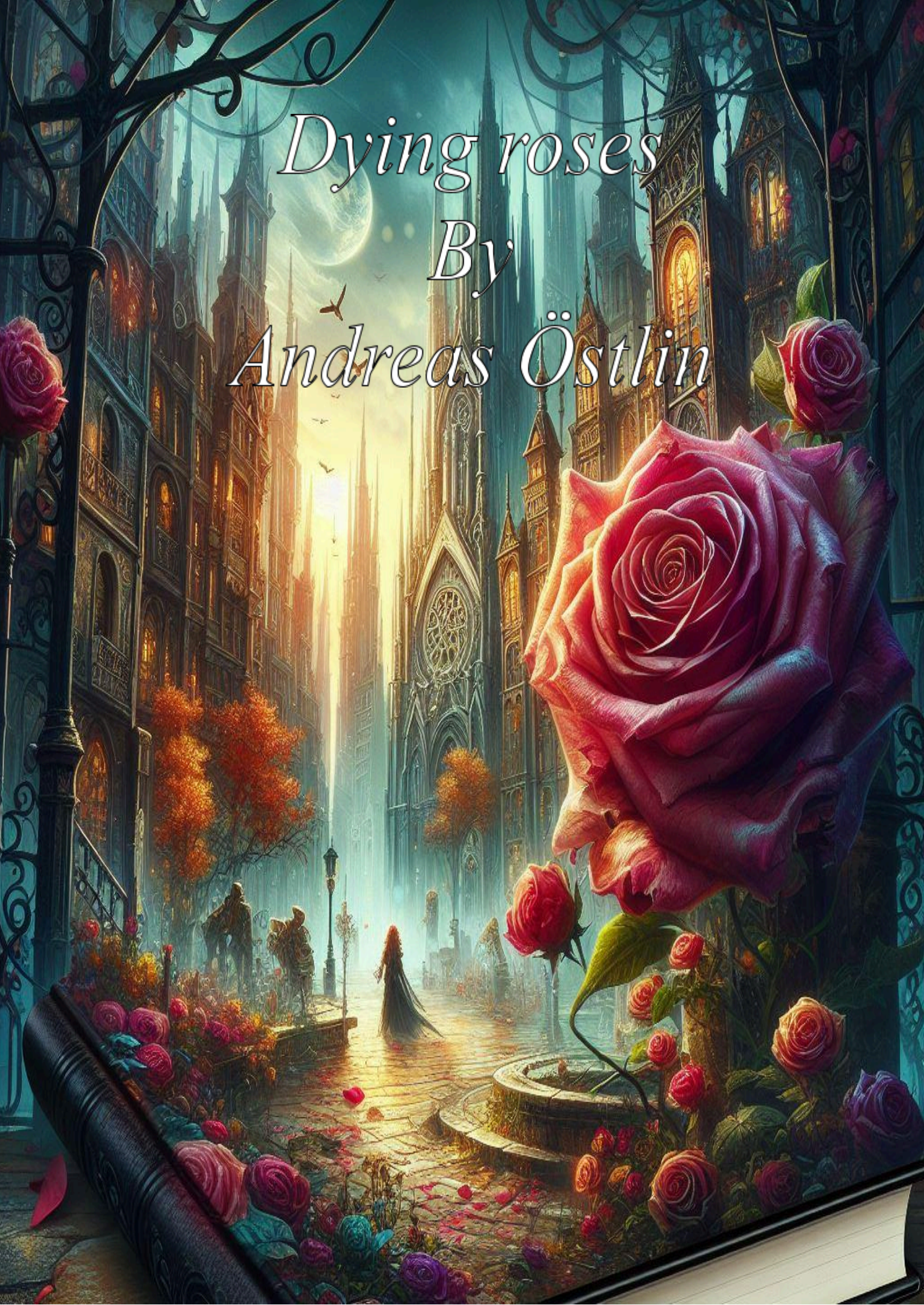
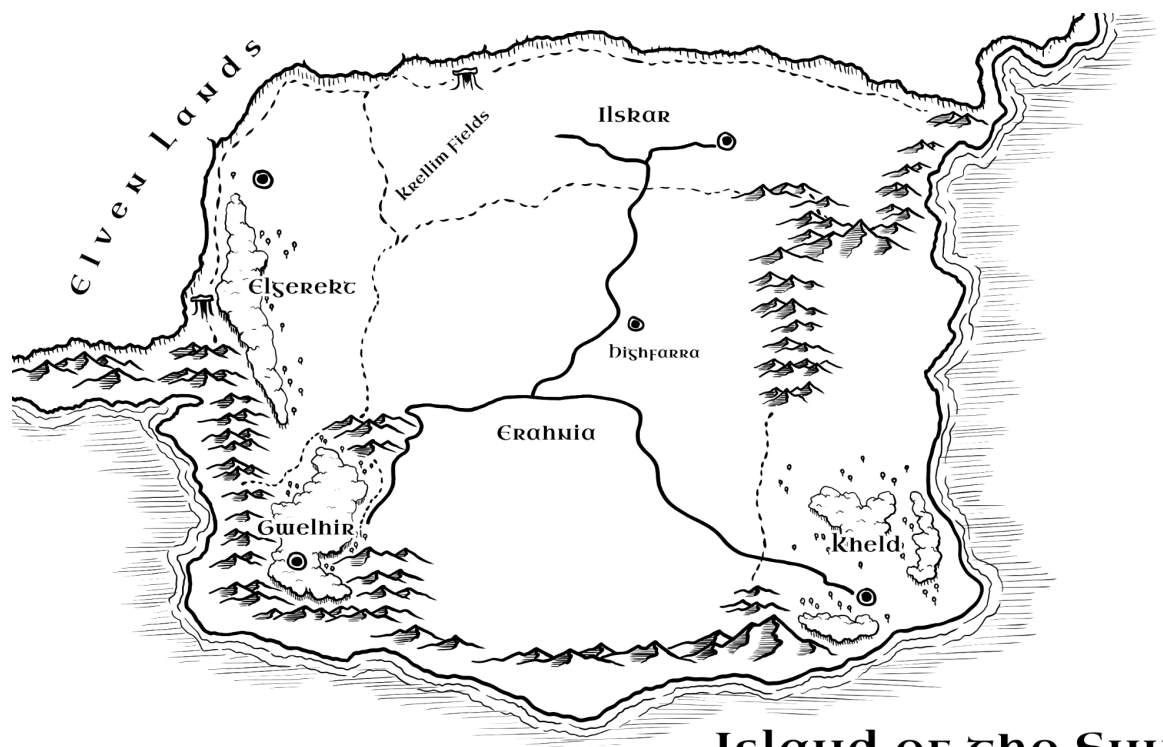


Dying roses
By
Andreas Östlin





Island of the Sun

The end of peace

Ghalen shifted in the saddle, his muscles stiff with unease, trailing behind his father through the crowded camp. The air was thick with the acrid stench of smoke and metal, mingled with the iron tang of blood that churned his stomach. Everywhere he looked, men in dented armour sharpened swords or brushed down weary horses, their faces a blend of determination and exhaustion. As his father passed, each man saluted or bowed, their chainmail glinting in the dim light that pierced the camp's haze. Riding a step behind, Ghalen mimicked his father's curt nods, though no one spared him more than a passing glance.

Tents and crates filled the camp, leaving only narrow pathways. Ghalen worried his father's stallion might balk at them.

His father muttered under his breath, "I'll have to lead the damned horse if it gets any more crowded." Turning to face Ghalen he added with a wry smile, "would have made your grandmother proud, wouldn't it, Ghalen?"

Ghalen returned the smile and nodded. He'd always loved his grandmother, though she had been a stickler for etiquette.

His father dismounted with practised ease, his boots sinking into the mud as he patted the stallion's neck. Ghalen followed suit, landing awkwardly on the uneven ground. Clutching his satchel of quills and parchment, he stumbled after his father toward the advisors' tent on the camp's eastern edge.

Ghalen's older cousin, Cedric, strode over with a confident grin to meet them. "Good to see you, Uncle," he said before turning to Ghalen. "And you too, cousin. It'll do you some good to see the real world for once—not just

read about it in a book.” Cedric winked at Ghalen before moving to take the reins of their horses, leading them toward the makeshift stables.

The muffled sound of raised voices reached Ghalen before he arrived at the tent. Another heated debate. He trailed behind his father, who pressed forward at a brisk pace despite the biting Ilskar winds seeping through every layer of clothing. Ghalen tightened his cloak, wishing they were anywhere but here. Flickering torchlight cast restless shadows on the tent’s fabric walls, offering fleeting glimpses of the animated figures inside.

A guard stationed outside the tent straightened at their approach and saluted. Ghalen shrank back as the guard announced in a booming voice, “High King Begrim Whitmore of Erahnia!” The tent flap was flung open, and Ghalen slipped in behind his father, his presence barely acknowledged amidst the tension in the room.

Inside, the weight of authority pressed down on Ghalen like an iron cloak. His eyes darted across the figures gathered before him. The Lord Marshal of Ilskar, broad-shouldered and imposing, seemed to fill half the space with his iron-clad presence. The spiritual leader from Kheld radiated a serene calm, her teal garments shimmering in the firelight and her piercing blue eyes so striking that Ghalen had to look away. Then there was the Gwelhir ranger—a towering half-elf with fiery orange hair cascading down his back. His pointed ears twitched as if attuned to every sound.

The room fell silent as Begrim stepped forward. Heads bowed, and a unified murmur of “My king” rippled through the gathered crowd. Ghalen lingered near the entrance, gripping the strap of his satchel like a lifeline. Begrim raised a hand in acknowledgement, his commanding presence unmistakable as he strode to the centre of the tent. There were no pleasantries, no time for formalities.

Begrim seated himself on a modest wooden throne at the far end of the room. He wasted no time. "I thought we sent the army to protect the border from raiding parties. The men outside look like they've seen far more than that. I need the latest reports. Now."

The Lord Marshal was the first to speak, his deep, commanding voice slicing through the tense silence. "My king, your sons have led the forces here well, but the attacks were far larger than our initial estimates. Our troops faced fierce resistance. It appears the Elgerekt are massing for another assault. They leave nothing but death and ruin in their wake. There have been no attempts at diplomacy. Their purpose, it seems, is solely to destroy."

Ghalen flinched at the mention of his brothers. Of course, they were leading the charge—warriors, unlike him. He tried to focus, committing every word to memory for the history books. But one phrase haunted him: *solely to destroy*. The Elgerekt? A peaceful people?

The ranger stepped forward, his fiery orange hair shimmering in the torchlight like molten metal. "Our scouts have tried to approach their borders," he said, his voice measured and calm, "but the Elgerekt have fortified them heavily. The paths we once used for contact are closed, and many have died attempting to cross. It's too dangerous to venture into their lands now."

Ghalen felt a lump in his throat. *Many have died.* He cast a sidelong glance at his father, searching for some flicker of emotion. But Begrim's face was a mask of stoic determination. *How does he remain so composed?* Ghalen wondered. He felt like an intruder in this grim council, safe within the confines of the tent while others spoke of death and destruction.

The cleric stepped into the light next, her teal robes shimmering in the flickering torchlight. The troubled lines etched on her face deepened the dread pooling in Ghalen's chest. "My liege," she began, her voice laden with unease, "they wield magic unlike anything we've seen before. It corrupts the land and

brings only death. Our healers are powerless against its darkness." She paused, glancing toward the restless tent flaps where the wind tugged and howled. "Whatever has twisted their minds must also fuel this evil."

Ghalen watched his father's jaw tighten with each report, the lines on his face deepening as if the weight of the world had settled there. Begrim sprang up, pacing the confined space of the tent. His heavy boots squelched against the muddy ground as he inhaled sharply, his voice slicing through the tense silence. "My mother orchestrated the largest military alliance in our continent's history. After nearly sixty years of peace, we're now under attack from the Elgerekt? These peaceful nomads, corrupted by death magic?"

The words hung in the air like a blade poised to strike. Ghaleen was stunned by the rare vulnerability in his father's tone. Begrim paused, then sank back into his throne. He pressed his forehead into his palm, his broad shoulders sagging under an invisible weight.

Ghalen's heart ached at the sight. His father had always been unshakable—a towering figure of strength and certainty. Grandmother had promised that his father would be the first king to rule in peace. Now, that promise felt like a cruel, unattainable dream. A sick sense of despair churned in Ghalen's stomach.

Begrim straightened slowly, his voice hardening once more as he turned to the Lord Marshal. "The Elgerekt have never involved themselves in our conflicts or shown the slightest interest in our politics. Yet I trust we've been monitoring their military capabilities. For precaution, if nothing else."

The Lord Marshal opened his mouth, his brow furrowing as though preparing to protest. But something in the king's tone must have silenced him. Instead, his gaze shifted to the ranger, a tacit handoff of responsibility.

The elf nodded, his expression sharp as he spoke. "Indeed, my liege.

The Lord Marshal instructed us to scout their military power—a prudent safety measure, no doubt." His tone was measured, but Ghalen noticed the flicker of annoyance in his eyes as he glanced toward the Marshal.

Begrim shook his head slowly, his face unreadable as he absorbed the information. "Then tell me," he said, his voice low but firm, "do the Elgerekt—death magic or not—stand any chance against us in war?"

The Lord Marshal answered this time, his tone confident and steady, his composure fully regained. "Not a chance, my king. Our weaponry is superior, and we outnumber them five to one. They have berserkers who fight among themselves in their internal conflicts, but no army trained for true warfare."

Before Ghalen could fully process the Marshal's words, the sharp clang of bells pierced the air, followed by the sound of a commotion outside the tent. The council fell silent, turning as one toward the source of the disturbance.

A guard thrust his head through the tent flap, his voice taut with urgency. "My liege, the alarm. What are your orders?"

Begrim's jaw tightened. "Lord Marshal, ready the troops. The rest of us will remain here and await a report. We must know what we're dealing with before we act. Go with Lumaire's light."

The Lord Marshal saluted and left with hurried steps, his boots squelching against the muddy ground outside.

Before long, two guards burst into the tent, faces grim, hauling a wounded scout between them, his uniform dark with blood, his body limp.

Ghalen felt an icy dread as he took in the scout's dire state. The soldiers laid their burden before the council, and the scout's eyes found the king's. With a struggle that etched deeper lines of pain across his features, the scout delivered his message in a hoarse, muted whisper. "They are here."

Those chilling words sparked an immediate flurry of activity from the council. And as Ghalen hurried after his father out of the tent, he could swear the alarm bells clanged more ominously. As the other leaders dashed to their respective stations, Begrim donned his armour and rallied his honour guard.

The army had assembled swiftly, as Begrim and his entourage made their way out of the camp, the men were already forming ranks, archers, cavalry and footmen in neat formations before the enemy host could break through the edge of the forest on the opposing side of the field. From the forest's edge, the fearsome figures of Elgerekt soldiers emerged, their tall, bearded figures an imposing sight. They wore battered leather armour, in

contrast to the Capital's polished chainmail and finely woven uniforms. Each held dual battle axes or a single axe paired with a shield.

Begrim rode up to Ghalen amid the chaos. "Get your horse and ride for the capital. This is no longer a place for learning, Ghalen. I will not risk your life for a lesson."

Ghalen wanted to be brave like his brothers, to argue with his father, to say he could help. But fear held his tongue.

The king stood before his assembled troops, his sharp eyes scanning the sea of faces in front of him. Each face was etched with a complex mix of fear, determination, and hope. He closed his eyes briefly, steeling himself. Then, drawing his sword and holding it aloft, he shouted, "soldiers of the Isle! Today we stand on the precipice of history. It is not just our survival that hangs in the balance, but the very peace our ancestors bled for. Let them hear the

thunder of our unity! Let them feel the tremors of our resolve! For our homes, our kin, and all that we hold dear!”

His voice rang out like a battle cry reverberating across the camp. The men erupted into cheers, their chants growing louder as those nearest the king relayed his words to those farther away.

As the soldiers rallied, Ghalen’s sharp eyes caught movement at the edges of the Elgerekt lines. Strange hooded figures emerged, their faces obscured in shadow. They moved with purpose, surrounded by heavily armoured warriors clad in dark, menacing metal unlike anything Ghalen had seen before. A chill ran down his spine as he realised these figures were orchestrating the enemy forces.

Something else was off—there were so many of them, and they did not stop coming. Ghalen glanced at the Lord Marshal, who appeared just as surprised by the sight.

The enemy advanced, and Ghalen's heart pounded in his chest. Then, amidst the chaos, he spotted his two brothers shouting orders from their mounts. They sat tall in their saddles, commanding and fearless, and for a moment, a swell of pride surged through him.

His father's voice cut through the cacophony of the battlefield, sharp and resolute: "Charge!"

For a heartbeat, the world seemed to hold its breath—a collective inhalation of a thousand men. Then, with a thunderous roar, the army surged forward. The ground trembled under the pounding hooves of a thousand horses, a rumbling drumbeat that reverberated in Ghalen's very bones. He felt

the raw, unrelenting power of the charge, each stride driving them closer to the enemy.

Ghalen's eyes stayed fixed on the advancing lines, the gap between them closing with terrifying inevitability. His heart hammered against his ribs, every beat a countdown to the moment of impact.

Time seemed to stretch, each second dragging into eternity. The sounds around him sharpened—the rasp of his own ragged breathing mingled with the thundering hooves and the rising crescendo of war cries.

Then they collided. Steel sang against steel, a deafening symphony of violence that drowned out all else. Horses, maddened and riderless, careened wildly across the battlefield, leaving trails of crimson in their wake.

One of the guards assigned to Ghalen seized his shoulder and yanked hard. "We need to leave, my prince," he urged.

But Ghalen couldn't tear his gaze away. His wide eyes remained fixed on the chaos before him, unable to look away from the carnage unfolding on the blood-soaked field.

He saw a lieutenant fall, an axe buried in his back, his lifeless body crumpling to the ground. Then, Ghalen's gaze shifted to the grass beneath his father's horse, watching in horror as it withered and blackened. One of the hooded figures knelt nearby, chanting with a palm pressed to the frozen earth.

Begrim's horse reared violently, throwing him from the saddle.

"Father!" Ghalen cried, his voice raw with panic.

His attention wavered momentarily, drawn to another hooded figure plunging a blade into the chest of a fallen officer. Ghalen's breath hitched as the soldier's lifeless body jerked unnaturally, rising to its feet, eyes glowing with an eerie blue fire.

But Ghalen's focus snapped back to his father. Someone was approaching him—a towering figure, a nightmare clad in black iron. Begrim, moving sluggishly, hauled himself to his feet. Sword in hand, he prepared to defend himself.

Steel met steel in a ferocious clash. Each strike rang out like a desperate prayer; each parry, a defiance against the inevitable. Ghalen could see his father's strength waning with every blow, his movements slower, his defences faltering.

There was a sudden slash, and blood began to flow. Ghalen's father faltered, his strength leaving him as he fell to the ground. The creature in black iron loomed over him for a moment, then turned away, leaving him to his fate.

Tears blurred Ghalen's vision as he struggled to comprehend what he had just seen. Shapes swam into focus—his brothers, screaming in rage and despair as they stormed toward the battlefield. Behind them, the Lord Marshal's voice rang out, desperate and strained. "We must retreat! The battle is lost!"

But his brothers didn't listen. They charged headfirst into the chaos, their war cries swallowed by the roar of battle.

Ghalen had no time to react before his guards seized him, hauling him away in the opposite direction. He fought against their grip, his heart splintering as he was dragged farther from the field and the family he couldn't save.

*** Shift in character perspective

Chapter 1

A Requiem for the Forgotten

They were winning. Ghalen's mad gamble had paid off—the enemy had only managed to bring a fraction of their forces. He surveyed the destruction in the fields: so much death, not even nature had begun to reclaim it. It was hard to believe that only three years ago, the very best of the Isle's forces had fallen here—his father among them. He clenched his fist tighter around the hilt of his blade. "Press the attack!"

The enemy was in shambles. A few of the remaining war beasts fell to arrows or spears. The towering axe-wielders fought to the last, but only one of those dreadful death generals remained. Clad in night-black armour, its glowing blue eyes burned like small embers. Not far behind it stood its hooded puppet master. As they pressed forward, Ghalen saw an opening in the enemy

lines—a straight path to the hooded figure. He glanced to his side. “Haldor!” Of course, Haldor had already seen it. Nothing escaped the man.

Haldor nodded at Ghalen’s command and sprang through the opening, his blade descending like lightning upon the enemy leader. Ghalen caught the shock in the man’s hidden face as Haldor’s strike split his chest open, and both the master and its puppet fell dead.

Ghalen surveyed the battlefield. They needed to kill or capture the remaining berserkers, but the day was won. He absorbed the shattered remnants of war. Dust and smoke cloaked the landscape in a ghostly haze, through which he glimpsed the lingering scars of loss. Trees that had once stood majestic were now mutilated, their splintered forms tragic reminders of what had been. Fragile tufts of grass hinted at the vibrant life this wasteland had once nurtured. The field before him lay strewn with broken weapons and

discarded armour, while the thick, metallic smell of blood mingled with the earthy scent of rain-soaked mud.

Now we just have to finish off—His thought broke as his eyes caught movement. The death general, which had fallen lifeless when its puppeteer had died, was now rising from the rubble where it had lain.

A soldier pointed in alarm. "How?"

Ghalen's gaze darted to the fallen dark master. It was still down. His eyes shifted back to the Death general—something was off. Its eyes were no longer glowing blue.

The three enemy berserkers who had fought alongside the Death general before it fell were also staring at it. The shock in their faces mimicked what Ghalen felt. With a war cry, they turned and attacked the black-clad figure.

"They're fighting among themselves!" Haldor called.

With eerie grace, the Death general danced between them. It seized a blade and dispatched the attackers with brutal efficiency.

Ghalen's men raised their bows, arrows aimed at the dark figure, but he raised his hand to stop them. "No, we must capture it. Something is not right here. Priests, can you hold it?"

Ghalen stood beyond the forming circle, gripping the hilt of his blade as he watched the scene unfold. The robed priests moved with precision, spreading out to encircle the Death general. Teal-clad soldiers held a defensive line, shields raised, prepared for retaliation.

The enemy, though still imposing, hesitated. Ghaleen saw it eyeing his men, taking in their neatly tailored tunics layered over chainmail. Its movements, once fluid and deadly, were uncertain now, as if it were calculating its odds.

The priests drew small, carved stones from their pouches, their faintly glowing symbols casting eerie light across the battlefield. Ghalen watched as they tossed the stones, one after another, into a rough circle around the dark-armoured figure. A low chant began to rise from their ranks, a rhythmic hum.

The death general tensed, its stance shifting as it braced for an attack. Ghalen caught the flicker of strain in its eyes as it struggled against something unseen. Its movements grew sluggish, as though an invisible force was pressing down on it.

"It's resisting," Ghalen said.

The death general gritted its teeth, voice low. "Release me..." Even at this distance, Ghalen could hear the strain in the words. The figure's defiance

faltered as its eyelids fluttered and with a final, faint hiss—"You demons..."—it collapsed to its knees. The armoured form sagged as its head dipped forward.

Ghalen released a slow breath, his instincts still on edge. "Bind it," he called out firmly, "keep it restrained. We need to question it." His gaze lingered on the fallen figure, unease curling in his gut. This wasn't over—not yet.

"It's a woman!" a soldier called out as he bound her arms.

Ghalen didn't linger on the revelation. What still had him reeling was the fact that it—*she*—had spoken.

The soldiers brought her to the old armoury tent, now mostly empty. They stripped away her armour, dressed her in a simple shift, and tied her to a stake. They were rough, slapping her awake and splashing water on her face. Ghalen couldn't blame them—the Death general had slain many of his men, many of their friends.

Despite their efforts, they got nothing but dizzy, slurred words from her.

What little Ghalen could gather suggested she knew nothing, or perhaps she was too disoriented to speak coherently.

"I don't think we'll get much from her like this, sir," one of his officers said. "We should let her rest."

Ghalen nodded. "Let me know as soon as she wakes."

A dull throb in her temples dragged her from sleep. She was bound and battered in what appeared to be a tent used as a temporary armoury. Despite her aching body, she tried to get her bearings, looking for anything that might aid her. In the corner of the tent, she noticed a set of black plate armour,

distinct from the leather worn by her attackers and the chainmail of her captors. *Did I wear that?* She wondered, squinting.

Through the commotion outside, she strained her ears, catching snippets of a conversation between the guards stationed outside. By the tone of their voices, they were confused.

"By Lumaire's light, we killed the Dark Master. Why is she not dead?" one guard said, a hint of fear in his voice. "A bad omen, I'm sure,"

A second guard weighed in. "The Westfolk feared her as much as we did, and she was killing her own before we cornered her. But I don't see why he ordered us to capture her."

Their conversation ceased, replaced by a palpable tension. Someone was approaching. She tensed, her body was prepared to react, even if her mind did not know what to do.

The entrance to the tent was flung open, revealing an imposing silhouette against the backdrop of the setting sun. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she studied the man who entered. His youth seemed marred by battles, tanned skin scarred and bruised, hand resting on his sword hilt. Black hair, like charcoal and neatly tied back, framed a pair of intense brown eyes. His armour, similar to that of his guards but adorned with gold embellishments, bore the crest of a mountain chain—a sign of high rank, she guessed. The large, calloused hands, especially the right one marked by a prominent scar across its back, testified to a man who did not shy away from battle. *A youth at the front of an army?* She wondered with a frown.

His gaze filled with awe or fear, as if confronted with a mythical beast brought to life. She felt a prickle of unease, a flicker of vulnerability. *Am I a beast?*

"I am Ghalen Whitmore, commander of these forces." His voice carried an authority that belied his youthful appearance. "I believe you've lost your memories," he remarked, his words echoing through the tent. A weighted pause lingered, expecting some form of acknowledgement, but she remained silent, lost in the maze of her thoughts. "You were fighting alongside the Western Elgerekt. Does that spark any memories?"

How does he know I lost my memories? The commander's words faded into the background, as foreign to her as an unfamiliar tongue. She tried to make sense of everything, fragments popped into her mind; they had questioned her earlier when they removed her armour, and they had not been gentle.

The leader spoke of war, puppeteers of the dead, and her role as a formidable general. She felt more lost than ever.

A surge of panic rose as she remembered the hooded figure stabbing her. *The wound in my chest. Did they patch it?* She could not see any bleeding, and the only pain she felt was from the guards earlier. Yet her hands were bound behind her back so she could not touch her chest. They had to have patched it. That wound would have killed her, and she was alive. *I am alive... right?*

The commander continued to pace the room, muttering to himself, "perhaps a woodland elf?" he speculated, his eyes tracing her face. His expression shifted to one of doubt, and he shook his head as if dismissing the possibility.

She turned to the side, catching her reflection in the polished shield by the wall. Her ears were long and pointed, almost twisting like a ram's horns. Her skin was pale, with intricate markings under her eyes. Her brown hair

hung in tangled strands streaked with dirt. The flower-shaped jewel woven into her hair felt familiar somehow.

“Could you be... a high elf?” he asked, lowering his voice to a hushed whisper. It was as though speaking too loud might dispel an illusion. “Could you be from beyond the great Elven Wall?”

Her heart fluttered at his words, an echo of familiarity ringing in her ears. The mention of the wall stirred something within her.

She had no answers. For the first time since waking up on the battlefield, fear gripped her. She did not know her identity or nature. The men around her viewed her as a mythical creature. And she somehow knew myths stirred fear and led to tragic ends. Despair filled her.

“No matter,” Ghalen sighed. “When our great warriors fall, the enemy raises them to fight against us. But if we bring down their masters, their

warriors die with them. But not you. You still stand and even fought them." He gave her a stern look. "There is a prophecy in our temple that an angel of Lumaire would deliver us in a time of need. I've never put much faith in prophecy, but you look like no creature I have ever seen. If we were to show you mercy, perhaps your kind could help our cause."

He wants me to fight this war? I don't even know who I am.

Ghalen's eyes locked onto hers, searching, questioning.

His stare was intense. "Do you truly not remember anything of your past?" he asked, a hint of desperation lurking behind that steady gaze.

She hesitated, feeling exposed. "I told your people I don't know who I am, or where I come from. Besides, why should I trust you?"

He grunted, "Do you have any other option?"

Death, she thought, and with a sigh, she added "When you mentioned the Elven Wall... It felt familiar, I can't explain it."

His gaze softened for a moment. "Very well," he said. "Our path home to the capital will take us past the Great Gate. Humans normally steer clear of it; it is... unpleasant for the mind. Perhaps what unsettles us could help spark something in your memory. Or time might bring something back to you. However," he added, crossing his arms, "we will not trust you. Restraints will be necessary."

Before she could respond, a guard stepped up, raising his voice. "Ghalen, are you truly inviting this... demon to join us? The journey home is already dangerous without an enemy in our midst!"

Ghalen raised his hand. "Khain, my decisions are not made lightly. Do not doubt my judgement, Banner-General."

The man's voice wavered. "No, sire, but she fought against us. I fear for—"

"Enough," Ghalen interjected. "Fear has two sides: the known and the unknown. Maybe, by knowing her better, we might find an ally where once we saw an enemy. Besides, do you think one disarmed, bound woman will defeat what remains of our company?"

Khain bowed his head. "I overstepped," he said, then excused himself from the tent in a hurry.

Outside she heard muffled voices, one whispering, "has the boy lost his mind?"

Another voice shushed the first. "Be careful with your words. Do not question His orders so boldly. He could have your tongue for that."

She thought her hearing might be sharp—Ghalen showed no sign that he had heard the exchange.

He turned back to her, extending his hand. "So, will you come along nicely?"

She looked into his eyes. "What if I did not?"

"I don't want more bloodshed."

"But you can't let me go?"

"No, I cannot." He frowned.

Better a prisoner than dead I suppose. "I'll play along if that will keep my head on my shoulders." *Can I help end this war? Or will I make it worse?*

She thought, staring at the ground.

As she agreed, Ghalen gave a sigh of relief. "The journey back to the East will be a test of endurance and patience. We are still within contested territory, with several days of arduous riding ahead. The enemy forces are scattered across these lands, and passage will not be easily granted."

The two guards stationed outside entered as Ghalen left. They hauled her to her feet and led her outside. Dirty, tired faces stared back at her. What remained of the victorious band seemed to be a force of less than a hundred strong. She saw frowns and narrowed eyes as she was led past them, but she steeled herself, ready to face the challenges that lay ahead.

The guards stowed her in an open carriage, her wrists and ankles bound, and her body draped in a green cloak to shield her from the harsh winds. They outfitted her in the teal robes of their healers, woven with brass detailing, very different from the intimidating plate armour she had worn in battle. The looming darkness mimicked her current state of mind—shrouded and

uncertain. Around her, the men and women of the company prepared for travel, their movements efficient and sure, opposite to the turmoil within her.

She remained preoccupied with the haunting memory of the hooded figure and the searing pain that had consumed her. She closed her eyes, searching her body for any remnants of the wound. But there was nothing. No scar, no lingering ache. It was as if the memory existed in a realm separate from her physical being. A shiver ran down her spine, a disturbing realisation that she had defied death itself, emerging from the abyss untouched. She thought about coming face to face with the Great Gate, which brought an unexpected sense of calm. She could see the wall that would lead to it stretching out in the distance, as far as her eyes could reach. Her gaze then settled on the distant battlefield where she had been captured. Despite the horror of the scene, her eyes lingered on the field, her shoulders slumping

slightly. She swallowed hard. It was the only thing she knew in this strange world.

Her captors' fallen comrades were retrieved and buried with ceremony, while the leather-clad warriors became a feast for crows, an exception was made for the hooded figures which were burned. There was much movement, packing and saddling of horses, loading of carriages. Weapons were cleaned and packed, soldiers patched each other's wounds, and those more gravely wounded were helped by cloaked figures whose faces she could only see in passing.

For some reason carts set off with just a couple of riders in different directions without any cargo, but with many riderless horses in tow.

A soldier with a large build mounted the front of her cart grabbing the reins, he turned to face her. She expected a vicious glance and a snarky

comment, but his smile was warm, "the name's Pieor Orlek, Ghalen's personal guard." He adjusted the reins. "Riding with him, I reckon we'll be crossing paths quite a bit, Mistress." he turned as Ghalen approached and gave him a respectful nod.

Ghalen mounted the carriage. "Everything's ready. Our enemy should struggle to track us. Let's go."

The elf saw him holding a mud-speckled blade in a scabbard, even in this dirty state she could see the golden details on the blade.

"You found the blade then?" Pieor asked, eyes widening.

"Yes, it seems they did not loot our dead. The blade will be brought home." Ghalen said, tucking the blade behind him.

They left the mangled battlefield behind. The war-tainted air gave way to the freshness of untouched nature, a balm to her soul. Gradually, she

surrendered to the lulling motion of the cart, dozing off to the rhythmic sound of the horses' hooves against the earth. Her mind wavered in visions of war, destruction, and always the hooded figure looming over her, but there was something new, she thought she could make out a figure in a rose garden, watching over a flower at its centre, it was withering.

When she came to, the sun was no longer in the sky. Hushed voices spoke at the head, barely audible over the rumble of the carriage. Pieor, driving the cart, spoke fast in a speculative conversation with Ghalen.

"Could she be a high elf like the stories?" Pieor's voice quivered with doubt. "I'm not very good with books or history, but did they not all leave thousands of years ago? Maybe she is just an odd-looking Gwelhir elf?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" Ghalen countered. Throwing a glance backwards.

Turning around with an embarrassed blush on his cheeks, Pieor quickly apologised.

"Can you tell me about these Gwelhir elves? Do they look like me?" *From what I saw in that shield I look nothing like these people.*

Pieor scratched his chin. "Well," he said, "the elves of Gwelhir live much longer than us humans, that's for sure. And from what I've seen, their hair is always orange, like fire itself. Their ears are much longer too, though not quite as long as yours, I reckon. My old nan always said, 'The longer the ears, the longer they live.'"

"Nonsense," Ghalen interrupted. "Elves' ears have nothing to do with their lifespan. It's said the woodland elves are descendants of the high elves, who intermingled with ancient humans. Over time, they strayed from their customs and gradually lost all resemblance to their elven kin. Where the high

elves were said to live forever, their woodland relatives would live for a few hundred years.”

Pieor quickly resumed, unaffected by his commander’s corrections. “That may be, but you’re different,” he remarked, pointing at her, “your hair is brown. And the markings on your face—elves are born with them. But woodland elves sport green markings, yours are as blue as the summer sky!”

“And would my looks make me more similar to these high elves you speak of?” she asked.

Pieor looked at her with his mouth open.

He appeared relieved when Ghalen answered, “we could not say, the gates to the supposed high elves have been closed for thousands of years, and the elves of those lands are nothing but legends to us. Our priests worship remnants of what they left behind.”

She sat in silence for a long while, listening to them talk. The conversation had changed to what routes would best avoid the wind. Pondering what was said earlier, she had no memory of anything but her seeming death, but she did not trust these men enough to share that memory.

As the carriage trundled forward, the wind was a constant companion. She saw the land transform from war-torn muddy fields to new terrain. It was not welcoming; but a harsh landscape with trees sparse and leafless, even though tree buds spoke of it being springtime. Abandoned farms and desolate fields told stories of more prosperous times gone by.

Soldiers of varying ranks and attire passed them, each offering a respectful nod to Ghalen. Pieor was the only one not giving her suspicious stares; he even engaged her in conversation. He talked of his daughter and pointed to landmarks. Their exchanges provided a welcome distraction,

keeping her troubled thoughts at bay. Her captors did not seem evil, this Pieor was quite kind to her.

When the sun reached high in the sky, casting a warm light that hinted at the summer to come, four distinct riders appeared. The teal of their hoods resembled the one she wore, adorned with intricate bronze jewellery. The riders felt familiar. Were they the same figures who had ensnared her with their magic on the battlefield? Their hoods were pulled back now, revealing beautiful, ice-blue eyes set against bronze faces framed by raven-black hair dripping with jewels. Their regal bearing was evident, even in their saddles.

They offered the customary nod to Ghalen but they seemed to look right through Pieor. The elf sensed an undercurrent of tension. Other soldiers passed the four riders with suspicious glances, moving out of their way as if to avoid a bad smell.

As they got out of earshot she turned to Pieor, “who are they? And why do they seem so... unwelcome among the soldiers?”

Pieor sighed, scratching his moustache. “Them? They’re the Kheld, from the far south. Priests and priestesses from the temple of Lumaire in the capital. They’re usually engrossed in their books and they know some healing arts. In most places across the Isle, they’re revered,” he muttered.

Not able to catch everything else he said, she thought she heard something like, ‘they should be grateful one of the tower seats rides with us.’ He turned to face her again. “But this is Ilskar. People say books don’t fend off wolves or bring in the harvest. I’ve learned a few things since moving to the capital, in no small part thanks to Ghalen, but people here are sceptical of what they don’t understand. Funny how quickly that changes when they’re injured,’ he added, a note of amusement flavouring his voice.

She furrowed her brow, glancing at the vibrant display of flags surrounding them. Each one had a distinct emblem and a colour scheme that seemed to hold meaning. "What's with all the flags, Pieor?"

He followed her gaze. "District banners. Erahnia's a big place, you know. Twelve districts, each with its lord and a spiffy flag to show for it."

She nodded. "And under which banner do you serve?"

He pointed to a teal banner with three mountains in its centre: "The capital of Highfarra. All other banners defer to it. It answers to the Lord Marshal himself."

"Lord Marshal? Have I seen him?"

"No, he's not here. Most men under our banner are busy at other fronts...." he trailed off.

She surveyed the scene, counting five distinct colours among the flags.

This Pieor appeared to be a talkative man, something she did not mind as he seemed indulged to teach her. He talked until the sun was setting and the cold kicked in. A scout returned with suggestions for a campsite, reporting an enclave some fifteen minutes' ride away. She tried her best to huddle deeper into her cloak, fighting the encroaching cold. As soon as the sun had left the sky she felt exhausted. *A fire would be nice*, she thought.

Chapter 2

The calm of the night

Stars gleamed in the sky as the caravan made their makeshift camp, nestled in the heart of the enclave. The wind was not as harsh in the deep woods, leaving a peaceful hush over the company. Her body was exhausted after bumping around the cart like a sack of grain on the harsh roads. Around her, soldiers moved slowly, their shoulders slumped and steps dragging. Some sank to the ground with groans, while others leaned heavily on their weapons, eyes glazed and unfocused.

A coolness seeped into the air, wrapping them in a chilling embrace, creeping through her garb, and settling into her bones. With each breath she released, a puff of vapour appeared before her, a ghostly spectre dissolving into the frigid night. She shifted, trying to adjust her breathing to come slower in this unfamiliar, frosty atmosphere.

Moonlight reflected in the few patches of wet grass, washing the camp in an ethereal glow that softened the harsh lines of fatigue on the faces of those around her. It was a serene scene.

Whispers of the wind caressed the leaves, setting them into a soft, rhythmic rustle. Scrambling noises suggested the presence of unseen critters in the forest going about their nocturnal life. She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to picture these tiny creatures, and dreamed she was running free in that garden of roses from her vision.

The quiet of the night shattered as a howl reverberated, leaving an echo that made her skin prickle with unease. Soldiers traded uneasy glances.

One soldier's fingers twitched over his sword's hilt, his eyes darting across the shadowy forest perimeter. "Wolves this far east?"

"They fought with beasts, but I thought Ghalen had our tracks well-concealed." Another added, swallowing hard.

Ghalen's voice cut through the tension. "Double the guard and keep your weapons ready. There is no need to fear an enemy that is not yet here. Still, we would be fools not to prepare for one who might come," he said, a subtle edge of worry colouring his voice.

His soldiers nodded with grim expressions.

As they carefully unpacked and began setting sharpened stakes at the edge of the camp, the tension in the air was palpable. Nervous, she cleared her throat and caught Ghalen's attention through the quiet labour of the soldiers. "Perhaps you could unbind my arms," she suggested, her eyes darting between the soldiers and Ghalen. The confidence that had come naturally to her on the battlefield was fading by the minute, and she longed to

hold a blade again. Somehow, it calmed her when she held it. "I might be able to help protect us if something were to happen."

The words, a single pebble tossed into the vast, still pond of the night.

The men stared at her with blank expressions as Ghalen retorted, his voice resonant in the quiet. "Do not mistake our courtesy for trust. We witnessed your martial prowess on the battlefield, but it was as our enemy. We will not hand you a weapon unless circumstances leave us no other choice."

As he turned from her, she could see guards nodding at each other in agreement. Her attention returned to the forest's edge, senses heightened.

Was the howl just a random cry? Or the sound of enemies drawing ever closer?

Two of Ghalen's handpicked guards settled close to her—one familiar from their travels, the other a stranger. Both towering figures, the strangers'

expressions emotive as a stone. Each of them appeared strong enough to break a man in half. Their purpose was clear: to ensure she remained harmless.

Pieor, his thick brown moustache working as he spoke, loomed large by the fire. A towering presence which eclipsed any other man she had seen in the band. Every so often, he'd add a log to the fire, the muscles in his arms flexing as he reached for them. And the other man introduced himself as Haldor, less towering, but no less imposing. His face, with neatly trimmed stubble, showed meticulous grooming, much unlike the weary and battle-worn faces around. It seemed in this dire situation, he still clung to the threads of discipline.

Pieor scooted closer to the fire. "We're not jailers, Mistress. We're here by King Ghalen's decree, purely for safety," his rough voice tinged with a hint of discomfort.

Beside him, Haldor shifted in his seat, sitting up straighter. "It's a necessary precaution," he asserted.

The contrast in their voices captured her attention—Haldor's refined, almost courtly manner against Pieor's coarser, more rustic speech, which was closer to the other soldiers she had met.

"Uneasy night, isn't it?" Pieor muttered, scratching his moustache. "Especially with that forest lurking out there. Seems the shadows are thicker than usual tonight."

Haldor nodded in response. "I don't disagree."

As the two guards continued their small talk, her gaze drifted back to the edge of the forest. The darkness beyond seemed sentient, glaring back at her. She clenched her fists, a silent scream of frustration swelling at her helplessness.

She could not make out what the two were saying over the mix of fear and jumbled thoughts in her head. One memory bubbled up above the rest. *What had Pieor called Ghalen?* And she blurted it out, "The boy is a king?" Her mouth tightened. She had not meant to speak it aloud.

Both men paused, exchanging surprised looks.

Pieor responded, "He may seem young, Mistress, but don't let that fool you. He's a good leader."

Haldor's only reply was a grunt; His expression never changed.

Pieor glanced at Haldor, then sighed. "Ghalen was meant for books, not swords. But Life had other plans for him. His grandmother, Lady Ironhand, tough as nails she was, created a peace that lasted for years. But sadly, we do not get to enjoy it. Now, Ghalen is the last heir of the Whitmore line."

As Pieor's tales of the King unfolded, her shoulders dropped, leaning back, her hands now rested on her lap. She felt at ease here around the fire with soldiers around her.

Pieor's eyes softened. "In time, perhaps you'll come to understand him. Beneath that exterior is a rare courage."

He added with a fond smile, "He is sharper than any other tactician. Not one man on the Isle could outmanoeuvre him."

The fire crackled, punctuating the silence. "As we've sworn to the king, no harm will come to you, Mistress," Pieor vowed.

As their conversation grew more casual, she grinned. "Why do you keep calling me 'Mistress'?"

Pieor laughed. "Look at you! With your sparkling green eyes and that golden thing in your hair, it seems fitting."

Haldor, expressionless, added, "it suits your demeanour perfectly."

As the night unfurled, the forest sank into a profound silence that seemed unnatural. The fog was rolling in over the hills and creeping close to the forest. She saw a guard squinting through the gloom, "I swear I saw—" He rubbed his tired eyes.

"Surely just your imagination, an afterimage from the flames." Another added.

As the first man turned towards his comrade, a wolf leapt from the darkness, its jaws clasped the man's throat, and the quiet of the night shattered. The forest came alive with the savage cries of wild beasts, their movements eerily coordinated.

"Wolves!" the men shouted throughout the camp. "Take arms!"

Screams and curses ripped through the night as the men were yanked from sleep. Hands scrambled for weapons, eyes wide with terror and grim resolve. Whirling swords cast long, silver arcs in the moonlight. Battle cries, raw and desperate, mingled with the guttural roars of their attackers.

Amidst the clash and clamour, she could see other figures materialise—wraiths from the encroaching darkness, their features covered by black hoods. They moved with an unsettling grace, silent and swift, daggers glinting in their hands as they struck with chilling precision.

Bound and helpless, she could do nothing but watch the unfolding carnage. Her heart pounded in her chest, her breaths short and quick, as a beast detached itself from the battle and stalked towards her, eyes glowing red in the dim light. She made out a wolf, but three times the size it should be. Its low growl rumbled like a distant storm. Closer and closer it came. Pedalling

backwards as much as her bound legs would allow, she ended up against a tree, paralysed by fear. She stared at it and waited for the inevitable.

Just as the beast lunged, Pieor came into view, rushing forward, sword drawn. His blade flashed in a wide arc, distracting the beast. Haldor was behind him, plunging his sword deep into the beast's side. The creature howled, turning to retaliate, but Haldor twisted his sword, causing the beast to snarl. The sound soon turned into a whimper and then silence. As the beast crumpled to the ground, the two soldiers stood their ground, eyes scanning the battlefield.

In the heart of this mayhem, she saw Ghalen fighting valiantly, his rallying cries igniting courage in his men. Blades clashed with teeth and claws, soldiers fell, but his guards did not relent.

A shadowy figure darted towards the king. Before anyone could react, a glint of metal flashed, and a choked gasp escaped Ghalen's lips as a blade found its mark through his armour.

With a roar, a captain cut the assassin down, but the damage was done.

As her eyes went from Ghalen to the rest of the soldiers, she could tell that the soldiers had finished the enemy, cornering or killing the last few, and an eerie hush descended as the last clang of steel faded. No triumphant roars, no celebratory cries, just a suffocating silence that pressed down on the battlefield.

As her horror settled, she saw Ghalen crumpled, unmoving. *I can help*, she thought. Her mouth felt dry. It wasn't supposed to be this way. The king. He lay sprawled nearby, breaths coming in ragged gasps. The vibrant night sky, once a calming backdrop, now mocked them with its indifferent twinkle.

The silence of the night reclaimed the battlefield except for moans from the wounded. The dying king called his men to his side, his voice strained with pain. "Crown my cousin," he gasped, his features etched with agony. "He will... lead you in the final battle."

She had been a mere observer, bound and helpless. Now, she felt an overwhelming urge to do something, to ease the surrounding suffering even if she did not know how. "Unbind me, I can help," she demanded, her voice resonating with a determination that made the men glance at each other.

"What can that demon do for us?" Khain spat out the words, those around him nodding in agreement.

Pieor stepped up to him, towering over the general. "Lumaire's light. There is no demon inside her. She says she can help!" He growled, and the nods stopped.

"But, she is our—"

Haldor cut her bonds. "It can hardly get worse."

No sooner had the ropes fallen from her wrists and ankles than a potent unseen force pulled her to the wounded king. Compelled by some instinct, she placed her hand over his gory wound. *Heal him, heal him. I have to heal him, but how?*

An ethereal glow spread around her, illuminating the darkened camp as if a lantern had been lit amongst them. She felt a soothing warmth, and as she looked up, soldiers relaxed, shoulders dropped and nobody shuddered from the cold any longer. Confusion was still written on their faces, and many still had their blades pointed at her. Before their eyes, the king's grievous wounds closed, his skin knitting together under her touch.

The warm light gradually dissipated, leaving them in silence.

“She healed him!” Somebody cried out. They gasped and somebody cheered.

Then she felt a cramp in her stomach and collapsed in a scream of pain.

The exertion of the mysterious power left her writhing in agony, and then it all went black.