

18. Beast Men and Fatal Wounds

Forcing their horses down into the shadows, the party laid low in the undergrowth of the forest some five-hundred feet up the hillside from the road. Slowly, the approaching rumble of hooves ascended then some dozen riders appeared dressed in skins and furs with an assortment of metal armor and helmets, riding hard and passing quickly then fading from sight around a bend.

“Is that them?” Fae inquired.

“Yes.” Orna affirmed.

“What does this mean?” Fae asked.

With a deep breath and a sigh, Orna concluded, “It is not good. It most likely means the main force is not far behind.”

“How far are we from Algath?” Fae asked.

“If we ride through the night, and we will,” Orna advised, “we will arrive in Algath by approximately sunrise.”

Within only an hour of leaving Androgath, the farms and small towns transitioned into a wilderness of ancient dark forests and the first humans the party encountered since then only just rode past.

“I am troubled no scouts from Algath have contacted us yet.” Orna commented, “I will take a short lead and you follow me. We will relax our guard to make up time.”

Mounting her horse, Orna broke into a run almost as the last word left her mouth and her companions rushed to catch up and follow from a distance. Running hard, Orna weaved between tree trunks and around undergrowth, brushing up against tree limbs and she served as an easy target for ambush, continuing in such a fashion for most of the afternoon until suddenly she pulled up to a short stop near a thick growth of bushes then rotated her horse in a full circle while shouting, “Here!”

Undergrowth rustled then two men on horseback with dark gray cloaks emerged from a shadowy thicket of brush. Orna slid down from her horse, as did the two men in dark cloaks, while Fae, Gaeryn and Dorian approached, and after a brief smile, Orna punched the two men on their arms, demanding, “Why did no one leave me a message at the Hunt Club?” The two men glanced at each other then returned a blank stare as if they had no idea of what she spoke. “Never mind.” Orna finally concluded, “It does not matter now. Tell me what is happening.”

“They’re two days out.” one of the men answered.

“Two days from where? From Algath?” asked Orna with growing apprehension. Both men nodded in confirmation and rocking her head back in reaction, Orna rubbed her palm on her chin then asked, “How many?”

“About twenty-thousand but that’s only about half of them.” a rider replied, “They’ve occupied Meldanich with next to no fight. We’re not sure what’s going on up there.”

“Gaeryn, Dorian,” Orna urgently barked, “go back... now! Stop for nothing. Use the road and do not look back. We will allow no others to come this way. If you overtake the patrol we earlier observed, go around them through the woods. Do not fight with them. You have no time for that.” Directing her instructions more toward Gaeryn than Dorian, Orna then asked, “Faelryd, will he follow my instructions?”

“You don’t have to ask Fae.” Gaeryn asserted a bit resentfully, “I understand the instructions and the situation. I am a scout.”

“Yes. I apologize.” Orna acknowledged then immediately continued, advising, “One of you must locate Aengys and Barail at the Hunt Club, but not both of you. The other must continue directly to the companies. I do not care what time of day. Tell them to make directly for Algath at maximum possible speed, no stop, no break, no meal, no sleep... understood? Yes?” Cautiously examining the two, Orna then urgently admonished, “This is a race now.” Both scouts demonstrated gestures of acknowledgement and Orna appeared sufficiently satisfied as she nodded, stared for a moment then jolted and nearly shouted, “For what are you waiting? Go!”

Gaeryn and Dorian leapt onto their horses and charged down the hill to the road while Orna returned her attention to the two gray-cloaked men from Algath then instructed, “Go back and tell the king we may arrive first but if we do not, stay inside the walls and do not come out to fight. We will deal with that eventuality only if we must. Stop any patrols heading south if you can but more importantly, none can return north with information to report - They must all die. We will follow you at a distance but will delay to watch the road and meet up with our people, yes?”

“Done.” a grey-cloaked man affirmed then suggested, “We should take the road now. Our backups will signal us if any more patrols head this way.”

“Good. Go then.” Orna instructed.

One of the men rubbed the top of her head then they both nodded at Fae and departed for the road heading north.

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In his dreams, Wyl saw the great orator in the blue and purple silks with golden trims and a crowd cheered him as he emerged from a gateway. Perhaps crowds cheered most everything he did. Perhaps crowds cheered him as he ate his breakfast. Raising his fists in the air, the hero howled in acknowledgement while pressed against a low fence surrounding the courtyard area, the crowd cheered and chanted, “Oost! Oost! Oost!” Opposite the hero, the Red Witch stood by ready, dressed in her tight golden clothing. Suddenly swiping at his silks, the hero tossed the garments disrespectfully behind him revealing a crude skin garment that exposed firm, muscular but not especially impressive bare arms and legs. Thick golden hair rippled across his shoulders and the crowd inhaled, awestruck by his sudden transformation into a primordial beast then slamming his fists against his chest, the hero snarled, provoking the crowd to near hysteria.

A man in a white garment stepped between the golden haired beast-hero and the Red Witch then in an ostentatious display of theatrics, introduced the two contestants prepared to duel for the prize of advancement in a series of duels to determine the position of Supreme General over the Federation of Armies. As the referee withdrew, the two opponents squared off in preparation and the spectacle immediately appeared ludicrous to the point of comedy, as a strong fit man prepared to engage in contest of physical feat, a runt waif of a girl barely more than half his overall dimensions. The audience murmured in a confused combination of raucous enthusiasm for their golden haired hero mixed with a smattering of laughter and jeers for the presumptuous arrogance of the girl and her disrespect for tradition and decorum. The great hero unexpectedly extended his arms then clasped his hands behind his back, bent low and held his face out toward the girl in a bold demonstration of sportsmanship, and the audience cheered wildly for his generosity. Clamping his eyes, the hero contorting his face with unnecessary exaggeration so all in attendance might easily observe the quality of his accommodation.

The presentation of his face to his opponent constituted generous compensation for obvious physical disadvantage but the girl exploited the courtesy presumably to an extent beyond the intent of the hero with a swift swing of her foot that landed with surprising force between his legs. With eyes snapped open wide, the hero staggered in a moment of defenselessness as the girl tore into him initially pummeling him mercilessly. Falling to his knees, the hero raised an arm to cover his face then extended the other to ward off the girl but she clutched his garment and ferociously pounded her fist against the side of his head until he crumpled over onto his face. Rushing in, the referee directed the girl to a neutral location then commenced a count for the downed contestant while the audience howled incensed in a racket of gasp, jeer, curse and exclamation yet she antagonized them to even greater fury with raised fists and a dance in mockery of the hero.

Suspending the count as the hero struggled up, the referee withdrew as the audience expressed relief for the avoidance of so near a catastrophe. Most among the crowd might have considered the contest a joke, comic relief in a series of spectacular contests involving only the most renowned and accomplished men of arms throughout the lands, but a hush of apprehension suddenly descended as a newfound appreciation occurred for the legitimacy of the runt girl contestant. The hero smiled as if perhaps he intended all along to demonstrate to the audience, their underestimation of his opponent and preclude the humiliation that any among them should later describe the contest as an accomplished man of combat simply beating up on a defenseless little girl. The referee waved his arms and the contest resumed as the opponents cautiously maneuvered.

As the contestants grappled, scratched, kicked and clawed, the hero slammed his forehead into the face of the Red Witch and she staggered backward then she leapt at him and stomped the soles of her feet into his face as if running across it then with hands clamped around her throat, he lifted her and shook her savagely. Kicking the hero solidly in the underside of his chin, the girl wriggled loose then dove into his knees driving him to the ground, clutched at his hair and pummeled his face with a knee on his chest. With a desperate spin, the hero lunged, clamped arms around her, pulled her head by the hair, drove a palm into her chin and bent her head back as she clawed at his eyes and bit his arm then howling, he set her loose and the opponents separated to recover.

In a collective hush, the audience sustained an eerie silence at last fully appreciating the seriousness of the contest, obviously the most savage and brutal thrashing of any they yet observed in the tournament. The contestants reengaged as the audience inhaled slowly in a protracted gasp for what developed into a grotesque and remorseless mutual beating for an excruciating duration that passed like an eternity. The Red Witch climbed the hero, wrapped a leg over his shoulder, bit his ear, gouged his eyes and tore his hair. The hero swung the girl overhead, slammed her into the dirt, pinned her down with a knee in her side, clutched her throat and pounded her head. Stomping at his face, the girl rolled the hero away then the two locked in a death grip pummeling each other into a gruesome bloody mess until finally, the Red Witch slowly relaxed limp but even so, the hero continued pounding her until the referee directed him to a neutral location. Nonetheless reeling, the hero staggered to his assigned spot then leaned over with hands upon knees breathing hard and staring at the ground while listening intently as the referee shouted his count ascending perilously close to ten but then pausing upon count of the number nine. The hero then raised his face to inspect conditions at the precise moment a sizeable rock whistled directly into the center of his field of vision.

In the otherwise deafening silence, all in attendance easily heard a pronounced thump as the rock struck the golden haired hero at the dead center of his forehead then bounced away leaving indentations on his skin. The audience cringed with a collective gasp as the hero winced then squinted and froze stiff, shuffled one foot forward scratching it across the dirt, swayed then adjusted the other foot backward. Knees buckled but the hero snapped erect, leaned to a side, turned slightly on his feet then a knee buckled again and as he shuffled a foot to compensate, his toes stuck in the dirt for just an instant and he leaned then slid his other foot. With an almost audible creaking as if from a great tree falling, the weight of his upper body leaned out past his feet then the hero staggered two more steps in an attempt to run his feet under his mass but the momentum swung too far and he again stubbed toes short of his intended mark. Attempting to raise his arms to brace for impact, the hero never lifted hands above the height of his waist then plummeting to the earth, slammed his face hard against the ground with a bounce from the momentum. Small plumes of dust swirled near his mouth as the hero huffed and puffed otherwise motionless, and as the referee chased the girl to a neutral spot, on her way, she paused to gloat over the fallen hero, swinging a fist in his direction in celebration. With indignant anger, the crowd howled riotous and guards even scurried to restrain some from jumping the fence while the referee commenced his count, and the hero never stirred again even as a physician and assistants rolled him onto a flat board then whisked him off the field through a doorway into a service hut.

Dropping his hands to his sides, even the referee gawked in stunned silence but three judges descended their observation perch to confer with him as shock and apprehension gripped the audience then the referee broke away from the judges as they returned to their perch. In an authoritative bellow, the referee declared “In accordance with rule one, which clearly states, ‘No contestant shall possess within the arena any weapon of any sort’, it is determined throwing a rock constitutes possession of a weapon. The contestant in question is therefore, disqualified, and the round is awarded to her opponent.”

The crowd erupted with a cheer of relief and vindication though somewhat dampened by the distress they experienced for the harrowing events they only just witnessed. The Red Witch scowled and shook her head as the referee dramatically waved an arm in her direction then gestured with protruding thumb signifying her ejection from the arena and exclusion from any subsequent appearance in the tournament. Heading for the stables at the opposite end of the arena, her path led the Red Witch before the full length of the crowd and she defiantly glared menacingly upon them as she passed while they cursed and jeered. In an obscene gesture, the Red Witch flipped her hands from under her chin and spat only agitating the crowd further. Clearly, the Red Witch was a sore loser and in a childish temper tantrum, she suddenly shrieked at the crowd, “If you continue with this folly... it will be your END!” and this constituted a grievous breach of etiquette for they considered forecasts of doom preceding a hazardous undertaking a curse of bad luck of the worst kind. Enraged attendees screeched, wailed and spat while some struggled over the fence past the guards then rushed her but tilting her head and glaring, the Red Witch halted them in their tracks for none dared touch her. “Your END!” she repeated, “No matter how many you send, you will regret. No matter how many you send, no more than seven will ever return.” The crowd howled overcome with anger, pulled at their hair, shook their fists and screamed but the Red Witch taunted, held up seven fingers and declared, “Seven! Remember it! No more than seven will ever return!”

Though the overwhelming majority of the audience held the Red Witch in considerable disfavor for the temerity she demonstrated by even her mere participation in the contest, by whatever means of connivance she might have orchestrated such an offense, some few perhaps silently and secretly in fact, entertained fantasies she might prevail and emerge at the conclusion of the contests, Supreme General. Had such a thing occurred, she may surely have altered the course of Sethian history, and well more than just a few that witnessed the events shuddered in recognition of that which occurred, for the Red Witch cursed them and though they might have pretended otherwise, a dark pall of ominous foreboding descended upon them.

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Stirring awake, Wyl stared up at the stars as a soft breeze rustled in the bare branches. The campfires long since burned to glowing embers and the multitudes slept in the cool open air. Stomping hooves of a single horse approached and those on watch crouched in the shadows in preparation then as the horse drew near, shouted commands to stop and submit to inspection. The rider identified himself as Dorian, Seilvhanian scout then a muffled anxious exchange followed by some commotion as the night watch roused others from sleep. The Angoran guard patrol that met up with the army to provide escort counted among the first up, and some two dozen huddled in conference then the captain dispatched a company to ride ahead and clear the roads. Kel spoke hurriedly with Glendwyn, suggesting he ought to take a company ahead and send back reports while running interference if necessary. Glendwyn concurred and with that, Kel departed to round up a company. In a flurry of activity, companies stirred and broke camp in the dark as word spread the Sethian army already marched on the road north of Algath and only an overnight sprint might beat them to the destination. In perhaps no more than a quarter hour, half the Angoran guard departed at a full run out onto the road and in possibly even less time beyond that, some few hundred Highland scouts rumbled off into the dark.

The sudden departure of Kel and the confusion of the change in plans disoriented Wyl and he wandered in the dark through the camp finally stumbling into Dorian while involved in an urgent conversation with Clovan and Adail. Dorian broke away from the meeting just long enough to instruct Wyl to find Glendwyn and stay close to him then pointed in the approximate direction. Wyl approached a group packing their horses and just as he recognized Glendwyn and Arieth, he realized his own horse and gear might prove of some use to him then departing to collect his necessities, he located neither Glendwyn nor Arieth when he returned. Companies rode out in columns and almost nothing of the camp remained so Wyl simply jumped onto his horse and rode into the end of a column as it passed without even identifying the company as Highland or otherwise. Traffic funneled onto the road and the pace immediately alarmed Wyl as already near the end of the line, he only lagged further behind while the sprint progressed.

The sun broke later over the horizon illuminating greater concentrations of buildings crowded up to the road where large gatherings of local residents assembled looking on in bewilderment as an unexpected and alarmingly large foreign army paraded before them. Slowing to a near stop as congestion formed at the entrance to a great stone bridge, even in a state of apprehension, Wyl noticed a concentration of rickety shacks and ragged people. Without his usual sources, only his imagination served to comprehend the circumstances and Wyl stared at the pitiful people attempting to gather clues but some stared back perhaps less than appreciative so he turned his eyes away self-conscious.

On the opposite side of the bridge, the pace immediately relaxed as horses trotted along cobbled streets in a vast amazing city while the clatter of hooves echoed in a tremendous roar. Wyl considered the situation an opportunity to gain ground and as he urged his horse along the side of the street, he thought he heard someone shout 'stop' but too intent on forging his way forward, he continued without investigation but then clearly heard, "Wyl!" Pulling to a stop, Wyl turned as Aengys approached and informed him, "Kel sent me back to look for you. He said he's sorry he forgot about you."

Wyl concealed a sigh of relief as Aengys pulled alongside him and instructed, "Slow down now. Why are you running?"

"To catch up." Wyl stated with some surprise over the question.

"-and how is that working out for you so far?" Aengys inquired glancing around him with obvious appreciation that Wyl traveled with companies in the tail end of the procession. With raised eyebrows Aengys advised, "Follow my instructions now, and everything will be fine, okay?" Forcing the horses to a casual pace while the trotting army flowed past, Aengys reassured, "Pace is paramount. This is a marathon, not a sprint. We accelerate best by slowing down."

If Wyl never before met Aengys, he would easily have identified him as a protégé of Fae by the witticism. The presence of a friend and familiar expressions reassured him that his conditions improved and as the pair continued ahead through the edges of the city, all the while falling further back towards the end of the line, Aengys entertained Wyl with tales of his adventures. Aengys recounted the wondrous variety of beers he and Barail sampled in the pleasant and comfortable atmospheres of the Three Corners Inn and the Hunt Club Lodge, and Wyl noted as he passed by the Three Corners Inn the day previous, he also appreciating its rustic charm.

The northern edges of the city faded into the background and in a remote farming area, the River Viala ran nearly alongside the road. Throngs milled about at a standstill and led their horses in rotations to the bank for watering. Aengys led Wyl quickly to the riverbank where they budged their way to the edge of the water and after the horses drank sufficiently, they returned to the road, mounted up and headed off at a gallop. Passing thousands of others as they reassembling for the next segment, Wyl immediately appreciate the strategy as the two horses he and Aengys rode fully rested from so leisurely a pace suddenly galloped with a surplus of energy and overtook most of the companies. Wyl even entertained thoughts of possibly riding alongside Arieth some time in the near future but as the companies reorganized and continued forward, Aengys again conducted a steady adjustment toward the end of the columns.

The sun sank beneath clouds of brilliant orange, red and yellow in an indigo sky, and a fierce wind whipped over the landscape as the Angoran patrol passed by in the opposite direction having reached the extents of their territory then word spread the first companies expected to reach Algath approximately two hours after sunrise. Aengys slowed the pace even more until he and Wyl rode among the very last company in the columns and under calm quiet conditions, lit a smoke and then casually informed Wyl, "We will go at the slowest pace we can now," Wyl raised his eyebrows with alarm as Aengys explained, "until we are outright last in line. The strategy here is conserve, conserve, conserve. I will attempt to time it so we reach the backend right about sunrise then we are going to make an all out dash the rest of the way, understood?"

"Yeah?" Wyl acknowledged with obvious lingering apprehension.

Aengys reassured, “We want that last sprint to be our strongest effort of the entire journey so far, when we need it the most... okay? The only thing I care about is getting through the gate anywhere other than last. Do what I say and that’s what will happen.”

“Okay.” Wyl responded with the most confidence he could muster.

Throughout the night, the companies progressed at varying paces of runs, gallops and walks while an ominous and foreboding thunder rumbled in the distance, flashes of lightning illuminated remote skies and a palpable tension mounted. Aengys backhanded Wyl on his shoulder several times to jolt him from a near slumber that pursued him in spite of tension and fear. Time slowed to a crawl as he plummeted through the darkness of an endless night, toward a sunrise that would break over uncertain conditions.

When Wyl closed his eyes, the hero in blue and purple silks intruded on his dreams, and with face illuminated by dim glow of candlelight, the hero addressed some number of subordinates and associates assembled in close quarters. In his thick and eerie accent, the orator-hero declared, “I care naught for the curse of witch, and I have no place in my cause or in my world for disloyalty, dereliction and cowardice.” With a judgmental glance around the room, the hero produced an ornamental gilded dagger and stabbed it into the table then admonished, “Oath you have sworn and naught but the honor of old releases you from your oath. If any now present, fear curse of witch, release yourself now from oath by way of the honor of old.”

All men present remained silent and shifted eyes nervously until at last with apparent intent of contrite resolve and demonstration of continuing loyalty, a subordinate asserted, “It is true. We have nothing to fear of witch curse. I have consulted the oracle. The oracle foresees portentous omen of epic deed.”

While all others continued to shift eyes nervously, the hero slowly directed his attention to the subordinate and stared until the man trembled then addressing all present with menacing calm, the hero proclaimed, “The oracle... I will tell you something about oracle, portentous omen and epic deed. Commerce, Enterprise and Profit, gross domestic product and currency circulation - These are the omens portent and deeds epic I foresee.

- I - overthrew the king, built the army and united the kingdoms, not the oracle...

- I - suspended taxation on capital transfer and initiative, not the oracle...

- I - stimulated competition, creation of occupation and open trade, not the oracle...

- I - am the oracle... and I will tolerate superstitious encouragement no more than I will tolerate superstitious dread. Our will is our portentous omen and the glory we take is our epic deed. We are kings among lesser men. We are invincible. Nothing in this life is of any value but that which you take. We will take our place in this world. We will take our place in history. We will trample into dust all those that resist and the glory of our accomplishments will endure for a thousand years... and I will cut out the tongue of any man that ever again utters, witch, curse, oracle, or any other superstitious nonsense...”

No crowds cheered but some dozen solemn men swallowed hard and stared vacantly with the realization they long since committed to a cause they no longer controlled, could not abandon, neither steer nor decelerate, locked in an unstoppable hurdle toward an inalterable destiny.

In procession, each man for better or worse clamped arms around his great supreme hero-king while he stared with eyes glazed over and a terrible crooked smile on his face.

Wyl blinked, adjusted in his saddle and shivered then struggled no longer to stay awake throughout the rest of the night.

Upon conclusion of a brief break, the pace increased as the first dull glow of morning spread over the eastern horizon. His anxiety increased dramatically as Wyl regularly glanced to his rear and there observed no more than a dozen riders between him and empty road. As bright purple and pink illuminated the eastern sky over a spooky wilderness of dark forests on rolling hills and tangled marshes in between, Aengys finally instructed, "All right. Now."

Wyl dug his heels into his horse, whipped the reins and inhaled deeply with relief for the instruction at last to run, and while wind whistled in his ears and rippled on his clothing, to his immense satisfaction, he and Aengys gained on many other riders and advanced their order in the line. Rumbling ahead at a frantic pace as the sun rose into the sky, the companies passed tended farms alongside the road but unlike Angora, no crowds observed the procession as all habitations appeared abandoned in anticipation of the fast approaching storm. With the city of Almath no more than a few miles ahead, riders grew more anxious to make the destination with so little distance remaining and the pace consequently steadily increased then an urgent murmur worked back from the front to the rear with no specific message or instruction other than vague suggestions to hurry. Wyl stared at Aengys in hope some witticism might immediately alleviate all concern but Aengys only shouted, "Keep your eyes front and pay attention. Listen to me, don't look."

Thrashing with his reins at the horse Wyl rode, Aengys even struck Wyl on the back and leg in the process as they steadily drifted further toward the rear of the line while all riders broke into a final dash for the city. At the crest of a long gradual incline, a vast relatively flat expanse of farmland sprawled open and not far beyond, the road intersected with another. To the right of the intersection, a short stretch of road ran through a narrow breach between two wooded hills and behind the hills, spectacular towers and spires soared over the treetops but motion attracted his attention to the road ahead perhaps somewhere in the neighborhood of equidistant from Wyl opposite the intersection. Squinting as he bounced in his saddle, Wyl detected vague figures converging from the north under a cloud of dust rising like swarm of locust.

Aengys thrashed with his reins at both horses propelling them forward then repeated the instruction, "Eyes front. Ride your horse."

Wyl gasped in short breaths as his blood felt corrosive in his veins and he sensed his heart beating at the top of his head then with eyes drifting up, he observed hundreds of riders on horse charging toward the intersection.

"Eyes!" Aengys shouted as Wyl felt the sting of reins across his back.

Refocused on the road in front of him, Wyl concentrated on his horse with renewed enthusiasm and as he charged the last bit of road to the intersection, despite the obvious, in the interest of precaution, Aengys screamed, "Right! Right!"

At the intersection, even devoting the entirety of his attention to his course, Wyl could not avoid noticing a nearby great hairy beast of a man in skins, furs and metal components, bearing down at alarming speed with a monstrous broad bladed sword overhead. Wyl roared through the shallow right turn as Aengys slowed on his right side while the shape of the intersection forced the hairy beast man to negotiate a sharper turn and he instantly fell several strides behind the pair. Beyond the gap in the trees lay an expanse of level field and at the far end, a stone barrier wall spanned the expanse between two steep wooded hillsides at which the road concluded at an arched gateway where hundreds of horses and riders packed together tightly to squeeze through.

Perhaps some dozen riders still trailed behind Wyl but the beast man evidently already locked onto his target and encountered but a brief moment of opportunity without the luxury of any further selection process. Consequently, the hairy beast man gained and raced near Wyl at his side opposite Aengys with great sword recoiled overhead and while Wyl sensed the presence in his peripheral vision, he perceived the figure might even have somehow magically enlarged until towering above like a lumbering giant as involuntary squeals and squeaks compressed from his throat.

Aengys shouted, "Pull and swing! Wyl! Swing! God damn it!"

Aengys long since produced his own sword and slowed to maneuver around Wyl then confront the offending subject but in doing so, he lost strides and still trailed the beast man just shy the length of his sword.

Wyl understood the instruction 'pull and swing' but as he stared at his trembling hands clinging tightly to the reins, he immediately concluded that under the circumstances and despite his most sincere intentions, his hands apparently had a mind of their own and neither would evidently at any time in the near future 'pull and swing'. As he cringed in expectation of a painful blow, Wyl remembered the words, 'Always stab at the face... Always stab at the face...'

A flash of color and motion streaked past in the opposite direction with a horrific crash of metal against metal and Wyl turned just in time to observe a brief glimpse of the last actions upon the earth of the hairy beast man with the monstrous broad bladed sword. With the top half of his hairy beast head absent somewhere evidently just above the jaw, a gruesome red pool splashed and spilled over the rims of the remaining half while his hairy beast torso rolled toward Wyl then the broad sword clattered on the road followed by a hairy beast carcass that tumbled in the dust.

Both Aengys and Wyl twisted their necks to observe the Red Witch dart and weave at full speed directly into a swarming beast man horde. Immediately an almost comical confusion occurred as blades flashed accompanied by crashing clanks and screams. Ghastly red plumes glowed like lamps in the low morning sun and weapons, hands, arms and heads rotated and tumbled through the air.

Aengys slapped Wyl on his shoulder and shouted, "Eyes front. Get to the gate."

The two sprinted along the last stretch and passed a figure at a standstill Wyl intuitively guessed from a brief glance might have been Fae.

Steering her horse in a wide arcing loop under hot pursuit all the while, Orna rounded another group that came to a stop, torn somewhere between joining the pursuit or heading to cut off her course, but she made a sudden sharp turn directly into them, relieving them of the difficulty of that choice. The group pursuing her came to a disorganized halt as they crashed into the other group at a standstill then Orna pulled to an abrupt stop, turned and charged back through the confusion, slashing at opponents, while the distraction accommodated a clear path to the gate for the last stragglers in the companies.

Bursting from the confused jumble of horse and rider, Orna signaled as she observed Fae sprinting toward her then reversing his course, he accelerated alongside as a shower of arrows fell about them. A dart struck Orna in the back and as she slumped forward onto the neck of her horse, Fae pulled his shield loose then held it over her while random shots continued to whistle near. From the disorganized pack, a band regrouped then charged the pair in a final dash to the gate while behind, thousands more riders poured through the gap uncontested and swelled into the field.

As Fae and Orna neared the gate, a salvo of arrows rained down from the wall onto the pursuers and a number of them fell and tumbled then with some shouted signals, the rest peeled off and curled to a stop after retreating out of arrow range. The recklessness of the pursuit cost some of the Sethians life and injury, and unprepared for neither a defense nor an assault of the wall, they abruptly ceased all hostilities.

The two horses slowed to a stop as the gate creaked to a close behind them. Twelve-thousand riders and their horses crammed into the wide belt of street and greens behind the wall and every eye surely concentrated on the activity at the gate as an eerie silence dominated. Lying forward over her saddle, Orna still clutched her sword while pushing her foot against the top of her horse in a vain attempt to dismount. Fae leapt from his horse before it even fully halted, rushed to Orna and clutching her garment in the front and back just above her waist, lifted her over his head as she moaned. Fae placed Orna gently onto her feet but her knees immediately buckled and she continued straight down doubling over onto her elbows while the arrow in her back pointed straight up toward the sky and clearly pierced through whatever protection her red garment provided. With a hand on her upper arm and the other on her back, Fae knelt near and held her up as Orna coughed with a wet rasp, spit blood, gasped for air then croaked, "Pull it out."

With a grimace, Fae clutched the arrow in his fist, yanked it with a sudden jolt then angrily hurled it aside. Holding her firmly by a shoulder, Fae cradled her forehead and leaned near evidently prepared to hear her last words as Orna coughed, gasped and spit blood then in a hoarse whisper, instructed, "Help me up."

With an expression of some degree of disbelief, a grip on her upper arm and firm hold on the back of her collar, Fae lifted Orna to her feet then held her up as she brushed hair from her face revealing a gash on her cheek while somewhere in her scalp, blood dribbled down onto her nose. With head wobbling from disorientation and a strand of bloody spittle dangling from her chin, Orna teetered slightly, raised her sword and with considerable effort to place the tip of it into the opening of the sheath, finally awkwardly slammed it back into place. Producing a hand towel from a pocket, Fae wiped spittle and blood from her face then pushed the towel into her hand, which Orna then held against the cut on her cheek.

"Find the king and take me there." Orna instructed in a hoarse whisper.

"Wyl!" Fae shouted.

"Here." Wyl croaked as he shuffled near.

"Get Orna's gear and follow us." Fae gently urged.

Observing her injuries, Wyl acutely appreciated if not for her intervention, he rather than Orna should rightfully have counted as the casualty and in all likelihood would have suffered injuries even more grievous or at the very least would never so miraculously recover regardless of degree. In any event, Wyl saw bright spots and his knees trembled as he appreciated the severity of the encounter then almost in afterthought as he collected the gear, he called, "Aengys, thanks." to which Aengys responded with a casual nod.

Orna evidently determined her condition adequate to commiserate with the king and furthermore, she exhibited remarkable progress in recovery from her apparently fatal wounds. Wyl suspected she would never dismiss the collective inquisition of so great a number of witnesses quite as easily as she dismissed his inquisition after the fight in Mercane... but then again he also suspected he probably underestimated her ability to dismiss inquisition altogether as well...