

CHAPTER FOUR

Moon, sword, skull. Skull, skull, moon. Cup, skull, sword.

The dice rattled across the table's stained surface. Skull, skull, skull. Three bony faces grinned up at her, as if mocking her for her lousy luck.

"Rynn," a voice said testily from the other side of the room, "I swear to you, if I hear that damn clattering one more time, I'll have Baral throw you out on your ass."

"Fine." Rynn snatched the dice up and put them away in her purse. She started drumming her fingers on the tabletop.

"Rynn!"

"What?" she looked over at the woman wiping the counter with a rag. "You know I hate waiting."

"And I hate listening to the same annoying sound over and over. If you're feeling restless, go out and punch the town wall, or get laid, or whatever. I don't care. You've been moping around here for a week now and I'm getting sick of it."

Mealda One-Eye, proprietor of *The Gilded Scabbard Inn*, was a middle-aged woman with a sourly disposition and an appearance to match. With gray hair cropped close to her scalp and leathery skin stretched taut over ropy muscle, Mealda looked more like an aging mercenary than a barkeep. Her eye patch and the pale crisscrossed

scars on her arms did indeed hint at her not always having served drinks in a northern mining town. But of her past little was known and Mealda was quick to scold anyone bold enough to bring it up. Rynn had known her for a few years, though, and knew the woman was more bark than bite. Yet she couldn't help raising her hackles at Mealda's words.

"Well, if that's how you feel I'll be happy to take my business elsewhere," Rynn said curtly.

"Business? What business?" Mealda threw her hands up. "Your purse is as empty as a gobber's head, remember? That's how you put it when you came here last week, and I'm guessing that hasn't changed since your tab keeps growing and I ain't getting paid."

Rynn didn't answer. She stared into the wall's dark paneling, chewing on her lower lip.

"So," the woman continued, "if you want to remain in my good graces I suggest you stop getting on my nerves. I like you, Rynn, I really do. But I'm not running a charity here."

"I just don't understand where the hell they are!" Rynn slammed her fist into the table, toppling her empty wine cup. "They should've been here weeks ago!"

"So you've said. Probably around a dozen times by now. And I don't know this time either. Look," Mealda added, "why don't you take your horse and go look for them? If they arrive while you're gone, I'll tell them you'll be back soon."

”You’re just trying to get rid of me.”

”You’re damn right I am! You sit here drinking all day and the regulars are starting to ask questions. They’re wondering why they can’t have tabs when you, a stranger, apparently can. And I’m running out of excuses.”

Mealda looked up and went quiet as the inn’s door opened and then closed again. There was a brief pause, then a voice exclaimed:

“Rynn? By the seven lords of hell, it *is* you!”

The Arctonian accent was unmistakable and Rynn groaned.

“Eraig,” she smiled tightly as the newly arrived man sauntered over to her table. “How good to see you.”

Red-haired with a neatly trimmed beard, Eraig was in his thirties and dressed in fancy clothes. White silk shirt, an embroidered red vest, royal blue trousers. A remarkably plain-looking sword hung at his hip and a moss-green cloak from his shoulders. He eyed her curiously.

“Last I heard you had a price on your head,” he said. “Quite the hefty sum too, if I do recall. Had you not been my friend I would have been sorely tempted to try and collect it.”

Rynn snorted. “What you’re saying is you couldn’t find me.”

“Well, I have now,” Eraig smiled.

“Unlucky for you then that’s all been sorted out. I paid Zarek the money I owed him just a few weeks ago. No bad blood between us, and the bounty’s off.”

“Good for you. Mind if I join you?” Eraig pulled up a chair without waiting for Rynn’s approval. “Barkeep, wine if you please. And none of that northern piss, mind you.”

Mealda, still annoyed, brought a pewter cup and a ewer of wine over to the table and slammed them down. “Northern piss is what I have, and if that’s not good enough for you, fine sir, then ask Baral over there to piss in your cup.” She pointed at the swarthy bouncer nodding on a bench by the door. “He’s from down south.”

Eraig stared at her, then burst out laughing. “I’m sure the wine is fine, my dear. Thank you.” He turned to Rynn, putting his doeskin boots up on the table. “So what are you up to? I thought you didn’t like the north.”

“I don’t mind the north. It’s the scum I always run into here that I have a problem with.”

The Arctonian shook his hand as if having touched something hot. “Mild and mannered, as always. Luckily I like feisty women. I’m not the marrying kind, but you I’d gladly take for my wife.”

“I’d slice your cock off before I’d let you touch me”, Rynn growled.

“I’m sure you’d try.” Eraig’s smile made Rynn furious. “Now, you were going to tell me what you’re doing here,” he said, pouring the golden wine.

“I was? That’s funny, I don’t recall having any intention of doing that.”

“Come on, Rynn! I’m curious. Last time I saw you, you said you had no interest in coming back to Northreach ever again. And you sounded like you meant it. Yet, here you are.”

“Here I am. Very acutely observed.”

“Don’t play games with me, Rynn.” The Arctonian leaned forward, smile waning. “You’re here so that means you’re up to something. And I want to know what.”

“Didn’t your mother teach you to mind your own business?”

Eraig’s laugh was a mirthless bark. “My mother was a gutter whore in Berdenais. If she taught me anything, it was that I need to look out for myself because no one else will.” He looked around the inn’s empty common room. “Where’s the dwarf and the lout?”

Rynn shrugged. “They’re around.”

His eyes narrowed. “So they’re not here?” He put his hands to his cheeks in mock concern. “My dear girl, have they abandoned you?”

“Shut up, Eraig.”

“Poor Rynn, all alone in the world.”

“I said shut up! They’re on their way, and that’s all you need to know.”

Eraig nodded, lightly tapping his fingers on his pursed lips. “You know what I think?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me,” Rynn sighed.

“The reason you’re waiting for them is that whatever you’re here for, it’s not something you can do alone. That’s obvious. So what if

they don't show up?"

"What if?"

"Then you're going to need a companion."

"Ever the arrogant prick," Rynn snorted. "Of all the people in this town, you think I'd throw in my lot with someone who's tried to screw me over twice and failed on both occasions? You know what that tells me about you, Eraig?"

He smiled coldly. "I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"It tells me that you're not only untrustworthy, but you're lousy at being a crook."

The man frowned. "Is that supposed to be an insult or a compliment?"

"Take it any way you like, I'm done talking to you."

"You're a cold woman, Rynn," Eraig said, getting up from the chair. He downed the wine, put a silver coin on the table and placed the cup upside-down on top of it. It was a customary thing in the west, for letting the barkeep know you were done and the payment was under the cup, but Rynn had no doubt the Arctonian did it just for show. Eraig liked to think of himself as a man of the world.

"And you're a sleazy fop, Rynn said. "Get out of my sight."

Eraig made an exaggerated bow, then turned to leave.

"That could've been handled better," Mealda commented, walking up to the table as the door closed behind the Arctonian.

"How so?"

“You confirmed his suspicions by letting him get to you. Should have made something up instead of being tight-lipped and snippy. Now he knows something interesting’s going on. But maybe you enjoy looking over your shoulder.”

“I can handle Eraig,” Rynn shrugged, reaching for the wine.

Mealda snatched the ewer away along with cup and coin. “Oh no you don’t, young lady. You get off your ass and do something. I’ll have supper ready at sunset. Until then, I don’t want to see you in here.”

Muttering, Rynn got up and headed for the door.

Two guards in steel caps and leather cuirasses were posted at the wooden gatehouse, leaning on their rusty pikes. They eyed Rynn with bored indifference as she rode past them, then resumed their muted conversation. She crossed the great stone bridge spanning the river Aryn, a heavily loaded barge gliding downstream under its arc, and went up the mountain road at a light trot. This far north, in the Iron Mountains’ shadow, the air was getting nippy and the trees were starting to turn, swathes of red and gold among the dusty greens of late summer. Far in the distance white smoke rose from the smelting camps on the mountainside.

Rynn had quickly dismissed the idea of going out to look for Olvan and Jedd. It was pointless. When they had parted ways in Kadrak

over a month ago, Rynn heading east to settle her debt with the smuggler Zarek, the two men had taken the coast road to Crast. But that was a long journey. Had they for some reason gotten lost or sidetracked along the way they could be anywhere, maybe even leagues away still. But Mealda was right on one thing: Rynn needed to do something.

You've been stalling, you stubborn bitch, Rynn admitted to herself.

Arriving in Aryn's bride and learning that her companions weren't there yet, her first thought had been to go into the mountains and try to determine whether there was any point in going after this supposed treasure in the first place. A fake map would reveal its true nature quickly once you started comparing it to reality. But Lilian's words had sown a seed of doubt so deep in Rynn's mind that she could not bring herself to walk out the door, dreading to find that the woman was in fact right. She had casually inquired among the inn's older patrons if there were any old tombs or such up in the mountains, but her questions had been met with shrugs and headshakes. The name of Zargon had not evoked as much as a glimmer of recognition in the eyes of those she spoke with. So Rynn had stayed put, drinking the days away and playing dice with herself in an increasingly dour mood.

Now, though, she felt better. The air was brisk and smelled of autumn. Anvil, having been stabled for a week, was jittery like a foal, at one point almost throwing Rynn from the saddle as he went chasing

after one of the season's last butterflies. She cursed at him, then felt sorry about it and let the gelding set the pace. Anvil stormed up the mountainside and Rynn clung to the saddle, wind and a smile on her face. As the road turned westward to the mines and the camps, she reined him in and brought out the map.

Four years ago Rynn had spent an entire summer exploring this part of the Iron Mountains, looking for the gold that was rumored to exist here in abundance. She had found nothing, nor had anyone else, and in the end it was revealed that the rumor had been spread by the Miner's Guild to lure workers to Arynsbridge. Rynn had left, angry and disenchanted, but many panners had stayed to take employ in the iron mines. Even if this was an episode she'd rather forget, it meant she knew the area and it was the sole reason she had been able to identify what part of the world the map depicted.

Rynn had no interest in history but she assumed the map dated from Imperial times. The spelling was archaic and it had no names that she was able to recognize. Arynsbridge wasn't on the map at all—unsurprisingly, as the settlement was less than a hundred years old—but the curve of the river was unmistakable, as were the meticulously drawn shapes of the larger peaks. This was the place, Rynn was certain of it. The scale was inaccurate and the unknown mapmaker had used many references to landmarks that were likely long since dust, overgrown, or otherwise changed beyond recognition. But she would figure it out, somehow.

At this low altitude the slopes were densely covered in forest. Rynn spied something that was little more than a deer path leading off in roughly the right direction. She looked at the map. The dotted trail that led up into the mountains was annotated with numbers in some antiquated unit of measurement that meant nothing to her, and she could only guess at the distances involved. But there was a place not far to the northeast labeled *Hunting Lodge*. Rynn threw her doubts to the wind, dismounted, and led Anvil straight into the woods.

To Rynn's surprise—having expected to find nothing—she came across it just a half hour later. The building was rubble, the walls having been toppled by the roots of large trees that grew inside and around it. But enough remained of the foundations to make her confident that this was the place and not some more recent structure. Only the Imperials would be so set in their ways as to build a stone house in a region where trees were everywhere. Out of curiosity Rynn poked around the ruin for a while but found little of interest. The place was so old that anything that wasn't stone had dissolved into nothingness long ago.

She turned her attention back to the map, feeling a tingle of excitement. The next landmark, *The Black Tree*, was less likely to still be there after Gods knew how many centuries. But finding the hunting lodge had raised her hopes and she pressed on. An hour went by, and then another. Rynn was just about to give up when she found it and

realized what she had been looking for wasn't a tree at all.

Half hidden among the vegetation a column of black volcanic rock rose from the mossy ground. It didn't resemble a tree much at all, aside from its shape being vaguely trunk-like. It occurred to Rynn that this probably was a colloquial name rather than a verbatim description of the ancient monolith, and that maybe she had been interpreting the map too literally. She made a mental note of this, in case something further along the path turned out to be equally difficult to locate.

Strangely, these discoveries made Rynn more confused rather than less.

That map is a sham, Lilian had said.

But it was evidently not a sham in the sense that it was completely imaginary, like a map drawn by children playing pirates. So far it appeared to be correct—disregarding scale and the landscape having changed over the centuries— and Rynn saw no reason to suspect that the rest of it was any different. Clearly the person who drew the map had actually been here, judging from the minute details, and who would go through the trouble of making part of the map in accordance with reality and just make the rest up? Rynn couldn't rule out the possibility of course, but it was unlikely.

Yes, Lilian could have simply lied to her. But this was unlikely too. Whoever or whatever Lilian was—a madwoman, a ghost, or a person who somehow had lived for over five hundred years—what

possible reason could she have for lying to Rynn about the map? If Lilian had the power to tell that the map was in Rynn's possession, it wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine that she might actually know something about its authenticity as well. With all that in mind, if the map was in fact true to reality and Lilian hadn't been lying, it could only mean one thing.

It was a sham insofar that the words printed in spidery letters on the brown parchment—*The Final Resting Place of King Zargon*—wasn't actually what was there. But if there was no dead king and no tomb, then what was it?

Rynn sighed and looked up to the sky. It was late afternoon and unless she wanted to find her way back to Arynbridge in the dark, it was time to call it a day. She gave the map one last look. Then, suddenly, the faint sound of voices came drifting back to her.

Rynn listened intently. Nothing. Then, when she was about to dismiss it all, she heard it again. Someone was coming down the path behind her, speaking in hushed tones.

“Stay here,” Rynn whispered, putting a gentle hand on Anvil's neck. “Good boy.”

The ground sloped upwards on the right side of the path. Grabbing hold of roots and rocks sticking out of the exposed red dirt she climbed up, quiet as a mouse. At the top she laid down flat under a fir and waited, peering out between its low, prickly branches.

Moments later two figures appeared, stepping over dry twigs and

loose stones with mixed success. One was a big, simple-looking man with curly hair, round cheeks and a wool coat over a plain shirt and trousers. His shorter companion was enveloped in a gray cloak, hood up and looking like he was trying to be sneaky. Rynn smiled scornfully.

Who are you two, then?

When they laid eyes on Anvil, they stopped.

The shorter man looked around. "Where'd she go?" he said quietly.

"I dunno," the big fellow said, "but her horse is right there. She can't be far."

"All right, we'll hide over there. When she comes back for the horse, we have her."

They went off the path and disappeared into the undergrowth. Rynn slid out from under the fir, careful not to make a sound, with the intention of slipping around the two men to give them a little surprise. Scarcely had she gotten to her knees when she heard a faint cracking sound behind her.

There was a white flash of pain as something hit her in the back of the head, and the world faded from her eyes.

When Rynn came to, the first thing she became aware of was the cold. Like water into a leaky boat it seeped into her body from the

ground she sat on, and from the rough bark of the tree against her back. Her teeth chattered and her head throbbed like a rotten tooth. She tried to get up, only to find that her wrists were bound behind the trunk.

Rynn was in a small clearing somewhere in the forest. Above the treetops the sky was aflame with reds and pinks, letting her know it would be dark soon. Five human shapes loitered in the distance and Rynn squinted. Her eyes had trouble focusing. Two of them she soon identified as the men that had been following her—Curly, and Cloak—but the others she did not immediately recognize. It wasn't until one of them pointed in her direction, having noticed she was awake, and another man broke off from the group that she understood. He walked over to her, folding the hood of his green cloak back. His red hair and beard shone like copper in the sunset's light.

“Hello again, Rynn,” Eraig said. “Sorry about the bump on the head.”

“No, you're not.”

He grinned. “You're right, I'm not. Well, maybe just a little. You've been out for a good hour now, and for a moment there I was worried that Odo had done some permanent damage to your pretty head.” He looked over his shoulder. “Looks like she'll be all right after all. I owe you two silvers, Odo.” The men laughed and an uncouth-looking fellow in a leather cap made a triumphant gesture.

“So you outsmarted me,” Rynn said as the Arctonian returned her

attention to her. “Congratulations, you deserve a reward. How about a knife in the liver?”

Eraig shook his head. “I don’t understand how you can keep it up.”

“Keep what up?”

“Playing tough all the time. It must be very tiring.

”Do I look tired to you?”

Eraig ignored her. He dragged a rotting part of a log over to the tree and made a big show of sitting down and making himself comfortable before finally looking at her.

“So, this map of yours”—he brought it out, unfolding it—”what can you tell me about it?”

“I’m not telling you a damn thing,” Rynn snarled. She’d had the map tucked away inside her shirt, which meant Eraig’s hands had been on her. The thought made her skin crawl.

“Suit yourself.” The Arctonian turned to his henchmen. “Someone make a fire. We’re staying overnight.”

“All right, all right,” Rynn said, “I’ll tell you. It’s probably nothing anyway.”

“I’m listening.” Eraig crossed his legs and looked at her expectantly.

“I happened across it in Dorath some months ago. I thought the river in the map looked a lot like the Aryn so I came here.”

“That’s an awful long journey for something that is ‘probably nothing’. What did you mean by that?”

“I think the map is fake. There ‘s never been a king named Zargon in these parts.”

“How do you know?”

“I had someone look at it,” Rynn lied. “There’s other things as well. I know the mountains, and some parts of the map are just plain incorrect.”

“I see,” said Eraig, rubbing his chin. “Well, if that’s the case you don’t mind me keeping it, do you?”

Rynn just scowled at him, making no response.

“No? My dear Rynn, are you not being entirely honest with me?”

“Look, I’ve told you all I know. I came here to find out whether this tomb or whatever it is might be worth going after. That’s all. But fake or not the map doesn’t belong to you and I’m not going to just let you take it.”

“Let me? You need to pay better attention, Rynn. I have already taken it. Now, I’m going to give you an offer. You’re better at this pathfinding business than any of us. You join me and my men and help us get there, and I’ll give you a share of whatever we find. Let’s say... one tenth.” He folded the map up again and demonstratively put it under his belt.

“Go fuck yourself.”

The Arctonian grunted. “That was a more generous offer than you have any right to expect, given the circumstances. Now you get nothing. I hope you’re happy.” He turned to his men. “Boys, we’re leav-

ing.”

“Let me go!” Rynn yelled. “Cut me loose you worthless cunt!”

Eraig gave her a hurt look. “You brought this upon yourself, Rynn. I hope you understand that. I gave you the chance to just tell me what was going on. You could have said, ‘well Eraig, I have this map here that I’m investigating, if I need your help I’ll let you know’. Instead you chose to mock and belittle me. And I won’t stand for that.”

“So you’re just going to leave me here to freeze to death?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” he said, walking away. “I’m sure you’ll work your way out of those ropes eventually. By then we’ll be long gone of course, but you’ll live.”

“Take another step and *you* won’t.”

Eraig froze mid-stride and all heads turned towards the voice.

Strolling out of the forest came Mealda. Wearing traveling clothes in brown and green and with a cocked and loaded crossbow pointed at the Arctonian, she looked far more in her element than behind the *Scabbard’s* counter.

“You’re a long way from your inn, barkeep,” Eraig said, trying to hide his surprise. “This doesn’t concern you, so why don’t you turn around and go back the way you came while you still can?”

“Cut her loose,” Mealda said, raising the tiller to her shoulder and taking aim.

Eraig regarded her coldly. “You’re a fool to come here alone, woman. These men are loyal to me. Kill me and you also die.”

“Who’s alone?” Mealda snapped her fingers.

Three men emerged from the trees behind her. One was Baral, the big Olmachian dressed in a long scale mail coat and wielding a two-handed mace that looked like it could smash a grown man into a pulp with one blow.

The other two were Olvan and Jedd. Rynn grinned as she saw the color drain from Eraig’s face.

“You heard the lady,” Jedd said as he moved closer, making a casual gesture with his broadsword, “cut her loose. And if you want to walk out of here in one piece, I suggest you don’t get careless with the knife while doing it.”

Eraig complied reluctantly, muttering a foul curse.

“You,” Mealda said, addressing Eraig’s henchmen, “start running or stay here and die. Your choice.” The four men looked at each other, then three of them took off into the woods without as much as a backwards glance. Only Odo remained, evaluating the opposition. Realizing the odds weren’t in his favor he spat and then disappeared among the trees.

Mealda returned her gaze to the Arctonian and smiled. “Loyal indeed.”

As the ropes fell to the ground Rynn got up stiffly, rubbing her wrists. She was trembling from the cold. Baring her teeth like a dog she snatched the map from under Eraig’s belt.

Jedd gave the Arctonian a rough shove. “Now it’s your turn to run.

Let's see if you're as good at it as your men."

"Wait," said Rynn. "I have a better idea."

Eraig remained silent while they tied him to the tree, but he eyed them with cold hatred. It wasn't until they were done that he spoke.

"I'll get you for this," he said, his voice trembling with barely contained rage. "All of you. I'll rip your guts out and feed them to you while you die."

"I'm sure you'll try." Rynn smiled sweetly. Then she punched him in the nose.

"Feel better?" Mealda asked as they walked out of the clearing, the bound and bleeding Arctonian shouting expletives at their backs.

"Much better. How did you know where to find me?"

"When you left I asked Baral to keep an eye on you. You're careless when you're upset, Rynn. He came back and told me he saw Eraig and his men follow you into the mountains. I figured you might need a hand so we went after. Then we ran into these two sorry-looking bastards out in the street."

Rynn eyed her two friends. Clothes and cloaks were stiff with dried mud and full of tears, and their skin was covered in scabs and bruises. They had lost weight and appeared not to have slept properly in weeks. In spite of all this, Olvan looked genuinely happy to see her and smiled broadly under his big, brown beard. Even Jedd, gruff as he always was, looked to be in a good mood.

"We found those ruffians' horses tethered out by the mountain

road,” Mealda continued. “After that, it was just a matter of following the trail of broken branches and loud curses. They ain’t no woodsmen these fellas, that’s for sure.”

“And you,” Rynn said to Jedd, “what took you so damn long?”

Jedd snorted. “Ask the dwarf.”

“Ask the—!” Olvan sputtered. “It wasn't my fault!”

“Never said it was. But apparently he’s the one keeping count of people’s mistakes, so you might as well ask him.”

Rynn raised an eyebrow. “Do I even want to know?”

“It’s a long story,” Olvan sighed. “Let’s find a fire, a hot meal and something to drink and I might just tell you.”

“Best idea I’ve heard all day,” said Jedd.

Slowly they made their way back along the path. Anvil remained where Rynn had left him, munching on a shrub. He rubbed his muzzle affectionately against her as she gathered up the reins and led him away. Half an hour later they reached the mountain road. Aside from her friends’ horses, only one other remained and Rynn deducted that it must be Eraig’s. She untied the reins, then gave the animal a hard slap on the rump, grinning wickedly as she watched it disappear up the mountain at a frightened gallop.

“Eraig,” the innkeeper said to Rynn as they mounted up, “he won’t forget this, you know. You underestimated him today and you see what that lead to. He may not be as formidable as he thinks he is, but he’s stubborn as a mule and never lets a slight go unpunished. He’ll

come after you, sooner or later.”

“I’m counting on it,” Rynn mumbled.

They rode down the slopes as night fell and the cold deepened around them. Soon they saw the flickering lights of Arynbridge below and a while later Mealda exchanged words with the sentries and they were let in through the gates. As they stabled their horses at the inn, Rynn said to her friends:

“Now let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we take stock of what we need for the journey. The sooner we get going the better.”

Mealda gave her a long, disapproving look. “Not so fast. Your friends look like they’ve fought a small war and you, my dear girl, you have a concussion. I want you all patched up and properly rested before I want to hear any talk about going on any further adventures.”

“I thought you wanted me out of here,” Rynn huffed.

“Listen to Mealda,” Jedd said with a yawn. “She’s a wise woman.”