Breath and Focus

by Heiwako

Summary

Sometimes your actions come back to haunt you. For Hecate it's how she left her housecarl Lydia without a word to go join the Dark Brotherhood. Now she has to contend with her former friend's desire to get revenge.
Chapter 1

Breath and Focus - Part 1
Laughter on the Wind

Morndas 15 Midyear 205 4E 10:00 PM

When death came, it came as laughter on the wind.

It had been three month since Ulfric Stormcloak had been murdered in the Palace of the Kings in Windhelm. The loss of their leader and his right hand man had been a devastating blow to the Stormcloak Army. They would have lost to the Imperial Legion if not for the guidance of Lydia Dragonborn. She now called herself Lydia Stormblade in his memory after the honorary title Ulfric had bestowed her on their last great victory before his death.

It had been demoralizing to have the capital of the Imperial sympathizers, Solitude, so close to being in their grasp before it was taken away. In many ways, Ulfric had been the heart and soul of the rebellion. It was his name that was born by every soldier and it was his ideals and words they carried in their hearts to battle.

At sixteen, Saeda was technically too young to join. It didn't matter though. This wasn't Legion where you had to be eighteen to sign up for a minimum of two years. This was the Stormcloaks, and any true son or daughter who wanted to fight and possibly die for their land was welcome.

Saeda had grown up in Windhelm under the influence of Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak his whole life. He remembered the man when he happened to walk through the city on his way to some meeting with other jarls or consult with his generals. Ulfric was the model example of what it meant to be a son of Skyrim. He was handsome, dedicated to his people, strong, and a powerful warrior. The man had been personally chosen by the Greybeards, the most elusive faction in all of Skyrim no, in all of Tamriel to be one of them and had given that up to fight during the Great War against the Aldmeri Dominion.

The young Stormcloak had been outraged when the Emperor had bent knee to the elves and given in to every single one of their demands, including the outlawing of Talos worship. The very man who had created the empire and become a god had been forsaken by his own successor. If the elves didn't wish to worship Talos, that was their right, but gods damn them all if they thought they could bring that trash into Skyrim. The Nords had always been a proud race who lived by their own sacred traditions; there was no reason to change now.

Saeda had to admit there was some truth in that the Stormcloak army was desperately lacking in numbers. They had always been outnumbered compared to the vast Imperial Legion that not only drew on traitorous Nords for troops, but all of Cyrodiil and High Rock as well. In the end, it was irrelevant. The Stormcloaks had always been terribly outnumbered, but they had the home field advantage.

And they had the Dragonborn.

When Lydia Dragonborn joined the army, things had changed and for the better. Nords who had either stayed neutral or had sided with the Imperial Army now doubted their choice. Some had even defected to the Stormcloak cause. How could they stand against the hero of legend, the one who commanded the mighty thu'um and had destroyed the World-Eater when he had returned to obliterate the world?
In the next three years, the Stormcloaks had found victory across the land, taking hold after hold. Everyone had thought that Ulfric would finally be named High King and Skyrim could find peace again after driving out the elves. Then the worst thing possible had happened: Ulfric had died, murdered in his own home.

It would have been bad enough if it had been some elite Imperial force, but there were bone-chilling rumors that it had been the Dark Brotherhood who had killed Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak. The assassins only came if someone prayed to their dark god and performed an evil ritual known as the Black Sacrament. Saeda didn't understand how anyone could call themselves loyal to the Empire and call upon assassins after the Brotherhood had murdered Titus Mede II in the very waters outside of Solitude. It made no sense to him.

What was worse was that there was a newer rumor. Some were saying that the Empire had employed the honorless bastards again. Saeda had heard there was a letter with a smiling face and frowning face with the caption "We're coming for you" written on it found in the captain's tent.

A pair of mountain flowers, one red and one black, had been found outside of the captain's tent tonight. The men were whispering that the sightings of jesters near Brotherhood killings were real and that they were on their way to claim the soul of Captain Sifkni so Fort Hraggstad could be returned to Imperial control.

"Black isn't even a natural color for a mountain flower," one soldier scoffed. "It's as meaningless as the Brotherhood itself."

Saeda was on patrol duty with some other men. He had paused at a campfire to get something to drink and hear what the men were saying. Everyone was talking about the rumor, but no one knew who had started it. "Shut your mouth, you fool," another snapped. "If they can kill the Emperor and Ulfric, what hope does Sifkni have?"

"The Emperor was a milk-drinking weakling," the first one retorted. "Jarl Ulfric was ambushed without his honor guard. Sifkni has a whole contingent of men here to protect him."

It was true that the fort was full, but that only accounted for about forty men. The rest of the forces were out on the field fighting to keep the land they had painstakingly worked so hard to claim. So far the forces in Falkreath had managed to hold the all-important Pale Pass so the Legion couldn't flood back into Skyrim, but nothing stopped them from traveling via ship to Solitude. This meant their troops were sent to Fort Hraggstad to oust the Stormcloaks from Haafingar Hold. The Imperials had to be nervous with their enemies on their backyard.

Luckily for the Stormcloaks, the Imperial reinforcements were often below optimal fighting condition. Water travel added months of travel time; fewer men could go out per ship, and there were always the problems of dysentery and seasickness. It was a rallying point for the rebels, but unfortunately the Empire was not ground to a halt on reinforcing their army. Thus, the war continued if at a much slower pace.

"You don't understand," a third, older soldier spoke up. "Nothing stops the Brotherhood. They are death incarnate. If they decide it is time to come for you, then you better make your goodbyes to your loved ones and square your debts with any gods or daedra. Not that it would matter who you're in the red with. Sithis is going to claim you all the same." His eyes were wide enough that Saeda could see the whites. "And then he'll devour your soul when you go screaming to the Void."

"But they'll only kill Captain Sifkni, right?" Saeda asked nervously, joining the conversation. It was one thing to die in battle; but it was another to die in your sleep or home. "The Brotherhood only kills who they are contracted to kill, right?"
"Normally," the older soldier responded. He sat close to the fire despite the fact that it was a warm summer night and rubbed his hands as if cold. "But they will also kill anyone who gets in their way. And they say these two are insane, even by the standards of assassins. They dress as jesters - a clear sign of being allied to the Empire if I ever saw one - and their battle cry is laughter. They leave no one alive."

"How can anyone know anything about them if no one is ever left alive?" the first one asked. "It's just all propaganda by the Brotherhood. Plain and simple."

"People know because the Brotherhood wants them to know," the older soldier said. He frowned at the condescending tone of the arrogant soldier. "You've only lived during a time when the Brotherhood was known as little more than a joke, much like the Thieves' Guild. But I remember when their Black Hand reached over all of Tamriel, just as I can remember a time when you could go into a temple of the Divines and see Talos' shrine standing proud with the rest of the gods."

"I'm not going to be scared of some fucking milk-drinking shadow creeping cowards," the first soldier spat. "You shouldn't either if you're a true son of Skyrim. A true son of Skyrim is fearless."

"No, son," the other soldier shook his head. "A true son of Skyrim is brave and bravery is admitting that you're afraid and still facing impossible odds." He stood, his arms crossed in front of him, still appearing cold. "There is a cold wind coming, my friends. We should be ready for the next storm, whether it is from Kyne or Sithis, or we'll all be lost."

As the older man left to go find his cot, the first soldier shook his head. "Damn, superstitious old man," he muttered. "That sort of thinking is why the Empire was able to rule for so long. We've got to stand strong and proud instead of looking under beds for monsters lurking in the shadows."

"What if he's right?" Saeda whispered. "What will we do?"

"We'll kill any assassins we find and string up their bodies for the crows," the other man snorted.

"What's that?" another soldier spoke up suddenly.

The men all fell silent as they tilted their heads to listen for what the soldier had heard. It was faint, but distinctive. Laughter.

It grew louder and louder. Laughter coming from the darkness. Laughter, jagged and raw, like the sound a man made when he's lost everything and had no idea what to do next. Laughter, almost like a scream.

Then the real screaming started.

"To arms, to arms!" a guard yelled. Stormcloaks jumped up from their seats, grabbing weapons as they flocked to the attack.

Saeda noticed some men were still sleeping in their tents. He had no idea how many were attacking the camp, so he ran to wake them. It wouldn't hurt to have more men fighting. The boy shook a shoulder violently, but there was no response. When Saeda rolled him over, he was horrified to see the man was already dead. The dead warrior's eyes were bulged out and a sickly green froth had gathered around his lips.

They had already been here.

Saeda's legs became weak and he fell to his knees. How could they have snuck into the camp and poisoned people and no one notice? Might as well ask how the roses and notes had made their way
into the captain's tent.

The boy turned and saw a large group of soldiers were gathered around a large fire pit. There were about a half dozen Stormcloaks fighting two people wearing black and red clothes. Their outfits were accented with black and gold gloves and boots and pointed flap caps. They looked too small to be Nords as the Stormcloaks loomed over them and it was impossible to tell their genders.

Most horrifying were their faces - or lack thereof. One wore a red porcelain mask of a smiling face, while the other wore a black matching mask that was turned into a scream. Both were grotesque in their features, eye holes and mouths much too big and twisted to ever be real.

They laughed and laughed and laughed.

Saeda could hear it above the clash of metal against metal and the battle cries of his fellow soldiers. It was dizzying to see how fast the assassins moved. Saeda watched as a Stormcloak swung a hammer and the red masked assassin leaned back under the swing. As the hammer reached the end of its arc, the assassin was already up and stabbing the attacker in the chest. He sprung off the dead man's chest as another Stormcloak tried to thrust his great sword into the fiend.

As the assassin jumped into the air, he did a backflip and landed on another Stormcloak's shoulder. One smooth motion later, the man held his throat as his life blood spilled onto the ground. The man gurgled as he spun around once and fell to the earth.

The black masked assassin was not doing badly either. A dual dagger wielding Stormcloak, almost as fast as the jesters, attacked him. The laughing figure dodged, barely using any motion to avoid each strike. Another soldier charged him and he responded by bending down and using the man's momentum to flip him into the knife fighter. As the two tumbled to the ground, the assassin slashed their throats before darting off to the other jester.

The two of them touched hands, apparently taking a moment to stare at each other. Then they held each other's hand as they moved into a dancing position. Dancing! In battle!

Saeda hadn't seen much dancing in his years, so he had no words for the steps they used, but there was no mistake the madmen were dancing as they killed more and more Stormcloaks. They whirled and twirled, mostly avoiding blows as they took down wave after wave of soldiers.

For each cut they received, they returned a lethal kick, punch, or slash of their deadly ebony knives. Soon a ring of dead soldiers circled them. It morbidly reminded Saeda of the mushroom rings that nature spirits were supposed to use to travel to the different realms of the daedra.

"A promotion for any man who kills either one of those bastards!" Captain Sifkni yelled. He had finally arrived to the battle, wearing his steel plated armor. Saeda doubted the man had been wearing it before the attack started.

The jesters' response was only more laughter.

The boy knew he should get up and join the battle, but he couldn't convince his legs to move. He had never actually been in battle before. He had been on patrol and given gate duty. Occasionally, he was sent out to gather items from the dead, whether to reuse for the living or to find mementos to return to the dead's families. But he had never seen battle before and it didn't seem to be fair that his first was during a massacre in his own army's fort.

"For Skyrim!"

A squad of four Stormcloaks charged towards the jesters. The red masked one darted towards them,
while the black masked one stayed behind. When the assassin met the soldiers, he became a red blur, moving too fast to follow. Within seconds, they were dead and he was still standing.

The jesters advanced towards the center of camp. They were getting closer to Saeda, who was still sprawled on the ground. He knew that he should either get up and fight or at least retreat, but his whole body felt numb from what he had witnessed.

People he knew by name were dead. People he had shared dinner with or a blanket during a cold night were now nothing more than corpses on the ground. How could this be? Just minutes ago he had been listening to men argue about whether the Dark Brotherhood was dangerous. Saeda picked out the first soldier who had scoffed so confidently. He was lying on his back, his mouth open in horror and his eyes gone. When had that happened?

"Come to your death, Captain Sifkni!" the black masked jester called. Although muffled, Saeda could tell that it was a woman's voice. "If you give yourself to Sithis now, we'll allow the rest of your men to live. Otherwise, their souls will be forfeit to Sithis as well."

"Never!" Captain Sifkni returned. "A Stormcloak never surrenders."

"Don't I know that," she muttered darkly. The woman had walked close enough that Saeda could have reached out and touched her leg, but he didn't dare to draw her attention. "I'll offer a second time, officer. Accept your fate instead of imposing it on your men."

"My answer will always be no!" Sifkni spat. He readied his sword. "Fire!"

Archers drew their bows and started firing towards the assassins, but the two of them easily found cover before the arrows could pierce them. Saeda sighed in relief. With the fire support, the killers were pinned. Captain Sifkni would take his time gathering the remaining men and circle in on them, wounding them easily with their superior range.

"Oh, no! What are we going to do now, oh great and powerful Listener?" the red masked one asked mockingly. Saeda thought at first it was another woman because of the high pitched voice, but the giggling sounded more masculine.

The black masked jester ignored the taunts of the other as she rooted around her area until she found a bow and some arrows. "They would have been better off just coming to us," she commented as she tested the pull. "Then they would have had a chance."

The female jester sat there for a second with her head bowed. Saeda could hear her taking large gulps of breath and slowly letting them out. He wondered if she was praying to her dark god for help.

While the archers were readying their shots, the female assassin suddenly popped out of cover. Calmly, she walked across the field, shooting arrow after arrow into the crowd protecting the captain. Each bolt found its mark perfectly - a throat shot here, a chest wound there, a puncture through an eyeball. There were no glancing blows or wide misses. Each volley was a fatal shot.

Captain Sifkni found himself alone, all of his support dead or dying. He looked around and saw no one else coming to his aid. His men had all been killed or had fled. The captain fell into a defensive stance with his mace held ready. "Come for me if you dare, you bastards!" he cried, still not willing to surrender.

"WULD!!"

The female assassin was near Saeda one second and within Sifkni's guard the next. She had gone a
hundred feet in a second. It was impossible! Did the Dark Brotherhood possess some forbidden magic too?

Unfortunately for the woman, Captain Sifkni was the best warrior in the camp. It was common to earn promotions in the Stormcloak army based on performance in battle, and the man's skill was legendary. Despite her inhuman speed, he had still managed to swing his huge steel mace. The edge of the weapon caught her in the face and shattered her porcelain mask.

Shards of ceramic flew and a spray of blood into the air as the mace found purchase. Saeda almost cheered when she fell backwards and rolled down the hill. The small figure didn't move once she came to a stop.

"Listener!" the male jester screamed. He ran to his companion and picked her up in his arms. Saeda was confused at the amount of affection the man was showing to the woman. Weren't all assassins cold-hearted, emotionless monsters? "Are you okay?"

"Finish the contract," she replied. The bottom half of her mask was completely destroyed, but the top half still remained. Her voice was more garbled than before. When the woman spat onto the ground, a glob of blood landed.

"As you command," the smiling-faced jester answered. He gave a grand bow before stalking up the hill. "Oh, Captain! I'm coming for you!" he called in a sing-song voice.

"I welcome the challenge!" Sifkni responded. He readied his weapon again, prepared to take down the male the same way he did the female.

However, the male didn't charge the captain directly. He cartwheeled and somersaulted about the commander, dodging Sifkni's blows until he was behind the man. Then the jester jumped backwards so he landed on his hands and used the momentum to thrust his feet forward so they kicked Sifkni in the back.

The larger man wheeled his arms as his greater mass and heavier armor prevented him from keeping his balance. The Nord fell down the hill until he rolled to where the woman was still waiting. He tried to get up, but much like a turtle on its back, he could barely move in his armor.

"I thought I told you to finish the contract?" she asked as the male jester joined her.

"It didn't seem right to do it alone," he said plaintively.

"Aw, a gift," she teased. "My Fool of Hearts is so generous."

"Always," he preened.

"Together then?" When the smiling faced jester nodded, the two of them knelt, held up their daggers and plunged them into the joints of Captain Sifkni's armor. Sifkni gurgled once as he body stiffened and then fell limp.

It was over.

"How's your face?" the male asked.

"No loose teeth, thank Mara," the woman answered as she gingerly touched her mouth. "Some cuts and there'll probably be bruising. I don't think it will scar."

"Not too tender for a kiss?"
"I think I can suffer for that," she chuckled.

Saeda watched in horror as the assassins shared a passionate kiss over the dead captain's body. They stood up and held hands as they wondered off.

Once the assassins were gone, Saeda realized that he had been holding his breath. He couldn't believe that he was still alive when everyone else was dead. He touched his face and chest, making sure he had not imagined the whole thing.

The boy stood up and shakily walked towards his tent. He would grab his few possessions and get out of here. He didn't know where he would go, but if it wasn't here, then he didn't care.

The camp was silent. Too silent.

Saeda passed Captain Sifkni, whose dead gaze looked too accusatory. "I didn't give up," it said. "Why didn't you even try?"

The boy saw the body of the soldier who hadn't believed in the Brotherhood's strength. It looked like he had been one of the ones they had caught unaware. His eyes were open still with incredulity. "The Brotherhood isn't real," those eyes whispered. "They're just a story to scare children."

Saeda whimpered as he walked by. He hoped he didn't see the older soldier, the one who warned them. Maybe the man had gotten away. Maybe Saeda wasn't the only one left.

When Saeda reached his tent, he almost couldn't open it because his hands were shaking so badly. It took several tries to untie the flap before he succeeded. When he finally got inside, he had to sit on his cot for several minutes with his head in his hands.

It was impossible to get the images out of his head.

How the jesters moved like wind spirits. How they looked like demons. How they had laughed and danced. How they had kissed like two lovers going on a moonlit stroll after killing the captain instead of two killers ending a massacre.

When Saeda finally composed himself, he grabbed his backpack and crammed whatever he could grab. Once it was full, he tied it closed and threw it over his shoulder. He reached to open the tent flap when it flew open on its own.

The boy screamed and fell backwards, landing on his ass, as he saw the entrance was filled with the forms of the jesters. They had come back! They had come back to finish the job. "Oh, Mara, Kynareth, Talos, Divines protect me," he wailed.

"That takes me back," the woman murmured. The bottom half of her face was still streaked with blood and the cuts on her lips leaked as she smiled.

Darkness filled the tent as the assassins stepped in and loomed over the sprawled Stormcloak. "Looks like we missed one, Listener," the male chided.

"It does at that, my Keeper," she responded.

"Whatever will we do about that?" the Keeper asked as he fingered his ebony blade. "Maybe we should send his soul to the Void too."

"What do you think, young man?" the Listener asked. She knelt before Saeda. "Are you ready to die for your cause?"
"I don't want to die!" Saeda admitted. He hated himself for it, but it was true. He had thought he was ready to die on the fields of battle while fighting gloriously, but the truth was he wasn't ready for either.

"You're just a child, aren't you?" the Listener asked. It should have sounded condescending or taunting, but Saeda could tell that she was sincere. He nodded, not believing his luck.

"I have a proposal for you then," she continued. "Go back to Windhelm and tell them what you saw today. Everything. If you do that, we won't kill you now. We'll let you live a good long life and then someday when you're old and in your bed, one of ours will come and send you to the Void."

"That doesn't sound every appealing," Saeda whimpered.

"The counteroffer is we kill you now," the Listener frowned. "It will probably be slow. My Keeper is in a playful mood. I wouldn't recommend it."

"Oh gods," Saeda moaned. Die now or die later, but death now knew him personally.

"I want you to tell the leaders of your rebellion, especially Lydia Stormblade, a message for me. Tell them that this is a lesson," the Listener continued, ignoring Saeda's comment. "Tell them that Ulfric couldn't stop us, Titus Mede couldn't stop us, and if the Night Mother commanded it, then we would kill Talos himself. Now, tell me what you'll say so I'll know you'll do it right."

Saeda nodded his agreement, hating himself. "Okay, okay. I'll do it. I'll tell them two jesters in demon masks came and killed everyone except me. They wanted me to give a message."

"No, no, they're not demon masks. They're comedy and tragedy masks. I swear this country has no culture," the Listener huffed.

"I'm sorry," Saeda whimpered. What if they changed their minds? "Two jesters in comedy and tragedy masks came, killed everyone including Captain Sifkni, and wanted Lydia Stormblade to know that nothing will stop them."

"Good," the woman smiled. Saeda was surprised to see that it wasn't cruel. It was almost kind, in fact. "I wish you luck, child."

The assassins stood and left without another word. Saeda knew they had really departed this time because he could hear their laughter fading away into the night.

Saeda started shaking again. He would be labeled a milk-drinker and probably a traitor the rest of his life. He didn't care; he would be alive to hear the taunts. It was better than being dead.

For the first time in years, he wished his mother was nearby so she could hug him and make him feel better. Instead, he cried. Huge, unabashed tears ran down his face as he mourned the loss of his companions. Then he started to scream.

Saeda wasn't sure when, but at some point the screaming became laughter.
Chapter 2

Copyright Bethesda
Comment appreciated

Part 2 definitely has a very different feel than part 1. Here we get to see Cicero and Diana as their public personas. It's a little rough for poor Jordis, but in the end everything worked out!

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 12:00 AM

Jordis the Sword-Maiden sighed as she rolled onto her side. It was always hard for her to fall asleep on the sleeping roll in her room in the basement of Proudspire Manor. There was no furniture in her room at all. The only decorations -- and Jordis used that term loosely -- were old wooden boxes, remnants of the previous owner, stacked on top of each other.

At least it was warm in here thanks to the fire pit in the next room. With no rugs or furs, the room would have been unbearable otherwise. Solitude wasn't as far north as Dawnstar or Winterhold, but it still got very chill at nights, even during the summer months.

The strawberry-blond Nord really wished her thane would remember to furnish her room, but unfortunately the Dragonborn was rarely ever in Solitude. And when she did show up, it was always a whirlwind of activity before she rushed off to wherever she was going. There had been more than one occasion where the Dragonborn had swept into the capital, visited Jarl Elisif the Fair, and left without Jordis even knowing she had been in town at all.

Leaving Jordis without a bed.

Jordis had been given the "privilege" of being Diana Dragonborn's housecarl back in Hearthfire of last year when she had presented her ward, Aventus Aretino, to the Blue Palace court. Elisif had taken an immediately liking to the boy, not surprising given his patron, and had decided that it was only appropriate that the boy have a guardian during his time in the capital. At eighteen, Jordis was the youngest member of the court and the closest to Aventus' age, so it seemed natural for her to be chosen as his protector.

Aventus had been enrolled in the Bard's College and would be learning the trade of the songsters for the next couple of years. Since the boy was old enough to be apprenticed, normally no one would give two thoughts about him. The Bard's School was the least violent faction in Skyrim and every member was well liked across the land.

Unfortunately, because of the false Dragonborn who had joined Ulfric's rebellion, the name of the Dragonborn was now spit upon instead of revered. The legacy of the thu'um should have been enough to stay anyone's hand who would think to do the boy harm, but instead it was now a reason to incite hatred. Very few knew that Diana was the real Dragonborn and Lydia, her former housecarl of Whiterun, was a mere identity thief.

Although Diana had made Elisif promise to not give her ward special favors or recognition, which
seemed perfectly reasonable, Elisif had still insisted that the boy be given his own bodyguard. The restriction meant that Jordis couldn't guard Aventus while he was in classes and definitely not at night when he was sleeping in the freshmen dorm. It drove Jordis to distraction. It was highly impractical for a housecarl to leave her charge's side. How could she protect Aventus if he was always away from her?

And there had been the various times when the boy had decided to spend the night because of a holiday or he wanted some time away from the other students. Jordis had tried to assist him with his bath, a standard housecarl duty, and the boy had just about died of embarrassment. The Nord didn't understand what the problem was. She had heard how the Imperials had orgies all the time down in Cyrodiil, so what was the big deal about her bathing him? It's not like she wanted to scrub him all over. She had merely tried to fulfill her duty like a loyal housecarl should.

The floor felt particularly hard tonight. Jordis sighed as she turned over again. If only if she had a cot or something down here. She missed her room at the Blue Palace.

The housecarl thought back to the first time she had met the Dragonborn. When they had returned to Proudspire Manor from the Blue Palace, the small Imperial woman had turned to the younger people.

"Look, I'm gonna have only one rule in this house," she announced. She stamped her foot as she pointed up the stairs. "No one is to use my bedroom while I'm gone. I don't care if I only use this place one day out of the year, that's my room and it is only for me."

"What about Cicero?" Aventus had teased.

"Him too," Diana said as she blushed.

"Who's Cicero?" Jordis asked.

"He's my," Diana looked like she was about to bite her own tongue on the last word, "husband." Frankly, Jordis thought it was weird for someone to grit their teeth so much when talking about the person they were supposed to spend the rest of their life with, but Imperials were strange folk.

Jordis had heard a lot about the natives of Cyrodiil. Since their capital was full of legionnaires, it only made sense to know as much about their allies as possible. She knew that Imperials were incorrigible (whatever that meant) flirts, they loved money (she had heard they could squeeze a septim out of a carrot), and they were remarkably good at light infantry, which was at least something Jordis could understand.

Oh, and they had orgies every night. Can't forget the orgies.

"Will you be having an orgy before you leave, my thane?" Jordis had asked. It seemed like a good idea to show that she was aware of their cultural niceties.

"What?" Diana and Aventus had both asked. Jordis worried that their eyes were going to pop out of their sockets.

"The orgy, ma'am," Jordis had said formally. She briefly wondered if she was saying it wrong. "I hear Imperials have them all the time."

"Jordis, do you know what an orgy is?" Diana asked carefully.

Jordis wasn't exactly sure what an orgy was, but she was pretty certain that it was some sort of fancy party. Imperials seemed the type to be good at throwing parties with all of their money and flirting.
"I have never been to one, but it would be an honor to be invited," Jordis replied. She hadn't been to a party ever.

"Um, no orgies," Diana had said. Her entire face had looked as red as a tomato. "Do you mind if I talk to Aventus for a bit?"

"No, my thane," the housecarl said, trying to hide her disappointment. She never got to do anything fun.

"I don't think she knows what an orgy is," Aventus whispered.

"Me neither and I have no plans on correcting her," Diana responded. "I'm going to head out in the morning. Do you think you have everything you need?"

"I'll be fine," Aventus promised.

The trio had spent the rest of the day at the market, picking up various necessities for Aventus. Diana had made arrangements with Falk Firebeard, Elisif's steward, to completely outfit the house, so none of them had known that Jordis' room was bare. By the time she had realized it, Diana had already left for whatever adventure she had planned after leaving Aventus.

So, now Jordis was stuck sleeping on the floor.

"You know, hon, if you want, you are more than welcome to go back to the Blue Palace when I'm out of town and Aventus has to be in class," Diana had offered that day. "I don't see any reason for you to be alone in such a big house."

"Thank you, my thane, but it is my duty to guard your possessions if you do not need my services otherwise," the girl had responded. She probably would have answered differently if she had known the circumstances better, but she had given her word and so she had stayed. A Nord always kept her word and a housecarl was always loyal to her thane. To her very bones and soul, a housecarl exemplified loyalty.

"Was Lydia like this?" Aventus had asked Diana as they returned home.

Jordis had fallen behind because she had insisted on carrying all of the packages and one of them had fallen out of her grasp. She had desperately tried to pick it up with her foot, but the darn thing was not cooperating.

"No, not really," Diana had said with a soft voice as she looked away. "She had the same sense of duty and desire to serve her thane, but there was more fire and wit there."

"Well, it's good they're not alike," Aventus said with a nod. "Maybe I can learn to like her since I know she won't betray me."

"I guess," Diana had said, but she had sounded doubtful.

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 1:00 AM

Jordis awoke to her side hurting. She lifted up her bedroll and found a big pebble had been poking her side. How had the darn thing gotten there to begin with? She tossed the offending rock aside and laid back down. Sometimes she wished she could sleep in Aventus' bed.
Oh!

Jordis sat up with her mouth in a little ‘o’ shape. Aventus' bed! She hadn't been ordered to not use it. He had seemed really nice the few times she had been around him, surely he wouldn't mind if she borrowed his bed until she got a real one. She just had to be sure to tell him that she needed a bed and she bet Talos to Talons that he would get one for her.

The strawberry-blonde giggled happily as she gathered her things and headed upstairs. When she entered the main entry room, she paused. The Nord could hear noises coming from the top floor. Oh gods, intruders!

Thankfully, she was there to protect her thane's possessions! Oh, Diana and Aventus were going to be so happy when they finally came home and she told them how she valiantly ran the thieves off. Screw those thieves!

Jordis carefully put her sleeping gear on the ground out of the way. It wouldn't do if the thieves tripped over it. She gathered her sword and shield from the weapons rack before heading upstairs. She tried to move quietly, but it was hard to do with her bulky weapons. At least she wasn't wearing her steel armor. Not that it really mattered. These were really loud thieves.

Oh gods, the noises were coming from the master bedroom! There's where Thane Diana kept all her things! Well, the stuff she bothered to leave here, anyway. All that grunting and moaning must mean they were trying to steal the furniture.

Jordis kicked the door open and cried, "Halt, thieves! In the name of Solitude, I am arresting you!"

She had been prepared for many reactions. Denial, an attempt at escape, or maybe even a straight up fight. Jordis had not been prepared to hear a woman screaming.

For a moment, the young housecarl stood there, blinking as she tried to adjust her eyesight to the dark room. There were two figures kneeling on the bed and they were holding up one of the blankets to cover them. One of the figures leaned forward and lit a candle to reveal an Imperial man and woman both naked as far as Jordis could see. The blanket covered a whole lot and she could only see to their shoulders.

"Who in the Void are you?" the woman shouted.

"My thane?" Jordis said weakly. In the light, she now recognized Diana Dragonborn despite the fact the woman's face looked cut and bruised. "Um, welcome home?"

"Get out!" the Dovahkiin commanded. The walls shuddered at the force of her Voice.

Nords by nature are brave warriors. They will face overwhelming odds time and time again to prove their physical prowess. Jordis still ran like a small child back downstairs at the order of her thane.

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 1:05 AM

"That was too close," Hecate sighed as she lowered the blanket. Jordi would have been shocked to discover the lovers were not naked. Instead she and Cicero were still wearing the bottom half of their motleys. "I cannot believe we forgot about the housecarl."

"Hecate may have, but Cicero didn't," the Keeper smirked as he stretched out on the bed. He grabbed Hecate and pulled her to him. "The possibility of being caught is half the fun."
"Maybe for you," Hecate frowned. Cicero could have at least reminded her about their houseguest, but given how immersed they had been in kissing when they had stumbled into the house, she supposed she couldn't fault him for not taking the moment to remind her.

The two of them had traveled to Solitude to rest for the night before moving onward the next day. They had been in high spirits from the success of their most recent contract and could not keep their hands off each other. The Listener had been surprised they had waited to get back to Proudspire before things got too hot and heavy.

Hecate had not planned on making an appearance as Diana in the capital, but now she was going to have to since they had been discovered being in town. It would look odd if the Dragonborn did not attempt to visit the jarl when she was in Solitude. It was inconvenient, but at least it wouldn't take a lot of time. She'd just pop into the Blue Palace tomorrow and maybe have a word with Elisif about the housecarl.

The girl seemed nice enough, but Hecate didn't like having some stranger in her house while she was gone. There were some conveniences to keeping someone in the house, like having a fire already going to keep the place warm, but it made using Proudspire as a base much more inconvenient.

Cicero leaned over and kissed Hecate. "Hm, where were we?" he murmured. His hands drifted over Hecate's body, making her sigh with pleasure. His thumb pressed against her nipple and circled it. "Cicero believes about here seems right."

The Listener moaned happily as her lover moved so he was over her and rubbing his body against her. It delighted her to feel velvet against velvet and her Keeper's expert hands touching her in all the right ways.

Then she heard crying from downstairs.

"Oh, for Mara's sake," Hecate complained as she pushed the Keeper away. The Listener sat up and pulled off her curly toed boots and striped pants.

"You're going to go comfort the girl," Cicero said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Hecate agreed as she pulled on a sleeping robe.

"My Listener is too kind," Cicero teased. He was lying on his stomach with his feet in the air. "Don't take too long or Cicero will have to Keep himself."

"Don't threaten me, Fool," Hecate shot back as she swatted the jester's head as she walked by.

As she descended the stairs, Hecate took a deep breath as she mentally put on her Diana mask. It was important to her to keep her identities as separate as much as possible. She had never had the problem of her past lives intersecting just as she had never had the problem of being famous before.

She might occasionally use her position as Dragonborn to drop some rumors in the right ears in the courts and to keep an update on the civil war, but in general Diana and Hecate were two separate people as far as she was concerned. She wasn't an actor like Cicero who could adopt a personality appropriate for a situation at the drop of a hat. She was just herself.

The only difference was that Diana was a hero and Hecate was a villain.

When she opened her eyes again, Diana saw the girl sitting at the small eating table. The Nord was bent forward so her face was in her hands and she was weeping loudly. Diana bit her lip as she watched the heart-wrenching scene. She hated to see people upset or in pain, but she didn't really
know how to make them feel better if there wasn't something to retrieve or someone to beat up.

The Dragonborn tentatively placed her hand on the other woman's shoulder. She patted awkwardly. "Um, there, there. It's okay."

"No, it's not!" the housecarl wailed. "I walked in on you and your husband – well, I think that's your husband. I really don't know, but if it isn't then I'm not judging because it's not my place to judge. You can have sex with all the strange men you want. Anyway, I walked in on you and that guy and you were naked and you were probably about to have sex because I cannot think of anything else a man and woman would do naked in the dark, but that might just be my inexperience talking. That doesn't really matter. What matters is that you were gone months and months and when you come back, I charge into your room and yell about arresting you. I'm a terrible housecarl."

At the end of her rant, the girl threw back her head and started to bawl in earnest.

"Oh goodness. Look, um," Diana paused. She suddenly couldn't remember this girl's name. Jordan? Joldi? "Look, dear, it's okay. You were just trying to protect your home. I cannot fault you for that."

"Really, my thane?" the girl sniffed. She looked up at Diana, hope shining in her eyes. "You're not going to send me away?"

"No," Diana answered, mentally wishing she could. "I haven't been able to successfully send a housecarl away yet. Now, how about we tuck you into bed, get some sleep, and maybe talk about this in the morning when we're rested?"

When the housecarl hung her head in shame, Diana asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't have a bed," the girl admitted.

"What do you mean you don't have a bed?" Diana repeated, the anger in her voice making the room shake. Jordis flinched from the action.

"My room is empty. Well, there are boxes in there, but they aren't mine and I don't know where to put them."

"Show me," Diana demanded.

The two women went downstairs and Jordis showed Diana to her room. The Imperial's eyes widened in horror when she took in the sight. This was not a room someone should be living in. She remembered that it had been the room they had kept Commander Maro in when Babette tortured the Pentius Oculatus leader to find out where Titus Mede II was. Shivers ran down her spine at the memory.

"You've been living like this for the last nine months?" she asked, aghast.

"It's not so bad most of the time," Jordis said humbly. "During the day, I stay upstairs. I clean or read or train. It's just at night. Well, the floor is hard." It wrenched Diana's heart that the Nord was trying too hard to sound like she wasn't complaining.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" Diana asked plaintively.

"You weren't here. Aventus is rarely here. Or when you two are, you're both so busy that I forget to say anything."

"This won't do at all," Diana muttered as she nibbled on the end of her thumbnail. "Come on."
"Where are we going, my thane?"

"You can sleep in Aventus' bed tonight if that doesn't bother you."

"My thane is so smart!" Jordis beamed.

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 1:30 AM

Cicero was lying on top of the bed wearing only his loincloth. He had disrobed the rest of his motley and put it away with Hecate's in one of the dressers when his Listener had gone downstairs to deal with the housecarl. It was unlikely that the girl would come back in here tonight, but it was better to be safe. The jester image was quickly becoming linked with the Brotherhood thanks to his Listener's actions, and it wouldn't do for their allies to know the truth.

A shadow fell across the bed and when Cicero looked up he could see the silhouette of his Listener in the doorway. The jester smiled widely as he stretched across the bed in his most seductive pose. "Welcome back, my Listener," he cooed. "Cicero was hoping he wouldn't be left alone in this big, cold bed."

A sob tore from the Listener as she hurled herself onto the bed and wrapped her arms around the Keeper. Cicero mentally sighed as he hugged the weeping woman. He had suspected that she would come back in this state. His lovely Listener couldn't stand to see others in pain.

"I'm a terrible person," Hecate wailed as she curved into the crook of her Keeper's arm.

"Did you kill the girl?" Cicero asked. That would have been unexpected.

"No," the Listener said.

"Did you threaten or hit her?"

"No."

"Call her names? Tell her that she's fat?"

"Now you're just being silly," Hecate scowled, looking at Cicero with bloodshot eyes. At least she wasn't crying any more. "The poor girl has been sleeping on the floor for these last nine months."

Cicero snorted. "Sounds like her own fault to Cicero."

"I'm a bad person because I didn't know," Hecate insisted as she pounded her fists on Cicero's chest. "I should have checked on her. She's my responsibility."

"Listener," Cicero said laughing. "We just killed an entire fort full of men and this is what made you feel like a bad person?"

"That's different," she grumbled, her forehead wrinkling in thought. "We were assigned to do that."

"Oh really?" Cicero pretended to ponder the idea. "Cicero recalls a Black Sacrament for the captain. Were there more Black Sacraments that poor Cicero was unaware of, hm?"

"No," Hecate admitted, trying to not giggle.

"Then letting a foolish Nord sleep on the floor for a few months hardly compares, does it?"
"Ah, my wise Fool," Hecate smiled as she nuzzled the Keeper. "You always make me feel better."

"Cicero must Keep his Listener," the Fool grinned. He leaned forward and kissed the Listener, picking up where they had been interrupted before.

"The girl might hear us," Hecate stammered.

"Cicero recalls this place having very thick walls," Cicero murmured. "Besides, I doubt she'll make the same mistake of barging in on us again tonight."

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 10:00 AM

"Why, Diana, what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" Jarl Elisif the Fair asked.

After getting up and grabbing breakfast with Cicero and the housecarl, Diana had given him a list of items to pick up from the blacksmiths while she ran to visit the Blue Palace.

"I was in town and thought I should visit," Diana smiled cheerfully. "Seeing you always makes my day a bit brighter."

"You flatterer," Elisif laughed.

The two women shared small talk for a bit. They both carefully did not mention the war to each other. Both had strong reasons to avoid that topic. Elisif never liked discussing her husband's murderer and Diana couldn't deal with the pain of Lydia's betrayal.

"You should come and see us more often," Elisif insisted.

"I'll try, but it's difficult," Diana hedged. "We're both pretty busy."

"I would always make time for you, my friend," Elisif smiled, making Diana's knees weak.

After leaving the jarl, Diana searched for her steward, Falk Firebeard. "You were supposed to decorate the entire house!" she snapped. "My housecarl has been without a bed the entire time."

"Why didn't anyone inform me?" Falk shot back. "I can't fix a problem I am unaware of."

"No one told me either," Diana huffed. "Given that was the case, you may wish to train better housecarls. Meek is fine in some situations, but being able to take initiative can be just as important."

"Like your last housecarl?" Falk said sharply. When Diana's face fell into one of misery, he immediately regretted his words. "Forgive me. That was unfair."

"I want the house properly stocked," Diana growled. "I expect to get what I paid for. In fact, since my delivery has been delayed for so long, here's an adjustment I want done." Diana gave the steward a written list of changes and with that she left him.

As she was about to walk out of the front door of the Blue Palace, the portal swung open to reveal General Tullius. The man looked good despite currently losing the war against the Stormcloaks. Maybe because his hair had turned silver a long time ago and his face was already wrinkled from years of countless battles, it was hard to tell if the ravages of war had affected him.

"Ah, Dragonborn," he said in way of greeting. "What brings you to our fair city today?"
"Just dropping by, General," she said stiffly. Diana had never had much of a relationship with Tullius. Although he had been there during Helgen, she had never begrudged him for it. Her near-execution had been because of a harried captain who had died that day, revenge enough for her. Still, they had little in common and the general was too prone to ask her to join his army instead of being happy with niceties.

"I heard you got married. Congratulations," Tullius said. "When will I have the honor of meeting him?"

"Not today I'm afraid," Diana said shaking her head. "He's in the market right now picking up some necessities. Maybe the next time we're in the capital for a ball."

"I'd love to meet him," Tullius said. "I have been wondering what kind of man would capture the eye of a Dragonborn."

"I'll be sure to let him know," Diana chuckled. "Now, I must be on my way."

"Feel free to come by Castle Dour any time," Tullius insisted.

"Yeah, right," Diana grumbled. She doubted either man would like the other very much. Tullius was too serious and Cicero was too inane. Undoubtedly both men would immediately hate each other and that was something Diana would rather not have to deal with.

Tirdas 16 Midyear 205 4E 10:30 AM

"Then he stood up and looked the man in the eye and said, 'Fuck you, clown,'" Cicero laughed as he ended his joke.

Jordis fairly screamed with laughter. It was so naughty of the Dragonborn's husband to swear like that, especially since they were in the marketplace, but it was so funny too.

She was really glad that the man she had found in her thane's bed last night was her husband. And she really liked how nice Cicero was to her. He had remembered her name, unlike Diana who kept calling her Jordan all morning. And he had asked her to accompany him to buy some things while her thane was at the palace.

Jordis had wanted to accompany her thane as was appropriate, but Diana had left without a word. She had looked a little mad this morning too, so maybe it had been a good idea to not go with her.

"Well, let's go shopping, shall we?" he had asked as they had piled the dirty dishes in the sink. He winked slyly at her. "As soon as we get these dishes clean. They don't clean themselves."

Cicero and she had chattered the whole time as they cleaned up. He had asked her questions about her life before becoming a housecarl and what her likes were. Then when they went to the market, he had insisted that she buy something for herself. Jordis had picked some perfume because she liked the way it smelled.

"I hope you don't begrudge my sweet Diana," Cicero said suddenly. "I think she would have been kinder to you, or at least more aware of your needs, if it hadn't been what happened with her and Lydia."

"What happened?" Jordis asked around a mouthful of sweetroll that Cicero had bought her.
"Did anyone tell you?" Cicero asked. Jordis shook her head no. "Lydia was her housecarl from Whiterun. They were very close. But Diana had to go away and didn't get a chance to tell Lydia. Poor Lydia thought she was dead and it made her very sad. She ended up joining Ulfric's army thinking that she would honor her thane’s memory, but it was the worst thing she could have done. Now they are bitter enemies."

"That's sad," Jordis said softly.

"It is very, very sad," Cicero agreed. "That's why she can't allow herself to get to know you. Because she's afraid she'll get to like you and you remind her too much of Lydia. So she keeps you at arm's length. Not just to protect herself, but to protect you too. She feels she ruined Lydia and she doesn't want that to happen again."

The two of them ascended the stairs to Proudspire Manor with Jordis deep in thought. She had to prove she was a good housecarl to Thane Diana. She just had to.

"We're home!" Cicero called out in a sing-song voice as they put away their purchases.

"Welcome back!" Diana responded as she descended. She came over and kissed Cicero on the cheek. "Did you find everything I needed?"

"Yes, yes," Cicero fussed. "Of course. Cic- I always get whatever you need done, don't I?"

"Hm, usually," Diana agreed as she hugged him. Jordis thought they looked like the perfect couple together. "Oh, Jordan, I need to talk to you."

"Her name is Jordis," Cicero corrected.

"Hmph, why didn't you tell me?" Diana asked, looking irritated.

"I didn't mind," Jordis said. "Whatever my thane wishes to call me, I'll answer to."

"Please speak up in the future," Diana scowled. "And that's an order. Goodness. Anyway, come with me."

The trio descended to the basement level. "I feel we've gotten off on the wrong foot," Diana started. Jordis felt nervous. The phrase "We need to talk" was the worst phrase in the world. "Each side had certain assumptions about the other. That has to change. I will not have a housecarl who is sleeping on the floor. It makes me look bad."

Oh, here it comes. She was going to give Jordis the axe, hopefully not literally.

"So, I went to Falk Firebeard and told him I wanted that furniture and I wanted it today. Thankfully, it arrived while you were gone." Diana threw open the door to Jordis' room to reveal a fully furnished room.

There was a closet, a full length mirror, a full array of cosmetics, and a bed! It wasn't just a single sized bed either. It looked big enough for at least three people and had a beautiful canopy over it. It dominated the room, but Jordis didn't mind in the slightest.

"Oh, thank you, my thane!" she squealed as she grabbed Diana into a tight bear hug. The smaller Imperial woman grunted at the force of her housecarl's grip.

"There's a condition," Diana wheezed as she broke Jordis' grasp. "You have to write to me once a week to update me on what is going on here and how you are doing." She gave the younger woman
a piece of paper. "Just send it here. I'm not always there, but I'll receive anything you send me eventually. I'll try to write back whenever I can."

Jordis carefully tucked the piece of paper away as Diana continued. "Also, I set up an account for you at the exchequer's. I should have given you an allowance when you were first assigned, so I put back pay for you. That is your money to use as you wish. You will also receive additional funds every month from my personal account."

The Nord burst into tears at all of this. It was much more than she could have hoped. "You're the best thane I've ever served under," she gushed.

"Although I suspect I'm the only thane you've worked for, thank you," Diana smiled. "We're going to head out too, but if you need anything that cannot wait, then just talk to Aventus and he'll take care of you."

Jordis thought she would fairly explode with happiness.

"Is there anything else you need?" Diana asked.

"No, no, I'm fine," Jordis said.

"Good," Diana said with a nod. "We're going to head out now. I look forward to your letter."

The Dragonborn gave the housecarl a hug and swept out of the house, Cicero bowed and kissed Jordis's hand which made her giggle. He winked and followed his wife.

Once they were gone, Jordis climbed onto the bed. She spread out on the comforter, enjoying how soft and warm it felt. The girl glanced from side to side, making sure no one was around. Then she stood up on the bed and jumped up and down, pouncing on the springs.

She screamed with delight for the longest time.

After a while the screams turned into gales of laughter.
Chapter 3

Copyright Bethesda
Comments appreciated

In this chapter we get to see part of what happened to Lydia after Diana disappeared. The following chapters will go into more detail as well.

We also get to see a bit of what the common folk know about the Dragonborn. It was very strange for me to write as if Lydia's version is the truth when we know it clearly is not. But most people don't know that and I wanted to see it from that point of view.

Midas 17 Midyear 205 4E 11:30 AM

Ralof hated doing patrol. It was dull compared to fighting on the battlefield and he detested talking to the different superior officers. Most of them weren't trained for their ranks and still thought that simply being the best warrior on the field was good enough to justify their position when in reality they needed to know how to train their men to be better fighters and how to encourage morale with the right words in the right place. Thus, Ralof often ended up in the captain's tent listening to old stories of glory with many tankards of mead instead of reviewing troop positions.

At least he was almost done. He just had to visit Fort Hraggstad, talk to Captain Sifkni, and review the troop roster before heading back to the Palace of the Kings to report to Regent Lydia Stormblade. If the numbers looked good, then they could finalize plans to take Solitude. The civil war would be over and Ulfvic Stormcloak's memory would be honored as Skyrim was finally returned to her true sons and daughters.

Ulfvic Stormcloak had taken almost four years to gain this much territory. Part of it was because of his careful planning -- he never threw men away on pointless skirmishes -- but a large part of their success was credited to the Stormblade. Lydia possessed the power of the thu'um thanks to her heritage as the Dragonborn, a Nordic hero of legend long before her birth. There were many prophecies regarding the ancient art of Shouting, the ability to absorb dragon souls, and the destiny to destroy the World-Eater.

Alduin had been the bane of humanity back in the Merethic Era when dragons had ruled over humans as if they were cattle and Alduin had ruled over the dragons. It had taken the bravery of the Tongues to face him in combat and destroy him. Unfortunately, like a bad septim, the creature had returned. Alduin had not truly died for he was as immortal as his father, the Dragon God Akatosh. Instead he had been caught in something called a Time Wound, bound there until certain elements of prophecy were to be fulfilled.

When he had returned, so had other dragons, resurrected by the vile wyrm himself. Skyrim was already torn in half and the added danger of flying magical monsters had made life even harder. They were almost impossible to kill and not without a few casualties. That was on a good day. There had been entire villages lost to the creatures, leaving behind a few charred homes, limbless men and women, and newly orphaned children.
Then the promised Dragonborn emerged after she had devoured the soul of a dragon in Whiterun when one attacked their Western Watchtower. Lydia, along with a nameless companion, had traveled across all of Skyrim saving both Imperial and Stormcloak towns from dragons.

Most people didn't even know her by face or name for she rarely stayed very long after destroying the monsters before moving on to the next village. They mostly remembered her gleaming dragon scale armor. It was a suit of beautiful craftsmanship and utterly unique in construction. Some scholars said it had echoes of Akaviri design, poetically appropriate given they were ancient dragonslayers known for their kiai, battle cries similar to the Nordic ability.

At some point near the beginning of the year in 202, the Dragonborn decided to take the fight to Alduin in his secret lair to defeat him once and for all. Appropriately enough, the final battle took place in Sovngarde amongst the legendary heroes of old. The beast had been gaining strength from devouring the souls of heroes so he could eventually consume all of reality. Fearlessly, Lydia had faced the black dragon in one-on-one combat. It had been a long, weary fight, but in the end the Dragonborn had triumphed and the heavens had shaken at her victory.

When she returned to Nirn, the Dragonborn immediately decided to join the struggle for Skyrim, a task that she had put to the side while saving reality from the World-Eater. She had accompanied an Imperial messenger from Whiterun, unaware that the woman was going to deliver an ultimatum to Jarl Ulfric from Jarl Balgruuf the Greater indicating that either Ulfric forsake his cause or Balgruuf would give his axe to the Imperials.

Jarl Ulfric had ejected the two women from the Palace of kings, thinking that the Dragonborn had sided with the Imperials. She had returned later and explained that she had been given false pretenses for her presence in escorting the Imperial. Lydia had been told by Jarl Balgruuf personally that she was to help negotiate a peace treaty when in reality she had been used to look like she had sponsored the Imperial side. Up to that point the Dragonborn had remained neutral in the war, but after seeing the true underside of the Empire, she had realized their influence was not only unwanted but corrupt, and had signed up to join the Stormcloaks.

Their first goal had been to take Whiterun. It was a central hold with access to many vital trade routes. Whoever held it essentially would win the war and it was vital to take it before the Imperials could move their troops there in force. Despite it being a winter campaign, the Stormcloaks had taken it easily with the Dragonborn fighting by their side. After that, they had known nothing but victory.

Until Ulfric Stormcloak had been murdered.

"General Ralof, sir, there's someone on the road," a Stormcloak soldier said, pulling Ralof out of his thoughts.

Ahead of the patrol, about five hundred feet, Ralof could make out a lone Stormcloak soldier. As they drew closer, Ralof noticed that the Stormcloak looked young, very young. His armor was covered in splatters of blood and he was oddly barefoot. The boy didn't even look at them as he stared blankly at the sky. His eyes were opened wide enough to show the whites and he had a grotesque grin on his face.

Ralof dismounted and approached the boy carefully. The child had the haunted eyes of someone who had seen something too horrific to describe. Battle-shock. It happened from time to time when a slaughter occurred, but there had been no battles recently.

"Private, report," Ralof said firmly.

The boy turned so he was facing Ralof. "I have to report to Windhelm," he said vaguely. "I have to
"Warn them of what?" Ralof prodded.

"They're all dead," the boy said. A single tear ran down his cheek, but his facial expression didn't change at all. "Fort Hraggstad is routed."

"The Imperials?" Ralof asked.

"No, worse. The Brotherhood," the boy answered. He swallowed. "They were death itself. And when death came, it came as laughter on the wind."

Loredas 20 Midyear 205 4E 7:30 PM

"Then they told me to tell you that it was a message," Saeda said dully as he recounted the massacre of Fort Hraggstad. "That nothing will stop them and no one was safe from their grasp."

Lydia shifted from her sitting position on the stone throne so she was leaning forward with her hand chin resting in her steepled hands. "Did you get a good look at either of these assassins?" she asked.

"No, I'm sorry," Saeda said. Although it had been three days since Ralof found him on the road, he still looked disheveled. Saeda felt that no level of bathing would make him feel clean again. Death had touched him and left its mark burned on his soul. "I know they were a man and a woman. They wore masks. Terrible masks. The woman said they were comedy and tragedy, but they looked like screaming daedra to me."

"Thank you for your report," Lydia said with a warm smile. It only made Saeda feel worse. He didn't deserve the kindness that the Dragonborn was showing him. "I'd like for you to stay around for a while in case I have any more questions. Calder!" One of the residential housecarls stepped forward. "I'm assigning you to Saeda. Protect him as you would me."

"Yes, my jarl," he said, saluting.

"Regent," Lydia reminded him. "I am merely a regent of Windhelm. Both of you are dismissed."

As the two men bowed and left the grand hall of the Palace of the Kings, Ralof and Yrsarald Thrice-Pierced approached the throne. Yrsarald was a high ranking officer in the Stormcloak army and had often reported to Ulfic in the war room. He had become Lydia's right hand man these last few months and without him she would have truly floundered. "Why did you assign a housecarl to a lowly private?" he asked. "That is usually a privilege for jarls and thanes."

"Because Saeda is a dead man walking," Lydia said as she watched the retreating figures. "Couldn't you see it in his eyes? Even if the Brotherhood honors their word to not kill him, I fear he may take his own life."

"They're a poisonous blight on this land," Ralof hissed. "Damn them. Like skeevens, getting into everything and where you least want them."

"What about this magic the woman seemed to possess?" Yrsarald asked. "I've never heard of a spell that teleported people before. Do you think it is some sort of blessing given to them by Sithis?"

"I shudder to imagine that possibility," Ralof growled, shaking his head.
"I don't know," Lydia said, but the truth was she recognized the description of the Whirlwind Sprint Shout. Diana had used it countless times when they used to go to the market. Always impatient her thane had been. It seemed it was a trait she had carried over to her new life as the Brotherhood's leader. "Maybe Wuunferth can tell us more. Mages are always coming up with new spells to outdo each other."

"This is going to put us back severely," Yrsarald growled. "Losing Fort Hraggstad is a huge blow to our plans. We needed that fort to safely take Solitude. We should have moved sooner, Lydia."

"Days lost lamenting lost days," Lydia responded. "We cannot change what has happened. Ulfric would have wanted for us to wait for the good weather before making our final move. I tried to save lives and instead only lost them. That is one of the prices of war, my friend.

"Ralof, I want you to go over our roster. Determine how many men we can afford to move to the front lines. I don't see any reason we can't continue this war. Let the Empire use its poisoned blades if it wishes. We knew they were honorless dogs when this fight began. Nothing has changed."

The blonde nodded before leaving to follow orders.

"Yrsarald, I want you to deliver a message for me," Lydia said as she stood. "It won't be easy. You'll have to travel through Forsworn territory. Take as many men as you need."

"Who would you need to deliver a message to in the Reaches, my regent?" the officer asked.

"A powerful ally," Lydia responded. "If the Brotherhood is going to be a problem, we're going to need a counter solution. I cannot afford to use resources to retrain our men to deal with assassins. These people will be exactly who we need to deal with these vermin while we focus on the bigger issues at hand."

"I'll gather a squad and head out first thing in the morning," Yrsarald said, as he saluted by pressing his fist against his chest.

"Excellent," Lydia said as she descended the steps of the throne. "I'm going to retire for the night. See that I'm not disturbed."

"As you wish, my regent."

The walk to the master bedroom always felt much longer than it really was. Maybe it was because it still felt like Ulfric's and not hers. Everything about that room screamed of the dead man. Its simple decorations, the small trophies that graced the shelves, it even still smelled like him months later.

Lydia sighed as she pulled off the wolf fur cloak that had been Ulfric's and placed it on the mannequin in the corner. She had started wearing it after he died. It had been a good symbolic gesture that he would have approved of. It also helped explained why she no longer wore the dragon scale armor.

Officially, she had retired it as it was no longer needed to bring the faithful together under the Stormcloak banner. Her name and face were famous now and she would rather honor the memory of their original leader instead of her dragonslayer heritage.

The bitter truth was that she had lost that precious armor. It had been stripped off her immobile body by the very person she had sacrificed everything for Diana. Or Hecate as she called herself now. And she was no longer the Dragonborn, but the Listener, the leader of the Dark Brotherhood.

Lydia fell wearily onto the too big bed and threw one arm over her eyes as she remembered her first
encounter with the Dark Brotherhood. It had been years ago when she was still just a housecarl and Diana was her thane.

Morndas 23 Morning Star 202 4E 9:00 AM

"Can I help you?" Lydia asked dryly.

"I have a message for the lady of the house," the courier said politely. He held out a folded piece of parchment. "Is that you?"

"No," Lydia said, shaking her head. "However, I can give it to her."

"Sorry, the recipient's hands only," the courier grinned. "Rules you know."

Lydia looked over her shoulder to where her thane was currently soaking in the bath tub. The Imperial had one leg raised in the air as she scrubbed it. "I tell you, I tell you, the Dragonborn cooomes," she sang off tune, her voice breaking on the last syllable.

"She's unavailable right now," Lydia said, returning her attention to the courier. "You'll just have to give it to me."

"I really can't," the courier insisted.

"Who is it, Lydia?" Diana called.

"A courier, my thane," Lydia shot back. She moved so the door swung further open so Diana could see the man.

As expected, the Imperial screamed and ducked under the lip of the bath.

"Maybe I should give it to you," the courier conceded as he handed the piece of paper to Lydia.

"Smart man," she remarked as she closed the door.

"That was mean," Diana pouted from the tub. "Did you really have to do that?"

"He was being stubborn," Lydia said with a shrug as she flipped open the letter. Her face fell as she read it. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"What? What does it say?" Diana asked.

"One moment," Lydia muttered as she turned and ran out the door.

The courier hadn't gone very far from Breezehome and Lydia easily caught up with him. The Nord grabbed him and shook him. "Who gave this to you?" she shouted.

"I don't know!" the courier cried. He had not been prepared for a tall angry woman to burst out of a house and grab him. "Some mysterious fellow. Wore a dark cloak."

"And you didn't think that was weird?" Lydia growled.

"He paid a lot of money," the courier said defensively. "It's not my job to ask why someone wants to have a message delivered. Or their taste of clothes for that matter. I just deliver the mail."
"Next time you get a good look at who your client is," Lydia hissed, "because if you deliver something like that again here with such useless answers, I'll use your entrails for dragon bait. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes, yes ma'am," the courier exclaimed. Privately he promised himself to never come back to this house. Maybe this town if he could manage it.

"Get out of my sight," Lydia barked as she shoved the courier away. The man fell on his back, but he didn't waste any time scrambling to his feet and running for the gates.

The housecarl looked down at the piece of paper that was now crumpled in her hand. She unfolded it again and looked at the simple message.

"We know."

Dominated by a black handprint. The symbol of the Dark Brotherhood.

Who would think this sick idea was funny? Diana didn't have any enemies that Lydia could think of. Everyone loved the carefree Imperial, a fact that sometimes drove Lydia crazy with jealousy, but a good one to know when she was your charge to protect.

Diana couldn't be allowed to see this. She was already scared that she was going to die because of a reading Olava the Feeble had done for her the previous day. She didn't need to know some toothless assassin's guild was supposedly coming after her.

Lydia stalked over to the forge of Warmaiden's. Adrienne was out for lunch right now, so no one was nearby. Lydia threw the note into the hot coals. It curled up and quickly charred into black ash.

When the housecarl returned to Breezehome, Diana was standing in the middle of the room with a towel wrapped around her. Her long black hair trailed all the way down her back, dripping onto the wooden floor. "Where did you go?" Diana asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Oh," Lydia laughed, trying to sound casual. There was no reason to concern her thane with the note. "It turns out that stupid courier delivered the message to the wrong house. How stupid can you get it?"

"Weird," Diana smiled. "As long as it gets where it's supposed to go, right?"

"Nothing for us to worry about," Lydia nodded.

Loredas 11 Sun's Dawn 202 4E 8:00 AM

Lydia woke with the worst headache ever. It felt like Eorlund Gray-Mane was pounding away at the Skyforge. She opened her eyes and was temporarily confused. This wasn't her room in Breezehome. She rubbed her temple as she sat up.

Slowly, she recalled that she was at the Candlehearth in Windhelm. She and Diana had been assigned by Jarl Balgruuf to deliver an axe to Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak. The jarl had a private conversation with Diana before publically denouncing Jarl Balgruuf for siding with the Imperials. He had then used a Shout on her thane, throwing the woman out of his palace. Guards had bodily thrown Lydia out next.

Diana had slunk back to the Candlehearth, sullen and mute, and started drinking heavily through the
night. It was unusual for Lydia's usually chipper and vocal thane and it had worried her although she had concealed her concern.

Finally after hours of watching her thane drinking and mulling, Lydia had spoken up when a barmaid had offered to refill the Imperial's tankard. "No. My thane, you've had enough I believe."

Diana ignored her as she idly pushed her circlet back and forth on the ground like a child's hoop. "This silent treatment is getting tiresome," Lydia had said with her forehead in hand. "It's late, why don't we retire and get a good night's sleep?"

Diana had lifted her blue eyes up to Lydia and held up a hand with one finger extended. A silent request for one more drink. Before Lydia could answer the request, Diana's expression had turned to one of absolutely fury. The local Dunmer bard had started singing "The Age of Oppression", a war propaganda song that favored Ulfric Stormcloak's cause. Her thane had hurled her tankard at the bard. Thankfully, it had missed, but it had also shattered against the wall.

"The guard will know of this," the Dunmer had threatened as she ran down the stairs to alert the innkeeper of the attempt at assault. Diana had flipped a rude gesture to her retreating back. Lydia had stifled a groan at the action. They really didn't need to instigate the local guards. She doubted that they would be willing to look the other way right now since Diana had fallen out with Ulfric.

"I suppose I got back just in time," the maid said, raising one eyebrow. Lydia hadn't even noticed that she had slipped away. "It looks like you're out of drink." She handed a mug to Diana before offering one to Lydia who accepted. Nords rarely refused alcohol and one cup before retiring for bed would not interfere with her duty. By the Nine, with the day she had, a drink was exactly what she needed before going to bed.

Diana had raised the mug in mock salute and downed the contents in one gulp. Lydia had followed suit, eager to crawl into her bed. That was the last thing Lydia remembered before blacking out.

Now she was sprawled on her bed in the inn, still fully clothed in her armor. She never did that. She never blacked out, especially from one single drink, and she never slept in her armor accidentally. A warrior's life was dependent upon her armor and weapon and Lydia always took care of both accordingly.

After Lydia rubbed her eyes to help her clear them, she saw something on the dresser next to the bed that made her heart stop. A cutting of Nightshade. An assassin's calling card. Lydia hadn't thought of the mysterious note since it had shown up weeks ago, but suddenly it was the only thing she could think of.

"My thane," she gasped as she scrambled to the door.

Lydia threw open the door to her room and crashed to the room across the hall that Diana had rented. She had been prepared to kick the door in if necessary. Even if it meant Diana sleepily looking at her like she had lost her mind, Lydia didn't care. Better that than her worst fear.

For a brief moment, Lydia was overjoyed to see that there was no slit throat corpse of her charge. But as she took in the rest of the scene, her grin faded into an expression of shock. The bed was made, something Lydia thought Diana was completely incapable of doing on her own. Another note rested on the pillows with another cutting of Nightshade holding it down.

Lydia swallowed hard as she approached the note. She didn't want to read it, but ignoring an
unpleasant fact didn't make it any less true.

"Another soul for Sithis."

With that damned black handprint stamped over it again.

It was impossible to breathe. Lydia's chest constricted as if a dragon had wound its tail around her and started to squeeze, threatening to break her into a million pieces. She had failed her thane. Not on a battlefield, not while fighting draugr, not while stopping a dragon from threatening a village, and not even while driving bandits away while the adventurers slept in their camp.

"Focus, focus," Lydia chanted quietly. There was no body. Why would the Brotherhood take the body? Maybe they wanted to torture her thane for information. It wasn't impossible. The Brotherhood was rumored to kill to any specification the client wanted. Maybe someone wanted to know more about the Blades or about being Dragonborn. She couldn't imagine there was much more Diana would know about, but she had never imagined someone would want the other woman dead.

They had gotten out of countless tight spots over the last several months. Diana had a gift for getting into trouble. She rarely had to go looking for it either. It just seemed to like to land on her lap. But she had always stumbled onto her feet safely time and time again.

Lydia ran out of the Inn, ignoring the startled stares as she ran past. She tore off down the bridge to the local stables. She found her mount there, safe and content in his stall, seemingly uncaring for anything in the world. But Diana's horse was gone.

"The other horse that was next to mine," Lydia snapped at the owner, an Altmer male who was cleaning another stall. "Where did he go?"

"Dunno," the man said noncommittally. "I was asleep last night. Whoever took him out didn't alert me. I guess they had to leave here in a hurry."

"Who? Who was in charge of the horses last night?" Lydia was on the edge of screaming.

"Arivanya," he stammered, picking up on Lydia's panic. "She's my wife. She could have attended to any late night visitors. I'll get her for you." The Altmer scrambled away, eager to be out of reach of the frantic Nord.

When the two returned, Arivanya looked displeased, but that was typical for most Altmer. "What is this all about?" she asked stiffly.

"The horse that was in this stall," Lydia demanded, pointing to the offending empty space. "Who took him out of here?"

"I don't know her, but it was a blonde woman. Nord, I think, but I have a hard time telling you Men apart," the elf grumbled. "She had the appropriate chit for it. I had no reason to question her. People leave and come at all hours around here."

"What about a black-haired Imperial woman?" Lydia asked, hopeful. Maybe Diana had been approached by someone for help last night and had left. She couldn't think of a reason why her thane would go without her, but she clung to the hope.

"I only saw the one," Arivanya shrugged. "Sorry."

Lydia was sorely tempted to leap on the taller woman and beat her until her face was bloody. Flippant, uncaring, lazy elves! Instead, she tossed her own token to the male elf. "I'm taking my
horse," she growled. "If you hear anything from an Imperial named Diana, you make sure she knows I'm waiting at home for her." As she mounted her horse, she turned the animal around so she was facing the elves. "You make damn sure you let her know."

Lydia dug her heels into her mount and started riding as fast as she could back to Whiterun. If anything had happened to Diana, she would return to Breezehome. They had been separated before. It was rare and unpleasant, but it happened. A bridge fell down. Diana wanted to do a mission on her own. A crowd of people pushed them apart. But no matter what, time and time again, they had been reunited at Breezehome.

Sometimes Lydia would be munching on a loaf of bread or she would be resting in her room, but sooner or later Diana would burst into the house with her joyful laughter and the two of them would go off on another adventure.

It was just a matter of time before she came home.

But she never did.
Part 2 of Lydia's story. There will be one more part and we'll be back to the main story line. I think you'll find it worth the wait.

Turdas 29 First Seed 202 4E 4:00 PM

"That woman's servant has been staying at the Candlehearth Inn for two weeks now," Galmar growled.

Ulfric didn't need to ask who "that woman" was. Galmar hated the Dragonborn with a passion and refused to use her name whenever possible. He didn't even like to use her title and avoided it also. She constantly had questioned his presence and had talked down to the housecarl constantly. There had been no love lost between those two when she had rejected Ulfric's offer to join the Stormcloak army. Galmar had been particularly pleased when she had been ejected from the Palace of the Kings on her last visit and subsequently banished from the city for her alliance to Whiterun.

"Has there been any sign of the Dragonborn?" Ulfric asked. He was surprised at the news. Surely he had wounded the Dragonborn's pride enough that she wouldn't dare to show her face here again. Maybe when the war was over she would return, but not a day before then.

"None," Galmar admitted gruffly. "It worries me. Those two are practically joined at the hip. Despite her heritage as an Imperial, she rarely allowed her housecarl out of her sight, unless she had wanted to be alone with you." Galmar smirked at the memory. Ulfric had done an outstanding job of appealing to that woman's ego. She had really believed that the Bear of Eastmarch had wanted to bed her simply because of her personality and not because of her political usefulness. "Even then she has usually just assigned her housecarl to wait outside the door. I don't like not knowing where that Imperial might be. Who knows what she is planning."

"What has Lydia been doing since she's arrived?" Ulfric asked as he turned away from the large table that held a map of Skyrim and the strategic outposts of his troops. Galmar was right in that it was a concern not knowing where Diana was.

Not only did she tend to go places she wasn't supposed to Ulfric had not forgotten the time she had skulked around Windhelm disguised as a priestess of Talos but now she had a personal vendetta against him. Before she had been playful in trying to get his attention, but now she was likely to be vengeful. Not only had she been publically ridiculed, but she had found out that Ulfric had only befriended her for her status as the Dragonborn. A woman scorned was a woman to be feared.

"That's the weird part," Galmar snorted. "She's been down at the market, roaming around most of the day before returning to Candlehearth Inn. She then spends most of her evenings in the loft, rarely drinking, but often talking and befriending the locals. Rolff likes her. Probably because of all the mead she's provided him."

Rolff Stone-Fist was the local drunk, a burden and shame to Galmar since they were brothers. He claimed that he was unable to join the war effort given some old battle injuries, but it never stopped him from wandering into the Gray Quarter and harassing the residents. Most of the time the guards
were able to turn a blind eye, but occasionally Rolff went over the line and discipline had to be meted out.

One time had been when he had unknowingly assaulted the Dragonborn during her first visit to Windhelm. Ulfric had been able to put a spin on it and threw Rolff with his faithful sidekick Angrenor Once-Honored into a jail cell for the night so they could sleep off their drunkenness. The Dragonborn had been very grateful at his assistance against those who had assaulted her. Despite the initial panic, Rolff's foolish behavior had been very profitable for Ulfric since it had given him the perfect opportunity to befriend the Imperial.

Given her training as a bodyguard, Lydia would have remembered the man, which made it even more bizarre that she had apparently befriended him. "Get Rolff and bring him here. I want to know what she's been saying," Ulfric commanded.

"I thought you would say that," Galmar grinned. "He's waiting in the great hall."

"I don't know what I would do without you, Galmar," Ulfric chuckled as he patted his friend on the back. The two men walked out to the great hall where Rolff was sitting at the grand dining table. Unsurprisingly, he was downing a mug of mead.

"Jarl Ulfric," Rolff said when he noticed the Bear of Eastmarch approaching. He scrambled to his feet and attempted a sloppy salute and mostly failing. Ulfric deigned to ignore it rather than allowing him to try again.

"At ease, Rolff," Ulfric said, making his tone as casual as possible. "I hear you have vital information for us."

"Um," Rolff stammered, looking at his brother for support.

"The jarl wants to know what Lydia of Whiterun has been talking to you about," Galmar snapped. There were days he wished he was an only child.

"Oh, yes, yes. Of course," Rolff answered, laughing a little too loudly. "She doesn't talk to me personally much. Mostly buys me drinks. Never the cheap stuff either. I've heard her talking to the Dunmer bard though. Asking if she's seen some woman named Diana. I've also seen her talking to the local beggars the same thing. Silda, the plainest face the Divines ever decided to chisel, frequently pockets coin from Lydia."

"Diana is missing?" Ulfric murmured as he rubbed his chin in thought. That was an interesting development. He had worried about her turning around and officially joining the Imperial Legion and the havoc it would have spread amongst his ranks after their falling out. He had been prepared to boost the men's morale with rousing speeches regarding why supporting him was more important than following the Dragonborn's lead.

Few would feel comfortable fighting against someone else who could command the thu'um. Ulfric's ability to Shout had always been one of his strongest attributes, so to have someone oppose them who could not only Shout, but learn it much faster than anyone alive was daunting.

It galled the jarl that he only knew the Way of the Voice and it would take years of isolation and mediation to learn only one word of a given Shout, especially since there were records from the Merethic Era that stated that the ancient Tongues could learn much faster. There had been entire armies composed of people who had master the thu'um. Ulfric didn't want to share the knowledge of the thu'um, but to be able to master that technique personally would have made him a one man army.
Just like how the Dragonborn could be a one man army.

"Rolff, what does the Dragonborn look like?" Ulfric asked suddenly. A plan was forming. It could be dangerous because if there as any backlash, his reputation would be damaged. But the plans with the greatest payoff usually had the greatest risk.

"Um," Rolff struggled to remember in his drunken haze. "She's got some really pretty armor. It glitters a bunch of different colors in the sun. Supposedly is made of dragon scale, but I think that's just a rumor."

"But what does she look like?" Ulfric pressed.

"I'm not good with faces," Rolff grumbled.

"Oh, for Talos' sake," Galmar shouted. "Just admit you don't remember or don't know. Ulfric won't get pissed at you for not knowing, but the jarl doesn't have time for your bullshitting."

"Okay, okay," Rolff flinched away from his brother just in case the other man decided to hit him. "I don't remember. I never really saw her that much and when she was around she was always wearing her armor. She's a Nord, right? Surely the Dragonborn is a Nord. After all Talos was a Nord and he was Dragonborn."

It was good enough for Ulfric. Granted, Rolff wasn't the sharpest axe on the rack, but as far as the lowest common denominator went, he was a good measuring stick. People hadn't remembered Diana, but they had remembered her armor.

"Rolff, thank you for your time. You've been a tremendous help," Ulfric said. The drunk broke into a huge grin at his jarl's praise. "Galmar, I need you to find Lydia and bring her here. She is to be treated as an honored guest. Do not, and I repeat do not, do anything that will make her skittish or scared. We want her to feel wanted and welcome here."

"What are you up to, Ulfric?" Galmar asked as he followed Ulfric from the great hall, leaving Rolff behind and forgotten. "I'm not sure I like that gleam in your eye."

"Only the greatest coup that Skyrim will never know happened," Ulfric crowed.

Turdas 29 First Seed 202 4E 5:00 PM

Lydia stood on the cold stone of the bridge that led to Windhelm City with her arms folded on the ledge. The White River churned with the spring runoff below her. Part of her mind wondered if Diana's body was hidden somewhere in the dark waters below. As always different scenarios ran through her head.

Her thane managed to escape her kidnapper, but was unable to make it back into the city with the safety of the guards. As she ran, she slipped on the ever present ice and fell into the cold waters below. No, surely her body would have surfaced by now if that had been the case.

Diana, killed after giving up whatever information the assassin had wanted, was weighed down with stones and tossed into the water. Her body still down there as slaughterfish nibbled on her flesh, or what remained of it. Possible, much too possible.

Lydia had waited in Whiterun for an entire month. During that time she barely left the house just in case her thane returned. Lydia didn't want to risk being out for a mug of ale or buying some
vegetables and miss her. She could have left a note, but Diana sometimes got so wrapped up in her own thoughts, it was possible that she would just run past whatever parchment Lydia left out, grab whatever item she wanted, and take off again. Lydia didn't think it was likely, but she had never thought Diana would be snatched to begin with.

The days had dragged. Lydia had spent the first week cleaning the small house. It didn't really need it since they rarely were there, but it never hurt to dust everything off, make sure everything was organized (a feat Diana never managed to master), and resupply their pantry.

There had been a particularly bad moment when Lydia had opened the chest next to her thane's bed. Diana always threw the most random assortment of things in there. She claimed that she had a system and generally remembered what was in there, but she never could recall exactly what if pressed.

Inside was the sleeping gown she had worn their last night in Breezehome, cut neatly in half down the front. Diana had never explained exactly how that had happened, but given that they had offered shelter to a mad man, Lydia didn't need many details to know it had been that Cicero who had done it.

She had started shaking looking at that ruined cloth. There were times the Dark Brotherhood note had been a blessing. It didn't answer anything other than who had taken Diana, but at least it prevented too many other dark possibilities to enter her mind. She didn't have to wonder if Cicero had come looking for her to finish whatever sick, twisted game he had started. Like he had done with Loreius and his wife.

Diana might have half convinced herself that Cicero hadn't killed those people, but Lydia didn't believe in coincidences. They had been alive when she had left them and dead the next day while a spurned jester had waited for relief to arrive. Of course he had murdered them! And rather sadistically too.

But her thane always wanted to believe in the best in people. Lydia still told the tale of how they had tried to peacefully ask bandits to leave their lair the first time they had gone out on a mission together. It had been ridiculous to even try, but Diana had been insistent. That was how her thane was, always trying to find the least bloody path to success.

Of course, the bandits had refused, and one of them had the gall to urinate on the Imperial. Instead of slinking home in defeat, Diana had turned around and with Lydia's help slaughtered them to a man.

After an entire month, Lydia had to admit that Diana wasn't coming back. Her thane may have been flighty and careless in many ways, but she would have returned to Breezehome by then. She and Lydia always traveled together, side by side watching each other's back. No matter what had happened, she should have returned and told Lydia what had occurred so they could go kick someone's ass together.

Skyrim was a huge country. It was made of the tallest mountains, the deepest rivers, the widest lakes and endless plains. The odds of finding one person in the midst of all that were phenomenally impossible, but Lydia had to try. Because that's what you did; you brought the fallen home so they could be sent on to whatever afterlife their soul was destined for.

A small part of Lydia hoped that her thane was still alive. She didn't really believe it, not now, but without proof or a body all she had was hope.

The housecarl packed up her things, assuming she would never return. Without Diana here, there was no reason for Lydia to remain. This had always been their home together and without her charge
it was only four walls. She stood for a moment to memorize the place before closing the door and locking it.

She had returned to Windhelm, unable to think of any other place to look. It was a terrible idea to think Diana might still be here; she had stated that she hated the city with a passion. But given no one had seen her leave and it was the last place she had been spotted, it was all Lydia had to go on.

A cold wind blew across the water. It stung bitterly on Lydia's face as she wiped the tears away. She was dishonored. Lost her one responsibility, not even able to find her corpse, and unable to extract revenge. The Dark Brotherhood was a whisper, a child's story to make the little ones behave. You couldn't kill an idea and that's all the murder cult was.

As she brushed her hair back, Lydia contemplated throwing herself into the cold waters below. What did she have left? She couldn't return to Whiterun. What could Balgruuf do with someone like her? She could never regain her honor, so Sovngarde was denied to her anyway. May as well go for Oblivion and hope that she found her thane at the bottom of the lake.

"You, girl," a deep voice growled.

Lydia turned and saw Galmar Stone-Fist approaching her. A squad of Stormcloaks followed him. He looked angry, but that was typical for the second-in-command. The two housecarls had spent a significant amount of time together when their masters had been on better terms and Lydia liked to think she had gotten to know the man pretty well despite the fact she couldn't recall ever seeing him smile.

"Galmar," she answered politely, "what can I do for you?"

"You need to come to the Palace of the Kings with me immediately," he snapped. "Jarl Ulfric has requested an audience with you. Refusal is not an option."

"I'm not in trouble, am I?" Lydia asked, feeling very nervous. The last time she had seen Galmar, he had proclaimed that Diana was banished from Windhelm. That didn't strictly apply to her, but what if Ulfric had decided it should? What would she do then?

"No, no trouble," Galmar grimaced. Lydia suspected that he was trying to smile and failing badly. "My jarl simply wishes to discuss something with you privately. He has not deigned to let me know. Will you accompany me?" He gestured back towards the city.

"Of course," Lydia said as she fell into step behind Galmar. The Stormcloaks circled her, making her feel like a prisoner going to the block.

Turdas 29 First Seed 202 4E 5:30 PM

"Thank you for accepting my invitation," Ulfric Stormcloak said cheerfully as he embraced Lydia. Her heartbeat slowed a bit to see that he wasn't mad. The Bear of Eastmarch was infamous for his temper. "I hope Galmar didn't give you the impression that this was an interrogation or something similar? You looked a bit frayed when you came in."

"I won't deny I was nervous," Lydia said weakly.

Ulfric and Lydia were alone in the war room. Galmar had been dismissed after announcing her. Oddly enough he didn't look as sour as he had whenever he had been dismissed to allow Diana time alone with his jarl.
"Ah, Galmar is a good man and a damn fine soldier," Ulfric chuckled as he poured some mead. He offered a cup to Lydia who accepted it. It was common practice to offer food or drink to one's guest and for the guest to accept. It created a bond of hospitality and an unspoken promise of no aggression. "Unfortunately, he's terrible with people. He'll never make a decent diplomat."

"Thankfully that is a trait we housecarls don't need for our jobs," Lydia said with a ghost of a smile. "Irileth"

"Yes?" Ulfric asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, I," Lydia stammered, not sure how to continue. Irileth was the Dunmer housecarl of Balgruuf and Ulfric had a bit of a reputation of not liking elves. There was some controversy of the so-called Gray Quarters in his city where the Dark Elves lived.

"No need to feel shy," Ulfric chuckled as he drank from his mug. "I remember Irileth from when I was younger and visited Balgruuf. She was always scowling. I don't think I ever saw the woman smile."

Lydia giggled so hard that she snorted. She couldn't believe that Ulfric had echoed her own thoughts about Galmar when talking about Balgruuf's cranky housecarl.

"Ah, that's refreshing," Ulfric said. "I get so tired of seeing dour faces around me every day." His expression turned grim. "Unfortunately, I must ask you a rather dark question. Where is your mistress?"

Lydia stiffened at the query, not sure how to answer.

"If you are worried about the last time we met, don't be," Ulfric said, waving his hand dismissively. "I can't say I blame her for returning. If I had lost it, I would have come for it too. I just want to avoid any incidents of Diana trying to sneak in here and my guards attacking her over it."

"What are you talking about?" Lydia asked, bewildered.

"The Dragonborn's dragon scale armor," Ulfric said mildly. He walked over to a corner and pulled off a cloth to reveal a mannequin wearing the unique suit. "I thought you had returned to Windhelm to retrieve it. I assure you that there was no ill intent in my obtaining it. Some of my soldiers found it in the Pale about a month ago scattered on the roadside. I had them bring it here for safe keeping. I thought sooner or later that the Dragonborn would show up demanding it, but there's been no sign of her."

"Oh gods," Lydia gasped. The Pale? How had it gotten there?

"You seem surprised," Ulfric said carefully. "You weren't aware?"

"No," Lydia admitted, tears threatening to fall. "I don't know how it got there."

She couldn't stop thinking of the rumors of dragon attacks along Dawnstar. The port city was small enough and without walls that it would be a tempting target for the beasts. It was all too easy to imagine Diana charging off to deal with them on her own. She had always been reckless.

Lydia realized that she had thought of Diana in the past tense. She had been. Not she was. "Oh gods," she repeated before fainting.
When Lydia awoke, it was in a large, unfamiliar bed and it was dark. When she moved to pull the blanket away, a large hand clasped hers. "You should stay still. You've been out for several hours. I don't want you to collapse again."

The moonlight streaming into the room allowed Lydia to see Ulfric sitting next to the bed. The jarl looked concerned as he pulled the blanket back into place. "Diana is dead, isn't she?" he asked simply.

"Yes," Lydia admitted. She burst into tears with the confession. Huge sobs broke from her as she tried to cover her face.

Diana would never have abandoned her armor. It was her most prized possession. She hated for anyone else to touch it and had steadfastly refused to share the design with Adrianna despite being good friends with the blacksmith. She would spend hours on fixing small kinks or tears in the armor. She had to be dead for it to be abandoned like that.

Ulfric leaned forward and engulfed Lydia in a hug as she wept. He didn't say anything; he just held her and let her bury her face in his wolf cloak. When her crying jag passed, the material was soaked with her tears.

"What do you think happened?" Ulfric asked.

"A dragon," Lydia rasped, her voice raw from crying. "It had to have been a dragon. I had heard that Dawnstar has been suffering from attacks lately, but we had never had a chance to go because we were dealing with the Alduin threat."

"Balgruuf will need to be told," Ulfric said. "I'll make arrangements for the fastest carriage to take you back to Whiterun."

"No!" Lydia cried. "I can't go back. It's my fault. I lost track of her. If I hadn't, then she wouldn't be."

Even after finally admitting it, Lydia still couldn't say the words.

"I hardly doubt Balgruuf will blame you for the Dragonborn disappearing," Ulfric snorted. "He's shrewd enough to recognize the true nature of his thanes. It wouldn't surprise me if this wasn't the first time she had disappeared."

"But it was the first time the Dark Brotherhood was involved," Lydia confessed. She figured that she might as well admit to everything now that she had been caught. "After Diana left the Palace of the Kings, we went to the Candlehearth Inn to spend the night. When I woke up, there was only Nightshade and a note with the Brotherhood's trademark."

"The Dark Brotherhood? In my city?" Ulfric shouted. His voice caused the bed to rattle. "How dare they? As if I don't have enough troubles with a serial killer, civil unrest, and a war on my hands. Now I must worry about filthy assassins in the night?"

Lydia flinched at the jarl's reaction. She had seen Diana do the same thing on occasion when her temper flared. Things shuddered and shook at the power of the Voice. Ulfric noticed her response to his thu'um. "I'm not mad at you," he said gently. "Sometimes the burden of my responsibilities is a bit much. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," Lydia said, shocked at his admission.

"If you do not wish to return to Whiterun, I will not make you," Ulfric said, changing the topic. He
stood up. "If you wish, you are more than welcome to stay here. Maybe we can find some trace of those sick bastards and make them pay. Although we had not gotten along very well towards the end, I did consider the Dragonborn a friend and would not have her memory sullied by such a disgraceful death."

"Oh, I couldn't impose," Lydia said, but in truth she didn't really have anywhere else to go. She still had some coin, but how much longer would it last? She had spent a large amount of what she had when she came here and had to pay for drinks and bribes in addition to her own cost of living. How much longer could she make that stretch before being reduced to becoming a sellsword of some sort?

"I insist," Ulfric said firmly. "You never would have been in that situation if I had been willing to be a little more patient with Diana. She tried, but she never truly knew our ways. Maybe if I had given her a bit more time or understanding, then we never would have argued." He patted Lydia on the shoulder. "Whatever guilt you feel, I feel twice as much. Stay, please. It's the least I can do. One room out of the palace is nothing to me. Tonight you'll rest in my room and in the morning we'll have Jorleif set up a guest bedroom for you."

"Your room?" Lydia stammered. As she looked around the dim room, she could make out how finely made the large bed was and the personal effects of the jarl. "Oh Talos, I can't possibly stay here."

"I insist," Ulfric said curtly. "You've had a hard time lately and I don't want you collapsing or risking permanent injury because of this." He smiled wickedly. "Don't worry. I won't sully your virtue. I can easily sleep in another bed. I know I've passed out on a cot in the war room more times than I care to count."

"Thank you, Jarl Ulfric," Lydia said humbly as the man left. She bowed her head, not certain if the feelings of relief were stronger than her feeling of shame. It had felt so good to finally unburden herself to someone else.

Ulfric allowed himself to smile as he closed the door behind him. Diana dead and no longer a factor in the war! Lydia, too ashamed to return to Whiterun, accepted his offer to stay. He could make good use of her knowledge of the hold and its jarl's court. It was as if Talos had answered his prayers.

Praise Talos!
Chapter 5

Copyright Bethesda
Comments needed!

I hope the promised reveal was as good as advertised. I've been very, very excited about introducing Elric Stormcloak and I hope you guys are too. I wrote this entire chapter, 6k+ words, in a frenzy of six hours straight last night.

Morndas 21 Second Seed 202 4E 6:00 AM

"Good morning, Lydia," Ulfric said with a smile when the former housecarl entered the war room.

It had been two months since Ulfric welcomed her into his home, and it still surprised her to see him up before her. No matter how early she got up, the jarl of Windhelm was already awake and working on the war effort or attending his court.

Lydia didn't sleep much anymore. There were too many nightmares for her when she closed her eyes. At night the dark would close in around her and dredge up memories of her thane, and Lydia would be overwhelmed with missing Diana. The woman had been infuriating, but she had been Lydia's friend as well as mistress and it hurt for her to be gone.

Most of her time was now spent sitting in front of the dragon scale armor. The pragmatic part of Lydia knew that she was just wasting time staring at the glittering mail, but she was just too emotionally exhausted to do anything more. She couldn't find it in her to keep moving now that she had accepted her thane's death. Maybe it had been a dragon instead of the Dark Brotherhood that had killed her. Lydia hoped so. It meant that Diana's soul hadn't been dragged into the Void, the ultimate fate of any victim of the Brotherhood. If only if she could honestly believe that lie.

"Lydia, may I speak to you?" Ulfric asked, breaking her train of pointless thoughts.

"Yes, Jarl Ulfric?" she responded formally as she stood before him. "What is it?"

"A Nord is not meant to spend every day sitting about," Ulfric said as he gazed at the war map. "We live in a hard land with an even harsher environment. We were built to be tough. I will continue to provide you with room and board as I promised, but I think it is time for you to start living again." He turned, his grey steel eyes boring into hers. "It's what she would have wanted."

Lydia felt a lump in her throat. Ulfric was right. Diana would have yelled at her months ago to get off her butt and do something. Anything. The Imperial might not have been the bravest warrior Lydia had ever met, but she had never shirked her duty. "What would you have me do, Jarl?"

"My men are spread thin with this damn war," Ulfric growled, although Lydia thought she saw a small smile as he returned studying his map. "I am in need of another housecarl. Galmar is my best, but I can't rely on only one bodyguard during these days. I would have you attend to me as well."

"Jarl Ulfric, I can't!" Lydia exclaimed. "How can you trust me? You know I lost my last charge and my previous jarl was Balgruuf. Wouldn't that create a conflict of interest?"
"Lydia," Ulfric sighed. He clapped his hands firmly on Lydia's shoulders. "I have no reason to doubt your loyalty. The fact you're here proves that you give completely to your liege. If you were going to betray me, you would have done so long ago. You are a good soldier and it pains me to see you wasting away. I won't let anyone under my responsibility be wasted, and as you live in my household I need to take responsibility for you too. Please, I need true sons and daughters of Skyrim by my side and I know you are one of them. I beseech you to say yes."

Lydia hesitated, torn by her loyalties. Part of her still felt beholden to Balgruuf, but she had shamed herself before him. Ulfric did want her services and she did agree with his policies, an unpopular opinion in Whiterun, but why should the Nords forsake their religious practices for the Altmer? What right did they have to dictate Nordic life?

And there had been the rumor that Diana and Ulfric had been more than friends. That she had been seen leaving his room very late at night or early in the morning on more than one occasion. Lydia knew that it had been true on at least one occasion. Maybe serving Ulfric would be like serving Diana's memory.

"It would be my honor, Jarl Ulfric," she said finally.

"I thought you would say that," Ulfric grinned. "Speak with Galmar about a schedule and then acquire anything you need from the armory. I think the bear skin armor will suit you nicely."

"Sir?"

"Lydia, you honestly don't think I would have anyone guard me who wasn't part of my cause, would you?" Ulfric laughed. "You're a Stormcloak now."

Oddly enough, that idea didn't bother Lydia at all.

Loredas 1 Evening Star 202 4E 1:00 PM

In the months that followed, Lydia was at least content. Not happy -- she wasn't sure if she could be happy after her shame -- but at least she was in familiar territory again. Protect your charge.

She also grew to know many Stormcloak soldiers by name. Ulfric frequently made time to visit the camps and talk to the captains about the war. He would stop and speak a few words with the soldiers after he gave a rousing speech about their cause. It was always the same speech about why Ulfric fought, but it was a moving one and after a while Lydia could recite it by heart. It never ceased to move her.

The troops had been on the field all summer and autumn. Now winter was almost on them and they were stuck in a siege against Whiterun. Balgruuf's hold was well defended with its tall walls and the natural hillside. Balgruuf also had a strong personal army as well as the backing of the Imperial army, making the numbers vastly in his favor. It was going to be a long siege and Ulfric couldn't afford to have his men retreat from the bitter cold lest he be unable to take the area around Whiterun again. He had mostly obtained it by his men getting there first. If the Imperials secured it, it would be a huge step backwards for the Stormcloaks.

Lydia had been scared that Ulfric would ask her for inside information about Balgruuf's forces. She had lived in Dragonsreach long enough to know where most of his scouts' patrols were and the training methods of his men. It would aid the Stormcloaks greatly. But Ulfric continued to prove that he was an honorable man and never once asked her for any insight. She merely attended meetings
with him to watch his back in case of attack.

"We lost another squad of men to the cold," Galmar reported bitterly. He pushed a list to Ulfric. "Here is the list of the dead. It galls me to see young men die. They should die on the battlefield with an axe in their hands, not on their backs in bed."

Lydia gasped as she saw the names on the list. She knew many of those men. The cause listed was pneumonia. Despite giving their lives to Skyrim, their souls would not be destined for Sovngarde.

"It is tragic, Galmar, but there is nothing we can do," Ulfric sighed as he also read the list. "There will always be those unfortunate who will be lost to the cold, hunger, and other unsavory deaths. We would lose more if we pulled back. We cannot forsake our position. We must suffer the cold until spring when our siege can continue in earnest."

"Can't we make an attack now?" Lydia shouted. She surprised even herself that she had spoken up. She had never done so before.

Galmar scowled at her outburst, but Ulfric smiled sadly. "The weather is good enough, so yes. But unfortunately to what avail? The men are cold and tired and they are saddened by killing brothers and cousins. Without something to rouse morale, it would be just a waste of lives. I refuse to use my men carelessly. No, it's better to hunker down for now."

"What could you do to raise morale? Go and speak to the men?" Lydia suggested.

"I wish," Ulfric sighed heavily. "No, we need something more. I have given my all, but now we need a hero that the soldiers could look up to personally. They admire and respect me, but they need someone they know on the field fighting alongside them. I now longer have that particular luxury."

Lydia glanced over to the glittering dragon scale armor. Diana always said that if she chose a side in the war, it would give that side an unfair advantage. The Nords would be rallied by the mere sight of the Dragonborn by their side. She wouldn't even need to use her thu'um because they knew her by her armor. She could help end the war but wouldn't because of some desire to stay neutral.

But if she were here and knew those men like Lydia did, she would want to do something. She wouldn't want to stand to the side and let people die. She had always helped people every time. It didn't matter if it involved killing a nest of bloodthirsty vampires or helping to chop wood, Diana always gave herself to the people.

Like a true Nord.

"What if you had something the people could believe in?" Lydia said softly.

"If I did, then I would have them march," Ulfric answered. He raised an eyebrow. "Do you have something in mind, my housecarl?"

Lydia blushed at the term. He had never called her that just as she had never called him "my jarl." It felt too intimate, but she wouldn't worry about that right now. She had to focus on making her suggestion because if she got distracted she would never say it.

"What if you had the Dragonborn?" she asked.

"Dragonborn is dead," Galmar snorted. "Unless we found her body and raised it, and I doubt that would inspire any one."

"Galmar," Ulfric said with a warning tone.
"I know she's dead," Lydia snapped back, tears threatening to make talking impossible. She refused to cry in front of Ulfric. She didn't want to appear weak. "But most people don't know. We didn't announce it because we didn't want to scare people. No one wants to hear there is no one to fight the dragons anymore or that the Brotherhood killed a hero. It would destroy people.

"But we do have her armor. And I could wear it. I think Diana would understand if it was me who used it. She hated for people to use her things, but I was her best friend. She would want me to use it and save people. Because that's what she did. She was a hero. She wouldn't just stand by."

"Doesn't seem very honorable," Galmar grumbled.

"Diana didn't care about honor or glory," Lydia said as she clasped her hands. She gazed at the armor, imagining Diana wearing it right now and what she would be saying. "She just cared about people."

"I can't ask this of you, Lydia," Ulfric said gently. "I know your loyalty is with Whiterun. It would be wrong of me to make you choose."

"You're not asking me to choose. I chose on my own," Lydia declared as she looked at Ulfric, her eyes sparkling with hope for the first time since she had come here. "And my loyalty is to all of Skyrim. Not just one hold, but all of them. I want to help and I think this is the best way. No, I know it's the best way!"

"If you think it's best, I won't stop you," Ulfric said, a grin growing on his face.

"Thank you," Lydia said, having to stop from throwing herself into the jarl's arms. "Now, we need to relocate the troops. Balgruuf's men move here, here, and here." She quickly bent over the table and started moving pieces around. Her knowledge of Whiterun's defenses would allow them even quicker victory.

Loredas 1 Evening Star 202 4E 11:00 PM

"I'm still in shock," Galmar admitted after Lydia had retired for the night. He and Ulfric were reclining in Ulfric's room drinking some mead before going to bed. "I thought you were keeping her here out of pity. This was your plan all along and you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't afford to," Ulfric confessed. "You're terrible with politics, Galmar. You wear your heart and soul on your sleeve. It's what ultimately got us into trouble with Diana. No, I had to keep you in the dark on this. Lydia had to see our side of things and decide on her own how she wanted to throw her lot in with us. Worst case scenario, I got a loyal housecarl out of it. Best case scenario, she claimed the Dragonborn title."

"Hmph," Galmar snorted, "to what end? People are going to notice she's not Shouting. It will cause problems."

"People are simple," Ulfric countered. "They see what they want to see and they are going to see the armor. Besides, I have a plan for Shouting. It can wait. For now, we need Whiterun. Everything else is merely froth on our mead at this point, Galmar."

"We'll get exposed," Galmar cautioned. "It will ruin our reputations."

"Hardly," Ulfric scoffed, waving his friend's concerns aside. "Lydia will accept all blame if any gets thrown. She won't turn against us."
"Balgruuf will know."

"And why would our allies believe our foes?" Ulfric countered. "Of course the honorless Imperials will try to discredit us. That's all they've done this war. Trust me, Galmar, she'll be incredible."

Loredas 22 Evening Star 202 4E 7:00 AM

"You're going to be incredible," Ulfric reassured Lydia as he adjusted the dragon scale armor that she was wearing.

The two of them were alone in the large tent in the center of the Stormcloak camp. Lydia had just finished dressing and presented herself to the Stormcloak commander for a last second inspection.

"I'll be behind you the whole way," Ulfric continued. "You'll be leading the charge. This moment is yours. All of the honor and glory will be for you. I have no desire to steal it from you." He ran a large hand gently down her jawline. "I cannot wait to see you at the other side." Ulfric's steel eyes held promises that Lydia had to be imagining. She was just a lowly housecarl.

Lydia felt like a nervous wreck. She was going to step outside and they would all know that she was a fake. They would point and whisper and she would have to retreat back into the tent and never show her face again.

"Let's do this."

It wasn't a real voice. Just a memory of Diana as she grinned impishly before the two of them dived back into yet another draugr infested ruin. It had been their rallying cry. Whenever things go too scary, they would pause, look each other in the eye, and one of them would utter the phrase before they nodded in agreement and kept moving forward.

"Let's do this," Lydia said, nodding her determination.

When she stepped outside, it was still the gray pre-dawn. Ulfric was behind her, just as he promised. His hand was pressed against her lower back, comforting in its presence. A few nearby soldiers looked up, sleep still in their eyes. That changed quickly as they took in the dragon scale armor that she wore.

As Lydia and Ulfric strode through the camp, more and more heads popped out of tents to observe their jarl walking with the nameless woman wearing the famous suit. As the sun broke over the horizon, the morning light struck the scales so a small rainbow aura shimmered around Lydia, transforming her into a goddess given form.

Ulfric and Lydia climbed the short steps of a platform that had been set up in the center of the camp. They waited a few moments as the soldiers gathered around them. Expressions were mostly of wide eyes and slack jaws as they took in the beautiful armor made of the deadly foes of Skyrim. Whispers of "Dragonborn" could be heard as they talked among themselves.

"My fellow Stormcloaks," Ulfric called loudly, using his training in the thu'um to make the most of his voice so everyone could hear, "today is a day that will live in the songs of our children. Today is the day when the fighting begins in earnest. We will no longer allow the tyranny of elves or the cowardice of the Empire keep us from our way of life. Today, we will take Whiterun and make it a city sworn to Skyrim instead of another pawn of the vast, faceless Empire. Today, we will honor
Talos as we make the first strike against the Thalmor. Today, you will fight and some of you will die, but you will do so under the banner of the Dragonborn!

With those words, Galmar pulled on a nearby rope and a flag with the stylized dragon curled into the shape of a crescent moon unfurled to fly beneath the Stormcloak banner. A cheer rose from the crowd when they saw the hero's symbol with their own.

"Say something," Ulfric urged quietly.

"FOR SKYRIM!" Lydia screamed. The response was deafening and exactly what Ulfric had hoped for. There was no need for further preamble as they poured onto the battlefield. The battle for Whiterun had begun in earnest.

Loredas 22 Evening Star 202 4E 6:00 PM

The fighting felt like it lasted forever. No matter how many foes Lydia struck down, there were always more. Imperial red and Whiterun beige both clashed against Stormcloak blue over and over. The ground ran red with blood and high overhead crows flew as they waited for easy pickings when the battle ended.

Lydia had been in many skirmishes in the last year when she and Diana had worked as bounty hunters for Whiterun or delved into tombs for word walls, but she had never been in a full scale battle like this one. It felt like too much to watch a sea of men on the field, all ready to kill or die for their cause.

The Nord's ears rang from the constant clash of metal on metal and screams of battle and death all around her. Too many times Lydia would see a familiar Battle-Born or Gray-Mane cousin lying dead on the ground. Both sides had people that she knew; it tore at her to see them lost, but she continued forward. To stop now would have made those deaths in vain.

The worst was toward the end of the day. Daylight was fading fast behind the mountains as Lydia and Galmar scaled the stairs in the Cloud District that led to Dragonsreach with their personal squad of Stormcloaks.

"Jarl Balgruuf the Greater," Lydia called after they battered down the doors to the great hall, "your rule over Whiterun has come to an end."

At the end of the hall, Balgruuf stood before his throne. He wore a full suit of plated steel armor and carried the axe he had offered to Ulfric. Lydia had never seen him wear anything other than his courtly clothes before and she thought he looked oddly out of place in the steel.

"I'll be damned if I let my city fall without lifting a blade in her defense," Balgruuf proclaimed as he raised his axe in the air. "For the Empire!"

The jarl charged into battle with Irileth by his side as well as several Whiterun guards. Lydia ignored them as she focused on Balgruuf. Once he surrendered, it would be all over. She crashed into him, swinging to only do nonlethal blows with the blunt side of her axe. She may have agreed to fight against him, but she couldn't kill her former jarl.

"You?" Balgruuf snarled as he took in the dragon scale armor. "A Stormcloak? I thought better of you. What happened to your oath to swear your bow to me, Diana? You'll come to regret this day."

Lydia wanted to sigh with relief when the jarl of Whiterun didn't recognize her. The added visor to
the helm obscured her features enough to even fool one of the people closest to Diana. She didn't answer as she continued her assault against the older man. Balgruuf tried to block her as best as he could, but Lydia was faster and stronger than the jarl.

"You're not Diana," Balgruuf said, his voice full of amazement. "She never fought this well with an axe. Who are you?"

"The Empire has no place in Skyrim," Lydia yelled, "not anymore. And you have no place in Whiterun anymore. Surrender."

"Never," Balgruuf growled. "This is my land and I will fight until I can't. We need the Empire as much as it needs us. We Nords are the Empire! Our blood built it. Our blood sustains it! You should know that."

"Do you truly wish to see an Empire without Talos?" Lydia countered. "Without its soul? How can you claim to be a worshipper of him and support the elves?"

"How do you know that?" Balgruuf asked, faltering as he realized the pretender was someone who was close enough to know about his private religion.

Lydia didn't give him a chance to recover as she pushed him hard against the long dining table and raised her axe. "For Skyrim, for Talos," she said simply as she cracked the axe against the jarl's skull, knocking him out.

"Surrender!" Galmar yelled. "We have bested your jarl. Stand down or he dies." The Whiterun contingent reluctantly lowered their weapons at Galmar's proclamation.

"Do not dare to harm one hair on his head," Irileth growled. She still held her blade. "I don't care how many of you there are, I'll kill all of you if anything happens to Jarl Balgruuf."

"Look at the little elf with all bark and no bite," Galmar laughed. "Typical."

"I promise if it was just the two of us, Nord," Irileth spat as she threw down her weapon, "you'd get plenty of bite from me."

"Maybe I'll have the displeasure someday," Galmar snarled.

"Men, grab the jarl and secure him in that side room," Lydia commanded pointing towards Farengar Secret-Fire's room. "His court wizard should be there. Make sure he's not a problem. Gather up the jarl's brother and children and put them all together. Make a guard for them. Jarl Ulfric will decide what to do with them when he arrives."

"Dragonborn," one of the guards said. "The wizard is dead in here. Looks like he was stabbed repeatedly with a dagger."

Lydia frowned at the news. She didn't remember anyone going in there. "Take him out and put him with the rest of the dead. Farengar was a good man. He deserves a proper burial with the rest of them."

"I knew you were no good," Irileth snapped as she was escorted away. Lydia pushed the feeling of guilt away. Irileth liked no one other than Balgruuf. The comment wasn't really intended for her anyway.

The next hour was spent cleaning up and securing the keep. When Ulfric arrived with his own squad of soldiers, Lydia thought her chest would burst from pride. His eyes were squarely on her as he
ascended the stairs of the great hall. To his right was an older man who Lydia recognized as Vignar Gray-Mane. "I trust that you will be able to restore the calm and reinstate the government with little trouble, Vignar," Ulfric said calmly.

"Of course, Ulfric," Vignar scoffed. "My family is greatly respected around here. We may not have the Empire's gold like the Battle-Borns, but we're an old and honorable clan. You don't have to worry about the Companions either. They wisely chose to be neutral in this war and they know me personally."

"Good," Ulfric nodded, "I don't need mercenaries thinking they're heroes."

"They're honorable men and women," Vignar said stiffly. He had been part of the Companions for years.

"I don't deny they do good work, but they don't need to worry about matters bigger than they can handle," Ulfric said. "Let them deal with what they do best and leave the war to others. For now, do what you can to restore order. You'll be named jarl of Whiterun in the morning if there isn't rioting in the streets."

Vignar grinned at that bit of news and scurried off to use his connections to quell the fighting.

"Dragonborn," Ulfric said, turning to Lydia and pulling her into an embrace, "you were magnificent. Just as I knew you would be." His smile made Lydia ready to take another hold in his name right then and there regardless of how weary she was. "It has been a long day. Go, clean up, and meet me in the jarl's quarters. There we will eat and you can tell me how the fighting went."

Loredas 22 Evening Star 202 4E 7:00 PM

"My jarl?"

The jarl's chambers were cast in dim illumination from the low banked fire and a few candles set around the room. Ulfric smiled when he saw Lydia. Her shoulder length brown hair was still damp and hung loosely. He could make out her silhouette through the simple shift she wore.

"Join me," he commanded as he pulled out a chair for Lydia to sit in.

"Please, I can get it," she stammered, looking down as she approached. A blush graced her cheeks making her even prettier than usual. "You shouldn't do anything for me. I'm just a housecarl."

"You can't think that way anymore," Ulfric chided. "You're the Dragonborn now."

"I'm just pretending," Lydia protested. "Diana was the real Dragonborn."

"You're my Dragonborn now," Ulfric insisted as he grabbed Lydia's arm and pulled her close. He paused. "That is the first time you've addressed me as your jarl. Do you mean that?"

"Yes," Lydia answered. She still couldn't meet Ulfric's eyes; they were too intense.

"Well then," Ulfric smirked, pleased at her declaration of allegiance, "if I say that you're the Dragonborn, then it must be true."

"Jarl Ulfric," Lydia started to protest weakly. She knew it was wrong, but part of her reveled at
Ulfric's proclamation.

"You should have been the Dragonborn to begin with you. You're a proper Nord. Strong, loyal, and humble. You're perfect." He leaned forward and kissed Lydia roughly, showing none of the gentleness he had with Diana. He was pleased to note that Lydia didn't struggle when he did; instead she returned it just as passionately.

"What about Diana?" Lydia gasped when Ulfric finally broke the kiss. It was one thing to take up the Dragonborn mantle with the intent to help end a war and save a country. It felt like something completely different to be dallying with her man.

"She's gone," Ulfric said as he tilted Lydia's chin up. He ran his lips along her jaw making her shiver. His tongue darted down her neck to the crook of her shoulder where he buried his face against her skin. Lydia stifled a groan as Ulfric pulled her shift open and exposed her skin to the cool air. "We can't live in her shadow forever."

Part of Lydia feared that she was doomed for that very thing, but the rest of her brain was focused on what Ulfric was doing as he continued to press his body against hers. "Command me, my jarl," she moaned, "I am yours to with as you wish."

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear you say that," Ulfric said as he led her to Balgruuf's bed.

Turdas 21 First Seed 203 4E 12:00 PM

"What do you mean the Dragonborn is returning with us to Windhelm?" Galmar growled.

The last three months had been spent reforming the local government, trying to repair the destruction of the coup, and housing the Stormcloak army. Unfortunately, it was difficult to achieve all three goals at once. With over a thousand troops now living on the streets of the city, the place looked much more run down it ever had under Balgruuf's rule.

Ulfric had magnanimously allowed Balgruuf and his court to find refuge in Solitude. "This was never personal, old friend," Ulfric had proclaimed as the former nobles were loaded onto a wagon. "I beseech you to go to Elisif and tell her that this would be best resolved if she surrendered."

"You may think that now," Balgruuf countered, "but what will you do when your forces are spread too thin, Ulfric? We need the solidarity of the Empire, not your personal campaign to be High King. You'll regret this someday, you fool."

"I doubt that," Ulfric answered, all joviality gone. "Get them out of my sight."

The only real dark smear during that time was when Galmar received word from Windhelm that his brother had been found murdered. The man's body had been discovered in an abandoned house. Lydia was never told the details, but given Galmar's reaction, it had been horrible. Nightshade had been found nearby.

"The Dark Brotherhood," she had whispered. Ulfric had only nodded and asked some time alone with his old friend.

Galmar had aged a decade after that time. All of the fighting had barely touched him. After all, the man was a career warrior. He had fought in the Great War and had served as a housecarl to Clan Stormcloak since he had taken up his axe. But losing his brother to such a dishonorable death had
changed him in a way nothing else had. He and Ulfric sat up drinking in the man's memory and Galmar spent a week alone before throwing himself back into the war effort. Mostly he seemed angrier than ever when dealing with anyone other than Ulfric.

"She needs to be out on the field leading the men," Galmar complained. "That was the whole point, wasn't it? To have someone the men could look up to."

"Lydia needs training," Ulfric said. "I am going to teach her the thu'um."

Galmar looked over at Lydia and snorted as his eyes ran over her form. It had been no secret that she was sharing Ulfric's bed, especially since it was every night. "You should have kept your prick in your pants, Ulfric. It caused you more problems than it may have solved."

"I'll let that pass since we're old friends," Ulfric said smugly as he pulled Lydia close to him, "but I don't need to remind you to not speak that way to me again. Understood?"

"Oh, I understand just fine," Galmar growled. "I suppose she won't be back on the field before the end of the year. I'll have to find some way to spin that to the men so they don't get discouraged. No army likes for all of their leaders to be safely behind the walls of home while they're out on the field getting slaughtered daily."

"I have no doubt that her training will be done long before then. I think we will be ready by Frostfall at the latest," Ulfric said cheerfully.

"Just in time for winter," Galmar snapped sarcastically.

"In the meantime, we can still campaign by going to all of the outposts," Ulfric continued, ignoring his housecarl's foul mood. "Let everyone see our Dragonborn first hand. Why depend on secondhand rumor when the men can see her in person? This will work out to our advantage in the long run."

Lydia blushed as Galmar's eyes ran over her again. She hated how it felt like he was studying her like she was some strange bug. "I wish I could be on the field," she said finally, hating how defensive she sounded. "I would rather be there. I swear."

"Obviously we can't say why Lydia isn't leading the charge," Ulfric said. "I'm depending on you as always, Galmar. You'll think of something to keep the men's spirits up. If all fails, just focus on our Whiterun victory."

"Gods damned politics," Galmar grumbled as he moved off to get ready for the trip back to Windhelm. "I'm not a politician. I'm a bloody soldier. Just let me hit something. Why couldn't the Dragonborn have been a man?"

"Don't mind Galmar," Ulfric said after his second-in-command left. "Ever since Rolff..."

"I understand," Lydia said quickly. "I just feel bad about the whole ordeal."

"Well, don't," Ulfric said gently as he pulled Lydia close. He wrapped his hands around her waist so they rested over her stomach as she nestled her back against him. "Maybe I like having you nearby for a little bit longer. If nothing else, it will be nice to have someone else around who knows the thu'um."

"Will my voice do the same thing as you were when I, ah, you know," Lydia stammered. She had been so scared their first night together when Ulfric's thu'um had shaken the bed as he came.
"Only if your emotions go out of control," Ulfric assured her. "Which won't happen. Unless it's then, which I would take only as a compliment. It's not a full thu'um, so I won't be hurt and neither will you." He rubbed her stomach to comfort her. "No one will be hurt. I promise."

Loredas 20 Midyear 205 4E 8:30 PM

The next two years had been a wonderful time for Lydia. Ulfric trained her personally in the old way of the Tongues, she started to learn the thu'um, she was loved and respected, and the Stormcloaks found victory across the land.

Then Diana came back from the dead. One day she had just appeared and demanded her armor back. That had been a terrifying moment for Lydia, but it became worse when she found out Diana had disappeared to be with that psychopath Cicero and that she had become a member of the Dark Brotherhood.

Despite her best efforts to capture them and have them meet justice, Diana and Cicero both escaped. Worse, Diana had stripped Lydia of the precious armor and then had her deposited on High Hrothgar like some common parcel by a dragon. A dragon of all creatures! The same one who had taken Diana to Sovngarde all those years ago.

Lydia had done her best to rush back to Windhelm. Descending the Throat of the World with minimal clothing and gear had been the hardest part. The Greybeards had at least given her some of their robes to wear for the trip down, but they had nothing else to offer. She feared she would fall and freeze to death, but she didn't care. She had to get back to Windhelm and warn Ulfric.

When she arrived in Ivarstead, she stole the first horse she found outside of the local inn. Grabbed the one next to it also so she could ride as long as possible. She rode them until they fell and then she kept moving until she found another horse. She didn't care. She would pay the owners later, if there was a later for her.

When Lydia burst into the Palace of the Kings, for a brief moment she thought she had made it back in time. Ulfric was slumped on his throne with his head bowed. It was a bit odd, but she was so relieved she didn't care. Then she got closer and saw the trail of red running down Ulfric's throat. It had been slashed, severing the cords almost to the point of decapitation. A black handprint symbol was burned on the stone throne, loudly proclaiming the Brotherhood's victory. It felt like some sick joke.

Lydia fell to her knees before her dead jarl. She had failed again. Worse than before, if that was possible. "I won't let them win," she swore as she held Ulfric's hand in hers. "I'll win Skyrim for you. I promise. And a Stormcloak will sit on the throne as High King. I don't care if it takes another fifteen years, it will be done."

"Regent?" a woman's voice broke Lydia out of her memories.

"Yes?" Lydia answered when she thought she could without her voice cracking. She quickly wiped her tears away. "What is it?"

"His lordship insisted on seeing you," the maid answered, her voice sounding amused. "I told him that you were resting, but he would have none of it. He said he was the jarl and his word was law. What should I do?"

"Have him come in," Lydia said, sitting up. Her heart felt lighter at the thought of her love. After
Ulfric's death, he was the only thing that kept her moving.

A figure appeared in the doorway before dashing into the room. Lydia laughed as she threw her arms around him. "How are you, my darling?"

"I missed you," he wailed as he buried his head against her breasts. "You were gone all day!"

"I know, baby, I'm sorry," Lydia said as she hugged him. "You know I love you, right?"

"I know," Elric Stormcloak said as he lifted his head to look at the most wonderful person in the world. Lydia chuckled as she used a cloth to wipe the snot off his face. His big blue eyes shone brightly and his chubby cheeks were red with exertion. The toddler popped his thumb in his mouth and sucked on it a moment before saying. "I love you too, Mommy."
Chapter 6

Copyright Bethesda
Comments loved!

A/N: Sorry for taking so long between chapters. I did write some more of Taking Care of Business and The Old Codger and the Virgin, but I also dragged my feet because I felt a little overwhelmed by the plot. There's so much I want to write and I want to make sure I don't forget any of it or skim over some of the build up. I really feel like I did that at times in For the Future.

Also, I was just emotionally drained by writing Lydia's backstory. All of that has been rattling in my head now and finally getting to introduce Elric just left me unable to write for a little bit.

Which reminds me. Thanks to PandaGirl138, JaneDurr, MoggyMan, blackwingedheaven, and dovahkay for your reviews! It always helps to get feedback from readers.

Cicero had it rough in this chapter. He's always a lot more unstable when Hecate is gone and then the minute she gets back they end up fighting! Can you really blame her for being mad?

I hope everyone had a good holiday and hopefully I'll be back a little sooner next time.

Turdas 22 Frostfall 205 4E 4:00 PM

"Cicero, Cicero, my sweet Cicero."

The Keeper looked up from cleaning the catacombs that housed the Night Mother's coffin; his eyebrows rose in shock. No one should be down here. They knew this place was off limits for everyone except him and the Listener.

But there was no Listener. There hadn't been for years and years. That was why Cicero was the Keeper. Because the Listener had died in mage's fire and the Night Mother's coffin brought to Cheydinhal for safekeeping.

Except he wasn't in Cheydinhal anymore. Cicero was in Dawnstar Sanctuary. This was his home, his jester's retreat. He had left Cyrodiil when Cheydinhal had become compromised. People banging on the Black Door, trying to get in. Trying to destroy the Night Mother. Trying to silence her forever.

"Who's there?" Cicero growled as he fingered the ebony dagger that hung at his side. His blade may be retired, but Cicero would fight to his last breath to protect his dear Mother.

"Cicero, Cicero, poor Cicero."

"Show yourself!" Cicero demanded. He looked around the nook he was in and saw no one. Stalking
into the hallway, Cicero couldn't find any one either.

"Cicero, Cicero, Cicero."

"I'll find you," Cicero promised in a sing-song voice as he prowled towards the Night Mother's hiding place. If any defilers were here, they would head to her.

When he reached the alcove that held the Night Mother's body, there was still no sign of any intruders. Cicero turned in a circle, his senses on high alert, but he couldn't find anyone.

"Mother, do not fear," he muttered. "Loyal Cicero is here to protect you."

"Cicero, Cicero, my Cicero."

The Imperial gasped in surprise. It sounded as if the voice was coming from behind him. He spun around and looked at the coffin, tears in his eyes.

"Mother, is that your voice I hear?" he whispered. Cicero fell to his knees, supplicating to his goddess. "Cicero is here! Command your Keeper!" But no more words came. The silence had fallen again. The maddening silence was everywhere.

"No, no, just Cicero's mind playing tricks on him again," the Keeper tsked as he stood and dusted his tattered motley. A great sadness fell over him as he placed a few flowers before the Night Mother before making his way back up to the Sanctuary proper.

If only if he wasn't alone. If only if there was a Listener.

The words, the words, the Binding words. Mother's only way to speak to loyal, sweet Cicero.

As the jester opened the false entrance disguised as a stained glass mural, he squeaked in surprise and ducked back into the passageway.

There were people in Sanctuary!

Cicero peeked out again and saw the unchild kicking her feet while sitting at the long dining table. She was talking to the Redguard as he stirred the cooking pot. Others wearing the shrouded robes and armor walked by chatting amongst themselves.

Time reversed and Cicero felt dizzy as he remembered that he wasn't alone any more. Poor, foolish Cicero sometimes got confused if he was alone for too long. The jester jumped in the air and clicked his feet together as he laughed. Cicero burst from the back entrance and tumbled about the dining table. He sang loudly, "Not alone, not alone, Cicero is no longer on his own!"

He rolled to a stop at Nazir's feet, still curled into a ball. "Oh wise Nazir, where is the Listener?"

"I've told you a dozen times that I don't know," Nazir growled, trying to not roll his eyes and failing miserably.

Cicero didn't notice. He had flipped over so he was walking on his hands and was making his way down to the practice area that way. If Nazir didn't know, maybe one of the others would.

"He is getting worse again," Babette said mildly as she watched the madman wobble away. She turned back to Nazir, frowning. "There has been no word from Hecate?"

"No," Nazir said as he stirred the pot hard enough to make some of the food slosh out the side. The fire hissed angrily from the action. "She never thinks to write. It wouldn't kill her to check in at least
once a week so we know that she's alive or not captured."

Hecate had left three weeks ago to go to Markarth so she could scout the Understone Keep, the stone palace that housed the jarl of the Reach. Igmund had sat on the throne for almost two decades, but he had lost it when Ulfric's army took control of the Hold. Now Thongvor Silver-Blood ruled, feeding precious silver into the Stormcloak coffers in exchange for political favors.

The money went a long way to help bolster the Stormcloak army. It bought much needed supplies and bribes that allowed the rebels to function much more efficiently than they ever did without it. That money also had been an important source of income for the Imperial Legion when the Empire controlled the Reach and it hurt deeply to lose that precious resource.

Solitude had not performed another Black Sacrament, but it was only a matter of time before it came. Probably some point next year after several lost battles. Elisif may have sullied her hands and soul by calling on the Dark Brotherhood to kill undesirables in the past, but she still appeared to be loyal to the Empire. She would want to give the Legion a chance to prove that it could win back Skyrim without the aid of assassins.

In the meantime, Hecate had decided that she wanted to know the lay of the land and political situation first hand for when the time came for a Black Sacrament to fulfill. She could have sent one of the initiates to do it for her, but there was the argument that personally knowing a situation made it much easier to adapt if trouble came along. Also, she needed to create a cover identity for later when she wanted to get close to the jarl.

Cicero had been upset at the idea of Hecate leaving without him, but she never took the Keeper with her if she thought she was going to be gone for more than seven days. She took his duties almost as seriously as he did and always strived to get him back in time for the Night Mother's weekly oiling. Babette had noticed them stumble into Sanctuary in the dark hours of the night more than once barely making the deadline, but had not said anything.

What would have been the point? Who would have reprimanded the two? It's not like anyone else had the authority.

Personally, Babette felt that Hecate had taken the job to get out of Sanctuary for a while and to get away from Cicero. Although the two fools adored each other to the point of nausea, the Listener still felt a need for freedom. Even if that freedom was no more than an illusion. She would always have to return here and it would always be sooner than later. Because the Night Mother called to her and she was the only one who could hear the Matron's voice.

There had been no contracts that could justifiably need the personal attention of a high ranking assassin, especially that of the Black Hand, since Fort Hraggstad in Mid Year. This had kept Hecate and Cicero more or less Sanctuary-bound. Cicero might have been better disciplined about his dagger being retired after years of being the Keeper, but Hecate's dragon blood demanded death and she couldn't always quell it.

Babette thought that it was very telling that the Listener had not repaired or replaced her shattered tragedy mask. Hecate had made excuses about needing materials to not just make a new one for herself, but a matching one for Cicero too. Ebony was a rare material after all. A quick glance in the Listener's chest confirmed that she had plenty of the dark metal to make more than two face concealing masks, so Babette wasn't sure what she was stalling for.

Maybe she had lost interesting in the whole overdramatic routine Cicero and she had been performing. There was no reason for the whole fanfare of the two jester personas when a knife across the throat of a sleeping man killed him just as thoroughly.
"I would not worry about her too much," Babette said lightly. "Hecate always lands on her feet."

"She better," Nazir responded as he moved to the table and started cutting vegetables. "I don't think I could take either the clown freaking out about her death or another stint with no Listener. Astrid was a good leader, and to be honest better than Hecate in a lot of ways, but I have gotten used to getting contracts directly from the Night Mother instead of relying on word of mouth. People are starting to fear us again instead of treating us like some gods damned joke."

Babette agreed that the respect was nice, but she had always operated as a false helpless victim. It didn't matter to her what people thought of her, unless it was their last few moments of life and she was draining them dry. Then she wanted to see fear in their eyes as they slowly dulled into death.

What really mattered to Babette was the money. She needed large amounts of cash for her research. Ever since her failed experiment with Aventus, Babette had decided to try alternate venues of companionship.

Aventus had incorrectly thought she was an automaton from an ancient Dwemer ruins. Although the idea had been laughable at the time, there was no reason why it couldn't be true. There were centurion statues that still guarded the old Dwarf cities. If she could get enough information and materials, maybe Babette could build one for herself. Make it more humanoid than the bulky monstrosities, of course. And if that failed, then there was always the next set of experiments she had brewing in her laboratory...

"Cicero!"

The jester came running from the training area as if his ass were on fire and his head might be catching. Vedave followed quickly on the jester's heels. The Keeper was laughing loudly as the Dark Elf threw a string of curses his way.

Babette merely shook her head at the antics. Hecate couldn't come home soon enough.

Loredas 24 Frostfall 205 4E 12:00 PM

Cicero was so bored. There was nothing to do. Tomorrow was his weekly oiling of Mother, and there was no need to clean the catacombs again. The place was spotless, or at least as spotless as a tomb got. The flowers were fresh, the candles were new, and there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen anywhere near Mother.

The jester was currently in his room, which was a rarity. He didn't sleep often and when he did it was usually with Hecate in her room in her wonderfully big bed. Since she had been gone, Cicero had taken to sleeping curled up behind Mother's coffin. It felt safe there with the Unholy Matron. There no one could torment or tease poor Cicero.

Not that any of his siblings would dare do that. Cicero was the Keeper after all. His position was a sacred one and made him the highest ranking member other than Hecate. But sometimes when he was alone in the catacombs, Cicero would hear the barest of whispers. It felt like something was scraping its claws along his brain.

He tried to stay busy to keep it away, whatever it was, but there was only so much Cicero could do. Nazir didn't like Cicero in his kitchen, Babette didn't like him helping with her alchemy, and Vedave got very cranky when Cicero used his enchanting table.

Meena was fun, but she was gone as usual. Miss Kitty didn't stay in Sanctuary very much. Last
Cicero had heard, she had said something about going hunting in Winterhold.

So today Cicero thought he would write in his journal. He hadn't done that in a while and his personal chronicles of the Dark Brotherhood were woefully behind. Shameful really. Unfortunately, Cicero didn't feel like writing. It took too long and felt dull. And he didn't want to relive some of those really bad moments.

Instead he had just doodled in the pages. There were sketches of the others—mostly Nazir, Babette, Meena, Aventus, and Vedave. The biggest one was of the Listener. She took up most of the page. He had drawn her wearing her jester's motley and she was dancing. She was so lovely with her arms spread wide as she spun on one foot. But her face was turned away because Cicero couldn't quite remember what dear Hecate looked like.

It worried him. Cicero never forgot a face. Well, not forever. Maybe for a little while, but then he would remember again. And still the Listener's face was fading from his memory. Were her eyes wider or narrower? How full were her lips?

What if he forgot completely? Would the Listener disappear? Would she stop existing because he forgot her? It was too terrible to consider.

"I'm home!"

Cicero sat up straight at the voice. It was her! Finally, finally, finally after weeks of being gone his dear Listener was home! He threw down his quill and book so he could run out into the common room.

She was standing at the top of the stairs, laughing at something Nazir had said. "I can't talk right now," Hecate said as she handed her bag to Nazir. "I need to go to commune with Mother and see what prayers have accumulated since I left. When I get done, I'll let you know everything that I've been doing."

Nazir grumbled acquiescence as Hecate descended the stairs. Cicero wouldn't stop staring at the Listener as she passed him. She was wearing her shrouded armor, although the cowl was down. Hecate didn't stop to talk to Cicero or even acknowledge him as she swept to the stained glass exit that led to the catacombs.

The Keeper didn't mind in the slightest. Of course the Listener should speak with the Night Mother first when returning home for the first time in forever. He did follow behind her, laughing and skipping merrily.

When the Listener knelt in front of the Night Mother's coffin, Cicero took a seat on a pew in the back of the small room. He watched enviously as she gently opened the sarcophagus and touched the Night Mother's hand. After so many years of jealously guarding the Night Mother from the unworthy it felt odd for Cicero to quietly stand aside and watch someone else touch her.

Although Cicero held the Night Mother every week when he oiled her, he was only allowed to do so then. The Listener had a much more intimate relationship with the Unholy Matron and could touch her when she wished. There was no fear of the corruption of the flesh where the Listener was concerned.

"Sweet Mother, Sweet Mother, give me the prayers of your children," Hecate intoned, her gaze respectfully lowered. She smiled pleasantly as she listened, her head tilted just slightly as if to better hear the ethereal words. Cicero felt his stomach tighten in jealousy.
Cicero was glad that there was a Listener. Really he was! But part of him still wondered why he had not been chosen. Why wasn't he good enough for Mother? He was good enough to be Keeper, why not Listener? He tried to stifle a sigh as he looked at the blissful expression on Hecate's face. It just felt a little unfair.

After what felt like an eternity of watching what he would never have, Cicero stood when Hecate did. She gave a little bow, thanking the Night Mother before closing the casket. She daintily brushed at her knees although there was no sign of dust on her legs before turning to leave the catacombs.

Hecate walked by without saying anything to Cicero again. He didn't mind. She had to remember all of the prayers of the needy that the Night Mother had given her. If she stopped to chat with Cicero then she would risk forgetting them and that would be blasphemous.

When Hecate sat at her desk in her room to write down all of the petitioners, Cicero curled up on the floor next to her and rested his head against her leg. It felt good to just touch her even if her attention was elsewhere. He kept hoping that she would reach down and run her fingers through his hair as she did sometimes, but today Hecate was completely focused on her task.

When the last name and location had been penned, Hecate rolled up the list and sealed it. The lunch bell rang as Nazir called everyone for the midday meal. The Listener and Keeper went to the dining room to take their customary seats after Hecate gave Nazir the names.

Lunch lasted longer than usual since everyone opted to eat at the table instead of just grabbing a bowl and taking off to their individual rooms. Hecate regaled them with tales of the adventure that she had been dragged into while at Markarth. She had killed a giant, stopped Falmer from invading the city when ancient Dwemer technology broke, and helped out with a bunch of little requests from locals.

"At one point I heard there was a word wall above a waterfall that was relatively nearby," Hecate told them. "I get up there and find that there is a hagraven in the middle of some dark ritual. I wasn't prepared to fight her, so I decided that retreat was the better part of valor. I turned and ran to find myself at the end of a dead end runway that hung over the waterfall. I looked behind me and saw the hagraven was slowly approaching me with lightning sparking in her hands and a sadistic smile on her face. I took a deep breath and jumped off the side into the churning waters below. I was never so scared in my life as I fell through the air!" The Listener gestured wildly as she reenacted the whole thing.

"When I hit the water, I thought I was going to drown because the force of hitting it knocked the wind out of me. I floundered about, not sure which way was up. I remembered learning how to swim in Bravil when I was little and how you're supposed to take a moment to relax and focus if you start drowning. I made myself go limp and floated to the surface. When I pulled myself ashore, sputtering and gasping, a ghost appeared!

"He gave me a speech about how he tried that very jump when he was alive, with less savory results, and how I should be proud that I survived. I just sort of spat up some water as a response and he faded away. After I recovered, I went back up to the top, much more prepared this time. The hagraven didn't even hear me when I shot her in the back. I finally got to look at the word wall and I already knew the damn word!"

The table burst into laughter at the end of the Listener's story. Her look of pure aggravation just sealed the story, especially for Cicero. He could imagine her cursing and stamping her foot in anger when she realized her trip had been completely pointless.

"Over the course of the last several weeks, Thongvor was so impressed with my deeds that he
awarded me the title of thane. I purchased some property which will be helpful for having a base if we need anyone to stay there for a long period of time," Hecate told Nazir. "It's a very lovely house, although the location is less than ideal. It's not near anything and at the end of a long set of stairs, but I like it nonetheless."

"That sounds very good for our purposes," Nazir said as he passed a bowl to Hecate, "but I wonder if you spent more time the last couple of weeks being the Dragonborn instead of the Listener."

Cicero silently agreed with the Redguard. There had been times during her recital the Listener hadn't looked like Hecate. She had looked like Diana. It was a subtle thing. Her voice would pitch slightly differently, her facial expression was softer. Then there were times when she was exceptionally shy that she reminded Cicero of Phoebe from so long ago. A smudge of soot on her face, an innocent expression as she discovered something for the first time, or a shy smile brought that girl back to mind.

Listener, Dragonborn, Diana, Phoebe, Hecate, thane, Dovahkiin. Too many names and titles to keep track of at times. It made poor Cicero feel confused and he worried that he would stumble on her name sometime.

"I know where my loyalties lie," Hecate said coolly as she spooned some food onto her plate. "I won't lie and say I didn't enjoy my adventures, but my heart was here."

"It would explain why you've been so chatty," Babette teased. "Normally it's like herding mammoths to get you to talk about what you've been up to."

"I've been lonely," Hecate admitted. "I've been surrounded by people, but none of them knew me. It's been a while since I've lived like that." After that she was quiet the rest of the meal.

No matter how much Cicero tried to get her attention, with either jokes or balancing objects haphazardly, Hecate kept her attention elsewhere. Even when he "accidentally" spilled a pitcher of milk all over Nazir, the Listener said nothing. It was frustrating.

Had Cicero done something to anger the Listener? He couldn't remember anything, but it wasn't uncommon for Hecate to get upset about something and Cicero not know why.

When the meal ended, Hecate stretched her arms behind her head as she stood. "I have a long ride back," she said trying to stifle a yawn. "I think I'll take a nap."

Cicero followed Hecate as she walked down the hallway to her room. The others went their separate ways now that lunch was over and the Listener had been properly greeted for her return.

It was dark in the corridor. No one had bothered with lighting any torches since everyone was up or out for the day. Cicero could barely make out Hecate's form as he followed her.

"Hecate," Cicero started to say as he reached out a hand to her.

Before he could continue, she turned around as fast as lightning and shoved him against the wall. Without a word, Hecate's lips crashed against Cicero's. Suddenly her body was pressed against his, her leather armor crushing against his velvet motley. Her arms wrapped around his neck as her legs encircled his.

"Gods, it took everything in me to not jump you when I came home," Hecate murmured in Cicero's ear. She nipped the lobe before kissing his neck. Cicero shivered at the contact. "I knew if I paused for a moment, I wouldn't be able to get anything else done."
"Dear Hecate missed poor Cicero?" he asked, giddy at her words. His arms encircled her waist to pull her closer. There was always the worry that she would decide that she had tired of him and his foolish ways.

"Of course, my dear Fool," she answered. A hand cupped his crotch, palming his erection. "I can see you missed me too."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cicero chanted as he kissed her again. His hands fluttered up to undo the buckles on her armor, but Hecate stopped him.

"It would take too long," she said. The Listener looked around furtively and saw that no one was nearby. A mischievous look crossed her face as she unlaced Cicero's pants. "This won't though."

The Listener knelt before Cicero and pulled his pants low enough to expose him. He didn't have enough time to register the cool air before her lips were on him. Her tongue ran down his length before she took him in her mouth. At the rate she was going, he wasn't going to last long. Which was probably the point.

Cicero gasped with pleasure as he arched against the wall. His gloved hands sought purchase on the wall to have something to hold onto as he tried to not thrust into Hecate. She had never done this for him before. Usually he was the one who took the initiative in pleasuring her. He didn't know what she liked, but he knew she would tell him if she wanted something particular.

There was no doubt that after this little naughty tryst, they would run to Hecate's room where clothes would end up thrown on the floor and they would become a tangled mess of limbs on the bed where Cicero would get to Keep his Listener.

Hecate would bite and scratch Cicero hard enough to leave marks. It would hurt and Cicero didn't particularly care for it, but she never broke the skin and it was just another manifestation of her inner dragon. It pleased Cicero even if it did hurt because he was the only one she allowed herself to lose control in that way. He would look in her eyes during those times and see how huge her pupils were and there was a cruelty that lurked below her normally kind exterior that sent shivers down Cicero's spine.

When Cicero came, he called out a name.

That's when it all went wrong.

"What did you say?" Hecate hissed.

Cicero looked down at her and saw murder in those blue eyes. This was beyond anger, this was pure hate. It actually made Cicero start to stiffen again to see that look in the Listener's eyes.

"Cicero said the Listener's name," Cicero said innocently.

"No, you didn't," Hecate growled. Cicero could tell that she was trying to not invoke her thu'um by keeping her voice low. "You said Sabrinda. That's not my name."

Sabrinda! Cicero swallowed nervously as he desperately tried to remember what he had exactly said. He hadn't thought of that sister in a long time. "That can't be right, Listener," Cicero giggled timidly.

Hecate stood up as fast as a shot and slapped Cicero hard. "Thinking about other women while with me would be bad enough," she snapped as her hands curled around Cicero's motley and she pulled him close to her face, "but to call out another's name is just insulting. Then you're going to deny it?" She pushed him away. "I hate you."
The Listener turned and fled to her room. Cicero quickly refastened his pants and followed, but he was too late. By the time he got to the door, it was already closed and bolted on the other side.

The jester tried knocking and calling the Listener's name, but there was no reply. She was good and mad at him this time. Who knew when she would be willing to see him again? Cicero sighed as he slumped against the door. This was worse than before. Now Hecate was home and she wasn't talking to Cicero. That was much more terrible than if she was just gone.

"Welcome home," Cicero said softly to the unforgiving door.

But there was just the silence for a reply.
"Where is Hecate?" Nazir asked. He was holding the list of names the Listener had given him that held the petitioners of the Night Mother. "I can't read some of her writing and I need her to decipher."

Babette and Meena had been sitting in the vampire's room, gossiping about Meena's trip to Winterhold. Nazir stood in the doorway, looking uncomfortable with walking in on the girl talk.

"That one is still sulking in her room," Meena said smugly. Her tail lashed back and forth with amusement. The Khajiit had a personal rivalry with the Listener that Hecate generally ignored. It always pleased Meena whenever Hecate was placed in a poor position.

"She's still in there?" Nazir said in disbelief. He shook his head. "This has to stop. I don't care what kind of lover's quarrel they had; it is time for Cicero and Hecate to make up." He gestured to Babette. "Babette, my girl, I trust you'll handle this."

"Me?" Babette squawked. "Why me?"

"Because you're the oldest," Nazir said smugly. "Besides, Hecate trusts you. I think you're her closest friend except when she and Cicero are getting along."

"Ugh," Babette made a face. "If I have to, I will, but I cannot stand the thought of those two groping each other again. I prefer it when they're feuding."

"Please do it," a male voice said from the hallway. Nazir turned to his left and saw Vedave on the ground. The Dunmer dragged himself up to the doorway so he could stick his head into the room. "Please, please, please talk to Hecate. I can't take it anymore. Cicero is always hanging out in my lab whining to me about how sad he is and at least the two of us understand what it's like to lose a loved one."

"Is Anaril still writing to you?" Nazir asked, looking down at the Dark Elf sprawled at his feet.

"Yes," Vedave pouted, "but not as much as he used to. He says he's busy."

"Aw, poor thing," Nazir said, looking completely like he didn't care.

"Hey, I didn't come here to complain about my love life," Vedave snapped. "I'm not even worried about Anaril. He's welcome to any distractions he wants. It's not like I have to be celibate or anything. We elves understand that you can't reasonably expect two people to be together forever.
We'll drift apart and maybe one day meet again."

The mage stood up and dusted himself off. "What I can't take is that jester hanging off me crying
every day. I'm trying to work on delicate experiments. What if he here were to knock into them or
start to juggle them? It could be disastrous."

Babette sat up straighter at that proclamation. She had her own set of chemicals brewing in the
laboratory that she shared with the Brotherhood. The vampire and the mage had their own area set
aside, but any sibling was welcome to use the alchemy lab to brew simple healing poultices or
poisons.

"Fine, fine," Babette said casually, trying to not let the others see how important her experiments
were. She didn't want to encourage any of them to tease her or inquire about her brews. "I will talk to
Hecate after Meena finishes telling me about her hunt in Winterhold."

"Hunt?" Nazir asked, his brow furrowing. "I don't remember any contracts out that way."

"Oh," the cat-kin chirped with amusement. "It wasn't that type of hunt." Her mismatched blue and
green eyes sparkled impishly. "Meena heard there was a male Khajiit up there named J'Zhargo. She
has not felt a male of her kind for some time, so she went prowling."

"Oh, Sithis," Nazir held his hands over his ears. "I do NOT want to hear about Khajiit mating
rituals." There had always been rumors about how similar to cats Khajiit were, especially in regards
to the male organ. The Redguard Speaker could go the rest of his life without finding out. "I swear
there are some days I wish I had gone with Garnag to Wayrest," he grumbled as he stomped off. "It
can't be as hectic there as it is here. At least he's been sending me copies of all the recipes he's
found."

As Nazir entered the eating area, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and saw that
Vedave had followed him out. "Hey, if you don't mind, I really do need to get out of Sanctuary for a
while."

"Looking for a contract, eh?" Nazir chuckled. The Redguard couldn't resist throwing in a pun. "You
think you have a burning itch you need to scratch?"

"Ha, ha," Vedave said dryly. It was no secret that he liked fire magic. It was how the Brotherhood
had discovered him after all. He had fireballed three useless classmates because he wanted to see if
they would burn differently in relation to their location within the burst radius. Results had shown
that it hadn't matter, which was perfectly acceptable to him. "I'm serious. I need to go kill something
before I scream at Cicero. He's bad enough weepy, but I don't want to risk riling him up. I haven't
forgotten what he did to Eiruki."

Eiruki was a Nord who had joined the Dark Brotherhood a year ago. The girl was quiet and shy
which meant she mostly kept to herself. No one would have cared one lick if it hadn't been for her
hobby. Your pursuits were your own in the Brotherhood. The only problem was she liked to play
with the Night Mother's coffin.

Some of the Brotherhood thought she was just very devout. Why not? Now that Hecate was the
leader of the guild instead of Astrid, the Five Tenets were back in full effect. Nazir had seen Aventus
kneeling before the Night Mother's shrine on more than one occasion when she had still been on
public display.

But there had been something about Eiruki's actions that made Nazir think she had been targeting
Cicero instead of revering the Night Mother. He didn't think her innocent actions had been quite so
innocent. Why constantly leave items out that Cicero would find and know someone had been touching his charge? No, he was pretty certain she had been taunting the Keeper.

Why? No one knew. Eiruki didn't really talk to anyone except maybe Aventus. Given some conversations Nazir had with the boy, it was clear she was as mysterious as the dark side of the moons to him.

In the end, Eiruki had pushed once too often and Cicero had flipped out and attacked her. If he had just hit her once or kicked her away, it would have been forgivable. The Keeper had been very verbal about his displeasure at Eiruki's "disrespect" toward the Night Mother's coffin.

Unfortunately, Cicero had beaten the girl severely and had almost choked her to death. Thankfully, they had been able to pull him off her and sequester him in Hecate's room. The Listener had been out hunting with Deesei when the incident occurred so Cicero had been left in solitary confinement for hours.

It had been nerve wracking with Cicero screaming his fool head off about how he wanted out and constantly slamming furniture in Hecate's room. Vedave and Anaril had wanted to sedate the jester, but Nazir and Garnag had refused. Nazir had said no because he was worried Cicero could overpower the two mages before they could cast their spells. The Keeper had always been a whirlwind when it came to combat and he was more crazed than usual. Who knew how he'd react after being locked up? Garnag had refused because he felt it was disrespectful of the Keeper's position.

Garnag had blamed himself for what had happened. He felt that he was the reason for Cicero's instability or at least his deteriorated stability. Being forced to deal with a part of his past had been too much for the Fool. The two of them had plotted together and killed the last Speaker of Cheydinhal because the Khajiit had falsely claimed to be the Listener, unaware that Cicero would know the truth because of the Keeping Tomes. The orc's return to the Brotherhood was a constant reminder to the Fool of what they had done. Even if it had been the right choice, Cicero was plagued with guilt for the infraction against the Tenets. Garnag had hoped that if he left, then Cicero would get better.

In some ways, the old orc had been right. Cicero had improved without the stress of Eiruki's pranks or the memories of Cheydinhal that Garnag represented. On the down side, the jester tended to unravel if Hecate was gone for any length of time.

He would slip into the past. Get confused if people were real or not. Go hiding in the catacombs to wherever he had hidden the Night Mother's body. No one except Hecate knew where the shrine was now, so if Cicero vanished and something happened to him, he would never be found.

Nazir just really hoped that given enough time Cicero would get back to the slightly manic state he had been in after the Purification of Falkreath. He had been invasive, loud, and nosy, but at least he had been cheerful. Nowadays they had to deal with weeping and ranting. It was a bit much.

Most of the time, Hecate was there to calm the little man down. She'd hold him and reassure him that everything was fine. When she was out for whatever reason and Cicero had an episode, she would put everything down and go find Cicero upon returning. Then this current feud happened. She had been gone for almost a month and the day she returned, they had some fight that left Hecate secluded in her room and Cicero scratching on the door like some damn stray.

It was disgraceful.

Nazir really hoped Babette would get things sorted out. She was really good at understanding
people's emotions and how to bend them to her whim. The vampire child might not be trained in seduction like Gabriella had been, but she was still a master manipulator. Centuries of tricking victims into thinking she was a child so she could drain them dry had certain other benefits when it came to diplomacy.

Tirdas 27 Frostfall 205 4E 7:00 PM

"Go away."

Babette frowned at the muffled reply from the Listener. She knocked on the door again, this time saying, "Listener, it is Babette."

"BEX!"

The door swung open, although no one was near it. The vampire stepped into the room, her nose wrinkling at the smell. For a human, it would have been a little stale, but to Babette, the room reeked of misery.

There was a lump on the bed bundled up with several furs that could only be the Listener. Sitting on the table was a tray holding the day's lunch. Cicero had probably made it for Hecate and left it outside. It looked barely touched. There were several other trays littered on the table, all of them looking like a few bites had been taken before being rejected.

Hecate was curled up on her side with her back to Babette. The Breton could only see a few tufts of black waist-length hair poking out from under the furs. The vampire child climbed on the bed, trying to not react to the smell.

The Listener had clearly not bathed since her return. Her hair was oily and limp, her bed clothes were rumpled, and her face looked blotchy. Snot-covered cloths were littered all over one side of the bed. Hecate didn't even turn to greet Babette; she just sniffled miserably with her hands steepled over her mouth.

"Oh, Listener," Babette murmured as she smoothed the hair away from Hecate's sweaty forehead. She didn't allow herself to get close to mortals. Three hundred years had been long enough for the small unchild to learn that you always had to say goodbye sooner or later. Regardless of race, assassins rarely had long life spans. Even a haughty Altmer could die from a well-placed guard's sword. Babette mostly kept to herself because it didn't feel worthwhile to become attached.

It was hard though. She craved for her own companion. Aventus was supposed to be that long awaited answer a child near her physical age who was also a killer. Then he had the audacity to grow up and decide that he didn't want the Dark Gift. It had been an insult! After all she had done for the boy and he found mortality more appealing.

Maybe that's why she resented Cicero so much. Not only had he brought chaos and change to Falkreath that had resulted in the death of her Family, but he had given Aventus a reason to not only want but also need to grow up. The boy had seen a man's desires in Cicero's dedication to Hecate and had coveted it for himself.

Babette had tried to turn Aventus away from Cicero. The two of them had been close when the boy first arrived. Cicero always enjoyed new family members and had immediately bonded with the child. But a few well-placed whispers in Aventus' ear had opened his eyes to Cicero's ways. If only if they hadn't focused them on Hecate instead.
Still, Babette couldn't find it in her to hate the Listener. She was so naïve and oblivious in so many ways. More importantly Babette knew Hecate would stay. Where others would die or leave, Hecate would always be here. Not aging because of her dragon's soul, bound to the Night Mother's location, and rarely taking contracts, she would be a good substitute for companionship until the vampire found something more permanent.

In the meantime, Babette had to keep her happy or she was no good to her.

"Tell me what happened," Babette commanded as she brushed the Listener's hair.

"I can't," Hecate muttered. Even with her hands over her mouth and her voice pitched low, the bed shuttered at her words.

It was easy to forget that Hecate secluded herself for reasons other than childish pouting. Her voice got out of control when she was upset. Although she showed no qualms about using it on Cicero, Hecate avoided invoking on the Voice on anyone else in the Brotherhood. People still remembered how Ulfric Stormcloak had Shouted High King Torygg to death and were uncomfortable with a Shout being directed their direction regardless of intent. Clearly it was particularly bad right now if three days of solitary confinement hadn't weakened it any.

"I cannot help you if I don't know what happened," Babette urged. It would be better to risk the thu'um than to let it linger and fester.

Hecate sighed, eyes leaking tears, as she curled up even tighter. Moments passed as she wept. Finally, she spoke, so low a mortal wouldn't have heard her. "Cicero doesn't love me."

Babette almost laughed out loud at the ridiculous statement. The Keeper did not love her? Where in the world did Hecate get such a ridiculous idea?

"Why do you think that?" Babette asked, hiding her smile behind a hand.

"We were..." Hecate paused, clearly feeling awkward.

"You were being intimate," Babette sighed. It amused her how Hecate sometimes forgot that Babette wasn't really a child and would try to shield her from adult themed conversation. It was especially ironic since Babette could frequently hear the Imperial orgasming as she Shouted her release.

"Yes," Hecate admitted. "When Cicero finished, he called out some woman's name."

"Who?" This was an interesting twist of events.

"Some woman named Sabrinda," Hecate said. "I don't think she's part of the Brotherhood. We don't have any female Imperial initiates. I can only guess she's from Dawnstar."

"Hecate, why not just ask Cicero who it is?" Babette asked. The Listener just made a whimpering sound and curled even further under her furs. "Oh for Sithis' sake, why ever not?"

"I can't," Hecate wailed. "I just can't."

"You know he loves you," Babette insisted. "Do you really think a man who does not adore you would take the time to set food out for you every day and scrape at your door like a hound locked out of his master's home?"

"Cicero was leaving the food?" Hecate asked, poking her head out a little.
"Yes!"

"I thought it was Nazir," the Listener admitted.

Babette had to refrain from slapping her forehead in frustration. The two fools were meant for each other.

Hecate shook her head morosely. "Cicero's just being the Keeper. He's always made it clear to me that his duties as Keeper are first. He just wants to tend to the Listener. It's not about me at all."

"If that is the case, then why would he find comfort with some theoretical woman in Dawnstar?" Babette insisted. "How can you really believe that Cicero only cares for you because of your position and then have an affair with someone not even in the Brotherhood? Honestly, and we all thought Cicero was the mad one."

"Then why did he say her name?"

"I have no idea," Babette exclaimed. She decided that she could not help throw in a little teasing. "You know Cicero better than anyone else here. The two of you are married after all."

"We are not married!" Hecate protested. The bed rumbled from her voice.

"Then why are you wearing his ring?" Babette pointed to the silver and amethyst Hecate always wore.

"I promised."

"You really are oblivious," Babette sighed. She decided to change tactics by pointing to the shelf that held the shattered remains of Hecate's tragedy mask. "Why haven't you either repaired or replaced that?"

"It's stupid," Hecate whined. "The Stormcloaks didn't even know what it was."

"And?" Babette urged.

"And what's the point," Hecate huffed. "The reason I made the masks was to be a symbol. Comedy and tragedy. They don't know what it means, so it is a wasted effort."

"Do you not see how that is so much better than if they did know?" Babette asked, stunned by Hecate's complaint. "People fear what they do not know so much more than what they do. Look at your own situation, Listener."

"Ulfric understood," Hecate merely grunted.

"Ulfric Stormcloak was not only a very well educated noble and high ranking soldier before he created his own army, but he was a master tactician," Babette sniffed. "It is completely unreasonable to expect his common born foot soldiers to have the same level of competency."

Hecate grumbled some more, but Babette could tell that she was absorbing what the vampire had said. The Breton could practically see the gears turning in her head as she thought. The rumbling had started to fade as Hecate spoke, a very positive sign.

"Talk to Cicero, fix your mask, and go kill some people," Babette advised as she hopped off the bed. She felt she had felt her obligation on the matter. If Nazir was not happy with the results, he could damn well come in here and deal with the Listener. "You both will feel much better after you have
shed some blood."

"Cicero's been miserable?" Hecate asked.

"Gods, you have no idea what it is like for him when you are gone," Babette said stiffly. "I think it is high time you learned." She gave a quick curtsy with a sardonic smile. "Good day, Listener."

Turdas 29 Frostfall 205 4E 2:00 PM

"The old Falkreath Sanctuary?" Cicero asked as they traveled through the Pine Forest.

The Keeper had obediently followed Hecate when she had finally emerged from her room on Middas morning. Cicero had been curled up with his back against the wall next to her room. The only thing Hecate had done was jerk her head and Cicero had gotten up and trailed behind her.

Other than grabbing Hecate's smithing supplies, packing some travel food, and quickly telling Nazir that they would be back no later than Sundas, the two of them hadn't wasted any time summoning Shadowmere and leaving Sanctuary. His hands had never strayed from their chaste position around her waist as the black mare charged across the countryside.

When they had stopped to eat, Hecate had handed Cicero some normal clothes with the command, "Change." When Cicero came back, traveling tack had been set out and Hecate was quietly watching a stream burble nearby as she chewed on some bread. Instead of wearing her shrouded armor, she was dressed in a simple green dress with her hair pulled back into a ponytail that fell down her back.

The Keeper sat next to the Listener and ate his share of the food. Cicero rambled about whatever was on his mind—the Night Mother, Vedave's experiments, Nazir's cooking, and Meena's contracts. Hecate hadn't spoken, but she had smiled and that was something. It made Cicero happy.

When it got dark, they had stopped in Whiterun to get a room. Hecate had been nervous since this had been her home from before the Brotherhood. They had passed Breezehome quickly with Hecate not even glancing it at as far as Cicero would tell.

No one thought it was strange for the Imperial woman decided to keep the hood of her cloak up while Cicero rented a room at the Drunken Huntsman. It was late enough in the year that there was a constant nip in the air. They had slept side by side as brother and sister, arms innocently wrapped around each other. Cicero had desperately wanted to do more, but he could tell that Hecate wasn't ready for things to be normal again. Instead he had given her a butterfly kiss. She had rewarded him with another smile and that was enough for the Fool of Hearts for now.

Now they were in front of the old Sanctuary. Even three years after the Penitus Oculatus had attacked and set the place afame the area was still covered in soot. Nothing grew within a hundred feet of the Sanctuary's husk. Tree stumps poked out of the ground like skeletal hands reaching for the sky.

Thankfully there were no bodies here. The Penitus Oculatus had long ago recovered their fallen comrades for proper burial, probably in the huge cemetery in the Falkreath village. Who knew what had happened to their fallen siblings? There had been no time to lay their bodies to rest before the survivors had fled to Dawnstar. They had barely had time to gather what few supplies had not been damaged by the fire and secure the Night Mother's coffin.

As callous as it might have seemed, it had been better to leave the corpses of the fallen behind to be
seen. Seeing dead Dark Brotherhood assassins had helped lull the cleanup team into thinking they had succeeded in destroying the Brotherhood. It had given the living members more time to regroup and plan to kill the Emperor.

Funerals and memorials were a rare luxury for assassins. Too often a child of Sithis died while completing a contract a guard changed his patrol at the last moment, the contract was stronger than expected, the bonus had been too difficult to achieve. Any number of little mishaps and a family member was never seen again.

The Black Door hung open on its side. Cicero watched as Hecate pulled it closed and waited to see if it would whisper its question, "What is the music of life?" Poetically there was only silence now. The enchantment that helped keep the Sanctuary safe was gone.

Cicero assisted Hecate with unloading their supplies from Shadowmere. In addition to what they had brought from Dawnstar, Hecate had stopped in Falkreath and bought a cord of firewood. They took it down the stairs to Arnbjorn's old forge where she stacked it carefully.

"What are we doing here, my Listener?" Cicero asked.

Hecate was crouching by the forge, feeding the fire and gently working the bellows. She looked up at Cicero's question. "I'm reforging our masks. I'll be making an ebony one for myself and a red one for you. I just hope the red paint I picked will hold. Otherwise, I'll have to try steel for yours."

"But why here?" Cicero insisted. He spun a pirouette in the empty floor that used to be the training area. "Why come all the way down here to use this forge? There was a perfectly fine one in Dawnstar. There was even one in Whiterun and Falkreath."

"Two in Whiterun, actually," Hecate chuckled sadly, referring to the Skyforge. She shook her head. "No, these are going to be very memorable. I can't risk someone remembering an Imperial woman asking to use their forge and seeing what I've made. It's safer to come here."

"And more nostalgic?" Cicero asked.

"That too," Hecate admitted. "This was our home. It's where we started. I think continuing the Brotherhood's legacy with these masks being made here is a good homage to those we lost."

"Cicero is not sure Arnbjorn would have been pleased," Cicero giggled. The jester hunched over almost in half with his arms swinging to the sides. He pitched his voice to a low, gruff almost growl. "'Tidbit, you better get away from my forge before I bite you in half.'"

Hecate giggled at Cicero's antics as he continued to imitate the werewolf. "Did you like Arnbjorn, Cicero?"

The Keeper paused and tapped his chin as he thought. "Cicero loves all of his family, although admittedly some more than others. Cicero liked the wolf better when he wasn't being Astrid's sheepdog." He scowled at the memory. "The Pretender Cicero did not care for. No, not one bit. The harlot dared to slander Mother!"

"Would you think less of me if I said I mourned her death?" Hecate asked.

"No, no dear Sister," Cicero skipped over to her and hugged her. "Family must be able to forgive each other. If we don't, who will? Besides, she has long since met the Wrath of Sithis."

Hecate wrapped one arm around Cicero's waist and leaned against him. She enjoyed how warm and soft he felt. When she looked up at him, Cicero gave her a kiss. It started as an innocent butterfly kiss
that quickly deepened into one that promised much more. He didn't press past her lips, but it was definitely not a brother's kiss.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked forlornly.

"On one condition," Hecate said as she pulled away.

"Anything," Cicero promised. "Cicero is yours to command, my Listener. Always."

"Tell me about Sabrinda," Hecate said as she finished reading the forge.

Cicero licked his lips nervously. "Cicero isn't sure"

"I need to know, Cicero," Hecate insisted. She faced the Keeper. "I have to know who this woman is that she steals your thoughts when you're with me." She swallowed hard. "I need to know if you love her. I'll release you from your duties as Keeper to me if there is another in your life. I won't force you to make love to me when there's another you want to be with. Is she a maid in Dawnstar? Someone you met when we were in Solitude?"

"Oh, Listener!" Cicero exclaimed. His hands fluttered about nervously. "No, no, no! There's not one by you, my dear, sweet Hecate!" He knelt before her and took her hand so he could kiss it.

"Then tell me who she is!" Hecate cried, tears running down her face. "Tell me because I can't stand not knowing. Why?"

Cicero moved so he was sitting cross legged before Hecate. His face was serious for a change. Assassins didn't normally talk about their pasts, especially before their life with the Brotherhood. They were born again in the blood they shed for the Night Mother. The person they were didn't matter so much as the person they had become.

Cicero didn't like lingering on who he had been in Cheydinhal. That man was dead. Cicero had been reborn. But he did owe it to his sweet Hecate. It wasn't as if she had asked about his birth family or his childhood, which was another bee's nest completely.

Yes, he would tell her about when Bruma Sanctuary was destroyed and how he came to Cheydinhal. He would tell her about Sabrinda Vicici and her crooked smile, her sharp wit, and her tendency to tease before granting Cicero her the favor of her bed. Of her twin Synniu who didn't care for Cicero very much and was jealous of another having her other half's attention.

Cicero would tell of how she had been one of the first of his new family to greet him wholeheartedly into Cheydinhal. He would tell of how she died. And how he thought that maybe he could have saved her life. But he hadn't because the Tenets came first.

"Sit down," Cicero said, patting the area next to him. His voice had lost some of its high-pitched edge as he started to remember his lost family. "Sit down and listen, my Listener. It is a long story."
Chapter 8

Morndas 23rd of Evening Star, 4E 186 5:00 PM

"Cicero, we are most pleased that you have joined our Family in Cheydinhal," Rasha said smoothly. The black furred Khajiit was lounging comfortably in his chair; tail swishing lazily as he kneaded the armrests. They had retreated to Rasha's private room, a privilege befitting his role of Speaker, for Cicero's interview of what had happened in Bruma that had caused him to flee to Cheydinhal.

Cicero thought it odd that the Speaker did not look more concerned about the loss of Bruma Sanctuary, but kept his tongue. The young Imperial didn't speak up much. His tongue rarely waggled what his eyes saw. And who was he to question the motivations of a member of the Black Hand? Cicero was a simple assassin. It was his job to execute contracts, not question his superiors.

"Do you know the history of these halls?" Rasha asked as he refilled Cicero's wine glass.

"Yes, Speaker," he answered softly.

"Purification," the Speaker murmured as he swirled the blood red wine in his own goblet. He leaned back in his seat, his chin rested in one paw. "Terrible story. A whole hall lost and none guilty of the crime they were suspected of." The Khajiit's ear flicked at the story. "Rasha reminds the young one because we remember loss better than most. None will bother you here. This is Sanctuary. This is home. Cicero is most welcome here."

"Thank you," Cicero said not sure if he could say more past the lump in his throat.

It had been a terrifying week for the Imperial. He had returned to Bruma after a contract to find the place still ablaze. He had immediately turned around and headed south to Cheydinhal, to safety. There had been no reason to try to go into the husk of Bruma. The Thalmor were notorious for their thoroughness and would have left none alive. If any had managed to escape or had been gone during the attack, they would have done the same as Cicero. Fall back and regroup.

"I don't know how Bruma was run," Rasha said, "but I doubt it was very different from here. We don't abide by any rules outside of the Tenets. You keep your own schedule, you clean up after yourself, and you take contracts when you see fit." He paused, not sure if this youngling needed babying or not. The Imperial struck Rasha as twitchy and nervous, traits that were either a blessing or a bane depending on the assassin. "Rasha does not spend much time in Sanctuary. His duties demand that he travel as per the Night Mother's instructions. If you need anything"
"I will be fine, thank you," Cicero interjected.

It seemed that the Imperial wasn't going to just fold up and curl in a corner distraught over the death of the siblings of Bruma Sanctuary. Good. Rasha had neither the time nor inclination to coddle assassins.

"Find a cot, call it your own," Rasha said, waving his hand. "You are dismissed, Eliminator."

Morndas 23rd of Evening Star, 4E 186 5:15 PM

Cicero stood in the doorway of the common sleeping area. His satchel was tightly clutched in his fists while the strap dug into his chest. It was difficult to tell whose bed was whose. They were all neatly made and if any of them had any personal items out for decoration, Cicero couldn't tell.

How to pick one without rifling through a sibling's things?

When Cicero had been initiated into Bruma four years ago, he had been assigned a mentor who had given him a tour of the facilities and helped him pick out his own bed and dresser. But that had been when he was new and the Thalmor's extermination of the Dark Brotherhood had not started in earnest. Now Sanctuaries were being destroyed or abandoned everywhere as the Aldmeri Dominion's iron grip spread across Tamriel.

"Feeling a little lost?" a female voice asked from behind Cicero.

The redhead whirled around, startled at the new presence. He had not felt her approach at all!

Cicero saw a woman in her mid- to late twenties, making her several years older than he. She was an Imperial also with green cat-like eyes and long brown hair. The front part was cut short with bangs that curled around her face, but the back was styled into a rat's tail that hung past her shoulders and curled up into an upside-down question mark. Her crooked smile immediately made Cicero feel more comfortable.

"Sorry for startling you," she said her tone not the least bit apologetic. The woman stuck her hand out in traditional Imperial greeting. "You must be the new guy. I'm Sabrinda Vicici. Welcome to the Family."

"Cicero." His mental checklist for handshaking rambled through Cicero's head as he took Sabrinda's hand. Shake firmly, but not hard enough to establish dominance. Keep eye contact to show confidence, but don't linger as to not imply aggression. Smile just enough to be friendly, but not enough to show teeth.

"If you're looking for a bed, I can point out which ones are empty," Sabrinda said, placing her hand on Cicero's upper arm to guide him into the room. He noted that she was a few inches taller than he. Not surprising. Almost everyone was taller than Cicero. "It used to not matter who slept where, but nowadays there are more and more of us crowding into here so we need to make sure no toes are stepped on."

The female flopped onto a bed near a corner. "This one is available. You look like the type who needs a little more privacy and one less neighbor would be ideal." Cicero smiled at her words, amused that she had pegged him so accurately. Although Bruma had been a fully functional Sanctuary, it had been rare for more than one or two assassins to be in at any given time and Cicero did prefer the quiet. It didn't look like he would get much in his new home. "And best of all, I am one bed over from you." Sabrinda pointed to the bed next to the one she was currently on.
"I appreciate your help," Cicero said as he sat beside Sabrina.

"Any time!" she chirped as she sat up. Sabrina threw an arm around Cicero's shoulders. "Family should watch out for each other. We're all we have against the world. Don't worry. You're going to fit in fine around here."

Cicero chuckled lowly. If all of his new Family was this friendly, he had no doubts that he would settle in just fine.

Turdas 26th of Evening Star, 4E 186 10:00 AM

"Excuse me, Garnag, have you seen Sabrina?" Cicero asked.

He had just entered the sleeping area and had noticed the orc mage sitting at the common table sifting through some alchemical ingredients he had gathered the other day. In the far corner of the room, an Imperial woman with long brown hair and short bangs sat up on her bed.

"Why I'm right here," the woman said cheerfully as she slinked over to Cicero. She wrapped her arms around Cicero and pouted. "How could you have forgotten me already?"

"You're not Sabrina," Cicero commented. Admittedly, she looked like a spitting image of the other woman, but Cicero could tell that she wasn't. He glanced over at Garnag who was struggling to keep a straight face and failing horribly. "Garnag, what is this all about?"

"Oh, did you tell?" the woman grumbled, moving away from Cicero and crossing her arms. Her face had turned down into an ugly visage. Her pinched nose and thinned lips from being thwarted didn't suit her in the slightest.

"Not a word from any of us, Synniu," Garnag chortled. "Cicero had no clue."

Synniu snorted and returned to her bed. Cicero noted that it neighbored Sabrina's other side.

"Don't let her get to you," Garnag winked. "They love doing the 'Let's confuse people by switching' thing all twins indulge in. You're just the first to figure it out before being told. I have to admit that I'm rather impressed since you didn't even know Sabrina had a twin."

Cicero watched Synniu as she flopped gracelessly onto her bed. It was true they looked alike, but Cicero had been able to tell right away that they were complete opposites. There was nothing in the way Synniu moved that was anything like Sabrina. While Sabrina was playful and friendly, Synniu moved like a feral animal who had been hurt one time too many by supposedly kind hands.

The redhead frowned at the thought. It was uncharitable an ideal that didn't normally matter to assassins, but it did matter in regards to the Family. He felt guilty for immediately being put on edge by this new Sister, but Cicero had lived by his instincts since he had joined that Brotherhood at the age of sixteen and he wasn't going to stop any time soon.

Middas 1st of Rain's Hand, 4E 187 4:00 PM

Cicero slid down the step ladder of the hidden well entrance into Sanctuary. He was feeling elated at the completion of his Baroness contract and couldn't wait to detail it in his journal. It had been four months since he had transferred to Cheydinhal and life couldn't have been better.
The Imperial still missed his first Family and sometimes he dreamed about his Brothers and Sisters, but this new one had accepted him fully, except maybe Synniu Vicici. She had never forgiven him for seeing through her charade, but there was nothing Cicero could have done about that.

Cicero skidded to a halt as he entered the sleeping area. It was empty except for Sabrinda who was lounging on her bed reading a book. "Where's Synniu?" Cicero asked with false cheerfulness. He didn't want to have to deal with the twin's dark glares as he recorded his contract in his journal.

"Out on contract," Sabrinda said as she marked her place and put the book on a nearby shelf. "I'm lying low until it's time for me to join her."

The twins worked as a pair for contracts. One would establish an identity with the contract or a close associate so they could learn the schedule of the household and where valuables were kept. Frequently the second twin would switch in to help keep track of identities and to prevent any slipups. Then when the time was right, the standby twin would be in open view for an alibi while the primary twin completed the contract.

The two of them took great delight in this setup. They loved fooling people with their nearly indistinguishable appearances and it was perfect for any contracts with long term con bonuses. If an item needed to be stolen from a safe or high class information of a company was exchanging hands, they were always the ones chosen for the assignment.

Cicero thought it was kind of funny that Synniu who was always so stiff and stilted around him could so easily adopt charming personalities for her victims. But that was part of the appeal of the Brotherhood. Siblings had to wear masks when out in ordinary society, but in Sanctuary they could simply be themselves. There was no shame in reveling in the sheer number of murders one had committed or the joy of feeling the lifeblood of your victim oozing through your hands.

"You just returned from your own contract, didn't you?" Sabrinda asked as she sat up. Cicero was sitting on his own bed and pulling out his journal. He was already thinking of how he would pen the story for his records. He nodded absentmindedly as he reached for his quill. "Tell me about it."

He paused, quill still posed in the air about to be dipped into the inkpot. He looked at Sabrinda to see if she was teasing him. She didn't normally, but the female assassin was known to play pranks. Cicero felt a flush of confusion to see that Sabrinda's request had been sincere.

Although Cicero eagerly wrote the details of contracts in his journal, he had never seen himself as a storyteller. He could recall his father commenting on one of the rare occasions the two of them had been in residence that there was a huge difference between bards and historians. Historians wrote down events for prosperity while bards would sing about them. Very rarely would the two ever mix.

"I, um, I" Cicero stammered.

Sabrinda laughed as she moved so she was sitting next to Cicero. She gently placed a hand on his leg and squeezed it. "Just start at the beginning," she suggested.

If she had been mocking in any way, Cicero would have just taking his writing supplies and left. But Sabrinda had been earnest in her curiosity. Somehow Cicero found himself telling of how he had infiltrated the Baroness' household as a guard. Weeks of getting closer and closer to the Baroness, always a helpful hand and a ready smile had earned her trust. Finally, she had assigned him to guard her bedroom and shortly after invited him into it. Just when she was on the peak of completion, he had buried his dagger into her chest.

"Oh Sithis!" Sabrinda exclaimed with a scandalous laugh. "You killed her before she got to finish?
"You terrible man!"

"I was pulling on my pants when the handmaiden came in," Cicero confessed. He could feel his heart beat faster at Sabrinda's crooked smile. It was an odd feeling, one he had never experienced before. "It was a messy kill."

"Tell me about it," Sabrinda demanded as she wrapped her arms around Cicero's neck and drew closer to him. Her face was flushed and her breathing deepened as Cicero described gutting the maid so she couldn't scream for help and then desperately cramming her under the bed to hide her. He thought she would laugh again at his frantic attempts, but instead Sabrinda murmured, "Clever boy," before kissing him.

Before Cicero could really wrap his mind around what was happening, Sabrinda was wrapping her legs around him and pushing him onto his bed. Clothes flew everywhere and the sex was quick and frantic. Afterwards, sated and with Sabrinda curled up asleep on his arm, Cicero managed to jot down a short entry.

*Completed the baroness contract. She died well. Her handmaiden, less so.*

He would flesh out the details later. But for now he curled up next to his Sister and fell asleep enjoying the warm body next to him. Sex wasn't something Cicero gave a lot of thought. He had a normal male's drive and turned to a priestess of Dibella when the urge hit him if nothing else was available. But for the most part, he saw physical intimacy as another tool of the trade. It was simply a way to get into the target's confidence and make them vulnerable for an easy kill. This had been different, though he couldn't say how.

Middas 15th of Sun's Dawn 189 4E 2:00 PM

The next two years passed with almost no change within Sanctuary. Cicero went on contracts and kept a record of everything that happened to the Brotherhood in his journals. Occasionally he and Sabrinda slept together, but it was never exclusive. Often it would happen after he returned from a contract and regaled her with the tale, but sometimes it would be simply when the mood took her. It never bothered Cicero that Sabrinda had slept with everyone in the Sanctuary at some point. Assassins were not bound by the same rules as others, including in matters of fidelity. Even if he had some possessive nature regarding Sabrinda, Cicero felt that he could never deny another sibling anything.

In the outside world, the effects of the Great War still shook Cyrodiil as the Thalmor systematically rooted out hidden followers of Talos. Wayrest Sanctuary was destroyed by corsairs while Corinthe Sanctuary was closed down and absorbed by Cheydinhal. The worst came when Bravil fell into civil unrest when the two largest skooma traffickers started a drug war.

Without a proper contingent of assassins, the Listener Alisanne Dupre had been forced to hire sellswords to protect her home and the crypt of the Night Mother. Rasha decided that he could afford to send Garnag and Andronica to help the Listener. Cicero begged to go too but Rasha refused, citing that Cicero was needed to help defend Cheydinhal. Privately Cicero wondered what possibly could have been more important than defending the Night Mother, but respected Rasha's order.

After all he was Cicero's superior, and to disobey would be to incur the Wrath of Sithis.

Later Cicero would suspect that the Khajiit had sent the bare minimum help he could reasonably get away with not appear to be disrespecting the Night Mother. Given Rasha's eventual betrayal, Cicero suspected the cowardly cat-kin had held the strongest of the Family back to protect his own hide
while leaving the Listener to burn in mage fire.

When the Night Mother had been brought to Cheydinhal by a gravely injured Garnag, everyone thought a new Listener would be chosen and life would continue as normal. But the Unholy Matron remained silent. The crippled Black Hand gathered and Cicero was chosen as Keeper. He was given one last contract: to kill the Jester.

That had been two weeks ago.

"Cicero, are you busy?" Sabrinda asked.

"No, what is it?" Cicero responded. He had been sitting at the small table in the main hall as he reread the Keeping Tomes when Sabrinda approached him. He noticed that the other Imperial was dressed as if she was about to go out. He unconsciously smoothed the fine satin of his new Keeper's robes. It still felt strange to move about in the silken cloth instead of his usual Shrouded Armor.

"Tomorrow is Heart's Day," Sabrinda said, smiling shyly. "I was thinking maybe we could get a free room together. Maybe catch up?"

Cicero had not had much time for any of his siblings since he had assumed the mantle of Keeper. He had spent every waking hour reading and rereading the Keeping Tomes as he attempted to at least memorize the ritual of oiling the Night Mother.

"I can't," Cicero said. Sabrinda's tone implied much more than talking and there had probably never been a couple in the entire of Tamriel that used the free rooms for mere conversation.

"Why not?" Sabrinda frowned.

Near the main entrance, Cicero could hear Synniu calling. "Hey, are we leaving or not?"

Sabrinda frowned over her shoulder as she called. "One moment!" She turned back to Cicero. "Are you avoiding me? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Cicero assured her with a small smile.

"I hardly see you any more despite the fact that you're always in Sanctuary now. You don't talk to anyone, which admittedly isn't that unusual for you, but you used to always gather with the rest of us in the evening and at least listen in while we gabbed. You're always reading that book. I miss you and you're right here!" Sabrinda paused her rant, her eyes wide with fear. "It's like you went away."

"Sabrinda, quit chatting with Chickpea," Synniu huffed. "If we don't leave now, we're never going to make it to the Imperial City in time."

"We have a contract," Sabrinda said, switching gears. "Synniu is primary, but I wanted to go with her to see where she was staying and so we could strategize on the trip down. I could come back tomorrow though and you could tell me what is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong," Cicero repeated. "Except that we have no Listener. Sabrinda, I am sworn to the Night Mother now. I'm her Keeper. Surely you understand that."

"I understand that you have new duties and that you've risen in rank considerably," she retorted. "I didn't think that meant you were never to have fun again."

"Sabrinda" Cicero began.
"That does it! I'm leaving now. With or without you," Synniu yelled. The Black Door could be heard opening and slamming shut.

"Oh, she's impossible," Sabrinda sighed. "Look, I have to go, but we'll discuss this more later." She paused and kissed Cicero on the cheek. "I love you."

Cicero was shocked into silence as Sabrinda threw a backpack on and raced out the door. She had never said that phrase to him before, nor he to her.

They were the last words she ever spoke to him.

Fredas 17th of Sun's Dawn 189 4E 9:00 AM

There was a heavy thump as someone came crashing down the secret well entrance. Cicero ran from the old storage room where the Night Mother's coffin had been moved. Cicero had requested the space be converted into a proper shrine for their Matron and to give him privacy while he oiled her and performed his sacred rites. He never could have concentrated if she had been left in the main room, and it felt blasphemous for prying eyes to linger on the Lady while she was laid bare when Cicero had to disrobe her.

The Imperial's heart thumped in his throat as he ran towards the crash. Had they finally been discovered? Was this Sanctuary lost as well? How would they transport the Night Mother? Where could they go?

Instead of an invading army of Imperial guards, Cicero found Synniu sprawled on the stone floor. It was almost comical to see her, limbs all akimbo. For a moment, he was confused by her return. She had been gone less than two days. Whatever was she doing back? Sabrinda had not come back to Sanctuary as promised yesterday, but Cicero had assumed that Synniu had convinced her beloved sister to stay a day in the Imperial City before returning.

Synniu's cries filled Sanctuary as she tried to stand. Cicero was horrified to see that she was covered with cuts and blood. Her face was a mass of bruises starting to bloom into ugly yellow and purple shades. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were wide enough that it seemed that the whites had engulfed her pupils.

"What is the meaning of all this?" Rasha barked from behind Cicero.

The Keeper turned around to see that the ragged remains of the Dark Brotherhood had gathered together at the ruckus. Rasha, Garnag, Pontius and Bun-za stood about awkwardly. Ardaru and Clagius Laenius had died from a contract about ten days ago.

"Ambushed! Caught! Betrayed!" Synniu wailed. Her pigtail had come loose and her long brown hair fell in waves around her shoulders. "We arrived in the inn for our contract, but he had caught wind of our plans. He knew we were coming and had a squad of Thalmor Justicars waiting for us."

Synniu paused as she wept. "SabrindaSabrina held them off as I managed to get away. I thought she was right behind me because she yelled that she would be. By the time I got to the end of the Imperial City, I had lost them, but she was gone too."

"This is most unfortunate," Rasha said evenly.

"We have to go back," Synniu insisted. She waved toward the exit. "We could infiltrate the prisons. We could get her out!"
"No!" Rasha barked. Synniu went completely still at the Speaker's denial. "There will be no such thing. Don't be ridiculous."

"They are going to have her executed," Synniu said slowly as if to a slow wit. "They'll put her on the chopping block and soon. We have some leeway because they'll want to parade Sabrinda around to show off their prize and they'll try to break her for information. We could do it! We could save her."

"No," Rasha repeated, if a bit softer. "We can't risk the rest of Sanctuary for one lone assassin. It is most saddening that we have lost another Sister, but she is one while we are many." He looked around the room, his tail lashing back and forth violently. "That goes for everyone. No rescue attempts."

"Are you out of your mind?!" Synniu screeched. She held her hands up, beseeching for help. She looked around the room trying to find sympathy, but no one would meet her eyes. Except for Cicero, most of them were already slinking out of the room with their heads down. "Sabrinda has always been there for all of you! Whenever anyone needed anything, she was there. How can you just let her die?"

The twin whirled towards Cicero and grabbed his sleeve. "Please, you'll help right? You understand."

"I can't," Cicero said softly. Part of him ached to go. He knew he could get Sabrinda out even if she was kept in the heavily guarded Imperial Prison or if she was in the equally dangerous Thalmor quarters. He was the best assassin they had, or he had been before he had been forcibly retired.

"WHY NOT?"

"Because Rasha forbade it," Cicero said.

"And?"

The blasphemy gave Cicero pause. "And he's the Speaker," he said. "The Third Tenet states 'Never disobey or refuse to carry out an order from a Dark Brotherhood superior. To do so is to invoke the Wrath of Sithis.' There's nothing I can do, Synniu."

"You're the Keeper!" Synniu insisted. "Surely you outrank the Speaker!"

Cicero paused. To be honest, he wasn't certain where he ranked in the Brotherhood any more. He was happy as a seasoned Eliminator, but now he was neither assassin nor an official member of the Black Hand which was traditionally composed of four Speakers and the Listener. His role of Keeper was an outdated one even if sacred.

"We must keep the Tenets," he said mildly. Before he could turn to leave, Synniu's hand slapped him hard across the face.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "I knew the first time I laid eyes on you that you would be another disappointment! I told Sabrinda that we couldn't trust anyone other than the two of us and I was right!"

Synniu turned, her movements awkward as a drunkard trying to get home after a long night of boozing. Or a wounded animal. She put her hands on the step ladder, ready to climb back out into the real world and leave Sanctuary behind.

"Stay," Cicero begged. "It's dangerous out there."
"At least it's honest. Unlike this place," Synniu hissed. "Don't worry. I won't break any more Tenets while I'm gone. I won't betray the Brotherhood. Even if it has betrayed me and my sister." Then she was up the ladder and gone.

Turdas 29 Frostfall 205 4E 7:00 PM

"And then?" Hecate asked. "What happened next?"

"I don't know," Cicero said. He was standing next to the forge. Its low light threw shadows across his face making him look incredibly old or lonely. Or both. "I never saw her again. There were rumors from Garnag two female assassins had been taken to the chopping block in the Imperial City, but I didn't see for myself."

"You didn't go to the execution?" Hecate asked. She couldn't imagine staying away if one of theirs was taken even if it was only to see them being sent to the Void.

"No, Rasha forbade that too."

The Listener looked down at the weeping ebony mask of tragedy that she had worked on all day while Cicero told his tale. She liked to keep her hands busy since she fidgeted when she was nervous and listening to Cicero's history with Sabrinda had definitely left her feeling on edge. The sad elements had seeped into the visage giving it an even more grotesque expression than the first one she had made.

"Do you regret not going?"

"Cicero the assassin knew regret," the Keeper said as he closed his eyes. Hecate could see the sadness melting away on his face as a grin crept back into place. He chuckled lowly. "Cicero the Fool of Hearts, Laughter Incarnate, never, ever regrets! The laughter is our friend! Why would we turn it away?" He spun in a pirouette, graceful despite not currently wearing his motley. The jester laughed madly, his personal grinning mask back in place.

Hecate held her hand out and allowed Cicero to sweep her into a spiraling waltz. The jester sang as they moved together. It was a wordless, tuneless melody, but Hecate had no problem keeping up with Cicero's movements. It wasn't about the rhythm so much as having something to do to avoid thinking about the past.

When Cicero finally started to wind down, Hecate disentangled from him. "We're going to spend the night here. It's too late to bother traveling to Falkreath tonight. Go see if the bedding has been completely destroyed since we were last here."

The Keeper nodded. He moved to their bags and opened the one holding his motley. As he pulled it out, Hecate said, "Now, Cicero."

"But, Listener."

"Now. I want you to do what I asked first." She held out her hand. "Give me your blade. I'll sharpen it."

Cicero paused before handing his ebony dagger over. He had run his hand up and down the hilt, an odd expression on his face. "As you wish, my Listener," he murmured before scurrying off to his chore.
Judging by the cracks in the leather on the handle, the blade was at least a decade old. Hecate absently checked the crafter's mark and was not surprised when she saw that it was scratched off. Maybe the blade had been stolen or Cicero had not want to risk losing it on a contract and it being traced back to someone who could have identified him. The lack of mark simply meant it had not been made within the Brotherhood.

Although still sharper than any iron dagger, it was woefully dull for the material. Hecate frowned as she hefted the blade in her hand, testing the balance. It had the feel of a poor journeyman's work. Criminal, given how rare ebony was.

As Hecate sat at Arnbjorn's old grindstone, she glanced over at her new mask. It did look fearsome even without the shadows caressing the dark material. She had altered it slightly so the bottom part could disengage from the top, creating a sort of domino mask. It would allow her to Shout if necessary. Hecate supposed she could also eat or drink while wearing the mask, but it was unlikely she would ever be in that situation while in her Tragedy guise.

Tomorrow she would craft a red Comedy mask for Cicero with the same specifications. There was always the chance they would decide to switch masks if just to keep their enemies on their toes. But tonightwell, she had other plans for the Fool of Hearts tonight.

The Listener smiled as the blade's edge sharpened against the rolling stone. The ebony blade would come in handy for what she had in store. "Need to sharpen my blade. Make it shiny, gleamy, and oh, so deadly," she murmured, mimicking one of Cicero's sayings.

Turda 29 Frostfall 205 4E 8:00 PM

"And if I spy a singing bird, I'll snap its neck before it's heard," Cicero sang as he bunched the grass he had gathered for their bedding.

Their old bedroom had been a wreck. No small surprise given that it had not been used in three years, not since the Purification of Falkreath. Neither Cicero nor Hecate had bothered to stop to do any repairs after the fire, so there were still dark streaks of soot lining the walls. The ghost of the unfinished mural of Solitude still lined one wall. The fire damage made it look like it was burning in its own fashion.

The first thing Cicero had done was check the hole in the wall above where Hecate's bed was. He was pleased to see that the plug he had made for it was still there. Some of it had come loose over the years, but it had mostly held and kept the moisture and vermin out.

The Keeper efficiently moved about the room, making it tidy enough for them to sleep for the night. He made a temporary fire pit for warmth then gathered grass to make bedding. The old stuff had to be pitched completely. It looked like skeevers had used it for a nest at one point.

The cleaning felt good for Cicero. Putting something else into order helped hold the anxiety at bay. He desperately wanted no, he needed his motley. It was his armor. The physical manifestation of Laughter Incarnate wrapped around him, keeping him safe from the silence. But the Listener had given him a command and the Listener must be obeyed.

At least she had given him a command instead of sending him away or, even worse, leaving. Cicero lived to serve and if that meant being forced into boring, ordinary clothes for a while to please his Listener, so be it.
So instead Cicero cleaned and sang. Maybe finally he would earn Hecate's forgiveness for his foolish mistake. She would let him have his motley back and let poor Cicero sing and dance. And everything would be okay again.

"When I next meet that fair maid, Nelly," Cicero began.

"I'll plunge my knife into her belly," Hecate finished.

Cicero turned around and dimly saw Hecate's silhouette in the entrance. She was standing far enough back that he could only make out the outline of her shape. He chuckled nervously. It was odd for her to linger like that.

"Listener?"

"Keeper."

Cicero licked his lips nervously as seconds passed and Hecate still didn't enter the room. Was she still mad at him after all?

"Do you remember the first day we met? That night in Breezehome?" Hecate asked suddenly.

How could Cicero forget? It had been late at night with the wind rocking the small house as a storm built. Cicero had been sitting by the fire, not able to sleep despite his relief at getting the Night Mother off the dangerous roads and the satisfaction of killing that lying Loreius and his shrew wife.

Hecate, or Diana as she had been at the time, had come downstairs all wide-eyed and barely clothed in her sleeping gown and blanket wrapped around her. Cicero had been unable to resist putting his arm around her and kissing her. Although the Keeping Tomes had not strictly said that it was necessary for the Keeper to practice celibacy, Cicero had not wanted to risk tainting his body with further corruption of the living and had remained as pure as possible.

For that night, for that brief moment, he had craved human contact too much to ignore the chance. Surely one night of naughtiness could be forgiven after years of loyal service? Didn't he deserve one night of just being Cicero the Man instead of Cicero the Keeper, Cicero the Jester, or even Cicero the Assassin?

But the storm had hit and Cicero had fled to protect the Night Mother from the wind, rain, and lightning. His body had ached with need but his soul had demanded that his duties come first.

"I don't think I ever quite forgave you for leaving me half naked and unsated on my living room floor," Hecate continued, taking Cicero's silence as agreement. She finally stepped out of the shadows and when she did Cicero's breath caught in his throat.

The Listener was wearing her motley, indicated by the lack of patches and smoke stains marring the rich blood red color. Smoke from the same fire that had destroyed their first Sanctuary. In her right hand, the ebony dagger gleamed in the fire light. The newly sharpened edge begged to cut something and soon.

Cicero backed away from her as she advanced until the back of his legs were pressed against the bed. He felt nervous from her predatory eyes and how she held the dagger, but there was no sense of anger from her. When one gloved hand touched Cicero's chest, he didn't so much sit on the mattress as he fell.

Hecate chuckled lowly as she moved so she was straddling Cicero's legs. "Clothes are in the way," she observed languidly before slicing Cicero's shirt open. It fell into many strips around the redhead.
When she grabbed the top of his pants and pulled it tight, Hecate whispered, "I really hope I don't cut you down there."

That made two of them.

Cicero moaned and tried his best to not move as the tip of the blade parted his trousers. The cool metal brushed against his hot skin. A small cry escaped his lips as Hecate tugged the ruined cloth away leaving him naked on the bed. Hecate ran the flat of the blade over Cicero's torso as she hummed tunelessly.

"I need you to do something for me," she said, her eyes watching the dark ebony pressed against Cicero's skin.

"Anything, my Listener," Cicero breathed.

"You can't come until I tell you that you may," Hecate said. She pressed the dagger against Cicero's chin so his gaze was raised to hers and he could see how serious she was. "I will be very, very disappointed if you disobey."

"Cicero always obeys the Tenets," he promised.

"Excellent, my Keeper," Hecate smiled. "Untie my top." After Cicero complied, resisting from grabbing her swaying breasts until given permission, Hecate commanded, "Remove my pants."

Once that order was fulfilled, Hecate wasted no time impaling herself on Cicero's erection. Cicero's arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. The Keeper bit down on his lip as the Listener moved against him. Normally he had no problems maintaining, but it had been weeks since they had sex the disastrous blow job notwithstanding. Hecate's cries of pleasure were quite distracting, and being told that he couldn't finish made it that much more difficult to not think about.

Usually in the throes of passion, Hecate would bite and claw Cicero's neck and back. The pain would help him focus and not orgasm until she was done. But today, oh today, she had decided that she was going to be gentle with her Keeper. Not tooth and nail, but sweet murmurs of how much she had missed him and wanted him while she had been gone. It was almost too much.

Wicked, wicked Listener to torment poor Cicero with her sweet love. It almost would have been better if she had decided to beat him. At least that was a type of endurance he was more used to.

Soft hands running down Cicero's back, even softer lips pressing against his, and her tongue invading his mouth and flicking against his. And her body tightening more and more around his. Pleasure beyond words, but Cicero was still at his sweet Hecate's mercy.

"Oh gods," Hecate moaned, her breathing ragged. "Oh, Cicero, my Cicero." Suddenly, she threw back her head and screamed as she came.

The thu'um ripped from her lips and hit the ceiling. The patch Cicero had made crumbled slightly and dirt rained down on the two of them. The two assassins stared in shock before they broke into nervous laughter.

"I guess it was a good thing we never did it here before, huh?" Hecate joked. She slid off Cicero's lap until she was kneeling on the floor. "Now your turn. Don't screw up this time and all is forgiven."

"Even when Cicero abandoned Diana?"
"Sure, why not?" Hecate laughed. "I suppose you've paid your dues."

Then she lowered her lips to his throbbing cock and oh Sithis how wonderful it felt! There was no build up to this either. Her hand stroked him with a furious pace as her tongue lashed against his tip. After their frantic coupling and the promise of release, Cicero knew he wouldn't last much longer.

Cicero sat up so he could look down at Hecate's bobbing head, the flaps of her cap flouncing in opposite rhythm of her movements. Cicero's hand lashed out and knocked the jester's cap away. Hecate's only response was a raised eyebrow and an expression of "Really?" but she didn't stop. He laughed as he wrapped his fingers in her thick, fine hair.

Then Cicero couldn't wait any longer. As he came, he cried out.

Fredas 30 Frostfall 205 4E 1:00 PM

Shadowmere pawed a hoof as the two assassins climbed onto her back. She was eager to get away from Falkreath Sanctuary. This was a dead place, full of the ghosts of the siblings lost in the Purification.

As Cicero wrapped his arms around Hecate, he leaned forward and asked, almost shyly, "Did Cicero do well last night?"

There was a moment of silence as Hecate adjusted the pouch heavy with their new masks. Finally, she nodded. "You did very well, my Keeper."

"Hecate doesn't mind that Cicero said the Binding Words?" he asked, not believing his luck. He had been certain that her quietness the night before when he shouted his love for her when he came would cause more trouble.

The Listener turned around and kissed Cicero on the cheek. "No, I didn't mind. At least that time." She scowled, playfully, but not really at the same time. "Just don't make a habit of it."

"As the Listener commands," Cicero grinned.

No more words were said as the Listener dug her heels into the demon horse and the assassins made their way home.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 9 30th of Frostfall

Fredas 30 Frostfall 205 4E 12:00 PM

The soldiers marched wearily along the earthen plain. They had been marching for what felt like forever. The litany of "left forward, right forward" still rang in their ears long after being put to bed at night. They rarely stopped for meals and they never stopped to merely rest. Their mission was too important.

Some had fallen from sheer exhaustion, but still they moved forward toward the enemy. Some marched because of their cause, but many marched because of the love they had for their commander. The golden-haired god who followed in their wake was the reason they strode across the endless ground with the sunless sky high above them.

"Company, halt!" their commander's clear voice rang out.

The men fell easily into two lines, waiting for their lord's words of encouragement.

"I know you are tired," the general said, his voice full of understanding. "I know it has been hard, but we fight for our home. We fight for Skyrim! We must kill the Imperials! We must win for Talos!"

The men cheered, heartened by their leader's words. The general Shouted back, his thu'um ringing across the plains, warning the dirty Imperials of the loyal Stormcloaks approach. They would all fall to.

"Elric Stormcloak, what did I tell you about yelling like that?" Mommy snapped. Lydia was glaring at him from her position over the huge map of Skyrim that dominated the middle of the room. Yrsarald and Ralof were there too and not looking very happy at the little child's sudden squealing.

The small boy's head snapped up in surprise, pulled out of his game of pretend at his mother's reprimand. The old worn metal soldiers fell into a disgraceful heap at his feet. He would have to make them do laps around his bed later as punishment for a sloppy formation in front of the army's leader.

"Momma, I was just showing them my Shout!" Elric whined.

Lydia sighed as she came over and picked up her child from his hiding place under the table. "I swear I wonder if it was a good idea giving you those old soldiers," she chided as she dusted her son's bottom. He had been scooting back and forth on the floor all morning making the little figures endure an endless march to Talos only knew where in his overactive imagination.

"They were Daddy's!" Elric protested as he waved the golden-haired, blue-button eyed cloth doll over his head in one grubby hand. The original general had been lost years ago when well, it had been lost. Tilma had graciously made a replacement that could sleep with Elric at night instead of being placed carefully in the wooden box that housed the common foot soldiers.
"I know, dear," Lydia whispered as she kissed Elric's forehead before hugging him close. Her chest felt like it would burst from love for her precocious son. Barely two years old and he spoke clearly and played games that according to Tilma were more appropriate for a four year old. She had no idea how she was going to keep up with him as he got older.

"My lady, if the lordling is being too rambunctious, I could take him to his lunch and then a nap," Tilma offered from her usual corner of the war room. She sat up from her endless sewing, quickly putting the materials away in her basket.

"I am not ram butt is," Elric declared. He paused, unsure of the word. "Am I, Momma?"

"A little," Lydia laughed, hugging her son again. "But that's okay for someone your age." She placed Elric down so he was facing Tilma. "Go with your nanny now and listen to her."

"Will you read me a story later?" Elric asked, his big blue eyes reminding Lydia too much of Ulfric. He stuck his thumb in his mouth, leaving the general doll hanging precariously in a four fingered grip.

"If I have time," Lydia said, hoping she would. She didn't have nearly enough time with her little prince and he was growing so fast. It was still hard to imagine him out of swaddling.

"You'll tell me more about Yol-riik?" Elric asked, stumbling over his father's name. Lydia thought it was adorable, but if anyone corrected him Elric got pouty. When Lydia nodded, he continued. "You'll tell me when he was with the Gray-Manes?"

"Greybeards, darling," Lydia amended. "The Gray-Manes are someone completely different."

"Did Daddy have a gray beard?" Elric asked as he suspiciously eyed his plush doll. He wanted to make sure it was accurate as possible.

"No, dear," Lydia answered, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. "He didn't get a chance to get old enough for that."

"Enough of that," Tilma said, as she took Elric's hand. "Your lady mother has enough to do with leading an army. I'll answer your questions about your papa as you eat your lunch. Then a bath."

"I don't wanna," Elric said in his high-pitched voice as Tilma lead him to the kitchens. "A good soldier should be covered in the dust of his travels."

"But not young lordlings from rolling on the ground," Tilma retorted, her voice fading as they left. Lydia ached to follow the duo. She wanted to be there and wipe her son's chin as he ate messily. She wanted to wash his hair as he splashed in his bath. She wanted to tuck him in, tell him make believe stories and kiss him good night. She wanted..."

"My regent," Yrsarald said, pulling Lydia back to stark reality, "we need to continue our planning."

"I'm sorry," Lydia said as she returned to her position next to the war table. At least she had Tilma here to help raise her son properly.

Tilma the Haggard had been a maid for the Companions for as long as Lydia could remember. She could still recall the woman walking down the steps from the renowned mead hall towards market when Lydia had been a little older than Elric. When Lydia had discovered that she was pregnant, she had approached Tilma and asked her to be Elric's governess.
"I need someone who will care for my son," Lydia had said. "I won't be able to raise him personally with the war going on."

"I don't get involved with politics," Tilma had interrupted.

"I'm not asking you to pledge your loyalty to the cause," Lydia had reassured her. "I just need someone to help my son grow into an honorable man."

"That I can do," Tilma had answered before taking Lydia's hand and squeezing it gently.

"Have we heard back from Sky Haven Temple?" Lydia asked as she looked at the troop movement schedule. They were stretched thin across Skyrim and it worried Lydia.

"No, still silence," Ralof reported.

Back in Midyear, after the report from Private Saeda about the Dark Brotherhood attack on Fort Hraggstad, Lydia had tried to contact the Blades about a possible alliance. Both sides would have benefited greatly by combining forces. The Blades had been the Emperor's personal guard and trained in dealing with assassins before being dismantled at the end of the Great War. Delphine would have had incredible insight on how to stop assassins as well as how to deal with the continuing dragon attacks throughout the country. In return, the Stormcloaks could have given her resources like new recruits and funding for Esbern's research on dragons.

The problem, as it was all too often, was Diana. Or Hecate. Or whatever in Oblivion she called herself nowadays. Delphine still held a grudge for the Dragonborn's rude dismissal of her command to kill Paarthurnax. Lydia had made the mistake of not telling Yrsarald to avoid announcing he was there on behalf of the Dragonborn when he met with Delphine.

When the Breton had heard the Dragonborn had requested her help, she had immediately turned the Stormcloak representative away without another word. "I won't talk to her until Paarthurnax is no longer a problem," Delphine had snapped before the heavy temple doors had slammed in Yrsarald's face.

It was risky to bring Delphine in as a confidante. The woman knew the truth about the Dragonborn, that the hero of legend was really Diana and not Lydia. But Lydia held out hope that Delphine's constant disappointment at the small Imperial's laidback attitude would encourage her to support Lydia's claim. There had always been the unspoken opinion that Delphine had wished Lydia had been the Dragonborn instead of Diana. Hopefully that would work in Lydia's favor now.

"I'm going to have to go myself," Lydia resigned. "It's the only way."

"Why do we need these people?" Ralof asked. "The Stormcloaks have found victory across the land without them."

"Because they're dragonslayers, or they were in the old days," Lydia answered. "The Blades are sworn to serve the Dragonborn. I met the Grandmaster several years ago when I first discovered what it meant to be Dragonborn. Delphine and Esbern were invaluable help to me during that time and I think they could provide us with better training on fighting dragons now as well as help to protect our people from the Brotherhood."

"If you're such good friends, then why is she refusing to answer your call now?" Yrsarald asked suspiciously.

"There was a misunderstanding with my companion," Lydia said, privately amazed at how easily the lies came now. "It caused an unfortunate estrangement that lead to Delphine withdrawing her support
until it was resolved."

"Why did you allow your squire to speak in such a manner?" Yrsarald pushed. Damn, he was a sharp one.

"I thought she was right at the time," Lydia admitted. Delphine had wanted them to kill Paarthurnax, a reasonable request from one dragonslayer to another, but there was something gentle about the old creature. Now Lydia wasn't sure she could get past the Greybeards without them standing to defend their master. Between their mastery of Shouts and the potential for her charade to be exposed, it was too risky. "Now I realize I chose poorly and wish to make amends. The only way to do that is to personally apologize. I should have gone initially, but with it being summer I had too many responsibilities. Now with the firm grip of winter upon us, I can afford to break away from court for a couple of weeks to make the trek to the Reach and petition Delphine personally. That will be all for today, gentlemen."

Lydia stepped away from the war table. There would be many plans to make before she could leave, but the sooner the better. It was essential to resolve this issue with the Blades. Lydia shuddered to think of what diabolical plans Hecate might be hatching at this very minute.

Fredas 30 Frostfall 205 4E 7:00 PM

"May I present the Lady Dragonborn and her consort!"

Diana and Cicero looked resplendent in their identically colored outfits. Cut in the Imperial style, Diana's dress floated about her while Cicero's sharply cut tunic clung to his chest. Her black hair flowed down until it reached the small of her back, while his shoulder length red hair was pulled into a queue. They each wore a golden circlet set with a ruby. The gold trim and rich red material of their matching outfits shimmered like good Imperial wine, blood red in the right light, marking both their heritage and allegiance proudly. They made a handsome couple as they smiled and waved to the gathered court.

Elisif hated it.

"That expression does not become you, my jarl," Sybille warned. "Keep it up and you'll get wrinkles."

"How can you even tell?" Elisif asked, tugging on the elaborate half-mask she was wearing. It was shaped in the image of a wolf's face to represent her city's heraldry. Not the most flattering piece, but it sent a message of dedication to her people.

"I can tell," Sybille said with a narrow smile. She was wearing a terrifying draugr type mask. It also only covered the top half of her face, although the sides curved down similar to long vampiric fangs leaving an opening for Sybille's mouth if she desired to eat or drink. Not that Elisif had ever seen her court wizard do either.

Everyone was wearing masks for the ball celebrating the Emperor's birthday. Elisif thought it was a bit pointless given that Titus Mede II had been murdered almost three years ago and no new heir had taken his place, but Tullius had insisted. Right before he took off back to Cyrodiil for the winter to petition the Elder Council for more troops and funds, and to remind the court there that he was still alive and doing his job whether he wanted to or not.

General Tullius was a good and honorable man, though he hid it well, but it was widely known that
he had no personal interest in Skyrim. He was here to do his duty to his country by securing a province that should have had its complete support behind its sovereign nation. Tullius wanted to win this war, earn his retirement, and go back home to the Imperial City. Elisif sympathized with the older man. The war should have been over already. The Stormcloak Rebellion should have fallen apart with both Ulfric Stormcloak and Galmar Stone-Fist dead.

But that upstart Lydia Stormblade had to take the leadership and keep that ragtag rabble together.

"You're making that expression again," Sybille warned.

"I'm not just a pretty face," Elisif snarled.

"No, but that's what people see," Sybille retorted. She bowed and left Elisif alone to stew over that comment.

Instead, Elisif chose to watch Diana and Cicero twirling together on the dance floor. Every time they came to a gathering in the Blue Palace, Cicero would insist that Diana dance with him first thing. He knew that the Dragonborn would be swarmed with petitioners and sycophants the moment they officially entered the presence of the court, so he would steal that one dance to last him the night.

They were the only people in the room not wearing some sort of mask, so it was impossible to not see the love and adoration they had for each other as they moved together on the dance floor. Everyone was watching them, envying them. It didn't matter if it was because they were powerful and rich, or that she had been born with the soul of a dragon, or he was graceful and charming. Everyone wanted to be them in one way or another.

Elisif wondered if she was the only one who envied Cicero's relationship with the Dragonborn.

When the song ended, Cicero smoothly knelt and kissed Diana's hand before lightly skipping away to find a new dance partner. He would go through them like an archer went through arrows, never dancing with the same person twice. Elisif was glad that Cicero seemed obsessed with dancing. It meant he wouldn't be lingering nearby when Diana presented herself to the court.

It wasn't that Cicero wasn't pleasant company; Elisif just couldn't take the secret smiles and touches he was allowed to share with Diana. It sharply reminded her of Torygg and that he had been dead for over four years now.

"Good evening, my jarl," Diana said as she curtsied.

"Good evening, Diana, welcome to..." Elisif started.

"It is always such a pleasure to have you here in the Blue Palace!" Erikur interrupted. He stepped forward to take the Dragonborn's hand and kiss it much like Cicero had done. "Didn't anyone tell you that you were supposed to come in costume for the event?"

"I was aware," Diana said coolly as she took her hand back.

"Then what are you supposed to be?" Erikur asked.

"The heroic Dragonborn, of course," Diana shot back, one eyebrow raised sarcastically. The court laughed at her joke.

"How was your" Elisif tried again, but once again she was interrupted, this time by Bryling.

"I simply love your outfit," she gushed. "Wherever did you get it?"
"Where I always get my wardrobe, the Radiant Raiment," Diana chuckled.

"I don't know how you can stand those two," Erikur sniffed. "They are so rude."

"Only Endarie, really," Diana said defensively. "Taarie is actually really good with people. She just lets her passion for fashion overwhelm her sense for discretion sometimes."

"How does Jordis like her new arrangements?" Falk Firebeard asked suddenly.

"Very much, thank you."

And that's how it continued for the rest of the night. Any time Diana was actually near Elisif and not pulled away to talk to some thane or deposed jarl, Elisif was overridden by someone. It was so frustrating! She had been looking forward to seeing Diana at this gala for months, ever since Falk had pulled her aside for the private meeting with Jarl Balgruuf regarding retaking Whiterun.

Whiterun was an essential hold for the war. It held a central position on the map, many trade routes, and a decent amount of wealth. Unfortunately, it would have to wait until Markarth was taken back. The silver mines provided too much coin for the previously poorly-funded Stormcloaks. Tullius dreaded the siege that would occur outside the stone city. Markarth was well-defended as well as rich. It would be a hard and bitter battle.

Unless Elisif called upon her special friends for help.

The problem was that Elisif wasn't certain she wanted to be more in debt to the Sithis-worshipping cult. Was she damning her soul every time she called upon them? Did it matter after that first time when she had sent them after that conniving, backstabbing traitorous Ulfric? She didn't know, but it had felt righteous to call the Brotherhood upon the man. How did he like it when someone snuck into his home and killed him before his court?

It had felt less righteous when she had summoned them to take back Fort Hragstad. She hadn't even known the captain they had slain for their dark god. But the Imperials had lost too much territory. If they hadn't taken the fort when they did, they would have lost the war. Elisif had given the Imperial Army every chance, but when it had been obvious some extra help had been needed, she had summoned the Brotherhood.

If only if they hadn't left such a bloody and terrifying message.

Elisif had voted against the ball being a masquerade initially because of the masks worn by Tragedy and Comedy, as the two assassins called themselves. The ebony sheen and red lacquer of those leering visages left her with nightmares every time she met them. But Erikur insisted that it was popular down in Cyrodiil and what was popular in Cyrodiil should be popular in Skyrim. "It promotes solidarity, you know," he had said.

Privately Elisif thought Erikur meant that it promoted profit for him since his motto "The Imperials are good for business, and business is good for Skyrim" had fallen back to her. She thought it was a pity that one of her thanes seemed to only care about profit, but Falk had told her that estranging Erikur would cause more problems than it would solve. For better or for worse, he had much of the businesses of Solitude either indebted to him or owned outright. Losing the support of the local market would be even more of a strain on the city's already depleted coffers.

"May I have this dance?"

Elisif was pulled out of her train of thought to find Cicero standing in front of her, his hand extended
for the requested dance.

"Oh, no, thank you," Elisif began.

"Of course, she would love to," Falk interjected. He leaned close to the jarl as if to help her from her position on the throne so he could whisper, "It would not do to slight the Dragonborn's husband. Besides, you've done nothing except sit on the throne all night. One dance would be good for you."

Before Elisif could respond, she was in Cicero's arms and whisked onto the dance floor. She had been worried that he would try to spin her into some intricate dance step, but thankfully it was a simple waltz. It had been years, since Torygg, that she had danced. Trying to save a failing kingdom had left little time for such things.

"You've been trained in dancing," Cicero stated with a pleased voice, his intense amber stare boring past the safety of Elisif's wolf mask.

"Of course," Elisif said, glancing away. It had always been hard for her to match someone's gaze. It felt too aggressive, too challenging. "It is standard for a nobleman's daughter and the future queen of Skyrim."

"It is also common for a nobleman's daughter to learn how to meet her opponent's eyes," Cicero chided as he gently tilted Elisif's chin so she was looking at him again. "If you always look away, they will know they have already won."

Elisif felt uncomfortable with how close Cicero was holding her. His hand on her back felt too possessive, too familiar. And that stupid, private, smug grin that was always on his lips simply infuriated her. Before she could stop herself, Elisif retorted, "And who are you to reprimand me on proper courtly etiquette?"

"A simple fool," Cicero chuckled. The word sent a chill down Elisif's back. Tragedy and Comedy liked to call themselves the Fool of Fate and Fool of Hearts respectively. "I am always giving unsolicited advice to my betters." He was still smiling, but there was a hardness there now that scared Elisif.

They danced for a few moments in silence. Elisif forced herself to not look away from Cicero as they danced, trusting their movements completely to his lead as they twirled on the dance floor. It was so hard for her to keep eye contact for so long. She had always been the shy one, while Torygg had been the naturally charming and charismatic king.

"I know you've been trying to get Diana's attention all night," Cicero said suddenly. "It's a shame the lords and ladies of this court would disrespect their queen so by their constant interruptions."

"I'm not queen yet," Elisif blushed.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't act like one if you wish to truly earn the title instead of merely wearing it for others," Cicero said. "You're lucky that the Stormcloaks rely on force as their political method. If Lydia wasn't a housecarl out of her league, she could call for a treaty of peace, summon the Moot and win with all of her jarls backing her. When," Elisif could hear the certainty of that word. When, not if, "when the Imperial Army wins this little war, the moot will be called and you hope to be named queen because of tradition. Tradition was Ulfric's standard. Maybe you should consider a different ideology if you wish for your land to be considered for anything more than its ice and snow and history of strong warriors by the rest of Tamriel."

"You speak too freely," Elisif said, overwhelmed by Cicero's straightforwardness and how right he
sounded. Gods, it would be nice to have someone in her court that supported her opinion, and not just her beauty and her claim based on her marriage to Torygg.

"Someone needs to," Cicero said. "The High King's court needs a jester." His expression was unfocused, making Elisif even more uncomfortable. "There should always be someone to tell the king that he is a fool. Otherwise, how will a ruler know the truth of the people's hearts?" Cicero's attention snapped back to his dancing partner. "Pity about your headache."

"What? I don't" Elisif felt very confused now.

As the song ended, Cicero whirled them off the dance floor. Instead of going back towards the throne, he guided her to where Diana was talking to Jarl Balgruuf and his entourage. "My darling, dear, delectable Diana," Cicero cooed, "could you help our Lady Elisif? She's developed the most horrid headache and it would be improper for me to escort her to her rooms for a chance to recover in silence."

"You, improper?" Diana quipped, one eyebrow raised. "I never imagined I would hear you say such a thing."

"You know me," Cicero giggled. "I am always one for propriety."

"Hmph," Diana snorted, not believing the redhead in the slightest. She turned to Balgruuf. "Forgive me, my jarl, but Jarl Elisif is in need of me."

"But of course," Balgruuf nodded.

Elisif couldn't believe how easily Cicero had managed that little turn of events. Of course, he had the luxury of being the Dragonborn's consort and could act with any level of familiarity with her. But the simplicity of stating what you wanted without worrying about what others thought and the same ease at how they had accepted it stunned her.

As Diana took her hand, Elisif turned to Cicero and managed to mouth "Thank you" before being whisked away by the Dragonborn.

Cicero's only response was to demurely look away, a gesture that almost made Elisif laugh.

Elisif felt her heart in her throat as Diana escorted her away from the ball and towards her room. The loud chatter of conversation and music quickly faded away as they walked down the corridor. Elisif stole glances at Diana's profile as they walked. It always surprised her how much shorter the Imperial woman was. Diana seemed to fill a room with her presence making her mentally a giant to most people. But in person, she was usually a full hand shorter than the smallest Nord.

Elisif envied that confidence.

"How have you been since we last spoke, my jarl?" Diana asked as she pulled open Elisif's bedroom door and waved for the Nord to enter.

"I've been fine, I suppose, given the recent events with the war," Elisif said. She paused, expecting Diana to launch into a story about her own adventures, but instead the Imperial waited for her to continue. It was one of the many things about the Dragonborn that Elisif liked. Most people simply waited for their turn to speak, but Diana actually listened! "General Tullius went back to Cyrodiil for the winter, so I've mostly been following Falk's advice on how to deal with all of our displaced jarls during the cold months. I suppose this ball was a good idea, but it feels a bit frivolous to me. How can we justify hiring entertainers and a banquet of food when people are starving?"
"These are hard times," Diana agreed, squeezing Elisif's hand, "but you can't forget the joys of living in the midst of all the death. Maybe you could arrange something special for the common folk when New Life Day arrives?"

Elisif swallowed, the sudden lump in her throat felt hard and unrelenting. They had planned something for the common folk already. It wasn't anything as pleasant as free food in addition to the free ale that would be flowing that day, but it was supposed to boost morale. It just didn't boost her own.

Unless her desperate idea worked.

"Actually," Elisif murmured, "Falk, Tullius and Balgruuf have something planned. I would like to modify it with your support."

"What is it, my jarl?" Diana asked.

By the Eight! Elisif had practiced this so many times and now Diana was here she found that she couldn't speak. Should she be subtle? Straight forward? How to do this without offending anyone? What could Cicero do?

Gathering her courage, Elisif stepped closer to Diana so she could wrap her arm about the Imperial's waist. Keeping eye contact, the jarl leaned forward and kissed Diana fully on the lips. She thought about trying to press her tongue against the other woman's, but her shyness pulled her back at the last minute. As they parted, Elisif declared, "Diana Dragonborn, will you marry me?"

Fredas 30 Frostfall 205 4E 11:00 PM

It was cold in Sky Haven Temple, but that was nothing new. The ancient Akaviri ruins were designed to have big open rooms intended for many Blades to gather, eat, sleep, train, or even make love if enough privacy could be stolen for a few minutes. There should have been dozens of Blades calling this place home when not out on assignment.

Instead there were only a measly dozen including Esbern and herself. The only reason there were that many was because Esbern wouldn't stop harassing her about keeping tradition and the faith. "The Dragonborn will always need the Blades," he insisted. "We can't provide the right protection with just the two of us."

Not that it mattered. Not ever since Diana had metaphorically spat in Delphine face years ago over the argument about Paarthurnax. Delphine had made the mistake of first taunting the Dragonborn about knowing Paarthurnax's true identity before making her second mistake of commanding the Imperial to kill the dragon.

It shouldn't have been a problem. They were DRAGONSLAYERS for Talos' sake. It's what they did. It wasn't like she had asked the woman to kill the Emperor or anything ridiculous given their line of work.

But Diana had refused and Delphine had been forced to withdraw the Blades' support. What else could she have done? The Dragonborn had questioned and mocked her at every turn. To allow her to simply refuse an order whenever she felt like it would have been the worst type of insubordination.

The Blades might have been officially reduced to two members the Grandmaster masquerading as an innkeeper and the Head Librarian taken prisoner by the Thalmor but they were still a prestigious
organization whose goals were to kill dragons and protect the Dragonborn.

Even with Diana gone, the Blades had managed to expand some. Delphine had already recruited several potentials before the estrangement. Afterwards, she had lost most of her drive. What was the point?

No Dragonborn, no Blades, right?

Delphine lifted her glass and found that it was empty again. Her fuzzy memory vaguely recalled draining the goblet, or was that the round before?

Today was a terrible day for Delphine. It was on this day back in 171 the Thalmor had made their ultimatum that the Empire should surrender to them. When Titus Mede II had refused, they had emptied their carts revealing over a hundred decapitated heads - every Blades spy assigned to the Summerset Isles and Valenwood.

It had marked the beginning of the end for the Blades, free worship of Talos, and gods help them maybe the Empire itself. After signing the White-Gold Concordat, no one had respected Titus for his surrender. Many of his advisors had warned him to accept the Thalmor's initial demands because of their weakened militia.

So every year Delphine drank to remember her fallen companions as well as to forget. To forget what a colossal failure she was. She had finally found the last Dragonborn and lost her. She had found her worth and her order's purpose again and tossed it away because of pride.

Things could have been patched earlier this year when a messenger from the Dragonborn showed up on Sky Haven Temple's doorstep saying that the Dragonborn had summoned Delphine because she needed her help. But there had been no sign of apology or Paarthurnax's head and Delphine's pride wouldn't allow her to meekly tuck her katana between her legs and go slinking back to the arrogant Diana.

She'd rather die first.

The door to her room opened, allowing light to flood in. "Still drinking in the dark?" Esbern asked as he entered with a book tucked under his arm.

"It's the best way to get drunk," Delphine slurred. "If I'm going to stumble to my bed anyway I might as well have the dark as an excuse."

"Well, pour me a drink too," Esbern asked as he sat next to her. After Delphine had done so, he raised the glass. "To friends lost."

"To friends lost," Delphine echoed the sentiment too close to what had been on her mind. "What brings you here, my friend?"

"You didn't think I don't know what day it is, did you?" Esbern asked. He reached out and patted Delphine's hand. "I'd never let you go through this day alone as long as I'm around."

"Thank you, Esbern," Delphine chuckled as she squeezed his hand in return.

"Also, I have some good news for you if you're not too drunk," the old man said, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Oh?" Delphine asked, sitting up. "What?"
“Do you remember how the Dragonborn sent a messenger earlier this year?”

“By Talos, I was just thinking about that,” Delphine admitted. When had Esbern become a psychic?

“I did some follow up work on that,” Esbern said. He placed the book he was carrying on the table, opened it and withdrew some papers he had tucked in there. “I had thought it odd for Diana to ask help from us. Especially through a messenger. She should have come personally after theahem, fight the two of you had.”

Delphine accepted the papers and scanned them quickly. Each one described the Dragonborn female, brunette, pale skinnedNord? That wasn't right. Delphine shuffled the papers and read them again. Time and time again the Dragonborn was described as a Nord.

“Someone is impersonating the Dragonborn?” Delphine asked, stunned.

“Not just someone,” Esbern said, tapping his nose. "Lydia. Or Lydia Stormblade as she goes by now."

“By the Nine!” Delphine whispered. "What happened to Diana?"

“My network says that she's been presenting herself at the Imperial Court, but other than that she's been disappearing into the wilderness. Not sure if she's been doing any dragon hunting since Alduin fell, but apparently she didn't like someone using her name for a cause she didn't support.”

“But why would Lydia lie about being the Dragonborn?” Delphine asked. "Those two were as thick as thieves."

“No good way for me to know,” Esbern admitted. "My network isn't as good as it was at the height of my day. But they are estranged." He laughed. "But it gets better. Lydia really can Shout. Ulfric must have taught her the old way of the Voice Masters before he died because there are consistent accounts of her using the thu’um on the battlefield."

“How does that help us?” Delphine asked, feeling hopeful even if she didn't know why.

“Because she was there when Diana learned Dragonrend,” Esbern explained, "and I don't see any reason why she wouldn't want to share that information. Especially if she wants an alliance with us. We can be the dragonslayers we were meant to be."

Delphine's laughter filled the room as she raised her wine glass again. "To friends lost and friends found!” she toasted. Things were looking up again.

Fredas 30 Frostfall 205 4E 11:30 PM

"Diana Dragonborn, will you marry me?"

Diana's eyes widened in shock at Elisif's proposal. "My jarl, I "

"Please don't lie to me," Elisif interrupted. "I know you're not married to Cicero."

"Why would you say that?" Diana stammered.

"Because you're not wearing a Band of Matrimony," Elisif said, pointing at the offending finger. "You weren't even wearing a ring at all on the day I found you at the Raiment. Since then you seemed to have picked up that one, but it's not a proper ring denoting marriage."
"Well, I, that is," Diana stammered as she twisted her silver ring nervously. She bit her lip as she stammered for words. "We had an Imperial style wedding."

"Why do I doubt that?" Elisif snorted. "You always blush and pause whenever you have to call Cicero your husband. Cicero wears no ring at all." She held up one hand to ward off any more protests. "I don't know why the two of you are lying, and I don't really care. But I want to marry you and I had to prove I know that you're available for marriage."

"Jarl Elisif, I'm still shocked," Diana admitted. Her blush was so red that she looked like she was about to pass out. "You could have anyone you want, why me?"

"Because you're the Dragonborn!" Elisif blurted. She immediately regretted her words when she saw how much Diana's face closed at that statement. "Well, it's not the reason I want to marry you. I like you a lot! You're always so kind to me. You listen to me. You respect me, or I at least think so. You never treat me as just a pretty face. But the reason why I can ask you at all is because you're the Dragonborn." Elisif closed her eyes and took a big breath. "Because if you refuse, I will have to marry Frothar."

"Balgruuf's son?"

"Yes," Elisif nodded. Gods, the boy was almost ten years younger than she. He was barely seventeen and would become eighteen this coming year. "It is to cement an alliance with Whiterun and show our good faith about returning Balgruuf's throne. The official announcement will be at this year's New Life festival."

"I take it that you don't want to marry him," Diana said sympathetically. "Why not just say no?"

"Because politically it makes a lot of sense!" Elisif said desperately. "I have to do what is right for my country. I am a widow, but I'm still young and beautiful and desirable. My hand can be easily resold and my advisors think that Whiterun can bring the most profit."

"But you're the jarl," Diana insisted. "You have the final say. Isn't there an alternative plan?"

"You're my alternative!" Elisif pointed out. "You carry a great deal of power with your name. You're the Dragonborn. You destroyed the World-Eater. Everyone respects you. If you were to reveal yourself openly to everyone, then this war will end that much faster when the Stormcloaks see your true power. Lineage isn't even important since we vote on the new High King or Queen, so marrying a woman wouldn't be problematic."

Diana shook her head, breaking Elisif's heart. "I can't. I'm sorry. I have no desire for power and that is what you're offering me. And," she paused, an odd expression on her face, "I love Cicero. He's the one I want to be with, not just someone I have to be with."

"I love Skyrim," Elisif insisted weakly. "I have to do what is right by my councilor's recommendations since they are more experienced."

"Regardless of your own feelings?" Diana asked.

"Yes, especially," Elisif swallowed. "If Ulfric hadn't died, I would have been expected to marry him as a sign of aligning the old throne with the new. I would have rather died than allow that happen."

"Then why agree to this engagement if you don't want to?"

"Because it's different. Because Frothar didn't kill my husband in my own home before my very eyes." Elisif felt like she wanted to throw up thinking about how Ulfric had arrogantly strode into
their home, accepted Torygg's welcome of friendship and then stabbed him before the whole court while ranting about the righteousness of his cause.

"Jarl Elisif," Diana said gently as she licked her lips nervously, "I won't lie. I find you very attractive. But despite any legality, I am with Cicero. I want to be with Cicero." She sighed. "Maybe we should have been legally married. I don't know. I know I want to spend the rest of my life with him, but I can't really wrap my head around the whole ceremony thing."

She stroked Elisif's cheek tenderly. "For what it is worth, even if Cicero wasn't a factor, even if my other obligations weren't a factor, I would never marry you. I'm not the marrying type. But I will gladly stand by your side as your friend." She chuckled sadly. "Could you honestly say that you're in love with me like you were with Torygg?"

Elisif wiped away a tear that had escaped down her cheek. "No, I don't think I could. I love you as a friend and a very dear one, but no, I am not in love with you like I was with Torygg."

Diana wrapped Elisif into a hug, pulling her close so she could stroke the Nord's hair. "You're young and confused, but you're also strong. I've believed that since the first day I saw you on your throne sitting so properly. You'll have to find your own path. You'll have to learn how to rule on your own instead of relying on your advisors so much. Maybe you should start by telling them to take this engagement and shove it up their collective asses."

The Dragonborn laughed as Elisif gasped in shock. "That's so rude!" Elisif protested.

"Maybe, but it's what they deserve," Diana winked. "You're the ruler. It's time you started acting like it."

"That's pretty much what Cicero told me," Elisif giggled. "When I called him out on it, he said he was a simple fool."

"Did he now?" Diana said, her voice oddly cool. "I will be sure to speak to him about talking out of turn."

"No, please don't," Elisif said. "I don't want him to get in trouble. It was a bit refreshing to have someone speak plainly to me and to encourage me to be more in charge instead of just pushing me aside. Besides, he sort of inspired me to talk to you about this." She blushed. "Even if it didn't turn out the way I wanted."

"It is a shame," Diana teased as she ran one finger down Elisif's chin. "I would have given you a night you never would have forgotten." Her lustful tone made Elisif forget how to breathe. "Oh well, maybe in another life, right?"

"Maybe," Elisif whispered.

"I should go," Diana said standing, "before I lose my resolve. You get your rest, but I think I should head home now."

"You're not mad at me, are you?" Elisif asked timidly.

"No," Diana chuckled. "Confused, flattered, and a bit stunned, but never mad." She bowed as she backed to the door. "Good night, my queen."

When the door closed, Diana leaned against it, trying to remember how to breathe. Gods, that had been hard to walk away from. Before Cicero, Diana would have been diving between those creamy perfect legs faster than you could Shout Fus Ro Dah.
"Ugh, get your mind out of the gutter," she mumbled to herself.

"Is the Listener talking to herself now?" Cicero teased, popping out of the shadows. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. A terrible habit."

"You're one to talk," she snapped.

"The best teacher is the one who learned from a burned hand," Cicero laughed. "What did the fair Elisif want?"

"To marry me."

"Ooooh, that explains why you're as red as a snowberry," Cicero snickered. "What did you tell her?"

"No, obviously," Hecate said as she took Cicero's hand with her left one, the one wearing the silver and amethyst ring. "I'm already taken."

"Yes, you belong to Sithis," Cicero agreed.

"Him too," Hecate agreed. "Let's get out of here. I'm oddly worked up."

"As you wish, my Listener," Cicero bowed. As the two assassins hurried out of the Blue Palace, he turned to Hecate. "Seriously though, what did Elisif want from you?"

Chapter End Notes

Copyright Bethesda
Comments loved!

A/N: I have been really excited about writing this chapter. I was stuck for the longest time on it because I didn't know if Elric was old enough for the type of mentality I wanted from him. Researching two-year-olds on Youtube did not give me confidence. But I figured that he's a precocious child so that works out. A lot of long term plot elements are finally starting to show up and come together.

I've been really excited about Delphine's bit too. The whole reason I had the back and forth between her and Diana in Diana Dragonborn was to help lead up to this return. Which was why I always thought it was ironic when a reader accused me of just using Diana as my mouthpiece. In most instances, this is true. I do use Diana as my in-world voice, but in the case of Delphine that's not true. I generally have neutral feelings about her because I don't really get the main quest line.

Special thanks to gangyzgirl, Missnotlob, ms-katonic, PandaGirl138, SlaaneshiSeeker, and Sparkzzzzzz for leaving comments. I love comments! They make me happy and give me feedback on what works and what doesn't.
Chapter 10

Fredas 20th Sun’s Dusk 205 4E 3:00 PM

It was cold enough to freeze the breath still in one’s lungs. But Lydia Stormblade was a true daughter of Skyrim and she wasn’t going to let something as insignificant as a blizzard in the high mountains of the Reach keep her from her goal.

It had taken her a whole week to get things in order in Windhelm before she could hit the roads. Yrsarald had been very displeased when she had refused any escort for her journey. Lydia couldn’t risk Delphine revealing that she was not the real Dragonborn and losing any support of her personal advisors. It was one thing to have your enemies declare you were a fake, but it was quite another when a supposed potential ally declared the same thing. She had simply explained that she didn’t want to make the Blades feel defensive with a warrior contingent on their doorstep and it was only appropriate that she present herself personally to their leader.

She hated to admit it, but part of her had missed traveling across the holds of Skyrim. She missed the clear open blue skies when it wasn’t snowing or even the dour gray when it was. She missed the endless tundra and the looming mountains. She missed the rushing rivers and the brisk cool air as she rode her gelding down the road. Nights spent huddling over a hot fire as her dinner of fresh rabbit stew cooked. Part of her had even missed being ambushed by bandits and fighting them off, especially now that she controlled the power of the thu’um.

For too long she had been sequestered in the Palace of the Kings, planning day in and day out their strategic maneuvers for the war. Now that she was the leader of the Stormcloaks, she rarely had time or resources to go out even to review troops. She was too new and inexperienced for this responsibility. Ulfric had been born and raised for the throne. She was just a pretender really. So it felt amazing to be her true self alone under the autumn sky when she thought she would never have that luxury ever again.

The only downsides were the bitter memories of traveling with Diana. She kept expecting to look over the fire and see her thane laughing as she awkwardly tried to peel a potato, or to look behind while riding and see the Imperial vaulting off her mount to go run and pick some flowers. Lydia had never imagined that she would miss her thane so much after all this time.

She had thought she had found closure by joining Ulfric’s side, and she finally had the goal of hunting down the Dark Brotherhood in revenge for her thane’s death. She had always known it was a false hope. Despite their weakened status as little more than stories to scare children, the Brotherhood had been around for a long time and little more shadows in the night. They were like skeevers: you could never truly wipe them out no matter how hard you try. You could destroy their cells and they would hide for a time, but sooner or later they always returned. Still, it had been something other than the terrible sense of loss and lack of direction in the depression she had suffered when Diana disappeared.

So when the Imperial had returned as Hecate the Listener instead of Diana the Dragonborn, it was as if Lydia’s world had flipped upside down. Three years –three years!–Lydia had thought her dead when in truth she had been the leader of the very death cult Lydia thought had cut her down. What was so fundamentally wrong with the world that this could even remotely be true? Diana should have been the one by Ulfric’s side winning the war instead of making it worse by killing the Emperor and later cutting down Ulfric Stormcloak in his home at the Palace of the Kings.

However, the thing that truly made traveling on the road the hardest was Elric. Lydia missed her
child. Often she would only get to see him at the end of the day, already tucked into bed, asleep and limbs all akimbo. She would give him a quick kiss to the forehead as she rearranged his blankets before she crawled into bed herself. But he had been nearby where she had the option to look in on him playing, napping, or discovering the world for the first time.

There had been a period when she had been away on the battlefield leading the Stormcloaks to victory. But Ulfric had been alive, staying at the palace as a public figurehead, being jarl. Elric had a father to watch over him and keep him safe from the world. Ulfric had adored the child and spent most of his days with him. He even held court with the babe in his lap, uncaring about any opinions of the matter.

Elric had just said his first word mere days before Ulfric’s death. He had been so proud of his son that he had sent a courier to Lydia with a letter telling her, tacked on at the end of a report of Windhelm’s status. “The boy has learned his first word and unsurprisingly it is his father’s name. He stumbled a bit, but it was clear enough! All that time in court has taught him well.” It had been his last letter to her. Hers to him had been “Diana lives.” She wished she had done something more personal, but she hadn’t known they would be her last words to her jarl. She hadn’t known Diana was a traitor and by the time she did, she was tied up and given to a dragon to deliver to High Hrothgar.

The next day, she had been holding Elric when he looked up at her and asked, “Yol-riik?” He wanted to know where his daddy was and she had no words for him. Especially since the two syllables sounded very much like the draconic words for “fire” and “gale.” Ulfric must have been bursting with pride for his son to name him so.

Even thinking about it now, eight months later, forced Lydia to pull over on the side of the road and cry for a good ten minutes before she could continue her trek westward. It wasn’t fair for a little boy to grow up without a father, a truth too many children were learning in Skyrim.

Normally the trip from Windhelm to Markarth took about a week, assuming good weather and if the rider was pushing herself, but Lydia was willing to take her time. She had no desire to get to Delphine looking like death warmed over and on the point of exhaustion. It was better to travel safely, contemplate her story, and do her best to win back the Blade’s trust after Diana had thoroughly stomped on it during their last meeting.

Now she was finally at the base of Karthspire near a Forsworn camp. It looked long deserted, but Lydia avoided it to be safe. The Forsworn were friendly to no one outside of their cause and would attack anyone on sight. Lydia wasn’t afraid. Why should she be? She was the Stormblade and a Voice Master. The Forsworn had no power over her. But Shouting would draw the Blades’ attention before she could properly present herself.

Thankfully there were no enemies waiting in ambush and Lydia was able to make it to the entrance of Sky Haven Temple unmolested. The first two obstacles were easily passed now that she knew the trick. The first puzzle involved rotating three pedestals to have the old Akaviri symbol for Dragonborn showing so a drop bridge would fall to give access. The second involved stepping on pressure plates with the same symbol. It was painfully simple if you knew what to look for.

Lydia felt her heart clench at the thought. Diana and she had had a similar complaint about the puzzles in the many ruins they had explored in their months together. They were aggravatingly hard when you had no clue what you were doing, but once you figured the answer out it was something a child could do—or downright impossible if you didn’t have the right claw key for the door. She had asked Wuunferth about it once and he told her it was because most traps weren’t intended to keep living people out so much as the restless undead in. It really gave the whole puzzle idea a different
spin when you realized the reason for it.

Lydia passed through a large open room with a huge stone face dominating the far wall. It was closed, staring at her passively, almost in challenge. This puzzle involved the Dragonborn releasing a few drops of blood on a pressure plate that would active the mechanism that would raise the stone face, revealing a stone staircase. She was stuck. No matter how much others believed it, no matter how much she tried to forget that it was all a farce, no matter how much she tried, Lydia was not a true Dragonborn.

However, she was a true Nord and she wasn’t going to let something like this stop her. But how to proceed? Call out and hope someone responded? It felt too much like begging and she was still proud. Wait and hope someone emerged soon? Too chancy. This far up in the mountains during the winter, Lydia could too easily freeze to death. Nords might be resistant to the cold, but they were not immune. There was no guarantee that anyone would come out for supplies either. Last she had heard, Delphine had managed to gather some recruits, but had they stayed on after Diana’s refusal? Would they keep their vows when the Dragonborn couldn’t be bothered to?

Thankfully the decision was taken out of her hands when a familiar voice called out from above. “I see that you’re stuck.” Lydia looked up to see Delphine standing above the stone face. The older woman looked resplendent in her Blades armor. Lydia grimaced at the smirk on the Breton’s face. Delphine was a proud woman despite being forced to hide as a simple innkeeper in Riverwood for almost thirty years after the disbanding of the Blades. Her ego had been badly bruised during her last conversation with Diana. Lydia hoped that she wouldn’t be seeking too much payback.

To Lydia’s surprise, the stone face lifted, sliding into the mountain wall to reveal the stairs that would lead to Alduin’s Wall. “Come on in,” Delphine said, gesturing as she retreated back inside. “It’s much too cold out here for me to have any sort of decent conversation.”

For a moment, the former housecarl stood in shock, her mouth hanging open. She had been prepared for no one to greet her, for Delphine to try to mock and taunt her, for there to be some prerequisite of humility before being given entrance to the Blades’ safe house, but the thought of simply being invited in had never occurred to her. She quickly composed herself before ascending the stairs, not sure if she should be grateful or suspicious of the change of attitude.

Alduin’s Wall, a bas-relief that dominated the far wall, still looked the same. Even years later, Lydia’s memory of it had not faded in the slightest. It was an ancient relic that depicted Alduin’s defeat from the Merethic Era and had given them the clue on how to find Dragonrend.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Esbern asked as he emerged from a side room, perpetual book tucked under one arm. His smile immediately made Lydia feel comfortable as if she belonged. “I never get tired of looking at it, looking for some secret we may have missed before.”

“It’s true,” Delphine piped up as she came in, brushing melting snow from her shoulders. “Sometimes I have to come out here and drape a blanket over his sleeping form.” She extended a hand of greeting in the Cyrodilic style to Lydia, who took it awkwardly.

Nords didn’t shake hands, but embraced as if close family. Lydia felt it was one of those crucial cultural differences that helped mark part of the basic problem of the Civil War. Imperials wanted to keep everything at arm’s length and painfully formal while Nords understood the necessity of closeness and camaraderie.

“So, I take it that you know that I’m the Dragonborn?” Lydia asked. “It’s the only thing I can think of for the warm reception. If you don’t mind me saying.”
Delphine laughed sheepishly. “Yes, but I only recently found out thanks to Esbern. Believe me; your messenger would have had a much different reception if we had known.” She motioned for the three of them to retire to the long table that the Blades used for meals. As they sat, she eyed Lydia’s steel armor. “I must admit that I’m surprised that you’re wearing your old armor and not the legendary Dragon scale set that Diana made. It was her signature in many ways.”

“I lost it,” Lydia admitted. It still stung her pride that she no longer had that unique mail. “Which is actually the reason why I’m here. The Brotherhood stole it from me so they could impersonate me to get close to Ulfric.”

Delphine and Esbern shared a look. “We had heard the rumors,” the old man admitted, “but we weren’t certain about the truth of it. The thought that anyone in the Legion invested enough to want Ulfric dead enough to use the Brotherhood after they killed the Emperor seemed ridiculous.”

“Whoever it is has been smart enough to not brag about it,” Lydia said with gritted teeth. “This last summer, they summoned the Dark Brotherhood to wipe out an entire fort as a lesson. To summon an assassin against our leader was bad enough, but to have them sneak into our camps in the dead of night and slaughter every man makes me ill. Every action from the Imperial army just proves time and time again what dishonorable dogs they really are. Nothing is too low for them if it will allow them victory.”

“Harsh words from a woman who is using a title and reputation that is not hers,” Esbern said mildly. He flinched when Delphine stepped on his foot. “Not that we’re judging you.”

“Diana was dead and we needed a symbol. Everything I did before Ulfric’s death was in her memory,” Lydia said stiffly. It was true enough. She had honored Diana until she had returned from the dead as something else. “I have earned the title of Dragonborn as a hero of Skyrim just as I have earned the other titles Ulfric bestowed upon me.”

“I don’t understand why you’ve approached us,” Delphine said, trying to pull the topic away from Diana before bitter memories could surface. “The Blades are a Cyrodilic faction. We were the protectors of the Emperor before being disbanded. Even with Titus Mede dead, our loyalty would lie with his successor. Why should we throw our lot in with the Stormcloaks?”

“Because the Empire abandoned you!” Lydia said. “They threw you aside for their Thalmor allies. You wouldn’t be fighting your old masters so much as the new tyrants who have climbed into their bed. Additionally, you’ll be able to go back to your true roots as dragon slayers. Skyrim is still plagued by the beasts. They are fewer now that Alduin has died, but I still receive reports periodically of small villages being razed to the ground. There is enough loss of life without these creatures creating more.”

“We can’t hope to fight dragons without a Dragonborn leading us,” Delphine sighed, looking regretful. “We are trained to back up one who can truly kill a dragon by absorbing its soul. You would need to lead any squads sent to kill dragons. Even as a fake, you still are a Voice Master. It would be enough to turn the tide.”

“I… I can’t leave the Stormcloaks leaderless,” Lydia said desperately. She had never considered that Delphine wouldn’t jump at the chance to bring the Blades back to glory. “I must stay in Windhelm organizing my troops until the time I can lead us to victory.”

“You would send us out to die for your cause,” Delphine said flatly.

“No, no! That’s not it. I want to use you as you were meant to be used. We all have roles we must play. You’re meant to be dragonslayers instead of rudderless wasting away in this temple,” Lydia
“Without some sort of edge, I would be sending men and women into their deaths,” Delphine replied. “I can’t do that in good conscience.”

Lydia sat back, her lips thin in frustration. “So that’s your asking price. You want Dragonrend.”

“I’ve always liked you, Lydia,” Delphine grinned slyly. Lydia didn’t like that expression. “You’re a sharp girl and willing to play politics when needed unlike your predecessor.”

“I am nothing like Diana!” Lydia said too sharply.

“There’s no doubt of that,” Delphine said smoothly. She patted Lydia’s hand sympathetically. “How did your mistress die?”

“The Dark Brotherhood,” Lydia growled. “They took her from me – from Skyrim.”

“We could help you with that particular problem,” Delphine said. “In exchange for making us the dragon killers we need to be to defend Tamriel, I’ll personally train my initiates to help protect you and yours from these daggers in the night.”

“Good,” Lydia nodded, “that’s what I had hoped you’d say. I have a few conditions though. First, I’ll only train Nords how to use the thu’um.”

“Why?” Delphine asked. She had hoped to learn that amazing power for herself. Not only was it appropriate as her role of Grandmaster, it would allow her to be able to train her people without Lydia’s assistance if the day came they needed to part ways.

“Because only Nords and Dragonborn have the inherent ability to learn Shouts,” Lydia explained. “It’s not personal, just pragmatic. I can’t teach a non-Nord how to Shout any more than I can teach a fish how to ride a horse.”

Delphine huffed, but nodded in agreement.

“Second, anyone I train in the thu’um will come from the Stormcloak army.”

“Trying to keep them loyal to you first?” Delphine asked. She wasn’t particularly happy with that arrangement, but it would mean she wouldn’t have to spend time finding people willing to join her ranks.

“Finally, if you find their leader, a woman who wears a Tragedy mask, I want her brought to me alive. She and I have unfinished business,” Lydia said.

“Wanting revenge for your lover’s death?” Delphine asked. Lydia was surprised to hear the sympathy in the Breton’s voice. “I can only promise that those will be standing orders, but my people are trained to kill not take prisoner. I won’t risk my people for your personal vengeance.”

“Fair enough.”

“I do have some conditions of my own,” Delphine said casually, too casually. “First, we want to be publically recognized as your allies. We might fight the daggers in the dark, but that doesn’t make us one.”

“Agreed.”

“Second, any assassins save the one you mentioned will be dealt with as we deem fit. I don’t expect
to have to garner your approval every time we catch one of your rats.”

“Fine.”

“Finally, there’s the matter of Paarthurnax. He still must be destroyed. I promised Diana the Blades wouldn’t help the Dragonborn until he was dealt with and I meant it. Nothing’s changed.”

Lydia sat back in her seat. So there it was, the other shoe dropping. “You realize I can’t do that. Not only do I not have the troops to spare, but I can’t afford to declare war on the Greybeards. They are the most respected and fear group in all of Skyrim. Ulfric trained with them! It would be political suicide. Losing half my allies is not worth anything I could get from you.”

Delphine shrugged. “That’s my offer. Take it or leave it.”

“You don’t have to mount an attack against High Hrothgar,” Esbern offered. “You could always summon Paarthurnax by Shouting his name much like Diana did with Odahviing.”

“It’s not something I can just do,” Lydia responded. “I have to study and meditate. There’s also no guarantee he’ll come. It’s not like a normal Shout where something happens. It will only draw his attention. And Paarthurnax knows about the trap. He’s the one who suggested it in the first place.”

“I will not have that monster running free without paying for his crimes!” Delphine snapped.

“A compromise then!” Lydia suggested, holding up her hands. “How about I give you something precious to hold onto as a show of good faith?”

“I’m listening,” Delphine said, resting against the table.

Loredas 21st Sun’s Dusk 205 4E 8:00 AM

Lydia sighed as she mounted her horse. The negotiations had gone long into the night, but Delphine had agreed to her proposal. The Paarthurnax stipulation was a stickier proposition than she could have hoped for, but most of her planning had depended on some ridiculous task that she could stall on.

Delphine had been leery of the exchange, but in the end Esbern, always the peacekeeper, had talked her into it.

In truth, this was the real reason Lydia came to Sky Haven Temple. She just wondered if she could go through with it.

Fredas 1 Morning Star 206 4E 5:00 PM

Elric was having the best New Life’s Day ever! He had woken up to find a huge pile of gifts waiting for him at the foot of his bed. He tore into them like a starving man at a banquet. There had been some yucky new clothes – thick, warm, and practical made with the Stormcloak blue as a common theme. But there had also been a wooden sword -- his first sword! -- as well as a small shield with the bear emblem of Windhelm. Toys upon toys – balls, boat, carts, little horses, farmers, and building blocks. No more soldiers sadly. Tons of sweets and other treats that he would have gorged on if Tilma had let him.
Best of all, Mommy had eaten breakfast with him. She listened quietly as he told her all about his
gifts while he ate huge mouthful after mouthful of bacon, eggs, cheese, gravy, and biscuits.
Afterwards they had bundled up in the new clothes and gone outside where they made snowmen and
snow angels.

“Do you think Yol-riik sees us from Sovngarde?” he asked as he vigorously made wings for his
snow angel.

“Of course, sweetie,” Mommy had said, but her smile had seemed strained. She ran her fingers
through his fine blonde hair, brushing the snowflakes that had fallen there. “Daddy loves you and
will watch over you always.”

After that, they had gone back to the Palace of the Kings and had a simple lunch of sandwiches and
soup before drinking cups of hot cocoa. Once they were nice and warm again, they went down to
the docks where Elric got to sail his new boat. There had been a terrible moment when the boat had
gone too far out and Elric had thought it lost. Mommy had hugged him and promised him an even
better new boat when one of the lizard men had dived off the pier and swam to the toy. He had
brought it back to Elric while balancing it on his tail as he swam.

Elric had squealed with delight and hugged the lizard man’s leg, unmindful of how soaked his cloak
became. The lizard man had smiled and ruffled his hair, or at least Elric thought it was a smile. It was
hard to tell with their tooth mouths.

“Thank you,” Mommy had said softly as she detached her son from the lizard man’s leg. “Can I give
you a few coins for your help?”

“No thank you, ma’am,” he answered. “It was no problem and anyone else would have done the
same.”

“Do you know who my mommy is?” Elric asked. He realized his mommy wasn’t wearing her wolf
skin cloak. “She’s…”

“Very grateful,” Mommy said, interrupting. Elric frowned. He was always told to not interrupt.
Momma should be yelled at later.

Then they had returned to the Palace where Elric and Mommy had taken a hot bath together. They
had splashed each other, made fake beards with bubbles (Mommy had looked especially silly), and
then created waves for his boat. After being fluffed dry, they had another meal together alone. Elric
was surprised because usually for dinner he ate with Tilma while Mommy talked to important
people.

They had eaten all of his favorite things. Mommy had even given him a sip of her wine. Elric
thought it tasted bad and bitter and almost spit it out, but he had managed to swallow it just for her.
That didn’t stop him from drinking big gulps of milk after.

There had been one moment when Mommy went away. Two people had shown up, a blonde haired
Breton woman who was older than Mommy and a really, really old Imperial man. He was gray
haired and wrinkled like Elric after a long bath. He must have been really old – like thirty! Mommy
had introduced them to Elric specifically. “This is Delphine and Esbern,” she said. “They’re the
leaders of the Blades, a very important and honorable group. They’re going to help us win the war,
baby.”

When dinner was over and all of his toys put away, Mommy had climbed into the bed with him and
read his favorite books out loud. She didn’t seem to mind if he asked her to reread the one about the
Nord and the Dragon unlike Tilma who would often tell him, “Once is more than enough, my lordling.”

They had snuggled down into the furs, warm and safe. Mommy had kissed his head several times as she hugged him with one arm before turning the page of his book. Elric’s eyes were getting heavy and sleepy when Mommy told him the bad news.

“Baby, when Delphine and Esbern leave tomorrow, you’re going with them. You’re going to go away to Sky Haven Temple to live with them.”

“What?” Elric sat straight up, all signs of sleep gone. “No! I don’t want to.” He grabbed Mommy’s arm. “You’re coming, right? You’ll be coming to join us?”

“No, dear,” she shook her head sadly. “I’ll be staying here?”

“Why? Did I do something wrong? Do you hate me?” Elric wailed, huge tears running down his chubby cheeks. He should have known today was too perfect. Mommy was always so busy and she had spent the whole day with him and no one else. Not even Yrsarald had been around and Mommy spent a lot of time with him planning the war.

“No, baby, no! I’m doing this because I love you,” Mommy promised as she cleaned Elric’s face. She patiently had him blow his nose before continuing. “Nordic tradition is that we don’t acknowledge children before they are five years old. Most children aren’t even given names before they turn one.” She brushed his hair back from his hot forehead. “Because of this, people outside of the Palace of the Kings don’t know you exist. They don’t know why I am fighting for the throne other than to honor Ulfric’s memory. Once you turn five though, people will start to talk. There are bad people who will want to hurt you. They’ll want to kill you if they know about you. For now you’re safe, but I can’t risk letting you stay here with me. I can’t protect you.”

“I still don’t understand why I have to leave,” Elric sobbed. “I’ll stay in my room with all my things. I’ll make a fort and hide in it. I don’t want to leave you! I love you and I want to stay with you.”

“I love you too, and that’s why you have to go,” Mommy was crying too to Elric’s surprise. She crushed him to her. “You’re going to be jarl someday, baby. You have to grow up to big, strong, and honorable. Tilma will teach you everything you need to know, Esbern is a wise scholar who knows everything there is to know about dragons, and Delphine will teach you how to fight. You’ll have the best of everything and someday when you’re sixteen, you’ll take the throne of Windhelm and you’ll be High King of Skyrim just like your daddy wanted.”

“I don’t wanna go!” Elric insisted. “I’ll be good. I’ll be so good and I’ll do it here. I can learn about Talos in the temple. I won’t sneak down to the marketplace again. I’ll eat all of my vegetables so Tilma won’t be cranky. I promise!”

“Listen to me,” Mommy said. She tilted Elric’s chin so he was looking at her instead of burying against her chest. “Did you know your daddy had to go to High Hrothgar to become a Greybeard when he was six? That’s not that much older than you are now.” It felt like a lifetime to Elric, but he didn’t disagree. “He learned how to Shout and someday I’ll teach you too. I promise that I’ll visit every chance I get, okay? Now be a good boy for me. Be strong and go with Delphine and Esbern tomorrow without any tears. We don’t want anyone to say the son of Ulfric Stormcloak is a weakling.”

“ Okay, Mommy,” Elric promised, sniffing. He curled up against her, hugging her until he fell asleep. When he woke, she was still with him, but it was a small comfort.
It had been the worst New Life Day ever.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Hecate is sent to kill Thongvor Silver-Blood as a contract for Solitude. She finds out an unpleasant surprise when he dies that she hopes she can turn to her advantage.

Turdas 23rd Midyear 206 4E 7:00PM

“The Empire will never take Markarth as long as the Silver-Bloods control it,” Thongvor Silver-Blood bragged. He glanced over at his Imperial guest to see if she was offended by his statement only to find her smiling at him while offering her cup to a servant to refill. “The supposed Legion is comprised of little more than sellswords who wish to only placate their Thalmor masters for as much coin as possible. They do not love Skyrim like we do. They are not willing to bleed and die for this land like we Nords, the true children of Skyrim!”

A collective cheer rose from the rest of Thongvor’s guests and someone, no doubt his housecarl Yngvar the Singer, started a slow clap. It grew into a full-fledged applause as Thongvor stood and accepted their praise. Most of it was standard sycophant ass kissing, but what really mattered was the story that would be shared later. The people of Markarth would hear of Thongvor’s brave words, so similar to the late Ulfric Stormcloak, and rejoice.

It was Dancing Day and the Markarth jarl had thrown a feast to celebrate. People loved parties where food and alcohol were plentiful. It made them more receptive to suggestions on how to spend their own money, time, and resources for another’s cause.

“And what about you, my thane?” Thongvor asked, gesturing to the Imperial woman, the only non-Nord at his table. “Don’t you have anything to say on behalf of your countrymen?”

The woman shrugged nonchalantly. “What can I say, my jarl? I am a sellsword so it is hardly appropriate for me to look down on any who wishes to make a coin or two for their service. In fact, it is because of my use of my bow and blade that I own that lovely house you sold me. I must admit that I always wonder while trudging up that endless flight of stairs to reach it if that is the type of gift you bequeath people you like, what kind of torture you must keep on hand for those you don’t.”

Thongvor did not like the laughter that resulted from her jibe. It felt too much like they were laughing at him and not with her. He longed to wipe that smirking, half-lidded look off her face. For a moment, the jarl wondered if he had the right woman. The one he was looking for had a reputation for having a bad temper and if he was right she should have been fuming at Thongvor’s speech. No matter. He would confirm his suspicion after dinner.

His gaze never quite left her during the rest of the meal as he studied her. Young looking, probably in her twenties, long black hair braided back, blue eyes, clear complexion, and a tiny thing since she was easily a hand shorter than most Nord women. She wasn’t a beauty in the traditional sense, especially by Nordic standards, but there was something about the way she held herself that made her memorable.

“We need to talk,” Thongvor said softly when the meal ended and he had said goodbye to most of his guests. She nodded and followed him obediently to his room.
The jarl’s quarters were lushly furnished, befitting a Silver-Blood. Ulfric had known who his friends and allies were and had made sure to give them all positions of power as he reclaimed Skyrim for his own. Thongvor still remember when the Bear had taken Markarth over twenty years ago. The streets had run red with blood of the native Reachmen who would become the Forsworn. But that had always been the way of Markarth – blood and silver.

He was still uncertain about this new upstart who had succeeded Ulfric’s throne when he died. Lydia Stormblade was loved as the Dragonborn, but was she really jarl material much less High Queen of Skyrim? Some said she claimed she was merely regent until Ulfric’s rightful heir could claim his title, but that lead one to wonder who this mysterious heir was and why wasn’t he the one leading the Stormcloaks? It felt too much like a plot to him. No matter, when the Moot met Thongvor could always make arrangements for the other jarls to support him instead of Lydia. It wasn’t as if it was required for them to vote for the person who had led the armies. “Money talks and bullshit walks” was a standard motto for the Silver-Bloods.

“More wine, my dear?” Thongvor offered as he poured a cup for himself.

“No thank you,” she said. “I have work to do and I’ll need a clear head.”

“Work?” Thongvor laughed. “This late tonight? What could you possibly be doing tonight that requires your line of work?”

“Oh, you know,” she smiled, her eyes flickering to his bed and her body language practically screaming sex. “Stuff.”

“I know who you are,” he said as he circled her. He swirled his cup, enjoying the deep red liquid. “I’ve known for a while.” And he was determined to have her admit it. Then once she had, he would break her and humiliate her before giving her over to the Stormblade.

“Oh really?”

“Yes. You’re an Imperial. You’re an archer who lends her bow to jarls for bounties. You travel everywhere, never staying in one place for very long.” He paused behind her, drawing out the moment.

Her shoulders were stiff. She tried to make them relax, but failed. “Go on, say it,” she whispered. “Say who I am.”

“You’re Diana,” he breathed into her ear. She had given him a different name the first time she had appeared in his court asking for work, but he had quickly known it was a fake one. The similarities to the description in the bounty were too many to be coincidence. “The one the Stormblade has put out a generous bounty for. Did you really think I wouldn’t know?”

“Actually, I had bet on it.” She swirled around faster than Thongvor could follow. Her open palm slammed into his chest, knocking him off balance. His cup flew out of his hand, leaving a spray of red across that wall that leave a stain.

Before Thongvor could regain his balance, she was on him slamming her fists into his face over and over. He fell onto the mattress, bouncing comically as the woman landed on his chest making it impossible to breathe.

“Before I forget,” the Imperial smirked as she pulled out her dagger and twirled it in her hand, “Elisif says ‘hi’.” Then the blade slide across his throat and Thongvor knew nothing else.

The assassin reached to undo Thongvor’s breastplate. There was the little business of the bonus.
Elisif had asked for “his black heart for proof of its existence.” Darker than anything she had expected from the frail jarl, but hadn’t they all changed in the last five years?

Before she could touch the metal, a soundless crack of thunder filled the air and Thongvor’s corpse started burning from within. The body immolated under her grasp without burning her as a golden energy tore out of it and into her. The assassin was slammed back from the force of power as it filled her, craving for more death and destruction as all dragon souls did.

“Dragonborn,” Hecate whispered as she stared in shock at the skeleton, the only remains of the late and unlamented Thongvor Silver-Blood. “Oh gods, he was Dragonborn.”

Turdas 30th Midyear 206 4E 12:00 AM

“The Listener has been pensive since her return,” Cicero remarked. “What happened in Markarth?”

The two assassins were crouched on the top of western most wall of the Blue Palace. They had traveled to the Imperial controlled capital to claim their payment for the most recent contract from Elisif. Hecate had been quiet since her arrival at Dawnstar Sanctuary two days previous. Cicero felt that it was a poor omen. Killing always made his Listener elated; even if it was days later, she would greet Cicero with kisses and hugs, eager to tumble into her bed with him when she returned.

This time she had given him a chaste kiss on the lips before telling him that she would be traveling to Solitude and asked him to accompany her. It wasn’t an unusual request, but something about the way she said it made Cicero wary.

“I’ll tell you some of it after we deal with Elisif,” she muttered as she pulled on her Tragedy mask. “Come, Comedy, let us visit our Lady Fair.”

“As you wish, my Listener,” he laughed as he tugged on his own red mask.

They ran in the shadows, unseen by the guards, as they traveled to the garden to meet Elisif. The beautiful Nord was there waiting for them. As far as Cicero could tell the jarl always waited here at midnight the night after she performed the Black Sacrament to summon the Dark Brotherhood. She would meet him and the Listener to tell them who she wanted dead.

Normally this was a task for the Speaker, but given the special nature of these contracts, Hecate bent the rules slightly. She would never admit it, but she was personally invested in the results of the Civil War. Ironic given that if Lydia had not used her Dragonborn reputation, Hecate would have stayed neutral in all ways.

But Cicero traveled with her when she came to Solitude as Diana and paraded in front of the courts to prove she was not the Stormblade. He had heard her whisper her request to Elisif to not kill Lydia. He had seen her take every contract involved with the leaders of the rebellion.

Diana the Dragonborn might not be leading any armies in the name of the Empire, but Hecate the Listener was the dagger in the dark striking precisely and without mercy each time.

“Greetings, Lady Elisif,” Hecate called as they jumped down from the wall’s walkway.

“Tragedy, Comedy,” the Nord nodded stiffly. Even while perched on a stone bench in a flower garden, Elisif sat properly with her back straight. Cicero thought she was more of a ruler than the rest of the lot. He wondered when she would realize it for herself. “I hope you have what I asked for.”
“Thongvor Silver-Blood is dead as by your command, my queen,” Hecate said lightly as she bowed.

“And his heart?”

“The bonus is forfeit, my lady,” Hecate admitted petulantly. Cicero was startled to hear that. The Listener always strove for the bonus. Even if she had been discovered killing the jarl she should have been able to pull his heart from his chest with little trouble. “His heart was lost.”

Elisif snorted in disdain. “I expected better.”

Hecate moved like lightning to grab the Nord by the front of her shift. “You forget yourself, my lady,” she growled. “We’re assassins, not some couriers! The only promise for a Black Sacrament is death. The bonus is always optional. If I choose to not accept it then I don’t owe it to you.”

“Get your hands off me!” Elisif demanded, her voice quivering. “I’ll call my guards.”

“Do it,” Hecate taunted. “Bring men to die for your arrogance. I promise if you do summon your men I’ll kill them and it won’t be fast or clean.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Elisif protested. “You work for me!”

“We’ve complete our contract with you. Pay us and we’ll be on our way,” Hecate snapped as she released the jarl.

“Fine,” Elisif spat. She reached into her robes and pulled out pouch before she tossed it to the Listener. “I should have known that’s all you care about.”

“No, we pay honor and homage to the Night Mother,” Hecate hissed. “I do everything for my goddess. What do you kill for, Elisif? Maybe you should look at the type of person you’re becoming and ask yourself if that’s the type of person you want ruling Skyrim. If you’re going to be High Queen, you’ll be the face and heart of your country. If you honestly believe we’re little more than mercenaries, what does it say about you?”

Despite the muffling of the mask, Cicero could tell that Hecate was on the verge of tears. If this conversation continued for much longer, her thu’um would invoke and then where would they be? He placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her away. “Come, my Listener, we should go,” he whispered.

“I don’t want…” she started.

“Now!” Cicero insisted. He would drag her out of here kicking and screaming if he had to. There was a time to act foolish and there was the possibility of risking the Brotherhood. Cicero was all for the first, but he would be damned before he stood silently by for the second.

“Until the next time, Elisif,” Hecate said with a mock curtsy before turning with Cicero and scaling the garden walls to make their exit.

“What was all that about?” Cicero snapped once they were down by the shoreline. They never immediately went back to Proudspire Manor after meeting Elisif. It was unlikely that the jarl would betray them, but it was better to not take unnecessary risks that a guard may spot them as they left.

“She was disrespectful,” Hecate snarled as she pulled off her mask. Even in just the light of the moons Cicero could see that her face was flushed. It was just a question whether it was from the mask or anger that colored her cheeks so.
“You agitated her!” Cicero snapped as he removed his own mask. “Cicero has never seen Hecate talk in such a tone to Elisif before. Never as Tragedy and never as Diana! Why attack our petitioner?”

“She thinks we’re her pets to retrieve for her at her command,” Hecate sniffed. She picked up a rock and tossed it into the ocean.

“Something happened on that trip to Markarth,” Cicero said plainly. “What has Hecate’s panties in such a bunch?”

“Cicero,” she warned.

“It’s true,” he scoffed, “don’t try to lie to Cicero. Cicero always knows, just not always why.”

“It has to do with forfeiting the bonus,” she admitted with a sigh. She flopped onto the stony shore and wrapped her arms around her knees. “It really shook me up.”

“Too used to being perfect?” Cicero teased.

“Too used to being unique,” Hecate mumbled. She looked up at her grinning jester. “Cicero, would you mind if we made a detour on the way home? I want to stop by a place called Skyborn Altar in Hjaalmarch. It’s high up in the mountains so we’ll have to hurry on Shadowmere to make it back to Sanctuary in time for Mother.”

“Why, my Listener?” Cicero asked, curious.

“I want you to kill a dragon for me,” she said. “Can you do that for me?”

“For the Listener, Cicero would kill a god,” he promised with a laugh. Cicero offered his hand to Hecate so she could stand. “If the journey is far, we should get started as soon as possible.”

Fredas 1 Sun’s Height 206 4E 3:00 PM

They hadn’t slept much the night before. Instead they had opted to ride most of the night to make it to the mountains that housed the Skyborn Altar. Hecate felt jittery as she settled into her crevice with her bow readied. She knew she was in no danger. Even if the dragon woke too soon at this distance she could shoot it down before it could even find her.

It was Cicero she was worried about. He was crawling with dagger in hand towards the slumbering beast. She couldn’t hear him from this far away, but Hecate could all too easily imagine him chuckling or singing to himself as he closed the distance to the dragon.

She took a deep breath, trying to find the comfort of the Void as she always did before a battle. No fear, no pain, no anxiety. Just her, her weapon, and her target. That comforting chanted litany to fall into the Void.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Kill.

Only this time, she wouldn’t be the one doing the killing. At least, hopefully. No, she was only there as a safety net. v
She was impressed that he was almost able to touch the dragon when it finally woke. She knew from fighting the beasts alongside Lydia that they were very sensitive to the area around them and the slightest noise woke them.

It reared up on its hind legs immediately awake, wings flapping enough to make Cicero’s cap’s flaps flutter madly. It roared its displeasure at the tiny joor that dared to disturb its rest. Fire shot over the jester’s shoulder as he ducked.

Hecate pulled her bow, ready to fire if the dragon took to the air. Cicero would have no chance once it was off the ground. But until then, the show was his. If only if her heart didn’t feel like it was in her throat.

Cicero screamed with laughter in response to the dragon’s roar. Fearless, he dove at it, thrusting his dagger into the hard chest. Hecate had tried to tell him about the few weak points in a dragon’s scales, but the Keeper didn’t seem to be finding them. His blade skittered along the rough surface, creating sparks as it skidded along.

“Take the shot!” her brain screamed. She easily saw at least three spots that would slow the dragon down if not outright kill it, but she held her hand. She had to know. And she couldn’t take the chance that the person who dealt the killing blow earned the dragon’s soul over whoever was closest.

The dragon brought down its wing trying to buffet Cicero to the ground, but the small Imperial jumped back, looking like a child at play. He danced for a few steps falling back, beckoning and teasing the dragon. He must have been at his most infuriating because the dragon did not take wing. Instead it fell to a crouching position and stomped towards the Keeper, snapping at him with its triangular head.

Cicero timed the dragon’s attack perfectly. Once its jaw was snapped closed, he pushed both of his hands on top of its snout and used it as a vault to flip onto its head. He spun gracefully and did a two-handed stab downward into its eye with his dagger. The creature screamed with pain and lashed backwards, trying to dislodge Cicero, but he held fast. Hecate could hear his mad laughter echoing through the hills.

The jester stabbed again and again in the soft eye. The dragon thrashed one last time before gong still. Never one to assume an enemy was dead, Cicero swung down and slid his dagger along the dragon’s throat, spilling hot steamy blood onto the snowy ground. The dragon didn’t move.

And neither did its soul.

“Cicero did it! Cicero did it! Ha, ha, ha! Mighty dragonslayer as well as Keeper, so mighty is he!” Cicero sang and danced cheerfully. “Come, Listener! Come and see how well Cicero did!”

Hecate waited a minute more, hoping against hope, that maybe it was only taking longer than usual since this was his first dragon. But no, the dragon’s corpse stayed whole and bloody. “Coming, my Keeper,” she called, her heart heavy.

“Cicero is the best assassin that ever lived!” the jester crowed as he whirled on one toe. “Who needs a Dragonborn when the Keeper is around?” His laughter echoed in the afternoon air as he danced.

“Well done, Cicero. I knew you could do it,” Hecate called.

Cicero paused in his celebration when he heard her. She could tell that he knew her smile was too tight, a little too fake, because he asked, “What’s wrong? Cicero thought the Listener would be pleased?”
Then the crackling of flesh burning from within drew his attention. Cicero whirled around, drawing his dagger, instantly ready for danger as soundless thunder cracked through the air. Fire burst along the dragon’s frame, burning from within as flesh and scale turned into ash to blow away in the wind. Golden light burst from the corpse and slammed into Hecate’s body. She threw her arms open as if to embrace the soul as she devoured it. She felt full of life. Everything was heightened. The sun was brighter, the call of the birds singing, the rustle of the wind. Even Cicero’s faded motley looked redder than usual.

“What was that?” Cicero whispered in awe. “Oh, Listener, that was an amusing trick. Tell Cicero how you did it!”

“Not a trick,” she murmured. “A dragon’s soul. I devoured it because I am Dragonborn.” She paused before going to him and wrapping her arms around her Keeper and burying her head against his chest. “I had hoped you were one too.”

Cicero laughed as he held her tight. “Now why would dear, sweet Hecate want that? Didn’t she once tell Cicero that she didn’t want him to learn how to breathe fire? What if poor Cicero were to get sad or upset and Shouted like Hecate did? Cicero would have to worry about hurting poor Mother! No, no, it is better that we only have one Dragonborn in our Sanctuary, eh?”

Hecate chuckled as she wiped away her tears. “I suppose you’re right,” she sighed. Only Cicero didn’t know that she wasn’t getting older because of dragon souls while he was. She had never found a good time to tell him.

“Why in the world did Hecate think she wasn’t the only Dragonborn?” Cicero asked.

“Because Thongvor Silver-Blood was one,” she said, still not really believing the words despite what she had seen. “His body crumbled just like this dragon’s and I stole his soul.”

“Ho, ho, ho,” Cicero cackled. “No wonder the Listener was so cranky. To have something so foul as a Silver-Blood’s soul in you would make any reasonable person mean.”

“You’re teasing me,” Hecate pouted.

“You deserve it,” Cicero stuck his tongue out at her. He gently took her chin and tilted her head so she was looking at him. “You’ll have to apologize to Elisif.”

“What?” Hecate whined. “I don’t want to!”

“You must!” Cicero insisted. “You made her feel bad and part of the Brotherhood’s purpose is to bring closure and vengeance to those faithful who pray. Despite the dark ritual they perform, our petitioners are innocents who cannot shed blood for those they hate.”

“The Tenets must be observed?” she mused.

“Hmm,” he agreed. “It is disrespectful to treat Mother’s children so poorly.”

“Oh, you apply everything to the First Tenet!” she said as she slapped Cicero’s arm. She sighed, pushing her hair back. “But I suppose that you’re right.”

“Cicero is always right,” the Keeper bragged. “This is more than just about losing the bonus and Elisif’s reaction. You’ve been uptight about her ever since you talked to her as Diana last year. Go make amends however you see fit. Cicero has faith in you, dear Listener.”
Elisif tossed and turned in her huge bed. She still had problems falling asleep when she was alone. Growing up, she had been piled into a bed with sisters and cousins keeping each other warm through the cold nights. Then as an adult, she had shared her bed with Torygg. Now her bed was too big and lonely and she could never get comfortable.

It had been made worse since her last visit from the Brotherhood. How dare they speak to her that way? Talking down to her like that. Still, she had to admit that at least Tragedy had berated her for her behavior instead of telling her to do nothing.

A cool breeze brushed across her face, smelling strongly of the sea. Elisif sat up, feeling vulnerable in her shift, and saw that her window was open with the curtains fluttering gently. Before she could get out of the bed to close it, a shadow emerged from among the curtains. It darted across the room and rested on the bed with her with barely a squeak.

A gloved hand went over Elisif’s mouth before she could scream for help. The figure settled its weight on her chest, pinning her hands down and keeping her from being able to move. She tried to struggle, but the invader was stronger than she. Her mind shrieked in terror. This was it! She was dead. Either the Stormcloaks had finally managed to get their own elite killer or they had bought the Brotherhood. Her blue eyes flicked up and her heart sank when she saw the sneering visage of Tragedy’s mask.

“Shush,” the assassin murmured. “Don’t yell. I want to talk.” She waited for Elisif to nod before slowly removing her hand. When Elisif didn’t immediately start screaming, Tragedy slid off her and onto the mattress. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Elisif answered. She wasn’t certain how she was able to talk, her heart was beating so hard she thought she was going to pass out. “Why are you here? I didn’t perform another Black Sacrament. Where is your partner?”

“Comedy is otherwise engaged,” Tragedy chuckled. The assassin paused, looking uncertain although it was hard to tell with the face concealing mask. “I came to apologize.”

“You did?” Elisif didn’t know assassins could apologize.

“Yes,” Tragedy nodded and sighed. “I was unfairly harsh to you the other day. I was embarrassed at my failure and I took it out on you. I also had other personal problems and I should have taken a few days to resolve them before coming to you. We’re a professional organization. I shouldn’t have treated you so familiarly. You deserved better treatment as both my employer and jarl.”

“Thank you,” Elisif said. She was shocked at the admission, but it made her smile too. None of her advisors ever said they were wrong or they should have respected her more. She patted the assassin’s hand. “That means very much to me.” She chuckled nervously. “In some ways you know the real me more than anyone else. None of my court has any idea who is summoning the Brotherhood. Some of them think it is Tullius and he’s clever enough to not deny it nor confirm it. He doesn’t think it’s particularly honorable, but I think he’s more concerned about not losing his commission or his head by losing this war, so anything that makes him look formidable only strengthen his position.”

“It’s safer for you to stay quiet,” Tragedy said, her fingers entwining with Elisif’s. The jarl gasped at the touch. “You could lose the Moot even if you win the war.”

“They wouldn’t dare!” Elisif exclaimed. She realized that she was getting loud so she leaned closer
to Tragedy and lowered her voice. “They wouldn’t dare!”

“Why not? Nords believe in strength and honor. Unless you prove yourself before the war ends, the people of Skyrim will think the real power in your court is your advisors. I have heard more respect for Tullius and Falk Firebeard than for you. You used to have the excuse of being a green girl on the throne and a new widow, but now you’ve ruled for almost five years. How have you proven yourself? You’ve gotten engaged to the boy of one of your allies. When do you stand on your own, lady?”

“You shouldn’t talk to me that way!” Elisif protested. “What happened to your talk of speaking more properly to me?”

“Because I spoke out of personal aggravation,” Tragedy shook her head. “Now I am fulfilling the role of all jesters. I speak the truth when none other dare. I am telling you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.”

“Hmph,” Elisif snorted. “You remind me of my friend Diana. She said very similar things to me.”

“Is that so?” Tragedy asked. She reached up and, to Elisif’s surprise, unhooked the bottom part of her mask. The top part stayed on, now looking like a domino style covering. The eyes were still cruelly shaped, but without the grotesquely downward frowning mouth the assassin looked more human.

It comforted Elisif more than she wanted to admit. She had been scared that maybe Comedy and Tragedy weren’t human or mer, but some daedra in disguise. She had never heard of the children of Sithis using demonic influences before—since the Void god was supposed to be neither Aedra nor Daedra—but one never knew what was truth and what was fiction with the old lore.

“What are you…?” Elisif was interrupted by Tragedy’s hand brushing her cheek before the assassin leaned forward and kissed her. The jarl made a muffled sound of surprise as the other woman’s lips locked against hers. She felt a shock of arousal shoot through her body from the contact.

“I’ve never forgotten your complaint about us being your bedfellows,” Tragedy chuckled against Elisif’s ear. She ran her fingers through the fine strawberry blonde hair. “I’ve never quite been able to get it out of my head. The thought of you ruined under me as I touch and taste every part of you.”

“Stop!” Elisif commanded. She didn’t care how loud she was. “I don’t know you!”

“You don’t really know your fiancé either, do you?” Tragedy asked, scooting closer so she wasn’t quite touching the jarl. She ran one gloved finger down Elisif’s jawline. “Is that going to stop you from taking his virginity on your wedding night?”

“Don’t be crass,” Elisif stammered. She could feel herself flushing. The thought of taking Frothar to bed and being the dominant partner was alien to her, but honestly what else would she expect? Balgruuf seemed too proper to send his oldest child to a Dibellan priestess to practice their art. She didn’t even know which thought was worse. A completely inexperienced virgin, or a boy who had dallied with prostitutes before coming to her bed?

“I could be so much more crass if I wanted to,” Tragedy grinned. Her hand trailed to the top of Elisif’s shift, running along the flushed skin. The breeze from the wind picked up again, blowing across her flesh, cooling her and emphasizing how hot she felt. “Did you go to Torygg a virgin?”

Elisif nodded, too flustered to form words.

“You can’t be the virgin forever,” the assassin said. “I could show you things. Make you more
comfortable in your bed as it were.”

The Nord shifted uncomfortably as the other woman’s hand trailed down and cupped her breast. Her hand kneaded her gently while her thumb played with her rock hard nipple.

“Yes or no, the choice is yours,” Tragedy promised as she ran her lips down Elisif’s neck. The jarl shuddered from the touch.

“No,” Elisif moaned.

“No? Are you sure? Normally I wouldn’t ask, but when someone presses against my touch like that, the answer is usually the opposite.”

“No,” Elisif repeated, forcing herself to lean away from the assassin’s touch. She took a deep, shaky breath wondering how in Oblivion she had gotten into that situation.

“Well, if you change your mind, you know how to get ahold of me,” Tragedy snickered as she sat back and replaced the bottom part of her mask. “Although you should figure a better method than the Black Sacrament. We owe the Night Mother a death when we are called that way and I doubt she was thinking of the ‘little death,’ as the Bretons call it.”

She got off the bed and made an ironic bow. “I’m glad we had this little talk, my jarl. Until we meet again.” Then she was just a shadow slipping out of the window, closing it behind her.

Elisif flopped back onto the bed, feeling frustrated as well as shaky. How did she get into these sorts of situations?

Tirdas 5th Sun’s Height 206 4E 2:00 PM

“Welcome home!” Cicero called when he saw Hecate come into Sanctuary. He was hunched over the alchemy table preparing oils for Mother. “How did it go?”

“Well, thank you,” Hecate said as she kissed him on the cheek. “It worked. Making it so she rejected me instead of me rejecting her made me feel better. Even if she didn’t know that was what she was doing.”

“Good, good,” the Keeper nodded happily. “Cicero knew it would.”

“My Keeper is always right,” she teased, playing with his hair. “I’m glad she didn’t say yes. I don’t know what I would have done then.”

“You would have had a night of passion and felt guilty about it,” Cicero snorted. “No doubt you would have come back here even faster, confessed everything, and wept in Cicero’s arms until sweet Cicero made love to you to make you feel better.”

“How can you be so blasé about it?” she asked.

“Because it’s part of the job,” Cicero shrugged. “We sometimes have to take undesirable roles to get a contract done. Cicero knows that it would not have been undesirable, per se, for Hecate to lie with the lovely Elisif, but it is also something she wouldn’t do for the sake of doing.” He patted her hand. “But if she had any thoughts of you being Diana, that will be suppressed now. So, good, yes?”

“Am I just a job to you?” she asked.
“No,” Cicero shook his head. “Everything Cicero has done, he has chosen to do. That is the joy of being an assassin! We can do what we please without the concerns of common convention.”

“But you just said that sometimes we have to do unpleasant things for the sake of completing a contract,” Hecate protested. “You just contradicted yourself?”

“Did I?” Cicero posited. “Hmm, no, Cicero doesn’t remember doing that.”

“You’re a real brat, you know that?” Hecate snorted as she lightly tapped Cicero on the back of the head. “Maybe next time I’ll make you go and seduce the jarl.”

“If Cicero was sent, he would succeed,” Cicero teased. “Elisif would be called ‘Elisif the Bow-Legged’ instead of Elisif the Fair.”

“That’s actually sort of hot,” Hecate admitted. Her hands wrapped around Cicero’s shoulders and started to massage them. “You should show me your exact technique sometime when you’re available. Just for reference, of course.”

“Cicero is available right now if the Listener would like to learn,” he grinned as he took one of her hands and kissed it. “Cicero is always eager.”

“Then come, my Keeper.”

“Oh, I plan on it,” Cicero declared as he turned around and swept Hecate up into his arms before bolting to her room as her laughter filled the Sanctuary. “By the way, what did that wall with the draconic writing behind the dragon say?”

A look of horror crossed Hecate’s face as she realized in all of the excitement she had forgotten to look at the Word Wall to learn a new word of power.

“Oh crap!”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I've actually been looking forward to this chapter for a while since readers have asked for some Tullius and Cicero interaction. I had to struggle for a long time to decide on how they would react with each other and I like to think this was a good result. If you haven't read "First Kill", I strongly recommend it as it ties in with this chapter significantly.

Turdas 25th Last Seed 206 4E 5:00 AM

It was still dark out when General Tullius's eyes snapped open. He had woken this time of day almost every day for the last thirty years. The general couldn't remember the last time he needed someone to wake him for the day. He was nothing if not a creature of habit.

The older man didn't bother to light a candle as he got dressed. There was no need. He knew exactly where his meager possessions were—tragically few for as long as he had lived here in Castle Dour, but General Tullius had never been much for material possessions. There were a few items of value to him—his Imperial armor, his blade, a ribbon that had belonged to his dead wife—but he did not have anything that mattered that he couldn't carry on his back for leagues if necessary.

General Tullius was a soldier through and through. Ever since he was a young man of eighteen, he had been a Legionnaire. He had joined the Imperial ranks as part of his citizen's duty and stayed when the two years had lapsed. He had advanced steadily in the ranks despite his own personal tragedies through the years. Maybe because of them to be fair. General Tullius had always been able to throw himself into his work when everything else was falling apart.

When he entered the planning room, he was not surprised to see Legate Rikke there waiting for him. No matter when he arrived, his second-in-command was there before him. It was admittedly a little vexing for his subordinate to always manage to precede him, but General Tullius did admire her dedication to the Legion. Rikke was his primary resource on dealing with the native Nords. Not only did she help provide a role model the younger soldiers could look up to and respect, but she understood the local customs much better than he ever would.

It had been five years since Ulfric Stormcloak began this damn war. Five years of perpetual winters, bland meals, ever-flowing mead, and distrustful Nords. Even the ones who kept their vows to the Empire rarely seemed to think of themselves as Imperial citizens. They were Nords first in their hearts and they kept their heritage sacred in a way that was almost enviable.

That was why the Empire had almost lost the war three years ago. Lydia Stormblade had declared herself the Dragonborn and had taken up Ulfric Stormcloak's cause. Men and women who had been undecided in politics flocked to her banner because of the ancient art of the Voice. They had believed she was the one destined to save humanity when she killed Alduin World-Eater in Sovngarde, but the truth was far more disappointing.

Lydia had been nothing more than a simple housecarl to the true hero, Diana Dragonborn, and had stolen her thane's reputation to help bolster Ulfric's floundering troops. It was sickening that Ulfric had allowed her lies to save his cause when he knew the truth of the matter. But then again, what
kind of man killed his own king with a power like the thu'um? No hero, as far as General Tullius was concerned.

Ulfric Stormcloak had been a dangerous opponent. The son of a jarl of a hold with a history that stretched back to the famous Ysgramor, founder of the Companions and the Nordic First Empire, a Legionnaire officer during the Great War, and an apprentice to the elusive Greybeards, masters of the Voice. Ulfric had been a man in his prime, charismatic, passionate, and driven.

And General Tullius was almost his exact opposite.

It was almost a joke to have stationed him here for this conflict, but the Empire could not afford to lose another province. Some Imperial influence needed to be established before they lost Skyrim to secession. In reality, General Tullius was too high ranking for the position of the general of the Skyrim armies, but he had never bothered to learn the game of politics—and as a result he had ended up here.

Not that he had anything in Cyrodiil to hold him there. It had been a long time since he had had a family of any sort. Sure, there were days when he missed the warm weather and variety of color the flowers brought. There were days when he missed there being real seasons. And sometimes he missed the food and the conversation. But did he crave those things? Did he need them? No, not really. It was better that he was here instead of some young man with something to prove or a tired officer who had a family at home waiting for them. He could afford to take his time instead of making rash decisions that would cost the Empire this war and people their lives.

"What do we have planned for today, Legate?" General Tullius asked as he settled into his military stance—arms crossed behind his back, legs set apart at the ready.

"Nothing spectacular, sir," she answered briskly as she bent over the table to tap a few blue flags. As she spoke about current supply lines and the securing of Markarth, General Tullius couldn't stop from admiring the swell of her legs under her armor's skirt. He would never abuse his position by dallying with a subordinate officer, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the view. Rikke was a robust woman in her late forties with a very prestigious family history in the Legion. Despite rumors of a romantic history with Ulfric Stormcloak, she had never been less than a perfect soldier either in General Tullius' presence or on her own personal time. "The privates are planning a training exercise in the courtyard today. I thought it might boost morale if we were to observe them."

"I suppose I could stand to watch them slaughter archery targets for a few hours," General Tullius said drily. Honestly, there were worse details, but he was hard pressed to think of any at the moment. Not only was it tedious to watch raw recruits do the same basic drills over and over, but General Tullius had never enjoyed personal instruction. He thrived on conferring with experts and making strategies from there, not showing a private how to hold his blade correctly.

"Excellent, sir, I'll let the commanding officer know when we're arriving," Rikke responded, ignoring General Tullius' sarcasm.

After a quick breakfast of toast and hot tea, General Tullius found himself with Rikke out in the practice yard watching the men doing formations in the predawn fog. The privates looked as organized as he had feared which was not at all. Most of them were bleary eyed and tousled haired, but they were dressed and in a neat line at least. He watched as Rikke tore them a new hole as she berated them for their appearances.

"You represent the Legion, boys," she scowled. "The citizens look up to you to protect them, their families, and their lands. You make damn sure to always look your best regardless of the time of day. I don't care if it's noon or midnight, you look shiny. Do you understand me?!!"
"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good, now do ten laps around the yard and make it look sharp!" Rikke called. "Ten hup!"

The shuffle of feet filled the yard as the recruits started their rounds. General Tullius tried his best to stifle a sigh as he watched them. Sometimes he missed being that young. He missed the energy and optimism, but then he remembered how dumb he was at that age and didn't miss that at all.

As Rikke reclaimed her place beside him, he felt a chill run up his spine. "Have you ever heard of 'killing intent,' Legate?" he asked quietly.

"Sir?" Rikke looked at him curiously.

"That feeling you get when you're in the middle of a battlefield and know someone is about to attack you from behind. You have no way to know it other than some instinct that warns you just in time to move."

"Once or twice, sir," Rikke granted. "Why do you ask?"

"A good soldier hones that ability," General Tullius answered, slowly sliding his eyes to his right without turning his head. There in an alley, he saw a silhouette lurking in the darkness. "Not everyone who wants to kill you does it openly on a battlefield. Just as frequently you'll have the same enemies in the court, but they wield words instead of daggers."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir," Rikke said, sounding a little doubtful.

"Just watch my back, Legate," General Tullius said as he turned towards the alley.

"I always do," Rikke promised, not leaving her post. If General Tullius had wanted her to follow, he would have said so. He liked that she understood that unspoken command.

General Tullius strode to the shadowy figure which was quickly becoming the shape of an Imperial man with red hair, indeterminate age but most likely forties, unhealthy pale skin, and amber eyes. He exuded fighting intent. "Can I help you, citizen?" the general asked coolly.

Suddenly, the man's manner was completely different. He was smiling and cheerful instead of the deadly aura he has exuded moments before. General Tullius wondered if he had misread the fellow as the smaller man grabbed his hand in both of his and shook enthusiastically. "Why yes," the stranger purred, his voice high, "General Tullius certainly can help sweet Cicero."

---

**Turdas 25th Last Seed 206 4E 5:00 PM**

"You did what?" Diana asked, her voice flat.

"Cicero invited General Tullius to dinner!" the jester proudly repeated.

"Why? When?" Diana yelled. She bit down on her tongue to keep her thu'um in check. Jordis was peering from around the corner, her eyes as wide as saucer pans. It wouldn't do to scare their timid and somewhat ditzy housecarl with her Shouts making everything rattle in their shelves.

"This morning, very, very early," Cicero answered, ignoring her first question. "General Tullius was very tickled to finally meet dear Diana's darling husband after so many years of missed opportunities." Cicero gave her a disapproving one eyed stare. "Shameful really. The highest ranking member of the Imperial army not knowing what the legendary Dragonborn's spouse looks like."
"Cicero," Diana growled as she clenched her fists, "I will end you." She had wondered why she had awoken to an empty bed. It hadn't bothered her at the time, Cicero rarely slept the night through when he did bother to sleep, but now she was pissed. He could have told her at any point the whole day, but he had waited to the last minute so she couldn't change his plans.

"Hm, promises, my dear," Cicero chuckled. "Still, it is only politic for sweet Cicero to meet the taciturn Tullius, yes?"

"And what would you know about General Tullius?" Diana asked through gritted teeth. Cicero wasn't wrong. It was disgraceful that she had never properly introduced him to General Tullius, but he was so unpredictable, she never knew if he would be a perfect gentleman or if he would start tumbling on the dinner table scattering the meal everywhere. That particular stunt wouldn't be the worst possible thing that could happen. What if Cicero decided he hated the man? She knew he would needle and heckle General Tullius incessantly and she needed the general as an ally in Solitude.

Jarl Elisif might sit on the throne, but in reality it was General Tullius who lead the city, especially in everything military. Diana hoped one day the actual seat of power would rein in Elisif's hands after the leader proved herself mature enough for the responsibility, but that wouldn't happen if General Tullius was cornered into a situation where he looked like a petty fool who had to defend his station, something Cicero was much too good at achieving.

"Cicero listens, he does!" her fake spouse insisted. "Cicero goes into the market while we're in Solitude and he talks to the merchants. Cicero buys drinks for the officers. Cicero gossips with jolly Jordis."

Diana looked over at the tall strawberry blonde lurking out of sight but within earshot, awaiting any orders from her thane. Little ears were listening to their every word, something that drove Diana to distraction. She'd have a few extra choice words for Cicero otherwise. They had some of their Brotherhood gear here, stashed under the bed in a chest in case they needed to make an appearance as Comedy and Tragedy. What if General Tullius were to discover it? She had no idea how much of a snoop he might be, but she did know he had been rather dogged about meeting Cicero over the years which didn't speak well of his respect of people's privacy.

"It'll be fine!" Cicero continued when Diana didn't say anything. "If General Tullius likes the dinner, then he'll be satisfied and his honor will no longer be impugned. If he hates it, then he'll never want to visit again. Either way, everyone is happy!"

"I'm not very happy right now," she spat.

"I'll make you happy later," Cicero leered, trying to make her at least smile, but it was no good. She was pissed.

Before Diana could respond, there was a knock at the door. "He's here!" Cicero sang, running to answer it. He was as excited as a child on New Life Day. Meanwhile Jordis ran in a small circle looking very much like a confused puppy not sure how to deal with a guest much less one as important as General Tullius

Diana could only sigh as she rubbed her forehead. For better or worse, General Tullius was here and he had already met her wayward Keeper. Cicero must not have made that bad of an impression if the general had agreed to the meeting. As much as she hated to admit it, the Fool was often right about this sort of thing.

Might as well get this over as soon as possible, she figured as she approached the door. Cicero had
flung it open and was squealing at their guest. Diana paused in surprise when General Tullius entered Proudspire Manor. In all the years she had known the man, she had never seen him out of his Imperial officer's leathers. Tonight he was wearing a civilian's outfit. It was well cut and made of fine quality material. The brown cloth was unassuming and if she hadn't known him General Tullius would have been completely forgettable. It wasn't quite new, the style was too dated, but there was almost no visible wear. He looked uncomfortable as he tugged off his coat.

Typically General Tullius looked rather dashing in his officer's uniform. He was confident in his position of authority that only came from years of competent work and a well-earned reputation of victories. Although he was still handsome enough for an older man, tonight he looked…frail. Mundane. Mortal. It left Diana with an unwanted chill that she tried her best to shake off.

"I brought some Imperial wine," General Tullius said as a way of greeting. He practically shoved the bottle into her hands. "I know it's harder to find up here as the embargo in Jerall's Pass tightens, but I figured what the hell. If you can't drink well with the Dragonborn, who can you drink well with?"

"Thank you, General Tullius," Diana murmured as she handed the bottle to Jordis. When the housecarl stood there with the bottle, she sighed and commanded, "Put that on ice until dinner, dear."

"Yes, my thane!" Jordis said before scurrying off to fulfill her thane's wish.

"You don't have to use my title, Diana," the older Imperial said as he fell into a military stance. "I'm off duty right now. For all intents and purposes, I'm a citizen just like you."

"Of course, Tullius," Diana replied, hiding a chuckle. No one currently in the room would ever be described as 'just a citizen,' but here they were all trying to play the part. "Would you like a seat?"

"Yes, of course," Tullius nodded curtly. "I often forget to remember to ask for one. You get used to standing all the time in the army. If we're not marching, we're standing it seems." He took the offered seat, not quite relaxing into it, but at least he wasn't perching in it.

"I remember from my time," Diana said chuckling as she sat next to him. "My legs felt like noodles after the first day."

Cicero was bouncing around the room, asking questions rapidly. "Would Tullius like something to drink? Something to eat? A snack before the meal?"

"Cicero, sit," Diana commanded sharply. "We have Jordis for all that."

The Keeper pouted, but he obeyed, flopping into the remaining chair. "Cic- I'm just trying to be a good host," he pouted.

"I'm sorry, Tullius, he's very excitable," Diana said as she watched her wayward companion. "We don't entertain very often. I'm not very well suited for it." Neither was Cicero, but it wasn't necessary to point that out.

"I understand," Tullius said laconically. "I always left the amusement of our guests to my wife, Helvia."

"I didn't know you were married," Diana said. She noticed Cicero become very still as he leaned forward in his seat, his attention focused on Tullius. Honestly, she should have known Tullius was married. It was almost mandatory for a high ranking military man to have a wife and children. A family unit represented stability in a way that bachelorhood did not. "Is your family in Skyrim?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't have a family anymore," Tullius said simply. His hand touched his belt pouch.
"They've all passed away."

"I'm so sorry," the Dragonborn said, feeling uncomfortable. How do you properly express sorrow for people you never met?

"Don't be. They died a long time ago," Tullius said. He looked at Cicero. "Coincidentally, my son's name was Cicero. He and his mother had the same red hair as your husband."

Diana bit her tongue when he said that. Red hair was rare in Imperials, unlike the Nords. She looked over at Cicero, but his face revealed nothing. "Is that so?" she asked slowly, wondering at the coincidence.

"He would have been of a similar age too," Tullius said, taking a long drink from his cup. Diana felt like she couldn't breathe. Coincidence was rapidly becoming something else. "Listen to me ramble about myself. I'd rather learn more about you and your husband. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Bravlil," Diana said, although truthfully that had been a different girl living there then. Diana had been born in Skyrim, Helgen to be specific, but Bravlil would always be home no matter what name she called herself. "I haven't been back since I was seventeen though."

"And what about you, Cicero?" Tullius asked. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He clearly was having the same thoughts as Diana regarding the similarities between her Cicero and his dead son.

"Cicero was born in Cheydinhal," the redhead said. Diana flinched. He was slipping into his odd vocal tic frequently tonight. "I spent most of my life taking care of my mother. She couldn't take care of herself and all of my siblings had died."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Tullius said bluntly. Diana thought he looked a bit disappointed at Cicero's response. Whatever response he had been looking for, that was not it. "Where is your mother now?"

"Oh, she's dead too," Cicero tittered, looking too deranged for Diana's tastes. She silently begged that he not burst into song about killing things. "But she rests easily now, so Cicero doesn't mind at all. Especially since he met dear Diana." He smiled gently as he took her hand and squeezed it. "Mother's silence doesn't ring in Cicero's ears as much now with Diana around to listen."

Diana thought she was going to have a panic attack. What was he doing? His story sort of sounded innocent enough, but she was sharply reminded of when she met Cicero on the roadside near the Loreius farm when he had given a similar story about needing to bury his mother. Cicero might be striving to look like the innocent wayward traveler, but he was only coming off as a scary stranger instead.

"Dinner!" Jordis cheerfully declared as she rang a bell. The Listener had never been happier to see the housecarl.

They filed to the dining table and settled into their seats as Jordis fluttered among them placing plates. She served them a typical Nord meal – potatoes, carrots, and venison. The housecarl hummed happily as she served them.

"My thane, will we be having an or-"

"No!" Diana snapped. Tullius looked at her in surprise. "I'm sorry, it's just…"

"Innocent Jordis keeps asking us if we'll have an orgy," Cicero interrupted, giggling.
Tullius' brow furrowed as he frowned. "Jordis, why would you think there would be an orgy?"

"Oh, I, that is," the housecarl mumbled, nervous after being chastised. "I heard it was a sort of party Imperials threw. I thought since you were here, General Tullius, Thane Diana would want to host one in your honor."

"Jordis, an orgy is where many people have sex with each other, sometimes in pairs and sometimes in groups. It's not a conversation for the dinner table," Tullius told her brusquely. After Jordis blushed as red as her hair and scurried back to the kitchen to check on something, he turned to Diana. "Sorry if I stepped out of line, but I always felt it was better to deliver a harsh truth than a sweet lie."

"No, you're right. I should have told her soon, but it's so hard to talk about such things with an innocent like her," Diana admitted. She had been lying and playing politics for so long that she had forgotten the simplicity of just saying the truth and found that she missed it. "I should have said something to her sooner."

Tullius glanced in the direction that Jordis fled. "I admit I almost laughed out loud when she asked." He chuckled which made Diana and Cicero laugh and after that the meal went much smoother. It was nice to talk about home after being gone so long.

In many ways Diana was reminded of the first night she had met Cicero and he had taken refuge in Breezehome while waiting for his wagon to be repaired. They had spent hours talking about Cyrodiil, but now she found that the memories were much more faded than before. Memories that used to be crisp in her mind were now only vague outlines worn away by time.

It was late when Tullius finally excused himself for the night. "I thank you for the meal and the wine," he said as he stretched, "but these bones are old and morning comes early. You'll find in time that it's impossible to sleep in."

As Diana and Cicero escorted the general to the door, he turned to Cicero, "Do you mind if I have a word alone with the Dragonborn?"

"As you wish," Cicero murmured as he bowed before flitting off to help Jordis with the dishes.

Although it was still late summer, it was cool when Tullius and Diana stepped outside. She could see the faint mist of breath hanging in the air. "Your man served, didn't he?" Tullius asked.

"Didn't we all?" Diana asked lightly, although in truth Cicero had never been part of the Legion. He had joined the Brotherhood too young to be enlisted.

"I don't mean the standard two years," Tullius clarified. "He saw something that changed him. I've seen it in many a solider. Some people can't handle death and others can't handle too much death. It wrecks a man's nerves at best and destroys his mind at worst." He glanced at Diana. "That's what I mean when I asked if Cicero served."

He served the Brotherhood more loyally than any man should have to, but she couldn't tell Tullius that. "The loss of his family was hard on him," she admitted, the closest thing to the truth she could give the general.

"I thought as much," Tullius nodded. "I never said this, but the alliance with the Thalmor has always left a sour taste in my mouth. They destroyed so many lives and now they want us to bow and scrape to them as secondary citizens because they won a war they had no right to have started." He stood on his toes, stretching, and it reminded her of one of Cicero's tics. "Tell your man that he's always free
to stop by Castle Dour and talk about nothing some time. Sometimes a man needs to talk about things with someone he doesn't know."

"Thank you, Tullius," she said, touched by his offer. "If you don't mind me asking, how did your son die?" It was an abrupt question, but Tullius was an abrupt man.

"He died in a fire with his milk mother when he was fifteen," Tullius said. "The whole house was consumed leaving nothing behind. It's hard for a man to bury his son, but they never tell you how hard it is when you have no body." He sighed. "I can't help it, but sometimes I keep looking for him hoping that there was a mistake or he managed to survive somehow. It's a foolish hope, but that's all you have when you're an old man." He shook her hand, changing the subject. "Thank you for dinner again."

"We'll have to have you back for dinner sometime soon," Diana said, feeling oddly better about the thought than she had earlier. Damn it, Cicero had been right again.

"I would appreciate that, but next time don't let your housecarl cook," Tullius chuckled. "She's a good girl, but I have enough of that Nordic fare at the castle."

"I'll see what I can do," Diana laughed. "Cicero likes to cook."

Tullius waved his farewell before heading up the hill back to Castle Dour. His stride was relaxed as he walked with his arms crossed behind his back. Diana watched him wistfully until he was out of sight. She had never had a father of her own and wondered what it would have been like.

The Dragonborn turned her gaze south towards High Hrothgar. The closest thing she had ever had to a father figure had been the hermit dragon Paarthurnax, and she hadn't seen him since Alduin's fall. She sometimes found herself wondering how he was doing. Was he happy now that he was no longer bound at the Throat of the World by honor, waiting for his evil brother's return? Had he successfully converted other dragons to the Way of the Voice?

Before her thoughts could linger too much on her old friend, a crash and gale of laughter from inside pulled her back to the present. "Cicero!" she yelled as she darted back in to see what trouble her Keeper had gotten into.

---

**Tirdas 6th Hearthfire 206 4E 2:00 PM**

"**PAARTHURNAX!**"

The old dragon lifted his head at the sound of his name being Shouted. His long tongue flickered in the air, tasting the Voice as it lingered. He did not like this Voice. He did not know it. It was not a *dovah* who called for him. Nor was it one of his Greybeards. He knew all of their voices.

For months now this voice had reached him calling his name, but Paarthurnax had deigned to answer it. To Shout a dragon's name did not mean you had power over him, but every dragon was vain and curious at heart, so it was getting harder and harder to resist the lure of sating his curiosity every time he heard it.

He tried to dig deeper in the sands of Elswyr to make his nest more comfortable, but no matter how he turned or rolled, he could not get settled. He was currently somewhere southwest of the city of Dune, although he didn't know the *joori* city's name. He only knew that he was far enough away no one would notice his passage of flight and would not come hoping to make a name of dragonslayer for themselves.
Paarthurnax was enjoying the hot climate of this country. He had spent millennia in the frozen lands of Skyrim and found that he enjoyed any environment that did not include snow. He told himself that was a good reason not to go back. Who wanted the snow and wind of Keizaal when he could have the pleasures of the other lands long denied to him?

He huffed, blowing sand everywhere. This was ridiculous! He was Paarthurnax, founder of the Greybeards, son of Akatosh, grandmaster of the Way of the Voice! He did not come when called like some common raan.

On the other hand, he was no nikriin who trembled at a joori thu'um! Paarthurnax nodded. He would explore and see who was calling his name. He would not go near Dragonsreach. He was curious, not meyye.

The flight was back uneventful, but that was to be expected. Paarthurnax was pleased to see that the source of the Shout was further north than Numinex's prison. Instead it was a walled city near a bay. A lone figure stood in a courtyard in front of the palace.

"Lydia," Paarthurnax said when he landed. He remembered the housecarl from before. Diana had been close to that one, trusting his secret to her. Something must have happened to the Dovahkiin and she had called him for assistance. "Why have you called me? Is there something wrong?"

"No. Everything is fine now that you're here." Lydia smiled. The dragon didn't like her toothy grimace. He started to spring into flight, but it was too late. "JOOR ZAH FRUL!"

Paarthurnax screamed as Dragonrend ripped through him. His soul shuddered at the temporary understanding of mortality. He was confused as the hated mortal Shout threw him prone to the ground. Guards streamed out from the castle, drawn by the Shout. Chains lashed out, lassoing him to the ground, binding him in place. "Why, Lydia? Why would you do this?"

He could hear the mortals whispering amongst themselves. "It knows the Stormblade's name! It talks!"

"You were the Dovahkiin's fahdon," the old dragon protested. It was hard to think as a chain tightened around his neck. His sight was darkening.

"No, I am the Dovahkiin," Lydia corrected as she strode to him. It would be easy to engulf her with his fire breath right now if he could catch his breath. "And you, monster, are my prisoner."

Her foot crashed down between his eyes and after that there was nothing but darkness.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Delphine shows up at Windhelm after she hears that Paarthurnax still lives. She fears Lydia has betrayed her trust, but it appears the Stormblade has other plans for the ancient dragon.

Tirdas 20th Hearthfire 206 4E 8:00 AM

"Regent, the scouts have noticed Grand Blademaster Delphine and her advisor Esbern with a guard of half a dozen Blades headed this way," Yrsarald Thrice-Pierced informed Lydia during their morning strategy plan in the war room.

Lydia growled as she looked up from the map of Skyrim dominating the table. She didn't have time to deal with Delphine right now. There were too many Imperial red flags cropping up among the holds, holds she had under her control only a few months ago.

They had been stretched too thin. Ulfric had always worried about that possibility. What good was it to take cities and lose precious lives if you would only lose the city as well when the Empire rallied? If only if they had been able to storm Solitude before the damned Brotherhood influence had intervened.

Before Diana had returned.

Before Hecate.

Why hadn't she stayed dead?

"If I may speak bluntly," Yrsarald hedged, waiting for Lydia's nod before continuing, "you look horrible. Are you not sleeping again?"

"I slept," Lydia grumbled. "Just not well."

Her dreams had been full of nightmares, half memories of when she had traveled with Diana. The scrape of metal on stone as mechanical spider sentries threw themselves at her, their claws raking her steel armor as a good dozen of them clambered over her body trying to get to her exposed flesh. She was alone in the dark fighting the things as she tried to not scream.

Lydia wasn't arachnophobic, but being covered in several spiderlike creatures as big as dogs and tougher than iron was enough to make any warrior shiver. She was trained to fight in conjunction with another warrior not by herself. Instead, her thane had immediately retreated leaving Lydia all alone to handle the monsters.

The housecarl had silently resented her mistress' preferred fighting style of archery. She was always in the back, away from the various claws, fangs, blades, and maces of the foes they had faced in the six months they had traveled together. She would immediately regret that resentment when she wasn't in the heat of battle. After all she was pledged to be her thane's sword and shield. Wasn't it her job to be injured instead of her charge?
In the years after Diana had disappeared, Lydia had frequently suffered from insomnia. She would jerk awake from dreams of their travels, but this time of her thane dead at her feet instead of running away as soon as danger reared its ugly head. In her nightmares, she failed her thane over and over.

Once Ulfric had taken her to his bed, the nightmares had abated. She felt safe in his embrace. She was valued and wanted. She was important. She was his Stormblade saving Skyrim.

Even after her jarl died, she still had Elric, her sweet boy. He was the future of Skyrim. He would sit as High King when he came of age after she expelled the Empire and the Thalmor from their ancient home. Only now he was with the Blades and her bed was too big, giving plenty of room for doubts and old fears to crawl in with her in the dark of the night.

Before Yrsarald could ask any more questions, Lydia asked one of her own. "Why are the Blades coming here?"

"No word yet, my regent. The scouts have not made contact yet. Should I send one out?"

"Yes," Lydia said shortly. She had woken in a foul mood which made talking difficult. She had never had any problems with the thu'um until Diana had showed up in her tent last year demanding her dragon scale armor back.

Ulfric had warned her about the possibility of her harmony being disrupted and the side effects. "The Way of the Voice is about balance within. That is why we have the mantra 'Breath and Focus.' You take a word into you when you learn it and it becomes part of you," he had lectured time and time again as she trained to become a Voice Master. "I'm not sure how it will affect you since you're learning at a much faster rate than I was taught by the Greybeards, but you must be prepared that one day something will affect you so greatly that your Voice will effectively crack." He touched his own throat with a faraway look. "After that it will be a constant struggle of who is the master – you or the thu'um."

She knew he had battled with it when his own emotions had been extreme. His voice would shudder with the force of his thu'um when angry, scared, or at the peak of orgasm, although only Lydia ever saw the latter two times. He had been careful to always present himself as confident in his crusade in public, but in the dark of their bed, he would hold her tightly. He never voiced his worries, but the way he kissed her and made love to her gently during those times were as loud as any words he would have used.

"It will be done, my regent," Yrsarald said, not waiting for Lydia to elaborate. He snapped a salute before leaving the command room to find a fresh scout. Lydia knew that he would make sure to get all the information she needed without explicit directions.

It wasn't until her second-in-command was gone that Lydia thought to wonder how he knew she didn't sleep well at night.

---

**Tirdas 20th Hearth's Fire 206 4E 6:00 PM**

"Do I need to caution you to diplomacy, Delphine?" Esbern asked.

Windhelm loomed ahead of them as they rounded the corner near a wood mill. The last week of traveling east had not been very pleasant. Delphine had pushed them to their limit on traveling. Not a moment of daylight was wasted as they had made their way to the ancient capital of Skyrim.

Even then Delphine had been continuously vexed by the short hours they had been restricted to.
Skyrim was far enough north that even in autumn they had only about six hours of good daylight before they had to make camp for the night. Esbern thought it was telling that the war campaign was on hold again although winter was still a couple of months away.

This place was so different than home. He missed Cyrodiil with its long days and warm nights, but at times like these he was grateful for Skyrim's harsher environment. In Cyrodiil, the war would have waged on all year long. There was some snow in his homeland, but not enough to grind supply lines to halt like the mountains and valleys of Skyrim did about half of the year.

People would die from the cold of winter, but far fewer than those in the battle lines. He prayed that calmer heads would prevail while each side had to cool their heels during the winter. "Talos give them wisdom," he murmured frequently.

"I won't tolerate disrespect, Esbern," Delphine grumbled. "We had a deal and she needs to uphold her half of it."

"This isn't Diana," Esbern reminded her. "Lydia is an honorable Nord. If you insult her by calling her a liar, she'll just dig her heels in harder about not doing what you want."

Delphine looked over her shoulder at the initiates to make sure they weren't close enough to overhear her conversation with Esbern. "Well, she is a liar. She may have power of the Voice, but she's not the Dragonborn."

"I know that, you know that, and she knows that we know," Esbern said. "We could expose her at any time, but to what avail? She'll just deny it like she's denied Diana's claims of being the true Dragonborn and we'll be out of the one ally we have here. Or do you plan on pledging your loyalty to the Imperials?"

"The Empire turned its back on me once already," the Breton scowled. "Diana too. All the more reason I don't trust Lydia."

"You trust her or you wouldn't have taken her child hostage," Esbern nudged. Esbern hadn't been around children for a long time, but he found that he enjoyed the precocious Elric Stormcloak's presence in Sky Haven Temple. "You have every right to be irritated. Just give Lydia a chance to explain herself before you make demands."

He was pleased to hear Delphine chuckle. "You always help keep me level headed, old friend. Fine, we'll have it your way, but she better have a damn good reason."

Tirdas 20th Hearthfire 206 4E 8:00 PM

"They're here, my regent," Yrsarald announced. He was standing in the doorway of the jarl's private chambers, shuffling uncomfortably. The large room was reserved for the jarl and any guests. Where a jarl could normally be approached for any reason, this was the one place the ruler could find any level of privacy.

Lydia opened her eyes to glance at him. "What sort of mood are they in?" she asked as she stood. She had been meditating, looking for her harmony since Yrsarald had told her of their incoming guests. She couldn't afford to get into a yelling march with Delphine. The Nord felt a little better, but not as relaxed as she would have liked. Not that a regent ever was given time to truly be at ease.

She brushed off the simple shift she was wearing as she had knelt on the floor. Although it was simply made of thin cloth, she didn't really feel the cold, but she could see the stark points on her
chest where her body had still reacted. A quick check showed her that Yrsarald was respectfully looking away. Good. It wouldn't do for her right hand man to be ogling her.

"Delphine looked a bit placated when I greeted her by the stables and even further pleased when I informed her that we delayed dinner so we may sup together," Yrsarald said. "Esbern looked calm as usual, so no storm on that front. Jorlief is currently showing them to their rooms. After they've had a chance to freshen up, we'll eat."

"Good," Lydia nodded as she pulled out Ulfric's wolf cloak. She wouldn't be wearing armor tonight, but her jarl's clothes often gave her the same sense of security donning iron had.

"It's a symbol, Lydia," he used to say. "Use and create symbols whenever you can. People need symbols to rally behind because symbols can't die like men do."

The regent had debated long and hard on how to receive her guests. Lydia had not forgotten how vexing it had been the last time Diana and she had come here together. The Dragonborn had been used to being accepted into Ulfric's company as soon as she arrived no matter what time of day it was, so when Ulfric had made her wait for two days it had exasperated her to no end.

It had been tempting to do the same with Delphine, but Lydia suspected she knew why the Breton was here and frankly it was smarter to placate the woman instead of antagonizing her.

"Talos guide me," she whispered as she dressed, but it was Ulfric's face she saw when she said the prayer. He had been so much wiser in the ways of people than she. She had always thought it was ironic that Ulfric had spent most of his childhood living in a secluded monastery with men who couldn't talk, but he was one of the best speakers she had ever heard. She remembered how some of the maids in Whiterun had gossiped about his amazing voice after he had visited Jarl Balgruuf and how that would be enough alone to get them into his bed.

Lydia brushed that memory away, a blush gracing her face. She wasn't a girl any more swooning after a handsome jarl. She was the ruler of a hold and she had a job to do. Brushing off the front of her tunic, she turned to Yrsarald. "Let's do this."

---

**Tirdas 20th Hearth's Fire 206 4E 8:30 PM**

Delphine had to admit that leadership had been good to Lydia. True, she had an exhausted look about her, but she had filled out into a respectable woman instead of the mere girl she had been when Delphine had first met her five years ago. The Nord carried herself with dignity and poise that few could possess. She had always struck Delphine as a serious minded woman unlike her flighty thane.

The Blademaster and Esbern stood when the regent entered the room. They were not eating in the main dining hall that was part of the throne room. Instead they were dining at a smaller, private table off a side room.

"Delphine, it's been too long," Lydia said pleasantly as she gave the older woman a hug. She smiled winningly as she moved to take her seat. "I hope if you don't mind if we wait to discuss what brought you here after the meal? I would love to hear how Elric is doing." Her blue eyes were briefly sad. "I can't believe it's been nine whole months since he left."

"You're welcome to visit him any time," Delphine said graciously as she took her seat.

"I wish it was that easy," Lydia chuckled. "One of my primary reasons to house him with you was to keep him anonymous. If I were to visit him, it wouldn't take long for someone to make note of it."
Even if that wasn't a factor and you were closer, I have my duties to attend to. I rarely had a moment for him when he was here." She paused with a faraway look on her face. "By Talos, he's three now! His birthday was last week. Yrsarald —"

"We sent him a care package from you, my regent," her lieutenant assured her.

"Thank you," she said, relief flooding her face. An awkward moment passed until Esbern cleared his throat.

"Your boy is quite the learner. I've already started teaching him how to write his letters and he's picking it very quickly."

Lydia brightened at the news, her face five years younger as she grinned. "Oh, Esbern, you didn't have to do that. Tilma said she would deal with his training."

"I know, my dear," Esbern reassured her, patting her hand. "I offered to do it."

The rest of the meal continued in a similar vein – discussing Elric's training, Blade recruitment, what kind of winter to expect.

Delphine mostly watched and listened while Esbern engaged their hostess. She had never stopped to consider what it must have been like for Lydia to offer her son as a hostage. Delphine had never had time to become a mother. Her family had been the Blades since she had joined as a young woman. After they had been disbanded, she had been much too preoccupied with not being caught and killed by the Thalmor to even think about finding love and making children. What could it possibly feel like to give up your child when he was too young to properly dress himself?

Once they finished eating, the dishes were cleared away by servants and wine was poured and Yrsarald was dismissed, Lydia leaned back in her seat and sighed.

"I suppose you're here about Paarthurnax," she stated.

"Yes," Delphine responded, "that is exactly why I am here. You've had him captive for three weeks and he's still alive. Care to explain yourself?"

"I'm impressed by your information network," Lydia chuckled. "I had Paarthurnax moved out of the front courtyard the day we caught him. Not a lot of people know he's an unwilling guest in the Palace of the Kings."

"A clever maneuver," Esbern mused. "You made it so your people saw him being captured, but you made sure that they wouldn't see how you didn't absorb his soul."

"I learned that lesson from Rorikstead," Lydia admitted as she swirled her drink. "A dragon attacked while Ulfric and I were there. We managed to bring the beast down, but were left with an inconvenient corpse. Thankfully, that was the day the Dark Brotherhood first tried to kill him. An arrow had been aimed directly at his throat. It was only through my trained reflexes as a housecarl that we were able to deflect the arrow from its target. The two assassins were forced to ride off on their black steed while I threw insults after them. We were able to use their failure to distract the townsfolk from the dragon." She smirked. "It must have rubbed her raw to have come so close and for me stop her."

"Rubbed who raw?" Delphine asked.

A flicker of something, hesitation perhaps, crossed Lydia's face before she responded. "The assassin, of course."
"Of course," Delphine nodded, letting the matter drop. The former housecarl was not a good liar. Lydia's tone had been much too personally satisfied when she had gloated for Delphine to believe her, but the Breton suspected pushing her would result in nothing. She gestured at her companion instead. "Esbern is right. It was clever. However, it does not explain why he's still alive."

"Maybe I thought I would have my own Numinex here like old King Olaf," Lydia hedged.

"I might have believed that if you had him on display," Delphine scoffed, "instead of hiding him away."

"I had to be sure he wouldn't hurt any of my people with his thu'um," Lydia said. "One word could have set an innocent on fire."

"You've muzzled him?" Delphine asked, hopefully. If Paarthurnax couldn't talk, then she didn't have to worry about him manipulating her stand-in Dragonborn.

"No need," Lydia shrugged. "He's not spoken one word since he was captured."

"I would like to see him," Delphine said.

"Delphine, do you think that wise?" Esbern asked. "If the dragon wanted, it could fry us with a Word!"

"I want to see him. I want to see Alduin's general. The monster they described in the books," Delphine insisted. And if he was everything they had said he was, she would kill him herself, Lydia's pride be damned.

"As you wish," Lydia said, standing. She led the two Blades towards a back area that had not existed previously. "I don't have a porch like Dragonsreach to host my prisoner, so I had to have something built. It's not as grand, but it suffices."

A stone room had been built up behind the palace. Lydia withdrew a key from her pocket. "Only Yrsarald and I have copies," she explained as she unlocked the steel door. "The entire structure is made of six-inch-thick stone. We had Wuunferth place fire, frost, and electrical protections throughout it before he tested it himself. They withstood every blast from him, and he's a master of destruction magic."

The inside was bare. Except for the large golden dragon with the brace around his neck, there was nothing other than chains holding him to various walls. Paarthurnax looked like a pathetic creature slumped against the floor, his eyes closed and his head on the ground.

Delphine walked slowly around the beast, ready to respond if he tried to attack her. He was as still as the dead. She couldn't even see him breathing despite being close enough to touch him. It would be so easy to kill him here and now. Pity she couldn't.

"It seems to be as you said," she granted when she returned to the other two.

"Of course," Lydia said shortly. She gestured for them to leave.

"What is your plan?" Delphine asked once they were outside and the door locked again. "Keep him alive until the war is over?"

"It seems a fair incentive for you to guarantee my victory," Lydia grinned.

"The Empire would be just as likely to kill him once they have him in their custody," Delphine
pointed out.

"Maybe, but only if he was here when they took Windhelm," Lydia countered.

"You would release him?!!"

"Only as a last resort," Lydia reassured her. "I don't want him to have a chance to take revenge on my city for his imprisonment, but I won't hesitate to turn him loose on some Imperial soldiers if I had no other choice."

"In the meantime, we both have political hostages," Delphine murmured approvingly.

"It is more than fair," Esbern piped in. "Leverage for both sides."

Delphine sighed as she nodded. She hated that Paarthurnax was once again escaping justice, but realistically what were a few more years to an immortal dragon? Let him languish here a prisoner instead of free on his mountain. "Agreed."

**Middas 21st Hearthfire 206 4E 3:00 AM**

Lydia couldn't sleep.

Falling asleep was easy. She usually entered the world of dreams as soon as her head hit the pillow every night. Staying asleep was a completely different story.

The Nord had climbed into her bed a couple of hours before midnight, but five hours later she was awake and all she could do was think about there was that needed to be done. Train the Blades Delphine had left to be Voicemasters. Deploy scouts for Markarth. Call in more taxes and harvests from her holdings. Try to appeal or bribe certain influential members of the courts. Decide if she could stomach trying to deal with Maven Black-Briar and if it was even worth her time.

And over and over – how to get Paarthurnax to talk.

She dressed in a simple night shift and went to the dragon's cell. "It's me," she said, feeling foolish as she held her lantern high to cast its light further.

Paarthurnax opened one great eye, but immediately closed it.

"Please, I need you to call her," Lydia said simply. "Call Diana. She'll come for you."

No response.

"Please," she pleaded, trying again after several deep, slow breaths. "She's a bad person. She's a killer. She's not the Dovahkiin anymore. She's become a monster. She leads the assassins now. She calls herself Hecate."

Still no response.

Lydia opened her mouth, but nothing came out this time. What else was there to say that she hadn't already said to the ancient dragon by now? He knew what she wanted him for – to Shout Diana's name so she would come to him.

The Imperial had returned for her insane lover. Surely she would stage a rescue for Paarthurnax if she knew he was her captive. Her thane might have changed, not enough to leave someone important behind.
Except Lydia.

Lydia had been left behind.

Her lips trembled as she struggled to not let the tears escape while she extinguished her lantern. She swallowed hard several times before she found her focus again. Only then could she allow herself to go back to her room.

As she neared her chambers, she noticed a shadow emerge from a side corridor. "Who's there?"

"Just me, my regent," Yrsarald answered.

"Yrsarald," she breathed. "You startled me."

"You have nothing to fear, my regent," he said with a short bow. "I am your sword and your shield." He paused before briefly touching her shoulder. "I'll protect your dreams as well as your person, my regent."

"Thank you," Lydia whispered, grateful for the dark hiding the blush burning on her cheeks. She brushed past her housecarl and slid the door firmly shut between them.

That night she had no nightmares.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

t's a typical Sundas for Hecate in Dawnstar Sanctuary during the winter.

Sundas 4 th Evening Star 206 4E 8:00 AM

Getting up

"Listener, time to get up!" Cicero whispered as he curled behind Hecate, pulling her into an embrace. He loved watching her sleep, her form warm and soft beside his while he stroked her hair. But he was bored after another long night of no sleep and it was time to get moving. Left on her own, his sweet Listener would sleep half the day away and there was much to do.

Hecate's only response was a muffled groan as she pulled the furs over her head. "J'st fw mre mintes."

As if she didn't say that every morning! By Sithis, she said it every time he shook her awake. That was fine. Clever Cicero was prepared. He pulled his gloves off before plunging them into the bucket he had brought for this very contingency.

The Keeper chuckled as he slipped his hands under the blankets. "Now, now, dear Listener, you know it's time to get up." He pressed his hands against her bare skin, his chuckle turning into a full bout of laughter as she jerked away from his touch.

"Ah, cold! Cold!" Hecate floundered, entangled in the sheets as she tried to get away from Cicero's icy hands. She fell gracelessly out of the bed. "Cicero, you bastard! I'll get you for that!"

Cicero flipped out of the bed, dancing away as he stuck out his tongue at the Listener. "You'll have to catch me first!" Then he was out the door with a naked Listener chasing him.

"Oh, by the Void, put some clothes on, woman!" Nazir yelled.

Sundas 4 th Evening Star 206 4E 8:30 AM

Making breakfast

"I swear one of these days, Cicero," Hecate grumbled as she flopped at the dinner table. She grabbed knife and started paring some potatoes. "You're going to go too far and I'll Shout the shit out of you."

"Promises, promises," Cicero snickered as he deftly stirred the pot simmering over the cooking pit before he danced to the table to lay out settings for the Family.

Nazir was still the Sanctuary's primary cook, but a few months ago he had privately talked to Hecate about how he was getting older and it was harder to cook for so many people in Sanctuary for one person.

There were currently ten assassins who called Dawnstar Sanctuary home. It didn't normally feel like that many people were here though. Other than Hecate, Cicero, Nazir, and Babette, most of the
Family tended to stay out and about instead of crashing on a cot in Sanctuary.

However, it was winter and that meant most of the Family was home for the holidays. Only Aventus wasn't there since he was still at the Bard's College in Solitude. There were usually fewer contracts during this time of year. Maybe it was because people couldn't get away to perform the Black Sacrament or maybe because fewer people were out committing atrocities. Regardless of the reason, it was a slow season for killing and the Family was all home which meant more food was needed for meals and Nazir was unable to keep up with the demand.

Hecate had generously volunteered Cicero and herself with helping food preparation. She couldn't personally cook, but that didn't mean that she couldn't assist by cutting up vegetables. She liked the calm she felt as she sliced and diced potatoes, carrots, and onions, but she hated needing to get up so early every morning. She yawned loudly, her jaw cracking.

"Stop sulking, dear, it doesn't suit you," Cicero chided as he rapped a knuckle on her head.

"I'm not sulking," she pouted. "I'm waking up."

"Next time Cicero will wake you with a kiss," Cicero teased, placing said kiss on her cheek.

"Promises, promises," Hecate mocked.

"Look, I don't care what activities the two of you do behind a locked door, but could you please keep your nude shenanigans there?" Nazir asked as he came into the main area. He stopped to sip the stew that was simmering for later meals. He sprinkled a few herbs into the mix before covering the pot. "It's too damn early in the morning for a screaming naked woman."

"Nazir is getting old if he thinks that," Cicero cackled. "Cicero would never reject a screaming naked woman. In fact, Cicero knows he is doing it right if that is the case."

"Shut up!" Hecate laughed as she kicked at the Keeper.

"I was never much of an exhibitionist," Nazir commented as he scooped up the pile of vegetables Hecate had prepped for him. "Give me a nice, cool dark room and I'll work wonders for you then."

"Hm, sounds like a contract," Cicero said as he sat down across from Hecate. "Stab, stab, stab!"

"Everything sounds like a contract to you," Nazir sniffed.

"Nothing wrong with that!" Cicero protested. He looked at Hecate for help as she stood up. "Right, Listener, right? There is nothing wrong with everything sounding like a contract?!"

"Of course not, sweetie," she said, patting his hair. "Come on. Let's let the others know food is ready."

---

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 9:00 AM**

Breakfast time

"I am telling you, Nazir, you have to add just a little bit of oregano to your meals. You will not regret it," Babette insisted as she handed Meena a plate full of ham.

"Girl, my recipes are fine as they are," the Redguard grumbled as he took a bite as if to prove a point. "I don't need any advice from a little she-devil like yourself."
"It's not like you eat anyway," Hecate interjected.

"I can eat," Babette sniffed. She fiddled with the empty plate set before her. "I have tasted quite a few wonderful dishes in my time. In fact, I thought Festus killing the Gourmet was a terrible shame. The world is a lesser place without his talent."

"I've never seen you eat," Hecate commented. "I thought you could only drink blood."

"There is a lot about vampires, you do not know," Babette sighed. "Remember how you thought I could not go into the sunlight?"

"You said you would burst into flames!" Hecate protested.

"No, I said it would feel as if I was bursting into flames," Babette said with a smile. "Similar, but different."

"The Listener isn't good at listening," Cicero teased from his seat to Hecate's left. He stole a bite of potato from her plate.

"Stop that!" Hecate chided as she slapped the Keeper's hand.

"Cicero thinks Babette is just jealous of the attention Nazir gets from all the cooking he does," Cicero smirked around a mouthful of food as he sat back in his seat. "Little unchild can't stand the thought of someone else being lauded instead of her."

"Babette thinks Cicero is an idiot!" the vampire hissed, showing her fangs.

"Cicero is not an idiot!" the Keeper protested. "Cicero is a fool! Bwahahaha!" He climbed on top of the table and started tumbling down it which effectively ended the meal. At least this time most of the siblings were able to grab their plates out of the way first.

Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 11:00 AM

Mending

Sometimes Hecate missed her days working at Adrianne Avenicci's forge. She would occasionally think of the other Imperial woman and her Nord husband with their unconventional gender roles. Big, burly Ulfberth would kindly invite people to come into the store and take a look around while his smaller wife sweated over the hot forge's fires. They were the first people who had made her feel welcome in Skyrim and had given her a home when she would have been otherwise homeless.

The long days working beside Adrianne were pleasant memories. Hecate had liked the hard work to give her something to focus on instead of Alduin's attack on Helgen, her near brush with death, and being stranded in a foreign land.

She worried about Adrianne and Ulfberth in occupied Whiterun, but what could she do? If anything bad was going to happen to the Imperial, it would have happened already. She was probably keeping her head down and focusing on improving her skill. It was a shame she had not retreated to Solitude with her father when Balgruuf's court had been banished there. Adrianne had frequently bragged Proventus asked her opinion on difficult matters. It would have stood to reason to stay near him with the war going on.

Most early afternoons found Hecate working on mending armor. It never ceased to amaze her how frequently assassins managed to tear up their armor. She supposed she was spoiled by being an
archer. Most of the others seemed to prefer up close and personal kills. One would think Vedave would be the only exception as the resident mage, but even he liked creeping in on a sleeping target and slitting their throats from time to time.

She liked the work. She liked to keep her hands busy with the stitching and repairs. She even liked curing new leather and dying it black or red despite the atrocious smells. It always felt good to watch as shapeless hide became the sleek, form fitting trademark armor of the Brotherhood.

Sometimes a few of the others would wander in and they would sit around together talking about nothing, laughing over their recent contracts. But frequently this was Hecate's "alone time," when she got to reflect and think about upcoming projects.

Still, she sometimes missed working side by side with Adrianne.

---

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 1:00 PM**

Training

To most people it looked like Hecate and Cicero were merely dancing. And to some degree that was true. They were dancing. But for the Fools, it was more than that.

Dancing had developed Hecate's speed, strength, and endurance in a way regular training never had. For one thing, she was always eager to meet Cicero for their hour of training while the drills she had been taught in the military had seemed dull and repetitive. Here on the training floor, Hecate never knew what their dance was going to be until they started. Sometimes Cicero would even manage to find a new style for them to practice, and Hecate loved those the most.

Most days Hecate let Cicero lead. He would guide her and show her how to move without thinking, how to spin and dodge faster than anyone else, or how to hear the music that no one else could. She loved how she could trust him, how she could surrender to his movements and become his puppet in a way she would never trust anyone else.

Other days he would have her lead and chose their music, but those sessions were much less satisfactory for her. She was the student eager to learn while he was the teacher, but she knew that sometimes the disciple had to lead to show their progress.

It wasn't just dancing, though. It was training for their unique dual style of fighting. They had developed a silent, quick method of communication from their years of training together. A quick squeeze on the left shoulder meant an enemy was coming that way. A nudge at the knee with her foot indicated that Cicero should kneel leaning that direction. A squeeze on the waist meant he should spin her in a whirlwind attack against surrounding enemies. They said so much to each other without words.

"What is life's greatest music?", indeed.

---

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 3:30 PM**

Late Lunch with the Keeper

It was Cicero's day to oil the Night Mother. The Keeping ritual started at sundown and lasted until midnight. During the summer there wasn't much time, sometimes only a couple of hours, forcing Cicero to hurry to finish in time. During Evening Star, though, the ritual started around 4:30 PM, which meant Cicero would spend almost a third of his Sundas evenings alone with the Night Mother.
Cicero could be easily done in four hours without needing to rush his duties, but he played by the rules when it came to the Keeping Tomes and would not emerge from the Unholy Matron's catacombs until midnight. During the winter months he would occupy his time by preparing the oils and various herbs needed for the ritual. Not the actual boiling process—that was for the day, when the fewest number of people were around to offend with the rending odors. But he could pluck, grind, and otherwise prepare his sacramental materials that he would need throughout the year.

"Will the Listener be joining Cicero tonight?" the Keeper asked as he took a huge bite out of his sandwich. The two of them were dining in the master bedroom instead of the main hall. It was more comfortable and intimate around the small table when it was just the two of them.

"No, I have errands," Hecate answered, sipping some juice.

"Is the Listener sure that it's not because she's afraid she'll fall asleep again?" Cicero teased.

"I was just resting my eyes!" Hecate protested, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. She had hoped that he wouldn't have noticed, but that had been a vain hope. Cicero noticed everything. "It was just for an extended period of time."

"It's okay," he reassured her, patting her hand, "Cicero understands."

She sighed with relief. She had been worried for years that Cicero would be offended if she nodded off during his Keeping. It was hard to be still and quiet for so long though. That's why she usually only attended during the spring and autumn months when they were long enough Cicero wouldn't be stressed by being rushed but not so long she got restless or sleepy.

Although she appreciated the confidence Cicero had in her to allow her to attend at all, Hecate felt a bit unsettled watching him Keep the Night Mother. It wasn't because her lover was thoroughly oiling a corpse, but she knew that it was a very personal duty to him. Also, she had never heard the Night Mother speak to her during that time, making her suspect that her connection was cut off during that time. It left her more unsettled than anything else to know that she couldn't speak to her goddess during those hours.

"I really do have things to do," Hecate explained. "I promised to help Babette with gathering some herbs that can only be plucked during the moonlight and there's some cleaning that needs to be done."

"The Listener should have the initiates do that menial work," Cicero sniffed. "It is beneath your rank to be scrubbing the torture room."

"Says the guy who does my laundry," Hecate teased, tapping the jester on the nose.

"That's different!" Cicero insisted. "Cicero loves tending to the Listener."

"You think you'll have enough energy to tend to me tonight?" she asked suggestively.

"Maybe," Cicero hummed slyly.

There had been a time when Cicero had no interest in sex on Sundas and Hecate had been grateful given his duties, but ever since he had given her a ring that rule had been relaxed a bit. It wasn't as if they were doing anything intimate in front of the Night Mother. Also, Hecate had to admit there was a pleasant residual scent that clung to the Keeper from his hands being soaked in the ritual oils.

"What about now?" Cicero asked, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. "Cicero has plenty of energy now."
"Hm, cuddling only," she chuckled as she took his hand to lead him to her big bed. "I don't want you worn out for the Night Mother."

"Never," Cicero promised as he fell into the bed with her.

---

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 5:30 PM**

Listening

Hecate was cleaning up her bedroom when Vedave knocked on her door. She looked up to see the Dunmer enter looking a bit sheepish.

"Listener, are you busy?" he asked nervously.

"Not really," she said giving the table a final swipe before placing the dirty plates in a pile on the edge. "What's up?"

"Well, I know you get letters from Garnag updating you on Wayrest Sanctuary," he said trying to sound nonchalant but failing. "I was wondering, ahem, well that is..."

"Yes?" Hecate asked, blinking.

"I was just curious if you had heard from any of the others?" Vedave said. "Maybe there were letters from one of our siblings?"

"Like Eruki?" Hecate suggested, almost growling. That Nord Sister had been a handful of trouble, enough so that they had been required to open a new Sanctuary to get rid of her in a less than permanent manner.

The girl had been young and beautiful and much too eager to do what she could to instigate Cicero at any opportunity. She had insisted on "honoring" the Night Mother in a too intimate manner-touching her coffin, leaving offerings, and lingering around the sarcophagus long after she had given her respects.

Eruki had to have known that she was upsetting the Keeper. Cicero had been very vocal on his displeasure, but it had not deterred the younger assassin in the slightest. Finally, Cicero had snapped and attacked her, beating her savagely.

It had shaken the Sanctuary. If the Keeper could dispense justice as he saw fit, who would be next? How far would he be allowed to go?

Given how crowded Sanctuary had become and at the behest of Garnag, the only other assassin outside of Skyrim to survive the purges, Hecate had reinstated the fallen High Rock sanctuary in Wayrest. With Garnag as their leader, Eruki, Elbent, Anaril Telin, Geldii, and Deesei had left to help rebuild the Dark Brotherhood’s presence in the west.

Most of the members had been chosen by Garnag, but in truth the others had been chosen because they had sided with Meena when the Khajiit had tried to usurp Hecate's reign under the pretense of discrimination. "Too many humans ruling, not enough other races," had been her stance. A quick duel had settled that matter easily.

There were still some lingering bitter feelings from the veteran assassins who had been pledged to Astrid. Nazir had been professional enough to let bygones be bygones, but there were times when Hecate would notice Babette glaring at the Fool of Hearts and it worried her. Sometimes she
wondered if she should have sent the vampire with the rest, but she honestly liked Babette, with her sharp wit and clever stories. But most of all, she liked that the unchild was immortal and wouldn't age and die.

Selfish, but it was what it was.

"Um, no, not Eruki," Vedave cleared his throat nervously. "I was hoping you had heard from Anaril."

"The Altmer mage?" Hecate said. "No, I haven't. Was he supposed to send you something for magical research?"

"No! No, it's nothing like that," Vedave stammered, waving his hands defensively. Was he blushing? Hecate thought he was, but it was hard to tell with his dark skin. "I just thought... We were... Ugh!"

With that declaration of disgust, the Dunmer started to stalk out of the room.

"Wait!" Hecate called, using just enough of the Voice to make the mage listen. She gestured to the chairs by the table. "Sit and tell me what this is about."

Vedave shuffled over and took the offered seat. He slumped forward with his hands in his head, shaking. Hecate awkwardly patted his shoulder, not sure what to say. She opted for silence, knowing he would talk when he was ready.

"It's just I miss him, and I didn't think I would miss him this much!" Vedave wailed. Hecate picked up a relatively clean napkin and gave it to him. She tried to not flinch too much when the Dunmer loudly blew his nose on the cloth. "I mean, we had something, you know? Something special and that could last and he just goes off to Wayrest without a never you mind and can't even be bothered to write to me or anything. Is it too much to ask?"

"I, uh, I'm sorry," Hecate stammered.

If the Dark Elf heard her, he gave no indication. He just sniffed noisily as he rubbed the napkin over his nose. "I realize I'm being a total twat. It's only been two years for Azura's sake! That's not really any time at all. And here I am sobbing like some lovesick calf. I keep thinking I'll hear from him and he'll say he misses me as much as I do and then we could be together somehow."

"Hey, I had no idea," Hecate said gently.

"Of course you didn't," Vedave wailed. "You're oblivious!" His voice broke on the last syllable. Hecate's eye twitched as she considered hitting the mage.

"Look, you know you don't have to stay here if you don't want to," Hecate said instead. "The original arrangement was just because we had fewer people then. We have plenty of siblings now. If you want, you could go to Wayrest."

"What if he doesn't want me?" Vedave asked softly, not looking up. "What if he doesn't care? I'd feel like an idiot if I showed up there and it was awkward."

"Well, you can write to him," Hecate suggested. "Why don't you write a letter? Maybe he's been waiting for one from you."

"You think?" the mage peeked at the Listener hopefully.

"It can't hurt," Hecate said. "If he misses you too, then you'll know and be able to do something about it. If not, then you can move on and not worry about it anymore. Right?"
Vedave sighed as he wiped the last of the snot and tears from his face. "Yeah, you're right."

The Listener thought about giving the elf a hug, but decided against it. They weren't really that close and Vedave had never struck her as the hugging type. Which made his longing for Anaril all the more interesting. She looked forward to telling Cicero tonight, although knowing the jester he probably had noticed years ago.

---

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 6:30 PM**

Dinner with the Family

Hecate nibbled on some cheese, still full from her late lunch with Cicero, as she listened to the Family chattering over their meal. Lunch was usually a solo affair for most of the Siblings, but breakfast and dinner were usually more active since people were either getting up for the day or about to go to sleep after a good night's work.

"How was your contract, Meena?" Nazir asked as he scooped some food onto his plate. "You're back later than I would have thought for a solo kill."

"Hm, Meena was distracted by caravan," the calico-colored Khajiit purred as she played with her claws. Her tail lashed mischievously.

"Oh, Mephala, please don't let this lead into a story involving male Khajiit barbs," Vedave grumbled. "That is a vicious, racist rumor!" Meena exclaimed, her fur standing on end.

Hecate sighed as she stood. Meena might be one of the senior assassins at this point, but sometimes it felt like she was still a kitten getting into a basket of yarn. She banged on the table to draw their notice. "Guys, no fighting. I have an announcement."

The Dunmer and Khajiit glared at each other one last time before giving Hecate their attention with the rest of the family.

"Don't forget that we're having a New Life's Day celebration at the beginning of the year," Hecate said. "We're going to do gift exchange, so be sure to be here and not on contract that day. If you haven't picked your gifts yet, you better get a move on it. You might have three and a half more weeks, but travel is rubbish right now with the winter snows in and I don't want anyone risking their lives for a trinket." She smirked. "And no weapons this year. I think we all have plenty of daggers and swords for our profession."

There was a good natured grumbling as they started to clean up the meal.

"Good luck getting Cicero to not go knife crazy," Vedave muttered as he handed some plates to Meena.

"Receiving or giving?" the cat purred, her mismatched eyes glittering. "The jester does love his shiny blades. Meena will be getting some skooma."

"Receiving or giving?" Babette teased as she took some silverware from Hecate to dump in the pot of water to wash later.

"It better be receiving, and there better be no drug use in Sanctuary," Hecate snapped. She didn't care what the others did in their spare time, but drugged serial killers stuck in one location while snowed in sounded like a recipe for disaster. Khajiit had a special advantage in that their bodies were
hardwired to need moon sugar, so skooma affected them differently.

Not that the catkin wasn't off a bit all the time anyway.

The Imperial glanced over to where Meena was rubbing up against Vedave, purring loudly as she shedded her fur all over his robes.

Maybe a lot off.

Sundas 4 th Evening Star 206 4E 7:30 PM

Meeting with the Speaker

"How are we doing on contracts, Nazir?" the Listener asked as she wiped down the dining table. They had just finished prepping the stew that would be simmering all night for any Family members who might be coming home in the middle of the night.

"We're down to only two left," Nazir said as he stretched, his back popping. "I hope the Night Mother has more for you tomorrow. The natives are starting to get restless. I was half-worried that Vedave would drop an icebolt on Meena tonight." He paused. "Half-hoping too, honestly."

Hecate snickered as she wrapped up the cleaning cloths and put them away. "I wouldn't depend on too many. With New Life's Day coming up, most people are in the good will mentality of 'Things will get better' instead of thoughts of despair and hopelessness. It won't be until springtime that we'll start seeing a true influx of contracts."

"Spring?" Nazir mused. "I would have thought the dark of winter would have been when most people would turn to black rituals and deals with evil entities."

"I did too once," Hecate admitted, "but I've found since becoming Listener that that is when people need the most comfort. They have to believe in the best of people or otherwise they'll go mad. They hold onto hope until they see the return of growth and life and then they think, 'I can't go on like this' and that's when they take extreme measures."

"By Sithis, I thought I was the cynical one of the Family," Nazir snorted.

"Nazir, have you heard anything from Wayrest?"

"A bit. Garnag writes pretty regularly," the Redguard said as he picked up a broom. "The others seem to be settling in pretty well and they've picked a pecking order of sorts. Eruki is still a handful by the sound of things, but he's done what he can to keep her in line."

"How is he? How is Garnag?" Hecate asked.

"Better. Worse," Nazir sighed. "He's happy being an assassin again, except he's not really, is he? Being a Speaker is an amazing honor, but it doesn't leave a lot of room for taking contracts."

"Do you regret getting the position?" Hecate bit her lip. If Nazir didn't want to be Speaker, she honestly didn't know who else she could appoint to the position.

"No, I like it well enough," Nazir assured her. "I was getting too old to handle an entire squad of bandits anymore and I like my skin where it is, not cut and bleeding." He paused in his sweeping, leaning against his broom. "It's harder for Garnag. He lost all that time, locked in a dark cell. I think he has a lot of 'what ifs' and 'could have beens' in his thoughts. Orcs don't live as long as the other
races, you know."

"You think he'll have to retire soon," Hecate whispered.

"If by retire you mean die, then yes, I do," Nazir stated matter-of-factly before he returned to sweeping.

**Sundas 4th Evening Star 206 4E 9:30 PM**

**Gathering**

"Babette, I'm ready now if you are," Hecate said as she poked her head into the vampire's room.

The smallest assassin was on her stone slab reading *Twin Secrets*. She daintily placed a bookmark in the book before closing it. "Thank you for your help," Babette said as she picked up a list and her basket.

"What are we looking for exactly?" the Listener asked as she pulled on her gloves.

"A little bit of everything," Babette admitted as she handed the list to the taller woman. "I am specifically looking for ingredients that can only be harvested at night. Nightshade, lunar moth wings, and torchbug thoraxes. However, with the current cold, I think we would do well to also look for frost mirriam and snowberries. If we have the bad luck of running into predators, then I could always use more void salts from storm atronachs, frost saber cat claws and eyes, as well as taproots from spriggans."

"That's quite the list," Hecate chuckled.

"I have not even gotten to the variety of mushrooms we might find," Babette grinned. "I am sure you appreciate that I keep my supplies well stocked for our family, Listener. We go through many potions and poisons in our line of work." She winked. "Not to mention your need for protectives against those nasty dragon attacks."

The two females exited out the secret entrance hidden by the large mosaic window. "I feel like I'm becoming a regular apprentice alchemist," Hecate chuckled.

"You are quite the helper around here," Babette commented as she handed the Listener her basket before ascending the stepladder to the entrance. "It seems like you're pitching in on everything lately."

"I like helping," Hecate shrugged as she gave the basket back before following the vampire child. Changing the subject, she asked, "What were you reading?"

"It is one of Vedave's books," Babette said as she headed towards the forest. "It is about the theory of being able to enchant an item with two different types of enchantments."

"I thought that was impossible!" Hecate exclaimed, her eyes growing wide. Cicero had given her a ring last year that he had stated had all the best protections on it, but she had assumed he had been exaggerating.

"The author of the book wrote of it as a previously unknown technique he had supposedly discovered from a dragon he had bested in battle," Babette said doubtfully. "'A life for a secret' was the way he put it. He had finally mastered it as he reached the end of his life and he could not stand the thought of dying without anyone knowing."
"That sounds fascinating," Hecate marveled. She paused in her pursuit of an evasive lunar moth.

"Sounds like foolishness to me," Babette sniffed as she picked some snowberries. "I suspect he was a mediocre enchanter wanted to leave some mark on the wizard world and made up lies to have his name stop from being forgotten."

"You're so skeptical," Hecate laughed as she managed to cup the moth in her hands. She fetched a bottle out of Babette's basket and deftly removed the lid before sliding him into it. "Why do you doubt people so much?"

"Because people lie, my dear Listener," Babette said simply. "We all lie. Thieves, bandits, killers, shopkeepers, jarls, generals. Why, even you lie, my dear Listener."

Hecate had no response to that.

---

**Mondas 5th Evening Star 206 4E 12:30 AM**

Bedtime

Hecate thought *Twin Secrets* was quite good. Babette had given it to her to read when they returned from their trip, claiming that she was bored with it and that Hecate just needed to be sure to give it to Vedave when she was done.

Part of her wondered if the dragon mentioned was Odahviing. It seemed to fit his personality, although it was possible it was some other dragon. Gods knew there had been a handful of dragons other than Paarthurnax and Odahviing who had survived so far. The refusal to share his name and willingness to deal felt like Odahviing though.

She looked up when she heard the door creak open. "Hey, you," she smiled as Cicero wearily entered the room. He always looked so tired when he came back from his Keeping duties. The black hooded robes were too big for him; they virtually swallowed him as he flopped on the bed, resting his head on her lap.

"Dear Diana," he murmured as he nuzzled her knee. She liked how he only called her by that name when they were either at Solitude or in private. Maybe someday she would share her true name with Cicero. She knew he wouldn't tell anyone else.

"Sweet Cicero," she responded as she brushed his hair away from his face. "I saved you some food and there's some water to wash off with."

"Thank you, lovely," he smiled as he got back up to undress. She watched him as he moved gracefully across the room to put his robes away and use the waiting bowl and cloth to wipe down the sweat. Hecate loved how efficient his movements were. "Did you have a good evening?"

"It was okay," she shrugged as she put the book away. "You weren't there, though."

"I'm here now," Cicero leered.

"You are," she agreed with a grin. Hecate patted the bed. "Come join me."

"As you command, oh great and powerful Listener," Cicero teased as he jumped into the bed with her. He took her into his arms, tickling her as he nuzzled her neck. "Cicero lives to obey."

Hecate laughed as she blew out the candle. It had been another good day in Sanctuary.
A/N: Special thanks to Fluttermoth and Blackwingedheaven for beta reading for me. Your enthusiasm and constant feedback helped me keep writing instead of procrastinating. 😊
Chapter 15

Turdas 11th Rain's Hand 207 4E 6:00 PM

"I can't believe the reports I've been receiving," Delphine exclaimed as she threw the documents her scouts had given her on the table. "Solitude absolutely refuses to acknowledge your capture of Paarthurnax."

Lydia sniffed as she moved away from the scattering papers to pick up her mug of ale. She drank it slowly as Delphine stalked back and forth, her arms crossed behind her. "What did you expect? That they would simply fall to their knees and declare me High Queen?"

"I thought they would recognize your power at doing something that has only been done once before," Delphine growled. "I thought they would at least start taking you seriously as a ruler instead of an upstart replacement."

"There are many who would find insult with that, Blademaster," Lydia warned, her eyes narrowing. "You know I'm right!" Delphine insisted as she slammed her palms on the war table, making the miniature flags wobble. "They feared Ulfric. He was not only a jarl's son from an unbroken line since Ysgramor, but he was a celebrated war veteran and a master of the thu'um. What are you but a housecarl who doesn't know her place?"

"I am the DOVAHKIIN!" Lydia Shouted. The troop pieces and flags fell over, some of them flying to the ground.

"Ladies, please!" Esbern said, standing with his hands held up warding the two women off. "I think tempers are high right now and things are being said out of anger that will be regretted later. We need to focus on the matter at hand, not speculation."

Delphine pursed her lips and stood back as she crossed her arms. "Those are not my thoughts, Lydia. I am merely repeating what I have observed from Solitude's flippant behavior to you. There's no reason they shouldn't have more respect for you. Your army drove them back to the front steps of their capital, you can use the thu'um, and you captured a dragon. They should be begging to parley with you to end this civil war. Instead they bed down with the Thalmor and call you a liar."

"Diana is to blame," Lydia huffed. "She holds too much clout with Elisif and Tullius. I don't know how she managed to get so close to them, but she did." She bit a knuckle as she looked away. "I don't understand why she's so determined to be part of politics after avoiding them for so long."

"Probably to discredit you," Esbern suggested. "I wouldn't put it past her to hold a grudge about the Dovahkiin matter. It has been shown that heroes of legend tend to be extremely egotistical and possessive of what they consider theirs. Add in the draconic tendencies…"

"Esbern, please," Delphine interrupted. The older Imperial could ramble for hours about old stories and she had no patience for it now. No doubt he could provide some insight she would have missed otherwise, but she needed to get to the core reason for her visit at Windhelm. "The point is that people don't believe that you captured a dragon and hold him prisoner. Some of my Blades have interviewed some of the locals and even they are doubtful. I think if you were to display him like Numinex was said to have been at Whiterun, our position of power will be undisputed."

"No," Lydia said simply, shaking her head. "I can't risk that Paarthurnax will attack people if he is
"He hasn't tried anything since you captured him!" Delphine snapped. "Not one word from him. No threats, no bribes, not even begging for his miserable life. If you can't afford to put his body where your people can see him, then I suggest you put his corpse out there instead."

"No," Lydia repeated. "I need something from him that he can only give me alive. Until then, he is my prisoner and Nords do not kill defenseless foes we've taken captive."

"And whatever could that be?" Delphine asked.

"It's...personal," Lydia hedged. The older Breton eyed her suspiciously before snorting.

"At least give me good news regarding the Blades I've left with you," Delphine said. Lydia would have her secrets, that much was clear. Delphine didn't have to like it, but so far she had liked very little about this arrangement. "How is their training going?"

"They are learning well. I spent the winter teaching them the history of the Voice and why it is important. I had them train on meditative techniques before progressing to actual Shouts so it is less likely that their Voices will break. All of them have learned fus, and some of them have mastered all three words of Unrelenting Force," Lydia said before pausing, a furtive look on her face.

"I hear a 'but' in that statement, regent," Delphine sighed.

"But so far none of them are as strong as I in the thu'um," Lydia admitted. "I don't know why. It could be because they are not as practiced or because I don't know it as well as Ulfric did. He had almost forty years of experience while I have less than five."

"It could also be her exposure to the Dovahkiin's thu'um," Esbern suggested. "You did spend a significant amount of time with Diana when she was manifesting her powers. You may have absorbed a significant amount of learning from her." He tapped his chin as he thought. "It could also be a matter of passion. While the Blades are dedicated to hunting dragons, we haven't actually blooded them with the monsters yet and you've gone to great measures to give them safeguards against losing control. This could lead to diminishing returns for their Shouts."

"Esbern, dear, write an essay when we get back to Sky Haven," Delphine said gently.

He sniffed at her comment, but sat back down, taking the hint. Esbern and Delphine had known each other a long time and were used to each other's quirks, so he didn't mind that she sometimes shut him down when he started to ramble. That didn't mean that she wasn't going to find a nice ten page treatise on her desk one day soon speculating about the relationship of the thu'um with exposure to dragonkin.

"Will the weaker Shouts keep them from doing their duty?" Delphine asked.

"It shouldn't," Lydia said with a shrug. "We won't know until our first fight. I plan on taking my best three with me next time there is a dragon sighting."

"I suppose that is all we can hope for," Delphine said. "Maybe seeing the Blades fighting side by side the Dragonborn against their ancient foe will help convince people of our sincerity. A few skulls decorating this place would add a certain 'umph' to our message."

"We should hear of dragon attacks soon. No later than summer," Lydia said. "There tend to be fewer attacks in the winter. I suppose the beasts like the cold even less than we do." She tilted her head. "I suppose that concludes our meeting?"
"I suppose it does," she sighed. She had hoped for much more progress, but she had waited thirty years for her revenge against the Thalmor. If she could break the Empire's hold in Skyrim, it would be one less country under the Dominion's control. What was a few more months in the meantime?

**Turdas 11th Rain's Hand 207 4E 9:00 PM**

Lydia sighed as she slumped against the door. Dealing with Delphine was always exhausting and it was impossible to find any peace of mind when she was visiting. The Nord brushed back her hair as she advanced into the dark room. She couldn't retreat into her bedroom. That would have been too easy for the Breton to find her.

She took a deep breath and let loose a Shout, her thu'um making the ground tremble at its passing. She wasn't worried about anyone hearing. This building had been erected around Paarthurnax, forming his personal prison to protect the people of Windhelm from him.

And maybe to some degree, to protect him from them.

The great golden dragon rustled at her Voice. He had appeared sleeping when Lydia had entered, but now his triangular head rose, tilting to see her more clearly. He didn't look like he had just woken. His slitted pupils almost filled his eyes, making them as dark as the room.

"Disappointed in me, old man?" Lydia huffed as she stalked around the room. She had taken to making this room her refuge since they had taken Paarthurnax captive five months ago. At first she had beseeched him to summon Diana, making promises she wasn't sure she could keep. After a couple of months, she had simply come here to blow off steam, feeling a sense of security here she couldn't find elsewhere knowing that her Voice wouldn't hurt the ancient dragon if it broke. "You think I shouldn't Shout and yell like a spoiled child?"

"Anger is a dangerous foe," Paarthurnax rasped. Lydia gasped, pausing mid-step. "It seeps into you, your bones, your soul until it becomes you and only it remains."

"Decided to talk after all?" Lydia joked, trying to not let her voice shake with surprise. It felt weird to hear him speak after all this time. "Done sulking?"

"What is this 'sulking' you speak of?" Paarthurnax asked, his tone genuinely confused. "Is that a joor thing? I have been meditating, trying to decide my next course of action before acting. Only a mey jumps before seeing how far he will fall."

"Don't speak to me of fools," Lydia growled. "I weary of them plaguing my goals at every turn."

"You speak of the Dovahkiin, of Diana," Paarthurnax said, trying to nod, but the restraint didn't give him enough freedom of movement. "But she has a new name now, geh? She no longer claims the title of Dragonborn, but Listener, yes?"

"Yes." Lydia flushed, not sure why she felt embarrassed that Paarthurnax had been paying attention at her months of ranting about her feeling about Hecate and her betrayal. "She's a monster. She kills people for money and for Sithis."

"I know of Sithis," Paarthurnax sighed. "He was old when I was born. A powerful creature to worship indeed. Odd that his chosen would stop my brother's goal of destruction."

"I know!" Lydia exclaimed. She felt odd feeling such kinship with Paarthurnax, but the paradox had bothered her since she had discovered Diana had become an assassin. How could one save the world from Nothingness and then become the leader of a cult that followed a creature who ruled the Void?
Paarthurnax shuffled, trying to find a comfortable position, drawing Lydia's attention back to him. "I remember when we would speak with our father, Akatosh, there would be times the other deities would be mentioned to us. The Aedra and Daedra both, for we needed to know those greater beings, the only ones more powerful than us. But we never spoke of Sithis. Maybe even Akatosh feared him and did not wish to speak his name lest we drew his attention. I remember the whispers from others telling of the old one who was neither Aedra nor Daedra, and I remember how I wanted to know more. Maybe that was what Father was trying to protect us from."

"A dragon needing protection?" Lydia scoffed. "Seriously?"

"I depended on the protection of the Greybeards for several Eras," Paarthurnax pointed out. "They often stood between me and any enemies who may have known of my hiding place. Their wisdom, prestige, and power made it ill-advised for one to earn their displeasure. Dragons may be immortal, but we can die too.

"Even if our bodies are safe, our souls can still be in danger," Paarthurnax continued. He reminded Lydia of Viarmo, the master bard at the Bard's College when he got onto a tangent he had studied for many years and loved to debate with Diana. "I fear that is what happened to Alduin. His heart grew as black as his scales and he turned into a monster of legend, rightfully earning the reputation of a creature of destruction and death. But to find that maybe Sithis opposed him after all gives me much to think upon."

The golden dragon finally found a position he seemed satisfied with. He lowered his great head to the ground, resting it as his nostrils flared with hot breath.

"You're, you're not going to go silent again, are you?" Lydia asked. She hated the slight quiver in her voice.

"No, I have already meditated upon my situation," Paarthurnax said gently. He seemed pleased at her question. "I am ready for words now if you are."

"Do you think Diana became an assassin because of darkness consuming her? Like Alduin? Do you think he did something to her when she was in Sovngarde?" Lydia asked, the words tumbling out of her mouth so quickly that she almost stumbled over them. "I thought she seemed a bit off when she came back. She didn't want to talk about her trip at all and although sometimes she would get stubbornly quiet like that, it didn't feel right. Who wouldn't want to talk about going to heaven and seeing all those heroes who were there?"

"It may be that thing. It could also be that Diana has a dov's soul and all dragons are meant to rule and destroy. I do not know the Dovahkiin well enough to say what her intent is. Our paths can be changed by as something as simple as a gust of wind or as something as complicated as our love for another. Who am I to know what her thoughts were?"

"You're a fricking old dragon! You created the Way of the Voice! You created the Greybeards. If you don't know, who would?"

"The Dovahkiin," he replied simply. "I am glad you mention the Way of the Voice. Ulfric Stormcloak did not teach you that path, did he? No, he taught you the older ways. The ways of the Voicemasters."

"What of it?" Lydia blushed.

"He may have had his own reasons. Joor are as complicated as dov in their own right. But it was wrong of him to do so. Learning the thu'um can be destructive. Power too quickly is still power—but it
is not earned and thus not given the respect or wisdom needed to wield it properly." Paarthurnax's
tongue flickered in the air as if to taste it. "I could teach you the Way of the Voice. It would help give
you the control you need so you do not worry about harming others with your thu'um."

"How can that be true?" Lydia scoffed. "The Greybeards are forced into vows of silence so they
don't cause avalanches. How do they have any better control than I?"

"Because I have not personally instructed them in too long," Paarthurnax explained. "The training
was between mortals for many centuries. Not even Arngeir has met me, and he leads the others well.
Ulfric has shown you the short path to power, but I can start teaching you the long path to wisdom. It
is not easy or fast, but it is worth every minute of your time."

Lydia bit her lip as she weighed her options. On one hand, it was possible that Paarthurnax was
everything Delphine feared—a manipulative mastermind dragon overlord waiting for his chance to
rule now that Alduin was defeated. On the other, Lydia personally thought it was a small chance, but
the dragon's offer of mentorship was almost too good to be true. To train with a true master of the
thu'um instead of the mere apprentices the Greybeards were...

Even if Paarthurnax was trying to use her, Lydia was the one in control. She would never let him
loose and she would not promise to let him free if he asked for it. In fact, the moment he did, she
would finally slay him. Better a dead dragon than one as powerful as he back in the world, ready to
make it fall to its knees in supplication to him.

"Where do we start?" she asked.

"Slen", Paarthurnax said. "It means 'flesh' in your tongue."

"I know that word already," Lydia sniffed. "It is part of the Ice Form Shout. Ulfric taught me it after I
learned Unrelenting Shout. He said it was one of the first Shouts every Greybeard learns."

"You know one way to use it," Paarthurnax chuckled, sounding very much like an indulgent
grandfather. "You know how to freeze a person's body in a block of ice so they can not hurt you or
so they are at your mercy. But 'flesh' is not just about the body. Flesh can be living or dead. It can be
a creature or it can be food. Flesh can be bleeding or rotten. Flesh can be warm as well as cold. Is
flesh simply meat or is it the whole of the being? When you learn a Word, you must know all of the
Word to truly understand it. You must take the Word within you and you become the word if you
wish to truly master the thu'um."

"Ulfric never said anything about any of this," Lydia said, wrinkling her brow.

"Of course he didn't," Paarthurnax said. "How could he? He was but a child learning how to speak
himself. A scholar can teach his students the intricacies of language, but another child might be able
to show another a word or two. That is what you are to me: children playing as pretend parents for
their doll children."

If anyone else had said something so condescending Lydia would have been offended. Yet, the
candid way Paarthurnax spoke made him charming instead of arrogant. She laughed at the little smile
he toothily grinned at her, clearly not getting the joke which only made her laugh harder.

It was the first time she had really laughed since Elric had left and it felt nice.
where she and Ulfric would come late at night after most people had gone to sleep. Here was where they had stolen kisses and he had told her about his life on High Hrothgar and challenged her to name each constellation he had pointed at. She liked it because it reminded her of him, but she also liked how she could see the lights of people's homes and how the cool wind blew the hair off her flushed face.

"Slen", she whispered, but nothing happened. The *thu'um* only worked with intent, and she had no idea what she wanted from the word.

In the Ice Form Shout, it was the second word meaning that it could not start the Shout on its own. It merely strengthened *iiss*, which meant "ice". Combined with *nus* or "statue" it was a powerfully useful combat Shout. Lydia had more than once trapped foes in blocks of ice rendering them helpless. Personally, she thought it was much more beneficial than Unrelenting Force which would send her enemies spinning away.

"Did you say something, my regent?" Yrsarald asked gently from the shadows. He never really left her alone any more. Even when Lydia was in Paarthurnax's prison, he would patiently wait outside, ready to charge inside if she gave the slightest cry for help.

"Yes. No. I don't know," Lydia mumbled, looking away, not able to meet her housecarl's steely eyes-those eyes that were too similar to Ulfric's. The two men were second or third cousins. Not close enough to be recognized in the court, but close enough to make Lydia uncomfortable with thoughts that had been flitting through her mind more and more lately.

"You must take the Word within you and you become the word if you wish to truly master the thu'um."

Lydia imagined two bodies in the dark, moving together, against each other. Her face felt hot even with the night breeze. It had been four years since she had been with anyone and her body craved another's touch.

*Slen.*

Flesh.

She felt Yrsarald's presence next to her. "My regent? How can I serve you?" he whispered.

Lydia looked at him and wondered how she had missed the look he had on his face. It must have been the same look Ulfric had seen on hers years ago. She swallowed, the lump in her throat constricting painfully.

*Slen. Flesh. Two bodies becoming one. "Take the Word within you.""

"I'm ready to retire, Yrsarald," Lydia whispered. She dared to brush her fingers over his chest, stroking the bear's fur of his armor. "Will you join me?"

"With pleasure, my regent," he answered with a huge smile. He captured her hand in his, the flesh of their fingers intertwining together.

*Slen.*

Flesh.

Lydia was definitely learning already.
"Cicero is enjoying our field trip very much, Listener," the Keeper exclaimed as he bounced behind Hecate on Shadowmere. "Oh yes, yes indeed."

"I'm glad, my dear," Hecate replied, trying to not sigh and failing.

The Rift was looking exceptionally beautiful today. It was late spring and this far south in Skyrim there was just a hint of the forthcoming summer's heat. The trees were in full bloom, occasionally showering the two assassins with petals as they traveled. There had even been a couple of fawn sightings which had sent Cicero into gales of squealing.

Shadowmere had not been pleased at his bouncing and exclamations of, "Go, girl, get 'em!" When the demon horse had tired of the jester's antics, she had nipped him on his wrist. It had the desired effect of calming the Keeper, but Cicero had sulked for the next hour while holding his wrist.

When Hecate had pointed out that Shadowmere hadn't even broken the skin, Cicero had burst into tears, wailing, "Poor, poor, pooooor Cicero," over and over until the Listener was forced to ask her dark steed to apologize.

Shadowmere had snorted her disdain as she tossed her mane over her shoulder.

"Poor, sweet Ciceroooo," he had whined, clutching his wound.

Shadowmere had finally relented when she saw that there would be no further travel until the jester was placated. She had begrudgingly nudged Cicero's arm to get his attention before nuzzling his hair. He had crowed with delight as he hugged her neck tightly. Hecate wasn't certain if horses could roll their eyes, but Shadowmere came pretty damn close.

Thankfully, the trio was getting along as they neared the wooden gates of Riften. Hecate was dreading the reason for their visit. They would need to visit the Thieves' Guild since she had not been able to make the yearly Jester's Day conference, but that wasn't the worst part.

The Listener and Keeper were here primarily to bail the Speaker out of jail.

Nazir was sitting with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees. This was the most humiliating thing that had happened to him in a twenty years. By Sithis, what a rookie mistake to make. And in Riften in all places. The only worse place would have been Markarth and he doubted he would be sitting so comfortably right now were he there instead. As in "bunghole throbbing from a pounding" uncomfortable.

"Hey, Redguard," Sibbi Black-Briar called from his cell suite. His space might as well have been a private room at the Bee and Barb. In fact, the Bee and Barb didn't have rooms nearly as nice as Sibbi's private little ten-by-ten area. "You never told me why you were in here."

At least there had been interesting company for the last week since Nazir had been arrested. Sibbi Black-Briar was the younger son of Maven Black-Briar and lacked for nothing. Whenever he wanted a particular food or drink, he got it within the hour. Or someone lost their job.
It seemed almost ridiculous that they even bother to keep him here since he practically ran the jail. There had even been a couple of nights when Nazir had been invited over for a game of poker with complimentary cigars and Black-Briar mead. Nazir had made sure to just lose often enough for the hot tempered young man to not accuse him of cheating, which he had been doing shamelessly.

The only things denied Sibbi were his freedom and a woman's company-which he lamented loudly. He was pretty certain that he would eventually get the ban on a sex partner lifted, but Maven's decree that he had to stay here until eight months had passed as punishment was non-negotiable.

"Mother can be a hard-nosed cunt," Sibbi had commented after he took a hit of skooma one day, "but I guess I have to respect that. She could be jarl if it weren't for these damn Stormcloaks, you know."

"I thought you didn't care to know why other inmates were here and for me to shut up and not talk to you?" Nazir snarked, throwing back what Sibbi had said on his first day here.

"Yeah, well that was before I got to know you," Sibbi replied shamelessly with a shrug. "And because a guard told me that your bail is being posted. You're going to be out of here by the end of the day."

"Thank Si- thank the gods, finally," Nazir grumbled.

"Aw, didn't enjoy my company?" Sibbi mock pouted.

"I liked it just fine," Nazir admitted. "Hell, next time I get arrested, I'll be sure that it's in the Rift. I'll recommend it to all my low-life friends. Unfortunately, I got a lot of stuff that needs to be done and I can't get it done behind these bars."

"I know the feeling well, my friend," Sibbi growled. "So, are you going to tell me or are you going to leave me hanging?"

Nazir mentally shrugged before answering. "Murder. Someone tried to kill me, but I killed him first. Seems like a crock that they arrested me."

Sibbi barked with laughter. "Preaching to the choir here, my friend." He looked at the Redguard with new interest.

Sibbi had not been shy about bragging about his "indiscretion" that had caused his incarnation. He had been engaged to a woman named Svidi who had reacted poorly when she found out he had been cheating on her. When her brother confronted Sibbi about it, Sibbi had stabbed the man, claiming self-defense when he supposedly wrestled the knife away from his attacker. A guard had told Nazir that it was common rumor that Sibbi had killed the man while he was defenseless.

Nazir respected that.

"Hey, tell you what. Since you're leaving, maybe you'll do me a favor," the Black-Briar purred as he wrapped his hands around his cell's bars. "If you find that bitch, Svidi, you wring her throat for me and I'll owe you a favor."

A favor from a Black-Briar? That was too tempting to pass up.

"I could never consider such a thing," Nazir declared loudly and as much indignation he could muster. He flickered a huge "okay" signal at Sibbi while giving him an exaggerated wink. It wouldn't do for the guards to overhear an agreement even if they were corrupt. It was impossible to tell when one had gone "too far" for most people's moral compass.
"Yes, of course," Sibbi grinned as he nodded his understanding. "How could I even consider suggesting such a thing? I surely have learned my lesson here. Thank goodness, Mother had the wisdom to lock her own flesh and blood up."

Nazir couldn't help but laugh at that one. He definitely needed to come back down here some time and go drinking with Sibbi when they weren't both locked up. The man had a sense of humor most civilians didn't. Hell, he could qualify for the Brotherhood if he wanted. Something to consider. Lots of pros and cons and almost all of them going back to Maven Black-Briar herself.

Hell, if he ever found that Svidi, he'd kill her-and for free to boot. Sometimes you just had to help a Brother out even when he wasn't actually a Brother.

---

**Middas 31st Second Seed 207 4E 2:30 PM**

"I, Diana Dragonborn, as thane of the Rift, personally vouch for this man," Diana said begrudgingly as she handed over a large bag full of coins. She glared at Nazir as he was led into the processing room and his handcuffs removed. "I'm sure this was a one-time occurrence and will never, ever, ever happen again."

Meaning Nazir's ass better not get caught again.

"I promise I'll be good, my thane," Nazir said as he rubbed his wrists, his tone just short of disrespectful.

Diana didn't bother to respond other than gesturing for him to follow her out of the dank prison. The first thing Nazir did when they got outside was to take a deep breath. Nothing was as sweet as the spring air after being imprisoned. It had been a long time since he had been caught and he had forgotten the feeling.

Hopefully it would be a similar amount of time before he was incarcerated again.

Nazir was feeling pretty good until he saw who was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs to Mistveil Palace. "By Sithis, why did you bring him?"

Cicero was laughing and dancing for a crowd of children who were watching him with wide eyes. Constance Michel, the keeper of Honorhall Orphanage, was off to the side watching her charges carefully. She looked like she didn't know if she should be amused or worried by the Imperial who was currently juggling a half dozen knives. At least the little man was wearing normal clothes instead of his usual ridiculous motley.

"To annoy you," Diana said dryly. When Nazir looked at her, she smirked. "Do you really think I could go anywhere and Cicero not want to tag along? Besides, he's been asking to come to Riften for a while and it's hard to make the trip given his duties."

Nazir was definitely going to visit Riften more often if that was the case.

"How did you know I was here so quickly?" the Redguard asked. "I thought I would be there at least a month before anyone would think to look for me." It wasn't uncommon with his responsibility as Speaker for Nazir to be gone for weeks at a time negotiating contracts. With it being spring, the number of Black Sacraments had increased as predicted.

"We'll talk about it some place a little more secure," Diana said vaguely. "Cicero, time to go!"

The children squealed in shock when Cicero turned to look at Diana. All six daggers landed in the
"Gods, this sucks," Nazir grumbled as he rubbed his head.

"It gets worse," Diana frowned. "We're going into the Ratway."

---

**Middas 31st Second Seed 207 4E 3:30 PM**

"It's always a pleasure to have a visit from our brother guild," Brynjolf said with a strained smile. He was flanked by Vex and Delvin Mallory. "We missed you at the last Jester's Day gathering."

"I bet you did," Hecate laughed from behind her cowl. The three assassins had changed into their shrouded armor after entering Riften's sewers. Despite Hecate's generally negative view of the Ratway, there were lots of little convenient hiding places down here. She had heard tales of insane people wandering the tunnels, never seeing the light of day for years. "I know how much you thieves love losing money."

Jester's Day was a sort of holiday, at least in the criminal world. For most people, it was a day to play jokes on each other. Since everyone was on the alert for pickpockets and pranksters, most thieves opted to take the day off. It made for a great meeting time for the Brotherhood to catch up on yearly activities and see if any members wanted to transfer between guilds.

After business was concluded, it was not uncommon for the two groups to stay up late into the night drinking and playing poker. Both sides shamelessly stole cards, lied, peeked at hands, sleight of handed chips—in short, typical behavior for thieves and assassins.

Hecate and Cicero typically did exceptionally well during these tournaments, but probably because she insisted that they both wear their masks. Their public personas were not as well known in Riften since it was a Stormcloak-controlled Hold, but she couldn't risk anyone recognizing them. It was unlikely that any of the thieves would inform on them—the Guild had its own set of rules for its members—but it was better to be safe than sorry when dealing with con men.

"Are you here on business?" Brynjolf asked, ignoring Hecate's jab. Last year she had taken over half his chips before he was "suddenly called away." "I thought we resolved all outstanding business with your Speaker here."

"I was called down for a Brotherhood matter," Hecate said blithely. "I need to talk to the Keeper and Speaker privately and was hoping you could lend us a secure place to discuss matters."

"Why not just use one of the random dead ends in the Ratway, lass?" the Nord asked. "Not like anyone would hear you down here."

"Maybe, maybe not," Hecate shrugged, "but I don't like taking chances with people I don't know."

"You're more likely to have a nosy thief eavesdropping if you stay here than anywhere else," Brynjolf warned. "Delvin's got the curiosity of a dozen cats alone. No offense."

"None taken," the Breton said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Hecate repeated, "but I don't think anything we'll be discussing will be beneficial for anyone to sell."

"Actually, it might be in your interest to join us," Nazir chimed in. When Hecate looked at him
questioningly, he continued, "I found out something that made my little trip to the local jail all worth it."

"I hope so, Nazir," Hecate said. "The Night Mother is pretty mad about what happened."

"Oh yes, Nazir, Mother is most displeased," Cicero giggled before his voice deepened, "and we don't like when Mother is unhappy."

The group of assassins and thieves made themselves comfortable around one of the tables in the Ragged Flagon. As Delvin flagged Vekel for drinks, Nazir started his tale. "It all started about a week ago."

Middas 24th Second Seed 207 4E 7:00 PM (About a week ago)

"I just can't take him hitting me any more," the Desperate Wife sobbed, her hands covering her face. Nazir tried very hard to not sigh in boredom as she wailed. "We were always together growing up. Sure he played a little too rough sometimes…"

"Let me guess," Nazir interrupted, "he would pull your pigtails and push you on the ground."

"Yes," she replied, wide-eyed, "how did you know?"

"I've been around the block a few times," Nazir grumbled, making a "go on" gesture. He really wanted to hit the bar for a few drinks before moving onto the next contract. Sometimes you got a good story out of the petitioners, but after a few years as Speaker, Nazir had heard a few stories over and over again and this one was a particularly popular tale of woe.

Guy meets girl. Guy seems nice at first. Guy and girl date. Guy proposes to girl. Guy and girl marry. Suddenly guy is a little more handsy than he ever was before marriage and girl starts sporting lots of long sleeved dresses and scarves to cover up bruises. Sometimes the genders were reversed, but only rarely. Made Nazir glad he never found someone who would tempt him with thoughts of 'forever after'.

Just as the Desperate Wife was winding down her tale, the door to her house burst open. A huge hulk of a Nord—basically, standard issue—charged into the room.

"YOU FUCKING WHORE. I KNEW YOU WERE CHEATING ON ME, YOU LYING BITCH."

He made the mistake of going for Nazir instead of his wife. If the man had attacked his mousy wife, Nazir could have faded into the shadows and sent an assassin to come and deal with the contract later. Instead, he went for his "rival" and Nazir's instincts kicked in. Without another thought, Nazir pulled his scimitar and another second later the husband's head was rolling on the ground with a look of utter shock frozen on his features.

Things still could have been salvaged. Nazir could have just left, writing off the expense of an unpaid assassination. Hell, it's not like the Brotherhood never did a little freelancing to scratch a particular itch for murder.

Unfortunately, the Desperate Wife continued to scream as she threw herself at Nazir.

"You killed him, you basta-" Her cry cut off as her lifeless body slid to the ground, Nazir's sword buried in her chest.
It was at that moment the Riften guards showed up. Nazir wisely put his hands up and said, "I surrender."

**Middas 31st Second Seed 207 4E 3:45 PM**

Nazir sat back, taking a long drink of his mead. Storytelling was thirsty work.

It was usually hard to make out an assassin's facial expressions behind their shrouds, but there was no disguising the twin looks of disgust on Tragedy and Comedy's faces as they glared at the Redguard. Brynjolf started to ask Delvin what the problem was, but paused when he saw the same look of disgust on his friend's face. It was usually easy to forget the easygoing pervert used to be in the Brotherhood, but moments like this sharply brought it back to mind.

"He killed the target," Brynjolf said softly, not liking the room's mood.

"He killed the client," Hecate hissed. "You should know that reputation is everything with guilds like ours. If it got out that do you realize what it could do to the Dark Brotherhood? We would lose clients."

"Hey, I defended myself!" Nazir snapped back. "He attacked me with the intent to kill. What was I supposed to do? Just stand there and take it?"

"Yes," Cicero said lowly. Everyone turned to look at him. "Sometimes we must play defenseless in order to get close to our contracts. Sometimes we must play the fool in order to kill."

A shiver went down Brynjolf's spine at the chilling tone of the other redhead man. He was used to the little Imperial capering and giggling, not this dark killer. It was easy to forget they all murdered for pleasure before they killed for coin, especially the Keeper.

"Yeah, well, maybe," Nazir stammered, clearly shaken by Cicero's declaration, but not willing to agree quite yet, "but you should thank the Night Mother that I did. I found out something pretty damn important this last week."

"What could that possibly be, dear Nazir?" Cicero purred, his amber eyes cold as ice.

"The Blades are back and in force," Nazir said. "They've made an alliance with the Stormcloaks and word has it that Lydia Stormblade is teaching them all how to Shout in the old ways."

Hecate and Cicero shared a silent look. The Blades were known as the personal guard of the Emperor until the Aldmeri Dominion destroyed them over thirty years ago, but before that they had been dragonslayers aiding the Dragonborn in killing the beasts.

The Blades were already trained in heavy armor and close combat with their mighty katanas to deal with assassins who were trying to kill their charge. How deadly would they be if they had the *thu'um* at their disposal as well?

And what if Lydia taught them Dragonrend as well? It would be damning for Hecate, whose dragon soul made her as vulnerable to the Shout as any trueborn dragon.

**Middas 31st Second Seed 207 4E 10:00 PM**

"Go on, say what you want to say," Hecate said as she pulled her shirt off to get ready for bed. The Thieves' Guild had graciously offered the use of their public beds for the assassins, but Hecate had
declined in favor of a windowless room that they could barricade in the Bee and Barb, the local inn.

Hecate didn't like the Ratway on the best of days, but after Nazir's declaration she couldn't risk the Cistern being raided by well-meaning Blades looking for her. There was already the high probability that they would want to clear out the underbelly that was Riften's sewers, but she didn't want to add to the odds of that happening any time soon.

"Say what, sweet Diana?" Cicero chirped as he kicked his heels against the bed.

"About how I should have killed Lydia when I had the chance," the Listener sighed as she tossed her top onto the floor. "About how I had at least half a dozen chances since we discovered that she had allied with Ulfric and that many of our problems now wouldn't even have been born if I had just slit her throat before she could open her mouth to call for her guards."

"It seems to Cicero that the Listener already knows those things," Cicero mused. "A fool only must speak truths for his mistress when she's so preoccupied that she doesn't see them for herself. If the Listener wishes to continue making a fool of herself for misplaced love for her old housecarl, then patient Cicero will watch quietly and see how it turns out."

By Sithis, he was laughing at her. She frowned but didn't argue—because the Keeper was right. She already knew the truth about the situation with Lydia. It had always been the right choice to kill her; she knew too much of the truth.

"Then what should you tell me?" she asked, her tone much too sharp.

"What are we going to do about Nazir?" Cicero asked, his voice deep and unamused. "He killed a petitioner. Performing the Black Sacrament makes them her children. Nazir has sinned and therefore must be punishment."

"Nazir has been part of the Brotherhood for a long time," Hecate sighed as she rubbed her forehead. "He's as loyal to us as he was loyal to Astrid. He has a point that an assassin who hesitates is a dead assassin. The woman attacked him while his nerves were still on edge. What about the fact that he had not accepted her payment yet? The contract isn't truly made until money has been exchanged."

Cicero nodded as he thought. "That does lessen his crime, Cicero must admit. Still, this cannot be allowed to pass without consequence. Cicero does not think that Nazir should be Silenced, but an example must be made. He has at least infringed on the Second Tenet by harming one of Mother's children."

---

Loredas 3rd Midyear 207 4E 10:00 AM

"I want it on the record that I really hate both of you," Nazir hissed.

"It's just for a week, Nazir," Hecate said, trying to stifle a chuckle. "I think given your good behavior in Riften's jail and the information you managed to find for the Brotherhood, you mostly absolved yourself of bending of the Second Tenet. However, I want to make sure you learned a valuable lesson regarding the use of lethal force. If I feel you've learned your lesson by next Loredas, you'll be forgiven."

"This was Cicero's idea, wasn't it?" Nazir groaned as he picked at the cloth that his punishment was made of.

"Well, he insisted that you be punished, but the form of it was all mine," Hecate said, shrugging. "Sorry."
"I just bet," Nazir grumbled. "Couldn't you have just done this in Riften instead of waiting until we got back to Sanctuary?"

"That would have just undermined the point, don't you think?" Hecate asked. "Now, stop stalling and get out there and start your punishment."

Nazir sulked as he left the Listener's bedroom and gloomily walked down the hallway to the main area. Maybe he could manage to spend most of the day in his room alone before anyone noticed.

As he passed Babette's room, she poked her head out. "Good morning, dear Nazir, how are… What in the Void are you wearing?"

The Redguard froze in the middle of the hallway, feeling like the world's biggest idiot wearing the black and red jester's motley the Listener had given him to wear. As she had put it when she gave him the outfit, "If you are ever going to learn how to play the fool, you must first be the fool."

"By Sithis, you look stupid," Babette laughed before she ran across the hall to the initiates' bedroom. "Hey, everyone, you simply must see this! Nazir is wearing a motley!"

Nazir growled as he dragged the jester's cap over his ears to try to drown out the laughter of his siblings. By the gods, he hated jesters. Especially the two who called themselves Comedy and Tragedy.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sundas 29th Frostfall 207 4E 7:30 PM

"What do you have to report regarding the Blades' activities?" Hecate asked as she sipped her wine.

Nazir and she were having their weekly meeting. It had been seven months since Nazir had discovered the resurgence of the Blades and he had been busy gathering intelligence on the opposing faction. Hecate had barely seen the Speaker since he was out so often tracking down rumors and stories about dragon slayers. He would come in on Sundas to give his report, take the list of petitioners on Mondas and head out immediately.

Sometimes Hecate worried that Nazir was still ashamed about his botched mission with the Desperate Housewife, but if that was the case, it was something he had to work out on his own. There had been some laughs about his motley punishment, but the Siblings had been good about not rubbing it in his face too much.

Nazir was a proud creature, they all were, and it hurt his pride for his record to be stained with such an easily avoided mistake. If he felt a need to earn her good graces and the status worthy of his rank, then she'll gladly take what he had to offer. Nazir wasn't as good as Elbent had been for networking, but he was still damned talented.

"They're definitely allied with the Stormcloaks," Nazir said as he took a deep drink from his own cup. "There are a squad of them based in Windhelm barracks full time. As far as I can tell, they've had a few in and out for the last couple of years. There are Blades established in all the of the Stormcloak controlled holds and in good standing with the jarls. They act as bodyguards with all the high ranking officers, usually a quad, but some only have one or two which indicates that they're stretched thin."

"And the rumor about them studying the thu'um?" Hecate asked carefully. She was glad Cicero was busy attending to the Night Mother. She didn't think this would be good news at all and she wasn't wrong.

"You can hear the thundering echo of their Shouts in Valunstrad Quarter as they practice," Nazir said bitterly. "Had me all flustered despite years of dealing with you tossing Cicero around like a ragdoll, but most of the locals took it not only in good stride. They actually seemed proud. All that Nordic heritage bullshit, you know." At Hecate's nod, he continued.

"Delphine is acknowledged as the Grandmaster of the Blades," Nazir said as he looked at his notes. "She's still stationed up at Sky Haven Temple, but I can't get any of our agents up there. The Blades are meticulous about their recruiting standards and seem to be able to smell a fake a mile away. Even if that wasn't an issue, their fortress is impossible to infiltrate. Not only do they have a series of puzzles, but the last one is some sort of blood seal."

"I remember that one," Hecate admitted. "It takes the blood of a Dragonborn to open from the outside. There's an interior lever they can use, but from the outside it looked pretty impossible to crack."

"Well, it is," Nazir huffed. "Meanwhile, when they're not playing babysitter with jarls, the Blades
have been going to wherever the dragons are and killing them. Lydia Stormblade is often seen leading a trio of Blades, presumably the ones who are currently training under her. It's said that their Voices can make a dragon fall from the sky."

Hecate shuddered visibly at that bit of news. "By the gods, I was hoping she hadn't learned Dragonrend. Lydia had only heard it a few times when I learned the Shout from the Heroes and she wasn't very versed in the dragon language." She sighed. "But then, neither was I. It's not too much of a stretch that she remembered me practicing most of my Shouts and retained what the words meant. Once Ulfric unlocked the ability to use the *thu'um*, it wasn't difficult for her to continue learning new Shouts on her own."

"Why are you so worried about this Dragonrend Shout anyway?" Nazir asked. "It helps defeat dragons. I know we're villains, but even I think getting rid of the flying monsters is a good thing for everyone involved. Who cares if it makes heroes out of the Blades or Lydia?"

"Because the Dragonrend Shout works by making the immortal dragon understand mortality," Hecate explained. "Dragons were never meant to know that and it makes them vulnerable for a short period of time. Their bodies are wracked with pain as they try to struggle with the acceptance of death. It's the only Shout ever created by mortals and is fueled by hate and anger."

"Again, what's the big deal?" Nazir shrugged. "Who cares if they get pissed off at dragons?"

"Because as the Dragonborn, I have a dragon's soul. It affects me less severely since I'm still mortal, but it hurts like Oblivion. Imagine daggers driven through your body, hundreds of them, and torn in every direction," Hecate said.

"Sounds like fun," Nazir said dryly. "You're worried that the Blades know that you're the Dragonborn and have been instructed to use it against Tragedy when she attacks her newest Stormcloak victim."

"It's not likely that she would risk sharing that secret," Hecate admitted, "so that means it's unlikely a Blade will use it against a non-dragon target. It does mean that Lydia does have that tool at her resources and if she gets close enough to me that she can take me down literally with a Word."

"Not good," Nazir said.

"Not good at all," Hecate agreed. She sighed as she considered her options. "Most of the Family should be returning for the winter. The roads will be closed from the storms shortly. Some are on long term missions, like Vedave, so we can't depend on them to come home on their own. Get to the dead drops and leave a message to come home for an important update. We need to get the word out about the Blades and their apparent strength. I don't want anyone to be ambushed now that we have solid information."

"It might be some time before they even see them," Nazir cautioned. "I just did a rotation of drops, leaving instructions and personal letters. They might not get them for a few weeks yet."

"It's just a risk we'll have to take," Hecate said.

**Sundas 29th Frostfall 207 4E 7:30 PM**

"It's just a risk we'll have to take," Lydia insisted. "I know *slen*, Paarthurnax. I've studied it for half a year now and that's much longer than any word I've learned in *dov*. I'm ready to learn the next word of the Shout."
Paarthurnax chuckled within his confines. "So the pruustiik thinks she knows more than the mindopah?"

"I want to know what I'm learning!" Lydia whined. She started pacing with her arms folded behind her back as was her want when aggravated. "It's so frustrating to be shown a Word I already know and not know the rest."

"Onikaan cannot be learned easily," Paarthurnax chided her gently. "One cannot say, 'I wish to be wise this day' or everyone would be wise. True wisdom comes with time, experience, and all too frequently aus. Something I have had to experience all too commonly since my imprisonment."

"Krosis, Paarthurnax," Lydia said, pausing in her pacing. She looked ashamed. "If I could stop it, I would, but the Blade recruits need to know that they have learned the Dragonrend Shout properly before going out in the field to face dragons. Their lives depend on it."

"You have no idea the pain I suffer from your Shout," Paarthurnax said quietly. Lydia wished he would be sullen or accusatory so she could feel righteously indignant. "Every time I feel like I am dying, violently and many times over and over."

"If you don't want to die for real, then we need to make you valuable to Delphine," Lydia snapped. "You're not giving us the fame Delphine thought you would when we captured you, not like how Numinex had been for old King Olaf. So, if you don't want to die, then you'll just continue to suffer."

"This aspect does not suit you, Struntuz. You wish to be hard and cold like the ice and snow of your land, but you are a better person when you are warm and kind. Striving to be what your lover was is no life. Striving to be what your thane was is no life. You must find your own path and walk it instead of trying to wear the shadow of those before you. You try to wear the mantles of the heroes you so desperately wish to be and find yourself lacking because you feel you are not good enough."

"Let me guess, I am good enough," Lydia said bitterly.

"No, krosis, unfortunately, you are not good enough. Not as long as you believe you are not and not as long as you live this nok," Paarthurnax responded. He curled up as best as he could given his chains, tucking his head under his wing indicating that he was done talking with her for now and that she should contemplate his words.

---

**Sundas 29th Frostfall 207 4E 7:30 PM**

Why did the letter have to arrive today of all days?

Vedave Sendal leaned back in the rickety chair that went with his equally rickety desk as he contemplated the letter he had found in the dead drop the Brotherhood used for Windhelm. The envelope was a creamy thick parchment, rich in both texture and cost. Although only Vedave's name was written on the cover, he knew only one person would have that flowing handwriting and extravagant taste.

Anaril Telind.

The Dark Elf's heart beat rapidly as he ran his fingers along the envelope's rim. He had written to Anaril months ago after deciding to follow the Listener's advice. She might be a flighty human at times, but he couldn't deny that she had a stable long term relationship with the Keeper.

Sure, it was a bit violent, with her frequently Shouting at him and sending him flying across the
Sanctuary, and Vedave was pretty certain that Cicero was mentally challenged in some capacity, probably from too many blows to the skull, but that didn't change the fact that they obviously adored each other in a way that made the mage want to vomit most days.

It was weird to realize the Listener and Keeper had only been together a mere five years. That was how long it took to really get to know a person. To understand their virtues and flaws, to know the little quirks they had that made them special and all the ridiculously annoying habits that made you want to pull your hair out. How could they have already decided they were going to be together forever?

It wasn't official in any capacity, although Babette had gleefully gossiped about the two of them getting secretly married before the Night Mother two years ago before going off to kill Ulfric Stormcloak. Everyone knew about the ring that Hecate wore under her gloves. She never took it off and sometimes when Cicero wasn't available, she would take the gloves off and smile wistfully while she looked at it.

Vedave's chest would clench with jealousy whenever he caught her doing that. He wanted something solid like that. It was stupid for an assassin to feel that way, but he did. He wanted someone who would understand the joy of the kill as well as the love of discovering new magic.

When Anaril and he had first gotten intimate, Vedave had thought that it would be a mere winter fling. Find a warm body-and Dunmer were notorious for their body warmth-until the snows thawed enough to go kill again. Until then, they had plenty of time to scratch a different sort of itch.

As much as Vedave had enjoyed the feel of Anaril under him as they shared a bed, what really drew his interest was the Altmer's knowledge of arcana. Both elves had centuries of experience and it was fascinating to compare and debate on different techniques. Finally, someone else who could comprehend the intricacies of magic!

Then Eiruki had to act like a crazy bitch and drive Cicero over the edge, causing the jester to lose his cool and attack her savagely. He had beaten the girl until her skin was almost as dark as Vedave's.

Hecate had resolved the matter by sending Eiruki away to Wayrest Sanctuary in High Rock. Garnag was made Speaker under the pretense of extending the Brotherhood's hand through Tamriel again, and maybe that was even true to an extent. The old orc had chosen a handful of Siblings to take with him in addition to the troublesome Nord and that included Anaril. Vedave had been chosen to stay since Hecate wanted at least one spellcaster to remain in Dawnstar Sanctuary.

Vedave had never been sure if it was an honor or a matter of elimination. It hadn't really mattered to him. He had a fully stocked enchanter's lab and a source of victims for his spells. He should have been satisfied, but he wasn't.

He found that he missed Anaril horribly. He had tried to exchange letters, but it just wasn't the same. Sure, they could discuss theory still, but it lacked the passion of a live debate. He missed the Altmer's face lighting up as he described his target's dying expressions or the look of intrigue when Vedave told him about his spell research.

Vedave had finally written a letter to Anaril after taking his current assignment in Windhelm. The Dark Elf had wanted to make sure none of the nosier members of the Family would be tempted to read his mail. They might not be allowed to steal from each other, but that didn't mean Babette or Cicero wouldn't snoop in a Sibling's personal things.

He didn't pour out all his thoughts and desires; that was too crass even for him. Why would Anaril want him if he came off as some desperate, needy thing who couldn't even survive a few years
without him?

Instead he had written that Dawnstar was doing well and that they were starting to get crowded again. The Listener had mentioned expanding again and how would Anaril feel if Vedave were transferred to Wayrest? They could pick up their experiments together again if he was interested.

It hadn't surprised Vedave there wasn't an immediate response. Travel between the two countries usually took weeks, between the inclement weather and the bandits lurking for easy pickings. Throw in the civil war on top of that and it was a miracle the Brotherhood's scouts managed to deliver letters at all.

Meanwhile, to help pass the time, Vedave had taken a special contract in Windhelm. A Crooked Merchant wanted to increase strife between the Dark Elves and Argonians in the Gray Quarters by having Torbjorn Shatter-Shield murdered.

Shatter-Shield, for reasons unknown, had decided years ago to pay Argonians the same wages as the Nords he employed in his shipping company. There had been some grumbling about it, but apparently it had been profitable for Shatter-Shield since he never revoked the wage increase or found cheaper labor.

The bonus included having a Dark Elf commit the murder to point fingers at the ghettos of Windhelm. Vedave thought it was all pointlessly complicated since it involved months of him patronizing bars and loudly complaining about the unfairness of it all, but it was a high-prestige contract since it involved a lot of set-up and the pay was fantastic.

If he earned enough reputation as a competent killer, maybe the Listener would consider him as a Speaker for the next Sanctuary. Sithis knew that the current homestead was getting full with the dozen extra people they had picked up over the last couple of years.

"Damn, why did it have to arrive today?!!" Vedave exclaimed as he looked at the letter again. Any other day would have seen him jumping around happily, but tonight was the night he was going to kill Torbjorn. No matter what the news, acceptance or rejection, Vedave would be distracted one way or another. A distracted assassin was all too quickly a dead assassin.

He couldn't afford to wait much longer if he was going to make it back to Sanctuary before the roads closed for the winter. In theory, Vedave could simply wait until spring and do the deed then. It would give him more time to make sure the rumors and lies he had spread about Shatter-Shield had thoroughly taken root, but he was ready to go home.

The mage would never admit it out loud, but he missed his adopted family. He liked Babette the best, as a fellow alchemist, but sometime he found that he even missed the inane Cicero and his incessant cackling.

Vedave carefully tucked the precious letter into one of his many pockets. He would complete his assignment and head home tonight. When he stopped at the campsite he had set up earlier, he'd look at the letter then. For better or for worse, the waiting was over and he'd deal with the consequences then.

For now, there was a job to be done.

---

**Sundas 29th Frostfall 207 4E 9:30 PM**

"I came to apologize," Lydia said meekly. Paarthurnax was still curled up and might be asleep, but
she was pretty certain he wasn't. She got the impression that Paarthurnax didn't sleep much and that most of the time he was meditating. "I'm sorry for pushing you about the Shout and getting sullen. I just don't feel like I have much time for anything any more."

"Tiid, time," the dragon rumbled as he unfolded. "There is never enough. You worry that you will never know what Shout I am teaching you because either Delphine will lose patience with your gambit or because her half of the bargain will be fulfilled and I will be slain."

Lydia blushed with shame at the accuracy of Paarthurnax's words. By the Nine, how was he able to see through her so easily? Was she that transparent to everyone? "Yes," she admitted, "you're right. I want to know everything I can."

"To be stronger than Diana," Paarthurnax asked, raising an eyebrow, "or to be better than her? Every Word you learn, every Shout you master puts you one step further ahead of her. Assuming she has not mastered the words first. Which is likely given her inherent dovah soul. All she has to do is read the word and kill a dragon while you struggle for weeks or months. That is what you think, geh?"

"How do you know all this?" Lydia asked, slapping her hands to her side in frustration. "It's like you can read my mind!"

The golden dragon laughed, the sound like thunder. "No, joor, I have simply taught many of your kind over the years. I waited on the Monalven since your Mythic Era after my zeymah was banished by the Kel. I was young when the Dwemer, Chimer, and Akavir ruled. I was alive when Ysmir and Ysgramor were merely men instead of legends. I have bargained with men, mer, and beastkin for a very, very long time."

Lydia was shocked at the sound of look of melancholy on Paarthurnax's face as he continued. "But I do not feel like I have had enough time. No one does. I know my death is in this room. I know that is the only release I will ever find, whether it is by your blade or when I have given up all hind. I am not ready for dinok, and I do not believe I ever will be." He swerved his triangular shaped head towards her. "You are my only hope for life, but I must wonder if you are strong enough to make the decision. You bend your dez to match those you respect and follow the wills of those you think are greater than you. Can you truly stand alone? Can you stand tall as yourself and change the course of history by your own will instead of that of others?"

"You speak too boldly, dragon," Lydia growled.

"I speak merely vahzen as I see it," Paarthurnax countered. "You already have me trapped like some animal for display. You have decided to not kill me for now so no matter what bitter truths I share you will either swallow or throw away as you see fit. My life is in your hands and I can only pray to the skies that you will give it back to me so I may return to them some day."

"You might have a little better luck with that if you flattered me more instead of being so rude," Lydia snapped, not liking how right the dragon was.

"Niid," Paarthurnax said, "I think you are not suited for sweet lies and honeyed words. You are a Bron and you crave the plainness of truth."

"Then tell me the truth of this Shout you're so carefully teaching me!" Lydia shouted, her thu'am threatening to break loose. "If you think I don't want to be deceived or tricked, then tell me as plainly as you promised."

"Everything in good time, little joor," Paarthurnax replied with a grin. Lydia suspected that he was pleased with her reaction and had hoped for it. "You must learn how to spell before you can write
just as you must learn to crawl before you can run. I need you to learn this Shout but I want you to use it with wisdom. You have learned how to hate in order to master the thu'um. I hope to teach you to find harmony and peace with yourself as I found it with myself so long ago. My life is precious to me, but I will not forsake your soul in the process."

"Thank you oh so very much for your consideration," Lydia drawled sarcastically before turning to leave. She was determined to have the last word this time, but was stopped short when Paarthurnax spoke again.

"Tiid," he whispered. "Tiid, time is the second Word of the Shout. Learn it well, Lydia."

---

**Mondas 30th Frostfall 207 4E 2:30 AM**

Vedave tightened his gloves before exiting through the second story window of his room at the New Gnisis Cornerclub. He was in full Dark Brotherhood regalia and had to admit that it felt good to be wearing the red and black again.

The elf had considered going out in civilian clothes, but had decided against it. He had already done his job of sowing the seeds of discontent among both the Dunmer and Argonians; thus there was no need for a dramatic, public killing. All he had to do was kill the Nord and leave town. His public persona would be noticed missing the new few nights at his favorite bars and the obvious conclusion of whodunit should be on the mouths of most of the Gray Quarter by the end of the week. Give them the rest of the winter to fume over the matter and there should be a few nice riots come spring, making Vedave's employer very happy.

On the off-chance the Windhelm guards were too stupid to solve the murder—they had done a fantastic job blundering in the Butcher case, after all—Vedave would be sure to drop a glove or some other minor item that could be easily identified as belonging to him. He had made sure to get in a few bar fights over the last couple months and caused enough damage to be put in jail overnight enough times that the guards should recognize it as his. Vedave was nothing if not thorough.

The cold wind felt good on his face as he sprinted through the empty streets of Windhelm. No doubt in the morning it would be full of people either celebrating or bemoaning the Emperor's birthday. Vedave thought it was weird to celebrate the birthday of a man long dead, but apparently it wasn't the actual Emperor's birthday. Instead it was a day to specifically celebrate every Emperor ever. More human silliness really, but for now the streets were blissfully empty.

It took almost an hour to travel from the Gray Quarter to Valunstrad. The two quarters were on opposite sides of the city and the difference between the two was astonishing. While the Gray Quarter was dirty and overcrowded with refugee Dunmer and lower class Nords, Valunstrad was where the Palace of the Kings was located as well as the higher class families. Crews were sent out daily to keep the travel paths clean of both trash and snow. Cold resistant flowers flourished on the stone walls giving a bit of color to the otherwise gray city.

The Dunmer mage was almost to the Shatter-Shield residence when he heard, "FUS RO DAH!" from behind. Vedave was thrown off his feet and into the air, tumbling head over heels a few times before slamming into a wall.

For a brief moment, he was confused why the Listener would Shout at him before he realized that the voice was a male's. As he shakily got to his feet, he saw a pair of Blades standing at the far end of the alley. He had heard something about the Blades learning how to Shout up at the palace, but he had dismissed it as idle gossip.
"Stop in the name of the law, scum!" one of the Blades yelled as he leveled his katana at the assassin. "You're under arrest!"

"I don't think so," Vedave responded as he threw a bolt of fire at the one on the left. The Blade went down in a burst of flame as the Dunmer turned to flee.

Dammit, months of work down the drain. He would have to abort the kill and try again later. Thankfully, he was fully cowled so there was no way they could identify him. Now all he had to do was lose the do-gooders and send a letter to Sanctuary to let them know about the Blades learning the thu'um. Hecate was not going to be happy when she heard about this.

"You're not getting away, assassin!" the remaining Blade yelled. "IIZ SLEN NUS!"

A blast of ice washed over Vedave, knocking him to the ground and encasing him completely. Panic surged through him before he reminded himself that Stormcloaks took prisoners. All he had to do was make sure to surrender and they would arrest him. He'd cool his heels until the Brotherhood could come and bust him out. Hell, worst case scenario, he'd pay his own bail. It's not like they had actually caught him doing anything.

"In the name of the Empire, I find you guilty of being a member of an unlawful organization," the Blade intoned as he drew close. He pulled his katana free, raising it above his head. "By the laws of Cyrodiil, I sentence you to death!"

If Vedave could have, he would have screamed as the blade descended towards his neck.

---

**Mondas 14th Sun's Dusk 207 4E 3:00 PM**

Cicero poked his head into the Listener's wardrobe to find her tucked into the corner behind her dresses. "Cicero knew he would find you here," he said as he climbed in. "Cicero takes it that Hecate heard the news about Vedave?"

"Yeah," Hecate said quietly as she took Cicero's hand and squeezed it. She knew how he hated the absolute dark and tight space of her personal refuge and was grateful that he was joining her instead of teasing her. "An initiate came in from Windhelm with the news a few hours ago."

"Assassins die," Cicero said as he squeezed back. "Cicero mourns every time he loses a Sibling, but we are sworn to Sithis. Death is a release, not a punishment."

"I know, I know," Hecate sighed. "We've lost Family before, but never like this."

"What did Cicero not hear?" the Keeper asked. "What is different?"

"The Blades killed Vedave before we could warn him about their Shouting abilities," Hecate said, trying to choke back a sob. Cicero pulled her close into a hug when he heard the waver in her voice. "That I could understand. It's their job. They were the Emperor's bodyguards. They're sworn to stop assassins."

"But?" Cicero nudged.

"But they didn't just dispose of his body," Hecate hissed. "They tied his body to a stake with his head dangling by his side. They left a sign that says 'This is what happens to assassins' hanging over him. They have him on display like some common piece of meat! How dare they!"

"This cannot stand," Cicero growled. "They must pay."
"They will, my dear Keeper," Hecate promised, her voice darker than Cicero had ever heard. "Come spring, when the roads are open again, I will personally go down to Sky Haven Temple. They can't keep me out of there. Not with the blood of dragons flowing through my veins. And when I do, they will pay." Her eyes narrowed with hate. "They'll pay with everything they hold dear."

Chapter End Notes

Copyright Bethesda
Comments appreciated
www.thuum.org used heavily for the dragon language this chapter. Check them out if you want to learn more!
And I intentionally didn't translate Paarthurnax's dovah to help emphasize Lydia's understanding of the language.
Lydia slowly released her breath as she sat cross legged in her room. She liked this time of day when she was the only person awake in this part of the palace. Over in the kitchens, cooks and busboys would be scurrying to ready the court's breakfast, but for the next hour or so the courtiers and minor nobles would still be sleeping. Even loyal Yrsarald was gently snoring on his side of Lydia's large bed.

The sun's rays had barely started to peek above the mountain range, welcoming the morning. Weak beams of light danced over the river valley that surrounded the ancient city of Windhelm. On the outer edges of the city limits, farmers would be feeding chickens, milking cows, and getting ready to hoe fields for the spring's first seeding.

The jarl's master bedroom was located on the western part of the palace, so gray mists still clung to the windows, not ready to be banished by the morning's light. Lydia found it peaceful in a way clear blue skies never were for her. She was a child of Skyrim and that meant she was a child of the ice and snow.

As a minor cousin of the jarl of Whiterun, she had grown up in Dragonsreach learning how to be a housecarl to serve some great thane someday. She had spent many years playing on the great porch that housed the dragon's trap that had held Numinex so long ago and for a brief time recently, Odahviing. There had been countless days when she had stood on the edge of the porch, looking down to the fields below as snow danced around her, melting when they touched her face.

Today she was meditating on the Word Paarthurnax had given her four months ago. She had spent the whole winter trying to learn and understand tiid, or time, but had made very little progress. Before, she had had a teacher who would tell her what the purpose of a word was and how to use it in a Shout as a Word of Power. She had seen demonstrations from Diana as they fought draugr and bandits, and she had studied with Ulfric, drawing from his years as an apprentice Greybeard. Never before had she been given a word with only the barest of its meanings.

It was a different experience and one Lydia had to admit that she appreciated. Being forced to start from scratch made her work harder to learn the word. Lydia couldn't simply try for a few days and expect someone to just give her the answer to the problem. Beseeching Paarthurnax resulted only in the ancient dragon giving her an amused look much like she had given Elric when he had whined for something unreasonable.

That wasn't to imply that Paarthurnax would not give her direction. They had many discussions about time and its significance. And to some degree, its lack of importance.

"Time is an illusion," Paarthurnax said one day. Lydia had been bundled in several layers of furs and the snow had blown thick enough to make the world appear completely white. "Joor measure it by seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, and eras. To some degree this is true. A day is the rising of the sun to the next. But at the same time it is a lie, for the amount of time between the sun rising one day is different if it is during the summer or winter. A day's hours do not start when the sun rises by your clocks. They start and end at midnight. What is an hour but the ticking of a clock that counts down the various seconds and minutes until the hand has gone around an entire rotation? It is only what a joor decided it was and it can be nothing else."

"But time is useful because it helps us keep track of important events," Lydia suggested. "I can
remember when certain things happened because I can say I was a certain age when it happened."

"Geh, this is wahtah, but why is it important? The event didn't change depending on your age. If you thought you were so many moons old instead of so many years old, it would not change the impact the event had on you."

"But with age comes wisdom and the only way to know if we know we're wise is by knowing how old we are," Lydia countered.

Paarthurnax merely snorted at her. "How many children have you seen shown wisdom beyond their years because their parents were not able to be wise? How many elders have you seen be meyus? Elves live much longer than men, yet they mature at a much slower rate. Should not tiid help them be wise from experience? Why are they still children in the time it takes humans to become elders?"

Their debates would go on for hours when Lydia managed to make time for them. She rarely could get away more than once a week, but she did treasure those lessons with the dragon. His experiences and stories fascinated her. He had seen so much and had was so patient, it was impossible to truly comprehend.

"Tiid," Lydia Shouted. She looked around and saw the grandfather clock's pendulum had slowed down, moving as if through a thick syrup instead of mere air. The Nord smiled triumphantly. She had only managed to make sense of the word a week ago and now she was managing to make the Shout work reliably. Paarthurnax would be pleased at her progress. She couldn't wait to show him later.

But first breakfast, morning petitions, afternoon war planning for the upcoming year's campaign, more petitions before dinner which would involve placating and wooing various diplomats and courtiers before Talos knew what else would demand her attention.

Fredas 30th First Seed 208 4E 3:00 PM

"Regent, I have been informed by our scouts that there's a group of about a dozen horses on the road riding towards the city," Yrsarald told Lydia as he snapped a smart salute. "They fly the heraldry of the Blades. Grandmaster Delphine was seen leading the group."

"The Blades aren't supposed to visit for another month," Lydia frowned as she descended from her throne. "And they never come with that many in tow."

Delphine liked to check in personally once a season to see how well Lydia was holding up her end of their bargain, training the Blades in Shouts, so her inclusion was not that surprising. Spring had arrived a week ago and the thaws had been consistent, without any nightly frost deterring travel.

"Not all of the horses have riders, my regent," Yrsarald clarified. "Only a third of them appear to be mounted. The others look like extras."

"They came in a hurry and couldn't afford to stop," Lydia whispered, her face draining of color. She placed her hand over her mouth as realization hit her. "Something happened at Sky Haven Temple."

Without another word, Lydia pushed past Yrsarald and to the courtyard outside. Delphine was dismounting from her steed as Lydia rushed to her. "What happened? What happened?" she demanded.

Delphine looked horrible. Her eyes were black with shadows from lack of sleep and her cheeks were sunken from lack of food. She wearily tossed her reins to one of her Blade recruits as she turned to
Lydia. "The damned Dark Brotherhood happened," she answered huskily. The older Breton coughed, the sound rough and dry. "We were routed by those bastards. Sky Haven Temple was burning to the ground when I came back from patrol. I managed to find a recruit who told me with his last breath that he saw a jester clad woman fleeing from the fire."

"Where's Esbern?" Lydia asked, looking at the two young recruits who looked just as battle worn as their mistress. "Where's Elric?!" Oh gods, her son had to be here. He had to be! Delphine had promised to take care of him and watch over him like one of her own. Esbern adored the boy and Tilma was his nanny, sworn to watch the boy grown up honorably. Where were they? "They're coming, right? They're behind you with another caravan coming this way? Please tell me they're coming!?"

"They're dead. Burned in the fire as far as I know. We weren't able to account for all the bodies before fleeing here," Delphine said dully. She glanced at the two recruits briefly. "These were the only two I managed to save, and that's because the three of us were out on patrol for Forsworn when the attack happened. Everyone else in Sky Haven Temple was murdered."

"No! No, no, no! Not my son," Lydia wailed, her legs falling under her. She crumpled to the ground, not caring that her thu'um was making the horses stamp nervously. She buried her face in her hands, unable to hold the tears back despite the crowd of people gathering. "Not my baby."

Strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her close and murmuring words of comfort. For a brief moment, Lydia thought it was Ulfric holding her and keeping her safe again, but it was only Yrsarald. She looked at his handsome face, glad he was there, but in her heart she wanted her son's father there. The fact the Brotherhood had stolen him too made her heart feel like it was breaking all over again.

"I failed him," Lydia sobbed. "I sent him away to be safe and he died anyway. My Elric, my little boy."

"Delphine, why don't you tell us exactly what happened?" Yrsarald asked. "It's not like the Brotherhood to wholesale slaughter… Where are you going?"

Lydia looked up from her grief to see Delphine stalking across the courtyard. She was almost all the way across and nowhere near a main door to the castle. Lydia leapt to her feet to follow after. "She's going for Paarthurnax," she called. "Stop her!"

Unfortunately, the Blades Master had a head start. Despite being in her fifties and wearing heavy armor, she was much faster than the two Nords. There would be no way to stop her from getting to the dragon first.

Fredas 30th First Seed 208 4E 3:00 PM

Paarthurnax looked up from his meditations when he heard the screaming in the courtyard. His heart ached for Lydia and loss of her son. He had never met the boy, never would, but he thought Elric would have been much like his father.

The ancient dragon sighed. He was out of time, that damnable illusion. There was never enough and it always left one hungry for more. Paarthurnax knew he should not complain. He had had more than most, even among the dovah, but the world was so full of many interesting and new places, things, and experiences he would never taste. It was hormun, a tragedy.

The doors of his cell flew open and the woman named Delphine stalked in. She reminded
Paarthurnax of a jotkaaz monah, sabre cat mother whose kittens had been threatened. She radiated anger as she approached him.

"Stop! What are you doing?" Lydia was close behind, but not close enough. "We need him."

"This damn dragon has lived long enough," Delphine spat, barely looking over her shoulder and not pausing her stride. "He's the reason my Blades have been destroyed. Thirty years of work, gone, because of him."

"I don't understand what you mean," Lydia said. "He's been here for years now. How could he have had anything to do with the destruction of Sky Haven Temple?"

"Because I know the truth now," Delphine sneered. "Sky Haven Temple burned to the ground. Normal fire couldn't have done that, only the fire produced by a dragon's Shout could have. Hecate the Listener and Diana Dragonborn are the same person. You knew that all along, didn't you? That's why you wanted Paarthurnax here. To use as a gambling chip against her. But it didn't do any good because that Imperial whore sold her soul to Sithis and she doesn't care about anyone or anything."

"Okay, I admit that you're right. Diana is Hecate, but I couldn't tell anyone. My own honor was at stake," Lydia pleaded. "That has nothing to do with Paarthurnax."

"It has everything to do with Paarthurnax!" Delphine screamed. "He was Alduin's most trusted general. He envied his brother's power and corrupted the Dragonborn to his side. Why else would she have turned from hero to villain? He seduced her and made her a monster just like himself. She's been killing people all this time because of him and I won't let anyone else die from his manipulations."

The Breton had pulled her katana from its sheath and stood before him. "I am a dragonslayer, the last of a great line of dragonslayers," she intoned. "If I die without killing another dragon after today, I will count myself blessed for I will have rid the world of this monstrosity."

Paarthurnax did not struggle or try to escape. His chains were too strong. If there had been any chance of breaking them, he would have done so long ago. He could fight the Blade; she was too close and his teeth were long and his claws sharp. But he had sworn an oath to himself a long time ago to never harm another no matter what. If fighting would mean living, he would have done so in a heart's beat, but death was his only option today—and he meant to meet it with dignity.

"Zu'u foral hi," he whispered before the katana bit deeply into his throat. The three feet of steel slid in and out of several time, jabbing him through until he was lying in a pool of his own blood.

"What did he just say? Did he use some sort of Shout on me?" Delphine demanded, looking scared.

Paarthurnax was floating away into the darkness of death. Dragons did not have an afterlife like joor did so he was not sure where his soul was going. Maybe to Father Akatosh, he hoped. There was no breath left in the ancient creature or he would have told Delphine. Thankfully, Lydia was there to explain although not as kindly as Paarthurnax would have liked.

"He said, 'I forgive you,' you stupid bitch."

Fredas 30th First Seed 208 4E 3:15 PM

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't kill you where you stand!" Lydia demanded as she drew her own axe. "You come into my home and slaughter my prisoner. How dare you!"
"Don't give me the wounded hero act," Delphine said coldly, all the fire out of her now that she had completed her mission. "You knew that Paarthurnax had to die. I upheld my half of the bargain, but I'm starting to think you were going to go back on yours. You let him corrupt you just like he corrupted Diana."

"That's not true!" Lydia protested. "You were supposed to keep Elric safe, but you let him die."

"How was I supposed to protect him when you didn't tell me the whole truth?" Delphine spat back. "You knew there was a Dragonborn who was opposing us and you never told me. How are we supposed to guard against that when it's the greatest weakness of our defenses?"

Lydia was struck speechless. Had sending her son away made him more vulnerable instead of safer? Had she forsaken those precious years together to have lost them because of her pride?

Delphine sheathed her sword and started to walk past Lydia. "Do you really think I'm just going to let you leave here?" Lydia asked, stepping to block the Blade's path.

"I know you will," Delphine smirked. "You see, Lydia, I knew you're a liar. You've been lying so long trying to keep this charade alive that you don't even realize you're doing it any more. So I lied to you as well."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a third Blade still alive, and he's waiting near the mill up the hill. If I don't talk to him personally by the end of the hour or if he sees anyone other than me coming that way, he is instructed to take a document with my personal seal to every jarl in Skyrim. It explains how your claim as Dragonborn is false and exposes the fact that Ulfric knew this when he took you as his second-in-command and lover," Delphine explained. "You'll lose all of your supporters and any chance you have of winning this war."

"You wouldn't dare!" Lydia gasped. "It would mean letting the Empire win. It would let the Thalmor win. Could you really allow that? Can you just hand Skyrim over to them?"

"I never cared about Skyrim," Delphine said bitterly. "Yes, this was about revenge against the Thalmor. I would have loved the chance to destroy their hold here, but I can't do that without a base and men. I just lost all that. The few men I have left aren't enough to reestablish the Blades, so I'm taking them back to Cyrodiil. We'll reinstate one of the temples down there and start over, but Skyrim is done as far as we're concerned."

"You don't need a lot of men!" Lydia protested. "The remaining Blades can all Shout. They are the equivalent of an army individually."

"I only have ten men now when I had almost a hundred!" Delphine yelled. "I lost five years of work, I lost my home, and I lost my best friend. Death follows you wherever you go, Lydia Stormblade, and I have no intention of being caught in its wake any more. I'm leaving. You can stop me and be exposed or let me go and continue living your lies, but we are done."

Lydia felt frozen as the Breton left. She had been caught in Diana's Ice Form Shout when they had adventured together. She remember the feeling of absolute helplessness she had experienced trapped in the block of ice, but it was nothing compared to this. This feeling of despair was so much worse.

And it wasn't done.

"You lied to me," Yrsarald said quietly. "I always believed you were the Dragonborn. I believed in you."
"I know," Lydia whispered.

"You invited me into your bed knowing I thought..." Yrsarald trailed off, unable to voice the rest. "Why? You couldn't trust me?"

"I do trust you!" Lydia cried, turning to face him. "I love you, Yrsarald! I do. And it was a lie at first, but not now. I really am the Dragonborn. It's not about heritage or chosen of destiny. It's a title, a name, and Ulfric gave it to me. I'm a symbol for our people and I'm going to lead us to glory just as Ulfric always planned."

"There is no honor that can be gained in lies," Yrsarald said. He reached up and took his bear skin mantle off. "I can't be a part of this. Not when I know the truth. If you had been honest this whole time, I would have followed you to Oblivion. But you've lied to everyone. Men and women have died under your banner in something that wasn't true. They swore themselves to the Dragonborn when in fact they were following a falsehood." He looked mournfully at her before turning to leave. "You're no better than the Empire."

Fredas 30th First Seed 208 4E 8:00 PM

Lydia was sitting in her room trying to meditate, but she couldn't find the harmony of the words. The room was too big, too empty, too dark with Yrsarald gone. She only felt numb, if she felt anything at all. She couldn't believe that he was gone. He had been her strong right hand and now he was gone. As well as the Delphine, Esbern, the Blades, and Elric. And Paarthurnax. She might as well count him as part of the lost.

Tears trailed down her cheeks as she took a shaky breath. Elric's face kept surfacing to her mind, but the only thing she could remember was when he was two. But he was five, had been five. She couldn't remember what her own child had looked like because it had been so long since she had last seen him. Three years gone. Three years she should have been with him.

A soft knock at the door drew her attention. Lydia wiped at her face, knowing she wouldn't be able to hide the puffiness, but she could at least put a brave visage on. "Come in," she said quietly, not daring to risk speaking louder less her thu'um activate. She was much too upset to do anything more.

"Regent, the dragon's body has been taken away as you commanded," Calder said. "They transported his body up to the mountains and buried him. There's some complaint that he should have been burned and his skull mounted over the throne like Nunimex's is in Dragonsreach."

"I'll keep that in mind, Calder," Lydia mumbled. "Thank you."

"There's more, Regent," Calder said, clearing his throat. "There are several scratches on the floor of the dragon's cell. The cleaning crew thought at first that he had been destroying the ground as an act of defiance or an attempt to escape, but when I saw it I thought you would be interested. I don't think they're random gouges."

Fredas 30th First Seed 208 4E 8:30 PM

Lydia stared in shock at the scratches on the ground. Calder had been right, they were not random gouges of a creature. These were the letters of the dovahzul. Despite everything, Paarthurnax had found a way to give her the last word of the Shout he had been teaching her.

"What good does this do, Paarthurnax?" she whispered. "I don't know what the word means. I don't
know what the Shout means. How can I use it? What would I do with it?"

She knew what she should do with it, though. He would want her to learn. He would want her to search and find out what it meant and then figure out how to use it on her own. *I need you to learn this Shout but I want you to use it with wisdom.* How many times had he told her that?

Lydia had to laugh at the irony. Paarthurnax had tried to train her how to take her time, how to go slow with the Words so she could learn on her own.

Lydia cracked her knuckles as she turned to leave. She still had a war to win as well as start studying this new word.

It was time to get to work.

Behind the Nord, the Word remained like a scar on the ground, just like so many Word Walls Lydia had found in her journeys with Diana.

Vo.
Chapter 19

Note: This story takes place two weeks before the last chapter and is after Dark Brotherhood Forever Parts 3-5. You don't have to read those chapters, but it does help a lot.

Turdas 15 First Seed 208 4E 12:00 PM

"The Listener seems distracted," Cicero commented. "You've been staring north for the last hour or so. What's on your mind? It is Aventus?"

"I wasn't thinking about him before, but I am now," Hecate sighed.

The Skyrim Brotherhood had gotten up and crawled back into the wagon that would be returning to Dawnstar Sanctuary around dawn after a few hearty goodbyes with the crew that was going to Wayrest. There had been some good natured grumbling from the hungover assassins wishing they could stay longer, but everyone knew that Cicero needed to be back to Sanctuary by Sundas and it was better to leave too early than too late.

The trip back had been sober so far. Part of it was due to Siblings dealing with throbbing headaches, but Hecate thought it was finally hitting them that many siblings had decided to travel on with Nazir to Wayrest Sanctuary. She knew that she kept expecting to look ahead and see the Redguard driving the wagon while making several scathing remarks about the landscape or Cicero's antics. She found that she missed him terribly and it had only been a few hours since she last saw him.

They had come down to Markarth with eighteen assassins and were now returning with less than half that: Hecate, Cicero, Aventus, a male Bosmer named Frand, a female Nord named Barri, a female Altmer named Siltal who would be replacing Nazir as Speaker, and of course the incorrigible Meena.

There was plenty of room in the wagon now for everyone to have a comfortable seat, but Hecate had opted to summon her demonic steed Shadowmere to ride instead. Cicero was sitting behind her with one arm wrapped around her waist since he was busy admiring the gold and ruby ring she had given him in Markarth. He had been especially tickled when she let him wear his jester's cap on the ride home. Hecate had decided that he had behaved as well as could be reasonably expected from the eccentric jester and had rewarded him for it as promised.

Cicero's discomfort in crowded spaces had been her stated reason for summoning Shadowmere, but the truth was Hecate just could not stand to be near Aventus right now. The boy had kissed her on the trip down after he had saved her from a giant's attack, one that had been instigated by Cicero playing a prank involving stealing a goat and some mammoth cheese from one of their camps.

It had not been a kiss between siblings either. No, there had been a bit of passion behind that kiss-as well as a bit of tongue-leaving Aventus' intentions for her quite clear and Hecate feeling very ill. She had raised the boy since he was ten—well, helped at least. She had never claimed to be a foster mother for him outside of her role as Diana Dragonborn and the alibi they had set up for Aventus when he had been apprenticed to the Bard's College.

In truth, she felt more like an older sister to him. A much older sister who was old enough to be his mom, but a sister nonetheless. It was discomfitting to accept that he has seen her as something more after all these years.

With the difficulties of travel and trying to keep Cicero from making too much mischief while in
Markarth, Hecate had not had any time to think about the dilemma with Aventus. The boy had become a man sometime in the last few years and had a man's desires. He wanted more than she could give and she didn't think sitting down for a heart-to-heart would help matters at all. Some problems just couldn't be talked away.

Glancing at the wagon, Hecate saw Aventus sitting with his arm around Barri, the curly-haired brunette girl snuggled up against him. The Nord had mentioned on the trip down that she was interested in Aventus and apparently the two of them had hooked up during their stay at the exotic Dibellran temple. Hecate wished she believed that he had decided to move on, but she had noticed how Aventus would make sure to glance her way before kissing Barri as if to gauge Hecate's reaction.

It was a revenge play to get her jealous, plain and simple. She doubted Barri would be hurt in the process. The little bit she had spoken to the girl had proven her a pragmatic assassin, and most assassins didn't bother with long term relationships. She wanted a fling with a handsome man and that was all. No, Hecate was worried Aventus would get hurt in the process by trying to prove something that was untrue.

The boy had always been passionate and given his hard background as an orphan, it wasn't surprising that he strove to find love and acceptance wherever he could. He had always been eager to accept a contract or give a hand around Sanctuary.

"Cicero had tried to warn you! Oh yes he did!" Cicero sang-song. "Cicero told you that Aventus wanted to kiss the sweet Hecate, but she didn't pay any heed to dear, sweet Cicero."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time," Hecate replied dryly, sorely tempted to push the jester off her horse to shut him up.

"Next time?" Cicero trilled. "Does Hecate plan on seducing more poor young boys for her conquests?"

"Stop that!" Hecate laughed, swatting behind her at the Keeper. "You know what I mean!"

"If not Aventus, then what is bothering you?" Cicero asked switching topics while nuzzling Hecate's back.

"Sky Haven Temple is north of us," Hecate admitted. She glanced in that direction, trying to see if the Blades' refuge was visible from here.

Cicero paused in his affections, making Hecate uncomfortable with how still he was. "You're going to go there, aren't you? That was part of your plan all along!"

"Yes," she admitted, hunching her shoulders. "It just makes sense because we're so close. This is the first time the roads have been clear since last year, and I'm set and determined to find out what the Blades' plans are. They have to pay for how they put Vedave's body on display in Windhelm. It's one thing to kill one of our assassins, but I will not let them disrespect us or the Night Mother by desecrating our bodies afterwards."

"Well, no sense waiting," Cicero said, cheerful again. "Let's go right away! Cicero and Hecate on the hunt!"

"No, you're not coming with me," Hecate said softly.

"Why not?" Cicero wailed right in her ear.
"Because in order to get to Sky Haven Temple, we have to cross a river which means we have to look for a ford, get past the Forsworn camp at Karthspire, climb up half a mountain side, and make our way through the myriad traps that surround the entrance—all of which is going to take at least half a day if not longer," Hecate explained. "Then once I'm there, I need to scout the place to see what their forces are like and patrol patterns. It is beyond foolish to go in completely blind, and that means reconnaissance. I'm thinking a week, three days if I have to rush because of weather, which is too long for you to come along."

"You knew! You knew you were going to do this and you planned to go without poor, sweet Cicero!" the Keeper started screaming at the top of his lungs, kicking his legs in a tantrum against Shadowmere's sides much to the horse's discomfort.

The other assassins looked over at them, all of them uncomfortable with Cicero's display. Except Aventus. He looked smug at seeing his rival's childish behavior. His shared glance with Hecate seemed to proclaim, "See, I told you."

"Siltal, the Keeper and I are going ahead," Hecate said as she dug her heels into Shadowmere's side. The horse all too gladly put on a burst of speed, quickly leaving the wagon behind. The Listener was glad that Cicero quieted down as he clung to her as they flew over the road.

Once they reached a good stopping place, Hecate dismounted. "Come on," she said offering her hand. "If we're going to talk about this, I don't want poor Shadowmere to have to suffer because you're mad at me."

"Sorry," Cicero grumbled to the horse as he dismounted. The black mare snorted derisively, knowing that the jester didn't mean it in the slightest before trotting off to find grass to feed.

"This whole trip, the ring, everything," Cicero said, looking at her with huge, betrayed amber eyes. "You did it because you don't think you're coming back."

"There's a good chance," Hecate clarified. "I wouldn't go into a death trap, Cicero. You should know that now."

"But you think you might die!" he yelled. He flailed his arms in the air violently as if trying to swat some invisible fly. "You never think that. You always believe we're going to come home and it will have been fun from all the stabbing and slashing, but this time you think you might, might, might die and that's the worst Cicero has ever heard from you!"

"Cicero, sweet Cicero," Hecate crooned, trying to calm him. She grabbed his hand and pulled them to her chest where she cradled them. "I'm just being cautious."

"You're never cautious," Cicero wailed. "We're never cautious!"

"I know, I know," Hecate admitted.

"What changed?" Cicero asked, burying his face against her shoulder.

"They can Shout and they know Dragonrend," Hecate said, haltingly. "It...hurts me. It hurts in a way nothing else can."

"Why would they use a Shout for dragons on a person?" Cicero laughed. "Hecate doesn't look like a dragon!"

"But I have the soul of one and it burns from that Shout," she said.
"Then don't go!" Cicero declared. "Send someone else. Hecate is the best, but Aventus would be good enough. Let the boy go and prove himself for you. Let him come home with his chest puffed out and brag about how he's so much better than Cicero, and Cicero will laugh and caper at his bravery!"

"It has to be me," Hecate sighed. "The final test is a blood seal. I have to use my blood to get in. No one else can go."

"Then at least take the boy to watch your back," Cicero suggested. His expression turned lecherous. "Cicero knows Aventus will do that with much enthusiasm."

"I was going to, but I can't now. He would be too much of a distraction," Hecate admitted. It hurt to say because Aventus had always been her first choice as backup when Cicero was unavailable. "Dammit, why did he have to feel a need to declare his feelings for her now of all times?"

"Siltal, then! She is to be Speaker!"

"No, Siltal's specialty isn't in stealth. She's a necromancer; she deals in overwhelming, blunt force," Hecate said.

"Then Meena," Cicero said. "She's fast, quiet, sneaky, sneaky, sneaky. Take Meena."

Hecate bit her lip in hesitation. The Khajiit was quite efficient in killing and she was the most experienced assassin in Dawnstar Sanctuary other than Cicero, Hecate, and Babette. Hecate had been making vague promises about making Meena a Speaker in Elsewyr soon, reopening the Corinthe Sanctuary. This would be a good trial to see if the beastkin could handle pressure. "Okay, I'll take Meena. I just hope I won't live to regret it."

"Don't you mean you hope that you will live to regret it?" Cicero asked slyly. "Otherwise you'll be dead."

"Shut up," she groused, rubbing him on the head. At least the Keeper was in a better mood. Now she just had to get up to the Blades' temple and see exactly what those fanatics were up to.

---

**Turdas 18 First Seed 208 4E 6:45 PM**

"Ysgramor built Windhelm as a monument to mankind when he stumbled on his recently dead son's grave," Tilma the Haggard recited from a worn book. "It was fashioned in the Atmorian fashion and was an invincible fortress. Ysgramor commanded that great bridge be constructed over the White River so no elf could attempt to sneak over and avenge his kin. The Palace of Kings served as the royal seat for many generations after Ysgramor himself. It is said deep under Windhelm, a huge crypt was built worthy of Ysgramor himself."

The elder woman turned to her solitary student who was sitting somberly at his desk. "Did you get all of that, young Elric?"

"Yes, Miss Tilma, but I has a question," the five-year-old piped.

"'I have a question', dear," Tilma corrected.

"Oh, you too? But you're the teacher!" Elric exclaimed.

Esbern chuckled from his desk where he was studying some old scrolls he had found that depicted martial fighting skills that the Akavir had used. Fascinating history, but he enjoyed listening into
young Elric Stormcloak's history lessons too.

"I was correcting your grammar, Master Elric," Tilma sighed as she rubbed her forehead. If only she could tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic when he made such comments. "What is your question, my dear?"

"Well, if Eegramoor made Windhelm and there was a mighty toom for him, then why wasn't he buried in that? His crip is in Winterhold."

"Ysgramor," Tilma said slowly. "Say it properly, please. Not only was Ysgramor the founder of the Companions, but he also created the First Empire. We must show his memory utmost respect."

"I did say it right," Elric pouted. "Just like how I say my daddy's name right. Yol-riik."

"Ulfric," Tilma pronounced. "Please, child."

"Oh, Tilma, give the boy a break," Esbern interrupted. "He's just a child. He'll grow out of it eventually."

"The only way for him to be correct is if I hold him to it," Tilma responded, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm the boy's guardian and I'll thank you to let me raise him properly. I took a grand care of the Companions for a long time so I think I can handle one boy."

"Well, I think it's cute," Esbern snickered. "He's an adorable child and that won't last long. He'll be a warrior grown before you know it."

"I'm not adorable!" Elric protested, his golden hair falling messily over his sky blue eyes. "I am a warrior!" He held his wooden sword aloft, swinging it over his head. "I've been training with the other Blade recruits in the mornings before breakfast."

"True, true," Tilma agreed, "but you're not a grown up yet. You're still a young boy and if we're lucky you'll grow into an honorable man. But for now, you have history lessons."

"You didn't answer my question," Elric reminded her. "Why was Yissgramor buried near the Sea of Ghosts instead of Windhelm? It was where his throne was and where many of his descendants would be kept."

"I don't know," Tilma admitted. "Maybe he missed his home, maybe he worried other conquerors would come from Atmora, or maybe some other reason. That is not kept in the history books." She put her own book back on the shelf. "That's enough for one day, young man. You're excused from your studies for now."

"Thank you, Miss Tilma!" Elric said, a huge smile breaking over his face. He grabbed up his quills, papers, and books to dutifully put them away. "May I play Hide and Seek with Esbern?"

"If he likes," Tilma said, nodding towards the Imperial.

"I can for a bit, Elric," Esbern said, "but not for long. I have these scrolls to decipher."

"Thank you!" Elric squealed as he ran off. "You're it!"

"I worry about that boy's lisp," Tilma sighed as she crossed her arms. "He's getting too old for such babyish qualities."

"I would worry more about his lack of friends," Esbern replied. "It's not right for a small child to
only be around adults-and all warriors at that."

"Have you forgotten us, old man?" Tilma teased.

"My lady, you're the most dangerous one of all," Esbern flirted. He liked Tilma. Maybe he could convince her to go to dinner at Markarth with him some time.

"Tease," she giggled, swatting him lightly. "Don't let him distract you too much. Be sure to be firm when you're done playing."

"Don't worry," Esbern reassured her. "I'll play a few rounds and then hide here. He never thinks to check the library when we play."

Turadas 18 First Seed 208 4E 7:00 PM

"Meena is bored!" the Khajiit complained. "How much longer must we wait out here in the cold and snow?"

The two assassins were perched on a ledge overlooking Sky Haven Temple. They had spent the last three days up here on this hard rock cropping watching boring Nords walk in circles. They couldn't talk much in case their voices carried, no fires lest they be seen, and absolutely no drinking.

The calico furred catkin lashed her tail angrily. She hated it. If the Keeper came up to her and said she had been handpicked for another undercover mission, she'd slash him good. Meena was more than ready to go home to where it was warm and dry, with a large supply of liquor.

"Meena is booooored!" she repeated.

"I know," Hecate hissed, glaring at her. "You've told me repeatedly. Luckily for both of us, I've got enough of a pattern by now that we can go in. The evening shift will be going to dinner shortly. Since the Blades are only worried about letting their men in and not keeping people like us out, they're not going to bother with a guard at the gate until morning." She scoffed. "Typical complacent laziness. I love when people get stupid."

"We are going to go in and kill all of them?" Meena asked, her whiskers quivering with anticipation.

"No," Hecate answered.

"What!?"

"This is a reconnaissance mission only," Hecate sighed. "I need to know what the Blades' goals are, where their men are station, exactly how they've been trained."

"They killed Vedave!" Meena growled. "Or don't you care about that at all?"

"We're assassins," Hecate said, "and I accepted a long time ago that we're going to get killed on the job. It happens. There's no shame in being sent to our Mother's arms in the Void. As tempting as revenge is, we save it for those who petition the Night Mother. We do not kill lightly in the name of the Brotherhood. Only through the Unholy Mother may we make a contract in blood."

"Then why bother being here at all?" Meena asked. "Meena is cold and tired and wants to be home with the rest of the Family."

"Because there's more than one way to skin a cat, if you'll pardon the expression," Hecate grinned
"We're going to get as much dirt on the Blades as possible and then politically assassinate them. We'll kill their reputation that they've tried to boost by hanging one of our Brothers like some damn trophy. We'll make it so no one in Skyrim wants anything to do with them ever again by ruining every plan they ever made. Then they'll have to live with the shame for the rest of their miserable lives."

"Meena thinks Hecate has spent too much time with the Imperial court lately," the Khajiit teased, her mismatched eyes sparkling, "but this could be fun. Let's get started!"

**Turdas 18 First Seed 208 4E 7:30 PM**

Elric Stormcloak skulked through the halls of Sky Haven Temple, trying to keep a low profile from his hunter. Esbern was surprisingly good at find the boy when they played Hide and Seek, but Elric was quickly learning how the older man did it. Tufts of blond hair poking above counters and desks were a quick way to be caught. Giggleing and talking to his dolls didn't help either.

They had already had a few rounds of hide and seek and each time Esbern found him within a few minutes. Clearly Elric's hiding places were getting routine, so he would need to find a new one. And he knew exactly which one he would use. There was a side room that was rarely used except when his mother came to visit. He would duck in there to wait until Esbern forfeited the game.

Most children Elric's age would get bored after hiding for a few minutes, resulting in them quitting and going to find the seeker. Elric never had this problem. He would settle into whatever cache he had tucked himself into and play with his toy soldiers he had inherited from his father. Recently, he had been learning how to read and now kept a primer with him at all times to scour over when he tired of the imaginary wars his Stormcloaks always won whether it be Imperial traitors or hungry dragons.

Today he was reading *A Children's Anuad*. It was a very confusing book detailing the beginning of Creation, Anu and Padomay, and how the races were made. How did someone hide in the sun? Wasn't it too far away? Farther than Cyrodiil?

The sound of the door scraping drew Elric away from the battle between the brothers that would throw them out of Time. It looked like the old man had hunted him down after all! Well, that didn't mean that Elric couldn't surprise him before losing this round.

Stifling a chuckle, Elric jumped up from behind the bed with his arms held above his arms. Before he could shout, he saw that it wasn't Esbern, but some odd creature wearing a tattered outfit of black and red and matching cap with dangling flaps. Its back was to him, but he could see it holding its chin as it contemplated the portrait of his father that dominated the wall. It turned, revealing a horrific ebony carved face with a terrifying frown and huge tortured eyes.

The child squeaked in surprise as he ducked back behind his hiding place. It had been the barest of sounds, but the creature still heard it. From his position on the ground, Elric could see its feet from under the bed and it was coming his way! Elric clamped his hands over his mouth, trying his best to be brave as the creature came towards him to investigate the sound. If only if he had a real sword instead of his toy wooden one!

"What's this?" the creature asked, looking down at him as it rounded the corner. The voice was hollow and echoey as if from a great distance. "A little boy in a Blades temple?" It tilted its head again as it studied him. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Elric said, trying desperately to ignore the pounding of his heart. Surely the
creature had to hear the rapid thudding in his chest, but Tilma had always taught him that true bravery came from facing your fears while cowardice was running from them. He would not shame his teacher by crying or cowering. Instead, he grabbed his sword and leveled it at the monster. "I am a Nord! A true son of Skyrim and I will fight you if I have to."

He was pleased to see the monster jerk back in surprise, but nothing could have prepared Elric for the laughter that erupted from it. It threw its head back and what could only be described as a belly laugh followed. It reached up and grabbed the sides of its face, pulling away the bottom half. The laugh changed from a dark, metallic sound to a light, melodic one.

"My, my, my, you're a tough one," the woman mused. Elric thought her voice was nice. It was very smooth and made him feel safe. He decided that he liked her. She crouched before him, lazily holding her mask in one hand as it draped over one knee. This close Elric could see that her eyes were blue, reminding him sharply of a dim memory of his mother. "I should have known that the Blades would only recruit the hardiest of Nords for their ranks."

Elric could see a delicate, feminine chin with pale skin and a woman's lips that were curved into an amused smile. He relaxed, seeing that it was just a person wearing a weird costume and not some daedric creature that had found itself into his home. She was much smaller than any other adult he had met. He couldn't really tell what race she was behind her remaining half mask and floppy hat, but he was pretty certain she wasn't a Nord and her skin was too fair to be a Redguard. She must be a Breton since she was much too nice to be a filthy Imperial! He had asked Tilma why the Imperials didn't just take a bath if they were filthy, but his nursemaid never did answer that adequately. It must be because they spend so much time scraping the ground the Thalmor walk on. Elric was proud that he figured all that out on his own.

"I'm not a Blade," Elric admitted, lowering his sword. "Not yet, anyway. My nursemaid is teaching me how to be honorable and how to read. When I'm older, I'll...app- appen-...," he bit his lip in frustration. "What's the word for study under a master?"

"Apprentice," the woman answered with a smile.

"Thank you," Elric said graciously. "I'll apprentice with Delphine until I come of age."

"How many other children are here?" the woman asked intently. "I had no idea there was a nursery."

Elric pouted a bit at the word nursery. That was where babies were kept! "There's no one else. I'm the only one!"

"Just you?" she asked, doing that odd head tilt again. "Why? What makes you special?"

The boy puffed up with confidence. Tilma always told him that he should be honored of who his father was and to always show pride in his name. "Because of my daddy, Yol-riik!"

"Yol-riik?" the woman chuckled. "I don't know him."

"How can't you know him? Everyone knows him!" Elric exclaimed with dismay. He stamped his foot in aggravation. "You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"I've been known to tease from time to time, but I promise you not right now," the weird lady snorted.

"Yol-riik Stormcloak! The Bear of Eastmarch! The jarl of Windhelm and my daddy!" Elric snapped as he pointed at his father's portrait on the wall. "Everyone knows him!"
"Oooh!" the woman exclaimed as she daintily put her hand over her mouth in surprise. Then she laughed, that sweet melody again. "He would have loved that, I bet."

"Loved what?" Elric asked.

"The way you say his name sounds like dovahzul, the dragon language. YOL RIK STRUN," she explained with a chuckle. "It would mean Fire Gale Storm."

Elric gasped as something passed between the two of them. The air wavered as if there was an intense heat above a fire. He could feel something settling into his chest, tightening before curling up like a cat, purring and pleased as it locked into place. He touched the place over his heart as he imagined what a fire gale storm would be like. His daddy full of passion and fire as he tried to save the people of Skyrim from the tyranny of the Thalmor and as he protected the worship of Talos. Yes, that seemed right! Just like all the stories Tilma told him and the ones he just barely remembered from his mommy when he was very little.

"YOL RIK," he said, imagining the words as flame. And they were. A gust of flame erupted from his mouth, making him and the woman both lean back in surprise. Elric briefly thought he should be scared, but he wasn't. This was amazing! It was the best feeling in the world! He had thought of something and when he said it, it came true!

"By the Eight," the woman whispered, "you're Dragonborn."

"Like my mommy?" Elric asked with awe. That was wonderful! She would be so proud! He knew she was the most important person in all of Skyrim because she was the child of prophecy who saved everyone from that evil dragon before he was born. Now he would be just as important as her! And maybe, just maybe, she would want him to come home so she could teach him all the dragon words so he could Shout like her and they could kill bad dragons together. Although he could barely remember her now, he still missed her dreadfully. "What would her name do?"

"What is your mommy's name?" the woman asked cautiously. Elric got the impression she knew, but didn't want to admit it. Adults did that a lot - asking questions they already knew the answers to.

"Lydia Stormblade!" he declared happily.

"Oh, Lydia, you've been busy," the woman murmured, her eyes softening from wary to sadly amused. "This explains so much. You should have just told me." She ruffled Elric's hair. "You've learned too much already, young man. I'm afraid…"

Before she could finish, a Khajiit burst into the room, wide eyed and bushy tailed. She was wearing black and red skin tight leathers and one hand clutched a handful of scrolls. "Listener! Thank Sithis, there you are. Meena has gotten into big trouble!"

"By the gods, what did you do?" the woman snapped as she stood. She replaced her mask, a small click locking it back into place. Elric clutched his sword nervously. The woman's voice had changed from warm to ice cold instantly. He didn't like when adults fought. It was scary.

"I was exploring as we agreed and found a library," Meena explained. "There were ancient Akaviri scrolls explaining an old technique for fighting Blades. Meena was engrossed in them, so when the old man jumped out at her yelling 'Gotcha,' she immediately reacted and clawed him from shoulder to hip. He looked surprised and fell down, clutching the wound on his chest."

"Is he dead?" the woman asked, her voice full of dread.
"Yes, Meena made sure! She slashed his throat so he could not call for help! But we must go before
he is discovered."

"You idiot," the Listener hissed. She grabbed Meena's shoulders and shook her. "I told you this was
recon only."

"You killed Esbern?" Elric screeched. No! No, no, no! Sweet, kind Esbern dead? His friend?

Elric had been sad before. He had cried when he had to leave his mommy. He had wept at the end of
sad stories. He had mourned the death of a bird he found. But he had never felt anything like this.
The pain of losing his dear friend who was always there reading with him, teaching him things that
Tilma would probably not approve, laughing with him over silly boy stuff. His friend dead?

The warm thing that had settled into his chest moments ago stirred, waking into an angry beast
instead of a content cat. He felt like something within him snapped, shattering into a thousand pieces.
Elric clenched his hands hard enough to leave marks on his palms as tears streamed down his face.

"YOU KILLED ESBERN?" he Shouted at the women. Fire manifested from his words, scaring
him as this flame was much bigger and brighter than the first, but making him feel good too because
it made him feel strong. It rolled over them. The catkin screeched in pain as her fur ignited, but the
other one, the one called Listener, ignored it as it merely licked at her harmlessly.

"Child, calm down! Your thu'um is out of control," the Listener commanded as she looked up from
helping pat out the Khajiit's fur. A sickly smoldering scent of burnt fur filled Elric's nose. Despite the
situation, the Listener's voice was soothing and confident. "You're upset. You have every right to be,
but you need to calm down."

"NO, I HATE YOU! YOU'RE MONSTERS BOTH OF YOU! YOU TRICKED ME! I
THOUGHT YOU WERE NICE, BUT YOU'RE NOT! YOU KILLED ESBERN!" Elric
screamed, letting the rage and sadness flow out of him and into his words. Fire filled the room,
becoming a whirlwind of flames as it spun in the air until it crashed against furniture, setting the
wood on fire. Embers ignited in the cloth of the bed instantly becoming an inferno.

Elric stumbled away, suddenly scared. This wasn't fun any more. He didn't want fire to come out his
mouth every time he talked, but he couldn't stop. Every word was another torrent of flame engulfing
the closest object in a blaze. He screamed, creating more fire, more chaos. Before the two assassins
could stop him, he darted between them and out into the hall.

"HELP, SOMEONE HELP ME, PLEASE!" he yelled. Gales of flame shot out of his mouth with
each word, catching onto tapestries and rugs. By Talos, what had they done to him?

Turdas 18 First Seed 208 4E 8:00 PM

Everything had gone to Oblivion in a handbasket. Hecate cursed as she started to follow the scared
child who was creating destruction in his wake. His Shouts had not directly hurt her; she was too
well trained in the thu'um for his accidental Voice to affect her. But now that he was scared as well
as upset by his Voice breaking, it was possible that if he hit her with a direct Shout that she would be
burned badly. And even if he didn't, the fire created by the boy's Shouts would be enough to cause
her harm.

The air was getting hard to breathe as it filled with heat and haze. It was getting almost impossible to
see through the blaze of fire and billowing, black smoke. Hecate threw an arm over her face as she
dove down the hall, desperately trying to stop the boy before he could cause any more damage.
Behind her, the Listener heard Meena's own exclamation before joining her. Thankfully, the boy's initial outburst had only singed the Khajiit's fur. Hecate hated to think what she would have had to do if Meena had been hurt worse.

"Blades!" Meena hissed unnecessarily. The hall opened up to one of the main rooms of the temple. Blade initiates were streaming into the room in various degrees of armor, but all bearing the curved signature katana of the faction.

The boy was running towards them, still wailing and generating more fire. The warriors scattered from his unintentional assault, but some were still caught in the blast, incinerated within moments. Hecate had to admit that she was impressed by the boy's thu'um. If it was this strong now, imagine what it would be when he was an adult after learning how to control it.

The child fell to his knees, cradling his head in his arms, too terrified to go further. He had found his protectors, but had killed some of them in the process. Hecate could all too easily empathize the horror he was going through.

That would have to be dealt with later though. Right now there was a squad of Blades bearing down on her, intent on killing her. The Listener fell into her fighting stance as she kicked at an incoming Blade before sliding under another while piercing his ribs with her ebony dagger.

Nearby Meena was spitting all sorts of Khajiit curses as she gleefully clawed through her own opponents.

The Blades normally would have easily overwhelmed the two assassins. There were more of them by tenfold and they were trained to deal with the Brotherhood's fighting style. But with the confusion and fire to deal with, Hecate and Meena were at an advantage. They were used to chaos while on mission. The noise, smoke, and heat were allies for Sithis' children.

"What are you doing?" Meena yelled as Hecate cut and danced her way among her opponents. The Listener's dagger rarely missed, but she wasn't bothering with killing blows. Instead she was taking the easier strikes against exposed arm and leg joints without following up with deadly vital strikes. "Kill them!"

"I don't have time!" Hecate called back. Fatal strikes took more precision and effort. She would have to either wait for the perfect opening to get past their heavy lamellar armor or do additional attacks once her crippling ones took them down. They weren't her primary goal and she wasn't going to spend time getting to them. "I need to get to the boy."

"Good! Kill him and we'll finally leave this place!" Meena snarled as she lashed her burnt tail. She jumped onto a Blade, gouging his throat as they fell. She howled with pleasure as the man gurgled his last breath.

Kill the boy? Hecate paused in battle, shocked at the thought. Kill Lydia's child? She couldn't! No! But looking at him, crouched there covered in soot, sweat, and snot while each sob generated more fire, she had to wonder what kind of life could the boy live now. His Voice had broken before he even knew what was happening to him, before he could learn what he was. Every time his emotions swayed-fear, sadness, anger, or even joy—he would destroy the world around him.

He wasn't even an adult or teenager who might be able to learn how to govern his feelings. He was just a little boy—and who could expect a child to rein in his emotions? It had taken Hecate more than thirty years and finding the right partner for her to learn control over her own.
Delphine had finally gotten the Dragonborn she had so desperately wanted and she hadn't even known it. The boy was too dangerous a weapon to leave alone.

"Meena!" she called, going back into action as she made her decision. "Head home! I'll follow you shortly."

"Oh no!" Meena laughed as she spun to deliver a backward blow to one of her opponents. Their foes had trickled to a few Blades, the rest dead or unconscious on the ground. "Cicero will skin Meena alive if she returned without you."

"It's safer if we split up," Hecate insisted, "and besides, I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. That's a direct order. And if Cicero complains, you just point out the Tenets to him and tell him to stuff his cap in his mouth until I get home." She paused, her voice softening. "And if he's still upset, you tell him I promise on my name that I will come home even if I have to drag myself out of the Void to do it."

Meena squealed with laughter at that thought. "As you wish, oh great and powerful Listener," she said, mocking Cicero's tone. She sank her claws into her opponent, gutting the poor girl, before turning and springing away. "See you at home!"

Hecate grumbled as she watched the Khajiit take off. There would have been a time she would have been furious with the catkin for the grand mess she had made of this trip, but she knew it was pointless to hate a creature for following its basic nature. Might as well despise the snake for biting you when you picked it up. She had known what Meena was like and had brought her along anyway.

"You're going to kill me?" the boy sniffed. He was hunched at her feet, looking so very young and tiny. He rubbed his nose, trying to clean it of the snot and tears that had accumulated there. "I won't go to Sovngarde, will I? I'm too small. I'll never meet my daddy." He cried some more, only generating small puffs of fire now. He was too tired for anything else.

"Shush," Hecate whispered as she patted his hair. She removed the lower half of her mask and pressed her lips against his ear. "Laag, sleep, child." The Word caused him to close his eyes and slump into her arms. She doubted she had even needed the Word, but better safe than sorry. She scooped him up and ran through the fire, using Fus Ro Dah when she could to beat the flames back. He felt so fragile in her arms, so she cupped his head and held him close to her chest as she fled.

The Dragonborn dreaded what she was going to do next, but there was no other choice. The child was too dangerous left alone in Skyrim. She hated to condemn him to what she was going to do, but what had been done could not be undone and she had learned years ago that sometimes one had to keep moving forward instead of always looking back.

---

**Sundas 28 First Seed 208 4E 1:00 PM**

Cicero whistled a merry tune as he drew on his sketchpad. The jester was perched on a large boulder outside of the Sanctuary, trying to doodle a group of horkers that were gathered on one of the miniature islands that graced the shoreline. It was bitterly cold today with the ocean's breeze blowing gently, making Cicero's fingers numb despite his thick gloves.

The Keeper knew that he should probably go inside and get a thicker coat, but he was sure that the Listener was coming home today, and he wanted to be waiting for her when she did. It didn't matter that he had been just as positive every day before this one that it would be the day she came home, he knew today would be the day. And if it wasn't then, tomorrow was just as good.
The others watched him warily, waiting for him to burst into an outrage over their missing leader. He didn't blame them. It was well known how protective he was of the Listener, Mother's chosen. Cicero wouldn't deny that his chest hurt whenever he thought about her out there alone, which was all the time, but he knew that his sweet Hecate would never lie to him. If she promised to come home, then she would.

But she had sworn to the catkin by her real name, and Cicero didn't know how good that particular part of his love was at keeping promises. So, he waited as he had always waited for his mistress until she was ready to return to him.

Cicero looked down at his sketchpad and stuck his tongue out in frustration. Horkers were boring to draw. They were dull, fat things that just flopped about looking for fish. He laughed as he erased the dour wrinkled faces and put in Nazir's and Aventus's instead. The Redguard would be so mad when he got it! Cicero would be sure to include his lovely sketch in the next mail to go out!

The hours crawled by as the sun traveled across the sky, making shadows grow from the barren rocks. Cicero's butt had long since frozen in the thin motley velvet pants. He shifted uncomfortably as he wiggled his fingers and toes to get some warmth back in them. Papers littered all around him from discarded drawings. Soon the light would be gone and the Keeper would have to admit defeat for another day. His breath hung as mist in the air already. It was almost Rain's Hand and winter had not given up its grasp in the Pale.

He would go inside, oil the Night Mother, and write in his journal a bit before retiring again for a lonely night in the Listener's big bed. Their bed really, but she had never officially moved him in. Cicero had hoped that she would after her sweet present in Markarth, but they had not had a chance to do so.

Maybe you never will, part of him whispered.

No! No, no, no, no! Cicero would know if something happened to sweet Hecate. He wasn't sure how, but he just would. She promised that she would come home and he had faith in her. He would wait here day after day until the end of the Era if he had to.

Cicero sighed as he gathered his things. Tomorrow it would be then. Cicero was nothing if not patient. There was always tomorrow. Or the day after that.

Or the day after that.
Chapter 20

Normally Hecate found the dark comforting. It was a blanket that encased her with its warmth, enshrouding her to keep her safe from harm and the unknown. She was the monster that lurked in the shadows hunting her prey. She had nothing to fear in the night. She was fear.

She was floating in the darkness and it was not comforting. She thrashed and tossed, trying to evade clawing hands that were trying to grab her and drag her deeper down. They were pulling her every which way, raking her skin as she pushed them away. Her heart thudded in her throat as she choked on her screams.

"Diana," a faraway voice called.

Who was Diana? Hecate knew she should recognize the name, but it slipped away from her. She swiped after it, needing to know because if she could remember then everything would be okay.

Instead she was seven again, waking alone in her bed. Little Rosa climbed out of her bed, too hot and covered in sweat. She went to her mother's room, already knowing that it would be unoccupied, but hoping that she would be there asleep and maybe would let Rosa climb in with her. The house was empty of anyone else, her mother still gone gods knew where.

It never occurred to Rosa that she should be scared that her mother was gone in the middle of the night. She had grown up with many days and nights of an absent mother who claimed, "I'll just be gone for a little bit. I have to go to the store," or some other hollow excuse.

It was still too hot in the house. She needed fresh air.

Outside, the two moons shone brightly, lighting the town square. Rosa breathed deeply, not minding the slightly foul scents of the bay of dead fish and sewage, only relishing the metallic tang of the water beneath the other smells. A breeze brushed back her sweat-soaked hair and ruffled her nightgown, making her sigh with relief.

Ignoring the gravel crunching painfully under her feet, the girl walked down to the Lucky Old Lady statue. She sat down, leaning against the cool base of the statue, and watched the night sky. There had always been comfort in seeing the blood red larger moon and its smaller pale companion travel through the sleeping hours.

Above her, the children of the Lucky Old Lady continued their frozen dance around their loving mother. Rosa liked to pretend that she danced with them, adopted among them so that she was no longer alone.

"Diana."

Rosa frowned as she tilted her head, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. No one else should be up now.

A sharp pain in her side took her breath away. Had she hurt herself again without knowing? Her mother often lamented that Rosa was a clumsy girl, especially after she knocked over something fragile. The girl touched her side, gently probing it, and was shocked when her hand came away bloody.
"Diana, can you hear me?"

The girl looked up and when she opened her eyes she wasn't in the memory of her childhood anymore, but a woman tangled in sheets on a bed. Sitting next to her was an old man, holding her hand and looking very concerned.

"Arngeir?" she rasped, her mouth feeling like it was full of cotton.

The Greybeard sighed with relief as he grabbed a glass of water that was sitting on the nightstand and gave it to her. "Sit up slowly," he warned before Hecate could reach for the offered drink. "Your wound is still not fully healed."

The Imperial sighed with pain as she struggled to get into a comfortable sitting position. Her hand rested below her ribs where she felt rough bandages. Otherwise she was naked. No doubt the Greybeards had undressed her to tend to her many wounds. She hurt from head to toe. Large, purplish bruises and long, shallow cuts covered most of her body.

As she greedily drank the water, Hecate reveled in the feeling of it spreading through her chest and chasing away the last webs of the dream. Waking brought back the memories of her desperate fight against the Blades. She had moved as Death Incarnate that night, slashing and kicking her many opponents like a living whirlwind, but they had given as good as they had gotten.

Hecate had not even noticed the wound in her side as she ran away from the Blades Temple carrying her precious cargo. The boy had been curled up asleep in her arms, dead to the world, as she summoned Shadowmere.

The daedric horse had practically flown across the countryside, her stride faster and more confident than any mortal steed in the darkness of night. The trip to High Hrothgar had only taken four days when it normally would have taken over a week.

They had rarely stopped except for a few bites of food and for Hecate to change out of her motley and into her traveling clothes. Only then had she even felt the gaping injury in her side. She had bound it with a shredded shirt since she did not have a healer's kit on her and could not risk stopping at a village. There would have been too many questions and the risk of the boy causing more destruction was too great.

By the time they had made it to the Greybeard temple, the wound in her side was a hot, throbbing constant pain. No doubt it had gotten infected during her frantic ride. Combined with exhaustion, she had collapsed on the outside stairs, weakly calling for the Greybeards. Someone must have heard her cries because the last thing she remembered was hands picking her up.

The boy hadn't woken once during their flight and that scared Hecate. What if her Word of Power had done something permanent to him? She had never used it before, and wasn't fully sure of its function other than rest.

"The child," she asked, looking at Arngeir desperately. "Is he okay?"

"He is," the elder told her. "He woke up two days ago."

"How long was I out?" Despite the cleansing power of the water, Hecate still felt weak and shaky.

"Three days," Arngeir answered. He chuckled when he heard her stomach grumble. "I'll bring you some broth. It'll help."

"Thank you," Hecate whispered as she laid back down. She coughed a bit, her chest hurting from
the effort. Despite her best efforts, she had still breathed in a lot of smoke from the fire that destroyed Sky Haven Temple.

She closed her eyes, wishing she was home in Dawnstar Sanctuary with Cicero fussing over her like a worried hen. Scolding her for leaving him behind and how next time she should make sure dear, sweet Cicero was with her to watch her back. She smiled as she imagined the jester clucking his tongue, "No one can watch the Listener's back as well as Cicero. No, no, no."

Arngeir sat quietly as she slowly sipped the clear broth he had brought her. Hecate was grateful that the Greybeards were not ones to pry with endless questions, especially ones she didn't have a good answers for.

At least she didn't have to worry about them asking about her motley. There had been no time for her to hide it and her ebony tragedy mask, but the Greybeards wouldn't even know what the items meant. No one came up to High Hrothgar, not even the pilgrims who traveled the Seven Thousand Steps.

"That's Ulfric's son you brought with you, isn't it?" Arngeir asked after Hecate finished her meal.

"It's that obvious, huh?" she chuckled.

"By Kyne, I thought it was him," Arngeir admitted. Hecate remembered that Ulfric had only been six when he had been chosen to join the Greybeards. Arngeir had been like a foster father to him until he had decided to leave to join the Imperial Legion during the Great War. "The only difference was those blue eyes."

"The boy isn't mine," Hecate said to the Greybeard's unasked question. "He's Lydia's."

"He said that his mother was the Dragonborn," Arngeir admitted, "but I knew that couldn't be the truth." He had to be referring to the fact the boy was a Nord instead of an Imperial. Hecate had never discussed her...turbulent personal relationship with Ulfric to Arngeir.

The jarl of Windhelm had fascinated her the moment she had laid eyes on him in the wagon on the way to Helgen. Even on their way to certain death, he had held himself with a sense of nobility. It had been easy to see why men followed him.

It didn't help that after the dragon had attacked and disrupted their execution that he and his men had tried to hold her hostage simply because she was an Imperial. She had been furious that they had automatically treated her like the enemy, although that hadn't stopped her from kissing him before she managed to escape.

Their next encounter had been months later in Windhelm after she had been attacked in the market. Ulfric had heard about it and invited her to his court. There had been some verbal sparring between the two of them which had left her even more intrigued to know the jarl better. In public, Ulfric had been a most proper host, but in private he had been full of flirtations.

At the time she had thought he had genuinely been interested in her. After all, they both shared the rare ability to Shout and knew what life on High Hrothgar was like. They were both surrounded by people and yet felt alone.

In truth, Ulfric had manipulated her for his own gain in the war. He made sure she was seen with him publicly and had spread rumors of bedding her after asking her to spend the night when in truth they had slept innocently. She had found out after she had retrieved the Jagged Crown, an important Nordic artifact and had overheard a conversation between Galmar and Ulfric.
It had hurt to hear the truth of his feelings for her, but it was nothing compared to the cruel laughter they had shared as they discussed her as if she was nothing more than a useful pawn. Her rage had caused her Voice to break, something that had taken years for her to regain any semblance of control so her thu'um did not activate if her emotions were swayed.

In fact, it had been after the last time she had visited High Hrothgar. Cicero had followed her here when she had retreated here for meditation. Her temper had gotten worse and worse, and she had lashed out violently at her Keeper. Cicero hadn't cared though. He knew her place was at the Sanctuary with the Brotherhood, with the Night Mother, with him.

Hecate gasped as she realized something. "Master Arngeir, what have you heard about the Civil War?" she asked, knowing the answer, but needing to ask anyway.

"We have heard nothing," he answered disdainfully. "We are men of peace and have no dealings with such things. Even then, there has been no one here since your friend came to visit you years ago. Why do you ask?"

"No one has told you about Ulfric?" she asked.

"What about Ulfric?" Arngeir replied.

"I'm sorry," Hecate whispered, not sure how to say it gently, "but Ulfric died three years ago." She twisted the enchanted silver amethyst ring on her left hand. Cicero had given it to her to help keep her safe before their mission. "It was the work of the Dark Brotherhood."

The Greybeard paled at her words, aging before her eyes. They both knew that to be a target of the Brotherhood meant your soul would not go to Sovngarde. Ulfric had been damned to the Void.

"Such is the price of a man of war," Arngeir said after several minutes. His voice rumbled with his sorrow. He bowed his head and turned away. "I hope you'll forgive me if I excuse myself to mourn my..." he paused. What word would he use? Friend, brother, son? "...as I mourn my student's death."

Turdas 25 First Seed 208 4E 3:00 PM

Elric was outside playing when he heard the great doors of the monastery open. Master Arngeir was standing in the doorway, looking very, very sad. Elric liked Master Arngeir the most out of the Greybeards because he talked to Elric. The boy knew that the others didn't because they couldn't, not because they were mean or rude, but it made it hard to get to know them.

The boy ran over to the old man and grabbed his hand, worry shining in his sky blue eyes.

"Is everything okay, Master Arngeir?" he asked.

The only answer he received was a sorrowful smile and Master Arngeir tapping his throat. Elric had seen the others do that when he had forgotten that they didn't talk and asked them a question.

It had been scary waking up some place strange, but Master Arngeir had immediately made him feel safe. Elric had heard about the Greybeards from Tilma and knew that they were very highly honored and respected by everyone. They hadn't even been scared when he made fire with his mouth and had even started teaching him other things he could say to make neat things happen!

Master Arngeir had explained because they were masters of the thu'um that Elric's accidental Shouts wouldn't hurt them unless he was trying to and he would never do that.
What could have made Master Arngeir so sad?

Elric looked to his right and saw a shadow standing inside the building. Although she was also wearing the same robes as the Greybeards, Elric recognized the Imperial woman who had been sleeping since he got here. She must have been the reason his friend was so sad!

As Master Arngeir made his way to the meditation tower, Elric stalked over to the woman. "What did you do?" he demanded. He didn't care if he was being rude. He wasn't going to let no Imperial hurt his friends! "Why did you make Master Arngeir so sad?"

The hood of her robes were down and Elric could see her long, black hair cascading down her back. There was something eerily familiar about her, but he didn't know what. All of the high ranking officers of the Stormcloak army had been Nords as well as the court and staff. Except for Delphine, all of the Blades had been Nords. It wasn't as if he knew any Imperials.

"I told him about your father," she said simply, not bothering to look at him. Instead she watched the old man entering the tower.

"What did you tell him?" Elric demanded. He was tempted to hit and kick the woman, but he had been too well trained by Tilma for such improper behavior. It didn't stop flames from flickering from his mouth. Good, maybe that would scare that cowardly Imperial.

"You'll need to get a control of that temper, little man," the woman said, clearly unimpressed by his display. "The sooner, the better too." She turned, gesturing for him to follow. "We should talk."

As the doors closed behind him, Elric could hear Master Arngeir's cry of anguish, amplified by his thu'um.

"Master Arngeir didn't know that your father had passed away," the woman said as she walked towards the kitchen. She paused. "I'm Diana. What's your name?"

"Elric," he answered promptly. "Elric Stormcloak."

"Of course," Diana chuckled. "You truly are your mother and father's son, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Elric frowned. Was the Imperial making fun of him?

"Just that your name is a combination of your parents' names," she explained. "'El' from Lydia and 'ric' from Ulfric. It's cute."

"I'm not cute," Elric pouted. "I'm a proud Nord and I'm going to be a warrior when I grow up."

"Hm, so I've heard," Diana replied. She gestured to the simmering stew pot. "Do you want some?" After he declined, she ladled a generous bowl for herself before snagging some bread. "I'm afraid things may have changed drastically for you."

The woman continued to serve herself as Elric climbed onto the bench that served as a seat for the table. "Did anyone explain to you that you're Dragonborn?"


"Breton?" Diana snorted. She shook her head before she continued. "Regardless, did anyone tell you what it means?"
"I can learn how to Shout really, really easily," Elric answered. He felt a bit put out by her response. He had been super smart to figure out the mean woman was a Breton despite her stupid mask.

"It also means that you have the soul of a dragon," Diana told him around a mouthful of food. "Other than the obvious fact you can learn Shouts just by someone sharing their knowledge of it, you can absorb their souls. This will extend your life. I don't know how much, but given they're immortal creatures, I can only assume a lot."

"Is that a bad thing?" Elric asked. He didn't think it was, but her tone indicated she thought so.

"Depends on the person, I guess," Diana shrugged. "Maybe since you're so little when you discovered this, it'll be easier for you. For me, I don't look forward to everyone I know dying long before I even start to age."

"But you're an Imperial!" Elric protested. "Imperials are cowards!"

Diana frowned. "I'm not sure I'm caring too much for the education your mother has decided to give you. There's more to Imperials than being cowards or Nords being brave."

"How would you know? You're just a dumb, filthy Imperial."

"Now I know I'm not liking your education so far," Diana growled. "I know because I'm Dragonborn too. I can teach you how to control your power. Or at the very least manage it better than you could on your own."

"My mommy could just teach me!" Elric said as he pounded his fists on the table. "She's the real Dragonborn! You're lying to me. You're a fakey, fake fake!"

"Listen, Elric, and listen well," Diana hissed. "You're never to talk to me that way. I'm Dragonborn just like you. FUS!" Her Shout sent the empty plates flying off the table. Elric flinched away from her, a bit scared of her now. When she saw this, her expression softened. "I'm sorry. I have a bit of a temper, something you'll learn about yourself in time. Dragons were meant to dominate and destroy and it reflects in our personalities by aggression."

"Even if you're telling the truth, why can't my mommy just teach me?" Elric demanded. He hated that tears were gathering in his eyes, but he was just a little kid and he had had a hard week. He wanted to go home more than anything.

"Because," Diana paused as she bit her lip, "because she hasn't learned how to control it yet herself. And because the Greybeards can teach you things she doesn't know yet. She learned from your father, but he wasn't a fully fledged Greybeard when he left here." She gently took Elric's hand. "And more importantly, there's no one you can hurt up here. If you get sad, angry, or even happy, your thu'um is going to activate. You don't have to worry about setting anyone on fire."

Elric cried harder as he remembered his friends in the Blades dying as they came to help him. It wasn't fair! He hadn't done anything wrong. Why was this happening to him?

"Because you're special," Diana said, making him realize he had spoken out loud. "You're going to have to stay here until you're an adult. Once you have enough control, you can decide to leave if you want, but in the mean time High Hrothgar is your home."

"And you're going to teach me?" Elric sniffed.

"When I can," Diana said. "I have other duties. My family doesn't know I'm here and they'll be worried about me. But I want to help you. We're alike, you and I. I remember how scared and lonely
I was when I found out. You don't have to feel that way either. But it'll mean we'll have to be friends—and you can't be calling me rude things like dumb and filthy. Friends?"

The Imperial held out her hand. After rubbing his snotty nose on a sleeve, Elric tentatively took it. The Greybeards were nice and he really like Master Arngeir, but it would be nice to have a friend who was closer his age. Maybe Imperials weren't all that bad if they could be Dragonborns too.

"Okay, friends."

Besides, she didn't look *that* dirty.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Elisif is feeling the pressure of her advisers constant interference and wonders how she can take control of her own life.

Chapter Notes

Some of the events in this chapter allude to events that will eventually happen in :iconblackwingededheaven: 's Age of Assassins, so minor spoilers there.

Loredas 30 Mid Year 197 4E 9:30 PM

It was a rare warm night in Solitude.

Elisif smiled as the ocean breeze lifted the hair off her neck and blew it back to flutter against her shoulders. She loved nights like this when the moons were full flooding the palace's garden with their twin light. The flowers that were normally vibrantly colored during the day became muted, darker colors while the pale petals were painted with the light red glow of Masser's light. In the distance, she could hear the crash of the waves against Solitude's cliffs and the discordant cry of seagulls.

"I like when you smile," Torygg, her fiance and soon to be future husband, said. She looked over and saw him grinning. It wasn't the usual smile of a politician, but that of a young boy. "You don't smile nearly enough."

"I'll do my best to do so more in the future," Elisif murmured as she looked down demurely.

"Only if it pleases you," Torygg insisted. "I would hate to think that you were only smiling for my sake."

"Shouldn't I be?" Elisif countered. "Isn't it the duty of a wife to please her husband at every chance?"

"I would only be pleased if you were truly pleased," Torygg said with all took her hand gently in both of his. "It would pain me to think that you were only smiling because you thought you were commanded to do so."

An uncomfortable silence fell between the two. Torygg cleared his throat as he awkwardly stepped away. He released his grip as he nervously fiddled with his vest.

"I don't know how you manage to wear that dress without freezing," Torygg commented, changing the topic after a few minutes. "I feel cold just looking at you."

The maiden was wearing an off the shoulder dress with no sleeves. It felt practically scandalous to be showing this much skin, but her traditional dresses had actually been too heavy to wear during the
day and her mother had insisted that it would only be proper to wear a style popular in Cyrodiil during her wedding tour. Elisif had been terribly conscientious at first, but after hours of being surrounded by congratulating nobles, she had been grateful for the cooler material and cut.

"It's not that bad," Elisif said, blushing. She could feel her skin heating at the thought of Torygg looking at her bared shoulders.

"I'm glad you're comfortable," Torygg said with a smile. "You looked lovely today."

"Thank you."


"Thank you."

"Elisif," Torygg said with a sigh. He turned so he was facing her, which surprised her. Normally, the two of them could barely to stand to look at each other. "Do you want to marry me?"

"My lord," Elisif said shyly, "it is my honor to be your bride tomorrow."

"No, I don't mean like that," Torygg interrupted. "Not because you have to. Do you want to marry me because you want to?"

She paused, not sure how to answer. They had been engaged since she was a child. Their parents had decided and it had never seemed up to debate to her. She was going to marry Torygg because she was supposed to. What other option was there?

Torygg bit his lip in frustration as he watched her reaction. He took her hands into his again as he stared earnestly into her eyes. Elisif blushed furiously, wanting to look down again, but not daring. She wasn't used to someone seeing her, seeing into her, and not just admiring her beauty.

"I remember the first day I met you," he said, his dark hair falling into his eyes. "You were ten and I was thirteen. I told my father, 'I'm going to marry that girl some day,' and he said, 'What if she doesn't want to?' I paused and said, 'Then I want her to find someone who she does and who will make her happy.' He rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs.

Elisif felt her heart beating harder in her chest. She wasn't used to someone who cared about what she wanted. All her life it had been, "Listen to your elders, do as you're told, your life has already been decided so don't worry about what to do and just do as I say."

"If there were such a thing as dragons, I would find it and do my best to kill it for you as proof of my love," Torygg continued. He swallowed nervously. "If someone were to challenge me for your hand, I would accept without hesitation and fight to the death. You deserve nothing but happiness. You should smile every day because it makes the world a brighter place. My world would be lessened without you by my side, but it would be nothingness if you were there and wished to be somewhere else."

A smile spread on Elisif's face, but instead of a demure curve of her lips or a wistful expression, it was a huge grin. She had never felt so happy before. She couldn't remember the last time someone cared about her opinion, about what she wanted. She tightened her grip in Torygg's hands.

"Yes! I want to marry you!" Elisif exclaimed. Happy tears clung to her eyelashes. She felt so full of energy that she couldn't stop from jumping up and down on the tips of her toes as she giggled.

"Thank you!" Torygg responded, tears in his own eyes. He swept her into his arms, making her feel
safe and warm in his embrace. He kissed her gently, but firmly making her feel beautiful and wanted in a way she never had before. "I promise I'll do everything I can to make it so you're happy. I promise I'll never make you cry."

It was the one promise he wasn't able to keep.

**Tirdas 1 Second Seed 208 4E 11:30 AM**

Erikur and Frothar were having a private conversation and it was making Elisif nervous. She didn't like the way the two men laughed together, how they put their heads together as they spoke, or the way Erikur seemed to linger too close to the young man.

She wasn't jealous of the attention her new fiance was receiving from the older thane. Honestly, it would have made her life a lot easier if the teenager decided he would rather marry someone else and elope or convince his father Balgruuf the Greater to cancel their engagement. She was ten years his senior and felt extremely uncomfortable about the thought of marrying him.

No, Elisif simply didn't trust Erikur. The man was too smug, too arrogant, and too quick to try to find an advantage that he could abuse. The Eight knew he had tried enough times to try to woo her after Torygg died-after a decent amount of time had passed, of course. And after Elisif's engagement had been announced, he had suddenly become very close friends with her future husband.

It was well known that Erikur was deep in the pockets of the Thalmor, or maybe it was the other way around and they owed him favors. Sybille had informed Elisif about rumors that Erikur was too close to the Thieves' Guild as well, and his influence might allow them to regain some of their stature in Solitude. At least he wasn't rumored to be connected to the Brotherhood, at least not by more than the vaguest rumors.

In reality, the only person in Solitude's court who summoned the Dark Brotherhood with any regularity was Elisif. The first time had been to do away with that foul murderer Ulfric Stormcloak. After that, she had been forced to keep summoning them to kill key Stormcloak officers. Gods knew Elisif had been tempted to try to strike the head of the snake off again by naming Lydia Stormblade in a Black Sacrament, but Diana Dragonborn seemed to have a soft spot for the traitor and Elisif couldn't stand the thought that Diana would somehow find out she had been the reason her former housecarl had been killed in the night.

She hoped no one would ever know her secret other than her confidante Sybille Stentor, the court wizard. Maybe it would have been safer, smarter, to have not shared what she had done with anyone, but it had been too big of a secret to hold on her own. Sybille was discrete and loyal, two qualities that made her the only choice when Elisif had decided to travel to meet the Dark Brotherhood's representatives years ago.

"What am I going to do, Sybille?" Elisif whispered.

"Follow your heart in matters of logic and your mind in details of passion," Sybille said just as quietly.

The jarl frowned at the wizard's response. Despite their shared secret, there were many times Sybille was Elisif's least favorite advisor. She rarely gave straightforward answers, preferring metaphors of blood and the arcane as well as vague responses such as the one she had just used. Diana's husband Cicero, during one of his infrequent visits, had teased the Breton once that she was covertly trying to get the position of court jester after a particularly cryptic remark. He had quickly stopped after a toothy grin from the older woman.
Frothar excused himself from his conversation with Erikur and walked over to the throne. Elisif had to refrain from sighing as he gave a smart bow. "Ready for our lunch date?" the teen asked with a winning smile.

"Famished," Elisif returned with a weak smile of her own. Falk Firebeard and Balgruuf had decided it would further help court morale if Elisif and her betrothed were seen together doing little things couples did. Their lunches were held in the gardens during nice weather with a quartet playing and servants jumping to refill their glasses and plates as needed.

Elisif found these meals boring and insipid.

"Sybille, do you think you'll be joining us today?" Frothar asked, including the mage.

"It's a bit too bright for me, my lord," she answered. "I think I'll retire to my room until this evening."

"She's an odd one," the teen mused as Sybille excused herself. "Sleeping all day and up all night. I don't know why you keep her about."

"Sybille has been here a long time," Elisif said tersely as she stood. "Her knowledge of both magic and court history is invaluable."

"Of course. I meant no disrespect," Frothar chuckled. A sad look crossed his face. "She's very different than Farengar Secret-Fire was."

The Whiterun court wizard had been killed during the attack on Dragonsreach when Ulfric's army took the castle. Given the wounds found on the body, it had not been part of the storming of the castle, but something personal. As far as Elisif knew, the murderer had never been found.

"I'm sorry," Elisif said, feeling embarrassed.

"It's okay," Frothar said with a shrug, clearly putting the matter behind him. "Times of war, lives lost, and all that, right? I was still a small boy when Farengar died. I barely remember him."

Elisif didn't disagree with his statement, but she privately felt that he hadn't been thinking of the court wizard's death, but rather his little brother's. Jarl Balgruuf's youngest son, Nelkir, had died a few months ago in an unfortunate accident. Some whispered that he had gotten in debt with ill reputed folk, others thought he had been involved in illicit midnight horse racing on the cliffs, and there were even some who said he had become a victim of the serial killer named Demon Mask.

Regardless of the truth, the boy's funeral had been very private, involving only his immediate family and Diana's protege Aventus Aretino who had been dating his sister Dagny and was a close friend of Nelkir's. Possibly the boy's only friend.

Frothar and Elisif's marriage was actually supposed to have happened during the spring to represent a renewal and rebirth, but Balgruuf had asked her if she would be willing to wait a few months for his grief to pass. He had looked so distraught and broken at the loss of his youngest child that she had immediately agreed, privately feeling guilt over her relief at her marriage's delay.

Neither of them spoke as Frothar offered his arm to Elisif and she accepted it. They walked silently out to the garden where a table had been set up for them ahead of time. The quartet, composed of first year bards, was already playing some simple tune.

"Could you please get an umbrella for us?" Frothar asked one of the servants. "The last time we dined out here, the sun was in my eyes the whole time and I was a bit burnt." The maid nodded and darted off to fill his command. Frothar smiled at Elisif. "Erikur says that it's not proper for noblemen
Elisif definitely didn't like Frothar interacting with Erikur. Torygg had never been afraid of the sun and actually enjoyed in getting a rare chance to meet the common folk as they worked their lands.

"I was thinking that we could have the lamb today," Frothar commented as he pulled chair out for Elisif. "The beef didn't sit well with me at all yesterday."

"I was more in the mood for some chicken," Elisif responded as she took the offered seat. "I don't mind if you want something different though."

"Oh, I'm sure, but Erikur thinks it's important that we show unity even in our meals." Frothar smoothed his hair back as he took his own seat. "Two servings of lamb stew, the black bread, and a bottle of Alto wine, please."

The jarl's knuckles turned white as she gripped the armrests of her seat. It was already happening. Frothar was taking over, doing what he wanted, ignoring her wishes. One of the main reasons Elisif had even agreed to an engagement with the much younger man was in the hopes he would look up to her for guidance. Instead he had turned his attention to a thane. Didn't he realize he was going to be prince-consort and not king?

A sharp pain ran through Elisif's chest as she thought of Torygg. He had never talked down to her, expecting her to be nothing more than a pretty trophy wife. He had valued her thoughts and opinions even if she only felt comfortable giving them in the privacy of their bedroom.

Seven years later and there was still a huge hole in her heart where Torygg had been. Almost at some point every day she wondered why he couldn't be there with her, letting her rule by his side instead of in his stead.

"Frothar, if a dragon were to attack here, what would you do?" Elisif asked, thinking of Torygg's proposal to her in this very garden.

"I would send a squad of our best troops to deal with the beast. That's what they're for, after all." The boy was lazily fanning himself, the little bit of sun already making him uncomfortable. "Or summon Diana Dragonborn if she could be found. It is her job to eradicate the monsters."

"What if someone were to challenge you for my hand?" Elisif asked, expecting to be disappointed.

"Refuse their claim," Frothar scoffed. "I don't see any reason to fight like uncivilized Forsworn against someone who has no right to claim your hand. You already promised it to me. It would be like someone coming into my house and trying to take away my furniture."

Lovely, she was equivalent to a couch.

"What about love, Frothar?" Elisif asked, feeling defeated. "Do you love me?"

"Love?" Frothar laughed, missing her hurt look. "Fair Elisif, I admire you for your beauty and strength of heart, but despite our lovely meals together, I don't know you to love you. Maybe some day, but I don't think it really matters, do you?"

"Shouldn't we marry for love? Aren't we Nords who follow our hearts because life is short and who knows when Sovngarde beckons?" Elisif countered.

"Maybe love is for lesser blooded men and women, but we have a country to worry about," Frothar responded, waving his hand. "I'm sure we'll have some sort of affection for each other as we grow to show signs of having been outside. He says it looks too common."
older, but love seems like a silly pursuit. Who has time for love when there is honor and glory in the name of the Empire to pursue?"

Elisif felt her face flush with anger as she took in the spoiled child. His hands and face were soft and white from years of living in a palace and never working. He didn't even have the basic calluses of a beginner sword wielder.

Torygg had been considered weak by Ulfric and his cronies, but he had never neglected his martial training. He had never shirked his duties off to another or been afraid to let his heart chose when his head was supposed to.

"Where are you going?" Frothar asked as Elisif stood up quickly enough for her chair to tip over.

"I find I have no appetite," Elisif growled, deciding to let manners be damned as she turned to leave. "I think I'll retire to my room and rest."

Tirdas 1 Second Seed 208 4E 10:00 PM

"What am I going to do?" Elisif asked her reflection as she sat at her dresser. She sank her head into her palms. She hated the desperate whine in her voice. "What am I going to do?"

After her disastrous lunch with Frothar, Elisif had retreated to her room for the day. Falk Firebeard had tried several times to get her to come out and attend court, for appearance's sake if nothing else, but she had begged him off.

The strawberry blonde was tired and miserable, but if that had been all she would have dragged herself to her uncomfortable throne and done her best to look pretty as her steward attended to all matters of the court, General Tullius dealt with their army, and Erikur ruled the thanes.

But she had been crying, sick to death of this life. Sick of trying to be strong and failing over and over again. Sick of being without Torygg. Sick of wondering what her life would be like the next day when someone decided what was best for her regardless of what she wanted.

So, she had cried, leaving her face puffy and her eyes bloodshot, ignoring anyone who came knocking at her door.

Now she was trying to clean herself up at least a little bit. Today had been lost, but tomorrow would come as early as ever. She would be expected to be in court, being the face of the Imperial forces and jarl of Haafingar, but the grim reality that she was nothing more than a puppet dancing on everyone else's strings was bearing down on her.

"What am I going to do?" she asked herself again. Her jaw set as she glared at her reflection. She slapped her palm against her dresser's surface as she came to a decision. "I'm going to summon the Dragonborn.

Tirdas 15 Second Seed 208 4E 8:00 PM

"You're a hard woman to track down," Elisif commented.

"Some complain I'm harder to get rid of," Diana laughed.

"For someone who holds as much esteem as you do in my court, it shouldn't take two weeks to track you down when your jarl wants your presence," Elisif scolded mildly.
"Who says you're my jarl?" Diana challenged. "Last time I checked I was sworn to Balgruuf the Greater."

"And yet his land is taken from him," Elisif countered. "Held by your former housecarl."

"Did you summon me here to just fight with me?" Diana asked, placing her hands on her hips. "It doesn't seem like you, my lady."

"No," Elisif replied, shaking her head. She gestured for the Dragonborn to walk with her into the gardens. The two women walked among the fragrant flowers bathed in the moons' lights making them different from their day selves. "No, I do not wish to fight with you, Diana. I wish to set right wrongs that have been going on for too long."

"I've stated several times that I have no interest in joining the civil war efforts," Diana said stiffly. "I'm sorry that Lydia chose to ally herself with the Stormcloaks, but that was her right and choice. I may have been her thane, but she was still a free woman by my understanding of your laws."

"That is true," Elisif said softly. "It was Lydia's right to choose regardless how the rest of us felt about it. But I'm not here to talk about her specifically. I want to talk to you and your loyalties. You've been in Skyrim for seven years now. You're no longer some newly arrived foreigner who has no vested interest in this land's problems. You've helped us time and time again, aiding the common people, becoming thane, being the Dragonborn. I think it is time for you to join the Legion's cause in ending this war."

"I appreciate your thoughts, my lady, but I would prefer not to," Diana laughed lightly. Her tone indicated that she was trying to lighten the mood and was not mocking Elisif. "I'm happily retired as a hero and wish to spend my days pursuing my own personal interests."

"Diana, would you kill a dragon for me?" Elisif asked abruptly.

"Seems a little bit of an unfair question," she answered with a smirk, "given that I'm the Dragonborn."

"And if someone were to demand my hand?" Elisif pressed.

"If it was unwanted, I would fight in your name, you know that," Diana answered, her expression confused. "What is this all about, Elisif?"

Elisif didn't bother with the last question. She already knew that Diana would pick love over fame or money. She just hoped that the Imperial would understand what the jarl was about to tell her. She took in a deep breath. "I'm desperate, Diana. I've been desperate for a long time. Ever since Ulfric Stormcloak murdered Torygg, I've been trying so hard to take his place and rule Skyrim in a way that would make him proud."

Hot tears filled her eyes, but she was afraid to brush them away less her voice break. "Instead of taking charge and being a jarl, I've let my advisors rule for me until they have forgotten that I am their jarl and they are my servants. I thought I was being wise by letting those with experience lead, but instead I was a coward."

"Elisif," Diana said softly as she placed her hand on the taller woman's shoulder, "there's no shame in depending on others."

"I didn't just depend on them!" Elisif cried. "I let them take over everything while I was playing monarch. I really am just the puppet the Stormcloaks say I am. Or I was...." She took another shaky breath. "There have only been two important decisions I've made my whole life. The first was to
marry Torygg for love. The other...the other was to summon the Dark Brotherhood to kill Ulfric Stormcloak."

"Oh, Elisif," Diana whispered. At least there was only sympathy in the Dragonborn's voice and not revulsion. Elisif didn't think she could have stood that.

"It didn't stop there," the Nord admitted, glad to finally explain it to someone else. "I used them time and time again when it looked like the Legion was going to lose the war. I had assassins kill the officers of important forts."

"And you didn't ask them to kill Lydia because of me?"

"That's right," the jarl nodded. "I knew that despite your estrangement you cared for her. I thought if we took enough territory back that she would finally surrender, but the Stormblade has dug her heels in deep. I can't keep cutting off the limbs of the beast when the head is there for the taking."

"What are you saying?" Diana asked, her eyes narrowing.

"The time has come for me, for Solitude, to take Whiterun back. It's the only way I can live my life the way I want and not by the command of my counselors. I've decided that I'm not going to marry Frothar Balgruufson, but in order to do that I must show that I have the power to rule on my own and not depend on the alliance of marriage to another." She turned to Diana. "I figure I have one of two ways to do this. Either you can decide to swear your official allegiance to the Imperial Legion and help me take down Lydia Stormblade, or I will summon the Dark Brotherhood one last time to end her once and for all."

Diana's expression turned dark as she crossed her arms. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"No," Elisif shook her head, "I am merely telling you my intent. You are free to chose to continue to be a neutral party in this war and allow your friend to die dishonorably, or you can help me free my land and earn a pardon for her."

"What stops me from going out there and telling everyone what you just confessed?" Diana pressed.

"Nothing," Elisif admitted. "I knew it was a chance when I told you, but I had to so you could understand my desperation-and what I'm willing to do to end all this. My soul is already damned, but hers doesn't have to be."

"I won't kill her," Diana insisted. "I will not allow you to command me to kill my dearest friend."

"I wouldn't ask you to," Elisif said, a great weight lifting from her shoulders. "But I am asking you to help me end this war, and you're the only one who can fight her on her own terms."

"Are you commanding me to join your army?" the dark haired woman asked.

Elisif hesitated, not sure what the Dragonborn was wanting. She bit her lip before answering. "Yes. Yes, I am commanding you to officially join the Imperial Legion, in my name as Jarl of Solitude and in Jarl Balgruuf's name. You must do your duty to your home and country, Diana Dragonborn!"

To Elisif's surprise, Diana broke out into a huge smile. "I had wondered how long it would take you to decide to grab the reins," she laughed. "Okay, you've convinced me. I think your demands are fair, and the reward is the only thing I would ever want from you." She extended her hand to Elisif. "Shake on it and consider it a deal struck."

Elisif laughed a bit as she performed the awkward Imperial tradition of shaking hands over a bargain.
That was one hurdle dealt with. Now she just had to convince Balgruuf to not secede to the Stormcloaks when she broke her engagement.

Middas 16 Second Seed 208 4E 9:00 AM

"Thank you for meeting with me, Jarl Balgruuf," Elisif said. The two were standing on one of the parapets that looked out to the ocean. "I appreciate you giving me your valuable time."

"It seems to me that you've been in several clandestine meetings lately," Balgruuf commented mildly. "You've been busy. Busy enough that you can't make time for meals with my son."

"Ah, yes," Elisif said, using her prettiest expression. "I can't get anything past you, can I?"

"I like to think not, but I doubt I'm that good," Balgruuf said. "Let's be blunt with each other, my dear. There's enough intrigue in the court without adding more between us. I've always enjoyed your forthrightness most of all your qualities, so please don't disappoint me by jerking me around."

"Very well, then," Elisif said, clearing her throat. "I will not be marrying your son."

"I understand why you're nervous. He is very young and hasn't had a chance to prove himself yet, but I think the two of you will come to like each other in time."

"Liking each other isn't good enough for me," the female jarl sniffed. "I am a daughter of Skyrim. We live in a harsh land. We are a people who find love and grab it when we can because we don't know what tomorrow holds. I've had love once and maybe the gods will smile enough on me to love again someday. It might even be Frothar. But for now no one holds my heart and as such, no one will have my hand."

"Bold words, lady," Balgruuf said, his mood darkening. "You would rather dishonor our agreement and insult me by rejecting the child of my blood?"

"No, I would never show you such rudeness, my friend," Elisif said softly. "Solitude keeps her promises. The agreement was the ruling family of Haafingar would marry with the rightful ruling family of Whiterun."

"You're suggesting a substitute?" Balgruuf grunted.

"Yes," Elisif said, hoping her voice sounded steady. "You've asked me to be blunt with you, so I will. The truth is that Frothar marrying me will label him as a milkdrinker the rest of his life. A man may marry a woman older than he, but usually only after performing a feat of strength. Which I don't need to point out, your son hasn't done. Even if an arranged marriage wasn't an issue, the age difference with Frothar being so young will always keep him in my shadow if we wed. He would never able to take honor or glory in his own name. It's not fair to him and it's not fair to you."

"He's a tough boy, I'm sure he would survive," Balgruuf said dryly, seeming intrigued by Elisif's demeanor.

"Maybe personal ridicule," Elisif responded casually. "but what about attempts on his life? Not every political murder is done using the Brotherhood. Ulfric Stormcloak claimed until his dying day that he fairly and legally killed Torygg in a duel. If your son is viewed as weak, he would risk duels by men much more experienced and bloodthirsty than he. He might win a few, but in the long run sooner or later, he would die on someone's blade."

"That's a cruel example given my family's recent loss," Balgruuf said.
"Yes, but all the more the reason we need to take into consideration Frothar's abilities to deal with men who are used to the rule of the sword instead of diplomacy," Elisif said.

"You seem to have an answer for everything," Balgruuf snorted. He leaned against the parapet and looked at her intently. "So, I have to wonder, what's your ultimate solution regarding my apparently frail Frothar?"

"I have a very pretty cousin who's about his age," Elisif said, hoping that Balgruuf wouldn't be outraged by her proposal. "He knows her already and they seem to like each other personally enough."

"Jordis?!" Balgruuf exclaimed. "The housecarl assigned to the Dragonborn's household?"

"Housecarls marry their lords frequently enough that it wouldn't be a problem if I were to transfer her to Frothar," Elisif explained, her voice gaining confidence as she went. "He's old enough he should have his own housecarl anyway and it would be a sign of honor if Haafingar were to be the one responsible for his safety. Since she's already martially trained, she would have the right to champion him at any time without any loss of face. This would allow Frothar more time to focus on political intrigue instead of swordsmanship. And, frankly, he seems more inclined for such talents. I feel it would be a waste to push him towards any other interest."

"And what about the original intent of the engagement?" the jarl of Whiterun asked. "We wanted to show a united front to raise morale to take my home back. Can we do that with a secondary engagement?"

"Yes, when I include the fact that Diana Dragonborn has finally added her sword to our cause," Elisif said firmly. "She will fight Lydia Stormblade using her thu'um. I have every confidence she will prove the stronger of the two as she is the real hero of legend and not some fake."

"You seemed to have given this a lot of thought," Balgruuf admitted. "This wasn't a spur of the moment choice, was it?"

"No, my lord," she said. "I was stuck on some points for a long time, but I would never lightly ask this of you simply for myself. I feel this is not only for my good, but for the good of all of Skyrim."

Silence enveloped them as Balgruuf digested Elisif's words. It was hard, but she waited patiently to give him time to think. She'd had months to consider all of this while he had only mere minutes. Pushing him might unravel all of her work.

"I'll agree to your new plan," Balgruuf said finally with a nod, "but only on the understanding that I'll be giving my axe to your rule. Not Falk Firebeard and not to General Tullius. If we're going to be a unified Skyrim, it has to be from within and with its true rulers. Do you agree?"

"Aye, I do," Elisif said, her face feeling like it was going to crack from the grin on her face.

"So, what are we going to do now?" Balgruuf asked.

"We're going to war."
General Tullius was normally a patient man. It was an essential quality for any career military man. It was common to have to wait weeks, months, or sometimes even years for the right set of circumstances to fall into place. Something as simple as establishing supply lines to something as delicate as information about where the enemy would be was enough to keep soldiers sitting on their haunches practically indefinitely.

War was literally a lifetime for some. Boys and girls became men and women under the Legion's training. And they became corpses just as easily. After more than forty years of serving as a Legionnaire, Tullius had a long list of soldiers who had died under his command, and he would be damned to Oblivion if he added to it recklessly.

But today was different. Tullius paced restlessly in his personal tent, stopping frequently to fiddle with the different colored flags and pieces representing different squads. Legate Rikke watched him with bemusement as she stood at attention.

"You're as twitchy as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs," she commented dryly. "I don't think I've ever seen you like this in the seven years we've worked together. What's so different about today?"

"It's the Dragonborn," Tullius sighed. When he didn't continue, Rikke made a "go on" gesture. "Diana has never been known as what most people would call reliable."

"I thought you liked her, sir," Rikke chuckled.

"You can like someone as a person just fine without having confidence in them," Tullius remarked. "I think she's a damn fine woman, an amazing diplomat, and extremely charismatic, but…"

"As far as being a hero goes, she's quite mediocre?" Rikke supplied.

"As always I appreciate your bluntness, Legate," Tullius said with a smirk.

His Legate wasn't wrong though. Despite earning great acclaim for defeating Alduin the World-Eater seven years ago, Diana Dragonborn had not done anything noteworthy since then. Most of her appearances were to make a show at dinners and balls as a guest. She never hosted from her home, and in fact rarely spent any time there. If there had been any real adventures of her exploits over the years, she had managed to keep them amazingly low profile.

Sometimes Tullius wondered if Diana wasn't just some commoner from Cyrodiil playing at being a noble. If he hadn't seen her use her Shouts, he never would have believed her to be the Dragonborn. No wonder the Nords supported Lydia Stormblade over her. That woman had actually lead armies, done great deeds, had been seen at Ulfric Stormcloak's right hand, and had trained others how to be Voice Masters. It was hard to compare the petite Imperial favorably to the Nordic warlord.

"I just hate having an entire army waiting on the whim of one woman," Tullius admitted.
Greater by her side. The jarl had not made many appearances since his youngest son's death. He looked ten years older than the last time Tullius had seen him, but his eyes were bright and seemed to take in everything around him.

"Skyrim has been at war long enough," Elisif had declared. "Brothers killing brothers will no longer be tolerated."

"And what do you have in mind?" Thane Erikur had asked, earning a chuckle from the courtiers.

"I have recruited Diana Dragonborn to our side," Elisif had continued, ignoring Erikur's jab. "She will personally duel Lydia Stormblade on the plains of Whiterun for control of the city."

"That's ridiculous!" Erikur's cry was met with the approval of several murmurs.

"And why would you say that, my dear Erikur?" Diana asked as she ascended the stairs leading to the court. Cicero walked beside her, his arm looped through hers as usual, but his grin was anything but typical. Tullius would not want to be the cause of that dark smile.

Erikur must have gotten the same impression because he swallowed hard before commenting. "It's just that you don't have a reputation as a fighter, Lady Diana. No one can refute your archery skills, but it is well known here that Lydia Stormblade was once your housecarl. She was your sword and shield. Not only is she better trained, but she'll know all your weaknesses. Can we really risk the balance of the war on a fight between the two of you?"

If the thane's doubts offended her at all, the Imperial gave no indication. Her small smile was amused at best, pitying at worse. "We all change, Thane Erikur," she said gently. "Lydia couldn't Shout when we traveled together, so I don't doubt I'll have a few tricks for her."

Cicero, on the other hand, had no compunctions on being as polite as his wife. His loud laughter was clearly mocking as he skipped up to the Nord. "Maybe Lord Erikur wishes the glory for himself, hmm? Maybe he's afraid that there's a shift of power on the wind and he'll be blown away? Cicero knows that he's been blown away on more than one occasion by dear Diana's Shouts."

As the petite redheaded Imperial spoke, he danced around Erikur, flapping his hands about. The court laughed at the small man's words, but Tullius noted that Diana looked a bit concerned. He had noticed how her spouse had referenced to himself in third person, a strange quirk Cicero did sometimes. The general decided to step in before Cicero could rip into Erikur worse and hurt the man's pride. It was pretty much agreed he was a skeeze, but he was rich and had connections in some very important places, so it wouldn't do to make an enemy of him.

"Jarl Elisif, I respect your desire to save lives, but this is really a decision that should have been discussed with me before making it official," Tullius said. He repressed a sigh as Cicero continued to caper around Erikur.

"I disagree, General Tullius," Elisif said. "I am not only jarl of Solitude, but I am the Imperial representative for Skyrim until an official moot is held to pick the new High King or Queen. It is well within my sovereign rights to choose a champion for any just cause." She turned to address the crowd. "It was, after all, the main premise of Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak's defense."

"Nordic law is for Nords," Erikur protested. "No offense, Dragonborn, but you're not a Nord. How can you represent our interests?"

"Excuse you?" Tullius started.

"The Dragonborn's blood transcends that of race," Elisif overrode the general. "The Greybeards has
recognized her as one of their own and have named her Ysmir, the Dragon of the North."

"The same name they bequeathed Tiber Septim?" Erikur scoffed. "When did this supposedly happen?"

"One of the times I visited them," Diana said casually with a shrug. "The whole thing was in dovahzul, so I didn't really catch it at the time. Master Arngeir had to tell me later."

"You really expect us to put all our trust on a Dragonborn who can't even speak the dragon language?" Erikur laughed. At least until Cicero had his arm wrapped around the Nord's throat and a dagger point pricking his skin.

"You try learning a new language as quickly as Diana has," he hissed, "and we'll see how well you do."

"Cicero, that's enough," Diana commanded. "Thane Erikur has a right to his opinion, no matter how wrong he may be."

"You're lucky that my lady is more patient than I," Cicero sneered before skipping back to Diana's side. His smile turned sweet as he kissed her hand. "You can't blame me for wanting to protect your reputation, my dear."

The Dragonborn merely snorted as she squeezed his hand in reply.

"I think everyone is forgetting something here," Elisif said, drawing the attention back to herself. "This is not a debate or request. I have already made arrangements with Diana Dragonborn and sent a courier to Windhelm to await Lydia Stormblade's reply. Unless she is as much a base coward as her lord was, there will be a duel and it will be between the two thu'um masters. Whoever is the stronger will determine the future of Skyrim."

The court as a whole grumbled their acknowledgement of Elisif's decree, but only Diana and Cicero looked pleased about the matter.  

**Middas 28 Mid Year 208 4E 1:00 PM**

"She's late," Tullius muttered as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I hate when people are late."

"The wagons never run on time, sir," Rikke replied.

"You're just full of useful sayings today, aren't you Legate?" Tullius snapped.

"They help me feel better, sir," Rikke said mildly. "And it seems more productive than pacing incessantly."

"I should have you replaced for insubordination," Tullius said.

"You wouldn't last a week without me, sir," Rikke grinned.

"The Dragonborn has been sighted!" a scout called out. He ran past Tullius's tent and towards the one marked as Elisif's. "The Dragonborn is coming!"

General Tullius and Legate Rikke bolted toward the crowd gathering around Diana and Cicero. The Dragonborn was dismounting from her black mare while Cicero's roan gelding danced impatiently, uncomfortable with the mass of people.
"I thought you were going to be here at sunrise," Tullius demanded as he grabbed Cicero's horse's bridle to calm it.

"Sorry, I'm not a morning person," Diana apologized with a grin.

"We left out late because Diana wasn't done with crafting her new armor and then Cicero had to make sure to make his sweet goodbyes last night," the redhead offered as he dismounted.

"Not confident in your wife's abilities?" Rikke asked dryly as she took the reins from Tullius.

"Oh, I'm very confident," Cicero laughed. "I just like to have a chance to make love to her whenever I can."

"Cicero!" Diana reprimanded as she tugged on his hair. "Remember our talk about things we say in mixed company?"

"No!" Cicero giggled.

Diana sighed. "Sorry, he's just really excited about this whole thing. He gets giddy." She hefted a full bag up for Tullius' notice. "Where can I go change into this?"

"You're not going to wear your dragon scale armor?" Tullius asked as he pointed to the appointed tent for the Dragonborn.

"No, it wouldn't be wise," Diana shook her head as she headed to the tent. "Too many are used to it being Lydia's armor now and it could only serve as confusion. Especially if she were to get it away from me somehow."

"We could have provided some Imperial officer's armor," Tullius said.

"The thought is appreciated, but it's too heavy for my fighting style," Diana said. "Don't worry. I'm a trained blacksmith. I know what works best for me." She winked and disappeared into the tent without another word.

"I hate surprises," Tullius muttered, "and she seems to always be full of them."

"Oh yes, that's why Diana is so much fun!" Cicero declared. "It's also why Cicero must constantly keep an eye on her lest she get into trouble!"

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Tullius said. He put a hand on Cicero's shoulder to guide him away. "I have a job for you."

"Oh, does it involve teasing and taunting? Please say yes!" Cicero begged as he clapped his hands together in glee.


---

Middas 28 Mid Year 208 4E 2:00 PM

"Diana?" Cicero called gently. He paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the interior of the tent. "The others are starting to wonder how long it's going to take you to change."

The Imperial slowly walked further into the tent, mindful of the shadowy furniture. Despite his best care, Cicero still managed to bump into various chairs and table edges. Why was it so dark in here?
A slight creak drew his attention, as well as his dagger, to one of the corners of the tent. Squinting, Cicero barely made out a figure crouched on the floor with her back to him. "Diana?"

"Yeah, it's me," she answered, her voice cracking on the last word.

"What's wrong?" Cicero demanded, his stomach cramping with concern. He crouched by the Listener, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. He was furious. "Did someone hurt you? Tell Cicero and he'll stab, stab, stab them!"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," Diana said, her voice cracking. She scrubbed at her face as she tried to wipe the tears away. No matter how fast she rubbed, the tears just fell faster.

"Please, please, please don't cry!" Cicero wailed. He wanted to desperately dance or caper or something, but the room was too dark and cramped. Cicero gasped when he realized that it reminded him of Hecate's closet back where she would hide if she was upset or needed to think.

"Sorry, sorry," Diana said. "It's... I just feel so awkward and useless. It's like I'm just playing a role here for all these people. This isn't me. I'm going to go out there in this new armor and they're going to be disappointed because it's not what they want. They want a big damn hero who wears the symbol of the Dragonborn or the Imperial insignia."

"Cicero likes your new armor," he said as he ran his fingers along the new leathers she had crafted. Although there were some implications of dragon scales in the design, it was a simple leather suit that covered Diana like a second skin. Cicero easily recognized it as the shrouded leather design, albeit without the black coloring or Dark Brotherhood handprint. "It suits you and it's a type of leather you can move in easily."

"I know, I just..." Diana ran her fingers through her hair and making it stand on end. "I can't shake this feeling of dread. Like I'm forgetting something or doing something wrong. So much depends on me today and I really don't want to be here. I don't want this confrontation, but Elisif really backed me into a corner."

"She did." Cicero chuckled remembering all the times Aventus had complained over the last several weeks about Hecate's "recklessness" regarding this fight and all the times she defended it so vehemently. "Do you want to know what I do in situations like this?"

"What?"

Cicero leaned forward so his lips were barely touching Diana's ear. "I say 'fuck 'em all' and do what I want."

Diana giggled at his scandalous words. She tried to cover her mouth to stifle them, but it only made her laugh harder. "That sounds like you."

The Keeper was glad to see his Listener a bit more cheerful. He kissed her forehead. "You know sweet Cicero is right. It's one of the privileges of being an assassin. We live by our own rules and ignore anyone else's." He looked at her with mock stern. "You wouldn't be here if you hadn't wanted to on some level. You know this confrontation with Lydia has been brewing since you reclaimed your armor from her."

"Yes," Diana sighed, "but I'm worried that someone will recognize that I move like Tragedy does. Elisif is too clever by half. And there could always be someone in her court, or Tullius or even Rikke."

"And if they do, so what? Elisif is in too deep to expose us. And how would she without revealing
her own involvement? And even if someone did, it just means we won't have to go to any of those gatherings anymore."

"I thought you liked the balls since you get to dance," Diana countered.

"Hm, yes, but Cicero has his own balls Hecate can dance on," Cicero said, enjoying the snicker that line earned. "And their food is quite bland and boring. Better to drink our own wine and eat our own meat in the comfort of our own home."

"Thank you," Diana said, giving Cicero a kiss on the cheek. "I needed that."

"I know," Cicero said as he pulled her to her feet. "Now, come, come. You've been keeping your standard bearer waiting long enough.

"My what?" Cicero couldn't see Diana's face, but he was pretty certain she was glaring when she used that deadpanned tone.

"Oh yes," Cicero smirked. "General Tullius has arranged for you to have a standard bearer to accompany you on your parley with Lydia before your big fight."

It took everything in Cicero to keep his face straight as Diana stormed out of the tent to find Tullius. She didn't even notice the glimpses they earned from the army as they stormed among them towards Elisif's personal tent.

"What is this about a standard bearer?" Diana demanded when she found the general going over his plans with Rikke and Elisif. "You know I don't want any innocent bystanders nearby when Lydia and I duel! Our Shouts might catch them by accident."

"Why am I not surprised he didn't tell you who it was?" Tullius remarked dryly. "New armor looks good by the way. Not what I would use, but it suits you."

Diana paused, blushing and flustered from the compliment. She turned to Cicero as Tullius' comment sunk in. "It's you, isn't it?"

"Hehe," Cicero chuckled, waving his hand in agreement.

"It's a bad idea," Diana said, turning back to Tullius. "Lydia hates him. His presence alone is going to infuriate her."

"That was why I picked him," Tullius said. "Let's be honest. You're not going in to negotiate anything. This is the prelude to an all-out fight, and it is my experience that the more angry an opponent is beforehand, the worse they fight. She's going to lose some of her composure-and that's good for you. Besides, you have to have someone bear your standard, and Cicero here knows how your thu'um works better than anyone else. The two of you have been together a long time now. He'll be able to avoid anything that accidentally comes his way."

Cicero was surprised to see Diana's expression soften instead of her continuing the argument. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "It's true there's no one else I would want by my side." She sighed. "Fine, let's get this over with."

A page brought Cicero his gelding. If anyone noticed Shadowmere emerging from nowhere, they said nothing. After mounting, Cicero was given a pole that sported the Imperial ensign with a smaller version of Diana's personal crest. He placed it firmly against his stirrup so it wouldn't slip while they rode. The two flags fluttered in the summer breeze, making the two dragon forms appear as if they were taking flight.
A crowd had gathered at this point to see the hero off to battle. The jarls and thanes were all there with various members of their court. Too many of them had nervous or doubtful expressions as they looked over their petite champion.

"Fight to bring honor and glory, Dragonborn," Erikur said, obviously insincere. Cicero wanted to smash his smug, fat face in.

"I don't see any reason to start now," Diana countered. Before anyone could respond, she kicked Shadowmere into motion.

The duel was being held in a shallow hollow. Both armies were stationed on the border, giving them both a full view of the fight and plenty of space to avoid the effects of the *thu'um*. Normally a duel would have been held in a public place where witnesses could see each blow as well as hear accusations between the fighters. Cicero suspected that both Diana and Lydia were grateful that the awesome power of their Shouts made that second part impossible.

Lydia was already waiting for them. Her standard, the bear of Eastmarch, was already planted beside her. She was wearing Ulfric's old wolf cloak and carried nothing more than a plain iron sword.

"I had imagined you in steel plate armor," Diana commented as she dismounted and handed her reins to Cicero. "It's hard to imagine you in only cloth. You seem incomplete without a shield too."

"I have no need for armor against a weaker foe," Lydia scoffed. She pointedly did not acknowledge Cicero's presence as he planted the Imperial flag and pulled back to give the women plenty of space.

"People change, Lydia. I would have thought you would understand that better than anyone else."

"Sabre cat can't change her spots," the Nord countered, holding her sword at the ready. "And the frog is a fool for trusting the scorpion."

"My, Ulfric certainly was an influence on you," Diana laughed. She held her hands out, weaponless, beckoning to her former housecarl. "Please, we don't have to fight. Let's talk. It's long past time we did."

"What would I possibly have to say to an honorless, cowardly, soulless assassin?" Lydia asked darkly.

"Maybe nothing, but there's plenty you should hear," Diana said, ignoring the jabs. Cicero wondered if it was because she knew Lydia was trying to anger her into making a mistake or if there was no reason to get angry at the truth. "Ulfric was not the man you thought he was. He manipulated you, used you."

"You have no right to even speak his name!" Lydia spat. She slashed her sword in anger. "Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak was a great man. A visionary! He cared about his people and Skyrim and refused to stand by while the Thalmor made us their slaves. And you...you killed him. Not for any great cause, but for gold!"

"I tried my best to take Ulfric alive so he could be held accountable for his actions in a court of law!" Diana clenched her fists as she relived the moment in her memory. "I foolishly thought that at the time that I didn't agree with his policies, but he had the right to defend himself before being given trial. I see now that I was wrong."

"What are you babbling about?"

"Ulfric was using the Voice to slowly manipulate people to his will," Diana explained. "I didn't
realize it at the time because I wasn't trained well enough, but as the years have passed, I've found that you don't have to do a Shout in order to use the thu'um. We both know what happens when our emotions get away from us. It's part of the reason the Greybeards are isolated from the world. But another reason is that it would be too easy for any Voicemaster to abuse their power. Haven't you ever been talking to someone and you put a bit more passion or conviction in your voice for emphasis and they changed their mind about something? Haven't you ever just pushed a little harder for something you wanted badly and people did what you wanted?"

Cicero watched as Lydia's face pale as she took in Diana's words.

"How long did Ulfric keep you in his court, whispering against me, against Whiterun, against the Empire?" Diana pressed. "How often did he casually mention the idea of another Dragonborn? One who could save Skyrim? And what a shame it was that I was gone?"

Lydia clapped her hands over her ears and shook her head in denial. "No, no!"

"And before you knew it, you went from a special guest to one of his most trust advisors?" Diana stepped forward, narrowing the gap between the two women. "He would just happen to 'accidentally' touch you all the time? Little things like your hands bumping or your hips touching? Nothing ever inappropriate, but somehow intimate? He would take you up to the parapets and tell you heart-wrenching stories of his years as a Greybeard in training or as a Legionnaire? Always when the sky was its most beautiful with the stars and moons? You knew that you were just his lieutenant, but you felt that there was a chance for something more?"

"How do you know all this?" Lydia demanded.

"Because it's what he did to me," Diana said softly. She looked down in shame. "The only difference is that I found out before we slept together. Galmar and he were having a good laugh at my expense and I just happened to overhear them." She sighed. "Sometimes I think Ulfric never planned on bedding me. He used it as an unspoken promise because he knew I was interested."

"You lie!"

"What?"

"You're lying! This is all one big lie to trick me," Lydia said, her words coming too fast and her breath too quick. "Ulfric would have told me that you never slept together if that had been the truth. He knew that I thought that and…"

"...and he knew how happy it made you to have done better than me?" Diana finished. "That I might have dallied with him, but you actually caught him?" The two women were almost in touching range. "I understand. I do. It was hard for you always being my second. I wasn't the hero you wanted, but Ulfric was. But you can't live your life trying to be someone else, Lydia."

"I am not doing that!"

"You are."

"No, I am not!" Lydia shouted. Her Voice cracked on the last word, pushing Diana back a few feet. "I'm not going to listen to your lies any more! Enough talk!"

The Nord threw herself forward, thrusting her sword directly at Diana's heart. The petite Imperial dodged out of the way avoiding the strike. Lydia immediately swirled around, continuing her assault with a flurry of blows.
Cicero realized he was holding his breath as Diana sidestepped each blow. He wondered why she hadn't still drawn her blade when he realized she wasn't wearing one! The Listener had intentionally gone into the fight without a weapon! At least, Cicero hoped it was on purpose, but that was still better than forgetting it back at camp like a total fool.

By Sithis, he really hoped it was intentional.

"Fight me, coward!" Lydia's blade struck against an outcropping stone, sending sparks everywhere.

"Stop calling me that!" Diana demanded. "Why do you have to be so stubborn?"

"Why do you have to be such a cowardly liar?" Lydia spat.

"I have never lied to you, you hypocritical bitch," Diana snapped, her patience coming to an end. "I tried to be nice about this, but you just have to make it into a bitchslap fight, don't you?"

Cicero cheered aloud when Diana changed from a defensive posture to an attack one. Suddenly she was the one darting forward pushing Lydia back as she assaulted the taller Nord with dozens of jabs and hand slaps. Lydia's attempts at blocking were all casually swatted aside with the flat of Diana's palm as the Imperial stepped into her reach.

Lydia stumbled as each strike slammed into a pressure point. Her expression was one of confusion as she tried to figure out how to counter Diana's unarmed style. Cicero was pretty certain she had never fought anyone who knew the Akaviri technique, but she was probably also just as shocked to see Diana fighting back. Cicero still remembered her early days as an assassin and how bad of a melee fighter she had been then.

"You really made this a lot easier for me by not wearing armor," Diana said, her expression dark and focused as she grabbed Lydia's arm and threw the bigger woman over her hip. "I was scared breathless that you would be covered head to toe in impossibly thick plate mail and I would be forced to try to find the weakest joints. Instead, in your arrogance, you came here wearing his clothes, fighting his battle, repeating his words. Did you think you would make me feel guilty? Did you think I would hesitate because you thought he was my lover? All you did was piss me off!"

Lydia lashed out a kick, catching Diana directly in the face. The Imperial grunted in pain as she stumbled back, holding her cheek where Lydia's boot had caught her. Blood dribbled from her nose.

"I honor his memory and the memory of all who have fallen in this war!" Lydia yelled as she scrambled back, holding her cheek where Lydia's boot had caught her. Blood dribbled from her nose.

"I honor his memory and the memory of all who have fallen in this war!" Lydia yelled as she scrambled to her feet.

"You've become nothing but an echo," Diana sneered, wiping the blood away with the back of her hand. "You repeat Ulfric's words without thinking of your own."

"You want words? I'll give you words! **FUS RO -!**"

Cicero ducked for cover as Lydia released her Unrelenting Force Shout. He looked for Diana's form to go flying backwards, but a split second after Lydia started her Shout, Diana responded with her own. **FUS RO DAH!**

The two *tha'ums* collided, creating a sonic force that imploded on itself. Cicero held his arm up in time to avoid getting grit in his eyes as the two Shouts dissipated.

The two Voice Masters breathed heavily as they circled each other. The second Lydia felt she could Shout again, "**YOL TOOR SHUL!**"
Once again, a split second behind Lydia, Diana screamed back the same shout. A huge gout of fire smashed between them, bellowing outwards before falling in on itself. Even from this distance, Cicero could feel the heat of their words against his face.

"IIS SLEN NUS!" Waves of ice crashed against each other.

"FO KRAH DIIN!" Bursts of frost crystallized everything in its path before annihilating each other.

"FUS RO DAH!" "FUS RO DAH!" "FUS RO DAH!" "FUS RO DAH!"

Each time Lydia would lead with a Shout, but Diana was able to counter it each time. Both of them were breathing heavily as they were taxed by the force of their Shouts.

"Go on, throw your Shouts!" Diana taunted. She gestured as if she welcomed anything Lydia could throw at her. "There's nothing you know that I don't know as well. By the Eight, I probably know more than you."

"Just because of a fluke!" Lydia screamed. She dropped her sword to throw a punch at Diana. Apparently this duel had turned into a full brawl. Lydia had none of Diana's grace or training as she wildly flailed at her opponent, but her punches were much stronger. Diana was forced to throw her arms up to block the heavy attacks. "Because you got lucky! Like you always do. You never had to try for anything. You just have fame, fortune, and love fall into your lap by existing. It's not fair!"

"Life's not fair. Anyone tells you anything else and they're lying to you or trying to sell you something." Diana grabbed Lydia's arm, twisting it painfully upward. "I'm sure you think I'm going to lament that I never asked for any of this, but I really want to believe that my actions for the last seven years prove that I don't care about any of that stuff. I'm not going to apologize for who I am! I like who I am now in a way I never felt before. I'm not going to let anyone shame me for the life I chose to live. Especially not you!"

The Dragonborn rolled onto her back, pulling Lydia with her. She thrust her foot up into the Nord's midsection, kicking her directly in the diaphragm as she vaulted her up and over. Lydia landed heavily on her back as Diana stood over her, still holding her arm.

"Let me go!" Lydia demanded. She tried to kick at Diana, but she had no leverage and missed.

"Surrender!" Diana countered.

"Never!" Lydia drew in a deep breath. "There's one thing I can do that you can't."

"And what's that?"

"This. JOOR ZAH FRUL!"

Cicero watched as Diana's face froze in horror before screaming in pain. She released Lydia, reeling back as she held her sides as if she was afraid her guts would fall out. She shuddered as she fell to her knees.

The Nord laughed as she regained her feet and picked up her sword. "It seems there is an advantage to being just a normal mortal after all. For all your power, you're just a dragon at heart. A filthy, mindless beast that only cares about destruction."

"Surrender, Lydia," Diana coughed, still hunched over in pain.

"Are you serious? I have you on your knees. You're defeated, Diana. Or Hecate. Or whatever you
call yourself nowadays. I won. And your damned dragon soul is going to the Void with the rest of the murderers."

"Surrender and I'll tell you how to find your son."

Lydia's face went dead still at Diana's offer. She started shaking, her knuckles white around the hilt of her sword. "How dare you! How dare you try to use my poor, dead baby against me!" She narrowed her eyes. "I knew you were a monster, but I never imagined you would stoop this low! Did you really think I would let you use the location of his body as a bargaining tool?"

"No, you don't understand…" Diana screamed as Lydia slashed the tendon in her upper arm.

"I was just going to behead you, but that's too good for you," Lydia snarled. Even from here Cicero could recognize the madness in her. She stabbed Diana through her shoulder. "I'm going to kill you slowly so all your admirers can witness you bleed to death. It's a better death than you deserve." She smiled evilly. "Even Delphine gave Paarthurnax a fast death and she despised him."

"What?" Diana asked, her eyes wide with shock.

"I actually had Paarthurnax as a prisoner," Lydia explained coldly as she cut Diana along her leg. "Delphine killed him after you destroyed Sky Temple Haven. She ran her blade into his heart as he was bound helplessly before her."

"What!?" Diana repeated as she tried to struggle to her feet.

"Oh, no. You're not going anywhere. I'm not letting you run away again," Lydia said. "JOOR-"

Before Lydia could finish Dragonrend, Cicero tackled into her side, knocking her away from his Listener. "Cheater! Filthy, lousy cheater!" he screamed as he punched her in the face. "Cicero thought the Nord would fight fair and with honor, but she cheats instead!"

"Back off, clown, this doesn't concern you," Lydia hissed.

"FUS RO!" The Shout pushed Cicero back enough that Lydia was able to grab his shirt and thrust him off her. "Then again, I've been waiting a long time to get revenge with you too. I'm going to make you regret the day you darkened Breezehome's step with your shadow."

Cicero's knees weakened as Lydia did a one-two punch in his gut followed by a backhanded slap. He grabbed her shoulder to support his weight as he leaned against her. He laughed weakly as he drew his blade. "Nords, always so serious. All Cicero ever wanted to do was put a smile on your faces."

Before Lydia could react, Cicero's ebony blade bit into her face, cutting through the flesh, leaving a gaping wound that widened her mouth grotesquely. The jester turned towards Hecate, expecting her to scold him for scarring her friend, but what he saw instead wiped the grin off his face.

The Dragonborn was standing there, her face blank except for her eyes which were too wide. Cicero could see little pinpoints of black, but otherwise the whites filled her face. He had seen Hecate angry over the years. Everything from slightly annoyed to genuinely vexed. He would never forget the mad look on her face when she had beaten him senseless after they discovered Lydia was the False Dragonborn.

That anger paled in comparison to this.

"Delphine...did...what?!" Diana repeated. She opened and clenched her fists over and over. Cicero could see that her nails had dug into the flesh enough to make herself bleed.
"DELPHINE...DID...WHAT?!"

Overhead the clear sky was starting to go dark from huge storm clouds swirling in. Cicero was pretty certain that it was not natural. His survival instinct kicked in as he let go of Lydia.

"Run," he whispered.

The Keeper took off at full speed towards Shadowmere, following his own advice. Part of his brain was screaming that he needed to grab the Listener, to keep her safe, to protect her, but he knew that she was the danger this time. There would be no protecting her now.

Thank Sithis, Shadowmere was coming towards him. There was no way he would have been able to reach her, not by the screams Hecate was making behind him.

Cicero threw his hand out and snagged the demonic horse's bridle as she wheeled around. The momentum threw him up into her saddle and he clung to her mane with all his strength. "Fly, Shadowmere!" he screamed, but it was unnecessary. She was already bolting towards the Imperial camp.

"RUN!" he screamed, not sure if anyone heard him as the wind blew his words away.

It didn't seem to matter. The camp was in chaos as soldiers broke rank and started to run away. Elisif sat on her mare, staring down at Hecate in shock. Cicero shook his head. Of course a civilian would stand there like prey. She was lucky he liked her so much. If it had been anyone else, like Erikur, Cicero would have left them to their foolish fate.

"Run!" he repeated as he grabbed her horse's reins and pulled her along with him. The silly creature slowed Shadowmere, so Cicero pulled Elisif on with him. Once the jarl was secure, he let the mare go to run on her own.

"What is going on?" Elisif screamed as she held onto Cicero for dear life.

"Diana is pissed," Cicero said simply. "And we need to get as far away as possible."

"DELPHINE DID WHAT?!"

The sky cracked above them. It was as if the world's loudest thunderstorm had happened directly above them and it only lasted a few seconds. A wave of energy shot down from the sky, hitting exactly where Diana was standing. The resulting shockwave washed outwards. Huge chunks of soil and rock flew everywhere.

Cicero could see tents flying into the air. Even this far away, Shadowmere was almost knocked off her feet as Hecate's unintentional thu'um caught up with them. The Keeper held hard onto Solitude's jarl as Shadowmere weaved under them.

Another bolt of energy hit them as Diana kept screaming. Cicero could make out a few words, but for the most part they seemed like guttural screeching. The Imperial was violently reminded of a hurricane he had seen once. That storm had been a gentle breeze compared to this unnatural force.

Cicero was pretty certain that he was scared. He didn't remember being scared in a long time. Maybe when he was alone in Cheydinhal and he wasn't sure he was protecting the Night Mother. But even that fear was more of failing his duty than any personal concern. So, yes, part of him was screaming in fear at this force he hadn't even imagined in his darling Listener.

The rest of him was screaming with laughter. He even noticed that it was bubbling out of his mouth
and being ripped away by the wind. What amazing power! What chaos! Cicero wasn't afraid of
dying. He had never feared that. And what a way to go! With hundreds, thousands of people as his
Listener gave in to the darkness within.

By Sithis, if it was his time, take him now!

"I think it stopped," Elisif whispered, tugging at his sleeve. Her eyes were as wide as a child's.

Cicero reined in Shadowmere and looked back the way they had came. Everything was in
desolation. No sign of the camp remained intact. Tents, horses, people were scattered to the four
winds. The ground was cracked and torn as if the gods themselves had struck it.

"What was that?" Elisif whispered as she slid to the ground. There was no reason to be so quiet, but
Cicero thought she had the right of it nonetheless.

"That was Diana proving her thu'um was stronger," he said simply.

"Gods protect us."

"I don't think the gods had anything to do with this," Cicero smirked.

"Where are you going?" Elisif panicked as Cicero urged Shadowmere forward.

"I'm going back to Diana," he said simply. His Listener needed him and Cicero was going to be
there for her. Just like he always was and always would be.

He found her kneeling in the field. Honestly, he was surprised that she was still conscious after
everything. Lydia was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the cyclone had carried her far away never to be
seen again, but Cicero doubted it. It would be too convenient.

Cicero offered his hand to Diana. "Your work is done here. Let's go home."

She wearily climbed on behind him. "Not as long as Lydia is still out there," she sighed as she leaned
her head against his shoulder. "But it'll have to do for now."

Cicero squeezed her hand before turning north towards home.
Chapter 23

Tirdas 17 Sun's Height 208 4E 5:00 PM

No one had seen the Listener for weeks. Except for the Keeper and the Night Mother. Hecate still kept to her duty of Listening, but as soon as she had recorded the Night Mother's words, she would return to her room, avoiding everyone.

Cicero would tend to her as gently as he did his Matron—rubbing her back, bringing her food, taking the mostly untouched trays away, brushing her hair. For the most part she laid on her bed face down sobbing or curled up in a miserable ball.

"What are we going to do about her?" Siltal wondered. The various members of the Brotherhood had gathered in the eating area to discuss their High Elf fiddled with the pile of contracts that had been collected. "We can't let her go on like this."

"Why not?" Meena responded. "Hecate has always supported a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy for the sake of everyone's privacy. Leave her to her mourning or guilt or whatever reason she's secluded herself and let her work it out on her own. That's what Meena thinks."

"Meena, you have the empathy of a sponge," Barri sighed. She played with a curly lock of brown hair as she leaned on the dining table with her elbows. "You are literally the last person I would go to for advice on what to do with my life. Why in Nirn do you think we would listen to you on how to deal with the Listener?"

"Watch your tongue, Nord," Meena hissed, extending her claws, "lest you don't have it any more."

"Tempers, ladies," Cicero reprimanded mildly. "Regardless of any crisis we may face, we must always mind the Tenets." He leaned back in his seat at the head of the table so he could place his heels on its surface. He steepled his fingers under his chin. "Unfortunately, the Tenets are intended to keep us from falling apart, not bind us together. We are already bound by blood, what more would we need as a Family? But it is the spilling of blood of one Hecate cared about that has drawn her away from us."

"So, what do we do?" Siltal repeated. "What can we do?"

"We do what we always do," Cicero grinned. "We offer vengeance. And you will do your job, dear. You'll Speak with her."

"Me?" she squeaked.

---

Tirdas 17 Sun's Height 208 4E 6:00 PM

"Go away."

Siltal pulled her hand back from the door she had just knocked on and cradled it against her chest. The Listener's voice was muffled, but thankfully did not have any traces of the thu'um lingering when she gave her command.

"I'm sorry, Keeper," Siltal said, looking down. "The Listener has given a command. I must obey."

"Hardly," Cicero sniffed. "Hecate is not always the Listener, especially when she gets like this. She
is commanding with her feelings, not her head." He put an arm around the taller woman's shoulders. "Now, Cicero always speaks as the Keeper. Well, except when he doesn't, but Cicero will always let you know when that is true. Besides, the Keeper is equal in rank to the Listener, so my command comes first." He winked with a toothy grin. "Don't worry. She doesn't bite. Not unless you're her sweet Cicero."

"Are you sure about that?" the High Elf swallowed nervously. She liked Hecate, she did. The woman had recruited her personally into the Brotherhood. The Listener had even promoted her to the vaulted position of Speaker little more than a year later. But for the most part, Siltal didn't know the Imperial very well.

"Which part?" Cicero teased as he threw open the bedroom door and pushing her in. "That she won't bite or that Cicero and Hecate are of the same rank?" His mocking laughter followed her into darkness before being cut off as the portal swung closed.

A silvery ball of glowing light formed in Siltal's hands as she cast a magelight spell. She took in the condition of the room with growing dismay. It wasn't dirty thanks to Cicero's meticulous care, but it definitely had a feeling of despair. It was an aura Siltal had seen time and time again when she went to meet with a client.

Hecate was lying face down on her bed. Her black hair was a dark cloud around her, making it impossible to see her mood. She was wearing a simple sleeping shift, making her look smaller and more vulnerable than usual.

"Listener?" she called as she advanced slowly to the large bed against the far wall. "Um, I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you and I know that you said to go away, but Keeper Cicero said that I had to talk to you. Well, he said I needed to Speak with you, but I guess it's the same thing."

Silence fell between the two of them. Siltal nervously fiddled with her hands as she tried to decide what to do next. At least the Listener wasn't Shouting at her. Sithis knew she had seen her do it to Cicero often enough.

"Cicero is stubborn like that," Hecate finally said. Her voice sounded rough and disused.

The Speaker sat on the edge of the bed and took the Listener's hand. "It's been almost three weeks, Hecate. You haven't talked to any of us at all. No one knows why you're so upset. Is it because of Lydia?"

"No," Hecate sighed. She sat up, pulling her hair back into a rough ponytail. Her face was red and blotched. She accepted a washcloth that Siltal offered her to wipe her cheeks. "As much my world has been turned upside down by Lydia Stormblade, it's not her directly that has me so upset."

"Was it because of all the destruction your Voice caused in your duel with her then?" Siltal ventured.

"That..." Hecate sighed, her voice wavering. She breathed for a few minutes to regain her composure. "That was not pleasant, but thankfully there were minimal injuries thanks to the armies being so far back from the fight."

"Then what?"

"It's what caused my reaction," Hecate said. "Lydia told me... She told me that Delphine killed my friend Paarthurnax."

"Who was that?"
"He is... was a dragon," Hecate admitted. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she broke down into sobs again. She buried her face into her hands. "He was so sweet. He would never hurt anyone or anything for any reason. He taught the Greybeards the Way of the Voice and did everything he could to make sure that Alduin would be stopped from destroying the world."

"How did Paarthurnax know Alduin?" Siltal prodded. She gently touched Hecate's shoulder.

"They were brothers. Paarthurnax had been Alduin's right hand during the Dragon Wars of the ancient times. Towards the end, before the Heroes of the Ages learned Dragonrend, he realized that their ways of domination and destruction were wrong. He turned to a way of peace and enlightenment. He's lived at the Throat of the World since Alduin was thrown through time when they used an Elder Scroll against him." Hecate rubbed her face with the back of her arm.

"Paarthurnax was good. He knew his nature wasn't the best, but he strove so hard to be good. He never hurt anyone. Delphine had no right!"

"But Delphine is a Blade! She's by definition a dragon slayer," Siltal pointed out. "Don't you think she was right to do what she thought was just? What about all of those people he either killed or help kill when he was a monster? Don't those lives matter at all?"

"Those people would have been dust long ago with or without his intervention," Hecate scoffed. "Delphine never met him, she didn't know him. She only wanted to kill him because of what he was born as, not what he had done or who he had become. There had been a huge chip on her shoulder ever since I told her she could go to Oblivion when she demanded that I kill him. She demanded! The Blades are supposed to follow the Dragonborn. They're supposed to obey. But she was so twisted up from what the Thalmor did to her that she couldn't stand the thought of not being in control." She scowled bitterly. "How she must have enjoyed killing him. Poor Paarthurnax. They had him prisoner and she butchered him."

The Listener jumped up and started to pace back and forth, her hands waving in the air. "Paarthurnax was going to be my one constant. The person I knew who would always be there for me. No matter how old I got or how much things changed, he was going to be the wise dragon out there in the world try to teach his ways to the others. He was going to bring revolution to the dragons that didn't involve slaves or wars. And even if it didn't work out, I knew he would never give up and sooner or later we would be sitting on High Hrothgar. He would be trying to teach me a lesson with his broken dovahzul intertwined, and depending on the Era I would understand more and more of it."

"But now he's gone and it's unfair. It's unfair and just! It just makes me sick to think of the unrighteousness of it. And I feel so powerless! I want to kill her with my bare hands, but I can't because she's fled back to Cyrodiil. She's out of my reach. Even if I knew where she was, even if I could find her, she's too far. I can't forsake my duties here. I have to put the Brotherhood first because that was the promise I made, but it's so hard. So very hard for me. I can't let this go. No matter how much I cry and grieve, I just keep thinking of his kind face. How could anyone just cut down such a gentle and good creature as Paarthurnax?"

"Then do something about it," Siltal suggested.

"What? What can I do?" Hecate wailed. She flopped back onto the bed's edge.

"Give her the gift we grant to those who deserve it," Siltal pushed.

"I can't just send an assassin after her," Hecate countered. "I've thought about it. I seriously considered it, believe me. But it would be personal, and it wouldn't be right to use the Brotherhood's resources for a non-contract. Especially one that not involves going across the border and needing to deal with highly trained warriors specialized in stopping assassins. The success rate is abysmally low
and survival about equally bad."

"If you don't feel right about asking your Siblings for a favor," Siltal said, "then you'll need to turn to your Mother."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying appeal directly to the Night Mother," the High Elf said. "Make it into an official contract and ask for Sweet Mother's Kiss."

"Can I do that?" Hecate wondered.

"If not you, then no one."

---

**Loredas 21 Sun's Height 208 4E 10:00 PM**

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear." Hecate stabbed the iron dagger into the skeleton effigy, sweat running down her face.

Gathering the items needed for the ritual had been simple enough for a cult of assassins living above a catacomb. A skeleton of a long dead Sister, flesh and heart taken from a sealed urn, Nightshade bought from Babette's alchemy store, an iron dagger collected from the armory, and enough candles to make a circle around it all.

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear." The Listener had been chanting for four days now. Her arm ached from the repeated action of stabbing the effigy and her throat was sore from repeating the summoning over and over.

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear." The dull thud of the dagger sinking into the flesh and heart gave her a morbid thrill. The thought of a similar dagger piercing that bitch Delphine's chest over and over, her face of pain and horror, brought a grim smile to Hecate's lips.

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear." It was tiresome, dark work, but it felt good too. It felt good to be doing something to gain vengeance instead of feeling powerless. It make her feel like she had control instead of being helpless. This was the gift the Night Mother gave her children who prayed to her. Hope-dark, bloody hope, but more than they had before.

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear." No longer was she curled up in her room, crying, feeling like her chest would rip in half with pain thinking of the loss of her friend. No longer was she trapped between duty to her Family and duty to her friend. She was finally able to take action. Even if the Night Mother decided her request was unworthy, the attempt was satisfying in its own right.

"*Daughter, come stand before me,*" the Night Mother's otherworldly voice echoed through the catacombs.

Never one to keep her Matron waiting, Hecate scurried to the Night Mother's hiding place. It was a small chapel shrouded in darkness. Cicero and she rarely needed candles or torches down here any more, wishing to house the Night Mother in the void of shadow.
The Unholy Matron's coffin was open when Hecate entered. The Imperial thought it was closed earlier, but the thing had a tendency to swing open when its occupant desired.

"One of my favored has prayed to me," the Night Mother whispered in her breathless, ethereal voice. "This has not happened in a long time. Usually a contract of blood is not needed for my dark children. Why have you needed to pray for one to extract revenge for you when you are so capable, my daughter?"

"Delphine of the Blades," Hecate whispered. She kept her eyes downcast as she knelt before the Night Mother. "She slew my friend, Paarthurnax. She is out of my reach. I can't leave my Siblings or you, Mother, to pursue her to the ends of the earth as she deserves."

"A Blade killing a dragon is not a new thing," the Night Mother mused. "Why should this concern me?"

"He was bound and helpless. He was her prisoner and had done nothing to provoke her."

"How do you know this? Were you there to witness?"

"No, but I knew Paarthurnax. He was peaceful and kind," Hecate insisted. "She killed him in retaliation to something I had done, or she thought I had done. She did it to hurt me to get revenge."

"So, you wish an act of revenge in response to another act of revenge," the Night Mother said. Her normally emotionless voice sounded almost amused. "What would stop this cycle of death, daughter?"

"Me."

"How? You admit that she has gone beyond your reach," the Night Mother responded. "What power do you have?"

"The power you grant me. The same power you grant all your children," Hecate said. "Delphine knows who I am. She thinks she has beaten me and as such she thinks she had beaten the Dark Brotherhood. The Breton wished to hurt Hecate by killing Diana's friend. She laughs at us while she hides safely in one of her Blades Temples, thinking herself safe. No one is allowed to be outside our reach. The Brotherhood's hand must be able to reach all of Tamriel."

"You provide good points," the Night Mother mused. "Still, nothing is free. Are you willing to pay the price for your revenge?"

"I am," Hecate promised.

"Thus begins a contract bound in blood."

---

**Mondas 28 Sun's Height 208 4E 10:00 PM**

The common area was full to the brim; every active member of Dawnstar Sanctuary had been called home. The large dining table had been pushed against a far wall and all the chairs put away. All except one. The Listener sat in a high back chair reminiscent of a throne with Cicero to her left and Siltal to her right.

Despite wearing her motley, or maybe because of it, Hecate looked particularly deadly tonight. Her face was as solemn as the ebony Tragedy mask that hung at her side, clipped to her belt. Cicero's grin was much wider than usual, his bright eyes darting back and forth as he took in all his Siblings.
The two of them may be dressed as jesters, but in Skyrim a jester meant death nowadays. Five years of butchering the Stormcloaks' best had earned them a reputation that was already being immortalized into song.

A low thrum of chatter filled the room as Siblings gossiped among themselves for the reason they had been called home. It was rare for a message from the Listener, but she had never called them all home like this. Delicate missions could possibly be jeopardized or even forfeited by leaving, but the message had been clear. "Come home."

"Everyone is here, Listener," Siltal said, looking up from her roster. "Well, everyone currently stationed in Skyrim."

"Thank you, Speaker," Hecate said softly, biting her lip. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest, and she prayed that her Voice wouldn't break during this. She had a lot to say and she needed to be able to depend on her ability to speak. When she stood, the room fell deathly silent, every eye on her.

"Children of Sithis, thank you for coming home so quickly," the Listener said, her voice carrying clearly enough that even those in the back could hear her. "I'm sure that most of you know by now that I was called to duel against Lydia Stormblade about a month ago. I'm also sure that you know how that particular thrashing turned out."

Sinister laughter filled the room. There had been no sign of Lydia since that fateful fight. Her forces were scattered, almost literally blown to the four winds, and Whiterun now belonged to the Imperials, ruled by Balgruuf the Greater again.

"During that duel, I fought under the name Diana Dragonborn. Although I tried my best to leave that life behind, it has pulled me back time and time again. I refuse to allow another to use my name for her own purposes," Hecate continued. "And as Diana, I discovered that a dear friend of mine was murdered by Delphine of the Blades." Her blue eyes swept over her dark Family, drawing them in. "And as Diana, I have mourned his death. But I am also the Listener of the Dark Brotherhood! How is it that the Listener should be in a position that a death goes unavenged?"

An angry outcry filled the room in response to her question. Hecate tried to take in all of their reactions, but she found her gaze drawn back to one in particular. Aventus, who stood almost a head taller than the rest of the room, met her gaze from his place in the back. His face was calm, but his eyes were cloudy. Except for Cicero, he was the most devoted Sibling in the Sanctuary.

"I'll tell you why! It is because the Black Hand is not yet back to full strength! It is because the Dark Brotherhood's grasp does not choke all of Tamriel, shrouding our enemies in fear. We have taken Skyrim and we have claimed High Rock, but what about the rest of the world? How can we allow Cyrodiil to remain untouched by our dark grip?"

The mood turned ugly as whispering broke out among the assembled assassins. By now, Aventus was moving towards the front of the room. To be closer to her, to hear her plea better.

"I called you all together as the Listener, but I stand before you as a petitioner of our Dark Mother. I have performed the Black Sacrament, and the Night Mother has answered. She has granted me a chance to have revenge through you, my siblings."

Silence returned as the audience took in this new bit of information. Hecate could see the question in their eyes, "The Listener appealed to the Night Mother?"

"I have gifted ten thousand septims to the Dark Brotherhood's coffers as part of my deal with the Night Mother," Hecate continued. Her mouth was dry, and she found that she had to stop to
swallow. It felt like a huge lump in her throat. She was getting to the part she dreaded the most. "I will pay whomever gives me vengeance another ten thousand septims. That's not the best part. There's a bonus, and it is the reason I've called all of you here today."

Now Aventus was at the front of the crowd, his gaze pulling her in so he was all she could see. Despite their differences since the trip to Markarth when Aventus had declared his love for her, Hecate still cared for the boy deeply. She had always tried to keep him at arm's length because she didn't know how to deal with children. Despite her best attempts to not to make attachments with the boy, Aventus was her favorite next to Cicero.

"This is a highly dangerous mission," she continued, her voice starting to waver. Hopefully they would think it was because of her anger. "Delphine is not only a hardened warrior, but she was trained to protect the Emperor against assassins."

"For all the good it did him!" someone catcalled, drawing a laugh from the others.

Hecate smiled, nodding her agreement. "True, but she was still trained to know our ways. She's been a Blade for a long time. She was also hunted by the Thalmor for a very long time too, meaning she's extremely paranoid and distrusting. She'll also have started rebuilding the Blades yet again, meaning she'll be surrounded by others trained in how to detect assassins. I have no doubt that she will have found one of the Blade Temples and made her base there."

For a brief moment, Hecate could feel Cicero's fingers brush against hers. He knew what the Night Mother's price was, and he knew how hard this was for her.

"Whoever goes will need to be able to infiltrate a group of highly alert warriors. This will not be a short mission. You're looking at possible a year, maybe two, in order to get close enough to Delphine in order to complete the bonus. I don't want her just dead. I want her to suffer. Torture at the hands of one of our brethren is not normally something I would wish on anyone, but then again I would never need to ask this of any of you. I would gladly spill her blood myself if I weren't needed here. So, I need someone who can earn her trust long enough to crush it before her. I want her to suffer."

Others were looking towards Aventus now. He had earned an excellent reputation among the Brotherhood. Not only had he joined at such a young age, but he had spent several years training in the Bard's College. If anyone could get smoothly past the Blades, it would be him. He was perfect for the job.

"You must be willing to pay my price if you want my blessing for this contract," the Night Mother had told Hecate.

"I'll gladly pay it," Hecate had responded immediately.

"You must declare this contract openly and you must accept whoever volunteers first," the Unholy Matron had declared. "This is too personal for you to choose who goes and who doesn't. Allow whoever speaks first."

Hecate suspected that the Night Mother knew more about how events would turn out than she tended to let on. Her chest hurt to think that she was about to send Aventus away again, further than ever before and into a nest of enemies. The idea that he would die while gone made her want to withdraw her request, but her desire for revenge was too strong. She would have to trust in her Sibling to succeed despite the odds. Gods knew he had survived worse in Solitude when he battled Demon Mask.

"In return for such dedication to the Brotherhood and surviving such great odds, I am offering as a
bonus the position of Speaker. Given the terms and great risk, I am only going to allow one of you the privilege of avenging me and earning a spot in the Black Hand. Whoever volunteers first will be awarded the contract and if they fail, then Delphine of the Blades will have proven that she is outside of our reach. I will not send Sibling after Sibling after her in blind vengeance. There will be only one chance at this. Who will represent the Dark Brotherhood?"

Hecate's heart plunged as she watched Aventus open his mouth. Of course he would volunteer. He was young and had to think himself invulnerable after everything that had happened since he was ten. And he still wanted to prove himself to her. He wanted her to notice him as a man, not as the boy she saved twice. What better way than this impossible task?

"This one volunteers!" Meena called out. She waved her paw in the air as she pushed her way to the front of the room. "This one will be the Listener's knife in the night!"

"What?" Hecate stammered.

---

**Mondas 28 Sun's Height 208 4E 11:45 PM**

The public area looked so much bigger with everyone gone. There had been noisy discussion as the assassins talked about the surprising turn the Listener's speech had taken before breaking into small groups to catch up in the initiate's sleeping quarters or going off to drink in Dawnstar.

Now only five remained-Hecate, Cicero, Siltal, Meena, and Aventus. They were all seated around the dining table, placed back in its usual spot, with hot drinks steaming in front of them. Meena looked as pleased as the proverbial cat while Aventus looked furious. Hecate looked stunned and Siltal couldn't blame her.

It had been clear that Hecate had thought Aventus was going to take the contract. How it must have shaken the poor Listener when the Khajiit had stolen it literally from under the youth!

"Meena, are you sure you want this contract?" Siltal asked gently. The High Elf held the details of the contract in her hands. "It's going to take a lot of hard work. You heard the Listener. You're looking at years before you'll get close enough to the contract to earn the bonus."

"Yes, yes, this one is certain she wants the contract!" the calico purred as she reached for the rolled up scroll.

Aventus snagged it away at the last second. "I hate to be this blunt, but I think the situation calls for it. Meena, you've never done a hard day's work since you joined the Brotherhood. You rarely do your share of the chores without convincing someone else to either do them for you or help with you barely contributing at all. You spend most of your free time down at the taverns drinking. Before becoming an assassin, you were a thief, so I highly doubt you worked an honest day in your life."

The Imperial waved the scroll under the Khajiit's nose. "So why in the Void should we trust you with what is the biggest contract we've received since the Emperor? Jarl Elisif didn't even give us this much coin for Ulfric Stormcloak."

"Well, she did make an exclusive long term contract with us against the Stormcloak army and made us her unofficial 'problems solvers'," Siltal pointed out.

"Not relevant," Aventus snorted. "The bonus is the real prize here, and we all know it. There's no way you're just going to waltz down there, kill Delphine, and just come back in two months. It would be an insult to not even try for the bonus. This involves real work. This contract needs
someone who can get to know people, know how to hobnob, be able to blend in, and to be noticed enough to be drawn into her confidence without tipping off who they really are. And that's not you!"

"You do not understand, boy," Meena said softly, her mismatched eyes not sparkling with mischief in the first time ever. "That is exactly why Meena must do this!"

"What do you mean?" Siltal asked.

"Meena is seen as a fool in Sanctuary," the Khajiit explained. "Ever since she failed to become Listener, the others treat this one as a joke. But they forget that the definition of fool has changed with our Listener and Keeper being the most deadly jesters in all of Tamriel." Meena's whiskers twitched violently. "Meena is told 'you have empathy like a sponge' and 'you're the last person I would go to for help', but if Meena is to some day be Speaker as the Listener has vaguely promised over the years, then Meena must be able to do these things. Meena kills well enough, but Meena does not have the patience to talk to others, to hear their words, to know their pain."

The Khajiit stared intently at Siltal, her slitted eyes making the High Elf uncomfortable. "Meena is not like Siltal or Nazir. She is not good at these things. But the only way to become good is to learn. This contract is perfect for Meena. Meena will learn how to play nice and get close and when she has done a good job, she will flay every inch of skin off the Breton making her watch as Meena makes shoes from it."

"Cicero likes! He likes it a lot!" Cicero laughed merrily at the Khajiit's description. He slapped the table. "Oh, how Cicero envies you, Sister!"

"But it was to be my contract!" Aventus complained. "I was going to volunteer."

"But you weren't fast enough," Cicero pointed out slyly, "and Mother's word is law. She knew it would cause infighting if she left it open, that must be why she told sweet Hecate what to do! Hecate can't give it to you even if she wanted. Not only must Mother be obeyed, but she would look weak in front of the others if she were to take back her word after such a grand speech. No, boy, you're stuck here for a bit longer."

"The Black Hand is not yet full," Hecate said finally. "There will be other chances, Aventus."

"Not like this one," he said sullenly.

"No, and for that I am grateful," Hecate admitted. She waved at the two Imperial men. "Be gone, both of you. I wish to speak to Meena as her employer now and neither of you have any business being here now that the matter of who is taking the contract is resolved. Siltal, as Speaker you may stay."

Cicero grumbled good naturedly before giving Hecate a kiss and skipping off to bed to wait for her. Aventus looked less pleased, but realized he had no ground to complain further.

"You better not mess this up," he warned Meena.

"I won't," she promised.

"We'll see," he scoffed before leaving through the secret tunnel.

"Don't mind Aventus," Hecate suggested as she poured new glasses of tea. "He's been irritable ever since he came home from Solitude."

"Aventus is exactly the sort of person Meena needs to be minding," the calico countered. She took
the mug into her hands and inhaled the steam. "He is a typical representation of how the Brotherhood sees Meena."

"I'm sorry you feel like you're in such a position," Hecate apologized.

"Don't be," Meena sniffed. "It's nothing that Meena did not earn. But this one has found a way out of her rut and she thanks you for it. Even if it meant great loss for you. For that Meena is sorry."

Hecate laughed at the Khajiit's awkwardness. Siltal had to admit that she really was trying. And it really was better than how she had acted in the past in matters of tact.

"Why does it matter to you? You never seemed to care what anyone thought about you before," Hecate asked.

"It mostly doesn't matter to Meena personally, but it does matter if Meena wants to have a position of authority," she said. "Meena is not happy being simply an assassin or a thief or another face in the crowd. Meena wants to be something more. Meena wants to be important. Like how Hecate and Cicero are important."

"Ambition will take you a long way, but your path is going to be a long one," Hecate warned.

"Meena is not afraid."

"No, I would never think that of you," the Listener laughed. She pushed the scroll and a bag full of septims to Meena. "When do you think you'll head out?"

"Now," the calico answered as she took the contract and stipend. The bells rang the midnight hour. "It is a new day and if Meena delays, others will take it as a sign that she was not as serious as she claimed. And maybe she will convince herself that it doesn't really matter and she likes sleeping in the sun more."

The assassins all stood as Meena tucked her scroll into her belt pouch. Hecate moved so she was standing next to the Khajiit. "I think I'll miss you and your troublemaking."

"Good, it is good to be missed." Meena's grin was toothier than usual.

"I look forward to discussing with you where you wish to be stationed when you return," Hecate said, shaking Meena's hand. "Save for Skyrim and High Rock, the world is yours to choose."

"It will be a good talk to have," Meena agreed. "When I return."

"Kill well and often, Sister."

"Always, Listener."

The calico nodded to Siltal before heading up the stairs. She stopped at the top to wave one last time before sprinting off to the Black Door. Meena had always traveled light. It was no surprise that she would have nothing here she would want to take with her.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Siltal muttered darkly.

"But satisfaction brought her back," Hecate grinned. "She'll be back. I know she will. If there's ever been one thing you can count on Meena for, it's that she always lands on her feet."
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Lydia is slowly recovering from her injuries from her fight with Hecate. Unfortunately, a summons from Riften might affect her ability to continue the war.

Sundas 26 Second Seed 203 4E 11:30 PM

"I can't believe how fantastic the lighting is in here, Jarl Ulfric," Lydia said as she gazed at the ceiling.

"How many times must I ask you to just call me Ulfric?" Her lord smiled as he ran his fingers over her cheek, pulling back errant sweaty strands of hair clinging to her face.

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting," she replied shyly. She felt like a virgin as she grinned at the older man. She still couldn't believe that the most powerful man in all of Skyrim had taken her as his lover.

The two of them had just finished making love in Ulfric's bed in the Palace of Kings in Windhelm for the first time since their arrival in Eastmarch. There were no candles or fires lit in the room, but it was far from dark. The light of the moons filled it from the overhead sky panels, bathing it in shimmering silver light not unlike magelight.

"How can you sleep with it so bright in here?" Lydia asked, trying to not be distracted by Ulfric's callous rough, but oh so gentle fingers tracing along her breast. "I'm so used to having nothing more than the banked embers of the fire pit before going to sleep."

Ulfric was silent as he continued to run his fingers over her body. He traced the swell of her tummy, just now really starting to show in her fifth month of pregnancy. "I like to think it is similar to sleeping outside. I have Skyrim herself below and above me, embracing me like a child to his mother."

"You're always so poetic," Lydia said. Everything about Ulfric awed her, but his constant ability to make every ordinary thing like something out of a song especially made her love him. It was such a wonderful ability to make life so beautiful and fantastic instead of dull and plain.

"Hm, thank you," he smiled before kissing her cheek. "It's better than the base truth."

"Which is?"

"When I was held prisoner with the Thalmor, they would blindfold me before they would torture me." Ulfric's gaze was far away as he remembered, his pupils wide. "I had been through many torments by that point, but that was one of the worst. Being in the dark, knowing that a blow would come, but never what direction, what kind of implement she was using, or how hard it would be. I could never brace myself for the pain because I didn't know where it was coming from. After I managed to get free, I found it impossible to sleep in the dark. Because the dark was where she was, my torturer, waiting with her whip to inflict more pain upon me until I broke."

"But you never did," Lydia said gently as she took his hand.
"No, no I didn't," Ulfric smiled wanly. "But still, the memories remain when the scars have long since healed. At first, Galmar would stand guard over me, but he still needed to rest, especially if he was to be by my side during the day. There was no one else I trusted enough to guard over me. I obviously couldn't leave a flame unattended as I slept. So, when I returned home and was named jarl after my father's death, I had these overhead windows installed." He gestured above them. "Galmar threw a fit. Complained that it would make it easier for assassins to get to me. I told him if assassins got this far into the castle, then I deserved whatever they had for me and him too. That shut him up quickly!"

Lydia giggled at the thought of a chargained Galmar. The housecarl had finally started giving her and Ulfric privacy. She hoped it was because she had earned his trust and not just because they were safely home in Windhelm. "I like them."

"Me too. And not just for the beautiful light they produce. I was in a powerless situation and instead of accepting it and being victim to it the rest of my life, I made changes. I took control and mastered my fear instead of losing to it."

"That's another thing I like about you," Lydia said, kissing his neck. "That I never give up or that I'm a winner?" he teased.

"Why not both?" Lydia ran her hands over his chest, enjoying the fine hairs sprinkling it. Ulfric might be almost fifty, but there were no gray hairs on any part of him. Lydia would know. She had checked.

"Indeed," Ulfric chuckled. "Have you given any more thought to what to name the baby?"

"Shouldn't we wait?" It was tradition to wait for a babe's first birthday before naming it. Too many hard winters had left too many mothers mourning for Nords to assume a healthy born babe would survive.

"Of course we'll wait, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a list prepared," Ulfric said. "I was thinking Elric if it's a boy. That way he could be named after both of us. 'El' for Lydia and 'ric' for Ulfric."

"Wouldn't Lyric be more appropriate?" Lydia asked.

"No, I like Elric better," Ulfric insisted.

"Oh? I suppose you already have a name for a girl already picked out too?" Lydia teased.

"I've always been partial to Ella," he admitted, almost shyly in Lydia's opinion.

"And we'll call her Ellie for short?" she teased again.

Ulfric's expression darkened, surprising her. His cheeks flushed. "No, Ellie is such an ugly name." He brightened just as quickly. "Our daughter will be beautiful and full of grace. She'll rule after us as a kind and just queen."

"My, you have such high ambitions," Lydia laughed nervously, uncomfortable with Ulfric's strange reaction to the nickname.

"Always, my Stormblade," he whispered before kissing her. "And right now my ambition is to make love to you again while I can before the child gets in the way."
Fredas 31 Last Seed 208 4E 1:00 PM

The last two months of Lydia's life had been nothing but constant pain.

She still wasn't completely certain how she survived her fight with Hecate. After Cicero had managed to weasel away after his dirty sneak attack, Lydia's world had narrowed down to the searing pain in her cheek. She could feel the blood streaming between her fingers as she tried to pinch the wound shut. It was not uncommon for victims of such cuts to bleed to death, and Lydia was going to be damned if she would have to explain to her ancestors how she let a filthy Imperial jester get the best of her.

In the distance, she could hear the redhead's shrill voice as he screamed. After a moment, she realized what he was saying. And as much as Lydia hated to obey anything that insane maniac told her, she had to admit that if he was yelling "Run!" the only reasonable response was to listen.

The Nord had turned towards her own camp, her feet flying under her, but she simply wasn't fast enough on foot. When the first strike hit the ground, she had been thrown head over heels into the air a good ten feet before landing. Multiple ribs broke under the impact. The aftershock had rolled over her, making her teeth rattle in her head. The gusts of wind that tore through the Stormcloak camp made her roll end over end like a tumbleweed.

Lydia regretted not wearing her old steel armor as she was slammed against rocks and earth. Her leg shattered from the impact, she could feel the bones grinding against each other as she skidded across the plain. A rock the size of her head flew through the air, landing on her forearm. She screamed as her arm broke, a bit of bone poking through the skin despite not breaking completely. More pebbles, all roughly the size of a septim, pelted her head as they whirled past her. All she could do was tuck and roll as best as she could to survive the storm, blocking out the pain of her wounds as she had been taught when she trained to become a housecarl.

And through it all, Lydia had realized that she wasn't even bearing the worst of it. Her training in the thu'um was protecting her as she braced against the impact of debris as best as she could. It could have been a lot worse if she were just a foot soldier or if Hecate was intentionally trying to call down a storm with her Shouts. Then she would have been braving the power of the thu'um as well.

When lightning struck nearby, she was glad she was in cloth though. If she had been wearing metal, she could have been fried alive.

Everything else was a whirlwind after that. At some point, Lydia awoke to find Yrsarald looming over her, his face distraught. "Someone bring me Lortheim or Jora immediately! The Stormblade is badly hurt and she needs their healing now!"

By the time the priests of Talos made it to her, it was too late for their restoration magic to do much to fix the damage done by the storm or Cicero's blade. At least they had been able to stabilize her and move her to her tent.

Once the camp was calm and most of the wounded attended to, Yrsarald gave the command for them to break ground and return to Eastmarch. Whiterun was lost.

As her second, Yrsarald had the right to give the call, but it still broke Lydia's heart to hear him tell the officers the news. She had been so sure she would defeat Diana. But she had underestimated her opponent. She had only remembered the sniveling, cowardly archer. Instead she should have
considered the assassin. Tragedy had been sending messages to her for years that she was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield, but Lydia had assumed Cicero had been the one doing most of the killing.

The only good thing had been waking up and seeing Yrsarald sitting over her, holding her hand, his face full of worry. They had barely spoken since he had discovered her secret—that she wasn't truly Dragonborn. He was still her general and lead her army, probably more out of duty to Ulfric than herself, but she had been grateful nonetheless.

Even that happiness was dirtied by Hecate's words. "Ulfric was not the man you thought he was. He manipulated you, used you."

No matter how hard Lydia tried, she could hear Diana's calm voice explaining. "Ulfric was using the Voice to slowly manipulate people to his will."

Lydia knew that Diana had to have been guessing. She had to! "Haven't you ever been talking to someone and you put a bit more passion or conviction in your voice for emphasis and they changed their mind about something? Haven't you ever just pushed a little harder for something you wanted badly and people did what you wanted?"

And here was Yrsarald, tending to her, making sure she would live, that she would get better. After he had realized she had betrayed him, lied to him, yet he was still here loyally by her side. Was it because he believed in the cause? Because he believed in her? Or because she had spent the last several months since Delphine left trying to convince him that her lies were righteous, that she had done only what she had been forced to do in the name of justice and freedom?

Or had it been her words or her Voice that had convinced him?

"You should be resting," he said, standing behind her. They were out on the parapets facing south. Lydia had been enjoying the fresh air after staying inside every day.

"I've been resting for the last two months," Lydia said bitterly. She was leaning on a cane, her leg still not fully healed. Standing made her dizzy and walking was an impossible challenge most days. It galled her to have such weakness. The thought of not being able to lift her blade scared her. How was she going to do that if she couldn't even cross the length of her bedroom? "I need to be up and moving if I'm going to get strong and lead my army again."

"Lydia," he said gently. The fact he used her given name scared her. Always in the past, Yrsarald would address her as regent or Stormblade if they were in public even if it was just the two of them. He had only called her Lydia when they were alone in her bed. "Lydia, it's over. We lost."

"No, no, we can never give up," Lydia insisted. "Not as long as we draw breath. The fight isn't over until we're dead."

"We lost Whiterun," Yrsarald continued, slowly and gently as if he was afraid she would have a fit or couldn't understand him. "Too many of our resources were tied up there. It made sense. It was a central hold and it was ours. But now that it's gone, we've lost too many men and trade routes that were essential. Especially combined with losing Markarth and the other western holds."

"We're no worse than when Ulfric led," Lydia snapped. She could feel her thu'um stirring within. She took a deep calming breath and repeated. "We're no worse than when Ulfric led us. We can start over. Solitude managed to come back when it was down to just Haafingar. Wars wax and wane in territory. It's an unfortunate fact."
"It's different now," her general said. His eyes were full of sympathy and pity. Lydia hated it. "Before we had Ulfric Stormcloak. He was jarl and the son of a jarl all the way back to Ysgramor. Now we have you."

"And what's wrong with that?" Lydia demanded.

"Nothing when you were the Stormblade, Dragonborn of legend," Yrsarald said calmly. "But now people know the truth. They know that Diana of Cyrodiil is the real Dragonborn. She proved it on the battlefield." He shook his head. "There's no way she could have produced that sort of *tha'um* unless she was. Even if we could convince people somehow she learned it by being a Voicemaster such as yourself, only a Dragonborn in a righteous fury could have produced such results."

"It's not for you to decide, Yrsarald," she said. Her knuckles gripped the head of her cane enough to turn white. "You may be my general, but you don't decide the fate of the war."

"No, but your allies will." He handed her a rolled up scroll. "This came in from the Rift. It has laila Law-Giver's signet on it. She's called a moot in Riften and you are to attend. There can be only one reason for it. They want your resignation."

---

**Turdas 5 Hearthfire 203 4E 4:00 PM**

"By Talos, he's perfect, Lydia!" Ulfric declared as he took his newborn son into his arms. Lydia had never seen him smile so broadly before or look so happy. Always before her jarl's joy was reserved, as if smiling was a foreign concept he had never quite learned.

But today was different. Today Ulfric looked like his face was about to split in half as he carefully counted his child's fingers before moving on to his toes. Baby Stormcloak didn't like his father's invasive inventory and started to cry without abandon.

"Looks like he takes after you, Ulfric," Galmar teased. The normally surly housecarl was also grinning like a loon. "He's got quite the set of lungs on him, don't he?"

"He does," Ulfric replied lovingly. "No doubt he'll be Shouting before we know it."

"Please wait until he's an adult first," Lydia said wanly. She laid back against the pillows that propped her up. "I don't think I could tolerate his terrible twos if he's *fus*-ing all his toys over because I told him it was bedtime."

"I'll do my best."

Lydia wanted to hold her son desperately. Jora, the priestess of Talos, had acted as midwife for her and had handed the child to Ulfric as soon as he had been cleaned off. It was only to be expected; he was the child's father and jarl. But Lydia hadn't had a chance to examine those toes or fingers yet and she found that she wanted to. She needed to be sure that her child was just as perfect as Ulfric had declared.

The babe kept crying, his wails sounding vaguely watery. Ulfric looked scared, his eyes as wide as saucers as he looked between Lydia and Galmar. "What's wrong with him? Why is he still crying?"

"I don't know!" Galmar declared, backing away. "I'm no wet nurse."

"Let me see him!" Lydia demanded, reaching. "Let me check."

But Ulfric ignored her as he turned to the midwife. "Woman, what is wrong with my child?" His
raised voice seemed to make the child just cry louder.

"He's just hungry, my jarl," Jora assured him. She took the babe from his arms, rewrapped the swaddling and placed him in Lydia's arms. "He's had a hard journey and just needs some of his mother's milk. And then he'll want to rest." She looked sternly at the older man. "So, you're to let him sleep once he's done eating."

The midwife went on with other instructions, but Lydia was too busy paying attention to her son. His skin was so soft and so wrinkly. She bared her breast to his eagerly seeking mouth, enjoying the sound of his suckle.

Ulfric was kneeling beside her, enthralled as he watched his son wolf his first meal. "This gives a whole new meaning to milkdrinker," he whispered.

"I don't think you've ever paid this much attention to my breasts, my lord," Lydia teased, feeling actually a bit jealous. She wasn't in the mood for anything amorous by any measure, but she would have liked for Ulfric to have given her some note during this whole process.

The jarl had stayed in the war room with Galmar while Lydia had been in labor. Jora had been giving her gentle encouragements of when to push and when to breath, but the whole time Lydia had wanted Ulfric there holding her hand like some men did with their wives.

There was no way she would have asked for him or admitted she had missed his presence. She was a Nord; she had to be strong at all times. Even during childbirth, she wasn't going to look weak. Especially before her jarl.

"I'll try to make it up to you when we make the next one," Ulfric said. He smiled, but it was his usual tight-lipped smile. It made Lydia sad that he couldn't grin for her like he did for their newborn, but at least this expression was more familiar and felt normal. He kissed her forehead which took her breath away. "We'll let the little one eat and rest. You should too. I hear there are many sleepless nights with a babe."

"Don't expect me to walk it back and forth while it burps all over me," Galmar growled, although the old bear did look longingly at the child.

Ulfric laughed as he clapped his best friend's back. "Never, old friend. Come, let us drink to the boy's birth and good health!"

"You did well, Ulfric," Galmar returned, thumping Ulfric's back in return. As if he had been the one who had just gone through sixteen hours of labor.

"And after that, we'll go buy him a pony. All children love ponies, right?"

"Maybe in a few years," Lydia said. "I don't think he'll be able to sit the saddle yet."

If the two men heard her, they didn't give notice. They were already talking about where they would go to drink and all the toasts they would give as they exited, leaving Lydia alone with Jora and her son.

"Call me if you need anything, Dragonborn," Jora said gently. She brushed Lydia's hair back. "Don't let the men get to you. I've been through many births and they always act as if they were the only one to do all the hard work. You did well. He's a very healthy baby."

"Thank you," Lydia said shyly.
After the midwife left, Lydia brushed the fine fuzz that would one day be her son's hair. His eyes were drooping heavily and his lips were lazily trying to get more milk. He yawned, his mouth a little pink maw. He curled up against her breast, burping messily.

"Sleep, little one," Lydia said as she wiped his mouth. She was so happy and proud, she felt like her heart would burst from joy. "Sleep, and I'll watch over you. I promise. I'll always watch over you no matter what."

Loredas 1 Hearthfire 208 4E 7:00 AM

It felt like she was trying to wear her father's clothes. The wolfskin cloak hung on Lydia's gaunt body. She had lost so much weight during her recovery. Not eating well, being confined to her sickbed, and the physical drain of restoration magic had left her little more than a skeleton. She must have been at least twenty pounds lighter than she had at the beginning of the summer.

She looked pathetic.

She looked weak.

At least she had been able to dress herself. All it had taken was thirty minutes with frequent rest breaks and now she had a pounding headache.

"Are you sure you're up to the trip?" Yrsarald asked. Lydia hadn't even heard him come into the bedroom. At least she wasn't crying.

"I don't have a choice," she said as she struggled to her feet. "If I don't go, I'll look too weak. If they're going to try to overthrow me, then they can at least do it to my face. Then I can show them my thu'um or something to prove that I'm still worthy to sit as regent for Ulfric."

"You are weak, Lydia," Yrsarald said gently. "And what are you regent for? Before, you ruled for Elric, but he's dead. There is no Stormcloak to inherit some day."

"Don't you think I know that?" Lydia asked. Gods, she must be exhausted. Her thu'um didn't even waver in the slightest. She had no energy to power it. "Don't you think I'm aware that my jarl and my son have both been taken from me by that Void cursed woman?" Tears poured down her cheeks. "He would have been five years old in four days. Four days! And I'm forced to go scurrying like a berated child to laila Law-Giver of all people to try to defend my rule!"

"I'm sorry, Lydia, I forgot his birthday was coming up," Yrsarald admitted.

"No, you didn't." She wiped her face, ashamed of her tears. "You never forget his birthday. Even when I was my most busy, you made sure he had something to make the day special. While Ulfric and I were busy trying to save Skyrim, you made sure a little boy had a birthday gift and some cake even if he was probably too small to remember."

He wrapped his arms around her, placing his chin on her head. "It's okay. It's okay."

"No, it's never going to be okay ever again!" she cried. "Everything I touch turns to ash. I failed as a housecarl. I failed as a general. I failed as a mother. I fail at everything I do. It's like I'm cursed. No matter how hard I try, I'm just not good enough. And I never will be."

"You are good enough! And I believe in you," Yrsarald insisted.

"Why should you? I lied to you. I lied to everyone." Lydia was crying uncontrollably now. "I'm not
"worth believing in."

"Yes you are!" he took her face into his hands. "I know you are because I love you."

"How can I know it's not because of the *thu'um*?" Lydia asked. "How do I know I didn't accidentally brainwash you?"

"What if you did?" He kissed her cheeks. "What if? There's no way to know. But I do know that even after I found out the truth, I couldn't stay away. I love you and I'll stand by you because I know everything you've done, you've done for good reason. You've never tried to take fame or power for yourself. You always put Ulfric and Elric first. And now you're putting Skyrim first. The *thu'um* is just a fancy way to talk and words have power regardless of the language. If anyone can rally our cause, it'll be you because you're our leader and where you go, I follow."

"You really think so?"

"I do."

Lydia sighed. She was tired. So very tired. But she still had many miles to go before she would be done with this war. "Then let's do this."

---

**Middas 5 Hearthfire 208 4E 12:00 PM**

It felt like a lifetime since Lydia had been to Riften. She remembered the city feeling so much bigger with its wooden walls and boat laden docks. The smell of the lake seeped into everything along with an unpleasant underlying scent of mold and dead fish.

Maybe it had been all of her time in Windhelm that made the city seem smaller. Windhelm was old and full of history while Riften's claim to fame was the Black-Briar meadery and the failing Thieves' Guild that lived in the sewers.

Hopefully, once the civil war was settled, the local militia could focus on routing out the den of thieves and other ne'er-do-wells that squatted down there.

The gate guards eyed them warily as they allowed Lydia and her people into the city. They had been made to wait a ridiculously long time. The head guard insisted on looking over their papers multiple times before calling for a superior. Finally, after an hour of delay, Yrsarald yelled at them to let them in or they would have to face his regent's wrath. Looking sullen, the head guard had muttered something about just doing his job before allowing them in.

Lydia's contingent was painfully small. She had arrived with Yrsarald and four foot soldiers. She hadn't been able to risk a larger guard. More men meant more security, but it also meant slower travel.

Lydia wanted this farce over with. No doubt Laila would posture and pout. The older jarl would complain about how deals hadn't been kept and would try to barter for better trade deals or some cut or another to line her well padded pockets.

At the end of it, Lydia would simply have to tell her that there was no more money. Every septim was going to keeping the rebellion alive. She couldn't afford to alienate Riften. After losing Markarth, Riften was Lydia's best supporter, providing money, troops, supplies, and information.

Lydia had thought long and hard on how to approach Laila. Ulfric probably could have simply charmed the older woman. He had been a handsome, well loved veteran of the Great War as well as
jarl of Windhelm and a Voicemaster. Lydia was unfortunately only one of those things, and she planned to use it to great effect.

If Diana was right and a Voicemaster could use the *thu'um* in more subtle ways, then she was going to use it that way. Lydia would gently remind Laila that she was one of Ulfric's first supporters—and if she didn't want to see her precious neck on the chopping block, then she better stay that way and make sure this war was won with her on the right side.

Failing that, she could always just cow the woman.

It would be crass, but hopefully effective. And it wasn't as if Lydia had many options or that Laila wasn't used to threats. It was a poorly kept secret that she looked the other way for the Thieves' Guild for future favors.

Lydia was about to enter the Bee and Barb to secure rooming when she heard a female voice yelling her name.

"Regent, you're earlier than expected!" Anuriel, the Bosmer steward, called. "We thought you wouldn't be here until tomorrow!"

"Your mistress' summons sounded so important," Lydia grinned with false cheer. "I decided that I couldn't possibly make her wait longer than necessary. After all, what could Jarl Laila possibly need to say to me that couldn't be expressed through a letter or with her coming to Windhelm?"

"My jarl keeps her own counsel," Anuriel said mysteriously. She smiled as she gestured to Mistveil Keep. "However, I do know that she would be affronted if you didn't stay as a guest with us. It's the least we can do after asking you to meet on such short notice."

Lydia paused as she weighed her options. She didn't particularly like being a guest of Laila Law-Giver, but it would be rude to refuse her hospitality too. Still, diplomacy first. "Of course, Anuriel. Lead the way."

The elf bowed gracefully before escorting them to the keep. "We were just about to sit down to eat. I hope you'll join us. Your men can take their meal in the kitchens while you dine with the jarl."

"As you will," Lydia said absentmindedly. She was more focused on what she would say to Laila first instead of what they would eat.

The steward rambled on as she led them up the stairs. "I hope you stay a few days. We're going to have a festival this weekend and the lake will be full of boats. I think they're going to light lanterns and set them floating over the water. It's a most beautiful sight."

"I think I'm unfortunately too busy fighting a war for such pleasantries," Lydia said wryly. "But it does sound delightful. Maybe some day soon."

Anuriel nodded with a sad smile as she opened the keep's doors.

The hall was busy with servants setting the large horseshoe shaped table that dominated the jarl's court for lunch. Lydia had to admit that the food smelled delicious, the aroma of hot fish making her poor stomach rumble hungrily.

"Regent Lydia Stormblade!" Laila called from her throne. Lydia noticed that the woman wasn't showing any signs of want. Her jowls were as thick as ever and her clothes were richly made. Her fingers were lined with multiple rings and several necklaces adorned her throat. "Thank you for coming to my humble city!"
"I notice that she's not addressing you as 'Dragonborn,'" Yrsarald grumbled.

"That doesn't matter any more," Lydia replied. "I still command the *thu'um* and have Ulfric's blessing. Those are real. I don't need a fake name any more."

"That's good to hear," he smiled.

Lydia's guards were shown to the kitchens for their meal while Lydia and Yrsarald were seated. Laila and her two sons took the seats at the head of the table as her steward and housecarl flanked them. Other minor nobles sat on the far wings of the table.

"Jarl Laila, thank you for having me as your guest today," Lydia said, holding up her glass. "However, I can't stay long. Let us settle our business here and now so I may return to Windhelm and continue leading this war for our freedom and rights as Nords."

"But you've just arrived! And who wants to talk business during a meal?" Laila laughed.

"I do."

"Please, you're early and I have other guests who are going to arrive and there's still so much to prepare for," Laila giggled again. Her forehead was covered in sweat.

"Something's not right here," Yrsarald muttered.

"I agree."

"We should leave. Now."

"Once again, I agree," Lydia nodded. "If you're that unprepared after summoning me here, then I'm going to have to respectfully decline your hospitality, Jarl." She stood. "My people need me back in Windhelm, and I only came here out of respect for our alliance. If you can't be prepared when you're the one who called me here, then I can't in good conscience stay any longer."

The doors of the keep threw open, letting in the harsh afternoon light. A feminine silhouette stood in the doorway, surrounded by dozens of heavily armed men bearing ugly maces. "I believe that you're addressing the wrong woman." The woman stepped into the room to reveal Maven Black-Briar wearing a smug expression. Her two sons flanked her. "Laila Law-Giver is no longer jarl. She has forfeited Riften to me in return for leniency in this war." She paused dramatically. "Well, that and your capture."

A mere snap of her fingers had her men in action. They surged forward with their weapons drawn as courtiers scurried out of the way. Lydia and Yrsarald quickly fell back to back as they fought off their attackers.

"Traitors!" Yrsarald bellowed as he threw his chair at his attackers. Thankfully, no one had taken their weapons, so he was able to pull his axe and bury it into the shoulder of one of the men. "Betrayed! How could you do it, Laila?"

"She lied to us!" Laila called from the safety of hiding behind her former throne. "She's not Dragonborn! I allied with Ulfric because of the promise of better trade, not because of some religious reasons. I stayed by her when I thought she was the chosen one. I'm not about to face off against the real Dragonborn. If you were smart, Yrsarald, you'd lay your weapon down now and join us."

"Never! Death to the Thalmor! The Empire has no hold here. Skyrim for the Nords!" Yrsarald held his sword above his head as he spat at the former jarl.
The fight was one huge chaotic melee. The area was dark and hard to move in. There was screaming as courtiers either got out of the way or were too slow and were hit with a weapon. Magic spells arced through the air, burning and freezing their targets when they hit.

Lydia really thought they would manage to get away. Her men had managed to make it back to her from the kitchens and join the fight. All of her people were trained soldiers while Maven's people were just hired thugs in heavy armor.

She wished she wasn't so weak so she could Shout, but she risked hurting herself more than helping if she used Unrelenting Force.

"Too bad Ulfric isn't still alive," Yrsarald said. One eye was blackened and he was covered in cuts. "He always wanted to be in a tavern brawl and this is as close as we'll ever get."

Lydia laughed, but it was cut short when she saw a mace take Yrsarald in the throat. His eyes bulged and blood gurgled up out of his mouth before he fell to the ground. Lydia screamed as she fell to her knees to hold his too-still body in her arms.

"No! Yrsarald! No!" she wept.

"No one harm her," Maven called out. Her men immediately fell back. "The reward is for her alive. For whatever reason, the Dragonborn doesn't want her dead."

"We'd be better off slitting her throat, Mother," Sibbi Black-Briar snarled. "Stormcloaks have an unfortunate habit of getting away from Imperial law."

"Less profit there, dear," Maven said. "And I don't believe in giving up a profit." She gestured to Lydia. "Gag her. I don't want to risk her Shouting at anyone."

Heavy hands grabbed Lydia and pulled her away from Yrsarald. She screamed, but still didn't have any energy to Shout. She wanted to. She wanted to Shout all of them to pieces like Ulfric had been rumored to have done to Torygg.

Instead her hands were bound behind her and a gag was forced over her mouth. Tears silently streamed down Lydia's face as she was roughly taken to the stables for her escort to Solitude. Her friend dead. Her rule lost. She truly had nothing now.

Except maybe an appointment with the chopping block.
Chapter 25

Turdas, 11 Evening Star, 208 4E 7:00 PM

It was a quiet day in the Dawnstar Sanctuary. Most of the family was out for a change, taking advantage of the nice weather while it lasted and earning gold with contracts instead of trying to figure out how to live in close proximity to their siblings in Sanctuary without violating a Tenet. Especially the one about killing each other.

Currently Hecate and Aventus were playing a word game with tiles while Siltal quietly read a book nearby. Cicero was somewhere in the catacombs, no doubt tending to the Night Mother as usual.

"Your turn," Hecate said lazily as she tallied her score from her turn.

"You always just slam them down immediately," Aventus grumbled as he looked at his options again. "You never have to think about your turn."

"I do think about it," the Listener teased, "while you're taking forever with your move. I always plan at least two different possibilities so no matter what you play, I still have a choice."

"Don't let her fast plays intimidate you, Brother," Siltal said softly, not looking up from her book.

"She tried the same maneuver with Babette and me and was disappointed when it didn't work since we're so much older. We realize that good results are not always a product of speed."

"I admit there's some intimidation factor," Hecate said playfully as she rested her chin on her steepled hands, "but I also expected our boy here to be better with words after all that time and money spent for his learning."

"We learned how to put real words together to move people's emotions," Aventus muttered, "not these made up words of yours."

"They're all here in the book," Hecate countered, waving at the dictionary that could be used for challenges. "It's not my fault you didn't memorize all the short ones."

"This is boring," Aventus grumbled. "I forfeit. You're going to win anyway. Why are we even still stuck here anyway? We could go up to Solitude for a few days. They're already celebrating the New Life festival despite it being two and a half weeks away."

Hecate frowned as she started to put the game away. Aventus seemed a lot less willing to suffer through these games since he had come home. "I don't want to risk the weather turning bad and getting stuck there."

"So what if it does?" Aventus asked. "You've missed your commune with the Night Mother before. I'd be surprised if there is even a petition before the beginning of the year anyway."

It was true. People were much less likely to appeal to the Black Sacrament during the worst parts of the winter.

"Maybe I feel like being extra attentive to the Night Mother right now," Hecate hedged. She did owe her Matron for granting her petition even if there were no results yet.
"Or maybe you're just trying to get out of going to Jordis' wedding," Aventus pushed. It had been announced months ago that Jordis Shield-Maiden would be bound to Frothar Balgruufsson in a pledge to Mara during the New Life Festival. "You really should go, you know. As her thane, it would mean a lot to her."

"I'm not anyone's thane," Hecate snapped.

"So this is really about Lydia being there, huh?" Aventus grinned smugly, having made his point. It had also been announced after her capture that the fate of Lydia Stormblade would be determined at the beginning of the year too.

Before the Listener could continue, the Black Door slammed open and closed. The three assassins went on alert at the sound, sensing something was wrong. No one was expected back yet and no one was ever that loud. Silence was second nature to most of the Brotherhood, Cicero withstanding, and even the jester didn't use the entryway that loudly.

A shadowy silhouette bobbed into view first before revealing the tired and sweaty form of Elbent, their Breton brother who had left to join Wayrest Sanctuary about three years ago. He had been chosen by Garnag because of his mastery in social diplomacy and charisma. The man had a silver tongue that had all but the most untrusting willing to give him secrets within minutes.

"What's wrong?" Aventus asked standing and starting towards the stairs. "Was the Sanctuary attacked? Is it the Thalmor?"

"Calm down, Aventus," Hecate said calmly. She had been waiting for this message since First Seed. She had honestly thought it would have come in Hearthfire and was surprised it took so long. "It's time, isn't it, Elbent?"

"Yes," the man said simply. He looked to his right to where the Night Mother's shrine used to reside. "By Sithis, it feels wrong for her to not be there, watching over all of us."

"She watches us," Hecate assured the man as he descended the flight of stairs to the common area. She approached him and gave him a welcoming hug. "It's just from a place where she can be safe from the corruption of the living."

"What's going on?" Aventus asked, confused and frustrated. "If Elbent isn't here to alert us to an attack on Wayrest, then why is he here?"

"To let us know that it is time," Hecate said softly.

"Time for what?"

"Garnag is dying," Elbent said. "He has requested that the Listener come to visit one last time before he passes into the Void."

Aventus fell to his knees, his face devoid of emotion. "Garnag is dying?" he repeated. Aventus knew he was old and that the Orsimer didn't have life spans as long as the other races. But Nazir had only been relocated to Wayrest only eight months ago to tutor under Garnag’s supervision as a replacement Speaker. He dropped his head into his hand, raking his hair into wild patterns. "I knew that Garnag would die someday, but I had thought that it would be years down the road. Not now."

Hecate placed a comforting hand on Aventus' shoulder and squeezed it sympathetically. "I'll let Cicero know," she said before turning to enter the catacombs.
Cicero was singing happily as he cleaned the floor in front of Mother's coffin. It was less necessary now that she was safely tucked away in the catacombs and away from filthy, prying eyes, but Cicero never took a chance when it came to Mother's welfare.

Unless he was called away from Sanctuary to help the Listener with a contract, usually from Solitude, the Keeper spent at least an hour a day going over his Matron's resting place. Candles were replaced, wilted flowers were removed, and careful inspection was made for any creepy crawlies that dared to invade the coffin.

Then there was the weekly oiling that Cicero observed every Sundas. It was the most essential of all of Cicero’s duties as the sacred oils and chants were necessary to keep the preserved body sanctified. It created the mystical conduit that allowed the Night Mother to channel her soul to the physical plane and to speak with the blessed Listener. It was a ceremony that Cicero never missed, outside of the most dire of circumstances. Usually caused by the Listener.

The jester spun in a pirouette as he held his broom. Life was good. Cicero had Mother. Cicero had his Listener, who had gifted him with a handmade ring with a blood red ruby and her true name engraved on it. Cicero had family. Cicero had Sanctuary. What more could Cicero want?

The silence-maddening, terrible silence-was held at bay with laughter and fellowship. Now longer was Cicero forced to laugh and sing to fill the Void around him. Instead, the jester chose to do those things because they pleased him.

"I see that you've finally tired of me and that I've been replaced," a female voice said from the shadows. Cicero stopped his dancing to look over to the Listener who was leaning against the entrance frame to the Night Mother's shrine. She was smiling, but there was a sadness to her eyes today. "I thought surely you would have picked someone a bit prettier."

The Keeper took a moment to place the broom back in its proper place before advancing to the Listener. Normally, he would have tossed it to the side to banter with her, but they were before Mother and proper decorum must be maintained before the Matron at all times.

"Cicero would never forsake his lovely, luminous Listener!" Cicero declared as he put his arm through Hecate's and led her out of the inner sanctum. Once they were out of sight of Mother's watchful eyes, Cicero planted a passionate kiss on sweet Hecate's lips. "Not after working so hard for her to admit her feelings for him."

Hecate chuckled softly as she pressed her head against Cicero's shoulder. The Keeper wrapped his arms around her, wondering what had her so quiet today. The Listener wasn't usually very loud, unless she was mad about something and taking it out on poor Cicero, but she only acted this way when something was bothering her.

"Is it Aventus?" Cicero asked quietly.

Things had been awkward between the Listener and the boy ever since he had kissed her. They had good days when both could pretend nothing had happened, but Hecate often made an invisible barrier between them now. She would stand with someone between them or move to the other side of a table, anything to keep the two of them apart. The idea of a physical relationship between them appalled her. Aventus would always be the ten-year-old boy she had found alone and forgotten in an abandoned house with only the remains of his mother for companionship.

In the meantime, seven years later, Aventus had become a full grown man with a man's desires. The
young Imperial was tall for his race, broad-shouldered, and handsome enough to turn every eye except the one he wanted. Despite being rejected, Cicero knew the boy still harbored some hope that one day the Listener would tire of the jester and turn to the bard for comfort instead.

If Cicero had any say in the matter, that would only happen over his cold, dead body.

"No, everything is fine with Aventus," Hecate chuckled, her voice muffled from her face being pressed against Cicero's chest. She paused, not sure how to say what she needed to say. "I have to go away for a while."

"Diana," Cicero growled, narrowing his eyes. Cicero remembered the last time she had said that. The Listener had retreated to High Hrothgar for three months, THREE MONTHS, before Cicero had discovered where she had hid herself and had been forced to go retrieve her. "You're not running away again, are you?"

Hecate looked up, her blue eyes wide and innocent, causing Cicero to immediately relax. She never could make eye contact if she was doing something shady. "No," she whispered, "I have to go to Wayrest Sanctuary."

"Garnag?"

"Yes. Elbent arrived a few minutes ago with the news."

"Cicero will go too."

"You can't," Hecate shook her head. "It's too far away. It's going to take me at least a week to get there, and that is assuming that I have no problems with weather, bandits, or dragons while pushing Shadowmere to her limits. You have to tend to Mother."

"Cicero wants to go!" the Keeper insisted, his voice rising in scale to the point of screaming. Anyone else would have accepted Hecate's point, but Cicero wasn't just anyone. "Cicero has to go!"

"You can't," Hecate repeated, pushing away from Cicero, her face blank. "I told you already."

"Please! Please, please, please!" Cicero fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around the Listener's legs so she couldn't move. He buried his face against her stomach. Tears ran down the Keeper's face as he begged. "Cicero must go! Cicero needs to say goodbye. Cicero never got to say goodbye. Not to his family in Bruma. Not to his family in Cheydinhal. Not even his family in Falkreath. Everyone dead, dead, dead and Cicero is left alone."

"You will never be alone again," Hecate promised as she gently petted his hair. "I would take you if I could, but it's just not possible. Even if it was just the two of us on Shadowmere, the trip is too far."

"Odahviing," Cicero whispered. "Deadly Diana Dragonborn could call her dragon friend like before when we were stealing the dragon scale armor lying, loutish Lydia wrongfully claimed."

"I don't like asking dragons for favors," Hecate frowned, ignoring Cicero's jab at her former housecarl. "They only respect each other based on strength and if I call on him it shows weakness."

"Cicero has only ever seen Hecate summon the red dragon once," Cicero whined. "Surely twice in six years isn't too much to ask?"

"Dragons measure time differently," Hecate protested, but Cicero would tell that she was softening. She was pressing one finger against her lips as she thought. "Six years probably doesn't feel very long to him, but maybe if I buttered him up."
"Sweet Hecate is very good at such things," Cicero said slyly. He looked up at the Listener, all smiles now. "Lucky Cicero knows that he simply melts at her careful ministrations."

"Oh, you," Hecate said affectionately as she bonked the jester on the head. "You're so spoiled."

"Only because Cicero has such a sweet, kind, loving Listener," Cicero murmured as he kissed her left hand, focusing on the silver and amethyst ring he had given her.

"We'll head out immediately if you're done with tending the Night Mother," Hecate said with a nod.

"Yay! The four of us going together on a trip!" Cicero jumped to his feet and gave an impromptu dance.

"Four?" Hecate wrinkled her brow in thought. "There's you, me, and Elbent."

"And the boy," Cicero reminded her as he danced in a circle. "Of course Aventus is coming."

"No," Hecate said. "I'm not comfortable with taking Aventus on a dragon ride."

"Why not?" Cicero asked, stopping his capering. "The boy has been on one before."

"That was before," Hecate said blushing. "You know how close all of us had to ride before crushed together. I wouldn't feel comfortable knowing how he feels."

"Aventus felt that way before," Cicero reprimanded her, wagging his finger. "Nothing is different now except Hecate knows and won't be wiggling against the boy as much. It's probably a mercy to him."

"Cicero," Hecate warned, glowering.

"Let the boy go," Cicero insisted. "He needs to say goodbye too. Garnag helped him with his first kill. Garnag was the boy's friend too. Surely, Hecate understands?"

Hecate sighed as she held her hand to her forehead, affecting a headache. "Fine, fine. But only if the two if you can manage to not act like two cats fighting over territory the whole time."

"Cicero will be on his best behavior!" the jester crowed as he did a backflip.

"I guess that will have to do," Hecate muttered. This trip is just looking more and more unpleasant as time passed. At least she could arrange it so that Elbent sat behind her, since undoubtedly Cicero will want the front. That will at least create a nice obstruction between her and their young protégé.

---

**Turdas, 11 Evening Star, 208 4E 7:30 PM**

"Listener, if it's all the same to you, I would rather stay here," Elbent said. He was sprawled at the dinner table with a simple meal set in front of him and a mug of ale in one hand. "I just spent an entire week getting here, riding as if Lord Molag Bal was personally trying to set my ass on fire, and I'm exhausted. I'm not quite ready to head back immediately. My tail bone feels like it's been molded to the shape of my saddle."

"We're not going to be riding by traditional horseback," Hecate said.

"A wagon will be awfully slow," Elbent said, raising an eyebrow.

"We're not going by wagon either," Hecate hedged.
"Not a wagon! A dragon!" Cicero interjected. "We will be riding a dragon! High in the sky so that people look like tiny, helpless ants. The world flows like a river under us while we soar, soar, soar!"

"Oh, ho, ho," Elbent chuckled nervously. "If that's the case, I know I'll pass, if you don't mind, Listener. This Breton was bred to keep both feet on the ground. I don't care much for sailing, never mind flying. Both seem to have the same unfortunate side effect: if something goes wrong, you have no place to go but down."

"Don't you want to say your goodbyes?" Hecate asked.

"I said them before I headed out," Elbent said casually. "None of us saw any point in taking a risk that he would be gone before I got back. By the Eight, he might already have passed to the Void."

"Don't say that!" Cicero screamed, suddenly in the Breton's face. The jester's face was livid and his eyes wide with frantic. "Garnag wouldn't die before Cicero could arrive. Garnag wouldn't!"

It was impressive that the Breton didn't flinch during the Keeper's tirade. Hecate grabbed a handful of Cicero's hair and jerked him back.

"If you cannot behave in Sanctuary, then I won't take you," she threatened. Cicero turned to glare at her, but both of them knew it was an empty threat. Everyone knew that the Listener had a weak spot for the Keeper, which allowed the jester to get away with far too much at times. Still, it was enough to remind the redhead that they hadn't left yet and arrangements could still be changed.

"Well, he wouldn't," Cicero muttered, backing down but still getting in the last word. He moved so that he was slightly crouching behind the Listener, much like a berated child finding protection from his mother. "Garnag wouldn't."

"It's okay, Cicero," Hecate said comfortingly. Her hand snaked back up to the Keeper's hair, but this time she softly stroked it. "We'll be there shortly and find out first hand. Garnag is tough. I'm sure that he's still waiting for us."

Elbent didn't think Hecate noticed, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Aventus snort in disdain as Cicero reveled in the Listener's attention. He hadn't been there for Aventus' failed attempt for the Listener's affection, but he had heard quite an earful of it when the group had arrived at Markarth for their reunion with their Wayrest siblings.

It had all sounded wonderfully scandalous and Elbent was sad to hear that he had missed it. Apparently, that particular story wasn't closed, though.

"Actually, if you don't mind," Elbent said, sitting up. "I would like to put in a request to transfer back to Dawnstar. You know I only left originally because Garnag needed a face man. I'm good with people and it was important to put the right whispers in the right ears. Now that Wayrest is firmly established and Nazir is there to lead, they don't have to have me anymore."

"You'd really give up those lovely temperate seasons to come back here?" Hecate asked, incredulously. "You would rather have cold, wintry Skyrim instead?"

"Hey, this was where I found my family again," Elbent shrugged. "I miss the place."

"You talked to Nazir about this?"

"Of course," Elbent snorted. He pulled out a scroll and handed it to the Listener. "He said final call was up to you."
"All of our family is welcome here," Hecate said. She hesitated as she glanced at Cicero. "Well, most of them anyway."

The official reason Wayrest had been reopened was that the Brotherhood had grown too big to accommodate all of the assassins comfortably any more. Unofficially, it was because of a feud between Cicero and Eiruki, an odd Nord woman who had gotten it into her fool head to torment the Keeper by constantly touching the Night Mother's coffin or leaving wild flowers before the shrine when Cicero wasn't around. Finally, one day, the Keeper had caught her with her "blasphemies" and almost killed the girl in a rage.

Elbent didn't know why Hecate had chosen Garnag to lead the Wayrest Sanctuary as Speaker. Maybe because of the accusations that all of the important positions were going to only humans, but the Listener had never struck him as someone who did something to appease others. He personally had thought it was weird given the close relationship between the one-eyed Orc and the Keeper.

Or maybe that was a reason all of its own to separate the two.

Garnag had never seemed resentful of the promotion if that had been the case. He wasn't that strong of personality, but he was well liked and he knew the Old Ways as second nature. More importantly, he had chosen his advisors well, and the Sanctuary had thrived. Every week, they received plenty of Black Sacraments via hawk, and were never without work to choose from.

Nazir could have easily sent a written missive by bird, but the Redguard had felt that it was better to take the longer route. This was a sensitive personal message, not a request for supplies or an update about the Sanctuary's business. You didn't tell loved ones that a family member was dying by note. You just didn't.

"Don't you need to get your personal effects?" Hecate pushed. "Clothes, trophies, or anything else that matters to you?"

"I have my shrouded armor in my bag, and I don't tend to collect trophies," Elbent said. "If I want more clothes, I can buy them here. I seem to recall you highly recommending a clothier in Solitude."

"You intentionally made this a one-way trip, didn't you?" Hecate sounded miffed as she placed her hands on her hips. "You knew I would approve of your transfer and made sure you didn't have to go back."

"Listener," Elbent said, his voice full of sincerity, "why would I doubt your generosity when you're such a kind and reasonable woman?"

"Ooooh, he got you good!" Cicero giggled.

"It's not like you need me to go back with you," Elbent reminded her. "You know the pass phrase and where to find the Black Door."

It was the Listener's responsibility to periodically visit all of the Sanctuaries. Not only did it give her a chance for a firsthand account of the organization of the place, but it allowed her a chance to meet new initiates, handle disputes that needed an outside, neutral party, and remind everyone of the Night Mother's presence. A repeat of Falkreath and the abandonment of the Tenets was not going to happen if Hecate could help it.

"It's true," Hecate said, frowning.

Elbent thought that was odd, until he noticed that her gaze flickered, just for a moment, to Aventus and away. He thought about it and smiled. Returning here had been a good idea. Although there was
always drama when multiple people lived together, Wayrest Sanctuary was boring compared to Dawnstar Sanctuary.

"Fine," Hecate conceded. "Aventus, you're invited to come as well, unless you don't want to go."

"I want to go!" Aventus practically shouted. He clenched his fists and leaned forward excitedly. "I can leave at any time."

"Then let's head out," Hecate waved.

As the trio filed out, Cicero turned towards Elbent and said in a sing-song voice, "You're missing oooout."

"No doubt," Elbent snorted. He rubbed his sore posterior, feeling that he had made the right choice. The Breton turned to the Altmer Speaker who had been quietly observing everything. "So, Siltal, love, help me catch up on everything that has been going on lately."

---

**Turdas, 11 Evening Star, 208 4E 8:00 PM**

**"ODAHHVING!!"**

The Shout echoed in the open field the three assassins had gathered in; wild rabbits broke from the tall grass to run from the noise. They were about a ten minute walk away from Sanctuary on the off-chance the dragon's arrival might catch a nosy hunter's attention. It wouldn't do to accidentally lead do-gooders to the Black Door.

The three of them stood awkwardly as they waited for the red dragon to answer Hecate's call. The walk had been fast paced enough that silence hadn't been an issue, but now that they were still, it was hanging in the air. Hecate was standing so that she wasn't facing either man, while the two men warily eyed each other.

"Sing us a song, bard," Cicero demanded suddenly as he danced around Aventus. "Sing a song so the Keeper and Listener may caper."

"I didn't bring my mandolin," Aventus said coldly. "I didn't think it would be wise to try to keep it from breaking while riding a dragon."

"Cicero has never been known for his wisdom," the Fool lamented, "but surely the boy would gift us with the sound of his voice. Bards aren't required to accompany song with music."

"Stop calling me 'the boy,'" Aventus growled. "I'm taller than you, you know. At least that should count for something."

"Yet, still so young," Cicero teased as he pinched Aventus' cheeks. "Cicero just hopes that Aventus doesn't help some poor girl catch pregnant and make Cicero a grandfather before his time."

"Shut up!" Aventus snapped as he swatted Cicero's hands away.

"He's here!" Hecate said loudly, drawing the Imperials' attention away from each other.

The red dragon hovered briefly as the three assassins scattered to make enough space for him to land. His wings made grass and dust fly everywhere as he landed heavily on the ground.

"Drem Yol Lok, Dovahkiin," the beast rumbled pleasantly.
"Drem Yol Lok, zu'ui fahdon," Hecate said affectionately as she stepped forward to caress the dragon's snout. "Him haas los pruzah?"

"Aam," Odahviing responded, "Zu'ui haas los pruzah. Him thu'um los zol mul."

Hecate giggled, hiding her face behind her hand and leaned against the dragon before responding in draconic.

"By Sithis," Aventus grumbled, "is she flirting with the dragon?"

"Sweet Hecate did say she would need to butter up the beast," Cicero said with a toothy grin. Aventus could tell that the jester wasn't pleased with this turn of events either.

"I wish I knew what they were saying," Aventus muttered darkly. He didn't like that the Listener was flirting with the dragon, and it was made worse by not know exactly what they were saying.

Thankfully, the Dragonborn and dragon didn't converse for too long. Hecate turned to the two men and waved for them to come over. "Odahviing says that he'll gladly take us. It always pleases him to make us mortals jealous of the dragons."

"Did the joor miss the thrill of flying after Odahviing showed them what they were lacking?" the dragon boasted.

"I know I did," Hecate said, obviously still flirting with the dragon.

"Cicero is up front!" the jester declared as he ran past the Listener to scramble onto the dragon. The little man bounced happily on the dragon's neck, unmindful of the sharp, scaly ridges.

"Why am I not surprised?" the Listener grumbled. She looked over her shoulder at Aventus who merely shrugged. Rather than hesitate and make a scene, she climbed onto the dragon behind Cicero.

Aventus followed, trying to not remember the last time they had ridden like this. Not that the order could have been changed around much. He didn't think Cicero would want to be squished next to him any more than he wanted to be crammed against the Keeper.

"Hold on tight!" Odahviing commanded, missing the collective grumble from his three passengers before he launched into the air.

---

**Turdas, 11 Evening Star, 208 4E 11:00 PM**

"What is life's final gift?" the Black Door whispered.

"Death," Hecate answered solemnly.

"Welcome home, Listener, Keeper, and brother," the door whispered as it swung open.

It had taken only about three hours to travel from Dawnstar to Wayrest. They had traveled over half of Skyrim, past Hammerfell, and to the eastern shore of High Rock to the trade road outside of the coastal town of Wayrest.

The layout of this Sanctuary was similar to Cheydinhal. There was a long corridor after the entrance that led into a common room. Off to one side was a training room, another side held the initiates sleeping area, and then a third corridor lead to the senior assassin's private rooms.

Nazir was talking to an initiate when the three Dawnstar siblings entered. The aging Redguard
looked up in surprise at their arrival.

"By Sithis, you got here quickly. Don't tell me Elbent killed the horses I gave him." Nazir hated the thought of wasting coin and nothing was quite as wasteful as losing horses.

"No, we rode a dragon!" Cicero laughed as he hurled himself at Nazir. Nazir grimaced as the jester hugged him tightly. "Oh, Cicero has missed the Speaker's cooking. It is just not as delicious without Nazir's grumbling and preening."

"Speaker?" the initiate said, obviously confused.

"You haven't met Cicero," Nazir said, trying to not sigh and failing pretty miserably. "He's the Keeper."

"He is?" The initiate sounded doubtful, as if this was some sort of strange prank from this Speaker. Not that Nazir's humor tended to run towards the bizarre.

"Oh, yes!" Cicero chirped as he turned to the initiate and threw himself into the young man's arms. "Cicero Keeps the Night Mother. He tends to her coffin. Oils her, preserves hers… makes her happy."

"Um," the initiate stammered.

"You're dismissed," Nazir said, feeling sorry for the young one. "Let the others know I'll be in my office talking to the Listener and her companions."

"Yes, sir!" the initiate said gratefully before taking off.

Cicero's smile faded as soon as the initiate was out of sight. "Is Garnag okay?" the Keeper asked, his expression worried.

"As well as a dying man can be, I suppose," Nazir said calmly. He'd had to deal with Cicero for years before being relocated to Wayrest; it would take a lot before he would be fazed by the madman's eccentric behavior. The Redguard escorted them to his office where he offered them seats before settling behind his desk. "He's comfortable in his bed. Old man can barely see out of the one good eye, but he knows who he is and where he is, which is more than I can say about some I've seen going through the process."

Aventus shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, starkly reminded of his period of catatonia right before he had left for the Bard's college. He had been one of the living dead for almost a week before finally recovering. He had never publicly spoken about what had caused his emotional crisis, and as with most things in the Brotherhood, no one had pressed him on it.

"If Garnag is up to it, I think we should see him now," Hecate said. "Individually so we don't strain him too much. Aventus will be first, then me, then Cicero."

"Why that order?" Aventus asked.

"Because I said so," Hecate said vaguely.

"Is that okay with you, Cicero?" Aventus asked. He didn't want the Keeper to throw a fit about the matter. He was surprised to see that the Keeper had pushed his chair to be closer to the Listener and that he was holding her hand.

"Yes, yes, that is fine," Cicero said vaguely, his gaze far off. Aventus suspected that Cicero wasn't
completely in the now. It happened on occasion that the Keeper would get lost in his memories.

"It was good seeing you, Nazir," Aventus said as he stood. "I'd like to talk with you some afterwards."

"Any time, Aventus," Nazir smiled. "Garnag's room is down the hall, last one on the left."

The next several minutes passed as Nazir and Hecate discussed business while Cicero quietly sat as close to the Listener as possible. Nazir actually felt more nervous with Cicero being so quiet than when the Fool was being his usual loud self, but at least Hecate was nearby to curb any outbursts. When Aventus returned, Hecate gave Cicero a small kiss on the cheek and patted his shoulder as she stood. "I'll be back soon," she promised.

"Cicero wants to wait outside," the Keeper insisted.

"As you wish," the Listener said gently as she took Cicero's hand and the two of them exited Nazir's office.

When Hecate entered Garnag's room, she was surprised to see how dark it was. There was a lone candle by the bed, but it did little to push away the darkness.

"Don't they give you enough light?" she asked as she stumbled towards the bed.

"I can barely see anyway," Garnag chuckled. "No sense in wasting, right? Besides, I've come to find the lack of light comforting. It's like a day fading into night. The Void embracing me as I slide slowly into it."

"So poetic," Hecate teased. "Maybe I should have sent you with Aventus to the Bards College."

"I've had a long enough life without having added that," Garnag countered. He squeezed Hecate's fingers when she picked up his hand with hers. "Thank you for coming. Aventus told me how you arrived so quickly. Clever and convenient."

"Hmph," Hecate snorted. "That was Cicero's idea."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I say that a lot when talking about the Fool of Hearts," Hecate said with a small smile. "He's here, did Aventus tell you that?"

"Yes," Garnag admitted, "I never thought he would be able to make it. I cannot thank you enough, Listener."

"I know the two of you shared a bond," Hecate said, stroking the old orc's hand, "being the last two of Cheydinhal."

"I think I was a little in love with him," Garnag confessed.

"That's easy to do with Cicero," Hecate snorted. "It's liking him that is hard. I envied that you knew him before."

"You shouldn't," Garnag said softly. "It was like seeing another man wearing the skin of someone you used to know."
"Do you regret coming here?" Hecate asked.

"No," Garnag sighed, "I think I was tearing him apart. He couldn't handle being whatever he had become to survive and reconcile it with who he used to be. I missed him, but it was better that I left. Besides, it was for the growth of the Brotherhood, the return of the Black Hand's grasp across Tamriel. How could I deny that?"

"You're a good brother, Garnag," Hecate said as she kissed his forehead. "It was an honor knowing you."

"It was an honor serving under you, Listener Hecate," the old orc responded.

After the Listener left, long minutes passed in silence.

"You're going to have to come over here, Cicero," Garnag said finally, when he realized that the Keeper wasn't going to move. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You called me by my name," the Imperial said with wonder in his voice. He appeared in Garnag's vision, wringing his gloved hands in worry. "What happened to 'Chickpea'?"

_I wonder that sometimes_, Garnag thought. Instead he answered, "I think we're past silly nicknames now."

"It's okay for Cicero to be the Fool of Hearts?" the Keeper asked sadly.

"Yes."

"Good, good." Cicero paused as he sat on the edge of the bed. His amber eyes were wide and looked so lost that Garnag was afraid that he was going to cry. "You left," Cicero suddenly said accusingly. "Garnag left and poor Cicero was alone. All alone with Mother and the silence. Because Garnag left!"

"I'm sorry," the orc said. He feared Cicero would ask if it was on purpose. If Garnag had decided to run away instead of coming back as he had promised. The orc had never told anyone that he hadn't tried to escape the guards as hard as he should have because he couldn't stand to go back to Cicero and his wide, needing, crazy eyes.

Instead, Cicero asked, "What it because of what I had asked of you? Was it because we killed Vasha for his lies?"

There had been some of that. It had been so incredibly hard to kill the Khajiit Speaker, to go against the Tenets after they had been so thoroughly ingrained into Garnag's soul.

Thankfully, Cicero didn't wait for a reply. He bent close to Garnag's face and whispered, his voice low and deep, unlike his normal speaking voice. "Sweet Garnag. Such a loyal brother. Such a good brother to Cicero."

The Keeper's lips brushed against Garnag's enveloping the old orc into a kiss that took him back to twenty years ago before his imprisonment in the Imperial prison, before Cicero had gone completely mad.

Cicero pulled back the blankets that covered Garnag and slipped in between them to nestle next to the mage. He rested his head on the orc's shoulders, his cap put aside so that his red hair flared out around him like a fiery halo. His body warmth flooded Garnag, a pleasant sensation.
after feeling cold all the time.

"If I asked you to stay, would you?" Cicero asked as he continued to kiss the orc, similar to the tactics he had used to convince the orc to kill the Speaker. "What would it take to make you stay?"

"You vile tempter," Garnag laughed. "No wonder Hecate lets you get away with so much." He became somber. "Will she be okay with you doing this?"

"Sweet Hecate would understand," Cicero assured him. "She always understands."

"Still, the time for such things has passed as well," Garnag said with regret.

"I don't want to say goodbye," the Imperial admitted, his face buried against Garnag's neck. "Cicero hates goodbyes. Cicero hates when good things end."

"That's our job," Garnag said gently. "We give endings to those who have drawn the Night Mother's attention."

"Not for Cicero's family. Not for my family," the Keeper moaned.

"It's time for me to go to the Night Mother," Garnag said. "I have a favor to ask. I have said my farewells to all of those I need to. I don't want to spend any more time here counting the seconds until my final breath. Will you help me, brother?"

"Cicero understands," the Keeper said, his eyes dull. "Cicero understands and obeys."

---

**Middas, 12 Evening Star, 208 4E 12:00 AM**

Cicero quietly closed the door behind him when he exited Garnag's room. Hecate was waiting in the hall where he had last seen her, still leaning against the wall.

"Garnag is gone," Cicero said, looking down. "He has joined Mother in the Void."

"You didn't have to," Hecate said as she came over and wrapped her arms around Cicero. "I would have if you had needed me to."

"Sweet Hecate," Cicero chuckled as he kissed her ear and returned the hug. "Always so kind, especially to poor Cicero."

"This wasn't against the Tenets?" Hecate asked.

"No, no," Cicero shook his head. "Cicero always obeys the Tenets. It was a gift, freely given."

"The final gift," the Listener said as she took Cicero's hand, echoing the Black Door.

"Ours to give to those who deserve or need it," Cicero replied.

Fingers entwined, the Listener and Keeper walked down the hall to let the others know the news.
Lydia took a deep breath as she shifted in her meditative pose. She could hear the murmur of other prisoners of Castle Dour through the walls. Even after a few months, her presence still made them nervous. There were no other Stormcloaks here-only thieves, bandits, and murderers. The Imperial Legion had not been kind in taking prisoners when retaking their territory.

A notable side effect of hiring the Brotherhood to do their dirty work.

Personally, the Nord found it an insult to be left in the same place as these no good ruffians. She wasn't some common criminal. She wasn't even a criminal. Not really. She was just someone who was trying to save the people of Skyrim.

At least they had given her a private cell. Lydia didn't think she could have tolerated the first few weeks with a cellmate. There would have been either endless questions or some attempt to show who was the bigger bitch, and Lydia hadn't had the energy or patience for either.

Much of her time had been spent lying on her bed in an almost catatonic state. She had felt lost like she was floating on an endless sea with no hope of land in sight. She had lost her jarl, her thane, her honor, her lover, her son. And whenever the Imperials finally decided to have their grand show, she would lose her life too.

That wouldn't be so bad within itself. Lydia knew she had tried her best, and she had always done what she thought was necessary. She had fought for what she believed in. And she had lost, but that was no sin in itself. Many heroes in the songs had failed in their goals, but they had been accepted by their warrior brethren in Sovngarde nonetheless.

But she had lied and stolen in order to try to achieve greatness, and that would be unforgiven in the halls of Sovngarde. Her ancestors would judge her unworthy of that sacred place. No doubt she would be sent to one of the planes of Oblivion. She had no idea which one; she had never been one for religious study.

It didn't matter. She would find out soon enough. And she would go to the chopping block with as much dignity as she could muster. She might not have lived honorably, but she could at least die that way.

Instead, Lydia turned her attention to the Word Paarthurnax had left her.

Vo.

If only if she could discover what it meant! It felt like the final piece of a puzzle that if she could
figure out where it went, maybe her life would make sense again. At least some small part of it.

*Slen.* Flesh.

*Tiid.* Time.

*Vo.* What did it mean?

If she knew the last word, she would have a better chance of understanding the intent of the Shout. Was it a healing Shout? Maybe a time traveling Shout?

Much like a child with a puzzle box, Lydia mentally turned it over and over, trying to find the answer despite lacking the crucial piece. It was frustrating, but at least it was better than brooding about her fate or mourning her lost loved ones.

Part of her hated that her captors had held her for so long. No doubt they wanted her to get better before they took her to the headsman. It would be so much more satisfying for the crowd to see a healthy prisoner taken to her death instead of the weak, emaciated, broken person she had become.

But, for whatever reason, they hadn't tortured her. Not that there was anything she could have told them of value at this point. They had fed her, and they had even removed her gag once she was safely behind prison walls. She had time to think and to find peace with herself.

It was more than Yrsarald had gotten.

Or Ulfric.

Or… Elric.

Thinking about Elric still made her tear up. Her poor little boy. He never had a chance. If she had known she was going to lose him so early, she never would have sent him away. She would have kept him with her and read the songs and stories of heroes to him every night. She would have loved him and cherished him like he had deserved.

But mortals don't get to know what the gods intend for them, and she had made her choices for better or for worse.

There were loud footsteps out in the hall. By the sound of them, there were multiple people coming. Lydia sat up, suddenly at alert. Life in prison was one constant schedule, and there was never a reason for people to be coming through the halls this time of day. Unless they were bringing a prisoner, and Lydia's cell was at the end of the hall, so there was no reason for them to be stopping outside her cell door.

"Lydia Stormblade!" A woman's voice, muffled from the thick door, called. Lydia narrowed her eyes in concentration. The voice was familiar, but she couldn't place it. "I wish to speak with you. Do you swear on your honor that you'll not use your *thu'um* on me while we speak?"

"There's some who say I have no honor," Lydia replied, unable to stop herself from making a snarky comment.

The woman laughed sharply before responding, "There are those who insist you do, and I tend to trust them."

As much as she hated to admit it, Lydia was intrigued. She had almost no companionship outside of the occasional guard pushing food or a book through the small portal at the bottom of the door or
listening to the catcalls of the other prisoners. Who knew she was here and would want to talk to her? And who had referenced a good name for her?

"I swear if you do no harm to me, then I'll do no harm to you through action or Voice today," Lydia responded.

"I told you she would swear an oath," the woman told one of her companions.

"She's broken others," a man's voice grumbled.

"From a certain point of view," the woman replied mildly. "And isn't that what this war is about? Open the door."

The lock tumbled and the heavy door swung open to reveal Jarl Elisif the Fair, General Tullius, and several guards. Lydia immediately felt shabby in her prisoner's garbs, but forced herself to stand tall as the jarl entered her cell.

When Tullius moved to follow, the Nord halted him. "No, I wish to speak with her alone."

"She's a dangerous war criminal," he protested. "I can't leave you alone with her!"

"Lydia has given me her word on her honor," Elisif said calmly. "I trust her. And if I'm wrong, it'll make trying her that much easier, won't it?"

"I'm the general of the army and I control this barrack," Tullius retorted.

"And I'm jarl of this hold and will be High Queen some day soon, especially with the war almost over," Elisif countered. "And as your queen, my decisions are final!"

"I liked you better when you had less backbone," Tullius grumbled as he stepped back into the hall.

"I'm sure you're not the only one," Elisif smiled. As the door swung to a close, she turned to Lydia. "You look much better than when I last saw you. If I had known you were so ragged, I would have had them keep you in Riften until you were more fully healed."

"I wished you had," Lydia responded. "Sibbi Black-Briar felt obligated to describe to me every luxury he had at his fingertips in the Riften jail during his nine month stay."

Elisif shook her head as she took the cell's sole chair. "Riften's corruption is one of the first things I wish to tackle once the civil war is over."

"A bit hard to do considering you made one of the primary corrupting forces your representative there," Lydia said coldly.

"Maven Black-Briar is a fine upstanding business woman who has no criminal background," Elisif snorted, "and is well liked by the Thalmor. Besides, it was she who orchestrated your capture and made a deal with Laila Law-Giver for jarldom."

"A dangerous position for you since it means she's eligible for High Queen," Lydia reminded her. Solitude might traditionally provide the High King or Queen, but the Moot could choose any jarl to rule.

"Maven doesn't strike me as the type who either moves too quickly or is too greedy," Elisif shrugged. "Unless it takes a lot longer than I think it will, she won't have tired of her reign in Riften before I am High Queen."
"You're awfully confident of yourself." Lydia found herself both hating and admiring this woman. Elisif would never know battle like Lydia had and would always be loved for her beauty. Scars might be considered honorable and glorious in Nordic culture, but Cicero's cut had left Lydia with a permanent half-frown from how it had twisted while it had healed.

"I have every reason to be. I'm jarl of Solitude, I have the support of the Dragonborn, and I have the leader of the Stormcloaks in my prison." Elisif placed her hands on her knee as she leaned back. "What more could I need?"

"You tell me."

"I need this war to officially be over," Elisif told her. "I need you to turn over control of Eastmarch to Brunwulf Free-Winter. Once that happens, the holds following the Stormcloaks will fall. Empire-loyal jarls will replace the current ones and we'll finally have peace."

Lydia scoffed. "Why even ask me to do this? Why not just take me to the chopping block? The Nine know that the Imperials love a good beheading!"

"Because I made a promise," Elisif said, "and as a true Nord I keep my promises."

"And what promise was that?"

"That you wouldn't die dishonorably if Diana Dragonborn helped the Legion retake Whiterun." Elisif nodded when she saw Lydia's look of disbelief. "The conversation was to something more specific than this, but I think the intent applies. Diana has done everything she could to keep you alive despite your betrayal. I don't think most people would have let you live after what you did, stealing her name, but she seems to have largely forgiven you."

"She forgave me?" Lydia snarled. "That's rich, considering what she had done."

"Oh?" Elisif asked simply, arching an eyebrow.

Lydia paused, not sure what to do. Tell Elisif or not? Then she decided that she didn't care any more. There was literally nothing left to lose. "She's the head of the Dark Brotherhood. She's the one who's been going around killing all of those people, including Ulfric Stormcloak."

"Is that so?" Elisif asked, leaning forward on her knees. "You really think that?"

Lydia blinked, surprised at Elisif's reaction. She had expected rage at Lydia's claim, disgust at the truth, or shocked silence. She had not been prepared for this calm acceptance.

"Because I'd think very carefully on this if I were you," Elisif continued. "Diana's already proven that she's stronger than you in the thu'um and that she can beat you in a fair fight."

"But you believe me?" Lydia asked, hopeful for the first time in months. Maybe if she could make Diana lose Solitude's sponsorship, there could be a chance for revenge. Maybe Elisif would allow her to keep Windhelm in the pursuit of destroying the Brotherhood.

The jarl laughed as she sat back. "Honestly, I don't know. It's too crazy to believe, but it's also too crazy to just make up. But I do know this. Diana could kill you with a simple word, whether it be a Shout or request of someone who likes her. And she has a lot of people who like her that would love the honor of killing you. So, unless you're suicidal, I recommend not repeating that to anyone ever again. Because the next person might not be as receptive as I."

Lydia's hopes came crashing down as she watched Elisif stand and put the chair away. "Take the
deal, Lydia. You won't get a better one. And few people get a second chance. Give Windhelm to Brunwulf on Old Life Day and come to your cousin's wedding on New Life Day. Start over."

"With what? I have nothing left," Lydia said bitterly.

"That's usually the best time to start over," Elisif said.

Turdas, 1 Morning Star 209 4E 12:00 PM

In the end Lydia took the deal. She spent most of the week meditating, her thoughts on a phrase Ulfric had taught her: *Su'um ahrk morah*-breath and focus. The Way of the Voice depended on those two concepts fundamentally. Breath was needed for Words and focus was needed for control.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Lydia felt like she had a chance to be in control of her life. She was no longer a housecarl stuck with the whims of a flighty thane, she was not sworn to any living jarl, she was not the leader of a rebellion. She was just Lydia. For the first time, she was only responsible for herself.

Honor wasn't about succeeding. Many heroes of the ages died in their struggles. Honor was about never giving up. Dying now wouldn't be honorable because too much of her cause had been wrapped up in a lie. And dying would be easy.

But living, having a second chance to earn her name truthfully, that was hard. She could find a way to redeem herself so one day her ancestors could smile down on her.

It was still with a bitter heart that she signed over jarldom to Brunwulf Free-Winter. Part of her felt she had failed Ulfric, but mostly she felt she had failed Elric. It was supposed to be his throne, but he was gone to wherever children go when they die. At least the old soldier was an honorable one and well loved in Windhelm.

He had shaken her hand, looking her in the eye when he did it. "I will do the throne of Ysgramor honor," he promised.

"You better," she had replied before stepping down to let the Imperial representatives swarm Eastmarch's newest jarl with contracts and petitions to sign.

Falk Firebeard, Elisif's steward, had shown her a room. He had been professional enough to not give his personal opinions on the matter, but Lydia got the distinct impression he didn't approve and would be checking the silverware after she left to make sure it was still all there.

Now she was standing before a mirror getting dressed for the wedding. She was wearing Ulfric's wolfskin cloak, probably not the best fashion or political statement right now, but it was the only clothing she owned. If someone had a problem with it, they could deal with it.

She jumped at the sound of a knock at the door. Who would be here?

The door swung open to reveal her father Hrongar and uncle Balgruuf. Lydia swallowed hard, not sure what to expect from the two older men. Hrongar had been particularly vocal about being more active against the Stormcloaks while Balgruuf had been more silently disdainful of Ulfric's motives for the war.

"Lydia," Hrongar growled gruffly. Suddenly Lydia wished she had asked Elisif for new clothes after all. Her father had been fond of claiming to be a living weapon that only needed to be pointed at a target. "Lydia," he repeated, swallowing hard, "my little girl." Then he was across the room,
crushing her in his arms. "Gods, I can't believe I've gotten to see you again alive."

Balgruuf smiled sadly as he followed his younger brother into the room, closing the door behind him. He waited until Hrongar was done thumping her on the back, before giving her a brief hug.

"You look better than you did when you arrived," he rumbled.

"You saw me?"

"Aye, looking little more than skin and bones," Balgruuf said.

"Did those Black-Briar bastards starve you, girl?" Hrongar interrupted.

"No, I was still healing from my fight with Diana," Lydia said, looking down. "You're not mad at me?"

"Oh, we're furious," Balgruuf admitted. Hrongar nodded a little too enthusiastically. "But if Jarl Elisif has seen fit to forgive you, how could we do any less as your family? We still love you even if you picked the wrong side. By the Eight, isn't that one of the biggest messages we'll need to be spreading in the months to follow? That those who chose the Stormcloaks aren't going to be put to the block."

"Damn, lass, I have to admit as mad as I was, I was impressed by how well you did for yourself!" Hrongar laughed. "My girl, the leader of an entire army! Balgruuf, I've always said I was a living weapon. Looks like my daughter is an even more literal version of that."

"Aye, she is," Balgruuf said mildly.

In that moment Lydia realized that neither of them knew she had had a son. That Hrongar had been a grandfather. She felt tears threatening to well up in her eyes, but she managed to swallow them down before they could fall. She took her father and uncle's hands into hers. "Thank you."

"We're family, girl," Hrongar insisted. "Family don't turn their back on their blood. No matter what happens."

_Turdas, 1 Morning Star 209 4E 2:00 PM_

"Definitely the strangest bride I ever laid eyes on," Hrongar commented.

"Are you referring to my son or his housecarl?" Balgruuf responded. The two men and Lydia were standing on the left side of the room in the place of honor for family members.

"I'm not sure," his brother admitted.

The courtroom of the Blue Palace was packed full of people who had gathered for the wedding. Jordis was already waiting at the front of the room with Elisif standing by her side. The young strawberry blonde warrior looked resplendent in her shining new steel armor. She grinned happily as Elisif presented her with a new axe with the Solitude crest branded on it. She also almost managed to not drop it before placing it on her belt. The dings would probably be buffed out the next time she honed it. Probably.

Frothar, on the other hand, was wearing some of the most colorful, frilly clothes Lydia had ever seen. "It's the newest fashion," he had bragged earlier when he had greeted his cousin with something like disinterest. "I bought it at the Radiant Raiment. It was specially made for my coloring in mind."
He was looking at his bride with mild amusement as she fumbled with her axe. He leaned forward and placed it in its sheath for her.

The priest stepped forward and held his arms up to gain the crowd's attention. "Let's begin the ceremony," he suggested. The bride and groom turned to face each other and held hands as the priest continued. "It was Mara that first gave birth to all of creation and pledged to watch over us as her children. It is from her love of us that we first learned to love one another. It is from this love that we learn that a life lived alone is no life at all. We gather here today, under Mara's loving gaze, to bear witness to the union of two souls in eternal companionship. May they journey forth together in this life and the next, in prosperity and poverty, and in joy and hardship. Do you agree to be bound together, in love, now and forever?"

It was no secret that this was a political marriage, but Lydia had to admit the two seemed to like each other well enough as they grinned while holding hands. Jordis wasn't as beautiful as her cousin, but she was pretty enough, especially when she blushed. It was the sort of beauty a warrior could maintain without worrying about scars or drawing the attention of other men to make her husband jealous.

"I do," Frothar said clearly. "Now and forever."

"I do!" Jordis practically yelled. She looked a bit confused at the polite laughter in the crowd. She blinked. "Well, I do." She bit her lip as she turned back to Frothar, squeezing his hand. "I promise as well to be your sword and your shield. Everything that is yours I will protect with my life. So I swear."

A cheer came from the crowd at her proclamation.

"Under the authority of Mara, the Divine of Love, I declare this couple to be wed," the priest declared. He pulled out a small box. "I present to the two of you with these matching rings, blessed by Mara's divine grace. May they protect each of you in your new life together."

Jordis squealed as Frothar placed her ring on her hand. Her own hands were shaking so much Frothar had to help her place his on. Her new husband kissed her ring before kissing her properly on the lips to the thrill of the crowd.

"Oh! I just realized I forgot to douse the fire at Proudspire!" Jordis exclaimed. She ran down the aisle and out of the Blue Palace.

"Jordis, come back," Frothar yelled, following her. "We can have someone else do that now!"

More laughter filled the crowd as the wayward couple exited. "Please enjoy the food and drink while we get our guests of honor back," Elisif called.

Lydia stayed close to her father who stayed close to Balgruuf as people mingled in the crowd. Irileth had materialized, glaring at her. The Dunmer glared at everyone who wasn't Balgruuf, so Lydia didn't take it too personally.

Some people looked at her curiously, but the general attitude of the crowd was accepting of Lydia's presence. Nords didn't forgive easily, but when they did, they forgave completely. It probably didn't hurt that no one wanted to risk the wrath of the Dragonborn by taking justice into their own hands.

As for the Dragonborn herself, she was in the back, wearing red and gold. It looked like Diana was laughing at something Jarl Idgroth Ravencrone had said.

For a moment, Lydia thought about going up to her and hugging her. Just let everything go and truly
start all over. Maybe Diana hadn't known Elric was there when the fire started and she had buried the boy when she discovered him. Maybe they could talk like Diana had wanted instead of fighting. Maybe they could still be friends. Diana had always liked traveling. Maybe she was tired of the assassin's life and the two of them could take to the road again like they used to.

Just as she was about to step forward and try to get Diana's attention, Cicero showed up with two drinks for them. His loud, shrill laughter carried over the murmur of the crowd.

Lydia scowled, tracing the ugly scar that marred her face thanks to him. That damnable jester!

As she watched the small Imperial take Diana's hand and dance with her, Lydia remembered that first night in Breezehome. Even back then it had been obvious Diana was infatuated with the crazy little man.

Diana had chosen him. That's why she had disappeared in Windhelm, to find the madman again. In the end, she would always choose Cicero over Lydia. And it hurt. Lydia had to admit that it hurt more than almost anything. She would never be first.

---

**Turdas, 1 Morning Star 209 4E 2:15 PM**

"Are you going to try to talk to her again?" Cicero asked Diana as they danced.

"Who?"

"You know who, silly girl."

"I don't know if there's anything to say," Diana admitted. "I'm pretty mad about the whole Paarthurnax thing still."

"You'll always be mad if you don't give her a chance to talk to you," Cicero admonished. "You'll pout, she'll simmer, and then we'll have to go through this whole thing all over again for another decade. Who's got the energy for that?"

"We don't even know if she's going to be here," she stalled.

"Elisif said she would, and we saw her next to Balgruuf during the ceremony," Cicero pushed.

"And you really think I could find her in this crowd?"

"It should be pretty easy since I saw her at the top of the stairs watching us," Cicero laughed.

Looking up, she saw her former housecarl on the balcony watching her. Lydia's face was stern amongst the sea of otherwise happy people. But the Nord had always been a solemn woman, even in the happiest of times.

"If I do, will you stop hassling me?" Diana sighed.

"Never."

"Your diplomacy skills never cease to amaze," Diana grumbled as she broke away from the dance to head up the stairs.

The Dragonborn would never admit it, but she was nervous as she made her way to the upper level. Every time Lydia and she had crossed paths since she had joined the Brotherhood had ended in disaster, one way or another.
Unfortunately, Cicero had a point, as he frequently did. They could never forgive each other if they
never had a chance to reconcile. Too much of this feud had resulted because Diana hadn't been able
to confide in Lydia as she learned to do with Cicero.

Maybe if she had told her she was going away, none of this would have happened. Maybe Lydia
wouldn't have fallen to Ulfric's charms and become his weapon. Maybe she would have found a life
of her own and been happy instead of chasing shadows all these years.

And maybe, just maybe, Diana could actually tell her all this and give Lydia the satisfaction of
hearing her admit she was wrong and she had screwed up.

But when she reached the top, Lydia was gone.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loredas, 20 Summer's Height 209 4E 3:00 PM

No matter how much Hecate looked, she couldn't find Lydia. After the wedding, she used some of her contacts throughout out Skyrim to keep an eye out for the former warlord. Very rarely there would be a rumor of a Nordic woman fitting her description, but no one was ever able to positively identify her and by the time Hecate could look for her, she would be long gone.

If she had ever been there to begin with.

"I can't really be mad at her," the Listener admitted one day while she and Cicero were cloud watching. She was lying on her back with her arms crossed behind her head with the Keeper beside her. "It's no worse than what I did to her by disappearing off the face of Nirn."

"True, true," Cicero giggled. "Maybe she learned from you! But Cicero wonders why Hecate is trying so hard. It's not like you to pursue someone who wants to be left alone."

"There's something I need to tell her," she said softly. "Something long overdue."

"Aw! Are you going to profess your love for her?" Cicero asked, sitting up abruptly. He grinned wickedly as he loomed over her. "Do you wish to hold her close and kiss her and bury your face in her bosom as you blush prettily and mewl those three special words?"

"I do not mewl!" Hecate protested. She swatted the jester. "Stop being weird, you weirdo!"

"You do, you do! You mewl so prettily when Cicero makes sweet love to you!" He howled with laughter.

"Shut up!" Hecate blushed. "Besides, I told her I loved her once a long time ago when we traveled together."

"Ooooh!" Cicero mock gasped. "But you won't tell sweet Cicero? You horrible harlot!" He latched himself around her waist, rubbing his face against her bottom. "Why not?"

"Because you're a horrible brat!" Hecate laughed as she tried to get away, only to end up dragging the jester across the field. "Brat, brat, brat!"

He only let go after she grabbed his motley cap and waved it above his head. "Ha, ha! I have your hat! What are you doing to do about it? Nothing, nothing!"

The two jesters ended up running through the flowers, screaming and screeching their heads off until Cicero managed to tackle his Listener. "Hm, it seems I have you at my mercy now."

"I wouldn't say now," Hecate murmured as she kissed him. "I think you've had me for a while."

"And I'm never letting you go."

"Good. I don't want to go any where." She sighed as Cicero kissed her neck, his hands busy undoing her top. "I'm happy right where I am."
Afterwards, they laid naked in each other's arms. Clothes were scattered all around them, and Hecate didn't look forward to trying to find them all later. But for now she was happy lying in the warm sun as the tall grass whispered in the summer breeze with her lover's arms around her.

"I like when it's hot like this," she said as she wiped a bead of sweat trailing down her face. "You can always depend on a day or two of heat during Summer's Height. The rest of the year is just snow, snow, snow. I have to admit that I miss Cyrodiil sometimes."

"Do you want to go back?" Cicero asked. He sat up and leaned on his arm, his shadow falling over her.

"Could we?"

"I don't see why not," Cicero admitted. "Alissan Dupre used to live by herself in Bravil, guarding the Night Mother's resting place. She would make it her duty to visit all of the Sanctuaries to see how everyone was doing and to make sure the Tenets were in place. It wouldn't be a bad practice to pick up again since you're reopening Sanctuaries." He grinned wickedly. "It would be even easier for you since you have the favor of a dragon."

"I am not going to show a dragon where all of the Sanctuaries of the Brotherhood are," Hecate scoffed. "Just...no."

"In all seriousness, we can do whatever you want, as long as we take the Night Mother with us," Cicero said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "You, me, and Mother make three."

"Would you like that?" Hecate asked, reaching up to trail her fingers through his fine, red hair.

"Not really," Cicero said with a sad smile. "Cicero likes living with his family, surrounded by brothers and sisters aplenty. Cicero would be happy with the Listener and Mother, but it would be too, too, too quiet us all alone."

"Hm, well, I suppose I'll just have to stay here then," Hecate said. "It's not like we can't change our minds later."

"True, true."

Long minutes passed quietly between them before Hecate spoke again. "Do you think I'll ever find her? Do you think I'll ever see Lydia again?"

Cicero bit on his lip as he thought. "It's not very likely. Skyrim is a big country. And she might have left with the borders being opened to Cyrodiil again. There's no reason to think she stayed and plenty of reasons for her to leave. She could be anywhere in Tamriel or even Nirn if she wanted."

"So, no, eh?" Hecate sighed. She felt like crying.

"I never said that," the Fool of Hearts laughed. "I said it was unlikely. But it was just as unlikely that I would ever find the Listener. I tried and tried and tried for so very long. Mother and I waited for you for a long time, you know." He brushed his hand against her cheek, wiping away a tear. "But no matter how many years passed, Cicero never gave up because he knew that you were out there waiting for him too. And against all odds, I found you."

"I'm glad," Hecate whispered, holding Cicero's hand tightly.
"Me too." He kissed her as his hands roamed over her body. "You do have the Night Mother's own luck and are the Fool of Fate." He grinned wickedly. "An assassin of the Brotherhood always finds their target. If anyone will find Lydia Stormblade, it'll be you."

**Middas, 29 Hearthfire 212 4E 3:00 PM**

"I finally found you!"

Lydia groaned as she looked up at the beaming face of her arch-nemesis. Three years had not been nearly long enough time away from Diana Dragonborn, yet somehow the Imperial had found her in the small village of Ivarstead.

Without waiting for an invite and apparently missing Lydia's glare, the petite Imperial plopped herself in a chair next to Lydia. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you forever."

The Nord sniffed, not deigning to answer the other woman's questions as she drained her mug. She slammed it down and signaled the maid to bring her another. She nodded gratefully when Lynly filled her drink, but scowled when the server took an order from Diana.

"You can't talk, can you?" Diana said softly after Lynly gave her a glass of wine. She swirled the red liquid slowly as she watched Lydia's face. "Your Voice fully broke, didn't it?"

Lydia frowned as she nodded. She had always been a rather laconic woman, but she had never realized how much she needed to talk in the course of a normal day until she couldn't. Anything past a few words would cause her *thul'um* to activate.

"What caused it?" Diana asked. Lydia just gave her a flat look. "Oh, right." She looked around as she thought. "I know some place we can talk. Come on."

The Imperial threw a few coins on the table and left without checking to see if Lydia would follow her. Lydia huffed at the woman's arrogance. It was just like her former thane to just assume she would follow her.

Lydia took a sip of her mead as she considered ignoring Diana. She could just stay here and keep drinking until she was too drunk to think. Then she could stumble into her room and pass out until the next day. Then she could get up and go searching for more Word Walls.

Instead, she sighed as she also placed some more coins on the table before going outside. Now that Diana had found her, she'd probably hound Lydia to no end until she got what she wanted.

The wind was cold as Lydia stepped outside. Summer wasn't quite over, but here in the shadow the Throat of the World, it was much colder than other parts of Skyrim. Snowflakes danced in the afternoon sun as she went to the stables.

Diana had already paid for Lydia's horse's stabling and was petting it. "Did you know I bought Number Six here after I defeated Alduin?" she mused out loud. She laughed at the memory. "My poor horses, dying all the time. It seemed like I was some sort of bad luck charm for them."

She handed the reins over to Lydia before mounting her own black mare. "Well, I have Shadowmere now and she's served me well for the last nine years." The horse seemed to watch Lydia warily before Diana turned her away. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Lydia asked. Even those few words made the world shake slightly, startling her horse.
"High Hrothgar," Diana answered. "If you can talk safely anywhere, it'll be there."

**Turdas, 30 Hearthfire 212 4E 11:00 AM**

"You have to admit that it's an amazing view," Diana said.

The two of them were standing behind High Hrothgar. Skyrim spread out below them as far as the eye could see. The particular view was of Windhelm, and even from here Lydia could see the Palace of the Kings next to the sparkling bay. Her heart wrenched at the sight of her last real home.

The last day had been spent ascending the Seven Thousand Steps. Diana had stopped at each shrine to dust off snow and other debris and give a small prayer, but otherwise the trip had been a quiet one.

"It is."

"Ah, ready to talk?" Diana chuckled.

"I guess," the Nord sighed.

"Where have you been?" Diana asked. She sat down so her feet were dangling off the edge of the cliff. For a moment Lydia considered shoving her former thane off the side, but discarded it as too cowardly.

Lydia was personally uncomfortable with how high up they were, but she would be damned to Oblivion before she voiced that. She plopped down next to Diana instead. She took a deep breath, not sure if her voice would cooperate. "I've been searching for Word Walls. I've spent a lot of time in barrows and old ruins."

"That explains why no one has seen you in the last few years," Diana mused. "What were you looking for exactly?"

"A Word, obviously," Lydia sniffed. She rubbed her throat, still surprised that her *thu'um* wasn't activating. She had always heard that it was peaceful up here away from the rest of the world, but she was astonished how quickly it seemed to be working on her.

"Obviously." Diana paused. "You haven't asked the Greybeards about it, have you?"

"No, I didn't think they would want to talk to me," Lydia admitted. "Or whatever passes for talking among them. Ulfric told me that there had been an argument between him and Master Arngeir about him joining the Legion during the Great War. Apparently they strongly disapprove of making war."

"I bet they haven't even heard of your reputation," Diana said. "Other than what I've told them."

"And why would you have been talking about me?" Lydia asked sharply.

"Why do you think I'm the reason your Voice broke?" Diana countered.

"Are you serious? Do you really need to ask me that? You ruined my life!" An echo bounced on the cliffs below from Lydia's voice. Rocks and snow came loose, cascading dangerously. The Nord paused, watching the effect of her words on the world around her. She sighed as she took a deep breath before starting again. "Everything that has gone wrong for the last ten years is because of you."

Diana frowned. "That's a little unfair."

"Not really!" Lydia counted on her fingers. "You disappeared on me, making me think I had failed
my duty. You had the nerve to return after dying for three years. You killed Ulfric. You turned out to be not only a Dark Brotherhood assassin, but their leader! You couldn't just leave well enough alone, no! You just had to get involved in politics, insisting that you were the Dragonborn instead of letting me have it after you obviously didn't want it any more. You ruined my reputation. You ruined my face. You took away my home. You killed my allies. You killed..." Lydia choked, unable to say that last part. Even now it hurt too much to think about Elric.

Hands were pulling her down, and Lydia found her face buried in soft hair. Only then did she realize that she was crying. Diana was making gentle shushing sounds as she hugged the taller woman.

"I'm sorry," Lydia wailed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I lied. I just thought you were dead and I had failed you and I kept asking myself over and over what you would do and what you would believe in and I thought that you'd want to help people and save lives. But instead all I did was make it worse. I made it so much worse, but I wanted to save my home."

She sniffed as she lifted her head. Cautiously, she looked at Diana. "Do you understand?"

"I couldn't understand a single word you said," Diana said with a broad smile. "But you feel better, right?"

Lydia growled as she pinched her nose. This was just so typical of her former Thane! "Do you ever listen to anyone?"

"More than you might realize," the Imperial chuckled. She moved to hug Lydia again, but was pushed away. "Sorry, but you were muffled and ranting. But if you want to talk more, I always want to listen to you. Just say whatever you feel like you need to. I want to help."

It hurt so much how sincere Diana sounded. Her eyes were wide and bright as she smiled her private smile. Lydia felt a moment of jealousy that the Dragonborn hadn't seemed to age a single day in the last ten years while Lydia was scarred and starting to get gray and more than a few wrinkles.

She wanted to tell Diana that she hated her for all of her fortune.

She was jealous of Diana choosing Cicero over her. She was jealous of Diana choosing the Brotherhood over her.

She wanted to tell her how much it had hurt to be abandoned.

She wanted to tell Diana that she missed her.

She wanted to tell Diana that she loved her.

There were too many emotions, all crowding in her throat wanting to get out. Lydia clasped her hands as she tried to find her voice. She looked at her thane and thought for a moment that it would be okay. They could start over. There would be plenty of time to say all of those things. They didn't have to be enemies. They could be friends again and make everything right.

"I want to see Elric," Lydia finally managed to say. "I want you to take me to his grave so I can finally say goodbye." It was probably near the ruins of Sky Haven Temple. They could travel together, and on the way they could talk about their lives since they parted ways. Maybe Lydia could finally understand why Diana had given up the life of a hero for that of a villain, and Lydia could explain why she had thrown her honor away. "If you could go to the Reach, that is."

"Why would we go to the Reach?"
"That's where he's buried, right?" Lydia asked, surprised by Diana's reaction. "You buried him near Sky Haven Temple, right?"

"Lydia, he's not dead," Diana said gently.

Lydia's attention was drawn away by a small hooded, robed figure walking up to them.

"He's here at High Hrothgar."

The figure stopped a few feet away from them. He pulled back his hood to reveal a boy of about nine. His fine blonde hair fell into his face. He had his daddy's broad nose and brow, but his eyes and chin were Lydia's.

"Elric," Lydia whispered, tears coursing down her cheeks. She ran to the boy and cupped his face in her hands. "By the Nine! I can't believe that you're alive! My little boy!"

The child looked at her with confused eyes as she hugged him.

"Why doesn't he talk?" Lydia asked. Elric should have had so many questions. He had been so little when she had sent him to Sky Haven Temple. It wouldn't have surprised her if he didn't recognize her.

"He's taken a vow of silence," Diana answered. "He's a Greybeard. Or an apprentice, I guess."

"You knew this whole time," Lydia growled. "You knew where he was, and you knew that I thought he was dead. And you didn't tell me? How could you? How could you have let me think he was dead this whole time?"

"Hey, I tried!" Diana countered. "I tried to tell you during our duel and you wouldn't listen. Remember?"

"You couldn't have written me a letter?" Lydia demanded. "Or found some other way to let me know?"

"Would you really have believed me if I hadn't told you personally? By the Void, you didn't even believe me when I tried to tell you in person. I was going to tell you at the wedding, but you disappeared before I could!"

"Don't blame me for your bad decisions! Talos, this is just so like you! You ruin everything you touch." Lydia scowled as she wrapped her arms protectively around Elric. "You knew what learning the Voice was like, and yet still you decide to teach it to a little boy! What is wrong with you? What is so fundamentally fucked up about you that you would do such a thing?"

"I didn't intentionally teach him a Fire Shout!" Diana yelled. Snow was falling all around them, shook loose from the mountain by the force of the women's Voices. "It was an accident!"

"How do you accidentally teach someone to Shout?" Lydia threw her arm out. "It takes years, months at the least, to learn a Word."

"Because he's Dragonborn, you twat!"

"Don't lie to me," Lydia narrowed her eyes as she spat. "Why would you even say that?"

"Because it's true!" Diana threw back. "I'm just so very, very sick of you calling me a liar all the gods damned time. I've done nothing but tell you the truth and you just never like what I have to
The two women were inches apart now, almost ready to come to blows. "Ladies, please. This is a place of peace. And usually quiet. Could you please stop screaming at each other?" They turned as one, both with identical looks of guilt, towards Master Arngeir. The Greybeards were gathered below them, all with looks of disapproval.

Elric broke away from the fighting couple and hid behind Master Arngeir. The Greybeard leader pulled the boy's hood up and back into place. "It's okay now, child. Sometimes people need to yell in order to know how to talk."

"I'm done talking with her," Lydia spat. She glared at Diana. "I have nothing more to say to her. Ever!"

The Imperial held her hands up in a surrendering motion. "I didn't come here to fight with you," she said sadly. "Lydia, if I could undo everything that had happened to you, I gladly would. I never wanted to hurt you, and if I could I would take your burdens for my own." She turned to the Greybeards. "I'll be leaving."

As the Dragonborn left, Arngeir and the older Greybeards followed her, presumably to discuss what had happened. Lydia knelt and held her arms out to Elric. "Do you know who I am?"

He nodded before whispering, "You're my mama."

"You remember me?" Lydia's heart soared.

The child shook his head. "Diana told me about you. Showed me pictures." He frowned. "Will she come back? She's my friend. She teaches me about the \textit{thu'um}."

"I'll teach you now," Lydia said. "You don't want to be near her. She's a bad person."

"No she isn't!" Elric yelled. Fire erupted from his mouth.

Lydia gasped as she fell back from the spout of flame. Fire! Elric's first word had been fire. Why in the world would Diana have taught him such a thing? And why in Nirn would he think she was his friend? What had happened at Sky Haven Temple?

"Tell me about her then," she said gently. "Tell me how you met her."

Elric pouted before nodding. "I was playing hide and seek with Esbern," he began.

---

**Turdas, 30 Hearthfire 212 4E 4:00 PM**

"Would you care for some tea?" Arngeir offered. "There's stew too if you're hungry."

"Maybe a bit of bread," Lydia said, her stomach growling to remind her that she hadn't eaten all day. She had just tucked Elric into his bed for an afternoon nap. The retelling of how he had discovered he was Dragonborn had left him shaken and exhausted. Lydia knew she didn't feel much better having heard the tale. Diana had done nothing in the last three years to help the boy get over the trauma of killing Blades members and the guilt of his friends' deaths. It made her shake with fury at the thought. "You're not going to make me leave?"

"No, I think you have a great need to be here," Arngeir said, handing her the heel of a loaf and some butter. "I'm sorry that you didn't realize that your son was alive. We don't really have any way to
contact with the outside world, but I suppose I should have realized that Diana wouldn't have been the best person to tell you. I should have taken matters into my own hands, but I've lived up here for so long, the rest of Skyrim is like a dream to me."

"There's plenty of blame to go around," Lydia said. She slowly spread the butter on the slice as she thought. "I have a favor to ask."

"Yes."

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask," Lydia said.

"I'd be shocked if it was anything other than the right to stay here and learn the Way of the Voice with us and your son. To teach him yourself as best as you can. Diana comes when she can, but she's an erratic teacher and he's a needy student. You can't learn Words as fast as her, but you learn them much faster than us, so it's a good compromise for the boy." Arngeir watched her as he sipped from his mug. "Does that sound about right?"

"Exactly on the dot," Lydia admitted. "You're pretty sharp, old man."

"I've been known to notice a thing or two at times," Arngeir laughed. "Where should we begin?"

"Vo. I need to know the meaning of vo. " Lydia took a deep breath. "And I need to learn it how you would. Slowly and with much wisdom."

"That statement alone shows you've started on the right path," the Greybeard smiled. "It means 'undo' and I'll gladly help you learn it as we would."

_Turds, 21 Hearthfire 218 4E 11:00 AM_

"Nervous?" Lydia asked as the gates of Windhelm loomed before them.

"A little," Elric admitted. "I don't even remember this place. What if something goes wrong? What if my thu'um activates?"

"Then you'll deal with it as we trained," his mother reassured him. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're a man grown now, Elric. You have a fine heritage and it's time you learned about it too. You shouldn't spend the rest of your life up on the Throat of the World."

The blond rubbed his cheek, grinning bashfully. "Ma," he half-complained, shy at her affection in front of all these people.

"I love you, son," she said, pulling him into a hug. "Nothing will ever change that. And it's time for you to earn your place in Sovngarde. And you can't do that just reading a book on a mountain."

"What about you? What are you going to do?" Elric asked. "You didn't come all the way down here to just escort me to my birthplace." He paused, worried. "Did you?"

"No, dear," Lydia laughed. "I have some unfinished business of my own too."

"I love you," Elric said suddenly. He pulled her in for another bear hug. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"I love you too," Lydia replied, choking back tears. "Be sure to write often, visit when you can, and for the love of Mara, don't die on me. I buried you once in my heart; I couldn't go through it again."
You hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

"Su'um ahrk morah," Lydia said.

"Breath and focus," her son replied. He waved one last time before turning and walking through the gate.

Lydia sighed as the gate swung closed. For better or for worse, her Dragonborn son was loosed in the world. She had done the best she could by him for these last five years. All she could do was pray to Talos that it was enough.

She left the busy trade route of the city and traveled up the hills north of Windhelm. She had come here once a long time ago, and she hoped she could remember the spot. At first the forest looked the same as it did everywhere, but then she turned and saw a stump that she had used as a landmark. It was simple after that to find the place she had buried Paarthurnax's bones.

"Let's see if this works," she said as she took a deep breath. She had carefully spent three years learning vo and then three more learning how the three words could work together. Most of the time she thought about the last thing Diana had said to her. About how she would undo the harm she had done if she could. Well, maybe Lydia could undo a little of the harm she had done to one who hadn't deserved it.

"TIID SLEN VO!"

__________

Turdas, 21 Hearthfire 218 4E 4:00 PM

"DOVAHKIIN!" Odahviing's Voice rang out through Dawnstar, drawing Hecate's attention. "DOVAHKIIN, come to me!"

The Listener heard the dragon's call even deep within the Sanctuary. She ran to the surface, watching the skies nervously. It wasn't like the red dragon to come looking for her. It was even worse that his tone was so frantic. She had always suspected that someday he would challenge her for dominance, and now she had to wonder if today was that day.

"What is it?" she called.

"Listen," he said simply as he landed roughly by her. "Listen with your little joor ears. Tell me what you hear."

"Zu'u lahney einzuk!" A Shout far in the distance, but loudly proclaimed so all of Nirn could hear if it so deigned to listen. And it was in a Voice familiar to her. "Zu'u lahney einzuk!"

Hecate laughed as she started to dance around the dragon. By now the other members of the Brotherhood had emerged from the Black Door and several of them were watching her with shocked expressions.

"What is it, Listener?" Cicero asked as he ran to her side. "What is it?"

Hecate grabbed her Keeper's hands and danced in a circle with him. Not quite sure why his Listener was so happy, he laughed along with her.

"He's alive! Paarthurnax is alive!" she sang.
"Yay!" Cicero cheered, obviously not that happy about the news, but happy for her. "Whoopie!"

"Yay and whoopie indeed!" Hecate laughed.

There was life in the air and it came as laughter in the wind.

The End

Huge thanks to everyone who stayed with me for this story. I know it was more about Lydia and less about Hecate and Cicero, but I really enjoyed telling it. Our poor housecarl has been through a lot and I'm glad she finally found peace.

Chapter End Notes

That's if folks. I hope you enjoyed it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!