

Chapter 5

The sickly-sweet smell of decaying corpses sits heavily in the air around the path leading to dark water. The trees flank them on both sides obscuring most of the fields of battle, but occasionally a glimpse of death sits staged 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 says.

"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 face.” 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 on the beach after a storm. They are piled high in ditches with their blood mixing with groundwater, 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 asks.

"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 as the forest subsides. Ealyn looks into the forest, and spots glowing yellow eyes, she stops her horse.

"I must relieve myself." Ealyn says.

"You're 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.

“Andromeda,” 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 that's 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 guard finds you they will 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. 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 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. It’s 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 tower. 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 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 emaciated serfs covered in burns, lesions, and other foul marks crowd around the gate, clamoring over each other to get in.

“One at a time!” A guard 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 guard. The guard laughs, and Gerard reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small leather bag. He hands it to the guard and the guard peeks out of the gatehouse, he waves at them. Ealyn and Salum trot forward, Gerard remounts his horse. The guard opens the gate and a couple other guards push the serfs back as they make their way through the gate.

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

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

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

“You can’t eat salt,” Ealyn responds.

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

Ealyn looks back at the gate, then looks forward. 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 have stayed here many times, and he knows that it pays more to not ask questions than to sell the answers.” Gerard says.

They all dismount, Ealyn heaves her saddle bag over her shoulder. Salum grabs the reins of their horses and they split. Ealyn and Gerard walk into the building, Salum

walks to a yard hidden behind. Ealyn and Gerard walk in. The patrons don't even turn their heads, they just sit and stare at their tables occasionally sipping at foul smelling tankards. At the back of the room three hooded figures sit with their hands out over the hearth fire. A pot filled with a light brown substance bubbles, occasionally bringing unidentifiable globs to the surface.

"Oscarth!" Gerard announces.

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

"Gerard?" Oscarth asks.

"I barely recognised you," Gerard says.

"Yeah, lost about six stone since I last saw you." Oscarth says.

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

"It's 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 sweet.” Gerard says.

He pulls Ealyn into a side hug.

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

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

They all walk to a staircase in the corner.

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

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

Gerard says.

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

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

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

Ealyn looks around the room, and she sees the carpet is fraying, the wood is rotting, and the vanity is missing a drawer. Gerard plops onto the bed. Ealyn drops her saddle bag onto the rug. The floor wines in response, and when Ealyn goes to pick up her bag, the floor has buckled in a little. Ealyn presses her foot on the rug, and the floor sinks ever so slightly. Ealyn jumps over the rug.

“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 it.” Ealyn responds.

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

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

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

Ealyn pales.

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

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

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

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

Gerard laughs again. Ealyn glares at him.

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

Ealyn continues glaring at him.

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

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

“Is that wise?” Ealyn asks.

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

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

“Two tankards please.” Gerard says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“In what way?” the younger man says.

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

“Yes,” the younger one responds.

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

“To help,” the younger one says.

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

“No,” the younger one responds.

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

“I don’t know.” the younger one says.

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

“What do you mean?” The younger asks.

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

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

She steps foot in the room and sits on the bed. She caresses the fabric of her shirt between two fingers and looks out the window. Gerard bursts into the room, and stumbles into the bed. He starts snoring. Ealyn scoffs then gets up and locks the door. Ealyn pulls a sheet out from under him and lays it across the floor in the corner of the room. She closes the window and curls herself in the sheet and closes her eyes.

A creak in the floor causes Ealyn’s eyes to shoot open. The room is filled with darkness, only a sliver of silver moonlight illuminating a streak across the floor, leaving her blanketed in shadow. The dark outline of a man stands over the bed with a knife in hand reflecting the moonlight. Ealyn stops breathing, and slowly moves her hand to her side. She pulls at her sword, but it makes the slightest amount of noise. The intruder turns to face her and she stops pulling the sword, the intruder looks over her, then continues inching towards the bed. Ealyn looks behind him at the deer skin rug. She slowly slips off her covers, then she crouches down. She breathes in, the intruder turns to look at her, and she leaps at him. She makes contact only causing the man to stumble, but he gets his footing right on top of the deer skin rug, and his leg goes through the

floor. His weight on the leg causes it to continue down pulling him through the floor, breaking his other leg at the thigh. He screams, and Ealyn picks his knife up off the floor and slashes at him until the scream turns into a gurgle. Something pushes against the door. Ealyn rushes for the vanity and with great effort manages to push it against the door.

She runs to the bed and shakes Gerard, he does not respond. Ealyn curses under her breath. She gets off the bed and darts to her bag. She reaches in and withdraws the alchemy box. She opens it and grabs a sprig of a dark colored herb. She runs to the bed and straddles Gerard's chest. She cracks the sprig in half. She breathes in and coughs. Gerard shoots awake and coughs as well. Gerard looks at the bleeding corpse on the ground. He draws his sword and looks at the door.

"What happened!" Gerard demands.

"I just saved your life!" Ealyn says.

Gerard looks down at the bleeding man, then walks to his side. He lowers his sword to his shoulder and swiftly cuts away a portion of the dark leather. Underneath is a metal plate with an engraved feather. Ealyn's eyes go wide, and Gerard curses.

"He found us." Gerard says.

An explosion shakes the walls and orange light spills from the window flooding the room. Ealyn winces, then covers her eyes. She lowers her hands and her mouth falls agape. Fire pours through the streets covering houses in towering inferno. People fall out of windows trying to avoid the fire at their doors only to be engulfed by the fire in the street. The great tower in the center of town is alight, illuminating the whole town in

a mix of reds and oranges. Balls of flame streak the sky like shooting stars, then they fall to the town causing more of the fire to pour through the cobbled streets. Ealyn slings her saddle bag over her shoulder. The banging on the door starts up again.

Gerard brings his sword to height with the middle of the door, then runs forward, plunging it straight through the door. A scream echoes through the wood planks. Gerard withdraws his sword, leaving a thin trail of blood as it drips from the drenched blade. As soon as his blade leaves the door a thump sounds against the door. Gerard raises his sword as the door bangs again, and buckles inwards. The door pops off its hinges and plunges to the floor. Three men step through the opening all in black leathers with their long knives raised. They leap at Gerard.

One man slices his sword through the air, and Gerard blocks. The other jumps in and attacks. Ealyn backs off as Gerard fends off the three men's attacks with grace. He dances across the wooden floor parrying and deflecting attacks and taking advantage of weaknesses in their stance. His deadly dance finishes when the last man falls to the floor. Gerard wipes his sword on one of their shirts, then grabs his saddle bag.

Gerard and Ealyn dart down the stairs. Another boom and the front of the inn explodes inwards. Ealyn and Gerard duck behind the banister. They get up and run out the back door. They stumble out the back door into the garden. The back yard is empty besides a couple pools of blood in the ground. Salum is nowhere to be seen.

Ealyn and Gerard dart to the horses, and quickly tie their saddlebags, then take off into the city streets. The entire city is covered in a haze of smoke, only the light of dancing flames break through. Ealyn and Gerard gallop their horses through the street. The closer they get to the front gate the more town defenders they spot in their blue and

red surcoats. Many yell for orders, but none come. The gates of the town are covered in bodies. A group of defenders push bodies off the wall and make their way to the center of the fighting. Men climb the sides and attack those on the top. A rain of arrows hits everyone on the top of the wall, and many fall to the side.

“I know a way out.” Gerard says.

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

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

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

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

up the wall. The blood moves through the ditches to lower elevation, trailing into a small stream pouring into the river the town is named for. The blood pools in the river in a growing red spot on the blue water.

Ealyn and Gerard rush past the chaos across the field, for the treeline. Men scream past them as they rush towards the wall. They do not give Ealyn and Rycard a second glance as they run past. Ealyn and Gerard make it to the forest edge. They take a breath. An arrow pierces through the branches and buries itself at Gerard's feet. They start running, more arrows follow the first barley missing them. One finds purchase in Gerard's shoulder and he tumbles to the ground. Ealyn stops and pulls Gerard into roots of a fallen tree. Ealyn looks at the wound in Gerard's shoulder and looks into the forest behind them. Torches break the darkness, bobbing up and down as they approach.

"I can't go back there." Ealyn says.

Gerard turns to face her and his eyes go wide.

"I'm sorry." Ealyn says.

Gerard opens his mouth, but before he can say anything Ealyn dives into the forest and runs.