

Chapter 4

Valindra blew smoke into the rafters of her tent and took a sip of wine. She layed on a velvet chaise, in the tent of whatever Nobleman she happened to be serving at that time. Jakob was it? No, Jakob was a Myzerian, the men of this encampment were mostly Khersarites. Jaromir! That was his name!

The elf took a puff from the pipe, letting the drug swirl through her, before letting it linger in the air above. She turned to one of the pages Jaromir had lent her and held out her cup. “I, I’m sorry ser, I was told to limit you to a single jar.”

Val ruffled her brow, “Then fetch me ale.” Before the boy could object, the tent flapped open. Val quickly put out her pipe and scrambled to her feet to stand at attention. Luka, a brown haired boy of ten and seven walked in, armored in a chain hauberk that was tied around his waist.

He flinched back as the stale smoke hit him in the face, then turned to Val. “Ser,” he said, waving away a plume of smoke, “Lord Celtrivo wishes for you to meet him at the central gate.”

“Thank you, tell your Lord that I shall be there soon.” Valindra said. The Lords squire bowed before exiting the tent. Val sighed and commanded her pages to fetch her armor. Her armor consisted of a layer of old, worn gamerson, that was covered in stains of blood, dirt, and metallic dust that could never come out. Overwhich she wore a brigantine cuirass over a shirt of mail, with splints along her legs and steel bracers and gauntlets on her forearms.

One page handed her sword to her, which she tied around her waist, grabbed her helmet, and walked out into the middle of the war camp. Around her, knights, squires, lords, and soldiers were scrambling to arm themselves and gather into formations.

Valindra “acquired” a brown horse and rode toward the southern gate of the encampment. The wooden gate was about twenty feet high and was connected by wooden palisades carved from the trunks of trees. Along each flank were two lookout posts, one of which was currently housing Jaromir’s war council. Valindra hitched her horse and climbed up into the tower.

Most of the council members turned their heads to her arrival, all except Jaromir, who was looking out a spyglass. “You’re late.” the High Prince said.

“My apologies, I was sleeping.” she said.

“I see. Tell me, when did sleeping involve drinking and smoking on my time?”

Jaromir turns towards her. He was fifty years of age, yet looked much older as his hair had turned thin and pale. He wore a vest of scales over a mail hauberk. He stood tall and regal, his face painted with disappointment that pierced Val and sent shivers down her back.

Her face began to flush red as the drug began to wear off and the awkwardness of the conversation began to set in. “I’m sorry, my lord.” she said as she knelt.

“Hmmf.” Jaromir turned, grabbed a tankard of water and tossed it in her face. The cool water shocked her awake as the liquid seeped into the crevices of the armor. “See to it that it doesn’t happen again.”

Val stood, on her right was Jaromir’s squire and Ser Petr Celtrivo, Jaromir’s brother and on her left was the dwarven Prince Throf and his companion Gormir.

Jaromir turned outward to the field before them, Val joining him at his flank. Before them sat a field of dried, overturned grass that led to a rocky cliffside that was punctured with entrances to a massive cave system within the rock.

“As I’m sure you all are aware, this operation has turned into a sour siege. I do not question the loyalties of my bannerlords, their men however?”

“Aye, I’ve heard whispers of dissent among the ranks. Men wishing to see their family, wanting to get home to plan for winter.” Ser Petr said.

“And they shall have all they want and more soon. But first we shall take Gevral’s head.” replied Jaromir. Gevral Ovinos, that bastard was the whole reason they were here.

He was the son of some sellsword, though she didn't know which one and had gained a following amongst the outlaws, occult, and demon worshippers of southern and eastern Kherlara. These followers called him the bloodlord, son of the god of war Korsnog, and in his name they put towns to the sword and used the survivors in great blood rituals.

That last part was only a rumor, but it was prevalent enough for the High Council back on Namis to send one of their own, her.

“Valindra, I assume you were sober enough to notice the movement around the camp.?” asked Jaromir.

“I did.”

“Good, maybe we’ll make use out of you yet.” The Lord of Casstrik snapped his fingers which his squire beckoned to and opened a large chest full of icy water for him to fill his cup. “When the horns blow and the banners are raised, you will take charge of the vanguard and secure the mouth of the cave. Throf and his seven hundred LongBeards will take the cliff and hold it till we clear the caves.”

“Tis a steep cliff.” Ser Petr said.

“Thank you brother, I was unaware.” Jaromir said with a hint of both amusement and scowl. The cliff was forty feet at least and its side was weathered and rocky. Bowmen would constantly rain arrows down to harass the camp, at least ten men had been wounded or worse.

Throf spat and growled, "I've seen children scale worse, you should worry about your own men getting through the caves."

Jaromir's hand shot up to silence them. Then a horn sounded out in the valley, followed by another, then another. Soon the camp sounded out in a cacophony of horns. Behind her the men had formed ranks.

At the front a group of five hundred dismounted knights and their squires with the banners of the houses they belonged to or whom they served painted on their shields and tabards.

Val donned her helm and descended the tower's stairs to join the vanguard, accompanied by Ser Petr.

She took up at the front, next to a man with a shield painted with a golden griffin on green whom she thought was Ser Yasha Kyvlow, but wasn't certain. A page handed Ser Petr a fish shaped Maul as he took up arms at her side.

Jaromir stood along the edge of the tower, scanning the army before him with a sense of great authority. "Men of Nossosy!" the High Prince began, "In those caves before you lay no men of honor or virtue, but savage dogs that must be put down. These beasts have raided your lands, stolen and murdered your people, and now they shall pay the price. To arms men of Kherslara!"

The army roared and cheered, inspired by the words of their Lord. Val joined them, crying out amongst the crowd. When the army had begun to settle down a horn was sounded and the wooden gate before her opened. "Keep close! We move as fast as the slowest man!" Val barked as she took command.

The vanguard moved forward, three men abreast on her flanks. The formation crossed under the gatehouse and formed along the other end of the ditch that stretched across the wall.

And now the dance begins she thought as she lowered her visor and drew her sword, which silver steel shone against the sun.

“With me!” she commanded and began to step forward into no mans land. Her and her knights moved together in unison, matching every step she took with one of her own. Eventually, she caught sight of movement along the cliff and shields to be raised. Seconds later a volley of arrows slammed against the formation. Not one hit flesh.

Soon they had made it halfway. Half way without losing any men. But at the mouth of the cave, the enemy had formed their own ranks. At least a company of men, most lightly armored in leather or gambeson stood before them, armed with simple crude weapons.

Val raised her sword into the air and cried out, “DEATH!” her men followed her lead.

The brigands she found herself against were cut down like blades of grass against a scythe. Her blade clashed with flesh as she tore through their lines.

Her foe began to break against the block and started to flee back into the cave, but something stopped them from going far.

Reinforcements

From the right of the cave came more men, these far more heavily armored, and led by a tall man in mail and a crossed sword and axe on his tabard. Val cut down another man before turning to duel the sellsword.

The warrior swiped at her head and she ducked away with a quick jab to the leg. He responded with a slash to her chest which caused her to back into the cave wall.

The sellsword went to cut her down, but was stopped by a maul with a fish shaped head that cracked into his hip. The man let out a muffled scream as he fell to the ground and into Val’s blade.

With the death of their captain, the rest of the sellswords fled deeper into the cave. Val rested her blade, around her the dead littered the floor, some her own, but mostly theirs. She lifted her visor and spat on the ground. “Does anyone have any water?”

A knight with a black tree painted on his shield walked over and handed her a waterskin. She took several gulps of lukewarm water before handing it back and wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“I need one of you to run back to camp, tell them the cave entrance is secure.”

The command was followed and a knight sent his squire back across the field. Val turned to Ser Petr who was now resting against a rock. “We should split up, leave a small garrison here, you take half and go right, I take the rest and go left.” she said.

Petr took a gulp of water and sighed, “Fine by me, when do you want us to move?”

“Rest for another five minutes, then we move.”

When those five minutes –which felt more like five seconds– passed, the vanguard split up with the wounded and squires staying at the caves entrance. Val took about one hundred to a hundred and fifty men with her along the left passage.

The group went ahead, first with five men abreast, with Val at the helm, but as they went the passage got more narrow, the cold stone walls enclosing the party. Eventually, someone got stuck and a fraction of men were forced to turn around.

Under normal circumstances Val would have been fine with such close confines, as a child she was practically raised among the tunnels of the Feyhold. But a hundred men following her and a general sense of evil that emanated from the cave caused a tightness in her chest which she couldn't explain.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the cavern opened up and the men were able to rest briefly. After a minute or so the group continued onwards.

Val rounded a corner where water sprouted from the rock and formed a shallow pool at her feet. Then she looked up. Above her, hanging from wooden boards chained to the ceiling were over two dozen bodies in various forms of decay, ranging from old men, to mother, and even children.

All leading into a cavern with a small stoney ledge that rose above an entrance to even further and deeper into the caves. At least one man vomited at the sight, she couldn't blame him.

The men began to spread out in the cavern, in shock at the wicked deeds committed. The Kyvlowian knight that had stood at the front of the vanguard had made his way towards the back of the cave where darkness had set.

“Ser, I think there's something down he-”

Crack

Valindra spun on her heel. Where the knight had been was now a massive feathered claw coated in blood and guts. Rising from the darkness came a great feathered beast. The front of its body was almost drake-like, its massive legs laying close to its body, but as the monster continued, its body became slender and went down into a tail.

On its back sat a rider, in bloodred scales and a golden mask covering half a scared face. The bloodlord.

“WYRM!” someone cried out. Some of the men fled, there was nothing to be done for that, another group charged the beast, brave, but stupid.

The Wyrms slashed at the men, sending three men crashing into the rock with a sickening crunch. They were lucky. From the depths of the monster a wave of acid was spat into the knights, burning into seven men.

Time slowed, Val counted her breaths. *Kill the rider. Slay the beast.* The knight of Namis darted forward. *Kill the rider. Slay the beast.* Images of prior battles flickered in her head; A pale Orc on dragon back, her fathers funeral, a young elvish boy charred so terribly his armor melted into his skin.

Kill the rider. Slay the beast. Valindra hoisted herself into the ledge, just above the Wyrms. *Kill the rider. Slay the beast.* She jumped. She landed, just in front of the bloodlord. *KILL THE RIDER.* The Bloodlord went for his sword, Val's sword was already through his eye and out his skull. *SLAY THE BEAST.* "Vaztez Ru!" her blade turned purple before she pierced the Wyrms neck and cut up to its head.

The beast gave out a cry of pain and went limp. Val slid down the dragon's carcass and onto her knees and breathed once more.

(Fun Fact: the three asterisks that represent a time jump is called a Dinkus)

Val collapsed onto a bench outside the great hall. She didn't understand, she had only had five cups of wine... or was it five hundred? Oh well, it doesn't matter now.

She sat on that bench for an hour or two she guessed, looking up to the shining lights that populated the night sky. The sounds of boots crunching against the dirt broke her trance. Jaromir stood there, holding an envelope in his hand.

"My Lord", she tried to stand for him, but stumbled back into the bench. The high prince sighed and handed her the envelope.

“It just arrived, addressed specifically to you.”

Val looked at the seel, a bird clutching a lightning bolt. Arengir’s seel. “Thanks.”

Jaromir turned and left her. She stuffed the letter in her breast pocket. She would read it in the morning, but for now, she would try to unravel the cosmos