

The Jagged Crown

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The Jagged Crown

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Summary

Galmar has a quest. The Dragonborn agrees. Ulfric comes along.

“Those were tasks necessary to your destiny as Dragonborn. This one isn’t. It’s something I’m asking of you. And as I have the time and the resources to accompany you, I shall.”

Seirian opened her mouth, closed it. “Fine. But please don’t make me have to explain to Galmar and all your supporters why I’m dragging the body of the once future High King of Skyrim back to Windhelm.”

“I think you’ll find me quite capable, Dragonborn,” Ulfric said.

Notes

I really don't know what this series is or if it ultimately has an endgame. Whenever I get ideas for these two, I write them up. For myself and whoever happens to be reading, I suppose.

This piece is directly follows *Fredas, 3 a.m.* (As in, happens around a week or so after.)

Also, I take prompts. If there's a scene you'd like to see between Seirian and Ulfric, let me know.

Mid-Day, Sondas, Windhelm

“Did I not just leave you in Winterhold? Are you pursuing me?”

Squinting up through the flurries of snow, Seirian spied Ulfric, on a horse the color of cream, trotting toward her. She could barely make him out through the storm.

“Mira Hlaalu’s baby is due any day. I promised I’d attend her. And I want to see how the Blades are handling the Gray Quarter security.”

“With deft and aplomb,” Ulfric said, swinging down off his horse and handing the reins to the stable hand. “Stonefist hasn’t made a peep in months.”

“That’s certainly better for his health and longevity.”

Ulfric’s eyes crinkled. “And where will you be staying during your visit?”

“Candlehearth Hall.”

“Ah. No more rooms available, I’m afraid. The inn is full of revelers come for the Moot.”

“It’s three weeks away!” Seirian tucked her cloak more tightly around her and headed toward the city gates. Ulfric followed. She could feel his amusement, both at her consternation and her unwillingness to stand on ceremony and wait for the Jarl to lead.

“You know Nords love a good celebration, my Dragonborn.”

Seirian huffed, breath frosting in the air. “I suppose the Hlaalus could put me up until after the birth.”

Ulfric made a sound suspiciously like a “tsk,” but that might have just been the settling of the old city doors as they guards pulled them open.

“Stay at the palace, Dragonborn. As my guest. I promise,” he continued, seeing her arched brow, “your virtue will be safe.”

A laugh strangled in Seirian’s throat as she coughed behind her hand. “I’m not sure there’s much virtue worth worrying about.”

“Intriguing.” Ulfric’s eyes glittered. Then, “You’ll have a room waiting. I also have something—a job, if you will—to talk with you about at dinner. Until then.” He gave a shallow nod that held all the courtliness of a bow and headed toward the palace.

Seirian stared after him for a moment before shaking her head and turning toward the Gray Quarter.

“The Jagged Crown,” Galmar said, “is made from the bones and teeth of ancient dragons. It’s said to contain a portion of the power of every High King of who has worn it.”

“And you want me to track down this piece of myth,” Seirian asked as she took a bite of roast chicken.

“It is not myth. And no, I’ve located it.”

“Or so you say,” Ulfric murmured into his goblet. Galmar shot him a filthy look. Seirian pretended to inspect the mash of vegetables on her plate.

“It’s at Korvanjund,” Galmar said.

“I’m well acquainted with crawling through Nordic ruins and if I’m going to risk life and limb for an adornment, I’d like to know why.”

“Galmar’s concerned about the legitimacy of my standing with the other jarls.”

“The Moot’s in three weeks. There are still Jarls who are expressing their doubts, perhaps not publicly, but I have ears in many private rooms. This crown, worn by the High Kings of old, will show you as the true ruler of Skyrim.”

“And may quell the rumblings that could lead to the start of another Civil War,” Seirian murmured.

“Even Balgruff will fall in line when he sees it,” Galmar said.

Seirian sipped her wine, put down the goblet with a heavy clunk. “Okay.”

Galmar raised his brows. “I wouldn’t have expected to have your support in putting Jarl Ulfric on the throne, Archmage.”

Seirian fixed her gaze on him. “I never officially chose a side in this war, as I believe you well knew when you had that archer shoot me down in the middle of Solitude.”

Galmar nodded, face placid.

“I don’t like war. It’s a waste of lives, a waste of resources. Death and destruction only breeds more of the same. I don’t like the Empire. They’re too entangled with the Aldmeri Dominion and they won’t stand ground where they should.”

Ulfric and Galmar shared similar expressions of smugness.

“That doesn’t mean,” Seirian paused, took another sip of wine, “that the Stormcloaks don’t have their own problems. Prejudice. Forgetting that this land isn’t just a home to Nords. It

might have been once, but not anymore. Tamriel is far too large and interconnected for that to continue to be the case.”

“So you’ve said, my Dragonborn. And I’ve heard.”

“Yes. You’ve shown you’re willing to listen and to act. The Blades have told me you’ve given them more resources, and financially helped those Dunmer who had property destroyed. If you weren’t that type of person,” she shrugged, “I would not be agreeing to this rock warbler chase.”

Ulfric stared at her for a moment, then finally said, “You’ll have a contingent of soldiers with you.”

“It would be best to leave tomorrow. Early,” Galmar offered.

“That’s all well and good, gentlemen, but I made a promise to deliver a baby and I’m not leaving until I do.”

Galmar frowned. “How long will that take?”

“As long as it takes, Galmar. Babies don’t follow a strict schedule. Though it has dropped and Mira’s having some pains... I believe it will be within the next three days.”

Galmar grumbled something unflattering under his breath, but Ulfric nodded, said “We can round up the contingent and be ready to go as soon as your obligations are fulfilled.”

#

Mira gave birth just before dawn on Tirdas.

Seirian thanked Mara that the birth was an easy one, though you wouldn’t know it to look at Belyn who had fainted dead away as the baby began to crown and who was still looking at little woozy as he sat by his wife’s side, cooing at the little one. The baby had been born with a shock of black hair, a shade of red-violet eyes that made Seirian think of the sunsets back in Shornhelm, and a set of lungs that let out a scream that could be heard throughout the Gray Quarter.

After making sure the Hlaalus had what they needed for the evening and denying Belyn’s offers to give her something in trade for her time, she dragged herself back to the palace where she informed Jorlief that her duty was done. Then she fell into her bed and slept until dinner time. She woke long enough to eat, bathe and pack essentials for the trip to Korvanjund.

In the pale hour before dawn, she met the small contingent of soldiers at the stables and saddled up a borrowed horse. As the commander rallied her people, Ulfric appeared next to Seirian on the same cream colored horse she’d seen him on when she’d arrived at the city.

“You need to be on horseback to see us off?”

He shot her a look, clearly unamused at this early hour of morning. “I’m coming with you, Dragonborn.”

“No.”

“Are you attempting to give me an order?” His tone was light but the steel in his eyes said he would not look kindly at such an attempt.

“No. Yes. I don’t—*why* are you coming? Isn’t your armed contingent enough?”

“No,” he said, “not where your safety is concerned.”

“Are we really going to have a conversation about my safety? Really? Me? Who flew on the back of a dragon to Skuldafn to find the portal to Sovngarde and put an end to Alduin’s reign?”

“Yes,” Ulfric said. “Those were tasks necessary to your destiny as Dragonborn. This one isn’t. It’s something I’m asking of you. And as I have the time and the resources to accompany you, I shall.”

Seirian opened her mouth, closed it. “Fine. But please don’t make me have to explain to Galmar and all your supporters why I’m dragging the body of the once future High King of Skyrim back to Windhelm.” She turned her horse toward the road, following the soldiers as they headed out.

“I think you’ll find me quite capable, Dragonborn,” Ulfric called, voice nearly lost to the wind.

#

They arrived at their destination in the late evening, having been halted by heavy snows and low visibility at several points during the journey. Korvanjund was half buried in the snow and they nearly missed the entrance to it in the settling dark.

A couple of bandits were camped out near the doors to the tomb, but they ran as they saw the party approaching. It was the first time bandits actually seemed to have more good sense than greed, Seirian thought.

They crowded into the antechamber just as the snowfall began to pick up, the wind howling like a wild creature through the trees and the stone archways of the ruin.

“It was a long journey,” Seirian said, pitching her voice so she could be heard over the murmur of conversation. “We’ll camp here tonight, go deeper into the tomb tomorrow. I want everyone starting fresh.” Where she had expected resistance, she found none as the soldiers spread out to settle down for the evening.

Wandering over to the doors that led into the tomb, Seirian considered them for a moment, then closed her eyes, visualized the electric arc of lightning, how it looked crossing the sky,

how it might look pooling in her hand and cast her fingertips toward the floor. The lightning rune glowed brightly for a moment before dimming, issuing a subtle hum that only those attuned to magic could hear. If anything tried to come through the door in the night, at the least they would be alerted. She thought doing the same to the main entry, then reconsidered at the idea of some poor soldier going to relieve himself in the middle of the night and setting off the rune. She could settle for the sentry the commander had posted.

With a warning to the nearby soldiers to stay clear of the inner door, Seirian headed for the fire the guard captain had gotten burning. She pulled her sodden cloak from her back and spread it out on a piece of broken stone to dry, then settled down in front of the fire, letting the flames warm the chill in her cheeks.

A piece of dried beef appeared in front of her, held aloft by a large hand. She blinked, took the food.

“Septim for your thoughts,” Ulfric said.

“I haven’t seen my children in weeks.” She’d kept the thought at bay, but being around Mira and her new family had brought back the heavy feeling in the pit of her belly, that feeling that she was not doing right by them, the little children that had fallen into her life, borne on the winds of a storm, the tide of blood spilled in war.

“How old are they?”

“Six and the other’s just turned three.”

“Young.”

“Young enough that the grief of losing their parents still makes them cry every time I leave them. Young enough to not understand why I must be gone so often. I’m not sure I understand it myself... Especially now. Alduin is gone. The Empire is out. The war is done. We’re at peace. Or as much as we ever can be.”

“And why must you be away so often?” Ulfric asked, drinking from a water skin before offering it to her.

“My duties to the College, mainly, at this point.”

“I imagine you won’t want to step down from your position as Archmage,” he said and she nodded. “Is delegation not an option?”

“That’s my next step. Tolfdur and some of the others aren’t keen on an Archmage who isn’t often in residence, but I’m working on them. Now that the war is over, post travels far faster and, well...let’s just say, as mages there are other ways of getting messages to each other that we should be working on perfecting.”

A slight smile curled Ulfric’s mouth then faded away as he looked into the fire. “Windhelm is quite a lot closer to Winterhold than Solitude.” He burst out laughing when she stared at him. “Spare me the dragon’s glare, please. I only mean, there’s a house for sale in the city. It’s a

good house. Plenty of room for the little ones. You'd have Wuunferth close by for discussions of spells, potions, hexes. And you can make the trek to Winterhold in under three days when the weather is clear."

She opened her mouth, shut it just as fast as he gave her the same steely look from that morning. "Would you say no, just because *I* offered the idea? I want you close, it's true. I've made that desire—and more—known. If the conversation we had at your College is any sign, I think we're getting somewhere with that. But this is not just about me or what we might have between us. Would you not make life easier on yourself and your children just because it means living in my city? I know you're stubborn, Dragonborn, but there comes a time when stubbornness can become spite and I have not known you to be spiteful."

That weight that had been sitting in her belly for weeks grew suddenly heavier and broke open in a flood of heat that raced through her veins, made her face burn. She looked away from Ulfric and into the flames again. It had been too long since she had someone willing to call her on the fierce and, she could admit, sometimes destructive independence she had cultivated.

She took a deep breath, let it out and turned back to him. He was still watching her and met her eyes.

"You're right," she said. "It's a much more reasonable location if I'm going to continue making regular trips to the College. I'll speak with Jorlief when we return."

"Good."

"And..." Seirian said, pushing the words out before she could rethink them, "I suppose you'll have to come to Sondas dinner after we're moved in and settled."

She felt Ulfric go very still beside her.

"An invitation to dinner, Dragonborn?"

"Well," she said, "we've already done the demanding one's presence at dinner. Or you have. And we—you've—done the surprise, late night dinner. And we've done the "you're here so you might as well dine with us," dinner. I think it's time we did something properly."

Ulfric's grin was wolfish. "I accept."

"Don't look too satisfied," Seirian said, turning back to watch the flames. "A few hours around my children may have you reconsidering this whole mess."

"Oh, my Dragonborn, don't you know by now that I love a challenge?"

###

There were no windows in the antechamber of Korvanjund but when Seirian woke, she knew it to be the small hours of morning. The air held a certain chill. The fire had burnt low as they slept. She stoked the embers, adding a few small pieces of wood and murmuring a flame spell. As the light and heat extended throughout the room, she heard coughs and curses as the soldiers began to stir. Across the fire from her, Ulfric sat up, eyes alert even as he yawned hugely and stretched before rising and beginning to pack up his bed roll and set it aside for later retrieval.

After a quick trip outside to relieve herself in the snow and a small breakfast of dried meat, bread and fruit, Seirian suggested they leave two men behind. They would need someone who could return to Windhelm with news if the worst should happen. Then she dismissed the sigil in front of the interior doors and they descended further into the tomb.

The captain took point, at Ulfric's command. Seirian followed close behind, letting go of the argument she wanted to make that, as someone who had likely been through more tombs than any of these soldiers combined, she should lead. She resolved to be extra vigilant.

Ulfric took up his place on her right side with a soldier called "Quix" to her left.

The tomb was quiet, save for the whisper of their breaths, the rasp of boot on stone, the soft swish of leather armor and rattle of metal buckles.

As they entered the Korvanjund halls and were welcomed by the honeycombed array of tombs that held Nords long dead, Seirian kept a close eye on the walls, looking for any signs of movement. There was none and the absence made her look harder into the shadows.

Passing an alcove, she called out for the captain to wait. She knelt, examined the body lying bent forward on the floor like a poppet whose strings had been cut. Worn leather armor hung on limbs that were mostly bone and sinew, the muscle and flesh having rotted away centuries ago. An arrow stuck through the front of the throat and out the back.

"What is it?" asked one of the men.

"A draugr," Seirian said, "the undead who protect the tombs."

"Dragonborn?" Ulfric's voice was pitched low, out of respect for the dead or the need for stealth. Perhaps both.

"It's truly dead now. Someone's been through here. Keep your eyes open."

"Weapons at the ready," Ulfric commanded as they moved forward.

The hush they carried with them now was tense, expectant. They came across more draugr, dead in their tombs, on the floor.

"Ugly things," muttered a soldier.

"Speak ill of the dead and the dead will enact ill on you," hissed another.

"I'll remove both your tongues if you don't shut up," muttered another.

The bickering faded away as they entered the Hall of Stories, the walls etched with murals of long dead dragon priests and their followers. At the end of the hall, in front of one of the large puzzle doors Seirian had seen in other tombs, lay three bodies. Two Imperial soldiers and a draugr that looked far more like a man than many Seirian had seen, its half open eyes glowing an eerie blue. One soldier lay propped against the door, his throat torn away from claws or teeth. Next to him, just out of reach of his hand, a dragon claw shaped out of ebony.

Seirian picked it up, spoke softly to Ulfric as he drew close, examining the claw over her shoulder. "This is the key to the door. Looks like the Imperials had the same idea as Galmar."

"They didn't factor in the draugr," Ulfric said, voice tight.

"No. Not if they only sent two men." She lowered her voice further. "I haven't seen a draugr like that before, Ulfric. I'm not sure what we're going to find past this door. I need to take point."

Ulfric nodded. "Captain, with me. Lead on, Dragonborn."

The halls leading to the Korvanjund crypt were quieter, colder, the old stones leaching the warmth from the air. Their breath made pools of frost in front of them.

"The crypt is just beyond this door," Seirian said, moving toward the double stone doors and pressing a palm to them. "According to Galmar, the crown was buried here with a member of the Dragon Cult. Stay behind me. Move quietly."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. Somewhere in the crypt was a word wall. She could feel the thrum of power deep in her bones. But there was something else, too. Something nearly as old as the Wall. It's presence brushed against her skin, made her twitchy, set her teeth on edge. "Do you feel that?" she whispered to Ulfric, who frowned, shook his head.

She led the group down the short hall that opened into a vaulted ceilinged crypt, dropping to her haunches just before the hall came to an end.

"Ulfric."

"I see it," he said, voice a hushed breath.

In the center of the room, on a throne made of stone, sat the figure of a man, tall and broad. Time had worn most of the flesh away, but magic had preserved the muscle and sinew, the white bone and teeth. The ebony armor gleamed wetly in the torchlight and the jagged crown of dragon bone and teeth sat atop its head.

"It has your crown."

"At least Galmar was right about the location."

"Is it dead?" one of the men whispered.

"No," said Seirian, "and yes." This was draugr but more than draugr.

“Ideas?” Ulfric said.

“We see if we can do this without waking it. But.... You men,” Seirian pointed to handful of men wielding swords and axes, “around the back, behind the throne. Slow and quiet. Keep your distance from it and watch your back.” She waited until they had slipped into position. “Archers, spread out, find whatever high ground you can. *Quietly*.” The archers vanished into the gloom. “Captain, Ulfric, flank it.”

When everyone was in position, she silently cast a strong armor spell and padded toward the throne, her eyes on the draugr’s hands as she reached for the crown. Her fingers had barely brushed the edge of bone when a rush of magic filled the air. The draugr twitched, began to wake. Its cold blue eyes found hers and she recognized something in it. The same something that was in Ulfric. In her.

“Ulfric,” she yelled, “it Shouts!”

Then the room exploded into chaos.

The shield she cast was barely strong enough to take the brunt of the *thu'um* that pushed her across the floor and into a pillar, stealing her breath from her and making her arms go half numb from the impact. The sharp, clear sing of steel rang throughout the room as several draugr spilled out from the honeycombs of the crypt.

Another shout made the walls of the cavern shake, sent pieces of rock tumbling from the ceiling. The captain’s sword clattered to the ground and went spinning past Seirian. She watched as Ulfric’s blade took a blow that had been aimed for the captain’s head. The captain rolled away from the melee, came up with her weapon in her hand and was pulled into the fray of lesser draugr. Several lay on the ground already, riddled with slashes and arrows. The captain beheaded another.

Seirian turned back to the dark streak of ebony armor, the flash of Ulfric’s sword. She wove a spell into her hands, focused on the shape and form of it, shouted “Ulfric, back away” and released the bolt of icy air as soon as he was clear. The creature turned to her, mouth stretching in a lipless snarl as it opened its mouth to shout.

Rii Va—

The words tore into Seirian, through the armor spell and the shield she threw in front of herself at the last moment. They reached into her skin, between her bones, seemed to rip at her very essence and steal her breath, quicken her heartbeat until her chest ached.

Then she dropped to her knees as the shout dissipated, incomplete. Ulfric’s blade stuck out of the chest of the ebony draugr and Seirian raised her hands, called the spell that had been on the tip of her tongue and drove lightning into the dead thing’s heart. The light in its eyes dimmed as it fell forward on its knees and then collapsed. Ulfric’s sword, pushed out by the impact, clattered to the ground next to it, arcs of blue and silver lightning streaming over the blade.

“Thank you,” she gasped as Ulfric knelt at her side.

“That draugr’s shout. Your eyes,” Ulfric said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and steadying her, “they turned silver as mist. I thought you were dying.”

“I think...I was. For a moment,” Seirian said. Her breath seemed to be coming back, her heart beat slowing to its usual tempo. The feel of the shout still crawled beneath her skin but the pain had gone. “The draugr—“

“All dead,” Ulfric said, nodding toward the group of soldiers, some inspecting the fallen bodies, others keeping an eye on the shadows. “Can you stand?”

No, Seirian thought, but she said, “Yes.”

“Let me help.” The words were spoken softly, a plea more than a command.

Seirian paused, nodded and leaned into Ulfric’s hold as he pulled her from the floor. She let him wrap her arm around his shoulders and his around her waist. It was an awkward position with their height difference and she could see the considering look in his eyes, but she’d be damned if she let him carry her.

“Don’t even think about it,” she whispered.

“Too late.”

Stifling a chuckle, she steered him toward the collapsed draugr. “Your sword should be safe to touch now. And this...” As Ulfric knelt to gather his sword, Seirian braced herself on his shoulder and pulled the jagged crown from the head of the draugr. “Is yours.”

Ulfric took the crown from her, held it up to the light, ran a thumb over the curve of a tooth and then gave it back to her. “Keep it for me?”

She looked at him curiously.

“Made of the bones and teeth of dragons and it was your killing blow that won it. It seems only fitting that you hold onto it,” he said as he adjusted her arm around his shoulders.

“Captain, lead us out.”

“It has a certain charm,” she said tiredly as they fell into the center of the line of soldiers.

“I’m not usually one for trophies, but this... You might not get this back.”

“I trust you.”

“I might even wear it.”

The corner of his mouth curled as he glanced down at her. “I’ll consider that practice.”

“I walked right into that one,” Seirian said, sounding surprised even to herself.

Ulfric’s laughter echoed off the stone and he held her tighter as they made the long trek back to the entrance of the ruin.

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