

Whiterun

“That’s how we managed to escape,” Hadvar explained to his uncle. Alvor was the blacksmith in the village of Riverwood. He was a stout man with grim expression. A Nord by his look, but he’d been kind and accommodating for them ever since they’d arrived.

“I can hardly believe it,” the blacksmith said, setting down his mead. “Can the legend be true?”

“Legends don’t burn down villages,” Aurelios stated.

Alvor nodded but didn’t answer. The walk to Riverwood had taken a little over a day. A day in which Aurelios and Hadvar had wandered the wilds of Skyrim. They’d encountered wolves, and hunted elk, but the worst they’d run into were bandits.

Aurelios had killed the brigands easily enough, but the strange map that he’d taken off of one of their corpses still drew his curiosity. When he’d analyzed it the parchment said “Treasure Map” and had a crude drawing of a log and a map that was not entirely clear on its coordinates. Regardless, Aurelios felt beneath the fold of his belt to ensure the parchment was still there and returned his attention to Alvor.

“We need to get back to Solitude,” he stated simply.

“We can take the northern road in the morning,” Hadvar informed him. “Solitude will not be easy to reach, but we should be able to find an imperial garrison between here and there.”

“Aye, stay as long as you’d like,” Alvor told him. “Take anything you need as well, though, I would ask a favor.”

Hadvar and Aurelios exchanged a surprised look.

“If there really is a dragon roaming about them Riverwood is in grave danger. I would ask that you first stop by Whiterun and speak with Jarl Balgruuf. Tell him that he needs to send a detachment here at once.”

In that moment Aurelios felt like a fool. For some reason he'd allowed himself to believe that once they reached Riverwood they would be safe from the dragon if they came across it. Now, remembering the crumbling walls of Helgen, he realized that Alvor was right.

“How long is the road to Whiterun?” he asked.

“Maybe two days,” Alvor replied. “Depends on the traveler I suppose.”

“So if we leave tomorrow it would still leave Riverwood defenseless for four days. More if it takes longer to ready the detachment.”

The mood had grown somber within the wooden walls of Alvor's home.

“Yes,” the blacksmith finally answered.

“Then we have no time to lose. We must leave for Whiterun at once!”

Hadvar rose from his seat. “Yes, we should...” he stopped as the flash of pain across his shoulder erupted. He'd suffered a blow from a war hammer against his shield when they'd fought the bandits, and his arm was still recovering from the blow.

“You need to give that time to mend!” Sigrid, Alvor's wife protested. “You should at the very least rest until morning.”

“But the village is in...”

“I'm sure Aurelios here understands,” Sigrid interrupted. “A brave soldier like him could probably make the trip there and back in half the time.”

Alvor rubbed his beard as he contemplated.

“I can do that,” Aurelios answered. Hadvar began to protest but against his aunt and uncle he was about as powerless as an unpowered soul stone.

“Take whatever supplies you need, lad,” Alvor repeated, patting him on the shoulder. “We are all counting on you.”

Less than an hour later Aurelios found himself with a small pack slung across his shoulder, a long bow with iron arrows across his back, and his two iron swords hanging from his hips.

He’d been told the road to Whiterun would be easy to follow, but with the sun already descending he knew he would do well to cover as much ground as possible before he was forced to find a place to sleep.

On his way out of town he noticed the same men he’d seen when they entered Riverwood, a Nord and a Wood Elf, arguing close to the mill. They were far enough away that he couldn’t hear their exact words, but judging from what he’d heard earlier, he assumed it was still a debate over a young imperial girl.

Curiosity forced him to glance around at the villagers trying to see who the maiden might be. He saw children playing with a dog, an elderly woman sitting on her porch, and atop the balcony of a two story building he saw a young woman in a yellow dress.

Aurelios stopped suddenly as he noticed her properly for the first time. The young girl in question was surprisingly beautiful. Without meaning to he found himself staring in her direction incredulously.

The young woman felt the strength of his stare and turned to meet his eyes. Suddenly, Aurelios became aware that his jaw had dropped open. He closed it and

shook his head as if forcing himself out of a trance. The girl smiled and giggled as she noted his embarrassment. Not in an unkind way but Aurelios still forced himself to stare down at the ground and continue forward until he was clear of the village.

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On the dawn of the second day after his departure from Riverwood Aurelios found himself standing upon a winding road gazing down the slope of a mountain. Below him he saw a large valley. Homes and other structures were visible along the bend of the road but the thing that drew his attention was the majestic city that stood proudly before him, Whiterun.

It was smaller than cities back in Cyrodil but the beauty of Skyrim, coupled with the way the Nordic structures enveloped the land they stood upon was majestic. By the northern end of the city Aurelios could see a tall proud palace that could only be, Dragonsreach. Happily, he hurried down the road eager to get men back to Riverwood and continue on his way back to Solitude.

Just off the mountain, and after a left turn, he came across a farm that was swarming with activity. A group of warriors was in the midst of combat with a large, humanoid, giant.

Without thought, Aurelios drew the bow he had slung across his back. He was too far from the battle to engage with his swords, but his aim remained true. He released the bow string and the arrow flew through the air until it buried itself into the creatures left eye.

That small attack was the difference the group of warriors had been searching for. They circled the giant's legs and brought the monster crashing down. Then, with expert precision, they quickly slayed it before the giant could try to counter attack.

"Well met, friend," one of the warriors, a Nord female, stated as soon as she noticed Aurelios approaching them. "Your skill would be welcome among our ranks."

Aurelios chuckled, "I'm enlisted elsewhere," he informed her. The woman was sleek and her figure was curvaceous, but the ferocity of her eyes was unsettling.

"Perhaps, but if ever you are looking for a change, speak to Kodlak Whitemane, up in Jorrvaskr."

Aurelios noted the name. He wasn't completely sure why but it seemed important.

"Thank you," he said, but turned and continued forward towards the stables just below the city walls.

Whiterun was one of the richest holds in all of Skyrim, but its citizens and streets did not betray that. The people all dressed casually for whatever their craft was, Aurelios noted a few merchants or nobles dressed more elegantly than the rest, but aside from them the city could have passed for a large village.

At least until he moved into the upper level, there the history and beauty of Whiterun became evident. Dragonsreach stood proudly over everything like a great shepherd watching over his flock. Directly below that, Aurelios notes the tall statue of Talos and the great many people who still worshipped there.

He touched beneath his armor and felt the amulet of Talos still hanging around his neck. Aurelios disagreed with the banning of the worship of Talos. He understood its

necessity in the wake of the White Gold Concordat, but that did not mean that his faith in him was changed.

To the right of that there was another flight of stairs that lead to a curious building. Aurelios wondered what it could be, but he remembered his task and decided to push his curiosity aside. He marched up the stone steps towards Dragonsreach and hurried in to speak with the Jarl.

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Jarl Balgruf the Greater was a middle aged Nord with golden locks of hair and a stern, nearly intimidating, gaze.

“So you were at Helgen, soldier?”

“I was,” Aurelios confirmed. “We would have ended the rebellion that day had it not been for that dragon soaring in.”

“So the rumors are true?”

“They are. I found sanctuary in Riverwood after myself and another soldier were left stranded beneath the Keep. I’ve come on the villagers behalf to ask that you send a detachment to protect the village.”

Jarl Balgruf studied Aurelios carefully. He looked as if he’d been expecting the news and was now considering another mater entirely.

“Tell me Imperial what do you plan on doing now that you’ve delivered this message?”

The question surprised Aurelios. "Return to the legion of course," he replied. "General Tullius will be regrouping in Solitude before he mounts another offensive."

The Jarl stroked his beard pensively. "Irileth, send a detachment to Riverwood at once."

The Dunmer House Carl bowed respectfully and headed away from the throne room to carry out her orders. The Jarl rose from his throne then and signaled for Aurelios to follow.

He did so, even though his instincts told him to take his leave, and he followed Balgruf to one of the side chambers of Dragonsreach. There, his Court Mage introduced himself as Farengar.

"Another local recruit in Imperial armor?" the hooded man asked. "Truly is there no limit to the legions lowered expectations in this war?"

"Actually," Aurelios interjected. "I'm part of one of the few companies actually trained and deployed from Cyrodil."

Both Balgruf and Farengar took a moment to process that information before they continued.

"I believe this one may have the talent you've been missing in your search."

"Talent?" Aurelios asked. "Search?"

"He means delving into an ancient Nordic ruin filled with monsters and traps in search of an item that may or may not be there."

Aurelios chuckled. "I believe you misunderstand my being here, Jarl. I came because Riverwood is vulnerable and they need the detachment at once, but my duty is back in Solitude. I don't have time to..."

“You will lead the detachment back yourself,” Balgruf informed him. “It will be good for my men to see a true legionnaire up close. Besides the item Farengar needs is located in the mountains just west of the village.

“Jarl, I really can’t...”

“You would be doing us a great service. Protecting the people of my Hold. Do this for me and then you can return to Solitude with my gratitude and a favored owed.”

Aurelios sighed knowing there would be little he could do to excuse himself from such an absurd mission. “Very well, but only because I would still need to return for Hadvar.”

Balgruf smiled and nodded. “Return quickly then. I will have the detachment meet you at the city gate. Farengar will tell him what he needs to know.”

The mage nodded and began his description of the item he needed retrieved.

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As Aurelios looked around Riverwood again he was shocked to find that he could not see Hadvar anywhere. The mountains to the west looked daunting as Bleak Falls Barrow appeared from behind a thin veil of mist.

“He left a few days after you did, lad” Alvor informed him. “Said he couldn’t wait about while you took all the risks. I thought you would’ve run into him on the road by now.”

“The city is a big place,” Aurelios explained. “Must’ve missed each other in the mob.”

Alvor nodded. The blacksmith surveyed the men that were now taking up positions along the edges of the village and patrolling its streets. “So you are heading to Bleak Fall Barrow then? I would caution you against it. If the bandits don’t get you the monsters inside sure will.”

Aurelios decided not to discuss his plans any further with the blacksmith. He thanked him again for his help, and surrendered the charge of the Detachment to the commander that had traveled with him.

“Pardon me!” a male voice began just as Aurelios prepared to make for the edge of town. The voice belonged to the man who ran the Riverwood Trader. “I’m sorry to but in but did I hear that you are heading for Bleak Falls Barrow?”

“Lucan!” a female voice called after the man.

Aurelios looked up and saw the same beautiful woman he’d seen when he’d last left the village staring down at the man angrily.

“Don’t!” the woman said as she headed into the building.

“Forgive my sister,” Lucan continued. “Camilla feels like this is a matter I should not burden you with, but you see I had an item stolen from my shop. A Golden Claw, worth more than anything I have inside the store.”

Aurelios stared at the shop keeper wondering what this had to do with him.

“Anyway, the thing is the thief took the Claw into Bleak Falls Barrow. I know we don’t know you, but I was wondering if...”

Just then Camilla emerged from the front door of the shop. She looked almost embarrassed as she approached them. “I told you not to bother this young man with our problems!”

“If I come across the claw I’ll gladly return it to you,” Aurelios informed them before they could continue their discussion.

Lucan smiled happily and thanked him while Camilla simply smiled and looked away from him shyly. The smile sent a torrent of euphoria through Aurelios as he stared at her.

“Why don’t I show you the way?” Camilla offered.

“Absolutely not!” Lucan protested.

“You’re already taking advantage of this young man’s...”

“Aurelios,” he interrupted, trying to formally introduce himself.

Camilla smiled again. “Aurelios’s generosity. The least we can do is show him the way. Especially if the Jarl asked him to retrieve something for him.”

Lucan looked concerned but Camilla directed a stern glare in his direction and he quickly consented. “Very well, but only to the edge of town! There’s wild animals about and it’s not safe outside the walls.”

She smiled and together Aurelios and her began their journey towards the bridge. As they walked Camilla and he began speaking of their past. They were both native of Cyrodil. She had joined her brother her not very long ago to help him run the shop, but she dreamed of returning home.

“Unless...” she hesitated. “I find a reason to stay here in Skyrim.” Her eyes met his and Aurelios had the distinct feeling that they were thinking the same thing. He cleared his throat as they reached the bridge.

“I too could...a...you know find more than one reason to stay here once we finish the war.”

They smiled at one another and she giggled slightly as she realized where they were. “Well, guess this is as far as I go.” She stared down at her feet. “Don’t be a stranger okay?”

Aurelios shifted his sword belt nervously. “Perhaps when I return you and I could...a...perhaps a....”

“Picnic?” she asked shyly.

He smiled. “That sounds great!”

“Deal!” Camilla exclaimed. She smiled and planted a kiss on his cheek quickly as if expecting herself to hesitate. Then she spun on her heels and began walking back towards the village.

Aurelios stared after her for a few moments. He felt lighter than air and his heart was beating faster than he’d ever felt it. Happily he turned towards the mountain and felt a new sense of purpose as he jogged across the span of the bridge.

“I just need to get the Claw and the Dragon Stone and I can return here!” he told himself happily. “To Camilla!” Each step he took sent a shock of adrenaline through him. He felt invincible and he’d crossed more than half the span of the bridge by the time he heard the blood curdling scream.

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned back towards Riverwood. The men on the walls were shouting and firing arrows towards the area where Camilla would be by now.

Aurelios gripped his bow and readied an arrow but he couldn’t see anything. He began running back and searched desperately for a sign of Camilla but couldn’t see anything.

Another scream broke out and this time he saw the bushes at the edge of the river separating. A huge Mud Crab was making its way back towards the water and it was dragging a bloodied Camilla behind it.

“Help!” she was screaming as she lost hold of the Iron Dagger she had futilely tried to use to defend herself.

“No!” Aurelios shouted. He tried to aim but the three arrows he fired all missed their mark.

“Camilla!” the Mud Crab had reached the edge of the water now and its powerful pincers continued to rip and tear at Camilla’s flesh. She was leaving a bright crimson pool as she was dragged along. “Talos, aid me!” he whispered in prayer as he readied a new arrow and released it.

The projectile soared and with the help of Talos above pierced the animal’s thick hide. The Mud Crab screeched in pain as the arrow buried deeper into it. Its hold on Camilla loosened as its limp body was carried off by the current.

The Mud Crab was dead, but Camilla had stopped screaming. Her limp body was also pulled behind the crab, and Aurelios was forced to watch in horror as Camilla Valerius was lost inside the fury of the river’s current.