

## Chapter 8

The sun breaks through the skin of Ealyn's eyelids, her eyes flutter open in response. She is in a small clearing. The autumnal trees surround them, she takes a small turn and sees that waterfall from before. Rycard is curled against her, Gerard is on the other end of the clearing next to the water laying down eyes closed. She shoots and starts wheezing. She starts grabbing the nearby vicinity for something. Salum looks at Ealyn and his eyes go wide.

"Bag" Ealyn croaks.

Salum darts to the other side of the clearing and grabs her saddle bag and tosses it to her. The bag lands at her feet, she quickly reaches in and grabs the black vial. She pours it down her throat and her airway clears. Her wheezing stops, then she turns to look at Salum. He is frowning looking Ealyn up and down.

"What happened?" He signs.

"I'm sick." Ealyn says.

"What sickness?" He signs.

"A malady of birth, my lungs have a blight on them if I don't drink my medicine they fill with fluid." Ealyn says.

"I'm sorry." He signs.

Ealyn nods then looks at the center of the camp. There is a small fire pit with a couple of rabbits on spits. Ealyn points at the fire.

"Breakfast?" Ealyn asks.

Salum nods, and Ealyn watches the rabbits cook. She turns her gaze over to Gerard. She stands up steadily, Rycard opens his eyes and blinks. He looks at the rabbits, and his tongue lolls out.

"Stay." Ealyn says.

Rycard nods and sits back down. Ealyn approaches Gerard with her saddle bag over her shoulder. She kneels next to him. Gerard is sleeping fitfully, occasionally shivering and shuddering. She presses her fingers against his throat, she nods. Then she puts her ear against his chest and sits back up. Salum walks from the main part of the clearing and sits next to her.

“I did not know what to do for him. He is still alive, but I do not know when he will wake.” Salum signs.

“He has a couple broken ribs, but none have punctured the lungs. His heartbeat is steady and strong. It seems that most of this is a result of sleep deprivation.” Ealyn says.

“Sleep deprivation?” Salum signs.

“Alyks is smart, he would not permanently harm anyone he is questioning. He has inflicted the most mental and physical damage possible without doing anything long lasting. Keeping him awake for days on end is apart of that. I can give him something for the pain, but he just needs rest.” Ealyn says.

She reaches into her saddle bag and procures the alchemy box. She lays it on the ground and pops it open. She pulls a dried flower from the box, she puts it in the mortar and grinds it to a powder. She grabs an empty vial from the box and walks to the pond. She scoops a small amount of water, then walks back to the mortar and pours it in. She mixes it until it turns into a loose paste. She takes the paste and puts it in his mouth, then she massages his throat until her swallows. The fitful shivers disappear and his breathing steadies.

Ealyn stands back up and alongside Salum walks back to the campfire. Fat drips off the charred skin of the rabbits onto the campfire, emanating a hiss as the fate vaporizes on the blackened wood. Ealyn sits staring at the rabbits eyes almost as desperate as Rycard. She turns to Salum, he shakes his head. She starts stamping her feet, then he goes to the campfire and poke on of the charred rabbits with a stick. He nods and Ealyn runs to the fire. She grabs all three rabbits then sits back down. She rips two of the rabbits off their spit and tosses them in front of Rycard. Rycard swallows one of the rabbits whole, then slowly peels away the flesh of the other one. Taking time to enjoy every single morsel. Ealyn rips into the rabbit's flesh and consumes it ravenously, juices spill down her chin onto her brown trousers. Ealyn stops eating for a breath and catches Salum eyeing her askance, as he carefully feels ribbons of flesh off his rabbit. Ealyn scoffs and continues wolfing down her rabbit until only bones are left, then licks the bones white.

Ealyn tosses the clean bones to Rycard and he catches them with his mouth and lays them next to his half consumed second rabbit still carefully peeling flesh from bone. Ealyn watches Rycard slowly finish his rabbit, occasionally letting her vision wander across the clearing. The wind blows; rustling the trees. Some hold onto their leaves greedily, but others simply let them go. The wind picks up the untethered leaves and carries them beyond their branches into the sky beyond. Ealyn follows one of these errant leaves as it dances with the wind until it catches on a protruding branch. The wind picks up and the leaf struggles against the errant branches grip, then the leaf tears. Now split the leaf unable to catch the wind sinks to the ground. Ealyn turns away from

the leaf to face Rycard who has not gotten a single dripping on himself. His clothes are still completely soiled, but no more soiled now than they were when he escaped.

“Thank you.” Ealyn says.

“You owe me no thanks.” Salum signs.

Ealyn looks at the ground. Gerard coughs then rolls to his side and attempts to get up. Ealyn runs to him and catches him before he falls to the forest floor.

“You,” Gerard says.

“I’m sorry,” Ealyn says.

“You left me.” Gerard spits out.

“If I had come back to free you the instant you were captured or was captured myself along with you, we would all be dead. However, if I escaped, then he had a reason to keep you alive.” Ealyn says.

He scowls as he looks at Ealyn, then his face softens. Ealyn looks downcast, then let's go of Gerard. He picks himself up now in a seated position, Ealyn and Salum sit next to him.

“I smell food.” Gerard states.

“Sorry no food.” Ealyn says.

Gerard looks down at Ealyn’s stained pants.

“You ate it all.” Gerard accuses.

“Well actually we ate it all.” Ealyn says as she makes a circular gesticulation with her right hand.

Gerard snorts.

“Ah sorry. Do you have anything?” Gerard asks.

Ealyn runs to the campfire and retrieves her saddle bag. She slings it over her shoulder and runs back to Gerard. She rifles through it retrieving a small slip of dried jerky.

“Sorry its all I have.” Ealyn says.

“It’ll do, but I expect lunch with added interest for food not paid.” Gerard says.

“Of course.” Ealyn says.

They both chuckle.

Gerard looks over to Salum.

“What’s it doing here.” Gerard hisses.

Ealyn looks over to Salum then back to Gerard and scowls.

“He is the reason you are here right now.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scowls, then turns to Salum.

“Why did you save me?” Gerard asks.

Ealyn’s eyes go wide.

“You knew he could speak!” Ealyn yells.

Gerard nods. Salum’s head turns to face the ground, as Gerard stares daggers at him.

“You should have left me.” Gerard whispers.

Salum stares at the ground.

“You should have left me!” Gerard yells.

Ealyn stumbles back. The corners of Gerard’s eyes start to wet.

“I don’t care that you saved me I still hate you!” Gerard yells.

Gerard tries to stumble up but collapses back to the ground. Salum does not move and continues to stare at the ground.

“Do you hear me beast I said I hate you!” Gerard screams.

Salum does not respond.

“You are an ugly shit stain that Broun forgot about long ago. Your presence disgusts me, and your precious god is a piece of shit. Fuck him and fuck you!” Gerard yells.

Ealyn gasps and Salum stands, then looks at Gerard. His face is impassive as he stares at Gerard, he reaches clenches his hands into a fist and Gerard smiles, then he takes off into the forest. Ealyn looks at Gerard shakes her head.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ealyn asks.

“Ask him.” Gerard spits out.

Ealyn stands gives Gerard a passing glance then grabs her saddle bag and heads into the forest behind Gerard.

“Rycard.” Ealyn says.

Rycard shoots up and stalks to Ealyn's side, they walk into the woods together. Gerard lays his legs splayed behind him as he watches Ealyn walks into the forest behind Salum. He sniffles, then he hits his hand against the ground. A tear comes out and he smacks himself in the face. Then he crumples to the ground and tears spill freely, watering the dark black earth beneath him.

The clouds start to coalesce into dark grey masses of cotton fluff. The rain starts as a slight trickle, then the drops grow fat hitting the trees earth with loud plops, shooting water in all directions around thier impact. Ealyn frowns as she tries to peer through the trees. The rain has brought with it a thick haze, obscuring Ealyn from seeing far enough in front of her to see Salum. She looks to the ground and follows the heavy footprints left in the mud. She and Rycard follow this track to a hollow under a fallen tree. Salum sits staring at the ground with his fists clenched. Ealyn slowly approaches, Salum eyes shoot up and meet hers. His fists unclench.

"Can I hide under your rain cover?" Ealyn asks.

Salum nods, and Ealyn darts under the tree, Rycard following behind. Ealyn settles next to Salum.

"Are you okay." Ealyn asks.

Salum nods.

"What happened between you? If that's okay to ask." Ealyn says.

"He was not always first in line to the black wing seat. His brother was set to take it. He and a woman named Maurika were promised to one another since before they could even define what love was. Many arranged marriages do not end well. Love is something that is very difficult to find and expecting it to just miraculously happen when people spend their entire lives looking for it is foley, but they fell in love all the same. Maurika made it very easy, no matter who she ended up with, if they were not a vile sort, she would make them fall in love with her, and she would fall in love with them. She was so

overflowing with kindness, joy, and passion for life. It would be a very cold heart that could deny her love of life. Gerard's brother was not a cold man in the slightest, they made a good match. The couple was so full of life. So when Gerard's brother died she was left empty. She was so easy to love that when Gerard was asked to fill in for his brother he jumped at the chance. She however could not let him go. He was a white soul and would have been in Broun's embrace, but she could not let Broun do his work. So she sought out a sorcerer. I found her in his hut, filled with vile mechanisms of wizards. Both begged for their lives in the end, but I brought them to the light. They will not suffer in the dark for what they did." Salum signs.

Ealyn gasps.

"You killed them?" Ealyn asks.

Salum nods. Ealyn opens her mouth then closes it. She stares at his face, trying to match scar with implement.

"That's awful, its in the hands of Broun now." Ealyn says.

Salum nods. Ealyn gazes into the woods trying to see the clearing through the haze.

"Gerard must be freezing, I need to go back for him." Ealyn says.

Ealyn stands up and turns around. She gazes into Rycard's glowing eyes. There is a shadow over them, something in the way they are glazed over.

"Do you regret it?" Ealyn asks.

Salum looks up at her.

"My hands are only implements of Broun." Salum signs.

Ealyn nods, then walks back into the forest. Gerard is huddling under his leather bedroll shivering. Ealyn approaches and his shivering is accompanied with pained sobs. Ealyn walks over to Gerard and puts her hand on his shoulder. He freezes.

“Did he tell you?” Gerard asks.

“Yes.” Ealyn says.

“Well?” Gerard asks.

“I don’t know, I don’t want to talk about it.” Ealyn says.

Gerard opens his mouth, then looks into Ealyn’s eyes. He closes his mouth. Ealyn looks at the waterfall.

“There is a cave behind the falls. I can shoulder a little of your weight, but your going to have to put most of it on Rycard.” Ealyn says.

“Who’s Rycard?” Gerard asks.

Ealyn nods her head at Rycard. Gerard turns to Rycard.

“The beast won’t bite me?” Gerard asks.

“If you keep calling him beast he might.” Ealyn says.

Gerard frowns, then moves his hand to the beasts back. They all hovel over to the cave behind the waterfall. As soon as they are inside, Gerard lets go of Rycard and slumps against the cave wall.

“I’ll go get firewood.” Ealyn says.

Gerard nods.

Ealyn ducks out of the cave and heads back into the forest alongside Rycard. Ealyn grabs a few sticks and other waterlogged pieces of wood, then makes it back to the cave. Ealyn drops the pile of soaked wood onto the cave floor.

“Thier wet.” Gerard says.

Ealyn frowns, the points outside. Gerard scoffs.

“You have a knife?” Gerard asks.

Ealyn nods, then reaches into her saddle bag and pulls out a sharp slim black knife. She stares at it for a second, then looks at Rycard. She breathes then holds the knife out to Gerard. Gerard reaches and tries to grab for it. Ealyn hesitates and pulls is back. Gerard scowls.

“Be careful with it.” Ealyn says.

“Fine, yes I’ll be careful with it, now give it here.” Gerard says.

Ealyn hands him the knife, and he starts wittling away the outside bark of the wet sticks and outside layers of the wet wood.

“What are you doing?” Ealyn asks.

“It just started raining so most of the wood is probably only wet on the outside. If you whittle away the wet parts you are left with dry wood.” Gerard says.

Gerard focuses on whittling the wood Ealyn watches for a time then reaches into her bag and retrieves her alchemy box. Gerard finishes whittling the wood while Ealyn pulls out a small vial of white powder.

“You didn’t grab any kindling.” Gerard says.

“We won’t need any.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scoffs. Ealyn stacks the wood in four walls with the twigs in the center forming a small nest. Ealyn pours some of the white powder into the center of the nest, then reaches into her saddle bag and grabs a flint and steel. She starts sticking it, then one of the sparks lands on top of the white powder. The powder ignites in a flash, the burns bright and shoots up a plume of smoke, then settles and the twigs are alight. Ealyn turns to face Gerard his mouth is wide open.

“How did you do that?” Gerard asks.

“There is a white substance that can be found in caves, and when mixed with refined sugar it lights up very easily. I use it to start fires all the time.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn holds her chin up and smirks. Gerard looks at her then looks at the fire.

“That’s quite the trick.” Gerard says.

“I know.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn smiles.

“Did you cause the fires at Alyk’s camp?” Gerard asks.

“Yes, I did.” Ealyn says.

“I would be careful Ealyn.” Gerard says.

Ealyn’s brow furrows.

“It saved your life didn’t it.” Ealyn says.

“Some people see something like that and call it magic.” Gerard says.

Ealyn goes pale.

“Salum wouldn’t do anything.” Ealyn says.

“He does not view you as a threat yet, but pull one to many daring shows of power, and he might just see you in a different light.” Gerard says.



“That’s now how it works. There is a method of due process, the white path only determines magic as evil. What I do is not magic, it’s just mixing things together.” Ealyn says.

“The white order does not care where the power comes from, all they see is a threat to the status quo.” Gerard says.

“That’s not true.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scowls as he looks past Ealyn.

“We will see.” Gerard says.

Ealyn turns around, and Salum is standing at the mouth of the cave.

“Come, sit.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn sits and points to a spot at the other end of the fire. Salum shuffles to the other end of the fire giving Gerard a wide berth. Ealyn looks at both Gerard and Salum.

“Well, what are we going to do now. Alyks has a price on our heads. The closest town not ruled by Lightfeathers are ruled by Whitefalls, and from how I saw your sister and Alyks we will find no quarter with the Whitefalls. So what do we do?” Gerard asks.

The flames create harsh undulating shadows across Ealyn’s face blanketing her eyes in darkness. She balls her fists until her knuckles go white.

“We kill Alyks” Ealyn says.

Gerard and Salum’s heads shoot to face her.

“How do we do that?” Gerard asks.

“I don’t know, but he needs to die.” Ealyn says.

“Killing is no easy feat, I don’t know if you understand how much it takes.” Gerard says.

“I’ve tried before.” Ealyn says.

Gerard’s jaw hits the floor.

“You tried to kill him!” Gerard yells.

“I paid an assassin to stab him with a poison blade during our engagement tourney.” Ealyn says.

Gerard continues to stare at Ealyn.

“Do you still have the poison?” Gerard asks.

Salum turns to face Gerard.

“Okay, poison may not be the best idea, but its not like we can take on the army that stands between us and him.” Gerard says.

“So we need an army?” Ealyn asks.

“Yeah, and a powerful backer so we don’t get killed in the aftermath.” Gerard says.

“Lord Talltree” Salum signs.

Ealyn’s eyes go wide, and she smiles.

“What did he say?” Gerard asks.

“Lord Talltree.” Ealyn says.

“Are you kidding, he would kill you himself, then use your dismembered head as a banner in the vanguard.” Gerard says.

“Its actually quite genius.” Ealyn states.

“In what way?” Gerard asks.

“The Whitefalls and the Lightfeathers combined armies are larger than this continent has seen in an age. The Talltrees don’t stand a change, so if they had a change to make peace they would jump at it.” Ealyn says.

Gerard's eyes go wide.

"If you married Lord Talltree it would force a peace. Your families would join under one banner. Not even the most powerful of lords go against white doctrine." Gerard states.

Ealyn nods.

"That's a plan then. All we have to do is make it past Alyks's army, dip behind enemy lines, then convince one of the most brutal men in Aurica to marry you. That should end the way, and you would be safe. Great that's a plan." Gerard says.

"Then I can kill Alyks in his sleep." Ealyn says.

"I mean if your married to lord Talltree you won't need to kill Alyks. You will be safe, he would not let the key to his piece die." Gerard says.

"He has my sister!" Ealyn screams.

Gerard shifts back.

"Do you know what he did to me!" Ealyn yells.

Gerard shakes his head.

"I am not some frivolous maiden who ran due to cold feet." Ealyn says.

Ealyn stands up and faces away from Gerard and Salum. She raises her shirt exposing the patchwork of faded scars. She pulls her shirt back down and stares into Gerard's eyes. His face is contorted into a look of horror, which then softens into one of sadness and concern.

"He did that to you?" Gerard asks.

"Every night he would come to my room, defile me, then have his way with me. He would say 'I need you Ealyn, If I didn't have a way to release the poison it would build, and who knows that I would do'". Ealyn says.

Gerard gasps.

"And now he has your sister." Gerard says.

"And now he has my sister." Ealyn says.

"Make a part of the marriage deal that Lord Talltree kills Alyks. It would end the Whitefall Lightfeather alliance, but with both Talltree and Whitefall armies at his throat he would not stand a chance." Gerard says.

“Yes, and if that doesn’t work, I will slip into his chambers during my wedding night and slit his throat.” Ealyn says.

“We will.” Gerard says.

Ealyn turns to Salum.

“I owe you a great debt Ealyn. As long as breath fills your lungs, and blood beats in your heart I will be in your service.” Salum signs.

Tears well up in the corners of Ealyn’s eyes. Rycard cuddles up to her side.

“We are going to make history.” Ealyn says.

“Hear hear!” Gerard yells