

Chapter 3

The sun edges above the horizon when Ealyn's eyes shoot open. A long gritty tongue drags itself across her face. She looks up and the valdyr stares back at her. It backs up and below it sits a bundle of weeds covered in the monster's slobber. Ealyn grabs the weeds and stuffs them into her mouth. Ealyn gags on the spittle, but she swallows. She breathes in and out slowly, the wheezing dissipates and her breathing clears.

She shoots up and wraps her arms around the valdyr, and cries. She stays embraced with the valdyr for only a second, then she stumbles back and gasps. The valdyr just sits and stares at her. The valdyr snorts then, disappears back into the forest. Ealyn takes in a shuddering breath and walks deeper into the forest.

Ealyn arrives at the clearing only to see pools of bloodied grass where Rycard's and the knights bodies once where. Glowing yellow eyes break the darkness of the shadowed brush. Katlin reaches into the remnants of her dress and rips of piece off the physick and pops it in her mouth. She continues breathes in and clasps her hands together. She says a prayer and walks back into the forest.

She walks slowly as her eyes study the ground, then she stops and grabs a broken twig. She looks forward and sees crushed leaves and broken twigs. She continues down the path to her and Rycard's original campsite. The leaves crunch under her boots as the light of the sun slowly grows to match the deep orange of the leaves, then the shadows start to grow long, and Ealyn crosses the farthest edge of her and Rycard's original

campsite and the sound of footsteps and the smattering of speech is distinct even from this distance. Ealyn crouches and slowly approaches the clearing.

Five men clad in chain mail wearing surcoats with a black wing stitched into the chests and barbute helmets, along with one in full blackened plate with a long conical nosed helmet with metal feathered epilates and a wing emblazoned on his chest plate. Ealyn's eyes pan across the clearing until they stop at the large bag sitting at one end of Rycard's sleeping bag. Ealyn curses under her breath and sits in the brush and waits for the cold embrace of the moon to suffocate the light of the sun. Once the shadows take over and only the light of the torches of the party keeping the darkness at bay does she inch closer.

A gauntleted hand grasps her shoulder tightly and Ealyn reaches for her sword. The man behind her grabs her hand before it can make it and spins her around to face him. His white armor glows silver as it reflects the light of the moon. His helmet completely covers his face in one plate bent in the center with slits for eyes. His eyes glow a deep orange slightly illuminating the tan skin around them below his helmet.

Ealyn goes pail and the inquisitor drags her out from the brush. The party turns to face her, and she wriggles but the inquisitor drags her with little effort and only one hand. He tosses her onto the ground in front of the knight in plate. She scrambles to her feet and the lead knight lifts his visor.

The man has long black hair flowing down to his shoulders like rivers of pitch which stand in contrast with his sky-blue eyes, he is young but not so much so that he does not have smile lines. His eyes dances across her face, and he smirks.

“Well, not much of a quest was it then lads.” The knight says

The party chuckles, the inquisitor does not.

“Soon to be princess, I know that the canny villain Rycard tried to abduct you, but we are here you save you, and maybe head home with a story of how we saved a princess. I am sure whores from whitefall to Goldfinger will be singing the tale.” The knight says.

Ealyn looks into his eyes and grits her teeth.

“I’d rather die, you cockless bastard.” Ealyn says.

The smile falls off the knight’s face.

“You are being saved whether you want to be or not.” The knight says.

Ealyn reaches to her side and draws her sword. The knight backs up and stands for a second, then starts laughing.

“That is a fine sword milady, but I doubt you have the nerve.” The knight says.

Ealyn looks around then she drops the sword to the ground. The inquisitor restrains her, she writhes against his grip, but he holds her hands behind her back. She writhes and struggles against his grip, but he just throws her to the ground and reaches his hand out. One of the men hands him a bundle of rope. He ties the rope around her arms. She writhes on the ground, then her arm catches on a jagged rock. She winces as it cuts into her skin, her eyes open wide as she sees the small dribble of blood pool beneath her.

“Run!” Ealyn screams.

“And why would we do that.” the knight says.

One of the torches falls to the ground. Everyone turns to face it, then their heads shoot to the darkness of the forest as a shriek tears through the midnight silence like a rusty dagger. The inquisitor runs to his horse.

“Form up!” The head knight yells.

The rest of the knight's crowd around him. Ealyn struggles against her bindings then she turns and faces her sword on the ground a few feet away from her. The valdyr emerges from the darkness and snarls, one of the men slashes at it, but the blade harmlessly glides across the beast's flesh, only able to cut off a tuft of hair. The valdyr leaps into the man and rips out a large portion of his chest, then ducks back encasing itself in shadow. The men quickly fill the other man's place. The man in white runs to to his horse and withdraws a long white hollow staff.

Ealyn squirms across the ground inching closer and closer to the sword. The valdyr jumps out of the woods again and latches its jaws around one of the knight's legs. The knight screams as it is dragged into darkness. The screams abruptly stop, and the rest of the men start violently shaking. Ealyn makes it to the sword, and she flips on her back. She reaches for the sword with her bound hands and cuts the bindings.

Ealyn shoots up and looks at the man with a large portion of his chest hollowed out. Ealyn's face goes pale and she starts shaking. The valdyr leaps back at the knights grabbing another by the chest and ripping a chunk out and tossing it to the side.

“Stop.” Ealyn croaks.

The valdyr continues tearing into the knights, all their blows glancing off the monster's flesh.

"Stop." Ealyn says.

The valdyr bites off one of the knight's legs.

"Stop!" Ealyn yells.

The inquisitor shoulders the staff and points the hollow end at the beast. He presses into one end of the staff, then after a beat a sound like thunder echoes across the clearing, and a plume of smoke like a dark cloud expels from the end of the staff. The men left drop their weapons and run into the forest. The smoke clears and blood sputters from a wound in the valdyr's thigh, it snarls and leaps at the inquisitor. Ealyn jumps Infront of the inquisitor and holds out her hand.

"Stop!" Ealyn screams

The beast freezes standing a head taller than a shuddering Ealyn. The beast continues to snarl with its fangs bared, then it looks down at Ealyn and its lips slowly close over the fangs, and it backs down. Ealyn turns around and faces the inquisitor and the head knight with his sword bared. She stands to her feet.

"Drop them!" Ealyn yells.

The inquisitor drops his staff on the ground, but the knight still stands poised to strike. Ealyn approaches the knight and the valdyr snarls. The knight drops his blade.

"Get on your knees." Ealyn says.

The knight and the inquisitor both get on their knees. Ealyn goes to the horses and starts searching through the saddle bags. The valdyr lays on the ground and slides its head on top of its paws, lazily gazing at the knight and inquisitor. Ealyn reaches into a saddle bag and retrieves a rope. She walks back and binds the knight and inquisitor. Once both their feet and arms are bound she mounts one of the horses.

“You can’t leave me here beastkin!” The knight yells.

“Yes, I can, and I will.” Ealyn says.

The knight shuffles to face Ealyn.

“I would rather let that beast mix my guts around, then meet with the prince without you.” the knight says.

Ealyn looks at the knight and swallows.

“Where are you going?” the knight asks.

“I am not going to tell you.” Ealyn says.

“Well, you are lady Whitefall, so I am going to assume you are heading to Whitefall.” the knight says.

Ealyn does not respond.

“I know the way. My company served your father in the war of the bloody tree. I can take you there, and if anyone stops us, I can just say that you were taken hostage by the Talltrees, and I am taking you back to prince Lightfeather.” the knight says.

Ealyn stares at the knight then sighs.

“Fine, but if anything happens, I won’t stop that beast from tearing you to shreds”

Ealyn says.

“You have a deal princess.” The knight says.

Ealyn dismounts and unbinds the knight, then goes to unbind the inquisitor.

“Leave him.” The knight says

“The prince will kill him.” Ealyn says

“He can try,” The knight says.

Ealyn looks into the glowing eyes of the inquisitor, and looks into the glowing eyes of the valdyr. She goes behind him and cuts his bindings.

“I’ll offer you the same deal as the prince.” Ealyn says

The inquisitor does not move.

“He can’t speak” the knight says

“Why?” Ealyn asks

“Have you not heard of inquisitors little lady?” the knight asks

“I have seen them around the white temples, and I have read scripture, but I have never met one.” Ealyn says.

“They served the white order during the collapse.” The knight says

“What’s he doing here then?” Ealyn asks

“He serves my family.” The knight says

“You would leave one of your servants to die at the hands of the prince.” Ealyn says.

“He is not a servant because he is not a man. He is as close to human as that beast over there, and if we take him with us, he might rat us out to the order.” The knight says.

“I will not leave him.” Ealyn says.

“You are playing a dangerous game princess.” The knight says.

“He is coming, and you can’t stop me” Ealyn responds

The knight scoffs and mounts one of the horses, the inquisitor grabs his staff and mounts another horse. Katlin grabs the rope and binds both to the saddles. Katlin ties the horses together and goes back to the clearing. She grabs the bag and rummages through it and withdraws three vials filled with dark liquid. She puts it on the ground beside the bag, and she reaches deeper and withdraws a bundle of clothes tied with a leather belt with a scabbard. She turns around, and the knight is looking directly at her. She scoffs and dips into the forest.

Just outside the campsite, she ducks behind a tree and withdraws her father’s sword, she leans it against the trunk and slips off her ruined dress. She puts on canvas breeches, and black cotton shirt, and fastens the belt around herself. The clothes drape over her slight frame, she grabs a fist full of fabric and brings it to her nose. She breathes in deep, and tears peek out from the corners of her eyes. She brushes the tears away then sheathes her father’s sword in the scabbard and leaves the forest. She looks up and runs back into the forest. She rummages through the ruined dresses pockets, then she exhales when she withdraws the ball of Physik. She stuffs it in her pocket and walks

back to the clearing. She stashes the vial of green liquid in her pocket and loops the bag over her shoulder. She struggles carrying it to her horse, then she secures it to the horse. She goes back to the clearing and grabs one of the torches, then mounts her horse and kicks off deeper into the forest.