

## Chapter 9

The sun peaks over the horizon causing light to spill through the mouth of the cave. The mist that spills into the cave is the same warm orange as the clouds overhead. Rycard is curled around Ealyn his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. A sun of morning light pierce the waterfall touching Ealyn's eyes. She blinks blearily then shuffles outside of Rycard's embrace. She stands up and yawns, then she reaches into her saddle bag and procures her medicine, she downs the black vile, then takes a deep breathe in. She turns around.

Salum is sitting staring at the long dead fire, while Gerard is still sleeping farther in the cave. Still covered in shadow. Ealyn walks to Salum, then accidentally steps on Rycard's paw. He shoots awake snarling, then looks at Ealyn and calms down. Gerard wakes in an instant his hand shoots to the empty sheathe on his belt. Rycard sidles up to Ealyn, Ealyn lays a hand on his head and starts slowly petting. Gerard yawns. Salum turns his head to face Gerard.

"Don't look at me." Gerard hisses.

Salum turns around and walks out of the cave. Ealyn frowns, then turns to face something. She opens her mouth, then closes it.

"We should get firewood, and while we're out there, maybe we can catch some breakfast." Ealyn says.

Gerard nods, and starts walking out of the cave, Ealyn tosses her saddle bag over her shoulder and follows. The leaves are starting to leave the trees bare. Thier twisted branches cut razor sharp shadows across the ground surfaced in layers of deep orange and red leaves. With each step Ealyn and Gerard take comes a crisp crunch of crushing brittle leaves. There is a rustling in the brush, and Rycard starts growling. Ealyn turns to the source of the noise sword drawn. A rabbit pops out of the bushes and darts across the trees into a burrow under a tree.

"Ready to fell a great beast I see." Gerard snickers.

Ealyn sheathes her sword then frowns at Gerard. Rycard has not stopped snarling. In the brush from where the rabbit emerged there is a pair of glowing yellow eyes. Ealyn grabs Rycard by the shoulders and shoves him behind a nearby tree.

"What's wrong?" Gerard asks.

"There is a beast in the brush." Ealyn says.

Gerard goes pale. Both peer from behind the tree as something emerges from the brush. It only looks like a trick of the light. The colors of its mane change to match its surroundings as it moves. The glowing yellow eyes stand out from the rest of its mane of shifting autumnal colors. Rycard snarls, the kottrail lowers its head and stalks back into the brush. Ealyn breathes out but forgets to breathe in when it returns with a severed arm. It drops the arm in front of Rycard, then stalks back into the forest. Rycard pokes at the arm with his nose, then picks it up with his jaws and lops back to Ealyn and Gerard.

“What was that?” Gerard asks.

“I don’t know.” Ealyn says.

Rycard drops the arm in front of Ealyn and looks up. Ealyn looks down at the arm, then back up at Rycard.

“Go ahead.” Ealyn says.

Rycard nods, then bites into the arm’s flesh. Ealyn cringes as Rycard rends flesh from bone, blood dripping down the sides of his mouth. Ealyn faces Gerard; Gerard staring enraptured by the display. Rycard pulls the last ligament from the arm, leaving it only a totally bleached white bone where the arm once was. Ealyn eyes go wide.

“I have an idea!” Ealyn says.

“What in the name of Broun could have possibly prompted that.” Gerard says.

“You saw what happened between Rycard and that other beast. What if there is some way that we can get them to attack in force, and we can run past the Lightfeather army in the chaos.” Ealyn says.

“That’s mad.” Gerard states.

“It would be if I didn’t have this.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn reaches into her saddle bag and pulls out the essence of dreyra. She pulls off a piece and holds it out to Gerard.

“Take some.” Ealyn says.

“You might not be a sorcerer, but I’m not taking some mysterious substance you hand me. Our relationship is not there yet.” Gerard says.

Ealyn pulls off another piece and pops it into her mouth. Then she holds the other piece out to Gerard again and shakes her hand. Gerard scoffs, then pops the physic into his mouth.

“Okay, am I supposed to feel something?” Gerard asks.

Ealyn turns to Rycard.

“Can you get that kottrail back?” Ealyn asks.

Rycard nods, then walks into the forest.

“What’s wrong with you?” Gerard asks.

“Don’t worry, Rycard’s here your fine.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scowls, then leans against the tree. Ealyn and Gerard do not wait long. Rycard returns with the kottrail. It is lithe and strong with wiry muscles like Rycard, but where Rycard is like a wolf, the kottrail is like a cat. Its body is slim, and muscular, its legs are taught, and there are no fangs protruding from its mouth. Ealyn reaches out to touch it.

“Stop!” Gerard says.

Gerard shoots forward and tries to grab Ealyn's hand. She swats it away then touches the kottrail’s head. It leans into it and starts purring. Gerard’s eyes go wide.

“Your turn.” Ealyn says.

“Your mad.” Gerard says.

“Are you craven?” Ealyn asks.

Gerard scowls and slowly holds his hand out to the kottrail. It takes a step forward, and he jumps back. He shakes his head, and curses then walks forward and pets it’s head. It purrs again and his mouth falls wide.

“This is amazing.” Gerard says.

Gerard continues petting the kottrail when Ealyn starts talking.

“I created a physic that can soothe beasts, so they no longer attack on sight. That is how I initially tamed Rycard.” Ealyn says.

Rycard scoffs at the word tamed.

“My father once sent a company of men twenty strong to slay a beast like this. None of them came back, and now I am petting it like some common house cat.” Gerard laughs.

“This could change everything.” Gerard says.

“Yes, maybe, but we just saw Rycard and this beast communicate. That means that maybe we can enlist them to do something en masse.” Ealyn says.

“Yeah of course.” Gerard says.

Gerard stares into the glowing eyes of the kottrail and continues petting it. Gerard finally looks away and turns to Ealyn.

“Imagine you supplied this to travelers, or merchants making long treks. There would be no need for beast kin protectors, or beast kin hunters. Or mercenary companies. One dose and they would be safe.” Gerard says.

“It only works for a day and a night.” Ealyn says.

Gerard shoots his hand backwards, then shivers when the kottrail sidles next to him. Gerard then frowns.

“So your telling me, that you had to take this every morning while I was captured, or Rycard would eat you alive.” Gerard asks.

“Yes.” Ealyn says.

“You are mad woman.” Gerard says.

“It was better than dying after getting lost in the forest.” Ealyn says.

“Maybe so.” Gerard says.

Gerard looks back down at the kottrail bobbing between his legs.

“That is still miraculous but are you not taking too many leaps. you only saw one beast interact with another?” Gerard asks.

“Maybe so, but we have no other option.” Ealyn says.

“One of us could slink past the army and get help from the Talltree army.” Gerard proposes.

“Yes, and if they are captured then we are down one man, and Alyks gets a hint at what we are doing.” Ealyn says.

Gerard nods.

“Well, this plan of yours is crazy, but this morning I saw you calm one of the most dangerous creatures of the wild, so maybe I should just let you work.” Gerard says.

“Maybe you should.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scoffs.

“Rycard, could you rally as many beasts as you can find in three days then meet us back at the cave?” Ealyn asks.

Rycard nods, then stalks back into the forest with the kottrail following behind shortly.

“This is mad Ealyn.” Gerard says.

“Yes, it is, but that's why it's going to work.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn palms her sword's hilt.

“Now that Rycard is gone, we are vulnerable.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn unsheathes the sword. Its white blade reflects the light perfectly causing the blade to glow. She raises the sword high, she lowers it and holds it out to Gerard. His eyes go wide.

“No, you can't that's priceless.” Gerard says.

“I'm not giving it to you, I am only letting you protect me with it.” Ealyn says.

Gerard's eyes pan over the blade, pausing at the shackles engraved into the base of the sword and hilt.

“How about a trade?” Gerard asks.

“Just take the Broun damned sword.” Ealyn says.

“Hear me out, I know you wish to wield this light a true warrior. How about lessons. Every day at the break of dawn.” Gerard says.

Ealyn's eyes go wide.

“Yes, yes of course that would be amazing.” Ealyn says.

“Then we have a deal.” Gerard says.

Gerard gingerly slides the sword out of Ealyn's hand into his. He swings it from side to side with a toothy grin plastered on his face. On the last swing he raises the sword high then slashes across the base of an oak tree. The tree splits the top half falling to the right. Gerard laughs, then suppresses it and looks back at Ealyn.

“Thank you.” Gerard says.

“You should not thank me now, when I am going to be the one prying you out of bed at the break of dawn.” Ealyn says.

They laugh for a time. As the laugh slowly dies, they walk back into the forest. Ealyn watches Gerard swing the sword back and forth like a boy with his first wooden sword.

“You know that these are the most well-balanced swords in Aurica. Only the white order before the fall could make these. Only those people could have forged a thing of such beauty.” Gerard says.

“You are romanticizing the past again, what if the process is rediscovered in the future. Don’t lose hope so quickly.” Ealyn says.

“I hope the scholars don’t.” Gerard says.

“Why is that?” Ealyn asks.

“If they find out the recipe it will be robbed of all its beauty. It would just become another treatise about metal working practices.” Gerard says.

“But if we knew how to make them, then we could develop practices to more finely tune the swords.” Ealyn says.

“Maybe, but every day the scholars rob a little bit of magic from the world. Maybe this, just this can stay a legend.” Gerard says.

Ealyn opens her mouth, but Gerard takes another playful swing, and she shuts it. They stumble on a small rabbit warren. Gerard holds his hand out, and Ealyn stops. He sheathes the white sword in his belt and crawls on the ground to the rabbit warren. He sits outside for a time, then reaches in and grabs a rabbit by the ears. It squeals, then he snaps its neck.

“Breakfast.” Gerard says.

Ealyn looks up at the sun.

“More like mid meal.” Ealyn says.

They walk back to the cave, moving quicker the closer they get. When they arrive at the bank of the pond Gerard stops Ealyn.

“What’s the problem?” Ealyn asks.

“I don’t think we should tell Salum plan.” Gerard says.

“Why?” Ealyn asks.

“The last person to rally an army of beasts was the black wizard. If he knew what you were planning, he would kill you.” Gerard says.

“He wouldn’t not to me.” Ealyn says.

Gerard turns to Ealyn and stares daggers at her.

“We are not testing him.” Gerard orders.

Ealyn scowls, then as Gerard’s lips quiver Ealyn’s face softens.

“I won’t tell him.” Ealyn says.

“Okay, tell him that we are planning to take a secret path through the woods, so that the search parties won’t be able to spot us.” Gerard says.

Ealyn nods and they walk beyond the pond into the cave behind the waterfall. Before either of them see anything, the smell comes first. The scent of roasting meats sits heavily in the air. Ealyn walks to the source; Salum has a full-grown deer roasting in slivers above the fire. Ealyn turns to Gerard, and his scowl is set into his face like stone. Gerard huffs, then takes a seat by the fire.

“Did you catch anything?” Salum signs.

“Oh, yeah.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn tosses the rabbit over to Salum. In one smooth motion Salum rips the skin from the rabbit, and in a second pulls out its innards. Salum looks up at Ealyn, then behind her.

“Where is your beast?” Salum signs.

Ealyn’s eyes go wide, then she schools her expression.

“He is gone to find a mate; he will be gone for some time.” Ealyn says.

“I did not know that beasts bonded to beast kin still practiced the same habits as their kin in the wilds.” Salum signs.

Ealyn looks at Gerard. His is staring stone faced into the fire.

“I have not known any beast kin in my long life. Maybe you can educate me in their elusive practices.” Salum signs.

“I am not a full-fledged beast kin, I was taught under a master. I gained my beast before he died.” Ealyn says.

“What was his name?” Salum signs.

“Rycard.” Ealyn says.

“He is in the hands of Broun now.” Salum signs.

“He is.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn sits down next to Gerard and watches the deer cook. Salum continually pokes at the meat, after the fiftieth prodding Salum grabs a knife off his belt and cuts off pieces handing one to Ealyn and another to Gerard. Gerard takes the meat. They all sit in a tense silence. Once the meal is over Ealyn turns to look outside the cave. Something is being silhouetted in the light of the cave. The figure is only slightly peeking out from the entrance. It starts to move closer into the cave, the silhouetted form into that of a sharp snout. Ealyn’s eyes go wide, and she turns to Gerard and Salum.

“I’ll be back.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn stands up and looks at Gerard. She slightly tilts her head to the front of the cave. Gerard's head turns and his eyes go wide. He schools his expression and turns back to Salum. He is looking at Ealyn with his brow furrowed. Salum looks at the front of the cave and gets up. He squints his eyes.

"You insolent fool you stepped on my food!" Gerard yells.

Salum turns to face Gerard, and frowns.

"You think you can just taunt my like this. Every day with you in my company is the worst torture!" Gerard yells.

Salum huffs, then turns back to the front of the cave. Gerard's eyes go wide, and Ealyn turns her head to Gerard and shakes it.

"If you want to goad me so, then let it be I challenge you to a duel!" Gerard yells.

Gerard shoots up and draws the white sword. Salum's face softens into a look of pity. Salum goes to the back of the cave and starts rifling through a small pile of his belongings. Gerard turns to Ealyn and tilts his head to the front of the cave.

"Thank you." Ealyn whispers.

Gerard nods. Ealyn walks off and Salum walks back to Gerard with his stolen Lightfeather sword in hand. As Ealyn approaches the mouth of the cave rings of steel start bounding off the cave walls. Ealyn cringes with every pang. Finally she reaches the mouth of the cave, and Rycard is standing on the right side of the water fall. Looking into the pond with glassy eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ealyn asks.

Rycard does not turn to meet her gaze, he simply starts walking into the forest. Ealyn looks back into the cave, then starts following. The sun is setting, the orange light that illuminates the forest matches the leaves falling from the trees. Most of the trees are bare now, only some leaves hold fast onto life. The ground is plastered in these orange leaves. Every step Ealyn makes causes a loud crunch, in contrast to Rycard whose steps barely make a noise. Rycard stops in a small clearing covered in orange and yellow leaves.

"What's here?" Ealyn asks.

Rycard stops then falls over. Ealyn's eyes go wide and she rushes to his side. Tears start streaming from her eyes.

"No, please, not you." Ealyn pleads.

Ealyn wraps her hands around Rycard, then she feels a hot pang in her back, and she freezes and rolls to the ground. Her open eyes dart around, but she can only see the



tips of tree branches and the orange sky. The leaves crunch as someone approaches. A older man with a beard of brown stubble with grey streaks, and short brown hair stares down at her. His face is covered in slim pieces of metal formed into intricate patterns. The sorcerer raises his hand, from his forearm a large metal blade springs out. He reaches the blade to Ealyn's throat.

"Stop!" A voice says.

The crunching grows rapid as Derk steps into Ealyn's vision. He is panting and sweaty, carrying a black metal crossbow in his left hand. His severed arm has been replaced by something shiny and black.

"She saved my life." Derk says.

"Oh, really, from the valdyr I assume." The sorcerer says.

"She might have saved me from her own beast, but she saved me none the less." Derk says.

"Do you know how dangerous she is." The sorcerer says.

"I don't, what she did can be done by any beast kin." Derk says.

"She can commune with them. If she accomplished what I think she was trying to, she could have lost control and set loose an organized horde of beasts. She is too dangerous to be left alive." The sorcerer says.

"She didn't know what she was doing Bredyn." Derk says.

Brendan uses his other hand to push the blade back into his forearm.

"Fine, but if she does not comply you are doing the job." Bryden says.

Brynden looks down at Ealyn.

"The anesthetic will wear off in a few minutes just don't panic and it will be fine." Derk says.

Derk walks out of Ealyn's vision then returns with a rope. He binds her wrists behind her back and binds her legs. Bryden scoffs then walks out of Ealyn's vision. Derk sits her up against Rycard. Ealyn's eyes continue darting from Derk to Bryden. As soon as she gains control of her body she opens her mouth.

"What did you do to Rycard!" Ealyn yells.

"He implanted a control node in his neck." Derk says.

"Undo the sorcery or I will rip both of your throats out!" Ealyn yells.

“I will, but you need to calm down, and I need an assurance that as soon as that valdyr wakes up he will not rip both our heads off.” Derk says.

Ealyn’s calms her expression and turns to Derk.

“I assure you; you will not be harmed.” Ealyn says.

“Thank you” Derk says.

Derk walks over to Rycard, and reaches a hand behind his neck into a small patch of fur. He parts the fur and there is a small metal needle with a glowing pin on the end blinking on and off. Derk pulls the needle out and Rycard opens his eyes. He starts growling.

“Calm down,” Ealyn says.

Rycard keeps growling and starts stalking towards Derk. Derk raises his black crossbow.

“Rycard stop!” Ealyn orders.

Rycard turns his head to Ealyn, then stops growling. He looks at Ealyn with his glowing yellow eyes, then pads to her side and stands looming over her right shoulder.

“Thank you.” Derk says.

Bryden appraises Rycard.

“So, it seems that she doesn’t control beasts like a wizard might. She instead seems to have a repour with the valdyr; like a beast kin. What do you make of this Derk?” Bryden asks.

Derk uses his other arm to reposition his black arm to his side, then starts gazing quizzically at Ealyn.

“She is no beast kin that's for certain.” Derk says.

“What makes you say that.” Bryden asks.

“Her eyes, they lack the characteristic discoloration and accompanied glow.” Derk says.

“Good I noticed that as well.” Bryden says.

Ealyn scowls looking between the two of them, then looks at the sorcerer’s right arm, and her scowl softens and beads of sweat start forming on her skin. She forces her scowl back, but she starts shaking.

“What are you gonna do with me?” Ealyn asks.

“Nothing ideally.” Derk says.

Bryden looks at Derk.

“We can’t just let her go!” Bryden yells.

Derk turns to Ealyn.

“Could we come to an accord?” Derk asks.

Ealyn’s eyes dart between the two.

“Yes.” Ealyn says.

“Of course she is going to say yes,” Bryden says.

“What else are we going to do.” Derk asks.

“Kill her, she is not only dangerous to us, but the world at large.” Bryden says.

“We are not killing her!” Derk yells.

“You don’t understand them, they think we are worse than monsters! We are the beings that haunt their dreams! We are the things that keep errant children from leaving thier beds at night! We can’t just expect her to suddenly come to reason after generations of fear and hate!” Bryden yells.

“Do you want to become that monster!” Derk yells.

Derk and Bryden continue yelling at one another, and Ealyn shaking becomes worse. Rycard nudges into her side, as her life is balanced on a scale tipping one way or the other with every exchange of phrase. Ealyn reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small piece of the physic.

“I’ll tell you how I did it!” Ealyn yells.

Both turn to face Ealyn.

“I’ll tell you how I did it, but I want something in return.” Ealyn says.

“What is that?” Bryden asks.

“I was mobilizing the beasts to distract the army of someone hunting me. If you can provide the distraction, then I will tell you to secret.” Ealyn says.

Bryden turns to Derk.

“What is to say that we don’t have a method of extracting that information by force.” Bryden says.

“You would have done it already if your sorcery was so powerful.” Ealyn says.

Bryden scoffs, then turns to Derk.

“Fine, but I will be implanting the control node in Rycard’s neck.” Bryden says.

Ealyn frowns, then looks at Rycard.

“Only if you must uncure Rycard after we are safely away from the army.” Ealyn responds.

“We?” Derk asks.

“Me and two others.” Ealyn says.

Bryden turns to Derk.

“You said she would be alone!” Bryden yells.

“She was alone when I found her!” Derk yells back.

“Just implant the control chip now and send them back. If anyone finds us we will know where to find her and her friends.” Derk says.

Ealyn pales, then swallows and stiffens her upper lip.

“Do we have an accord?” Derk asks.

“Yes.” Ealyn says.

Derk walks over to Rycard who starts growling.

“Stand down,” Ealyn says.

Rycard stops growling, but keeps his gaze fixed on Derk. Derk plants the metal needle into the same tuft of fur then walks back to Bryden.

“Now go, before we reconsider our proposal.” Bryden says.

Ealyn walks back into the woods and Rycard follows her. When they are outside of the clearing in the deep of the woods Ealyn falls to her knees. Tears stream from her eyes and Rycard pushes his nose into her side.

“They could have killed me.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn pulls Rycard into a hug, and for a second just sits on the ground in Rycard’s warm embrace and lets the cool wind of autumn blow over them; taking the pain away on the wind. The sun sits on the horizon when Ealyn finally gets up. She wipes away the tears, and gives Rycard one last big squeeze then walks back to the pond.