

Chapter 6

She runs deftly dodging roots and branches, then Someone from jumps out from the brush and tackles her to the ground.

“Rycard!” Ealyn yells.

A man brings a knife to Ealyn’s throat, then the knife falls from his hands. Ealyn rustles out of his grip and turns around. Rycard has bitten into the back of the man's neck. Ealyn withdraws her sword and runs deep into the forest. The forest gives way to a small open field. In the distance the tower at the center of dark water burns light a pillar of flame, lighting up the sky. In the distance a small burnout farmhouse stands alone on a hill. Ealyn walks warily towards the burnout home, Rycard trailing behind. They walk past broken fences that border empty fields. The house stands alongside a sall barn on a small hill above the empty fields. A small oak tree sits in the front yard with a small wooden swing dangling from it, one of the ropes broken. It dangles occasionally being blown by the wind. The entire scene has a dull orange glow from the light of the dark water tower.

Ealyn walks to the front door, and pushes through. The dwelling is only one room with a thatched roof that is patchy at best. There is a table in the center, a small table to the side and a large straw mattress behind the table. Ealyn walks to the mattress and crumples on top of it. She shifts her body, then shoots back up. She pulls back the sheet

and the bones of a small girl and a woman holding her reveal themselves. Below them is a dried pool of blood. Ealyn stumbles back and falls to the floor. She looks at the bones then looks outside. Ealyn walks out the door towards the barn. She opens the barn door.

The floor is covered in straw, with three stalls. There are no animals, but there is a shovel and a hoe still hanging on the wall. Ealyn grabs the shovel and walks outside. She presses on the ground outside until the shovel breaks the earth beneath the oak tree. Ealyn starts digging. Sweating profusely she digs until her face is pale. When the hole is three feet deep, she stops, laying against the shovel to keep herself upright. Ealyn takes a second, then walks back into the house and carefully bundles the bones in the sheet. Ealyn walks back outside with the sheet full of bones, and carefully places it in the shallow grave. She lays against the oak tree, catching her breath. When some time has passed she covers the grave. Once the grave is sufficiently covered, she clasps her hands together and whispers a prayer.

“Broun please lead them along the path of white into your gentle embrace.” Ealyn whispers.

Once the prayer is finished, she grabs a small stone from the base of the tree and puts it on top of the shallow grave. Ealyn walks from the grave site back into the barn. She rehangs the shovel, then collapses to the ground into sleep. Rycard stalks towards her, then curls himself around her.

Ealyn eyes shoot open when the barn door creaks open. Ealyn ducks behind a stall in the center of the barn. Four men wearing the blue and red surcoats of the Darkwaters walk through the barn door. Thier surcoats are spotted and torn in places, covering rusted chainmail. One has a club instead of a sword, another has a worn

crossbow, the other two have longswords. The man with the longsword spots Ealyn's saddle bag laying against the first stall. He turns to the rest and shushes them.

"What Derk?" one of them says.

"Someone's here." Derk responds.

"Oh." the first one says.

They draw their weapons and start poking around the barn. Ealyn looks around and spots a small hole in the wood of the barn leading outside. Ealyn pushes through the opening. Ealyn is covered by the shadow of a large man wearing the same mottled surcoat as the others. Instead, he has a great sword over his back.

"Went for a piss, and it seems an angel has fallen from the heavens for me." the man says.

Ealyn darts to the side, the man grabs her by the scruff and pulls her back forcefully.

"Where are you going sweet angel?" the man says.

Ealyn spits in his face.

"Ah, this is going to be fun."

The man starts dragging Ealyn back to the barn. As Ealyn's feet brush against the ground, she starts to wheeze. Then her face goes pale. The man brings Ealyn to the front of the barn. Ealyn starts breathing in rapidly.

"What's wrong with her." Derk asks.

“I don’t know, whats wrong little lady?” the man asks.

“My medicine in. The. Bag.” Ealyn croaks.

Ealyn points to the saddle bag.

“Oh, interesting, and what would you be willing to do for that medicine.” The man asks.

Ealyn coughs and strangles against his grip. Derk frowns, and grabs the saddle bag, then tosses it to her feet.

“Put her down Bendic.” Derk says.

Bendic slings the saddle bag over his shoulder. Ealyn tries to reach for it, but Bendic holds on tight.

“Why would I do that.” Bendic asks.

“What use will she be if she's dead.” Derk says.

“I think she has a little while to go. All she has to say is please and I'll put her down.” Bendic says.

Ealyn opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

“Put her down!” Derk orders.

“No.” Bendic says.

Derk draws his rusted sword from his side. The man does the same.

“No sorcerer will save you now.” Bendic says.

Bendic drops Ealyn and she falls to the floor and scrambles away. Ealyn looks up and Derk and Bendic are standing roughly five feet apart with their swords point at each other, the other deserters men stand in a circle around them. Bendic lunges at derk with a wide slash. The slash cuts Derk's arm slightly and blood falls to the ground. Ealyn's eyes go wide, and her head darts to the opening of the barn. Derk responds with a slash of his own, which Bendic doesn't dodge. He takes the slash in the stomach drawing blood. With Derk close, Bendic brings down the pommel of his sword on Derk's head. Derk dodges, but the pommel hits his shoulder. He falls to the ground, as his left arm goes limp.

Bendic raises his sword, but then everyone apart from Bendic's eyes go wide. Bendic turns around and sees Rycard standing with the carcass of a deer in his mouth. Rycard opens his mouth and drops the deer. Everything is still for just a second, then Rycard leads for Bendic, and bites through his chainmail and rips a large chunk out of his side, he does not even scream before he falls. One of the men tries to run out of the Barn, Rycard bites his leg off. Another raises his sword and brings it down on Rycard. The sword glances off, and Rycard bites out his stomach. One backs to the other side of the barn. Rycard runs at him then takes a leap and bites his throat out. Rycard jumps back and bites Derk's arm off. Derk screams, Ealyn scrambles for the saddle bag. Before she can reach it Rycard stands in front of her. She reaches for the saddle bag and he snarls. Ealyn pushes her self back, wheezing the entire way. Rycard walks forward, baring more and more of his fangs. Ealyn keeps pushing back until she is against the wall.

Rycard moves forward. Tears start streaming from her eyes as she reaches for Rycard. He opens his maw and bites Ealyn's hand. She screams, and something in Rycard's eyes changes. He opens his jaw, and Ealyn cradles her bleeding hand. Rycard looks around at the carnage, then runs out of the door of the barn. Ealyn scrambles for the bag and grabs the alchemy box. She pours the black vial down her throat, then she treats her own wound. Derk, now pale, is laying on the floor bleeding out. Ealyn treats his arm and wraps it in white linens. He is still writhing in pain. Ealyn reaches into her alchemy box and withdraws a brown vial. She pours it down his throat, and his eyes flutter shut.

Ealyn turns around to face the barn doors. She gets up cradling her wounded hand. She walks to the open door. The morning haze sits over the plain and forest beyond. The sun breaks through the haze behind the trees causing them to be obscured by shadow as light cuts around them, the haze gives the light substance as it one could bottle it. The clouds reflect the light of the yellow morning sun, but they are marred by the black smoke billowing in a large plume from the town. The smoke creates a large dark mass that mars the golden clouds. Ealyn looks down at her hands then up at the forest beyond the plain.

"Rycard!" she yells.

Ealyn gazes into the forest, not a branch rustles. Ealyn walks back into the barn. Derk is sound asleep his rhythmic breathing the only sound accompanying the rustle of the oak tree's leaves outside. Ealyn goes to Bendic's side and picks up her saddle bag. She slings it over her shoulder then leaves the barn.

Ealyn walks along the broken fences and salted fields until she reaches the edge of the forest. The morning haze still sits on the forest, causing the light pouring through the trees to gain substance. Ealyn steps into the forest.

“Rycard!” she yells.

There is nothing, just the symphony of nature. The calling of the birds, the rushing on a nearby stream, and the rustling of the leaves above. Ealyn pushes through a sheet of vines and steps onto the bank of a pond shadowed by a large rock formation. Water pours down from the rocks above, feeding the pond as it continues deeper into the forest. The water reflects the rock overlook above it. Ealyn steps forward and spots a small cave hidden by the waterfall. Through the water Rycard’s eyes glow for a second, then he walks deeper into the cave.

She pulls off her boots and hikes up her pants. She stuffs her boots into her saddle bag and wades through the shallows of the pond towards the cave. Once at the mouth she pulls herself up the lip onto the cave mouth. Ealyn puts her boots back on and walks into the cave. She stops just before the light ends. She sits down, dropping her saddle bag to the ground. She reaches into the saddle bag and retrieves a small slice of dreid meat. She bites into it. She reaches into her bag, retrieving another small piece, and tosses it in front of her.

Rycard’s glowing eyes peer at her from deep within the cave. Ealyn continues eating the dried meat and stares back. Rycard slowly stalks forward until just the edge of the light touches his snout. Ealyn pulls the dried meat back towards her. Rycard follows the meat until his entire head is illuminated. Ealyn pulls the meat until it is right in front of her. She picks up the meat and holds it out to Rycard. Rycard steps back, then looks

up at her. Ealyn continues to hold out the meat, slowly shuffling towards him. Rycard steps forward and carefully bites the meat on the other end. Ealyn lets go and Rycard plops to the ground ripping at the meat with his teeth and paws. When Rycard is finished Ealyn reaches out her hand. She starts shivering as Rycard approaches, then she stills herself. Rycard slowly nestles the front of his head in her open palm. Ealyn smiles then pulls Rycard in for a hug. Rycard does not move when Ealyn moves forward and embraces him.

Ealyn breaks her embrace and looks Rycard in the eyes. As Ealyn stares the retinas constrict and Rycard looks up to the waterfall. Ealyn looks up along with him. Behind the waterfall something is rustling. Ealyn draws her sword and walks forwards slowly, Rycard staying behind keeping to the shadows. As they approach the waterfall the noises beyond become clearer and clearer.

“You can’t drink that.” A muffled voice says.

Ealyn approaches the edge of the waterfall. Ealyn ducks to the side of the waterfall, finding a place in a hollow in the solid rock. She stuffs herself in and looks to the right of the waterfall. Two men wearing the white surcoats of the light feathers over chainmail sit on the edge of the river passing a wine skin between them. Another is crouching on the back refilling four water skins.

“Devon is a churlish cur, once prince Alyk’s arrives, he would not bemoan one dalliance for the party that captured the Blackwing inquisitor.” The man sitting at the front says.

The same man punches into the shoulder of the man to his left. The smiles and looks down at the ground.

“Twas not my bravery, twas the crafting of the smiths that really captured the beast.” The man says.

“You’re too modest Refan. This should cure some of that.” the man at the front says.

The man sitting at the front shoves the wineskin into Refan’s chest. The wineskin spills a patch over his bleached surcoat. Refan grabs the wineskin from his hands and pours some down his throat. Wine dribbles from the corners of his mouth to his coat, creating small rivulets of red as gravity tugs them to the ground. The man at the edge of the pond fills the last water skin, then walks back to the rest of the group. Refan holds out the wine skin to him, the man shakes his head.

“Demric drink the damn wine.” The man at the front says.

“No, I do not wish to incur Devon’s rath. Especially after what happened to Rakin.” Demric says.

The man sitting at the front opens his mouth, then closes it. He looks at the ground as the haze over his eyes clears.

“Did you know him?” The man at the front asks.

“No, but I knew his sister. I am glad there’s no body, after that I would not wish the poor lass to see what was left of him.” Demric says.

Refan hands the wine back to the man at the front.

“Did you see him do it?” Refan asks.

“No, but I saw the body before it disappeared, and Euwic told me that Devon did it to him after he abandoned his post.” Demric says.

“Euwic is an idle talker. I think one might get more truth from a snake if it could speak.” the man at the front says.

“You did not see Euwic, the man’s face was paler than the one on a white coin.” Demric says.

They all stare at the ground in silence.

“I know Euwic is an idle talker, maybe the real culprit threatened him?” Refan says.

Ealyn shuffles out of the rock formation, knocking a stone loose. Ealyn stares at the stone as it sits on the edge of the rock above her. She stands frozen in place watching the rock teeter on the edge of the overhang over her. She moves slightly back into the crevasse. The rock falls just the same and makes a slight plink as it hits the edge. The man at the front of the group turns around.

“What are you looking at Gelrad?” Refan asks.

“Thought I heard something.” Gelrad responds.

“Do you think maybe the person who did Rakin could be an outside. Maybe a spy from the Talltrees, picking off errant soldiers. Sowing discontent.” Demric says.

Gelrad draws his sword, the rest follow suit.

“I don’t know but I’m not going down like Rakin.” Gelrad says.

“Aye,” both Refan and Demric say.

The group walks towards the waterfall with swords drawn. Ealyn shuffles out of rock cover, quickly scuttling into the comforting shadows of the cave. The three men enter the cave mouth.

“Fight us like men!” Gelrad says.

Ealyn stares at the three men then looks at Demric. Ealyn turns to Rycard.

“Walk forwards until I tell you to stop.” Ealyn whispers.

Rycard stalks forwards until the light slowly uncovers his face. The men go pale at the sight, Gelrad starts shaking. Ealyn stays obscured in the shadows of the cave.

“Stop!” Ealyn says.

Rycard stops his teeth bared for all the men to see.

“Beastkin.” Refan whispers.

“Leave Refan, and I wont do you like Rakin.” Ealyn says.

Gelrad and Demric swords clatter as they hit the cave floor. Refan stands alone, shaking and pale looking into the glowing eyes of Rycard.

“How did you capture the Blackwing inquisitor?” Ealyn asks.

“I, I, I, can’t tell you.” Refan stammers.

Ealyn presses into Rycard’s side, and he snarls.

“The smiths at castle light feather made a collar that could bind any inquisitor.”
Refan says.

“Where is he now?” Ealyn asks.

“He is at camp by the stockages, with his lord.” Refan says.

Ealyn sits in silence looking into the tearing eyes of Refan as he stands silhouetted by the light pouring in from the mouth of the cave.

“Why should I let you go?” Ealyn asks.

“I won’t tell a soul I promise.” Refan says.

Tears start pouring from his eyes, and he falls to his knees.

“Please just kill me, don’t do me like Rakin, please.” Refan begs.

“Draw your knife.” Ealyn says.

Refan draws his knife from a side pocket.

“Thank you for letting me pass with honor.” Refan says.

He lifts the knife to his throat.

“You will not pass today. Slash your palm.” Ealyn says.

Refan’s eyes go wide.

“Are you a sorcerer.” Refan asks.

“Yes.” Ealyn says.

Refan’s soils himself. Refan starts babbling on the ground.

“Cut yourself!” Ealyn yells.

Refan slowly draws his knife to his hand and slits it spilling blood onto the ground.

“I have your blood now. If you dare move against me, expose what you told me, or in any way work against me. I will not only curse you, but all who share your blood. None will live anything but a half life. Your days will be agony and they won’t end, and when you beg for death, and I feel generous enough to give it to you. Broun will not embrace you. Do you understand.” Ealyn says.

Refan nods profusely.

“You may go.” Ealyn says.

Refan scrambles off the cave floor and runs. After some time Rycard turns his head up to Ealyn. She shrugs.

“He won’t tell anyone will he.” Ealyn says.

Rycard looks back at the ground and huffs. Ealyn chuckles.

“I guess we should be going then.” Ealyn says.

Rycard huffs and starts walking out of the cave. Ealyn follows. As they approach the edge of the cave Ealyn looks down at the blood puddle. Her reflection looks back at her. The reflection is slightly distorted over the uneven terrain off the cave. Her face is twisted and angry. Ealyn turns back and leaves the cave. The blood flows deep into the cave meeting a small inlet. The blood mixes with water as it travels deep into the cave. Eventually the inlet finds an underground stream. The stream continues deep underground eventually ending at a strange opening. Almost man made, the water flows

into the structure travelling along its smooth walls. The bloodied water trickles through some cracks. It follows the ceiling of the structure until it meets a part of exposed cave. It gathers on the tip of a stalactite. Once it reaches critical mass it falls onto a pile of organic matter. Something opens letting light in. Revealing a large pile of human corpses twisted into various unnatural shapes. Something falls from the opening landing with a splat, and the opening closes. Cascading the entire place in darkness.