

Chapter 1

The Valdyr

Rycard sits in the fog of his mind. His greyscale vision only shows the outline of people. Threats, humans that are a sign of danger. His memory recalls the human that captured him, and made everything go fuzzy. One of the humans stares at him with his sword raised. This human does not have real power, he is hiding behind that sword. So he lunges at him. He rips his stomach out, the others try to flee, but one by one he rips into them. They don't stand a chance against him. Their armors and swords are not real power. He has seen real power, he has seen humans take light from the sky and bring it down on their foes. He has seen humans summon fire with their sticks and kill other humans leagues away.

Quickly all the humans are brought to the floor, either dead or soon to be; that is except one. He turns to face the vile enchantress. The human that has had him ensorcelled. Only now that the haze has passed he knows she has tricked him. She has forced him to fight for her, he has tasted more human flesh in his time with her than the rest of his life. She smells like the man who brought him low. The man who took his family away from him. The man who made him into this. Slobber drips from his jowls. The vile human tries to scramble for the satchel containing the spell.

He growls and she scrambles away like the cowered she is. He is going to savor the sweet taste of her blood on his tongue. He is going to show her what it means to stand in the way of true power. So he savors every moment walking closer and closer to the enchantress. Yet as he gets closer he hears an odd noise. She is wheezing and crying.

That wheezing its familiar. He pushes past the odd feeling in his stomach and stalks closer. Once he is right above her, she reaches out her hand. Rycard pauses for only a second, but then it occurs that to him that she might be casting a spell. So he bites the outstretched hand.

Suddenly his mind is filled with images of the woman. He gets these visions when he tastes the blood of humans and monsters. The echoes of their lives before he consumes them. When he first became this he was terrified by the visions, but after months of going without eating human he started to feel himself drifting away. He grew more restless, and less reasonable, in that time he lost the ability to understand White speech. If he went any longer without human flesh he knew the fade would happen. One of his friends a calaxus told him of it. He said that his mother went through the fade when she got too old to hunt. First thing that went was the ability to talk, then she started getting irritable. Eventually she started lashing out at everyone even her own kin. He actually had to kill her when she tried to eat his children.

The visions continue, but something is off, when they reach memories of her childhood, he notices something, then she is a baby and he immediately lets go of his bite. He stares into the woman's eyes, she is crying, cradling her bleeding hand. He is staring into his daughters eyes. He almost killed his own daughter. He thinks of what he has become. He looks around at the faces of all the people he killed. He darts out of the barn and runs into the forest.

The shame compounds with every step her takes away from his daughter. He realizes he has spent so long as a beast the he did not have to lose his humanity to be a monster. So he runs, he runs as fast as he can. He runs away like he always does. He runs away like he did with his wife. He runs away like he did when his daughter was

born. The memory comes flooding back. Leaving the manor with Ealyn crying in his wife's arms.

The night was cold, and dark, although not totally absent of light, the stars where enough to illuminate the young man's face, the face of Geridan Ealyn's father. He is young, and handsome, lines of his face could only be captured by the finest of brushes. He has deep wavy black hair, that frames his face. He turned back to look at the manor house he just left. A cold breeze blows in shooting up a cloud of snow; totally obscuring the manor. He turned around and continued into the forest.

The journey to his bounty was short, the whole endeavor was supposed to be in and out. It would pay just enough to get the creditors off his back this moon's turn. All his titles, accolades, and knighthoods meant nothing when the pockets of lords remained empty. So, he marched through the forest. The snow seeped into his boots, until his feet where drowning in water. The journey should only have taken one day, but three days passed when he finally stepped foot on the outside of the beast's cave.

The tracks where unidentifiable, it seems like it might be a valdyr, but the prints where too large to match that description. He had to admit to himself that this was the first time he felt fear. He was always afraid before facing any beast, but his daughter was waiting for him. So he felt fear, true fear, only fear that can be felt when you are not the only one whose life is on the line. Yet he walked into the cave anyway, because if didn't then his wife would leave him, and she would take their daughter with her. Thats the way with high born. He was a commoner, elevated himself as much as he could, but in the end it meant nothing. Marriage to a high born was an impossibility. Another case in which accolades did not matter. So he spent every day making sure that his wife was happy. She even loved him for it, at least at first.

He realized quickly that this was not the life she wanted. To be with him meant giving up her seat in her father's court. She was young and rash when she decided to leave with him, they both where. Now, now he could see it in her eyes. When she watched him leave all that he could see was resentment. She could leave anytime, but with the child she hesitated, he had to admit he took advantage of that. He hoped that maybe the baby would keep her hear, because she might not love him, but he loved her. With every fiber of his being. He did things, things that many would consider evil, vile, even heretical to be with her.

So he walked into the cave. The stench was cloying, sickly sweet, the air was thick with it. He had to keep himself from breathing too deep, it seemed to fill his lungs. He could feel it sticking to skin, and hands. Yet he walked on. He kept trudging forward his feet cracking bones underneath him. He kept walking, puddles of blood and viscera leaking red bile into his worn boots. Eventually he found it, in the center of the cave there was a large clearing, with a pile of cloths and rags piled in the center surrounded by half eaten men, and animals. In the center sleep the largest beast he had even seen.

It was humanoid, but its muscles where distended and stretched across its body in a random pattern. Right now, its arms where Digitigrade reversed like a dog, but on all legs. It had paws at the bottom that were abnormally large. He had read about the one and only surviving account of fighting this monster, the man did not kill the beast. The beast left the man alone after eating his entire village, the scholar said that the beast was too engorged on the flesh of his neighbors that it simply had no more room left to eat him. He said that the beast flew into town with wings like a dragon, then when it landed its wings turned into scythes made of bone. People tried to hide in their homes, and the beast reformed its arms into deft hands to rip the doors off buildings. Yet the

worst detail that the scholar wrote about was when it ate its victims. He wrote that when he first saw its face he was mortified, because it simply did not have one. It was a blank slab of flesh, and when it opened its mouth to snarl at him, it parted its face in two and revealed a whirlpool of razor-sharp tiny teeth. He named the beast Grendel.

Now the beast of such a horrible tale lays across from him, its belly engorged on flesh. While it sleeps he rifles through his bag, he grabs a small black vile and unstops it, holding it to his mouth he stops. This is the secret of his success, everything he achieved could all be traced back to this small bottle. The bottle containing the culmination of all his alchemical experience. Not even the sorcerer he stole the mold from could ever have dreamed of this. True strength distilled into substance, yet he hesitated. He did not like the person the potion made him. He thought that maybe this potion would save him from poverty, from his tiny village, from weakness, but after everything he only achieved one thing that he can truly be proud of, and that was his daughter. So he stowed the potion back in his bag and unsheathed his white sword.

He stalked to the beast, closer and closer, with every step the beast took a heaving breath. It did not stir, but at the last step he did not notice the small body of a bird. The skeleton cracked underfoot. In a blur of movement the beast leaped towards the sound, He stumbled backwards as the beast landed onto the body. He ducked backwards, and only just brought up his sword to deflect. He did this on instinct forgetting that his sword was not the one he grew up with. The speed of the scythe drove it through the sword, which parted it perfectly in half. The two halves continued forward, and cut two large gashes into his sides. He and the beast screamed in unison, their voices harmonizing into a chorus of agony.

The beast recovered first, it redistributed muscle and bone to the severed appendage until it was reformed, but the beast was a little smaller, its muscles pulled even more taught over its skeletal frame. Geridan readied his stance, and planted his feet. The beast no longer lunged instead focused on him. He realized that the beast had no eyes, so it must use sound to register movement. He carefully pulled a small empty vial out of his pouch and tossed it to the other side of the cave. It shattered, the beast turned to face, and lunged. It landed on top of the bottle and Geridan stood still.

He paced slowly towards the creature careful to avoid making noise. The creature darted its head around from side to side, and eventually He was standing right under it. He readied his sword to strike, but he stopped. The beast stopped turning its head, instead it froze in place, and with a horrible squelch it's head parted in two. Geridan looked in horror at the parted mouth, because in the center was one black and red eye. The beast lunged at him again, he slashed cutting another piece of limb, this time avoiding the fragments. The beast retracted its limbs, until it was slithering on the floor like a snake. It lashed at him, snapping its jaws. He dodged deftly, but with every move his armor felt heavier. He looked to his side and saw that it was totally soaked with blood.

He was losing he was going to lose too much blood. So with the last of his strength he charged at the beast. With one deft slash he cut the beast in two. The beast howled in anguish and went limp. He screamed at the corpse, then a mad grin stretched across his face, and he started laughing. For a time he just stood there laughing at the limp corpse of the beast. Once his voice was too hoarse to continue he walked to the other side of the beast and grabbed its head. The head is the best part for proving a kill, its hard to dispute a creature is dead when it is without a head. Yet when he reached the head he looked into its eyes. They were not yet glassy and clouded. He reached down,

and froze. The eye turned to face him, and before he could even scream the beast lashed out with its appendage. His sword flew out of his hand and he soared across the room. He was greeted by the far wall of the cave, and his body replied with a sickening crunch. He slid down the wall and piled onto the floor in a heap. His vision blurred as he watched the beast pull itself back together. He couldn't move, only his left arm would respond to his command. So, the beast newly put together lumbered towards him, it was slowed, only able to trudge across the room. So, he watched it slowly approach.

With the adrenaline and the slow beast it was an eternity. He had time to process many thoughts before he died. After a careful balancing of the scores he actually found that maybe he would welcome death. His life has crumbled around him, this beast is only the first of the many he would continue to have to risk his life to kill, just to pay the interest on his debts. His wife would surely leave him. So he would end up alone, and drowning in a mire of his own stupidity. Yet on the last thought he realized something. He would not be alone. The image of Ealyn's face filled his mind.

So, he reached into his satchel and procured his small black vile. He feared taking this again, the last time he blacked out and was not himself for weeks. Every time he has taken it the blackout has grown longer. He feared that maybe this time he would not wake from this somnambulation. He drank anyway. Within seconds his body was anew. His sword was across the room. He leaped for it, but the beast cut him off. It slashed at him, he jumped over it onto its back. The beast bucked and writhed, but nothing could cause his vice grip to release. Reaching into a side pocket he produced a small dagger. He stabbed into the beast's back, but the steel just slid off like its skin was of iron. The beast continued to protest, and he climbed across it until he reached its smooth head.

With one hand he pried the beast's mouth open. The beast shrieked like a rabbit, and he plunged the dagger into the beast's eye. The beast went still, and he rolled off.

The beast did not scream as it died, it just slumped to the side and let out a wheeze. He thought it was a pathetic death. He trudged across the mire of blood and viscera to his sword. He grabbed his sword and beheaded the beast. Walking out of the cave he waited for the blackout to come, but it did not come. Maybe Broun has favored him this time. Maybe before he was taking the tonic for a selfish reason, and now he has shed this and Broun will not punish him. Yet as he walked something felt off. His armor felt tight, and far too war for such a damp cave.

It started as a stomach ache. The further he walked the worse it became, until it was so bad that he doubled over in pain. He felt like he had to vomit, but couldn't. He writher in pain as more pain erupted from his bones. His skin and muscle distended across his growing bones, and changing flesh. The hair on his head fell out in bloody clumps as skin beneath forced off it's covering. For a night and a day he sat in that cave shaking from the pain. Once he was capable enough to stand, he tried but landed on his stomach. He was in such bad sorts that he had to walk on his hands and legs.

He picked up the monster with his mouth, refusing to let this excursion go for waste. He dragged his armor to the mouth of the cave, and buried it. He would come back for it once he had this horrible malady cured. In the back of his jaw he bit onto his sword, and dangling from a bit of loose skin he carried the head of the Grendel.

All things considered the journey home was quite pleasant. The cold no longer bothered him. The winter chill must have cleared since he left the cave. The pain also disappeared totally, and he felt stronger than ever. He actually felt and instinct to run,

so he did. He galloped across the lands at speeds he never thought possible. Maybe the tonic was a miracle that he refused to let take effect, maybe this was how he felt when he blacked out. So he ran, the wind blew across his face and he felt truly free.

He could see his manor in the distance, and shortly he was at the door. He could not free his hand to knock, so he just nudged the door hoping that his wife would answer. He had to let go of the servants before he left, but with the prize this beast would fetch he would be able to hire them again. He could not pay his debt as of yet, but his wife and Ealyn was all that mattered. If he had to kill a Grendel every day to be with them he would.

He heard feet rushing across the floor, and his heart raced with anticipation. Once at the door he heard his wife ask who it was. He tried to respond but his throat refused to form the words. Must be a result of this horrible malady. She opened the door and froze.

He dropped the beast's head and the sword onto the ground and opened his mouth to say hi. No words came out, but his wife screamed. He turned around, but there was nothing. She scrambled back and shut the door on him. She ran across the house and he followed her movements, trying to see if he could catch her through a window. He finally did, but he wished he hadn't. He saw it in the window who he was now, what he had become. He ran into the woods and never saw either of them again. Until today that is.