

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 and walk into the inn. 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.

“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, Salum splits off towards the back of the inn.

“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, his armor clanking.

“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 two-day 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 way for you to keep me bound, 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.

“I 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 and Ealyn gets up from the bed and storms out the door. Gerard looks at the closed door and his laugh dwindles into a chuckle then silence. He spreads

himself across the bed and stares into the ceiling. He looks out the window, and Ealyn is walking towards the stable where the inquisitor is sitting cross legged with his eyes closed. Gerard walks back to the bed and sits on it. He stares out the window and his view catch a small crow in flight. He follows it over the town until an arrow pierces its side and it falls to the ground. Gerard turns away from the window and stares back at the ceiling. He twiddles his fingers, then he gets up and puts his hand around the door handle. He scoffs then trudges back to the bed. He sits and stares back at the ceiling, then he looks at his armor, he gets up and undoes the buckles one by one, until the armor slips off his person. He sits back on the bed and stares at the wall. He continues staring until tears poke out from the corners of his eyes. He dabs them away, and swallows, more tears leak, and he dabs them away. Then they come in a torrent, and he breaks into sobbing and crumples onto the bed in a fetal position.