

## Chapter 7

Ealyn stands above the waterfall on top of a rock outcropping. She has laid her alchemy box in the center of a large mostly flat rock, using the rock as a makeshift table. Rycard sits at the edge of the forest with his head on his front paws staring with his glowing eyes at Ealyn. Ealyn opens the alchemy box and grabs a vial of yellow powder. She stuffs her alchemy box into her saddle bag, then pours out the vial onto the center of the rock's surface. She sniffs, then wretches. She grabs a small nose clip from her saddle bag and clamps her nose shut.

She reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws a palm sized glass lens. She holds the lens above the mound of powder until it blackens and turns liquid. She walks to the edge of the rock outcropping and finds a stick. She returns stick in hand and holds it above the bubbling black mass. The stick catches alight and Ealyn smiles. She leaves the solution to bubble then moves to another part of the clearing. Rycard looks on head cocked looking at the bubbling mass.

In the other part of the outcropping Ealyn takes out more vials of the yellow powder. She reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws her alchemy box. She pulls out a vial containing bleach, white, yellow crystals. She unstops the crystal vial and the powder vial. She pours out a pile of the yellow powder, then only drops the tiniest white crystal in the center. She looks at the pile then spits on it. Her spittle hits the white crystal, and it glows white hot for only a second, then the yellow powder turns black liquid. Ealyn

smiles, then grabs three more vials. She puts a small white crystal at the top of each of them then stuffs them back in her saddle bag.

She reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws a section of rope. She takes the rope and fashions an impromptu sling. Once the sling is finished, she puts it aside. She reaches into her alchemy box and withdraws four empty vials. She couches a vial in the sling. She holds her thumbs up to a broken tree stump. She raises the sling then slings it. The vial goes wide. Ealyn curses then grabs another vial, and tries to sling it. The vial is closer to the stump, but still ends wide. Ealyn curses again, then starts scouring the ground for a stone. She retrieves a smooth one and attempts to sling it at the stump. It goes wide. She continues this until the sun hangs low in the sky coloring everything in a deep orange. Finally, a rock hits the stump right in the center. Ealyn laughs and jumps up and down, then she swallows and grabs a vial and slings it. It hits the stump in the center. Ealyn looks at Rycard.

“Follow,” Ealyn says.

In the light feather camp, the light of fires and torches break through the darkness of a moonless night like sputtering orange stars in a grim reflection of the sky above. Off the side of the main concentration of tents there is a break in the trees leading to a clearing in the forest covered in crates and piled weapons. Wagons sit at the edge of the area. There is a small path leading further into the camp, currently a wagon bumps along the uneven path deeper into the camp.

Above the camp hidden by a copse of trees Ealyn sits looking down at the camp. She looks down at her shaking hands.

“Don’t worry about me boy. Just the shakes.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn takes a step out from the edge of the trees. Her knees buckle and she falls to the dirt. She shuffles into a seated position against a tree. Rycard moves to her side and pushes his head into her side.

“I’m fine.” Ealyn says.

Tears start to leak from the corners of her eyes. She pushes herself up, but her knees buckle again. Her hands dart to Rycard’s side, keeping her from collapsing to the floor again. She leans against Rycard as she looks deep into the camp. She turns to Rycard.

Ealyn stands up straight and shakes her shoulders. The shivering abates but is still present. She scuttles down the hill with Rycard at her side until she is at the edge of the forest clearing. The clearing has many boxes, and stands, but there is only one tent, which is surrounded by ten light feather soldiers. Ealyn counts all the guards surrounding the tent. Ealyn reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws the sling and the vials of yellow powder. She unstoppers the vials, then spits in one of them. The white crystal glows white hot for a second, then the yellow powder starts to bubble. Ealyn quickly couches the vial, then slings it into the clearing. The flame only glows a slight blue, the light could be mistaken for a trick of the eye, but as soon as it hits one of the wooden crates an orange explosion of flame erupts from it.

“Fire!” One of the guard's cries.

The guards all run from the tent to the flame now quickly spreading across the clearing. Ealyn ducks into the back of the tent along with Rycard, she wretches. The

stink is the worst of it. The smell of putrid flesh and soiled garments. Ealyn pulls her head back into place and looks at Salum. He is completely hairless, his glowing eyes set deep in his head. The rest of his face is covered by long faded scars and gashes. He has no mouth, only nine vertical slits in a row under his nose. He sits frozen with a metal collar chained to three posts that surround him. Blood seeps in rivulets from the collar down his sodden shirt into a puddle of dark brown below him. Ealyn gasps, and steps to him, continuing to wretch at the stench. Once she makes it to his side, he does not even turn his head to meet her. He is stiller than a statue staring at the ground. Ealyn looks at the back of the collar, there is a keyhole. Ealyn reaches into her saddle bag and withdraws a small lockpick. She picks the lock eyeing Salum the entire time.

Orange light spills through the bottom of the tent and continues growing as time passes. The back of the collar clicks but nothing happens. Ealyn eyes the collar, then pulls the locks. It pulls slowly along with a squelching noise. Ealyn vomits when the collar finally comes out revealing the hole that it was driven into his spine through. Salum finally moves and turns around to face Ealyn. With tears in his eyes he raises his hands.

“Thank you” he signs.

Ealyn nods, then undoes the rest of the collaring mechanism. Salum stands tall for a second, then collapses to his knees. Ealyn shoulders his weight, and they walk out of the back of the tent. As he walks the hole in the back of his neck knits itself closed, and he starts walking straighter, until when they get to the edge of the clearing, he stands tall and unaffected. Ealyn continues walking into the forest. Salum taps her on the shoulder, she turns around.

“We can’t leave yet. We need to get Gerard” Salum signs.

“We are leaving now.” Ealyn signs as her eyes scan the perimeter.

“I’m not leaving without him.” Salum signs.

“He would leave you.” Ealyn signs.

“I would rather stay than break a vow.” Salum signs.

Ealyn looks at the camp, tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

“Please.” Ealyn signs.

“I am staying, you can go.” Salum signs.

Ealyn wipes the corners of her eyes, then walks into the forest with Rycard at her side. Salum walks back into the camp. In the darkness Ealyn holds onto Rycard as he walks into the forest. The only light in the moonless night paints their backs a deep orange. The light slowly dims the farther they get into the forest. Ealyn stops and looks back at the camp, the light reflecting the tears on her cheeks. Ealyn sits against a tree and lets out a breath. Rycard sits next to her. Ealyn looks at him.

“Stay.” She says.

She stands up and swallows and starts walking back to the camp. Rycard looks as she walks away his glowing eyes slowly fading until only darkness is at her back. Once the light now on her face grows strong again, Salum walks out from behind a nearby tree.

“I thought you were going back for Gerard?” Ealyn asks.

“I knew you would come back.” Salum signs.

Ealyn gives a weak smile and together they walk back to the edge of the camp. The central fire in the clear has abated now only a smoldering pile of ash half the size of the clearing. The ten guards have now tripled, all now walking around the clearing frantically.

“Do you know where he is.” Ealyn signs.

“He is in the main camp in the holding area.” Salum signs.

“If you lead me there I can create a distraction, and we can go in and break him out.” Ealyn signs.

“Was the fire your doing?” Salum signs.

“Yes.” Ealyn signs.

“How?” Salum signs.

Ealyn smirks.

“You’ll see.” Ealyn signs.

Rycard leads Ealyn along the edge of the camp until they reach the threshold of the forest. Rycard points to the right side of the camp with twenty guards patrolling one end to the other. Ealyn nods and reaches into her saddle bag. She withdraws the sling, and one of the vials. She looks at the center of the camp.

“Can you use a sling?” Ealyn signs.

Salum nods.

“Ok, I am going to light this physic, and then you are going to sling it to the center of the camp.” Ealyn signs.

Salum nods again.

Ealyn hands the sling to Rycard. She reaches into her saddle bag and pulls out the rest of the explosive vials. She reaches in her bag and pulls out a leather code. She ties them together, then spits in them. She nodes at Rycard as the vials start to bubble. Rycard grabs them and couches them in the sling. Rycard swings the sling faster than Ealyn’s eyes can make out, then he lets it loose. The vials goes out of the sling faster than arrows. The vials fly above the camp, making their way to the center of the camp. They get closer and closer to the ground, their trajectory leading to a large tent in the center of the camp.

The vials tear through the canopy of the large tent. Nothing happens, then screams of the people inside cut the silence. One runs out of the front covered in flame. The flap of the tent opening behind him revealing a towering inferno covering the floor. The flaps close as the man falls to his knees and dies. Then the flames reach the canopy of the tent and it catches instantly. Everyone across the camp starts yelling fire. The fire leaps from the center of the tent to surrounding tents.

Ealyn stands with eyes wide as the flames erupt from the center of the camp. The glow is enough to cover the field in light. Ealyn turns to Rycard then nods, and they make thier way to the holding area. The holding area is dotted with people tied to posts hammered into the ground. The closer you get to the center the more prisoners have shackles instead of rope, then right at the edge of the camp and the holding area there is a tent. They make their way to the tent. They open the flap on the tent.

Ealyn eyes go wide. The tent is empty a post sitting in the center with various stains and puddle around it. Ealyn closes the flap and curses.

“Where is he.” Ealyn signs.

“He could be with the prince.” Salum signs.

Ealyn’s eyes go wide and she starts shaking. Salum turns to her.

“I’ll go.” Salum signs.

Salum turns to leave, then Ealyn grabs his shoulder. He turns around.

“I’m coming with you.” Ealyn signs.

Salum nods, and they both walk to the center of the camp. The center of the camp is still ablaze. So many pained screams echo across the camp that they create a resonance that thrums like a beat in the night. The light from the fiery plume illuminates the entire camp, creating harsh shadows, until the fire subsides and the entire camp is set back into shadow. Ealyn peaks out from behind a tent. The courtyard beside the tent is empty. Ealyn raises her hand and points to another tent in the center of the clearing. The large tent is gray with black stitch work in the sides of feathers interconnected with each other.

“Is that it?” Ealyn signs.

Salum nods.



“When I make the signal light the fire.” Ealyn signs.

Salum nods, Ealyn swallows and steps forwards legs shaking. She wills her feet to move another step, slowly her feet start to cooperate as they approach the tent. The inside of the tent is illuminated, two distinct shadows of a candle flame dance across the side of the tent, as their source flickers. One shadow grows large as it approaches the front of the tent. Ealyn jumps behind another tent. The figure peers across the courtyard then goes back into the tent. The muffled sounds of talking are barely perceptible as they are covered by distant screams.

Ealyn moves closer to the tent. The muffled voices get clearer, but are still indistinct. She moves in so close that she can see through a slit in the side of the tent. The tent is wonderfully appointed, a grey rug with a feather stitched into the center covers up the entire floor. There is a large wooden table to the right of the tent with four chairs at each end. There is a bed on the other side of the tent. Prince Alyks stands in the center of the tent, Gerard is below him in shackles covered from head to toe in bruises and scratches.

“Tell me where she is!” Alyks screams.

Gerard stays silent. Alyks raises his fist and punches him in the gut.

“Tell me!” Alyks screams.

Gerard stays silent. Alyks kicks him in the side repeatedly, his blonde hair tumbles over his sweating face and cover one of his crazed yellow eyes. Someone lifts the tent flap outside of Ealyn’s vision. Ealyn cranes her vision to see it, but refuses to disturb the tent to get a look.

“Sir the fire has.” The soldier is cut off.

“Get out!” Alyks screams.

The soldier ducks out of the tent quickly. Alyks turns back to Gerard and raises his fist. Someone steps through the flaps, Ealyn cranes to see the visitor again, but can only make out the slightest of side profiles.

“I said get out!” Alyks screams.

“I’m sorry.” A woman’s voice says.

The figure does not respond. Alyks turns to the figure murder in his eyes, then his face goes pale and his eyes soften. The woman walks out of the tent, Alyks trips over himself then barrels out of the front of the tent. Ealyn stares at the front of the tent through her peep hole. She looks to the side of the tent, then steps just a little to the left. She moves her vision to the front of the tent. When her vision stops here eyes go wide.

Brena wearing a resplendent form fitting white dress; is standing outside of the tent sobbing into a small white cloth. Alyks slowly walks up to her.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.” He says.

“No, don’t apologize I shouldn’t have interrupted you.” Brena whimpers.

“Don’t worry about that at all Brena.” Alyks says.

“It just...” Brena pauses.

“It really scares me seeing you like that.” Brena says.

Alyks puts his hand on her shoulder and turns her around to face him. She brings her into an embrace. Ealyn's face goes pale, then red. She reaches for the sword at her side and slides it slightly out of her hilt.

"I am not that person Brena, understand that." Alyks says.

Brena looks into his sharp yellow eyes, then looks back down.

"Do you need an escort back to your tent?" Alyks asks.

"I want to see him." Brena says.

Alyks leads Brena inside. Ealyn quickly ducks back to her previous position peering through the slit in the side of the tent. Brena stands in front of Gerard next to Alyks. Gerard spasms, and Ealyn leaps back into Alyks's arms. Ealyn's scowl deepens. Brena slowly breaks from Alyks's embrace. She approaches Gerard until she is only a few paces away.

"Did he kill Ealyn?" Brena asks.

Alyks nods. Brena looks back down at Gerard sitting still on the floor. She raises her arm and punches him in the gut. Alyks's eyes go wide, and he flushes. Brena reels back from the pain cradling her fist.

“You killed my sister!” Brena screams

Brena cradling her hand, kicks him in the side repeatedly. Blood spatters all over her white dress creating a long streak of red that reaches her face. Blood shoots all over her face. She only stops when her dress is almost totally sodden, then she collapses to the floor. Alyks approaches her side and kneels next to her. Brena starts sobbing.

“I loved her so much and I never told her.” Brena sobs.

Alyks grabs her by the shoulders and pulls her into a deep kiss. Brena melts into his arms. Ealyn freezes with an expression of total horror and rage on her face. Ealyn pulls her sword to its full length, then a boom. Ealyn stumbles back and looks at the source of the noise. A huge plume of fire has erupted to the right most point of the camp. Ealyn goes back to her spot. Alyks quickly grabs Brena and shoots out of the tent. Ealyn goes into the tent, then walks to the entrance. Brena and Alyks are walking to the other side of the camp. Ealyn steps towards them, then Gerard coughs. Ealyn turns to him then to Alyks and Brena leaving. Ealyn curses then walks back into the tent.

Ealyn raises her sword high and brings it down in one smooth motion, cutting the shackles in half. Gerard flinches, but fails to wake. Ealyn tries to lift him up, but crumples under her weight. Ealyn looks to the carpet on the floor. She pulls the carpet from the floor. She pushes Gerard onto the carpet. Once fully on the carpet Ealyn starts pulling Gerard outside the tent.

Soldiers run past yelling from one end of camp to the other. A man on fire runs across the camp and dunks his head into a water barrel then slumps into it dead. Many of the men ignore Ealyn as they panic. The fire spread across the camp quickly. It jumps from tent to tent in small leaps like woodland creatures jumping from branch to branch. Ealyn makes it to the border of the camp dragging the carpet behind her. A group of soldiers turn to face her. Their eyes go wide and they draw their swords.

“Stop thief!” One of them says.

Ealyn drops the carpet and raises her hands. One of the soldiers turn to the others, then approaches Ealyn. Before he can get within range, she draws her white sword. The guard freezes then goes for a slash. Ealyn tries to block, but the strength of the blow caves her grip, even though the white sword has cut halfway into the incoming blade. The soldier lets go of his sword, and Ealyn with a new sword attached to hers drops it. The soldier tackles her to the ground. Ealyn opens her mouth, but before she can say anything the soldier punches her across the face, then everything starts spinning. Ealyn looks at the place where the carpet was but it's gone. Ealyn turns to the blurry face of the soldiers now dragging her to her feet.

The soldier stops and drops Ealyn. She plunges to the ground with a splat as mud cascades around her. She turns her head to the soldier and her vision refocuses. Gerard stands in front of him covered head to toe in bruises his eyes almost swollen shut, he is slouched to one side his left hand over his stomach. Blood is trailing from his mouth in a thin rivulet, but he holds Ealyn's sword with his right hand. Another member of the group lunges at Gerard from behind. He swipes the sword and in one smooth motion bisects the man through his chainmail. The two halves fall to the ground. Gerard raises

the sword and before the soldier next to Ealyn can do anything Gerard cuts him down the middle. Another soldier screams and runs at him. The man slashes his sword at Gerard. He blocks, but instead of catching or parrying the sword, the white sword splits the other like the incoming sword was but a twig. Gerard thrusts forward and stabs the man through the head. The sword cuts through the helmet going full through the other side. Once the last man falls Gerard slumps over against the sword. He uses the sword to prop him up for a second, then he collapses to the floor. Ealyn pulls herself across the mud to be next to him. Then her head goes limp and she passes out on top of him.

Flashes of orange dance across her vision. Snippets of light, there is the taste of blood on her tongue. Slowly as she blinks the orange disappears, and the heat of the fire cools until it is frigid cold. The throbbing in her head soothes when a cold wind brushes against her. She opens her eyes again and she sees Salum. He stands in front of a tree in the forest nervously pressing his fingers against Gerard's and Ealyn's throats. Then she closes her eyes and falls asleep.