The Bonds of Civility

by joyofthejoui

Summary

The Dragonborn asked for a truce. Ulfric Stormcloak asked for her hand in return. Neither of them knew what they were getting into.

A whole lot of politics, drama, and a backstory involving the Great War and the Aldmeri Dominion, that's what.

Chapter 31 posted: Tanulvie gets to know Ondolemar. The Great War Flashback continues for Ondolemar, Elenwen, Emilin, and Ulfric.
Chapter Notes

Typically, love in Skyrim is as earnest as the people who live here. Life is hard and short, so there is little room for long courtship. - Maramal

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

3 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Windhelm

It began with a plain white missive sealed in red wax, addressed simply To The Dragonborn, and delivered to her room at Candlehearth Hall.

Lady Cecilia,

Against my better judgment, I have agreed to attend the peace conference at High Hrothgar. There can be no real peace in Skyrim until her oppressors are expelled, but if a short truce allows you to strike down the World-Eater at last, it will be well-done.

Yet, I must still take thought for the aftermath of your victory. Clearly, the great beneficiary of this truce will be the Jarl of Whiterun. You will buy Balgruuf time to prepare against the attack I had already prepared. In the end, the cost of this truce will be paid in the blood of my men and women. Therefore, despite wishing you the best in your fight against the World-Eater, in these negotiations, I must push for the best deal for the Stormcloak army.

What concessions are you willing to make, Dragonborn?

Regards,

Ulfric, Jarl of Windhelm

The response, scribbled on the back of the original letter and sent posthaste up to the Palace of the Kings:

Jarl Ulfric,

You already know I’m not joining your rebellion, and it’s not as though General Tullius or Jarl Balgruuf takes orders from me.

Cecilia Varo

On writing this reply, the author immediately vacated Windhelm.

11 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Ivarstead

The follow-up, delivered by courier a week later to the Vilemyr Inn, Ivarstead.

Lady Cecilia,

I know well I must abide your decision to stay out of the war. I could lecture you until I turned blue
in the face on how much Skyrim needs the Dragonborn’s service in her moment of need, and it would not move you. I am only thankful that you have similarly refrained from aiding the Imperial army against us.

I will never demand you fight for me, but I have decided on the concession I must have as a condition of this truce. Cecilia Varo, I am asking now for your hand in marriage, once the World-Eater is defeated. It should go without saying that I have no intention of tying you down to Windhelm after marriage. The Dragonborn belongs to Skyrim, not to me.

A short “Yay” or “Nay” will suffice. I trust your honour to bind you to your decision.

Ulfric Stormcloak

“But he’s old,” protested Lydia.

Cecilia Varo, Dragonborn, citizen of Cyrodiil and the heroine of this story, nodded emphatically. “Very old. He fought in the War. My parents fought in the War.”

“Gross.” Lydia threw the letter down on the floor and turned to face her thane who was sprawled out in full glass armour on the only rentable bed in the inn. She’d flopped down there after giving Lydia the letter to read.

“Yes. Really gross. Really, really gross.” Cecilia pushed herself up on one elbow and fixed her housecarl with a glare that was really meant for the absent Ulfric. “I’m glad you understand, Lydia. I want you to talk me out of marrying him.”

“My Thane! You’re considering his offer?”

Cecilia groaned and sat up completely. “What can I do, Lydia? I need this peace. I can’t let Alduin feast on the dead till he’s satisfied. Ulfric’s got me where he wants. He couldn’t recruit me to the Cause, but now he’ll have the Dragonborn as a consort.”

“You could offer to join the Stormcloaks instead.”

“I’d rather die.”

“My Thane . . .” Lydia – blunt, sarcastic Lydia who never hesitated to speak her mind - seemed lost for words.

“Give it to me straight,” Cecilia advised her.

“What are you thinking? You won’t give him your soul, so he can have your body? That’s rubbish! If he’s married to the Dragonborn, it doesn’t matter if you never fight for him. Skyrim will flock to his banner! You’d be signing the Empire’s death warrant. If you can accept that, why can’t you just join the war instead?”

Cecilia shook her head. “I will never take up arms against the Empire.”

“So why didn’t we join the Legion when we had the chance?”

Cecilia had actually been asking herself this very question for the last two weeks. She’d been angry after Helgen, as she had every right to be. She’d imagined writing letters to the right people in Cyrodiil and having General Tullius drummed out of the service. That had been an idle fantasy, she
now realized. In time, she might have taken up arms with the Imperial Legion, just as her ancestors had done in every other crisis. But time had run out on her atop the Throat of the World.

“General Tullius tried to cut off my head, please remember that.” If she said it very confidently, Lydia might accept it.

“Bastard.”

“Really, this is all his fault,” Cecilia continued, warming up to her theme. “Oafish Imperials who don’t know Skyrim from the Nibenay . . .” Seeing the skeptical look on Lydia’s face, and recognizing that she, Cecilia Varo, was also an Imperial completely out of her depth in Skyrim, she trailed off. “No, that’s not fair. It’s all the Thalmor’s fault. That’s what they want us to do. Forget that.”

“So if you marry Thalmor asset Ulfric Stormcloak-“ Lydia began, but Cecilia cut her off.

“Dormant Thalmor asset.”

“That makes it all right then.”

Cecilia hadn’t shared Ulfric Stormcloak’s dossier with many people: only Lydia, Delphine, and Esbern, and she already regretted having shown it to the last two, given their recent falling-out over Paarthurnax. It might not matter now, but if Delphine ever saw an opportunity for the Blades in using the dossier, she’d take it. Lydia, on the other hand, Cecilia trusted implicitly.

“If I thought for a second Ulfric was consciously working with the Thalmor, I’d kill him myself. But I don’t. And you don’t either, Lydia.”

“Hmmpff.”

“They manipulated him at Markarth, that’s obvious, and whatever I decide now, I need to confront him about the dossier. But not while our peace treaty hangs in the balance.”

“Very well then. You agree to Ulfric’s conditions, defeat Alduin, what happens next?”

“Isn’t it a bit crazy we’re discussing this as if defeating Alduin is just a tiny little detail?”

“Everything’s crazy following you around, my Thane.”

Cecilia burst out laughing. “Damn right. Lydia.”

Two hours later. The Dragonborn was at last out of her armour and pacing the floor of the room in her underclothes while Lydia sat with her back against the door to keep the bard out. This was immensely unfair to Miss Lynly Star-Sung who owned the other bed in this room, but what sort of inn had not one private room? Lydia was already relegated to the floor when they stayed here. (At her own insistence, though Cecilia had never tried to dissuade her.) One hoped none of the delegates to the peace conference were planning on staying at the inn.

“I won’t let Jarl Ulfric have it all his way,” Cecilia announced, stopping mid-pace.

“I know, my Thane. You’ve said that. About a hundred times.”

“Don’t roll your eyes, Lydia. My grandfather was a career diplomat. I just have to draw on all my diplomatic blood.”
Despite Cecilia’s boast, the late Falco Attius had not been a very successful diplomat. His last post before the Great War had been an embassy to the Thalmor, during which they’d completely pulled the wool over his eyes. Falco was insistent the Thalmor wanted peace until the 31st of Frostfall, a day after the Blades’ heads were gifted to the Emperor.

Going strictly by his diplomatic precedent, Cecilia realized she would probably read this situation wrong, make the worst decision possible, and then have to live it down for the next couple decades. Killing dragons was a lot easier than diplomacy.

“I can’t settle for just a temporary truce,” she said at last. “If I do marry the Jarl of Windhelm, I have to be working towards peace for Skyrim.”

“There’s no peace in Skyrim,” Lydia replied firmly. “You can’t stop a bunch of Nords from bludgeoning each others’ brains out. It’s our way of life.”

Cecilia began pacing again. “I’ll be honest, Lydia. I don’t really care about peace in Skyrim.”

“Oh dear.” Lydia’s monotone revealed no shock or concern at this revelation.

“We’ll be back to war with the Dominion before you know it and Skyrim can’t keep out of it.”

“Jarl Ulfric doesn’t want to keep out of it,” Lydia pointed out. “He’s always talking about invading the Summerset Isles once this war’s over.”

Cecilia snorted. “After he’s killed half of Skyrim’s fighters. Lydia, I swear, he makes me so, so angry.”

“My Thane, turn him down, I beseech you.”

Lydia said this with such sincerity and gravity that Cecilia almost agreed to this request. Could she call Ulfric’s bluff here? He believed enough in the Dragonborn and the threat of Alduin to enter a truce. If she refused him this concession, were there others he would take instead? She’d avoided being drawn into these discussions, but hadn’t there been talk in both Solitude and Windhelm about trading control of holds? She could turn Ulfric down, then really push for him to get the Reach. Couldn’t she?

She’d prefer if Ulfric did not get the Reach. At least not while Thongvor Silver-Blood was lined up to become Jarl.

“I’m going to die with my boots on, Lydia. Against Alduin or the Thalmor, I don’t know which. And if it’s not Alduin, there’s worse I could do to prepare for the latter than become the Lady of Windhelm.”

Lydia sighed. “Do what you will. I am sworn to follow you, wherever your path takes you.”

“Thanks, Lydia, I do appreciate you. And who knows, maybe the Jarl won’t be so keen on marrying me once he knows all about me.”

The banging on the door started up again. Lynly Star-Sung wanted her bed very badly, and Cecilia was at last ready to let her have it.
The great powers of Skyrim arrived at High Hrothgar at last. Cecilia and Lydia had climbed up the Steps the day before. So they could look down on the others huffing and puffing up the final steps, Cecilia claimed. So that they could avoid any chance of meeting Ulfric Stormcloak on the path, both Cecilia and Lydia understood.

The first to arrive at the conference were Delphine and Esbern. It was a frosty meeting. Cecilia had been mostly just flummoxed when the Blades demanded she kill Parthuurnax. In the time since, she’d dreamed up many angry, indignant speeches to set them straight. But meeting them here, she realized that she was not actually very good at confrontation and Delphine kind of scared her. She mumbled a few words, then fled to the Greybeards’ dormitory.

Lydia came to fetch her an hour later. “The Jarl of Windhelm has arrived, my Thane.”

“I’m not going to talk to him. If we’re seen talking privately, it’ll make the others suspicious. Lydia, just deliver my message. Tell him I say, ‘Yay.’”

The next week was the most important of Cecilia Varo’s life. And this story will skip over it completely, because everyone already knows the tale of how the Dragonborn lured the dragon Odahviing into her trap, how she took to the skies to enter Skuldafn, and in Sovngarde united with the great warriors of old to shout down Alduin the World Eater.

This is the tale of the cosmically much less important things that happened after. It is not a romance, although marriage and love do both figure in it. And while our heroine is the Dragonborn, and Ulfric Stormcloak is committed to play a role, it’s as much the story of a greying middle-aged Imperial battlemage and his lifelong one-man-war against the Thalmor . . . but we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

Next up: 22 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Dragonsreach. Not exactly the worst day in Jarl Balgruuf’s life – he was in the War after all – but not one of the best.

Here’s a fic about politics and families, starring a Dragonborn who, as Dragonborns go, is not exactly hitting it out of the ballpark. She’s defeated Alduin, which is really the important thing, but it would never have crossed her mind to tangle with the Thieves’ Guild, join the Companions, destroy or join the Dark Brotherhood, become Arch-Mage, or do every random quest the NPCs wanted help with. Her preferred battle style is to hang back and let others do the heavy lifting while quietly firing spells from a corner.

Also, because this first chapter may be a bit deceiving, she isn't the sarcastic irreverent free spirit she imagines herself. Ulfric Stormcloak evidently thinks she’s a pushover and . . . But I’ll save the character development for the next chapter, as well as the introduction of some other main characters.

Your author is a huge nerd, so the title is actually taken from a history book: Eiko Ikegami's ”Bonds of civility: aesthetic networks and the political origins of Japanese
culture". The appropriateness of the borrowing is questionable, but the phrase was stuck in my head. I think Elenwen (slated to appear in this fic) would appreciate it.
Being honorable might make you a good man, but it doesn't make you right. Be a better world if it did. – Captain Aldis
dragons. Jarl Balgruuf was on his feet at the porch’s far end, looking out across the dawn-touched landscape of his hold. Irileth stood on guard behind him.

Irileth had refused to drink on duty, but Balgruuf had drunk as much or more than any other Nord there. It was a wonder he was standing erect, having a fairly sensible conversation with his housecarl. At first, drifting towards sleep, Cecilia didn’t really register what they were talking about. But then a phrase pierced her consciousness and she could sleep no more.

“We’ll be hearing from Ulfric soon enough” were Irileth’s words.

Cecilia stood up, rubbed her eyes, and teetered down the porch towards the pair. They turned to meet her. Balgruuf was smiling, Irileth was as severe as ever.

“I need to tell you something,” Cecilia blurted out. “You’re not going to like it.”

Irileth raised her eyebrows. “Is it a private matter?” She gestured down the Porch to the Companions, who had stopped talking and were now watching them intently.

“It’s going to be public,” said Cecilia despairingly. “I’m going to do something that will make everyone angry.”

“And you can’t just not do it?” Balgruuf sounded more puzzled than worried.

“I gave my word.”

“Truly she’s a Nord after all,” Irileth commented drily. “Spit it out, Varo.”

The sentence that next came from Cecilia’s mouth was mostly inaudible. Something like “-missedahfricstormcloakaaahmarry’em.”

“Pardon me?” asked Irileth.

“I promised Ulfric Stormcloak that I’d marry him!”

Balgruuf’s jaw dropped. Irileth swore in Dunmeris.

“That’s how I got him to agree to the truce,” Cecilia continued. Her eyes felt hot and prickly. She was going to cry, right here, as if she was the victim of this decision, rather than the two people in front of her. She was disgusted with herself, but couldn’t stop it.

“What an utterly idiotic thing to do!” Irileth’s scorn cut like a knife. “My Jarl, we must keep her here in Whiterun till her family can collect her.”

“But I promised!” Cecilia protested.

“Then be thankful we didn’t,” snapped Irileth. “My Jarl, give the order.”

Balgruuf seemed, at last, to stir from his shock. “Don’t be daft, Irileth. You can’t keep the Dragonborn locked up.”

“Let me try.”

“I don’t want to fight you!” cried Cecilia. The tears were rolling down her face. “I’d never ever fight for Ulfric Stormcloak. I promise you.”

“Does Ulfric know that?” asked Balgruuf.
Cecilia nodded.

“It won’t matter,” said Irileth. “He has her. The rest will follow. Damned cradle robber.”

“If I could interrupt—“ One of the Companions was approaching them now. One of the dark-haired hero twins, Cecilia did not know him by name.

“No, Farkas, you may not,” snapped Irileth.

“Look, I don’t know anything about politics. And that’s okay, because I’m a Companion and we’re not supposed to get involved in politics. All I know is this: if the Dragonborn is going to Windhelm to be married, she needs an honour guard.”

“And the Companions would be that honour guard?” Balgruuf asked mildly.

Farkas nodded. “It’s the least we can do. Right, guys?” He appealed to the others.

“If you let me sleep off my hangover first, I’m in,” the red-headed woman replied.

“Not a bad idea, really,” the other twin put in. “But does the Dragonborn actually want to go to Windhelm?”

Everyone was staring at Cecilia.

“I will go to Windhelm and see this through,” she said at last. “I am sorry, Irileth. You probably could have advised me better. And you, my Jarl,” she began to choke up addressing Balgruuf, “I have not repaid your kindness as you deserved. I will resign my title as Thane.”

Balgruuf shook his head. “You killed the World-Eater. You even trapped a dragon on my own porch. I will never forget your services. And it is too late to chide you for your choice. Irileth, I am going to sleep. We will discuss this later. Who knows what end the gods have in store for all of us?”

Irileth nodded. “As you wish, my Jarl.” Her fiery eyes still bore into Cecilia, but she said nothing more.

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22 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

When the World-Eater was defeated, the shouts of the dragons at the Throat of the World shook Skyrim itself. Many were paralyzed in fear at the sound, believing this must be the End of the World at last. Ulfric Stormcloak, however, let out a great and joyous shout.

“It’s over, my friend,” he turned to Galmar Stone-Fist with the lightest of hearts. “Alduin has fallen.”

“How do you know?” Galmar demanded. “They sound like they’re getting ready to swoop down on us one last time.”

“I hear their shouts. Alduin is dead, slain by the Dragonborn.”

“I suppose you’d know.” Galmar still sounded skeptical, but as in all things, he was ready to trust in Ulfric.

The official news of the Dragonborn’s victory came by courier two days later. The Dragonborn, the courier said, was returning to Whiterun. It was unknown what she planned to do next.
And so, while Whiterun was toasting its adopted daughter, Ulfric Stormcloak sat quietly by the fire in his bedroom, sharing a cup of mead with his closest friend and listening to the sounds of celebration outside the Palace walls.

“Do you really think she’ll come to you?” asked Galmar suddenly.

“She will. Her word is her bond.”

Galmar sighed. He had been opposed to this venture from the start. They could have had the Reach if they’d held out for it in the peace talks. Instead, Ulfric had settled for Falkreath, just because he’d had the promise of the Dragonborn.

“I don’t trust her. At all,” Galmar continued. “She’s an Imperial, through and through. You haven’t changed her, Ulfric.”

“I don’t imagine I have. But she cares enough for Skyrim, and the people believe she cares even more than she does.”

Despite the arrangements he’d made, Ulfric did not actually know whether he liked the Dragonborn. She was so quiet, so retiring and shy in all their previous encounters: to all appearances a model young Nibenese noble-woman who had no place trekking through the wilds of Skyrim. His intuition told him this wasn’t the true or full character of Cecilia Varo. There were at times flashes of anger in her pale blue eyes, and laughter as she conferred quietly with her housecarl. Others who knew her assured him she could talk up a storm when she was at ease. He had never been able to put her at ease.

But he was certain he could trust her. The same family connections that had Galmar worried reassured him. She came from a family who had fought hard and suffered terribly at the hands of the Thalmor. That family had taught her to worship Talos from her birth, in defiance of the White-Gold Concordat. She had a Nord grandmother who was yet living in Skyrim.

Of course, there was also the Altmer connection: surely an insignificant drop of blood in Cecilia Varo’s veins, but distressingly significant if she could really do half the magic rumours said. He had no grudge against battlemages, but his people were rightly skittish around magic, particularly magic of elven origin.

He dismissed his worries. Cecilia Varo had behaved herself so far in his hold. She seemed to know what Nords expected of her and how to win their approval. That would hardly change once they were married.

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23 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Somewhere along the Gold Coast, Cyrodiil

Two bedraggled figures emerged from the rain.

“You can’t keep doing this,” the innkeeper said when she saw them come through the door. “Is that your blood, Junius?”

The man shook his head. “It’s Emilin’s,” he said, motioning to his Bosmer companion.

“But I’m all right now,” Emilin said quickly. She pulled off her sopping wet coat. Underneath, her tunic hung in bloody shreds. “Do you have some spare clothes I can borrow, Hannah?”
“I’m telling you. You can’t keep doing this. Those goldskins are swarming the coast looking for you.”

“They know exactly who I am,” the man demurred. “And where to find me when I’m at home.”

“And they know that’d go badly for them,” Emilin chimed in.

“My wife is dead, my in-laws are in Skyrim, and my daughter’s safe with them,” the man continued. “So I can keep doing this as long as I want to.”

“All right, have it your way.” Hannah turned to the Bosmer. “I’ll find you something to wear, though it’ll be too large for you.” She turned back to see the man sitting at her bar and biting into an apple. “I hope you’re planning to pay for that, Junius.”

“Put it on my tab.”

She did, though she doubted he would ever pay it off. One apple – half a septim. Charged to the tab of Junius Varo.

Chapter End Notes

Upcoming: Ulfric Stormcloak and Cecilia Varo actually have a conversation in the same room, together. Balgruuf has a head-ache, Elenwen does some overdue investigation into the Dragonborn, and the mysterious Junius Varo gets the shock of his life. Maybe he can’t keep doing this. Whatever "this" is.
Sometimes I miss the soldier's life, but when I hold my daughter in my arms, I know I made the right choice. - Amren

See the end of the chapter for more notes

23 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Jorrvaskr, Whiterun

After an uneasy day-long sleep in a spare bedroom of Dragonsreach, Cecilia Varo had decamped to the Hall of the Companions. She could have walked down to Breezehome, her own house in the city, but she couldn’t face being alone with Lydia and the depressing conversations they would inevitably have. Her new friends in the Companions, even if they were nursing major hangovers, were wonderfully cheery about her plans. It made for a pleasant distraction.

She’d snuck out of Dragonsreach without seeing Balgruuf or Irileth. Proventus Avenicci had tried to stop her from leaving, but she and Lydia had ignored him and the guards hadn’t interfered. Outside, the city was a mess from last night’s festivities. A few dutiful citizens had begun cleaning the streets, but most of Whiterun’s people were probably still recovering from the fun. At the foot of the Cloud District stairs, Cecilia had stopped at the shrine of Talos and knelt in a short prayer for guidance. It might have been a longer one, if Heimskr hadn’t interrupted to tell her that, now she’d defeated Alduin, Talos wanted her to liberate Skyrim from the Empire and the Elves. She didn’t think this really counted as an answer to her prayer.

The Companions had welcomed her with open arms the moment she walked in. She had never thought of joining them – she wasn’t a fighter in the traditional sense – but now she’d been to Sovngarde and met Ysgramor himself, which she guessed counted for something? Not membership in the Companions, but recognition as a fellow warrior.

They were arguing now about who would have the honour of going to Windhelm with her. It did not seem that any one of them had the final decision. The Harbinger, Kodlak Whitemane, had given his blessings to the mission but warned that there was other business the Companions were needed on. They could not all rush off to Windhelm, forsaking their other duties.

It had been Farkas’ idea, so everyone agreed he was going. The red-haired archer, Aela, insisted she was going because she had agreed first. The one Dunmer Companion – Cecilia hadn’t caught his name – declared he’d only go to Eastmarch if he was dragged there, but the rest were vying for the honour of joining the Dragonborn’s guard.

“Gods, their lives must be sooo boring,” Lydia suddenly whispered in Cecilia’s ear. Cecilia choked on her laughter.

“My ears are pretty sharp, Lydia,” Aela called merrily across the room.

“You’re all in a pretty fuss about who gets to perform the heroic task of attending a wedding,” Lydia teased. “What am I supposed to think?”

“That we’ll go anywhere there’s food, drink and fun? You’d be correct.”
The other twin, Vilkas, cleared his throat. “There may be trouble on the way to Windhelm. Or after we arrive. I know it’s still a secret why the Dragonborn is going there, but secrets have a way of spreading.”

“I shouldn’t have said all that on the Porch,” Cecilia admitted. “Servants, friends, I don’t really know who heard.”

“Hey, if you hadn’t said it there, I wouldn’t have heard it,” Farkas pointed out consolingly.

Everyone laughed, but it was true. Farkas had defused a tense situation with the Jarl. And now the Companions were giving her an escort, and if the Empire or anyone else tried to interfere, they’d make short work of them. Cecilia was truly grateful to Farkas for his intervention.

In the Jarl’s quarters of Dragonsreach, Balgruuf had a horrible headache. He had tried to sleep for several hours, yet when at last he drifted off he was soon woken by Dagny poking him repeatedly in the shoulder blades. She was demanding he make Nelkir give her back her necklace. Not for the first time in his life, Balgruuf wondered why it had seemed like a good idea once to father children.

He finally appealed to Irileth, who was hovering at the door, to sort it out. Irileth just picked up Dagny by the scruff of her neck, deposited her outside the door of the bedroom, then shut and locked the door. Dagny began howling outside.

“I thought you’d get the necklace back for her,” Balgruuf commented.

“We have more important matters to discuss than your children’s misbehaviour, my Jarl,” replied Irileth coolly. “The Dragonborn is with the Companions now, readying herself to ride to Windhelm.”

Balgruuf groaned. “I’m not stopping her, Irileth.”

There should have been something incongruous about this scene between the Jarl of Whiterun and his housecarl. The former was sitting up in bed: bleary-eyed, shirtless, and half-covered by his blanket. The latter was standing at attention in her leather armour. But it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for them to converse so.

“Very well. But will you send a message to Ulfric with her?”

“I have only one thing to send him. And she can not be the one to deliver it now.”

“You will go ahead with that, then.”

“You know I made my decision two weeks ago. Now the truce is over, General Tullius will be sending his legionnaires to Whiterun.”

“Good.” Irileth nodded her approval. “Proventus is already trying to figure out how we could draw back from our agreement with Tullius. He would counsel neutrality again.”

“Neutrality,” Balgruuf chuckled. “He and the Dragonborn are the only two in Skyrim to believe in that. I will talk to him. Jilting the Empire at this moment would just make us Tullius’s next target. Besides, I am looking forward to finally teaching Ulfric a lesson.”

“So are we all, my Jarl.”
Regulus Umbranox, Count of Anvil, fixed his visitor with his hardest stare. His visitor, however, returned the stare, and after several seconds the Count had to look away.

“Do I even have to tell you why I called you here, Varo?” asked the Count, as he pulled a sheaf of papers from a desk drawer.

“Surprise me.”

“I have here two formal complaints made out against you by the Aldmeri Dominion’s ambassador to the Imperial City.”

“Very surprising.” Junius Varo leaned forward in his seat across the desk. “Can I read them?”

The Count pushed the documents towards him, then watched quietly as Varo leisurely read through them.

Regulus Umbranox had not been Count for long, and his power in Anvil was severely limited. In the current climate of unrest, his sway extended exactly as far as he could convince people to listen to him. Junius Varo, retired battlemage and hero of the Great War, did listen to him, but never took orders. It did not help that the Count’s father had been lifelong friends with Varo and that Varo still seemed to regard the Count as an amusing child.

“I don’t know what this first one has to do with me, my Lord,” said Varo, looking up from the documents. “They’re very clear the culprit was an Altmer pirate calling himself Captain Shimmersword.”

“They’re very clear you are Captain Shimmersword.”

Varo guffawed. “They do know I’m not an elf, don’t they?”

“Stuff it. You’re a master of illusion magic. If you wanted to raid the Valenwood coast dressed up as this Captain Shimmersword, you could do it.”

“I could think up a better name than Captain Shimmersword,” Varo protested.

“Ahem.” The Count slammed his hand down into the second letter. “Completely and utterly coincidentally, the Embassy is also passing on the demand of the High Kinlord of Shimmerene that you return the ancestral sword you stole from that family.”

“Elf-biter?” Varo looked down at the sword fastened at his side. “Didn’t steal it. It’s a family heirloom. Belonged to my grandfather.”

“And he named it Elf-biter?” the Count asked skeptically.

“Perhaps not,” Varo admitted. “But it’s Elf-biter now, and it’s staying with me. Look, Regulus, my lad, just write them back that you’ve advised me of the complaints and I’ll come up to the capital myself to deal with them. It’s high time I leave Anvil. I don’t want to bring any trouble down on you all.”

“Thank you,” the Count’s relief was palpable. “I don’t want to bow down to the Thalmor, but I’m supposed to protect my people and—”

“Yes, yes of course.” Varo sounded impatient now. “I’ll see you on the battlefield next war. Until
then... “He stood up from the desk and bowed. “May the Nine watch over you and your city.”

“You mean the Eight,” the Count said quickly. One never knew who was listening.

Varo did not dignify those weasel words with a reply.

Outside the castle, Emilin was waiting. He’d told her to stay behind and rest, but unless they were on a mission, she didn’t follow his orders. Nor did he really expect her to. He didn’t know exactly how old the red-haired Bosmer was, but she looked as young now as she had in his childhood. Meanwhile, he had grown from callow youth to late middle age. His dark hair was turning grey, though thankfully it wasn’t thinning. Anyway, Emilin wasn’t going to start doing what he asked this late in the game.

“I have a packet for you, Junius;” she greeted him with a wave. “A courier brought it to your house.”

“Legion business, huh?” He recognized the seal. “This was for my eyes only. How did you get it off them?”

“Professional secret,” replied Emilin.

So she’d pickpocketed a Legion courier. He’d have to apologize for that later. Carefully, he opened the first envelope in the packet and began to read the missive inside.

Thirty seconds later, his entire world had exploded. The Emperor himself had summoned him to the Capital three months ago, while he’d been unreachable harassing the Dominion in Valenwood. Appended to that request were letters from half his Legion acquaintances demanding that he show his face and explain what the hell his daughter was doing in Skyrim. The final letter, dated two weeks earlier, cancelled all previous orders and told him to report to General Tullius in Solitude. Immediately. His daughter had been confirmed by Tullius to be Dragonborn. She was also completely out of line, and he, Junius Varo, was being drafted back into the Legion to deal with her.

He handed the packet wordlessly to Emilin and turned back towards home to start packing.

24 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Thalmor Embassy, Haafingar

Tanulvie of Sunhold, newly-minted Justiciar (Mage -Third Class) was stuck in the frozen hell of Skyrim for her foreseeable future. Which, she was beginning to worry, might not be very long at all.

She was sitting this morning in First Emissary Elenwen’s study, trying to take in the enormity of Elenwen’s briefing. Tanulvie and her companions had arrived the previous night to take the place of a number of deceased Embassy staff. The highest ranking member among the dead had been Third Emissary Rulindil himself.

Rulindil’s replacement Calerion was now dragging out the briefing, questioning Elenwen on every detail and offering up suggestions that Elenwen repeatedly dismissed.

Could he not listen to the First Emissary’s story before deciding he had all the answers? Tanulvie assumed there was some politics going on here that she was too low-ranking to understand. She’d privately ask the others later what they knew about Calerion’s friends and family. And Elenwen’s.

“I mean, I would recognize the name Varo, if a guest with that name presented themselves,” Calerion was now saying.
“She did not attend the party under that name,” snapped Elenwen. “She was disguised and using the name of a real Imperial merchant.”

“And you didn’t recognize her?”

“I had never met her before in my life,” Elenwen replied. “We had no warning from our Cyrodiil branch that Varo’s daughter was come to Skyrim.”

“I thought you might recognize her, though,” Calerion continued on. “Family resemblance.”

Several people in the room gasped. Elenwen flinched.

“To her father,” Calerion added. “You’ve seen him before, haven’t you?”

“Junius Varo specializes in Illusion magic. I have no idea what he actually looks like. Now, if I could continue with my briefing . . .” Tanulvie could feel the white-hot anger radiating from Elenwen, but her face was calm and undisturbed as she continued her story.

“What was that about?” Tanulvie asked one of her friends, once they’d been dismissed.

“Oh, you don’t know? About Elenwen’s father and uncle?”

“I know Mistress Elenwen’s father was a Hero of the War,” Tanulvie began tentatively.

“He was a Thalmor Hero before that,” her friend explained. “For wiping out the stain upon his family’s honour. Elenwen’s father was heir to the High Kinlord of Shimmerene, but the youngest son of that family was a great mage who turned his back on the Dominion and assorted with the lowest mages of the Empire. So, Elenwen’s father undertook a vow to kill his own brother for his treachery. He spent years tracking down and at last killing his younger brother. Only then did he return to Alinor to take his place among the Thalmor.”

Tanulvie was awed by this story and wondered why she’d never heard it before. It seemed the sort of heroic tale one learnt in school to underscore the duty every Altmer held to their race.

“But there was one problem,” her friend continued. “While he was wandering Tamriel, Elenwen’s uncle had a child with a Breton woman. And that child grew up to be an Imperial battlemage named Curinwe. We killed Curinwe in the Great War, but her son Junius Varo was just like her, and now we’re dealing with the third generation, who also turns out to be Dragonborn. The entire family is hellbent on revenge against the Thalmor.”

“So . . .” Tanulvie thought about this, sorting out the bonds of kinship in her mind. “The Dragonborn is the First Emissary’s first cousin twice removed?”

*Family resemblance.*

Calerion had struck a low blow indeed.


Tanulvie rapidly assented.

Chapter End Notes
And now almost all the main players are assembled. The next chapter will finally get to Windhelm.

If you're reading and enjoying, please leave a comment. It feels weird to suddenly have a story spill out in a new fandom where I don't know anyone, but I couldn't stop myself.
25 Rain’s Hand, Whiterun

Chapter Notes

You know what’s wrong with Skyrim these days? Everyone is obsessed with death. – Jon Battle-Born

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

25 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Whiterun

Jarl Balgruuf the Greater came to the gate of Whiterun to see off the Dragonborn. He did this because the occasion demanded it of him, because his people were watching, but most fundamentally because he was a good person.

There were some faces conspicuously absent from the throng that had gathered around the gate. Balgruuf’s own brother had refused to attend, and none of the older Battle-Borns were there, a sign that gossip had begun to spread throughout the city.

A short moment of comedy preceded the drama of farewell. After an unasked-for and unnecessarily long performance of The Dragonborn Comes, the bard Mikael bent over to kiss Cecilia’s hand, and she pulled it back very quickly before he could.

Then it was Balgruuf’s moment to say something. What he really had in his heart, he could not say, so instead, he wished her a safe journey and then embraced her. “May the gods watch over your battles, friend,” he added, as always, and meant that truly.

Irileth briefly inclined her head to the Dragonborn but said nothing more.

Cecilia Varo looked around her. She seemed so young and vulnerable and sad, surrounded by her crowd of well-wishers. A memory came unbidden to Balgruuf’s mind: Legate Attius standing in Talos Plaza the day the White-Gold Concordat was announced. So different from her daughter, but with the same look of quiet misery on her face.

Avelina Attius had been happy again after that, he reminded himself. And so had he been, and Irileth, and so many of those heartbroken soldiers who couldn’t believe that they’d defeated the Dominion just to sign over everything they’d fought for. The world was always ending, and always beginning anew.

“Thank you,” said Cecilia at last. “I don’t deserve any of it, but thank you, all of you. I will always consider myself a daughter of Whiterun.”

The crowd cheered, although some of them seemed to have picked up on the oddly subdued tone of this parting, and were looking puzzled. Cecilia seemed as though she might say something more, but then shook her head, and turned her back to the crowd.

“Let’s go, Lydia,” she called to her housecarl.

And so the Dragonborn departed Whiterun, accompanied by five of the Companions: Farkas, Vilkas, Aela the Huntress, Ria, and Njada Stonearm.
There was a short sequel to this scene. Ten minutes later, Lydia came running back to grab something she’d forgotten in Breezehome. Jarl Balgruuf was still at the gate, talking with the citizens, and Lydia stopped to speak with him on her way out of the city.

“My Jarl, thank you so much for making me her housecarl,” she told Balgruuf breathlessly.

“You’ve well fulfilled our trust,” he replied warmly.

“We’ll trust you to keep protecting her,” said Irileth.

Lydia assured them she would, before she ran back to join her thane.

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**25 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, The Thalmor Embassy, Haafingar**

Tanulvie had barely unpacked and reconciled herself to barracks life when she found herself assigned to field duty. She was going to Markarth, Elenwen informed her. And she’d be going without any soldiers, out of uniform, by hired wagon. It was not, Elenwen was quick to emphasize, an espionage mission, but she should hide her identity, anyway. Thalmor patrols had been going missing too often in this land. The safest route to Markarth was to play the part of an ordinary traveller with money enough to pay for transport. As she was new to Skyrim, no one would recognize her as Thalmor along the way, even if they were suspicious of all Altmer.

“Once you arrive in Markarth, you will contact Chief Justiciar Ondolemar at his headquarters in Understone Keep. You won’t be carrying any documents, so I trust you to carefully commit to memory my instructions for him.”

“Understood, Mistress Elenwen.” Tanulvie did not fear forgetting. Her teachers had trained her well in the art of certain recall, preparing her for jobs such as this.

“Very good. I have sorted out several documents for you to memorize.” Elenwen waved her gloved hand at a tall stack of papers. “But I am giving you my personal instructions now. The most important aspect of your mission is to tell Ondolemar to begin an investigation into a woman who may live in Markarth or elsewhere in the Reach. Her name is Embla Attius, although she may also be called Embla Snow-Child. She is an elderly Nord woman, eighty-five years old if she is still living. She originally hailed from Solitude, but she has lived much of her life in Cyrodiil and was married to an Imperial diplomat who is now dead. It is of the utmost importance that we locate her, dead or alive. If she is alive, Ondolemar must take her into our custody. It should not be a problem since the woman is an attested heretic. Will you recall all this, Justiciar?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Good. Tell Ondolemar that Embla Attius is the maternal grandmother of Cecilia Varo, the so-called Dragonborn. We know now that when Cecilia Varo first came to Skyrim, she was supposed to go to Markarth to join her grandmother there. How she ended up a prisoner at Helgen we do not know, although she probably came north through the Pale Pass from Bruma. Ondolemar should determine whether Cecilia Varo has since made contact with her grandmother or any other relatives in the area. There is also a son of Embla Attius, Pavo by name, who may be in the Reach if he accompanied his mother back to Skyrim.” Elenwen paused. “This is in the strictest confidence, Justiciar Tanulvie, and for no ears but the Chief Justiciar’s. Assist him then in his investigations, however he orders you.”

Tanulvie laid her arm across her chest in salute. “Instructions received and understood, Mistress.”
“For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion,” Elenwen intoned the solemn words of parting. “Auri-El watch over you.”

“For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion,” Tanulvie replied as required.

And then she could leave, taking the papers to study and learn in a quiet corner of the Solar, away from Elenwen’s forbidding presence. Her interview with the First Emissary had gone better than she feared. Of course, she had no desire to travel Skyrim alone, but a trip to Markarth by wagon should not be a worry for a trained wizard of the Thalmor.

She did hope the Dragonborn wouldn’t take this moment after her victory against Alduin to visit her Nord grandmother in the Reach. That would be unfortunate timing. Thalmor wizard though she was, Tanulvie had no desire to stand against this powerful mage with a grudge against the Dominion.

She was therefore very happy a few days later, after she’d set out for Markarth, to hear that the Dragonborn was heading to Windhelm, on the opposite side of Skyrim from the Reach. Since she was new to Skyrim’s politics, she did not take much notice of the accompanying rumour which was sweeping the country like wildfire: the Dragonborn was going to Windhelm to marry Ulfric Stormcloak.

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**30 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, Windhelm**

The news of the Dragonborn’s coming went ahead of her, as she and her honour guard took their time travelling the road to Windhelm. They were waylaid by admirers at every inn, farm, and fort along the way, and for once, Cecilia Varo lingered over long meals, called camp early, slept in, and lived life as someone who wasn’t in terror of the world ending should she not be prepared to save it.

Ulfric Stormcloak thus had ample warning of her arrival and was waiting at the gate into Windhelm to welcome her. There had been no official announcement made yet, but the small knot of soldiers waiting with him were in his confidence and thus bursting with excitement.

Ralof was nearly walking on air. After all, it was he who had rescued the Dragonborn from Helgen. “I couldn’t have believed it would end up like this,” he was saying to a group of spell-bound Stormcloaks. “It goes to show, the gods do reward kindness to strangers.”

That was a good moral to draw from these events. It was not the one Ulfric would have drawn himself. His ran more along the lines of the gods rewarding those who seized every opportunity they were given. Time and time again he had seen the way forward and taken it. With regret sometimes, but never remorse, he’d pushed forward for Skyrim’s sake. Today was no different, waiting here to greet the woman he’d won in a diplomatic deal.

At last, the Dragonborn was approaching. She and her party did not hurry across the causeway, so he had a fair amount of time to watch her draw near. Before the conference at High Hrothgar, he had never really focused on her appearance, and there she had been sitting at the table, her eyes downcast, doggedly avoiding his gaze. Now she was marching into Windhelm with her head held high. As he stepped forward to welcome her, she met his eyes with a frank, clear gaze he had never seen from her before.

She was small, compared to most Nord women, clad in green glass armour from her head to her toes. Her eyes were a pale blue, evidence of her Nord ancestors, but she was olive-skinned like many a Nibenese. As she halted before him, she reached up to remove her helmet, letting fall a mass of dark
brown ringlets that reached down to her shoulders. Her housecarl took the helmet from her.

“Welcome to Windhelm, my Lady.” He reached out and took her gauntleted hand in his.

“As promised,” she replied, a small nervous smile appearing on her face.

“And these must be the mighty Companions of Ysgramor,” said Galmar, breaking into the awkwardness at just the right moment.

The Dragonborn lifted her hand from his to introduce her comrades. Most of them Ulfric had already met; the Companions were active from one end of Skyrim to another. He was pleased that they had given his betrothed the honour of their company. He could not have planned a more fitting and memorable escort for her to enter the city.

“We will repair to the Palace of the Kings, and give you some time and space to rest and refresh yourself,” he spoke after all the introductions were made. “My people all wish to meet and thank the Dragonborn, so I have made arrangements for a feast tonight, but I will not resent it if you choose to only make a short appearance, then retire early.”

“I’m well-rested enough,” replied the Dragonborn. “And the Companions would murder me if I didn’t let them stay up for the Feast.”

“Hey don’t badmouth us to the Jarl,” Aela retorted.

The Dragonborn laughed and tossed her hair. Her eyes then met Ulfric’s, and she looked away again. There it was, that flash of someone different, someone more lively than the meek, gentle woman he’d met so far. He was marrying the Dragonborn, but it remained to be seen who Cecilia Varo was when she wasn’t the symbol he planned to rally Skyrim around.

The walk from the Front Gate to the Palace of the Kings felt like the longest in Cecilia’s life. The streets were packed with people out to catch a glimpse of Skyrim’s saviour, so they moved very slowly past Candlehearth Inn, past the Temple of Talos, up the steps to the Palace gates. The Companions gleefully cleared the way ahead of her and Ulfric who walked side by side, followed by the Stormcloak soldiers. Thankfully, he did not take her hand again.

The cheers were mostly “All Hail the Dragonborn!” and “Praise her!” so she concluded the common folk did not know of the betrothal. She wondered when Ulfric planned to announce it, perhaps at tonight’s feast? She wouldn’t mind if that was his plan. They might as well get it over with. The same went for the wedding, to be honest. A quick simple wedding would be easier to navigate than some grandiose long-planned ceremony. And he’d promised he wouldn’t keep her tied down to Windhelm, so the sooner they were married, the sooner she could get back to her business.

She knew what would be expected of her as the wife of a Jarl. She wouldn’t try to escape Windhelm; she’d make this town her home base as Whiterun had been before. (Whiterun was way more convenient for that purpose; life just wasn’t fair.) And then . . . it would be up to the gods whether she bore him children. She had her doubts because she’d never heard a breath of gossip that Ulfric Stormcloak had any bastards, and if a man got to his age without a wife or children . . . well, maybe she should stop making assumptions and meet her new life as it presented itself.

He was good-looking, in that rough-hewn Nord fashion. And despite being ever so old (forty-six), he was well-preserved, in peak health. She didn’t have to worry about being prematurely widowed, except of course that she did, given his chosen path of fighting the whole world till he reached Sovngarde. Worried might be the wrong word. She might actually be relieved if General Tullius
drove a sword through Ulfric’s heart one day. And then she felt terrible for thinking that as she walked beside her future husband. With such contradictory thoughts swirling inside her head, she reached the Palace of the Kings.

There were more people to greet her there. The Steward Jorleif was so warm in his welcome that she began to wonder if he was counting on not paying her any more bounties. The court-wizard Wuunferth showed up for approximately one minute, the minimum he needed to say hello, certainly at Ulfric’s behest. She didn’t really blame Wuunferth. She’d made a mess of the Butcher investigation, locking the poor old man in jail while the real killer struck again. The other citizens of Windhelm hadn’t blamed her for that. They had also been taken in by Calixto Corrium’s façade. But she should have known better; she’d had the skills to investigate that amulet herself, and because of her complacency, two women died whom she could have saved.

At last, Ralof came forward to shoo off the court members and servants surrounding her. “I’ll show you to your quarters, Dragonborn, Companions.”

“And Lydia,” added Lydia.

“Yes, and the Dragonborn’s housecarl, my apologies,” Ralof continued without missing a beat. “Follow me.”

Cecilia looked over to Ulfric who nodded. Cecilia gratefully turned to join Ralof.

“You know, you owe my Thane an apology,” Lydia spoke up as they followed Ralof into a passage off the Great Hall.

“I- what?” Ralof stopped on the first step of a staircase.

“You called her ugly the last time we met,” continued Lydia mercilessly.

Ralof’s face turned beet red. “I did? I don’t recall that. Why would I say that? She isn’t ugly. At all.”

“You were very drunk,” said Cecilia. “In Candlehearth Hall. I told Lydia not to mind you.”

“I’m sorry! I truly don’t know what came over me!”

“Were you wearing that creepy dragon mask?” Aela asked Cecilia.

“No, I didn’t have it then. Might have been my helmet struck him oddly.”

“I’m so sorry!” Ralof was spluttering. “Please forgive me.”

“Of course I’ve forgiven you. Lydia’s just needling you.”

“How long are we going to be stuck in this tiny passage?” Vilkas called out from the back.

Ralof recovered himself enough to start walking again, though he cast more than a few nervous glances at Lydia while he was showing them to their rooms.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Ralof called me ugly in my Stormcloak play-through of Skyrim, and I’m still not
over it. I also messed up “Blood on the Ice” during the first playthrough in the worst way possible: Not only did I imprison Wuunferth and let another murder happen, I basically watched Calixto stab Hillevi Cruel-Sea to death because I didn’t realize I could attack him yet. So Cecilia’s got my terrible experiences there, and probably a lot of guilt/trauma over that.

So, storywise, Cecilia has some things to say soon to Ulfric (whom she apparently thinks is either gay or infertile), questions about the Thalmor and the Markarth Incident, particularly. Her long-suffering father is on a boat to Solitude, and my Thalmor wizard is heading for the Reach, woefully unaware of the dangers that await her there. Elenwen hasn’t heard that the *Blades* are now head-quartered in the Reach, after all.
Their fires lit up the night. All across Lake Rumare, like stars come to earth. It was beautiful, really. - Salvianus

30 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

The guest rooms in the Palace of the Kings were certainly grand. But even in spring, even with a fire at the hearth, the stone palace was too cold for Cecilia’s liking. When evening fell, she could be found wrapped in a thick bear robe, sitting in a chair which she had dragged dangerously close to the guest room’s fireplace.

“How can anyone stand this?” she demanded petulantly of Lydia who was sitting further back from the fire, in her ordinary clothes.

“True Nords don’t feel cold.”

“True Nords can build houses with proper insulation and heating. There are even some nice houses in Windhelm.”

“Some of them even come with their own secret murder rooms.”

“Lydia!”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

“Come in,” ordered Cecilia.

The door opened a few inches and a young guard shyly poked her head into the room. “Uh…. Your Excellency . . . uh …. The Dragonborn,” she tripped over her words, unsure of the proper address.

“Yes?”

“The Jarl would like to know if he may visit you.”

“Right now?”

“Y-yes,” the poor woman seemed really nervous. She probably sensed this was a delicate task she’d been given, and didn’t want to mess up anything for her lord.

“I suppose he may,” said Cecilia. “Go tell him I’m expecting him.” The guard withdrew. “Lydia, I think you’d better clear out.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right alone with him?”

“I should hope so! Unless you were planning to stand guard by my marriage bed too.”

“Ewww, all right, I’m leaving, my Thane. I might run down to The White Phial to stock up on
“Do we really need those?”

“Not for us, I’m planning on selling them to the Companions at a profit.”

Lydia left. Cecilia didn’t stir from her chair, staring into the fire and steeling herself for the encounter to come. The Thalmor dossier lay heavy at the bottom of her pack, but she didn’t think there was time to discuss that before the feast. It was a good excuse for putting off a conversation that would probably be the emotional equivalent of cutting open and digging around all Ulfric’s old war wounds.

When he entered the room, he told her immediately not to rise, and with his usual self-assurance, took the other chair by the fire. His eyes flickered from the bear robe to the embers near its hem, and he leant forward to pull the robe back from the hearth a little.

“Careful of the flames,” he said.

“If it burnt, I’d just Shout it out.”

“Would that work?”

“There are words for frost, yes.”

“I see. Show me some time, when we are outside, preferably.” He settled himself back into his chair. “There are stories I would hear from you, past the little we heard at the council, but it must be wearisome to have half of Skyrim barking at your heels for the full Tale of Dragonborn.”

“I am thinking of writing it down,” she confessed. “All that I understand of it. And then I shall just hand over my book when people ask how I defeated the World-Eater.”

“I think you overestimate how many Nords read.” His green eyes flickered with amusement. “Better you teach it to the bards. In this land, they are the ones who will pass on all our stories.”

“So, in the end, I’ll be cut into the shape Skyrim prefers,” Cecilia said slowly. “And no one will remember the woman I once was.”

“I would say rather that you have taken on the mantle of someone greater than yourself. Did not the Greybeards hail you as Ysmir, Dragon of the North?”

“That’s one of the things I don’t understand,” she confessed.

“Perhaps you were not meant to. I once thought . . . no, never mind. I have wandered away from the present.”

She’d actually been more interested in this conversation than anything he’d ever said to her before. However, she could not force him to finish that thought, so instead she turned her attention back to their present situation.

“When do you intend to announce our betrothal?” she asked him.

“Tonight,” he replied frankly. “Have you any objection?”

She shook her head. “It’ll be a great deal simpler once it’s out in the open. But before you make the announcement, answer me one question, truthfully, my Jarl. Do you really know who I am?”
Ulfric held her gaze. “You are Cecilia Ameliana Curinwe Varo. Born in Cyrodiil, the daughter of two legionnaires, Junius Varo and Avelina Attius. You are a mage who has from time to time profaned ancient tombs, dabbled in necromancy and dealt with Daedra. You are also, without a doubt, chosen of the gods, the Dragonborn.”

Cecilia hadn’t expected *that*. It was an accurate summary, even if he made it sound worse than it was. She wasn’t looting old tombs and riling up the dead for profit, though that sometimes was a side benefit. And she had *standards* when it came to Daedra.

“I’m charmed you’re condescending to marry a tomb robber,” she replied curtly.

Ulfric let out a great roar of laughter. “Come, don’t be angry that I answered your question honestly.”

She *had* asked him. But she was still irked. “Very well, since you and your spies have done your research so thoroughly, tell me, did my Nord blood cancel out my Altmer blood in your estimation?”

Ulfric stopped smiling.

“See, I was also wondering if you could abide wedding a woman who’s one-eighth elf.”

His hands clenched the arms of his chair, and he stared into the fire. “I was there. At Vilverin.”

She thought for a moment he was harkening back to his reasons for hating elves. And then she understood exactly what he was saying, and her whole understanding of Ulfric Stormcloak *changed.*

“Do you mean - You served with my grandmother?”

“That day, Aye.”

He did not elaborate. He did not have to. The Thalmor dossier stated simply that he had been taken prisoner “during the campaign for the White-Gold Tower” before the Imperial City had fallen. She had not given the exact circumstances any thought. But she knew all about The Feint at Vilverin, Curinwe Varo’s suicidal play for the Dominion army’s attention while the Emperor readied his true exit from the city. No one had gone to Vilverin that day expecting to survive. Few did.

She wondered if Ulfric had seen her grandmother’s ending. But she did not ask. It had not been an easy death to witness. The one member of Curinwe’s Old Guard to survive, Emilin of Silvenar, still wept to recall it.

“Thank you,” Cecilia finally said.

He looked up from the fire with a questioning expression. “For what?”

“For knowing who I am.” *Now if only I knew who you are,* she thought.

He nodded, then stood up from his chair. “Was there anything else you needed?“

“How should I dress tonight?”

“However you like.”

“Roughspun tunic and footwraps it is then.”

She did win a smile from him then. “Just like old times,” he commented.

The old times at Helgen eight months ago.
Josslyn Haring, captain of the Cliff Racer, threw down his cards in exasperation. “I’m out. You can all keep losing to her, if you like,” he addressed the other officers around the wardroom’s table.

Emilin finished sweeping septims into the large pile in front of her, “But you were doing so much better this last round,” she said sweetly. “What about you, Junius?”

“Still in,” replied her comrade. “The rest of you cowards?”

“That’s easy for you to say, Varo!” Captain Haring protested. “At the end of the day, you share her purse.”

“Certainly not, this is all for me!” retorted Emilin.

Junius leaned back in his chair, grinning. “There you go, boys. I’m as much a victim as anyone at this table. She’ll have the clothes off my back by the time we reach Solitude.”

“Well, you won’t need them there,” said Emilin. “They’ll have you back in uniform soon enough.”

Junius made a face. “Please tell me the Legionnaires in Skyrim at least get to wear trousers.”

The ship’s officers broke down laughing. “I am so, so sorry, Varo,” said Ingvi, the second mate. Junius dramatically buried his face in hands. “Divines, was that too much to ask? Do the Stormcloaks wear trousers? Is that why they’re rebelling?”

Yngvi confirmed that the Stormcloaks did indeed wear trousers. Junius was inconsolable.

“What about you, Emilin? Are you re-enlisting?” asked Yngvi.

The Bosmer shook her head. “I retired from the Legion forty years ago,” she told them.

“I thought you fought in the War after that?”

“Accidentally.”

“How do you accidentally fight in a war?” Haring demanded. He did not notice Junius tensing up as he asked, but Emilin did. She still answered Haring’s question truthfully.

“An old friend said, ‘Why don’t you come visit me in Cyrodiil. It’s beautiful this time of year.’ Then the Dominion attacked.”

“That’s a nasty surprise. Did you ever feel torn, fighting your own kin?”

Haring had absolutely no tact, but Emilin liked straightforward people like that. “Not really. I felt sorry for my kinsfolk, letting a bunch of snotty Altmer throw them into the war. But I left Valenwood a long time ago, and most of my mer friends had no love for the Thalmor either.”

“They formed the Old Guard,” Junius surprised her by speaking out. “A volunteer unit; most of them were mer who’d served the Empire and came out of retirement just to fight the Dominion.”

“No one made the Dominion troops quite as angry as we did,” boasted Emilin. “We flaunted our ties to our homelands. Sang our old war songs, and marched under the banner of a lord of Shimmerene.”
“What I’d pay to have seen that!” cried Haring.

“Your life, that’s what you’d have paid,” said Junius sharply. Emilin frowned at him, but he continued. “They all died, every single member of the Old Guard but Emilin here. The legionnaires whom they fought alongside died too.”

“But you avenged them in the Battle of the Red Ring,” said Haring. “Were you really at the Emperor’s side, Varo? When he defeated Lord Naarifin?”

Junius’s expression froze and his reply was toneless. “I was at the Emperor’s side during the Battle of the Red Ring. I was also at his side when we broke out of the Imperial City and left behind the Eighth Legion to die in our stead.”

Emilin leant over and laid a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I’m starting to feel a little queasy. Let’s get some fresh air, Junius.”

Haring must have realized by now that he had put his foot in his mouth. He and the other officers of the Cliff Racer said nothing as their two passengers took their leave.

Upon the darkening deck, Emilin turned to Junius. “You have to get a hold on yourself,” she warned him. “You’re going to be back in the Legion, and it’ll all come back. All of it.”

“Yes, but in the Legion, we’ve all been there. That makes a difference.”

“I’ll give you that.” Emilin sighed. Even in the Legion, there were few who could share the horrors she’d lived through. Junius couldn’t. That was the problem with throwing in one’s lot with humans. They tangled you up in their troubles and sorrows, and then they died, leaving you to bear them alone. She wondered if Master Andanyon could have foreseen the end result of picking up a Bosmer orphan to be a playmate for his human daughter. It had not strictly been a kindness, although she wouldn’t have traded any life for the one she had led by Curinwe’s side. Or the life she was now leading by the side of Curinwe’s son.

“It was twenty-seven years ago. Today,” said Junius.

Emilin thought about it. “Thirtieth of Rain’s Hand. The Battle of the Red Ring. I don’t really recall the day. I was otherwise disposed.” She was in fact nearly dead in a Thalmor dungeon. “There are better anniversaries coming up, Junius. Seventh of Second Seed, Young Junius Varo meets the beautiful Legate Attius, who arrests him for looting.”

“How do you know about that? You weren’t there.”

“Avelina told me all about it.”

Junius’s face lit up. “She told you what a fool I was?”

“Absolutely.”

Two years ago, Junius had lost his beloved wife, and Emilin had worried that this would be the final blow to his wounded spirit. But Avelina Attius remained a source of joy to her husband. He liked to talk about her, and he found only peace in his memories of family life.

“You’ve been to Skyrim before,” Junius suddenly changed the subject. “Does it always look so foreboding?” He waved to the mountainous coast before them.

“Oh, always. Solitude’s nice enough, though. It’s sheltered from the sea. And full of old friends, I
reckon.’’

“Old friends who are apparently very upset with me,’’ said Junius.

“I think they’re more upset with Cecilia.”

“I’m upset with her. She lied to me, and I can’t understand why.”

This was a sticking point for Junius. A few weeks after Cecilia had started for Skyrim, he’d received a letter from her, saying she’d safely made it to Markarth and was living at her Grandmother Embla’s house. He’d only set out to Valenwood once he’d received the news his daughter was safely away.

“Junius, if she wrote that letter of her own free will, she probably didn’t want to interfere with your mission. You’re not the only selfless idiot in the Varo family.”

“When you put it that way . . .” He grinned. “I’m proud of her. Don’t think I’m not. Dragonborn. She’s left her old dad behind in the dust, hasn’t she?”

“She certainly has,” said Emilin fondly.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was all about survivor's guilt! I picked the date for the story's beginning to be a plausible number of months after Helgen, and only realized while writing this chapter that 30 Rain's Hand was the day the Battle of the Red Ring began. It fit the chapter's theme perfectly, as if it was planned.

There are a lot of Great War veterans in Skyrim, so figuring out where everyone was during the war, and who they knew, and how the war unfolded is a challenge, never mind working my own OCs into it, but I think I have my version figured out.
30 Rain's Hand, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

Evgir Unslaad has come at last. The "Season Unending." War... without end. – Bergritte Battle-Born

See the end of the chapter for more notes

30 Rain’s Hand, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

The Great Hall of the Palace of the Kings was packed that evening with nobles, soldiers, and every citizen of the city who could fit inside. Two extra trestles were set up on both sides of the central tables, but people were also standing up against the walls, and the crowd spilled out into the courtyard. The servants had wisely rolled up the blue carpets and laid down rushes on the flagstones to sop up the spilled drink, mud, and other unmentionable fluids. One table had been moved to the front of the hall, just beneath the Throne, and there the Jarl sat in pride of place. But when the Dragonborn entered the Hall, he yielded her his seat at the head of the table, and then took the seat at her right side. This was political theatre at its best; the onlookers lapped it up.

The Dragonborn was dressed in fine dark blue robes: the colours of Windhelm, noticed the more observant. Very rarely had anyone in Windhelm seen her out of her armour. She seemed much more human this way, sitting at the table with her curly dark hair loose to her shoulders. She didn’t talk much, and she only picked at the food on her plate, but she smiled at everyone and blushed when they praised her.

At last, after the guests had filled up their bellies and were beginning to move on to sweets, Ulfric stood up. His speeches were quite genuinely the highlight of any event at the Palace of the Kings, and so his people fell quiet, straining to hear every sonorous word, even in the far corners of the hall.

“Sons and daughters of Skyrim, tonight you lift your cups to the World Eater’s bane, the Dragonborn returned from battle.”

They lifted their cups, indeed. He waited a little for the cheering to die down, then continued, “It is true that by her sword and by her Voice, she has saved all of us from the fire and ice of the dragons’ breath. But you are the children of Kyne; you do not fear death, whether it descends from the Sky or comes at the blade of an enemy. Death is but your entry into Sovngarde.”

Most of the assembly cheered this too, but he could he see puzzlement on several faces, including Cecilia’s. They must be wondering why he was downplaying her achievements.

“Sovngarde, where the World-Eater descended to feast upon the souls of our valiant dead. My friends, you thank the Dragonborn for your lives, but you must thank her for your very souls, for your entrance one day into Shor’s Hall. If we shed our blood for Skyrim, the way across the Whalebone Bridge is open.”

The puzzled looks had all cleared up, though Cecilia was staring resolutely at her plate. She still had no love for his cause, nor for him. He bent his head down to hers. “Stand up. And take my hand,” he whispered.
She did as he said. Her hand was cold as ice. He turned back to their audience. “And now let us forget death for a short while. I have called you here to be witnesses. Before all of you, and before the Throne of my ancestor Ysgramor, I, Ulfric, Jarl of Windhelm, pledge my troth to Lady Cecilia Ameliana Varo, whom you know as the Dragonborn.”

The din in the Hall was like nothing heard there within living memory. His people stomped their feet upon the stone floor, pounded their fists on the tables, and shouted their cheers.

“Let the Dragonborn say her part!” shouted Farkas. His voice cut through the crowd, and they did quiet a little. Everyone’s eyes were on Cecilia.

“And I do pledge my troth to Jarl Ulfric,” she said simply.

After the cheering began again, she whispered in his ear, “Is that all?”

“Yes, we’ll sit down and receive our people’s congratulations.” There were probably more rituals for nobility in Cyrodiil. But in Skyrim there was nothing more binding than a Nord’s promise, so there was no need for further speech.

Cecilia noticeably relaxed after that. The citizens of Windhelm had formed an impromptu queue to congratulate their Jarl and the Dragonborn. Lydia then suggested that Cecilia go sit on Ulfric’s throne to meet her new subjects, and Galmar looked like he was going to have a heart attack.

“The Throne of Ysgramor is for the Jarl only,” he spluttered.

Although Lydia was certainly teasing, Ulfric was glad that Galmar made this clear. Otherwise, he’d have had to say it himself, no matter how petty it made him sound. He’d carefully calculated exactly how much honour he should show Cecilia as Dragonborn, and it didn’t extend to placing her on his throne while he was in the room. Perhaps, after they were married, she could fill in for him when he was absent, if she liked.

Instead, he pulled out a chair and placed it at the foot of the throne for Cecilia, then stood beside her chair. He caught Cecilia’s eyes; she was smiling. No, she was smirking. He looked away, annoyance rising in his gorge. People simply didn’t smirk at the Bear of Markarth, and he didn’t know how to deal with it.

Their well-wishers were a rowdy bunch. This was a true Nord court, where everyone was welcome and no one was very guarded in their tongue. His folk revered him, but they didn’t hide how surprised they were that their Jarl was finally taking a wife. The old women were the worst, innuendo dripping from their tongues. . . Shor’s Bones, Bolfrida Brandy-Mug was now giving Cecilia advice on how to slide a Nord Greatsword into an Imperial scabbard. The answer? Horker’s grease.

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind,” said Cecilia blankly.

“How small does that woman think Imperial scabbards are?” asked Lydia, after Bolfrida moved on. Cecilia’s housecarl was obviously possessed tonight by a daedra of mischief.

“It’s not the scabbard’s small, it’s the Greatsword that’s over-large.” Gods, now Galmar was in on it. Oblivion take them all!

Brunwulf Free-Winter had the effrontery to grasp Cecilia’s hands in his and sincerely declare that for the first time in years Windhelm’s fortunes were on the mend. “You have been a true friend to all Skyrim’s people,” he told her.
“Couldn’t stop lobbying even for the Jarl’s betrothal, could you?” sneered Galmar.

Brunwulf ignored him. “Jarl Ulfric, I congratulate you on your choice of bride. You’ve shown a wisdom that bodes well for governing Skyrim.”

That was interesting. Brunwulf had never openly opposed him, but he’d held himself clear of the war. Was he coming around because Ulfric had the Dragonborn? Let it be so for all of Skyrim.

There had been about an hour of this when Jorleif appeared at his elbow with a worried expression. “My Jarl,” he whispered. “There’s a messenger arrived for you. From Whiterun.”

Cecilia’s head shot up. So much for Jorleif’s discretion.

“Already?” Ulfric asked. “Balgruuf wastes no time. I will see this messenger in the war room.”

“As you say, my Jarl,” Jorleif scooted away.

“Lady Cecilia, Companions, I bid you a good night,” Ulfric addressed his guests.

Cecilia ignored him and turned to Lydia. “Should I—” she began.

“Go to bed, my Thane,” Lydia answered. “We should all go to bed.”

“But it’s Whiterun. Aren’t you worried?”

“It’s not for you to interfere,” said Lydia firmly, placing her hand on her thane’s shoulder. Her eyes met Ulfric’s. “Are you going to go or not?” she asked sharply.

Once again, Ulfric was taken aback by the behaviour of Cecilia’s housecarl. That slipshod Dragonsreach discipline seeped into all its inhabitants. The place was surely due for a cleansing. He gave Lydia no reply and turned to go to the war room. Galmar followed after him.

The face in the war room was a familiar one. Balgruuf’s younger brother, Hrongar, stood there, and in his hands was an axe.


“I’ve been expecting you,” replied Ulfric. He stepped towards Hrongar. “Let me have that message.”

Hrongar passed to him Balgruuf’s great war axe. Ulfric turned it about in his hands. It was a simple steel weapon without any fancy ornamentation. The simple weapon of a complicated man.

“It crosses my mind that you should have been here earlier,” Ulfric commented. “How long has your brother had his deal with Tullius?”

“Three weeks ago he was ready to send the axe. He has simply waited out the Dragonborn’s truce.”

Ulfric nodded. “Hrongar, take this back to your brother then, and tell him he should prepare to entertain . . . visitors. I expect a great deal of excitement in the city of Whiterun in the near future . . .”

“Of course you do.” Hrongar took back the axe with a wolfish smile. “And in turn, please look forward to the day we come to visit your fine city.”

“Jorleif, find our honourable visitor a bed for the night. He will be riding back to Whiterun early in the morning.”
Hrongar allowed himself to be led away by Jorleif. Ulfric then turned to Galmar. “He’s a fierce one, isn’t he?”

“He’s been champing at the bit a long time to challenge you. Tell the truth, though, I had expected the Dragonborn to be the one to do the honour, one way or the other.”

“She would never have carried my axe. Balgruuf’s perhaps, had he asked.”

“You know that, and you’ll still make her Queen of Skyrim.”

“By my side as High King, aye. The Jagged Crown is not shared.”

“Make certain she knows that.”

Ulfric nodded. He looked down at the map. “How fast can you ride for Whiterun, Galmar?”

“I could be gone from here in an hour.”

“Truly? It will be a nightmare gathering men tonight.”

“I’ve toured our camps. There are soldiers enough outside Whiterun to begin the siege. We’re ready, Ulfric... Whenever you are.”

“Is any man ever ready to give the order that will mean the deaths of many?”

“No. But neither is every man able to give that order when he must. But you are that man, Ulfric. You’ve been that man before, and you’ll be him again. And these men and women - they call themselves Stormcloaks because they believe in you... They’re the meanest, toughest sons of bitches Skyrim has to offer. And they want this. They want this as much as you do. Perhaps they want it more.” Galmar’s voice was raw with passion.

Ulfric bowed his head. “And so we put aside the Dragonborn’s hard-won truce. As was always fated to happen. Take a few trusted men, Galmar. I’ll send out reinforcements the morning after tomorrow. But leave me Ralof. I will need his help handling Cecilia Varo.”

“Do you expect her to cause you trouble?”

“I expect her to be unhappy, and to make that known. But she gave her word to stay out of this war, and I’ll find some work to distract her.”

“Wedding planning?”

Ulfric snorted at the idea of the Dragonborn dropping everything to plan a wedding. “Killing bandits, perhaps. Galmar, are you certain we’re ready? Whiterun’s army will no doubt be bolstered with Legionnaires. And those walls around Whiterun are old, but they still stand.”

"We’re ready. And I might be old myself, but I’ll kick those damn walls down with my bare feet! - if you would only ask me to do it!"

"And I'm sure you could do it, too. All right. This is it."

"Yes!"

“Send the word. “A new day is dawning and the sun rises over Whiterun.”

“Aye, and the sons of Skyrim will greet that dawn, teeth and swords flashing.”
“So it begins.”

1 Second Seed, 4E 202, Solitude

Emilin was right. Solitude was nice. The city was so airy and verdant this morning that Varo had a hard time believing its reputation for driving its residents mad. Perhaps the Bretons were right, and it was really Wayrest that had pushed Pelagius around the bend.

There were Legionnaires stationed at the docks, ready to search the Cliff Racer and its passengers. However, when he showed them his seal, they waved him and Emilin through. “General Tullius is up at Castle Dour. He’ll want to see you right away,” their captain instructed him.

It was a long walk up from the docks to the city gates, but a very pleasant one with some splendid views. Inside the city, all was peaceful as well. Children were playing in the streets, folk were coming into market, and the only hint of something more ominous were the many soldiers patrolling the streets.

They were climbing the stairs to Castle Dour when a shout came from above.

“Varo! You’re finally here!” A woman in legioaan’s uniform was sprinting down the steps to meet them.

“Rikke,” Varo greeted her back. “You’re a legate now?” he asked, surveying her uniform. He’d known Rikke years back, but they were not close comrades, and he had not kept track of her career.

“Have been for years, Varo,” replied Rikke. She turned to Emilin. “And you are?”

“Emilin of Silvenar.”

“Of course! I know your name. We’re honoured to have you here as well.”’ Rikke turned back to Varo. “Your timing could have been better, though. You’re walking into a right mess.”

“I hear my daughter’s refused to help out the Legion, yes.”

Rikke’s face fell. “Ah . . . Varo, she’s done worse than that. Brace yourself. General Tullius is waiting inside.”

What on earth could Cecilia have done now? Varo racked his brain as they followed Rikke through the courtyard and inside the castle. The letters he’d received in Anvil complained that she was insisting on neutrality in Skyrim’s Civil War. As a daughter of the Empire, this was bad enough. But worse?

General Tullius was in his war room, standing with his officers around a table covered with a large map of Skyrim. Varo recognized him right away. Tullius wouldn’t have been his first choice to send to Skyrim – couldn’t they have sent a Nord? – but he was a professional soldier with a good record and a talent for managing scant troops and resources. He had apparently done very well here, almost crushing the Stormcloak rebellion within months. Only the appearance of the dragons had saved Ulfric Stormcloak from the chopping block.

“Junius Varo,” Tullius addressed him crisply. “So you’ve finally decided to drop in?”
“I regret I was out of contact till a week ago,” Varo replied, ignoring the jibe. “I have received my orders and am at your command, sir.”

“Very well. What do you know of the situation with your daughter?”

“I’ve been informed that when Cecilia came north to Skyrim, she was involved in an incident with a dragon. That she has been recognized by some Nords as ‘Dragonborn’, and can use the powers of dragons themselves to defeat them. Also, she has refused to fight for the Legion. Is this all true?”

“When I sent for you, that was the gist of it. But the situation has changed. First, your daughter is widely reported to have defeated the chief of the Dragons: Alduin the World-Eater. I believe those reports. And secondly, your daughter has gone to Windhelm to marry the rebel Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Varo’s knees buckled and his head swam. Blindly, he reached out for something to keep him upright and felt Emilin’s arm around him. “She what?”

If Tullius answered, he did not hear him.

“Junius, take a deep breath,” Emilin’s voice was in his ear.

“There were softer ways of breaking that news, sir,” he then registered Rikke’s voice.

“I’m – I’m.” He broke off trying to say he was fine. He wasn’t. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do we,” Rikke replied.

Someone guided him to a chair, and there he sat and tried to will the room before him back into reality, rather than the unfocused blur of colour and movement he was seeing. Then a bottle was pressed to his lips. “Drink,” instructed Emilin.

He opened his mouth and took a swig of the liquid. It was tasteless in his mouth but burst with warmth as it went down his throat. The room around him refocused itself. He was sitting in a chair by the door with Emilin kneeling at his side with a potion bottle, and the other soldiers gathered around him.

“That’s enough,” he told Emilin. “I’m back. I don’t know what in Oblivion has happened to my daughter, Tullius. I thought she was in Markarth.

Really?” Tullius was frowning. “She’s been to Markarth, yes, but she hasn’t stayed in one place since she first came to Skyrim.”

“For what it’s worth, Varo,” Rikke cut in. “I don’t think your daughter supports the Stormcloaks. At all. A short while ago, she called a peace council at High Hrothgar, and it was clear to me she only wanted peace in Skyrim.”

“High Hrothgar?” Varo asked.

“It’s a weird Nord commune of pacifist monks living on a big mountain,” said Tullius.

Rikke sighed. “Let me explain the cultural stuff, sir.” She turned back to Varo. “High Hrothgar is a building near the top of Skyrim’s tallest mountain, the Throat of the World. The Greybeards dwell there, and they are the ones who recognized your daughter as Dragonborn and have guided her all this time. We and the Jarls agreed to a truce at High Hrothgar a couple of weeks ago, at the behest of your daughter and the Jarl of Whiterun. It now appears that there was a secret clause to this treaty.
The Jarl of Whiterun has written us that your daughter promised her hand to Ulfric Stormcloak in return for his agreement to the peace.”

“But if you’ve made peace?” began Varo.

“A short truce only, while the Dragon Alduin was undefeated,” Tullius explained. “The war has now begun again in earnest. We expect Ulfric to attack Whiterun immediately.”

Varo tried to recall the map of Skyrim. “Whiterun is the central hold, yes?”

“It is. Its Jarl has tried to stay out of this war, but he’s at last seen reason and sided with the Empire.”

“Good.” Varo stood up. His legs felt weak, but he wasn’t wobbling. “Do you want me to go to Whiterun?”

Tullius raised an eyebrow. “Whiterun? I’d like you to collect your daughter from Windhelm.”

“With due respect, sir, that’s not going to work out. If my daughter’s made a promise to Stormcloak, there is nothing I could do to drag her to Solitude. Not if she has the powers of dragons, as you’ve told me she does.”

“You’re treading very close to insubordination,” Tullius growled.

“Instead, I would like to strike at the source of the problem. Ulfric Stormcloak must be stopped now. I can see he has the momentum. But if we smash his army at Whiterun, that changes. So, he’s engaged to marry the Dragonborn, he still doesn’t have her power. Let Skyrim know that the Dragonborn’s father will destroy Ulfric Stormcloak to take back his daughter.”

“You’re very confident in yourself,” said Tullius. “But you’re not wrong. Ulfric must be stopped at Whiterun. How good are you, these days?”

“You know I was personal battlemage to the Emperor himself. Smashing armies is my specialty.”

“And I’m his back-up,” added Emilin. “Only we have a request. Please let Junius wear trousers. No one wants to see his bare legs.”

There was laughter all around. Emilin was once again the champion of breaking the tension. “Well, I expect you know what armour works best for you,” Tullius told them. “Varo, I’m inclined to send you to Whiterun right away, then, Legate Cipius and his detachment marched out a few days ago, and I have no more troops to send, but you can handle yourself on the road.”

“Yes, sir. I can.” Varo was smiling.

“Legate Rikke, you go with him,” Tullius instructed her. “You can get Varo up to speed on everything along the way.”

“Yes sir,” Rikke turned to Varo and Emilin. “It’ll be an honour to finally serve with you both.”

“Sir,” one of the other soldiers spoke up. “Jarl Elisif’s steward has been asking that Varo attend the court when he arrives.”

“He certainly won’t be, Caesennius. Varo, a word of advice: With a few exceptions, these Skyrim nobles are all useless pains in the arse. That goes double for everyone in the Blue Palace. Avoid them.”

“What of the Jarl of Whiterun?” asked Varo.
“He’s a canny one. His name’s Balgruuf, he served with us in the war.”

“I recognize the name. One of Jonna’s Nords?”

“Yes. In your wife's legion, I believe?” Tullius replied.

“Yes,” Rikke confirmed. “We both served under Legate Attius near the end of the war.”

“I’m sorry to hear of her death,” said Tullius. “She was far too young. Not that the young are spared in our line of business.”

“But it’s a shock when a soldier dies in bed, in peacetime,” Varo replied. “All my life, I feared it would be the Thalmor that got my family in the end. Avelina made it to a peaceful death. I don’t regret that.”

Tullius slapped him on his back. “You’re not going to fit in with these war-hungry Nords, Varo, but I think they’ll be all the better for it. Anything else you need right away?”

“There are some mysteries Legate Rikke might help me solve. For instance, I got a letter from a friend saying my daughter first encountered a dragon at Helgen. Why would she have been in Helgen in the first place?”

Tullius froze. Rikke opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. The other officers stood very still, watching Tullius.

“Well, we might as well tell you the truth,” said Tullius at last. “You’ll hear the whole story from the Stormcloaks. In Last Seed, your daughter was found by an Imperial patrol near Darkwater Crossing. I presume she’d come up the Pale Pass from Bruma.”

“That was her plan, yes,” replied Varo.

“The Pale Pass is hardly navigable these days, and she must have had trouble along the way, because she’d lost her supplies, her travelling clothes were in shreds, and she had no identification on her. Or so I’ve been told since. I didn’t see her then. I believe she had the bad luck to run into Stormcloak soldiers who gave her some rough garments and offered to set her on the road to Darkwater Crossing. They didn’t know the Legion was waiting near Darkwater Crossing to ambush Ulfric Stormcloak.”

“I heard news of that,” Varo commented. “It was a masterstroke of strategy, sir.”

“Yes. Well, my soldiers took your daughter prisoner as well. Can’t blame them. She was there, with the Stormcloaks. And then - You know what happened to Helgen, don’t you?”

Varo nodded. He wasn’t liking where this story was going. It was understandable that the soldiers should arrest Cecilia under these circumstances, but when Tullius found out who she was, he’d have let her go, right? And yet, something had happened to make his loyal daughter spurn the Legion’s requests.

“We carted the prisoners to Helgen. I had Ulfric Stormcloak right there, bound and gagged. I ordered his execution along with all his soldiers we’d captured. They were guilty of high treason, and I wasn’t taking any chances that they’d escape along the way, or that the Thalmor would take them. Now, among the prisoners was your daughter. I did not speak with her, and her name was not on the list we’d made up of the Stormcloaks. The captain reading out the list decided that didn’t matter. My attention was on Ulfric. If I’d heard her name, I certainly would have intervened but-"
“You tried to execute my daughter?” Varo roared.

“Guilty,” said Tullius.

Varo socked him in the jaw.

Tullius stumbled back and the other legionnaires grabbed Varo. Rikke twisted Varo’s hands behind his back. Emilin raised her hands to show she wasn’t a threat.

“You have a job to do, Varo,” said Tullius, rubbing his jaw. “Are you ready to do it?”

“Yes,” Varo pronounced the word through gritted teeth.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let go of him,” Tullius ordered.

Reluctantly, they let Varo go. Varo turned on his heel and headed for the door. Emilin followed after him.

“I deserved that, didn’t I?” said Tullius softly.

“Yes, sir, you did,” said Rikke.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter had no Thalmor! They aim to fix that next chapter. Also starring Ralof in his new career as a buffer between his Jarl and the Dragonborn.

For practical gameplay purposes, the siege of Whiterun is not a real siege. I’m taking advantage of fanfic, however, to write a real siege, which isn’t concluded after one mad charge at the gates. Now, how it will end here . . . no spoilers.

Also, I wrote Junius Varo was an Alteration master, when I meant Illusion. Have gone back and fixed that.
1 Second Seed, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

Too confusing for me. Empire, Nords, Talos. Who cares? Just tell me who need bludgeoning. – Farkas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1 Second Seed, 4 E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

Just before dawn, Lydia entered her thane’s room with news. Promising Cecilia she would find out what Ulfric was up to, she’d stayed out all night. Cecilia had tossed and turned through the night, waiting for Lydia’s return. She’d hoped Lydia wasn’t taking any huge risks. Her status as Cecilia’s housecarl should protect her, but the Stormcloaks were already jumpy and paranoid of spies.

“Is everything all right?” Cecilia jumped from her bed at once.

“The messenger was Hrongar,” Lydia told her. “I just managed to have a few words with him before he starts back for Whiterun.”

“Why was he here?”

“He was bringing Jarl Balgruuf’s axe to Ulfric. Ulfric sent it back.”

“And that means?”

“It’s war between them now. Hrongar called you a bitch, by the way. I’d have punched him out, but he’s my own Jarl’s emissary.”

Cecilia smiled faintly. “Thanks for not punching him.”

“I’ve also found out that Galmar Stone-Fist rode out of Windhelm in the middle of the night. He took just a handful of Stormcloaks with him.”


“As far as I know. I’ve been watching the corridor up to his bedroom, but I had to move on whenever the guards came by.”

“Thanks, Lydia. You should get some sleep now. I’ll go see what’s up.”

“You’re welcome.” Lydia climbed into her bed. “Go demolish him.”

It was too bad demolishing Ulfric Stormcloak was not an available choice. She’d felt rather kindly towards him last evening, but now she could cheerfully Shout him into a wall. True, he hadn’t betrayed her by continuing his war. In fact, he had stated up front that he was marrying her to help the Stormcloaks’ cause. But she had expected that her truce would linger on a little, and perhaps there would be an opportunity for another peace to be brokered, one that would let Skyrim prepare for a new war against the Dominion. She hadn’t counted on that happening, but it stung that he and Balgruuf had immediately returned to their enmity. They’d not even consulted her about beginning
their new war.

She lit the lamp by the washstand and began to brush her hair. She was wearing a long white flannel nightgown, brought to her by the maids. She would make an excellent vengeful ghost, she thought, observing herself in the mirror.

When she went to look for her clothes, all she could find were the rumpled blue robes from the previous night. The servants must have taken the rest to the laundry. A mad idea was beginning to form in her head. She went to the chest at the foot of her bed, and rummaging through her luggage, pulled out a dagger. She closed the chest, then left her room, still in her nightgown.

The flagstones of the hallway chilled her bare feet. A guard was staring at her. “Are you all right, my Lady?” he hurriedly asked.

“Just taking a morning stroll,” replied Cecilia. “Where are Jarl Ulfric’s quarters?”

The guard took a step back. He looked terrified.

“I’d like to visit my betrothed,” Cecilia said, reminding him of her status.

“All right, my Lady, follow me.” The guard acquiesced. He still seemed uncomfortable, casting awkward glances over his shoulder as Cecilia stalked behind him, dagger in hand.

He led her up some more stairs to a closed door, at which he knocked.

“Come in.” Ulfric’s voice rumbled.

The guard opened the door, “My Jarl, the Lady—“

Cecilia pushed by him.

Ulfric Stormcloak’s bedroom was the most ridiculous thing she had ever seen in her life. His bed was in the centre of the room on a dais! With Eastmarch’s banners hanging above it. The Jarl himself, though, was already up and dressed, sitting at a small table with Ralof. They both jumped to their feet as she entered. She had apparently interrupted their breakfast.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Ulfric asked.

“Is it really a pleasure?” asked Cecilia. She took another look at the dagger. She’d been feeling very resolute when she hatched this plan, but now she was losing her nerve.

“It should be.” Ulfric took a cautious step towards her. “Though I hesitate to ask what the dagger is for.”

“Oh well.” She flashed him a bright smile and decided to go for it. “The dagger’s for me. If I need to use it.”

“I can’t think of any reason you’d need it here, Dragonborn.”

Cecilia continued to smile. “You’re right. Because I have my Shouts, right? You know I could just Shout down anyone that threatens me. But one can’t Shout oneself dead. That’s what the dagger is for.”

Ulfric’s arm shot out and grabbed her hand, immobilizing the blade. “Don’t you . . . What is wrong with you?”
“There’s nothing wrong with me, my Jarl. I’d rather not die myself. But if I’m backed into a corner, I’m warning you now, that will be my choice.”

She let Ulfric take the blade from her now. She’d made her point, she hoped.

“No one’s backing you into a corner,” Ulfric continued. “Ralof, I’m assigning you to Lady Cecilia today. I assume she has business of her own to attend to in Windhelm.”

“I do, yes. Come along, Ralof.” She turned and swept out of the room.

Ralof hurried to catch up with her. “Dragonborn, are you all right?” he demanded when he did.

“Yes. I just had to let him know I have an out,” said Cecilia, continuing her march down the corridor. “You don’t have to worry. I promised not to interfere in his war.”

“But you threatened to kill yourself?”

“Only if everything I love is destroyed, Ralof.”

“Cecilia,” Ralof used her given name, as he had in Riverwood before she became Dragonborn. She stopped to look back at him.

“Cecilia,” he said again. “Do you love Jarl Ulfric?”

That was what broke her. Right then and there, she dropped all her pretenses, all her cool, calculated plans, and wept.

“I want to go home,” she wailed. “I want to be back in Anvil with my father, and never ever have to see Skyrim again.”

Ralof reached out and awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Is your father alive, Cecilia?”

“Ye-es.” She gulped for air. “I hope so.”

“Then you’ll see him again. I promise you. Surely Jarl Ulfric will send for him.”

She knew her father would never join the court of a traitor to the Empire. “He won’t come.”

“Well then, you can go to him someday. You’re not locked up here. Are you?” He asked the last question sharply.

Cecilia shook her head. “No. I’m not. That was part of the deal. I chose to accept your Jarl’s proposal, Ralof. And I’m not going to break my word. But I don’t think I realized how much it would hurt. I feel like I’ve betrayed everyone in Whiterun.”

Understanding dawned on Ralof’s face then. “I see. Well, that’s not true, you know. That’s my home hold too, and you haven’t betrayed me. Or Gerdur. Or Thorald Gray-Mane. Or half the hold, who only want to live and worship how they like.”

This earnest Stormcloak speech did not persuade Cecilia, but the heart of the man giving it was pure, so somehow it did comfort her. She lifted her hand to wipe the tears from her face.

“You’re not going to hurt yourself, are you?” Ralof pressed.

“No,” she admitted. And just like that, he disarmed the threat she’d designed for Ulfric: *Don’t tread too far or you lose the Dragonborn*. Ulfric Stormcloak might have more formidable soldiers, but
none of them could have bested her like Ralof had with his honest kindness.

“Jarl Ulfric’s worrying about you, I reckon,” said Ralof. “I’ll explain how you’re upset about Whiterun. He’ll understand. We all know how you wanted peace.”

“Right.” Cecilia gave up. She could not conduct a marriage like a war, after all.

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1 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Reach

Tanulvie had thought she knew pain. One did not become a Thalmor Justiciar without learning to master oneself, even in the worst moments of suffering and desperation. Her teachers used lightning spells to teach that discipline first hand. And yet she felt now she had never truly known pain until she’d travelled Skyrim’s Reach in the back of a wagon.

Thump, bump, bump, thump. The wagon jolted up and down on the cobblestone roads. There was no suspension at all. She’d considered for a while what sort of Alteration spell could improve the experience, but throwing around spells was exactly the sort of attention-drawing behaviour she was supposed to avoid.

She was not the only passenger in the wagon. An elderly couple had boarded at Solitude with her, and then at Dragon’s Bridge, a young mother with three small children climbed in. The wagon bed was packed with goods being transported to market, and the passengers packed in between the goods. Healthy, normal adult people in Skyrim walked, and Tanulvie envied them.

The children had been wary of Tanulvie when they first climbed on board. They probably took their cue from their elders. The wagon driver and the other passengers avoided speaking to her when they could. But, as time wore on, the children lost their inhibitions and began to investigate this strange being riding along with them.

“Are you an elf?” one of the small boys asked.

“I am a mer,” replied Tanulvie.

“See, she’s not an elf, she’s a mer,” the little boy informed his older sister.

The girl, who seemed to be the oldest of the three children, scoffed at her brother. “Mer’s just another word for elf, nitwit.”

“Is that true?” the boy was appealing to Tanulvie. She confirmed that yes, this was true, but mer was much the superior word to use, as it was what her Aldmeri ancestors had called themselves. The children didn’t seem to understand this at all. It seemed she had been quite correct to assume Nord children were dull-witted.

Unfortunately, this one interaction had cut through their inhibitions, and Tanulvie was soon plagued with a range of stupid questions.

“Why’s your skin yellow?” (Ignored)

“Why are your ears pointy?” (Ignored)

“Where are you going?” “Markarth.”
“Do you have kids?” “No.”
“Do you have brothers?” “No.”
“What about sisters?” “One.”
“Do you like sweetrolls?” (Ignored)
“Do you know where dragons come from?” (Ignored. But wouldn’t they all like to know the answer to that one?)

She answered some and ignored more. But the questions never ended.

“Do elves go to Sovngarde?”

“Certainly not,” she snapped and started the children crying for the poor elves. They only calmed down when one of them spotted a cave on the side of the road ahead: a good distraction from the eternal fate of elves.

“Is there a bear in there?”

“Shush,” the wagon driver said. “All of you be quiet.”

The wagon proceeded down the road, past the mouth of the cave. Tanulvie’s eyes strained to pierce its darkness but saw nothing. But her intuition was that something was wrong about this place. The driver certainly seemed to be on edge.

However, they passed the cave without trouble and were coming to a small bridge over a rocky stream that raced down into the river.

“Kolskeggr Mine’s just ahead. We’re stopping to drop off some things the miners have ordered,” the driver announced.

And then he fell backwards from his seat with an arrow through his neck.

There was a lot of screaming after that: Screams from the terrified children and the whoops of their attackers who swarmed out from the cave behind them and from beneath the bridge. These attackers were men and women, half naked, half-clad in furs and decked out in human and animal bones. These must be the Forsworn of the Reach: the degraded offspring of a mongrel race.

In a split second, Tanulvie took stock of the situation. The driver was dead or as good as dead. The horses were in panic. But the old man was brandishing a dagger, the old woman was pulling out a bow, and the children’s mother had taken out her sword. That was Skyrim for you. These Nords were completely unprepared for an ambush, but they’d die with a weapon in their hands.

Tanulvie wasn’t going to die, but she had to decide what to do with the Nords. Thalmor guidelines on dealing with the Empire’s civilians were complex. They were not stationed in these lands to protect these people, but they were enjoined to uphold the reputation of the Thalmor and to co-operate with local authorities in simple matters that did not concern the Dominion’s interests. It was a matter of practicality. A Justiciar who lent their aid to the locals could then count on some amount of local co-operation in return.

So, while she didn’t feel obligated to save her fellow passengers, it would probably be a good idea to do so, if she could assure her own survival as well.
“Lie down!” she ordered them all and began to place a ward on the wagon. Only the children listened to her. The old man and the mother sprung down from the cart, out of the ward’s protection. They were cut down immediately. Tanulvie jumped down after them, casting lightning cloak as she went.

Her wall of lightning fell upon the nearest Forsworn. Two of the warriors were struck to the ground, but the others stumbled back, howling their pain and anger. In the short time this bought her, she could focus enough to summon some help: a simple Flame Atronach wouldn’t overtax her magic. But as the flames roared into existence beside her, a blast of frost slammed into her from behind.

She spun around to face a figure out of a nightmare. He was a man, or once he had been a man. A deer skull’s helmet covered his face, he wore only a tattered fur loincloth, and there were human skulls hung upon his belt. But her eyes were drawn foremost to the gaping bloody hole in his chest where his heart should be. A fiery bloom sat in its place. This must be one of the Reachmen’s abominations: the Briarhearts.

There were other spellcasters approaching too. The Reachmen were mostly Breton by blood, she remembered: mongrels who were twisted mockeries of Auri-El’s image. Their magic was strong, but nothing compared to a true mer of Alinor. She let her lightning jump from one enemy to another, then slashed forward at the Briarheart with her life-leeching glass dagger. She drew blood, but the creature jumped back, out of her reach.

From the protected wagon, the old woman was shooting arrows, which was of some use. But the ward on the wagon was failing. Tanulvie could not continue to hold it and fight the Forsworn. She’d have to let it fall then. Her own survival was the first priority.

But perhaps she should try some intimidation first. Elenwen had instructed her to stay incognito, but only as a precaution to avoid attack, not an absolute order. So, she shouted out a threat that could do wonders:

“Begone from this place or face the wrath of the Thalmor! I am a Justiciar of the Glorious Aldmeri Dominion, and no matter what hole you crawl into, anyone who stands against me will be hunted down by my brethren!”

She was counting on Chief Justiciar Ondolemar to have cemented the Thalmor’s reputation in these parts so that her words would not strike them as an empty threat. Judging by their reaction, however, Ondolemar had failed in his duties. Her declaration seemed to energize her opponents. Regretfully, she let the ward fall and lost herself in the dancing storm of battle.

Then at her left side, she sensed a new figure. A warrior in dark armour had joined the fight against the Forsworn. Through the dancing sparks and flames, Tanulvie only caught glimpses of the newcomer but could see they were making short work of the ordinary Forsworn warriors. Breathing a short prayer to her ancestors, Tanulvie focused her attention again on the Briarheart five paces ahead of her.

Again and again, she threw her lightning bolts at him, but he seemed unhurt and returned them with blasts of frost. But while they were fighting, she noticed movement in the juniper bushes behind him. Someone was creeping up on her opponent. Very well. She would keep serving here as the distraction.

The person in the bushes slowly stood up behind the Briarheart. He was a light-haired Bosmer, in light armour with a quiver and bow at his back. But he had nothing in his hands. Meeting Tanulvie’s eyes, he laid a finger across his lip. Then he reached forward and thrust his hand into the Briarheart’s chest. A second later, he pulled out the red blossom and the Briarheart slumped to the ground, dead.
There was silence at last. The Briarheart was the last of their enemies. Tanulvie opened her mouth to thank the Bosmer, then a spell hit her from behind. She fell forward on her face, unable to move. Caught just like the Briarheart in the newcomers’ trap.

“Good work, Faendal, Esbern,” she heard a woman’s voice behind her, and then another spell hit her and she lost consciousness.

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1 Second Seed, 4 E202, Solitude

Around noon, Varo departed Solitude on horseback, accompanied only by Legate Rikke and Emilin. Rikke rode beside him. Emilin, however, had refused the offer of her own horse, and as usual, climbed up behind him.

Despite their short stature, most Bosmer handled horses as well as they did any animal. Emilin was no exception, but she said that she’d learnt to ride and fight on horseback while sharing a horse with Varo’s mother. She was indeed an expert at firing arrows while the rider in front of her urged their steed onwards.

None of them talked much as they rode out the gate and down the road that would, at last, bring them to Whiterun. There were too many people around with ears pricked for gossip. A few had even recognized Varo and were speculating what he was doing there. Once they got into the wilderness, however, they began to relax and traded accounts of their lives since they’d last seen each other.

Rikke explained that she’d served under Tullius in the Colovian Highlands for the last few years. “So, when he got assigned up here, he insisted I come along,” she explained to Varo. “I’m his expert on Nords and their strange ways, you saw that, right?”

“He’s not exactly diplomatic,” said Varo.

“No. He says what he thinks and half of it is truly atrocious. But Nords respect men like that. Our legionnaires curse him to Oblivion, but would follow him there, if he ordered them.”

“You want me to say I forgive him?” asked Varo.


“Hush,” Emilin broke in suddenly. “There are horses waiting for us down the road.”

Varo strained to listen and then heard it. Far ahead of them, out of sight, the unmistakable sound of horses breathing heavily and stomping their feet.

“Any idea who that could be?” asked Varo, turning to Rikke.

“No idea,” she replied.

“Should I slip off and scout ahead?” Emilin asked.

“If we start at every traveller along the way, we’ll never get anywhere,” said Rikke. “Haafingar’s usually safe enough . . .” They rode further along the road in silence, straining to see who was lying in wait.

“Thalmor,” hissed Varo suddenly, and halted his horse.
“Talos preserve us,” Rikke muttered under her breath, as she did the same.

Five figures were waiting on their horses in the clearing to the left of the road. The sunlight glinted off the gold armour of three. The other two were clad in black robes with gold trim.

“Well met, Legiionnaires.” One of the dark-clad Thalmor called out to them.

Rikke recognized the voice immediately. “Elenwen. What’s she doing here?”

“Of all the places in Nirm,” Varo groaned. Then he called back. “Hail Cousin! Were you waiting for me?”

Elenwen made a very undignified huffing sound but rode forward into the road. Her companions followed.

“Cousin?” Rikke asked in a low tone.

“My mother’s first cousin,” Varo explained. “But I’m not invited to the family reunions.”

“Legate Rikke, Junius Varo,” Elenwen addressed them. “You are riding to Whiterun. We will accompany you as observers.”

“No, you won’t, Elenwen,” Varo roared. “There’s nothing in the White-Gold Concordat about stalking Legionnaires on military business.”

“You may not be aware, Varo, but Whiterun’s Jarl has barred the Thalmor from his gates, in defiance of the Concordat. But now that he is submitting to Imperial authority, we are simply asserting our right to enter Whiterun and examine the city for signs of the Talos heresy.”

“Hah, you could go do that on your time,” said Varo. “What’s with the ambush?”

“We are going the same way. Safety in numbers, correct?”

“If you think I’ll pull any strings to get you into the city, think again,” Varo warned her.

This encounter made no sense at all. If the Thalmor were hunting him, they’d never have shown themselves like this. And it was not their style to interfere openly in a country’s “internal politics”, so he doubted they wanted to join the fight at Whiterun. Also, he must be the last person Elenwen wanted to meet in public, where men and mer could hear him call her kin. So if they were here now, specifically for him . . .

He burst out laughing. “You think I might be planning to defect to the Stormcloaks?”

“Surely not,” replied Elenwen quickly.

“Certainly not. But I can see it now. You’re worried that all of a sudden this war might move out of stalemate. The Dragonborn married to Stormcloak, and her Thalmor-hating battlemage of a father goes to his son-in-law’s side. The war would be over before you could pack up your Embassy’s wine cellar.”

Elenwen sniffed. “I will not be drawn into your mental gymnastics, Varo. You are a loyal servant of the Empire and we have the Empire’s approval for our mission here in Skyrim. Do not attempt to hinder us.”

“Do you usually let her boss you around like this?” Varo asked Rikke.
“She does tag along sometimes,” Rikke admitted. “She came up to High Hrothgar for the peace negotiations.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Your daughter expelled us from the council,” said Elenwen. “Is defying the Concordat your new family tradition?”

“You know what my family traditions are.” Varo rattled Elf-biter loudly in its scabbard

“We’re wasting time,” Emilin’s soft voice broke into the argument. “Let them follow along, Junius. I’ll keep my eyes on them.”

“Silence, traitor.” Elenwen spat out the words.

Emilin chuckled. “Junius, ride.”

He and Rikke did. Elenwen and her elves rode after them but kept a little distance between them. He didn’t feel safe with this arrangement, but at least Emilin had her eyes on Elenwen’s posse. He also wondered what they would do when it came time to make camp. Would Elenwen insist on camping with them? He didn’t know his mother’s cousin well – their encounters had been limited to a couple of duels over a few decades. But had she always been this audacious?

What were the gods even thinking? Were they gathering his mismatched family to Skyrim so they could all comfortably kill each other? If so, he hoped he got to be the one who took out Elenwen.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a lot. Any questions on the plot/timeline so far?
1 Second Seed, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

It's not easy being a woman in Skyrim, I know. But stay strong, men will come to respect you, and maybe even fear you. – Olfina Gray-Mane

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

Ulfric Stormcloak’s morning had not been improved by his future wife’s appearance in his room as a deranged madwoman from a High Rock melodrama. His confidence in his choice was severely shaken. Cecilia Varo had seemed a good investment because she was so stable and well-behaved. The barefoot woman in a long white nightgown brandishing a dagger was anything but. Too late, he remembered Legion Battlemage Junius Varo’s reputation for dramatic eccentricity. Was he a fool to have assumed Cecilia took after the orderly, respectable side of her family?

He wasn’t worried she’d carry out her threat. In dire circumstances, yes, she’d have the courage for it. But Ulfric was following the same path he’d always followed, just as he’d spelled out to her in his proposal letter. She was trying to bluff him into some concession, though he couldn’t imagine what she actually expected. No doubt she really was distraught about Whiterun – as Ralof came back to inform him – and that was to blame for the general incoherence of her strategy.

A treacherous voice at the back of his head accused him of being annoyed because there was only room for one moody, over-emotional, dramatic leader in Windhelm. He’d even threatened to kill himself back in Markarth, hadn’t he? And hadn’t it worked? So could he really fault Cecilia for this?

Ralof had said that she was missing her father in Cyrodiil: an unsolvable problem, that. But Cecilia had a grandmother and uncle in the Reach; they should be brought here for their own safety, and perhaps those family bonds would help her settle into Windhelm. Ideally, she’d make more friends in the city, but he couldn’t do that for her.

Focus. He hadn’t survived all these years to be sucked into this woman’s emotional hurricane.

He had a war to win.

More troops would be marching out tomorrow morning for Whiterun. His army had been preparing for this campaign for two months, but the business with the truce had upset many of their assumptions. They could no longer bank on the element of surprise; Balgruuf had been given all the time in the world to suss out their plans.

The truce itself had changed the landscape of Skyrim. He had not fought as hard as he might have at the negotiating table, knowing that he had the Dragonborn’s promise. So, rather than demanding the Reach, he’d settled for taking Falkreath and giving the Empire Winterhold. Winterhold was a difficult-to-defend ruin, and with Falkreath in hand, one of the mainland routes to Cyrodiil was under Stormcloak control. Yet it worried him how hard Tullius had been pushing for Winterhold at the table that day. The obvious explanation was that receiving Winterhold gave the Empire a “loophole” to sail ships up the Sea of Ghosts even during the truce. Reports from his scouts confirmed this. There were currently two Imperial ships anchored off Winterhold. The Imperial navy these days
didn’t have the strength to launch a full-scale naval attack down the White River, but they could certainly cause problems for Windhelm’s shipping.

As well, Cecilia had determined they pay compensation for the so-called “massacre” at Karthwasten. Whether she actually believed that bit of Imperial propaganda, or just wanted to keep things relatively balanced, he did not know. But they were out a good sum of gold marked for the war effort. He’d raise the money from the Rift eventually, but Laila was dragging her feet on raising taxes. She did not seem to realize how close she’d come to losing her hold entirely. If he had aimed for the Reach, the Empire would have demanded her hold in exchange.

Lastly, there was the matter of the Gray Quarter. Dunmer discontent was a given; truly they enjoyed being sullen and resentful, but there’d recently been some alarming scuffles in the streets. Most of them were petty affairs started by Windhelm’s finest drunks, but if these little streetfights progressed into something bigger, it wouldn’t really matter who started it. Most of his people scorned the Dark Elves and loathed their magic, but they did not properly fear their ability to strike back. They felt secure marching into the Gray Quarter and poking the proverbial hornet’s nest. With so many fighting men and women marching off to Whiterun, the city guard would be stretched thinner than usual.

He’d promised Galmar he would find something to occupy Cecilia’s attention and her dramatic appearance over breakfast made it only more important she be occupied. Why not send her to the Gray Quarter? They could talk her ear off with their complaints, and then if she decided to righteously “intervene” for them, he’d grant her a few small favours that would calm the situation. Two birds killed with one stone, possibly three, if Windhelm’s resident elf-lovers were mollified.

Cecilia breakfasted with the Companions in a corner of the Great Hall. She had informed them of the situation in Whiterun, expecting them to be shocked, but Vilkas had just shrugged.

“We stay out of politics, remember? It’s one Jarl versus another, not our business.”

Aela nodded. “It’s good luck for us we’re here instead of Whiterun. Balgruuf understands our position, but some folk keep pestering us to join in.”

“I had a short chat with your Jarl last night,” Vilkas told Cecilia. “He gets it.”

“My Jarl?” For a moment Cecilia wondered how he could have spoken to Balgruuf. “Oh, you mean Ulfric?”

This set the Companions laughing. “Yours as in the one who belongs to you,” said Njada archly.

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” said Cecilia, thinking of this morning’s encounter.

“Weak,” said Njada, shaking her head.

“I don’t think Ulfric lets anyone boss him around,” said Farkas seriously. “Anyway, Dragonborn, we’ve been hired to clear out bandits in Uttering Hills Cave. Do you want to come along?”

He said this as if he were offering her a chance to join the most enjoyable outing imaginable.

Cecilia shook her head. “I’ve had just about enough bandits, thank you. You don’t need my help. Who hired you for the job?”

“Brunwulf Free-Winter,” said Vilkas. “Got to talking last night, and he might have a few jobs for us.”
Brunwulf had tried to talk her and Lydia into going to Uttering Hills before, but Cecilia had never had the time to spare. She was glad to hear he’d found someone else.

While the Companions readied themselves for their expedition, she was considering what she should do today. She needed a new wardrobe for palace life, she had some work for the smith to do, a few acquaintances to catch up with. Nothing seemed very pressing or appealing.

Then Ralof reappeared with a request from Ulfric to talk to the leaders of the Gray Quarter.

Cecilia raised her eyebrows. “Really? You’re not pulling my leg?”

“There’s been some minor unrest in the Quarter, but Jarl Ulfric can’t spare his attention from the War,” Ralof explained. “He thinks you might make some headway there.”

Cecilia wanted to roll her eyes. If Ulfric cared about the Gray Quarter, he would have found someone to help him out before now. His hands had not been tied until the coming of Cecilia Varo. But she’d go along with this. She needed a better handle on Windhelm as a city, rather than a place to sleep, sell loot, and buy supplies.

Ralof escorted her into the city after breakfast. Lydia was still sleeping, so she very much appreciated having him there to shoo people away. It came in handy when people asked awkward questions such as “Will you be leading the army to Whiterun, Dragonborn?”

She’d murmur a few words about not being a soldier and Ralof would send them on their way.

She’d been to the Gray Quarter on her previous visits to Windhelm, usually to visit Revyn Sadri’s used goods store. He was a reliable purchaser of Nord grave goods, scuffed up bandits’ armour and dragon bones. Other than that, she’d exchanged some pleasant words with a few residents, and some unpleasant words with Ambarys Rendar. The latter, she’d been assured by multiple people, was a local rite of passage.

“I don’t really know the Gray Quarter,” Ralof confided in her, as they made their way down from the Palace. “I’ve only been in Windhelm on army business, so . . . “

“You’d have no reason to go there and it isn’t really inviting for a Stormcloak soldier. I understand that.”

“Is it as dreadful as people say?” asked Ralof.

“No, but then people say some really ridiculous things about it. They claim the guards are afraid to even go in there. It’s just crowded, dilapidated and foreign. Didn’t really bother me, but then I’m from Anvil.”

At the entrance of the Gray Quarter. Cecilia gave Ralof a warning. “It should go without saying, but they don’t care much for Jarl Ulfric in here. And since we’re here to hear them out, try not to take offence.”

“I may be a Stormcloak, but that doesn’t mean I have to agree with every single decision the Jarl’s made,” said Ralof.

He’d said as much their first day back in Riverwood, Cecilia remembered. That he’d heard things about Ulfric he didn’t like, but that Ulfric was right about the war. Cecilia brightened. “Good man. But I’m warning you, there’s this one guy, Ambarys Rendar . . . well, you’ll see when you meet him.”
Their first stop in the Gray Quarter was indeed the New Gnisis Corner Club. It was still morning, so there were no customers inside. Rendar was busy tidying the bar.

“Well, look who’s here. The fine lady herself,” Rendar’s acid tone greeted them. “Slumming it, are you?”

“I’m getting to know the city properly, Rendar,” replied Cecilia. “Let me introduce my friend Ralof. Ralof, this is Ambarys Rendar, owner of this establishment.”

“I’m very glad to meet you,” said Ralof heartily.

“Are you really?” Rendar snorted. “Well, Dragonborn, why are you starting your little tour of Windhelm in the Gray Quarter? Tired of all those Nords fawning over you?”

Cecilia took a seat at the bar. “Rendar, I met half of Windhelm last night at the feast in my honour. But I couldn’t help noticing there was not one Dunmer face in that crowd.”

“Weren’t invited, were we?”

“That didn’t stop most of the Nords from showing up.”

Rendar gave her an incredulous look. “You’re not that innocent. You know damn well what those Nord drunks would do if a Dunmer shoved his way into their precious Jarl’s feast.”

“So, you need to be invited by name to all future events. Is that the way of it?”

“The way of it is we’d prefer to be left alone.”

Cecilia leaned forward on the counter. “The way of it is that I am not going to leave you alone.”

“What sort of do-gooder nonsense-“

Cecilia cut him off. “I live here now! I have a stake in this place, Gray Quarter and all. And do you think I’m happy to see all this wasted potential? I’m a mage, you s’wit. Do you think that’s going to win me any popularity points with the Windhelm mob?”

Rendar seemed to consider this for a second but then launched into another stream of invective. “We should all be falling at your feet to serve you because you understand what it’s like being an outsider? Try living here for two hundred years and see what you think then!”

“Why are you still living here, if you hate it so much?” Cecilia snapped back.

“I could ask you the same!” shouted Rendar. “You’re from Cyrodiil! You know what a cesspit this city is. How did you end up stuck with Jarl Skyrim-is-for-the-Nords? Do you really want to be Queen that bad?”

“All right, I’m done here,” said Cecilia brusquely. She stood up from the bar. “Ralof, come along, we need to get to our meeting with Belyn Hlaalu.”

“Wait, what are you talking to him about?” Rendar demanded.

Cecilia kept walking towards the door, then turned around for a parting shot. “Do-gooder nonsense, I guess.” She stepped out into the street, refusing to give Rendar a chance to reply.

Ralof came out after her and she turned to him with a huge grin. “Do you think I overdid it?”
“I don’t know what you just did,” confessed Ralof.

“Diplomacy. I think.”

“You said I wasn’t supposed to take offence.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t planning any of that. But it seemed the right tack to take. Rendar’s a jerk, even the local Dunmer will tell you that, but he’s smart and experienced and he has the other Dunmer’s respect. I want him to take me seriously. Also, he’s jealous of Belyn Hlaalu, who’s the model Dunmer immigrant, so now he’ll be worried Hlaalu’s in on something important, and he’s being left out. We’ll talk to Hlaalu as well, of course.” She took a deep breath. “This is a lot more fun than it sounded.”

Ralof was staring at her. “Uh . . . Cecilia, were you always like this?”

That was a good question. She had a hunch the answer was yes, but that she’d just been waiting for the right conditions to bloom. The right conditions for her were the freezing cold of Skyrim, who’d have guessed?

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1 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, The Reach

Tanulvie thought she was dreaming a long time after she returned to consciousness. She was lying on her back upon a soft surface but there was a strange hollowness inside of her, something missing, something as essential as blood or bone. Her eyes were darkened and no matter how hard she strained to be whole, she could not be. She felt trapped in her own body. She tried to move her arm. It seemed to her as if she had succeeded, but she still felt immobilized.

“Khajiit thinks this one has woken up,” a strange purring voice broke into her confusion.

“That was a woman’s voice. The same one she’d heard before being knocked out. Tanulvie heard a rustling sound, as if someone was drawing close, the scraping of a chair, then the touch of a hand upon her forehead. “Did you sleep well, Thalmor?”

Tanulvie pulled away from the hand. “Y-you-“ her voice cracked. “You attacked me.”

“Yes. We’d rather not face the wrath of the Glorious Aldmeri Dominion, or whatever it was you were shouting about. You’ve been completely neutralized. Do you feel the bracers on your forearms?”

Tanulvie did. They didn’t hurt her exactly, but that weird nothingness seemed to pool there.

“These are magic-draining bracers. I’m sure you know how they work, and that they cannot be removed without their key.”

That was the reason for the hollowness. She was drained of all her magic. Perhaps it would not have hit the races of men so hard, but for an Altmer it was as though the blood in her veins had stopped pumping. She groaned and tried to move her hand again. This time, she could feel that she was indeed moving it; she just felt paralyzed without the steady background of magic. Now she tried to sit up. But there were real physical restraints to prevent that. She could move a little, but her arms and legs were still bound to the bed beneath her. She also realized at last that she was not struck blind, but rather blindfolded.
“We could dispose of you more permanently,” continued her captor. “We probably will later.”

“Who are you?”

“Do you not know? Perhaps you could hazard a guess.”

Tanulvie realized she could make a guess. It was in Elenwen’s briefing. The Dragonborn had snuck into the Thalmor Embassy as part of a plot by a surviving Blade. Elenwen had warned them that there were now two Blades operating in Skyrim, a Breton woman named Delphine and an older Nord named Esbern. That had been one of the names she’d heard before blacking out.

Elenwen hadn’t said anything about a Bosmer archer or the Khajiit she’d just heard speaking, but if these were the surviving Blades, they could easily have recruited more associates.

Tanulvie groaned. She must be the first Justiciar in nearly thirty years to be taken prisoner by the Blades. It was as humiliating as it was frightening.

“I don’t care who you are,” she told the woman. “The Thalmor will hunt you down.”

“You’ve been failing at that for thirty years,” replied the woman, whom she was now certain must be Delphine.

“What I don’t get,” Tanulvie continued, “is what you think you’re getting out of this. Congratulations, you’ve captured a Thalmor Justiciar who was defending some Nords from the Forsworn. Does that make you feel righteous?” She didn’t imagine this would sway Delphine but any newer recruits listening might feel some shame. She could work with that.

“You saved the lives of three children and an old woman,” said Delphine. “But we both know you would have cheerfully struck them down if it’d been expedient.”

“You presume a lot about me,” said Tanulvie. Of course, Delphine was absolutely right, but she was actually proud to hear she’d been successful keeping the Forsworn at bay. “Should I tell you a little of who I am? So you have the full picture?”

“Go ahead.”

“My name is Tanulvie. I am a Justiciar on my way to Markarth, where I’ve been assigned to serve under Skyrim’s Chief Justiciar, Ondolemar. That is all.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

There was a long silence. Then Delphine said, “Very well, Tanulvie. We’ll talk some more later.”

Tanulvie heard the sound of the woman standing up. She had expected a more intense interrogation, but then, these people weren’t Thalmor. They couldn’t know exactly how to take apart and reconstruct a prisoner, as many times as was needed. How to be kind or cruel, depending on the moment. They couldn’t know how to break a prisoner till they gave up everything they knew, everything they were, just to please their captors.

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1 Second Seed, 4E 202, Dragon Bridge, Haafingar
Junius Varo halted his unlikely cavalcade and dismounted by the Four Shields Tavern in Dragon Bridge.

“You aren’t stopping for the night already?” asked Elenwen disapprovingly, as she rode up beside him.

“I need to ask these people about the road,” he said vaguely. “Emilin, you can water the horses.”

“Yes, sir.” Emilin was a great deal politer in hearing of the Thalmor. He presumed she played up her helpful Imperial servant role to annoy them.

“I’ve been down this road before,” Elenwen objected. “So has Legate Rikke.”

“That’s nice,” Varo walked up the steps to the inn.

To his annoyance, Elenwen followed. She must have decided not to let him out of eyesight. He knew he wouldn’t make the best impression walking into the inn accompanied by a black-robed Thalmor agent, but his questions were fairly simple.

“Good day,” he greeted the woman tending the counter. “Pour me a cup of ale? And if you have some cheese and bread, I’ll have that too. I’m famished.”

“Yes, sir.” The woman looked nervously at Elenwen. “And you?”

“I do not require anything,” said Elenwen stiffly.

“She’s a real snob,” Varo told the innkeeper in a stage whisper. Elenwen ignored him.

Varo sat down at a table and began unfolding a map of Skyrim which he’d procured in Solitude. He looked up at Elenwen who was still standing there. “All right, coz, show me how you’d go to Whiterun.”

Elenwen didn’t look at the map. “I’d take the road, Varo. There is only one.”

“Is there? I wonder.” The innkeeper brought his lunch to the table. “Pardon me,” he asked her, “but I’m looking at this map and there’s something I don’t understand.” He pointed to an area south of Morthal. “There’s a pass there from Hjaalmarch into Whiterun, yes? Why don’t people use it?”

The innkeeper took a look at the map. “Oh, that’s Labyrinthian. Sometimes caravans do cut through there. But only in mid-summer, if the weather’s promising. It’s a nasty place. Big ruined city, lots of snow, and they say it’s crawling with frost trolls.”

“But if the conditions are right, it’s the fastest way down to Whiterun hold?”

“Yes, I guess it is. Not this time of year, though.”

“Of course. Thanks for clearing that up.”

The innkeeper went back to her work and Varo looked up at Elenwen. “Do you follow?” he asked.

“The risks are not worth the extra time you might buy,” she replied.

“It’s not just the extra time. Stormcloaks will be guarding against reinforcements from Solitude. If I go through Labyrinthian, I’ll bypass their patrols entirely.”

“I see.” Elenwen finally took a proper look at the map. “Do you think we will help you fight these
"frost trolls then?"

"You don’t have to come along at all. But if you insist on this wild goose errand, I’m sure you won’t let a troll bash in your heads to spite me."

Elenwen continued to contemplate the map. Varo finished his ale and ate half of the bread and cheese. The other half he’d save for Emilin.

"You should check with your Legate," said Elenwen at last. "But it’s not unreasonable. If this was your plot to throw us off, consider it a failure."

"It must be absolutely delightful living in your tangled mind," said Varo as he refolded the map.

Rikke was stunned by Varo’s proposal. "Labyrinthian! But it’s impassable this time of year."

"Not for a mage."

"No, it’s really – have you ever been through a snowy mountain pass?"

He waved that off. "I’ve climbed snowy peaks in the winter. It’s not fun, but if you’re creative with your spellwork, it’s very doable. Elenwen agrees with me."

"You’re taking advice from Elenwen now?"

"No, I was seeing if she’d balk at following us into the pass. Apparently not."

Rikke’s brow was furrowed. "It’d be a great place for her to murder us and hide the bodies," she said quietly. Elenwen was busy by the inn steps giving orders to her followers.

"Or for us to murder them and hide the bodies."

"Varo!"

"No, no. That’s not in my plans. Or hers, I’d bet on it. The Thalmor don’t want the war decided, and right now, Ulfric Stormcloak’s on too much of a roll. If Elenwen tries anything, though, Emilin and I have some tricks up our sleeves."

Rikke didn’t look convinced. "Emilin, what do you think?"

Emilin looked up from their horse’s saddlebags. "I think Junius and Her Haughtiness will try to outdo each other clearing the Pass, and we’ll follow behind safely. I packed winter clothes in here. Do you need some?"

Rikke shook her head. "I’m a daughter of Skyrim. I’m always prepared for the cold."

"Let’s go then," said Varo. He called over to Elenwen. "We’re riding on to Morthal!"

Chapter End Notes

Judging distance and travel times in Skyrim is hard. The game landscape is a shrunk-down facsimile of the lore landscape, but there’s very little canon for the actual size, and even reading people’s reasonable lore arguments doesn’t easily answer how long it takes to ride from one place to another in-lore. So, I’m just winging it, really. But I do believe
there has to be a substantial advantage to crossing via Labyrinthian, since one of the cut-screens says that it was once an important trading route, and the odd caravan still risks the crossing.

As usual, I crave comments, reviews, or questions.
Chapter Notes

Too many Nords in this town have been listening to Ulfric’s narrow-minded words. He’s tough, loyal to his men and a good leader, but if you’re not a Nord, Ulfric will never trust you.– Brunwulf Free-Winter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

Cecilia Varo walked back into the Palace of the Kings while Ulfric was sitting down to supper. Was interrupting his meals going to be a regular thing then? Jorleif icily pointed out to her that while she could dine when she liked, they did observe a regular schedule in the Palace. Cecilia nodded and sat down at the table. Ralof hovered behind her.

She was wearing what looked like a brand new leather cuirass and was covered with grime. “I won’t touch anything,” she promised Jorleif. “We already ate anyway. But since you’re here, my Jarl, I’ll let you know how things went in the Gray Quarter.”

Ulfric braced himself for a litany of complaints filtered through her overly sympathetic point of view. Instead, she continued, “Honestly, I’m having a hard time convincing anyone to take me seriously. That shouldn’t be surprising; I think I’m a mature enough adult woman, but older elves think we’re all silly children playing at being grown-ups.”

“And yet the children of Skyrim pack more into their short years than most of them have managed in two centuries,” said Ulfric bitterly.

“That’s for the good, though, isn’t it?” asked Cecilia. “If elves lived at the same pace as us, they’d run everything. I met someone today who’s been deciding whether or not to move to Raven Rock for forty years. Can you imagine?”

“Unfortunately so. Was your day a failure, then?”

“Too early to tell. We talked to a lot of people, not just the Dunmer. And putting our heads together, Ralof and I do have an idea but it’s not going to be a popular one.”

“Go ahead.”

“We think this city needs a curfew.”

Ulfric was surprised. “A curfew?”

Cecilia turned to Ralof. “You’re better at explaining. Tell him.”

“Ralof, take a seat,” Ulfric ordered.

“Yes, my Jarl.” Ralof sat down beside Cecilia. “We heard a lot of people’s complaints, Nords’ and elves’. We even went out and helped plant crops at Hlaalu Farm. And we came to the conclusion that it would take years to mend this rift and we certainly couldn’t do it in a day, especially with a
Ulfric nodded. They were both showing very good sense. Maybe he should get Ralof to go explain this to Brunwulf next.

“The immediate problem is preventing a riot,” Ralof continued. “Everyone told us the fights so far have started at night. And they involve hot-heads and drunks who wander the streets looking for trouble. If there was a strict curfew – say nine o’clock - there wouldn’t be any opportunity for fights to start.”

“I don’t care to lock my people up in their homes for convenience’s sake,” Ulfric objected. “This is a city of free Nords, Ralof.”

“I did say it wouldn’t be popular,” Cecilia put in. “The tavern owners would be up in arms. But if it was just for a short time? While the guard’s stretched thin?”

“No.” Ulfric would not budge on this point. Well-intentioned though Cecilia and Ralof were, they were both outsiders to Windhelm. Cecilia was too used to the meek citizens of Cyrodiil, while Ralof came from some quiet little town in Whiterun Hold. One couldn’t manage a city of proud Nords and touchy Dark Elves with such a heavy hand.

“Something needs to be done about these trouble-makers,” Cecilia insisted. “Rolff Stone-Fist wanders around the Gray Quarter every night, trying to start a fight.”

“If I may, my Jarl,” Jorleif interrupted. “I’ve investigated this myself, and while he’s an annoying drunk, he’s never thrown the first punch. If we were to arrest people for insulting each other, we’d have half the Gray Quarter in our cells as well.”

“Why isn’t Rolff in the army anyway?” asked Cecilia. “He sure sounds like he wants to be.”

“Galmar kicked him out,” Ulfric explained.

“His own brother?”

“Would you trust Rolff Stone-Fist at your back?”

Ralof began coughing. He was obviously trying to hide his laughter.

Cecilia pursed her lips. “Well, someone should do something about him. He challenged me to a fistfight my first day in Windhelm, did you know that, my Jarl?”

“Who won?” asked Ulfric.

“Lydia.”

Ralof lost it. Even Ulfric had to smile.

“I thought she might have set him straight,” Cecilia continued. “But she didn’t. There’s only one man in town who could do that.”

“Aren’t you suggesting I talk to him?” Ulfric asked.

“No, I think you should punch him.”

“Jarl Ulfric is far too busy to deal with the local drunks,” Jorleif insisted.
But Ulfric was now thinking about it. It was appealing, the idea of going out on the streets and dealing directly with this problem. The Stormcloaks were out there shedding their blood for him, and he was stuck in the Palace. Although he accepted the necessity of his role, it palled.

“Ralof. Get me four guards, and we’ll go out tonight,” he ordered. “There should be some consequences for causing disorder on my streets.”

“I’ll come along too,” said Cecilia.

“No, you won’t,” he told her. “This is my business to settle.” If he had to bash in some Nord heads tonight, they should think of it as their Jarl’s justice, rather than a favour he was doing for his Cyrodiil bride.

Cecilia frowned. “So, I do all the boring stuff, you do all the fun stuff, got it.” Which was a ridiculous thing to say to a man who’d spent his entire day going over supply route logistics, but he didn’t dignify the accusation with a response. Instead, he turned to Jorleif. “We may bring back guests, so have the cells ready.”

Cecilia left the table in a huff, leaving Ulfric in peace to finish his dinner. He was still unsure where exactly he stood in her estimation: grudgingly respected, barely tolerated, or what? It was probably safer not to pry there for now.

At sunset, he left the Palace with Ralof and his guards. His people knew not to bother him when he was out on business. There were a few cheers, and some folk doffed their hats, but most of the people just got out of his way.

At the entrance to the Gray Quarter, he signed a halt. “Now men, keep your mouths shut and your footsteps light. Ralof, we’ll follow your lead.”

Ulfric had not set foot in the Gray Quarter for five years, but he could not see it had changed any. The faded, frayed banners still hung upon the stone walls: emblems of the proud stubbornness of their owners, as well as those owners’ inability to mend or replace them. Their boots squelched in the mud and splashed through dark puddles he hoped were rainwater. The local residents fled into their homes at their approach.

Ralof led them to the door of a shop: Sadri’s Used Wares, he said. Ulfric recognized the name. Revyn Sadri had been brought up in front of the Jarl a few times, accused of selling stolen goods. Ulfric had settled each occasion by fining him, but the last time he had warned Sadri that he would be facing a lengthy stay in the Bloodworks if it happened again.

Ralof knocked on the door several times before Sadri at last answered. The elf’s eyes went wide when he saw Ulfric and his men.

“This is all a mistake,” he started off. “You know how Viola is. Probably knocked it behind her dresser and now she’s blaming me –”

“What in Oblivion are you talking about?” asked Ulfric.

“You’re not here about the ring?” Sadri asked. His face fell, realizing he’d let a secret slip. “Ah, my Jarl, please step in. There’s a special discount for local government and military officials.”

Ulfric and his men followed him in. The shop’s front room was tight for seven people. Behind a counter were shelves packed with oddities, including one shelf completely covered in dragon bones. Moving behind the counter, he picked up a vertebra to examine.
“That’s from your lady,” said Sadri quickly. “I daresay she’s my best supplier. And in turn, I’ve sold her the gear for many of her expeditions. It’s been a true honour serving her.”

“Indeed.” He put the vertebra back. “What do you do with the bones, Sadri?”

“People want souvenirs,” Sadri explained. “Probably sold as many as I will in Windhelm, but foreign merchants are looking for dragon bones as well.”

“If it brings money into the city, well enough,” said Ulfric. “But the rest of this,” he waved his arm at the nearby shelves. “How much of it comes from Nord graves?”

If Dunmer could pale, Sadri surely would have. “My Jarl, I don’t loot graves. I merely buy beautiful and interesting items that are brought to me. And truly, if it’s the Dragonborn who’s selling, should I refuse to take her goods?”

Ulfric sighed. It was becoming clear that he was marrying the worst tomb robber in Skyrim, and he still had no idea how to deal with that. “You’re saying I should settle my own house before I meddle with yours? I take your point. Rest easy, Sadri. We are not here on your account. We need a place to lie in wait tonight, and Ralof thought your shop a good location for it.”

“Ah!” Sadri relaxed. “Of course, my Jarl. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you wish. Would you like anything to drink?”

“No thank you.” It’d be *sujamma* or *flin* or some other nasty foreign liquid from one of the dark jugs Sadri had stashed on a high shelf. “Ralof, you ready to head out?”

“Yes, my Jarl.” Ralof went back to the door and let himself out. Their plan was for Ralof to wait outside, listening and watching for trouble, while Ulfric and his men kept out of sight in the shop.

“You can go to bed,” Ulfric told Sadri.

“Am I allowed to ask what you’re waiting for out there?” asked Sadri.

“Trouble,” said Ulfric shortly.

Their vigil lasted a few hours, but Ulfric was an old soldier and used to such tedious watches. About half past midnight, there was a crash outside. Ulfric moved quickly to the door and opened it a crack. Ralof was running towards him. “Time to move,” he called out to Ulfric.

Ulfric led his men out into the street, followed by Revyn Sadri who’d raced out from his bedroom at the sound of the crash. They could hear shouts further down within the Quarter. Curses in Dunmeris, and someone’s idea of a Nord warcry.

“Rolff?” Ulfric asked Ralof, after hearing the latter.

“I think so. Just around this corner.”

“Swords out,” Ulfric ordered his men. He laid his hand on the axe at his belt but did not pull it out. “Announce me, Ralof.”

Ralof saluted, then bounded around the corner. They followed hard after.

“On your knees, all of you!” Ralof shouted. “For the Jarl of Windhelm, Ulfric Stormcloak!”

Rolff Stone-Fist let go of the stone he was about to chuck through a window. With treacherously bad luck, the stone hit Ralof right above his left eye.
Within seconds, Ulfric had grabbed Rolff by the throat, picked him up and slammed him into a wall. Everyone else in the street had sensibly fallen to their knees in the muck. There were three Nords beside Rolff, and a few more Dark Elves.

Rolff was crying out some apologies. Ulfric ignored him and turned to Ralof who was leaning on another guardsman. Blood was streaming from his brow.

"‘m all right," said Ralof. “Seen worse, haven’t I?” He put his hand up to his brow, then brought it down sticky with blood and stared at it.

“Take him inside one of these houses,” Ulfric ordered a guard. “Clean that wound out and lie him down.”

“The Atherons have lots of room,” said Revyn Sadri from behind. “Hey, Suvaris, where’s your key?” He called to one of the elves kneeling in the street.

The female elf pulled out a purse from her skirt and held it out to him. “Here you are.”

Having settled that, Ulfric turned his attention back to the troublemakers on the street. Rolff was lying back against the wall, sobbing. One of the guards kicked him in the ribs. “On your knees, didn’t you hear the Jarl?”

“I wasn’t even part of this!” wailed one of the elves. “I was just walking up the street-“

“Did the Jarl ask you?” snapped a guard. The elf fell quiet.

Ulfric’s eyes fell on one of the men before him. “Angrenor,” he named the man, and in turn, Angrenor raised his bowed head. “My Jarl?” he asked in a quavering voice.

“You rode with me from Solitude with the hounds of the Empire upon our heels,” said Ulfric.

“Yes, my Jarl. It was an honour.”

“How have you come to this?”

“My Jarl . . .” Angrenor faltered. “I was cut down in your service, do you remember?”

“I do,” Ulfric confirmed. “And honourably discharged to live on as a proud son of Skyrim. You shame yourself carousing in this Quarter.”

“I – I …” Angrenor broke down and began sobbing. “Forgive me, my Jarl.”

In truth, Ulfric pitied the man. Angrenor was just one of many soldiers who’d returned home wounded in both body and spirit. If he’d since descended into wretched poverty, relieved only by drink, the responsibility was surely his Jarl’s. And yet, Ulfric could not save all the wretched of Skyrim; instead, he daily offered up Skyrim’s children to war.

“All of you, weigh your words well before you speak, for I will return falsehood with blood,” Ulfric warned his audience. “Who will tell me what happened here?”

There was silence, then Angrenor spoke up. “My Jarl, we were spending an evening at the Candlehearth: Rolff Stone-Fist, I, Arvid, and Tristan Medard here. A while ago, Dame Elda sent us on our way, so while we were walking this way, we met a suspicious person-“

Ulfric interrupted him. “Walking this way? Do you live in the Gray Quarter now, Angrenor?”
“No, my Jarl,” said Angrenor quickly. “But we come through from time to time, patrolling for spies and the like, you could say.”

“Did you secure this suspicious person?” asked Ulfric.

“Err . . . well . . .” Angrenor didn’t seem to have an answer to that.

“I believe I was the suspicious person.” The elf who’d given Sadri her housekey now spoke up firmly.

Ulfric knew her. “You are Suvaris Atheron who manages Clan Shatter-Shield’s shipping, are you not?”

“Yes. I am she.”

Ulfric burst out laughing. “Angrenor, You took Torbjorn Shatter-Shield’s most trusted employee for an Imperial spy?”

“It was Rolff who said she probably was,” Angrenor replied quickly.

“Rolff Stone-Fist. I’ve not forgotten him. Guards, take Master Rolff up to his own cell. He can cool his heels there, give some thought to what the punishment is for attacking the Jarl’s armsman.”

“I didn’t mean to do it!” cried Rolff.

Ulfric ignored him. “The rest of you, listen now and burn my words in your memories. I have no interest in sorting out the rights and wrongs of your squabbles before this moment. But there will be no more of this. On your honour, Angrenor, if you’ve not forgotten what that is, you will not set foot in the Gray Quarter again. The same for your companions. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, my Jarl.” The three Nords replied in chorus.

“Suvaris Atheron,” he turned the kneeling Dunmer. “Torbjorn Shatter-Shield speaks well of your reliability, so you must show me the same here. If these men harass you again, send word to the Palace. But I also expect that you and your fellows do not take such matters into your own hands, or pick fights of your own with my people. The Jarl’s law holds on the streets of the Gray Quarter as well as on the Valunstrad.”

“I understand and have always obeyed that law,” said Suvaris. She spoke softly, but anger burned in her red eyes. He could read her mind clearly: she had done nothing and yet was being upbraided for being victimized by Nords. But tonight, she stood in for every elf listening, and every elf that would tomorrow hear of the Jarl’s visit to the Gray Quarter.

So Ulfric simply nodded to her, not bothering to soften his speech. He spotted Revyn Sadri in the corner of his eye, standing by the Atheron residence’s door. His shirt was soaked in blood, Ralof’s, Ulfric presumed.

“How is my man?” he asked Sadri.

“He’s all right. We had to force him to sit down, but Faryl’s washing out the cut, and I checked that he knew his name and the date, so I don’t think he’s concussed.”

“Good. Show me to him. The rest of you,” he turned back to the kneelers. “Disperse.”

Ulfric entered the house, followed by his two remaining guards and the sullen-faced Suvaris. It smelt
strange inside, of foreign herbs and spices, but not unpleasantly. They had stepped into a sparse
dining room with bare wooden walls and more of the tattered old banners. Ralof was sitting on a
bench beside an elf who was busy bandaging his head.

Ralof tried to stand up when Ulfric entered, but Ulfric laid his hand upon his shoulder and told him
to sit still.

“When I get my hands on that Rolff—” began Ralof.

“Didn’t smash him into that wall hard enough for you?”

Ralof’s face brightened. “Exactly hard enough, my Jarl. I enjoyed it.”

“He’s bound for a prison cell tonight. The rest I lectured and sent on their way.” He turned to the elf
doing the bandaging. “Thank you for your aid . . . “

“Faryl Atheron,” the elf said.

“My brother,” put in Suvaris. “He works for Bolfrida at the Brandy-Mug Farm.”

Her intention was plain and somewhat pitiable. She was emphasizing how respectable and hard-
working her family was, hoping that Ulfric wouldn’t hold any of this against them. He had no
quarrel with the Atheron family, of course . . .

“Revyn Sadri.” The shopkeeper jumped at Ulfric’s voice.

“Yes, my Jarl?”

“That ring you were blabbering about.” Sadri flinched. He must have hoped Ulfric had forgotten.
“You said it belonged to Viola Giordano?”

“I didn’t say I had the ring,” Sadri replied cautiously.

“Do you take me for a fool? Give the woman back her damn ring, and if I ever catch you with stolen
property again, you can walk back to Morrowind and leave your goods behind.”

Sadri looked conflicted. He was probably weighing the risks of continued denial. But he at last
nodded. “I certainly had no intention of buying stolen goods, but I was not careful enough. I’ll return
the ring to her with an apology.”

“See you do.”

Ralof insisted he was well enough to walk back to the Palace, so once Faryl Atheron was finished
with the bandages, they departed the house. Despite the late hour, the Gray Quarter was now
buzzing with excitement. Gray faces peered out from behind shutters and, people huddled in
archways talking softly, only falling silent when Ulfric passed. He wondered idly what they were
saying; Cecilia would probably try to find out tomorrow. He was looking forward to telling her about
their adventure.

2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Morthal

The road to Labyrinthian passed through Morthal, but Junius Varo did not intend to stop there. To
bring the Thalmor upon a small Skyrim town was a near unforgivable sin. Elenwen and her cronies
would have no time to interfere with the townsfolk, but he knew they were always watching, marking useful potential victims for later. Fortunately, Elenwen agreed with his suggestion that they ride through the night and camp in the wilderness. Probably she didn’t want to be seen with him in town.

Yet, when they came to Morthal in the dead of night, there were two men with torches waiting on the road.

“By the Nine, she was right!” one of them exclaimed.

Varo heard a sharp intake of breath from Rikke beside him, but Elenwen said nothing.

“Of course she was right,” said the other man. “Hail Friends! Jarl Idgrod is waiting for you in Highmoon Hall.”

“Waiting for us, Aslfur?” asked Rikke. “We sent no word of our coming.”

Aslfur laughed. “And yet she told us that men and elves were riding here to brave the pass. Come in, Legate, and bring your friends.” He turned to Elenwen. “Madame Ambassador, you are as welcome within as my wife has been within your own walls.”

“Thank your gods I am a better-behaved guest than your wife,” said Elenwen sharply.

Varo’s ears perked up. There was a story there he had to hear.

Highmoon Hall was a small rustic wood building. Varo had never been inside a traditional Nord longhouse, and he was surprised how well this one matched the illustrations in his childhood picture books, down to the great hearth at its center.

“Welcome, travellers.” An older woman with a shrewd weathered face and dark hair sat upon the Jarl’s throne. “I see faces both familiar and strange to me.”

Elenwen took a step forward. “Idgrod, I did not think we would meet tonight, but I will take this opportunity to give you a message. The Thalmor do not forget.”

“Are you still upset about the party, dear?” asked Idgrod. “I can’t help them, you know, these odd turns. Just ask my people here. And I do so dislike snakes in all forms.”

Elenwen didn’t reply. Rikke then spoke up, “Jarl Idgrod, I present to you Junius Varo, a battle mage of the Imperial Legion and his comrade Emilin of Silvenar.”

“Now that’s a familiar name.” Idgrod stood up from her throne, her eyes fixed on Varo. “Yes,” she said, nodding to herself. “The father of the Dragonborn comes to our Hall. How may I help you, Junius Varo?”

“If you’re an acquaintance of my daughter, I’d like to talk privately,” said Varo.

Idgrod nodded again. “We’ll speak in my chamber. Gorm, take care of the other travellers.”

Varo followed Idgrod into a small room off the main hall. The man called Aslfur brought up the rear. With a shock, Varo realized that this simple room was the Jarl’s bedroom.

Idgrod pointed out a chair, then sat on the side of her bed. Aslfur stood on guard by the door.

“I do know your daughter, Cecilia,” she explained. “Indeed, I made her a thane of Hjaalmarch for all she has done here in Morthal.”
“I’ve awakened late to my daughter’s fame,” said Varo. “She’s accumulated a whole list of new titles since she left home.”

“So she has. And may soon take on another one, if rumour tells true?”

“Lady of Windhelm, you mean? Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“How much do you have to say about it?” asked Idgrod seriously. “Cecilia has her own mind and will, Master Varo.”

“If it were a love match, I’d be powerless to forbid it, no matter how much it galled me. But I will not see my daughter sacrifice herself for the schemes of a power-hungry traitor nearly twice her age.”

“So that’s how it is,” said Idgrod. “It was too much to hope Ulfric Stormcloak might have softened with the years.”

“Do you know him?” asked Varo.

“Somewhat more than I wish, and less than might have helped. I last saw him at the moot, where we jarls confirmed Torygg as High King. An unbending proud man he was, who did not listen easily to any counsel, and certainly never to mine.”

“Do you have counsel for me, Jarl Idgrod?” asked Varo.

Idgrod’s eyes lit up. “What sort of counsel do you think I could give you, Master Varo?”

“You knew we were coming from Solitude. You knew we were men and elves, though we ourselves did not know the Thalmor would join us. And you knew we would attempt the pass, although that was not our original plan. You strike me as a woman of foresight. Am I wrong?”

“You have the wit to see things as they are. Very well, I will tell you what I have seen in my visions, and perhaps I may help you on your journey. Aslfur, bring me that book Falion gifted me.”

Aslfur went to a chest in the room’s corner. Idgrod continued, “I have seen your attempt of the Pass. The snow lies heavy on the mountains, and you will face the frost trolls who prowl the ruined city. You hardly need a seer to tell you that. But the real danger you bring with you; the hearts of mages are easily led astray. You seek now only to pass through the mountains, but I have seen you and her standing in a dark maze together.”

“Elenwen?” Varo’s eyebrows shot up. “I’d never enter anything dark with her.”

“And yet that is what I have seen,” replied Idgrod.

“If these visions come true?” he demanded.

“In time and in their own fashion. But I see what will be. I do not see what it means.”

“This one won’t come true, sorry.” He felt terribly agitated now. He didn’t believe in fixed fate, but he couldn’t dismiss this woman who’d already proved her foreknowledge. “There’s a maze at Labyrinthian, right? That’s where the name comes from?”

“Aslfur, give him the book now.”

Aslfur handed him a brown leather book with gilt binding.

A Minor Maze: Shalidor & Labyrinthian, he read the title. “Shalidor,” he mused. “Of course, how
could I forget? He was one of yours, back in the days when Nords didn’t run from magic.”

“I’ve no use for the book, but it may aid you. Take it with you.”

He slid the slim book into his leather jerkin. “I hope I’ll have no need of it, but either way, I’ll come back to Highmoon Hall someday to tell you how it went.”

“Our door is always open to you and your daughter,” Idgrod assured him.

Chapter End Notes

Revyn Sadri tried to get Cecilia to plant the ring for him. She told him he should just drop it down a latrine. If this fic's solution for Sadri’s problem strikes you as less than ideal . . . yep, but Ulfric thinks he’s being fair and even generous there. I am not an Ulfric apologist, and he strikes me as the sort of person who thinks they aren’t racist, but totally are. (Though being racist is like default mode in Tamriel.) I don’t really buy a lot of the justifications people make for his (mis)management of his city. I love this guy because he’s a flawed, shortsighted, depressed mess who rises to moments of grandeur.

Next chapter will probably be all Ulfric’s story, as we finally tackle the Thalmor Dossier. It’s not pretty. (Tanulvie continues to be locked up in a storage room in the Blades’ Temple. Since I’m trying to tell the three storylines chronologically, and not as much is happening in the Reach right now, she may be there for a while.)
Chapter Notes

Upon my honor I do swear undying loyalty to the Emperor, Titus Mede II, and unwavering obedience to the officers of his great Empire. May those above judge me, and those below take me, if I fail in my duty. – The Imperial Legion’s Oath of Allegiance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Highmoon Hall, Morthal

Jarl Idgrod insisted her guests stay the night in Highmoon Hall. Elenwen, however, insisted on setting up camp outside the Hall. This suited Varo and his companions fine.

“If you want to go camp out in the swamp, go for it,” Varo advised her. “We’ll be in here enjoying Nord hospitality.” He took another sip of ale.

“I’m sure it’s a very nice tent,” observed Emilin after Elenwen had stalked out of the Hall. “You know how Altmer do things.”

“In style,” agreed Varo. His half-Altmer mother had certainly been that way. Curinwe Varo could never understand why a mage should put up with simple Legion-issued tents, and travelled through warzones with more luggage than she could possibly put to use.

“Mages have no sense,” he continued. “Just because you can think up ways to carry along your household furnishings, doesn’t mean you should.”

“Varo, I’ve seen your saddlebags,” twitted Rikke. “You’ve got enough in there to start your own general goods store.”

“I’m a mage, aren’t I? But I need all that stuff. You’ll see.”

Once he was certain Elenwen was not coming back, he pulled out Idgrod’s book to show Rikke and Emilin. While they examined it, he recounted Idgrod’s vision. Neither of them was impressed.

“So, something terrible will happen if you do something completely stupid,” Emilin summed it up. “I’m not afraid of fate, Junius, but I’m always afraid of your harebrained schemes. If you dare set foot in Shalidor’s maze, I’ll drag you out by your ear.”

“I don’t believe our future paths are set in stone,” said Rikke. “But true prophecies guide us in our choices. We should know that by now, after everything Cecilia’s done. If Jarl Idgrod hadn’t told you all about Shalidor’s maze, would the idea even be in your head to tempt you, Varo?”

“It’s not tempting,” Varo protested. “Not now, anyway.”

“Keep Cecilia fixed in your mind,” Emilin advised.

“I always do.” He frowned. “I wish I knew what our timeline was there. Can we prevent the marriage or do I have to widow her?”
“You’re going to kill Ulfric then?” asked Rikke slowly.

“If no one else gets to him first,” said Varo. “Isn’t that what Tullius’s plan has always been? Strike down Stormcloak and the rebellion falls to pieces?”

“Yes.”

Varo gave Rikke a sharp look. “What’s eating you, Legate? Did you think we could spare him?”

Rikke shook her head. “No. He’s gone too far, and he’ll never back down. I’ve made my peace with that.”

Varo wasn’t convinced by her assertion. “You know him, Rikke?”

Rikke looked down at the table before her. “Yes. Known him since the War. He fought with us, you know. I can’t forget the artless, brave boy who left a privileged life in Skyrim to defend the Empire against the Dominion’s onslaught.”

Varo took a deep breath. “What happened to him?”

“We were in the Eighth Legion. I was wounded just before the City was cut off and sent north to recover.”

“I remember. They sent as many of the wounded away as possible,” said Emilin.

“Ulfric was still in the City,” Rikke continued. “When the City fell, I thought he must have died, but the Dominion had taken him prisoner. He was in their hands for seven months. I can’t even imagine.”

“I can,” said Emilin simply. “Either they hated him very, very much or they thought he’d be useful to them.”

Varo didn’t say anything. He knew Emilin was speaking from experience of the first. He’d seen Thalmor dungeons. Unwanted pity for Ulfric Stormcloak crept into his heart alongside the old feelings of guilt.

Junius Varo should have died in the Sack of the Imperial City alongside his fellow soldiers. Instead, he’d lived as Titus Mede’s favour to his mother.

“They were keeping him as a hostage maybe?” Rikke continued. “They must have found out he was the son of the Jarl of Windhelm. Anyway, he escaped his prison at last.”

“Really?” Emilin lifted her eyebrows. “I didn’t know one could do that.”

“He had the Thu’um. They weren’t prepared for that.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Emilin pressed. “I’ve heard Nord shouts in battle. The Thalmor aren’t stupid. They’d know how to deal with that.”

“There are plenty of Nords who can manage some sort of Shout,” Rikke explained. “War cries that fray the enemies’ nerves and put them off their balance. But Ulfric’s a step above that. He was trained by the Graybeards themselves in the ancient Way of the Voice. He doesn’t compare to Cecilia, but I’ve seen him shout open locked iron doors, if that gives you an idea.”

“So he escaped. And after that?” asked Varo.
“He came back to us, but he could barely lift a weapon,” answered Rikke. “He was recovering slowly from his time in prison. Then the war ended and he was devastated by the Concordat. I stayed in the Legion, Ulfric went back to Skyrim and the next thing I’d heard he’d raised his own militia and taken Markarth back from rebels in the Reach.”

“Now that’s where I first heard of Ulfric Stormcloak,” commented Varo. “The Forsworn were ready to negotiate with us, but Stormcloak simplified everything immensely. Seemed like a good ending, till we found out what the fool Jarl had promised him.”

“You’re supporting the White-Gold Concordat now?” Rikke asked skeptically.

“Well, on paper. And for the common people’s sake. If I run around Tamriel wearing Avelina’s old Amulet of Talos,” he pulled out the amulet to show Rikke as he spoke, “that’s my head I’m risking. But if I encourage the average peasant to keep worshipping Talos, that’s their blood on my conscience.”

“Understood,” said Rikke, putting her hand to the chain around her own neck. “But Ulfric couldn’t live with our dishonesty.”

“So he killed his own king to soothe his conscience?”

“He killed Torygg because he’s a power-hungry ego-maniac. I thought I understood him; Torygg’s death was proof I didn’t anymore.”

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2 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

Ulfric returned to the Palace of the Kings in the early hours of the morning. He knew he would be up in a few more hours to see the troops off to Whiterun, but he hoped to snatch some sleep in the interim. His hopes faltered, though, when he entered his bedroom and found Cecilia Varo sitting in his chair by the fire. She was reading a book, which she closed quickly and slipped into the side of the chair.

“Who let you in here?” he asked.

“The door wasn’t locked.”

His guards had no orders to restrict her movements, and he probably should leave it so, irritating though her intrusions were. He had no secrets hidden within this room.

“I was waiting for you,” she added. “Is that not allowed?”

He gave her a weary smile. “No, it’s allowed. You want to hear what happened out there?”

She nodded. “If you have the time, my Jarl.”

He pulled a second chair close to hers and sat down. They were sitting nearly knee to knee. “We spent a few hours waiting and watching for trouble. Some Nords and Dark Elves got into a fight, and when Ralof tried to break it up, Rolff Stone-Fist chucked a stone at his head.”

“Is Ralof all right?” she asked, alarmed.

“Aye. He has a cut above his left eye, but he’s walking and talking fine. Rolff’s in the Bloodworks.
The rest of the mob I gave a good tongue-lashing. We’ll have to see if this lesson sticks.”

“I hope it will. Will Galmar mind about his brother?”

“I doubt he’ll be surprised. I’ll have to figure something out for Rolff. Can’t keep him locked up forever, and he’s a bloody menace left on his own.”

“Why not send him to Mixwater Mill? Gilfre’s desperate for labourers.”

“Clever. I’ll consider it, my Lady.”

She was beaming now, and he turned his thoughts from the Gray Quarter to winning her cooperation in more things than loathing Rolff Stone-Fist. Carefully, he reached out to take her hand in his. She didn’t pull back. Success, he supposed.

“What can I do not to back you into a corner, my Lady?”

Her face registered her surprise at the question. “I – I just wanted a breathing space, for myself, for this country. You could all put aside killing each other so I could kill dragons, but you couldn’t put your war aside a second more.”

“No. I could not. That truce did not save lives. It cost them. It gave both sides two more weeks to prepare for a long siege.”

“By that logic, you should have begun your siege long ago.”

“Aye. I waited too long, hoping Balgruuf would join us. I’ve never rushed to war, my Lady. More than two decades have passed since the Thalmor first pushed their way into Skyrim, and all that time I waited, holding them off from my own lands, but keeping peace with the Jarls who bowed down before them. Two decades, two weeks: the time to wait is over. If we fall now, we fall. And then you may pick up the pieces as you will.”

“Do you think you’ll fall?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head. “I have too many promises to keep. And now there’s the one I’ve made you.”

He bent towards her and, experimentally, touched his lips to hers. It was not a great success. She did not pull back but sat stock still.

He sighed, and drew himself back, letting go of her hand. “How difficult is this going to be?”

“I don’t know. I can’t know yet. I have to ask you something, my Jarl.”

“Ask away.”

She pulled out the book she’d been reading when he came in. It was a thin volume bound in red leather. “I found this in the basement of the Thalmor Embassy.”

“What were you doing there?” he asked sharply.

“Searching for information on dragons. I didn’t find any. What I found . . .” she broke off and handed him the book.

Upon its spine was the name Ulfric Stormcloak.

His hands trembled as he opened the book.
Status: Asset (uncooperative), Dormant, Emissary Level Approval

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

Asset. How dare they? “You’ve read this?” he demanded.

“Yes.” Her face showed no emotion, but she was watching him closely. He looked back down at the page and tried to read line by line, rather than let his eyes race over the page.

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.

There were more words but he could not read them. His stomach rose up in protest.

(the city had in fact fallen before he had broken)

And then he was on his hands and knees in front of the fire, vomiting. The journal lay on the floor where he’d dropped it. Cecilia was still sitting in her chair, watching.

Even after he’d emptied out the contents of his stomach, he continued to retch violently.

“I’ll get help,” said Cecilia suddenly.

He put up his hand to stop her. “No. Don’t move.”

Then he collapsed on the floor, face down in his own sick. He felt Cecilia’s hand on his back.

“Please, Ulfric, let me get help.”

Funny, he thought, as he got back on his knees. She’d never called him by his name before. A few moments ago, he would have taken it as a good sign for their alliance. And now it didn’t matter because she had delivered the final blow, the coup de grâce the Thalmor had prepared for him so long ago.

“Read me the rest,” he growled. “Now.”

And so she read as she knelt beside him and he stared into the fire.

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.

She paused in her reading, then asked, “Contact was made?”

His head swam, but he answered promptly. “Yes. I was stupid enough to trust . . . someone whom I never should have trusted. Keep reading.”
Operational Notes: Direct contact remains a possibility (under extreme circumstances), but in general the asset should be considered dormant. Dormant. Thank the Nine! If the document had boasted of still having their hooks in him, he could not have borne it.

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.

She stopped reading.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“Yes.”

(The city had in fact fallen before he had broken)

“Why are you doing this?” he demanded.

“Doing what?”

“Do you think you can control me with this . . . information? Has that been your plan all along?”

“What? If I wanted that, I’d have used this ages ago.”

(The city had in fact fallen before he had broken)

“Ulfric?” she’d grabbed his hand. “Talk to me.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“Did you know?”

He pulled his hand from her, then lifted his sleeve to clean his face as best he could. “Some of this, yes. But not—“ he couldn’t say it.

“Did you know it wasn’t your fault?” She had unerringly fixed upon the most important thing there.

“But it was my fault. If I didn’t help them - if this document is correct and this isn’t another of their infernal schemes - it doesn’t change what I did. I still gave them information that I knew would result in my comrades’ deaths. A simple accident of dates doesn’t change that.”

“You held out long enough,” Cecilia insisted. “You can blame yourself, but I won’t.”

He looked her full in the face. “You’re still young. And innocent. And may the gods never take that from you.”

And then she’d thrown her arms around him. It was awkward; she was holding on to him tight, her face nestled in the crook of his neck, and everything smelt of vomit, which was now on her as well. There was nothing romantic or pleasant about it, but she was solid, something he could hold on to
He didn’t know how long they sat there on the floor like that. His mind was far away, wandering down the corridors of a Thalmor prison, re-examining every little detail that could collaborate or contradict the dossier.

_allowed to escape_

How could that be? There were things they never could have faked. Could they? Could they have sacrificed their own people just to make him think he’d won his freedom? No, what was he thinking, of course, they could have. The jailers he’d struck down, plainly it was Elenwen who’d ordained their deaths.

He should have realized. No matter how naïve he’d been, he should have realized the moment they showed their hand in Markarth. He knew then, after he’d been thrown into prison, that he had been played by the Thalmor, but he had never imagined the extent of it. Perhaps he still did not see the full picture, the full extent of misery that bitch had prepared for him.

“I have to wash before I see my troops off,” he said at last to Cecilia.

She didn’t move. “That’s what they want,” her muffled voice spoke beside his ear. “Unending war in Skyrim.”

“I know that. I’ve always known that.” He patted her back. “I told you, I waited so long. And their power only grew. But what did that document say about a Stormcloak victory?”

“That it should also be avoided.”

“Yes, one way or another, this needs to end. That is what we are doing at Whiterun. There is nothing in those pages to sap my will or shake my intention.”

She did let go of him then. “I can’t – I won’t follow you,” she said simply.

“I know that. Cecilia,” – if she was using his name now, he’d use hers in return – “I knew that when I asked for your hand. Keep that book for me. I’ll have to read it closely, but not yet.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Has anyone else read it?” he asked suddenly.

“Delphine has.”

Ulfric swore.

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**Some Very Detailed Notes:**

So, reviewer Mary Muir pointed out something interesting that I’ve noticed too.

“I’ve always wondered why some of the NPCs in the game don’t have closer bonds due to the Great War, more than just the housecarl/jarl thing with Balgruuf and Irileth and Ulfric and Galmar. I would have expected Balgruuf, Brunwolff, Ulfric, Galmar and Irileth to have something of a group bond from serving in that war together. Rikke had a bond with Ulfric and Galmar from the Great War, why wouldn’t she also have a bond with the other veterans?”
Balgruuf especially doesn’t talk about Ulfric with any fellow-feeling. I conclude that even though they all served in the Great War, they didn’t necessarily serve together. I think this interpretation makes a lot of sense if you look at the canon accounts of the war. The Eighth, which was defending the Imperial City at the time of Ulfric’s capture, was nearly wiped out, whereas Titus II is described as breaking out from the City and “linking up with reinforcements marching south from Skyrim under General Jonna”. If Ulfric had information about the Imperial City defences, I have to conclude he was already part of the Legion(s) defending the city, *not* one of the Nords who were just then arriving with Jonna.

So, leaving some story spoilers for later, here’s the timeline I’ve worked out for this fic:

**4E 162:** Ten years before the Great War, forty years before the fic: A group of high-ranking officers within the Imperial Legion are accused of jeopardizing the Empire's peace with the Dominion, due to their hawkish attitude towards the Thalmor. It’s a political mess (orchestrated from behind the scenes by Thalmor operatives) and the highest-profile casualty of the affair is Chief Imperial Battlemage Curinwe Varo who is forced to resign her position. Other Legionnaires, including Curinwe’s right-hand woman Emilin, resign in protest or are forced out of the Legion. The Mede family is privately friendly over the next decade, but officially Curinwe is in forced retirement.

**4E 171:** Great war begins. Irileth and Avelina Attius (Cecilia’s mother) are already in the Legion. Young Junius Varo was training to be an Imperial battlemage and is assigned to the Imperial Guard on account of his mother’s influence. Curinwe Varo, Emilin and others take up arms again, but as a volunteer group of elves and elf-friends: the Old Guard.

Ulfric and Rikke are in the first wave of volunteers from Skyrim, who are sent to round out the Eighth. They meet Galmar who’s a bit older and already serving in the Eighth.

A couple of years into the war, Avelina Attius (who’s half Nord) and Irileth accompany General Jonna to Skyrim to recruit more troops.

**4E 174:** The Dominion’s Assault on the Imperial City. With the possibility of an upcoming siege, civilians and wounded were probably being sent out of the city, and that’s where I have Rikke leaving as one of the wounded. However, the Dominion army moved very fast when they did strike and there were certainly a lot more people trapped in the City other than active soldiers. According to the Thalmor Dossier, Ulfric was captured during this campaign. My fic has teased a bit of information about how that happened, that he was captured in the same incident as Curinwe Varo died, and Emilin was captured. There’ll be more later.

Titus Mede II fought his way out of the Imperial City, with Junius Varo at his side. General Jonna’s reinforcements from Skyrim were too late to reach the City before its sack. In the reinforcing army were Irileth, Avelina Attius, and now, Balgruuf. Once Rikke’s recovered, she joins Jonna’s legions.

Galmar was in the Imperial City when it fell, and how he survived will be in the fic later.

A lot of the characters met each other during the war, particularly in the aftermath of the Battle of the Red Ring, but didn’t become close (Balgruuf met Ulfric after Ulfric’s imprisonment, and they didn’t get along). Others (such as Junius Varo and Ulfric Stormcloak) have probably passed each other on the street, but there was nothing memorable about each other. And others remember each other, but wouldn’t have known each other by name. (Emilin in this chapter mentions having heard Nord shouts in battle. That was young Ulfric.)
Answering a few more questions about Junius Varo:

Varo actually served in the Legion until about six years ago, though his service was a bit irregular, with the Emperor alone sometimes knowing what he was doing. His personal history is so wrapped up with Titus Mede II’s, there was never any doubt he’d obey.

As for his attitude towards solving the problem with his daughter, he’s a very flawed person in his own right: Hotheaded, high-handed, and self-righteous. Although she loves him dearly, there’s a reason Cecilia never wrote him about her issues in Skyrim. He does things *for* her, not *with* her.

Next chapter has Ondolemar, among other people.
Chapter Notes

The Empire may have been good for Skyrim once upon a time, but those days are long past. Banning the worship of Talos was the last straw. Thalmor everywhere, dragging people off for honoring our own gods! - Gerdur

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Understone Keep, Markarth

The Nord child on the bench beside the stairs was staring at Ondolemar. “Look, more yellow elves,” he heard the boy declare. “Mers!”

The servant girl who was sitting with the children shushed him. Ondolemar looked away. Nord children and dogs were both dreadfully behaved, and until now, he’d only had to tolerate the latter in Understone Keep. Then this morning, this rambunctious trio had been ushered into the Keep and parked on a bench within the area Ondolemar considered his own territory. He hoped they weren’t going to be staying in the Keep. He’d file a formal complaint if they were.

Wait, more yellow elves? Reluctantly, he turned back towards the children. It probably was nothing – maybe they’d run into Calcelmo or his nephew on their way in. But he’d better find out what Altmer the child meant.

The children shrank from him as he approached with his guards; at least they had some sense. The servant also looked terrified. “Commander Ondolemar?” she asked.

“Who are your charges here?”

“Their mother was killed by the Forsworn. The men from Kolskeggr Mine brought them in.”

“My condolences,” said Ondolemar stiffly. He fixed on the boy who’d spoken, a grubby child who looked about six or seven. “You, boy, you said you’d seen other ‘yellow elves’?”

The child clung to the arm of the servant and said nothing. His eyes were as big as saucers.

Ondolemar decided to change his approach. He pulled back the hood of his robe and knelt down in front of the child, giving him his kindest smile. “My name is Ondolemar. What’s yours?”

“Ketill,” the boy squeaked.

“Thank you, Ketill. You’re a brave lad. And this is your sister?” He motioned to the older girl.

“Yes, she’s Marta. And that’s Njall,” he pointed to the smaller boy.

“Ketill, we’re not supposed to talk to strangers,” Marta whispered.

“Is that so?” replied Ondolemar smoothly. “It’s a good thing I am not a stranger. I am the Commander of the Thalmor in Skyrim. Do you know what that means, Marta?”
“No,” said Marta.

“It means it’s my job to talk to you. It is through my service that this country is kept safe.”

The servant looked as though she was dying to contradict him, but he knew she wouldn’t dare.

“You didn’t keep my mama safe!” cried Marta accusingly. She began to weep again.

“I am very sorry I was not there. I could have fought off the Forsworn if I had been,” said Ondolemar.

“Like the elf-lady?” asked Ketill.

“You met an elf-lady?” Ondolemar asked lightly.

“She was a yellow mer,” the boy said. “She could shoot lightning from her hands!”

“That’s very interesting. Where did you see this mer?”

“She came in the wagon with us. She was pretty but she didn’t have any kids and she said elves don’t go to Sovngarde.”

Now, there was a list of truly random facts. But put them all together, and he needed to meet this mysterious mer. “Where did she go?” he asked Ketill.

“They took her away,” the boy replied.

“Who took her away?”

“Fighters took her away.”

Had the Forsworn taken this mer prisoner? “What did these fighters look like?” Ondolemar asked.

“They were big.”

“And?”

“They were scary.”

Ondolemar looked to the boy’s older sister. “Marta, who took away the elf-lady?”

Marta rubbed her eyes. “I don’t know.”

She knew something, all right. Ondolemar had spent over two decades in Skyrim. He knew when Nords were lying.

“Were these children the only survivors of the attack?” he asked the servant.

She shook her head. “There was an elderly woman with them. The Jarl is talking to her and the miners right now.”

Ondolemar nodded. “Good. We will all make a visit to him then.” He stood up. “Ketill, you’re a very brave boy. I need you by my side.” He held out his gloved right hand to the boy. The boy automatically took it. “And you, Marta,” he reached for the girl’s hand with his left. She pulled it back, but he had expected that, and deftly seized it anyway. “Come along, the Jarl is waiting for us.”

Marta struggled for a few seconds, but his grasp was firm. He pulled the children to their feet beside
him. “Bring the little one with you,” he instructed the servant, then nodded to his guards to follow.

It was a short walk to the Jarl’s throne room. There were quite a few people in the small room when they entered: Jarl Igmund, his steward, his housecarl, two guards, an old Nord woman, an orc and a man both in miner’s clothes, and strangely enough, Thongvor Silver-Blood.

Thongvor immediately turned to the Jarl. “So there’s no room for me at your councils, Jarl Igmund, but there’s room for the Thalmor.”

“Commander Ondolemar, is this urgent?” the steward asked.

“I believe so,” replied Ondolemar. “This incident involves a citizen of the Dominion after all.”

“Hah!” Thongvor burst out laughing. “This was an attack on Nords, there were none of your pointy-ears involved, unless they’ve started joining the Forsworn.”

“Thongvor, hold your tongue,” the Jarl’s housecarl snapped. “Let Jarl Igmund speak in his own throne room.”

“Commander Ondolemar,” Igmund spoke up. “The wagon attacked by the Forsworn was carrying only Nords. The driver and two passengers were killed, and there were four survivors: Dame Aud and these children.”

Ondolemar shook his head. “There was an Altmer passenger aboard, did no one tell you that?”

That caused a sensation.

“How dare you?” Thongvor responded first with his usual bluster. “You lying-“

“Why don’t we ask the survivors?” Ondolemar cut in. “I’ve already talked to these very intelligent children, but the older woman-“ His eyes fixed on the white-haired woman at the foot of the Mournful Throne. “Madame? Your story?”

The woman shrank under his gaze. “It was just us,” she mumbled. “No elves.”

“Where are you from?” asked Ondolemar.

“Solitude.” The old woman was staring at the ground.

“Solitude. So I suppose you have family and friends living there . . . ”

“You bastard!” Thongvor snarled.

“I do not appreciate this man’s attitude, Jarl Igmund. I am trying to assure the safety of one of my kinsfolk. I know that this party travelled here with a female Altmer mage. I know that she heroically defended them against the Forsworn’s attack. Where, Jarl Igmund, is she now?”

Igmund leaned forward in his throne. “Is this true, Dame Aud?” he asked the older woman.

“Yes, my Jarl.” She hung her head, not meeting Igmund’s gaze.

“Why did you lie to me about this?” Igmund was seething.

Aud began to sob. “They told us not to say anything.”

“Who told you that?”
“The warriors who took her away. She said—” Aud broke off and looked at Ondolemar. “Please, my Jarl, can you send these elves away first?”

“No,” Ondolemar replied. “He may not.”

“This is about one of their people,” said Igmund. “They have a right to be here.”

“The elf said she was one of them,” cried Aud. “Thalmor!”

Ondolemar let go of the children’s hands. “Jarl Igmund, this woman is party to the murder or kidnapping of a Thalmor agent. Under the terms of the White-Gold Concordat, I am taking custody of her for further interrogation.”

The announcement threw the room into chaos. He thought he could hear Jarl Igmund asking for his forbearance, but the Jarl’s voice was nearly drowned out by Thongvor’s ranting, the old woman’s pleas for mercy, and the children crying again.

“Now what would convince you to leave this poor woman alone?” a voice from his elbow broke in. He turned to see one of the miners: a bald, heavy-built middle-aged Nibenese man.

“You were on the scene yourself?” asked Ondolemar.

The man shook his head. “Certainly not. We found these poor people after we left the mine. But if you want to find whomever took your agent . . .” he trailed off.

The room had quieted again. “Who is this man?” Ondolemar asked Igmund, pointing to the miner.

“Pavo Attius, owner of the Kolskeggr mine,” Igmund replied.

Attius. Ondolemar gave the man a sharp look. That wasn’t an uncommon Nibenese surname, but . . . “Any relation to Falco Attius?” he asked.

Pavo swallowed hard. “My father.”

Ondolemar nodded. Something was coming together here. He wasn’t certain what it was, but an unexpected Thalmor agent went missing off the road, and here was the son of the Empire’s disgraced former diplomat at the scene. Strange little coincidences? There were no such things as coincidences. He could not see what thread bound all these facts together, but it was there, and he would tug it out, slowly and expertly.

“Take her into custody,” Ondolemar ordered his guards.

“She’s co-operating!” protested Jarl Igmund. “You’re co-operating, aren’t you?” He glared at the woman.

“Please, I don’t know who they were. There were three of them. A fighter in heavy armour, an old wizard, and a short elf with a bow.” The story spilled out from Aud’s lips. “They crept up on us while we were fighting the Forsworn, and they helped defeat them. But then the wizard shot some spell at the elf-lady and she tumbled over.”

“Dead?” asked Ondolemar.

“I don’t know, I didn’t get a close look. They told us to stay in the wagon. And the woman in the armour said the Thalmor would kill us if we told anyone about the elf-lady.”

Ondolemar was impressed. This unknown opponent had thought to use their own reputation as
Skyrim’s bogymen against them.

“We will be able to extract more information with our superior interrogation techniques,” he pronounced. “But enough time has already been lost. I expect you to co-operate with our search, Jarl Igmund, but I will direct this operation with the finesse and close attention to detail that only an elite Justiciar of the Dominion can provide.”

Thongvor snorted, but Ondolemar continued. “Attius, you seemed like you had something to say. When you interrupted me.”

“I did have something to say,” Pavo Attius replied. “Let this woman go and I’ll show you around the area. I know where all the secret paths are around my mine, and there’ll be tracks to follow, no doubt.”

This Imperial thought he could bargain with the Thalmor, then? Like father, like son. Humans never learned.

“We will certainly not let such an important witness slip through our hands,” Ondolemar told Attius. “But if this matter is concluded satisfactorily, I will release her.”

“What worth is that promise?” muttered Thongvor.

“You Nords have such a strange view of the Aldmeri Dominion’s priorities,” Ondolemar replied. “The duty of Skyrim’s Chief Justiciar is not, in fact, to accumulate scared Nord peasants in our overburdened correctional facilities.”

That might be the end result of his duties, but that was entirely on them.

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**2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm**

The army healer who was attending to Ralof was getting on his nerves. He had a gash on his forehead, not a serious wound, but she insisted he stay in bed and rest. He had tried to get up anyway, and then she’d called on his fellow soldiers to put him back to bed. So there he stayed and fumed, while this woman fussed over him. There must be a major lack of injury or illness in the city, that she had the time for this.

He had plenty of visitors over the course of the morning. Ulfric himself dropped in for a few minutes, though he seemed distracted and distant. He mentioned that the reinforcements for Whiterun had set out on schedule and a messenger had arrived from Galmar saying the siege had begun.

More interesting was his visit from Lydia who said her thane was sleeping in, but she’d come to see his horrific war wound. Despite her teasing, Lydia had brought cards to play with him.

“I am so tired of this town,” Lydia announced after she’d settled into a losing streak. “Ralof, you ever considered being a housecarl? Just on a temporary basis? While I take a break?”

“I thought this was a break for you.”

“It really isn’t. Too much politics. Too much standing around and watching other people watch each other. I’m starting to miss hanging out in draugr-caves.”

“We could find you one near Windhelm,” said Ralof. “For a day trip.”
“Hmph.” Lydia started to gather up the cards. “I think my thane’s stuck.”

“Stuck in Windhelm?”

“More like she doesn’t know what to do with her life now Alduin’s gone. And your Jarl knows exactly what she should do, according to him, anyway. So who gets their way?”

Ralof thought back to Cecilia’s appearance with the dagger. “No one. They’ll figure it out. I don’t know how they ended up together, but they’re figuring it out.”

Lydia frowned. “I wish you were wrong. I don’t want him to lay a finger on her. That’s the absolute truth, Ralof, and you can hate me for it if you like.”

“But she decided to marry him,” Ralof pointed out. He was feeling increasingly lost in this conversation, taken aback by Lydia’s vehemence.

“That she did.” Lydia began to shuffle the deck. “And she spent half of last night in his bedroom, so it would appear your side is winning.”

Ralof’s cheeks coloured at this revelation. “Lydia, that’s not appropriate, that . . . gossip.”

“Of course it’s not appropriate. That’s why I’m in here telling you instead of discussing it in the Hall openly. I need someone in this skeeverhole to talk to.”

“Lydia, it’s not a skeeverhole, it’s historic.”

Lydia might have said more, but their conversation was broken up by Cecilia herself. She asked about Ralof’s head but she seemed somewhat distracted herself, much like Jarl Ulfric, Ralof realized. Lydia was probably right; something had happened between them last night, and Ralof hoped it was for the good.

“The Companions still aren’t back?” Cecilia asked Lydia.

“They haven’t been gone for much more than a day,” Lydia reminded her.

“True . . . Ralof, how would you send a letter to Cyrodiil from here?” Cecilia jumped to another topic without warning.

“Depends who you want reading it along the way,” he replied.

“I assume Imperial censors will read it any way I send it.”

“Stormcloaks will too,” commented Ralof.

“Nah, they can’t read,” Lydia put in. Ralof laughed in spite of himself.

“I have to write my father a letter,” Cecilia explained. “I’ve been putting it off for months.”

Ralof remembered how she had wept yesterday over missing her father. Yet, she hadn’t written him? “Where is he?” he asked.

“He lives in Anvil,” said Cecilia. “But I doubt he’s home. Well, that’s what I always tell myself so I don’t feel bad about not writing.”

“You don’t think he’s worried you haven’t written?” asked Ralof.
Cecilia shrugged. “I wrote him a letter from Markarth last year. I said I’d made it safe to Skyrim and everything was great.”

“You didn’t mention you were Dragonborn?”

“I was handling that on my own.”

Cecilia’s father, Ralof remembered, was this big-time Imperial wizard. So it was probably a good thing she kept him in the dark about her adventures in Skyrim. But she couldn’t hide all this away forever.

“If you write a letter, Clan Shatter-Shield could get it to a more secure port,” he commented. “Too many pirates and bandits every other way.”

Cecilia nodded. “I’ll do it that way, then. Lydia, get me some paper and ink.”

There was a desk in the barracks, where Cecilia settled down to write while Ralof and Lydia returned to cards. Whenever he looked up from their game, he could see she was not making much progress. Several times she crumpled up sheets of paper, and at last, she sat chewing on her quill pen and staring at the wall.

One of the guards entered the barracks. “There’s a Dark Elf woman asking for you at the city gates, my Lady.”

Cecilia threw the quill down. “Did she give her name?”

“She wrote it down for us,” said the guard. “It’s tricky and foreign,” he added defensively as he held the scrap of paper up to the light to read. “Brelyna Maryon of House Telvanni.”

Cecilia stared. “Here?”

“Do you want to see her or should we turn her away?”

“No. I need to see her. Lydia, come on.” She turned to Ralof. “Get better soon. Winterhold mages are on the prowl.” And with that enigmatic declaration, she left the barracks.

In the ordinary course of affairs, a Dunmer woman standing before the Gates of Windhelm would hardly attract anyone’s attention. The grayfolk went in and out of the city all the time and the guards paid them little heed. But this elf was different, anyone could see that. She was dressed in mage’s robes, and she walked up the causeway with the confidence of a monarch. At the gate, she asked the guards to fetch the Dragonborn and then scared the wits out of them by dropping the name Telvanni. The guards did go to find the Dragonborn, but also rushed to find the Jarl to warn him of this magical incursion on Nord soil.

Ulfric was down at the docks with Torsten Cruel-Sea, who was making his regular pitch for a Stormcloak Navy. (Ulfric wasn’t opposed to the idea of equipping boats to defend their coast, but Torsten’s only qualification for the job was that his fore-bearers had been sailors.) He almost welcomed the distraction when the guards informed him of their Telvanni visitor.

**WULD NAH KEST!**

The Dragonborn’s shout sundered the air. The dockworkers and guards jumped at the unexpected assault on their ears. One Argonian dropped the crate he was carrying. It smashed open and apples rolled out across the dock.
“Not in the city,” muttered Ulfric as he turned to walk up to the city gates.

Cecilia had made it all the way from the palace to the gates before he did, no wonder with her liberal use of the Thu’um. She wasn’t even out of breath as she stood laughing and bright-eyed opposite the Dark Elf. She greeted Ulfric as he stepped out towards them, “This is Brelyna Maryon, an apprentice of the College of Winterhold, and a friend of mine.”

As Dragonborn, Cecilia had accumulated a diverse body of friends and enemies, some of them much more troublesome than young mages. This elf didn’t seem very alarming: a mere whelp of the Telvanni, he guessed. He tolerantly introduced himself and waited to hear the reason for this visit.

“Did you come here all alone?” Cecilia asked her friend.

Brelyna shook her head. “With Onmund and J’Zargo, most of the way.”

“Where are they now?”

“J’Zargo’s in a Stormcloak cell down the road,” said Brelyna, as if this was the most natural thing in the world. “Onmund stayed behind to keep an eye on him.”

“What did he do?” demanded Cecilia.

“If you ask him, he was just examining a very interesting protective amulet he found dropped on the road,” said Brelyna, shrugging her shoulders.

“And?”

Brelyna fixed her eyes on Ulfric. “The Stormcloak post commander said he pickpocketed his grandfather’s Amulet of Talos. Really, who’s to say what actually happened?”

“Am I being asked to release this light-fingered Khajiit?” asked Ulfric.

Brelyna flashed him a winning smile. “That would be very gracious of you, Jarl Ulfric. We were sent here by Arch-Mage Aren of the College of Winterhold, on urgent business.”

“I’ll send a courier to bring your companions along,” said Ulfric. “I want the Khajiit handcuffed, though.”

Unexpectedly, Cecilia nodded. “It’s not that I don’t like J’Zargo but . . .”

“He’d rob the Palace blind?” asked Ulfric.

“Not the whole Palace, just anything he could find in Master Wuunferth’s study.”

Brelyna laughed. “You know him too well, Cecilia.” She leant over and whispered something in Cecilia’s ear.

Cecilia’s eyes narrowed. “Oh.” Then she turned to look at Ulfric. “I think we’d better all go inside. It sounds like there’s much to discuss.”

As they passed back into the city, Cecilia leant over to whisper a short but blood-chilling phrase to Ulfric. “Thalmor at Winterhold.”
Every time Rikke got used to the weirdness of this journey, it got weirder. They rode out from Morthal in the morning under the hard stares of the villagers. Varo was in a foul mood and continually swore at the swamp, the weather, Skyrim in general, and the Thalmor especially. Elenwen was ignoring him, which just made him more irritable.

Then the sun came out, and Rikke was astonished at the change in his personality. As their horses climbed the mountain path, Varo and the second Thalmor mage were deep in a completely cordial conversation about the risks and benefits of melting snow with fire-based magic. The main risk, from what Rikke could overhear, was avalanches.

“It’s counter-intuitive but ice spells give you better control of loose snow,” the Thalmor mage was saying.

“You have a point, but I think there’s a perfect combination we’re aiming for. I tried out a variation in the Valus Mountains that I think you’d find interesting . . .”

This mage shop talk completely lost Rikke, but at least they sounded like they were having fun.

They rode their horses through the first drifts of snow across the path, but presently, the snow banks rose too high for horses to barrel through. There, they dismounted.

“Gather around!” commanded Varo. “Let me demonstrate the utility of one judiciously-placed rune as developed by the College of Imperial Battlemages.”

Rikke took a few steps backwards.

“He always gets like this around Altmer,” said Emilin quietly. “It’s an inferiority complex. Like he has to convince them he’s just as superior.”

“Does it ever work?” asked Rikke.

“Not with Thalmor. They fear him, though. That’s gratifying.”

The judiciously placed rune exploded, carving a passage through the snow drift.

“Those walls aren’t stable,” commented Elenwen.

“That’s the next step,” Varo snapped, as he knelt down to release a spell into the snow.

“I never dealt with the Thalmor directly before I came back to Skyrim,” Rikke told Emilin. “I thought I hated them before, but now . . . “

“They’re so talented at being hateable,” agreed Emilin. “They send their worst people here, you know. To fan the flames.”

“Are you two all right back there?” one of the Thalmor soldiers had turned back.

“We’re okay!” Emilin waved back. “I quite like that guy, though. In an emergency, we take him and run.”

“Because he’s cute?” asked Rikke.

“Because he’s got a lot of meat on those bones.”
Rikke doubled over laughing. The Thalmor soldier ran back to them, probably convinced Rikke was having a seizure. She waved him off. “Are we going through?”

“As soon as the First Emissary gives the go-ahead.”

“Screw that, I’m going through,” Emilin announced. “Nice work, Junius!”

He took an extravagantly deep bow, then passed between the drifts of snow.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, we finally meet Pavo Attius, the canon NPC who gets the Dragonborn as a niece (his sister's child), and all the problems that go with that. His conversation in-game reveals him as a Great War veteran, and this story will expand on that.

Also, After playing through Skyrim once, I didn't get people's obsession with Ondolemar, but yeah, I get it now. Best. Thalmor. Ever. I'm just so amused by an overly friendly Justiciar whose daily routine is to parade around Understone Keep and complain about the Jarl’s dogs a lot. Presumably in-lore he gets out more, but still . . . .

Reviews and comments are much appreciated, and any questions shall be answered.
2 Second Seed, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

What greater glory than to serve the Emperor and his citizens here in Skyrim, in these days of greatest need? – General Tullius

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

In the War Room of the Palace of the Kings, Brelyna Maryon told her story. The Arch-Mage’s message was for the Dragonborn, she’d explained, but if Cecilia didn’t mind, Jarl Ulfric could listen as well. “We might need some extra help,” she said offhand.

Ulfric was in no mind to send help to the College of Winterhold, but he listened politely, leaning against the map table as Brelyna perched upon a crate to deliver her message. The chairs were being used by Cecilia and Lydia. Yrsarald hovered in the background, clearly unhappy with this mage invasion of his military space.

“You know that artifact we dug up at Saarthal,” began Brelyna. “No, of course, you don’t, sorry, Jarl Ulfric. The College was excavating the ruins at Saarthal a few months ago when the Dragonborn was visiting.”

“Excavating or looting?” asked Ulfric.

Brelyna laughed as if he was jesting. “You and Onmund would get on very well. He doesn’t think the College had any right to be in Saarthal in the first place.”

“They didn’t,” said Ulfric sharply.

“We found a curious artifact down in the depths of Saarthal. It’s this huge magical orb. And we lugged it back to the College to try to figure out what it was. But our librarian couldn’t consult the texts he’d need to identify it, because an ex-student had stolen them. Cecilia was supposed to go get the books back, but she never returned to Winterhold.”

“I never said I was getting the books!” protested Cecilia. “Why does everyone assume because I’m travelling the wilderness I have time to fetch their precious items?”

“We didn’t need the books in the end,” Brelyna ignored her outburst. “Arch-Mage Aren and Master Tolfdir think it's something the Nords hid away in Saarthal from the Snow Elves. They're calling it the Eye of Magnus.”

“Typical!” said Cecilia. They could make do on their own, after all.

“I still don’t know what it does and it’s just sitting in the Hall of Elements glowing, but the problem is our Thalmor guest. He’s obsessed with it.”

“Thalmor?” asked Ulfric.

“Ancano. He’s the Aldmeri Dominion’s Special Advisor to the Archmage,” Cecilia explained. “Self-
appointed, as far as I can tell.”

“Arch-Mage Aren doesn’t give him the time of the day, so he follows the rest of us around all creepy-like,” said Brelyna.

“I still think he’s casing the joint for a grand burglary,” Lydia spoke up.

“Why are you here, though, Brelyna?” asked Cecilia. “If nothing’s changed with the orb?”

“Someone showed up looking for you.”

“Someone?”

“Do you know any Psijic monks?” asked Brelyna.

Cecilia’s face fell. “Damn.”

“Told you they’d be back,” said Lydia.

“That’s why I never went back to Winterhold!” Cecilia cried. She turned to Ulfric. “When I was in Saarthal, this ghostly Altmer popped out of nowhere and said I’d started a terrible chain of events and I needed to prevent disaster. But he didn’t say how to do that! Then he just disappeared!”

“In retrospect, I think we can all agree Jarl Ulfric is right about leaving the place alone,” said Lydia. “Just for future reference. So, what do these monks want, Brelyna? Should we cart the orb back to Saarthal and lock it up?”

“The Thalmor wouldn’t allow that to happen now,” said Brelyna. “And the monk didn’t say what he wanted. He walked into Arch-Mage Aren’s quarters and asked for you by name. He seemed disappointed you weren’t there, but he wouldn’t explain himself further. Ancano was beside himself, a Psijic showing up after all these years and refusing to speak to the Thalmor’s representative.”

“Who are these Psijics anyway?” asked Lydia.

“They were – are a mages’ order in the Summerset Isles,” Brelyna explained. “But they disappeared with their entire island over a century ago.”

“And what are the odds that this so-called Psijic monk is a Thalmor operative himself?” asked Ulfric.

Brelyna’s eyes widened. “The Thalmor were afraid of the Psijics. Ancano’s absolutely terrified that they’re meddling with him now.”

“The Thalmor carry out their operations on multiple levels. Ancano could be completely unaware of another agent’s mission or co-operating with him by pretending to be worried. All this would lure the Dragonborn into their grasp.”

Cecilia’s eyes met his. She understood now, he realized. It should be comforting, but it wasn’t. He was remembering things he’d tried so hard to forget, all because of her.

“Jarl Ulfric isn’t wrong,” Cecilia spoke up. “These Psijic monks may really be what they say they are, but we can’t underestimate the Thalmor. Does Arch-Mage Aren expect me to come to the College, Brelyna?”

She nodded. “But he said to come prepared, with companions you trust. I think he knows more than he’s letting on.”
“Winterhold’s under Imperial control now,” Ulfric pointed out. “I couldn’t send men along even if I wanted to.”

“That’s all right. I have Lydia, and Brelyna and the other apprentices.”

“What if the Legion decides to detain you?” demanded Ulfric.

Cecilia looked shocked. The possibility had evidently not occurred to her before. “But I’m the Dragonborn! I’m free to wander every hold in Skyrim!”

“You’re my betrothed now. I think you’ll find your welcome in Imperial holds somewhat cooler than you’ve experienced in the past.”

Cecilia frowned. “I’ll have to teach them respect then.”

“Could you fight them?”

“I wouldn’t – are you still trying to get me to fight for the Stormcloaks?” She sounded hurt.

“I’m trying to make you think. If you head out to Winterhold, you can’t rely on your old assumptions. You can’t assume all your old friends will be glad to see you.”

“The Dragonborn belongs to Skyrim, not to me,” She threw his own words back in his face. “That’s what you wrote me, isn’t it? Did you mean it?”

He bowed his head. “Yes, more than you can imagine.”

Because the great tragedy here was that Skyrim had been given a Dragonborn who didn’t fully belong to her. Cecilia Varo had been shaped into Skyrim’s saviour by fate and circumstance, but she wasn’t committed to live and die for this country the way every man and woman in his army was.

“If the Thalmor get hold of a powerful magical artifact, everyone suffers,” Cecilia continued. “I don’t know why the college mages can’t deal with this themselves, or what these Psijic Monks have to do with it. And I don’t know why I always have to be the one to solve these problems. I’ve lit almost a dozen candles to Julianos asking why the gods chose me. But they did. So, my Jarl, I am going to Winterhold, whether you approve or not.”

Lydia applauded.

“Go then,” replied Ulfric. “I won’t hinder you.”

He wanted to. He knew the moment she stepped foot in Winterhold, the Empire would try to detain her. She didn’t realize how serious they would be about it, how ruthless they could be. Despite her experience at Helgen, she was still a child of the Empire, brought up to regard Legionnaires as protectors, and the Emperor as a benevolent father to his people.

“Ahem,” Yrsarald coughed, and for the first time since Brelyna had begun her story, Ulfric remembered his commander was in the room. “If the Dragonborn’s going to Winterhold, the Legion will be looking for her on the road. Our spies say Fort Kastav’s manned again, and you can’t get through that pass without walking right up to its walls. But if you went by boat, you could land near Winterhold and walk into the College with no one the wiser.”

“There are pirates all over the Sea of Ghosts,” objected Brelyna.

“Ye-es,” Yrsarald drew the syllable out. “And they’re certainly not affiliated with the Stormcloak
cause. But . . .”

“Spit it out,” Ulfric advised him.

“I’m not accusing them of anything, but Clan Shatter-Shield’s ships get through. Always.”

Ulfric nodded. Torbjorn Shatter-Shield’s arrangements with the local pirates were an open secret in Windhelm. Ulfric didn’t approve of them, but for the moment the pirates were very useful in keeping Imperial ships out of the area. “You should consider the sea route, my Lady,” he told Cecilia.

“And you would arrange the trip?” Cecilia asked suspiciously.

“Should I not? If you go talk to the Shatter-Shields, it won’t keep a secret. But if I arrange a supply-run up the coast, you can slip out of the city with no one knowing.”

“I see. I suppose I must trust you.”

“Yes, you must. Else I don’t know how we will fare together.”

Lydia actually rolled her eyes. The nerve of that woman!

“Make sure there’s room for five passengers,” spoke up Brelyna. “The Dragonborn, Lydia, me, and the other two apprentices.”

Ulfric considered this. He still didn’t like letting go completely of Cecilia. There should be at least one person in their party who was loyal to him, not the College of Winterhold or Whiterun Hold. One person at least who would think to alert him if something went wrong, and who would watch out for any Imperial interference.

“I’d like to send Ralof along with you,” he said at last.

“To spy on us?” asked Lydia.

“Lydia! Show the Jarl respect,” Cecilia snapped at her housecarl. It seemed that Lydia had finally crossed a line. She looked as surprised as Ulfric felt; he’d never seen Cecilia reprimand Lydia before.

“I apologize, Jarl Ulfric,” said Lydia sullenly.

“But I don’t know what I think of taking a known Stormcloak into Imperial territory,” Cecilia continued. “I don’t think it’d be fair to Ralof to put him in that position.”

“Why don’t you ask him what he thinks?” asked Ulfric. Ralof, of course, was a good soldier who would follow his commander’s “suggestion”. And if he was in this room, he’d probably volunteer anyway. He’d been invested in protecting the Dragonborn since Helgen.

Cecilia looked troubled. “I’d be glad to have him with me, but you can’t pressure him into it.” She turned to her housecarl. “Lydia, you go ask. I can trust you not to bully him into it.”

Lydia shot Ulfric a triumphant look before leaving the room. Ulfric concluded that Ralof would not be coming.

He was very surprised when Lydia was back within twenty minutes, ushering Ralof into the war room.

“I’m coming with you, my Lady,” he addressed Cecilia. “Lydia’s explained everything.”
Lydia was grinning. Had she actually wanted Ralof to come? He might have to completely reassess the housecarl’s character.

Ralof turned to Ulfric. “Thank you, my Jarl, for entrusting me with the Dragonborn’s safety.”

“Seems to be the job the gods gave you,” said Ulfric, clapping him on the back. “I’m entrusting you to her as well. I want you both back in one piece.”

While Lydia was gone, they’d been poring over a map of the Northern coast which Yrsarald had pulled out for him. Brelyna had pointed out a few places around the College that she thought might make good drop-off points. Ulfric was silently examining the coastline with a mind to the intelligence he’d received about Imperial ships in the area. He’d tell Cecilia before she left, but there was no way he was sharing military intelligence with a Telvanni wizard, even a harmless-seeming apprentice.

It was a fruitless enterprise, anyway, trying to figure this out without Shatter-Shield input. Soon after Ralof appeared, Ulfric dispatched Yrsarald to start up the arrangements.

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2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Labyrinthian

Varo’s party stood beneath the ruins of Labyrinthian, listening to roaring up above: the frost-trolls Idgrod had warned of.

“The snowpack must be stable where those beasts are,” ventured Amirion, the Thalmor mage who’d been getting along well with Varo.

Rikke shook her head. “Frost trolls don’t care if they set off an avalanche. It won’t kill them, and they can climb out of the snow eventually. Fire and each other are the only things they really fear.”

“Good. Mayhem spells are my specialty,” said Varo. “Let’s go.”

“The horses are too spooked to go on,” Rikke protested.

“Then stay here with them, Legate,” Elenwen broke into the discussion. “Amirion, we’ll go ahead of our soldiers to deal with these trolls.”

“You mean, you’re coming with me,” said Varo. “I don’t exactly need your help, coz, but it’ll make things easier.”

He was rewarded by Elenwen’s sour expression. She had no come-back for being called ‘coz’. She was clearly trying to ignore it, rather than hash out their family relationship in front of her subordinates. In retaliation, he’d stopped calling her anything else.

“Emilin, you and Legate Rikke probably should stay with the horses,” Varo continued. He was confident he could handle himself in the Thalmor mages’ company, but he wouldn’t leave just one follower alone with the soldiers.

“Fine with me,” said Emilin. “Don’t do that stupid thing we discussed last night, though. Okay?”

Idgrod’s prophecy, right. That wouldn’t be a problem. He wasn’t going into any mazes with Elenwen. Honestly.

Elenwen raised her eyebrows. “Stupid thing?”
“Don’t wander off and explore these ruins,” Emilin clarified. “That goes for you too, First Emissary. We need to find the quickest way through.”

“I’m sorry I solicited that inane piece of advice,” said Elenwen tartly. “Come along, Amirion.” She started up the steps to the city.

Varo followed after the two Thalmor, quickening his pace to match their own easy stride. He would always insist he didn’t envy these Altmer, but longer legs would be nice.

They stopped at the top of the stairs, peering forward into the ruins. The trolls were not in sight, but they could hear them somewhere close by. There were too many corners for the beasts to hide behind in this vast ruined city.

Wordlessly, Varo muffled his footsteps. Beside him, Elenwen and Amirion were doing the same. He briefly considered an Invisibility spell to follow, but that would drain his reserves too far for a job that should be simple. Also, although he would like to see Elenwen’s face if he just vanished on her, he needed the Thalmor mages to stay co-operative.

The snow here was about a foot deep, with the ruined walls providing some shelter and break from the wind. But there were tracks across the snow: hard-packed icy furrows bearing the prints of bestial feet. They moved along one, Amirion leading. Varo was right behind him, feeling a prickle at the back of his neck from the knowledge that Elenwen was following. She wouldn’t try anything, but by Talos, if she did, he could move so quickly . . . He hoped she realized that.

They met their first trolls in a plaza not far beyond the outer walls. There were three of them, two were already locked in combat, while another watched and howled.

“Mating season?” whispered Amirion.

“How the hell would I know?” Varo responded.

“Well, if they’re already fighting each other . . .”

“I am not going to wait this out.” Elenwen snapped her gloved fingers. A small ball of flame appeared in the palm of her hand. Varo was a little surprised. The ever-patient Inquisitor had learned to hurry, had she? If she’d moved so quickly in the past, instead of clinging to protocols and prudence, he wouldn’t be alive today.

He let Elenwen draw the creatures’ attention with a firebolt, meanwhile readying his spell of Mayhem. These weren’t mentally strong adversaries, but he wanted to target all three at once, which made it a little more complicated.

The creatures left off their battle immediately and charged towards them. Elenwen kept up the rain of fire, Amirion was throwing up a ward around them. Varo waited till they were ten feet away to cast Mayhem.

It worked perfectly. There was a sickening snapping sound as one of the trolls grabbed the other’s arm and bashed it into a wall. The third continued in its fury towards the mages but was repelled by Elenwen’s blast of fire.

They didn’t even need wards in the end. With a lethal mixture of fire and illusion spells, they cleared out the old alley-ways of the city within the space of twenty minutes. Fifteen frost trolls lay dead, some of them reduced to heaps of smoking ash. It’d definitely been mating season, Varo reflected, and this their local breeding site. He wondered if the locals would notice a significant decrease in the Troll population after this.
He was exhausted when they were finished and let himself fall back into a comfortably thick snowbank.

“You can call them up,” he told Elenwen and then noticed the look of horror on her face. He followed her gaze. There down a wide avenue, a tall figure was rushing towards them. The – man? – no, elf was dressed in Legionnaire’s uniform. He called out in Altmeris, “Mistress Elenwen! I have the mask ready!”

“SHUT UP!” Elenwen screamed back at him.

Varo sat very still, willing the elf to spill more of his secrets. “Wait, is that a real Legionnaire?” the new elf asked as he approached the trio.

“He understands Altmeris,” hissed Elenwen at the newcomer.

Since his cover was blown, Varo stood up and bowed. “Indeed I do,” he said in the tongue. “What mask are you talking about?” Once again, he thanked his mother’s paranoia of the Thalmor. While Curinwe Varo had been too busy to teach her own son, she’d hired an Altmer nanny just to immerse him in the language. Curinwe didn’t think of it as preserving her Altmer father’s heritage, but as handing her son another weapon to survive. So had it proved on many an occasion.

The false Legionnaire had no chance to answer his question. Elenwen waved her hand, and the elf seized up, then fall backwards, stiff as a board.

“Amirion. Bind this renegade’s hands,” she ordered.

“Oh, so he’s a renegade?” asked Varo innocently.

“Yes. He’s a minor guard at the Embassy. He’s been missing from his duties,” Elenwen replied. “To find him here – this is truly shocking.”

“You need any help searching him for this mask he mentioned?”

Elenwen scowled. “What mask?”

“Why don’t you ask him? Oh for Talos’ sake, coz,” – he appreciated the look of pure murder on her face, “I don’t have time to pry into your secret schemes. No doubt you have agents crawling the country, I don’t want to meet them all. I need to get to Whiterun to lift a siege, so I’m going back to get my comrades.”

He stomped off through the snow, hoping Elenwen bought his reaction. Because he wasn’t going to leave it there. Getting to Whiterun was his ultimate goal, but he’d learnt long ago that you didn’t just ignore Thalmor actions. They played the long game; anything could turn out to be crucial, the difference between life and death for a huge number of people.

Amirion caught up with him quickly, and they said nothing as they descended to their soldiers. Varo wondered if the paralyzed Thalmor agent would even be alive when he returned.

At the bottom of the steps, he drew Rikke and Emilin aside and quickly described what had occurred above.

“I’m not leaving Labyrinthian without finding this mask,” he finished the story.

“Varo! The general ordered you to Whiterun!” Rikke protested.
“I’m still going to Whiterun. But I’m not going to ride away from this place leaving the Thalmor in possession of some powerful magical artifact.”

“You don’t know it’s a powerful magical artifact!”

“What do you think, Legate? It’s Elenwen’s mask from her last fancy dress party?”

“He’s not going to change his mind,” said Emilin to Rikke. “Junius, what do you want me to do?”

“You’re going to look for this mask. The legate and I will be providing the distraction for you to do it.”

“Are you ready to come along?” Amirion called over to them. The Thalmor had readied their horses.

“The legate forgot to change into winter clothes,” Varo shouted back. “We’ll need a few minutes while she changes.”

“VARO!” Rikke was absolutely furious.

“Buying us time,” he hissed. “Emilin, get me those extra woollens.”

Rikke swore at him but thankfully complied with the ruse. She made him hold up a blanket while she slipped out of her armour to don the extra thick woollen underclothes he’d brought along. While she was changing, he outlined his plan.

“If the Thalmor agent had the mask on his person, Elenwen probably has it now,” he explained. “So, your first job, Emilin, is to find out if she or the agent is carrying it. If they are, we don’t need to take action right away. But if neither has it, it’s somewhere in the ruined city.”

“And you think I can search the whole city for it?” asked Emilin.

“No, I think you’ll use your amazing tracking skills to find exactly where this agent popped up from. Does he have a camp in the area? Was he hanging out in an old ruined building? That’s where you’ll look for the mask.”

“How are you going to distract the Thalmor from me?” she asked.

“I’m going to take Elenwen maze-crawling.”

“Junius, you weren’t supposed to take Idgrod’s vision as a suggestion.”

“Why not? Maybe that’s why the gods sent it to her. So I’d know what to do. Let me explain; I’m afraid of the Thalmor getting their hands on powerful magic. Well, Elenwen will be just as afraid of me doing the same. Once we get up there, I’m going to very dramatically succumb to the temptation of Shalidor’s Maze. Elenwen certainly won’t let me go in there by myself. If I’m very lucky, she’ll bring along Amirion. Now, the second layer of distraction is up to Legate Rikke.” Rikke groaned. “I won’t tell you what to do, but you need to let Emilin slip away. They’ll notice she’s gone, but they won’t be able to track her. I promise you that.”

“So I’m going to be left with three or four angry Thalmor?” asked Rikke.

“We’re all doing our duty for the Empire,” Varo replied smoothly. “Emilin, when you find the mask, hide it in the Ruins. Then we’ll all get back together and talk down the Thalmor.”

“Talk down,” repeated Rikke.
“They need me to prolong the war; they probably won’t try to kill us.”

Emilin patted Rikke on the shoulder. “Junius and I have been running circles around them for years. Trust us.”

Rikke fastened the last buckles on her armour. “Let’s get this done quickly. I’m going to overheat in your horrible long underwear.”

Chapter End Notes

In this universe, Captain Valmir found someone other than the Dragonborn to successfully bring him Rahgot’s mask. His orders in-game are then to bring it to Labyrinthian, which backfired spectacularly for him here. Reviews, comments and questions would be much appreciated, especially since I sometimes feel I’m writing into the void.
Chapter Notes

Hail All - Brave City Bromjunaar
Forever These Walls Shall Stand
May Enemies See Her Majesty
May All Quake to Behold Her
- Ancient Tablet within Labyrinthian

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2 Second Seed, 4E 202, Labyrinthian

Rikke had to trust that her companions knew what they were doing. Leading the horses into Labyrinthian was already a difficult enough job, tasking every bit of her concentration. The stink of frost trolls was on the city and the horses were afraid. Emilin spoke quietly in a sing-song voice to the animals, and that seemed to be calming them enough to continue, but it was slow-going through the snow.

“Labyrinthian is really a misnomer,” Varo’s voice spoke up ahead. “This was Bromjuunar, great city of the Ancient Nords.” (Rikke wondered if he’d just read that in Idgrod’s book the day before.)

“What a place for a city,” Amirion responded. “They’d have had to bring up all their supplies from below.”

“The Nords weren’t allergic to magic in those days.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Amirion chuckled.

“Just ask the Snow-Elves,” replied Varo.

Rikke paused and let them move on a little further. She wouldn’t chance being drawn into a discussion on the victories and/or crimes of Ysgramor.

They found Elenwen sitting on a block of stone, with the so-called Thalmor renegade standing before her, his hands tied behind his back. She stood up to address her subordinates.

“Soldiers of the Aldmeri Dominion, this mer was lately one of us. But he has turned his back on our benevolence, absconding from our Embassy for some selfish purpose of his own. He is now a prisoner of the Dominion, and you will treat him as a captured enemy, not a fellow.”

The Thalmor agent hung his head in well-feigned shame. Or in real shame, Rikke corrected herself. He’d exposed a secret operation to Legion eyes; Elenwen would not be merciful.

“Strip him,” Elenwen ordered her soldiers.

Rikke wanted to look away from the unpleasant scene that followed. But she couldn’t. Surely this was Elenwen’s demonstration to show them this agent was not carrying the mask he’d spoken of. Varo watched intently, but Rikke noticed that Emilin was examining the ground around them. Emilin had been a legendary Legion scout, Rikke knew. She must be reading the snow for the story of
Elenwen’s actions after Varo had left the scene.

After the elf had been stripped of his Legionnaire’s uniform and smallclothes and stood shivering in the snow, Elenwen ordered one of the soldiers to find him some extra clothing. “No armour,” she added. The elf had been carrying a few rings and an amulet, which Elenwen took into her possession, but nothing of real interest.

“It’ll be an annoyance to watch this prisoner in Whiterun,” Elenwen stated. “I’ll send two of my soldiers to bring him back to the Embassy.”

Relief washed over Rikke. She’d have three fewer Thalmor to distract. This plan suddenly seemed feasible.

While the Thalmor soldiers prepared to depart with their prisoner, Emilin wandered over towards Elenwen. “That’s real Legion armour your renegade was wearing,” she pointed out. “Hand it over?”

“Take it.”

“Thank you!” Emilin leant down to pick up a leather cuirass, then she seemed to lose her footing on the ice and toppled into Elenwen. They fell together into a snowbank, Emilin sprawled all over the Emissary.

“I’m so sorry!” Emilin was spluttering, her arms flailing.

“Get off me!”

Emilin pushed herself off Elenwen. As they returned to their feet, Elenwen towered over the Bosmer, “You dare touch me again—“

Varo grabbed Emilin and pulled her behind him. “It was an accident, Elenwen. But if you threaten my friend, what I do won’t be an accident.”

“No threat was intended,” Elenwen said in a low voice. “But please control your friend.”

“I’ll control myself,” Emilin piped up. “I didn’t realize how slippery this ice was.”

While Rikke helped Emilin pack away the confiscated Legion uniform and armour, Emilin whispered, “She didn’t have it, plan’s on. Follow Junius’ lead.”

“Okay.”

Rikke was on edge waiting for that lead. Two Thalmor soldiers departed down through the city with their prisoner. Now, only Elenwen, Amirion, and one soldier (the one Emilin had joked about eating) were left.

Varo was wandering the ruined street, examining the crumbled stonework that lined it.

“We came this way as a shortcut,” Elenwen commented. “We’re ready to move on, Varo.”

“Yes of course . . .” he sighed heavily.

“Junius,” Emilin called his name. “Have you forgotten what I said?”

“No exploring?” he answered, but his eyes were still fixed on the ruins to the East.

“Exactly.”
“What’s there to explore here?” Rikke asked innocently. “It’s just a jumble of old rocks.”

“Old rocks!” Varo exclaimed. “Legate, have you never heard of Shalidor?”

“Uh . . . some old wizard?” Do your best dumb Nord act, she thought to herself. They’ll buy it.

“Some old wizard? Is that all you - Legate, Shalidor was one of the greatest mages of all time. After Vanus Galerion, maybe the greatest. And he built a maze in these ruins to test the mages who would follow in his footsteps.” He pointed East. “It should be over there.”

“It’ll have crumbled to dust by now!” insisted Rikke.

Varo shook his head. “Divines, do they teach you Nords nothing about magic? Enchantments like that don’t just crumble.”

“It doesn’t matter, Junius!” Emilin shouted at him. “You don’t need to test yourself in this stupid maze. Why would you even want to?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to,” Varo replied. He turned to the Thalmor. “Do you know about the maze?” he asked Elenwen.

“I have read of it,” Elenwen assented. “But it holds no interest for us. It was a test for potential Arch-Mages of the College of Winterhold. Unless that is your ambition, pray let us continue.”

Varo’s face broke into a huge grin. “Just a test? You think-“ he cut off. “Of course, just a test. Well, it’s a test I think I’ll take.” He turned his back on Elenwen and began to walk away.

“Junius, don’t you dare!” Emilin chased after him.

Rikke let them go. She was focused on the Thalmor. Behind Elenwen, Amirion was standing stock still, the colour drained from his face.

“Mistress Elenwen,” she heard him say.

“What is it?”

“Glamoril.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Elenwen, but then she shook her head. “That’s a myth.”

“And if it’s there?”

“It isn’t there! Do you how many idiots have searched that maze over the centuries?”

“Yes, but will we let this idiot search it alone?” Amirion was insistent.

Elenwen groaned. “We won’t. I’ll take care of it. Amirion, keep watch here. I’ll deal with this.” She rushed off after Varo, moving faster than Rikke had ever seen her move.

When Elenwen caught up with Varo, there was a big argument. Rikke was too far away to hear the details of it, but she was satisfied that Varo was getting his way when he shouted, “All right, follow me! I don’t care!”

Emilin came stomping back through the snow. “They’re going into that maze together.”

“I hope you’re happy,” Rikke snapped at Amirion.
“I didn’t do anything,” he protested. “Your commander is an impulsive fool.”

“He’s not my commander,” Rikke replied. “I’m his minder.”

“Then go mind him!’

“I’m not going into a wizard’s maze,” Rikke sat down. “This is a disaster. What if they never come out of there?”

“They’ll come out,” Amirion insisted. Mistress Elenwen is a great mage.”

“And so is my boy Junius,” Emilin added. “It’s just a pain, that’s all. Let’s make a fire. Might as well get comfortable while we’re waiting.”

Amirion agreed to this, and they set to work on building a fire. At first, Rikke wondered where they would get the fuel. Emilin produced only a small bit of tinder from her saddlebag. But this didn’t phase the Thalmor mage who began his spellwork on the tinder. Presently, a blazing fire shot up around the small pile of sticks and straw. Despite this, they didn’t burn up. Amirion noticed her confusion and explained that spell preserved the fuel so that the heat of the fire didn’t diminish.

“That’s amazing,” said Rikke sincerely. She was eyeing Emilin at the edge of the fire. Was it time to distract the two Thalmor already? Emilin nodded as if she read Rikke’s thoughts.

“Your magic is very impressive, Master Amirion,” Rikke began. “There’s a question I’ve always had . . . maybe you can answer it?”

“Perhaps I can,” he replied politely. Mages liked to show off, didn’t they?

“It’s about magic, I guess. And history too,” Rikke continued. “You see, when I was growing up, I heard a lot of stories about the Oblivion Crisis.” She saw him pursing his lips. Yes, she was on the right track. The proper place to strike at the Thalmor was their pride. “I learnt that Martin Septim saved all of Tamriel during the Oblivion Crisis. That he was Akatosh’s avatar. So, why do the Thalmor say they saved elvenkind?”

She’d worried for the last half hour how to distract these Thalmor, but it was so simple in the end. Amirion and the other soldier were completely focused on her.

“That is typical human nonsense,” Amirion spat out his words. “Verging on the Talos heresy itself.”

Rikke watched Emilin creeping away behind them. “But I was talking about Martin Septim, not Talos!”

“Ask yourself why those gullible Imperial citizens thought Martin Septim was a fitting avatar of the Father of Time. Because they believed that the Septim line partook of divinity, isn’t that why?”

“But Martin Septim did end the Crisis!”

“Were you there?” demanded Amirion. “It happened two centuries ago, and yet short-lived humans dare to tell us who were there what happened?”

“You were there?” Rikke asked. Emilin had disappeared from view. She’d try to keep the Thalmor distracted as long as possible.

“Yes. It was . . . most unpleasant. I was there when Crystal-Like-Law was uprooted and smashed down upon the ground like a child’s toy. Do not dare to lecture me on my own history, Nord.”
“I wouldn’t dare! It was a question! Why are you so angry?”

Amirion snorted. “Just a question, was it? And did you really wish to hear the answer? Would you ever acknowledge our superiority, Legate? Keep comforting yourself with nonsense about poor dead Martin Septim. The Thalmor have proven ourselves with our deeds.”

“Master Amirion,” the soldier broke in. “The Bosmer’s gone!”

Amirion whirled around to where Emilin had been sitting. “That little bitch! Legate, where did she go?”

“I don’t know!” Rikke shouted at him. “You were yelling at me about elven superiority, I wasn’t watching her!”

“I was not yelling,” huffed Amirion. He looked down at the snow. “Find her tracks, soldier.”

But Emilin had been too careful to leave them an easy trail. There were tracks everywhere, from the Trolls, from the horses, and their own party. The Thalmor were at a complete loss. Amirion realized this and turned back on Rikke. “On your life, Legate, where did she go?” A crackling sound came from his raised right glove.

Rikke had been on the wrong end of the Dominion's favourite spell before. She still had scars on her body from the lightning bolt that felled her in the hills of the Heartlands. She hadn’t lost her nerve then, and she didn’t now. “If you harm a Legionnaire, your life is going to be forfeit.”

He lowered his hand. He was nothing without Elenwen to tell him what he could do. “Did she go to help Varo?” he asked.

“I told you. I don’t know.”

He waved his hand, but this time there was no crackle of electricity. Instead, her body seized up and she crumpled into the snow. She’d been paralyzed, just like the unfortunate Thalmor agent.

“Tie her hands, soldier,” Amirion ordered his subordinate. “But don’t hurt her. If this turns out to be a misunderstanding, I’ll apologize, Legate. You two will wait here while I find the Bosmer.”

Amirion ran off into the ruins. Rikke was unable to move her mouth to smile, but she was smiling inside. Distraction well achieved!

Shalidor’s Maze was at least easy to find. They entered through a porch in one of the few fully standing walls in the city. At the end of this entryway were wooden gates reinforced with iron struts (and without doubt, magic).

“So this is it. You can change your mind if you’re scared, coz,” Varo addressed Elenwen.

Elenwen pushed open the gates. They swung forward silently, revealing stone steps leading down into a dimly-lit tunnel. When they descended the steps, they realized that it soon came out again in the open air. They were standing in a dusty grey courtyard with towering walls on all sides, a small plot of flowers in its midst, and two barren trees flanking the arch before them. Tattered banners flapped above them in the wind. There was no snow on the ground.

“Do you know how this maze is set up? Or are we going in blind?” asked Elenwen.

Varo slipped his hand beneath his cuirass and pulled out the book Jarl Idgrod had given him. “I have
“Were you planning this all along?” asked Elenwen.

“I picked this up in Highmoon Hall,” said Varo truthfully. “Been thinking about it since.” He opened the book. “I’ll read out the important bit:

*Shalidor's Labyrinthian is actually two intersecting mazes, in an hourglass pattern. One maze could not be completed without exiting the other first, which makes the only existing instruction for the test especially mysterious:

Enter Twice - Exit Only Once

Alteration will lead you to Destruction

Only Illusion shows the way to Restoration

Conjure not, but be conjured instead.

I figure that will make a bit more sense once we’re underway.”

“Certainly. But what is it that you think you’ll find in this maze, Varo?” asked Elenwen.

“Does there need to be something? What if I just want to test my abilities?”

“Your pride in your abilities seems to be unlimited already.”

“True, you do know me, coz.”

Elenwen said nothing.

“There might be something in there,” he said slowly, pretending to relent. “Probably not the secret of life itself, of course.”

“So you have heard that story,” said Elenwen.

“Glamoril, the secret of life stolen by Shalidor from Akatosh himself. No, don’t bother to protest that’s heretical and disrespectful of your great Auri-El, I don’t buy it myself. But something interesting and worthwhile? Much more likely.”

“I will not allow you to bear away an artifact of Shalidor’s. Though I do not expect us to find anything in this maze.”

“So we’ll work out how to deal with each other if and when we find something. Till then, we’re allies. It’s a fair deal, coz.”

“Are you going to keep calling me that?” asked Elenwen quietly.

“It obviously annoys you, so yes.”

“It doesn’t annoy me more than your existence.”

“That’s harsh. Tell me, Elenwen, were you hating me before I ever knew you existed?”

“Of course. There was a day of penance in my father’s halls when we received news of your birth.”

And people had accused his mother of paranoia.
“For failing to wipe out the family’s dishonour?” asked Varo.

“Yes.” Elenwen walked forward through the arch, ending the conversation. Varo paused for a moment, staring at the back of her sleek black coat and her long blonde hair, and feeling, for the very first time in his life, something other than anger and hatred towards her. Why, after so many decades, did he just now feel the pangs of rejection? The anger and hatred didn’t lift; he still loathed Elenwen, but he also realized how sad he felt about the situation. He had no family left in Cyrodiil, and only Cecilia here in Skyrim. If the Thalmor hadn’t risen, if young Elenwen hadn’t been brought up to hate her own kin, what would their lives have been like?

His common sense reminded him that if the Thalmor hadn’t come to power, his Altmer grandfather would have probably stayed in the Summerset Isles and never met his Breton bride. If you looked at it from a certain angle, he existed because of the Thalmor’s actions. He touched his hand to Elfbiter’s hilt and murmured a short prayer to his ancestor for guidance. (He hoped Master Andanyon would forgive him the name he’d given his sword.)

“Are you coming?” Elenwen called back to him.

He walked through the arch. A gruesome sight greeted him there. They were in another courtyard with more barren trees and forbidding walls, but both he and Elenwen were staring at a charred corpse that lay on a circular platform at the centre of the courtyard. Standing before the corpse on their own circular pedestals were four magical staffs.

“What do you think happened here?” he asked Elenwen.

Elenwen shrugged. “I’ve seen dead like this, recently. When a dragon attacks, the bodies are charred beyond recognition.”

“A good flame attack can do the same,” said Varo skeptically.

“Yes. There’s no way of knowing yet. I expect we’ll find out soon.” Elenwen knelt down beside the body. “They dropped a note here. Oh, it’s just that verse you read out to me. My own copy, then.”

He now noticed the entrance to the maze ahead of them. But he lingered at the platform, examining the staffs before him.

“Do you think they’re booby-trapped?” he asked Elenwen.

“Why risk finding out?”

“It may be part of the test that we bring them in.”

Elenwen frowned. “Or they didn’t actually expect their Arch-Mages to be halfway decent magicians, so they left some cheats here.”

“That doesn’t sound like Shalidor.”

“Shalidor’s not been running this place for a long time. I’m not touching any of those. Come along, Varo.”

Varo shot a last glance at the staffs and entered into the maze. Elenwen followed shortly after.

Shalidor’s maze was, in truth, not a maze at all. There were no turns to choose between, only winding passages between steep walls. At the passage turns were small shutters. When pulled open, they revealed small little knick-knacks: a few coins, a small soul gem. Varo hesitated before
collecting these. He had little use for them, but they might be part of an upcoming test. Not far into
the maze, iron bars blocked the passage. Before them, set into the wall of the maze, there was a blue
magical sigil.

“Alteration will lead you to Destruction,” he said. Elenwen was already blasting the thing.

The bars lowered. “What spell did you use?” he asked.

“Oakflesh.”

“So we hit the next sigil with a Destruction spell and so on?”

“It’s not much of a puzzle, is it?”

“No. I have to imagine it’s measuring the strength of our spells, though.”

Elenwen sniffed. “Don’t give these Nords the benefit of the doubt.”

They continued through the maze, without any more challenging puzzles, and nowhere to use the
trinkets he was gathering from alcoves. Each sigil, in turn, required a school of magic as set out in the
riddle. He shouldn’t be bothered by the maze’s lack of challenge – this was all a distraction for
Emilin’s sake – but he was. He and Elenwen were top mages, they could have handled anything.

At one point, the maze led them through a Nord tomb and Elenwen was convinced they would have to
fight the walking Nord dead. Apparently, that was a common feature of these ancient Nord tombs.
But those skeletons stayed peacefully on their backs, even after he poked a few with Elf-biter. The
only threat they met were common skeevers, which they easily dispatched. They did find another
skeleton near the end of the maze which had apparently not fared so well against the skeevers.

“Nords!” Elenwen said it like it was a swear.

The final challenge in this maze was a sphere of rippling magical energy which blocked the entire
hallway. After waiting to see if it’d do anything, Varo slowly approached it. Everything went black,
and then he found himself standing on a black disc surrounded by a wall of flames. Before him stood
a Dremora, who instantly raised a Flame Atronach to face him.

be conjured instead.

He was on a plane of Oblivion? Elenwen stepped up beside him. “Accursed wizard,” she hissed.
She probably meant Shalidor, not him, although there wasn’t time to ask for clarification. He’d agree
with the first; people should stay out of Oblivion if they could.

There wasn’t any time to think after that. It was not an enjoyable fight. Varo’s specialty was Illusion,
which was much more useful against armies than against a powerful Dremora. As a trained
battlemage, his Destruction spells were strong enough, but throwing around fire and lightning lacked
the elegance and grace of his preferred fighting style. He rose to the challenge, though, swinging his
sword and firing off spells at the Dremora and his servants. Elenwen was fighting much the same
way.

The Dremora at last staggered under his blow, and then the flames vanished – no, they were back on
the platform with the corpse, in front of the maze, with the Dremora still attacking them, and an Ice
Atronach joining in the fun.

He and Elenwen took care of their opponents quickly after that.

When the Dremora fell down dead at last, Varo knelt down to examine the corpse. There wasn’t
much to be found on the body, except a jewelled circlet with a strong magical presence. He picked up the circlet. Nothing happened.

“That was a complete waste of time,” Elenwen pronounced.

“This circlet’s pretty,” he demurred.

Elenwen reached out to touch it. “Some small enchantment.”

“To strengthen casting, probably,” he agreed. “I’ll take it.”

“I really don’t care. Are you happy now? Can we leave this blasted place?”

“Not yet. See those passages on the right and left. We need to find where they go.”

“Because Glamoril will just be sitting at the end of one of them.”

“If we don’t check, we’ll live the rest of our lives wondering if it was.” He placed the circlet on his head and headed down the righthand passage.

The passage led along the side of the maze and at last opened up into a large area before a giant stone wall. Upon the wall were carved foreign marks; some ancient language was written here.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked Elenwen.

“It’s the Dragon tongue,” Elenwen replied sullenly. “Don’t ask me to translate it.”

“Whom should I ask?”

“Your daughter probably.”

“Being Dragonborn gives her Dragon language reading skills?”

“I don’t know. Almost everything about dragons is a mystery. But we can kill them, that’s all we need to know right now.”

“Can you kill them without my daughter?”

“Yes,” said Elenwen, but she didn’t sound very convincing.

“Thank you, coz. I just realized something. For the first time in forever, the Aldmeri Dominion wants my child to live.”

“You’re assuming too much,” she protested.

“No, I understand how you all think. You’d never throw away the one person in Tamriel who can destroy dragons. You want to kill her, but there’s a voice at the back of your heads, *What if we need her? How can we bring her under our control?*”

“She is not the only one who can kill dragons,” insisted Elenwen.

“Really? But she’s the only one who can absolutely keep them dead,” he continued. “Rikke explained it to me: unlike anyone else, she can take their very souls. So you’ll try to threaten or blackmail her or take her prisoner, but you want her to live!”

“If it makes you happy to believe that, do so.” Elenwen began walking away.
It didn’t make him happy, but it felt as if a large stone had been taken off his chest. He remembered telling Avelina they shouldn’t have children, that any child of his would be marked for death. Avelina had shaken her head and said all children were marked for death, but they got to live first; five years, twenty years, one hundred, who knew what the future would bring their child? They’d love each other and their child for as long as the gods allowed. They’d be happy. She’d been right, of course. She always was.

But now, terrible as the circumstances were, he knew that the death sentence had been commuted for a time. He no longer doomed his daughter simply by his blood. Of course, he was relieved.

They did not speak any further leaving the maze. Outside, the wind had whipped up and was blowing the snow around in eddies. Varo was thankful he’d worn the long underwear and wondered if Rikke would be too.

They plodded through the snow back to where they’d left their companions, and there found a very bizarre sight.

The remaining Thalmor soldier was standing on guard with his sword drawn. Beside him, sitting in the snow was Rikke, her hands behind her back. Amirion was pacing back and forth, and Emilin was nowhere to be seen.

Varo called out, “Legate Rikke, are you all right?”

“If my hands were free, I would be!” she shouted back.

“What is going on here?” Elenwen asked Amirion.

“The Bosmer’s vanished,” said Amirion quickly.

“No, I haven’t.” Emilin’s head popped out from behind a wall.

Amirion stared at her. “You—“

“I’m sorry if I didn’t want to hear the full glorious tale of how the Thalmor singlehandedly ended the Oblivion Crisis,” said Emilin. “I got a nice nap instead. Sorry, Rikke, didn’t realize they’d take it out on you.”

“I searched this whole city for you!” insisted Amirion.

“I wouldn’t hire this guy as a scout.” Emilin pulled herself up onto the wall. “Junius, can we get going now?”

“After our Thalmor friends cut Legate Rikke’s bonds,” replied Varo. “Elenwen, I could lodge an official complaint.”

“I would be the one to receive it,” she pointed out. “Amirion, release the Legate. This is not what I expected of you, but we will speak of that later.”

The Thalmor soldier rapidly cut the rope that tied Rikke’s hands. She rubbed her wrists energetically, then stood up.

“Do you need a healing potion?” Varo asked her.

“No thanks. Just a bit of pins and needles in my legs. Did you find anything interesting in that maze?”
Varo threw her his knapsack. “I collected these things through the whole maze and didn’t find anything to do with them.”

Rikke peered inside. “Are those bloody rags?” she asked.

“Bloody rags, a horker’s tusk, Dwemer scrap metal, okay there are a few jewels in there. I think Shalidor was a hoarder.”

At long last, they prepared to leave Labyrinthian. This delay had only cost them a few hours, and it was all worth it when Emilin had a moment to tell him privately that she’d found a strange green stone mask in the Thalmor agent’s campsite. She’d placed it in a difficult-to-access crack in the ruins and promised she could draw a map to direct the Legion to it.

Junius Varo left Labyrinthian with his conscience clear, his fears relieved, and his hopes high.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, no Dragonborn in this chapter.

In-game, Shalidor’s Maze doesn’t make much sense. It’s a test for potential Arch-Mages to prove their magical prowess and can be passed without any magical knowledge or preparation. The spell staffs are right there to take in with you. I was tempted to just leave them out of this, to make the test a bit more realistic, but instead, I lampshaded them with Elenwen’s suggestion that the cheat staffs were installed later, long after Shalidor. Certainly the College of Winterhold’s standards have gone down since his days.

But Elenwen and Varo aren’t being entirely fair. Those sigils did judge the strength of their magic, and there was a tough fight with the Dremora. It’s a perfectly respectable challenge for respectable mages.

Next chapter will explore more of Ulfric’s problems, and return to the Reach where the Thalmor are working very hard on finding a hold over the Dragonborn, just like Varo suspected.

Comments, reviews, and questions are much appreciated.
Before the Great War, the Blades helped the Empire against the Thalmor. Our Grand Master saw them as the greatest threat to Tamriel. At the time, that was true. Maybe it still is. So we fought them in the shadows, all across Tamriel. We thought we were more than a match for them. We were wrong. - Delphine

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Torbjorn Shatter-Shield was immediately enthusiastic about arranging a voyage up the coast for the Stormcloak cause. He arrived at the Palace in the late afternoon with plans for setting out the next morning, if that was what the Jarl wanted. Ulfric wavered a bit at the prospect. He’d really prefer to keep Cecilia here a bit longer. And yet, delaying her wouldn’t serve any purpose in the long run. The sooner she went, the less likely the Legion was to learn of the outing. He reluctantly agreed to Shatter-Shield’s proposal, then went to inform Cecilia of the timeline.

She received the news happily. She couldn’t wait to get out of Windhelm, could she? He didn’t hold that against her. She was an adventurer by nature, even if she complained constantly about things people wanted her to do for them.

She, Lydia and Brelyna were busy packing for their trip. They’d set up in one of the spare bedrooms, and Ralof was kept busy running around the Palace fetching things and then returning them after the women decided they didn’t need them after all. The two other apprentices showed up in the early evening. One was a young Nord, Onmund, who was very polite and extremely nervous around Ulfric. The other . . .

“J’Zargo thanks the Jarl for his kind hospitality,” purred the handcuffed Khajiit before him. “These are fine bracelets, though not exactly what J’Zargo was hoping for.”

“They’re better than you deserve,” said Ulfric bluntly. “Take a man’s god from him and people here get violent.”

“J’Zargo had no intention of keeping the Talos amulet. The poor Stormcloak had only that petty piece of magic to protect him. J’Zargo is looking for much finer things.”

“Not in here, you aren’t,” said Onmund quickly.

“This is not a city of magic. J’Zargo understands. Even these bracelets are not fit for a mage.”

“Did you want magic-suppressing handcuffs?” Lydia asked.

“J’Zargo has often wished to see those. Does the Jarl have any?”

“Just behave yourself,” Ulfric turned his back on the Khajiit. “Cecilia, could I have a word?”

“Of course, my Jarl,” she smiled at him, but once he’d led her out into the hall, her expression turned uncertain. “Is there something wrong?”
“Do you trust these folk?”

Cecilia thought about it. “Yes. Well, not in everything. I wouldn’t trust J’Zargo alone in my room with my spell scrolls and amulets. But he’s in love with magic itself, and that’s how they all are up at the College. They just want to be free to mess around and explore the arcane arts.”

“And put us all in danger along with them.”

A faint smile appeared on Cecilia’s face. “You’re not wrong, Ulfric. But Arch-Mage Aren keeps them within bounds. I do trust them as friends. These three won’t betray me to the Thalmor or the Empire.”

“I’ll trust your judgment. Come dine with me in my chambers an hour from now. There are things we must discuss before you set out.”

“Of course.”

“Bring that foul dossier with you.”

She agreed and returned to the room with her friends.

A couple of days ago he hadn’t known whether he liked the Dragonborn. And now he knew he liked her a great deal. They seemed to have passed overnight from uneasy acquaintances to comrades. Not lovers; she’d rejected his attempt to kiss her, and inwardly he was relieved. In time, he should take her to bed: binding their lives together and if fate was kind, giving Skyrim kings and queens with the blood of dragons. But he took no pleasure in the thought right now.

He had vowed twice over not to marry or beget children. Once as a student of the celibate Graybeards, the second time as leader of the Stormcloak cause. A man could not leave freedom and peace to his children in these days, so he would not ensnare a wife and children in this slavery or let their demands dissuade him from his devotion to his country. And now he’d broken his vow, but not from lust, only out of love for Skyrim.

Cecilia showed up an hour later with the Thalmor dossier. He put it aside at first, forcing himself to eat some of the small supper the servants had laid out for them. While they ate, he asked Cecilia questions about her journeys in Skyrim, and she became very animated, recounting stories of close calls and strange encounters.

“Did you ever travel like this before you came to Skyrim?” he asked her.

“A bit, in Cyrodiil. With my father. He taught me how to survive in the wilderness. My mother would take me up to the Jerall Mountains too when I was a child, but not far past Bruma.”

“And you never went to visit her family in Skyrim?”

“My grandmother hadn’t moved back to Skyrim then. She only went north after my grandfather died.”

“Your grandmother and uncle are in Markarth right now, aren’t they?”

“My grandmother’s in the city. Uncle Pavo owns a small mine just outside Markarth. I’ve visited them both; they’re doing well.”

“Markarth is not a safe place for your family, though. It is the base of the Justiciars’ operations in Skyrim, did you know that?”
“Yes, but they stick to Understone Keep most of the time. I think they’re afraid to venture out these days.”

“Is the Chief Justiciar still Ondolemar?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not afraid. And you don’t want to underestimate him. We need to get your family out of the Reach as soon as possible.”

“And bring them here?” Cecilia asked.

“If they don’t object. But anywhere other than Markarth or Solitude.”

“I thought it was best not to draw attention to them,” said Cecilia slowly.

“It may well have been. But you have the Thalmor’s full attention now.”

“Ulfric . . .”

“Yes?”

“Do you know this Chief Justiciar?”

And now it was time to return to the dossier. He reached for the leather-bound book. “Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No,” he heard his voice quaver, so unlike him. “But I must.” He opened the dossier to read for himself, to examine every word for its deepest and darkest meaning. He stared at the page.

The so-called Markarth Incident was particularly valuable from the point of view of our strategic goals in Skyrim.

“Oft-times I feel I brought this on Skyrim,” he confessed. “They were looking for a way to weaken us, but the way they did it, I was the one who brought the Thalmor down upon my people.”

“They’d have found their way into Skyrim anyway,” protested Cecilia.

“Yes. I don’t doubt that. Perhaps I have let guilt and shame eat away at my soul, but I have never broken faith with Skyrim. I am still here, twenty years after Markarth, fighting for the right of free Nords to worship our own god.”

“What I don’t understand about Markarth, why did the old Jarl think it would be okay to promise you that?”

“Jarl Hrolddir would have promised us the moons in the sky to get his hold back. But . . . I had assurances that the Thalmor would not look into the matter too closely. That they were far too occupied in other places to notice what we did in Skyrim.”

“Assurances?” her eyebrows shot up.

He put his finger to the most damning sentence in the dossier. “After the war, contact was established,” he read out.

“Who?” breathed Cecilia.
2 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Reach

When he needed to, Ondolemar could mobilize a great number of people. His guards had ridden out with him at once, of course. Other Justiciars slowly trickled into the headquarters he’d set up outside Kolskeggr Mine, summoned by his emergency orders, as did local informants and mercenaries he trusted less but could utilize in a pinch. He’d publicly announced a very large reward for information leading to the vanished Thalmor agent and privately threatened several key Reach figures with a visit to Northwatch Keep if they didn’t help out. (Jarl Igmund had lent him a squad of men from the Markarth Guard, but he didn’t have much faith in their help.)

Breaking from his usual protocol, he had also sent a message to the Embassy to inform them their envoy had never reached him. They hadn’t responded, which was not unusual practice on their part. Messages sent by magic could be intercepted just as physical ones could be, which was why Thalmor couriers usually memorized important messages instead. In this case, now that the Embassy was informed, they could decide if it was urgent enough to contact him more directly.

The description he’d got out of the Nord woman troubled him, although it was not specific enough to identify the perpetrators. Once the woman had been discovered in her lie, she was very eager to cooperate with him. She’d been insistent that she’d never seen armour before like that worn by the woman who commanded these assailants. It was “all in little pieces, attached to each other”, whatever that meant. He had one of his assistants back at the Keep searching through catalogues of different races’ armour and showing them to the woman to identify. He hoped they would find a match soon.

The search around Kolskeggr Mine had so far brought no results. They found signs of the battle and the miners showed them the pit where they’d buried the Forsworn’s bodies. Ondolemar set the Markarth guards to work digging up the pit, just in case. He watched from a distance. When they were finished, though, he wrapped a scarf over his mouth and nose and climbed down into the pit to inspect the rotting corpses for himself. None of them were the missing Altmer. Some of the corpses were covered in wounds, but others seemed unmarked, which matched the witnesses’ claim that the missing mer had fought with lightning spells.

“Nothing to see here,” he pronounced, coming out of the pit. “Shovel the dirt back in.”

“Commander!” one of the mercenaries was running towards him. “More travellers on the road!”

Ondolemar nodded. He had set up a barricade a little way's past the mine and was personally speaking to every person who approached. So far, none of these travellers had been very interesting. They were Reach people, most of them, travelling into Markarth to buy or sell their wares. But this time, as he approached the barricade, he could see that they’d stopped some more interesting travellers.

There were two of them: a man and woman. The man was the shorter of the two: a mousy brown-haired Imperial who wore leather armour, carried a short sword, and looked absolutely terrified. The blonde Nord woman, on the other hand, was every inch one of those barbaric shieldmaidens this land boasted of. Half her face was painted blue, she carried a huge greatsword on her back, and she looked at Ondolemar as if he were an ant crawling in the dirt, rather than a superior mer who far surpassed her height.
“Travelers in the Reach, identify yourself to the Chief Justiciar of Skyrim,” he ordered them.

“Where is he?” asked the Nord woman.

Ondolemar coughed. “You have the honour to be speaking to him. I am Ondolemar, a representative of the Aldmeri Dominion. What are your names?”

“I am called Mjoll the Lioness,” said the woman. “And this is Aerin. Why is this road barricaded?”

“You may continue to Markarth after we make certain of your intentions in the city.”

“Our intentions are to find work in the Reach,” explained Mjoll. “There are certainly enough bandits and Forsworn to hunt in these parts, are there not?”

Ondolemar turned his attention to the man called Aerin. “You don’t look like a mercenary to me.”

“Adventurers, not mercenaries,” Mjoll corrected him.

“Nor an adventurer. This stripling doesn’t have an ounce of muscle on him. Can he even use that sword?”

“Mjoll’s teaching me!” Aerin broke out. “We train every night.”

The barricade guards broke out laughing. These Nords were a vulgar, crude bunch and a bit of Ondolemar’s soul died every time he had to work with them.

“Where have you come from?” he asked Mjoll.

“Riften. Have you ever been there, Justiciar?”

“Unfortunately yes.”

“Aye, so now you know why we’ve come to the Reach. I could not stand another day in that gods-forsaken town.”

“Do you know anyone in the Reach?”

“A few people. I’ve travelled most of Tamriel in my time. I have old friends in the oddest places.”

“Interesting,” he drawled. “Have you met many warriors on your journey here?”

“Too many to count on the roads of Skyrim these days.”

“In the Reach particularly?”

She shook her head. “Just Legion soldiers and Hold guards.”

“Have you met any Altmer in the Reach?”

“You’re the first.”

“Very well. You may go on. If you ever wish to contact me, I am usually stationed at Understone Keep. Remember this: I generously reward those who aid the Thalmor in our duties.”

“I’ll try to forget it,” said Mjoll. “Come on, Aerin.”

He let them go without the retort he would have usually made. There were more peasants coming up
the road behind them. He’d keep Mjoll in mind, though: a woman who claimed to have travelled throughout Tamriel was someone to keep an eye on if she settled down in the Reach.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, The Reach

Tanulvie had a lot of time to think in captivity. Since she’d first awoken, the Blades had mostly left her alone, blindfolded and restrained upon a cot. They hadn’t been cruel; she’d been given bread, cheese, and water, and they unchained her a couple of times so that she could use a chamberpot and wash a little. The latter experience was humiliating since, with a blindfold, she basically had to let her captors move her about.

There were at least four of them. The woman she assumed was Delphine, the man who was probably Esbern, a Bosmer, and a Khajiit. The only one who had talked to her since Delphine’s first interrogation was the man. He’d asked her about dragons and the Thalmor and she refused to answer any of his questions. Most of them she didn’t know the answer to, anyway.

The silence wasn’t bad. Her body still ached for its missing reserves of magic, but one didn’t become a Justiciar without long training in quiet meditation and surviving isolation. She was drifting off into sleep again when a racket outside her cell jolted her into wakefulness.

“How do I make this clear? Aerin is not a member of the Blades!” Delphine was yelling.

“Well I could not have left the lad in Riften, Grandmaster,” replied a melodious Nord woman’s voice.

“You damn well could have left him there. In his house. And what do you mean ‘lad’? He’s a grown man, Mjoll.”

“So he is; he’ll be helpful around the place.”

The cell door slammed open. “Wake up, Thalmor!” Delphine ordered. Tanulvie didn’t stir a muscle. Then a hand hit her across the face.

Tanulvie groaned. “What do you want?”

“There are Thalmor agents looking for you all over the Reach.”

“And that’s my problem?”

“It’s a problem you won’t enjoy the solution to,” said Delphine. “I’m giving you a choice. You can start co-operating now or we cut your throat and leave you on a Forsworn Altar.”

“What?” Tanulvie was mystified. Not at the threat of death – Delphine had threatened that before – but why a Forsworn Altar?

>Your cohorts find your mutilated body, you were sacrificed by your Forsworn captors. It’ll be very convincing.”

Tanulvie began to laugh. “You’ve messed up badly. So badly.”

“What sort of answer is that?” Delphine asked. “Will you answer my questions or not?”

“Absolutely not! The Thalmor do not fear death!” A lie, but one she had the resolve to see to the
“Very well. I’m not wasting any more time here. Mjoll, get her ready to move.”

“Can Aerin help me?” asked Mjoll.

“Oblivion take Aerin!”

“Yes or no?”

“Do as you like. But I’m packing him off to Riften the moment the Thalmor are off the roads.”

Delphine’s footsteps grew fainter, then there was the sound of a door closing.

“I don’t think the Grandmaster likes me,” Aerin whispered.

“She’s a crusty old bat sometimes,” said Mjoll. “Just show her what you’re capable of, Aerin.”

“What do we need to do with the Thalmor?”

“Get her ready to take outside. But we’ll give her some food and water first. We aren’t monsters.”

There were more indistinct sounds around the room. Then Aerin’s voice was in Tanulvie’s ear. “Sit up, Miss . . . um . . . what’s your name?” Aerin asked.

“Tanulvie.”

“Tanulvie. That’s a pretty name.”

“I’m glad you think so. Makes being murdered by you and your friends so much more palatable.”

“It’s not murder,” said Aerin slowly. “You’re a soldier, aren’t you?

“A Justiciar, but do you think you can’t murder soldiers?”

“I’m not supposed to be talking to you.”

“Of course not. It makes it easier to kill if you don’t know your victim.”

He said nothing, but her mind was spinning with new possibilities. Aerin was the weak link in this organization, Mjoll his over-indulgent protector, and Delphine was delegating tasks she should oversee herself.

“You don’t have to die,” Aerin suddenly spoke up. “The Grandmaster just wants you to answer some questions.”

“And I’ve sworn not to answer those questions. On my honour, Aerin. Do you know what that is?”

“Of course I do! But-“

“Aerin, stop talking to her,” Mjoll called from across the room. “Just give her the water.”

“Right. That’s why I need you to sit up,” he said, sounding frustrated. “I’ve got you a cup of water.”

Tanulvie sat up and sipped from the cup offered to her.

Then she ate the small loaf of bread they gave her. She wasn’t hungry, but if she escaped from the
Blades, who knew when she would get her next meal?

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun Hold

The day after leaving Labyrinthian, they met their first Stormcloaks. They were a small party of five soldiers, patrolling the craggy foothills northwest of the besieged city, and Emilin spotted them from far off, down the path below them.

“Don’t get involved in this,” Varo warned Elenwen.

“I don’t intend to. The Dominion is completely neutral in your internal squabbles. We will stay back and watch how you all fare together.”

Varo tethered his horse to a strong tree branch. Rikke did the same. “We’ll let Emilin lead them into our reach, Legate,” he said. “Follow me. We want at least one prisoner when we’re done.”

They crept down the slope, while Emilin positioned herself on a rocky outcrop. She held her bow taut, ready to let fly her arrow. Varo stopped in a small patch of trees, about twenty feet up from the Stormcloak patrol, then raised his hand.

The first arrow hit the patrol leader in the face. He fell to the ground screaming. Emilin followed the shot up with another which hit its target in the chest. This soldier staggered but stayed on his feet. The Stormcloaks were searching for the hidden archer now, and they ran up the slope, right into Varo and Rikke’s ambush.

It was a quick, bloody fight. Varo didn’t bother with any elaborate spells, trusting instead to fire and his sword. When they were finished, three Stormcloak soldiers lay dead, another was rapidly bleeding out, and a fifth was on the ground begging for his life.

Rikke took charge of the surrendering soldier, while Varo knelt down beside the dying woman and placed his hands on the gushing wound in her chest. He was not a master of Restoration magic, but like most battlemages, he was an expert at closing wounds. The woman might have lost too much blood already, but she had a fighting chance if she could avoid going into shock.

“Breathe, you’re safe now,” he told the Stormcloak soldier. “We won’t hurt you. Just close your eyes and rest.”

“Well done, Varo,” Elenwen’s voice broke into his world. She had walked down to the site of the battle. And now his patient was staring at Elenwen in wide-eyed terror.

“You can’t touch them,” he said quickly to Elenwen, for the Stormcloak’s benefit. “They’re prisoners of war and will be respected as such.”

Elenwen laughed. “Why would we want them? You might want to check with General Tullius, though, before you make them any promises. He’s been known to take a much more direct approach with rebels. And suspected rebels.”

“I know all about Helgen already. Did you think you were holding that secret over my head?”

“Your loyalty to your Empire is irreproachable,” said Elenwen. “What are you going to do with these prisoners, then?”
“Ask them a few questions.” He turned to Rikke’s captive, who was now kneeling at the Legate’s feet.

“What is your name, soldier?” he asked the young man.

“Auli,” he answered. “Of Kynesgrove.”

“Where’s Kynesgrove?” Varo asked Rikke.

“In Eastmarch, near Windhelm.”

“One of Ulfric’s boys then.”

“I serve the true High King of Skyrim,” cried Auli.

“True High King, my arse. He’s a brigand lord commanding a rabble of criminals and farm boys.” The young man cried out in anger, but Rikke shushed him. “You seem like you’re one of the latter, Auli of Kynesgrove, so I’ll spare you.”

“Faithless Imperials!” spat the man.

“Faithless? For keeping the vow we made to our Emperor? The vow your precious Jarl made and broke?” Varo laughed loudly. “You’re a funny child, aren’t you?”

“I’m nineteen-years-old.”

Exactly the right age to die in battle, he knew that far too well. “Thank the gods you may still live past nineteen years then, Auli. I have a message for your general, whoever he is. Stormcloak didn’t bother coming to Whiterun himself, did he?”

Auli said nothing.

“It doesn’t matter to me. Go tell your commander this: Junius Varo has come to Skyrim and will not rest until Ulfric Stormcloak’s head is mounted on a pike.”

Auli gulped. “Varo?” he whispered.

“As in the Father of your Dragonborn, yes. Now, get going. We’ll take good care of your comrade. On my honour, we’ll not give her over to the Thalmor.”

Auli still knelt there, frozen. Rikke prodded his back. “On your feet, soldier.”

The young man reflexively obeyed. He gave his bloodied comrade one last glance, then turned and ran down the slope.

“Alerting the enemy to our presence?” asked Elenwen quizzically.

“Let me manage the stage. Our drama is just about to begin.”

“What is your plan?”

Varo told her. Her jaw dropped.
And on that cliffhanger, we will leave the Siege of Whiterun for another day.

The issue with Aerin tagging around on Blades Missions if you recruit Mjoll seemed worthy of being incorporated into the plot.

Definitely more backstory upcoming about Ondolemar’s dealings with Ulfric re: the Markarth Incident. Elenwen was assigned as First Emissary because she was Ulfric’s interrogator in the war, so it fit for me that they might have assigned a Justiciar to Markarth who similarly could twist the knife in his emotional wounds. The Thalmor don’t do anything by half.

I took a shot at answering one of the most obvious mysteries in Skyrim: How come Ulfric isn’t married? You’d think that a man of his ambition would want to leave behind a stable legacy and there could be all sorts of useful political alliances he could make via marriage. One boring in-game answer is that the developers didn’t bother with too many NPCs, but to me he comes across as someone who lives half in despair, half in hope, and has traded away an ordinary life for one of dedicated sacrifice. In this fic, he saw an opportunity he could not forgo to win his war, but he still is uncomfortable with having taken it.

Reviews/comments/questions still very appreciated.
Chapter Notes

Terrible and powerful Talos! We, your unworthy servants, give praise! For only through your grace and benevolence may we truly reach enlightenment! And deserve our praise you do, for we are one! Ere you ascended and the Eight became Nine, you walked among us, great Talos, not as god, but as man! - Heimskr

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Windhelm

Early in the morning, before the sun had risen on Windhelm, Cecilia and her companions set out to sail for Winterhold. They were wrapped in cloaks as they went down to the docks, hiding their identities as best they could. Torbjorn and his daughter Nilsine were readying the boat themselves, Cecilia was surprised to see when they arrived at the docks. They’d taken to heart the Jarl’s directions to keep this journey as private as possible.

Torbjorn was similarly surprised to see whom his passengers would be.

“Dragonborn!” he greeted Cecilia. “We have the honour of transporting you?”

“Yes. I’m already very thankful for your service.”

“You’ve been a good friend to my family, my Lady,” he said sincerely. “There’s a lot more I could say, but it’d end in weeping, and you don’t want us distracted from this task.”

Cecilia nodded, unsure herself of what to say. Torbjorn’s daughter Friga had been murdered by the Butcher before she ever came to Windhelm, so the Shatter-Shields were just grateful she’d finally found their daughter’s killer.

The boat itself was a traditional Nord affair; that is, it didn’t look to Cecilia like a proper sea-faring vessel at all. “Is it okay out on the ocean?” she asked Nilsine. In her mind’s eye, she could see the boat being swamped by a medium-sized wave.

“It was built for the Sea of Ghosts,” Nilsine replied.

“I guess I don’t know much about boats.”

“This type’s called a karve. It’s a lot broader than the average longship, can carry a good amount of cargo, and navigates very shallow waters.”

“How many rowers does it need?”

“Twelve. Don’t worry, we won’t put you at the oars, my Lady. We have our sailors at the ready.”

“There must be a spell- “began Brelyna.

“No!” said Cecilia, Lydia, and Onmund in unison. They all knew Brelyna’s experimental spells were something to be avoided.
While the last of the cargo was being arranged in the boat, Cecilia had turned back towards the city.

“Septim for your thoughts?” asked Lydia beside her.

“I didn’t think we’d be leaving here so quickly.”

“You don’t sound happy about it,” commented Lydia.

“I didn’t want to come here, did I?”

“But now you love the place? Or just him?”

Cecilia stared at the city wall. “I don’t.”

“But?”

“But what?”

“There’s got to be a but coming,” said Lydia.

“Very well. I don’t love him, but I think I could, Lydia. And that scares me.”

“It scares me too.”

“I don’t know why. Don’t you want me to be happy with the man I marry?”

“Yes, I want you to be happy, my Thane. With a man who can be happy with you. Not a man whose heart was broken before you were even born.”

Cecilia wished she could protest that. But Lydia saw things all too clearly. Cecilia could perhaps accompany Ulfric Stormcloak in grief, but it would never be in joy.

Last night, she had opened another window onto that grief.

Ondolemar.

Ondolemar.

The story Ulfric had told Cecilia the night before was a strange one, about a Justiciar who during the Occupation burnt down a temple to Talos after politely warning the priests to leave the premises. When the Dominion asked where the priests had gone, the Justiciar regretfully admitted he’d lost track of them. On further reflection, he explained he didn’t think it’d been that important, since they were now out of a job, and presumably would find new worthwhile careers as peasants or whatever it was people did around here.

And so, the Justiciar ended up in the same dungeon as the Dominion’s victims, where he complained a great deal about his treatment, threatened his jailers with powerful relatives back in the Isles, and demanded that they remove the dirty, emaciated Nord in his cell. When his jailers ignored him, he at last deigned to talk to his cellmate. That was how Ulfric had met Ondolemar.

It turned out to be a very successful trap on the Thalmor’s part, one that led by dim and torturous ways to the Markarth Incident. Ulfric now assumed that he’d been set up in that cell to trust in Ondolemar. And yet, even now, knowing the full extent of the Thalmor’s manipulation, the interlude with Ondolemar didn’t quite make sense.
Because Ondolemar hadn’t made himself remotely likeable in their time together. He’d been such a
terrible cellmate that Ulfric at the time had half-believed this was a new form of torture by the
Thalmor. Ondolemar threw out the one blanket they had because it was dirty and not fit for a
superior mer. Ondolemar kicked him when he was trying to pray. Ondolemar tattled on every tiny or
imagined infraction Ulfric committed.

Then there was the night Ondolemar got the jailers to smuggle him a couple bottles of home-distilled
rotgut and nearly died of alcohol poisoning. Somewhere between singing off key and choking on his
own vomit, there was a sentimental interlude where he did call Ulfric his only friend in the world and
tried to make him drink the stuff as well. But he was back to his usual intolerable self the next day.

If Ondolemar had merely been doing an impression of an arrogant lazy elf having a complete mental
and emotional breakdown, he was a great actor indeed. It was a convincing performance. Then one
day, Ulfric woke up in his cell and Ondolemar was gone.

He didn’t imagine they’d ever meet again. In fact, he suspected the Dominion had executed the
pathetic elf. Then to his surprise, a few weeks after Ulfric’s legion had shipped back to Skyrim,
Ulfric encountered a very familiar face in Castle Dour.

Ondolemar’s first reaction on meeting his old cellmate was to launch into a litany of complaints about
Skyrim. After the Concordat was signed, he’d been sent here as an observer, he explained to Ulfric,
and Skyrim was too cold, too barbaric, too bleak, too vulgar etc. etc. Ulfric was in no mood for a
conversation with any Thalmor, and told Ondolemar to fuck off or he’d murder him, Concordat or
no.

The scuttlebutt around Solitude was that Ondolemar had been sent to Skyrim as a punishment for his
failures during the war. He continued to be a failure now. He moped around Castle Dour, ignored
every sign of Talos worship around him, and talked longingly of the Summerset Isles to anyone who
would listen.

The wartime legions were disbanding and Ulfric was supposed to return home to his father in
Windhelm. But he’d been hearing disquieting rumours from the Reach for a while now. The
Forsworn had risen up, slaughtered the Nords of Markarth and declared independence from Skyrim.
In the mess hall in Castle Dour, the returning veterans were wondering whether they’d be sent to
pacify the Reach before they were disbanded.

And then Ondolemar stuck his oar in. He was absolutely livid that evening as he came storming into
the mess hall to find Ulfric.

“Your Empire plans to treat with those Daedra-worshiping savages!” he spat at Ulfric.

Ulfric hadn’t believed him, so Ondolemar threw a packet of sealed documents on the table before
him. That had been the beginning of the Markarth Incident. Ondolemar had been telling the truth.
The Empire was indeed negotiating with the Forsworn to recognize their independent kingdom in the
Reach.

“Are you going to do anything about this?” Ondolemar had demanded a few days later, after Ulfric
had verified the information.

“Why do you even care what I do?” Ulfric had asked him suspiciously.

“I don’t care what you Nords do. The Dominion doesn’t care about your awful country. But we
can’t let Daedra worshipers run the Reach.”
“Shouldn’t you be happy they aren’t worshiping Talos?” asked Ulfric sarcastically.

“I’d prefer if they were. Then we wouldn’t be running the risk of another Oblivion Crisis, would we?”

It was a grand deception held up by many small details; Ondolemar’s general incompetence, his complete lack of interest in rooting out Talos worship, everything seemed to fit together. The Dominion wasn’t really interested in Skyrim, Ulfric had decided. It’d sent one lone Justiciar to Solitude for formality’s sake, and he regarded his assignment as a punishment. It was Cyrodiil and Hammerfell they were really targeting with the Concordat, after all.

And so Ulfric had been lulled into taking the step that would fully invite the Thalmor into Skyrim. When the dust had settled, and Markarth was once again under Imperial rule, Ondolemar revealed his true colours. He was made Commander of the Justiciars in Skyrim for his efforts.

Ulfric had told Cecilia this story the night before she went to Winterhold. It was his warning to her, not to underestimate the Thalmor she was going to face at Winterhold. But on another level, it was something he could tell her of his imprisonment without touching on the worst and most humiliating of it. His brief time sharing a cell with Ondolemar had come months after he’d been broken by Elenwen. Those earlier days . . . Cecilia knew the result, but he’d never willingly speak of them. He’d carry the shame to his grave without speaking.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Thalmor Embassy, Haafingar

In Elenwen’s Solar, the Second and Third Emissaries of the Thalmor Embassy to Skyrim were still engaged in debate over the message they’d received from Ondolemar the other day. Usually, Elenwen decided everything around the Embassy, but she could not be contacted on her mission, and the disagreement was getting heated.

Second Emissary Arinye was a career civil servant who regarded Elenwen’s word as law, and she believed they should wait for her return. She argued that they had no idea what mission Elenwen had given Tanulvie, and that Ondolemar was capable of handling the search on his own.

“This is the same mer who completely disgraced himself during the War,” disagreed Calerion, the new Third Emissary.

Arinye had to acknowledge the truth of this, although she wondered at Calerion’s prudence in bringing up the matter. “Commander Ondolemar’s made up for that. We have no complaint about his conduct in Skyrim. In fact, his lapse in Cyrodiil ended up laying the foundation for our mission here.”

“What do you mean we have no complaint? I’ve been going through our files and it seems like there have been reports on Ondolemar from every last informant in the Reach.”

“You’ve been going through the files . . .” Arinye’s eyes narrowed. “The First Emissary’s files, Calerion?”

“They’re not supposed to be kept secret from us, are they?”

The Second Emissary paused. One of the very few benefits of life in Skyrim was the escape it
provided from all the tiresome intrigue of life in the Isles. Here, First Emissary Elenwen gave the orders and everyone obeyed. The new Third Emissary, on the other hand, was already angling to unseat Elenwen. He must think he had adequate support in Alinor for so brash a power play.

“No. They are not secret.”

“Good. In these reports, I’ve read all sorts of allegations against Ondolemar. Did you know he tolerates a Stormcloak supporting noble who publicly worships Talos within Understone Keep?”

Arinye frowned. “Calerion, I am going to give you some advice. You are very young to have achieved your current position, and I foresee greater triumphs in your future. But have a care that your ambition does not turn overweening. Subject yourself to the guidance of your elders. Mistress Elenwen did not reach her current position within the Thalmor simply by birthright. Remember that.”

“I am humbled to have the opportunity to learn from my elders,” replied Calerion with obvious insincerity.

Ondolemar was therefore left on his own to settle the mystery of the missing Justiciar. For a little while.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, The Reach

The missing Justiciar was currently contemplating her fate in the company of an overfriendly Blade. Aerin and Mjoll had followed Delphine’s orders and marched her down several stone passages with her arms pinioned behind her back and her eyes still blindfolded. Now they were sitting outside - Tanulvie could feel the wind on her skin - and waiting for Delphine to decide it was time to set out for her execution.

Mjoll was talking with someone a good distance away. Tanulvie could not make out their conversation. But Aerin was still right by her side, and ready to talk. And although everything he said was dreadfully uninteresting, Tanulvie was focused on charming him as her last chance.

“Where are you from?” Aerin asked her.

“Alinor.”

“Where’s that?”

“You probably call it the Summerset Isles.”

“Oh right. That’s far away. How do you even get to Skyrim from there?”

She laughed softly. “By boat.”

“I’ve never been on a boat. I mean, on an ocean-boat, I’ve been out on Lake Honrich of course.”

“Where is Lake Honrich?”

“Just outside Riften. That’s my hometown. Before I came here with Mjoll, I’d never traveled so far from the Rift.”

“I suppose you’re looking forward to traveling all over Tamriel with the Blades.”
“Do you think they’d let me?”

“I wouldn’t know, would I?”

“Right.” Aerin sighed. “I’m sorry, Tanulvie. I thought this was going to be about killing dragons. I’m scared of dragons, but I thought if I’m with Mjoll, it won’t be so bad. I didn’t think I’d have to- “

“Kill a prisoner?”

“They won’t make me do it, will they?” he sounded horrified. “Like some sort of initiation?”

“Do you want tips on how to cut a throat?”

“Do you cut people’s throats?” She immediately regretted that attempt at guilting him. It’d brought his attention back to her status as a member of the dreaded Thalmor.

“I just came from Sunhold; I’ve never fought in a battle before the other day. Did they tell you how I ended up here, Aerin?”

“There was a fight with the Forsworn?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes. I saved some Nord children from the Forsworn. I wasn’t looking to interfere with the Blades.”

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t help you.”

“I know that. I’m resigned to my death. If I could only tell my parents once more that I loved them . . .”

The sound of a strangled sob came from Aerin’s direction. Tanulvie was convinced that she had him now. But did she have enough time to make use of him?

“On your feet, Thalmor,” that was Delphine’s voice. Time had run out.

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3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun Hold

Despite their best efforts to save her, the wounded Stormcloak prisoner died about fifteen minutes after their battle. She had slipped into unconsciousness before that, with Rikke holding her hand. As deaths went, they’d all seen much, much worse.

And yet, this was the first time in years that Varo’s enemy had been the Empire’s own citizens. In his earlier years as a Legion battlemage, he’d helped put down small uprisings in Cyrodiil and High Rock, but the majority of his life had been dedicated to fighting the Dominion, on the battlefield and in the shadows. The woman lying dead beside Rikke was a subject of the Emperor, probably not any older than his daughter. He lifted the body gently in his arms and went to lay it down beside the other three dead Stormcloaks. They did not have much time, so they had agreed that he should incinerate the bodies, rather than leave them for the wolves. It would be the closest thing to a funeral pyre for these warriors.

The Thalmor kept their distance while he and Rikke attended to the bodies. Emilin was busy taking out the things he required for his battle plan: gilt plate armour, a red cloak, a pendant set with an imitation ruby, and a portable enchantment table.
Most battlemages focused on destruction spells: the raw power of magic brought down to crush an enemy. Junius Varo, however, revelled in the subtle and awesome power of Illusion magic. Illusion, he would often argue with his fellow mages, was a more powerful weapon on the battlefield than any other. It was powerful because it fed on the thoughts and feelings of friend and foe, bringing into reality things that were already struggling to be born. It enhanced the actions of the ordinary soldiers by his side rather than replacing them. In a battle, Illusion magic only worked if there was already something there to draw on and amplify: fear or passion or doubt or bravery. To prepare for battle, one read the mood of both armies and plotted out an elegant deception that would push one’s side forward to victory.

In this case, both armies were mostly Nords, distrustful and afraid of magic. Most of the defenders of Whiterun had not trained at all to fight alongside mages. If he threw fireballs and lightning bolts, it’d terrify their own allies and would probably cause a panic which could hurt them just as badly as the Stormcloaks. Instead, he had a plan that would raise the courage of their own fighters and put dread in the belly of the Stormcloaks.

He picked up the pendant which Emilin had acquired for him in Solitude the other morning. It was a cheap thing, and the imitation ruby was not the right shape, but with some enchantment it would serve its purpose. Setting it upon the enchantment table, he began to will the illusion.

“What are you doing?” demanded Elenwen sharply.

“Making it glow a bit.”


“Is completely irrelevant to this. Unless there’s a clause in there forbidding dress-up games.”

“If you’re pretending to be a false god, it is every bit the business of the Thalmor.”

“I am not pretending to be Tiber Septim. But if these superstitious Nords are awed into making that mistake, it’ll be a very useful thing. I want to remind them of the power and glory of the Empire they’ve turned their backs on.”

“It may not break the Concordat,” conceded Elenwen. “But we will be watching how you conduct yourself. Do not think you can take this illusion any further than this battlefield.”

“How could I? Does this pendant look anything like the Amulet of Kings? It’s only in the rush of battle, midst the smoke and the mud, when the mind is open to the least suggestion, that I could pull this off.”

He finished working with the pendant and handed it to a frowning Rikke to keep while he changed into the gilt plate armour he’d borrowed from the Castle Dour armoury.

“You don’t look too happy with me, Legate,” he commented.

“I’m not.”

He had the feeling that if Elenwen wasn’t there, Rikke would be chewing him out over the Talos thing. And he could sort of see her point – Avelina wouldn’t have approved either – except he figured Tiber Septim was the sort who would appreciate this trick.

Once he’d finished putting on the armor and helmet, Emilin fastened the red cloak around his shoulders. Rikke reluctantly returned the pendant.
“How do I look?” he asked.

“Like Tiber Septim setting out for the Siege of Alinor,” said Emilin loudly.

“You look ridiculous,” said Rikke. “But that’s your affair.”

Elenwen didn’t even comment.

“Okay, are we ready to go?” asked Varo.

“Ready,” said Rikke.

“Let me get the war horn,” said Emilin.

“Well, then, coz, this is where we part ways,” he told Elenwen. “Go find a nice bluff to do your observing from a distance.”

“We will be watching,” said Elenwen. “And if you do defeat the Stormcloak army, we will meet again within the walls of Whiterun, as the Concordat allows us.”

“Now that’s something to look forward to.” Varo turned his back on the three Thalmor. “Emilin, Legate Rikke, we ride!”

They set out at a brisk trot down the winding hill road that led to the open plains of Whiterun. Far ahead of them, across the plains, the city on a hill was barely visible through the thick grey smoke. Small flickers of orange attested to the fires that were burning within.

“Is the whole place built of wood?” Varo asked Rikke.

“Wood and thatch. There are wards on the Jarl’s Hall at least, but it doesn’t look good.”

“Did you know the Stormcloaks had that sort of firepower?”

“Yes,” Rikke sounded exasperated. “We’ve been warning Balgruuf for months that Ulfric’s army was well-installed in his own hold. He chose to ignore us.”

“I thought he was the canny one?” asked Varo.

“Oh, he is. I’d say Whiterun Hold’s about equally divided between Imperial and Stormcloak sympathizers and he’s kept them from each other’s throats. If it weren’t for the dragons, he’d have waited out the entire war successfully. And kept the Thalmor out of his hold. Ulfric’s the fool for provoking him.”

“I don’t know about that. I’d probably do the same, if I were Stormcloak,” Varo admitted. “Time isn’t on his side.”

Their general strategy had already been decided among them. Even Junius Varo had to admit that three people could not lift a siege in a day; their primary goal, therefore, was to break through the besieging forces to enter the city. In the process, they hoped to do some damage to the Stormcloak army and shake their spirit.

Galmar Stone-Fist was cautiously optimistic about the siege’s progress. He had not expected Whiterun to fall into his lap; the city was perfectly built to wait out an invading army. But they’d
taken the plains around the city itself, cutting it off from the far-flung towns and farms of the Hold. They held the road towards Solitude, so no reinforcements would be coming from the West, and the road from the Stormcloak-held Eastern holds was open.

Whiterun’s defenders had been very quiet today. They’d built several rows of barricades before the Gates, and jealously guarded the ground there a little past the Whiterun Stables, with frequent sorties to push back daring Stormcloak charges. But that was as far as they went. Otherwise, they stayed within the walls. Their archers were all along the walls of the city, keeping the area just beneath the city walls clear on all sides, but the city was surrounded by Galmar’s forces. Most of these forces were on the southern side of the city, since that was the only viable entrance for an army to enter or exit Whiterun, and the best place for them to install their catapults. But soldiers watched the northern walls as well, and it was from the northern troops that the alarm first came.

“There’s been a skirmish in the hills to the north-west,” one of his captains alerted him. “Legion strays, it seems like. They ambushed one of our patrols, only one survivor. He said they had a mage with them.”

“Are we pursuing them?”

The captain nodded. “The survivor alerted the troops at Silent Moons Camp, so they’ll be taking care of it. But they sent him to us right away. He says the Legionnaires gave him a message to deliver to you.”

“A message, huh? Bring him in.”

The soldier who was brought into the command tent was a youngster with an Eastmarch accent. He had a large bruise on his face but otherwise seemed unharmed.

“I hear you have a message for me?”

The young man looked around the tent at the other Stormcloak officers, “Can I tell you in private, sir?”

“I don’t have time for this- “

“Please!” He sounded desperate.

“All right.” Galmar waved his men away. “You’d better have a good reason for this,” he warned the soldier.

“We were patrolling up above Silent Moons Camp. We were ambushed by Legionnaires, and most of us were killed. But they spared my life. They had Thalmor with them too.”

“Thalmor?” Galmar was transfixed. Thalmor Justiciars sometimes used the roads of Whiterun Hold but he thought they’d have the sense to scarp before the storm.

The boy nodded. “The Thalmor didn’t fight, but they were there watching. Then the Legion commander – he was a wizard – said he had a message for our commander.”

“Go ahead.”

“He said he was going to put Jarl Ulfric’s head on a pike!”

“That’s not really a new threat.”
“But he also said his name. Junius Varo. And then he said he was the Dragonborn’s father!”

Galmar stared a second, then began to laugh helplessly. *Ulfric, you owe me another ten septims!*_ He’d told him Varo would get involved sooner rather than later. “Why do I always have to be right?”

“Sir?”

“Thank you for delivering the message. Keep quiet about it now, and don’t worry too much. A cocky mage is no match for the Children of Skyrim.”

“But is it true?”

“That the Dragonborn has grumpy Imperial relatives? Of course. But she’s the one who chose our High King, remember that.”

“Yes sir!”

Galmar imagined he’d be saying that line a lot in the next few days, and he hoped that every listener was as easily persuaded as this boy.

He didn’t trust Cecilia Varo at all. No, he did trust she wouldn’t try to kill Ulfric, otherwise he’d never have left his side. But that was about it. She was a spoiled little Imperial with the taint of elf blood and little care for Skyrim’s traditions. Ulfric argued that her Altmer ancestry was insignificant, but her prowess as a mage gave the lie to that. Magic may have been the only thing the Varo family inherited from their witch-elf ancestor, but wasn’t it the most elfish thing of all?

Now they had her father to deal with. Junius Varo, the arrogant mage who’d run from the Imperial City with his tail between his legs, while Galmar and Ulfric fought and saw their fellows die beside them. Junius Varo, who despite his own mother’s gruesome fate was now traveling with Thalmor.

He decided not to mention Varo’s name to his soldiers, but he did warn his officers to watch out for a strong Imperial mage. There were some magic-users in the Stormcloak ranks, though they kept a low profile at their commanders’ advice. Two of these competent young mages he sent north-west with orders to back up the regular troops there. Then he left the main camp himself to check on the situation before the Whiterun Gates. Nothing was really happening there; the Whiterun guards jeered from behind their barricades, and some enterprising archers took shots at him despite the fact he was clearly out of their range. He ignored their taunts. He had a raid planned once the sun set. At the very least, his army’s stealthiest warriors would smash and burn the city’s first line of barricades. He’d lead those warriors himself, if he wasn’t called elsewhere.

The first indication that Varo was on the scene was an Imperial war horn blowing in the distance. It was a familiar sound to an ex-Legionnaire such as Galmar. In the past, it’d been a comforting one, a message that all was not lost, that you still had comrades out there, coming to save your hide. That was probably how the Legionnaires defending Whiterun heard it now. They began to cheer.

Then there was a deafening boom. A shower of shimmering sparks blossomed in the sky above Whiterun: a sign from just beyond the city. Someone had announced their coming, and Galmar knew who it would be.

He would have rushed to confront Varo directly, but a few minutes later, the Gates of Whiterun opened to unleash another sortie. The leader of these adventures was invariably Balgruuf’s Dark Elf housecarl. Galmar knew Irileth could go toe to toe with any Nord. Her sword had already cut down far too many of their warriors. She used spells as well; today, as she charged beyond the barricades, she was cloaked in lightning.
“Fall back!” he ordered the men beside him. “Let them over-reach. Fall back!”

The first day of fighting at Whiterun had seen horribly high casualties among the Stormcloaks, simply because they were too eager to prove themselves in battle. Skyrim’s bravest warriors didn’t need to be taught how to charge an enemy, but they did need to learn when to retreat. But today, they seemed to be learning the lesson. Irileth’s charge faltered rather than continue past the point of safe return. And at that point, the battle was closed between the two sides.

Galmar’s armour was enchanted against lightning spells (always, since the war), and Irileth was a proper opponent for his skill. He raised his battle-axe and entered the fight.

In the close quarters of hand-to-hand combat, only the world around you mattered. Pushing back Irileth, springing over the fallen body of one of his soldiers, embedding his axe in a Legionnaire’s head. These actions were his world, so he did not at first register the uproar coming from the West, behind him. His men were calling on Talos – that wasn’t unusual . . . wait, what did he just hear “walks again”? He tried to pull back from the line of battle, but Irileth was on him; he blocked her sword with his axe, desperate to see what was happening behind him.

If Galmar could have looked back, he would have seen an awesome sight. The Stormcloak army was falling apart around an advancing figure in gold armor, red cloak, and a glowing red amulet. He strode through the smoke, dealing death with his flashing sword.

Irileth saw it all. She had spied the newcomers first from Dragonsreach, riding across the Plains with Stormcloaks on their heels. She’d then rushed down to launch another sortie, convinced these riders would win through to her fighters. And now, they were nearly through. They were three of them, on foot now, storming through the enemy lines with terrible bloodied swords. Despite the cries of terror that Talos had returned to defend his Empire, many of the Stormcloak soldiers were still trying to fight the newcomers. But, as Irileth knew well, when an army breaks, the resolute are pulled along with the panicked.

She could feel the pull of the Illusion spells that radiated from the red-and-gold soldier. If you looked carefully at him, which was very difficult to do when you were seeing him over the shoulder of the ferocious Galmar Stone-Fist, the impression of divine grandeur broke down and he was only a man in bad fancy dress.

Galmar jumped back, finally removing himself from her reach. He was screaming an order to retreat: the only way to reform his shattered army back into one.

Irileth moved forward to join the newcomers. She recognized Legate Rikke immediately but could not see the face of the slight archer by Rikke’s side. As for the living reincarnation of Tiber Septim, “Junius Varo,” The Dunmer raised her sword in salute. “What are you wearing?”

“Irileth,” he greeted her back. “It’s good to see you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thematically, this chapter ended up being about Illusions: both magical and non-
magical, woven by Junius Varo, Elenwen, and others. With Ondolemar’s story, it proposes an answer to this bit in the Thalmor dossier:

“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.”

Ondolemar’s a fascinating character, with the potential in fanfic to go a lot of different ways. The most convincing lie is the one closest to the truth. Ondolemar in this fic’s backstory didn’t strike Ulfric as a conniving double agent, simply because he wasn’t *at first*. He really did mess up during the war, was punished for it, and then woven into the plan Thalmor intelligence was creating for Skyrim.

He performed his duties, particularly luring Ulfric to Markarth, well enough to make up for his earlier mess. But to his horror, he is still stuck in Skyrim twenty plus years later and privately regards this as part of his ongoing reprimand. His superiors have noticed that he still tends to get weirdly close to humans in his own arrogant fashion, but that can be useful sometimes. (In this universe, the Dragonborn didn’t help him out in Markarth, so he wasn’t the one who provided the distraction at the party, but the fact that he’s completely willing in-canon to help prank Elenwen says something about his character.)

Please leave a comment if you're enjoying this/have any questions. I love to answer questions.
3 Second Seed, Whiterun

Chapter Notes

Home? Home to me is a hot cup of ale at the end of the day and five minutes without someone needing something from me. Cyrodiil is a beautiful place, full of diverse peoples and histories. But so too, Hammerfell and Skyrim, and every other place I've been. – Legate Fasendil

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

Junius Varo entered the City of Whiterun between Irileth and a hulking Nord warrior who was introduced as the Jarl’s younger brother. He had lost sight of Emilin during the last few minutes of fighting, so he was relieved to see her waiting inside the gate for him. There were splashes of blood on her armour, but he quickly realized none of it was hers.

“Where’s Legate Rikke?” he asked, realizing he hadn’t seen her either for a while.

“She’s with the healers. Her neck was grazed by an axe,” said Emilin, pointing to the blood on her armour.

Varo winced. “Is she-“ he began.

“She’s going to be okay,” said Emilin. “I stopped up the wound right away and carried her in here. They had proper Legion healers waiting.”

“Good. Uh, Emilin, how did you carry her in?” He was trying to imagine the scene: the tiny wood-elf carrying the strapping Nord woman into the city.

Emilin gave him a look. “On my back, Junius. I’ve carried you, don’t you remember?”

He remembered it as being dragged but was prudent enough to only nod.

Irileth had been talking to a soldier; she now turned back to Varo. “Jarl Balgruuf’s waiting to meet you. Just a few steps up the road, in one of the houses.”

Varo and Emilin followed her. At the door of a small wooden house, she paused. “Actually, Varo, this is your daughter’s house. But since she’s not using it now . . .”

“We’re breaking in,” he finished with a wry smile.

Irileth opened the door.

There were two men waiting in the house: A Legionnaire and a blond bearded Nord wearing a coronet. Irileth introduced the latter as Jarl Balgruuf. Although the name seemed familiar and he’d supposedly served in Avelina’s legion, Varo didn’t recognize him. Which wasn’t surprising. Irileth, yes, he remembered because you couldn’t forget a Dunmer among so many Nords. The Nords blended into each other, big fair-skinned, light-haired background scenery in his early courtship of Legate Avelina Attius.
The Legionnaire with the Jarl introduced himself as Legate Cipius, who said he’d served with Varo about fifteen years ago on the Strid River. “Though I was hardly more than a kid. I doubt you ever knew my name.”

“Welcome to Whiterun, Junius Varo,” began Balgruuf. “My hospitality is lacking in this moment, but you are truly welcome in my hold.”

“It seemed easier to meet down here than push up to Dragonsreach,” Cipius explained.

“And I’m sure you didn’t want Junius wandering among your citizens while he’s blaspheming Talos,” said Emilin.

“I am not!” retorted Varo.

“It would be advisable to change, yes,” said Irileth drily. “Bedrooms are upstairs. Do you have anything else to wear?”

“We had to leave our baggage behind with the horses,” answered Varo.

“I’ll go find you an extra uniform,” Cipius volunteered.

“It seems I cannot escape my fate after all,” Varo remarked to the smirking Emilin as Cipius left the house.

“We’ll find you trousers yet,” replied Emilin soothingly.

“So,” Varo lowered his voice. “Is there anything we should talk about while the Legate’s out of the way, Jarl Balgruuf?”

“How much have they told you about your daughter?” asked Balgruuf.

“More than Tullius really wanted to. He told me about their mistake at Helgen.”

“And you’re still committed to the Empire, Varo?”

Varo shrugged. “I’m no innocent. The Empire’s done its share of terrible things. And yet we still need to stick together. I assume you’ve come to the same conclusion.”

“Aye, though I won’t say I like it. Accepting the Legion’s support was no easy choice.”

“There is no room left for neutrality in these days,” said Irileth. “But I assure you, we’ve tried it.”

“Fair enough. I’m glad to have you on our side, and I apologize for all the troubles we’ll bring you once we’re well-established in your hold. There are Thalmor observers already waiting on the plains outside.”

Balgruuf groaned. “That’s my limit. I’ll not let them inside my gates.”

“I’ll help you stall them, once the siege is lifted. We can at least tie them up in paperwork that needs to be sent back and forth to Cyrodiil a few times. Start by challenging Elenwen’s identity and work up from there. And who knows? That may be all the delay you need.”

His suggested scheme brought laughter from both the Jarl and his housecarl. The atmosphere in the room relaxed. He’d hinted at the prospect of another war with the Dominion, at Skyrim’s need to ride out this period of persecution, but he couldn’t promise anything, any more than Titus Mede could to him.
“As for the war and the rest of my daughter’s adventures, I’ve had Legate Rikke with me since I arrived, and she’s been very honest and thorough in her briefings if I judge her right.”

“The Legate’s a trustworthy woman,” agreed Irileth. “How long have you been in Skyrim, Varo?”

“This is my third day. I arrived in Solitude on the morning of First of Second Seed and set out for Whiterun around noon.”

“That fast? With Stormcloaks on the road?”

“We cut through Labyrinthian,” he explained.

Irileth and Balgruuf looked at each other. “Glad we have him on our side, my Jarl?” Irileth asked.

“Aye. Should strike up fear in Ulfric’s heart to hear of it.”

“Do you know where my daughter is right now?” asked Varo.

“In Windhelm, most likely. She was there on the First. I sent my brother Hrongar there as my messenger, and he spoke with her housecarl. He said the town was celebrating her betrothal to Ulfric.”

Varo frowned. “You were the one who informed Tullius of this betrothal, yes?”

Balgruuf nodded. “Your daughter told us of the arrangement about a week back.”

“She was very unhappy,” Irileth added. “I’d say Windhelm was the last place on Nirn she wished to go.”

“And yet you let her go?”

Irileth let out a bitter laugh. “Nords and their honour, Varo. I would have kept her here.”

“She is Dragonborn. She could not be kept against her will,” replied Balgruuf.

“Didn’t you say the same thing?” Emilin reminded Varo. “To Tullius?”

“Yes,” Varo admitted. “I can’t fight against stubborn honour and Nord legends either.”

The door opened. Legate Cipius re-entered with his arms full of Legionnaire gear. “Some of this should fit you, sir,” he told Varo, who reached out to take it from him. “Jarl Balgruuf, Commander Caius sends word the fires are all out and he will be down here to report as soon as possible.”

Varo carried the clothes and armour up the stairs into the small loft. There were two rooms up there. He entered the larger bedroom, where he dropped the gear on the bed. Since Irileth had mentioned this was Cecilia’s home, he’d looked around for traces of her, but there was nothing in this simple Nord dwelling that reminded him of his daughter. There were weapons and books that probably belonged to her, but they spoke of a life in Skyrim that he had never seen.

But then he noticed a small silver hairpin lying on the floor. How often he’d stepped on such hairpins, scattered around his home completely unnoticed by their owner. He reached down and held the hairpin up to the light – it was simple and unadorned – then let it fall again, feeling a sharp pang of loss. Even if he recovered his daughter from Stormcloak, they would never return to that happy family life in Cyrodiil when her mother was still alive.

Cipius had judged well what would fit him, so he changed into a Legionnaire’s uniform. At least it
was a warm spring day on the plains. He’d be out of Skyrim by the time winter really set in, he promised himself.

When he returned downstairs, the others were gathered around the table where a map had been spread out. There was a new face at the table, bringing the number of people packed into the small home to six. The newcomer was introduced as Commander Caius of the Whiterun Guards. He was covered in grime and ashes but confirmed that the fires were out and the Stormcloak catapults were taking a rest.

“Their army’s still in confusion,” added Caius. “They’ve firmed up the front lines past the Stables, but so many of their troops were scattered, they’re milling around trying to find each other.”

“We need to decide whether we can strike again before they’re back to normal,” commented Irileth.

“The faster we strike the better,” said Legate Cipius. “There are far too many civilians in this city, Varo. We’ve got large reservoirs of water and a natural spring, but only stores for about two weeks on strict rations.”

Varo asked why they hadn’t sent away more of their citizens. Irileth sighed and said that they’d tried to, but the ordinary people preferred the threat of the Stormcloak invasion to the dragons that had been terrorizing the countryside. Dragon attacks seemed to have lessened since Cecilia defeated Alduin, but they were still out there and the people had learnt terror over the last year.

The average Nord did not know how to follow or enforce orders was what Varo concluded from this conversation.

“Are your townsfolk loyal to you, Jarl Balgruuf?” asked Varo, remembering Rikke’s estimate that the hold was evenly split in its loyalties.

“Those inside the walls I judge loyal enough not to openly take up arms against me,” said Balgruuf. “Though there are some who are waiting hopefully for a Stormcloak victory.”

“And you can’t throw them out?”

“Not without starting a fight.”

Varo frowned. “It’s your town but I’d at least like to know who our enemies are.”

“Gray-Manes are the worst of them,” supplied Caius. “Their young men are off fighting with Ulfric. Old Vignar is counting on being Jarl no doubt.”

“Vignar Gray-Mane is an honoured member of the Companions of Ysgramor,” said Balgruuf sharply. “And as long as he holds publicly to their rules of neutrality, his role in this city is unquestioned.”

“Who are the Companions?” asked Varo.

“An ancient order of warriors, a bit like the Fighters’ Guild back in Cyrodiil,” explained Irileth. “But better respected by the people.”

“Let’s get back to our strategy, please,” protested Legate Cipius. “How fast could we be ready for another sortie?”

“What’s the strategy behind these sorties?” asked Varo. “You rush out, they run away, repeat?”
“Keeping them away from the gates, yes,” said Irileth. “But we can do a bit more now, I think.”

“Hmmm . . . “Varo examined the map. “Their catapults are over here?” he pointed at some marks on
the map.

“Yes. Right in front of their main encampment,” said Cipius. “They were building them in the woods
across the valley and hauled them out just after my men arrived.”

“Those have to go,” said Varo decisively.

“More easily said than done.”

“I won’t argue with that. But they do have to go. I’m surprised they’re only using fire. If they had
proper projectiles, they could do some damage to these crumbling walls.”

“Ulfric wants my walls intact,” stated Balgruuf. “He’ll have to hold Whiterun himself if he takes it.”

“It’s my opinion they’ll switch to boulders if they think they can’t win otherwise. They’ve had all the
time in the world to get that ready,” said Cipius.

“I don’t think they’ve had the discipline for it,” disagreed Irileth. “We haven’t seen any evidence of
quarrying, and we have not been blind to their movements before this fight.”

Cipius laughed harshly. “I hope you’re right, but we need to plan for the worst.”

Varo shook his head. “No, we need to find out the truth of it. Do we have eyes out there on the
ground?”

“There are Legion scouts somewhere out there, but we’re out of touch now,” replied Cipius.
“They’ll have gone to ground as ordered. As for espionage, I presume General Tullius has people in
the Stormcloak ranks, but those channels are high above me.”

“I’m not in his confidences either,” agreed Varo. “What about the Hold’s people? Anyone out
there?”

“I don’t employ spies,” said Balgruuf shortly.

“Do the Stormcloaks share that honourable stance?” Varo asked.

No one at the table seemed able to answer that with any certainty.

“Who is the Stormcloaks’ commander?” Varo asked.

“Galmar Stone-Fist, Ulfric’s housecarl and close companion since the War,” said Balgruuf.

“You saw him outside. He was the big man with the bear pelt head-dress,” said Irileth.

“Doesn’t hang back to direct a battle, then,” observed Varo.

“This is Skyrim. No one does,” replied Irileth. “It’s all I can do to restrain my Jarl from charging out
there on his own.”

“I’m not that bad, Irileth,” protested Balgruuf.

“I need to know as much as possible about this Stone-Fist and any other commanders,” explained
Varo.
“Legate Rikke will be your woman for that,” Balgruuf replied. “She served closely with Galmar in the War.”

“Right, she’s with the healers now? If someone could take me to her . . .”

“Do we let this chance slip away while you’re getting up to speed?” demanded Cipius.

Varo turned to Cipius. “This is your battlefield, Legate, and you’re the one who’s studied this terrain and knows your army. I’m only here to help you with what you decide. But if you want my opinion, you can get your soldiers out there and ready, even if you decide later how far to go. I’ll be back after I’ve talked to Legate Rikke.”

Cipius nodded. “Gods speed you.”

“I’ll take you to the Legate,” offered Balgruuf. “It seems I am the most expendable in this room,” he added with a chuckle.

“Only for the moment, my Jarl. We’ll want you back to rally the troops,” replied Irileth briskly.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Reach

Tanulvie, still blindfolded with her arms tied behind her back, stumbled along the rocky paths of the Reach, guided by her Blades captors. She was so weak and dizzy she had completely lost track of their twists and turns. She suspected now she’d been drugged in some manner before they left the Blades’ base. Even if she could get the magicka restraints off, she’d be in no condition to escape or fight.

The Blades weren’t hard on her out here on the trail. Often, one of them would take her arm to support her or guide her over a hard bit. But they said nothing, which was much scarier than any punishment. They had made their decision to kill her and there was no reason for them to talk further to her.

At last, after climbing up many sets of stone stairs, they came to a place where the smell of rotting flesh and blood overpowered everything else. Here, she was pushed down onto her knees and made to crawl through a flap onto a floor of ragged furs.

“Let her rest there,” she heard Delphine saying. “We’ll scout the altar first.”

She lay on the furs, her stomach heaving. Then a low voice spoke just above her.

“You said you wanted to send a message to your parents.” That was Aerin.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I couldn’t let you write anything that would hurt us, but if you wrote a note to say goodbye, I’d make sure it got to your people.”

“You would?”

“You have to write you’re a prisoner of the Forsworn, all right?”
Tanulvie nodded. “I just want to tell them I’m sorry for leaving them behind.”

“All right.” Aerin began to unknot the blindfold. When he finished and slipped it off, she found that they were in a skin tent. The floor was covered with furs, and Forsworn clothes and armour were strewn all around. She looked up at Aerin. He was exactly as she’d imagined him: a short, soft-looking Imperial with an apologetic smile.

“Which hand do you write with?” he asked.

“My right.”

“Okay, there’s a desk here with quills and paper. I guess even the Forsworn write from time to time. I’ll help you sit up, then I’ll unbind your right hand. But you have to promise me not to try escaping.”

“I promise.” She didn’t think she could escape here, with the other Blades just outside the tent, but she certainly wasn’t bound to any promise.

“Swear it on something you Thalmor value,” insisted Aerin. “What’s the name of your god, the one who isn’t Akatosh?”

“I swear to Auri-El that I will not try to escape,” replied Tanulvie, inwardly amused by his naivete. As if Auri-El would enforce a promise made to the enemies of his descendants.

But Aerin seemed satisfied. Slowly and quietly, he helped her sit up in front of the small writing desk. Then he prepared the things for writing. When that was done, he took out a dagger and cut her right hand loose from behind her back.

Her hand was stiff and cramped. She could hardly move it, let alone write. She whispered this to Aerin, who took her hand and massaged the wrist. Life and pain flowed into her hand, but now she could write.

Her hand trembling, she dipped the quill in the ink pot, then began to write.

Honoured parents,

I, Tanulvie, greet you with immeasurable sadness and regret that I have failed to uphold the sacred obligations placed upon me by my birth. Because of my lack of wisdom and the failure of my will, I have come to this end. Though my blood may spill forth on my heathen captors’ altar, know that my spirit will return to whence it came.

May this message be found and sent by some kind soul to Sunhold so that my parents may know what was in my heart the day that I died.

This was indeed what she would have written in a death letter to her parents. Minus the Blades’ lie about the Forsworn being her captors, these were her true feelings. But as she wrote, she worked in the cypher the Thalmor used for basic messages. Nothing very elaborate could be communicated in such a small space, as the code relied mostly on the carefully placed curlicues of the standard letters. *Blades prisoner my message Dragonborn’s grandmother uncle Markarth name Attius* was what she managed to weave in. Commander Ondolemar should understand.

When she finished, she handed the letter to Aerin to read.

“Is that all right?”
He read through it carefully. “Yes. I’ll make sure it’s found by your people. Now, I have to blindfold you again. And fasten your hand.”

With the sounds of the other Blades nearby, without her magic, and in this weakened, dizzy state, she knew there would be no good in trying to escape. Aerin would not send on her message if she tried, and this message was all that she could do for the Thalmor.

The blindfold slipped over her eyes, then he took her right hand to bind again. She heard him moving away. Then she sat there alone, waiting in regret. Because she had failed, and she would never again feel the warmth of southern skies or see her parents’ and sister’s faces.

She waited, but for a very long time, nothing happened. Then she was pulled up again by one of the Blades. They were exiting the tent. And they began to walk down steps.

She’d thought the altar was higher up. Had they said that? Or had she just assumed?

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded.

“Just knock her out,” said Delphine.

“I can’t carry her,” a man responded. She wasn’t sure of the voice, though it certainly wasn’t Aerin.

“I can. It’ll be easier than walking her all the way.”

A bottle was pressed against her lips, and fingers held her nostrils closed. Vainly she tried to resist. At last her mouth opened, gulping for air, and the liquid ran down into it. She tried to spit it out, but this was a powerful potion. She was already falling into darkness.

And there she must have stayed, dreamless, for a long while. Because when she came back to life, she was sitting on a cot in a dim stone cell. The blindfold was gone, though her hands were still bound. A woman was standing before her.

“Who are you?” Tanulvie asked groggily.

“My name is Delphine. Grandmaster of the Blades,” replied the woman. Tanulvie was beginning to focus. Delphine was a blonde-haired Breton woman, clad in strange segmented armour. She was flanked by two others, who were partially obscured in the shadows.

“So, the Dragonborn has family in Markarth, Thalmor?” Delphine asked.

Tanulvie’s heart fell. Aerin.

“Esbern, read out the message she wrote,” Delphine continued. “So she knows we have it in its entirety.”

An elderly Nord in mage’s clothing stepped forward beside Delphine.

“Blades prisoner my message Dragonborn’s grandmother uncle Markarth name Attius,” he read out.

“Aerin, I take back my earlier words. I believe you will make a fine member of the Blades after all,” commented Delphine.

“Thank you, Grandmaster.” Aerin spoke up from Delphine’s right. Tanulvie could kick herself. Why had she believed so easily in Delphine’s laxity? Leaving a useless milk-sop alone with a prisoner? Would a woman who’d evaded the Thalmor for decades do such thing?
She hadn’t. She’d played Tanulvie as well as any Thalmor interrogator, first creating the illusion that she didn’t know how to run an interrogation, then building up the terror of an execution march, and having Aerin take pity on her.

Delphine continued. “You’ve messed up, haven’t you? Giving up secret information to the enemies of the Dominion. That won’t be forgiven, you know.”

Tanulvie stared at the floor. Her heart was pounding. Dying as a captive of the Blades was a tragedy, but to have given up her message to the Blades, that was unforgivable. And she’d thought herself so clever.

“When your superiors find out you handed this information to us, what will happen to those beloved parents in Sunhold?” Delphine continued. “Assuming you do have parents in Sunhold. But any family would suffer that fate, wouldn’t they?”

Tanulvie didn’t know. A part of her wanted to protest that the Thalmor wouldn’t punish them for their daughter’s lapse. But another part thought, yes, yes, they would. That was exactly how they ensured their agents’ complete trustworthiness.

“I’ve already sent Blades to Markarth to find and extract the Attius family before your Justiciars get their claws into them. In time, I can make sure your note finds its way to the Thalmor Embassy, with thanks on our part. Before that happens, Tanulvie, you need to consider your future actions very, very carefully.”

“Let me die,” cried Tanulvie at last. “Just kill me.”

“That won’t help your family.”

No, it would not. She looked around the room for inspiration. It was a small bare stone cell; the only furniture was the cot she was sitting on. Delphine and Esbern were watching her intently. When she looked at Aerin, however, he turned his face away, refusing to meet her eyes.

“What do you want?” she demanded of Delphine.

“I wanted you to understand your situation. I think you do now. We will pick this up later.”

Delphine spun on her heel and left, with Aerin following. Esbern stayed behind to lock the cell door but said nothing more.

Tanulvie sat still in the dark and despaired.

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3 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Sea of Ghosts

Cecilia’s place in the Shatter-Shield boat was more comfortable than she’d imagined it could be. Open to the elements though the boat was, she was snuggled up in furs among the cargo with lots of room to stretch out and watch the rowers labour over their oars. The ride turned choppy as they left the mouth of the White River and entered the Sea of Ghosts, but they’d packed plenty of potions for seasickness, so she wasn’t bothered by that.

Brelyna kept up a constant chatter about the landscape they were passing through. It would seem she
knew about every wreck along the coast and would tell their gruesome stories in detail. At last, Cecilia asked her why she knew all this stuff, and Brelyna paused as if she’d been found out in something.

“J’Zargo also wonders. He thinks perhaps it has something to do with the rumour of Telvanni mages searching the Sea of Ghosts.”

Brelyna sniffed. “Don’t believe everything you hear about the Telvanni.”

“You mean they do not all ride clouds and distill sujamma from raindrops? J’Zargo is disappointed.”

“Sujamma from rainwater?” Brelyna asked. “With the proper Alteration spell—”

“It would probably only be very thin ale,” J’Zargo finished.

“I don’t know if you could actually alter it that far,” Cecilia said. “But you could place an Illusion so it tasted exactly like Sujamma.”

Brelyna clapped her hands. “As expected of the Illusion master’s daughter,” she commented.

Lydia’s head poked out from behind a large crate. “These poor rowers are being forced to ferry mages to Winterhold, the least you could do is hold off on the magic talk.”

“Yes, I think that would be wise. Meaning no offence, my Lady.” That was Ralof. Cecilia had certainly noticed that he and her housecarl had settled down together in the boat. At the very least, they were becoming fast friends. At the most? Cecilia had never seen Lydia flirting with anyone before, but she was almost certain that was what Lydia was doing now.

At least one love match might come out of Ulfric’s proposal, she thought with amusement. They made a nice pair; she’d support them if they took this further. Both were living in constant contact with death, but that didn’t seem to matter in Skyrim. Nords didn’t wait for practicalities like peace or good weather to declare their love.

“What are you smiling about?” asked Brelyna at her elbow.

“I’m thinking about love in Skyrim.”

“You and the Jarl?” asked Brelyna.

“No. Just generally. Like, my grandmother’s story.”

“J’Zargo would like to hear your grandmother’s love story. He is sure it would be more heartwarming than another shipwreck tale.”

“Yes, tell it,” said Brelyna. “Is this about your mer grandmother?”

“Half-mer,” Cecilia corrected her. “But no, my Nord grandmother. Her name is Embla. Embla Snow-Child they called her, because she was found as a baby abandoned in the snow in a farmer’s field just outside Solitude.”

“Do you know why she was abandoned?” asked Brelyna.

“No. Probably some poor peasant couldn’t afford another mouth. They say it was a harsh winter.”

“Humans,” sniffed Brelyna “have more children than they know what to do with.”

Brelyna looked stricken. “I’m sorry. I just . . . we don’t have many children, you know.”

“I know,” said Cecilia. “Embla Snow-Child was taken in by the farmer who found her and brought up to be useful. She learned to read and write, and they found her a job as a maid in Solitude when she was around twelve. Which was a good solid start on life for a Nord peasant girl, mind you. She was an excellent servant, and by the time she was eighteen, she was working in the Blue Palace, which was quite an honour.”

“J’Zargo has been to the Blue Palace. There are so many beautiful things lying around there for all to see.”

“How did you – “Cecilia began. “Oh, never mind. This is my grandmother’s story. She worked at the Palace for six years. Then when she was twenty-four, a visitor came to the Palace. He was a young diplomat from Cyrodiil, part of the staff accompanying the Emperor’s envoy to the High King.”

“Your grandfather?” asked Brelyna.

“Yes. His name was Falco Attius, and he was about Embla’s age. He came from an ancient landowning family in the Nibenay Valley, but as a younger son, he had to make his own way in the world. Which he was doing very successfully. He was a rising star in the diplomatic service. Embla liked him right away. He was polite, he didn’t cause any problems for the palace staff, and he asked her about life in Solitude and her family. She could see he was respected by his peers and treated his subordinates well. So, being a Nord woman, she did the logical thing. She proposed to him.”

The boat exploded into laughter. It seemed Cecilia’s story was a hit with the listening Nord rowers. She raised her voice so they could easily hear the rest of the story. This would go a long way to diffusing the tension about transporting mages.

“He was completely taken aback, of course. He wasn’t a snob, but servants in Cyrodiil wouldn’t dare associate with a man of his class. So, he hadn’t even thought of Embla as a possible partner. But when this pretty Nord girl with the winning smile suddenly asked him to marry her, he was completely taken aback. My grandmother says he turned beet red and stuttered something about not getting married at this stage in his career. She asked, why not? Couldn’t she help him in his career? If he was going to be a diplomat in Skyrim, she knew all about Skyrim.”

“Impeccable logic,” commented Brelyna.

“He had all the reasons why he couldn’t marry, she had all the reasons why marrying her would be a good decision on his part. And pretty soon he couldn’t remember why he wouldn’t want to marry this lovely young woman. So, about two weeks after her proposal, they were married in the Temple of the Divines in Solitude.”

“I hope they lived happily ever after?” asked Brelyna.

“Mostly. They had four children and lost two of them in the Great War, which was very hard on them. But they stayed in love and together till my grandfather died eight years ago. My grandmother Embla lives in Markarth now, and she was hale and happy when I last visited her.”

“Well, on this day I learn the Dragonborn is really a Nord after all,” remarked Brelyna. “All the way to rushing into betrothals like her grandmother did. But you’ll have to tell me the story of your father’s family someday, as well.”
“If you mean my great-grandparents, that was a whole lot more complicated,” said Cecilia. “And not really fit for this trip.”

She did not think the Nords in the boat would appreciate the tale of an Altmer mage who fell in love with a Breton spellsword. Though they’d probably empathize with the bit where they were both brutally murdered by the Thalmor. She’d wondered for a while now what the people of Windhelm would think when they learnt the full background of their Jarl’s new wife. It would depend on how they spun the story, wouldn’t it? Hereditary enemy of the Thalmor was a good start and had the advantage of being completely true.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Outside Kolskeggr Mine, The Reach

“Commander Ondolemar!”

Ondolemar looked up from the report he was reading at his makeshift desk. Before him stood the Justiciar he’d left in Understone Keep to do some research. “Yes?”

“The Nord witness identified the armour.” The Justiciar lowered his voice. “Blades.”

Ondolemar put down the report. “Are you sure?”

“The first thing that old woman responded to was the image of an Akaviri warrior in an old scroll. She said it didn’t look exactly like that, but the segmented armour reminded her of the woman who took our agent. I remembered the Blades were of Akaviri origin. It took a while to find a drawing of Blades armour, but when I did, she was certain that’s what she saw. Then I showed a bunch of pictures to the children; the littlest one didn’t remember, but the two oldest picked out the Blades’ armour.”

“Blades in the Reach . . .” Ondolemar considered this. “I believe two people calling themselves Blades did attend the recent negotiations at High Hrothgar. If they’re recruiting followers, this could be most bothersome.”

“Are they really Blades?” asked the Justiciar.

“I wonder. This one at least got her hands on the right sort of armour. But I will need to speak with the First Emissary for full details.”

Privately, Ondolemar did not doubt now that the attackers were led by the Blades Delphine and Esbern, of whom the Justiciars in Skyrim had long been warned. Whether Elenwen wished their names to be more widely circulated, he did not know. Making the Blades famous in Skyrim was not one of the Thalmor’s goals.

“Will you travel then to the Embassy?” asked his subordinate.

“Not at once. We should continue our search here while the scent is still warm. If I do go North, though, I’ll take a whole squad with me. Did you ride out here alone?”

The mer’s ears flushed red. “I shouldn’t have, should I?”

“No more travelling around the Reach in groups smaller than four, do you understand?

“Yes, sir.”
“Did you also look up Pavo Attius as I requested?”

“Yes, sir! He’s been living in this area for about fifteen years. Came up from Cyrodiil with an orc named Gat-gro-Shargahk, and they started the Kolskeggr Mine together. They’re both veterans of the War. Pavo’s mother lives in Markarth.”

“And her name?”

“Embla Attius. She’s a Nord who’s lived in Cyrodiil most of her life. She came back up here to be with her son. Do you want us to bring her in?”

“I’ll go talk to her myself in a bit. Stay here; we’ll go back to Markarth together after I talk to this Pavo Attius.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pavo Attius had already shown Ondolemar around the mine and its surrounding area. But Ondolemar had not yet broached the subject of the man’s background. He found Pavo coming out of the mine and asked if he could have a word.

“And if I said no?” asked Attius.

“I could make the request official,” said Ondolemar with a smile. “But I can’t imagine why you would object to a chat. Your father was always very amenable to us.”

Pavo stiffened. “That did him a lot of good, didn’t it?”

Falco Attius had been one of the Empire’s top diplomats in the years leading up to the Great War. A brilliant man and very easily led astray by Dominion operatives. Unwittingly, Attius had passed on many lies, half-truths, and easily-broken promises to the Emperor and his council. Most brilliantly, in the eyes of the Aldmeri Dominion, Falco Attius had been a key figure in the Varo Affair, the political scandal which had so hampered the Legion’s preparation for war.

“Do they still call your father a traitor in Cyrodiil?”

“He wasn’t a traitor,” hissed Attius.

“I know that. He was a good diplomat; ours were better.”

“Surely you didn’t come here just to taunt me about my father’s diplomatic career?”

“I didn’t. But I was surprised to run into the son of a person of such significance to us. You’ve lived here all this time and never come to my attention before.”

“I’ve kept my head down,” replied Attius. “I don’t do politics.”

“What happened to your family after the War? Do you still have land in Cyrodiil?”

“My family’s dead.”

“Really? I’m told your mother lives in Markarth.”

“You bastard!” Attius’ eyes flashed in anger. “She’s a widow who’s lost all her children but me. My sister drowned defending the Niben, my brother died in the Alik’r Desert. We have nothing left in Cyrodiil, and nothing to do with your schemes and politics.”
“Lying to the Justiciar, Attius?” a voice cut into their conversation. Ondolemar turned to see one of the mercenaries he’d hired in Markarth, standing there with a triumphant look on his face.

“I’m not lying,” began Attius in protest. Ondolemar raised his hand to shush him.

“Do you have something to say?” he asked the mercenary. The man’s name he could not remember.

“Would you pay if I did?”

“I’m already paying you,” Ondolemar reminded the man. “Don’t push your luck.”

“All right, ask Attius about his niece. The one who cleared out Kolskeggr Mine for him. He was boasting about it last year.”

Ondolemar turned back to Attius. “Your niece?”

Attius said nothing.

“Imperial name,” the mercenary helpfully supplied. “Celestia, Selena, something like that.”

There was a long pause during which Attius kept quiet, and Ondolemar thought harder than he had for years. Then he said, “Cecilia?”

“Yeah, I think that was it.”

“Cecilia,” Ondolemar breathed the name again. “Pavo Attius, you will accompany me back to Markarth. We have much to discuss.”

Cecilia Varo was the Dragonborn: a woman who walked in and out of Understone Keep as if she owned it. In the past, he’d been ordered to watch her, but not to stop her. More lately, she had been wanted by the Thalmor in connection with an incident at the Embassy. He had not seen her since then.

He had no idea she had family in Markarth this whole time. Had Junius Varo really married a member of the Attius family? After all that bad blood between Curinwe Varo and Falco Attius? He presumed the Thalmor’s Cyrodiil branch could have sent him the entire family tree if he’d asked for it, but it had never occurred to him Cecilia Varo could have roots in the Reach.

Did Elenwen know? If she didn’t, it’d be a coup on his part to tell her of the discovery. His excitement at this prospect faded a little when he remembered the missing Justiciar. Was this why the Blades took her? Was she coming here to out Pavo Attius and his mother?

The dots were nearly all connected now. But how did the Forsworn fit into this? And why would the Blades wait till Elenwen’s messenger was nearly in Markarth to intercept her? Did they have a base in the Reach?

He’d be asking some of these questions of Attius and his mother soon, in the privacy of the Thalmor’s quarters at Understone Keep.

Chapter End Notes

There’s a family tree I’ve been working off for Cecilia [here](#), which I include in case it
might clear up any confusions.

I thought I'd take advantage of Aerin's reputation as a weird stalker, and Delphine as the most annoying woman in Skyrim, to build up a somewhat believable scenario for the reader, as well as for Tanulvie, to think Tanulvie was getting away with something. I wonder if that worked for you readers. Much as I dislike Delphine personally, she's good at her job, and will be a great foil for Ondolemar going forward.

Ulfric and the Companions will be back next chapter, as this one was getting too long. And I don't know when, but you can count on Legate Fasendil soon making an appearance. All my favourites gathered into a fic.

I realized in the middle of writing Tanulvie’s scene that I’d ripped off the Japanese Confucian scholar/revolutionary Yoshida Shoin’s 1859 death poem letter to his parents:

“Because my knowledge was too superficial and my sincerity not enough to move heaven and earth, therefore it has come thus far. I am sure you all will be most grieved and wounded.”

But since it fits, I leaned into the whole death poem genre. I just have to acknowledge that is indeed the inspiration. In my other fannish life, I’m a Japanese history nerd.
I don’t like where this is going. – Brelyna Maryon

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

With Cecilia and her entourage gone, Ulfric ate his breakfast and prepared for his day without interruption. He had already cleared much of the day to hear cases and receive petitions from the common folk: an important duty which he had been putting off since the negotiations began for a truce. In theory, every one of his subjects had the right to make a petition to their Jarl. In practice, Eastmarch was a large hold, with lots of would-be petitioners, and his role as war chieftain eclipsed his ability to render judgment. He relied on Jorleif to deal with the lesser issues, and today he would hear some of the more important cases.

The Hall was already crowded when he took the Throne. There were more onlookers than usual, probably hoping to catch a glimpse of the Dragonborn. They would not know that Cecilia had departed in the gray hours of the morning.

The first case he had to hear concerned a stabbing in Kynesgrove. It was a sordid story; the victim, Kjeld the Elder was a well-known womanizer who had tangled with a woman in Riften. She’d then tracked him home and discovered he was already married, hence the stabbing. If she was trying to kill Kjeld, she had failed, but he’d been unable to work in his mine for a while. The woman’s sister had arrived from the Rift with an offer of wergild that Kjeld and his family thought was low and insulting for the wound he’d taken. And now the decision to set the price was the Jarl’s.

Personally, he would have liked to set compensation aside entirely; Kjeld was a liar who almost deserved that stabbing. But that would be a bad precedent. Not only must he officially discourage attempted murder, he needed to set a particular example to Riften’s criminally-inclined citizens. Their lawlessness might be ignored by Jarl Laila, but it was not welcome in Eastmarch. So, he awarded Kjeld the full amount he asked for, then banished his assailant from the hold. She seemed rather relieved at the sentence; presumably it was her sister paying the bill.

Ulfric did have some choice words for Kjeld, though, once he’d made the judgment. “You’ve thrown away your honour, Master Kjeld, and you are no longer welcome within Windhelm’s walls.”

“But my mine provides ore for the army,” protested Kjeld.

“That does not require your presence in my city.”

Kjeld’s would-be murderer burst into laughter at this turn of events, and the guards shushed her. Kjeld at least knew when to stop arguing. He bowed his head to Ulfric. “As you command, my Jarl.”

As the guards were showing out the disputants, two more people entered the Hall. They were Aela the Huntress and Farkas, two of the group of Companions who’d come to Windhelm with Cecilia. He understood they had taken a job in the area after their first night here. Telling Jorleif he would delay the next case, he got up from his Throne to greet the honoured visitors.
Farkas warmly hailed him back. Aela seemed distracted. She was looking around the Hall for someone or something. When she finally did pay attention to Ulfric, she asked him directly, “Is the Dragonborn here?”

Ulfric shook his head. “She departed Windhelm this morning on a mission of some urgency.”

“When’s she coming back?”

Ulfric shrugged. “It will depend on how her business goes.”

Aela gave him an odd look, then walked up quickly to within a few inches of his face. “You aren’t keeping her locked up, are you?” she growled.

“What?” Ulfric spluttered. His guards had their hands on their weapons. He waved at them to stand down.

Aela spoke in a low voice. “Under the circumstances, it’s a bit suspicious. That’s all.”

“The Jarl’s not a liar,” Farkas put in. “The Dragonborn thinks he’s trustworthy enough to marry, doesn’t she?”

“Fair point,” Aela conceded. “All right, Jarl Ulfric. This is your problem, not hers, anyway.”

“What problem?”

As if on cue, the door to the Palace opened, ushering in a large group of people led by Brunwulf Free-Winter. Behind him came the other Companions, and they were leading prisoners: two Altmer males roped together. Ria was carrying a dark red bundle of fabric in her arms. The spectators began to murmur. Jorleif called for silence.

“Jarl Ulfric, these bandits had Fjotli Cruel-Sea’s locket!” Brunwulf called out across the Hall. He held up something silver in his hand.

Ulfric stared. Torsten Cruel-Sea had been adamant that thieves, not the Butcher, had murdered his daughter Fjotli and taken her locket. And Fjotli’s locket had never actually turned up in Calixto’s home or at Hjerim. Still, everyone else had assumed Fjotli was a victim of the Butcher; the murder fit Calixto’s pattern too well for it to be coincidental.

Ulfric took his place again on the Throne. The guards hushed the assembly, while the group came up to him. At the foot of the Throne, the elves were pushed down to kneel. Ria then held up the fabric, unfolding a dark red banner with a golden star emblazed on it.

“What is this?” asked Ulfric.

“The banner of these bandits,” replied Vilkas. “They call themselves the Summerset Shadows and were operating out of Uttering Hills Cave.”

Ulfric stiffened at the name *Summerset*.

“Could it be . . . Thalmor?” asked Jorleif.

“Not unless their standards have really dropped,” said Aela. “But we thought the Jarl would want to know about a well-organized group of Altmer thieves in his hold.”

“How did you find them in the first place?” asked Ulfric.
“Brunwulf Free-Winter hired us to clear out bandits from Uttering Hills Cave.”

“Brunwulf, did you know about these Altmer?” asked Ulfric.

“I’d heard only that there were bandits holed up there. I did submit a petition to you about the matter . . .”

Ulfric’s heart sank. Brunwulf had a long list of complaints, all of which harped on the same theme: that Ulfric was neglecting his city and his hold for the war. He was not entirely wrong, but oh so short-sighted! In war, everything fell apart. Skyrim was in disorder and Windhelm suffering. He could only focus on the most pressing issues and consign the rest to the mercy of the gods. But it was inevitable that one of the least pressing would turn out to be more urgent that it appeared. And inevitable too that Brunwulf would hit on it, with his multitude of complaints.

Instead of answering Brunwulf, he turned his attention to the thieves themselves. “Were these the only members of the group?” he asked the Companions.

Vilkas shook his head. “There were six of them holed up in the cave. The other four are dead. This one,” he pointed to the elf on the right, “is their leader. Calls himself Linwe.”

“Linwe,” Ulfric spoke the name, and the elf raised his bowed head. His hair was light brown and his face bearded. He was much rougher around the edges than the elegant Thalmor; it brought Ulfric back to the war, facing down the Dominion’s troops. His face was as sullen as the captives they’d taken then. Elves never seemed to think they could be defeated by mere humans.

“Did you or your elves murder Fjotli Cruel-Sea?” Ulfric demanded.

“No!” the elf said vehemently. “I never even met her!”

“And yet you have her locket.”

“One of my boys stole it from her body, I admit that! But she was already dead.”

“Were you there?”

“No! No, I don’t – I’ve hardly ever been in Windhelm.”

“If you’re telling the truth, you didn’t witness whether your comrade killed Fjotli,” Ulfric pointed out.

“But he – It’s true I didn’t see it happen. If he was lying to me- “

Ulfric cut him off. “Don’t try to shift the blame. Whichever one of you killed her, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“But we don’t kill people! We’re thieves, not murderers.”

“Where is the elf who took the locket from her then?”

“He’s dead. Torsten Cruel-Sea tortured him to death,” snapped Linwe.

Ulfric was taken aback. He had heard nothing of this. He glanced at Jorleif who looked similarly confused.

“We all saw Fjotli’s body,” said Ulfric slowly. “If that elf was really her murderer, Torsten had a right to vengeance.”
A chorus of agreement broke out from the spectators. To Ulfric’s surprise, Brunwulf also nodded. Now he spoke up. “Life for a life, cut for cut. If the elf murdered her.”

Trust Brunwulf to harp on the possibility he hadn’t.

“Someone fetch Torsten Cruel-Sea,” Ulfric ordered.

“I already sent for him, my Jarl,” said Brunwulf, “once the Companions showed me the locket.”

“We’ll clearly be spending our day sorting out these bandits,” Ulfric continued. “Clear the Hall. We’ll have to address the rest of the cases another day.”

It took a while to clear the Hall. The common folk tried to linger, and the guards at last had to drag some of the gawkers out. Several Windhelm nobles had also elected to stay without invitation, but Ulfric decided to let that go. Fjotli Cruel-Sea’s death had shaken them all. It’d been the first of six gruesome murders that had hit both the highest and lowest classes of the city: from a noblewoman to a servant girl. Fjotli’s own mother, Hillevi, had been the last victim of the Butcher. It’d been a tragic, sordid story, but at least it had an ending: Cecilia Varo had at last found and cornered the murderer. He’d died in the ensuing fight and the city was left to mourn in safety.

And now the entire narrative was thrown into question by Fjotli’s locket.

He asked the second elf’s name and received the name “Iremo.” After that, they both turned uncommunicative. Ulfric was relieved when Torsten Cruel-Sea at last entered the hall.

Torsten stared at the elves. “I told you!” he cried. “I told you they killed my daughter.”

“I never touched your daughter!” protested Linwe. “She was dead! That Imperial you called the Butcher, he killed her! The locket broke off in the scuffle. I didn’t even have to touch the body!”

“I thought you weren’t on the scene at all,” pointed out Jorleif.

“You’re going to kill me whatever I say,” said Linwe bitterly. “So, I’m telling you the truth. At least you can take down the bitch that sold us out.”

“Who?” asked Ulfric.

“Niranye. My backstabbing fence. She spread those rumours about us, I know it.”

“Niranye, that Altmer merchant in the main marketplace?” asked Ulfric.

“The same,” Torsten confirmed. “The elf I killed gave me her name too when I – uh – when I questioned him. But she’s sly. I’ve been following her, hoping she’d lead me back to the rest of the gang, but she’s given me the slip several times.”

Ulfric took a deep breath.

“I want every Altmer in the city rounded up and brought here,” he ordered. “First priority is Niranye, but we’ll see how far the rot spreads.”

“Jarl Ulfric, most of our Altmer are law-abiding subjects,” Brunwulf protested.

“I’m questioning them, not executing them,” snapped Ulfric. “When did you become so soft, Brunwulf? You were a soldier once.”

“That’s where I learnt the need for other things than harshness,” replied Brunwulf. “Being on the
other side of brutality didn’t teach me to be brutal.”

“You know nothing of—” Ulfric began, then stopped. He didn’t want to talk about it. Ever again. Brunwulf was a decorated war veteran, but he’d never been a prisoner, never seen the full horror of what the elves were capable of. “I don’t need your interruptions, Brunwulf. I appreciate your help uncovering this nest of vipers, but you must stand back while I question their potential allies or you may leave the Palace.”

“I’ll stand by and watch that justice is done,” replied Brunwulf. “As will the Companions, no doubt.”

“That’s all I ask,” said Ulfric acidly.

How many Altmer were there in Windhelm, he wondered. A dozen? Less? Aside from Niranye, he knew there was that elf at the stables. He seemed trustworthy but looks could be deceiving. Yrsarald would probably know more about the Altmer in Windhelm; he handled local military intelligence. And if he didn’t? If it hadn’t occurred to him keep tabs on their local witch-elves? Ulfric could already feel the head-ache setting in.

The only upside to this affair was that Cecilia was well out of it. He had no idea how she felt towards Altmer, but this wasn’t how he wanted to find out.

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3 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Sea of Ghosts

Before they left Windhelm, Ulfric had warned Cecilia there were two Imperial ships anchored near Winterhold. Torbjorn Shatter-Shield acknowledged this but insisted it wouldn’t be a problem. “The Empire’s never tried to blockade our shipping,” he explained.

“Why not?” asked Lydia.

“They don’t have the boats for it. The Imperial Navy doesn’t exist anymore in practice.”

“Not up here,” Cecilia corrected him. “The Navy in Cyrodiil and High Rock are almost back to full strength.”

“But they don’t sail up here?” asked Lydia.

“The Dominion has the best navy in Tamriel,” Cecilia explained. “They destroyed most of our ships during the War, but now that we’ve mostly recovered, our navy’s on guard against their incursions. Which aren’t a problem up here.”

“Our navy?” asked Torbjorn.

Cecilia would have used a more neutral phrasing if she’d thought about it, but she bristled at his implication. “I am from Cyrodiil,” she replied evenly. “I would have thought that was obvious.”

“Ah, but now you’re Skyrim’s,” Torbjorn replied with good humour. “This little boat can be the flagship of your navy, if you like, Dragonborn.”

Once again, Cecilia was reminded that the people of Windhelm assumed she had joined the Stormcloak cause. She was beginning to dread their reaction when they discovered the truth.
Torbjorn was sailing the boat up to Dawnstar after he’d dropped off Cecilia’s party. So, Lydia and Ralof had both reminded Cecilia this would be the best opportunity to send her father a letter, and at last, Lydia forced a piece of parchment into her hand, along with a bottle of ink and a quill pen.

“It’s too moist to write,” protested Cecilia.

“Valenwood ink,” said Lydia triumphantly. “For writing on even the wettest parchment. I got some from Revyn Sadri.”

Cecilia had to acknowledge defeat in the face of Lydia’s craftiness. Carefully, she laid the parchment down on a wooden crate and dipped her quill in the ink. Then paused again.

“Do you need help writing?” asked Brelyna.

“I can’t think what to write,” admitted Cecilia.

“Start with *Dear Father,*” Brelyna advised.

Cecilia complied.

*Dear Father,*

“And now?”

“Write him the truth?” suggested Brelyna. “Your father’s an Imperial loyalist, right? He won’t like what you write him anyway, so you don’t need to sugar-coat it.”

Brelyna had a very good point there. Cecilia decided to just be blunt.

*I am sorry that I wrote you I was living in Markarth. I am not. I did visit my grandmother there (she and my uncle are well, just as I wrote), but I have been traveling Skyrim since I first came here.*

*It turns out that I am what the Nords call Dragonborn. They say I have the soul of a dragon. I can speak in the Dragon tongue – the words I have learned they call the Thu’um, or Shouts. And these words have power. Some words can strike my enemies to the ground. Others give me a speed beyond human capability. My words take on the form of flame or ice. And I can summon a dragon to my side. Do I sound delusional? I’m sure I do. But I promise you it’s true.*

*The Nords who know these things claim that I was chosen as Dragonborn by Akatosh. (You pray to Auri-El, instead, don’t you? And you never were very clear if you thought they were the same god or used to be the same god or whatever . . . This is getting way off track. I should have asked you so many questions when we had the time.) I don’t really know what I believe, except that some Divines must indeed be involved in giving me this power, because of all that’s happened since . . .*

She trailed off, trying to marshal her thoughts. Her father’s religion was an enigma. She knew that, while he publicly made offerings to the Imperial Cult, he privately worshiped the Altmeri pantheon and Talos. It was a weird combination, which she guessed he’d got from his mother Curinwe. Cecilia’s mother, on the other hand, had been a very devout member of the Imperial Cult (including a private devotion to Talos), and it was from her that she’d got most of her religious instruction.

*We aren’t related to the Septims, are we? I think you would have mentioned that. Anyway, you may have heard this news already. Everyone in Skyrim knows about the Dragonborn, even if they don’t know my name.*

*I’ll continue to the shocking and miraculous finale where I joined with ancient dead Nord heroes in*
their afterlife to help them defeat the dragon ruler, Alduin, the World-Eater. If I write that I saved the world, is that boasting too far? Everyone else keeps telling me I did, which is not good for my humility.

Now that she’d settled into this conversational style, the words flowed from her quill. She’d always enjoyed talking with her father. Yes, he could be overbearing sometimes. And sometimes he didn’t seem to know her very well. He’d been away on the Empire’s business too often during her childhood. But when he was around, she had always been his shadow. He would even take her with him to the White-Gold Tower or the College of Whispers, where she’d wait for him outside his meetings, propped up on a bench with a book to pass her time.

She had completely idolized him. She still did, to some extent. Unlike Ulfric Stormcloak, who daydreamed of striking down the Thalmor, her father was taking the fight to them. He didn’t share the details of his secret missions, but when she was in her mid teens, he’d confidentially explained that he and Emilin had never stopped fighting the Dominion. She’d come to Skyrim in the first place because he was increasingly worried for her safety from the Thalmor in Cyrodiil, now that her mother was dead.

But Cecilia was not a child anymore. She’d seen twenty-four years on Nirn, and along the way had developed into a woman with her own opinions and her own stubborn will. And if she had to clash with her father’s wishes, she was ready for that.

I don’t know how you’ll take the news of me being Dragonborn, but I do know you won’t like the next bit. I have promised to marry the Jarl of Windhelm, Ulfric Stormcloak. We have not yet set a date for the wedding, but I don’t expect we will wait very long. Nords rush into everything, and I think I am now at least an honorary Nord. I’m afraid to commit to paper my reasons for accepting the Jarl’s proposal. (I can guess that censors will see this letter before it reaches you.) I must assure you that I am trying to act in the best interests of both my adopted homeland and the one I left behind. I love you very much and I know this will break your heart, to see me wedded to a traitor. I am so sorry, but I can’t beg your forgiveness as I won’t change my mind. I do not, though, ever plan to take up arms against either the Empire or these Stormcloak rebels. I don’t really see any future for peace in Skyrim, but at least I will hold to it myself.

I don’t know what you will do when you get news of me. I hope that you will be able to stick to your greater duty, to continue with your lifelong quest. I certainly do not hold to neutrality in regards to that. And neither does my future husband. The Jarl served honourably in the Great War, and I don’t suppose even the censors can object to me saying he’s a sworn enemy to the Thalmor. (That’s the root of the problems in Skyrim . . . but you can get your political updates from someone else.)

I’m sending my love to Emilin as well, of course. Please think as kindly of me as possible, and if you do ever come to Skyrim, I suppose we’ll hash this out in more detail. I’d appreciate any letter you send me, even if it’s to lecture me for my failings.

Your loving daughter,

Cecilia Amelia Curinwe Varo

P.S. I hope Regulus isn’t too crushed to hear I’m getting married. I know all about you warning him off. But he’s probably already figured out that he’s better off without all the trouble I’d bring.

Regulus Umbranox, now the Count of Anvil, had made several attempts to court her ever since they were in their late teens and both living in Anvil with parents who were close friends. Neither the old Count nor Junius Varo had approved of the prospect, and Cecilia had not been interested back.
Poor Regulus, though . . . The last time, two years ago, after his father’s death, he’d apparently officially asked Junius Varo for permission to court his daughter, and her father had told him to leave her alone or there’d be consequences. As if she couldn’t have turned down Regulus on her own. (And he liked Regulus; Divines knew what he’d do to Ulfric if he could.) It was exactly this type of high-handed behaviour Cecilia bristled at while at home.

When she’d finished writing, she folded the parchment.

“Did you bring wax for a seal?” she called to Lydia.

“You know it!”

She sealed the letter with a signet ring she’d found in one of those dusty Nord tombs. She’d lost her own signet ring before she even got to Helgen. This one had a dragon etched into it, so she’d recently adopted it for sending letters. Her father wouldn’t recognize it, of course, and she had no illusions the wax seal would keep the letter unread along its way, but it looked very proper and official when she’d finished.

She put it into Torbjorn’s hands. He promised that he’d find a trustworthy carrier in Dawnstar who’d take it to Solitude and deliver it to the East Empire Company’s offices there. Best case from thereon: The East Empire Company delivered it to Anvil. More likely they’d turn it over to Tullius immediately. And then it’d be up to the Imperial censors how much of the message ever reached her father. (But she was optimistic; if it went to the highest levels, she thought Titus Mede himself would pass it on.)

Her heart felt much lighter now she’d written the letter.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

Emilin stayed behind with the war council in Breezehome, while Jarl Balgruuf led Junius Varo to find Legate Rikke.

Rikke was already on her feet when they entered the barracks. There was an ugly welt on her neck where the axe had struck, but nothing to show it’d been cut recently. That would be Emilin’s work, Varo thought approvingly. Emilin didn’t know or use much magic, but she closed up wounds faster than most healers. Not elegantly – Rikke was probably going to have a mark there permanently – but soldiers preferred quick jobs that let them live to elegant ones.

Jarl Balgruuf greeted Rikke, then Varo asked if she knew Galmar Stone-Fist.

“Galmar?” Rikke said. “Yes. I know him. He was outside today. Didn’t get near him, though.”

“He’s the Stormcloak commander here,” Varo explained.

“That’s what I’d expected.”

“So I’ve come to ask you what makes him tick. Who is Galmar Stone-Fist?”

Rikke shook her head. “You’re not going to manipulate him, Varo.”
“So you say. Why not?”

“Galmar is one of the most level-headed sensible soldiers I’ve ever served with. He’s not superstitious, he doesn’t waste any time on complicated clever plans, he gets in and does the job that needs doing. I’d be dead a dozen times over if he hadn’t been my shieldbrother in the War.”

Varo nodded. “And he served with Stormcloak back then too?”

“Yes. He’s devoted to Ulfric. Everyone was, you know.”

Balgruuf coughed.

“Present company excepted,” Rikke corrected herself. “But you didn’t know Ulfric before the Imperial City fell,” she addressed Balgruuf. “You probably would have got on then.”

“Here’s an odd question. Did I ever meet Ulfric Stormcloak?” asked Varo.

Rikke and Balgruuf both thought about it.

“Possibly?” said Rikke. “He wasn’t really fit to be back on duty after Red Ring, but he insisted on it. And you were hanging around us Nords every chance you got. I think we all remember you better than you do us.”

“I don’t remember any of you except Irileth,” confessed Varo. “Legate, I remember you from after the war,” he clarified.

“You certainly weren’t there to see us,” Balgruuf chuckled.

True. The days following the Battle of the Red Ring had been a heady, wonderful, horrible time: Grieving for his mother and celebrating their revenge against the Dominion, trying to discover what had happened to his mother’s comrades, and then falling madly in love with Legate Attius, all in the space of a few days. He’d spent a blessed week at Avelina’s side before he received the news that Emilin was still alive in a Thalmor prison. He’d said goodbye to Avelina not knowing if he would ever return. Kissed her for the first time then among the ruins of the Arboretum. A few days later, he’d met Elenwen for the first time in his life, and he still had the scars to show for that encounter. No wonder so much of that week was blurred in his memory of it.

“What would Galmar Stone-Fist do if he found out there were Thalmor hanging around his northern flank?” asked Varo.

“He probably already knows,” Rikke said. “Elenwen showed herself to that Stormcloak we released.”

“Good. Am I right that he’ll try to deal with them?”

“Absolutely right. But they’ll ride off and keep their distance.”

Varo sighed. “Well, I can always hope. How does Stone-Fist treat non-combatants, Legate?”

“Here in the middle of Skyrim? Well enough.”

“But not elsewhere?”

“You know what it was like after Red Ring. We slaughtered every high elf we found. Didn’t matter if they were soldiers or not.”
Varo nodded. He hadn’t gone as far as some of his companions, but it was true they had not looked too closely into their enemies’ backgrounds or tolerated their excuses.

“And I don’t know what it was like in Markarth, but I’ve heard some disturbing stories,” Rikke continued. “They probably aren’t all true. But I can’t just decide they were made up because I don’t like the Forsworn.”

“I believe those stories,” commented Balgruuf. “I don’t know how to apportion the blame there – I’m told Old Hroldir was the one who had his axeman busy chopping off children’s heads – but Ulfric wasn’t a voice for mercy in the Reach.”

“And the Empire was grateful for that,” commented Varo. “Much easier clean-up for us. Well, not in the long run, but . . .”

“And I let you people into my poor city,” muttered Balgruuf.

“I’ll ignore that for diplomacy’s sake,” said Varo. “Here’s my dilemma. There are too many civilians in this city. Specifically, there are too many children. They’re not safe here and they’re a drain on your supplies. What would Stone-Fist do if we sent some of them out?”

Balgruuf reacted to this suggestion with the horror Varo had guessed he would. “This is my city! I will not allow it!”

“Why not? Do we think they’d be in danger? That’s what I’m asking Legate Rikke.”

“If you throw them out the gates into the middle of a war, yes, they’d be in danger,” replied Rikke.

“But if they went out under a flag of truce, shepherded by a neutral party whom the Stormcloaks respect? A ‘neutral’ party you should have tossed out on his ear a few days ago?”

“Forget about it,” growled Balgruuf.

“Legate, your answer?” Varo pressed on.

“If you could somehow talk Vignar Gray-Mane into arranging this truce, it would be safe to entrust these children to Galmar Stone-Fist,” Rikke replied.

Varo gave Balgruuf a triumphant look.

“You’d give them hostages?” demanded Balgruuf.

“Would Stone-Fist use the children as hostages, Legate?” asked Varo.

“No. He wouldn’t. They’re Nord children; the Stormcloak army has plenty of this hold’s soldiers in it. They’d probably even have relatives out there who’d feel obliged to take charge of them.”

“I’m not suggesting we send your own children out,” Varo explained to Balgruuf. “They would make tempting hostages. But the elderly, children, the people you would have sent out already if you could.”

“Vignar won’t co-operate,” Balgruuf objected. “He wants Whiterun to fall as quickly as possible. He won’t help you prolong the siege.”

“He won’t co-operate if he thinks you have me on a leash. But if you let me run mad, I can bring him around, just watch.”
“So, your plan is to make Vignar Gray-Mane think you’re a brutal psychopath who’d sacrifice innocent people’s lives if they stay in the city, and the Jarl is afraid of you,” Rikke summed up.

“Exactly.”

“I can’t take part in that!” Balgruuf protested.

“You don’t have to do anything but plead very honestly with Gray-Mane for the safety of those innocents,” Varo pointed out. “Remember, the end goal benefits both the people you send away and those who stay. We get innocents out of danger and we extend our ability to resist the siege.”

“Your mind works like a Dunmer’s,” said Balgruuf.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Are you saying Irileth would have my back in this?”

“Yes,” conceded Balgruuf. “She’s still upset I didn’t push harder to send out the civilians. All right. I won’t join in on your threats. But I won’t interfere with anything you tell Vignar Gray-Mane. And if he asks me, after you’ve convinced him you’re a bloodthirsty lunatic, I’ll request he negotiates for their safe exit.”

“Good. Of course, once he’s out of the city, he’s not welcome back in.”

“That I can’t agree to. Any Companion of Ysgramor is welcome in Whiterun if he or she does not bear arms against me.”

“That’s perfectly fine. It’ll be Legate Cipius keeping him out, not you, Jarl Balgruuf.”

Balgruuf put his head in his hands. “Why do I feel like I’m going to regret the day you entered Whiterun, Varo?”

“You won’t. You’re going to hold on to Whiterun and protect your people with my help. I promise you.”

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3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Markarth

The young Blades found Embla Attius’ home in Markarth more quickly than they had dared hope. They had rushed all the way from Karthspire Camp to Markarth, keeping off the road as much as possible. Grandmaster Delphine had warned them the Thalmor might already have taken the Attius family, so they were relieved when the first person they asked in Markarth about Embla Attius directed them down an alley just inside the gates.

It was a small home but it looked well-maintained, a very respectable dwelling. Mjoll knocked at the door. Kharjo and Faendal took a few steps back. They did not want to overwhelm the Dragonborn’s family.

The door was eventually opened by a tall white-haired Nord woman with wrinkles on her face and a spring in her step. “Good evening,” she greeted them. “Are you three all together?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mjoll. “Could we talk to you inside? It’s important.”

The old woman looked them over. They were not wearing Blades armour but they were all carrying weapons. “I probably shouldn’t let you in. But only people who mean no harm would look so
dangerous, that’s my experience. Come in.”

As soon as they entered, Kharjo closed the door behind them. Mjoll began at once, “Are you Embla Attius?”

“Yes, that’s my name.”

“The Thalmor are after you, Ma’am. They could be here any moment. We’ve been ordered to get you out of town safely.”

“The Thalmor?” Embla didn’t sound too surprised. “After all these years.”

“Are you the only one in this house?” Mjoll pressed on.

“Yes,” said Embla. “So, you want to whisk me away from the Thalmor. Where to?”

“To a safe spot not far outside Markarth,” Mjoll answered.

“And who are you, may I ask?”

“The Blades.”

Embla now was surprised. “Blades? But they’re all dead.”

Mjoll shook her head. “No, Ma’am. There are two veteran Blades in the Reach. We’re the new recruits; we’ll bring you to them.”

“Blades,” the woman repeated the name. “I can’t say I ever liked you folk. But I understand. We need to go. Let me grab a few things and we can leave in about five minutes. Is that all right?”

“Five minutes would be perfect.”

Mjoll had not expected the old woman to actually be done in five minutes, but five minutes later, Embla Attius was ready to go. She carried a sack over her shoulder, had put on a very large straw hat, and was carrying a walking staff. “Lead me on, young Blades.”

They left the house and hurried down the street. “My son Pavo’s at Kolskeggr Mine,” Embla explained as they went. “We need to tell him too.”

“Yes,” agreed Mjoll. “But the Thalmor are on the road, we can’t-” She cut off as there was a flash of gold in the sunlight beyond the alley.

There, coming through the gates, were Thalmor soldiers. They were leading an Imperial man as their prisoner. And behind them walked the Thalmor Justiciar who’d stopped her and Aerin at the barricade.

“Back,” hissed Mjoll. They ran back down the alley, past Embla’s home.

“That was my son!” Embla whispered as they turned the next corner.

“We were too late,” said Faendal mournfully.

“Better they have one than two,” said Kharjo.

Mjoll nodded. “We’ll get him back later. Right now, we need to get out of this city.”
“They’ll be watching the gates now. How?” asked Faendal.

“I’ll scout the gates. Right now . . .”

“Well, I hate to suggest this,” Embla spoke up. “But I think it’s time I call in a favour. Let’s go visit Thongvor Silver-Blood.”

“Silver-Blood?” Mjoll asked. The name seemed familiar. One of Jarl Laila’s friends, she thought.

“The man’s an ass but he hates the Thalmor. Follow me.” Embla had taken charge of them.

“By the way,” she asked as they made their way deeper into the city. “Is this connected to my granddaughter?”

Mjoll nodded. “Yes. The Thalmor are after her.”

“I see. I suppose it makes sense to them. Grab the Dragonborn’s family and she’ll crumple before them. Won’t happen, but it makes sense.”

“We all owe great debts to your granddaughter,” said Mjoll. “She’s the one who recruited us to the Blades.”

“Typical. She’s just like my son-in-law all over again.”

The woman sounded more annoyed than proud of Cecilia. “Are you worried for her safety?” asked Mjoll.

“I gave up worrying long ago. Round the time my daughter brought home the most dangerous man in Cyrodiil as her husband. After that, every year we don’t all end up butchered by Thalmor agents is a bonus.”

She said this brightly, as if the prospect didn’t bother her. Mjoll didn’t know much about Embla Attius, but she knew one thing: she wanted to be exactly like her when she grew old.

Chapter End Notes

I had midterms and other stuff this week, so I went nearly a week without an update, which in the context of my previous breakneck pace, is very long! I also didn’t get any reviews for the last chapter during most of that time, so can’t tell you how delighted I was to get some today. Just a hello to say you’re reading means the world to me.

Random observations:

- In game, you can’t run into the Summerset Shadows while doing Brunwulf’s radiant quest if you aren’t on the Thieves guild quest. In this world, it can absolutely happen. I always wondered what Ulfric would think of a gang of Altmer thieves working right under his nose.

- Junius Varo is proceeding through Skyrim calling anyone who has a surname by it. Rikke will probably get bothered enough to correct him eventually. Surnames, when Nords have them, are just extra flavour.
- I found out about Valenwood ink in an ESO book when I was searching whether TES had pencils. Apparently, none are mentioned but the Bosmer-made ink is incredibly cool. The book mentioned it was perfect for secret agents to write reports in the middle of a rain storm in a jungle.

If you’re very observant, you might notice that the story isn’t unfolding *exactly* chronologically. It’s 3 Second Seed in every scene, but for instance it’s morning in Windhelm and early evening in Markarth. This bugs me more than I can tell you, but the only solution to avoid this would be to write really long chapters where we only check in on one viewpoint character. So, splitting up the action by days is my solution. Events in the same chapter are happening the same day.

Watch out for a one-shot set eighty years before this story, starring Emilin and Curinwe and taking place in Raven Rock. I’m not sure if it or the next chapter will be up next.
3 Second Seed, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

It's only a matter of time before your whole rotten Empire collapses of its own decay.
No offense. – Ondolemar

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

Ulfric’s orders to bring in all the Altmer in Windhelm had netted about a dozen elves and a very angry young Imperial who was supporting his frail Altmer master. Ulfric winced when he saw the pair. He’d have excluded the dying Master Nurelion from the order if he’d thought of him. Of course he trusted the elf who’d mixed up his medicines since childhood.

“Your ruffians pulled my master out of bed!” Quintus Navale protested.

“Have you or Master Nurelion ever heard of a group calling themselves the Summerset Shadows?” asked Ulfric.

Quintus shook his head, then stopped. “Wait, he’s part of that group?” he pointed to Linwe.

“Do you know him?”

“His name’s Linwe. I’m not allowed to sell him potions.”

Nurelion, who had been resting his head against Quintus’s shoulder, opened his eyes. “Linwe,” he said in a cracked, thin voice. “It seems justice has caught up with you.”

“You know him?”

“Wouldn’t sell him potions in bulk at no profit,” said Nurelion. He began to cough, unable to speak further.

“He’s made some nasty threats since then,” Quintus finished the story for his master, “but he doesn’t have the guts to carry them out.”

“Does no one in this town report these things to the guard?” asked Ulfric wearily.

“Of course they don’t!” That was a woman’s voice, speaking in the purest of Summerset accents. He started at the voice, almost believing Elenwen had come to his own court, then realized it was the merchant Niranye, just come into the Hall. She walked in front of the guards who’d fetched her, her skirts rustling across the floor as she took long strides towards him. “Unfortunately, the mer of this city do prefer to stay out of your scrutiny, my Jarl.” Then she curtsied to him.

He’d seen Niranye many times before about the city, but they’d never spoken. He saw no reason to strike up relationships with mer, even if he tolerated their presence in his city.

“Quintus, you may take Master Nurelion home,” Ulfric directed. Quintus stammered his thanks.

“Niranye,” he turned to the elf woman. “You’ve already been outed as a thief and accessory to
murder.”

“Have I?” Her eyes fell on Linwe and his companion. “By Linwe? He certainly is a trustworthy source.”

“Spare me your lip. You identified him yourself.”

“I can’t deny I know this sad mer,” replied Niranye. “He’s threatened me too many times for that. And I can’t even deny I’ve sold goods for him. But murder?” She shook her head. “Did he really confess to murder? That’s never been his style.”

“I didn’t murder anyone!” burst out Linwe.

Niranye nodded. “You see Linwe specializes in robbing corpses. Halls of the Dead, old tombs, battlefield dead . . . he got his start during the Great War, I’m sorry to say. A Dominion footsoldier with a real talent for looting.”

“You bitch!” burst out Linwe.

“Do you know any other insults?” asked Niranye. “You’re a disgrace to our race, an Altmer with the brain of a dreugh.”

“If he’s a Dominion veteran, what are you?” Yrsarald broke in.

“A successful purveyor of quality merchandise from across Tamriel.”

“Elves don’t leave the Summerset Isles for no reason.”

Niranye smiled. “You’ve never said a truer word, Master Yrsarald,” she said sweetly. “For an Altmer to come all the way to these inhospitable wilds, there are really only two reasons.”

“They’re working for the Thalmor,” said Yrsarald.

“Yes, that would be the first. As agents of the Thalmor. The only other reason to come live in Eastmarch? If one is trying to put as much distance between oneself and the Dominion as possible.”

“And you’re the latter?”

“Oh I wouldn’t say that. Who knows who’s listening?” She looked around the Hall.

“If what you say is true, it would be nearly impossible to pick out the spies among you. I’ve a mind to simply expel you all,” said Ulfric.

“A bit short-sighted, I think,” replied Niranye airily. “It’s never occurred to you we ex-citizens of the Dominion could be a useful resource?”

“Not one I can trust.”

“Unfortunate. Does your Lady feel the same way?”

Ulfric froze. “The Dragonborn has nothing to do with the running of Windhelm,” he said slowly. “Jorleif, take them all to the Bloodworks.”

“Jarl Ulfric,” Brunwulf raised his voice in protest. “You haven’t even talked to most of them.”

“I will talk to them one by one.” He could see Niranye was looking very satisfied with herself, like
she’d got the exact reaction she wanted. “I’m going to my quarters to prepare. We will speak of this later, Brunwulf.” He rose from his throne and ignored Brunwulf’s pointed questions as he walked into the war room, Yrsarald following him.

Once they were in there, he turned to Yrsarald.

“I want to talk privately with Niranye.”

“Do you think she’s Thalmor?”

“I didn’t. But I’ve underestimated her. She’s worth talking to, at any rate. I can’t tell if she was appealing for mercy or threatening me!”

“Threatening you, my Jarl?”

“Bring her here right away.”

When Yrsarald returned with the elf, Ulfric directed her to a chair, then stood before her.

“Who killed Fjotli Cruel-Sea?” he began.

Niranye sighed. “That Imperial. Calixto Corrium. Isn’t that clear?”

“Not with the locket ending up in your companion’s keeping.”

“Linwe could never prove his innocence, I admit that.”

“I wouldn’t call it innocence.”

“Coming upon a murder scene and looting the victim? No. I wouldn’t call it innocence either. You’re going to execute him, my Jarl?”

“Should I not?”

“I would be very grateful if you did.” She smiled a little. She had, Ulfric thought, an objectively charming smile. He could see why she’d done so well in Windhelm, even if her manner sickened him. “I could show you a whole stack of Linwe’s threatening letters.”

“You were his fence in Windhelm,” stated Ulfric.

“Sadly, yes.”

“And yet you’re claiming now he’s your enemy?”

“My blackmailer. All he had to do was whisper to your guards that I’m a thief. You wouldn’t be kind in your judgment, would you?”

“I would – I will be fair.”

Niranye laughed softly. “I see. That doesn’t bode well for me. Nord fairness means putting both nobleman’s and peasant’s head on neighbouring pikes.”

“And Altmer fairness?”

“Does not exist,” she replied gravely. “I’ll answer your questions now we’re alone. Linwe himself came to Eastmarch to stay out of reach of the Dominion. He committed a terrible crime during the
War. He survived the Legion’s annihilation of the Dominion's army in Cyrodiil.”

Ulfric understood. Yrsarald seemed puzzled, so he explained it to him. “The Dominion didn’t welcome back its soldiers who surrendered or fled into hiding.”

“The latter mostly,” commented Niranye. “You didn’t accept many surrenders.”

No, by the Nine, they had not. After the savagery the elves had inflicted upon the Heartlands, killing them seemed almost too merciful.

“And what were you doing during the War?” Yrsarald asked Niranye.

“Lying low in the Rift. It wasn’t a good time to go about Skyrim publicly.”

“Skyrim?”

“I’ve lived in Skyrim for thirty-three years,” said Niranye. “Not that I’ll admit it to my customers.”

“The old thieves’ guild was headquartered in Riften,” Ulfric pointed out.

“So I’ve heard,” Niranye replied. “I wouldn’t like it if people associated me with that organization.”

“Like Linwe did?” he pressed on.

“You can talk to him. I’m sure he’ll accuse me of all sorts of horrible things. But, I hope, my Jarl, you can see my intentions clear through all this murk. I’ve tried to put the past behind me. Left Summerset Isle and never turned back, even if I had to run to the ends of Nirn. Even if I’ve had to reinvent myself a few times along the way.”

Ulfric wasn’t moved by this speech. This criminal had evidently kept one step ahead of the law across Tamriel, changing her identity every time she was in trouble. “Perhaps it’s time you move on, then. Have you ever been to Morrowind?”

She began to laugh. “Oh dear. Now that would be a punishment. I wish you wouldn’t exile me, my Jarl. I love your city, and your people.”

“Love?” he scoffed. “What of Fjotli Cruel-Sea?”

“She was murdered by Calixto, you know that. You may never want to admit it because that would mean Torsten Cruel-Sea tortured an innocent elf to death.”

“Innocent,” repeated Ulfric.

“Innocent of that murder. Torsten’s victim was another ex-Dominion soldier; that’s probably reason enough for you to justify his death.”

It was so clear to Ulfric what she was doing: half-defending the Summerset Shadows to clear herself of Fjotli’s death, then providing him with more reasons to kill Linwe and his companion.

“I am wearying of this game,” he announced. “Murder or no, your sordid connection with these bandits does not recommend you to my mercy.”

“And you will not extend me your lady’s mercy?” asked Niranye.

There it was: the unspoken threat or plea from before that had moved him to this private meeting.
“Why should she show it to you?” he asked.

“We’ve had an entirely amiable relationship,” said Niranye. “As I have with many of your folk.”

“You’re presuming on the fact Lady Cecilia’s bought things from your stall?” snorted Ulfric.

“That’s as much as she knows of me, yes. But I do have a claim on her consideration. About fifty years ago, when I was quite young, lost, and down on my luck in Sentinel, I met a Legion battlemage named Curinwe Varo.”

Ulfric said nothing, waiting for where this would go.

“Mistress Curinwe had her son with her, a little child of two years of age. She’d brought him with her when she was assigned to Hammerfell, though she left his upbringing to his nursemaids and hired an Alik’r warrior as his bodyguard. She asked me if I would join their household and take care of her son.”

“You’re claiming to be Junius Varo’s old nanny?” asked Ulfric. “And you think that would sway Lady Cecilia?”

“I hope it might. Taking that job is why I could never return home after all. I didn’t realize the gravity of Mistress Curinwe’s request then. She wanted her son to grow up speaking and reading our language. To learn all the etiquette and traditions and rituals of Alinor.”

“Why?” demanded Ulfric. “Your people never accepted her. Why did she want to inflict that on another generation?”

“Are you afraid that your lady will do the same, my Jarl?” asked Niranye.

Damn, but she was sharp. He was afraid. He’d welcomed into his court a woman whom he hardly knew, who brought with her magic and grave-robbing and Imperial softness. If they had children, what would they learn at their mother’s feet?”

He didn’t answer her question. “Very well. Since you say you have a claim to Lady Cecilia’s benevolence, I will wait for her return to pass judgment.”

Niranye inclined her head. “Thank you, my Jarl.”

Unsettling. He’d began the morning with the hopeful feeling that everything would work out with the Dragonborn. Rationally, these encounters with a bunch of Altmer criminals should not shake him from that. But they’d stirred up war memories that ate away at him, and then Niranye had reminded him that he was putting his trust in an alien bride.

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3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

Junius had come back from his meeting with Rikke with yet another audacious plan. He wanted Emilin’s help to scare a revered local hero into shepherding civilians out of the city. The poor Jarl looked ill-at-ease, but Irileth and Legate Cipius immediately embraced the plan, promising to confirm Varo’s threats.

They were told that Vignar Gray-Mane had not set foot outside Jorrvaskr since the Siege began. A wise move on his part, thought Emilin. The Jarl was tolerating the local Stormcloak sympathizers,
but the soldiers defending the city were grumbling about the Gray-Manes.

“I know I said we should take down the catapults as soon as possible, but I think we should leave that till we’ve sent out the children and the elderly,” added Junius. “If Stone-Fist thinks he’s still in a strong position, he’s more likely to agree to this.”

“Did you have a plan for taking out the catapults?” asked Cipius. “They’re right in the Stormcloak camp.”

Junius looked to Emilin. “You’re up.”

Everyone turned towards her. Until now their attention had mostly been on Junius, the flashy, overconfident member of their duo.

“Am I supposed to take the catapults down myself?” she asked.

“I’ll help,” replied Junius. “But this is your field of operations.” He turned to the others. “Don’t let her modesty fool you. She’s the best skirmisher and scout the Legion ever had.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” said Emilin quickly. “But we’ll do our best. Do you have any spell scrolls available?”

“Farengar’s been laying in a stock, hasn’t he?” Irileth asked the Jarl.

“I think so. I’ll introduce you to my court wizard, Emilin,” Balgruuf promised.

“Oh you have a court wizard?” asked Junius.

Junius’ surprise was a bit too obvious, but Balgruuf took it in good humour. “We aren’t all magic-hating barbarians. There’s a court wizard in most holds.”

“Do they fight?” asked Junius.

“No.”

“Not since the Oblivion Crisis,” added Irileth.

So, in fact, they were a bunch of magic-hating barbarians, thought Emilin. Then again, when Emilin considered all the mages she’d known, she couldn’t really blame anyone for hating magic.

As for the war outside the gates, Cipius had decided on an evening sortie. “They’re still in disorder. Can’t waste your gift, Varo. But that’s about as fast as we’ll be ready.”

“Count me in then. Now I have to go pay Master Gray-Mane a visit.”

“Direct Vignar down here if he wants to talk to the Jarl after that,” Irileth said. “Can you find your way up to Jorrvaskr?”

“I’ve procured a very eager guide. Fellow by the name of Nazeem?”

Commander Caius and Jarl Balgruuf burst out laughing.

“Is that a problem?” asked Junius. “He didn’t look like he was busy.”

“No, it’s perfect. He can show you up to Jorrvaskr,” replied Irileth. “Best be on your way.”
Emilin followed Junius out into the street where their new Redguard guide was waiting for them. Junius explained that he’d met Nazeem on his way back from the barracks and Nazeem had volunteered to take them around Whiterun. Nazeem informed her that he was one of the most prominent citizens in Whiterun, and a confidant of the Jarl. Remembering the Jarl’s laughter, Emilin doubted it.

Jorrvaskr was towards the top of the city, off an area called the Wind District. Nazeem pointed out the local points of interest as they went along.

“Why’s there a dead tree up there?” Junius asked as they climbed up the steps to the Wind District.

“That’s the Gildergreen. It’s a blight on the Plaza, isn’t it? But it’s sacred to Kynareth, so the Jarl won’t plant a new tree.”

“Destroying sacred sites is generally a bad idea, yes,” said Junius. “Wait . . . is that a shrine to *Talos*?”

Emilin peered through the bare branches of the tree at the large statue and the shrine’s sacred symbol. “Yes! It is!”

“I can see why the Jarl doesn’t want the Thalmor in here.”

Nazeem sniffed. “The shrine itself is very elegant, a classic example of religious statuary, but its priest—”

But Junius was already bounding towards the shrine. Emilin followed after, hoping he wouldn’t do something stupid like publicly pray there.

What Junius intended to do became moot, though, when the priest standing at the base of the shrine saw him.

“Blasphemer!” shrieked the priest. “You come here to mock Mighty Talos, infidel, but Talos watches and his judgment will be terrible!”

“I- what?” stammered Junius.

“Your costume,” Emilin reminded him.

“Talos who once was man now —“

“Oh, you saw me outside?” Junius interrupted the priest.

“Be gone, blasphemer!”

“Let’s just go.” Emilin grabbed Junius’s arm. “That’s Jorrvaskr right there, right?” She pointed to what looked like a big upturned boat up the steps to their right.

“Go then, bow down to your elf masters, Imperial.”

“Wait, are you saying she’s my elf master?” asked Junius.

“Yes, I’m your elf master, and I’m ordering you to leave this fool priest alone! Come on.” He let her pull him away now and they started up the steps to Jorrvaskr, Hall of the Companions.

At the door, Junius thanked Nazeem for his guidance. Nazeem insisted that they needed him to introduce them to all the foremost Companions, but Junius firmly dismissed him.
They stepped through the door into a dim warm smoky hall. Tables ran around a long central firepit in which a fire was blazing. Junius started coughing almost immediately. Since he’d recently fought his way through a smoke-choked battlefield, Emilin figured the effect was mostly psychological.

“Who are you here to see, dears?” An elderly woman with a broom approached them.

“Is Vignar Gray-Mane here?” Emilin asked while Junius quieted down.

“What does the Legion want with me?” called a voice from the far end of the room.

Junius walked towards the voice. “You’re lucky I found you, Gray-Mane. My name’s Junius Varo and I’m the Legion battlemage assigned to this city by General Tullius.”

Emilin followed after Junius. Vignar Gray-Mane was a white-haired weather-beaten Nord with an amazing mustache, sitting behind a table by himself.

“Varo, eh?” Vignar greeted him. “Curinwe Varo’s boy, aren’t you?” His gaze turned to Emilin. “And you’re her wood-elf sidekick, right?”

“Emilin of Silvenar,” replied Emilin, trying to recall if she’d ever met this Gray-Mane before. The Imperial Legion was a very large organization and Curinwe had been Imperial Battlemage to the Emperor at one point. Everyone knew her in some capacity.

“Right. That’s the name. I served thirty years in the Legion. I’ve forgotten more soldiers’ names than I ever knew, but I don’t forget faces.”

Junius seemed taken aback. No one had told them this Gray-Mane had been a professional Legionnaire. “So you’ve turned your back on the Legion?” he blurted out.

“Seems like the Legion turned its back on us,” replied Gray-Mane. “I shouldn’t have to tell either of you that, though.”

“When did you quit the Legion?” asked Emilin.

“Right after the War. Got out with my conscience and pride intact. Before you lot started taking down the Ninth’s shrines.”

“I haven’t been in the Legion for forty years,” said Emilin.

“So you weren’t involved in any of that business? How about you, Varo?”

Junius said nothing. Emilin gave him an odd look. Had he been? She hadn’t been in any state to pay attention to his actions in the first years after the War. But she knew the Legion had been called in to enforce the White Gold Concordat in Cyrodiil on quite a few occasions: dismantling shrines, dispelling worshipers. She’d always thought of Junius as a loyal worshiper of Talos, but he was also a loyal servant of the Emperor . . .

“I don’t regret anything I did,” said Junius. “It had to be done.”

“Then we don’t have much to talk about,” replied Vignar.

“You’d be surprised. I have work for you to do.” Junius’ voice had now turned cold. “I arrived in the city today and am undertaking its proper defence.”

“If you think that you can harness the Companions for your political cause, you’ll be disappointed,” replied Vignar.
Junius shook his head. “I’m asking you to arrange a truce.”

“Another truce? Are you already losing so badly?”

“Not at all. I’ll do everything I must to win. And that does not include feeding a bunch of useless mouths.”


“I’m not talking about the Companions. This city is packed with civilians who have no business being here. I want every child and invalid out by tomorrow dusk. Go talk to Galmar Stone-Fist and arrange that.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you care about the people you want to rule, Gray-Mane? Have you ever been in a city under siege when the rations run out? Seen children dying? I have.”

“The rations will not run out,” replied Vignar. “One way or another, this siege will be wrapped up before you know it. We don’t drag out war up here.”

“But I do. I’m not giving up this city, not even if we have to eat our own dead to survive.”

“I can give you tips on that,” put in Emilin. There were very odd occasions her people’s reputation as cannibals was an advantage. Seeing Vignar’s horrified face was one of them.

“I’m cutting rations to all non-defenders by half starting tomorrow,” continued Varo. “And I’ll reduce them further if I need to.”

“You don’t run this city, Varo,” said Vignar. “The Jarl’s a man of honour.”

“Jarl Balgruuf isn’t very happy with me, true. But his housecarl and commander are backing me up. Same with the Legion.”

“Varo, you would be dead by my sword before I ever allowed such a scheme to unfold in Whiterun,” replied Vignar with an eerie calmness.

“You’d have an arrow through your throat before you could touch him,” replied Emilin.

“Or we could all live,” said Varo. “Including a bunch of innocent children who should have been sent to your hold’s outer villages already. Whiterun’s houses are already burning. Why are they even here?”

“Their parents are afraid of the dragons,” Vignar replied.

“That’s what everyone tells me. And they also tell me my daughter defeated the World-Eater himself. There’s more chance of burning to death here than outside these walls.”

“You bluff dangerously,” said Vignar.

“I don’t bluff. I’m warning you what will happen if you don’t exercise your prized neutrality for the good of Whiterun’s people. I’m going to try to arrange a short truce, but I’m already told it won’t happen without your input.”

“You’re very sure Galmar will agree to my requests.”
“I’ve been assured of that by those who know him well.”

“Legate Rikke?” guessed Vignar.

“Yes, she’s come here with me.”

“Can’t see her liking this. But she’s sold her soul to the Empire.”

“As I have I,” said Junius. “You asked if I was involved in the Talos cult’s suppression? Yes. I was. I’ve smashed centuries-old altars with my magic, Gray-Mane. I’ve presided over executions of Talos-worshiping rebels in High Rock and Cyrodiil. I’ll do what I must to gain victory.”

“Thank the Nine your mother never lived to see that,” spat Vignar.

“I thank the Nine every day we’ve survived and we’ll fight again,” replied Junius, putting his hand to his chest, where Emilin knew his wife’s Amulet of Talos hung. “I have to get back to fighting. See you around, Gray-Mane.”

Vignar didn’t reply. Junius turned and strode out of the Hall.

“Do you think he was convinced?” Emilin asked, once they’d left Jorrvaskr.

“Not really. But I don’t think he was completely certain I was bluffing. With any luck, that’s enough.”

“I wasn’t certain you were bluffing by the end.”

“Thank you.”

“The Talos suppression, was that true?”

“Somewhat. There were a bunch of little local uprisings right after the war, you know that.”

“They weren’t all about Talos,” she pointed out.

“No, but it was one reason people rebelled. Same as here.”

“And the altar smashing?”

“That was true. I don’t regret it. Gave the Justiciars fewer hunting grounds.”

“You’ve never told me about it.”

“You were a mess. We tried to hide all that ugly stuff from you.”

She understood. After losing Curinwe and most of her friends, she’d almost lost herself in that Thalmor dungeon. Her mind and spirit were shattered, and after Junius rescued her, she was not whole for a long, long time.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Markarth

The Silver-Bloods’ doorman did not rush to welcome the heavily armed young Blades into the Treasury House. He’d let Embla in, he explained, but her companions could wait outside in the street.
till Master Thongvor decided whether they should be admitted.

Embla was having none of that. She walked by the doorman, then called for Mjoll and the others to follow. The doorman tried to shut the door on them, but Kharjo had already placed his foot in the door, and the ensuing altercation resulted in the screaming doorman being knocked back into the front counter. The woman behind the counter backed away into a corner. Faendal had quickly closed the door to the street while this was happening, so they hoped no one outside had noticed. Markarth’s stone walls shut out most sound.

Inside, though, the doorman’s screams fetched the guards almost immediately. They were led by a lean muscled Nord in armour who had already drawn his sword. Yet, he checked himself when he saw Embla bearing down on him.

“Dame Embla?”

“Put that sword away, Thongvor. This is a social call, not an invasion.”

Thongvor Silver-Blood shot a dubious look at his doorman. Mjoll let go of the man, who slumped to the floor.

“Your man thought he could leave my companions out on the street with the Thalmor,” explained Embla.

Thongvor paled. “The Thalmor are outside?”

“Oh I hope not. For all our sakes. But they’re on the prowl. They’ve taken my son prisoner, Thongvor. What do you know about that?”

“Pavo?” asked Thongvor. “He was in town yesterday. He didn’t visit you?”

“He dropped in yesterday morning. He’d come in from Kolskeggr with the survivors of a Forsworn attack and was taking them up to see the Jarl. After that, I know nothing.”

Thongvor rubbed his shaved head. “Ahh. After that, things got bad. A Thalmor wizard’s been murdered or kidnapped and the goldskins are searching the Reach for her.”

“How did my son get involved in that?”

“He wasn’t. He brought the survivors in, like you said, and I saw him and his orc friend heading back to the mine. But our dear friend Ondolemar went out to the area as well, looking for his missing wizard.”

“We just saw Ondolemar and his crew marching my son in through the Gates.”

“I don’t know anything about that.” Thongvor looked sincerely troubled. “Have they come after you, Dame Embla?”

“They will,” said Embla. “My friends here got to me first, though. We need to get out of the city without the Thalmor noticing. And we need to figure out how to retrieve Pavo. You can help with both those things, Thongvor.”

“I – I’d be happy to help you evade the goldskins, but if they’ve taken him up to the Keep, what can I do?”

“What would Ulfric Stormcloak expect you to do?” asked Embla.
Thongvor winced. He looked around the room at the Silver-Blood employees. “I’m not in communication with rebels,” he said stiffly.

“Pffft. Shall I tell my granddaughter that was your answer?”

“Your granddaughter?” he asked uncertainly.

“My granddaughter Cecilia Varo, who has apparently betrothed herself to that rebel Jarl you want for High King.”

Thongvor’s jaw dropped. “You’re the Dragonborn’s grandmother?”

Embla nodded. “It’s not exactly a secret. My daughter Avelina married Junius Varo, and Cecilia’s their child. But I don’t go around boasting about her. I came back to Skyrim to get away from all that fuss.”

“I’ve met Junius Varo,” said Thongvor. “Years ago. When I was in the Legion . . .”

“And did you leave the meeting with an unsettling desire to punch him in the face?”

“I – uh . . . yes.”

“I knew we were kindred spirits, Thongvor,” said Embla merrily. “I don’t care for this Stormcloak rebellion. I’m a Solitude girl, myself, even if I’ve been away most of my life, and my husband sunk too many years of his life into his Empire for me to give up on it. But you were a good soldier, still are I’m sure. We have a common enemy to fight, and you can finally repay that life debt.”

Thongvor did not reply immediately.

“Thinking it all through?” asked Embla. “When did you grow so wily, my boy?”

“When I grew out of boyhood,” replied Thongvor. “I’ll do my best to aid you, but I can’t guarantee anything. Will you stay in my house as guests, then?”

Embla nodded. “Thank you very much. Let me present my new friends . . . what are your names again?”

“You don’t even know these people?” Thongvor cried out in horror.

“They’re adventurers who ran into Justiciars are the road and came running to warn Pavo’s family,” explained Embla. “We didn’t have time to go through introductions.”

“The cat and the elf are the Dominion’s people!” Thongvor protested.

“Oh I don’t think so,” said Embla. She turned to Kharjo and Faendal. “Are you?”

“This Khajiit does not love the high elves.”

“There’s a reason I’m in Skyrim,” added Faendal.

Mjoll decided it was high time to interrupt and get the introductions over with. “I am Mjoll, called the Lioness, and I am an adventurer who’s lately been living in Riften. Faendal’s a lumberjack from Riverwood, and Kharjo was a guard for a trading caravan. Till I persuaded them both to join me on this adventure.”

“What are you doing in the Reach?” asked Thongvor.
“Hunting for Red Eagle’s tomb. You ever heard of it?”

“An old wives’ tale,” said Thongvor scornfully.


“It wouldn’t be a challenge if they didn’t,” replied Mjoll. “But now we’re tangled up in this business with you and the Thalmor, it’s probably best we pass on the tomb.”

Thongvor seemed to buy the cover story Mjoll had rapidly invented. He relaxed and ushered them out of the foyer and into his home.

The Silver-Blood mansion had not seemed large from the outside but the carved passages and rooms extended far back into the cliff. This was the famous Dwemer-built City of Stone. Mjoll felt a little afraid. She’d nearly died within the last Dwemer ruin she’d entered. If they were tracked here, would this be their tomb? No, she reassured herself. The Silver-Bloods would have a secret back exit somewhere.

Thongvor led them to a room with cushioned stone benches and bookshelves, ordered his sister-in-law to bring them food and drink, then promised to find out what had happened to Pavo. Mjoll would have preferred a proper chair, but the cushions were better than nothing.

After Thongvor had left the room, Kharjo stretched out on one of the benches. “Rest while we can,” he commented.

“I couldn’t sleep on that,” complained Faendal. He was examining a scrap of golden metal, probably a Dwemer artifact of something.

“What’s this life debt you mentioned?” Mjoll asked Embla quietly.

“My daughter Gina saved Thongvor’s life during the War,” Embla explained. “Gina was killed during the Forcing of the Niben, but Thongvor paid his respects to us after the war. If we didn’t have that connection here . . . well, the Silver-Bloods basically run the Reach and they aren’t exactly upright, model citizens.”

“Just like the Black-Briars in the Rift then,” said Mjoll.

“From what I’ve heard of them, not a bad comparison. I think our Silver-Bloods edge your Black-Briars out for viciousness, though.”

“But we’re trusting Thongvor?”

“He’s not the worst of them. He’s also Ulfric Stormcloak’s man in the Reach. He’ll be Jarl if the Stormcloaks take over.”

“You said you don’t support the rebels.”

“I don’t. But right now they’re bound to support my granddaughter. Let’s take advantage of that.”

“Is Cecilia really going to marry Jarl Ulfric?” asked Mjoll.

“That’s a very good question. It doesn’t make much sense to me,” said Embla. “But politics makes strange bedfellows. Literally sometimes.”

Mjoll had thought she’d known the Dragonborn; she’d trusted her enough to let Cecilia recruit her
into the Blades. They’d hunted down dragons side by side. And then, everything had turned strange. Cecilia and Lydia had come to Sky Haven Temple nearly a month ago, friendly and talkative as ever. They’d talked with Mjoll about their plans that afternoon: Not just defeating the dragons but the impossible dream of taking their fight to the Thalmor. Lydia had joked that they should take on the Riften Thieves’ Guild as an intermediate step between dragons and Dominion. Cecilia had then gone to speak privately with Delphine and Esbern and exited that meeting with a downcast expression. She’d barely acknowledged the other Blades, only saying that she and Lydia would be leaving immediately.

Grandmaster Delphine hadn’t spoken much of Cecilia after that. Esbern had told the young Blades that he’d designed a plan for the Dragonborn to trap a dragon within Jarl Balgruuf’s palace, which had reassured them. A couple weeks later, Delphine and Esbern had gone to High Hrothgar to meet with Cecilia. Mjoll prayed that all was right between them after all. Yet, after the news came of Cecilia’s victory over Alduin, when Faendal asked if they should go to her or wait for her here, Delphine had replied that they probably wouldn’t see the Dragonborn for a while.

Lately, news had spread that Cecilia was marrying Ulfric Stormcloak. Was that the reason for Delphine’s new coolness towards Cecilia? Delphine and Esbern had served the Empire. Perhaps Cecilia had told them that day of her betrothal to Ulfric?

There was no use in all this speculation. She would have to hear the truth some day from Cecilia’s lips. She prayed that the Dragonborn had not deserted the Blades, but worried in her heart that she had.

Pavo Attius had come along quietly with the Justiciars, but he had refused to direct them to his mother’s home in Markarth. As if that would make any difference. Ondolemar left two Justiciars to find Embla Attius’s home, then continued up to Understone Keep.

Igmund’s guards seemed troubled that he’d brought in Attius as a prisoner, but they’d learnt to keep their noses out of Thalmor affairs. Annoyingly, he also found that the Nord brats were still hanging about the place and they’d now made friends with the dogs.

“How long are these children going to be here?” he demanded of one of the Keep guards.

“I don’t know.”

“Do they not have relatives to take them in?”

“If they do, they’ll be back in Dragon Bridge, most likely. Might take a while till their folk can fetch them.”

During which time they would tumble around under Ondolemar’s feet with the dogs. He needed a drink.

There was a special store of Colovian brandy in the room he used as his private study. He proceeded there where he directed Attius to take a seat on a stone bench, while he poured himself a glass. On second thought, he poured Attius a glass as well. It was important to strike just the right note in interrogation, to show your subject there were favours to be won as well as punishments to avoid.

Then he settled down in his own chair, the comfortable one he’d commissioned after the first few horrible months of living in Markarth.
“We can discard those lies about your dead family and start over with the truth,” Ondolemar began conversationally.

Attius didn’t touch his brandy. “Those weren’t lies. I lost a brother and sister in the War. But my other sister, Avelina, survived. Cecilia Varo is her daughter.”

“Where is your sister now?”

“Avelina died about two years ago. That’s why my niece came to Skyrim in the first place. To live with my mother.”

“Your brother-in-law sent her away from Cyrodiil?”

“My brother-in-law . . . do you know who he is?”

“Of course. The famous Imperial battlemage, Junius Varo.”

“The thorn in the Thalmor’s side,” said Attius with a small smile.

That was an accurate description of the man. Here in the wilds of Skyrim, Ondolemar did not hear the full details of Varo’s depredations, but the man had famously never let his hatred of the Dominion rest.

“Is he? A very small thorn, I think.”

“My niece is now the big thorn, huh?” replied Attius. He was grinning.

Ondolemar wondered about that. Any power vested in the Varo family was a problem, but many contradictory forces made up the landscape of Skyrim, and Thalmor plots were woven around them all. Ulfric Stormcloak and the King in Rags had been the keys to open up this land. The Empire and Stormcloaks were perfectly balanced in a war that spent all Skyrim’s blood, money, and soul. The Dragons had been an unforeseen complication, and so too the Dragonborn. But the weavers that had designed the rest of the tapestry were surely ready to work them into the larger glorious pattern. Ondolemar’s job was only to carry out their commands.

“We have no quarrel with dragon-slaying,” he responded lightly.

“I heard she did some Thalmor-slaying,” said Pavo.

Ondolemar pursed his lips. “Wherever did you hear that?”

“Slaughtered the entire Thalmor Embassy is how the bards are telling it.”

That was an exaggeration, but not as much of one as Ondolemar could wish. Eight mer had died in the Embassy infiltration, including the Third Emissary himself. “Nonsense. The Dominion’s emissaries are in good health. They even attended the recent peace conference. Mistress Elenwen is very much looking forward to meeting you and your mother, Attius.”

The man stiffened. Good. He’d heard of Elenwen.

“You mustn’t think we’re ignorant of your family, Attius. I had no idea Varo had married Falco Attius’ daughter, but tracking your family is a responsibility of our people in Cyrodiil.”

The Cyrodiil branch had messed up, of course, even letting Cecilia Varo arrive in Skyrim without warning him. And they hadn’t sent up much useful information about her. Or about dragons either. The last time Ondolemar had met with Elenwen, she’d been angrier about their lapses than he’d ever
seen her. He’d been very relieved it wasn’t with him this time.

“Why are we even having this conversation?” Attius demanded. “You don’t want anything from me. I’m just your hostage.”

“You might make a good intermediary if you could conduct yourself decently.”

Attius stared. “Me?”

“While your mother stays with us,” explained Ondolemar.

“I see. Layer upon layer, eh? Have you already figured out who to kidnap to get my mother to bend? Because she won’t stand for me co-operating with you.”

“These are delicate operations,” Ondolemar admitted. (Those layabouts in Cyrodiil had better get off their arses and track down any other relatives.) “But we have all the time in the world, my dear Attius.” He gestured to the brandy. “Drink up while you still can.”

Attius spat in his brandy.

“Your loss,” said Ondolemar and took a sip of his own. “This is war loot, by the way. Thirty years-aged fine brandy from your homeland. As I said, time is with us.”

(It was a good metaphor for the Dominion’s path to victory over men. But, on a purely practical level, grabbing that barrel of high-grade new brandy during the confusion of the Dominion’s final rout was probably the best decision he’d made in his life. After joining the Thalmor, of course.)

This pleasant conversation was interrupted by one of the Justiciars he’d dispatched to find Embla Attius. She waited until he’d sent Pavo Attius out of the room, then gave him her report.

“Commander. We went to Embla Attius’ house. She wasn’t there.”

“Are you looking around the city?”

“We’re doing that.”

“She’s probably out on an errand.”

The Justiciar nodded. “Her house wasn’t disturbed. But we’re not the only ones looking for her. We were told three armed warriors were also asking about her location.”

“Three? Do you have descriptions?”

“A Nord woman, a Khajiit, and a male Bosmer. They were wearing leather armour and carrying weapons. They entered the city not long before us, but we haven’t seen them yet.”

Ondolemar bit his lip. “I think we must proceed with the assumption they are Blades.”

“Blades, Commander?” This Justiciar had not been involved in the previous investigation, he realized. Most of his mer had no idea there were Blades on the move.

“You do know who the Blades are?” he asked. This one was young for an active Justiciar, not old enough to have fought in the War.

“Yes, but didn’t they all die in the War?”
“They’re like skeevers. They multiply in the dark. Warn your fellows. But don’t be overly afraid. We’ve crushed them before and we will crush them again. For good.”

Chapter End Notes

Since Cecilia’s party are rowing up to Winterhold, they missed a look-in this chapter, but next chapter events at Winterhold College begin.

If you ask Niranye how long she’s been in Windhelm, she answers “Just got here from the Summerset Isles. Lots of opportunity in Skyrim.” But then in the Summerset Shadows quest, she admits that she “used to fence for the Thieves Guild in Skyrim a long time ago.” Presumably she’s trying to hide her past identity as a member of the Thieves’ Guild, and frame herself as an innocent newcomer, but man, that is a weird alibi for moving into Windhelm. “I just came from the Summerset Isles!” sounds more like a threat than anything . . . All of which is to say that Niranye has guts, and I love her so much.

I wrote a one-shot prequel fic to this one: The World Will Never Be The Same.

About eighty years before the events of Skyrim, a young Bosmer thief meets the love of her life in Raven Rock.

Emilin meets Curinwe.

So there's a chance to meet Curinwe in the flesh, rather than people's memories of her. I didn't really get any feedback for it - and only one review for this last chapter - so as usual, I love reviews and I love answering questions.
3 Second Seed, Markarth

Chapter Notes

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. – Nerien

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

3 Second Seed, 4E 202, Understone Keep, Markarth

Late in the evening Ondolemar received a summons from the Jarl. This was unusual. Igmund did not hold court at this unseemly hour, yet here he was in his throne-room waiting for Ondolemar’s arrival. His steward and housecarl were with him and standing at the bottom of the first set of steps was Thongvor Silver-Blood, looking smug as ever.

Ondolemar ignored him and walked up the steps. “I am at your service, Jarl Igmund.”

“Thank you, Commander. Have you had any success finding your lost Justiciar?”

“I am making progress. Is that what you wished to speak to me about?”

“I don’t know if there’s a connection, but I have been informed you’ve taken into custody a miner named Pavo Attius.” Igmund’s gaze flickered to Thongvor Silver-Blood. That man had protested on Attius’ behalf then?

“I am investigating the possibility of a connection.”

“Do you have any evidence that Attius was involved in this disappearance?”

“With due respect, Jarl Igmund, that is why I’m investigating.”

Thongvor coughed loudly.

“Commander Ondolemar,” Raerek the steward now spoke up. “While we will do everything we can to aid your investigation, taking suspects into custody is the Jarl’s purview, not yours.”

“Not if the person we take into our custody has violated the terms of the White-Gold Concordat,” Ondolemar reminded him.

“You have proof Attius has violated the Concordat?”

Ondolemar nodded. “In the course of my investigation, I’ve uncovered evidence that Pavo Attius and his mother Embla are adherents of the Talos heresy. I can show you the items confiscated from their home in Markarth, if you like.”

“You have Dame Embla in your custody as well?” asked Igmund sharply.

“No. She has vanished. I am requesting that you issue a bounty for her arrest.”

Raerek spoke up again. “This business isn’t going to stay within these walls, Commander. It’s come
to the Jarl’s attention that this miner is a close relative of the so-called Dragonborn, Cecilia Varo.”

“So-called, eh? They’d welcomed her here before as Dragonborn, but now they were putting some distance between themselves and Ulfric Stormcloak’s future bride.

“Are you saying that relationship puts him above the law?” Ondolemar asked pointedly.

“No I’m not saying that,” snapped Raerek. “But we’re probably going to hear from Solitude about this. Are you trying to pick a fight with the Imperial Legion?”

“You know that I have always upheld Imperial law in this province. Which includes the provisions of the White-Gold Concordat.”

Thongvor Silver-Blood snorted.

“Yes of course,” said Igmund, ignoring Thongvor. “But surely you can show some discretion . . .”

“Why, Jarl Igmund?” Ondolemar asked.

Igmund looked to Raerek who nodded. “We might as well broach this now, my Jarl.”

“Very well.” Igmund leant forward, his voice lowered. (Thongvor started up the stairs a few steps to hear better.) “We’ve received tidings from Solitude that Junius Varo is in Skyrim and has returned to active Legion service.”

Ondolemar was not surprised. It was high time that absent father came looking for his wayward daughter. Thongvor, however, gasped. “What?” he exclaimed.

Igmund ignored Thongvor again. “Commander, perhaps you are willing to explain to Varo why you’ve imprisoned his brother-in-law and are hunting for his mother-in-law, but I want nothing to do with it.”

“Is he coming to Markarth then?” asked Ondolemar. Meeting Junius Varo was not something he looked forward to, but if he had to do it . . .

“Not at this moment, no,” said Igmund. “He’s gone off to fight the Stormcloaks at Whiterun.”

“Then we should have this investigation satisfactorily resolved before he returns,” said Ondolemar. He was enjoying the expression on Thongvor’s face: it’d taken on such a mottled shade of purple. Had he assumed everything was going Ulfric’s way now? He had. Of course he had.

“We do want this investigation resolved,” Igmund continued.

“You want it enough to sacrifice a war veteran whose only crime is being the Dragonborn’s uncle?” asked Thongvor.

“Not his only crime. May I remind you all once again, worship of Talos is strictly prohibited by Imperial law,” said Ondolemar.

“Imperial law,” Thongvor growled.

“Do you have something you would like to confess?” Ondolemar asked.

Ondolemar regularly pretended not to notice Thongvor Silver-Blood’s open adherence to the Talos cult, sometimes when the man was ranting about Talos only ten paces away. There were strategic reasons for that – a divided hold was good for Thalmor interests. But it galled him to have to play
stupid and delighted him now to see Thongvor squirm before him.

“Commander, you can keep Attius detained as long as he stays in the Keep under our observation,” Igmund broke in. “You may not remove him from Markarth.”

This was a wise move on the Jarl’s part. It kept the Thalmor from moving Attius out of the Legion’s reach. When the inevitable order came from General Tullius to hand over the Dragonborn’s family, Igmund could send the Legion to Ondolemar’s doorstep.

It was also unwise for Ondolemar to co-operate. The best place for Attius right now was Northwatch Keep. He’d move Attius – and hopefully, his mother too – the first chance he had. But not while the Blades were waiting on the road. He still had no idea where they were based, how many of them he was facing, and over the last few months, more and more Thalmor patrols across Skyrim had been found dead or gone missing. It wasn’t safe yet to transport prisoners out of Markarth.

“We’ll keep him here, yes,” he lied. When the time came to move Attius, he’d move quickly.

“Faleen, you’ll check on Attius periodically,” Igmund instructed his housecarl.

Ondolemar nodded. “You’re very welcome to do so. Now if may take my leave? My bed is calling me.”

He walked out past Thongvor with a smile on his face. Bed could wait a little longer, while he instructed his Justiciars to focus their search on the Silver-Bloods’ holdings in the city.

4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Stormcloak Camp, Whiterun

The third full day of the Siege of Whiterun dawned on the battered Stormcloak army. Galmar was proud of his soldiers. Junius Varo’s bizarre entrance had confused but not broken his army. As a result of Varo’s schemes and the Whiterun defenders’ supporting sorties, he’d not been able to take the barricades last night as planned. But tonight, he vowed he’d do so.

He was outlining these plans to his commanders when he received a message from Vignar Gray-Mane. The Legion troops lined up before Whiterun had tossed the letter over to their Stormcloak counterparts, which made Galmar immediately suspicious of its origins. He began to read the letter, then swore loudly.

“Sir?” asked Hjornskar at his elbow.

“Balgruuf’s asking for a truce to negotiate whether to starve Whiterun’s children and elderly.”

“What?”

Galmar read out the letter. Vignar had a lot to say, some of it profane, regarding the crew now running Whiterun. Jarl Balgruuf apparently had lost control of the city, with the Legion and his bloodthirsty guards all jumping to follow Junius Varo’s orders. Varo planned to starve the citizens to drag out the siege, unless the Stormcloak army let those people depart the city.

Vignar emphasized that he would not stand by and let Varo do this. He’d fight Varo himself before he saw children starved. But if Galmar could allow it, the safest place for the children of Whiterun was certainly beyond the sieged city. Vignar wanted to know if he could come under a flag of truce.
to discuss this with Galmar.

“I can’t believe that fiend is the Dragonborn’s father,” said Hjornskar.

“The witch-elf blood runs strong in him,” said Galmar.

Hjornskar looked astonished “Elf blood?”

“Aye.” Then he realized this could be taken as a comment on Ulfric’s choice of wife. “His daughter takes more after her Nord ancestors.” He hoped so much that was true.

Uneasily Galmar sent back the message that Vignar was welcome. He was wary of tangling himself up in another of Varo’s schemes, but at least Vignar could give him more information on the mood inside the city.

A couple hours later, Galmar and Hjornskar were waiting about half way between the Whiterun Stables and the Stormcloak camp, watching Vignar Gray-Mane walking across a farmer’s field alongside a small figure in the Legion’s red cloak. As they came closer, Galmar could make out more of the details. The Legion’s envoy was a wood-elf with light-brown skin and chin-length wispy dark red hair.

He turned to Hjornskar. “The elf is Varo’s. She’s ex-Legion, seems like she’s back in the service.”

“Should we be watching out for magic?” asked Hjornskar.

“No. She was a scout, and she is – well, she was an honest dealer. Though the way everyone else has changed . . . We’ll keep an eye on her.”

He stepped forward to meet the pair.

“Welcome, Vignar Gray-Mane.”

“Thank you for meeting with me, Galmar,” said Vignar.

“And Emilin,” Galmar added. “I won’t say you’re welcome but you’re protected under this truce.”

Emilin’s eyebrows quirked up. “Oh you already know my name?”

“We’re all old Legionnaires here,” Galmar replied. He’d seen Emilin quite a few times during the War, scurrying through the streets of the Imperial City. People always noticed Curinwe Varo’s elves. They were on their side, but they still made the ordinary soldiers jumpy to have about.

And then Emilin had been taken prisoner in the same battle as Ulfric. They’d both been assumed dead, both suffered in Thalmor captivity, and separately escaped it. Even though they’d never met up and compared notes, Ulfric obviously remembered the wood-elf with fellow-feeling. He’d even mentioned her lately as a probable positive influence on Cecilia Varo. (Ulfric could be weirdly optimistic about people for someone who had been kicked in the teeth so many times by those he wanted to trust.)

“Does that mean we can work this out together through our brotherly Legion bond?” asked Emilin archly.

“Don’t push it too far, elf.”

She laughed. “I won’t. I’m actually here to make a bunch of terrible threats on my master’s behalf.”
“There’s nothing amusing about this,” snapped Vignar. “Galmar, you read the message I sent you?”

“Aye. Emilin, is there nothing the Empire holds sacred? Our gods, our lands, our *children*?”

Emilin shrugged. “I could argue we hold them more sacred than you. None of you Nords had the sense to get them out of a besieged city.”

Galmar ignored her. He was not going to be drawn into an insincere argument. “I can’t take charge of a bunch of children and cripples, Vignar. Our army doesn’t have the ability to support them.”

“I’d send them on to the outer villages,” Vignar explained. “Last year’s harvest was very good.”

“That it was,” said Galmar. “You must have good stocks laid up in the city.”

“Those supplies are primarily for the active fighters’ use,” said Emilin.

“So you really plan on starving the people of Whiterun?”

“Do you?” she asked.

“We won’t bear your guilt for you. We aim to take the city before you’ve done any real damage, but if we can’t do that in time, we’re not a party to your cruelty.”

“What are your Whiterun soldiers going to think, if they hear you had a chance to avoid disaster?”

“Shut your mouth, elf. Vignar, step aside and talk to me without this harpy listening in.”

“I’m part of the delegation,” Emilin protested.

“You’ll soon get the answer you came for,” replied Galmar. “Hjornskar, wait with her.”

Emilin didn’t protest further and Vignar followed Galmar. “She’s sharp of hearing,” Vignar warned as they walked.

“Aye, we’ll put some distance between us.”

When they stopped, Galmar went straight to the point. “What do you want me to do, Vignar?”

Vignar Gray-Mane was going to be the Jarl of Whiterun, he was a trustworthy soldier and patriot, and beloved by most of the Hold. Galmar valued his judgment.

“The impulse for this plan is nauseating, but I’d be grateful if you let me shepherd at least the children out of Whiterun,” said Vignar.

“I can see that. But if this siege drags on a longer time as a result of this, and more parents end up dying because of that, have I really done these children a good turn?”

“Any parent would sacrifice their life to see their children live, Galmar.”

“If I do accept, I’ll send some of the children to Windhelm and Rifteen.”

“As hostages?” Vignar sounded appalled.

“No. As guests till they can safely return. We’ll take on some of the burden of supporting them, that way. I want all Skyrim to see that the Stormcloaks act fairly by your hold’s children, while the Empire plays games with their lives.”
Vignar nodded. “Thank you, Galmar. I knew I could depend on your honour.”

Realistically, of course, some of the Imperial supporters within Whiterun would interpret their children’s situation as hostages. That perception might be useful, even if he truly did not plan to keep them captive as leverage against their parents.

He continued to discuss with Vignar whom he would let out from the city. Children thirteen years and younger, they both agreed to, but Galmar was reluctant to add the old and infirm in general.

“Old men and women can fight as well as many young whelps,” he pointed out.

“This old man can.” Vignar smiled. “But I wouldn’t send out anyone I knew was really a strong fighter. I’d send out a few older folk who can shepherd the younger ones. There’ll probably also be a handful of nursing mothers and older siblings who can help with the very little ones. But it’ll be my choice who goes and who stays.”

“Then I’ll trust your judgment. Let’s go back and tell your new elf friend.”

Emilin quickly accepted the terms he offered. (He did not mention his plans to re-locate some of the children.) “Do you want to sign a memorandum of understanding?” she asked.

“No. If you’re planning anything ugly, your signature won’t be worth the paper you write on. And if your signature is worth anything, your word is as well.”

“We can be on our way then,” said Vignar. “We have a lot to organize.”

“So soon.” Emilin’s eyes lingered on the Stormcloak camp beyond them.

“You’re not going to see anything, Emilin,” said Vignar.

“What would I be hoping to see?” she asked.

“Sending an old scout to do a diplomat’s job? It’s obvious why you were chosen,” said Galmar.

“You know the Legion, never overlook a possible advantage.”

“Well, it’s a harmless tactic on your part, nothing like the devilry Varo’s up to.”

“True enough,” she replied.

“I expected a keener defence of your boss.”

“Great mages aren’t good people. He’d be the first to tell you that.”

Galmar stared at her. “You know that, do you? And yet . . .”

“And yet I’ve lived with mages my whole life? Well, I don’t claim I’m a very good person myself.”

She turned to Vignar. “All right, let’s go.”

“A moment,” said Galmar. “I’d like to ask you something, Emilin.”

She turned back to him. “Ask away.”

“Why are you going about Skyrim with Thalmor?” he demanded. His troops were looking for the Thalmor that had been spotted with Varo the day before, but had not yet found them.

“No, I’m asking how can you, who survived Vilverin, stomach it?”

She looked down at the ground. “It’s amazing what you can stomach, if you have to.”

“Ulfric Stormcloak never did.”

She looked up now and met his gaze. “Are you suggesting the Thalmor broke me?”

“Did they?”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “That’s an awful question to ask of a complete stranger.”

“What about asking an old comrade-in-arms?”

“In the loosest sense. We’ve never fought together.”

“Not me. But Jarl Ulfric fought by your side.”

Emilin stared at him. “When?”

“Vilverin. As far as I know, you’re the only two who ever returned from there.”

Emilin said nothing.

“He was no more than a boy then. He volunteered when your commander came looking for soldiers who’d lay down their life for the Emperor. I’d have either kept him back or gone with him – but I was sick in bed that day, and then he was gone.”

“I’m sorry,” said Emilin simply. There was no longer any trace of the arch, mocking attitude she’d maintained throughout this encounter.

“Sorry? That was nothing to be sorry about. You, me, Ulfric, we were all going to die there for the people we loved.”

“I’m sorry for what came after.”

“But not sorry enough to defy them.”

A very small smile appeared on Emilin’s face. “The Thalmor might disagree with you there.”

“Could you not speak more clearly, woman?”

“Not about this. Can I ask you some questions in return?”

“Go ahead.”

“How is Cecilia?”

He glared at her. “In good health and with friends at her side. I’m not her keeper.”

“No one is.”

“Does her father recognize that?”

Emilin paused, as though she had to think about this. “To some extent,” she said at last. “It’s hard for
parents to let go. Especially when everyone else is ready to hurt or take advantage of your child.”

“Are you trying to claim Junius Varo wouldn’t let the Empire take advantage of the Dragonborn?”

“It’s not a test I’d like to put him to,” replied Emilin. “But we don’t have her right now. Your Jarl does. And as an old family friend, I’m worried for her.”

“She’ll come to no harm in Windhelm. The Jarl’s treated her with honour.”

“Well then . . . I suppose that is the best news I could hope for without seeing her myself. Thank you, Galmar.”

He nodded an acknowledgment. It felt as though they’d come to some sort of understanding here, though he couldn’t say exactly what. She was still serving that bastard of a mage.

She and Vignar began their way back to the City. In a few hours, they’d hear more about the arrangements they’d made within. He expected the children to be sent out tomorrow morning, and that would bring its own complications. No matter the negotiations, the barricades needed to come down tonight, so he went back to his camp to begin planning for tonight’s raid.

Those who only saw Elenwen in the luxury of the Thalmor Embassy would never have guessed how well she could function without a shred of luxury or comfort. She didn’t enjoy camping in a damp cave overlooking the plains of Whiterun, but she’d risen high among the Thalmor for a reason. Suffering in the Dominion’s service was to be embraced, even small, irritating inconveniences such as the damp cold of this cave. (She’d forbidden her two followers from lighting fires in this place; smoke would attract the Nords.)

The three of them were taking turns patrolling outside. Amirion was outside now while Elenwen and the foot soldier Naryon rested on their bedrolls.

Amirion’s voice came from the entrance of the cave. “Mistress Elenwen, Valmir’s back.”

“Why?” She was too tired to move.

“He says the mask is gone.”

Elenwen sat up and rushed out to face the unfortunate agent.

Valmir was waiting outside with the two soldiers she’d left with him. Their instructions had been to start back down from Labyrinthian, but to return the next day to retrieve the mask in Valmir’s camp. Then they would head back to the Embassy.

“How did you find us here?” she demanded.

“They didn’t,” Amirion assured her. “I spotted them coming down the road.”

“My instructions were for you to return to the Embassy, Valmir,” she continued.

“After we’d got the mask, Mistress Elenwen,” Valmir replied. “When we got there, it was gone. We thought you should know at once.”

“I knew that Bosmer was up to something!” exclaimed Amirion.
“You knew nothing and did nothing,” Elenwen said flatly. “You’ll never learn to avoid deception if you can’t acknowledge when you’ve been fooled. We were completely taken in by Varo up there.”

“So, going into the Labyrinth . . .” began Amirion.

“- was an excuse to give Emilin time to search for the mask.”

“Did they already know we were looking for the masks?” asked Valmir.

“I don’t know. You said enough to make Varo suspicious. In fact, Agent, it may have escaped your notice, but Amirion and my soldiers here were not to know either. Since all of you have now been let into this confidence, I expect you to keep it. Unlike the agent here.”

Valmir began to apologize profusely, just as he had up in Labyrinthian when she’d got him alone. She ignored him. She’d have to use him again – the Thalmor in Skyrim were short-handed – but first opportunity she was sending him back to Alinor for re-education. Maybe they could reshape him into a more reliable tool.

“The Legionnaires either took the mask with them to Whiterun,” she continued, “Or left it up in Labyrinthian. Probably the latter.”

“Why do you think that, Mistress Elenwen?” asked Amirion.

“The same reason I didn’t take the mask. We were traveling together; we’d have opportunities to take it back. It’s nearly certain that the Bosmer hid it within the ruins.”

“Shall we go back to search for it, Mistress Elenwen?” asked Valmir.

Elenwen sighed. “You don’t have the skills to do that. It’ll take some serious divination magic, with all the magical background energy up there. I would need a team of mages.” She paused. “Yes, go look for it. Alone.”

Valmir’s face fell. “But you said . . .”

“You’ll most definitely fail, but I’m giving you a chance. Take it.”

“As you command, Mistress Elenwen, but -”

“Gather your stuff and go. For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion.” Elenwen began the official dismissal. “Auri-El watch over you.” No one else was going to.

“For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion,” Valmir managed the reply.

She turned her back on him to address the others.

“The Stormcloaks are still searching for us, but they’re easily avoided and they must know the trail’s gone cold. I’m going to send some of you out to retrieve Varo’s baggage.”

“Varo’s baggage, Mistress Elenwen?” asked one of the soldiers who’d accompanied Valmir.

“He and his companions had a lot of it, but we’ve observed they did not get their horses all the way to the city. They had to drop the baggage somewhere in these plains. While they were out of our sight, down some old badger hole or mine shaft, we imagine. Amirion has already marked out the possible search area on a map.”

“Could the mask be in that baggage?” Valmir had looked up from his pack.
“I believe I dismissed you,” Elenwen replied curtly. “No, it’s not likely there’s anything important in there. The Legionnaires will have taken their most valuable items with them. But we can not afford to overlook anything.”

“Mistress Elenwen,” the soldier named Urena spoke up, “How is the attack on Whiterun proceeding?”

“From our point of view, very well. It looks like both sides are settling in for a long drawn-out siege, but even if Varo manages to lift it, he’s already done enough to drag out the war.”

“He moves fast,” demurred Amirion.

“He’s wily but he doesn’t know Skyrim or how Nords think. His petty tactical victories will drive Nords to Ulfric Stormcloak’s banner. Aping Tiber Septim,” she laughed derisively. “How does he imagine that will play with barbarians who’ll lay down their lives for Talos?”

She stopped. Her family amulet was quietly pulsing against her skin. “Just a second, there’s something I need to attend to.”

She stepped back into the cave, then pulled out the small golden eagle with red ruby eyes. The eyes had turned green.

A message from her older brother. Green meant Danger from within the Thalmor.

She bit her finger and let a drop of blood fall on the eyes. The amulet stopped pulsing and the tiny rubies turned back to red. She’d confirmed she’d received the message. And that was all she could do right now. Likely there was a more detailed sending waiting for her in her drop-spot near the Embassy, but it would be too dangerous for him to attempt contacting her directly.

Danger from within the Thalmor, hmmm . . . There was always danger. Eager ambitious youths, wizened old wizards who’d plotted their way to the top. But for her family to warn her directly, there must be something very substantial underway. It probably involved the new Third Emissary, Calerion, then. She already had her eye on him. He’d tried to humiliate her at her first briefing to the new Embassy staff, drawing everyone’s attention to her relationship to the Varo family. Who were his backers in Alinor and what were they planning?

This was the worst time possible to be out here in Whiterun Hold. She trusted the Second Emissary to be loyal to her, but if Calerion had brought along his own subordinates . . . She hadn’t picked any of the replacements and extra mages Alinor had sent to the Embassy.

The obvious answer was she needed to neutralize Calerion. Immediately. Send him out on his own wild-goose chase, far from the Embassy. Now where could he go? Not Labyrinthian, he might be able to find the mask, but she certainly didn’t want him to find it. Then the perfect answer popped into her head. The missing Agent Sanyon. That idiot mer had gone out looking for a non-existent Talos shrine in Falkreath and never come back. She’d order Calerion to go find him. Falkreath was in the Stormcloaks’ hands now, which made it even better. A sending from an unsecured location such as this was dangerous, but she didn’t care if anyone scried her orders to Calerion. It’d be all for the good if some enemy was waiting along his route to take him out.

Calerion was a fool to defy her. No one ever took on Elenwen and won.

No one but Junius and Cecilia Varo, a small inner voice reminded her.

She just hadn’t finished with them yet, she told herself. One day, once she was allowed it, she’d complete the vow her father had made and wipe out her treacherous uncle’s bloodline.
4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold

Just as Ulfric had warned, there were Imperial ships off Winterhold. One of them had sighted the Shatter-Shields’ boat and given chase. It’d been an exciting, terrifying half hour after that, but Torbjorn insisted they’d never been in any real danger. Longships could easily evade the great Navy ships. They’d threaded their way through shallow waters between small islands, and quickly lost the Imperials. A short while later, they’d reached their planned drop-off point, some miles East of the College, where there was a shallow slope down to the water between the cliffs. They’d have to hike up to the main road from there, and then head into town and through there to the College. Their route would pass the town’s guards - Legionnaires now the town was in Imperial hands - but if the guards somehow recognized Cecilia in her hooded cloak, they could quickly outpace them to the College. Brelyna had assured them that the Arch-Mage still barred the local guards from entering the College.

Brelyna had assured them that the Arch-Mage still barred the local guards from entering the College.

Cecilia thanked Torbjorn for his assistance. He’d be back from Dawnstar three days from now, and planned to wait here a full day, should she want to return to Windhelm. Torbjorn heavily implied this was her duty, that Jarl Ulfric needed her by his side, even if he said he was all right with her running off to the Mages’ college. Cecilia reassured him that she didn’t want to stay long in Winterhold either, and unless it was an emergency, she’d be there waiting for his boat.

They said their farewells and began the climb up to the road.

“So what did you think about Cecilia’s new friends?” Lydia asked Brelyna once they were out of earshot.

“Are they friends?” asked Brelyna.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

“I should hope we are,” said Ralof quickly. “You’ve seen how Windhelm’s rallied around you, Cecilia.”

“Yes, everyone’s been very welcoming,” Cecilia answered.

“For now,” Lydia said. “They’re infatuated with the Dragonborn, they don’t know my thane yet.”

“They already know she’s a mage,” Ralof argued. “If that hasn’t scared them off, Cecilia’s fine.”

“They don’t know her politics,” replied Lydia.

“They’ll have to learn to respect her neutrality. The Jarl will set them straight about it.”

“J’Zargo likes your Jarl.” Everyone turned and stared at J’Zargo in surprise. He flicked his tail. “He is not the storybook ogre his Stormcloaks boast of. He lets the Dragonborn boss him around. J’Zargo is looking forward to seeing the rest of this story.”

“He doesn’t let me boss him around,” Cecilia protested.

“Really? Does your Jarl always let Khajiit in his city?”

“You were in handcuffs,” Onmund reminded him. “That’s not really a victory for tolerance.”

“He was in handcuffs because he stole a soldier’s Amulet of Talos!” Ralof shot back. “There’s
“nothing intolerant about that.”

“The handsome Stormcloak has a good point there,” said J’Zargo. Ralof’s face turned a deep scarlet.

“I don’t want to talk any more about this,” Cecilia said. She herself was unsure of her position in Windhelm, of how deep the prejudices and hatred ran in its citizens and within Ulfric’s heart. She was not in the mood to hear the question debated by her companions.

They trudged on through the snow without talking. The going became easier once they’d reached the road, and then Lydia broke the silence with a song. It was a Nord traveling song, perfectly suited to match their pace, with a lot of Heys and Hos. Ralof and Onmund joined in immediately, and once they’d grasped the chorus, the others joined as well.

After they’d finished all twenty verses, J’Zargo tried to teach them a Khajiit song. It was a complete failure, since none of them could make the purring sounds properly, but it was a merry failure, and they were all laughing when they at last entered the town of Winterhold.

“Halt!” the Legionnaire on sentry duty called out to them. “Oh, you’re the young mages from the College,” he added. “Back already?”

“With new students,” replied Brelyna. “This town is booming today.”

“It’s a lot livelier than I thought it’d be,” replied the Legionnaire. “What with the navy and the Thalmor hanging around.”

“Please don’t tell me our Special Aldmeri Advisor’s brought along more friends,” replied Brelyna. “A few. You don’t sound like you get along with your fellow elves, wizard.”

“I’m Dunmer, they’re not my fellow anything.”

“Ah, that reminds me. Legate Telendes wants to talk to someone in the college about teaching our soldiers some basic spells. But none of your mages will meet with him.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Brelyna promised.

The Legionnaire let them go. As they reached the bridge to the college, Ralof was spluttering.

“Spells.”

“The faculty doesn’t want to get involved in your war,” Brelyna assured him.

“J’Zargo wonders what the legate will pay.”

“No you don’t,” said Onmund hastily.

Just as it was the first time Cecilia had come to Winterhold, the bridge was guarded by a female Altmer mage. This time, however, it was not the friendly Faralda but the supercilious Nirya. Cecilia stepped forward to greet her and Nirya’s expression soured even more than usual.

“Well, look who’s finally decided to grace us with her presence? Everyone is looking for you, Cecilia.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“The Arch-Mage, the Thalmor, the Legion, and this very distinguished-looking mer who claims to be a Psijic monk,” explained Nirya.
“Did you let them all into the College?” asked Cecilia.

“Not the Legion. Or the two Justiciars. They’re staying down at the inn. But Master Ancano’s brought in another mage. The so-called Psijic goes in and out as he pleases.”

“I’m trying to avoid the Legion and the Thalmor, Nirya,” said Cecilia.

“Of course you are. I’m not dim, Cecilia.”

“Where’s this Psijic right now?”

“In the Library last time I checked. Ignoring Ancano’s new friend, probably.”

“And Ancano?”

“Oh he’s practically living in the Hall of Elements now.”

“I’ll go see the Arch-Mage,” said Cecilia.

“Are you bringing this Nord in with you?” Nirya pointed at Ralof.

“Yes. He’s my follower.”

“Has to demonstrate a spell first, then.”

“He’s my follower; he doesn’t,” snapped Cecilia.

“I never had to,” Lydia pointed out.

Nirya sniffed. “Faralda would neglect her duty.”

“Nirya, I don’t have time for this.”

“You can go on. They can too, if they pass the entrance requirement.”

“All right. That does it. I’ll be at the Frozen Hearth. Tell the Arch-Mage you wouldn’t let my friends in.” Cecilia turned away.

“Wait. This would be an opportunity to teach your Nords magic,” said Nirya as if she was making an amazing offer.

“They don’t want to learn magic.”

“Fine. Let them wallow in ignorance.”

Nirya at last let them past. Ralof swallowed hard when they came to the places where the walls had crumbled away from the bridge, but didn’t comment. The rest of them were used to it.

They arrived inside the College courtyard and immediately ran into the person Cecilia was most anxious to avoid: Special Advisor Ancano.

“More apprentices?” he surveyed the group. Cecilia pulled the hood down over her face.

“Yes,” said Brelyna shortly.

“You’ve actually found some Nords who . . . “ he stopped. “Wait . . . is that Cecilia Varo?”
His eyes were far too keen.

“I hear people have been asking for me,” she replied, letting the hood fall around her shoulders.

“Yes. Does that surprise you?”

She shrugged. “Some of them do.”

“I’ve no interest what the Legion wants with you and you can talk to the Justiciars after I’ve settled this. What I want to know is why there’s someone claiming to be from the Psijic Order here in the College, and why they’re asking for you by name.”

“Then you’re doomed to disappointment.”

“How so?”

“They’re asking for me, not you.”

“We are going to have a little chat with him and find out exactly what he wants. I will be the one asking the questions.”

Cecilia shook her head. “These aren’t the Dominion’s lands. You have absolutely no power over me.”

“As Special Advisor to the College of Winterhold –“ he began.

Lydia snorted. “That title and two septims will get you a cup of ale.”

“Thank you, Lydia,” said Cecilia. “I’m going up to see the Arch-Mage, Advisor. I can’t stop you from following.”

“Lead the way,” he said shortly.

“Brelyna, come up with me,” Cecilia ordered. Arch-Mage Aren wouldn’t appreciate if she showed up in his quarters with six people in tow, but she wasn’t going anywhere alone with a member of the Thalmor. “Onmund, you give Ralof the tour of this place. Lydia and J’Zargo, get our rooms ready. I’ll be back at the Hall of Attainment as soon as I find out what’s going on here.”

Her friends rapidly complied and scattered off on their various missions.

“You’ve taken to command easily,” said Ancano quietly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I must admit, I’ve under-estimated you. Not as a mage, your skills are mediocre to say the least. A sad falling-off from what should have been an enduring magical lineage.”

Cecilia started laughing. A year ago, Ancano’s insults to her developing magical ability might have had the power to wound. She’d grown up in the shadow of legends, starting with her own father, and often worried about living up to her family’s expectations. Now she was a living legend in her own right and Ancano’s insults sounded petulant and jealous.

“Is that what you wrote in your report to the Thalmor?” she asked.

“You think very highly of yourself.”
“No, I’ve just never under-estimated you. What is it you people like to say? The Divines are found in
the details.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Ancano.

“I always heard it was the Daedra in the details,” said Brelyna.

“To a Dunmer, maybe,” said Ancano viciously.

“Both viewpoints would presume the details were important,” said Cecilia lightly. “The Thalmor
don’t do anything by half measures, particularly paperwork. Aren’t I right, Advisor?”

“Come along. We are wasting our time in this miserable courtyard.”

They entered the antechamber to the Hall of Elements. Through its gates, Cecilia could see the orb
they’d found in Saarthal, hovering and glowing as it had down in the ancient ruins. But they turned
instead through a door that led up to the Arch-Mage’s quarters.

Before the Arch-Mage’s door, Ancano stopped. “You are not a subject of the Dominion, but these
Psijic monks are and let me remind you that if you meddle in our internal affairs, it would be a direct
violation of the White-Gold Concordat.”

“Do you think I consider myself bound by the Concordat?” asked Cecilia. It would be a more
understandable threat if the Thalmor didn’t already know she’d killed a large number of their
Embassy staff. That went far beyond meddling, didn't it?

“Your Empire will bind you to it at last.”

“The Empire binds me to nothing.” She pushed open the door.

The Arch-Mage was standing a few steps in, and he began to greet her, then stopped. He stood as if
frozen with his arm extended towards her. The light in the room changed, from soft candlelight to a
harsh white glare, and snowflakes seemed to dance across her vision, although she could feel
nothing. This had happened before in Saarthal, and like then, a tall Altmer was standing just ahead of
her in the robes of a Psijic monk.

“Please do not be alarmed. I mean you no harm, Cecilia Varo.”

“Brelyna?” Cecilia turned towards her friend, who was frozen at the door. Ancano stood similarly
still.

“She can’t hear you. I’ve given us a chance to talk privately, but I’m afraid I can't do this for long.
We must be brief. My name is Quaranir and I am a member of the Psijic Order. The situation here at
your College is of dire importance and attempts to contact you as we have previously have failed.”

“I’ve been busy.”

He nodded. “Yes, we have heard. It bodes well for your success in this matter.”

“What is this matter?”

“This object... The Eye of Magnus as your people have taken to calling it. The energy coming from
it has prevented us from reaching you with the visions you have already seen. The longer it remains
here, the more dangerous the situation becomes. And so I have come here personally to tell you it
must be dealt with.”
“Why me?”

“You set this chain of events in motion at Saarthal.”

“That’s not an answer. You’re obviously a greater mage than I am. If it’s so dangerous, why aren’t you taking care of it?”

“You must understand, the Psijic Order does not typically... intervene directly in events.”

That was what they always said in the old stories. But the chronicles told of how the Psjics advised the kings and queens of Summerset’s kingdoms, and in time even offered their advice to some of the Septim emperors.

“I know that. But you’re intervening now, aren’t you?”

“To some extent, I am. My presence here will be seen as an affront to some within the Order, and as soon as we have finished, I will be leaving your College. The rest will be up to you.”

“So you’re bending your principles but not entirely breaking them?”

“Something like that. I assume you already know something of our Order’s history and philosophy.”

“You were advisors to the great kings and queens of old.”

“That is not our Order’s most important role, but it is one very pertinent to your situation. We do not meddle; in dire necessity we may advise. I would elaborate but this conversation requires a great deal of effort on my part. My Order will not act directly. You must take it upon yourself to do so.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Are you asking because you mistrust the Psijic Order or me as their envoy?”

It was a very perceptive question. “I’d trust a real Psijic. I know the Order hasn’t bent its knee to the Thalmor, and I really would like to believe that you haven’t turned your back on the rest of Tamriel. But how do I know you’re what you claim to be? You could be an agent of the Thalmor yourself.”

“You are right not to trust too easily. But I believe my advice may reassure you. I will not tell you what you must do, as such an agent would.”

“What are you telling me?”

“As you may have learned, this object... The Eye... is immensely powerful. This world is not ready for it. If it remains here, it will be misused. Indeed, many in the Order believe it has already... Rather, something will happen soon, something that cannot be avoided. Your efforts should be directed towards dealing with the aftermath, but we cannot predict what that will be. The overwhelming power of the Eye makes it difficult for us to see the future.”

“That’s reassuring?”

“For a woman who fears manipulation, it should be. I have drawn your attention to the danger, now it is your responsibility to learn what you must do to be ready for it.”

“I don’t know where I’d even start!”

“I fear I have already overstepped the bounds of my Order, but I will offer this: seek out the Augur of Dunlain in your College. His perception may be more coherent than ours.”
“Who's the Augur of Dunlain?”

"He was once a student here at the College. Now he is... something different. Ask your colleagues where you may find him. Now, I am afraid I must leave you. We will continue to watch over you, and guide you as best we can. It is within you to succeed. Never forget that."

“I'm sorry were you about to say something?” Arch-Mage Aren spoke out. Cecilia realized the scene was no longer frozen.

"Well, what is the meaning of this?” demanded Ancano.

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't understand,” said Quaranir.

"Don't play coy. You asked to see Cecilia Varo. Here she is. Now what is it that you want?"

Quaranir’s eyes met Cecilia’s for a moment, then he looked away. "There's been a misunderstanding. Clearly I should not be here. I shall simply take my leave." He moved towards the door.

Ancano was absolutely livid. “What? What trickery is this? You're not going anywhere until I find out what you're up to."

"I'm not 'up to' anything. I apologize if I have offended you in any way."

“You come here, you seek out a known enemy of the Dominion –“ Quaranir was through the door. “We'll see about this,” said Ancano through gritted teeth and followed after him.

“A known enemy of the Dominion, are you now, Apprentice?” the Arch-Mage commented.

“I consider that an honour, sir.”

“What just happened?” asked Brelyna, who was looking dazed.

“I'm... I'm not sure,” replied Aren. “A monk from the Psijic Order, here, after all these years, and then he just leaves. I hope we didn't offend him somehow."

“Do you think he was a real Psijic monk?” Cecilia asked.

The Arch-Mage drew his eyebrows together. “Yes, I believe he was. Without going into the theory of it – which is far beyond young apprentices - I could sense him as he really was. I have no doubt he was one of their Order.”

“Did he tell you what he wanted?”

“Beyond asking for you, he never said, not in the full week he spent here with us. Very strange indeed.”

“I came at your summons, Arch-Mage. What would you have me do?”

“You came here to speak to him. If he will not speak to you, the matter is at a rest. You may wish to return to your studies here, now that you have the time to attend more fully to them.”

“I don’t have the time. I left my betrothed’s side just to come here for you. And I’m worried about that orb. What are you going to do with it?”

“We are studying it. Talk to Master Tolfdir if you are interested in our progress. But you must have some faith in the mages of Winterhold. We are keeping careful watch over the Eye.”
Cecilia sighed. “Have you ever heard of the Augur of Dunlain?”

Aren frowned. “Has Tolfdir been telling stories again? I thought I made it quite clear that this was a subject inappropriate for conversation.”

“So you do know about the Augur of Dunlain,” Cecilia pressed.

“I do not engage in old, sensational college gossip. And neither should Master Tolfdir.”

As if to end the discussion, he turned his back on her. That was all right, though. He’d already told her who to approach next.

“Are we going to find Master Tolfdir?” Brelyna asked on the stairs outside the quarters.

“You know it.”

Chapter End Notes

Re-writing canon scenes so as not to be completely familiar and thus boring is a challenge. In this case, the scenes with Ancano and Quaranir play out a little differently because of Cecilia’s connections to the Dominion, and the fact that as a well-educated mage, Cecilia would know a lot more than the usual Player Character about the Psijic order’s history. I was delighted to find while researching their that they are per the lorebook “The Old Ways” basically the Confucians of Tamriel as well as space/time bending wizards.

Emilin’s come to a decision in this chapter, but we’ll have to wait till next chapter to learn what that is.

Thank you for the review for last chapter, Lulzy. As usual, my heart bleeds for reviews, even if they're just to say you're reading, and I’m always up to answer questions.
4 Second Seed, Whiterun

Chapter Notes

One lives for the things he is willing to die for. - Galmar Stone-Fist

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

Once they’d returned to the city, Vignar Gray-Mane lost no time in leaving Emilin’s side. She’d offered to help him arrange the children’s safe exit, but he insisted he could handle things with Legate Cipius himself. That wasn’t unexpected. She and Junius had devoted themselves to playing the bad guys here. She couldn’t complain if people hated them for it.

Junius was delighted to hear of their success. But when she brought up her conversation with Galmar about his family, he shut down.

“Are you trying to make me feel sorry for Stormcloak?” he asked, after she told him Ulfric had been captured at Vilverin.

“He’s a pitiable man, for sure.”

“I don’t have any pity to spare for traitors.” This was all he’d say about that, but she could tell how unsettled he was by this piece of information. Junius had idolized his mother, and if it’d been any other situation, Emilin knew he would have felt a great debt to any veteran who’d volunteered to die alongside her. But in this moment, he was right. He didn’t have any pity to spare.

Which left it up to her to finish Curinwe’s business here.

She left the Legion headquarters in search of one specific woman, one who knew Ulfric and Galmar, and whom she was certain would understand.

Rikke was up on the walls in the Cloud District looking over the plains.

“Hey, Legate” Emilin called out to her. “Got some time to talk?”

She was looking none the worse for her encounter with a Stormcloak axe, Emilin was pleased to see. It’d been a close call, a few more inches and the axe would have cut an artery.

“Are you flirting with me?” asked Emilin bluntly.

Rikke blushed. “Maybe?”

“Thought so,” said Emilin smugly. She wasn’t very surprised. She and Rikke had hit it off almost immediately. She’d love to find out how serious Rikke was, but this was not the time for that.

“Unfortunately, it’s business not pleasure today. I’m going to Windhelm and I need your advice.”

“Windhelm?” Rikke’s eyes opened wide.
“As a private citizen, not on Legion business, and not with Junius’ approval. I’ll leave him a letter.”

“Why do you want to go to Windhelm?”

“Haven’t seen Cecilia for more than a year, she’s the closest thing I have to a granddaughter.”

“Does that make Junius Varo the closest thing you have to a son?” asked Rikke.

“A bit. Don’t ever tell him I said that.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Rikke put her hand to her chest as if she was swearing an oath.

Emilin paused. And then plunged in. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but I feel like talking about it somehow. I loved Curinwe. Always did. We were best friends since I was fourteen. I joined the Legion just because she did. And eventually, I wanted more than just friendship.”

Rikke nodded. She said nothing, but her eyes were so sympathetic . . . Emilin continued the story.

“When Curinwe married Junius’ father – I didn’t take it very well. I didn’t ever want to make trouble for her, but it was way too difficult for me to be around her and her husband. So I put a bit more distance between us. Finally took a Legion assignment away from her; I wasn’t around when Junius was very small. But that marriage broke down – nothing to do with me – Leontius Varo wasn’t a bad man, but he didn’t trust his wife. People said Curinwe was too overbearing about everything, that she was so paranoid about the Thalmor she was losing her mind. And he half-believed it. So they ended up separating when Junius was about seven.”

“And then?”

“And then, a couple years later, I got my happily ever after.”

“Does Junius know?”

“That I was his mother’s lover? Yes. It wasn’t – we really didn’t keep it a secret, just private, given everything she’d already been through. Nowadays, Junius and I never talk about her together, which probably sounds awful but it’s only because the grief’s still too raw – for both of us.”

“That I can understand. There are names I haven’t said for years, but they are heavy in my heart.”

“I thought you could. I was with Curinwe till the day she died. And that’s the other reason I have to go to Windhelm. Galmar Stone-Fist told me Ulfric Stormcloak was with us that day. He was one of the young Legionnaires who volunteered for our suicide mission.”

“I didn’t know that. I knew he was captured before the City fell, but he didn’t want to talk about it after, and I didn’t pry.”

“I thought I was the only survivor from Vilverin. And now . . . I don’t know what I think this will accomplish, but I need to meet him, one old comrade to another.”

“Ah . . . so that’s why you’re telling me.”

“Yes, as his old friend, I want your advice. How should I go about this?”

“As openly as possible. Don’t creep into the Palace of Kings and surprise him.” Rikke had apparently accepted her plan, which was very reassuring.

“No sudden moves?”
“Not unless you want to be shouted into a wall. But seriously, he has a short temper and you like to poke at people, Emilin.”

“Friendly teasing.”

“Is that what you were doing to Elenwen?”

Emilin grinned. “All right. I’ll try not to poke Ulfric.”

“Traveling to Windhelm right now is going to be difficult. I’m sure the Stormcloaks patrolling the road have all been warned to watch out for you and Junius.”

“I can always sneak around patrols. And city guards. But I’ve been considering a quicker route.”

“There aren’t any dangerous mountain passes that’ll get you there faster,” Rikke teased.

“No. I’m wondering if your friend Galmar would send me to Windhelm.”

“Oh!” said Rikke. “I don’t know if that’s brilliant or suicidal.”

“I was hoping you could tell me that.”

“I don’t know . . . He might. But it doesn’t sound like you made a very good impression on him. He might think you’re planning to assassinate Ulfric.”

“I don’t know about that. I think he almost wanted me to take an interest in Ulfric. Like he thought it was my duty.”

“Well don’t you know all of Tamriel revolves around Ulfric Stormcloak? Don’t worry, if you don’t know, Ulfric can explain that to you.” Rikke laughed bitterly.

“Do you think this is a waste of time then?”

“Getting to know Ulfric? Probably. I’ve certainly wasted too much time on the man for how he repays friendship and loyalty. But you should go for the Dragonborn’s sake. She’s been alone and far from home so long.”

“Could you write me a recommendation to Galmar?” Emilin asked.

“You think he’d respect that?”

Emilin nodded. “Just a hunch, but if he’s as straightforward as you say, he’ll know your value. Even if you’re on opposite sides.”

“Emilin, you’re going to make me cry.”

“I don’t want to do that, dear Legate. I prefer when you’re laughing.”

“Okay, I’ll write it. I hope you appreciate what I’m doing for you here. If the General gets to hear about this, he’ll rake me over the coals.”

“I’m not part of the Legion. I can go wherever I like.”

“Try telling that to General Tullius.” Rikke was smiling again, though. “Don’t worry, Emilin. I’ll take care of any fall-out. Come back quickly, though. If Ulfric tries to keep you in Windhelm, I’m sure you can slip right back to us.”
“I certainly will. And don’t get yourself killed while I’m gone. I want to get to know you better when I’m back, Legate.” She saw the blush on Rikke’s face. “I – oh why beat around the bush? Can I kiss you?”

“Absolutely!”

She had to stand on tiptoes to reach Rikke’s lips, even with the Legate graciously bending her head down to meet her. Romancing a Nord seemed to come with its own set of challenges. But then Rikke laughingly scooped her up in an embrace.

“You kiss like a saber-cat,” muttered Emilin, once Rikke had put her down again.

“Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“Very good. Let’s do it again sometime.”

Rikke nodded. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

So that was one thing settled. She had no idea how shallow or serious this relationship with Rikke would be, but this kiss was a new beginning. After being alone twenty-eight years, grieving her lost love, she’d hesitantly began again.

Curinwe would be proud of her.

4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, the Reach

“Good morning,”

Tanulvie lay very still on her cot and ignored Delphine’s voice.

“If you don’t want your breakfast, fine with me,” said Delphine. “Aerin’s getting you water to wash up.”

Tanulvie didn’t move a muscle.

“You don’t know how lucky you are,” Delphine continued. “Or maybe you do . . . you’ve probably seen the inside of a Thalmor dungeon.”

She had, of course. Not one of the ordinary jails, but an interrogation facility in Alinor. She’d been stationed there six months. Intensive, formal interrogation was not a duty assigned to active Justiciars, but as the Head Inquisitor had reminded the young recruits, it was important that no agent went out into the field with any illusions what extremes their duty might require. High-level interrogation work was brutal and stomach-turning – and Tanulvie could not imagine undertaking it as a career – but it was necessary to the security of the Dominion. Even torture practiced for its own sake had salutary deterrent effects on other would-be dissidents . . . She wished she didn’t know that. If the Thalmor chose to make an example of her family, she hoped it would be a quick execution.

She chose not to eat the breakfast they gave her: a futile gesture of defiance but at least she could control that one little thing. She did, however, wash as best as she could with cold water and no soap. She was covered with the grime of unpleasant journeys back and forth among these rocky valleys.
About an hour after she’d finished, the real interrogation began. She was taken out of her cell into a larger stone room, where there was a small table with chairs. Delphine sat her down in one of the chairs, then sat beside her. The mage Esbern sat in the chair across the table. Aerin stood on guard at the door.

Her hands were free, but the magic-draining bracers were still on and she had no weapon.

“Your name?” Delphine began.

“Tanulvie of Sunhold.”

“Rank?”

“Justiciar. Third-level mage.” It was supposed to be the beginning of a glorious career.

“Your age?”

“Thirty-two.”

Esbern raised his eyebrows. “Young for a Justiciar.”

“Yes . . .” She didn’t know why Esbern was surprised. The war had killed so many young Altmer. Those who grew up after the war had been pressed into service faster than any generation since the Oblivion Crisis. There was no time now for the drawn-out leisurely life their ancestors had once lived.

“How long have you been in Skyrim?” Delphine asked. “We’ll check your answers later, by the way. Any discrepancy – no matter how small – and we’ll forward your note to your Embassy.”

Tanulvie knew how interrogation worked. First, they’d ask the safe questions, the ones there would be no harm answering, and then bit by bit, they’d draw her into more dangerous topics. The best strategy, the one taught to Justiciars, was to shut up completely, to deny the interrogator even the most harmless bit of information. But she was already outmaneuvered here; if she refused to speak to the Blades, there was no chance for her or her family. She would have to navigate these traps as best she could.

“I arrived in Solitude on the 23rd of Rain’s Hand.”

“Where were you assigned?” Delphine asked.

“To the Embassy near Solitude.”

Delphine had a lot of questions about the Embassy. Most of the answers were public knowledge, or easy enough for a determined inquirer to discover, so Tanulvie answered them honestly. She didn’t know the Embassy’s secrets anyway. She hadn’t even settled in before Elenwen sent her out to Markarth.

Delphine at last dropped the subject of the Embassy and turned the questioning over to Esbern. She told him once again that she knew nothing about dragons. Or the Dragonborn, when he pressed her on that.

“You sent a message about the Dragonborn’s family,” Delphine reminded her.

“No, I know who she is,” Tanulvie protested. “But I don’t know what she’s supposed to have done. Other than break into our Embassy and kill people.”
The two Blades exchanged a significant look. *Oh . . .* “Was that your work?” she asked bitterly.

Delphine didn’t answer that but continued asking what she knew of the Dragonborn. Slowly, she gave up every pointless bit of knowledge she had of the Nords’ heroine. She couldn’t figure out where Delphine was going with this. She admitted to knowing the Dragonborn was the First Emissary’s kinswoman, but surely Delphine already knew of the relationship.

“How did you learn that Elenwen was related to Cecilia Varo?” asked Delphine.

“That’s not secret, is it?”

“I doubt it’s widely discussed in Summerset,” Delphine replied.

“It’s not – I only heard it in Skyrim.”

“From whom?”

Tanulvie bit her lip. Delphine had narrowed in on this like a slaughterfish summoned by the scent of blood.

“How told you that Elenwen was the Dragonborn’s cousin?” Delphine pressed.

If she told the Blades this, it’d be the first secret she voluntarily relinquished to them. Likely it wouldn’t be an important one. Was it really surprising that the Thalmor vied for power within themselves? That a subordinate might want to rise above his superior?

“Tanulvie,” said Delphine. “I do not expect great stores of knowledge from you, but I will not tolerate you being completely *useless.* You know the stakes here. Answer my question.”

Yes she knew the stakes. She would not give up her soul for her family’s lives, but she could give up this.

“Third Emissary Calerion taunted the First Emissary about it. In front of the new Embassy staff,” she told Delphine.

“Taunted?” Delphine sounded skeptical.

“He said Mistress Elenwen should have recognized Cecilia Varo because of the family resemblance. She froze up. Then he added that he meant her resemblance to Junius Varo. But I think I was the only person in the room who *didn’t* know what he really meant. I had to ask a friend, and he told me about Mistress Elenwen’s family.”

Delphine had more questions about the new Third Emissary, and she couldn’t answer most of them. It was Esbern who at last called a halt to the session, pointing out it was nearly lunchtime. Of the two old Blades, he’d said much less than Delphine, and none of it had been threatening. (Though of course she shouldn’t forget he’d hit her with that paralysis spell in the first place.) He wasn’t kinder than Delphine; he just seemed way less interested in her.

However, after they returned her to her cell, he paused at the door to speak to her.

“Your life has got off to a bad start. But there’s time to change that.”

She shook her head. “My life was *perfect.* Until I came to Skyrim.”

“Was it? You fear what the Thalmor would do to your family. Where did you learn that fear?”
“Those who forsake their duty deserve their punishment.”

Esbern sighed. “What duty would your parents have forsaken?”

Bile rose in her throat. “My transgressions would be proof of their failure in raising their children. They might even suggest a previously undetected impurity of blood.”

“So, the sins of the child are borne by the parent. Do you think your parents failed, Tanulvie?”

“No,” she admitted. “I might be a failure, but my elder sister is a true child of Alinor. They should be credited with her, not dishonoured by my existence.”

Esbern shook his head. “It’s been half a century of trying and I still fail to understand how thoroughly warped your people have been by the Thalmor. Likely that is why we Blades were destroyed so easily.”

He left her alone then. His words settled in her heart uneasily and ate away at her soul.

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4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Thalmor Embassy, Haafingar

In the Solar of the Thalmor Embassy, Third Emissary Calerion was busy with his aide copying all of Elenwen’s public correspondence. The Second Emissary had been in a few times to glare at him and suggest he shouldn’t be, but he ignored her. He had assurances from powerful figures in Alinor they would back him in his full investigation and – if that went well – exposition of Elenwen. Copying Elenwen’s public archives was only the first step; he’d have to find a way into her private papers next.

“Master Calerion, we’ve received a sending from Mistress Elenwen.” The mage’s announcement was troubling, and when he went to receive the sending itself, he was even more troubled. Elenwen had thrown all caution to the wind and sent a message that every mage between here and Bruma could scry if they had the talent. He listened to her harsh voice ordering him to go searching in Falkreath for an agent she’d lost ages ago. An agent who was obviously dead and utterly unmissed. Why? Why now? She was trying to neutralize him, he understood that, but why hadn’t she done this while she was still in the Embassy?

He had to conclude that some of his patrons’ plans had been discovered. By someone in Elenwen’s family’s pay, no doubt. And now Elenwen was trying to send him into a benighted Stormcloak-held hold, in a complete abuse of her powers as First Emissary.

“You’d better start packing,” said Second Emissary Arinye in an aggravatingly calm voice. “I’ll put those papers back for you.”

“I don’t think I should go to Falkreath,” he said.

“You’ll follow her orders,” said Arinye.

“She said I should take over the responsibility of bringing home loyal members of the Thalmor who’ve gone missing mysteriously.”

“She told you Agent Sanyon was last seen in Falkreath,” Arinye repeated. “If he’s dead, you can bring back his corpse for the proper rites.”
Calerion nodded. “And I will. But if these retrieval missions are my duty as Third Emissary, Sanyon can’t be my first priority. That young wizard Elenwen sent out... Tanulvie, Ondolemar’s looking for her kidnapper, but I’m not impressed by his track record. I’ll go to Falkreath, but I’m going to the Reach to look for her first. Unlike Agent Sanyon, we might bring back more than a corpse.”

This impromptu journey to the Reach, with its swarms of mongrel barbarians, was not his first choice, but if he was up against Elenwen, he had to be flexible. He could take his own mer with him, find out what the chief of the Skyrim Justiciars was really up to in Markarth, and keep out of Elenwen’s reach.

He ignored Arinye’s arguments that Elenwen’s orders meant he absolutely had to go to Falkreath first. Short of ordering his arrest, the Second Emissary couldn’t keep him here, and he didn’t think she had the nerve to do that. Meanwhile, he had a trip to plan.

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4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold College of Magic

“Well, hello there, my dear! I’ve been wondering where you were.” Master Tolfdir finally noticed Cecilia standing beyond the Eye of Magnus.

“Fighting dragons, mostly,” said Cecilia. She and Brelyna walked around the Eye to join Tolfdir.

Tolfdir nodded. “Ah yes, heard a bit about that. In your journeys you haven’t happened on anything that might shed some light on this... we’re calling it the Eye of Magnus, but we haven’t exactly figured out what it is.”

“No. I wasn’t really looking.”

“Ah well, I suppose you’ve been busy,” he said forgivingly. “Urag would still love it if you got those books back for him, but the Arch-Mage pieced together some old references, and we think the Eye may be the instigation for the Night of Tears itself!”

“That’s when the Snow Elves attacked Saarthal, right?”

Tolfdir nodded. “Attacked and burned it. The lead-up to the legendary Return of Ysgramor and his Companions. You saw the traces of that night down in the excavations.”

“So you think the Snow Elves were after this?” She pointed to the Eye.

“Very possibly. Ysgramor himself may have sealed the Eye within the ruins afterwards.”

“And we dug it up,” said Cecilia faintly. “Despite the fact Ysgramor locked it away for all eternity.”

“Excavated under the supervision of the College’s finest mages. We are keeping detailed observations of the Eye here. Right now I’m focusing on those markings,” he pointed towards the Eye. “You know, they’re quite unlike anything we’ve seen before. Ayleid, Dwemer, Daedric... Not even Falmer. None of them are a match. Quite curious indeed...”

It was no use arguing with a scholar in the grip of discovery. She likely had only a short time before Ancano returned to the Eye. Nirya had said he was spending most of his time in here now.

“Have you ever heard of the Augur of Dunlain, Master Tolfdir?”
“Well now, there’s a name I haven’t heard in some years. My goodness it’s been years since I’ve spoken with him.”

“So he’s not in the college then?” she asked in disappointment.

“I suppose he’s still down in the Midden, but I haven’t checked. Are you going to go see him?”

“Uh . . . who is he?”

“Oh you seemed like you knew . . . well . . . I suppose he wouldn’t mind. . . It was all before my time, you understand. I’ve heard the stories, the same as anyone else. He was a brilliant student, an accomplished wizard. Delved into magic in a way none had seen before. But I think he became too focused on just how much power he could acquire. That’s what led to the accident.”

“What accident?”

“I’ve never heard the details. Only that it resulted in – well, you’ll see if you’re going to visit him. Do tell him ‘hello’ for me, won’t you?”

“Could you be a bit more specific, sir? Is he dangerous?”

“Oh no, not him. But the Midden, it’s not the nicest place. Under the college, Brelyna, you’ve been down there before?”

Brelyna nodded. “They use it for magical experiments, Cecilia.”

“Some of which have gone very poorly for the experimenters. That’s why I always insist on safety before all else.”

Safety before all else apparently only extended to teaching the apprentices their wards, not pausing before hauling a strange magical artefact out of its crypt. Why were mages always so headstrong and careless? Did the magic eat away at their brains over the years? Was she going to be like this one day? (Judging by her father, yes.)

“I’ll go down with you, Cecilia,” Brelyna offered.

“Thank you. We’d better go tell the others what we’re doing.”

Tolfdir was absorbed with the Eye again, so they left the Hall without further discussion. In the vestibule, Brelyna bumped into an unfamiliar figure in the familiar black and gold of the Thalmor.

“You must be the clumsy apprentice I was warned about,” this male elf commented.

“Who are you?” Brelyna demanded.

“Estormo, Aide to Advisor Ancano.” He continued into the Hall of Elements.

Cecilia looked after him for a second, then headed for the door.

“This place is lousy with Thalmor,” Brelyna hissed once they were outside.

No more Thalmor presented themselves on their way to the Hall of Attainment. Inside they found their friends gathered around a table, covered with a large spread of food.

“I saved you apple pie, my Thane,” Lydia called out.
“I knew there was a reason you’re my favourite housecarl.”

“And only housecarl,” shot back Lydia.

“Well, I don’t need another one with you around.”

While they ate, Cecilia recounted her meeting with the Psijic Monk and Tolfdir’s instructions for finding the Augur of Dunlain. The young mages were very interested, but Ralof looked increasingly distressed by the story. When she had finished, he spoke up,

“So there’s this Altmer who insists he isn’t Thalmor but won’t tell you anything about the Eye, your teachers won’t even tell you what this Augur of Dunlain is, and you’re trusting these people, Dragonborn?”

“They’re mages. That’s how they are,” said Cecilia.

“I promised the Jarl I’d protect you,” said Ralof. “If we’re going into this Midden, we should know a lot more about what we’re looking for.”

“Ralof, she’s not going to take you,” Lydia told him, then turned to Cecilia, “but you’ll take your favourite housecarl, right?”

“J’Zargo knows the Midden passages like the back of his paw. Also, Onmund would like to come as well.”

“I never said- yeah, I’ll come,” said Onmund.

“I said I’d be your guide,” said Brelyna.

“I don’t see why you can’t all come,” said Cecilia. “Will numbers make up for skipping the research, Ralof?”

“I guess they’ll have to.”

After they finished their meal, they bundled up in their winter gear again. The apprentices had warned that it was freezing in the Midden. There was a trap door to the Midden in the Hall of Countenance, not a very long journey but they spent every second of it worrying that Ancano or his new Thalmor friend might show up.

Inside the Hall of Countenance, Colette Marence and Drevis Neloren were sitting at a table.

“What are you-” Drevis began, then spotted Cecilia. “Oh, Varo. Good to see you. Have you been practicing that invisibility spell?”

After the Thalmor, Drevis Neloren was the College resident Cecilia least wished to see. She didn’t dislike the elf, but he was the College’s Master of Illusion, and she was the daughter and granddaughter of famous Illusion mages. She couldn’t really blame Drevis for hoping he’d found a protégé in her; but it was awkward. She’d always known she couldn’t stay long at the College, and she also knew she’d only inherited a small part of her father’s magical talent.

“I have,” she assured Drevis. And then added, “I used it in Skuldafn to sneak past some of the enemy.” Which was true, but she’d only held the spell for about twenty seconds after her invisibility potion’s effects ran out.

“I hope you’ve also been practicing your Restoration spells,” Colette Marence said sternly.
“Oh yes ma’am, she has,” said Lydia. “I think my thane’s healed every bone in my body once.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Maybe we can talk about your technique—”

“After we go down into the Midden,” J’Zargo broke in.

“You’re going down to the Midden?” asked Colette.

“Master Tolfdir sent us,” said Brellynna quickly.

“Oh very well. Be careful. Ancano’s complained there’s an Ice Wraith down there.”

“Ancano was in the Midden?” asked Brellynna.

“Went down there without any invitation, then came back up complaining about it being dangerous,” Drevis scoffed.

“Other than Ice Wraiths, are there are any other threats we should be aware of?” Ralof spoke up.

“Are there still draugrs down there?” Collette asked Drevis.

“The ones Tolfdir stowed away from his last dig. But he swore they weren’t walking.”

“They were walking when I went down there last month,” said Collette.

“Okay, well then yes, there are draugrs. Does that answer your question, young man?”

Ralof opened his mouth then closed it. “Yes it does,” Lydia answered for him.

There was no reason it should be colder in the sheltered Midden than it’d been outside in the wind, but it was. It might be the residue of frost magic down here. They were keeping their eyes peeled for an Ice Wraith, but the Midden was no different than a score of icy stone ruins Cecilia and Lydia had previously explored. When they ran into the first draugr, Cecilia simply stepped back and watched the overkill as her five companions demolished the creature in a few seconds.

They dealt with two more draugr before entering the area Brellynna called the Midden Dark. Its entrance was marked by a strange mosaic made of human bones. (Grisly, but she’d seen Forsworn camps and in comparison it was a tasteful piece of decoration.)

The tunnel they were following opened up onto a large pit spanned by a narrow bridge. On the other side was a small ice cave.

“Are we going in there?” asked Ralof.

“Master Tolfdir didn’t really give us directions,” said Cecilia.

“There is a locked door beyond this ice-cave,” J’Zargo explained. “Perhaps this Augur is behind there.”

“We couldn’t unlock it when were down here before, but if we knock hard enough . . .” Brellynna’s voice trailed off.

Cecilia walked out on the bridge. The others hastened to follow her. She had barely set foot in the ice-cave when a rasping voice boomed from somewhere before her.

“There is no solace in knowing what is to come.”
She looked back at her friends. “You heard that?”

They nodded. Brelyna put her finger to her lips.

They must be on the right track. She continued into the ice-cave.

“There is no help for you here.”

“I’ve met a Psijic monk who tells me otherwise!” she shouted at the invisible voice. No response.

The ice-cave led out into more stone passages. J’Zargo took over guiding her now, down icy steps and around corners to a wooden door

“You're the Augur of Dunlain?” asked Cecilia.

White lights within the orb of blue light pulsated as it answered: "I am that which you have been seeking. Your efforts are in vain. It has already begun. But those who have sent you have not told you what they seek. What you seek."

No. They hadn’t. “Something different” Quaranir had called him. This was certainly different. But such things did happen to careless and overambitious mages. Tolfdir had spoken of an accident.

“I was told to find you,” she answered when it seemed the Augur had stopped speaking.

“Indeed. And so you have come looking, though you do not know why. Like others before you, you blindly follow a path to your own destruction. The Thalmor came seeking answers as well, unaware they will be his undoing. Your path now follows his, though you will arrive too late.”

"Thalmor? What Thalmor?” she asked sharply.

"The one who calls himself Ancano. He seeks information about the Eye, but what he will find shall be quite different. His path will cross yours in time, but first you must find that which you need."

Curses! She’d answered the Arch-Mage’s summons because the Thalmor were involved, so she shouldn’t be surprised she was now facing them. And opposing the Thalmor was what she’d been brought up to do; the Dragonborn business was the real surprise. She shouldn’t be so afraid after she’d walked in Sovngarde and ended the World-Eater.

She was very afraid. Alduin had been a fear she’d come to know as an adult. The Thalmor were the ever-present terror of her otherwise-idyllic childhood.

"You, and those aiding you, wish to know more about the Eye of Magnus. You wish to avoid the disaster of which you are not yet aware. To see through Magnus' Eye without being blinded, you require his staff. Events now spiral quickly towards the inevitable center, so you must act with haste. Take this knowledge to your Arch-Mage."
And then the light faded away. The stone room was dim again.

“Hello?” she asked. There was no response.

“A powerful staff,” J'Zargo was purring. “Where could it be?”

Ancano was back in the College, still smarting from the brush-off given him by the Psijic monk. He’d followed the mer all the way down to the Frozen Hearth. There, the Psijic had ordered some of that inferior Norse ale and settled in at a table with a guidebook for visitors to Skyrim. He’d completely ignored Ancano, and at last Ancano had given up and returned to the College.

He found Estormo watching over the Eye as he’d requested, but as Tolfdir was also there, he ushered Estormo away to give him further instructions.

He briefly updated Estormo on the Psijic monk’s latest outrage and the presence of Cecilia Varo.

“Oh, is she that Imperial girl with the dark curly hair? I saw her coming out of this Hall.”

“That would be her, yes. She’s brought along her own bodyguards and she has the apprentices wrapped around her little finger.”

“Do you want me to trail her?” asked Estormo.

“If she leaves the College, maybe.” He frowned. “I haven’t decided yet what to do about her.”

“I thought our orders were to leave the Dragonborn alone.”

“They are. But that was before she started meddling with this. Be ready to go anywhere, that’s all I can say right now.”

Estormo nodded.

“She said something that made me remember . . . things I would prefer to forget,” Ancano said slowly.

“Really?”

“She said, The Divines are found in the details.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Yes, of course you’ve heard it. It’s a favourite saying among us. It encapsulates the sacred duty of a good Thalmor agent, striving for perfection in every detail. But the mer who said it first to me, the teacher who burned that phrase within my heart, he turned away from that duty.”

“That doesn’t mean he was wrong when he said it.”

“No, it doesn’t. But to be betrayed by the master I idolized, and then to have his words flung back in my face by his mongrel descendant – I tasted bile.”

Estormo nodded. Sympathetically, Ancano thought.
“The First Emissary thinks we must keep her alive, as insurance against the dragons and a tool to meddle in Skyrim’s politics. Elenwen’s willing to give up her family’s duty to blood vengeance, but I am not.”

He paused for dramatic effect.

“I want her dead, Estormo.”

Chapter End Notes

I wasn’t planning side ships then I turned around and realized that certain characters fancied each other. So, there have been Ralof/Lydia hints, and this chapter properly launches Emilin/Rikke. I’d always planned that Emilin had been Curinwe’s lover, and felt bad that it played into the “Bury your gays” trope where gay romances are doomed. So, here’s a bit of happiness for Emilin, even in the middle of a civil war.

Lots of random Thalmor in this chapter, huh? I promise it’s going somewhere. Back to the young Blades’ adventures in Markarth with Cecilia’s grandma next chapter.

Reviews/comments are yearned for.
4 Second Seed, Markarth

Chapter Notes

There are no innocent onlookers in this struggle. Just the guilty, and the dead – Braig

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Cidhna Mine, Markarth

When Thongvor Silver-Blood had promised to hide them here in Markarth, the last thing Mjoll had imagined was being locked up in Cidhna Mine. They were not prisoners, the guards assured them, but the fact remained there were locked gates between them and the outside world. Those gates kept out the Thalmor, of course, and Embla Attius didn’t seem at all worried that the Silver-Bloods might leave them cooling their heels here permanently. She was the Dragonborn’s grandmother and the Silver-Bloods needed her, she assured Mjoll.

Mjoll wasn’t very re-assured, but at least they’d seen Faendal off from the city last night before taking refuge here. The guards had looked the other way when one of the Silver-Blood employees walked him to the gates. Faendal would have to go carefully, staying off the Thalmor-infested road, but he’d be back to Sky Haven Temple soon, giving the Grandmaster an update. The elder Blades would probably have a better idea how to retrieve a prisoner from the Thalmor than Mjoll or Embla.

Embla agreed to wait until they heard from the Grandmaster. She was clearly worried for her son’s safety, but she stayed calm and self-possessed. It was no good imagining what might be happening, she explained to Mjoll and Kharjo. It was better to find a distraction while they were waiting. Right now, she was most interested in seeing Cidhna Mine from the inside.

“I’ve heard some interesting stories about this place,” Embla explained to the young Blades. “There’s a rumour the King of the Forsworn is still locked up in this prison.”

“The Forsworn have a King?” Kharjo asked.

Embla shrugged. “They had a man who claimed to be their king. Many years ago, before I ever came to Markarth.”

“Should we try to find him?” asked Kharjo.

“Why?” Mjoll asked.

“It seems like something the Grandmaster might like to know about.”

Embla nodded. “Proper Blades go poking their noses into everything.”

They couldn’t very well ask the prison guards to let them see the King of the Forsworn. Instead, Mjoll asked about silver. She tried to play up how excited she was to see a real silver mine, but she wasn’t a good actress. When the guards started flirting with her, she logically knew she should flirt back. But she couldn’t do it.

And then, the Dragonborn’s grandmother stepped in and took over the flirting. Mjoll watched in mingled admiration and horror as Embla cooed and giggled and made a joke about wishing she was
“forty years younger”. Even now, as an old woman, it was easy to see how attractive the young Embla must have been.

“I don’t suppose you really want to charm me,” Embla continued to the two guards on duty. “But you’d make an old woman very happy if you were kind to my pretty young niece here. She’s too proud to ask you handsome lads for a tour herself.”

“A tour?” asked one of the guards.

“To see the silver dug up. You know, I was married in a tiara wrought from Cidhna Mine silver. It was the first real piece of jewelry I ever had. I’ll let you have it, Mjoll, when you find the lucky man. I was going to give it to my granddaughter, but Jarl Ulfric will give her a finer crown.”

Mjoll was taken aback by the mastery of Embla’s performance. The jokey compliments, the insinuations that Mjoll was looking for love, the reminder that Cecilia might be Queen of Skyrim some day. It was amazing watching Embla wrap the guards around her little finger.

“I’ll show you the ore at the gate, but there are black-hearted villains in this mine. It wouldn’t be safe for you lovely ladies to go around it.” The guard sounded apologetic.

“Even with you showing us around?” asked Embla.

“Ah . . .”

“Are you afraid of your own prisoners?” Mjoll asked bluntly.

“Of course not!” the guard said too quickly. “Maybe when the guard changes, we’ll have men to spare.”

“We’d have to ask Thonar Silver-Blood for permission,” the other guard reminded him.

So that was, for the moment, a wash. And as Kharjo pointed out, once they’d regrouped to discuss strategy, they weren’t here to search out the Silver-Bloods’ secrets.

“But they’re definitely afraid, right?” asked Mjoll.

Everyone agreed with that.

Despite deciding not to dwell on it, the talk inevitably turned back to rescuing Embla’s son from the Thalmor. Thongvor Silver-Blood had gone up to Understone Keep last night and tried to get Jarl Igmund to release him. Igmund had refused to gainsay the Thalmor, though he’d made the chief Justiciar promise to keep Pavo in Understone Keep. Thongvor had scoffed at the idea of the Thalmor keeping a promise, but assured Embla that the city guard were now watching the Keep’s exits.

(Between the Silver-Bloods, the Forsworn, and the Thalmor, Mjoll wondered exactly what part of his hold Jarl Igmund was actually running.)

“I hate to say this, but I don’t think you should be involved in any rescue, Dame Embla. It’d be best if we got you to Headquarters first,” said Mjoll.

“You want me to leave my son behind?” asked Embla.

“We’d get you to safety, then get our Grandmaster’s help rescuing him.”

“Are you going to tell me your Grandmaster’s name?” asked Embla.

Mjoll wasn’t sure if Delphine was keeping her identity a secret. She and Esbern had gone to the
negotiations at High Hrothgar, so the Thalmor at least knew the Blades were back. But was Delphine all right with everyone knowing the Blades had reformed under a new Grandmaster?

“Secretive as always,” Embla said while Mjoll was still deciding what to say.

That jogged a memory.

“Embla . . . when we first showed up, you said you didn’t much like the Blades?”

“Yes, I did say that.”

“Why?”

The woman’s usual smile vanished. “They didn’t much like my husband.”

“Why was that?”

“The old Grandmaster was convinced my husband was in the pocket of the Thalmor,” said Embla calmly.

“Oh . . .” Mjoll didn’t know what to say. The Dragonborn liked to boast that her family had been fighting the Thalmor for the better part of a century. Had the Blades really suspected her grandfather of working for them?

“I don’t suppose young folk like you have ever heard of the Varo Affair?” asked Embla.

They both shook their heads.

Embla sighed. “Well, it’s not my favourite story to tell, but you should hear it. My husband Falco served the Empire for decades as a diplomat and at last a member of the Elder Council. He was a good, honest, upright man and don’t let your Grandmaster tell you anything else. But he was deceived by the Thalmor. And manipulated.”

She paused, but no one said anything.

“Forty years ago, the Blades were obsessed with the Thalmor. It seemed like nothing could happen in Tamriel but they’d be whispering in the Emperor’s ear that it was probably the Thalmor behind it. Pirates in the Abacean, probably the Thalmor. Peasant uprising in High Rock, the Thalmor. An unusually harsh winter in Skyrim, might be Thalmor magic.”

“This Khajiit does not think any of those are too far-fetched to be their work,” Kharjo commented. “Remember the Void Nights.”

“Do you believe they restored the moons?” Embla asked him, a frown appearing on her brow.

Kharjo shrugged. “Perhaps. And perhaps they took them away in the first place. But, even if they had nothing to do with it, they knew beforehand of their return and used it to their advantage.”

“You’re right of course,” said Embla bitterly. “They had fingers in many pies. But, that’s not what I thought back then. I thought my husband had the right of it. The Blades were out-of-control and jeopardizing our fragile peace with the Dominion. They were obsolete. They weren’t guarding the Emperor anymore, that was the Penitus Oculatus’ job. And then there was Curinwe Varo . . .”

“Isn’t that—“ began Mjoll.

“Cecilia’s paternal grandmother, yes. Gods, I hated her. I’m sorry for it now, we were all loyal to the
Emperor, we should have been on the same side. But she was my husband’s enemy. She was a brilliant battlemage, but what did she know of politics and diplomacy? She was out for vengeance against the Thalmor. And that blinded her to the political reality . . . I know it didn’t, don’t look at me that way. I’ve had thirty years to regret our mistakes. We lost two of our children in the war: my son Marius and my daughter Gina. The Attius name has become infamous in Cyrodiil. I’ve never even met my other grandchild, Marius’s daughter, because her mother wants nothing to do with us. Pavo ran off to Skyrim, because he couldn’t handle it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mjoll impulsively.

“Half of Tamriel’s still mourning the loved ones they lost to that war. I’ve lived a comfortable life compared to most folk, then or now. But I’m getting off track. I was going to tell you about the Varo Affair.”

Mjoll nodded.

“About forty years ago Titus Mede’s father appointed Curinwe Varo as Imperial Battlemage. He did this over the objections of most of the Elder Council, including my husband. Titus – he was the heir apparent then – had served with her in the field, and he pushed his father to make the appointment.

No one doubted her abilities as a soldier, but the Imperial Battlemage is more than a soldier. She’d be the Emperor’s most powerful advisor, setting the direction of our government. And the direction she wanted to take us in was war with the Aldmeri Dominion. Falco felt Titus was letting his personal friendship cloud his judgment. But once the Emperor appointed her, there was nothing the Elder Council could do. The Blades were ecstatic over the appointment. They finally had a powerful ally who shared their obsession with the Thalmor.”

It was uncomfortable listening to this. Even now, despite admitting her husband had been wrong, the scorn and resentment in Embla’s voice was palpable. She wasn’t joking, Mjoll realized. She really didn’t like the Blades.

“The Thalmor must have been worried,” said Mjoll. “They weren’t ready to start the war then.”

“Perhaps. But unlike us, they were ready to do something about her. My son-in-law says the Thalmor had quit trying to assassinate Varo several years before her appointment. Killing her would legitimize her claims. So they switched over to discrediting her.

A 'friendly' Thalmor diplomat gave my husband a thick sheath of confidential papers collected by Dominion intelligence. It included correspondence between Curinwe Varo and half a dozen high-ranking Legion officers. These Legionnaires were privately working to ready the Legion for a war against the Dominion, going behind the Elder Council’s backs. They were, Falco thought, trying to provoke a war that the Dominion didn’t want. He brought the papers to the Elder Council and confronted Varo before the Emperor himself.”

Mjoll winced. “Why did your husband trust the Thalmor?”

“Diplomats work very closely together. They can build up long, productive relationships, where they’re working for peace and mutual benefit. Falco thought he had that with some of the Dominion’s people.”

It sounded ridiculously naïve now but forty years ago, perhaps it had made sense.

“The documents did their work,” Embla continued. “The Elder Council began an investigation into the Legion, which uncovered more evidence of high-ranking officers’ private dealings with the
Blades and other anti-Dominion hardliners. The Emperor was reluctant to act, but he at last dismissed Varo from her position. There was a purge of the Legion: the commanders of the Third, Sixth, and Seventh Legions were dishonourably discharged, and so were many lower ranking officers and Legion mages. I was so proud of Falco for weeding out these bloodthirsty sabre-rattlers. The Dominion responded by withdrawing troops from the disputed territory along the Valenwood-Cyrodiil border, so it seemed like he’d helped bring about peace.”

“Does Cecilia know all this?” asked Mjoll.

“Yes. Though she wasn’t taught to hate us for it. I’ll say one thing for my son-in-law. He can be infuriating, but he never held a grudge against us. I was worried he would try to turn my daughter and granddaughter against me, so I was rather harsh with him at first. But he’s a good man. Not always the best husband and father – he left my daughter when she was three months pregnant to go off on some secret mission and didn’t show up again till Cecilia was four months old. Then he was off again. We hardly saw him the first five years after the War.”

“Hammerfell?” asked Kharjo.

“Not officially,” replied Embla.

The Dragonborn’s father had been involved in Hammerfell’s ongoing war against the Dominion, then? With the Emperor’s connivance? He sounded like an incredible man, and even if Cecilia really had turned her back on the Blades, he could be the ally they needed against the Thalmor.

While they were talking, the guard shift had changed. Mjoll remembered too late that the guards had said this would be the safest time to give them a tour. But when she pointed that out to Embla, she smiled cryptically.

“Follow me.”

Embla went up to the new guards. “Finally, our tour guides are here,” she called back to Mjoll and Kharjo.

“Huh?” asked the head guard.

“Thonar said we’d better wait for the new guard shift,” said Embla confidently. “They were too busy with paperwork to give us the full tour yet.”

“Of the mine?”

“Yes. I told him I’d like to try my hand with a pickaxe, but he didn’t know if you’d have time for that. So just the basic tour will do.”

The guard looked at his colleagues. “Is she-“

“A friend of the Silver-Blood family,” one of the other guards supplied. “Thonar says she’s his brother’s honoured guest.”

“All right, then.” The head guard relaxed. “We can definitely make time for some pickaxe handling, if you’ve got the strength for it. Come along.”

And so, Embla Attius got her tour of Cidhna Mine after all. Mjoll was impressed. If she could get over her grudges, this woman would make a great Blade herself. Quietly, Mjoll and Kharjo followed after Embla and the guards. If there was an opportunity to peel off from the group, one of them should take it. Perhaps they could find the legendary King of the Forsworn himself.
Cecilia climbed up the stairs to the Arch-Mage’s quarters for the second time that day. She'd crept through the vestibule to the Hall of the Elements, successfully evading any Thalmor attention from the Hall. (She’d sent Brelyna and J’Zargo in there first to distract that Thalmor mage on duty.) She knocked on the Arch-Mage’s door softly, then when no-one answered, more loudly.

Since the Arch-Mage didn’t respond even then, she opened the door and let herself in.

Savos Aren was standing at his alchemy lab on the left. He sighed when he saw her. “Back already?”

“Arch-Mage, We need to find the Staff of Magnus,” she began directly.

"I'm sorry, what?"

“The Staff of Magnus. You must know of it!” It was a famous artefact that had figured in many stories. Aren really couldn’t be playing dumb about it, could he?

“Well... I’d certainly love to have such a powerful staff, but I’m not really sure that any of us need it.”

“I spoke with the Augur of Dunlain,” she began.

He raised a hand to stop her. “After I instructed you to leave that unfortunate event in the past, where it belongs?”

“What event? No one will tell me what happened to him. He can take the form of a giant ball of magical energy and he can see possible futures. What else is there to know?”

The Arch-Mage frowned. “I think, Miss Varo, that I have misjudged you. You’re not easily bidden or well-behaved after all.”

This was getting to be a common refrain lately. She wasn’t sure if she was getting more daring or just hid her true nature well at first meetings.

“The Augur said that to see through Magnus’ eye we need his Staff.”

“Did he?” It was maddening how uninterested he sounded.

“Yes. And he warned me that Ancano is also obsessed with the Eye.”

“Now that can be seen without descending down into the bowels of the College,” Aren remarked sardonically. “We are keeping an eye on the Advisor, Apprentice. As for this Staff . . .” he trailed off.

“The Thalmor won’t blink at destroying this College if it benefitted them,” said Cecilia desperately.

“They could try. In the meantime, yes, you should probably look for this Staff. I’m impressed with your initiative.”

He didn’t sound impressed.

“Do you have any idea where to start looking for it, Arch-Mage?”
“Not really. Something as specific and ancient as the Staff of Magnus... I'm not sure we'd ever find something like that.”

“You must know something... Wasn’t it in a museum in Mournhold before the Oblivion Crisis?” she asked. That was what J'Zargo had told her, and J'Zargo was well-informed on the history of great magical artefacts.

“Was it? Ah... I seem to recall Mirabelle mentioning the staff somewhat recently. Why don't you see if she can tell you anything?”

She nodded, admitting defeat. She was sure the Arch-Mage could say more but for some unknown reason he seemed unwilling to speak frankly with her. Perhaps Mirabelle would be more forthcoming.

“Miss Varo, I'm quite pleased with your progress, you know. You've certainly proven yourself to be more than a mere Apprentice.”

“Thank you, sir.” She turned to go.

“Wait, a second. I have something for you.” He moved to a chest further along the wall, and stooping down, withdrew a cloth-wrapped bundle. He unwrapped it to reveal a silver circlet set with three blue stones. “This is the Mage’s circlet. It should fortify your reserves of magical power. It once proved invaluable to me. I hope it can be of use to you now.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the circlet. She wondered how much use it would really be to her, now that she had the mask of the ancient Dragon priest Nahkriin. But the recognition was good to have, and maybe she could trade the circlet to J’Zargo. Or wear it for state events. The blue stones would match the colours of Eastmarch.

“If you decide to go back to Windhelm for good, I am certain no one here could blame you,” Aren continued. “You’re not the only mage in Skyrim capable of handling this affair. Far from it.”

“Do you not want me to look for the Staff?” she pressed him.

“You seem to have got your marching orders from other authorities than myself. Psijic monks who refuse to talk to you and our notoriously unsociable friend in the Midden... If you know what you’re doing, go do it.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but I still have to do it.”

He nodded. “One last question. Miss Varo, did you know that your father is in Skyrim now?”

Her stomach dropped. “What?”

“Arrived in Solitude a few days ago.”

“What is he – is he still there?”

“No, he left the city on horseback heading south with a Legion officer. That’s all my report says. You look a bit pale, do you want to sit down?”

Cecilia shook her head. “No. It’s...”

“I won’t pry into your family’s inner workings. But this task you’ve set yourself, you need allies you can rely on. And your father is truly a great mage.”
“I’ll think about it,” she said bleakly.

He didn’t press her further about her father. She left the Arch-Mage Quarters and drifted slowly down the stairs, lost in desperate thought.

The Legion had got to him. But then what did she expect? He had officially retired from the Legion six years ago, but he’d never truly left the Emperor’s service. She didn’t know what he and Emilin did exactly, but it involved risking their lives against the Thalmor. Naively she had believed – or tried to believe – that his missions were too important for him to come to Skyrim. But of course he’d come. It was really a miracle he hadn’t come already.

And if he’d come a month ago, she’d have been happy to see him. She’d have joined the Legion herself if her father ordered it. And he would have. She knew that. But that was before she had made her promise to Ulfric. She couldn’t break that . . . She didn’t want to break it. Not after Ulfric had trusted her.

But she also didn’t want the Stormcloaks to take Whiterun. And if her father had been heading South that was probably where he was going. To fight for the Empire there. The Legion in Skyrim didn’t have many mages; they were focused on the borders with the magic-reliant Dominion. So her father could truly make a difference in Skyrim’s war.

Nothing made sense to her anymore, and she didn’t know what she wanted. She was a mess. The only sure thing was that she had to stop the Thalmor from getting control of the Eye of Magnus.

Near the bottom of the staircase, she paused. Mirabelle was standing at the door of the vestibule talking to Ancano. Neither of them had seen her yet.

“You do acknowledge that the College lies within the territory of the Empire?” Ancano was saying.

“The College has always been independent of government,” Mirabelle replied.

“Independent? You’ve given the Stormcloaks free run of your college.”

“Certainly not.”

“And yet Ulfric Stormcloak’s woman is traipsing around with her personal guards.”

“Cecilia Varo is an Apprentice of the College of Winterhold. Her political affiliations are no more important than your own.”

“But mine are very important. Do you forget that the Aldmeri Dominion has granted you an advisor in me? I will not be ignored.”

This had gone on long enough. Cecilia coughed loudly. They both looked up to her.

“I’m not a Stormcloak, Advisor,” she said.

“Is there not a marriage agreement between you and Ulfric Stormcloak?” Ancano asked.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m fighting for his cause.”

Ancano stared at her. “Are you really this naïve?”

“Shouldn’t you be grateful for my forbearance? Or do you want me to join the Stormcloaks? It could go either way with you people, couldn’t it?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

There was no point arguing with a Thalmor agent. “Then let’s forget this discussion. Arch-Mage Aren is asking for you, Advisor.”

Ancano raised his eyebrows. “Is he?”

Cecilia nodded. “I think he’s considering expelling you from the college grounds.”

“Do you really think I’d believe that?” Ancano was already heading for the stairs, though. He couldn’t risk it being true.

“I need to ask you some questions,” Cecilia told Mirabelle hurriedly. “Do you know anything about the Staff of Magnus?”

“Well now that’s an odd question. Why in the world would you be asking?”

“Arch-Mage Aren said you’d mentioned it recently.”

“Well yes, I suppose I did mention it, though I’m not sure what he expects me to tell you. I only brought it to his attention a few months back when the Synod showed up here looking for it. They were apparently under the impression we were keeping it in a closet somewhere.”

The Synod was one of the two rival mages’ organizations in Cyrodiil, the other being the College of Whispers. Cecilia’s father had dealt with both as a Legion battlemage, and had a very poor opinion of them as a result. Always vying for the Emperor’s favour, but rarely achieving anything the Empire needed, he’d said.

And yet, if the Synod found the Staff of Magnus, wouldn’t that be a good thing for holding back the Dominion?

“You didn’t have it in a closet, then?” Cecilia asked.

Mirabelle laughed. “Of course we didn’t. These Synod mages insisted it was somewhere in Skyrim, but they didn’t tell us why they thought that, or what they wanted with it. They seemed amiable enough, but their line of questioning made me . . . uneasy. It became clear they’re trying to hoard powerful artifacts, looking to consolidate power.”

“For the next war,” said Cecilia.

Mirabelle’s eyes grew piercing. “With the Stormcloaks? Or the Dominion?”

“It’d better be the latter,” said Cecilia. This Civil War was bad enough without using Dawn-era artefacts on each other.

“Are you thinking of going after it yourself?” Mirabelle asked.

“Someone has to. The Augur of Dunlain said we need it to see through the Eye of Magnus.”

“The Augur said that? Just what have you gotten yourself involved in?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Whatever is going on . . . be very careful.”

“I will,” she promised. “Do you know where the Synod went after here?”
“They inquired about the ruins of Mzulft, but that's all I remember.”

“Mzulft? Isn’t that in Eastmarch?”

“Yes, between Windhelm and Riften.”

Cecilia had considered delegating the search for the Staff to others, but if the first place to look was in Eastmarch, she might as well do it herself. She’d have all the back-up she needed there. Ulfric would be livid to hear Imperial mages were trying to make off with a powerful magical weapon.

“Have you heard if the Synod’s still in Skyrim?”

“No, but it seemed like they were prepared for a lengthy expedition. There’s a chance they might be in Mzulft yet, if you’re intent on looking for the staff. Just don’t expect them to be cooperative.”

“They’re on Jarl Ulfric’s territory, we’ll make them co-operate.”

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**4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun**

The arrangements to send Whiterun’s children through the battle lines were well under-way now. Vigrn’s niece, Olfina Gray-Mane, had thrown herself into organizing the effort, reassuring parents and consoling children. She was standing by the gate reading from a scroll to a blond young man when Emilin and Junius emerged from Breezehome. Olfina scowled in their direction, but the young man walked towards them with a smile.

“Good evening. On behalf of House Battle-Born, let me welcome you to Whiterun,” the young man said gravely. “I’m Jon Battle-Born.”

“Ahh, the Jarl’s told me about your family,” replied Junius. “And the Gray-Manes,” he added, shooting a glance at Olfina. Balgruuf had explained that the Empire-loyal Battle-Borns and Stormcloak-sympathizing Gray-Manes were at each others’ throats.

“Olfina’s got everything in hand,” said Jon. “She’s had me running all over Whiterun today. Haven’t you?” he addressed Olfina.

“Jon Battle-Born, go soak your head in a well,” replied Olfina. She turned her back on them.

Jon only laughed at this remark.

“Can I ask you a personal question, Battle-Born?” Junius asked in a low voice.

“No harm asking.”

“Are you two sweethearts?”

Emilin started laughing. This was typical Junius, nosing into people’s personal business half a minute into knowing them.

“Shush. No one’s supposed to know,” whispered Jon. “Our families hate each other.”

“If you keep flirting like that in public, everyone will know,” said Junius. “Good on you, though.”

“She’s a treasure,” said Jon enthusiastically.
“Worth braving her ogre of a father?” asked Junius, his eyes twinkling.

“Absolutely.”

Olfina turned back towards them. “I can hear you two!” she snapped. “Jon, if you’re calling my father an ogre, what does that make me?”

“A beautiful ogre maiden?” asked Jon.

Olfina laughed in spite of herself. “I could break your bones in a fight, Jon Battle-Born.”

“Please, mercy!”

They were adorable, thought Emilin. Junius had a huge smile on his face, and she suspected he was thinking of his own youthful courtship. Like Jon and Olfina, Junius and Avelina had parents who hated each other. Falco and Embla Attius had grudgingly warmed up to their son-in-law, but Junius’s father had never forgiven the Attius family for their role in sparking the Varo Affair. (Leontius and Curinwe’s marriage had ended, but Leontius still took the scandal as a personal assault on his family’s honour.) Junius and Avelina had eloped rather than trying to get their families in the same temple.

“Is everything ready to move the children out?” asked Junius.

The scowl returned to Olfina’s face, as if she’d just remembered what role Junius had in these proceedings. “Tomorrow morning. And you aren’t going to cut the rations tonight.”

“I’ll allow a couple extra meals,” said Junius mildly. “But they had better all be out by noon tomorrow.”

“Of course.” She turned away from him. “Jon, you can take this up to Dragonsreach, and have the Jarl or the Steward sign off on it.” She handed Jon the parchment scroll she’d been reading from.

“Aye, Captain.” Jon saluted.

She pointedly ignored Emilin and Junius after Jon had left. So, they walked on to the barracks where the Legion officers were having dinner. It was paltry fare: enough food to keep Legionnaires fighting, but no delicacies, liqueurs, or after-dinner dessert. Since Junius was making such a big deal about preserving rations, it’d be a public relations disaster if the Legion’s commanders were caught eating better than the others.

There was mead, however, which the Nords apparently considered an essential nutrient. Emilin had never drank any before, but at Rikke’s prompting, she downed a mug and pronounced it “Tolerable.”

“This one’s a bit too sweet for me,” said Junius, after taking a sip. “I prefer a dryer mead. Do the Black-Briars still brew theirs?”

“Yes, but the Legion isn’t doing business with Riften,” Commander Caius explained. “So you’re out of luck.”

“I didn’t know you were a mead connoisseur, Varo,” said Rikke.

“I fought alongside a bunch of Nords in the War,” Junius explained. “After Red Ring, you couldn’t walk a step without someone pressing a bottle of something on you. Mead. Ale. Wine. Horrible moonshine they brewed in a wash bucket. But there was one chap – he came from Riften – who’d
brought a bottle of Black-Briar Reserve all the way from Skyrim, then carried it around for three years, as a sort of talisman. He’d survive to drink the bottle at our victory, he explained. He was kind enough to share it with us, when we did win, and it was one of the best things I’ve ever drank in my life.”

“Do you remember his name?” asked Rikke.

“Snow-Back or something?”

That induced laughter around the table. One of the captains explained that “snow-back” was a Nord insult, and probably not the mead-sharer’s name.

After dinner, they began their preparation preparations for tonight’s operation: sabotaging the Stormcloak catapults. Balgruuf’s court wizard had come through with a bunch of already prepared fire rune scrolls, which Emilin would hopefully be placing on the catapults after dark. Junius would be accompanying her part of the way, then providing a magical distraction while she moved in to the camp.

Right now, they were briefing the Legion officers on tonight’s plans. In turn, once this mission was underway, these officers would brief the soldiers on duty tonight. The timing had to be just right. Too early, and there was a risk of the plans leaking to the Stormcloaks. Too late and Junius’s magic would terrify Whiterun’s defenders as well as the Stormcloaks.

Once they’d all run through the timeline, they went back to debating whether Emilin should wear a Stormcloak uniform. It wouldn’t be very convincing, trying to pass a Bosmer off as a Nord, but would it be better than plain clothes? Junius thought yes, that if a Stormcloak sentry just caught a glance of her, the uniform would keep them from looking closer. Cipius, however, pointed out that dressing as an enemy soldier would put Emilin in more danger if she was caught.

“I’m not going to be caught,” said Emilin with more bravado than she really felt. “This is a holiday outing compared to some of the missions I’ve been on. If the uniform can improve my chances of escaping detection, I’ll wear it.”

The Stormcloak outfit they produced for her was, of course, too large, but at least it was light leather armour under which she could wear a well-fitted chainmail shirt. This would be much more difficult if the Stormcloaks wore heavy armour like Legionnaires.

“You clearly aren’t capturing enough tiny warrior women,” commented Junius.

“Can’t be helped,” said Cipius. “Nords come in two sizes. Tall and really tall.”

The last person to arrive was Irileth, who came in after Emilin had donned the Stormcloak uniform and was fastening a cloak over it to hide it within the city.

“Excellent,” she pronounced. “It seems like you have everything in hand. Ready to head up to Dragonsreach?”

“Ready.”

Junius and Emilin were going to be departing the city over the Dragonsreach section of the walls. Invisibly, if Junius did his work right. It was the most difficult place in the city to breach the walls, so the least watched. From there, they’d work around towards the Stormcloak camp and the catapults. It’d be dark when they were ready to strike.

The other Legionnaires wished them luck, and they set off after Irileth.
This chapter took forever to write, compared to the others so far. There was a lot of backstory to impart, some canon scenes with dialogue to change and try not to make boring. I’m not sure how successful I was in dealing with those issues without making it a snoozefest. But thankfully, everything’s set to plunge straight in action next chapter.

Kudos to anyone who can figure out which minor Skyrim NPC shared the mead with Junius Varo back in the Great War. Reviews/comments/questions are much appreciated.
I fought in the Imperial army, in the war against the Dominion; I bled and spilt blood for the Empire. And for what? The Empire to bend its knee before those evil Elf bastards? Signing a treaty meant to kill the heart of the Empire itself? To deny Talos? No, I will have no part in any such Empire, and I will gladly gut anyone who says otherwise. - Galmar Stone-Fist

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cidhna Mine was a hellhole and Mjoll was never going to wear silver again. Not after what she’d seen and heard down here. But at the moment, avoiding premature death was a far more pressing concern. They were currently holed up in a supply room of the mine, Kharjo and one of the guards with their back against a great wooden door, and howling Forsworn prisoners outside.

The tour had started well. The prisoners were sullen, keeping their distance from the guards showing the Dragonborn’s grandmother around. Mjoll had tried to talk to some of the prisoners, but the guards had noticed immediately and told the prisoners to be silent.

Then, about a half hour into the tour, while Embla was fumbling at a silver vein with a pickaxe, all Oblivion had broken loose. One of the prisoners buried his pickaxe in a guard’s head, and they were plunged into a fight. The prisoners outnumbered them five to one. Though they were only armed with pickaxes, some of them were spellcasters. Two more of the guards fell as Mjoll and the others fought their way out of the ambush, and at last into this small storage room with the heavy door. They were at a dead-end with nowhere to go from here.

“I don’t think they were trying to hurt us,” said Embla suddenly.

“They killed three of us!” objected the guard. He was bleeding from a gash on his shoulder.

“They’re certainly trying to kill the guards,” Embla agreed. “But they had plenty of opportunities to bash my head in, and they didn’t take them.”

Kharjo nodded. “They were trying not to hurt us badly.”

“But why? We’re not their allies,” said Mjoll.

“They could want Dame Embla as a hostage,” spoke up the guard.

“I’d be surprised if they knew who I was,” said Embla.

“They know way more than they should,” he muttered.

“Oh? How so?”

The man didn’t respond.
“I tried talking to the prisoners,” said Mjoll. “Maybe they just want to find out why.”

The howling outside stopped. A moment later, there was a knock on the door.

Everyone in the room held their breath. When no one answered, another two knocks followed, louder and more insistent.

“Hello?” asked Mjoll.

“May I come in?” The man’s voice was gruff but perfectly polite.

“Are you trying to kill us?” Embla called back.

“Not at the moment. I’d like to talk to you. If that doesn’t work out, we can return to killing each other.”

“Why should we trust you?” asked Embla quickly.

“We could blast the door off its hinges easily enough.”

“Fair point,” said Embla. “All right, stand away from the door, and I’ll come out.”

“You can’t trust them!” cried the guard. “They’re animals.”

Embla shrugged. “Then they’re animals who want to talk to me. Come on, boys, let me through.” Kharjo and the guard weren’t moving from the door.

Mjoll sighed. “If we’re going to do this, I’ll go out with you. Kharjo, let Dame Embla through.”

“This is not-“

“That’s an order,” she told Kharjo.

Mjoll usually didn’t pull rank on her fellow Blades, but as the first of the young Blades to be recruited, Delphine had made it clear that the others were to follow her orders without question. Kharjo reluctantly moved away from the door.

The guard kept his back against it. “I’m not moving,” he insisted.

“Kharjo, move him.”

Kharjo pulled the guard away from the door. The man began screaming that they were going to all be killed. He might be right, but what else could they do?

“Keep our friend safe in here,” Embla instructed Kharjo. “These prisoners may want to kill us all, but they definitely want to kill him. That’s why I’m going out there, instead of letting them in.”

There was a chuckle on the far side of the door. “You think that’s funny?” Embla shouted through the door.

“It’s very astute of you,” replied that gruff voice. “We’re standing away from the door now. You can come out.”

Mjoll, of course, cast a Detect Life spell rather than take that on trust. She was not a mage, but there were a few spells that Esbern had insisted she learn before she went out into the field. The spell reassured her that the people outside the door had indeed stood back. A mass of lights revealed that
the majority of the prisoners were now standing far down the tunnel, and one person was standing alone, about six feet away from the door.

She nodded to Embla, then rapidly opened the door and walked into the tunnel. Embla followed on her heels, and slammed the door shut behind them.

Before them stood an old mustached man in prison garb. His white hair hung loose to his shoulders. Despite his age, he was lean and muscled, and he stood like a warrior about to spring into action, even though his pickaxe was the only weapon in his hand.

“Are you by any chance the King of the Forsworn?” asked Embla.

A half smile appeared on the man’s face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard that title from the lips of a Nord. Yes, I am Madanach. The King in Rags, they call me more often. And you, you’re the grandmother of the Nords’ heroine, I hear.”

“Embla Attius at your service.” Embla gave him a sort of half curtsy. “This is my right-hand woman, Mjoll the Lion-Hearted, and I have another of my warriors, Kharjo the Undefeated, within my inner sanctum here.”

“I may introduce you to my own retinue in time, but first, I’m curious how you came to be down here. Are you hiding from the Thalmor who are searching the city?”

“How do you know the Thalmor are searching Markarth?” asked Embla.

“We are not so disconnected from the people of the Reach as our ‘masters’ think we are.”

Embla laughed. Mjoll was once again struck by how natural a diplomat the old woman was. If anyone could charm a crazed Forsworn, it’d be her. “Oh, well done. You’ve outwitted the Silver-Bloods, have you?”

“The greedy are very easy to outwit.”

“They’re so obsessed with silver, they don’t notice what you’re doing under their noses?”

“Something worse than that. Thonar Silver-Blood stopped my execution all those years ago. He wanted the Forsworn at his call, so that I would point their rage at his enemies and spare his allies. And I have. Humiliating at first, but I knew he would let his guard down eventually. That he would come to trust I was under control.”

“Incredible,” breathed Embla. “Is that why all those miners are killed by the Forsworn? Eliminating the Silver-Bloods’ competition?”

Madanach gave a small nod.

“What about Kolskeggr Mine?” Embla pressed. “Did Thonar order the attack there last year?”

“Yes, and a dozen others in the last three years. He grows greedier by the day.”

“And now he’ll reap your vengeance? I would like to see that.”

You seem far too pleased with us, Nord,” said Madanach. “Do you think I have any love for you and your people?”

“Certainly not. My son Pavo Attius owns Kolskeggr Mine, you massacred his companions. He and his friend barely escaped with their lives. But from what I hear, you’ve a valid blood-grudge against
Nords, whereas the Silver-Bloods owed our family a life-debt. It’s a deeper betrayal.”

“So you know our grievances are legitimate. It doesn’t do you any credit, though. You’re an honoured guest of the Silver-Bloods, or so the guards said.”

“You’ve been using the Silver-Bloods, haven’t you? Why can’t I?”

“Everything I’ve done has been for the Forsworn. We will cut a bloody hole into the Reach until we are free. But I stand here parleying with you because I don’t know what or whom you work for. Are you in the pocket of the Silver-Bloods? Or an Imperial spy like that woman Margret? Are you allied with the cursed Butcher of Markarth? And are your companions truly members of the Blades?”

Mjoll gasped. Madanach turned to her now. “Yes, my people are not blind. Skyhaven Temple has stood empty for more than a thousand years. But we know who dwelt there once, and then a few months ago, your Dragonborn came to the Reach with warriors who slew the Forsworn of Karthspire Camp, and then took up residence in the long-sealed Temple. My eyes in the Reach have watched your friends from afar ever since. You and the cat must be some of the newer recruits. Why are you here in Markarth today?”

“They’re here to rescue me and my son from the Thalmor,” said Embla quickly. “I hope you can at least recognize the Thalmor as our common enemy.”

“Are they? The Thalmor have never set fire to the Reach and massacred our children. Your granddaughter’s betrothed on the other hand . . .”

“I have no love for Ulfric Stormcloak. But the Thalmor will finish the work he began, if they’re not stopped.”

“If the Dominion sets one foot in the Reach, we will fight back. But if they come to the Reach, they’ll have taken most of Tamriel first, don’t you think?”

“Fool!” cried Embla. “They’re already in the Reach. And they’re not as harmless as you think. Mjoll, tell him.”

Mjoll had no idea what Embla wanted her to tell the Forsworn king. Perhaps she was appealing for a Blade’s perspective on the Thalmor. The Blades were supposed to be obsessed with the Thalmor. The Grandmaster certainly was . . . wait, the Grandmaster had said something.

“The Thalmor gave you over to the Nords in the Markarth Incident,” said Mjoll.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Madanach. The Forsworn behind him now stood stock still, listening for their leader’s reply.

“How did they do that?” asked Madanach.

Mjoll didn’t know. It was something the Grandmaster had said off-hand once, that the Thalmor had orchestrated the entire Incident. She hadn’t offered any further explanation, and maybe it was one of her more paranoid theories. Hadn’t Delphine also once believed that the Thalmor brought back the dragons? This could be more of the same.

But Mjoll was now committed to selling this particular paranoid theory to the Forsworn. “If you want the full details, you’ll have to speak with our Grandmaster,” she said quickly. “But as I understand it, the Thalmor arranged for the Nord militia to attack Markarth.” This was the best she could come up with at the moment, and if it wasn’t true, Delphine could enlighten everyone later. Once they’d survived this encounter.
A man at the end of the passage began laughing, but Madanach wasn’t smiling. “Since when have
the Sons of Skyrim taken orders from elves?” he asked.

“When they don’t realize who’s giving the orders,” said Mjoll.

“The Thalmor are masters of manipulation,” Embla broke in. “My husband did their work for years,
believing the whole time he was serving the Empire’s best interests.”

“Ulfric Stormcloak, manipulated by the Thalmor . . .” Madanach seemed to be taking the theory into
serious consideration. “He’s dull-witted enough for it.”

“You don’t appear to think much of my grand-daughter’s future husband,” commented Embla.

“Should a man respect the killer of his kinsfolk?”

“Yes. I respect the Thalmor. I can’t afford to be dismissive of my enemies.”

Madanach smiled, but his smile showed his teeth. “Good advice, kinswoman of my enemy.”

“Do you think that my grand-daughter is your enemy then?”

“Is she not?”

Embla shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t a clue why she’s got herself engaged to Ulfric Stormcloak.
I’d love to ask her myself. But she’s a fair-minded, thoughtful girl who doesn’t take sides easily.
When she came here, she was interested in learning all about the people of the Reach. I doubt she’s
really your enemy, King in Rags. Not yet, anyway. After you’ve killed us, yes, she and her dragon
will probably burn down the Reach as revenge.”

That seemed a stretch, Mjoll thought, but it was a good bluff.

“Spare us the sympathy of a green girl who cannot bear to take sides, but can leap into bed with the
Butcher of Markarth.”

“What exactly did Ulfric Stormcloak do here?” asked Embla. “I’ve heard a few rumours, but no one
in Markarth wants to speak of it to an outsider.”

“If it’s stories you want, you’ve come to the right place,” said Madanach. “But we have no time to
tell our tales now. I have made my decision. I will entertain your story, until I’ve discovered if it’s
true. If you are lying to my face, you’ll pay the blood-price for it. It’s high time I pay a visit to Sky
Haven Temple and see for myself what the Blades are up to in my realm.”

“You can get out of this mine?” asked Mjoll.

“Do you think I would slaughter the guards without a way out?” The frightening smile had returned
to Madanach’s face.

“I was thinking you might be planning to hold us hostage till the Silver-Bloods let you out,” said
Embla.

“The Silver-Bloods wouldn’t bother ransoming their own mother if we held her hostage,” said
Madanach. “No, we’ll exit another way.”

“And you want us to come with you?” asked Embla.

“I think that would be a fair solution to our mutual problems.”
“Well, if we’re all going the same way . . .” Embla shrugged. “What do you want us to call you? Your royal highness? Your majesty?”

“Just call me by my name: Madanach. You’ve a wicked tongue for a Nord, woman.”

“Do you really think all Nords are dull and serious-minded, sir?”

“In my experience, yes.”

Embla giggled.

If they got out of this alive, Mjoll was asking Embla Attius for training in charming people. So far, she’d seen the old woman win over Thongvor Silver-Blood and his household, several guards, and now the wild King of the Forsworn himself. Madanach was still a dangerous man who could strike them down at any moment, but she could see he wasn’t thirsting for their blood anymore.

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**4 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun**

Emilin crept through the darkness towards the Stormcloak catapults. There was very little moonlight right now, almost a perfect night for this mission. The main sources of light were the soldiers’ campfires and the torches carried by the guards patrolling the camp’s perimeter. So far, it had been easy to keep out of the light, but it might be a bit more difficult to place the explosive fire runes on the catapults themselves. Guards continually passed along the line; it was as well set-up as most Legion camps. No surprise, considering how many of the Stormcloak commanders were ex-Legionnaires.

She was relying on Junius to lure out the soldiers. She’d left him crouched in a ruined farmhouse a little way back. He’d cast invisibility on both of them when they climbed over the Whiterun walls, and might still be using it himself. She, on the other hand, preferred not to use invisibility unless it was absolutely necessary.

When you relied on invisibility, you weren’t working with your environment, but against it, and the consequences were often deadly. She’d seen it happen many times: over-confident wizards turning themselves invisible and then assuming they were undetectable. They made noises, confused their allies, didn’t pay proper attention to their surroundings, and let their enchantment lapse by accident at exactly the worst moment. Emilin, in contrast, moved as a silent shadow without any magical help. She carried a potion of invisibility only for true emergencies.

While the main army slept, some of the Stormcloaks were on the move tonight. From afar, she’d seen soldiers heading across the plains to the Whiterun gate. Cipius and Irileth would have to deal with that. Carrying out her mission here was more important than giving Whiterun advance warning of the Stormcloaks’ latest attack.

She’d got as close to the catapults as possible without detection, then settled down to wait, lying flat against the ground in the wind-rustled grass. The minutes crawled by slowly. Junius had promised to begin the show half an hour after they’d parted. Which should be . . . NOW.

A terrible, inhuman roar rattled her eardrums and sped up her heartbeat. She knew what he was up to and it was still terrifying. Screams from the Stormcloak camp confirmed he’d chosen the right distraction.

“Dragon!”
The defenders at Whiterun’s gate should have been briefed by now that there’d be no real dragon. The panic would be all on the Stormcloaks’ side. That was the idea, at least. Hearing the roars and watching the massive black shape blot out the stars, she wondered if they’d believe their commanders.

Junius was leading the soldiers away from the catapult line with his illusory dragon. The time to place the explosive runes was now. She crawled forward again.

When the dragon appeared, Galmar was at long last ready to burn down the first row of Whiterun’s barricades. His raid had gone exactly as planned. The small handpicked group of warriors he’d brought with him had easily crept up, surprised the barricade guards, and overwhelmed them. One warrior dropped his newly-lit torch in shock at the dragon’s roar.

“I thought the Dragonborn killed them all!” the soldier exclaimed.

“Most of them,” Galmar corrected him. “Don’t look! Burn down the barricades before the dragon beats us to it!”

These men were well-disciplined; some of them had even fought dragons before, and they obeyed his orders perfectly. As the barricades went up in flames, and more Whiterun defenders sallied forth to drive them away, his Stormcloaks fought with their backs to the dragon who could swoop in at any moment. By Talos, they were men to be proud of.

The first row of barricades was now an unquenchable blaze. That was as far as they’d get tonight, so he called for his men to retreat.

“Sir, I don’t think that’s a real dragon.” From behind him came the voice of the only mage in his party.

Galmar slowed his pace, letting the mage catch up with him. “What do you mean?”

“Illusion magic,” the mage said.

Galmar groaned. “Damn him. Where’s he casting from, then?”

Not sure, but I don’t think he can be doing this from inside the walls.”

“So he’s out here somewhere?”

“I think so, somewhere between the walls and our camp.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“If I can stay still for a second.”

They were still sprinting over the fields. But they were out of range of Whiterun now. Galmar called a halt and hushed his men.

The mage was busy casting a detection spell. After about a minute of silent concentration, he turned to Galmar and pointed south. “Life signs in that ruined farmhouse,” he whispered. “Mostly skeevers, I think, but one’s definitely larger.”
“Can you muffle our footsteps?” asked Galmar.

The mage swallowed. “If it’s only for a couple of people,“ he said. “Any more than that, I can’t
handle.”

“You and me, then. Come with me. The rest of you, head back to camp.”

“I’m nowhere near Varo’s level,” the mage warned.

“You don’t have to be. Just get me there as stealthily as you can.”

They broke up, the others running to the camp to inform the other soldiers there was no dragon.
Galmar and the mage headed towards the farmhouse.

Varo’s dragon illusion was very clever, but it couldn’t be his whole scheme. The dragon must be
distracting them from something else. It couldn’t have been aimed at disrupting Galmar’s raid; the
Whiterun defenders hadn’t been prepared for that. Something else was happening out on the
Whiterun plain, and he feared what it could be.

Then, when they’d nearly reached the ruined farmhouse, they saw what that “something else” was.
Flames leapt up before the Stormcloak camp. The catapults.

He was going to kill Varo. Quickly, before he had any chance to use his witch-elf magic. Galmar
was prepared to shoulder the Dragonborn’s inevitable hatred for that, if it saved his men’s lives,
saved Ulfric’s life.

He held up his hand, gesturing the mage to stop, then crept on alone into the charred ruins. His target
was kneeling against a crumbling wall, intent on the exploding catapults. Galmar raised his axe and
brought it down with a fury.

Varo moved at the last second, so the axe missed his skull, but it cleaved deep into his left shoulder.
He cried out in pain. His right hand was already reaching for his sword which hung at his right side,
but it fumbled at his scabbard. Galmar instantly realized the man was left-handed. By chance he’d
struck well, disabling Varo’s dominant hand. He’d strike one more time and finish him off.

But Varo had got the sword out just in time. He might favour his left hand, but his right hand was
strong enough to swing his sword up to block the axe blade. There was a storm of sparks when the
blades clashed. Varo’s golden sword shone in the darkness: elf-made. During the War, it was said
that Curinwe Varo carried a powerful magical sword from Summerset itself. When it cut into flesh, it
unleashed the energy of a lightning storm. Typical elf magic, and very satisfying to think of it being
turned on the elves. But now Galmar was the sword’s target.

Varo was struggling to get to his feet, but he was bleeding hard, and couldn’t manage it. Galmar had
worried about him using magic, but he realized that Varo was pouring every last bit of magic he had
into not bleeding out completely.

He dodged Varo’s follow-up thrust, and brought down the axe again. Varo rolled out of the way, but
now he was completely down, at Galmar’s mercy. And Galmar had no mercy.

He did not anticipate Varo grabbing at his ankle and pulling hard. They were both on the ground
now, but he was still uninjured. Varo had only delayed the inevitable.

And then an arrow struck his armour. They weren’t alone anymore. As he got to his feet, he saw a
slight figure in Stormcloak armour about twenty feet away, pulling back on a bow. The arrow flew
towards him, but he dodged to the right. He had no doubt who this interloper wearing his own
“Take that elf out!” he yelled, hoping his waiting mage would hear and understand the order.

Varo was pulling himself up against the ruined wall. He had dropped his sword; his right hand moved up in the motion of spellcasting. Galmar smashed his axe into that hand. Blood and bone splattered everywhere. Varo screamed out again in pain.

That was the last hit Galmar managed to get in on Varo. The archer had reached the farmhouse now and sprang over the wall, taking a defensive stance over Varo’s body. Just as he had expected, it was Emilin’s face that glared at him. She’d stopped shooting arrows as she advanced; he saw now this was because she was holding up a scroll. A giant fireball erupted from the scroll and he was blasted back across the ruins.

Fortunately, his mage was there to pull him up. He could feel the young man’s whole body shaking, but he’d been very brave to head in here for his commander.

“We’re going,” Galamar barked. If he fought on now, it’d be to the death, and he wasn’t going to risk his life for so little gain. He’d already incapacitated Varo – he’d likely die tonight, but even if he recovered, it would take time.

Emilin had already switched back to her bow and fired several arrows after them as they rapidly retreated towards the camp.

At the edge of the camp, Galmar surveyed the damage done to the catapults. Only one remained intact. Most of the machines were heaps of ash and charred wood. The faces of the Stormcloak soldiers were gloomy. Many hung their heads in despair.

Galmar raised his voice as he strode past the catapults. “We’ve burnt the enemies’ first line of barricades, and I’ve disabled the Imperial wizard’s left arm and crushed his right hand. He was bleeding out when I last saw him. If he doesn’t die tonight, he’ll have a hard time casting his witchspells for a good while!”

The soldiers cheered. The atmosphere had changed in a second: from desolation to triumph.

“As for the catapults, we’ll rebuild them,” Galmar continued. “The Legion’s settling in for a long siege. They don’t expect any reinforcements. We have the time to rebuild properly. And then we will breach the walls of Whiterun!”

His army roared back its approval.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he added, more quietly, to Hjornskar. “I have to write Jarl Ulfric a letter. Ready the fastest horse we have, and have a messenger prepared to ride in about fifteen minutes.”

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5 Second Seed, 4E 202, College of Winterhold

“Is it just me or was Ysgramor a real jerk?” asked Cecilia.

Brelyna looked up from her book. “Brave words from the future Lady of Windhelm.”
They were sitting together in the Library of the College of Winterhold. Ralof and Lydia had been kicked out of the library earlier for chatting, so they spoke in hushed tones, watching for the approach of the Librarian.

“Hear me out. It’s not the bit about slaughtering all the Snow Elves. People did lots of terrible things back in those days.”

“They don’t now?”

“Good point. But, anyway, the way I always learnt it, Ysgramor lands in Tamriel, has his tiff with the Snow Elves, then starts wiping them out. Harsh, but understandable.”

“Understandable,” Brelyna repeated sarcastically.

“Brelyna, please let me finish. Because I have been sitting here all morning reading *Songs of the Return*, a punishment that no one should ever suffer, by the way, and by Volume Twenty-Four, the Companions are in The Black Marsh trying to kill as many Argonians as they can. It’s way more than Ysgramor versus the Snow Elves. It’s Ysgramor and friends’ lunatic stab-happy wanderings across Tamriel.”

Brelyna was laughing. “Come to Morrowind, Cecilia. And we’ll tell you all about Ysgramor. But you could also ask Master Tolfdir. He thinks that a lot of *Songs of the Return* is the awesome, inspiring elf-and-beast-killing Ysgramor and the Companions did in the *story-telling* of their descendants. He’ll tell you all about the archaeological record and myth-making, and Dragon Breaks too, probably.”

“Dragon Breaks, the only thing more headache-inducing than reading every volume of *Songs of the Return*.”

“Why are you punishing yourself then?” asked Brelyna.

“Like you said, I’m the future Lady of Windhelm. And Dragonborn. It seemed like something I should know about. I met Ysgramor in Sovngarde, did you know that?”

“Did you tell him he was a jerk?”

“The topic didn’t really come up, no. But people in Sovngarde seem to have got over their hatreds in life. It felt like they finally saw things clearly, once they were dead.”

“Do you want to go to Sovngarde when you die?”

“Not particularly. But I think Shor has first claim on me.”

“Is that how it works?”

Cecilia shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not a bad afterlife, and I guess I’ve cast my lot in with the Nords.”

She was depending on her Nords to get her out of Winterhold this evening. The Shatter-Shield boat wouldn’t be back at their meeting spot for another two days, but the longer she waited in the College, the more difficult it would be to slip out past the Legion and the Thalmor. So, she’d told the College members that she’d stay a week, while planning to head out with Ralof and Lydia as soon as it was dark. They would make camp up one of the fjords along the Sea of Ghosts and wait there until the rendezvous with Torbjorn.
The other Apprentices had offered to come with them, but Cecilia had other plans for them. Reluctantly, they acceded to her request to watch Ancano and Estormo. If either of them left the College, they should follow them if possible. Tracking Thalmor mages was a lot to ask of her friends, but if the Psijics said the College was on the brink of disaster, everyone had to do their part.

Estormo was also in the library this afternoon, watching them over a large book which he probably wasn’t reading, as he rarely flipped the pages. They’d kept their conversation light as a result: the perfect picture of two friends with all the time in the world catching up on each others’ lives.

Then Colette Marence entered the library with an armful of books for Cecilia.

“What are those for?” asked Brelyna after Colette had handed over the books and exited the library.

“Ah . . . “

“Your face is the shade of a tomato, Cecilia.”

Cecilia looked around to see if Estormo was still listening. “Come outside with me, Brelyna.”

Outside the library, she spoke in hushed tones. “I was talking earlier to Colette about Restoration magic and pregnancy.”

“You what?”

“No now of course! But I do want to have children when I’m married. And I don’t want to coop myself up in Windhelm and do nothing for nine months, just so I can deliver a baby safely. Colette’s given me a lot of reading to do.”

“Restoration: A Perfectly Valid School of Magic by Colette Marence,” Brelyna read one of the titles. “I didn’t know Colette wrote a book.”

“You obviously don’t listen to her very much. I should hire her away to Windhelm; Restoration’s the only magical school the Nords respect.”

“What To Enchant When You’re Expecting,” continued Brelyna. She took that book from the top of the precarious stack and opened it to a random page. “Ughh,” she said after reading a few sentences. “You really want to do this?”

“If you know any Telvanni secrets for growing babies with Alchemy apparatus, feel free to share.”

Cecilia was joking, but Brelyna launched into a history lesson about an old Telvanni master who’d created female clones of himself. But as Divayth Fyr was a mage powerful beyond her imagination, and as Cecilia was not insane, the applicability of the story was somewhat limited. If Cecilia was going to have children, she’d stick to the messy old-fashioned way.

Chapter End Notes

After publishing so many chapters quickly, it took almost a month to release this one. Christmas, bronchitis, and then the flu intervened, but also I’ve been playing Oblivion a lot. Which means I think a lot about writing in this universe, and have spent a lot of time scouting out areas in Cyrodiil while imagining how they were affected in the Great War, but do less writing.
But here is Chapter 22 and I hope you enjoyed it. I'm sorry if it got a bit graphic with the violence, but this is war, and all the plot lines are going to be pretty action-heavy for a bit. It got too long to fit in everything I had planned for this chapter, so quite a bit of Chapter 23 is already written.

Reviews/questions appreciated.
5 Second Seed, Markarth

Chapter Notes

Traitors. Traitors, all of you! -Thonar Silver-Blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Understone Keep, Markarth

In the early hours of the morning, while most of the Markarth residents were sleeping, the Forsworn struck. Ondolemar, who was going down to the City Gate, was one of the few people awake to see the onslaught. He also wasted several valuable moments rubbing his eyes to ensure this was really happening. He was, therefore, unprepared for the flame spell that seared into his flesh, but he pushed aside the pain to fight back, unleashing a wall of lightning on his opponents.

In all his long, dull years in Skyrim, he’d never really fought for his life. He’d almost forgotten the rush of blood, the pounding of his heart, as he desperately avoided the spells and blades of the enemy. These Forsworn spellcasters could fight.

Ondolemar and his accompanying guard retreated into a narrow alley way. He planned to hold the Forsworn off here. But when he’d killed the two spellcasters pursuing them, he realized the rest of the Forsworn had moved on through the city.

People were awake now, pouring out into the streets in confusion, and gasping in horror when they saw the corpses littering the streets.

“Go back to the Keep and see if things are all right there,” Ondolemar ordered his guard. “Check on our prisoners first.”

Ondolemar continued down towards the Gate of Markarth, following the trail of blood and corpses. There’d been a final brave stand of the Markarth Guard at the Gate, it seemed, but the pile of bodies and the open Gate attested to the Forsworn’s successful escape. The city's folk were discussing whether to give chase, but no one was really enthusiastic about the prospect. At last, they closed the Gate in case any of the Forsworn decided to return.

Among the bodies, Ondolemar found the mer he’d set to watch the Gate. He then turned to the civilians to find a witness to the fight. There was a lot of hearsay but at last he found a reliable witness, an elderly man who said the Forsworn had been accompanied by an old white-haired woman, a Khajiit, and a woman warrior in Nord armour. Yes, they’d gone out the gate with the rest of the Forsworn fighters.

Ondolemar mentally swore, but thanked the witness for his information, and gave him a handful of coins. An observer with this level of accuracy in a crisis was a treasure, and might be useful in the future.

The Blades had made cause with these Forsworn and taken Embla Attius out of Markarth. This was an improbable turn of events; the Empire’s old Blades had no love for the Forsworn. But strange times brought on strange alliances. As the Aldmeri Dominion itself proved.
Where had these Blades even found a horde of Forsworn in the city? He turned back and began the climb back to Understone Keep. Up near the Keep, he came on a most satisfying sight. Thongvor Silver-Blood was kneeling in the street with a mutilated corpse in his arms. He was weeping over his dead brother Thonar.

When Thongvor saw Ondolemar, he let go of his brother’s body and leapt to his feet. “YOU!” he cried. “You had him killed!”

Ondolemar took a step back and prepared to throw up a ward. “Certainly not. These Forsworn were trying to kill me as well.”

“Thonar was killed by one of your damn cats! You sent those agents into our own home!”

Ondolemar was puzzled for a moment, then he realized what Thongvor meant. “So you took those Blades into your home and they turned on you? How ironic.”

“Blades?”

Ondolemar sighed. “You really should leave the strategies and plots to your betters, Silver-Blood. My condolences on your brother’s death, of course.”

Thongvor looked as if he was about to attack, but at this point, the Jarl’s housecarl Faleen arrived on the scene with a group of Keep guards and Thalmor soldiers.

“The Jarl requests both of you up at the Keep,” said Faleen briskly. Then seeing Thonar’s body, her tone softened. “I’m so sorry, Thongvor.”

The head of the Thalmor soldiers saluted Ondolemar. “No casualties at the Keep, sir. Our prisoners are secure.”

“Where did these Forsworn come from?” Ondolemar asked.

“From Cidhna Mine,” Faleen answered. “We’re uncertain how they got out, but it seems there’s an undiscovered Dwemer ruin right by the Keep, and it might be connected to the Mine. Calcelmo and Aicantar have already gone off to check it, of course.”

Of course. The old mer would celebrate today’s bloodshed if it netted him a new Dwemer ruin to explore.

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5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Breezehome, Whiterun

Junius lay very still upon the mattress they’d placed on the ground floor of Breezehome. The slight rise and fall of his chest was the only indication he was still living. His face was white as chalk, his eyes closed.

After Galmar had retreated, Emilin had closed the wound on his left shoulder as best she could, then tied a tourniquet at the wrist of his shattered right hand. He was still conscious then, and very calm. She had tried to be reassuring as she worked. They’d get him to the Legion healers and they could restore his hand.

He shook his head at that. They’d both seen countless war wounds and this one was past setting right with magic. But, he said with a small smile, at least it wasn’t his dominant hand. And it’d be just as

...
easy to cast spells with the stump of his right hand, once he had some practice.

He was too weak to stand, though he’d tried. At last, she carried him on her back, just as she had carried Rikke the other day. Of the two, Rikke was the taller, but Junius was heavier; his pockets were no doubt full of soul gems and other junk. She was very relieved to at last reach the front line of the defenders where some strapping Nord Legionnaires took over carrying him. He’d fallen unconscious by then, and had not woken up since.

Emilin was not usually one for prayers. But Junius was, and fittingly the room was now filled with tokens of prayers offered to the gods of several different pantheons. The Nords had wanted to take him up to the temple of Kynareth, but Legate Cipius had forbade them to move him any further than Breezehome. Instead, they’d fetched the priestess of Kynareth, a famous healer, down to the Plains District. Danica Pure-Spring had hemmed and hawed over his condition, but expressed the hope that his sleep was a healing one. She’d left behind an Amulet of Kynareth, and someone else had hung hawk feathers over his bed: a Nord custom, Emilin presumed.

The priestess had found his Amulet of Talos when she cleaned out his wounds. The Nords in the room had been impressed at that, and Emilin heard whispers that Talos had saved Junius from death at Galmar’s axe. Someone – Emilin had no idea who – had slipped a signet ring with Stendarr’s hammer upon the little finger of his surviving left hand: the emblem of the god of mercy, the patron god of the Legion.

But the god whom Junius would have prayed to in this situation was absent. It fell to Emilin to light a candle to Syrabane, youngest of the Aldmeri Eight, the mages’ god who delivered Tamriel from the Thrassian Plague. Syrabane was very much Curinwe’s favourite divinity: a healer, a scholar and a battlemage, whom the Altmer said had rallied the All Flags Navy against the Sload.

Which of these tokens – or any of them – worked in Junius’ favour, no one could know. But just before noon, he at last opened his eyes and groaned.

“Welcome back,” said Emilin, leaning over his pallet.

“How long . . . “

“You’ve been out for about eight hours.”

“Oh . . . disappointing.”

Emilin snorted. “Disappointing? How long did you want to be unconscious?”

“I think I need a few weeks of sleep. My right hand hurts . . . is it still there?”

“The Legion surgeon didn’t want to touch it until you’re stronger.”

“I can’t think very clearly. But that was Rikke’s old bear friend who took a swing at me, right?”

“A few swings,” confirmed Emilin. “The Nords are very impressed you survived the encounter. It’s a miracle of Talos, as far as they’re concerned.”

“Don’t think I’m in that good with Talos,” said Junius. His eyes closed again. “I dreamt I saw Avelina, she didn’t say anything. Just looked concerned.”

“Well, who wouldn’t be with you as a husband?”

“Hate to think . . . she’s worrying over me now. Didn’t I put her through enough when she was
alive?"

“She left the worrying to me,” Emilin reassured him.

“Wait - now I remember - did you get the catapults?”

“All but one of them. You can rest easy. They’ve sent the children out of Whiterun. You’ve done everything you set out to do.”

“Not even close to everything.”

“Everything you can do today,” Emilin amended.

With Junius in such a precarious state, she was reconsidering her decision to go to Windhelm. And given their encounter last night, Galmar Stone-Fist would be less welcoming than ever. Still, when Rikke and Cipius came in to check on Junius, Emilin took Rikke aside and asked if she’d written the recommendation to Galmar yet.

Rikke nodded. “Do you still want it?”

“I haven’t decided yet. If I head off soon, Junius won’t be able to chase after me, that’s a plus.”

“But leaving him in this condition . . .”

“I don’t know what his condition is. I thought last night he might be dying, but he’s bright-eyed and chatty right now. I’ll wait for the healers’ opinion.”

By late afternoon, Danica Pure-Spring and the Legion surgeon had both pronounced Junius to be out of danger. The surgeon and Junius were already discussing what to do with the mangled right hand, with far too much interest and enthusiasm for details on Junius’ part. The surgeon believed that he could save at least the thumb and index finger. Junius protested this would interfere with his plan to replace the hand with a hook.

He was going to be all right, Emilin concluded. And meeting with Cecilia was as pressing as ever. So, she sat down and wrote out the letter Rikke would give him after she left. Then she went down to the front gate. The truce was still holding; that morning Vignar Gray-Mane had escorted most of the children and infirm from the city and through Stormcloak lines. Vignar had not attempted to return yet. The people at the gate were uncertain whether he’d be re-admitted. They knew that Junius Varo had ordered he not be, but the Jarl had insisted Vignar was welcome in the city.

“Will probably depend on who’s on guard when he comes back,” commented Jon Battle-Born morosely.

“Do you want him back?” asked Emilin curiously.

“I don’t care one way or another. But she’s not coming back.”

Olfina Gray-Mane had volunteered to see the children to safety. She would return only when the battle was over.

“And this battle won’t be over soon,” Jon confided in Emilin. “I thought we’d settle things quickly, one way or another, but that’s not happening. Not with you and Varo here, right?”

“Are you going to fight?” Emilin asked.

“Already am. I was out there last night. Can’t really avoid battle with my family name. I just wish it
was something a bit more glorious. Instead, I might end up killing my girl’s brothers, or them, me.”

“Olfina has brothers with the Stormcloaks?”

Jon nodded. “Two of them. No idea if they’re out there. Did you know your commander’s daughter rescued Olfina’s brother from the Thalmor?”

“Cecilia did?” asked Emilin.

He nodded. “Broke him and a bunch of other prisoners out of Northwatch Keep, that’s their prison up north. I guess that should have been a clue where her loyalties lay.”

“Where do you think her loyalties lie?”

“Well, she’s marrying Ulfric Stormcloak, isn’t she?”

“Jon, by that logic, you’ll be a Stormcloak supporter yourself before long,” Emilin pointed out.

Jon laughed. “That’s how my Da would see it, yeah.”

An idea came to Emilin. “Jon, I have to go out and parley with the Stormcloaks. Would you accompany me over? You didn’t get a proper chance to say your goodbyes with Olfina, did you?”

“Is this official?” Jon asked suspiciously.

“A mix of official and personal. I can’t say there’s no risk – the Stormcloaks are pretty upset with me and you’ll be a nice buffer.”

Jon rapidly warmed up to the idea. He’d see Olfina, and he offered to introduce Emilin to any Gray-Mane members they met.

Emilin informed the soldiers on the front lines that she was going to make certain the children had reached safety. She’d negotiated the truce, so they had no reason to doubt her, and let her and Jon pass through safely. Jon was carrying a white flag of truce.

The first Stormcloak soldiers they encountered were very polite, offering to escort them straight-away to Galmar Stone-Fist. The truce had been made to last the entire day, so the arrival of an Imperial observer didn’t strike them as odd. However, as they progressed into the camp, Stormcloak soldiers shot them dark looks. And then, just outside Galmar’s tent,

“JON BATTLE-BORN! What are you doing here?” Olfina rounded on her lover.

“Escorting the Legion’s negotiator,” said Jon quickly.

“You – you call her a negotiator? After last night? Thorald, look who’s here,” Olfina called to a Stormcloak soldier a few paces away.

“That’s Thorald Gray-Mane,” Jon explained to Emilin. “The one I told you about.”

“What’s all that racket?” a voice asked from within the tent.

“Messengers from the Legion!” Olfina called back. She grabbed hold of Jon’s arm, “Come on in.” She pulled Jon with her through the tent door. Emilin and Thorald followed after her.

Inside, Galmar Stone-Fist, Vignar Gray-Mane and a couple Stormcloak officers were standing around a wooden table.
“I wasn’t expecting any more Legion minions-“ Vignar Gray-Mane was saying as they entered. He broke off when he saw who had come in.

Galmar was the first to speak. “I didn’t expect spies to walk straight into my tent either.”

“Not spies, sir,” said Jon. “We’re only here to ascertain the children’s safety, per the terms of the truce.”

“The boy’s no spy. Too dense for that,” Vignar told Galmar.

“Hey-“ Jon began, but then cut himself off. Olfina was glaring at him.

“The elf was wearing Stormcloak colours last night when she burnt down our catapults,” Galmar growled. “She’s forfeited any rights as a warrior or a diplomat.”

Emilin regretted that she’d let Junius talk her into wearing the Stormcloak uniform during last night’s foray. She hadn’t needed it, really. “I’m not here to claim any rights,” she replied to Galmar. “In fact, I’m here to entrust myself to your mercy.”

Jon gasped. Galmar stared at her. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I surrender. You can see I have no weapons on me.”

“What sort of elf trick is this?”

“I’ve used up all my tricks and am resorting to Nord straight-forwardness. I have a letter for you from Legate Rikke. I’d take it out of my jerkin, but I don’t think I should put my hands where you can’t see them.”

“Rikke secretly communicating with the enemy?” Galmar scoffed. “You don’t know her very well if you think I’ll believe that.”

“You don’t know her well enough, if you won’t wait to see what she has to say.”

“You might as well read the letter,” Vignar told Galmar. “And I’d prefer if you’d let me leave here before you start executing Legionnaires.”

“I’m not actually a Legionnaire,” Emilin reminded him.

“And yet you keep fighting for the Legion,” replied Vignar. “More fool you.”

He had a point there.

“Give me the letter,” ordered Galmar. Once Emilin had handed it to him, he turned to Olfina’s brother. “Thorald, take these two outside and wait there.”

Emilin and Jon complied with these orders. Olfina followed them all out from the tent then confronted Jon.

“You had no idea what you were getting into here, did you?” she demanded.

“I didn’t,” Jon agreed. “But it was worth it just to see you. Or at least that’s what a song would say about this.”

“If you’re writing the silly song, sure.”
Thorald Gray-Mane cleared his throat. “As an older brother, I have some concerns—”

“Oh shut up.” Olfina was not in a good mood.

Jon gave Thorald a hopeful smile. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“No thanks to your family,” replied Thorald.

Jon’s face coloured. “You know Idolaf wrote General Tullius on your behalf? Think on that for a while, you big lumphead.”

Emilin cleared her throat. “Jon, you did promise to introduce me.”

“Right. This is Olfina’s brother, Thorald Gray-Mane. Thorald, this is Emilin of Silvenar. She’s an old friend of the Dragonborn.”

Thorald frowned. “A friend of the Dragonborn or her father?” he asked.

“Both,” replied Emilin. “I’m very glad to meet you, Thorald. We have a lot in common, you and I.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We’ve both been rescued from Thalmor prisons by members of the Varo family.”

Thorald froze.

“Now’s not the time to talk about,” Emilin said hastily. “But if you ever do want a friendly ear . . . “

She trailed off. She was very serious about the offer. There was a fellowship among the prisoners of the Thalmor; they shared experiences and knowledge and guilt that no one else could understand. Thorald was one of their number and so was Ulfric Stormcloak. What tales the three of them could share if they ever came together in one place!

5 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

To the people of Eastmarch, Ulfric Stormcloak seemed undaunted by fate or misfortune.

In private, however, in the company of his oldest and dearest friends, he would quietly admit that his hold existed in a permanent state of barely controlled chaos, and he had very little idea how to put it to rights. There were Dark Elf malcontents in Windhelm, bandits and necromancers (also Dark Elves) running wild in the countryside, the Skooma trade, Riften (Skyrim’s leading exporter of crime) as a neighbour, and now dragons . . . it never ended. It was surely a mark of divine favour that the Stormcloak cause had nonetheless prospered.

His great hope was that victory in the field would at last allow his people a respite from their misfortunes. They could for a time rebuild their shattered lives and restore Eastmarch to a glory it’d not known for a generation.

Meanwhile, they struggled on, as did Ulfric. The discovery of the Summerset Shadows had ended his town’s complacency over bandits throughout the hold. The other day, a huge crowd had gathered in front of the Palace demanding he send soldiers to hunt through every cave and ruin in Eastmarch.

He had no soldiers to spare at the best of times; lately he’d sent nearly every able-bodied warrior to besiege Whiterun. The mob had, in the end, been appeased by Torsten Cruel-Sea’s offer to hire the
Companions for the job. Torsten had then shamed or strong-armed every merchant in Windhelm to donate to this endeavour. If they were reluctant to give, he appealed to the memory of his murdered daughter, Fjotli. Ulfric was growing to believe that Niranye had the right of it: Fjotli had been murdered by the Butcher, not the Summerset Shadows. But it seemed like they’d all agreed to Torsten’s story of avenging his daughter’s murder. It was easier for Windhelm than embracing the truth: that Torsten Cruel-Sea had tortured a petty thief to death.

Brunwulf had complained, of course, because the man didn’t know when to stop pushing. He’d won everyone’s good will for apprehending the Shadows, then lost it for insisting Torsten should be tried for his actions. Town gossip had it that Brunwulf’s lover, Elda Early-Dawn, was giving him the cold shoulder over this. Couldn’t have happened to a more deserving man, in Ulfric’s opinion.

He’d released most of the Altmer in the prison cells yesterday. Some of them, without local citizens to vouch for them, he’d exiled from Windhelm. The two Summerset Shadows remained in the cells, scheduled for execution tomorrow. They’d given up no further useful information, other than attempting to incriminate Niranye as their full accomplice. Ulfric was holding off on a decision about Niranye, until Cecilia gave her input. Since Cecilia had only been gone two days, that wouldn’t be soon.

He missed Cecilia. She wasn’t always pleasant to have around, but she’d been good for him and Windhelm. It certainly hadn’t been her intention, but she’d rallied the spirits of his soldiers and distracted the populace from their daily woes. They were now quietly worried about her absence, though they obviously hesitated to interrogate him about it. (Not so Aela the Huntress who had hounded him until she was satisfied Cecilia really had sailed to Winterhold.)

This morning a delivery boy had brought to the palace the new clothes Cecilia had fitted for before she left town. They were mostly practical outfits for an adventurer, but he noticed with approval a couple court gowns. He offered to pay for the delivery, of course, but the boy explained that Cecilia had already paid up front. For a few seconds, he felt wounded, as if this was an insult to his masculine pride as a provider. Then he realized how ridiculous that was; Cecilia the dragon-bone collector certainly had more money to spend than him, who was waging a war on a very tight budget.

Galmar’s messenger rode into Windhelm that afternoon like the hounds of Hircine were on his tail. One look at the man’s face was enough to see he had brought bad news.

“Jarl Ulfric, I’ve brought you a letter from Galmar Stone-Fist,” he announced. This soothed Ulfric’s greatest fear, that Galmar might have been killed. Whatever doom had driven on this man, it would be bearable.

He took the letter the messenger now held out to him, and breaking the seal, began to read.

_Battlemage Junius Varo has entered the fray._

And now Ulfric understood the messenger’s expression. Gods protect them.

_I suppose Tullius sent for him at last. He arrived several hours ago, this afternoon, the second day of our siege. Rode in across the plains north of Whiterun – I don’t know how he avoided our troops on the Solitude road – accompanied by Rikke and his old Bosmer sidekick, Emilin. Worse, he’s brought a party of Thalmor with him, though he left them behind in the foothills north of the city. I have sent out patrols to search for them._

That didn’t make sense. Varo was no collaborator with the Thalmor. Something had gone terribly wrong if he’d joined cause with them.
Was taking his daughter from the Empire enough to explain that?

Varo and his companions first slaughtered one of our patrols, sending one young soldier back to us with the usual Imperial threat: that he’ll put your head on a pike.

For a short time, long enough to win through to the city, Varo sent our troops into a panicked rout. He achieved this with the most despicable use of Illusion magic I have ever witnessed. Dressed in a red cloak, gilt armour, and wearing an amulet set with a glowing red jewel, he charmed a large number of our warriors into seeing Talos Stormcrown come again to defend his Empire.

I called a retreat away from the city walls to regroup. There were several hours of confusion, during which we clashed with the Legion and Whiterun guards a couple times. They are drawn up behind barricades in front of the main gate, and have made a few sorties to keep us at a distance. I don’t have a count of today’s casualties yet, but even with Varo’s participation, I saw far fewer deaths than the terrible numbers I sent you yesterday. After a rough start, our younger soldiers are adjusting to war on a different level than they’ve so far experienced.

We won’t let you down. Me, I’m willing to fight your angry future father-in-law if you’re getting something out of it. You committed yourself to this, now see it through: Take the girl as your wife immediately. Don’t stand on ceremony or Cyrodiilic propriety. Start your day by finding the priest, make your vows by dinner time, and have her in bed by evening.

Galmar’s advice didn’t surprise him. Nor was it wrong. The stronger he made his hold on the Dragonborn, the better.

He’d held off on discussing with Cecilia a date for the wedding. He’d devoted all his energies to making her comfortable in Windhelm first. But he’d imagined they’d be wed after Galmar had taken Whiterun and his future as High King was more certain.

He could make no decision with Cecilia away in Winterhold. He could only wait and see what mood she was in when she returned. If she hadn’t heard of her father’s return before then, he’d have to tell her. He wasn’t looking forward to it. She’d wept over her separation from her father before. And now he was here to take her back for the Empire? Ulfric didn’t doubt her honour; she would keep her promise. But she could break. He’d seen desperation in her eyes that morning she’d invaded his room with a dagger. And he had to keep her whole. For Skyrim.

There was only one practical thing he could do right now. The seamstress who’d made Cecilia’s clothing had her fittings. After dismissing Galmar’s messenger, he asked Jorleif to summon the seamstress and asked her to put all her other work aside and begin on a simple wedding dress of blue and white.

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5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold

Leaving the College of Winterhold was much easier than Cecilia had anticipated. They’d taken many preparations for their exit. Cecilia had gone to bed early, then crept out that evening in a cloak she’d borrowed from Brelyna. J’Zargo and Onmund had been charged with creating a distraction for any nearby Thalmor; Cecilia regretted she would not be able to see it. J’Zargo had also produced three potions of invisibility for Ralof, Lydia and Cecilia (but refused to explain where he had got them.) They took these before they walked out on the exposed College bridge. It was snowing heavily tonight – did spring ever really come to Winterhold? – and that would cover their tracks perfectly. Once across the bridge, they stole away into the hills behind town rather than walk past the inn and
Jarl’s longhouse.

Cecilia relaxed once they’d put some distance between them and the town. They’d avoided both the Legionnaires and Thalmor Justiciars. It was hard going through the snow but they could take their time. Torbjorn Shatter-Shield was probably in Dawnstar sending on her letter right now. His boat would return in a couple of days at the earliest.

Their goal tonight was a campsite down a deserted valley that Cecilia and Lydia had explored before. Cecilia couldn’t have found the place again, but Lydia’s sense of direction was nearly superhuman. The site was under a cliff face, sheltered from the wind. A cave would be more comfortable, but they’d all experienced too many of the things that lived in Skyrim’s caves to want to face those tonight.

Perhaps they let down their guard. Or perhaps it was impossible to guard against everything. The last thing Cecilia expected as they entered the small valley was a burst of light that burnt into her eyeballs and an order to halt in the name of the Emperor.

She halted. Some instincts are bred in the bone, and Cecilia was the child and grandchild of Legionnaires. Lydia and Ralof, in contrast, pulled out their swords.

“Keep away from my thane!” Lydia shouted.

The curtain of falling snow obscured Cecilia’s vision, but she could make out figures before and behind her. They’d been caught in a trap, encircled by the Legion. They hadn’t shared their destination tonight with any one, so they’d been followed to the perfect site for ambush. The Legionnaires probably had the aid of mages to cover their pursuit. This was very well-done: so perfectly executed that she feared for a moment her father would step out of the falling snow to greet her.

The legionnaire who stepped forward was not Junius Varo. But he was familiar.

Ralof snorted. “Are we really doing this again?”

Hadvar ignored him. “Dragonborn, the Legion will escort you—“

“No, you won’t,” Cecilia broke in. “Don’t you dare interfere with my personal business.”

“We’re here on the Emperor’s behest,” said Hadvar patiently. “You’re traveling with a damn traitor,” he pointed to Ralof. “Nothing personal about that.”

“Ralof’s my retainer,” Cecilia snapped. She was angry, but not intimidated. She was the Dragonborn. Hadvar and his fellow soldiers would be crazy to try to take her down.

“So you’re not putting down your arms?” Hadvar asked.

“We’re not,” confirmed Cecilia. “I’m not the Empire’s enemy, but I don’t take commands from the Legion.”

Hadvar sighed and turned towards another Legionnaire, who handed him a rolled-up scroll.

“I deeply regret this, but . . .” he unrolled the scroll. “Cecilia Ameliana Curinwe Varo, by order of the Emperor, His Most Gracious Majesty Titus Mede II, you are charged with high treason and rebellion.”

Hadvar gestured to Ralof. “What are you doing now?”

“I could knock you all down with a single shout!” she yelled. White rage had taken hold of her. “I can call on dragons as my allies! Let us go now!”

“You are openly rebelling against the Legion,” Hadvar warned.

“I don’t care!” she screamed. One of the Legionnaires took a step towards Ralof.

*FUS ROH DAH*! She flung the man half across the valley.

Fighting had never come naturally to Cecilia. In battle, she preferred to hang back and fight with well-utilized spells rather than rush into the mayhem. But at times like this, when she had no such choice, she relied on the Thu’um. The shouts had become second nature to her.

*FEIM ZII GRONN* they could not touch her while she readied a warding spell, and Ralof and Lydia would not have to defend her. They’d break out of this trap together. She would call on Odahviing and burn these Legionnaires to cinders! She was Dragonborn and how DARE THEY? She raised Dawnbreaker in defiance. Her ward leapt up to protect her as she became solid again and joined her companions in battle.

The battle lasted all of about fifteen seconds. There was a sharp burst of pain at her neck, followed by a warm, soft numbness as her body collapsed. She felt nothing as she hit the snow, and could not even lift her head from the ground.

“My thane!” Lydia was crying over her, but she was pulled away.

“That was unexpected. You almost missed the shot.” An unfamiliar voice, speaking in a Cyrodiil accent.

“You never said anything about her fading out!” someone else protested.

“We hadn’t heard of that shout. It looks like there’s a lot to learn.”

She tried to focus on the pair of Legionnaire’s boots that were at level with her eyes. Then she felt her jaws pulled apart, and cloth stuffed into her mouth.

“Sorry, Dragonborn,” said Hadvar. “We had to do it this way.”

She was pulled to her feet between Hadvar and another Legionnaire. Her body was completely limp.

“For what it’s worth, you haven’t actually been charged with High Treason,” continued Hadvar. “I know that upset you.”

“Not yet,” said the unseen man with the Cyrodiil accent. “I hope not ever.”

“What do you want us to do with the others, Legate?”

“Bind them properly and bring them along. Be gentle; they’re not necessarily our enemies.”

Cecilia still couldn’t move her head to see who was speaking, but she heard Ralof snort at that. “This the new softer Imperial way?” he asked.

“He’s a Stormcloak, sir,” Hadvar reminded his commander.

“Be gentle with the enemy as well,” the Legate replied. “Let’s march.”
“Are you going to drag my thane along?” demanded Lydia.

“Not at all. We have a sled ready.”

A few minutes later, they were settling her in a fur-lined sled. As they laid her down, she saw an Altmer face looking down at her, and stiffened in fear. How had the Thalmor – but then she realized this Altmer was dressed in a Legate’s uniform. How strange . . . You hardly ever saw Altmer in the Legion, and in Skyrim?

“Cecilia Varo,” the Altmer Legate had knelt down beside the sled. “I am Legate Fasendil, and my assignment is to bring you to Solitude safely.”

Cecilia tried to glare at him.

“We’ll continue our journey tomorrow, but tonight, there’s a warm cave we have staked out. Oddly enough, Varo, I was called up from my post in the Rift to give you a briefing. Then the General got news of your promise to Jarl Ulfric and changed his orders to capturing you. But you’ll still get the briefing, and I hope this makes more sense after you’ve heard what I have to say.”

He stood up and nodded to his men to begin their march. Cecilia stared up at the stars and cursed her naivete.

Chapter End Notes

I've been waiting for so long to get Fasendil involved. (And he's been waiting around in the cold for the Dragonborn to show up in Winterhold eventually.) He has stuff to tell Cecilia that I've been sitting on for a while and am very excited to write next chapter.

I've been writing a lot of meta on /r/teslore lately. One piece took the form of a rather dry academic-style document which technically is part of the Varo'verse. So I posted it on A03 for your persual. 4E 157: Letter From Luindil of Cloudrest, Envoy to the Ruby Throne, To An Unidentified Thalmor Official.

If you're interested in any of my Elder Scrolls lore posts, I've been deep-diving into anything related to Ulfric Stormcloak. Warning to Ulfric/Stormcloak fans, my conclusions are often very critical of him, even if he's my favourite Elder Scrolls character. I got a bit of blow-back from Stormcloak fans for writing this piece: Eight Myths of the Gray Quarter, but a lot more people (including Stormcloak fans) were positive.

I've also written a trilogy of posts about the Markarth Incident, which spawned really interesting discussions with a lot of good points, some of which have helped me nuance my thoughts. 
"Madmen of the Reach" and "The Bear of Markarth": A Close Reading of Ariannus Arius' Works
The Crimes of Ulfric Stormcloak? (Yet Another Markarth Incident Post)

>Aftermath of the Markarth Incident.

There have been a few Civil War and Talos ban threads where I've waded in, usually to defend the Stormcloaks' position as making more sense than it's given credit for, so
maybe I should get all that stuff together some day.

Questions/reviews much appreciated and always answered. I really don't get much response per chapter, maybe one or two people reviewing.
The Thalmor saved all of Elven-kind during the Oblivion Crisis. We’ve been watching over our lands for 200 years. We re-founded the Aldmeri Dominion, an alliance between us and our Bosmer cousins. You might know them from their common name: Wood elves. We intend to prove the superiority of Mer over Man, one century at a time.
- Ondolemar

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Stormcloak Camp, Whiterun

A few minutes after Emilin had given Galmar Rikke’s letter, the rest of the Stormcloak officers left the tent. Only Vignar Gray-Mane and Galmar remained inside. While Emilin waited, Jon Battle-Born kept up a steady stream of chatter about nothing, which Olfina Gray-Mane only half-listened to. Her brother Thorald sulked quietly. Emilin had a long time to wonder if Galmar would agree to her request or have her executed out of spite for her destruction of his catapults.

At last Vignar Gray-Mane strode out from the tent. “You can go in, Emilin. And remember this. I put in a word for you. Don’t make me regret it.”

She nodded, a little surprised. Maybe old Legion bonds counted for something after all.

“I’ll come with you,” Jon assured her.

“No you won’t, boy,” said Vignar. “I think you and I should have a chat. You too, niece. You must think us old folk were born yesterday.”

Jon looked petrified. Olfina smirked. “Bring it on, Uncle Vignar.”

Emilin couldn’t predict Vignar’s position on his niece’s relationship, but she was certain Olfina would hold her own against anyone, Gray-Mane or Battle-Born. Jon was in good hands.

She stepped into the tent, followed by Thorald Gray-Mane.

“I don’t need a guard,” Galmar greeted Thorald. “You can go—“ then he cut himself off. “No, stay. You may be the perfect man to help me decide this.”

“Yes sir,” said Thorald.

Galmar turned to Emilin. “So you want me to send you to Windhelm?”

“Yes. Do you believe the Legate sent that letter now?”

He shrugged. “Seems to be Rikke’s handwriting, and it sounds enough like her. But we haven’t survived till now by blindly trusting the enemy.”

“If I was an assassin sent to strike down the Jarl of Windhelm, this would be a very convoluted way of getting to him,” Emilin pointed out.
“You don’t need to repeat Rikke’s arguments.”

“I haven’t read what Legate Rikke wrote,” Emilin told him.

“Really?” He sounded surprised. “That’s a lot of trust to put in her.”

“This entire venture is based on trust. She trusts you and so I can too.”

“And Varo doesn’t know anything about this?”

“In the state you left him in? He’s barely conscious most of the time.” This was technically true; Junius had been sleeping again when she left him.

“Glad to hear that.” Galmar was grinning.

Emilin tried to ignore a rising urge to throttle the man. It wouldn’t work, anyway.

“You wanted Master Gray-Mane’s opinion?” she reminded Galmar. She had a hunch why, and she knew it would probably work in her favour.

“Sorry to drag you into this, lad,” Galmar told Thorald. “But Varo’s housecarl here wants us to send her to Windhelm to meet with Jarl Ulfric.”

“Housecarl?” Emilin spluttered.

“It’s a fair description, isn’t it?”

From a Nord’s point of view, she supposed it was.

“She’s an old Legion scout,” Galmar continued. “She and Ulfric fought side by side in one battle all those years ago, and were both taken prisoner by the Thalmor. They then both escaped that prison, but separately.”

“I didn’t exactly escape,” Emilin corrected him. “I was rescued by Junius. And I wasn’t aware anyone else had left that place alive. If I’d known, I would have ran to Skyrim to talk to your Jarl.”

“So you want my opinion because I was in Northwatch Keep?” Thorald asked sharply.

“Would you want to meet a fellow prisoner from that place?” asked Galmar. “Even if they were somehow loyal to the Empire after all that?”

Thorald stayed quiet.

“I have to judge here for Ulfric, and yet I don’t know his mind. Emilin can tell him a lot about the Thalmor, I don’t doubt that. But she’ll also be opening up wounds I’ve spent twenty-five years trying to keep closed.”

“And you want me to decide whether to hurt him?” exclaimed Thorald.

“No. I’m setting too heavy a burden on your shoulders, lad. I’ll make the decision myself. You will go to Windhelm, Emilin, and Ulfric can decide whether he wants to meet you there. If you’re going with the intention of talking the Dragonborn out of her promise, though, I’ll show you no mercy when we meet again.”

“Am I supposed to pretend I’m happy at her choice of husband?” asked Emilin. She was relieved at Galmar’s decision, but she was not thrilled at how he interpreted her probable actions as grounds for
“You can pretend you have a small bit of honour left,” he growled.

“You don’t think much of her honour, do you?” she turned her attention back to his original statement.

“She’s a pleasant enough lass, but I barely know her, other than that she’s the descendant of turncoats and traitors.”

Emilin clenched her fists tightly, willing herself not to respond. She wanted to tear out his insolent eyes with her fingers and pluck out every hair in his beard.

But it was Thorald whom Galmar’s insults moved to action. “The Dragonborn is the truest woman I’ve ever met!” he cried, his face now flushed. “I owe her a life debt and she’ll be your queen, sir!”

Thorald Gray-Mane had survived the Thalmor’s hospitality, then returned to battle. That meant he was a very brave man indeed. But Emilin thought the bravest thing he ever did might be chiding Galmar Stone-Fist for showing disrespect to Cecilia. His voice quavered as he reached the end of his protest, and he didn’t speak eloquently or persuasively, but he held his ground against a glare that could freeze a Flame Atronach.

Yet when he finished speaking, Galmar burst out laughing. “Let no man ever doubt your loyalty, Thorald. Would you go with her to Windhelm if I asked it?”

“I want to stay here and take my city back,” Thorald replied. “But I’ll obey your orders.”

“No, I won’t rob you of that. It would do my heart good, though, to send one of your kin to Windhelm, to remind the Dragonborn of your gratitude. Perhaps your sister would be willing to go.”

“She’s going to be busy watching the children,” Thorald reminded his commander.

“Some of whom will be fostered in Eastmarch,” Galmar replied. “We’ll see what she says.”

“You’re taking the children as hostages?” commented Emilin blankly.

“As guests,” Galmar corrected her. “It’ll take some burden off this hold’s farms.”

Emilin began to laugh. Honourable these Stormcloaks might be, but they were not stupid. They could plot just as well as Junius.

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5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, the Reach

Tanulvie sat at a desk writing on the paper provided her. What she was writing was of little importance to her. After they’d exhausted her small knowledge of the Thalmor’s operations in Skyrim, Esbern had asked a number of random questions about life in Alinor. Delphine had huffed that none of this was relevant, and left Esbern to it. Which probably meant that the questions were indeed important. Tanulvie wasn’t going to be taken in by Delphine’s play acting again. But the Blades held the fate of her family in their hands, so she had to go along with this.

Her best guess was that Esbern’s inside knowledge of the Dominion dated back to spy reports before
the Great War, and that he was now using her to confirm rumours he’d heard since. Summerset Isle itself was locked down tight against outsiders, even citizens of the Dominion from other places. It was difficult to leave the Isle, but even more difficult to return. Esbern seemed particularly interested in how the Isles had recovered from the losses of the War, so she tried to emphasize their strength and recovery while writing answers to his questions. She couldn’t lie directly, though. If they found any untruth in her answers, they’d send that incriminating letter to the Thalmor Embassy and her family would undergo the consequences.

That Bosmer who’d pulled out the Forsworn abomination’s briar heart was back. She’d caught a glimpse of him talking to Delphine. The Bosmer and the other younger Blades had been sent to Markarth to retrieve the Dragonborn’s family before the Thalmor could; she wondered if they’d failed or were delayed. Tanulvie had never got Mistress Elenwen’s message about the Dragonborn’s family to Commander Ondolemar, but if Delphine could be trusted (which she probably couldn’t be), the Justiciars were searching the Reach. Had the Embassy contacted Ondolemar to tell him she was coming? Were they searching for her? Or was this a coincidence and the Justiciars busy on another matter entirely?

The door to her cell opened, this time admitting both Esbern and Delphine. And this time there wasn’t any lengthy preamble or beating around the brush. They wanted to know if she’d heard the name Sanyon before.

She had. She’d stayed a very short time in the Skyrim Embassy, but Sanyon was a legend among the junior Embassy staff, a cautionary tale of what happened to those who crossed the First Emissary. Sanyon, as she honestly told the Blades, had wasted the Justiciars’ time and resources trying to find a non-existent Talos shrine on Lake Ilinalta. Mistress Elenwen had at last sent him off into the wilderness on his own, without any back-up or resources. Sure, he technically could come back if he admitted he was wrong, but everyone knew that the next step would be re-education, so it surprised no one that he kept doggedly searching Falkreath for that shrine. And then he vanished, probably frozen to death in the winter months, and the First Emissary seemed completely satisfied with that outcome. That, the other Justiciars had warned the new recruits, was what happened if you messed with Mistress Elenwen.

“Did anyone ever search for Sanyon after he vanished?” Delphine asked.

“I wasn’t here,” Tanulvie demurred.

“But what were you told?”

“No, they never did.”

“You travelled from Alinor with Third Emissary Calerion, correct?”

“Aboard the same ship. But he didn’t socialize with us.”

“Did anyone ever mention Calerion’s duties involving finding lost agents like Sanyon?”

She shook her head. “But I wouldn’t be privy to those discussions.”

Delphine seemed satisfied by her answers and left it at that.

Tanulvie was once again completely mystified. Was the Third Emissary out searching for Sanyon in Falkreath? And if so, how did Delphine know about it? Were they planning to ambush him too?

It was a complete mystery and there was no way to solve it. Esbern directed her back to writing.
She focused on the next question: a request to draw a map of Auridon with major military posts, cities, harbours, and roads marked. She was a fine sketcher, but she resolved to draw a child’s map for Esbern.

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5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Breezehome, Whiterun

Time to pray. Worshiping the Daedra was easy. The Daedra got things done for their followers. The Divines gave so much of themselves to the making of Nirn, there wasn’t enough left to intervene directly. But if you opened yourself up properly to their graces, they could do great things through you. At least that was how Junius Varo had been taught, and who could doubt it after the gift given to his daughter?

When traveling, he’d sometimes make his prayers in the chapels of the Imperial cult, even if those gods didn’t exactly match up to his preferred pantheon. But he was too weak to leave Breezehome now, too weak to even get out of bed, according to the healer. He crawled out of bed anyway. There must be candles somewhere in Cecilia’s kitchen.

He’d not got far before the door opened and Legate Rikke expressed her disapproval. “What are you – you’re supposed to rest!” She ran to his side. “Where’s your caretaker?”

Commander Caius had assigned a Whiterun guard to watch over him.

“I told him I couldn’t sleep while he was standing over me like a prisoner at the block. We made a deal, he’ll check in on me twice an hour.”

Rikke shook her head at this. “We should have assigned you a Legionnaire.”

“Why? I think my guard is doing my laundry out back right now, which is actually useful. Said he knew an old recipe for taking out blood stains.”

“Why are you out of bed?”

“I need candles. Ten of them.”

Rikke sighed. “All right. I’ll get you the candles. Just get back to bed.” She put her arm around him to help him back. “Any type of candles you prefer?”

“The sort they have in chapels, if you can get them. But any candles will do.”

“Right.” They’d got back to the mattress and he allowed her to tuck him back under the covers. “I’ll be back with the candles but if you’ve stirred an inch while I’m gone, we’ll have to tie you down.”

She was back with ten white beeswax candles long before he expected. “There’s a small shrine in the barracks,” she explained. “What do you want with these?”

“Put them by my bed in a row and light them. Nine together, one off to the side.”

“Nine and one, for . . . gods?”

“Indeed.”

“And here the rest of us are arguing whether it’s Eight or Nine!” She was grinning.
“Well, there are eight main gods in the Aldmeri pantheon, Legate, but there’s also Phynaster, wouldn’t want to leave him out.”

“And you worship the Altmer gods?” asked Rikke.

“Yes. And Talos. I know it’s an odd combination. But I learnt this way from my mother. And I don’t think her gods should be left to the awful fate of only having crazed fanatics as worshipers.”

“I’ll set them up for you. Is it Talos you shove off to the side, by the way?”

“Yes. Emilin used to joke that she wasn’t sure if my mother thought the rest would take offense if they were close to Talos, or if Talos got to taunt the rest of the line. But as I said, it’s what I was taught, so I’ll keep honouring the divines in my own peculiar way.”

Rikke lined up the candles for him, but then didn’t move to light them. “I really came here to give you a letter.” She held out a folded piece of paper.

“Playing courier?” He took the paper, then recognized Emilin’s handwriting. It was addressed For Junius. “Why couldn’t she come here herself?” He opened it, fearing the worst.

Junius,

I’m off to Windhelm. I’ve got a head-start, so don’t even think of following me. You’ve sworn your oath to the Legion, anyway, so you can’t. Rest now, and when the healers let you up again, keep winning this war for General Tullius.

I’m going to see Cecilia and find out exactly what’s going on in her mind and heart. You may think that’s irrelevant to your duty here; it likely is, given how tightly you’ve bound your life to Titus Mede’s commands. But I know how much you love her, and so I’m taking over your parental duty to check on your daughter. Allow me to soothe your guilty conscience in this.

I’ll also find out what sort of man Ulfric Stormcloak is. Don’t worry, I won’t join the Stormcloaks if he turns out to be fairly impressive. I’ve promised Legate Rikke I’d come back for her, not to mention those promises I’ve made you. I’ll return soon enough.

Your dearest and most devoted friend,

Emilin

Varo finished reading, then looked up at Rikke. “So . . . Legate, she says she’ll come back for you.”

Rikke blushed. “Does she?”

“Yes. It’s a promise apparently. That bit I’m glad to hear. I think you’re about perfect for her.”

“I’m glad you’re all right with it,” said Rikke hesitantly.

Emilin had been alone so long, since his mother’s death. He was delighted that she finally had found love again. “It’s too bad you couldn’t woo her into staying,” he said. “Windhelm, huh?”

“She’ll be safe there, I think. Jon Battle-Born went with her to the Stormcloak camp, and when he came back, he told me Galmar promised her safe passage.”

“Oh she’d better be safe. Or I’ll – no, I’ve already promised to put Stormcloak’s head on a pike, I can’t do it twice over.”
“Do you understand why she went?”

“Yes. I understand. I don’t like it. And I don’t thank you for hiding it from me, but I understand that too. Gods know I’ve been told often enough that I’m overbearing.”

Rikke chuckled. “Not today, you aren’t."

He smiled but said nothing to that. It was true. He was uncharacteristically resigned to fate today. Would the loss of his right hand really change his temper like this? He doubted it. He just needed some sleep to recover. Some sleep and the favour of the gods.

Rikke was lighting the candles for him.

“Thank you.”

“I promised Emilin I’d look out for you,” Rikke replied.

After she left, he pulled himself into a kneeling position upon the mattress and began his prayers.

_Auri-El, Great Ancestor, may your name be praised even here in this land of snow. Protect me and my daughter from those who claim to be your servants. You granted some of your power to Cecilia, guide her through this darkness into your light._

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**5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold**

Feeling was slowly returning to Cecilia’s limbs. Despite the thick furs wrapped around her, she was cold. When the soldiers at last removed her from the sled, she was shaking like a leaf.

They were at the entrance of a cave. She caught a glimpse of Ralof and Lydia as she was carried inside. They seemed unharmed. And then, inside the cave, blessed warmth radiated from a fire. They laid her down on a bedroll beside the fire, and she soaked in the warmth. Despite herself, she grew more and more drowsy.

She must have fallen asleep, because suddenly Hadvar was shaking her shoulder and all the feeling had come back to her body. Her neck felt sore, where the paralyzing arrow had struck, she assumed.

“Can you sit up?” Hadvar was asking.

She nodded and pulled herself up. Her hands, she found, were unbound. But the gag stayed in her mouth. She was horribly thirsty and worried that they wouldn’t dare give her anything to drink, lest she Shouted. But it seemed the Legate had thought out this operation perfectly. A Legion mage was there to cast Silence on her, and a couple minutes later, she was holding a mug of hot mead, and a plate of stew was set beside her.

She ate up the stew, which was perfectly serviceable for wilderness food, better than the meal they would have made that night. They replaced the gag on her mouth once she was done. She was then shown to an alcove where there was a clean chamberpot and a basin of hot water and a bar of soap for cleaning up. They’d prepared everything for her maximum comfort. She worried, though, that Lydia and Ralof were nowhere to be seen.

The Silence spell had worn off but they were watching her movements closely, so she didn’t dare try to cast a spell. Without the Thu'um, she wasn’t a great mage, and they’d had the foresight to bring
mages with them. At last she was ushered down a long rocky passage to a smaller chamber of the cave. There, a makeshift plank table had been set up, and Legate Fasendil was sitting on a camp stool behind it. He stood up when they ushered her into the room, and directed her to another camp stool. Then he dismissed the guards except for the mage whom he instructed to stand at the entrance.

“This conversation is going to be difficult if I’m the only one talking.” The Legate set down an ink well on the table before her, then laid down parchment and a quill. “Write what you wish to say.”

She stared down at the table.

“Nothing at all to ask?”

Yes, she had questions.

*Did my father send you here?* She asked.

“No,” he answered, when she had finished writing. “Your father is in Skyrim with the Legion, but he’s gone to defend Whiterun from the Stormcloaks. We were sent out here to wait for you quite a while before he arrived in Solitude."

*Where are Ralof and Lydia?*

“Youre companions?”

She nodded.

“They’re in one of the cells here. We’re keeping them warm and fed. I’ll let your housecarl stay with you once I’ve gone over some of the more sensitive information.”

That was good to hear. She couldn’t trust him until she saw them for herself, but this was encouraging.

*Do you know my father?* she then wrote.

“Yes. And I knew your grandmother fairly well. Met her when she was a fresh young Legion mage in High Rock. That brings me to what I’m here to talk to you about. The Thalmor.”

Cecilia’s eyes widened.

“You already know they’re our greatest enemy. And yet we’re at peace with the Dominion. The General’s been in a quandary these past few months with you, Varo. There’s a lot he can’t say about the Dominion and the future of Skyrim within the Empire. He can’t tell you what is being planned back in the Imperial City. He’s had to hope, as your father’s daughter, that you’d understand. Meanwhile, the Stormcloaks can pour their poison into your ears as they wish.”

*I’m not a Stormcloak!* Cecilia furiously scribbled.

“Good. General Tullius can’t be honest with you, so he decided to give me the job. And I’ll get to that, but there’s some history we need to clear up first. I’m not sure what you know about your grandmother, but I’ll tell you what I know.”

Despite herself, Cecilia was intrigued. To meet someone who had known Curinwe Varo, an Altmer nonetheless, was tantalizing.

“About seventy years ago,” Fasendil began. “I met a young Breton mage, fresh to the Legion. Your grandmother Curinwe. I’d never have pegged her as half-Altmer.”
As a young child, when Cecilia had been told her dead grandmother was half-elf, she’d imagined Curinwe with pointed ears and golden hair. But of course, children took mostly after their mothers’ races, and Curinwe more than most. Everyone agreed that Curinwe had been the splitting image of her Breton mother, without a trace of her father’s looks. When it came to her magic, though, there was no doubt Curinwe was Master Andanyon’s child.

“Your grandmother . . . surprised me. Not that she was mixed-blood – there are plenty of folk who are and they often fled to High Rock where that was more accepted. But I thought her family must be refugees from the Dominion.” He paused, as if he expected a response.

She picked up her quill. *They were.*

“In a way. But not the way I imagined it. How much do you know about your great-grandfather, Varo?”

She stared at him in confusion.

“Do the words *Night of Green Fire* mean anything to you?”

She shook her head.

“Back in 42 I was stationed in Hammerfell, on leave in Sentinel, trying to track down some refugee relatives who had fled persecution in Alinor. Suddenly an explosion of magic in the refugee quarter. Thalmor mages were attacking the Altmer dissidents who were resisting with magic of their own. I ran to the scene with other Legionaries who were stationed there, but the entire quarter was a smoking ruin by the time we arrived. Everyone was dead. Wholesale slaughter. The Dominion, not content with killing dissidents at home, came to Hammerfell to finish the job.”

Cecilia nodded. She hadn’t heard of this particular incident, but that was how the Thalmor functioned. They’d tracked down and murdered her great-grandparents. Her grandmother had only narrowly escaped with her life.

“The architect of the Night of Green Fire was your great-grandfather.”

Cecilia stared at him, then grabbed the quill. *What do you mean?* she scribbled hastily.

“Curinwe’s father wasn’t just any Altmer refugee. He’d been a high-ranking member of the Thalmor since before the Oblivion Crisis. Andanyon of Shimmerene, the youngest child of Shimmerene’s High Kinlord.”

Cecilia knew her great-grandfather had been essentially a prince in the Summerset Isles. But he’d turned his back on his Thalmor-supporting family, fleeing to the continent and eventually marrying a Breton spellsword and raising a daughter together. She hadn’t imagined he was actively Thalmor.

“The Thalmor call themselves the saviours of the Oblivion Crisis. Which you could dismiss as lies, but it’s not so simple. When the Summerset Isles were ravaged and Crystal-Like-Law fell, the Thalmor did close some of the gates of Oblivion. But for every gate that closed, another opened.”

Cecilia nodded. She’d learnt all this in her history classes. Many groups across Tamriel had some success in shutting the Gates, but only Martin Septim’s sacrifice could close off Oblivion permanently.

“Curinwe liked to boast her father had personally shut three Oblivion gates. He was quite rightly hailed as a hero when it was all finished. But he and his friends used that reputation for the Thalmor’s goals . . . Is this new to you?”
She nodded reluctantly.

“I’m not surprised. Your father could tell you all this, but I’ve got the impression he doesn’t like to talk about the past much. Which may have been wise; you’ve been raised free of its shackles. But now the past comes knocking on your door. Do you know who Elenwen is?”

Cecilia nodded and then wrote out an answer. Yes, I know she’s my grandmother’s first cousin. My parents did tell me that family wants us dead.

“The High Kinlord of Shimmerene was one of the first and highest-ranking Summerset nobles to declare for the Thalmor. He did so at his sons’ urging: Lord Morandur, Elenwen’s father, and Andanyon, your great-grandfather. Their devotion to the cause was not at all typical of the Great Families of the Isles. The Lords and Ladies of Summerset were comfortable with their place within the Empire; they and their ancestors had bowed their heads to Tiber Septim after all.”

I know this. Cecilia wrote. The history of the Third Aldmeri Dominion might be utterly fascinating, but she’d heard this all before. The Thalmor had largely emerged from the sapiarchs and the lower nobility, who still rankled at their country’s humiliation.

The Thalmor overthrew “the rightful kings and queens of Alinor,” she added, quoting Lathenil of Sunhold. But my great-grandfather’s family kept their power by choosing the right side.

“Exactly.” Fasendil nodded. “But don’t think it was a cynical move on their part. Those two young princes were true believers. Your great-grandfather threw away the privileges of rank and underwent incredible hardship to expand the Dominion’s reach across the continent. And it was in those years that he planned and executed that attack in Sentinel.”

But he was killed by the Thalmor! Cecilia scribbled rapidly.

“He left the Thalmor at last. After he met your great-grandmother, I believe. I heard all this from Curinwe. She was proud of her father, but knew exactly how bloody his hands were.”

As Fasendil had rightly guessed, her father didn’t like to talk much about the past. Neither did Emilin. Her knowledge of her family’s elven side came mostly from her mother, who’d related the basic facts of Curinwe’s ancestry. Cecilia wondered now how much her father had ever even told her mother of this.

But a new thought replaced her curiosity. Why does this matter? She demanded. He died a long time ago. Do you want me to feel guilty for what he did?

“Certainly not,” said Fasendil sharply. “But you need to understand what the Thalmor see in you. How deep their hatred runs. You’re not just the descendant of a dissident who mingled his blood with humans. You and your father are the scions of a traitor who hurt them deeply. Your great-grandfather’s brother is now High Kinlord of Shimmerene, and even after he killed your great-grandparents, he was unsatisfied because your grandmother escaped him. That family hates you beyond the limits the Thalmor have placed on them. They’ve defied the Thalmor Council before trying to assassinate your grandmother and father. Elenwen is probably the most sensible member of that family, but you can’t expect her to restrain herself if there’s ever an opportunity to destroy you.”

This doesn’t change anything, Cecilia wrote defiantly. I always knew they were my enemies.

“Good. Then let us face what must be done against your enemies.”
And there we go. Cecilia had always imagined her Altmer great-grandfather as the Tamriel equivalent of a hippy, rebelling against the Man, but if you've read my one-shot about Curinwe and Emilin's first meeting, you'll know he wasn't anything of the sort. In fact, Emilin's first impression of him was a clue.

*Emilin hadn’t known what to expect of Curinwe’s father, but she somehow hadn’t expected him to be such a stern-seeming mage. He was an Altmer who’d defied every tradition in siring a human daughter, and yet he would not have been out of place within the ranks of the Thalmor themselves.*

The more one learns about Master Andanyon, the murkier his story gets. And speaking of that, I also wrote some apocrypha for r/teslore about a murder Andanyon may or may not have been involved in.

**Twenty-First of Last Seed, 3E 415: Report of Valiitha Direnni, Blades Agent assigned to the Imperial Province of Summerset regarding her informal investigation into the murder of Eranwen, Crown Princess of Shimmerene.**

*If anyone's still reading, I'd love to hear your thoughts, questions etc. Actually I'd die to hear them, pretty much.*
Chapter Notes

There's no shame in such thoughts. A man without doubts is a man without conscience.
– Ulfric Stormcloak

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, The Reach

If she lived to be a hundred, Mjoll would never forget the look on the Grandmaster’s face when the Forsworn came to Sky Haven Temple.

The journey from Markarth to Karthspire had been a strange one, but very easy. They’d followed the road most of the way, scaring travelers and locals half to death as they went. Madanach and his followers ignored these once they ran. More Forsworn had joined their group along the way, having somehow heard the news of the prison break, and by the time they reached Sky Haven Temple, they were nearly a hundred in all.

Madanach had agreed to take only a couple of his men up to the temple, otherwise the Blades would never open up the gate. He’d insisted in return that Embla Attius stay down in the valley with the rest of the Forsworn. Mjoll hadn’t been happy with that arrangement, but Embla had encouraged her to accept it. They had been at the Forsworn’s mercy since Cidhna Mine, why begin worrying now?

“Kaie’s promised to show me around Karthspire Camp.” Embla added, gesturing to the fearsome woman warrior who’d joined them when they emerged from Cidhna Mine. “I’ve lived quite a few years in the Reach without seeing a Forsworn camp, so it’s a good time to remedy that.”

She made it sound like a treat.

Now, Mjoll and Kharjo were standing at the gate of Sky Haven Temple, watching Delphine hesitantly greet Madanach, who was flanked by his massive orc bodyguard and another of the Cidhna Mine Forsworn.

“Grandmaster, is it?” he responded. “Your pups here say you know something of the Thalmor meddling in these parts twenty-six years ago.”

Delphine turned to Mjoll and Kharjo. “You told him that?” Her expression was blank, but Mjoll could sense the reproach behind it.

“Yes, Ma’am. We banded together to get out of Markarth alive. Embla Attius is with the rest of Madanach’s folk down in the valley.” She hoped Delphine would pick up on how badly they needed to co-operate.

Delphine turned her attention back to Madanach. “Not how I expected my Blades to return, but yes, we might have something to discuss. This doorstep isn’t the place for it, though.”

“It’s a better place for me than inside your walls,” Madanach replied.

“I’m sure it is, but I won’t sit down to speak out here. Your followers far outnumber mine. I’d be
looking over my shoulder the whole time.”

“You’ve already posted a sentry,” replied Madanach, pointing out Faendal, who’d taken up a position with a view of the entry.

“If you let me talk to my Blades privately, and make certain you’re not holding them hostage somehow, we could arrange a proper parley.”

“So I should allow you time to make your stories match? No. Mjoll here won her and her companions’ lives back in Markarth by promising me a certain piece of information. If you’ll tell me the meat of it now, before you hear what she said to me, we can go through the details later. What happened twenty-six years ago with the Thalmor?

“You should tell him, Delphine,” Esbern spoke up from the shadows of the gate. “The Thalmor thrive on secrecy. The Reachfolk should know the true face of their enemies.”

Delphine frowned. “Very well. I don’t know what Mjoll told you, but if it’s about the Thalmor twenty-six years ago, you want to know what role they played in the Markarth Incident.”

Madanach said nothing, waiting.

“A few months ago, an agent of the Blades retrieved official Thalmor documents that referred to the Thalmor’s role in setting up the Incident. You must know how convenient it all was for their plans. And how quickly they discovered Jarl Hrolfdir’s promise to Ulfric Stormcloak’s militia.”

“Whom did they set it up with then?”

Delphine hesitated a moment, glancing at Esbern, who nodded. “They claimed to have made contact with Ulfric Stormcloak soon after the Great War,” she said slowly.

Mjoll stared at Delphine. What – what was she – how could that be right? Delphine had never said that to her, only that the Thalmor had orchestrated the whole affair. Mjoll hadn’t felt she could press the Grandmaster for details.

“The Liberator of Skyrim working with the Thalmor?” asked Madanach. He sounded as skeptical as Mjoll felt.

“According to the Thalmor’s own documents, yes,” answered Delphine. “I’ve no idea how they got his co-operation, but they’re very good at manipulating people. I’m not claiming he’s a Thalmor agent; the same document said he became uncooperative after the Markarth Incident.”

“Can you show me this document?”

“Unfortunately, it’s in the possession of the agent who procured it, and that agent is not here. I did have a copy made.”

A Blades agent who’d infiltrated the Thalmor a few months ago . . . Cecilia. It had to have been the Dragonborn who’d found this document, Mjoll realized. And now it made less sense than before that Cecilia had gone to marry Ulfric Stormcloak.

“Will you show me that copy?” Madanach persisted.

“I sent my Blades to Markarth to rescue a woman and her son from the Thalmor,” Delphine didn’t answer him directly. “Mjoll said Embla Attius is down in the valley with your band. What of her son?”
“Her son’s a prisoner of the Thalmor in Understone Keep,” Madanach replied. Mjoll nodded in confirmation.

“I see. Will you send up Embla Attius in exchange for a copy of the Thalmor’s dossier on Ulfric Stormcloak?”

Madanach laughed. “Aye, I’ll hand her over to you. I’ll make my own judgment on this document, but if you’re speaking the truth, perhaps we can become better neighbours than we’ve been to this point. Your Blades helped fight our way out of Markarth this morning. I’d have liked to rip out Thonar Silver-Blood’s throat myself, but your young cat here did a fine job of skewering him instead. Go on inside, get your document, we’ll return with the Nord woman.”

Once Madanach had left and the Blades were back inside the temple, Delphine turned on them.

“What did you do?” she cried. “You killed Thonar Silver-Blood?”

“In self-defense!” said Mjoll quickly. “It’s a long story. Let us report and then judge us.”

“I’m listening.”

Mjoll and Kharjo ran through the tale of their adventures in Markarth after Faendal had left them. Delphine was somewhat mollified once she’d heard all the details. At least she understood that they’d done what they needed to bring back Embla alive.

“We’ve finally made enemies of the Stormcloaks,” she observed at last. “Thonar was one of their key men, and now we’ve outed Ulfric, Divines help us.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” said Esbern. “If we kept the dossier secret, the Thalmor would always have a hold on him and Skyrim. You know we couldn’t let that continue.”

“Ulfric’s not likely to see it that way.”

“No. He isn’t. But this was bound to happen. The World-Eater is dead, and we return to plotting against the Thalmor. Isn’t that what we’re doing with our prisoner?”

Delphine cracked a small smile. “Right, Mjoll, Kharjo, we’ve broken our Justiciar’s spirit. She’s proving to be an interesting source of information. Esbern can tell you all about that. There’s something strange going on with the Thalmor in Skyrim right now. Esbern scried a sending by Elenwen to the Thalmor Embassy. She was somewhere in Whiterun Hold ordering the new Third Emissary to go find a missing Thalmor agent in Falkreath.”

“The sending was completely unsecured,” Esbern added. “They’re smarter than that. It may be a trap.”

“But we don’t know what the trap could be,” said Delphine. “Or who it’s for. But keep all of this in mind. They’re far subtler than the dragons you’ve faced with us previously.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Is there any way of contacting the Dragonborn about this?”

“No,” said Delphine. “Not right now.”

Mjoll mustered up all her courage to ask the next question. “Is the Dragonborn ever going to come back to us?”

Delphine said nothing. Esbern at last spoke up. “We don’t know,” he said simply.
5 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold

Legate Fasendil turned to the mage who’d been standing guard at the entrance to this chamber of the cave. “Can you cast that spell now?”

The mage nodded and waved his hand. Nothing happened.

“Let’s see if this works,” said Fasendil.

The mage spoke up: “I presume you’re talking, but I can’t hear anything. And if I can’t hear anything, no one further out can.”

Fasendil turned back to Cecilia. “Can you hear me, Varo?”

She nodded.

“Good. I do trust my men but I’m speaking to you now in the utmost confidence. Mathis here prepared a very powerful muffle spell for this room. What I tell you now will certainly be denied by any Imperial official you should ask about it later. Though, for my sake, I hope you don’t ask.”

She kept still. She’d not give her captor any promise.

“You’re intelligent enough to know that another war with the Dominion is inevitable.”

If this was his top secret information, he’d wasted his time here. Anyone with a speck of common sense knew that, and she’d grown up in a household that took that for granted.

“You probably know that in some ways the war has never ended. Very literally for your father, I imagine. I’m not privy to his assignments, or where he gets them, but the Dominion’s complaints about him are a bit easier to access. If their complaints can be believed, he and his companions have been harrying their shipping on the Valenwood coast, even sacked one of their smaller ports. Does that sound right to you?”

Cecilia nodded, but then she picked up the quill to clarify. *That sounds like him. But I don’t know anything about what he actually does.*

“Right. You can’t slip up and let out his secrets if he never tells you them. But there’s no doubt he’s been preparing for the coming war, as we all are.”

*When?* Cecilia demanded.

“I wish I could give you a definite timeline. Sooner rather than later. We can’t wait for the Dominion to attack when it feels properly prepared. Many would say we’ve waited too long already. If we’d declared war two years ago, we’d have avoided civil war in Skyrim . . . and the war here, even if we finally crush the rebellion, has weakened us considerably.”

*And if you lose?*

He seemed to hesitate. “It’s difficult to imagine that the Empire could lose Skyrim to the Stormcloaks. If we seriously keep fighting for it, that is. There is a point, however, at which the Empire might just let go. The Legion is tied up on the Dominion’s borders, the Navy can’t spare any ships, and eventually it may hurt us less to just let go of Skyrim, just as we did Hammerfell. I think
that would be a mistake; the Empire can’t win the next war without Skyrim. But it could happen if this war drags on.”

She thought hard before writing down her next thought. She didn’t want to sound as if she was regurgitating Stormcloak propaganda.

Would the war actually be without Skyrim? Ulfric Stormcloak says he would lead Skyrim against the Dominion.

Fasendil nodded when she finished writing. “He’s not an idiot. I’m sure he knows as well as you and I that all of us must stand together against the Dominion. And he must believe that he can do that better as High King than a subordinate of the Empire. He’s wrong, but I can understand the appeal of expelling the Thalmor and building up Skyrim’s strength. If he had another twenty years to do it in, perhaps he’d be successful.”

How long do we have? She’d asked that before and he’d deflected the question, but she really needed to know. Two years? Five? Another Decade?

“If we’re not at war within five years, I’ll be very surprised. But whether we’re ready for that – now, that’s up to you.”

No.

“I’m sure you don’t want it to be. But you’ve already changed this war. The Stormcloaks are fighting for you now.”

I haven’t joined a side!

“You didn’t mean to. But to the people of Skyrim, you’ve made a choice. And even though I can take you back to Solitude as a prisoner, the Dragonborn’s freedom is something they’ll fight for.”

Then let me GO!

“I can’t. There’s no good outcome here. By Ulfric’s side, you’re a threat to the Empire. And in our hands, you’re still a threat. But in Solitude you can take the first step towards fixing this mess.”

What’s that? If it was joining the Legion, she was done with this conversation.

“There’s someone who wants to meet you. A visitor who’ll be coming to Solitude by the end of the month.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“His Majesty Titus Mede II has decided to attend his cousin’s wedding in Solitude after all,” Fasendil continued. “Privately, he’s coming here to try and salvage this province and your presence is required.”

Cecilia didn’t know what to say. Or write.

She had known Emperor Titus since childhood. Not well, but as a friendly, grandfatherly man who’d pat her head and express wonder every single time at how tall his battlemage’s daughter had grown. She’d met him only a couple times in her adult years. Their last encounter had been at Regulus Umbranox’s installation ceremony as Count of Anvil. Both the older Count Umbranox and Cecilia’s mother had died that spring in the influenza epidemic that had hit the Gold Coast, and the Emperor had personally given her his condolences. (There were rumours the Thalmor had unleashed this
particularly lethal epidemic, but Cecilia’s father scoffed at those: Valenwood, he said, had seen more deaths than Cyrodiil from that flu, despite the Dominion’s assertions to the contrary.)

But she couldn’t say she knew the man, and the farther away from Cyrodiil she got, the less the Emperor’s actions made sense. In Cyrodiil, she’d accepted the need for the White-Gold Concordat because her own father had been at the Emperor’s side when he negotiated it. But in Skyrim, she had begun to wonder. Twenty-seven years was a long time to wait for the Empire to get its act together, while the Thalmor wormed their way into everything. It wasn’t even clear that the Empire’s own officials were committed to another war. The East Empire Company and other merchant interests certainly weren’t.

What was the vague promise of war worth to Nords whose families were dragged away by the Thalmor in the middle of the night? If there was something planned, something substantial, good! But there had been nothing to reassure Ulfric and his followers of that.

Or had there been? She suspected that once Ulfric had made his mind up, he wasn’t a good listener. She had no idea what overtures the Empire had made to the Stormcloaks before Torygg’s death brought about war.

If she ever got back to Windhelm, she’d have to ask him. About Torygg, about his militia before Torygg’s death, about what he’d done in Markarth. She had to know it all. Because she couldn’t stand aloof from Skyrim’s politics. She’d tried that, and she’d ended up here.

Fasendil wanted an answer.

_I do think I should meet with the Emperor._ she wrote. _But if you take me to Solitude, something dreadful is going to happen._

“What’s that?”

_I don’t exactly know. But I came up here because of what the Thalmor are doing at the College. They seem to have some plan for a dangerous magical artefact that’s in the College’s keeping. I need to search a Dwemer ruin in Eastmarch for another powerful artefact, or else . . ._

She feared Fasendil would dismiss this as an excuse, but he seemed troubled.

“I’ve heard reports that the Thalmor are indeed searching Skyrim for artefacts of power,” he commented. “What’s this thing at the college?”

_No one really knows, but it’s an orb the scholars there are calling the Eye of Magnus. They think it may be a Dawn era artefact._

“The Eye of Magnus . . . I don’t know anything about Dawn magic, but that’s exactly what the Thalmor claim to specialize in. What does the Arch-Mage say about this?”

_He said I should go get the Staff of Magnus. But he’s not the one who sent for me in the first place. That was the Psijic monks._

_“By the Eight!”_ Fasendil was now well and truly alarmed. _“The Psijics have shown up again?”_

Cecilia nodded vigorously.

“Well, this is bad. I don’t know . . . “ he trailed off and stared at the wall. “Forget the Emperor and the war for now. Write me the whole story of this orb. I can’t decide correctly unless I know exactly what’s at stake.”
Was he suggesting he might let her go if the threat was great enough?

*It will take a long time to write* she warned him.

“It’s worth waiting for.”

This must be a tale strong enough to change her fate. Mentally, she repeated the old invocation of writers beginning a work.

*Come to me, Akatosh, for without you, my resolution falters, and my pen is still and dry, though all the seas were full of ink, and the sky my parchment of dawn.*

She began to write, beginning with her first visit to the Ruins of Saarthal.

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**6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Breezehome, Whiterun**

Varo had refused Cipius and Rikke’s offer of a Legionnaire to watch over him. He was getting attached to the Whiterun guards who’d taken over his care. They were more talkative than Legionnaires would be around a high-ranking officer. He was building up a broad knowledge of Whiterun and Skyrim via local gossip: Belethor down at the general goods store was a sleazy little man, but he’d have good prices for the father of the Dragonborn. A cousin of one of the guards was out fighting dragons, though really, there weren’t many left to fight, so his parents suspected he was now just skiving off work. There was a Redguard in the Dragonsreach cells – not an ordinary Redguard, but one of those wild men from the desert; he’d marched in here with his *curved sword* and threatened people, which Jarl Balgruuf had not taken well.

The tale of the Redguard caught Varo’s attention. “Why was he threatening people?”

“He said he was looking for another Redguard. A woman. He obviously didn’t mean her any good, so no one spoke to him. These foreigners need to leave their feuds back home. No offence, sir.”

“None taken. I’m starting a whole bunch of new feuds here. Could you find out what this desert warrior wanted, though? I lived in Hammerfell when I was a kid, and it’s rare for them to leave the Alik’r.”

The guard promised to do so, then asked a whole bunch of questions about Hammerfell and whether he’d ever used *a curved sword*. No, not as a child. His mother had said it would throw off his forms to keep switching sword types. (Later, during the Aldmeri occupation, yes, but he wasn’t allowed to talk about that.)

The great downside of having the Whiterun guards as protectors had yet to manifest. Around noon, the cheerful guard gathered up the tray from lunch, and on his way to the wash house out back, let in Heimskr, Priest of Talos: the last person Varo had expected or wanted to see.

Since their last encounter had consisted of Heimskr yelling at him for blasphemy, he didn’t even bother trying to sit up. If he lay very still, Heimskr might decide to leave him to his sleep. Seconds passed, more seconds . . . The man was just standing there over his mattress. He opened his eyes to glare up at him. Heimskr stared back.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” he at last asked Heimskr.
The priest shook his head. “No, I do not think I am the one with something to say.”

“And I am?”

“Do you not wear his glorious sign upon your person? Did he not defend you in your moment of need?”

Varo sighed. “Blabber-mouth Nords.” Those guards who’d helped the temple’s healer couldn’t keep their mouths shut about his amulet, and all of Whiterun would be talking about it. The story would get back to Solitude and eventually to Cyrodiil, shocking no-one. The Thalmor would complain, there’d be an investigation to see if he was violating the Concordat, he’d deny it, and with no proof on their part, the investigation would be closed. This wouldn’t be the first time something like this had happened. But it was so degrading and tiring.

Since Heimskr wasn’t going to leave him alone, he’d better face him in a less vulnerable position. He pulled himself up in bed, leaning on his left hand. The axe-shaped amulet’s outline was plain to see beneath his night shirt. “Do you really think he saved me?” he asked Heimskr.

“Are you not a child of man? Does not Talos cherish each one of us?”

“I’m a child of elves too,” Varo pointed out with a smile.

This was obviously a revelation to Heimskr. “You –“ Varo could feel the priest’s eyes examining his ears. They were perfectly rounded, which probably reassured the man. “Though your blood be mingled with theirs, you still worship Talos Stormcrown.”

“That’s not something I’ll ever admit to you,” said Varo. “I’ve denied Talos before the other gods. What right do you have to contradict me?”

“Your own heart shall contradict you. You carry a heavy burden, my friend. Let Talos lift it from you.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. It’s too precious a burden: it’s the lives of those I love, the fate of the Empire, the freedom of its men and women. I couldn’t drop that burden, even for my god.”

“There is no freedom in the tyranny of the Empire–“ Heimskr began.

“No, stop. I’ve had this discussion a thousand times. You’ve made a brave choice, and I honour you for it, but I cannot do as you do.”

“If you know it’s the right choice –“

“I didn’t say it was the right choice. It may be for you. As it was for my wife.”

“Your wife?”

“At the end of the war, my wife Avelina was Legate of the Seventh Legion. She was a fine soldier, and she loved her Legion. She should have stayed on in the service. But all commanding Legion officers were required to take an oath renouncing the worship of Talos. She refused. I didn’t. And so she turned her back on her old life and began a new one raising my child while I wandered around Tamriel.”

The words spilt out from his mouth, unintended and raw. Talos could not lift the burden, but his priest could listen.
He and Avelina had only just married when the Concordat was signed. It’d nearly torn them apart. Everyone including Avelina had expected him to react angrily to the conditions. In fact, he’d been with the Emperor when they were drawing up the Concordat, and assented to it then. In turn, Titus had made him certain promises, promises that would sustain him through the long years that followed.

“Your wife taught your daughter, then,” commented Heimskr.

That was mostly true. Naturally, Cecilia had learnt her prayers and theology from her more present parent. He felt a bit of guilt there. So many of his mother’s beliefs and traditions ended with him, and yet they were too much to inflict on an ordinary Imperial child. “Be grateful she did. If I’d taught her, I’d have filled the Dragonborn’s head with a lot of elvish nonsense.”

“Talos has guided her,” said Heimskr. “When first she knelt before his shrine here, I told her that he would. He does not fail his chosen. He delivered her from the bonds of Skyrim’s oppressors.”

“She knelt at your shrine?” Varo interrupted him. “In front of everyone?”

“Yes, the true daughter of man fears not. The Dragonborn proudly shows forth her faith, even unto the unbelieving.”

But his daughter couldn’t do that. He couldn’t let her.

Setting out for Whiterun, he hadn’t thought much past retrieving Cecilia from Stormcloak, but of course he knew what followed would be difficult. Everyone would stake their claim on the Dragonborn. Some, such as the Thalmor, he could help her avoid. Judging by Heismkr’s testimony, they’d accuse her as a public heretic, but the Empire would never hand her over to their custody. As long as she learnt again how to shut up and hide her faith.

It was harder to foresee what Titus would want with her, or what the Legion and the Elder Council might demand. Even the Blades might rise up again to demand their Dragonborn. Harder still, he did not know if he should shield Cecilia from all these demands or convince her to submit to them. If she had the opportunity to unite Tamriel behind the Empire, how could he not encourage her to take it?

He was loyal to the House of Mede, and the Medes weren’t Dragonborn. His own daughter was. Would they move to co-opt her power just as Stormcloak had? Titus had a few unmarried young relatives who’d be very keen to cement their rights as successor to the Ruby Throne. Would he be expected to co-operate with that?

His track record for integrity was not very good. But he was better than that, he hoped.

Lost in his thoughts, he’d quit listening to Heimskr. But now the guard was back with the clean dishes, and it was time to move the priest – now enthusiastically telling a tale of Talos and his Red Legions - out of Breezehome.

“Thank you for your words of comfort, but I’m going to sleep,” he announced, glaring at the guard to do something.

Thankfully, the guard got the message and began to usher Heimskr out.

“I will pray for you,” Heimskr proclaimed before he exited.

“Thank you,” said Varo in all sincerity.
6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Valtheim Towers, Whiterun

The Stormcloak-led caravan called a halt for lunch at these massive stone towers that dominated the landscape of the White River’s gorge. The children, of course, wanted to climb up to the bridge, but the Stormcloak soldiers currently manning the towers refused to let them in. Emilin too would have liked to climb up there, but she wasn’t pushing her luck. Her Stormcloak escorts were already wary of everything she did.

They’d left Whiterun Camp early this morning. It was a large group. Aside from the Stormcloak soldiers, there was Olfa Gray-Mane, a few older men and women, and sixteen of the Whiterun children, destined for fostering in Eastmarch and the Rift. They had three wagons loaded with supplies and passengers and were moving painfully slow. Galmar’s messengers would get to Windhelm with news of her coming long before she did.

The children had been scared at first, and some of them were still quiet and homesick, but most of them now regarded the current expedition as a holiday. Their natural leader appeared to be a Redguard girl named Braith, who reigned over her friends with a mixture of threats, bravado, and should the first two not work, well-delivered punches. Braith was currently trying to climb the stonework of one of the towers, while a Stormcloak guard yelled at her to get down.

“She never listens,” said a soft-spoken Imperial girl sitting beside Emilin.

“I can see that.” Emilin turned her attention to this child. “What’s your name?”

“Lucia.”

“Nice to meet you, Lucia. My name is Emilin. How are you enjoying our adventure?”

“It’s very nice. Better than it was in Whiterun.”

“Whiterun seemed like a good place to me.”

“Oh. Yes. It is. But –” Lucia lowered her voice, “I don’t have any family. So when Miss Olfa said we needed to go, I was glad.”

“You’re an orphan?” asked Emilin.

Lucia nodded.

“And where have you been living?”

“Around town,” said Lucia vaguely.

“I see.” The memories were rushing back. Cold, hungry, unloved. Emilin knew what that was like. “I’m an orphan too, Lucia.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t have a home till I was fourteen. I used to beg for my food.” Or steal it, but she wouldn’t tell Lucia that. It might sound like a suggestion.

“And now you don’t have to?”
“Not for a very long time. You won’t either now.”

“I hope so,” said Lucia. “Everyone says the Stormcloaks are scary, but they seem really nice.”

After they’d finished lunch, and Lucia had gone off to play with the others, Emilin asked Olfina about the girl.

“She’s a beggar with no family,” Olfina confirmed. “That’s why I picked her for this group. It’s not really what Galmar wanted – I was supposed to pick children with families in Whiterun – but the poor girl needed some help.”

“Are there a lot of children like her around?” Emilin asked.

“Yes. More than can possibly be helped. With the war and these dragons . . .”

“You’ve done your best though,” Emilin assured her.

“I’m trying. They’re good kids, aren’t they?”


“Braith’s a strong girl,” Olfina replied enthusiastically. “I can’t wait to see her grow up. She won’t take nonsense from anyone.”

“Olfina, the girl is a bully.”

“Well, a little bit, maybe,” Olfina conceded. “But she has a good heart.”

“Does she?”

“Nord kids need to be strong. A bit of scrapping and wrestling is good for them. It’s how I grew up. See this scar here.” Olfina pointed to a white line beneath her chin. “That’s where Thorald hit me with a rock when we were little. I gave him much worse, though.”

“You’re close to your brother?” Emilin asked.

“Yes, he’s only a year older than me. He, Jon Battle-Born, and I, the three of us were really close. Then our families quarrelled, and Jon and Thorald were stupid about it, and they quit hanging out together.”

“But you and Jon?”

“Why quit talking to someone you’ve been friends with your whole life, just because of politics?”

Jon Battle-Born had returned to Whiterun, but he’d left with hope. Olfina had told her Uncle Vignar straight out that she was going to marry Jon one day. Vignar Gray-Mane had then had some choice words, Olfina told Emilin, about how long Jon had dallied and delayed in Whiterun. If he’d gone to the Bards’ College in Solitude, the way he always said he would, he wouldn’t be part of this fight. As it was, Jon had a duty to his family, and he’d be risking his life every day against the besieging Stormcloak army.

But if he survived this fight, Vignar had promised his blessing on the marriage. He could talk Olfina’s parents into approving the match, he reckoned, and he was looking forward to seeing the Battle-Borns’ faces when the betrothal was announced. With no children of his own, he’d put aside a large sum of gold from all his years in the Companions. Enough to send them to Solitude together, if that’s what they wanted as a wedding gift.
Olfinia was overjoyed. She somehow didn’t doubt Jon would survive, and Emilin hoped that this love would never be crushed or disappointed, the way her own had been by war.

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6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun Hold

Elenwen had at last decided she understood the situation here in Whiterun, and it was under control. She’d come here to make certain Junius Varo wasn’t defecting to the Stormcloaks, and if he was staying loyal to the Empire, to observe whether his presence would shift the balance of this war. His actions in Whiterun had been everything the Thalmor required. He’d changed what was probably going to be a short siege into a long one, and even stirred up the anger of the Talos-worshiping heathen.

She could return to the Embassy now and make certain that the meddling Third Emissary Calerion had been sent off to Falkreath. She’d dismantle any of his organization he left behind and open up a more secure exchange of messages with her family in Shimmerene to find out what was going on back in the Isles. On their way back to the Embassy, they could take a brief look in Labyrinthian for the mask Emilin had pilfered, although she didn’t have much hope for finding it so quickly.

She was ready to order they leave their cave hide-out when Amirion and Naryon returned from their latest scout of the plains. But they looked shaken, and there were scorched marks on Amirion’s robes.

“We found the baggage Varo left behind, Mistress Elenwen” Amirion announced. “It was cached away in an old badger’s hole and trapped with an explosive rune.”

“Was any of it salvageable?” she asked calmly. There was no point complaining that Varo had taken proper foresight with his baggage.

Amirion shook his head. “After the baggage was lost, we proceeded using invisibility spells towards the Stormcloak camp to find out what was going on with all those people who exited the city yesterday.”

“And did you?”

“Yes, we found a Stormcloak straggler, who we took aside and questioned. According to him, Varo negotiated a day-long truce to get the children and elderly out of the city.”

“I see. They’re all back to fighting now?”

“Yes. They are.”

“And you disposed of your straggler?”

“Yes. There was no safe place to hide the body, but it’ll look like a fatal fall, not a killing. He told us something disturbing, though. Galmar Stone-Fist met with Varo’s Bosmer and now she’s gone off to Windhelm.”

Elenwen had thought she understood the situation here in Whiterun, that everything was all under control, but she’d been wrong.

“Was Emilin taken prisoner by the Stormcloaks?” she asked.
“No, she just walked into the Stormcloak camp while the truce still held, met with Galmar Stone-Fist, and this morning she set off for Windhelm with a Stormcloak-led caravan.”

What was going on here? Did Emilin think – did Varo think? – that she could negotiate peace with Ulfric? She couldn’t. This war had gone too far for that.

Or was Emilin going to Windhelm to kill the man? She could perhaps succeed in that, and if she did, the Stormcloak rebellion would crumble. It had always been one of the rebellion’s regrettable weaknesses that there was no leader prepared to step into Ulfric’s place. None of the Stormcloak Jarls or generals had Ulfric’s sway over Nords’ hearts. Elenwen’s foremost duty in Skyrim was making sure Ulfric Stormcloak did not die, a duty she’d almost failed at Helgen.

Chaos engulfed her from all sides. If she did not return to the Embassy, she could be unseated by her power-hungry subordinate. But if she let Varo’s assassin slip through to Ulfric, the retribution from Alinor would be terrible.

She made her decision quickly. “Emilin can’t reach Windhelm,” she decreed. “Amirion, Naryon, Urena,” she addressed her mage and two soldiers, “Follow that caravan and kill her. Amirion, I am giving you complete discretion how to complete this task, only it must be done before she sets foot in Windhelm.”

Amirion was an old hand at this business, a mage who’d served the Thalmor for nearly two centuries, but with no ambitions to rise above this sort of dirty practical work. Elenwen wished there were a lot more like him. He raised his arm to his chest in salute. “Instructions received and understood, Mistress Elenwen.”

“For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion. Auri-El watch over you.”

“For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion,” he echoed.

They set to work packing. As for Elenwen . . . she’d have to rely on Second Emissary Arinye and Chief Justiciar Ondolemar to hold the front against Calerion and his minions. She could not return to Haafingar yet. It was high time she visited Junius Varo and confronted him about his plans.

Chapter End Notes

Cecilia’s writer’s prayer to Akatosh is from the Foreword of the Pocket Guide to the Empire, Third Edition.

I’ve written a few things more or less related to this story since the last chapter. Under the category of ”More related”, there’s a second report from Valiitha Direnni, the Blades/Thalmor double/triple agent, this time concerning the marriage of Elenwen’s parents, back in 4E 16. I’m finding Direnni a useful viewpoint for an exploration of the rise of the Thalmor, focusing on the mysterious figure of Cecilia’s great grandfather, Lord Andanyon, a right bastard who may or may not have murdered his sister, helped the Thalmor rise to power, orchestrated the Night of Green Fire, and yet somehow ended up at odds with the Thalmor bringing up a half-breed child. Cecilia will soon be looking for answers as to what lies in the gap in between.

Less related, I wrote my version of Breton fairy tale mentioned in lore but never expanded on: Hearts’ Day: The Legend of the Lovers.
Questions/reviews are much appreciated and always answered.
6 Second Seed, Winterhold

Chapter Notes

As for honor, well, there are some luxuries even I can’t afford. - Erikur

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold:

Camping out in caves with the Imperial Legion was a lot more comfortable than Cecilia and Lydia’s usual adventures. The bedroll was thicker, they’d given Cecilia an extra fur robe, and she didn’t have to get up before they’d rebuilt the morning fire.

Last night, she’d written out her full account of the Eye of Magnus for Legate Fasendil and then he’d sent her to bed. He had said it would take time for him to read and think on it; they’d discuss it in the morning.

Cecilia would have slept in longer, but Lydia wanted to talk. And as Cecilia was still gagged, she couldn’t tell her to be quiet.

“I haven’t seen Ralof since last night,” Lydia whispered. “He was arguing with that Imperial soldier who arrested you. Seems they’re both from Riverwood, and they both think they can win a debate by yelling.”

Cecilia nodded. She’d only briefly met Hadvar at Helgen, but Ralof had griped about him half the way to Riverwood. She hoped their continued argument here was a good sign for Ralof. Her father would have said that you didn’t argue with prisoners you planned to execute.

She was very sorry she’d dragged Ralof out here. Ulfric had predicted the Legion would try to take her prisoner. She’d agreed it was a risk, but deep down, she’d come to believe in her own legend. She was the Dragonborn, untouchable, all-powerful, respected and feared by all. And now the gagged prisoner of some competent but quite ordinary Legionnaires.

Being Dragonborn wasn’t a defence against everything. Tiber Septim himself had never shouted again after his throat was cut by a Breton nightblade. She at least was learning this lesson from a Legate who didn’t wish her harm, rather than at the hands of the Thalmor.

“Does your neck hurt?” Lydia asked.

It didn’t. Cecilia put her hand to the place where the poisoned arrow had struck her. When she pressed down a little, there was a small twinge, but nothing more than that. She shook her head.

“Good. They had a healer cast a spell on your wound. Didn’t even wake you up.” Lydia lowered her voice. “If you want to fight your way out of this, give me your hand. But if you think you’re safe, close your eyes.”

Cecilia closed her eyes immediately.

“All right, I’ll wait on your next decision. You’re the Imperial here. The Legion probably feels like home to you,” Lydia joked.
That was truer than Lydia imagined. Although Cecilia had lived most of her life in her family’s Anvil house, she’d stayed in quite a few Legion forts over the years, visiting her father on duty. Legionnaires lived a hard life, but the Legion’s guests were afforded every possible comfort, and officers’ children completely spoiled.

She’d never get that deep sense of security from the Legion again, not after Helgen. But it hadn’t entirely vanished.

At last, Fasendil sent for her. After being Silenced by the mage, she was allowed to wash up, but the Legionnaires gave her no breakfast, escorting her straight to the Legate. He was sitting again in the small cavern where they’d talked last night.

“Good morning, Varo. I thought you might breakfast with me, and we can talk some more.”

She pointed to her mouth to remind him she’d been Silenced.

“True. I’ll do the talking. At least at first.”

Breakfast was fried fish and Legion hardtack. Cecilia had gnawed on many pieces of the latter in her life. Her father usually carried a supply with him for emergencies and had taught her to dunk it in tea to make it palatable. True to tradition, a Legionnaire then handed her a steaming hot mug of tea. It was a rather nice breakfast after all.

“I read your tale twice through,” Fasendil commented as she ate. “Your life since setting foot in Skyrim has been one crisis after another, hasn’t it?”

She nodded vigorously. Her written account had only covered a small fraction of that.

“There’s no question someone should fetch the Staff of Magnus for Arch-Mage Aren. But should it really be you?”

Cecilia looked around for a piece of paper to plead her case, but Fasendil shook his head.

“Hear me out first. The College of Winterhold has masters of magic, and none of them will go? I find it suspicious that Aren is only sending you if he truly believes the Staff’s needed. It’s as if he does not expect you to find it. I worry that if you go to Mzulft, you are only being sent out of Aren’s way.”

Cecilia could see his reasoning. She too had found the Arch-Mage strangely evasive about the Eye and the Staff.

“In the end, though, if it comes to choosing between putting our trust in the Arch-Mage of Winterhold or the Thalmor, we must put our trust in the Arch-Mage. And since the Psijic Order has come out of seclusion to give you this task, how can I hold you back?”

Cecilia looked at him in amazement. Was he about to let her go?

“Do you trust Ulfric Stormcloak to aid you with the Staff?” he asked.

She nodded. Ulfric would move mountains to thwart the Thalmor.

“I can’t forsake my mission,” he continued. “But you’ve already agreed you should meet the Emperor when he comes to Skyrim. Give me your promise that you’ll do everything you can to get to that meeting, and I’ll send you on your way.”
Only now did he hand her the paper and ink.

Where and when would we meet? She wrote.

“We will have to arrange the details closer to the date. Vittoria Vici’s wedding is on the First of Mid Year, but his Majesty’s exact date of arrival is unknown.

And you think I’ll be able to negotiate a meeting? From the heart of Stormcloak territory? She could already imagine Ulfric’s reaction to further diplomacy. It’d been difficult enough dragging him up to High Hrothgar for a peace meeting, and the price he’d exacted for that was the source of all her current problems.

“I’m not asking that you promise you’ll succeed. I’m asking that you try your best to make this meeting happen.”

That’s a lot of faith to put in me.

“I may not know you, but I knew your parents and paternal grandmother, and I would have trusted any of them. And —” a smile crept onto his face. “If you were stopped from coming, your father would go fetch you.”

He would, wouldn’t he? And if anyone – Ulfric or the Thalmor - tried holding her against her will, she’d actually appreciate her father coming to her rescue.

“Do I have your promise?” Fasendil asked.

Yes.

“Good. If you’ll sign this memorandum of understanding for me, we can get you unsilenced and have a friendlier discussion.” He pushed a document across the table to her.

The document stated that she would endeavour to meet with Emperor Titus Mede II towards the end of this month and would be open to overtures from Imperial representatives to arrange that meeting. And that was all. When she contrasted it to the promise Ulfric had demanded from her . . . well, that was another matter altogether.

Fasendil would have taken her back to Solitude as a prisoner if it hadn’t been for the Thalmor and the Eye. The easy conditions he imposed reflected his own thoughtfulness, not the Empire’s benevolence.

After she had signed, he called over his mage to lift the Silence spell.

“Questions?” he asked.

She had a lot, but she started with the most important. “Is my man Ralof safe?”

“Yes. He’s in restraints, of course, but he’s been well-treated. Hadvar says he’s a Stormcloak soldier.”

“He’s my man.”

“He’s Ulfric’s man first, isn’t he?”

“That doesn’t matter. I came to Winterhold over Jarl Ulfric’s protests. Ralof knew he was risking his life for me, and he still came. I can’t leave him behind.”
“You can take him with you,” Fasendil conceded.

“Thank you!” Everything was back in order, and there was even the possibility she could negotiate for peace with Titus Mede. That would surely pacify her father.

“Why did my father go to Whiterun?” she asked Fasendil. “He knew I was in Windhelm, didn’t he?”

“I haven’t seen him since he came to Skyrim. So that’s a question I can’t answer. Except that there’s nowhere he’d rather be than a battlefield. Did you want him to come to Windhelm?”

“No!” said Cecilia quickly. “He’d try to duel Jarl Ulfric or something awful like that.”

“And that’d be awful?” asked Fasendil.

“For a lot of people, yes.”

“And you?”

She stared at the cave wall, avoiding his gaze. “I don’t know. I made a choice that seemed like the right one, and when I was in Windhelm, I thought I could live with that choice. But now I’m back in my world, and I can’t believe I got myself into this.”

“How much trust do you put in Ulfric Stormcloak?”

“What do you mean?”

“I read your account. I’ve heard rumours of your deal with him. And I don’t feel very happy about sending you back to him and his thugs.”

Cecilia stiffened. “He’s not . . . he’s an honourable man.”

“Maybe he lives up to his own standard of honour. But the position he’s put you in, he’s using your own honour against you.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then didn’t. He was right. She’d very quickly become accustomed to the arrangement with Ulfric, grown even to enjoy his company and feel sympathy for his sorrows. But this all began because she needed to defeat Alduin and no one would just help her with that. Not without getting something out of it for themselves.

“I’m not naïve,” she began slowly, then corrected herself. “No, I’m sure I’m very naïve – but I do know a few things. The deals we make are not the sum of ourselves, they can’t be. Or . . . My father . . .” she trailed off, but Fasendil waited for her to finish her thought.

“My father,” she tried again, “swore an oath against his own god. He’s enforced a treaty he doesn’t believe in . . . even when people have died for it.”

“You know why.”

“Yes, but you can’t support that, and call out Jarl Ulfric for taking his chance to save Skyrim!”

“Is that what you think he’s doing?” asked Fasendil sharply.

“That’s what he thinks he’s doing.”

“How well do you know him?”
“I-“

“How many days have you spent with him, Varo? A week in total? Less?”

That was a low blow. She couldn’t reply that she’d seen Ulfric at his most vulnerable. The contents of the Thalmor dossier should stay forever unknown.

“I don’t want to talk any more about this,” she said, as firmly as possible.

“Very well.” Fasendil stood up. “We’ll get your companions and Hadvar in here and make plans for sending you on your way without raising too many suspicions among my men.”

“You’re going to get in trouble for releasing me.” It was a sudden realization on her part. She’d been so focused on her own plight, she’d given little thought to his situation.

“Disobeying a direct order from the General, yes. That should tell you how seriously I take the Thalmor’s threat at Winterhold. Don’t let me down.”

6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Understone Keep, Markarth

For the most part, Ondolemar’s tenure in Markarth had been uneventful. There’d been a few exciting interludes hunting down particularly elusive Talos worshipers, but nothing to command the full talents of a highly-trained Justiciar with decades of field experience before he ever reached Skyrim. He knew better than to complain to his superiors in Alinor; his exile to Markarth was as much a punishment as an assignment. One ill-advised moment of mercy (and not filling in paperwork) in Cyrodiil was paid for in decades of boredom and isolation.

But now there was more going on in the Reach than he could handle. The worst of it was the Blades’ weird new fellowship with the Forsworn, but most aggravating was Thongvor Silver-Blood’s grief and rage over the death of his brother. Thongvor didn’t know whom to ultimately blame for Thonar’s death, but he irrationally included the Thalmor somewhere in the mix. Jarl Igmund had pled for the Thalmor to lie low while Thonar was being committed to the Halls of the Dead.

Ondolemar could see the sense of that, but he’d just received a sending from the Embassy in Haafingar, which made laying low impossible. After days of silence, Second Emissary Arinye’s message named the missing Justiciar as Tanulvie of Sunhold, a Third-Rank mage and a newcomer to Skyrim. First Emissary Elenwen had sent her to the Reach. Arinye didn’t elaborate on why she was the one sending the message, not Elenwen, which was worrisome. And she continued with the unwelcome news that Third Emissary Calerion, the replacement for the unfortunate Master Rulindil, was on his way to the Reach to search for Tanulvie. On his own initiative, Arinye emphasized. That wasn’t a compliment.

Ondolemar didn’t recognize Tanulvie or Calerion’s names, but the former had been trusted enough by Elenwen to carry him a message, and the latter was apparently ignoring Elenwen’s directions to come here. It reeked of homeland politics, and Ondolemar had been too long away from home to fathom it. But Calerion’s impending arrival gave him a deadline; he had to gain control of the situation before the Second Emissary complicated it.

A knock at the door of his quarters interrupted his reverie. He looked to his guard to answer it. A few
seconds later, she ushered in Igmund’s housecarl Faleen and steward Raerek. Both were sombrely
dressed, straight from Thonar Silver-Blood’s funeral rites, he imagined.

This was a surprise. Neither had sought him out before. Like most of the residents of Understone
Keep, they stayed clear of the Thalmor whenever possible.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he inquired, rising to greet them.

“Thongvor Silver-Blood wants your head,” said Faleen bluntly.

“How predictably barbarian of him.”

“He’s convinced you ordered his brother’s death,” Faleen continued. “Says you sent Khajiit and
Wood-Elf spies to Cidhna Mine to break out the Forsworn.”

Ondolemar sighed. He could easily disprove Thongvor’s version of events, but exposing the Silver-
Bloods’ dirty business to the Jarl would not further the Dominion’s interests. Markarth was perfectly
balanced between the Stormcloak-supporting Silver-Bloods and the Imperial Jarl’s administration.
Just to preserve that balance, Ondolemar had put up with years of fairly public heresy from
Thongvor Silver-Blood.

“Do you have anything to say to that?” Faleen pressed when he didn’t reply.

“Of course, I completely deny these ridiculous accusations. The Reach is barbarous enough without
releasing another horde of bloodthirsty Daedra worshipers upon it. The Dominion has no wish to
involve itself in your hold’s internal politics, but any sane person would conclude that Thongvor
Silver-Blood has brought this disaster upon himself.”

“So, you know what the Silver-Bloods have been up to with Cidhna Mine?” asked Raerek sharply.

“I prefer not to know. Isn’t that your Jarl’s position on the matter as well?”

“My late brother committed those Forsworn prisoners to the mine at Thonar’s request,” replied
Raerek. “It was just that they pay for their crimes with hard labour. But . . .” he trailed off.

“You think it goes further than that?” asked Ondolemar.

“There have been many rumours.”

Igmund’s steward and housecarl were wiser than their Jarl. They’d long counselled Igmund to be
wary of Thonar Silver-Blood.

“Why come to me, though?” he asked them. “I have never interfered with the affairs of this hold, and
I don’t intend to begin now.”

Raerek began laughing. “Oh, come off it, Commander. I’ve advised the Jarls of Markarth for near
forty years and have had the displeasure of knowing you for twenty-five of them. I know very well
who sent us Ulfric Stormcloak in the first place.”

Ondolemar glanced at his guard. She was not cleared for a discussion of this level, but he would not
send away an ally in this volatile situation. He would raise her security level after this conversation,
he decided.

“Ulfric Stormcloak began gathering his militia in Solitude after he was discharged,” Raerek
continued when Ondolemar did not respond. “He came to my brother saying that the Empire was
negotiating to confirm Madanach as King of the Reach.”

“And you took his word as truth?”

“It was confirmed by multiple sources. I know it was never likely to go Madanach’s way. But the fact the Empire was treating with the Reachmen . . . that was enough to whip up the flames. And I know you were the one who gave that information to Ulfric in the first place.”

Ondolemar shrugged. “The Dominion had no wish to see Daedra-worshiping mongrels rule the Reach.”

“So, you pushed Ulfric into the rebellion that would let your Justiciars into Skyrim.”

“Certainly not! Did I ask Jarl Hrolfdir to promise Ulfric a space for his heresy?”

‘No,” Raerek conceded. ‘That was our mistake for you take advantage of.”

“Is there any further old history you would like to reminisce about?”

Raerek shook his head. “I would like to avoid repeating that old history. Thongvor Silver-Blood is threatening to rebuild the old militia.”

“Rebuild? Is the man pretending the Stormcloak army doesn’t already exist?”

“Most of the Stormcloak army is occupied in Whiterun,” Raerek replied. “Galmar Stone-Fist won’t send troops up here, even if Thongvor asks for them.”

“Then what is your problem?”

“He can gather up his men and kill every Justiciar in Markarth,” Faleen snapped. “Maybe we should just stand by and let him. Gods know he’ll have the whole city at his back once he tells them the Thalmor let Madanach loose on Markarth.”

Ondolemar froze. Even Thongvor could not be so stupid and bull-headed, could he? Thongvor was in contact with Ulfric Stormcloak and knew the time was not yet ripe for an uprising.

“He’s on the brink of open rebellion,” Raerek added. “And it’s all to avenge his brother. You can sit in here and wait for his attack, or you can try to sort this out. We shall defend Igmund with our lives, of course, whatever happens.”

If Markarth collapsed into anarchy now, the Empire would crack down hard on Thongvor. And the balance Ondolemar had carefully created here would be gone. It would hardly matter whether he survived or not; death at the Stormcloaks’ hands might be preferable to Elenwen’s reaction.

“I’ll talk to Thongvor,” Ondolemar said. “Where is he now?”

“In the throne room, waiting for Igmund,” replied Faleen.

“Tell your Jarl to wait for me to finish with him then.”

“I do hope you’re not planning anything rash,” said Raerek doubtfully. As if he imagined Ondolemar might be planning to murder Thongvor in there.

“I never do anything that is not carefully considered and in accordance with the Dominion’s principles of neutrality,” lied Ondolemar.
He took two guards with him to the throne room, just in case, but asked them to wait near the entrance with the Keep guards. Thongvor was standing with his arms crossed beneath the Mournful Throne. When he saw Ondolemar, the scowl already on his face deepened.

“Begone or taste my steel, elf,” he warned Ondolemar.

“You fought in the war, Thongvor Silver-Blood. You must know what happens when a Nord warrior with a sword meets a trained Altmer mage in battle.”

Thongvor pulled his sword from his scabbard. Ondolemar might have taunted him a little too far. But he didn’t stand back. “Your brother was not killed by me or any servant of the Dominion. He was killed by the Blades.”

“Liar! You people wiped out all the Blades!”

“How I wish that were true. But there were survivors, and they’re here in Skyrim, spreading chaos and ruin in the same fashion as they did before the Dominion dealt with them.”

“The Blades weren’t a bunch of damned cats and elves!” protested Thongvor.

“The two old Blades who’ve set themselves up in Skyrim are a Nord and a Breton, respectively. You’ve now met some of their recruits. Did they pretend to be on your side?”

“If they’re so secret, how do you know about them?”

“Not so secret now. Ask Ulfri Stormcloak or General Tullius about their meeting with the Blades at High Hrothgar. Take your pick. They both can confirm the truth.”

“But why – why would they target my brother?”

“At the end of the day, the Blades serve the Empire. And the Empire has been investigating Thonar’s business dealings, haven’t they?”

“Over a pack of lies!”

“Were they?”

“Yes!” Thongvor was crying.

“I have no wish to tarnish your brother’s reputation,” said Ondolemar softly. “There’s no gain for the Dominion in it. But if you continue to threaten me and my people, I will fight back with every weapon I have to hand. There are many things I could tell Jarl Igmund about your family, Thongvor Silver-Blood. Our Embassy in Haafingar has a stack of documents ready to hand over to General Tullius.”

“You dare blackmail me.”

“This is hardly blackmail. Do you think I’m asking for some of your silver if I keep my mouth shut? A few favours? I only suggest that you investigate the Blades before you throw away everything to lash out at me.”

“You deserve death,” said Thongvor flatly. “You and all your kind.”

“You are a true son of Ysgramor,” said Ondolemar. Thongvor looked startled at that. “That’s not a compliment,” Ondolemar clarified for him.
“Not to an elf.”

“Exactly.”

There was a long pause. Thongvor’s eyes had locked on his own as if he thought he could read the truth there.

“I’m leaving,” Thongvor said at last. “Don’t think you’ve won, elf.”

“But you’re going to investigate the Blades’ involvement?”

Thongvor said nothing at all to that, before storming out of the throne room.

That was, Ondolemar reflected, likely the closest Thongvor could come to agreeing with a member of the Thalmor.

6 Second Seed, The Palace of Kings, Windhelm

The two Summerset Shadows were brought to the chopping block at dawn.

Bandits, deserters, and other condemned prisoners were usually executed in the courtyard of the barracks, but there were more people to witness today’s execution than was usual. The people of Windhelm were now calling these common bandits Thalmor spies. Ulfric had done nothing to encourage that identification, but if it lifted everyone’s spirits, there was no need to correct them. He ordered the block be set up before the Palace gates.

The two elves went quietly to their fate. They must have realized nothing could save them now. Helgird gave them Arkay’s rites, despite the crowd’s impatience. Ulfric had a moment of grim satisfaction seeing Linwe flinch at “blessings of the Nine Divines.” Since the Great War, he’d observed that as much as the elves hated Talos, they also feared him.

After the execution, the crowd slowly dispersed, exchanging rumours about Thalmor subterfuge and the Companions’ ongoing campaign against the bandits. Ulfric went back to his work. This included dealing with Rolff Stone-Fist, who’d now had four days in the Bloodworks to ponder his fate.

Taking Cecilia’s suggestion, he sentenced Rolff to two years indentured labour at Mixwater Mill and banished him from the city indefinitely. This, he told Rolff, was an act of mercy. The ancient penalty for injuring an armsman of the Jarl was death. Rolff thanked him effusively for his forbearance.

Later in the day, a message arrived from Galmar (reminding Ulfric he should write to his general about his brother’s misadventures). Ulfric wasn’t sure what to make of Galmar’s news: He and Vignar Gray-Mane had negotiated a peaceful exit of children and the infirm from Whiterun, well, he’d trust their judgment on that. But more disturbing was Galmar’s allegation that Junius Varo had threatened to starve the children in the first place.

Ulfric showed the letter to both Yrsarald and Jorleif, who were appalled but had no insight on the matter. It bothered Ulfric a great deal. He hadn’t thought of Cecilia’s father as a potential friend or ally, but this was vicious. Coupled with the tale of Varo’s association with the Thalmor at Whiterun, it was unsettling.
Then, late at night, a messenger arrived with more news of Varo. Galmar had wounded the man – perhaps even killed him. He wasn’t certain yet.

Ulfric sat still, staring at the embers of his fire late into the night. If he had to tell Cecilia that her father was dead . . . how could he ever salvage this marriage from that? And yet, what choice did he have here? What choice had Galmar?

When he had killed Torygg, he had struck down innocence. There was no drawing back.

6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Breezehome, Whiterun

After she’d finished dinner at the barracks, Legate Rikke dropped into Breezehome to check on Junius Varo. She found him out of bed, playing cards with the Whiterun guards. Empty mead and ale bottles littered every available surface.

“Don’t know why I ever worried about you,” she observed.

“Join us for a round, Legate?” Varo asked.

“No thanks.”

“Hold my cards up for me?” he asked. “It is rather hard to play with one hand.”

She pointed to the pile of coins before him. “Doesn’t look like you’re hurting.”

“They may be letting me win out of pity,” said Varo, holding up his bandaged right hand. The guards laughed and denied this.

“Has the surgeon decided what to do about your hand?” asked Rikke.

“Tomorrow morning he’ll be taking off the three crushed fingers. He seems pretty certain he can save my thumb and pointer.”

“You’re going under the knife in the morning? Get to bed, Varo!”

“You sound just like Emilin.”

“I think that means I’m right.” She turned on the guards. “Come on, time to pack it in.”

The guards reluctantly stood up.

“Remember to check on that Alik’r warrior up in Dragonsreach,” Varo reminded them.

“I’ll report back tomorrow morning,” one of the guards promised before leaving.

Rikke raised an eyebrow. “Alik’r? Here?”

“Mysterious, isn’t it?” answered Varo. “The Jarl locked up an Alik’r searching for a Redguard woman. Or at least that’s what the guards tell me.”

“And they know what an Alik’r looks like?”
“They said ‘one of those desert wild men with curved swords’,” admitted Varo.

“Strange . . . well, you have the mystery in hand.”

There was a sudden flash of blinding light, which then formed around a transparent blue figure. Rikke jumped back, startled. Varo flinched but then leaned forward, recognizing the person.

“Hello, cousin!”

“There you are,” Elenwen’s voice was low, but clear and distinct.

Rikke had seen such magical projections a few times in her life – Legion mages could facilitate this sort of communication – but always with careful safeguards and preparations against scrying and eavesdropping. Never had she seen a mage casually project themselves into an ordinary home.

“What’s this about?” asked Varo.

“I’m requesting a meeting.”

“If you have anything to say, you can say it now,” Varo snapped, raising his left hand. “Before I banish your sending.”

“If you’d like to discuss this publicly, very well. Is that Legate Rikke with you?”

“She thinks you’re reporting on me,” Varo explained to Rikke with a grin. “Probably thinks I’ll be afraid she’ll bring up something the Empire here isn’t supposed to know.”

“That seems complicated,” commented Rikke.

“The complication is entirely in his mind,” replied Elenwen. “Very well. Your Bosmer servant is on her way to Windhelm. Care to discuss that?”

Varo stopped smiling. “That bothers you?” he asked Elenwen flatly.

“Unauthorized communications with the Stormcloaks? No, the internal business of the Empire is of no importance to the Dominion.”

“Then why this? You know this isn’t a secure sending. Any decent mage could track you down, coz. And the Stormcloaks are looking for you.”

“Decent mages.” Elenwen snorted.

“I know why you’re worried,” Varo continued. “But not why you think I’d meet with you. If that’s really what you want.”

“I gave you the chance to discuss the Bosmer without eavesdropping. If you could have assured me that there was no violation of the Concordat involved – “

Varo waved his left hand and Elenwen’s projection blinked out of existence. Then he pulled himself up against the table. “This place needs proper wards,” he commented. “I won’t be going to sleep until I make sure Elenwen can’t project in here again.”

“Why do you think she did it?” Rikke asked him.

“For the benefit of a larger audience, I expect. Made the accusation, got me to halfway admit to it. Tried to blackmail me into a meeting that would look even worse. You’d better get ready for
questions from Solitude, Legate. Wouldn’t surprise me if the sending was for Tullius himself.”

“She could do that? Have others listen to it?”

“There are a few ways she could do it,” Varo confirmed. “Well, your General isn’t an idiot. He’s used to Elenwen playing mind games with him, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” agreed Rikke.

“But he’ll have to investigate this. And he won’t be happy we let Emilin go.”

“I already knew it’d come to that.”

“Good. I look forward to telling Tullius that Emilin is a civilian over whom the Legion has no power, and she can damn well go wherever she feels like. Where’s the guard on duty?”

The Whiterun guard was guarding the front door of Breezehome. He’d left the house when Rikke sent everyone packing, but conscious it was his duty to watch Varo, had taken up this post. Rikke ushered him back in.

“Give me your shoulder, lad,” Varo greeted him. “We’re laying down wards around the house.”

“M-magic?” the young man stuttered.


“I guess. Is it . . .” he trailed off.

“Ask away,” said Varo.

“Is it different?” the guard asked. “Elf magic and the Clever Craft?”

“A good question. I’d love to find a real Clever Man and ask him. Or a Clever Woman, I suppose.”

Varo continued chatting to the young man about the history of magic in Tamriel. The guard seemed to have relaxed a bit. Rikke watched them move off, pondering her options.

If Varo was right and Elenwen had arranged for that conversation to be shown to Tullius, she should start preparing her explanation for the General.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back.

In the interim, I wrote a post on r/teslore entitled The Case for The Stormcloaks (How we Know Less Than We Think We Know about the Empire vs. the Dominion) which may interest my readers.

We'll see Madanach and the Blades and Tanulvie next time. All Hell is about to break loose for Ulfric. Elenwen's already living her personal Hell, as the Thalmor go to pieces.

Reviews/comments are so much appreciated.
6 Second Seed, Winterhold

Chapter Notes

Long has the Stormcrown languished, with no worthy brow to sit upon. - Arngeir

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Winterhold

Once Legate Fasendil had made his decision, he moved quickly. First, he summoned Hadvar into the chamber and asked him if he was willing to risk his career in the Legion to thwart the Thalmor. When Hadvar heard Fasendil's plan, he seemed most disturbed by how Ralof would be let off scot-free yet again but agreed once the threat was described to him.

Lydia and Ralof were fetched next, and Fasendil and Cecilia explained their decision to them.

"So how many people know about this?" Ralof asked after they'd finished.

"The six people in this room," replied Fasendil. Mathis, the Legion mage who had been very quiet throughout, gave a small bow.

"And you think the rest of your men might give us trouble if you let us go?" asked Ralof.

"I may need to let more of them in on the plan, but I'd prefer not to involve them in the consequences."

Ralof nodded. "Understood. Dragonborn, I await your orders."

"What was your plan for returning to Windhelm?" Fasendil asked Cecilia.

Cecilia hesitated, but she'd decided to trust Fasendil. "There's a boat coming to pick us up late tomorrow at the earliest."

Fasendil frowned. "I'd prefer if you left earlier than that."

"How? Would the Imperial Navy give us a ride?" asked Lydia.

Legate Fasendil shook his head. "Not the Navy . . . Varo, you said you could call on Dragons as allies. Did you mean that?"

Cecilia coloured at the memory. That boast, made a few seconds before a Legion archer had easily paralyzed her, had not been her finest moment. "Yes. One dragon," she corrected herself. "Maybe."

"The dragon you trapped in Jarl Balgruuf's porch?" asked Fasendil.

Cecilia nodded. "Odahviing. He carried me to Skuldafn."

"Would he carry you back to Windhelm now?"

"I – I don't know. He said he'd come if he could, should I call him."
"He said you'd proved your mastery over him," Lydia reminded her.

"Yes, but – Dragons are *dangerous.*"

They all burst out laughing. She rushed to clarify. "They respect power, but power can shift. Odahviing served Alduin once. He hasn't sworn service to me because he *likes* me. If I slip up, if it seems like I've lost my power, he'll turn against me."

"At the moment, you are at the height of your powers," said Fasendil. "If you want to exit Winterhold without further Imperial or Thalmor interference, call your dragon ally."

"Odahviing might carry me, but he wouldn't carry Ralof and Lydia," Cecilia objected. "Wait – the Thalmor are on my trail too?"

Fasendil nodded. "Yes, you got a good head start on them, but they've noticed that you left the College. My scouts ran into a Thalmor mage tracking you. They played dumb for him, but the Thalmor won't give up easily."

"I think we could handle the Thalmor," scoffed Lydia. "We always have."

"Like you handled our ambush so well?" asked Fasendil mildly.

"All right." Cecilia came to a decision. "I'll do it. Odahviing was hanging around the Throat of the World, last time I saw him. I don't know where he is now or how long it'll take for him to get here."

"How fast do dragons fly?" asked Fasendil.

"Fast," said Cecilia. "I don't really know," she elaborated. "I think they might fly faster by themselves than carrying a human on their back."

"No time to waste, then," said Fasendil. "We'll get your things ready, then take you outside to call the dragon. If he doesn't show up, there's still the boat. If he does show up but won't take your companions, I'll send them back with your boat tomorrow."

"Is that all right?" Cecilia asked Lydia and Ralof.

Ralof nodded. "I promised Jarl Ulfric to protect you, and I haven't fulfilled that duty very well, have I? I'll be glad to see you safely off to Windhelm."

"You've been a fine bodyguard," she reassured him.

"My thane, I live to support your every whim," said Lydia. "Take your dragon back to Windhelm. Ralof, you can look after me if you like."

Ralof looked like he wanted to die. Lydia was smirking . . . Cecilia had some questions to ask Lydia but they'd have to wait.

Despite Fasendil's argument for urgency, the preparations for Cecilia's departure were infuriatingly slow. He didn't want to draw the attention of the Thalmor or the other local Imperial authorities, and most of his own men weren't in on her release. She was gagged and loosely bound again for show. Ralof and Lydia also were bound. At last, she was led out and placed again on the Legion sled, where she lay quietly staring up at the grey sky, wondering if Odahviing was even within earshot.

They headed out again, in the late afternoon, with a smaller group of Legionnaires than the previous night. Cecilia was pulled on the sled for a very bumpy half-hour before Fasendil called a halt, and
ordered that she be unbound.

A couple of the Legionnaires looked confused by his order, but Hadvar stepped forward to help her with the gag and ropes.

"Now?" she asked, once she’d stood up.

"Now," Fasendil confirmed.

She turned her face up to the sky and shouted: OD-AH-VIING!

She had no idea if or when he would respond. She did not expect an almost immediate roar in response.

THURI, DOVAKHIIN.

Odahviing was already here? A dark shadow fell upon the valley.

"Stand back," Lydia shouted to the soldiers. "She's the only one he fears."

"And she fears nothing," said Ralof.

Did he really believe that? Or was he just boasting to the Legionnaires? She was very afraid as Odahviing descended to greet her. She must not let the dragon see it. She must demonstrate her mastery once again. She must – the ground shook as Odahviing landed, splintering the trees at the clearing’s edge like so much kindling. She kept her footing, but only barely.

Saraan uth. I await your command again, Dovakhiin.

She stared up into the unreadable rusty-scaled face of the dragon. What was going on in that massive brain? Was there any fondness for her or only submission to greater power? Were the two so different in dragons?

"How did you come here so quickly?" she asked.

Zu'u hon hin thu'um. Yesterday, you shouted out, but you did not call for me, so I waited.

"Have you been following me around Skyrim?" she demanded.

Nii vahzah. It is true. I have wondered what the Dovakhiin would do next. I began to despair you would ever call me.

"Despair? Are you happy I called you then?"

What is your command? Should I eat these kendov for you?

"No! NID! These are my followers. I called on you to bear me to Windhelm."

There was a great roar from Odahviing. She hoped it was laughter. And if so, amused laughter, not derisive.

One taste of flying does not satisfy you. Am I but the wings of the Dovahkhiin?

"I need to get to Windhelm immediately. Take me there!" It was horribly rude of her to make this demand, but she'd learnt the hard way that dragons were not kind to perceived weakness.
I will take you and you alone to the city of the Quolaas do jul, the city of Ysgramor. Do you seek Ysgramor's throne, then, Dovakhiin?

"No." Odahviing would have no knowledge of events among the humans of Skyrim, and of course, he'd be very happy at the prospect of the Dragonborn conquering Skyrim . . . "I'm betrothed to marry the Jarl of Windhelm."

He will be your husband? Mey, foolishness. Take the throne from him and let him taste the rightness of your Thu'um.

"That's awfully tempting sometimes, but no. Give me your wings, Odahviing and bring me to Windhelm."

Odahviing, at last, bowed his head to her and let her climb once more upon his back. There was no time to linger over farewells. Odahviing would not wait around forever.

"I'll see you in Windhelm," she promised Ralof and Lydia. And then, as she settled behind Odahviing's neck, she called out to Fasendil. "Thank you, Legate. I'll keep my promise."

They were up in the air before she could hear his response. The rush of cold wind buffeted her body, and her stomach tilted as she looked down on the jagged coast far below.

"How long will it take us to fly to Windhelm?" she yelled over the roar of the wind.

Before dawn tomorrow. If I flew faster, Dovakhiin, the flesh would freeze upon your bones.

"It's cold enough already," she said, putting her head down against his neck. "But you're warm. Like a big hot water bottle."

No longer am I Odahviing only the wings of the Dovakhiin. I am also the Dovakhiin's hot water bottle.

She decided he must like her after all.

6 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, the Reach

"What is Madanach playing at?"

The Blades looked up at the Grandmaster’s question but no one had an answer. They'd been waiting a full hour for the Forsworn leader to show up for a meeting he'd arranged at noon in the first place. The wild Forsworn were likely no sticklers about exact times, but the King in Rags had seemed more organized than that.

"He'll be back," Embla Attius spoke up. "He needs you to become King of the Reach."

"We're not here to set a wild Reachman on the Mournful Throne," Delphine replied stiffly.

"It's hard to see him doing a worse job than the Silver-Bloods."

Delphine shook her head. "Mistress Attius, you're a Nord. Do you think he would hesitate to wipe your people from the Reach?"
"He did hesitate. I'm here, aren't I? Whereas those false Silver-Bloods have been killing our own people. All those attacks on miners, that was their work. I nearly lost my son to one last year."

"Madanach carried them out for the Silver-Bloods," Mjoll reminded her.

"And he had reason to be our enemy. I've had enough false friends to fill up a lifetime; I think I'd prefer a real enemy."

Embla was shaken by the duplicity of the Silver-Bloods, but this was ridiculous. Or so Mjoll thought. Then Esbern spoke up. "Madanach made alliances with many Reach Nords thirty years ago. He could do so again."

"Ulfric Stormcloak had them all executed," Delphine replied. "Along with most of the sane Reachmen in that rebellion. Only the worst survived in the Forsworn."

"Most of Tamriel thinks the Blades have been wiped out," Esbern pointed out. "And yet here we are. All five of us."


Aerin glowed at the Grandmaster's words. He'd told Mjoll last night the full story of how he had manipulated the Thalmor prisoner under the Grandmaster's direction. Mjoll was proud of him. Delphine had truly been angry when Mjoll brought Aerin with her to Sky Haven, but Mjoll had insisted that she give him a chance. The Blades had need for many talents, not just the strength of a warrior.

Typically, Aerin also felt bad for their prisoner. He'd asked the Grandmaster if the Thalmor would truly have punished Tanulvie and her family for the letter she'd tried to smuggle out. Delphine admitted it was quite probable that Tanulvie's family would be fine, and Tanulvie only reprimanded and demoted. But the possibility was there; the Justiciar's instructors had cultivated that fear in her, and Delphine had played on it.

"Of course, now she's talking, they really would take her to pieces," Delphine had said with a grim smile. "Slowly."

So, Aerin concluded optimistically, the safest place in Tamriel for Tanulvie was the custody of the Blades. Mjoll was dubious but let him believe that.

They were nearly ready to return to Sky Haven Temple, when Madanach strolled through the rocks, barely dried blood upon his shirt, and a small dirty child on his hip.

"Where have you –" Delphine was cut short as the child began screaming.

"Ah, you've got your voice back," Madanach said, depositing the child on the ground. "Here, I brought you a present, Mistress Attius. One of your Nordlings. Needs a good bath, but otherwise, she's unharmed."

Embla and Aerin rushed to the girl's side.

"Where is that child from?" Delphine demanded.

Madanach shrugged. "A raid on some Nord settlement months ago. This morning we killed the folk who took her, so I don't know the details."

"You're rescuing Nord children now?" Delphine asked skeptically.
No," Madanach shook his head. "I'd as lief left her with her new folk, they'd taken her as their own daughter. But they would not fall in line behind their King, so they're no more. Then I thought this wee bairn might serve as a token of my good intent."

"The Forsworn aren't all your followers, then," said Delphine bluntly.

"Oh, not even most of them," Madanach agreed. "I've been too long away from my lands, and they always were a fractious lot. I'll win them back, for certain, Blade. Just watch me."

"Well, if all you're asking is that we watch—" began Delphine.

But Madanach put his hand up. "Nay, I'm a little late to this gathering, and that has nothing to do with this morning's set-to. Just received word from my scouts that you have the Thalmor almost on your doorstep."

"The Markarth Justiciars have been searching for the one we took, if that's what you mean."

"No, these are a new party, coming down the road from Haafingar. A large group, six soldiers, two mages. None of the faces seen before in the Reach. Do the Thalmor know where you're set up, by any chance?"

"They didn't," replied Delphine shortly.

"They may," Esbern replied. "Sky Haven Temple was sealed, not lost. Now that we've shown our hand, the Dominion's loremasters would tell them to seek us here."

"Perhaps . . . Are you planning to hang back and watch?" Delphine asked Madanach after a long silence.

"That depends on your co-operation. I'd like to test the truth of your story about Ulfric and the elves. You seem to have some experiencing capturing Thalmor Justiciars. How about we join our causes and make certain these newcomers never get past Karthspire?"

"That's an incredibly risky proposition," said Delphine.

"I'm in the mood to take risks. Too many years of long, canny planning, and where has that left me? Or the Blades, for that matter?"

"We are rebuilding our organization," said Delphine stiffly.

"And where's your Dragonborn leader?" asked Madanach. "Off in Windhelm with Ulfric Stormcloak while you six are stuck out here. I won't press you about what happened between you and your Dragonborn, but you're in bad need of friends."

"You'll be that friend then?" Esbern asked.

"If you'll have me."

Esbern and Delphine exchanged looks. Then Esbern gave her a nod. Delphine turned back to Madanach. "We'll co-operate to capture the Thalmor. No more than that for now. We aren't joining your fight for the Reach."

"Fair enough. I'm not signing up to reinstate the Blades as the Empire's secret spy service. But you'll have to let me interrogate our prisoners. Unless you've something to hide from me."

"We'll interrogate them together," replied Delphine.
"Good. Now you already have a Thalmor prisoner on the premises, correct? I'm thinking we could use her as bait."

"Have you got everything you want from our Justiciar?" Delphine asked Esbern.

Esbern nodded. "I could ask questions about the Dominion forever; the answers are fascinating. But there's nothing that we need from her. We can't trade her for Dame Embla's son either."

"Then, yes, we can use her as bait," Delphine told Madanach. "Don't give me that look, Aerin. She's co-operating with us; we'll keep her alive if we can."


"Your young recruit there needs some hardening," Madanach observed. "Lend him to me and I'll make sure he learns the ways of the world."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," snapped Delphine.

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Windhelm, the Palace of the Kings

"Dragon!"

Ulfric leapt from his bed at the guard's shout. Hurriedly, he pulled on his breeches and rushed downstairs while pulling on his tunic. A servant followed with his boots and cloak.

"Is it attacking us?" he demanded of Jorleif, who was standing blinking just outside the war room.

"I don't know. The guards just reported it flying in from the north-west."

Ulfric grabbed his boots. "Axe!" he called out to one of the guards.

"And armour my lord," Jorleif prompted him.

"No time for that." He ran out into the courtyard.

Dawn was a couple of hours away, and it was difficult to make out anything in the dark sky. The dragon was nowhere in sight.

More guards came running into the courtyard to say the dragon had landed beyond the Causeway, then flown away again.

"I'd better go take a look," Ulfric replied.

Half across the causeway, he caught sight of the figure coming up the steps near the stables. A small woman in leather armour, casually strolling back into the city.

He paused in recognition. He would have run to Cecilia, but the news from Galmar kept him where he stood. When they came together, he would have to tell her that her father was horribly wounded, perhaps even dead.

But while he was thinking this, it was Cecilia who ran to him, and then without any hesitation, flung her arms around his neck. "You're here!"
"This is my city," he said, somewhat confused and completely surprised by her forwardness. Her cheek pressed against his was freezing cold.

"Did you get to Winterhold?" he added.

"Yes. I came back by dragon."

"That was your dragon just now?"

"Yes. His name's Odahviing."

"Just a second, I need to order the guards to stand down." He disentangled himself from her embrace, and turned to tell the guards all was well, they should return to the city.

He wasn't an idiot – well, not that much of one. His Dragonborn wouldn't be so demonstrative in her affections without a reason. She wanted something from him. He'd hear soon enough what it was. And yet he couldn't deny his heart had lifted when she'd ran to him. When he turned back to her, that smile . . . he didn't exactly love her, but he loved her smile.

"How did you fare in Winterhold?" he asked her.

The smile disappeared. "I need your help, Ulfric. We're in danger – Skyrim's in danger from the Thalmor."

"Does this involve the orb the mages took from Saarthal?"

"Yes. It's still at the College. The Thalmor don't have it yet. But they're going to make a move for it. I know it. And I have to – this is a long story. And you're not even properly dressed."

"I had no time to dress during an impending dragon attack."

"I'm sorry. I must have scared the townsfolk."

"Most of them are still sleeping, fortunately."

"As were you?"

"Yes, but I'm awake now. We'll get back to the Palace, and you can tell me all about the Thalmor."

They walked back across the causeway. Cecilia was now shivering noticeably. It was a balmy spring morning, but if she'd been flying all night, it was a wonder she wasn't frozen through already.

One of the guards at the gate was carrying his fur cloak. "I was told to get this to you, my Jarl," he explained.

"Thank you." He took the cloak, then slipped it over Cecilia's shoulders. "We need to get my Lady inside and warmed up."

"I'm used to the cold now," Cecilia pulled the cloak close around her. "I'll never be warm again. I'm resigned to that."

"Nonsense. You've never even seen a Skyrim summer," Ulfric replied.

"I don't think that exists, got to be a wild Nord legend." She was laughing again. Whatever was wrong with the Thalmor, it couldn't be too bad.
"Ralof and Lydia are coming back the long way," she added. "With Torbjorn Shatter-Shield. They're safe."

"And your mage friends?"

"I left them at the College. You'll be happy about that."

He was, but he was not so discourteous as to say it.

The streets of Windhelm were busier than was usual for the hour. The clatter on the streets had drawn out quite a few observers, whose curiosity was rewarded when their Jarl re-entered the city at the side of the Dragonborn.

Some of them cheered for Cecilia. She shrank down further into the cloak.

He had time to consider his options while they walked. He didn't have to tell her immediately about the message from Galmar. Better to wait to hear if Varo had recovered from his wounds. He'd tell her that her father was in Skyrim, that he was fighting in Whiterun, but nothing further. Not yet.

And then? Galmar's advice had been to press his suit with the Dragonborn. But it was a harder thing to do than say.

Inside the Palace, he let the servants fuss over Cecilia, finding her more fur robes, a tankard of hot mead, and a hot bath for her feet. Then he sent the servants away and sat down to hear her tale in full.

It was quite a tale to hear. Time-stopping Psijic monks, an angry Thalmor advisor, a disembodied mage who'd become a ball of light and energy, Imperial wizards seeking magical artifacts in his own hold. When Cecilia, at last, came near the end of her visit to Winterhold, she stopped talking.

"And then?" he prompted her. "You decided it'd be quicker to fly back here?"

"No . . . not exactly. Then I got captured by the Imperial Legion."

"What?"

"You were right, Ulfric. I admit it. I walked into an ambush after I left Winterhold. But the Legate let me go after he heard about the Thalmor."

"And that's why you left the others behind?"

"They are safe!" she protested. "But Legate Fasendil thought I should leave quickly before anyone else came looking for me."


"He's in Winterhold right now."

"And he decided to let you go just so you could thwart the Thalmor."

"Do you think the Legion doesn't want to fight them?"

"I don't believe they have the will to. Else I'd be with them, not here."

She frowned and paused again in her story. It seemed as if she was considering what to say, and how to say it.
"You still believe in their honour?" he asked. This was a dangerous subject, not at all the way to woo her. But it was a conversation they must have.

"No, I don't. There are honourable soldiers in the Legion, but the Emperor traded honour for hope. A false hope, maybe. If I knew, I would have chosen a side long ago."

He felt his ire rising but forced himself to stay calm. This conversation threw into stark relief how many years he had on her. She'd never known a world in which the Empire didn't grovel in the dust, in which men and women didn't trade away their faith for expediency. "Hope for whom?"

"For mankind. And anyone else who'd prefer the Dominion didn't rule over them."

"That's a tale the Legionnaires tell themselves to avoid facing the truth. The Empire has no more will to fight, its merchants and nobles are in bed with the Dominion, its citizens are at the mercy of the Thalmor. If they gave up Talos to win back his Empire, they've done a piss-poor job of it."

"You may be right," said Cecilia, in a tone that suggested he was certainly wrong.

But what had he ever expected of her? Her father was the Emperor's man, and she a child of Cyrodiil. She should never have come north to Skyrim. Akatosh could have chosen a better recipient for his gift. Skyrim deserved a Dragonborn who'd give his life for her freedom, not grudging any sacrifice.

It should have been *him*.

The traitorous thought emerged yet again from the dark reaches of his heart where he'd banished it time and time again. He knew his history and theology too well to pretend that being Dragonborn was truly his due. He was like Wulfharth of old, blasted to ash by the Grey-Beards' Voice, while young General Talos was named Ysmir instead. Akatosh had given the gift to Cecilia Varo, and he could not gainsay him.

"You're not listening to me," Cecilia's voice broke through his dark reverie.

"Am I not?"

"No, you haven't answered my question."

"I'm sorry, what was it again?"

"You didn't get enough sleep either," she pronounced. "Let's just go to bed and talk more in the morning."

"You didn't sleep?" he asked.

"You can't sleep while you're hanging on to a dragon's neck for dear life."

"Then you should certainly go to bed. I'll be at your disposal when you awake. We'll find this Staff and send these Thalmor wizards running back to Solitude."

"Thank you." She leapt up from her chair and departed the room so quickly that he was left reeling.

He was not the only one who feared to share his secrets. She'd told her story in detail till she reached her encounter with the Legate. What had the Legate said to her, and what deal had they made? He'd have to ask her tomorrow, and he already knew he would not like the answer.
Finally broached one of Ulfric's secrets. I honestly believe that Ulfric once thought that he would be the Last Dragonborn, that this hero complex drove him from the time he ran away to war. Very early in this fic, he almost let that slip to Cecilia.

"I would say rather that you have taken on the mantle of someone greater than yourself. Did not the Greybeards hail you as Ysmir, Dragon of the North?"

"That's one of the things I don't understand," she confessed.

"Perhaps you were not meant to. I once thought . . . no, never mind. I have wandered away from the present."

Needless to say, the fact that he resents and is jealous of Cecilia, that he is still trying to grasp at the power he wasn't granted, is a huge issue for their future together. He knows that himself, though, and is struggling with it. (I obviously don't write ideal relationships or ideally behaved characters.)

Keeping the timelines of the characters caught up with each other is an ongoing challenge. I'd already written all of Junius Varo's Sixth of Second Seed, so he has a rare absence from the story. He's resting while waiting for surgery on his hand. The Thalmor are also absent, but in the background, the Third Emissary, Calerion, and his mer, are about to run into a Blades/Forsworn ambush, Elenwen's minions are trying to determine their best chance to assassinate Emilin, and Estormo is flailing around Winterhold trying to find the Dragonborn. Tanulvie's POV didn't work out in this chapter, so she'll be back in the next.

I've been writing a lot of Elder Scrolls stuff recently, just not this fic. If you're interested, check my Apocrypha tag for my latest: Breton fairy tales about Sheor/Shor, Phynaster, Mara, and Auri-El/Akatosh, some Thalmor correspondence from Valenwood, and an 'Ask Me Anything' Reddit post hosted by Ondolemar and Elenwen.

Reviews, comments, and questions are appreciated and answered.
7 Second Seed, Whiterun

Chapter Notes

Dragonborn . . . Perhaps this is the fate of Skyrim after all. To be destroyed from the inside. – Legate Rikke

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

This was to be the day of the operation on Junius Varo’s right hand. Yet, Rikke and the Legion surgeon found Breezehome empty. A note from Varo informed them that he and his guards were just going up to the Bannered Mare to check out something. They’d be back straight away, it promised.

“His guards?” fumed the surgeon.


This was at least a good sign for Varo’s recovery, she figured. Probably. If she found him passed out at the inn, she’d have sharp words for those guards.

Two of them were standing at the inn-door. They explained to her that Varo had asked them to wait outside while he went in for breakfast.

“Do you know what this is about?” she asked.

“Those Alicker, the Redguards from the desert,” one of the guards began.

“Is this about the warrior locked up in Dragonsreach?”

“Yes. Master Varo asked me to talk to the prisoner. Well, he tells me they’ve been looking for a Redguard woman who might be in town. So I thought, there’s a Redguard woman working in this inn, keeps to herself most of the time. When I told Master Varo, he said we should check on her right away.”

“But he left you out here?”

“He said we’d put everyone on edge if we all went in together. We’ll rush in when he calls.”

“He didn’t say what he’s planning?” Rikke asked.

No, Varo hadn’t. Rikke sighed. She didn’t want to upset his little investigation, but the man was late for his own surgery. Fetching him shouldn’t arouse anyone’s suspicions. She entered the inn.

The atmosphere inside The Bannered Mare that morning was subdued, as was to be expected. The city was on rations, many of the citizens had said farewell to their children, and everyone was waiting for the fighting to pick up again.

Varo sat by himself at a table in the corner, a bowl of porridge before him. It looked completely
“Hey,” Rikke greeted him. “Can you even use a spoon?”

“I made a miscalculation there, Legate,” he admitted. His left arm was in a sling and his right-hand bandaged up.

“I’d offer to spoon-feed you, but you shouldn’t be eating.”

“I’m due on the chopping table, am I?”

“As of ten minutes ago. So, unless there’s something very important you have to do here –“

“I’ve already done it.” He lowered his voice. “Take a look at the woman behind the counter, Legate.”

Rikke looked over. A Redguard woman in a barmaid’s clothes was busy with another patron. “Should I know her?”

“No. You’ve never been to Hammerfell, have you? Let’s go back to Breezehome. I’ll tell you about it outside.”

Rikke made a show of hauling him away from his breakfast, loudly castigating him for escaping the surgeon. The patrons laughed at this. It was friendly laughter, for the most part. Varo had made some enemies in Whiterun, but he seemed to be winning an even larger following.

Speaking of his following:

“Do you need our help, sir?” a guard asked him, once they’d exited the inn.

Varo shook his head. “Not yet. Those Alik’r are after Saadia, for sure, but they can’t enter the city during the siege. She’ll be safe as long as you keep that prisoner locked up in Dragonsreach.”

“So they’re assassins?” the guard asked.

“Very likely. I don’t have time to sort this out this morning, so you’ll keep quiet about our investigation, won’t you?”

“If Commander Caius asks . . .” the guard sounded unsure.

“Tell him I have it under control. Just no gossiping around town. Leave Saadia alone and I’ll be back to take care of this.”

“Yes, sir. Good luck with your hand.”

“Thank you. The omens are good today.”

“Omens?” asked Rikke.

“Birds flying in the proper direction, Magnus shining down on us, all the usual.” She wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. “Also, twenty-seven years ago today I met my wife. So it’s a very good day.”

“Right. She arrested you for looting.”

“Wait, does everyone know that?” Varo demanded.
“They do now,” she said airily. The guards were grinning like lunatics.

Varo sighed. “Nord gossips.” But he was grinning as well.

For a few short months near the end of the war, Avelina Attius had been Rikke’s commander in the Seventh Legion. Young for her rank, Attius only made Legate after the Seventh’s original Legate and most of his command were killed on the third day of Red Ring. She must have been overwhelmed by the sudden responsibility, but to young Rikke, she’d seemed completely unshakable and in control. Legate Attius had been in the Legion before the war began, which made her a hoary veteran to the young Nord recruits.

“When were you really looting, sir?” a guard asked.

“Well . . . yes,” Varo admitted. “From a warehouse on the south side of Lake Rumare. A bunch of Nord Legionnaires were trying to find the Dominion’s booze supply, but they couldn’t read the labels on crates. So they asked around for anyone who could read elf letters, and as I happened to be in the neighbourhood . . .”

“He found them the booze,” Rikke filled in. “Then Legate Attius swooped down upon them all like a hawk.”

“She had a lot to say about us stealing from the Empire. Everything in that warehouse had been taken from our own people, were we no better than those witch-elves?”

“What did you say to that?” asked Rikke, pushing for the story she’d heard many times before.

“Must be my witch-elf blood showing,” he repeated. “Then I apologized profusely, because she did not laugh. Not then.”

Legate Attius had marched the looters back to her headquarters, then was forced to release the Emperor’s favoured young battlemage, Junius Varo, next morning. Once released, Varo just kept hanging about the Seventh Legion. No one in the Seventh was surprised to hear a few months later that their Legate had quietly married Junius Varo. Everyone had expected the couple to continue serving in the Legion together. They’d drive out the elves from Cyrodiil and Hammerfell.

The future was not so rosy as the young Legionnaires imagined, but at least those two had held to each other.

Rikke dismissed the guards and she and Varo turned back towards Breezehome.

“Who was that woman in the inn?” she asked once they were out of the guards’ earshot.

“Calls herself Saadia. She’s actually a noble from Taneth. House Suda if I recall correctly.”

“She told you this?”

“No. I came up here to see if I knew her. And now I know why the Alik’r are after her.”

“Why?”

“This Saadia – her real name is Iman – betrayed Taneth to the Dominion during the war. Or so her accusers say.”

“Did she actually?”

“Probably. Though it might have been for the best. Taneth couldn’t have held out against the
Dominion, whatever their nobles might say now."

"If everyone thought like that, we’d have just given up in Cyrodiil," Rikke reminded him.

"Your Stormcloak friends would say we did."

"Well, they’d be wrong," she said firmly. "Is this something you should get involved in, Varo?"

"As a matter of principle? No. I don’t have any stake in this. I’ve both betrayed and defended Hammerfell. As a servant of the Empire, though, it strikes me this woman might be useful."

"You think a Thalmor collaborator would be a good recruit?"

"If she’s hiding out in Skyrim, the Thalmor have thrown her to the wolves. The Empire might be her last chance. Or we could make some friends in Hammerfell by handing her over to the Alik’r. Could go either way, really."

This conversation was too cold-blooded for Rikke.

At the door of Breezehome, Varo paused.

"Time to say goodbye to some of these fingers." Beneath the levity, there was a hint of sadness, perhaps even fear, in his voice.

"I’m sorry, Varo."

"Thank you, Legate. I know I messed up. After you live through as much as I have, you start thinking you’re invincible. A few fingers is a much lighter price than I deserve."

"Now you know not to underestimate us Nords," she joked.

His face brightened. "Learned that long ago. At your General Jonna’s feet."

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Sky Haven Temple, The Reach

Tanulvie sat cross-legged in her cell, trying to meditate. It did not come easily. Guilt and loneliness kept her spirit unsettled.

"Where’s your Justiciar?"

That was a man’s voice, one she hadn’t heard before. She opened her eyes as the door of her cell swung open. "Bring her out," Delphine commanded.

A tall Nord woman seized her by the arm and brought her out into the large room beyond.

There were more Blades here than she’d seen before, as well as some people who couldn’t possibly be Blades. Delphine, Esbern, Aerin, and the Bosmer she knew by sight, but there was also that tall Nord woman, a Khajiit, a white-haired elderly woman, a little girl, two Forsworn warriors, and an orc in Forsworn garb and face-paint.

Tanulvie blinked.

"Not so imposing without the black-and-gold!" exclaimed the elderly woman.
Tanulvie gave the woman a hard look, fixing the face in her memory. She’d mastered her searching expression before a mirror, and it made people back home quail. People in Sunhold, however, knew she’d been chosen for Justiciar training. Her audience here lacked that context of respect and awe. The white-haired Nord woman burst out laughing.

“Tanulvie,” Delphine addressed her. “Your co-operation so far has been noted and documented. But we’ll require your assistance again.”

“What do you want from me?” Tanulvie held her head high.

“The Forsworn are taking you off my hands for a little while. Step out of line with them and you won’t enjoy the consequences. Follow their orders, and they’ll hand you back safely. Isn’t that right?”

One of the Forsworn spoke up. “Yes, that’s how it is.”

The first thought Tanulvie had was that she was going to end up sacrificed on a Forsworn altar after all. Delphine and Esbern had got everything they wanted from her; now the Forsworn would get their revenge for the savages Tanulvie had killed near Kolskeggr Mine.

The second thought was that – human sacrifice or not - at least she’d be leaving Delphine’s company.

“So, you are my new travelling companions?” She addressed the pair of Forsworn men with an affected high-society Alinor accent: a travesty of the real thing, but in Skyrim, they wouldn’t know the difference. “Names, if you please?”

“Urracen,” replied the dirtier of the pair. “Braig at my right.” He motioned to the large man with a tattooed face. “And to my left, Borkul the Beast.”

The orc grinned at her, showing all its teeth.

Tanulvie took an instinctive step backwards.

“Come along, elf,” Urracen said. “Borkul will carry you if he has to, but he's none too gentle.”

“No, I’ll walk. I could stand to stretch my legs.” She surveyed the crowd again, fixing her gaze for a few seconds on Aerin who shrank back into a corner. “I did nothing to any of you. Remember that.”

“You tried to have me thrown in a Thalmor dungeon,” snapped the elderly woman.

“I did not - oh.” Tanulvie belatedly made the connection. This must be the Dragonborn’s grandmother whom Elenwen had sent Tanulvie to warn Ondolemar about. Was her son Pavo here too then?

“How is your son?” Tanulvie ventured.

“Don’t answer her,” Delphine snapped. “She’s snooping for information.”

True, but under the circumstances, so very unkind.

The Forsworn might be more talkative than the Blades. She’d try them once they were out of here. Mara’s mercy but what could the Forsworn want with her? And why would Delphine grant them it?
When she and Junius first set out for Skyrim, Emilin had little idea of what to expect. But it had not involved babysitting a bunch of children, and it certainly did not involve saving a headstrong girl from death by drowning.

Yet here she was, climbing out of the freezing White River with a dripping Braith in her arms. Braith had started to cry, so she’d be all right. Olfina and one of their Stormcloak escorts were running down the bank to reach them.

“What you were doing?” Emilin demanded of the girl.

“We were playing tag!” Braith wailed.

Playing tag on rocks that jutted out into rapids. It was lucky the girl hadn’t been knocked to pieces, let alone drowned. Emilin had run downstream the moment Braith went in, then waded in to catch her beneath the first set of rocks. If she’d lost her footing, they both might have drowned.

It was a cold day in the narrow forested valley. Past the river and the road, the snowpack was not yet fully melted, and the White River was swollen by run-off.

The Stormcloak soldier pulled off his cloak as they caught up with them, but Olfina shook her head at him when he tried to put it on Braith. “She needs to strip out of the wet stuff first. Emilin, take the cloak. Halli, run back and get Emilin’s pack.”

Emilin held the cloak up as a screen while Olfina helped Braith strip out of her wet clothes, then wrapped Braith up in the cloak.

“I hope you learned something from this,” Emilin commented to Braith.

“You’re the fastest runner ever!” Braith answered enthusiastically.

Olfina grinned. “Aye, she is. Braith, darling, you’re a fool. But you’re a live fool today. Thanks to Emilin.”

“Thank you, Miss Emilin.”

Halli returned with Emilin’s pack. “We’re starting a fire,” he told Emilin and Braith. “We’ll dry out your clothes.”

“We’re losing time, then,” Emilin pointed out.

“We can’t help it,” replied Halli. “It’s too cold for you to travel without warming up properly.”

It was. If Junius had been here, he’d have whipped up a hot dry wind to speed up the drying. Emilin missed travelling with an accomplished mage.

“Well, there’s no reason the main caravan should be delayed,” piped up Olfina. “We’ll catch up with the rest of you.”

The Stormcloak commander was doubtful whether he should leave a Legion scout behind, but Olfina reminded him that Emilin was going to Windhelm at her own request. Soon, the caravan had moved on, leaving behind Olfina, Emilin, Braith, and the Stormcloak soldier named Halli.

While Halli built up a roaring fire, Emilin kicked off her boots and stockings. Then she and Olfina slipped away a bit into the woods. It was bitterly cold, but she felt better the moment she pulled off
her sopping wet shirt. She put on the clean shirt Olfina had taken from her pack, then undid her belt, laid it down on a nearby stump, and began to strip off her stiff leather breeches.

A sudden sense of unease seized her. From where it sprung, she had no idea. But she’d learned to trust her instincts. She ducked down to the ground, her breeches halfway down her legs.

A second later, a lightning bolt hit the tree to her right. Olfina hit the ground beside her.

“Thalmor.” Emilin reached for the phial hung around her neck. If these Thalmor were right by them, they were doomed. If the mage had tried to blast her from afar, they had a small chance. She popped the top off the phial and gulped the liquid inside. This was the invisibility potion she carried as her last resort. Olfina gasped as she vanished. Emilin grabbed her dagger from her belt. Then she was up on her feet, moving carefully but quickly through the forest. Her breeches had settled down around her lower thighs, but there was no time to pull them off or on completely. She had about a minute to find and deal with the enemy mage, a task that would be much harder without her bow handy.

Fortunately, Olfina stepped up as her distraction. “Come fight us face to face, cowards!” she screamed.

Emilin’s bare soles pressed into mud, wet leaves, and patches of snow. She knew the general direction the lightning had come from. At last, she got a glimpse of a black hooded figure crouched behind a tree. Still invisible, she readied her dagger. The mage straightened up and took a fateful step forward. She recognized the face of Amirion, the mage who’d travelled with Elenwen. And then she struck.

She drove the dagger into his abdomen and withdrew it in one strong fluid movement. It was not an easy cut to make, but in her long life of cloak-and-dagger operations, she’d practiced it to perfection. She knew the exact artery she was aiming for and counted out the seconds as the blood bubbled up in his wound and he dropped to the ground, never to rise again.

She was visible again. A Thalmor soldier charged in from her left side. Emilin jumped back, sizing her up. This soldier had been with Elenwen too, and hadn’t shown any magic then. In a pinch, though, any Altmer soldier might try a spell.

“Are you mad?” Emilin shouted at her. “You have a treaty with the Empire!” That, of course, meant nothing, but she hoped her opponent would give some hint of Elenwen’s reasoning.

“You’re with the Stormcloaks!” snarled the Thalmor soldier. Then she stumbled forward, an arrow lodged in her throat. Confused, Emilin turned to the source of the arrow. The Stormcloak, Halli, was holding a bow.

“Two down, any more?” Olfina called.

None that any of them had seen. Emilin took the moment to pull up her wet breeches. She’d at least been spared the embarrassment of dying with her pants down.

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7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

When Cecilia woke, it was long past noon. It took all her willpower to sit up in her soft feather bed.
Every muscle ached from hanging on to Odahviing through the night. But she could not lay abed and let the world get along as it pleased. She’d been charged with saving Winterhold or Skyrim or perhaps even Nirn itself from this Eye of Magnus. And as if that wasn’t enough, she’d been charged with a diplomatic peace mission by Legate Fasendil. At least Ulfric would help her with the Winterhold business; probably not so much with Fasendil’s request.

She was relieved to discover the Windhelm dressmaker had delivered her new clothes. The clothing she’d worn on her trip out of Winterhold was all smoky and stained. Grabbing a simple green dress, she set out to face the day.

There was a lot to do. Convincing Ulfric not to interfere with her planned meeting with the Emperor was high on the list. She’d better break it to him softly.

He wouldn’t be the only one worried at the prospect. She needed to ensure she could walk away at the end of the meeting. She’d been captured by the Empire twice already. Never again. But how could she show Titus Mede she was not an easily-won pawn in his schemes? While she was figuring that out, how could she get Ulfric to stop regarding her as a pawn?

The guard on duty didn’t know where Ulfric was. But the Companions were taking a late luncheon in the Hall. They’d just returned from bandit-hunting, he explained.

Cecilia was surprised the job had taken so long. They’d set out to hunt bandits for Brunwulf Free-Winter six full days ago. She assumed she was in for a good story.

As she entered the Great Hall, Aela leapt up to greet her.

“You’re not locked up in the Jarl’s secret dungeon after all!”

“What?” Cecilia stared at the Companion.

“I was wondering why you disappeared so suddenly, Dragonborn,” explained Aela.

“I had to go up to Winterhold on an urgent matter.”

Aela nodded. “That was what Jarl Ulfric plead when I cornered him over it.”

“Did you not believe him?”

“We decided to trust in his honour. Come, join us.” She motioned over to the table where the other Companions were tucking into a spread of meat, cheeses and bread. “You’ve missed a lot. That cave we were hired to check out, we found a whole band of high-elf thieves operating right under your Jarl’s nose.”

“Altmer? In Eastmarch?”

“Yes! They even called themselves the Summerset Shadows.”

“They weren’t – they couldn’t be Thalmor, surely?”

“Don’t think so. And neither does your Jarl. But the Windhelm mob is pretty well convinced it was a Thalmor plot we uncovered. We killed most of the gang and your Jarl executed the two we captured. You didn’t see the heads when you came in?”

“Where?”

“At the front gates. On pikes.”
“No, it was dark . . . Ughh.” She’d seen worse – much, much worse in Cyrodiil – but elves’ heads decorating the gates of Windhelm was a bad omen.

Listening to the full story as told by the Companions, Cecilia realized that her exit from Windhelm had been incredibly well-timed. The Summerset Shadows deserved their fate, but she was happy to have missed Ulfric’s inquisition into the city’s Altmer. Most of the Altmer residents of Windhelm were now back to their everyday lives, Ulfric had punished the guilty, and she’d been spared the duty of intervening for elves against Nords.

Thankfully, the people of Windhelm had mostly moved on from their Thalmor hysteria to a larger campaign against the hold’s bandits: most of whom were Nords. The Companions had been hired by the townsfolk to finish clearing out every bandit lair in the vicinity. She frowned at that. It must be a large sum of money the Companions were getting for their services. Windhelm was already bleeding money to the war, could they really afford a bunch of costly mercenaries?

“What’s wrong?” Vilkas had noticed her expression.

“I’m thinking you’re probably paid too much,” she said bluntly.

“Maybe.” Vilkas chuckled. “But you won’t find anyone else who can do our job.”

“Not with Eastmarch’s warriors off in Whiterun.”

“Exactly. No offence to you, Dragonborn, but we’re simple warriors, out for gold and glory. You’ll make a fine ruler, though.”

“I’m not going to rule anything,” she protested.

Njada Stonearm burst into laughter. “Why not? It’s not like you could do any worse.”

Njada was perpetually sharp-tongued, and Cecilia was inclined to ignore her, but she felt the gaze of the palace guards upon her. “I’m not so silly as to think I could run a hold better than the men and women who’ve spent their whole lives doing so,” she replied with equal sharpness. “Jarl Ulfric values my counsel, but I will never rule Eastmarch.”

The nearest guardsman broke out in applause, then quit clapping at a sharp look from Jorleif, now approaching with greetings and apologies on behalf of Jarl Ulfric. He’d be here soon, Jorleif assured her.

Ten minutes passed before Ulfric entered the Hall from the war room. He was dressed in full furs, as though ready to head outside. While he smiled at her, his face looked drawn and haggard.

“You’re up, at last, my Lady,” he greeted her. “Have you eaten?”

She nodded. “With the Companions. They’ve told me all about the bandits they’ve been hunting for you.”

Ulfric groaned. “Now, that is yet another thing we need to discuss. But let’s find some privacy first.”

“Were you going out?” she asked him.

“I had some business at the Temple. It can wait.”

“I’ll go with you. I could use some divine guidance.”

He gave her an approving nod. “Very well, let’s go.”
The Temple of Talos lay not far past the Palace gates. Cecilia had been inside several times, but it still felt very daring to pray in public to Talos. From infancy, her parents had hammered in the lesson that you never, ever talked about Talos outside your home. Even there, her mother’s little shrine had eight alcoves for the Divines and a secret compartment that only a very skilled mage could open.

There were a handful of worshipers inside the temple, but they were either too rapt in their prayers to notice their entrance, or too polite to bother the Jarl and the Dragonborn. Ulfric strode to the front of the chapel and knelt upon the hard flagstones. It brought to mind the cushions reserved for the Count and his family in the Chapel of Dibella in Anvil. Ulfric, of course, would spurn such luxuries in worship. The Graybeards had seen to that.

She knelt down beside him and tried to focus on her own prayer. *Defend the people of Tamriel,* she asked. *Or – if this really is up to me, show me how to defend your people.*

Talos had no answer for her.

Having finished her simple prayer, she snuck a glimpse at Ulfric by her side. His head was still bowed. She wondered if Ulfric felt any thrill of rebellion in honouring Talos. Or if praying to Talos felt to him like a comfortable conversation with an old friend. The priestess Jora had told her he prayed here often.

She was not the only one watching Ulfric while he prayed, for the moment he raised his head, the priest of Talos was at his side.

“My Jarl, My Lady,” Lortheim inclined his head briefly to both of them. “May I be of service?”

“Yes. Allow me a second.” Ulfric stood up, then offered his arm to bring Cecilia to her feet. He was being impeccably courtly since she’d returned from Winterhold, and Cecilia wondered how long that would last before the rougher Nord informality re-emerged. She did not dislike either manner.

Ulfric returned his attention to Lortheim. “I’ve received a request from Falkreath about setting up a shrine to Talos there. Jarl Dengeir writes that the old couple who used to lead his worship in Falkreath are missing, presumed dead at Thalmor hands.”

“The ones who tended the shrine on Lake Ilinalta?” asked Cecilia.

Ulfric gave her a sharp look. “You know something?”

“There’s a shrine to Talos just up from the lake, on the south-eastern side. Lydia and I found corpses there. Four Nords and the body of a Justiciar. We cremated the bodies and built a small cairn nearby to mark where we buried their ashes. I can write Jarl Dengeir how to find it.”

“So they are dead,” said Ulfric. “It’ll be a comfort to the folk of Falkreath to know where they’re buried. I trust the Justiciar isn’t interred with them?”

“No,” said Cecilia promptly. “Lydia threw his ashes in the lake.” She’d been uncomfortable with that; she wouldn’t be surprised if she heard a Thalmor ghost was haunting Lake Ilinalta, but Ulfric laughed heartily over it.

“Is there anyone who can go to Falkreath to help them reinstate a shrine?” Ulfric asked Lortheim.

“I don’t think there’s a fully-trained priest or priestess left in Skyrim other than myself and my wife,” replied Lortheim. “Either they recanted or they were imprisoned,” he explained to Cecilia.

“There’s a priest of Talos in Whiterun,” Cecilia replied.
“Heimskr is self-taught. Very passionate but . . . “

“Heis theology is weird?”

“As I said, very passionate.”

“So it’s not actually your order’s official doctrine that Talos breathed on Cyrodiil and cooled it down?”

“The symbolic truth of that story is perhaps more important.” Lortheim sounded uncomfortable.

“How much Talos loves his Empire,” said Cecilia automatically, and then realized it was the wrong thing to say. “Errr . . . I mean to say-“

But Ulfric was smiling. “Don’t correct yourself, my Lady, you’re right. Cyrodiil and Skyrim will be united once again under His guidance, I truly believe that. But for now, we Nords must go our own way.”

She wanted to ask him more about that – it might be a good lead-in to revealing her planned meeting with the Emperor – but not here in front of Lortheim.

“If there’s no one else, I could go to them,” Lortheim offered reluctantly.

“Your good wife would kill me if I did that to you,” Ulfric replied. “No, I’m sure we can find some ambitious young acolyte to send Dengeir. You and Jora will have your work cut out for you after the war. Till then, you must stay safe in Windhelm.”

“Yes, my Jarl. Thank you.”

“Give my regards to Jora,” said Ulfric.

“She’ll be sorry she missed seeing you both,” Lortheim replied. “Oh, she wanted me to ask, have you set a date for the wedding yet?”

“Not yet,” Cecilia said quickly.

“We have much to discuss together,” said Ulfric.

“Yes, we do,” she agreed.

Outside the Temple, she turned to Ulfric with a question. “People in Windhelm don’t get married in the Temple of Talos, do they?”

Ulfric chuckled. “No, certainly not. I can see your thinking. Perhaps we do give too much weight to Talos here. We shouldn’t neglect the other Eight.”

His honesty surprised and delighted her. “So, let me make sure, Mara still oversees marriages in Eastmarch?”

“Mara, yes. But by the Old Ways, also Kyne and Dibella,”

“Do you hold to the Old Ways?” she asked.

“No, not as such. But you’ve been in Skyrim long enough to see how easily we Nords mix old and new. A bunch of fancy Cyrodiil trappings do not change our bond with our gods. That bond is as old as the very bones of our mountains.”
Since he was in a good mood, she didn’t point out that Talos had only been a god for a few centuries, so Talos worship really couldn’t be as old as the mountains. Of course, he’d probably have an answer to that, too. Maybe that Talos was foretold, or that Talos was Ysmir, so very properly ancient after all. He knew more about theology than she, for certain.

“I’ve sent a scout to check if that Synod expedition is still at Mzulft,” he told her as they walked back to the Palace.

She thanked him sincerely. Having someone else do the legwork was a new and pleasant experience. She could get used to this.

“I did confirm the expedition headed there a couple of months ago. They came through Windhelm and haven’t been back since.”

“You didn’t notice them then?”

He shook his head. “As you can imagine, I find it disturbing that none of my people alerted me to a group of Imperial wizards searching my hold. Between that, the elf bandits, and the Gray Quarter mess, I’ve had some sleepless nights lately.”

“Did something happen in the Gray Quarter?” Cecilia asked, alarmed.

“Nothing of substance. But since I went down there, I’ve been besieged by complaining Dark Elves. Dealing with Rolff Stone-Fist didn’t pacify them, just made them think I could solve the rest of their problems.”

“Is it a bad thing they’re asking your help?” she asked warily.

“Cecilia, I have no patience for their problems. We’re in the midst of war, we’ve barely weathered the onslaught of dragons, and you’ve come back to me with tidings of a Thalmor threat in Winterhold. But Kyne forbid some Nord so much as looks at an elf funny. Because they’ll want me dropping everything to rush out and deal with it.”

The feeling of collaboration with Ulfric had been nice while it lasted.

Sometimes she wanted to just **shake** him. Tell him to his face that he was a terrible Jarl and he should find someone else to run the hold for him. Then he could go fight his war to his heart’s content – that was all he was good for, anyway.

No, that was unfair. He believed he was fighting to liberate Skyrim. If he made sacrifices now in Windhelm, it was for that, not entirely from ineptitude. But her mood had certainly soured by the time they entered the Palace.

In a quiet side-room off the Hall, he showed her to a chair, then took a seat himself.

“We can talk fully now,’ he began. “I’ve much to ask you, but was there something you wanted to tell me?”

“Do you know my father is in Skyrim?”

He flinched at that. “Yes,” he said quietly. “He’s fighting for the Legion at Whiterun. Did the Legate tell you this?”

“Him and the Arch-Mage,” Cecilia replied. “Well, you don’t need to break the news to me. That should take a weight off your shoulders.”
He didn’t answer immediately. “It’s not a burden that can be lifted,” he said at last. “As long as he’s killing my men, they will do their best to kill him.”

“And if you met him on the battlefield . . .” she didn’t finish the sentence, because she wanted him to say it.

“I would fight for my life,” he told her, looking straight into her eyes.

“So I lose either you or my father. I think you know whom I would choose.”

His gaze was unwavering. “No. You didn’t choose. You promised your neutrality.”

“Oblivion take you! Yes, I promised. But you’re not the only person I’ve made promises to! I promised myself I’d fight for peace in Skyrim, and yesterday I promised Legate Fasendil that I’d meet with the Emperor to discuss the future of Skyrim and the Empire.”

She’d meant to ease into the subject. Instead, she flung the words in his face. She didn’t know what sort of reaction she was trying to get from him, but the change in his manner was immediate. He stiffened, blood rushing to his face, turning it almost purplish in hue. “You –” he choked out the words. “You went behind my back –“

“Did you think I was going to sit back and watch you all slaughter each other?”

“You’ve just seen how far the Empire will go, and you’re going back to them willingly! Because some wily elf spun you a tale.”

“A tale you haven’t even heard.”

“Oh, I’m sure he made you some fine promises. All the Empire wants is to build up its strength so it can fight the Dominion again. If only we’d stand back while they cozy up to the Thalmor. If only we’d stop up our ears to the cries of men and women dragged to their deaths! If only we’d denounce our very god!”

“So we can fight again and win!”

“And you believe that?”

“Whom do you think I should believe? You, whom I hardly know, or my father who raised me my whole life?”

“Open your eyes and look around you. Skyrim is bleeding –“

“And that’s not your fault?” she interrupted. “You didn’t want a war when you killed King Torygg?”

“Skyrim was already at war! Should I have stood aside while I watched the elves wage their war on my people? While the other Jarls ignored and profited from their people’s sufferings? While the blood we shed to save your homeland was paid back in dishonour and oppression? While –“

“Stop it! You can’t monologue me into compliance!”

“I’m appealing to your better nature.” His fists were clenched, his knuckles white.

“You haven’t listened to my story! Why should I listen to you?”

Silence. She turned away from his glare and walked towards the door of the room.
“Stop.” She did but did not turn back towards him. “Why did you agree to my proposal?” he asked.

“You know why. I needed that truce.”

He stepped in front of her. She refused to look up at his face.

“And you didn’t think you could get my agreement in any other way?” he asked.

“You insisted on that condition,” she said dully.

“I thought you would at least argue, try to negotiate a different solution, or ask for something in return.”

*The Reach. She’d nearly given him the Reach.* “But I did exactly what you wanted.”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because I’m easily manipulated? Does that satisfy you?”

“You’re not easily manipulated. Shor’s bones but I’ve *tried.*”

*Now* she looked up at him. “You got what you wanted. I’d call that a success.”

“I didn’t. I wanted the Dragonborn for Skyrim. Instead . . . we have this compromise.”

“You don’t want to marry me, do you?” she asked quietly.

“You’re trying to back out now?” he snapped.

“I’m asking you, what do you want from me? And don’t say Skyrim’s freedom, or I will *scream.*”

Ulfric fell silent.

“I can’t do this.” There was a lump in her throat. “I don’t see any future here together.” She made a move for the door.

“Cecilia,” he raised his hands to block her.

*FEIM ZII GRON!* She passed through his hands like water through a sieve and into the Great Hall. His curses echoed behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to anyone who began reading this hoping for a nice romance fic between Ulfric and the Dragonborn.

One thing we don’t really see in Skyrim much is Ulfric Stormcloak’s temper. With the exception of blowing-up at Elenwen in Season Unending, he talks passionately, but still with composure. But there are enough people who know him who testify to how he can break. Jorleif, for instance, says “Serving as Steward to Ulfric Stormcloak was a great honor, but I don’t miss his temper.” The man has a terrible case of PTSD. He feels betrayed by Cecilia; another betrayal in a lifetime of betrayals. He's not a great strategist in his despair, refusing to even put in the effort to win her to his side when she's
basically begging him to give her *something* . . .

Well, we'll see where this goes next chapter.

Looking into Saadia's quest, I realized that Saadia is accused of the same thing Ulfric thought he did, giving up a city to the Thalmor. It's an interesting parallel, and grows even more interesting when you realize that Taneth absolutely could *not* have held out against the Dominion, Kematu's claim aside. Taneth's position on the coast means it would have been part of the first wave of invasion by Lady Arannelya, which swept along the coast of Southern Hammerfell with back-up from the Dominion navy. More distant cities in Hammerfell resisted at great cost for years, but no city in that zone did and the Legion was forced to retreat back across the Alik'r in the March of Thirst. If Saadia was guilty, she didn't betray a city that could have held out for very long.

Reviews, comments, and questions are appreciated and answered.
Chapter Notes

We all get used, dear. It's living with it that makes you a woman. – Bothela

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Along the White River, Eastmarch

The Thalmor soldier who'd been shot in the throat wasn’t quite dead. But Emilin was not going to waste her time trying to save one of those bastards. Instead, she began inspecting the scene, looking for signs of other Thalmor. They travelled in groups of three or more if they could help it. Never pairs. But she found no mark in the woods of another pursuer.

While she was searching, Olfina had run ahead to fetch the Stormcloak caravan’s commander. The man was now staring at the Thalmor bodies lying in the wood.

“They’re dead?” he asked.

Emilin knelt down to check the soldier’s body. “Yes. Both of them.”

The Stormcloak whistled.

“They were careless,” Emilin continued. “And there were only two of them. There should be a third somewhere.”

“But you didn’t find a third?” Olfina asked.

“No. It’s odd.”

“Well, thank Talos for their carelessness,” said the Stormcloak commander.

“And Halli for his quick reactions,” Olfina gestured towards the young Stormcloak who’d shot the second Thalmor. He was down by the fire sitting with Braith, keeping her away from the bodies. Emilin didn’t think the bodies worried Braith at all. But if she held true to form, the little terror would be poking them with a stick or rummaging through their pockets, so Halli was doing everyone a great service.

“Now, sir,” Emilin addressed the commander. “Let me tell you what I believe you should do next. And then you can decide whether to do it.”

“Say it then.”

“You need to send a message to Galmar Stone-Fist, quick as you can, but I’d also like to send along a message for my old friend, Junius Varo. It’ll be up to Galmar whether to pass it on.”

“I could do that, but I don’t think Galmar will want to tell the Legion anything.”

“It’ll make trouble for the Thalmor, so he might.”

“Ah, not a problem then.”
“Second. The Thalmor have decided to kill me. These two may not be the last assassins they send.”

“Why would they want to kill you?” Olfina asked. “I thought they were working with the Legion.”

Such an innocent statement, Emilin wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. “It’s more complicated than that. I’ve spent most of my life fighting the Dominion, one way or another. They may pretend they’re collaborating with the Empire now but . . . “ She shrugged. “They haven’t forgiven me, anyway, and I certainly haven’t forgiven them.”

The Stormcloak commander was looking at her with new respect. She should push on and capitalize on that.

“I’ll tell you why I’m going to Windhelm. Ulfric Stormcloak and I were comrades in arms once. We were taken prisoner in the same battle, then both thrown into the same Thalmor prison. As far as I knew, I was the only survivor from that day. I only found out here in Skyrim that one of the Nord legionnaires, Ulfric, had escaped as well. I’ve put aside this civil war to meet with him. It seems the Thalmor don’t like me doing that. All the more reason for me to go.”

“So you might join the Stormcloaks?” the commander asked her.

Emilin shook her head. “I’m playing the diplomat, for the moment. With your general’s approval.”

“We’ll get you to Windhelm safe and sound.”

“Well? This caravan is crawling along the road. And the children would make perfect shields for attackers to grab. Please, send me ahead to Windhelm. I need to get there as quickly as possible if the Thalmor are on my trail.”

The Stormcloak looked troubled, but Olfina immediately agreed with her. “Send her with the next army couriers that pass!”

“They don’t have spare horses,” the commander objected.

“I can ride behind a courier,” Emilin replied. “I’m not much extra weight.”

“And she’s just as important as the messages they’re carrying,” Olfina backed her up. “You know Galmar wanted us to get her to Windhelm safely.”

There was some more debate on the topic, but Olfina carried the day. As she always did, Emilin suspected.

Having settled that, there was finally time to finish changing out of her wet clothes. This time, she didn’t bother finding a private place in the woods. The Stormcloaks could just avert their eyes.

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7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Karthspire Camp, the Reach

Tanulvie had merely disliked the Nords. That was nothing to the loathing she had amassed towards the Forsworn in the last hour. They used blood and dirt like other men used cosmetics, and no outfit was complete without a few rattling bones and some mangy feathers.

There were rumours the mongrel Reachmen had orc blood mixed in with the blood of men and mer. Tanulvie could believe it.
But the King in Rags, as they called their leader, was different from the camp inhabitants she’d passed. Dirty he might be and there was blood on his clothing, but he was far more civilized in his manner than she’d expected. There were folk with him too whom she’d have taken for ordinary Breton townsfolk: no dirt or blood on them.

“Here’s your elf, my liege,” said one of the latter, an elderly man in fur-trimmed Nord finery.

“So they’re keeping their end of the deal after all,” replied Manadach. He turned to Tanulvie. “Your name, Mistress?”

“Tanulvie.”

“And you’re truly a Thalmor Justiciar?”

“Would you believe me if I denied it?”

Madanach laughed. “They’ve not entirely broken you. Do you know anything about Ulfric Stormcloak?”

“He’s the rebel leader in Skyrim, that’s all I know,” said Tanulvie.

“She’s right from Summerset, no way she would know anything,” the elderly man by Madanach’s side advised him.

“Couldn’t hurt asking. Do you need her conscious?” he asked his adviser.

“We don’t even need her alive for this,” the man said softly.

“We’ve promised to return her to the Blades alive,” Madanach replied. “Try to keep that promise. I leave the rest to you, Nepos.”

Nepos smiled at Tanulvie. “Step right this way.”

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7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Whiterun

Within an hour of his surgery, Junius Varo was up and ready to go. And then, having got out the door, he was down again.

“Stop being ridiculous,” Rikke upbraided him as two Legionnaires helped him back to his bed. “Or I’ll get the healer to knock you out completely.”

“We need to plan how to break this siege,” Varo objected.

She put his hand to his brow. It was scorching. “I’ll schedule a council tonight. Rest till then.”

“You’re not going to do it,” he said accusingly. She ignored him.

She was glad to find Danica Pure-Spring outside, arriving with a basket of tinctures, dressings and talismans.

“If you’ve got anything to put him to sleep and give him good dreams, give it to him,” she instructed Danica. “He’ll be climbing the walls soon.”
Up in Dragonsreach, there was a council being held by the Whiterun defenders. When Rikke arrived, the Jarl asked after Varo.

“Surgery went as well as possible,” she replied. “There’s every chance he can use his right hand still, with just the thumb and forefinger. If not, well, he’s left-handed and a mage, he’ll be all right.”

“We miss his advice as well,” said Balgruuf.

“He misses giving it to you. But his advice is not likely to be coherent at the moment. So, what’s new outside the walls?”

After destroying the first set of barricades, the Stormcloak army had stalled. Rebuilding their catapults, Cipius explained.

“They have the run of our forests,” Irileth said. “And sawmills aplenty.”

“If Varo was here, he’d suggest we burn all the forests down, wouldn’t he?” said Commander Caius. He clarified that he was joking a second later, seeing the Jarl’s stricken expression.

“Nothing we can really do but wait,” Cipius concluded. “Unless we get in contact with Legion scouts out there. But we haven’t heard a peep from them.”

Rikke and Cipius left Dragonsreach together. He was very quiet as they left the Hall, and then he paused at the top of the stairs.

“I received a strange missive this morning, Rikke.”

“What?”

“An anonymous letter showed up in the mess hall, addressed to me. Just a simple folded piece of paper without a seal.”

“What did it say?”

“It said you and Varo are in secret communication with Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Rikke raised her eyebrows. “I suppose your anonymous correspondent is talking about Emilin going to Windhelm.”

“Did you send her there?”

“No. But I didn’t stop her. Varo wasn’t involved, though. She left just when he couldn’t hold her back.”

“Why did you let her go?”

“I’ll answer to the General about that.” She pursed her lips. “I think I know who sent you that letter. I just don’t know how she got it to you.”

“Who?”

“The Dominion’s First Emissary to Skyrim. She’s already tried to talk to Varo via projection, and I’m sure she’s alerted the General as well.”

“She’s hanging around Whiterun still?” asked Cipius.
“Probably. She came here to keep an eye on Varo. Cipius, I know this puts you in a bad position. If you want to relieve me for insubordination, I'll understand.”

“You and Varo answer to the General,” Cipius replied. “As far as I know officially, the General could have sent Emilin to Windhelm himself. If I hear differently from him in the future, I might have to relieve you, but I’m not jumping at the whims of the Thalmor.”

“Thank you.”

“We really should find out how that letter ended up in the mess room,” he continued.

“You can try. But it’s not locked down, is it? A city this large, there’s someone who’ll carry messages for the Thalmor. Even if they’re not in the Legion, they could get it in there.”

“You think they could be in the Legion?”

The Thalmor did have agents in the Legion here in Skyrim. General Tullius had pretty well confirmed it at Helgen. All those months, Ulfric had known exactly how to evade the Legion, and then the first time Tullius kept his plans close to his chest, Ulfric fell into his trap. The Thalmor had come rushing to Helgen in a panic after that. In the aftermath, it was easy to conclude that Thalmor agents in the Legion were feeding the Stormcloaks intelligence: anything to keep Skyrim in turmoil. The General was still busy looking for the leaks.

But she shrugged at Cipius’ question. “Possibly. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

If Elenwen was determined to make trouble, she’d make it. Rikke could only brace for the oncoming storm.

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Windhelm

Cecilia had walked out of the Palace of Kings full of rage and resentment. Pacing the streets of Windhelm, those feelings faded into a dull, aching sadness.

She came to Windhelm committed to a marriage of convenience, undertaken for purely political reasons. Nothing had changed. So why did it hurt so much that Ulfric hadn’t insisted he wanted to marry her? She felt as though something had been taken from her, but she’d never had it in the first place.

“Lady Cecilia!” There was Viola Giordano, Windhelm’s greatest gossip. “I must speak with you!”

Cecilia murmured a greeting. Viola took this as an invitation to launch into her complaint. Revyn Sadri had stolen her ring. True, the Jarl had found out and made him give it back to her, but he hadn’t been punished at all for his crime. Was Jarl Ulfric aware of how perilous Windhelm had become? “Bandits and murderers in our midst,” Viola intoned. “And how many of them are elves? Almost every single one.”

“Calixto Corrium was not an elf,” Cecilia objected.

“He was doing elf magic,” Viola replied. “Ayleid flesh magic, you said.”

She had told Viola that. She wished she hadn’t.
“Jarl Ulfric’s dealt with the bandits, though,” Cecilia pointed out.

“He’s made a start. My blood runs cold knowing how many times I passed by Niranye’s stand without ever imagining the depths of that woman’s depravity.”

“Niranye? You mean the Altmer woman who runs a stall in the market?”

“Yes! That Niranye! She was part of those Summerset Shadows.”

“Really?” Cecilia hardly knew the woman, but a bandit? “Was she executed?”

“She’s in prison, hasn’t been sentenced yet. Might be the Jarl is reluctant to behead a woman. You should talk to him about it.”

“You think she should be executed?”

Viola’s eyes widened. “Of course I do! Do you think a woman’s any less capable of villainy than a man?”

“I suppose not. I’m capable of burning down a whole city.”

“So you’ll deal with her?”

“I’ll look into it.” Ulfric had mentioned having something to tell her about the bandits. A pity she hadn’t allowed him to tell it. Or anything else. She’d just charged ahead and started a war with him.

“Good. You can make some big changes in this city. She and Sadri are just the tip of the ice-berg. When it comes to crime, these elves-“

“I’ll look into it immediately.”

It was something to do, and as a strategy for escaping Viola’s company, it was flawless. Cecilia faltered, however, as she returned to the Palace. She only knew how to get to the prison through the Great Hall of the Palace. If she met Ulfric now, what would she say?

Fortunately, a guard noticed her hesitation and asked where she wanted to go. When she said the jail, he took her down a side passage that lead into the barracks and then introduced her to the head jailer.

He nodded when Cecilia asked to see Niranye.

“She’s been expecting you,” he remarked.

“Her?”

“She has?” Cecilia asked in surprise.

“ Asking for you ever since she got here. I’ll bring her up so the other inmates can’t spy on you.”

Cecilia took a seat while she waited. It was gratifying how easily the Windhelm guards trusted her, but it wasn’t likely to last much longer. After her quarrel with Ulfric, he’d have to restrain her wanderings in the Palace. Too risky to let a pawn of the Empire go wherever she liked.

“My Lady Dragonborn!” Niranye’s lilting voice broke into her self-pitying thoughts.

Cecilia looked up. Niranye was wearing a rough-spun shift, her hands were in shackles, and she still carried herself like a queen.

“You wanted to see me?” Cecilia asked.
“Yes. Is it a bad time? You don’t look so well, my Lady.”

Cecilia rubbed her eyes. “I don’t look so well? You’re the one in prison, Niranye.”

“In temporary detainment till the Dragonborn arrives to give her judgment.”

“Me?”

“Did the Jarl not tell you?”

“I didn’t give him the chance.”

Niranye’s eyes travelled to the jailer. “Would you mind giving us some privacy, sir?”

“My Lady?” asked the jailer.

Cecilia nodded.

“Where should I begin?” said Niranye, once he’d left. “Should I tell you about myself or would you prefer to talk about the Jarl?”

“Why would I talk to you about him?”

“Because I may have some good advice. You’re young; you’ve a lot to learn about managing men.”

“I don’t want to manage him.”

“There’s a pity. You could have him wrapped around your little finger if you put the least effort into it.”

“I doubt it. Niranye, I’m only here to find out if you really were involved with those bandits.”

“The Summerset Shadows? Yes, I fenced some goods for them. I feared for my life if I didn’t.”

“How come the Jarl didn’t sentence you for it?”

“I appealed to the mercy of the Dragonborn.”

“Oh – “That hit her hard. Ulfric had stayed his judgment in deference to hers. “Why should I be any more merciful than him?”

“I have a small claim to your consideration, my Lady.” Niranye bowed her head to her. “Nearly half a century ago, I was your father’s nanny and tutor.”

Cecilia stared. She knew her father had been raised by an Altmer nanny, whom he hadn’t heard from for many years. But her name wasn’t Niranye, it was –

“What was your name then?” Cecilia asked.

“I was Eliande for a good fifteen years.”

Yes, that was the name. Niranye could have found out about her father’s old nanny somewhere and then assumed that elf’s identity, but it made a lot more sense to take her at her word. Her father had boasted that his old nanny was an expert confidence artist. According to him, she’d made a living in Alinor swindling wealthy socialites. It was that criminal background that made her such an effective teacher of high Altmer society’s customs and culture. She’d moved on to Hammerfell when
Summerset got too hot for her, then ended up in Curinwe Varo’s employ.

“Do you believe me?” Niranye pressed.

“I – I think I do. I’ve heard tales of you.”

“All good, I hope?”

“My father says you were a criminal. Also, he adored you.”

“Precocious little tyke.”

Cecilia laughed. “He’s not so little anymore. Why did you disappear on my family?”

“Your father went off to boarding school in Cyrodiil. I decided it was time to strike out on a new adventure. Went north to Skyrim and haven’t looked back.”

“You could have written.”

“My Lady, your grandmother was a fine woman, but she attracted the most unwelcome attention. I’m sure there are enough documents filed away in Dominion archives to keep me from ever returning home – alias or no alias. I’ve done my best to keep my head down since then. Though not so successfully these days.” She held up her manacled hands to underscore the point.

“I’ll ask the Jarl to show you mercy,” said Cecilia. “But I don’t know if he’ll listen to me. We’re . . . we’re not on the best of terms right now.”

“You quarrelled, did you?”

Cecilia nodded.

“I thought so. You do need some advice. Pardon my asking, but this match is not an affair of the heart, is it?”

“No. It was a deal we made between us. No romance, just politics.”

“And what do you want from this marriage?”

“I don’t even know if it’s going to happen now. I promised him, but he doesn’t care –“

“Have you tried kissing him?” Niranye interrupted.

Cecilia coloured. “He tried to kiss me once. I didn’t let him,” she confessed.

“Well, there’s your problem.”

“He wasn’t very enthusiastic about it. I think he was relieved I didn’t respond.”

“So neither of you are giving this a proper try.”

“I . . . guess so.”

“Go find him, kiss him and then see what happens.”

“That won’t solve his problems with the Empire!”

“It might make him forget his problems with the Empire. My dear Lady, you need to decide what
you want from him, then tell him what that is. You can’t wait around for Nords to figure these things out on their own.”

“I don’t know what I want,” she admitted.


“I wanted his friendship,” said Cecilia at last. “I can marry someone who doesn’t love me. But not someone who doesn’t like me. Who doesn’t respect me.”

“He doesn’t like you? Are you sure?”

“No. I’m not sure.”

“Then go find out. Your father didn’t raise a coward, did he?”

Cecilia lifted her chin. “You’re right. I’ll go back and finish this. One way or another.”

After the rage came the self-loathing. Ulfric had exhausted all his anger. He’d slammed the door, sworn at Yrsarald for an incomplete war report, then reduced one of the guards to tears with an only slightly deserved scolding. He’d made an ass of himself. Again.

‘Ulfric.’ The small voice at his shoulder surprised him. Cecilia had slipped into the war room.

He turned to greet her, then noticed her face was pale, and she was shaking.

“I owe you an apology,” he began stiffly. “I should at least have heard you out.”

“Yes. I should have listened to you as well. But it’s not – it’s not what you think. When I say I want peace for Skyrim, I don’t mean I want you and your people defeated. If I can negotiate a peace that doesn’t give you up . . . .”

“I think you know you can’t.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have promised the Legate.” She sighed. “Someone told me I should just march in here and tell you what I wanted. It sounded easier than it is.”

“Well, then, what is it you want?”

“You.”

He stared at her.

“You made your mind up to marry me, you must have imagined our future together. Was there – is there more to it than neutralizing the Dragonborn’s power?”

“Cecilia,” he tried to speak but could say no more.

“You’ve never told me what you think our future should be.” She took another step towards him.

“Are you the same woman who complained I was backing her into a corner?”

“Maybe it’s a comfortable corner. Please describe it for me.”
He put his hand to his brow. “I could paint you a charming picture, no doubt. A queen by her king’s side, with devoted subjects, a babe in the cradle and shield-siblings always welcome at your hearth.”

“What about fewer draughts and more carpets?”

“All the finery Skyrim can offer.”

“Like that’s a lot.” She was smiling, though, so he took it as gentle teasing.

“I could tell you all that. It wouldn’t be true, though. I’m not made for entertaining a noble lady, and you are made for the gods’ own ends. I’m merely borrowing you for a while.”

She blinked. “So, what do you really think we’re made for?”

“Rebuilding Skyrim together. Taking the fight to the Thalmor. Raising children to carry on our legacy.”

“Being happy?”

He paused. “You deserve every happiness in life.”

“I can’t force you to be happy. But pretend with me sometimes. Pretend you don’t think you’re going to die horribly rather than live to a ripe old age.”

She’d hit the mark there. Even if he became High King, he foresaw death in battle or at an assassin’s blade.

“Well then if I’m going to pretend -” He took her in his arms and kissed her. It was every bit as much a calculated experiment as before, but this time she responded wholeheartedly to him. Her body relaxed against his.

Then she wriggled a bit in his arms, “Um . . . oof . . . your beard tickles.” He was blindsided by the sudden jolt of desire that triggered in him.

“I want to marry you,” he gasped.

“I assumed that from your proposal.”

“As soon as I can arrange the ceremony.”

“So you can stake your claim to me more firmly.”

“Do you have any objections?”

She laughed. “Not at all.” Then she pulled back from him, a knowing smile playing around her lips. “I want Lydia here first, though. But then gladly, my Jarl.”

This didn’t solve their problems. This didn’t keep her from the Emperor’s manipulations. But damn if he hadn’t found a bit of happiness with her after all. And Oblivion take whomever tried to take her from him.
So there we go. Twenty-nine Chapters in and we get some kissing. I thought Niranye
with her philosophy of "People just need to schmooze better" would be the one to give
Cecilia the push. Their issues aren't solved, they aren't wildly in love with each other,
but . . .

Reviews, comments, and questions are appreciated and answered. I'm particularly
nervous now that I finally got to some romance in this story.
7 Second Seed, Windhelm

Chapter Notes

They were golden, even when they were dead. But their blood was red. I knew it would be. - Salvianus

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

7 Second Seed, 4E 202, Palace of the Kings, Windhelm

This time, Ulfric sat by her side and listened quietly to the details of her agreement with Fasendil. When she repeated Fasendil’s belief that the Empire would go to war with the Dominion within the next five years, he merely sighed.

She did not mention her father’s operations against the Thalmor, or that Fasendil had implied they were directed by the Emperor himself. That was not information Ulfric Stormcloak, leader of a rebellion against the Empire, should have. It might help prove the Empire was serious about the upcoming war, but it could also be used against her father.

“You could not have left there without making that promise,” he said when she had finished. “But if you go to Solitude, you are not coming back.”

“I won’t go to Solitude. This meeting has to happen on neutral ground. I can’t let them prepare the time or the place, can I?”

“No, you cannot. You cannot trust this elf either, just because he let you go this once.”

“You’re right. If it hadn’t been for the Thalmor, he’d never have let me go. But aren’t you glad there are still Legionnaires who are resisting the Thalmor?”

“Not keeping the Dragonborn as a prisoner is a very low bar to clear. Resisting the Thalmor is beyond the Legion’s capacity.”

“Well . . . “ she faltered, mindful of their earlier argument.

“I won’t bite your head off if you still disagree,” he said as if reading her mind. “But keep thinking on it. Watch what your Emperor does, not what he promises.”

“I’ll watch him like a hawk.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You?”

“Titus Mede needs to learn he can’t treat with you and leave me out of it.”

“And if he refuses to meet with you there?”

“You’ll have kept your promise. Then you will know there was no peace to negotiate. Not without giving up on Skyrim.”
Not without giving up on you, she thought. To his mind, it was probably the same thing. And she couldn’t give up on him.

“I want to be married when I go, at least,” she told him. “I need to make it clear this isn’t something I can just change my mind about.”

“Do you imagine Titus will trot out a Mede cousin to marry the Dragonborn?”

“Mara save me, I hope not!” One political proposal was enough for a lifetime. “You really think that might be the Emperor’s plan?”

“Perhaps as an alternative to the Dragonborn marching into Cyrodiil to take the Ruby Throne for herself.”

“I don’t want that! No one in Cyrodiil would want that.”

“No one?” Ulfric gave her a grim smile. “I think you underestimate the sway of the Dragonborn. It would be perilous, but you could win through, Cecilia Stormcrown.”

“No, I couldn’t. Please don’t tell me you want me to.”

“If you were an entirely different person, much more ambitious and ruthless, I’d gather up an army for you. But that person would never have accepted my suit.”

“No, that sort of warlord would have cut off your head for getting in her way. You’re far better off with me.”

He chuckled. “Let me make you a proposition, my Lady. Lydia and Ralof should return to Windhelm on the Ninth. We should also hear by then if the Synod is still digging around in Eastmarch. If they are still there, I’ll accompany you to Mzulft myself. But before we go, let Tenth of Second Seed be our wedding day.”

Cecilia stiffened. “Three days from now?” Yes, she had said he could arrange the wedding as quickly as possible. But this rush wasn’t possible.

“You said you wanted to be married when you meet Titus Mede,” Ulfric reminded her. “There’s no telling where you must go, or for how long, once you begin your search for the Staff of Magnus.”

“Do you think this will please your folk? Getting married on the sly, without celebration, without even a dress.”

“There’s a dress. Or will be. Your usual seamstress has put everything aside to work on it.”

“You ordered a wedding dress for me!” She didn’t know whether to be annoyed or impressed. “What do you know about wedding dresses?”

“That it should be blue and white for Eastmarch. The rest I left in her hands.”

“I haven’t even been fitted for it.”

“She has your measurements, doesn’t she?”

“That’s not enough for a wedding dress! People take months to design their wedding dresses!”

“In the Nibenay? With long trains and many layers?”
‘Oh.’ Although she’d been brought up in Anvil, her family was more Nibenese than anything else. And they did over-do ceremonies and celebrations. Ulfric would probably choke if he saw the gown in which she was presented to the Imperial court when she was sixteen. ‘They don’t do that in Skyrim, do they?’

He shook his head. ‘No, they do not. Go see if the dress needs any adjustments. I’ll arrange the banquet. I do not intend to marry you on the sly.’

She was trying to follow Niranye’s advice of fully committing herself to this marriage. So she steeled herself to go on. ‘Very well. But let me invite some guests.’

‘From Windhelm?’

‘Yes.’ Ambarys Rendar was getting an invitation with his name on it this time; she was looking forward to seeing him squirm. She had a few more heartfelt invitations in mind: common folk of Windhelm who had helped her in the past. And Niranye - Ulfric might not care for it, but Niranye was the closest thing she had to family in this town.

‘I met Niranye today,’ she told him.

‘You were in the prison?’ he asked in surprise.

‘Yes, when I heard she was there, I had to find out why.’

‘What did she tell you?’

‘She was a fence for the Altmer bandits you had executed. And she was my father’s old nanny. That’s why you waited for my judgment, yes?’

‘She told the truth then?’

‘I think so. Her story matches my father’s. Her name then was Eliande.’

‘How does one fall from the servant of a noble family to a common thief?’ Ulfric asked in disgust.

‘She’s always been a thief. But not a common one, I think. She used to swindle Summerset nobles out of their precious heirlooms.’

‘And that recommended her to your grandmother as a nanny?’

‘My father’s family was . . . odd. Ulfric, you were very quick to assure me that you knew all about my elven ancestry. But did you know my great-grandfather was Thalmor?’

Ulfric raised an eyebrow. ‘I had heard Curinwe Varo’s family were fleeing the Thalmor.’

‘That’s what I was told too. I guess my great-grandfather really was a defector. But he started as a high-ranking member of the Thalmor. He killed people across Tamriel for them. No one ever told me that. Not until I met Legate Fasendil.’

‘Cecilia.’ His tense face broke into a smile. ‘None of that matters. That’s three generations back. He took his sins to his tomb. He will not trouble our family’s peace.’

‘That’s not how it works, not with Altmer. My great-grandfather’s family are still alive and bitter. Do you think your people are going to love that? The Dragonborn bringing down her Thalmor kin on Skyrim?’
“What kin are these?”

She stared at him. “Oh, gods. You don’t know.”

“What don’t I know?”

“Elenwen.”

She watched the blood drain from his face.

“I didn’t mean to keep it a secret,” she said pleadingly. “She’s my grandmother’s first cousin. I never thought I’d meet her, then the Blades sent me to the Thalmor Embassy, and suddenly she was there – the one from my father’s story.”

“What story?”

“He fought her during the War. It was this big, magical duel . . . or maybe it wasn’t that grand. My father’s prone to exaggeration. But she had taken his mother’s sword, and he took it back off her unconscious body.”

“He couldn’t have saved us all a great deal of trouble and stabbed her with it then,” said Ulfric bitterly.

“An oversight on his part.” She laughed nervously.

Ulfric put his hand out to cup her chin. He looked intently into her face, then with his other hand, swept back her curls.

“I don’t see any of her in you,” he pronounced, letting go of her chin. “That’s a blessing.”

“My grandmother didn’t show any Altmer blood,” she told him.

“Yes, she was all Breton. Short of stature but she was still the largest presence in the room.”

It had slipped her mind that Ulfric knew her grandmother. He’d been with her the day she died.

She had put off asking uncomfortable questions too long. She didn’t want to hurt him but she had to know.

“Why were you at Vilverin?” she asked.

“I volunteered.”

She waited for him to elaborate.

“I’ll tell you the full tale.”

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24 Rain’s Hand, 4E 174, The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

Late in the afternoon, horns were heard blowing on the Causeway, and soldiers flocked to the walls to get a good look at the incoming forces.

The old Legion veterans cheered when they saw that this glittering cavalcade rode under the banner
of a golden eagle against a white satin background, surrounded by eight jewelled stars. Many of the newer recruits were mystified, among them, Ulfric Stormcloak.

“Elves?” he said in disbelief under his breath.

“Those are our elves,” a Legionnaire by his side explained. “Curinwe Varo’s leading them.”

Ulfric had heard of Varo, of course. The ex-Imperial Battlemage was a heroine in Cyrodiil. She’d come out of retirement to fight the Dominion. Legionnaires and civilians swapped stories of the daring feats she’d performed. They said she’d lured a Dominion unit into a swamp with her illusions, once convinced her enemies fording a river that they were drowning, rescued the wife and children of the Count of Anvil from behind Dominion lines, and fought a Flame Atronach with her mind alone. (The last seemed rather unlikely, on the balance.)

Even the most stubborn magic-hating Nord could respect a mage who reduced the goldskins to gibbering terror. Ulfric’s education had given him a wider view of the arcane than most of his countrymen; if Ysgramor had his own Clever Man by his side, the Emperor deserved this Clever Woman.

He cheered whole-heartedly for Varo as she rode into the city. The elves . . . the elves made his skin crawl, honestly. No fault of these ones; Varo’s Old Guard had proved their loyalty to the Empire in full. But he’d seen too much elvish butchery to ever be comfortable around these southern elves.

“All this cheering is turning my stomach sour,” old Galmar Stone-Fist growled in his ear in a homey Eastmarch accent. “Only one reason all these troops are coming inside the walls: we’re giving up the far shores and settling in for a siege.”

“How long will it take them to get here, do you think?”

Galmar shrugged. “General Jonna’s coming as quickly as she can, but moving an army isn’t quick business.”

“I’m glad I have you here at least to keep my hopes in check.”

“Don’t be cheeky, boy.”

Ulfric often wondered whether Galmar had taken on the role of protector on his own initiative or been charged with it by the Legion. It certainly wasn’t arranged before he left Skyrim. Ulfric had left High Hrothgar without a word to anyone, including his family in Windhelm. He’d spent a couple of very pleasant months as an ordinary Legion recruit without kin or class, though his fellows surmised he was of noble birth the moment he opened his mouth.

Then one day in Cyrodiil he’d been taken aside by his Legion commanders and confronted with his true identity. They’d made inquiries back in Skyrim. The son of the Jarl of Windhelm could not be a rank-and-file foot soldier. He’d first been upset at the new special treatment he received but Galmar, in particular, had been very convincing.
“If you’re risking your life for the Emperor, you can’t deny him your full use,” was what Galmar, the career Legionnaire, had told him then. “I’m an Eastmarch man myself and I know how it’ll put the heart into our troops that a Jarl’s son came out here to fight with them.”

Ulfric had thus resigned himself to the undeserved promotion and strange deference the Imperials afforded nobility. Here in the Imperial City, he received regular dinner invitations from the local nobility. If his commanders pressed him to go, he went, but he knew he confirmed every image these Cyrodiil nobles had of Nord barbarism. He’d been six years old when his parents gave him over to the Graybeards; he knew nothing about court etiquette, even by Skyrim’s standards.

The one exception in these awful get-togethers had been his introduction to the Emperor. Titus Mede II was nothing like those pompous aristocrats. He was a soldier at heart, a brilliant commander, and a father to his Legions. Ulfric was already disposed to idolize him, but the five minutes of conversation they had together sealed the deal. The Emperor had joked that once he had a few more Nord Legions, he could drive the Dominion into Oblivion, not just back across the Niben. Then he more seriously commended Skyrim’s sacrifice. There were tears in his eyes as he spoke of the blood Skyrim had spilt to defend this land.

At least there would be no more dinner parties. Many of those nobles had fled the city; those who remained were completely committed to its defence. War certainly brought out both the best and worst in people. But as the city settled in to face a siege, Ulfric was above all impressed by the heroism he saw all around him, from the shining leadership of the Emperor to the unsung labour of the civilians who’d stayed in the city.

It would be an honour to fight alongside these comrades, even if they must fight through to Sovngarde itself.

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24 Rain’s Hand, 4E 174, The White-Gold Tower, Imperial City

It was a great honour to be a member of the Emperor’s personal guard. It was also frequently very boring. Junius Varo had by now mastered the art of standing still and not interacting with the Legionnaires and officials who went in and out of the council chambers. But today his patience was being severely tried by a visitor who nudged him in the ribs when he ignored her.

“Mother, I—“

“My darling son. Fancy meeting you in a place like this.”

He was struck immediately by how small his mother was, in contrast to the larger-than-life figure of his childhood. At twenty-three years of age, Junius had stopped growing and he doubted she’d actually shrunk. But he hadn’t seen her for a year, and now he saw her as she really was, a short well-preserved woman in her sixties, with strands of silver in her braided brown hair.

“You did get me this assignment,” he pointed out to his mother.

Curinwe Varo laughed. “True. I’m very grateful you’ve stayed put where I left you. Come here and give me a hug.”

“I’m on guard duty.”

She laughed again. “All right, I won’t bother you anymore. But I expect you washed, dressed, and ready for dinner at seven tonight, understand, soldier?”
“Yes ma’am,” he saluted. He might have added that he would check with his commander first, but he already knew she’d get what she wanted. She always did. She’d had him placed in the Imperial Guard right out of the Battlemages’ College, rather than letting him fight alongside her or in the front-line Legions.

Maybe she was trying to keep her only son from danger, as his comrades insinuated. But Junius knew that she truly believed her son deserved a place by the Emperor’s side.

Curinwe had lost her own parents when she was only nineteen, leaving her with nothing but an Altmer-sized pride that didn’t match her status as a penniless Breton orphan. She’d fought hard her whole life to be here today: a trusted confidant of the Emperor, a decorated Legion veteran, a member of the Cyrodiil aristocracy, and a master of Illusion magic. Her son was the embodiment of her hard-tried fealty to Titus Mede; the honour afforded to Junius was all hers.

Junius liked to think he did deserve his position, and that he would one day be as great and loyal a battlemage as his mother, but he realized he probably should have been given the chance to earn it in his comrades’ eyes first.

As he had assumed, his commander immediately permitted him to go to dinner with his mother. At six o’clock, he arrived at the Varo mansion in Elven Gardens, ready to wash up and dress there, rather than walk through the city in formal attire.

Junius had never really lived in the family’s townhouse. As a child, he’d travelled Tamriel with his mother. They’d stay in the house when they visited the Imperial City, but the longest they’d ever lived here was three or four months at a time. He’d lived in a succession of dormitories and barracks since he first attended boarding school.

The house was seeing more use now than it had for decades. Once the war began, Junius’ father had offered it up to the Legion. It’d been converted into soldiers’ lodging at first, and then as the war worsened, a makeshift hospital. Leontius Varo had reserved only one set of rooms on the second floor for the use of his estranged wife and this was where Curinwe stayed when she was in the city.

Trying to explain his parents’ relationship to his friends had always been a headache. On paper, Leontius and Curinwe Varo were still married, but only because Nibenese noble families saw divorce as the ultimate scandal. Quiet separation and pretending not to notice any new partners was the archaic, repressed norm.

Junius could barely remember a time when his parents had still been together. The split itself had been acrimonious, but after some time to cool off, they’d dealt well together as parents. During the Varo Affair, his father had rushed to his mother’s defence. That went a long way to soothing any lingering resentments. Any spark of romantic love, however, had long been extinguished. His father lived at his country estate with his mistress Silvia, an amiable woman who somehow tolerated her lover’s public pretense that she was merely his research assistant. His mother had Emilin.

Even though her only guests were her lover and her son, Curinwe Varo had ordered some poor Legionnaires to set a full formal table. Which, of course, they hadn’t done properly, not being trained in the mysterious ways of high society servants. His mother didn’t say a word – it’d be uncouth to complain about one’s subordinates – but he could see from her glances to the table that it was bothering her. So he strode over to the table and began rearranging things.

Emilin laughed when she saw what he was doing. “Really, Curinwe, you should hire Junius as your valet. He’s the only person outside the Summerset Isles who understands your standards.”

His mother wrinkled her nose. “Other than you?”
“Yes, but I don’t indulge them.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Tonight, Emilin was as formally dressed as he was, wearing a long-sleeved black velvet and lace gown with a flared skirt that swept the floor. The outfit was about four decades out of style.

“Found it in the attic,” she explained when Junius teased her about it. “I think it was your Aunt Cecilia’s. I certainly don’t travel around a war zone with a trunk full of formal gowns.”

His mother, who was clad in a green perfectly-tailored gown suitable for a respected Imperial matron, sniffed. “It doesn’t cost more than a simple Feather spell to be prepared for all eventualities.”

Emilin rolled her eyes.

“Junius, I met your father a couple of weeks back,” his mother continued. “He wanted a pass through the battle lines to come join you here since the Legion isn’t letting people in.”

“He can’t come here!” Junius protested in alarm. His father was not a soldier or a mage; the only thing he could do in the Imperial City was die by his son’s side.

“I refused to give him a pass,” his mother reassured him. “I told him I wouldn’t forgive him if he threw away his life and left you fatherless.”

“Did he accept that?”

“I hope so. He was a little too quiet, but I can’t imagine he’s planning anything more dangerous than badgering Legionnaires for passes. And I’ve put the word out he is not to get any.”

“Thank you. I’ll write him a letter.”

“You haven’t been writing to him?” His mother frowned. They spent so much time travelling, she’d always insisted Junius write frequent letters to his father.

“Ah . . . “ he was sure his face showed his guilt. “I know I should be doing that more. But it’s hard, writing letters to get past the censors. Everything I do in the Guard is top secret. If I write about what I had for breakfast, that might give Dominion spies information on our resources inside the city. I had about five letters burnt to cinders before I stopped trying.”

His mother shook her head at him. “Whenever did I teach you to stop trying, Junius? My father managed to send us letters even with the Thalmor watching his every move.”

Junius decided not to point out that his grandfather had been found out and expelled from the Thalmor. “I’ll write him a letter tonight,” he promised her. “I’ll just say I love him and I hope he’s proud of me. And then just wait, the censors will destroy it because that suggests we’re desperate.”

“I don’t think even they can hide that anymore,” Emilin replied.

“Desperate?” His mother repeated. “I’m not desperate yet. We’re all going to be cooped up together for the next couple months, but we have supplies to wait them out and more troops on their way.”

“That’s the Emperor’s official line, is it?” Junius asked bluntly.

“If we don’t stick to it, we’ll collapse.”

“I understand. But, Mother, be honest with me, just this once, and I’ll shut up after. How likely is it we all die here together?”
“Promise me you’ll not say a word of this outside these doors.”

He put his hand to his chest. “By Auri-El and all the gods, I swear.”

“I give it about half-odds the city falls before Jonna’s troops arrive. But even if it does, we will not have gone down to defeat, any more than your Breton ancestors were defeated by the Nords who harried their lands. We will still have northern Cyrodiil and Hammerfell, still, be able to call on High Rock and Skyrim. There will still be an Emperor to rally the men and mer of Tamriel who fight for our freedom. And you will still carry on my ancestors’ legacy that I’ve entrusted to you.”

“What do you mean?” A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. “Are you saying you’ll send me away?”

“You will stay by the Emperor’s side, wherever he goes.”

“But he’s staying to defend the city!” Junius protested.

“Yes . . . he is. But if you have to fight your way through Oblivion itself, when the time comes, you must bring him safely through. That’s an order.”

“That’s a heavy responsibility to put on your poor son’s shoulders,” Emilin remarked.

“They’re strong shoulders,” his mother replied.

So this was how it would be. There was no gainsaying his mother. He didn’t suppose she wanted the Emperor to abandon the city to its fate. But if the choice was between saving the city or the Emperor, or his mother or the Emperor, he must choose the latter.

But then, if the Emperor was in dire danger, she’d be at his side, surely? Titus had once appointed her as his Imperial Battlemage, a position the Elder Council had taken from her at the Thalmor’s prompting. He called her his Mistress of Illusion and lately said he looked forward to taking the field with her once again. Most likely, there would be no choice to make. He would follow his mother and Emperor wherever they led.

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26 Rain’s Hand, 4E 174, Great Chapel of Mara, Bravil

When Ondolemar had left Leyawiin, he had hoped that at least he would now get out of the rain. Instead, it had rained his whole journey up the Niben, and once he set foot in Bravil, the heavens opened in the worst thunderstorm he’d seen this year. Even with his water-charmed Justiciar’s robes, he was drenched when he entered the city, taking shelter in the guardhouse there to wait out the storm.

In the guardhouse, half an hour later, he heard the news that his betrothed was dead, and the storm outside now seemed completely appropriate.

Taarinque of Shimmerene, daughter of High Kinlord Morandur and Kinlady Ilantuwe, was laid in the undercroft of the Great Chapel of Mara. There was an argument underway whether to go ahead with cremation or wait for the Shimmerene Kinship’s input. The funerary rites out here in the field were usually severely abbreviated, with the promise that the full rites would be performed later in Alinor. This was how they had dealt with Taarinque’s comrades, all slain together two days earlier in
an ambush by resistance fighters a few miles up the Larsius River. But Taarinque’s father was a
High Kinlord and the soldiers here did not know if there was anything special the Shimmerene
Kinship would demand of them.

So they washed the blood from her long blonde hair, dressed her in a white robe, covered her face
with a veil, and placed her in the dark undercroft surrounded by candles and kept cool with a
continually applied spell.

Ondolemar stood by her bier a long time. He pulled the veil aside almost immediately. He could
identify the face as hers, but it was horribly cut up by the barbarians who’d not stopped at killing
their victims. He replaced the veil quickly; it seemed an indignity to gaze upon the mutilated face
when in life she’d never gone without make-up and small little illusion spells she thought no one
noticed.

They had been betrothed for five years. If the war had not come, they would be married now: a short
betrothal by their people’s standards, but her family was anxious for her to wed. Her previous much
lengthier betrothal to a much more distinguished suitor had fallen through when that family had
broken ties with hers. Her mother had then looked around for a new suitable son-in-law, been
introduced to his mother, and a few weeks after this maternal conference, he was having tea with the
High Kinlady while Taarinque winked at him from behind her fearsome mother. Of course, nothing
was openly suggested at that introduction and he and Taarinque barely exchanged words, but he was
immediately taken by her easy-going nature even in the rigid formality of that parlour. He told his
mother that yes, he was amenable to a connection being explored.

Everything went smoothly after that. On further acquaintance, Taarinque proved to be as lovely,
intelligent, and pleasant to be around as he’d hoped. Her family was more tolerable than they first
appeared. He somehow lived up to their standards and Taarinque accepted his courtship. It was
arranged they would marry as soon as he made full Justiciar.

She confided in him that she was secretly overjoyed that her first betrothal had broken down.
Although he was from a less prestigious background, he was a much better match in every way. He
replied that despite his family’s lack of distinction under the Dominion he came from a far superior
bloodline to the idiot who’d jilted her. Why that ungrateful mer must have had man’s blood in his
veins to do that! She laughed at him and reminded him that the Thalmor had made all bloodlines in
the Isles pure, else she would have suspected her former betrothed was part-troll at least.

He would never hear her laughter again. Never again would they talk poetry and theology and
gossip into the early hours of the morning and watch the dawn together.

He shed tears for her, but he did not make a scene or let his emotions overcome him in the
conversations that followed.

The mer here were very glad that someone had shown up with a connection to Taarinque. They’d
sent messages to her older brother Lord Ohtimir, who was by Lord Naarifin’s side readying the final
assault on the Imperial City. No answer had yet come. He would not be able to rush to his sister’s
funeral even if he did receive the message.

“Isn’t her sister Elenwen somewhere near here?” Ondolemar inquired.

“No one told me she had a sister on this front.”

“Elenwen’s an interrogator. It’s closely-guarded work. I don’t know exactly where she is . . . but I
think I can get a message to her. If she’s nearby, she should come before we burn the body.”
“You think we should do the cremation here then?”

“I can tell you that the Shimmerene Kinship would not wish you to give their daughter any special treatment when so many other lives have been lost. They’re nobles, yes, but they’re Thalmor loyalists first. But let us see if Elenwen can come.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Justiciar,” the priestess of Xarxes offered.

He nodded. “Thank you. She walks now in Auri-El’s light.”

He really had to believe that tonight as he went out alone into the rain.

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7 Second Seed, 4E 202, The Reach

Ondolemar did not enjoy riding in the Reach on even the best of days. Riding out in pursuit of a band of Forsworn pleased him even less. But Thongvor Silver-Blood had left him no choice. Fortunately, the man was faltering in his previous conviction that the Thalmor orchestrated Madanach’s escape. Unfortunately, he had demanded Ondolemar show his sincerity by joining him in the hunt for Madanach.

Ondolemar would not willingly have gone anywhere – even the footbridge below the Keep – with Thongvor, but Faleen and the Jarl’s guards had agreed to join them. They’d go down along the roads, cautiously, with scouts flanking them on both sides, to check the state of the villages and mines Madanach had passed on his way. Ondolemar was also painfully aware that the new Third Emissary would soon come down this road to Markarth. He had no respect for the Third Emissary’s faction, but if something happened to Calerion and his mer, Ondolemar would like it publicly witnessed that he had taken some care for their safety.

They were a large party once they got on the road. Thongvor had brought his men; Ondolemar had rounded up his Justiciars and guards, not enough to match Thongvor’s numbers, but far more skilled in the event of an emergency. It was slow going too; they stopped to talk to peasants and miners or waited for their scouts to give them the go-ahead to advance. It appeared that Madanach and his band had left the settlements along the road untouched in their wake. At last, they met a Nord farmer and his family who told them that Madanach’s band was reported to have gathered at Karthspire - Ondolemar saw Thongvor start at that name - and that the Reachfolk were flocking to him. This Nord family had decided to leave their farm in the care of their Reachfolk neighbours and get behind the walls of Markarth.

“It was bad enough before, but if they’re out for blood . . .” the man shrugged.

“If you need a job to tide you through, mention my name to Reburrus Quintilius at the Treasury House,” Thongvor told the man. “There’s always work to be done around our silver mine.”

True enough. He’d need to replace all the escaped prisoners, and they couldn’t round up enough alleged Forsworn yet to get the place running again.

The Nord farmer and his family thanked Thongvor profusely.

“Is there something significant about Karthspire?” Faleen asked once the family had moved on.

“Maybe . . . There are stories that the Akaviri built a fort high in the hills above Karthspire.” Thongvor replied in a near-whisper.
“Akaviri?” Ondolemar echoed. “When you say Akaviri, do you mean Dragonguard?”

Thongvor’s face fell. He must realize now that Ondolemar had told the truth about the Blades’ involvement in his brother’s death and Madanach’s escape. But it would take him some time to admit it.

“How can we not know if there’s a fort up there?” Faleen demanded.

“There’s a stone door for sure,” Thongvor replied. “I went up there once, many years ago. But no one has ever been able to open it.”

“Just to be clear, are these stories about the Dragonguard?” Ondolemar pressed relentlessly.

“Yes,” Thongvor admitted.

“If no one can get in, then it’s of no use to Madanach either,” Faleen said practically.

It was time for Ondolemar to lay all his cards on the table.

“Perhaps it is not sealed anymore,” he told Faleen. “There is a small group of renegade Blades in Skyrim, have you heard of them?”

Faleen bit her lip. He’d take her silence as an affirmative. Delphine and Esbern had made their appearance at High Hrothgar – every Jarl must have heard of them by now.

“That old door may lead to a temple of the Akaviri Dragonguard, the forerunners of the Blades,” he continued. “It is possible the remnants of the Blades are hiding there.”

“What does that have to do with Madanach?” Faleen demanded.

“Blades agents broke Madanach out of Cidhna Mine and killed Thonar Silver-Blood.”

“Thongvor, is this true?” Faleen turned on him.

“I don’t know,” he said glumly. “Blades, Forsworn, Thalmor, all of them could be working together . . . “

“Those Blades agents abused your family’s trust,” Ondolemar reminded him. “You sheltered them from my Justiciars, then they thrust a blade between your brother’s ribs.”

Thongvor said nothing.

“Thongvor?” Faleen prompted him. “Is he telling the truth?”

Thongvor took a deep breath. “Faleen, three strangers came to Markarth the other day: a Khajiit, a Bosmer, and a Nord woman. They were accompanying an old friend of my family, Dame Embla Attius. I gave them shelter as she vouched for them. Then they did indeed aid Madanach, and the cat personally killed Thonar. But I don’t know whom they’re working for. I won’t believe they were Blades until I see the evidence.”

“It sounds as though the evidence is in the hills above Karthspire,” replied Ondolemar.

“We’re not going into a Forsworn camp,” Faleen replied. “All of our forces put together are no match for Hagravens and Briarhearts on their own ground.”

“Are you saying we should leave Madanach to reign in these hills?” Thongvor asked.
“We will wait till the Legion can back us up,” said Faleen. “Men, we’re heading back to Markarth!”

“I’ll go on without you,” Thongvor declared. “We weren’t afraid to face the Forsworn back in Seventy-Six. I will not run away now.”

Ondolemar saw years of his meticulous work about to thrown away by Thongvor and blanched. If Thongvor got himself and his followers killed, there would be no more balance between Stormcloak and Imperial factions in Markarth. He had to preserve this idiot’s life.

“I and my Justiciars will ride on with you,” he told Thongvor.

“Why would you do that?”

“I am expecting a visit from the Dominion’s Third Emissary to Skyrim. It is my duty to ascertain his safety.”


“It must pain you to see your ancestors’ work so thoroughly undone.”

Faleen was unshaken in her decision to turn back. Thongvor, at last, decided he would go on even if the elves tagged along. Thus they continued down the road, keeping their eyes on each other as much as on the landscape around them.

Two hours further riding brought them close to Karthspire. Madanach and his followers must have left the road here and they soon found their trail.

Ondolemar had no intention of following the trail up on to Karthspire. He hoped the ride out here had given Thongvor time to reflect on the foolishness of going any further. Thongvor had dismounted and stood staring up into the hills.

“Wait, is that yours?” Thongvor was pointing along the path to something gold and black. Ondolemar took a few steps forward; he could make out the golden wing of an eagle. A banner of the Dominion lay in the dust.

“Your Third Emissary?” Thongvor asked.

Ondolemar swallowed hard. Who else could have come out all this way with a Dominion banner?

“We will investigate this,” he said stiffly.

Wary of Forsworn ambush, they crept up the path and he retrieved the banner. It was ripped and even more ominously, there were bloodstains upon it.

One of his Justiciars then reported there was a confusion of marks upon the road. The hoofprints of several horses crossed over each other again and again, as though their riders had been there a while. There was a variety of footprints alongside the hoofprints: the marks of shoes, bare feet, and the unmistakable tread of Thalmor boots. More blood was discovered in the grass by the road. It seemed the horses had at last turned back down the road. But among the footprints on the path were the familiar boot prints. Every one of these tracks led away up the path, there was no mark of their owners returning.

“Could they have met the Forsworn, fought them, and then rode back up the road?” Thongvor asked.
Ondolemar shook his head. “At least some of went down this path.”

He had a terrible suspicion that the horses had been taken from the scene by the Forsworn.

Ondolemar turned to his Justiciars. “If our colleagues were lured off the road, we gain nothing from following in their footsteps. Get ready to ride back to Markarth. I will scout this path by myself.”

“Commander, you cannot risk your safety,” one of his Justiciars objected.

“I’ll be safer alone. I can cast a few concealment spells well enough.”

“I will come with you, Elf,” said Thongvor suddenly. “Men,” he called to the others. “Wait here and we’ll return to Markarth together.”

“You’ll draw attention to me,” Ondolemar complained.

“Cast some of those spells on me, if you like.” This was a new side to Thongvor. Previously, Ondolemar would have said the man would die before letting a mer use magic on him.

It must be the Legion coming out in him. Thongvor was not a good politician or businessman; he was at heart a tough old soldier whose value came out in war. He let Ondolemar cast Muffle and Chameleon on him, then they crept together up the trail. Thongvor knew his business; even without the spells, his stealth was undeniable.

Down in a dell, only five minutes up the trail but out of sight of the road, they found the bodies. Two black-robed Justiciars and three guards in golden armour. He examined each body quickly. He recognized only one of the dead, a guard from the Embassy. None of them was Third Emissary Calerion.

They’d been ambushed by a large force here. Some of the wounds were made by ordinary weapons, others most certainly by spells. But why had they come up this path in the first place?

Then Thongvor called out that he saw long blonde hair further down the dell among the weeds. They crept down to find the body of a heavily tattooed Forsworn warrior flat among the weeds with a Justiciar’s blade in his back. The blonde hair, however, belonged to someone lying beneath him.

Carefully, he pulled back the man’s left arm, revealing golden skin beneath. Placing his hand to the skin, he found it was warm. Then he heard a woman’s groan.

Thongvor had heard it too and was now on his knees beside him. Together, they heaved up the Forsworn body, exposing a young Altmer woman in stained Nord clothing. Her eyes fluttered open, then closed again.

“Who are you?” Ondolemar asked.

“She’s in shock, ask her later. We need to get her out of here.” Thongvor spoke sense. “I’ll carry her on my back.”

“You will?”

“I doubt you’re strong enough, twig-elf.”

Ondolemar let that one go. If Thongvor wanted to expend his energy carrying one of his hated mer to safety, let him.

They returned to the road quickly. The woman’s eyes had opened again, and one of Thongvor’s men
gave her a drink from his waterskin.

“Your name?” Ondolemar asked her again.

“Tanulvie of Sunhold. Justiciar, Third-Class Mage, sir,” the words spilled from her lips.

“We’ve been looking for you, Justiciar,” he told her.

She closed her eyes again. “I’m sorry.”

“She can ride with me,” he told Thongvor, in case he had any idea of continuing his care of their Justiciar. “Let’s go before we bring those murderers down on us.”

Thongvor didn’t protest, helping to lift the nearly unconscious Tanulvie to sit before Ondolemar.

He wrapped an arm around her; otherwise, she’d fall into the road. It’d be a long ride back to Markarth. He’d have plenty of time to reflect on the massacre of his fellows and the Third Emissary’s disappearance, but at least he was not returning empty-handed.

Chapter End Notes

And so we begin the tale of what happened at the fall of the Imperial City with Ulfric, Galmar, Emilin, Curinwe, Junius, Elenwen, and Ondolemar. There have been lots of little pieces of information before now, but as Emilin is coming to Windhelm to talk with Ulfric about the past, it's time for the whole story.

The next chapter will mostly be a flashback as well, though we'll definitely check in on Junius in the present, and find out what happened to Tanulvie that she ended up in a ditch to be rescued by Ondolemar and - least likely of rescuers - Thongvor Silver-Blood.

All reviews and comments are appreciated so, so much. And questions are answered, so please leave those if you have any.
8 Second Seed, Markarth

Chapter Notes

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 breath. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find our 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. - Ulfric Stormcloak

See the end of the chapter for more notes

8 Second Seed, 4E 202, Understone Keep, Markarth

If Tanulvie had come straight to Markarth from the Embassy, she’d have found the Justiciars’ Headquarters in Understone Keep bare and uncomfortable. After her imprisonment in the Blades’ storage room, it seemed utterly luxurious. The stone bed was odd, but there was a thick mattress, clean sheets, and soft, warm blankets. She’d fallen asleep nearly the moment she hit the mattress, so bone-tired she could not even worry over her precarious situation.

Yes, she’d been in shock, as that burly Nord put it when they’d pulled her out from under that body. She’d slowly come around as they rode back to Markarth, but she’d played at barely conscious the whole day. She should be overjoyed to be rescued by her own people; instead, she was debating what she could or should tell the Chief Justiciar of Skyrim. If she confessed the truth in full, the consequences would be dire. If she kept her mouth shut, the Blades still had everything she’d written or drawn for them. They might think she was dead now, but once they learned she was alive, they could easily expose her to her superiors. They might try to blackmail her again.

She’d kept up her dazed demeanour when they’d arrived in the city late at night. Commander Ondolemar had asked her a few questions, but as he could not extract any sensible answers, he had, at last, sent her to bed.

She would have willingly stayed in that bed for the rest of her life, but her new roommate, a red-haired young Altmer woman, was gently shaking her shoulder.

“The bath’s waiting for you,” the woman told her.

Tanulvie reluctantly sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She knew she was filthy from head to toe: covered in mud, blood, and dust. They’d offered a bath last night, but she hadn’t reacted to the offer. She longed for the bath but knew that once she was washed, dressed, and fed, it’d be time for her de-briefing.

When she pulled herself out of bed, she was surprised to find how weak she was upon her feet. She’d have lost her footing, but the other woman held her up. “I’ll help you with everything,” she promised.

The bathing facilities were surprisingly nice. An advantage of ancient Dwemer plumbing, her helper explained. She told Tanulvie a lot about Markarth while she helped her scrape off the grime from her skin and wash her horribly matted hair. She was a soldier assigned to guard the Chief Justiciar. She’d
been here two years already and most of the time it was very dull here. Searching for Tanulvie was the first exciting thing that had occurred on her watch.

After the bath, she helped Tanulvie dress in a slightly too-large set of Justiciar’s robes and guided her back to the mess room where a bowl of hot chicken broth was waiting for her breakfast. “It’ll be easier on your stomach,” another Justiciar explained apologetically.

Tanulvie nodded. The heartier fare spread out upon the mess room table looked tempting, but she needed to recover from the past week’s captivity. Sudden rich food would just make her sick.

She lingered over the broth, but at last, there was no more room for delay. The Chief Justiciar had requested her presence in his study. He was expecting a full report. She still had no idea what she would tell him.

Commander Ondolemar’s study was set up to intimidate, she immediately realized. The room was richly furnished with a desk, one very comfortable chair, and a cushioned stone bench. Where would he seat a friend who was just here to chat with him, she wondered? Did he have any friends at all?

She was a little surprised when he motioned her to the one good chair, but then she was, as far as he knew, an invalid rescued from the Reachfolk’s savagery.

She began her report with the message Elenwen had given her. Ondolemar nodded when she mentioned Embla and Pavo Attius’ names. “We have Pavo in custody here,” he remarked.

She was about to begin her tale of her journey into the Reach, but he stopped her. “Why did the First Emissary choose you to carry these orders?” he asked.

“She said it was because I was new to Skyrim. No one would recognize me as a Justiciar.”

“I see.” He didn’t seem convinced, though. “You’re from Sunhold? Who are your people?”

This wasn’t an unusual question, though she was surprised he focused on it at this moment. Being a Justiciar should be the only background that was important, but kinship ties and family reputations still ruled too many affairs. Tanulvie’s roots were as common as they came.

“My family were mostly fisherfolk until my parent’s generation. My father Tarmultur’s a harbour pilot in Sunhold, my mother Erinquen is a warehouse supervisor.” To the families of Tanulvie’s parents, these respectable occupations had been grand achievements almost beyond belief. “My sister Ranais served with distinction in the Second Alinor Marines.”

Ranais’ sudden ascent to several weeks of national fame as “The Heroine of Leyawiin” had come to her family as a complete surprise. Ranais had been the only surviving marine of her squadron’s mission to open the Leyawiin water gates. It was pure luck she’d not died, she told her awed younger sister later, but the story caught the imagination of the Isles. It was because of Ranais’ reputation that Tanulvie had been accepted into Justiciar training.

“That explains it. I was wondering why the First Emissary would trust a newcomer with this mission. But if you’re Sergeant Ranais’ sister, you won’t be mixed up in any faction nonsense.”

“Factions?”

“Do not exist, of course. Still, I’m sure you have an idea of what goes on behind closed doors in Alinor’s most esteemed halls of government. Neither I nor the First Emissary was given any choice of the replacements we would receive. Nonetheless, someone was probably pulling the strings to send us some useful people, thank Auri-El.”
She was inwardly elated at being called useful, but only for a second. The higher she flew, the harder the landing.

She omitted no detail of her journey towards Markarth and the Forsworn ambush, answering every question he put truthfully. Then, when she came to the moment when she woke up in Blades’ custody, she froze.

“And then?” he prompted her.

For a moment, she considered pretending to have lost her memory of all that had occurred after that. But that wouldn’t forestall the Blades.

“I was kept a prisoner in the Blades’ old fortress,” she began. “I think they took the Third Emissary there yesterday.”

“Alive?” asked Ondolemar sharply.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him die.”

“Tell the story in order.”

She began again, describing how the woman named Delphine had first threatened her. Then she stopped.

“Is there a reason you can’t continue?” asked Ondolemar. His eyes had narrowed. He was picking up on her reluctance. It was too late . . .

Ondolemar stood up from the bench. “I’ve debriefed many agents who’ve returned from missions,” he spoke quietly. “Some of whom fell into captivity and were ashamed of how they fared with their captors. Look me in the eyes, Justiciar. There is nothing that I have not heard before.”

She tried to keep her eyes fixed on his, half-convinced that he could read the guilt upon her face.

“Did you break under their interrogation?” he asked directly.

“I didn’t – I didn’t mean to.”

“I see.” He took his seat again. “I had wondered how the Blades just happened to find Embla Attius while I was looking for her.”

Yes, Tanulvie’s attempt at cleverness had doomed the mission.

“I said that I’ve seen the worst,” Commander Ondolemar continued. “This is not the worst, Justiciar. Whatever you told them, let us see if we can set it right.”

It was the last thing she'd expected him to say. She stared up at him in disbelief. “But . . . sir . . .”

“At worst, you’ll be sent back to Alinor for re-education.”

She shuddered at that word.

“No, it isn’t pleasant,” he agreed. “But it would not be fatal, not for a junior Justiciar. That’s the worst-case scenario. The best is that we may make use of your sojourn with the Blades and your career continues under my direction. But I require absolute sincerity. Do you understand?”

She didn’t fully understand, but the words flooded out. She told him the story in detail, answered
every question he had. When it came to the Forsworn’s ambush, her recollections, however, became vague. They’d given her something to drink in their camp. She’d been in a haze while they carried her down to the ambush site. She knew that she’d been used as bait for the other Thalmor agents, used to lure them from the road. She hadn’t been able to cry out, to warn her rescuers of the men and women hidden behind every rock. She’d seen most of the Thalmor party die, but the Forsworn had left the Third Emissary alive. He was still alive when a Justiciar felled the Forsworn giant who had fallen upon her. After that, she saw nothing and soon passed away into unconsciousness.

Had the Forsworn decided she was dead? Or had they heard newcomers on the road and made a hasty exit? She didn’t know. She didn’t know when the ambush had happened or how much time passed between the ambush and Ondolemar’s coming.

He had more questions after that. Did she know the Third Emissary before she came to Skyrim? Had she observed any strange behaviour from him? Since she had already confessed her errors, she honestly described Calerion’s insulting behaviour towards Elenwen.

When she had yielded up every last detail, Ondolemar made his pronouncement.

“Our situation is precarious. Our situation is precarious. You gave the Blades very little useful information, but this can easily be spun into a tale of how you brought about the Third Emissary’s kidnapping.”

“But I didn’t-” Tanulvie began to protest. She was guilty enough without being accused of things she had no hand in.

He held up his hand to shush her. “Correct. You fouled up the mission the First Emissary sent you on. Nothing more. But Mistress Elenwen has enemies who will much prefer their version of your story. Factions,” he said the word as if it tasted bitter in his mouth. “Do they still teach young Justiciars back in the Academy that there shall be no factions within the Thalmor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Unfortunately, you’ve blundered your way into a dispute between political factions. Third Emissary Calerion represents interests in Alinor who would like to strip Mistress Elenwen’s family of the considerable amount of power they have accumulated within the Dominion. The rights and wrongs of that dispute do not concern us. We have found ourselves within Elenwen’s camp, one way or another. Do you understand? No, of course, you don’t . . .”

“I’m trying to!”

The dour expression on his face disappeared. “Yes, of course. Let me put it simply. Everything has gone disastrously wrong in the Reach. We need to put it back to rights, else we will all fall together.”

“What does that mean for me?”

“The Blades think they have a hold on you. That will be useful. For a time, we will act as though you did not make any confession of guilt to me. There’s a Nord who wants to meet you too: Thongvor Silver-Blood. He helped pull you from under that Forsworn corpse and carried you on his back down to the road. Not at all characteristic of him – the man’s a true-blue Stormcloak - but it seems like we must cultivate him now. I’ve accepted an invitation to have drinks with him tonight at his family’s inn. You’ll need to play up your gratitude to him there. Can you tolerate mead?”

“I’ve never had it,” Tanulvie admitted.

“That might be a good starting point. Act like you’re excited to try the swill for the first time.
Charming and slightly shy is, I think, what will work with the block-head.”

She remembered her last attempt to charm a man: Aerin had not been as malleable as he seemed. At least she would have Commander Ondolemar’s backup with this one.

“Thank you for giving me a chance, sir,” she said sincerely.

“As much as I can give you. You’ll need to show your usefulness. But yes, I do believe in second chances. I have . . . I have seen Justiciars who recovered from very grave errors. During the Great War, I knew a young Justiciar who let his grief for a dead lover lead him astray. He was punished for his lapses, and he’s still paying for it, but he’s risen in the ranks since then.”

Was he saying he was that Justiciar? And that he was showing mercy because he had been shown mercy? She couldn’t ask, but she was determined now to do her best for him, no matter the consequences.

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28 Rain’s Hand, 4E 174, Bravil

“Over there in the corner. Is it him you’re looking for, Miss?”

Ondolemar cracked open one eye, saw the empty bottle lying beside him, and closed it again. This wasn’t good. He needed to get up and . . .

“Get up!” That was Elenwen’s voice. The order was followed by a boot in his ribs. “How dare you? On your feet now.” Another kick.

Slowly he pulled himself upright. Elenwen grabbed him by the collar. “You couldn’t even stay sober for my sister’s funeral! You asshole! Get on your feet!”

“You got my message then,” he said blearily. He was trying to stand, but his legs weren’t cooperating. How much had he drunk to get to this point?

“Get up now! I only have a day’s leave. We were supposed to be at the chapel half an hour ago.”

The enormity of his transgression settled upon him. “The rites are . . .” he trailed off in a questioning voice.

“Now. You useless-.”

“Miss.” That was the man who ran this tavern. A decent sort for a human, he’d given Ondolemar plenty of space and kept pouring the drinks without pressing for pay. “Pardon me, but do you need something to sober him up?”

“What do you have?” Elenwen asked.

“We keep remedies behind the bar.”

There was a short pause. “Fetch one,” Elenwen ordered.

“Elenwen, no!” Ondolemar protested. They’d been warned about this, not to accept gifts from locals who claimed they just wanted to be helpful. “It might be poison.”

“You’ve been drinking this man’s liquor since yesterday, and you’re worrying about that now?”
The tavern keeper was back with a small bottle. A few seconds later, Elenwen was pouring it down his throat. “I hope it does poison you,” she hissed.

The remedy did not cure his nausea or head-ache, but his mind felt clearer and some strength began to return to his limbs. He stood up at last.

“Get him a wet towel,” Elenwen instructed the tavern keeper. Then she closed her eyes. “Stendarr, take pity on us.” It was the most heartfelt prayer he had ever heard her utter.

She helped him wash the dirt and slobber off his face and ran her fingers through his hair to make it somewhat presentable. The tavern-keeper gave him a hackle-lo leaf to chew to cover up the reek of alcohol on his breath. There was nothing to be done for his mud-spattered Justiciar’s robes.

“I’m sorry, Elenwen. I’m so sorry,” he repeated to her, over and over again.

“I know,” she said at last. “Come on, let’s go.”

He stumbled after her through the muddy town. The rain had let up, but the sun was still hidden behind the clouds.

There were a few familiar faces in the group of mer gathered outside the Chapel of Mara. Taarinque’s Battlereeve he knew slightly, and some of the Justiciars stationed here were old colleagues of his. Elenwen was the only member of Taarinque’s large and scattered clan to attend and took over the role of Chief Mourner. Ondolemar stood by her side, aware he should be participating more fully as the deceased woman’s lawfully betrothed, but still too hung-over to remember exactly what rites or prayers he should perform. Elenwen had decided not even to bother prompting him through the ritual.

They did light the pyre together. Touching the symbolic torch to Taarinque’s bier was the hardest thing Ondolemar had ever done in his life. Elenwen’s hands too were shaking. But they lit the fire, and then stood back to let the mage on duty speed it along.

Most of the attendees departed, once this was done. Unexpectedly, Elenwen suggested they should go sit in the Chapel for a while, until it was time to gather up the ashes.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, once they had sat down upon a bench inside.

“Stop saying that,” Elenwen replied. Her face was in her hands. “Just be quiet.”

They sat undisturbed in the gloom of the Chapel.

Elenwen at last straightened up. “Ondolemar. You have to pull yourself together.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” she demanded. “Today, everyone made allowances for you. But once I’m gone, if you let grief consume you, if you neglect your duty, no one will spare you pity.”

“Elenwen, today was –“

“I know it isn’t fair,” she continued. “I wish we could grieve her properly, at home, with our family. But everyone out here loses someone they love. We still need to uphold our duty.”

“Do you really think I won’t? After all we’ve sacrificed?”

“I didn’t think I’d find you on a tavern floor. I’m afraid for you, my near-brother.”
Taarinque’s voice echoed in his mind.

“*The trouble with Elenwen is that everyone in this family needs her too much. She’s spent her whole life looking after us.*”

“*Bossing you around,*” Ondolemar had teased.

“*Absolutely bossing us around. She even tells my brothers what to do. And sometimes they listen.***”(Elenwen’s two older brothers had children older than her, so this was a feat.) “*Because she’s usually right. But she has no one to look out for her that way.*”

“She’ll have us, then,” Ondolemar had promised.

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**13 Second Seed, 4E 174, The White-Gold Tower, Imperial City**

This was the second day of the capital’s siege. Even under assault, the city itself was disciplined and orderly: a complete contrast to the scene within the chamber of the Elder Council. There was shouting around the Council table; in fact, the discussion had nearly come to blows, with the Imperial Guard intervening to restrain two impassioned Councillors.

Emilin was ignoring it for the moment. She’d found a soft seat in the gallery and closed her eyes. When it was important, Curinwe would nudge her awake and update her on the proceedings.

Late last night, the Emperor had requested Curinwe’s presence. She and Emilin had been here for hours and still not met with Titus. Instead, they’d been shown up to the gallery overlooking the Council chamber. Some other guests were already there. Emilin recognized the Primate of the Temple of the One and a leading mage from the Synod among them.

Once the debate began, the Emperor’s reason for summoning them all here became clear. Titus Mede II was proposing to abandon the Imperial City. No one inside the chamber would leave until they came to a decision.

Curinwe said nothing that night, quietly watching the debate as it unfolded. She’d come to the same conclusion as the Emperor, Emilin knew. In the last two weeks, it’d become very clear that they could not hold the city for even a fraction of their original estimate.

Shortly after dawn, the Elder Council, at last, bowed to the Emperor’s will. The Legion commanders departed the chamber to carry out their new orders. The Councillors and government officials remained to plan the city’s fate.

“This is intolerable,” the Primate was complaining to Curinwe. “If Dominion troops destroy our Temple, what happens *then*? Martin’s statue may be the only thing standing between us and Oblivion!”

“They won’t destroy it,” Curinwe replied. “They’re not idiots. They won’t mess with something that might be out of their control. Also, it’s a statue of Auri-El. It wouldn’t play well with their own to destroy it.”

The Primate seemed unconvinced. Emilin didn’t blame him. When a city fell, reason vanished for a while. She’d cross her fingers for the statue. And for the civilians left behind.

The Emperor had entered the gallery now to greet them. Curinwe stayed seated beside Emilin and
they watched him deal in turn with the other guests. He avoided debate, deftly directing them towards the preparations they would now have to undertake. The prelate left last, still grumbling about Martin Septim and the Covenant with Akatosh.

When the guests had departed, Titus invited them up to his private quarters.

“You took all that in, Varo?” he asked, once his guards had departed.

“I did.”

“Will you try to change my mind too?”

Curinwe shook her head. “I’m your battlemage, Sire. I take your plans and bring them to fruition.”

“Then will you fight alongside me again?” asked Titus.

She paused. “I don’t think so.” She raised her hand to stave off his objections. “I’ll be of more use elsewhere. You have many capable men and women who’ll fight their way out of the City with you. I, on the other hand, am your Mistress of Illusion. I am going to weave you one last illusion that will protect you in your flight.”

“One last illusion?”

“You’re asking the entire Eighth Legion to die in your stead, Sire. I can hardly do less than them.”

“I need you, Varo!”

“You need me to get you out of this City alive. I’m going to make sure you do. And then you’re going to thrash the Dominion for us all.”

“Emilin!” Titus barked at her. “Are you going to let her do this?”

“Well, we could try tying her up. Got any rope, Sire?”

Curinwe ignored this poor joke. She was busy pulling a map from her satchel. “I’ve been planning for this eventuality,” she told Titus. “Emilin and Orintur have been through this plan with me already, and we’re ready to carry it out.” She placed the map down on a table.

Titus bent down to examine the map. “These are the north-western Prison tunnels?” he asked.

“It’s the fullest map we could find of them. Emilin’s been up and down every one these past two weeks.”

“The Dominion surely knows all of these,” Titus commented.

“Absolutely. Still, if I were taking a small force out of the City, I’d take those tunnels. Better than riding out in plain sight.”

“I need to take my army with me,” he reminded her.

“Indeed. That I’m leaving to the Legion. You’ll fight your way north from the Causeway, correct?”

“With support from the boats we still have.” There were not many. The Dominion navy controlled most of Lake Rumare.

“It’s a good plan. But I want to draw away some of your opponents. They will have some of their
best mages focused on you and you alone.”

“And I have my best mages to protect me.”

“Yes, you do. This is how I mean to protect you. This evening I’ll lead a hand-picked armed force through the north-eastern tunnels. Our destination: the ruins of Vilverin. I won’t mess around with boats; I’ll bring mages to freeze us a passage over Lake Rumare.”

“Why Vilverin?”

“The north-eastern shores only look clear. Dominion forces are waiting to swoop down on anyone who crosses the lake. The moment Dominion scouts report back to Lord Naarifin that a small Legion party is crossing, lead by the Emperor himself, they’ll throw their most powerful mages at us.”

“But I’m not coming with you.”

“I can show them an Emperor, trust me.”

“What then?”

“We’ll retreat into the ruins of Vilverin, luring them in after us. They’re a dead-end, but Emilin’s been busy spreading the rumour we know a secret way out, and that we’re debating sneaking you out that way. A dropped map and some scried conversations should have done the trick. Once we’ve taken the Emperor himself down there, they won’t doubt the exit exists. They’ll be desperate to catch us. There are vast chambers and miles of passages down there, traps and pitfalls and we know every inch of it. It will be a fight to remember, though I’m afraid you’ll have to imagine it, Sire. There’ll be no Imperial survivors.”

“And I’m supposed to break out of the City while you’re sacrificing your lives there?”

“Yes, my Emperor. You already decided to sacrifice your soldiers’ lives. Follow it through to the bitter end.”

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“Leaving the city? Yes, I do. You’re the one man who can hold the Empire together. If we fall apart now, we’ll be picked off one by one. If you leave now, you can save the bulk of your army and meet up with Jonna. But I don’t have to tell you that. You made the case quite well yourself.”

“Thank you. I suppose this is our farewell then.”

“Yes, we have our mages ready, but we’ll need Legionnaire volunteers. Legate Imbrex said I could raise them from the Eighth if you approved the plan.”

“Volunteers . . . “

“It’s a choice of where to die,” replied Curinwe.

“Yes, go ahead. Emilin, are you going with her?”

“Of course.”

“Gods watch over you both.” He clasped Curinwe’s hands and then Emilin’s. “It was an honour to serve with you both in Hammerfell, and my everlasting shame, Varo, that I could not keep you as Imperial Battlemage.”
She inclined her head to him. “I have one favour to ask you, Sire.”

“Name it.”

“Please take my boy with you.”

“Of course I will!” He sounded surprised that she should even have to ask.

“He won’t want to go. If he asks permission to follow after me, promise me you won’t give it.”

“I will not.”

Curinwe drew a great sigh of relief. “That takes a heavy load off my mind. Emilin, let’s go and find our volunteers.”

Legate Imbrex’s face was pale, but he did not otherwise show any fear as he laid out the plans for the Eighth Legion to as many of its Legionnaires as he could bring together in this Hall. They would remain and defend the city’s southern walls, where the main attack was expected. The rest of the army was on the move - Ulfric had already observed that- but the Legate would not elaborate on the Emperor’s plan. However, the sickening realization that the Eighth was being left on its own was dawning on every man or woman in this Hall.

There was a murmur at the back of the hall. Ulfric turned back to see a small group of newcomers: elves, mostly, but in their midst, a short Breton woman in battlemage’s armour: the renowned Curinwe Varo herself. Legate Imbrex stopped speaking, and there was a short whispered conference between the Legate and Varo. Then the Legate accompanied her to the front of the Hall.

“I’ve already laid out the plans for our Legion’s defence of the southern wall, but now, Varo here has a request to make. She has the Emperor’s blessing in this, and I hope you all won’t let me down,” Imbrex announced.

The hall was hushed as Curinwe Varo began to speak. “The Emperor has asked me to relay his deepest gratitude to you all. You’re already giving everything you have, but I’ve come here today to ask for volunteers in a mission that will almost certainly end in our deaths. We –“ she motioned to her elf companions – “have been given a mission to protect the Emperor in this battle. Not by the force of our arms, but by stealth and magic. But I need ordinary Legionnaires with me too. Legate Imbrex has agreed that I can take a squad of volunteers with me. I’ll take anyone who comes forward. But if you’re used to moving over snow and ice, I need you all the more.”

Ulfric did not have to think long on his decision. This was a noble cause to give his life for. He was nearly the first to step forward. (His usual shadow, Galmar Stone-Fist, was sick abed, and not there to hold him back.)

Varo welcomed him to the new squad, but Legate Imbrex was ill-pleased.

“Do you want your death to be on my head, Stormcloak?” he hissed at Ulfric.

“We’re all ready to lay down our lives for the Emperor,” Ulfric replied calmly.

“Not you. I’ve already arranged to transfer you to the Imperial Guard. You will be leaving the city with His Majesty.”
“You can’t do that!”

“I don’t enjoy doing it. You’re a brave young man, and I can see how it stings at your sense of honour. But the Legion needs to keep the son of the Jarl of Windhelm alive.”

So that’s how it was. Ulfric had put up with the Legion’s cossetting because of his importance as a symbol to his fellow Nords. But he had reached his limit.

“I refuse,” he said simply. “If the Imperial Guard wants me, they can drag me away.”

“You can’t refuse,” Imbrex snapped. “Varo, are you listening to this?”

Curinwe Varo turned from the conversation she was having with another Legionnaire. “You’re trying to send this young man out of the City?” she asked.

“He’s the son of the Jarl of Windhelm. The Legion wants him alive,” Imbrex told her.

“I see.” She sized Ulfric up. “I’ve heard a little of you. The warrior with the Voice, yes?”

Ulfric nodded. He didn’t like to use the Thu’um in battle – it still seemed sacrilegious to him – but necessity had compelled him on the battlefield.

“I want him,” Varo told Imbrex.

“That’s not your choice,” the Legate protested. “You don’t even have a command in the Legion anymore.”

“I’m taking him. You know very well that the Emperor will give me everyone I ask for. So let’s not go through with this pointless argument. What’s your name, soldier?”

“Ulfric Stormcloak, Ma’am!” He saluted.

“Ulfric Stormcloak, Welcome to the Old Guard. Tonight, we will be making history.”

Chapter End Notes

It's a long-time overdue, but I need to thank Syllis for all the feedback and help she's given me figuring out odd corners of the lore together, and working out plots. Go check her stories. Her work is amazing and needs way more attention than it gets.

I said I'd check in on Junius Varo in this chapter, but it got too long for that scene. Next chapter, Junius returns to the story. And I think I'll be wrapping up this Great War flashback arc. There may be more flashbacks later, but these are the ones that will set up the next part of the story.

If you've been reading this for a while, you may not recall some of the details from earlier chapters, so a short refresher on where certain characters were during the Great War, and what it's been mentioned they did.

Rikke was part of the Eighth, and a friend of Ulfric's, but was wounded a couple of months before the Siege and sent north with other wounded. Galmar, as mentioned in this chapter, was sick in bed when the Siege began. More on his war experience later.
Ondolemar had a misadventure during the War, which this chapter is setting him up for. As Ulfric recalled it to Cecilia in an earlier chapter:

_The story Ulfric had told Cecilia the night before was a strange one, about a Justiciar who during the Occupation burnt down a temple to Talos after politely warning the priests to leave the premises. When the Dominion asked where the priests had gone, the Justiciar regretfully admitted he’d lost track of them. On further reflection, he explained he didn’t think it’d been that important, since they were now out of a job, and presumably would find new worthwhile careers as peasants or whatever it was people did around here._

_And so, the Justiciar ended up in the same dungeon as the Dominion’s victims, where he complained a great deal about his treatment, threatened his jailers with powerful relatives back in the Isles, and demanded that they remove the dirty, emaciated Nord in his cell. When his jailers ignored him, he at last deigned to talk to his cellmate. That was how Ulfric had met Ondolemar._

_It turned out to be a very successful trap on the Thalmor’s part, one that led by dim and torturous ways to the Markarth Incident._

More on how Ondolemar messed up, and how he ended up part of Elenwen's plan to use Ulfric Stormcloak to come.

I've updated the backstory of the Thalmor's rise to power in this universe, with a new chapter of _Reports of Valiitha Direnni: Blades Agent to the Thalmor_. Curinwe's father, Andanyon is an important character in these reports. The latest details the Thalmor's coup and the fate of Queen Morgiah of Firsthold. Related to that, I also wrote a text called _The Real Morgiah_ which details what the Thalmor had against the Dunmer queen. Lots of Daggerfall and Morrowind lore ahoy!

All my 'Apocrypha' texts can be found together [here](https://example.com). Twelve works ranging from Breton fairy tales, political attack pamphlets, a Thalmor edict on Reproduction, the notes of a Thalmor civil servant in Valenwood, and a few other odds and ends

All reviews and comments are appreciated so, so much. (More than appreciated. Actually, I was really quite depressed when I went a full day with no reviews after posting the last chapter. I adore those of you came through with comments in the end.) And questions are answered, so please leave those if you have any.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!