

CHAPTER ONE

RYNN

“This used to be a guard tower, you know.”

Rynn started at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. She leapt to her feet, her hand moving reflexively to the dagger hilt at her hip.

Just outside the lichen-covered ring of stones where Rynn was setting up camp was a woman. Despite the ground being covered in a carpet of dry leaves and twigs not even a cat could have traversed in complete silence, she had somehow appeared without a sound. Adding to the mystery, Anvil had not reacted to the woman’s presence at all, even though he was normally wary of strangers. The big black gelding stood just a few paces from her, peacefully munching from his bag of oats and flicking his ears at the gnats and flies.

“I’m sorry,” said Rynn, realizing the same instant that it was a strange thing to say. Was it not the woman who should be apologizing for having startled her? Rynn wondered how long she had been standing there, watching her. She felt her cheeks grow hot. She had been singing quietly to herself while laying down the stones for her fire, some silly tune from when she was a girl. Maybe that was why she hadn’t heard her approach.

“I said, this used to be a guard tower,” the woman repeated, interpreting Rynn’s apology as if she hadn’t caught her words.

“I see.” Rynn couldn’t think of anything better to say. She felt embarrassed and slightly annoyed. It was a guard tower—so what? From here to the Gray Sea, the countryside was a tangled maze of crumbling ruins and ancient roads, the paving stones cracked and jutting from the passing of innumerable seasons. Did it matter what this place used to be?

The strange woman was old, but she was no crone. She was straight and tall like a reed, and were it not for the lines on her face and the cascade of iron-gray curls that fell down her back, she could easily have been mistaken for a much younger woman. She was beautiful, Rynn decided. Her features were noble and the eyes a piercing cornflower blue. She wore a rust-colored gown that had seen its better days, but the fabric was of fine quality, as were the embroidered patterns around the hem. This was a garment unlike anything Rynn had seen in the numerous hamlets she had passed through the latest week, where the womenfolk wore simple homespun in countless hues of brown.

The woman’s feet, Rynn noticed, were bare. She could not have walked far like that. Rynn’s own feet were aching after having spent the last hour on foot, leading Anvil up the steep, rocky ascent to the forested hill where the tower ruin lay. And she wore good, thick boots. Was there a cabin up here? She hadn’t seen one when circling the hill, looking for the easiest way up, but she supposed she could have missed it. Daylight was quickly waning.

Rynn was about to ask her if she lived nearby, but before she had a chance the woman said:

“So, what brings you here, child?”

Rynn glanced at her unfinished campfire. “Well, I’m making camp, as you can see.”

“Not this place, silly,” the woman said with a smile, “I mean *here*.” She made a gesture with her hands, encompassing all around her. “This land.”

She had an unfamiliar accent. People talked funny around these parts—an unholy mix of Rhanese and Rynn’s own Dessian dialect—but it sounded nothing like this. There was a lilting quality to the woman’s speech, as if her words were the notes of a melody.

“Oh. I’m on my way to Arynbridge. I’m meeting some friends there.”

“Friends,” said the stranger, nodding to herself. Then she smiled again. “I’ve had friends.”

Was she a madwoman? She didn’t look like one, but who knew. This was a remote corner of the world, the kind of place where people were wont to marrying their cousins, and inbreeding could affect the mind even though the body showed no signs of it. The weirdness of it all was making Rynn uncomfortable.

“Look,” Rynn said, “ma’am. I don’t mean to be rude, but it’s getting dark and I would like to get my fire going. I heard wolves last night, and they sounded hungry. As a matter of fact, I’m hungry too. So unless there is something I can do for you ... ?”

“Nonsense.”

“Excuse me?”

“There are no wolves here. Never have been. Wild dogs perhaps, but

they won't harm you."

"How do you know? Do you live around here?"

"I used to," the woman replied cryptically. She looked up into the air above them as if imagining the tower as it once was. "The prefect's legionaries manned this tower and many like it. They wore red and gold livery and on a clear day you could see their helms and spears sparkling in the sun from a league away. When a threat approached, as it sometimes did, they would blow great brass horns to warn the city of the danger."

"What are you talking about? What's a prefect? And what city?" Rynn made a sweeping motion with her hands, sarcastically aping the woman's gesture. "There's nothing within a hundred leagues of here deserving of the name."

A sadness crept into the woman's eyes as she shook her head. "It doesn't matter. It is gone now. Like everything else."

The woman was clearly mad. Gone insane from spending too much time alone in the woods, perhaps. Whatever the reason, Rynn decided that it was probably best to have no further dealings with her. "Excuse me, ma'am," she said, "I have work to do."

With that she returned to her preparations. Normally Rynn would not have turned her back to a complete stranger—particularly not one who didn't seem to have both oars in the water—but the woman was unarmed and seemed gentle enough. She was just... odd.

And despite being ignored, she did not leave. As Rynn added kindling and brought out her flint and steel, she could feel the stranger's gaze on her

back. She struck sparks, set the kindling aflame and put small twigs on the fire. When she had a good blaze going she brushed her hands off and rose to fetch the cooking pot and water skin. When she turned, she jumped.

The woman had moved closer. Not by much, but still. She was now standing by the stone circle, her left hand resting on a chest-high part of the ruined tower wall.

“What is your name, child?”

“Would you please stop calling me ‘child’? I’m a grown woman.” Rynn was quickly running out of patience with this person. She talked gibberish and had managed to startle her twice within the span of a half hour. “Tell me what it is you want or be on your way. I’m sorry, but I’ve had a long day and I’m not in the mood for games.”

“What I want? Oh, just some company and conversation is all. It gets lonely out here.”

“I can imagine.”

The woman looked into Rynn’s eyes. “No, you can’t. You have no idea.”

At those words a chill gripped Rynn’s heart and suddenly she was ashamed for being rude. “Well, all right,” she said, “feel free to stay, then. But if you want to talk, we’ll have to talk while I make something to eat because I’m starving.”

“Of course,” the woman smiled.

“I would offer you some, but I’m afraid I don’t have much and the next village is two days away.”

“That is all right. I don’t eat much these days anyway.”

Rynn bade the woman to sit, and that she did. Her movements were fluid, graceful like a dancer's. Perhaps the fact that she had managed to sneak up on Rynn was no mystery after all.

When the water came to a boil, Rynn added some leeks and carrots and the last of the rabbit she had snared yesterday. While the meal simmered she and the strange woman talked. She asked Rynn where she was from, what had led her here, and what business she had in Arynsbridge. Rynn, summoning all patience she could muster, answered truthfully while leaving out large parts of the story. Being rude was maybe uncalled for, but that didn't mean she was going to divulge the details of her journey to a complete stranger.

"Olvan and Jedd, my friends, have been in Arynsbridge for a while now. We're going on an errand up north and Arynsbridge is the last outpost big enough to have everything we need for the trip. I was supposed to meet them there weeks ago, but I was delayed. They're probably not too happy about being stuck there, but they'll live."

"Are you not afraid that your friends will depart without you?"

"Oh, they won't." Rynn grinned. "Trust me, they won't." The map hidden in Rynn's saddlebag ensured as much, though this fact she kept to herself.

When the stew was done Rynn brought out her bowl and spoon to eat. The bowl was almost as old as herself, carved by her father from a piece of driftwood when she was just four or five. Olvan liked to joke that the bowl was so thick with grime that if times became hard, Rynn might cook the

bowl itself to make a broth. As Rynn ate, the woman remained silent for a bit, watching her.

“So tell me, grown woman,” she said with a smirk, “why do you seek treasure, you and your friends?”

Rynn squinted at her, hiding her alarm behind an air of puzzlement. “I never said we do, lady. What makes you think that?”

“Oh, just look at you! Hair cropped short like a lad, wearing boots and trousers, a coil of rope on your saddle and torches sticking out of your bag.”

“Are you saying I should stay home and wear a dress?” Rynn spat, glaring at the woman over the rim of her bowl.

“Not at all. All I am saying is that your appearance speaks for itself. And I have seen many like you, though few as pretty. Adventurers. Treasure seekers.”

Was that a hint of... contempt?

Rynn snorted. “What’s it to you anyway, lady? I’m minding my own business here, and I suggest you do the same.”

“Oh, but this *is* my business.”

“What do you mean?”

The woman ignored Rynn’s question. “You would be wise to remember that it is fleeting, all of that. Unimportant.”

“What is?”

“Treasure. Fortune. The so-called happiness that you seek.”

Rynn shrugged. “For you, maybe. I grew up a fisherman’s daughter. Youngest of five, and dad had barely enough to feed two of us. I ran away

when I was nine and he died. So I'd say it's pretty damn important, keeping my belly full and not having to sleep under the open sky in winter."

"You are so like her," the woman said with a wistful half-smile. "Good-hearted, but stubborn."

"Like who?"

"Never mind. I know you will see reason, eventually."

"If you say so."

"I know so." She leaned forward, as if to emphasize her words. "You are meant for greater things."

"What are you, some kind of fortune teller?"

"No. But sometimes I know things about people. And sometimes I know things before those people know it themselves. I suppose you could say I have an outside perspective."

"Lady, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Exactly."

Rynn let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. "If you're trying to make a point, then make it and be done with it. It's late, the road is long, and I need to sleep."

"Fair enough. One should strive to learn what is valuable in life, or life will teach you. Often cruelly."

"Whatever you say."

The woman shrugged and rose. "By the way, that map is a sham. There was never a king called Zargon in this part of the world, and even if there was, he would have no tomb to be plundered."

“What?” *How did she know... ?*

“You heard me. The tribes here, before the Empire, burned their dead kings on pyres. And they were never much for amassing wealth anyway. And the Empire cremated their nobles, sending their ashes back to Ul to be interred with their forbears.” She smiled mischievously. “I will leave you to your rest now. Thank you.” She turned her back and started moving away, her bare feet making no sound as they fell on the uneven ground.

Rynn just sat there, stunned, watching the woman disappear into the trees. Then she stumbled to her feet.

“Wait,” Rynn called, “lady!”

The woman stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“I didn’t catch your name.”

“That is because I didn’t say it,” she smiled. “Lilian. My name is Lilian.”

“Lilian. I’m Rynn.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Rynn. And farewell.”

With that she was gone, a shadow among shadows.

By the time Rynn rode into the next village two days later, the strangeness of the encounter on the hilltop had begun to fade from her memory. It felt almost like a dream, vaguely remembered and making little sense to the waking mind. That she had met Lilian there she did not doubt, but the odd circumstances and the woman’s words she dismissed as her imagination playing tricks on her.

It was late, she told herself, it had been a long day of an even longer journey, and sometimes when you're exhausted your mind can't be fully trusted. That was all there was to it.

Rynn was in a foul mood. It was another stifling late summer day. The sun hung like a white-hot coin in a cloudless sky, and she was sweating profusely under her linen shirt. Swarms of flies circled her head and she swatted at them, cursing under her breath. The road dust stirred by Anvil's hooves trailed behind them like the smoke from a wildfire.

The village was larger and more sturdily built than the smatterings of hovels she had passed through previously. Situated on the banks of a small creek, it consisted of maybe twenty stone houses with thatched roofs. Around it lay fields where wheat and barley were ripening in the heat. Cows lowed in the distance. The village looked peaceful and homely, and this lifted Rynn's spirits significantly.

It even had a proper inn, which lifted her spirits even more. A handful of tables and benches stood in the inn's dusty yard, and in the shade of a large oak tree a few patrons gossiped over their pewter tankards.

Rynn rode up to the inn, dismounted and tied Anvil's reins to the railing by the water trough. As the gelding was drinking his fill, she dipped her head and shoulders into the water. It was lukewarm and full of hay and drowned bugs, but she didn't care. Rising, she shook like a dog, sending water droplets flying. *Yes, much better.*

The innkeeper, an aproned, bearlike man with arms like logs and a bushy beard, came to greet her when she sat down on a bench, still dripping

after her impromptu bath.

“Hello, young miss! What can I get ye?”

“Whatever passes for ale around here will do fine, as long as it’s cooler than this fiery demon’s ass of a day. That, and some answers.”

“Cold ale I can provide. Answers, well that depends. What’s the question?”

“It’s an easy one. Where am I?”

“One moment.” The innkeeper disappeared in through the doorway, and returned shortly with a foam-capped tankard. Placing the ale in front of Rynn, he hooked his thumbs under his belt and pulled his trousers up before sitting down at the opposite side of the table.

“Well, let’s see,” he rumbled. “Ye’re twelve leagues north of Crast, seven west of the Elduin estuary. There’s a whole lotta nothin’ between you and civilization. And this here village is called Lament.”

“What a cheery name,” Rynn remarked. “You seem to be doing well compared to some other places I’ve seen. What are you lamenting?”

The innkeeper made a wry grin. “If I had a silver piece fer every time someone made that joke, I wouldn’t be here in this Gods-forsaken place, serving cheap ale to cocky youngsters such as yerself.” He winked. “No, ye see, Lament is what we call it fer short now’days. The real name’s Lilian’s Lament.”

Rynn’s tankard froze halfway to her mouth.

“What did you say?”

“Aye, it’s a strange name, Lilian’s Lament. From what I reckon it’s from

an old tale from 'round these parts. Ain't that right, Dovyn?" This was directed at an old man in a straw hat sitting at an adjacent table, drinking his ale with poorly feigned disinterest in the innkeeper's conversation with the stranger. Dovyn nodded, and instantly seemed to realize he wasn't supposed to be eavesdropping on the other patrons. He took a swig from his tankard to hide his embarrassment and the innkeeper laughed boisterously.

"I knew ye were listening, ye old coot! There, there, just having a bit of fun with ye. Come on, tell the young lady here what ye've told me."

Dovyn looked at Rynn with rheumy eyes and stroked his wispy, white beard. His drawl was so thick as to be barely intelligible.

"Back in them olden days, there was a city here, ye know? Right here. A big one, it was. Ye sure wouldn't think it, lookin' at it now. There's hardly nothin' of it left. The people here, they took the stones they found, see, and built their homesteads and the walls around their fields and gardens."

Rynn looked around. Old Dovyn was right. There was nothing left to suggest that this place might once have had paved streets, tall buildings and maybe even a fortified wall surrounding it. All she could see was a main street of sorts, probably covered in ankle-deep mud during the rainy season, but presently baked dry and hard like piece of pottery. In the distance the street widened, becoming a small square or a commons, where she could make out market stalls and villagers inspecting the goods on offer. The houses were haphazardly scattered, like a child's toys.

"That name," Rynn said, "Lilian..."

"Aye, Lilian," Dovyn nodded. "She was a noblewoman, see, and a wid-

ow. Her husband fell in the war. Some war, I dunno which. This was back in the Empire's day. Ye've heard of the Empire, haven't ye?"

Rynn had. One could not travel for weeks across Northreach without hearing about it. A lot of tall tales it seemed, much of it. Right now, though, she wished that she had paid more attention.

"Yes, the Empire," she said. "They built all these roads, and towers, and... things." She waved her hand, urging the old man to continue.

"Aye, that they did. Anyways, this Lilian, she was a strong woman, see. Strong, but proud. Hard-headed and cold-hearted, she was. Accordin' to legend, she cared more fer lands and riches than fer the people around her."

"Sounds like a charming lady," Rynn said.

"Charmin' like a boil in the ass." Dovyn flashed a gap-toothed smile. "All her life she wished fer a son, a strong lad to carry the family's legacy. But the Gods, wantin' to spite her fer her pride, gave her a daughter instead, and took her husband from her shortly afterwards. She never had another child."

"Couldn't she have found a new husband?"

Dovyn shrugged. "I dunno, miss. The story doesn't tell. Maybe it wasn't allowed. Maybe she did, but never had a child with him anyways. Now, the girl— Lanira was her name—she knew that her mother was displeased with her not being a lad. Lilian made no secret of it, callous as she was, and growin' up, Lanira went out of her way tryin' to please her mother. She learned letters and law, she learned how to hunt and fight, she learned all

those things highborn boys were supposed to know in those days. And she was good at it. Better than most boys, in fact. None of it made a lick of difference, though. In her mother's eyes, Lanira was just a mockery of what could've been.

"The Empire, it was failin' in those days. It had no strength left in it. The old emperor was dead, with no successor. The lords bickered while provinces rebelled and bandits ruled unchecked in the countryside, rapin' and pilagin'. And so it came to pass, like they say in the fairy stories, that a strong bandit lord had amassed an entire army of brigands, and he was marchin' on Lilian's city. This right here place.

"Now, ye see, this weren't a powerful army, like the Empire had. It was a ragtag sort of army, made up mostly of farmers and deserters from the legions. Not well organized, like. Or well equipped fer that matter. But there were a good many of 'em, and they were desperate and hungry, and they were all itchin' to take back what they felt the Empire had stolen from 'em."

Dovyn fell silent. He removed his straw hat to fan his face, revealing a bald pate.

"Go on," said Rynn.

"Ye know, young miss, tellin' tales is thirsty work." Dovyn smacked his lips and winked at her.

"Another ale for the good man here," Rynn said to the innkeeper who was still sitting at the table, seemingly as engrossed in the story as she was. "And another one for me too, while you're at it."

The innkeeper made a pained face. "The first one's always on the house

when ye're a stranger in these parts," he said, "but if ye want more, I'm gonna have to see some coin first."

"Oh, for the love of..." Rynn stuck a hand in her purse and produced a small silver piece. "There. Better? That should be enough for both our drinks, as well as at least two more, given how much creek water you're adding it with."

The innkeeper nodded as he pocketed the coin. "Apologies, but one can't be too careful these days."

"Think nothing of it."

When the large man returned with their tankards, Dovyn continued:

"As the bandits were approachin', Lilian and the other nobles rallied their forces. With trouble brewin' all across the land, the Empire didn't have enough soldiers to protect every city in every province. So it was painfully clear that they were outnumbered ten to one, and help wasn't comin'.

"Lilian stepped up on the dais in the square where the soldiers and citizens were gathered, and raised her arms. 'Hear me, oh Lord of the Firmament!' she cried. 'Grant me the power to save my city, and I will forever be your servant!' A single crack of thunder answered her words, though the skies were clear and blue. The One God had accepted her offerin'.

"Then she summoned her daughter to her. 'Here is your chance to prove yourself to me, girl,' she said. 'Lead the troops, subvert these invaders, and you will have earned my love and respect. Have no fear, for Ailor is on our side in this'. And so the troops rode out the gates, Lanira in the lead, chargin' down the bandit host.

“As you might’ve guessed, they suffered a crushin’ defeat. When Lanira’s body was brought before her mother, broken and bloodied, Lilian’s legs buckled under her and she fell to her knees. Tears streamin’ down her face, she let out a keenin’ wail that echoed across the city and into the lands beyond.

“So fierce and hauntin’ was her cry that the bandit horde stopped dead in its tracks. And then a large part of ’em turned tail and fled, so many that the remaining soldiers could make short work of the rest. The city was saved, Lilian’s lands and riches were saved, but at a terrible cost.”

“What happened to her?”

“None knows fer sure. She got up, not sayin’ a word, and walked out the city gates never to be seen again. And I guess the lesson fer us all,” Dovyn added loftily, “is that ye should try yer best to learn what’s valuable in life ...”

“... or life will teach you,” Rynn finished hoarsely. “Often cruelly.”

“That’s right! Ye have a good head on ye, girl. That’s exactly what it means.”

“Still,” Rynn said to the two men, “what’s to say that this isn’t just an old wives’ tale? I see no evidence that there was even a city here, like you claim. These people, this... Lilian. They might all be made up. Who says they’re more real than the grinks and nettlefolk my mom told me of when I was a little girl?”

And, she thought, what’s to say that some crazy old woman couldn’t have heard this tale, and decided to take the name of Lilian and walk around pre-

tending to be her?

“I suppose,” said the innkeeper, scratching his beard. “But then there’s the statue, of course.”

“Statue? What statue?”

“Show her,” he said, getting to his feet and nodding in Dovyn’s direction. “I have idled away too much time here already, I need to go inside and prepare supper.”

The old man rose with a nimbleness that was surprising for someone his age who likely had spent better part of the day drinking.

“Come,” he beckoned. “It ain’t far.”

Old Dovyn led Rynn to the market square that she had seen in the distance. It was little more than a dry patch of dirt between the buildings, some twenty paces across and encircled by rickety stalls where peddlers sold groceries and cheap trinkets. Business was slow in the heat and the handful of villagers browsing the wares looked almost as wilted as the vegetables they were inspecting.

In the center of the square stood a desiccated fountain, a round stone slab with floral patterns around the lip of the basin, finely crafted but weathered and chipped from the passage of time. And at the fountain’s center was a statue.

Rynn gasped.

The statue was made in the likeness of a kneeling woman, arms stretched up into the air as if in prayer. Or lamentation.

“What’s wrong, miss?” Dovyn said. “Ye look like ye’ve seen a ghost.”

“How”—Rynn’s throat was suddenly very dry, and she swallowed—
“how long ago was this?”

“Well, it wasn’t last week, that’s fer sure!” Dovyn cackled. When he noticed that Rynn wasn’t even slightly amused, he coughed and continued: “Seein’ as how this was at the tail end of the Empire’s might, I’m guessin’ five hundred years ago, give or take a few decades. This tale was old already when the first of our people came here to settle, see.”

Five hundred years ago.

“That’s impossible,” Rynn croaked.

Just like the rest of the fountain, the statue was worn and cracked. The left hand was broken off at the wrist and missing. Yet there was no denying that the craftsmanship was exquisite. Every crinkle in the gown, every curl of hair, every fingernail and eyelash had been expertly chiseled from the unyielding rock. The face was turned upwards and the mouth open in a frozen cry.

Though wind and weather had turned the statue an almost uniform gray, it had once been painted in vibrant colors. Enough paint lingered in the pits and crevices of the stone that Rynn could see that the woman’s eyes were a piercing cornflower blue.

Arynsbridge lay nestled in the heart of the forested river valley, some hundred steep-roofed wooden houses surrounded by a palisade. And enclosing it all was an even taller palisade where the Iron Mountains rose in the hazy

distance, snow-capped and forbidding. On a rocky outcropping overlooking the town Rynn sat atop Anvil, lost in thought.

When she set out on her journey she had been hopeful—exhilarated, even—filled with that familiar thrill of the chase. The map was the most promising lead they'd had in almost a year. She had found it tucked into a dilapidated book in an apothecary's shop in Dorath. The book itself was worthless, some old treatise on herbalism, falling apart from age and from having been a meal to generations of book lice. She had paid only a few coppers for it, which confirmed her suspicion that the woman running the shop was oblivious of what hid between its pages. Rynn had seen many fakes and forgeries in her day and if this was one, it was a good one. A *really* good one.

After meeting the strange woman and the visit to Lilian's Lament, however, that feeling of exhilaration was gone, replaced by gnawing doubt.

What if she's right? she thought.

Rynn and the others had spent a small fortune on this trip, the last of the coin they got for the treasure retrieved from a sunken ship in Malady Bay. So confident had she been in the credibility of this map that she hadn't stopped to think what it would mean if they'd come back empty-handed. Rynn's purse felt worryingly light and she knew that Olvan and Jedd were probably even worse off, being stranded in Arynbridge for weeks. If this turned out to be a fool's errand they would have to find menial work this winter, or starve.

Anvil snorted and stirred as a flash of red fur darted across the path lead-

ing down the mountainside, disappearing into the undergrowth as quickly as it had appeared.

“Easy, boy,” said Rynn absentmindedly, “it’s just a fox.”

For the first time Rynn found herself questioning what kind of life this was. She had always been proud to be an adventurer, bold and free. No lords or captains ordered her around, she was free to go wherever her fancy might take her, and when times were good and her bags were brimming with gold she had felt like the world was hers.

But then she thought of other times, when her luck had run out and everything went wrong. Miserable winters spent sleeping in barns or in the cold mud, and stealing from farmers’ larders to stay alive. Looking back, it felt like there had been a lot more of those.

I’m a bloody vagabond, Rynn thought. Eating roots and berries and shitting in the woods, like an animal. She made a disgusted face. Damn you, you meddling old witch! Damn you and your greater things!

The map was in her hand, the folded parchment dry and rough against her fingers. Suddenly Rynn experienced a strong urge to crumple it up and toss it as far as she could, letting it tumble down the cliff face and disappear into the river far below. But then the moment passed and with a sigh she returned it to her saddlebag.

Olvan and Jedd had their flaws, but they were loyal friends and had proven their mettle many times over. They had just as much vested in this, so she couldn’t let them down. They had to at least try—if the map was a fake they would find out sooner or later. Nothing was to be gained from telling

the others about her encounter, so she decided to keep her doubts to herself.

“We’ll see,” she nodded. “We’ll see.”

With a soft kick in the sides she urged Anvil on, making their way down the rocky path to the town below.