

Chapter 2

Ealyn peels open her bleary eyes. She lays in an oiled leather bedroll whose scent mixes with the fallen leaves and crisp air of autumn. She pulls herself up slowly into a sitting position, leaves cracking beneath her. In front of her is a smothered campfire, whose embers have only just lost their glow, and a large rucksack full to the brim sitting on top of another bedroll. She stands, the horse bites off a piece of a small bush on the outer edge of the clearing. The sound of rushing water echoes from the forest to her right. She investigates the floor of the clearing, until she spots a slight depression in the grass.

She looks ahead, many more depressions, broken twigs, and crushed leaves lead to a break in the treeline. She follows the trail walking carefully, eyes plastered to the ground. She hikes through the forest following the trail of broken twigs and crushed leaves, lazily surveying the trees until her eyes lock onto something. She stares intently at a bush laden with plump purple berries. She squints and her mouth falls agape. Her foot catches on a grasping root. She slips and a twig catches her dress. She winces as the tearing of cloth breaks the calm melody of the forest.

Now on the ground, she looks down and she winces again. Her dress has been torn from the bottom of her waist to her feet exposing another tapestry of faded scars and old bruises. She gets back up and brushes off the dirt and continues walking, sparing the occasional look at the bush. Once through the break in the trees she arrives at the

bank of a fast-moving stream. The bank is gravel, smoothed to a gem like polish by the ever-moving water. She hears a crunch and turns to her right.

Rycard holds aloft on a makeshift spear as he stares into the water intently. Rycard thrusts the spear forward and smiles as he pulls out two skewered trout. Ealyn steps forward, and Rycard turns to face her.

“Ealyn, I thought you asleep.” Rycard says.

“Well, I can supply much evidence to the contrary.” Ealyn says.

Rycard smiles and plants his spear into the gravel. He carefully removes the trout, then ties them together as Ealyn approaches. Ealyn watches studiously as he bends down and loops the fish around a small stake in the river along with three others already underwater. Rycard stands back up towering three heads above her, and he looks down.

“Is that breakfast?” Ealyn asks and points at the trout in the stream.

“Yes, I was not out here long, I figured you would sleep the day after all that happened.” Rycard says.

“I am no pinewood doll that needs to be minded vigilantly.” Ealyn says as a smile grows on her face.

“Of course, lady Whitefall” Rycard responds.

Ealyn shoves him, and Rycard chuckles. She brings him into a deep embrace, and he returns in kind. They stay interlocked for a few minutes until Rycard separates them and looks down at her dress. Rycard frowns.

“Did the prince do anything tonight?” Rycard asks.

“No, but not for lack of trying.” Ealyn responds.

Rycard grits his teeth.

“I am sorry that I could not bleed the man myself.” Rycard says.

“You could not have done more than scratch him before he tore your guts to ribbons.”

Ealyn says.

Rycard cringes.

“Everything will be fine when we make it back to Whitefall.” Rycard says.

Rycard smiles, and Ealyn nods as she stares ruefully at the ground. Rycard looks at his smile falters.

“So how did the lady’s dress come to be in such disrepair.” Rycard asks

Ealyn smiles.

“I spotted a Hyala bush.” Ealyn says.

“What’s that?” Rycard asks.

“It’s only the secret to the most powerful ever made.” Ealyn says.

Rycard chuckles.

“What’s that then?” Rycard asks.

“It makes you invulnerable to beasts”. Ealyn responds.

Rycard frowns.

“I know of your alchemical prowess, but even you have limits. If such a thing existed then there would be no need for beastkin.” Rycard states.

“Maybe, for I invented it, and if I did produce it for the masses maybe there would be no need for beast kin.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn smirks.

“You spin falsehoods.” Rycard responds.

Ealyn frowns playfully, then smiles.

“Well, it doesn't actually make you invulnerable.” Ealyn says.

“Continue” Rycard says.

“There was a treatise written by scholar yelling that studied the behavior of different beasts of different form, and it said that the only reason these beasts don't attack each other is scent based.” Ealyn pauses.

“So, I endeavored to find something that smelled like beast, my father left many specimens, so I wanted for not when it came to samples.” Ealyn says.

Rycard frowns, and Ealyn stiffens.

“He was an honorable man.” Rycard says

Ealyn frowns, then quickly wipes the expression off her face.

“I used the samples and mixed a few herbs until I found something that would stimulate sweat glands to produce a similar scent.” Ealyn says.

“Okay” Rycard responds.

“You know what I can prove it to you, I will make some and you will have to believe me.” Ealyn says.

“I look forward to sampling your physicks young alchemist” Rycard responds

Ealyn huffs then smiles and walks back into the forest.

“I expect breakfast in return.” Ealyn yells back.

Rycard laughs, and Ealyn crosses the threshold into the forest. In the river, blood seeps out of the dead trout, like long ribbons that fray the farther they wander. The long distended snout of something with taught leathery skin laps at the water, then crosses the river.

Ealyn’s eyes scan the forest retracing her steps, until she stops the bush. She approaches and picks one of the larger berries. She breathes deep and lets the scent dance on her tongue. She pockets the berry and plops down on the forest floor.

She reaches into her dress and pulls out the wooden box. She grabs a small mortar from the box and drops a few of the berries in it along with various herbs. She pulls out a pestle and grinds down everything until it forms a paste. She reaches back into the wooden box and pulls out an oily tuft of fur. She strains it between two of her fingers, until a dark brown ooze sits in the crease. She mixes the ooze with the paste until it takes a dull reddish color, then she takes the substances and rolls it into a ball in her hands.

Ealyn looks at the ball and smiles. She carefully puts all her supplies away with only the ball left. She slips it into her bodice and gets up. The winds in the forest pick up, causing the branches to compel the dappled light on the ground to dance in writhing

patterns. Ealyn approaches the rays of light cutting through the trees and takes a deep breath in. She spins slowly, letting the light play across her sallow skin. She takes another breath, then walks back to the bank.

She cuts through the gap in the trees to see Rycard bent over an impromptu fire pit using a fire striker to light a bit of kindling atop various sticks. Rycard stands and waves, then a whistling and a dull thump. Rycard opens his mouth wide but no sound escapes. A stain pools around his shoulder, Rycard reaches for it and falls to his knees. Ealyn opens her mouth to scream, but a hand covers it letting nothing but a muffled whimper escapes.

Three men in leathers and mail jump up from the brush and start wading across the river.

“I got er.” A gruff voice says from behind her.

“Lady whitefall is not to be harmed,” another voice says from behind her.

The owner of the voice makes himself known when he steps in front of Ealyn. The man is built like an overstuffed sausage. He is encased in mail pulling tight around his stomach, where a straining belt keeps a surcoat from billowing over his legs like a dress. The surcoat has a pair of crossed feathers emblazoned across it. His face is covered by a great helm, only exposing his dull yellowed eyes.

Ealyn squirms under the bandit's grasp to no avail. The knight looks Ealyn up and down slowly, his gaze fixing on her chest for a second, then he breaks his trance.

“Thank Broun that your safe milady” the knight says

“We will be escort...” A yelp and a gurgling sound cuts him off.

One of the four men has a knife protruding from his neck. The other bandits turn to face him as he slinks to the ground revealing a bloodied Rycard. The wound on his shoulder is still lazily oozing blood but he holds his two long daggers at his side. He yells something primal and dives at another one of the men savagely tearing at the man's throat with his daggers. The man holding Ealyn lets go and unsheathes his short sword. Ealyn crumples to the floor. She looks up and Rycard is batting away two swords and two axes, the knight trudges towards her.

Ealyn reaches under her dress and draws the white sword. The knight stumbles back, then draws his longsword. Ealyn stands in a clumsy guard position, the man raises his longsword, and Ealyn braces, then he drops his sword and barrels into her, she tumbles backwards. She hits the forest floor with a thud. The wind leaves her lungs and she coughs. The man approaches, and Ealyn looks at Rycard.

He catches her eye.

“Run!” Rycard yells

Rycard runs at the knight and slashes, the knight turns around to block. Ealyn slips her sword into her belt and picks up her skirt and takes off into the forest. The sound of metal hitting metal echoes throughout the forest carried on the wind. Branches cut into Ealyn's face while she jumps rocks and roots underfoot. The wheezing of knight grows farther and farther. The sounds of metallic ringing abate until there is only the melody of the forest.

Ealyn grabs her chest, and starts breathing erratically, she stops in a clearing and spots a toppled tree, she takes cover in the pulled roots. She reaches into her bodice and

procures the vial of dark green liquid. She unstops it and pours a little down her throat, then stops it again, and stuffs it back into her bodice. She leans against the tree, and her breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

“Sweetling, you have no need to fear me.” The knight says

Ealyn cringes. The knight pans his gaze across the clearing. Then a cracking of twigs, Rycard emerges from the edge of the clearing covered in long shallow wounds. The many wounds weep blood dribbling down his tunic then pooling at his feet. Rycard crouches and points his knives at the knight. The knight draws his longsword and holds it straight. Rycard leaps like a cat at the knight and slashes. His knives glance across the mail. They trade blows, the knight keeping the defensive. More blood leaks. He stabs into the knight's left arm and draws blood. The knight slugs him across the face in response. Rycard tumbles and is slow to get up. They continue to trade blows, but Rycard grows slower and slower, his blood speckling the clearings grasses a rust color.

Rycard collapses to his knees. He pans his vision across the clearing and spots Ealyn. The knight approaches him and holds his sword high. Rycard mouths run, then the knight brings his sword high. Ealyn draws her sword and runs at the knight. She brings her sword down, and the knight ducks to the right. He turns around and slashes, his sword makes contact and the white sword cuts into it halfway. He lets go of his sword, and while Ealyn tries to pry her sword out the knight punches her in the stomach.

Ealyn doubles over and coughs, she drops her sword. The knight picks it up and holds it to her throat.

“You have a death wish princess.” the knight says.

“Please don’t hurt him!” Ealyn cries.

The knight smiles.

“If I don’t bring the head of the man who captured you the prince will surely have mine. Although this should make the process much less painful.” the knight says.

The knight pans his gaze across the length of the bone sword. He walks to where Rycard’s collapsed. He lifts the sword, and Rycard looks directly into Ealyn eyes and mouths ‘sorry’. The knight cuts his head off in one clean motion.

“Nothing like a fight to keep the blood hot.” the knight says.

He turns to face Ealyn. Ealyn stares back at him stone faced, tears threatening to escape the corners of her eyes.

“We ought to find a more private place, the dead do not make for good bed companions” the knight says.

The knight grabs Ealyn by the wrist and drags her into the forest. Tears start to leak out of her eyes, she swallows and wipes them with her wrists and walks alongside the knight into the forest. They walk through the branches the knight keeping his eyes peeled scanning the surroundings. Ealyn looks up and spots a pair of glowing yellow eyes. She opens her mouth, then uses her other hand to cover. She looks up at the fat knight, and looks back at the glowing eyes. She reaches into her bodice, grabs a portion

of the physik and pops it in her mouth. The knight tugs her, and she stumbles forward and falls to the ground.

While on the ground whispers a prayer. She takes a second, then raises her hand to her mouth and bites down. A whimper oozes out as she sinks her teeth deep. until she tastes copper on her tongue. The knight pushes her to her back.

“Broun curse you girl.” the knight says.

Ealyn spits blood into the knight's face. The knight slaps her. The knight reaches into his coat and draws a small dagger. He cuts her dress and bodice until her skin shows. He reaches his hands down and pulls the rest apart. Ealyn stares into his eyes. The man gives her a confused look, then he hears a deep snarl from behind him. He turns around and opens his mouth to scream. A large maw wraps around his face and starts pulling his head from his neck. The scream grows more and more high pitched and strained as the vocal cords are stretched until they snap. The beast bites down and crushes his skull, then swallows.

The Valdyr has leathery pink skin pulled taught over wiry muscle. It stands on four legs with clawed opposable digits on each paw. Its head is elongated like a wolf, with long sharp teeth that partially stick out to the side, protruding even when its mouth is closed. Fur grows in tufts randomly across its body. Its eyes are sharp, and deeply intelligent, they glow a deep yellow.

Ealyn squeezes her eyes shut, now violently shaking. The beast sniffs then moves back to the brush. Ealyn opens her eyes and the beast stares back. She gets to her feet and continues looking into the beasts eyes. The beast slinks back into the shadows and

its eyes disappear. Katlin looks at the knights corpse, and she shudders, then ducks behind a tree and vomits. She brushes her mouth and walks back to the clearing.

She enters the clearing and the eyes of Rycard's corpse stare back at her. She shudders and walks to the corpse's side. Tears form in the corners of her eyes. She falls to her knees and grabs his corpse into her arms and cries. She holds onto him, his blood mixing with the knights on her dress along with the tears pouring from her eyes.

Ealyn cries and the sun drifts across the sky, until it sinks lazily below the treetops, creating skinny shadows, like long withered fingers reaching into to the clearing where Ealyn still holds onto Rycard's now cold corpse. She finally snuffles and lays the corpse gently onto the ground. She sits on her knees above the corpse and clasps her hands together. She whispers a prayer under her breath, then she reaches out and closes its eyes.

Suddenly Ealyn starts breathing erratically then she reaches into her pocket and her face goes completely pale. She retrieves a vial, but it is cracked in half, only the residue of dark green liquid coats it. She walks to a tree and braces her arm against it. Her breathing grows more erratic. She slumps against the tree. Now sitting on the forest floor her breathing grows more strained, she starts to wheeze and her head lulls forward. Ealyn closes her eyes, and her breathing grows shallow.