

The Temporal Myth

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The Temporal Myth

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Inspired by/a continuation of [Reach Heaven by Violence](#) by [mongoose_bite](#).

After the Dragonborn, Rath, failed to kill Mercer Frey at Irkngthand, they engaged in a violent mutual pursuit, until Mercer set his sights on something else. Having acquired the ability to Shout, by means mysterious to Rath, Mercer began to fill the role of the Dragonborn. Apparently invincible and capable of far more than she'd imagined, Rath resolved to learn what was really going on with Mercer.

Rath continues the chase. When Mercer issues a challenge to travel to High Hrothgar using only her mind, Rath begins to walk a road that will see reality crumbling around her. The world, it seems, is more flexible—and more breakable—than she'd thought possible.

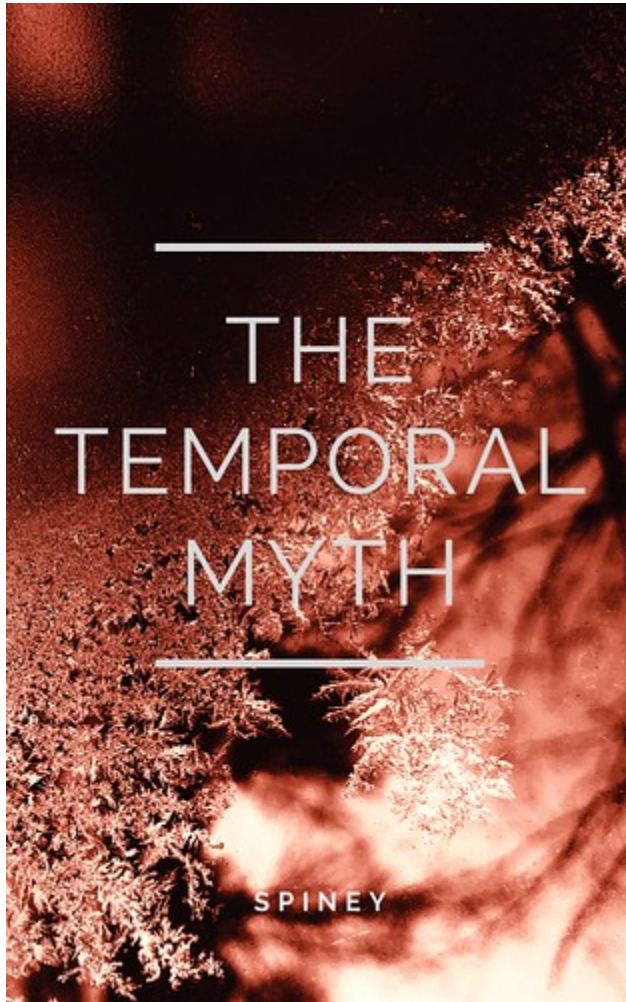
Notes

This fic is inspired by, and a direct continuation of, the unfinished fic mentioned above. There will be references to events and conversations from there. Since it would be extremely long-winded to try to give a thorough enough summary at the beginning here, I heartily recommend you head over and check it out. The fact that I've spent an incredible number of hours essentially writing fanfic of other fanfic should be an indicator of its quality. I'll patiently wait here while you read.

now with cover art! by [crimsonherbarium](#)

- Inspired by [Reach Heaven by Violence](#) by [mongoose_bite](#)

Chapter 1



Mercer had left a trail of corpses through the embassy outbuilding, and had left a door wide open for Rath at the bottom of the stairs. The door led to a dungeon—not shocking, but still a disturbing contrast to the genteel party taking place above. From the doorway she could already see two more bodies. The soft groans of a survivor echoed on the stone. Rath took a deep, quiet breath and eased the door closed behind her. She made her way down the stairs, toward the meek cries coming from a cell. Rath stepped over the body of a guard. A man was shackled to the wall, eyes nearly swollen shut, torso bruised and limp. He recoiled at her approach.

"I—is that Rath? I can't—" His breath was labored and his face was wet, tears and spit and blood shining on skin overstretched with inflammation.

"You don't have t—" Rath slowed her movements. "You know who I am?" She looked around the room carefully, ensuring there wasn't anything she'd missed.

"Mercer was here. He said you'd—I'm supposed to give you a message."

"You know Mercer?" she asked. The man was speaking to her as if she should recognize him, but even with the distorted face she was sure she'd never seen him before.

"I was so relieved," he said. "Never thought he'd come to save me personally, but gods I thought I'd cry." The man shook his heavy head and laughed. The laugh caught in his chest and blood flecked his lips and Rath's face as he sputtered and coughed.

"Hang onto me," Rath said. She wrapped an arm around the man's waist and popped open the shackles. Her knees dipped as his whole weight slumped onto her. She eased him down until he was sitting on the floor. He was trembling.

"I'm sorry," Rath said, "but I don't think I recognize you." She was crouched before him, studying him, trying to put the pieces together.

"Etienne. From the guild. I saw you around a few times, but we never talked, and then," he gestured around the room with a shaking hand and shrugged.

"I guess you've been here quite a while," she said.

"Haven't been able to count." He seemed to notice he was shirtless and crossed his arms over his chest in a protective gesture, shoulders tight and fists clenched. "They picked me up sometime around the middle of Last Seed."

It had been months. Too many months to make any sense. And the timeline didn't add up. Rath hadn't even made contact with the guild until almost a month after Etienne had been taken, which she quickly realized had been around the same time as the dragon attack on Helgen. Something was wrong, but Etienne seemed oblivious. He was broken, and he was telling the truth.

Rath's heart dropped when she realized he didn't know about Mercer. The last time Etienne was in the Ratway, Mercer would have still been the misanthrope-in-charge, crotchety but apparently concerned about the welfare of his people. Etienne had genuinely thought Mercer had come to rescue him. Rath was glad he couldn't see her face.

"What's the message?" she asked. She couldn't bring herself to tell him how long he'd been there.

Etienne rested his head against the wall and tried to roll his shoulders back, though it appeared to be too painful to produce more than a small motion. "Mercer said he has the horn, and that he's never been to High Hrothgar. He said it's a race." He shook his head. "You know what it means?"

Rath nodded. *You can always go back there in your mind.* Mercer had said it within the last hour—a challenge.

"And he left you here to wait for me?"

Etienne didn't speak right away. He pulled his arms tighter across his chest and looked hard into the stone of the floor.

"Why was he here?" he asked. "He didn't come for me—he made that clear." His voice was flat, distant.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Rath said. "He was here because of me, and to find out what the Thalmor know about the dragons." They sat in silence for a moment. "Was there anything else, anything I should know?" Rath asked.

Etienne didn't seem to mind her questions. Being out of his binds was enough to have left him in a pliant state, like he was about to fall asleep. "There's an old man in the Ratway the Thalmor were trying to find. I guess his name is Esbern. That's all I know." He shrugged gently.

Rath knew who Esbern was. Mercer did, too. Any thief worth their boots would have scouted the Ratway, and they would have found, deep in a chamber they called the Warrens, a paranoid old man behind an enormous metal door that he wouldn't open for anyone. Why would the Thalmor hold Etienne so long for that? How little must it have taken to learn that much, and why would they think he knew more? Rath started undressing the dead guard in the cell.

"Here," she said, handing the armor piece by piece to Etienne. He pulled on the helmet, but set the rest aside, unable to stand. Rath pulled a dagger from the guard's golden thigh and held it handle-first to Etienne. "You need to put the armor on," she said. "I have to go, and I need to move fast. Is there somewhere you can hide?"

He gripped the dagger loosely and pulled it close to his body. "There's a door where they take bodies. The guard should have—" The sound of a key in a lock reached them from above. Etienne's shoulders tensed and he dropped his voice to a fast whisper. "A key, the guard should have a key."

"I've got it," Rath said. She heard metal swinging open, and at least three voices, occupied for the moment with arguing among themselves. Etienne was still unarmored, but there wasn't time. "Come on," she said.

They crept to the trapdoor and eased down the ladder into a blast of cold air and the smell of moss and decay. A passage opened up into a cave. Rath helped Etienne to a wall and brought him back down to sitting. She pulled out some potions she'd found in the dungeon and handed them to Etienne to drink. "I have to go," she said. "Take care of yourself, okay? Maybe I'll see you around the Flagon. And—" *Mercer*. "And, just, don't trust Mercer. If you see him. Okay? A lot's happened."

"I'll be fine," Etienne said. He straightened himself up with effort. "I don't know what he's done, but when he left me there—" He coughed out a small laugh. "Go get him."

Rath smiled. "Count on it."

Rath's pack was laying on the road outside the cave when she exited. There was a note pinned to the flap:

Thought you might need this. —M

Fine. She checked its contents and changed into her own armor and walked quickly southward. She couldn't head back toward Solitude, not with the Thalmor no doubt searching for her. Pluck was stabled there, but he'd have to wait.

You can always go back there in your mind.

The trick is realizing your mind is reality, Mercer had said, or something similarly cryptic and obnoxious. Rath pressed on and gritted her teeth, and if her mind was reality, then reality was incredibly frustrated and uncertain and tired. If it was all somehow true—well, it could explain how Mercer moved so quickly. How he seemed to stay ahead of her despite any advantages she'd thought she'd had. What would it take to try? Mercer had challenged her to beat him to High Hrothgar, but 'your mind is reality' was really no starting point at all.

Rath slowed her pace at the sight of a stranger on the road. A silhouette of someone in a priest's robe, backlit by the afternoon sun, obscured except in profile. The figure was walking very slowly and without apparent goal. Rath caught sight of a tail. She slowed further as their paths drew closer.

The Khajiit looked up and regarded her with a nod. Rath returned the gesture and came to a stop.

"M'aiq wishes you well, traveler." His voice was warm and chesty and colored by the shape of his mouth.

"Thank you," Rath said, "and I wish you the same. If you're heading to Solitude, it's a ways down the path behind me. Might take a while on foot but it's a safe road."

The Khajiit smiled at her and the sun caught on his delicate fangs. "M'aiq can travel fast across the land. Some lazy types take carriages. It is all the same to M'aiq."

Hm. "You walk that quickly?" Rath asked. "As fast as a carriage?"

"M'aiq once walked to High Hrothgar. So many steps, he lost count."

She hadn't mentioned High Hrothgar. This was uncanny, but she didn't know what to say.

"M'aiq does not remember his childhood. Perhaps he never had one."

"What?"

"M'aiq is tired now. Go bother somebody else."

"Wait, hold—"

The Khajiit had already turned and continued his slow walk along the cobblestones, tail flexing lazily behind him. Rath turned around halfway and watched him go.

Meditation had never been Rath's strong suit. Several martial arts instructors had tried to teach her, had tried to encourage her to still her mind, but Rath had always been restless. She'd needed to be moving, anticipating the next threat, analyzing the ever-changing dynamics of a fight. It made her a fearsome sparring partner, but she knew she burned too hot. She trained hard to compensate, running and swimming and climbing—if she always had more reserves than her opponents, she wouldn't need to worry about conserving her energy. She wouldn't need to still her mind if her fists stayed fast enough.

But now she needed to try. She walked to the side of the road and leaned against a boulder.

Once you've visited a place, you remember it.

Rath tried to call up High Hrothgar. She closed her eyes and focused on the motion of the air as it passed into and out of her lungs. The rhythm was easier to melt into than she'd expected, and she let her weight press against the place where her back met the rock behind her. It was snowy. It would always be snowy on the approach to the Throat of the World. The speed of the wind here was faster, its texture sharper on her cheeks and in her ears. It smelled like ice and, just around the corner, the burning coals of the enormous braziers at the entrance to the monastery. She could hear the knife-sounds of an ice wraith behind her, below her, not close enough to be a threat. She was walking, and the sound of her footsteps and the pressure of the earth changed from step to step, sometimes on stone, sometimes on snow. Rath leaned forward in a tighter angle to the ground as she moved up the steep path.

Her focus broke and her eyes opened and she was freezing and there it was. Just like that. High Hrothgar.

Rath laughed, loud. She looked around in bemused shock and felt a wave of more uncontrollable, bubbling laughter growing in her chest—was this what madness felt like?

"Nicely done."

His footsteps crunched in the snow behind her. Rath's brief moment of exuberance passed and she moved to draw her weapons.

She heard Mercer draw his own blades, then heard them crash with two heavy thumps into the snow. She turned. Mercer, back in his guild leathers and a heavy fur cloak, stood with his gloved hands open at his sides.

"I think it's time we talked," he said. "Don't you?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rath heaved a deep breath of icy air. Her hands stayed ready at her hips.

"You beat me here," she said.

Mercer looked smug. He half-smiled and cocked an eyebrow as he nodded upward. "The sky, Rath."

It was dawn. There was the promise of daylight, but the sky was still a pale, dusky gray. She would have thought it was just the snow if he hadn't called her attention to it. The sun hadn't yet begun to set when she'd left the embassy.

"Fuck, Mercer. Just . . . fuck." The heat of her breath soaked her cowl with condensation. "So, what? You want to talk here? Standing on top of a mountain in the freezing cold where we'll have to shout the whole time just to hear each other over the nonstop whipping wind? That's your plan?"

Mercer closed the distance between them. Rath tensed, but he just leaned in to speak more softly. "We're not at the top," he said. "And if you'd still rather kill me," he stepped back and held his arms open, "now's your chance. No bystanders to protect." He shrugged. "Just us and the snow. I won't stop you."

Rath rolled her eyes and relaxed her arms. "I've already stabbed you through the ribs and sent you flying off a bridge. I'm not an idiot. Where's the horn?"

"You've already got it," he said.

"This is exhausting. Seriously, where is it?"

"Look in your pack, Rath. It's there." She looked. It was. Rath's cheeks burned with anger despite the cold. "You can take it inside if you like," Mercer said, "but I'm going up there." He gestured toward the mountaintop, past the monastery.

"The way is blocked," Rath said, "some kind of, I don't know, weather magic. I thought you wanted to talk?"

Mercer was walking to the inside edge of the monastery, toward a craggy vertical ascent.

"Mercer," she said, but she didn't continue. She couldn't understand what she was seeing. Mercer had scrambled up a few rocks until he'd reached an incline too steep to climb. And then he'd . . . turned. He was walking up the incline as if it were flat ground. Even his cloak draped from his shoulders as if the rock were the source of gravity. He looked at her and laughed. Really laughed. Rath had never heard him do that before, no spite or superiority or cynicism. This was a belly laugh.

"Aren't you coming?" he said. Rath shook her head, eyes wide with disbelief, not sure whether to be terrified or delighted or something else entirely. "It's just walking," he said. Mercer extended a hand and raised his brow in a question. Rath still hesitated. Mercer huffed through his nose. "The world is full of mysteries, Dragonborn." He spat out the word, and Rath recoiled. "You get to choose the ones you chase. Come with me now or find me later, either way I can promise no other mystery will be as exciting as this one."

Deliver an old horn to a bunch of mute monks who'd sent you to get it as a condescending quest to prove your worth, or follow a sociopath walking sideways up a mountain through an impenetrable snowstorm for reasons unknown. The more interesting option was clear.

Rath wanted to go home. She wanted to get off this freezing mountain and back to Hammerfell, back to the town outside Sentinel where she'd grown up, back to the camp where just a few years ago she'd lived with a band of adventurers and mercenaries and drunks, back to warm, dry air and the sounds of stiff palm fronds gliding over each other in the wind. She thought of how they'd use the palm fronds for kindling, how they'd burst into the brightest flames and burn so fast and clean and quiet, and in moments they were nothing but dust. Could she travel there the way she'd traveled here? Just, thinking about it? Wishing herself there?

Mercer's voice bit into her thoughts. "I'm sorry, was this too much? I'm being very generous here, but that could change at any time."

His hand was out again. Rath climbed over the rock and took it with a shiver. He pulled her arm with more force than she'd expected, and then her feet left the ground as Rath fell the wrong way through the air. She closed her eyes tight and covered her mouth with her free hand as she spun around and around with a surge of nausea. Mercer's grip was firm, and the friction between the leather of their gloves was solid, reliable. Rath leaned into it, tightening her hand.

Her feet touched rock, confident and sure. Her stomach, however, did not adjust so quickly. Still maintaining a vise grip on Mercer, she bent at the knees and leaned down, pulling her cowl away from her face. Her need for air was urgent. Spinning, head between her legs, she heard herself groan. At least she hadn't vomited, though she wasn't confident that would remain true much longer.

"It's just until we get past the monastery," Mercer said, voice infuriatingly calm and comfortable.

"Mhm." Rath was still crouched, trying to breathe slow and deep through her nose. She was unsure what would happen if she opened her mouth. Mercer relaxed his hand in hers and tried to shake her loose. She grabbed tighter, suddenly terrified of letting go. What if Mercer was the only thing allowing her to stand this way? What if when she let go she'd just tumble backward onto the jagged rocks below?

"If this is how you handle yourself in the face of change," Mercer said, "you should probably turn back now."

She hated how easy it was to light a fire under her, how predictable her reaction was. But right now she was grateful for the push. She eased her grip off Mercer's hand, breaking contact slowly, then balancing against empty air. She cradled her head in both hands for a moment, then took a final deep breath and stood.

Immediately, she doubled back over and retched. She hadn't eaten in over a day. What came up was mostly water and bile, acrid and frothy and tasting like half-digested grass and bad mead. It pushed into her nose and she heaved more, had to get it all out, had to keep going so it would stop. And it did stop. With shaking hands, she pulled off a glove and wiped her mouth on her wrist. She reached for a handful of snow and rubbed it on her face and in her teeth as she watched the contents of her stomach slide a slow trail backward toward the ground, suddenly feeling like she'd come back from someplace far away. She pulled her cowl back up, put her glove back on, and with another breath tried once more to stand.

As she'd seen with Mercer, gravity seemed to have changed for her. Her armor, her pack, her arms, everything draped toward the surface of the rock where her feet were planted. The ground where they'd stood before looked odd, like a wall of snow at their backs. It wasn't quite that they were standing sideways, she realized. It felt more like the rest of the world had rotated around them. What was once upward was now forward. Rocks that had pushed up into the sky were now flat planes they could traverse with as little effort as if they were roads.

"Shit," she said.

"I told you," Mercer said.

"We're going to have to change back in a minute, aren't we?"

"It's not as bad the second time."

They scaled the vertical section and reached the footpath at a juncture that appeared to be past the violent, impassable storm she'd seen behind the monastery. Mercer stepped up onto the snow casually, changing his angle again. He kept walking forward without waiting to see if Rath would make the shift on her own. She lifted her foot and closed her eyes and pushed forward with a cartwheel sensation, and when she opened her eyes she was walking behind Mercer as if nothing strange had happened. They walked in the snow quietly for some time, shoulders forward against the wind. Rath noticed Mercer's blades were back at his hips, though she didn't recall seeing him pick them up.

"What's at the top?" Rath yelled.

"I'm not certain," Mercer called over his shoulder, "but it's important."

Rath quickened her pace until she was at Mercer's side. "How I . . . appeared here. Can you at least tell me about that?"

Mercer slowed his stride to talk. "What about it? You managed to do it."

"Where did I go all that time?" Heat rose in Rath's voice. "At least half a day, just gone."

"There are faster ways to do it. But you'd go the same place anyway. Someplace else, between there and here." Mercer laughed to himself. "I wouldn't worry about losing time if I were you."

Back to cynicism and secrets.

They walked along in an apparent truce. Mercer kept his eyes forward and upward. Rath watched him. The reality of her sudden transportation from Solitude to High Hrothgar still gripped her. It was clear that Mercer had been using some incomprehensible methods during their mutual pursuit, and now he'd given one to Rath. And all she'd had to do was think. Rath could feel herself edging toward disregard of all Mercer had done, if he'd just show her more. It was a dangerous feeling, snake-tongued and bloody at the back of her consciousness.

It was also a comforting feeling. Mercer's actions, from the moment he'd gutted her in Snow Veil Sanctum, had put her in a defensive position. Her movements had been reactionary. She'd been protecting herself, protecting others, maybe even protecting ideals—it wasn't like her. She'd trained herself to be an aggressor, had fought hard to find the stony chill that kept her pushing forward. To stop caring would be easier than she'd like to admit.

She knew why she hadn't killed Mercer, besides his maddening ability to not die. Brynjolf's charmingly transparent pitch had gotten her down to the Ratway, but it was Mercer who'd kept her there. She'd seen something dark simmering behind his mask, even the first time they'd met. He was hard to please, dismissive, cold, and a vicious fighter. He offered the sort of challenge that kept Rath's wheels turning. She admired him, still.

"You ruined my nice shirt," Mercer said. They'd entered a sheltered stretch of the path, where Mercer's voice was no longer stripped by the wind.

"There's a thing called thread," Rath said. "I hear you don't even need weird space-bending magic to use it."

"Your biting wit aside, when I was undressing you it was for strategic ends. I can only wonder what your plans were, slicing open my clothes like that. What would have happened," he slowed his pace and darkened his tone, "if that drunk hadn't started talking when he did?"

Rath flushed, glad for the cowl that hid her face. Surely it had been about the power dynamic, a demonstration of the sharpness of the knife. The blade would smoothly cut cloth, and Mercer had only had his hands. Despite his strength, her weapon would have been faster.

Not that the whole scene hadn't stirred something in her.

"What," Mercer said, "no clever retort?"

Rath shook it off, determined to focus on the current goal. "What makes you say it's important?" she asked.

"Well, Rath, a gentleman likes to know when he's being courted—"

"Wh—no, the mountain." Her anger bristled at the flustered catch in her voice.

"Oh, I see. Business before pleasure, of course." Mercer laughed. "Setting aside your no doubt complicated feelings for me, all across Tamriel are these great towers, yes? And Skyrim doesn't have a tower, right? Wrong." They turned a corner and began a steep, windy ascent. Mercer raised his voice and pulled his hood to his cheek, turning his head toward Rath and trying to keep his words moving in her direction. "Strange that they call it the Throat, isn't it? Connotations of swallowing, or some form of intake, generally. Breath, both in and out. But also voice and speech, output quite changed from the input. And another connotation," he slowed and looked Rath full in the face, then dropped his eyes to her throat. "Vulnerability. You and I are fighters, Rath. Killers. How many times have you ended a life by way of the throat? Felt the hot rush of blood, the fall of a powerful pulse? Felt an airway crushed under your hand? Often more reliable than approaching the vital organs, and accessible even to the untrained and the weak. The throat," he brought his hand to his own, tapping a finger on his windpipe, "is a target that even a determined child might exploit. If the world has a Throat—well, what does that mean?"

Rath thought of Alduin. The World-Eater, that was the name the Nords used.

"Is that a rhetorical question and you're about to tell me?"

"Yes. And no. I really don't know what we'll find at the top."

They'd come to a wide approach engulfed by the same impenetrable storm Rath had seen below. A goat sailed through the air at high speed, wailing as it passed. Rath's eyes and nostrils widened with apprehension. Mercer kept walking, his form cutting a silhouette in the wind. Rath ducked her head and followed close behind. She felt the air slice closed at the hem of her cloak. She kept her pace quick.

The landscape began to open, until it was clear they were near the top. Rath saw the top of a great stone wall in the distance. Of course. What was on top of every godsdamned mountain in Skyrim? She detached her bow and quiver from the loop that held them to her pack. She lowered to a crouch and stepped softly, scanning the sky as she prepared her weapon. She caught Mercer's eye and pressed a finger to her lips. He nodded and silently drew his blades.

There was no sign of movement as they approached the wall. The wall itself didn't call to her like they usually did. No mysterious pull, no glowing words beckoning her to come read. Something was wrong.

A gust of snow-filled wind blew behind them like a bellows as a dark shadow passed across the morning sun.

Rath had never been out-stealthed by a dragon before. She drew back an arrow and turned, but the dragon didn't appear to want a fight. It hovered above, watching her. Mercer was tracking it with a thoughtful expression.

The dragon spoke, shaking the ground beneath them, its voice a gentle rumble rolling through Rath's ears.

"*Krosis, Dovahkiin*," it said, "my apologies. I did not expect to see you so soon."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to [Cypress](#) for reading these chapters and for incredible lore assistance, and to [mongoose_bite](#) for graciously fielding my questions and generally being cool with me playing in his sandbox. And for, you know, throwing Rath and Mercer together in the first place.

Chapter 3

"Alduin and *Dovahkiin* arrive together," the dragon had said.

The dragon hadn't seemed to notice that Rath wasn't alone. Mercer had made himself inconspicuous, leaning on a rock behind Rath and listening.

The dragon was Paarthurnax, the master of the Greybeards, and all he'd seemed to want to talk about was the end of the world.

"*Wuldsetiid los tahrodiis*," the dragon had said. "Those who try to hasten the end, may delay it. Those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer."

—

"It's flimsy," Mercer said as he and Rath moved back to the path. "And disappointing."

Paarthurnax had told Rath about Alduin. He'd told her how, unable to defeat him, the ancient Nords had cast Alduin through a space-time rift using one of the fabled Elder Scrolls. Fantastic and difficult to verify, but to Rath's ear it was about as plausible as anything else. Then again, she'd begun to take a lot on faith since she'd started suddenly absorbing dragons' souls and breathing fire.

"How's that?" Rath asked.

"All the possible political intrigue with the Thalmor, the potential connections between the dragons and the war—it could have been an endlessly interesting web of conspiracy and malicious intent. Now we're told it's just literal co-incidence, magic, metaphysics. I hate it when the answer is magic. The treachery of man and mer is far deeper and more disturbing."

Rath squinted at Mercer for a moment, wondering if he saw the irony in his frustration. "I'm so sorry," she said, coming to a halt, "that a world-eating dragon being blasted through time by a mystical document isn't compelling enough for you." She crossed her arms. "So that's what you learned at the embassy? The Thalmor aren't involved?"

"Precisely," Mercer said. "They're after one of Delphine's comrades trying to find out more. I don't know what they expect to learn—it's likely more to do with their petty feud with the Blades. Otherwise they'd have gone to a fucking library." His voice was edged with irritation, petulant, a schoolboy who hadn't gotten his way.

"So what now, Mercer?" Rath asked. "Are you done playing Dragonborn?"

Mercer looked up at her with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "The better question is," he said, "are you?"

"I'm not 'playing' anything," Rath said.

"Is that right?" Mercer tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "You're it."

Rath blinked, and Mercer was gone.

Rath passed through the snowstorms almost without effort, barely considering whether she'd be able to, just eager to get down and get on with things. She was livid, done with Mercer's stupid chase, done with his riddles and threats and manipulations. She'd give the Greybeards their horn and find an Elder Scroll and see what came next. Apocalypse, at least, carried the promise of closure. The promise of some sort of end.

Rath knew her life was unlikely to ever return to how it was before Alduin appeared. It hadn't been an especially good life, but it had been simple and free and hers. She wanted it back. She'd go home—sometime in the last day she'd made the decision. She'd go home and kiss her parents and apologize for everything. She'd meet her niece and nephew, old enough now to be in school. She'd visit her brother's tomb, and she'd let herself cry. Maybe she wouldn't stay long, but she knew it was where she needed to be next. She'd do what she needed to as the Dragonborn, so that she could put it behind her and return to herself.

She entered High Hrothgar by the back door. Walking past trays of fruit and cheese in the living quarters, she absently recalled that it had been over a day since she'd eaten. She didn't feel hungry, so she continued down the hall, unwrapping her cowl as she went. She spotted Arngeir reading in the corner. He stood and bowed his head in greeting as she approached.

"I have your horn," Rath said, pulling it from her pack without ceremony.

Arngeir didn't take it. He didn't say anything. He looked at Rath with a vacant expression, hands moving as if he were talking.

"Um." Rath placed the horn gently on an end table. Arngeir continued to gesture slowly without speaking.

"Are you . . . okay?" Rath asked.

Arngeir shook his head and closed his eyes and continued his vague arm movements.

"Is there, uh, anything I can do?" Rath asked. "To help, I mean?"

The response was the same. Puzzled and unnerved, she nodded to him, turned, and left.

Rath walked down the Seven Thousand Steps and stayed the night at the inn. For the first time since Irkngthand, when she lay down she slipped toward a deep, restful sleep. The pursuit was over. Mercer might be causing havoc somewhere in Skyrim, but she couldn't find the will to care. Too much had happened in too short a time—she didn't understand it, but she did understand that Mercer was some sort of force of nature. And so was she. She couldn't fight the wind or the earth, not really, despite what the performance on the Throat of the World might have suggested. She'd just moved them, made space enough for her body to pass

through. Was that a key? Space? Movement? The thought resonated somehow in its rightness.

Nestled in sheets and furs, sleep took her. She hadn't dreamed since she'd arrived in Skyrim, but now the floodgates opened.

Her skin was warmed by the sun and the air was dry. She was on a horse, hooves soft on sand that tickled her cheeks as the wind blew. Nabil was ahead of her on his white mare. He was talking, but he was facing forward and the wind whipped his voice away. They were twins—watching him was like watching herself. They didn't have coffee in Skyrim, Rath noticed. It was a shame. She was in a tent, and it was frigid. She wasn't dressed for the weather, still in cotton clothes made for the desert. "Nabil?" she called, searching for her brother, but the sound died in the tent, no echo, so much quieter than she'd intended. There must have been snow outside. She closed her eyes and lay down on the bedroll.

When she woke, the tent was larger, brighter, and the sounds of battle outside called her to attention. She reached for her blades, but her hands were bound and she was dressed in the ragged burlap of a prisoner. She stood up and she was outside and there was Alduin perched atop the keep at Helgen, shouting at her, awakening something in her, and she stood her ground before him, trembling, holding her hands to her face and trying to chew through the binds. A hand touched her shoulder. Even without turning she knew it was Mercer. He reached around and took her wrists and gently separated her hands as if the rope weren't there. And there was no rope, her hands were free and Mercer's hands were gone and she charged toward Alduin.

But Alduin was gone, and Rath was in the sands once more. She was alongside Nabil now. "Are you okay?" he asked her. His eyebrows were drawn together in concern. Rath nodded.

Where are we going? she thought.

"Home," Nabil said, voice warm and familiar. Rath looked ahead of them, but it was only more sand. To her right and her left and her rear, all sand, no landmarks, no vegetation, and she didn't recall the desert being this empty for such distances.

We're not going to make it.

"You're right," Mercer said. Nabil was gone and Mercer sat on the mare in his place. His black leather armor would scorch him in the sun, but the sun had gone, leaving just the clear, inky darkness of desert cut by the blue-white gleam of the moons. Nabil's horse glowed under Mercer in the moonlight. Rath looked to the sky and felt tears flowing down her cheeks, salt pooling in the creases of her face and seeping into her mouth. The horse disappeared from under her and she fell up into the stars, swallowed up into void and pushed out the other side, hurtling through nothingness at great speed until she stopped, floating as if underwater. She could feel her body, could hear her stuttering heart and breath, smell the salt and heat of her skin, but beyond her there was nothing at all. She shouted, but there was nowhere for the sound to go and it died in her throat. Rath grabbed at her flesh, curled up into a ball, needed

to be smaller, denser, safer. It would be over soon, had to be over soon. She closed her eyes and listened to the relentless churn of her blood and waited.

She opened her eyes when she heard snow. She'd never noticed the sound of snow before, but now she recognized it, soft and tiny breaks in the air, a nearly indiscernible filter applied to all other sounds in its domain, making everything gentler, echoless. She felt her feet on the ground, cold and wet as her shoes soaked through. She was in Skyrim again, near the sea, high on a cliff. The wind blew in from the north and she shuddered. *I'm going to die here*, she thought. She heard a whistle in the wind just over her shoulder, air passing quickly through a small opening. She turned to see a standing stone reaching into the sky, so much larger than it should have been, reaching and reaching and how was it she couldn't see the top? Hadn't it been there just a moment ago? It was growing endlessly before her, pressing itself further and further into the sky. She approached it. Carved into its body was a tall tower flanked by the moons. She traced her fingers along the shapes, and the outlines filled with light at her touch. She looked up. Light streamed down from the top of the stone, filling the carved lines and flowing into the bones of her hand. Her breath caught, and she found herself sighing, filled with uncanny relief and certainty. Boots crunched in the snow behind her. It was Mercer again, she knew, and she turned toward him laughing, her hand still on the stone. He was wrapped in a cloak and stood with his arms crossed, watching. "What now, then, Dragonborn?" he asked.

The stone was gone, and the snow was gone, and Rath was at the inn, the same inn where she knew she lay asleep. She sat across the table from Mercer, both of them drunk. Rath's attention was unfocused, and Mercer's eyes were glazed.

You know exactly what this is about, she thought.

"Correct again, lass," Mercer said in Brynjolf's voice.

What?

"Sorry," he said in his own voice. "Drink mixes things."

Am I going to remember this?

"Depends how much you've had," Mercer said. "And that amount is," he lifted his tankard to his lips and drained it, "a lot."

Are we done?

"No," he said.

Chapter 4

After too long without rest, Rath slept more than half a day. When she woke her mouth was sticky and her temples ached. She was disoriented and sore, but her body felt refreshed in a way it hadn't for a long time. She took inventory of the room. Her armor was loosely folded on the chair, cowl draped on the back, boots tucked underneath—all where she'd left them. Her pack was on the floor slumped against the dresser. Her blades were on the belt that hung from the bedpost. All in order.

But Rath wasn't in order. She felt it somewhere deep within her, some knowledge that something was wrong. One foot still in bed, she reached for her pack and hoisted it up onto the mattress. She sat cross-legged and started to lay the pack's contents in front of her.

She'd known the bag was near to bursting its sturdy seams, but until now she hadn't taken the time to learn exactly how bad it was. The stench of rotting meat hit her as she unwrapped a wax paper parcel. It was dog meat—it had to be the dog meat. How long had she been carrying spoiled dog meat? Fuck. She wrapped it back up as best as she could and pulled a mercifully empty bucket from its discreet home under the bed. Rath dropped the foul package in. She'd pay the innkeeper to replace it if he liked, though more likely than not this bucket had seen worse deposits.

She was carrying too many books. She decided she'd leave most on the shelf for the next guest. It's what they'd done back in Hammerfell, when she was squatting with bandits—always leave some behind for those who'd come after you. She'd discovered the practice had extended to the diaspora. When Rath cleared out bandit camps in Skyrim she'd sometimes find vast libraries. When she'd remove the helmets of those hyper-literate bandit chiefs, their empty eyes were inevitably those of her own people.

Shit. Books, libraries. *Otherwise they'd have gone to a fucking library.* Just like that, she knew her next stop. Maybe Mercer's too, or maybe he had other plans. She doubted it was prudent or wise or sane, but she was resolved—it didn't matter what Mercer was doing. She'd go about her business, and he'd go about his. And she was headed to Winterhold.

Rath left the inn with a lighter pack and the clarity that came with a straightforward goal. She found a stone wall on the outskirts of town and sat down to see if she could teleport again.

In Winterhold she could feel the harsh wind off the sea, blowing relentlessly from the north, buffeting the humble wooden structures of the small town with ice and salt, a slow but undeniable erosion. Ahead of her, to the northwest, the shadow of the College loomed, its size and elaborate stonework standing as artifacts from another era. Rath absently thought of the Great Collapse, maybe eighty years prior, and she wondered what Winterhold would have looked like back then. She saw the Frozen Hearth Inn on her right and the Jarl's longhouse on her left. At her side, Rath felt a large, warm body and heard an exhaled huff. She opened her eyes. She'd made it to Winterhold, but so had someone else.

"What are you doing here?" Rath said, eyes wide and hands raised in front of her as she processed the scene. Pluck was beside her, looking characteristically irritated and impatient and expectant. He stamped a hoof and shook his head, snow flying from his mane. Rath laughed lightly and patted him on the shoulder. "Oh relax," she said, and Pluck turned to give her a halfhearted nip but didn't withdraw from her touch. Had he wandered here from Solitude, somehow knowing she'd be here? It wouldn't surprise her to learn he'd broken out of the stables. But he'd been tacked up, so what really happened? Mercer? It would be a strange gesture, and strange as Mercer's gestures had been, this one didn't seem to have any particular relevance. "You're going to be disappointed," Rath said, rubbing her knuckles along Pluck's neck as he leaned into the motion. "I don't know how you got here, but I've got things to do. Going to need to tie you up just a little while longer."

The stern College librarian gave her a few books and directed her to an allegedly mad scholar named Septimus Signus, last known to be conducting research at an isolated outpost in the sea to the north. Rath returned to Pluck, who perked up at her approach, clearly sensing they'd finally be back on the road together.

Rath had lost time again when she'd traveled. She'd left Ivarstead in the late morning and arrived in Winterhold in the dead of night. It was a wonder anyone had been awake at the College to help her. The trip would have been shorter if she'd just gone by horse in the first place, and so she reasoned that's what she'd do instead, going forward—Mercer had said there were quicker ways, but she didn't even understand the slow one. Better to set it aside.

The outpost was nearby, too close for Pluck to get any good exercise on the way. And given the darkness and the late hour, it wouldn't be practical for Rath to make her way out onto the ice just yet. Rath's internal clock was severely disrupted—she should sleep, but hadn't she just woken up? So they rode for a while, slow and aimless along the coast, listening to the gentle crash of the waves and the deep, rolling breaths of sleeping horkers and smelling the brine and muck of the tidepools. When they came back toward town, to where she'd need to venture out into the sea, Rath made camp and they waited out the night.

At first light, Rath downed a few potions against the cold and made her way to the outpost.

The man who had been Septimus Signus was dead, his shabby blue robes frozen to the icy ground by the blood that had spread from his chest in a dark bloom. The mage's face looked vaguely pleasant and peaceful.

"Fuck," she whispered at the body. There was no evidence this was Mercer, beyond the certainty she carried in her gut. The shelves held only books she'd already read, and if Septimus had kept any notes on his research, they were long gone. She had a room of ice, a body, and a box—the far corner was dominated by an enormous Dwemer cube, half embedded in the wall. Maybe, then, this was an opportunity. Mercer had said he'd 'commanded' the puzzle locks to open. The teleportation and spatial manipulations she'd already encountered seemed to be achieved by, essentially, very aggressive wishing—by taking her will and exerting it on the world.

Rath focused on the Dwemer cube and willed it to be open. A hiss of air, a grinding of gears, and it unfolded itself before her.

A voice filled the chamber from all directions. "You are an excellent student," the voice said, deep and foul and rippling. "But," it continued, "you do not even know with what forces you meddle, do you, mortal?"

Rath sighed, eyes falling on the swirling, forming and deforming tentacled mass filling the vast space of the lockbox. "I'm really not looking for trouble," she said. "Is it safe to assume our dearly departed here was doing some sort of bidding for you?"

"Perhaps you find your flippant tone charming, but you will find I have little regard for such rhetorical pretense. Septimus was my servant, yes, and his untimely demise was a setback. Yet you've appeared and completed his task, years of work and research foregone as you simply made the box be open." The voice paused and produced a simulacrum of a laugh. "I see the Hero has arrived."

Rath pressed her lips tightly together and gathered her patience. "And who is it I've had the dubious honor of helping this morning?"

"Do you not know me? I am Hermaeus Mora, guardian of the unseen and knower of the unknown." The grotesque amalgam quivered with what Rath guessed was pride.

"I actually did recognize you," Rath said. "When you're made out of tentacle-themed horrors there's really only one possibility. I'm just always curious what grandiose titles you daedric types will introduce yourselves with." Rath crossed her arms. "So is there anything besides you in this box?"

It was a bad habit Rath had adopted since she'd started running into daedric princes. They barely seemed to register her surly attitude, so she kept trying, hoping to one day find the moment where one of them would break character and get really pissed off. So far the day hadn't come.

"Within this chamber lies the knowledge of the ages, locked away for centuries, kept hidden from this world," the prince said.

"And you want me to have it, I guess?"

"Perhaps you do not need it. You are already beginning to know that which you ought not. But take my artifact nonetheless, that its secrets may once more insinuate themselves into the lives of men."

The wretched figure vanished, revealing the inside of the cube, containing just a pedestal and a book. Rath lifted the volume and teased her finger over the edge of the strange leather binding before opening the cover. She couldn't read anything, page after page of foreign scripts and arcane sketches and mysterious diagrams. She felt a strange wash of competence overtake her, something she couldn't quite explain filling her with a sense of conquering, masterful energy. She closed the book, and it vanished from her hands.

Septimus continued to lay on the floor, dead. Not that Rath expected otherwise. The cube had not contained any clues toward finding an Elder Scroll—maybe she should have asked the prince, but he'd gone so abruptly. "What did you know?" Rath asked the corpse. Septimus stayed smiling and silent.

There was another library, at the Bard's College in Solitude, and there was the old Blade back in Riften, but Rath sensed that her best bet had been the dead man in the ice hovel. Mercer, assuming it had been Mercer, was continuing to play Dragonborn after all. And he didn't want her to catch up this time. This last thought was troubling. Until now Mercer had seemed to revel in leaving tracks for Rath to follow, letting her scramble in pursuit, both of them caught up in the chase. But he'd killed her only lead. She was at a loss for what to do next.

The Skeleton Key weighed heavy in her pocket. That was a clue to something, wasn't it? A clue to Mercer, maybe, though she didn't know what she hoped to learn. It hadn't been much use to her in the end—it couldn't open the locks she'd hoped it could, and she was a skilled enough lockpick without it that keeping it seemed superfluous. In the absence of other plans, it seemed reasonable to finally make her way to the Twilight Sepulcher. Rath broke camp, packed up Pluck, and they set off on the long trek to the opposite corner of Skyrim.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They rode for a day and a night on the long journey to the outer edge of Falkreath. Taking in the dip and swell of the mountains, the proud defiance of the scrub grasses and the flowers, Rath was reminded of what drew her to Skyrim in the first place. The harsh wind both cut and cradled her as she tore across the landscape—she felt its rush reach her eyes and reveled in its force.

She'd come to Skyrim as a bounty hunter. Rumors described depleted guard forces due to the burgeoning civil war. Jarls offered generous rewards to capable and adventurous travelers who could lend a sword arm against both beast and bandit. The coin had been good, but she could have had coin anywhere. It was the drama of the land that captured her affections and bid her to stay far longer than she'd intended. She should have left, she thought now. But, with the snow retreating at her back and the Whiterun plains stretched open beneath her, she knew she couldn't have made another choice.

Somewhere between Winterhold and Falkreath, Rath had stopped sleeping.

Rath didn't know what she'd expected to find when she reached the Sepulcher. What she didn't expect was Gallus, spectral, standing guard in armor that matched her own, speaking in a voice both kind and sad. She told him she'd come to return the key, and he seemed relieved, but then he asked about Mercer.

"Mercer is . . . up to something," she said.

"Mercer lives?" Gallus asked, concern apparent in his tone.

"Yeah, he's," Rath searched for a brief explanation, "tenacious."

"This isn't right," Gallus said. He'd begun to pace, ghostly echos of feet swirling in the darkness that veiled the ground.

"The key is the important thing, though, right? For you? For, uh, Nocturnal?" Rath felt the creep of guilt that she'd failed, that she'd let Mercer walk away over and over.

Gallus paused and massaged his translucent temples in thought. "The key cannot be returned while Mercer lives," he said. "I don't understand it myself, but somehow I know it to be true. Events must occur in their proper sequence—conditions must be satisfied, requirements met, lest we slip into incoherence. I—I'm sorry, I don't know what I'm saying."

Gallus was agitated. "Are you okay?" Rath asked, and she noticed this wasn't the first time she'd asked someone that question lately. She recalled Arngeir's strange muteness. The

scenarios were similar—Rath had come to each of them to return an item, only to be met with unexpected resistance.

Gallus, at least, was talkative. He seemed as puzzled by his own response as she was. "I am diminished," he said, "isolated, in many ways, from my former self. A shade—an appropriate synonym, an aspect of an original whole, reflection and obscurity."

Rath smiled beneath her cowl. She liked him.

He continued to reflect on his status, pacing again, speaking almost as if alone. "It seems to me that there is some structure that I have a duty to uphold, handed down to me and to the world by ambiguous forces and means. And I feel I know more, somewhere far away from this moment. But I am not myself, and cannot know that which I have known. I merely feel the reverberations of knowledge, passing through my being, registering as sound without meaning." Gallus stopped walking. "Rathleen," he said, urgent and stern.

Rath's eyebrows knitted together at the sound of her full name—it was unclear how he would have learned it. "Gallus?"

He stepped towards her with heavy purpose. "The person I was might have been able to help you. I suspect that I cannot. But please, tell me." Gallus placed an ethereal hand on her shoulder. "What has been happening with Mercer?"

"Oh boy," Rath said. And, as best as she could, she told Gallus about the previous few weeks. She told him about the death blows she'd struck, the doors Mercer had opened, the dragons and the shouts, the teleportation and sideways walking. Gallus listened with growing anxiety, eventually sitting down on the stone steps, worrying at his gloves, shoulders visibly tense.

"So it's you, then," Gallus said. "You're the Hero."

Rath cracked a knuckle. "You're not the first to say that."

"And I'm unlikely to be the last. Do you know what it means?"

Rath shook her head.

"Sit with me," Gallus said, gesturing to the step beside him. Rath sat. Gallus had a warm, open demeanor, the perfect personality for both teacher and con man, loquacious and welcoming and keen. His easy voice echoed in the darkness of the temple, sliding over walls and pillars out of sight. "You already understand that you're the Dragonborn, with all the weight of prophecy that is borne in such a title. From what you've told me, though, I have reason to believe that your role extends beyond mere legend. Have you ever heard Mercer speak of the Gray Fox?"

Rath imagined Gallus's eyes were wide and intense beneath the shadows that obscured his features. She swallowed. "No," she said. "He had a bust in his house. Delvin mentioned Mercer had a particular interest—but I don't really know who the Gray Fox is. I don't recall coming across the name in books. A thief, presumably." Rath shrugged. "Is this where you tell me I'm the Gray Fox or something?"

Gallus laughed. "Or something. I am not saying that you are the Gray Fox, or any inheritor of such a title. What I am saying," his voice became wary, "is that the last known Gray Fox, was, perhaps, a lot like you."

"A hero," Rath said, suspicious and tentative.

"Not a hero. The Hero. An entity of change and consequence, whose entry into the world both rends it and sets it spinning. Evidence suggests that, at the end of the third era, the person who became the Gray Fox was such an entity. Oral tradition within the Cyrodiil Thieves Guild is frustratingly vague, with no indications of the contemporary Guildmaster's name or background or death, no remarks on their tenure, just a handful of barely-remembered acts—including, notably, the theft of an Elder Scroll."

"Which Mercer is probably doing as we speak," Rath said.

"Likely," Gallus said. He didn't seem overly concerned at the prospect. "Most of what I know about the Gray Fox comes from Mercer. Even before I met him, he'd been fascinated. He used my contacts in Cyrodiil to conduct research, trying to parse the reality from the folk tales. He was," Gallus's voice caught and he paused for breath. "He was—is—such a brutal man, so driven by thrill and power, and so easily bored. I was happy to accommodate his scholarly interests, naively hoping he might find diversion and satisfaction in historical discovery." Rath heard him suck his teeth. "But he was just obsessive."

"Don't I know it," Rath said.

Gallus looked into the black distance. "It's far away from me now," he said, "but as I call Mercer up in my memory, he is uniquely vivid among the rest. Maybe it's just his primacy in my psyche, that he was my dear friend and my murderer and as such he will always be, lamentably, the most important person in my life. But it's . . . more than that, I'm almost sure."

"I," Rath wasn't sure what she hoped to say, so she said plainly what she was thinking. "I know what you mean. It's like he's more *here* than everyone else, but at the same time he's disconnected, hardly here at all."

Gallus rubbed his jawline in consideration. "What I'm remembering, what my dampened intuition is whispering—it's as if I've known many Mercers in my life. Maybe hundreds. As if every moment I've known him there have been multitudes within him, all distinct yet performing the same actions, saying the same words. A chamber of echoes disguised as a man."

Rath considered this in silence, unsure what the thought might suggest. "What did you mean, calling me the Hero?" she asked softly. "I mean, beyond the whole Dragonborn thing."

"Not to linger too long on Mercer," Gallus said, "but it became clear after some time that his fixation on the Gray Fox had shifted into a fixation on the concept of the Hero. Someone whose presence would change the world deeply, someone whose arrival would be prophesied but who would remain nearly unacknowledged in the histories. Based on how things have developed," Gallus looked into her hooded face, "Mercer seems quite sure that person is you."

The 'Dragonborn thing,' as you call it, is one aspect of the concept. A person of destiny, whose coming has been foretold, for whose arrival the events of the world wait. But the Hero is also a person of unique agency, unbound from that same destiny, with the ability to impact the world around them to an unusual degree. The things you've been doing," Gallus shrugged and gestured in front of him, as if to a table laid out for a feast.

"But Mercer's been doing the same things. Been doing more, and for longer."

Gallus sighed. "This is where my knowledge reaches its limit. I feel somehow responsible for what's happened, though I am unable to identify why. I'm sorry."

"Thank you for what you've been able to tell me," Rath said. "I'm glad to have had a chance to meet you." She stood up and adjusted her armor. "The guild really misses you," she said. "And if Karliah would set aside her shame I'm sure she'd love to come talk with you." Rath hoisted her pack onto her shoulder. "You're sure you won't take the key?" she asked.

Gallus stood and walked to his original post, voice turning suddenly hard. "I am unable to accept the key or to guide you further in your endeavor to return it." He coughed, and his tone eased once more. "I really am sorry," he said, then fixed his gaze forward towards the door, standing in wait.

Rath stepped back into the afternoon glow of the forest, the Skeleton Key still tucked in her pocket. Pluck waited uncharacteristically patiently at the tree where she'd tied him. They'd return to Ríften. Maybe the man in the Ratway could help after all—he was just about her only lead left.

Rath didn't eat or sleep, and Pluck didn't either. Neither of them seemed to need it. Maybe it was some kind of transcendence, her frustration and anger finally pushing her to a suspended state where physical demands dissolved away. And somehow that transcendence had carried over to her horse. Fuck if she knew. What it meant, in practical terms, was that they could ride through the night.

It was on the approach to Ivarstead that she heard it. A dragon cry, huge and bone-rattling and deep. Deeper than what she was used to hearing, not that she'd ever really gotten used to it. She heard its wings, and they were slower than others she'd heard. It was a large dragon, much larger than those she'd encountered in the wilds. She brought Pluck to a stop and looked up through trees that shook with the force of the still-unseen dragon's passing. Then she saw it, black and shining and massive, winding its way up to the Throat of the World.

It was Alduin. She recognized him right away as memories of Helgen surged forward and heated her blood.

"Come on," she said to Pluck, urging him forward in a rush toward the Seven Thousand Steps.

They charged up the path as quickly as the twists and turns allowed. Rath was focused on not driving her horse off a cliff, leaving little room in her mind for formulating a plan. Mercer

must have done it, must have gotten the scroll and taken it to the top, and it must have worked. It seemed to have at least succeeded in drawing Alduin out. Rath heard the unmistakable sound of shouted fire pealing from the mountain above her. She pushed Pluck harder. The ground beneath them shook as Rath heard the dragon land in fury, tail slamming into snow and jaws snapping. So close, but they weren't there yet.

When Alduin took to the sky again, he pulled back far enough that Rath could see him hovering far above the path. Too far for an arrow, but closer, getting closer. She kept her eyes on him, but then her eyes failed her. Alduin, who had been bracing to descend for another attack, was gone. He hadn't swooped back down to the mountaintop. There were no more vicious cries, no trembling earth. He just wasn't there anymore.

"What the fuck?" Rath yelled it off the side of the mountain, almost blind in her rage. She hopped off Pluck and drew her blades and hacked and slashed at a small tree, bark and branches flying in graceless, violent arcs from the blazing metal. She drew both blades back and delivered a powerful kick to the trunk, uprooting the young tree and sending it crashing into the snow. Rath dropped to her knees, released her blades, and punched into the icy ground until she felt her chest release. She heaved several good breaths, rubbed snow on her face, and pulled out her map.

Slay Mercer Frey. Slay Mercer Frey. Her mind was filled with little else beyond the unfulfilled task she now wanted to finish more desperately than ever. If she were Mercer, where would she go? She scanned her map in thought. What she noticed, though, was a small mark she couldn't recall making, right near where she sat, up on the Throat of the World. She knew, vividly and inexplicably, that this mark was Mercer. He was right there. Before she could roll up her map and start charging upwards, though, the mark disappeared. Fucking typical. She was going to snap his bones and crush his godsdamned throat under her boot. She stared at the map. If she was right, then soon she'd—

There it was. The mark reappeared. Rath was heading to Windhelm.

Chapter End Notes

Hi there! I've got a couple projects I'm working on, so if you're following this one and want updates to be fairly regular please feel free to let me know in the comments :) It'll just help me to prioritize what projects get attention when.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Worthy of note: this chapter is where I'll first make good on that Graphic Depictions of Violence warning, and the first thing that really warrants the M rating. It felt fairly heavy while writing, so if that's something you'd like to avoid feel free to scroll down to the section break - you won't miss too much that you can't infer later.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Rath was going to Windhelm faster than she'd expected. Kneeling in the snow, her rage closed in around her, fire in her muscles and drums in her ears. It grew and crested and her vision went black. There was a brief moment of suspension, her limbs falling loose around her in the darkness, and her rage was colored with a glimpse of fear until her feet were on solid ground once more and she found herself staring down the door of the New Gnisis Cornerclub.

She pushed open the door with unnecessary force. The mer behind the bar—Ambarys, she recalled—looked up at her cautiously, keeping his eyes trained on her as he wiped down the counter top. Rath moved toward the only patron who hadn't reacted to her dramatic entrance. He sat at the corner of the bar, hood up, having an apparently spirited conversation with the elf next to him, gesturing with a half-full glass in his hand. In front of him was a nearly empty bottle of a liquor Rath didn't recognize.

She kicked out a leg of his stool. He stumbled to standing, spilling his drink on himself in the process.

"Excuse me," he said to his now frightened-looking companion as he set down his glass. "I have an appointment."

Mercer turned to Rath and opened his arms as if to embrace her. "It's been too long," he said. His eyes were glazed, but the corners of his mouth were sharp as ever. "You must have really missed me."

Rath drew back her arm and threw a fierce right hook, meeting Mercer full force in the face. She felt his cheekbone yield under her knuckles as he turned to absorb the blow.

Mercer kept moving with her fist and leaned hard into the bar, swinging a leg to deliver a boot to Rath's exposed flank. Rath stepped into the force of the kick, releasing air from her lungs as she pulled Mercer's knee to her chest and grabbed the back of his armor. Mercer's standing leg failed beneath him, and Rath heaved him across the room into a recently vacated table. It crashed to the ground behind him as glasses and cutlery clanged in the heavy silence of the Cornerclub.

Mercer hunched over the floor and sucked his teeth with a hiss, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the uneven stone. He looked up at Rath with an intensity that sent a chill over her skin.

"If I'd known it would put the spark back in our relationship," he said, articulation compromised by the damage to his face, "I'd have ended the world much sooner."

Patrons had begun pulling tables and chairs to the perimeter of the room, watching the scene with wide eyes and held breaths. They knew who Rath was, and maybe who Mercer was too. They were getting ready for the show. Behind the bar, Rath caught sight of Ambarys, one hand alive with electricity, the other with the unmistakable sky-blue aura of a calm spell, standing ready to intervene. Not that it would do him much good.

Pain seared up Rath's torso where Mercer's foot had made contact. She was favoring the opposite side as she breathed, and she gritted her teeth to push past the stabbing sensation. She'd need all the air she could manage. She didn't think any ribs were broken, yet.

"What did you fucking do?" Voice hoarse, she spat it at Mercer as he pulled himself to his feet. "I saw Alduin. What did you do?" Of course, if he answered, he'd lose the only thing keeping Rath from slitting his throat on the spot.

But she knew he wouldn't answer. When had he ever answered a question? Mercer was standing now, and as he stared Rath down he began to undo his belt. His blades crashed to the ground. He held eye contact, practically growling under his breath, his face alive and flushed and mischievous. Rath licked her teeth and loosened her own belt, surrendering her weapons to the floor. She pulled off her hood and cowl and added them to the pile. It seemed to remind Mercer of his own jacket, buckles and straps and hood all liabilities. He shucked it and smiled darkly.

"No weapons, no magic, no shouts," he said.

Rath nodded. "No yields," she said. As if she needed to say it.

Mercer's grin spread, bloody-toothed and lopsided. "All right then," he said.

They paced around each other, closing the distance slowly. "So what did you do?" Rath asked again, quiet and serious.

"It's too late," Mercer said, words slurring as much from injury as from drink. He moved closer, almost close enough to reach. "It's already done."

Rath watched Mercer's shoulder tense and his elbow tuck. She sidestepped a brutal uppercut and caught Mercer's arm as it sailed past its target, but he was already curling into her chest to pound his other fist into her gut. Rath reached for his shoulders as she sputtered and recoiled, but Mercer had pedaled back out of reach.

"Doesn't look like the world's ended yet," she said with a cough, all her body pulsing with the adrenaline and endorphins that, for a little while, would use the pain of the blows as fuel. She closed the gap and threw a punch at Mercer's jaw. Fast and efficient, he ducked under her arm

and sent an elbow into her ribs. Rath yelled and doubled over, throwing a fist wildly out in Mercer's direction while she pulled herself away.

The stab in Rath's side intensified with each breath. Her skin hummed with heat as her anger slid into the excitement and anticipation of imminent violence. She kept her hands up and elbows tight, watching the direction of Mercer's hips as he stalked around her.

"I have a confession," Mercer said. "I lied. Dramatic effect and all." His gaze focused and he looked about ready to pounce again. "It wasn't the end of the world I was going for."

"And what were you going for?" Rath asked. She didn't give him a chance to answer, descending on him for a blow from the left. As he deflected with his right arm Rath latched one hand onto Mercer's wrist and the other above his elbow. She twisted clockwise and down with all the force she had, overextending the joints and forcing his torso down nearly to his thighs. Mercer let out a wretched sound, but didn't miss the opportunity to send his left arm flying up in a wide arc, landing a speeding palm directly over Rath's ear. She might have wailed, but she couldn't hear it. She released him and fell backwards as a sharp white ringing filled her skull. She held her head and tried to balance, tried to focus her eyes. Mercer closed in and leaned to whisper in her undamaged ear.

"Something worse," he said. Just as Rath focused, Mercer's fist rushed in to meet her face. She felt tears and spit and blood on her skin, and the frantic bloom of pain that said her nose was deeply broken. But she also felt a spark of triumph—he'd jabbed with his left hand then stepped out of reach with no attempt to follow up from the right. He was holding his right arm close to his body, guard up but clearly weak. Rath leaned back, gathering momentum, then charged a shoulder into Mercer's chest. He grabbed her armor for balance and tried to bring a knee to her gut, but she was too tall and she kept pushing, her hand at his throat now, pushing harder until the backs of Mercer's thighs collided with a table and his feet lost purchase. Onlookers scattered. Distantly, Rath thought she might have heard shouting, but her senses were fully occupied with the man below her; in any case, no one tried to pull her off. She pushed back on Mercer's neck with her left hand and pinned his left arm with her right as she drove him down, his head bouncing on the wood before she slammed it down again. Mercer tried to use his free hand to resist, but the tendons and ligaments were undoubtedly torn. His attempts barely registered against the force of Rath's body weight bearing down on his windpipe.

Rath felt a wash of bloody, exhilarating joy. Mercer's swollen, broken face was quickly reddening under the pressure of her hand, veins in his forehead and temples and jaw surging forward. His feet dangled off the ground and she stood between his legs, hips pressed in close, nowhere for him to kick, not where it would do any good. This was it. If she stayed the course, it could be the end. She could have Mercer Frey dead in her hands. She felt feverish, almost mad. An involuntary laugh escaped her.

Mercer's glassy eyes were alight. His whole body was on high alert, taut as a bowstring, twisting and gasping, injured arm flailing and pressing Rath back without effect. He looked her hard in the face. "Do it," he mouthed, sound barely escaping, using his last breaths to goad her just a little more. "Fucking do it," he said again, and he pressed his throat up into her hand.

Rath's resolve flickered, and that was all it took. Mercer's twisting had eased his free shoulder off the table, and his hand had found a heavy bottle. Noticing too late, Rath watched in slow motion as he swung his useless arm loose and fast. She felt a flash of terrific, shattering pain, felt gravity pulling her to a hard surface, and then felt nothing.

She was laying on her back in a meadow in the Rift, looking upward. A voice nearby told her to watch the skies, and Rath smiled.

I am.

The sun warmed her face, and a pair of butterflies chased each other across her vision. In her mind, Rath heard Karliah's voice.

"Eyes open."

A shadow passed across the sun. It was him, she knew. Either Alduin or Mercer, though she was unsure how she'd know the difference. The butterflies became glowing moths in the fleeting darkness. When the light returned, they were gone.

That's all?

Rath was underground. She could feel the weight of hard earth around her, the gravity that held her together pushing and pulling from all directions. There was earth against her skin, earth in her mouth, earth settled comfortably in her lungs. She coughed and soil spilled out of her, wet and warm. She could breathe then, and the earth became air.

She was in Riften, in the graveyard, inhaling the darkly sweet scent of blooming nightshade. Rath leaned on a tombstone. Her legs trembled. She turned away, tried to breathe different air, but the odor of the flowers, like funeral oils applied to mask decay, was overpowering. Her knees buckled and she fell, skull cracking on granite.

Rath was in the Cistern, in bed. It was all familiar, all the way it had always been. She saw Brynjolf sitting with his feet in the water near the foot of her bed. As if he'd felt her look at him, Brynjolf spoke.

"Sorry, lass, I've got important things to do. We'll speak another time."

He didn't move, just kept dangling his feet in the water and watching the ripples.

She pushed off her covers and found she was in full armor with blades at the ready. Rune approached her as she stood.

"Hey," he said as he passed, warmth in his voice, "good to see you."

Rath smiled and looked around. She noticed a sound underneath the rushing water and the clanging cutlery and the thieves' chatter. It was almost like music. Something ominous, but not quite threatening. A dark, repetitive hum. Then she saw him. Lying supine, arms behind his head, on the stone circle at the very center of the cavernous room, Mercer was whistling.

He wasn't the source of the music she was hearing, but he was whistling something else she must have heard before. It reminded her of rain, just as it starts to fall, the surge of feeling as the first drops meet skin.

Rath walked to where he lay. She pulled off her cowl. "I—huh. Usually in dreams I just know what I'm going to say. I don't have to think about it."

Mercer turned his head towards her and arched a brow. "In dreams, huh."

Nothing came to her. Rath noticed a distant ache in her limbs, and a sharp pain in her head. She sat down cross-legged next to Mercer and said nothing.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Mercer asked. His voice said he already knew the answer.

"If I killed you," Rath said, "I'd be alone." She shrugged, and Mercer nodded.

"So now you're what, waiting for things to happen? Just going to sit here?" Mercer's tone was lazy, full of both indifference and disdain.

"I guess so," she said. "That's how it usually works, I think."

Mercer laughed and rolled onto his stomach, his shoulder pressing into Rath's knee. "That," he said, "is the opposite of how it usually works. But it's a start."

"Okay," Rath said. Mercer put his head back down, apparently for a nap.

Rath sat quietly for a while and watched people wander around the space. Brynjolf moved back and forth between two different spots, brow tight with concern but apparently doing nothing in particular. Cynric appeared to have an infinite supply of arrows and was taking out some unspoken aggression on the target dummies. More than once, Sapphire seemed to fall through the floor—just a little bit, a few inches, but Rath saw it. And that hum underneath everything. If this was a dream, something should be happening.

"Hey, Mercer?"

"Mm." He didn't lift his head.

"Do you hear . . . music?"

Mercer smiled and pushed himself up to sitting. "Do I hear music, she asks. Do I hear music. Rath, oh what a day for you, you lucky, lucky girl." His eyes glittered in the torchlight, and Rath was suddenly afraid. "Are you just now hearing it?" Mercer stood and shook out his legs. He looked down at her. "Well?"

"I guess so. I mean, I hear it." She looked up at him, completely confused.

"But you've never heard it before." His gaze was growing insistent, almost frenzied.

"I don't think so. It seems familiar, but, I don't think so."

"A word of warning, Rath: by the end of today, you will hate me more than you'd ever have guessed you could."

Rath pushed herself back to standing. "This is closer to how I expected this dream to go."

Mercer smiled wildly. "You're going to be very disappointed soon enough."

Chapter End Notes

I need to thank my Significant Other one million times for going through the fight with me blow by blow and reviewing what I wrote for sanity. We ended up with some serious bruises and *maybe* a light concussion; I hope the final result was worth the trouble. Regardless, it was a delight to choreograph and write. I'd love to hear thoughts, it's the first time I've written anything like this - concrit always always welcome!

I thought I might finally throw some explanatory dialogue in this chapter, but this felt like a good moment for a chapter break. So, up next: walking through walls, existential crises, and the nature of time.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Wherein there is dialogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Why are we walking?" Rath asked, the Riften sunlight momentarily blinding her as they emerged from the mausoleum.

Mercer looked at her like she was deeply stupid. "We're going right over there," he said, extending his hand toward Riftweald Manor. The door was visible from where they stood.

"No, I mean, why aren't we just," she gestured vaguely at their surroundings, "there?"

Mercer sneered and continued walking down the path to his house.

The music hadn't stopped, but it had changed. Now it was a slow, welcoming breeze, or the clear air of morning. Rath followed behind. She watched Mercer climb the ramp to the balcony door, and she lingered on the ground in consideration. She hadn't lied, though she'd never put words to the notion before. If Mercer died, she'd be alone—the pliant, dreamy drift of her consciousness has delivered it from the depths. She thought of the other people around her, people she knew well, people she cared for. Brynjolf, the rest of the Guild, the Brotherhood. Why didn't they matter?

And what about going home?

"Are you just going to ogle me or are you coming?"

Rath didn't move. "Why are we going through that door?"

"This is the door that's open."

"But we could go through the others. I mean, right? The one down here is closer. Why go up the stairs?"

"Are you that lazy?"

Rath shrugged and continued up to the balcony.

They worked their way down to Mercer's underground office, Rath's third visit now, unchanged since the last time she'd seen it.

"Could we have gotten here through the Ratway?"

"Same distance."

"That can't be right."

Mercer shrugged. "Believe me or don't." He ran a hand along the stone wall. Rath sat down at the desk, still waiting for something to happen.

The music continued, the same now as it had been in the Cistern. Its ceaseless presence, combined with Mercer's and her own apparent lack of injury, confirmed for her that she was still dreaming, though she could barely believe it. This wasn't like any dream she'd had before.

"Come on, then," Mercer said. His hand was no longer resting on the wall—he'd slipped wrist-deep into the rock, arm turned as if to pull back a curtain.

Rath didn't stand. "What do you mean?"

Mercer sank his arm further into the surface and stepped toward it, one hip starting to shift out of sight.

"Oh," Rath said. She moved to stand at Mercer's side. He nodded and stepped fully through the wall, sliding in a flat plane through the fabric of things, until he just wasn't there.

Rath was left alone in the room, no trace of Mercer's presence, no telling differences in the stone to mark where he'd passed.

"Mercer?"

The office and her chest were tight and cold and empty, and in her fingers and cheeks she felt the mounting panic of a lost child, separated from her parents in a crowded market, uncertainty and sorrow and helplessness saturating her thoughts, paralyzing her. The music seemed louder. Her hands shook.

It wasn't the only option, but of course it was.

Rath rested her forehead on the cool stone and breathed. The room around her felt so, so small. It was getting smaller, she realized, and further away. Biting her lips and balling her fists, she pushed her head forward until the stone suddenly yielded, changed its texture, and it was like swimming, pushing through nothing but water, and then she was in the same place but somewhere else.

Mercer sat cross-legged on top of the desk.

The music had stopped. The silence was cotton in her ears, her heartbeat suddenly so loud, her breath conspicuous, almost embarrassing. Her hands were still shaking.

"This is the next phase, Rath," Mercer said. His voice was stern, but underneath there was a glee, a flicker of the madness she'd seen in the Cistern. "I'm giving you a chance to walk away without hearing what I have to say." He waited for her to look at him, to make firm eye contact, and he nodded gravely. "The world is going to crumble, fast or slow, no matter what. Continuing with me now won't change it. But you might be happier if you don't."

Rath took a step closer. "And would you stop following me?"

"No"

"Why?"

"You've already said it."

"I've said a lot of things."

"If I thought you needed clarification I'd give it."

Rath's heart beat faster. "So tell me what it is."

"You're choosing to stay?"

Rath narrowed her eyes and frowned.

"Fine," Mercer said. "Welcome to someplace else, Dragonborn." He spread his hands and gestured to the room.

"The music," Rath said, fidgeting with her fingers and processing the familiar, unfamiliar space. "That's what got you all worked up. But I can't hear it anymore, not in here."

"I have been hearing that music since the dragons came, Rath. And you just heard it today. That tells me something has changed."

"Something to do with Alduin?"

"Something to do with Alduin."

"Mercer," Rath said, jaw starting to tighten, anger starting to bloom. "What is this?"

"This is my office," Mercer said. He leaned back to rest his head on the wall, hands pulling up on his knees. He was unusually at ease, folded up on the desk like a cat.

"You know what I mean."

"This is my real office," he said. "The other is a copy. Or, maybe this one is a copy of that. Same thing."

Rath looked around. "There's no exit."

"Everywhere's an exit."

Rath inhaled to cool her frustration. "What is this?"

"This place," Mercer slid his palms flat over the solid wood of the desk, "this is mine. I made it by brute force in the time that was coiled around itself, before you arrived."

Something about Mercer's phrasing was familiar, something she knew, but she couldn't place it. Rath took closer inventory of their surroundings. The office was fully stocked again, and then some. The bookshelf was overflowing, and stacks of books and journals were piled on either side and in corners and on the desk. The bust of the Gray Fox was back, and Chillrend was in its display case. Rath's hand shot to her hip, but the cool tingle in her palm said the sword was still in its sheath. There was still no music, and her mind felt sharp. All her senses, she realized, were telling her she wasn't dreaming anymore.

"Am I . . . awake?"

Mercer smiled broadly and his eyes widened. "A question without an answer. You're learning. I know whether I'm awake, but I can't speak for you."

"You said I'd hate you."

"You already hate me though, don't you?"

Rath huffed and clicked her tongue on the back of her teeth.

She had to be awake. This wasn't dream logic, and it wasn't dream language. It was just weird things happening in the waking world. She felt sure now. She walked to Chillrend's case and ran her fingers over the glass.

"It used to be mine, you know." Mercer had stepped down from the desk. His voice over her shoulder was quiet, almost sad.

"The sword? Well, yeah. I took it from your house."

"No. Your armor. It was mine, before the business with Gallus."

Rath turned to face him and pursed her lips in question.

"I know. Funny how it's the right size. I'm shorter than you, broader, lacking a certain," Mercer arched a brow, "curvature." He shook his head. "It's not daedric magic that makes it fit."

Rath had a notion of where this was headed. She moved to the desk, picked up the bust, and tossed it to Mercer. "Tell me about this."

Mischief returned to his face. "Who've you been talking to, Dragonborn?"

"Just tell me."

"Gray Fox. Legendary thief. Stories say the original title-bearer stole Nocturnal's cowl and was subsequently cursed and blessed with complete, insidious anonymity. Some said the

Gray Fox was an unusually long-lived, possibly immortal figure, though evidence suggests the mantle was passed down from one person to another over the centuries."

"What about the last known person to hold the title?"

"You're asking loaded questions."

Rath laughed. "What did you expect? I'm trying to play your game."

"And I think you already know why that armor fits you."

"It's because I'm the Hero, isn't it?"

Mercer's upper lip curled and he nodded with his whole body. "Nice that someone's already caught you up. That wasn't the thing I wanted to tell you, though." An unusual expression passed over his face; it took Rath a few moments to recognize it as a soft, mournful fear, like he was about to lose something. "You'll have wondered about the marks on the wall."

"Yeah," Rath said.

"That's maybe the easiest place to start." Mercer reached to the stone and ran a finger in one of the carved grooves. "You know that your status is special, and you know that your position in the world is uniquely powerful. What you don't know, I'm fairly certain, is how key you are. How essential. You don't know what you've done to time."

"The marks are tracking time?"

"Not exactly. Talking about time before your presence is complicated. It's all semantic approximations and shorthand. But yes, in a way, they're tracking time."

Rath tilted her head and watched his fingers move, still tracing the gouged-out stone. "You've talked about me like this dividing figure, 'before' and 'after' language."

Mercer sighed. "I'm going to say this very plainly and we can catch up from there. The world," he gestured toward the wall Rath had pushed through, "that world, didn't start until a few months ago. 17th of Last Seed. I'm quite certain."

"Okay." Rath crossed her arms. "So, catch me up."

"You're pretty game for this."

"It's too ridiculous for me to take seriously right now, Mercer." Rath shrugged. "I'll be game until I'm not."

"With everything you've seen so far, this is what you're finding too ridiculous?" Mercer's mouth was tight, amused.

"I've got evidence, experience. It's not up for debate."

"Is that so?"

It was so good to feel certain, to feel ready to laugh in Mercer's face. "Just catch me up," she said. "Tell me about the marks."

Mercer nodded. "There's a phrase, a piece of dubious scripture: *There is an eon within itself that when unraveled becomes the first sentence of the world*. You're the unraveler, Rath." That told her about as much as anything else.

Mercer's gaze focused somewhere beyond her shoulder as he continued. "I . . . what happened with me—the reason I'm," he rolled his eyes, "different—I'm fairly sure it was an accident of fate. I happened to have a unique set of qualities and experiences that, when coupled with stealing that godsdamned Key, left a door unlocked for me to slip outside the skein, if you want to carry over this now exquisitely mixed metaphor excessively." He paused and studied Rath's face. She stayed neutral, waiting. "I know . . . quite a few things, as a result. It took a long time, except it took no time at all, and one thing I came to know was that my memories had an end. My life was fixed. It had a start, it had an end, and every detail of every moment in between was already set, totally unchangeable. But at the same time, I had fallen outside and was suspended in infinite time and no time, and I hadn't learned control, and so I cycled through my life for a while, over and over and over." He gestured to the wall with a counting rhythm.

Mercer's face was getting more difficult to read. It made Rath nervous. "How many marks are there?"

"Hundreds. And that's only reflecting the instances that came after I was able to make this place persist. Honestly, I don't want to count them." Mercer ran his hands through his hair, coarse silver and brown tugging at his temples "It comes out to thousands of years, Rath. It's a wonder I'm capable of anything even approaching normal human interaction."

Rath leaned a hip on the desk. "So, what, your life always ended on a particular day, at a particular moment?"

"Precisely. I'd be standing in the Cistern one unremarkable day in 4E 201, and then everything would start again. Until it didn't."

"Which is when you're saying I 'arrived.'"

"I didn't know right away. I knew the Hero had shown up, somewhere. Figured it was you once we'd met, but couldn't be absolutely sure." Mercer's lips spread to a wistful, manic smile. "Not until you sent me off that bridge." He rolled his shoulders and focused on her. "Do you remember what happened that day? 17th of Last Seed?"

Rath shook her head, but it dawned on her anyway without prompting. "Helgen," she said. "I mean, assuming I'm believing any of this, which is a big leap—couldn't Alduin have been the change?"

"You heard the dragon on the mountain. *Alduin and Dovahkiin return together*." His expression said it should be obvious.

"It sounds like you're basing this whole concept on a few out-of-context platitudes."

"The platitudes merely illustrate what I know from research and experience."

Rath rolled her eyes. "Fine. So the takeaway from the marks on the wall is that you're actually super old."

Mercer didn't acknowledge her growing surliness. "Infinitely old. Everyone is, though most, of course, don't realize it. Except maybe you. The funny thing about you—the real amazing difference about you—is that you didn't exist here before, at all. You fell in out of the blue. Just in time for Helgen."

Rath straightened herself and moved as if to leave, though she didn't know how exactly she planned on doing that. Wishing herself out, probably. "You promised I'd hate you more, but I'm just irritated Mercer. You haven't told me anything about what you did with Alduin, you haven't dropped any horrible revelations on me, you've just rambled about half-baked metaphysics and tried to sound important. I'm—I'm tired."

"You were really hoping for that exhilarating sensation of being furious with me, is that it?"

Maybe it was. Rath ground a heel into the stone beneath her. "Piss me off, Mercer."

Mercer pressed the tip of his tongue into a canine. "There's a lot of morsels you'll miss if we skip to the main course, Dragonborn. I was trying to give you all the pertinent information before you inevitably storm out."

"You're a narcissistic, manipulative piece of shit, and I'm just as bad for fucking following you around. I—" She'd admit it now, no loss to be had in the admission. She could feel that something in her had changed, something about her purpose had broken. "I want that world you live in where nothing means anything and you can do whatever the fuck you want. I want it so desperately, and it means I can't leave you the fuck alone. Piss me off so much I walk out of here."

Mercer was laughing silently. "Here it is, then." He clapped and rubbed his hands together. "There's the issue of time, and then there's something else: The world out there? It's tiny. The places that seemed to have existed before just aren't there. Never were, not in the way you think. You can't go back to Sentinel. You can't go much of anywhere. Just Skyrim." Rath squinted and waited for more. "I've done the fieldwork, Rath. You don't have to believe me. But there's no leaving the province, except to come somewhere like here." He gestured to the room around them. "Home isn't where you thought it was. I—" His gaze hit the floor, just briefly, before coming back to her face. "I'm actually sorry."

Rath kept the lines of her face hard. "It's been like this the whole time? This isn't the result of your twisted bullshit?"

A warm, wry laugh jumped from Mercer's chest. "If anything, it's the cause of my twisted bullshit. Yes. Yes, it's been like this."

Rath nodded. "I can't believe you until I see for myself."

"Entirely reasonable."

She stepped back to Chillrend's display case and removed the finely-balanced blade from its velvet enclosure. She drew its copy from the sheath at her hip. They were identical, their weights mirrored across her body, frost magic curling against her palms and thighs.

"So," she said to Mercer. When he met her eye she tossed him a blade. "What are you up to right now?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay. We're at a point where my chapter buffer is dried up - I have the final few chapters written, but the next 2-3 are just in the wind. If there's reader interest I'll surely prioritize (so feel free to let me know!), but otherwise I'm just going to let this unfold at whatever pace it wants to. Rest assured, it's all plotted and wrapped up!

And a thousand thanks to raunchyandpaunchy for reading this dense chapter for sanity - I think there's some in there?

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mercer's fingers wrapped around Chillrend's grip, and the room fell away.

"Where are we going?" Rath asked, and she noticed she was shouting, and they were moving. Frigid, relentless wind curled around her limbs and torso. They were both falling somewhere, both at the same rate, Mercer's tumbling form stalwart against the ephemeral rush of their surroundings. Rath could make out some of the colors of the stone, but beyond that it seemed they were just nowhere. The sky, maybe.

Mercer pulled his knees to his chest as he fell, bracing the sword against his shins and spinning like a ball, laughing. By all rights, given the context, Rath would have expected maniacal laughter. But it was childlike, full of wonder, and it made something in Rath's nose twitch. Her stomach flipped as much from the sound as from the plummeting.

"I didn't make a choice on this one, Dragonborn," Mercer yelled. "Wherever we end up, that's on you."

Had she made a choice? What had she been wanting?

"I guess we're on our way to see if you're telling the truth," she said.

"Still doesn't leave us with any idea of a destination, though, hm?" Mercer threw open his arms and legs like a star and continued spinning. It wasn't clear what direction they were falling, and his body careened like some sort of gyroscope set in motion.

Rath did her best to let her body stay loose, to float through the fall. "Have you done this before?"

"Not quite like this. I always know where I'm going. This is—" He laughed again, absurdly soft and happy. "This is new."

"How long does it usually—" The ground met Rath's feet with unforgiving force, the impact shooting through to her knees and hips. Her legs failed beneath her, and before she could process where they'd landed she was facedown in the dirt. She heard leaves crunch somewhere to her left as Mercer landed with a hard but graceful roll.

They were back in the world they'd left, and the music was a gentle, verdant fanfare. Rath pushed back onto her heels and breathed in pungent pitch and wet dog. The dense pines and craggy hills told her they were in the Falkreath forests.

"Wolves nearby, close," Rath said, scanning the brush. She could hear the rumbling growl in their chests—a pair, like always—but she didn't see any movement.

“Found them,” Mercer said. He stepped aside with nonchalance and gestured his sword. Two wolves stood snarling, teeth snapping and legs tight with the hunt. But, except for the frenzied tossing of their heads, they didn’t move. Their feet stayed planted to the ground, and their eyes never focused on the humans who’d fallen almost literally into their angry maws.

Rath stayed back, crouched and careful, as Mercer closed the small distance to the growling hounds. He bent down and watched them for a few moments before running one through with his blade. It yelped and fell limp with no response from its companion. Rath joined Mercer in observation.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Not sure. I expect this won’t be the last time we see something like this.” He planted a foot on the first wolf’s body and yanked back his sword, shaking gore down to the forest floor. The live, unmoving wolf showed no changes, no signs of awareness, just a sustained fury that was becoming more comical and unsettling as the moments passed.

Rath stepped close and loosed a gentle kick into the wolf’s flank. No reaction. “We can just leave it, I guess.”

“Makes no difference to me. Where’d you take us, then?” Mercer sheathed his blade and looked around the grove where they’d landed.

The sun streamed almost white as they stepped out of the trees and onto a clear, well-trod road. Out in the daylight with Mercer, Rath saw features she’d never quite noticed in the torch-lit shadows—a faint but jagged pink scar gouged into his right cheek, a slice across his lips so soft and worn it nearly disappeared among the lines that showed his age. She looked at her own hands, dark fingers protruding from dark gloves, knuckles thick with callous and scar tissue. All around them, pines rustled in the wind, birds sang sweetly, small animals shuffled in the brush. The sweeping music swelled around her, and she smelled snow on the wind from the west. Everything was sharp, grotesque, bleeding in its vividness—almost idyllic, mostly bizarre.

They walked a little and came across a cave. Bones and blood littered the entrance. Mercer stepped toward it and smirked. “You just wanted to do some good old-fashioned dungeon delving? Work off some of that angst you like to shoulder around?”

“Don’t be stupid. No, I think it’s something else. I don’t think this is where I was trying to go.”

Mercer turned around himself on the road, apparently thinking, and soon his eyes widened. “Do you know what’s on the other side of this ridge? To the west?”

Oh. Rath’s chest tightened. She took a shaky breath. “It’s the border.” Her fingers curled and uncurled of their own accord. “It’s the fucking Hammerfell border.”

Mercer, out of pity or concern or courtesy, said nothing. He nodded and took a step back. Rath moved past him and stalked with heavy purpose westward.

There wasn't far to go. The mountains in this corner of the province were abrupt walls of granite—the pass between Falkreath and Elinhir was a wide, curving channel into the tight, jagged peaks of Craglorn. It was the only place on the border that could be crossed without strenuous climbing.

This road, wrapped in pine and scrub and incredible, monumental cliffs, was the one she'd used when she first came to Skyrim, alone but for a stolen horse, ready to hide away somewhere new.

As the border gate came into view, Rath knew something was wrong—there were no guards. She slowed her pace, as if that might prevent any unwanted discoveries. The open gateway looked the same as always. Stone pillars, a covered walkway overhead. Beyond the wall, she could see the road continuing downhill for a while, then curving sharply north.

She knew. She could feel viscerally that it was true, but she kept walking, pushed all her want and determination into her legs and closed the distance.

She reached the gate and held her breath, but her progress was unimpeded, entirely normal—and if she'd gone through the gate, if she was continuing down the road, she'd made it to Hammerfell, hadn't she?

Until she stopped. It didn't feel like something blocking her path. It was a physical manifestation of denial, the repulsion between magnets. She pushed, and her legs moved beneath her as if treading water, boots moving smoothly over the stone. She set her jaw and pushed harder. Her hips turned against the force, and something slipped.

The gate was there behind her when she turned, along with an occasional stone and tree, but in between, everywhere, was white. Blank. No music, no road, no Mercer. Rath could still feel ground beneath her feet, but there was nothing to see there. Walking forward only took her further away from those few concrete features that remained, pushing into more blankness. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of her heart beating, heavy and sure.

If she could feel the earth beneath her feet, she would keep walking. It was a last-ditch resolution, a desperate attempt to deny the undeniable, but if there was something under her feet, there was *something*. She'd cling to it, eat the road until she was proven right, just keep pushing forward on the path and—

Rath's feet slipped. There was no ground beneath her. She was utterly still, suspended again, but not falling. There was something she couldn't hear, but she could feel—a chord, thrumming in her chest, mournful and final. She turned back, and in the distance, above her now, she could still see the gate. Angular lines, so thin as to be nearly imperceptible, cut through the blankness, almost like the shapes of mountains and trees, almost like a road.

Suspended and bereft and still, Rath thought, *okay*. She thought, *you win*. She knew she didn't mean Mercer. Her heartbeat filled her, centered her, and she closed her eyes again and listened to its rhythms until she felt the soft wetness of snow on her cheeks.

She was back at the gate, standing on solid ground, snow falling on her face and in her hair and melting to trickle past the collar of her armor. Mercer was beside her, his expression

difficult to parse. He was waiting for her to speak.

She didn't. Steeling herself, not taking a second glance through the gate, Rath began to walk back toward Falkreath without clear intent. She would just walk. She would just keep walking, and then she'd know something, she'd think of something, she'd have a plan. She thought with her body, it had always been that way, so she'd walk and walk until she understood what to make of an empty white space where her home should have been.

Rath had crossed that pass before, and not just once. It was a well-traveled road, entirely mundane, beautiful and remote and reliable. She should have turned that corner northward, and she should have seen a curving trail of jutting mountains winding her down into Lower Craglorn. It should have been less than an hour's walk to the first small Redguard settlement before the city, a little town with an inn that catered to travelers on their way to the border. It was called—Rath swore quietly. What was the name of the town? She'd been there so many times. She should know it, but it wouldn't come.

She allowed her pace to slow nearly to a stop, then turned to face Mercer. The gate was long gone now, out of sight. "I don't hate you," she said.

Mercer nodded. "I know."

They walked, slowly now. Rath swallowed and clenched a fist and spoke. "How do you deal with this?"

Casually, gently, Mercer responded. "Bad behavior, obviously. And practice.

Rath pushed her fingertips into her hairline, pressing at the coarse curls and focusing on the satisfying scratch as she rubbed at her scalp. "I . . . I'm thinking I might need to be alone for a while."

"I've got some things I'd like to get up to, if you want me to go."

Rath raised a brow and narrowed her stare to something calculating. "What kinds of things?"

"Ongoing vendetta, nothing concerning you."

She couldn't find the will to object, so they continued to walk quietly. The music was softer than it had been, lilting and mysterious now, and Rath felt herself bristling with resentment, snapping back at the music's attempt to soothe.

"Alduin is . . . gone?" Rath's voice cracked.

"No," Mercer said, "Alduin's just not here. You can try to find him if you like, but I truly don't know how you'd even start."

"Right." Rath bit the side of her tongue and spat her words. "Of course."

She could believe him, or she could not believe him. Logic allowed for the possibility that the disappearances of Alduin and Hammerfell were connected, that it was Mercer's fault. It wasn't a leap. But that didn't feel right, and after only a moment's thought she knew why—

Mercer would gloat. If Mercer had made pieces of the world disappear, would he be able to keep it a secret? Maybe it was another long con, but she didn't think so. He'd want to tell her what he'd done, want to show her how powerful he was.

He'd still managed to make her feel small. For all the powerful new things Mercer had shown her, Rath felt more helpless than ever. But he wasn't gloating, wasn't manipulating, wasn't saying much at all. He was being normal, maybe even *nice*, giving her room to breathe. It could still be a game. She knew that. It wasn't beneath him, wasn't too cruel. She just . . . she didn't think that was it. He . . . gods help her. She believed him.

"Actually—" She needed to be busy, needed a goal. It might be good to be left alone, but—"Do you need any, uh, help?"

Mercer rubbed his chin and eyed her skeptically. "It's rare that I ever *need* help, Dragonborn. But if you're asking to join me, I think that sounds like a whole mess of fun. You don't know the agenda, though."

"Is it something incredibly shitty?"

"It's characterized by serial murder."

"Fuck, Mercer."

"You asked how I deal with this. I'm not a monk."

Rath laughed, real and full and incredulous. "That's one of the most absurd leaps of logic I've ever heard. You're not a monk, so naturally you can't help but be a serial killer?"

Mercer shook his head and continued forward more quickly. "You don't have to come with me."

Rath caught up so they stood shoulder-to-shoulder. "Who are you killing?"

"It—" His jaw worked back and forth. "It sounds stupid to say it out loud. You're not going to understand."

The hot bloom of frustration and indignation in her belly was pleasant, comforting. "Being outraged at you really helps stave off the existential terror."

"I live to serve," Mercer said, eyes rolling almost audibly, before his tone turned quieter, more serious. "It's the people who share my voice."

Rath stopped. "What?"

Mercer turned to face her and gestured vaguely to their surroundings. "There are quite a few people in this world with exactly the same voice as me. If you listen, you'll notice soon enough—the same voices, over and over. I've been, ah," he looked into the distance with a disturbingly serene smile, "thinning the herd. In my spare time."

“That’s unbelievably fucked.” Rath brought her hands to her face and tugged at the skin, as if the action could deny what she’d heard. “I knew you were an egomaniac, but—gods.”

And they walked, passing Falkreath, turning north, hugging the mountains. Mercer seemed to have a plan, seemed to be walking with intention, so Rath followed and let her mind rest in the pumping of her blood.

“In any case,” Mercer said, as if they hadn’t been walking in silence, “I’ve got reason to believe Madanach—Forsworn King, currently imprisoned in Cidhna Mine—is one of the people walking around with my voice. Left to my own devices, that would be my next stop.”

They were walking to Markarth then, apparently. “Get yourself thrown in prison, hit your target, then break out?”

“I’ll just walk in and out, I don’t see any need to complicate things.”

“That sounds needlessly boring.” Rath had never done a jailbreak before, but it was appealing. She’d talked about it with— “Wait. Cynric. You and Cynric have the same voice.”

“I’d tut and tell you I don’t shit where I eat, but you know that’s not true. I like the kid.” Rath studied Mercer’s face. There was a tightness at the corners of his eyes, a tension in his neck and shoulders; it was an unmasked lie. She let the silence hang, and Mercer yielded. “We have history. Plenty of other candidates to hit first.”

“You have *history*—is that some kind of a joke?”

“Not at all. Cynric came in from High Rock under circumstances not unlike my own. We knew a lot of the same people. He’s—” He continued slowly. “As far as I know, he’s the only other person in this little world who knew a particular someone who’d been very dear to me.” He cleared his throat, walked harder. “She only existed at all because we two people remember her now.” He licked his lips and worried a palm over the pommel of his blade. “Killing Cynric gets complicated, in that way.”

“You’ve got a fucked up way of coping, Mercer.”

“I know. It’s worked so far.”

“I think you should at least make this Cidhna Mine job more challenging for yourself.”

Mercer turned his face to her in an expression of mock surprise. “Job? Challenge? What’s this I’m hearing? Is the Dragonborn craving a little assassination?”

Rath shrugged off his tone. “Good point. It’s political too. Might as well get someone to pay you to do it, if you’re going to be doing it anyway.”

Mercer’s eyes gleamed. “That’s filthy. I feel like a proud papa right now.”

Something light and clear filled Rath’s chest. She felt like herself. “Been thieving and exploiting since long before I met you, Mercer.”

“Silver-Bloods, you figure?”

“Maybe. Markarth is such a mess. But yeah, that’s where I’d start.” As if just noticing what she’d been saying, Rath flushed. “You know. If I were doing this.”

Mercer nodded. “All right, Dragonborn. I’ve got a proposition.” He came to a stop. “You should take some time—I know you can see as well as I can that you need it. I’ll hold off on this Madanach business. I’ll go elsewhere. You take a few days. If you want in on the action, meet me at the Silver-Blood Inn on Loredas. Wheels start turning on Sundas.”

Rath swallowed and nodded her agreement. She opened her mouth to speak, but wasn’t sure what she intended to say. She stood there dumbly for a few moments before she identified what was on her mind. “I—I still don’t believe you. I mean, I do, a little. But most of me just . . . doesn’t.”

“It’ll take some time.”

The music was even quieter now, so subtle she could almost ignore it. “Wh—Mercer, if this is real, who am I?”

His brow tightened and his tone turned stern. “You’re the same. You’re the Hero, the Dragonborn. You’re Rathleen. You dramatically lack a last name. You come from wherever you come from. It’s the same as it ever was.”

“Almost helpful,” she said. “Thanks.”

They were close to the Twilight Sepulcher now, it wouldn’t be long before they hit the Reach. Mercer spoke softly. “You ready for me to go?”

“I think so. You know,” she gestured into the woods where she knew the temple stood, “Gallus is inside, actually, if you want some sort of dramatic encounter. I could give you the Key back, you could try to return it.” Rath shrugged.

The Key was pointless and she wanted it gone. It seemed like a natural choice.

“I’m glad your humor is holding up,” Mercer said. “I—I didn’t know Gallus was here.” He looked into the woods. “If you give me the Key, I’ll consider it. But honestly?” He looked a little wistful. “I’ve killed him thousands of times. It’s a hard memory.”

“Harder for him, I’d guess.”

“For him it only happened once.”

Rath shook her head. “Memory’s funny, though, right? He’s done some thinking on it, anyway.”

She pulled the Skeleton Key from a pouch at her hip and handed it to Mercer, and the somber weight of the action filled her with something like dread, some feeling of inevitability and resignation. The Key left her hand, and it felt right.

“Okay,” she said, shrugging. Mercer stood in the middle of the road, staring at the Key, and Rath let herself vanish.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience waiting for this chapter, and thanks to [raunchyandpaunchy](#) for wonderful beta-ing!

I've posted a small vignette from Mercer's perspective that begins at the end of this chapter, for those who might be interested: [The Wise Avoid It](#)

As always, all comments and concrit welcome! The more convoluted this gets, the more I'm actively wondering "Wow, is this still making sense to people?"

(3/5/19: I made some big formatting edits here because there were lots of line breaks - hopefully Ao3 didn't alert folks that there were changes/updates? If so, sorry about that! Next chapter is moving along briskly but the update schedule is still . . . loose. Thanks for sticking around!)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been six years since her brother died, six years since he'd been cut down in a raid, working a respectable job protecting merchant ships, trying to do right by his new family. Rath had laughed when he'd told her—a job on the docks, a glorified security guard—and he'd shoved at her and taken the insults, smiling all the while, too genuinely happy with his life to be annoyed.

They'd both thought they'd be adventurers, sellswords. That they'd live chaotic, hand-to-mouth lives free of responsibility. It was a silly, romantic notion, and while Rath had been managing to make it work, Nabil had fallen in love.

Her name was Zhara, and she was a priestess, of all things, with a permanent post at the Temple of Arkay in Sentinel. Their mother's mother, deeply dedicated to her Crown heritage and the Yokudan pantheon, had been outraged; for a while, Rath had sided with her out of misguided, jealous spite.

"She's hardly a priestess," Nabil had said, "she's a . . . religious scientist. A biologist, an alchemist."

"So she's a mortician." He'd come to Rath's camp in the desert, and they were drinking. A weekend, they'd said. A few days to spend some time together like they'd used to, to try to close the slowly-growing rift between them. Rath knew it was her own fault, but she couldn't seem to stem the creep of bitterness she felt toward this woman she barely knew.

"And a midwife, actually." Nabil sipped at the flask of rum they were sharing. "But I mean, yeah. That's what she does. Dissection, embalming. Fuck, she's so godsdamned smart, Rath; you should talk to her."

"Yeah," Rath said, accepting the flask as he passed it. "Yeah, I know." She took a long drink, too long, alcohol burning up into her sinuses. "I'm sorry. I know I've been a shit."

Nabil licked his lips and nodded, looking into the fire, looking somewhere past it into the desert. "We're . . . I'm going to be a dad, Rath." His mouth quirked into a half-smile, something like disbelief in his eyes as they reflected the light of the fire.

There was happiness—a warm, pleased feeling in Rath's chest at seeing her brother's hopeful expression. There was the amused, surreal feeling of imagining a new, small human that was made up of some of the same material as she was. But there was also more bitterness, involuntary and petty, lashing out at one more hypothetical loss. Nabil was so essential, so entwined with her life, with her sense of self, and she couldn't quash the ugly fear that a partner and a child would leave no more room for her.

She took another long drink, then passed the flask. "Seyma's going to murder you."

Nabil laughed. Their grandmother was stern, and she could be frightening, but they both knew she'd be ecstatic at the news, Forebears and the Imperial Cult be damned. He took a drink, and something lifted. He smiled broadly and turned to face Rath. "Did you know twins run in families?"

Rath felt her eyes widen, struck with nostalgia and excitement and belonging all wrapped up into a single, strange, indescribable emotion. "Are you serious? You know already?"

"Pretty sure."

Rath shoved at Nabil's shoulder. "Shut up. Holy shit." She shook her head and clapped, kicked at the sand. "Put that piss away," she said, gesturing to the flask. "I've got the good stuff in my tent."

Nabil took a long, stubborn drink. She heard him spit as she walked away, spraying the rum onto the fire, flames roaring as he laughed.

It was less than two years before he was gone.

When it happened, Rath was sure her whole world was collapsing. Their parents, their grandmother, their younger brother—no one mattered. Nabil was dead, laid out on a slab by his own grieving wife, skin ashen and eyes empty. The scrambling in Rath's gut wouldn't stop, and she left, and she'd never returned.

And she never would return, apparently. A fresh, rippling scrambling was taking hold, a scream trapped in her chest, opening inward, leaving her in a shaking fog.

When she'd vanished on the road to the Reach, she hadn't known where she'd go. She hadn't been thinking much at all, hadn't begun to process what she'd witnessed at the border. But she wasn't surprised to find herself alone in the silence of Mercer's secret office, a chaos of books around her, a merciful absence of music in her head.

Somehow it seemed there were even more books than the last time, but Rath didn't want to read, didn't think she could muster the focus. She sat at the desk and stared at the wall with its terrible, precise tally marks. The walls and floor and ceiling were solid stone here, no doors or pathways. It was a sealed cell—there was hardly another word for it. If Mercer wanted freedom, why build a cell? Even as she thought it, she recognized she was confusing her own desires with his; she didn't have the first idea what Mercer wanted. But if she wanted freedom, what was she doing here?

"You're back!"

The voice came from all directions, loud and fast and vaguely unhinged. Rath groaned and covered her ears. "No. No no no, just go away."

"Oh, my mistake," the voice said. "Where's the little man?"

Rath uncovered her ears at that and laughed with her whole body, looking around the room but seeing no one.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Did you want to leave a message or something?”

The voice laughed. “Have we met? I think I’d remember someone as charming as you, hm . . . and I think you might have something of mine, but . . . huh, nope! Can’t say your face is in my halls!”

“Maybe if you tell me who you are I can tell you if we’ve met.”

The voice hummed for a moment, then brightly declared, “But we haven’t. So what are you doing with the hip bone?”

Rath wasn’t carrying a pack anymore, but she could sense some kind of access to her belongings, some thread of connection to the concepts of the things she’d normally carry with her. And, sure enough, there was a hip bone. She remembered now, a long time ago, the first time she’d gone to Solitude for the Guild—there’d been a raving man walking the streets who’d thrust a human pelvis into her hands and begged for her help. She’d nodded and tried to give him a few coins, and he’d left in a huff. She was still carrying this thing around? Or, not. She wasn’t carrying anything around as far as she could see. Gods help her, she was losing her mind.

“You’re not losing anything, my dear!”

Had she been thinking out loud?

“Nope! Just a perk of the profession.”

Holy shit. She needed to leave.

“Before you go,” the voice said, “do consider *not* going.”

There was no follow up. The voice had fallen silent. Rath’s gaze darted from wall to wall, as if she’d notice something new, or see some confirmation that the presence had left. Her heart was beating wildly—she was being watched, her thoughts listened to. If a tiny, sealed cell offered no privacy, where could she go? As she’d done so often over the last few days, Rath closed her eyes and returned to her breath, kept it full and easy, smiled at how much stupid meditation practice she’d been logging just to keep from falling apart.

It was laughable, now that she noticed it. The sensation, so startlingly like the grief she’d felt at her brother’s death, that no one and nothing mattered. The terror of moving forward, the lurking belief that it was impossible, that her losses were insurmountable—so how had she?

She knew the answer was she hadn’t, not really. But she had pushed on, and how was that? It didn’t surprise her to realize her answer wasn’t different than Mercer’s: bad behavior. It had been her immediate reaction to the loss, and not much had changed in the time since.

Her brother had been killed by thieves, bandits, but if she blamed them she'd need to reckon with her own choices. After all, she'd killed for less, and more than a few times. So had he—Rath and Nabil were not good people. It wouldn't suit either of them to feel moral outrage at how he'd died. The bitter, jealous streak in her wanted to blame his wife, his children—it was their presence, after all, that led him to take the stupid job on the docks, that led to him standing out in the open, target on his back day after day. But she knew that was petty, that it was unfair. Nabil made his choices, and things just . . . happened. Mostly she blamed him—deep down she knew she didn't, not really, but if she had to put words to it? If she had to rant and grit her teeth and cry? She'd blame him. Stupid, what did he do that for, how dare he get himself killed. How dare he leave her alone.

In her dream, back in Ivarstead, Mercer had been riding her brother's horse. Was he filling that role? Sure he was, of course he was, somehow he'd slipped in, gone from antagonist to something else. When Nabil had died, the connections to her home felt shattered, irreparable, and so she'd left. And there was that same feeling, that one that had swelled up in her moment of hesitation with Mercer's throat beneath her crushing palm. That nothing else would matter, that she'd be adrift—and so she'd saved herself. She hadn't been sparing Mercer. She'd been protecting herself against more grief.

It had come anyway. Of course it had. Her home seemed to be gone, no chance now at amends, no chance to heal what had been broken there. Bad behavior, of course, was one option available to her. She smiled a little, felt a twitching pull at her lips as she thought about Mercer's vendetta. It was stupid, petty, absurd—just ridiculous enough to catch her interest, and vicious enough in its ends to hold it.

But she'd tried that route before. Lashing out at the world, running away. Not that she could run very far now—the thought returned her attention to her body, to her surroundings, still absent the intruding voice, still without music. Eyes closed, she could only assume she was still in the cell. There was the world, whatever its size, and there was this room, and gods knew where else, really. She clenched her fists against a bloom of anger and heard Mercer's words again, and they seemed so, so long ago now. *Once you visit a place, you remember it.* He hadn't mentioned that not all the places you remembered were . . . fuck. But that connection, that sense of tangible reality. She needed it. If she couldn't run, if this was the world she had? She'd try, maybe, to do what she hadn't done the first time—she'd see about finding the value in what she had left.

That was supposing, of course, that running was out of the question, so there was one piece of business she had to see to before anything else.

Was it the same everywhere?

The border, of course, was continuous and flexible, but Rath decided to focus on a few key passes. Places she'd been before, places she knew to be real—if that meant anything. The Pale Pass, south of Helgen, into Cyrodiil. Silgrad Pass, east of Riften, into Morrowind. She needed more evidence. Had it been some kind of anomaly, or some kind of trick?

A difficult to describe notion lay beneath her thoughts, insisting that she didn't need more evidence. Hadn't she seen enough? Yet here she was, at the Pale Pass now, gates locked, gritting her teeth, turning away, choosing to ignore what she might find if she opened them. And far to the east now, at the gates to Morrowind, quiet tears on her cheeks as she pushed into the same white endless end that she'd met to the west. And here she was again, walking into Riften, feeling strangely huge and important, feeling all eyes on her as she moved, and why did it seem so small? She shuddered and ducked through the courtyard at the Temple of Mara and into the graveyard—again, so small, how had she never noticed?—then descended into the Cistern.

There had been music all the while. Music unceasing, sometimes changing gently, sometimes with an odd abruptness, always there and always giving her the feeling that it was trying to be unobtrusive. Stepping into the torchlight of the Cistern, she met the same music she'd heard there before, that quiet, unnerving catalyst of all the unraveling of her last few days. This was home now, it was the most home she had, but it was hard to feel it with the low, creeping hum filling every moment.

Vipir gave her a nod as she entered, looking up from where he stood tending a stew, but her breath caught before she could greet him when she saw a newly familiar profile pass by. He was in Guild leathers now, hood up, but his slight frame and delicate features were immediately distinguishable.

"Etienne?" She called it out from a small distance, and he stopped where he stood near the water.

"Good to see you again, friend." His tone was disarmingly casual as he turned to face her.

"You made it back," Rath said, surprised by the depth of her relief at seeing Etienne safe and recovered.

He didn't respond or elaborate, just turned away and continued walking along the water.

Rath's forehead creased as she squinted after him. It wasn't as if she had anything else to say—they didn't know each other. But she'd saved him from continued torture at the embassy; was it so out of line to expect more than a passing greeting?

He'd already walked away. With a grumble she hoped was at least mostly internal, Rath set her jaw and headed toward the Flagon.

Brynjolf was nursing a tankard of something, and despite a knowing knot in her gut, she approached him. They were close, after all, about as close as she'd been with anyone since leaving Hammerfell.

He seemed to be brooding over something, sitting alone, hood up, sipping at his drink with a worried expression.

Rath sat down across the table from him, then realized she was unsure whether their last encounter had actually even happened. “Hey,” she said, “did I, uh—did we talk the other day?”

He looked at her sternly, took a swallow. “Sorry, lass,” he said, and no, no already the cadence was too familiar, “I’ve got important things to do. We’ll speak another time.”

Her nose stung, and her throat was suddenly tight. “Bryn.” She unclenched her jaw, tried to wish he’d speak to her—wishing seemed to work for a lot of her problems, didn’t it? “Bryn, please—are you okay?”

“Never done an honest day’s work in your life for all that coin you’re carrying, eh, lass?”

He’d said that before, hadn’t he? “Isn’t there some line about pots and kettles?”

“It’s good to see you in one piece, lass. I just wanted to give you a proper thank you for everything you’ve done. The Guild is back on its feet again and on its way to a prosperous future.” He looked around the near-empty chamber with a smile, lifting his tankard as if in toast. After a sip, his expression turned more serious. “What’s become of the Skeleton Key?”

This was . . . better, this was relevant, even if it sounded—wrong, somehow. Stilted, and missing context.

But, oh. Fuck. The Key. “Right, the Key. So, I . . . gods, Bryn, so much has happened, I—I think the Key is back at the Sepulcher.” Maybe he wouldn’t press further.

“That’s it then.” He leaned back in his chair, satisfied, almost wistful. “After all those years of helplessly watching the Guild decline. But enough of that. I’m confident that with you in charge, we’ll soon have more gold than we could possibly spend.” Another hearty swig of his drink.

“You know I’m not . . . I don’t want . . . we’ve talked about this.”

“Careful at Mercer’s place,” he said, and Rath looked at him with deep confusion. “I don’t want to lose anyone else to that madman.”

“What are you t—”

“Sorry, lass, I’ve got important things to do. We’ll speak another time.”

It was like her chair had fallen out from beneath her, like the room had fallen away again. Rath opened her mouth to speak, but couldn’t imagine what words she might possibly want to say. Shaking more than a little, she stood. Brynjolf watched her movements closely, and after a moment his lips pursed as if to speak—Rath tried to wish again, demanded with great violence that she not hear those words—and to her horror, Brynjolf’s lips continued to move, completely silent. He appeared to be oblivious to the change.

Rath brought a hand to her own lips, rubbed across them anxiously. “Bryn, I’m—” She reached out toward him, placed her hand on his shoulder, squeezed. His mouth kept moving soundlessly. “I’m sorry. Fuck. I’m sorry.”

Without a word to anyone else in the Flagon, Rath left, pace brisk, eyes and chest burning, shouldering through the stink of the Ratway and out onto the RIFTEN canal. Struck by the change in music, the bright sun, the strange sensation that the city was some kind of miniature, Rath leaned over the edge of the boardwalk and dry heaved, sucking in the foul, fishy air in huge, desperate gulps. Her face tingled and her ears rang, and for the first time since Helgen she felt truly, deeply frightened. There was a rigidity in her muscles, her shoulders held painfully tight as she took slow, wary steps up to the marketplace.

It wasn't actually smaller, she knew that. She could look around, catalog what she saw, compare it to her memory—though that was a joke now, wasn't it? She could see that things were the same as she remembered, the same businesses, the same people, the same structures. But it was impossible to reconcile with this new sense of scale, the impression that the city was too small for her somehow. In some ways it was a familiar feeling, something she recognized—it was the same thing that happened any time she'd lived somewhere new, a perfectly natural and normal evolution. A place would seem vast, confusing, complicated at first, and over time it would shrink around her as she learned its makeup, its workings, learned her place within its routines. This was . . . like that, but also wildly different in a way she couldn't explain.

The merchants' voices as they called their wares seemed flat and hollow. Rath avoided walking too close to anyone, unsure she could stomach another interaction like those she'd had belowground. She had started to retreat behind the Keep, to find a patch of grass to sit and process her thoughts, when a guard barreled around the corner, shoving past her, bow at the ready. Rath wheeled around and watched as guard after guard streamed toward the north gate. She didn't see anything, didn't hear anything odd.

Until she did. It was the music first. Seamlessly, the music that was either in the air or in her head had changed. A drumbeat had begun, and though she would swear she'd never heard it before, she knew there was only one thing it could mean.

She heard it before she saw it, shrieking peals of fire behind the bunkhouse. A calm clarity washed over her, and a little smile tugged at one corner of her lips. She understood this, could handle this. Blades drawn, Rath charged around the corner and out into the road.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, folks! I started a brand spankin' new job a few days after posting the previous chapter, so it's been a series of adjustments. But stick with me, I'll get you there!

And thanks once more to [raunchyandpaunchy](#) for being my second set of eyeballs - you are treasured <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Half a dozen guards were letting arrows fly, and while their aim was mostly true, their efforts were clearly having little effect. They'd never done this before; they didn't have a strategy.

Rath let their arrows push the dragon into flight, as she had time and time again all over the province. She chased it as it made a retreat, and when it landed near the meadery she was there to meet it, shouting it back as it reared its head, charging in with furious, slashing swords, throwing herself beneath its throat without a thought, eyes widening and muscles blazing with the sudden knowledge that she was about to be very, very lucky. Wings and claws and jaws thrashed around her, but somehow she'd placed herself in a pristine, untouchable spot, just out of reach, and time fell slow.

It wasn't a magical slowness, and it wasn't anything new. It was just the gorgeous drift of a mind conditioned for battle. In the span of a breath she analyzed her surroundings—guards and civilians were flanking the dragon now, distracting it; she heard them shouting, steel crashing and slicing on scales. The dragon's legs had bent and tensed—it would take off again in another breath, she only had a moment. But she knew, somehow in her bones, that this would be the lucky hit. Music swelled around her, triumphant chanting overwhelming her senses so fully she could barely hear the dragon's roars. She thrust the Razor forward with all the force she had, and it sunk smoothly through the flexible scales of the dragon's throat. Dropping Chillrend to the ground, she grabbed the Razor with both hands and yanked downward, throwing all her weight into the motion, tearing the dragon's throat wide as horns blared in victory.

More amazing and disturbing than anything else was the remarkable lack of blood. Rath had been prepared for a warm bath cascading down her arms, for powerful spurts falling over her face, but . . . there was nothing. She tore the flesh apart, she felt it happen, but . . .

The dragon shrieked and shuddered, and as its head began to fall Rath leapt backward, pulling her blade from its neck. For once, finally, the Razor had done what it was supposed to do and given her an improbable, stupendous killing blow. The rousing music quieted, and for a few moments Rath heard nothing but the sounds of Riffen—the footsteps rushing over the boardwalk, the crackles and sighs of Balimund's forge, the tipsy slosh of the canal below.

Rath sheathed the Razor and braced herself as the dragon's massive form began to disintegrate, curling on itself in bright, papery tendrils, reaching out to her, wrapping around her, merging into her. She almost jumped at the sounds of drums and chanting, but her surprise quickly turned to a groan as she realized it was just more of the music that seemed, probably, to be in her own head. No one else seemed to hear it, anyway—just Mercer.

It had been a small dragon, but its skeleton filled the whole space between the forge and the meadery. She picked up Chillrend from its feet. By now, the whole town had come to gawk,

and Rath was filled with the sensation that the words they were saying were words she'd heard before. She retreated quickly.

Or, she tried to, but was stopped when she tripped on a still-twitching tail.

Madesi, pitiful iron dagger in hand, lay dead on the boardwalk, eyes wide open. He didn't look burned or slashed, he wasn't bleeding—then again, the dragon hadn't bled either. Maybe he'd died of terror, thought himself brave enough to charge toward the dragon but found his fortitude wanting when he'd reached it.

Rath crouched beside him, tried to still the residual jerks in his tail with her hand. It . . . she hadn't expected the rush of emotions she was experiencing now, especially after how things had gone in the Flagon. Madesi was just a shopkeeper; she'd run some little jobs for him, and he'd always been kind to her, but she didn't *know* him. They weren't friends by any definition. But the fact that he—Rath shook her head. Unarmored, underarmed, inexperienced. Why would he do something so stupid?

She was absently stroking Madesi's tail when a guard approached and looked over the corpse. "What happened?"

Rath looked up at the guard with venom coursing through her veins. "Excuse me?"

The guard kept looking at Madesi, then shook his head and began to walk away.

"Hey," Rath said, standing now, already drawing her weapons, thoughts gone blank. She spoke louder, took a step after the guard. "Hey, I was talking to you."

The guard held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Guard might get nervous, a woman approaches with her weapons drawn."

Rath shook her head. "I don't think I'll be putting these away. Remember how I just killed a fucking *dragon* for you?"

She turned to gesture at the dragon's bones, but what she saw was impossible. The skeleton was upright, twitching in something almost like a dance, towering over the marketplace. It seemed . . . stuck, somehow, like it had been lodged in a tight space and was trying to break loose.

A giant, shivering dragon skeleton loomed over the thoroughfare, and not a single person seemed to notice.

The guard's attentions were still on Rath, and he began to repeat himself. "Guard might get nervous—" he said, and Rath stopped listening.

Something . . . snapped. Madesi dead at her feet, a skeletal dragon dancing in the air, idiots continuing their days like nothing happened, guards leaving bodies in the street—Rath's ability to care had reached its limit.

"You want me to put the sword away?" She adjusted her grip and stepped toward the guard. "I'll fucking put the sword away, fucking watch me."

Fast as anything, propelling forward low and coiled, the guard had barely begun to draw his greatsword when Chillrend was thrust up behind his ribs. That was his own fault, another idiot—what did he expect, lifting his arms above his head as an enraged dragonslayer charged at him blade-first?

There was shouting from all directions; guards with weapons at the ready were running at Rath from all sides, and a new, ominous pounding of drums had begun. She braced her foot on the first guard's hip, wrenched her sword from his torso, then launched into a sprint.

Her pursuers were lumbering dullards, but they had numbers. She could get to the market, avoid bottlenecks, use the stalls and stone barriers to her advantage, and there would be a thrill in that challenge, in the nimbleness she'd need to exercise. Or she could purposefully channel them, pull them into an alley, shout them back, pick them off one by one—exhausting, but satisfying in its own right.

Her feet—ahead of her conscious planning, trying to cover all contingencies—were routing her around the marketplace, taking her toward the Temple of Mara, ready to duck behind the architecture, or to bring the fight to the grassy area behind the city's manors.

An arrow caught her tricep; her armor blunted most of its penetrating force, but the sharp, focused strike was still enough to make her hiss as she pounded her way up the stairs to the temple. Locked gates on both sides, a building full of pacifists to put at her back—good. She took a deep breath and turned.

With a wild glee, she shouted back a column of charging guards, pride and satisfaction swelling as she watched them stumble backward down the stairs. She assessed her position. There were the guards closest to her—three slowly regaining their feet, one just now entering the courtyard. Most were armed with clunky two-handed weapons, just one with a sword and shield. Two archers were sending volleys from the marketplace, but the walls of the temple courtyard minimized the value of their efforts.

But it wasn't just guards streaming toward her. Residents of Riften, weapons drawn, were making their way to the temple, bellowing out their anger, hurling threats her way.

Once again, the word flashed bright in her mind: idiots. Not minutes ago they'd watched her kill a dragon and gut a guard. What were they hoping to accomplish, coming at her with nothing but their fury and their shitty daggers? They should be running to their homes, locking their godsdamned doors. And it wasn't Mjoll or Grelka or Maul—any of them, Rath conceded, might at least make her work. No, it was Balimund and Haelga and Hemming Black-Briar, not one of them armored, and only Hemming carrying a weapon worth its salt.

Just—fuck. She could kill the guards. If she was being honest? She *wanted* to kill the guards. They'd chosen to keep pursuing her, and they were prepared for a fight. But the thought of slaughtering a bunch of brainless, reactionary townsfolk, people she'd known, even if there was something . . . wrong, now? She'd have to run. She . . . she could do it, but she'd rather run.

Rath darted left, positioning herself outside the formation of her now-recovered pursuers as they charged up the stairs. She brought her blades down on the flanking guard, holding off

the fall of a warhammer with one arm and slashing at the guard's gut with the other—not a major blow, but enough to send the woman staggering. There should have been blood on the guard's cuirass, blood on the ground, but it was strangely absent, even as the Razor gleamed wet in the afternoon sun.

Two more guards were closing in—Rath lowered her shoulder, tucked her elbows, and hurled herself forward, leaping from the temple promenade and down into the main courtyard. More guards and angry civilians had rushed in, but if she kept up her speed she expected to make an exit through the cemetery.

Her feet hit the ground and she pivoted on instinct, letting muscle memory move her to safety.

Another arrow struck, this time over her kidney—her armor proved its worth and refused to yield, but the searing, sharp pain left her yowling and sputtering as she ran through the grassy alleys, past Black-Briar Manor, past the Keep, blades forward and ready as she turned the corner toward the city gate, but no one had caught up with her. She heard continuing commotion near the temple. The gate guards had left their posts, presumably to chase her, and she smiled. Idiots.

Outside Riften's walls, the music was calm again, even as she struggled to regain her breath. She kept her blades drawn, but she slowed her pace, moved to the side of the road to walk partially obscured by the bushes and trees. She rubbed at her back where the arrow had struck, expecting the pain to be blooming, but she found it was already lessening. She thought she'd been hit at close range, that the force had been significant enough to cause real damage—but maybe she'd been disoriented in all the scrambling. Or maybe this was new. She thought about waking up after the fight with Mercer—gods, how long ago had that been now? How she'd thought she'd been dreaming, how she'd had no injuries. Maybe something new with the way her body healed, then. She couldn't say she wasn't grateful.

She continued along the road and met no interference, so she sheathed her weapons and let herself walk at a comfortable, natural pace. The sun was beginning to set, shining orange over Lake Honrich. Tomorrow, Mercer would be waiting for her in Markarth, sitting in that dark, austere tavern, plotting an assassination for little reason beyond the simple logic of that's what he wanted to do. He just . . . felt like it.

Rath felt her lips twist into a smirk. In the end, what else was there?

Chapter End Notes

A book cover and some character art exist now! I'm deciding on the best place to host those/where to stick 'em in here, but I'm thinking I'll include those with the next update.

Thanks as always for reading, feel free to comment in whatever way you like! I'm always happy to hear concrit.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rath's movements throughout the province had become fluid, her new method of travel already second nature. She arrived at the gates to Markarth on Loredas, exactly the time and place she'd intended, purple shadows of the dawn receding from the stone walls and cliff faces. A spray of cool morning mist drifted in from the Karth River as the sound of gentle horns filled her head; despite everything, Rath still shivered at the wonder of the place.

Mercer hadn't specified a time for their meeting, but she had trouble envisioning him as an early riser. Although, Rath hadn't slept in . . . she shook her head, rolled her shoulders. It was more likely than not that Mercer didn't sleep at all.

Markarth was a shithole—a beautiful shithole full of silver, more corrupt than anything Riften could ever dream to achieve, home to murderers and slave-drivers and actual, literal cannibals. Last time Rath was here was on a Brotherhood contract—no surprise there. The enormous Dwemer doors to the city closed behind her with a whoosh and a heavy clang, and she took stock of her surroundings. The winding streets and tiny marketplace were empty except for shuffling Hold guards—gods, there were so many guards here. The paranoia of the place was palpable; Rath held her back too straight as she walked, as if somehow good posture could repel the omnipresent side-eyed glances that bristled over the back of her neck. She should have covered her face, but it was too late now. Resolute, she crossed the plaza to the inn.

The main hall of the Silver-Blood Inn was dark as ever, windowless and weakly-lit by torches and lanterns that failed to fill the vastness of the space. The barkeep offered a sniveling, halfhearted greeting, and Rath nodded as she scanned the shadows. The soothing twang of a lute echoed off the stone; its tune was a familiar comfort, but there was no bard in sight.

Mercer was sitting at the back of the chamber, chair pulled close to the roaring fire in the hearth, a goblet in his hand and a bottle of wine on the table beside him.

Rath dropped herself into the chair next to him without ceremony. "Isn't it a bit early?"

He twisted his lips and flared his nostrils and patted at his pockets. "You know," he said, words thick with sardonic exasperation, "I seem to have left my watch at home." He rolled his eyes and drank deeply.

A small, huffing laugh left Rath's chest before she could stop it. She reached for the wine—not much left, maybe a glass. With Mercer's eyes on her, intense and calculating, she swirled the remaining liquid, watched it spin at the bottom of the bottle, then tipped it back, sighing at the sweet, bitter tang on the back of her tongue.

"You got a plan?" she asked, setting down the bottle and wiping the corners of her mouth with the inside of her wrist. Mercer looked like shit, his eyes more sunken against the blaze

of the fire, his expression tired and distant.

He nodded. “Maybe. Did some legwork in town—folks are tight-lipped, but I remember the uprising. Silver-Bloods have one of Madanach’s old comrades running part of their operation, and if that’s not damning I don’t know what is.”

Rath squinted in consideration. “I don’t have a whole lot of context. But, uh—” She combed through her memory, recalled the man she’d met the day of the murder in the marketplace, his tattoos, the note he’d dropped. With a thought, the note was in her hand. She held it out to Mercer. “Someone gave me this, long time ago now.”

Mercer unfolded the yellowed paper, shook his head. “This tells me nothing.”

“Yeah, the guy seemed like kind of a prick, so I just, uh. Never followed up. But it has something to do with the Forsworn, with that woman who was killed in the market.”

With a shrug and a sip of his wine, Mercer handed the note back. He lowered his tone, softened his voice. “Where’d you go?”

Rath pressed her lips tight, looked over Mercer’s shoulder at nothing in particular. “I—a couple places. Riften.”

A knowing nod—he didn’t know, couldn’t have known how her past few days had unfolded. But there must have been something in her face, in her tone, something he recognized.

Rath coughed, straightened. “The Key—did you . . .”

Mercer inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. “I did,” he said, gruff and clipped. He didn’t elaborate. Rath nodded.

“Well, good talk,” she said, tucking the note into a pocket, feeling it disappear as she did. “We’re both here, there’s a man in a mine you’d like to murder, and there’s the possibility of coin and conspiracy besides. But if the Silver-Bloods have one of Madanach’s people in their employ—”

“It’s not just one. I’ve had a hard time finding a single Nord working for them; it’s all Reachmen and Orcs. For a bunch of Stormcloak sycophants who were handed the Reach after the mess with Ulfric, it’s . . . suspicious.” Mercer drained his goblet, set it aside, then leaned forward on his knees, speaking low. “But Nepos? That’s huge. He’s Thonar’s right-hand man now, but he’d filled the same role for Madanach. A bureaucrat, though-and-through, but he also headed the Forsworn intelligence efforts during the war. He’s a godsdamned spy.”

Despite the heavy circles beneath his eyes, Mercer looked excited. Rath couldn’t blame him. It’s what he’d been hoping for with the Thalmor, albeit on a smaller scale. She wondered if it might remind him of home—she didn’t know where he was from in particular, but growing up on the Iliac Bay, Rath had seen her share of Breton “politics.” When she was a child, the monarch of Wayrest had opened the kingdom’s ports to corsairs in a bizarre attempt to eliminate rivals and thwart an assassination plot—the city had fallen to the pirates, an all-too-familiar example, her father had sternly told her, of a petty Breton power grab gone awry.

Their parents' staunch disdain, of course, did not deter Rath and her brothers from playing pirates, sacking imagined castles, laughing at the cowering nobles within. Here in Markarth, she and Mercer were faced with deceit, a messy web of conflicting interests, ancient grudges, bloodshed—she was a little excited too.

Mercer gestured at Rath's pocket. "I think I met the kid from your note, loitering at the shrine. Unfortunate face tattoo, simpering voice?"

"That's the one." She processed Mercer's words. "He hadn't been . . . waiting for me at the shrine this whole time, had he?"

With a shrug and a wry smile, Mercer shook his head. "How should I know? Maybe he just likes it there. Maybe I just happened to go to the shrine at the same moment he did. But I think you know better than that." He leaned back in his chair and studied Rath's face. "I suppose, from the outside, I might be in a position to see the evidence more clearly. But don't tell me you haven't noticed that people seem to wait for you."

A heavy tightness pressed on her chest, a sensation of stubbornness against the obvious. "Whatever. So you talked to him?"

"He's concerned that the official response to decades of violent Forsworn attacks has been . . . underwhelming at best. Something I noticed, listening to him and comparing his observations with what I've seen out here? It really is incredible how the most powerful Nords in the Reach have weathered the Forsworn onslaught unscathed—of course, that's an understatement. They're thriving. And then over in Karthwasten you've got Forsworn bands attacking Reachmen-owned mines. This is some deeply dirty business."

"And what about Madanach?" Rath leaned forward, lowered her voice, suddenly extremely conscious of how freely they'd been speaking. "He's the reason you came here in the first place, is that still the goal?"

Mercer cracked his thumb in his fist, sucked at his teeth, exhaled. "Eventually. First," he smirked, more to himself than to her, "I'd like to see where this goes."

This was the type of job that, left to her own devices, Rath would turn down almost every time. There was no clear goal, no obvious compensation for her time or effort, and a clear risk of major escalation. Logic and self-preservation nearly always took precedent.

But logic was more flexible than it used to be, and self-preservation wasn't nearly as high on Rath's list of priorities as it had been. And Rath wasn't alone.

"So," she said, nodding her head and tapping her foot as she considered the situation, "we're going to chase this until you get bored?"

Mercer laughed from behind closed lips. "More or less. That a problem?"

"No." Gods, this felt . . . normal. Refreshing. Just another job, another goal, something real to wrap her mind around. She crossed her arms, leaned back in her chair, and they made a plan.

The sun was morning bright as they exited the inn, glinting harshly off the city's shining Dwemer ornamentations, somehow making the rush of the falls seem louder. Rath smiled; she could barely hear the music.

"You've been digging around where you don't belong." An aggressive voice, approaching them from the direction of the smelters. Rath turned, palms falling to rest on her weapons—Mercer mirrored her. The man was armored, but unarmed. "It's time you learned a lesson," he said, closing the distance quickly, puffing up his chest.

Rath and Mercer shared a look of amusement and pity. Mercer raised his brow, then tilted his head toward their would-be attacker and stepped aside.

She must have looked mad as she squared herself against this stranger, the way her eyes widened and gleamed, the way her lips spread wide into something too predatory to be a smile. "I don't listen to threats," she said.

The stranger scoffed and raised his fists. "You'll listen to this."

It took great restraint not to roll her eyes as she settled into a comfortable fighting stance. He pushed forward, and she let him take the first swing, arcing wide over her head as she ducked and sunk a blow into his diaphragm.

As fistfights went, it was . . . boring. It was slow and clumsy, and it didn't seem to matter where she hit her opponent. A strike to the head didn't stagger him any more than one to the arm—Rath had growled low in her throat at that realization. She fought lazily, and more than once she considered simply drawing her sword and calling it done. But the Markarth guards were watching closely, and while they didn't seem to take issue with a public brawl, certainly they'd need to do something if she felled this man in the street. She didn't want a repeat of Riften; she threw her punches one after another, waiting for the stranger to decide he'd had enough.

"I'd rather not do this all day," she said through a grunt, striking the man across the jaw with one fist as the other swept into his ribs, pedaling back out of reach. He roared, ran at her at full speed, and she knew that would be enough.

His own momentum did most of the damage as he descended on her. Rath crouched, pushed up as he entered her range, then slammed the heel of her palm into his nose. He fell backward, breathing heavy, then dropped to one knee and held up his hand in a yield.

His shoulders rose and fell in exhaustion, but, as she now expected, his face was unbloodied.

Mercer returned to her side and crossed his arms, glaring at the now-calmer stranger. "Who sent you?"

The man twisted his lips into a scowl, as if he thought he could still appear intimidating. "I was sent by Nepos the Nose. The old man hands out the orders. He told me to make sure you didn't get in the way. That's all I know, I swear."

Rath nodded, then gestured in the direction of the smelters and the Warrens. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Appearing rightfully fearful, the man did as he was told.

“Well,” Mercer said, “could have guessed that. No changes to the plan, then. To Nepos?”

Rath shook out her arms and turned, looking up at the precarious promenades lined with the homes of Markarth’s elite. “Guess so.”

Without further interference from goons or guards, Rath and Mercer began their slogging ascent.

“I like watching you fight.” It was almost a whisper, Mercer’s voice pitched low and rumbling, speaking out of the side of his mouth as they climbed the stone stairs.

“First time in a while you weren’t on the other side.”

Mercer hummed in affirmation. “The way you move—it’s distinctive. You use your leverage incredibly well. Coil and release—are the snake parallels purposeful, I wonder?”

“Is that a question, or are you just talking to yourself?” She looked at him with a raised brow, her tone both teasing and tired.

Mercer shrugged. “Either.”

Rath pushed harder up the stairs, turned a corner to a new flight—the last one, she thought, before the row of homes high above the city. “It’s a common motif in Redguard fighting,” she said. “You know about the sword singers?”

Mercer followed Rath around the corner, keeping his pace easy. “Only a little.”

“It’s all the same thing,” she said, “loosely, anyway. Maybe Bretons don’t have—I don’t know, martial philosophies? But even as kids, we all knew the Book of Circles. You fight from the inside out, improvise. And, you know,” she shrugged, “Redguards just like snakes.”

Mercer had stopped climbing, his face now pulled into an expression of mock offense. “You would insult my heritage, Dragonborn?”

“Yep,” Rath said, continuing up the stairs, reaching the topmost terrace. She turned, opened her arms in challenge, walked backward toward Nepos’s front door. “You gonna do something about it?”

Mercer smirked and followed, apparently satisfied with her response.

In the entryway to Nepos's home, a young woman in the clothes of a servant blocked Rath's passage, arms crossed and hip cocked aggressively as she questioned Rath's presence. Mercer breezed past, even bumping shoulders with the woman, seemingly unnoticed by her or the others in the room behind her. He turned around with a cheeky, boyish grin and gestured to Rath to keep talking.

The woman indicated, none too gently, that Rath should leave—Rath drew out the conversation as long as she could, but soon a man's voice came from the main room, granting Rath permission to enter. The woman moved aside, a begrudging snarl on her face, and Rath stepped forward, making note of the gleaming steel dagger on the hip of the ill-tempered stranger she was placing at her back.

In her periphery, Rath saw Mercer near the hearth, standing behind the old Reachman who must have been Nepos, casually reading through what appeared to be a journal. He looked back at Rath, held the journal up, and shook his head. Rath tightened her brow. Could the others really not see him? Did they just not care?

Mercer returned to stand at Rath's side, leaned in to speak. "There's a little bit here, but we'll need to question him for more."

"Let me see it," she said, hand outstretched. Mercer passed the small leatherbound book to her—she flipped through, conscious that all eyes in the room were on her, a thick anticipation in the air. The pages held only enough information to vaguely confirm the double-dealings they already suspected. There was barely enough written to even call it a 'journal,' just a hasty half-confession, maybe just a way for the man to ease his conscience a little.

Rath closed the journal and moved to speak to Nepos, but as soon as she pocketed the small book she was met with the sounds of steel and spells from all corners of the room. Nepos had gotten to his feet, was closing the distance between them as mage armor rushed and gleamed over his skin. Reflexively, though they'd only fought alongside each other once before, she and Mercer turned back-to-back, drew their weapons, then charged in their respective directions, Rath to Nepos and Mercer to the servants.

It was a more vigorous fight than she might have expected, but it still didn't last long. Rath cornered Nepos, gritted through the arcane flames he pushed her way, slashed at the old man until he fell at her feet. She wheeled around to help Mercer with the servants, only to find he'd already taken them down, just the woman's body and two piles of dust remaining.

She sheathed her weapons and caught her breath, skin throbbing sharply from her burns.

"So much for that," Mercer said, looking around the room as if he might find another lead. "Might as well check on Thonar next."

Maybe it was because Mercer had "history"—as he called it—here, that he remembered the uprising, that it contained something like nostalgia for him. For Rath, the promise of drama was losing its shine. She'd had an underwhelming brawl, read a few scrawled lines of remorse, and killed an old man—and not the one she'd come to Markarth to kill. She'd come to Markarth to shed blood—that was the whole of it. She'd come for the thrill of a

challenging kill, and instead she was being dragged along as Mercer chased a trail of conversations. Her patience, already in such short supply, was failing.

“I’ve got a proposition,” she said, and Mercer’s attention fixed on her with startling intensity.

“I’m listening.”

“Solve your mystery,” she said. “But you’ll have to beat the clock. Because I’m going into that mine, and I’m going to kill Madanach.”

Mercer’s eyes widened with unmasked excitement; he licked his teeth as he grinned. “Now why would you do that, Dragonborn?”

Rath worked her jaw back and forth, rolled her palm over the pommel of her sword. “Guess I’m just bored.”

“And we couldn’t have that.”

She shook her head. “Have fun, Mercer,” she said, turning away, walking to the door.

He didn’t respond, just laughed where he stood, until the sound of music and Markarth’s rushing falls overtook his voice as Rath pushed forward, a real smile tugging at her lips, ready for a race.

Chapter End Notes

Hi folks! I'm having some serious life upheavals right now and don't know how much time I'll have available to dedicate to this project. It's always a priority to me, but things at present are highly unpredictable. As always, I'll emphasize that this is all plotted, and I am absolutely so excited to get you all to the end! Thanks for all of your eyeballs and support - even if I'm not especially on top of responding to comments for a bit, I treasure them all and always love to hear from you folks.

In happy news, there's art!!

[Thanatopsiturvy](#) has drawn Rath! A bunch of times, and a lil bit of Mercer too! Resulting in some sobbing from yours truly. Just a little bit. [Take a look!](#) And definitely let me know if for some reason the link is broken and I'll either remove this note or get it sorted - it drives me weirdly nuts when there are links to art but no art to be found.

There's also a cover by [crimsonherbarium](#)! I've embedded it in the first chapter if you feel like taking a peek.

Author Update

Chapter Summary

A brief update about the status of this project

Hi, folks. There seems to have been an uptick of interest in this project over the last month, including (I think) some new subscribers, so I've decided it's about time that I let you know what's going on and where things will be going from here. I know public opinion can be a bit split on this sort of non-update update, but I've had you on the hook for a long time and I think you deserve to get a sense of what to expect going forward.

As I mentioned in the last chapter update (so, so long ago now), there were some major upheavals in my life beginning last summer that seriously compromised my ability to continue active work on this project. In a lot of ways, I'm still in the fallout from those changes despite the fact that things have become more or less settled over the last few months. I've thrown myself very deeply into another hobby, which is now taking up most of my free time - but it's also helping me develop some of the mental tools I'll need for the coming chapters of Temporal Myth, so in the long run it may be a big factor in helping this get finished.

From a reader's perspective, you can likely see that things aren't situated to go especially well for Rath at this point in the narrative. Some of the things I've been building to have proven to be a bit too close to home, and I'm wary to wade into those waters unprepared. I've said it before and will say it again - in broad strokes, this project is already planned out through to the final scene. I will be back. But I need to be ready for it, and I don't want to give you something that isn't the best, most thoughtful thing I have to offer. I do not have an estimate on when I will be posting again, but it is my full intention to finish this.

Thank you so much for your eyeballs and interest and patience, I hope you're all well and the new year is everything you want it to be.

Yours,

spiney

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Bits and pieces of what happens next

Chapter Notes

Hi. It's two years later now. Life is very different. I've noticed this fic getting a little more attention lately and decided it's time to wrap it up, one way or another. There's material written, and I'm going to chop it up and put it here.

So what you'll see here are the bits and pieces of what I've written from this point forward. It is likely to just be fragments and flashes, with large chunks missing in between. I'll try to fill in the gaps a bit from my notes, but if that doesn't sound like a pleasant reading experience you may want to bow out, because I suspect that will be the format for the rest of the project as I bring it to some semblance of closure.

Some new tags will be added, even though what you're going to see here is pretty sketchy. General content warning going forward for suicidal ideation/overall lack of desire to live.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Rath had known that getting into the mine would be easy, but exactly *how* easy was a disturbing surprise. She'd walked down to the market as she considered her options, deciding whether it would be more sensible to enter by brute force or by official means. Looking over the butcher's wares, contemplating whether petty theft would be crime enough to get her inside, she briefly—just for a moment—lifted a slab of horker meat from the table. Before she could react the butcher had a dagger drawn; she heard clanking footsteps closing in around her, and the voice of a guard booming at her back. Easier than she could have dreamed, and now she was in the mine, stripped of her weapons and armor, pickaxe in her hand and Madanach's name on her lips.

My notes say the following, not all of which is reflected in the written narrative:

Events that need to occur:

1. Rath enters Cidhna Mine
2. Rath accidentally starts a riot
3. Rath is nearly killed

4. Mercer comes in and saves the day
5. Rath realizes she'd been hoping to die
6. Rath and Mercer fight
7. Rath leaves

The narrative covers approximately points 4. and 5.

Burlap rough and sweat-soaked on her back, smelling of singed hair and the sharp burn of ice, surrounded by the empty crackle of ozone, Rath panted over the dirt floor of the mine. Her breath was hot, wet with exhaustion and condensation, each heaving inhale tasting of mud and copper and the sour, chemical tang of silver dust. She knelt wide, heartbeat still too loud in her ears to hear more than muffled speech from across the chamber, coming closer; she kept her head down, curled over until her damp forehead met earth. She clutched a shiv in one hand, still tight, knuckles balled into the ground; the other hand was empty now, fingers splayed, seeking stability. She'd closed her eyes, gods knew how long ago, but the deep voice and solid footsteps came closer, words becoming more distinct even as she felt her ribs thump with a fresh quickening in her pulse.

"...n't understand how..." Ringing in her ears, louder with each breath, white oblivion wrapping around her senses. "...ing mess..."

"Are you even listening to me?"

Rath's eyes shot open and she coughed, flecking her lips and cheeks with wet dirt. She sat up, slow. As her hands peeled back from the floor, as her grip released from her weapon, she found they were shaking, weakly at first and then with a jerky, uncontained quality as she righted herself. She pressed her palms flat into her thighs, tremors cascading up her forearms, up into her shoulders, and met Mercer's critical gaze.

"You won," she said, and it didn't feel like she was talking about the race.

Mercer sheathed his bloodied blades and planted his fists on his hips, sneering down his nose at her. "What makes you so sure?" He cocked his head toward the barred door through which he'd entered. "Have you seen a body? Do you even know what the esteemed King in Rags looks like?"

Rath shook her head, wiped moisture from her mouth, smearing the taste of sweat and dirt across her lips. "Doesn't matter. I'm conceding."

Mercer's nostrils flared and his jaw twitched, eyes shining with a fury Rath hadn't yet seen from him.

His lips didn't move, but Rath heard Mercer's voice coming from the passage behind the barred door, bellowing slogans about the Reach as it moved rapidly closer.

She dropped her shiv into the dirt and held her empty palms in front of her, shaking her head again. Mercer pressed his lips into a scowl, fists balling harder into his hips. The voice was almost upon them now, air shimmering with the sounds of arcane armor. Rath held her

ground, Mercer held his, and the barred door was flung open by a white-haired man roughly Mercer's size, skin shiny with spells and hands full of ice.

The man who could only have been Madanach charged through the chamber as if Mercer weren't there, shouldering past his back and locking his attention onto Rath. He wasn't what she'd expected, but his bearing was kingly and his aim was excellent. Hands in her lap, Rath felt a hot shout leave her throat as an ice spike pierced her chest, deep, visceral pain blanking her vision until a blazing, vicious spike through her head flashed bright, strobing impressions of the chamber before her: Madanach, still advancing, preparing another projectile. Mercer, blades drawn once more, looking between her and the Witch King with an expression of incredulous frustration. The unrelenting cold behind her breastbone spread like cascading fractals, crystallizing through her body as the blow to her head shot sharp, rigid agony down her spine. Her senses were quiet and slow, the pain pushing her far from her surroundings. Mercer's and Madanach's twin voices reached her through walls of snow, soft and wet with distance, almost intimate as Mercer drew her attacker's attention to himself, as he snarled and heaved his sword, as Madanach dodged and fell back and readied a fresh spell. Rath fell to her side, the floor of the mine so warm now, and she imagined wrapping herself in it, warm and dark and welcoming as she melted into the earth. A booming, sucking crack bounced off the rocks, and she realized her eyes were closed. The pressure of the air changed and the ground shook under the weight of some conjured behemoth. More ice sounds, charging footsteps, either Mercer or his not-double shouting a battle cry. Metal on flesh, angry, pained cries from both voices, and Rath was warmer, her limbs no longer shaking, sounds closer and clearer by the moment. Still here, then.

The feeling that struck her first, a sucker punch hard to her gut, was disappointment. She kept her eyes closed, listening to the fight, wrapping her arms tight across her chest and gritting her teeth against the bubbling despair threatening to break her open.

Chapter End Notes

This is all I've got for this scene, so I'm calling that the chapter. There are more fragments on my machine to be pieced together, and I plan to basically follow this pattern - pull together the snippets and stitch them into something kind of linear, break them up by the chapters they would have lived in if this were completed.

Thanks for your eyes and your time.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Continuing the posting-of-the-random-snippets I have hoarded, here's the next plot beat. Mind the tags. This is a quick one, as this is the part I really couldn't get through. After this we get to the very first things I wrote, so next update will be longer.

NOTES:

The following scene takes place on the mountaintop near Dawnstar, beside the Tower Stone. In the time between the prior fragments and this, the world has continued to deteriorate and Rath has reached a point of despair regarding the state of the world around her. She has come to the Tower Stone because it was in her dream, back when things started to go wrong. She is despondent, and has possibly been sitting here against the stone for days, wondering why she isn't hungry, isn't tired, doesn't even really feel the cold. Probably by her willing it, Mercer shows up.

(I lost a snippet here, where Mercer tells her she should have been an orc, and she laughs bitterly at how her youngest brother used to tell her the same thing. It's off in the ether somewhere, probably living on Discord servers I'm no longer in.)

"This isn't the world," Rath said.

"Unfortunately," Mercer said, "it is. It's the same world it always has been."

"No. This is broken. You did this."

"I did some of this. You did some too. Why am I still here, Rath?"

"What would be the point of getting rid of you? It wouldn't fix anything."

"Fair point. And why are you still here?"

Rath stared at what was once the sea. Stretched out before them, out to the horizon, was void. Waves of void lapping at the shore, icebergs suspended in void, slaughterfish swimming through void. Just flat, empty darkness where once there had been water.

"I don't know," Rath said.

"What will you do next?" Mercer asked.

"I don't know," Rath said.

The sound of metal cut through Rath's pause as Mercer drew a blade. He examined it casually. "You don't look so good, Dragonborn," he said. "What are you hoping for?"

"Mm." Rath nodded at the heavy golden sword in Mercer's right hand.

"I could go for a round," Mercer said.

"I don't want to spar," Rath said.

Understanding flashed across Mercer's features and passed as quickly. Rath saw his thumb twitch around the handle of the blade, a nervous motion. He was hesitating.

"You've got to stand up if you want to fight, Dragonborn."

"Stop. Stop calling— it doesn't mean anything."

Mercer kicked under her calves, knocking her legs out so they were stretched in front of her.

"It means something. Up."

"I can't do it myself," Rath said. She wasn't talking about her ability to get up, but Mercer grabbed her under the armpit and hauled her to standing.

"You can do it yourself; you just don't want to."

"I'm just scared."

"And it's less scary this way?"

"It's more familiar."

"I don't want to do this, Rath."

"I know. But will you?"

"I can. Blades."

Rath shook out her legs and drew her weapons as Mercer pulled his dagger.

—

NOTES: At this point, they fight and have a lot of unsaid understandings. Some specifics of how it ends will come up in a later fragment, but the long and short of it is, Mercer pushes Rath off the cliff, and Rath dies. (In a development that will be no surprise to the canny: she gets better.)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!