

DYING ROSES

ANDREAS ÖSTLIN

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First Edition

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This book is dedicated to my wife,
for enduring endless story
discussions with grace.
To Tim Ravemark Andersson,
whose commitment to this
narrative was truly extraordinary.
And to my esteemed beta readers
and critique partners: Rick, for his
keen eye; David, for his creative
spirit; Ox, for breathing life into
my characters; and above all,
Emily, whose belief and
meticulous feedback shaped this
book beyond measure.



The End of Peace

The cold black eyes of the dead man at the camp's entrance should have been the first warning. Perhaps even the withered crops they'd ridden past should have set off alarms in his head. But it wasn't until Ghalen saw the soldiers, really saw them, that he understood. Even to his untrained eyes, these men had not been fighting mere Elgerekt raiding parties.

He sought his father's gaze for reassurance, the way he always did when fear crept in. But the older man stared straight ahead, jaw set, more distant than Ghalen had ever seen him. *You need to learn about real battles, real hardship*, his father had said when forcing him to come. Yet now that hardship surrounded them, the man who usually offered reassurance had withdrawn completely.

Ghalen shifted in the saddle, his muscles stiff with unease as he followed in silence through the crowded camp. The air was thick with the stench of smoke and

metal; it churned in his stomach. This was nothing like the glorious battle preparations he had read about in the royal archives. Reality was far grimmer. Men with haunted eyes and bloodstained bandages moved past him without a word.

He fingered the small journal hidden inside his tunic, already composing in his mind how he would record this contrast between heroic ballads and brutal truth.

As his father passed, each man saluted or bowed, their chainmail glinting in the dim light. Riding a step behind, Ghalen mimicked his father's curt nods, though no one spared him more than a passing glance.

Tents and crates clogged the camp, leaving narrow pathways. Ghalen worried his father's stallion might not fit through the tighter gaps.

His father finally broke the silence with a muttered curse. "I'll have to lead the damned horse if it gets any more crowded." He turned in the saddle, offering Ghalen a wry smile. "Would have made your grandmother proud, wouldn't it?"

Ghalen returned the smile and nodded. He'd always loved his grandmother, though she had been a stickler for etiquette.

Upon reaching their destination, his father dismounted with practised ease, his boots sinking into the mud as he patted the stallion's neck. Ghalen followed suit, landing awkwardly on the uneven ground. Clutching his satchel of quills and parchment, he stumbled after his father toward the advisors' tent on the camp's eastern edge.

Ghalen's older cousin, Cedric, strode over with a confident grin to meet them. "Good to see you, Uncle," he said before turning to Ghalen. "And you too, cousin. Nineteen's well beyond the age to stop hiding behind books and start seeing the world with your own eyes, eh?"

Ghalen forced a polite smile, though his stomach soured. They all wanted him to become one of them, moulded in the same shape as his brothers, perfect warriors with bloodied swords and calloused hands. But Ghalen had no desire to join their ranks. In his eyes, the world had more than enough men eager to swing blades and shout orders. *Let them have their battles.* He would play the dutiful son, nod where expected, endure the mud and bravado. But his true purpose lay elsewhere, in watching, remembering, and one day writing the history of it all.

Cedric clapped Ghalen on the shoulder with a wink, then moved to take the reins of their horses, leading them toward a makeshift stable.

The muffled sound of raised voices reached Ghalen before he arrived at the tent. Another heated debate. He trailed behind his father, who pressed forward at a brisk pace despite the biting Ilskar winds seeping through every layer of clothing. Ghalen tightened his cloak, wishing they were anywhere but here. Flickering torchlight cast restless shadows on the tent's fabric walls, offering fleeting glimpses of the animated figures inside.

A guard stationed outside the tent straightened at their approach and saluted. Ghalen shrank back as the

guard announced in a booming voice, “High King Begrim Whitmore of Erahnia!” The tent flap was flung open, and Ghalen slipped in behind his father, his presence barely acknowledged amidst the tension in the room.

Inside, the weight of authority pressed down on Ghalen like an iron cloak. His eyes darted across the figures gathered before him. First, the Lord Marshal of Ilskar, broad-shouldered and imposing, seemed to fill half the space with his iron-clad presence. Beside him stood the spiritual leader from Kheld, radiating a serene calm in teal garments that shimmered in the firelight; her piercing blue eyes were so striking that Ghalen had to look away. And further back, looming near the shadows, was the Gwelhir ranger: a towering half-elf with fiery orange hair cascading down his back, his pointed ears twitching as if attuned to every sound.

The room fell silent as Begrim stepped forward. Heads bowed, and a unified murmur of “My king” rippled through the gathered crowd. Ghalen lingered near the entrance, gripping the strap of his satchel like a lifeline. Begrim raised a hand in acknowledgement, his commanding presence unmistakable as he strode to the centre of the tent. There were no pleasantries, no time for formalities.

Begrim seated himself on a modest wooden throne at the far end of the room. He wasted no time. “I thought we sent the army to protect the border from raiding parties. The men outside look like they’ve seen far more than that. And the dead bodies outside the camp... what is happening here? I need the latest reports. Now.”

The Lord Marshal was the first to speak, his deep, commanding voice slicing through the tense silence. “My king, your sons have led the forces here well, but the attacks were far larger than our initial estimates. Our troops faced fierce resistance. It appears the Elgerekt are massing for another assault. They leave nothing but death and ruin in their wake. There have been no attempts at diplomacy. Their purpose, it seems, is solely to destroy.”

Ghalen flinched at the mention of his brothers. Of course, they were leading the charge. He tried to focus, committing every word to memory for the history books. But one phrase stood out to him: *solely to destroy*. The Elgerekt? He’d read of them, an insular people known for their woodwork and disinterest in diplomacy. In every account he could recall they were peaceful.

The Gwelhir ranger stepped forward, his fiery orange hair shimmering in the torchlight like molten metal. “Our rangers have tried to approach their borders,” he said, his voice measured and calm, “but the Elgerekt have fortified them heavily. The paths we once used for contact are closed, and many have died attempting to cross. It’s too dangerous to venture into their lands now.”

Ghalen felt a lump in his throat. *Many have died*. He cast a sidelong glance at his father, searching for some flicker of emotion. But Begrim’s face was a mask of stoic determination. *How does he remain so composed?* Ghalen wondered. He felt like an intruder in this grim council, safe within the confines of the tent, while others spoke of death and destruction.

The cleric stepped into the light next, her teal robes shimmering in the flickering torchlight. The troubled lines etched on her face deepened the dread pooling in Ghalen's chest.

"My liege," she began, her voice taut with unease, "they wield magic unlike anything we've seen. It seeps into the earth, turning fields to ash and rivers foul. Crops wither overnight. We find livestock bloated and blackened, as if the land itself rejects life." She paused, eyes flicking toward the restless tent flaps where the wind tugged and howled. "In some reports, soldiers claim they raise the dead. The corpses outside died on the corrupted fields. Their bodies reacted to the taint. We plan to burn them to prevent further spread. Lumaire must forgive us for not following funeral rites, but our healers are powerless against such darkness."

Her voice dropped lower, almost a whisper. "Whatever has twisted their minds... must also fuel this evil."

Ghalen watched his father's jaw tighten with each report, the lines on his face deepening as if the weight of the world had settled there. Begrim sprang up, pacing the confined space of the tent. His heavy boots squelched against the muddy ground. "My mother orchestrated the largest military alliance in our continent's history. After nearly sixty years of peace, we're now under attack from the Elgerekt? These peaceful nomads, corrupted by death magic?"

Ghalen was stunned by the rare vulnerability in his father's tone. Begrim paused, then sank back into his

throne. He pressed his forehead into his palm, his broad shoulders sagging under an invisible weight.

Ghalen's heart ached at the sight. His father had always been unshakable, a towering figure of strength and certainty. Grandmother had promised that his father would be the first king to rule in peace. Now, that promise felt like a cruel, unattainable dream. A sick sense of despair churned in Ghalen's stomach.

Begrim straightened slowly, his voice hardening once more as he turned to the Lord Marshal. "The Elgerekt have never involved themselves in our conflicts or shown the slightest interest in our politics. Yet I trust we've been monitoring their military capabilities. For precaution, if nothing else."

The Lord Marshal opened his mouth, his brow furrowing as though preparing to protest. But something in the king's tone must have silenced him. Instead, his gaze shifted to the ranger, a tacit handoff of responsibility.

The elf nodded, his expression sharp as he spoke. "Indeed, my liege. The Lord Marshal instructed us to scout their military power, a prudent safety measure, no doubt." His tone measured, but Ghalen noticed the flicker of annoyance in his eyes as he glanced toward the Marshal.

Begrim shook his head, his face unreadable as he absorbed the information. "Then tell me," he said, his voice low but firm, "do the Elgerekt, death magic or not, stand any chance against us in war?"

The Lord Marshal answered this time, his tone confident and steady, his composure regained. "Not a

chance, my king. Our weaponry is superior, and we outnumber them five to one. They have berserkers who fight among themselves in their internal conflicts, but no army trained for true warfare.”

Before Ghalen could process the Marshal’s words, the sharp clang of bells pierced the air, followed by the sound of a commotion outside the tent. The council fell silent, turning as one toward the source of the disturbance.

A guard thrust his head through the tent flap, his voice taut with urgency. “My liege, the alarm. What are your orders?”

Begrim’s jaw tightened. “Lord Marshal, ready the troops. The rest of us will remain here and await a report. We must know what we’re dealing with before we act. Go with Lumaire’s light.”

The Lord Marshal saluted and left with hurried steps, his boots squelching against the muddy ground outside.

Before long, two guards burst into the tent, faces grim, hauling a wounded scout between them, his uniform dark with blood, his body limp.

Ghalen felt an icy dread as he took in the scout’s dire state. The soldiers laid their burden before the council, and the scout’s eyes found the king’s. With a struggle that etched deeper lines of pain across his features, the scout delivered his message in a hoarse, muted whisper. “They are here.”

Those chilling words sparked an immediate flurry of activity from the council. And as Ghalen hurried after his father out of the tent, he could swear the alarm bells

clanged more ominously. As the other leaders dashed to their respective stations, Begrim donned his armour and rallied his honour guard.

Hurrying to keep pace, Ghalen followed his father as he emerged from the camp with his entourage. Already, the army was in motion; archers, cavalry, and footmen formed tight ranks, prepared before the enemy host could breach the forest's edge.

From the forest's edge, the fearsome figures of Elgerekt soldiers emerged, their tall, bearded forms an imposing sight in battered leather armour, a far cry from the Capital's polished chainmail and woven uniforms. Hulking beasts accompanied them, creatures far larger than any wolf or bear Ghalen had ever seen or read about. He knew the Elgerekt were said to train animals for all manner of tasks, but these were nothing like the beasts of burden he'd imagined. Towering, and draped in thick muscle, they looked bred for war, not for hauling lumber or guarding flocks. Some wore spiked collars. They stirred a primal urge in Ghalen to flee. The bearded soldiers advanced in step with their beasts, wielding either dual battle axes or a single axe paired with a shield.

Begrim rode up to Ghalen amid the chaos. "Get your horse and ride for the capital. This is no longer a place for learning, Ghalen. I will not risk your life for a lesson."

Ghalen wanted to be brave like his brothers, to argue with his father, to say he could help. But fear held his tongue.

The king stood before his assembled troops, his sharp eyes scanning the sea of faces in front of him. Each face was etched with a complex mix of fear,

determination, and hope. He closed his eyes, steeling himself. Then, drawing his sword and holding it aloft, he shouted, “soldiers of the Isle! Today we stand on the precipice of history. It is not just our survival that hangs in the balance, but the very peace our ancestors bled for. Let them hear the thunder of our unity! Let them feel the tremors of our resolve! For our homes, our kin, and all that we hold dear!” His voice rang out like a battle cry reverberating across the camp. The men erupted into cheers, their chants growing louder as those nearest the king relayed his words to those farther away.

As the soldiers rallied, Ghalen’s sharp eyes caught movement at the edges of the Elgerekt lines. Strange hooded figures emerged, their faces obscured in shadow. They moved with purpose, surrounded by heavily armoured warriors clad in dark, menacing metal, unlike anything Ghalen had seen in his books. A chill ran down his spine as he realised these figures were orchestrating the enemy forces.

Something else was off, there were so many of them, and they did not stop coming. Ghalen glanced at the Lord Marshal, who appeared just as surprised by the sight.

The enemy advanced, and Ghalen’s heart pounded in his chest. Then, amidst the chaos, he spotted his two brothers shouting orders from their mounts. They sat tall in their saddles, commanding and fearless, and for a moment, a swell of pride surged through him.

His father’s voice cut through the cacophony of the battlefield, sharp and resolute: “Charge!”

For a heartbeat, the world seemed to hold its breath, a collective inhalation of a thousand men. Then, with a

thunderous roar, the army surged forward. The ground trembled under the pounding hooves of a thousand horses, a rumbling drumbeat that reverberated in Ghalen's very bones. He felt the raw, unrelenting power of the charge, each stride driving them closer to the enemy.

Ghalen's eyes stayed fixed on the advancing lines, the gap between them closing with terrifying inevitability. His heart hammered against his ribs, every beat a countdown to the moment of impact.

Time seemed to stretch, each second dragging into eternity. The sounds around him sharpened, the rasp of his own ragged breathing mingled with the thundering hooves and the rising crescendo of war cries.

Then they collided. Steel sang against steel, a deafening symphony of violence that drowned out all else. Horses, maddened and riderless, careened wildly across the battlefield, leaving trails of red in their wake.

One guard assigned to Ghalen seized his shoulder and yanked hard. "We need to leave, my prince," he urged.

But Ghalen couldn't tear his gaze away. His wide eyes remained fixed on the chaos before him, unable to look away from the carnage unfolding in the blood-soaked field.

He saw a lieutenant fall, an axe buried in his back, his lifeless body crumpling to the ground. Then, Ghalen's gaze shifted to the grass beneath his father's horse, watching in horror as it withered and blackened. One of the hooded figures knelt nearby, chanting with a palm pressed to the frozen earth.

Begrim's horse reared violently, throwing him from the saddle.

"Father!" Ghalen cried, his voice raw with panic.

His attention wavered, drawn to another hooded figure plunging a blade into the chest of a fallen officer. Ghalen's breath hitched as the soldier's lifeless body jerked, rising to its feet, eyes glowing with an eerie blue fire.

But Ghalen's focus snapped back to his father. Someone was approaching him, a towering figure, a nightmare in black iron. Begrim, moving sluggishly, hauled himself to his feet. Sword in hand, he prepared to defend himself.

Steel met steel in a ferocious clash. Each strike rang out like a desperate prayer; each parry, a defiance against the inevitable. Ghalen could see his father's strength waning with every blow, his movements slower, his defences faltering.

There was a sudden slash, and blood flowed. Ghalen's father faltered, his strength leaving him as he fell to the ground. The man, or creature in black iron loomed over him for a moment, then turned away, leaving him to his fate.

Tears blurred Ghalen's vision as he struggled to comprehend what he had just seen. Shapes swam into focus, his brothers screaming in rage and despair as they stormed toward the battlefield. Behind them, the Lord Marshal's voice rang out, desperate and strained. "We must retreat! The battle is lost!"

But his brothers didn't listen. They charged headfirst into the chaos, their war cries swallowed by the roar of battle.

Ghalen had no time to react before his guards seized him, hauling him away in the opposite direction. He fought against their grip, his heart splintering as he was dragged farther from the field and the family he couldn't save.



Chapter 1

A Requiem for the Forgotten

Three years. That's how long it had been since he last stood on this blood-soaked field. Same enemy. Same broken ground. The place where his father had fallen.

Three years of retreat and sacrifice. Of desperate councils and impossible choices. But now his mad gamble had worked. The Elgerekt had brought only a fraction of their strength. The trap had held.

He scanned the devastation. Corpses strewn across the churned mud, armour half-buried, banners torn and lifeless. Not even nature had dared reclaim the ground.

He tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade. "Press the attack!"

The enemy was in shambles. A few of the remaining war beasts fell to arrows or spears. The towering axe-wielders fought to the last, but only one of those dreadful death generals remained. Clad in night-black armour, its glowing blue eyes burned like small embers. Not far behind it stood its hooded puppet master. As they

pressed forward, Ghalen saw an opening in the enemy lines, a straight path to the hooded figure. He glanced to his side. “Haldor!” Of course, Haldor had already seen it. Nothing escaped the man.

Haldor nodded at Ghalen’s command and sprang through the opening, his blade descending like lightning upon the enemy leader. Ghalen caught the shock in the man’s hidden face as Haldor’s strike split his chest open, and both the master and its puppet fell dead.

Ghalen surveyed the battlefield. They needed to kill or capture the remaining berserkers, but the day was won. He absorbed the shattered remnants of war. Dust and smoke cloaked the landscape in a ghostly haze, through which he glimpsed the lingering scars of loss. Trees that had once stood majestic were now mutilated, their splintered forms tragic reminders of what had been. Fragile tufts of grass hinted at the vibrant life this wasteland had once nurtured. The field before him lay strewn with broken weapons and discarded armour, while the thick, metallic smell of blood mingled with the earthy scent of rain-soaked mud.

Now we just have to finish off—His thought broke as his eyes caught movement. The Death General, which had fallen lifeless when its puppeteer had died, was now rising from the rubble where it had lain.

A soldier pointed in alarm. “How?”

Ghalen’s gaze darted to the fallen dark master. It was still down. His eyes shifted back to the Death General, something was off. Its eyes were no longer glowing blue.

The three enemy berserkers who had fought alongside the Death General before it fell were also staring at it. The shock on their faces mimicked what Ghalen felt. With a war cry, they turned and attacked the black-clad figure.

“They’re fighting among themselves!” Haldor called.

With eerie grace, the Death General danced between them. It seized a blade and dispatched the attackers with brutal efficiency.

Ghalen’s men raised their bows, arrows aimed at the dark figure, but he raised his hand to stop them. “No, we must capture it. Something is not right here. Priests, can you hold it?”

The creature had changed, he was sure of it. Its eyes... and the way it moved... it wasn’t like before. Less mindless, more deliberate. It looked, for lack of a better word, alive. His pulse quickened. This wasn’t just another spawn to be cut down. There was meaning here, something that didn’t fit the pattern. And patterns mattered. He had to understand it. Document it.

Ghalen stood just outside the containment circle, gripping the hilt of his blade as the priests took their positions. He recognised the ritual, *holding stones*. Carved from obsidian and etched with anchoring runes, they were designed to restrict movement. A brutal but effective method of capture.

The priests moved with practiced precision, robes brushing the earth as they spread out to encircle the Death General. Teal-clad soldiers held a tight formation behind them, shields raised in case the binding failed.

The enemy, though still imposing, hesitated. Ghalen caught it scanning the field, assessing the uniforms, the discipline. Its movements, once fluid and deadly, had shifted. No longer pure instinct, but calculation.

As the chanting began, the priests tossed the stones into position. Pale light shimmered from the runes, tracing an invisible cage around the armoured figure. The Death General flinched as the field solidified. Ghalen saw the strain instantly, subtle tremors in its limbs, a tightening of its jaw.

It tried to fight it. Most of them did. But the stones were already working. Its movements slowed, limbs growing heavy under the weight of magical pressure.

The creature ground out the words, voice low and guttural. "Release me..." The defiance in its tone wavered. With one final breath, it whispered, "You demons..." before collapsing to its knees, armoured frame sagging as its head dropped forward. Ghalen released a slow breath, his instincts still on edge. "Bind it," he called out firmly, "keep it restrained. We need to question it." His gaze lingered on the fallen figure, unease curling in his gut. This wasn't over, not yet.

"It's a woman!" a soldier called out as he bound her arms.

Ghalen didn't linger on the revelation. What still had him reeling was the fact that it, no *she*, had spoken.

The soldiers brought her to the old armoury tent, now mostly empty. They stripped away her armour, dressed her in a simple shift, and tied her to a stake. They were rough, slapping her awake and splashing water on

her face. Ghalen couldn't blame them, the Death General had slain many of his men, many of their friends.

He took in her features: pale skin, intricate blue markings beneath her eyes. Her brown hair hung in tangled strands streaked with dirt, a flower-shaped jewel woven into the mess. Her green eyes looked kind and frightened, but undeniably alive.

Nothing like the empty, lifeless gaze of the enemy. And those ears, large, curved, inhuman. What manner of creature was she? Despite their efforts, they got nothing but dizzy, slurred words from her. What little Ghalen could gather suggested she knew nothing, or perhaps she was too disoriented to speak.

"I don't think we'll get much from her like this, sir," one of his officers said. "We should let her rest."

Ghalen nodded. "Let me know as soon as she wakes."

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A dull throb in her temples dragged her from sleep. She was bound and battered in what appeared to be a tent used as a temporary armoury. Despite her aching body, she tried to get her bearings, looking for anything that might aid her. In the corner of the tent, she noticed a set of black plate armour, distinct from the leather worn by her attackers and the chainmail of her captors. *Did I wear that?* She wondered, squinting.

Through the commotion outside, she strained her ears, catching snippets of a conversation between the guards stationed outside. By the tone of their voices, they were confused.

“By Lumaire’s light, we killed the Dark Master. Why is she not dead?” one guard said, a hint of fear in his voice. “A bad omen, I’m sure,”

A second guard weighed in. “The Westfolk feared her as much as we did, and she was killing her own before we cornered her. But I don’t see why he ordered us to capture her.”

Their conversation ceased, replaced by a palpable tension. Someone was approaching. She tensed, her body was prepared to react, even if her mind did not know what to do.

The entrance to the tent was flung open, revealing a silhouette against the backdrop of the setting sun. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she studied the man who had entered. His youth seemed marred by battle, his tanned, olive skin scarred and bruised, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Black hair, like charcoal and neatly tied back, framed a pair of intense brown eyes. His armour, similar to that of his guards but adorned with gold embellishments, bore the crest of a mountain chain, a sign of high rank, she guessed. The large, calloused hands, especially the right one marked by a prominent scar across its back, testified to a man who did not shy away from battle.

A youth at the front of an army?

His gaze filled with awe or fear, as if confronted with a mythical beast brought to life. She felt a prickle of unease, a flicker of vulnerability. *Am I a beast?*

“I am Ghalen Whitmore, commander of these forces.” His voice carried an authority that belied his youthful appearance.

He paused for a bit, studying her. "You look very much alive," he said at last.

She blinked, lifting her head. Curiosity edged his voice. Or was it suspicion?

"That's something, at least," he added, as if speaking to himself more than to her. "Most of your kind don't survive long once their master falls."

She stayed quiet.

"Do you remember anything?"

Her throat was dry. The words came slowly. "No."

A pause.

"So you say," he replied, studying her as though trying to see through the answer.

Ghalen stepped closer, not threatening, but deliberate.

She didn't flinch, though every instinct told her to.

"You fought with the Western Elgerekt," he said. "Do you even know who they are?"

She opened her mouth, then hesitated. The name meant nothing. Or perhaps it did, somewhere deep beneath the fog in her mind, but no recognition surfaced.

He kept talking, not waiting for her answer. Of war. Of reanimated soldiers. Of generals like her, death-touched and hollow, driven by dark masters who controlled the dead like puppets.

Her pulse quickened. She felt more lost than ever.

"When our warriors fall, the enemy twists their bodies and sends them back against us," Ghaleen said. "We've learned to target the ones pulling the strings. Slay the dark master, and their puppets crumble." He

paused, eyes narrowing. "But not you. You're still standing. Still thinking. You even fought against them."

She swallowed. "How do you fight an army that doesn't stay dead?"

Ghalen gave a grim smile. "We don't, not easily. Luckily, only the dark masters can raise the dead, and not many at once. As far as we can tell, each one commands a handful of Death Generals. And we've never seen more than a few dark masters on the same battlefield."

He looked away, jaw tight. "But that's been more than enough. They've kept us losing for years."

A surge of panic rose as a memory surfaced: a hooded figure stabbing her. *The wound in my chest. Did they patch it?* She could not see any bleeding, and the only pain she felt was from the guards earlier. Yet her hands were bound behind her back so she could not touch her chest. They had to have patched it. That wound would have killed her, and she was alive. *I am alive... right?*

Ghalen continued to pace the room, muttering to himself, "Perhaps a woodland elf?" he speculated, his eyes tracing her face. His expression shifted to one of doubt, and he shook his head as if dismissing the possibility.

She turned to the side, catching her reflection in the polished shield by the wall. Her ears were long and pointed, almost twisting like a ram's horns. She looked nothing like these people around her.

"Could you be... a high elf?" he asked, lowering his voice to a hushed whisper. It was as though speaking too

loud might dispel an illusion. "Could you be from beyond the Great Elven Wall?"

Her heart fluttered at his words, an echo of familiarity ringing in her ears. The mention of the wall stirred something within her. Yet, she had no answers. The surrounding men viewed her as a mythical creature. And she feared such creatures met tragic ends.

"There's a prophecy in our temple that an angel of Lumaire would deliver us in a time of need. I've never put much faith in prophecy, but you look like no creature I've ever seen. If we were to show you mercy... perhaps your kind could aid our cause. Lumaire knows we need it."

Fight in this war? Her brow creased. "Did you not win out there?" Her eyes drifted toward the tent flaps.

"We won the battle," Ghalen said. "But we're losing the war."

He wants me to fight? For them? My people? The words echoed hollowly. *Who would I even call upon? I don't know who I am.*

Ghalen's eyes locked onto hers, searching. As if the answers might be buried behind her silence.

"Do you truly not remember anything of your past?" he asked, a hint of desperation lurking behind that steady gaze.

She hesitated, feeling exposed. "I told your people I don't know who I am, or where I come from. Besides, why should I trust you?"

He grunted, "Do you have any other option?"

Death.

She sighed and added, "When you mentioned the Elven Wall... It felt familiar, I can't explain it."

His gaze softened for a moment. "Very well," he said. "Our path home to the capital will take us past the Great Gate leading to the elven lands. Humans normally steer clear of it; it is... unpleasant for the mind. Perhaps what unsettles us could help spark something in your memory. Or time might bring something back to you. However," he added, crossing his arms, "we will not trust you. Restraints will be necessary."

Before she could respond, a guard stepped up, raising his voice. "Ghalen, are you truly inviting this... demon to join us? The journey home is already dangerous without an enemy in our midst!"

Ghalen raised his hand. "Khain, my decisions are not made lightly. Do not doubt my judgement, Banner General."

The man's voice wavered. "No, sire, but she fought against us. I fear for—"

"Enough," Ghalen interjected. "Fear has two sides: the known and the unknown. Maybe, by knowing her better, we might find an ally where once we saw an enemy. Besides, do you think one disarmed, bound woman will defeat what remains of our company?"

Khain bowed his head. "I overstepped," he said, then excused himself from the tent in a hurry.

Outside she heard muffled voices, one whispering, "Has the boy lost his mind?"

Another voice shushed the first. "Be careful with your words. Do not question his orders so boldly. He could have your tongue for that."

She thought her hearing might be sharp, as Ghalen showed no sign that he had heard the exchange.

He turned back to her, extending his hand. "So, will you come along nicely?"

She looked into his eyes. "What if I did not?"

"I don't want more bloodshed."

"But you can't let me go?"

"No, I cannot." He frowned.

Better a prisoner than dead.

"I'll play along if that will keep my head on my shoulders." She could not help wondering if she could help end this war, or if she would make it worse.

As she agreed, Ghalen gave a sigh of relief. "The journey back to the East will be a test of endurance and patience. We are still within contested territory, with several days of arduous riding ahead. The enemy forces are scattered across these lands, and passage will not be easily granted."

The two guards stationed outside entered as Ghalen left. They hauled her to her feet and led her outside. Dirty, tired faces stared back at her. What remained of the victorious band seemed to be a force of less than a hundred strong. She saw frowns and narrowed eyes as she was led past them, but she steeled herself, ready to face the challenges that lay ahead.

The guards stowed her in an open carriage, her wrists and ankles bound, and her body draped in a green cloak to shield her from the harsh winds. They outfitted her in the teal robes of their healers, woven with brass detailing, very different from the intimidating plate armour she had worn in battle. The looming darkness

mimicked her current state of mind, shrouded and uncertain. Around her, the men and women of the company prepared for travel, their movements efficient and sure, opposite to the turmoil within her.

She remained preoccupied with the haunting memory of the hooded figure and the searing pain that had consumed her. She closed her eyes, searching her body for any remnants of the wound. But there was nothing. No scar, no lingering ache. It was as if the memory existed in a realm separate from her physical being. A shiver ran down her spine, a disturbing realisation that she had defied death itself, emerging from the abyss untouched. She thought about coming face to face with the Great Gate, which brought an unexpected sense of calm. She could see the wall that would lead to it stretching out in the distance, as far as her eyes could reach. Her gaze then settled on the distant battlefield where she had been captured. Despite the horror of the scene, her eyes lingered on the field, her shoulders slumping slightly. She swallowed hard. It was the only thing she knew in this strange world.

Her captors' fallen comrades were retrieved and buried with ceremony, while the leather-clad warriors became a feast for crows, an exception was made for the hooded figures which were burned. There was much movement, packing and saddling of horses, loading of carriages. Weapons were cleaned and packed, soldiers patched each other's wounds, and those more gravely wounded were helped by cloaked figures whose faces she could only see in passing.

For some reason, carts set off with just a couple of riders in different directions without any cargo, but with many riderless horses in tow.

A soldier with a large build and pale skin mounted the front of her cart, grabbing the reins, he turned to face her. She expected a vicious glance and a snarky comment, but his smile was warm. "The name's Pieor Orlek, Ghalen's personal guard." He adjusted the reins. "Riding with him, I reckon we'll be crossing paths quite a bit, Mistress." He turned as Ghalen approached and gave him a respectful nod.

Ghalen mounted the carriage. "Everything's ready. Our enemy should struggle to track us. Let's go."

The elf saw him holding a mud-speckled blade in a scabbard. Even in this dirty state, she could see the golden details on the blade.

"You found the blade then?" Pieor asked, eyes widening.

"Yes, it seems they did not loot our dead. The blade will be brought home." Ghalen said, tucking the blade behind him.

They left the mangled battlefield behind. The war-tainted air gave way to the freshness of untouched nature, a balm to her soul. Gradually, she surrendered to the lulling motion of the cart, dozing off to the rhythmic sound of the horses' hooves against the earth. Her mind wavered in visions of war, destruction, and always the hooded figure looming over her, but there was something new, she thought she could make out a figure in a rose garden, watching over a flower at its centre, it was withering.

When she came to, the sun was no longer in the sky. Hushed voices spoke at the head, barely audible over the rumble of the carriage. Pieor, driving the cart, spoke fast in a speculative conversation with Ghalen.

“Could she be a high elf like the stories?” Pieor’s voice quivered with doubt. “I’m not very good with books or history, but did they not all leave thousands of years ago? Maybe she is just an odd-looking Gwelhir elf?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?” Ghalen countered. Throwing a glance backwards.

Turning around with an embarrassed blush on his cheeks, Pieor apologised.

“Can you tell me about these Gwelhir elves? Do they look like me?” *From what I saw in that shield, I look nothing like these people.*

Pieor scratched his chin. “Well,” he said, “the elves of Gwelhir live much longer than us humans, that’s for sure. And from what I’ve seen, their hair is always orange, like fire itself. Their ears are much longer too, though not quite as long as yours, I reckon. My old nan always said, ‘The longer the ears, the longer they live.’”

“Nonsense,” Ghalen interrupted. “Elves’ ears have nothing to do with their lifespan. It’s said the woodland elves are descendants of the high elves, who intermingled with ancient humans. Over time, they strayed from their customs and gradually lost all resemblance to their elven kin. Where the high elves were said to live forever, their woodland relatives would live for a few hundred years.”

Pieor resumed, unaffected by his commander's corrections. "That may be, but you're different," he remarked, pointing at her. "Your hair is brown. And the markings on your face, elves are born with them. But woodland elves sport green markings, yours are as blue as the summer sky!"

"And would my looks make me more similar to these high elves you speak of?" she asked.

Pieor looked at her with his mouth open.

He appeared relieved when Ghalen answered.

"We could not say, the gates to the supposed high elves have been closed for thousands of years, and the elves of those lands are nothing but legends to us. Our priests worship remnants of what they left behind."

She sat in silence for a long while, listening to them talk. The conversation had changed to what routes would best avoid the wind. Pondering what was said earlier, she had no memory of anything but her seeming death, but she did not trust these men enough to share that memory.

As the carriage trundled forward, the wind was a constant companion. She saw the land transform from war-torn muddy fields to new terrain. It was not welcoming; but a harsh landscape with trees sparse and leafless, even though tree buds spoke of it being springtime. Abandoned farms and desolate fields told stories of more prosperous times gone by.

Soldiers of varying ranks and attire passed them, each offering a respectful nod to Ghalen. Pieor was the only one not giving her suspicious stares; he even engaged her in conversation. He talked of his daughter

and pointed to landmarks. Their exchanges provided a welcome distraction, keeping her troubled thoughts at bay. Her captors did not seem evil, this Pieor was quite kind to her.

When the sun reached high in the sky, casting a warm light that hinted at the summer to come, four distinct riders appeared. The teal of their hoods resembled the one she wore, adorned with intricate bronze jewellery. The riders felt familiar. Were they the same figures who had ensnared her with their magic on the battlefield? Their hoods were pulled back now, revealing beautiful, ice-blue eyes set against bronze faces framed by raven-black hair dripping with jewels. Their regal bearing was evident, even in their saddles.

They offered the customary nod to Ghalen, but they seemed to look right through Pieor. The elf sensed an undercurrent of tension. Other soldiers passed the four riders with suspicious glances, moving out of their way as if to avoid a bad smell.

As they got out of earshot, she turned to Pieor. "Who are they? And why do they seem so... unwelcome among the soldiers?"

Pieor sighed, scratching his moustache. "Them? They're the Kheld, from the far south. Priests and priestesses from the temple of Lumaire in the capital. They're usually engrossed in their books and they know some healing arts. In most places across the Isle, they're revered," he muttered.

Not able to catch everything else he said, she thought she heard something like, 'they should be grateful one of the tower seats rides with us.' He turned

to face her again. “But this is Ilskar. People say books don’t fend off wolves or bring in the harvest. I’ve learned a few things since moving to the capital, in no small part thanks to Ghalen, but people here are sceptical of what they don’t understand. Funny how quickly that changes when they’re injured,” he added, a note of amusement flavouring his voice.

She furrowed her brow, glancing at the vibrant display of flags surrounding them. Each one had a distinct emblem and a colour scheme that seemed to hold meaning. “What’s with all the flags, Pieor?”

He followed her gaze. “District banners. Erahnia’s a big place, you know. Twelve districts, each with its lord and a spiffy flag to show for it.”

She nodded. “And under which banner do you serve?”

He pointed to a teal banner with three mountains in its centre: “The capital of Highfarra. All other banners defer to it. It answers to the Lord Marshal himself.”

“Lord Marshal? Have I seen him?”

“No, he’s not here. Most men under our banner are busy on other fronts....” he trailed off.

She surveyed the scene, counting five distinct colours among the flags.

This Pieor appeared to be a talkative man, something she did not mind as he seemed indulged to teach her. He talked until the sun was setting and the cold kicked in. A scout returned with suggestions for a campsite, reporting an enclave some fifteen minutes’ ride away. She tried her best to huddle deeper into her

cloak, fighting the encroaching cold. As soon as the sun had left the sky, she felt exhausted.

A fire would be nice.