

Chapter 5

The sickly-sweet smell of decaying corpses sits heavily in the air around the path leading to dark water. The trees surrounding the path on both sides obscure most of the fields of battle, but occasionally one can catch a glimpse of death sitting between the trees. The group's horses trot along this path. Ealyn peers through the trees and a body held up by a pike lanced through its chest stares at the ground. Ealyn reaches into her saddle bag and rummages around. She withdraws a small piece of white cloth. She ties it around her face and continues following the group. Gerard turns to face her.

"I didn't know the princess was so sensitive to smell." Gerard asks.

"It is to protect from the miasma." Ealyn responds.

"I have been around many a battle princess, if breathing in the air of death has yet to choke me, then I doubt it will choke you." Gerard says.

"Scholar Mitass published a pamphlet on the harmful miasma created by the dead, and that one should always cover your mouth and nose with cloth or strong-smelling perfume to protect yourself." Ealyn says.

"Damn the scholars! They are charlatans who confuse precedent with cause. If everyone took their word as gospel then we would all have been bled to death before age four, because our spirits are unbalanced." Gerard says.

“What separates us from animals then. If we do not test and practice our arts, then we are no different than the pagan peoples that ate each other for blood magic rituals.” Ealyn says.

“You confuse my meaning princess; I did not say that we should not learn and grow, but that you should not accept the words of so-called learned men at their word.” Gerard says.

“I will admit that maybe the scholars are not perfect but denying that they are at least progressing on the grounds that they are not always right is a fallacy that leads to total ignorance.” Ealyn says.

“For all the power their words hold they should be the first to admit their own lack of efficacy. I have seen to many men supplicate at the feet of collages begging for cures, only to be drained of life and used for spare parts.” Gerard says.

“The cost of progress is the occasional misstep; it is the price that we pay for our children to be better than us.” Ealyn says.

“That is a cost that I am not willing to pay.” Gerard says.

Gerard rides forward. Ealyn looks at the dead bodies peeking through the trees as they pass. The closer they get to the town the more the bodies pile, until one does not have to look deep in the trees. The bodies sit like fish washed up after a storm at the side of the road. Piled high in ditches with thier blood mixing with ground water, and thier skin sloughing off thier bloated corpses. Ealyn takes a breath and gags, then pulls off her mask and vomits off the side of her horse. Gerard stops and turns around. Ealyn quickly wipes her face, then stands straight and faces Gerard.

Gerard stops his horse and looks around at the piled bodies, then back at Ealyn. He pushes his horse forwards to Ealyn's side and reaches into his saddle bag. He pulls out a small, dried fruit covered in something sticky. He hands it to Ealyn; she accepts it warily.

"It will settle your stomach." Gerard says.

Ealyn pops the fruit in her mouth, and swallows.

"Why hasn't anyone done anything about this." Ealyn says.

"This town is contested between your father and Lady Talltree, so there is no lord to manage the town, and as for the town folk. When your family is starving because a soldier burned your crops, the smell is not your top priority." Gerard says.

Ealyn looks forward and her expression stiffens. They trot along the path; bodies continue to line the path, but as they come closer to town the bodies diminish and the forest subsides. Ealyn looks into the forest, and spots glowing yellow eyes, she stops her horse.

"I must relieve myself." Ealyn says.

"Your welcome to without stating as much." Gerard says, then chuckles.

Ealyn flushes then dips into the forest until she is obscured by the trees.

"valdyr" she whispers.

Nothing appears.

Ealyn darts her head around.

“valdyr” she says.

Nothing appears.

“Come,” Ealyn says.

The valdyr erupts from a bush obscured by the shadow of a great oak. It turns its head and stares at her.

“You need a name.” Ealyn says.

The valdyr cocks its head.

“Andraemyda,” Ealyn says.

The valdyr snorts, Ealyn chuckles.

“Eada,” Ealyn says.

The valdyr huffs. Ealyn looks towards the path and looks at the ground.

“You know my father used to go on adventures like this.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn pauses and plops to the ground, the valdyr comes to her side.

“At least thats what mother told me.” Ealyn says.

She looks into the glowing eyes of the valdyr.

“I don’t know if I can do this. Aena?” Ealyn says.

The valdyr snorts and Ealyn smiles. Ealyn looks down at her shirt, and looks at the valdyr.

“Rycard.” Ealyn says.

The valdyr stands tall and looks at Ealyn and bows its head. Ealyn tears up and lets loose a small sob into her shirt. She swallows her tears and gets up.

“Rycard you need to stay in the forest, if the town found you they would kill you.” Ealyn says.

The wolf looks into Ealyn’s eyes.

“Stay in the forest Rycard.” Ealyn says.

The wolf bows then walks into the forest, and disappears into the shadows of the trees. Ealyn walks out of the forest, and wipes away her tears. She appears back on the path, Salum and Gerard look down at her. She gets back on her horse and trots down the path, they follow. The bodies slowly dwindle as the forest opens to rolling hills spotted with burned-out houses. The town appears as they party crests a hill.

A large stone tower juts out from the center, casting a long shadow like the minute hand of a great clock. Completely covering a sliver of the buildings in darkness. As they move closer so does the shadow change. It’s shadow moves in perfect time with the sun. Right now the shadowed part of the tower face’s the party. Ealyn looks up at the tower mouth agape.

“Is that ruddy stone obelisk so impressive princess?” Gerard asks.

“I’ve only read about it. Its actually an engineering marvel, its shadow is perfectly aligned with the sun. So based on where the shadow is casted you would know the time.” Ealyn says.

“The white order was truly a marvel before the fall.” Gerard says.

“Actually this was built a mere two hundred years ago, by the hands of mortal men.”

Ealyn says.

“Mortal hands cannot erect such a marvel.” Gerard says.

“You are free to live under the constant haze of nostalgia, I refuse to keep my vision so obscured.” Ealyn says.

As they approach the shadow moves and reveals the true visage of the once great town. Its face now pocked, and burned. Large gouges in the side leave it leaning slightly to one side, the shingles of the roof shattered as a memory of the the stone thrown at it by seige weapons. Ealyn looks the tower up and down and sighs.

They part approaches one of the gates. Outside a crowd of emasciated serfs covered in burns, lesions, and other foul marks crowd around the gate, clamouring over each other to get in.

“One at a time!” A gaurd yells.

Ealyn looks at Gerard.

“I can get us in.” Gerard says.

Gerard gallops his horse forwards and dismounts at the side of the gate house. He peeks in and starts talking to a gaurd. The gaurd laughs, and Gerard reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small leather bag. He hands it to the gaurd and the gaurd peeks out of the gatehouse, he waves at them. Ealyn and Salum trot forward, Gerard remounts his horse. The gaurd opens the gate and a couple other gaurds push the serfs back as they make thier way through the gate.

The town is a grim reflection of the outside. Many of the buildings are burnt out with many naught more than rubble. Beggars sits on the side of the cobblestone street wearing only enough for modesty holding hands out. Some wear the red and blue of the once great house of redtrout. Many are wounded, some are blind calling to people as they pass. Ealyn turns her head and looks at the gate house, people clamouring at the closed gate.

“How much gold did you pay him.” Ealyn asks.

“Not gold, salt. Gold doesn’t mean shit when you cant eat.” Gerard says.

“You can’t eat salt,” Ealyn responds.

“No but you need it for curing meat, and this towns only supply of fresh food is from the stream. I bet that salt right now is worth twickee more than its weight in gold.” Gerard states.

Ealyn looks back at the gate, then looks foward. They trot along the wall until they arrive at a squat wooden building. It buckles under the weight of its roof, the sides bowing out slightly, making the building almost look like a big brown pumpkin.

“We can stay here,” Gerard says.

“Why here,” Ealyn asks.

“I can trust the owner, I have stayed here many times, and he knows that it pays more to not ask questions then to sell the answers.” Gerard says.

They all dismount, Ealyn heaves her saddle bag over her shoulder. Salum grabs the reigns of thier horses and they split Ealyn and Gerard walking into the building; Salum

walking to a yard hidden behind. The atmosphere is grim, a bard in the corner plays a discordant tune, and many of the residents sit and stare at thier tables occasionally sipping at foul smelling tankards. In the center towards the back of the room three hooded figures sit with thier hands out over the hearth fire. A pot filled with a light brown substance bubbles, occasionally bringing unidentifialbe globs to the surface.

“Oscarth!” Gerard announces.

A thin man with thick black hair down to his shoulders wearing a long brown apron and white undershirt stands up from behind the bar.

“Gerard?” Oscarth asks.

“I barely recognised you,” Gerard says.

“Yeah lost about six stone since I last saw you.” Oscarth says.

Gerard’s smile falters, then he approaches Oscarth and wraps his arms around him.

“Its been a long time friend.” Gerard says.

“Aye it has.” Oscarth responds.

Gerard pulls back a little, but Oscarth grabs a little tighter and maintains the hug until Gerard pulls away. Oscarth looks into Gerard’s eyes, then steps back and moves back behind the bar.

“Needing rooms,” Oscarth asks.

“Yes, for me and my companions.” Gerard says.

“The usual for the white one.” Oscarth says.

“Yes, but I want a prime room for my sweetling.” Gerard says.

He pulls Ealyn into a side hug.

“Your best room for my princess.” Gerard says.

Ealyn scowls and turns to Gerard who has his teeth bared in a toothy grin. Ealyn knees him in the side, and he winces for only a second, then recovers. Oscarth reaches into the bar and pulls out a set of keys, he hands them to Gerard and Gerard smiles.

They all walk to a staircase in the corner.

“You didn’t tell me the plan.” Ealyn says.

“I figured you would disapprove, but people won't ask questions this way.”

Gerard says.

“Fine but tell me next time.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn and Gerard climb the stairs until they are at a wooden door at the top of the stairs. Gerard opens the door to reveal a master suite with a large, canopied bed, wooden vanity and a deerskin rug on the floor.

“I knew this was the place.” Gerard says.

Ealyn looks around the room, and she sees the carpet is fraying, the wooden is rotting, and the vanity is missing a drawer. Gerard plops onto the bed. Ealyn drops her saddle bag onto the floor.

“I needed this.” Gerard says.

Ealyn takes a seat on the bed, and picks up a handful of sheets, letting the rough fabric pass through her fingers.

“There is only one bed.” Ealyn states.

“Well, I call it.” Gerard says.

“You call what?” Ealyn asks.

“The bed,” Gerard responds.

“You can’t just call something. I am to have the bed.” Ealyn responds.

“Does the princess ail from her travels abroad. Did the epic journey test your metal.” Gerard responds.

“I am fine sleeping in the stables for all I care, but you are my prisoner.” Ealyn says.

“Yes, and why is that state of affairs still true? I see no bindings about my wrist, and I do not see the monster that kept me in line. Princess be very aware that right now, you have no power over me.” Gerard says.

Ealyn pales.

“If you step foot out of town my valdyr will rip you to shreds.” Ealyn stammers.

“I am not totally empty-headed princess; I know that when a beastkin dies so does its thrall.” Gerard says.

Ealyn gets up from the bed and draws her sword. Gerard laughs.

“Twas a jape princess, don’t worry I will not stray far. What kind of husband would I be to abandon my new wife.” Gerard says.

Gerard laughs again. Ealyn glares at him.

“Well, now that we can call ourselves settled and I have affirmed my devotion to you. I suggest that we get something to eat.” Gerard says.

Ealyn continues glaring at him.

“Princess, you are not going to kill me, and I don't want to kill you. So, I suggest we table this duel for a later time.” Gerard says.

Ealyn sheathes her sword. Gerard starts unbuckling the various pieces of his armor.

“Is that wise?” Ealyn asks.

“Oscarth is a friend, and I doubt anyone even knows you are here.” Gerard says.

Ealyn rummages through her saddle bag and withdraws a small coin purse, and a bundle of dried meat. The last piece of Gerard’s plate falls on top of the rest causing the pile to disperse all over the floor. Gerard resecures his sheath to his side, and they walk out of the room. As soon as they touch the bottom landing Gerard darts towards the bar. Ealyn takes a calmer pace, panning her gaze across the room as she stalks towards the bar. In the center two men, one younger and one older are having a debate. Ealyn slides into the seat next to Gerard.

“Two tankards please.” Gerard says.

“Just water for me, thanks.” Ealyn says.

“Who said I was ordering for you.” Gerard says.

Ealyn scoffs. Oscarth ducks under the bar and grabs three tankards.

“I am going to watch lord Whitefall bleed on the battlefield tomorrow.” the young man says.

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

“Never mind the Lord Whitefall, the prince light feather is the one to be concerned about.” An older man says.

“In what way?” the younger man says.

“Lord whitefall has made no ground in this war, yes?” The older man says.

“Yes,” the younger responds.

“So, imagine that I am a man of great power with an army to rival Denland. What would I be in a position to do.” The older man says.

“To help,” the younger says.

“Thats right to help but am I going to do it for free?” the older man asks.

“No,” the younger responds.

“Exactly, but what cost would equal the thousands of lives spent?” The older man asks.

“I don’t know.” the younger says.

“Power, ultimate power.” The older man says.

“What do you mean?” The younger asks.

“If prince Alyks where to marry the Whitefall daughter, then he would have an avenue to control two of the most powerful kingdoms in Aurica.” The older says.

Ealyn turns back to see a full tankard of murky water in front of her. Gerard is chugging one of the tankards, then drops it back on the bar and grabs the other. Ealyn draws a slice of dried meat from her pocket and eats it. She lifts the water to her mouth, but she takes a sniff. She frowns and puts the tankard back down. She turns to Gerard as he gulps down another tankard, and she gets up and walks back upstairs.

She steps foot in the room and sits on the bed. She caresses the fabric of her shirt between two fingers and looks out the window. A raven sits on the ridge of a roof and eats a small rat. It rips into the rats guts covering its beak in blood. A white raven dives from the sky and lands next to the raven. The raven caws and the white hawk jumps closer, the raven caws again and backs up. The white raven moves closer, not breaking its slow stride. The raven drops the rat, and dives for the hawk. They nip and bite at each other until the hawk tears out the ravens throat. Blood drips off the red speckled feathers of the white hawk. The hawk takes off, and an arrow pierces its heart and it falls to the ground. Gerard bursts into the room, and stumbles into the bed. He starts snoring. Ealyn scoffs then gets up and locks the door. Ealyn pulls a sheet out from under him and lays it across the floor in the corner of the room. She closes the window and curls herself in the sheet and closes her eyes.

A creak in the floor causes Ealyn’s eyes to shoot open. The room is filled with darkness only a sliver of silver moonlight illuminating a streak across the floor. At the edge of that streak the black boot of a man cascaded in shadow stands over the bed where Rycard is sleeping. Ealyn stops breathing, and slowly moves her hand to her side.

She draws her blade painfully slow. Once out of the sheathe, she moves out of the bed sheet. The intruder grabs his side and retrieves a knife. Ealyn jumps at the man, he raises his knife to block, but when the white blade meets the knife; The knife snaps in half and as Ealyn continues her swing the sword is buried into the man's shoulder. He screams and Ealyn tries to wrench her blade out. Ealyn lets go of the sword as the man screams and blood shoots out of his wound. Ealyn grabs half of the blade off the ground and plunges it into the mans throat. The screaming turns to a gurgle and the man slumps to the ground. Ealyn turns to Gerard who is still asleep.

She gets to the bed and shakes him, he does not respond. Ealyn curses under her breath. She gets off the bed and darts to her bag. She reaches in and withdraws the alchemy box. She opens it and grabs a sprig of a dark colored herb. She runs to the bed and straddles Gerard's chest. She cracks the sprig in half. She breathes in and coughs. Gerard shoots awake and coughs as well. Gerard looks at the bleeding corpse on the ground. He draws his sword and looks at the door. A yelp echoes from outside the window. Ealyn darts to the window and looks down. Six men stand in a circle around Salum. He is covered in wounds. One of the men has a long pole with an open spiked collar at one end. One of the men rushes Salum, and he raises his gloved fist and punches the man. The man collapses to the ground with his skull crushed in. The man loops one end of the poll around Salum's neck and he starts choking. Ealyn gasps, and the other men turn to the window. Three of them rush into the building.

Gerard stands ready at the door when two people rush in. With two quick slashes he exposes their guts, and they crumple to the floor. Gerard grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder, Ealyn does the same shrinking under the weight. Gerard gets out of the

room first and confronts the three men in the hallway. Ealyn's goes pale, then starts wheezing, she reaches into her pocket and withdraws the small black vial and pours it down her throat. Gerard holds his sword defensively as the men look at him, and at her.

"We don't want to hurt you, just surrender. We will take you prisoner under the white seal." One man says.

The man raises his sword and drops it to the floor. Gerard lowers his sword; the rest of the men match him. One of the men moves towards him and Gerard backs off. The man looks inside. He yells and raises his sword back up.

"Stop you fool!" the man says.

The other man slices his sword through the air, and Gerard blocks. The other jumps in and attacks. Ealyn backs off as Gerard fends off the three men's attacks with grace. He dances across the wooden floor parrying and deflecting attacks and taking advantage of weaknesses in their stance. His deadly dance finishes when the last man falls to the floor. Suddenly a boom, Ealyn turns to the end of the hallway, fire licks the edge of the window as large stone balls covered in burning oil soar through the sky and pepper the town.

Gerard and Ealyn dart down the stairs. Another boom and the front of the inn explodes inwards. Ealyn and Gerard duck behind the banister shielded from the blast. They run out the back door. The light of the moon and stars are choked out by the haze of smoke filling the sky, replaced by sputtering orange glow of flame across the town. Ealyn and Rycard stumbled out the back door into the garden. As they arrive two men jump for Salum, he beats them away but from behind another pushes the metal pole with the

open collar. The collar clamps shut around Salum's neck under his helmet, and he falls to the ground. Blood dribbles from his neck drawing streak of blood across his white armor. The man with the pole spots Ealyn and Gerard, he steps back and thrusts the pole into the wood siding of the stable then runs out of the garden. Ealyn approaches Salum, as he grips and paws at the metal collar. She looks at the other end of the pole stabbed through a beam of the stables. She goes to the other end of the pole and starts pulling.

"Leave him!" Gerard yells.

"No!" Ealyn yells back.

"He will survive when the attackers come, you won't." Gerard says.

"I'm not leaving him!" Ealyn yells.

Salum raises his hand, and makes the symbol for run. Ealyn steps back.

"Fine," Ealyn says.

Gerard and Ealyn attach their bags to their horses. Ealyn takes one last look at Salum sitting on the ground with the collar around his neck, then takes off into the city streets. The entire city is covered in a haze of smoke. One is only able to make out the occasional person sobbing over a dead body. Dancing flames break through the haze. Ealyn and Gerard gallop their horses through the street. The closer they get to the front gate the more town defenders they spot in their blue and red surcoats. Many yell for orders, but none come. The gates of the town are covered in bodies. A group of defenders push bodies off the wall and make their way to the center of the fighting. Men climb the sides

and attack those on the top. A rain of arrows hits everyone on the top of the wall, and many fall to the side.

“I know a way out.” Gerard says.

Ealyn and Gerard trace the wall under they arrive at a small sewer drain. A couple of men in black leathers push their way through the small opening, they spot Ealyn and Gerard and hold up their small swords.

“I have no quarrel with you I just want to leave.” Gerard says.

One of the men runs at Gerard, in a smooth slash Gerard beheads the man from horseback. The others run off into the city. Ealyn and Gerard dismount their horses and loop their saddle bags about their shoulders. Gerard is first pushing himself through the waist size grated; sludge sticks to his light brown shirt. Ealyn is next, her black clothing masking most of the filth she dredges up. As soon as Ealyn pops out of the grate they take off.

Hundreds of men stand at the gates of the castle, their shields raised as the defenders drop stones from the walls and shoot arrows down. A group in front of the grate is heaving a battering ram, jagged at both edges. The steel bands of the wooden gate buckling under the force of the log. The rest of the army stand behind the men scaling the walls with great ladders. A man reaches the top of the ladder and brings his sword down screaming. His face is split by an axe, his blood spills down wall pooling in ditch below the ladder. These ditches line the walls below all the ladders scaling up the wall. The blood moves through the ditches to lower elevation, trailing into a small stream

pouring into the river the town is named for. The blood pools in the river in a growing red spot on the blue water.

Ealyn and Gerard rush past the chaos across the field, down the treeline. Men scream past them as they rush towards the wall. They do not give Ealyn and Rycard a second glance as they run past. Ealyn and Gerard make it to the forest edge. They take a breath. An arrow pierces through the branches and buries itself at Gerard's feet. They start running, more arrows follow the first barely missing them. One finds purchase in Gerard's shoulder and he tumbles to the ground. Ealyn stops and looks at Gerard, then looks deeper into the forest.

She picks Gerard up by the armpits and drags him behind a bush. She reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws the box of alchemy supplies. Someone leaps out from the darkness. The man in chainmail and dyed green leathers looks down at Gerard, then back up at her.

"Rycard!" Ealyn yells.

The man unsheathes his sword, and Ealyn does the same. The man slashes his sword down, Ealyn misses the block, and the sword cuts a slight gash in her belly. The man raises his hand for another slash, then he screams, and drops his sword. He takes off running, when Rycard her valdyr takes off after him. Rycard leaps at the man and rips a large chunk out of his side. He does not make a noise when the rest of his body hits the ground. The valdyr stalks back to her she reaches out, but the valdyr stumbles back. She goes pale and reaches into her saddle bag, and withdraws a small piece of the physick and pops it into her mouth. The valdyr calms and approaches her, then a blur of movement and the valdyr tumbles to its side. A beast with long slender

legs, and the same leather skin pulled over wiry muscle with tufts of fur, but a feline head and long lithe body rips into Rykard's side. Ealyn screams, and the Koetre backs down. A man with a long black coat steps out of the forest. The sigil of a wolf biting a monster's throat is emblazoned on his leather chestpiece. His eyes glow a pale yellow, and his long brown hair cascades out of the hood he has obscuring his face. He steps in front of Ealyn then kicks her in the head.