Summary

After the betrayal of Mercer, Kaiya is forced to work with Karliah in order to bring Mercer to justice for his crimes. While Kaiya struggles with facing the reality of everything that seems to be moving so fast, Karliah keeps her eyes on her vengeance. Soon a Daedric Prince is involved and there's a plot to chase Mercer through a Dwarven ruin and all the while, Kaiya does her best just to keep it together. Well, that and to not hold out hope for redemption for the man she loves, although she can't seem to help herself.

Notes

While I was writing this, I leaned heavily on this playlist for inspiration and to keep my head in the right space. As a result, I feel as though I need to let you know which songs directly influenced which chapters, so be prepared for a few song recommendations.
Chapter 1

18th of First Seed 4E203

Mercer killed Gallus.

The thought repeated itself in Kaiya's head over and over, as if she would forget. As if she could forget. She remained paralyzed on the stone floor but fate cursed her with lying so she couldn't look away. She could still see him as he stared at the place he had last seen Karliah.

Suddenly, he turned towards her where she lay on the ground. His dagger still unsheathed, he took determined strides in her direction. Was he going to kill her now? She felt like she didn't know him anymore. The Mercer she knew and trusted was gone and whoever this was may very well be capable of slitting her throat for learning his secret.

But she could see his eyes. Those were the same eyes, the emerald green in a sea of shadows, that she knew so well. They look tortured, bloodshot and weary. They seemed sunken further into his face than normal, the sharp edges of his cheekbones jutting out prominently. It was obvious he hadn't slept well in weeks. Is this what he had feared? Is this the moment he knew would come?

He knelt down beside her with his dagger still in his hand and although Kaiya could still see the conflict in his eyes, fear pulsed through her. This could be it. No, he couldn't. He wouldn't hurt her. Her Mercer was still in there.

Wasn't he?

He brought his dagger to her face and if she had been capable of flinching, she would have. Just as she thought he was going to take the blade to her skin he stopped moving, the flat edge of the dagger hovering just over her mouth. He stared at it intensely as if trying to wield it with his mind as Kaiya's light breaths fogged the blade.

Then his eyes lightened. His shoulders sagged with relief. And he spoke.

"You're alive" he said in an exhale. "You're breathing."

His dagger still in hand, he leaned into his palms as they rested on the floor, taking deep breaths in as he sat motionless on all fours. Deep breath in, deep exhale.

Then his head lifted so his gaze could meet hers again. She tried to show all she felt through her own eyes, tried to communicate her pain to him. How could he? How could he do that? How could he not tell her? There was so much she wanted to scream at him but all she could do was hope that her eyes conveyed the way she felt. His eyes showed heartbreak, nothing more, nothing less. She could see it as if it were a physical wound. His heart was broken.

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way" he spoke, startling Kaiya with his sudden outburst. "I'm sorry for a lot of things." His head fell to hang between his shoulders in defeat. Kaiya found herself thankful that she was paralyzed in that moment because her instinct was to reach out, to comfort him. But this was his fault. Her heart was broken too.

He covered his mouth with his large hand as he looked down her body, rubbing across his chin as if it was a nervous habit. His eyes focused in on her chest, to what she had to assume was where Karliah's arrow pierced her skin. With a groan, he sat back on his haunches and looked up at the ceiling before locking his eyes on hers again.
"I'm sorry."

His movements were swift then. The dagger he held in one hand came down to her chest, pain erupting as her vision clouded over. The realization struck her as suddenly as the dagger had. He stabbed her. This man, the one she had given her heart to, had just stabbed her in the heart she had given him. Tears streamed down her cheeks, the pain too overwhelming to stay hidden. The last thing she saw was his eyes trained on hers once more as a broken, choked "I'm so sorry, Kaiya" crawled out of his throat. Then, as if in blessing, her world went black.

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Kaiya's confusion was overwhelming. She could feel the breeze move through her hair and her body against cold ground under her, signaling that she was no longer laying on the floor of the tomb. She tried to wiggle her fingers. They moved. She tried to lift her arm. It responded. She finally could move again. She slowly sat up, her muscles screaming in protest after being dormant for so long. Her head spun with the movement and disorientation, her vision struggling to process the increase in information filtering through her eyes. Her hand shot up to shield her from the onslaught of brightness coming from all around her. Sunlight bounced off the snow covered ground, piercing her vision. Still, she struggled to stand.

"Easy, easy."

The disembodied voice rang through Kaiya's ears, reverberating throughout her body as she processed what was happening. Memories from inside the tomb began to flood her, tears welling in her eyes in an effort to compensate for the overwhelming emotion. Mercer. Karliah. Gallus. Betrayal. She recognized at once that the voice she heard could only be that of Karliah, even though she had only briefly heard her speak before. Her vision focused in on the Dunmer before her, wearing the familiar garb of a member of the Thieves Guild. Her first impulse was to fight though her limbs were unwilling to cooperate. She clumsily grabbed for her sword but the motion caused her to lose her balance, stumbling back to regain her fragile footing. Karliah shot out a hand in response to steady her, prompting Kaiya to jerk away as if on instinct.

"You shot me!" Kaiya proclaimed with a cracked voice as she struggled to get away from the thief before her.

"Yes, but I didn't kill you. My arrow was tipped with a unique paralytic poison. Had I intended to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Kaiya couldn't place her accent, although she had to admit she found the Dunmer's voice soothing. She forced her mind to comprehend the changes to her expectations that were occurring before her. Karliah seemed to have no intention of causing her harm.

"Why?" she asked breathlessly, as though she barely had the energy to form words.

"Why what? Why did I save you?"

Kaiya nodded weakly in response.

"My original intention was to use that arrow on Mercer, but I never had a clear shot. I made a split second decision to get you out of the way." She took a step back as she spoke, leaving Kaiya to stand on her own.

"Why should I believe you?" Kaiya narrowed her eyes at the Dunmer, still unable to believe that this woman was not her enemy.
"Without the antidote I administered, you'd be as still as a statue. I treated your wounds and didn't leave you defenseless. The poison on that arrow took me a year to perfect. I only had enough for a single shot and yet I used it on you."

*Your wounds.* She said it as if they were so commonplace, like she had fallen and scraped her knee. Not like she had just been pierced twice, one by a man she trusted.

"Yeah, but you didn't have to shoot anyone Karliah. It doesn't really bode well for our budding friendship for you to tell me that you treated the wounds you caused." Kaiya felt a headache coming on as a result of her pounding thoughts. She pressed the palm of her hand to her forehead to try to relieve some of the pressure she felt.

"I didn't intend to kill anyone. All I had hoped was to capture Mercer alive." Karliah's voice escalated slightly as she spoke, standing firm in her convictions that what she did was the right thing.

"Why?" Kaiya was afraid she knew the answer, but she needed Karliah to speak it out loud.

"Mercer must be brought to the Guild to answer for what he's done. He needs to pay for Gallus's murder." Karliah's hands balled into fists at her sides as she spoke, betraying her calm demeanor and revealing how angry she really was. This was an anger that had built over decades. It was a struggle for Kaiya to wrap her head around the enormity of it all.

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Kaiya responded with a shrug. The anger was different for her than it was for Karliah, although she didn't have a hope that she would understand. "How were you intending to prove it?"

Karliah's brows rose in surprise at Kaiya's response. "Are you saying you don't believe me? You heard what he said back there!" She jerked her arm in the direction of the ruin to clarify what she meant, as if there could have been anywhere else.

"I didn't say that," Kaiya groaned out, pressing her fingertips to her aching forehead for some relief. "Mercer made it very clear you were telling the truth. But for twenty-five years the guild has believed that you were the one that killed Gallus. They weren't here to see that conversation for themselves. I'm asking how you planned on proving Mercer's guilt to them. His friends and allies."

The conversation was beginning to sap her already depleted energy supply, so Kaiya leaned against a nearby boulder for support. She crossed her arms over her chest and crossed her ankles as she reclined, giving off the impression that she was calm and collected, although she was anything but.

"Aren't you also their friend and ally?" Karliah asked hopefully.

"Oh so now I see why you made sure to save me from that tomb, so I could cover for you." Kaiya scoffed as she shook her head. "How about we have that be our Plan B?"

"Well there is one other option. My purpose in using Snow Veil Sanctum to ambush Mercer wasn't simply for irony's sake. Before both of you arrived, I recovered a journal from Gallus's remains. I suspect the information we need is written inside."

"Let me see that!" Kaiya cried out as she shot off the rock towards Karliah. "What's it say?"

Although she hated herself for it, a small part of her hoped that she would find redemption for Mercer in that journal. Maybe there was more to this story than Karliah thought, although she knew that nothing in that journal could explain why Mercer had decided to stab her.

"I wish I knew," Karliah admitted as she handed the journal over to Kaiya. "The journal is written
"Maybe the journal could be translated!" She spoke excitedly now, thumbing through the pages of the text as if she could read it herself. "This looks oddly familiar. I'm sure someone in Skyrim could tell us what this says."

"Enthir!" Karliah proclaimed, matching the excitement demonstrated by Kaiya before. "Gallus's friend at the College of Winterhold!"

"Enthir?" Kaiya laughed and rolled her eyes. "I swear that guy has more layers than a damn Dwarven ruin."

"You know him?" Karliah asked in disbelief.

"Sure, I know Enthir" she scoffed as she resumed her leaning position on the nearby rock. "I am his Archmage after all."

Karliah shook her head quickly as if Kaiya's statement were rattling around inside. "He was the only outsider Gallus trusted with the knowledge of his Nightingale identity."

"There's that word again. What in the Oblivion is a Nightingale?"

"There were three of us. Myself, Gallus and Mercer. We were an anonymous splinter of the Thieves Guild in Riften. Perhaps I'll tell you more about it later. Right now, you need to head for Winterhold with the journal and get the translation from Enthir."

"Wait, hold on" Kaiya exclaimed as she held her palms up to the enthusiastic Dunmer. "First, you shot me. Then I found out that Mercer..." her voice caught in her throat and prevented her of speaking of what she had learned in the tombs. "Well I found out some pretty intense stuff about Mercer. Then I found out that there was some secret club that Mercer was a part of with you and Gallus. Now you want me to carry out the rest of your mission for you? I know my boss just bailed on me, but that job isn't so easily taken by another." Kaiya relaxed back into the rock she leaned against, hoping her insouciant nature would bely the confidence that she wasn't feeling at the moment. "I respect your temerity though. Nice."

Kaiya watched as frustration spread across Karliah's face. She had apparently assumed they were partners in this after all the incriminating information about Mercer was just revealed, but she obviously didn't know Kaiya very well.

With a raised voice, she responded. "I have preparations to make and Gallus's remains to lay to rest!" she cried, storming across the distance between them in a fury. "I promise to join you there as soon as I can but I need your help!"

"And I have a broken heart I have to put back together!" Kaiya shrieked, surprising both Karliah and herself with the outburst of emotion. "I don't mean to be selfish but this is your mission Karliah! Yours! I'm only roped into it now because Mercer insisted on bringing me with the hopes that I could subdue you enough that he could talk to you! If it wasn't for that I wouldn't be here and I'd be at home..." Kaiya let her sentence trail off as she was assaulted by the thoughts that came flying at her with the word home.

What home? Riften? Why was that home except for the fact that Mercer was also there? At the realization that no matter what house she chose to call home, Mercer would no longer be there with
her, Kaiya broke anew. Her anger dissipated as quickly as it had come on and she sunk back into the rock behind her in defeat. Her voice now came out softly, barely audible over the wind. "I'd be at home, waiting for Mercer."

"Oh," Karliah gasped, her hand coming up to cover her open mouth. "You loved him?"

"Ha!" Kaiya jumped off the rock and began pacing the campsite, her hand once again pressing into her forehead to stop the pounding headache that encroached on her thoughts. "I like how you said that like it was in the past. Like all of this changes it instantly. Like somehow it's that easy to turn off."

"I'm sorry, I-"

"No you know what?" Kaiya spoke in a higher pitch than normal, bordering on manic. "I'll take the damn journal to Enthir, okay?" She held the journal up for Karliah to see the proof that she had it in her hands. "Anything's better than this conversation right now."

"Here, take these!" Karliah said eagerly as she held out a few potions to Kaiya as an offering. "They may help you."

But Kaiya was already storming off in the direction of the College of Winterhold, her back to Karliah. "I don't need your damn potions" she yelled out but she did not turn back. Karliah watched as Kaiya kicked a snowbank as she walked, getting smaller and smaller as the distance between them grew.
Kaiya had spent a considerable amount of her life alone. She had escaped from the Forsworn on her own. She had traversed through most of Skyrim as she searched for answers in her quest to battle Alduin with no companion. She had ventured to Sovngarde with no one but herself to count on. The sound that accompanied the night with no other human or elf around for miles was an old friend to her. She knew the quiet of midnight, the solitude of waking in a tent with no one by her side. Even so, Kaiya had never felt as alone as she felt now.

There was a part of her that was thankful for the solitude. Keeping up the pretense that everything was fine had taken more effort than she would have ever imagined. Now that she had no one to answer to, she let the tears stream down her face freely, choked sobs breaking free from her chest.

She had been betrayed by the one person she had grown to trust above all others. The one person who knew everything from her past. The one person who knew how deep betrayal cut her and had seen the evidence of her scars. The one person she had asked not to betray her.

Memories from her past with Mercer began to blur through her mind as if to taunt her, to remind her of what she'd just lost. She remembered training with him to dual wield, him playfully trying to check her footing. She remembered times they sat at the bar in the Ragged Flagon, sharing smiles and jokes as if their budding relationship was a secret just for them. She fought back memories of their first night together in the Bee and Barb when he pick pocketed her coin purse. The kiss by the graveyard when a guard was passing. The look on his face as he stood bracing himself on her doorway in the rain. They came steadily as if assaulting her one by one with the realization that they were all over. There would be no more smiles over a tankard of mead in the Flagon or mornings where she tried to convince him not to leave and to stay for one more round.

There would be no more Mercer because that Mercer never really existed.

The Mercer that she trusted with her past from the Dark Brotherhood and that offered to help her piece together the fragments of her broken mind. The Mercer who told her she wasn't alone. The Mercer who told her he needed her. The Mercer that had told her and showed her things that he had told and shown no other. That Mercer was all a farce. An illusion. The real Mercer was a liar, a betrayer and a murderer.

She screamed out in anger, in agony, in heartbreak. There were no words that described the feeling of her heart shattering, the pieces that had just started to heal back together cracking into shards. She knew he couldn't have gone far. He had to be around here somewhere. She began to yell, to scream with all her might into the frigid Winterhold sky.

"Mercer you coward!" She held her arms out to the side, spinning around in case he could see her. In case he was watching. Listening. "How could you?!"
She grabbed at some of the loose snow that had built up along the roads and packed it into a ball before launching it at nothing in particular. "I know you're around here somewhere Mercer! Come out and face me! Look me in the eyes and admit to me what you did!"

The silence she heard in response was too much to bear. She pulled down her hood and grabbed at her hair, tears streaking across her cold face.

"MERCER!" She spun around as she screamed, hoping she was facing the right direction. The ground was slick, and her foot caught a particularly icy patch on the road as she spun. In an instant, she was on her back, the hard ground knocking the air from her lungs.

She gulped for air to replenish what she'd lost from her fall. She gulped for air to combat her sobbing. She laid on her back staring up at the gray sky as her body gave out its last croaks and tears, exhaustion overtaking her. The last thing she remembered as she felt her body go numb from the cold was speaking out into the openness of the Winterhold sky to the memory of a person who no longer existed.

"Mercer…"

"Miss? Miss are you alright?"

Kaiya could hear someone calling out to her from across a great distance. She couldn't call back; her lungs had no air. A faint light slowly began to come back into focus as she forced herself to open her eyes. Candlelight. She started to sit up causing her limbs to tingle from the movement. She could feel soft fur beneath her and realized that she was no longer cold. She was indoors.

"Where am I?" she croaked out, her head throbbing from the effort. Her eyes tried to make sense of her surroundings. She recognized that she was in a bed but the room was quite unfamiliar.

"You're in the Frozen Hearth in Winterhold. I spotted you out in the ice fields and brought you here. You're a lucky woman; I usually don't venture far from this inn." Her rescuer spoke with the typical intonation of an Altmer, unsurprising considering where they were.

She slowly turned her head so she could see the elf who spoke to her, immediately recognizing the robes worn by a wizard of the college. He sat in a chair that he had pulled over to the side of the bed to keep an eye on her, she supposed. "I know those robes. College robes," she said, her voice dry with disuse. "I don't recognize you though."

"Ha!" the Altmer scoffed as he fell back into his chair. "My days at the college are long behind me."

"Mm, a dropout I see," Kaiya joked as she pushed herself up to a sitting position, leaning her back against the headboard of the bed.

"I am no dropout!" the elf cried with offense. "I merely -"

"Relax, it was just a joke," she interjected with a soft laugh. She loved when elves misunderstood her humor. "You have a name?"

"I'm Nelacar," he introduced himself with a slight bow of his head. "And you are?"

"The name's Kaiya" she offered with nod of her own. "Now do you have any water around here Nelacar or should I start melting some snow?"
Nelacar hopped up from his position seated next to the bed and headed towards the door without a word. She hoped he was finding her something she could drink; her mouth was so dry she was having trouble forming words. The elf might be a little socially awkward, but she doubted that he would just walk out and leave her alone in what seemed to be his permanent residence. She took the opportunity to try to smooth out her wild hair, tangled as it was. She wiped her cheeks with her sleeve, hoping she didn't look as horribly as she felt.

He returned promptly with a tankard and handed it to her as he returned to his seat, watching her has she gulped the contents down. "Thanks Nels" she said as she exhaled, catching her breath. "Now do you have anything stronger than this?"

"I don't know if that's wise-" he started before Kaiya shook her head at his words.

"Nels I know we just met but trust me," she stressed her words with her hands, punctuating her need "you'll like me better after a mead or four."

She watched as a small smile crept into the corner of Nelacar's mouth before he rose and walked towards the bookshelf positioned in the back of his room. "I don't have mead, but I do have wine" he offered as he held up the bottle for her to see. She nodded emphatically as she handed him her tankard to fill. "That'll be just fine Nels, thanks."

"And for the record," he said as he poured her wine, "I like you just fine."

She gave him a sweet smile in response, but it felt hollow to her. While she appreciated his clumsy flirtation, she was not in a place to reciprocate. The realization dawned on her like an epiphany - this may be the first time in years that with no other suitor around, she wouldn't take an attractive man up on an offer to share his bed. The thought angered her, not at herself as much as at the man who did this to her. The man who ruined her for anyone else.

She gulped the wine down just as she had the water he had given her, hoping to chase away these venomous thoughts with that blissful numbness she so often sought. He filled her tankard once more as she downed the contents, commenting on how he "respected a woman who could handle her wine."

The feeling that his flirting brought forth was not one she recognized. She felt unlike herself. Here she was, drinking wine with a very attractive and suitable Altmer wizard who had saved her life, but all she could think about was the man who had betrayed her. When she identified the feeling, it struck her to the bone. She felt guilty.

"Do you know where I can find Enthir?" she spat out hastily, interrupting the wizard as he waxed poetic about some experiment he was currently working on. She needed to get out of this room if she cared to protect her fragile sanity.

"Enthir? From the college? Why do you ask?" Nelacar responded, seemingly skeptical of her desire to see Winterhold's infamous fence.

"I need his help translating something" she confessed, hastily feeling around her leathers for the Gallus's journal.

"Are you looking for this?" Nelacar asked, reaching over to the counter to retrieve a bound notebook. "You were clutching it when I found you in the snow."

"Yes that!" she yelped as she snatched it back from him. "It's written in some strange language and my… colleague… and I were hoping Enthir could help with the translation." Calling Karliah her
colleague had felt wrong in her mouth, but she had no better way to describe their relationship to someone outside of the guild's framework.

"It's written in Falmer" Nelacar stated smugly, proud of himself for recognizing the language.

"Falmer?" Kaiya responded in disbelief. "What in the Oblivion? Okay, well I still need to find Enthir."

She pulled the furs back and began to get out of the bed, her cold toes protesting the loss of warmth. She located her boots and began pulling them onto her feet in a flurry of movement. Nelacar was taken aback by the sudden hasty retreat.

"Must you leave so soon?" he asked, letting his silky voice caress the words as they came out of his mouth. The intention of his velvet words was clear to Kaiya and the thought made her cringe. Then the fact that she cringed at the advances of a man like Nelacar stirred up her anger once again. She considered staying out of spite to the thought of Mercer, not that he would ever know. Or care.

She paused before she responded, not wanting to ruin her chances with this man if she did decide to get over herself and her stupid guilt long enough to forget her plight. "I need to find him, but that doesn't mean I won't come back" she crooned as she faced the Altmer, letting one finger slowly drag down his chest. "But you have to tell me where he is."

The sudden forwardness demonstrated by Kaiya caught the wizard off guard, which was made apparent by the stuttering response he gave her. "I-I-I would be glad to help you find him, Kaiya" he said, regaining his composure as he looked her in the eyes. Kaiya reeled at the sound of her name coming from his mouth. It sounded beautiful, but wrong. "He's actually just downstairs in the cellar."

Kaiya spun at his words and started to head out his bedroom door before he lightly grabbed her wrist, pulling her back to face him. "Now, I'll be here waiting with more wine for you to return when you're done with the merchant." The look in his eyes was unmistakable. Kaiya had been wrong when she pegged him as awkward. This wizard knew exactly what he was doing. She felt the familiar stirring in her belly at the confidence of the Altmer, but the new feeling of guilt jumped up to meet it.

"I won't be long" she spoke like the experienced flirt she was, hardly trying to send a flashing smile his way. It was an act she had perfected over years. Tonight that would be all it was.

She turned and headed for the cellar door, careful not to look back at the man who would be waiting for her to return.
Chapter 3

19th of First Seed 4E203

"Enthir?" Kaiya called out once she descended the stairs into the cellar, looking around for the mischievous mage.

"Ah, is that the Archmage?" he said as he moved from behind the table in which he sat to greet her. "Good to see you, Kaiya."

Kaiya cringed when she heard him speak. His voice was so similar to Mercer's she almost expected to see the Breton rogue. Almost. She shook off the feeling as quickly as it came on, careful to shield her emotions from the mer before her.

"Hey Enthir" she crooned as she stepped closer to wrap her arms around the Bosmer in a hug. "It's been a while."

"That it has," he agreed as he pulled back and returned to his spot at the table against the wall. "What do you have for me?"

"Karliah and I were actually hoping you could help us out with translating this journal" she shrugged as she saw the look of recognition and surprise battle for dominance on Enthir's face.

"Karliah?!" Surprise won out. "Small world."

"Indeed. So can you help us out or not Enthir?"

"Look, I don't care what you have to do to get this translated for us, but we need it done as soon as possible." Kaiya barged with the mage as she packed up her things. She did not have the time to deal with going all the way to Markarth to try to make a deal with that stubborn court wizard. "If you're as good as you say you are at 'procuring things,' then procuring a translation shouldn't be that much to ask."

"Kaiya this isn't something I-"

"Can you do it or not Enthir? Please? We need your help." She found herself practically begging, something she was not accustomed to doing. Right now however, she was doing a lot that she wasn't accustomed to.

"Fine," he relented as he paced with his hands firmly on his hips "but only because you look like you went through Oblivion to get it. And I expect sufficient payment."

"You can have whatever you want Enthir" she offered with her arms out by her sides. "Money's not a problem."

He grunted as he waved her off, a little embarrassed after demanding coin to do a favor for an old friend. "I'd do anything for Karliah. Go on now, see to it that the guild treats her fairly. She deserves that."

Kaiya nodded in agreement as she turned to leave, confident that Enthir would do whatever it took to get his old friend's journal translated. He put up a front of being a tough negotiator but in actuality, Enthir was soft when it came to the people he cared about. And women. Kaiya liked that
about him.

"Always a pleasure" Enthir called at her back as she ascended the stairs towards the inn.

She was tired but restless. There would be no sleep for her tonight. She decided to use her anxious energy to start on her voyage back to Riften, to give her some time to think. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she forgot about the mage waiting for her in the Frozen Hearth, who leaned against the doorway to his room as she walked by.

"You've returned" he cooed, creating space in the doorway so she could enter his room.

"Not tonight, Nelacar" she called out as she continued her exit, storming right past the eager wizard. He didn't chase after her, and that caused her opinion of him to rise significantly. She hated it when men followed after women like hungry beggars.

Icy wind blasted her as she opened the door to the Frozen Hearth, causing her to lose her breath for a moment. Her eyes watered in protest to this new environment and she had to admit that it was much less desirable than a warm bed with a warm mer to keep her company, but yet she traveled on.

Her mind bounced around like a torchbug in a jar trying to come up with a plan for her return to the guild. Would they believe her and Karlia? Should she have gotten the journal translated before she left? It was too late now, she convinced herself, so she needed to decide how they would go about proving to the guild, her friends, what Mercer had done.

This would not be an easy conversation. Ornery as he was, Mercer had a loyal following from those inside the Thieves Guild. They trusted him, respected him, looked to him as a mentor. It would crush all of them to learn of what he really was, but there was no way they could hurt more than she already was. A selfish part of her was secretly glad that soon she'd have some company in her misery. Karlia would never understand, but Delvin might.

Try as she might to stay focused, her mind kept wandering back to the rogue that she so desperately wanted to hate. She was so angry, furious even, at what he had done and the lies he had told her, but she couldn't get herself angry enough to hate him. To forsake him and what they had. Although she could never speak it aloud to another living soul, she knew in her heart that if he were to show up here in this path leading out of Winterhold that she would greet him as she always did. She would forgive him. She would do anything she could to get him back. She was convinced that maybe she didn't know the whole story and maybe he had his reasons. Good reasons.

As her trek continued south towards Eastmarch however, the hope that she had held onto for his redemption began to slowly fade. The more she thought about all he had done the more she realized that her hope was a fool's hope, and nothing more. The anger that had once respected the boundaries of her hope began to encroach into it, taking it over and choking out all but the smallest of glimmers. By the time she reached the edges of the city of Riften, the hope had vanished almost completely. There was no good in him, there was no light to be found in his actions.

He was a liar. He was a murderer. And worst of all, he was a betrayer.

Her anger was like a fire, burning through every vein as her heart pumped her need for vengeance, her desire for retribution. If he were to show up here now, just a day later, he would be met with the tip of her sword instead of her open arms.

Betrayal will do that to a person. Astrid's betrayal had changed her, had fractured her trust and broken her ability to feel kinship with another. The treachery she felt as she watched her brothers
and sisters die before her had forever altered the way she would view others. And then she met Mercer. She hardly recognized who she was anymore now that her battered and burned body had undergone another treason. Another heartbreak. She was convinced there was nothing left in her to hurt. She was no longer the warm heart and loyal friend. She now was all iron, cast in the fires of deception. And Mercer would pay for doing this to her.

She had made her way through Riften before she had even realized she was in the city. Her body seemed to operate on its own, fueled not by sleep and food but by sheer determination of vindication. The only reason she finally paused as she stormed towards the secret entrance to the cistern was the light touch of a hand on her elbow, bringing her pace to a halt.

"It's locked," Karliah spoke softly "we'll have to enter through the Ratway."

Confused, Kaiya tried the button anyway only to realize that Karliah was telling the truth. "That's weird."

"It's standard protocol for the guild to lock the entrance when the Guildmaster is away for longer than expected," Karliah explained as they headed towards the Ratway. "It prevents anyone being able to use him to get in."

"Ah," Kaiya responded. She was beginning to be annoyed at the fact that Karliah knew so much more about the guild than she did. Kaiya had been so blind from Mercer's attentions that she never realized how much she had to learn.

"Do you have the journal?" Karliah asked eagerly, eyeing Kaiya's pack as if she may be able to see it through the leather if she tried hard enough.

"No," Kaiya responded bluntly. "It's going to take some time. Looks like we're going to have to rely on Plan B after all." She gave Karliah a side smile and a wink to try to calm the anger that looked like it was taking shape on her face.

"What?" she demanded through a forced whisper as she grabbed Kaiya's arm, forcing her to stop. "That was the proof we needed! They'll never believe my word over Mercer's. I'm as good as dead!"

"Oh calm down," Kaiya groaned as she brushed Karliah's hand from her arm. "I've got a plan. Plus, it's me. It's like you said, I'm also their friend and ally."

"But what if Mercer's in there?" Karliah challenged, not calming down in the slightest.

The thought caused Kaiya's heart to twist in her chest. Running into him here hadn't even crossed her mind. "He won't be" she spoke meekly, not confident in her own words, "but if he is then we just hope my plan works out and it doesn't all end in bloodshed." She began walking as she spoke so she would not have to sit under the inspecting eyes of the Dunmer any longer.

"Well that's comforting" Karliah said sarcastically, jogging to catch up.

"I'm not here to comfort you," Kaiya responded sternly. "Now just try not to smile while we break all of their hearts, okay?"
Kaiya and Karliah break the news of Mercer's betrayal to the rest of the guild.

21st of First Seed 4E203

"You better have a good reason for bringing that murderer down here, Kaiya."

Brynjolf was furious. He stood blocking their way into the cistern, crouched into a fighting stance with his dagger unsheathed. He was flanked by Delvin and Vex, both equally angry and ready to fight. The sight formed a lump in Kaiya's throat - these were her friends, poised and ready to fight her over the story they had been fed by a liar.

"Please Bryn, this isn't easy for me to do." Kaiya spoke calmly, forcing the tears that were beginning to form in her eyes to retreat. "But I need you to listen to what I'm about to tell you."

"This better not be a trick, Kaiya." Brynjolf warned as he sheathed his dagger and approached them cautiously. "I won't hesitate to defend our guild."

His loyalty caused the tears Kaiya was fighting so hard to break free, two of them slipping down her cheeks. "I know, Bryn." She took a deep breath with her eyes closed to steady her frenzied nerves before beginning.

"Mercer lied to you. Lied to us all." She stopped trying to hide her emotions from the thieves before her, who needed to see how hurt she was. How hurt they'd be soon. "He's the one that killed Gallus. He's been stealing from the guild for years. Gallus figured it out and that's why he killed him." The tears flowed freely now.

"Kaiya, this must be a misunderstanding." Delvin spoke now, his calm voice breaking Kaiya even further. She hated having to be the one to bear this news.

"I heard it for myself, Delvin. Trust me, if there was anyone here who wished there was a misunderstanding, it would be me." She covered her mouth to try to keep in the sobs that threatened to spill out at the sight of empathy on Delvin's face. She'd seen that before. He was warring between arguing her and hugging her.

"Do you have proof of this? Not to say I don't believe you lass, but I've known Mercer too long to just take someone else's word over his." Brynjolf crossed his arms over his chest and stood strong, although Kaiya recognized the fear in his eyes.

"Check the vault," she suggested meekly as she looked down at her hands. "If I'm right, you'll see for yourself. If I'm wrong, and sweet Sithis I'd love to be wrong, then it will all be normal."

As they all made their way towards the guild vault, Karliah reached out and put a hand on Kaiya's shoulder for support. She understood this must be tough for her. Kaiya's initial reaction was to shrug her hand off, but she stopped herself. It didn't make sense, but there was still a part of her that was angry at Karliah for all of this. For stirring the pot, for bringing it all up. If it wasn't for her, it would still be business as usual in the cistern, the bustling activity of the thieves going about
their heists and robberies, Mercer hunched over the ledger at his desk. They wouldn't be walking towards the vault to check on the consequences of Mercer's embezzlement if it wasn't for her.

But Kaiya knew that wasn't fair. It wasn't Karliah's fault. It was Mercer's, plain and simple. Karliah had been brave to bring this forth, to put an end to what Mercer saw as business as usual. Kaiya respected her for it, for asking for justice, but it still hurt. It seemed as though nothing would be simple for them anymore, but life was rarely that easy.

"Bryn, how could he open the vault with only one key?" Delvin asked quietly, still in disbelief.
"There's no way."

"I'm with Delvin on this one," Vex interjected. "That's the best puzzle door money can buy. There's no way he could've picked it, I don't care how talented he is."

"He didn't need the key" Karliah spoke quietly enough that no one other than Kaiya heard her. Kaiya's brows furrowed as she swung her head to eye the Dunmer, questions written all over her face. Karliah kept facing forward, apparently unwilling or unable to discuss what she meant.

When the group reached the giant puzzle doors of the vault, Brynjolf stepped up first to put in his key. Then Delvin. The sound of gears turning could be heard inside the massive door and then it opened with a hiss. Brynjolf crossed the threshold first with a jittery, nervous energy that was foreign to his usual demeanor.

"Dear gods," he exclaimed as an exhale. "It's gone. It's all gone."

Delvin and Vex charged in at Brynjolf's words, closely followed by Karliah and Kaiya. "What?!" Delvin cried, spinning around in the empty room to make sure he wasn't missing anything. "All of it? Gone!?"

"I'll KILL that son of a bitch!" Vex spat as she unsheathed her dagger once again.

Kaiya had no control over her visible wince at Vex's words. Even as angry as she was, the anger displayed by her fellow guild members tore her open as if she was experiencing it for the first time alongside them. Delvin noticed her struggle and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Vex, enough" he spoke calmly, reducing the tension in the room. "That's not helping anything right now."

"Fine," Vex snipped. "We'll do it your way for now Delvin, but I swear to the divines if that skeever so much as approaches the cistern again, you won't be able to stop me."

Brynjolf had remained quiet, his eyes locked onto one of the many open chests that lie throughout the room. "I can't believe it" he breathed. "All these years…" He let his sentence trail off, but his meaning was clear.

After twenty-five years of working together, trusting each other, having each others' backs and respecting each other, it was all ruined in an instant. His eyes looked glazed over as if they were swimming in memories, reaching back for any clue that he had missed, any indication that Mercer was not what he seemed. Kaiya approached him and wrapped her arms around him to bring him into a hug. He stayed dazed for a heartbeat longer, then responded by enveloping Kaiya in return. He squeezed her tight as though she were his tether to reality. As if she alone could keep him from diving head first into his own ruminations.

"What now?" Delvin broke the silence that hung in the room. "What do we do?"

"We find him and make him pay." Karliah spoke with a razor's edge tone to her voice. This had been the moment she had been waiting for.
"And how do we do that, huh?" Vex jumped in now. "I'm sorry and I know we've treated you like shit for twenty-five years, but I still have a lot of questions."

"And you will have your answers" Karliiah said tersely, effort taken to remain calm "but first, we need to figure out where he's run off to. We don't have much time."

They stood in awkward silence for a minute, each of the thieves thinking about what their next step could be. Brynjolf had the first idea.

"I hate to ask this of anyone," he spoke to the group "but we need someone to search Mercer's house to see if he left behind any clues."

"I'll do it." Kaiya stated as if it were nonnegotiable.

"You sure, lass?" Brynjolf asked with concern. "He has paid mercenaries there. It will be dangerous."

"I know the mercenaries, Brynjolf" she said flatly. "I've been over there a time or two. They know me."

Brynjolf looked back at her with surprise, apparently the only one in the room who was unaware of Kaiya's relationship with Mercer.

"They were involved, Bryn" Delvin explained. "Kai and Mercer."

"Involved?" Brynjolf now directed his questions to Kaiya, his brows knitted together in confusion. "What does he mean, Kaiya?"

"It means we were fucking, Brynjolf" Kaiya answered with a laugh. "Does that help explain it?"

"Oh it was more than that, love" Delvin disagreed. "I saw the two of you together. I'd argue that you were lovers."

Kaiya's eyes filled up with moisture at Delvin's words, once again betraying her emotion. "Godsdammit I wish I would stop crying!" she laughed as she dried her eyes with her sleeve. "This is getting to be ridiculous."

"Well this is pretty devastating news lass," Brynjolf consoled her with a hand on her nape. "I'm sorry for you, Kai. I didn't know about you and Mercer, but I know that makes it harder."

Kaiya laughed again, covering her pain. "And here you thought you had it rough just because he was your trusted friend and leader for twenty-five years."

His lips curled into a sad smile and his fingers squeezed her nape affectionately in response to her joke. "You sure you're okay to search his house Kai?"

"Damn you guys act like I've never had to deal with heavy shit before!" she continued laughing as she brushed off his hand. "Do remember that I've handled problems a little more difficult than this in my past."

"Oh how silly of me to look out for your feelings, Dragonborn" Brynjolf taunted in reply, understanding from Kaiya's tone that she desperately wanted to end the emotional conversation. "Be off then! We'll search his desk and effects in the cistern while you're gone."

With a swift nod, Kaiya turned on her heels to rush out of the vault and out of the cistern, wanting
desperately to have a bit of distance from her friends. Their concern and care was almost too much for her shattered heart to handle. The past few days had been a barrage of emotion and she was running the risk of losing sight of her anger if she was around caring friends much longer. That anger is what was going to help her survive this; she wouldn't make it any other way.

She could feel exhaustion setting in as she jogged through the cistern and the thought terrified her. She hadn't slept in days and soon she'd have to. Gods only knew what nightmares would be waiting for her when she did.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

It's a different experience for Kaiya when she goes through Riftweald as an intruder.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The sun was just beginning to set on the city of Riften as Kaiya approached the back gate to Riftweald Manor. She could see Vald doing his rounds, walking from one corner of the small backyard to another.

"Psst!" Kaiya called out in a forced whisper. "Vald!"

"Kaiya?" the mercenary asked as he approached the other side of the gate. "Mercer's not here."

"I know, but I need to get into his place." She grabbed two iron bars of the gate and pressed her face as close as she could through the space between so Vald could see her eyes. "Can you help me out?"

"Shit Kaiya" Vald groaned as he rubbed the back of his neck. "You know I can't let you in without orders from the boss."

"I know Vald, but will it help if I tell you he's not coming back?"

"Why wouldn't he be coming back?" Vald asked with interest. "He didn't take much with him when he left."

"He's on the run," Kaiya stated plainly.

"Oh shit, from the guards?" Vald leaned in to whisper his question, not wanting any guard that happened to be nearby to overhear him.

"From the guild." Kaiya's eyes bored into his to accentuate the gravity of her statement. "He messed up real bad, Vald."

"Well why do you need to get in here then?" he asked. Kaiya could tell his resolve was cracking.

"To see if he left anything behind that might tell us where he's going." she answered honestly. "You've always been good to me Vald, so I that's why I'm telling you the truth and not making up some dumb excuse. You know if he's not returning then you won't get paid."

"But I'll still have my debt with Maven" he admitted through clenched teeth. "I'll be working for that witch for the rest of my life at this rate."

"What if I promised that I would handle that for you?" Kaiya offered with a shrug.

"You would do that for me?" Vald asked with surprise. "Why?"
"Like I said, I like you Vald" she shrugged again. "Plus, I hate seeing anyone stuck under that woman's thumb. I'll erase every debt she keeps if I can."

"If you did that, you would be the true hero of Skyrim" Vald joked with a chuckle. "The Dragonborn wouldn't have shit on you."

Kaiya smiled at the irony of his statement but did not correct him. "So will you let me in or not, Vald?"

He hesitated for a moment longer, rubbing the back of his neck as he thought. "You've always been nice to me too, Kaiya" he started to answer. "Not all of the company Mercer has invited here over the years could say the same, but you always treated me like I was a person, not just muscle."

Kaiya stayed quiet to let him finish his thought, even though he had trailed off.

"Yeah I'll let you in" he groaned with a smile. "But don't make me regret this, little one." He unlocked the gate and opened it wide for Kaiya to enter.

"Here" he said as he handed her the key. "You finally got a key to your boyfriend's place." He joked, but immediately regretted it as he saw her face fall. "Oh I'm sorry Kai, it was just a joke-"

"It's fine" she interjected with a beaming false smile. She went up onto her toes to be able to reach his shoulders as she hugged him, mumbling "thank you Vald" into his ear. He rubbed her back in return before breaking away.

"Well I guess I should make myself scarce, huh?" he laughed as he ruffled Kaiya's hair. "Take care, kid."

And at that, Vald looked both ways out of the gate to make sure he wasn't being watched before taking off. "Good luck, Vald" Kaiya said softly once he was out of earshot, knowing he would have hell to pay if Mercer ever found him.

"There's nothing in here" Kaiya mumbled to herself with exasperation as she sat on the floor in one of Mercer's cluttered side rooms. She had really hoped that she would find what she was looking for in one of these rooms so she wouldn't have to venture into his bedroom, but she knew that was probably too much to hope for.

She steeled her nerves and got to her feet, resolute that she wouldn't let her emotions get the better of her and ruin this mission. If there was something here, she had to find it. She wanted to find it. Kaiya was surprised at how thankful she was that they were going after Mercer. If they caught up with him then she could make him answer to her. She could make him look her in the eyes and tell her none of what they had mattered. At least then she would have some closure. A quiet whisper in her mind admitted "and you'd get to see him again too" but she tamped that down before it had a chance to truly surface. No use wasting her almost depleted energy on those thoughts.

Her breath caught in her throat once she stepped inside Mercer's bedroom. It was just like she had last seen it, a fire burning in front of two chairs, a large bed saddled up to a wooden post. She let her eyes scan around the contents of the room, remembering the first time she had been invited here. It was right before Goldenglow. Her eyes stopped on one of the wooden pillars by the bedroom door. This was where they had their first real kiss. Well, their first kiss after she joined the guild that wasn't just to throw off a passing guard.

She swallowed hard to get the lump in her chest to go away, but it seemed as though it would be staying around for a while. With a deep breath, she made her way through the contents of the
room, shoving out any intrusive memory that jumped up in the process. She went through the barrels, the chests, the shelves and even looked under the bed but found nothing.

With a tired exhale, she plopped onto his bed in order to think for a moment. Where would he have kept plans? Or notes? Or a journal? Mercer didn't strike her as the journal keeping type, but then again he hadn't seemed like the betraying type either. She fell backwards onto the bed to stare at the ceiling, but putting herself that close to his furs was a grave mistake. His smell. In an instant, it was all she could comprehend and it sent her mind reeling. Water on stones. Smoke and leather.

She sat up with a gasp, eyes watering at the assault of memory from his scent. Damn him! She forced herself to get up from the bed and to leave the bedroom. If she couldn't find anything else she would return for one more check, but right now she needed to get out fast lest she risk slipping down that rabbit hole.

She jogged from his bedroom to a set of stairs that led down to the first floor of the manor. Once she was away from his bedroom, the memories and smell began to fade. She took a few deep breaths to center herself before pressing on through her search.

The dining room was set as though he would be back for dinner at any moment. Plates with salmon steak and bottles of mead covered the table, leading Kaiya to assume that perhaps it was for the mercenaries that she had dismissed earlier.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary in the dining room, so she made her way into another one of the side rooms on the first floor. This room was a little more sparse, and she immediately noticed a note sitting on one of the tables. She picked it up hastily, wondering what he could have written and left for her to find. It was with sheer embarrassment that she realized it was just a shopping list. She threw it onto the floor in frustration, not caring where it landed. It was then however that she saw a second note on the floor. She picked it up quickly and opened it with the same eagerness as she had the shopping list and this time was met with more of a reward for her efforts.

It was a letter from someone named Kilthinius Dandoril, a name she did not recognize. He was writing Mercer to let him know the job he had been hired for was completed to Mercer's "surprisingly specific specifications." There was a mention of the balcony ramp and at first Kaiya assumed that's all Kilthinius had been hired for but then she read it again. This time she noticed a mention of a floor mechanism. What floor mechanism?

Kaiya's interest was piqued. She knew all about the balcony ramp that Mercer had installed outside for easy escapes, but she had never heard nor seen any floor mechanism in all the times she had visited him here. With a renewed fervor, she pushed on through the rest of the room. She checked a wardrobe and snickered at the fine clothes that hung in it. This must be where he kept his 'disguises' as he had once referred to them.

In the second wardrobe however, there was nothing except for a pair of boots and an odd looking back panel. She had seen something like this before in Windhelm when she helped the local guards solve a few murders. This must be a false panel just like the one in Hjerim. She looked around in a frenzy to find some way of opening this panel when her eyes fell on a pull chain, camouflaged by the stone pillar it hung against. She would never have noticed it had she not been looking for it.

With a yank, she pulled the chain and listened for the sound she knew would come next - the grinding of gears as the mechanism gave way. Sure enough, the false back panel of the wardrobe moved away and she was greeted with an opening into a cobweb infested room. She climbed through the wardrobe while batting away the cobwebs that threatened to entangle her.

The room was entirely normal besides the entrance, which at first caught Kaiya off guard before
she noticed the steps descending into a cellar. Once down the stairs, she knew she had found what she had come looking for. There was a gaping hole knocked out of the stonework of one of the walls, revealing a dark pathway into the sewer system that beckoned to her.

She crawled through the hole and made her way through the corridor in the only way possible. A chest sat behind a few iron bars, but Kaiya knew a trap when she saw one. She quickly identified the pressure plate that hid itself in front of the bars and congratulated herself for not walking into that one.

She continued to walk in a crouch through the tunnel, not wanting anyone who may dwell in this dank sewer to be aware of her intrusion. When the path made a slight left, she was shocked at the sudden presence of flame traps littered across the floor. Whatever Mercer kept at the end of this tunnel, he wanted no one to know about.

With a WULD NAH KEST, Kaiya quickly made her way past the flame spouts and further into the tunnel. She avoided another pressure plate before recognizing she was on the other side of the wall that she started at. The chest that had been obstructed by iron bars was now next to her and open for the taking. The opportunist in her saw no reason not to loot it, so she did before making her way further into the sewer.

The next hallway presented a bit more of a problem with its swinging blades and battering ram. She stood still for a moment, taking in all she was discovering about her former Guildmaster throughout this process. Not only was there this secret tunnel she knew nothing about, but battering rams? What kind of guy puts battering rams in his house? He would have to have a lot of secrets…

With another WULD NAH KEST she made it through the swinging blades unscathed. If he intended to keep everyone out, he had never considered someone with her skills would be trying to break in. The path had finally ended at a wooden door that Kaiya noticed was also rigged with a tripwire. The last trap.

She flung open the door and jumped out of the way as a barrage of poison darts shot out of the trap above the door. The darts smelled acidic, a potent fume that caused her eyes to water. Waving her hand in front of her face to dispel the odor, she stepped into the room. At the sight of where she was, her mouth dropped open in shock.

She had been here before.

Chapter End Notes

That damn shopping list gets me every time.
Chapter 6

22nd of First Seed 4E203

There she stood in the secret office that Mercer had brought her to just days before. The room he told her he had never shown another living soul. The room in which she confronted him about his relationship with Karliah and they discussed the intricacies of his involvement with Maven. The room in which they had reconciled their argument on the very desk that stood before her. The desk that stood now as a stark reminder of how much had changed in just a few days.

She first approached the weapon case that was locked up on the side of the room. Chillrend, he had told her it was called. Grasping for her lockpicks in a flurry of movement, she hastened to open the case to get at the sword inside. She could see the enchantments coming off of the sword like an aura. She wanted this sword. She needed it. The reason was uncertain, but she felt compelled to get her hands on this glass blade. Maybe it was because it was a beautiful, powerful weapon. Maybe it was because it was something tangible of Mercer's that she could hold onto.

With a final click, the lock fell open. She opened the glass covering to the case and stared at its contents with wonder. As her hand touched the hilt, she knew that she would not be letting this weapon go. She gave it a few practice swings in the small space before storing it in her pack. She'd have to adjust her sword belt to hold it later.

She moved on from there and worked her lockpicks through the rest of the chests and dug her hands into the burial urns throughout the room. There was a small amount of vindication she felt from looting Mercer's goods like he had looted theirs. A bowl of gems also sat on the desk to which she helped herself. She discovered a gold ring in the bowl with the gems and took it upon herself to accept his gracious gift, even audibly exclaiming "Why Mercer! You shouldn't have!" as she pushed it onto her finger. A note was left out on the desk that she jumped at the opportunity to read. It was from someone that called themselves "R" and was apparently a fan of Mercer's. Kaiya couldn't help but feel a bit impressed at the heist described in this letter. As she had said before, he wasn't the Guildmaster for nothing. Her eyes then locked onto the one item in the room that had not been there during her last visit. Sitting on the desk in plain view was a detailed plan for a heist in Irkngthand.

She grabbed the plans as her eyes scanned every inch. Why would he just leave this in the open like this? In a place he had shown her before? Suddenly, his motive was clear. He wanted her to find it. He wanted her to chase him.

She tamped down the fluttering her heart did in her chest by reminding herself that she was angry. He wasn't baiting her so that they could reunite in an old Dwarven ruin. He was baiting her so that they would chase him for some dark, nefarious purpose. But what purpose could he have? The answer she feared crept up through the haze of her thoughts and smacked her. This is where he intends to have their final showdown. He intended to ambush them like Karliah ambushed him.

She rolled up the plans with more aggression than was necessary, safely storing them in her pack. If he wanted to bait them then bait them he did. They would follow, but he had no idea what he would be facing. He had no idea what kind of vitriol he had awoken in Kaiya.

She finished cleaning out the room, swiping his prized Gray Fox bust that sat in the corner of the desk and looking through his books for anything of value. Feeling as if her search had reached its end, she made her way out the same way she had entered the very first time. She dropped down through the hole that brought her to the Ratway and jogged back to the Ragged Flagon to show the
"He's going after the Eyes of the Falmer?!

Brynjolf's eyes were wide with surprise as he gazed at the plans Kaiya presented him. He had found no luck in tracking Mercer through his own means, but Kaiya's findings were more than enough to get them in the right direction.

"Then he means to disappear for good."

Brynjolf rolled up the plans and handed them back to Kaiya, his eyes staring off into space. Kaiya stuffed the plans back into her pack as she watched him, waiting on some instruction or explanation of what he was thinking.

"Are you going to explain what you're talking about or -" Kaiya started but did not get to finish her question as Brynjolf interjected.

"This was Gallus's pet project. A heist he had worked tirelessly on for years that he never got to see come to fruition. It's Mercer's final insult to have this plan be his last."

"And why do you assume that it's his last?" Kaiya asked.

"Because it would set him up for life" he spat, clearly upset by the thought.

"Oh," Kaiya said dejectedly. "Well it's obvious he wants us to follow him, so we should be prepared for an ambush."

"What makes you so sure, lass?" Brynjolf's attention snapped back to Kaiya at her comment. He had not gotten the same impression from the plans.

"Because he had them laying out in plain sight in his office that he had taken me to just days prior. He knew I would find them."

"Shor's beard" Brynjolf exclaimed, his mind wandering off once more in thought. He shook his head quickly to try and clear his mind from the bouncing ideas within to continue updating Kaiya. "Karliah wishes to speak with both of us."

"I'm sure she does" Kaiya spoke sarcastically, raising her eyebrows in mock surprise. "She's been waiting for this for 25 years."

"Why do I get the impression that you're mad at her for this?" Brynjolf asked tersely, folding his arms over his chest.

Kaiya exhaled heavily in response. "I'm not mad at her for any of what has happened," Kaiya explained. "I do feel though that she doesn't give a flying fuck whether or not this has hurt us in the process. It's like all she has in her head is vengeance and doesn't care if our hearts are broken along the way as long as she gets people to help her enact her revenge."

Brynjolf's brows shot up at her answer. He hadn't expected that. "Well, I need you two to get along. I've apologized for how the guild has treated her in the past and she's been gracious. She says has her eyes on the future. Maybe it's time we do the same."

Kaiya narrowed her eyes at the thief before her. "Gods I hate it when people say that. 'Forget about the past and let's move forward.'" she spoke in a mocking tone. "The only people who say that shit
are people who have more to gain from me 'getting over it' than they do from helping me through it." She ran her hands through her hair in frustration, surprised at her own reaction as much as Brynjolf was. "See this is the shit that makes me miss Mercer," she admitted with a laugh. "He understood that not everything was so easy to just get over. He understood that some things took time and that was okay."

"I never said you had to just get over it, Kai" Brynjolf thundered. "But we don't have time to hang around and nurse your wounds. Karliah is not your enemy. Mercer is your enemy. It's time for you to accept that."

"Whatever Bryn, fine. Let's go talk to Karliah. Let's go fight Mercer. Let's go do whatever you want as long as you stop giving me life advice about something you have minimized and frankly don't understand." She stormed off away from where Brynjolf stood, but he reached out and grabbed her elbow before she could get far.

"Hey!" he growled, pulling her close to him so she could see the anger in his eyes. "I'm sorry if I stumbled into a conversation I wasn't ready for, lass. I didn't mean to insult you, I just want you to have a level head, is all."

"Do any of us have level heads right now, Bryn?" Kaiya spun around as she spoke and faced Brynjolf, her face only a few inches from his. "Can you look me in the eyes right now and tell me that you feel centered and balanced and level headed? Because if you can, then I envy your lack of emotion. But if you're the person I think you are, then I know you're struggling as much as I am." She took a deep breath before continuing while Brynjolf stood silent as he thought on her words. "We'll get through this but it's not going to be easy and I need you to understand that. I need you to understand that I may need you to give me some patience and you may need the same and that's okay. It's okay that this is hard. It's okay that this hurts and it's okay that we're all freaking out a little bit right now. Because if it's not okay now then when is it?"

Brynjolf stared back at her with a blank expression, his mind reeling and trying to keep up with what just happened. After enough time had passed where Kaiya begun questioning if he was even paying attention anymore or not, the corners of his mouth began to turn up into a grin.

"Well color me impressed lass" he teased as he held her by the shoulders to face him. "I never knew you had it in ya to be so deep. Here I thought you were just a pleasure seeking lecher like myself but you have put me to shame!" He laughed as he pulled her into a hug, though she was too stunned to hug back. "I hear ya lass, and I'll give ya patience. It's okay, you're right."

At Brynjolf's words Kaiya grasped his leathers to her tightly, thankful and grateful that he understood what she needed. She was beginning to realize that even though the Thieves Guild no longer held Mercer, she had plenty of friends here.

This place was still home.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Mercer's fate is decided.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was inspired by the song "Eating Like Kings" by Shawn James. Seriously. Give it a listen.

22nd of First Seed 4E203

"The time has come to decide Mercer's fate."

Karliah's words spun in Kaiya's head, making her dizzy. For a moment, she worried that she would topple off the side of the platform where they stood in the center of the cistern. This conversation was destined to happen, but no amount of preparation could have readied Kaiya for it. In a way, deciding Mercer's fate was deciding her own.

"Brynjolf, until a new Guildmaster is chosen, that decision falls to you." Karliah spoke with authority, bristling Kaiya's already frayed nerves.

"Aye lass, and I've come to a decision." Brynjolf spoke sadly, foreshadowing the decision he had yet to utter.

Kaiya's dizziness worsened. Was it hot in here? Was this not moving too fast? Before she could stop herself, words leapt from her mouth. "Does no one else have a say in this decision, Bryn?" She cringed at how pleading her voice sounded in her ears.

For a moment, Kaiya could have sworn she saw Brynjolf wince. His eyes were cast downward, unable to meet her questioning stare. He didn't have to say a word for Kaiya to know exactly what he had decided. The realization caused her stomach to plummet to her feet.

"Mercer Frey tried to kill you and Karliah, he betrayed the Guild, murdered Gallus… and he broke your heart, lass." Brynjolf finally dared to bring his eyes to face Kaiya as she stood facing him, mouth agape. "He made us question our future, you probably most of all. He needs to die."

He needs to die.

Although she had expected this decision, the words spoken aloud crashed into her like a warhammer. For a moment, she felt like she couldn't breathe. Her eyes jumped from Brynjolf to Karliah, both wearing a look of pity for her. She hated pity. Without realizing what she was doing, she bent forward and placed her hands on her knees to try to steady her breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Come on Kai. Inhale. Exhale.

"I'm so sorry, lass. It was a difficult decision, but it was one I had to make. You know that."
Brynjolf pleaded with her to understand. They couldn't afford division between them on this. She had to understand.

"Just give me a minute, Bryn." Kaiya's voice was cracked with emotion.

She fought her rising temper, her instinct to defend. Kaiya had always been a loyal friend, one who would disembowel another for even thinking of hurting one she considered "hers." Her mind was unused to the cognitive dissonance it was being asked to accept. "MINE" her heart screamed at her, reminding her that Mercer was one of the names on her list of people she would defend to the death. She breathed in slowly, willing logic to battle the instinct inside her. He had betrayed them. He had murdered one of their own. Was the rest of the Guild not on that list? Would she not have killed anyone who betrayed Delvin? Slaughtered any who thought to harm Brynjolf? It was as if she were standing in the destroyed sanctuary all over again, Blade of Woe in her hand, being asked to slay the woman who brought destruction on her family. She had done it then without pause. What was different about this?

She knew the answer to her own question. The only difference was her and her damn emotions. She couldn't stand in her own way to protect her new family. There would be no redemption for her if she stood in the way of defending the Guild. With wobbly legs, she stood back up and ran a trembling hand through her hair.

"I know," she croaked out. "He has to die."

A hand was placed on her shoulder for comfort, but she couldn't bring herself to pay attention to who it belonged to. Her eyes gazed into the distance, locking onto nothing in particular. The conversation continued on without her. She heard "Nightingales" and some mention of Nocturnal. Brynjolf seemed surprised. They began to make preparations for the next step, all while Kaiya continued to stare. She couldn't bring herself to look away from the water gushing from the pipes above her, cascading down the wall and crashing into the pool below them. More water. More churning. The sound was bombarding her ears the more she let it in, but she wanted it in. Wanted it to wash away the chaos in her head.

"Kaiya, can you do that?" Karliah's voice snapped Kaiya's attention back to the conversation with a jolt.

"Do what?" she said, although her eyes still felt as though they were floating. With a shake, she brought her focus back to the purple eyes of the Dunmer before her.

"Meet us at the standing stones outside of town in the morning?" Karliah continued on with directions on how to get there and what time to meet as Kaiya mentally mapped it out in her head. She knew of the stones.

"Yes, I'll be there."

Karliah gave her a small smile and a nod before turning to walk away, leaving Kaiya alone with Brynjolf in the center of the cistern. He grabbed her shoulder, turning her to face him as he bent down to make his eyes level with hers. "It's going to be okay, lass" he promised, although he sounded unsure. "We're going to get through this."

Kaiya nodded, not knowing what to say. What choice did she have but to get through this? She would be okay like she always was. Broken, battered, cracked into shards, but still pressing on. One day it would all be too much and she would finally be ground into powder, but now she stood. She'd continue on until that day came.
"Go to the Flagon. Get some food, have a drink and for the love of all that is holy, get some sleep lass." He ordered with a crooked smile, trying his damndest to bring her out of her own head.

She nodded again and felt her lips twitch as she tried to return a fraction of his smile.

"Come on, I'll walk with you" he said into her ear as he wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders. He steered her to the Flagon before sitting her at a table with Delvin and ordering her a mead and some dinner. When she had taken her first bite of seared slaughterfish, Brynjolf nodded in appreciation and retreated back to the cistern, no doubt to do some more planning.

Delvin said nothing, just took a sip from his tankard as he watched her slowly make her way through her dinner. When she would slow, he would nod towards her food, encouraging her to continue.

"We're going to kill him, Delvin."

Her words were spoken softly, but they conveyed everything she felt. Her eyes met his, searching for something he could not identify.

"Aye," he forced out in response. "His fate was chosen when he fled from that tomb, love."

"I know," Kaiya agreed as she looked into her tankard. "Still sucks."

The corner of Delvin's lips twitched into a half smile at her words. "That's the truest thing you've ever said."

She couldn't help but mirror his smile in response. Although she was still famished, the food in front of her held no appeal. She picked at it with her fingers, trying to force herself to continue.

"I know that slaughterfish in front of you may as well be a boot for how appealin' it is right now, but you need to eat it." Delvin nudged the plate towards her with another sad smile. "It may be the last meal you get in a while."

"Last meal," Kaiya let out a humorless chuckle. "Fitting."

Delvin stayed quiet, merely letting the heavy words she spoke sink into air around them. As word of the decision to kill Mercer began to make its way through the cistern, more thieves found their way to the Flagon. The atmosphere was somber, a miasma of sadness and anger so thick it seemed to permeate their skin and get caught in their leathers. Without a word, each member of the guild ended up sitting around with a tankard of mead, a silent show of solidarity in their misery.

It was one thing for them to angrily proclaim that Mercer would die at their hands in a number of creative ways when his betrayal was discovered, but it was another to actually plan on doing it. To actively plan and set out with the sole intention of ending the life of their Guildmaster. Some of the thieves picked at food that sat in front of them, sharing in what Kaiya had deemed the "last meal." Others seemed content staring into tankards of mead.

Vex took up the chair between Kaiya and Delvin, joining them as they stared at the table. Delvin reached out and placed a comforting hand on Vex's knee in what was probably their first show of public affection, although no one paid it any mind. They had each other and in times like this, reasons for secrecy paled in the need of a little comfort.

As the night set in, the thieves began to make their way to their beds, one by one, as quietly as they had entered. As each thief left the Flagon, they made sure to walk past Kaiya, giving her shoulder a squeeze or a gentle hand on her arm. No words needed to be spoken to communicate the message...
they were sending: Good luck. I'm sorry this falls to you. We'll be here when you come back. Each touch caused moisture to build in Kaiya's eyes, but tears never fell. This was not the time for them. This was the time for her to share a bit of her fractured soul with her fellow guild members. Her friends. Her family.

Before long, the Flagon was empty except for Delvin, Vex and Kaiya. Vekel had left moments before, one arm tightly wrapped around Tonilia's waist as they made their way to their bed for the night. Kaiya found herself so incredibly jealous of the thieves that wouldn't be alone tonight. She was dreading sleeping alone.

Delvin and Vex stood to leave but still, no one spoke. Vex squeezed both of her shoulders as she passed and Delvin leaned down to kiss her head before they made their way to their bed. Minutes passed while she continued staring into her tankard of mead. To her surprise, it was still almost full. She hadn't even come close to finishing a single drink. She looked around and for the first time, realized no one else remained in the Flagon. Her mind drifted to the days in which she would wait for this hour each night, hoping for moments alone with her Guildmaster. Now she sat by herself with only her tankard of mead for company.

Kaiya was alone and she didn't want to be anymore.

Silently, Kaiya stood and slowly stumbled towards the room where the leaders of the guild slept. Delvin and Vex were cuddled up in one bed, soft breathing indicating that they were both asleep. Her eyes scanned the room until she found what she was looking for. She approached the bed and lifted the furs before sliding in next to the warm body that laid there, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Come here, lass" Brynjolf crooned, wrapping his arm around her small frame and enveloping her in his warmth. Head on his chest and hand over his heart, she slowly let her tired and achy body relax into him. She was so tired. Brynjolf's fingers ran through her hair, soothing her racing thoughts until they quieted enough that she could rest. As she listened to the steady rhythm of his breathing and felt the beating of his heart beneath her hand, her eyes shuttered closed and she finally, for the first time in days, drifted off to sleep.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Brynjolf and Kaiya become Nightingales after Karliah convinces them to do so. Kaiya is not happy with Karliah's convincing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"Oh no," she thinks, as she approaches the blazing door of the open sanctuary. A sword slashes her back and she turns to face an onslaught of guards with the help of a black, immortal stallion with red eyes. A soldier falls before her, coming to his end with a slice across his throat from her dagger.

She knew this dream. She had it so many times she knew exactly what would happen, how it would end.

She runs inside, past the corpses of the fallen guards and through the the hallway that led to a large opening. Fire is everywhere, the smoke clouding her vision and causing her eyes to water. The smell is overwhelming, assaulting her senses. Where is he? She spots the werewolf, fighting for his life and falling with an arrow to the back. She feels the spectral assassin move past her to take on a soldier, one powerful strike sending the ethereal form back to the void. Clashing swords, a redguard fighting at the top of stairs in his Alik'r armor. Where is he? An open casket. Darkness.

Although still asleep, she was aware of what was happening. She knew what was to come next. Astrid.

She runs up stairs and through a doorway she had never seen. Debris litters the floor. She jumps over burning wood. Her lungs burn as she jumps through a wall of smoke. Ahead of her she sees a body...

No. It's changed.

Instead of a burnt body on the floor, she sees a man standing in the center of a circle of nightshade and candles. There is no longer an Alik'r warrior with her. She is alone with this man, his back turned to her. Who is he? Slowly he turns to face her...

Mercer!?

She runs to him but stops before she enters the circle. Her heart pounds in her chest at the sight of him. "What are you doing here?!" she yells above the sound of crumbling stone. He seems to notice for the first time that he's not alone. His gaze raises to meet hers, but there is no recognition in his eyes. "Mercer, it's me!" she calls out, but his face doesn't soften. Instead, his blank stare turns into a menacing scowl, filling his features with hatred. Still, he does not speak. She feels anger rise from her stomach, burning her heart. "HOW COULD YOU!??" she screams, picking up a rock from the floor and launching it at him. He doesn't flinch. 'I trusted you! I gave you everything! Did it
mean nothing!?” her voice cracks from the effort, smoke still in her lungs, burning her throat. He remains silent. Her anger rages inside her, hating him for not giving her answers. "Tell me to my face you never cared, you bastard!” she screams again, her thu’um threatening to unleash its power on the man before her. "Tell me it was all a trick! Tell me it was all lies! TELL ME YOU DIDN'T LOVE ME!” she pulls at her hair as the sanctuary crumbles around them, but still he does not speak. He stares at her, baring his teeth in disgust but he does not answer her.

Suddenly, the sanctuary begins to crumble above them, large boulders crashing between and around them. They are in danger. "MERCER!" she screams, anger forgotten as she races to him to protect him from the falling stone. A large rock falls in her path, blocking her from getting to him. He does not move, though now his face seems to hold fear. He is afraid. He reaches for her just as a boulder drops from the ceiling and heads straight for him… "MERCER!"

She sat up with a jolt as her eyes snapped open, screaming Mercer's name. Brynjolf hovered above her, straddling her over the furs. His hands were on her shoulders from his unsuccessful attempts to wake her from her nightmare. His breathing matched hers, ragged and heavy. Both of them were sweaty. Both looked scared.

"Are you okay, lass?” he asked with a shaky voice.

"Yeah," she answered, her adrenaline slowly returning to a normal level. "I was having a nightmare."

"So I noticed," he said with a smirk. "At first I thought you were trying to fight me, as many blows as I took trying to figure out what was happening."

Her eyes went wide. "I'm so sorry Bryn," she apologized as her hands covered her mouth in shock. "I didn't mean to!"

"I know, Kai" he laughed as he rolled away from where he straddled her, flopping onto the bed beside her. "It's forgiven. That must have been a nasty one though."

Kaiya ran her fingers through her hair as she tried to catch up. "I have them a lot" she stated as fact. "I should have warned you if I was going to sleep next to you, it's just that, I haven't had a nightmare like that since…” her voice trailed off as a realization struck her.

"Since when, lass?” Brynjolf asked, putting his weight on his elbow in order to face her.

"Since I started sleeping next to Mercer." She slowly turned her head so that her wide eyed stare would meet Brynjolf's. He looked angry.

"And seeing as how you were screaming his name, I'm willing to guess he made an appearance in your nightmare as well."

She shook her head in affirmation.

"Bastard," he cursed as he rolled onto his back. "Just another thing he robbed from you."

Kaiya winced at Brynjolf's anger, although hers was beginning to rise as well. He was right. No matter what happened in the next few days, Mercer had taken away her ability to sleep soundly. She was now worse off than she was before, his betrayal adding a whole new horror to her night terrors.

"Let's go meet Karliah," Kaiya spoke with an eerie calm. "I'm ready."
"That a girl!" Brynjolf exclaimed as he jumped out of bed and started throwing his leathers on over his undershirt. "There's that fire we need!"

Kaiya tried to hold onto it, the "fire" as Brynjolf had called it - the lasting fear and anger from her nightmare. Though it was there, she couldn't shake another residual feeling from her dream that laid right under the surface. A feeling that was so potent and horrifying that she knew she couldn't ponder on it lest she lose her nerve. She would push it down and fight it but she knew it was there - the overwhelming sense of dread, loss and heartbreak she felt as she watched that boulder crashing down towards Mercer as she was powerless to stop it.

"I feel like we're about to do some necromancy or something," Kaiya joked as she approached the two thieves at the Shadow Stone outside of Riften.

Karliah seemed a bit surprised at Kaiya's jovial attitude considering why they were meeting, but Brynjolf cracked a grin in response as if he was used to this type of behavior from the Breton. "You say that like you have experience, lass. Was this a phase you went through in your time at the college?"

Kaiya matched his grin, happy that he understood her need for banter as a distraction. "Bryn how many times have I had to tell you that what happens at the college stays at the college?"

"Tell that to the horrible case of the rattles I brought home one time."

A laugh burst out of Kaiya's chest as her hand shot up to cover her mouth in an attempt to refrain from laughing at Brynjolf's misfortune. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he watched her reaction, happy to see her smiling again.

The smile was not meant to last however as Karliah brought their attention back to the matter at hand. "Can we get started?"

Kaiya forced herself not to roll her eyes as she diverted her attention to the Dunmer. "Sure," she agreed with a shrug. "I'd love to hear why we're having a secret meeting by the Shadow Stone."

"We've come to seek the edge we need to defeat Mercer Frey." Her voice was steel, unrelenting to the pain she knew it inflicted.

Kaiya stifled a wince. She had to stop reacting so openly to every mention of the man's name. Still, she couldn't stop the acceleration of her heart rate at the blunt admission. "I don't know," Kaiya dithered "I'm pretty fond of the Lord Stone."

"We're not here for the standing stone, Kaiya" Karliah spat with impatience. "This is Nightingale Hall." She pointed towards the mountainside to a door cut into the rock.

"Are we to become Nightingales, then?" Brynjolf asked with wonder in his tone.

"It is my hope that you will, yes." Karliah answered. "Now let's go inside."

A strange sense of foreboding washed over Kaiya as they entered the hall. It was the same feeling she got when she spoke to Gulum-Ei or even Astrid, a feeling that something more was going on beneath the surface and that she should stay alert.

Brynjolf did not seem to have the same reservations, spinning around as he walked to see everything the hall had to offer. "So this is Nightingale Hall?" he asked as they made their way past the entrance and into the cavernous stone opening. "I heard about this place when I joined the
Guild, but I never believed it existed."

Kaiya couldn't help the scoff she exhaled as she watched Brynjolf's reaction. He was like a starstruck child. Karliaih went on to explain the need the Nightingales had to keep their existence a secret, but that same feeling kept itching at Kaiya's consciousness, wanting to hear what this was really about.

"Why are we here, Karliaih?" Kaiya's words seemed to snap Brynjolf out of his reverie and bring attention to the questions he undoubtedly had as well.

"I'm with Kaiya on this one, lass" he said. "I'm not looking to become some priest. I'm not exactly a religious person, nor do I see myself becoming one."

"This isn't about religion Brynjolf," Karliaih groaned in irritation. "It's about business."

"Yeah you say that, but we have no idea what's going on." Kaiya interjected, unable to let Karliaih skirt the question.

"This is Nightingale Hall," Karliaih spoke reverently, effectively ignoring Kaiya's statement. "Now, if you'll both proceed to the armory to don your Nightingale Armor, we can begin the oath."

"The Oath!?" Kaiya and Brynjolf yelped in unison.

"Just put on the armor and I'll tell you everything you want to know." Karliaih was beginning to lose her patience, but the two thieves were suspicious.

In the end, Kaiya's curiosity won out over her suspicion. In all her time traversing Skyrim, she knew the value of protecting herself and was never one to turn down a good weapon or effective armor. A small gasp left her lips as she began sliding the enchanted leather onto her body. This armor was exquisite! It fit to her small frame like a second skin and covered her completely. She felt invincible, like no one could touch her as long as she wore it. Perhaps Karliaih was right to push them to don the armor first; Kaiya had definitely become more open minded to this Nightingale business if this was part of the deal.

"This is enough to make your head spin, eh?" Brynjolf joked from his position next to her.

When she looked over to respond, her words stopped on her lips at the sight before her. He was like a shadow, his armor so dark that she could barely make out the details. It fit him just as snugly, accentuating every inch of his body that was normally concealed in his bulky guild leathers. She had to admit, he looked pretty damn good in that armor. As if on cue, the reminder that Mercer had been a Nightingale crept up into her mind. Oh what she would have paid to see Mercer wearing this armor. To watch the leather meld to his lithe frame, revealing nothing but his green eyes. Stop it, Kai! She scolded herself, shaking her head to force the thoughts from her mind.

Brynjolf interpreted her actions as a compliment to him, a small chuckle breaking free from the shadow. "Look your fill, lass?" He teased as he stood up a little straighter.

"Oh get over yourself, Bryn" Kaiya responded as she rolled her eyes. If she had thought of telling him he looked good before, she wouldn't now. It would be way too much for his ego.

"We're wasting time." Karliaih's voice came from another shadow, having donned the armor herself as well. Kaiya couldn't help but think that Karliaih looked comfortable dressed this way, as if she finally felt at home. Her heart softened a bit towards the Dunmer at that. How long had it been since Karliaih was able to feel comfortable?
"Okay lass. We've got these getups on. Now what?"

"Beyond this gate is the first step in becoming a Nightingale," Karliah explained as she determinedly headed for the gate.

"Whoa there lass," Brynjolf insisted. "I appreciate the armor but we need to talk about this."

Karliah turned to face them, impatience seeping out of her stance. "If we wish to have any hope of defeating Mercer, we must have Nocturnal at our backs and in order to do that, an arrangement must be struck."

"Wait, what?" Kaiya interjected. "Why would we need the help of a Daedric Prince to take out Mercer? He's just a man."

"For you and Mercer to have been lovers, you don't know much about him," Karliah spat venomously, her fists balled by her sides.

"Whoa!" Kaiya retorted. "Easy there, spitfire. If we're not understanding the gravity of the situation, then maybe you should slow this down and explain it to us."

Karliah's chest rose and fell dramatically, signalling that she was taking a few deep breaths to calm herself. "I need you to trust me on this. There is more but I am honor bound to secrecy until you take the oath."

Kaiya approached Karliah cautiously, not wanting to anger her further. "Look, Karliah. I'm not saying that I'm unwilling to do this or that I don't trust you. You just need to tell us the terms of what we're getting ourselves into."

"I agree with her, lass." Brynjolf walked towards them as he spoke, his hands up to show he meant no harm. "I need to know the terms."

Karliah lifted her chin confidently. "The terms are quite simple. Nocturnal will allow you to become a Nightingale and use your abilities for whatever you wish."

Kaiya's eyebrows shot up with skepticism. "And what does she want in return?"

"And in return, both in life and in death, you must serve as a guardian of the Twilight Sepulcher."

"Aye, there's always a catch." Brynjolf relented as he rubbed the back of his neck in nervous habit. "But at this point, I suppose there isn't much to lose. If it means the end of Mercer Frey, you can count me in."

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Kaiya exclaimed, holding her hands up to the others as if commanding them to stop. "Hold on a second, Brynjolf. That's a big commitment. Yeah, we all want to right the wrongs of the Guild, but to resign yourself into service of a Daedric Prince for eternity? Is that not a bit steep?"

"Why the worry for me, lass?" he asked in a teasing tone. "I noticed you didn't mention your own afterlife."

"Don't worry about me," Kaiya brushed off his sentiments with a wave of her hand. "My afterlife has never been my own. But yours…"

"In the grand scheme of things, Nocturnal doesn't sound that bad" Brynjolf joked. "If Gallus did it, it couldn't be that bad of a decision."
Kaiya rolled her eyes at his nonchalance. "I will never understand how people can be so careless with their souls."

"And what about you, Kaiya?" Karliah asked expectantly. "Will you transact the oath?"

Kaiya cocked her head to the side at Karliah's question. "I feel the need to remind you both that before I was in the Guild I killed dragons for a living. Huge, fire and frost breathing dragons. And I absorbed their souls." She began gesturing with her hands, waving them around to accentuate her story. "I traveled to Sovngarde to slay the Worldeater. I killed the godsdamned Emperor of Tamriel for crying out loud!"

At this, Karliah's brows shot up in surprise, reminding Kaiya that maybe she should be a little more careful with her boasting.

"Forget that last one about the Emperor. That was a joke. Heh!" she laughed awkwardly to try to make her lie convincing, but decided to instead just carry on. "My point is, I'm having a hard time believing I should get in deep with Nocturnal in order to have a chance against the man I was sleeping with up until a few days ago."

"I have no doubts that you are strong," Karliah spoke calmly. "But an Agent of Nocturnal has abilities you've never seen before. Will you not join us?"

"All right look," Kaiya rebuked, a gloved finger shooting up to point at the Dunmer. "I'm already indebted to more Daedric Princes than you could imagine, so for me it's not a big deal to add one more. You probably could have sold me on this for the armor alone. That being said, I think it's bullshit that you sprung this on us like this. It takes a special kind of selfish to try to urge two people into making a deal with a daedra in order to further your own end. I know I don't know you very well, but if this doesn't make you feel at least the slightest bit guilty, maybe you should think long and hard about what separates you from Mercer."

"Kaiya!" Brynjolf scolded, his gloved fists resting on his hips. "Watch your tongue."

Kaiya rolled her eyes. "I know, I know, she's not my enemy, blah blah. Well consider this a warning to you too, Brynjolf." Her gloved finger moved to point at Brynjolf's chest. "If you continue jumping into trusting others so easily then we're going to be right back here in another few years, shocked and surprised at someone's betrayal. I've warned you of this before. You see others for what you hope them to be, but rarely for what they really are. Did Mercer's betrayal not teach you to be at least a little hesitant before offering others your trust?"

The room fell silent after Kaiya's outburst as the thieves thought on her words. Karliah's eyes cast downward as Kaiya paced back and forth before her.

"I don't understand why you're angry." Karliah stood her ground, hands on her hips as Kaiya paced back and forth before her.

"Because you just used us as payment!" Kaiya thundered, gesturing to the circles each of them had stood on to transact the oath to Nocturnal moments before. "Even Nocturnal said that the deal was..."
in her favor! And there I stood, hearing for the first time that you were not on good terms with her and that you brought 'two more people to transact the oath’" Kaiya mimicked Karliah's accent as she quoted her "so that you could be reinstated? Why would that not upset me?"

Karliah remained quiet. What could be seen of her eyes through the Nightingale armor showed that her brows were knit together in confusion.

"But no, we just had to become Nightingales so that we would 'have any hope of defeating Mercer'" Kaiya mimicked her again.

"Kaiya, calm down!" Brynjolf demanded, his hand gripping her shoulder so that she would stand still. "You're not even giving her a chance to explain!"

"By all means," Kaiya taunted with a fake bow towards the Dunmer "explain."

"Remember earlier when I said you needed to trust me? That there was more to this but that I had to wait until you had taken your oaths to tell you?" Karliah snapped, any calm she felt gone with Kaiya's repeated attacks.

Brynjolf nodded. Kaiya spun her finger in the air as if to say "get on with it."

She took a deep breath before she continued. "Well now I can tell you Mercer's true crime. He stole a powerful artifact from the Twilight Sepulcher called the Skeleton Key. This is why he was able to open the Guild's vault without two keys. But worse than that, by stealing the key, he's compromised the Guild's ties to Nocturnal and in essence, caused our luck to run dry."

"Our luck?" Kaiya asked with raised brows, her skepticism seeping into her tone. She crossed her arms over her chest as she faced off with the Dunmer, unconvinced that this crime was as bad as described. "Please, enlighten me on this key. It opens any door, I'm guessing."

"You jest, but yes." Karliah crossed her arms to match Kaiya's stance as she continued. "But that's not all it does. It's not restricted to just unlock doors, but also minds. It can access untapped abilities that are securely sealed within our minds. Once anyone realizes that the key can do this, the potential becomes limitless."

Kaiya's skepticism remained firmly in place. "Do you realize how crazy that sounds?" she laughed at the absurdity. "Right. Mercer stole a key that can open any door, which to be fair, that I believe. It's the whole 'you can unlock your true potential" idea that I have problems with."

Karliah's impatience rose to the forefront again, her fists returning to her sides. "I don't know what to tell you," she shrugged as if she didn't care, although her tension betrayed her. "It's the truth. The key can unlock doors both physical and mental, which makes Mercer incredibly powerful. Not only that, but without the key in its lock in the Twilight Sepulcher, things will never be the same for the Guild. It's already been missing for two decades, so soon our luck would diminish to nothing." Seeing Kaiya's unbelieving smirk at the idea of luck, she continued. "Whether you realize it or not, our luck is what defines our trade. That's why Nocturnal has been the driving force behind the Thieves Guild for centuries."

"You know what?" Kaiya threw her hands up in surrender, her head shaking back and forth at what she was about to say. "Fine. It's too late to turn back now anyway. And to be fair, I have enough experience with Daedric Princes to know that when they're involved, things rarely make sense."

"So you're still in this with us?" Karliah squeaked with surprise. "You're going to help us kill Mercer?"
"What?" Kaiya was confused. She didn't realize she had given Karliah the impression that she would back out. "Yes, I'm still in. I am still pissed about this Nocturnal nonsense and I'm not really sure how I feel about all you said with the key and whatever, but none of that matters when it comes to what we're setting out to do. These are all just steps in the process."

Kaiya could have sworn she saw the black mask covering Karliah's face shift to signal a smile. "Thank you, Kaiya. We'll need you."

"Yep!" she agreed. "So what's the next step? Any more Daedric Princes we need to bind ourselves to for eternity before we go out to face a mortal man in a dwarven ruin?" While she was willing to move on from her anger, it would continue to be an unceasing subject of teasing that she would use against the Dunmer.

"Irkngthand." Brynjolf declared with authority. "We head to Irkngthand. And ladies, prepare yourselves. This will be a fight to remember."

Chapter End Notes

This part of the questline always makes me angry at Karliah.
"The bandits!" Karliah gasped as the large, heavy doors to Irkngthand slammed shut behind them.

It took a few moments for Kaiya's eyes to adjust to the change in lighting before she could see what it was that had Karliah so upset. They were in a huge, cavernous room of stone and metal, typical of most dwarven ruins. In the center of the room, a fire burned with pots and a spit set up over the flames. The typical setup of a bandit hideout. As her eyes roamed around the room, Kaiya noticed several bed rolls lying about the fire, once again quite typical.

What made this scene different from most of the bandit dens Kaiya had seen, and what caused Karliah's gasp of horror, was the sheer amount of blood that covered the bed rolls and the stone floor. Bandits lie dead all around the room, their armor drenched in the blood that seemed to be everywhere. Stone steps led away from the fire pit and climbed higher, leading towards a stone corridor on the far side of the room. The steps were littered with corpses of bandits lying face first on the stone, apparent that they been killed as they tried to run away.

The sight caused Kaiya's brows to raise in surprise, but Karliah reacted with anger. "What happened?" she exclaimed in a forced whisper.

As if in response, a hacking cough could be heard from somewhere on the stairs before them. The trio made their way past the dead bandits towards the sound, but only Kaiya thought to loot the bodies. She wondered to herself whether or not the other thieves thought themselves above that level of larceny. They continued to follow the sounds of harsh breathing and wet coughs before they finally found its source: a dying bandit in fur armor that sat leaning against one of the stone outcroppings surrounding the stairs.

"I didn't know shadows could kill" the dying bandit rasped as the thieves approached. "Impossible."

"Tell us what happened," Karliah urged, moving swiftly to create a tourniquet to stop the bleeding from a gushing wound in his upper thigh.

"Leave it," he instructed, using his fleeting strength to swat her away. "It's too late." He coughed again, a rattling, pained sound that sounded of death.

"It came out of the shadows," he started to explain, his eyes wide at the memory. "Just felt the blade enter my skin."

Karliah held her waterskin up to his lips and his mouth opened to take a few stray drops before he gave up. It wouldn't be long now.

"You saw nothing?" Brynjolf spoke now, his voice strained from the shock of the moment. This had not been expected. But the bandit was too far gone now. He continued to mutter quietly with
the breath he had left, but no one could understand. His breathing became shallower and shallower. He managed to utter one last word, "impossible" as the life left his body, leaving yet another bandit corpse to litter the cold, stone floor.

"Mercer!" Karliah growled in her rage as she released the bandit. "He'll pay for this!"

Brynjolf’s tense shoulders seemed to signal his agreement. "Aye, crime's one thing but murder is another."

While it hadn’t been pleasant to watch the life leave the bandit, Kaiya couldn't find it in her to be angry with Mercer for killing them. Hundreds of bandits had fallen to her swords throughout Skyrim and she had never given it a second thought. In fact, she was certain that if Mercer hadn't killed all of the bandit inhabitants in the ruin, Kaiya would have left a similar scene in her wake.

"Uh…" Kaiya began to protest the strange turn of events, but she was unsure of what to say. "You guys know I'm in the Dark Brotherhood, right?"

That probably hadn't been the smartest thing for her to decide on to break the tension. Brynjolf and Karliah whipped around to glare at her, their eyes sharp with anger and accusal.

"What?" Kaiya shrugged, not understanding the need for so much anger this early in their mission. "I've killed people. Lots of people. I've killed way more bandits than this," she held her arms out to the side as she indicated the corpses around them, "yet you guys aren't making me pay."

Karliah's response was sharp. "What's your point?"

"My point is that I think you guys are trying a little too hard to make Mercer into a monster. He's already the bad guy. We don't have to add 'bandit slayer' to his list of offenses." She shrugged again. "I mean, if that's the case then you guys probably shouldn't like me very much. Or Ravyn. Or Thrynn. Or…"

Brynjolf cut her off. "All right, you've made your point, lass." He seemed irritated. "Let's get going."

They made their way past the rest of the dead bandits and snuck towards the open corridor that lie ahead. As they approached the stone archways, Kaiya noticed the remnants of a dwarven sphere lying on the floor. She had been through enough dwarven ruins in her time to know what this meant.

"Have you guys ever been into a dwarven ruin before?" she whispered, not wanting to alert anyone or anything to their presence.

Karliah whispered her answer. "Once or twice, why do you ask?"

"Because these," Kaiya kicked at the broken pieces of dwarven metal that littered the floor "are not fun, but it looks like we'll be facing them sooner rather than later."

Brynjolf's brows furrowed as he inspected the heap of metal Kaiya had indicated. "What is that?"

"They're dwarven spheres," she explained. "They shoot these wicked arrows and have a pretty bitchin' melee attack with this long arm thing." She held up the weapon as she spoke so they could see for themselves.

"Ah, the long arm thing" Brynjolf teased, unable to resist the opportunity. "Sounds treacherous."
"Ignore my warning at your own peril, Brynjolf" she scowled. "Just know that they're mean and they're fast. The first time I encountered one of these things I ended up running around in circles trying to drink healing potions until I could face it."

A small laugh shook Brynjolf's shoulders at the image. "Well let's hope you've improved since then, Dragonborn."

"You'll see" she warned, unaffected by his jab at her by using her title.

They continued on through the open corridor, encountering a small pool of water that was littered with shards of metal from dwarven spheres and spiders. "Damn," Kaiya breathed as she took in all of the wreckage. "Mercer handled those automatons like a boss." She was beginning to get a sense of just how capable of a fighter he really was. It's as if those sessions in the training room back in the cistern may not have showcased all of his prowess after all.

"I guess we owe Mercer a thank you," Brynjolf teased.

Kaiya scoffed at his optimism. "There are always more. Always."

The doorway into the next room of the ruin gave Kaiya pause. The walls were covered in ports that dwarven spheres and spiders loved to hide in, waiting on the next intruders. "Careful up ahead," she warned as she took the lead. "I have a feeling we're about to encounter some of our very own."

Just as Kaiya had predicted, two dwarven spheres descended from the ports along the wall as soon as they crept through the doorway. Although the constructs had sensed the presence of intruders, the thieves had not yet been spotted, giving them the advantage. Kaiya unsheathed her dragonbone sword and silently cast the Ebonyflesh spell with her free hand, preparing for a rough fight.

The two spheres rolled around the stone floor, their giant, humanoid bodies still compacted into spheres. Kaiya had learned that if you could wipe out a dwarven sphere before they fully transformed into their attack form, it was much easier. She crept further down the corridor while instructing Karliah and Brynjolf to hold back for the time being. Pressed against one of the walls, she waited for the sphere to pass by on its seemingly preordained route.

In no time, Kaiya got her wish. The sphere rolled towards her as she remained undetected, allowing her to plunge her sword straight into the metal that encased the construct. As it tried to unfold into its attack form before her, she continued to whack away at the more vulnerable aspects of the automaton: its thin legs that connect the body to the wheels and allow it to be mobile as well as the singular rod that acted as a spine. Within three well placed swings of her blade, Kaiya had single handedly dismantled the first sphere.

As she knew would happen however, the commotion caused by the first fight brought the second sphere into the fray with a vengeance. Before Kaiya could fully recover from her final blow to the first sphere, the second was racing towards her with an inhuman speed. She ducked out of the range of its first strike at the last moment, then tucked her head to roll away to gain some distance.

Karliah's arrows began to penetrate the few weak points in the armor as it approached Kaiya for a second strike, but Kaiya was ready this time. As it lunged forward with all its power to land a blow, Kaiya took the opportunity to slide past it on her knees, taking a powerful swing at its spine as she went. The automaton was not yet destroyed, but it wouldn't be long. Brynjolf then jumped into the fight with his daggers, slashing away at the chest of the humanoid construct.

"Aim for the hip joints!" Kaiya called out to him. "Hips, spine and legs!"
Brynjolf adjusted his slashes to hit the areas Kaiya was yelling to him, his sharp twin blades slicing through the dwarven metal with ease. With a final blow, the sphere crumbled before him, chunks of metal lying in a heap on the floor.

Out of breath but not injured, Brynjolf sheathed his ebony daggers. "Whew!" he called out as the success of the fight rushed through his veins. Kaiya knew that feeling and smiled as she watched him experience it.

"Head rush, huh?" she laughed as she sheathed her own blade.

Karliah didn't seem to be as euphoric. "And to think, Mercer took out twice that many by himself."

Kaiya placed a hand on Karliah's shoulder before leaning in and whispering in her ear. "Let him have a win Karliah. We're going to need confidence to make it through this alive."

She nodded quickly to agree, her mind racing for a way to be encouraging. "Nicely done, team!" It sounded forced, but it was a start.

Forging on, the trio continued. They slowly traversed the flame traps that littered the next room of the ruin, keeping to the edges and fighting off any dwarven spiders that popped out along the way. After working their way through what they soon learned was merely the entrance to the ruin itself, they found themselves at one of the iconic dwarven style elevators that would take them deeper underground into the Irkngthand Grand Cavern. After they all nodded that they were ready to continue, Karliah pulled the giant lever to operate the elevator and they descended.

After exiting the elevator, they found themselves in a small room that consisted of nothing more than a set of stone stairs that led to giant, golden doors. They paused for a moment to adjust to the feeling of being underground, a feeling that never got easier no matter how many times Kaiya had done it.

"We should tread carefully," Karliah muttered. "If Mercer knows that we're following him, I wouldn't be surprised if he left behind a few surprises for us."

The thought made Kaiya feel uneasy. It was one thing to imagine facing off with Mercer as two equals fighting to the death, but it was another to think of him stealthily setting traps with the intention of hurting or maiming them. She grimaced at the thought.

Karliah turned and placed her gloved hands on the door leading into the next room. Turning to look over her shoulder at her fellow thieves, she gave her command. "Let's continue."

As soon as the doors swung open, Karliah's warning became real. A spiked steel ball came flying at Karliah's face before she ducked out of the way, just in time. That wasn't a trap one expects to find in a dwarven ruin. That was a Mercer trap.

"Well if either of you were wondering whether or not Mercer knows we're following him, you now have your answer" Kaiya commented, pointing at the trap for reference.

Brynjolf nodded as he examined the trap. "Aye, that will be the first of many I'm sure."

They entered through the door after examining for any more traps and found themselves in another spacious stone hallway. More remnants and pieces of dwarven constructs littered the floor, a sign that Mercer had fought his way through. The thieves looked at each other in silent communication, understanding that they should all be on alert.

The hallway made a sharp left, then right, before opening up into what seemed to be a balcony of
sorts, overlooking a vast area below. Between them and the lower zone was a looming, metal partition made up of slats of dwarven metal that allowed one to see through to the other side, but it in no way could be breached.

All three of the thieves put their faces up to the slats of the partition in order to see what was beyond. That's when Karlia saw him.

"Wait a moment, what's that?!" she cried in an excited whisper. "It's Mercer! Look! Down there!"

Kaiya's eyes searched the cavernous area below in a frenzy hoping for just a sight of him. She didn't ask herself why she wanted to spot him so badly, but she didn't want the answer anyway. Brynjolf must have spotted him as well, tossing an "I'm on it, lass" over his shoulder as he looked for a way down. Suddenly, Kaiya saw movement. A dark blur moved across the white stone with purpose. He was quick and silent, but she would recognize that Guildmaster armor anywhere.

"Damn it!" Brynjolf cried as he returned to peer through the partition with them. "There's no way through!"

Her heart seemed to pause and her breath waited to exhale as she watched Mercer sneak through the Falmer den below. Everything around her seemed to slow and fade away, making it seem as though it was just the two of them. For a moment, she forgot about the mission, about the Falmer and the dwarven spheres and all she knew was that Mercer was right there. So close, but unattainable.

Before she was even aware of what she was doing, Kaiya heard herself call out to him.

"Mercer!"

It was spoken as if it were a prayer, a soft and breathless plea. She didn't scream it out. It was actually spoken softer than what Karliah and Brynjolf had said when Mercer had first been spotted. But for whatever reason, Mercer seemed to hear her.

His head shot up immediately and focused in on the dwarven partition above him. His eyes searched for the source of the sound, not believing his own ears. Then it happened. Their eyes met. It was only for a matter of seconds but sometimes a matter of seconds is all you need to communicate everything.

He seemed sad to see her. Not angry, not annoyed, but sad. Sad as though he was hoping she wouldn't have to witness this side of him. Sad as if the thought of facing off against her pained him. As if he regretted the traps he set, knowing she may be hurt.

She had no idea what he was able to derive from her expression as she gazed at him, but she hoped it told him enough. She hoped he saw her heartbreak, her anger. She hoped he saw how broken she was from this. Though she wanted him to see the consequences of his actions as they scarred her expression, she also hoped he saw how much she missed him. She wanted him to know that she still yearned for him, even though she hated him for it.

As quickly as the moment had begun, it ended. Mercer snapped his attention back to the situation at hand and put all his concentration into killing the Falmer that stood just a few feet from him. He crept up behind the Falmer, sliced its throat in one fluid motion and then continued back the way he came.

"He's toying with us!" Karliah exclaimed as she rattled the partition with both hands. "He wants us to follow!"
"Aye lass," Brynjolf answered as he pulled her away from the partition. "And we'll be ready for him. Let's keep moving."

Kaiya slowly picked her feet up, one at a time, to follow Brynjolf and Karlia as they pressed forward through the ruin. Her mind was chaos, replaying the image of Mercer's face as he looked her way over and over. She had tried to prepare herself for a lot of different outcomes from this mission. She had practiced what she'd do or say if Mercer was cold and callous towards her. She was ready for his anger, for his unbridled greed. She had rehearsed her response if he told her she had meant nothing to him. She had been ready for almost anything, but she hadn't expected sadness.

The memory of those sad eyes was chipping away at the wall she had built around her heart for this mission, but she couldn't let it fall. If her heart was open and vulnerable, how would she ever be able to do what was required of her when the time came?

How would she ever be able to plunge a sword through his heart if he looked at her that way?
Chapter 10

25th of First Seed 4E203

They continued through the ruin, crouched and silent, taking out any Falmer that got in their way while sneaking past those they could manage to avoid. Karliah and Brynjolf were sure to plunder through any available chest and continued remarking on what a good haul this was going to be, but Kaiya could not bring herself to care about the spoils. There was nothing she wanted to keep to remind her of this day.

The bear traps littered throughout the paths between cavernous rooms infested with Falmer initially made Kaiya sad at the thought that Mercer would want to hurt her that way, but after avoiding the hundredth trap, she was just annoyed.

"Sweet Sithis, Mercer! How many godsdamned bear traps did you bring with you?" she cried in a forced whisper. Brynjolf chuckled at her anger from somewhere behind her as he watched her deactivate yet another iron snare.

It suddenly seemed silly to be worked up over traps when they felt the actual ground beneath them start to quake in one of the vast open spaces in the ruin. They each grabbed for each other, trying to brace themselves against the rumbling and falling rocks and pillars that crashed around them in the ruin. Karliah mumbled a cursed "Mercer" under her breath, but that's all that was said. Kaiya found herself a bit surprised that Mercer could have been even remotely responsible for a quake that size inside such a powerful and ancient ruin. Maybe this skeleton key really was as powerful as Karliah claimed it to be.

They fought their way through and around all of the fallen stone architecture, making quick work of the few Falmer that had been residing nearby. The crumbled ruins soon morphed into a different room, the walls lined with the same dwarven metal slats that had adorned the balcony area earlier. A lone torch fallen on the ground bounced its light off the golden metalwork, creating an eerie aura in the room with its large, dancing shadows. A lone, dead Falmer lay nearby, evidence pointing towards a slit throat as its cause of death.

"A chest!" Brynjolf excitedly exclaimed as he rushed as quickly as he could while remaining quiet into a smaller room off to the side. Kaiya had to give it to the thief, he knew how to spot the loot. Golden, dwarven metal lined the walls of this smaller room as well with golden, dwarven shelves taking up most of the space around the large chest. There was another torch which added more chilling shadows, although it seemed a bit out of place. Why a torch on a shelf? It's not like a Falmer dropped it there.

Then Kaiya saw the reason. Scratched in Mercer's familiar scrawl on the metal partitions lining the walls was a message: "One step ahead." He even signed his name behind it just in case there was any doubt that it was him that tagged the wall with this message. Kaiya scoffed when she saw it, her anger rising to fill the empty pit seeing his handwriting created in her stomach.

"Seriously Mercer?" she taunted, pointing out the message to her fellow thieves. "I like how he signed his name to it, as if anyone else would've taken the time to scratch that out. Who else did he think we would assume responsible? The Falmer?" she scoffed again, shaking her head. She realized she was probably focusing on the wrong detail in all of this but it was a lot easier to be aggravated with him and make fun of his threats and dares than it was to ruminate on them on any deeper level. That would be too much for now. That could be future Kaiya's problem to break down all of that.
"He's teasing us," Karliah stated as she poked at the torch resting on the shelf. "See? He even left this torch to make sure we'd see it."

"Aye, I thought the same thing." Brynjolf agreed, joining the other two thieves as they stood staring at the wall. "But he's going to be more than one step ahead if we don't keep moving."

With a few nods of agreement, the trio continued on. Kaiya took one last look over her shoulder at the message from their former Guildmaster before facing forward, committing to not looking back any more. It wasn't doing her any good. It rarely did.

After traversing through a few more bear traps, they found themselves in yet another vast, open stone space. This room was populated by quite a few Falmer, as evidenced not only by their huts littered throughout the space but the overwhelming Falmer stench that hit the three thieves square in their faces as they entered the room.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to forget how horrible that smells," Brynjolf whispered as his eyes watered from the pungent stench. "I hope our armor doesn't smell like that after we're done here."

"Wash your damn armor, Bryn." Kaiya jokingly whispered in retort. Karliah snapped her head around at the whispering from her companions, eyes wide in warning. Her meaning was clear: shut up. As they looked around the room, they soon understood her trepidation.

A giant, metal dwarven centurion stood proudly in the center of the area. It was immobile but it didn't take a dwarven scholar to tell them it was just in hibernation. In a silent conversation with only their eyes, the three thieves agreed that stealth would better suit them in this predicament as opposed to brawn. Fighting their way through a Falmer den with the addition of a dwarven construct was not the best way to be in best fighting shape by the time they reached Mercer.

Slowly and silently, they crept through the vast, stone space. Every sound in the room seemed to echo around the walls, bouncing off the metal. The echo combined with the astute hearing of the denizens of the area did not make for the best environment for sneaking but if these three thieves were good at anything, it was remaining silent and unseen. Kaiya found herself momentarily grateful she was with the two of them instead of some of the clumsy followers she had accompanying her in the past. She laughed a bit to herself at the thought of Farkas working his way through this room unheard.

Before they knew it, they were through the room and opening a door into an area that smelled even worse than the one before. "This must be where they kept all the Falmer," Karliah mused aloud, no doubt reasoning with the assault the stench was doing to her senses.

"Kept?" Kaiya asked quizzically. "They weren't pets, Karliah. These would be slave quarters. Because the Falmer were once regular ol' mer, just like you. Much like the Argonians, actually now that we're talking about it."

"Watch it, Kai." Brynjolf warned, no doubt sensing where Kaiya was headed with her current train of thought.

"It's okay, Brynjolf." Karliah spoke soothingly. "She doesn't really mean anything by it. I know she's not blaming the entire slave trade of Argonians on me."

"Riiight," Kaiya drawled out, only slightly joking. "I'm just sayin', it's a little weird when the only one in here to be of a race that's owned slaves is talking about other slaves as if they're pets." When Brynjolf's eyes cut towards her, she threw up her hands in surrender. "Just an observation!"
They did not get the chance to continue their debate on the Argonian slave trade however, as their conversation perked the ears of the waiting Falmer below. A fight was now on their hands, whether they wanted one or not. Kaiya jumped ahead to take the lead, feeling slightly guilty and even more responsible for being the one that initiated the fight by her incessant need to argue. Removing both of her blades from their scabbards, she became a flurry of movement at the bottom of the ramp they found themselves on, single handedly making quick work of the two Falmer that had been alerted with their squabble. Feeling as though her penance had been served, Kaiya turned around to face her companions with a half smile hidden underneath her black leather armor. "That one was my fault" she admitted without much remorse, "but it's over now so let's forget about it."

"It's not over if you don't stop talking, Kaiya!" Karliah whispered tersely, her annoyance clear in her tone. "Let's get moving and everyone be quiet!"

Kaiya gave a nod in agreeance and they moved on, getting deeper into the slave pens and more enveloped in the horrible stench that permeated the air. The stench was no longer just Falmer, but the strange, almost rotting smell that accompanied the chaurus. This was definitely the less glamorous side of dungeon and ruin diving that most didn't encounter and most adventurers didn't discuss.

When Kaiya became convinced that this was all just a cruel trap by Mercer who had led them into a literal unending abyss of Falmer dens until they just gave up and went home, they finally reached the golden door at the end of the tunnel. Through the door, the sound of rushing water and metal on stone could be heard clearly, which stood in stark contrast to the virtual silence they had been surrounded by in the Falmer dens for the past several hours. It was clear this was it, the end of the line.

The three Nightingales grouped together, evaluating their potions and healing any small scrapes or bruises they had received along the way. They were exhausted, but their adrenaline was beginning to make up the difference with every erratic beat of their hearts.

"This is it," Karliah stated the obvious, no doubt ensuring that everyone was aware this could be where they died.

"Classic Karliah," Kaiya joked with a small smile, "really putting the laughter in slaughter."

Karliah ignored her taunt, graciously understanding that her quips were a nervous reaction. All three of the thieves eyed each other nervously, and finally Kaiya's ability to make a joke finally came through.

"So should we all put our hands in the middle or something? I feel like we should have planned a handshake for this moment."

Brynjolf chuckled lightly, appreciating the gesture while Karliah felt her face morph into a small smile. It wasn't much, but it was better than the dread she had been feeling up until then. Instead of making up a cheer on the spot, they embraced into a huddle. No words were shared, but none were needed. They all knew what was waiting for them behind that door.

With a deep breath to settle her nerves, Kaiya pressed open the giant golden doors and took her first step into the sanctuary for her final showdown with Mercer Frey.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

It's time to face Mercer.

Chapter Notes

Song Recommendation: "Wolves" by Down Like Silver

25th of First Seed 4E203

Kaiya thought she had prepared for this moment, the moment she would first see him, knowing that the encounter would end in bloodshed. She had been sorely wrong. As if a warhammer had come down on her lungs, her breath left her in one forceful exodus and she felt the room spin ever so slightly. There he was.

Because he either did not notice the three thieves enter or he was ignoring them on purpose, he did not acknowledge their presence. A loud scraping echoed around the cavernous room as Mercer worked to pry one of the large, gem eyes from the massive statue of the Falmer that took up the majority of the sanctuary. The statue was indeed a sight to behold. The brass image of a Snow Elf sitting with his legs crossed, one hand holding a book that rested on one bent knee and a torch in the other hand, was not only the focal point of the room, but it was the room. Stone steps made their way up each side of the statue and disappeared once they reached the shoulders of the proud Falmer. It was apparent that the statue had been built into the sanctuary itself as the collar that wrapped around the neck and shoulders of the elf seemed to act as a ramp to allow access to the head. It was here that Mercer toiled away at the right eye of the Falmer, hanging precariously from its brow. Luckily, the water gushing from pipes in the ceiling swallowed up most of the sounds that bounced around the stone room, creating the perfect environment for the thieves to remain unseen if they wished.

"He hasn't seen us yet," Karliah whispered, snapping her two companions out of their stunned trance as they stared at their former Guildmaster. "Brynjolf, watch the door."

"Aye lass," Brynjolf replied as he slowly backed himself into the doors the thieves had entered, not removing his eyes from Mercer for a moment. "Nothing's getting by me." His resolve was now solid, evidenced by the steel tone of his voice.

"Kaiya," Karliah whispered carefully, trying not to startle the stunned Kaiya into doing anything stupid. Or loud. "Climb down that ledge and see if you…"

"Karliah, when will you learn that you can't get the drop on me?"

At the sound of Mercer's booming voice, Kaiya's entire body began to shake violently. Then she realized it was not in fact her body, but the room itself that was shaking. As she tried to decide if it was good or bad that she wasn't the one vibrating so intensely, the ledge she stood on crumbled
beneath her and crashed into the floor below, bringing her down with it. With her arms out to the sides for balance, Kaiya tried to gain her bearings as she wobbled back and forth on the bottom floor of the sanctuary. "Talk about symbolism" Kaiya joked to herself, relieved that at least her inappropriate joke timing hadn't been broken in the fall.

Then it was just the two of them. Brynjolf and Karliah must have gotten stuck on the platform above her with no way down. Without her noticing, Mercer had somehow moved to stand on the book that rested on the knee of the Falmer statue and was, to Kaiya's surprise, considerably closer than he had been.

"When Brynjolf brought you before me, I could feel a sudden shift in the wind." Mercer snarled, his deep voice holding a much more manic nature than it normally did when he was just angry. "And at that moment, I knew it would end with one of us at the end of a blade." Kaiya couldn't help but notice a small hint of sadness in his tone.

This was a different type of anger that he was displaying for her now. Kaiya knew it well, but not from Mercer. She knew it from herself. It was the anger that boiled up inside her when she had no options left. No control. No voice. She had felt it when Astrid commanded her to kill Cicero, knowing he had been through Oblivion to save the Brotherhood, but demanding he die anyway. It had made an appearance the first time she saw the Grey Quarter in Windhelm and heard the rantings of the Nords that lived there. It was a particular type of anger that burned hotter than most, a fury that came when she felt as though no matter how powerful she became, there would always be people, places and beings that she could not change. That she could not overcome. It was the anger of a helpless marionette seeing its own strings.

"Is that so?" Kaiya replied cautiously and quietly, trying her damnedest to exude a sense of calm into the crazed tone of their conversation. "Well it doesn't have to end that way, Mercer. Just give me the Key. You have options here."

Her attempt to calm him only served to fan the flames of his rage. "The Key?! That's why you're here?! What's Karliah been filling your head with? Tales of thieves with honor? Oaths rife with falsehoods and broken promises?" He scoffed, his hands finding their way to his hips. "Nocturnal doesn't care about you, the Key or anything having to do with the Guild." After a moment's pause, he continued, his voice dropping lower to the point Kaiya could almost not hear him over the sound of the gushing water. "I would know."

Kaiya was beginning to feel as though she was conversing with the human equivalent of an iceberg. Sure, she understood what he was saying to her but she had a strong feeling that the majority of his meaning was hidden deep under the surface of his words.

"This isn't about Nocturnal, Mercer." Kaiya's voice shook as it passed her clenched teeth, her anger and frustration beginning to rise to the surface. Tears she didn't realize had even been threatening to make an appearance began clouding her vision. "This is personal."

"Revenge is it?" he snarled patronizingly. "For the death of a Guildmaster you never knew? You killed the Emperor of Tamriel, Kaiya. Or is it for the theft of an artifact of a Daedric Prince? You corrupted the star of Azura to use for your own means and have in your bag right now, don't you? When will you open your eyes and realize how little my actions differ from yours? Our actions have always been one in the same; both of us lie, cheat and steal to further our own end."

"Yes, but not to each other!" Kaiya shrieked in response as tears formed pale streaks down her dirty cheeks. "To blazes with Nocturnal and the Key, Mercer! We could have figured this out! I would
have followed you anywhere!"

If she had blinked she would have missed it. The look of genuine surprise that gripped Mercer's features for the briefest of moments before morphing back into his mask of a snarl. He hadn't expected her to say that. An onslaught of thoughts buzzed frantically around in Kaiya's head as she tried to make sense of what she had just witnessed. **Did he really think she was here in this dwarven ruin to fight him just for the godsdamned Skeleton Key? Had he really assumed that she would hate him by now? Did he really think this was all just about the Guild for her?** But the moment ended as quickly as it started as Mercer regained his composure and continued his belittling tirade.

"Wait a moment… do I detect a hint of genuine avarice from this noble thief?" he laughed at the notion, although to Kaiya it seemed contrived. He knew better than to assume she would have followed him for the damn coin. Didn't he? "Perhaps Karliah and Brynjolf misjudged you and your true nature is no different than my own."

"I've been telling them that for days, Mercer." Kaiya surprised herself as a laugh escaped her at the confession. "But the thing is, I take care of my friends, the family I've chosen, my people. You were one of them. I would have fought off Molag Bal himself if it meant defending you. But you bailed on me, Mercer." The tears that had been individually escaping her eyes began to gather and fall down her face in streams as she continued. "You betrayed the guild. And you know what? You betrayed me. The one thing I asked you never to do. I came here for revenge for what you did, yes. I came here to right some wrongs. But selfishly, I came here for answers. I hoped there would be a reason why you would have done all this, because I knew it couldn't possibly have been because you just didn't care. Because of the coin. And here I am, standing before you in a damned dwarven ruin halfway across Skyrim from where we started all to find out that in the end, it was about the coin. We didn't matter to you. And you know what? You didn't matter to you, did I?"

Kaiya closed her eyes tightly as she waited for him to answer, but an answer did not come. She slowly opened one eye, and then the other, as she continued to brace herself for what she knew was to be a response that would break her in half from the brash and cold man that stood before her. What she saw as her eyes focused on him was not what she expected. He stood in stunned silence, a look she had never seen him wear before. Her trepidation was quickly replaced with anger. **This was the closure she needed. This was the moment she had prepared for, when he would finally have to answer to her! It was her nightmare made flesh as the rage began rising and rising at his inability to say a word, so she revoked his opportunity.**

"You coward," she accused through clenched teeth as she unsheathed her sword at her side and slowly began approaching where he stood on the statue, the need for violence clear in her determined eyes. "You will pay for this."

Mercer's eyes grew wide at her approach, stunned momentarily at the sudden shift in her from heartbroken to deranged. He scrambled to ready himself for an attack. "Karliah, I'll deal with you later" he called out towards Kaiya's companions on the ledge. "In the meantime, perhaps you and Brynjolf should get better acquainted." At this, he did something Kaiya had never seen him do before: he cast a spell. A familiar crackling could be heard as a red haze formed in his palm before he shot it forward with expert precision towards Brynjolf. Instead of surprising or even giving Kaiya pause, it proved to only infuriate her further. How many more secrets could there be? How many more surprises would she have to endure from this man she thought she knew? The purpose of the spell became clear as she heard Brynjolf and Karliah fighting on the ledge behind her, but she dared not turn around. Her eyes trained on Mercer as he backed away and fled up the steps towards the neck of the statue.

This was it. The fight she had dreaded for so long yet now that it was here, she was eager. She
unsheathed her dagger to wield alongside her favorite dragonbone sword and continued her approach toward Mercer, who now turned and faced her with his own blades drawn. When they were close enough that she could see the whites of his eyes, she stopped and dropped into her dual wielding crouch and he did the same. This was so familiar, something they had done while sparring in the training room countless times, but yet it felt so incredibly foreign. Mercer no longer wore the look of the helpless anger he had worn when they first began speaking. His face now was drawn in concentration, his brows knitted and eyes fierce. His lips were a tight, thin line. There was only one action that told Kaiya he was nervous - a single, visible gulp that caused his adam's apple to rise and fall in his throat. She had never seen him do that before. It was the signal she needed to begin the attack.

Just like all of the sparring sessions they ever had, she started with the quick left jab of her dagger and he immediately parried her with his own. She caught herself laughing at her predictability and before she realized what she was doing, she made a joke. "It's almost like you knew that was coming."

His eyes darted to hers at the break in her anger. Hers did the same. It's as if the familiarity of their sparring had them both on edge as they tried desperately not to let the memories of the times they had done this before drift into their thoughts but with one joke, she had snapped their ability to remove themselves from their own past. It was inevitable, this moment.

"Why, Mercer?" Kaiya asked as the rage returned full force, reminded again of why she was fighting him in the first place. Those training room sparring sessions were the nights in which she began to fall for this rogue who had broken her heart. With an unexpected surge of energy from her ire, a swipe from her dragonborn sword hit its mark and slashed through his leathers, leaving a long, bleeding gash across his chest.

Mercer was forced to take a step back to keep from stumbling and losing his footing, but the shock on his face was clear. It was the first time either of them had ever drawn blood from the other and it made the fight all too real. It really was happening. "I could ask you the same, Footpad" he accused as he tried to find his rhythm again, parrying her blows and dodging those he couldn't block.

"Are you serious?!!" Kaiya shrieked as she came at him with an overhand swipe with her sword. "You betrayed us! You robbed us! You killed that one dude they all seemed to really like!"

"But why YOU, Kaiya." he retorted as he took another slash from Kaiya's sword, this time to his left bicep. Blood began oozing down his leathers pretty steadily from his two open wounds.

"Um, how about the fact that you left me on a cold, stone floor in a tomb after STABBING ME!" she shrieked again, her dagger going for a quick jab towards his lower stomach that he clumsily parried. He was flagging.

"What?!" he exclaimed with surprise, dropping his hands from his parry attempts to stare at her. She raised her sword above her head to try to take advantage of his momentary lapse in judgment with a power attack before he stopped her with his next words. "Kaiya, I did not stab you."

She stopped dead in her tracks, her sword still above her head, ready to attack. "Yes you did! In Snow Veil Sanctum! I was laying on the floor and couldn't move to defend myself and you came over with your dagger and stabbed me!"

Mercer let out one loud chuckle at this, irritating Kaiya enough for her to continue with her previously paused attack. Mercer easily avoided it since he had been prepared for it for quite a while by then. "And why do you think I stabbed you? Did you see me do it?"
"Well, no" Kaiya responded as she regained her footing after the failed move. "But I sure as hell felt the blade go all the way through my shoulder before I blacked out."

Mercer continued to smile to himself at her statement, yet his loss of blood was beginning to make him woozy. It flowed out of his open wounds with each movement he took. "Do you remember what happened to you the moment we walked through the door to enter that area of the tomb, Kaiya?"

"Uh yes, considering that whole day ranks as one of the worst days of my life." Kaiya saw as Mercer winced at her words, unable to put forth the effort to hide his reactions from her any more. "The door lowered after you unlocked it and I walked in and was shot." She stated it plainly as she continued her jabs and slices at Mercer's arms and chest, hitting her mark considerably more often than she would ever have expected.

"Right, the arrow. Did you not wonder about that, Footpad?" he asked through wheezing breaths after a particular close call with a dagger jab. "That's what I was doing. I was taking the arrow out, you foolish girl!"

Kaiya stopped fighting for a moment, allowing Mercer to get a swipe at her forearm with his dagger before she hopped out of the way. "Then why did it stab through me, Mercer?"

"Because I couldn't yank it out! I had to push it through!"

"Oh" was all Kaiya could bring herself to say in response. This did not necessarily change everything, but it did mute a lot of her anger. He had tried to help her, not hurt her. This whole time she had let that moment fuel a lot of her fury because why would he have done that? Left her for dead? Only to find out that in fact, he was helping to save her life. Her blades began to swing with a bit less gumption than they had moments before.

Mercer laughed sardonically at her lame concession to his explanation. "I can handle you fighting me for the things I did, but not the things I didn't." Their eyes caught at his words and he used the opportunity to really try to stress his innocence in this matter. "And I did NOT stab you, Kaiya."

The intimacy of his plea began to eat at her resolve which at this point was a death sentence for her, so she focused on the anger she had harbored since the day in the tombs to get her going again. She still had reasons to be mad, to want revenge, to want to do him harm. "And why should I believe that, Mercer? Nothing you've ever told me has been true."

"Sure it has, Footpad." He managed to force a smile, his teeth red with the blood that was beginning to pool in his mouth. "Do you remember what I said to you that last night we were together? The night in Kynesgrove?"

Kaiya felt her irritation and anger rise even higher at the memory of that day and his unwillingness to speak to her throughout their entire journey. "You didn't say anything to me Mercer, you didn't talk to me that whole day!"

"Yes I did, Kaiya. Think about it." And at this, he disappeared from in front of her eyes. Her first instinct was to chase him, to use her magic or shouts or whatever it took to find him as he fled and to finish what she started, but she was transfixed by his words. What had he said that night?

Then she remembered. Her eyes began to flood with tears at the memory of that night in the Braidwood Inn. It was a night she didn't let herself think about often, as it made the events since then even harder. Suddenly, he appeared in front of her again with his blades drawn and looking a little better than he had before. He had healed himself, but not completely. "Do you remember?" he
"Yes," she said quietly, but did not say anything further.

"Go on, remind me" he urged with a slight laugh in his rumbling voice. She could see the creases at the corners of his eyes that indicated he found humor in this, and she was once again stunned by the familiarity of it all. The sparring, the talking, him trying to make her think as they parried each others' blows, and the laughing. She loved his laugh, but that was a different man in a different time. This man was merely his imposter, she reminded herself.

"You told me that I was yours," she stated with renewed confidence. "And that you were mine."

"Aaaand," he drawled, a smile present in his voice.

"And that no matter what happened the next day, I should remember that you meant that." Kaiya hated to admit it, but those words had haunted her ever since. Every time she had convinced herself that he did not care at all, those words would pop into her mind to tease her as if he had done it on purpose just to make her crazy.

"Good girl," he cooed as he jabbed at her with his dagger, reminding her that they were indeed still fighting and not having this conversation back in the training room where it seemed to fit a little better.

"But it was bullshit!" she cried as she slashed another gash into his abdomen. "Look at us! We're fighting each other to the death and you're trying to tell me what you said during pillow talk one night meant something!? If it did we wouldn't be here in this literal life and death struggle!"

"Oh stop it Kaiya, you're smarter than that" Mercer argued as he stopped fighting back for a moment, letting Kaiya leave another long, bleeding wound directly across his ribcage. "We're not fighting to the death! We both know you are going to kill me here today."

"What!?" Kaiya screamed in a pitch so high it could have shattered glass. "You can't be serious!"

"Of course I am," Mercer stated flatly with a shrug in stark contrast to her rising temper. "It's the way it has to be."

"What?! What in the Oblivion are you talking about, Mercer?!" Tears began betraying Kaiya's strong will as they slid down her face, the swipes of her blades coming in a fury of bewilderment that Mercer seemed not to fight back from.

"Why else do you think I chose you to fight, Kaiya?" his eyes met hers as her movements became frantic and erratic, a physical manifestation of her emotions. "I could just have easily made you fight Brynjolf while I fought Karliah but I didn't, I chose you. Why?"

"Because I'm the one that mattered the least!" she cried out, her blades slashing two new gaping wounds into Mercer's thighs, causing him to stumble and throw an arm out to keep from falling. "I was a good time but nothing more. You want to take me out of the way so you can get to the two that really mattered." Tears cascaded down her face freely, blurring over her vision and forcing her to stumble back a bit as well.

"No, Kaiya. I chose you because if I'm going to die at the end of a Nightingale blade, I want it to be yours."

She could not have heard that right. "You selfish bastard!" she screamed out as her blades went on the offensive once again, this time opening up his chest and arms with panicked slashes. "All so
people will tell tales of you being taken out by the infamous Dragonborn of legend?!” Kaiya’s voice rose with her anger, causing her Thu’um to threaten to break out. The room quaked at the trembling from her voice and the boulders and rocks that had been falling from the ceiling began falling at a much quicker rate. The flowing water from the pipes was also seeping through cracks in the ceiling and walls. Kaiya had not even noticed at this point, but the room was flooding. She also did not care and continued her tirade. "You just want to be a story told by more than just thieves! Not just a story for the guild but a story for the history books!” Her crazed slashes across Mercer's body began taking their toll as he faltered, stumbling back until he had to brace himself on one knee. "IS THAT IT!?" she screamed with everything she had, her thu'um making itself known once more.

In his weakened state, Mercer could not keep on his feet or even knees anymore. He toppled over onto his back and did not try to fight it as Kaiya straddled him with her dagger drawn. The frenzied fury in her eyes was something he never wanted to see but somehow always knew he would have to one day. Knowing he was nearing his own end, he smiled. "I'm guessing you want me to say it now…"

"What? No! This isn't a sparring session in the training room, Mercer! I want you to tell me why you want me to plunge this dagger into your heart. I want you to tell me why you want ME to live with this burden for the rest of my life. Is it because of what I said? Is it because you would rather be offed by the Dragonborn than mere thieves?"

"No," Mercer chuckled to himself as his eyes bored into hers. His expression had softened as he knew this fight neared its end. "But it got you angry enough to do what had to be done, so I'm okay with it." He smirked up at the dumbfounded Kaiya and as her face morphed from anger into one of fear, he knew she was beginning to grasp the reality of what was happening. His smirk evolved into a smile as he watched the familiar signs of her understanding spread across her face. Kaiya's eyes darted down to his teeth that showed in his smile, red and bloodied. "Now, Footpad," he began again, his voice ragged. "Take your dagger and do what needs to be done. Finish this."

"No," she shook her head in a panic "Not until you…"

"Say it?" Mercer interjected with another smile. "Okay fine. You win, Kaiya."

"No, you ass!" Kaiya argued as tears flooded her eyes once more. "Tell me why you chose me for this!"

"Because your face is the last thing I want to see when I go."

She shook her head, mouthing "no" over and over. This was too much for her to handle. There was no way her heart would make it out of this still beating. Kaiya's tears broke free, sobs forcing their way out of her.

"It has to be this way, Footpad. Now, take Little Friend…"

"I can't!" Kaiya cried out as she dropped her dagger to the floor. Gripping Mercer's leathers, she bent forward and began crying onto his chest. "I can't do this."

"Sure you can, Footpad," Mercer said softly, using her change in position above him as an opportunity to free his arms from the grip she had them in previously. One hand then found its way to cradle Kaiya's face as he lifted her chin so that she could look him in the eyes. "You deserve this. Be the hero. Take my place as Guildmaster. It has to be you."

His kindness in this moment overwhelmed her. Tears continued to flow from her eyes freely, her
body trembling with the sobs. "We could leave, just me and you. Leave Skyrim, start our own life."

Mercer interrupted her last ditch effort at an escape plan. "No, Kaiya. Finish this."

"I can't!" she cried out, grasping onto his leathers again for support even though he was the one fading. "I can't do it, Mercer."

"No matter," he croaked out through cracked lips. "It won't be long now anyway." At Kaiya's panicked expression, he continued, trying to allay her fears. "It's okay, Footpad. Like I said, it has to be this way. I hope one day you'll know why but for now, just trust me."

"Well this afternoon sure pulled a 180!" Kaiya exhaled as a laugh.

Mercer only smiled in response, his energy waning. "You should go. Save yourself. This room will be full of water in moments."

Kaiya looked around at his observation and realized that she hadn't even noticed how high the water had gotten since they had been on the ground. He was right. The room would flood quickly and they would all be dead. "Well let me carry you out of here at least" she offered, not wanting to leave him to the flood.

"No, Kaiya. Leave me here. Don't heal me. Don't move me. Don't try to save me, please. Just save yourself, okay? Consider this my last command as your Guildmaster." Mercer let out a forced laugh that turned into a pained cough. "They won't let you leave without killing me, or either they'll do it." Kaiya reached over and touched the side of his face, committing his features to memory as he laid beneath her.

In a flash of inspiration, Kaiya remembered the necklace that Mercer had given her in Snow Veil Sanctum as a gift and decided it was perfect to give back to him in this moment. She took it out of the pocket she had placed it in to keep and reached around Mercer's neck to secure the clasp. "This is for you, Mercer. Don't take it off. Just let me give you this last thing, okay?"

Mercer only had the strength to nod. Tears could not stop flowing from Kaiya, but she was trying to be strong. Knowing this was it, the last time she'd ever speak to him, the only man she had ever loved. She leaned down and kissed his lips that were almost too weak to respond, but yet respond they did. Tears dropped from her eyes onto his face, but neither of them cared. Both of her palms caressed his face as they shared their last kiss, her heart breaking anew as she tried to remember every feature one last time. His smell. His eyes. His hair. His voice. His scars. His smirk. She caught herself smiling as she kissed him, reveling in the memories they had shared. Finally pulling away, she leaned down to speak once more into his ear.

"We will meet again in the shadows."

His response was barely more than a whisper. "And just like always, I'll be one step ahead."

And at this, his world went black.

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