smiling to himself as her white hair brushed against the letters U.S. carved into the headboard.

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Pain carved its way through Katariah as she landed heavily on the familiar cliffside, only to see a solitary figure facing away from her. “Is this it?” she asked, “the final betrayal?”

The figure turned to reveal her mirror image, covered in Akaviri armor with a sneer on her lips and contempt in her eyes. “My faults are yours, sister, and right now, you are the betrayer and not the betrayed.”

Katariah longed to demand more answers, when the ground beneath her hands and knees crumbled to dust, sending her falling into an abyss without bound. Colors fled past her vision as she heard bits and pieces of her past.

“He’s gone and he’s never coming back!”... “Just keep wandering, follow the moons, and you will end up where you need to be”.... “Now spill, you’re among friends here” ... “This must be like a homecoming for you”... “I always knew you had potential”...

Her pain began to dissipate as the memories became more and more intense.

“ I will follow you until I am but dust in the wind’... “Dying breed? What do you call her, then?”... “If we do our jobs, we’ll both be alive by the end of the night”... “Remember the lessons you have learned with us”... “By the Gods, you really are Dragonborn!”
She fell further and further as the voices grew more and more distant. Underneath her, she could see a vast landscape completely covered in mist that curled upwards and threatened to consume her whole, drag her towards the presence that waited to tear the flesh from her bones again. That was when she heard him.

“We need to move, now!”

It was as though she wandered in the dark, but could now see a candle in some distant window. She had to stop falling, she had to pull herself towards that voice and those eyes that she could just faintly see, the color of a sea right before a storm, but her hands grasped at nothing. As the ground came closer and closer, she prayed that she would shatter on impact rather than face that which waited for her in the mists.

She suddenly found herself standing upright, no longer falling endlessly, but still in a void, a limitless room of white. A lone figure, a man with piercing blue eyes and snow white hair, beckoned for her to approach. As she stepped forward, he moved lithely to meet her halfway

“I am glad to finally meet you, Little Sister.” For a man that radiated vitality and strength, he seemed unable to speak in a voice louder than a whisper. “I’ve been watching your progress for some time now.”

“Is this another warning about what is to come?”

He smiled. “Not quite, Katariah. This is a gift, something to help ease your journey to Sovngarde.” As he spoke, their surroundings changed from white emptiness to a beautiful landscape with unending green fields.

Katariah cast her eyes around for some clue as to the nature of this ‘gift.’ “Where are we?”

“Right now, somewhere in the countryside in Cyrodiil. But the more important question right now is ‘when are we?’” He placed an arm around her shoulders. “Before you face Alduin, I want you to see the most important day on Nirn.”

The landscape faded again and Katariah found herself standing behind a desk, next to a exhausted looking Imperial scholar, who at the moment was screaming at her subordinate, a Khajiit boy with mousey colored fur. “What do you mean, ‘they’re gone’?”
“Scholastica, I was reorganizing the texts like you told me to, when I came to the Scrolls’ case, and it was empty, I do not know what else to tell you!”

The Dragonborn turned to see what was probably nothing good for the Khajiit when she found herself in a gilded room of a palace that seemed to be divided in half by the people who stood in it. On the right stood a small cluster of soldiers and lords, all clad in battle weathered and blood splattered armor. Their leader, a middle aged man with slumped shoulders, Katariah instantly recognized as Titus Mede II. “The time has come for peace in our time. May this treaty open a dialogue between our two great cultures.”

A man with gold hair tied into a topknot gave a one sided smile that did not reach his eyes. “We hope the same. May we all open a new chapter and leave behind the barbaric practices of old. Seventh Emissary Elenwen, the document, please.”

The woman with cruel features just at the edge of the meeting removed her hand from her abdomen and placed the parchment in between the two parties. The leader of the Thalmor spoke again. “At this moment, on the ninth day of First Seed, the hundred and seventy-fifth year of the Fourth Era, both the Aldmeri Dominion and the Empire of Cyrodiil willingly agree to the White-Gold Concordat. May the Eight Divines bless this union.”

From just outside the doorway that Katariah stood under, she heard the youngest Imperial soldier mutter under his breath, “May Talos damn us all.”

“Silence, Corporal Tullius! Before you get us both killed!”

Katariah moved to get a better look at the commanding officer, but the room fell away from her vision, replaced with a deserted city street. She felt bile rise in her throat as she realized that nearly every stone of the grey pavement was covered in bodies of men, mer, and beast, most burned past recognition. Among this carnage, she watched two figures, a man and woman, plunge their hands into the horror, desperately searching for someone.

“It’s no use, Galmar!”

“Damn it Rikke, I have to find him!”

The Dragonborn couldn’t watch anymore of this. As she ran away down the street, walls rose around her. She could practically feel the wails of anguish that echoed around this place. At the
end of a dimly lit hallway, a metal doorway covered in rust cracked open by just an inch. Ulfric Stormcloak, with a horrible emptiness on his face, took one shaking step forward before collapsing forward onto his hands and knees.

The man that accompanied Katariah nudged her forward. “I know you owe him a favor,” he whispered. “Go and help him. He will not remember it.”

Katariah reached down and took both of Ulfric’s hands in her own. He looked up at her with such reverence that it brought tears to her eyes. Bracing herself against his side, she slowly walked with him towards the light at the end of the passage. By the time they reached the door to the outside, he had found enough strength to stand on his own. Katariah felt snow on the back of her neck but refused to break eye contact with Ulfric as he and the Thalmor prison faded from her vision.

She found herself being pelted with snow on the Throat of the World. At the very summit of the mountain, Paarthurnax, in response to some distant, unknown noise, uncurled himself from sleep. Fixing his gaze over Skyrim and across the sea, he let out his first speech in decades.

“DOVAHKIIN NAHLAAS!”

The Shout jolted Katariah forward, but when she recovered her senses and realized where she was, she let out breathless laughter. After all this time, she was home again. Even though she walked as a ghost from place to place, the sense of having Cathnoquey’s soil beneath her feet brought her joy beyond measure.

At the present moment, her island was wracked with a violent storm, with chained lightning during the night sky into a false day. However, Katariah’s attention was fixed on the tiny cottage emitting a warm glow. From outside, she could clearly hear their voices as the screams of a woman were replaced with the wails of a newborn.

“Boy or girl, Alban?” the mother asked, breathlessly.

“A girl, Cornelia, a beautiful girl.”

The Dragonborn buried her face in her hands and wept as her father whispered, “Welcome to Cathnoquey, Katariah.”
When the roaring in her ears ceased, Katariah looked up to find herself back in the white light with her guide standing in front of her.

“It will be time to wake up soon, Katariah, but when you do, remember your inheritance, both its blessings and its burdens. It will carry you through your trials. Until next time, Little Sister.”

On a stone bed in High Hrothgar, Katariah opened her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I like to think of this as making up for lost time around the college of winterhold arc for this fic. Like always, please please please with a side of three wheels of cheese comment/kudos/bookmark if you enjoyed and/or have any suggestions. Come back soon for a promise and a journey to the realm of the World Eater! It's finally happening!!
A Promise

Chapter Summary

Ulfric and Katariah exchange a promise and truth, the Dragonborn meets Odahviing.

Chapter Notes

I know I’ve been thinking over a chapter too long when I have more than one song recommendation, so reader’s choice: either "The Precipice" by The Classic Crime or "You Should Know Where I’m Coming From" by Banks. This chapter is a little shorter than I expected but I think it hits all the beats that it needs to.

As her world came in to focus, Katariah wondered what she had ever done in her life to earn the wrath of Vaermina. The dreams with the Children of Time, she could basically understand the broad strokes of, but the white haired man with a whisper like his throat had been cut, she did not even know where to begin with that. And why did she have the faint memory of Ulfric carrying her? And why in Oblivion was Paarthurnax there?

It was at his moment that she felt pressure against her right hand, and her vision unblurred to reveal Ulfric sitting on the edge of her bed. “Welcome back,” he said, smiling down at her.

Katariah groaned and craned her neck to look out the window to see where the sun was in the sky. “How long was I out for?”

“About half a day and a night. It’s just before dawn now.”

The memories that explained why she was currently lying on a stone bed speaking with Ulfric began to flood her memory. “The ice spike—”

The jarl grimaced. “That was Delphine’s comrade, Esbern. Arngeir told me what led to your...disagreement.”

The implications of what Ulfric said sent Katariah’s head spinning. “So you know about
Paarthurnax?”

“As much as I struggle to believe it, yes. I brought you up to the summit, and the dragon...Shouted you back to the land of the living, for lack of a better description.”

As one part of her jumbled recollections slid into place, she suddenly felt uncomfortable with the fact that she was lying in bed in front of Ulfric. Shifting herself upwards into a sitting position, she prayed that her usual scarlet blush had not firmly situated itself on her face. “I guess that makes me in your debt.”

“Consider it in return for killing the dragon that attacked Windhelm. Or for sending Elenwen down the mountain.” He paused for a moment. “What did she mean, when she mentioned that you were from Akavir?”

Her eyes beginning to sting, she focused her gaze on the stone tile just to the right of Ulfric’s boot. “It was nothing.”

Perhaps noticing her blank expression, the jarl asked, “Are you nervous, about facing Alduin?”

Katariah grimaced. “Not truly. That fight is wrapped up in so much prophecy that it almost feels like some reflection of me is going to Sovngarde, while I watch from a distance and wait to deal with the result. What I’m really afraid of is, if I should fall, there will be no one left.” She tried to bite her tongue before that last sentence left her mouth, but failed.

“No one left of what?”

_Gods damn me,_ Katariah thought. Before she could muster the effort to stop herself, she was looking Ulfric in the eye again. “Tell me, have you ever heard of Cathnoquey?”

He furrowed his brow. “I remember reading about it. It was one of the islands discovered by Uriel the Fifth, during the Third Era. There was a group of Nords that was sent to populate it, but they faded into history.”

She smiled, sadly. “It was a group of Nords and Bretons, actually. And while we may have faded to most of Tamriel, we lived relatively well, until four months ago.”
Ulfric leaned forward. “What happened four months ago?” he asked, with bated breath.

The tears that Katariah had mostly held been back since that moment she found herself in Bruma began to spill down her cheeks. “The Thalmor showed up one morning, I don’t know why they picked us but they did, and they tested something called a white soul gem that turned everyone except me into dust.” Her voice began to quaver and she knew that ugly red splotches were covering her face. “They brought me to a dungeon in Bruma where they were poisoning their prisoners, but there was an earthquake that killed everyone except for me, again, and then I was caught by Imperials crossing the border.” She buried her face in her hands. “And I know that if I die fighting Alduin, what happened on Cathnoquey and at Bruma will die with me because the one other person that I spoke to about this was Delphine and we just tried to kill each other, and I don’t know what to do!”

As she sobbed uncontrollably, she felt Ulfric wrap his arms around her, gently rocking her back and forth. Her cries slowing down, she heard him whisper, “—on my honor as Jarl—”

Wiping her eyes and steadying her voice, Katariah looked up at him. “What?”

Ulfric pressed palm to her cheek, and she leaned into the cool touch. “I promise you, on my honor as Jarl of Windhelm and a warrior of Skyrim, should you fall to Alduin, Cathnoquey will not be forgotten. I will carry on your fight against the Aldmeri Dominion in your stead if I have to.” He laced his fingers through Katariah’s. “But I don’t think I’ll have to. You were born for this, Katariah. Every part of your spirit was created to carry you to Sovngarde to stand against Alduin. When the moment comes, all you will need is to be yourself, because victory is your birthright.” He looked out the window behind her bed. “If Balgruuf were amiable, I would come with you to Dragonsreach to see you off. But, promise me that you’ll come to Windhelm with stories of Sovngarde when you return.”

Feeling her spirit rising, she smiled and felt it reach her eyes. “I promise.” At that moment, if she turned her head upwards the distance of a breath, her lips would be against his, and something in his eyes seemed to tell her that he might meet her halfway if she did so. But it was as if there was some weight holding her precisely in place. She knew what it was.

She let go of his hand to pull something out of her pack. “Before I leave, I need to give you this.” She pressed the Thalmor dossier into his hands. “I found this a few weeks ago, and I didn’t know how to begin telling you, but...you deserve to know.”

As he opened the leather bound book, Katariah resigned herself to whatever outcome that would come to pass. That did not mean that it did not hurt her to Oblivion and back when she watched his
face darken as he slowly read through the words written in black inky and silently got up and walked out of the monastery. She could not marshal the energy needed to be angry with him for leaving. It was her own doing, keeping that knowledge to herself, and she had to accept the consequences of her actions, or in this case, lack thereof.

Centering herself, she grabbed a quill and ink, and scrawled across a piece of parchment that should she not return in three day’s time, all of her worldly possessions should go to Brynjolf, who would best know what to do with them. After that, she became numb Nirm again.

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“You do have a plan for luring a dragon here, don’t you?”

Perhaps it was a sign that she was becoming more and more disconnected from the world that Katariah found it decreasingly necessary to give verbal responses to questions asked of her. She walked alone to the edge of Dragonreach’s balcony and looked towards the sky.

“OD AH VIING!”

It seemed that somebody was waiting for her call. Mere seconds after the Shout echoed across the plains, the keening roar of a dragon answered it, followed by a truly unlucky city guard getting scooped up in a pair of blazing red talons.

“Dovahkiin! Here I am!”

Katariah felt the whole keep shudder as Odahviing crashed against the railing, but waved down a few twitchy soldiers who had begun to knock arrows. “Hold your fire, we need him alive!”

Jarl Balgruuf followed her lead. “Everyone, get back! Wait until it’s inside!”

*No turning back now,* Katariah thought as she stood alone at the center of the balcony. The dragon cocked its head to the side, curious at this odd sort of combat. She drew her sword and mimicked his surprised expression. “Nikriin?” she teased as she tensed her legs underneath her.
The insult had its desired effect, as Odahviing roared and began to charge across the wooden floor, claws nearly sliding out from beneath it. She held her place and waited until it rumbled across the imaginary line that she had mentally drawn down from the guard towers. It wasn’t until she could count the teeth in its mouth and smell the meat rotting there that the dragon transgressed it. “Now!” she screamed, sending the giant wooden yoke clattering onto its neck.

Odahviing let out a slew of roars and draconic words that would probably make Katariah’s hair curl if she knew their meaning, but she folded her arms and decided to wait out the storm. “Are you done?”

All of a sudden, it had a strange glint in its orange eyes. “Evidently, yes. My eagerness to meet you in battle was my undoing, Dovahkiin. I salute your, what will we call it, low cunning in devising such a grahmindol, a stratagem.” It cast its gaze around Dragonsreach. “Zu'u bonaar. You went to a great deal of trouble to put me in this humiliating position.”

“I’m sure you know why. I need to know where Alduin is hiding.”

Odahviing tensed its claws, carving deep scars into the floor. “Rinik vazah. An apt phrase. Alduin bovul. One reason I came to your call was to test your Thu'um for myself. Many of us have began to question Alduin's lordship, whether his Thu'um was truly the strongest. Among ourselves, of course. Mu ni meyye. None were yet ready to openly defy him.” During the middle of this speech, Katariah had moved as if to turn on her heel, drawing the dragon back to the point. “Unslaad krosis. Innumerable pardons. I digress. He has travelled to Sovngarde to regain his strength, devouring the sillesejoor your mortal dead. Yet I feel you already know this.”

The Dragonborn thought to keep her voice level as she clenched her fist around Dragonbane’s hilt. “I do, you only need to tell me where the door is, and how to get there.”

It ran a long tongue across its teeth. “His door to Sovngarde is at Skuldalfn, one of his ancient fanes high in in the eastern mountains. Mindoraan, pah ok middovahhe lahvrain til. I surely do not need to warn you that all his remaining strength is marshalled there.” Lowering his head to face her head on, it added, “There is one detail I neglected to mention.”

“What would that be?” Katariah asked, fairly confident as to what that detail was.

“You have the Thu'um of a dovah, and perhaps even our spirit, but without the wings of one, you will never set foot in Skuldafn. Of course, I could always fly you there.”
The Dragonborn’s heart bounced in her chest. “Then I propose an exchange. Your wings in exchange for your freedom. Can you live with that?”

Odahviing let out a series of roasting hot breaths that Katariah slowly realized was laughter. “Sil do dovah nu. It is wise to recognize when you only have one choice. And you can trust me. Zu'u ni tahrodiis. Alduin has proven himself unworthy to rule. I go my own way now. Free me, and I will carry you to Skuldafn”

Waving to the reluctant guards that manned the geers, she only just jumped over Odahviing’s tail lashing from side to side as the dragon turned to face the clear sky. As a pair, they ran towards the balcony’s edge.

Before she could move, Odahviing bared his teeth to Katariah in what she prayed was a grin. “Zok brit uth! I warn you, once you've flown the skies of Keizaal, you envy of the dov will only increase. Amativ! Mu bo kotin stinselak.”

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Katariah could not hold back breathless excitement as she climbed on top of the dragon, situating herself in between its wings. The wind tore the hood off of her head and sent it flying into the wind as they rose higher and higher in the sky, but she found herself not particularly caring, as her gaze was fixed on one man who stood waiting in the plains of Whiterun below her. Ulfric Stormcloak rose a hand in greeting as she flew overhead.

As they locked eyes for perhaps one last time, the Dragonborn remembered her thoughts before the headsman’s block at Helgen, *At least for the few more minutes of life that this man has left, we are bound together, he will mourn me. That will have to be enough.* Except where there once was resignation and despair, there was now strength. She could do this. She would begin her war against the Thalmor. She would see him again.

Walking through the dungeons and gravesites of Skuldafn, Katariah left piles of Draugr in her wake. After sending a Dragon Priest to his eternal rest, she looked down into the swirling mists that marked the space between Nirn and Oblivion, and felt some sort of peace. *I just wish that I had kissed him,* she thought as she fell towards Sovngarde.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I want it to be known that Kat follows the Targaryan school of dragon riding (between the wings) as opposed to whatever Skyrim has where you're directly behind the skull which makes me feel unsteady just looking at it. Next, OVER 75
kudos?! That is the coolest thing ever!!!! Please come back soon, because Sovngarde beckons us all. Also, bring headphones. Every comment/kudos/subscription is worth a dragon flight around Skyrim to me!!
Chapter Summary

Katariah faces the World Eater of songs and legends.

Chapter Notes

I know I kind of missed the cultural moment for songfics, but all the things of past fandom that we make fun of today, I actually like the concept. So, without further ado, plug in your best headphones and tune into "Sovngarde" by Jeremy Soule!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, naal ek zin los vahriin, wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal!

“Turn back, wanderer! Terror awaits within these mists. Many have braved the shadowed vale, but vain is all courage against the peril that guards the way.”

“Who are you?”

“Near Giants’ Gap, in the gloom before dawn, we marched, unsuspecting into the Imperial trap. Then we stood and fought, our shield-wall until by dawn’s light, the Legion’s ranks wavered. But I never knew if night’s end brought victory, a swift-flying arrow to Sovngarde carried me.”

“Come with me, I can lead you through the mist.”

“I’ll try to hold to your hopeful purpose. Quickly, before this consuming fog once again ensnares me in the World-Eater’s net!”

Ahrk fin norok paal graan fod nust hon zindro zaan. Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal.

Beneath the city of Riften, in a Cistern of brick and mortar, a cluster of vagabonds and pickpockets sat waiting with no idea of how to support her, the Guildmaster that stabbed her predecessor with
sword of ice and eyes of fire.

“Perhaps I could return to the Twilight Sepulchre and use the Skeleton Key to follow her and give her support. Brynjolf, we can’t leave her to face this alone!”

“Karliah, I’m not going to risk the Guild by embarking on a potentially one-way trip to Oblivion. Kat’s a smart girl, she knew what she was getting herself into, and if luck and decent blade are on her side, she’ll know how to get herself out of it.”

*Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal!*

By the word of Sithis they gathered, the Redguard, the jester, and the forever-child, three killers constantly slathered in blood, by the door of their Sanctuary that smelled of loam and salt, trying to catch a glimpse of a Listener that stopped her ears, that split a bond by staying her blade.

“There she is, Cicero sees her!”

“Cicero, that’s a raven. Nazir, do you think we’ll be able to see her from here?”

“I doubt it, the clouds are too thick here, damn this northern weather.”

“Are you nervous, Nazir?”

*Huzrah nu, kul do od, wahaan bok lingrah vod, Ahrk fin tey, boziik fun, do fin gein!*

“Do you know the way? I am weary and lost.”

“Yes, stay with me, the Stormcloak following me was taken by the mist but you might make it!”

*Wo lost fron wah ney dov, ahrk fin reyliik do jul voth aan suleyk wah ronit faal krein!*
Beyond the streets of Solitude fair, under banners emblazoned with the sigil of Akatosh, a foreign
general, a torn legate, and a widowed would-be-queen watched from palace window on high as
western waters sloshed against the cliffs.

“My Torygg loved that story so much. Rikke, you must tell the General.”

“Alduin, or Akatosh depending on your perspective, constantly creates and destroys Nírn. But, as
time went on, Alduin began to neglect his duties in favor of enslaving man with an army of dragons
as servants. So, the gods send a Dragonborn to act as a sort of counter-weight on the scale.”

“So that girl is meant to stand against a god, and win. And I thought the the Emperor set me up
with a thankless task.”

“Perhaps, sir, but I believe that there is a strength to her.”

“I do want her to return to Solitude so we can have a parade in her honor. Perhaps if she knows
how much true Nords of the Empire support her, she’ll feel more comfortable about openly
supporting us!”

Ahrk fin kel lost prodah, do ved viing ko fin krah, tol fod zeymah win kein meyz fundeín!

In a College facing ruined village, students three who soughted prestige and knowledge remembered
a time when their number counted four instead of three.

“Did you know that she was lying to us?”

“J’zargo had his suspicions that our Ennis was not telling us her full truth, though I question if that
makes her a liar.”

“She said something that she knew wasn’t true, I’m not sure what other definition applies here.
Brelyna, what do you think?”

“I’m just wondering if there is a difference between one who lies and one who is a liar. All three
of us have, at some point in our lives, lied, killed, acted cowardly. Does that make us all liars,
killers, and cowards?”

*Alduin, feyn do jun, kruziik vokun staadnau, voth aan bahlok wah diivon fin lein!*

“When Ulfric Stormcloak, with savage Shout, sent me here, my sole regret was fair Elisif, left forlorn and weeping. I faced him fearlessly, my fate inescapable yet my honored unstained. Can your Ulfric say the same?”

“Please, everybody keeps getting caught in the mists, you need to follow me!”

“There is no escape. Courage is useless.”

“VEN MUL RIIK!”

*Nuz aan sul, fent alok, fod fin vul dovah nok, fen kos nahlot mahfaeraak ahrk ruz!*

Darkness reigned in the Thalmor Embassy, where the First Emissary, growing wary of the days ahead, glared at her functionaries, her daughter with fairness mutilated, and her replacement, ordinary black sackcloth forever hiding her identity.

“So it seems that your pet-project did not require your help after all. Once she returns, plans will be put in place to dispatch her. There is no place for a Dragonborn in the future of the Dominion.”

“Surely there are other paths we—”

*Paaz Keizaal fen kos stin nol bein Alduin jot!*

Room lit by a book burning, the leader of the rebellion stood watching the flames while his general brought him a mug of mead, unaware of the jarl’s private shames.

“So what of the Dragonborn? Is she to be the next conquest of Ulfric Stormcloak? What? I’m only trying to make you stop your brooding.”
“I’m just tired, Galmar.”

“Well you better wake yourself up if she returns to Windhelm. With Alduin defeated, she’ll have to pick a side in our war.”

“As I view it, Katariah doesn’t have to do anything. The rules don’t apply to her.”

_Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin_

_naal ek zin los vahriin_

_wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal!_

_Ahrk fin norok paal graan_

_fod nust hon zindro zaan_

_Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal!

--

“What brings you, wayfarer grim, to wander here, in Sovngarde, souls-end, Shor's gift to honored dead?”

Trying not to despair for the souls that she had lost along the way, Katariah kept her gaze level. “I am going to fight Alduin.”

Tsun roared a laugh. “A fateful errand for one so small. No few have chafed to face the Worm since first he set his soul-snare here at Sovngarde's threshold. But Shor restrained our wrathful onslaught. Perhaps, deep counselled, your journey here he foresaw.” He looked her up and down. “No shade are you, as usually here passes, but living, you dare the land of the dead. By what right do you request entry to our Hall of Valor?”

All at once, Katariah could see every aspect of her identity since she set foot on Tamriel, rising and crashing around her stood the thief, the Guildmaster, the Nightingale, the assassin, the Listener, the mage. They were fragments that burned brightly when she needed them to, only to fade out again. Standing on their own, no one of them individually could hope to stand against Alduin. She felt the voice at the core of her brain come to life, the voice that she heard that last day before she was pulled into Skyrim. “I claim the right of my birth. I am a daughter of Cathnoquey and I am the Dragonborn.”
The warrior smiled. “It's been too long since last I laid eyes on a doom-driven hero of the dragon blood. By the will of Kyne, by the will of Shor, by the will of Atmora of Old, we stand behind you in this trial!”

The Hall of Valor and the figures that Katariah met there passed around her like a fever-dream until Katariah found herself Shouting the purple mist out of the sky with three warriors from before time was recorded.

The golden-haired woman looked over to the Dragonborn with unadulterated mirth in her eyes. “Are you ready, Katariah? The fields will echo with the clamor of war, our wills undaunted!”

Before she could answer, Alduin flew from the mist, blindingly fast over the still night air. “Dovahkiin, you should not have come here. Nu hin sil dii.” It dipped in and out of the mist as she tried to lock her sights on it, only to miss, sending arrow after arrow into the voice. Finally crashing on top of an outcropping of rocks, it growled, “You are persistent, kiir. Pruzah ol aar. A fine slave you would have made.”

Katariah drew Dragonbane, only to be Shouted to her knees. Alduin’s maw dominated her vision, breath singing the tips of her hair. “When I have killed you and devoured all of Sovngarde, I will return to your Skyrim and set it ablaze!”

Victory is your birthright.

Burning rage entering her veins, she swiped the edge of her blade across the dragon’s black scales, causing it to rear its head back. “Dur joor! My teeth to your neck!”

Not giving Alduin the chance to make good on his threat, Katariah raced around the pile of rocks and began to climb, wincing as the stones sliced at her palms. The warriors three continued to fight and Shout words of time, keeping the dragon grounded as she stood atop the small hill. If she timed her jump correctly, she would land on top of its skull and kill it with a stab to one of its glowing orange eyes. I can do this, she thought to herself as she launched herself towards the World Eater. The second her boots made contact, Alduin threw back his head, sending her flying upwards into the air.
“Zu'u unslaad! Zu'u nis oblaan!”

Feeling almost suspended in midair, she gripped Dragonbane and whispered, “Krosis, zeymah. But I am your end.” Blade pointed down, she plunged towards the ground, spearing Alduin through the base of his neck.

Blade still in hand, a blast of white light sent her sprawling onto the grass as spirals of green, golden, purple light wrapped around a bellowing Alduin as the World Eater was torn from the planes of Sovngarde.

“This was a mighty deed! The doom of Alduin encompassed at last, and cleansed is Sovngarde of his evil snare. They will sing of this battle in Shor's hall forever, where a girl with snow in her air destroys the World Eater with sword and Shout. But Dragonborn, your fate lies elsewhere.” Tsun helped her to her feet. “When you have completed your count of days, I may welcome you again, with glad friendship, and bid you join the blessed feasting. When you are ready to rejoin the living, just bid me so, and I will send you back.”

Tears, not of sadness or joy, but of the realization that for the first time in her adult life, she felt whole, began to stream down her face. “I’m ready. Send me back to Skyrim.”

“NAHL DAHL VUS!”

--

“Alduin mahlaan!” Alduin has fallen!

As Katariah stood on the Throat of the World, she realized that she could suddenly understand the dragon’s language as well as her own.

“Sahrot thur qahnaraan!” The overlord was vanquished! “Thu’umii los nahlot!” His Voice was silenced! “Dovahkiin los ok dovahkriid!” The Dragonborn is his dragonslayer!

“Mu los vomir.” Now we are free. The last sentence came from Paarthurnax, who had perched beside Katariah during the eulogy. “So, it is done. Alduin dilon. You saved the world you loved, and the Eldest is no more, he who came before all others, and has always been.”
Now’s a little late for regrets. “You don’t sound happy about it.”

“Happy?” The word sounded foreign on his tongue. “No, Mal Briinah, I am not happy. Zeymahi lost ont du'ul Bormahu. Alduin was once the crown of our father Akatosh’s creation. Our world will never be the same.”

Perhaps the world is a better place without Alduin.” She was able to just recognize the sad smile on Paarthurnax’s face.

“Perhaps. At least it will continue to exist. Grik los lein. And, as you told me once, the next world will have to take care of itself. Ful nii los. Even I cannot see past Time's ending, though I sometimes believe you mortals have clearer sight than the dov.” He stretched his wings to the mountain wind. “But I forget myself. Krosis. So los mid fahdon. Melancholy is an easy trap for a dovah to fall into, as I’m sure you know. You have won a mighty victory, Katariah, one that will echo through all the ages of this world for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.” He beat his wings three times, rising into the air. “Savor your triumph, Dovahkiin. We know that this is not the last of what you will write upon the currents of Time.”

Leaving behind the snowstorms of the summit, Katariah pushed open the door to High Hrothgar, where Arngeir waited with a contented expression on his face. After hearing her tale of Sovngarde, he guided her to the front steps of the monastery, looking down over all of Skyrim as an aurora bounded across the night’s sky. “Breath and focus, Dragonborn. Your future lies before you.”

Chapter End Notes

...so that happened! This chapter honestly made me weirdly emotional for some reason. But I digress. Please come back soon for a post-Alduin world. Where in the world will Kat go first? Hopefully breath and focus will guide you all to leave a comment/kudos/subscription for me!
Triptyque

Chapter Summary

After the defeat of Alduin, follow three different paths.

Chapter Notes

Best paired with "Free Animal" by Foreign Air

So she had actually done it. She had journeyed to Oblivion on the back of a dragon, killed Alduin, and returned to tell the tale. The threat had been eliminated. Aleyne looked up from the written reports and gazed out of the window, clutching her probably broken wrist to her chest. *I really must improve in the Restoration School,* she thought to herself, absentmindedly, *Illusion and Alteration aren’t doing me much good here.* It must have been simply amazing, gliding across the wind like a bird, seeing Nirn the way the gods do, existing somewhere beyond pain.

Elenwen had barely reacted to the news when the dragon Shouts were heard across Skyrim. That was the worst of all. Aleyne had learned to read emotions, and read them quickly since before she could remember, but she could not work with a blank slate. Her usual strategy for times such as these was patience: wait out the storm, preferably from a safe distance, at least four rooms away, and everything would eventually be fine again. Until it wasn’t. Then, return to step one and repeat as many times as necessary. But now, she didn’t have that option. *Dispatched,* the euphemism bounced around her head.

Aleyne rubbed her temples, cringing as she accidentally tore open a scab. Some pitch black part of her mind wished she could be like Elenwen at this moment and cut herself free from this stupidity and weakness. She tried to remember one of the maxims that she learned back in Alinor, before the Second Emissary became the First under decidedly crimson circumstances, and Aleyne had been sent to meet her in Bruma. Her teacher, the woman with dusty brown hair and the ill fitting black robes over her aging form stuck out clearly in her memories, but for the love of Magnus, Aleyne could just barely recall what she was actually saying. Something about *dissonance.* That was it! “*Dissonance is uncomfortable feeling when two thoughts exist in the same place within the mind,*” the Catechizer explained, her simpering voice sliding across the marble floor. “*All of you here have been gifted with brilliant minds. Commit them to a single purpose, and you will bring glory to the Dominion!*”

Single purpose, she could do that. As the thought crossed her mind, she could almost feel long, icy fingers pressing against the back of her neck and her shoulders, *Your purpose is to follow me to the*
letter. Kill her. Aleyne rested her head against the glass window. That idea sounded like when she tried to bring a Dremora to heel, and it kept on dragging its black sword against the stones it stood on. She had eventually broken from the noise and let it return to Oblivion without any promise of service. Even now, she still had horrible nightmares where Ancano’s cold, unblinking eyes stared up at her until she was catapulted from sleep, and she didn’t even have logical regrets about that.

In all of the futures she imagined where she killed Katariah, the timeline shattered to blackness immediately after the event. It was like trying to dream up a future where the ground turned inside out, or where auroras crashed into the ground and stirred up the snow. It simply was not possible.

She cast around her mind for another memory that could aid her. The sunlight warmed her face, in spite of the clouds and the white and gold stained glass that it had to filter through. She was only peripherally aware of the Proselytiser’s strained voice as she thought of the magic she could practice once she was released from the Temple of Phynaster and could get off of her numbing knees. “Keep close to your hearts, my children, the ever-present evil of Lorkhan.” His voice droned on. “All of our suffering, all of our misery, all of our disappointment has a name, and it is mortality. We may share the world with Man, but their mortality is the root of our pain.” So mortality was her enemy. But that did not make sense either. According to the texts that she read since arriving in Skyrim, Katariah was chosen by Auri-El. Over all of the elves that existed, the king of the gods, he who began time, picked a mortal girl as his avatar on Nirn. So either the gods were incorrect, or the priest who always had venison stuck in his teeth was. She was inclined to follow the gods. But then she was back to dissonance.

She sighed as she stood up. Truthfully, she knew the answer even before she started this pointless mental debate. The solution was simple, yet it was not easy. Using her still-functioning hand, she pushed herself onto her feet, and strode into the next room. “I still believe that the Dragonborn should live,” she said to the woman sitting behind the desk.

“And I believe we’ve already had this conversation,” Elenwen replied, not bothering to look up from the letter she was reading.

*We are on the same side, try to appeal to a higher purpose.* “With Auri-El no longer bringing in the next world, it is our duty to be its carriers. It will be easier with her on our side to bring more believers onto our side of faith.”

Elenwen buried her face in her hands, making Aleyne think that she had reached some breakthrough, until she heard the First Emissary mutter, “I cannot believe that I gave birth to someone so stupid.”

“What?”

“You still believe that all of this is about something so fleeting as religion.” Elenwen leaned back
in her chair. “This is about power, and power alone. Perhaps the white soul gems had some profound impact on the souls of those on Cathnoquey, I don’t know and I don’t particularly care. All that matters is that they are dead, like all of the races of Man soon will be.”

Aleyne felt as though ashes were filling her mouth. “But everything we do, all of the horrible things that follow us, it’s to bring about the world that the gods intended...that’s what all of you have always told me!”

“And now you know the truth. May it set you free. The gods have nothing to do with what we want. Now, go join our mutual friend near Morthal. This pointless civil war bores me, the Empire is weak enough, so it’s time for the Stormcloaks to come to an end.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

Aleyne thought that she might throw up, but swallowed. “The things we’ve done, I’ve done with a smile because I believed that I was serving some higher purpose. Cathnoquey, that prison...oh gods, the civil war, it wasn’t the Nords, that was you...every time I look in the mirror I think I can still see the blood on me. I can’t even imagine what horrors Oblivion has in store for us after death, but I cannot be a part of this anymore!” She made for the door.

“Where are you going?” Elenwen’s voice had become deathly quiet.

“As far away from you as possible.” Aleyne pushed open the door to find a gold-armored soldier blocking her path. “Let me through!”

Elenwen stood up behind her desk. “Soldier, did you just hear Fourth Emissary Aleyne confess to treason against the Aldmeri Dominion?”

He only hesitated for a moment. “I certainly did, First Emissary.”

“Then by my hand and seal, I sentence her to execution. May Auri-El have mercy on your soul. Throw her in the dungeon until we can arrange for a ship to bring her back to Alinor to face death.”
Later that evening, damp evening air filled Aleyne’s lungs as she choked out sob after sob.

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So she had done it. She had journeyed to Oblivion on the back of a dragon, killed Alduin, and returned to tell the tale. To be perfectly honest, she didn’t think that Snowcap had it in her. Snowcap, that was funny, she had to remember that one. She licked her lips, tongue brushing against the black sackcloth.

Things had shifted around her. Little Miss Half-a-Face seemed to be fading in and out between faith and doubt, and her mother had a funny look on her face after the “peace” talks in the Rift, like a cross between a child sent to bed without supper and someone who had tasted fear for the first time in years. It was not a good look on her. That beings said, from her own perspective, this new dynamic was working just fine for her. She was allowed to journey by herself to Morthal. It was a small, pointless reward, like a sweet given to a child, but the freedom from the Fourth’s indecisive and ineffectual existence was truly a blessing. How had the First put it? That her minder was “indisposed,” that was the term, and that she would meet her near Morthal a few days later.

The Fourth needed to be a little quicker on her feet in getting to Hjaalmarch. She hated waiting, and today was supposed to a special occasion for her minder. Her mother had planned a bloodletting of sorts. Leyney was going to kill some Stormcloaks in, what was the expression? In cold blood, that was it. Personally, she didn't understand the origin of that idiom, her blood always felt plenty warm within in her when she saw the last moments of terror in her opponents’ eyes, feeling the souls underneath her skin writhing as she took another life. That was about as far away from ice as one could get. She did not think that the Fourth would take to this activity well. If she were a betting woman, she would stake gold on the Altmer girl vomiting after the deed was done.

From just beyond the trees, she watched as a troop of Stormcloak soldiers passed, led by one of their bear-skinned officers.

“Alright men, we move quietly and take the Imperials at Fort Snowhawk by surprise. I want their guts on the ground before they know we’re here.”

“General Stone-Fist, how many soldiers should we expect?”

The address sent the wheels spinning in her mind. General, officer, prison, bait, fuck it. Scars was too late and would have to wait for another opportunity, this early bird was going to catch herself some worms.
She whistled, and the seven heads turned towards the forest. Blasting out of the trees, she cut the throats of the first two with one swipe of her ebony sword before they had a chance to draw their weapons. Reality had sunk in for the rest of them, who had begun to circle her. *Now’s when the fun begins.*

“I’ll enjoy killing you,” the general growled, battle axe tensed in his hands.

*Best not to take chances.* Quicker than the bite of snake, she smacked him across the forehead with the hilt of her sword, sending him onto the ground. Channeling the souls into her legs, she launched herself into the air, landing outside the circle, hitting the ground behind a soldier with pretty blonde hair. She shoved her blade through the back of his neck. Four down, two to kill, one to spare. She picked up the general’s battle axe of the ground, gave it a spin to test its weight, and swung it at number five, taking her head off her shoulders. *Last, but certainly not least.* Heaving the axe over her head, she lodged it in six’s stomach. Poor number seven, his hands had started to shake. *Better not keep him waiting,* she thought as she swiped her sword across his kneecaps. “In case you want to crawl off and tell someone,” she whispered through her hood, “I’m taking your general to the Thalmor Embassy.”

Summoning power to the muscles in her arms, she slung the unconscious man over her shoulder and strode off into the forest, whistling to herself as she walked.

--

So she had actually done it. She had journeyed to Oblivion on the back of a dragon, killed Alduin, and returned to tell the tale. After a night of black sleep at High Hrothgar, Katariah walked down the Seven Thousand Steps in a sort of daze as the sun rose to greet her. Walking towards the hitching post outside of Vilemyr Inn, she untied Shadowmere and rested her head against the horse’s neck for just a moment. Judging by the reactions of the people in Ivarstead, everyone had heard Alduin’s eulogy. Even though she felt the same, a new chapter for life in Skyrim had begun.

Swinging herself in the saddle, she realized that she did not quite know where she wished to go first, the College, the Cistern, the Sanctuary all flashed through her mind, but all of those places held bloody memories that she did not want to relive now. In reality there was really only one person that she wanted to talk to right now, the one person that knew everything.

Spurring Shadowmere into a gallop, she let her hair out of its braid, sighing in relief as it flew behind her. All of a sudden, she began laughing, the icy wind filling her lungs. She had defeated Alduin! Skyrim and Tamriel and Nirn were safe. As she travelled northwards, she gave money to beggars, aided caravans, set right everything that she could. Good or bad, everyone she saw would
take part in her celebration of her victory. Morning bled to afternoon, and then to evening, and the bridge leading to Windhelm came into her view. She considered striding through the city, straight to the Palace, but thought better of it. *It’s practically a tradition at this point, I had best respect it.* She turned Shadowmere loose and headed behind the city.

By the time she had climbed to the roof of the Palace, night had completely fallen, and a awesome turquoise aurora waved over the ice fields. If she were to look to the east, past the smoke of Red Mountain, Katariah could maybe catch a glimpse of her island.

“If I could spare the men, I would install a ladder for you.”

Grinning, she replied, “For this view, it’s worth the effort.” Turning around, she met the gaze of Ulfric, leaning against the door to the palace. He was smiling, something that instantly made him look years younger. Laughing breathlessly, she began to slowly walk towards him, picking up speed as she went. He met her halfway and, after a second that felt like an age to her, swept her into an embrace.

She could feel his heart against her chest. As she sighed into his shoulder, the refrain, *Alduin is gone, but you’re alive, he’s alive,* echoed around her head. She did not know how much time had passed when he released her from his arms and took her hand. “Let me show you something,” he entreated, as he led her to the otherside of the roof.

Looking down as the city, Katariah gasped. It looked as though candles had been set up and lit on every available surface. The streets, the walls, the buildings, the faces of the people, they all glowed with a hopeful sort of light. “Is it New Life Day already?” she asked.

“Not quite,” Ulfric replied. However, at that instant, a countdown could be heard outside of Candlehearth Hall. “Perhaps I spoke too soon,” he said with a quiet laugh.

Five moments later, the bells at the Temple of Talos rang out, signaling the start of a new year. “Happy New Life Day, Katariah,” he breathed. The Dragonborn looked up, expecting him to be looking at the city beneath him. Instead, he was looking straight at her. Any other day, she would have found herself tied down by a thousand anxieties and obligations. But tonight, she was alive, and she would join the ranks of the living. Rising to the tips of her toes as he wrapped an arm around her waist, she pressed her lips to his. Tonight was for the living.

Chapter End Notes
So when I say "slow burn," I'm not messing around. Of course, the 9000 loose plot threads mean that unfortunately Kat and Ulfric cannot stay on the rooftop forever. In lieu of septims, pretty please comment/kudos/subscribe!!! And come back soon to see what storm these two have to face!
Ulfric broke away first. “I have something for you,” he said, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing a small silver case that he pressed into Katariah’s hand. She flipped open the lid to reveal a surface of glass covering a design depicting four arrows, each pointing a different direction. Pulled by some invisible force, a red needle spun beneath the glass, gradually settling towards a fixed point.

Katariah turned the case from side to side, amazed as the needle remained constant. “Is this from Hammerfell?” she asked.

“Yes. A delegation from Sentinel brought it when they came to discuss a potential alliance. They call it a ‘compass,’ the red arrow will always point you towards the North.”

The Dragonborn wanted to marvel at this invention, but her heart leapt at Ulfric’s mention of an alliance. All of the different peoples of Tamriel, rising up against the Aldmeri Dominion, it was like something out a perfect dream. This was a future that she would be delighted to take part in. “They’re really going to stand against the Thalmor?”

The jarl shook his head. “Not against the Thalmor. Against the Empire, if I can get them to agree to send ships to aid our cause.” Seeing her shocked expression, he continued. “First things first. We need to finish this war before we begin the next one.” Still met with silence, he added, “Say you understand, Katariah. Skyrim needs heroes right now, and there’s no one left but us.”

Fighting to keep her hands steady within his and stop her voice from shaking, she looked up to meet his eyes. “Ulfric, I know you read the Thalmor’s intelligence on the civil war, you cannot continue the fight against the Empire.”
Stepping back, the jarl ran a hand through his hair. “Nothing has changed. The Empire is still bleeding Skyrim dry, and we have a duty to cut it free.”

Katariah reached to tug at her hood before remembering it had been torn off of her on her flight to Sovngarde. “But you know that the Thalmor are directly benefiting from this war! Perhaps if you were to work out some alliance with Tullius—”

“I will go back to the headsman’s block before I even consider working with that puppet,” Ulfric growled.

“So you’re willing to knowingly serve the Dominion’s interests if it means you don’t have to admit you were wrong?” As she spoke, she cast her gaze around, looking for a way to climb off of the rooftop, something that did not escape Ulfric’s notice.

“At least I’m willing to commit to something, while you’re already thinking of running away!” He stepped closer, towering over her. “Where to next, Dragonborn? The Companions, perhaps the Bard’s College? You’re starting to run out of factions you can join and masks you can put on.” His glare deepened. “Maybe you’ll turn to the Legion, since the idea of joining me is so repulsive to you.”

Rage and guilt flooded her head. “Fuck you, Ulfric,” she spat.

Before the conversation could degenerate any further, Jorleif opened the door to the rooftop.

“Excuse me, my jarl—”

“What?!”

The steward slightly jumped as the pair yelled at him unison, but sobered quickly. “Galmar’s been captured.”

Ulfric took a breath to steady himself. This was going to be fine, this was why he kept prisoners. “Send a courier to Castle Dour to arrange for an exchange of captives.” However, he knew he was
about to learn bad news when his steward bit his lip before speaking.

“My jarl, he’s been captured by the Thalmor. One of his units was attacked by a hooded figure in black who told the only survivor that they were taking him to the Thalmor Embassy in Haafingar.”

He could feel his heart begin to race as his throat ran dry. To his right, Katariah leaned forward. “Did the surviving soldier mention anything else about the attacker?”

Jorleif shook his head. “He died of his wounds shortly after getting a message to us, all he mentioned was that they were covered in black, like a shadow.”

Ulfric noticed the Dragonborn’s jaw twitch. “Thank you, Jorleif. We’ll take it from here.” The steward looked like he couldn’t get back inside fast enough when she turned back to him. “So what’s the plan?”

“What?”

“To get your friend out of there, what’s the plan?”

Ulfric shook his head in an effort to get his scattered thoughts back into focus. “I’ll organize the other generals out in the field, and we’ll plan an assault on the embassy.”

Katariah folded her arms. “That sounds like a really fast way to get you, Galmar, and all your officers killed in the space of an hour.” Her eyes once again held that intensity that he remembered from their meeting in the Temple of Talos. “You may not be willing to change your strategy in the civil war from the Thalmor dossier, but we need to use it now. They already have spies inside both armies, so they’re not going to try to get information from him. This is a trap, for you, or at least for other high ranking Stormcloaks. We need to act in a way that they will not anticipate, and right now they anticipate an open assault.”

One part of this proposition did not make sense. “‘We’?”

She nodded, looking him up and down and motioned for him to follow her inside. “You’re already in civilian clothes, that’s good. Get whatever armour and weapons you want to carry, but we’re going travelling rough terrain and then breaking in, so try to bring lighter gear.” She pushed open the door to his chambers and handed him a bag she found. “Get packing.”
She didn’t seem to understand his question. “You’re helping me rescue Galmar, why?”

Katariah called down the hallway, “Jorleif!” When the steward came running, she ordered, “Tell the court downstairs, when they ask and not before, that Jarl Ulfric has gone to assist General Stone-Fist with an assignment, but that he’ll be back in a few days. Do not mention a word about the Thalmor, or that he’s only with me. If they ask for more information, tell them to wait. Are we clear?”

After seeing Ulfric’s nod from behind her, he replied, “Yes, miss,” before heading back downstairs.

Katariah was scanning through a line of potions as she spoke. “Right now, time is of the essence, if we leave now, we should make it to the embassy by the midnight after next, budgeting for a night’s rest. But, you’re in luck. I’ve broken into and out of the building before, and I know a secret passage through a cave that connects with the dungeons. If we do this right, we can grab Galmar and leave before anyone knows we’re there.”

Still not having an answer to his question, he grasped one of the Dragonborn’s shoulders and spun her around to face him. “Why are you helping me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “To prove a point. Also, it’s been a while since I’ve participated in a heist.” She walked to the window where the rope attached to the grappling hook hung. After pulling on it a couple times to test its weight, she turned back to him. “Have you ever rappelled before?”

This night had consisted of a series of emotional highs and lows for Ulfric. First, there was the kiss, then the fight, finding out that his closest friend was in the hands of his worst enemies, and now Katariah wanted him to climb out of his own window. Instead of expressing this, he just sighed and said, “There’s a front door, there’s always been a front door.”

The Dragonborn gave him a one-sided smile. “The fewer eyes on us, the less likely any potential spy can slip word to the Thalmor. After you.”

_This girl is either an absolute blessing or a curse from the gods themselves_, Ulfric thought to himself as he took hold of the rope and braced his feet against the wall of the palace. Confident that he was not, in fact, about to fall to his death, he looked towards Katariah, who was leaning on the windowsill. “Are you coming?”
She nodded, and began to climb outside, refusing to look him precisely in the eye. “For this to work, I’m going to need to wrap my legs around you.” Situating her bag over her shoulders, she placed her arms around his shoulders and sat awkwardly on his hips. “Forgive the impropriety, Sir Stormcloak,” she said, trying to break the tension, as she rested her chin on his shoulder.

*When I thought I wanted to get closer to the Dragonborn, this was not exactly what I had in mind,* Ulfric thought to himself as they shambled down the wall into the snow.

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Katariah plotted their course going forward as the sun sank towards the horizon. Barring any major disasters like a platoon of Thalmor soldiers or any loss of limbs, they would arrive at Morthal after darkness fell, and spend the night at the inn there. That would work well enough. She had elected to keep them off the main roads out of caution that one or both of them might be recognized. There had been a bit of discussion about whether or not they should travel through the night, but they both agreed that they needed their wits about them when they reached the embassy. Things such as this had been the sole subjects of their conversations, logistics so dry she could use them as kindling. Neither of them had brought up the kiss, or the argument that followed it. Katariah watched as he gripped the reins of his horse with white knuckles and knew that he was deeply terrified for his friend. That had been part of her reasoning for bringing herself along on this operation. She knew well the kind of mind-killing terror that Ulfric was facing right now, and if left to his own devices, he would have definitely committed some self-destructing act. But she was also here out of guilt. Their fight may have been driven by anger and stubbornness, but Ulfric had been right. She had become the type of person that would kiss a man on the rooftop, leave, mentally pack away the experience, and move on, and she was not really sure if she liked that kind of person. Brelyna’s betrayed face after the fight with Ancano came to mind.

So here she was. Committing to something. She wasn’t sure what that something was, but hopefully she would figure it out along the way.

They arrived in Morthal and ducked into the town’s inn, just stopping at the door as Katariah covered her hair with a piece of cloth she had dug out of her pack.

“Welcome to the Moorside Inn, are you here for the night?” They were greeted by a lovely looking Redguard woman holding a broom.
“We are,” Ulfric replied, keeping his face turned away from the torchlight.

“Well you two are in luck, a room just opened up. I had to send the last couple packing, they weren’t married, and I’m a devout follower of Mara, I couldn’t have them carrying on under my roof.”

Katariah slammed an aghast expression on her face as she toyed with the Amulet of Articulation around her neck. “I can’t even imagine the impropriety.”

The innkeeper led them to a room in the far left corner of the room. “I’m so happy you understand, and you two do make a handsome couple. Tell me, what is your last name?”

Katariah felt Ulfric move to speak behind her, but beat him to it. “It’s Sombrage. Thank you so much for your hospitality, we will let you know if we need anything.” With that, she placed some septims in the innkeeper’s hand and shut the door to their room for the night behind them.

Ulfric sat down on the bed and began to take off his boots. “You’re quick on your feet.”

“Normally I’d try to find some shelter outside and save us the trouble, a cave or something, but this is Hjaalmarch, I’d probably get my nose bitten off by a mudcrab or something.” She found her voice trailing as she took in where they would be spending the night. There was a bit of a dichotomy for inns in Skyrim, there were the cozy but grander ones like the Winking Skeever or Candlehearth Hall, and those that had glorified broom closets serving as guest rooms. Moorside veered towards the broom closet side of things, which was not even mentioning the one bed they would have to share.

“That would be a tragedy,” he replied while quietly laughing.

*If I don’t say anything, it’s not awkward*, Katariah resolved as she took her hair out of its bindings and removed her leather armour while facing the wall. She normally slept in the linen shirt and pants she wore under her armour anyway. Keeping her breast band on through the night would be kind of uncomfortable, but she would manage. She tried to find some interesting spot on the floor as she climbed under the blanket to ignore the fact that Ulfric seemed to have taken off his shirt. Situating herself on her side, she fixed her eyes on the opposite wall. *Six short hours and this will all be over,* she thought to herself as she felt the bed depress next to her.

“How did you come up with Sombrage as a last name?” Ulfric asked from across the bed.
“Some advice I learned from Skyrim’s underground: never lie when the truth will work just fine. Sombrage was my family’s name.”

“You’ve never mentioned it.”

Katariah sighed. “Don’t take it personally. I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone here, and last names weren’t really of much importance back home. It was more of a way of keeping records than an identifier.”

A few seconds passed before he spoke again. “I’m sorry for suggesting that you’d join the Legion.”

The Dragonborn wanted to turn over and read his expression, but she kept herself still. “It’s fine. I’m sorry too, for being stubborn and for wanting to run away. I just don’t know what we’re going to do.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

Looking back on that night, Katariah had absolutely no memory of actually falling asleep. She did, however, remember waking up in small hours of the morning, the witching hour, as her mother used to call it. The time of night when all gods-fearing people were asleep. However, right now, she was at least three-quarters awake and she could feel her legs entangled with Ulfric’s, his chest flush against her back, and his hand resting against her hip. Wiser women than she would have found a way to render themselves awake and extricate themselves from this position, but at that moment, Katariah did not feel particularly wise. Instead, she felt warm, safe, and the contented type of tired. Nestling just an inch closer, she fell back into an easy sleep.

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It had been years since the Great War, but the habits of a soldier had not left Ulfric. He still found himself rising precisely six hours after midnight, no matter how much his nightmares had kept him from sleep. What made this morning different from others, however, was the presence of a certain Dragonborn curled up against his chest.

Her white hair fanned out into a halo around her head. Personally, he didn’t understand why she insisted on keeping it bound up in braids or under a hood all the time, it was the most attractive part
of her appearance. As she slept, she looked unburdened in a way that he had never seen before. He imagined that this was the closest he would ever come to seeing how she was before the Thalmor stole her life from her.

Carefully, he pulled himself away from her and out of the bed. True, he was only a man with a pretty girl sleeping next to him, but he had to remember why they were here in the first place. His closest friend was in the hands of his most ruthless enemy, and tonight, he and Katariah would take him back.

*He and Katariah.* If she was unwilling to join him, he would need to stop thinking of them as a pair. He quietly got dressed and walked to a nearby glen to meditate. However, he was having more trouble than usual focusing. That girl had wormed her way into his thoughts since the day they were slated to die at Helgen, firmly staked her place within his dreams when she slew the dragon in Windhelm, and burned her image behind his eyes when she flew above him to Sovngarde. A part of him had dared to hope that something between them had fundamentally shifted when she kissed him as the bells rang in a new year, but she still remained perched between two paths, one of which contained a possible future with them together, the other decidedly lacking that.

Behind him, he heard leather boots crushing dried leaves.

“Arngeir would be proud,” Katariah called from behind him. “A septim for your thoughts?”

“Just preparing for the day ahead. Are you ready?”

Turning, he saw the Dragonborn, wearing her leather armour and shrewd expression on her face. “I’m always ready for things like this. Come on, let’s go get the horses.”

As they rode west through the hills of Haafingar, Ulfric silently prayed that Kynareth would watch over Galmar and that Talos give him and Katariah strength for the coming battle.

*Him and Katariah. Gods damn it.*

Chapter End Notes

So who's ready to go back to the Thalmor Embassy? I'm new to writing romance, so I apologize if the dialogue sounds a little stilted, but I added a dollop of bed-sharing,
everyone's favorite fanfic trope, to make up the difference :D. Every comment/kudos/subscription is worth a hug from Ulfric to me!!!
Dominion

Chapter Summary

Two enter the Thalmor Embassy, and four leave.

Chapter Notes

I couldn't think a suitable song pairing, apologies, but I'll leave you with these words from William Shakespeare's As You Like It:

Good shepherd, tell this youth what 'tis to love.
It is to be all made of sighs and tears;
It is to be all made of fantasy,
All made of passion and all made of wishes,
All adoration, duty, and observance,
All humbleness, all patience and impatience,
All purity, all trial, all observance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Objectively speaking, the conditions were perfect. Clouds blackened the sky, hiding all of the stars and the twin moons. From what Katariah could see of the Embassy, it was dead quiet. On one of the guard towers, there was the silhouette of two soldiers wearing the graceful patterns of the Thalmor’s signature glass armour. Not that it will do them much good, Katariah thought to herself with a slightly wicked smile coming to her lips. She nudged Ulfric as she took the Nightingale bow off of her shoulders. “You take the one on the left. On my count?”

She waited for his nod before she knocked an ebony arrow. “Three...two...now!” she whispered.

Their arrows whistled through the night and the two watchmen fell without any major noise. So far, so silent.

The mouth of the cave that Katariah remembered crawling out of with Etienne the night Malborn died hung open like a slack jaw. She straightened her shoulders and took a calming breath. Tonight would be different than last time.

Trying to find the balance between confident and reassuring, she squeezed Ulfric’s arm. “Are you ready?” she asked. Once again, he silently nodded, and together they walked into the blackness, the
only light coming from a tiny ball of magelight she cast to the far end of the tunnel. He had spoken less and less as they grew closer to the embassy, and Katariah grew more certain in her decision to come with him.

What she was not certain about, however, was the growing presence of something between them. If she was being honest with herself, that something was born the day they locked eyes at Helgen, took its first real breath the day they met at the Temple of Talos, and sank its fangs into her when they kissed three nights ago. Whatever it was, it had no name, and seemed to dance and duck in between tension, friendship, and affection, if it existed at all. Perhaps it was nothing at all. Perhaps he only wanted her as a notch in his bedpost, and she could hardly fault the man for feeling the same base level attraction that she felt towards him. What truly terrified her was the prospect that Ulfric wanted her, not as a partner, but as a weapon, something sharp and inhuman that could topple the Empire and then be set aside. Delphine and Esbern had wanted her as a weapon, and she could still feel the pain in her back when she moved her shoulders too quickly.

They approached a ledge, and without speaking, Ulfric boosted her up, and she leaned down to give him her hand to hold on to as he joined her.

Katariah remembered one day of her childhood, looking up at her mother in the kitchen of her childhood home, and asking what a soulmate was, having just learned the word from Liselle, who had told her that everyone on the face of Nírn had a special someone waiting for them, somewhere. Her mother, who adhered more to the Breton side of Cathnoquey’s heritage, described how some souls were closer than others before the creation of Mundus, a condition that made them more likely to fall into friendship and maybe even love. Her father, on the other hand, described how all mortals had learned of love and devotion after being bathed in Kyne’s tears after the death of Shor, and every rain storm served as a reminder of that love. Then, there was Ursula’s explanation, given to Katariah in front of an altar to Akatosh, that love was not an end, but instead a constant challenge to another person to be the version of themself that the gods intended.

They approached the trapdoor leading to the dungeons, and Katariah forcibly shoved down these pointless, circling thoughts. Now was not the time or the place. Truthfully, she was taking the debacle with Brynjolf as positive proof that romantic love had no fitting place in her future. The potential for a happy marriage and a family was burned off of her the moment the Thalmor destroyed her island. That would be alright. It would at least be easier. If she kept on repeating that to herself, she might begin believing it.

Before she pushed open the door, she turned to Ulfric one final time. “Just follow our plan, and everything will be fine.”

“Allariah, no matter what happens, thank you for coming with me.”
Talos help me, he needs to stop looking at me like that or things are going to get complicated. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The Dragonborn pushed open the trapdoor and immediately sneaked to the upstairs balcony where she found two soldiers sitting at a table, playing what she was sure was a riveting game of dice. Recalling one of Tolfdir’s lessons, she raised a hand and simultaneously snuffed all of the torches, calling the orange flames into her palm. The two soldiers started, and got up from their table. She moved amongst the shadows and cut the first soldier’s throat, catching his golden sword out of the air before it could clatter against the wood floor. The second, stumbling in the dark, walked right into the Blade of Woe and speared herself between the ribs. Katariah covered the Altmer’s mouth as the elf’s shaking body sank to the floor. Confident that she was the only one that remained on the upper level, she stuck a wooden chair underneath the handle of the door that led to the embassy proper. Now was not a time for surprises. She unclenched her fist and fire light returned to the room to reveal Ulfric taking the keys from a dead mage.

“If you pointy-eared bastards think you can frighten me with the dark, you’ve got another thing coming!”

That was a hopeful sign. Taking one last look to make sure that there were no Thalmor hidden in the shadows, she bounded down the stairs to meet Ulfric, who was already unlocking the door to the cell. Inside the tiny room sat Galmar, enraged, but apparently unharmed.

“What in Oblivion are you two idiots doing here?”

“Is he alright?” Katariah asked.

“Yes, this is normal. It’s good to see you in one piece, old friend!” Ulfric said as he helped Galmar to his feet. The housecarl, however, did not seem as relieved as the jarl.

“Sure, you two want-to-be legends go galavanting across the countryside, risking all of Skyrim, why not?” He glared at Katariah while nodding towards Ulfric. “Him, I expect him to unreasonable, but you, I may not trust you, but I thought you at least had a decent head on your shoulders! Well? Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Katariah blinked slowly before replying, “Only that I’m slightly offended that I’m just a want-to-be legend, but I think we can continue that debate somewhere else. Are we ready to go?”
Galmar sobered quickly. “Not quite. There’s another prisoner, a woman, she was in the cell next to mine, they took her upstairs. We need to bring her along, the bastards weren’t going easy on her.”

Katariah unsheathed her dagger. “I’ll go and get her. Barricade the door after me, and let me in when you hear five knocks. Be ready to run.”

Ulfric grabbed her forearm as she moved to go back upstairs. “Be careful.”

She smiled. “Always.”

Walking up the wooden staircase, she faintly heard Galmar mutter, “You should have kissed her, it would have made a better song.”

The inside of Elenwen’s solar was how she exactly how she remembered it from the night of the party. In all honesty, Katariah elected to save the other prisoner herself out of partly selfish reasons: the rooms were full of fine weapons and trinkets, and she had an eye on a house in Markarth for Guild and Brotherhood hideout. This operation so far had gone pretty perfectly, Galmar was fine, and she and Ulfric didn’t have a scratch between them, it seemed a shame not to bring back at least a few spoils. However, her thoughts were turned from enchanted weapons and jewelry when she heard a conversation coming from one of the offices.

“I still cannot believe that you could do something so stupid, you could get us all killed!” When Katariah first heard Elenwen’s voice in Bruma, she had compared the sound to a rusty door. If she were to continue along the lines of that metaphor now, she would say that the First Emissary sounded positively unhinged. The scratching cadance remained, but the tight control that bound it together was gone. “I gain absolutely nothing from additional Stormcloak intelligence and you’ve potentially attracted an army to our doorstep. Ulfric knows his most loyal general is here by now because you saw fit to leave a survivor, so it’s too late to kill him, and I cannot pass him off to Tullius without admitting that we openly provoked a unit of Stormcloaks!” Katariah hid, her back pressed just to the left of the door frame as the Thalmor’s voice turned. There was a pause where no apparent reply to the accusation could be heard, until Elenwen turned her focus to another in the room. “This was your doing, wasn’t it?” Footsteps walked across the room. “You advised her, you told her to betray me, that has to be it.” Elenwen’s voice trailed off and Katariah heard what sounded like someone crawling their way across the floor, taking shuddering breaths. “The Dominion cannot touch me here, and I no longer have the patience to wait for them to remove you from me.” There was the sound of jagged metal scraping metal, like a weapon being unsheathed. “We’ve been approaching this point for twenty-four years...It’s time to end it all, don’t you think?”

The time for waiting was clearly over. Katariah leapt into the room, brandishing Dragonbane, to find Elenwen with a vicious-looking Daedric dagger drawn, the shadow she remembered from the
woods outside Winterhold casually leaning against the farthest wall, and Aleyne, dressed in rags and covered in blood, sprawled on the floor of the solar, reaching towards the door. “Katariah,” she whispered, a broken smile coming to her face, “I always knew...you’d come.”

Elenwen looked stunned before recovering herself. “Dragonborn, you are unexpected, but not unwelcome.” She glared at the shadow. “Kill her, Aleyne, and the general downstairs and report back to me when you’re done. I’ll figure out some way to clean up your mess.” With that, she hurried out of the door leading upstairs, locking it shut behind her.

The second the lock clicked, the shadow launched herself towards Katariah, who barely had time to hold up Dragonbane in defense against the ebony sword that was pulsing purple light. Since their last fight in the woods, the shadow seemed to have gotten stronger, with every one of its strikes nearly knocking Katariah’s blade out of her hands. As she moved to kick its legs out from under it and hopefully gain the upperhand for just a moment, the mass of black cloth jumped into the air with an impossible sort of agility, turned in mid-air above Katariah’s head, and landed lightly on the ground behind her. The Dragonborn could hear its blade whistling towards her neck for a killing stroke when the words to the Shout she needed flashed across her head.

“TIID KLO UL!”

Time slowed to a crawl as she ducked underneath the sword and stepped away from her attacker. Looking down, she saw Aleyne, still trying to claw her way towards the door. Without consciously making a choice, Katariah bent down and pulled the elf’s body over her shoulder. As the power of the Shout began to wear away, she took off towards the dungeon, not daring to look back as she head the footfalls of the shadow running after them. Behind her, she could hear Aleyne rasp, “Look...out...” Katariah felt a sharp pressure on her shoulder, but kept moving. Passing by a section of loose bricks, she suddenly had an idea.

“FUS RO DAH!”

The hallway began to collapse behind them, and Katariah looked behind her to see the shadow stopped, simply staring at them, before they were obscured by the falling stone and wood. Slamming on the door five times, she sprinted into the dungeons past Galmar and Ulfric. “Time to go!”

“No wonder you two get along so well, you both love dramatic entrances,” Galmar muttered to her left.

“Save your commentary for later, Galmar,” Ulfric called over his shoulder as they ran towards the
trapdoor. Behind them, Katariah could hear the shadow pounding against the wooden door. The jarl and housecarl descended into the cave first. As Katariah moved to shift Aleyne’s weight to another point on her shoulder, she made the mistake of looking back up at the door, causing her to become transfixed with horror by the sight of the shadow splintering the wooden door with its fists, the black gloves tearing to reveal hands covered in blood.

“Katariah!” Ulfric’s voice broke her out her trance. “Come on!”

Together, they sprinted through the cave and back into the night, towards the tree where Ulfric had tied up their horses at their arrival. Katariah could just make out the spot of blackness standing behind them as they took off to the south, never breaking from a gallop for hours as the early light of dawn began to rise around them, breaking over the mountains surrounding Dragon’s Bridge Village. The horses began to become tired, and when they crossed the border from Harfingaar into the Reach, they found a cave to make camp for a few hours.

Propping Aleyne, who had fallen unconscious over the course of their journey, by the fire, Katariah suddenly felt disconcerted and weak. Looking up at Ulfric, she asked, “Well, now what?”

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter was a lot shorter than my liking, but I couldn't stretch it out any further without breaking in an awkward place, so I hope you all enjoy!! Come back soon for an answer to Kat's question! As for me, this story has gotten a lot more kudos than I thought possible (when I started this little project back in April, I expected maybe 10), so thank you all so so much! It's very difficult to articulate how much you all mean to me! I would love it even more if you all commented a bit more so I could get to know you, so I propose a bit of an ice breaker question: What is your favorite video game that is not Skyrim? For me, I personally love Super Paper Mario, it was funny and genuinely moving at times. Hope to hear from you all in the comments!!
River

Chapter Summary

Katariah and Ulfric discuss their pasts and futures

Chapter Notes

Again, shorter chapter (sorry!) but otherwise it would be nine pages long and coming to you all a week from now, so that's the trade-off. Music pairing idea that is on the nose, even for me: "Riverside" by Agnes Obel

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well, first we need to get that dagger out of your shoulder,” Ulfric said, moving behind Katariah as she sat down on a rock.

“What dagger?” she asked, reaching toward her back. Her mouth went dry as she looked to see her hand covered in red.

“This is when you thank the Nine for a little thing called ‘shock,’” Galmar said while walking towards the outside of the cave. “You two handle that, I’m taking first watch.”

Pain laced through her muscles as Ulfric placed a hand on the knife’s hilt. “It’s really not a big deal, you can just leave it in!”

Ulfric seemed to be ignoring this perfectly reasonable request. “It looks like it just missed your lung. On the count of five...one...two...three—”

The dagger was out as Katariah screamed, “You lying bastard!”

From the entrance to the cave, Galmar called, “Save it for the wedding night!”

She reached for some projectile to throw in the housecarl’s general direction, but found herself
restrained as Ulfric gently removed her armor and pulled her shirt down to expose her shoulder. At first she flinched as he touched her skin, but gradually relaxed under his hand as he bandaged the wound.

“The wound doesn’t seem poisoned, but you should still see a healer,” he said, brushing her hair off of the back of her neck.

Katariah grimaced, not replying. Already her thoughts had turned to the near future, where she would have to, as Vex always phrased it, put up or shut up. Galmar was safe, he and Ulfric would return to Windhelm, and she would face a choice. She could silence her doubts and guilt, and join them, fighting the Empire in the hopes that they would be able to turn their blades to the Thalmor after Tullius and Rikke were dead by their hands, and whatever was growing between her and Ulfric would follow its own course. Or, she could leave, walk Nirn like before, except now without the threat of the World Eater hanging over her head. She would be alone, like usual, except now with the knowledge that something more could exist in her life, and that she was actively abstaining from it.

Ulfric dragged her out of her musings as he pressed the dagger into her hands. “Here’s a souvenir for you.”

She ran a finger along the etching in the ebony knife, noticing that they spelled words in capital letters. “I am alive because that one is dead. I exist because I have the will to do so.”

“It appears that your would-be assassin is very poetic,” Ulfric said, looking over her shoulder.

“Those are Boethiah’s words.”

Ulfric and Katariah quickly turned to the other side of the fire, where Aleyne had woken up.

“What?” Ulfric asked.

“Those words Katariah read from the knife, they’re Boethiah’s words. I’m personally not a follower, I just had to learn things like that for my studies.” She grasped at a wound in her side. “I’m sorry, do either of you have a healing potion by any chance?”

Mechanically, Katariah reached around her pack and found a bottle. The implications of what she
had done when she had grabbed Aleyne from the embassy and what she was currently doing in lending her aid began to sink in as she moved to pass the elf the salve. Her expression turned icy when Aleyne took the potion from her hand. “I’m going for a walk,” She said, turning on her heel and not caring how abrupt she sounded.

She strode past Galmar and the entrance of the cave towards an outcropping of rocks just a stone’s throw away. As she leaned against a juniper tree, enraged tears began to sting her eyes as she watched a rushing river below her. She winced as she heard footsteps approaching from behind, not particularly wanting anyone to see her like this.

“Katariah.” Least of all, him.

She groaned. “Ulfric, just leave me alone.”

Like with the dagger, he seemed to be ignoring her suggestion, instead choosing to watch the river alongside her. “What are you so mad at?” he asked, not unkindly.

“Everyone that I knew and loved is dead by their hand, and I saved one of them,” she said, self-disgust creeping into her voice. “Now she’s here, and I’m not going to kill a wounded, unarmed woman, meaning that I’m essentially saying that what happened to my island doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What?”

Ulfric sat down on the rocks, and beckoned for her to do the same. “You had the option to leave her to die in the embassy, but you chose another path. Why?”

“I didn’t choose anything, it just happened.”

He shook his head. “You and I both know that’s not true. She didn’t just end up on your shoulder, you put her there.”
Pinching the bridge of her nose, Katariah sighed. “When I was in Sovngarde, Alduin sent some sort of mist, meaning that no soul could reach rest at the Hall of Valor, they kept on getting lost, and wandering in hopelessness.” She found herself shuddering at the memory. “It was horrible, terrifying like some sort of childhood nightmare. I tried my best to guide whoever I met, but it was useless.” She traced her hand over the rocks as she realized one part of her motivations. “I guess that’s why. I don’t want to see anyone lost like that again.”

He placed an arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to his side. “You mentioned how the Thalmor stole your life from you, but I don’t think that’s true. In spite of everything, your first instinct was to help. They will never be able to take that from you.”

Even though she wanted to remain by the river’s edge with Ulfric for at least just a little longer, she kept talking. “There is another reason.”

“What is that?”

“She’s Elenwen’s daughter.” Katariah held her breath as she waited for Ulfric’s response.

He grimaced. “I expected as much when I saw her.”

That was unexpected. “How? They don’t look similar at all.”

He turned to face her. “May I show you something?” he asked, locking eyes with her.

“Yes, of course, Ulfric.”

Releasing her hand from his, Ulfric pulled his linen shirt over his head. Katariah opened her mouth to ask what specifically she was supposed to be seeing when her breath caught in her throat. Ulfric’s chest was covered in criss-crossing blackened scars that looked agonizingly painful. The Dragonborn was not an expert in injuries, but she would have guessed that the wounds were two weeks old, at maximum.

Gasping, she moved to get up. “We need to get you to a healer, now!”
Ulfric gently pulled her back down to sit next to him as he put his shirt back on. “Katariah, these are from twenty-five years ago, I sincerely doubt there’s much good a healer can do now.” He laughed quietly at her aghast expression. “Relax, they don’t hurt anymore.” He sobered quickly, however. “Perhaps that will someday be the case for your friend.”

She bit back the impulse to say that Aleyne was in no way her friend when she remembered the dossier. “I think I’m going to kill Elenwen.”

Ulfric tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “You had best get in line, Dragonborn. You are a beautiful woman, but I am not that generous of a man. I think I’m keeping that honor for myself.”

Katariah’s heart jumped, but she kept her voice steady. “It’s after dawn, we need to get moving.”

His gaze turned to a point further down the river, where the water split into two courses. “What are you going to do?”

*So much has changed, yet simultaneously, nothing has.* “You know I’m not going to join your cause, Ulfric.”

“And you know I’m not going to stop fighting the Empire.”

The Dragonborn sighed. “I’m going to miss this,” she said, squeezing Ulfric’s hand one last time.

Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against hers. Whereas their first kiss had been nearly frantic, an affirmation that in spite of having fallen into Oblivion, she was still breathing, this one seemed to slow down time and drown their surroundings in quiet. Touching his cheek, she deepened it for just a few more precious moments before pulling away.

Slowly getting to her feet, she looked back towards the cave. “I’ll gather my things and head south. I have business in the Reach.”

“Galmar and I will cross through the Pale. I’ll keep my window open, should you wish to return. One more thing, Katariah.”
“What is it?”

He had a one-sided smile on his face. “Do me a favor and promise to try and steer that woman towards a better path.”

That request threw Katariah off guard, as she had personally intended on giving Aleyne a bag of septims and an iron sword before leaving her by the side of the road. “Why does that matter to you?”

“When I escaped the Thalmor prison, I needed a stranger to help me to the door. After that, I’m not sure where I would be now without the support of Galmar or Jorleif. You chose to save her, you should follow through on that course of action.”

*Talos, I really hope I don’t end up regretting this.* “I promise.”

When they returned to the cave, they found Galmar and Aleyne in the middle of an interesting exchange.

“Is it true that your kind can walk on top of snow without crushing it?”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never tried it.”

Ulfric cleared his throat. “Galmar, are you ready to head out?

The housecarl shuffled to his feet. “I’ve never been so happy to return to Eastmarch. Dragonborn, are you coming with us?”

Katariah shook her head. “I can’t say that I am, General.”

“Well, get yourself back to Windhelm when you can. I may not like you, but you’re good for him,” he replied, jerking his head in Ulfric’s direction as he walked away.

Katariah gave a sad smile to Ulfric. “Be safe.”
“You as well, Katariah.” Before turning to leave, he added, “Should you ever change your mind —”

“The same goes for me, Ulfric.”

After the two men left, a few moments passed before Katariah turned to Aleyne, who had been watching the preceding events in silence. Digging around her pack, the Dragonborn grabbed her College robes and tossed them to the elf. “Put these on.”

“Why…?”

“Because I can’t deal with every hold guard asking why I’m traveling with someone covered in blood. Be quick, we’re heading to Karthspire.”

Aleyne shook her head. “Why are you helping me?”

“Outside of promising a friend that I would, I’m asking myself the same question. We’re leaving in five minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

And so Ulfric and Galmar exit stage right, but personally I have a funny feeling they’ll be back soon :D Come back soon to see how Kat and Aleyne work together. Like always, please please please comment/subscribe/kudos if you enjoyed, and thank you sincerely to those that already have!! Until next time, and also happy holidays to you and yours!!
The Dragonborn discusses the role of the past when deciding what to do in the future.

Song recommendation specifically for Aleyne: "Rousseau" by Nerina Pallot

Katariah’s mood soured as the day dragged on. Something about Ulfric called her to be a better version of herself, and with him gone, she just felt bitter and tired. Personally she wanted to ask which of the Nine Divines found it necessary to put her irreparably at odds with the one man she felt reciprocated affection towards.

“The Reach is particularly interesting as the Bretons who dwell here have unusually high concentrations of elven blood when compared to—”

One thing that was not particularly helping her disposition was the fact that Aleyne never seemed to stop talking, practically regurgitating a library’s worth of facts about their surroundings. As someone who was used to travelling in relative silence, this new addition would have been somewhat tolerable for someone Katariah had positive or neutral feelings towards, but with this elf in particular, it was slowly becoming something like a sword on a grindstone.

“—must admit to being surprised at seeing Akaviri stone work this far to the west do you want to look and see what’s—”

This has got to stop before I end up clawing my own ears off. “Aleyne, there’s a number that I want you to keep in the back of your head.”

“What—”

“It’s forty-seven.”
“Why—”

“The reason why I want you to remember that number is that I have personally killed forty-seven people. Before your friends destroyed my island, that number was zero. Now it’s not. Maybe you’ve had a sincere change of heart, maybe you haven’t, but just know that in my mind, there really isn’t that big of a difference between forty-seven and forty-eight. Do you understand?”

Aleyne silently nodded.

_Perfect_, Katariah thought to herself. “Now, I am going to head in there and speak to two people that were once my friends but then essentially succeeded in killing me. Won’t that be fun?” After she turned on her heel to enter Sky Haven Temple, she heard the elf quietly following after her.

The Dragonborn had several names for the kind of humor she was in. Back home, Liselle had referred to them as _black spells_, where a person’s melancholy was so deep that the sun could not touch it. Brelyna subscribed to the old, Third Era theory that bile from the stomach crept into the blood, causing feelings of sadness and anger. Delven called it _being a bitch_. Whatever it was, Katariah was feeling it acutely as she walked over the blood seal.

The interior of the center of operations for the Blades looked a lot more decrepit and dark than she remembered. She noted with dull surprise that Alduin’s Wall no longer flickered in her vision, but now displayed a young woman in leather armor holding an Akaviri blade. Perhaps it always had. The old man reading a text in front of it practically jumped out of his skin when he saw Katariah.

“Dragonborn, you’re here!” Esbern set the tome down on the stone table. “You should speak with Delphine, she’s been worried about you.”

“Has she?” Katariah asked, dryly.

As if entering on cue, the Grandmaster appeared at the top of the stairs. “So, people are saying that you flew out of Whiterun on the back of a dragon. That’s...something, even for you, Katariah.” She paused, but continued after taking a breath. “There still is the business about Paarthurnax, however.”

Esbern cut in. “It’s not that we’re ungrateful, Dragonborn, but we must remember our priorities. Paarthurnax must die. There’s really no excuse now that Alduin is dead.”
As he spoke, he moved to place a hand on Katariah’s shoulder, a gesture she sidestepped. “Are we just not supposed to talk about the fact that you tried to kill me?”

The old man’s hands began to shake in a manner that betrayed his true age. “That was...short-sighted on my part. But, we assumed that because you killed Alduin, you had come around to our way of thinking.” He gave a stilted sort of laugh. “There’s nothing like a trip to Oblivion to give someone perspective.”

Delphine was trying to wear a reassuring smile. “We all have our roles to play here. Our oath as Blades binds us, just as your dragon blood binds you.”

“Nothing binds me.”

A hush fell throughout the ruins. Esbern took a tentative step forward. “Dragonborn—”

Katariah shook her head. “Enough. I don’t really have any interest in fighting either of you, but you both really need to hear this.” Narrowing her eyes, she continued. “I never was the hero that either of you wanted. I’m a thief, an assassin, I’ve consorted with Daedra, godsdamn it, I’ve even killed the Emperor. All that I’ve ever been is someone alone in the world, trying to get by. Perhaps, for that reason, you two should be grateful Paarthurnax lives.” She turned to leave, calling over her shoulder as she exited Sky Haven Temple for the last time, “He can protect you from me.”

She squinted against the light as the noon sun hung in the sky. From inside the temple, Katariah could hear Aleyne give her own parting remarks, consisting of, “Goodbye, it was very nice to meet you both!”

--

Something wasn’t right. Granted, all of Aleyne’s previous interactions with Katariah had been... emotionally charged, to say the least, but she never remembered the Dragonborn so angry, and definitely not in this way. Even when they clashed in the Ratway Warrens and later at the College, she remembered how Katariah seemed to move faster, her eyes were more alive. Now, it looked like she was wading through a black cloud.

When they boarded a carriage outside the gates to Markarth, the driver said that he could only take them to Riften or Whiterun when Katariah instructed that he take them to Ivarstead. In response to
this, she practically bared her teeth at the poor man until he relented.

As the wagon’s wheels bounced against the rocks in the road, Aleyne was at somewhat of a loss as to what to say to her newfound companion. She wanted to be helpful towards the person who saved her life, but she knew that Katariah probably wouldn’t start spilling her innermost thoughts to someone she barely trusted. So all she was left with was her knowledge from the books she had read about Skyrim, and the Dragonborn had made it abundantly clear that the soulless facts were not helping. Honestly, Aleyne knew that from the beginning, she sounded grating even to her own ears, but the heavy silence between them was just a shade too similar to kind that had existed in between her and the First Emissary.

They passed by the skeletal remains of a dragon when Aleyne found herself speaking again. “What did the warrior say when fighting Alduin?”

The question jerked the girl across from her out of her brooding state. “Huh?”

“Can we get this over with? This fight is starting to drag on.”

There were four seconds of agonizing silence until Katariah let out a sputtering laugh. A one-sided smile came to her face. “I thought of another one the other day: What does a dragon say when losing to a mortal?”

“What?” Aleyne asked.

“You seem to have tipped the scales.”

Together, the pair laughed at two of the most groan-worthy jokes ever conceived, and Aleyne inwardly breathed a sigh of relief as a bit of light entered her companion’s eyes. Finding a bit of courage, she asked, “Why are we going to Ivarstead?”

Katariah glanced towards the mountain looming in the distance. “I need to speak with my teacher about some things.”

That was exciting. “You mean the dragon you were speaking with your friends about earlier? Paar-thur-nax?” She carefully sounded out the three syllables of the draconic name.
“You’re catching on quickly.” The Dragonborn pushed her white hair behind her ears. “We’ll come up with a plan after that.”

--

“Hi daal, Mal Brinaah.” Paarthurnax glided to his usual perch on top of the Word Wall. “You are back sooner than I expected.”

Katariah loosened her fur wrap from around her neck. “Pruzah wah koraav hi, wuth mun. I thought you liked talking with me.”

The old dragon breathed a bit of fire onto the logs that she had set down next to her. “With you, Brinaah, geh. Always. I take it this is about the fahliil, the elf down below.”

“How did you know?”

“Koraav do dovah, Katariah. One thing that you will begin to see as you continue your travels, Dovahkiin, is the connections between the living, ney zah ahrk lingrah. Mortal and immortal alike, they bind us all, like it or not.” As he spoke, they both watched the village below them. “The link between you and that elf has always burned bright, like the one between you and Bronjun Strun Ahtiid.”

Katariah laughed quietly as Paarthurnax nudged her shoulder with his nose. “Don’t get too excited about me and Ulfric, I doubt anything will come of that.” Sobering, she muttered, “I just don’t want anything to do with her.” The darkness in her heart surprised her, however, the dragon did not seem shocked.

“Tinvaak. Speak as to why you are so upset.”

“From how I’m seeing things, there are two options: either she’s lying to me, and I’m about to find myself stabbed in the back again, or I’m pretending as if what she and her own mother did never happened. Either way, I come out the loser.”

Her mentor stretched a wing, cutting a snowy gust of wind down the middle. “Krosis, I have
neglected to thank you, Dovahkiin.”

She furrowed her brow at the non sequitur. “For what?”

“You spared my life. The Blades, your servants for millennia, demanded that I fall to your blade. Yet you chose a different path.” He levelled his head to hers. “Why?”

Katariah gave a one-sided smile. “Because you’re my friend. Besides, the Greybeards would kick me out of High Hrothgar if anything happened to you, and I don’t know where I would be without Borri’s cooking. Have they ever brought you any? It’s amazing.” She chuckled at the mental image, but yelped as Paarthurnax jabbed her thigh with his tail. “What was that for?!”

“Su’um morah, kiir. Be serious, Brinaah. You know your history, you know the role I played, you now know what my name means. Why did you choose to let me live?”

Rubbing her leg, she sighed. “I wasn’t there, I can’t speak as to why you made the choices that you did, I can only judge based on what I have witnessed. Whatever you were back then, you are not the same today, and I will not respond to the possibility of your betrayal with the certainty of your murder.

A log in their fire fell, releasing a shower of sparks. Paarthurnax poked at it with a claw. “Pruzah. I thank you for your judgement, yet I am curious as to why you will not show it to your companion.”

Her head jerked upwards in anger. “It’s completely different!”

“How so?”

“You helped me. Over and over again, you and the Greybeards guided me towards where I needed to be. At her best, Aleyne has only been an annoyance.” She watched as the sun dipped below the mountain range to the west. “I know that you will not betray me, and I definitely cannot say the same about her.”

“You speak with certainty about things you do not know, Katariah.”
Her heart tripped on a beat. “What?”

Paarthurnax squinted against the slanted rays of sunlight. “Dov wahlaan fah rel. We were made to dominate. The will to power is in our blood. You feel it in yourself, do you not? The anger like fire, the darkness as deep as a sea. I know that I can be trusted, but you do not, you cannot know what I will do next, just as I cannot predict you.” Twilight crept onto the mountaintop. “No day goes by where I am not tempted to return to my inborn nature. The same is true for you, and for your friend. But I must ask you one question, Brinaah.” He flapped his wings, rising into the air and extinguishing the fire. “What is better - to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?” Before he glided into the icy winds, he turned back to her. “Think on that question going forward.”

Feeling contemplative, she trudged back down the mountain and straight into the inn, where Aleyne sat in the corner, looking distinctly uncomfortable as she clutched an untouched mug of mead in her hands. Katariah sat down across from her. Before she spoke, she pointedly wiped her mind clean of her bitterness and anger.

“Let’s talk.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the pitfalls of these quieter chapters is that they end up being shorter (I try to shoot for 5 pages, this one ended up being a bit more than 4). At any rate, I hope you all enjoyed this interlude and are having an awesome holiday season. Thanks a ton for your patience, and come back soon for an interesting conversation between Aleyne and Kat, and some excitement with the Wolf Queen of Solitude!! Start off 2019 nicely for me by commenting/kudosing/subscribing if you enjoyed!!!
Aleyne had a strained smile on her face. “How’s your teacher? It must be fascinating being able to talk to someone with that much knowledge.”

Katariah set her pack down next to her. “Paarthurnax is doing fine. But right now, I’m curious about you, Aleyne.”

Her eyes shot up. “What do you want to know?”

_First things first._ “What went wrong? Why did Elenwen want to kill you?”

Pain flashed across the elf’s face. “She’s always—” She stopped herself. “The First Emissary sentenced me to die because I wanted to leave the Thalmor.” Wringing her hands in her lap, she took a shallow breath. “I always thought that we were noble people who did terrible things to bring about a better world, and I found out that that assumption was...incorrect, to say the least. I doubt that Elenwen is mourning my betrayal, I never was much use to the Dominion”

Nodding, the Dragonborn pulled some septims out of her bag to pay for their dinner. “Gods know that I can respect that.” She tilted her head to the side to get a better look at Aleyne. “I know from experience that you are an awful fighter. What is it that you like to do?”

She looked befuddled. “I don’t know what you mean.”
Gods, this is depressing. “Come on, Aleyne, everyone has something they like doing. Personally, I like sword fighting and reading. What about you?”

Aleyne bit her lip. “I really enjoy fabrication magic.”

Katariah tried to think back on her time at the College of Winterhold. “I’ve never heard of that. Is it anything like conjuration?”

She shook her head, a grin coming to her lips. “Not exactly, Conjuration calls in something from Oblivion that already existed. When I weave magic, I use the power that already exists on Nirn to create something entirely new.” She readied a hand. “Like this!”

The Dragonborn watched in amazement as, strand by strand, a bunch of poppies came into being on the table between them. The flowers produced a light of their own, a soft glow that mirrored Aleyne’s suddenly peaceful face. Katariah reached forward and marveled as her hand passed through the opaque image. “This is incredible!”

The elf smiled weakly as she waved her hand over the table, dispelling the flowers into hundred of particles that faded back into the air. “Not many people practice it in the Summerset Isles anymore. It’s not useful, according to them.”

“I’m not surprised the Thalmor have no interest in something that relies on creation as opposed to destruction,” Katariah replied, grimacing.

“That’s essentially what my...what the First Emissary said when we spoke about my intentions for the future. Fabrication is basically a combination of Illusion and Alteration, so I tend to focus on those.” She glanced down at her hand. “There’s just not a lot of room for invention there.”

“I guess that will make us good partners.” Katariah motioned for the innkeeper to bring them bread and cheese. “Alteration and Illusion never worked well for me.”

Aleyne looked up from her plate. “You mean I’m coming with you? You’ve forgiven me?”

The Dragonborn glanced to the side, not particularly looking forward to this part of the conversation. “As far as I’m concerned, this isn’t a question of forgiveness. All either us can really do is try and accomplish something vaguely heroic going forward.” Trying to look comforting, Katariah took a breath before continuing. “Aleyne, I know that Elenwen—”
“She’s not—” She gulped down a breath before continuing. “She’s never been a mother to me. Even before she started to doing this,” she gestured vaguely to the scarred half of her face, “we led pretty separate lives.”

All of sudden, Katariah felt a sense of helplessness at the situation in front of her. “Is there anything I can do?”

The elf’s features tightened into a determined expression. “Just let me try and become something apart from her and the Dominion.”

The Dragonborn grinned. “That sounds like a good start.”

Footsteps approached from their left. “I've been looking for you. Got something I'm supposed to deliver, your hands only.”

“That’s good timing,” Katariah said as she took the letter out of the courier’s hand and began to read aloud:

Katariah,

Over the last few days we’ve had some disturbing information come to light regarding a potential summoning of the infamous Wolf Queen, Potema Septim within our borders. Considering your reputation and your aid to Jarl Elisif, I'm asking you to return to Solitude to help us once more. I'm wary of putting all the details in print, please come see me at the Blue Palace.

Sincerely,

Falk Firebeard

Folding the letter and stashing it in her bag, Katariah gathered her things. “Looks we found the first step in declaring your independence from the Thalmor. Get a good night’s rest, we leave for Solitude with the dawn.”

Aleyne’s eyes went wide. “Are you sure to you want to go to Solitude? I thought you were sympathetic to the Stormcloak cause.”
Katariah grabbed a last piece of bread for her supper. “Considering the Thalmor’s involvement in the war, I’m trying to remain neutral,” she stated while chewing.

“But what about Ulfric? You’re in love with him, you’ll surely want to help him!”

The Dragonborn nearly choked on the crust. “Let’s not go throwing words like ‘love’ around, alright?” She took a sip of mead to clear her throat. “Remember what you said back in Bruma, about wants and needs? Believe it or not, I follow that advice.”

Aleyne nodded slowly before speaking, “If you say so, but I will always remember what the First Emissary said after the negotiations at High Hrothgar.”

“What did she say?”

“‘Together, they could ruin everything.’ Personally, I’m finding myself favoring things that could ruin the Dominion.” Aleyne patted a stunned Katariah on the shoulder. “Sleep well.”

As the pair journeyed west, Katariah glanced to her right to observe Aleyne, who seemed to be in a contemplative mood. Unfortunately, the Dragonborn had to disturb her new companion’s meditations. “Aleyne, back in Riften, when you tried to take on the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood simultaneously—”

“Magnus, that was stupid, wasn’t it?”

Laughing, Katariah shook her head. “I would still love to know what your plan was with that.” She sobered quickly. “In the Ratway, you mentioned another survivor. From my island.”

Aleyne nervously fidgeted with her bag. “I was waiting for you to ask about that. In all honestly, I was trying to buy myself time. You didn’t look too well.”

“I had the voice of a screaming corpse in my head.”
“That actually makes a lot of sense.” She stopped staring at her boots and met Katariah’s gaze. “All I have to go on is the passenger manifests that I saw at the prison in Bruma.”

“What do you mean?”

“From the voyage to Cathnoquey from the Summerset Isles, there’s four Thalmor officials listed, which makes sense. But on the trip from Cathnoquey to Bruma where you and the Thalmor were on the boat, it said that there were six passengers, not five.” Aleyne kicked a pebble down the road. “When I somehow convinced you to join the Thalmor, I was planned on having us investigate together.” She sighed. “It might have just been a clerical error.”

“I hope so.” Katariah turned her thoughts to another dark subject. “One more question: what is that figure in the black sackcloth that Elenwen has fighting for her?”

Aleyne shuddered. “She’s a nightmare.”

“So it’s a she?”

“That’s how Elenwen always referred to her, so I’m assuming so. I’ve never seen her without her hood, so I can’t tell you much more than that. According to some of the soldiers I’ve overheard, she came to Thalmor’s attention about a year ago.”

Katariah felt her shoulder ache. “The way she fights, it shouldn’t be possible.”

Aleyne grimaced. “It really shouldn’t. She...absorbs souls.”

“I absorb souls too, but I haven’t figured out how to leap over someone’s head in a fight.”

Shaking her head, Aleyne replied, “From what I can gather, I think she’s some sort of living soul gem. She uses the power from everything she’s killed and releases it back into her body.”

Katariah squinted against the sun that was rising behind Solitude’s windmill. “She’s going to be
annoying as Oblivion to kill later. Right now, we need to focus on the Wolf Queen. Come on, this will be fun!”

--

“You've come far, mortals, but can you two stand against my inner council? Let's see!”

Katariah readied an arrow while Aleyne cast a barrier of fire around them as a legion of Potema’s draugr rose from their coffins. Steadying her hands, she fired her shot towards the blue spectre at the far end of the room. There was a clatter as some sort of circlet fell off of Potema’s head, followed by shrieks as the spirit writhed in anger and pain simultaneously. At that moment, a deathlord burst into the circle of fire, launching itself towards Katariah and grabbing onto both of her wrists. The Dragonborn screamed, “Aleyne, destroy the circlet!”

The elf raced towards the throne where the pulsing blue form of Potema crouched. Katariah, who had managed to chop the sword arm off of the deathlord, felt a bit of comfort as Aleyne picked up the circlet with both hands. However, relief turned to horror as the Wolf Queen reached forward towards Aleyne and spoke in a rasping voice, “Abandon your friend and take your place by my side.”

Shit this is how I’m going to die, in Solitude of all places, because I decided to follow my gut and trust Paarthurnax, what does a dragon know of trust, how could I be so stupid—

Katariah thoughts were halted as a blinding light filled the burial chamber. When she regained her sight, the draugr laid dead around her, and Aleyne stood, green eyes wide with excitement, holding Potema’s skull in her hands.

“That. Was. Amazing!” Aleyne practically skipped her way back towards the Hall of the Dead. “You killed so many draugr, and I got to practice flame wall, and then I conjured a dagger to destroy the circlet.” She held the door open for Katariah as they stepped back into Solitude’s streets. “Can we do something like that tomorrow?!”

Katariah sighed with contentment. “Hopefully. I’ve heard about a shrine to Molag Bal in Markarth, and a talking dog outside of Falkreath. We can decide which to do first later this—”

“I just knew it!”
The pair whirled around to see Elisif hurrying towards them, a housecarl trailing awkwardly behind her.

“I simply knew that you two would get along famously.” The jarl grabbed each of their arms by the wrist. Looking towards Katariah, her eyes lit up. “Dragonborn, let me congratulate you on your victory over Alduin. You must let Solitude throw some sort of celebration for you, that sort of thing doesn’t happen every day!” She bounced on her heels. “I have an idea. How about I arrange for a carriage to take us to the Thalmor embassy for dinner tonight with your mother, Aleyne?”

Katariah felt Aleyne go rigid next to her. *Let’s head this off at the pass,* she thought to herself as the Amulet of Articulation pulsed to life around her neck. “We’re actually planning a surprise party for the Embassy officials right now, my jarl.”

“Really? A surprise?”

She nodded emphatically. “That’s right. So please don’t say anything to the First Emissary about us being in Solitude, alright?”

Elisif beamed a smile. “Of course, as long as you invite me. Speaking of which, Dragonborn, keep an eye out for an invitation from me. As the rightful High Queen of Skyrim, I want to properly honor your victory. You two have fun planning your celebration!” With that, the jarl turned on her heel and walked towards the Blue Palace.

Katariah stopped holding her breath when she was certain Elisif was out of earshot. “That was a little too close. Let’s head to the Winking Skeever so we can—”

“Katariah, I’m going to need you to promise something.”

She had never heard Aleyne sound so serious. “What is it?”

“I am not going back to Elenwen alive. If something should happen, if the Thalmor ever try to take me back, you are going to have to k—”

Katariah shook her head. “It’s not going to come to that. How about we hit the road tonight and decide what to do next as we travel?
As the pair made their way to the city gate, all the way across the province, in Eastmarch, a solitary figure dressed in rags banged on the front door to the Palace of the Kings.

Chapter End Notes

I have a fun bookmark to share with you all: this story has hit 200 pages on the google doc!!! Come back soon as Katariah and Aleyne hustle to Windhelm where...interesting developments await them. Like always, pretty please comment/kudos/subscribe!!
Refugee's Rest

Chapter Summary

Katariah questions what to do next, and tells a bit of her own history.

Chapter Notes

Song recommendation: "Miracle Mile" by Cold War Kids
Content warning: This chapter discusses a suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"State your business here, girl."

"Please, I must be allowed to speak with Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak!"

"The jarl has more important things to do than deal with the likes of you, go find someone else to bother."

"This concerns the Thalmor!"

Katariah kicked a rock down the road as she contemplated her current state of affairs. So far, she and Aleyne had ended Vaermina’s hold over the people of Dawnstar, reunited a talking dog with its calculating master, restored the tree at the center of Whiterun’s Wind District, and rescued the Sybil of Dibella. She grimaced as she checked the events off in her head. Was this their life now? Katariah and Aleyne, protectors of Skyrim, mighty vanquishers of three-step errands, may the ground tremble at their feet?

She sighed to herself. Truthfully, things could always be worse. One could say that they were making life in Skyrim safer for those they encountered, and most of the decisions they came across had a clear ‘right’ answer, which had two net positive results: First, she wasn’t having the same sleepless nights that gave way into hands-shaking, eyes-twitching, jaw-clenching hours of rising panic, and she was growing increasingly convinced in her decision to keep Aleyne with her. It was
nice having someone to bounce ideas off of, and the elf was a talented mage in her own right. In
another lifetime, she could have been happy at a place like the College of Winterhold, thought
Katariah shuddered at the thought of Aleyne and J’zargo’s magic combined. Instead, because of
her blood and her time, she was now wandering Skyrim with no clear end in sight.

The Dragonborn reached the small stone and kicked it again, further down the path. If she was
being honest with herself, there was a clear and logical destiny in front of them, and it lied on the
Summerset Isles, where she could avenge her island, and Aleyne her stolen childhood. Would that
be an adequate end to the future that Arngeir said lay before her?

Katariah swore under her breath as the stone bounced off the road and landed in a river with a quiet
splash.

--

“I’m here to speak with Ulfric Stormcloak, not his housecarl!”

“The jarl is a busy man, so right now, I’m the best you’re going to get. Now, tell me what you
know about the Thalmor.”

--

They weren’t ready to face the Aldmeri Dominion. Neither of them were. Her victory over Alduin
had given Katariah a bit of renewed faith in her Voice and abilities, but she could not stand against
an army, and that was not even considering that the Thalmor held Valenwood and Elsweyr as
slaves to their will, either as soldiers or hostages. Additionally, the encounter with Elisif and a
squad of Justicars later on their travels had shown Katariah that Aleyne was not remotely prepared
to face her past. Magic seemed to fail the elf when the spectre of her mother came to face her.

She bit her lip. The only way they stood a chance against the Dominion was if they had an army
by their side.

And just like that, Ulfric Stormcloak was back in her head again. How easy would it be, to run
back to Windhelm, climb back up to the roof of the Palace of the Kings, agree to crush Tullius’s
forces, and rally the Nords behind them, the Dragonborn and High King standing together? She
felt the blood rushing through her heart as that desire to dominate that Paarthurnax referred to
flooded her brain. She could crush Thonar Silver-Blood in his mines, burn the Black-Briars alive in
their meadery, she could make Delphine and Esbern pay, she could, she could…

She took a deep breath of cool air as she deliberately scattered those dark dreams. If she started down that path, she might not be able to stop, and Skyrim would be trading one World Eater for another.

So this was the choice: she could twist herself into something terrifying but effective, or she could stay in Skyrim and slowly chip away at whatever evil came her way. It would be like trying to stop a waterfall with the edge of her blade, but it was better than doing nothing, or worse, losing herself entirely.

--

“Galmar, what is this about?”

“Tell him what you told me.”

--

“You never talk about your family.”

Aleyne’s voice jolted Katariah out of her reflections. “What?”

Aleyne shifted her pack to her other shoulder. “It’s just that you talk a lot about your friends in the Thieves Guild, the Dark Brotherhood, the College, Ulfric, all types of people that you’ve met on your travels, but never your own family.”

“I have no siblings and my parents are dead.”

The elf’s ears grew red. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think—”

Katariah nudged her companion’s shoulder. “Relax. The Thalmor had nothing to do with that part of my tale of woe.”
Aleyne’s posture became less stiff, but she kept looking back towards Katariah like she was waiting for a punch in the face.

The Dragonborn sighed in exasperation. “Will you stop feeling guilty if I tell you what actually happened?”

--

“What you say better be true.”

“On my honor, my jarl.”

--

_Ursula had told her the story about the day of her birth often enough._

“What’s Ursula?”

“She was the wisest woman on Cathnoquey, and most believed she could turn her eyes toward the future.”

_The old woman wrapped her wizened fingers around Katariah’s hand as they stood in front of a statue of Akatosh. “We all held our breath and waited on the day that you came to us, Katariah. The night before, I had dreams of a white dragon flying across the sea to protect the good and destroy the wicked.”_

“In retrospect, I think Ursula might have known that I was Dragonborn since the beginning.”

_The more superstitious people of the island believed that the world was coming to an end that night. Across the ocean, the Great War was tearing bloody scars through Tamriel, and above them, black clouds brought the most violent storm in living memory. It was as though thunder coming crashing in from the North as lightning flashed through the sky. Some would later claim_
that the storm had woken the dead, that they saw a ghost with white hair running across the island.

“Honestly, I think some people were a little disappointed that I didn’t die or that Cathnoquey didn’t sink into the sea.”

In spite of the ominous circumstances surrounding her birth, the child took her first breaths, surrounded by loving parents. When she was eleven years old, she learned amazing news, that her family would grow from three to four. As she had previously spent her days waiting for the Emperor of Tamriel to keep his promise and return on a ship he had named for her, her parents were relieved to have their daughter looking towards a more definite point in the future. Ursula, on the other hand, grew more and more silent as the day of her sibling’s arrival drew closer. The girl did not particularly understand why: the storms of Rain’s Hand had given way to a brilliant spring, nothing wrong could possibly happen on such a beautiful day. On the twentieth day of Second Seed, her mother had gone into labor.

“No one noticed she was bleeding until it was too late.”

The death of Cornelia Sombrage shook the island to the core, and no one was hit harder by grief than her husband. However, he was determined to raise his daughter and new son in a way that would honor his wife. He loved his two children with all of his heart, but all the love in Nirn could not stop ataxia when it came to steal the infant in the middle of the night. The father had not yet decided on a name for the baby.

Katariah set her bag down where they would make camp for the night. “It was as though the light went out from behind his eyes. He lost his wife and child in the space of a week.” She sat down beside the hastily crafted fire. “He sat down at our kitchen table and had no reason to stand again. I came home one afternoon, and he had taken his own life.”

Aleyne wiped tears from her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Katariah.”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t your doing. I was never angry at my father for doing what he did. But towards my brother, I felt my throat close with rage for taking both my parents away from me. That night, my closest friend, Liselle, hugged me as I cursed that child to Oblivion with every word that I knew. I never really forgave myself for that.” The Dragonborn laid down on the ground and turned away from fire. “We better talk about something lighter tomorrow, Aleyne.”
“Get this letter to the Dragonborn as soon as possible!”

“Yes, my jarl.”

“Are we lost?”

“We’re not lost, Aleyne.”

“We’ve passed this same tree four times already.”

Katariah glanced down at her map. “We’re not lost, I just don’t know where we’re going.”

Behind her, Aleyne folded her arms. “There’s actually an old Aldmeris phrase that describes that very concept, ‘nu vasha.’

“What does that mean?”

The elf sidled up to look at the map. “It actually has a really direct translation into Tamrielic, it means ‘we’re lost.’”

Sighing in exasperation, Katariah gripped the parchment firmly in her hands. “It’s not that I don’t know where we are, I just have no clue where we’re going.” She cut off Aleyne’s coming comment with a glare. “I’m at a loss for what we should do next.”

A glint that made Katariah ill at ease entered Aleyne’s eyes. “Perhaps we could go back to Windhelm and you could spend some time with Ulfric, I’m sure he misses you.”

The Dragonborn swatted weakly at Aleyne’s hand that was pointed towards the northeast. “Why are you so invested in my romantic life?”
“Mostly because I believe you should solve the easier problems before trying to handle the more difficult ones, and looking at the grand scheme of things, helping two people that love each other start something meaningful seems like the simplest dilemma ahead of us.”

Katariah fiddled with the hilt of Dragonbane. “Ulfric and I aren’t in love.”

Aleyne gave her a flat look. “Really? When you came back from fighting Alduin, who was the first person you went to see?”

“Ulfric, but—”

“And who was waiting to speak to you when you arrived?”

“Listen, there is an amazing view from that rooftop, I’m sure that he always waits—”

Aleyne rolled her eyes and barrelled on with another question. “And who decided, at a moments notice, to drop everything and journey across Skyrim to break into the Thalmor Embassy for the sole reason of helping one Ulfric Stormcloak?”

--

“Do you think she will be happy to see you?”

“I certainly hope so, my jarl.”

--

To avoid giving up another telling answer, Katariah began to stride ahead of Aleyne. “To take your mind off of this fascinating conversation, we’re heading to Morthal. It’s only an hour’s walk from here and there’s always something going wrong there.”

However, their heroics in Hjaalmarch would have to be postponed for another day. As soon as they arrived in the town, a courier ran up to Katariah, a letter held in his outstretched hand.
Leaning against one of the wooden houses with Aleyne peering over her shoulder, she began to read quietly:

*Katariah,*

*When this letter reaches you, make your way back to Windhelm. There is someone that you should see.*

*Yours,*

*Ulfric*

Aleyne could not hide the satisfied smile by the time Katariah turned around. “What a nice letter. We shouldn’t keep him waiting, it wouldn’t be polite.”

“Don’t push your luck,” Katariah replied as she put a fur wrap around her shoulders. “But we are heading to Eastmarch. It isn’t like him to write like this.”

When they approached the gates of Ysgramor’s City, Aleyne glanced towards her companion. “Personally, I think someone could get used to a city like this. It seems like the sort of place where you could build a life.”

“Oh, shut up,” Katariah whined as they walked through the city streets, keeping her gaze forward to ignore the looks of awe that had been following her since Alduin’s fall. She did, however feel distinctly uncomfortable as she pushed the bronze door to the Palace of the Kings open. Even though she knew that she couldn’t possibly ask Aleyne to wait outside while she climbed up the Palace wall, it set her on edge as they entered the hall.

From across the room, the Dragonborn saw Ulfric, sitting on his throne and speaking with a blonde figure. When he laid eyes on her, he smiled and the woman in front of him turned towards the door, something that caused Katariah’s heart to stop in her chest.

“Hello sister,” greeted Liselle.

Chapter End Notes
Who doesn't love a reunion? I apologize for the break in the action, new semester, same excuses, but, hey, longer than usual chapter :D Come back soon to see what comes of this development!! Also, over 100 kudos?!?! All of you, get in her for an internet group hug, you've kept me motivated to keep this story going! :D
Jarl Elisif the Fair was a simple woman. She wanted for nothing, everything in Skyrim that she could possibly want was handed to her. *Well*, the dark voice in her head reminded her as she slipped out of bed, *not everything*. As her bare feet hit the hardwood floor, she slowly blinked and shook her head. It was Sundas, the one day of the week that she did not have to sit on that accursed throne and listen to problems that she knew less than nothing as to how to solve them. She could not waste her one day that was purely *hers* on something as silly and pointless as grief. Purposely casting her eyes just to the left of her bedside table where *it* sat, she got dressed and sat herself down with the piece of embroidery she was working on.

It was going to be a present for Aleyne, either a handkerchief or the front of a pillowcase, Elisif hadn’t decided yet. According to Elenwen, the poor girl was under the weather and unable to come to the city to visit her, hence the pressing need for a get-well gift. As the jarl traced the needle and thread through the intricate pattern of red roses entwining around the Wolf’s head crest of Solitude, she thought of the prayer she heard at the Temple of the Divines last week, *blessed be the sick, for Arkay will heal them*. Setting her mind into this comfortable trance as her fingers danced over the cloth, she went through the other blessings.

*Blessed be the lovers, for Dibella will give them passion; blessed be the merciful, for Stendarr will show them mercy; blessed be the patient, for Akatosh will grant them perspective; blessed be the prudent, for Zenithar will guide them to prosperity.*

*Blessed be those who mourn, for Kynareth will comfort them.*

And just like that, black grief washed over Elisif, who buried her face in her hands as tears scalded her cheeks and the cloth fell to the floor. She remembered like it was yesterday, sitting and listening to the same prayers with Torygg, feeling a mixture of pride and embarrassment as he
stubbornly whispered, **blessed be the courageous, for Talos will lead them to victory.** Her eyes burned with anger. Torygg had been courageous, yet where was Talos when Ulfric shattered her husband?

It was Sundas, no one was expecting her, and so Elisif was free to cry out all of the tears in her soul until she was left with a familiar numbness. Earlier that year, Sybille Stentor had sat down with her and explained that several healers in Cyrodiil, followers of Arkay and Akatosh, had come up with a theory surrounding grief, that someone mourning a death would feel denial, anger, then begin to try and barter with Oblivion to their loved one back. Following that, they would fall into sadness, and then finally accepting that life without that person was new normal. Personally, if Elisif ever found enough time, she would board the next carriage to Imperial City to tell these theorists who believed they had “solved” grief that they did not know the first thing about the subject. She was not moving from one state to another, the only constant to her mourning was that her memories of her life with Torygg were fading, while her pain at losing him seemed content to live forever.

Feeling returned gradually, and she realized that she had been staring at it for the past several minutes. The night before, General Tullius and Legate Rikke had presented it to her with great fanfare, and it had taken all of the willpower in Elisif’s body to smile politely, take the artifact Rikke’s soldiers had dug up, and place it quietly next to her bed without screaming in terror. The **Jagged fucking Crown**, Elisif thought to herself as she padded across the room to get a better look at it. She so rarely swore, even in the confines of her own head, but the barbaric-looking thing seemed able to brutally slaughter all of the courtly manners she had spent her entire life building. However, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and had an idea.

Taking the crown in both hands, she stood in front of the glass and practiced the posture exercises that her governess had taught her back in her girlhood: balance lightly on the balls of the feet, activate the muscles of the legs up through the thighs, straighten the hips, elongate the spine, hold the stomach in, draw the shoulders back, and lift the neck up. Just barely remembering to breathe, Elisif gently placed the crown on top of her head and looked at herself in the mirror, barely recognizing the woman reflected in the glass. Is this what Skyrim expected of her? Would Torygg have loved the person she was turning into?

Her shoulders sagged and the crown slid off of her head. Quickly catching it before it clattered to the floor, the jarl set it back on the table, a faint smile coming to her lips as she remembered the day she first met her husband.

--

“It’s not fair!” Elisif screamed at her parents.

“Life isn’t fair,” her father responded, barely looking up from the letter he was glancing over,
“and it’s damn good thing for all of us here that it isn’t.”

The sixteen-year-old girl did not find comfort in these words. “But I don’t know him, and people are saying that he’s a heretic!”

“That is a rumor spread by Thalmor, but heretic or not, he is to be High King of Skyrim, and you will be his queen.”

“Elisif—” Her mother tried to strike a more comforting tone, but she was already sprinting up to her chambers, flinging herself onto her bed, burying her face in the pillows and willfully ignoring the old woman that entered behind her.

“What troubles you, child?” her governess asked as she stroked her charge’s red hair.

“I should never have been born a Nord, I belong in Cyrodiil or Hammerfell or High Rock where there’s culture and I would not be dragged off to marry some barbarian!”

Reylga chuckled, much to the girl’s ire. “With stubbornness and pride like that, you make a pretty perfect Nord.” She met Elisif’s annoyed pout with a shrewd but not unkind smirk. “Get yourself up and head to the fields. I have a pressing need for mountain flowers and fresh air combined with busy hands is the best cure for your kind of misery.”

Elisif stomped through the house and past her parents and out the door, straw basket in hand. By the time she had made it to clearing outside of Solitude, the anger towards her situation had not left her, and she ripped the plants out of the soil with all of the rage she could silently muster.

“I cannot even imagine what the poor flowers did to deserve your cruelty.”

She started as a man about twenty-five years of age with handsome features knelt in the grass next to her, but quickly recovered her wits. “These flowers,” she said while reaching for another to tear from the ground, “are not being forced to marry godsdamned Torygg at the will of their father.”

The man laughed, and Elisif could not help herself from staring at how the morning sunlight bounced off of his bright, brown eyes. “Is he really that poor of a prospect? I hear he is to become High King of Skyrim.” He leaned forward as he waited for her to answer him.
The fear that was lying underneath Elisif’s anger began to surface, “And what if I’m not ready to be queen?”

He took the basket sitting in between them. “Perhaps you are more ready than you think.” With a few quick movements, he wove a handful of the wildflowers into a circle. “May I?”

With exaggerated manners, Elisif bowed as the stranger placed the circlet on her head, and in spite of her commitment to misery, she found herself grinning from ear to ear as he murmured, “A crown for a queen,” and placed a soft kiss on her hand. She would have been content to remain in that clearing all day long with this man when the sound of her governess calling her name from a distance dragged her back to reality.

Awkwardly getting to her feet, she gave the man one last smile, “I need to go.”

Finally releasing her hand, he swept the loose strands of hair behind her ear. “Until we meet again, Fair Elisif.”

As she placed her hand on the door to her home, she realized with a thud that she had never told the man in the woods her name.

--

Rifling through her drawers, she found the roughspun dress that she kept towards the back and slipped it on. Grabbing her straw basket and quietly making her way through the palace, she nodded to Bolgeir to indicate that their usual arrangement was in effect: she would remain in sight of the guard towers where he would keep an eye on her, and she would have a few moments of privacy in the sunlight.

However, those moments were small in number that Sundas as a black with gold detailing carriage rolled up to the clearing where Elisif was collecting flowers, and the jarl looked up to meet the eyes of the First Emissary of the Thalmor.

“Greetings, Jarl Elisif,” Elenwen said with that smile that radiated intelligence and control to the younger woman. “I was just on my way to meet with General Tullius.”

Elisif set down her basket and brushed off her hands. “Don’t let me keep you, I’m just here
collecting a few plants.”

Elenwen sat down delicately on a rock and gazed at the situation with appraising eyes. “I did not know you were an alchemist.”

“I’m not,” Elisif replied, “These are just a few things my court’s mage requested.”

“Odd, that a jarl would be running errands for her mage.”

“The fresh air and time without a housecarl at my heels is reward enough for me.” For reasons she did not know, there was an increasing feeling of discomfort and maybe even fear in the pit of her stomach. Pushing past the instinct, she wanted to continue speaking with one of her closest allies, and chose to change the subject. “How’s Aleyne? I hope she’s feeling better.”

Elenwen laced her fingers together. “We are waiting on a healer from the Dominion to see her, so it will be a while until she may come and visit you.”

Elisif nodded sympathetically. “I hope she didn’t take ill when she was with Kata—” She gasped as her hands flew to her mouth. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that!”

Sharpness flashed across the elf’s features. “The Dragonborn was with Aleyne?”

“Yes, but don’t tell them that I told you. They said they were planning a surprise at the Embassy.”

“I’m sure that will be a night to remember.” Elenwen sighed with what Elisif assumed was sadness. “I’m finding myself growing concerned about the Dragonborn.”

The jarl was eager to lend her expertise about the Dragonborn’s character. “I think Katariah is doing well, she has helped Solitude many times, and of course she saved us all from Alduin.”

Elenwen waved a hand dismissively. “Yes, of course, there are just the nasty rumors surrounding her name. Do you remember the death of Vittoria Snow-Shod?”
Elisif shuddered. “I wish I could forget that awful day, it reminded me so much of how Torygg died.”

“I’m sure it did, my dear,” Elenwen replied, leaning forward. “There are some that say that Katariah was the one who fired the arrow that day.”

“That’s ridiculous, no one saw who it was.” She refused to let doubt towards her friend enter her heart.

With a thin smile, Elenwen shrugged. “Perhaps you are right. Powerful women such as ourselves always generate so much ugly suspicion.” She paused before adding, “There is no denying the whispers about her and Ulfric Stormcloak, however.”

All of a sudden, Elisif felt incredibly cold. “What?”

“Just that Katariah spends a lot of time in Windhelm, and that some say that she and the jarl have grown...close.”

Trying to sound cool and detached, Elisif turned her eyes to a lone nightshade flower. “According to the legend, the Dragonborn is for all of Skyrim, Katariah is probably just helping those in Windhelm the same way she aids the citizens of Solitude. Besides,” she added, growing more confident, “Tullius’ intelligence suggests that she is not picking a side in the war. If their goals are not aligned, I sincerely doubt that they could ever even hope to work together, much less....” Her voice trailed off to avoid speaking about such a horrible idea.

However, it seemed that Elenwen was not repulsed by the image, as she threw her head back and laughed, a sound that Elisif found to be bone-chilling for reasons she did not know. “My sweet friend, how could they not love each other?”

The jarl gripped her flower basket like it was the only thing that tethered her to Nirn. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re a Nord, I’m sure you know the stories, how Katariah supposedly of the same blood as all of the Emperors of Tamriel, all the way back to Tiber Septim himself.” She stopped to gather her thoughts. “Neither you and I indulge in the heresy that a man can also be a god, but Ulfric Stormcloak firmly believes in Talos as the god of man and courage.” Her lip curled slightly. “Now tell me what you think will happen, when the last of his personal savior’s line comes storming into
Ulfric’s life, in the form a pretty girl no less, will he see her as a jarl views a subject, or as a man views a legend.” She shook her head. “They met as equals, and he sees her as a man sees a woman. How could he not love her?”

This could not be true. “Perhaps Ulfric wants Katariah for her power, but she could not possibly have any interest in him!”

Elenwen gave the younger woman a flat look. “Do not deny what you see with your own eyes. We were both at High Hrothgar, you must have seen the tension between them.”

Elisif’s hands clenched into fists. “This could be a disaster!” She got up onto unsteady feet and began to pace around. “I don’t want this to be true, Katariah has been a kind friend to me.”

Elenwen moved back to her carriage. “I’m afraid I can’t keep Tullius waiting for much longer, but I do know that you are a smart woman. Call the Dragonborn back to Solitude, and we will figure out the truth together. I believe you mentioned something about a victory parade? That sounds like the perfect opportunity to me.”

Later that evening, Elisif sat at her desk, clutching her husband’s Amulet of Talos in her hand. She had refused to let the priests of Arkay bury it in the ground with the body. She could be killed for owning such a possession, but along with a circle of pressed flowers, they were what she had left of Torygg, and she would make them count. Moving her lips, she spoke against the dying candle light, “Blessed be the courageous, for Talos will lead them to victory,” and began to write a letter to the Dragonborn.

Chapter End Notes

So I hope you guys don't mind still living with chapter 48's cliffhanger for just a little while longer :D I personally thought we needed a little break from the Katariah and Aleyne show, and Elisif and Elenwen's relationship is super interesting to me, come back soon for a promised return to the Palace of the Kings!! Comments/kudos/subscriptions are life and love to me!!! My fellow Americans, stay warm!!!
Nightfall

Chapter Summary

At the Palace of the Kings, Katariah and Liselle face their futures.

Chapter Notes

Fire up your Spotifys!: "Louvre" by Lorde

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Keep your knees bent!”

“If you keep hunching your shoulders like that, I won’t need to worry about my knees!”

So this is happiness, Katariah thought to herself as she and Liselle circled each other in the courtyard of the Palace of the Kings. I could get used to this. Ulfric had given them plenty of time to talk, and Liselle had explained how she had survived the Thalmor and ended up in Windhelm.

“I had gone to check on the ship the morning the Thalmor arrived,” she recounted during her first night back with Katariah. “We were to make another voyage to Imperial City and I wanted to make sure that the sails and ropes were still in workable condition. Then I saw their leader—”

“Ancano,” Katariah rejoined with a shudder.

“Yes, him,” Liselle paused to take a breath. “He pulled these white crystals out his pocket, they looked like soul gems, and I don’t know why but I just had this terrible feeling, so I ran up to them and stunned me with some sort of spell.” She watched the black night sky outside of the window. “When I came to, I was in a prison cell in what I later found out was Kvatch, and all time faded away. I must have been in there for at least four months.”

“How did you escape?” Katariah asked while nearly holding her breath.
“In comparison to the story you told about the earthquake, I sound a lot less heroic.” Her eyes welled up with tears. “I used a bit of metal I found to slit the throat of the guard who brought me food, and I took the keys he carried.”

Katariah took her hand. “The gods won’t judge us for doing what we did to escape the Dominion.”

Liselle nodded, wiping her eyes. “Talos or another one of the Nine must have watching over me because I didn’t get caught, and I started making my way to Skyrim.”

Aleyne, who had been listening to conversation, chimed in, “What made you choose Skyrim? Why not stay in Cyrodiil? Or go to High Rock or Hammerfell?”

“I look like a Nord, and I wanted to find a place where I could fade away, and start a new life.” A small smile crept onto her face. “When I heard that the legendary Dragonborn was named ‘Katariah,’ I started working to find you.”

Tears of joy spilled onto the Dragonborn’s cheeks. “I’m really glad you did.”

So here they were, living out this strikingly familiar way of life, sword fighting as usual. Perhaps a few things had changed: Using a technique she had picked up from Brynjolf, she whacked the underside of Liselle’s forearm with the hilt of her sword, sending the opposing blade falling to the ground.

Liselle grinned sheepishly as she picked up her weapon. “Looks like I’m out of practice.”

“We have plenty of time to get you back into shape,” Katariah replied, sheathing Dragonbane.

Aleyne quietly walked up from the corner where she had been observing, parchment and quill in hand. “So what distance do you try to keep between you and your opponent?”

The Dragonborn scratched the back of her head. “Honestly, that depends on the length of the weapons and whether or not one of us has a shield.” As she spoke, she realized the elf was writing. “Aleyne, are you taking notes?”
She nodded. “Even an elf’s magicka has limits, and I don’t want to be caught off guard again.”

To Katariah’s left, Liselle sniffed. “I’m amazed the former Fourth Emissary of the Thalmor never learned how to wield a blade.” Aleyne opened her mouth to respond, but the other woman cut her off. “You either have the spirit of a warrior, or you don’t. Studying isn’t going to help you that much.”

Aleyne barely spoke for the rest of the day, and Katariah found herself standing alone on one of the Palace ramparts, watching the afternoon sunlight reflect off of the grey clouds, when Liselle slung an arm around her shoulders.

“This really is just like old times, us duelling, and you staring off towards some distant horizon,” Liselle remarked with a quiet laugh against the wind.

Katariah jokingly nudged her friend’s side. “Don’t knock gazing off into the middle distance until you’ve tried it.” Might as well bring this up now before things get even more tense. “Liselle, can I ask you a favor?”

“Always.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears as she tried to phrase the request in the best way possible. “Can you take it easy on Aleyne? She’s trying her best.” She felt Liselle’s muscles tense as she spoke.

“I was just about to ask you why you keep her around, you know she’s responsible for what happened to our island.”

“She’s younger than us, I really don’t think she was responsible for much of anything in the Dominion.” She shifted her weight to the other foot. “Besides, she’s been dealt a shitty hand, and she’s been doing really well with her second chance.”

Liselle squinted as the sun began to sink towards the ice fields. “If you think so, I’ll trust your judgement. Just keep your eyes open, you were always hopeless at deception.” She began to grin. “But enough of this subject, I have very exciting news!”

“Oh?”
She gripped Katariah’s hand as she said, “I think Ulfric and I are going to get married!” There was a pause. “Well, what do you think?”

At the moment, the only thing Katariah was thinking was why is everything suddenly brighter and louder, and how does it feel simultaneously too cold and too hot? She blinked for a moment and replied in a tone that she prayed was lighthearted. “When did that happen?”

Liselle’s cheeks flushed pink. “We really hit it off when we were waiting for you.” She began to pace around the stone walkway, taking a few dancing, swaying steps. “We spent so much time talking about what we believed in, I agreed that I would support his cause in whatever way I could, and talks of marriage sprung up soon afterward. Can you imagine it, Katariah? Me as the High Queen of Skyrim.” She took hold of the Dragonborn’s forearms. “I know you won’t pick a side in the war itself, but promise me you’ll support us once we win. I want you by our side every step of the way.” Liselle stopped suddenly. “Doesn’t it sound wonderful?”

Katariah slammed a smile to her lips and replied, “It really does,” proving Liselle wrong: she was no longer hopeless at deception, for at that moment, she was a liar to her core.

To her credit, she managed to go through the motions required of her while ignoring the faint ringing in her ears. After dinner that evening, Aleyne, still more quiet than a temple mouse, tapped Katariah on the shoulder.

“Can I speak to you about something?”

Katariah barely held back a groan. “Can it wait until tomorrow? I just want to go to sleep right now.”

Aleyne’s concerned face softened as she slowly nodded. “Yes, of course, we can talk then.” She began to walk away.

“Aleyne?” The elf turned quickly as Katariah tried to look like a calming presence. “Give Liselle time, alright? Things will work out.”

A sad smile came to her friend’s face. “I’m sure they will. Sleep well, Katariah.”

The Dragonborn truly intended to heed Aleyne’s advice and head to her bedchamber, but some
Ulfric stood just near enough that their knuckles brushed. “We’re standing on top of Tamriel here, there are worse places to meet.” He looked down to meet her eyes. “Are you happy?”

Gods damn me, this must be the tenth lie I’ve told today. “I’m very happy.” She began to avoid his eyes. “What brings you up here?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m finding myself thinking more and more about the future.” Gazing on the Stone Quarter as the merchants returned to their homes, he explained further, “Either the Legion wins, I die for Skyrim and this point becomes moot, or my armies win, and I need to focus on making this land whole again. That means repairing the damages done, settling rivalries, creating a legacy.” Met with Katariah’s silence, he looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “Have you ever thought about marriage?”

There is a limit as to how much I can take in a day and we have hit it. “I’m sure you’ll find the right woman for the job. Good night, Ulfric.” She refused to break her stride or let tears blur her vision as she walked down the stairs.

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Aleyne hated her mother with every fiber of her being. It was a hatred that intensified, too, as more and more information cast every interaction she had ever had with the woman in a dark shadow. However, her time spent with Elenwen had given her one skill: she knew when she was being lied to, and the girl that introduced herself as Liselle, Katariah’s sister not in blood but in bond, was a mess of dishonesty.

She sat in the Palace kitchen, thoughts spinning as she tried to conjure up some plan when Galmar came up to her side. “Three’s a crowd?” he asked, not unkindly.

“I’m just giving them some space, that’s all.”

Galmar took a swig of mead before asking, “Do all elves’ ears twitch when they’re hiding
something, or is it just you?”

Aleyne sighed. “There is something wrong about that woman, she doesn’t look or act like a person who’s been captured.”

“Have you spoken to the Dragonborn about this?”

“From what I can gather about their relationship, that would be like trying to accuse you of betraying Ulfric, and if she had to choose between the best friend she thought dead for half a year, or the ex-Thalmor who is still figuring out what it means to be a hero, who would she pick? Don’t answer that,” she snapped as Galmar opened his mouth.

Throwing back the rest of his drink, the housecarl made to leave. “If you ever have anything more than a suspicion, let me know. Listen, the worst that can happen is Katariah and Ulfric throwing us both back in the prison where they found us!” He threw back his head and laughed at that, but Aleyne was having trouble seeing the humor.

“I’ll figure this out. Maybe I’m wrong.” She wiped her palms on her robes as she stood up. “I really hope I’m wrong, but keep on your guard just in case.”

Sensing the conviction behind her words, Galmar nodded. “I will. Talos protect you.”

“Thanks. I pray Magnus will shield you.”

The Nord batted her on the shoulder, muttering, “Elves” under his breath as he left her alone again.

Later that afternoon, she caught sight of Liselle from down a corridor, walking towards her chambers, giving her the opportunity to get a clear look at the newcomer.

She was very tall, nearly matching the stature typical of an Altmer woman. Her thick, honey-blond hair hung loosely around her shoulders, and her plump cheeks carried a pink blush. Not really the typical look of a recent prisoner of the Thalmor, a nasty voice in the back of her head remarked, but Aleyne silenced the thought. Katariah had given her the benefit of the doubt, and she would do the same.
However, when Liselle met her gaze, it became clear that she was not playing the same rules. “You really are like the bad septim, always turning up when you’re not wanted,” she said with a sneer.

Aleyne squared her shoulders. “That’s true, I’m pretty resilient.” She angled herself so she was standing eye to eye with Liselle. “You must be pretty strong yourself, being able to survive a Thalmor prison in, where was it?”

“Kvatch.” She attempted to sidestep the elf, but Aleyne matched the movement and blocked her path.

“Really? Are you sure about that? Because the Thalmor have never had any footholds in Kvatch, ever since Lady Aranneyla was unable to capture the city during the Great War. Any child in the Dominion could tell you that.”

Liselle’s eyes had grown steely. “Perhaps it was kept secret, your people sweep a lot of things under the rug.”

“That’s very true, and I would have been in Bruma at the time,” Aleyne replied, refusing to blink. “Have you ever been to Bruma?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“So we’ve never met until today?”

“No, I’ve never had the displeasure.”

*Whatever Aedra and Daedra are listening, give me courage,* Aleyne prayed as she leaned forward. “Then how did you know that I was Fourth Emissary?”

Liselle’s face went blank for moment, before becoming flushed with anger. “I don’t have to take this,” she muttered, shoving past Aleyne and striding down the corridor. Before she rounded the corner at end of the hall, she turned back to Aleyne with a serene smile on her face. “If you’re going to start running your mouth, I sincerely hope that you are a quick study. I won’t allow you to hurt Katariah with such vicious stories.”
Later that night, Aleyne found herself unable to sleep as she prepared for a deeply unpleasant conversation with the Dragonborn tomorrow.

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As the moons hung in the sky, Katariah tossed and turned in her bed as sleep became a more distant fantasy as guilt clouded her mind. She should be happy: her best friend was alive and well, but instead she was tearing herself apart with self-pity. Swearing under her breath, she kicked the sheets off of her. Liselle had been through Oblivion and back, she deserved some happiness, and the Dragonborn had the responsibility to stand aside and let her friends be happy. Together. Without her.

She sighed. At least she had Aleyne. But, what Liselle had said had shaken Katariah’s confidence in the elf. What if Liselle was right, what if Aleyne was responsible for Cathnoquey, what if, in spite of everything, she ended up with another knife in her back? She still had the recurring, circling dreams: one betrayal remained.

In another, probably futile effort to clear her head, she quietly exited her chamber and began to pace down the corridor, coming to a sudden stop as she passed Ulfric’s door.

She was being sincere when she had told Aleyne that the gods wouldn’t judge them for taking extreme measures to survive. For Katariah, those measures had brought her towards the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood. Her time in these organization meant that she was intimately familiar with certain sounds. Sounds like a weapon being unsheathed and a dagger entering flesh. White-hot terror racing through her veins, she Shouted the door down and raced into the room, weaponless.

To the right, she saw Ulfric, lying in bed, deathly pale, with an ebony dagger sticking out of his chest. On the windowsill that opened to the ice fields beyond Windhelm perched Liselle, covered from neck to foot in black sackcloth that blended her form with the shadows.

“Katariah,” she said, smiling and shaking her head, “You still are far too easy to read.” With that, she jumped out of the window and into the night.

Chapter End Notes
Longest chapter yet!!! And a good one, I hope! I recognize I was about as subtle as a brick to the face with this plot twist, but personally as a reader I prefer being able to spot the thread as opposed to having something come entirely out of left field. Hope you all enjoyed, come back soon to see what happens when a letter from Solitude reaches Windhelm, and Katariah has to live in a post-revelation world. As always, por favor, s'il vous plaît, bitte, please comment/kudos/subscribe if you enjoyed!!
Halfway

Chapter Summary

Katariah faces a new day in Windhelm

Chapter Notes

Next on the playlist: "Train" by Brick + Mortar

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Around Katariah, all had faded except for the now empty window. Bare feet pounding against the stone floor, she sprinted towards it and looked out to the ice fields, lit by Masser and Secunda. From nearly a hundred feet above, she could see Liselle, a black speck on a field of white.

Somehow, she had survived the fall. More than survived, Liselle was standing upright and running north. Perhaps sensing eyes on the back of her neck, she stopped and turned towards the window, gaze locking with Katariah. She smiled.

Her mind numb with icy rage, the Dragonborn concentrated all of her magicka and conjured a bound bow into her palms. Drawing back the string, she set her sights on her target and focused on its heart, not once breaking eye contact with the shadow beneath her.

“Sometimes I wish I could whisk you away, and take you with me on one my voyages to Tamriel, and we could start our lives anew over there. We could be free of all of this nonsense and walk our own path.”

That second of hesitation was all it took. Magicka depleted, the ethereal bow faded back into Oblivion and Katariah’s head dropped as her strength left her. When she lifted her gaze back to the ice fields, Liselle was gone.

Behind Katariah, Aleyne, Galmar, and Wuunferth had spilled into the room. Underneath the roaring in her ears, she could hear Aleyne screaming that Liselle was the attacker, and Wuunferth casting Healing Hands on Ulfric. She was snapped back to reality when Aleyne grabbed her forearm.
“Katariah? Where did she go?”

Feeling as though her mouth was filled with ashes, the Dragonborn jerked her head towards the window. As every second passed, her mind drifted further and further from where she stood to watch the proceedings from a distance. She barely registered as Aleyne darted to the window and turned back to Galmar.

“I can’t see her from here!”

Galmar was already leaving as he called over his shoulder, “I’ll rally the garrison, she won’t get far!”

Wuunferth finished checking Ulfric’s pulse. “He’ll be fine after a few hours sleep,” he said to the two women. “But I don’t want to leave him alone for the night.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Katariah said, awareness returning slowly.

The two mages looked at each other and silently nodded. Wuunferth left the room, followed closely by Aleyne. Before the elf left, she smiled at Katariah. “Things are going to be alright.”

Katariah did not acknowledge that comment, and sat down in the chair, just a few feet from the bed. Upon hearing the door shut, she looked at Ulfric. The color had returned to his cheeks and lips. She moved the chair a few inches closer and sighed. Tomorrow, she would have to explain to him that the woman he had intended to marry had attempted to murder him and fled Windhelm. A few more inches closer wouldn’t hurt either of them. A sudden wave of exhaustion washed over her, and she laid her head on the empty space of mattress just a breath away from his hand and closed her eyes. If the Nine saw fit to take happiness from her once again, she would steal just a few hours with this man.

As soon as sleep claimed her, she stood on that familiar cliffside. But this time, there were no Children of Time to greet her, scold her, warn her. She stood alone in the pitch black darkness.

But not for long.

To her left, a Breton man in Guild Master’s armor melted out of the shadows. In life, he might have been considered ruggedly handsome, if not for the constant sneer on his lips and mocking
glint in his eyes. But now, his limp, grey skin hung loosely from his bones as his soaked form slowed advanced towards her. An ice blue sword stuck out from between his shoulder blades.

“When Brynjolf brought you before me I could feel a sudden shift in the wind. And at that moment, I knew it would end with one of us at the end of a blade. I never thought it would be me.” Mercer Frey reached towards her throat, gloved hand dripping with grey water.

Katariah scrambled backwards, only to collide with a Nord woman in red and black leather armor, her thick blonde hair tied back in braids.

“I welcomed you into my Family, I gave you sanctuary when you had nothing.” Flames crept up the Matron’s body, charring the flesh black and burning the hair off in clumps. A red slit appeared across her neck. “How could you do this to me, sweet sister?” Astrid asked, reaching a skeletal hand towards her.

Terrified to her core, Katariah turned to run off the cliff, believing that death would be better than facing these two spectres of her past. However, before she could even make a step, she came eye to eye with Liselle, covered in black sackcloth so that Katariah could only see her eyes.

“After seeing these two, I shudder to think what will happen to me.”

In shock, the Dragonborn fell backwards onto the ground, powerless as the three figures advanced towards her.

She waited for a few agonizing seconds, but all of a sudden, terror and pain could not touch her. Above her, shielding her from the darkness, Ulfric stood and smiled down at her. “You’re safe now.”

Sinking into a blissful sort of content, she fell into a dreamless state.

Katariah woke slowly to the pleasant combination of dawn’s sunlight grazing her cheek and a hand stroking her hair. She lifted her eyes to meet Ulfric’s.

“Good morning,” he said, a small smile coming to his face.
“Morning,” she replied, memories of yesterday returning to her head. “Ulfric, I am so sorry.”

He gently pulled her arm until she was sitting on the bed beside him. “It’s not your fault, Katariah. We all let our guards down.”

Her mouth went dry as he sat up, bed sheet falling to reveal his bare chest. Suddenly she became extremely aware of the loose nightshirt she was wearing and how Ulfric’s eyes trailed across her collarbones and down a little further. Swallowing to alleviate the tightness in her throat, she glanced out the window. “It’s too bad it won’t work out between you two, you would have made for a handsome couple.”

Ulfric’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“She told me that you two had talked about marriage. I completely understand why, she’s so beautiful and—”

He stopped her rambling sentence, grabbing her arm with a calloused hand “That’s not true, we never spoke of that.” His eyes looked briefly towards her palms, lying open on her lap. “We talked of you, mostly.”

“Me?”

“Who precisely did you think I was speaking about last night on the roof?” Ulfric sounded faintly exasperated. “I can’t think of anyone else who I would rather rebuild Skyrim with.”

Katariah felt her hands begin to shake. “I can’t believe—”

“Then let me prove it.”

In less than a moment, he pressed a bruising kiss to her lips and buried a hand in her hair. Surprised, Katariah gasped, only to have Ulfric return the same air back to her lungs. Not wanting to be outdone, she moved her lips against his in a sort of dance and placed a palm against his chest, feeling the upturned edges of the scars that resided there.
Her passion coming to a sudden halt, she pulled away. “Ulfric, wait.”

“What is it?” he asked, taking both of her hands in his own.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. “You know what I’ve said, about not picking a side.” Closing her eyes as his breath ghosted over her shoulder, she continued, “I can’t just abandon that, no matter how I feel about you.”

Running a thumb across her cheek, Ulfric pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m not asking that of you,” he said, brushing a wisp of hair behind her ear. “You saved Skyrim when you defeated Alduin. You’ve done enough already. Let me meet you halfway.”

Something like hope began to burn in Katariah’s chest. “What are you saying?” she asked, only slightly annoyed with herself as the question ended in a sharp inhalation as Ulfric lightly bit at the skin at the base of her neck.

He looked up at her with falsely innocent blue eyes. “I’m saying that if you’ll wait for my victory over the Legion, we can lead Skyrim together.”

Katariah could hardly believe that for once in her life, the Divines were letting her have her cake and eat it too. “Let’s do it,” she breathed, a foolish grin situating itself firmly on her face, as she nestled into Ulfric’s side.

A sunbeam refracted through the glass window and scattered light across the floor. “High Queen Katariah,” Ulfric murmured against the crown of her head.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to that,” the Dragonborn laughed, turning her head as she heard a clatter of books from the next room over. “I’d better go check on Aleyne,” she said, sliding out of the bed.

“You two have become quite the pair,” Ulfric remarked as she made her way to the door.
“I’m just beginning to see the virtues of committing to things, that’s all,” she said over her shoulder. “Wuunferth will strangle me if I interrupt your recovery anymore than I already have, so try to rest.”

“Let me worry about Wuunferth.”

Katariah chuckled and repeated, “Get some rest. I’ll see you later today.” Walking into Aleyne’s room, she saw the elf, fully dressed and glaring at a Grand Soul Gem. “Good morning to you, Aleyne.”

“If I figure out the particulars of how the Mysticism School ties into Soul Gems and how that relates to our problems, it will be.” Breaking her concentration, she looked up towards Katariah. “What happened to your neck?”

Cheeks flushing red, the Dragonborn clapped a hand to her collar. “Nothing!”

Aleyne smirked. “I’m glad to see you’re taking my advice to heart.” Her smile faded. “Do you want to talk about what happened last night?”

“What do you mean?” Katariah asked, looking out the window at the pink clouds rolling across the sky.

“I mean about Liselle. Do you want to talk about what happened?”

The Dragonborn had a blank look. “What is there to talk about? I know what happened, don’t you?”

“I really don’t, you’re going to have to spell that out for me,” Aleyne replied, furrowing her brow.

“Obviously the Thalmor have her under some sort of spell, an enchantment or potion or curse or something.” When met with Aleyne’s silence, she continued, “That’s the only explanation that makes sense. We just need to find her, and we can help bring her back to the way she was.”

There was a beat before Aleyne asked, “Do you really think that’s what’s going on?”
Katariah chose not to acknowledge the question. “I know you’ll love her when she’s back to normal, everything will be fine and we can figure out—”

Aleyne placed a hand on Katariah’s shoulder to halt the spiralling sentence. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Now for a lighter subject: what happened between you and Ulfric?”

Katariah recounted the events of the morning to a delighted Aleyne, after which she got dressed and wandered about Windhelm, mostly getting updates from Niranye about Skyrim’s underground. Apparently Delvin was wanting to train flocks of crows to steal for the Guild, an idea that Brynjolf found hilarious and Vex infuriating, and Cicero had finally gained Babette’s respect when he brewed a potion that made its victim laugh himself to death, though Nazir was still probably a lost cause for the jester. Later, she continued her fighting lessons for Aleyne, stop trying to throttle the hilt, just act like it’s an extension of your arm. If she didn’t think at all about what had happened the night before, it was a more than pleasant day.

However, as the day went on, her conversation with Ulfric began to gnaw at the back of her brain. She wanted a life with him, that was still true. But something about staying on the side while someone fought a war without her did not sit right with her. Additionally, she could no longer claim to be an impassive observer in the conflict. Every day, she would face the possibility of hearing the news that Ulfric had been captured, killed, his head stuck on a pike in Imperial City. That constant, subtle terror of not knowing would definitely wear her down, and quickly. She found herself sitting alone in the Temple of Talos as her desire for certainty battled with what she knew about the Civil War in Skyrim.

She smiled as Ulfric entered the Temple after her.

“I hope I’m not bringing another dragon to my city by meeting you here.”

“I doubt that, you know what they say about lightning never striking the same place twice.” She walked towards him and rested a hand on his shoulder, marvelling at how natural it had become to reach for him. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

“I’m listening.”

“You said you would meet me halfway, and I appreciate that.” She took a breath before continuing. “But I don’t want to wait. If you’ll have me, I’d like to join the Stormcloaks and fight for Skyrim, by your side.”
Wordlessly, Ulfric wrapped Katariah in his arms, lifting her off the floor in an embrace that made her lighter than air. Finally setting her back down, he began to lead her out of the Temple, back to the Palace. “We will bring a new dawn to Skyrim, together.”

She laced her fingers into his and smiled, willfully ignoring the feeling that the statue of Talos was glaring at her with stony eyes as she left.

Chapter End Notes

Before we all get our hopes up, remember that the tag on this work says REwriting the Civil War :D Come back next time as Kat kneels to take the oath, and Elisif makes good on a promise. Comments/subscriptions/kudos more valuable than wheels of cheese to me!!
Oath Breakers

Chapter Summary

In Skyrim, life moves in between the cracks of broken promises.

Chapter Notes

This one only really fits for Ulfric's section, but I love it to death: "Chosen" by Generdyn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk down from the Embassy to the docks was so rarely worth it. These people never seemed to see fit to actually pave their dirt roads, and after even one storm, which happened much too often in this godsforsaken wasteland of a province, the mud could be ankle deep. Elenwen sniffed as she remembered how the dirt had seeped into the cracks of the black leather of her favorite pair of boots, utterly ruining them. What made matters even more annoying were the glares she and her guards received whenever they ventured off the grounds. Most Nords weren't stupid enough to sign their own death warrants by actually attacking her, but these pester ing people were beginning to grate on her, though she would never let anyone know that she allowed something so irrational into her being.

However, this morning, the sun, moons, and stars appeared to have aligned above the First Emissary. There had been no rain or snow for over a week, and the road was empty. A few sailors went about their ships, but she was able to stand mostly alone on the docks as the rowboat came bobbing across the calm sea. A breeze from the sea managed to unsettle a few strands of her hair as she thought about the cargo she had come to supervise. A Justiciar had caught it wandering around Whiterun and, rather than risk losing the asset in an overland journey to Haafingar, had elected to ship it up the rivers that emptied into the Sea of Ghosts. The effort would be noted if the Justiciar ever found himself on the wrong end of the Thalmor’s judgement, for what lay in the wooden crate that was currently being hoisted onto the docks could help Elenwen return in triumph to the Summerset Isles. She doubted that what she learned from this endeavor would be enough to bring her home, to streets like glass and buildings that glimmered like a dragonfly’s wing, but it would be a step closer to Alinor and away from Skyrim.

The crate was out of the rowboat and being hoisted into the East Empire Trading Company warehouse. Sometime before she killed the girl, Elenwen would have to thank the Dragonborn for murdering Vittoria Vici and freeing up the building for Thalmor interests, as it would have been time consuming to the point of absurdity, to have to haul the cargo all the way back up the hill to the Embassy. She had her guards open the crate and deposit the crate into a metal cage before directing them to watch the door outside. Straightening her shoulders, she arranged the list of
questions in her head, and began with the most obvious. “I suppose you know why you are here?”

“M’aiq wishes that you Altmer would cut more air holes in the little box you so generously provided for him,” the Khajiit said, lazily looking his claws.

Elenwen was torn on her opinion of prisoners like this. On one hand, it was an annoyance to have to deal with idiots who did not realize the danger they found themselves in. On the other hand, it was a truly rare privilege to see the terror grow behind their eyes as they moved from confidence to the realization that they would never see the light of dawn again. “You are here because you were caught spreading heterodoxy, contrary to the laws set forth in the White-Gold Concordat. The penalty for standing as an apostate against the Eight Divines and the Aldmeri Dominion is death, however if you provide information that I deem valuable, I may see fit to extend you mercy. I recognize that this may be difficult for one called ‘The Liar,’ but do you understand the terms of the agreement as I have explained them?”

“Whatever you ask, M’aiq will do his level best to answer. Some of it might be verified by actual facts.” He situated himself so he sat cross-legged at the center of the cage.

From the intelligence the Dominion held on this wanderer, this kind of answer would be standard for their conversation. Not if I have anything to say about it, Elenwen thought to herself as she folded her arms so that the prisoner could see the dagger that hung on her waist. “Multiple witnesses heard you speaking of a cycle to Nirn. Would you care to elaborate on that?”

A glint entered his eyes. “Certainly. M’aiq was telling the passers-by of the people that you fear.”

“What is this nonsense? I will not hear—”

He rose, approaching Elenwen slowly. “But you will hear of it, because you have already seen it. The heroes that rise when the gods so choose, the ones that connect our world with the ones that have been and the ones to come. They have so many lives, so many faces, along and spread across time, both original and reflections: The Eternal Champion of the Arena, the Vestige of Coldharbour, the Emperor’s agent from Daggerfall.” He wrapped a clawed hand around one of the bars. “The Chosen Nerevarine, the Hero of Kvatch.” M’aiq grinned, fangs glimmering in the orange torchlight. “And now our own Stormcrowned Dragonborn lives by the grace of the Aedra, and she walks Tamriel because of your own actions.”

Elenwen’s heart pounded with rage. “If you are a spy against the Thalmor, I won’t waste the time extraditing you back to Elsweyr, I’ll cut your throat now and dump your body in the bay!”
Chuckling, the Khajiit replied, “M’aiq marvels at how you Altmer always seem to miss the point. You fear our heroes because they represent the cycle that you try to break out of, but never can and never will. M’aiq has wandered this land long enough to know when we are walking in a circle.”

The First Emissary unsheathed her dagger. “I’ve had enough of this,” she hissed, barely keeping her voice from wavering.

Before she could take a step towards him, M’aiq raised a hand and snapped his fingers together. As the sharp click rang across the cavern, all of the torches went dark, plunging the room into blackness. Elenwen quickly turned from side to side, weapon held at the ready as she tried to focus on calling magelight to her palm.

“M’aiq sees the cycle within you, First Emissary.” His voice came from no direction that she could discern. “How you toiled for a place in your precious Dominion, the silent, judging eyes of your husband. How you tried to cut yourself free of him, only to see his face reflected in your daughter.” Suddenly, it seemed as though he was right behind her shoulder. “No matter how hard you tried, you could never carve the same look off of her face.”

Elenwen whipped towards the voice as all of the torches flamed back to life. Horror grew in her chest as she realized she stood alone in the warehouse. Racing towards the door, she only found her guards standing with their backs to the entrance. Silently, she beckoned them to follow her back up the hill to the Embassy as a storm began to gather on the Sea of Ghost. As she trudged through the deepening mud, she could only barely suppress the need to scream.

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Ulfric is twelve years old when he learns of her, though he did not know it.

It was during his first week at High Hrothgar. He was becoming accustomed to the knowledge that he would spend the rest of his days in meditation and prayer, and was reading one of the books that a pilgrim brought as an offering to the monks. It was black, with a silver sigil of Akatosh emblazoned on the cover. He drank in the words of the prophecy written in black script: The World-Eater wakes, and wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn.

Arngeir approached him from behind, squinting as he read the text over his student’s shoulder. “I should never have allowed this work of superstition within our walls,” he said with a sigh.
“Though it appears that you have already absorbed it.” He smiled slightly as he noticed the rapture on Ulfric’s face.

“Will the Dragonborn come soon, Master Arngeir?”

Arngeir shook his head, gently pulling the book from his hands. “Kynareth willing, no. Remember Ulfric, it is a curse to live during interesting times. However, if the gods see fit to give the Voice as a gift, we will offer the Dragonborn instruction and guidance.”

The boy’s face lit up at the prospect. “He’ll be a Nord hero, like Talos or Wulfharth,” he declared with the confidence that only a child can have.

Chuckling, the monk commented, “There have been more than just Nord warriors that have taken the mantle of Ysmir, Ulfric. Even Empress Katariah, a Dunmer woman, held that title, back in the Third Era.”

However, Ulfric was barely listening, and he went to sleep that night hoping against hope that he would meet Skyrim’s savior.

Six years passed, and it appeared that Skyrim and Tamriel as a whole would have to suffer under the curse of living during interesting times, though they did not take the form of Alduin, but instead a war in Cyrodiil. In spite of Arngeir’s best efforts, whispers from the world below of Imperial City being consumed in green fire reached Ulfric’s ears. The thought of war coming to Skyrim, to his father’s city, tore him from his meditations. On the night of his eighteenth birthday, he resolved to make a decision when the sun rose: to stay or to leave.

When he found himself in the world of dreams that night, he remained in the monastery, looking out over Skyrim as the four monks knelt in silent prayer. However, he was not alone.

A girl walked down the stone hallway towards him, feet barely making a sound. Her hair was as white as snow, her cheeks hollow and her eyes haunted and exhausted. She was beautiful.

When she reached to touch him, he read in her grey eyes, “Be a rescuer, for the sake of your soul and those you hold close, be a rescuer.” He prayed that his eyes were saying the same to her, even as their world melted with the coming dawn.

That morning, after informing Arngeir that he would be breaking his oath to the Greybeards, he walked down the Seven Thousand Steps and journeyed to the Great War in Cyrodiil.
Ulfric saw her again, four years later, after they had broken him.

It was all his fault, the fall of Cyrodiil, and the end of the veneration of Talos, the rise of the Dominion. The enormity of his failure spreading out before him, he resigned his soul to Sovngarde and prepared his body for death. However, it appeared that the Nine had other plans.

The rusty iron door cracked open, and Ulfric attempted to take his first step into the world beyond the walls that echoed with bloody screams, only to collapse forward. When he looked up again, she dominated his vision.

Perhaps she was a spirit maiden of Kynareth, meant to watch over him and eventually guide him to Aetherius. She looked stronger, and she nearly glowed with white light in the darkness of the Thalmor prison. Strength radiated from her small body as she supported his weight against her side and guided him towards the outside world.

Even among the chaos of his heart during the Markarth incident, the duel with Torygg, the beginning of the Stormcloak rebellion, her image remained at the back of Ulfric’s thoughts. That was why he thought it was a cruel joke played by the gods when Imperial soldiers tossed a girl with the same features into the cart after him, bound for death at Helgen. Her head bounced lightly against his shoulder in the hours before she woke.

Perhaps she was part of his punishment. In retribution for turning his back on the Greybeards and the Way of the Voice, he would be forced to watch an innocent with the face of his savior die because of his actions. However, before the headsman’s axe could cut her away from Nirn, the girl with white hair was haloed by the black wings of a dragon. Moments after he sliced the bindings from her wrists, she was gone, as all the survivors of Helgen scattered into the winds.

But not for long.

When Ulfric found out, after they met under the eyes of Talos, that she was the Dragonborn, he was enraged. How dare she, he thought to himself, How can she accept a gift from the gods like mastery of the Voice and choose to do nothing with it? However, her legend only grew, and when the snowstorm forced her to stay within his sight, he found himself understanding Katariah, and he prayed that Katariah was understanding him too.

She was changed, after she returned from Sovngarde, and as she stood now, in front of his throne in the bronze and blue uniform of a Stormcloak soldier, he knew with certainty that she was the same
as the spirit that came to him at High Hrothgar and the Thalmor prison. It shouldn’t be possible. She shouldn’t be possible.

Yet she was.

--

Katariah smiled as she heard Aleyne and Galmar bickering.

“We are warriors, we have no need to prance about casting spells!”

“I’m telling you, a group of battle mages will work wonders for your battles, and I will die before I start carrying around a battle axe!”

The Dragonborn looked down at her new armor. Although it lacked the slashes and bloodstains, it was almost completely identical to what she wore as she ran from Alduin and Helgen. Pushing down the lump in her throat, she stepped quietly down the hall and knelt on the stone floor.

Ulfric hushed the debate going on to his left when he saw her. Turning to Galmar, he asked, “Are we ready to begin?”

The housecarl stepped forward and recited the oath that would bind her to Ulfric’s cause.

“I do swear my blood and honor to the service of Ulfric Stormcloak Jarl of Windhelm and true High King of Skyrim.”

*He’s gone! He’s gone and he’s never coming back!* Katariah gulped as Elisif’s voice echoed in her head, now being one of the worst possible times for one of her moments of weakness.

“As Talos is my witness, may this oath bind me to death and beyond,”

*Under interrogation, we learned of his potential value and he was assigned as an asset to the interrogator, who is now First Emissary Elenwen. He was made to believe information obtained*
during his interrogation was crucial in the capture of the Imperial City, and then allowed to escape.

“Even to my lord as to my fellow brothers and sisters in arms.”

You could end the rebellion and help lead the Imperial army against the Dominion. It would be the stuff of legends.

“All hail the Stormcloaks, the true sons and daughters of Skyrim!”

Everyone in the hall leaned forward as Katariah began to repeat the oath. “I—”

The bronze doors slammed open as a messenger bolted into the Palace. “I bring an urgent message for the Dragonborn!” he said between gasping breaths. “Jarl Elisif requests your presence in Solitude for a celebration of your victory and a reaffirmation of your support for Skyrim’s customs.”

In the silence of an oath interrupted, the hall came to a standstill.

Chapter End Notes

So close, and yet so far. Come back soon for an interesting time in Solitude! Elisif does love herself a parade. Comments/kudos/subscriptions are love, they are life!! Thanks so much for reading!!
After the courier left, they had relocated to the war room, where Katariah was currently facing a red-faced Galmar. “I am serious. I should go.”

Aleyne looked faintly ill at the prospect of going to Solitude. “You do realize that the Thalmor will be there, alongside the Legion, right? Granted, I wasn’t present at High Hrothgar during your meeting, but it sounded to me like you and Tullius ended on a sour note.”

The Dragonborn wiped her palms against her Stormcloak uniform. “Relax Aleyne, I would be doing this by myself.”

“But why do you want to go?” Ulfric asked, folding his arms. All of a sudden, Katariah felt as though they had returned to how things were that night she climbed into his room to summon him to the Greybeards’ council, with a gulf of unanswered questions between them.

“Here’s how I’m interpreting this. On one hand, I go and I have the potential to gather valuable intelligence about the Legion and the Thalmor. At worst, I’m paraded around like some sort of symbol for the Legion. Then, at the end of whatever Elisif has planned, I head straight back here and we chart a new course going forward based on what I learn.” She leaned forward on the table, looking at the map of battle flags. “On the other hand, if I refuse, Elisif, Tullius, and Elenwen will correctly assume that I’ve joined your cause. Tullius could go so far as to take that as a declaration of war, and we would all be immediately starting on the defensive, and your soldiers fight at their best when they are attacking with the element of surprise on their side.” She met Ulfric’s eyes. “No matter how we look at it, we have a lot to possibly gain if I play along with this, and a lot to
lose if I don’t.”

“And what if I say that I don’t want you to go?”

Katariah squared her shoulders and refused to blink. “Seeing as I’ve sworn to nothing, I’m sorry that we disagree, but I must choose for myself.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the room held their breath, after which the jarl stormed out of the room, followed by the thud of a slammed door from down the hall.

Refusing to meet the others’ eyes, she muttered, “I need to start packing,” and made her way back upstairs to her chamber. Every step she took, the torrent of unresolved emotions grew in her stomach, and her previous sense of certainty faded. By the time she made it to the table where she had set down her pack, the image of Liselle dressed in black and her fear towards her unknown future with Ulfric swirled within her, closing her throat and stinging her eyes.

Turning to her usual strategy for calming herself down, she catalogued her possessions in her bag, bow, sword, septims, potions, armor, clothing. Speaking of which, she thought to herself as she looked down again at her Stormcloak uniform. If she were to leave for Solitude with the coming sunset, she would have to change clothes now.

She unfastened the leather belt from around her waist and took off the blue cloth that wrapped around her shoulders, and set them both down on the bed. Next, off came the boots and gauntlets. Lastly, she would have to undo the fastening at the back of the quilted armor. Reaching behind her back, she grasped around for the tie, but could not reach it. In her frustration, blood rushed to her head and her arm and shoulder cramped as she kept trying to untie the small binding.

The fact that such an unimportant task became impossible in spite of her best efforts proved to be the straw that broke the ox’s back for Katariah. It might have been funny in a twisted kind of way had she not been walking on the edge of an emotional blade for the past week. She let out a frustrated sob as she caught sight of her scarlet, tear-streaked face in the mirror. In the midst of her cries, she almost didn’t notice the cool hand that came to rest on the bare skin of her shoulder. As she met Ulfric’s eyes in the glass, her sorrow grew even deeper, that he would see her at such a low point. Gently, he undid the ties at the back of her armor.

Strong arms enfolded her and she was resting on warm thighs as they sat on the edge of the bed. As he rubbed soft circles into the back of her scalp, Katariah caught sight of them again in the mirror: Ulfric in his richly colored robes and furs, and her with tangled hair and a plain linen shirt and trousers. What is it about this man, she thought to herself, that he always shows up when I am
“I’m sorry,” he whispers, wiping a tear from her cheek with his thumb. The apology sounded strange, coming from someone who always seemed to project strength. “I shouldn’t have tried to hold you back from going to Solitude.”

“This isn’t your doing, Ulfric,” Katariah replied as she swallowed the last few tears she had within her. “It’s just a combination of everything that’s been going on.” She tried to look vaguely brave, even as she sat in his arms. “I’m scared that there’s a trap waiting for me in Solitude, too.”

“That’s not what I fear.” When met with her confused stare, he continued, “I fear that somehow, they will take you away from me. That you will show up back here with a legion at your back and a blade in your hand.”

That image spurred her out of sadness. “That will not happen,” she whispered with a fierceness that she did not know she possessed. When he did not respond, she pushed herself forward on his lap, sliding a hand under his shirt, trying to work her way under the layers, all while pressing kisses, on his mouth, down his neck. “I will always come back to you as I am.”

With that, Ulfric exhaled a breath as he slipped her shirt over her head.

Back on Cathnoquey, Katariah was no stranger to sex. However, they had all been hurried encounters, reflections of her own loneliness, full of warm breaths but no emotion, all with the undercurrent of please take me out of my current life and show me another way, that made them desperate and awkward.

That was not the case with Ulfric.

As he ran his hands and mouth down her body, touching and tasting her, he was unbearably slow, drawing each moment and moan out of her with excruciating detail. He coaxed her to a boiling point so that when he buried himself inside of her, she was nearly crying with ecstasy. He finished half a moment after her, collapsing onto her chest as she relearned how to breathe.

When she fully regained her senses, the room was bathed in the pale blue light of early dawn and
Ulfric was running a hand through her hair. “Good morning,” she whispered, a sudden shyness taking over her as she rolled over to face him.

“It certainly is,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

Katariah wasn’t convinced just yet. “Was last night alright for you?” she asked, feeling her blush creeping back onto her face.

“Alright’ is far too faint a word for it,” he said with a quiet laugh. The first rays of the sunrise broke over the mountain. “Are you going to leave this morning?”

“I should. I want to get this whole thing over with as quickly as possible.” In spite of these words, she nestled herself closer to Ulfric’s side.

“Be safe. Promise me that you’ll be safe.” He tilted her chin so she was looking in his eyes. “Katariah, please.”

The urgency in his voice drove the breath from her lungs. “I promise,” she whispered, distracted as Ulfric fastened something around her neck. “What’s this?”

“It’s an Amulet of Talos that belonged to my father, and his father before him. I want you to bring it with you to Solitude.”

Katariah ran her fingers over the sword hilt carved from copper. “I’d be honored.” An idea came into her head, and she slipped out of bed to retrieve the Amulet of Articulation from her bag. “Hold onto this until I come back,” she said, pressing the necklace into his hand. “Fair warning, don’t lose it, or Skyrim’s most hardened criminals will be after you. Including me.” The humor masked the seriousness of the undertone, that the Amulet was collateral that would draw her back to Windhelm and to him.

In the silence before the rest of the Palace woke up, they got dressed, Ulfric back in robes, and Katariah wearing the Nightingale armor that she wore to the peace talks at High Hrothgar. The people they were the night before were gone, only the Dragonborn and the Jarl remained.

Ulfric had insisted on escorting her to the stables, and as they walked through the still-empty streets of his city, if she were observing them from their usual place on the roof of the palace, they
would look like an ordinary couple, facing a new day together after enjoying each other’s company the night before. There was so much room for peace and happiness in that abstract version of reality. But, here in the realm of the specific, Katariah’s heart pounded in her chest as she imagined what waited for her in Solitude. As she felt her fingers lace with his, she tried to imagine the best: maybe a simple celebration, a promise to always help those of Skyrim, a few stilted conversations with Elisif and Tullius. Maybe the Thalmor wouldn’t even bother making the trip down from the Embassy. Maybe everything would work out.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a carriage?” Ulfric asked, jarring her out of her thoughts.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want to get caught in Haafingar waiting for somebody else to take me back to Eastmarch.”

“That’s fine, but I don’t trust that horse of yours with the orange eyes.”

Katariah laughed. “Shadowmere is a sweetheart, you just need to get to know him.”

“That sounds like someone else I know,” he replied as he helped her into the saddle, his hand still holding onto hers.

“I can’t imagine who you’re speaking of.” A foolish grin had crept onto her face, even as Shadowmere started forward, slowly pulling her hand from his, finger by finger. “Don’t let Aleyne and Galmar squabble, try not to worry Jorleif and Wuunferth, and I’ll be home as soon as I’m able.”

Something passed over Ulfric’s face before he said, “Talos protect you, Katariah. Be careful.”

Shadowmere took off, and Katariah took one last look at Ulfric before he and the city faded from her view. The landscape flew past her as thought about how quickly her world had re-oriented itself. She had just crossed the border from Eastmarch into the Pale when she realized that she had referred to Windhelm as home.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened!! Nothing like waiting until the fic hits 100,000 words, right? Next up, Katariah finally makes it to Solitude, I promise this time! Like always, comment/subscribe/kudos!!! Feedback keeps your favorite writers writing!!
In Solitude

Chapter Summary

Katariah stands alone in the capitol of Skyrim.

Chapter Notes

Sing along for a record EIGHT PAGES!!: "The Dragonborn Comes" by Erutan

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katariah took a shuddering breath as Solitude’s windmill came into view. Tucking Ulfric’s amulet under her armor, she spurred Shadowmere further down the road, towards the city. This will mean nothing, I’ll be out of here soon, she recited the platitudes in her head like a prayer. However, it appeared that the outside world was not responding to her plea that this “pledge,” whatever Elisif intended that to be, was going to be a small affair.

She had never seen Skyrim’s roads so crowded as they were outside the city. People from every background streamed towards the city gates, the sound of their footsteps undercut by Khajiit caravans hawking their wares to the crowd and travelling bards competing for tips. As she passed Katla’s Farm, she smiled down at a Bosmer child, who was playing with a doll and wooden dragon. As the child return her gaze with awe-struck eyes, Katariah realized that the toys represented her fight with Alduin, complete with a miniature Akaviri sword and white yarn covering the doll’s head. While she had abandoned her hood since returning from Sovngarde, it seemed that she had taken her relative obscurity for granted: when this was over, she would be a public figure in Skyrim and Tamriel. Someone to rally around, or someone to blame.

Talos help us all, the Dragonborn thought to herself.

There was a shout from the guard tower when she came into view, and the wooden door was pushed open to reveal Falk Firebeard, flanked by a contingent of hold guards and various nobles of Skyrim. “Welcome to Solitude, Dragonborn,” the steward said as Katariah dismounted Shadowmere, who was quickly whisked away by a stable hand. “As you can tell, we’ve been anxious for your arrival.”

She could see what the steward meant. Under normal circumstances, Skyrim’s capital was trimmed and pruned to the point where it nearly did not belong with the rest of the wild province. When Falk beckoned her to follow, for the briefest moment, Katariah thought that she might have
stepped into Cyrodiil, or perhaps High Rock. Solitude practically gleamed with cleanliness, and garlands of ribbons and flowers decorated every available surface. Above all of that, red banners with Akatosh in black, the symbol of the Empire, fluttered in the wind.

At least there were some victories: the black and gold colors of the Aldmeri Dominion were absent, and Katariah had not heard a single Justiciar, nor heard their sound of black boots clapping against the stone. *Maybe they really won’t show up,* she mused, a glimmer of hope settling in her chest.

She had to lift her heels up to keep pace with Falk, who was speaking very quickly about what the coming days would entail.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” he said while throwing back a stamina potion, “I’d like to go over your itinerary with you right now.”

“I have an itinerary?” She tried to prohibit bemusement from creeping into her tone.

He ignored the question. “When we get to the Blue Palace, you will take Supper with Jarl Elisif. Then, tomorrow morning, you accept an award from Elisif and General Tullius in front of Castle Dour. After that, you meet with them, Legate Rikke, and all of the jarls and nobles willing to attend the festivities about long term plans for Skyrim and the Empire. Then, there is a final banquet. Do you have any questions?” He tacked the last sentence on as they stood at the doorstep to the Palace.

“Not really, just—”

“Glad to hear it, I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that, he practically ran back into the fray of preparations.

Feeling as though she had just been swept by a whirlwind, Katariah straightened her shoulders and ventured inside the Blue Palace, to see Elisif waiting at the top of the stairs.

“You’re here!” she ran down the steps, only to grab the Dragonborn’s hand and pull her back up towards her rooms. “I managed to get you all to myself this evening, come on, we’re taking dinner in my chambers.”

Elisif provided a constant stream of conversation that only required an occasional nod or
noncommittal shrug: Did she like the decorations on the Bard’s College, did the Winking Skeever have reliable cooking or was the Bannered Mare better, did she find Maven Blackbriar trustworthy, or was there just something about her?

At this point, the food was eaten, and wine had flushed Katariah cheeks. In her mind, so far she was managing this whole deception thing pretty perfectly, when Elisif placed a hand on top of her own.

“Katariah, you know I consider you a friend, right?”

“That’s so sweet of you, Elisif,” she responded, ready to go to bed for the evening.

The jarl situated herself in front of the Dragonborn. “Because we’re friends, you can tell me anything.” She paused before continuing. “Even about the rumors about you and Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Oh, that’s not good, Katariah thought as she realized that it might have been a tactical blunder to leave the Amulet of Articulation with the object of Elisif’s suspicions. Pushing through the clouds in brain and willfully suppressing the memory of Ulfric smiling against the inside of her thigh, she replied, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Elisif’s face nearly glowed with hope. “So it’s not true, that you and him are…?”

“Honestly, I don’t have a lot of time for romantic relationships.” That was, technically speaking, not a lie, but Katariah felt her body tense up all the same. However, Elisif still looked relieved. Either she’s as drunk as I am, or she’s hopeless at this.

The next words out of Elisif’s mouth confirmed it was the latter case. “Elenwen thought that you two might be, but I just knew—”

“Wait, what did Elenwen say?”

“Did somebody say my name?” The First Emissary entered as if on cue, and Katariah felt the multiple goblets of wine turn over in her stomach. Taking in the room, the elf gave a simpering smile. “Isn’t this a lovely scene?” She sat down at the table leaned conspiratorially towards the younger women. “Dragonborn, I had the privilege of speaking with your friend from home earlier.
Before that moment, Katariah had always thought that what Paarthurnax had described as a dragon’s will to dominate was a bit of poetic exaggeration, something to justify the conquests of ancient heroes. However, facing Elenwen, she felt white-hot rage coursing through her, burning the alcohol out of her blood and making her calculate precisely how many seconds it would take to jam one of the forks on the table into the pulsing vein in the First Emissary’s neck.

Before the Dragonborn had time to act on her theory that it would take just under two and half moments, Elisif spoke up. “Katariah, you never told me you had a friend from your home in Skyrim, you’ll have to introduce me sometime.” She paused after seeing Katariah’s pale face. “But that will have to wait until later, you need your beauty sleep for tomorrow. First Emissary, if you’ll excuse us?”

Elenwen waved a dismissive hand. “Until tomorrow. That will be a day to remember.”

As Elisif walked her out of the room, Katariah refused to look over her shoulder, not wanting to give Elenwen the satisfaction. If she had, she might have noticed the Thalmor’s eyes on the piece of twine around her neck.

When the door shut behind them, Elisif whirled to face Katariah. “Can I braid your hair for tomorrow? My governess used to always do the same for me before special occasions, and it always made me feel more at ease.”

“By all means,” the Dragonborn replied, trying to calm the blood within her veins as the jarl separated her hair into plaits. “May I ask you something?”

“Mhmm,” Elisif hummed, drawing the braids into a circle behind her head.

“Why do you trust Elenwen so much?”

Katariah felt Elisif’s hands pause for the briefest moments before she replied, “She has control over everything in her life, and I would give anything to have that.”

_I have to walk a fine line here._ “I can see why that might look appealing, but I remember reading in a book somewhere, _May Talos give me the courage to change what I can, Akatosh the serenity_
to accept what I cannot, and Kynareth the wisdom to tell the difference. Even if it seems like Elenwen controls everything, I doubt that can last forever.”

The jarl sucked in a breath. “You know you could get in trouble for saying that.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Katariah quipped, taking her reflection in the mirror. “You really are a master at this.”

“It’s nothing, only a small favor for the World Eater’s bane.” Elisif patted her shoulder. “Sleep well tonight, Katariah. You’ll do amazingly tomorrow.”

The next morning, the Dragonborn woke to a splitting headache and sound of someone whispering in her room.

_Katariah...wake up and open your pack...

Brow furrowed, she grabbed a dagger and began checking around the bedroom for the source of the sound.

_Hurry up and check your bag...I can’t do this all day...

Not seeing any other options, she rifled through her bag, unsure of what she was supposed to be looking for. Towards the bottom, under her spare set of clothes, she saw the compass Ulfric had given her and the piece of topaz Aleyne had dropped into her hand at the College of Winterhold.

_For the love of Magnus, pick up the stone...

“What in Oblivion—“ Katariah’s sentence was cut off as almost opaque image of Aleyne sprang to life when her hand wrapped around the carving of the sun.

“Finally! Behold, Katariah, the power of Fabrication magic,” she declared while bowing dramatically.
“How are you doing this?” Katariah asked while walking around the image.

“I fabricated a link between me in Windhelm and the stone in your bag in Solitude. Can you stop waving your hand through my face? It’s disconcerting.”

The Dragonborn jerked her arm back. “Sorry, I’ve just never seen anything like this.” A possibility came into her mind. “Does that mean that I can use the stone to talk to you when I want?”

Aleyne looked thoughtful. “Depends. How are your Alteration spells?”

“I kind of paralyzed a skeever the other day.”

“‘Kind of’?”

“It might have gotten tired and just stopped running.”

The elf shook her head. “Looks like I’ll have to initiate the connection. I just wanted to give you an update about things over here.” She looked to a point above Katariah’s head. “Galmar, you of little faith, come say hello!”

The housecarl’s rasping voice came over the transmission. “Did it work?”

Katariah laughed. “Galmar, is that you?”

“Larger than life and twice as ugly, Dragonborn! We’ve been going through our intelligence, and we have a pretty good handle on who’s in Solitude right now.”

“I know the First Emissary is here,” she grumbled, remembering the conversations of the previous night.

Aleyne nodded, eyes shifting to the side. “So are every Imperial-aligned jarl and merchant, so try and keep close to people that like you, like Balgruuf and Idgrod.”
Galmar’s voice joined back in. “That way, if the Thalmor stab you, at least we’ll have witnesses.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” She felt the amulet against her skin and thought of something. “Is there any way I can talk to Ulfric before—”

She could see Aleyne looking from side to side, as if searching for something. “I knew I should have brewed more magicka restoration potions. Listen, before I have to go, Ulfric told me to tell you that—”

Aleyne’s image blinked out of existence, and Katariah was left alone to prepare for the day ahead. Once she had her armor on, she was escorted by a guard to the city gates, where a white horse was waiting for her. “I thought I would be riding my own horse,” she remarked, turning to one of her minders.

“Jarl Elisif thought that this mare would be better for your image. You’ll be riding at a walking pace through the city streets up to Castle Dour, where you will dismount and accept the circlet from the jarls. Do you understand?”

The Dragonborn nodded silently and swung herself into the saddle and nudged the gentler horse onward.

Throughout all of Katariah’s life, she had considered herself lonely, of low circumstances, a mere speck in Mundus. From an outsider’s perspective, she had come full circle, surrounded by a crowd throwing red flower petals in her path, chanting her name, and knowing at least some piece of her story. Yet, she had never felt more isolated. In the throngs of people, she saw flashes of people she recognized, partial resemblances that made her heart trip on a beat: a man with green eyes became Brynjolf, refusing to even touch a potential life with her. A Nord and Dunmer couple stared at her with Onmund and Belynna’s accusing faces. A woman with chestnut hair looked so much like her mother in that moment that Katariah nearly fell out of the saddle. In the midst of everything, she would swear to all the Aedra that she felt Liselle’s eyes on her from above, but she found herself unwilling to check and confirm her suspicions.

She had reached the stage, where the delegation of jarls sat in their richly colored robes, surrounded by a platoon of Imperial soldiers with General Tullius in front. There was no sign of Elenwen. Elisif rose and beckoned Katariah forward with open palms. “Approach, Dragonborn.”

Dismounting, she took a few stiff steps onto the stage.
Beaming at the crowd, Elisif declared, “Today, we honor a hero to Skyrim and all of Tamriel. Katariah, in your defeat of Alduin, you have opened up a new chapter for us and united Skyrim towards the future.” There were a few awkward looks among those on the stage and in the crowd below as they remembered their friends and family that stood decidedly not united with the bond between the Empire and Solitude. Elisif continued, seemingly oblivious to the shift in moods. “Katariah, do you swear to protect Skyrim and her customs for as long as you live?”

No conveniently timed courier to interrupt this oath. “I swear.”

“And do you swear to respect the authority of the Empire, under which we are protected?”

An Empire with what Emperor? “I swear.” Skyrim had made a liar and murderer out of her so many times over that one more broken promise could not possibly damn her soul any further.

“Then kneel and accept this circlet as a token of our continued gratitude towards you, Dragonborn and Champion of Skyrim.” As Katariah knelt on the hard wood stage, Elisif gently placed a circlet of silver decorated with emeralds on her head.

As the crowd erupted into cheers, the Dragonborn rose to find herself in a fog of fading adrenaline and the sense of anticlimax. The only long-term consequence of this whole affair was the branding of herself as a liar in the eyes of all the denizens of Solitude, and she had faced worse punishments than that. While walking to the afternoon of planned meetings in Castle Dour, she estimated that she might be back at Windhelm by midnight tonight. Maybe even sooner if she could coax Shadowmere into a faster gallop.

Looking back on that day, she realized that she should have never let her guard down until she was back in Stormcloak territory, until she was back in Ulfric’s arms. If she had been more careful, she wouldn’t have gotten up to get a cup water during one of the discussions on trade roots with Cyrodiil. She would never have found herself alone in a corridor with Elenwen.

“Looks like I arrived just in time,” the First Emissary sneered while blocking the path back to the gathering.

“You’re in my way,” Katariah remarked flatly.

Elenwen didn’t acknowledge that she had spoken. “You know, Dragonborn, I’m very different
among those in the Aldmeri Dominion. Most of them see man as dogs to either be put down or kept on a short leash.”

“And I suppose you find yourself intelligent because you believe all mortals deserve death without exception. You’re still in my way.”

She feigned offense. “I believe no such thing, Dragonborn. In fact, I was going to say that some of you even approach Mer in virtue and intellect. People like you and Ulfric Stormcloak represent the potential that mortal life has to offer Mundus.” She grinned at Katariah in a way that bared her teeth. “I suppose it’s only natural that you two should fall in love, equal beings so often do.”

“There’s more important things going on right now than my romantic life, where there is truly nothing to see. If you’ll excuse me,” she snarled as she attempted to step around the elf.

In that moment, quicker than the sting of a scorpion, Elenwen grabbed Ulfric’s amulet from the back, pulling it tight across Katariah’s neck. “I’ve never liked liars, but the truth always comes out in the end” she said, tone unchanged as the smaller woman struggled to breathe. “I remember this amulet well, back when I was doing what I truly enjoyed, cutting people down to their core.”

Picking at her nails, she glanced at Katariah from the corners of her eyes. “I don’t doubt that Ulfric loves you, but I want you to know that you will not be his first.” Pressing her cheek to Katariah’s, Elenwen whispered in her ear, “You will never make him scream like I could.”

In her oxygen-deprived brain, all Katariah could hear was the roaring in her ears. Focusing all of the strength to her legs, she kicked the elf in the stomach with all of the power she could muster, knocking her to the ground. Taking a gasping breath, she let rage flood every part of her body as she unsheathed Dragonbane and called a fireball to her hand. Everything but Elenwen, lying vulnerable on the ground, faded from her vision.

“How...me...” The First Emissary pleaded to the figures that now stood behind them.

Katariah whipped around to meet the twin, shocked gazes of Jarl Elisif and General Tullius. If she had been thinking clearly, she would have wanted to slow down time, try to explain, at least form some sort of defense. But, as she stood alone, the only thing she wanted was to get as far out of Solitude as possible.

“WULD NAH KEST!”
As the Dragonborn raced out of Castle Dour with the speed of a whirlwind, the circlet Elisif had given her clattered onto the stone floor.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that was worth the build up, plus we have the bonus of Aleyne inventing high-fantasy Skype XD. Thanks so much for reading, every kudos/comment/subscription is worth precisely one kick to Elenwen. Come back soon for conversations between survivors :)
Survivors

Chapter Summary

Survivors from various islands of Tamriel speak about their circumstances.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: this chapter mentions parental abuse. Song recommendation: "Rivals" by Generdyn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cloaked by Nocturnal’s shadows, Katariah weaved her way through Solitude’s streets and up the stairs to her room in the Blue Palace to get her pack. Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she made to climb out the window and hopefully not fall to her death on the rocks below when she heard a small voice from the doorway.

“You don’t have to leave.”

She turned to see Elisif extending an arm to her. Shaking her head, the Dragonborn muttered, “My jarl, Elenwen and your friend Tullius are going to be after me, I have to go.”

Elisif took a step forward and grabbed Katariah’s limp hand. “I can help explain to them, maybe you can apologize, say you’ll destroy the amulet—”

“I can’t do that, Elisif.”

“—Besides, I think General Tullius and Legate Rikke are sympathetic to Talos worshippers, maybe if you agree to support the Legion, they can—”

“Elisif, no.”

The jarl’s head drooped as she dropped Katariah’s hand. “Please don’t leave me alone here. I
don’t know what happened to Aleyne, and without either of you here, I have no one.”

Katariah knew she had only a few moments before soldiers, Imperial or Thalmor, came sweeping through the Palace, but she had to say something to this poor woman. “Elisif, before I leave, you need to hear this: I beg of you, don’t trust Elenwen.” She gripped her small hand as she continued, “You have your thanes and housecarls, your mage, your stewards, for Mara’s sake, even Tullius and Rikke, you are not alone and you can trust any of them to tell you the truth, and you cannot do that with Elenwen. But more than that, you are so smart and you care for your people, I’ve seen it in Solitude and at High Hrothgar, you don’t need to be following Elenwen for advice.”

A moment passed. Her mouth set into a determined line, Elisif grabbed Katariah’s and pulled her down a back staircase. “This leads through the cellar and has a door that opens to the harbor.”

Before entering the basement, Katariah turned back to the jarl. “Thank you so much for this.”

“Your fight with Elenwen, it was only about the Talos question, right?”

Staring back at Elisif’s hopeful eyes, Katariah could not bring herself to lie or tell the truth. “I’ll be back when I can.” Refusing to glance back, she hurried underneath the Blue Palace to the harbor as a storm gathered above the Sea of Ghosts.

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Aleyne had never felt this type of exhausted before. She had spent the entire morning and the better half of the afternoon with Stormcloak officers, pointing out all Thalmor strongholds and patrol routes in Skyrim that she could draw from her memory. Most of the Nord men had very visible doubts about working with an Altmer, but the potential to rescue captured comrades in specific and terrorize Justiciars in general had warmed them to the prospect.

She was a traitor to her blood and history. What was the term the Catechizer used back at school, to describe the type of person she had become? **Apostate**, that was it. Worse than a heretic, she was someone who had known the truth and renounced it. According to the laws of the Thalmor and her mother, she was not worth the ground she stood on or the magicka within her soul. If caught by the Dominion, there would be no public execution. In some black room, they would cut her throat, burn her body, and scatter her ashes to the wind, and her identity with it. The mention of her name would become illegal, no child born in the Dominion would ever be called “Aleyne” again.
Yet in the midst of this threat to her existence, both in the present and in the future, living or dead, all Aleyne could think about was that there were multiple kinds of tired, and she had never been this kind before. There were those nights at the prison in Bruma and the Embassy in Solitude where she worked until her hands shook, consumed by fear of failure and terror at what success could mean, collapsing in exhaustion while senseless dread followed her into her dreams into the next morning. This was different. In the face of betraying every man, woman, and child on the Summerset Isles, she felt calm, as though a great darkness had passed over and through her, and left her unscarred its wake. It would always be with her, the blackened scars on her face would always speak to her past, but it no longer had dominion over her.

Aleyne needed some form of white noise as she worked through this revelation, and had decided to sit on one of the crates in the Stone Quarter and watch as the merchants and their customers went through the last flurry of activity as the sun sank towards horizon. As she observed their interactions, she was struck by another epiphany: the devotion of the younger man to the aging apothecary, the apprentice’s eager eyes as she watched the blacksmith, a family growing closer after the loss of a daughter, adults rallying around a child orphaned by war, all these moments displayed the mortality the Thalmor so often described, but they were all so beautiful.

“Whenever there’s an Altmer in Skyrim, there’s an interesting story behind them.”

Dragged from her ruminations about the necessity of temporality in meaningful life, Aleyne turned to see the merchant that Katariah frequently spoke with, Niranye, leaning against her stall full of goods of dubious origins. “What?”

Niranye continued as though Aleyne hadn’t spoken. “As for me, I realized only a few moments after our dear Dominion came into power that they spoke in far too many absolutes. I have always found myself far more comfortable in the world of shadows between false and true.” She leaned forward. “What about you? How did you survive them?”

She was twelve, sitting at the kitchen table with her father, with open books spread luxuriously over every available surface. The Fifth Emissary would not be back until late that night, leaving them to their favorite pastime. A professor of literature at Vukhel University, Celyarel specialized in the poetry of the late Second Era, and he found the most eager pupil in his daughter. He picked up one of the volumes of Ayrenn’s sonnets, written during her years of solitude, and looked across the table at Aleyne. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes!” She squealed, her body held in rapt attention.

“We never know how high we are...”
She bit her lip as recalled the poem. "‘We never know how high we are till we are called to rise.’"

“Perfect!” he called in response to her memorization.

“‘And then, if we are true to plan, our statures touch the skies.’” She knew the verse by heart, but also knew that her father loved the last line. “‘The heroism...’” she paused and gestured across the table.

Celyarel got to his feet and leaned forward. “‘The heroism we recite, would be a daily thing...’” He paused for dramatic effect before exclaiming, “‘Did not ourselves the Aedra warp for fear to be a Queen!’”

“There was never a bond between me and my mother, but my father was my closest friend.”

After the fits of laughter from her father’s performance died out, she asked, “Will mother be home tonight?” She wasn’t quite sure what she wanted the answer to be.

“I can’t say I know, beautiful.” His mouth had settled into a thin line. “But I do know it is time for you to sleep. We’ll practice your Fabrication tomorrow morning,” he said, tacking on the last sentence as a bribe.

Later that night, Aleyne had woken to a whispered debate.

“Are you sure the focus on Talos is necessary? We have our heroes, the races of Men have their own.” She could hear her father’s furrowed brow in his voice.

“There is a difference between a hero and a god,” the newly appointed Fourth Emissary replied smoothly, “And you are flying very close to heresy right now, my dear.”

“I wish I could say that the conflict between my parents was solely theological.”

Two years later, Aleyne woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of a glass being shattered against their kitchen table.
“We are not going!” As she folded her knees against her chest, she realized that this is the first time she has ever heard her father raise his voice in anger.

The First Emissary was unaffected. “Of course, the three of us will not all be uprooting immediately. Aleyne will need to finish her education here, and she will meet us in Skyrim when she is ready to formally join the Thalmor.”

“I will not allow that.”

There is an ugly pause. “Excuse me?”

“You have made murderers out of us, Elenwen, and I will do everything in my power to spare our daughter from that fate.”

Black boots scraping against their soft wooden floor echoed up to Aleyne as Elenwen paced around the room. She could hear the exasperation in her voice, the overemphasized vowels that betrayed her lack of a formal education that she desperately tried to cover up. “Spare me your histrionics, Celyarel. You may be content to hide behind texts, but I will not let the Dominion pass us over because of your cowardice!”

There was the slamming of a door, and the cloud-covered darkness eventually lured Aleyne back to sleep.

“When I was fourteen, my mother told me that a Nord assassin had slipped into the city of Vulkhel and killed my father during the night. Even as a child, I knew that was only a story.”

“Upon the completion of your studies, you will join me in Skyrim, where you will serve the Dominion’s interests. Do you understand me?”

The now Second Emissary had deemed a week a sufficient period of time for mourning the murder of her husband before departing for Solitude. Aleyne disagreed with that assessment. Clutching the volume of Ayrenn’s sonnets to her chest, she asked, “What about university?”

Elenwen was turning to leave, but stopped. “What about it?”
“Father always said—”

Aleyne registered the sound of the slap before its sting. By the time she raised a stunned hand to her burning cheek, her mother was gone.

“I’m not sure I understand the point of this exercise: my father lost everything, I served the Dominion and my mother until they nearly destroyed me, and then my friend saved me. It’s more Katariah’s story of survival than my own.” The sun had sunk below the ice fields as Aleyne got up and stretched her legs, ready to return to the Palace of the Kings.

Niranye raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps, but you and I both know the Dominion won’t last forever. If the one led by Queen Ayrenn eventually fell, the one led by these incompetents certainly will. I believe these stories will definitely matter then.”

Upon entering the Palace, Aleyne saw three young mages, a Nord, a Dunmer, and a Khajiit speaking with Ulfric and Galmar.

“In summary, we are graduates of the College of Winterhold hoping to use our talents to investigate the Thalmor’s abuses of power, and if you have any information that might help us, we would be grateful,” the Nord mage explained in a voice Aleyne recognized from somewhere.

The heavy bronze door slammed close, and the Khajiit quickly whipped around to see her. “J’Zargo thinks we have just found our first target,” he said, readying lightning to his palms.

“I’ll have you all in a cell if you electrocute our best source of intelligence,” Galmar growled.

“So you know that she’s—” the Nord asked, looking desperately between Ulfric and Aleyne.

Ulfric leaned forward on his throne. “She is a close ally and friend to Katariah.”

A collective jolt of surprise went through the three mages. The Dunmer girl stammered, “Do you know where En—” She recovered herself. “Do you know where the Dragonborn is?”
Katariah had turned Shadowmere loose, trusting the horse to find his own way home. In the pelting rainstorm that drenched her to her skin, she crossed the wilds of the Pale on foot, feeling eyes on her back the entire way. Whenever she looked over her shoulder, expecting to see Thalmor or Imperial warriors with swords drawn, she saw only the wilderness, but felt the presence all the same. When it became certain and unbearable, she turned to the back forest of trees behind her and said, “You can come out now.”

Liselle melted out of the shadows. “In all the time I’ve watched you, you’ve gotten very good at running from things. You ran from your friends in the Guild, the Brotherhood, the College, you ran from Ulfric, you ran from me, you’re running from Solitude. Just out of curiosity, do your feet ever get tired? Mine would.”

Katariah folded her arms. “Tell me why. I deserve that much.”

“Tell you why, what, exactly?” She tilted her head to the side. “Why you run from everything? I’m afraid only you can answer that, sister.”

“Why you decided to betray every person who ever loved you.”

Liselle smiled. “With pleasure. I even remember the day I decided to do so.” She stared into the Dragonborn’s eyes. “Do you remember the day your father died?”

Katariah realized that she was speaking to a stranger. “Oddly enough, yes.”

“I remember how you cried that night, and as I held you, I was struck by the futility of our little island. You, me, our families, all of us would fade with no one to remember us. We are the product of a failed experiment, and when I was in Imperial City and the Thalmor offered me the chance to wipe the slate clean, I—”

“Liselle, I beg of you, tell me the Thalmor forced you, that they put you under some curse, I’ll believe you and we can start again!” Tears filled Katariah’s eyes. “You can even lie, and I’ll believe it all the same, it will be no different, please just come with me!”

The hand the Dragonborn extended dropped back to her side as the other woman dressed in black
laughed. “That’s the Katariah I remember so well from back home, always so desperate, willing to grasp at any fiction if it will mean some place in the world.” She paused, a satisfied look entering her face. “Speaking of desperate, you and Ulfric, right? That was something to see. You trying to hide your jealousy and rage from me was truly impressive. Tell me, have you two fucked yet?” Met with Katariah’s slackened jaw, she pitched forward with laughter. “You have, haven’t you? Gods, you really haven’t changed a bit.”

A clap of thunder rang through the sky, and Katariah reached for Dragonbane’s hilt, but Liselle’s arm shot forward as soon as she saw the movement.

“Not so fast!”

Some force emanated from her palm, freezing Katariah in place. This was no ordinary paralysis spell. It felt as though some ghostly hand had wrapped its hand around the air in her lungs and frozen all the blood in her veins.

Liselle seemed mildly surprised, like someone who had found a forgotten ruby in their pocket. “That’s new. I suppose that’s your soul I’m holding onto right now.” She flexed her hand. “I wonder what would happen if I just...pull.”

Katariah heart pounded as her very essence shifted within her for several agonizing moments. In response to the invasion, her blood burned within her and she collapsed onto the soaking ground, gasping for breath.

Slightly disappointed, Liselle glanced at her palm. “Not quite impressive yet, but practice does make perfect.” Turning around, she strolled back towards the forest cloaked in night. “Until we meet again, Katariah. I look forward to it.”

By the time the Dragonborn had fully regained her breath, Liselle was gone again.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for an unexpected delay, my three big research papers deadlines are beginning to creep up on me like a pack of skeevers, but not nearly as cute. As much as I would
prefer to spend all my time with this writing, I would like to graduate, so priorities D: Like always, let my tired fingers know that all their typing was worth it by commenting/kudosing/subscribing!! Come back soon for a hitch in plans!!
Prisoner's Dilemma

Chapter Summary

As open warfare approaches, two pairs reflect on purpose of cooperation.

Chapter Notes

Next on the playlist: "Slow Animals" by the Strokes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well, this is a mess,” Tullius muttered as he sat in Castle Dour’s war room, forehead in his palm. “I can’t begin to count the number of times I’ve wanted to draw steel on Elenwen and the rest of the Thalmor bastards, but the Dragonborn picked the worst of all possible days to actually do so.” He sighed and glared at the order he and Rikke were supposed to be drafting. “What precisely does the First Emissary want?”

Rikke clapsed her hands behind her back. “An order to all Imperial soldiers to engaged and capture the Dragonborn and any associates on site, and then deliver her to the Thalmor, where she will be executed.” Glancing towards Tullius, she asked, “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Oh, of course.”

“This demand is a clear plot against us. All of Skyrim just witnessed and cheered as the Dragonborn pledged her loyalty to Elisif, to persecute her publicly would cast us in the worst light and would drive even more people to Ulfric’s cause. It could even cause our soldiers to desert us.”

“It’s not a cause, and the girl didn’t pledge loyalty, she promised respect, which is the least anyone could have asked of her.” He tightened one of his bracers as he stood to look at the scrolls in front of them. “But I see your point. Elenwen choosing to make religion a problem right now and for this person is simply too convenient to be coincidence. There are open shrines and temples to Talos in Whiterun and Riften, but the Thalmor seem urgent to make the Dragonborn a martyr, and for us to be the agents.” As he tried to decipher Elenwen’s strategy, he caught a bundle of parchment before it rolled off the table. “Legate, why have you brought all of this here?”

“General, our intelligence grows by the day. Katariah’s time in Windhelm and specifically in and around the Palace of the Kings suggest some sort of relationship between her and Ulfric”
Stormcloak. A romantic attachment or otherwise, this is not a development we can continue to ignore.”

“Gods damn it,” Tullius groaned, “She’s joined the rebellion.”

“That’s the thing, sir. I don’t believe she has.” Rikke leaned over the battle plans that depicted the lines between Stormcloak and Imperial territory. “Ulfric is many things, but he is not subtle. He would never pass up the opportunity to have the Dragonborn fighting for his cause out in the open. But we don’t have any reports of anyone matching her description fighting in the Stormcloak ranks.” She picked up a large scroll from the Imperial Archives. “All of this is emblematic of our larger problem: we have no idea who the Dragonborn is.”

Tullius tilted his head as he tried to read the title of the scroll. “We know her name’s Katariah, and the Empire takes censuses. Do we have a record of her last name?”

“Perhaps,” Rikke replied. “Elenwen claims that Katariah’s last name is ‘Sombrage,’ but considering the source—”

“We can’t trust that,” Tullius finished.

“Besides, it doesn’t help us, one way or another.” She unfurled the roll of parchment. “There are no Bretons, Nords, Imperials, or Redguards born on Tamriel between 160 and 180 with the name ‘Katariah.’ By our records, she doesn’t exist.” She dropped the census on the table. “Do you remember what Elenwen said at High Hrothgar?”

He nodded. “Yes, after the Dragonborn kicked her from the negotiations, she said something about the girl being from an ‘Akaviri backwater.’ The comment and Katariah’s reaction struck me as odd at the time, but we had more important things on our minds that day.” An idea began to form in his head. “She couldn’t possibly be from Akavir, could she? That would explain her lack of a history.”

Rikke strode across the room to examine the map of Nirn on the wall. “No one has crossed the entirety of the Padomaic Ocean since Uriel’s expedition, and she speaks Tamrielic with a slight Breton accent, so I don’t think she’s from Akavir itself. But look at these.” She gestured to a point in between Tamriel and Akavir.

Approaching the map, Tullius squinted. “Esoniet, Ynesla, and Cathnoquey. The Padomaic
Islands.” He folded his arms. “Esroniet has been the center of the Imperial spice trade and an East Empire Company foothold for centuries, we would have found a record of her there.”

“I agree sir, which is why I wrote to the Imperial Library for information on Ynesla and Cathnoquey. By the way, Scholastica told me to tell you hello and that your copy of The Mirror is overdue by nearly three decades.”

Tullius chuckled. “I’m glad to hear that crone still has a sense of humor. What did she tell you?”

“Ynesla is out of the question,” Rikke replied as she skimmed the letter the librarian had sent her. “Apparently Uriel’s forces massacred the island on arrival, and those that weren’t put to the sword died from diseases from Tamriel in the months after. Most records of what happened there were wiped clean by the Elder Council in order to preserve the stability of the Septim name.”

“With those scheming bastards, nothing surprises me anymore.” He folded his arms. “And what about Cathnoquey?”

“That’s where things become unclear. Let me read aloud from the letter.” Clearing her throat, the legate skimmed to the bottom of the paper. “‘On the subject of Cathnoquey, I must urge a person with a promising future such as yourself to turn away from dangerous lines of inquiry while she still has that option.’” Rikke turned back to Tullius. “Sir, you and I both know this woman kept her library open on the Night of Green Fire, saying that she hadn’t closed for forty years and she wasn’t about to start. ‘Surrender’ isn’t a word in her vocabulary, but she essentially told me to back off when discussing this island in particular. There’s something bigger going on here.”

Tullius furrowed his brow. “Maybe you’re right, but that doesn’t explain how this girl made her way to Skyrim.”

“The first record we have of her is at Helgen, where she was slated for execution before Alduin destroyed the village.” Rikke replied, turning to the next scroll.

“Gods damn it all, we had the key to our victory in our grasp, and we essentially drove her towards Ulfric’s rebellion,” the general muttered.

“Don’t blame yourself sir, you nearly ended the war that day, and judging by our information, Katariah herself didn’t know she was Dragonborn at that point, so you certainly could not have known,” Rikke argued, having no patience for self pity. “Fortunately we still have some living
witnesses from the squadron that captured the girl alongside Ulfric.” She called to the doorway, “Auxiliary Ignavius, you may enter now.”

A young Imperial soldier walked into the war room and stood at attention. “General, Legate, reporting as asked.”

“At ease, soldier,” Rikke replied. “You were with the squadron that captured the Dragonborn near the Pale Pass on the Fifteenth day of this past Last Seed.”

“Yes, and I just saw her at the parade yesterday,” Ignavius replied with a boyish grin. “What are the odds of some random runaway actually being the Dragonborn of legend?”

Rikke leaned forward. “You captured her assuming that she was one of Ulfric’s rebels after a skirmish, correct?”

“Yes, General. In fact, we only found her when she started screaming bloody murder after she got her foot trapped in one of our bear traps.”

“Bear traps?” Tullius asked, suppressing a shudder from the image.

The soldier nodded enthusiastically. “Yes General, we set them up to catch Ulfric’s men before they can escape our archers.” He looked as though he was waiting for a laugh, and when he received silence, he continued, “It’s funny because the Stormcloak symbol is a bear, so—”

“Save your ‘jokes for the tavern’ and keep them off of my battlefield, soldier!” Tullius barked at the Auxiliary.

Rikke seemed similarly disturbed but continued, asking, “What did you notice about her when you found her?”

“She was dressed in rags, so we assumed that she had dropped her uniform in order to escape. When I saw her, I remember thinking, ‘If Ulfric can’t take care of his own soldiers, how can he claim responsibility for Skyrim as a whole?’”
“What made you come to that conclusion?” Tullius asked, agreeing with the assessment but not understanding what role the Dragonborn played in the conclusion.

“Personally, I wouldn’t have laid money on her making it to Helgen and the headsman’s axe alive. She looked as though she hadn’t eaten in weeks, and she could barely stand upright on her own, either from sickness or exhaustion, I wasn’t sure.”

Rikke waved Ignavius towards the exit. “Dismissed Auxiliarly. Thank you for your report.”

The second the door shut, Tullius turned to his subordinate. “Make sure that man never gets promoted. If Skyrim or the rest of Tamriel learns that we’re doing things like using bear traps, we’ll lose whatever support we have overnight.”

“Yes, sir. Ignavius doesn’t have much value on the field.” She folded her arms before continuing, “But I believe the information he provided does. You said Elenwen was at Helgen?”

“Yes, she said that they were hunting down escaped prisoners. You don’t think the Dragonborn was one of them, do you, Legate?”

She sighed. “General, you know better than anyone that we work with probability and never certainty. All we know is that something made a near-death Katariah run through the Pale Pass in the dead of night. We will never know what exactly led to that and the extent of the Thalmor’s involvement unless—”

“We ask her,” Tullius finished, “And risk revealing our hand to the Stormcloaks.” He cast his eyes over the various scrolls and letters, and decided, “It may be in our mutual interest to at least try to communicate with the Dragonborn, but there is also some degree of risk.” He motioned for Rikke to pick up a quill. “Let’s try to find some balance in this order, shall we?”

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Back at the Embassy, Elenwen picked up one of the ebony daggers and read the carved etching: “I am alive because that one is dead, I exist because I have the will to do so.”

“Words to live by, don’t you think?”
The First Emissary whipped around to see the traitor casually leaning against the wall and turning another one of the daggers over in her hand. “I’ve never had much patience for Daedra,” Elenwen replied with a sneer. “Or their worshippers.”

The girl laughed and called the dagger from the elf’s hands with a startlingly adept display of Telekinesis. “Oblivion knows that I don’t worship Boethiah, or any of the Princes. But, Elenwen,” she said, smiling as she saw the reaction to the first name, “You simply have got to admire that independant will that is lacking in so many on Nirn.”

Elenwen was ready to be rid of this conversation. “Well, did you use your independent will to track down the Dragonborn?”

“Sure did,” she replied, lazily stretching an arm. “Katariah and I talked, we caught up, we had a great time.”

“And? Did you do as you were ordered?”

“Oh, you were talking about the boring part where I kill her and dump her body at the feet of an Imperial to spur along all of your civil war plans. Nope, haven’t gotten around to that yet.”

“Would you mind letting me know when you’ll get around to it?” Elenwen asked, clenching her fist by her side.

“Where is your sense of presentation, First Emissary? Or gravitas? It isn’t every day when you get to kill your oldest and dearest friend.” She bounced on the balls of her feet while sheathing the daggers. “I’ll have my final fight with Katariah when I have the appropriate venue and audience, and not a moment before.”

“You’ll kill her when you are ordered to kill her,” Elenwen snarled while striding towards the girl in black. However, as her left foot moved to take its second step, a gloved hand was waved, and the First Emissary was sent crashing into the wall, where she was held for a moment by some invisible force before she was sent sprawling onto the ground.

“Don’t think so,” the traitor sang over her shoulder as she bounced up the stairs and out of sight.
As Elenwen struggled to pull herself to her feet, she remembered the theory that two rational beings might scheme against each other, even when it contradicted their own best interests. She had managed to lock herself into an opposite problem, where she was forced to cooperate to her own detriment, or else face the monster that she had revealed.

Chapter End Notes

So there has been a slight influx of new subscribers lately, so I just wanted to say a quick hello and sincere welcome!! Good news: Kat and Ulfric finally reunite in the next chapter, so report back for that, and pretty please comment/kudos/subscribe if you enjoyed!!!
Chapter Summary

Katariah returns to Eastmarch and the civil war.

Chapter Notes

In spite of the grim chapter title, this is a relatively upbeat part with an upbeat song: "Brave Enough" by Christina Perri and Lindsey Stirling. Though I will warn you all, this is a dialogue HEAVY chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So what happened?” Ulfric asked as he pulled Katariah into his bedroom window. “Our intelligence went silent after you accepted the award from Elisif.”

“Elenwen happened,” the Dragonborn muttered, the anxiety and weariness slipping out of her shoulders as Ulfric tightened his grip around her fingers. “She provoked me into drawing a blade, Tullius and Elisif saw, and I had to escape Solitude.” She noticed Ulfric’s furrowed brow. “What is it?”

He slid the cloak off from her shoulders and set it by the fire. “The Thalmor witch flashed the destruction of Cathnoquey in front of you at High Hrothgar with no almost no result, so I wonder what she could have possibly said that would bring you to violence.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Katariah looked to her side. “She mentioned some things about you that I would not allow.”

Ulfric’s gaze darkened in the moments that followed, where he pieced together what might have happened. Without warning, he swept an arm under the Dragonborn’s legs and carried her up into a tight embrace while kissing her neck passionately.

Feeling breathless from the touch and sudden sense of vertigo, Katariah asked, “What’s this for?”

“My protector,” he murmured against her shoulder. “I wish I had somehow been there to witness
“I’m glad that image works for you,” Katariah remarked while smirking slightly.

Dragging his shirt over his head, Ulfric replied, “Let me show you how much it does.” A low growl had entered his voice.

As his hands traced over the insides of her thighs, Katariah forcefully pushed down her own instincts and pulled back from his mouth. “Ulfric, wait.”

“For what?”

She tried to bring her knowledge of Skyrim’s current political climate back to the forefront of her mind. “We should look to see how the other jarls are responding to what happened in Solitude before we—”

“Katariah, I have been going through battle plans all day. I am well aware that a war rages around Skyrim.” He took her face in his hands. “Right now, for just a few hours, I would like to remember that there are some places where it can’t reach us.”

With no more feeble resistance left to offer, the Dragonborn smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck.

During the course of that night, had either of them looked out the window, they might have seen the faint orange glow where Kynesgrove should have been.

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The second to the door to Castle Door closed and the wheels of a carriage were out of earshot, Tullius roared, “Gods damn it!”

In spite of her many years on the battlefield and in the war room, Rikke started. She had never heard the general lose control like this. What was scarier was that she did not have a better solution to offer him. “Can we send men to Eastmarch to stop this?”
“You heard Elenwen, Legate, this is happening right now! And even if we did have the ability to stop it, or just warn them, either the Stormcloaks, the Thalmor, or both would view it as a declaration of war. They’ve forced our hand.” He sat down heavily by the map. “This could be the beginning of the end for us all.”

Icy terror gripped Rikke as she watched a pink sunrise from the window that in no way indicated the turmoil the coming days could bring.

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As Ulfric and Katariah made their way down to the main hall the next morning, they heard the dulcet tones of Aleyne and Galmar.

“Is this a Nord thing? Or are you just pathologically stubborn?”

“This isn’t stubbornness, this is any man’s respect for valor and courage! Read your history and you’ll see.”

Katariah grinned. “I’m glad to see those two haven’t changed since I’ve left.”

“So far, this is calm,” Ulfric remarked as he gently placed a hand on her lower back to guide her through the hall. “At their worst, Jorleif has to clean up the debris from their disputes.”

Aleyne’s point of contention with Galmar must not have been worth agonizing over, as she quickly abandoned the fight when she caught sight of the Dragonborn. “Thank Magnus you’re back safely Katariah, you might be able to talk some sense into this one.”

Shaking his head, the housecarl muttered, “Both of them are heroes of Skyrim, they will not abandon their swords in favor of this cowardice.”

“It’s not cowardice, it’s strategy!”
Katariah shouldered her way in between them. “Maybe we can find some middle ground.” As she tried to get a comprehensive look at the two competing battle plans, she asked, “Do you have any news from Imperial territory about what happened after the ceremony? Tullius, Elenwen, and Elisif all know I worship Talos now.”

Galmar scoffed. “Over half of the puppet-aligned jarls worship all nine divines, or at least accept it within their borders. In my mind, that makes them all the more traitorous to our way of life, but that alone won’t turn them against you.”

“For once, I’m inclined to agree with him,” Aleyne said, looking thoughtful. “It’s unclear what anyone has to gain from saying that you follow the dominant religion in Skyrim.”

“I believe I understand.” All eyes turned to Ulfric, who had folded his arms. “The Thalmor are trying to force the Empire into targeting Katariah. That alone would cause Nords to take up arms against the Legion.”

“Isn’t more of Skyrim joining our cause always a good thing?” Galmar asked.

Ulfric shook his head. “Not if it puts Katariah at risk.”

“If you’re honestly ready to begin this war right now, both of us could enlist today,” Aleyne remarked. “By formally allying the Dragonborn with the Stormcloak cause, she doesn’t have to face whatever wrath the Legion has planned alone.”

Galmar barked a laugh. “We’ll accept Katariah with open arms. But you’ll have to prove yourself!” He tossed an arm roughly around Aleyne’s shoulder, causing her to stagger forward. “We’ll send you to Serpent Stone Island, where you’ll kill an ice wraith with nothing but your bare hands and the love of Skyrim in your heart!”

The combined force of Aleyne’s horrified expression and the knowledge that Galmar was joking cause Katariah and Ulfric to burst out laughing. Catching herself on Ulfric’s arm as she tried to keep herself from doubling over, she wiped the tears from her eyes. However, as the laughter died down, she realized that she was back to where she was a week before: about to make the same decision with the same doubts in her soul. Before she could open her mouth to make her choice, a courier burst through the front door to the place.

“I have one letter for Jarl Ulfric from Kynesgrove, and one for the Dragonborn from Castle Dour.”
After handing the messages over, he turned on his heel and ran back out the door.

Katariah tucked her letter into her pack. “Whatever threats Tullius has in store for me matter less than what’s going on in Eastmarch. Let’s hear yours first.”

Ulfric’s gaze became more serious as he scanned over the parchment. “It’s from the mages investigating the Thalmor. Apparently there was an attack on Kynesgrove last night.” He grabbed his axe from the table and gestured for the three others to follow him. “We need to head over there, now!”

“My jarl, if I might caution you against going—” the steward tried to advise from the edge of the hall.

“Save it for a fight you might actually win, Jorleif!” Galmar called over his shoulder as the four ran to the bridge out of the city.

Making their way towards Kynesgrove, Katariah asked, “Who are these mages that are trying to fight the Dominion? I can’t wait to meet them!”

“You already know them,” Ulfric replied, not breaking eye contact the rising plume of smoke on the horizon.

Aleyne nudged her side. “They’re your friends from Winterhold, the ones that I had the chance to briefly meet.”

The Dragonborn nearly tripped on the path. “I’m not sure we’d call ourselves ‘friends’ anymore. I kind of burned that bridge when I lied about not being the Dragonborn.”

“Maybe you’ll have the opportunity to mend that fence,” Aleyne replied as a small crowd of distressed but unharmed Nords came into view, next to three mages that were trying to control the situation and a smouldering ruin of the village.

The Dunmer mage used a calming tone of voice. “If you all will report to the Palace of the Kings, I’m sure the Jarl’s steward will help you all get back on your feet.”
Underneath the growing commotion, a small boy in the crowd extended a finger towards the four newcomers. “Look! It’s the Dragonborn! And Jarl Ulfric!”

As what remained of Kynesgrove surged forward, Galmar muttered in Aleyne’s ear, “Welcome to the life under the shadow of a legend.”

Katariah asked, “Are there any wounded?”

The Dunmer mage stepped forward. “Everyone is present and accounted—” Her breath hitched as Brelyna fully realized who she was speaking to. “There are no deaths or injuries to report, Dragonborn, the villagers were very lucky as the alarm went up early. However, all of the buildings were lost to the flames.”

“Did anyone see who was responsible for this?” Ulfric asked.

A woman from the back of the crowd spoke up. “It was the Legion. Me and three others saw them running into the night.”

The jarl took a breath before announcing, “Make your way to the Palace in Windhelm, and my steward will find a home and work for you somewhere in Eastmarch. Those of you that wish to stay and help rebuild Kynesgrove are free to do so, with my full support.” As soon as the crowd was out of earshot, he turned to Galmar. “Ready the garrisons in every hold. Tullius will pay for this act of cowardice.”

Katariah was trying to figure out why Tullius would want to burn down a village in the dead of night when a familiar Khajiit sauntered out to greet her.

“I see the Twin Moons have guided you well. J’zargo is glad to see you, old friend, as I have many questions for you.”

In spite of standing in ashes, Katariah found herself grinning. “I would have thought your people disliked curiosity.”

He purred lightly at that comment. “Yet we love satisfaction even more. There are many that say that you came to Solitude in triumph. Yet, carried throughout Skyrim’s underworld, there are those that claim you fled the capital with fire under your heels.”
“Glad to see you haven’t changed, Ennis,” Onmund remarked as he examined the charred remains of the tavern.

Before Katariah could marshal the wits to reply to that, a pile of remains suddenly shifted, and a lone Imperial soldier staggered out into the smoke covered light. Reflexes taking hold of her, she grabbed the bow off her shoulders and loosed an arrow into his ankle. The soldier fell forward in a graceless heap.

Aleyne hurried forward to subdue him. “Just think, you could have used that as opportunity to practice Paralysis.”

Brelyna leaned forward. “Is she still hopeless at Alteration?”

“Like trying to teach a brick wall,” she replied.

“No matter how we caught him, he’s going to regret the day he was ever born,” Galmar growled darkly.

However, the moment that Aleyne reached the heap in Imperial armor, the body crumbled into grey ashes that were carried on the wind along with the ghostly remains of Kynesgrove.

Chapter End Notes

Gotta love characters sitting and talking!! The stuff fanfics are made for!! Join us next time as seven people with vastly different backgrounds try to figure out what happened in Kynesgrove, and where to go from there. Your comments/kudos/subscriptions keep me writing!!
Katariah is forced down a particular crossroads, and watches as others walk past her.

So, song choice: If you want a humanist, more happy song that fits with the story as a whole, "Sick of Losing Soulmates" by dodie. If you want a more depressing song that fits better with just this chapter, "Do You Feel It?" by Chaos Chaos

“Well, that’s unusual,” Aleyne remarked flatly as she found herself holding an empty breastplate.

Galmar turned sharply to the three mages. “What in Oblivion did you magicians do?”

All three of them took steps back while Onmund stammered out, “That’s a Conjuration spell, but none of us had anything to do with it!”

Aleyne rubbed some of the ash between her thumb and forefinger and nodded. “I don’t doubt that, none of them are advanced enough to accomplish something like this.”

“J’zargo thanks you for that...compliment?”

“Don’t take offense,” she replied while getting to her feet. “There’s probably only around a dozen mages on the face of Nirn capable of reanimating a thrall that would last for hours.”

That opened up an entirely new line of questioning. Katariah asked Ulfric, “Does the Legion have access to that kind of power?”

“With their witch-elf masters in the Dominion, anything is possible,” Galmar muttered, but the jarl shook his head with a grim look on his face.
“I’ve seen Tullius’ strategy with magic first hand,” he countered. “He uses mages on the frontlines, but they have never been anything other than part of his offensive force.” He turned a steely gaze towards the now-empty set of Imperial armor. “There never has been evidence of anything that... arcane.”

Brelyna nodded enthusiastically while edging her way into the discussion. “We met a member of the Imperial Synod during our time working together,” she said, eyes awkwardly skirting towards Katariah. “From what I could tell, he seemed underfunded and uncreative, and definitely not the type with enough talent for mastery of Conjuration.”

Katariah squinted towards the south, where the border between Eastmarch and the Rift lay beyond the mountains. “So, where does that leave us?”

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Liselle languidly stretched a cramp out of her leg muscles as she continued to gaze through the spyglass. To be perfectly honest, if she had known that selling her proverbial soul to the Thalmor would lead to her being stuck for hours in tiny watchtower from dawn’s first light while being under the foot of an obnoxious bureaucrat, she might have reconsidered.

“Anything yet?” Elenwen called up to her, the exasperation and impatience clear in her voice.

“Nope.” She cast a sweeping gaze from one camp to the next. “No movement at all.” She smirked as she allowed an unconcerned tone to creep into her voice. “Gods, I heard you talking about how this would be the culmination of the Dominion’s efforts. It seems a little quiet for the beginning of a war, don’t you think?”

Liselle could practically hear Elenwen clenching her fist in frustration. “Keep watching,” she demanded in a strained voice.

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Katariah paced around the wreckage, the charred wood crunching beneath her boots. “Even if you ignore the thrall that shouldn’t be here, this still doesn’t make sense. Tullius has been trying to claim the moral high ground since the beginning of this conflict, so why would he order the burning of Kynesgrove?”
Galmar looked thoroughly unconvinced. “Perhaps it was not an order, but soldiers acting outside the chain of command. It has happened before.”

“J’zargo thinks the Nord dressed as a bear is wrong.” Ignoring the aghast scoff to his left, he continued, “A group of soldiers drunk on a mixture of mead and power do not somehow have the power to reach into Oblivion and call forward a thrall. Ignoring the presence of the undead, this is the work of brutes. In our situation, it becomes the actions of those hoping to be considered as such.”

Katariah dug in her pack for the letter she had received from Castle Dour earlier that morning. Quickly tearing through the seal, she began to read aloud from Tullius’ letter. “‘Dragonborn, Because you left under such hurried circumstances, I would like to take this time to remind you to act with thought in regards to the political situation in Skyrim and the Empire. While I cannot compel you to do anything, know that the Legion is ready to act against any threats to Tamriel that you might bring to our attention.’” She turned to Ulfric and argued, “Tullius wouldn’t write to tell me to be more careful while also sending men into Eastmarch. And his line about threats to Tamriel, there’s only one thing he could be implying there.”

Ulfric looked resigned to the conclusion. “This was the Thalmor. They seek open warfare now.” An expression Katariah could not identify passed over his face as he turned to the three mages. “You will escort the Dragonborn safely to Whiterun.” He looked back to her with a gentle but sad smile. “Jorrvaskr and the Companions remain neutral in the war. You’ll be safe there.” His expression became unreadable again. “Galmar, tell the generals to alert the troops in the field and wait for my command.” With that, he began to walk back towards Windhelm alone.

Aleyne moved to place a comforting hand on the Dragonborn’s shoulder, but missed as Katariah spun around to follow Ulfric.

Grabbing his arm around the wrist, she angrily whispered, “What in Oblivion is this?” Her prayer that the small crowd down the road didn’t hear her was overshadowed by the outrage that this man could simply cast her away without a second glance.

“You’re a brave warrior, and a hero to Skyrim. You’ll find a home with the Companions.” He had stopped walking but refused to meet her eyes. When met with her silence, he sighed and continued, “We were lucky today in realizing that the Thalmor were behind this particular action, but open fighting with the Legion is coming, we can’t deny it any longer. It’s now a matter of whether I or Tullius chooses to strike first.”

Katariah was having trouble seeing why this particular set of circumstances would cause Ulfric to
send her to Whiterun. “But I’m willing to join your cause!”

“You’re willing, but you do not want to.” Cutting off her coming denial, he elaborated, “I will not deny what I see with my own eyes, Katariah. I see your love for Skyrim, but I also see your belief that my cause will not save this land.” He extricated his arm from her grip. “I will not have you risk your life in a war that you do not believe in, and that decision is final.”

The Dragonborn’s blood burned with indignation. “Why?!” she demanded. This did not make sense, he was not supposed to turn her away, they were supposed to face the uncertain future together.

“Because I—” He abruptly stopped speaking before saying slowly, “Because this is the situation the gods have given us, and we have to work within it.” He turned back towards the Palace of the Kings.

The late morning’s light caused Katariah to squint at Ulfric’s retreating figure. “Before you leave, just one thing. You owe me that much.” Her anger remained with her, but it was no longer directed at him. Instead, it was nebulous, taking the form of the indistinct yet powerful forces that pulled her back into the winds. Knowing that while she could barely see him, she had his full attention, she insisted, “The war with the Legion, it does not start because of this. Promise me, Ulfric.”

She could just barely see his nod before she forced herself to turn back towards Kynesgrove.

Keeping her face deliberately blank, she strode back towards Aleyne and the three mages. “Let’s get going to Whiterun.” The last embers in the ruined village died away as the sun continued its ascent westward.

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Nothing yet, Liselle thought to herself while scanning the horizon, her mouth twisting. Watching the First Emissary have a meltdown was certainly a not unpleasant way to spend a morning, absolutely nothing, no change whatsoever, spelled a kind of uncertainty for her future that caused an unfamiliar churning in her stomach.

She purposely dispelled the thought. She knew the Dragonborn. The compliant, eager, giving, lonely Dragonborn. She would play her role. There were no other options.
“J’zargo does not think that what you are saying is possible.”

“I’m telling you, it is! If you add Lightning Wall to a Flame Cloak scroll at just the right moment, you can create a storm of blue fire. My classmate’s cousin’s friend tried it one time, and he said it worked magnificently!”

“Really? Does this acquaintance twice removed still have all his fingers?”

In spite of everything, Katariah found herself smiling at J’zargo and Aleyne bickering over the possibilities of combining various Destruction spells. If someone three months ago had told her that she would find comfort in the elf’s presence, she would have shown them the business end of Dragonbane. Now, she believed that she would not have been able to handle the journey to Whiterun without the knowledge that Aleyne would be with her. Personally, she was amazed and frightened by how long she had wandered Skyrim alone without anyone permanent by her side. At least today, she had someone who had become a friend, even if he don’t think about him, you told yourself you wouldn’t think about him at least for a day.

A brush of robes on either side of her drew her from her self-scorning, and Katariah realized that due to a mistake in pacing, she was now walking in between Onmund and Brelyna. Summoning almost the same amount of courage that it took to fight Alduin, she said, “I’m really sorry about lying about myself.” They could curse her if they wished to, but it was out of her hands at this point.

Over her head, the Nord and Dunmer locked eyes. Katariah observed that they seemed to able to communicate sentences of information without speaking a word.

Brelyna spoke first. “We’re not angry, we just wish that you had just trusted us enough to tell us.”

“We could have helped you. You know that we would have,” Onmund continued, shifting his pack to the other shoulder.

“I know. I was just used to being alone, and I thought it was easier at the time,” Katariah murmured as a glint of enchanted gold caught her eye. “That’s nice new ring, Brelyna. Are you practicing Restoration magic now?”
A glint that Katariah remembered well from the College had returned to Brelyna’s gleaming eyes. “Shall we tell her?”

Onmund nodded in a way that indicated a mix of contentedness and continued amazement at his own circumstances.

“We got married!” the elf squealed, throwing her arms around Katariah’s waist. “I wish you could have been there, but we couldn’t find you.”

For the hours that followed, Katariah found herself divided into two clear halves. Externally, she rejoiced with Onmund and Brelyna about their wedding, asked about the ceremony, how their families were getting along. Internally, she was realizing that life was passing her by. Bit by bit, she had become a collection of heroic moments, at the cost of a story that might include marriage and maybe even a family. That was alright. She was fine with that. But as she looked up the path towards Aleyne, she wondered if her friend had thought about her future this way. If presented the opportunity, would Aleyne choose stability or uncertainty.

Night was falling, and the group of five had chosen to spend the night at a rural inn. As they entered the simple hall, they found it empty, save for the innkeeper and a lone Khajiit sitting in the far corner.

“Hear your fortune, wanderers?” the Khajiit asked, shuffling a deck of cards.

The group drew forward, even as Onmund protested, “There is no evidence for Divination in any of Eight Schools, we all realize that, right?”

“M’aiq takes no offense at your doubt, but asks for your ears all the same.” He drew a line with his finger across the three mages and drew the first card. “The Sun. Your purpose and vitality burn bright within you three. Yet your two friends remain.”

He pointed to Aleyne next, and drew the next two cards. “The Fool. The Magician. You face your new beginning with resourcefulness.” A sly grin situated itself on his face. “Know that she waits for you.”

Aleyne started. “What?”
The fortune teller continued, unperturbed. “She lies sleeping, both alive and dead, until someone opens the box.” His fingers darted back to the deck as his yellow eyes turned to Katariah. “And now the wanderer.”

“This will be interesting,” Katariah muttered, torn between doubt and intrigue.

The first card hit the table. “Strength. Unyielding, you stride to battle.” He drew another card, but hastily stuck it back in the deck. “M’aiq does not think you are ready for that knowledge yet.” Just as quickly, he replaced it with two more pictures. “The Chariot. Judgement. You fly towards victory. Yet you know what you face.” The next card was laid upside down. “The Hanged Man, inverted. She is committed to the destruction of you and herself.” Lastly, he placed a picture of a city in flames in front of her. “The Tower, you fly towards defeat.”

Katariah smirked, the nonsensical nature of this glimpse into a supposed future lending her a comfortable kind of doubt. “How can I face both victory and defeat?”

“The cards on the table speak for themselves but know two things, girl from the end of the world.” He paused as a shudder passed through the Dragonborn. “Like will defeat like, and the murderer of a wife and child will save us all.” He swept the cards back into the deck. “I wish you good fortune in the days to come.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the fourth act everybody!! And belated April Fools day! No pranks in this chapter though!! Come back soon as Katariah and Aleyne face life in the Companions!! As this story approaches its first birthday, I want to thank all of you so much for reading and engaging in this project with me. And always, kudos/comment/subscribe!! Your feedback will carry me through to the end!
As Katariah and Aleyne arrive in Whiterun, see another's perspective.

Next on my characters' playlist: "All I Ever Wanted" by the Airborne Toxic Event

It was approaching midnight as the three mages dropped Katariah and Aleyne off at the gates of Whiterun.

“Good luck with the Companions,” Onmund said as he looked towards the city. “Talos, my grandfather is probably turning over in his grave, wishing that it was me joining up.”

Brelyna nudged her way past her husband to wrap Katariah in a tight embrace. “Keep in touch this time. Don’t drift away from us.” She pulled away to look the Dragonborn in the eyes. “I’m serious. If we have to track you down again, I will make you the prime tester for all of J’zargo’s spells, and that is a threat.”

“I will, I promise,” Katariah murmured while gracelessly wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

“I’ll make her if I have to,” Aleyne added over her shoulder.

“J’zargo thinks that it is time for him and his very rude friends to leave you two.” He helped Brelyna onto the carriage bound for Windhelm, and as they began to roll down the road to the east, he called over the edge, “Moons guide you both, until we all meet again!”

Aleyne looked hopeful as they took their first steps into Whiterun. “I’m glad I get to see another city, this one seems so open and peaceful.”
“There are a few tensions here, but you’re right. Whiterun’s nice, in its own way,” Katariah replied as she ducked to avoid eye contact with Nazeem. “Better than Markarth, at any rate.”

Aleyne’s eyes scanned over the row of shops in the market. “Should we get rooms in the inn for the night, and then speak to the Companions in the morning?”

“Don’t worry about that, we can just spend the night in my house here.”

The elf stopped dead in her tracks. “You have a house?”

Katariah didn’t understand her friend’s surprise. “Yes, I own a house here, one in Riften, and one in Solitude. Why do you ask?”

Aleyne seemed stunned. “You own three houses, but you don’t live in any of them?”

“Well, Breezehome here, and Proudspire Manor in Solitude, they were both gifts, and I only bought Honeyside in Riften to make sure that the Black-Briars didn’t own the majority of the city.” Katariah pushed the wooden door open and called to the woman sitting at the kitchen table, “Evening, Lydia.”

The housecarl looked surprised for a moment, but settled back into resignation. “Honored to see you again, my thane. Welcome back to Whiterun.”

Katariah smiled faintly before turning back to Aleyne. “There’s a bed over there, and the kitchen should be fully stocked if you need anything, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You haven’t answered my question, Katariah. Why don’t you live here, or any of your other houses?” Aleyne folded her arms and waited for an answer.

She’s going to have to wait all night, the Dragonborn thought to herself as she headed upstairs to what was supposed to be her bedroom. “I’ll see you in the morning.” After getting undressed, she felt an unfamiliar pressure hanging against her neck. Taking hold of the piece of copper, she let out a curse that would have made Mara cry: she had forgotten to switch amulets back with Ulfric.
“Please, I’ll say anything you want me to, just let me go!”

Liselle threw an exasperated arm into the air. “Honestly, that’s what I keep telling Ellie. Torture just doesn’t work for that reason. Or, I guess the reason is that it works too well.”

The hapless Orc girl sniffed and looked up in confusion. “What?”

Pacing around the chair, she felt her ankle joints crack and pop underneath her. “What I’m saying is that you know, I know, realistically, Her Eminence the Emissary knows that you hold no valuable intelligence for the Dominion. But…” Like lightning, she lunged on top of the bound girl and held a dagger next to her lips. “When I threaten to cut out your tongue, you’ll claim that you yourself destroyed the Crystal Tower.” She leaned back and sat across from the prisoner. “Don’t you see why that’s a problem?”

“You’re a monster!”

Liselle shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. Honestly, I don’t know what I am anymore.” She paused. “While we’re both stuck here, I might as well start at the beginning.”

She was sixteen, and after staring deep into her blue eyes, Ursula declared, “It is the will of Talos and Akatosh that you see the world beyond Cathnoquey. You will join the ship’s crew and journey to Imperial City when needed.”

Returning the embrace of an overjoyed Katariah, she tried not to pay attention to how lifeless the prophet’s eyes had become.

“I thought it was a blessing: every time my dying homeland began to depress me, I would be able to get a breath of air, I would know that life existed beyond the island.”

On her voyage to Cyrodiil, one of her crewmates had joked that all roads lead to Imperial City. Personally, Liselle didn’t understand the devotion to the metropolis, especially since they were travelling to Tamriel by boat.
Everything changes when she caught sight of the glowing city on the horizon. Everything about it seemed to attract knowledge and culture and life that was quickly fading from home.

It was a place where destiny could be achieved, and fate defied.

“In all honesty, I thought that balance would work forever: I would stagnate, and when it became unbearable, the voyage to Tamriel would give me new life.”

“Tell me a story,” Katariah insisted from across the room, her eager face streaked with rust from her day’s work at the forge.

Liselle stroked her chin in exaggerated thoughtfulness. “Which one? Maybe the epic tale of the scavenger girl from the Alik’r desert and the black prince, you always love that one.” Sidestepping a nudge from the shorter girl, she continued, “Or perhaps the Breton story with the talking animals and the green mage.” She ducked another swat, and a mischevous glint entered her eyes. “Maybe you want to hear more about your love from another land and his rebellion.”

Katariah playfully nudged her with surprising strength. “You know what I mean. Tell me everything!”

“This wasn’t a situation built to last. My home took and took and took from me, and gave me nothing in return. One day I would wake up, and there wouldn’t have been any of me left.”

“Katariah?” She turned to her friend as they sat on the cliffside.

“Mhmm?” Her surrogate sister barely reacted as she soaked up the sun’s afternoon rays with closed eyes.

“Do you ever wonder what our purpose is here?”

A grey eye cracked open. “What do you mean? You know your purpose, and I’ll know mine eventually.”

Her friend’s everlasting hope was becoming exhausting. “No, not for us.” She uprooted a few
strands of grass as she searched for her words. “For the island. The expedition to Akavir, it’s not happening. Ever.”

Katariah laughed. “No shit, Liselle.”

“Then why are we here? What’s our purpose?”

Leaning back on her elbows, Katariar’s mouth quirked slightly upwards. “I’m not sure we’re owed a purpose. Or if we are, it’s our responsibility to help create it.”

“Just between you and me, I always loved my sister. But she was wrong. I was owed a reason to live, and I found it. Or, I suppose, it found me.”

“I’m sorry, I need to get back to my ship, we’re leaving tonight.”

The Altmer man chuckled as she began to walk back to the docks. “I can hardly believe that anyone can spend just one day in Imperial City. But before you head back to your island, let me show you one thing. A souvenir, if you will.” He placed a guiding arm around shoulders. “It truly is something to remember.”

“You would not believe the things I’ve seen.”

“This shouldn’t be possible!”

The Altmer man, Ancano, whisked the white gem off of the table. “So, you see how important our work is?” There was an unsettling fire in his green eyes. “There is purpose to be found in shaping this world, for those that are willing to take it.”

An energy that she had always been searching for began to run through her body. “I want to help.”

“And you can.” The sun began to drift towards the horizon. “Before you head back to your ship, you need only tell us a few things.”
“Don’t look at me like that, you would have done the same if you were in my position.”

She moved through the next months like a sleepwalker. To ease the pains in her stomach that grew when she thought too hard about what would become of her friends and family, she tried to negotiate for Katariah’s safety. Unfortunately, the Thalmor would not hear of it. Ancano, who grew more grating with each encounter, insisted on the so-called “purity” of his experiment.

So that was it. She resolved herself with the advice she had learned from the sea: when the ship is going under, get to the lifeboat yourself before helping others. She would get to her lifeboat.

As the final days approached, it seemed that the gods had a sick sense of humor: Katariah was to hear her fate from Ursula. As Liselle stood in the back of the hall, she gained a bit of cold satisfaction from the confirmation that Ursula was wrong, that even that aspect of their lives was built on a lie.

The sun rose the next morning, and she watched with arms folded as the Thalmor agents placed the white soul gems in a circle around the island.

“Words of wisdom, don’t ever trust a mage who thinks too highly of himself.”

After the flash, the dust cleared. The soul gems shined like the sun for half a moment before settling into a steady, iridescent glow. Unable to look at Ancano or the other elves, Liselle took a cautious step inside the now vacated circle. She had done it, there was nothing but silence left. She was free.

Then came a hacking cough from the beach.

The blood drained from Ancano’s face. Lying on the sand, a white haired figure struggled to stand. Heart pounding against her ribs, Liselle squinted against the sun as she tried to discern who could have possibly survived.

“You said there would be no survivors!” One of the assistants hissed as the girl’s white hair parted to reveal a face.
Terror stopped the breath in Liselle’s lungs. Without thinking, she struck the back of Katariah’s neck with the hilt of her sword.

“If this isn’t a metaphor for life, I don’t know what is: one moment, you think you’ve secured your freedom forever, the next, you’re under the heel of a bureaucrat.”

Elenwen barely glanced up from the stack of papers in front of her. “The experiments with the soul gems are over, making your...contribution to the Dominion somewhat irrelevant.”

Liselle exhaled a breath as she took stock of her situation. Katariah was dead, or on her way to dying in the prison beneath them. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way, her friend was supposed to go out in a flash of light, not choking to death on a manufactured illness. But it was too late now. The die was cast. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“Not quite,” the First Emissary replied, motioning for a soldier to block the door. “You know too much to be cut loose, and I personally adhere to the principle of ‘waste not, want not.’” She cocked her head to the side. “You still want power, don’t you?”

“I said I want purpose.”

“For you, they are one in the same.” She reached into her desk drawer and placed one of the white soul gems in between them, and Liselle watched as the reflection of her face became refracted and broken in its facets.

“Listen carefully, because you’ll only here this once, but Elenwen was right,” Liselle muttered as she twisted her wrist and felt the white hot current writhe under her skin. “Power and purpose are the same. They just have to be reached for and taken.”

The prisoner tried helplessly to scurry into the dark corner of the room. “How could you—”

“How could I use the souls of everyone I know?” Liselle laughed dryly. “Why is that where you draw the line? You can buy soul gems from every merchant in Tamriel, every mage under the sun knows how to trap a soul, the legendary Dragonborn must have twenty dragons worth of souls coursing through her, but I’m the monster?” She glanced down at her palm and muttered, “I’m the monster.”
The Orc tried for a different tactic. “You don’t have to be,” she pleaded. “You can always go back, you can get help.”

Liselle paused. “You want to help me?”

A spark of hope entered her eyes. “If I can, of course.”

Centering the power within herself, Liselle shot her palm forward and grasped at the girl’s soul. She made a faint screeching sound as her essence was ripped from her, and her head fell lifeless against her chest after a few agonizing moments.

“Thank you,” Liselle murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Look at me, updating in a reasonably timely manner :) . I'm trying to time my chapters to that I'll have one posted by this fic's birthday. In other news, come back soon to see how Kat and Aleyne have adapted to life in the Companions, and journey to a very damp but very plot-relevant crypt. Thanks a bundle for reading, and kudos/comment/bookmark/subscribe if you enjoyed!!
Chapter Summary

After the burning of Kynesgrove, Tullius prepares for a journey. Life in the Companions grates on Katariah and Aleyne.

Chapter Notes

Sing along with the author: "Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of Your Fist" by Ramshackle Glory

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days after the burning of Kynesgrove by the Thalmor, Rikke watched as Tullius stared into the map on the table as if some previously impossible solution would spring to life if only he did not break eye contact. The part of her mind with a morbid sense of humor wondered if the map would eventually burst into flames from the glare alone. The hypothetical was a distraction from the bloody wager the Thalmor had forced them into: The safety and future of Skyrim, and perhaps all of Tamriel was at stake, unless Ulfric Stormcloak chose to give the Legion the benefit of the doubt.

They were doomed.

The legate remembered her comrade from the Great War as though the fighting only ended yesterday. She remembered scoffing at the notion that the son of a jarl would give up a life at High Hrothgar to take part in some of the most brutal fighting Nirn had ever seen. She remembered the doubts fading in an instant when she saw the man storm through the Thalmor’s lines, constantly pushing their soldiers forward with sword and Shout. She remembered crying in spite of herself during the hours after the three of them, her, Galmar, and Ulfric, parted ways after the Great War ended, when they were told that they had won. She remembered looking into Ulfric’s hollow eyes and thinking, *If this is winning, I’d hate to see the losers.*

A courier arrived at the entrance to the Castle, and when Tullius made no movement to answer him, Rikke forced her legs across the room and took the parchment, sealed with the image of a bear stamped in wax, from the boy’s shaking hand.

Her brow furrowed in surprise as she scanned the letter.
“Well?” Tullius asked, bracing himself against the table.

“They’re not going to attack.”

Alertness replaced resignation in his gaze. “What?”

She read aloud, “‘The Sons and Daughters of Skyrim will always protect their own, but the Legion will not face our fury today. Remember that the Children of Kyne are not without mercy, and,’” the legate looked up at the general as she finished, “‘that you owe your soldier’s lives to the grace of the Dragonborn.’” Rikke placed the letter with the documents on the Pandomeic Islands as she repeated the last phrase of the message under her breath.

Tullius exhaled a slow breath. “So now we have an entirely new set of problems.”

“At least Katariah’s not out for our blood,” Rikke replied, her voice slightly shaking along with her optimism.

“Legate,” Tullius sighed, “You know what it means if the Dragonborn can convince Ulfric to abandon a fight.” His hand traced over the line between Hjaalmarch and the Pale that marked the western bound of Stormcloak territory. “One of our greatest arguments against the rebellion is that it has no future. That once its leader dies, it will fade away. A marriage between the Dragonborn and the High King tells you Nords that Skyrim has a future in place for those that would follow them.” His mouth settled into a thin line. “For Mara’s sake, even I could be talked into believing something like that.”

Rikke knew what was behind his grim attitude. “Not looking forward to your trip, sir?”

He laughed darkly. “If you’re volunteering to explain to the Elder Council why the Stormcloak rebellion still exists, or why the Dragonborn is not yet a member of the Legion, or how Elenwen’s damn daughter is somehow unaccounted for, you are more than welcome to.”

“That sounds like a job for a general, sir,” Rikke answered with a one-sided smile.

He clapped a hand around her bracer. “Skyrim should be safe in your hands, Legate. Just be sure
that rumors of the Dragonborn do not reach Elisif. That girl is enough of a wreck already without knowing what could be going on between her friend and her enemy.”

“Yes, sir,” She returned the grip on his arm for a moment before letting go. “Safe travels, and say hello to Portia and the twins for me.”

He smiled before turning to the door. “Thank you, Rikke. At least some good may come out of this trip. Long live the Empire, and stay safe.” With that, he was out of the castle and on his way to Cyrodiil, leaving Rikke in command of the legion.

As Rikke stood alone in the silent war room, she found herself praying, *Talos, give me courage for the days to come and…* Her eyes fell on the letter from Windhelm, before she whispered, *and let the grace of the Dragonborn last for just a little while longer.*

--

In the wilderness of the Pale, closer to Whiterun than to Dawnstar, the last snows of Sun’s Dawn had melted, and after the constant storms of First Seed and Rain’s Hand, all of Skyrim seemed to spring forward with new life as mountain flowers and poppies covered the plains and crept through the forests. The only sounds to be heard were birdsong, and the occasional hoofbeats of a deer leading its young to drink from overflowing streams.

It was in this atmosphere of tranquility that a horse drawn cart exploded out of a cave and into the sunlight. Following the cart at a full tilt sprint was a group of Falmer that from an outsider’s perspective might have been classified as a horde, but from the point of view of those in the cart, came across as a small army.

“They’re on our tail!” Aleyne screamed as the cart skittered across the rocky terrain.

Meanwhile, Katariah fought to keep her hands steady as she tied a strip of cloth around a bottle of Black Briar mead. “Steady, gods damn it!” A wheel bounced, and the glass bottle was sent flying from her grip. Just barely catching it before it crashed to the ground, she made her way up to the front of the cart. “Switch with me,” she said as she thrust the bottle into Aleyne’s hands.

Katariah whipped the horse forward as they approached a forest. She was out of arrows, Aleyne was out of potions, and they only had one shot to make this work. Dropping their speed to a near stop, she looked over her shoulder to see the ravenous frontrunners of the Falmer that they had
disturbed approaching at an alarming speed. “Now!” she yelled.

Aleyne threw the bottle with her right hand and cast a fireball with her left. As the cloud of flames that consumed the Falmer expanded towards them, she began chanting, “Drive, drive, DRIVE” with increasing intensity.

It wasn’t fast enough. As Katariah tried to spur the horses onward, the blast knocked them both from the cart and sent them flying through the air. Landing nearly ten yards away, the last thing she remembered was the sight of the cart burning.

After that, her memory fragmented. She had absolutely no recollection of walking back to Whiterun with Aleyne in silence, or entering Jorrvaskr to the sound of cheers. She could faintly recall Vilkas slapping a hand around her shoulders as he announced their “triumph” to the hall of warriors, and she was fairly confident that she replied, “Thanks, Harbinger.” She would lay a modest amount of septims on the fact that Farkas lifted a protesting Aleyne onto his shoulders during the celebration. Maybe Aela leading the Companions in a drunken rendition of “Ragnar the Red” was more hallucination than reality.

Her memories snapped back to certainty as she closed the door to Breezehome behind Aleyne, after she had told Lydia to get herself a drink at the Bannered Mare.

The elf buried her face in her hands and slowly slid down the wall to the floor. “My...gods...” The prayer descended into a cross between a scream and a moan.

Katariah, across the room, was not faring much better, as she clawed at her bloodshot eyes while yelling, “Fuck,” at no one in particular.

“I can’t do this anymore!” Aleyne yelled at the Dragonborn, who was pacing in front of the fireplace.

“That was seriously messed up, we almost died,” she said as she felt the days without sleep catching up to her.

“So you agree?!”

“Yes, that was insane! That was pure luck! I was not in control of that situation at all!” As
Aleyne began another existential scream towards the heavens, Katariah held up a hand and stared as her palms shook uncontrollably. “Look at this, Aleyne, look at my hand! Do you see this shit?”

“Why?” Aleyne stared at her from the gaps in between her fingers. “Why do you keep doing this to us?!”

Katariah threw an arm up in exasperation. “I don’t know! Maybe I hate myself, maybe it’s misplaced guilt that I haven’t processed, I don’t fucking know!”

Aleyne took in a shaking breath and shuffled to her feet. “Let’s get a grip on things. We joined the Companions, you turned yourself into a werewolf for two weeks—”

“Aela and Skjor were standing around a cauldron full of blood, and I didn’t know how to say no—”

She held up a hand before continuing, “Then Kodlak got killed by the Silver Hand because you and Aela antagonized them—”

“They started—”

“You almost burned off my one remaining eyebrow today, I get to recount what’s happened. Anyway,” she took a deep breath. “You and the other three Circle members laid the Harbinger’s spirit to rest, but you, breaking with thousands of years of tradition, ignored his command to be his successor, and passed the title onto Vilkas. Not only that, but you elected to essentially risk tearing your soul in half by curing yourself—”

“I couldn’t sleep, it was driving me insane!”

“But it hasn’t helped, Katariah! You still don’t sleep, and now Aela and Vilkas barely trust you, so now we’re throwing ourselves into the jaws of death, over and over again, for no discernible reward.” She gripped the edge of the kitchen table. “We need a vacation.”

--

The next morning, Katariah quietly pushed the door to Jorrvaskr open and immediately came face
to face with Aela. “Is Vilkas here?” she asked while forcing herself to keep eye contact.

“Downstairs,” the huntress replied, jerking her head towards the stairs. “He’s trying to make sense of the old man’s things.”

“That’s always hard,” Katariah murmured as she made for the bed quarters, but she stopped herself. “Aela, I’m sorry. About everything.”

The other woman sighed. “Don’t be. It’s our way that no warrior owns another. Besides, none of us expect you two to stay here for life. Maybe Farkas does, but he’s just hoping.”

Katariah started. “I’m not leaving!”

Aela wore an understanding smile that seemed at odds with the rest of her demeanor. “But you will soon. My mother used to always tell me that legends are never what are expected, but they’re always what are need. You needed to help us defeat the Silver Hand, and you’re going to move on soon.”

“But I can’t keep on living like this, moving from one place to another.” The Dragonborn felt her bag grow heavier on her back.

“You’re strong, and the moons will guide you towards where you’re meant to go.” She nudged the younger girl towards the staircase. “Maybe the errand Vilkas gives you will help you along.”

Making her way downstairs, Katariah avoided the gaze of the other warriors as she walked quickly down the hall and into the Harbinger’s quarters. “I’m looking for work,” she announced, not able to think of a suitable preamble. “Something easier than last time.”

Vilkas barely moved in response. “That means less of a reward for you and your friend.”

“It’s not really about the money,”

“Then what is it about for you, Katariah?” Met with silence, he muttered, “You better come up with an answer to that, and soon. In the meantime, you can clear out Dimhollow Crypt. We’ve
gotten complaints about necromancers there, but it will be simple for you and the elf.

Another adventure. Katariah wordlessly turned around and headed back upstairs, but was stopped by a hand grabbing her arm.

Farkas placed a glass vial in her hand. “Butterfly wings and nightshade. Arcadia said it would help you sleep.”

The gesture snapped something within Katariah. She threw her arms around her shield-brother and exhaled a shaking breath before finally leaving the hall of heroes.

Wiping some stray tears from her face, she called to the upper floor of Breezehome, “Aleyne, we’re heading out!”

Her friend jogged down the stairs. “Thank Magnus! Alright, we can go the springs in Eastmarch, or maybe visit your friends in Riften, or—”

“We’re going to Dimhollow Crypt to deal with some necromancers. Come on, don’t look at me like that, Vilkas said this would be an easy job.”

Aleyne sighed before heading out the door. “This is the last shot, Katariah. If something goes wrong on this ‘adventure,’ if you get worse, I’m writing Brelyna and Ulfric. Don’t think I won’t do it.”

Katariah forced a confident smile to her face. “Relax, we’ll be back here by sunset tonight.” Even then, she knew she was lying.

Chapter End Notes

366 days (and 279 pages) after I started this little project, and I'm so happy that you all have experienced it along with me. A ton of things have changed for me this year, but this fic, Kat-Aleyne-Liselle, and all of you have been a really nice constant to have. Gods willing there won't need to be a two year anniversary, but let me say now that I cannot thank you all enough for your patience, enthusiasm, and attention. In other, less emotional news, please come back soon for a glimpse into an obscure, shadowy, place. I said it a year ago and I'm saying it now: comment/kudos/subscribe if you
enjoyed!! Thanks again!!
Spring

Chapter Summary

As winter turns to spring, two reflect on the changes around them.

Chapter Notes

Not a great fit but a passing one: "Underflow" by Emma Louise

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’ve never felt so alone,” Katariah whispered against the cool night air.

“You’re not alone.” His reply came from just over her shoulder.

She exhaled a shaking, relieved sigh. “Thank the gods.”

“Come here,” Ulfric murmured as he wrapped an arm around Katariah’s waist and drew her into his chest. “You’re still cold.”

A contented smile came to her lips as she heard his heart beating, she could feel his breath against her cheek. “Keep me warm, then.”

“Always, my love.”

*His love.* The jolt that those words should have sent through her didn’t come. She brought her knees to her chest and nestled into his side. “Since I arrived in Skyrim, I’ve been running, constantly moving from place to place.” Sighing as she searched for her next sentence, she looked at the canopy of stars above them. “That wouldn’t have mattered, except the further I ran, there was less of me that I could recognize in the mirror. I could feel parts of myself breaking off and apart, and those that remained twisting to match the dangers around me.” She allowed her head to rest against his chest.
Ulfric ran a gentle hand through her hair. “It’s still you.”

A tear came to the corner of her eye, but she didn’t feel the need to wipe it away. “I just want to stay here, for just a while longer.”

“It’s a shame this is a dream, then.”

“Wait, what?” Katariah’s grey eyes shot up to meet Ulfric’s blue, but instead found two twin pools of red fire. She threw herself away from the monstrosity and reached for a blade that was not there. However, fear turned to anger when she realized that the dragon made no move to attack her. “I killed you!”

“Zu’u nis oblaan,” Alduin growled as he lowered his head so that it was level with the Dragonborn’s. “Listen well, mal joor. You did not kill me.”

The sense of simultaneous resignation and dread began to creep down her back. “I failed. Everything was supposed to get better with your defeat, yet I have solved nothing.”

A low rumble shook the air in what Katariah slowly realized was laughter. “For a mortal whose pride I could not humble, you yield easily.”

The mocking undertone to the dragon’s voice sparked her anger. “You know nothing of me!”

“Ni orin, Dovahkiin. I see the mortal who climbed to Sovngarde, zeim sos luv, content with turning her bahlok, her hunger inward, wah ek zii. You will not survive that.”

Dark, bitter rage flooded Katariah’s mind as she spat towards Alduin, “What does it matter? Evgir Unslaad, nothing will ever change.”

A deafening roar knocked her onto her back, and Alduin loomed large over her. “How dare you forget the weapon that sent me out of time, dur joor!” He stared intently into her eyes with a look that Katariah would not classify as anger. “Ulse, lingrah, oblaan.”

Understanding struck her suddenly, and she gripped the fresh spring grass under her hands as she
searched for the strength to Shout, “JOOR ZAH FRUL!”

Katariah woke with a start, almost expecting to still have a dragon’s weight on her chest.

“Bad dream?” Aleyne asked sleepily.

“Not exactly,” she replied before turning over and falling into a black sleep.

--

“I don’t care what you say, nothing will ever change.”

“Have a little hope.”

Tullius listened to the quarrelling couple as he approached the gates of Imperial City. Thirty paces ahead of him, they made it to the gate first.

The young soldier grinned in a manner reminiscent of a sabrecat. “Welcome to Imperial City, the visitor’s tax is fifty septims.”

One of the civilians scoffed. “We’ve lived here for ten years!”

“That’s delightful, the residential tax is a hundred. Pay up, or walk away.”

Time to put a stop to this, Tullius thought to himself as he quickly strode up to the dispute. “Let them through, Private.”

Clearly not used to being opposed, he gripped his cheap iron sword with white knuckles. “Who do you think you are, a legate?”

The other man leaned forward as he enunciated, “I am General Tullius, and unless you want to be
reassigned to the southern border, you will let us through now.”

“Right away, sir,” the soldier quickly replied a moment after his face drained of color.

The three imperials entered the city, and as soon as they stood on the roughly paved streets of the Market District, one of the civilians quickly turned to face Tullius. “You didn’t have to do that.”

The general shook his head. “It was nothing.” A disturbing thought entered his head. “Does that happen often?”

“Not always,” he replied. “Sometimes they demand food instead of septims.” With that, the couple turned down one of the narrow streets, but before they disappeared into the twilight, he turned around and said, “Best you get to wherever you’re going. Even a general shouldn’t get caught out here after dark.”

A mix of resignation and dread sitting in his chest, Tullius turned right towards the Elven Gardens. Unlike the markets, this area of the city seemed to have someone looking after it, the marble remained polished and the flowers were in their first bloom of the spring. Next to the boarding house, a priest of a sect Tullius did not recognize stood on a dias in front of a not insubstantial following.

“Hear me now, Children of the Turning Wheel,” the priest demanded as a frantic edge crept into his voice. “The brightest night comes for us all, I have seen the white flames, yet I have also seen the dawn where we will rise as one!” He raised his hands in supplication. “Let us pray.”

The audience took to their knees and began to sing:

“Far in the distance
Is cast a shadow.
Symbol of our freedom
Will bring us salvation.
On the horizon
Hope for tomorrow,
Sweeping across the land
To give us unity.

Look to the heavens

With tears of triumph

To cherish a new life

And suffer not again.

Lift up our spirits

From all destruction

Never shall we return

From conflict we must learn!"

Even as the singing stopped, the air around the new believers seemed to vibrate with an energy that unnerved Tullius. He tapped the shoulder of a passerby. “Who are these people.”

The woman barely shrugged as she took a passing glance at the gathering. “He’s been here for days now, claiming that the city is at some sort of turning point. Or sometimes, he claims it’s a breaking point. Either way, he’s gaining new followers every day.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “Anything to fill a vacuum, I suppose.”

Tullius managed to tear his eyes away from the display and continued through the gardens. It seemed that the controversial sculpture that had been set up still existed on the western edge of the district still existed. It depicted a report, now more a legend from the last days of Great War: nine figures cast in bronze stood in various poses of despair with ropes around their necks and the keys to the city in their hands. Unable to face their people or each other, they turn their eyes inward in disbelief of what they have become. The ending surrounding them varies. Officially, moved by their courage, the invaders let them go. However, most believe that the nooses were put to use. Clearly the sculptor thought so, as the words, “What would you die for?” were inscribed in unforgiving letters in the ground in front of them.

The point of the question became obvious as Tullius approached his neighborhood, the Ta— He hurriedly shook his head and corrected himself, the Heroes Plaza District, named in dedication for those who had fought in the war. Those like him. If he looked closely, he could still see the old name etched in the signs.

He found the blessedly familiar house with the red door and knocked three times. Barely a second had passed before a woman in a purple dress he remembered well threw open the entrance.
“Tullius,” she breathed.

“Portia,” he answered before wrapping her in an embrace. Home may have changed, yet it was still home.

She shut the front door quietly as she whispered, “They waited up for you, but I sent them to bed—”

“Papa!” A small figure ambushed Tullius and grasped his hand while another bounded down the stairs. “You’re back!”

He pushed Calpurnia’s wild hair behind her ears. “Little Pea, it’s so good to see you!” Turning to her mirror image, he had to stop himself from tearing up. “Vera, you’ve grown so much!”

The demands started immediately. “Tell us about Skyrim!”

Shaking his head, he nudged them both back up the stairs. “Your mother sent you to bed, and there will be time enough for stories tomorrow. Sweet dreams to you both.”

After the whines and yawns had faded, Portia turned to her husband. “Was your journey safe?”

“My journey was fine, but my arrival was not. Portia, how are things getting so unruly this quickly?”

She grimaced. “It’s to be expected, the only legionnaires here are those too unqualified to be sent to Skyrim or the southern border. Almost all of them are underpaid, and make up the difference by accepting bribes from thieves and bandits.”

“Things can’t go on like this,” he muttered.

“We’ve survived worse,” she replied as she remembered something. “Did you bring it?”

Tullius nodded silently as he took the dragon bones out of his bag, his mouth set in a determined
“Perfect!” She passed him a lit candle and gently guided him towards the cellar. “Nothing should come our way, but I’ll keep watch all the same.”

“Thank you, my love.”

“Just pray for me and the twins, and it will all be worth it.”

The door shut behind him, and as Tullius descended the stairs, he felt his face redden in shame as he came face to face with the altar shaped like the hilt of a sword. Laying the bones down, he bowed his head in prayer.

_Talos forgive me, and accept this offering from one who does not know how to begin serving you._

Tullius remained fixed in that position until the candle threatened to burn itself out.

Chapter End Notes

This is a reference heavy chapter! The song the street preacher sings is "End of the Beginning" from End of Evangelion and the statue Tullius looks at is the Berghers of Calais by Rodin. For you Oblivion fans, I hope I did Imperial City justice!! Come back soon (i.e. after my thesis is due) to meet the Elder Council and another (well-liked) figure who is more than she initially appears :) Kudos/bookmarks/comments fuel my typing!!!
Three venture into chasms infected with vicious creatures.

“I live!!
Song recommendation: "Hazy Shade of Winter" by Gerard Way

“Remember,” Portia said as she fastened the red cape around Tullius’ shoulders, “You’re all on the same side. Just speak calmly and they’ll understand.”

The general grimaced as he mentally ran down the list of his talking points. “Do you really believe that?”

“Not at all. Everyone on that Council is on their own side,” she said as she gripped his hands. “But if anyone can bring them into cooperating for the greater good, it’s you.”

“You’re the kindest liar that I know.”

Portia grimaced. “Tullius, people like you are the Empire’s last hope. You’ve given everything to the Legion, it’s time the Elder Council at least helps you serve them.”

Tullius glanced towards the door to their home. “The girls won’t be up for at least another hour. Will you walk with me to the Palace?”

“Let’s go.” Gently leading him by the hand, they headed out the door and towards the bridge that connected the rest of the city to the tower that loomed above them all, dyed orange from the rising sun.
At the corner between the street and the bridge, the priest Tullius remembered from the evening before screamed at passersby, “And this I swear to you, although the end of our age has been delayed, it still comes for us all! Our salvation has come from across the sea, and when she arrives in the land of Alessia, stone shall shatter, and the night will shine with the brilliance of a thousand suns!”

Portia watched her husband’s face carefully as a shudder passed through him. “He’s talking about the Dragonborn, isn’t he?”

Tullius stood about to meet with the most powerful men in the Empire, yet this fanatic dressed in rags had shaken him to the core. “How could he possibly know where she came from?”

She did not respond to the question, but asked, “Do you think she’ll come here?” Portia glanced towards the people that streamed through the city streets. “If she tried to claim the Ruby Throne, she might be able to find support here amongst those who want an end to the Thalmor.”

“It would be a nice story, but I sincerely doubt it,” Tullius replied. “She hasn’t even tried to claim any territory for herself in Skyrim. She looks more like a girl than a conqueror, she’s barely taller than Vera.”

A slightly wicked grin came to Portia’s face. “I think she’s a little more than just a girl. There’s those stories about her and the Stormcloak king.”

The general groaned. “How in Oblivion has that made it all the way down to Cyrodiil? And who in Oblivion is consuming it?”

She shrugged. “You have to admit, the story has its appeal: a girl who comes from nothing becomes legendary, and on her journey she steals the heart of a rebellion’s leader.” She continued when met with Tullius’ withering look, “I’m just saying, in the midst of everything that’s going on, there’s worse things to be thinking about.”

“I’m glad my worst nightmare at least brings you some joy. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to explain why your heroine has not joined the Empire as of yet,” Tullius muttered as he stepped towards the bridge.

Portia gave his forearm one last squeeze. “Remember what I said. You can do this.” She backed away into the street. “Come back and say goodbye to me and the twins before you return to
Skyrim.”

Tearing his gaze away from his wife, he began to walk towards the Imperial Palace. As he grew closer, the white-gold marble of the tower became less blinding to the eyes. In fact, he could still make out the brown-red smear where they had hanged Naarfir for thirty-three days,

_They were brutal, and so we made ourselves just as monstrous_, Tullius thought to himself. There were rumors that on the thirty-fourth day, a winged Daedra had swept Naarfir into Oblivion. The general knew that was a lie. The Thalmor leader had rotted away from starvation and infected wounds while Imperial City watched. It had not been daedric influence, but a single arrow of mercy that had ended Naarfir’s punishment.

One of the soldiers standing guard at the entrance pushed open the red wooden doors emblazoned with the sigil of Akatosh. In spite of his many hours in the heat of battle, Tullius clenched and released his fist as he passed through the silent corridors of the Lower Library. Willing his left hand into steadiness, he unsheathed his sword and handed to the Penitus Oculatus guardsman who awaited his arrival. Slowly exhaling a deep breath, the general pushed open the last door and strode into the Council Chamber.

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“Aren’t we the lucky ones?” Katariah quipped to Aleyne. “The necromancers have left, I don’t see any draugr, all that’s left for us is to collect our reward.”

The elf looked unconvinced. “As much as I would love that change in the winds, I don’t think the cavern is deserted. Look over there.” She pointed to fresh tracks in the cave’s damp soil. “There’s probably a sabre cat or bear somewhere in here,” Casting a ball of magelight into the air, she bent down to examine the dirt. “They lead this way.”

The cave grew darker as they walked forward, following the pawprints. Finally, the pair reached the end of the trail: the tracks stopped beneath a collapsed section of the tunnel. Katariah laid a hand against one of the loose boulders. “It must have gotten crushed underneath.”

Aleyne’s ears perked up. “Wait, listen.” She closed her eyes as she concentrated. “I hear voices from the other side of the rocks.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Katariah replied, but decided to humor her friend. “Let me check.” After
exhaling a few centering breaths, she whispered against the darkness, “LAAS YAH NIR!”

In her mind’s eye, she could see Aleyne’s aura come to life next to her, and it turned out the elf was right: several figures lit up from beyond the rocks. Katariah grimaced. “They’re probably just some draugr, shuffling around in the dark. Might as well leave them alone.”

Shaking her head, Aleyne waved a hand towards the boulders. As a narrow path cleared, she replied, “I hear talking. There could be someone trapped back here.” She took a few deliberate steps before looking back to Katariah. “Are you coming with me, or am I on my own here?”

The Dragonborn nodded slowly and joined Aleyne at the end of the tunnel. The pair came to a dead stop as they took in their surroundings.

They found themselves on a stone balcony overlooking a massive chasm. The architecture was not the jagged rock carvings of the ancient Nords, nor the blood-and-moss covered nature worship of the Forsworn. It had the palatial style of Solitude, yet it stank of age, decay, and death. However, it was the corpses at their feet that held their attention.

“Vampires,” Katariah murmured as she examined the withered, pale husks.

“Do you think this is your friend from the Dark Brotherhood?” Aleyne asked.

“Babette wouldn’t do this. Look,” Katariah replied as she examined the amulet the corpse wore. “She’s not an idiot, she would never attack the Vigilants of Stendarr, it would be a death sentence for her. Besides—”

Katariah never finished her thought, as Aleyne shot out a hand and covered her mouth. Before she had the chance to get irritated at the interruption, even she could hear the conversation going on beneath them.

“I’ll never tell you anything, vampire. My oath to Stendarr is stronger than any suffering you can inflict on me.” The boldness of the Vigilant’s claim was betrayed by the quaver in his voice.

Creeping to the edge of the balcony, Katariah glanced down to see the brutal scene beneath them. She could feel Aleyne tense up as one of the pale figures drew a wicked looking dagger.
“I believe you, Vigilant. And I don't think you even know what you've found here. So go and meet your beloved Stendarr.” With a backhanded swipe, the vampire cut his throat. After casually licking the blood off the tips of his fingers, he turned to a woman who appeared to be his subordinate. “He served his purpose by leading us to this place. Now it is up to us to bring Harkon the prize. It’s time we unearth it.”

Katariah turned to Aleyne and whispered, “Ready to go?”

She nodded. “I stun, you strike, then we improvise. Remember the order this time.”

The vampires below pivoted towards the noise. “Who’s there?”

Aleyne popped her head over the balcony’s railing and cast a sweeping Fear spell over the undead. As they staggered backwards, Katariah unsheathed Dragonbane and leapt down to their level while Shouting, “YOL TOOR SHUL!” While swiping her blade through the leader’s neck, she screamed up at Aleyne, “You could have cast Paralysis and made this a lot easier!”

“You need the practice,” Aleyne replied as she blasted one of the thralls with a lightning bolt. “Watch your left!”

Katariah quickly discovered the source of the pawprints that had led them there. A massive Death Hound lunged at her chest and pinned her to the stone floor. Out of options and too weak to Shout, she wrenched the ebony dagger engaged with Boethiah’s words out of her pocket and shoved it into the dog’s shoulder. After that, the cave went silent.

As she shuffled back to her feet, Aleyne scrambled down to meet her. “You alright?” she asked, glancing at the dagger in Katariah’s hand.

“I’m fine,” she answered, hurriedly shoving the knife back into her pack. “It just caught me off guard.” Before Aleyne had a chance to ask another question, she said, “Let’s find this prize they were talking about.” She forced a smirk to her face. “Ten septims says it’s a daedric artifact. Hermaeus Mora’s and Peryite’s are still unaccounted for.”

Aleyne inspected the dias in the center of the floor. “It’s probably just an amethyst, a potion of swiftness, and some vampire dust. But there’s no harm in looking.” She gazed intently at the pillar. “Perhaps it’s like the dwemer mechanism, and if I just push right here—” As soon as she applied
pressure to the button on top of the pillar, a rusty spike pierced her palm. Shrieking, the elf lurched backward.

Katariah frantically reached into her pack for some bandages. However, before she could find anything, an otherworldly purple light erupted from the stone floor as a monolith slowly rose from beneath the pillar. “Aleyne, get away from the center!”

Perhaps unable to hear her warning, Aleyne stood transfixed as a narrow door slid open and a dark haired woman fell into her arms.

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“The Elder Council recognizes General Tullius and compels him to speak.”

The general cleared his throat as the voice of his wife whispered in the back of his head, *You can do this.* “My...lords, I come bearing news of the Imperial Legion’s ongoing efforts in the province of Skyrim.” Perhaps his time in the north had altered his perceptions, as he found himself startled to be speaking to an audience that only included men. Steadying himself, he continued, “While the Legion stands its ground, the Stormcloak rebellion is proving to be an able threat. In my opinion —”

“So what you’re saying is that the best soldiers on the face of Nira are *losing* to handful of barbarian rebels?!” Tullius recognized the interjector as Dyuch Traganius, a man with dim eyes, a trait that foreshadowed his inability to see even the slightest bit of nuance.

“The Stormcloaks are more than barbarians, *sir,*” Tullius replied, trying to regain control of the room. “They have knowledge of the territory, popular support, and many of them trained as legionnaires before defecting. In my opinion, we have two options. Either we divert men from the southern border to Skyrim and concentrate on defeating the Stormcloaks in the open field, or,” Tullius swallowed before continuing, “We make concessions to bring all of Skyrim back to the table.”

A hollow cheeked Breton named Dorielon Blanche leaned back and folded his arms. “You want us to surrender. We look weak enough already after the assassination of Mede.”

“Not surrender, an armistice,” Tullius countered. “As much as Cyrodiil is loathe to admit it, we need Skyrim, just as much, if not more, than it needs us.”
Dyuch sneered. “It appears the general has gone native. Can we expect you to be wearing a bear skin and swilling mead at our next meeting?”

Tullius felt cold rage curl at the center of his chest. “Our armies are made up of Nords, half our trade roots stem out of Solitude, the very marble for this damned table came from Skyrim’s mountains.” He leaned forward at leveled his gaze at the council. “You do not have to like its people or its customs, you never even need to set foot there, but it does deserve our respect. If we do not unite, we will fall. Skyrim might stand on its own, but Cyrodiil and High Rock might not.”

“And how do you propose we accomplish this unification?”

Tullius exhaled a small sigh of relief. *At least some progress.* “We need to reexamine the Talos question. With that divide between us, there will only be conflict after conflict. If we defeat the Stormcloaks, another faction with the same beliefs will rise up in their place.”

Dorielon leapt to his feet. “So it is we feared!”

Tullius furrowed his brow in confusion, “My lords?”

Waving to a guard, Dyuch command, “Allow her in.”

The general felt his jaw go slack as he saw the next guest of the Elder Council.

“The Elder Council recognizes First Emissary Elenwen of the Thalmor and compels her to speak.”

The ambassador gracefully folded her hands and bowed her head in Tullius’ direction. “Such touching words. In times such as these, we must stand together. However, action must be taken in Skyrim, in accordance with the White Gold Concordat. Even…” Elenwen paused to wipe a fictitious tear from her cheek. “Even my daughter, my only child, has been swept away into the province’s perils. I pray for her safety, even as my hope diminishes by the day. It is in her name that pledge before this council that Skyrim will be brought into compliance.” Locking eyes with Tullius from across the room, she declared, “From now on, the Legion and its officers will *never* be out of the Dominion’s sight. Together, we will represent the radical unity necessary for our peoples.”
Tullius found himself barely able to speak, “This cannot—”

One of the oldest members, an Imperial man who looked half decayed asked the table, “Do I hear any objections from any member of the council?”

There was only silence in the Council Chamber for the required ten seconds.

“There is law,” he declared, “And the will of the Empire.”

“Long live the Empire,” the Council intoned soullessly.

Without a word, Tullius turned on his heel and strode out of the chamber. As he reached the door, he heard her oily voice over his shoulder.

“Don’t be too disappointed in your countrymen. Everyone has their price, and the Thalmor were willing to pay.”

“You don’t have enough to buy me,” Tullius answered through clenched teeth.

Elenwen pretended not to hear him. “We do not have time to stop and say goodbye to your wife and twin daughters. We ride north immediately.

Unable to send word ahead to Rikke, or behind to Portia, Tullius could only ride beside Elenwen as black dread consumed him.

Chapter End Notes

So first things first, sincerest apologies for the long unannounced hiatus. I’ve just graduated from college and have been doing a lot of job-hunting and adulting things. Also, not to name names, but the unfortunate end to another white-haired, dragon-aligned girl kind of put me off writing this fic for a while. But the good news is that I am back, and re-invigorated!! Come back soon to see how Ulfric and Windhelm are handling the changing world. As always, comments/kudos/subscriptions are my lifeblood!!
Taste of Iron

Chapter Summary

In the light of Windhelm and in the darkness of Dimhollow crypt, Ulfric and Katariah face unknown elements.

Chapter Notes

Song recommendation: "Woman King" by Iron and Wine

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“May-be this is a blessing in disguise,” Jorleif murmured as he and Galmar strode towards Ulfric’s chamber. The pale gold light of the Tirdas morning crept through the windows. “Maybe this behavior...maybe it’s not that bad.”

“That bad?” Galmar muttered in reply, “Jorleif, it’s that worse. We have to tell Ulfric, today.”

The steward had taken to gnawing the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit he had forgotten he still possessed. “Perhaps if we give it a week, it will simply solve itself.”

Galmar scoffed and roughly grabbed the smaller man’s arm. With a quick jerk, he spun Jorleif towards one of the windows. Pointing towards crowd gathered in the Stone Quarter, he growled, “This is serious. Even my shit-for-brains brother has quit the tavern to join them. Whatever that screaming monk is telling them, it’s having an impact, and Ulfric needs to know.”

“Fine,” Jorleif hissed, “But do we need to be the ones who have to handle this?”

“What in Oblivion is that supposed to mean? Ulfric keeps his thanes at an arm’s length, and that blasted mage is never around when he’s actually needed. There is only us, Jorleif.”

“You know who else I mean,” he whispered, sneaking a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure no one was listening in, “Her.”
Galmar looked confused for a moment before shaking his head emphatically. “Absolutely not,” he muttered as he continued to stride down the corridor.

Jorleif began to jog in order to keep pace with the housecarl. “You know that the Dragonborn could take care of this...uprising, revival, whatever this is.” Receiving no response, he continued, “She’s popular with the people, her voice carries weight even with those that don’t believe that she’s Talos come again.” He nodded, having convinced himself that this was the best course of action. “We need to call her back to Windhelm.”

“Nice try,” Galmar replied as he clotheslined Jorleif across the chest with his arm, stopping him from reaching Ulfric’s door first. “You and I both know that Ulfric specifically ordered that the girl be kept clear of the battlelines.” He grimaced before adding, “Now maybe neither you nor I agree with that decision, but that’s where we’re at right now, and I would pity the man that purposely disregarded those specific orders.” He jabbed a pointed finger towards the wooden door. “So, it’s your job to knock, walk on in, and tell Ulfric—”

The door swung open. “Tell me what?” Ulfric asked.

Galmar wordlessly beckoned for Jorleif to speak. However, the steward surreptitiously jammed his heel on top of the housecarl’s foot, causing the man to let out a gasp of pain, which did not go unnoticed by Ulfric.

“Well, Galmar, spit it out,” the jarl commanded.

After shooting an infuriated glare to his side, Galmar cleared his throat and began, “My jarl, we have a situation in the Stone Quarter.”

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The dark-haired woman in Aleyne’s arms slowly blinked awake. “Why...why are you here?” she murmured.

“Can you stand on your own?” Aleyne asked, slowly releasing her grip. “We were brought here to solve the undead problem.”

“And it looks like we’re not done yet,” the Dragonborn muttered as she forced her way in between
“Katariah, what are you doing?” Aleyne asked, furiously. “I thought we talked about this—”

Katariah smirked over her shoulder. “You can thank me later.” Levelling her gaze at the red eyes in front of her, she continued, “Because I know exactly what you are.”

The pale girl smiled wanly, even as every muscle in her body tensed. “And what am I?”

“A vampire.”

Aleyne jolted back as though she had touched an open flame. “How can you be sure?”

“Yes, how can you know?” the other woman interjected.

“FUS!”

The Shout sent the stranger stumbling across the stone floor. “A Dragonborn,” she murmured as she drew herself back to her feet. An oddly hopeful expression flashed across her face. “This might actually work.”

Aleyne and Katariah glanced at each other in confusion. While the latter gripped the hilt of her sword, the former seemed disinclined towards violence. “What might actually work?” Aleyne asked.

The vampire sent a steely gaze towards Katariah. “You’re the Dragonborn, right? A slayer of monsters?”

“I try to be,” Katariah replied, straightening her back.

“Yet monsters, undead and otherwise still exist.” She stepped forward standing toe to toe with the Dragonborn. “Are you not worthy of your title, or do you simply not care?”
“I care,” Katariah growled, “About protecting the people of Skyrim, and I will care about that until my dying breath. I care about killing monsters.” She unsheathed Dragonbane with a flick of her wrist. “Do I need to kill you to prove that?”

“Do you think you can?” the vampire countered. “If you truly are a Dragonborn and not some loud-mouthed girl, you might be able to.” She drew a ebony dagger that pulsed with red light. “Let’s find out.”

“Katariah you don’t want to do this!” Aleyne screamed. “She seems different from the others!”

“She’s a vampire that sleeps in a stone coffin, Aleyne, she seems pretty typical to me,” Katariah called back as she caught the dagger against her sword’s crossguard.

Katariah’s opponent readied a bolt of lightning to her palm. “You have nothing but hostility and insults. Sorry it had to end—”

“FUS RO DAH!”

The full impact of the Shout hit the vampire in the chest and sent her flying into the opposite wall. After slamming into the stone with a sickening crunch, she collapsed forward onto her hands and knees. This advantage did not move the Dragonborn to sympathy. “Stand up and fight,” she snarled.

The vampire bared her teeth as she lunged across the room towards Katariah, who held her blade up in defense. However, instead of meeting the steal with her ebony dagger, she grabbed her opponent's wrist and wrenched it away, causing Dragonbane to clatter against the stone floor.

Staggering backward, Katariah quickly tried to summon a fireball to her palm and a Shout within her throat. “ZU—” Before she could force the first word of Disarm out of her mouth, the vampire’s fist collided with the bones in her cheek. Crashing to ground, Katariah only faintly registered the sound of Aleyne begging them both to stop. As the vampire crouched over her, she realized she still had one option.

The woman above her smiled, even though her gaze looked somber. “Do you wish to give a last prayer to the Nine, Dragonborn?” she asked.
“Yes,” Katariah rasped, “Merciful Kynareth, please don’t let the vampire’s guts land in my open mouth.”

“What?” The woman’s gasp turned into a grunt of pain as the Dragonborn tightened her grip on Boethiah’s dagger, lodged between her ribs. Her eyes narrowed. “I can still rip your throat open.”

“Maybe you can,” Katariah agreed, “but not before I drive this into your heart.”

“But you’ll still die.”

The Dragonborn grinned darkly. “It’s like you said: I’m here to kill monsters. Living through it was never essential.”

To Katariah’s surprise, the vampire let out a soft laugh at those words. However, her smile faded as an orange glow appeared behind her.

“I’ll burn you alive before a drop of her blood hits the floor,” Aleyne said as she prepared to cast a Wall of Flames.

“I thought you were on my side,” the vampire remarked flatly.

Aleyne shook her head. “Against her, never. She’s saved my life one too many times for that.”

The dark-haired woman cast her gaze over the elf. “You’re a mage. One of the Thalmor?”

Aleyne’s posture stiffened as a blush crept to her face. “I was.”

“A daughter of Coldharbour, an exiled Dominion Mage, and a Dragonborn, this might work.” Standing back up, the vampire abandoned her position over Katariah and strode towards the exit of Dimhollow Cavern.
Clutching her side as Aleyne helped her to her feet, Katariah asked, “What will work?”

The vampire turned around to face her new companions. “My name is Serana, and I need your help.”

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As Ulfric, Galmar, and Jorlief approached the doors to the Palace of the Kings, the Jarl asked, “How long did you say this has been going on?”

“About two weeks, sir,” Jorlief answered as the brass door swung open.

Ulfric’s brow furrowed. “We are fighting a war to restore Talos to Skyrim, I fail to see why my people’s devotion should be a cause for alarm.”

“This isn’t worship, it’s fanaticism,” Galmar countered. “And you have to listen to what they’re actually saying.”

As they made their way to the Stone Quarter, Jorleif tried to explain what they knew so far. “They call themselves Children of the Spinning—”

“Turning,” Galmar corrected.

“Yes, the Turning Wheel. They believe that destruction is coming for Tamriel, and that a hero who brings a storm in their wake will be their salvation. I’ve never seen anything like it, for once Nords and Dunmer are standing together on something.”

For a moment, Ulfric was astonished by his good fortune. “Can’t we use this to our advantage?”

Galmar shook his head grimly. “Ulfric, you need to hear what they are actually saying.”

By the time the trio stood outside the Temple of Talos, they were able to discern what the crowd was saying.
“Thunder and light bow to the coming Storm!” A woman yelled.

“And so we bow to her,” the masses answered.

A man with a feverish look in his eyes found his voice next. “As our world falls and crumbles to ash, she will lead us through the chaos!”

The crowd intoned, “She will lead us to the eye of the storm.”

“Whoever has ears, let them hear.” All eyes turned to a priest in rags, who stood as the center of the worshippers. “The Storm has crossed oceans to walk the soil of Tamriel, and when she reaches the center, a New Age will begin for us all!”

“See what I mean?” Galmar muttered towards Ulfric.

The priest’s words had hit Ulfric like blasts of icy water. However, he did not respond to his housecarl as his attention was grabbed by the hooded figure standing at the other end of the Stone Quarter. One of the woes of leading a city as large as Windhelm was that Ulfric did not know the face of every one of his citizens. Yet he did know when something was clearly out of place. Keeping his gaze locked on the person at the far end of the courtyard, Ulfric slowly strode through the crowd. Normally, his appearance would have caused something of a spectacle, but this day his people were so focused on the priest’s words that they took no notice of him. The same could not be said of the hooded figure, who quickly ducked into a nearby alley.

“Wait, stop!” Ulfric yelled.

Galmar caught up to him. “I’ll order the guards to bar the gates, they won’t get far.”

“There’s no need to do that,” a voice above them replied. Sat upon one of the stone walls, a petite Breton woman gazed down at the two Nords.

“Delphine, I suppose it had to have been you,” Ulfric remarked as the Grandmaster of the Blades landed lightly on the stones in front of him. However, rage curled at the center of his chest as he realized the full implications of the priest’s words. “How could you do this to Katariah? You’re
one of her sworn servants, and you expose her story to everyone in Skyrim?”

Delphine met Ulfric’s glare head on. “First of all, the Dragonborn has made it infinitely clear that she has no use for my service.” She folded her arms and looked past Ulfric and towards the crowd. “I just need to get her attention and soon.”

“Why? What’s the hurry?”

“She needs to return to Skyhaven Temple, just once more. Esbern is dying.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm back, and I have no excuses for this unprecedented hiatus. For some reason, I haven't been finding myself in the best mental space to write, but hopefully this chapter will spur me along. Come back (hopefully) soon to journey towards Castle Volkihar, and happy holidays to all of you! Pretty please comment/kudos/subscribe!

End Notes

This is my first fanfiction ever, so I am so excited to get this ball rolling. In this writing, I hope to develop some of the personalities seen in Skyrim, particularly in the Civil War Quest line. Getting there is going to be one hell of a challenge for me, though. Please comment with any thoughts or suggestions!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!