

Focus

My watch—no one dies tonight. The thought was clear, repeating to the rhythm of her stride. Aveline du Lac ran through darkness, her eyes on distant fires. *No one dies tonight.*

Aveline was one of thirty recruits stationed outside Dales End, a backwater that hadn't seen a king's soldier in years. Their commander had chosen the location for its lawless hills—bandits and the odd beast would serve as combat training. But tonight was different. A wounded squire had run the message: templars in trouble. Either unaware or knowing and foolish, six had entered a freehold a few leagues distant, and something had gone very wrong.

Doubt reached across the path. Aveline shrugged it aside and ran on.

She'd been on watch, still in full kit while everyone slept. Her fellows would be quick to gather arms and follow, but the fear in the squire had told the urgency, so Aveline had set out alone. She knew the risk—the duty of the week had been to flush out highwaymen, not make the land safe for sprinting in the dark. But a soldier doesn't always have the luxury of fortifying every step. Sometimes all that matters to the spear is the destination.

Doubt reached again. Aveline shrugged it aside and ran on.

Scraggly trees gave way to a clearing that seemed to hold the moon overhead. A man was struggling at the approach to a small estate, grasping for a bent blade, his dark hair matted with sweat. Even at distance, Aveline could see that his breastplate—templar issue—was split on the left. Three gashes through the finest armour, from no weapon she knew. Doubt reached for her. She cast it back without thought and knelt at his side.

"King's soldier. We heard your call. Are there others?" She spoke in a monotone as she set to work, tearing strips from her tabard to bind his wounds. They were deep, but his reply was edged with wonder, not pain.

"Maker, woman! You have their blood from head to foot!"

Aveline blinked and looked down at herself, then to the path she'd taken. Black ichor trailed from the hesitations of her run, the doubts she had barely acknowledged—clawed deformities now dissolving into the earth, like liquid ash. She had denied them, her strikes unconscious, automatic. She felt a chill at their strangeness, but pushed it from her mind.

"We need to get you out of here," she said, lifting the templar to his feet. But once righted, he turned to the manor. A sickly yellow glow outlined the door.

"No," he said, steadying. He braced his blade against the ground and forced it straight with his foot. "If it fully manifests in this realm, we'll never cage it." Aveline looked the man up and down: pale, bleeding, not a trace of fear. She had never understood templars. Their world seemed impossibly distant from hers. His words were nonsense. He may as well be mad.

Then he bowed his head and quietly added, "No one else dies tonight." Aveline stared, recognizing the soldier behind the heraldry. He glanced back, the slightest turn, and she knew that look as well—appraisal. She could help, and maybe survive.

"All right, templar," she said, shaking her head but drawing her blade. They stared at the door for a moment, side by side. The light behind it pulsed to a vile heartbeat.

"Don't believe anything it says," he warned.

"I won't," she said plainly. He raised an eyebrow at her confidence. Aveline glared. "You either know your business, or you don't." He nodded grimly and turned back to the door, but she could tell he was searching for words, as if the right combination could make this meeting normal.

"Ser Wesley Vallen," he started. "And you are...?"

"Waiting to be impressed." Her reply was colder than she had intended, an instinct borne of long weeks in coarse company. He didn't react, but it annoyed her and she forced herself to try again. "It's Aveline," she offered, "and you can impress me later." She winced at how improper it sounded, and stood board-straight for several seconds before chancing to look for the response. Wesley's gaze remained fixed on the door, but a smile crept across his face. Once more, Aveline somehow knew his mind. A small foolishness had cut the gloom; perhaps their blades were likewise not outmatched.

"As you say," he said, with a smirk that was... warm.

And with sudden bond and steeled resolve, the two of them shouldered the door off its hinges.

"A knight, you say?" Benoit du Lac regarded his daughter with cloudy eyes, his voice thin but hopeful. Aveline cradled his hand, hesitating.

"He's a templar, father."

"Pish," he spat. "Then he has no holdings. A waste of you." The outburst echoed through the ward, bringing glares from attending sisters. Aveline ignored them and looked past to the Chantry doors concealing the bustle of Denerim beyond. She sighed and turned back, dreading familiar arguments. But the old man had softened as he lay back in his berth. Perhaps he was just as tired of the cost of victory.

"He's a good man?"

She looked skyward, thoughts fondly elsewhere. "I believe so."

"Then take his name," he said, grudgingly.

Aveline chuckled, shaking her head. "You know I wasn't asking permission."

The old man smiled, closing his eyes. "That's my big girl."