

Chapter 1 - The Greyse of Glyn Rhi

“Are ye certain ’tis the way?” Jessel asked again, her voice revealing more than a little unease.

The wood had grown quite dense and the old path, worn into the mountain by generations of MycKellyn’s before them, had nearly faded from view. Ayshlyn herself had traveled this narrow track hundreds of times in her thirteen years, though not once in the last. Neither had anyone else. At least, not to her knowledge. And surely no one else would come today.

Ayshlyn experienced a moment of doubt when the sun slid behind a cloud, dimming the already wan light that permeated the forest canopy. She turned in her saddle and leaned to look around her cousin who was riding close behind. A conscious effort was made to avoid Jessel’s gaze and to casually study the surrounding wood and the trail behind as if merely to check her bearings. Not only did nothing strike Ayshlyn as familiar, her eyes seemed to be playing tricks on her. As the bracken lining the trail swept back into place following the passing of their mounts, the route from which they’d come appeared to vanish into the green.

She looked ahead and studied the faint path she traveled. Her mare hesitated, sensing her indecision. Perhaps this *was* only a deer track.

No. Something within urged her forward. “I’m certain.”

Before her cousin could question her again, the ancient oaks thinned and a clearing appeared. As they rode out into a small meadow, the sun broke free from cloud cover and cast the cottage before them in golden light.

Woodbine stretched up the walls, across the thatched roof, and into the meadow. Its flowering tendrils climbed stalks of thistle as if searching for something, ever grasping, reaching across the expanse toward the trees. Their perfume, though faint in the full light of day, drew unbidden memories and Ayshlyn savored the unexpected sweetness. For a moment, the heavy errand at hand was forgotten and she was a little girl again, chasing butterflies in the high grass and tumbling with Jessel like fox kits under an endless summer sky.

It was just as she remembered, down to the—

Ayshlyn’s mount halted with the involuntary shift of her weight. The cottage door was slightly ajar as if their visit was expected. It must not have been closed when...

“I’ll wait wi’ the horses.”

Ayshlyn turned, puzzled. “She was your grandmother as well.”

Jessel’s mouth opened slightly, as if to respond, but after another glance at the door, she set her lips firmly together and shook her auburn head. “If there was ever a soul to make the journey to *Talyvsheera* unaided, ’twas her. She has little need of my prayers, though I’ve had her in mind all day. ’Tis you she wants. You have yer duties as *greyse*, to be remembered of her and she of you.”

Ayshlyn frowned, but knew better than to accuse her cousin of cowardice. Jessel would stand beside her no matter the danger that threatened. But this was the work of a priestess and perhaps it was work best done alone.

Grasping the sack that lay across her saddle, she threw her leg over her horse's neck and slid to the ground. She left her sword on her saddle, but absently ran her hand over the hilt of the knife belted at her hip before making her way through the knee-deep grass.

She wished she had allowed Fynok to come. The great beast would have eased her nerves, made her feel protected as only an enormous dog could. She was rarely without her canine shadow, but he had cut his foot and the wound was still too tender for the trek up the mountain. Without his acute senses, she had to rely on her own.

No sound came from inside and though she knew they were alone, her hand still trembled as she reached for the door. This place had been a second home to her. In truth, it was often the place she felt most at ease until the Dark One's visit. No, it wasn't a presence she feared as she stood at the threshold of her grandmother's cottage; it was an absence. She pushed the door wide.

The room was dark, but the open door let in enough light for her to navigate around the table at the rear of the cottage to pull open the shutters. Sunlight spilled in, illuminating the dust that swirled in the air and clung to the remaining clusters of dried herbs that hung from the rafters. Their combined sweet and savory scents mingled together to tickle her nose. As her eyes adjusted, she took stock of the room.

The small table and two stools remained, as well as the heavy bench where her grandmother, the last Greyse of Glyn Rhi, had prepared her potions. Small cabinets with tiny drawers lined the wall below the windows. Those drawers had once overflowed with pouches of dried herbs, tinctures in tiny glass vials, and jars of poultices. A large cauldron hung on a hook above the cold hearth. An assortment of smaller iron pots was arranged on the stones below. Reluctantly, her gaze came to rest on the empty bed in the far corner.

It had been late in the night the last time she stood here. The stifling heat from the fire had done little to warm the old woman's icy hands as she pulled Ayshlyn to her. Pale green eyes, preternaturally bright, belied her body's fading condition, and her words held the power of the tide beneath the reedy rasp of a voice slipping from this world into the next.

Her grandmother spoke of all she had taught her, reinforcing lessons, and lamenting all still left to teach. Ayshlyn's instruction would now come on the touch of a breeze in the autumn wood, the play of the moonlight on the mist-shrouded meadows, and the song of a rambling brook in spring. The tutelage of Glyn Rhi's young greyse would continue through means beyond what this woman could teach her in this world.

The burden of that responsibility—of continuing a line unbroken since before Ayrimyrd raised the Great Mists to cloak Iyshyll forever from the sons of Mil—that duty had not seemed daunting or even a concern as her grandmother breathed her last. Ayshlyn only felt the crushing weight of loss, of entering a world unknown and unfathomable to her; one in which Ara MycKellyn did not exist.

Since that night, the mantle of the Great Mother had begun to settle on her. Healer. Diviner. Priestess. She felt ashamed to think it, but perhaps it was best that many of her clan, including her family, no longer held strongly to the old ways. The need for her cardinal skills would not be so great as it would have been not a few generations past. Few clan rituals she would lead required any great spell-craft. Fewer still would be those seeking her intervention between the world of men and the realms beyond. The *teharads* or greenwalkers—common healers who tended only the ailments of the flesh—could minister to the clan. She would only be called upon if the malady lay between the land and her people. Surely, while her father lived there would be no crisis for which she must intervene on her clan's behalf.

A bevy of finches burst from the dog roses flanking the doorway as she stepped out the rear door of the cottage, their tiny forms scattering in a flurry of chirps and beating wings. Her gaze swept the empty livestock shed to her right before she began to pick her way through the riotous greenery that had once been her grandmother's immaculately tended garden. Beyond the low wall and up the slope through a copse of birch she could see the sprawling reach of the yew tree, beckoning her to the dolmen beneath its shade.

Ayshlyn's first task as greyse had been performed in a fog of grief. Thankfully, she had not been completely alone in it. The oldest of the teharads in the region—those mentored in their calling by Ara—had washed her withered body and wrapped her in the funeral shroud. Talese, her grandmother's closest friend and a mage in his own people's tradition, had been ever present; a silent shadow of guidance and support.

Ayshlyn rode before the litter that carried Ara to Glyn Rhi and stood watch as the people came to offer small tokens of remembrance to see her through on her journey to Talyvsheera, the eternal lands. Some spoke solemn messages or offered mementos for their own ancestors, for there was no better messenger to bear their regards to the Talyvsheeree than a greyse.

Unlike those before her, Ara chose not to be burned, her ashes and bones interred in the passage tomb of their ancestors on the hill at Shlea Evonann. Rather, she insisted her remains be nestled in the earth below the peak of Karrig a'Mavyra where her cottage lay, near the sacred spring.

And so it was that Ayshlyn led her family to this place one year prior. For the first time since that day she let the memories come. So few were clear. Most danced just along the periphery; snippets of color flashing close and away again in a swirl of grey like trout darting past in the river's rush.

As she climbed the slope she recalled how the light rain, hardly more than mist, had tickled her forearms as she raised them in invocation. Her grandmother's sacred ebony robes, long on her and smelling of dragon's blood, came alive as she moved; first gliding across her chilled skin with the gravity of water, then swirling weightless as smoke. She'd circled thrice around that dark opening in the green, refusing to look directly into the chasm, denying it completely even while she felt its pull grow stronger with each rotation. Her voice rose as the tow to that cold center increased and the ancient song slipped from her with such command as to be almost defiant.

When at last she looked upon the grave, she was strangely comforted. No abyss at all, but a slit in the cloth of her beloved land waiting to enfold her grandmother in its embrace. Ara's voice drifted up from memory: *Crafted of Iyshyll's making and returned to her keeping.*

Had her father and elder brother Ashyr lowered the body? Or had it been Ashyr and her eldest cousin Kyras? She had no recollection of that. But when her gaze had risen from the shrouded form nestled in rain-darkened earth, it was her father's look that pulled her from the fog and sharpened the world around her into clarity and contrast once more. Those familiar deep brown eyes shone as she had never seen them before, bright with tears.

He held her gaze for a long moment before he nodded to her. A wordless acknowledgment of her position, paternal pride, and something new. Respect. She would forever be his little girl, but when she wore the mantle of greyse, she was something more entirely.

Her brothers and cousins had filled the grave, placed the turf back upon it, and erected the stones; three pillars supporting the larger capstone. As she approached it now, she was surprised to find it only waist high, smaller than she remembered, though the horizontal stone was as long

as she was tall. The unusually dark granite seemed to have grown even darker in the last year and had yet to host lichen.

She knelt before the stones and settled her thoughts to the task at hand. Her body relaxed into the pull of the earth and her mind quieted. It took but a moment for the earth to respond to her connection. Her feet and legs tingled as the energy rose upwards. Raising her arms gently to the sky, a second stream of power from above washed over her until each of the two forces moved through her in time with the flow of her breath.

The energy within her expanded to form an invisible sphere about her, a sacred space within which she could offer her gifts to the Talyvsheeree on this day, Ara's *Djeru a'Ashtar*, her journey's end.

The first anniversary of a death had once been a celebrated occasion with feasting and merriment in this world and the next, or so Ara had told her. In Ayshlyn's lifetime, the day the soul arrived in the eternal lands to be reunited with the ancestors and *D'anu Morai*, the Great Mother, was marked quietly by loved ones, if at all.

It pained her to think on the plight of those souls so lightly grieved, for their journey would be difficult and the solace of the *Djeru a'Ashtar* could indeed elude them. Some wandered lost between the worlds and turned back to their families here to create mischief and hardship.

She sang the song of celebration for them as much as for Ara now. Her flesh tingled as the air around her grew heavy with the presence of spirits just beyond the veil, in the world unseen. Expanding her awareness to those before her, she greeted them silently and removed the items she carried in the sack. Placing a wooden bowl on the grave beneath the capstone, she poured milk from a flagon and lay a platter of beef beside it; offerings for Ara's welcome feast. From a pouch on her belt she pulled an ochre crockery jar and held it cupped in her hands.

"Grandmother," she began, uncertain as to whether to address her as she would a fellow greyse or speak to her as she had in life. She smiled as she heard Ara's voice remind her: *There are no more powerful words than those spoken from the heart.* "Grandmother, I offer you a token of remembrance this day. 'Tis the salve you bid me make from the rare ginger from Indus to fight fever in a wound. 'Twas used to treat a festering cut on one of the yearlings and Talese said he'd seen none heal faster in all his years. True, ye've no use for it now. Still, I'd have you know I mastered it... and more. I feel your guidance each day... and am always listening, as ye bid me."

A tear fell onto her right hand as she placed the small jar beside the offering bowl. The droplet slid down to her wrist, bisecting the multi-colored band that encircled her wrist, the tattooed mark of her station. She wiped her cheek with her sleeve. After a steadying breath, she spoke the closing words, expressing her thanks and fond farewell to the Talyvsheeree, both ancestors and those yet unborn. As their presence receded, she absorbed that blessed energy of connection with a grateful heart and rose to her feet.

Those in the world unseen had departed, yet she sensed she was not alone. Turning, she found Jessel leaning against a tree in the stand of birch, arms crossed, patiently watching. She was not surprised. Her cousin's curiosity often overcame her unease.

"Your ma will rant us deaf if she finds ye've made off with half our supper to feast the dead, greyse or no." Jessel fell in step beside her as they walked down the hillside to where the horses grazed beside the little barn.

"The kitchen provided the offering. I merely delivered it. Besides, with that cursed band of Brythandori arriving any day, they could hardly deny me. Better to feed our dead than any one of them living."

“Your da would have us be welcoming,” Jessel reminded her.

Ayshlyn pressed her lips together. Minding her tongue was a skill she was struggling to develop, but it was easier when she considered that Jessel had already heard her opinion. Many times, in fact. No doubt her cousin would know the words before she uttered them.

Welcoming a Brythandori onto their lands, into their home... and a soldier, no less, one who sought to subjugate the MycKellyn? It wasn't like her to disagree so strongly with her father. Had she not seen these men in action herself she would have trusted his desire to consider an alliance.

But she *had* met them once before. The thin scar on her left shoulder itched as if to remind her.

“My brothers have talked of nothing but this... seneschal.” Jessel pronounced the foreign title carefully; a little too deferentially for Ayshlyn's liking. “He is a knight, they say, mayhap the youngest to receive such title in Brythandor. And only but a few years or so older than Ashyr. 'Tis hard to imagine how he came to such distinction.”

“By bloody means, no doubt.”

Jessel frowned. “I ken your displeasure well, but aren't you curious? Do ye not wonder—”

“Wonder what sort of man we shall bend a knee to? What man seeks to enslave us? Conquer us without a fight? Aye, I wonder. I've grown sick with wonder.”

They'd reached the horses and Ayshlyn's mare shied as she grasped for the rein. Willing herself to calm, she drew a deep breath and patted the animal's neck. She could feel her cousin watching her as she tightened the saddle's girth.

“You've seen something.” Jessel's voice was low, nearly inaudible. It wasn't a question.

“Nay.”

No, though she had tried. Trying to pierce the veil of time and fortune for some hint of what was to come had been like pressing her forehead to a stone wall. Impermeable grey. Not only could she not see through it, its presence towered and stretched in every direction beyond her so as to obliterate all senses. All but one.

How could she explain the feeling deep within her? That sense of stepping off a high cliff and not falling? It unbalanced her even as it steadied her. Something seemed to move in this darkness, rising to buoy her. It did not frighten so much as unnerve her. And what alarmed her most was her desire to lean into its embrace.

“Nay,” she repeated, turning to meet Jessel's eyes. “I've seen nothing.”

Jessel studied her. They'd been close as sisters since the cradle, each raised amongst a pack of brothers and male cousins. The trust between them was absolute. But Jessel was not a greyse. She respected the mystical arts and realms of spirit, but did not envy Ayshlyn's path. That didn't mean she did not feel dismay at this separation that had begun to widen between them. Did she wonder if Ayshlyn would withhold something from her now? Or did she fear for her cousin against powers she could not herself behold?

“Talese has said 'tis to be expected,” Ayshlyn added. “At times, there is either nothing to be revealed or it is not for a greyse to see. In any case, we shall know soon enough.”

Jessel seemed satisfied with that. Ayshlyn wished she could convince herself as easily.

Once mounted, she turned to gaze up at the stones beneath the yew and sent out a silent prayer to the Great Mother in all her many forms. Whatever the path ahead, she knew she would not walk it alone.

They took the longer route down the mountain to gather tormentil root from a high meadow beyond the mouth of the valley. It was a considerable ride, but the day was so fine neither

minded the trek. By the time they reached the river on the ride back to Glyn Rhi conversation had returned to speculation about which of the crop of two-year-olds would prove hardest to break to saddle and gossip about which of Jessel's brothers would gain the affection of a particular maiden at the upcoming Midsummer gathering.

The day had turned surprisingly warm and Ayshlyn's spirits were lifted by the sunlight filtering through the forest. Its rays wove patterns that echoed the call and response of bird song streaming ribbons of sound all around them. She closed her eyes and let her mount pick the way down the trail, her body swaying in rhythm with its steps, her senses alive with the green world. Under the incessant roll of the river as it swept past she could hear the occasional buzz of an insect, the scratching of a squirrel scampering up a tree, and...

Her eyes snapped open. Their horses halted in unison and Jessel's eyes narrowed as she peered into the forest. The low murmur of male voices and the plodding of hooves drifted across the river from the road that traced the edge of the wood.

Before she'd made a conscious decision to do so, Ayshlyn's feet hit the ground.

"What do ye mean to do?" Jessel whispered, her amber eyes wide as a frightened doe's as Ayshlyn tossed her the reins of her mount.

"I'm going in for a closer look. Take the path beyond the clearing downstream and I'll meet with ye shortly."

"Are you out of yer wee, addled mind?" Jessel hissed, but Ayshlyn was already lost in the thicket with hardly a sound to mark her passage.