

Chapter 1

Ealyn stood obscured in the stone alcove next to a large man wearing green tinted plate armor. She reaches into her dress, careful not to lift her sleeves and reveals a steel dagger in its sheath, she pulls the dagger from its sheath, revealing the blade covered in a glossy viscous black paste, she sheathes the dagger, and hands it to the man. The man nods and walks off. Ealyn breathes in and starts shuddering. She breathes in and out slowly, causing the shuddering to ebb until she stands still. She walks out of the alcove, the sun reflects off the gold trim in her high collared dress, the dress covers every inch of skin except her young, sallow face.

Ealyn walks craning her neck to look up at the towering stone wall to her left. She reaches her hand outwards and touches the stone wall. She tracks her hand along it and walks forward, until a piece of the wall gives slightly. She pushes it in, revealing a small entryway into a passage. She looks around and quickly ducks into the passage. The passage was only lit by the light that passed through long horizontal slits that span from one end of the room to the other, occasionally obscured by the feet of people sitting above.

Ealyn looks through the slits onto the floor of the grand arena. Knights trickle into the center of the arena, either alone or with squires in tow. Some of the knights sharpen their swords, and some scatter to the edges of the arena to accept cloth favors from women in the crowd. One knight is particularly popular as women from all walks of life clamor over the railings holding out their favors to him. The knight in glistening

plate armor with feathers adorning the helm, walks along the edge brushing his hand along the many favors dangling ahead of him. Until he stops at and looks up at a noble woman no older than fourteen wearing a white and gold dress with the same filagree as Ealyn's.

The silver knight looks into the woman's eyes. The young woman blushes as the knight grasps his armored hands around hers and kisses them. He pulls away and delicately takes her white favor. Ealyn clenches her fists until her knuckles bleach. The silver knight ties the favor around his waist and walks over to his squire. The squire gets down on one knee and lifts his arms presenting a sword in a beautiful black scabbard. The knight pulls the bastard sword from the scabbard, revealing the blade with many crossed feathers etched into it.

A horn blows and the knights shuffle into a circle. The ten knights ready their blades, maces, and pikes and eye each other carefully. A booming voice resonates throughout the arena.

"Champions present arms!"

The knights raise their weapons.

"Let Broun's favor fall upon you!"

The knights hold their weapons ahead of them then raise them to the sky and touch them to the ground.

"Now begin!"

A stocky man carrying a large hammer swings at his neighbor. He makes contact with his chest knocking him to the ground. The stocky knight goes over to the grounded knight and raises his hammer. Before he can swing down the grounded knight raises his middle, thumb, and pinky fingers and the stocky knight backs off. The grounded knight gets up and walks out of the arena.

As the melee continues the green knight stands off to the side and watches the feathered knight carefully. The feathered knight slashes down at his opponent. The other knight raises their shield to block, but the silver knight cuts his swing short and pushes his blade along the shield cutting the muscle in the man's neck. The cut was not enough to incapacitate him, but the man raises his hand and makes the symbol, causing the feathered knight to back off, the other knight gets up and leaves the arena.

The melee continues for another twenty minutes until just the green and feathered knight remain. The feathered knight saunters towards the green knight carrying his sword with a loose one-handed grip. He laughs and blows kisses out to the crowd along the way. Now, five paces away he lunges, but the green knight deftly dodges and responds with a slash. The feathered knight blocks, and almost drops his sword. His smile fades as he backs away gripping his sword with both hands.

The two opponents orbit each other carefully studying one another. The feathered knight goes for a slash, which the green knight deftly blocks, but now in proximity he shoves the green knight. He stumbles and the feathered knight seizes the opportunity and sweeps his leg; tripping him. As the green knight falls to the ground, the feathered knight raises his sword to slash at his throat. The green knight grabs his armor and pulls him to the ground. They both fall in a heap. Before the feathered knight can get his

bearings, the green knight reaches into his belt and pulls the poison dagger, slashing in one clean motion. The feathered knight dodges, but a light graze gets under his armor.

The feathered knight looks down and sees that the dagger did not only graze him, but also cut the favor in half. As the green knight gets back to his feet, the feathered knight flips his sword and holds it by the blade. The green knight half stands up, when the silver knight swings his sword like a hammer into the green knight's side. The cross guard pierces the armor and digs deep into his flesh beneath. The green knight reels back in pain taking the sword with him. Blood seeps from the wound and starts dripping onto the ground. The green knight pulls his sword back up but stumbles backwards from blood loss.

The feathered knight walks ahead, and the green knight slashes widely. The feathered knight reaches his arm up and deflects the blade with his bracers. He grabs the green knight by the neck and slams him into the ground. He rips the green knight's helm off and straddles the green knight's chest. He raises his armored fist and brings it down on the green knight's now exposed face. He does this over and over until his head is nothing more than a bloody puddle of stew sloshing around a metal helm.

The feathered knight stands up and raises his bloodied fist. The crowd anxiously cheers, and Ealyn's face pales. She turns around and quickly ducks out of the passage and takes off running.

Ealyn runs across the field dodging around improvised market stalls and wide-eyed crowd's people. Her foot catches on her dress, and she trips barreling into one of the adjacent tents, as she tumbles her dress rips revealing a pattern of fine line scars at various stages of healing, on a purple canvas of bruises.

She reels on the ground, and people start to stop, but before anyone can say anything she shoots up and takes off. She continues her mad dash until the market stalls around the arena are out of view. Now she stands in front of a towering stone wall inset into a mountain. She turns to the right and follows the wall until it ends at a sheer cliff face jutting above her. She takes a deep breath in and starts climbing up. Her foot slips and she falls a couple feet, she catches herself losing her slippers in the process. She reaches her foot out and taps around until she finds a small lip, she gets a hold and moves to her right. A melody of dull drips echoes from the mouth of a cave further right. She jumps onto the ledge of the cave mouth.

Once she balances herself, she reaches her hand out to the right wall until it touches the slimy stone. A dull orange light illuminates a far-off portion of the cave, she approaches steadily her bare feet slapping against the wet stone. The light of a small torch dances across the wet walls of the cave. She grabs the torch and heads to a small ladder propped against the cave wall. She climbs up the ladder as it squawks in protest, until she pushes open the hatch revealing a small stone room.

The room is made of stone brick, light pours through a couple small gaps in the wall. It has a small cot with dark red stains dotting its surface, next to the cot is a small brown box with a sewing kit and various herbs and tonics, along with a vial of black liquid. She grabs the small box and stuffs it into a large pouch she has sewn into her dress.

Ealyn smothers the torch and tosses it down. She hikes up her dress and presses on one of the walls with gaps. The wall moves and she walks through until she is in a well-appointed hallway. She shoves the wall closed and runs across the red carpet, until

she is face to face with a large black oak door. She pushes in and turns around locking it behind her. The room is sparse, there is nothing covering the bare stone walls. There is a canopy bed with a well-worn headboard covered in gouges and scratches along with cream drapes. There is a small desk and chair along with a small vanity next to a large closet. There is one large window that sits latched closed from the inside. The window shows the picture of perfect autumn with various trees swaying in a sea of orange and red. The trees ebb and flow like the waves, with the setting sun further bathing the scene in orange. She goes to the small desk and grabs the chair in front of it. She pulls the chair to the door and presses it against the latch. She walks to the large canopy bed and reaches under it. she pulls her hand out revealing a short sword.

She holds the sword aloft, pointing towards the door. Hours pass until the light white light of the sun creeps back into the window, and the blue light of the moon pours out in kind. Suddenly Ealyn reaches a hand to her chest and starts breathing rapidly. She rushes to the desk and reaches inside pulling a small vial of dark liquid. She unstops the vial and pours a little down her throat, and she stops it again. She breathes deeply, and she collapses onto the bed.

Ealyn shoots awake when something starts banging on the other side of the door. She stuffs the vial into her bodice. She gets to her feet before the lock shatters and the door explodes open. A tall handsome man stands meeting her gaze. He has pale blonde hair that swoops over to the right side. He is wiry with dancer's muscles. His white shirt bellows out below him along with his loose cloth trousers. He has the feathered knight's sword in hand. He draws in close, and Ealyn gets to her feet standing at guard holding

the short sword at the man. She starts to shake, the shaking growing in intensity the closer he approaches.

“Your grip is weak.” he says.

The man lunges and swipes his sword, forcing the short sword from Ealyn’s grip.

“Your stance is wrong.” he says.

The man reaches his leg out and sweeps bringing Ealyn to the floor.

“I think you need better armor.” he says.

The man straddles her chest and rips open her dress, revealing her scarred and bruised flesh. She starts to scream, but he jams a piece of cloth into her mouth.

“Do you think I'm stupid?” he says.

She violently shakes her head.

“You must, because that was one of the stupidest things you’ve tried yet.” he says.

He reaches behind his back and produces a rope. He starts to tie her hands as tears leak from her eyes. He lowers and licks the tears from her face and peels his lips apart into a toothy grin.

“Our betrothal will be announced tomorrow.”

Ealyn screams through the cloth as the man drags her by her tied wrists across the floor. He gets to the bed and pulls her entire body up with one hand and tosses her onto it.

“I am going to relish this, once you are married to me, I can set up an adequate replacement and you will be of no more use to me” the man says.

He pulls her across the bed, and she starts kicking wildly. He puts her tied hands on the bed post and loops the knot around it.

“Your sister will be a fine replacement.” The man says.

A toothy grin crawls its way across his face, and he walks out of the room. She sits there as tears stream down her face. She swallows her tears, and she starts wriggling her wrist back and forth, then a crack, and the part of the headboard breaks off and splinters into her wrist. She winces and crawls off, she plops onto the floor of the room, and she makes her way to the window. The window is still latched, she tries to push it open, but she can't. She looks at the latch and loops her restraints around it. She tries pulling up, but it does not budge. She eyes the weak hinges, and she pulls with as much force as she can muster. The latch breaks off and the window lazily lolls open.

The handsome man comes in holding a rolled set of butcher's tools only to see her sitting on the ledge of the now open window. She looks him in the eye and rolls out. He runs across the room and looks out the open window. He looks down only to see the grass.

Ealyn runs as fast as she can as bells start to ring across the grounds, she darts around a corner into a small dark space next to a large door. She ducks into it and presses in a stone. She crawls into the small space and starts worming through. From below footsteps and the clanking of heavy armor.

Ealyn crawls into a side passage and pushes on a stone, revealing a small dining room, with a man with grey streaks in his hair sitting at a table. She pulls herself out of the passage and faces the man wearing a buttoned black frock coat and a white undershirt, he has kind blue eyes that turn to face her and become wide.

“Rycard it has to be today,” she says

Rycard nods, Ealyn starts to tear up and he goes to her side and pulls her into a deep embrace. Once safely within the confines of his strong arms she completely breaks down and goes limp. He holds onto her gently rocking her back and forth for several minutes until he pulls her out and looks her directly in the eyes.

“If today is the day so, be it” Rycard says

Ealyn nods in agreement, he lets go of her and starts loading various supplies into a large sack. Once the sack is half full, he tosses it over his shoulder and approaches her again.

“You are strong, and you are brave.” Rycard says.

“Do not leave this room until I come back.” Rycard says.

Ealyn nods again, and Rycard reaches into his black frock pulling out a small dagger with a black leather hilt. He cuts her restraints and leaves the room. Ealyn sits at the table in silence while she bites her nails, until footsteps echo from under the door. Ealyn gets up excitedly, but when the door opens, she goes completely pale.

On the other side of the door is a household guard adorned with simple chainmail and a breastplate with crossed feathers on it.

“The prince is looking for you.” the guard says.

Ealyn backs up towards the table.

“Please come with me” The guard says.

Ealyn continues backing up. The guard winces.

“Please just come, you know what he will do if you make him wait.” the guard pleads.

Ealyn backs up until she is pressed against the wall. The guard swallows deeply and approaches her. She dodges around him and attempts to run across the room into the hallway. The guard grabs her by the forearm pulling her back. He wraps his arms around her, and she violently writhes attempting to bite his arms. He tosses her over his shoulder while she kicks and bites, then he walks out of the room.

He starts walking to the right but is stopped when he turns a corner and stands face to face with Rycard.

“Drop her right now” Rycard says

“Please, you know what he’ll do to us if she escapes, you know what he’ll do to her once he finds her. It's better that we don’t make him wait any longer.” the guard begs.

Rycard reaches into his frock and pulls two small ornate black daggers; holding one in each hand the daggers face opposite direction.

“Put her down.”

The guard puts Ealyn down and reaches for the sword at his side. Before he can halfway draw, he lets go of the sword hilt and reaches for his throat. Which now has a

deep gash from ear to ear. He uselessly holds his hands to his throat as blood gushes between his fingers and he falls to the floor.

Rycard reaches down and pulls Ealyn back to her feet. Before they leave Ealyn reaches down and grabs the guard's sword. Barely able to hold it aloft, her arms shiver shakes as her arms protest against the weight of the heavy longsword. She slips it into her belt and continues walking with Rycard down the hallway.

The floors vibrate in tune with the march of guards across the castle, as Ealyn and Rycard slink down hallways making sure to keep to the shadows. As they walk forward the two of them pass a large oaken door, Ealyn stumbles, and Rycard pulls her along, but she tugs on his shirt, and they stop.

“We should grab my sister.” Ealyn whispers

“Your sister is promised to the church, there is no need to worry for her.” Rycard responds

“What if prince Alyk's finds a way around it.” Ealyn says.

“You father; although a truly repugnant sort, needs the support of the white order and will not so easily let Brena slip the bonds of gospel duty. No matter how smitten she might be.” Rycard says.

Ealyn clenches her jaw at that remark.

“I still want to see her.” Ealyn says.

Rycard sighs and lets go of her arm. Ealyn opens the door and walks into the room beyond. The room is covered top to bottom in different white lacework patterns,

some hang off the top of the canopied bed and others dangle off the mirror, and some incomplete ones sat on a desk. Aside from the cloth dregs, it is well appointed with four tapestries for each of the walls, and a patterned rug for the floor, and a beautiful, canopied bed with rose colored curtains.

Ealyn walks forward and parts the curtains of the canopied bed and takes a second watching the steady lifting and lowering of the sheets as her sister sleeps soundly. Ealyn reaches out her hand and cups her sister's cheek. Bleary eyed, her sister blinks until Ealyn comes into focus.

"Brena are you awake?" Ealyn whispers.

"No." Brena says.

Brena pulls the sheet coverings above her face.

"I need to talk to you." Ealyn says.

"I don't want to talk to you." Brena says.

"Please" Ealyn says.

Brena pulls back the sheets and shifts herself into a sitting position against the headboard. The girl is around fourteen with a small, pointed face, small pouty lips, and dark brown hair that falls down in ringlets to her shoulders. Her face contorts into a sneer.

"Fine what do you want." Brena says.

"I am leaving today." Ealyn responds softly.

"Prince Alyks said you would be running away." Brena chides.

Ealyn grips her thigh tightly making red marks where her fingernails burrow into the skin.

“I didn’t know you and prince Alyks were so close.” Ealyn says.

“Prince Alyks is kind and generous, he even took the favor I made.” Brena responds.

Ealyn looks around the room at all of the previous failed attempts at making a favor.

“You know that prince Alyks is promised to another.” Ealyn says.

“The prince loves me, and I love him, I doubt that he will kowtow to any lord's match. He is stronger than any of them and could easily challenge them to single combat and win.” Brena responds.

Ealyn’s grip tightens, and her nails break the skin, causing blood to start dribbling out in rivulets.

“The prince is not who he seems.” Ealyn says.

“The prince said you would say that, and he says that you are just jealous of us.” Brena responds.

“Please you have to understa-” Ealyn half utters.

“I will not listen to any of your slander when it comes to prince Alyks, you are just jealous that he loves me and not you.” Brena interrupts.

“Please Brena” Ealyn pleads.

“No Kat, I will not hear it any longer.” Brena says.

Brena crawls back under the covers and pulls them above her face. Ealyn stares at her sister and rage fills her eyes, as she pulls her fingers from her thighs tossing droplets of blood over the bed in the process.

“If you won’t come home with me willingly then I will just have to drag you.” Ealyn hisses.

“If you do, I will scream.” Brena says from under the covers.

Ealyn reaches under the covers for Brena’s waist, but before she grabs hold, Brena starts wailing at the top of her lungs. Ealyn quickly extricates her hands from under the covers and turns to face the door. The clanking sounds of footsteps echoe down the hall. The door shoots open and Rycard enters.

“We have to go now.” Rycard says.

“Please.” Ealyn says.

“No!” Brena screams.

Tears started to well up in Ealyn’s eyes.

“Please.” Ealyn croaks.

Brena does not even bother to respond and just continues wailing. Ealyn walks backwards, and Rycard grabs her by the arm, and they run out of the room and down the hallway. Ealyn looks at her sister's room as she leaves, tears streaming down her face as the screaming finally stops. Ealyn turns back around and brushes the tears from her eyes and continues running down the hall.

The pair turn a corner and continue, the guard's footsteps get louder. They arrive at a small staircase leading further down into the castle. Darkness blankets the pair as they rush down the stairs. The darkness thickens until the pair are in total black. Rycard turns around, waits and listens, then he paws at the wall until he grabs an unlit torch wall. He pulls a flint and steel from his pocket and sparks it. He continues deeper into the darkness with Ealyn in hand.

They land at the bottom of the staircase and Rycard takes another look around, then he gives the torch to Ealyn. Rycard gets down on all fours and brushes his hands across the floor stones. Ealyn looks at him and looks up the stairs, the footfall starts again. Ealyn fidgets and looks down at Rycard, until he pushes and one of the stones moves slightly.

Rycard lifts the stone, and motions for Ealyn to come. She looks down the hole, the torch only lights a small area, revealing the top of a ladder fastened into the dirt. Ealyn gives Rycard the torch and starts climbing down the ladder.

Ealyn touches the floor of the dirt tunnel; she waits in darkness until the orange light of the torch slowly fills the tunnel. Rycard gets off the ladder and starts walking down the tunnel. Ealyn follows until they stop at a wooden door inset into the dirt of the tunnel, moonlight pouring through the cracks.

Ealyn moves to walk through the door, but she shudders when Rycard lightly grips her shoulder. She looks up at him.

“I have something for you from your father.” Rycard says.

Rycard drops the large sac onto the dirt floor and reaches one hand into it. He pulls out a long stiff canvas covered sword. Rycard unties the leather binding at the base, and starts to unfurl. The dull brown of the canvas gives way to the gleam of white underneath. The canvas piles onto the floor revealing the sword in its entirety. The blade reflects the orange torch light like milk. Ealyn reaches out to touch the blade and draws a finger back. Blood dribbles onto the floor from a cut thinner than a hair. Ealyn puts her finger in her mouth and watches as the blood on the blade spreads like it was just dropped in water then disappears.

Rycard frowns and turns the sword around carefully avoiding touching the blade. He holds out the grip to Ealyn. Ealyn wraps her fingers tightly around it. Rycard lets go and Ealyn tenses her muscles and puts all her strength to avoid dropping it. The sword shoots up slightly and Ealyn gasps. Rycard smiles and backs away as Ealyn swishes and swipes in the air with a dopey grin on her face.

“I have never been able to swing a sword like this”

Rycard smile sours and he looks behind him.

“We better get a move on Ealyn, I doubt Grin will wait forever.”

Ealyn nods and Rycard opens the door. Beyond is a large courtyard completely quite only broken by the clomping of hooves on dirt. They exit the tunnel, behind them stands the mountain side with the castle jutting outwards from it. The closer the stonework gets to the mountain the smoother and whiter it becomes, until at the edge it is just smooth white stone with no seams. Ealyn and Rycard continues walking until they reach a small, thatched stables with a small stout man holding a lantern ahead of

him. Rycard stands Infront of Ealyn and walks towards the man. Ealyn stays behind and her eyes bore into the archway at the castle end of the courtyard.

“3 white coins nothing less” the stout man says

“Fine” Rycard responds

Rycard reaches into a pocket and pulls out three large enameled white coins. He hands them to the stableman, and he walks back.

The doors in the archway behind Ealyn and Rycard explode open and twenty guards wearing surcoats with the crossed feather crest run into the courtyard. Rycard runs into the stable and the stableman yells, and he comes out with a saddled horse. Rycard reaches his hand down and Ealyn grabs his forearm. He slings her onto the saddle. The main gate on the other side of the courtyard shakes, then the sound of chains against wood emanates from it side, and the door starts closing. Rycard ducks down and spurs the horse, it takes off. Ealyn and Rycard barely make it through the gate before it closes.

The moon hangs high above the castle as it becomes smaller and smaller in the distance, as Ealyn and Rycard enter a dark wood. Ealyn presses her face into Rycard’s back, and closes her eyes.