

Chapter 4

They ride in silence for weeks, only stopping for food and water. One day 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 foley.” 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 physick 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.

Ealyn 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 river.” 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 for your 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.