

## Chapter 17

Nirea's head pounded. It was as if she'd been cracked across the head with a rock in her sleep. In truth, it was a wine bottle. It had also been a long while since she'd spent so much time on a horse.

The Auld Road began with the old Royal Mile running through Auldun, but the cobbles and grandeur ended at the city gates. Out here in the country it was little more than a wide clearing through the trees, rutted by wagon wheels and trampled by hooves. In some places, the foliage cleared and you could see for miles across rolling farmlands and heath, but here, as they approached the shadow of the Black Hills, the trees were so thick that in places the canopy formed a tunnel of green and amber.

It had been a strange, quiet day. Glorbad still seemed grumpy about his argument with the envoy, and the fact that he and Allandria were not there hung over the group like a fat black cloud. Even the boy, who had been hanging off Samily like a puppy since she arrived, was sullen. While Samily rode at the head of the group alongside Nirea, he'd fallen back beside Glorbad at the rear, leaving Meristan to guide the pack horse. She'd heard very little from any of them all day, and the silence was becoming painful.

Maybe conversation would take her mind off the pain. "Vastin tells me you're an orphan too."

"I am a child of God," the knight replied.

“Hmmp. I suppose that’s a nicer way to look at it. Aren’t we all supposed to be children of God?”

Samily looked at her curiously. “You don’t believe?”

“I’ve never seen anything in my life to make me believe in a god, I’m afraid.”

*Quite the opposite.*

“I’m sorry for you,” the Thorn said. “But I believe everyone’s life has God in it.”

Of course she did. “Well, you grew up surrounded by it.”

“And you did not?”

No, she did not. “I don’t even remember my parents. I assume they were murdered by the bastards that took me, but not one of them ever had the decency to tell me either way. First thing I remember is cleaning. Scrubbing the deck. Washing the blood out of dead men’s shirts. Sometimes, they’d get drunk and use me for target practice, promising worse with rotten, rum-soaked breath. If there’s a god who planned my childhood, I prefer not to believe in them.”

*Damn it.* The headache got worse; her vision took a spin. Why did she have to go digging in that dirt?

Samily had turned a sickly shade of grey and her eyes were wide. It had probably seemed an innocuous conversation until Nirea blurted out her childhood trauma. What had she done that for? “I’m sorry. I had no idea. How did you survive?”

“By being harder than those drunken old cunts.” Nirea could feel her heart beating faster, nausea rising in her guts. She took a deep breath. “I learned how to use a knife. Then a sword. And one day, when I had the captain alone, I slit his bastard throat. Some of the crew were unhappy when I gave them his head, but once I sent them after him, the rest fell in line. The only way to become a pirate captain is to kill the previous one.”

“You were a pirate?” The shock was apparent in Samily’s voice.

“I was a pirate captain.” She was feeling bolder now. Stronger. “But when you’re a woman, there’s always some dull ox thinks he can take you.”

“So you left?” Before Nirea could answer, the Thorn put up a hand, looking ahead down the Auld Road. They were approaching the foothills where they were to meet Aranok and Allandria. Was it them?

They stopped and Glorbad rode up alongside Nirea. “What’s wrong? Why are we stopping?”

“I heard something,” said Samily.

Then so did Nirea, and despite the fading light, she saw something too. A man, maybe two, running toward them. She vaulted from her horse and drew her swords. Glorbad joined her on the ground.

Samily turned her horse sideways, blocking off the rest of the path. “Stay behind me.”

As the men drew closer, she could see they wore Reiver colours. All right then. It had been a quiet day. Maybe this was just what she needed to get her blood pumping. She heard Glorbad draw his sword and prepared to run.

“Wait.” Samily raised her hand again.

“Why?” It wouldn’t do to have the Reivers crash upon them—they would have the momentum.

“Something’s wrong,” the knight said.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” asked Glorbad.

Nirea looked again. The men had no obvious weapons—and they weren’t charging, they were running. As they drew close enough to see Nirea and the others, they faltered for a few steps, looked back and kept running. One of them shouted something, but Nirea couldn’t make out what. “What did he say?”

Samily muttered something in reply, and when the Reiver shouted again, she heard it clear as glass.

“Blackened!”

“Dear God,” said Samily, “horses!” Nirea sheathed her swords and leapt back on her mount. Glorbad took longer—his armour slowing him.

“Come on!” she screamed at him. A distant rumble. The Reivers drew level and barely slowed to skirt around them. Vastin raised his axe as the smaller one passed close by, but the Reiver didn’t even look up at the boy.

“Run, you idiots!” the larger one panted.

Then she saw them. A shambling mess of broken humanity. The withered, sickly remains of victims of the worst plague ever known to man. The Blackened. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them.

She pulled alongside Glorbad’s horse and helped yank him up into his seat.

“Come on!” Samily screamed, kicking her horse into action. She took the pack horse’s lead from Meristan, and he prodded his animal into life. Nirea could feel her horse’s nerves. The Blackening didn’t affect animals, but it bloody unsettled them.

She dug in her heels and the animal gladly took flight.

They rode hard. But the pack horse was slowing them down. It whinnied in fear, steam pouring from its skin. Samily rode with it at the back. But they had to keep going. The Blackened didn’t tire. They might not be able to outrun the horses, but they could keep running forever—unlike them.

“What in Hell’s arse are they doing this far north?” Glorbad yelled.

Nirea shrugged. How should she know? They were supposed to be at Mournside, across the Black Hills—not here.

“What do we do?” shouted Vastin from the front.

Nirea drew her horse up. “Stop!”

“What?” Glorbad’s horse almost barrelled into hers. “Are you touched, woman?”

But they stopped.

“We can’t just run like this. Now they’re chasing us, they’ll keep going until they find others to infect—and this road leads straight to the White Hart.” They’d passed the inn not long ago, at the junction to Auldun. It would never withstand an onslaught like this. Everyone there would be infected by morning. “We need to draw them off the road!”

“And then what?” asked Glorbad.

She ignored him. She didn’t have an answer. “Meristan, Vastin, take the pack horse and ride for the inn. Tell them to bar every door and window and stay inside! Samily, Glorbad, we’re taking them south!”

“Why south?” the soldier asked.

“Because Mournside has walls!” And if it wasn’t already overrun, it was probably the only place outside Haven that could survive. Plus, they might run into the envoy—and they could do with some magic right now.

“No.” Samily sat proud in her saddle. “I stay with Meristan.”

“No!” It was the loudest she’d ever heard the monk. “You go with them, Samily. That is an order.”

“Yes, Brother.” The knight’s tone was solemn, but with a hint of defiance Nirea hadn’t heard before.

“It’s all right.” Vastin tried to smile bravely. “I’ll protect him. I promise.”

“Go!” Nirea pulled her horse around. They didn’t have long before the horde caught up. The Reivers must have got off the road, knowing the Blackened would follow the last prey they’d seen.

Meristan gave Samily a final nod as he took the reins of the pack horse and set off with Vastin. Once they were out of sight, Glorbad spoke. “We’ll never make Mournside. It’s almost a day’s ride cross-country. The horses are already fucked.”

He was right. She could feel the heat coming off her mount. They might well have to ride the horses into the ground. And even then, they’d have a long way to run on foot.

“I know.” She pulled up her hood. “Have you got a better idea?”

He stared for a moment, then shook his head. The ground rumbled again.

“How are they this far north?” Samily asked. “I have never known of them straying from the Black Meadows.”

*Because they haven’t.* “If we survive the night, we’ll figure that out.”

The first of them came into view. It was relatively unwasted. Must have been fresh. That explained her speed, poor bitch. She was well ahead of the rest. As she drew closer, Nirea made out the telltale black handprint on her face. The touch that had killed her—and gave the Blackened their name. The woman screamed as she saw them, and bloodlust took her. She ran even faster.

“Hold!” Nirea held up a hand. They needed to wait for the rest of the horde. If they didn’t change tack here, they’d eventually catch the others.

Samily moved her horse in front and drew her sword. But as the Blackened barrelled toward them, the Thorn’s horse whinnied an objection, shying away. Samily raised her blade—and the horse stumbled. A rock, a divot in the road, and it went over. Nirea heard the sickening crack as its leg snapped, then the thud as Samily landed, one leg still underneath it.

*Fuck!*

Nirea leapt down and drew her scimitars. Samily’s helm lay next to her head. The Blackened was nearly on top of her, scrambling over the horse. Nirea swung her blade and

split the back of its head. It slumped forward on the horse, which was desperately trying to get back up, but with only three legs it was going nowhere.

“Nirea!” Glorbad bellowed.

She didn’t need to look. The horde was coming.

“Come on!” she shouted, dragging Samily to her feet. The knight shook her head, trying to regain her focus. Nirea picked up her helm and put it in her hands.

“Come on, get on my horse!”

The rumble was becoming deafening. She turned to see Glorbad getting down from his own mount. “What are you doing?”

“It’s too late.” Glorbad closed his visor and turned as the first of the Blackened barrelled toward him.

He swung his giant sword and nearly split it in half. It had been a young boy once. He crumpled like a broken sail. Nirea pulled her scarf up over her face. The three of them against God knew how many Blackened. Here on the Auld Road.

She breathed deep, and they were upon them.

Nirea swung for the first to reach her, a man with red hair. The first blow took his jaw off, but he didn’t even flinch. She brought up the other blade and drove it through the soft, exposed flesh of his mouth. He dropped before her. Another came from the side—she swung instinctively, knocking it back. A girl maybe. She couldn’t tell. Her hood blocked her side vision. Another lunged, tripping over the first she’d killed. Glorbad and Samily were both swinging. Their armour should protect them. Her leathers suddenly felt like satin.

“Behind the horse!” Glorbad shouted, stepping back beside Samily. He slit the animal’s throat as he passed. Its body was a barrier now, giving them space to swing as the Blackened kept coming. Nirea took the head off a woman in front of her and flinched away as blood splattered across her face.

*Damn it!*

She wiped the blood with the back of her hand, and suddenly she was down. She kicked and wriggled, trying to get it off—could feel its hands clawing at her chest, reaching for her face, for her only exposed skin.

She screamed.

A blade took the top of its head off as it knelt above her. She pushed it away and rolled to the side, then pushed herself up, forcing herself toward the horse, near the others.

“This isn’t working!” screamed Samily as she dispatched another one. “There are too many!”

She was right. They needed another option. But the horses were gone. They must have bolted.

Nirea slashed at another, taking out both eyes—still it reached for her, until the next blow went deeper and it dropped on the horse’s carcass. Another came, then another. She was almost swinging blind now.

Aim for the head. Just aim for the head.

She heard a scream. Blackened maybe. Hopefully. She couldn’t even see the others anymore. The horse was lost under a pile of bodies. She looked up at the sky and gulped air.

Keep swinging. The head. The head.

The trees. Blackened couldn’t climb. She slammed a scimitar into an ear and ran. Leaping, she buried both blades in the massive tree trunk and pulled herself up. Her shoulders screamed, her back ached, but she reached the lowest branch and retrieved her swords. She could see the white of Samily’s armour, but she was surrounded. Her blade, though. It cut through the Blackened like butter. Three, four, six Blackened gathered below the tree branch, reaching for her. Her heart pounded in her ears.

“Samily!” she bellowed. “Tree!”



If the knight heard, she made no reply. She swung, and swung, and swung again. Where was Glorbad? She caught her breath, felt her heart stop beating against her ribs, and looked down. One at a time, she split the skulls of the Blackened below her. One. Two. Three. The fourth didn't go down the first time, or the second. She was weakening. Four. Five.

The rest had given her up and gone back for Family. They'd killed the fittest—the newest. These were older now. More withered. Slower. Maybe now they could run.

Next to the horse, an arm appeared.

Glorbad!

She dropped down from the branch and charged. Still Family stood. Still Family swung. The Blackened were struggling even to reach her over the pile of bodies.

Nirea sliced her way through three more Blackened—one could barely stand—and reached Glorbad's hand. She pulled, and the two Blackened on top of him rolled away. They were both finished—and his armour was intact.

Thank God!

“Fuck me!” he bellowed. Another came at them. Nirea speared it through the face, but her blade stuck as it fell, leaving her only one.

She tossed it from her weaker left hand to her right. Glorbad recovered his sword from the ground, panting heavily.

Still they came.

Suddenly, Nirea was on the ground again. Two of them on her, crawling up her back, clawing at her head. She heard a crash as Glorbad went down again beside her. A grunt as the air battered out of his lungs.

*Shite.*

She was facedown. She couldn't lift an arm. The weight on her was only getting worse — crushing her lungs. Forcing her face into the mud. She felt the panic rising. The writhing on her back. If she didn't move, she was going to suffocate. Glorbad roared next to her.

She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe.

The weight lessened. Again, and again. She rolled onto her back and sucked in precious air.

And saw the Blackened, floating above her.

*What the fuck?*

An arrow thunked through the skull of a Blackened. She forced herself back onto her feet and looked into the trees. The *draoidh* sat on his horse, gesturing at the Blackened, throwing them back—giving her time to breathe, to pause, to think.

She found one sword. The other stuck proud out the back of the Blackened head it speared. She kicked the body over, put her boot against the withered neck and wrenched the weapon free. Glorbad was up again. Samily still stood. The girl was incredible. She must have taken out twice as many as Nirea and Glorbad together, and was still going. An arrow went straight in the temple of what was once an old man. Allandria had circled behind them and fired from her horse, picking off the strays that got past Aranok's magic.

Samily and Glorbad stepped back, away from the piles of corpses. Another rumble, louder than before, and the earth rose before her eyes. With a burst of stones, a wall of mud grew in front of them, cutting them off from the Blackened.

And then there were flames. Aranok had dismounted and come closer, throwing fire from his hands at the other side of the wall. She saw them catching, heard the screeching as the Blackened burned.

“Are you all right?” It was Allandria, behind her. She turned.

“Were you touched?” the archer yelled over the screaming.

Nirea felt her face. She pulled her hood and scarf down, feeling for any sign she'd been infected. There was blood and dirt, but...Allandria leapt down from her horse and grabbed her face with gloved hands. She wiped at it, clearing away the gore, held her cheeks and examined her, and then, satisfied, let her go with a relieved smile.

Nirea collapsed to her knees, her heart pounding. She loosened her leathers. She needed to breathe. Allandria nocked another arrow and fired over her head. One of the Blackened must have cleared the wall. She heard it crackling as it landed behind her.

Glorbad's helm dropped to the ground, his breath laboured. “Well, that was fun!”

Nirea felt herself laugh. She didn't know why.

“Samily!” she said. “Where's Samily?”

“Here.” The girl's blade was slick with dark red blood. There was hardly any white visible on her armour. She looked like she'd been turned inside out.

Nirea forced herself to her feet. Her thighs screamed in objection.

“I may have been wrong,” she said to the Thorn.

“About what?” Samily removed her helm. Her face was red and her slick hair stuck to her head.

“Watching you fight, maybe there is a god.”