

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 vile 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.

Chapter 2

Ealyn peels open her bleary. She lays in an oiled leather bedroll whose scent mixes with the fallen leaves and crisp air of autumn. She pulls herself up slowly into a sitting position leaves cracking beneath her. In front of her is a smothered campfire, whose embers have only just lost their glow, and a large rucksack full to the brim sitting on top of another bedroll. She stands, the horse bites off a piece of a small bush on the outer edge of the clearing. The sound of rushing water echoes from the forest to her right. She investigates the floor of the clearing, until she spots a slight depression in the grass.

She looks ahead, many more depressions, broken twigs, and crushed leaves lead to a break in the treeline. She follows the trail walking carefully, eyes plastered to the ground. She hikes through the forest following the trail of broken twigs and crushed leaves, lazily surveying the trees until her eyes lock onto something. She stares intently at a bush laden with plump purple berries. She squints and her mouth falls agape. Her foot catches on a grasping root. She slips and a twig catches her dress. She winces as the tearing of cloth breaks the calm melody of the forest.

Now on the ground, she looks down and she winces again. Her dress has been torn from the bottom of her waist to her feet exposing another tapestry of faded scars and old bruises. She gets back up and brushes off the dirt and continues walking, sparing the occasional look at the bush. Once through the break in the trees she arrives at the bank of a fast-moving stream. The bank is gravel, smoothed to a gem like polish by the ever-moving water. She hears a crunch and turns to her right.

Rycard holds aloft on a makeshift spear as he stares into the water intently. Rycard thrusts the spear forward and smiles as he pulls out two skewered trout. Ealyn steps forward, and Rycard turns to face her.

“Ealyn, I thought you asleep.” Rycard says.

“Well, I can supply much evidence to the contrary.” Ealyn says.

Rycard smiles and plants his spear into the gravel. He carefully removes the trout, then ties them together as Ealyn approaches. Ealyn watches studiously as he bends down and loops the fish around a small stake in the river along with three others already underwater. Rycard stands back up towering three heads above her, and he looks down.

“Is that breakfast?” Ealyn asks and points at the trout in the stream.

“Yes, I was not out here long, I figured you would sleep the day after all that happened.” Rycard says.

“I am no pinewood doll that needs to be minded vigilantly.” Ealyn says as a smile grows on her face.

“Of course, lady Whitefall” Rycard responds.

Ealyn shoves him, and Rycard chuckles. She brings him into a deep embrace, and he returns in kind. They stay interlocked for a few minutes until Rycard separates them and looks down at her dress. Rycard frowns.

“Did the prince do anything tonight?” Rycard asks.

“No, but not for lack of trying.” Ealyn responds.

Rycard grits his teeth.

“I am sorry that I could not bleed the man myself. ” Rycard says.

“You could not have done more than scratch him before he tore your guts to ribbons.”

Ealyn says.

Rycard cringes.

“Everything will be fine when we make it back to Whitefall.” Rycard says.

Rycard smiles, and Ealyn nods as she stares ruefully at the ground. Rycard looks at his smile falters.

“So how did the lady’s dress come to be in such disrepair.” Rycard asks

Ealyn smiles.

“I spotted a Hyala bush.” Ealyn says.

“What's that?” Rycard asks.

“Its only the secret to the most powerful ever made.” Ealyn says.

Rycard chuckles.

“What’s that then?” Rycard asks.

“It makes you invulnerable to beasts”. Ealyn responds.

Rycard frowns.

“I know of your alchemical prowess, but even you have limits. If such a thing existed then there would be no need for beastkin.” Rycard states.

“Maybe, for I invented it, and if I did produce it for the masses maybe there would be no need for beast kin.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn smirks.

“You spin falsehoods.” Rycard responds.

Ealyn frowns playfully, then smiles.

“Well, it doesn't actually make you invulnerable.” Ealyn says.

“Continue” Rycard says.

“There was a treatise written by scholar yelling that studied the behavior of different beasts of different form, and it said that the only reason these beasts don’t attack each other is scent based.” Ealyn pauses.

“So, I endeavored to find something that smelled like beast, my father left many specimens, so I wanted for not when it came to samples.” Ealyn says.

Rycard frowns, and Ealyn stiffens.

“He was an honorable man.” Rycard says

Ealyn frowns, then quickly wipes the expression off her face.

“I used the samples and mixed a few herbs until I found something that would stimulate sweat glands to produce a similar scent.” Ealyn says.

“Okay” Rycard responds.

“You know what I can prove it to you, I will make some and you will have to believe me.” Ealyn says.

“I look forward to sampling your physiks young alchemist” Rycard responds

Ealyn huffs then smiles and walks back into the forest.

“I expect breakfast in return.” Ealyn yells back.

Rycard laughs, and Ealyn crosses the threshold into the forest. In the river, blood seeps out of the dead trout, like long ribbons that fray the farther they wander. The long distended snout of something with taught leathery skin laps at the water, then crosses the river.

Ealyn’s eyes scan the forest retracing her steps, until she stops the bush. She approaches and picks one of the larger berries. She breathes deep and lets the scent dance on her tongue. She pockets the berry and plops down on the forest floor.

She reaches into her dress and pulls out the wooden box. She grabs a small mortar from the box and drops a few of the berries in it along with various herbs. She pulls out a pestle and grinds down everything until it forms a paste. She reaches back into the wooden box and pulls out an oily tuft of fur. She strains it between two of her fingers, until a dark brown ooze sits in the crease. She mixes the ooze with the paste until it takes a dull reddish color, then she takes the substances and rolls it into a ball in her hands.

Ealyn looks at the ball and smiles. She carefully puts all her supplies away with only the ball left. She slips it into her bodice and gets up. The winds in the forest pick up, causing the branches to compel the dappled light on the ground to dance in writhing patterns. Ealyn approaches the rays of light cutting through the trees and takes a deep breath in. She spins slowly, letting the light play across her sallow skin. She takes

another breath, then walks back to the bank.

She cuts through the gap in the trees to see Rycard bent over an impromptu fire pit using a fire striker to light a bit of kindling atop various sticks. Rycard stands and waves, then a whistling and a dull thump. Rycard opens his mouth wide but no sound escapes. A stain pools around his shoulder, Rycard reaches for it and falls to his knees. Ealyn opens her mouth to scream, but a hand covers it letting nothing but a muffled whimper escape.

Three men in leathers and mail jump up from the brush and start wading across the river.

“I got er.” A gruff voice says from behind her.

“Lady whitefall is not to be harmed,” another voice says from behind her.

The owner of the voice makes himself known when he steps in front of Ealyn. The man is built like an overstuffed sausage. He is encased in mail pulling tight around his stomach, where a straining belt keeps a surcoat from billowing over his legs like a dress. The surcoat has a pair of crossed feathers emblazoned across it. His face is covered by a great helm, only exposing his dull yellowed eyes.

Ealyn squirms under the bandit's grasp to no avail. The knight looks Ealyn up and down slowly, his gaze fixing on her chest for a second, then he breaks his trance.

“Thank Broun that your safe milady” the knight says

“We will be escort...” A yelp and a gurgling sound cuts him off.

One of the four men has a knife protruding from his neck. The other bandits turn to face him as he slinks to the ground revealing a bloodied Rycard. The wound on his shoulder is still lazily oozing blood but he holds his two long daggers at his side. He yells something primal and dives at another one of the men savagely tearing at the man's throat with his daggers. The man holding Ealyn lets go and unsheathes his short sword. Ealyn crumples to the floor. She looks up and Rycard is batting away two swords and two axes, the knight trudges towards her.

Ealyn reaches under her dress and draws the white sword. The knight stumbles back, then draws his longsword. Ealyn stands in a clumsy guard position, the man raises his longsword, and Ealyn braces, then he drops his sword and barrels into her, she tumbles backwards. She hits the forest floor with a thud. The wind leaves her lungs and she coughs. The man approaches, and Ealyn looks at Rycard.

He catches her eye.

“Run!” Rycard yells

Rycard runs at the knight and slashes, the knight turns around to block. Ealyn slips her sword into her belt and picks up her skirt and takes off into the forest. The sound of metal hitting metal echoes throughout the forest carried on the wind. Branches cut into Ealyn's face while she jumps rocks and roots underfoot. The wheezing of knight grows farther and farther. The sounds of metallic ringing abate until there is only the melody of the forest.

Ealyn grabs her chest, and starts breathing erratically, she stops in a clearing and spots a toppled tree, she takes cover in the pulled roots. She reaches into her bodice and

procures the vial of dark green liquid. She unstops it and pours a little down her throat, then stops it again, and stuffs it back into her bodice. She leans against the tree, and her breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

“Sweetling, you have no need to fear me.” The knight says

Ealyn cringes. The knight pans his gaze across the clearing. Then a cracking of twigs, Rycard emerges from the edge of the clearing covered in long shallow wounds. The many wounds weep blood dribbling down his tunic then pooling at his feet. Rycard crouches and points his knives at the knight. The knight draws his longsword and holds it straight. Rycard leaps like a cat at the knight and slashes. His knives glance across the mail. They trade blows, the knight keeping the defensive. More blood leaks. He stabs into the knight's left arm and draws blood. The knight slugs him across the face in response. Rycard tumbles and is slow to get up. They continue to trade blows, but Rycard grows slower and slower, his blood speckling the clearings grasses a rust color.

Rycard collapses to his knees. He pans his vision across the clearing and spots Ealyn. The knight approaches him and holds his sword high. Rycard mouths run, then the knight brings his sword high. Ealyn draws her sword and runs at the knight. She brings her sword down, and the knight ducks to the right. He turns around and slashes, his sword makes contact and the white sword cuts into it halfway. He lets go of his sword, and while Ealyn tries to pry her sword out the knight punches her in the stomach.

Ealyn doubles over and coughs, she drops her sword. The knight picks it up and holds it to her throat.

“You have a death wish princess.” the knight says.

“Please don’t hurt him!” Ealyn cries.

The knight smiles.

“If I don’t bring the head of the man who captured you the prince will surely have mine. Although this should make the process much less painful.” the knight says.

The knight pans his gaze across the length of the bone sword. He walks to where Rycard’s collapsed. He lifts the sword, and Rycard looks directly into Ealyn eyes and mouths ‘sorry’. The knight cuts his head off in one clean motion.

“Nothing like a fight to keep the blood hot.” the knight says.

He turns to face Ealyn. Ealyn stares back at him stone faced, tears threatening to escape the corners of her eyes.

“We ought to find a more private place, the dead do not make for good bed companions” the knight says.

The knight grabs Ealyn by the wrist and drags her into the forest. Tears start to leak out of her eyes, she swallows and wipes them with her wrists and walks alongside the knight into the forest. They walk through the branches the knight keeping his eyes peeled scanning the surroundings. Ealyn looks up and spots a pair of glowing yellow eyes. She opens her mouth, then uses her other hand to cover. She looks up at the fat knight, and looks back at the glowing eyes. She reaches into her bodice, grabs a portion

of the physik and pops it in her mouth. The knight tugs her, and she stumbles forward and falls to the ground.

While on the ground whispers a prayer. She takes a second, then raises her hand to her mouth and bites down. A whimper oozes out as she sinks her teeth deep. until she tastes copper on her tongue. The knight pushes her to her back.

“Broun curse you girl.” the knight says.

Ealyn spits blood into the knight's face. The knight slaps her. The knight reaches into his coat and draws a small dagger. He cuts her dress and bodice until her skin shows. He reaches his hands down and pulls the rest apart. Ealyn stares into his eyes. The man gives her a confused look, then he hears a deep snarl from behind him. He turns around and opens his mouth to scream. A large maw wraps around his face and starts pulling his head from his neck. The scream grows more and more high pitched and strained as the vocal cords are stretched until they snap. The beast bites down and crushes his skull, then swallows.

The Valdyr has leathery pink skin pulled taught over wiry muscle. It stands on four legs with clawed opposable digits on each paw. Its head is elongated like a wolf, with long sharp teeth that partially stick out to the side, protruding even when its mouth is closed. Fur grows in tufts randomly across its body. Its eyes are sharp, and deeply intelligent, they glow a deep yellow.

Ealyn squeezes her eyes shut, now violently shaking. The beast sniffs then moves back to the brush. Ealyn opens her eyes and the beast stares back. She gets to her feet and continues looking into the beasts eyes. The beast slinks back into the shadows and

its eyes disappear. Katlin looks at the knights corpse, and she shudders, then ducks behind a tree and vomits. She brushes her mouth and walks back to the clearing.

She enters the clearing and the eyes of Rycard's corpse stare back at her. She shudders and walks to the corpse's side. Tears form in the corners of her eyes. She falls to her knees and grabs his corpse into her arms and cries. She holds onto him, his blood mixing with the knights on her dress along with the tears pouring from her eyes.

Ealyn cries and the sun drifts across the sky, until it sinks lazily below the treetops, creating skinny shadows, like long withered fingers reaching into to the clearing where Ealyn still holds onto Rycard's now cold corpse. She finally snuffles and lays the corpse gently onto the ground. She sits on her knees above the corpse and clasps her hands together. She whispers a prayer under her breath, then she reaches out and closes its eyes.

Suddenly Ealyn starts breathing erratically then she reaches into her pocket and her face goes completely pale. She retrieves a vial, but it is cracked in half, only the residue of dark green liquid coats it. She walks to a tree and braces her arm against it. Her breathing grows more erratic. She slumps against the tree. Now sitting on the forest floor her breathing grows more strained, she starts to wheeze and her head lulls forward. Ealyn closes her eyes, and her breathing grows shallow.

Chapter 3

The sun edges above the horizon when Ealyn's eyes shoot open. A long gritty tongue drags itself across her face. She looks up and the valdyr stares back at her. It backs up and below it sits a bundle of weeds covered in the monster's slobber. Ealyn grabs the weeds and stuffs them into her mouth. Ealyn gags on the spittle, but she swallows. She breathes in and out slowly, the wheezing dissipates and her breathing clears.

She shoots up and wraps her arms around the valdyr, and cries. She stays embraced with the valdyr for only a second, then she stumbles back and gasps. The valdyr just sits and stares at her. The valdyr snorts then, disappears back into the forest. Ealyn takes in a shuddering breath and walks deeper into the forest.

Ealyn arrives at the clearing only to see pools of bloodied grass where Rycard's and the knights bodies once where. Glowing yellow eyes break the darkness of the shadowed brush. Katlin reaches into the remnants of her dress and rips of piece off the physik and pops it in her mouth. She continues breathes in and clasps her hands together. She says a prayer and walks back into the forest.

She walks slowly as her eyes study the ground, then she stops and grabs a broken twig. She looks forward and sees crushed leaves and broken twigs. She continues down the path to her and Rycard's original campsite. The leaves crunch under her boots as the light of the sun slowly grows to match the deep orange of the leaves, then the shadows start to grow long, and Ealyn crosses the farthest edge of her and Rycard's original

campsite and the sound of footsteps and the smattering of speech is distinct even from this distance. Ealyn crouches and slowly approaches the clearing.

Five men clad in chain mail wearing surcoats with a black wing stitched into the chests and barbute helmets, along with one in full blackened plate with a long conical nosed helmet with metal feathered epilates and a wing emblazoned on his chest plate. Ealyn's eyes pan across the clearing until they stop at the large bag sitting at one end of Rycard's sleeping bag. Ealyn curses under her breath and sits in the brush and waits for the cold embrace of the moon to suffocate the light of the sun. Once the shadows take over and only the light of the torches of the party keeping the darkness at bay does she inch closer.

A gauntleted hand grasps her shoulder tightly and Ealyn reaches for her sword. The man behind her grabs her hand before it can make it and spins her around to face him. His white armor glows silver as it reflects the light of the moon. His helmet completely covers his face in one plate bent in the center with slits for eyes. His eyes glow a deep orange slightly illuminating the tan skin around them below his helmet.

Ealyn goes pail and the inquisitor drags her out from the brush. The party turns to face her, and she wriggles but the inquisitor drags her with little effort and only one hand. He tosses her onto the ground in front of the knight in plate. She scrambles to her feet and the lead knight lifts his visor.

The man has long black hair flowing down to his shoulders like rivers of pitch which stand in contrast with his sky-blue eyes, he is young but not so much so that he does not have smile lines. His eyes dances across her face, and he smirks.

“Well, not much of a quest was it then lads.” The knight says

The party chuckles, the inquisitor does not.

“Soon to be princess, I know that the canny villain Rycard tried to abduct you, but we are here you save you, and maybe head home with a story of how we saved a princess. I am sure whores from whitefall to Goldfinger will be singing the tale.” The knight says.

Ealyn looks into his eyes and grits her teeth.

“I’d rather die, you cockless bastard.” Ealyn says.

The smile falls off the knight’s face.

“You are being saved whether you want to be or not.” The knight says.

Ealyn reaches to her side and draws her sword. The knight backs up and stands for a second, then starts laughing.

“That is a fine sword milady, but I doubt you have the nerve.” The knight says.

Ealyn looks around then she drops the sword to the ground. The inquisitor restrains her, she writhes against his grip, but he holds her hands behind her back. She writhes and struggles against his grip, but he just throws her to the ground and reaches his hand out. One of the men hands him a bundle of rope. He ties the rope around her arms. She writhes on the ground, then her arm catches on a jagged rock. She winces as it cuts into her skin, her eyes open wide as she sees the small dribble of blood pool beneath her.

“Run!” Ealyn screams.

“And why would we do that.” the knight says.

One of the torches falls to the ground. Everyone turns to face it, then their heads shoot to the darkness of the forest as a shriek tears through the midnight silence like a rusty dagger. The inquisitor runs to his horse.

“Form up!” The head knight yells.

The rest of the knight's crowd around him. Ealyn struggles against her bindings then she turns and faces her sword on the ground a few feet away from her. The valdyr emerges from the darkness and snarls, one of the men slashes at it, but the blade harmlessly glides across the beast's flesh, only able to cut off a tuft of hair. The valdyr leaps into the man and rips out a large portion of his chest, then ducks back encasing itself in shadow. The men quickly fill the other man's place. The man in white runs to to his horse and withdraws a long white hollow staff.

Ealyn squirms across the ground inching closer and closer to the sword. The valdyr jumps out of the woods again and latches its jaws around one of the knight's legs. The knight screams as it is dragged into darkness. The screams abruptly stop, and the rest of the men start violently shaking. Ealyn makes it to the sword, and she flips on her back. She reaches for the sword with her bound hands and cuts the bindings.

Ealyn shoots up and looks at the man with a large portion of his chest hollowed out. Ealyn's face goes pale and she starts shaking. The valdyr leaps back at the knights grabbing another by the chest and ripping a chunk out and tossing it to the side.

“Stop.” Ealyn croaks.

The valdyr continues tearing into the knights, all their blows glancing off the monster's flesh.

"Stop." Ealyn says.

The valdyr bites off one of the knight's legs.

"Stop!" Ealyn yells.

The inquisitor shoulders the staff and points the hollow end at the beast. He presses into one end of the staff, then after a beat a sound like thunder echoes across the clearing, and a plume of smoke like a dark cloud expels from the end of the staff. The men left drop their weapons and run into the forest. The smoke clears and blood sputters from a wound in the valdyr's thigh, it snarls and leaps at the inquisitor. Ealyn jumps Infront of the inquisitor and holds out her hand.

"Stop!" Ealyn screams

The beast freezes standing a head taller than a shuddering Ealyn. The beast continues to snarl with its fangs bared, then it looks down at Ealyn and its lips slowly close over the fangs, and it backs down. Ealyn turns around and faces the inquisitor and the head knight with his sword bared. She stands to her feet.

"Drop them!" Ealyn yells.

The inquisitor drops his staff on the ground, but the knight still stands poised to strike. Ealyn approaches the knight and the valdyr snarls. The knight drops his blade.

"Get on your knees." Ealyn says.

The knight and the inquisitor both get on their knees. Ealyn goes to the horses and starts searching through the saddle bags. The valdyr lays on the ground and slides its head on top of its paws, lazily gazing at the knight and inquisitor. Ealyn reaches into a saddle bag and retrieves a rope. She walks back and binds the knight and inquisitor. Once both their feet and arms are bound she mounts one of the horses.

“You can’t leave me here beastkin!” The knight yells.

“Yes, I can, and I will.” Ealyn says.

The knight shuffles to face Ealyn.

“If the prince finds us like this then we are going to die. If the prince gets word that I let you go I am going to die. Either I take you in, or I might as well let that beast mix my guts around, because either way I’m dead.” the knight says.

Ealyn looks at the knight and swallows.

“Where are you going?” the knight asks.

“I am not going to tell you.” Ealyn says.

“Well, you are lady Whitefall, so I am going to assume you are heading to Whitefall.” the knight says.

Ealyn does not respond.

“I know the way. My company served your father in the war of the bloody tree. I can take you there, and if anyone stops us, I can just say that you were taken hostage by the Talltrees, and I am taking you back to prince Whitefeather.” the knight says.

Ealyn stares at the knight then sighs.

“Fine, but if anything happens, I won’t stop that beast from tearing you to shreds”
Ealyn says.

“You have a deal princess.” The knight says.

Ealyn dismounts and unbinds the knight, then goes to unbind the inquisitor.

“Leave him.” The knight says

“The prince will kill him.” Ealyn says

“He can try,” The knight says.

Ealyn looks into the glowing eyes of the inquisitor, and looks into the glowing eyes of the valdyr. She goes behind him and cuts his bindings.

“I’ll offer you the same deal as the prince.” Ealyn says

The inquisitor does not move.

“He can’t speak” the knight says

“Why?” Ealyn asks

“Have you not heard of inquisitors little lady?” the knight asks

“I have seem them around the white temples, but I have never met one.”

“They are a relic of a time long past. They say that they where once wizards. ” The knight says

Ealyn stumbles back, and gasps.

“Really?” Ealyn asks.

The knight nods his head.

“It is said that long past they were converted from the pagan religions into soldiers to hunt down wizards, but when the white order sent the wizards out of Broun’s light, the inquisitors were left with no purpose” The knight says

“What’s he doing here then?” Ealyn asks

“He serves my family.” The knight says

“You would leave one of your servants to die at the hands of the prince.” Ealyn says.

“He is not a servant because he is not a man. He is as close to human as that beast over there, and if we take him with us, he might rat us out to the order.” The knight says.

“You have not seen the wrath of the prince; I will not leave him.” Ealyn says.

“You are playing a dangerous game princess; Broun will not add this to the tally of your good deeds. If there is one thing I know about Broun it is that he hates wizards.” The knight says.

“He is coming, and you can’t stop me” Ealyn responds

The knight scoffs and mounts one of the horses, the inquisitor grabs his staff and mounts another horse. Katlin grabs the rope and binds both to the saddles. Katlin ties the horses together and goes back to the clearing. She grabs the bag and rummages through it and withdraws three vials filled with dark liquid. She puts it on the ground beside the bag, and she reaches deeper and withdraws a bundle of clothes tied with a

leather belt with a scabbard. She turns around, and the knight is looking directly at her. She scoffs and dips into the forest.

Just outside the campsite, she ducks behind a tree and withdraws her father's sword, she leans it against the trunk and slips off her ruined dress. She puts on canvas breeches, and black cotton shirt, and fastens the belt around herself. The clothes drape over her slight frame, she grabs a fist full of fabric and brings it to her nose. She breathes in deep, and tears peek out from the corners of her eyes. She brushes the tears away then sheathes her father's sword in the scabbard and leaves the forest. She looks up and runs back into the forest. She rummages through the ruined dresses pockets, then she exhales when she withdraws the ball of Physik. She stuffs it in her pocket and walks back to the clearing. She stashes the vial of green liquid in her pocket and loops the bag over her shoulder. She struggles carrying it to her horse, then she secures it to the horse. She goes back to the clearing and grabs one of the torches, then mounts her horse and kicks off deeper into the forest.

Chapter 4

They ride until the sun sits high in the sky. The knight sits on his horse at the front of the party, the inquisitor sits behind him next to Ealyn. They trot along a long-decayed road. The rough black stone has been mostly reclaimed by nature. Roots jut out from the cracks and trees cover their sides, leaving them mostly covered from the sunlight.

“Where is your beast, beastkin? I thought they are bred to not stray from thier masters?” the knight says.

“He travels hidden in the brush, better to not be detected sir knight.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn turns her head to face the brush and scans it. Finding no evidence of the beast's whereabouts her body stiffens, then she forces herself to relax.

“Ah sir knight, I seem to have you at a disadvantage. I know you are lady Ealyn Whitefall, but you seem to not know me.” the knight says.

“Why would I need to, I do not need to familiar myself with all of my prince’s loyal puppets.” Ealyn says.

The knight smirks.

“My name is Gerard Blackwing. Primary inheritor to the Blackwing keep.” Gerard says.

“Oh yes of course.” Ealyn says.

“You know it?” Gerard asks.

“No, but I do not wish to know anything about it, and maybe pretending to know would silence you, but it seems that I misjudged your persistence.” Ealyn says.

Gerard laughs.

“Of course, princess.” Gerard says.

Ealyn frowns.

“You know it's quite beautiful.” Gerard says.

“Everyone says their keep is beautiful.” Ealyn says.

“Well, it all must seem so plain compared to Whitefall. Every castle must seem to have been constructed by blind paupers to you princess.” Gerard states.

“That’s not true.” Ealyn says.

“I went to whitefall many times princess, you need not deceive me.” Gerard says.

“It has been so long, but I do remember the smooth white towers, that jutted from beneath the earth and touched the heavens.” Ealyn says.

“Yes, I have seen them. I went after I had a great disagreement with my father. It was all so much for my young mind to handle. The smooth white stone that composed the buildings, the towers seemed to have been carved by the hand of Broun himself, like he plucked a mountain from the earth and formed it into one gigantic form, and stuck it right into the ground for his most devout followers, but the thing that really made me awestruck where the roads.” Gerard says.

“The roads?” Ealyn asks.

“Yes, you have been on them before, there is nothing so remarkable about them. They are made of the smooth black stone that sits under us right now but seeing them pristine reminded me of the once great power of the white order. To imagine that roads like that once covered the continent. Connecting every village, town and city. Armies could move across the continent in weeks, towns that needed food could have it transported in days. It made me realize the true extent of the black wizard’s evil.” Gerard says.

Ealyn frowns.

“Maybe if the black wizard did not destroy everything, it would rain chocolate, you would piss gold, maybe even Broun be good you would learn to shut up. Dreaming of such a time is useless. It only obscures the present.” Ealyn says.

Gerard frowns, then trots his horse forward. Ealyn stares at the back of his head, then looks at the pieces of road still observable through the many roots, and weeds that now cover this road. She sighs, then continues looking back into the forest. The group moves in silence their horses making a steady pace forward along the overgrown road. They arrive at a cross in the road, and they dip into the forest. Gerard spots a small clearing next to a small creek and he goes back to lead the horses.

The group makes camp, Gerard gathers a couple stones and forms a small fire circle. Ealyn gathers twigs along with the inquisitor. She eyes him the entire time, but he does not turn to face her once. They return with a bundle of sticks, and Gerard has finished the fire circle. They toss their sticks in, and Gerard makes a small fire. The sun has set, Ealyn and Gerard have set their bedrolls opposite each other around the

campfire. The inquisitor does not grab a bedroll. Ealyn goes to the horse and grabs a spare bedroll and holds it out to him. He shakes his head.

“He doesn’t sleep.” Gerard says.

Ealyn blinks, then nods, stowing the bedroll back in her saddle bag. She goes to bedroll and slips under the fur lined oiled leathers. Ealyn’s eyes blink to sleep as the sun dips below the horizon and the world is cast in pale moonlight.

Ealyn stands at the edge of a cliff, and Rycard stands opposite her. He is mouthing something, but she cannot hear. She steps back and slips, Rycard jumps and grabs her wrist. She blinks and his face morphs into the prince’s. Ealyn shoots awake drenched in sweat. She darts her head from side to side, spotting the inquisitor poking at the fire with a stick. She gets out of her bedroll and sits next to him, and stares into the fire. She turns to face him, and he does not turn to meet her gaze. She opens her mouth to say something, then she turns back to the fire. The inquisitor takes the stick out of the fire and writes in the dirt.

“I know white speak.” the inquisitor writes.

“I was actually gonna ask if you knew how to sign.” Ealyn says.

The knight turns to face her his covered face not conveying the emotion underneath. He holds his hands out and starts to sign.

“How did you learn?” the inquisitor signs.

“In my grandfather’s old age, he fell deaf. He and I were very close, so when he stopped speaking, I learned how to sign so I could still talk to him.” Ealyn says.

“He must have been a great man to illicit such a devotion.” the inquisitor signs.

“He was the only connection I had to my father” Ealyn says.

The inquisitor looks down.

“I am sorry for bringing it up.” the inquisitor signs.

“Don’t suffer for it, you did not know, and I do not mind bringing it up. He left us and died of his own folly.” Ealyn says.

“Do you really believe that?” the inquisitor signs.

Ealyn face eyes tear up.

“Yes,” Ealyn says.

“It must be very difficult to keep that up.” the inquisitor signs.

Ealyn gets up from beside the fire and storms back into her sleeping bag. She slips under the covers and closes her eyes. Throughout the night she tosses and turns, and the inquisitor spares a single glance, then he turns his head back to the fire and sighs.

A flock of crows take off from the trees into the sky, the crows are silhouetted by the early morning sun barely peeking over the horizon. The ground is bathed in deep orange light that matches the color of the fallen leaves. The flock starts cawing and Ealyn eyes shoot open, and she watches the crows move across the sky in undulating patterns. Ealyn shuffles awake and Gerard is still asleep, and the inquisitor is staring into the coals that were once the campfire.

Ealyn gets out of her bedroll, and stares forward. The glowing eyes of the valdyr stare back at her, then after a second, they disappear. She reaches into her dress and withdraws a small portion of physik and pops it in her mouth. She walks to her horse and reaches into the saddle bag and withdraws a bundle of dried meat and a small vial filled with green liquid. She takes a swig, and stuffs it into her pocket. The inquisitor glances at her. She holds her hands up.

“Breakfast.” she whispers.

Ealyn waves the bundle of jerky. The inquisitor nods and stars back into the long dead remnants of the fire. Ealyn slinks into the forest. She walks forward darting her head back and forth until she whirls around and the valdyr is a finger’s length away. She pales and stumbles back, falling onto the floor. The valdyr stares at her motionless. She gets back up and the valdyr’s gaze follows her. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the dried meat. She holds out the meat, and the valdyr grabs it and gulps it. She keeps her hand aloft and moves it forward and puts it on the valdyr’s head. The valdyr’s eyes close as Ealyn pets the beast. Ealyn lets out a yelp when the valdyr darts its head to the side. Ealyn follows its gaze she sees squirrel dart into the nook of a tree. The valdyr looks back at Ealyn.

Ealyn looks at the valdyr and furrows her brow. She nods, the valdyr does nothing. She points at the squirrel and points at the valdyr, it does nothing. She tries various hand motions, and the valdyr just stares at her. Ealyn furrowed brow turns into a scowl as she tries more and more hand motions.

“Just, go get it I don’t care.” Ealyn says.

The valdyr darts towards the tree and claws into the nook and retrieves the dead squirrel and returns to Ealyn within the minute. The valdyr drops the squirrel at Ealyn's feet and looks up at her. Her mouth is agape, and her eyes are wide.

"Sit," Ealyn says.

The valdyr sits.

"Spin around," Ealyn says.

The valdyr spins around.

"Jump," Ealyn says.

The valdyr jumps

Ealyn laughs, and she stares into the glowing yellow eyes of the valdyr. She scratches behind its ears, and it plops onto the forest floor. Ealyn moves around the squirrel and sits down and crosses her legs. the valdyr lays its head in her lap. She continues scratching behind its ears. The valdyr shoots up to its feet, and snarls. Ealyn turns around and faces Gerard.

"I had no idea beast kin where so friendly with their thralls." Gerard says.

"Maybe one should treat the companions that thier lives depend on with more than disdain." Ealyn says.

Gerard frowns.

"That inquisitor is not worth my respect, why do you care so deeply of his plight."

Gerard says.

“He was once a man, and maybe I respect that piece that.” Ealyn says.

Gerard scowls.

“There is nothing left in that armor, but a beast in human skin.” Gerard says.

Ealyns scoffs, puts her hand on the valdyr’s head. They walk back to the campsite with Gerard following behind. Ealyn arrives and the scent of roasted meat fills the air. The valdyr’s tongue lolls out. The inquisitor is sitting by a now roaring fire, the carcasses of skinned rabbits on spits above. Gerard and Ealyn take seats around the fire, the valdyr lays down next to Ealyn eyeing the roasting rabbits.

When the fats of the rabbit drip into the fire, and crackle the inquisitor pulls a single rabbit off and hands it to Ealyn. She takes it in hand, then tosses it at the valdyr. The valdyr jumps and opens its large maw. It catches the rabbit and swallows it whole. The inquisitor draws another rabbit and hands it to Ealyn again. She takes it and bites into it. Gerard grabs a rabbit off a spit and starts eating. Gerard brushes his dripping mouth with a gloved hand, and points at Ealyn’s scabbard.

“Do you know how to use that thing?” Gerard asks.

“Yes,” Ealyn says.

“The last time you used that, you dropped it. Maybe the grip was slippery.”

Gerard smirks.

Ealyn draws the sword.

“I meant no offense princess, merely sating my curiosity.”

“Well, consider your curiosity sated.” Ealyn says.

She sheathes her sword back in her scabbard and continues eating. They finish their meal and pack up the campsite. When all the bedrolls and stuffs are stuffed into saddle bags the inquisitor stomps out the fire. They grab the reins of their horses and walk back to the crossroads. Once at the path, they remount their horses.

“So which way?” Ealyn asks.

“The quickest way to Whitefall is through dark water, but that town is crawling with the prince’s men. The other way takes us to the Talltree territories, and we would need to make it to a city and catch a barge on the father.” Gerard says.

“How long would the detour be?” Ealyn asks.

“Two to three moon’s turn.” Gerard responds.

Ealyn looks down the two paths.

“We will go to dark water, but Gerard, I think it best if you lead the party from here on. If the prince’s men meet with us, and you turn coat. I will leave you praying Broun for death. Understood.” Ealyn asks.

“Understood.” Gerard responds.

Gerard marches down the path. Ealyn turns to face the inquisitor.

“The same goes for you, inquisitor.” Ealyn signs.

“Understood, and my name is Salum.” Salum signs.

Ealyn’s expression softens, then she turns and follows Gerard and the inquisitor down the path to dark water.

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 too 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 their blood mixing with ground water, and their skin sloughing off their 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 siege 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. Beggers 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.

Chapter 6

Ealyn bursts out of the back door of the inn to a small yard. A ray of sunlight pierces through the buildings and bathes the garden in a warm orange. A small garden enclosed by a locked fence has some winter squashes growing their yellow leaves covering the exposed dirt in patches reflecting the sun's light like gold flecks in expensive chocolate. To the right of the garden a stable sits empty, its roof sagging slightly and the rotting wood bowing under the weight. In front of the stables in the center of a ray of light Salum sits cross legged on the ground, the light reflecting off his white armor. Ealyn steps onto the edge of a leaf of a squash and Salum's eyes shoot open. He turns to face Ealyn; the movement causes the light reflecting off his armor to dance on the ground. Rycard loosens his posture and closes his eyes again.

“What are you doing?” Ealyn asks.

“Meditating,” Salum signs.

“What is the purpose of this.” Ealyn asks.

“Focus,” Salum signs.

“Oh, sorry,” Ealyn responds.

“Don't worry, these times are so full of turmoil, I have not found focus in an age, I don't know why I expected it to be different today.” Salum signs.

Salum opens his eyes and turns to Ealyn.

“Why have you come out here?” Salum signs.

“I was done dealing with Gerard.” Ealyn says.

“He has a penchant for facetiousness.” Salum signs.

“Yes, that is a word for it. Why do you travel with him?” Ealyn asks.

“I promised to serve his family a long time ago.” Salum says.

“Did you take an oath to serve his father?” Ealyn asks.

“No, it would have been many generations before that.” Salum says.

Ealyn gasps.

“How many cycles have you seen?” Ealyn asks.

“I don’t know the exact number, but you must know the scripture.” Salum signs.

“I know the scripture, but it says, ‘After a priest who had lost the will to fight, he blessed a fallen wizard, from his corpse a new being emerged. The priest witnessed the true power of Broun and deemed this man an inquisitor.’ named after the soldiers of Broun who defeated their wizard overlords.” Ealyn says.

“Your knowledge of scripture is laudable.” Salum signs.

“My nonblood father made us memorize it from cover to cover.” Ealyn says.

“Your birth father was not so taken with scripture, I gather.” Salum signs.

“He was baptized, but he never stayed to the path of white. He thirsted for glory and that's what killed him.” Ealyn says.

“You are doing it again.” Salum signs.

“Doing what?” Ealyn says.

“You’re lying.” Salum says.

“No, I am not.” Ealyn says.

“I’ve had no voice, so for many cycles I have listened for many cycles. I know when a person is lying, especially to themselves.” Salum signs.

Ealyn turns and takes a step.

“I have a memory of my father and I picking berries.”

Ealyn turns and sits back down.

“He showed me all these different kinds of herbs, plants berries, and their uses. That’s my last memory of him. It was my mother who said that he died foolishly, and I believed her for a very long time. Not until I talked to his father did, I get a different perspective. He said that my father was a proud man but not stupid, and that his reputation and wealth depended on his slaying of beasts. He could not simply stop just because he was married and had a child. My mother would not even have married a low born if he was not so distinguished.” Ealyn says.

“So why do you keep telling yourself the lie.” Salum asks.

Ealyn swallows.

“I don’t know why exactly he went out to hunt a sorcerer, but I know that he did it for money. At least that is what his father told me. He knew my father was ailing for gold. Especially since he could not marry my mother due to his low status, so he could not get a dowry, and on some days when the rains don’t abate, and I sit staring out my

window. I do wonder if the reason he went on such a dangerous mission was me.” Ealyn says.

“It was not your fault. Your father died doing something that Broun will look favorably upon. He is in the arms of Broun now, I am certain. This mortal life is only a trail for the heavens. Even if your father was not a totally clean soul, hunting down a sorcerer is something that would clean the most blemished souls.” Salum signs.

“It is certainly a comfort.” Ealyn says.